Cecil Taylor: *Life As...*

Structure within a free improvisation

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Introduction

"To play with Cecil Taylor, you need the stamina of an athlete and the imagination of a God!" (Tony Oxley in an interview with Panken, 2001)

Cecil Taylor's free improvisations are beautifully structured compositions. The material Taylor is using is pre-considered and fairly restricted; therefore, cohesive and at the same time, colorful and varied. He has developed a complete language of his own, which derives from his philosophy of life, his physical approach to the instrument and music in general, and from his heritage(s).

As a composer with a jazz background, I've been searching for systems that provide a structural coherence and simultaneously allow the improvisor to be expressive and inspired. This was the reason I decided to investigate the music of Cecil Taylor. As one of the pioneers of free jazz, he has been constructing systems for the purpose of creating his own music, using, in his words: "the energies of the European composers, their technique, consciously, and blending this with the traditional music of the American Negro...to create a new energy."(Spellman, 1966, p.28) His endeavor to construct a personal language, resulted in a very specific material, the sequence and order of which, he is able to improvise in a given situation. Therefore, the improvisation doesn't only apply to pitches and rhythm, but also to structure itself. Creating the structure in a moment is only possible when one understands and studies its laws. Taylor did that on many levels and through many arts; music, dance, theatre, architecture *etc*. What he has managed, was "basically, ... to restore to jazz its valid separation from, and anarchic disregard of, Western popular forms. [He has] used the music of the forties with its jagged, exciting rhythms as an initial reference and have restored the hegemony of blues as the most important basic form in Afro-American music."(Jones, 1963)

For this research, I chose to analyze a solo piano piece from album *Momentum Space*, since it was a recording to which I've been enthusiastically listening for a long time. My two main questions were: 'what is the reason this free improvisation sounds so coherent' and 'how does Taylor deal with the form in a free context.' Therefore, my focus in this research is his structural logic, the manipulation and the nature of the materials he is using, and his "navigation through form."(Braxton, 1988)

Since I wasn't well-acquainted with Taylor's work, my guesses were that he might have specific motives and phrases that serve as a bridge or reference points between completely free parts. I didn't expect him to have a harmonic or melodic plan, or clear structural sections. These preliminary suppositions proved to be almost entirely incorrect.

Biography and influences

Biography

"Life of choice within esthetic curve." (Taylor, 1966)

Cecil Taylor is an American pianist and poet, born in New York City in 1929. He began piano lessons at the age of 5, at the wish of his mother, who had a lasting influence on him, even though she died when he was a teenager. "I was tapdancing when I was six. I was entering contests for young virtuosos--I was never a young virtuoso--but she tried to make me--so I was playing Chopin when I was six and all this nonsense."(Funkhouser, 1995) He also studied percussion with the husband of his piano teacher, who was a timpani player in the orchestra under Toscanini. Taylor studied classical piano at the New York College of Music and New England Conservatory. Boston was where Taylor started his transition towards jazz. As Ekkehard Jost describes it:

> Subsequently, his European musical background was pushed aside during his stay at the Conservatory, with considerable aid from Boston jazzmen. The process was not without programmatic overtones, as Cecil Taylor's turning to his black musical heritage was more emphatically expressed in his words than de facto in his music, at least at the start. Nevertheless, this process was of great importance to his whole stylistic development; European elements gradually ceased to dominate and were completely integrated in what was, to be sure, a very novel conception of jazz.(Jost, 1974, p.68)

Along with Ornette Coleman, he was the first jazz musician to consciously place himself outside of the mainstream.(Spellman, 1966, p.XI) He formed his first band in 1956 with the saxophonist Steve Lacy, releasing his first recording, *Jazz Advance* that same year. He released eleven more records in the next five years (including one featuring John Coltrane, for marketing reasons called *Coltrane Time*.)

Even though he wasn't getting much encouragement from the audience or most of his fellow musicians, he had been developing his language and his original music intensely in the '60s, producing ultimately two pivotal recordings (both released on Blue Note in 1966): *Conquistador* and *Unit Structures*. In 1962, during his search for 'freedom music', he started a collaboration with his most important musical partner, his 'second half', saxophonist Jimmy Lyons, forming a group *Unit*, most notably featuring drummers Sunny Murray, and later Andrew Cyrille.

Taylor began to perform solo concerts in the early '70s (many of which were released on albums). After decades of struggle, he finally garnered critical (and popular) acclaim (*e.g.*, playing at the White House) and was eventually being rewarded by Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973 and MacArthur Fellowship in 1991.

After Lyons's death in 1986, Taylor formed the *Feel Trio* in the early '90s with William Parker on bass and Tony Oxley on drums. He started performing with larger ensembles and big bands. His residence in Berlin (1988) was extensively documented by the German label FMP (performances in duet and trio with important European free improvisors, including Tony Oxley, Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Han Bennink, Tristan Honsinger, and others). During the '80s he collaborated with improvisors like Max Roach, AACM individualists (Roscoe Mitchell, Henry Threadgill, Leroy Jenkis) and other European free jazz musicians (Tomasz Stanko, Peter Brotzmann, *etc.)*. Taylor's performances were increasingly enriched by putting into practice his knowledge of Native American, African and Japanese ritual.(Panken, 2001)

Cecil Taylor has been continuing to perform until today with his own ensembles, as well as a soloist.

In addition to piano, Taylor has always been interested in ballet and dance (his mother was a dancer). In the '70s, he collaborated with some of the important dancers of the day, such as Dianne McIntyre, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Heather Watts. He has been writing poetry since his high school years, featuring his poems on the performances and on his albums (most prominently on *Chinampas*, released in 1987).

Influences

> For instance, today I listened to Chinese Classical music--which I really didn't dig too much, but I'll listen to it again--I listened to Islamic chants that really knocked me the fuck out. And just single voices. I listened to Duke Ellington's Orchestra circa 1945-- there was one piece that was just amazing. I listened to Victoria de los Angeles singing Purcell's *Diedere and something or other...* and then I listened to Gary Grafman playing the first movement of the Brahms piano concerto. Brahms, boy I tell you-- then I listened to Leonard T. Price singing the last movement of Richard Strauss' *Solome*[sic.]. Boy--what what a-- wheeew--boy, that guy--I have to go to see that guy. A lot of shit was up. And then, of course, of course--I listen every day to something by Ligeti. Today I heard *Ramifications* and this choral piece, and *Atmospheres*. Then I listen every day to [he chuckles] Marvin Gaye, of course. Then I put on Sarah Vaughn, then I put on Xenakis--oh, this fucking guy--this orchestra piece, and then I'm--god, I mean I practiced the piano four hours today. I spent two hours completing another section of this poem this morning. I cooked, I mopped all the floors in this house, and I've done all this stuff. (Funkhouser, 1995)

The quotation from an interview with C. Funkhouser shows clearly, that Cecil Taylor is a man of many interests. Apart from the variety of musics, he is interested in poetry, literature, theatre, dance, and architecture. He is active in all of these art forms (except the last). He is not "interested in separations" between them. "I'm discovering and

becoming aware of every day now is that the similarity, although the nature of the material is different, the process of building the structure are very similar."(Funkhouser, 1995) This attitude, I believe, is one of the keys for understanding his development as an artist with a unique voice.

After being influenced by European classical music (Bartók and Stravinsky in particular) in the conservatory, he started to explore his heritage on his own. He knew about the Negro history from his father, who had a lot of knowledge about "black folklore. He could talk about how it was with the slaves in the 1860s, about the field shouts and hollers, about myths of black people."(Spellman, 1966, p.49) He explored African elements; the African drumming and the blues. He also investigated his Native American heritage, obvious in his poems (he is using their languages).

The most prominent jazz figure among his influences is Duke Ellington, for his work with the orchestra, compositional and structural thinking and orchestral approach to the piano. He was attracted by Dave Brubeck (his dense harmony) and Lennie Tristano (his lines) at the beginning of his jazz career. But as soon as he heard Horace Silver in the early '50s, his taste changed and his interest was with the Afro-American jazz musicians, such as Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Milt Jackson, Charlie Parker, Erroll Garner, and, to some extent, Miles Davis. He is very fond of Betty Carter, and mentions her on several occasions.

He has been interested in Kabuki theatre and the Butoh dancing. He incorporates the theatrical elements and movement on the stage in his performances. The theatrical dimension is also present in the music itself; as his long-time collaborator Buel Neidlinger points out: "His compositions are organized by juxtaposing elements of different moods against each other like actors on a stage."(Neidlinger, 1961)

Cecil Taylor has been very inspired by the construction of bridges. In his words, he learns much more from looking at a bridge than at a score, as the bridges "encompass not only structure but also time. They take you."(Felver, 2005) He is especially interested in suspension and cable-stay bridges of Calatrava.

> Taylor's particular interest in Calatrava's bridges seems to lie in the ability of Calatrava's forms to identify the forces and counter-forces acting upon them. Calatrava's drawings reflect conceptional principles that regard structure as a three-dimensional well-woven network containing different conduits dedicated to different scales and qualities of movement.(Brown, 2006)

Movement is an important element for Cecil Taylor, having a very physical approach to the piano and using dance/theater in his performances.

In poetry, he quotes his influences being Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Jean Genet, Ishmael Reed, Mike McClure and Bob Kaufman (with whom he had a couple of live encounters).

He finds inspiration in nature, in the way it functions, in its shapes, colors, and laws. His connection and translation of nature is suggestive of Edgard Varèse's. Like Taylor, Varèse was an extremist and visionary in his own right, uniquely incorporating geometry and laws of nature in his peculiar musical esthetics.

> I have a lot of interests. Dance is certainly one. Architecture, particularly structural engineers. I look at basketball. I'm not interested in it though. I love horses, horse-racing. I've never seen a horse race. I can remember Sea Biscuit and those things, though. I used to run when I was young. I do all these exercises everyday.(Cecil Taylor in an interview with Funkhouser, 1995)

Cecil Taylor: *Life As...* (Momentum Space, Verve 1999)

In order to understand the structure of *Life As...*, we need to first observe the building blocks of the composition- the material and the language used in the piece.

Language

> What I am doing is creating a language. A different American language. I feel that ... I don't make a separation between intellect and emotion. I think with the great artists that I love there was the same thing. By that I mean they had a structure, technique, and the thing that made the technique and the structure move was their passion. (Funkhouser, 1995)

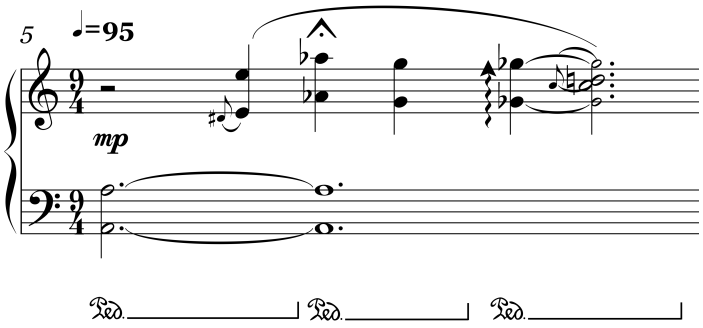
The language of Cecil Taylor consists of several behaviors, specific intervals, rhythms and registers. In this particular piece, he is mainly using four different behaviors: a) fragments of melodies, b) arpeggiated figures, c) (sustained) chords, and d) (clustered) chord repetitions/ runs.

Four main behaviors

a) Fragments of melodies

By fragments of melodies I am addressing clear melodic lines, with simple accompaniment (usually a sustained octave). Cecil Taylor uses these figures predominantly at the opening and the closing of the piece. The melodies are generally played in octaves (sometimes as single notes). At the points where the line is resting, the octave is colored by two or three notes inside of it, in a *montuno* manner.

An example:

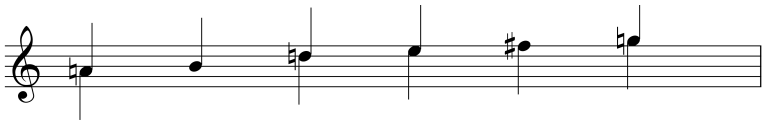


Fragment of a melody, bar 5

b) Arpeggiated figures/scales

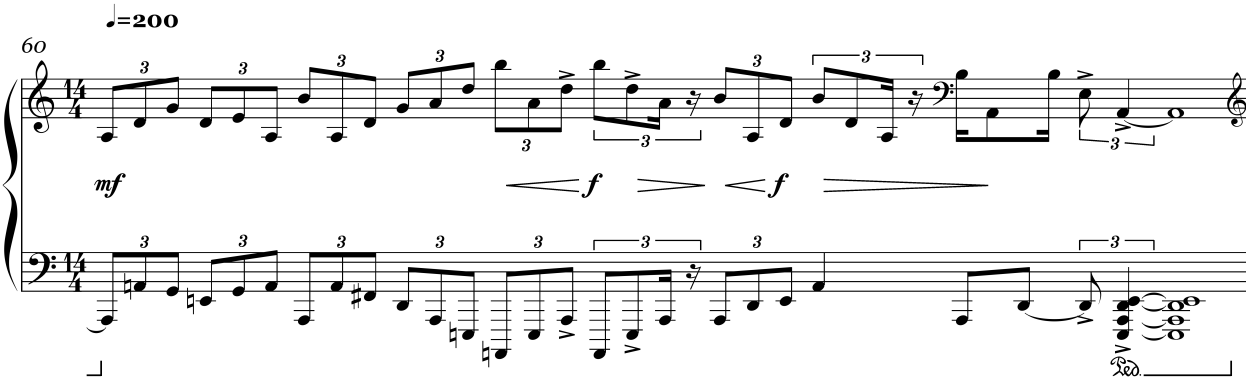
Proportionally the largest part of the composition *Life As...* consists of arpeggiated figures[1] (at times, again, reminiscent of the Cuban *montunos*), often in contrary motion. The pitch content of these figures are scales, created by Cecil Taylor himself. In the documentary *All the Notes* he describes his method as: " Scale is linear, harmony is vertical," showing how the notes of the scale can be dissected and distributed in both hands, forming small patterns, played as inversions and variations.

An example:

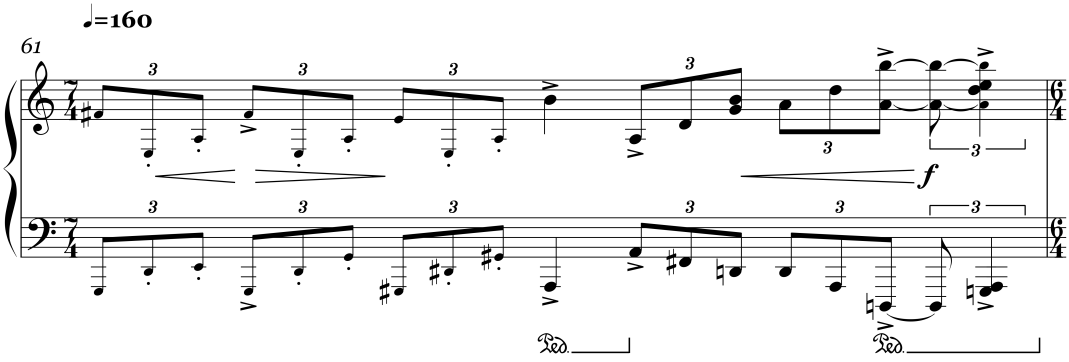


Scale with root A (categorized as A1)

Arpeggiated figures based on scale A1:

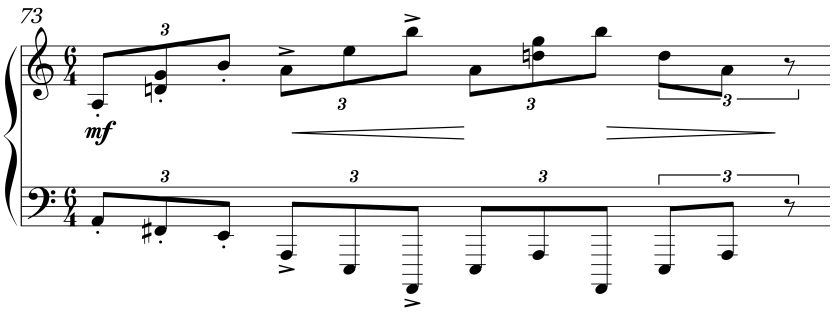


Bar 60

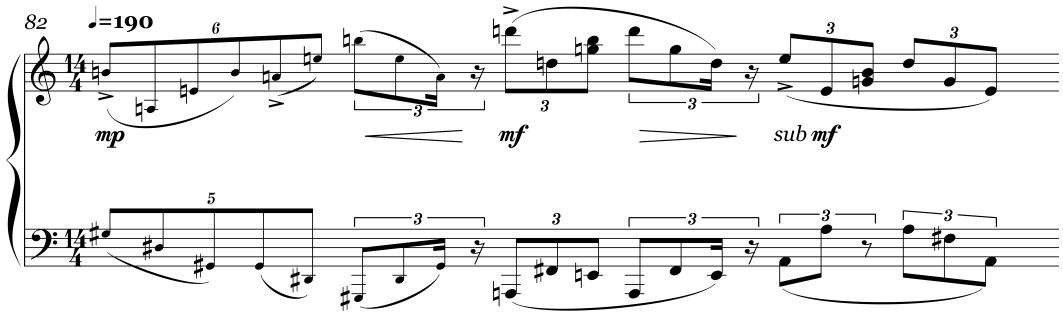


Bar 61

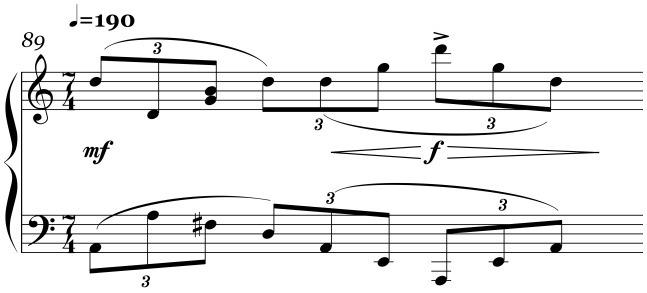
1 *Arpeggiated figure* is a figure with the logic of an arpeggio but not simply an arpeggiated chord. The term is used due to the lack of sufficient terminology. For a better comprehension, see the notated examples.



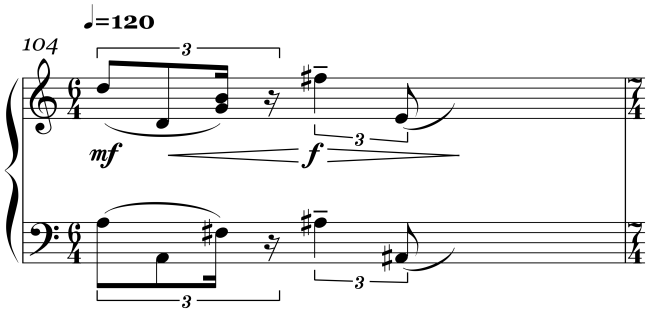
Bar 73



Bar 82



Bar 89



Bar 104

We can notice that the choice of the notes for the lower and the upper voice is fairly consistent; the left hand plays A and F$^{\#}$, at times E as a passing tone, the right hand plays A, B, D, E and G, (at times suggesting a G major triad).

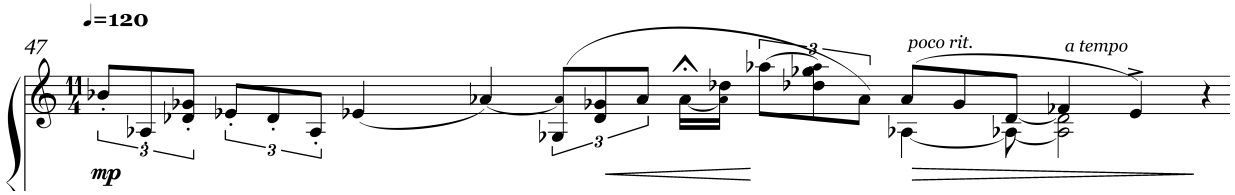
Nevertheless, each of the phrases is distinctive (that is especially evident when listening to the recording) due to the dynamics, the articulation, the length of the phrases, the context *etc.*

If we look at the list of scales[2] - I labeled notes played by left hand/the lower voice with stem down, notes played by the right hand/the top voice with stem up - we can notice that he is approaching all the scales in a similar fashion, using I, IV and V/VI degree of the scale in the lower voice and the rest of the notes (sometimes with the root, sometimes without) in the upper voice. Regarding the pitch, there are variations (especially in the top voice), sometimes even within the phrase (alternating between D and E in bars 73 and 82).

Because the scales, and consequently the arpeggiated figures, are bound up with specific melodic movements/motives, they tend to have either "static" or "active" function.[3]

Sustained notes

Within the arpeggiated figures, as well as inside the melodic fragments, Taylor often makes use of sustained or tied notes. When used inside the arpeggiated figures, they have a function of outlining the melody or emphasizing a particular color. Within the melodic fragments, they are mostly used inside the *montunos*.



Sustained notes ($A^{\flat}$) in bar 47

c) (Sustained) chords

As resting points between the arpeggiated figures, Cecil Taylor often uses a group of sustained notes, suggesting chords. Many of them have a dominant sonority and blues-influenced grace-note embellishments. Their placement at the end of the phrases, suggests a resolution point. This type of dominant chord treatment is connected to the post-blues American music, where the dominant chord can have a function of a stable chord (as opposed to its function in western tonal harmony).

Examples of such chords are: D dominant^{7} chord in second or third inversion in bars 2, 4, 5, 23, and 41(see bellow), G dominant^{9} chord with

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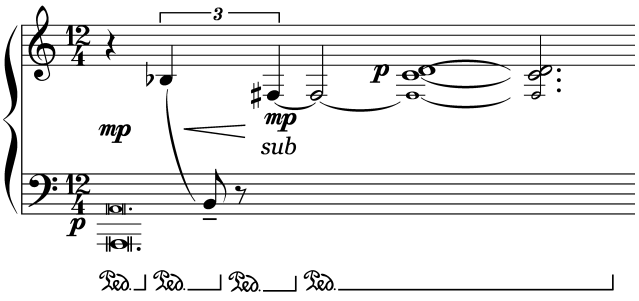
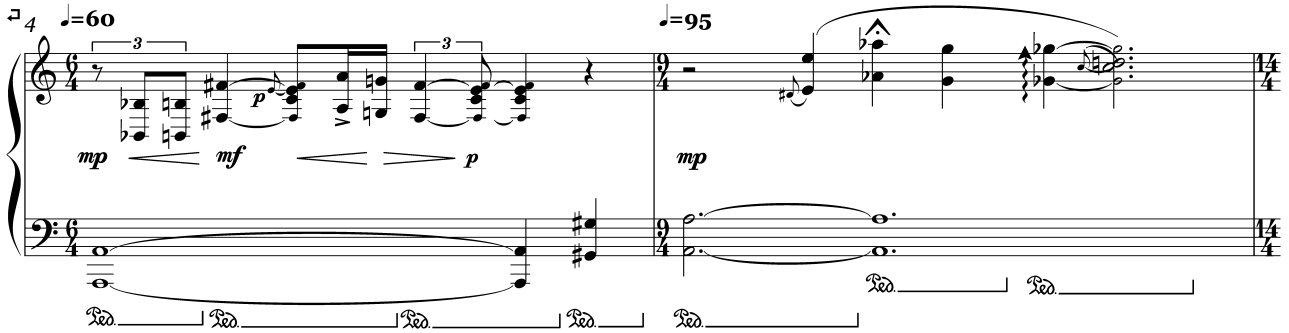
2 See *Appendix B*

3 The scales with an "active" nature, function either as a starting point of the phrase, transition point inside the phrase (usually to modulate to the next scale) or as a passage to the end of the phrase.

