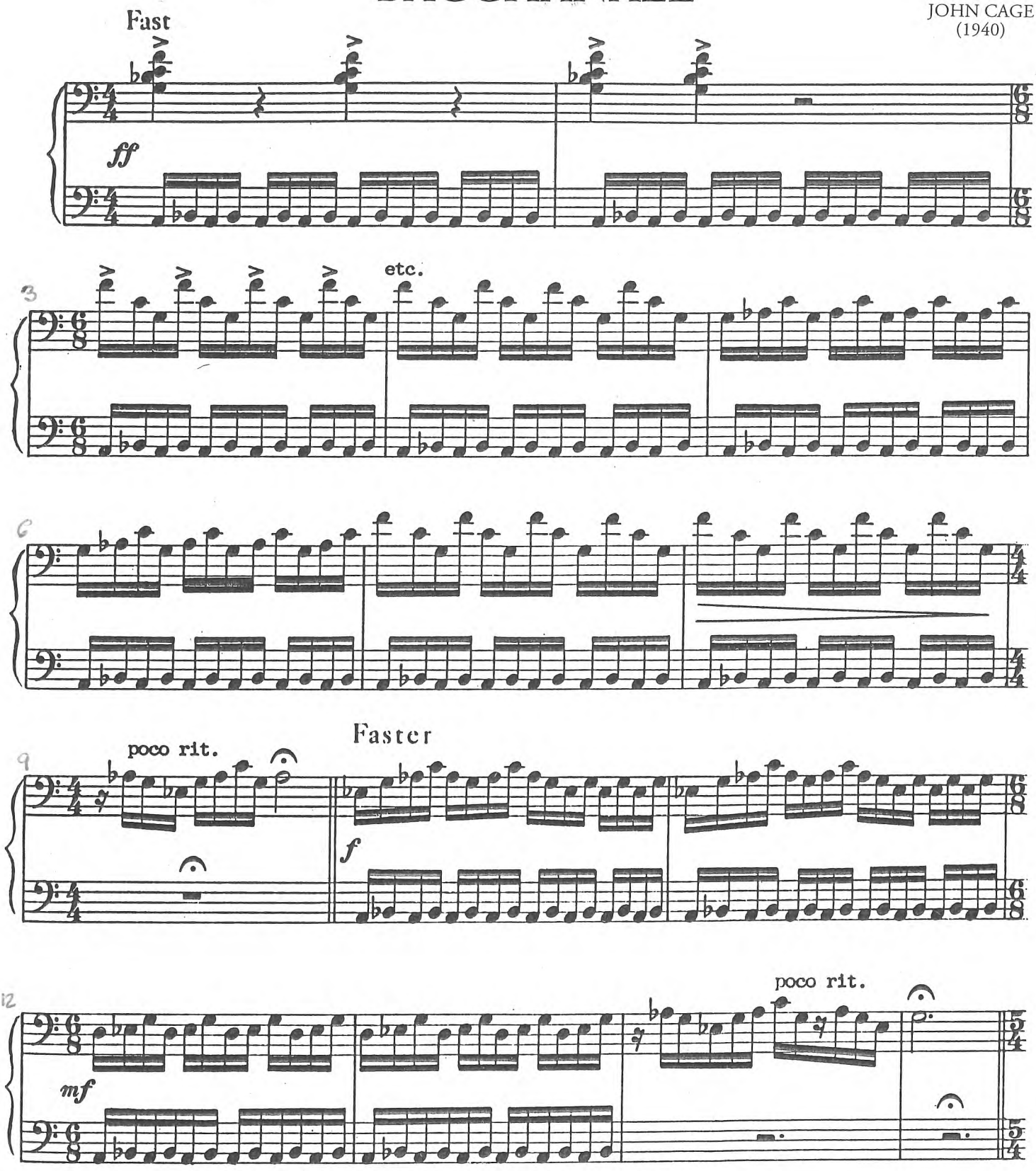
for Syvilla Fort

BACCHANALE

JOHN CAGE
(1940)



