Continental Divide

(an American cantata)

Peter Bird
2010

Piano Parts

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For further information, please visit **http://peterbird.name/choral/**

Program Notes on *Continental Divide*

1. Timberline..... [tacet] 5

This first number is celebratory and could be subtitled, "Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country." But, rather than sonata form, it has a loose Mahlerian structure where one main melody is developed while 3 others vie for expression. A certain Romantic instability of key symbolizes enthusiasm that escapes Classical restraint. A final repetition of the initial section makes this structurally a da-capo aria for chorus.

The other 7 numbers of the cantata progress in historical order, from Pleistocene times before humans arrived, through the Arapaho era, the fur trade, pioneer days, arrival of the first tourists, the gold/silver rush, and the modern age of national parks and interstate highways. The central numbers (#3~6) have texts from oral tradition or contemporary accounts; the framing numbers at the start and end incorporate my own attempts at poetry.

2. Yellowstone ..... [tacet] 7

The strong mantle plume that created Yellowstone has a few peers in the world: Iceland, Afar, and Hawaii. But here alone the volcanic plateau was built on the back of the older Rocky Mountain chain, producing lodgepole forests and parklands at 8,000' elevations and peaks that go much higher. This number depicts a summer dawn along one of the verdant high-altitude river valleys (*e.g.*, Lamar River, or Yellowstone River above the falls) where bison and elk are grazing, until interrupted by wolves. The text is a set of 6 haiku-like nature poems, with 5/7/5-syllable structure but no rhyme.

3. Vision quest ..... [tacet] 9

The adults of the village sing one of the traditional Arapaho Eagle Songs, with its proud refrain, "My father gave me the song of the eagle." (I did not alter this in any way, except to add some very light instrumental accompaniment.) A young man [or a group of young men; it may be performed either way] drifts off to follow the calls of a distant eagle. He is inspired to climb the mountain Neniisotoyou'u in search of other animal mentors. He is rebuffed by a bear, and then by a cougar, but high on the mountain shoulder he feels the presence and inspiration of Thunderbird. I based his (new) song on the text of a vision-quest song of Chief Yellow Calf: "[Thunder]bird walks about; the sky is turning yellow." (That is: Soon he will fly; prepare for thunder.) Performed in the Arapaho language.

4. Osborne Russell ..... [tacet] 11

Osborne Russell (1814-1892) was a largely self-taught man from Maine who entered the trapper's life and the Rocky Mountain fur trade at the age of 20. (Later he was a miner, a farmer, a trader, and was elected judge and then triumvir in the provisional government of Oregon Territory.) He recorded his experiences in *Journal of a Trapper…* which was published posthumously. This solo aria takes its text from the book's valedictory poem, *The Hunter's Farewell*, which may be the only extant poem by anyone involved in this chapter of our history. His description of the impact of firearms on the flocks of the mountains and the herds of the plains is sensitive and moving.

5. South Pass..... [tacet] 13

The Sweetwater River route through South Pass is more lonely and barren than scenic, but topography dictated that here the California Trail, the Oregon Trail, and the Mormon Trail necessarily ran together for several days travel as they approached the Divide. I have merged 3 songs of the trail (each in its own meter and its own key) to represent the passage of these 3 distinct kinds of pioneers in the same year. *Ho! for California* represents the gold-miners; both text and tune are authentic, although reharmonized here. The Oregon-Trail text and tune are my own inventions. The text of the LDS hymn *Come, Come Ye Saints* was written by William Clayton (1814-1879) while traveling the trail in 1846; here, I have given it a new tune that better harmonizes with the others. Despite the cultural and musical contrasts, there is no actual dissonance; perhaps I may even suggest that a new kind of polymodal harmony emerges?

6. Isabella Bird 15

Isabella Bird (1831-1904) was a very independent Englishwoman who toured the Sierra Nevada and the Colorado Rockies in 1873: arriving by train, renting a horse, and finding her own way through mountains and plains, come blizzard or sun. Her account, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, is well worth reading. This solo number uses a montage of her words to describe her ascent of Longs Peak (which was guided by the colorful and mysterious "Mountain Jim" Nugent). She may have been the first woman of European ancestry to make the ascent; it is certain that later she was the first woman inducted into the Royal Geographical Society, in London in 1892.

