Cantus

for alto flute
with optional drones
(2013)

Peter Nagle

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Duration ca. 9'

Cantus was composed for Carla Rees for the tenth anniversary of rarescale, and forst performed at the Royal College of Music on 27 September 2013.

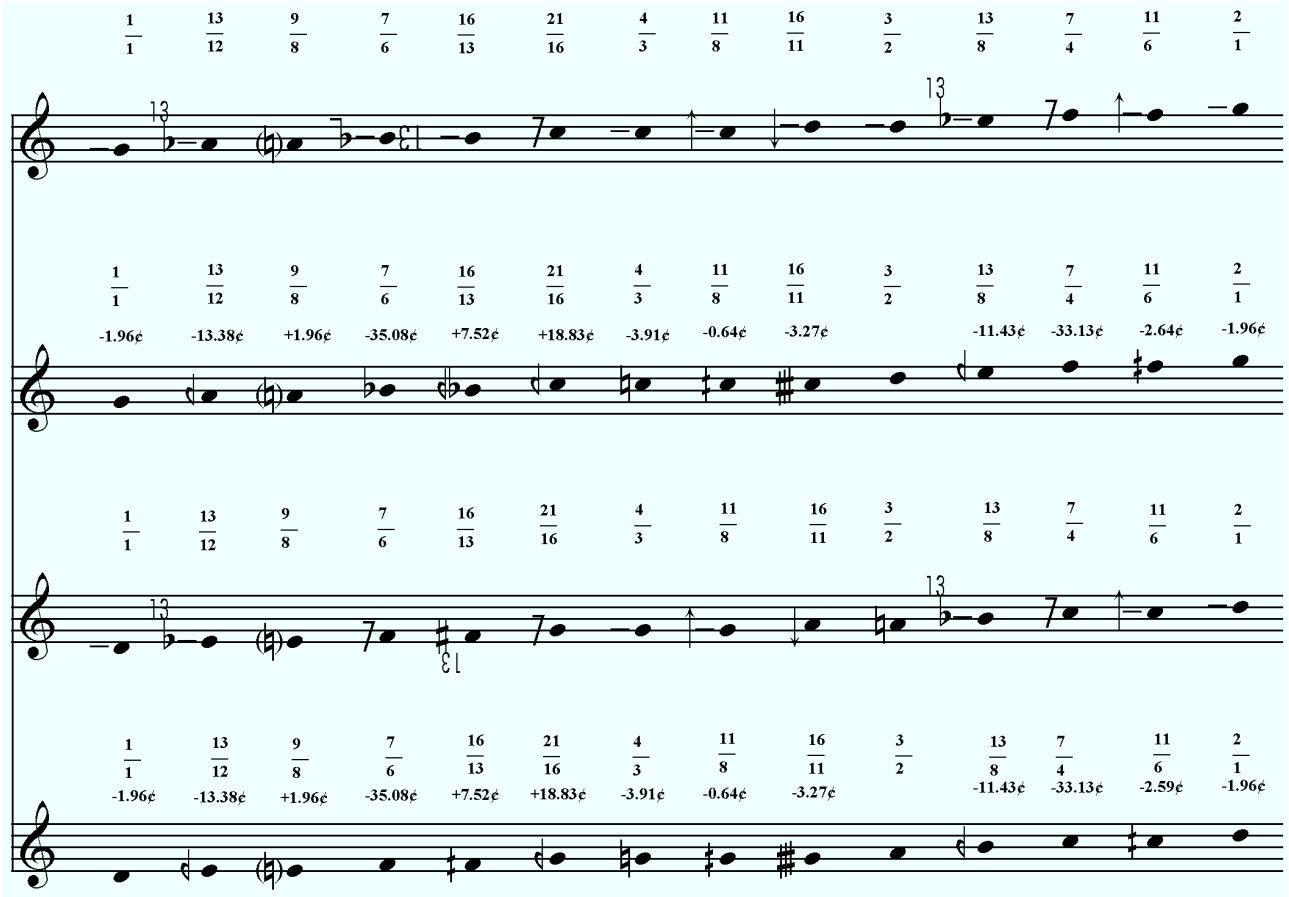
Programme note

Cantus is a free melody based on a scale comprising intervals derived from the first, third, seventh, eleventh and thirteenth tones of the harmonic series. It may be performed as a solo or with accompanying drones.

"Cantus" has a number of meanings in music terminology; the primary meaning I have in mind here is the simplest one, of a melody. There are a number of variants, but the one that comes closest to what I have in mind in this piece is *Cantus simplex planus,* which Grove defines as “a simple melody using notes of indefinite value, as in Gregorian chant.” There is something chant- or prayer-like about this melody, though as I am a confirmed atheist, I can't say to whom the prayer might be directed.