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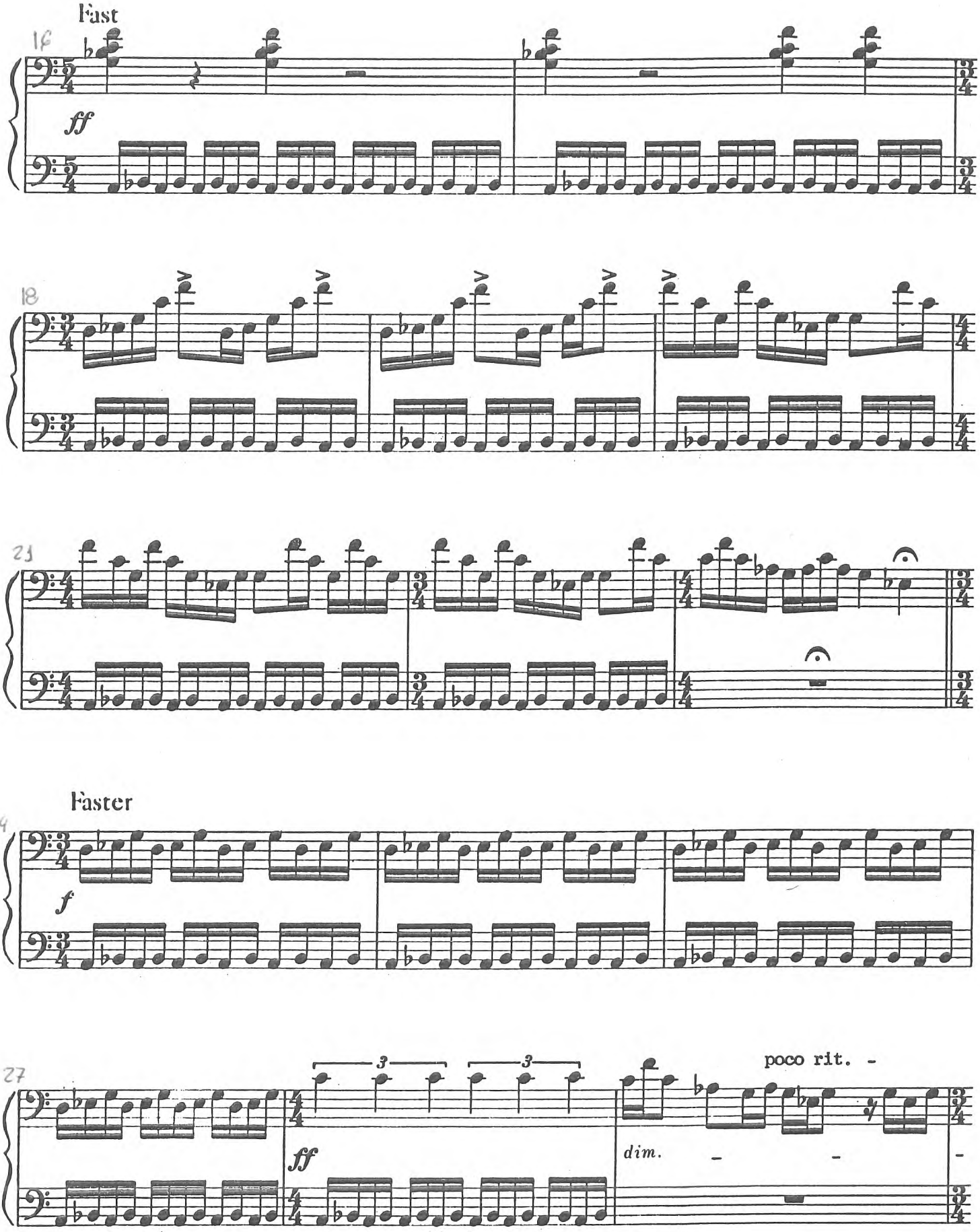
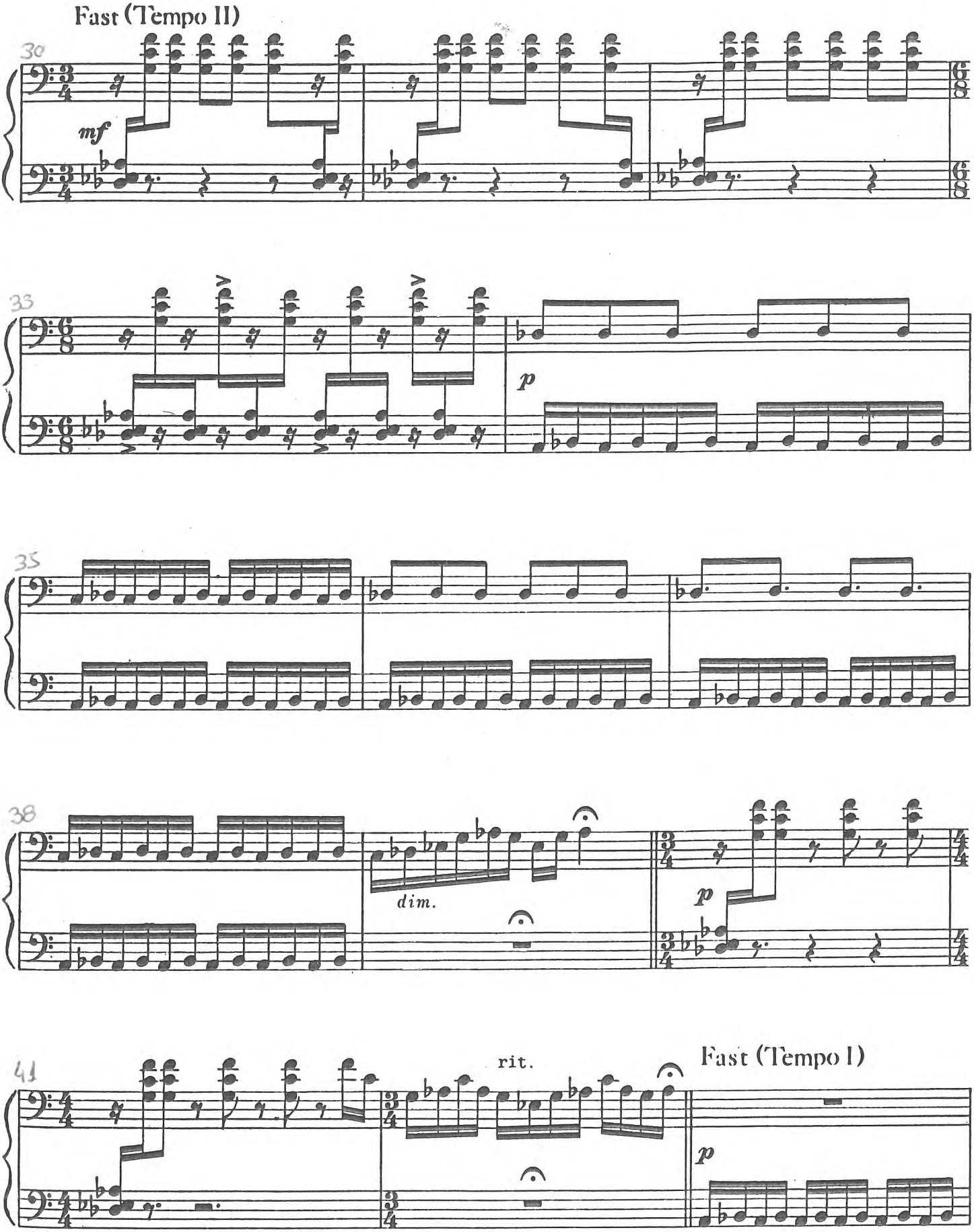

Fast
16
ff
18
21
Faster
24
f
27
3
3
ff
poco rit.
dim.


