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Learning Pain: A Journey Through The Human Heart in Solo Piano

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# LEARNING PAIN: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE HUMAN HEART IN SOLO PIANO

By

Hannah Hanks

A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

May 11, 2017

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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Interim Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education

## Abstract

"Learning Pain: A Journey Through the Human Heart for Solo Piano" is a selection of original musical pieces composed for intermediate piano students and distributed online in an open access format.

Music is an influential medium for composers, players, and listeners. Piano students who have not reached advanced levels may not appreciate that playing music can help investigate their emotional states. It can stabilize, utilized to work through a problem, and can emulate the real world. The appeal of emotional music is ubiquitous, yet beginning students are frequently not exposed to the pieces that deal with raw and unattractive emotions because most are children. Intermediate students, then, who are a bit older may not be aware music can be used to express the negative aspects of life. Because of this, I have composed six pieces that mostly deal with unpleasant emotions and aspects of life. They double as a testament that music does indeed help the composer emotionally and an invitation to intermediate piano students to see what continuing to learn the piano can do for them emotionally. Even if they compose nothing, learning to play an emotive piece can have a cathartic effect similar to that experienced by the composer, and playing a polished piece on the piano can transcend most other pleasures.

Using music to learn to cope with pain can only be an asset. Continuing to play the piano and hearing how pain may be interpreted are valuable lessons from which students from diverse backgrounds can benefit.

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## Introduction

Intermediate piano students have taken lessons for three to six years and are comfortable with introductory notation, tonal chords, and fingering. Exposure to novel keys and phrasing and playing longer songs that have more depth and complexity are a natural extension. It is at this point that many students quit because they lose commitment or interest, perhaps through a lack of connection with the pieces they play. “Learning Pain: A Journey Through the Human Heart in Solo Piano” closely ties music with relatable emotions. There is a progression through negativity ending in resignation with shortcomings and finding beauty in the world despite that resignation. Using emotions as the connecting thread takes advantage of their ubiquity and appeal. Music is a useful medium for working through emotions and thoughts with piano students. Music is an influential medium for composers, players, and listeners. Piano students who have not reached advanced levels may not understand that playing music can help investigate their emotional state. It can stabilize, be used to work through a problem, and can emulate the real world. The appeal of emotional music is ubiquitous, yet intermediate students are frequently not exposed to the pieces that deal with raw and unattractive emotions. Because of this, I have composed six pieces that mostly deal with unpleasant emotions and aspects of life. They double as a testament that music does indeed help the composer emotionally and an invitation to intermediate piano students to see what continuing to learn the piano can do for them. Even if they compose nothing, learning to play an emotive piece can have the cathartic effect that composing it had on the composer, and playing a polished piece on the piano can transcend most other pleasures.

## Discussion of Works

Six Pieces for Solo Piano, a suite, contains unique choices of rhythm, melody, tempo, harmony, and form used to convey a specific emotion or a journey of emotions to the listener and player.

1. Happy
2. Studying
3. Headache
4. Calm Contemplation
5. Longing
6. Resignation

Happy

"Happy" is about reaching for something joyous but never quite finding it. The repeated interplay between A and D brings to mind the fourth and fifth intervals used in many happy songs. However in this case, the theme of climbing from A to D sounds like reaching for something desired; then falling to the A emulates confusion. What was obtained was not what was anticipated, or it should have been something other than what it was in the end.

The sparse, punctuated harmony offered by the left hand before measure 21 allows some movement in the emotional tone of the piece, but after measure 21 this tone changes. The harmony follows the melody more closely and has more movement, allowing the search to become more obvious and agitated. The moderate 100 beats/minute tempo lets the listener be caught up in the seeking without running. A

frantic charge would be against the nature of the piece, which is discontent but not a flurry of motion.

Because there is no introduction, the listener is thrown into the middle of the action and left to find their own way. This is why the cheer is most present at the beginning, before it is recognized as false and is really a search for more.

When the right hand rises and spreads into octaves, it is reminiscent of a lone trumpet solo bemoaning loneliness and loss over the abandoned surroundings from a watchtower. After the break in measure 21, the use of staccato shows impatience. The veneer of calm wears thin. To complete the piece, the ending phrase musters strength and seems to reach for a high E one last time in a search for joy. The last two chords leave the listener in a state of ambiguity—on one hand, the descent to the last chord indicates that the search came up empty-handed, yet the ending chord (the tonic) is the most genuinely pleasing chord in the composition.

If joy was found, it was short lived. The journey begins with an expression of wanting more and being dissatisfied with what exists.

Studying

The focus of “Studying” is repetitive activity. The introduction establishes the baseline of stagnation that expands in measure 3. The tempo is of walking speed to indicate a comfortable, unhurried motion. Measures 3 through 20 embody the very beginning of studying, where a person forces themselves to sit down and go through the actions of studying, but may not get very much out of the activity. The two aspects that show such a behavior is not fruitless are the set of triplets in beat one of measure nine and

the eighth notes in measure 20 where the music swells and rises. The triplets signify dawning illumination before the impression fades and drudgery resumes. However, these triplets do not rise in pitch like later ones will. The descending eighth notes in measure 20 insert a moment of enlightenment into the melody, heightened by a crescendo. Leading into measure 21, the left hand climbs upward to segue into the next section, where understanding begins to take root.

Measures 21 through 41 remove the undercurrent of drudgery and the melody is allowed to rise and gain some confidence before becoming shy and pausing in measure 41 as if making a decision. The pieces are almost put together, but at this point full understanding may or may not bloom.

Measures 42 through 70 features the return of the illumination triplets in measure fifty, where the fragment subsequently plays a prominent role in the next three measures. There is a fifth interval, A to E, because the rise in pitch coincides with the burst of difficult but necessary knowledge. It begins low as an ominous presence before being accepted and raised in pitch. The song climaxes with an almost angry falling melody—what was realized was not a good thing. This idea is reinforced as the ending chord is one of melancholy.

Headache

The introduction to “Headache” is a representation of normal, relaxed brain activity. The tempo is close to that of the previous movement, “Studying”, so there is not a shift in motion so much as mood and capability of thought. Transitioning into measures 5 through 13, the headache begins in the melody of the right hand, holding back the flow

of the previous melody and drawing attention away from the left hand. However, the left hand still fills in the gaps in the right hand headache's pulsing, despite the pain and imposition caused by its presence. The headache continues to dominate in Part B, where pinprick-like high Bs emulate the intrusiveness of bright light and sound.

Measures 23 through 32 are when the pain is at its worst. Blood pulses when the right hand goes into octaves and bemoans its lyrical tale of woe. The triplets in right hand battle the left hand's eighth notes in measure 29, indicating that the brain is fighting against the ache, but by the end of measure 32 the pain is still strong. Measures 33 through 48 are the slow recession of blinding pain and the return of normal blood flow, ending in suspended moderate movement indicative of exhaustion. The brain gives in to sleep after its ordeal.

Calm Contemplation

The introduction emulates mental conflict; the syncopation shows there are at least two sides to the issue and they must be reconciled. However, despite conflict, no anger is involved. It is simply an issue, a question, or a daydream. The tempo is noticeably slower than the previous movement--this mood is not being rushed. The key to working through this problem is patience.

Measures 3 through 11 are a preliminary weighing of the issue, which becomes more solid and less abstract in measures 12 through 15. The first chord of measure 16 is where the issue is resolved, but it's still a captivating train of thought even with the primary question answered, so the musing continues. As the piece continues through measure 24, it gets faster and less delicate to segue into measures 25 through 30, where

the issue is seen and understood in its entirety. Measures 31 through 35 reflect the introduction, suggesting satisfaction with where the issue stands.

One feature of “Calm Contemplation” is that there is no anger involved. A problem was resolved using intellectual faculties rather than emotional bluster. The mind works in the delicate, methodical tinkling present in much of the composition. Little by little, it puts together the pieces and presents a coherent picture.

It is a paradigm of peaceful, neutral thinking.

Longing

“Longing” is about functioning while feeling unfulfilled and lonely. The emotional theme of continuing ability to function despite mental hardship in the last three pieces now is reunited with the search for joy from “Happy.” The introduction symbolizes trying to rise while feeling like everything is in shambles. Carrying on like nothing is wrong, as was done in “Calm Contemplation”, is not working particularly well. The first chord in measure 5 is suddenly high pitched in a burst of lingering pain. Continuing through measure 22, the sorrow behind the introduction is explored. The loss is great, yet does not take over the entire mindset. Life is still rolling along in the undercurrent of the left hand, handling each day well enough to pass muster as the left hand notes rise and fall. The mismatches in rhythm in the right and left hands convey a clunky, not always successful attempt at living. Measure 22 ends with a final expression of true melancholy.

Measures 23 through 29 have a more frantic quality that shows the loss has begun to heal and the search for something more is commanding primary focus again. Many of

the same motives persist from measures 5 through 22 because the player has not given in, yet is not healed from the sorrow initially explored. Measure 26 is the best example of looking for and wanting more as the melody's experiences a sudden rise to a high D then immediately drops a third to a B. However, the accompanying motion in the measure ends, causing the dotted quarter note to stagnate—the search was fruitless. Measures 30 through 35 are the painful realization that the loss will never fade, or alternatively, that the pain will be experienced repeatedly because nothing has changed. The last resounding sprawling soft D minor chord speaks of stoic pain.