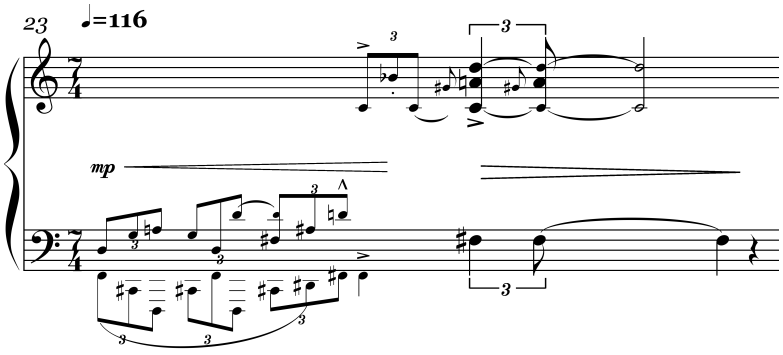
F# in the bass in bars 26, 31, and 32, C augmented7(#11) and Db augmented7 (#11) chords in bar 76 *etc.* B1 scale motives are often preceded by a B half-diminished chord (bars 33, 85, 88, 100, 103)[4]. There are other chords separating the arpeggiated figures, not necessarily being resolution points; F major chord in bars 22, 25, and 31, G minor7 chord in bar 29, Eb minor chord in bar 42, F half-diminished chord in bars 44 and 49, Eb minor7 chord in bar 46, Bb major(#11) chord in bar 62, a sort of A sus chord in bars 72, 84 and 90.[5] Although the "definable" chordal structures are fairly rare in Cecil Taylor's language, they represent an important part of the composition skeleton.



D7/A chord, 3rd inversion, bar 2



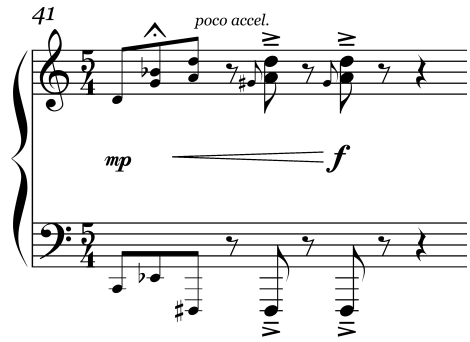
D7/A chord, 3rd inversion, bars 4 and 5



D7 chord, 2nd inversion, bar 23

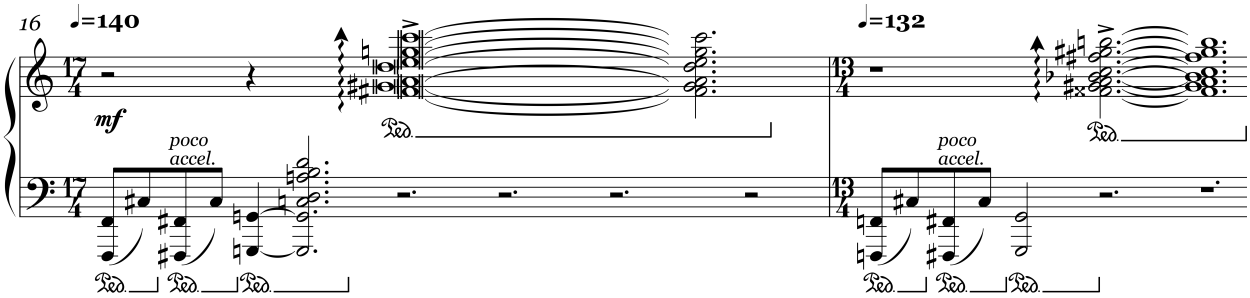
4 see *Appendix A-4, A-11, A-13, A-14*

5 see *Appendix A-3 to A-6, A-8 to A-11*



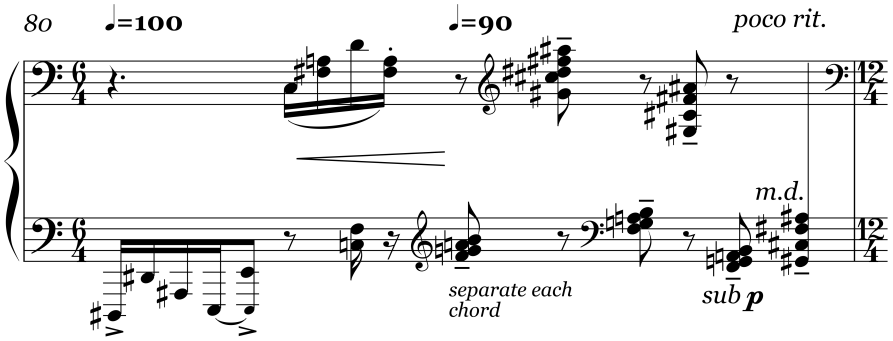
D^7 chord, 2nd inversion, bar 41

At times, chords appear as a coloristic element: like in bars 16 and 17:

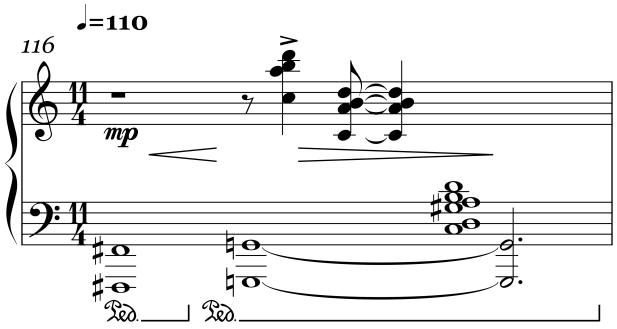


Chords as a color effect, bars 16 and 17

Sometimes such chords repeat in several octaves; bars 80-81, 92, 94, 116-117:

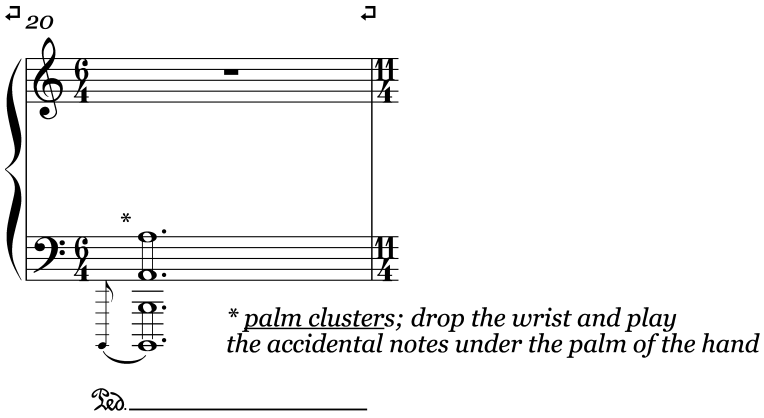


Chords repeating in various octaves, bar 80



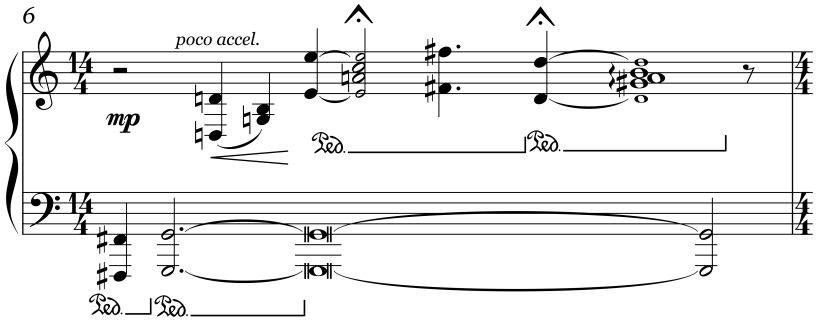
Chords repeating in various octaves, bar 116

As a coloristic element and a resting point between smaller or larger formal sections, Taylor also uses wide range clusters (possibly played by the whole palm of the hand).



Wide-range palm cluster, bar 20

Chordal structures can be identified also within *montuno* figures- in the following example a G-major chord, an A-minor chord and a D-major 6th chord (with added #4).



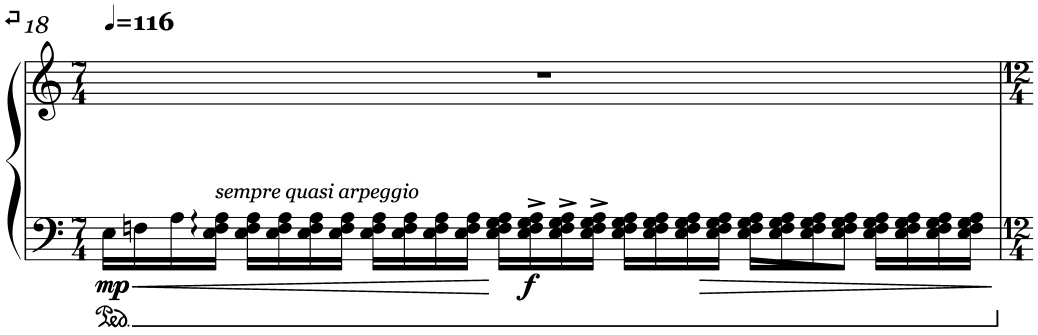
Sustained bass- *montuno* gesture exchange, bar 6

d) (Clustered) chord repetitions/runs

Even though clustered chords (especially chromatic clusters) play a prominent role in Taylor's language, they don't appear as much in this particular piece- perhaps due to its ballad character. The (clustered) chord repetitions and runs form the transition material, separating

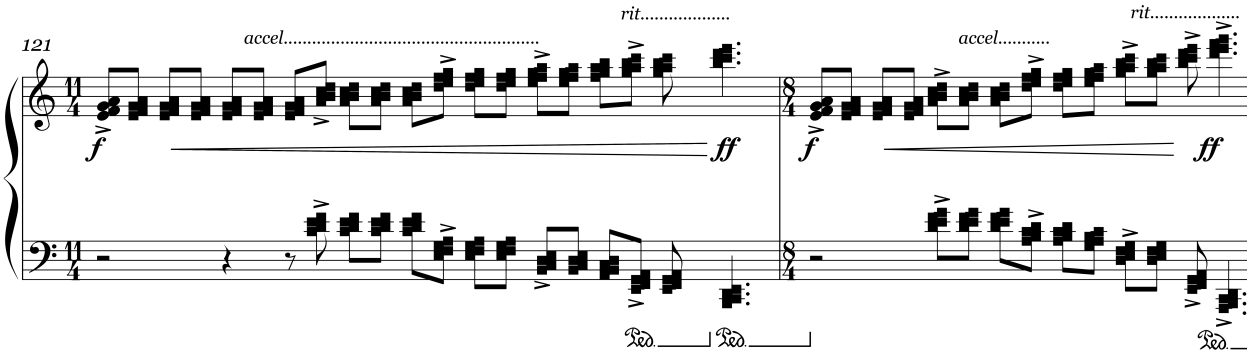
(smaller or larger) sections of the composition. There are diatonic and chromatic clustered chords in this piece.

The diatonic cluster repetitions have a transitory function. An example of such structure appears soon after the opening, in bar 18:



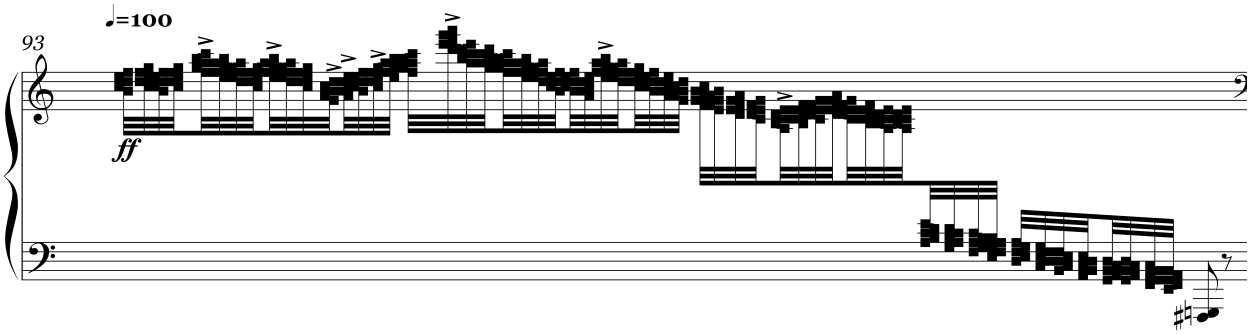
Diatonic clusters, bar 18

Another example of diatonic clustered material is at the beginning of the last part of the composition, in bar 118, starting with (similarly to bar 18) diatonic three-note chords, that move upwards and at the point split into a counter motion in bars 121 and 122.



Diatonic clusters, bars 121 and 122

The only ‘signature’ high speed, impeccably loud, energetic chromatic cluster run happens in bar 93:



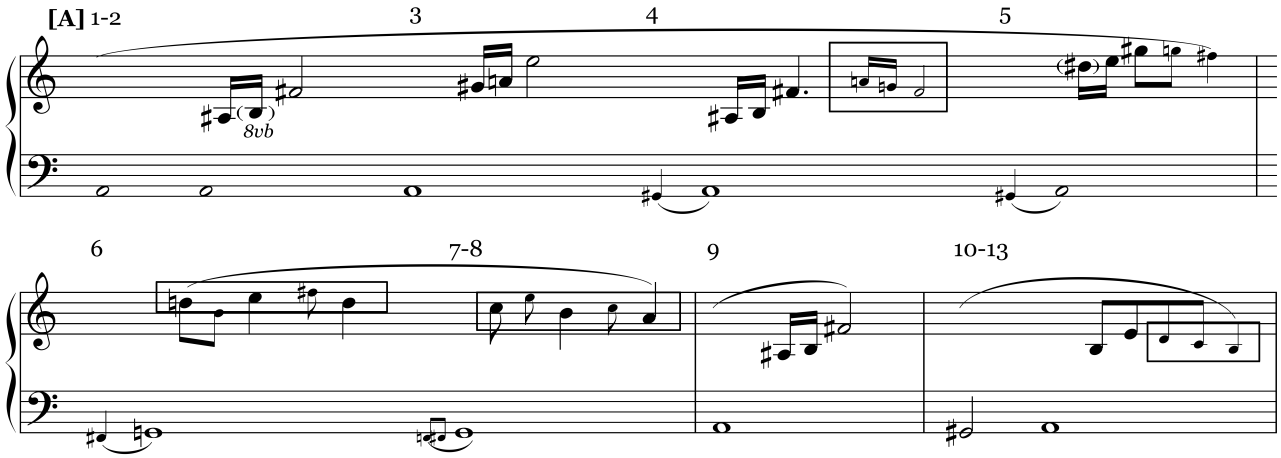
Chromatic-clusters run, bar 93

This bar appears to be the culmination and resolution point towards which he is building the material patiently.

Apart from having a transitory function, clustered structures also serve as a coloristic and textural element that thins the more concrete material.

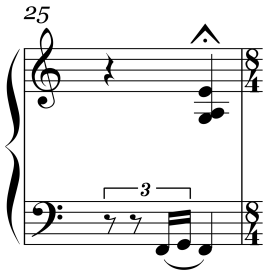
Intervals

One of the factors that contribute to the coherence of Cecil Taylor's language is the consistency in the choice of intervals- I am referring to the intervals between two (or more) notes played simultaneously; dyads and chords, as well as to the intervalic relationship between single notes within a melodic line. If we take a look at the simplification of the opening bars of the piece (section [A])[6], we observe that the melodic lines are constructed mainly with whole steps, fifths and (chromatic) passing notes. Lower voice is consistently played in octaves (see the full transcription in the appendix).



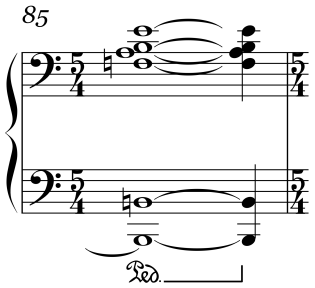
Simplification of the opening bars

Similarly, the chords throughout the composition are often voiced using seconds, fourths and fifths:

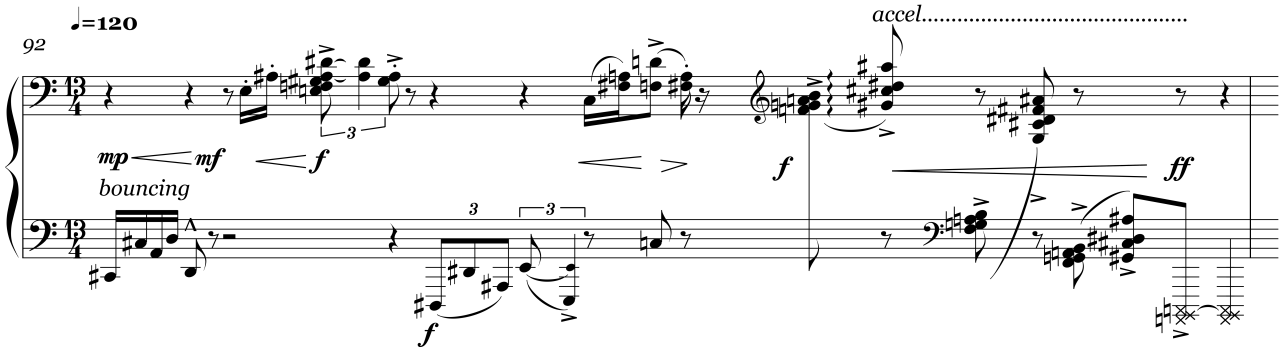


Fma^{9} chord, bar 25

6 note: for easier visual distinction between the scales and the sections, I use [] parentheses when mentioning sections and no parentheses when mentioning scales.



B half-diminished chord with added 4th, bar 85

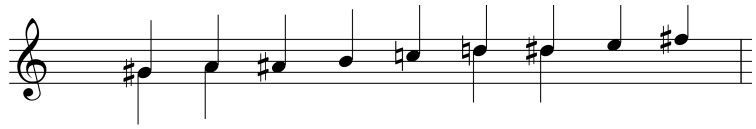


Various chords, constructed with seconds and fourths, bar 92

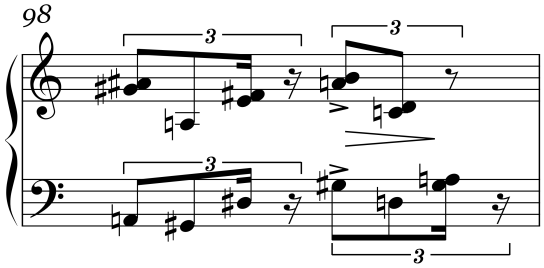
Chromatic elements

There is a fair amount of chromatic elements in Taylor's playing. As we can notice in the 'simplification of the opening' on the previous page, he uses chromatic passing and approach notes in the melodic lines. The chromatic motion is dominant in the bass/'root' movement throughout the piece, especially in the slow sections (the beginning and the end).

Furthermore, some of the scales (such as *e.g.* G♯5) are very close to the chromatic scale. If we take a look at bar 98, we can notice the dense chromatic texture within an arpeggiated figure.



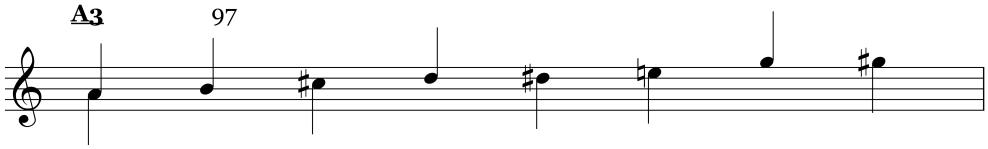
G♯5 scale



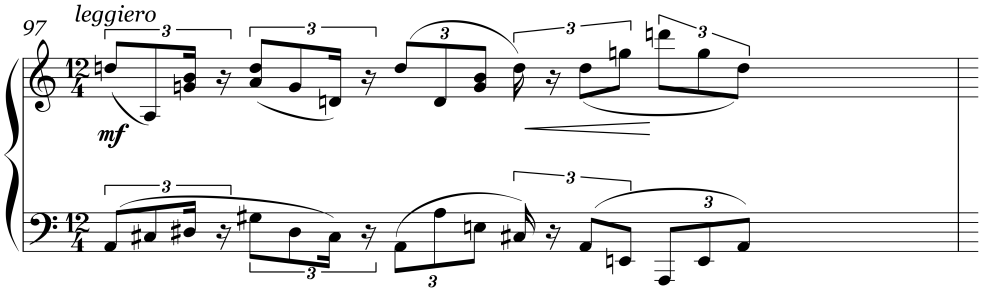
G♯5 scale inside an arpeggiated figure, bar 98

The scale A3 contains many half-steps as well - it is in fact resembling scales A1 and A2, with the addition of the half steps.

However, compared to G♯5 scale, A3 has a more polytonal logic: the lower voice is outlining an A-lydian sonority and the top a G major[9] sonority.



A3 scale



A3 scale within the arpeggiated figure, bar 97

Register

Cecil Taylor relates the registers to the cosmological areas: "...two or three octaves below middle C is the area of the abyss, and the middle range is the surface of the earth, the astral being the upper register."(Figi, 1975) In this particular piece, Cecil Taylor's focus is on the middle to low register of the piano, which I believe he generally feels attracted to in a solo setting. An indicator of this preference is his love for the 97-keys Boesendorfer (an extra octave places the middle C in the actual middle of the keyboard).

The register also affects his use of intervals in this piece. In the middle register he tends to use small intervalic motion, while in the low and the high register, the intervals are generally broader (this is also a consequence of mirrored motion in his playing).

Rhythm

> Another time Taylor sang a four-note sequence and asked the group to play it twice. "But I also want you to break up the rhythm," he added. "These notes are divided into different rhythmic registers, and that could be the basis of a whole improvisational..." Rather than complete his sentence, Taylor demonstrated five or six variations at half-speed. "Anything is possible," he said. "Let's try it."(Panken, 2001)

One of the most prominent and altogether important elements in Taylor's music is his treatment of rhythm and pulse. His piano playing has been described as percussive and compared to a dance; as he says

himself, he is trying “to imitate on the piano the leaps in space a dancer makes.” The rhythms are arguably the most engaging aspect of his music.

Ekkehard Jost describes Taylor’s rhythmic component as ‘energy’, claiming that the dynamic impetus of the motion in his music doesn’t arise from the typical jazz off-beat phrasing (like in swing) but from combining “the parameters of time, intensity and pitch, thereby creating a new musical quality, *energy*”, which is not an equivalent of power or intensity (measured in decibels), but a variable of time. “It creates, motion, or results from motion.” (Jost, 1994, p.69)

I believe Taylor generates the energy and motion Jost is referring to, with the combination of dynamics, articulation, pitch material (scales), *ambitus* (of the arpeggiated figures) and the constant change of the pulse. The idea about pulse fluctuation might derive consciously from an example of nature. In the documentary *All the notes*, Taylor speaks about playing along the movement of a tree (as opposed to the metronome). In this solo performance we are able to determine the pulse of an individual phrase quite clearly, but his rhythmical structures grow more complex/polyrhythmic in the compositions for groups and large ensembles. There, he deals with the energy of each performer, allowing every individual a place to express, since rhythm is the parameter of music by which a musician is able to manifest his own physicality and existence. For Taylor, rhythm also proves the existence of time, which gives space to the other elements in the music: “Rhythm then is existence and existence time, content offers time quantity to shape: color, mental physical participation.” (Taylor, 1966)

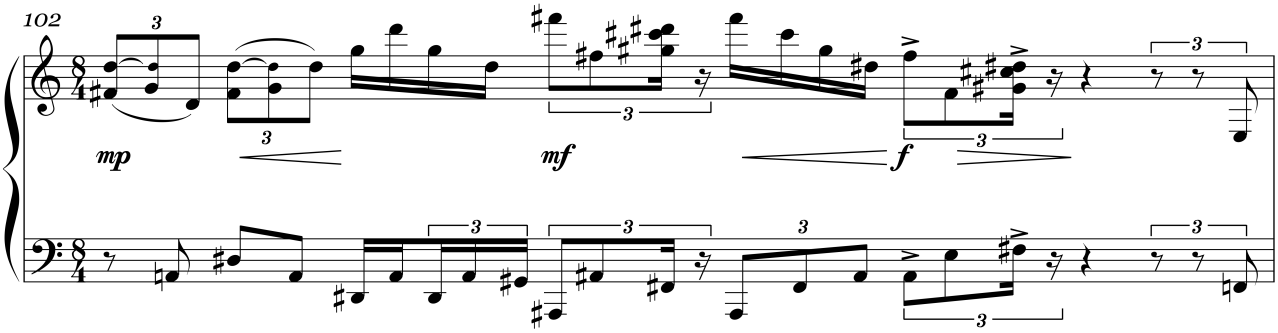
Cecil Taylor has many thoughts on rhythm, beat and motion. There are a number of philosophical ideas about the rhythm in connection with space, time, force and motion in his poetic liner notes for 1966 record *Unit Structures*:

> Rhythm is life the space of time danced thru.
>
> The root of rhythm is its central unit of change.
>
> Rhythm-sound energy found in the amplitude of each time unit.
>
> Rhythms, regular and irregular measuring coexisting bodies of sound.
>
> Acceleration result succession of multiple time compression area.
>
> Beat is physical commitment to Earth force.

