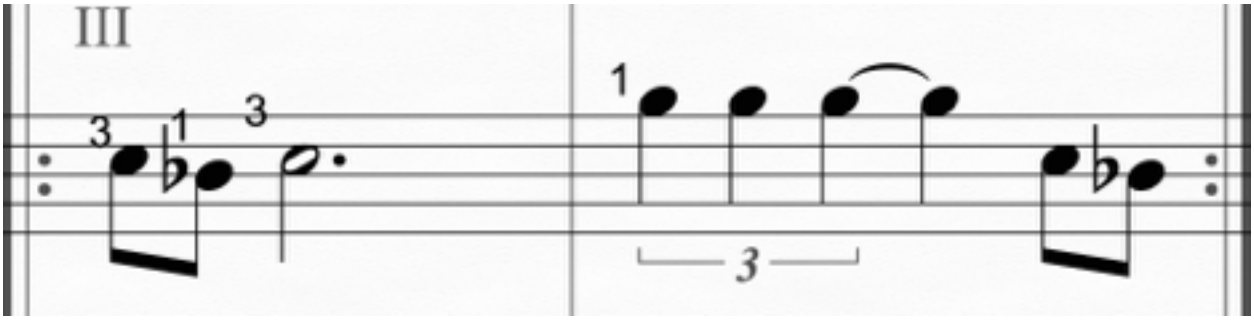
Beyond Ferguson

Based on a melody in Michael Brown's Music



by Thomas Flippin

Arranged for Guitar Trio in support of the *Kithara Project*

August 2015

(Originally Sept. 2014)

About Beyond Ferguson:

On August 9th, 2014 an unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, was fatally shot by the White police officer Darren Wilson. The shooting came less than a month after the widely reported and graphic police choking of Eric Garner and was part of a streak of stories about unarmed minorities being killed by police or civilians across the country (e.g. Jordan Davis, Renisha McBride, Jonathan Ferrell, Trayvon Martin, Ricardo Diaz-Zeferino, Rekia Boyd et al). Consequently, the events in Ferguson felt both familiar and tragic. It was tragic that Michael Brown needlessly lost his life weeks before starting college, and it was tragic that Darren Wilson had to go into hiding after receiving death threats.

Ferguson also felt divisive. Various witnesses gave conflicting accounts that made it impossible to know anything with certainty except that both men could have made better choices that day. The Justice Department concluded that Brown had stolen cigars moments earlier, initiating the encounter with Wilson. They also concluded that Wilson potentially showed poor judgment in his contact with Brown and that Ferguson's then majority-white government and police intentionally targeted Black residents for petty offenses to increase fines, used racial epithets toward Black residents, and sent racist emails. Ultimately, they did not exonerate Wilson, but concluded that he could not be prosecuted as long as the government could not disprove his saying that he felt threatened.

It has been almost a year since the events in Ferguson unfolded and I originally felt called to write this piece for guitar ensemble students in nearby St. Louis. I had performed an outreach concert at Brown's high school mere months before his death and felt compelled to respond. Since then, police shootings and abuses of unarmed people of color have been recorded far beyond Ferguson (e.g. Tamir Rice, Samuel DuBose, Walter Scott, Dajerria Becton, John Crawford III, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Levar Jones, Antonio Zambrano-Montes et al).

Writing a piece about such a timely and sensitive topic is certain not to please everyone, but the piece neither seeks to vilify all police, nor glorify unlawful or vulgar conduct. Rather, it attempts to give a historical context for the outcry to these shootings through a 1903 Du Bois reading, and through a musical collage of Negro spiritual, jazz, hip hop, and African influences. Accordingly, *Beyond Ferguson* begins with a melody from one of Michael Brown's raps, to give him a chance to speak directly and metaphorically for the dozens of unarmed citizens who have been killed by police in the past two years. And the music comes to an inconclusive end, waiting to be resolved.

-Thomas Flippin, New York City, August 2015

Introducing the piece to the audience:

Prior to performance, effort should be made to explain the national context of this piece in an unbiased way (possibly reading portions of the previous page). Performers should explain that Michael Brown was an imperfect teenager, but he loved to make music in his spare time and used the melody in (mms.3-4) for one of his amateur rap songs. Demonstrate that melody and then discuss how its pitches (C-Bb-G) can be truncated, transposed, stacked, and arpeggiated throughout the piece as part of the composition process (e.g. briefly play Section B to show how the piece evolves from Michael Brown's original idea and is transformed).