PN

The flute line (which is transposed) is presented in two notations. The top line is a quarter-tone approximation, while the lower line uses Ben Johnston's notation for extended Just Intonation, in which the uninflected notes represent a just C major scale (with C-E-G, F-A-C and G-B-D as 4:5:6 just major triads). The + and − symbols represent the syntonic comma (81/80), while ♯ And ♭ represent chromatic semitones (25/24). The 𝅀 and 7 chromas represent 7th-harmonic relations (36/35), the ↑ and ↓ 11^{th} harmonic relations (33/32), and the 13 and 𝅁 13^{th} harmonic relations (65/64). The scale used in the piece is given below in both notations, both transposed and at pitch, with ratios and cent deviations from equal temperament for the quarter-tone version:



N.B. This takes “A” (“D-” in the transposed part) as the reference / tuning tone. This tone therefore therefore has no cent deviation.

For those unfamiliar with the basic ideas of just intonation, a good introduction can be found at http://www.kylegann.com/tuning.html

If the drones are used, they may be played on any sustaining instrument or device capable of producing just intervals. For acoustic performance, a viola and cello are suggested: the viola may double the cello at the octave, except for the point where a three-tone drone is indicated, where the viola should take the A and the cello the (open) D and G. Alternatively an iPad or iPhone drone app such as Droneo could be used, or any other means of producing sustained tones. For electronically-generated tones, waveforms should not be too complicated, nor excessive filtering used.

The flute should not dominate too much; rather the melody should be perceived as emerging from the drones rather than placed over them. Moments of change are notated approximately. The drone should never be silent: each one is to be held until another is indicated. At the end the drone fades after the flute finishes.

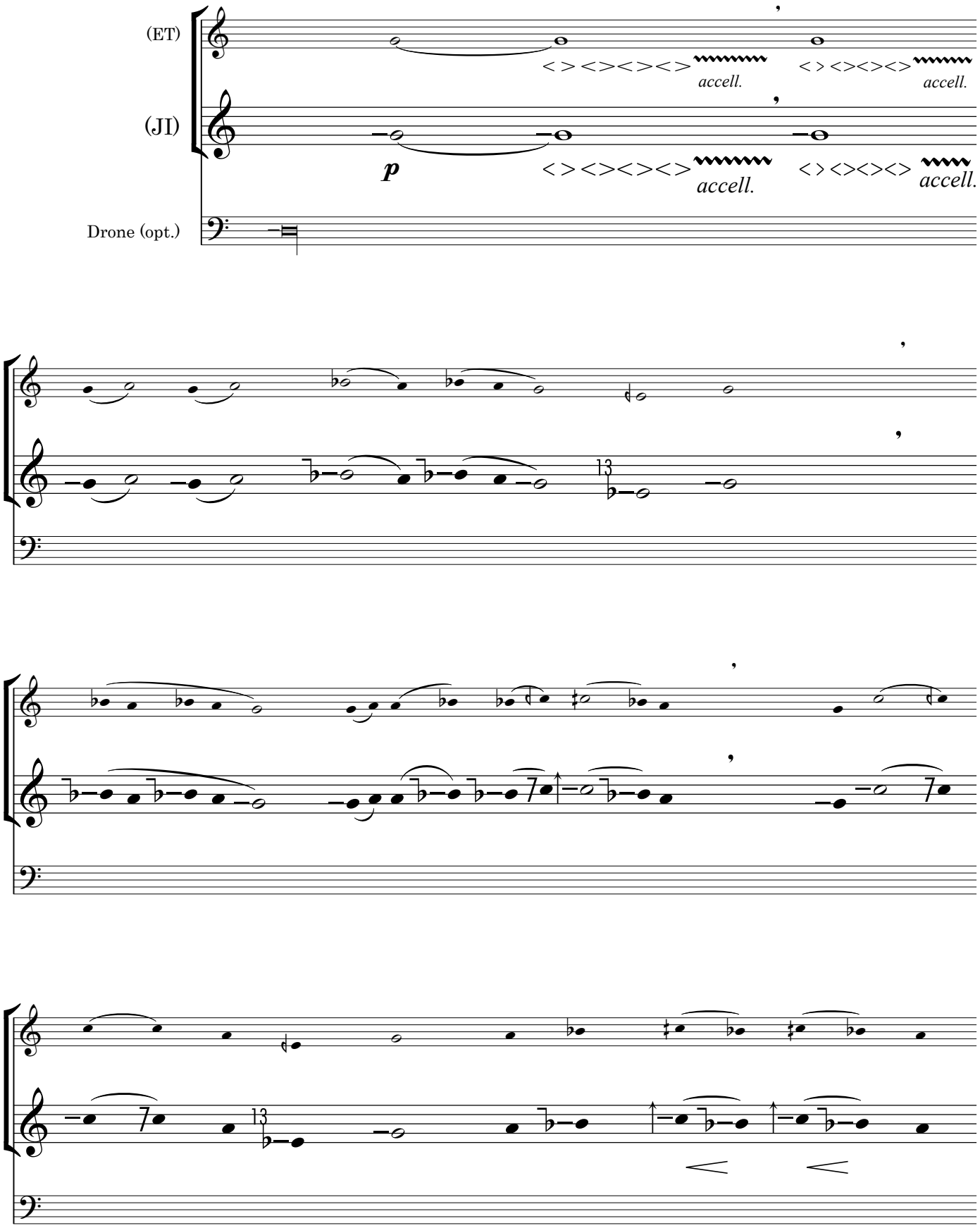
Semibreves should always be played with a varying, pulsing volume (as indicated at the start), with also possibly a slight varying up and down of pitch (approximately 81/80, the syntonic comma, about a 1/5 semitone), almost like a very slow vibrato. Open noteheads are longer than solid ones, but beyond this precise rhythm and durations are free. Wavy lines indicate that the preceding note or motif should be repeated and varied ad lib. Commas are given for breaths in a few places, but otherwise this is left to the discretion of the performer. Empty points on the stave imply a period of silence. It is expected that the process of tuning will introduce an element of portamento into the melodic line.

