What We Can Say

Preludes and Fugues for Keyboard
by Robert Adámy Duisberg

"One is trying to say everything
that can be said for the things one loves
while there is still time."

~ W.S. Merwin

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Prelude

"Listen / with the night falling / we are saying thank you"
--W. S. Merwin

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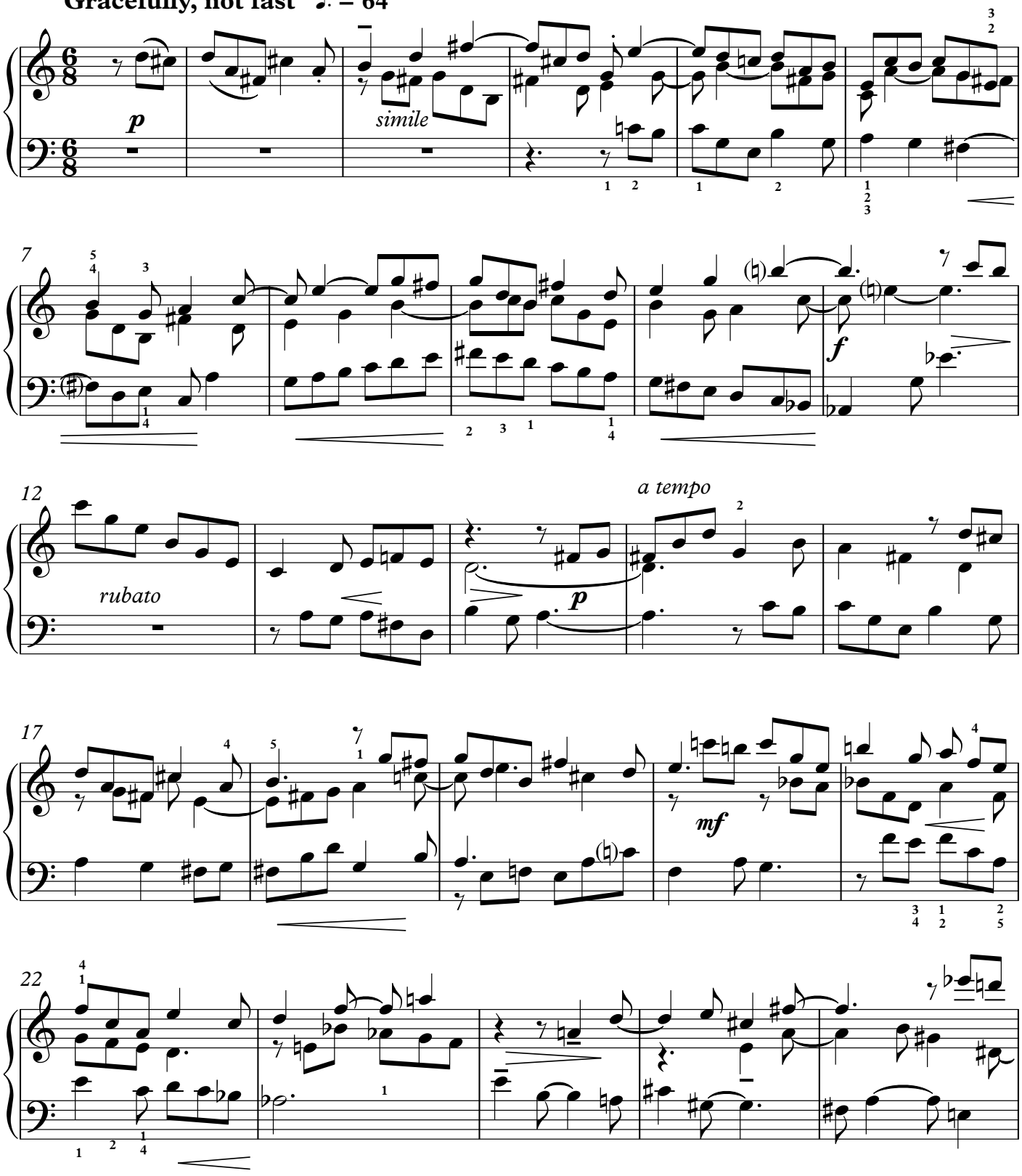

