The Whirlies

J. Simon van der Walt

For strings and improviser

The Whirlies

Composer's note

What is East Kilbride famous for? I'm not entirely sure how most people would answer that question! For myself, although I'm not exactly Scottish born and bred, there is a big chunk of me which is 'from' East Kilbride; I spent two highly formative periods of my life there, during my primary school years, and again for the last couple of years of high school before university. And one of the things which always sticks in my head about East Kilbride is… roundabouts! Being one of those 60's new towns, it has an elaborate road plan, with sweeping dual carriageways carefully separated from winding dead-end closes; the kind of town where you can *see* the house you're trying to get to, but there seems to be no way of actually *getting* there…

The biggest roundabout in East Kilbride is known to most residents by name; 'The Whirlies'. In recent times it's been rather travestied by the addition of traffic lights, but in it's heyday it was a madness of a junction, roads spiraling off in every direction…

Of course, a piece of music can't *really* be about a roundabout. More than that, this is a reminiscence of my teenage years, when I first started to become seriously interested in music. There were two strands to this. Firstly, I was starting to branch out from my Father's transcendental but admittedly rather limited listening diet of Bach, Wagner, and, er nothing else, to explore the delights of jazz, experimental rock music, Stravinsky, and Bartók. My second way into music was through the soldering iron, literally getting my fingers burnt hacking together home-made noisemakers using transistors salvaged from broken hi-fi sets and the like.

Commissioned by the Scottish Philharmonic Orchestra and first performed by them on 17/11/2008 at Òran Mór in Glasgow, with conductor Peter Cynfryn Jones and artistic director: Gordon Rigby. The improvised part was taken by the composer, using an amplified banjo ukulele originally belonging to his grandfather through a circuit-bent effects unit. Duration ~10 mins.

JSDVW
www.jsimonvanderwalt.com
3 Oct 2009

To the performer

When the Great Masters of the Past wrote themselves a work to perform, it was a relatively easy matter for them to notate their solo part for future publication. The Whirlies seems more problematic, as the first performance was improvised by the composer on a unique instrument of his own devising. In the original version of the score, a stave was allocated to the soloist, with some sparse verbal indications as to how to respond to the string material. However, not only did I find myself completely ignoring these in the heat of battle, but there seems no good reason why another performer should follow the same path.

The solution has been to remove the solo part from the score entirely, and to leave the manner of its future performance entirely in the hands of a future performer. The written material for the strings now has stands as a frame, or a blank canvas; a fixed background for a solo part over which the composer chooses not to exercise control.

To be clear then; the solo part should be as personal and unique to individual performer as it was to the composer on the first performance. The boundaries here are extremely widely drawn; it might be performed upon any instrument or 'instrument', or spoken, or sung, or tap-danced, or...

One would hope for an *honest* performance, although if someone wished to go to the trouble of staging the piece and then deliberately pissing about, one would have to take that as their honest response. More realistically, one would hope that a future soloist would have some interest and investment in the piece, and would want to know more about how and why the composer made the piece in the first place.

The Whirlies, then, hangs upon two poles. The first of these was my desire as a composer to get out from behind the desk and start performing in public again. This insight may seem relatively useless to a future performer, who stands in a different relationship to the work; and another composer would presumably write his or her own piece! However, perhaps there is a useful inversion here; it might serve as a vehicle for a performer tired of a score-based approach, wishing to revisit their own creative approach to music making.

The other fixed point in this piece, as hinted at in the programme note, is a particular kind of nostalgia; in my case for my last years in high school, in a town which I subsequently left, seldom to revisit. The story about driving around the roundabouts of my home town to visit my father is true. The title of the piece and the ruminations upon the roundabouts of East Kilbride are in a sense false, or at any rate a red-herring; the piece is certainly not about roundabouts, although many of the audience for the first performance did choose to read the round-and-round loops of the music and the largely noise-based sounds made by the effects unit as some sort of music-traffic-picture.

Rather, the roundabout journey was the one back to my father. Leaving home after high school also marked a break in our relationship which was not healed for many years; perhaps remains unhealed.

Something could be said about the music in the string parts, which have their own nostalgia, four slices of the musical past being alluded to (but not quoted). The waltz material marked at the opening is a fairly clear reference to Ronald Binge's notorious Radio 4 classic *Sailing By*. (Another cross-reference; the Scottish Philharmonic Orchestra who gave the first performance is largely comprised of BBC musicians, who would of course often be called upon to play this kind of concert-orchestra material.)

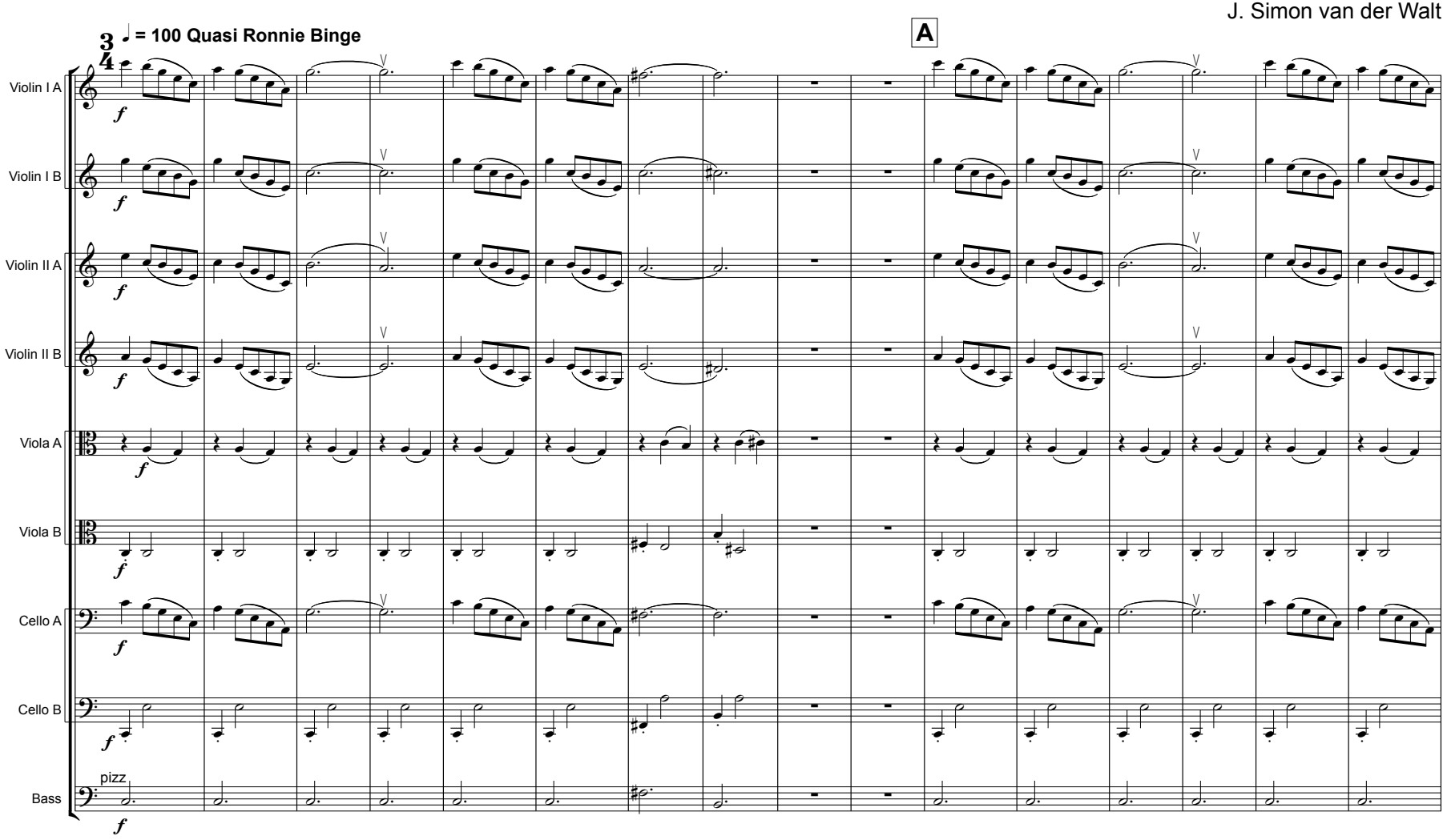
The material at letter I is a sort of histrionic hyper-romantic gesture alluding to… a certain personal weakness for hyper-romantic histrionicism in music. (There is a passage in Tchaikovsky's Symphony no 4 in F minor which may have influenced the shape of my phrase, or perhaps Chopin's Raindrop Prelude. No direct reference is intended; if anything this is meant to sound Germanic rather than Franco-Russian.)

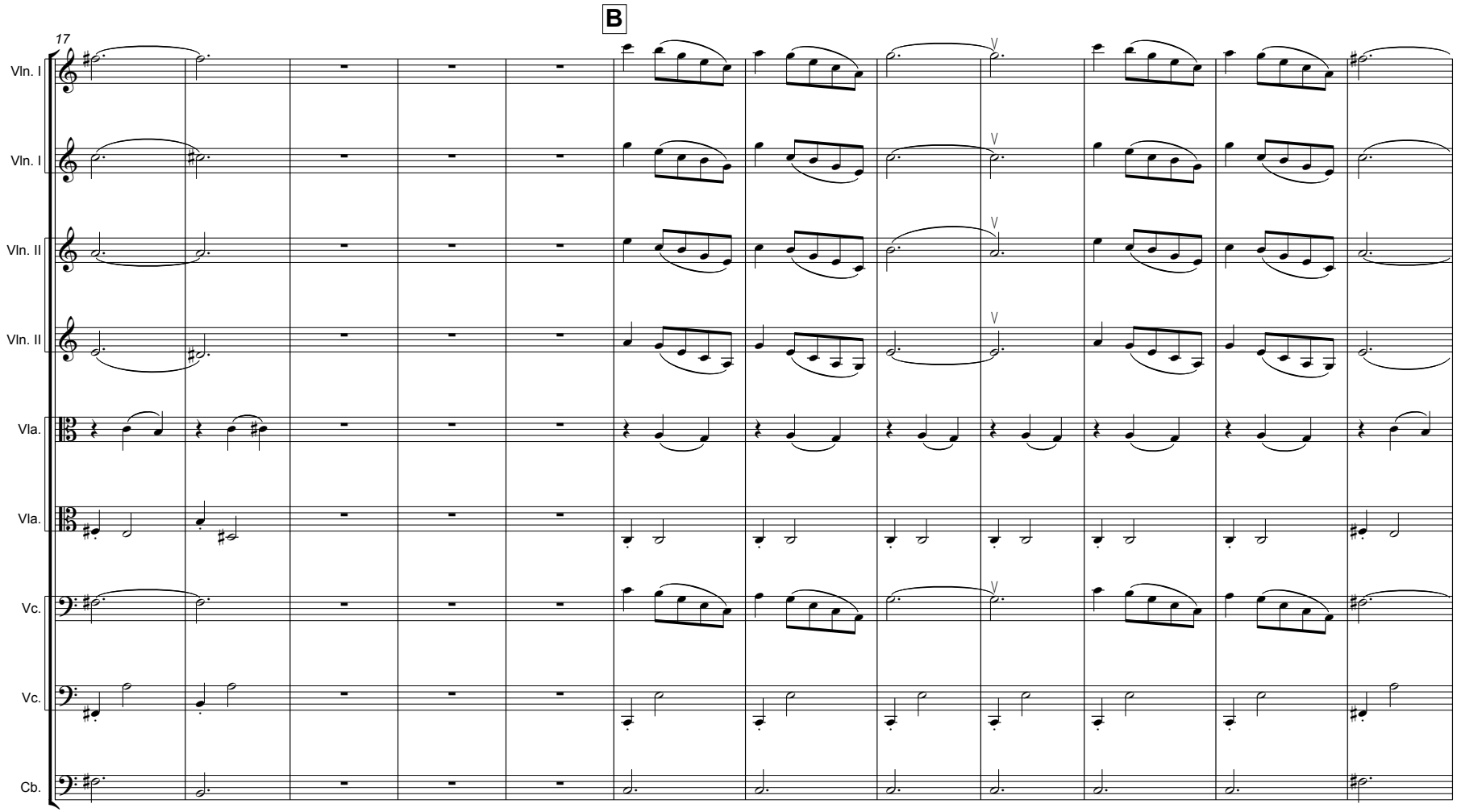
The bow scratching sounds at letter H are an ironic reference to a zillion modernist pieces which attempt to 'compose' using the sounds of extended techniques on the instruments to hand. The stop-start repetitions of the waltz phrase are probably a reference to digital sampling and looping of material rather than, as might have been suspected, minimalism.