These six statements present some of Taylor’s thoughts on rhythm, pulse and energy. He sees rhythm as an abstract and in some sense mystic element, but at the same time connected (more than any other musical component) with the cosmic energy and existence. Pulse is present in Earth’s rotation and has a quality of constant change. He finds the rhythm related to space and dance. Rhythm is an embodied element,

helping people to connect and coexist (in sound). The acceleration and retardation compress and stretch the time, play with its relativity.

One of the characteristics of the arpeggiated figures/phrases is the rhythmic unison. His textures don't involve much rhythmic polyphony, which underlines the motion within them. Nevertheless, if we listen closely, not all the notes are in an exact rhythmic unison, which creates a tension and a motion, by giving the individual lines a certain independence and direction.



Rhythmic polyphony of the two voices, bar 102

The basic rhythmic element in this piece, as well as in most of his other solo piano compositions, is the triplet. The triplet is the prevalent African diasporic rhythmic element, and since rhythm is one of the most vital parts of Taylor's music, I believe this choice was carefully considered, taking into an account his African heritage and his jazz experience.

The triplets are present from the opening melodic fragments throughout the piece, as an indicator of the general underlying subdivision. They are (most noticeably), the main ingredient of the arpeggiated figures (and therefore the prevailing texture in the composition).

Due to the constant pulse fluctuation, it was quite a challenge to transcribe the rhythms of Cecil Taylor and I was at first considering the use of a proportional notation. I decided not to, because, as I mentioned, almost every phrase, with the exception of few completely free clustered textures (bar 118, for example)[7], has its own pulse. I limited myself to sixteenth-note being generally the shortest value and for the most part I use only the triplets from the tuplets. It is impossible in this way to notate exactly all the richness in Taylor's rhythmic variations, but I believe a complex, exact notation would not be suitable, since it would not show properly his rhythmic ideas.

7 see *Appendix A-15*

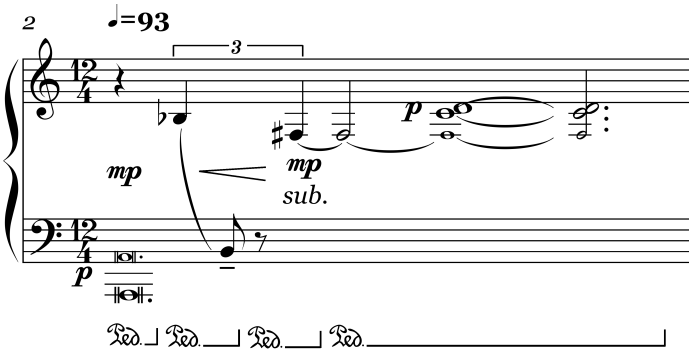
Expression Tools

Dynamics

"Measurement of sound is its silences. Acknowledging silence is definition in absence." (Taylor, 1966)

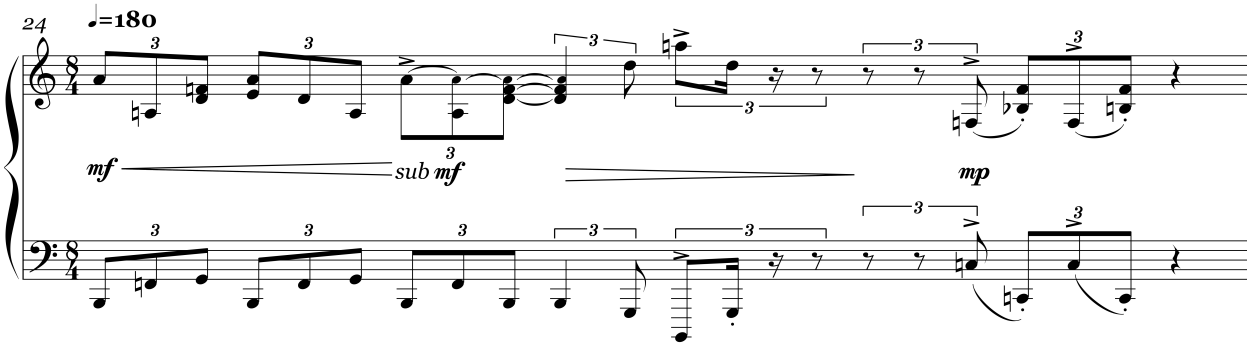
Cecil Taylor's sensibility in terms of dynamics is for me one of the most fascinating aspects of his playing. By using its extremes within a split second, he is creating rhythmic illusions and simultaneously unfolding a vast color palette. He is working with dynamics within phrases rather than within sections- it is the differences in the density and nature of the material that create dynamics in the bigger picture.

There are places where, especially in the slow sections, every note of the phrase has a different intensity, for example, in bar 2 (the smaller note A in the left hand indicates that the top voice is softer than the bottom one):



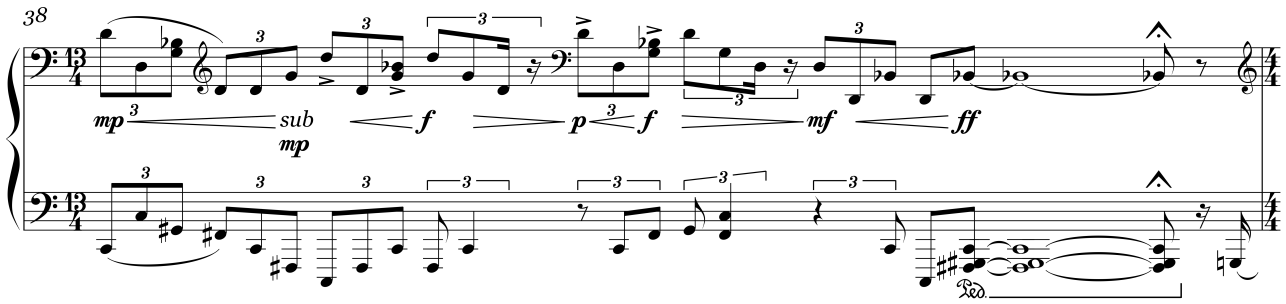
Dynamics within a phrase, bar 2

The case of crescendo between ***mp*** and subsequent subito ***mp***; that is, starting with a certain dynamic, making a crescendo and suddenly going back to the starting dynamic appears in many places. Another example:



Dynamics within a phrase, bar 24

Especially within longer arpeggiated figures, the dynamics are often parallel with the *ambitus* of the phrase. When it broadens, there is a crescendo and vice versa, when the two lines approach each other, there is a decrescendo.

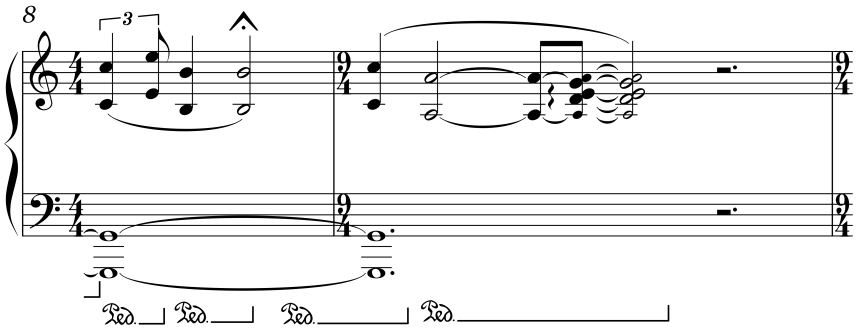


Ambitus of the phrase parallel with the dynamics change, bar 38

Pedaling

Listening to Taylor's use of sustain pedal, I've noticed many peculiar instances, where pedaling creates a specific color effect or surprising turn in the texture. The first such surprise happens in bar 1,[8] when he suddenly removes a pedal for a second, as if deciding to start the piece again. Another surprise follows in bar 10, when he unexpectedly changes the pedal in the middle of the phrase, letting go of the low-register resonance for the first time.

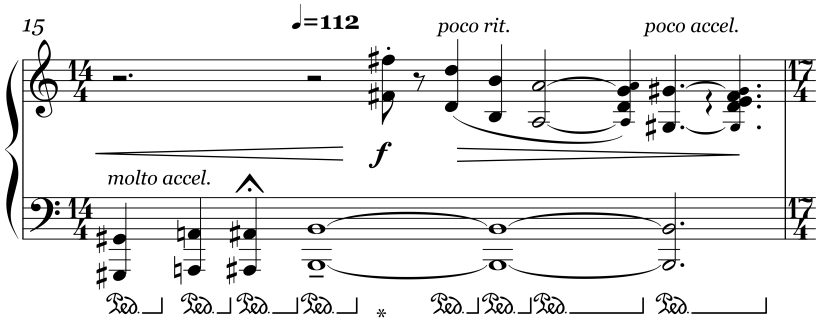
At times he likes to add some blur and softness to the melodic outline, so he changes the pedal less than expected:



Sustaining the pedal to connect the phrases, bar 8

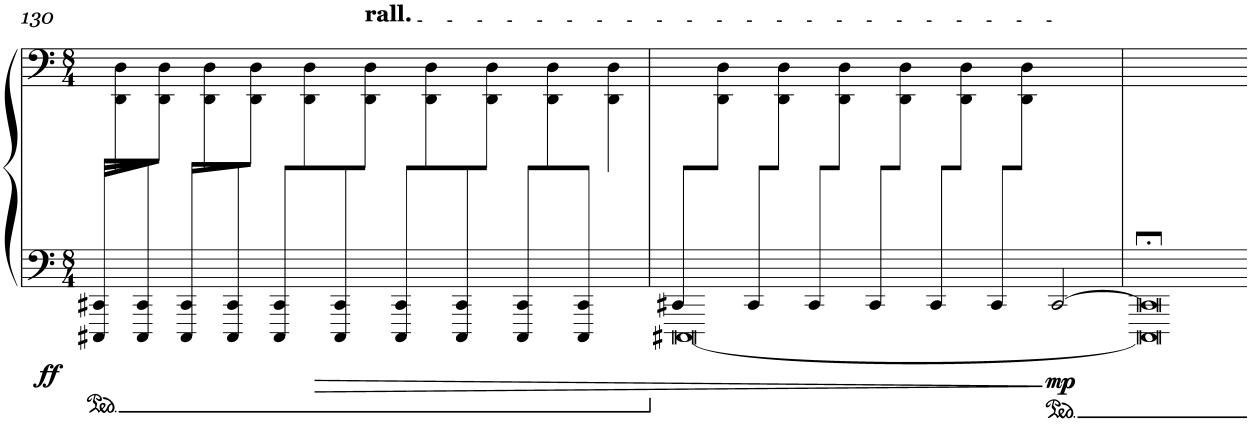
Another beautiful detail happens in bar 15, where he omits the sustain pedal for one *staccato* note at the climax of the phrase:

8 see *Appendix A-1*



Absence of pedal at the peak point of the phrase, bar 15

Among many other examples, his choice of pedaling is interesting also in the very last phrase of the composition, where he removes the pedal as the dynamics are getting softer, as if to disguise the two octaves that were forming the texture.



Pedaling in the last three bars, 130-132

Personal technique

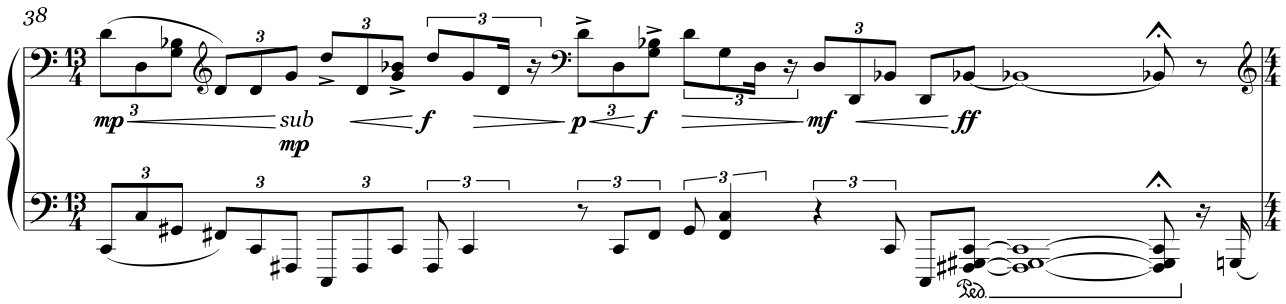
Photo of Cecil Taylor in motion, All About Jazz Archive (*www.allaboutjazz.com*)

> Now, the only difference is that certain people wish to notate their improvisations. That's all. And other people improvise – now what does that mean? It simply means that these people who choose to improvise utilize certain physical things in their characteristics and transpose them to the instruments and, after a certain amount of years, these things take shape in a form... (Weston, n.d./1964)

Taylor's statement illustrates the process improvisor experiences in search of his own language and this process inevitably includes his physical features and abilities. "...[A]n improvisor's original playing style is bound up with his or her (possibly idiosyncratic or self-styled) technique. Usually the autodidactic approach plays a large role for improvisors, for whom the creation of music is embodied in one's relationship to one's instrument..." (Iyer, 1998, chapter 4) It is an important fact, that by the time Taylor involved himself in the improvised music (as an autodidact), he already was an accomplished pianist. Hence he has embodied a specific pianistic logic; needless to mention, this technique was much different from the technique of other jazz pianists, who mostly built their language on stride piano, boogie-woogie or later styles (such as be-bop *etc.*).

Many of his hand-centered figures involve in some way an interval of an octave (a very comfortable interval on the instrument). One of Cecil

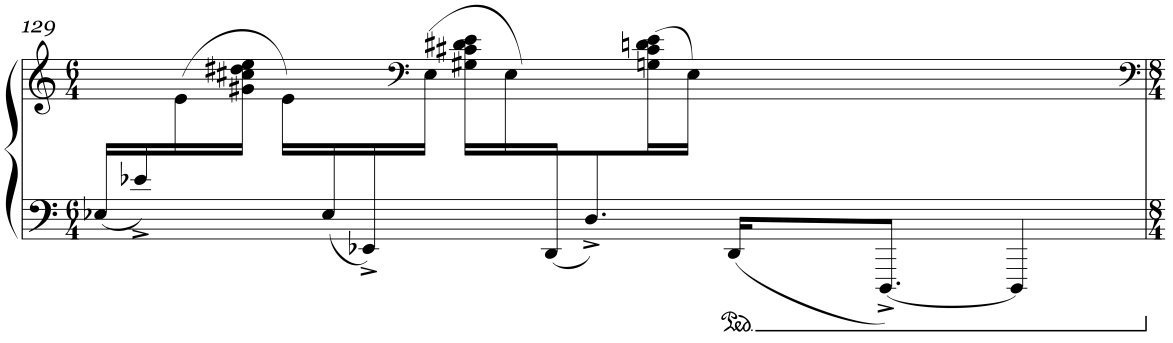
Taylor's most characteristic, octave-based patterns, that possibly derives from his formal piano studies, is the arpeggiated figure. Often times the arpeggiated figure is executed in counter motion, in groups of three or four notes, out of which the last (or at times the first) of the group is a dyad, outlining the harmony. This type of hand motion and finger action resembles the basic arpeggio warming-up exercises and lays quite naturally in pianist's fingers. It is interesting that Taylor uses a fair amount of counter motion, which is a very natural hand/arm movement. Often times when a (non-musician) mimes a piano player, he moves his hands horizontally in counter motion. Yet not many improvisors or jazz pianists use it (it is, again, more prominent in classical repertoire).



A typical arpeggiated figure, built inside an octave (D in the right and C in the left hand) bar 38

We can see these arpeggiated figures also as dissected *montunos*, repeating themselves in different octaves. *Montuno* itself is a figure that fits well in the palm of pianist's hand.

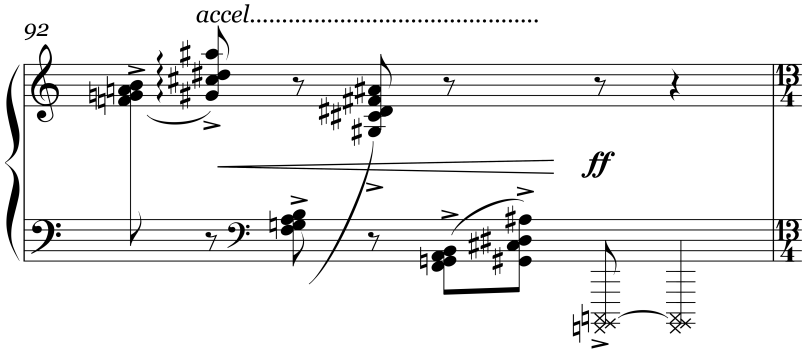
Another very pianistic gesture, which Taylor possibly drew from Cuban music is octave arpeggios, half step apart (in this case with added chords).



Idiomatic playing at a very high speed (♩=180), bar 129

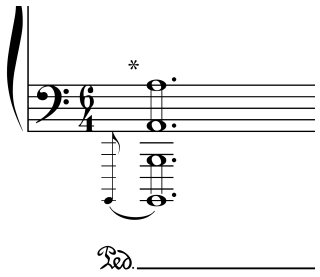
When dealing with chords, specifically clusters, Taylor at times seems to be using the most elemental treatment of the piano, by separating white keys and black keys. In bars 18-21 and 118-122 we can observe clusters on white keys only and in bar 92 there is a white keys-black keys chord 'exchange'. Similarly, the beginning of part [D] starts with

white keys- black keys dyad exchange. This type of treatment enhances the difference in the two instrument inherent sonorities.



White keys- black keys chord exchange, bar 92

A distinct sound color is created by the palm clusters. They often appear after an octave arpeggio and are executed by simply dropping the wrist, letting the weight of the arm press down the accidental keys under the palm of the hand.



Palm clusters, bar 20

A type of kinesthetically derived material is the rapid chromatic cluster runs which demand a great amount of velocity and power. This uncommon approach to piano displays the percussive properties and possibilities of the instrument (see bar 93).[9]

At times, Cecil is using the technique of sliding a finger from black to white key; utilized often in a blues-influenced musics. This technique creates an illusion of bending notes and is another of “hand-centered logic” (Iyer, 1998) figures.

Interestingly, Taylor doesn’t use scale-runs, which are indeed a large part of the piano vocabulary, perhaps because they involve a specific finger-technique.

I believe Taylor’s language is a result of merging his personal technique with his musical intention. Taylor describes the playing of John Coltrane: “In short, [Coltrane’s] tone is beautiful because it is functional. In other words, it is always involved in saying something. You can’t separate the means that a man uses to say something from what

9 see *Appendix A-12*

he ultimately says. Technique is not separated from its content in a great artist." (Taylor, 1959, p. 34) This statement supports the notion, that Cecil Taylor's compositional intent blended with the ways of his limbs and digits; his idiosyncrasies to form his own language.

Cecil Taylor is not the only composer who developed a large part of his language on the piano. There are numerous pianists-composers in the classical history, who wrote their compositions in such fashion, *e.g.*, Chopin, Brahms, Lizst, Rachmaninoff, to name a few. In the jazz history the development of the stride piano is an example of a technique deriving from the inherit possibilities of the piano, in this case exposing the orchestrational aspect of the instrument. Art Tatum is probably the most illustrative pianist who mastered and expanded this technique to its extremes. In fact, Taylor's virtuosity, dexterity and prowess are often paralleled with Tatum's.

Indeed, the content of Taylor's and Tatum's languages differ greatly. Hoverwer, this fact isn't only a result of a different period in the jazz history, but also a result of two different bodies; *e.g.* Taylor's hands are much smaller than Tatum's and thus "find" other ways on the instrument. In fact, watching Taylor play, we observe the involvement of his whole body (even facial gestures), whereas Tatum sits still at the piano, astonishingly moving as possibly little as needed.

The connection between Taylor's sound and his physical motion is perhaps most noticeable in the (extreme) dynamics, which reinforce the rhythmic fluidity of his playing. Therefore, his body helps in creating the fluctuating pulse. The physical movement and the pulse are in his music, as well as in many other rhythm based musics, inseparable. "He seems to think of his music as a kinetic act, a ritual of place and ancestry, something that lives in bodies..." (Ratliff, 2012)

My experience with practicing the transcription of *Life As...* differs from my original expectations. From watching Taylor play, I suspected he executes most of the arpeggiated figures "from" his arms, whereas in fact they involve a lot of finger work and hand positioning. One must move his hands quickly, parallel and close to the keyboard from one position to the other and work the material by finger action. The weight of the arm though helps to execute the dynamics. Another interesting physical experience is the effect on the hands after playing the rapid clustered structure in bar 93. The fingers need to hit the keys with a great force and velocity, and therefore become extremely agile and flexible, which is just the opposite of what I expected.

Even though or maybe because the material Taylor is using (the types of chords, the arpeggios, the percussive clusters *etc.*) derives from a "hand-centered logic", his sound and language are very unique due to the way he contextualizes and works with his material.

Structure

"The concepts of musical organization now have to be broadened to accommodate the worldwide awareness of music." (Taylor in an interview with Funkhouser, 1995)

I believe structure has a special place in Taylor's music. Since "Life As..." is a free improvisation, I was most curious to discover his way of navigating the form. The structure is very difficult to define from a first listening, but one can definitely sense it. A close look at the piece reveals a very clear form, with distinctive parts, that have their melodies, bass motion, *etc.* Part of why the separate parts are not obvious is because of the way he interprets them; he likes to stretch or shrink the phrases, add a full stop in the middle of them, play with the extreme dynamics, vary the tempo and alternate the pitch material (scales).

"My music is constructionistic, that is, it is based on the conscious working-out of a given material."(Taylor in an interview with Noames, 1965) It is fascinating in Cecil Taylor's music, how each of the notes he plays seems to have a place in the composition, a place in the phrase but also an individual life, a direction of its own. He uses motives with similar movements and intervalic figures, sometimes alone, sometimes intriguingly juxtaposed one on top of the other, and even though they might be similar in form to one another, each of them has its own way to go, its own color and tension. It seems that he is always in control of the direction, but simultaneously manages to surprise himself. "Each piece is choice; architecture particular in grain, the specifics question-layers are disposed deposits arrangements." (Taylor, 1966)

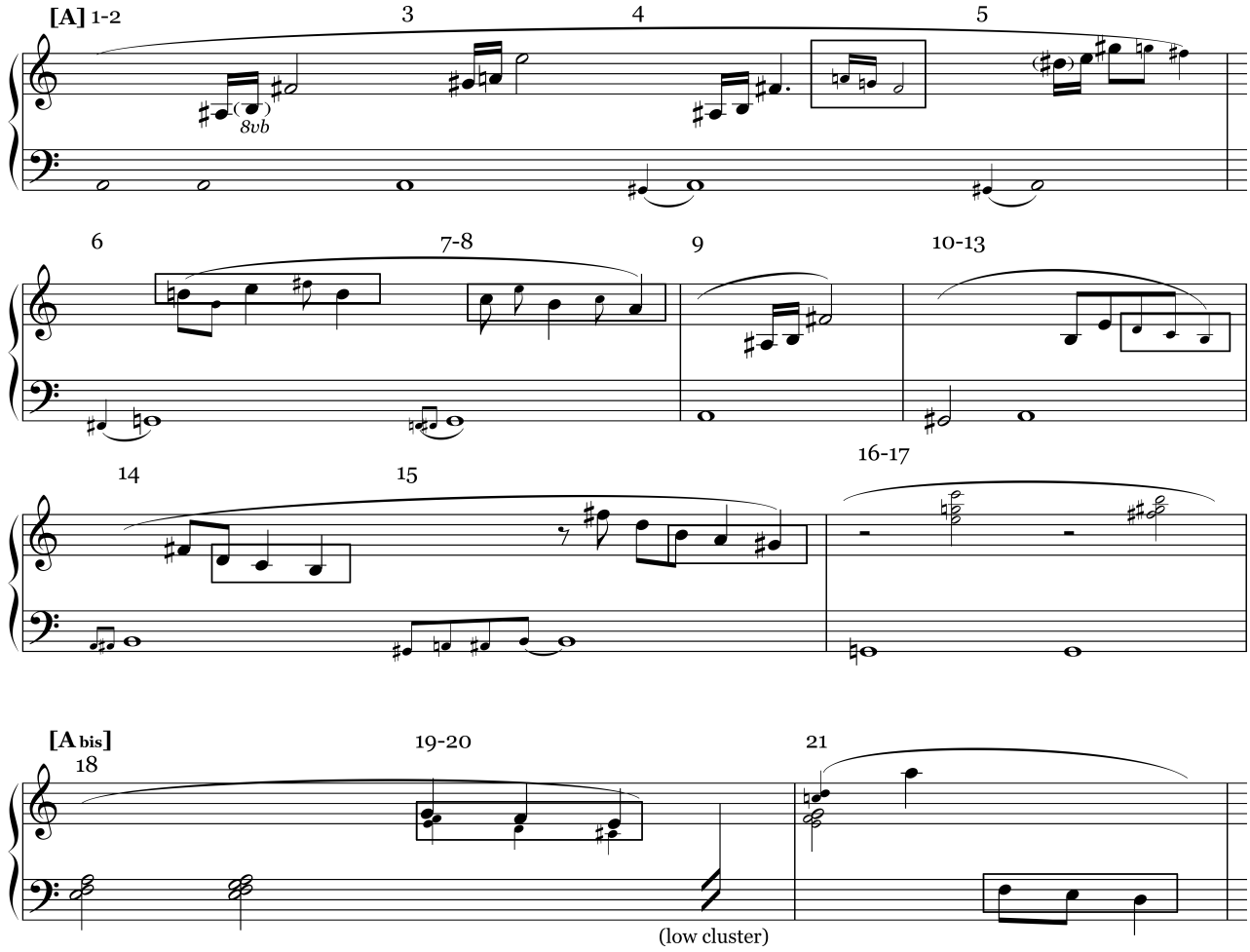
Cecil Taylor does not use the traditional concept of form in jazz, where a particular harmonic sequence delineates the overall structure of the piece, but he does, in my opinion, use the idea of a melody with a bass movement as the framework, as a silent song in the background. In addition, he is using very specific pre-composed motives. I believe the structure of the piece was not determined beforehand- he most likely prepared the possible ingredients of the composition and decided the sequence and the shape of them on the spot, he improvised them. As he compares improvisation to 'self analysis', I believe his choice of the material, its development and variations are intuitive, depending on his surroundings and his state of mind at the moment of playing. "Form is a possibility; content, quality and change growth in addition to direction found." (Taylor, 1966)

It may be important, to mention at this point, that his improvisation within the structure does not only apply to his solo pieces but to ensemble pieces as well.