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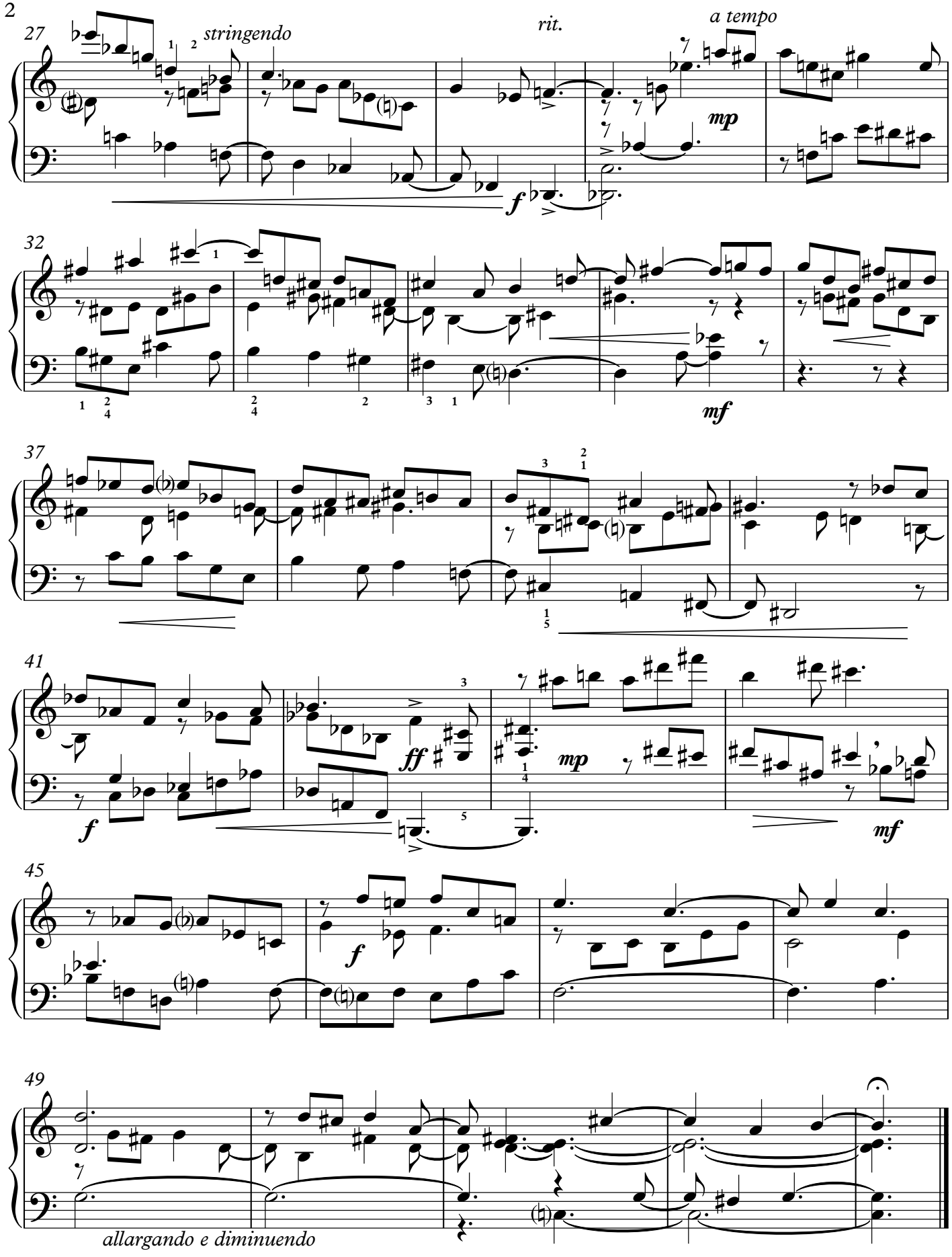
27
stringendo
rit.
a tempo
mp
f
32
mf
37
41
ff
mp
f
mf
45
f
49
allargando e diminuendo