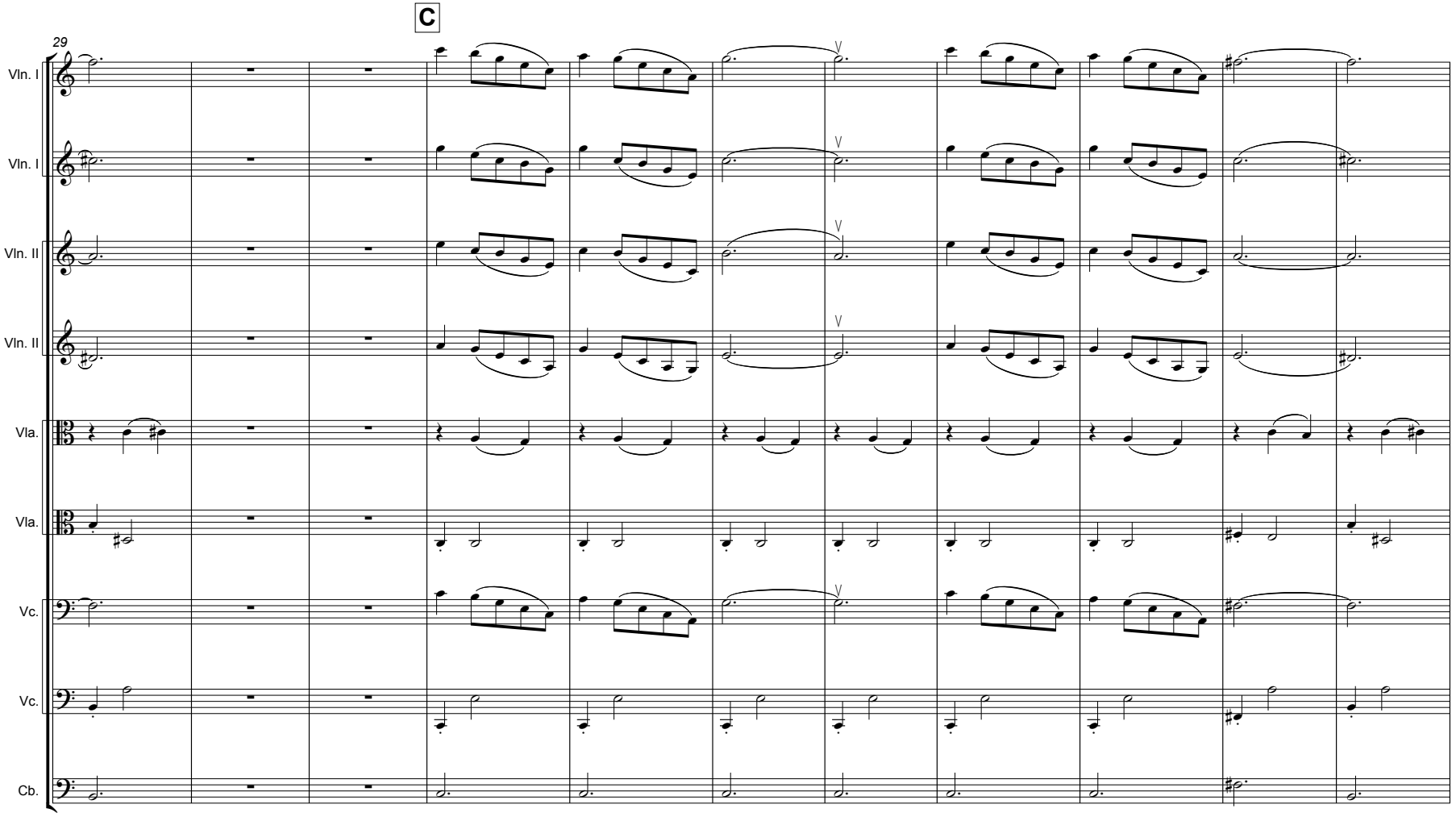
Or, maybe they are roundabouts after all.

