THE SIBYL OF CUMAE (2001)

Music by Edward Dudley Hughes

Text by Tom Lowenstein

commissioned by the Brighton Festival

for

mezzo soprano
flute (doubling piccolo & alto flute)
clarinet (doubling bass clarinet)
violin
cello
piano
1 percussion player:
(2 octaves crotales, vibraphone, marimba,
glockenspiel, bass drum, 4 tomtoms,
5 temple blocks, suspended cymbal)
double bass

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first performance: 19 May 2001
St Nicholas Church, Brighton
Brighton Festival

Louise Mott, mezzo-soprano
The New Music Players conducted by Patrick Bailey

Date of draft copy:
7 May 2001

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The Sibyl was priestess of Apollo, through whose mouth the god sang in a shrine at the Graeco-Roman settlement at Cumae, south-west Italy. Like her sisters at the earlier oracle at Delphi, the Cumaean Sibyl was a visionary whose prophetic utterances were not infrequently used to guide state policy. Much of our knowledge of this world comes from Virgil, Ovid and other ancient poets and historians who evoke the Sibyl's often painful possession by Apollo and her arduous spirit journeys to the underworld.

The Sibyl of Cumae is a work in eight sections, or eight separate monologues, treating different aspects of the Sibyl's mind and history, though together, these 'scenes' or 'panels' might represent, or appear to represent, one skein. At the centre of each scene there is some narrative and/or drama, though the text itself is in varying degrees fragmentary and allusive. One unifying element is the Sibyl of Cumae's preoccupation with time. She has been given near-immortality by Apollo, and can thus look back over a thousand years of mortality: this is balanced by demands on her to predict the future which she alone will live to observe being worked out.

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The first section is a Ritual Invocation in the nature of a Greek chorus, introducing Apollo, god of sun, light, music. But he is also a dark and unintelligible force, a usurper in that he takes over, at Cumae, from the cult of Demeter, an earlier, dark earth goddess. A quieter, contextualising interlude follows, to provide a visual impression of Cumae. The Sibyl's sanctuary lies within a mountainous outcrop which stands alone in flat coastal country. Inland a little way are the Phlegrean Fields. These are smouldering volcanic pits giving off sulphur fumes which suggest hell just underfoot. Section 3 represents the beginning of the Sibyl's more expressive monologue. She describes how the god casually and *en passant* bestowed on her the poisonous gift of [prophetic] madness. This she carries 'like a child's scream'. The scream represents the pain inherent in her career, her relationship with the rogue god she may love, hate and depend on, and also the energic principle which takes her into shamanistic states.

In section 4 the Sibyl describes Apollo's visits to her, when he 'enters from the trees' which are visible and audible from the large window cut into the rock of her chamber. This section is one of possession. The god's visit is conceived as an assault. This derives from the shamanistic idea that a possessed individual is taken over by a spirit or deity, who may then dismember the initiate. In section 5 the Sibyl emerges from trance language and at once enters an account of relationship with an enquirer at Cumae, an emperor who wants to extend Rome. Section 6 is a meditation on the Sibylline leaves, on which prophecies were inscribed. Section 7 refers again to the Sibyl's initial, semi-erotic meeting with Apollo, but introduces now the idea of her attempt at a pact with him. The final section attempts to redeem the negative aspects with an invocation from the end of the Sibyl's life when at last she can approach a genuine death. Here the text and music echo and contrast with the form of section 1. The Sibyl can now look forward to not having foresight and knowledge. In death she will join 'the silent and eventual collectivity', the silent collective of humanity. She can now dismiss the god and retreat into privacy and humanity.

TOM LOWENSTEIN & EDWARD DUDLEY HUGHES

THE SIBYL OF CUMAE -
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1. LIGHT. GOD.
MUSIC. PROPHECY.
INTELLIGENCE.
NEKUIA.
OPAQUE ENERGY.
USURPER DAIMON.
APOLLO AND HADES.
BOTH DRAG ME DOWNWARD.
THE DEITY TORMENTS ME.

OTOTOTOTOI POPOI DA
APOLLO
APOLLO!

2.
Alone. Hot. Volcanic.
A high rock fringed by the western ocean,
and washed, inland, by the current
of Hades' lava.

Deep in juniper, buckthorn, oak and laurel forest,
tunnels and hollows thread the dark grey\yellow strata.
Here dwells the Sibyl in her high-roofed chamber:
convulsed, wrung, harassed,
ravished by Apollo.

3.
The god, radiant in transit,
bestowed this madness
which I carry
like a child's scream in me:

since when I was
such a tender little finch,

with goats at pasture,
I was wounded,
with that stink of metal to him,
driven by his modes and dialects
to breathe fumes at hell's mouth,

returning to this threshold
ancient, sick, deranged
and vision-haggard…

4.
The god enters from the trees,
as always he has,

arrives humming,
to attack my body:
plies my vertebrae and tendons,

so I shake,
invaded,

and he strips me,
strumming,
he undoes me,
with this terrible,
excited singing…

So I go down
in my pieces.

kuanos, kuanos
koila, koilamata:
cold blue darkness.

Through coils and hollows
I go.
Tortuous itinerary
through root, stone,
hot Phlegraean pastures,

bird-beak in my sternum,
he undoes and deforms me,
like these *orcullae:*
you intermediates!

Birds float dead
on the dull lake's poison.

Acheron. Achh! Filthy.
Stony, hot Phlegethon!

Leaves I clutch at,
sharp-edged to the fingers.

Ianua Ditis:
hell's door is slimy.

Dead souls pick my leavings.
I am bits and pieces.

The queen of Hades
shakes my bones
with her oracle coppers.

I drop as she did
on that dark blue

little flower.

5.
Green crown clashing with deity's,
some grand fellow bows at my passage entrance!
He wants provinces beyond
the great northern rivers:

Pannonia, Dalmatia, Lycia, Pamphylia …
wants the Black Sea and Arabia…

He shapes his ambition,

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shaking at the threshold
to my hooded tunnel.

I shake. I grow large. *He* grows transparent.
His sarcophagus prefigured,
the syllables inch through
at the cold end of the chisel.

6.
Thick long withered yellow heaps of serrated sweet chestnut
criss-crossed as they drift to my cave-mouth, piling together:
thinly rounded oak and cracked, aromatic bay-tree leaves:
inscribed with names, notes, marks, signs, glyphs and hexameters
raked up from Hades…

What started as music, scatters in syllabic fragments.
The god has unhinged them.

7.
I want to die.
Yes, he heard
me say this
in the bottle I'd shrunk to.

A voice. Just voice
I had become.
But enormous.
And what's left is a scrap.
A mere shred,
hung up:
every fibre, though,
alive still.

It's the nature of a god
to misrepresent
his undertakings
and intentions.

8.

Beautiful Apollo:
where time joins music,
I have fought your employment.

Is time what you are?
And time, as I shuttle between air
and Hades, this paralysing mania?

At last when I join,
without foresight or knowledge,
the silent and eventual collectivity:

leave me, calm god,
god of music, without music.
Leave me silence.

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THE SIBYL OF CUMAE

Music © Edward Dudley Hughes, 2001
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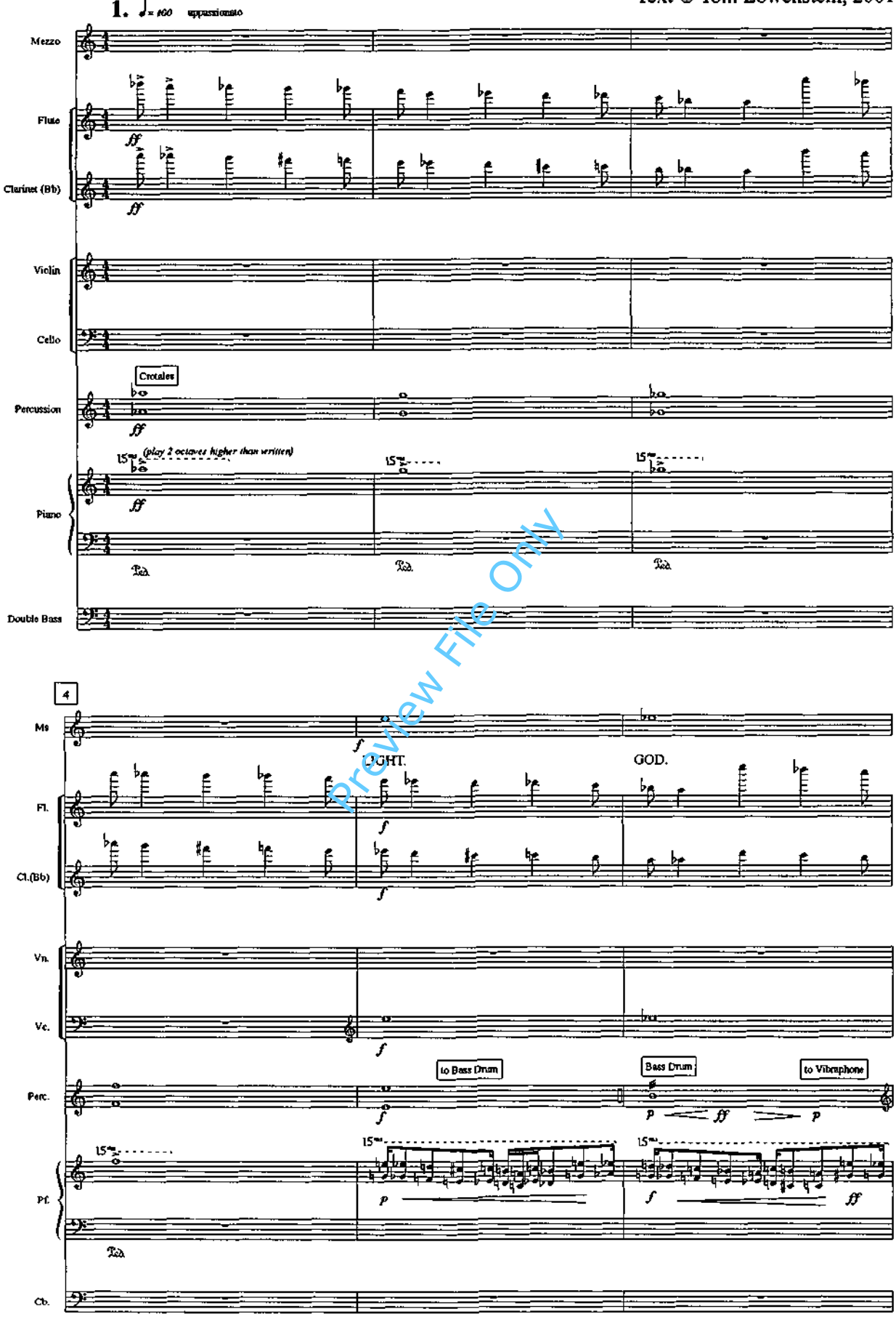

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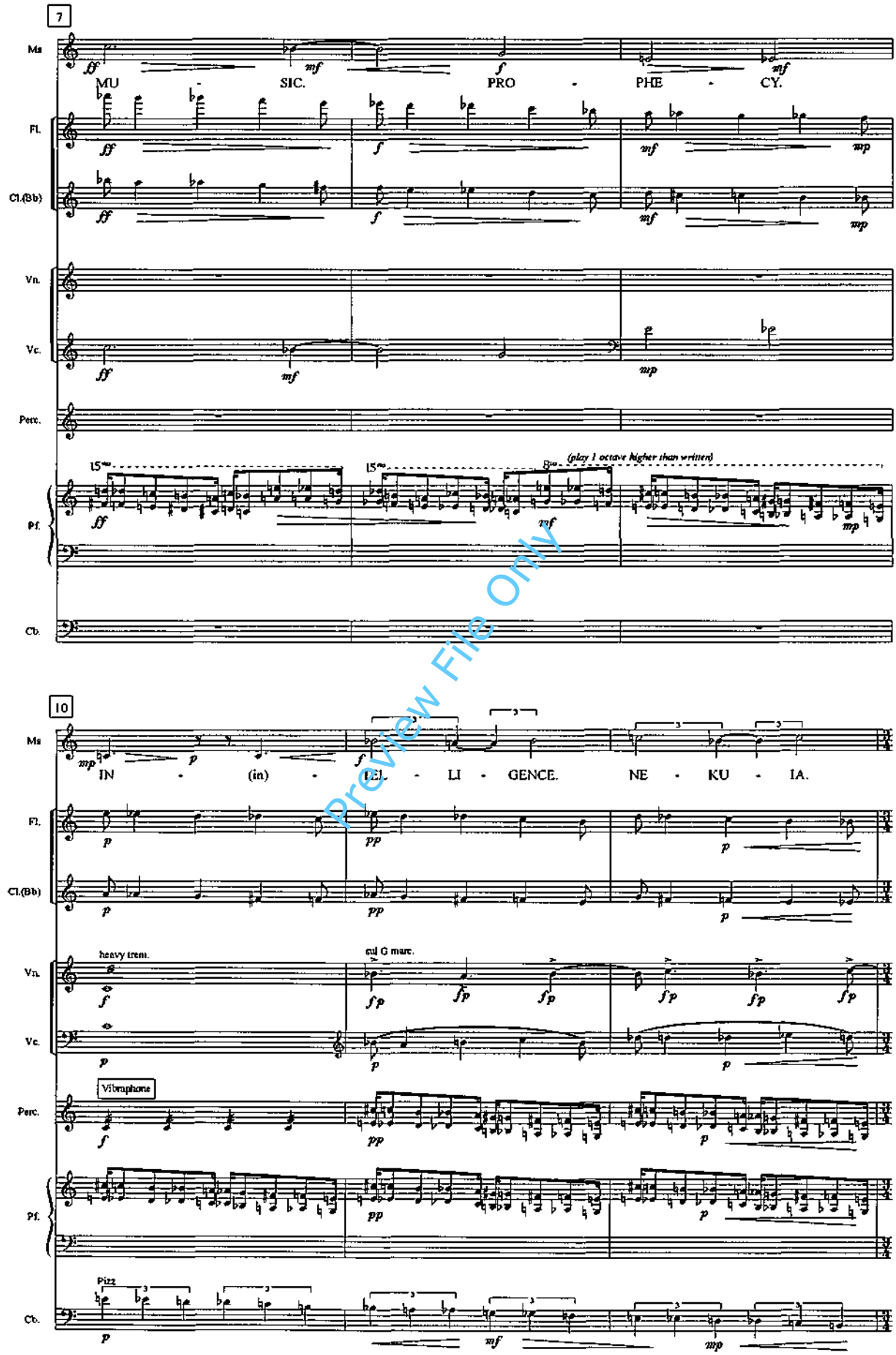

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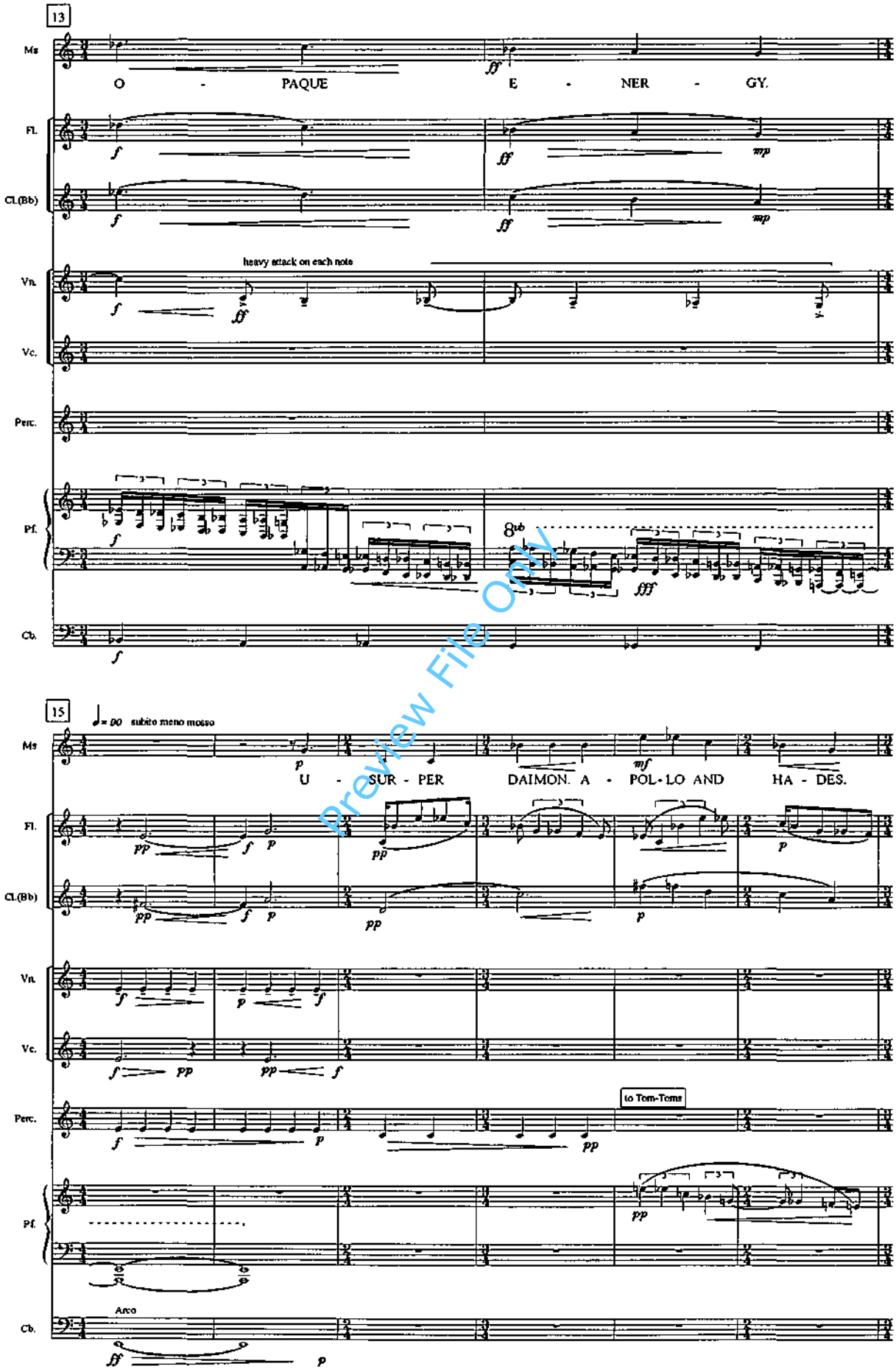

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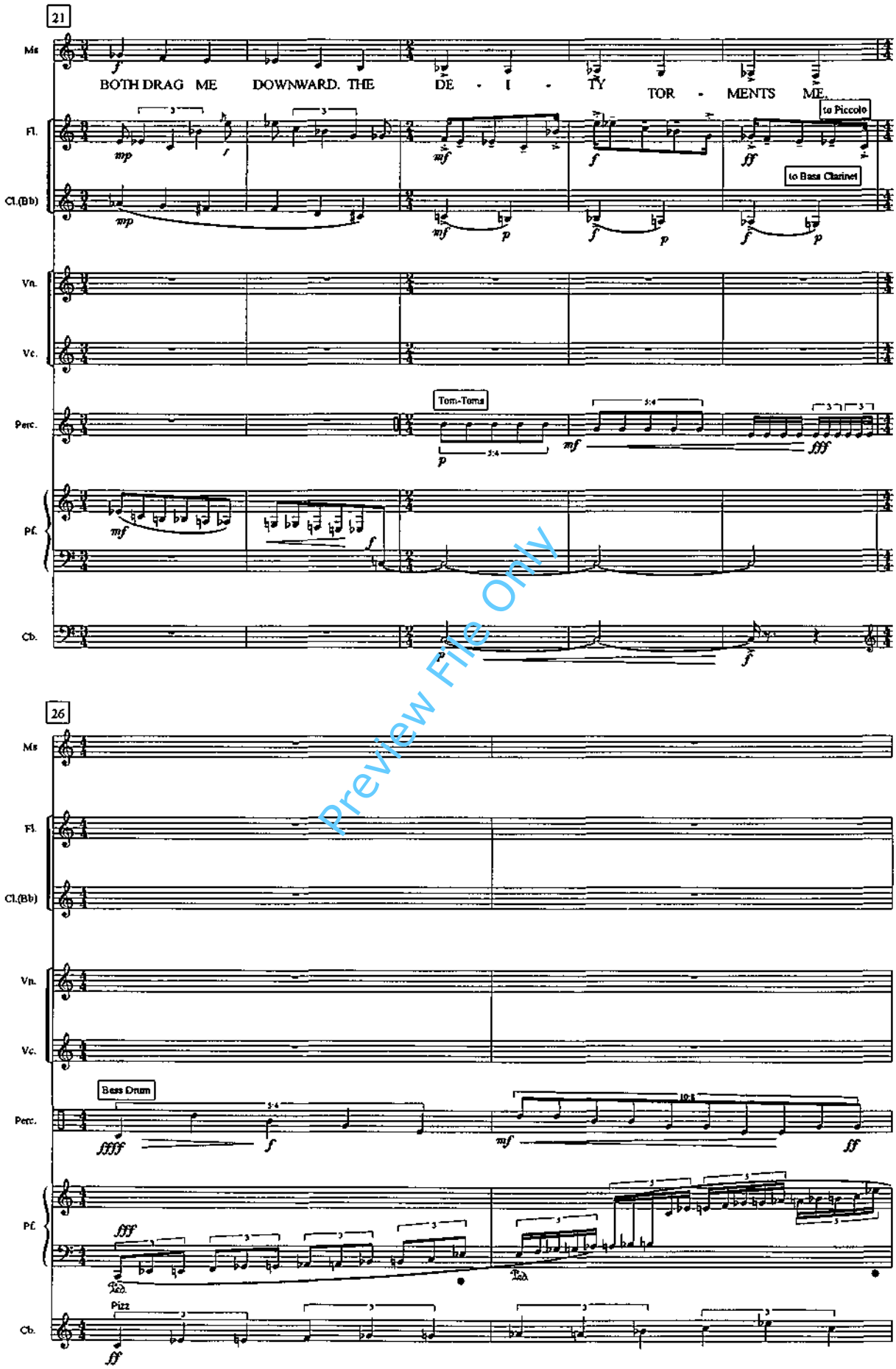

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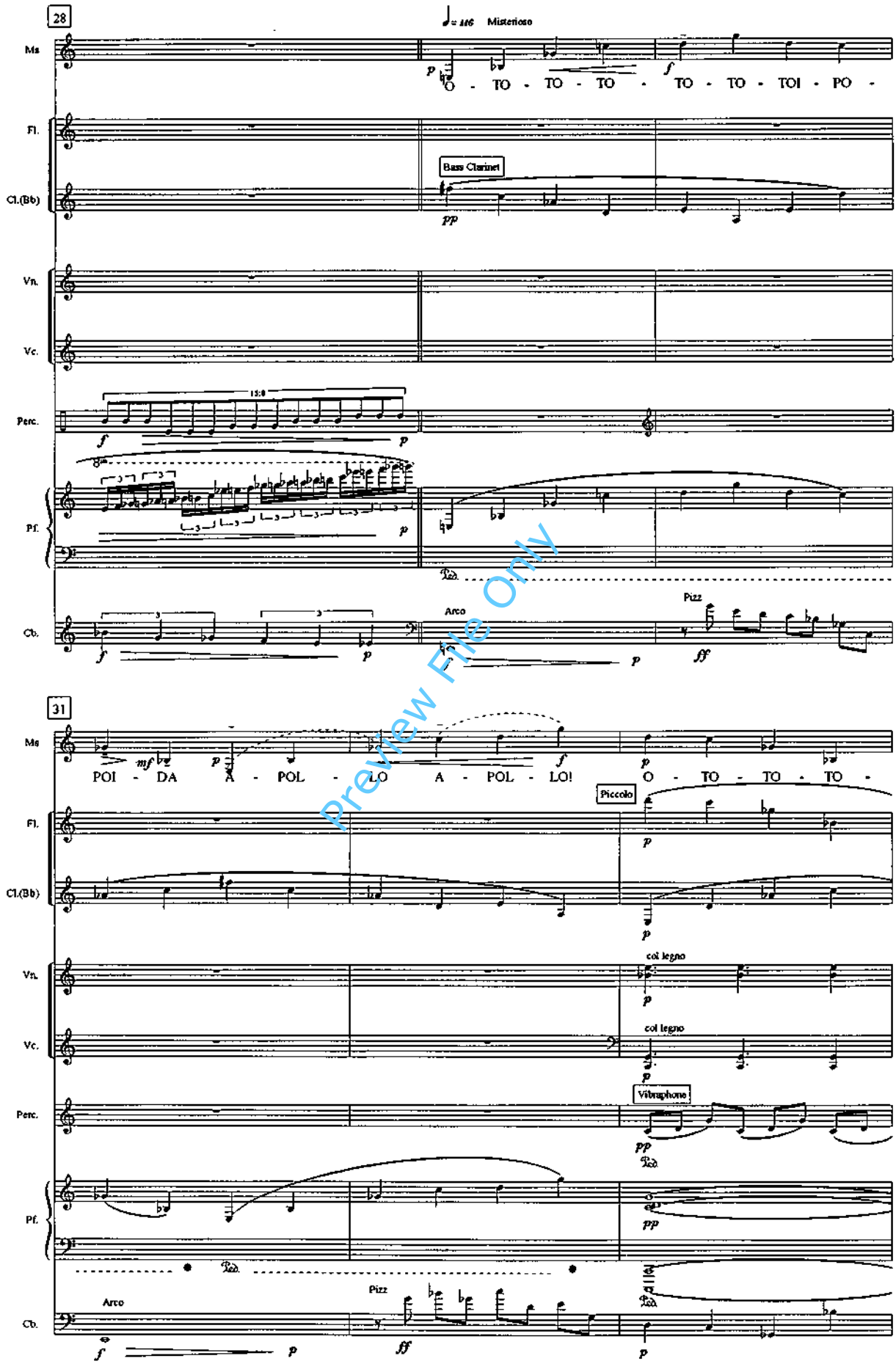

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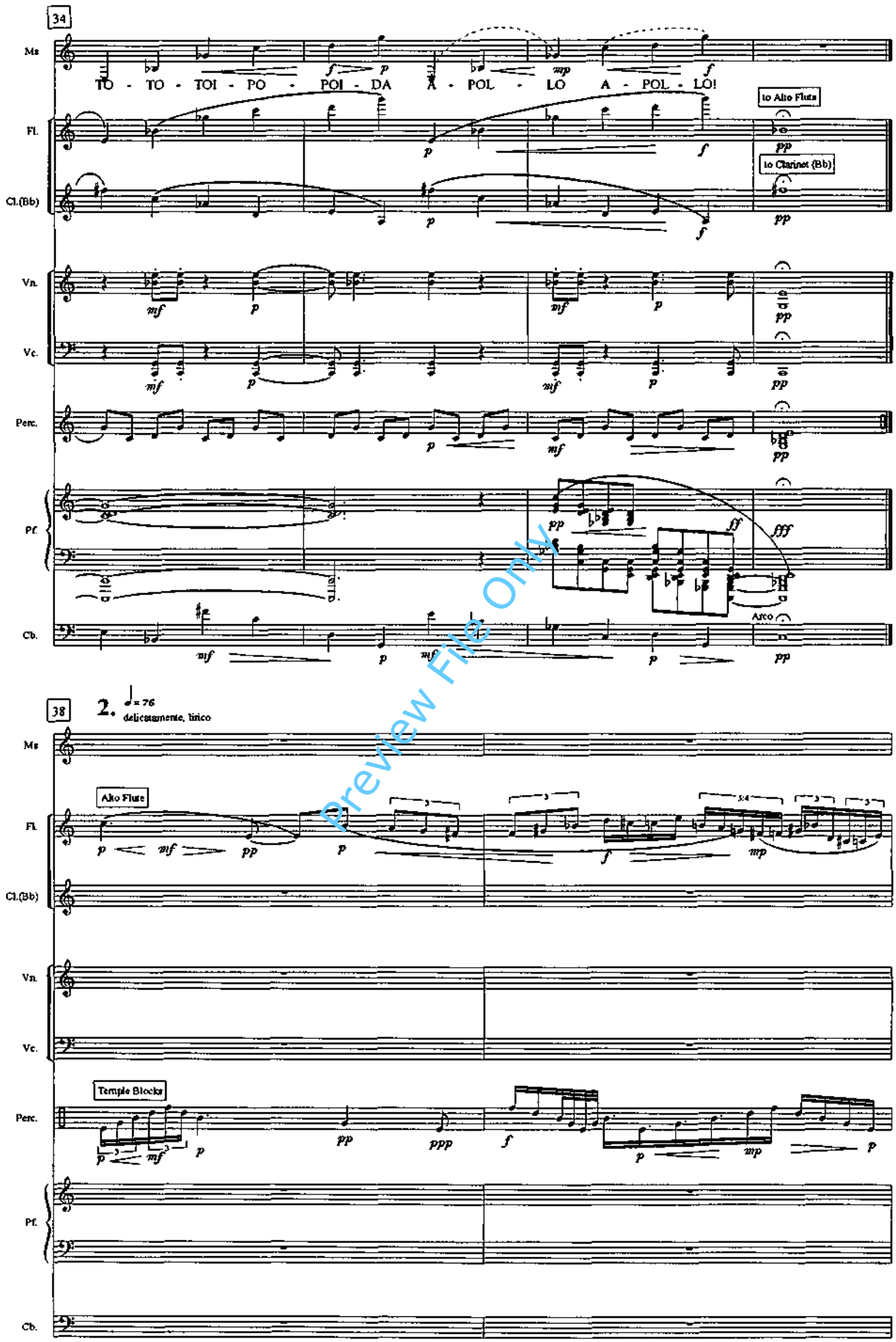