The duration is approximately 7-9 minutes, or may certainly be longer if the performer wishes.

Cantus

Peter Nagle

(sim. for all subsequent semibreves)



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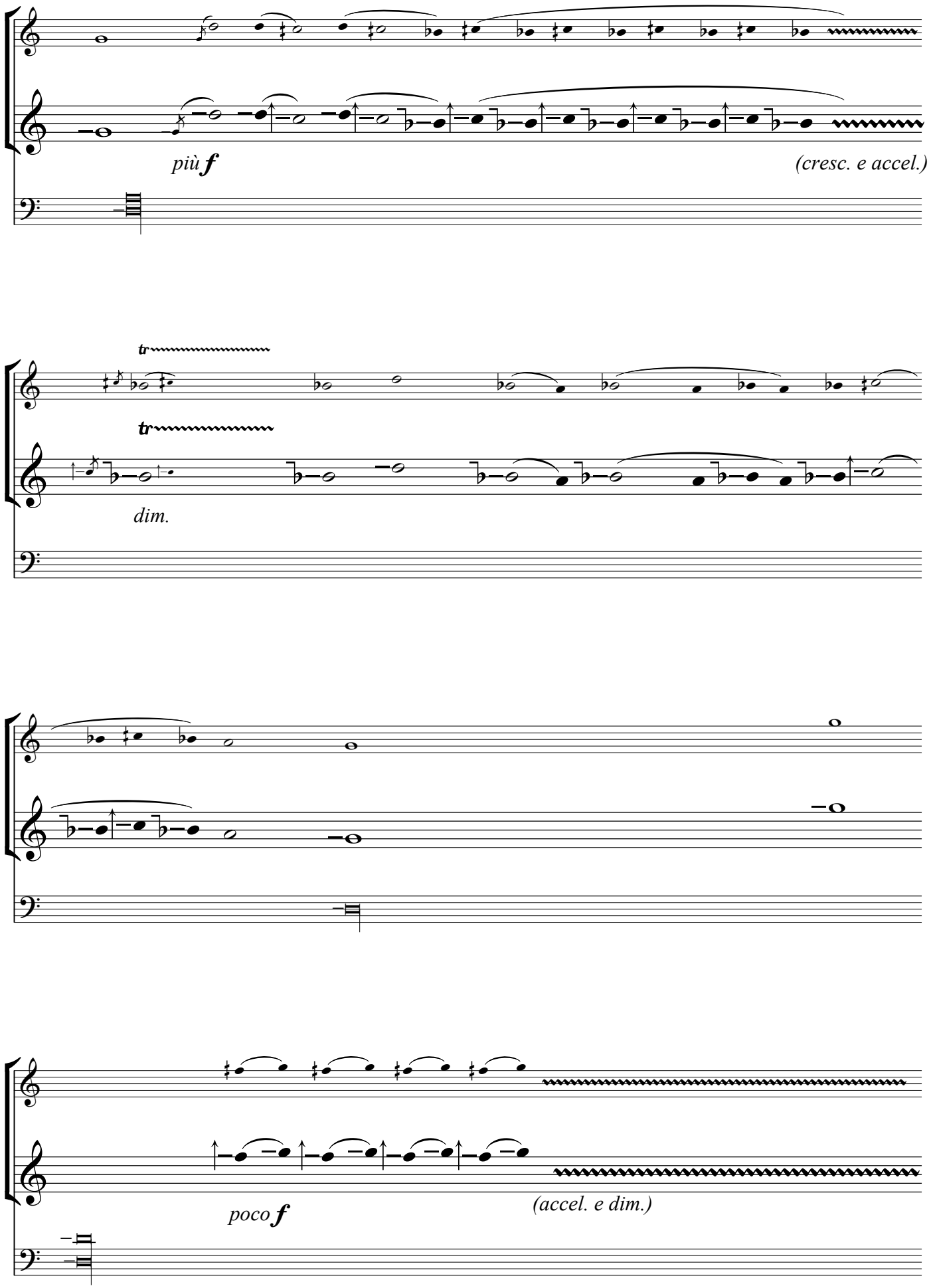
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