Resignation

"Resignation" signifies accepting that life is deficient and will never change. "Happy" presents the knowledge that there is something wrong with life, but that idea is not matured until "Longing", where instead of quietly dealing with it and then stoically being sad, in "Resignation" the pain is reveled and wallowed in before being able to mature into a quiet whisper. "Resignation" concludes the emotional journey of the six pieces.

The tempo in "Resignation" is the fastest of all of the six pieces. At 130 beats/minute, the player and the listener are expected to be more engaged in this piece than the others. "Resignation" has a driving force built by the previous movements.

The introduction, measures 1 through 14, shows the growing hurt with a quiet, but swelling and diversifying melody, which peaks in measure 15. The left hand has the low melody, accompanied independently by the right hand in the first four measures. Starting in measure 5, the right hand rises minimally and accepts its sorrow. The melody in

measures 15 through 24 stops frequently with rests because the pain is not constant, but ebbs and flows. The rests cause anticipation in the listener while demonstrating the player's occasional emotional distance because they are distracted from or numbed to their pain for a time. Eventually in measures 19 through 24, the player is swept up in a tide of cresting anger and sorrow, poignant because the forte dynamic combines with full four part harmony. The ritardando in measure 23 slows down the piece enough to put the listener into a state of suspended anticipation. Measures 23 and 24 are the only moment of anger present in the six pieces. All six of them build to the yearning anger and question present in these two measures.

Measures 25 through 33 show a calmer pain, but one that is still not resolved. The legato quarter notes have a minute effect on the driving force beneath the piece, causing a small disruption and drawing attention to the melody's struggles. The opening phrase in measures 34 through 45 is especially stark and bleak. Beginning in measure 41, there are alternating right and left hand punctuations, building tension and anticipation as it crests to the key change in measure 46. Measures 46 and 47 resolve the building anticipation and leave behind a sad magnificence. The key change is a new frame of mind—there seems to be more peace and beauty after the key change than before. The melody reaches upward to high tones almost every measure, but the expectation of the melody remains the same. Instead, the melody learns how to exist in the new frame of mind and has a regal sound. The F minor chord (the tonic) offers the resolution sought; the pain exists but in a different, more mature form than in the beginning. The journey to resignation with sorrow and pain is complete.

## Conclusion

After taking the journey through pain, it is to be understood that pain is universal and takes many different forms. Pain is not a weakness; it is human. Some pain is with a person forever and may be beautiful and delicate, whereas other times it is short and sharp.

Having an outlet, such as music, to cope with pain can only be an asset. In this way students from diverse backgrounds can benefit from continuing to play the piano and find a therapeutic interest or motivation in the art.

## Selected Influences

Recordings

Bergersen, Thomas, *Two Steps from Hell,* iTunes Classics Volume 1, 2013, MP3.

Chopin, Frederic, *Ballade No. 1 in G Minor,* Janusz Olejniczak, Selene B004QS4GQQ, 2011, MP3.

Chopin, Frederic, *Nocturne in C# Minor,* Vladimir Ashkenazy, Decca B00160TO78, 1999, MP3.

Flaherty, Stephen, *Once Upon a December,* MBG Direct B002JT1E3C, 1997, MP3.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich, *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture,* London Philharmonic Orchestra, Classical Compilations B018QAJPVK, 2015, MP3.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich, *Serenade Melancholique,* Itzhak Perlman, Warner Classics B010DUTW46, 2015, MP3.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich, *Swan Lake,* Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, Haenssler Classic B003ACIRAA, 2000, MP3.

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The Piano Guys, *Arwen's Vigil,* Sony Masterworks B009EAO8GE, 2012, MP3.

Zimmer, Hans, *Davy Jones' Theme,* Walt Disney Records B000FTCF2M, 2006, CD.

Zimmer, Hans, *Marry Me Suite,* Walt Disney Records B000FT1F1, 2007, CD.

Scores

Chopin, Frederic. *Ballade No. 1 in G Minor (1831).* New York: G. Schirmer, 1934.

Chopin, Frederic. *Nocturne in C# Minor (1830).* Warsaw, Poland: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1974.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich. *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture (1869).* Moscow, Russia: Muzgiz, 1950.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich. *Serenade Melancholique (1875).* Moscow, Russia: P. Jurgenson, 1876.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich. *Swan Lake (1875).* Moscow, Russia: P. Jurgenson, 1895.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich. *Symphony No. 6 (1893).* Moscow, Russia: P. Jurgenson, 1901.

Learning Pain: A Journey Through the Human Heart for Solo Piano

By

Hannah Hanks

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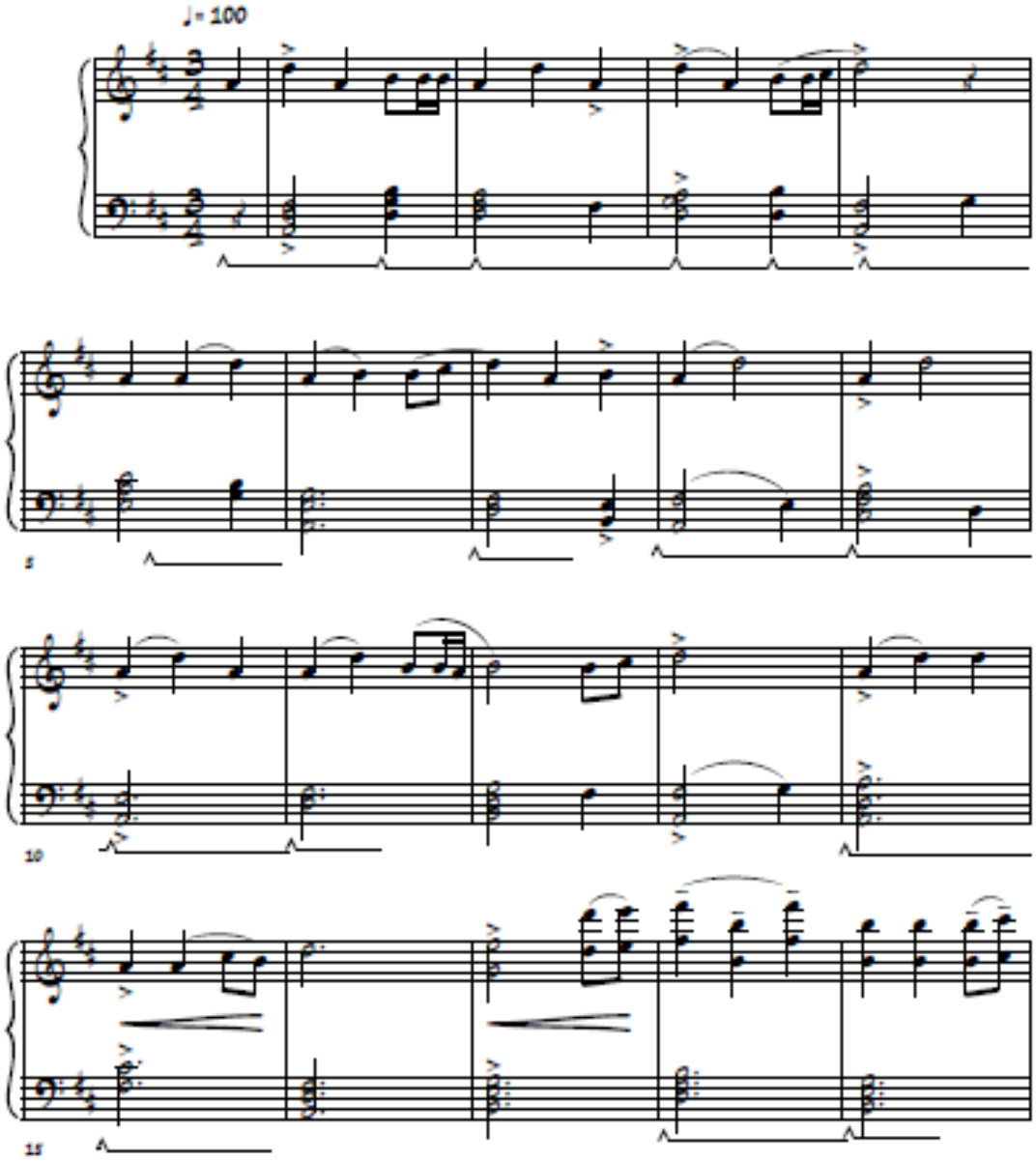
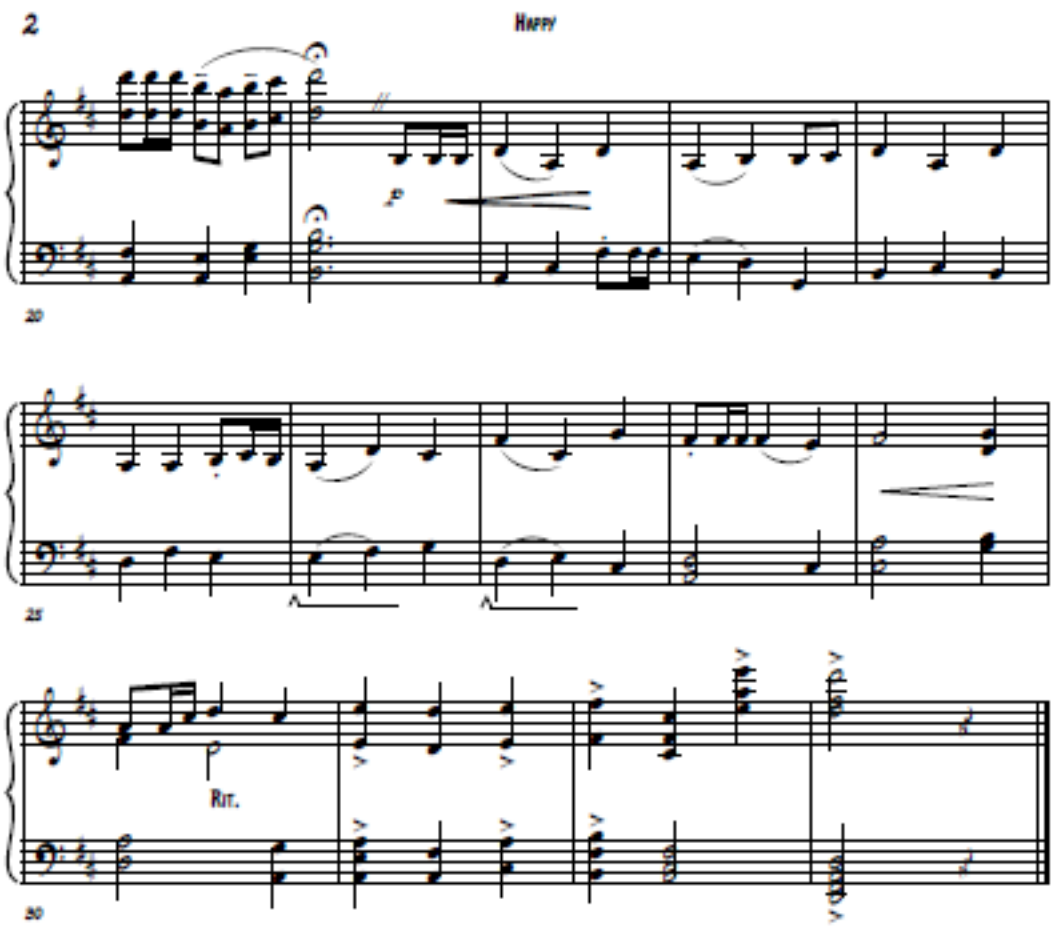
# Happy