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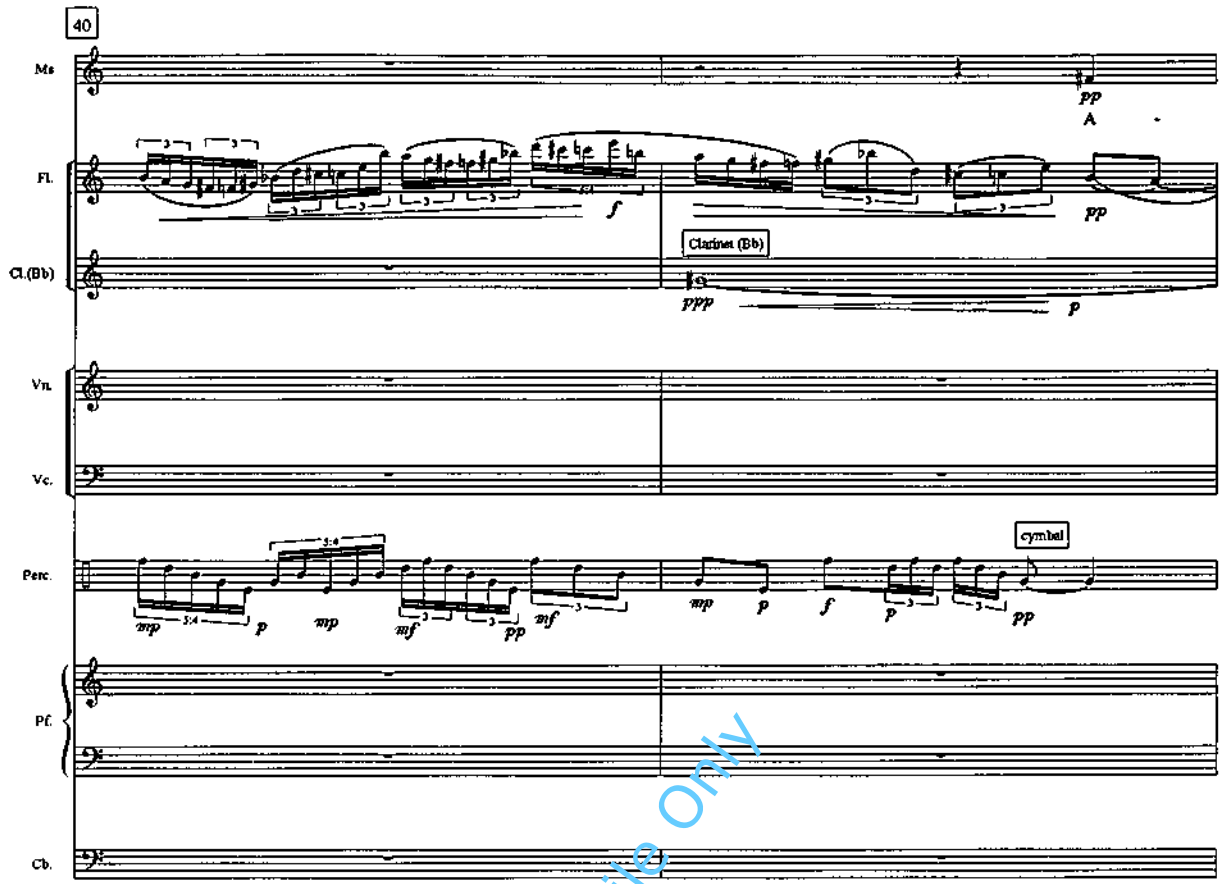

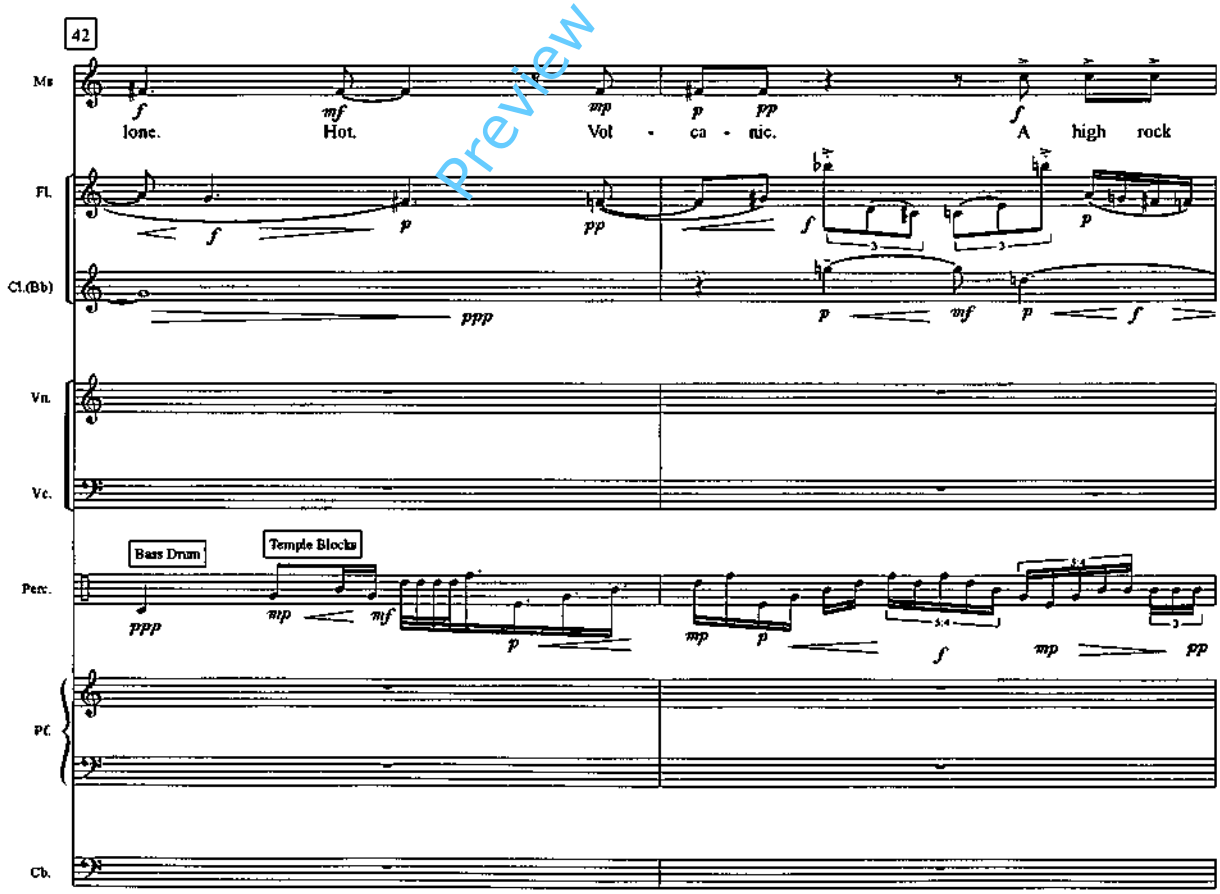

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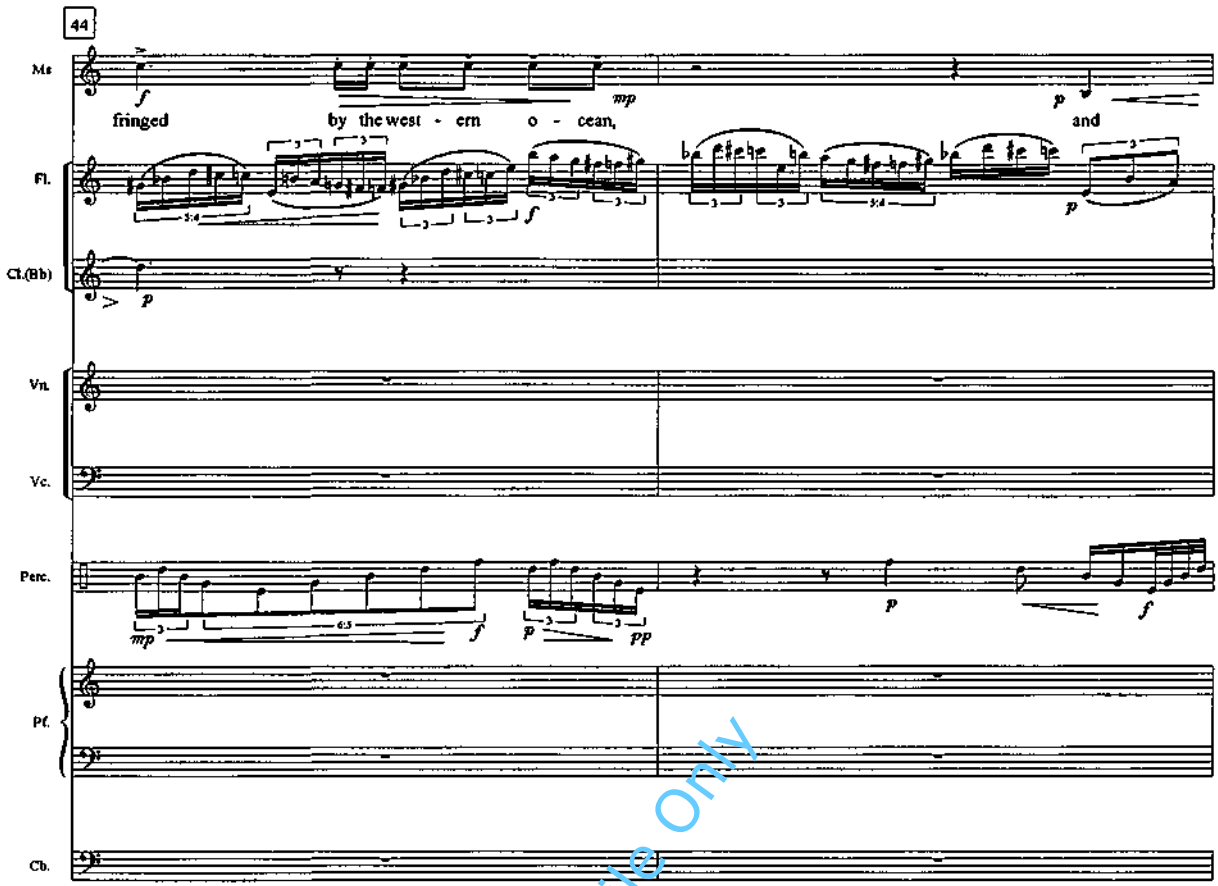

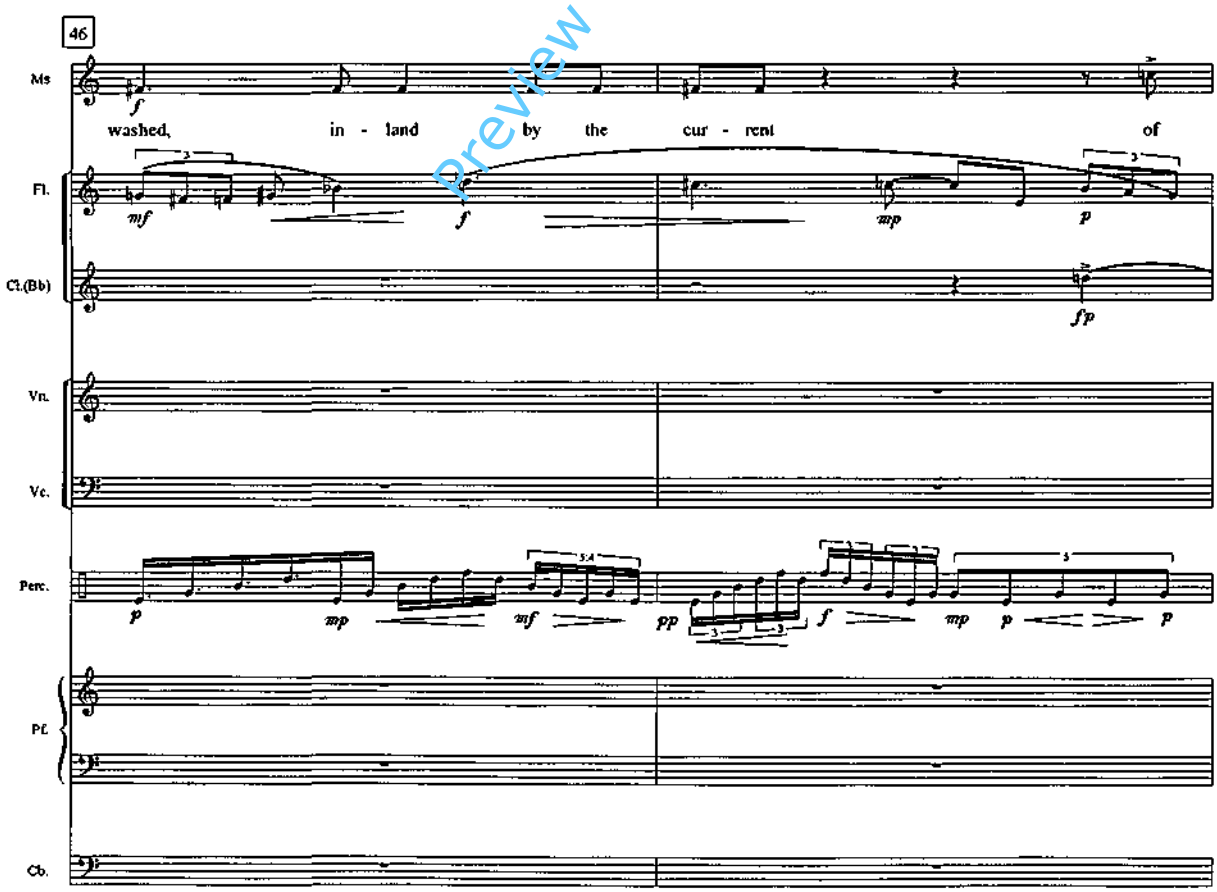

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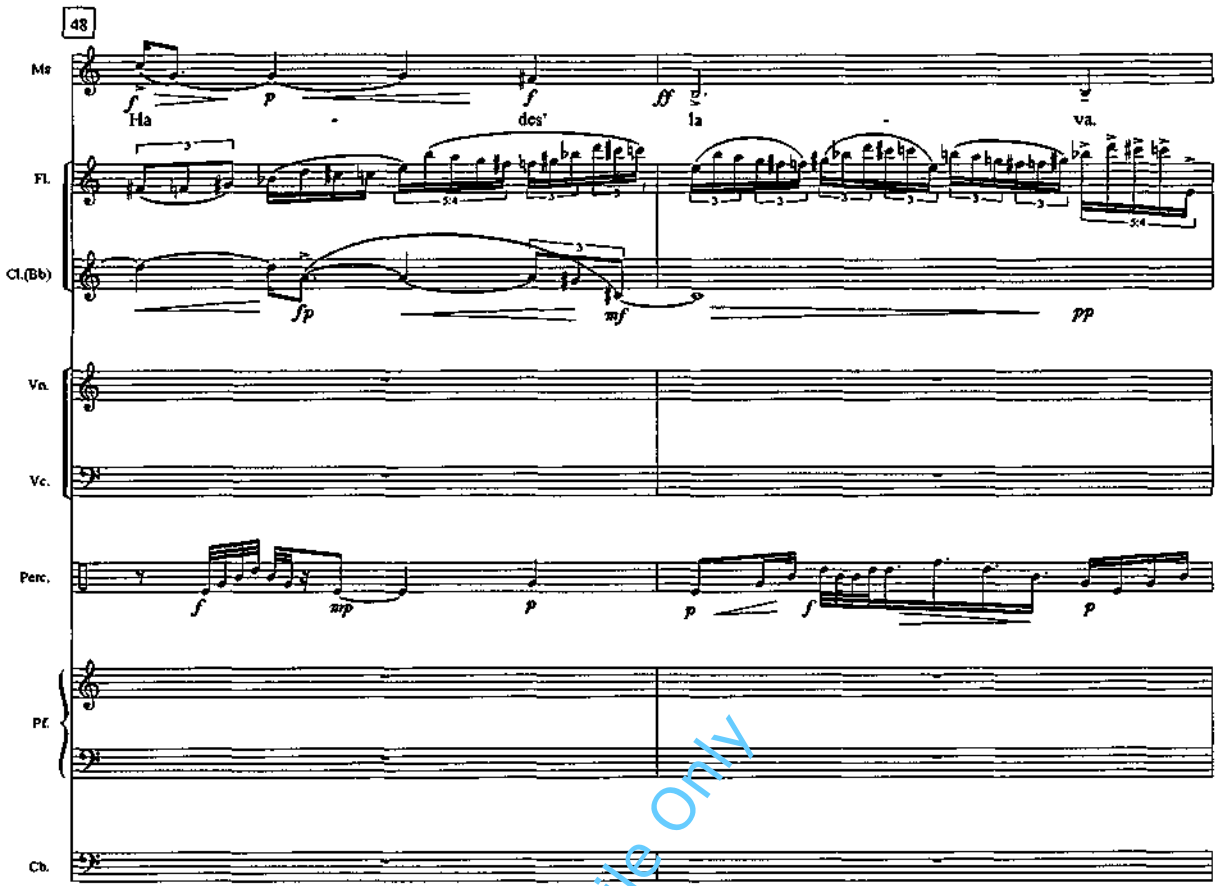

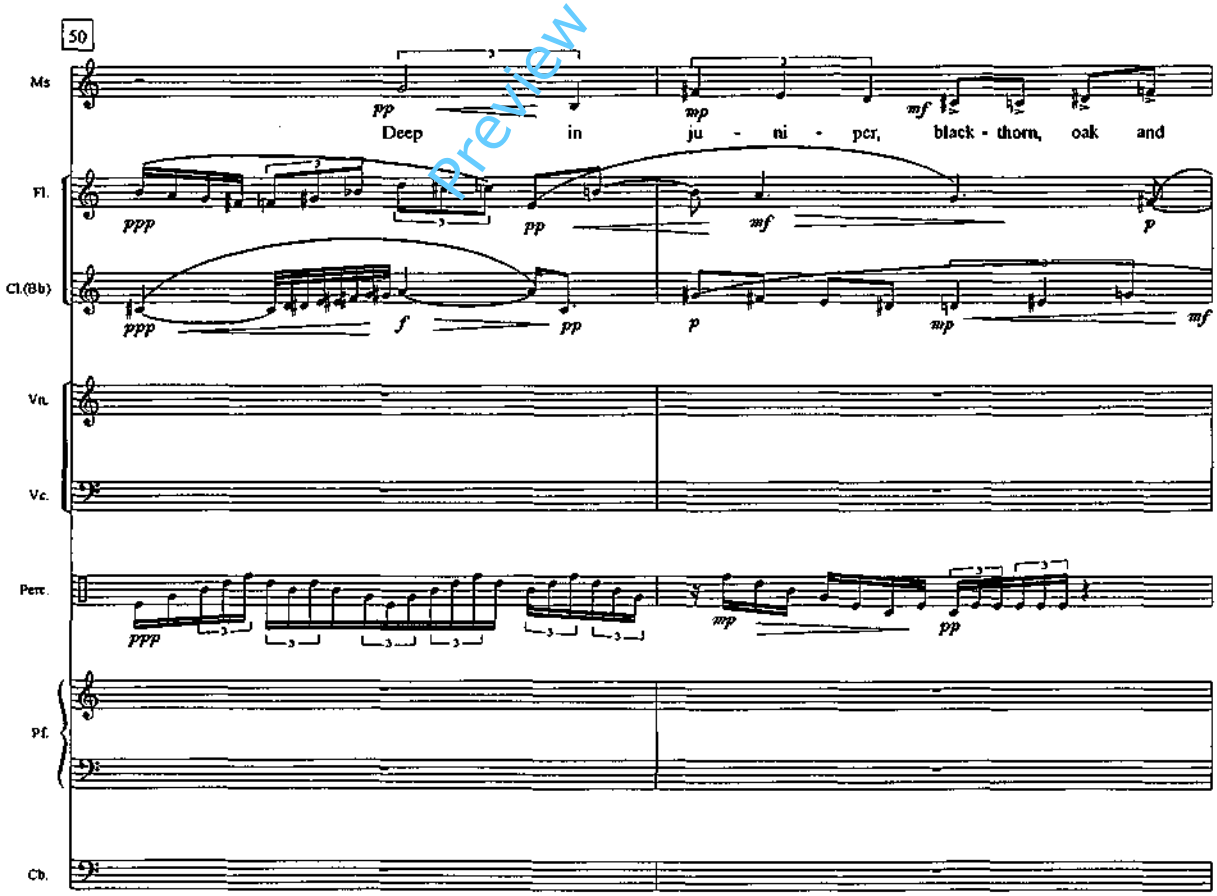

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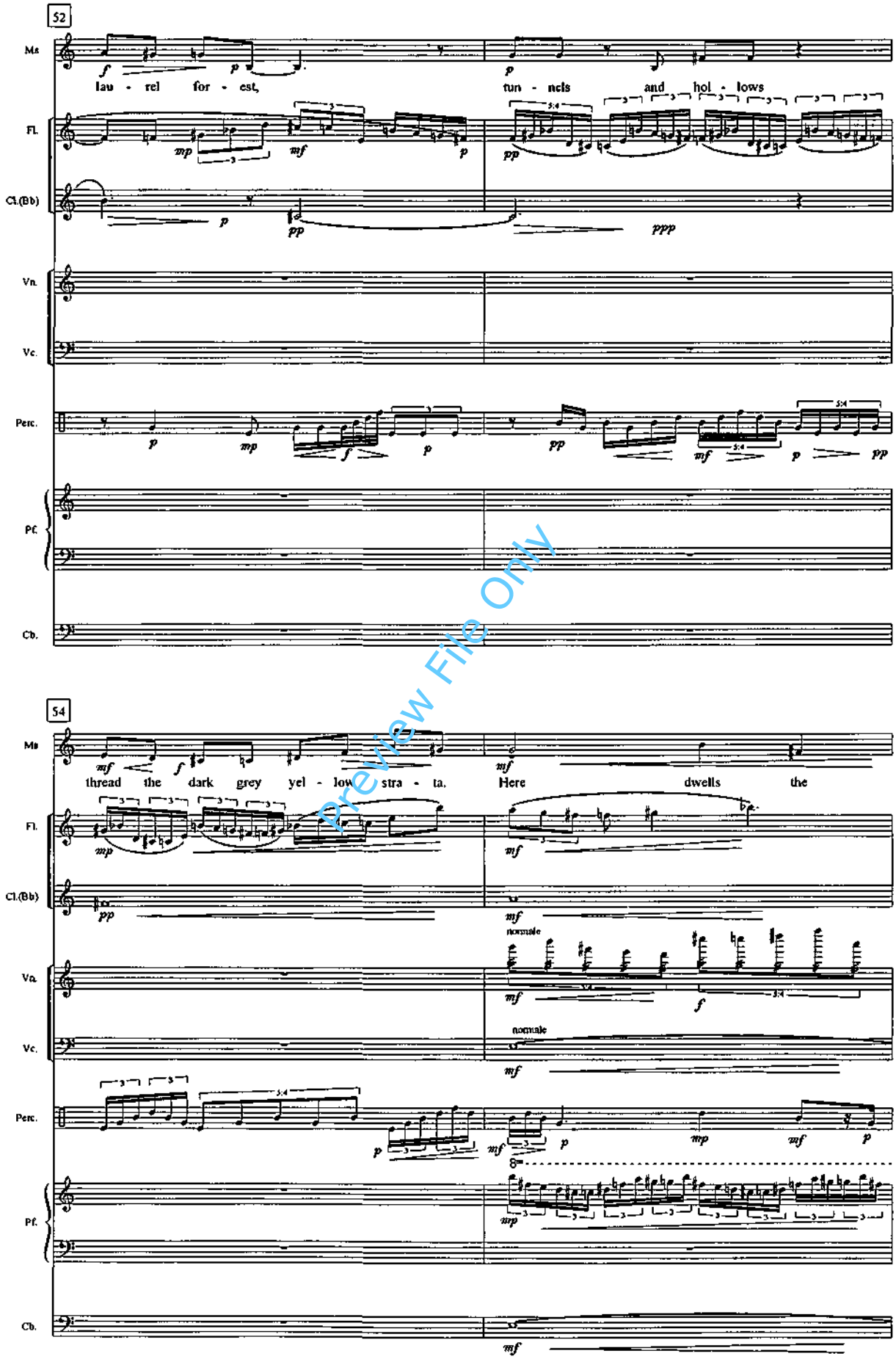

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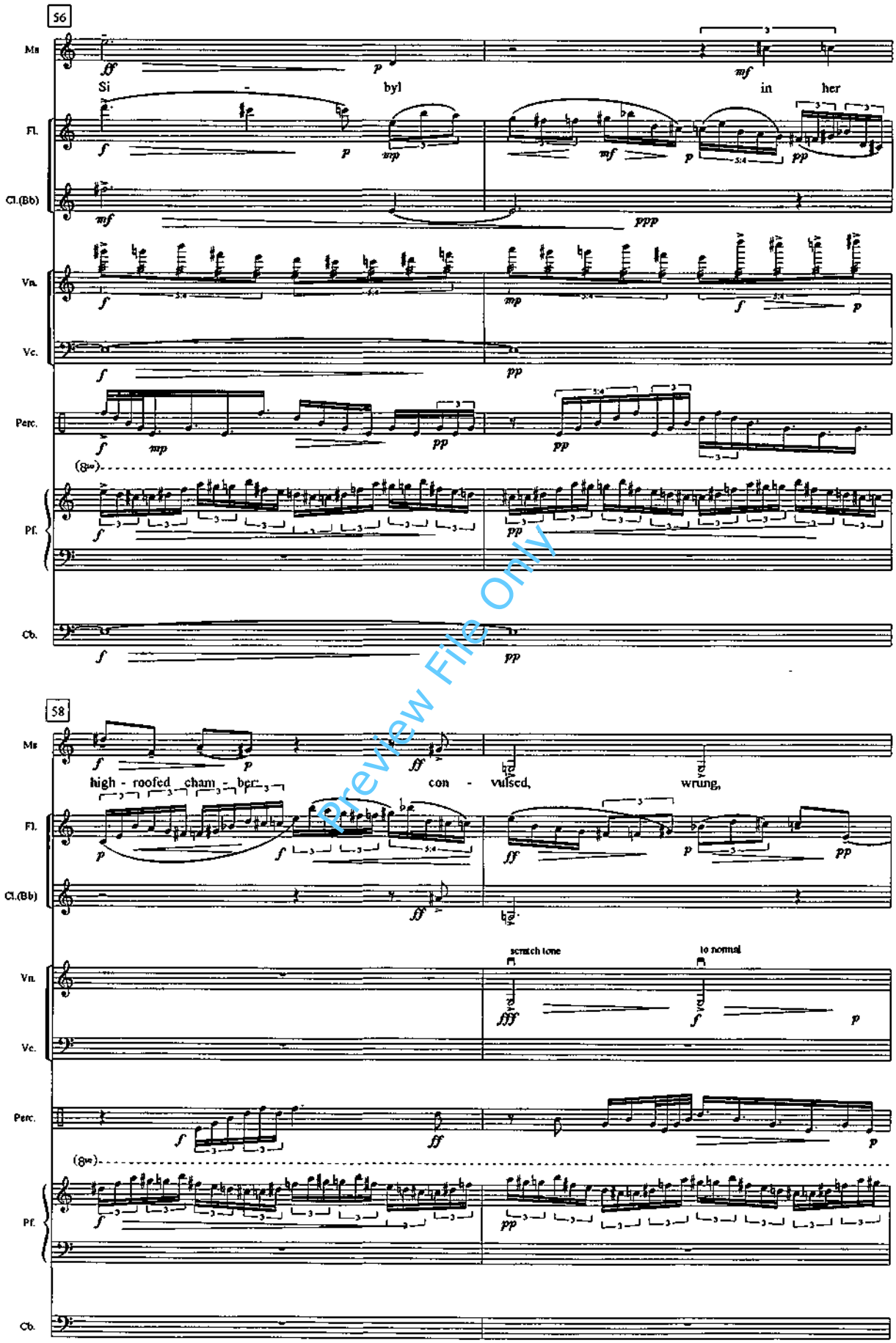

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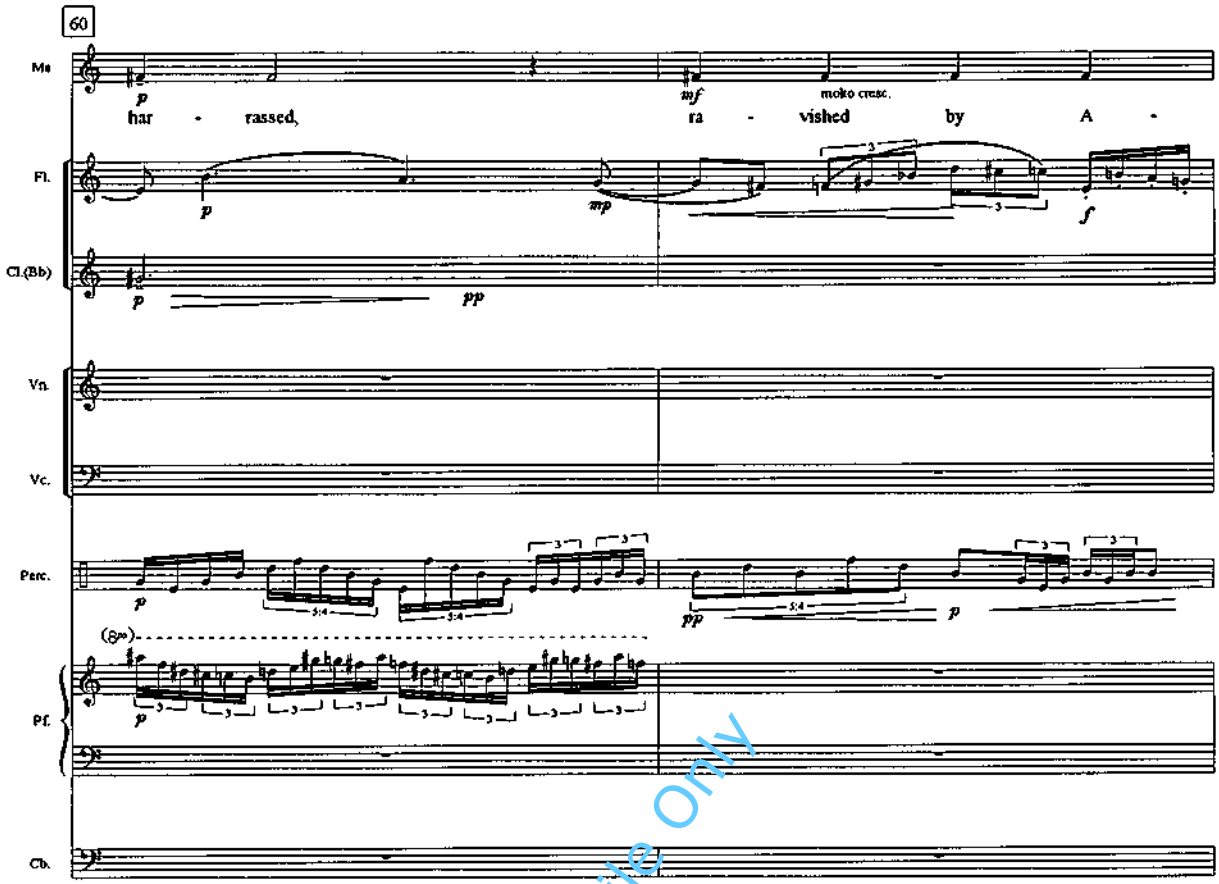