Fugue

"The first composer could hear / only what he could write"
--W.S. Merwin

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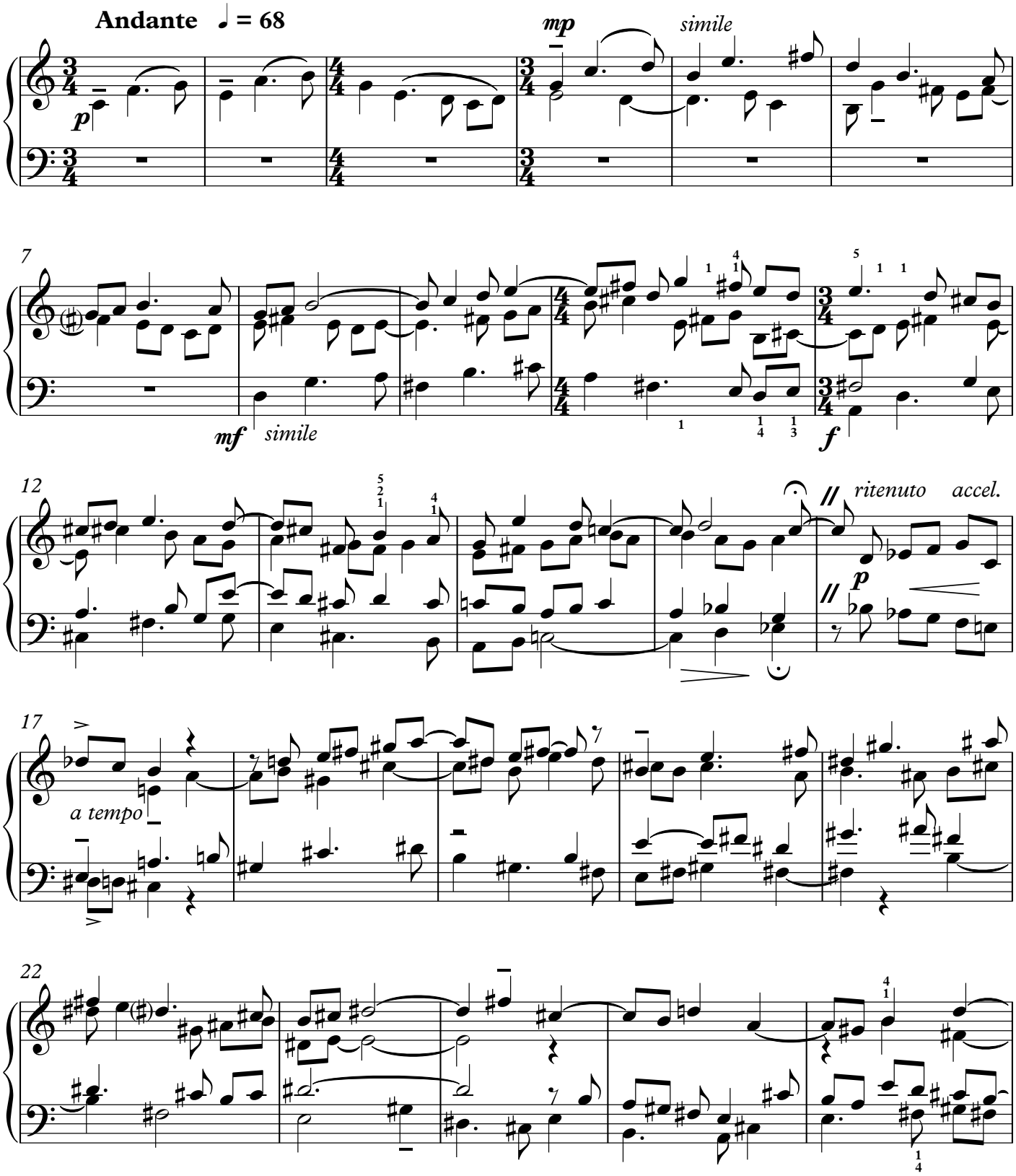