Performance Notes:

The A section is an Invocation. The opening two measures can be looped for as long as the performers want to establish a mood and rhythmic heartbeat of the piece. When guitar 3 is ready, s/he begins in mm.3-4 by warmly introducing Michael Brown's melody.

The B section is a Dance. It takes Brown's melody and arpeggiates it with a truncated plantation slave Juba rhythm in Guitar 3. There is an option here that after Guitar 3 has looped this section solo a few times, Guitar 1 can slowly stand up and read aloud the 1st paragraph of the following quote in a dynamic and theatrical fashion. Then Guitar 1 sits, and after a pause with just Guitar 3 playing, Guitar 2 stands and reads the 2nd paragraph. Then Guitar 2 slowly sits and cues section C when ready:

"Being a problem is a strange experience...It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others....shut out from their world by a vast veil. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness- An American, a Negro... (PAUSE)

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife....He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face....This then is the end of his striving. -W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903"

While the quote is being read, Guitar 3 can instead use i-m-a for the arpeggio and begin using their right hand thumb to add improvised bass notes alongside the arpeggio. These should be sustained and occur on occasional downbeats of the looped measures (pluck every 4 beats or 8 beats, but don't be predictable). This enables a real-time response to the spoken words with a corresponding amount of dissonance to what is being said and felt. Effective notes could be: D and Eb on string 4, B natural and C on string 5, F# and G on string 6.

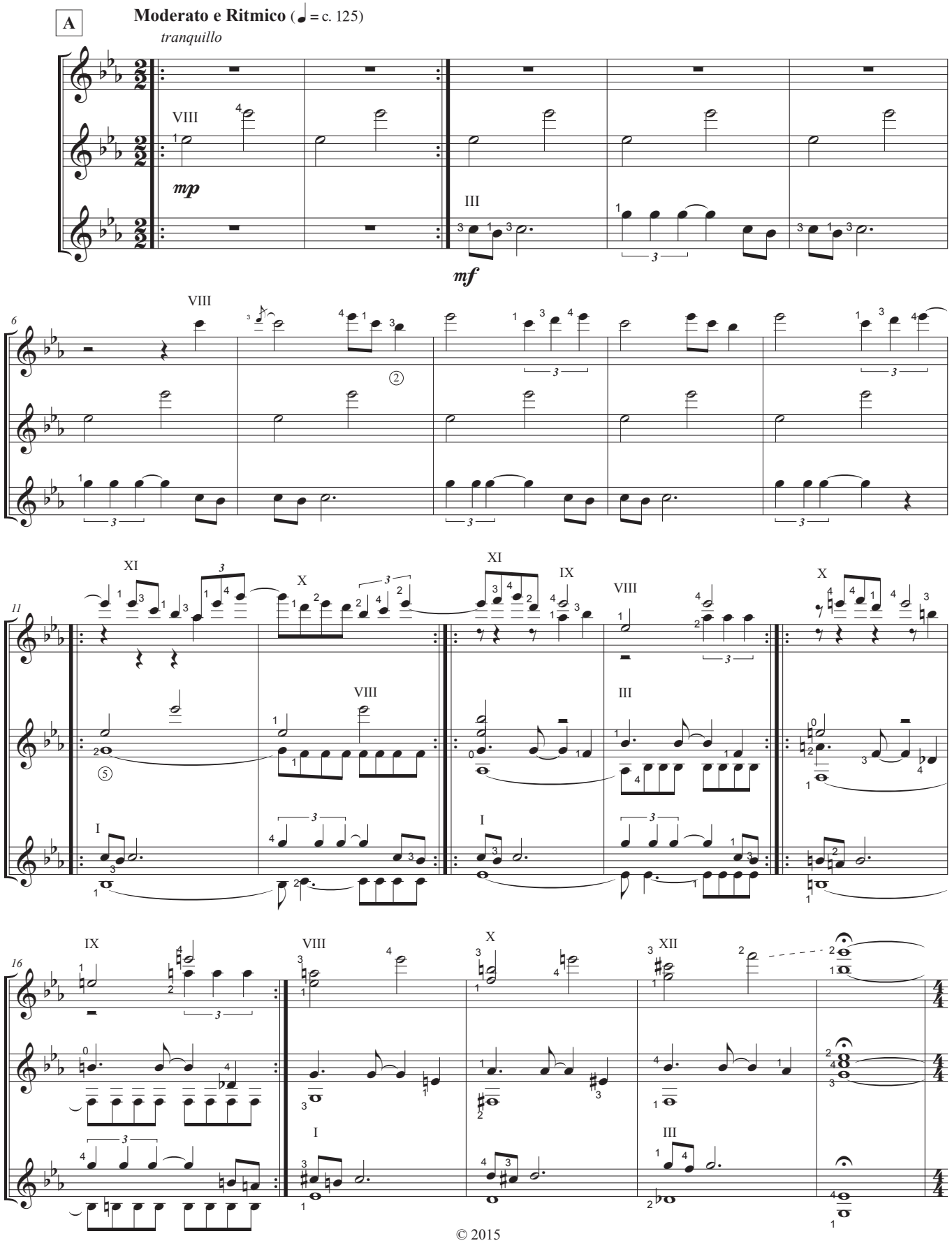
The K section should have players slowly moving their right hands to transition the color starting in m. 64, and then move the other direction in m.67. As the piece fades out players have the option to let their last notes sustain for as long as possible with the left hand while slowly raising their right hand in the air as though doing a benediction or a gesture of support for the non-violent "Hands Up Don't Shoot" protests. Guitar 3 can loop their penultimate measure for as long as feels appropriate to wind the piece down, while the other players sit motionless with their hands raised.