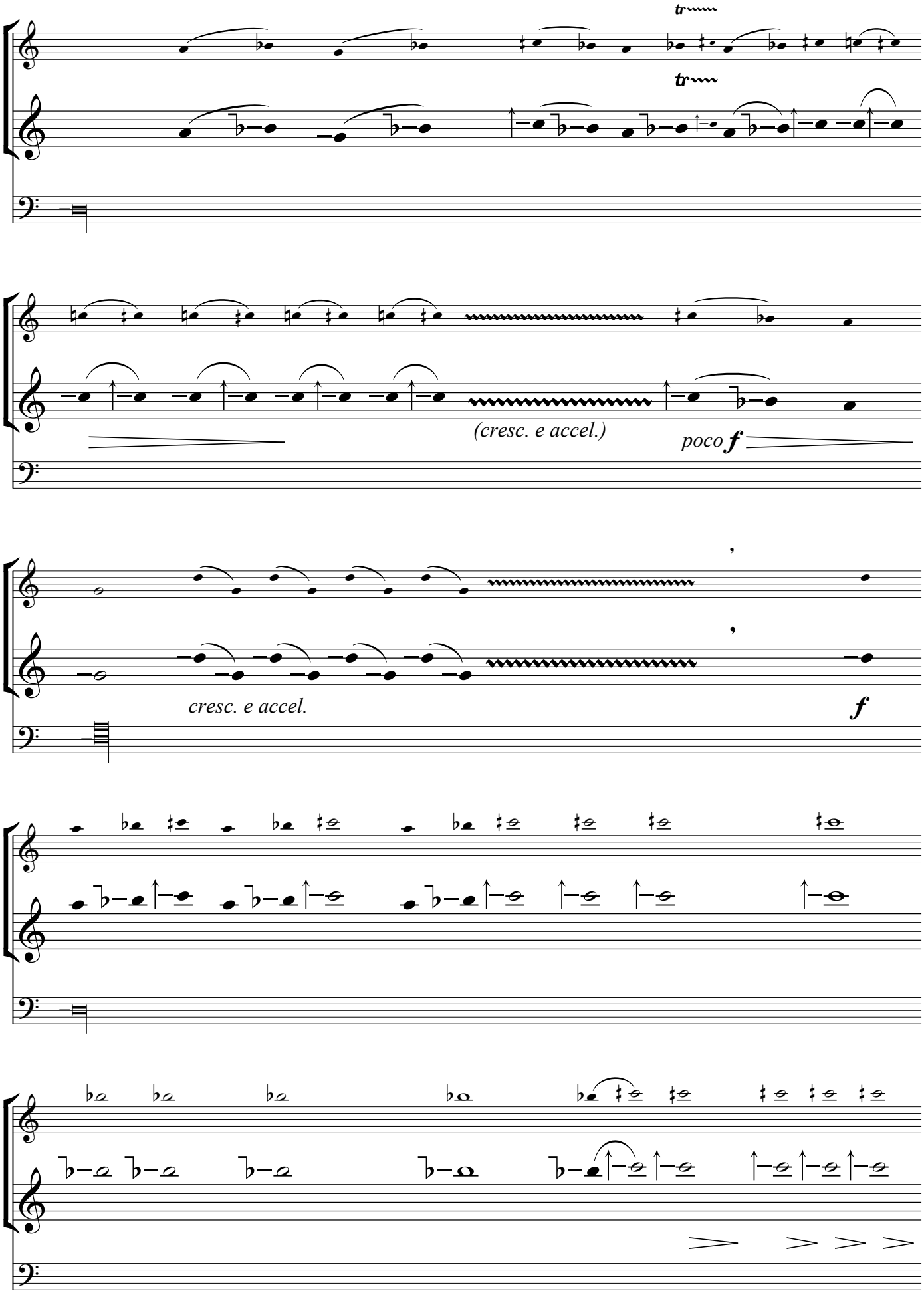
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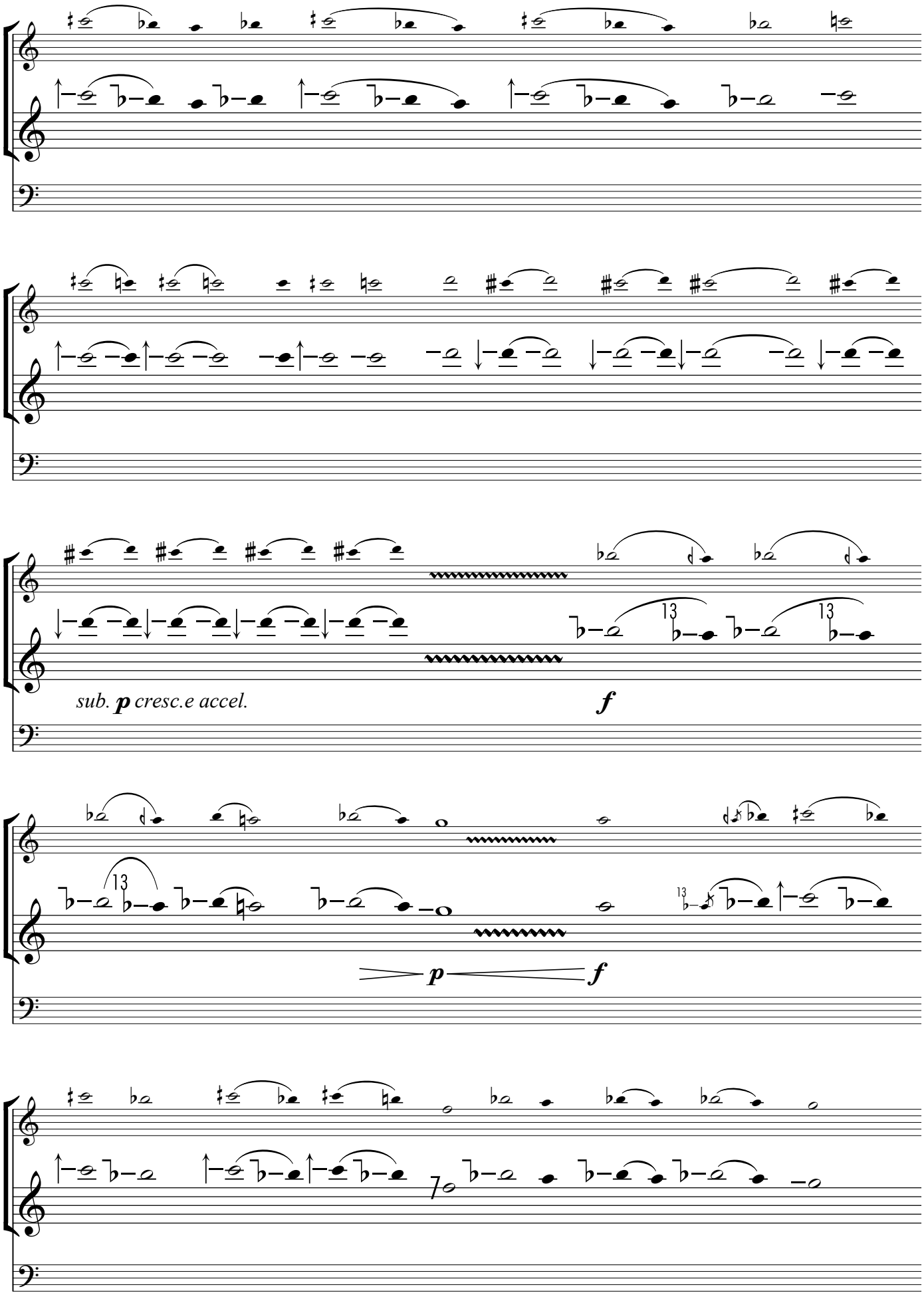