7. Silverton 20

Saturday night in a mining town! This turbulent setting with its many conflicting personalities, subplots, and emotions is represented by the overlaying of up to 6 tunes at once. Traditional tunes *An Outlandish Knight* and *Shenandoah* represent the women's point of view, and some new tunes (in the "gaslight" style of the times) represent the men's. An opera-buffa version of the sextet from *Lucia* transported into *La fanciula del West*.

8. Logan Pass ..... [tacet] 23

Approaching Glacier Park from the East, today's tourists can drive directly from the lonely and pristine rolling prairie of the Blackfeet lands to some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in the world. Chief Mountain, St. Mary Lake, Logan Pass, and the Garden Wall will not be forgotten by anyone who has made this trip, and of course the automobile makes it possible for most. But, travel by car is much too fast for the spirit.

Performance Notes

Continental Divide is scored for 9 instruments: flute, oboe, horn in F, pedal timpani (II, III, IV), violin I, violin II, cello, double-bass, and piano. (Piano parts occur only in numbers 6 & 7.) If the chorus is large, it may be best to amplify the instruments. I would not want to double them, as this would destroy the "rugged individualism" and lonesome timbre of solo performances. The total duration of this cantata is about 51 minutes.

Peter Bird, Los Angeles, 2010

Piano

Continental Divide: 1. Timberline

PETER BIRD

TACET

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Piano

Continental Divide: 2. Yellowstone

PETER BIRD

TACET

--- Intentionally blank ---

Piano

Continental Divide: 3. Vision quest

PETER BIRD

TACET

--- Intentionally blank ---

Piano

Continental Divide: 4. Osborne Russell

PETER BIRD

TACET

--- Intentionally blank ---

Piano

Continental Divide: 5. South Pass

PETER BIRD

TACET

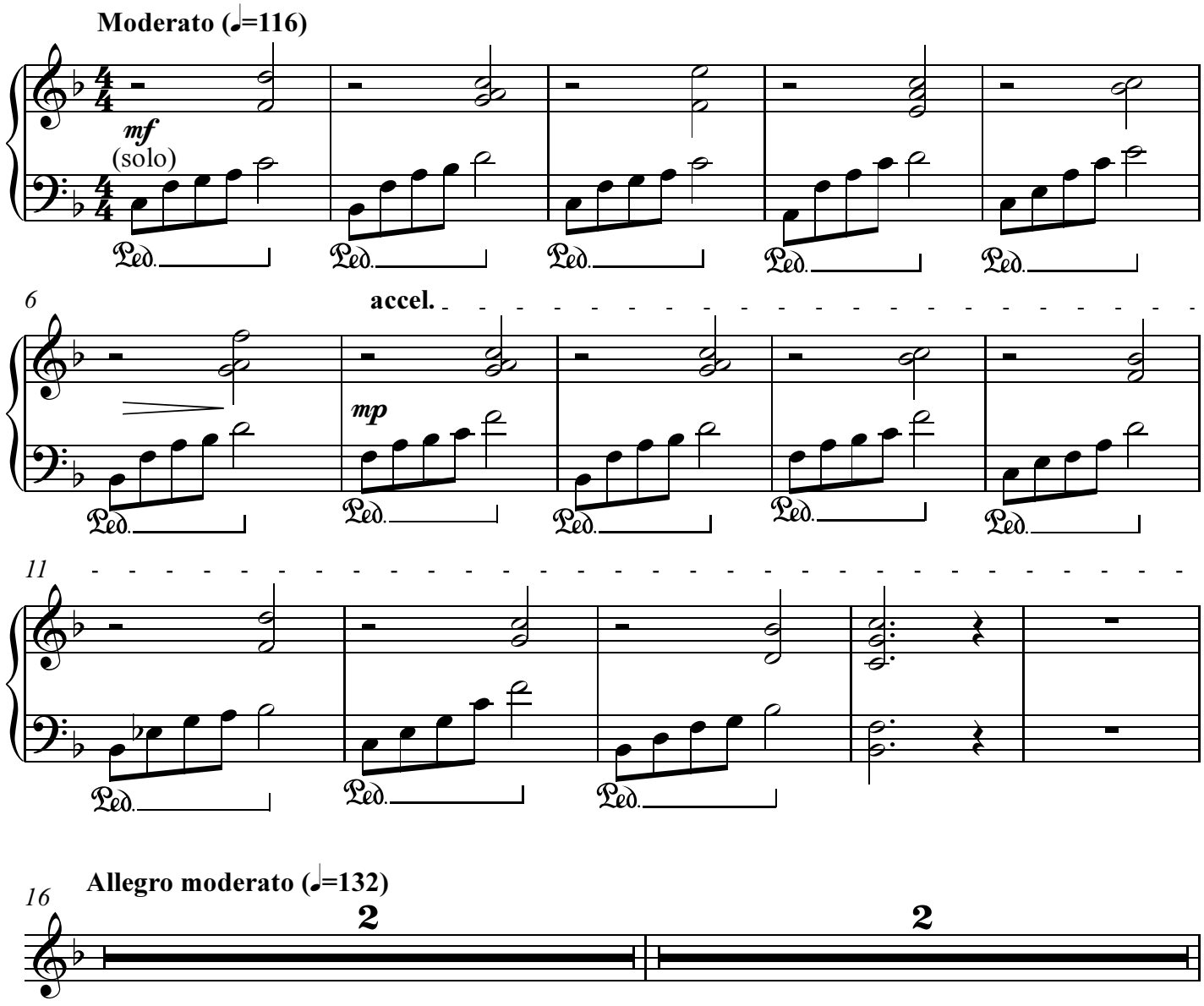
--- Intentionally blank ---

To ILB, world traveller, writer, natural historian, & Fellow RGS

Continental Divide: 6. Isabella Bird

Isabella Lucy Bird (1831-1904)