Fast (Tempo II)
30
mf
33
p
35
38
dim.
p
41
rit.
Fast (Tempo I)
p

44

47

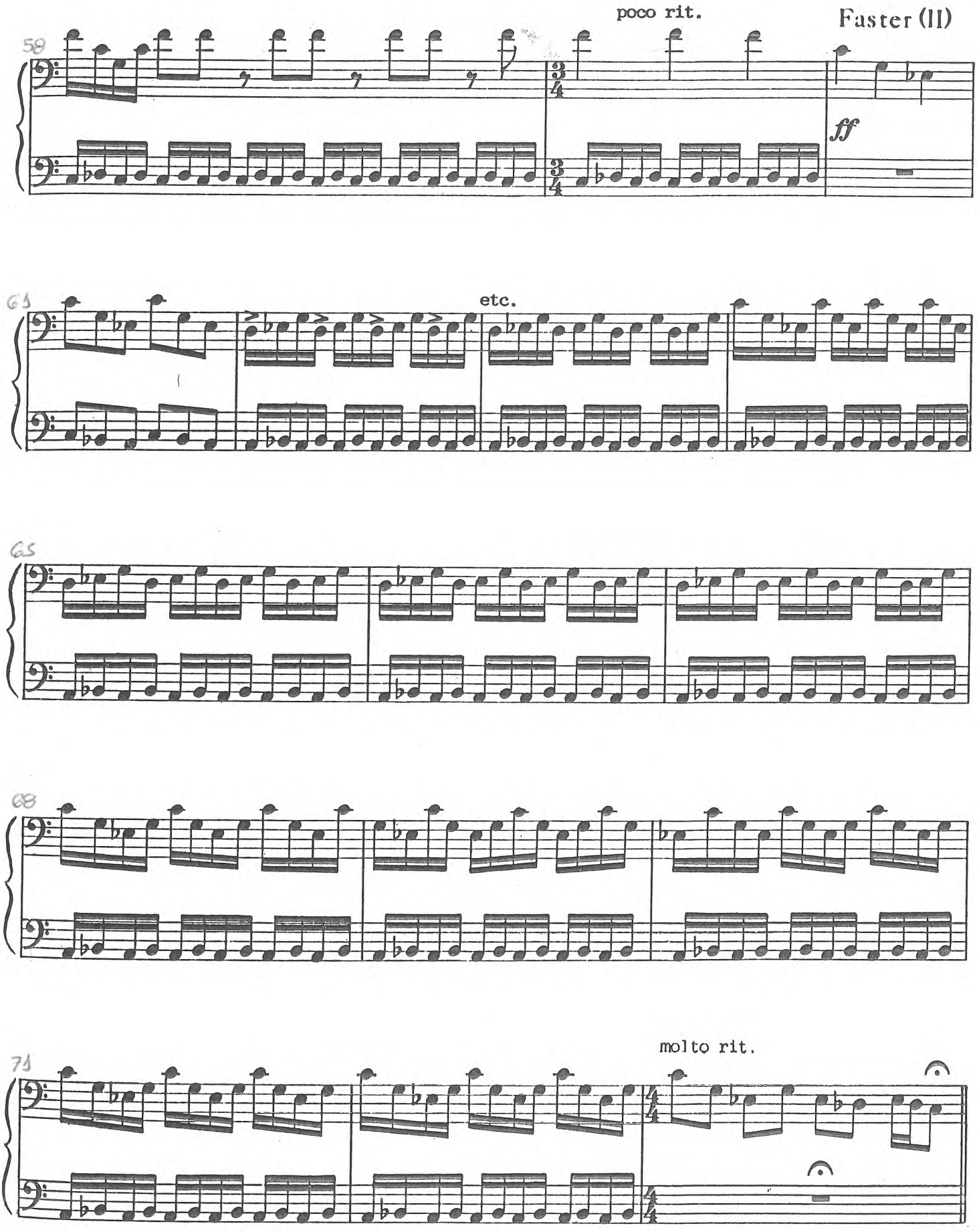
50

poco rit.

Tempo I

53

56


poco rit.
Faster (II)
58
ff
61
etc.
65
68
71
molto rit.

Very slow

74

ppp

r.h.

l.h

U.C.