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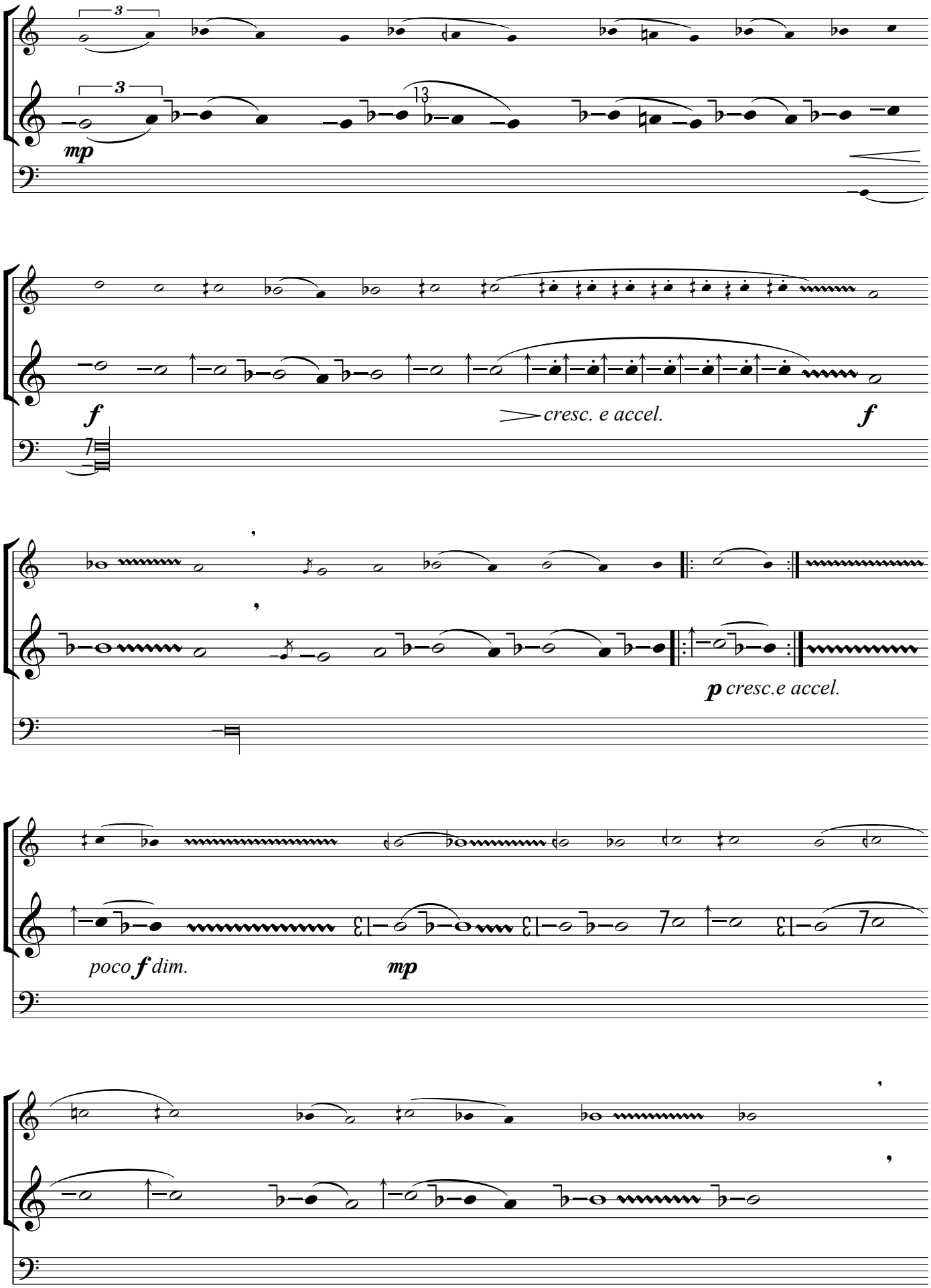
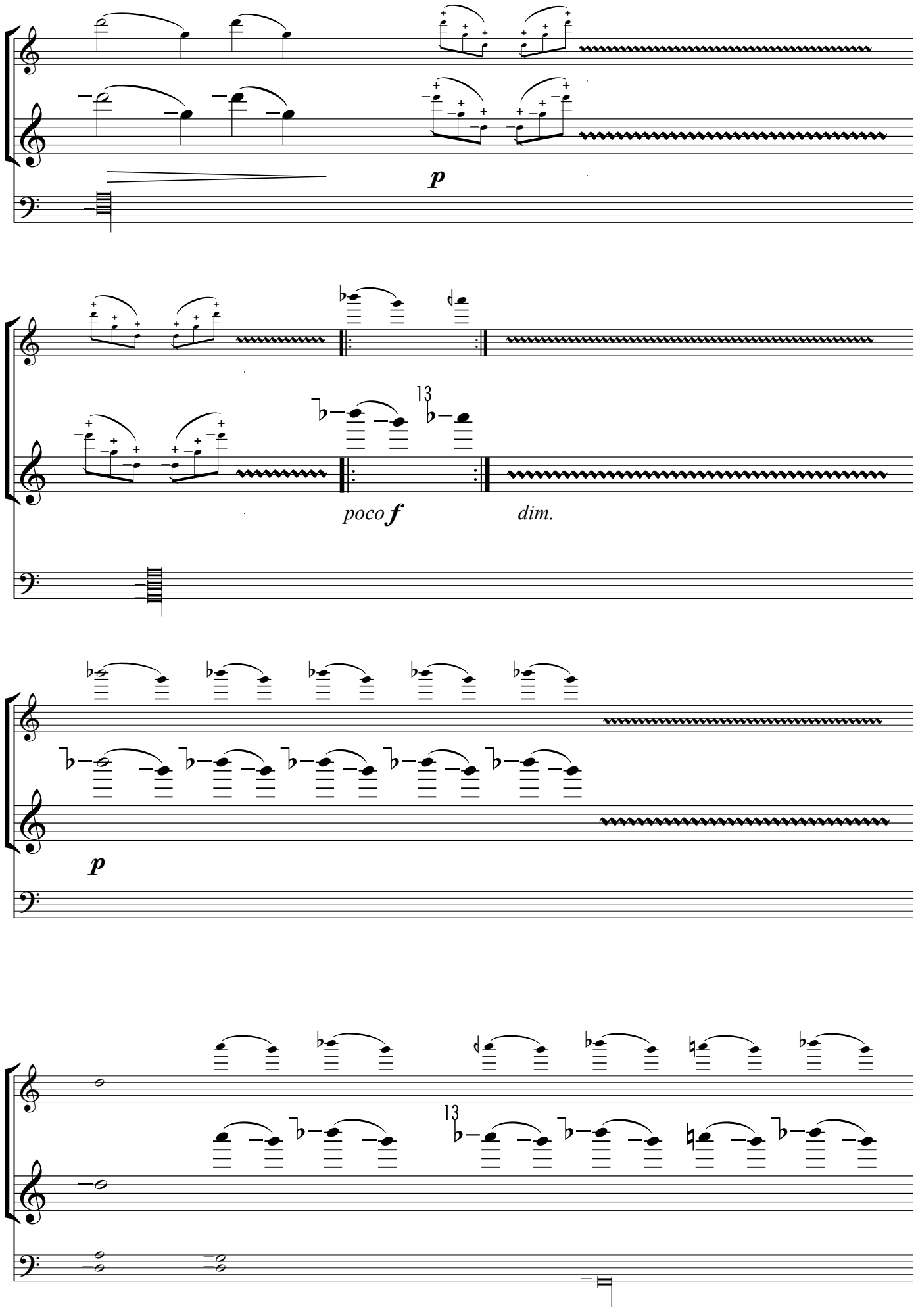