For William Ash

Beyond Ferguson

Thomas Flippin

Based on the music of Michael Brown



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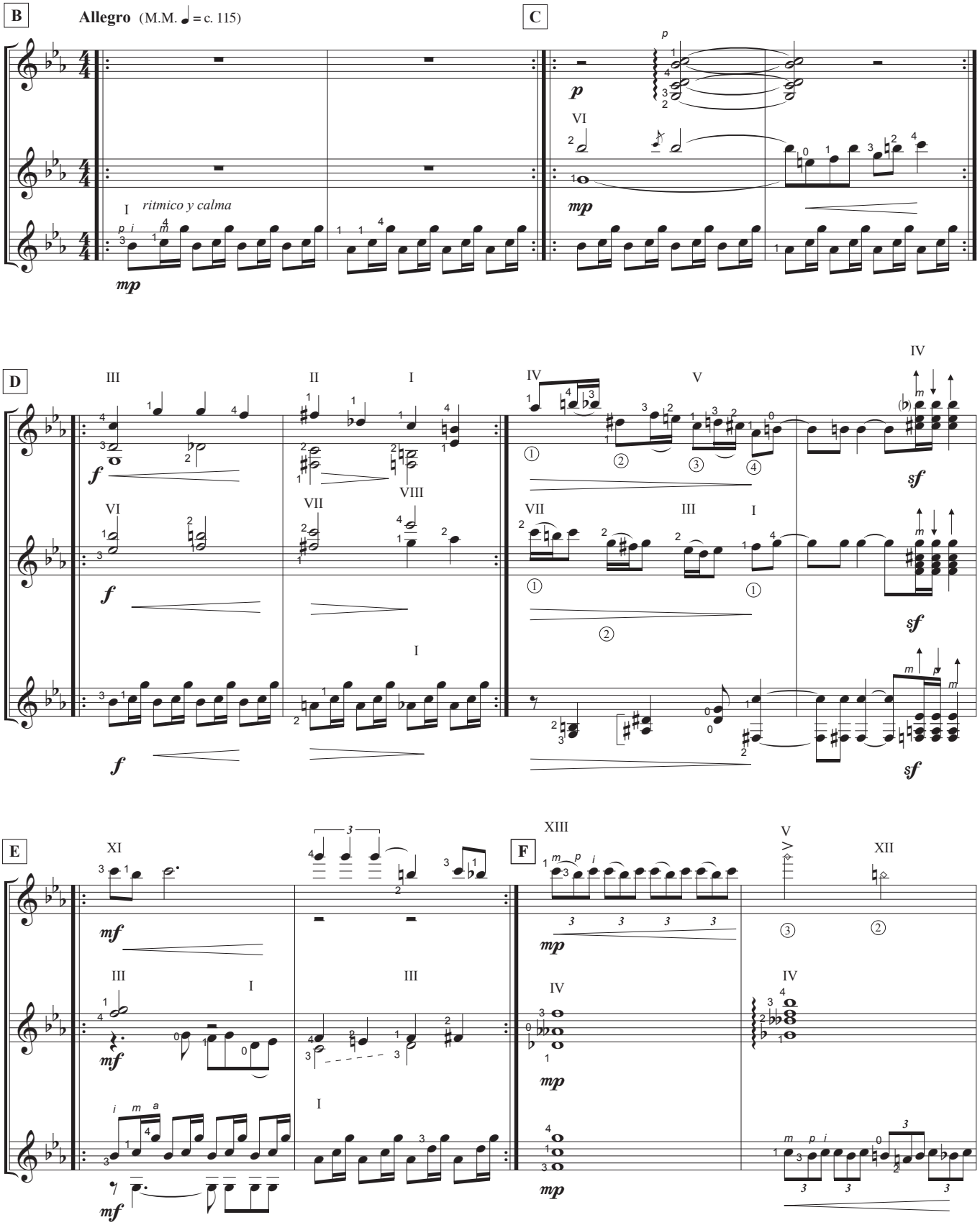
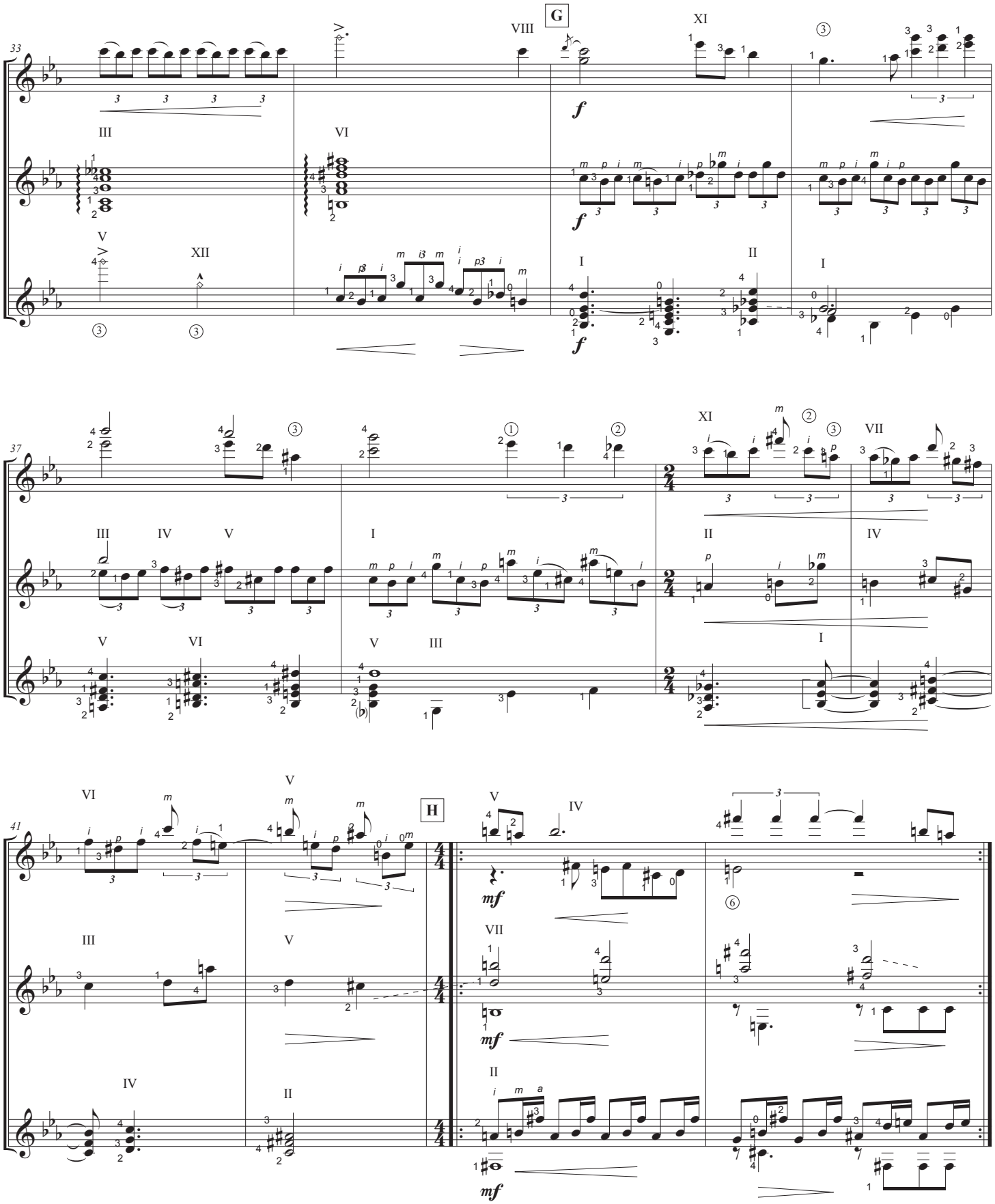
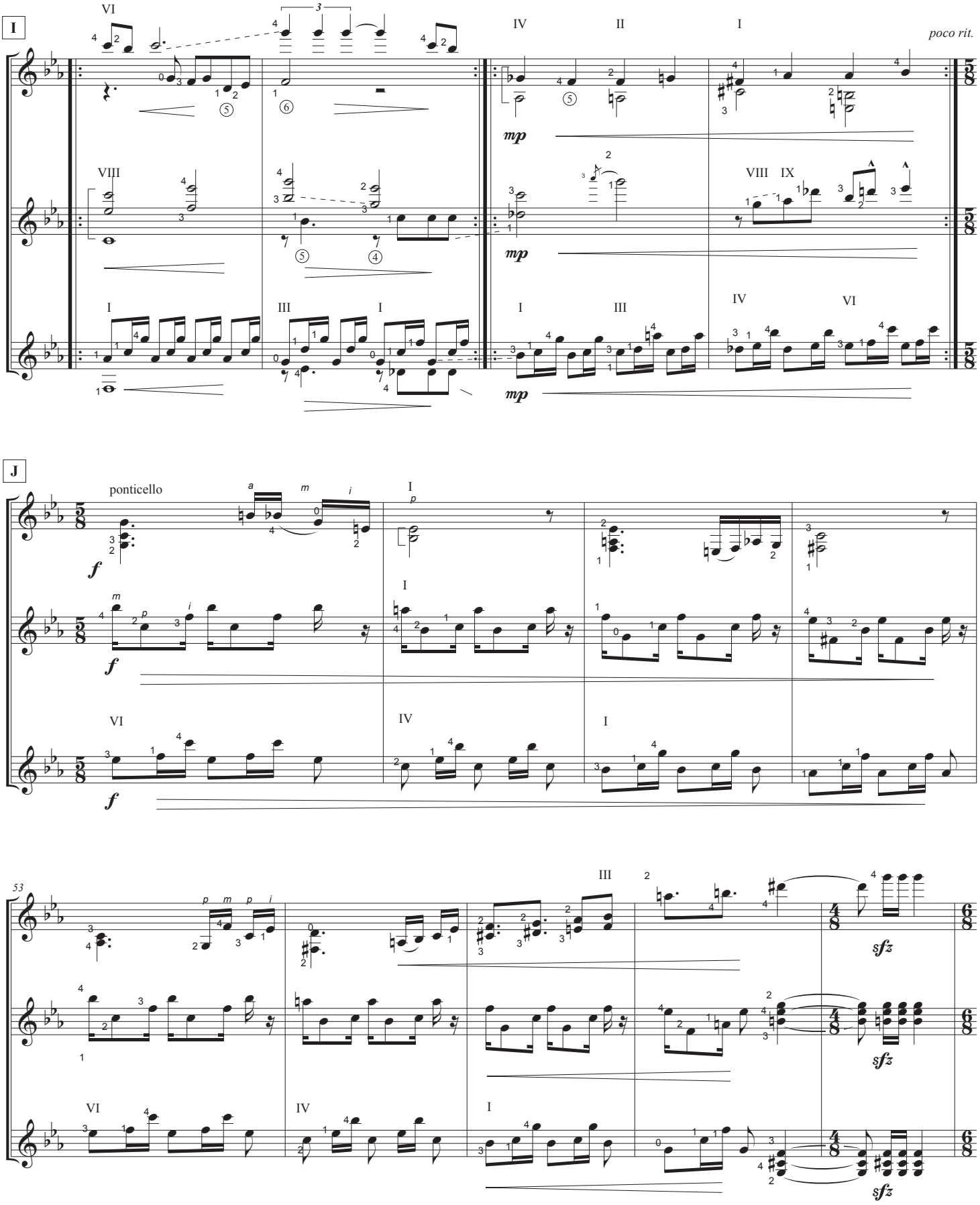