77

80

mp

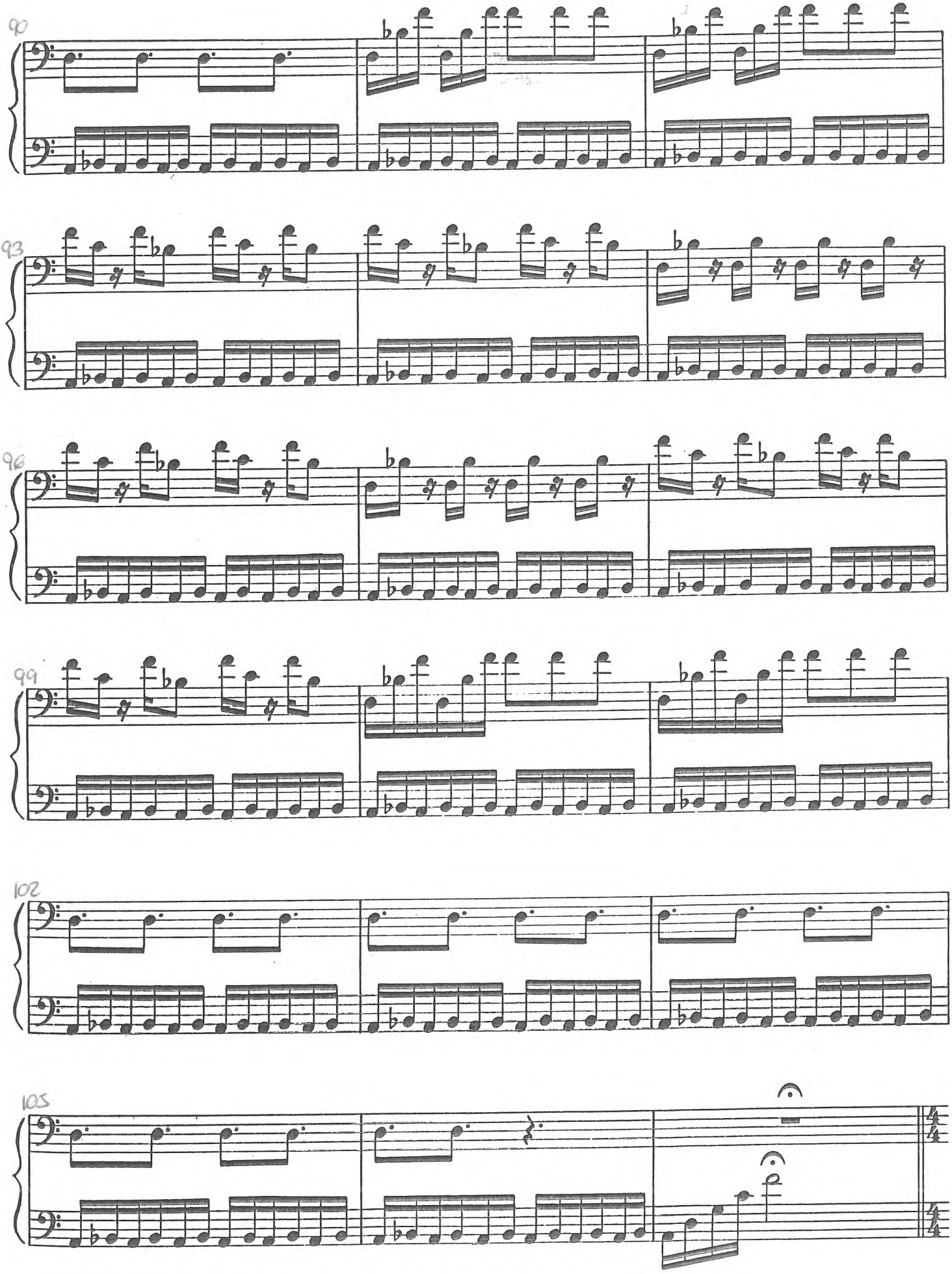
83

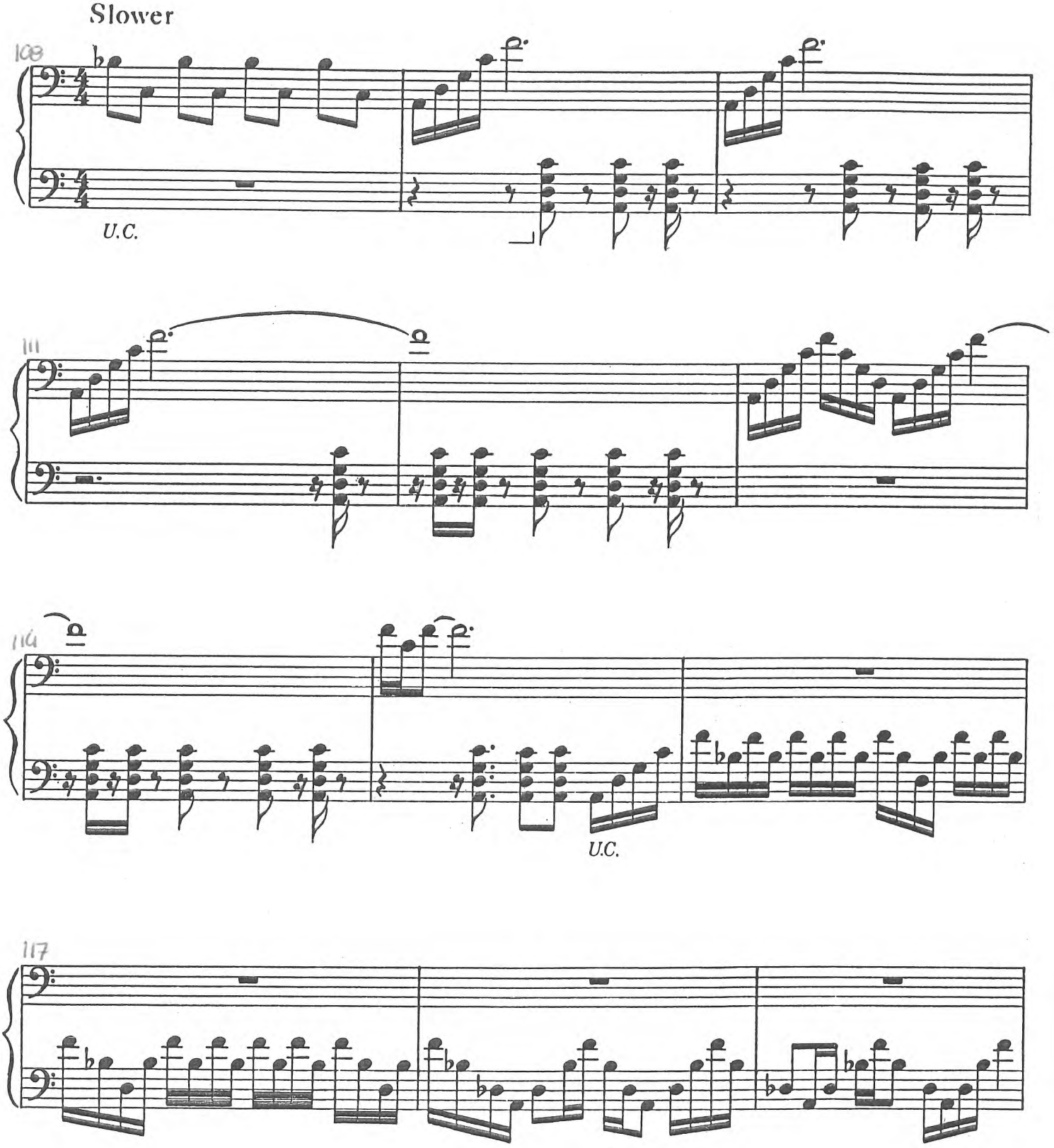
poco rit.