Life As... consists, in my opinion, of three main parts, possibly described as introduction, development and recapitulation. The introduction is in two parts ([A] and [A^{bis}], [A^{bis}] being a short transition), the development is roughly in three parts, ([B])-[C]-[D], [B] is consisting of two sequences). The recapitulation is, like the introduction in two parts ([E1] and [E2]), [E1] vaguely resembling [A].

Let's take a closer look at each part.

Introduction



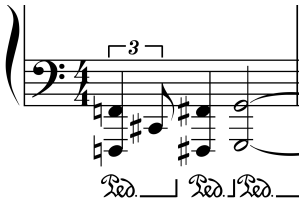
Simplified melodic outline of the Introduction

The piece opens in a slow, fairly static pulse. In this introduction, Taylor uses soft dynamics and a fair amount of the sustain pedal. Some of the core material of the composition is presented, such as the step-wise diatonic and chromatic motion of the bass (with the approaching fifths; see the example on the following page), octaves in the low voice, (descending) diatonic melodic motion, *montuno*-like right hand figures and diatonic clustered seconds as a transition material [A^{bis}]. The occasional *ritardandi* and *accelerandi* are an introduction to the

later pulse fluctuation. Together with the extreme dynamics, they are creating a strong *espressivo* character.

The opening phrases (bars 1-8) are similar in duration. From bar 9 on, the pulse becomes more fluctuating, the energy is starting to accumulate. The last two bars of [A] section are a sort of a transition to [A^{bis}] which is a transitional section itself, clearly separated from [A], serving as an energy accumulator. The melodic connection between [A] and [A^{bis}] is utilized by the descending figures (step-wise motion), indicated above by the rectangles.

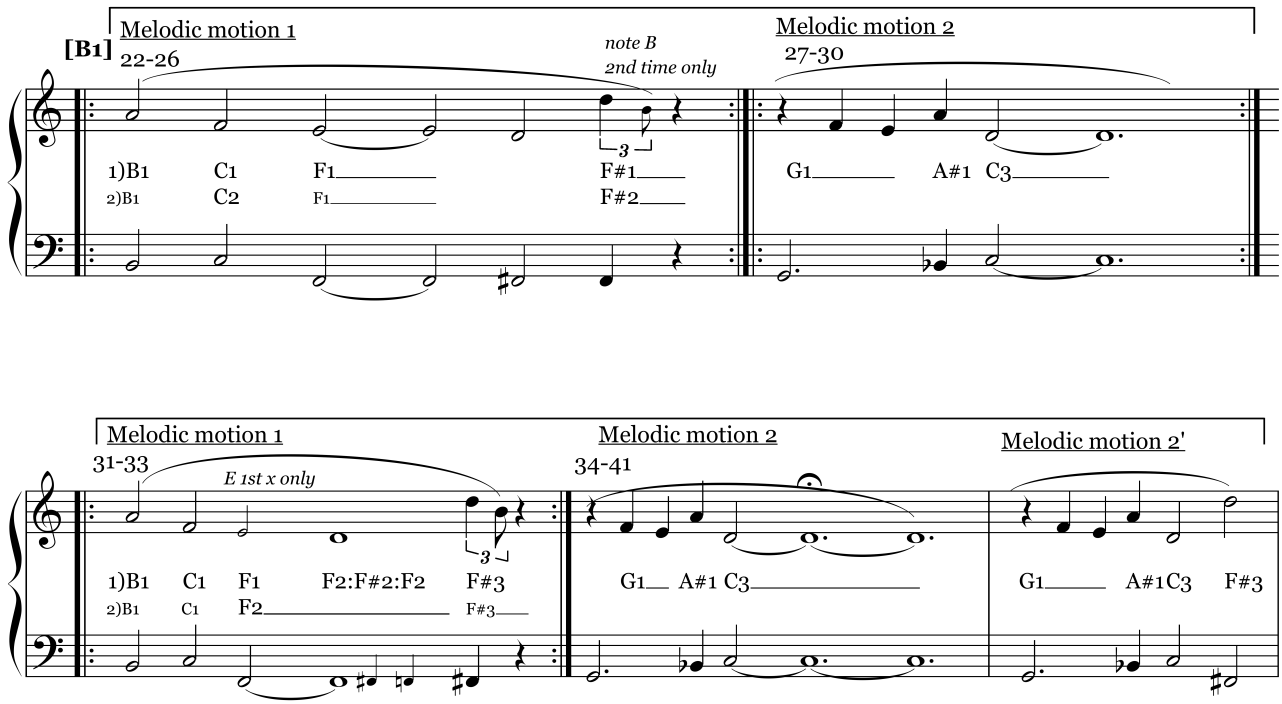
As I mentioned in the chapter *Intervals*, Cecil Taylor is quite consistent with the intervalic motion. There is the main, defining melodic motive of a half step and a fifth, in the opening bars (1-5), and in the following bars the focus is on the descending diatonic seconds with the approach notes (phrases inside the rectangles). The bass movement in part [A] is A-G-A-B-G, insinuating A as a sort of modal center. In [A^{bis}], the bass movement disappears (as in most of his transition parts)- the diatonic texture in the middle register takes over.



Typical bass movement; chromaticism with an approaching fifth, bar 7

Development

At 2’08”, the development starts - at first very ambiguously, but as soon as Taylor plays the first arpeggiated figure in bar 22, the new section becomes obvious. The development section consists predominantly of arpeggiated figures in various pulses, producing a distinctive forward motion. In the development section, we can observe Taylor’s intriguing interpretation of the prepared material.



Simplified melodic outline of [B1] with scales indications

The above figure shows an outline (with the scale markings[10]), of part [B1] which consists of merely two melodic motions. They both repeat themselves, and the configuration [2x Melodic motion 1 + 2x Melodic motion 2] repeats twice. The ending of the Melodic motion 1 (the triplet) is clearly and abruptly separating the two phrases. In all the repetitions, this separating point embraces blues influences; grace notes, triplets, and dominant sonority (in a function of a stable, resting point).

Even though the scheme is very simple, the form of [B1] isn't easily recognizable when listening to the recording. The repetitions differ in length and shape of the phrases, the pulse speed, the velocity of pulse fluctuation and the register. Thus, also the duration of each sonority (scale) in the context of arpeggiated figures differs from phrase to phrase, from repetition to repetition. In that sense, the two biggest deviations are: 1) Melodic motion 1 is much shorter in its first and longer in its second repetition. The audible differentiation is strengthened by the choice of the scales- C1 in first and C2 in the second repetition (the two scales only have three common pitches[11]). 2) The Melodic motion 2 in bars 34-38 (first repetition) has a prolonged ending, formed by an extensive phrase on C3 scale (bars 35-38), and in the second repetition (marked as Melodic motion 2') ends with an $F^{\#}$ root ($F^{\#}3$ scale).

This type of variety in the interpretation of a basic melodic outline is similar throughout the composition.

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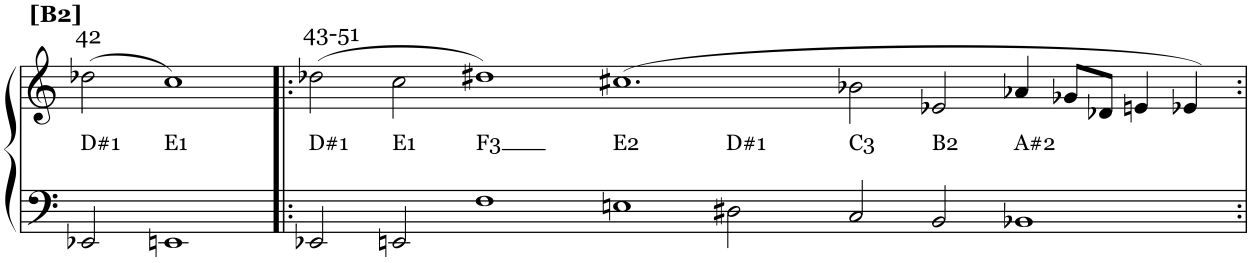
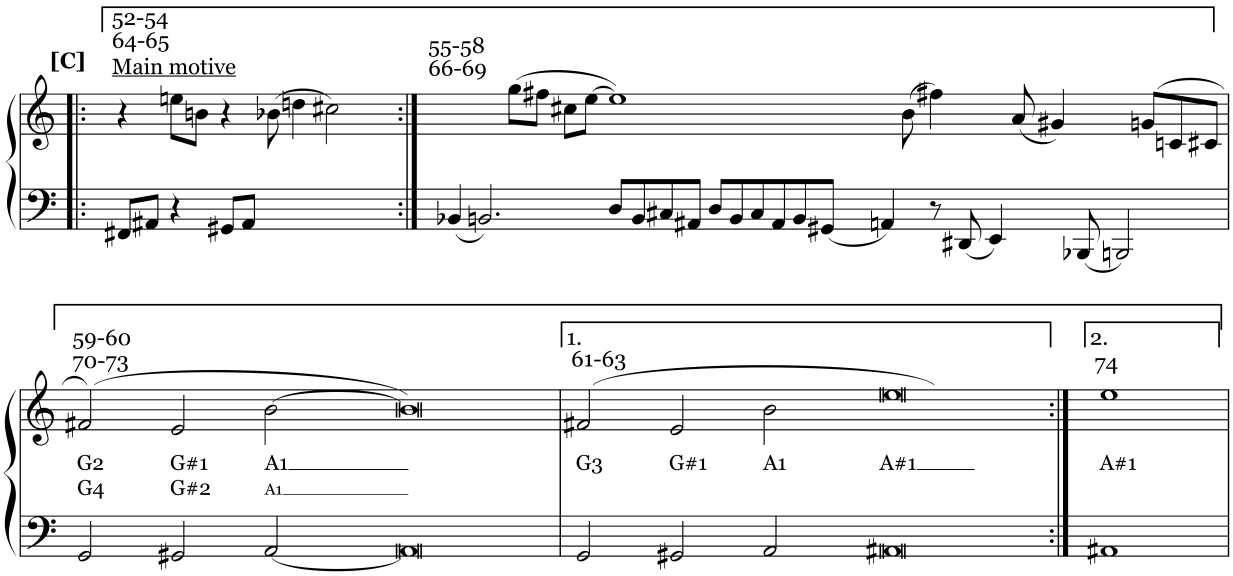
10 see *Appendix B*

11 see *Appendix B-3*



Melodic outline of [B2] with scales

Compared to part [B1], the pulse in part [B2] slows down and becomes more constant. The amount of information is thinned out. Taylor continues with arpeggiated figures, but moves into a higher register, and the figures alter constantly with short melodic gestures. Almost every arpeggiated figure ends in a suspense with a little melodic line, slowing down and holding the accumulated energy. The pulse is changing rapidly. [B2] repeats twice and the scales stay consistent in both repetitions, as well as the length of the phrases and the beautiful melodic motive at the end of the phrase (again, with the characteristic diatonic descents). We can clearly notice the chromatic bass movement; (Eb-E-F-E-Eb)-(C-B-Bb). The blues-influenced elements (see bars 44 and 49[12]) appear at the beginning of scale F3 (bar 44 and 49) in both repetitions as a sort of resting point (with a dominant sonority).



Simplification of part [C], bars 52-74

Part [C] begins with a particular Main motive, very different from the material we've heard so far. The *staccato* octaves without pedal (bar 52[13]) are breaking the momentum created by all the arpeggiated lines in

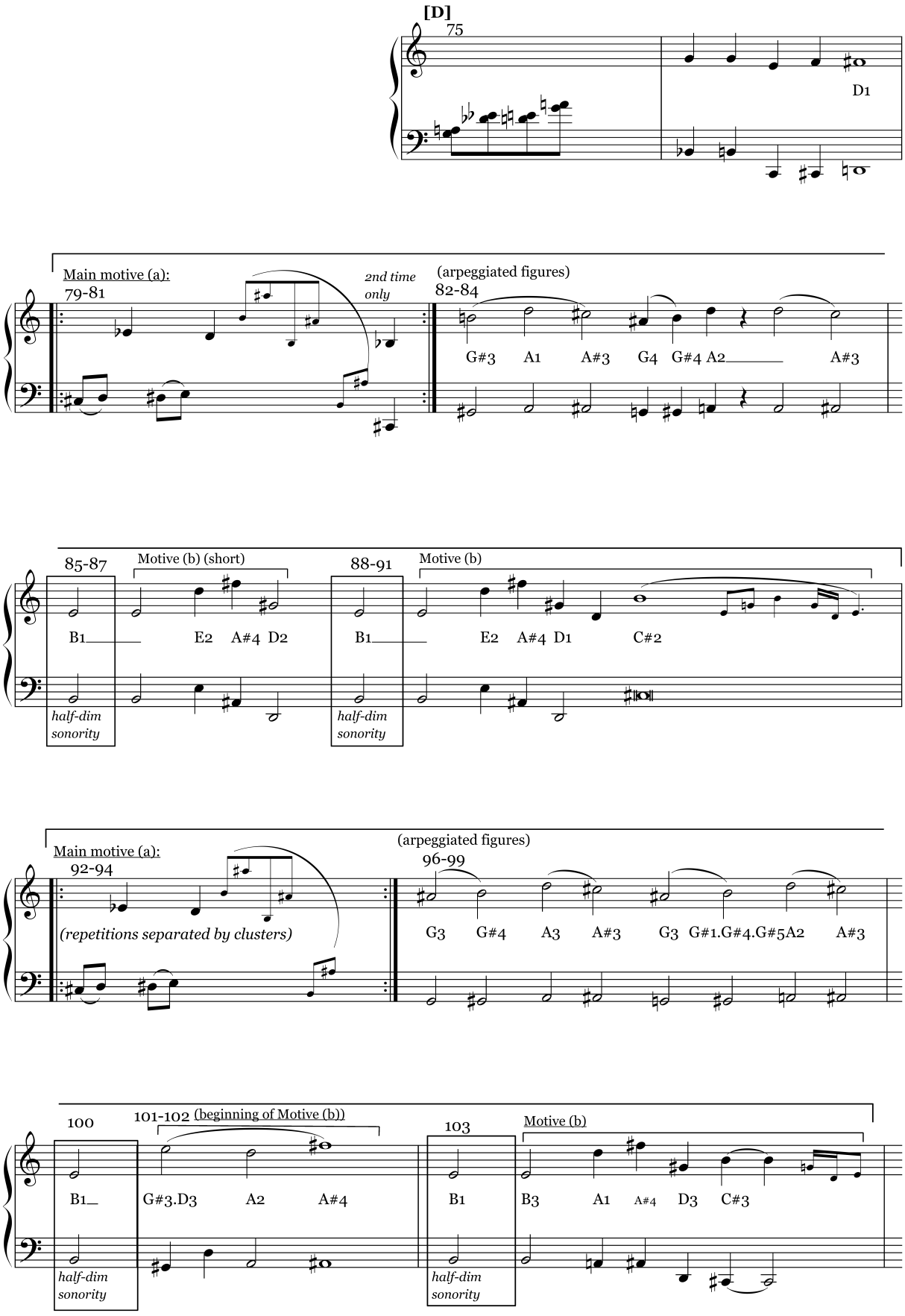
12 see *Appendix A-6*

13 see *Appendix A-7*

[B1] and [B2]. It is the only part of the composition with this type of *staccato* material. The quasi *montuno* element appears at several places. Part [C] consists of two contrasting parts; the motivic first part and arpeggiated second part (using almost the same scales in both repetitions). The second part is in the second repetition (bars 70-73) by the character much more connected to the first part of [C], and less to [B].

Scale G1 and G3 are similar to each other, as well as $G^{\#}1$ and $G^{\#}2$. The rest of the scales are the same in both repetitions.[14] Part [C] is more clearly split in smaller sections than the previous parts and has a sort of static energy, probably due to the arpeggiated section with constant pulse (bars 59-63 and 70-74). As mentioned, it is repeated twice, second repetition being slightly shorter variation of the first one, with some extra repeated notes (not included in the above simplification). The main motive makes the [C] part very distinctive due to its *staccato* and dry sound.

14 see *Appendix B-4*



Simplification of part [D], bars 75-105

Part [D] is the most complex in structure. The changes in behaviors are very swift. The pulse changes ever so quickly, accumulating energy, with its peak in bar 93, where it manifests itself in a rapid cluster run.

The opening bars (75-78) are of a transitional nature, again featuring seconds, moving quickly on, to quasi-arpeggiated figure, two very concrete dominant(♭6,#11) chords half step apart, and more arpeggiated material, that leads to the Main motive (a). The motive consists of the typical chromatic bass motion with the approaching fifths (the root movement from $C^{\#}$ to E), answered by *montuno*-like figures and the very pianistic chords spread in a wide register (alternating between "white" keys and "black" keys). Because of the *montuno* figure, the Main motive (a) resembles the Main motive of part [C].

[D] section is in two parts as well. The Main motive (a) with its repetition appears twice, the second time (bars 92-94) the repetition is separated by the cluster run. The melodic outline of arpeggiated figures is almost identical in both parts (bars 82-84 and 96-99), with characteristic $G^{\#}4$ and $A^{\#}3$ scales and chromatic bass progression from $G^{\#}$ to B. The length of the phrases as well as the use of scales varies considerably. The tempo of the arpeggiated figures is the fastest in this section. A very distinctive Motive (b)- a melody inside arpeggiated figure with a rich texture of four consecutive scales- appears in both parts, being repeated as well, but not always in its complete version. A B-half diminished chord occurs before each Motive (b) as a resting point between the motive's repetition. Scale B1 has a defining sonic role in part [D].

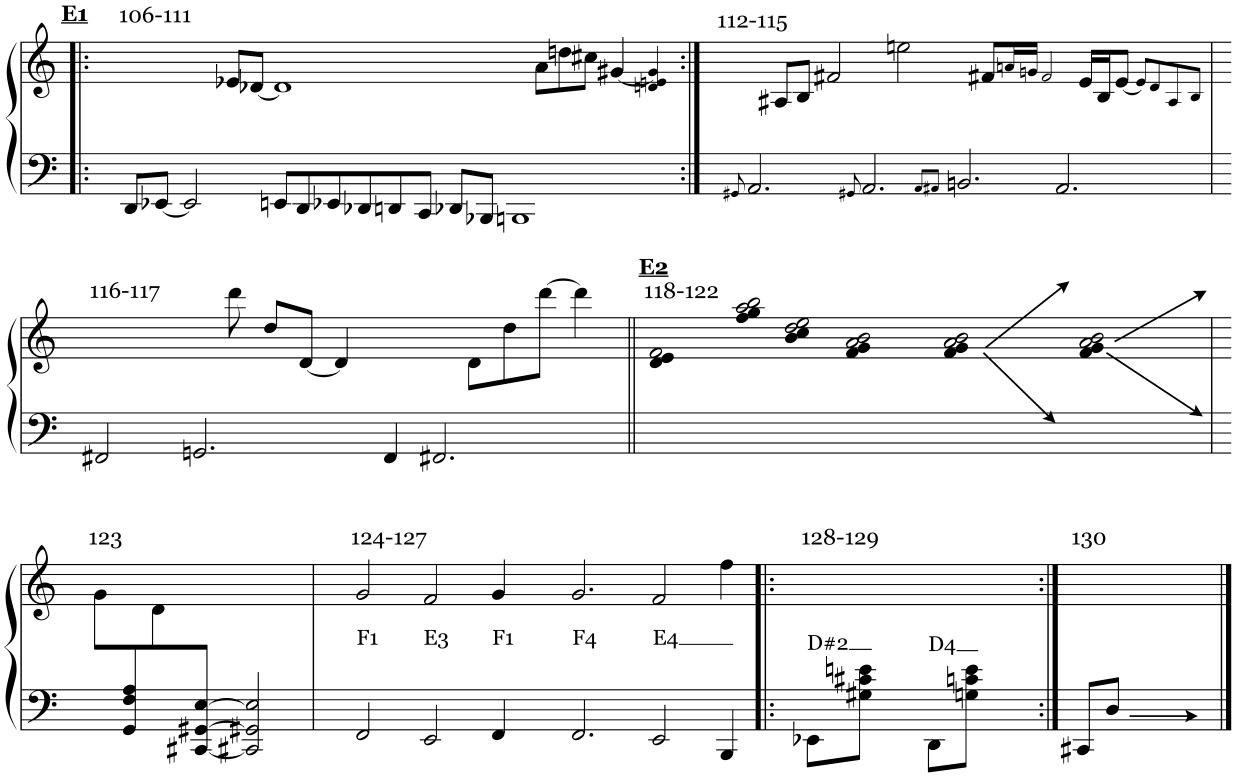
The expressive interpretation of the phrases, differences in the use of scales, unpredictable articulation and stretching/shrinking of the melodic movement, paraphrasing, actually, break the rigidity of the structure and make the two part structure of part [D] ambiguous and difficult to hear.

Recapitulation

The recapitulation starts in a slower, more regular pace with material similar to [D]'s Main motive (a) - a chromatic bass movement with *montuno*-like responses. The tempo of the pulse is close to the one of the introduction, allowing the instrument to resonate and the listener to digest the condensed material of the previous section. Recapitulation continues (bars 112-115) with a motive from the introduction (bar 4), defining itself more clearly as a recapitulation. The bass moves from A to B, back to A, and in the following bars (116-117) from $F^{\#}$ to G, back to $F^{\#}$, suggesting an inner two-part logic of part [E1]. Bars 116 and 117 resemble the second part of [D]'s Main motive (a) with a chord repeating itself in three octaves. [E1] is therefore a combination of the

character and motives from the introduction and the material from previous part ([D]).

The final part of the composition, part [E2] consists of a varied material, summing up the gestures from the whole composition. It starts with transitional, clustered diatonic chords, this time also in counter-motion outwards, leading into octave-chord 'exchange' (relating to the final gesture of the piece). It continues with an arpeggiated material, resembling the previous sections with a chromatic bass motion (F-E-F-E) in two parts, separated by a sustained chord. To conclude the piece, Taylor utilizes an octave-chord exchange (bass motion Eb-D) in an extreme speed, finishing with octaves exchange $C^{\#}$-D in *ritardando*. The bass motion of the section [E2] is thus a chromatic line: F-E-Eb-D-$C^{\#}$.