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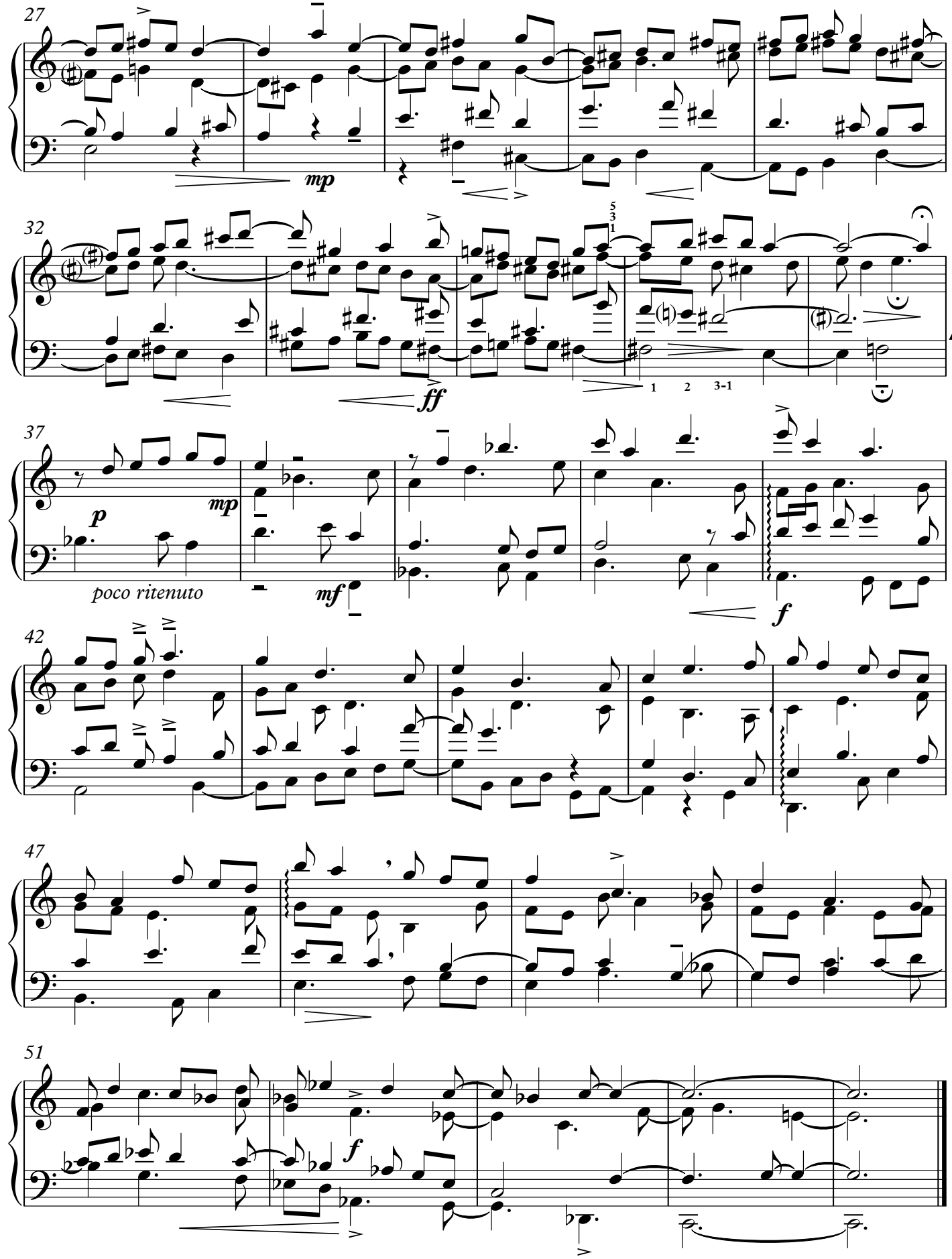
27
mp
32
ff
37
p
mp
poco ritenuto
mf
f
42
47
51
f

Interlude

"We have been here so short a time / and we pretend that we have invented memory"
--W.S. Merwin