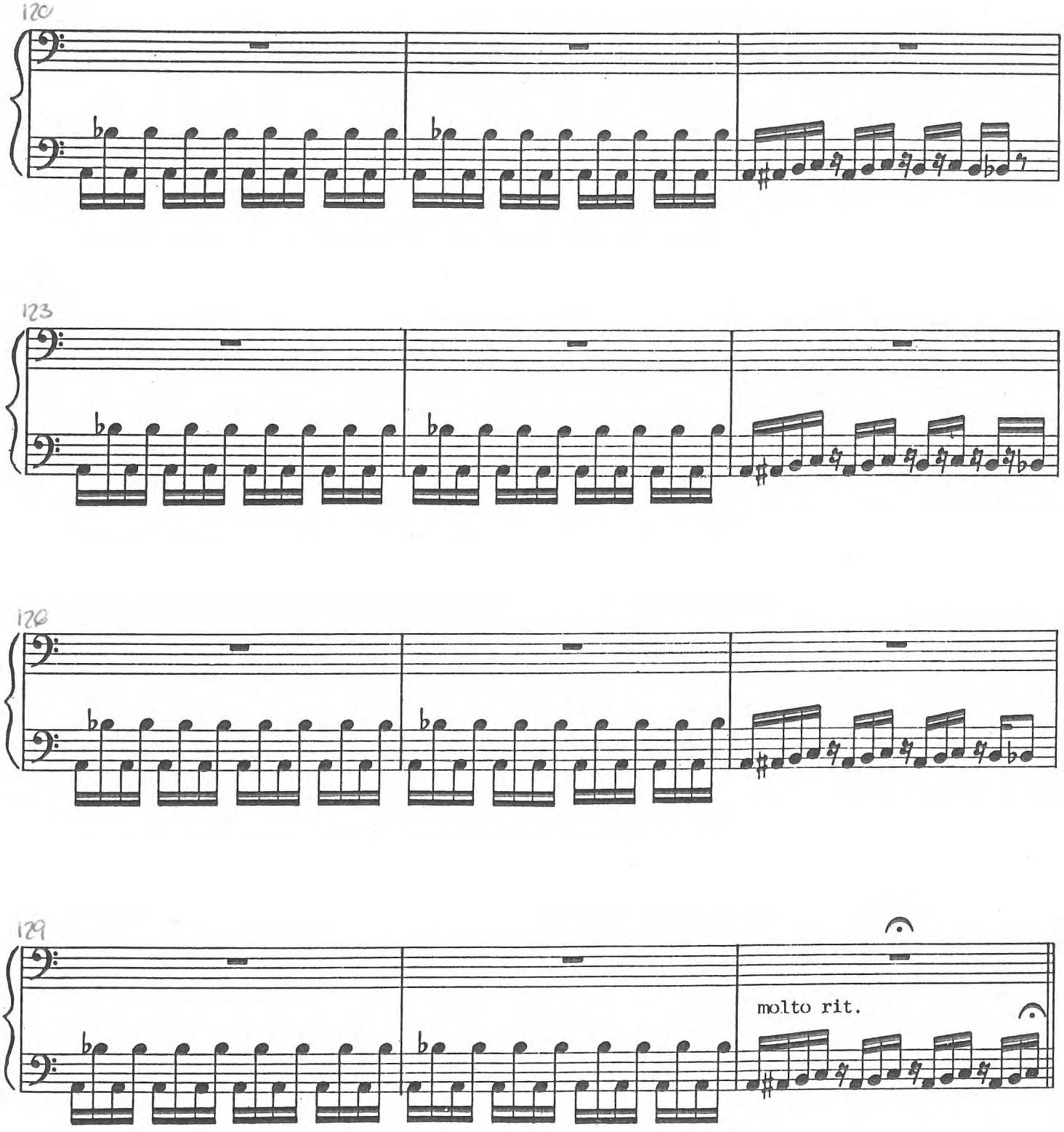
release U.C. gradually

Slow

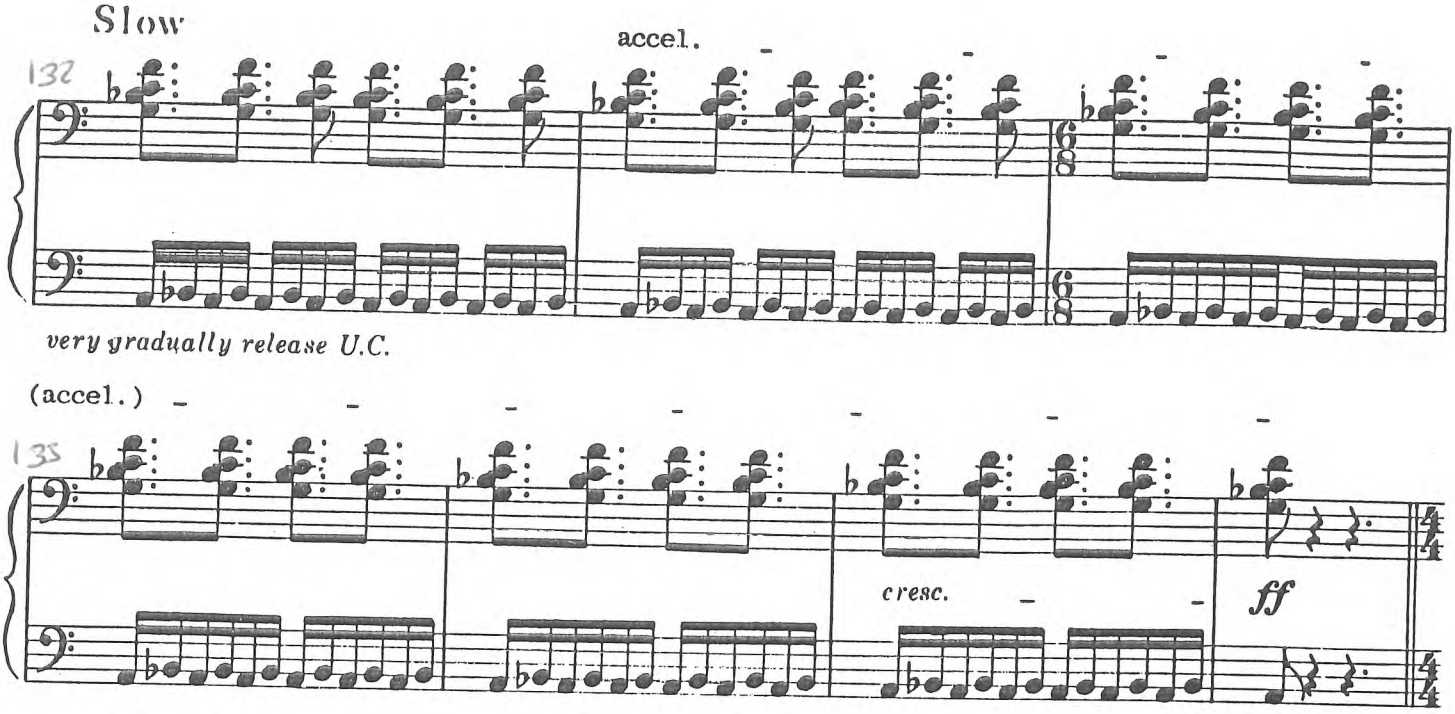
87


90
93
96
99
102
105

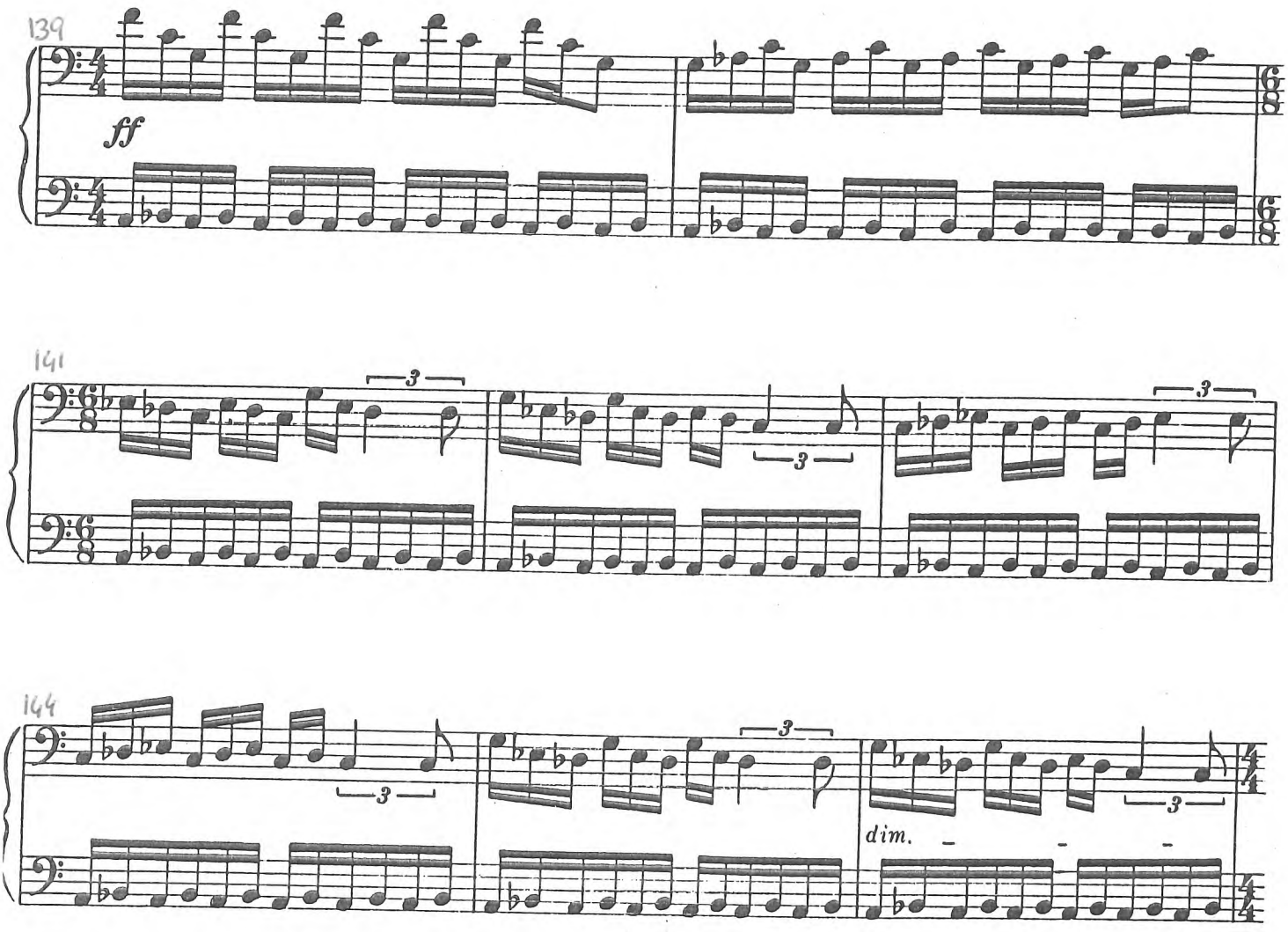

Slower
108
U.C.
111
114
U.C.
117

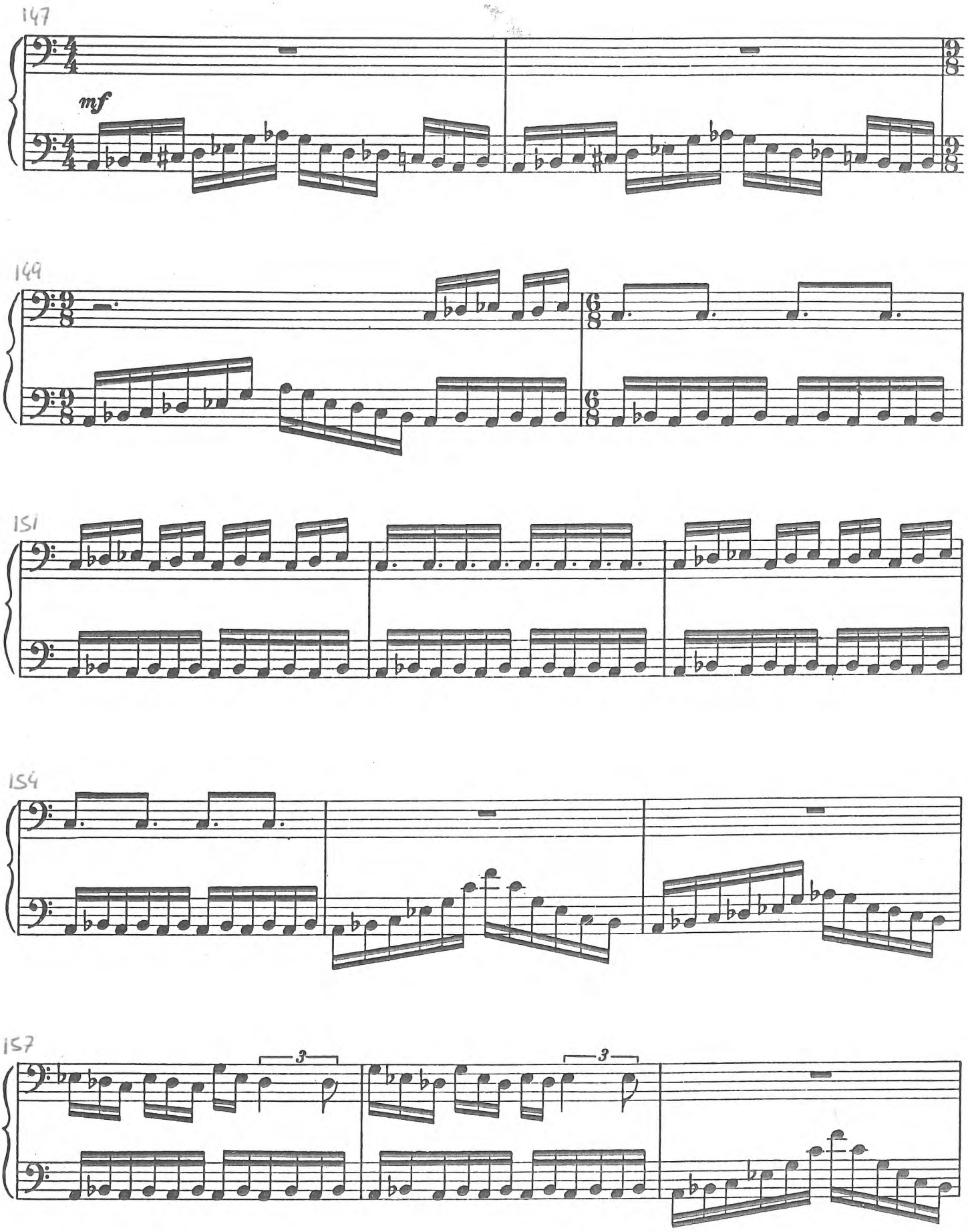

120
123
126
129
molto rit.