Simplification of parts [E1] and [E2], bars 106-131

Implications of tonalities

> ...[what] Taylor ha[s] done is to approach a kind of jazz that is practically nonchordal and in many cases atonal... [his] music does not depend on constantly stated chords for its direction and shape. Nor does it pretend to accept the formal considerations of the bar, or measure, line. In a sense, the music depends for its form on the same references as primitive blues forms. It considers the total area of its existence as a means to evolve, to move, as an intelligently shaped musical concept, from its beginning to its end. (Jones, 1963, p.226)

Life As..., as well as other Cecil Taylor's pieces have neither a functional harmonic structure, with definable tonalit(ies), nor are they atonal. However, Taylor is often "implying a tonality without being strictly tonal" (from a private conversation with V. Iyer, 2012). Looking at the macro harmonic structure of *Life As...*, we are able to observe certain tonal, or perhaps, modal centers. The following basic outline of the composition might help us determine them:[15]

We can theorize that the [A] section is in the key of G major (with its constant appearance of a D^7 chord), but the sound of this introduction in fact suggests a modality. The note A in the bass, with the approaching $G^{\#}$, implies an A-dorian mode. The transitory [A^{bis}] part is in the key of D-minor.

[B1] is probably the only section which offers a possibility for an actual functional harmonic analysis. It is undoubtedly in F-major; the harmonic progression is rather obvious; [IV-V-I-#I] inside the Melodic Motion 1 and [II-V] inside the Melodic Motion 2. The (#I) at the end of the Melodic Motion 1 is strong enough to suggest a modulation (which doesn't happen). Further on, the [II-V] progression in the Melodic Motion 2 is anything but obvious due to its "disproportionate" interpretation. The [V]-chord is in fact a suspended chord, and is treated as a resolution point (with a stable function).

Even though the modulation is obvious, the key of [B2] is harder to determine, but we can speculate an Eb-minor, the progression being: [I-#I-II-bII-I-IV-V]. The harmonic progression from [I] to [V] (E^bmi-B^bmi) outlines the shape of the two part section.

Section [C] is again suggesting an A dorian mode. A major part of the section (bars 55-58 and 66-69) suggest a clear B-minor tonality, whereas the beginning (Main Motive) and the arpeggiated sections gravitate towards A.

The key of section [D] is hard to define. We can hear the $C^{\#}$-minor as a home key, since the $C^{\#}$mi chord is concluding each of the section repetitions (bars 91 and 105). The progression of the arpeggiated figures would be [#IV-V-bVI-VI]-[VII-VI-IV-II-(I)]. We can also determine D as a lydian modal center. The two indicators of this

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15 see Appendix C

modality are the beginning of the section ($C^{\#}$-D bass progression) and the ending of the Motive(b); in the second repetition of the motive, the ending is extended to $C^{\#}$-minor. The obvious B-half-diminished sustained chords suggest a modulation, which doesn't happen.

Section [E] is by sonority close to the beginning of the piece. The section starts with E^{b}-minor- B-minor sequence. Further on, we can hear an A-dorian mode again. The beginning of [E2] is suggesting a D-minor (the texture is similar to [A^{bis}]), and the whole piece ends up with the chromatic bass descend to $C^{\#}$, suggesting $C^{\#}$-minor as the final key center.

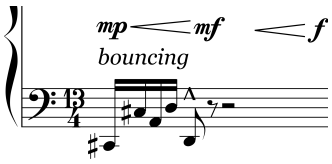
The key centers of the five major parts of this piece would therefore be: A-dorian; F-major; E^{b}-minor; A-dorian; $C^{\#}$-minor; A-dorian; $C^{\#}$-minor.

More than an information about the harmonic degrees and tonal/modal centers, this type of analysis gives an overview of the different sonorities in the piece.

There are specific figures, with which Taylor implies the tonal/modal key centers. The most obvious are a) the chromatic movement of the bass, and b) the counter-motion of the outside voices to a minor/major tenth (similarly with the use of chromaticism).

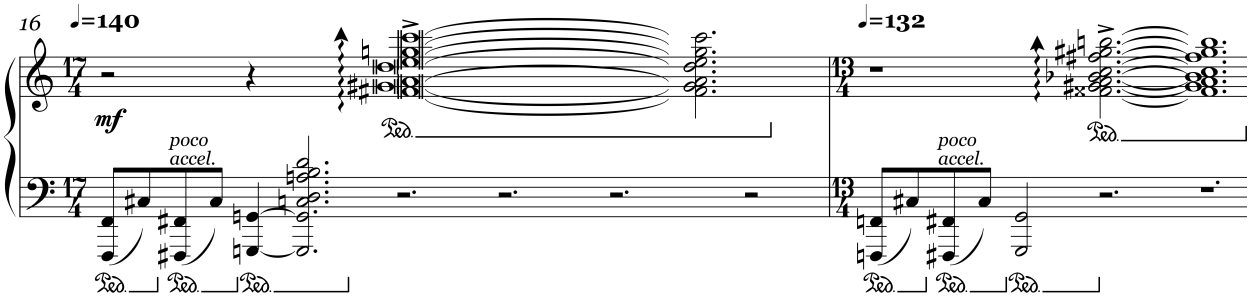
a) The chromatic movement of the bass

If, for example, Taylor wishes to imply a tonality of D (minor or major), he might approach it through an (usually increasing) bass motion of a $C^{\#}$ (with an octave jump), an approaching fifth (A; a [V-I] motion) and an octave jump to the final D.



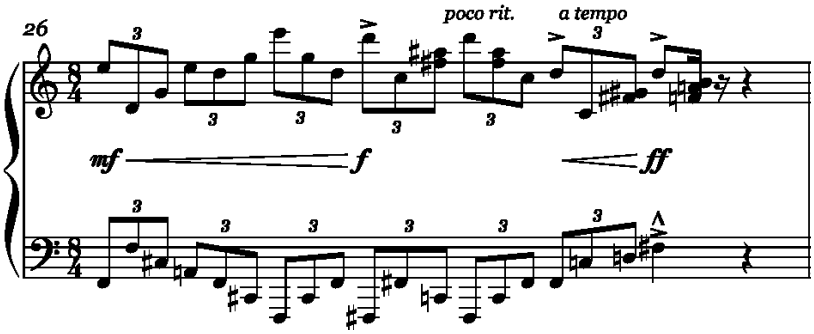
Typical chromatic bass movement figure, bar 92

In other cases, he might use the same pitch as a passing note while moving chromatically in the bass:



Typical chromatic movement bass figure, bar 16 and 17

There are numerous similar examples of chromatic bass movement with approaching fifth and octave jumps. The same rule applies, and similar structures are formed in a progression within an arpeggiated figure. In most cases, there is a central arpeggiated figure ("I" of the implied key), which is usually preceded chromatically by one or two other figures, and sometimes even concluded by a single figure, half step up from the central figure. E.g. in bar 26, the key center is F-major, but the progression is concluded by an arpeggiated figure in F#.



"I-#I" motion within arpeggiated figures, bar 26

b) <u>the counter-motion of the outside voices to a minor/major tenth</u>

The counter-motion of the outside voices to a minor or major tenth usually appears outlining a quasi-*montuno* figure, or an arpeggiated figure. In many cases it includes a half step in either the melody, the bass, or both. Examples are plenty- the above figure illustrates movement from E-D in the melody and F-F# in the bass. We can find similar outline of the arpeggiated figures in bars 25, 32, 42, 43, 59, 61,...

Notation and its relation to music

"Notation can be used as a point of reference, but the notation does not indicate music. It indicates a direction." (Taylor quoted in Brown, 2006)

Since Cecil Taylor is not very fond of traditional Western notation, which in his opinion "blocks total absorption in the 'action' playing," (Taylor, 1966) he has developed his own notation, consisting of letters and symbols; "what is above middle C is plus, what is below is minus," (Felver, 2005) in order to write down his musical ideas. This notation probably has two functions. First is to set the musicians free from their common experience with reading music and make them more attentive. And the second is to simplify the communication to ensemble members of different skill levels with conventional notation. A description of his score by Dan Marmorstein:

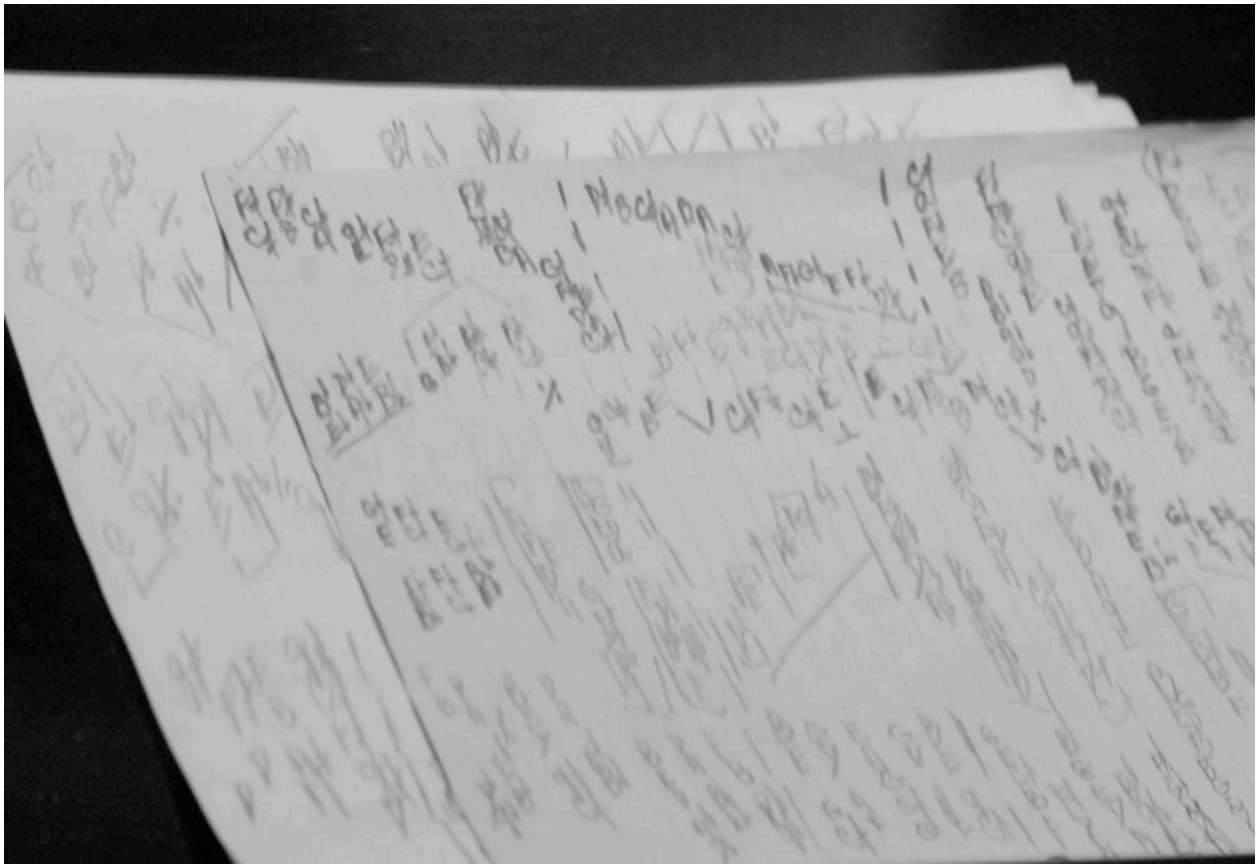
> On the page of the scores, he has a group of anywhere between three or five or as many as ten, and sometimes he may stack sequences of lines, in which case you could have 25 or 30 different tones. Quite frequently, more than one tone is described. The way that music is transmitted to the musicians is that the musicians are basically being asked to breathe their own poetry into these melodies and shape them as they will. But that being said, with Cecil being there, Cecil will often play the thing on the piano and expect that we can hear that that's the way he wants it to sound.(Panken, 2001)

Another insight into his work with groups, connected with notation by Vijay Iyer:

> Taylor's approach spoke volumes about improvised music as a collective activity. Early on, when we were repeatedly questioning him about the role of the written material, he said, "This [written material] is the formal content of the piece; what I want is for all the players to bring their individual languages to the interpretation and execution of the piece." Taylor desired that we create a collective embodiment of his material by filtering it through our individual "languages," framing the music as speech, individual sound as personal narrative. (Iyer, 1998, chapter 4)

Thus this type of notation can arguably encourage the performer to listen and remember the motives, using the score only as a reminder. Working with a group in this way, he is encouraging everybody to participate in making of the composition and he often only sings the individual parts, letting the musicians transcribe the score in whichever notation they choose. Even though this might show he is not overly concerned with the notation, the mere act of inventing his own (after mastering the Western notation) speaks for itself.

It might be relevant to mention at this point, that Taylor, despite being a free improvisor, often uses scores during his performances. As I mentioned in the chapter *Structure*, these aren't full scores, but rather a pool of motives from which he chooses spontaneously in the moment.



Cecil Taylor's scores, photo by Ssirus W. Pakzad

Cecil Taylor's relationship with the European classical music

> There is only one musician who has, by general agreement even among those who have disliked his music, been able to incorporate all that he wants to take from classical and modern Western composition into his own distinctly individual kind of blues without in the least compromising those blues, and that is Cecil Taylor, a kind of Bartók in reverse.(Spellman, 1966, p.5)

One of the influences that contributed to the formatting of Taylor's unique language was his classical training. While studying at The New England Conservatory he was exposed to specific esthetics and trained to develop a particular sensitivity and connection with the instrument. He might not consciously apply this knowledge later (in fact, Taylor claimed he had to 'un-learn' some of the piano techniques and hand positions after he had switched to jazz in order to reach the sound he was searching).

In 1958, Taylor wrote:

> Everything I've lived, I am... I'm not afraid of European influences. The point is to use them— as Ellington did— as part of my life as an American Negro. Some people say I'm atonal. It depends on your definition of the term... I have been atonal in live performances... Basically, it's not important if a certain chord happens to fit some student's definition of atonality. A man like [Thelonious] Monk is concerned with growing and enriching his musical conception and what he does comes as a living idea out of his life's experience, not from a theory. (Taylor, 1958)

While Taylor's musical conceptions surely derive from his life experience and his deliberate integration into African-American environment, there are behaviors in Taylor's playing and composing that possibly derive from his classical piano training. For example, his detailed use of the articulations, subtle pedaling, particular (and full) use of the piano range and the use of the counter motion. His right and left hand are equal in expression and nature of the material (differently from the most post be-bop pianists who use left hand to support and accompany the right hand). He is dealing with intricate textures, unusual form, intense, detailed dynamics, absence of constant pulse or groove. He operates with scales or selected pitch collections and intervalic relations that are not connected to the functional harmony. He had probably processed and digested the information gained during his classical training and applied it to his own idea of jazz/ (black) improvised music. Bassist Buell Neidlinger says he believes Cecil "is the first cat who has used these [classical] systems,... and made them work for jazz, which makes me think that all his music is really very personal, and any kind of allusion to classical music is strictly accidental or subconscious."(Spellman, 1966, p.33)

During his conservatory years, Taylor was interested in composition and wanted to study it “but the department head/. . ./ figured that he already had one Negro [composition student], and that was enough.”(Spellman, 1966, p.55). As a composer, he describes himself as a ‘constructivist’, which displays another point of reference to Western art music. As he says himself, “the key to European music is construction - that’s what you listen to more than anything else in European music - form, shape.”(Spellman, 1966, p.39) Nevertheless, he stresses that for him, of all the composers, the master constructivist would have to be Duke Ellington, who found a way to integrate the musical personalities and specific instrumental timbres of the band members into a distinctive sound and intriguing forms. At the beginning of his career, Taylor himself played and recorded some of Ellington’s/ Strayhorn’s compositions (*e.g., Azure* (Taylor, 1956), *Johnny Come Lately* (Taylor, 1957)) as well as other popular jazz songs, such as *You’d Be So Nice To Come Home To*, *Sweet and Lovely*, Monk’s *Bemsha Swing*, (Taylor, 1959), *Love for Sale*, *Get Out of Town*, *I Love Paris* (Taylor, 1959) *etc.* His interpretations are indeed rather radical and some of the musicians he worked with had difficulties with that. The type of situation is similar to the experiences of another “American original” (Kelley, 2009), Thelonious Monk, who had a considerate influence on Taylor, himself having an original language and approach to music, way ahead of his time.

“... his [Cecil Taylor’s] propositions were really brilliant; his way to develop monumental improvisations from little melodic cells was gifted with so much structural strength... I sincerely think that Cecil Taylor is one of the great geniuses of our times as the creator of a real synthesis, as Anthony Braxton, between jazz and Western tradition.” (Ollivier, 2009) Braxton and Taylor are indeed both notable examples of jazz musicians inspired by (some aspects of) the Western art music, as Marilyn Crispell observes. Nevertheless there is a major difference in how the two musicians applied their knowledge. While Anthony Braxton researches and consciously utilizes some of the concepts of Western composers (e.g. Cage and Stockhausen), Taylor wishes to continue the lineage of Ellington and Monk. He does not search to combine jazz with classical music, as he understands his own music as “an extension of period music- Ellington and Monk. Third Stream is George Gershwin and Ferde Grofe.” (Spellman, 1966, p.29)

He realizes and admits the influences, but he nevertheless disagrees with many of the aspects of Western tradition and feels overall far from it. Notation is one of the aspects, because it (as mentioned in the previous chapter) blocks the musician’s connection with the sound and the physicality of performing music. He is an advocate of playing and learning (even extended compositions) by ear, not only because it brings out different (in his, and many of his collaborator’s opinions; better) results, but also in order to stay true to the jazz tradition. He

dislikes the lack of body involvement and the detachment from the music of contemporaries like David Tudor, who is “so detached, he ain’t even there.” (Spellman, 1966, p.36)

Being a dancer himself, physical engagement and body movement are of a great importance to Taylor. And, clearly, the (over)-involvement of a musician’s body (unless being a part of the composer’s visual concept) isn’t desirable in the world of classical music.

> I think Western musicians, fine art musicians, what they call fine art musicians--European fine art--they're the only ones who don’t dance. Every other--of course these certain stupid Americans--but you’ll find in all other cultures, like third world cultures, musicians dance. What they don't understand is when you are playing, whether you know it or not, you're dancing. I always got great enjoyment watching great musicians dance when they play. I mean, to watch Elvin Jones or Art Blakey. Horace Silver, Ellington had a way--and Billie Holiday--those movements. Or Betty Carter. (Taylor in an interview with Funkhauser, 1995)

Cecil Taylor’s music of course doesn’t have a steady pulse (which arguably defines the dance music); nevertheless, he is following the jazz legacy, “dancing” at the piano, possibly making the audience move as well. Jazz critic Garry Giddins confirms, Taylor “is still swinging, he is still in a jazz tradition, a different kind of swing, the rhythm of the momentum separates him from Messiaen and Boulez’ piano sonatas which very superficially might sound alike.”(Artisthouse Music, 2004)

While not being conceived systematically and led by strict rules, Taylor’s piano pieces might resemble serialism- a variety of elements is made into a sort of collage, cut one from the other. Along with the changes of the material, there are also rapid variations in dynamics and articulation, which correspond to the attributes of *e.g.* Anton Webern’s music. It is the material, and the condensed form, Taylor values in Webern’s music and compares it to the melodies of Parker and Monk, who could “have all the energy and all the rhythmic qualities of a symphony in twelve measures.”

Taylor’s interest in classical music isn’t for the sake of finding a synthesis, but rather to observe the conceptual and esthetic parallels between the two worlds.

“The ultimate struggle is to challenge the musical concept America has adopted from the West.” (Taylor in the documentary by Felver, 2005)

Conclusion

My initial idea about the piece *Life As...* was that it is a free form improvisation. I could not hear where the individual parts of the composition start and end but I understood that there is a strong inner structure, because there is an obvious, audible coherence within the piece. My goals were to understand the ways Taylor is manipulating the material and creating the structure. I wanted to learn about how he combines composition and improvisation, since he owns, in my opinion, one of the most inspiring and original approaches to composition through improvisation. The two are balanced perfectly in his work and I thought the reason for it is his mind being miraculously 'composerly', enabling him to create perfectly structured pieces on the spot, without agenda.

The analysis showed that this is not the case. This particular work consists of a fair amount of prepared material, which differs from repetition to repetition and which is repeated in various manners. The bass movement is following a specific (chromatic) logic and almost each motive has its respective scale (consistent in the repetitions). The order of the parts is probably improvised. So are the tempi, all the stretches and the compresses of phrases, the dynamics, articulations and sometimes the scales. He might play the same phrase with another scale in the second repetition to give it a slightly different flavor. All these factors give his free improvisation fluidity and at the same time a sense of inner logic and coherence.

To reach this level of improvising, one must develop his own language continuously and rigorously. Cecil Taylor achieved his unparalleled, highly individual style by combining the knowledge of his heritages, the social experience of the jazz community, the interest in other arts, his classical piano training and the vision of his own music.

It is not only his obvious devotion to the instrument, to the search of new, and his uncompromising music-making that contribute to his unique voice. It is also his ability to connect his physical existence with the elements of music and to combine all his various (extra-musical) interests in a very natural way. It is probably one of the most challenging tasks for an artist, to present his work as self-evident, even thought it might include a number of seemingly incongruous elements.

I was eager to learn a "new system" for combining composition and improvisation, but ended up realizing, that his approach is actually quite basic- he takes a motive and embellishes it, variates it, repeats it. He takes a scale and dissects it, finds interesting combinations within it and plays around with it. What is more, the whole process of language creation is connected to the body logic (unique for every individual).

Cecil Taylor's music undoubtedly has a strong inner logic and a unique sound. Perhaps one of the reasons for it is the system behind it being so natural and fundamental. It is Taylor's treatment of the system, the

focus on details, and the effortless playfulness within the complex possibilities that are breath-taking and genius.