3
3
13
mp
f
cresc. e accel.
f
p cresc.e accel.
poco f dim.
mp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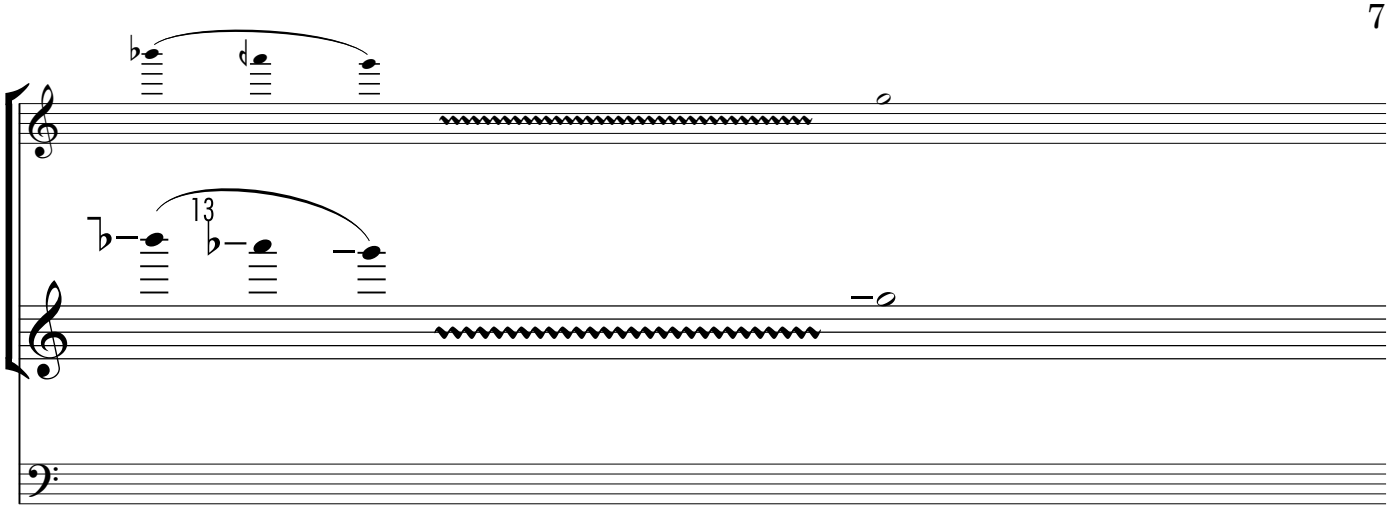