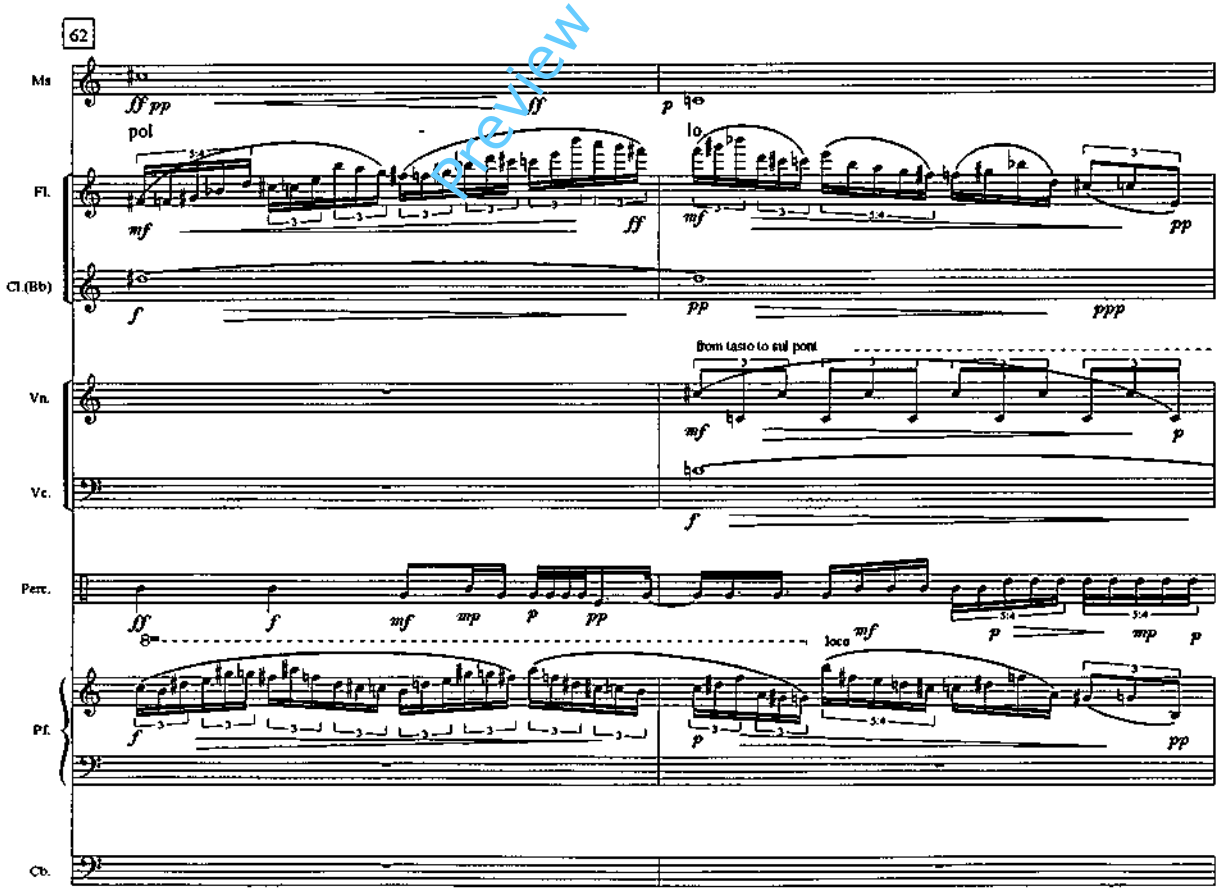

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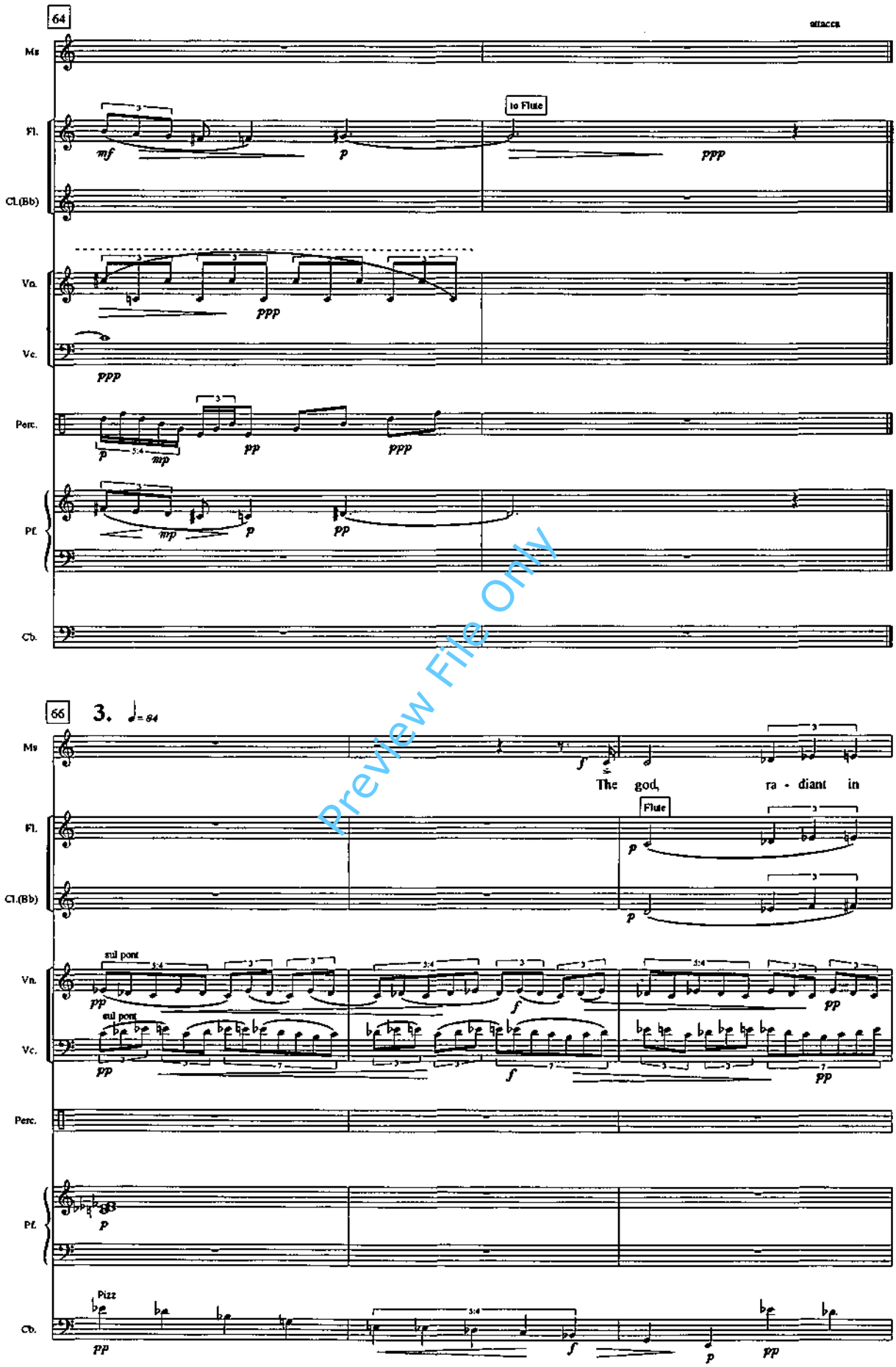

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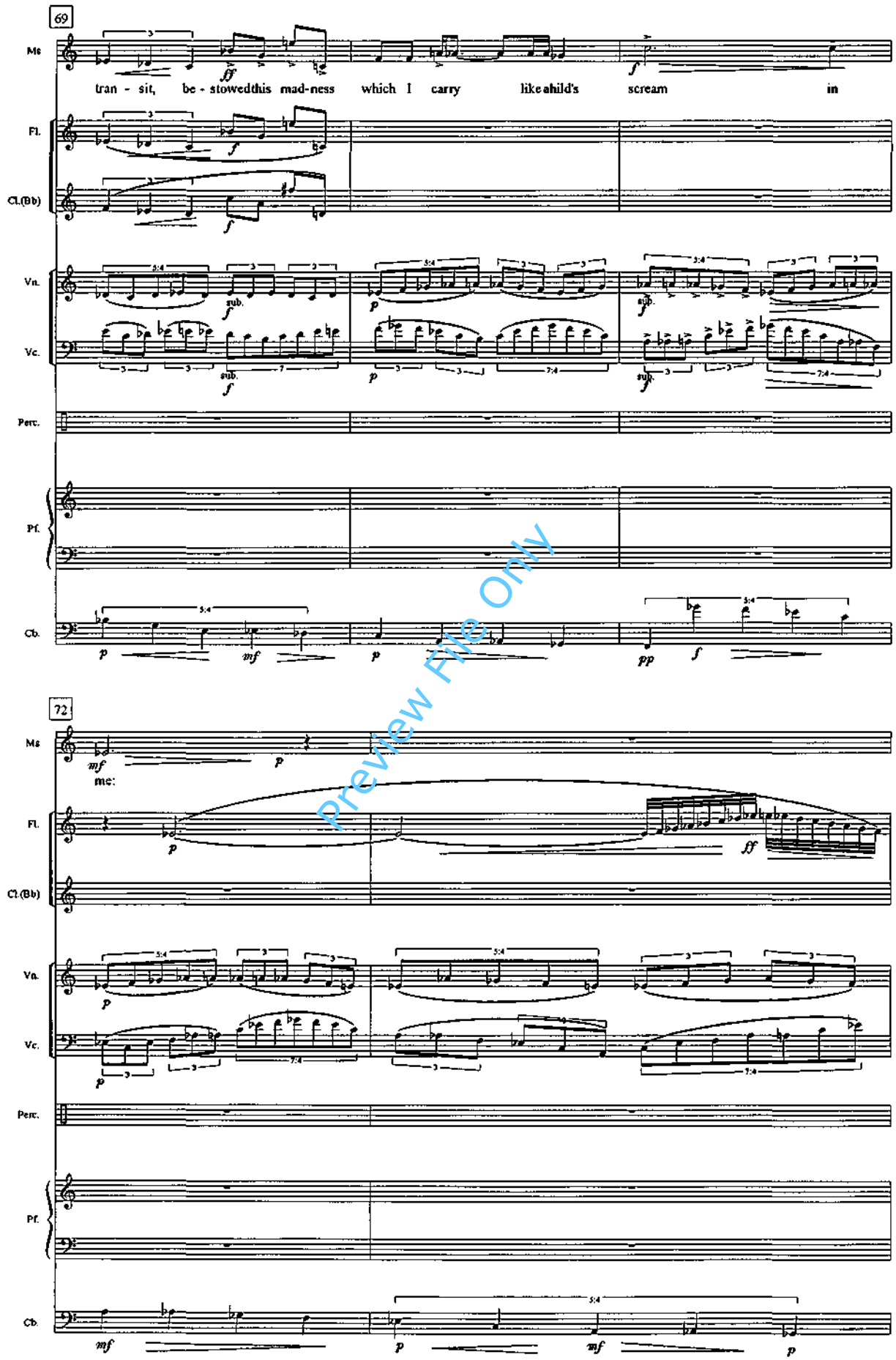

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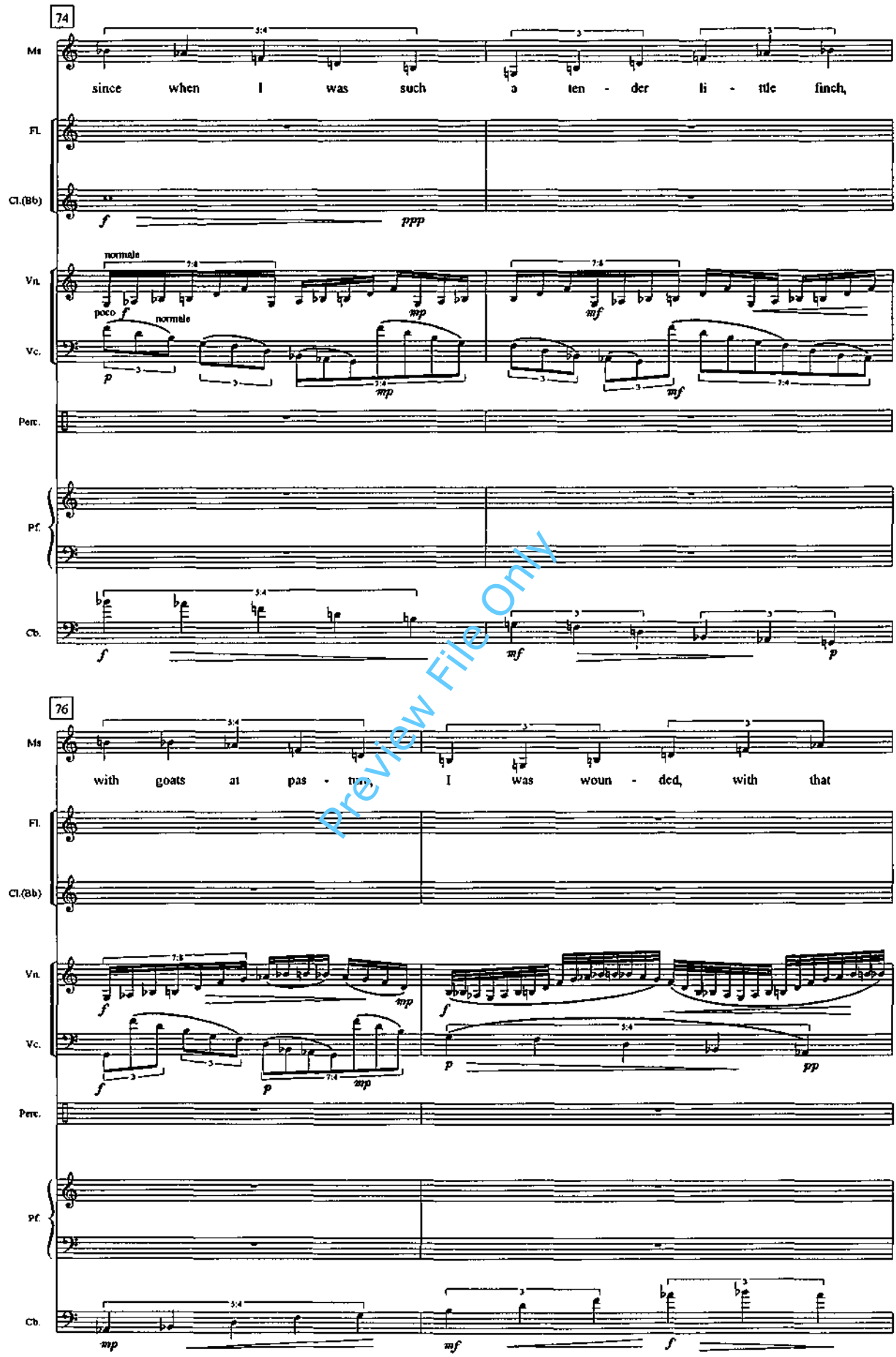

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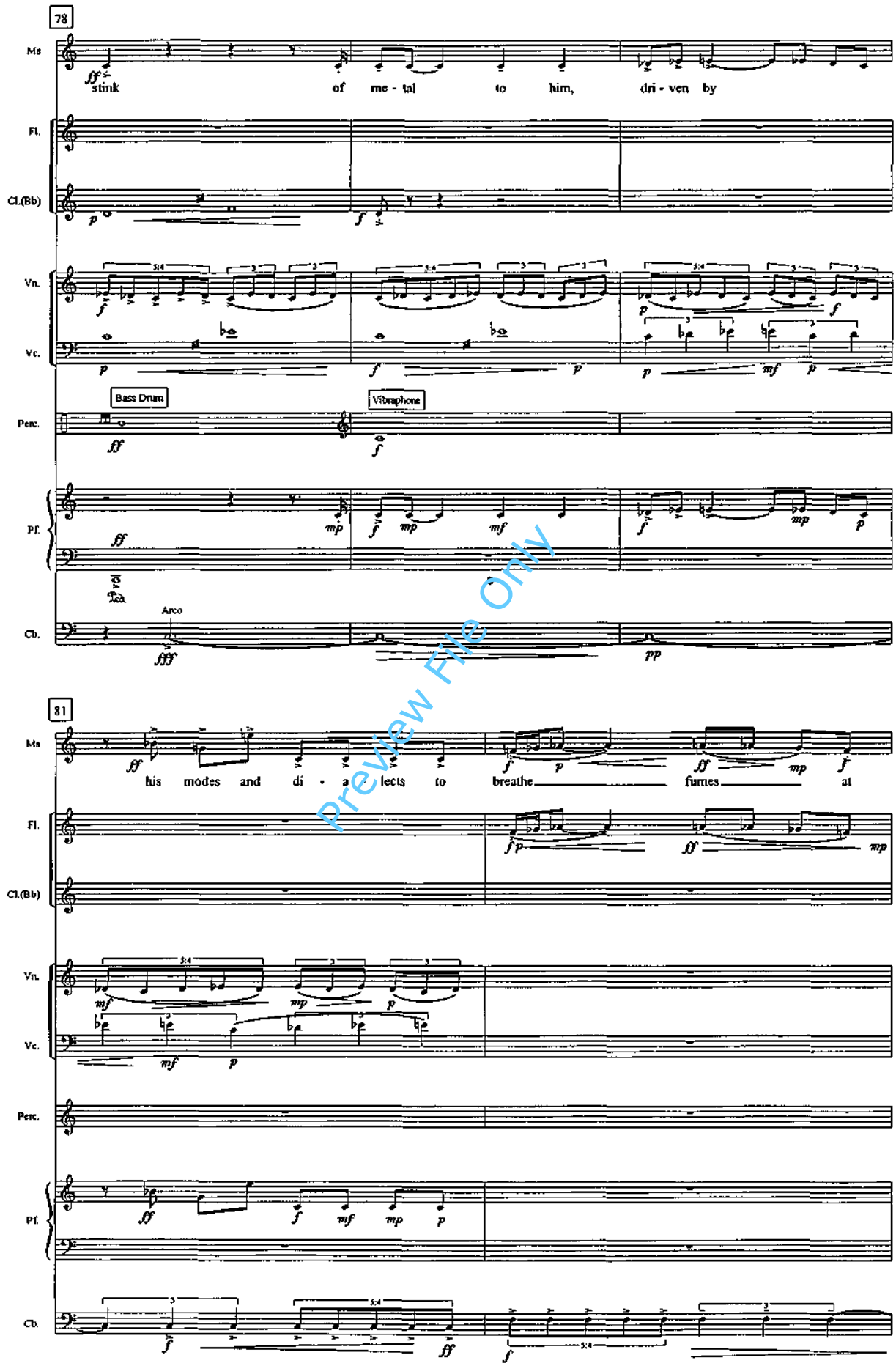

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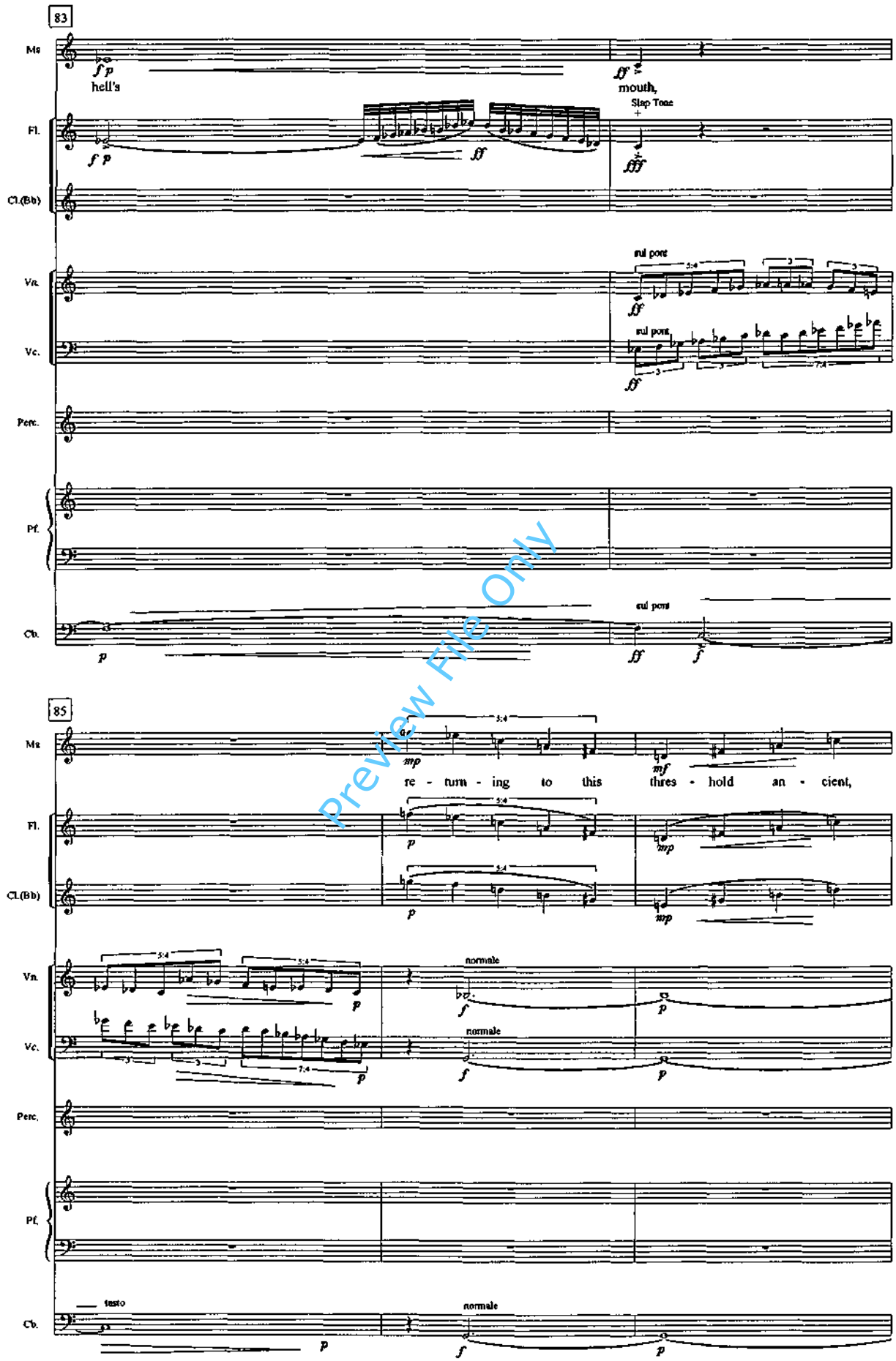

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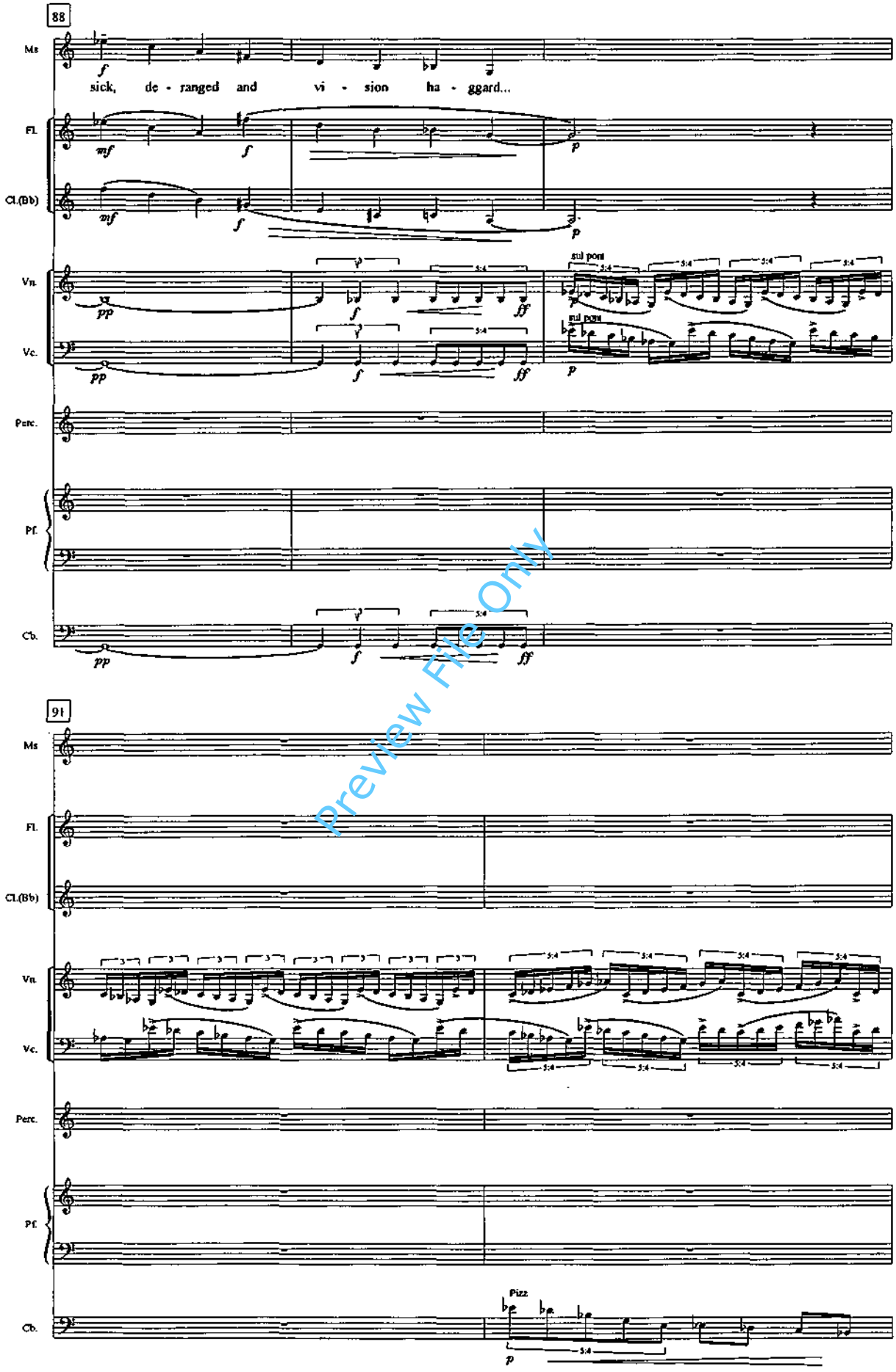