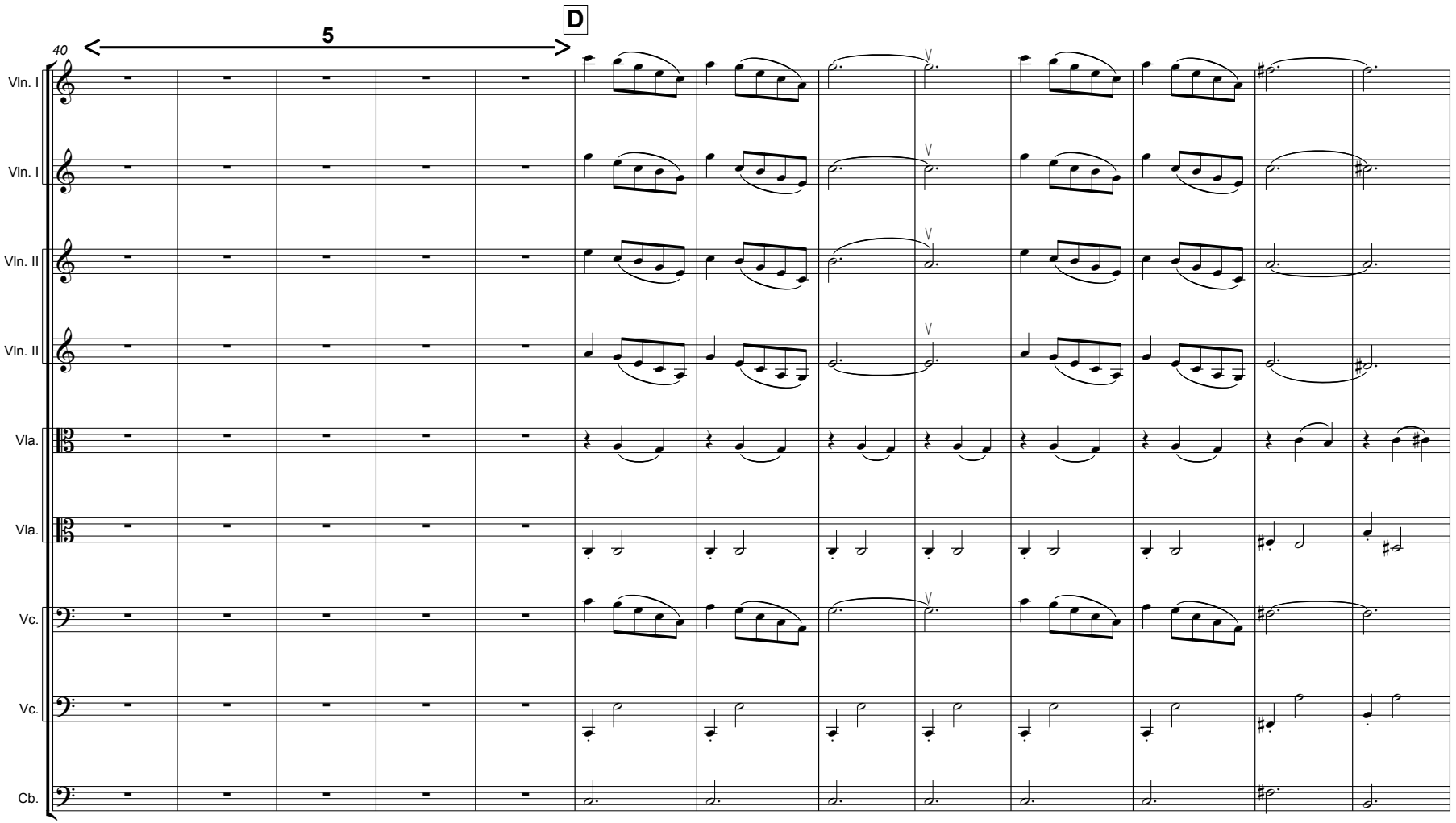
The Whirlies

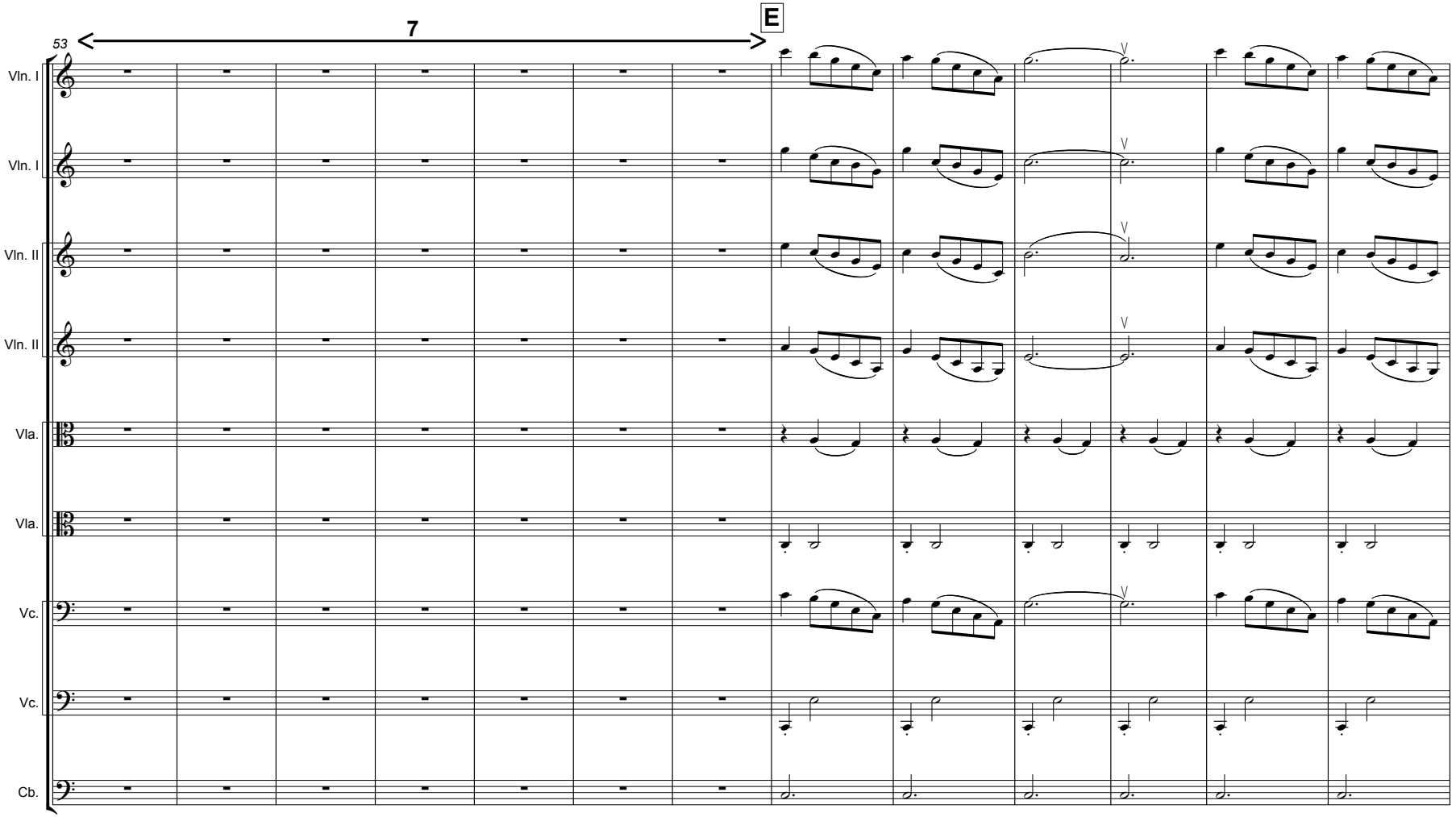
J. Simon van der Walt

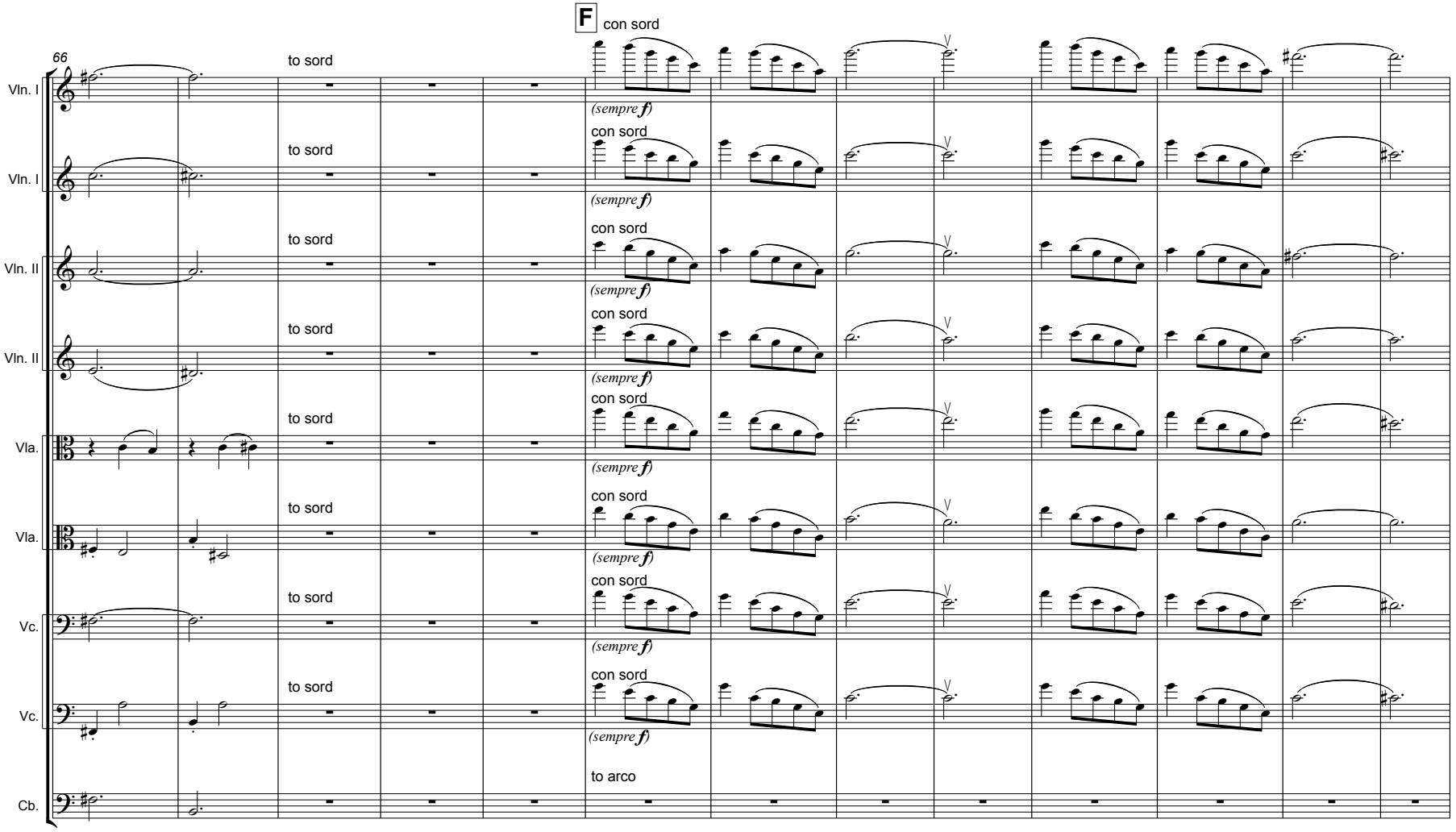


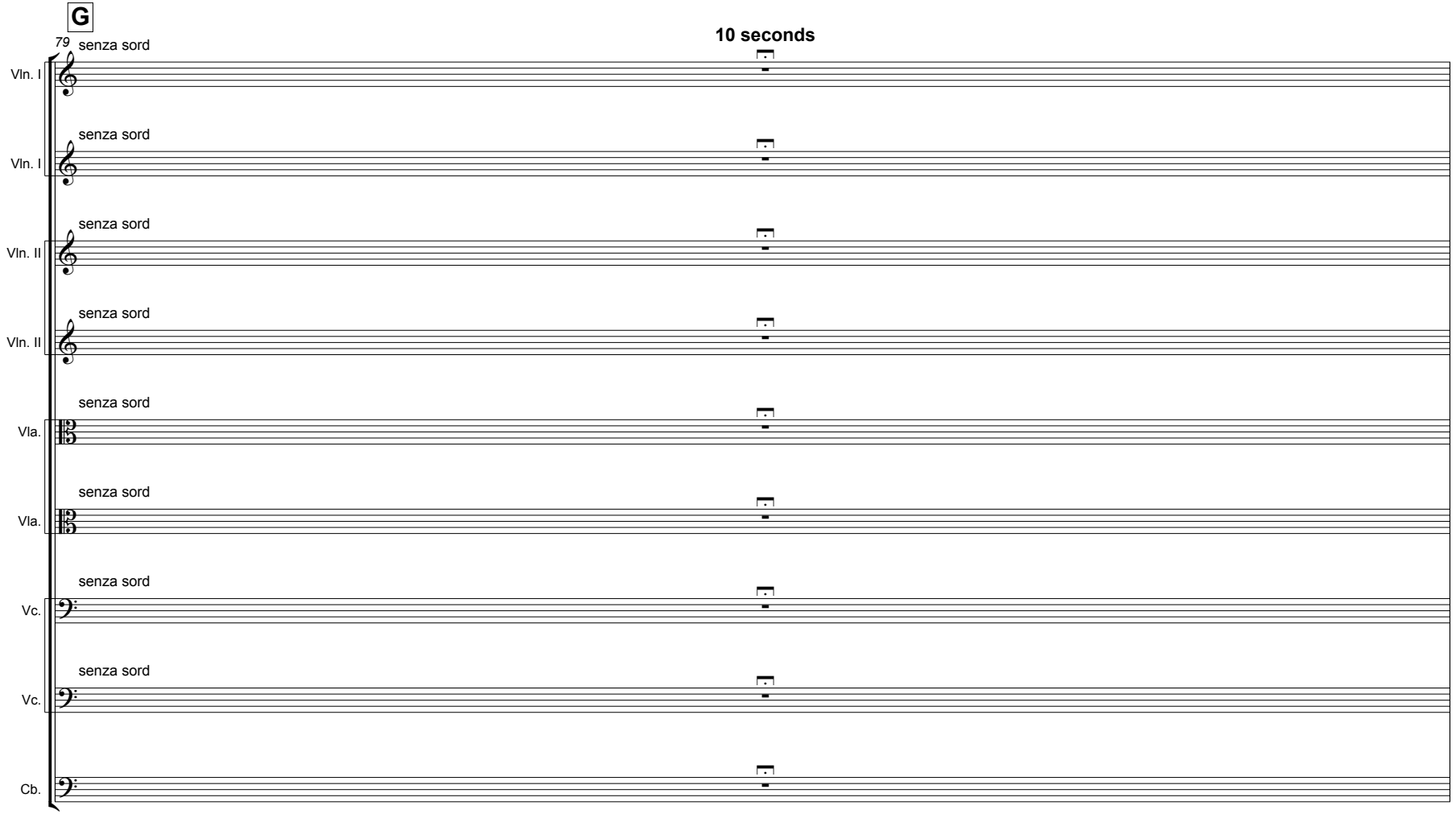

B
17
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.

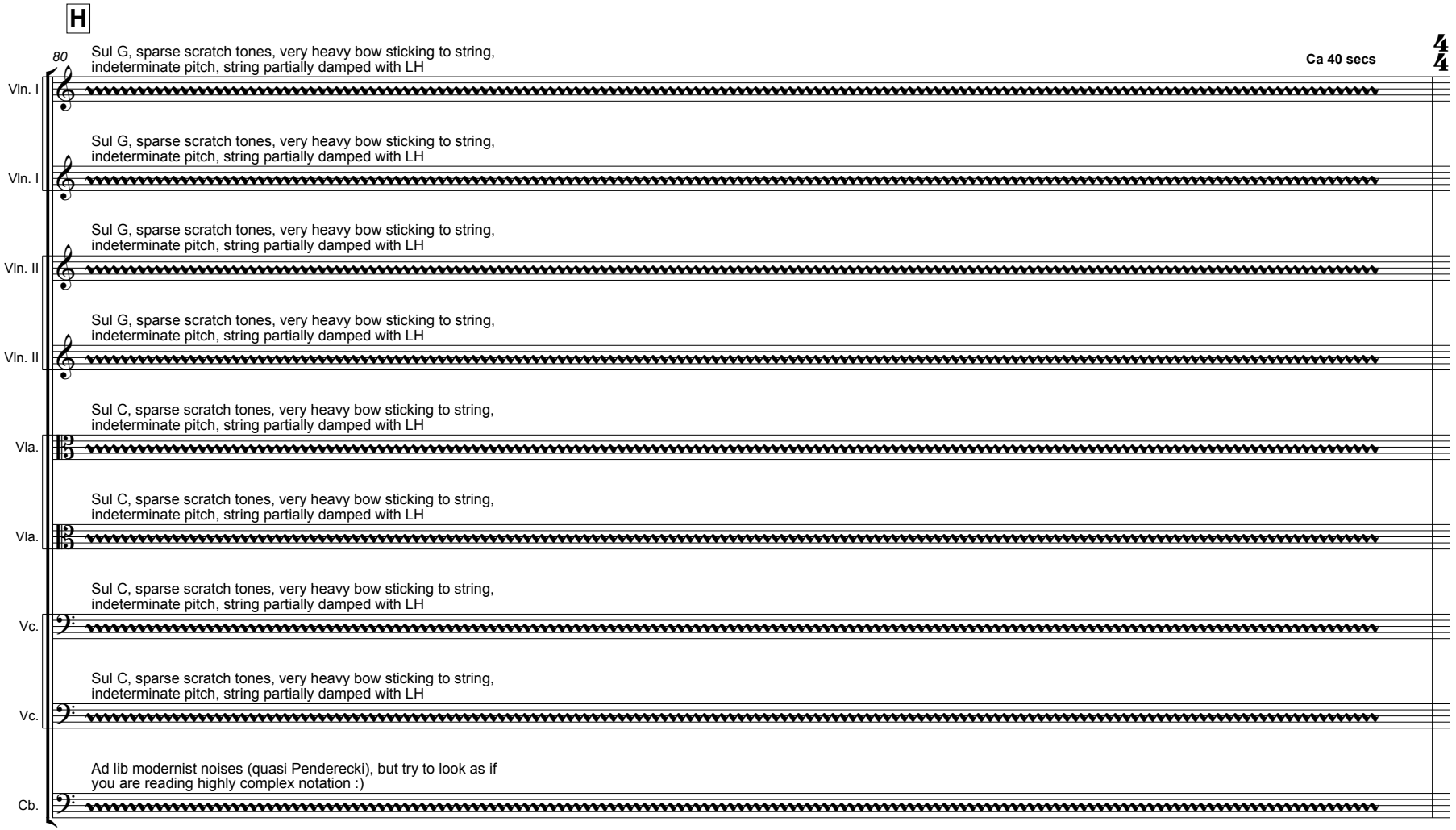

C
29
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.