PETER BIRD



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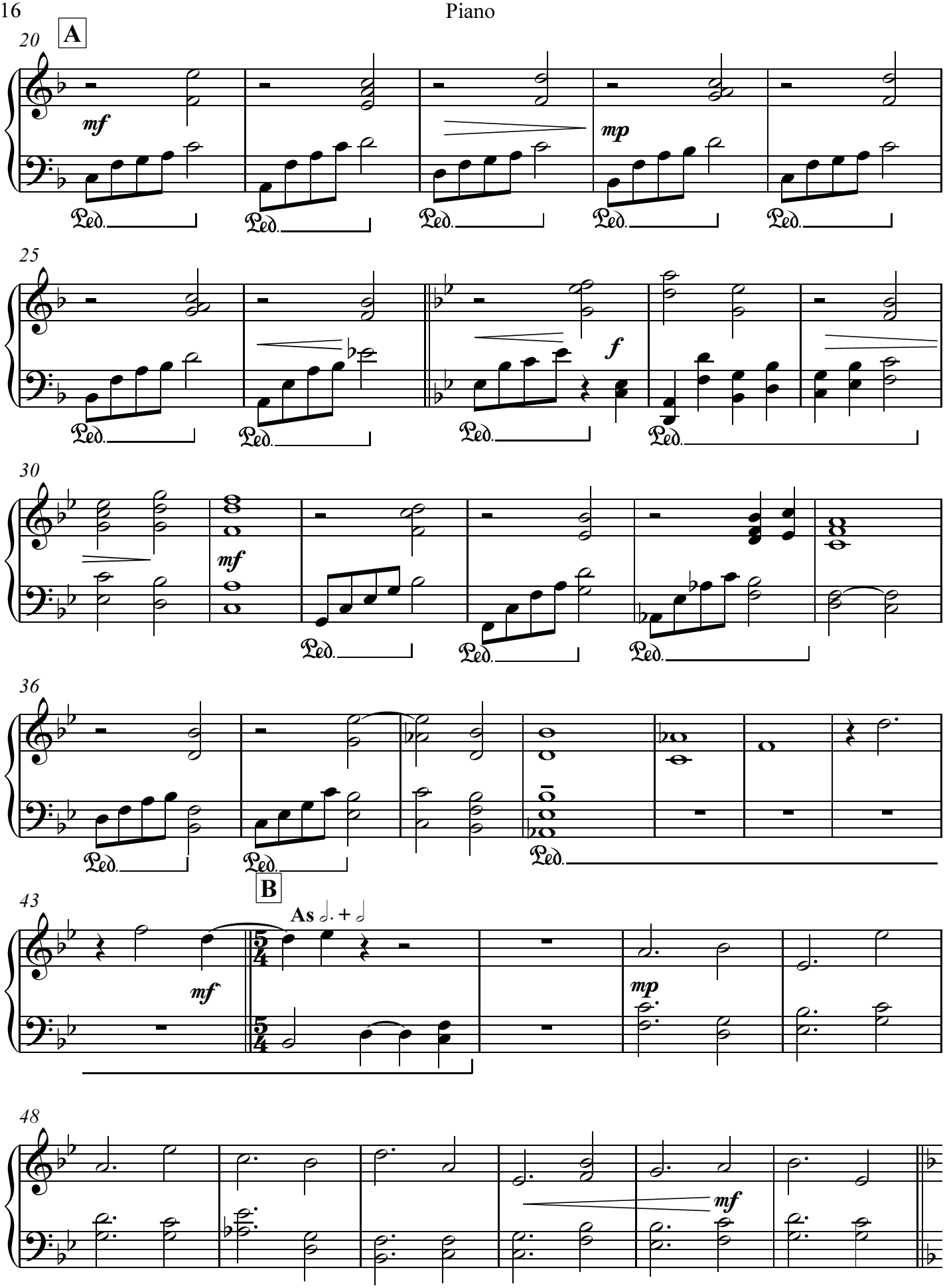