Slow

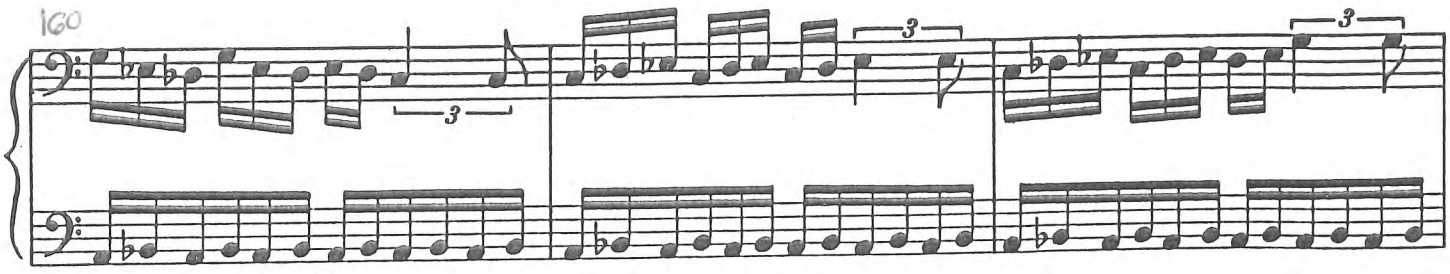

accel.
132
very gradually release U.C.
(accel.)
135
cresc.
ff

Fast (J)


139
ff
141
3
144
dim.


147
mf
149
151
154
157
3
3

160



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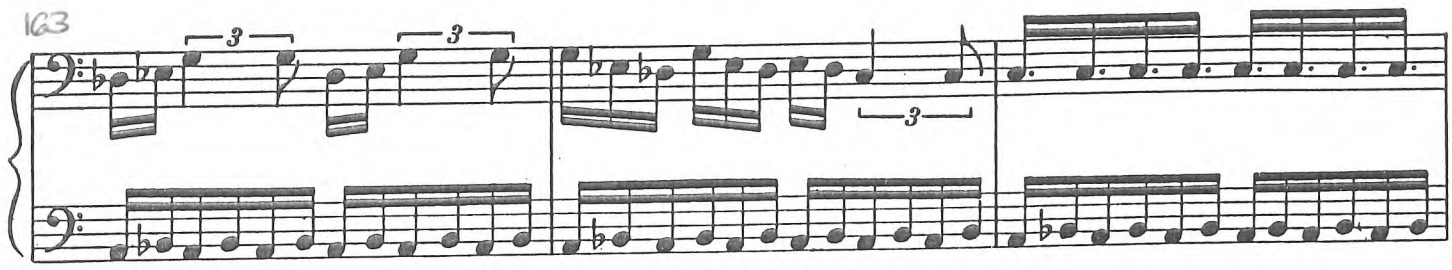