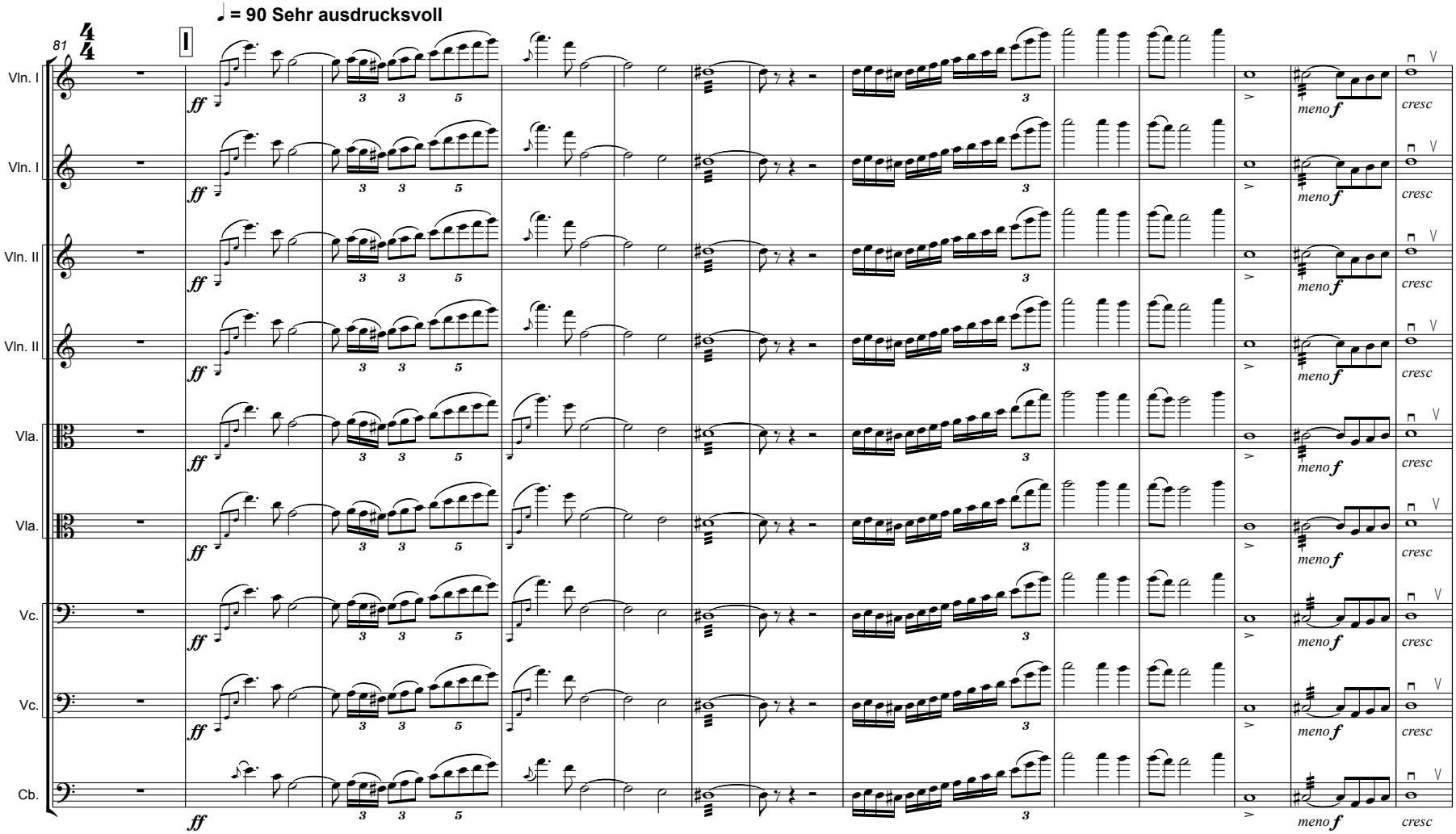

40
5
D
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.