Hannah Hanks

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# Studying

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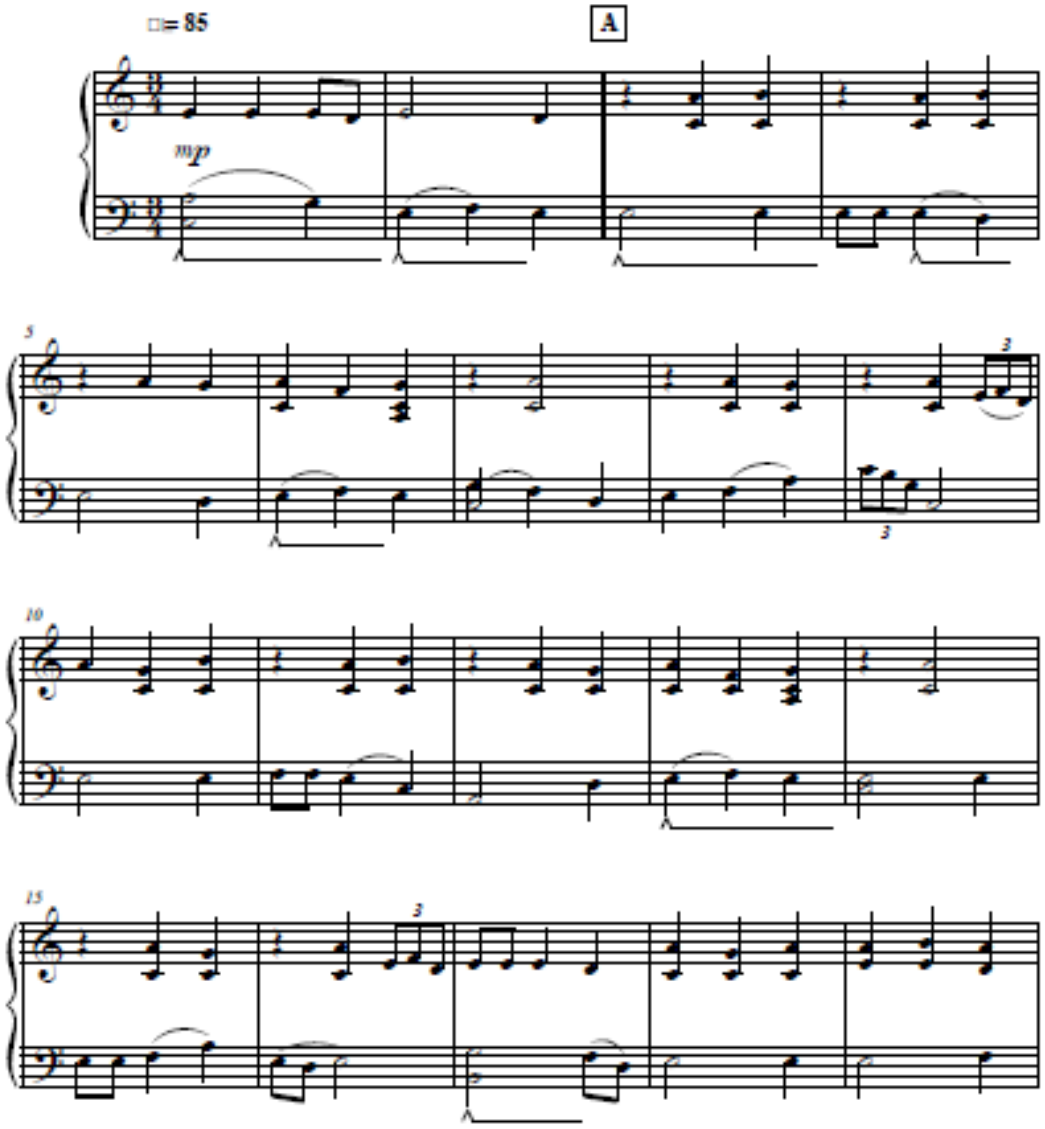