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Appendix

- *Appendix A*: A transcription of *Life As...* with explanatory notes _____ A-1 to A-18

- *Appendix B*: A list of scales_____ B-1 to B-5

- Appendix C: Harmony outline_____ C-1 to C-3

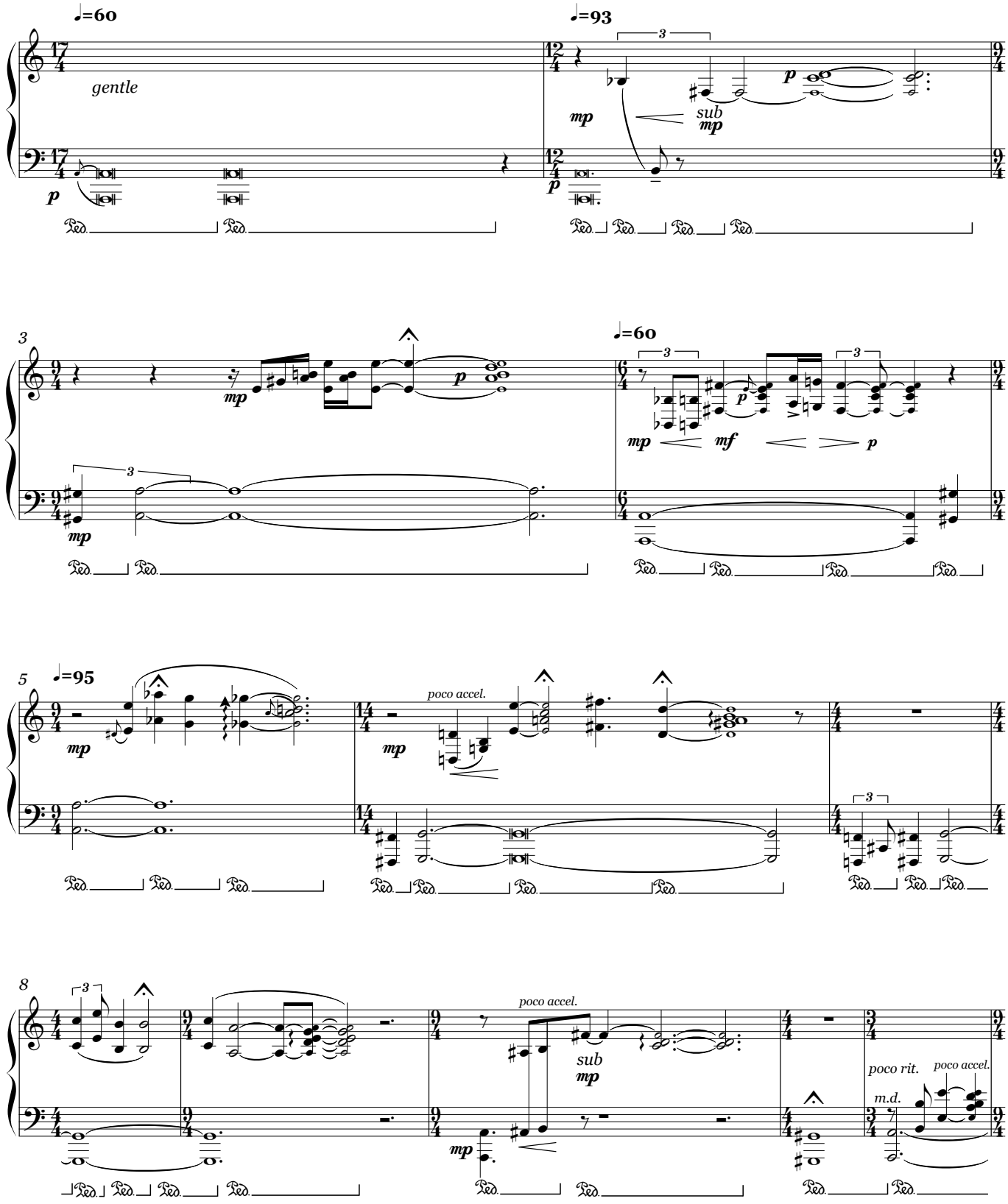
Life As...

transcribed by Kaja Draksler

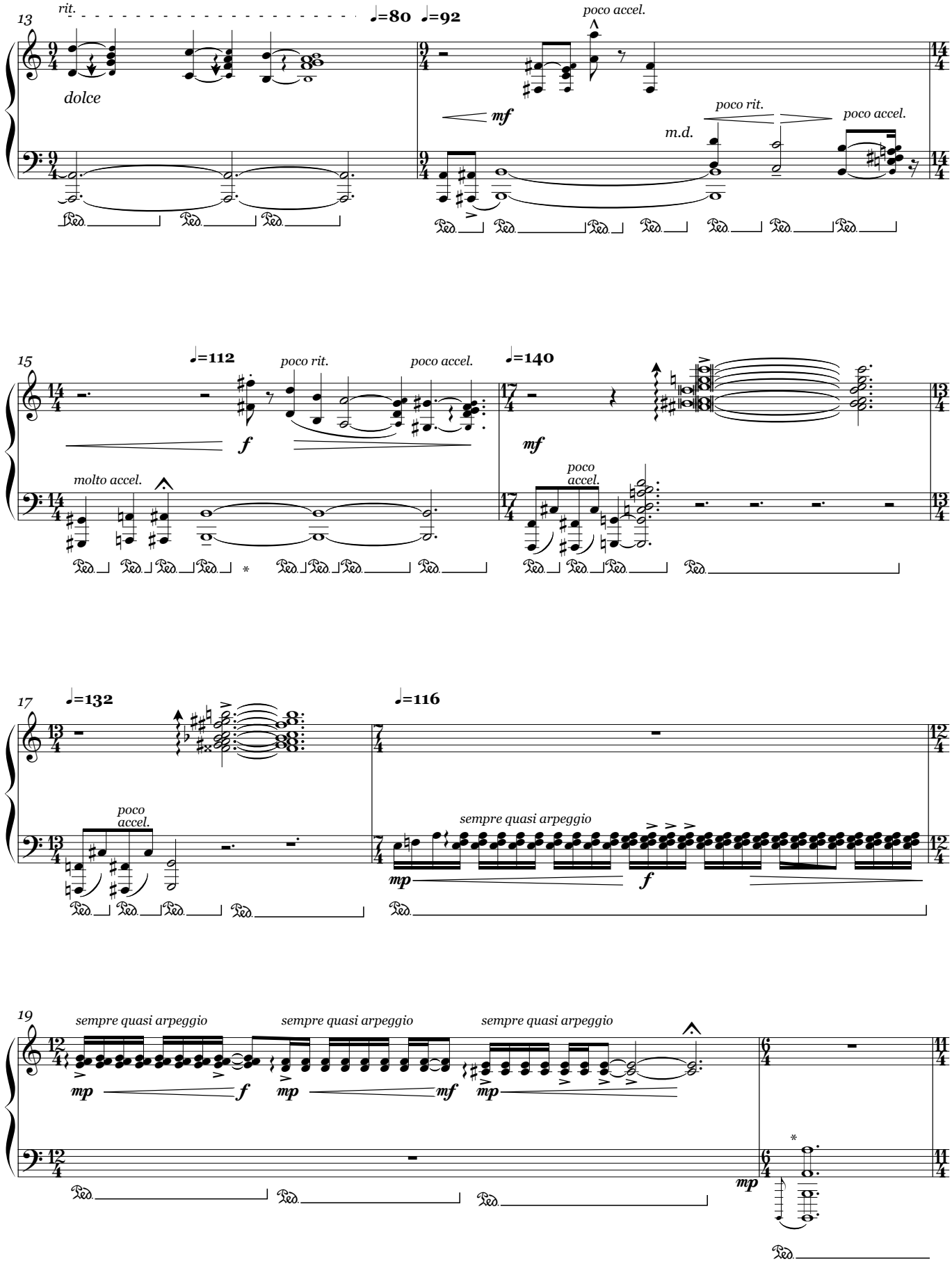
Cecil Taylor

from Redman, D., Taylor, C., Jones, E. (1999). *Momentum Space*. Verve

Quasi rubato



1'13"



* palm clusters; drop the wrist and play the accidental notes under the palm of the hand

2'00"

21 ♩=100 *sempre quasi arpeggio*

mf *f* *f* *f* *sub p*

22 ♩=90 ♩=115 ♩=90 ♩=116

mp *mf* *mf* *mp* *mp*

24 ♩=180

mf *sub mf* *mp* *f* *sub mp*

26 *poco rit.* *a tempo*

mf *f* *ff*

♩=140 *poco accel.* *a tempo* *poco accel.*

mf

2'27"

28 ♩=170 *poco accel.* *poco accel.* *poco rit.*

mp ***mf*** ***f***

29 ♩=125 ♩=95 *poco accel. poco rit.*

ff ***mf*** ***f*** ***mp*** ***p*** ***mp***

* *same as bar 20*

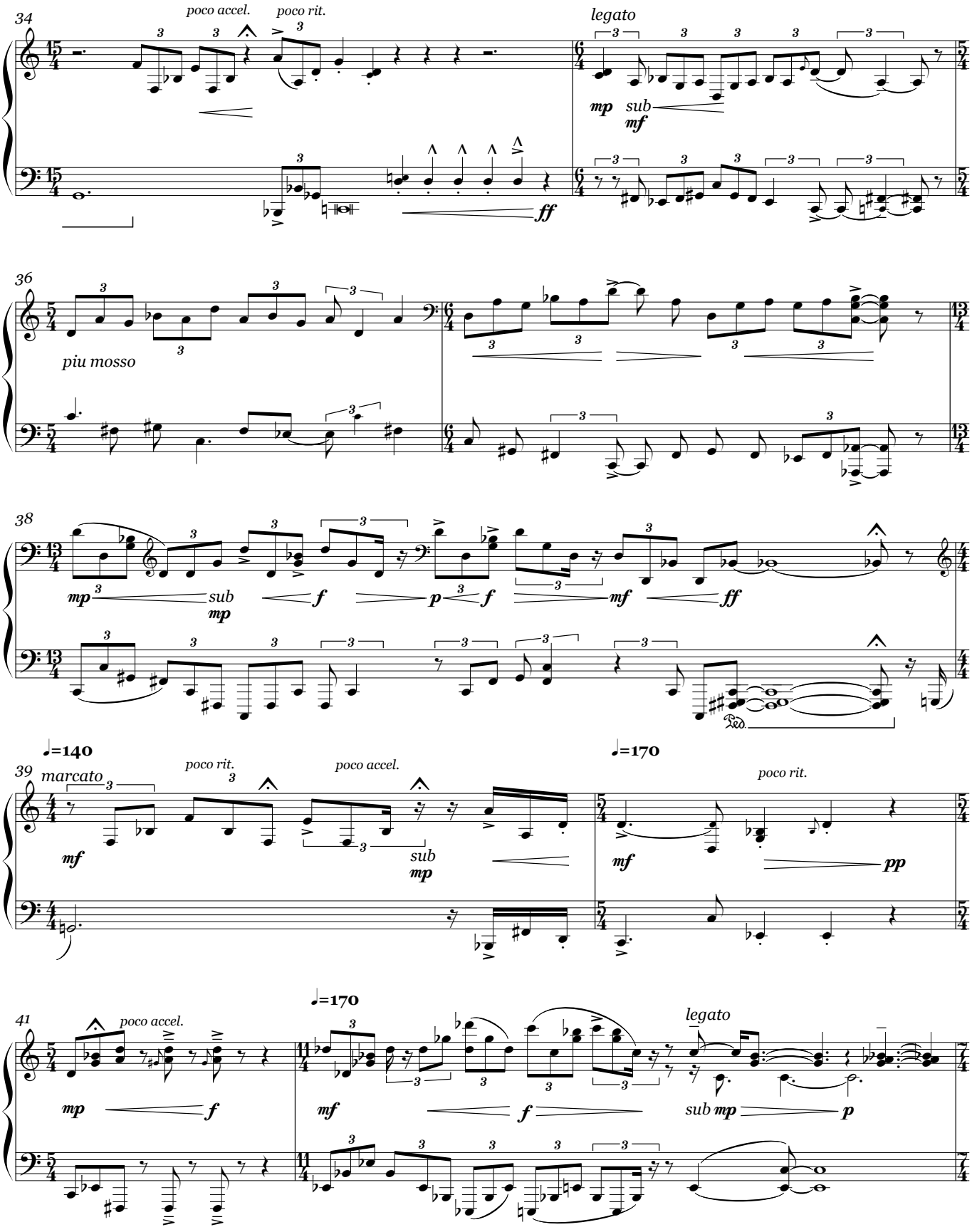
31 ♩=180 *leggiero*

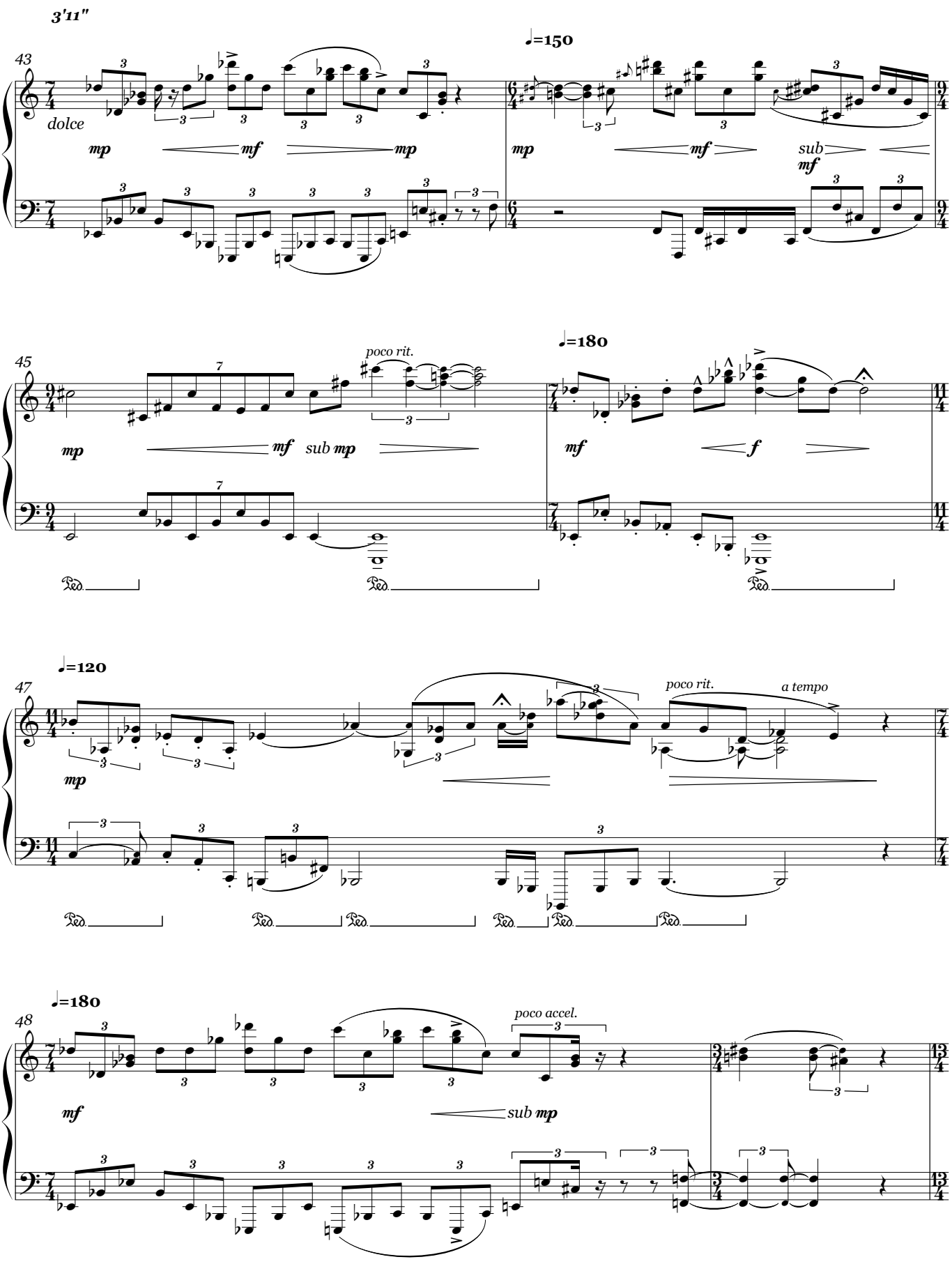
mf ***mp*** ***mf*** ***f*** ***sf***

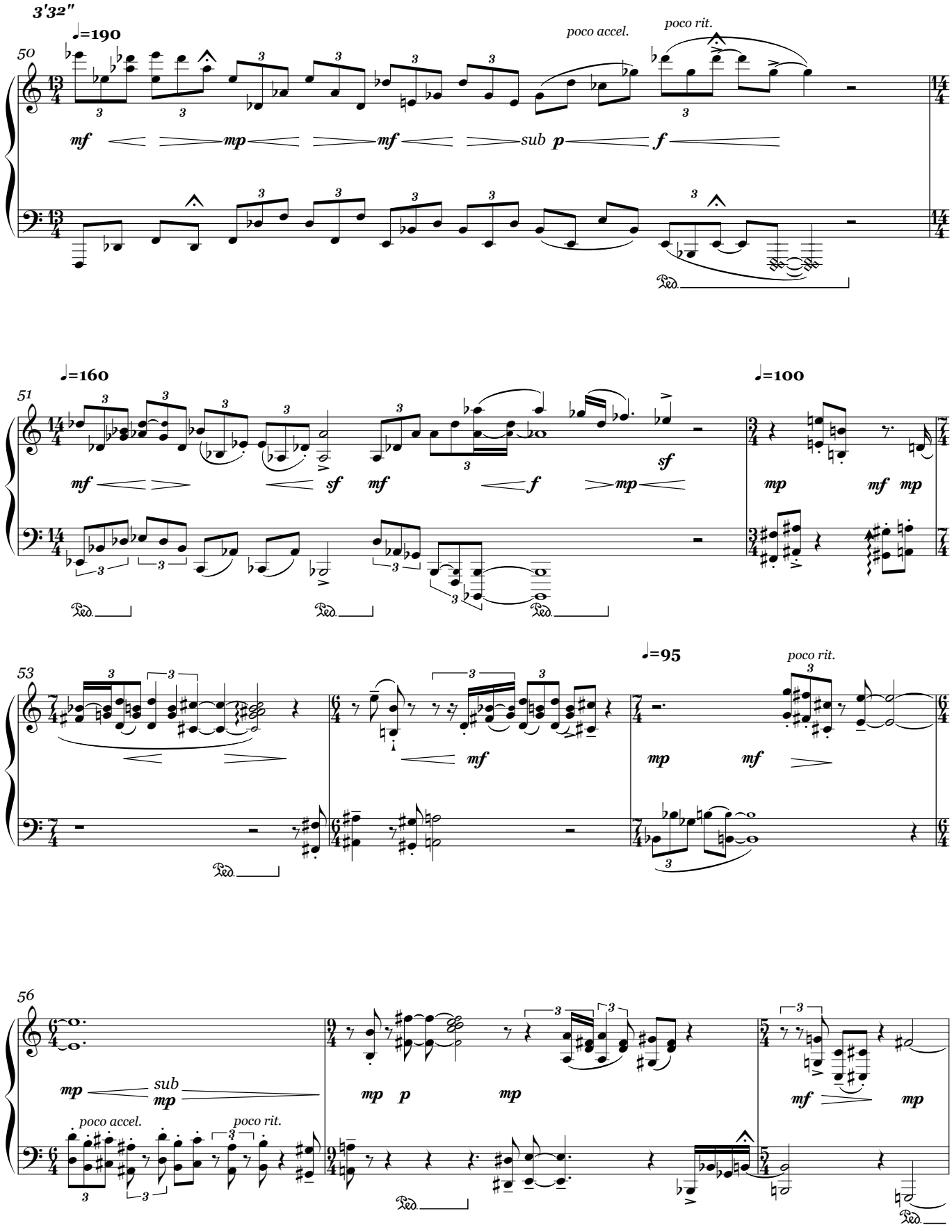
33 ♩=190

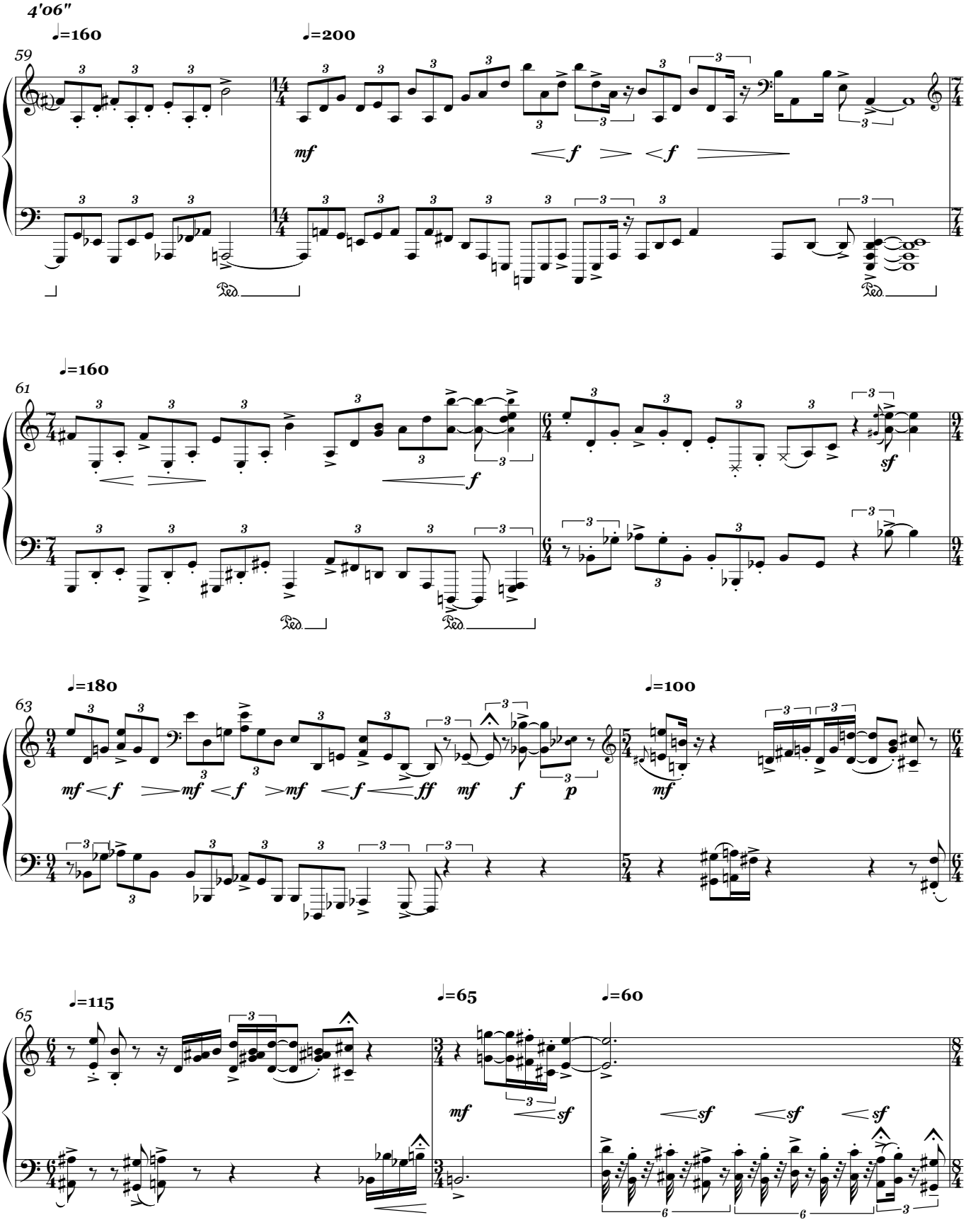
mp ***mp*** ***f*** ***mf***

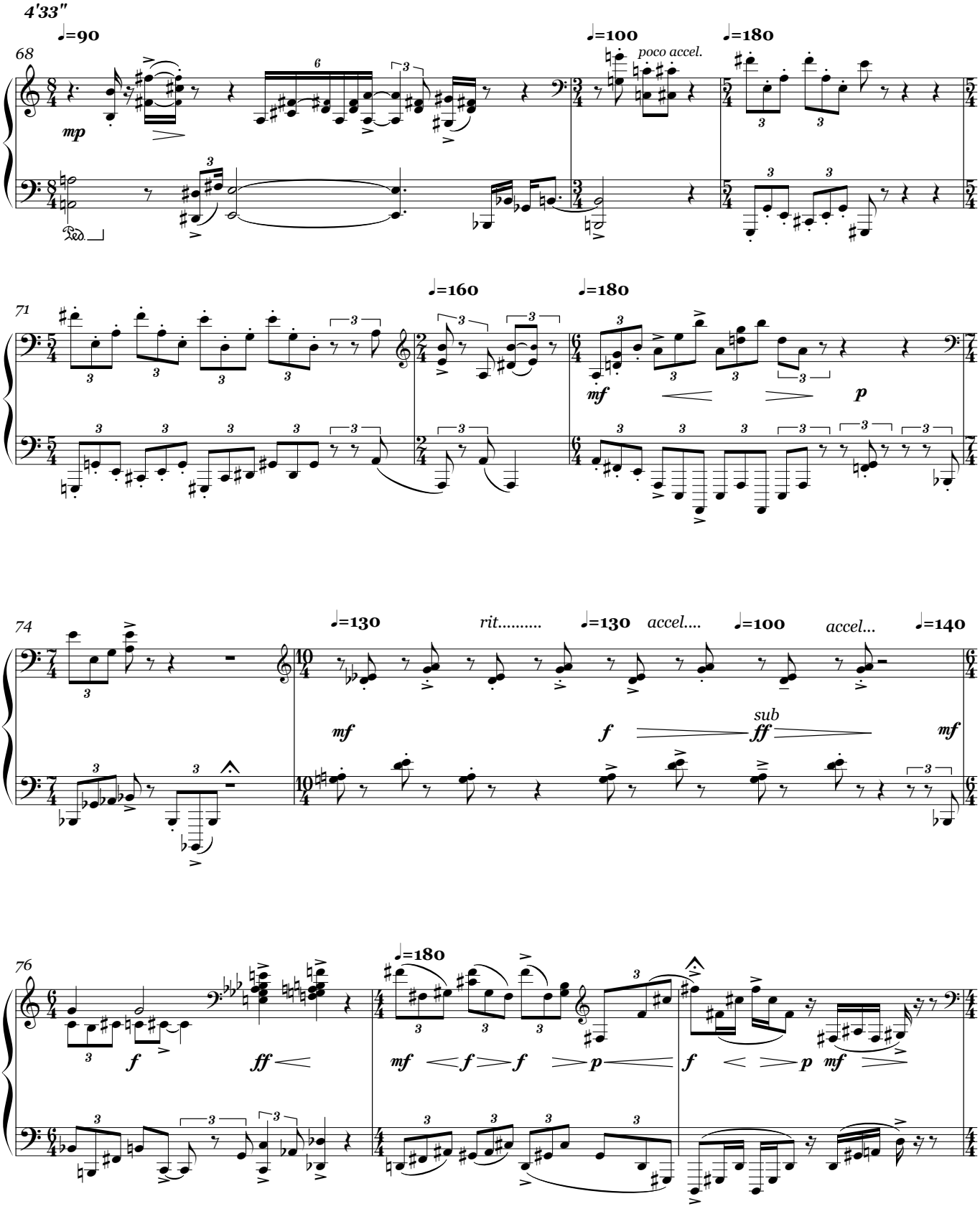
2'46"