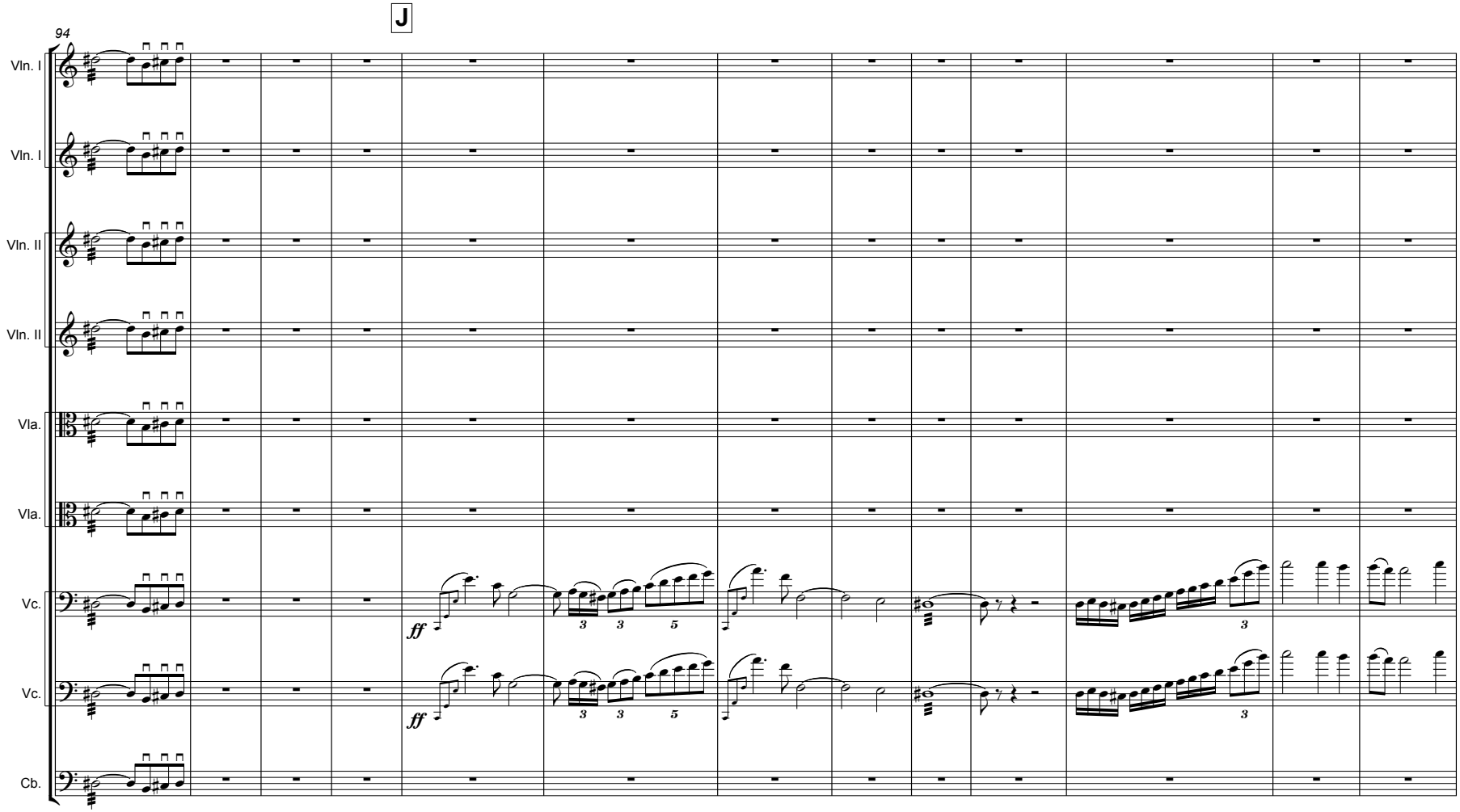

7
E
53
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.

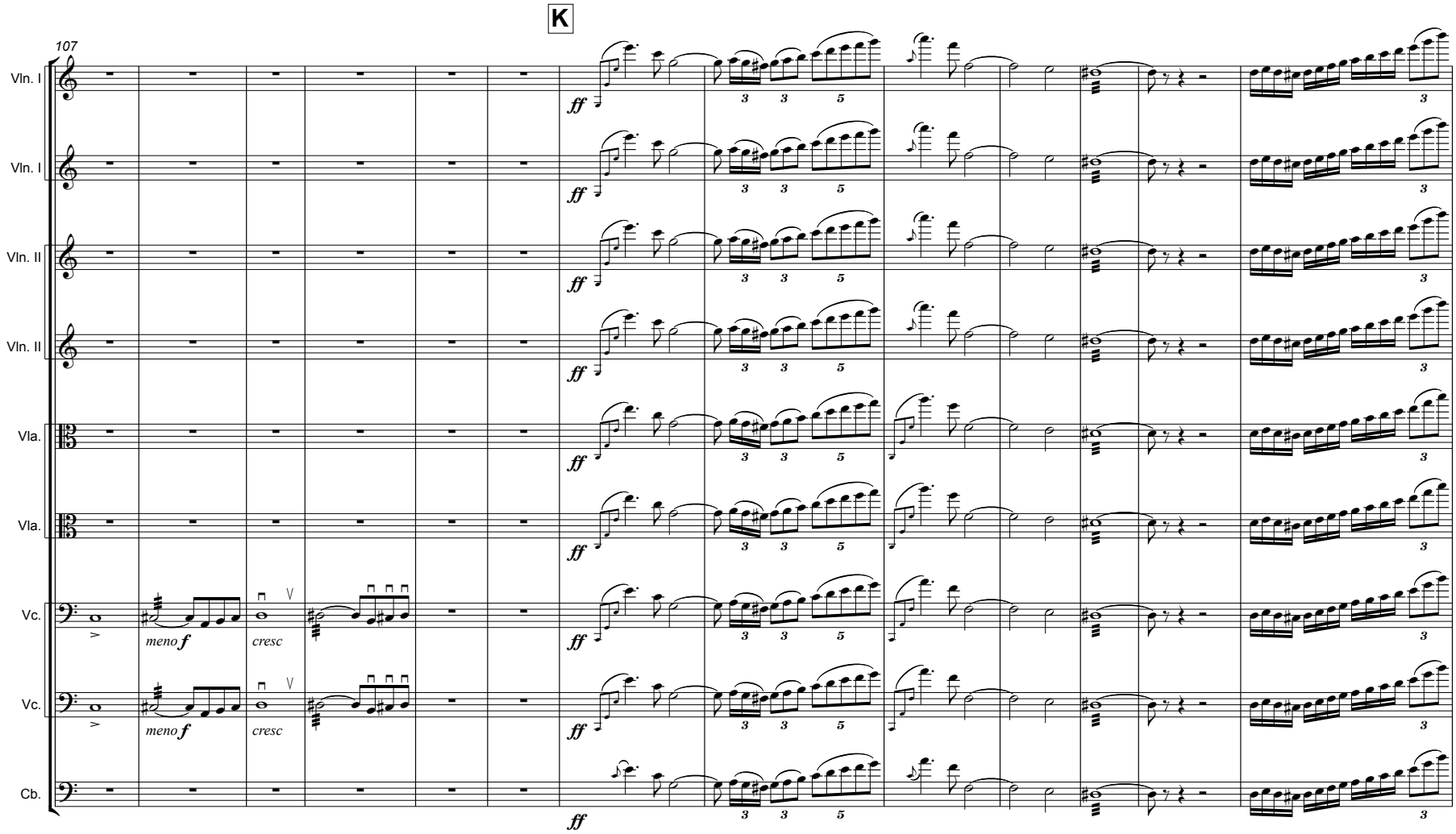

F
con sord
66
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
to sord
(sempre f)
to arco

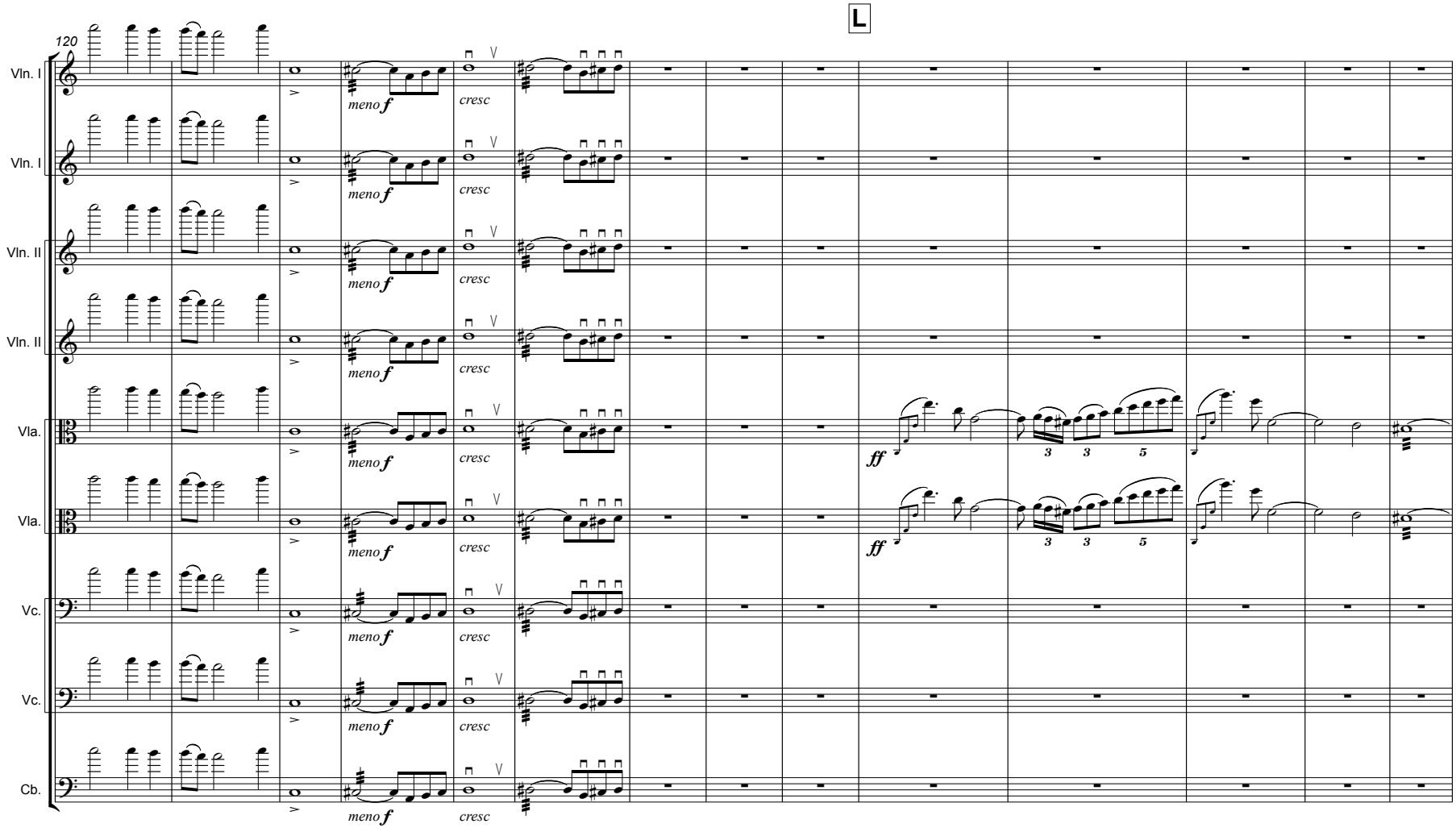

G
79
10 seconds
senza sord
Vln. I
senza sord
Vln. I
senza sord
Vln. II
senza sord
Vln. II
senza sord
Vla.
senza sord
Vla.
senza sord
Vc.
senza sord
Vc.
Cb.

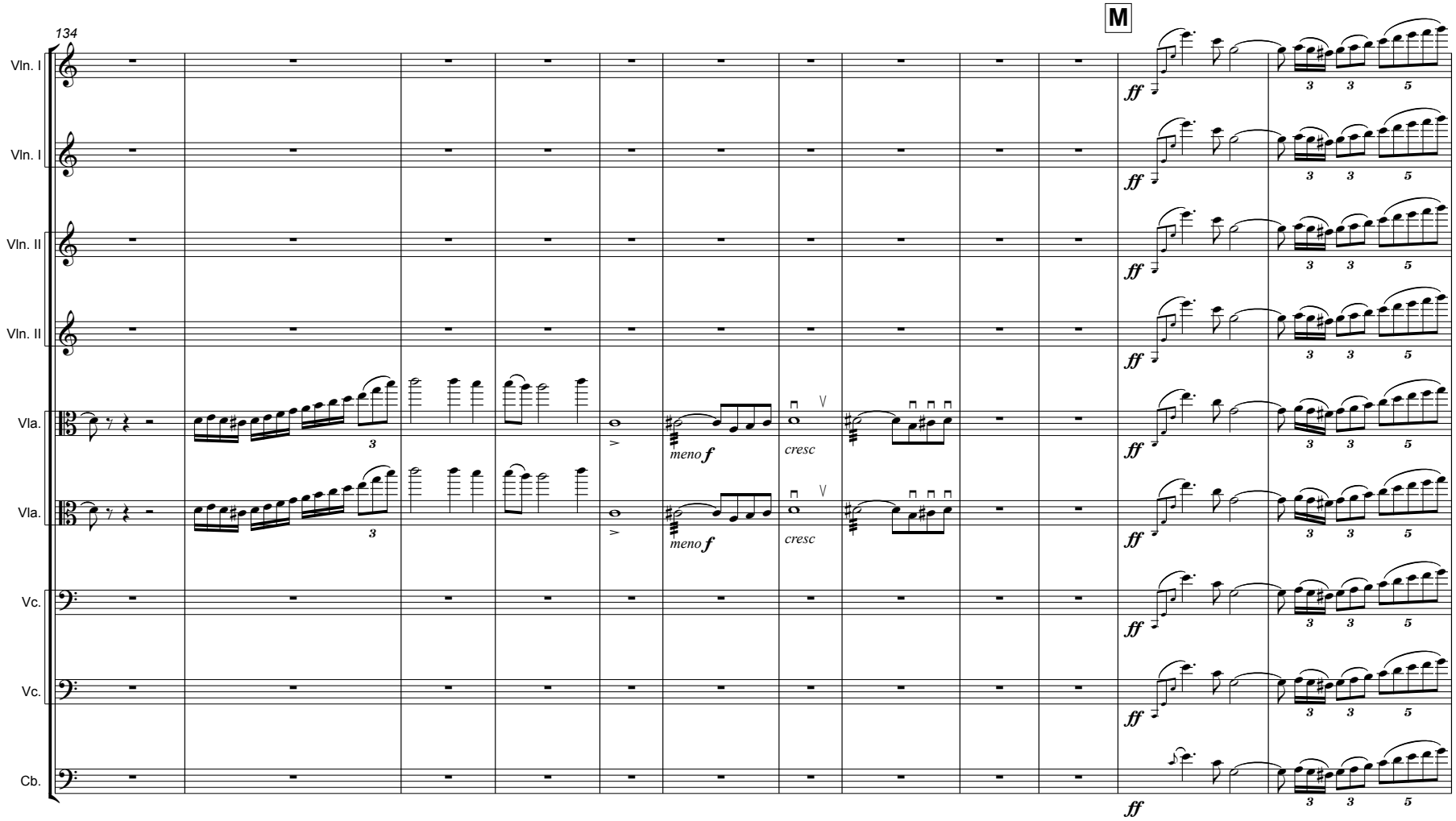

H
80
Sul G, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Ca 40 secs
4/4
Vln. I
Sul G, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Vln. I
Sul G, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Vln. II
Sul G, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Vln. II
Sul C, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Vla.
Sul C, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Vla.
Sul C, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Vc.
Sul C, sparse scratch tones, very heavy bow sticking to string, indeterminate pitch, string partially damped with LH
Vc.
Ad lib modernist noises (quasi Penderecki), but try to look as if you are reading highly complex notation :)
Cb.