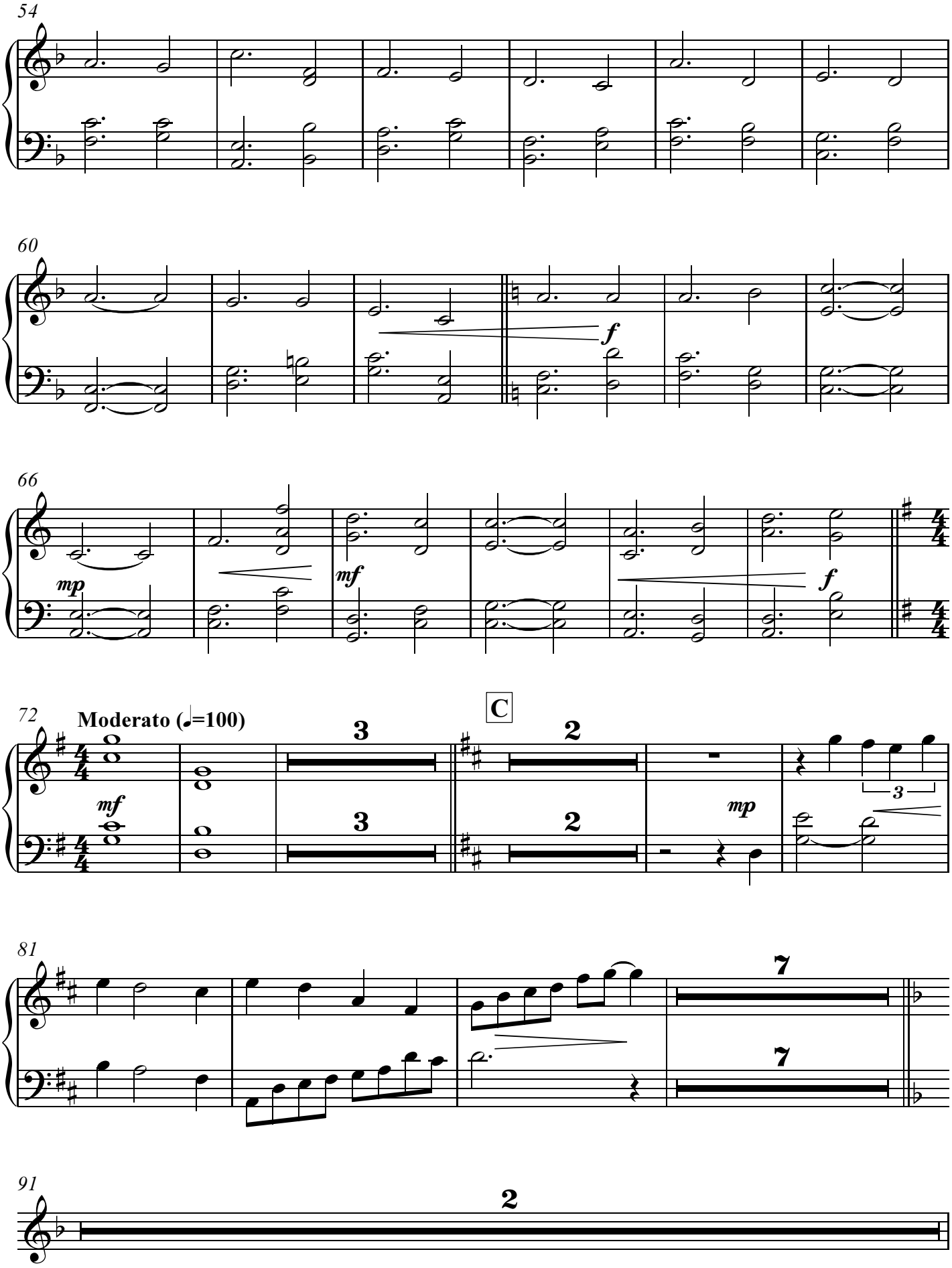
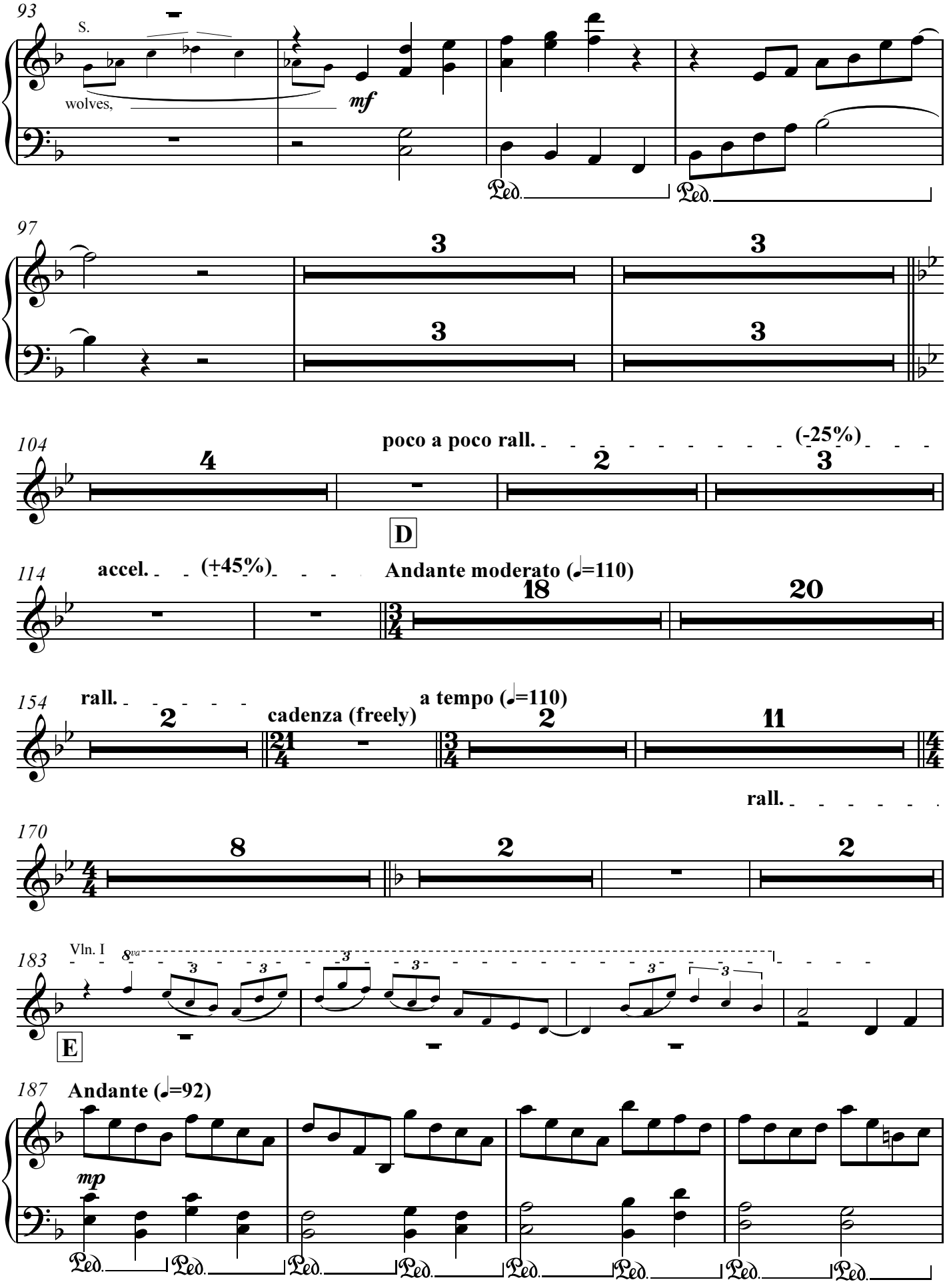