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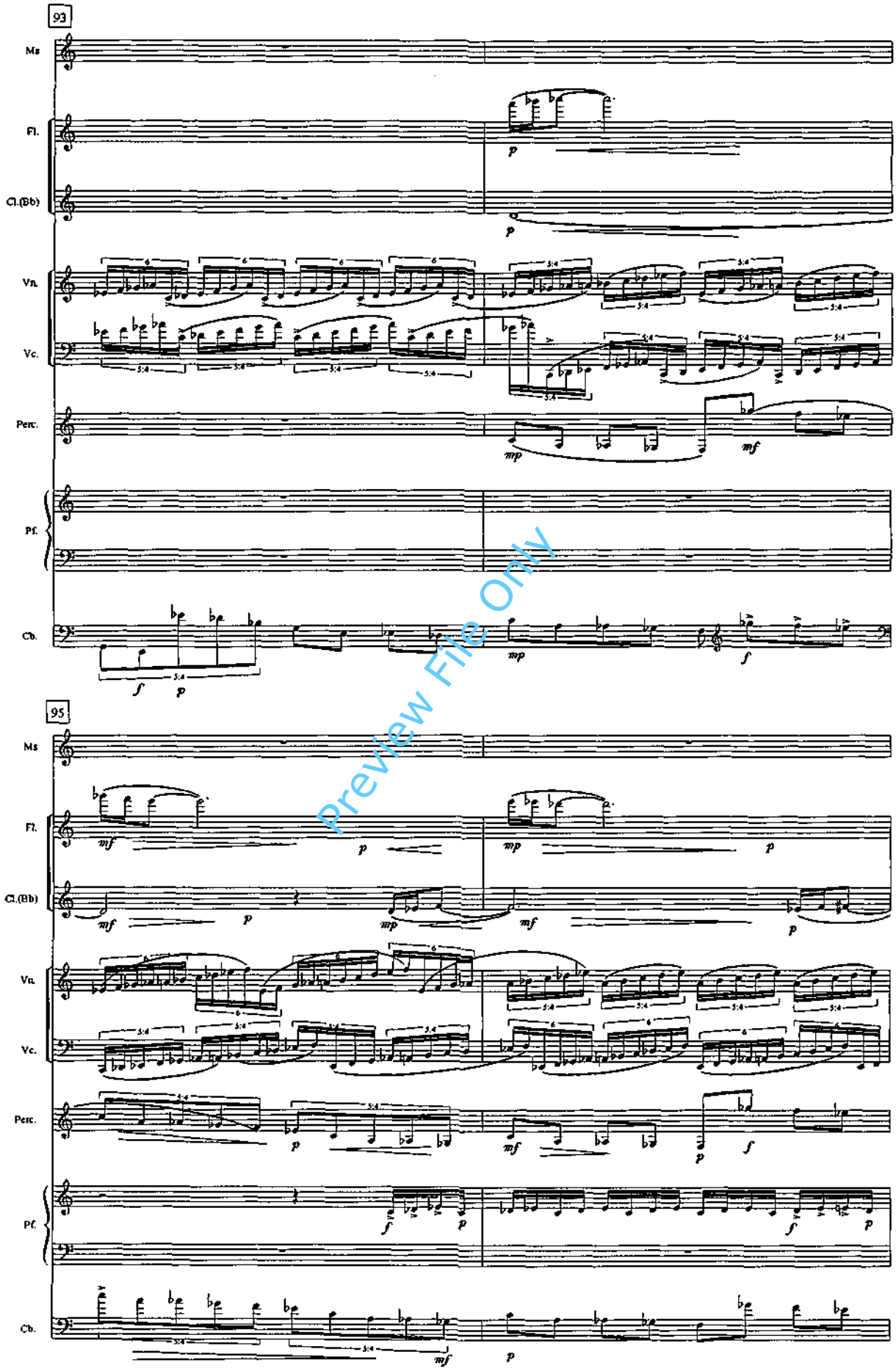

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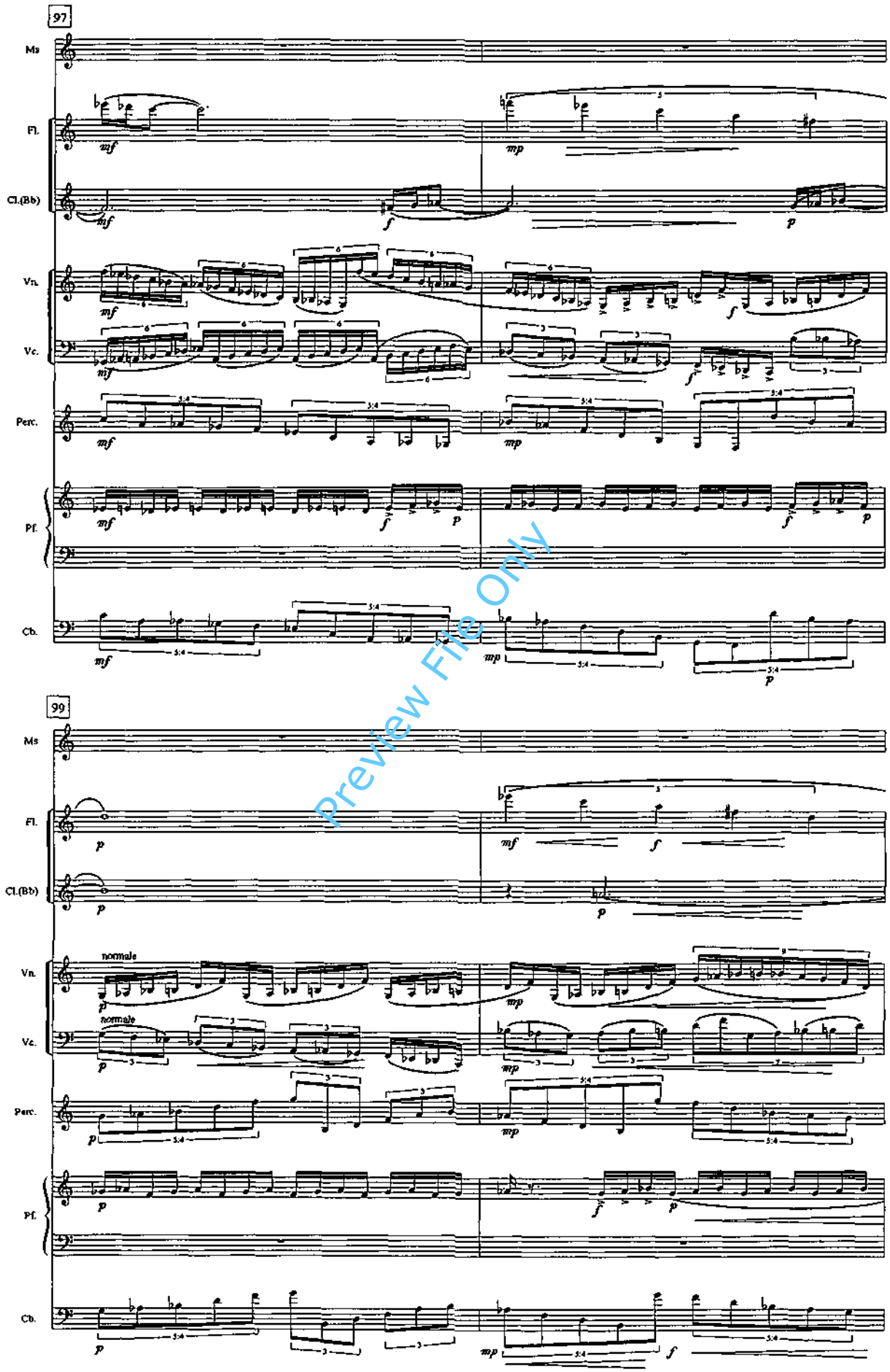

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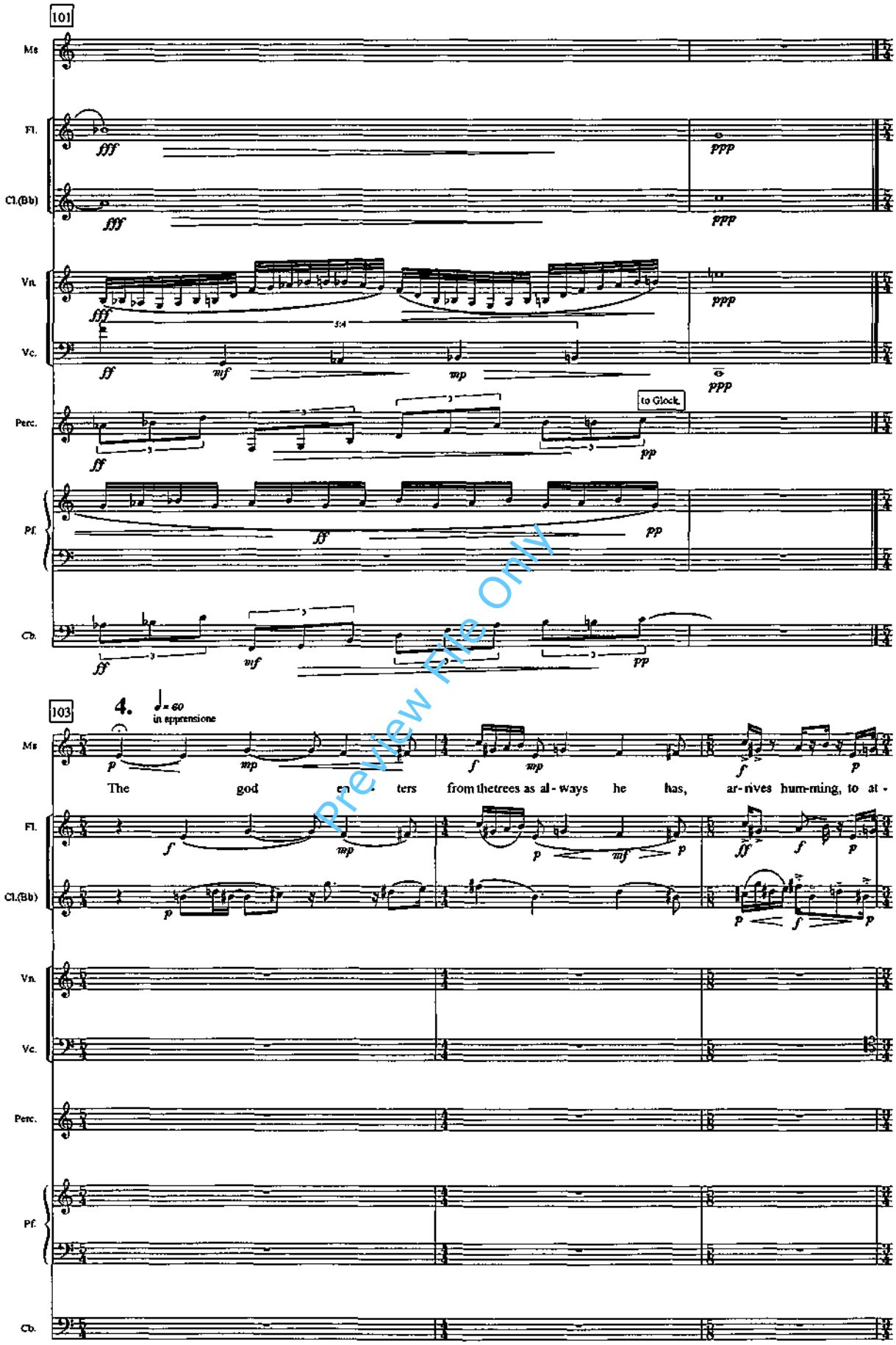

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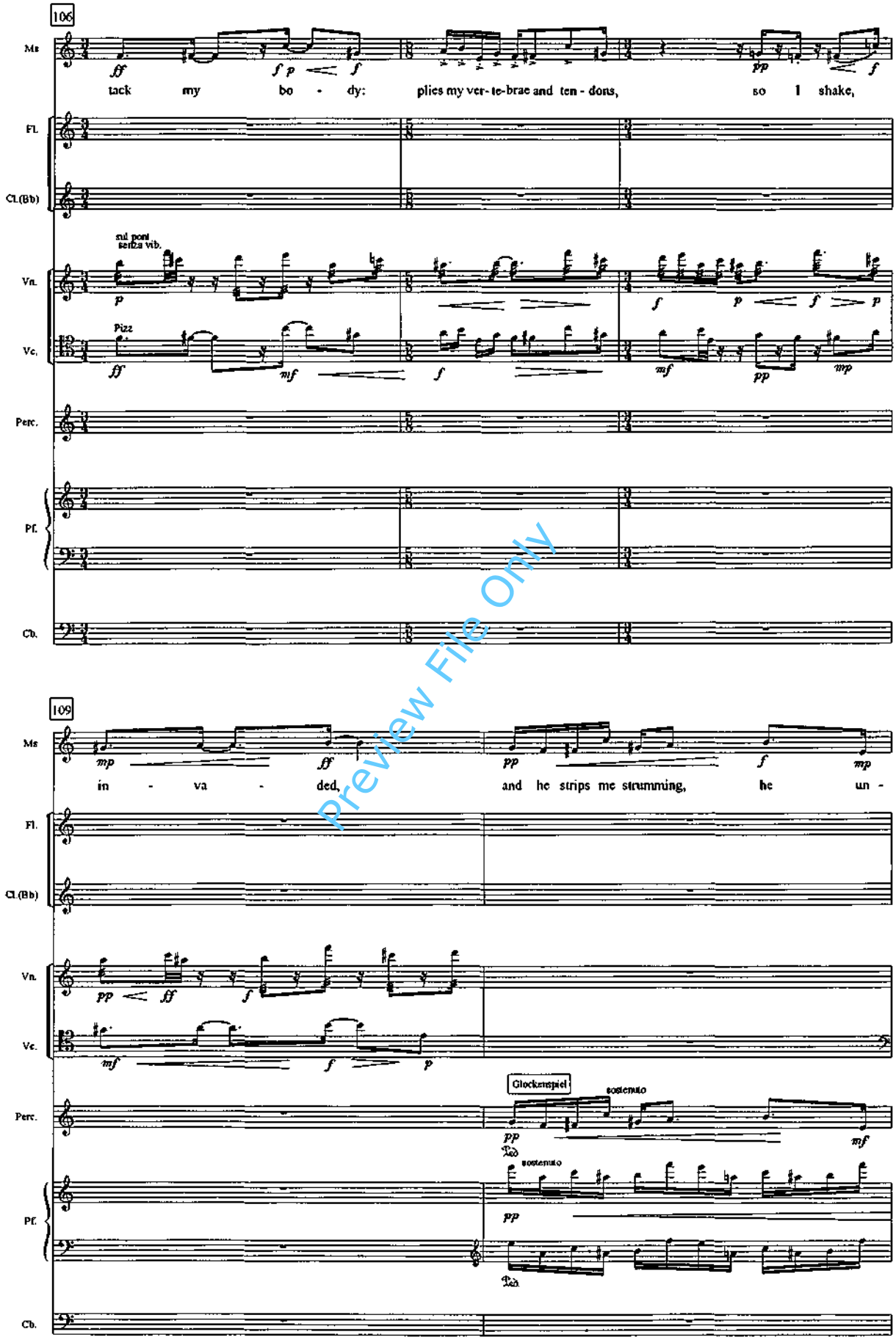

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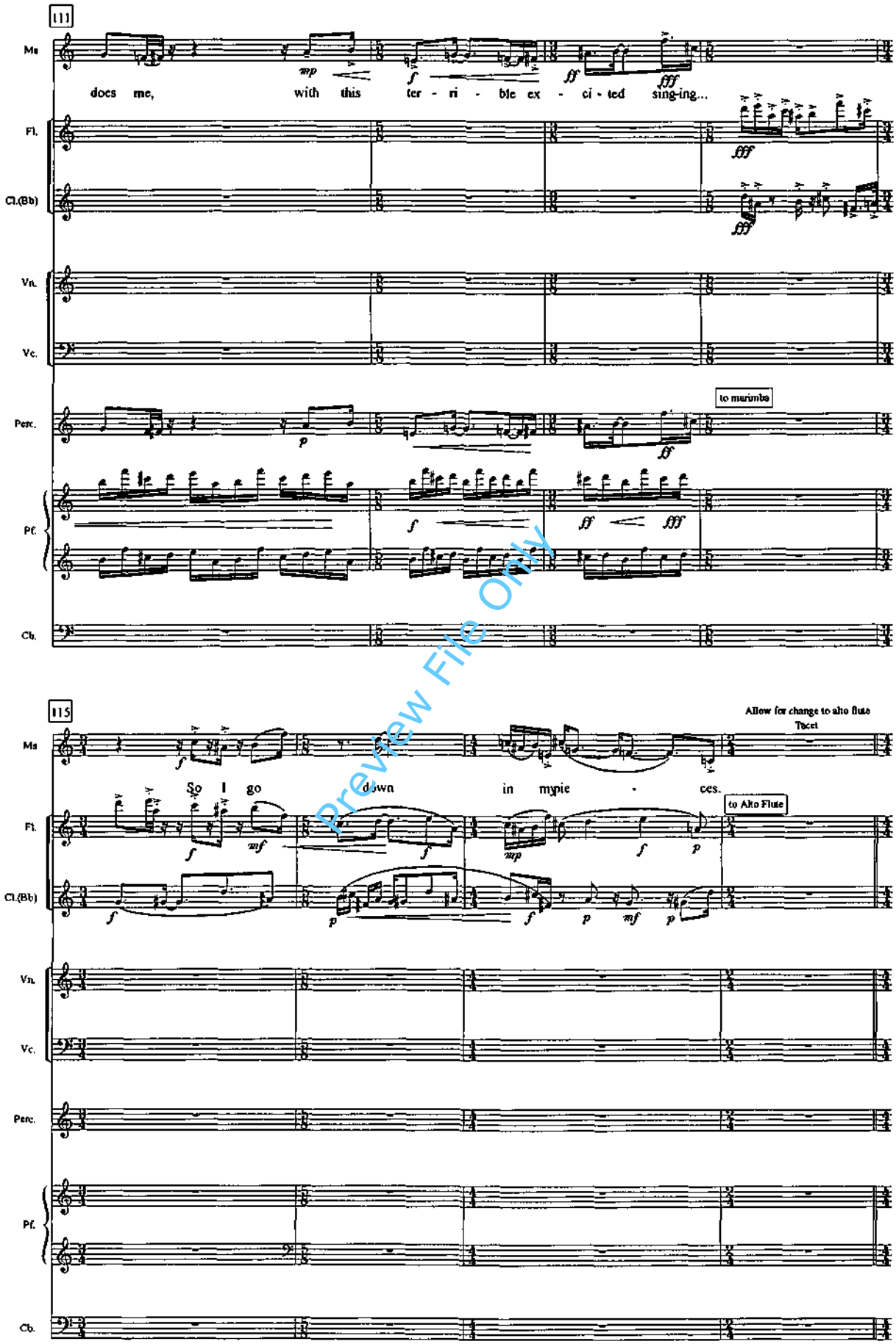

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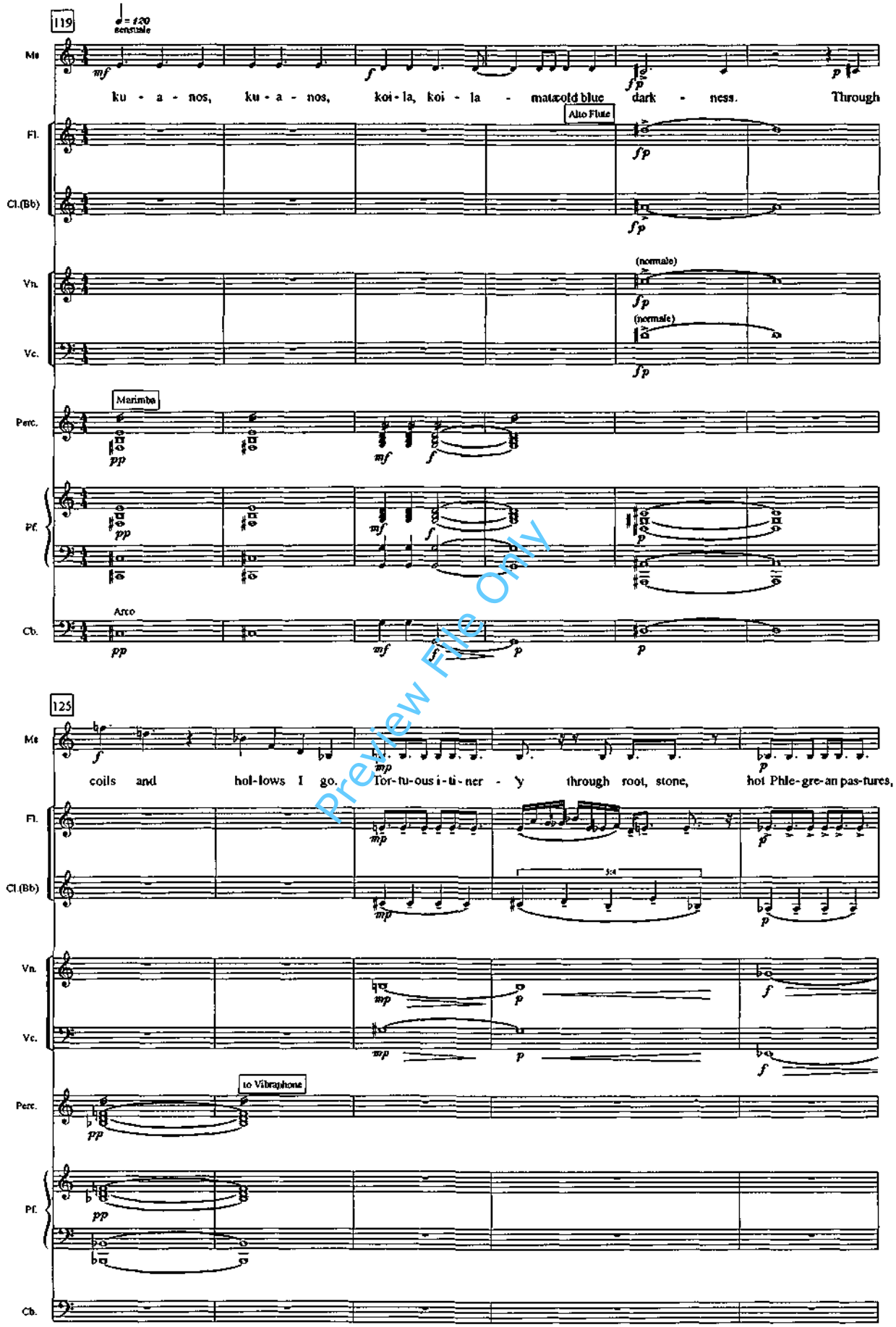

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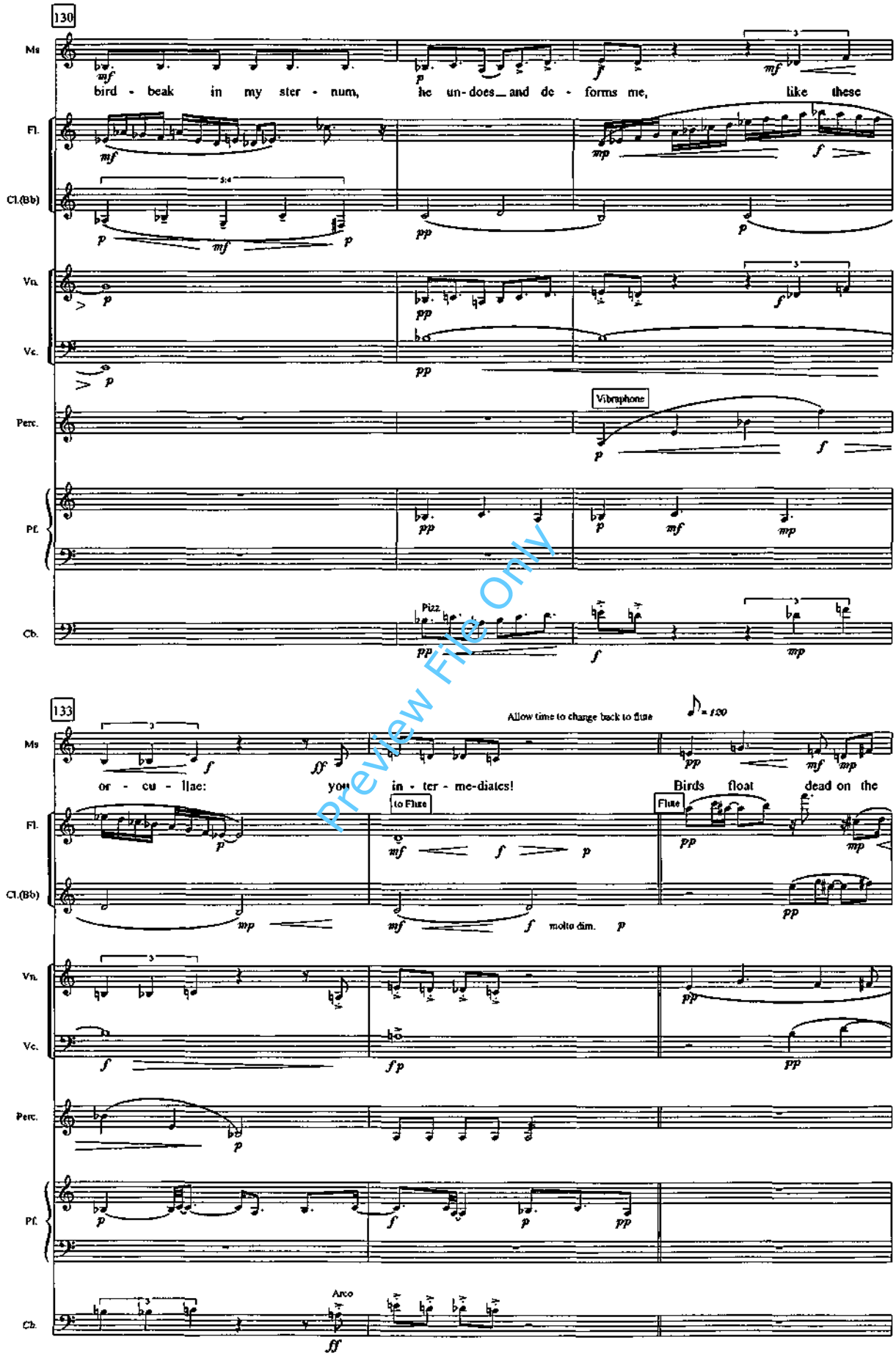

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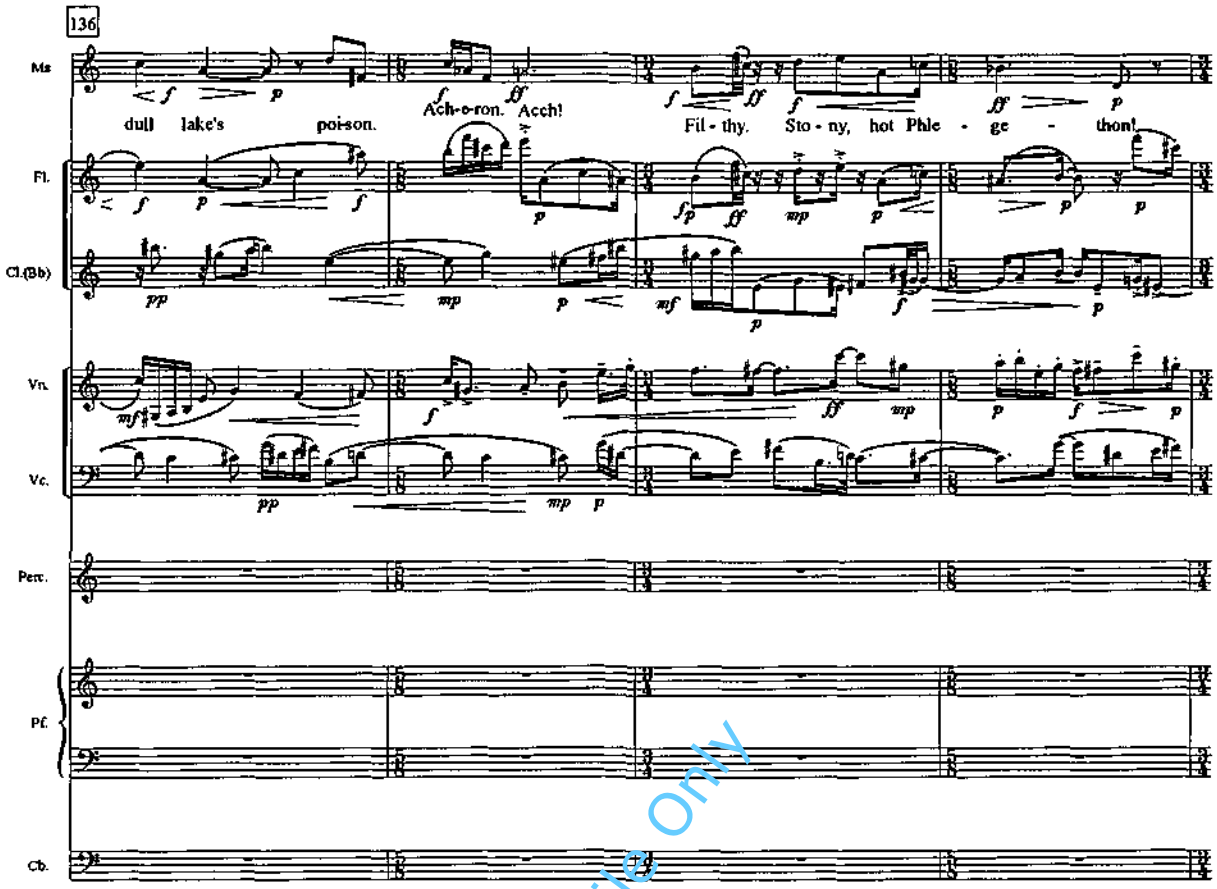