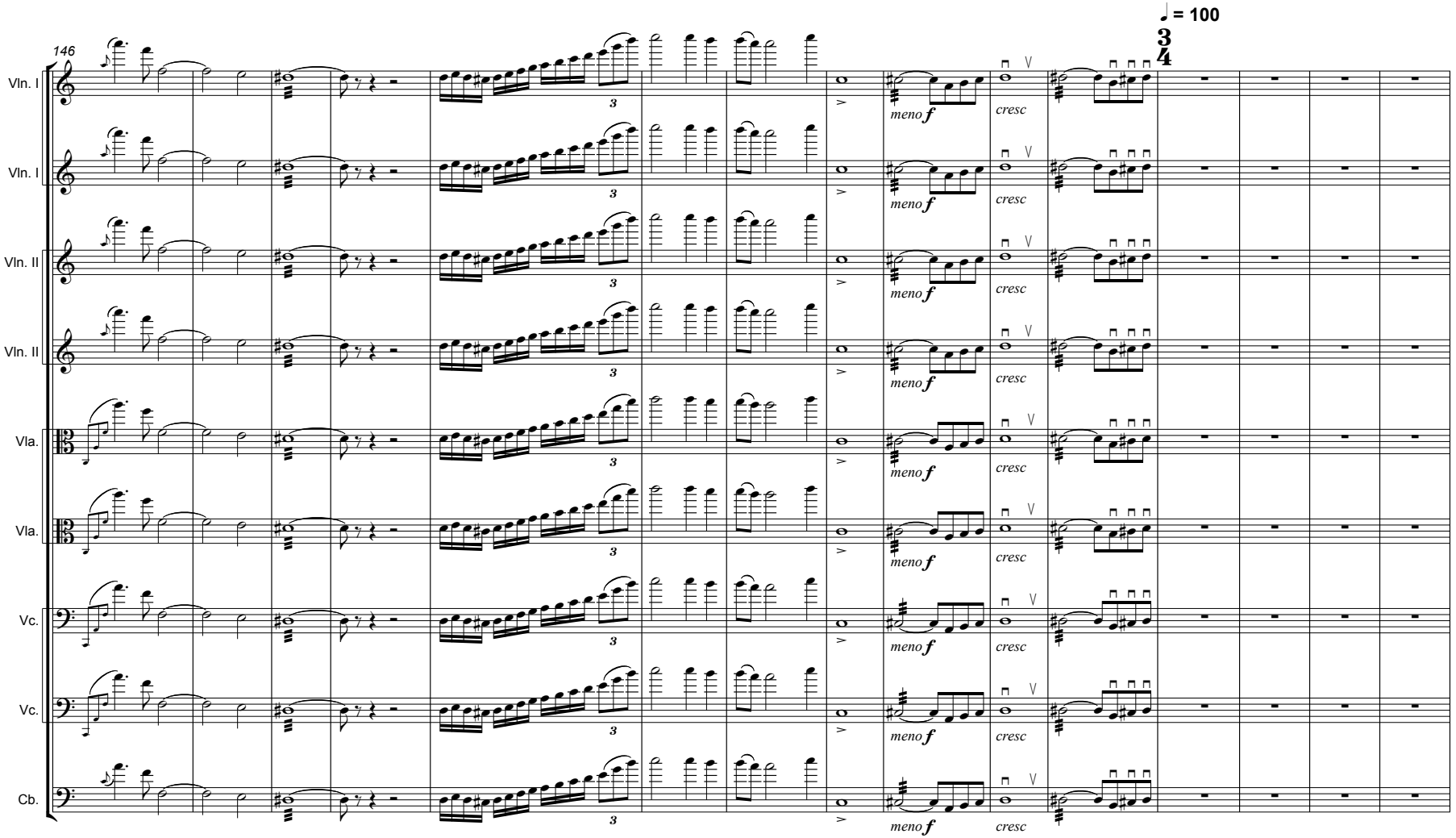

♩ = 90 Sehr ausdrucksvoll
81
I
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
ff
meno f
cresc

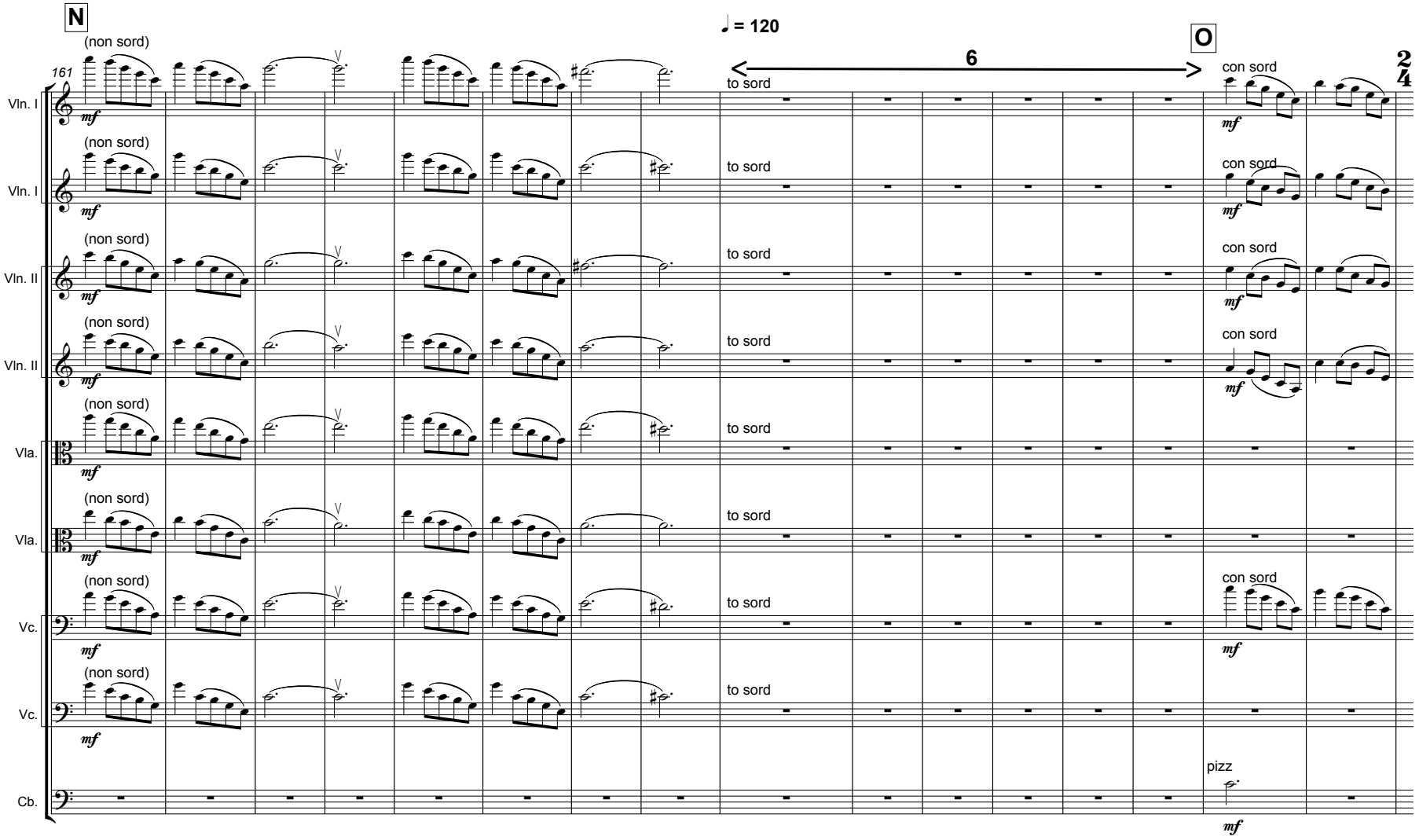

J
94
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
ff
ff

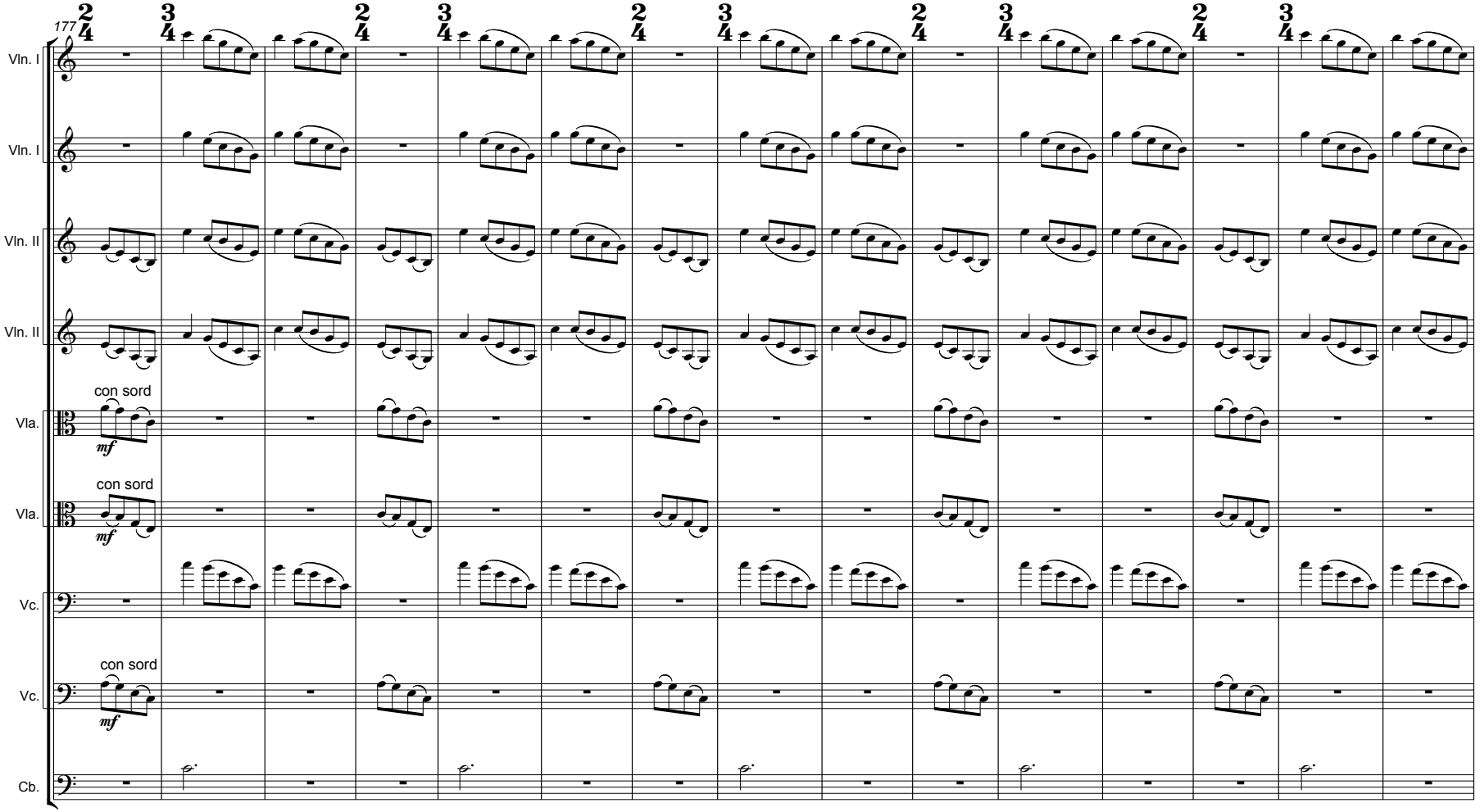

K
107
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
meno f
cresc
meno f
cresc
ff