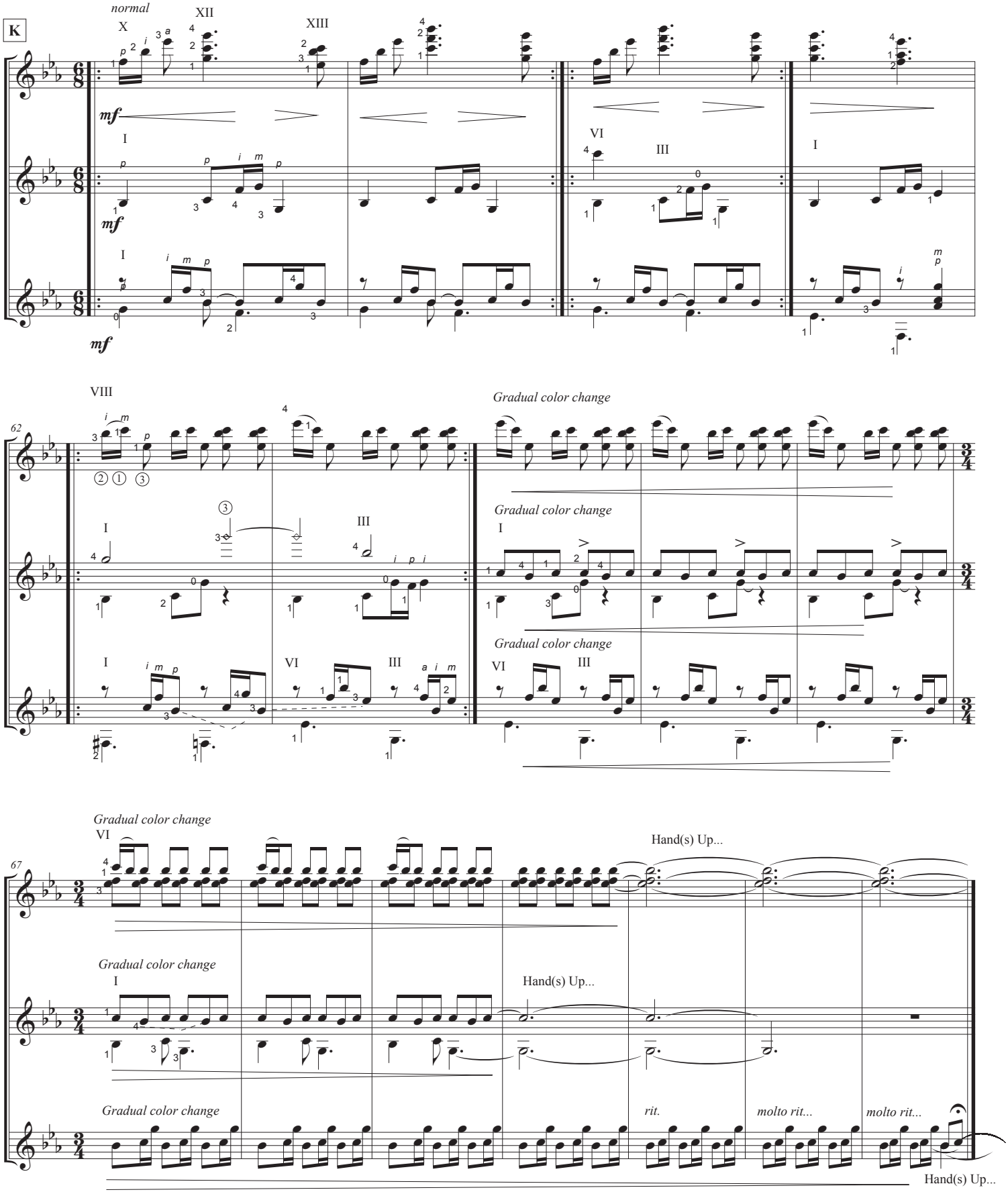

B
Allegro (M.M. ♩ = c. 115)
C
ritmico y calma
D
E
F


33
G
37
41
H


I
poco rit.
mp
J
ponticello
f
53
sfz


K
normal
mf
Gradual color change
Hand(s) Up...
rit.
molto rit...
molto rit...