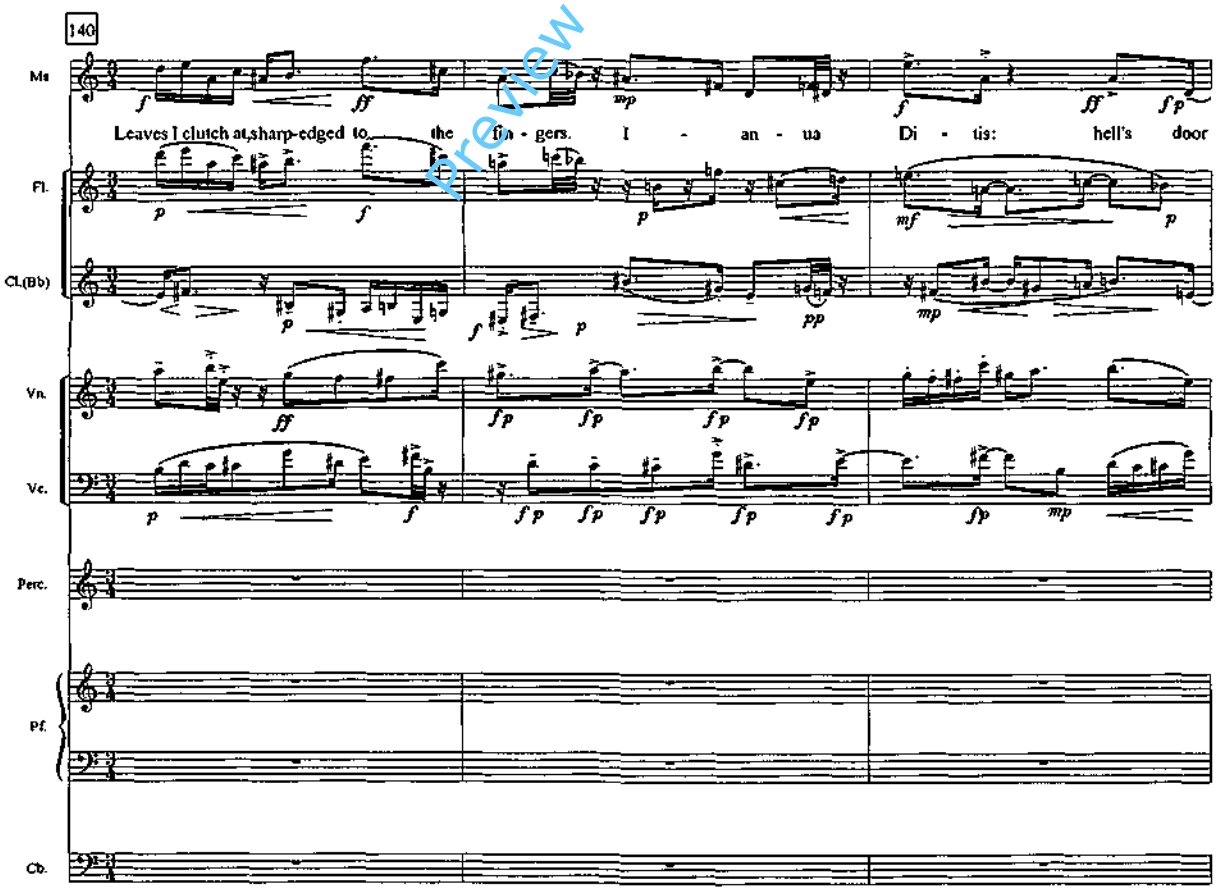

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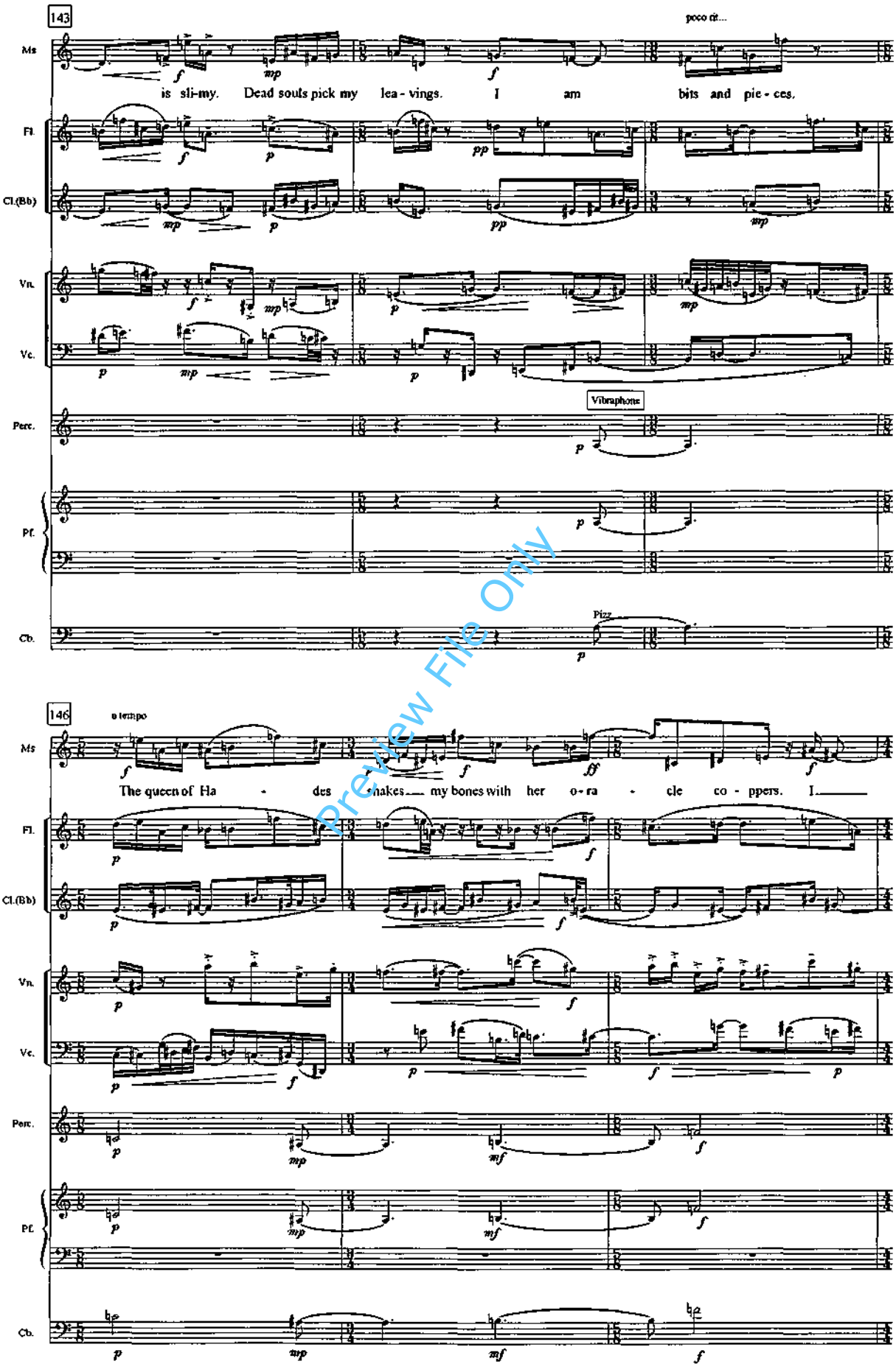

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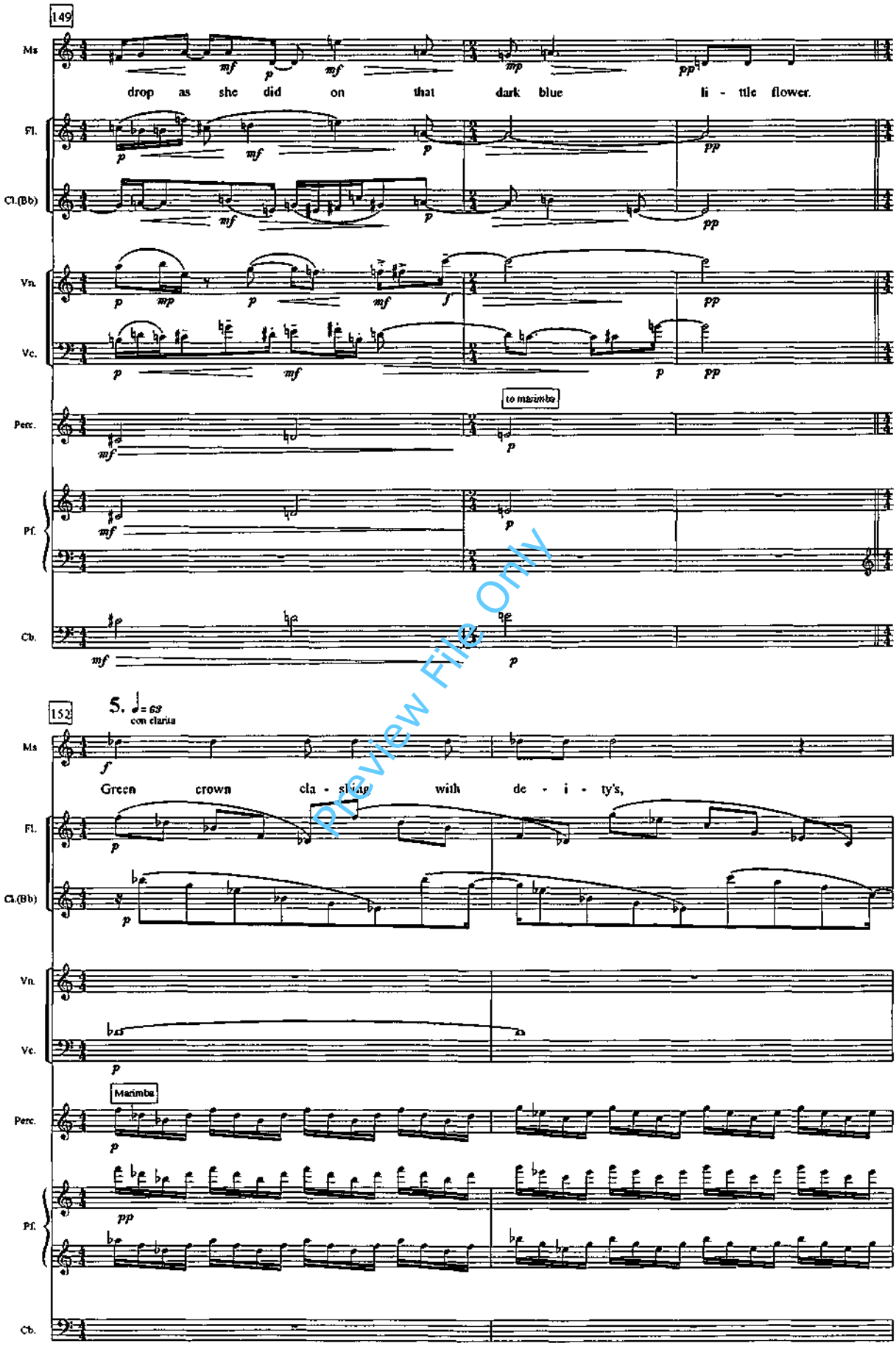

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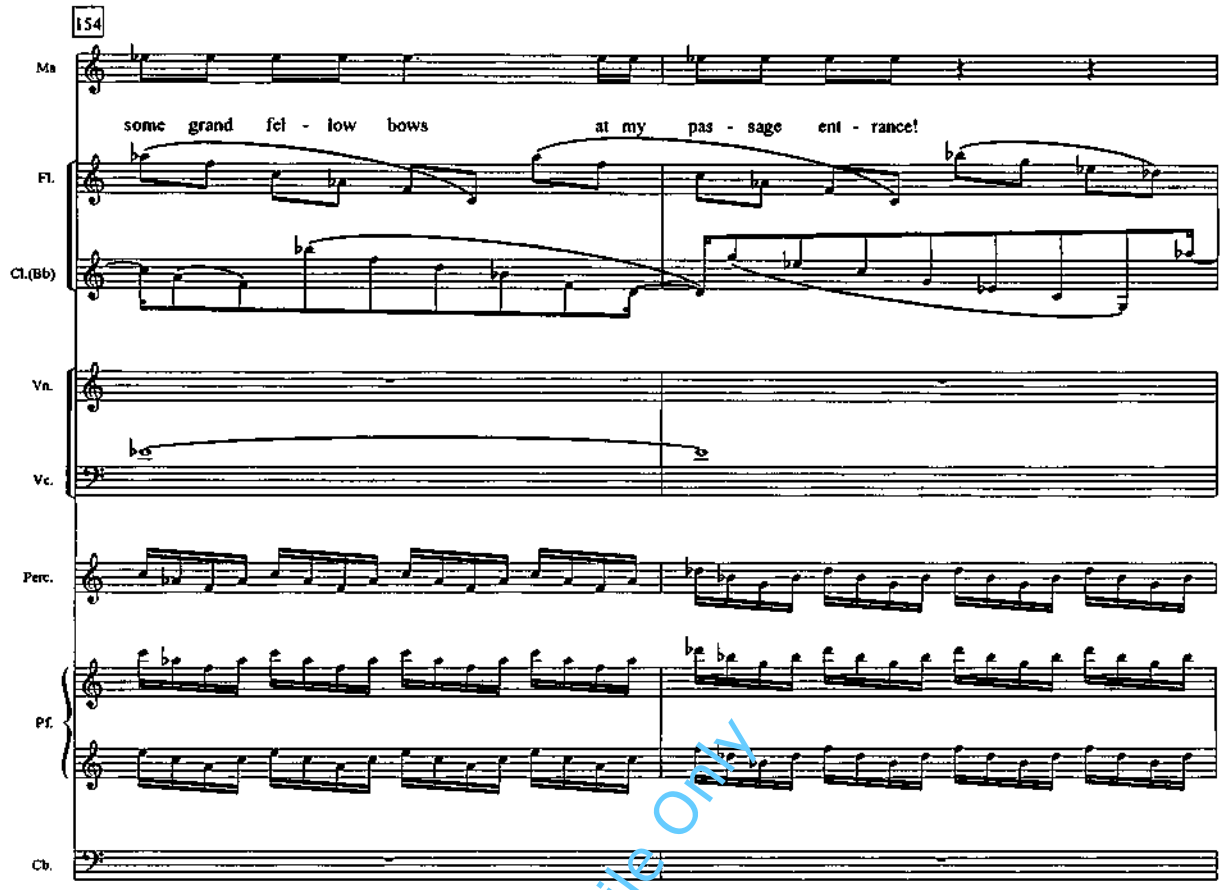

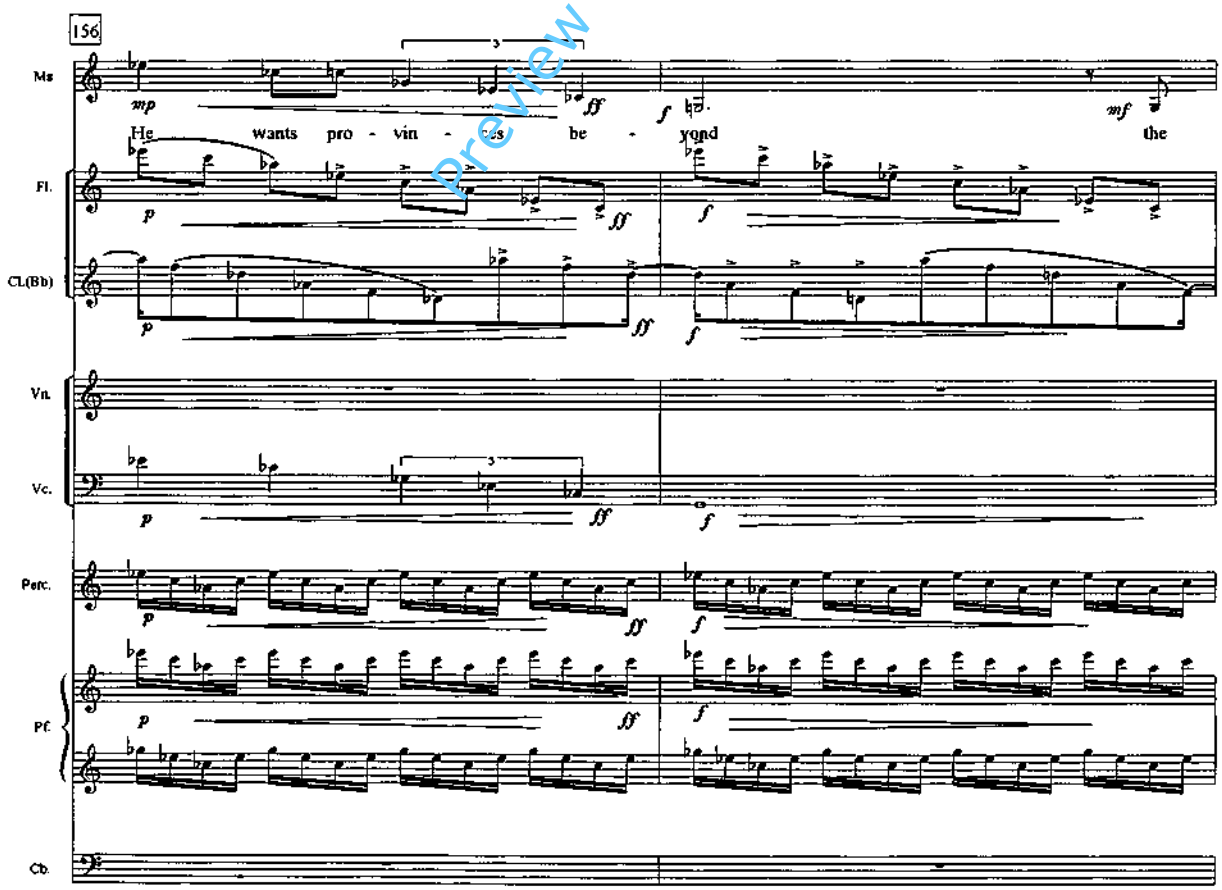

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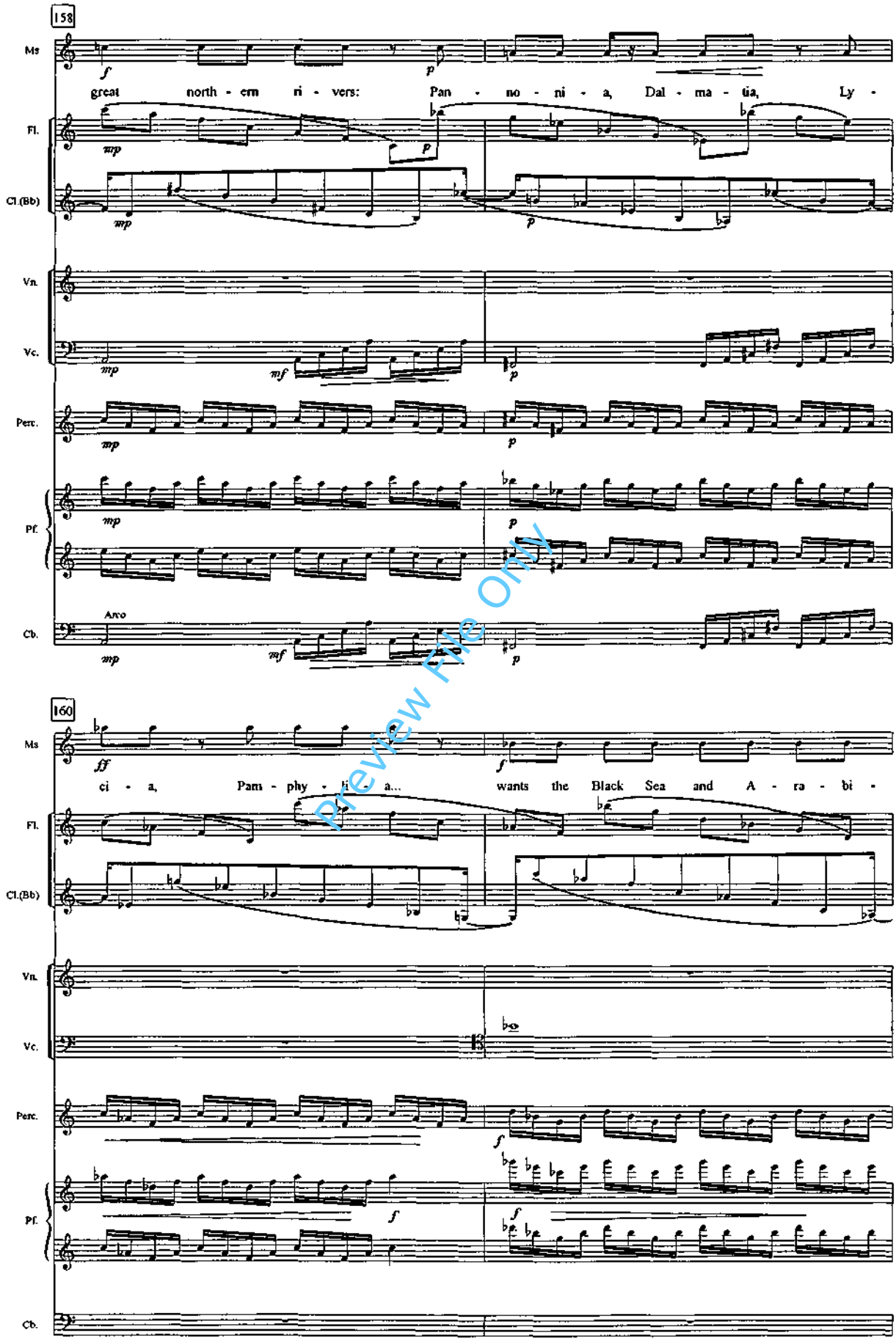

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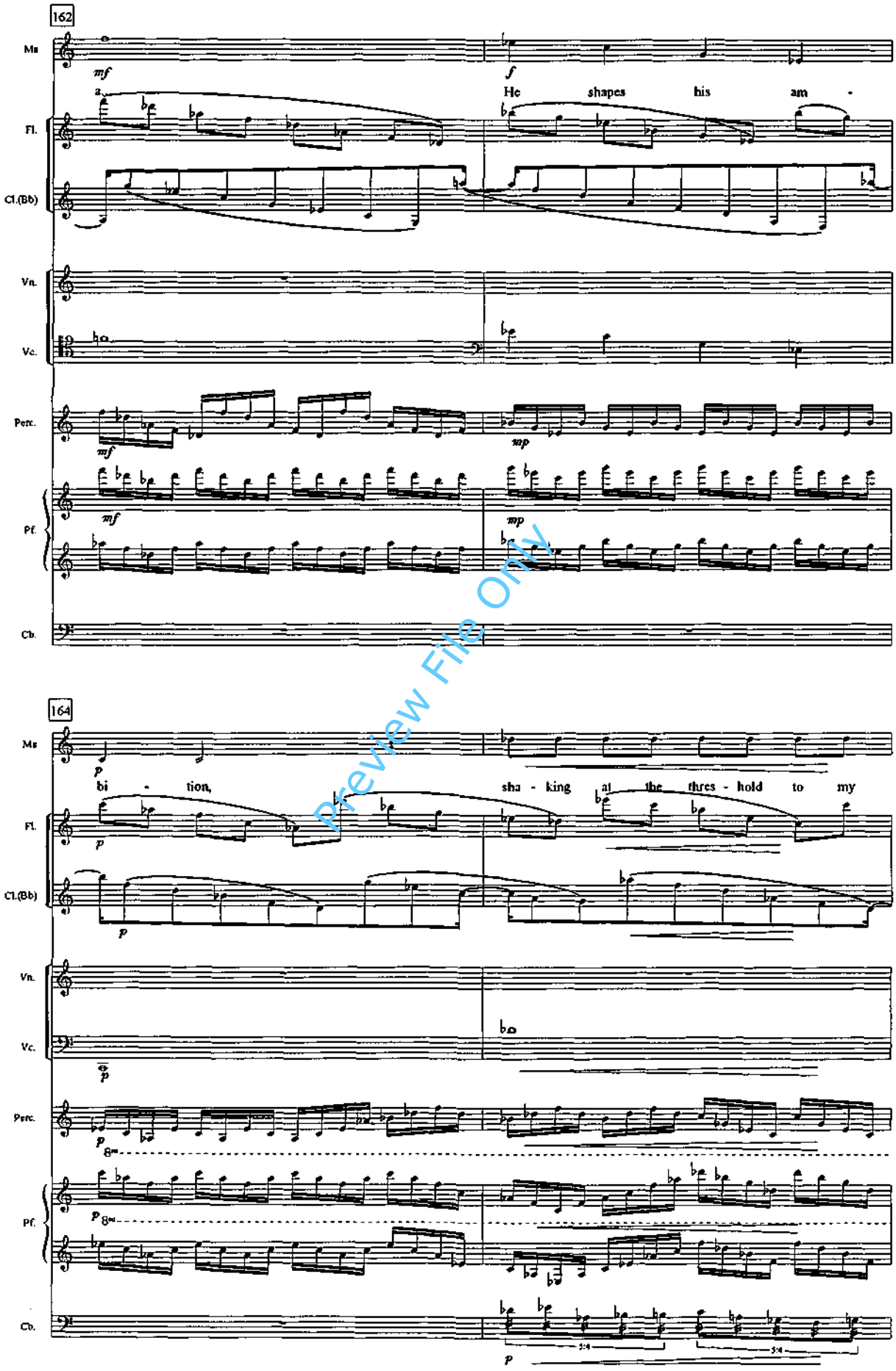

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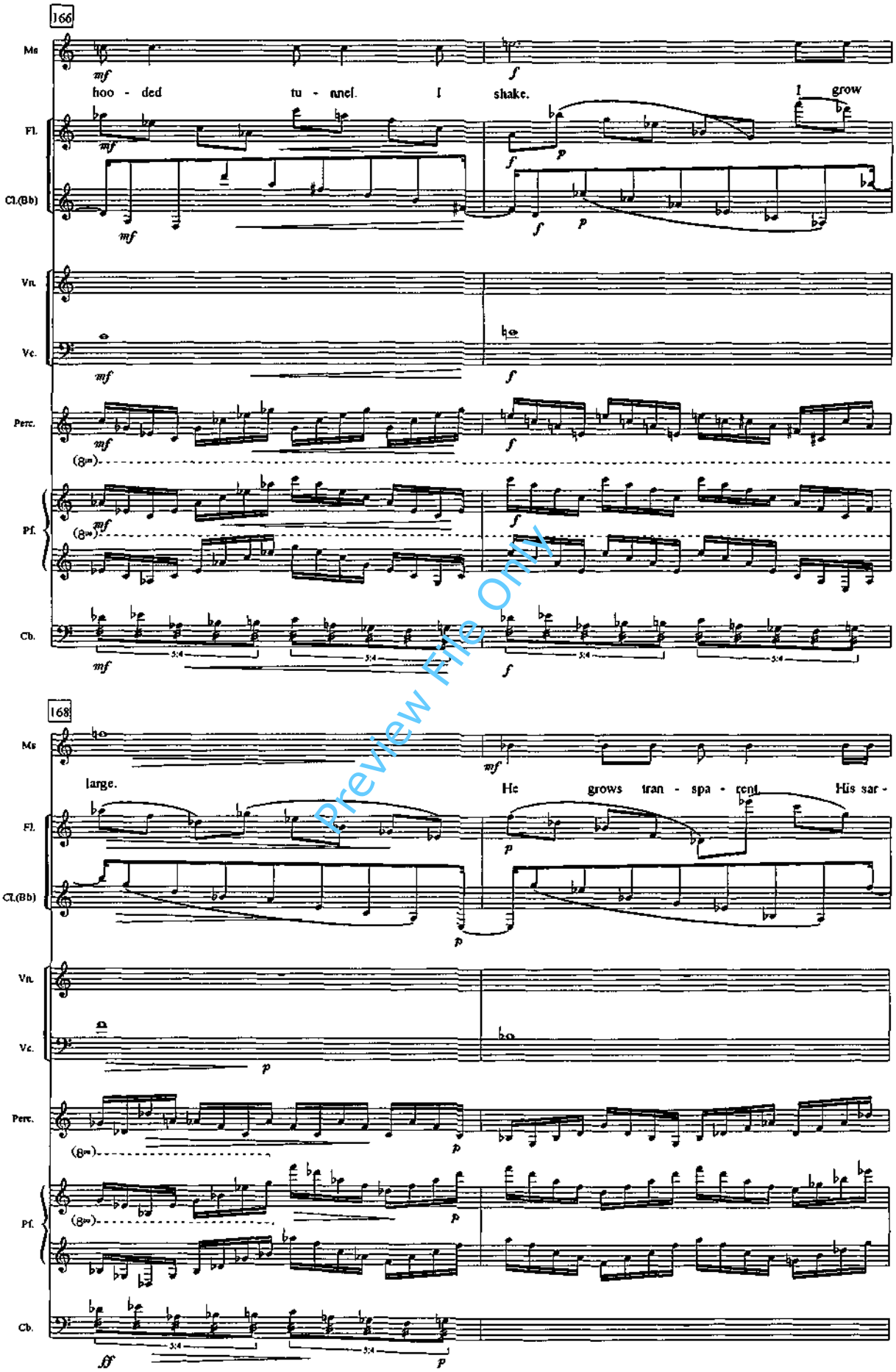
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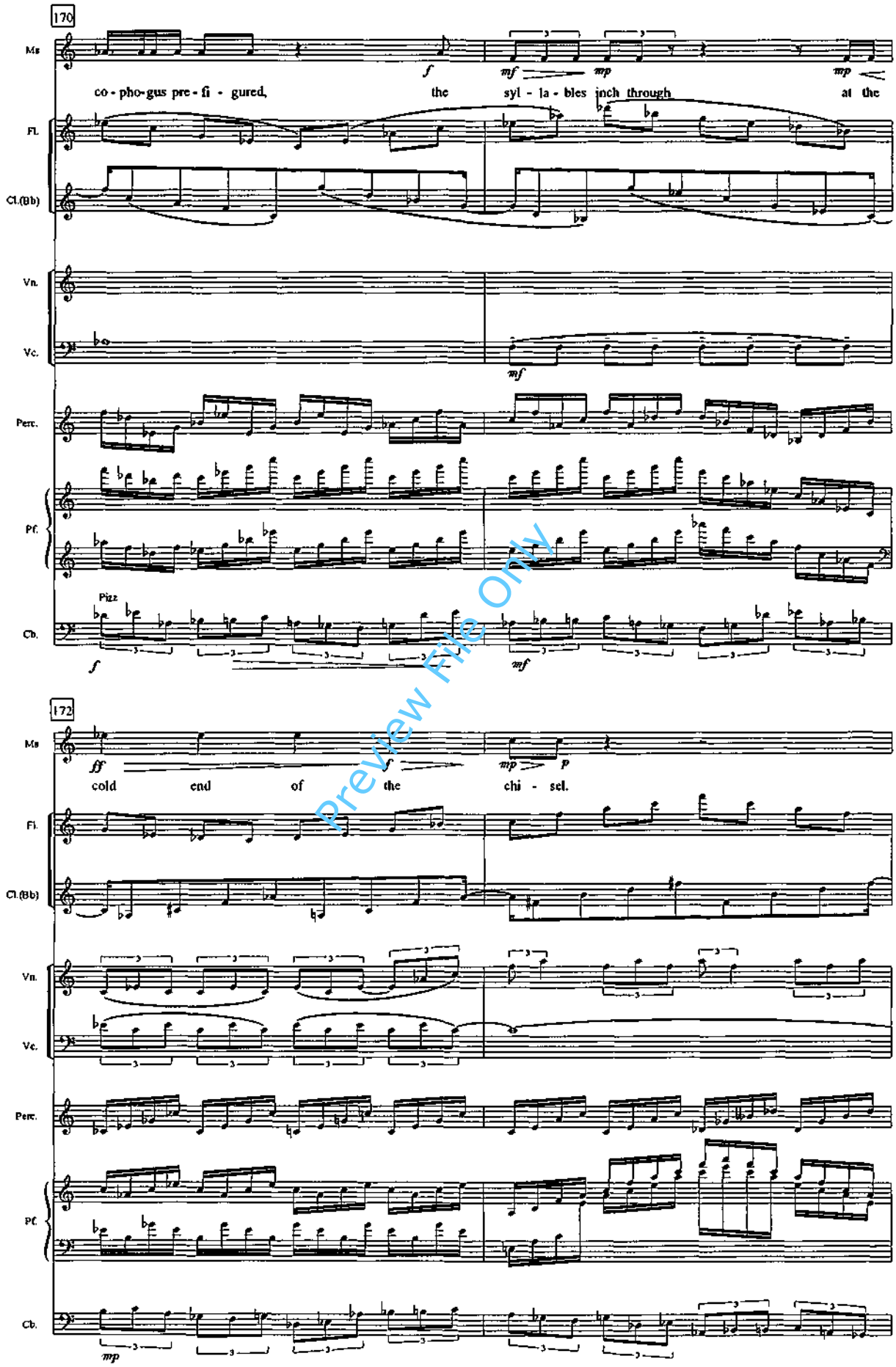