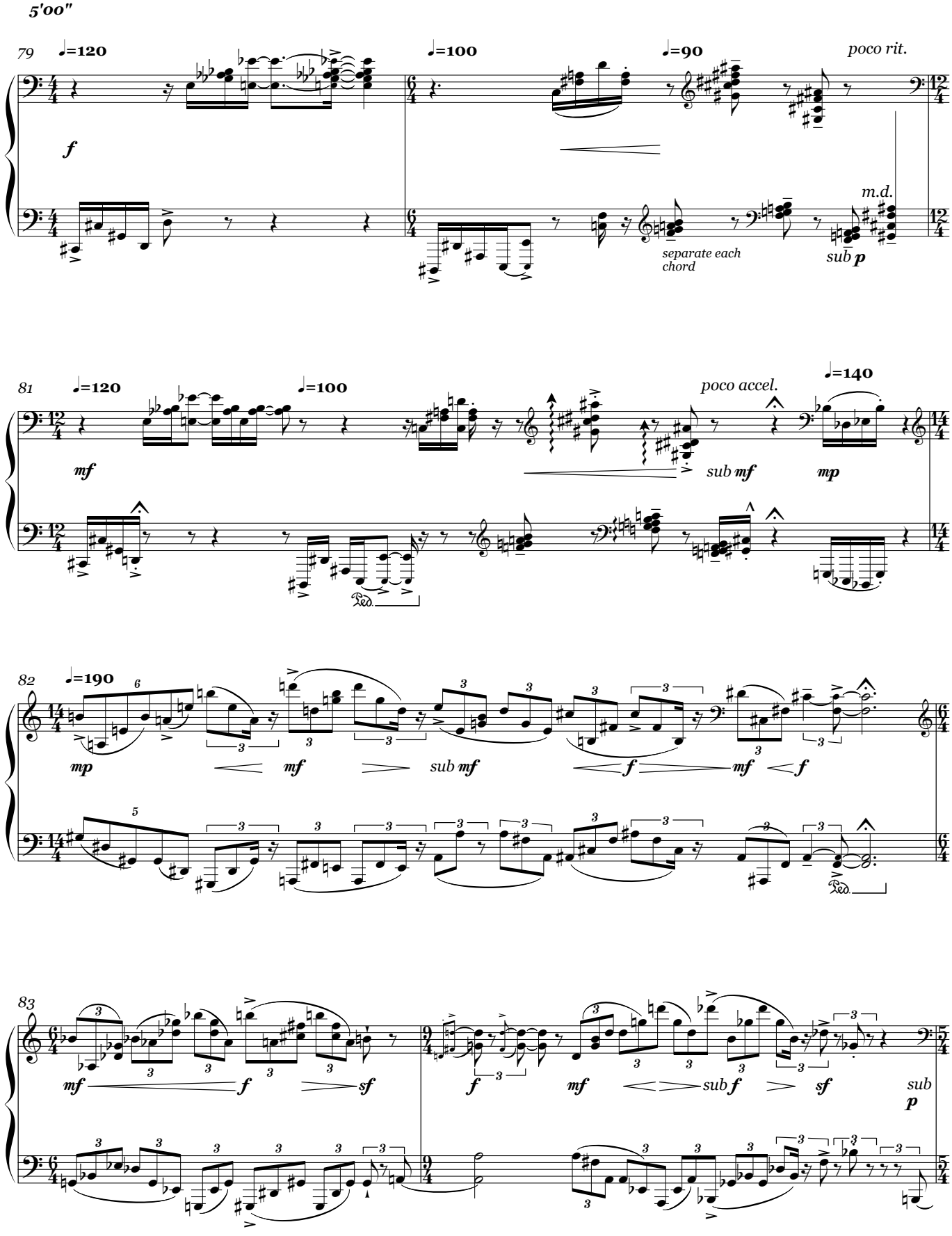

34
poco accel.
poco rit.
legato
mp
sub
mf
ff
36
piu mosso
38
mp
sub
mp
f
p
f
mf
ff
♩=140
39
marcato
poco rit.
poco accel.
sub
mp
mf
♩=170
poco rit.
mf
pp
41
poco accel.
mp
f
♩=170
mf
f
legato
sub mp
p

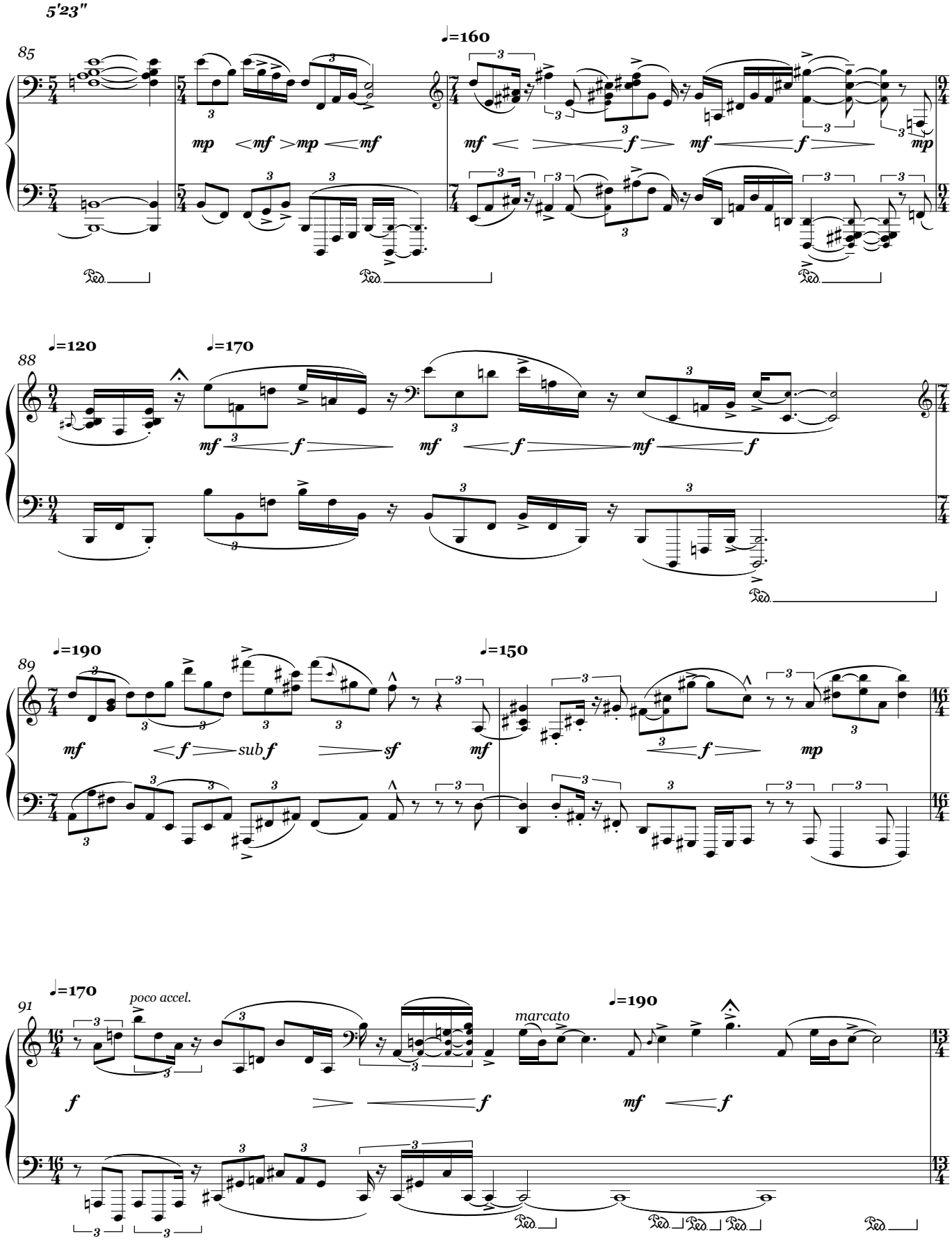

3'11"
43
dolce
mp
mf
mp
♩=150
mp
mf
sub
mf
45
poco rit.
mp
mf
sub mp
♩=180
mf
f
47
♩=120
mp
poco rit.
a tempo
48
♩=180
mf
sub mp
poco accel.

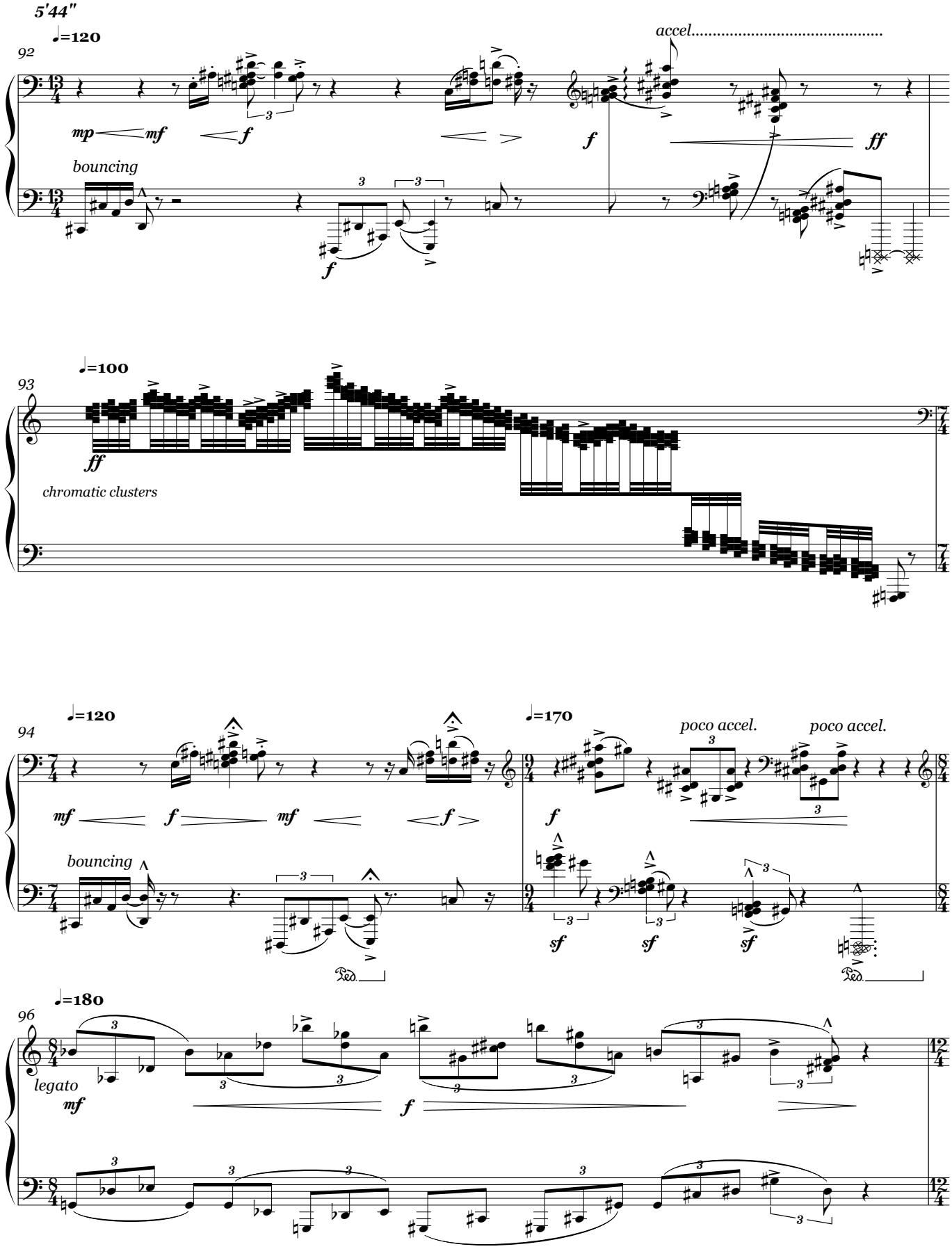

3'32"
♩=190
50
poco accel.
poco rit.
mf
mp
mf
sub p
f
♩=160
51
sf
mf
f
mp
sf
♩=100
mp
mf mp
53
mf
♩=95
poco rit.
mp
mf
56
mp
sub
mp
poco accel.
poco rit.
mp p
mp
mf
mp

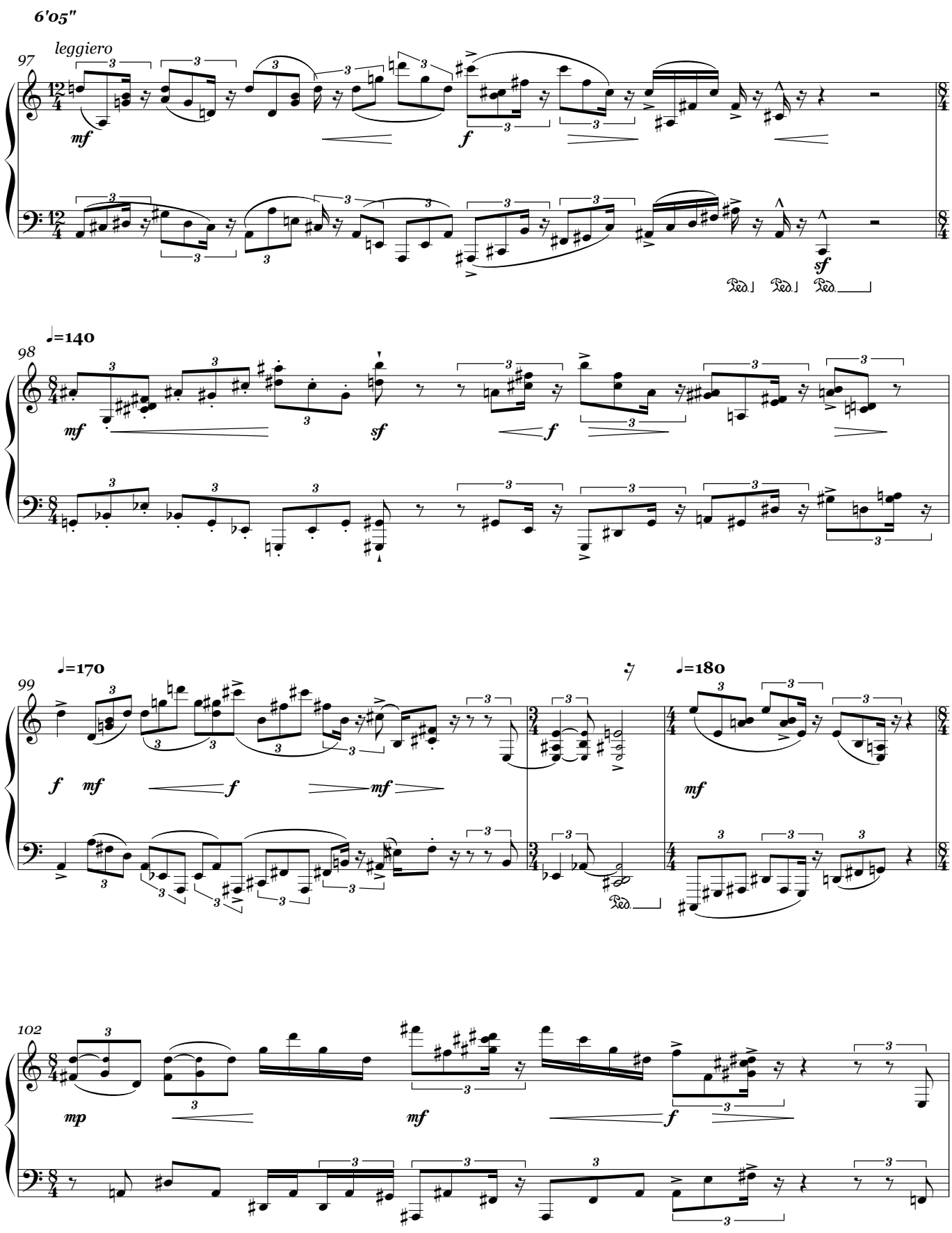

4'06"
59
♩=160
♩=200
mf
f
f
61
♩=160
f
sf
63
♩=180
mf
f
mf
f
mf
f
ff
mf
f
p
♩=100
mf
65
♩=115
♩=65
mf
sf
♩=60
sf
sf
sf

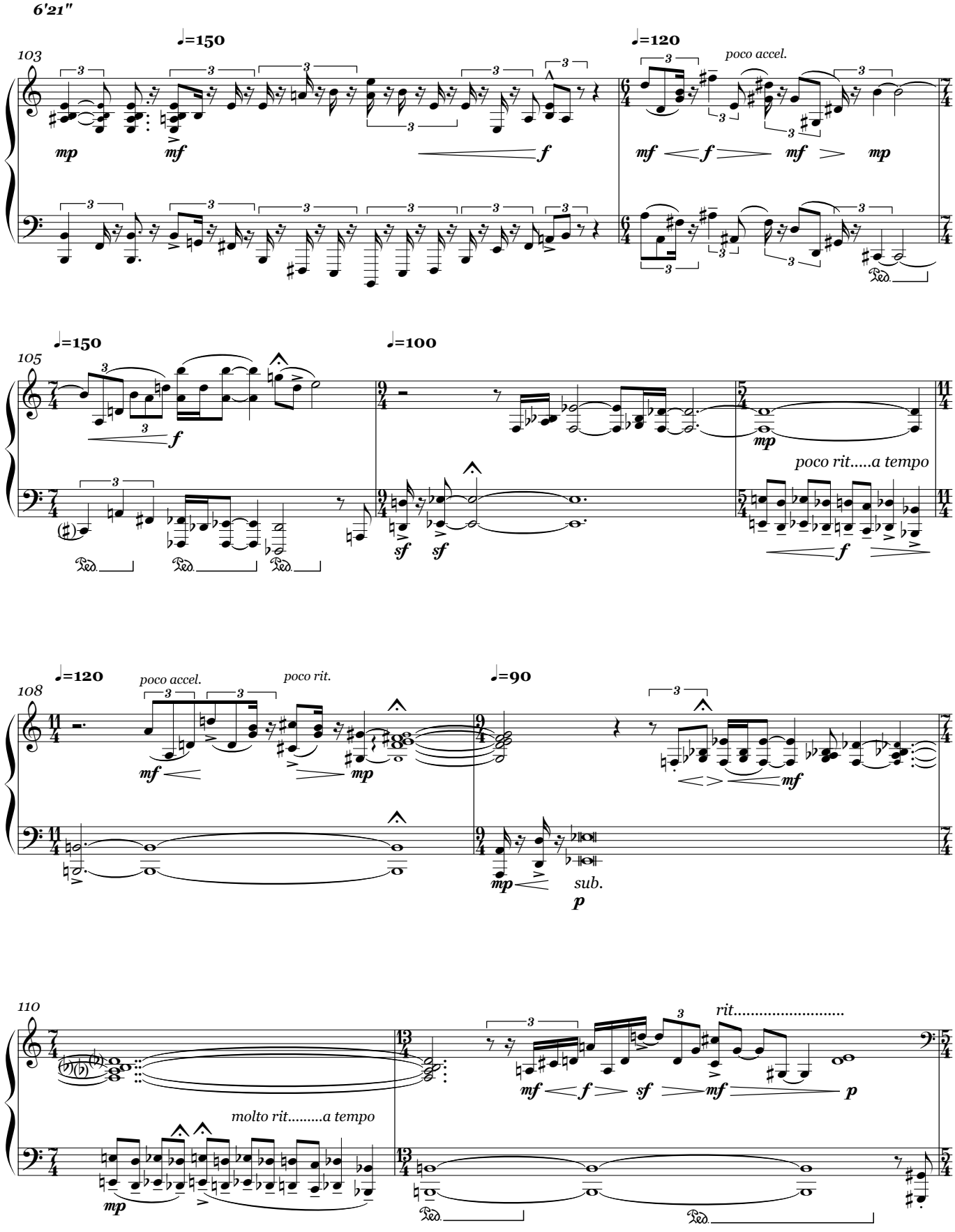

4'33"
♩=90
68
mp
poco accel.
♩=100
♩=180
71
♩=160
♩=180
mf
p
74
♩=130
rit.....
♩=130
accel....
♩=100
accel...
♩=140
mf
f
sub
ff
mf
76
♩=180
f
ff
mf
f
p
f
p
mf

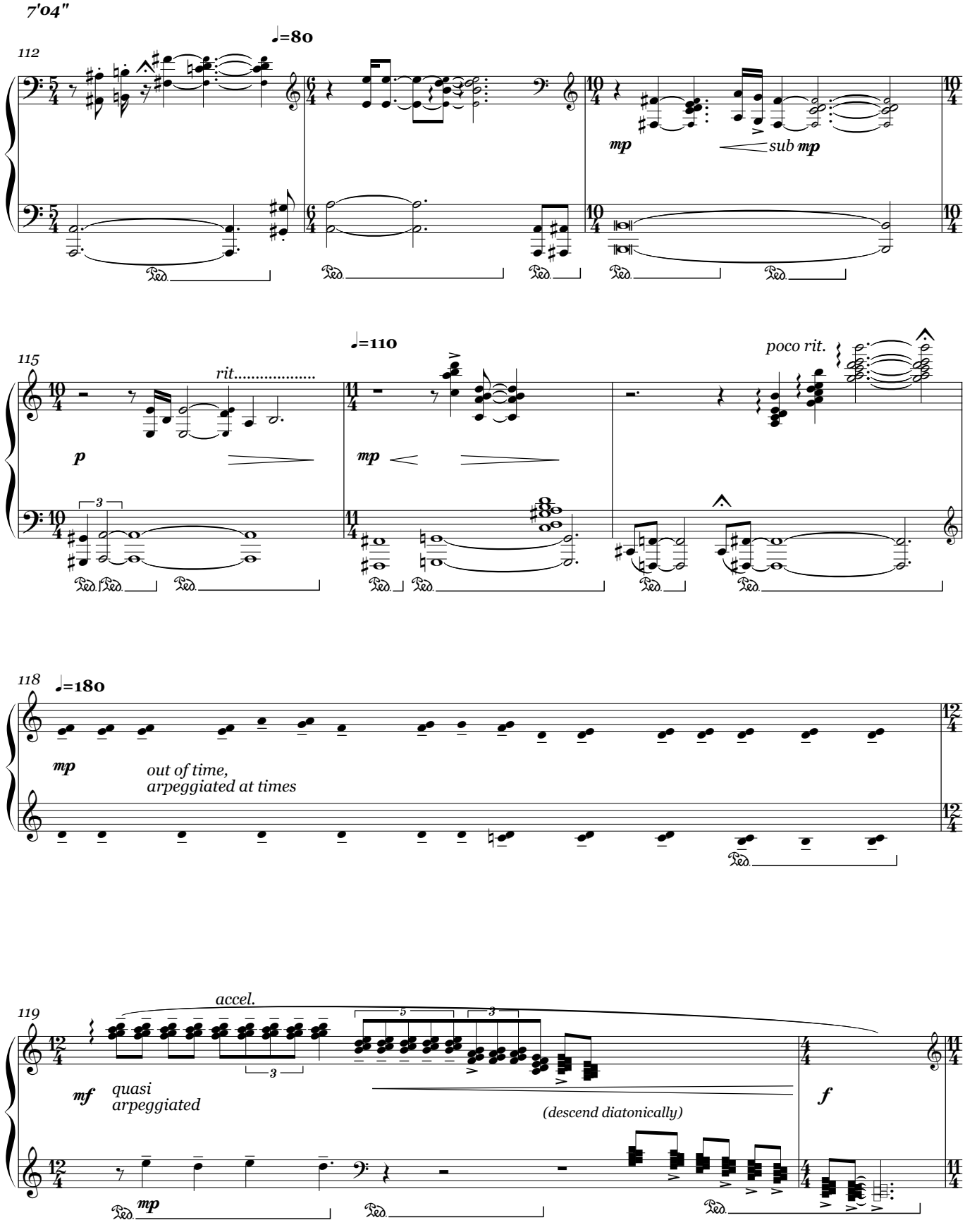

5'00"
79
♩=120
♩=100
♩=90
poco rit.
f
m.d.
separate each chord
sub p
81
♩=120
♩=100
poco accel.
♩=140
mf
sub mf
mp
Ped.
82
♩=190
mp
mf
sub mf
f
mf
f
83
mf
f
sf
f
mf
sub f
sf
sub p