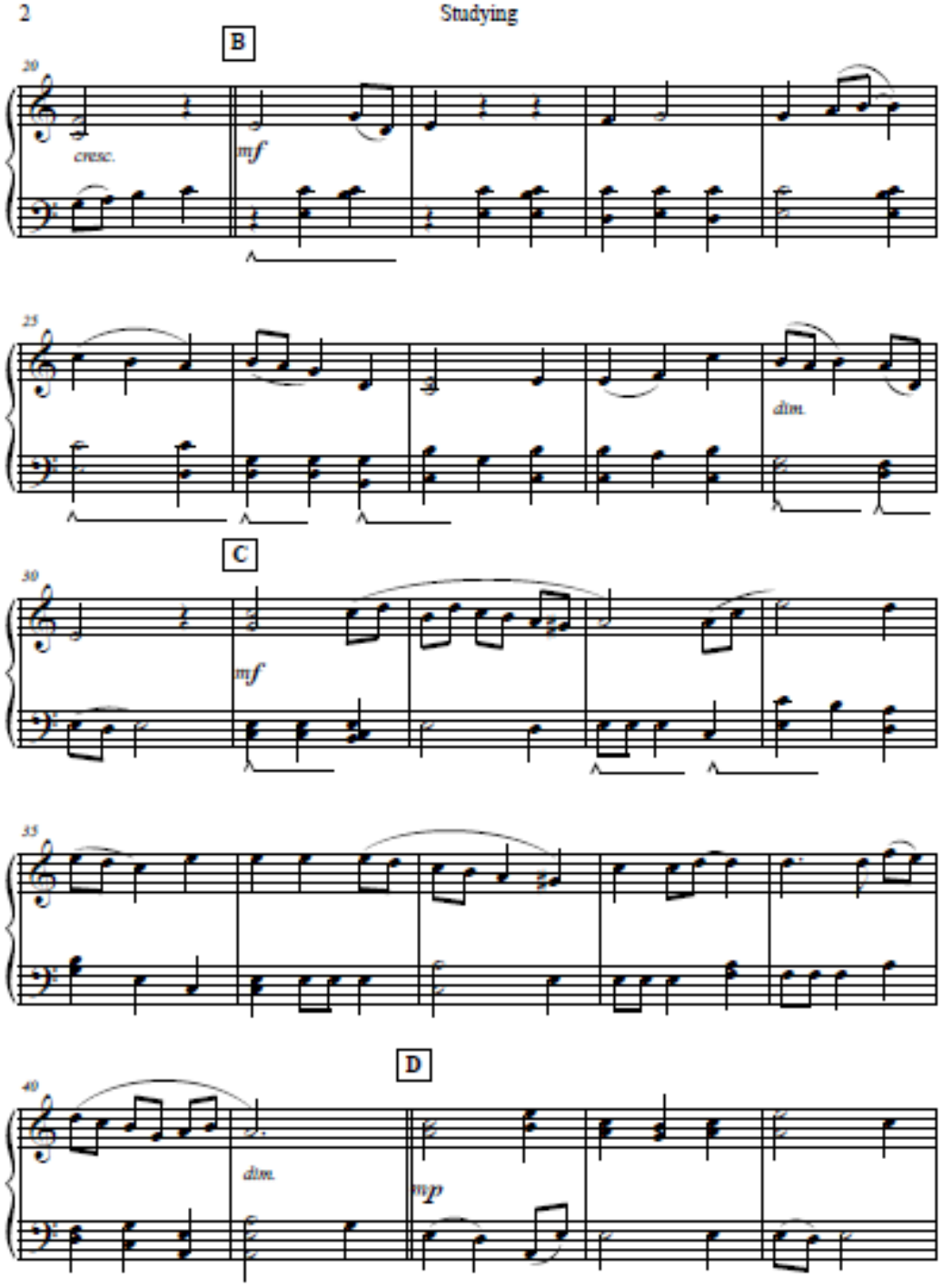
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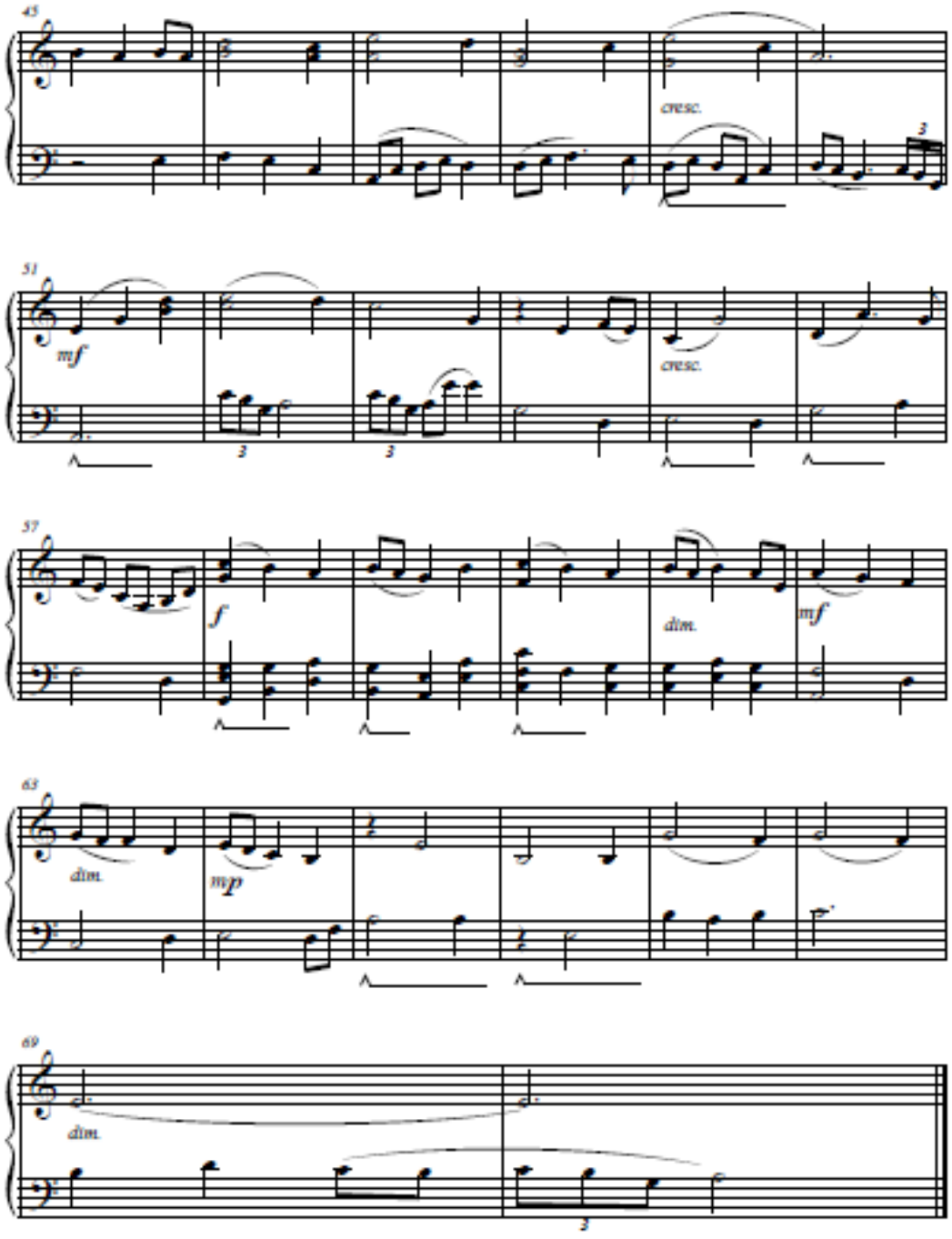
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# Headache

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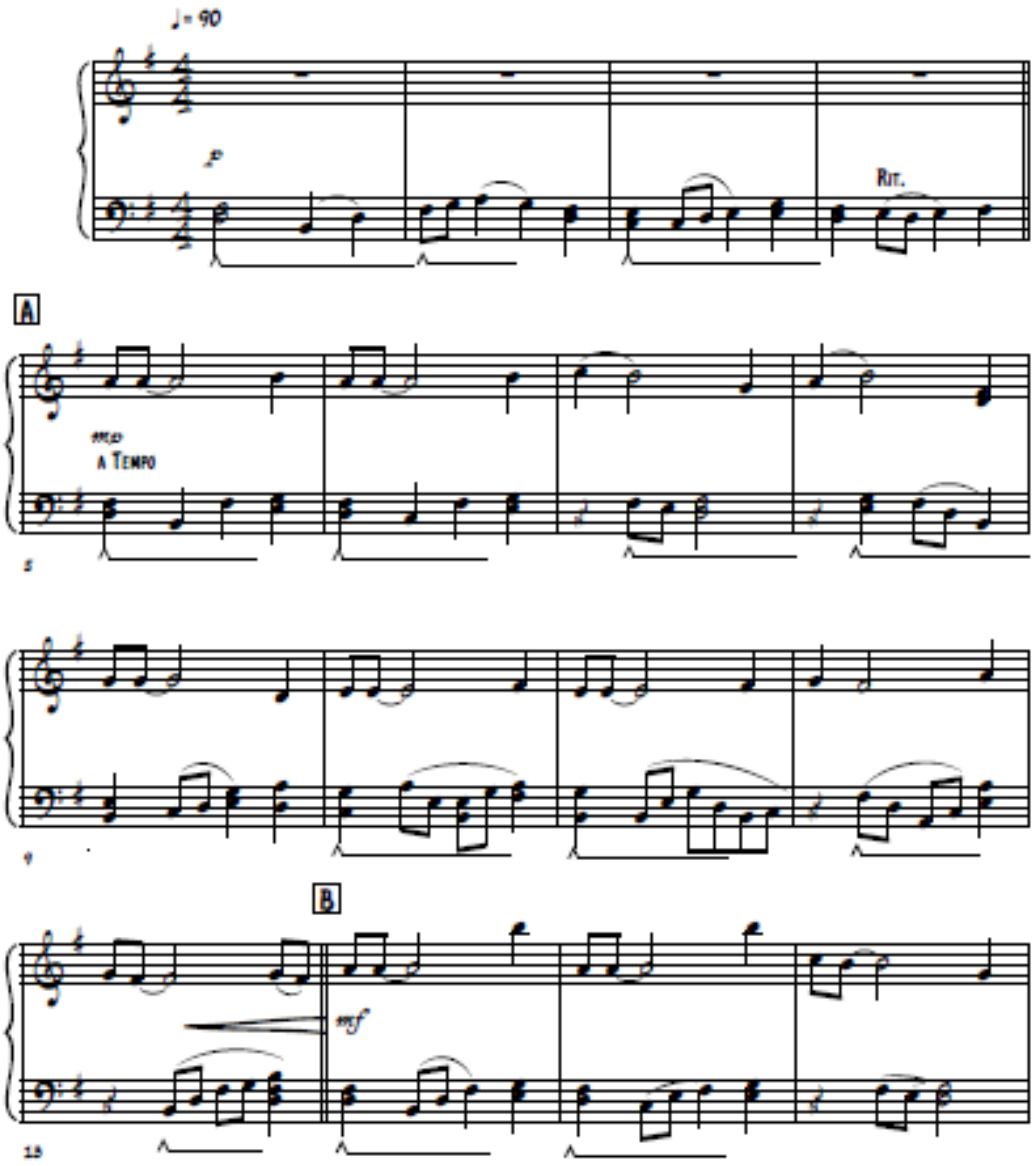