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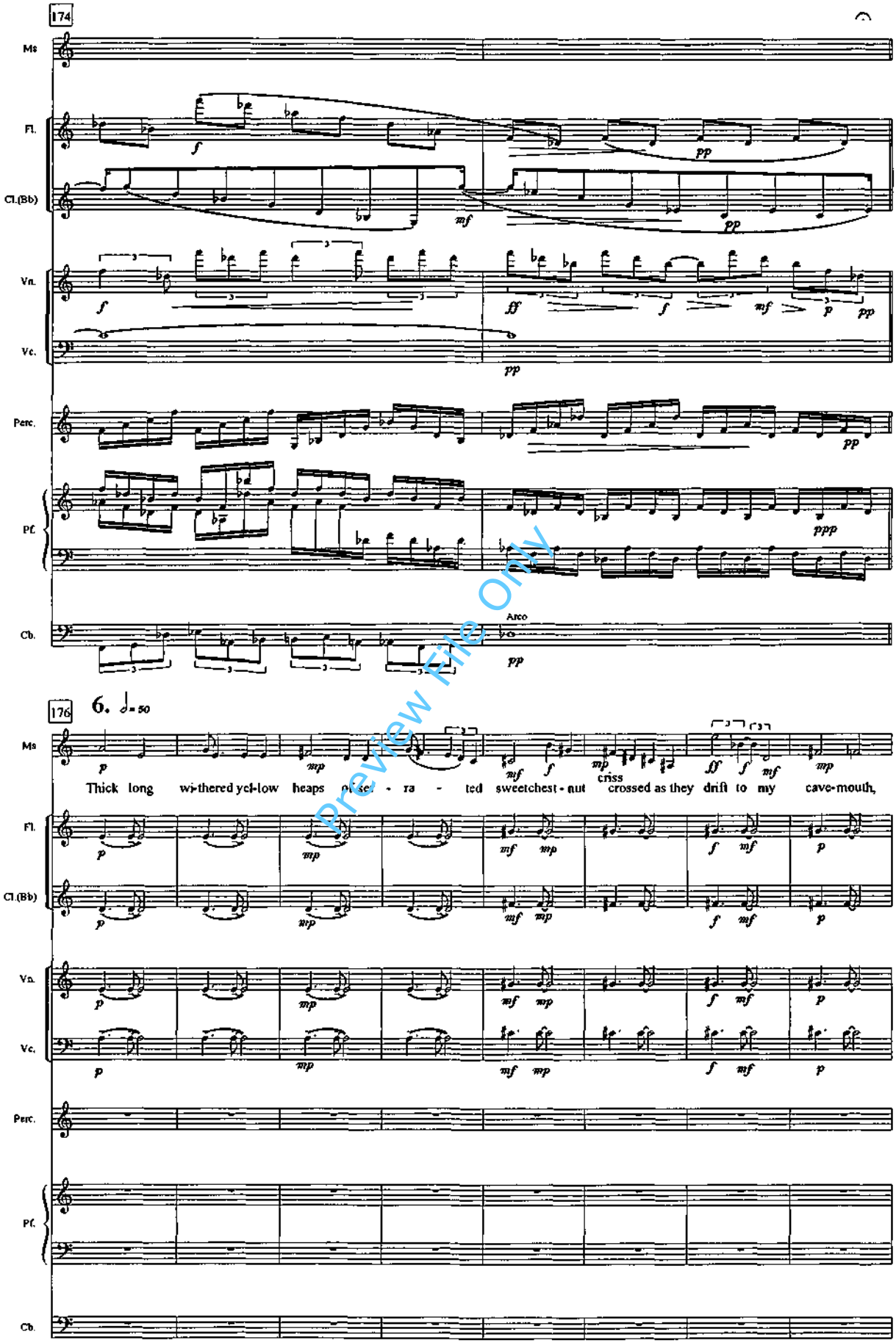

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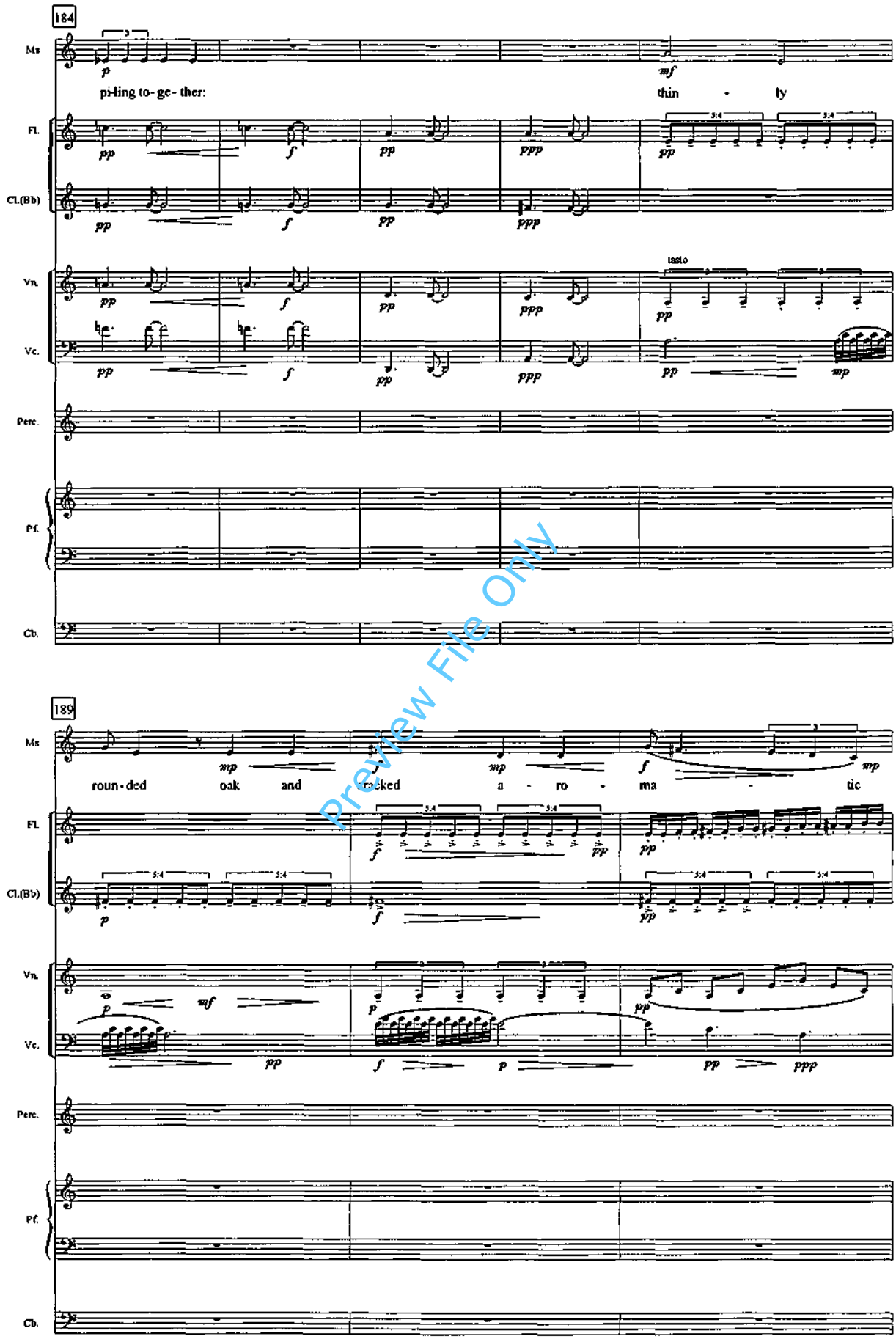

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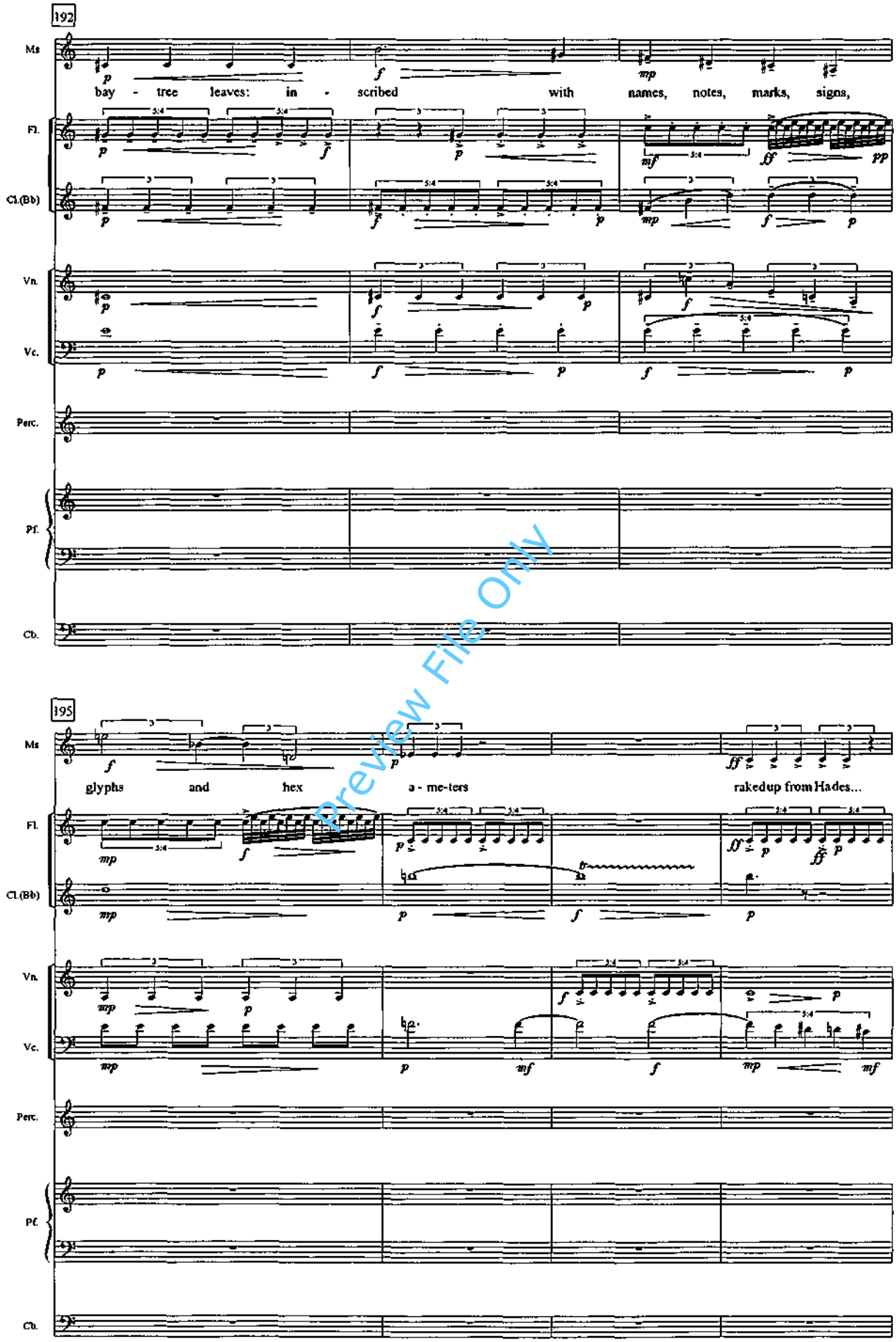

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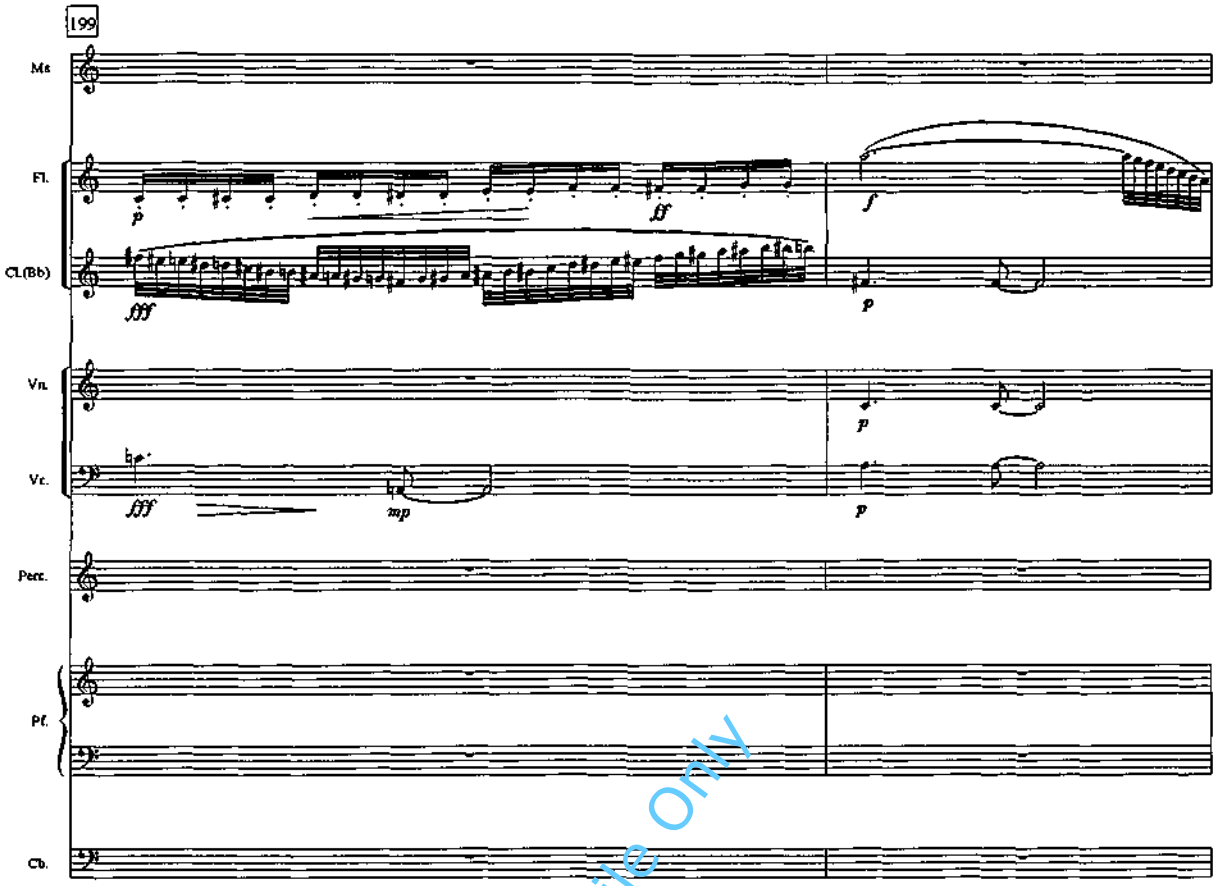

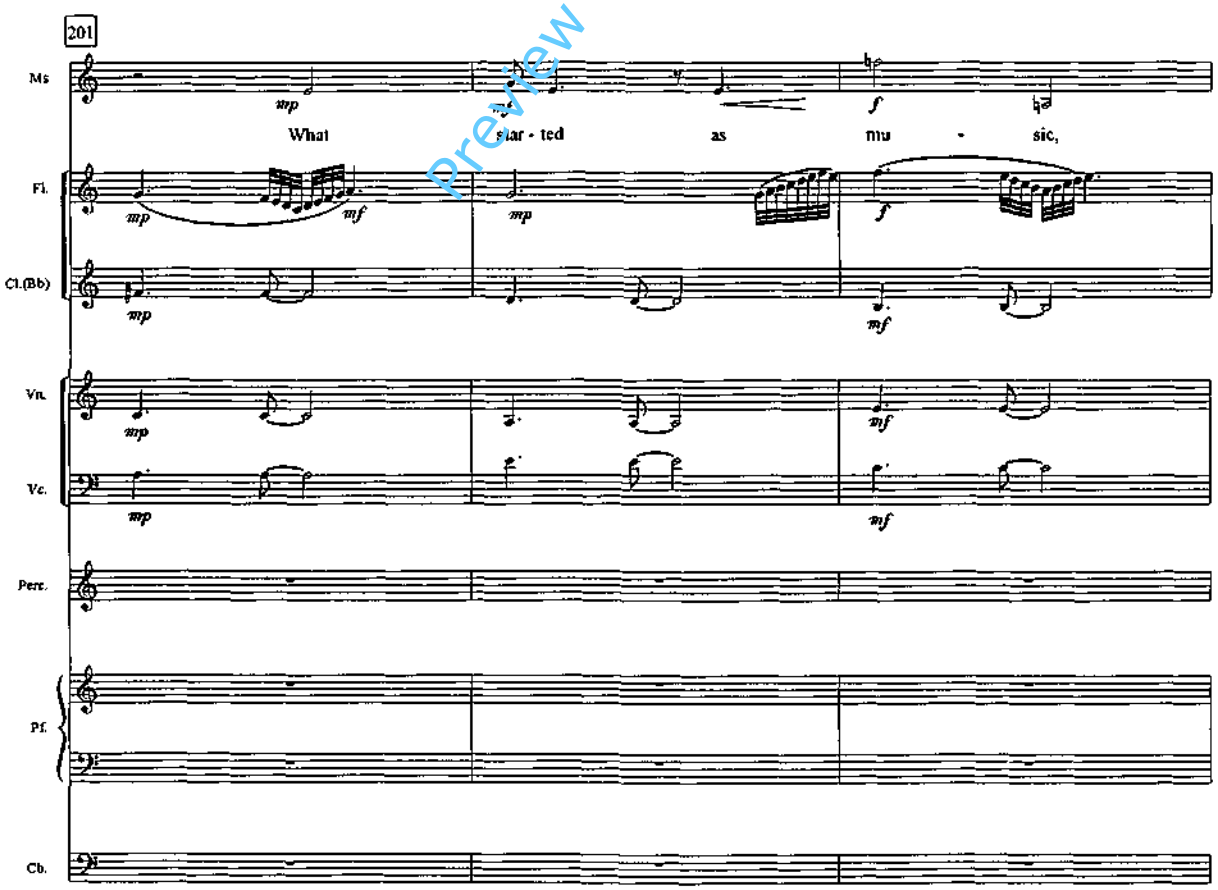

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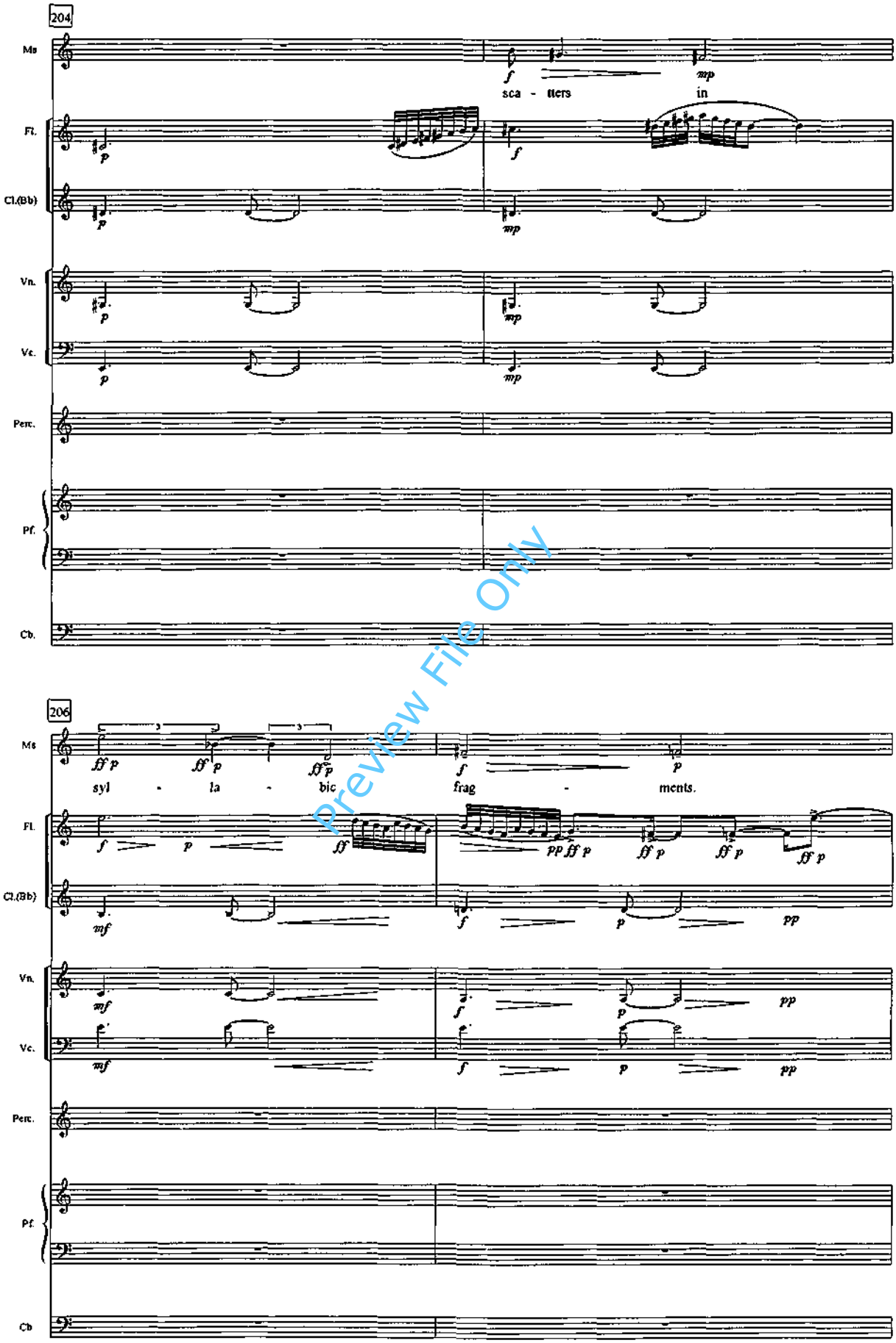

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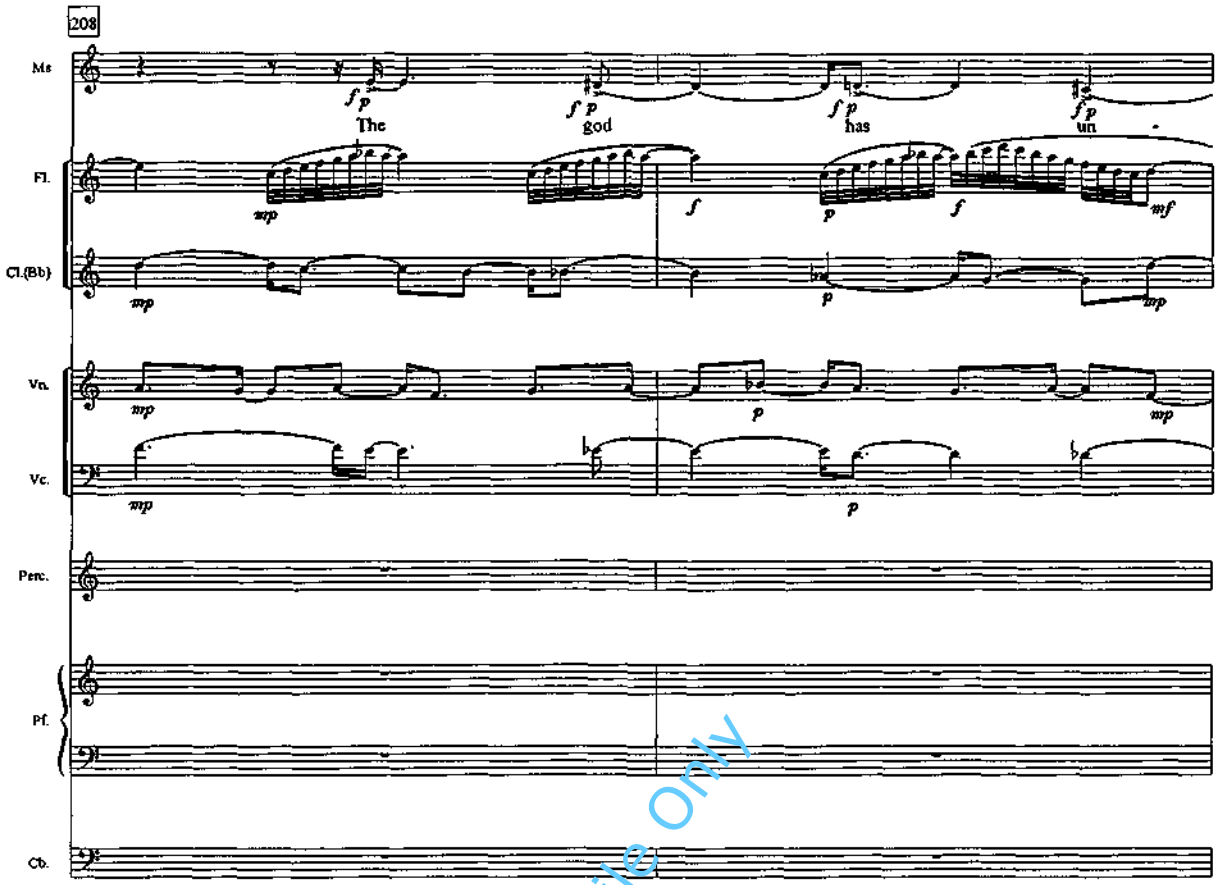