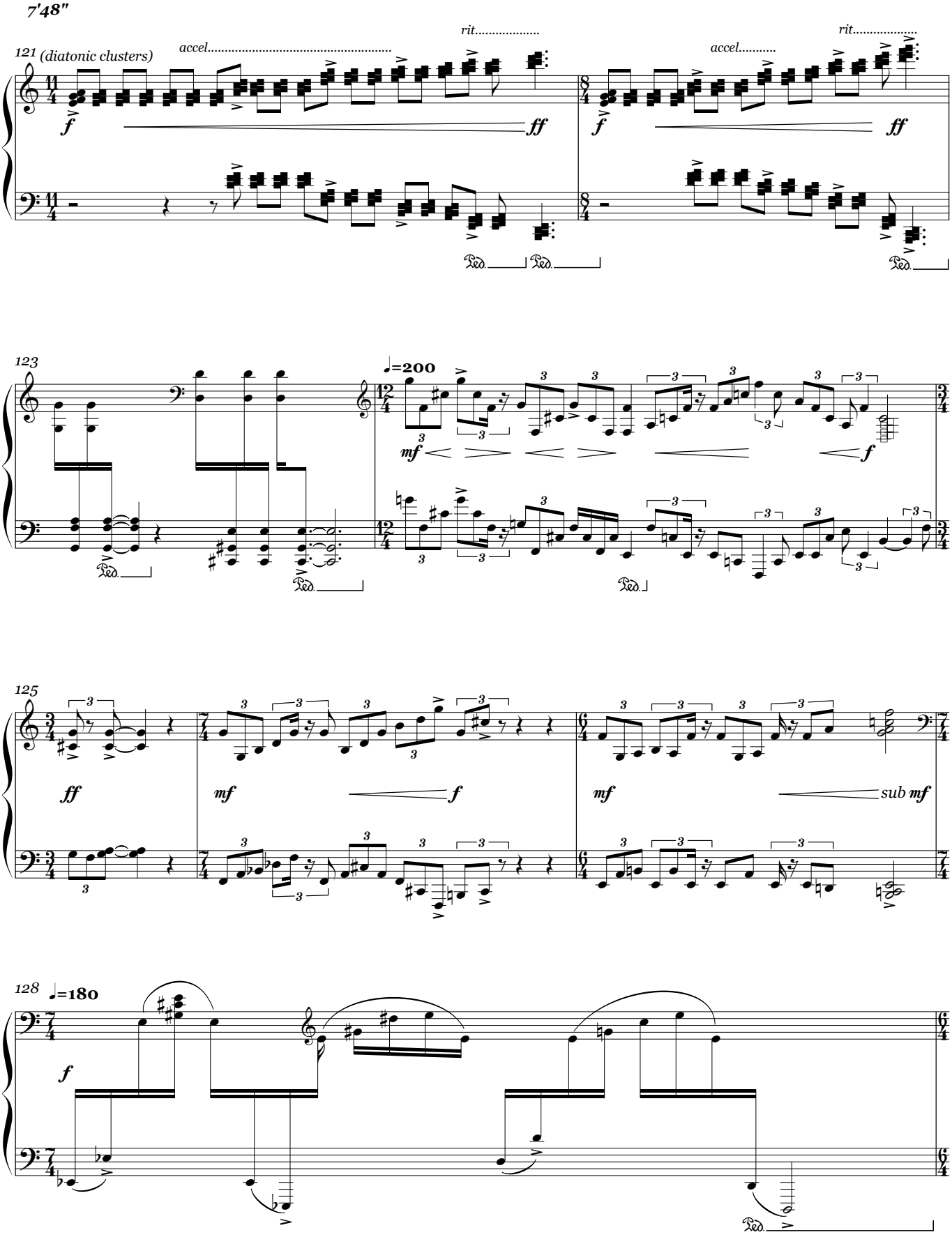

5'23"
85
♩=160
mp <mf >mp <mf
mf < f > mf < f > mp
88
♩=120
♩=170
mf < f mf < f mf < f
89
♩=190
♩=150
mf < f > sub f > sf
mf
< f >
mp
91
♩=170
poco accel.
marcato
♩=190
f > f
mf < f


5'44"
♩=120
92
accel.....
mp
mf
f
f
ff
bouncing
f
♩=100
93
ff
chromatic clusters
♩=120
94
mf
f
mf
f
bouncing
♩=170
poco accel.
poco accel.
f
sf
sf
sf
♩=180
96
legato
mf
f

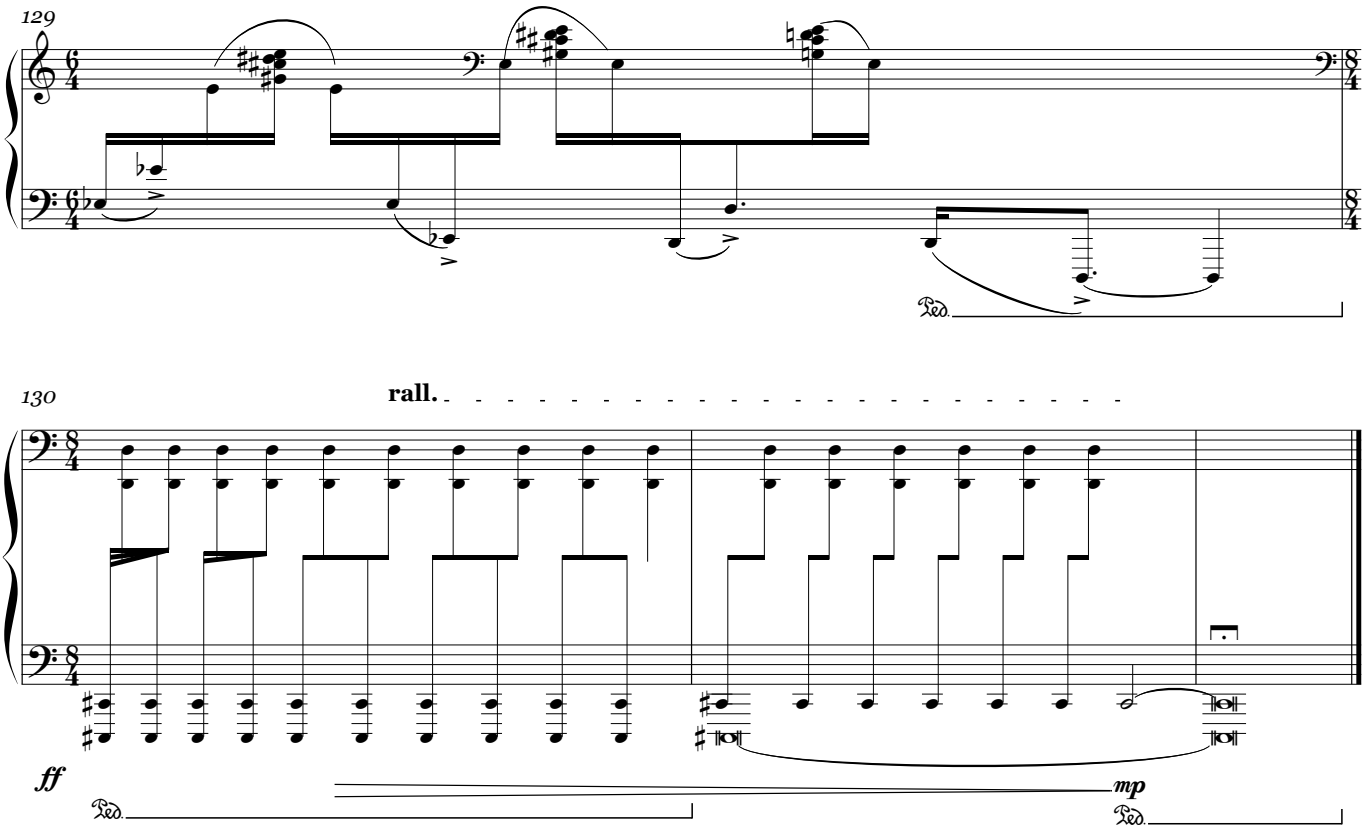

6'05"
97
leggiero
mf
f
sf
Ped. Ped. Ped.
98
♩=140
mf
sf
f
99
♩=170
f
mf
f
mf
♩=180
mf
Ped.
102
mp
mf
f


6'21"
103
♩=150
♩=120
poco accel.
105
♩=150
♩=100
poco rit.....a tempo
108
♩=120
poco accel.
poco rit.
♩=90
sub.
110
molto rit.....a tempo
rit.....


7'04"
112
♩=80
mp
sub mp
115
rit.....
♩=110
poco rit.
p
mp
118
♩=180
mp
out of time,
arpeggiated at times
119
accel.
mf
quasi
arpeggiated
(descend diatonically)
f
mp


7'48"
121
(diatonic clusters)
accel.....
rit.....
accel.....
rit.....
123
♩=200
125
128
♩=180
sub mf

8'08"



Transcription Explanatory Notes

A bar's length corresponds to the phrase's length. The quarter note is roughly the basic pulse of the phrase.

 - short fermata, lengthens the value of the note for approximately sixteen note.

 - an arpeggio without an arrow indicates press the keys non-simultaneously.

The notation is not always logical, there would need to be a completely new way of notation with flexible tempo markings to show the logic of the phrases completely.
Smaller note-heads are used with the tie, for the reason of visual clarity. When they are not tied, it indicates a softer dynamics (usually within a chord or interval).

Note on scales

The scales are ordered chromatically based on the root of the scale. Each scale has a name comprised by the root note and the order number of appearance. You can find all the scales that appear in the piece on the *List of Scales* on the following pages. Next to the scale name, there is an indication of the bar numbers in which the scale appears.
When scales have an active function, discussed in the research (p.9), they are labeled as:
•"es"- when a scale functions as an end or as a link leading to the end of the phrase.
•"ts"- when a scale functions as a transition, either between two other scales, or between two concrete phrases.
•"ss"- when a scale functions as a starting point of a phrase
When scales are similar to each other and/or have similar function inside the form, they are connected with the line above (e.g. D1 and D2).
In several cases it was hard to determine, weather two pitch-wise similar arpeggiated figures should be analyzed as belonging to two separate scales, or to one common (slightly chromatic) scale. My decisions were based on weather the two arpeggiated figures had a distinctive and dissimilar function within the structure, weather the sonority of the two phrases was differing enough, *etc.* There are other classifications possible.

Furthermore, I would like to mention additional correlations, not discussed in the research:

1) There is a particular sonority that appears in several scales with different roots. If we listen to the phrases constructed with scales C3, D1, D♯1, E2, F3, F♯1, G♯4, and A♯2, we hear a similarity, that is based on the fact, that these scales include four or five black keys (C♯, D♯, F♯, G♯, A♯).

2) D1 and D2 are in the same family, having the same left hand and two notes of difference in total. They appear close to each other.

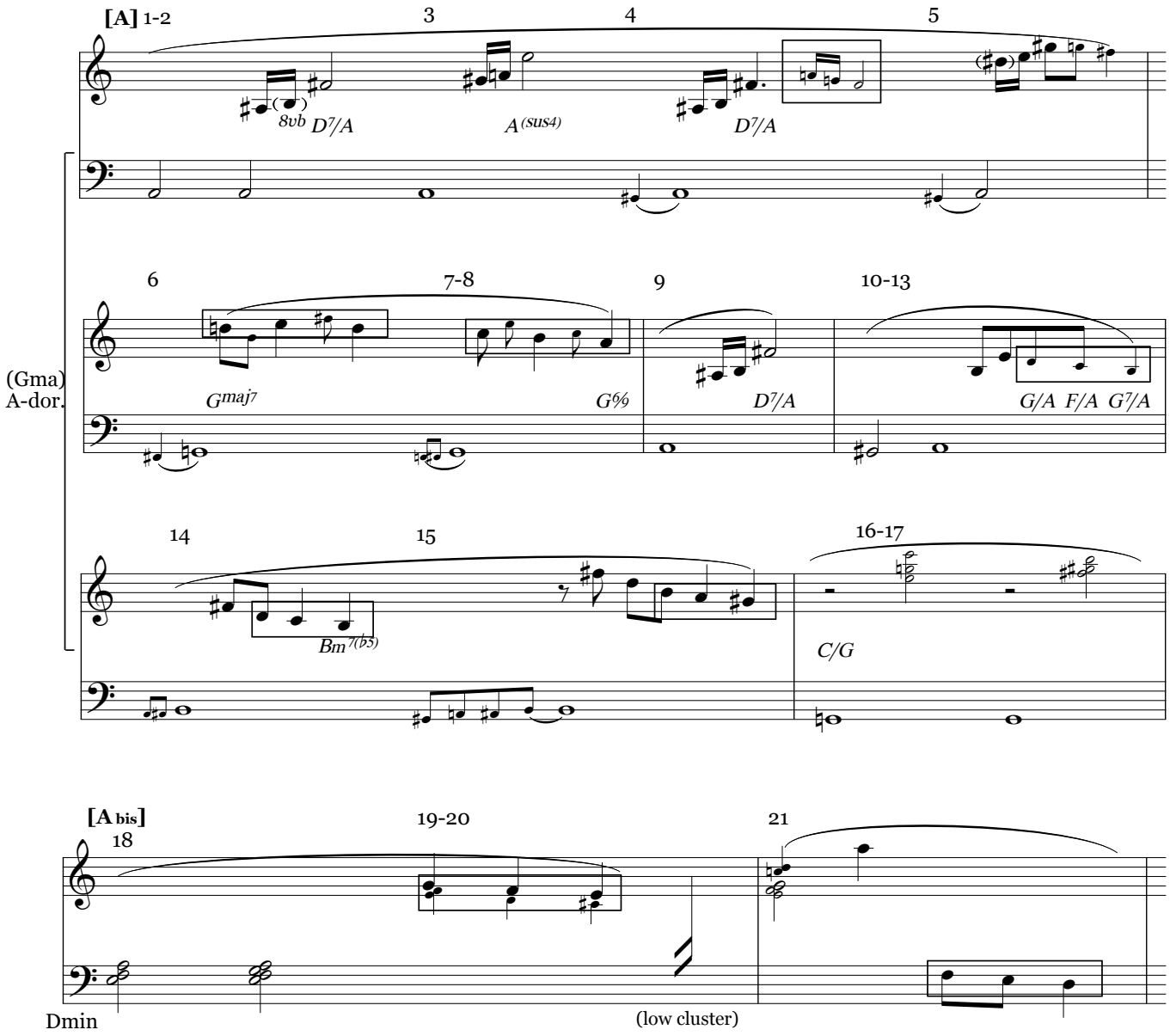
3) F1 and F2 are in the same family, having F and C♯ in the bottom and G, A and D in the top voice. They appear in the Melodic motion 1 of [B] part.

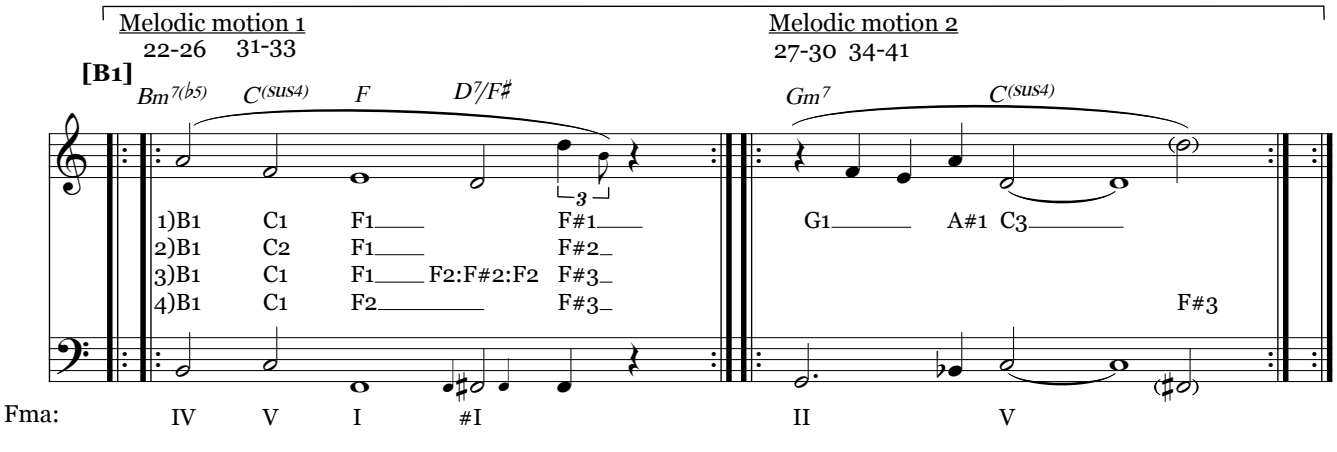
4) All the F♯ scales are transitory, with characteristic pitches F♯, Bb, C, and D.

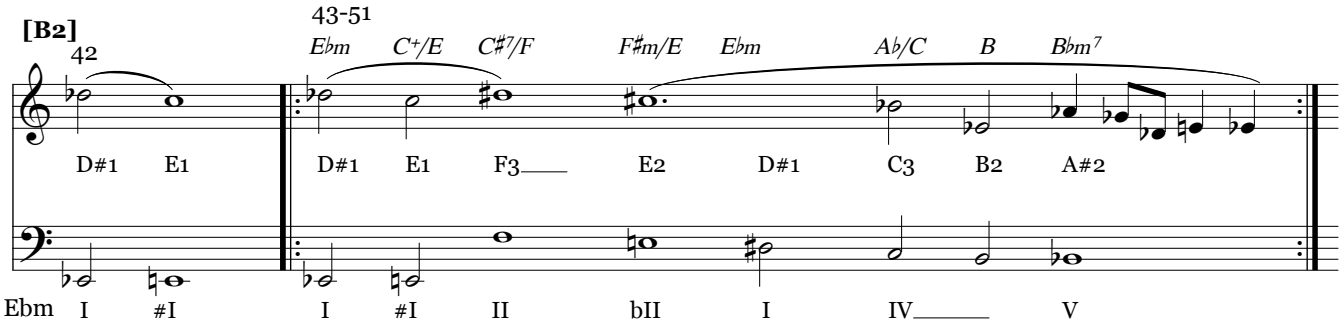
5) A1 and A2 only differ in one note. However, they differ from each other in sonority and the use of each scale is particular, which is the reason for classifying them separately. They are both used in several phrases.

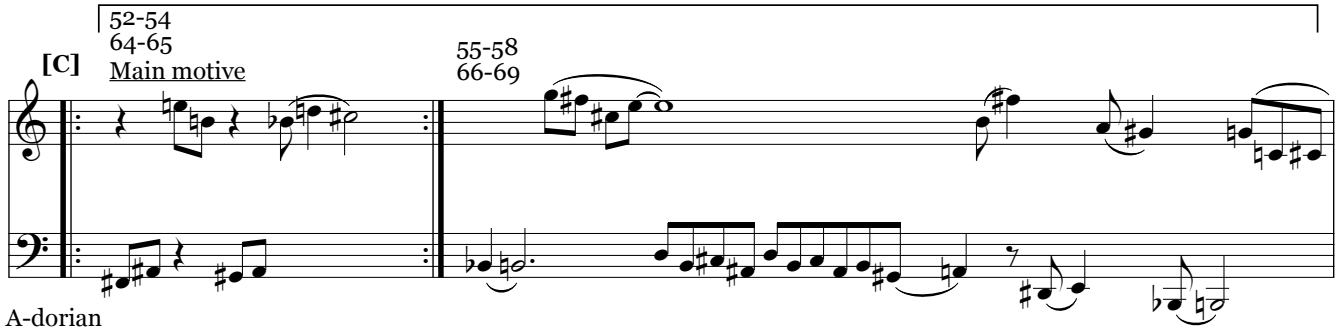
6) A♯2, A♯3, and A♯4 have a construction of A♯-C♯-F♯-G♯. They are all motion scales, ending or connecting the phrases.

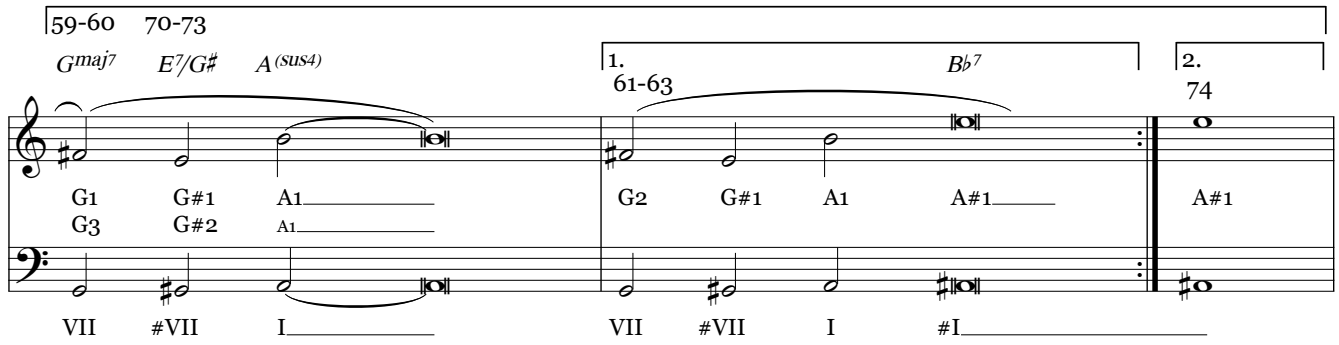
Harmony outline

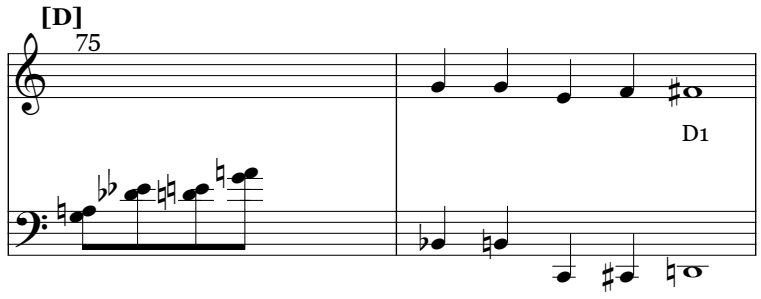





[B2]
42
43-51
Ebm C+/E C#7/F F#m/E Ebm Ab/C B Bbm7
D#1 E1 D#1 E1 F3 E2 D#1 C3 B2 A#2
Ebm I #I I #I II bII I IV V


52-54
64-65
[C]
Main motive
55-58
66-69
A-dorian


59-60 70-73
Gmaj7 E7/G# A(sus4)
1.
61-63
Bb7
2.
74
G1 G#1 A1
G3 G#2 A1
G2 G#1 A1 A#1
A#1
VII #VII I
VII #VII I #I


[D]
75
D1

79-81
92-94

Main motive (a):

(2nd x, repetitions separated by clusters)

C#mi

2nd time only

82-84
96-99

$G^{o(b6/b9)}$ G♯m(♭6) A7(sus4) $A♯m^{(b6)}$ $G^{o(b6/b9)}$ G♯m(♭6) A7(sus4) $A♯m^{(b6)}$

1) G♯3 A1 A♯3 G4 G♯4 A2 A♯3
2)G3 G♯4 A3 A♯3 G3 G♯1.G♯4.G♯5A2 A♯3

#IV V bVI VI #IV V bVI VI

85-87
100-102

$Bm^{7(b5)}$ $F♯^{7}/E$ $A^{(sus4)}$ $F♯^{7}/A♯$ $D^{(♯11)}$

1)B1 E2 A♯4 D2
2)B1 G♯3..D3 A2 A♯4

VII IV/7 IV/3 II

88-91
103-105

$Bm^{7(b5)}$ $A^{(sus4)}$ $F♯^{7}/A♯$ $D^{(♯11)}$ $C♯m^{7(b5)}$

B1 A♯4 D1 C♯2
B1 B3 A1 A♯4 D3 C♯3

VII VI IV/3 II I

E1 106-111

E♭m Bm

Gma/
A-dorian

112-115

116-117

G

E2
118-122

Dm

123

124-127

F1 E3 F1 F4 E4

128-129

D♯2 D4

130