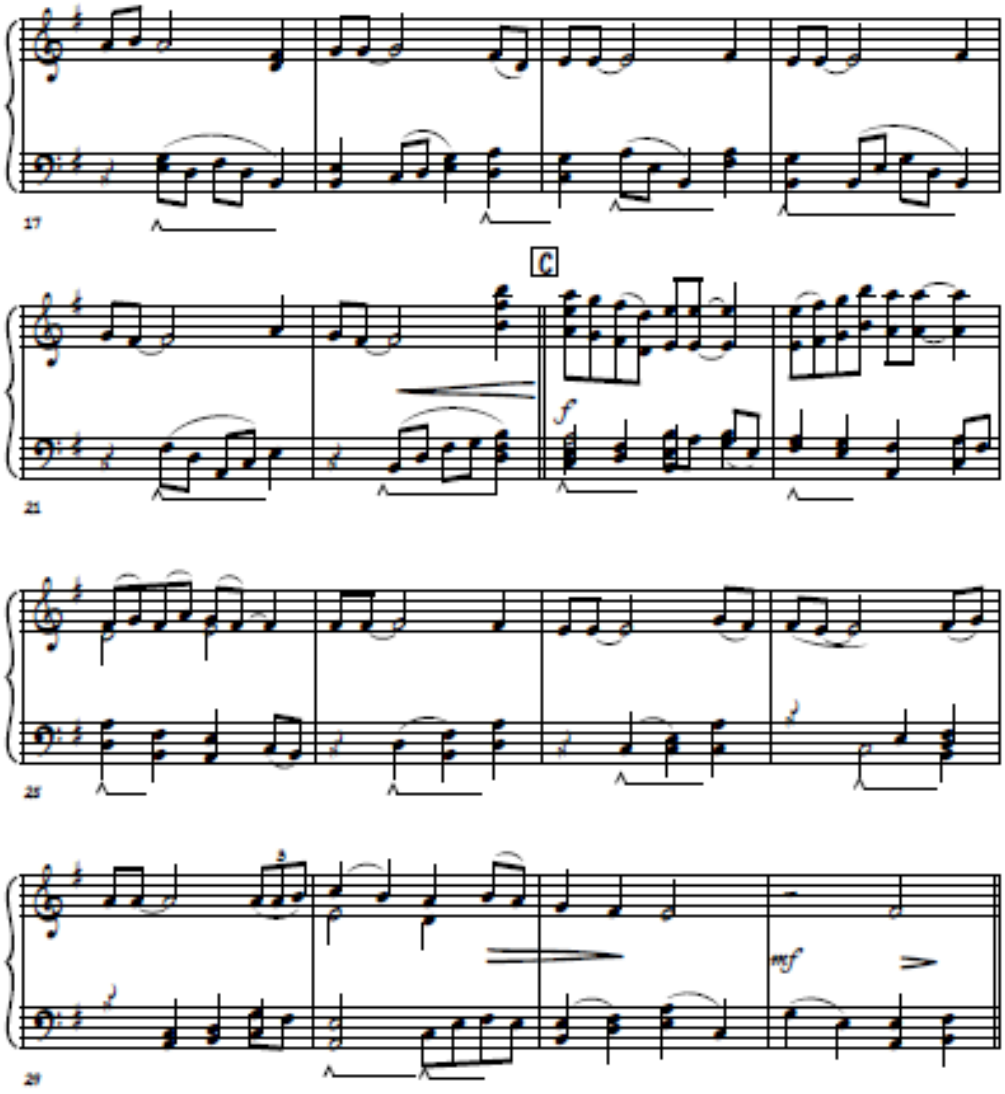
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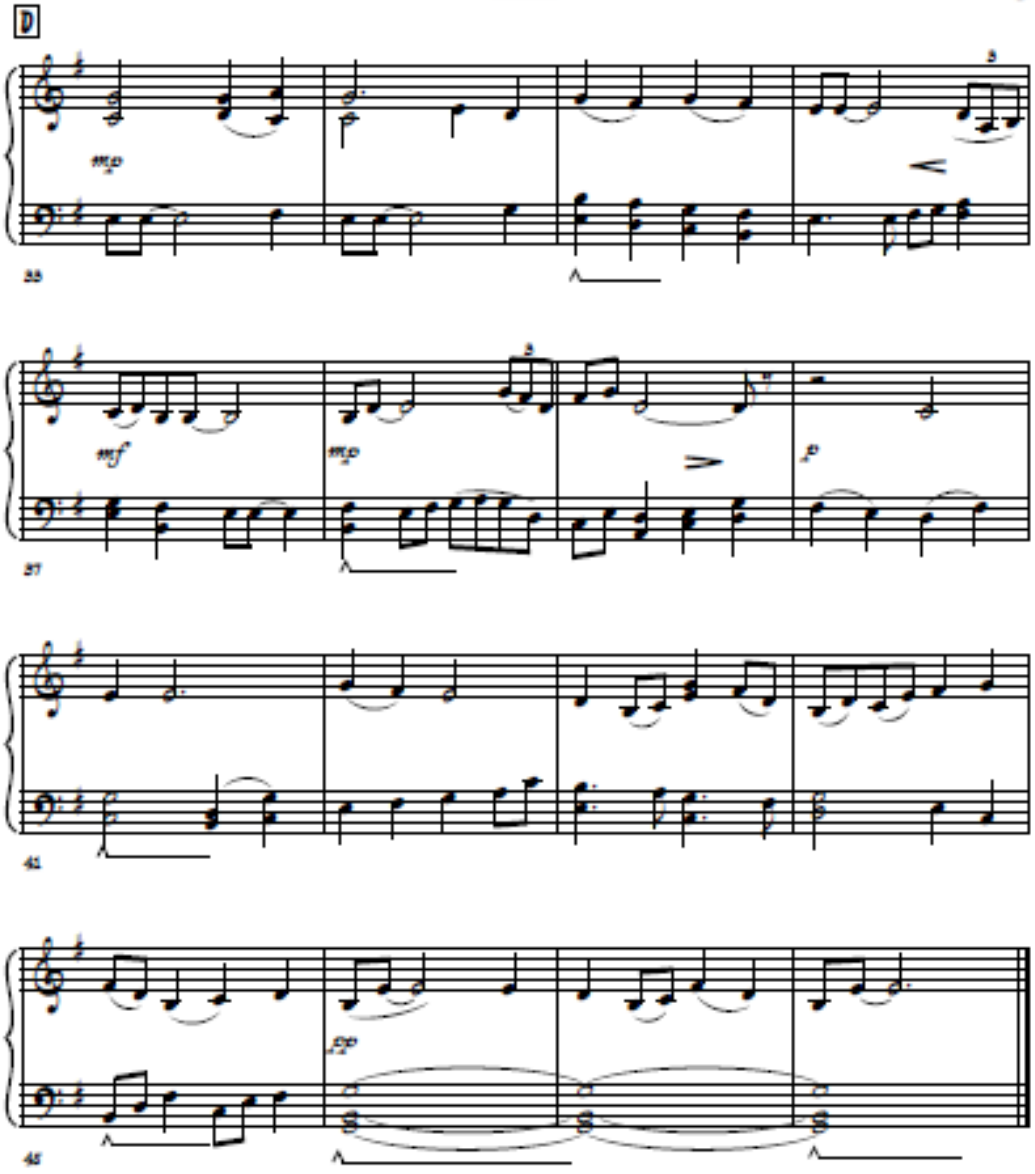
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# Calm Contemplation

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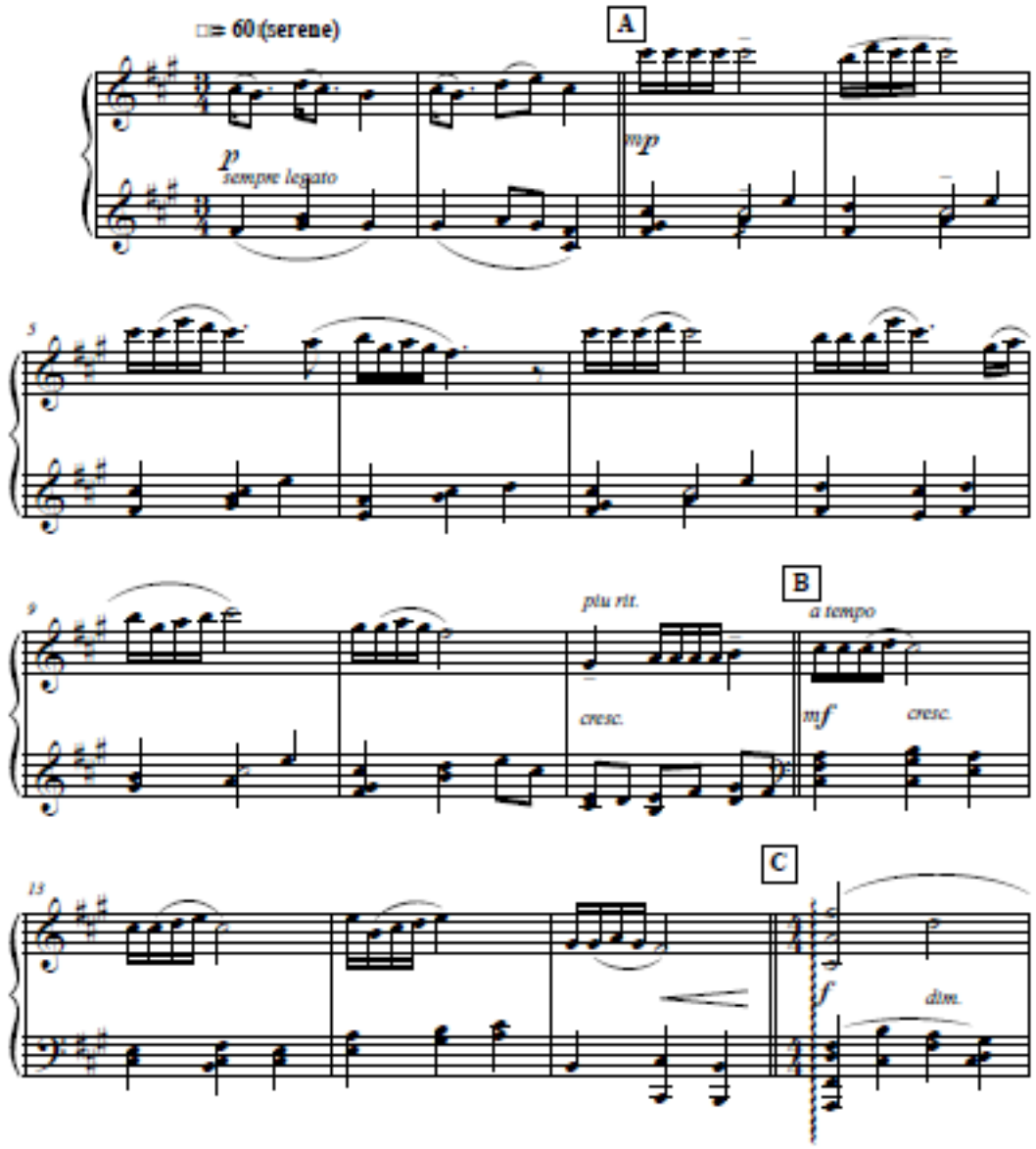