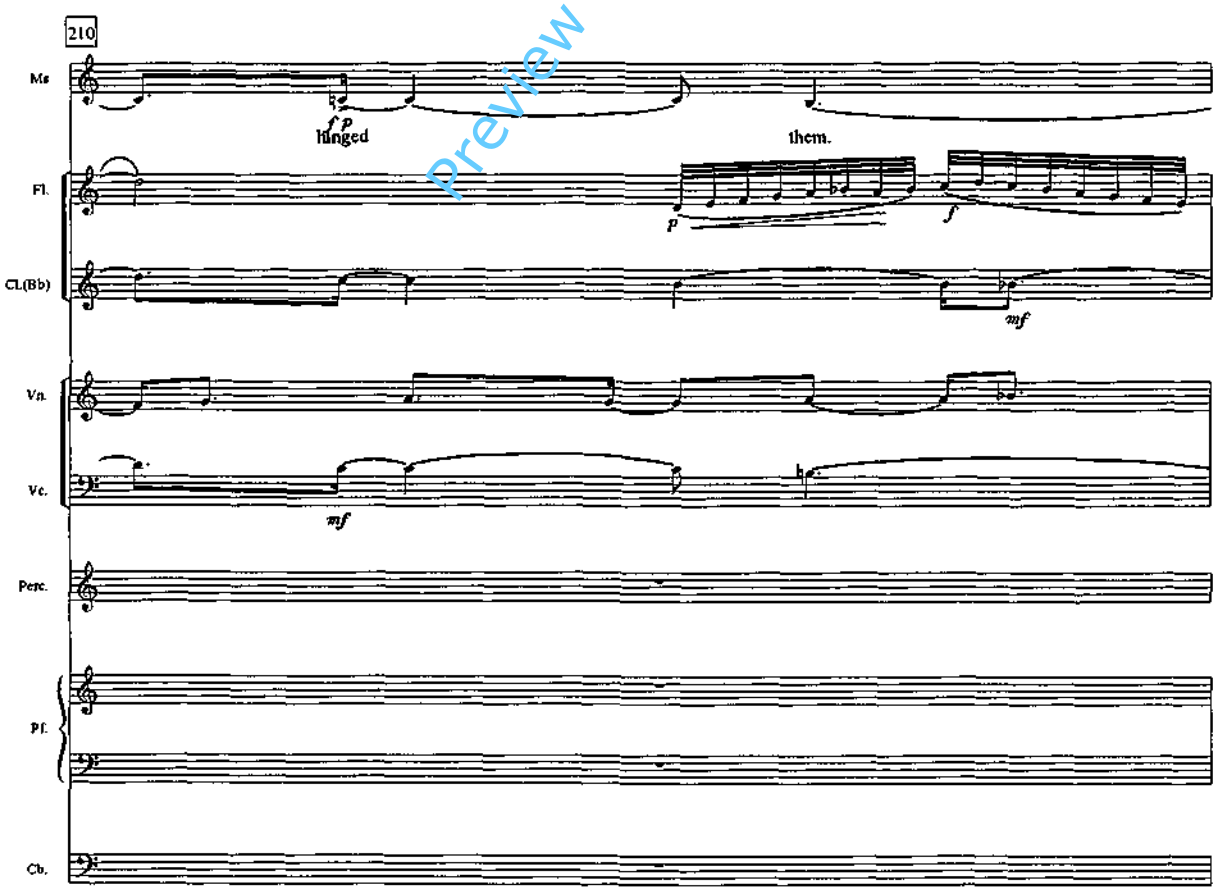

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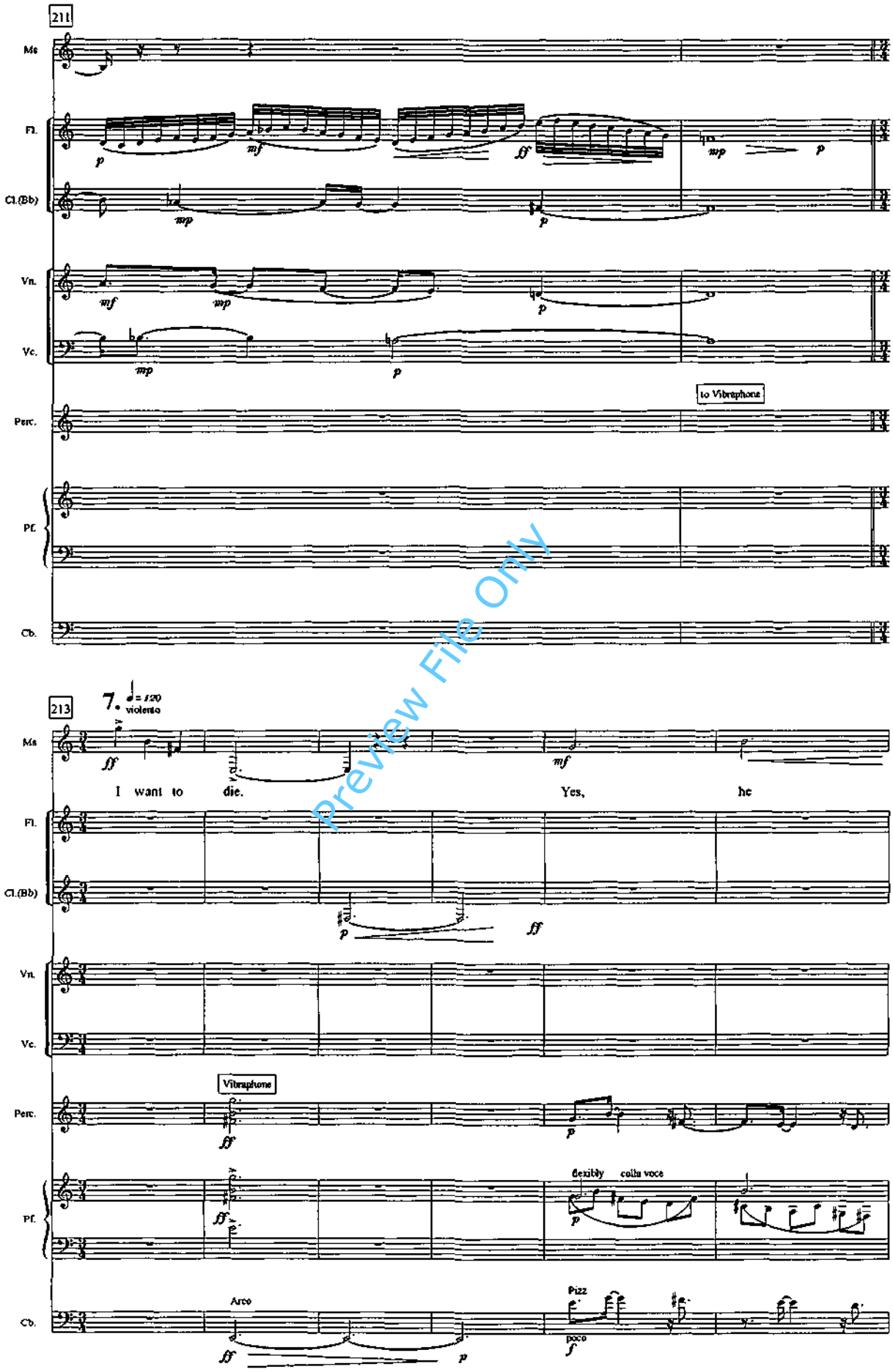

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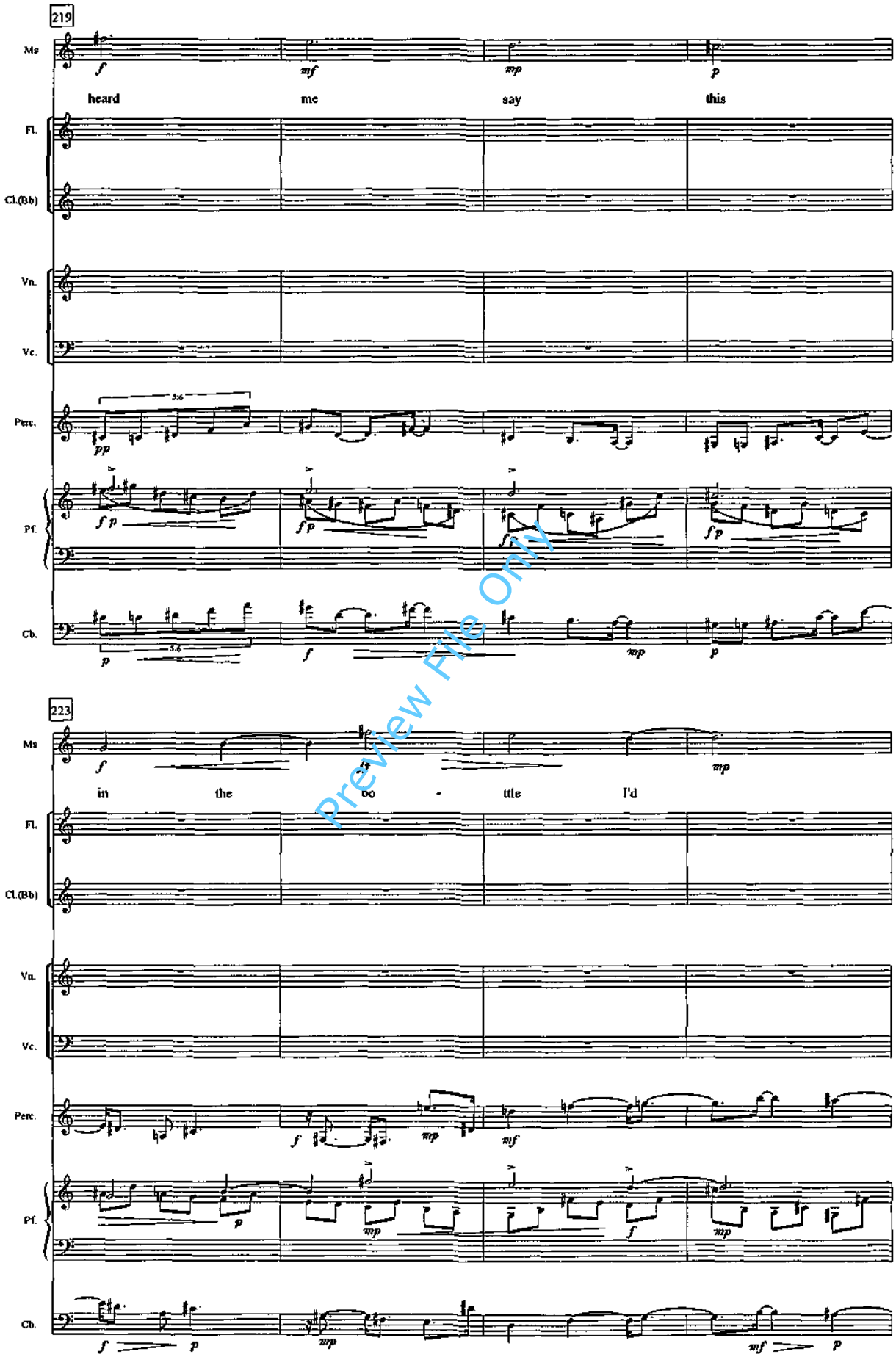

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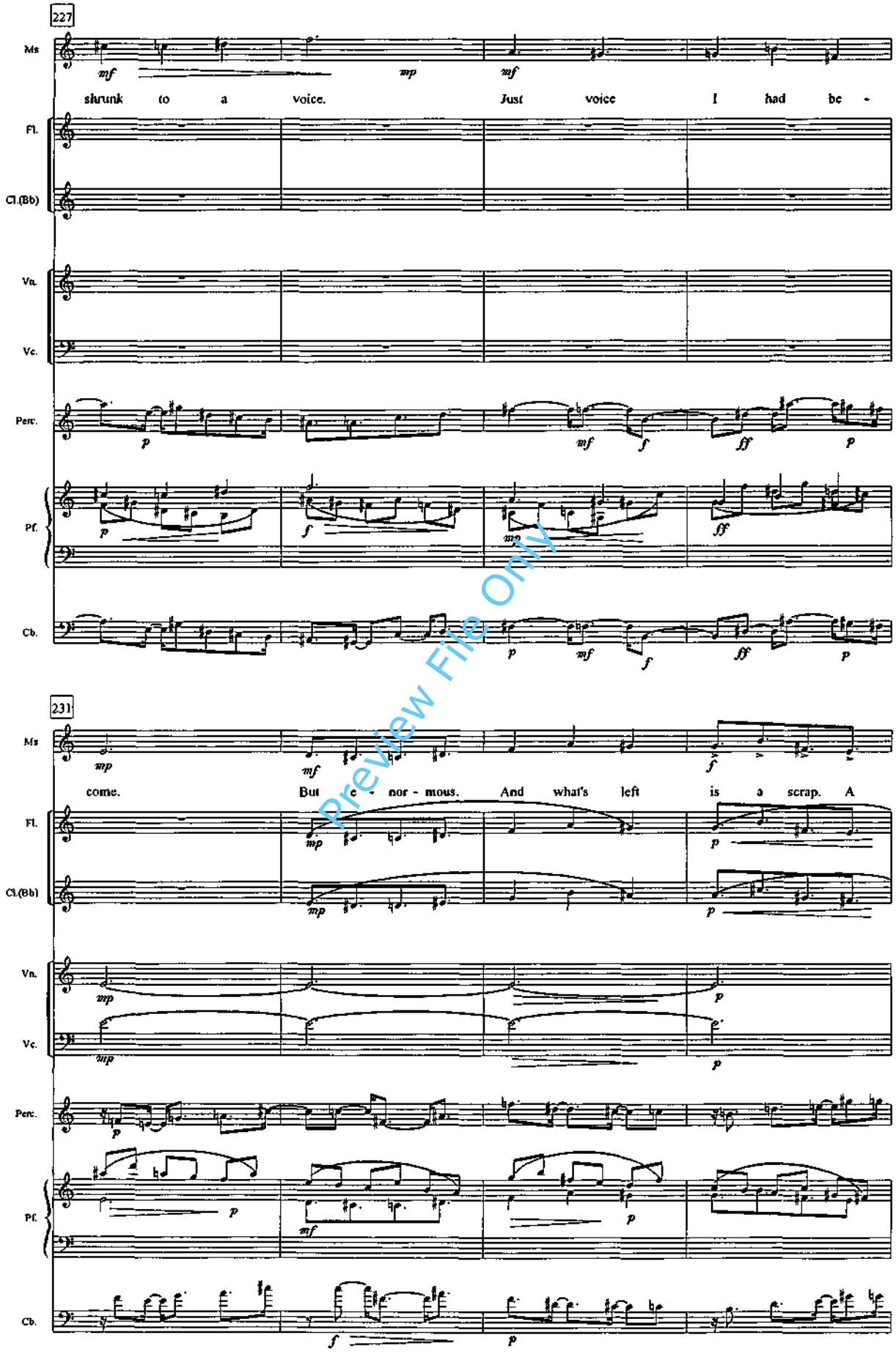

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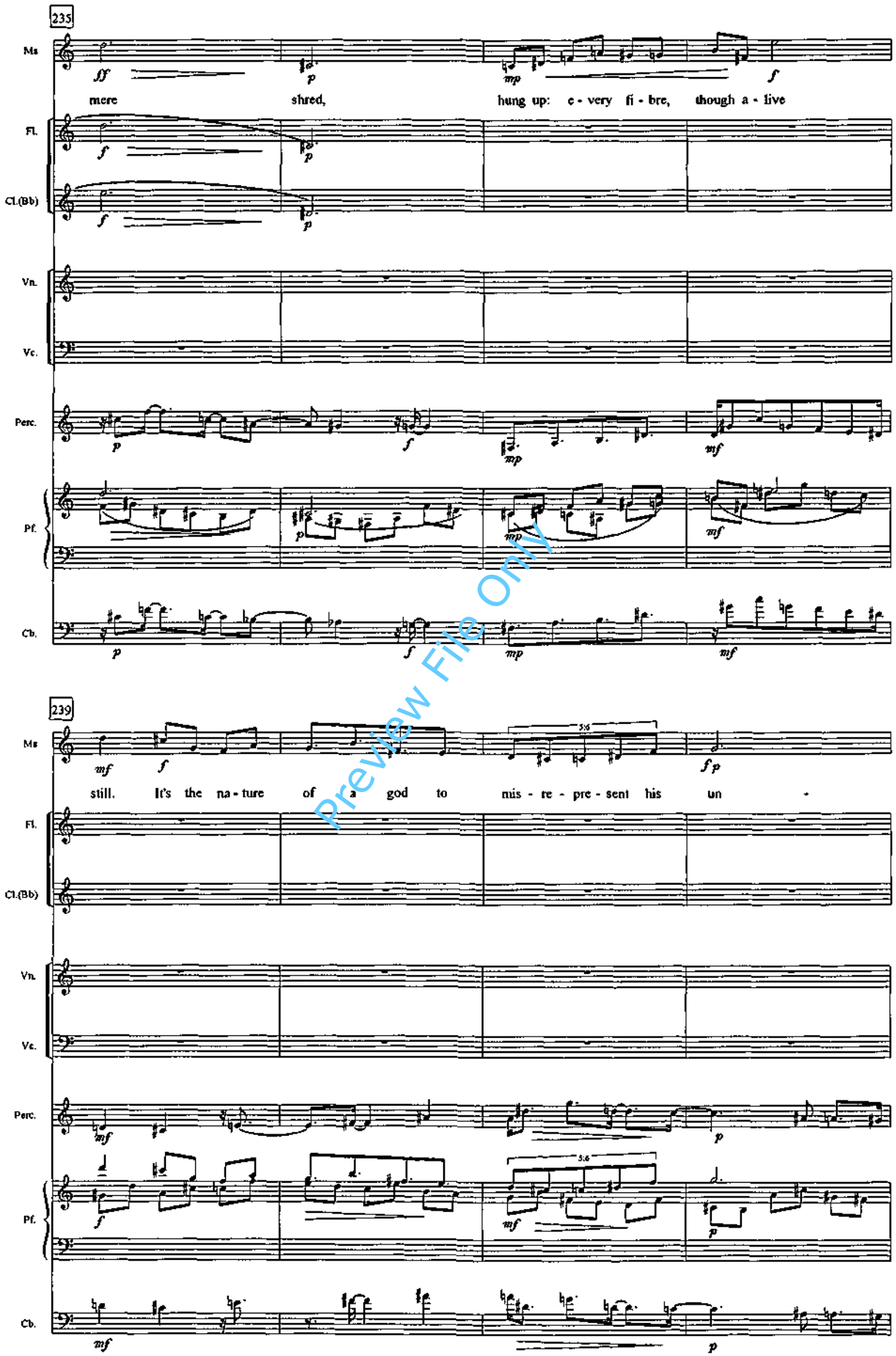

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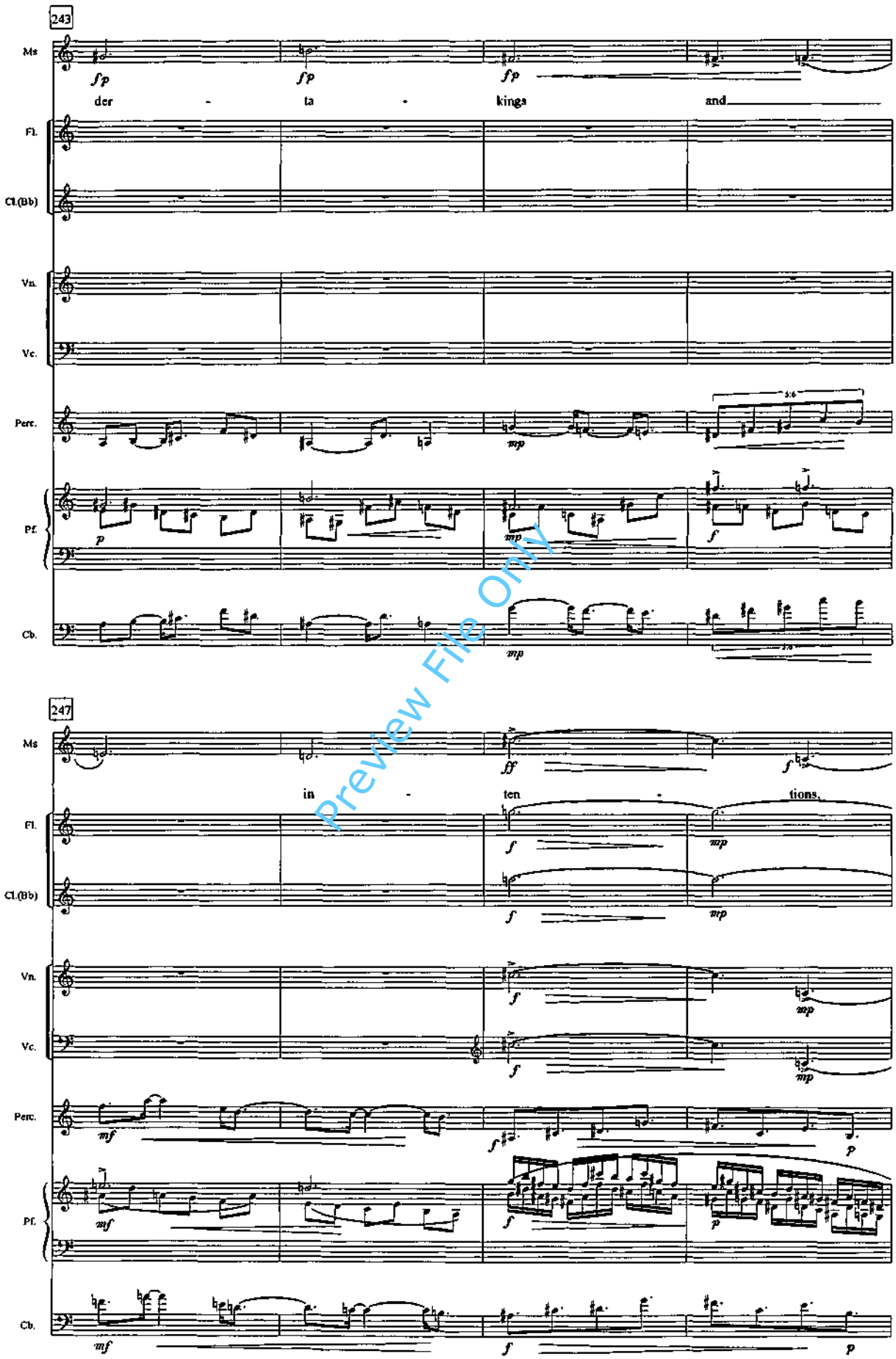

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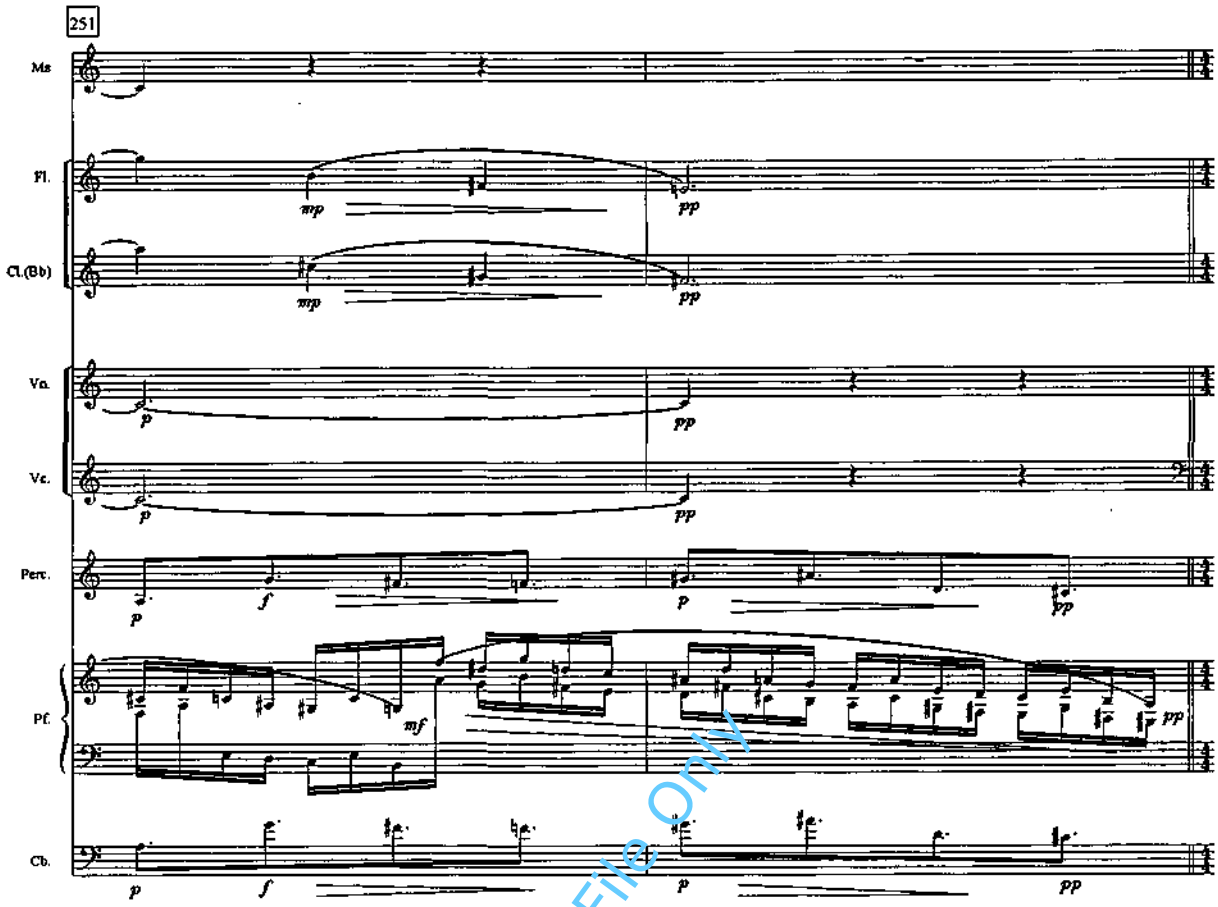

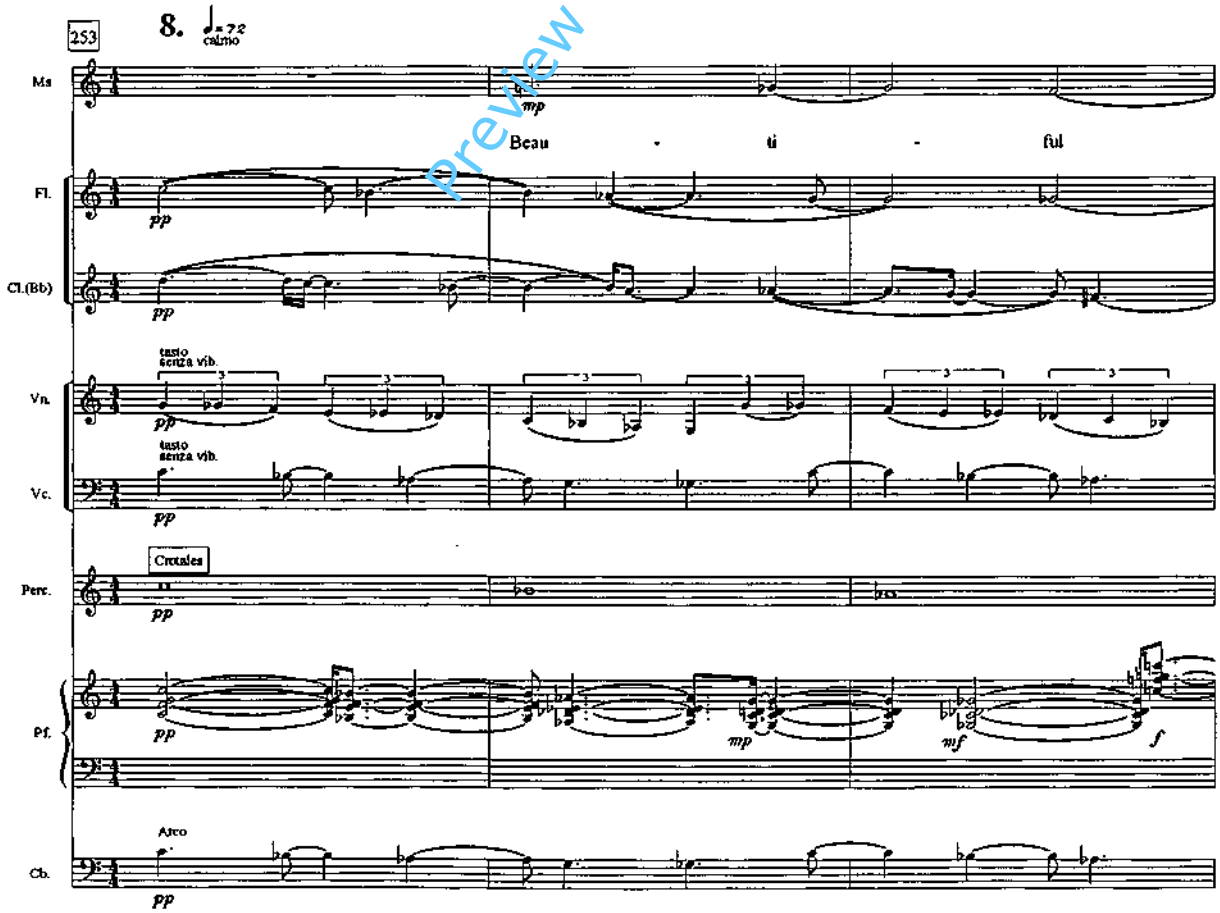

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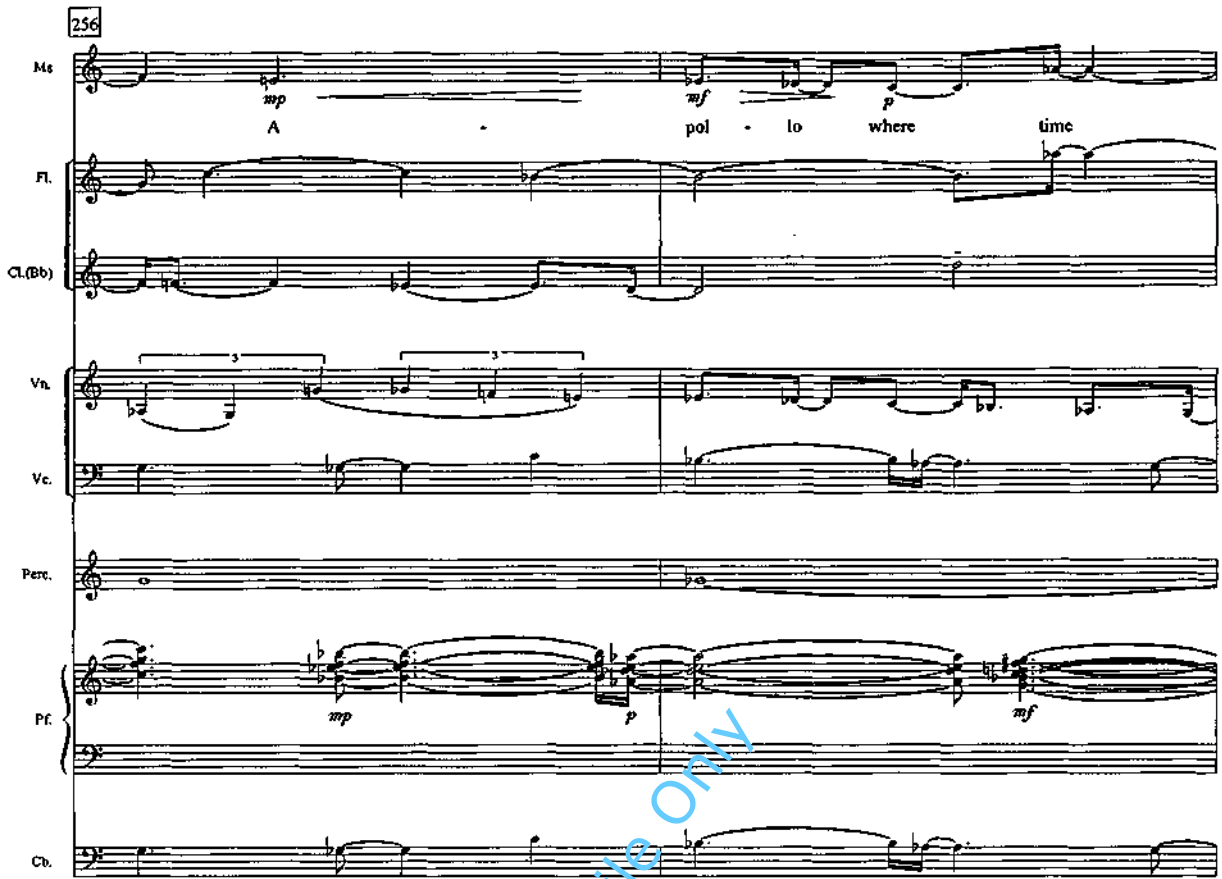