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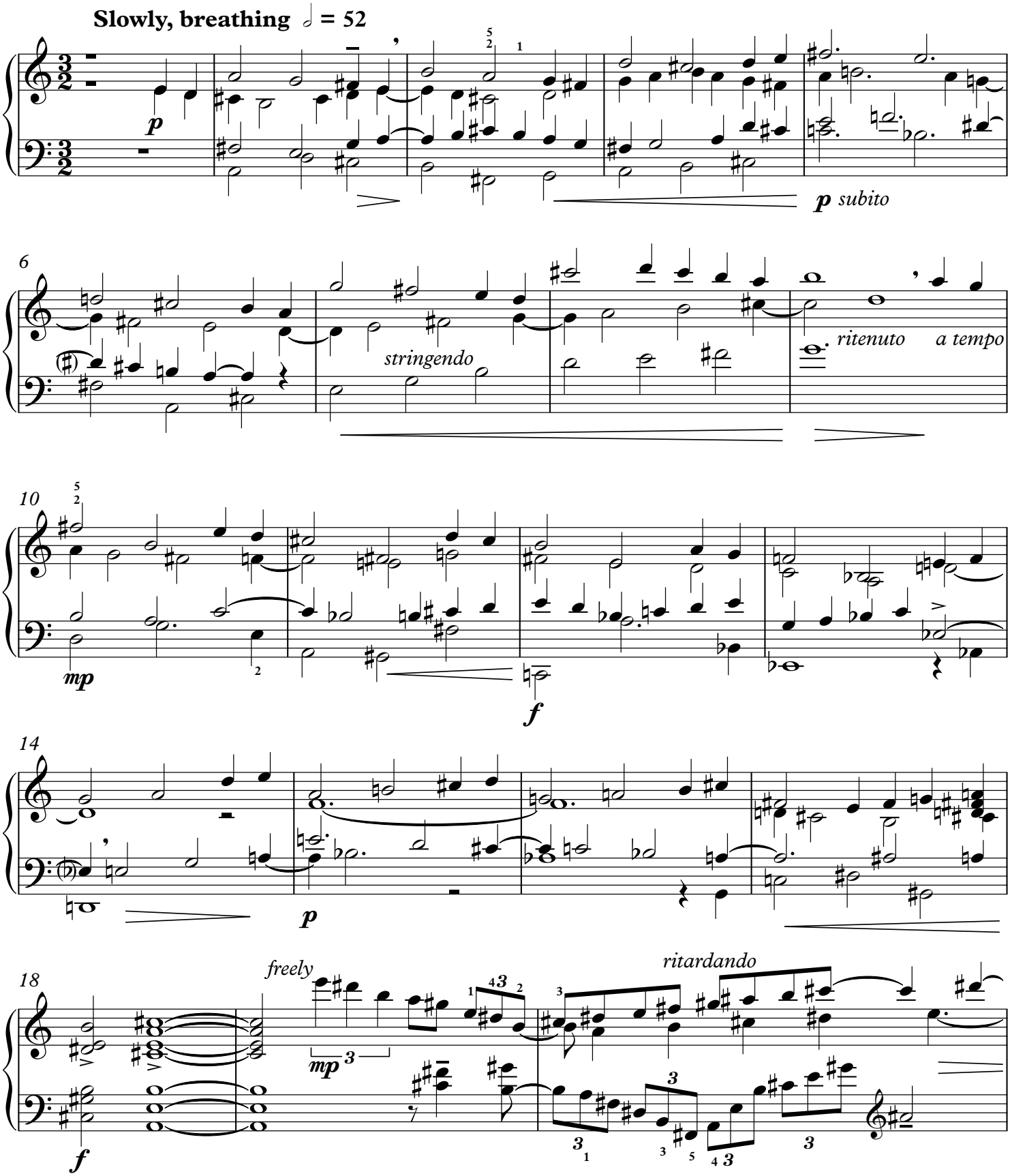