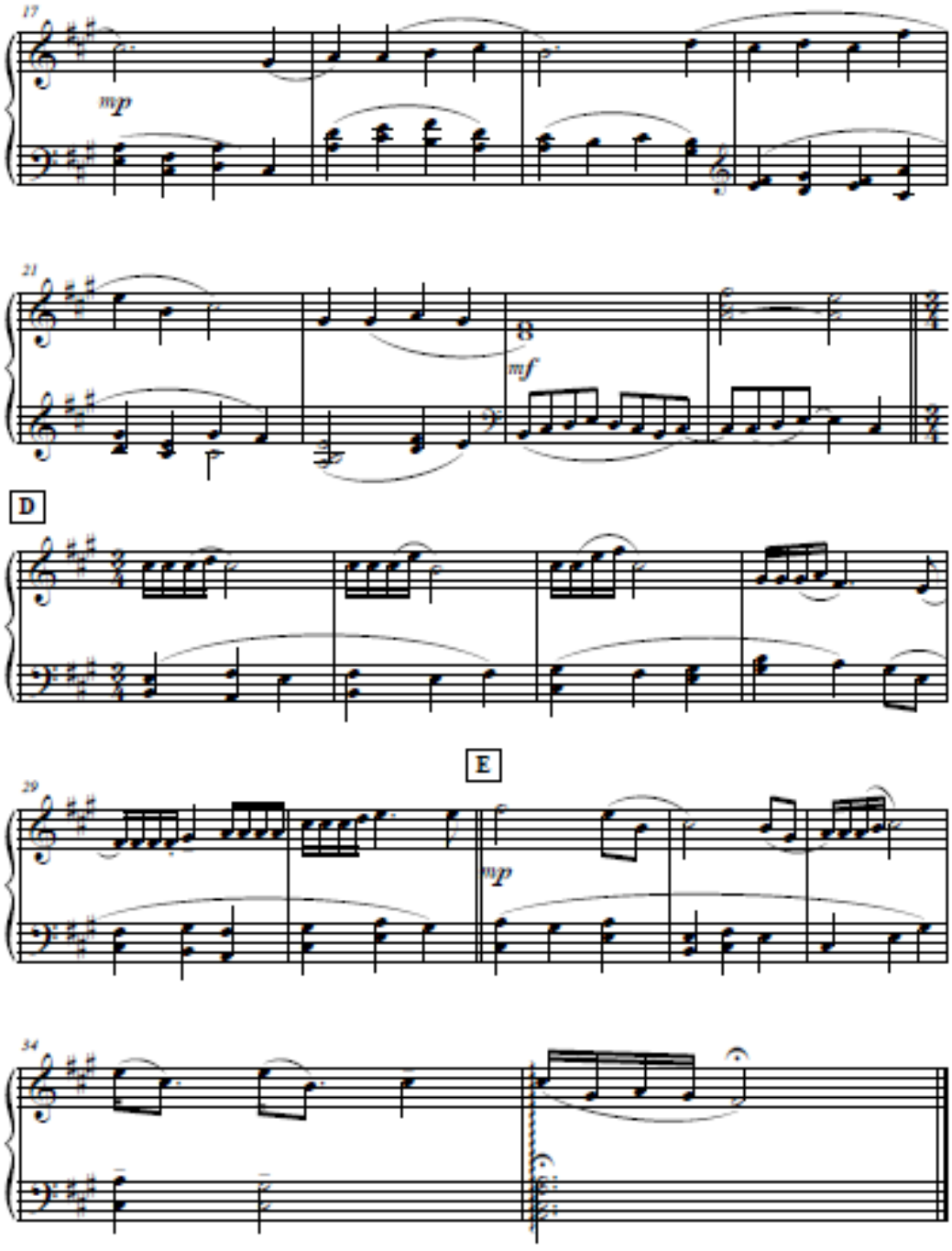
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# Longing

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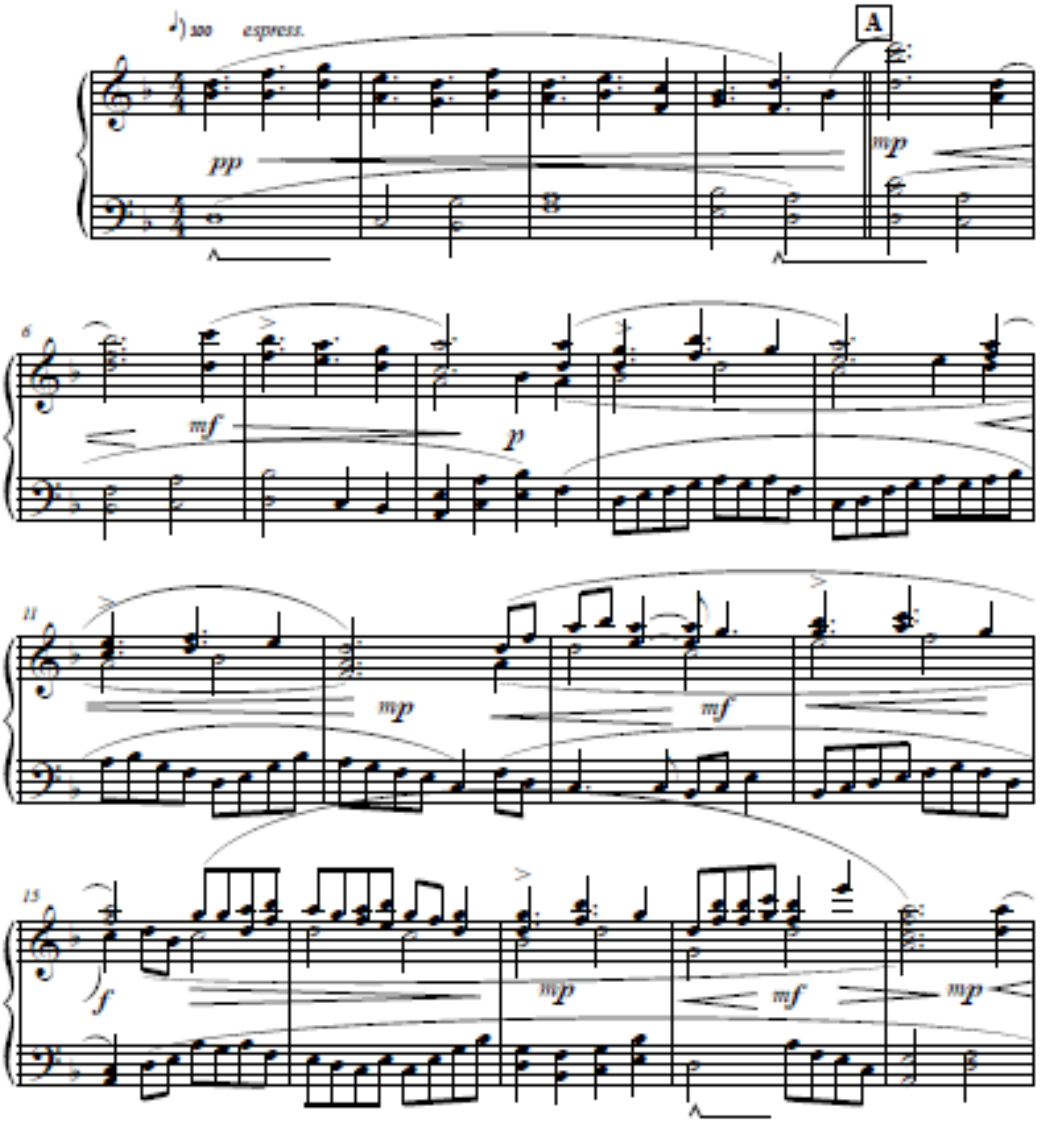