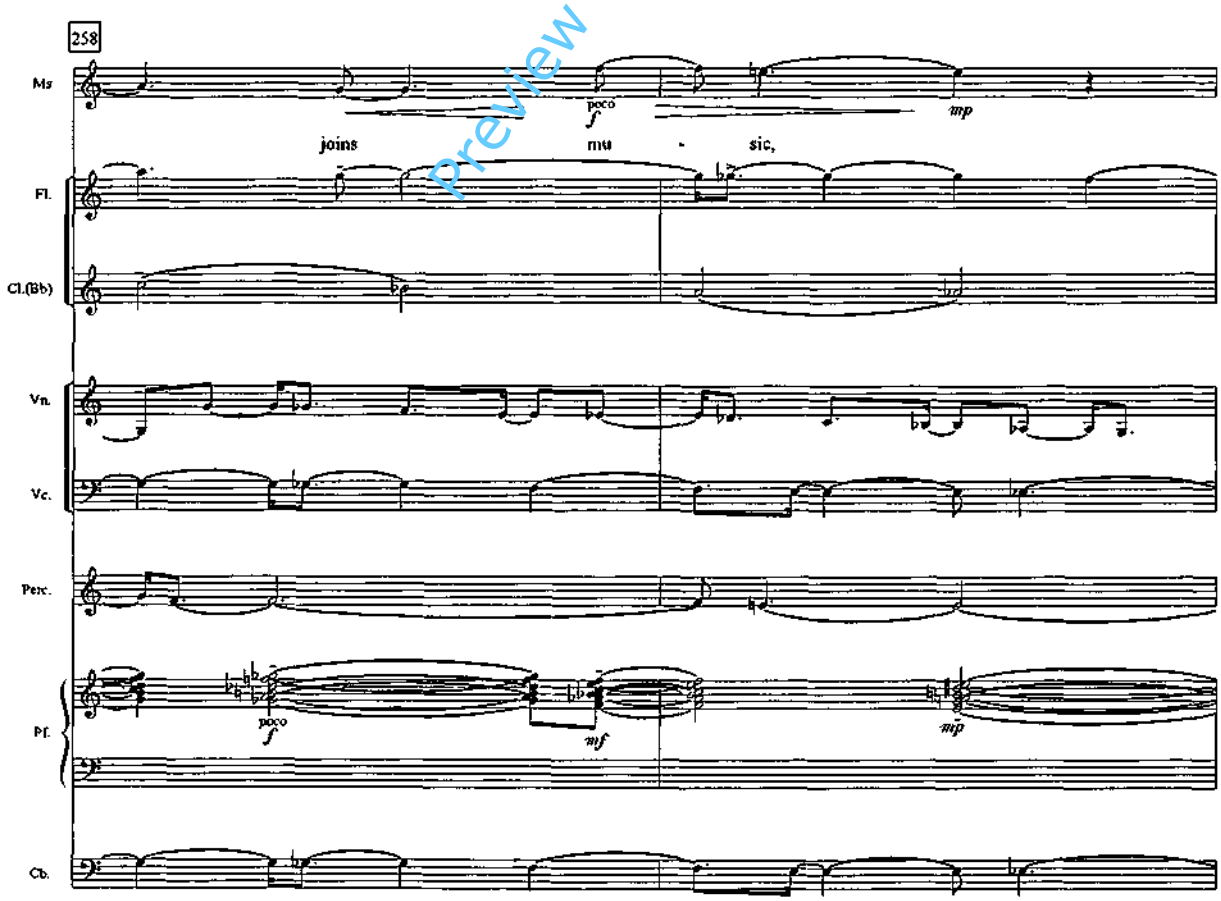

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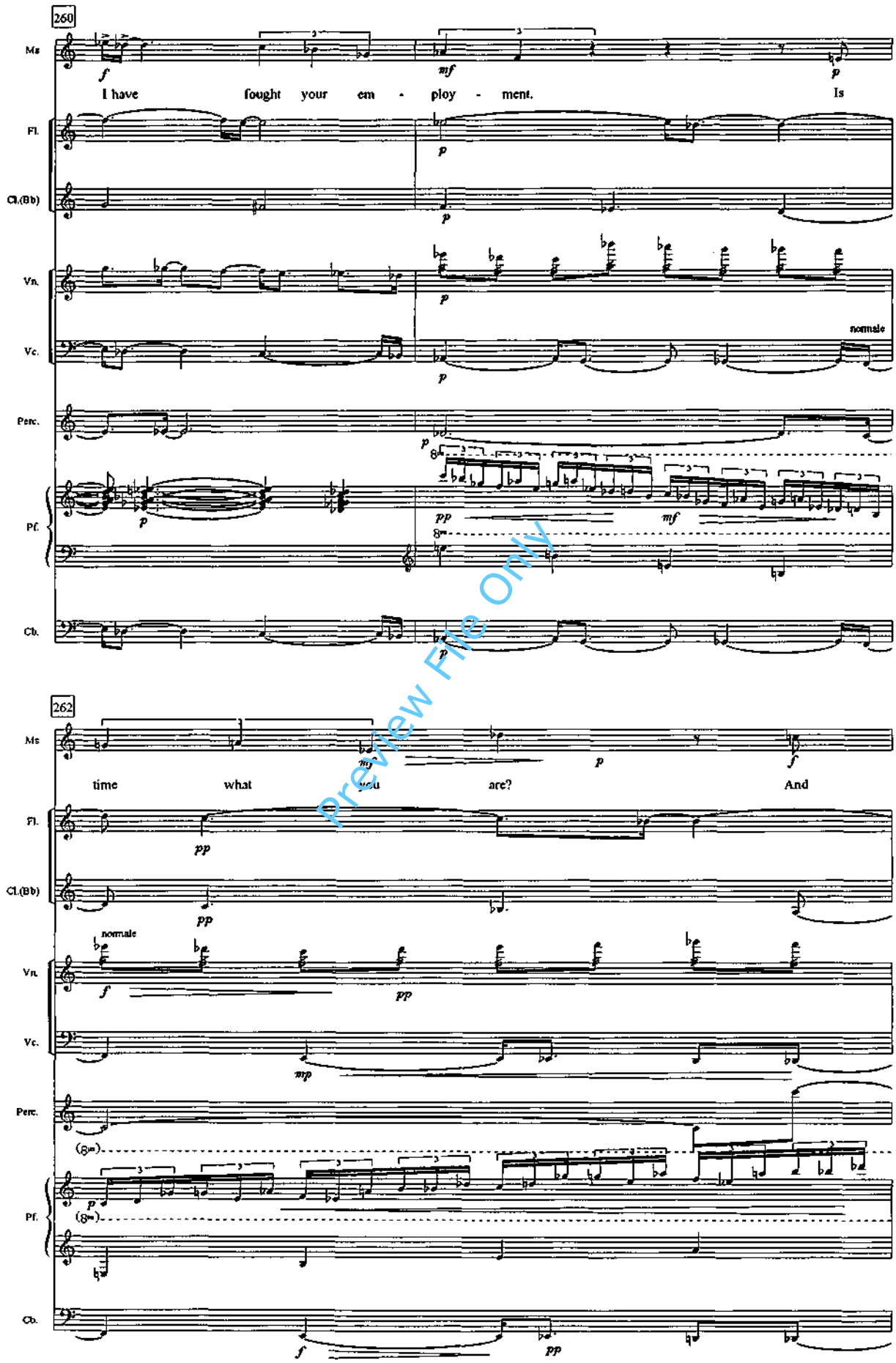

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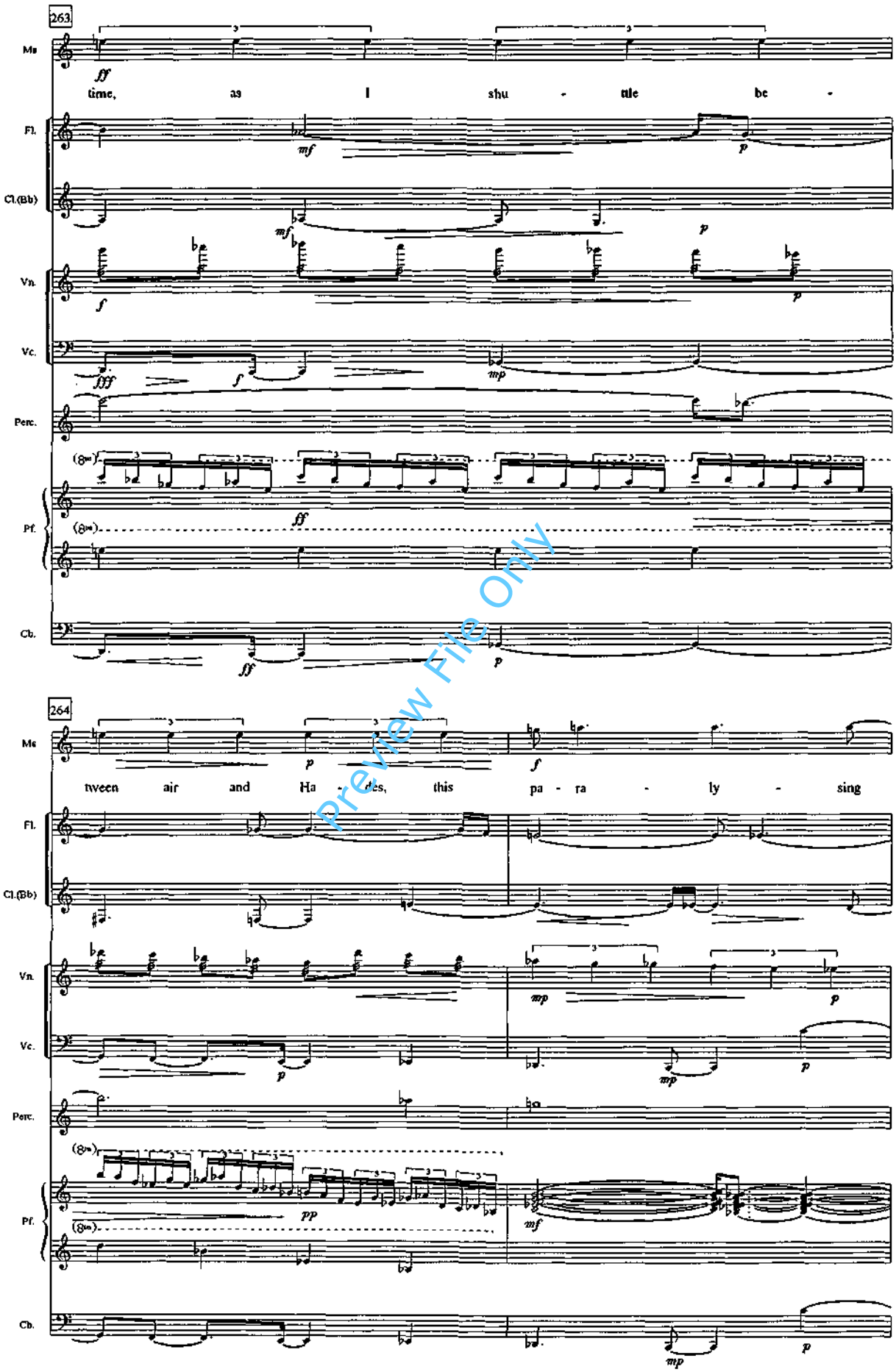

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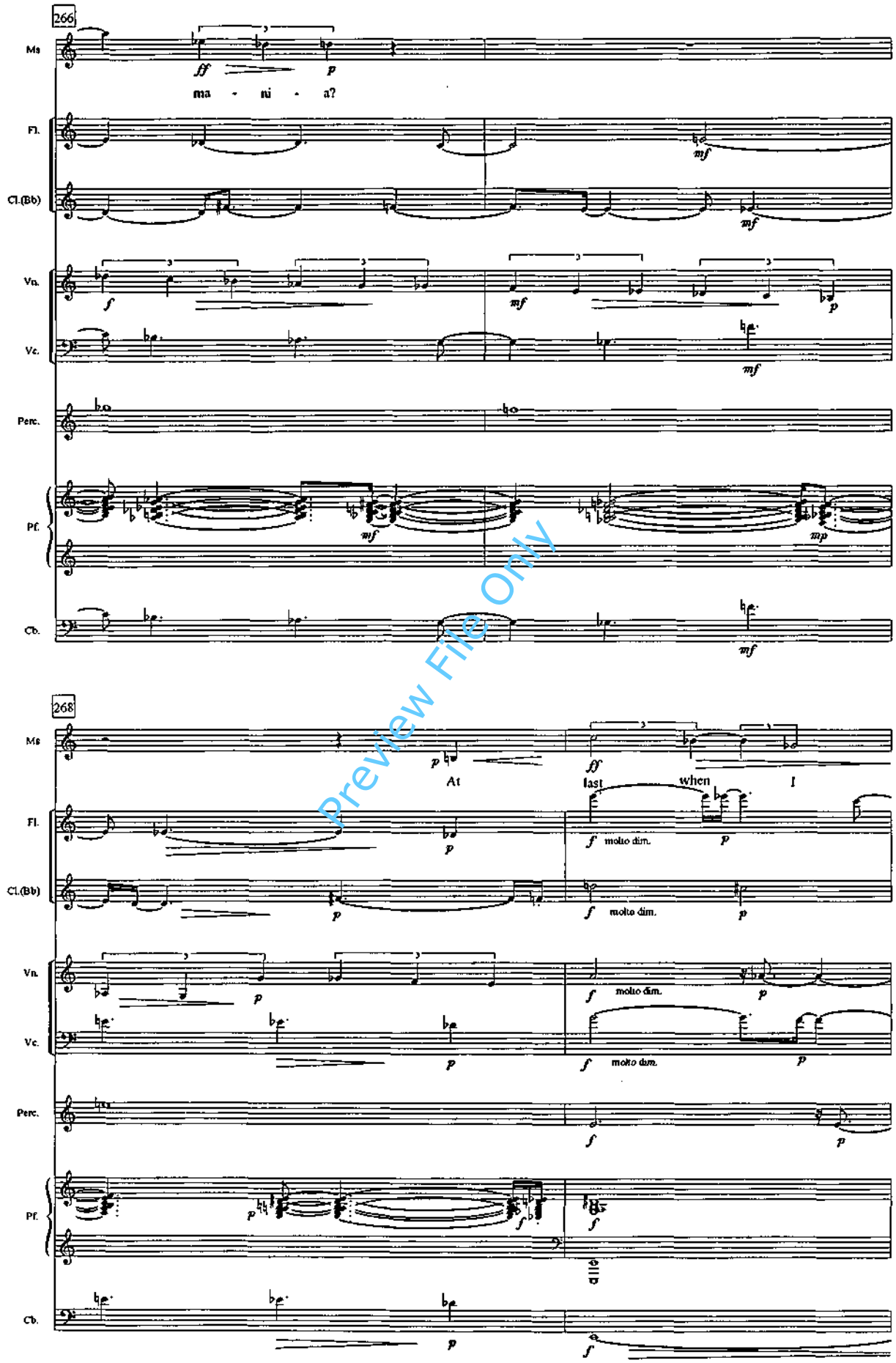

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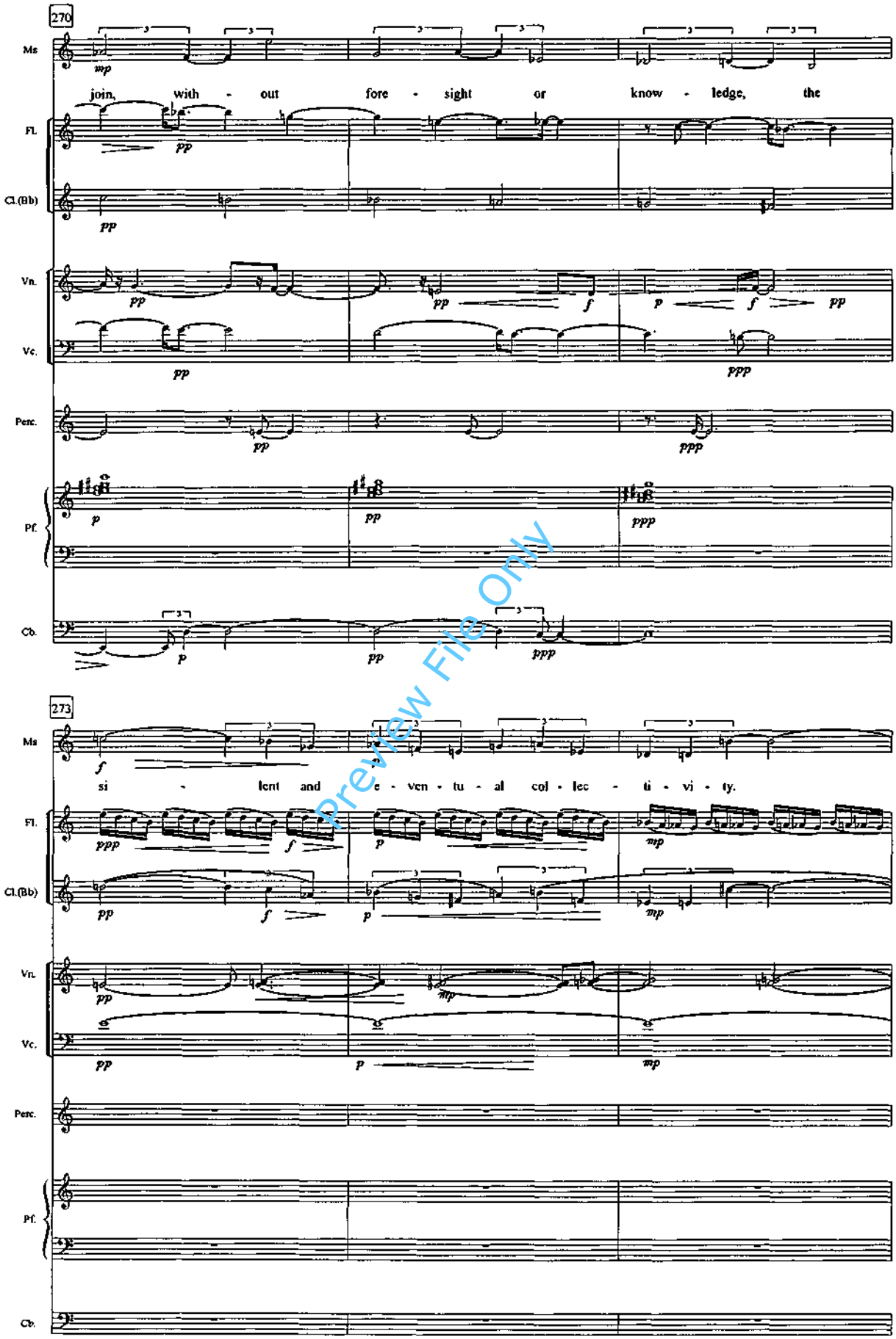

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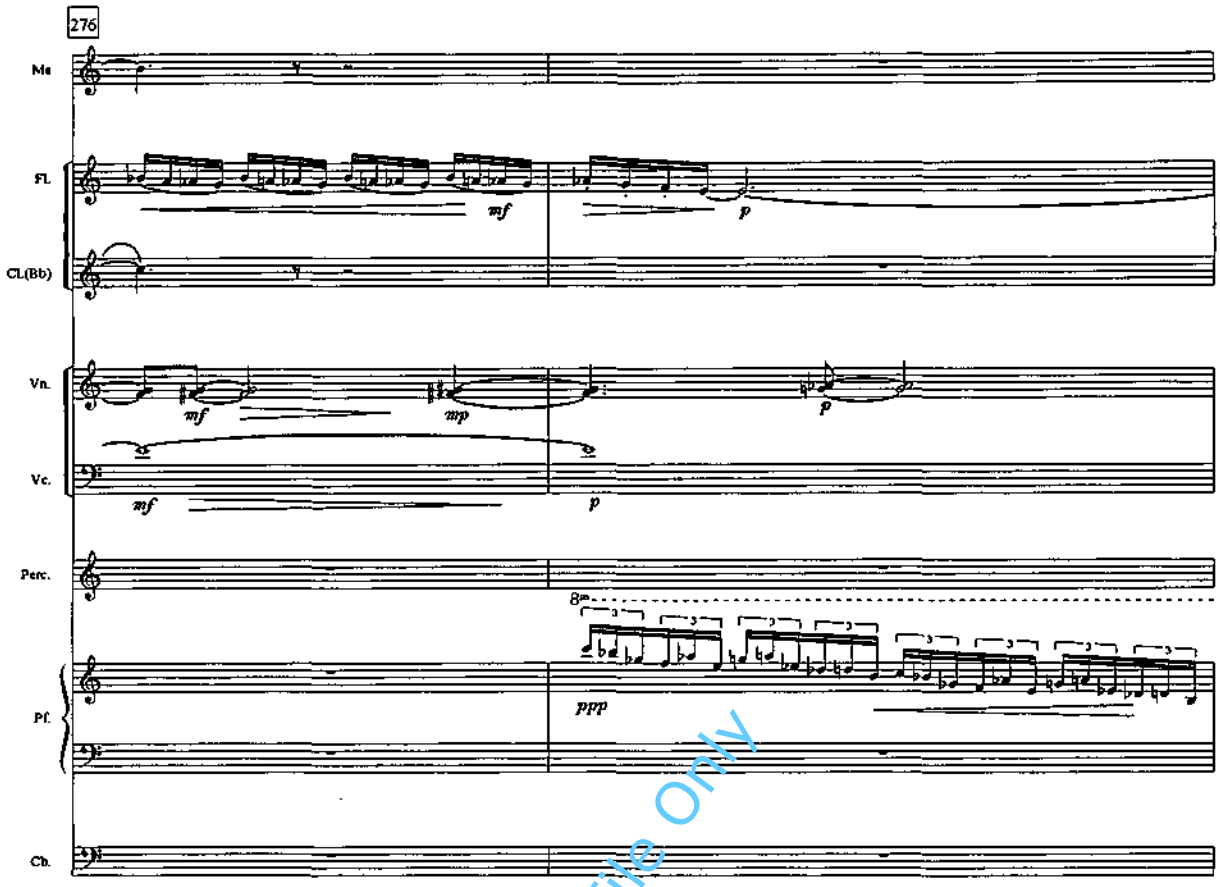

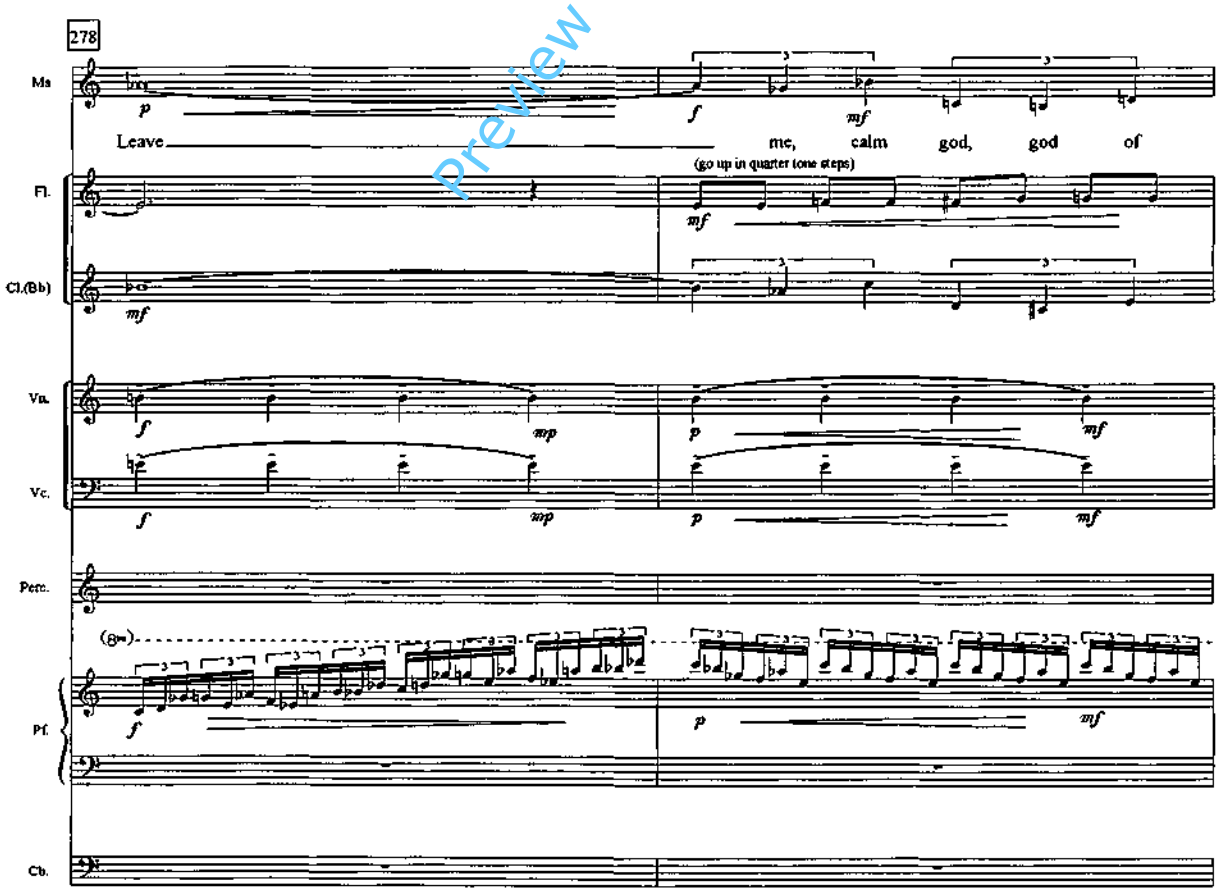

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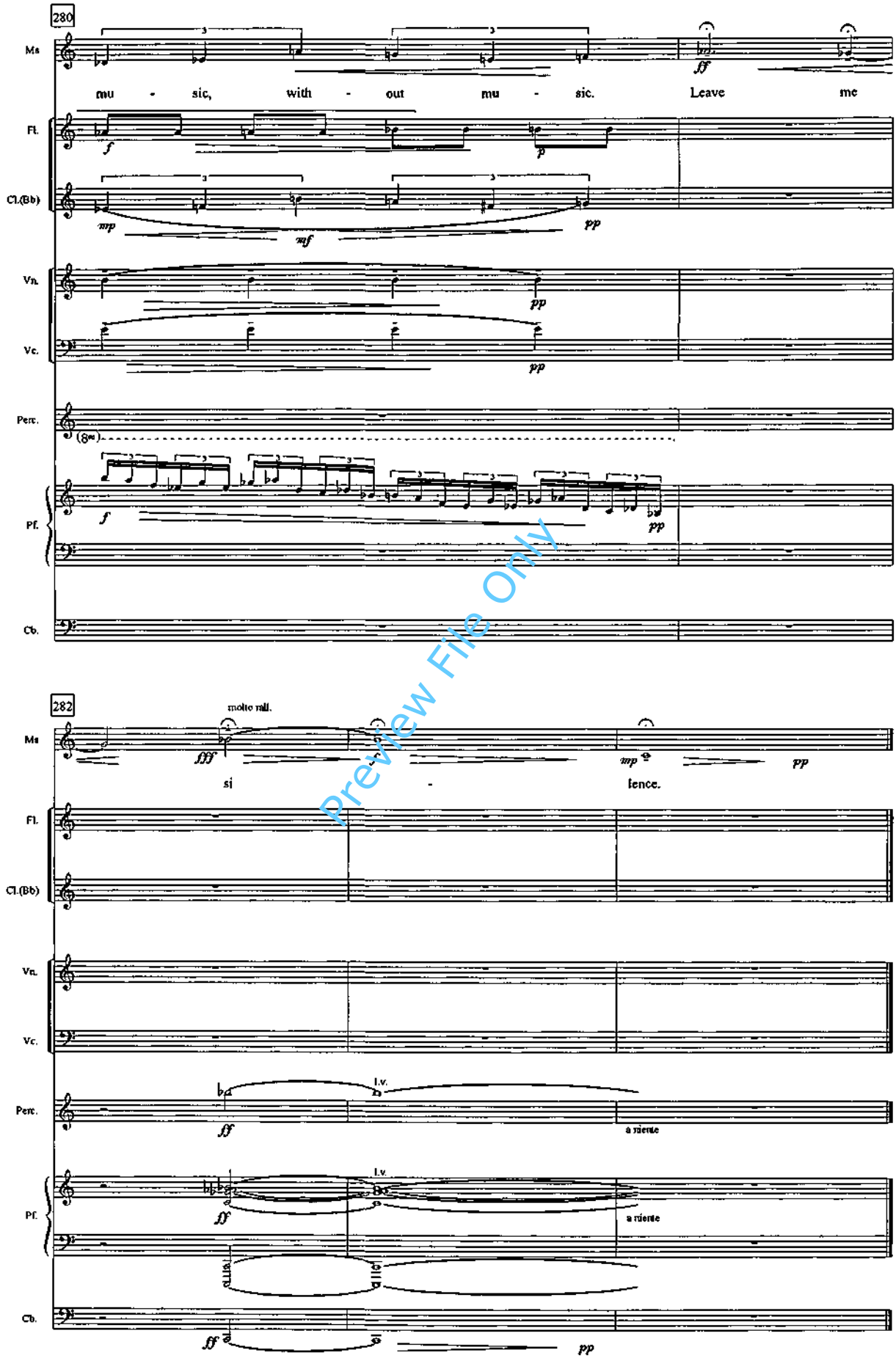

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