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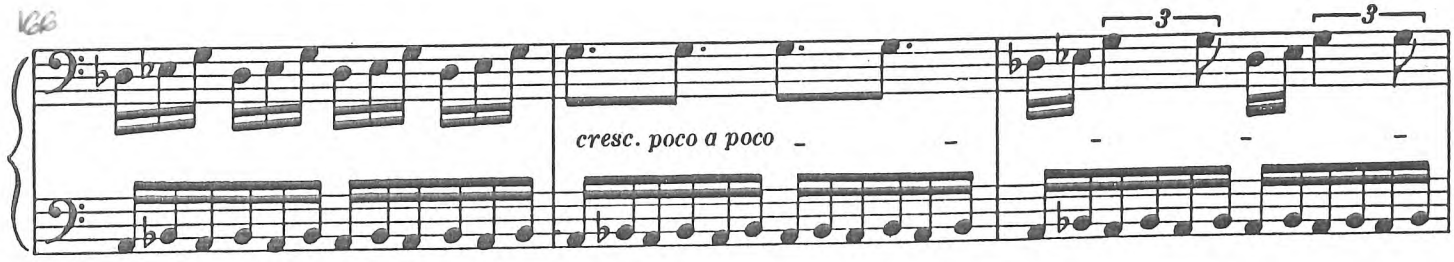

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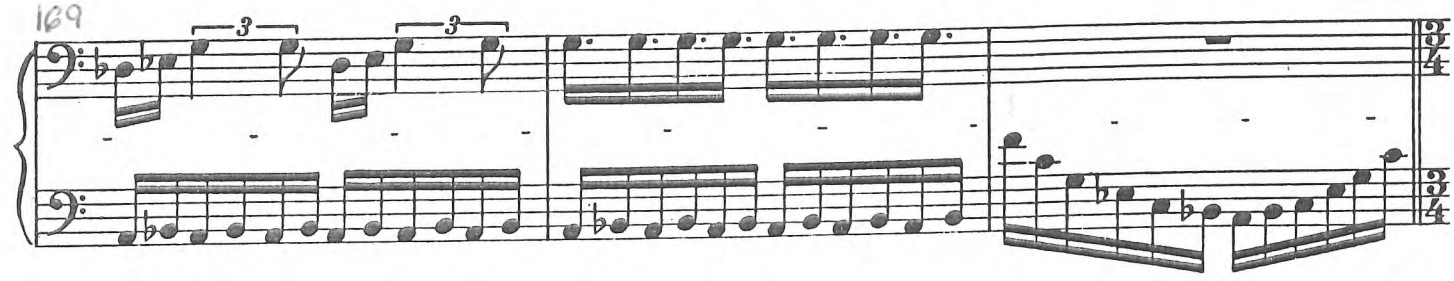
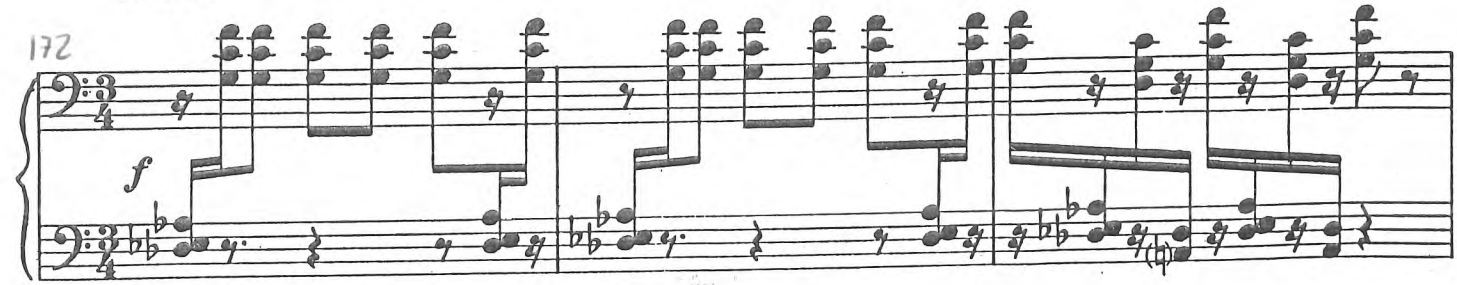


Faster

172



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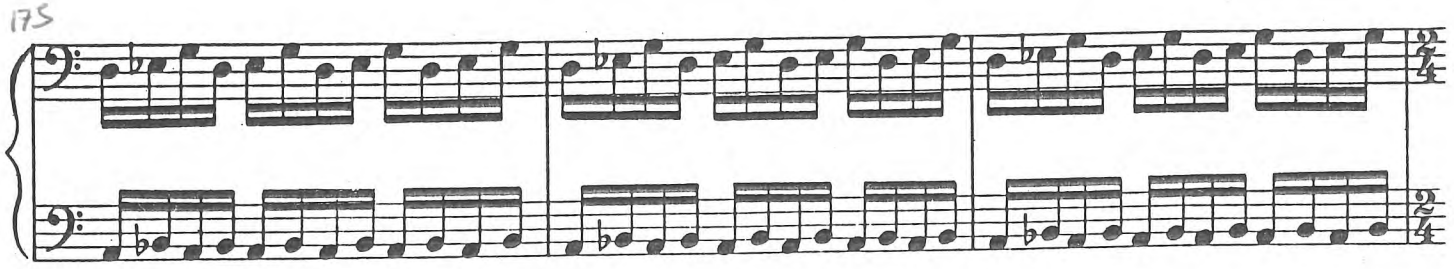

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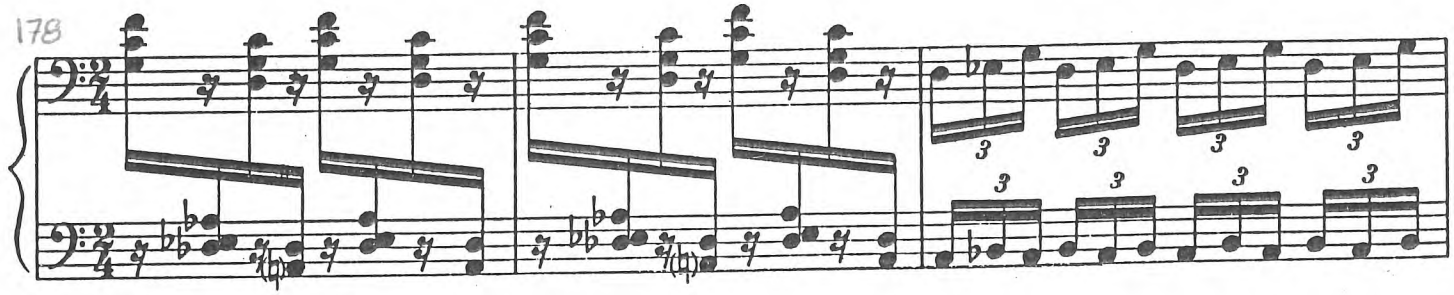