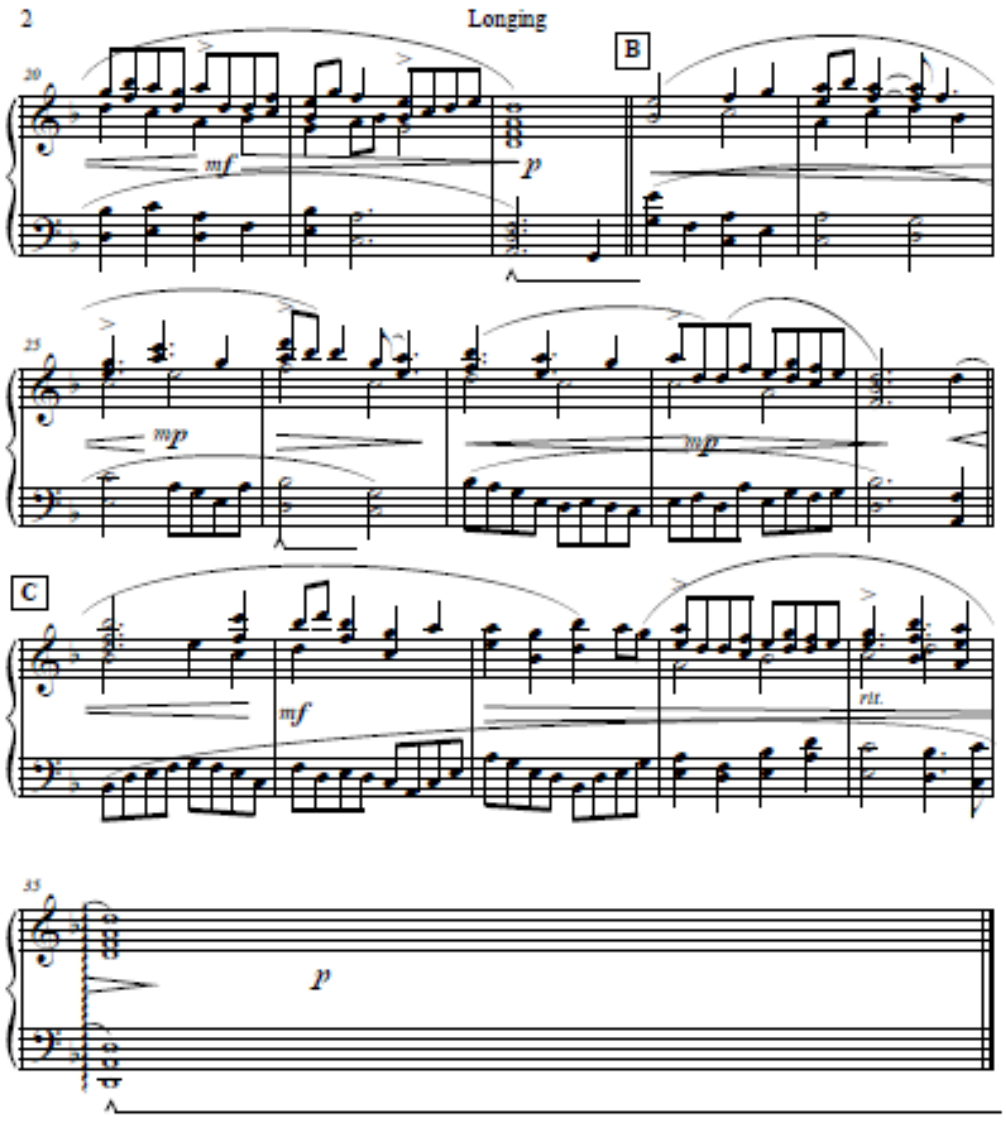
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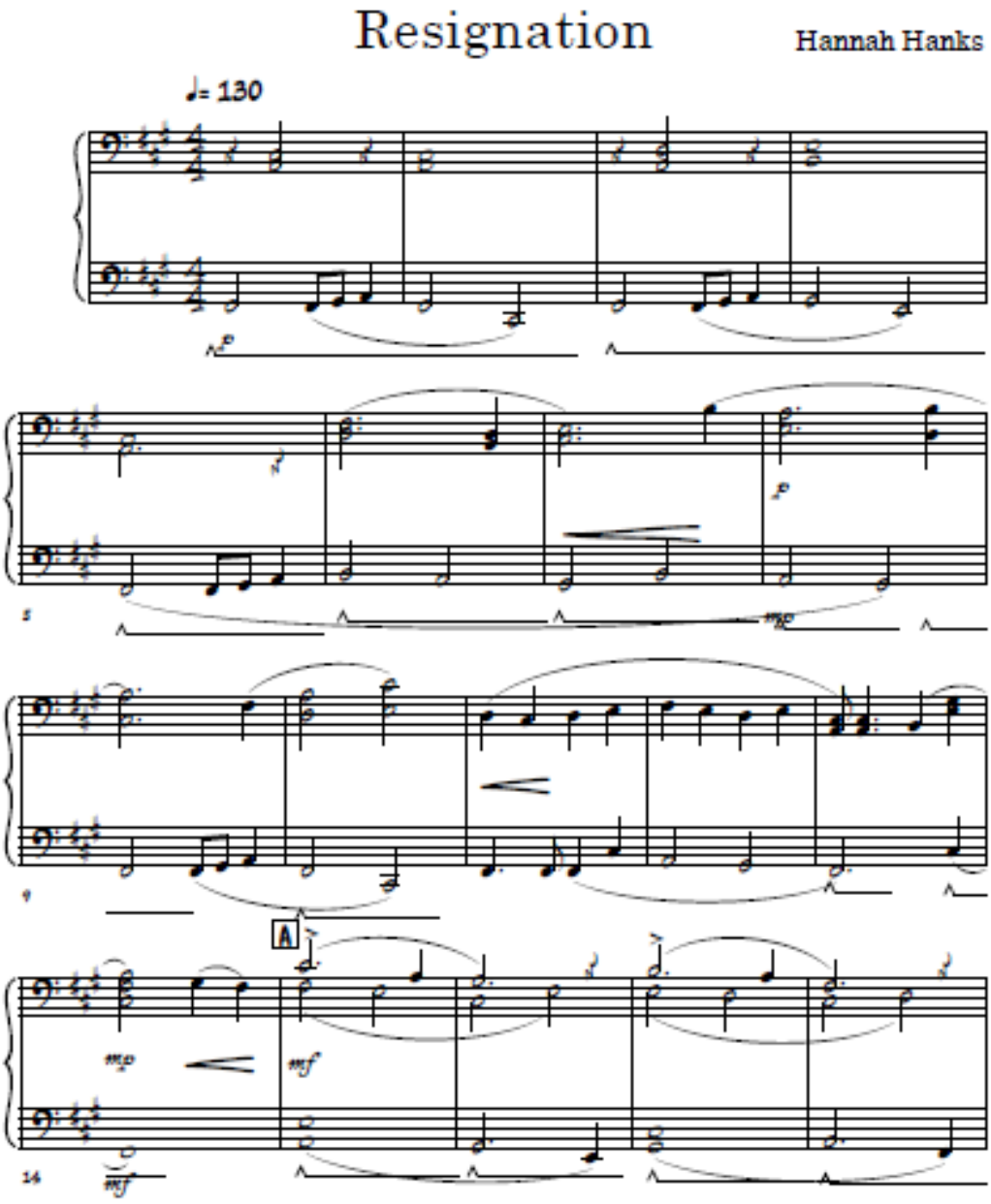
Resignation
Hannah Hanks
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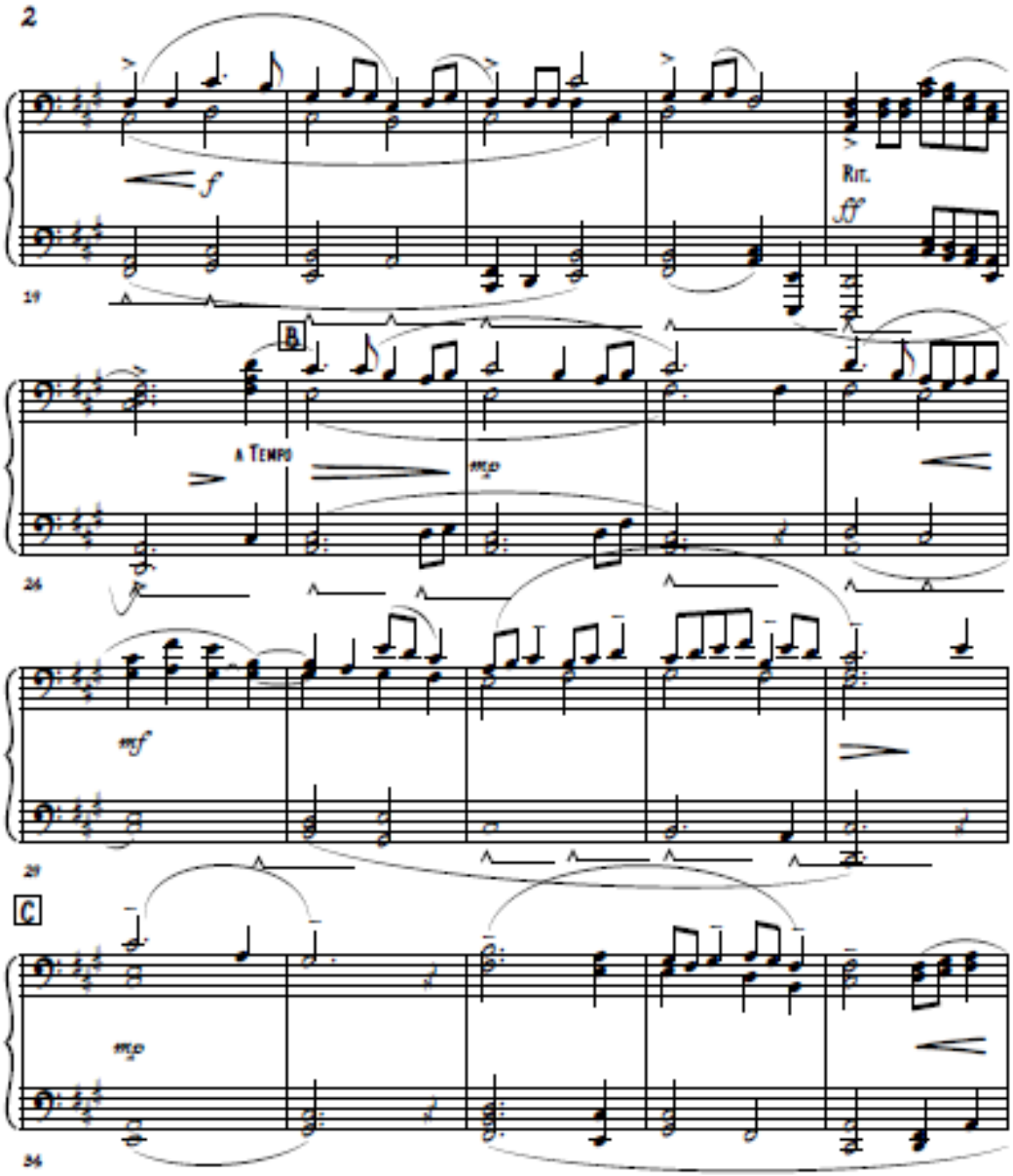