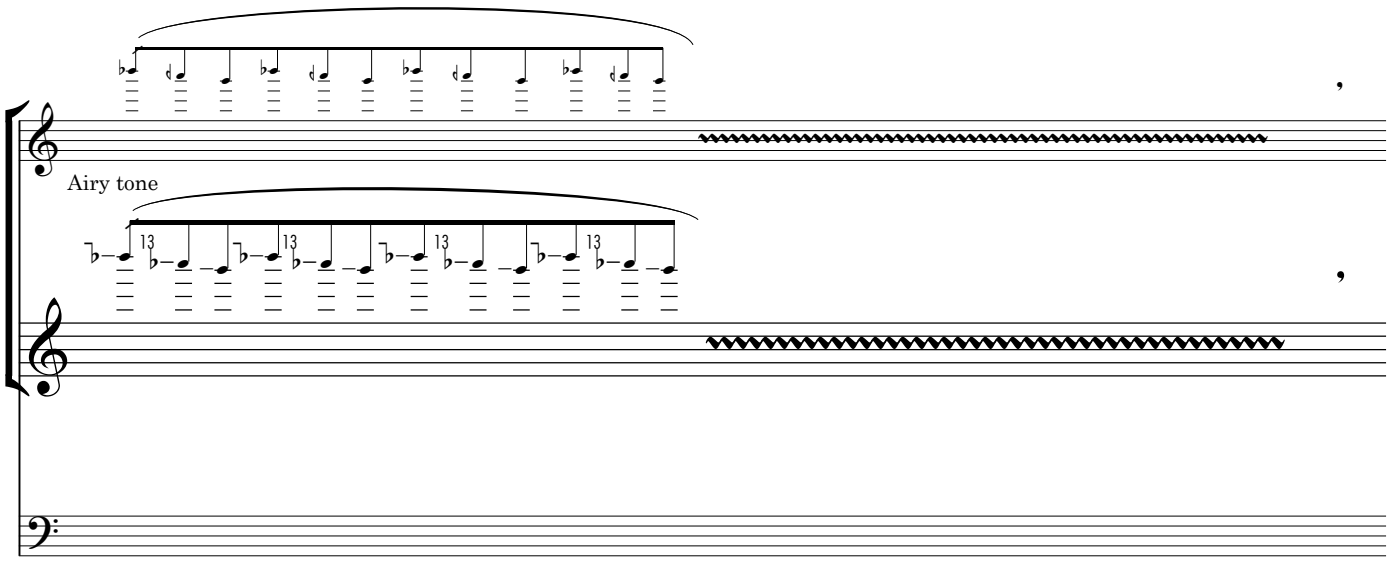
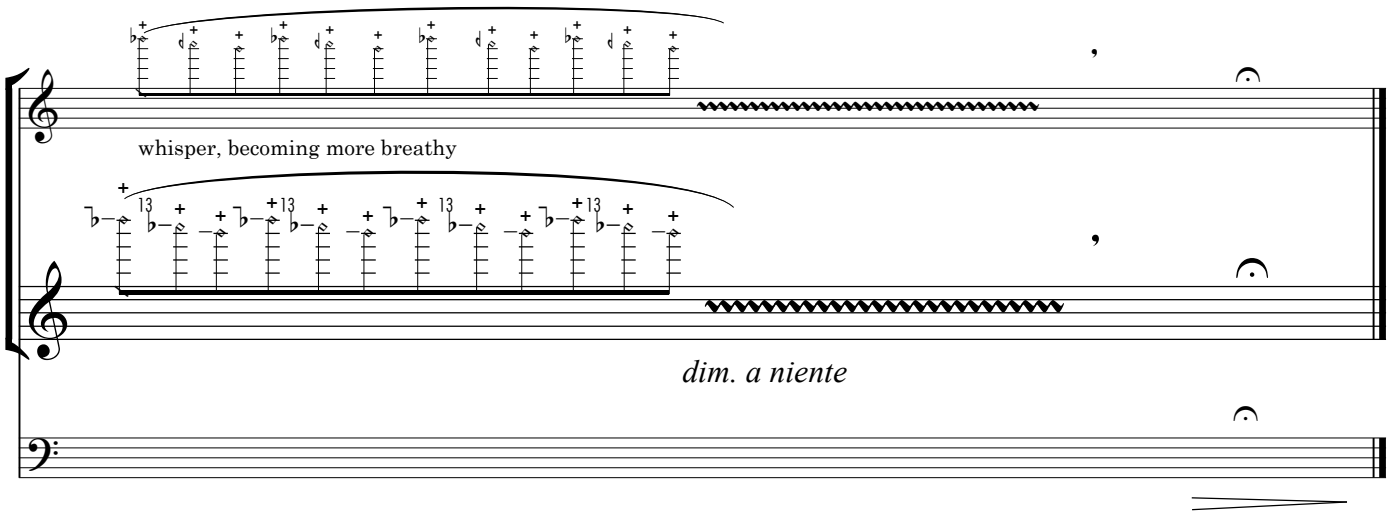



Airy tone


whisper, becoming more breathy
dim. a niente