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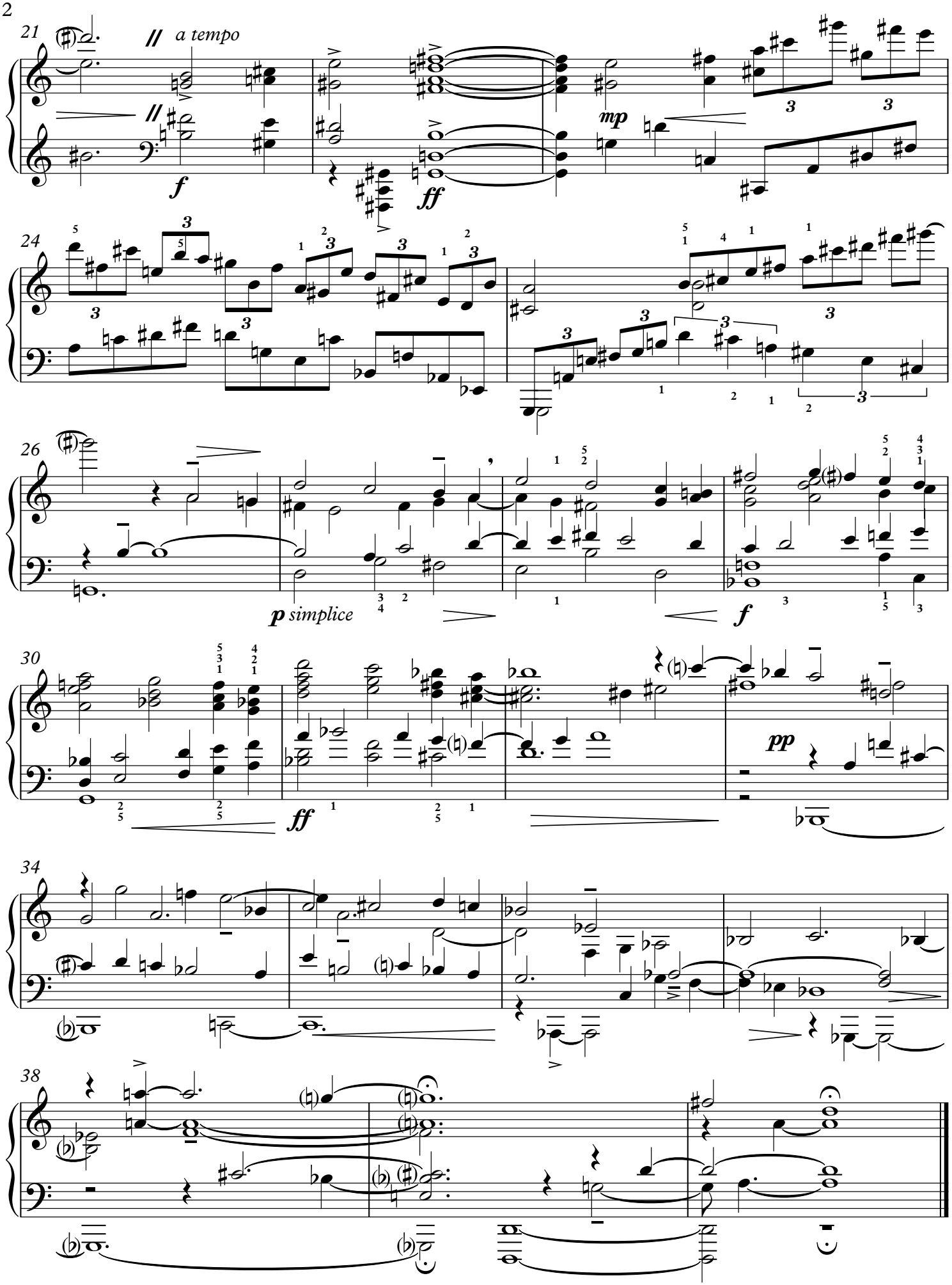
21
// a tempo
f
ff
mp
24
26
p simplice
f
30
ff
pp
34
38

Double Fugue

"With nobody listening we are saying thank you / dark though it is"
--W.S. Merwin

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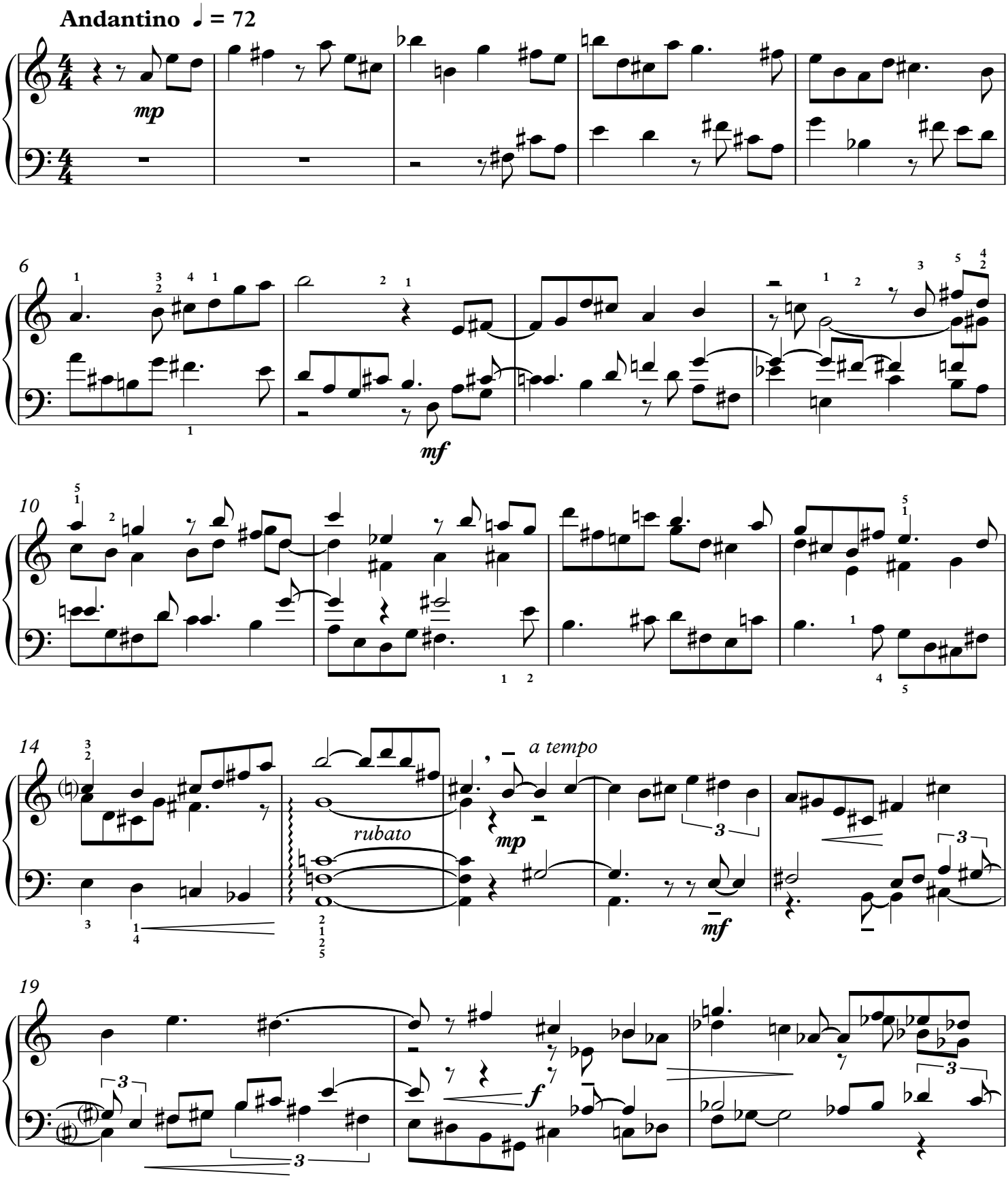