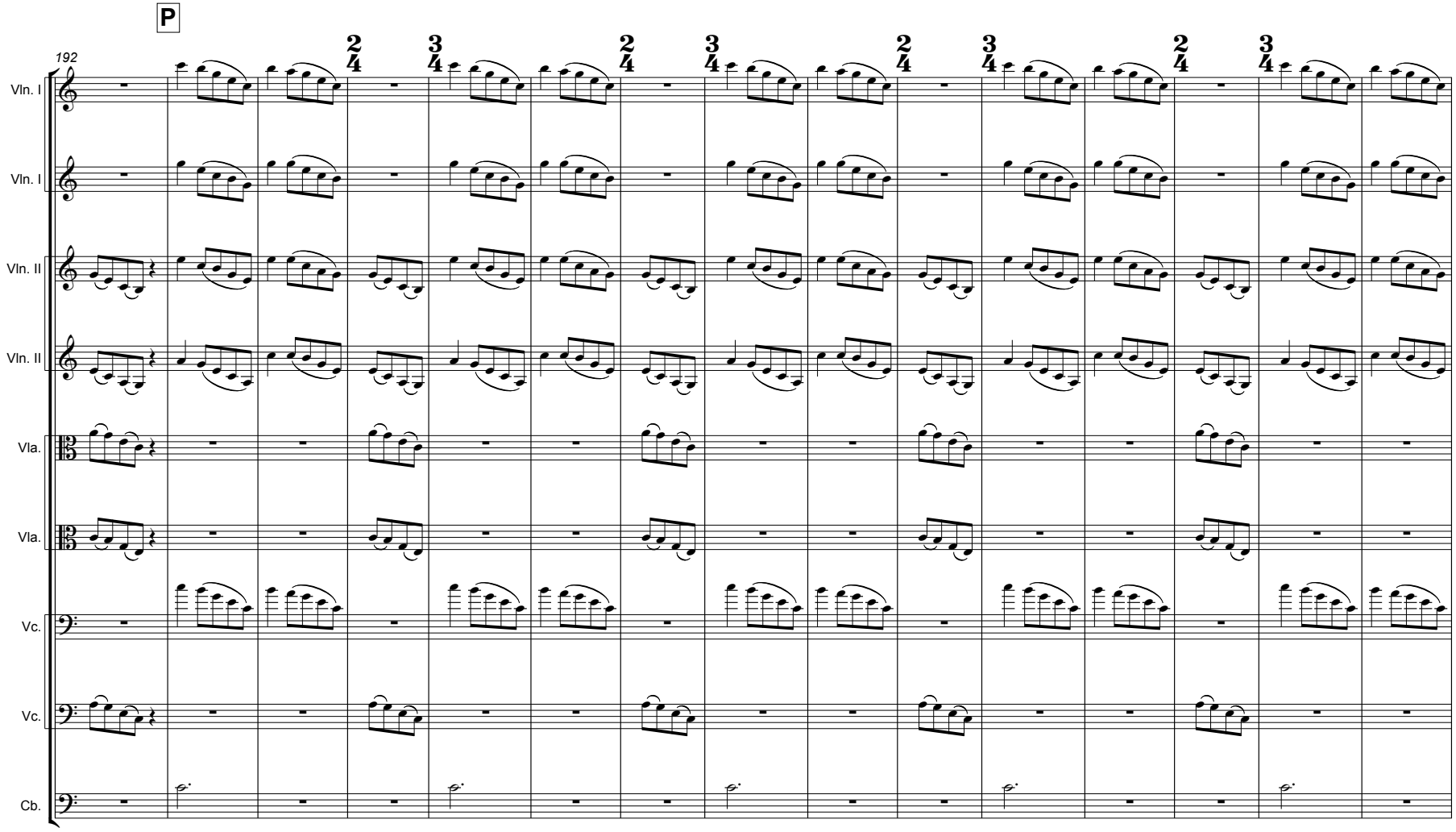

L
120
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
meno f
cresc
ff
3
3
5

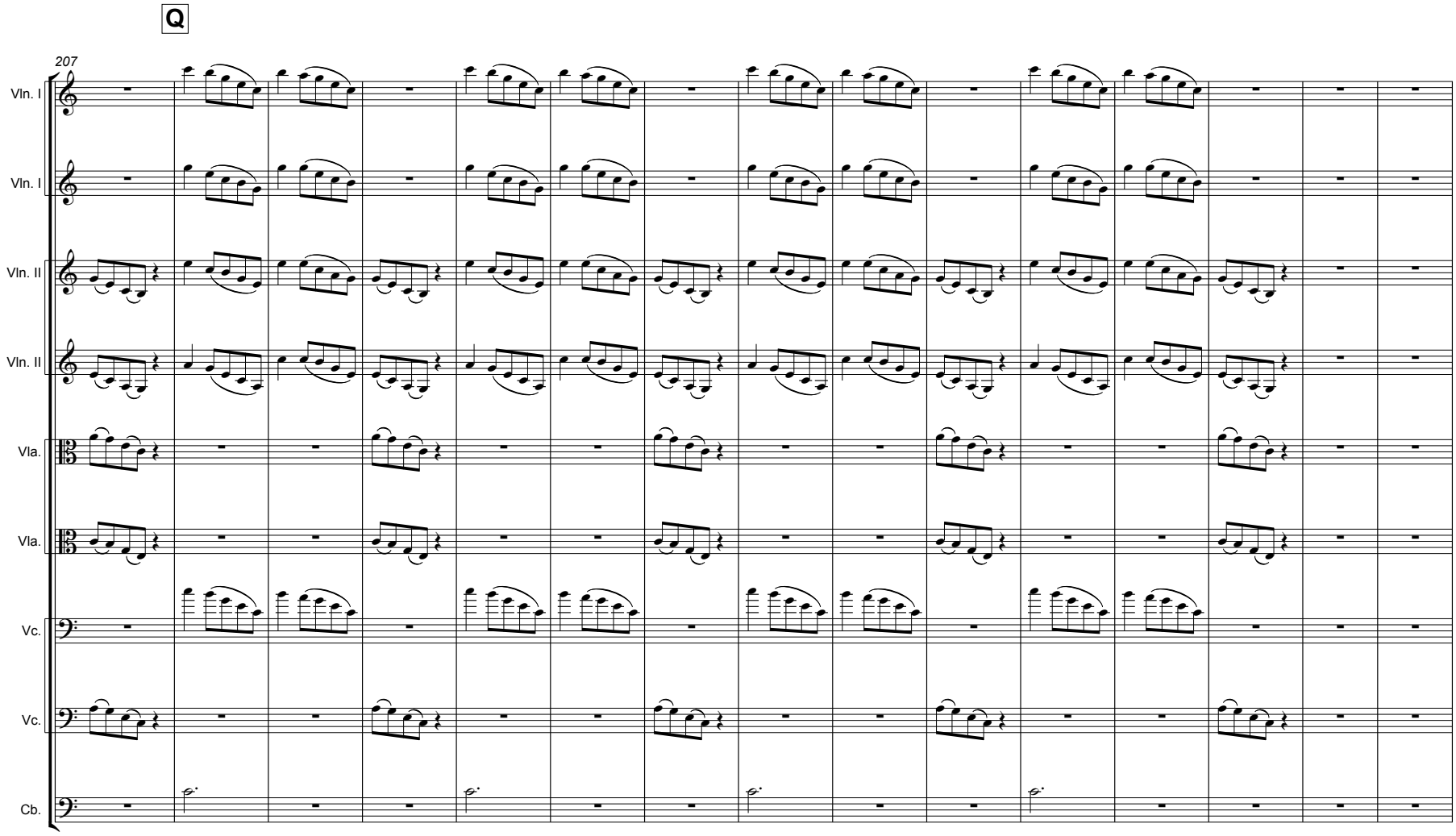

134
M
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
meno f
cresc
ff
3
5

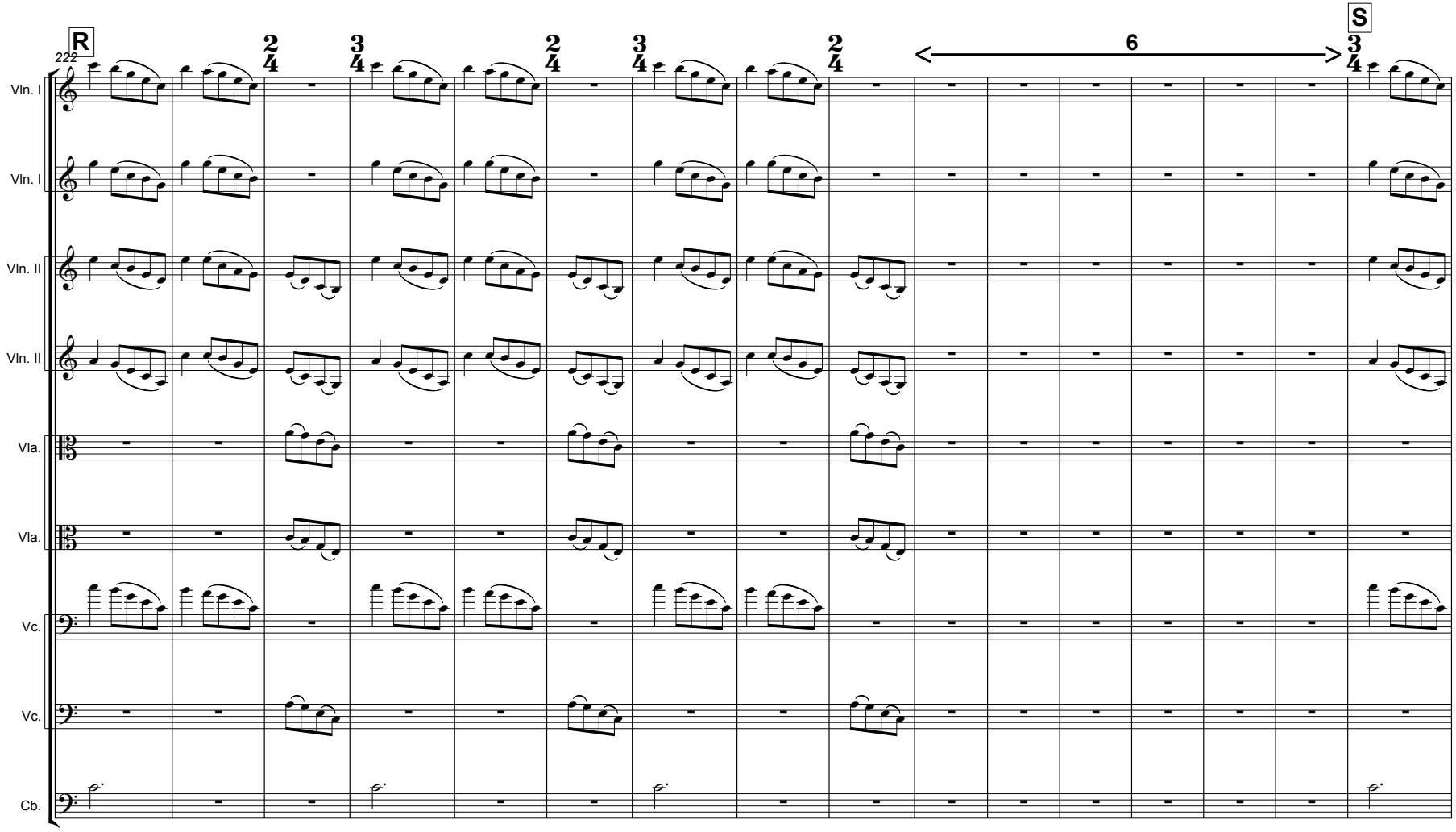

146
♩ = 100
3
4
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
meno f
cresc
3