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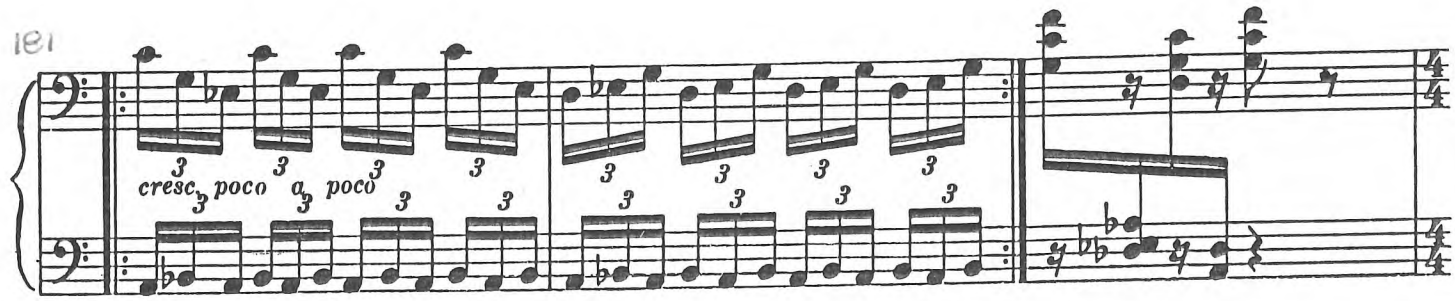
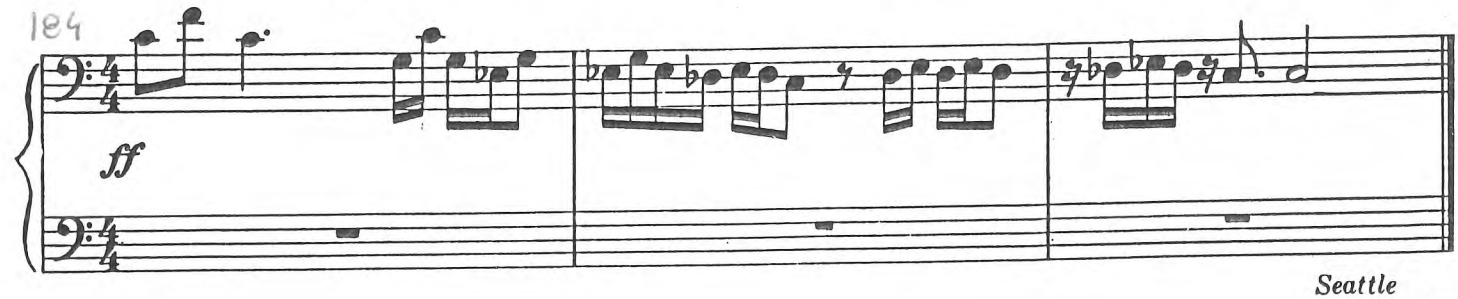


molto ritardando

184



Seattle
March, 1940

How the Piano Came to be Prepared*

John Cage

In the late 'thirties I was employed as accompanist for the classes in modern dance at the Cornish School in Seattle, Washington. These classes were taught by Bonnie Bird, who had been a member of Martha Graham's company. Among her pupils was an extraordinary dancer, Syvilla Fort, later an associate in New York City of Katherine Dunham. Three or four days before she was to perform her *Bacchanale*, Syvilla asked me to write music for it. I agreed.

At that time I had two ways of composing: for piano or orchestral instruments I wrote twelve-tone music (I had studied with Adolph Weiss and Arnold Schoenberg); I also wrote music for percussion ensembles: pieces for three, four, or six players.

The Cornish Theatre in which Syvilla Fort was to perform had no space in the wings. There was also no pit. There was, however, a piano at one side in front of the stage. I couldn't use percussion instruments for Syvilla's dance, though, suggesting Africa, they would have been suitable; they would have left too little room for her to perform. I was obliged to write a piano piece.

I spent a day or so conscientiously trying to find an African twelve-tone row. I had no luck. I decided that what was wrong was not me but the piano. I decided to change it.

Besides studying with Weiss and Schoenberg, I had also studied with Henry Cowell. I had often heard him play a grand piano, changing its sound by plucking and muting the strings with fingers and hands. I particularly loved to hear him play *The Banshee*. To do this, Henry Cowell first depressed the pedal with a wedge at the back (or asked an assistant, sometimes myself, to sit at the keyboard and hold the pedal down), and then, standing at the back of the piano, he produced the music by lengthwise friction on the bass strings with his fingers or fingernails, and by crosswise sweeping of the bass strings with the palms of his hands. In another piece he used a darning egg, moving it lengthwise along the strings while trilling, as I recall, on the keyboard; this produced a glissando of harmonics.

Having decided to change the sound of the piano in order to make a music suitable for Syvilla Fort's *Bacchanale*, I went to the kitchen, got a pie plate, brought it into the living room, and placed it on the piano strings. I played a few keys. The piano sounds had been changed, but the pie plate bounced around due to the vibrations, and, after a while, some of the sounds that had been changed no longer were. I tried something smaller, nails between the strings. They slipped down between and lengthwise along the strings. It dawned on me that screw or bolts would stay in position. They did. And I was delighted to notice that by means of a single preparation two different sounds could be produced. One was resonant, the other was quiet and muted. The quiet one was heard whenever the soft pedal was used. I wrote the *Bacchanale* quickly and with the excitement continual discovery provided.

When I first placed objects between piano strings, it was with the desire to possess sounds (to be able to repeat them). But, as the music left my home and went from piano to piano and from pianist to pianist, it became clear that not only are two pianists essentially different from one another, but two pianos are not the same either. Instead of the possibility of repetition, we are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion.

The prepared piano, impressions I had from the work of artist friends, study of Zen Buddhism, ramblings in fields and forests of mushrooms, all led me to the enjoyment of things as they come, as they happen, rather than as they are possessed or kept or forced to be.

*This text was written in 1972 as a foreword for Richard Bunger's *The Well-Prepared Piano* (The Colorado College Music Press, Colorado Springs, 1973; reprinted Litoral Arts Press, 1981). It was slightly changed for reprinting in John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings '73 – '78* (Wesleyan University Press, 1979), and has been further revised for the present circumstance.

PIANO PREPARATION

TONE	MATERIAL	STRING (left to right)	DISTANCE FROM DAMPER
	small bolt	2-3	circa 3"
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	screw with nuts & weather stripping*	2-3 1-2	** **
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**
	weather stripping *	1-2	**

*fibrous

**Determine position and size of mutes by experiment.