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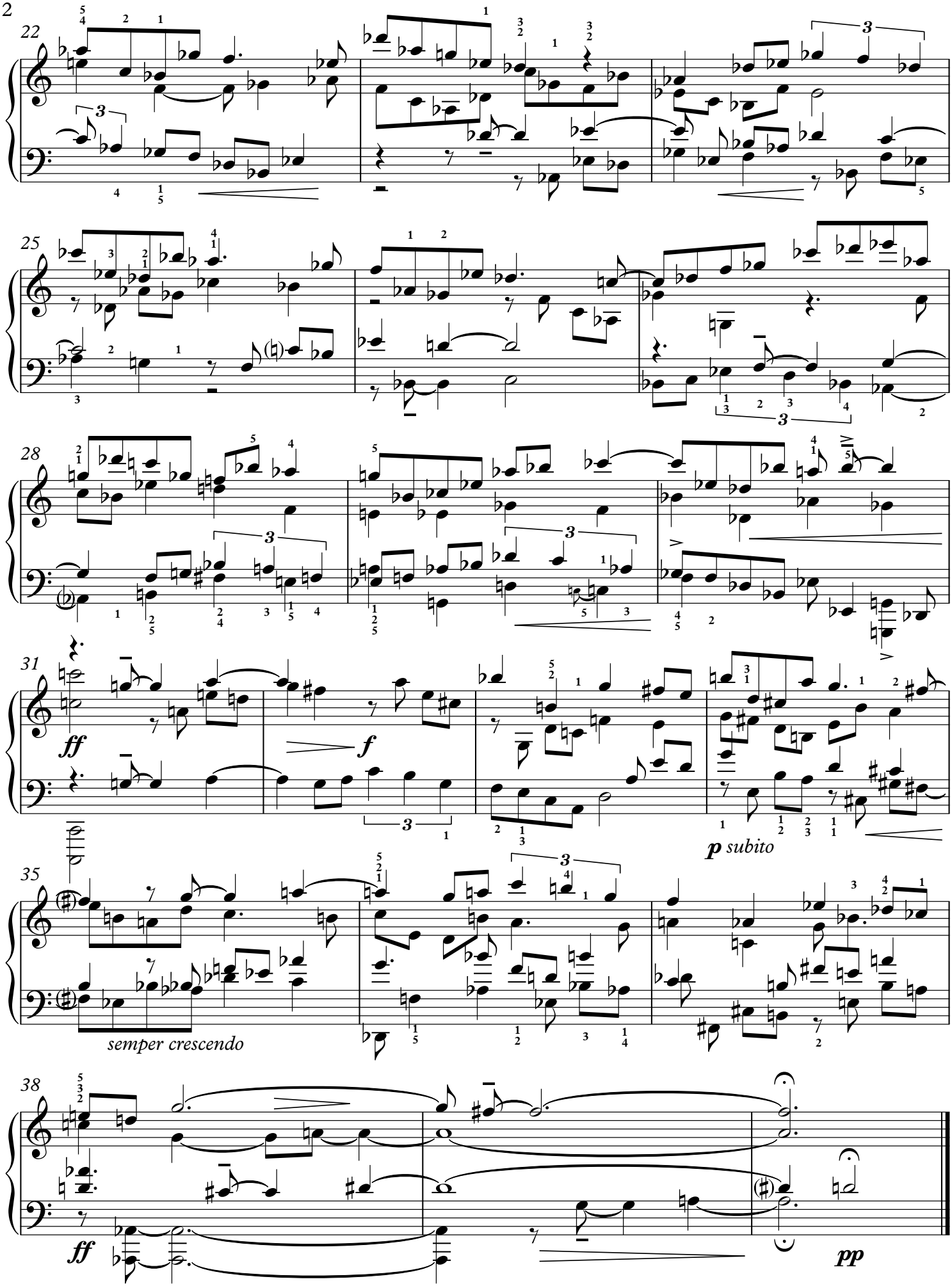
22
25
28
31
ff
f
p subito
35
semper crescendo
38
ff
pp