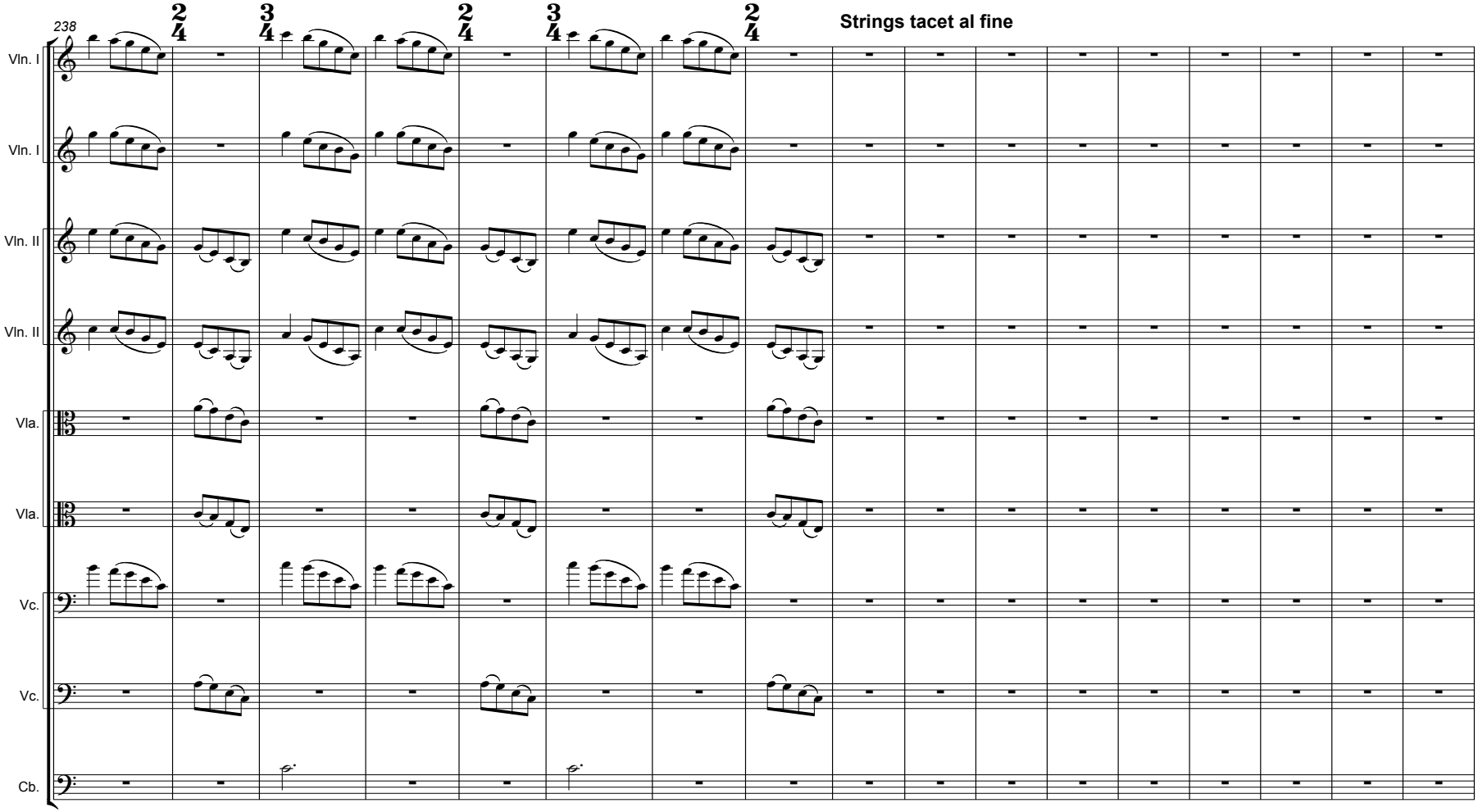

N
♩ = 120
6
O
161
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.
(non sord)
to sord
con sord
pizz
mf

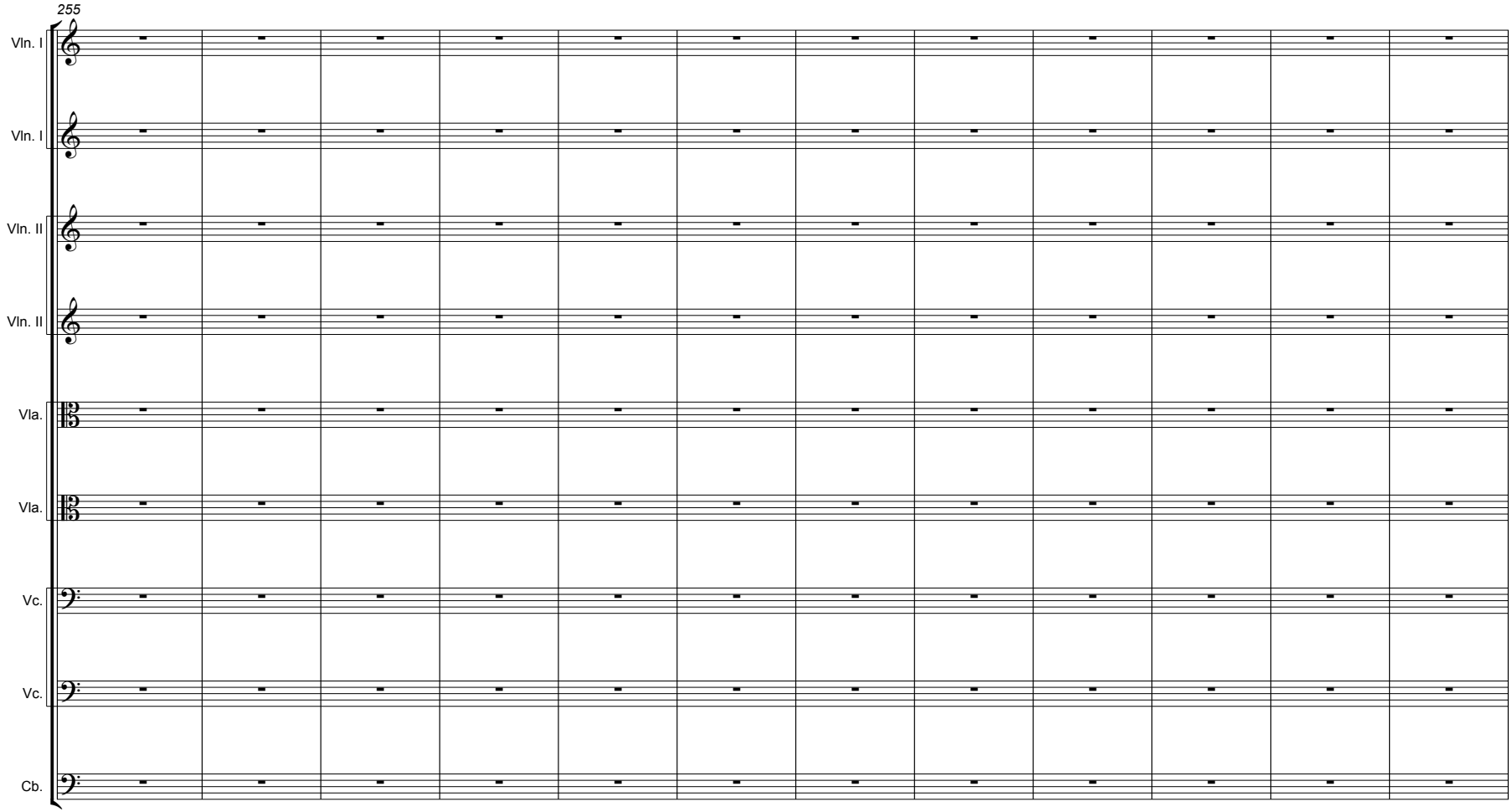

177
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
con sord
mf
Vla.
con sord
mf
Vla.
Vc.
con sord
mf
Vc.
Cb.

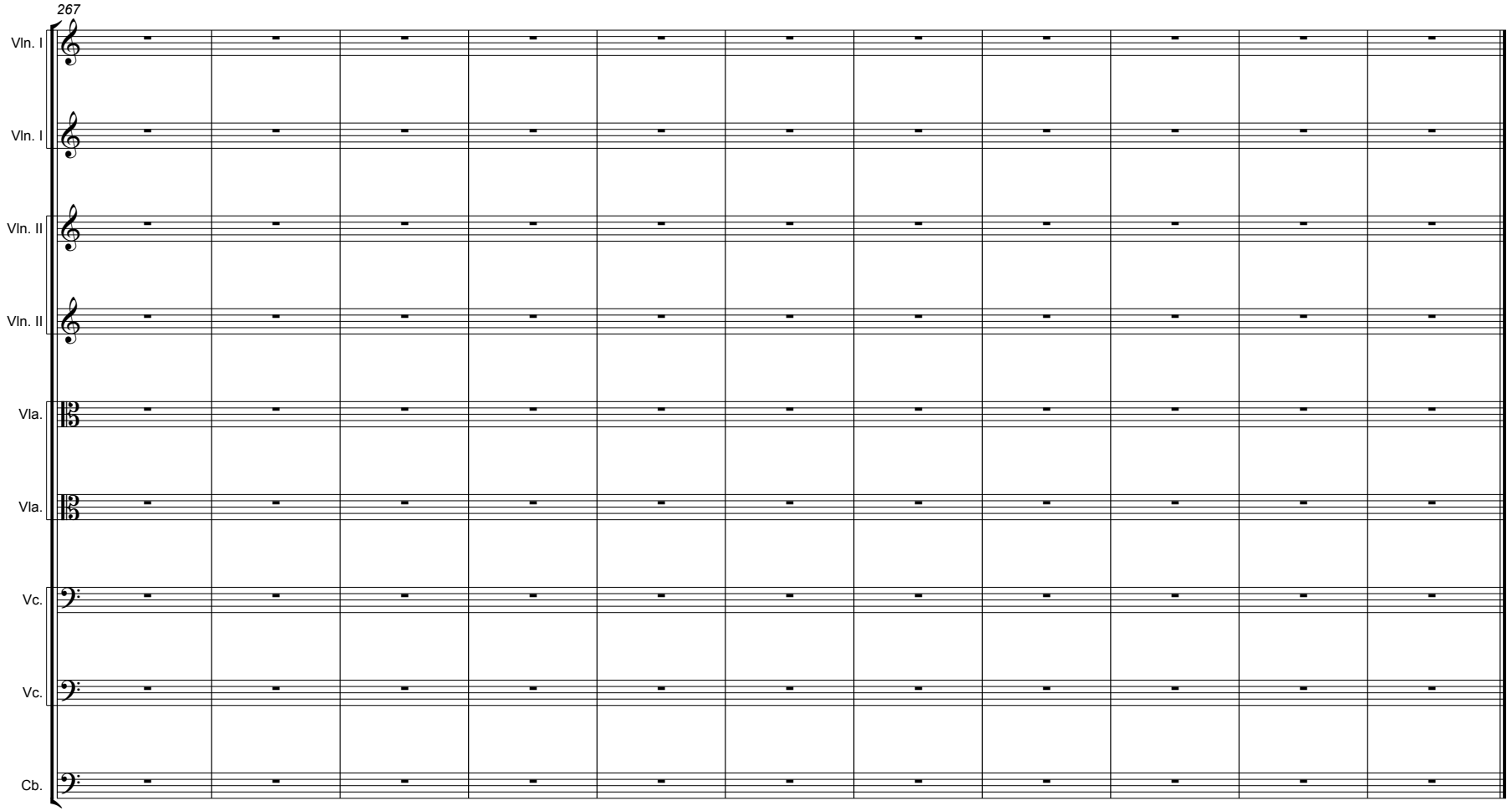

P
192
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.


Q
207
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.


R
222
2/4
3/4
2/4
3/4
2/4
6
S
3/4
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.


238
Strings tacet al fine
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.


255
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.


267
Vln. I
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vln. II
Vla.
Vla.
Vc.
Vc.
Cb.