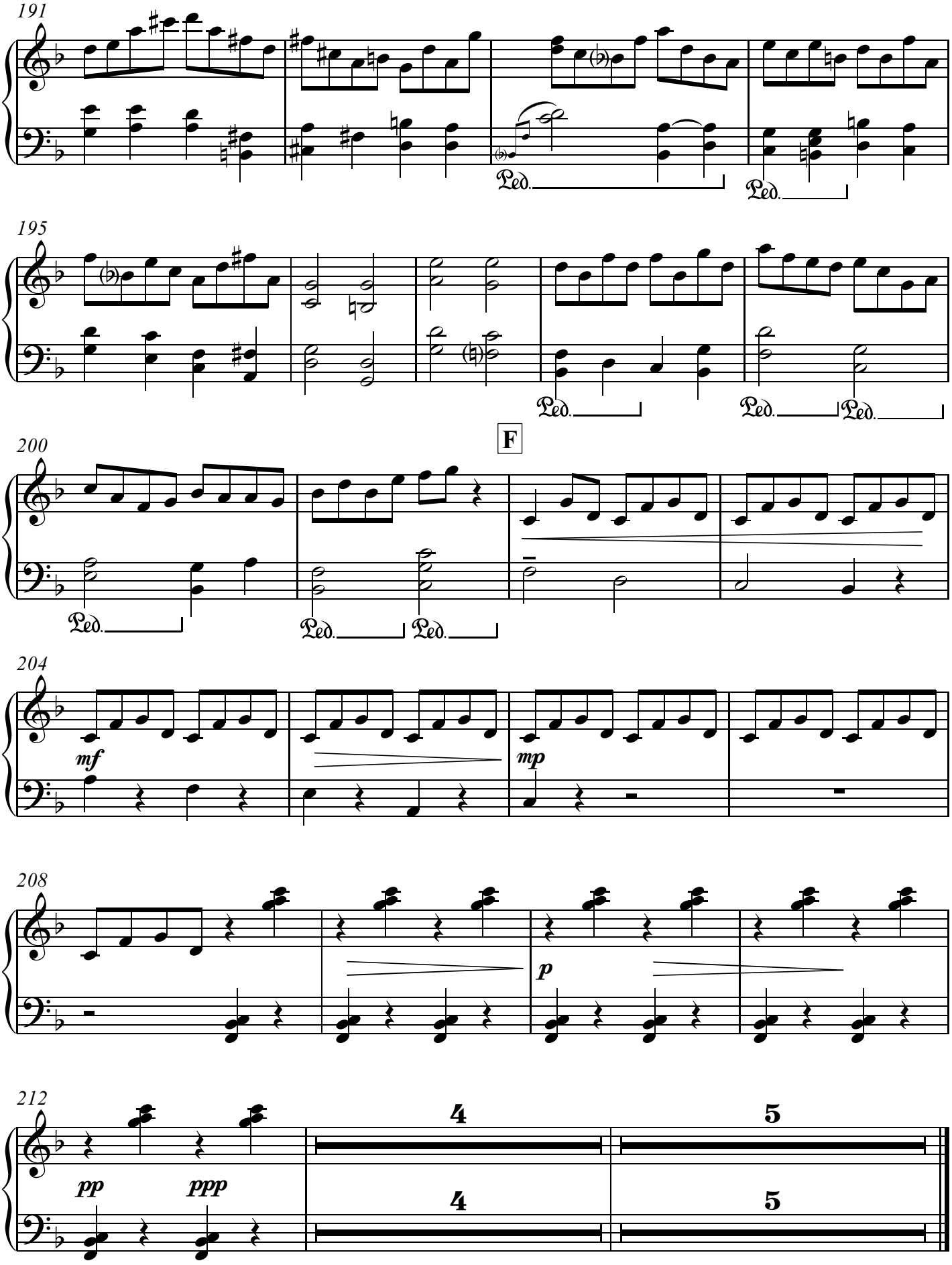