Composer's Notes

These preludes and fugues are essays in harmony and counterpoint, contemplations melding an inherent formalism of the genre with expressive gestures intending a transcendent response in a time of collapse. Contrapuntal music has always afforded a contemplative refuge in its evocative intellectual and emotional forms.

The set is heard as four linked movements, in an emotional arc of transfiguration. The harmonic language explores an extended sense of tonality, in which lines follow their own independent implications into sharp tonal clashes of tension and release. Passing through crucibles of such poignant, polytonal dissonance, the music invites us to take hopeful steps into resolution.

The emotional transfiguration is from grief into gratitude. Grieving for all that is lost sharpens our gratitude for the fragile preciousness of all that is. W.S. Merwin's poem, 'Thanks,' engages this paradoxical transformation, as it sings of gratitude in the face of the darkest visions, and its lines are suggestive as epigrams.

The first fugue predates the other pieces in this set by more than a decade. In the 1990's, at a reading he gave on an island near my home, I had the honor of a conversation with the great laureate poet, in which I impertinently asked his permission to set some of his text to music. To my surprise, he smiled warmly, saying, "That is simply between you and the poetry." The result was a choral version of this fugue, in which the epigram of the 'First Composer' is sung as the fugue subject. Merwin's poetry has always called us toward the salvation of the natural world. Ten years later, at another reading in Seattle, I humbly presented that score to him, expressing doubt he'd remember his generous permission. Warmly again, fixing me with his penetrating eye contact, he said, "Of course I remember!"

Its playful prelude delights in the world's grace, nonetheless weaving into dark implications, and forecasts the fugue. The fugue subject itself is elegiac yet inviting in its rising fourths, a hopeful requiem. Its climactic resolution is to an emphatic "Chord of Nature" in C major.

The second prelude stretches time like breath itself. In its rhapsodic middle it introduces a two note motif, a simple rising major second, the hopeful step, which pirouettes from there into a yearning gesture. This motif comes into dominance as the second theme of the double fugue, resolving ultimately into a pure yet unstable consonance. We take a step. We do what we can.

Performance Notes

Fingerings for each hand are directly above and below their respective staves. As cross-staff fingerings abound, they are indicated when the number of fingerings designated on a staff differs from the number of pitches present there.

Tenuto marks, in addition to their usual meaning, are also to highlight motivic elements to be brought out, especially in inner voices, and particularly in the third and fourth pieces. For examples, the aforementioned rising step motif is marked with a *tenuto* as it wants strong presence, coming in as it does on the weak part of a beat. The falling melodic fifths so marked in the closing bars of the Interlude could even be emphasized by performing them as with grace notes slightly before the beat.

The breath mark (comma) is used to indicate a breathing of the tempo, rather than a cessation of sound, a "*Luftpause ohne Luft*" as it were, more local than a *ritenuto*, not as hard as a *caesura*.

More music, information and contact information can be found at:

https://www.robduisberg.org