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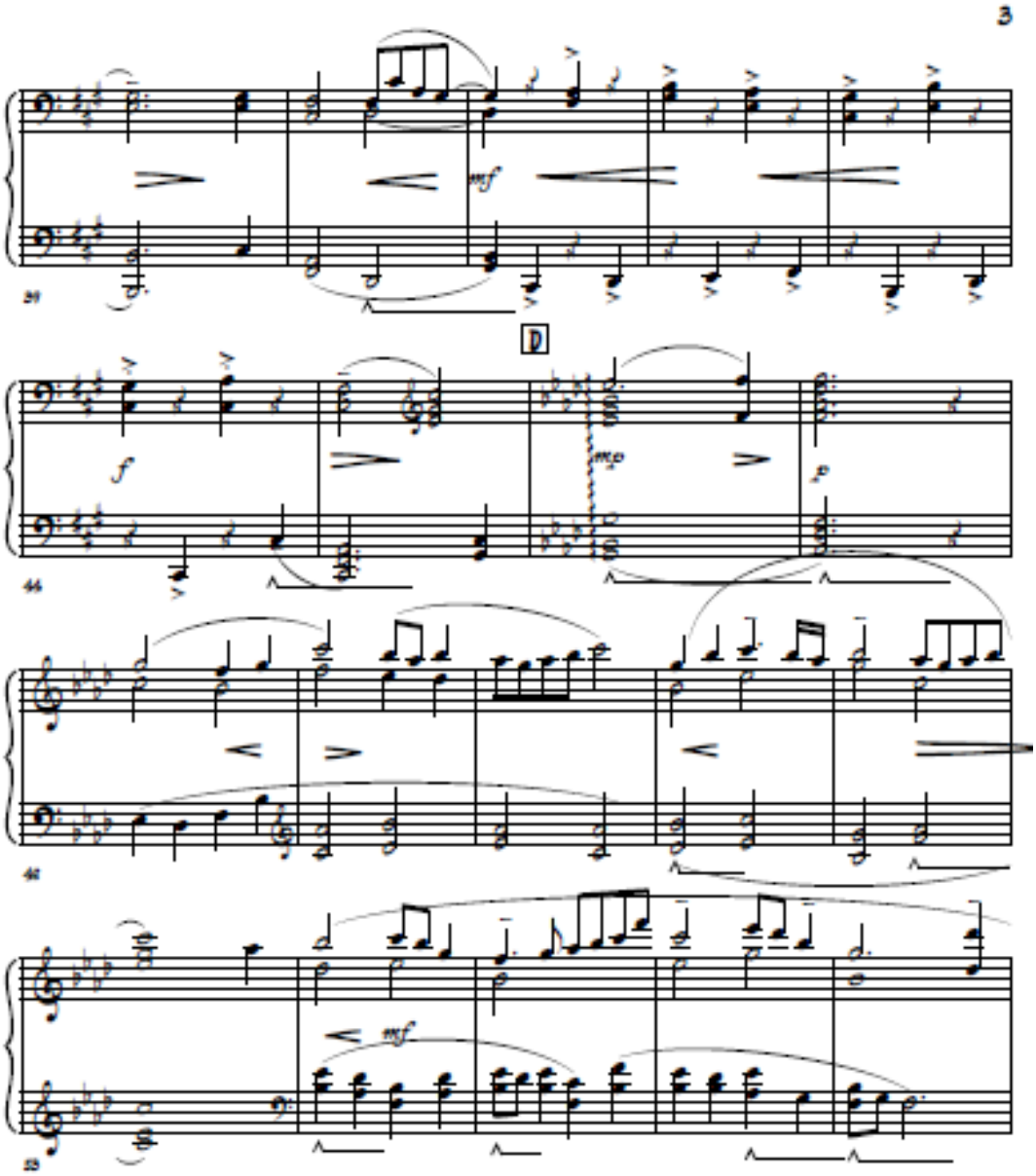
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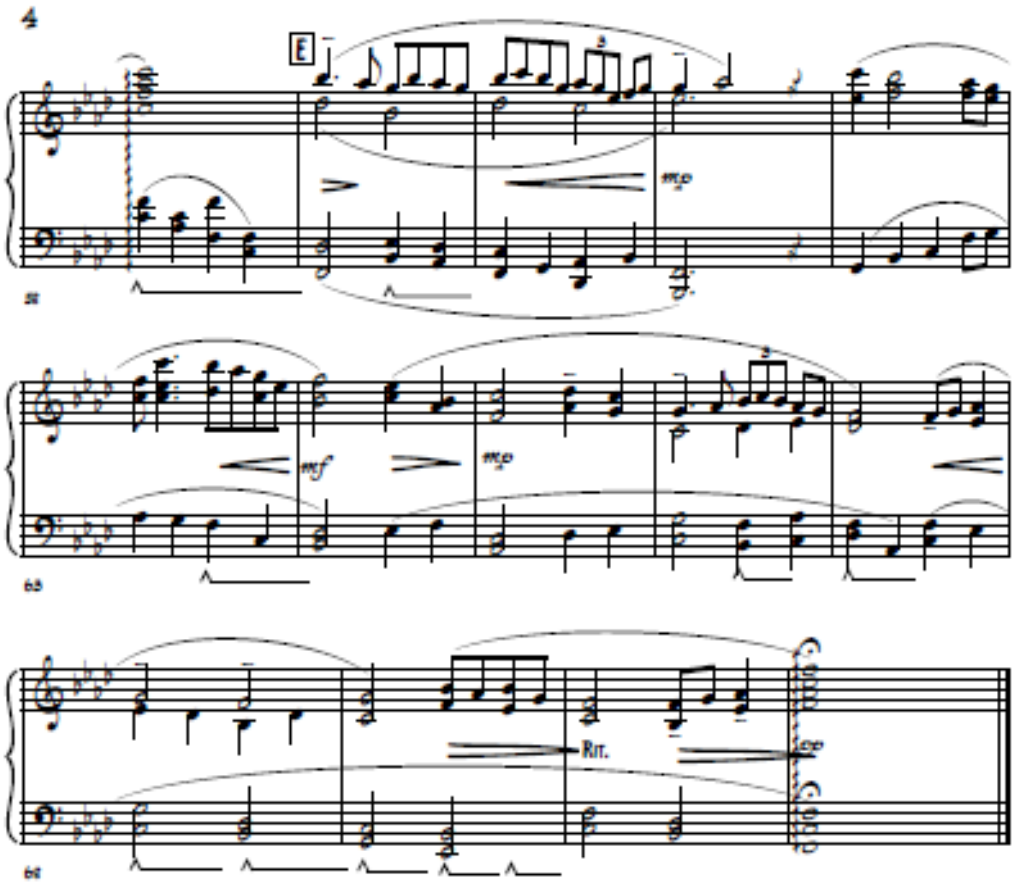
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