20
A
mf
mp
Ped.
25
f
30
mf
36
43
B
As ♩. + ♩
mf
mp
48
mf


54
60
f
66
mp
mf
f
72
Moderato (♩=100)
C
mf
3
3
2
2
mp
3
81
7
7
91
2


93
S.
wolves,
mf
Ped.
Ped.
97
3
3
3
3
104
poco a poco rall.
(-25%)
4
2
3
D
114
accel.
(+45%)
Andante moderato (♩=110)
18
20
154
rall.
2
cadenza (freely)
a tempo (♩=110)
21/4
2
11
rall.
170
8
2
2
183
Vln. I
8va
3
3
3
3
3
E
187
Andante (♩=92)
mp
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.


191
Ped.
Ped.
195
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
F
200
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
204
mf
mp
208
p
212
pp
ppp
4
5
4
5

Piano

Continental Divide: 7. Silverton

Peter Bird & traditional

PETER BIRD & traditional

Andante (♩=100)

strings gliss. octet

mp

6

mf

10

15 **A**

mf

19

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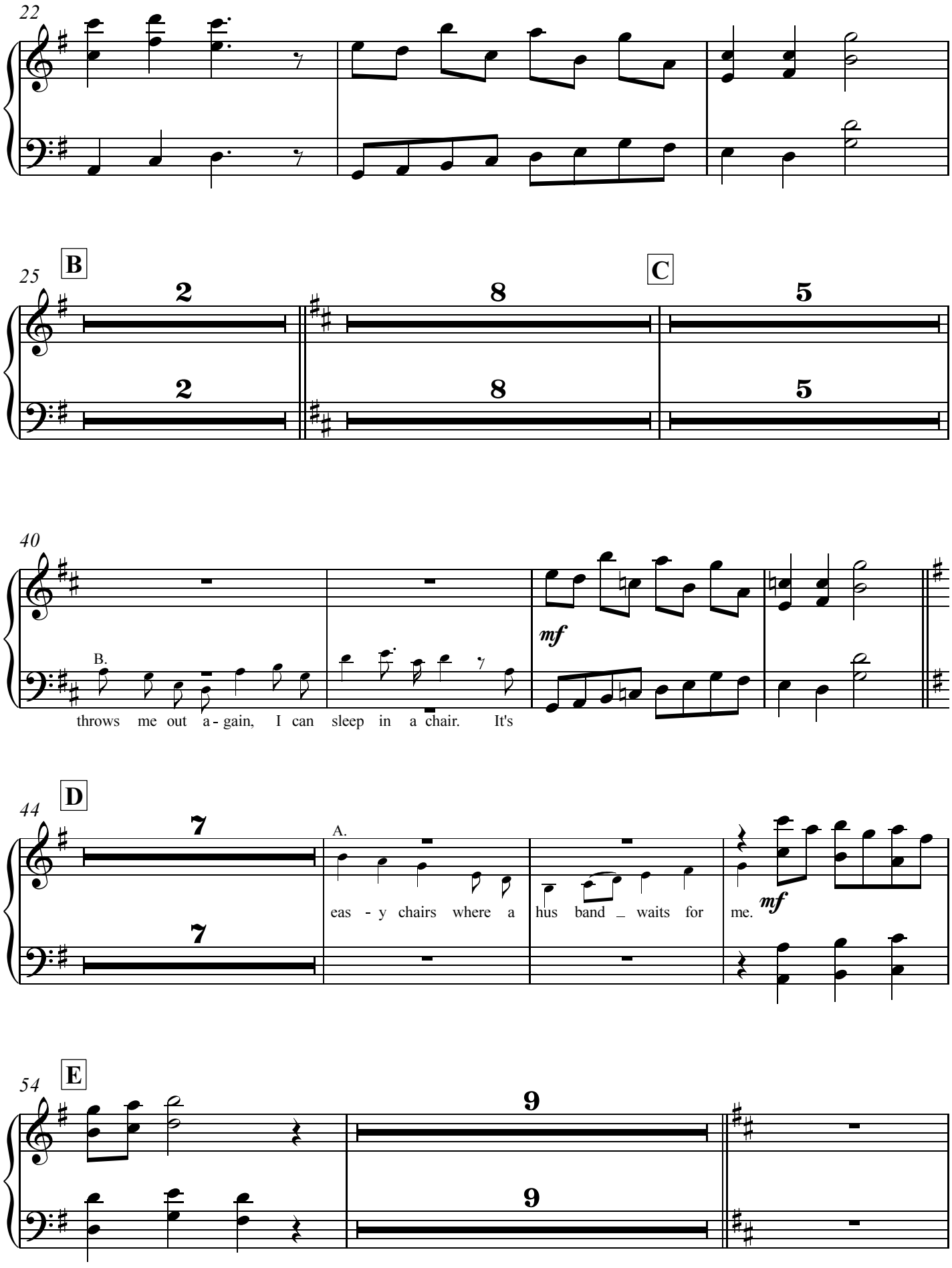
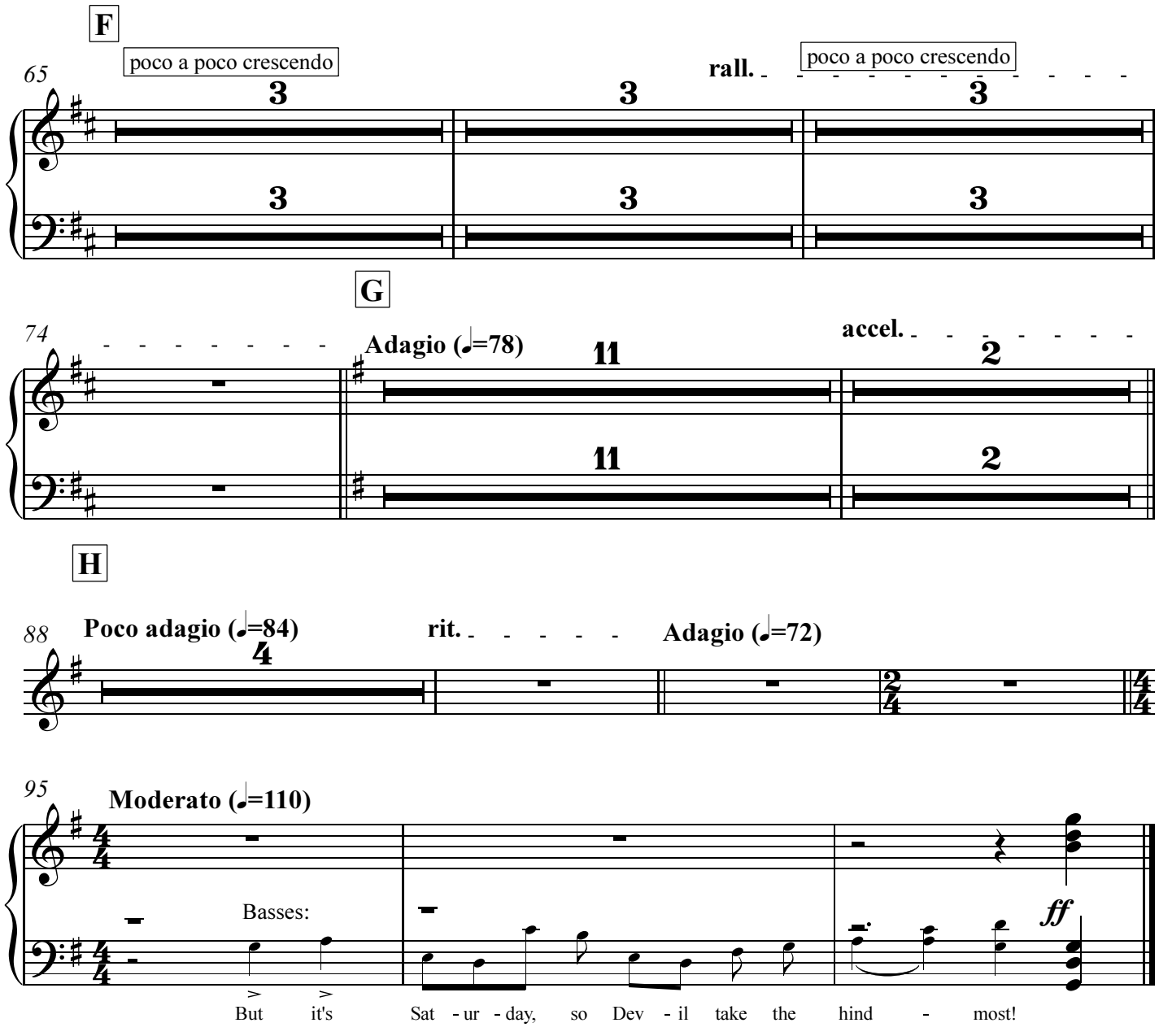

22
25
B
2
2
C
8
8
5
5
40
B.
throws me out a - gain, I can sleep in a chair. It's
mf
44
D
7
7
A.
eas - y chairs where a hus band _ waits for me.
mf
54
E
9
9


F
65
poco a poco crescendo
3
3
3
3
3
3
rall.
poco a poco crescendo
G
74
Adagio (♩=78)
11
11
accel.
2
2
H
88
Poco adagio (♩=84)
4
rit.
Adagio (♩=72)
95
Moderato (♩=110)
Basses:
ff
But it's Sat - ur - day, so Dev - il take the hind - most!

Piano

Continental Divide: 8. Logan Pass

PETER BIRD

TACET

--- Intentionally blank ---