Essay #1

An Attempted Self Study on My Compositional Voice

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An Attempted Self Study on My Compositional Voice

"How do you compose?" Such is my most adored and feared question – feared, as it feels nearly impossible to be fully aware of the mysterious and chaotic process of creativity, let alone explain it to others; adored, because with every attempted inspection deep into myself, I gain a little more insight into my identity as a composer and man. This time I find myself confronted with the challenge and opportunity to conduct the most comprehensive study to date on my own process of writing music, from a third person perspective. I shall frame the focus of discussion on the materials of composition that appear the most in my music, and their origins.

I still remember like yesterday the day when I obtained a bootlegged CD of Joe Hisaishi's score of Princess Mononoke during my first visit back to China in 2011. Hearing that soundtrack for the first time had such a profound impact on me that I trace the origin of my dream to be a composer to that exact moment. I became aware of a whole other way of writing art music – western concert music in flesh, East Asian in soul, a sound I had never heard before, and one I have never stopped searching for.

Having been born and raised in China, my passion and fascination in my cultural heritage has only intensified ever since I stepped foot on North American soil. Traditional Chinese musical elements and extra musical materials have been an integral part of my composition work since my early days in architecture school still dreaming to pursue composition full time. Apart from setting classical Chinese poems and depicting epic historical battles in my music, the specific musical elements with which I have composed to embody a Chinese ethos primarily include quintal harmonies, melodies limited by intervals, inspiration from Chinese operas, and quotation of, or homage to folk music.

While it is the case that ancient Chinese music is largely lost and difficult to research and recreate, it is common knowledge and, sometimes a cliché, that the harmony of Chinese music is very much based on quintal/quartal sonorities. The concept of harmony in the western sense is entirely absent in a significant portion of traditional Chinese music, as heard in the Jiangnan Sizhu ensemble,

such as in the Qing Dynasty composition “Sping, River, Flowers, Moon, Night”. The pipa, the xiao, and the erhu play almost always in unison or octaves with, very occasionally, other intervals resulting vertically from regional, quasi-improvised differences in one melodic part. This is but one of the countless telling examples that the fundamental basis of the concept of “harmony” in most traditional Chinese ensemble music, as opposed to the Western foundation of tertian construction for centuries, is, like they teach in Zen Buddhism, “nothingness” – the mere doubling of melodies by octaves for enlargement of instrumental force and colour, with total apathy for any elaborate vertical intervallic sonorities. This conclusion serves equally well the same phenomenon in Beijing Opera, where the band almost always play in unison with the singer. The occasionally formed “harmonic” intervals appear to solely, “accidentally” result from the interest of polyphony, not from concern of vertical richness.

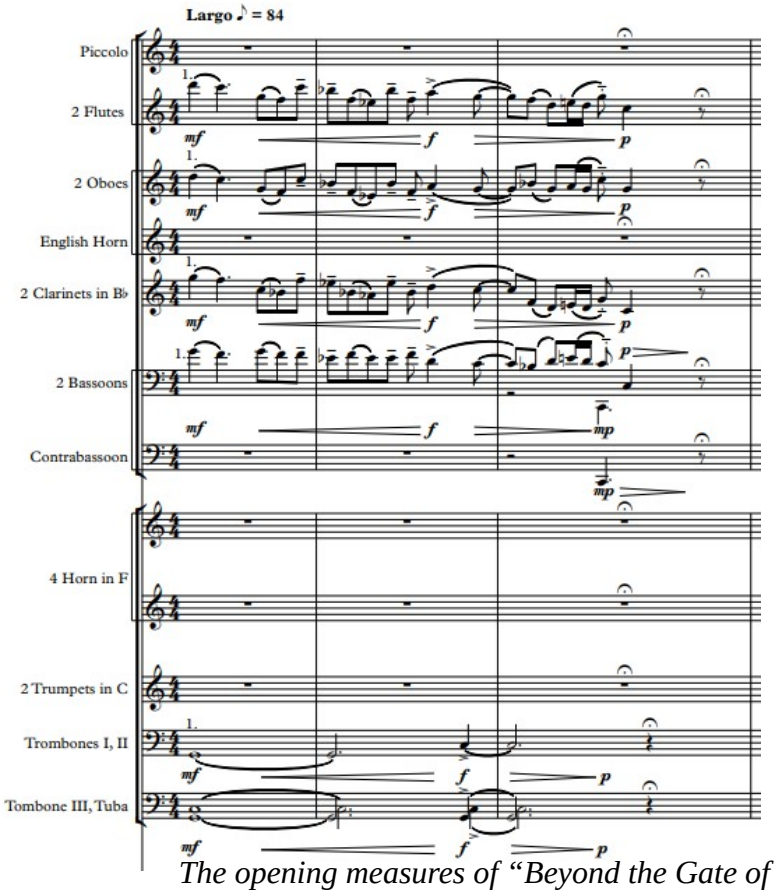
From this nothingness of unison, the harmonic realm did expand so far as adopting quintal and quartal sonorities systematically in certain cases. One of the places that could serve as evidence of such practice in ancient Chinese music is, interestingly, across the pond - Gagaku. The royal court music of Japan had been transmitted from China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). Between the ryūteki (literally, the “dragon flute”) representing the dragon soaring across the sky, and the hichiriki representing mankind with its double reeds, the shō paves a delicate, steady stream of sustained harmonies in 2nd, 4th, and 5th intervals. The Tang Dynasty was a time of tremendously frequent cultural exchanges between China and Japan, when most of the traditional Japanese instruments today, along with the language, Buddhism, and political systems, were

Main theme of the Qing Dynasty “Spring, River, Flowers, Moon, Night” arranged for the Jiangnan Sizhu Ensemble. From top to bottom: pipa, xiao, erhu, in unison with occasional variations.

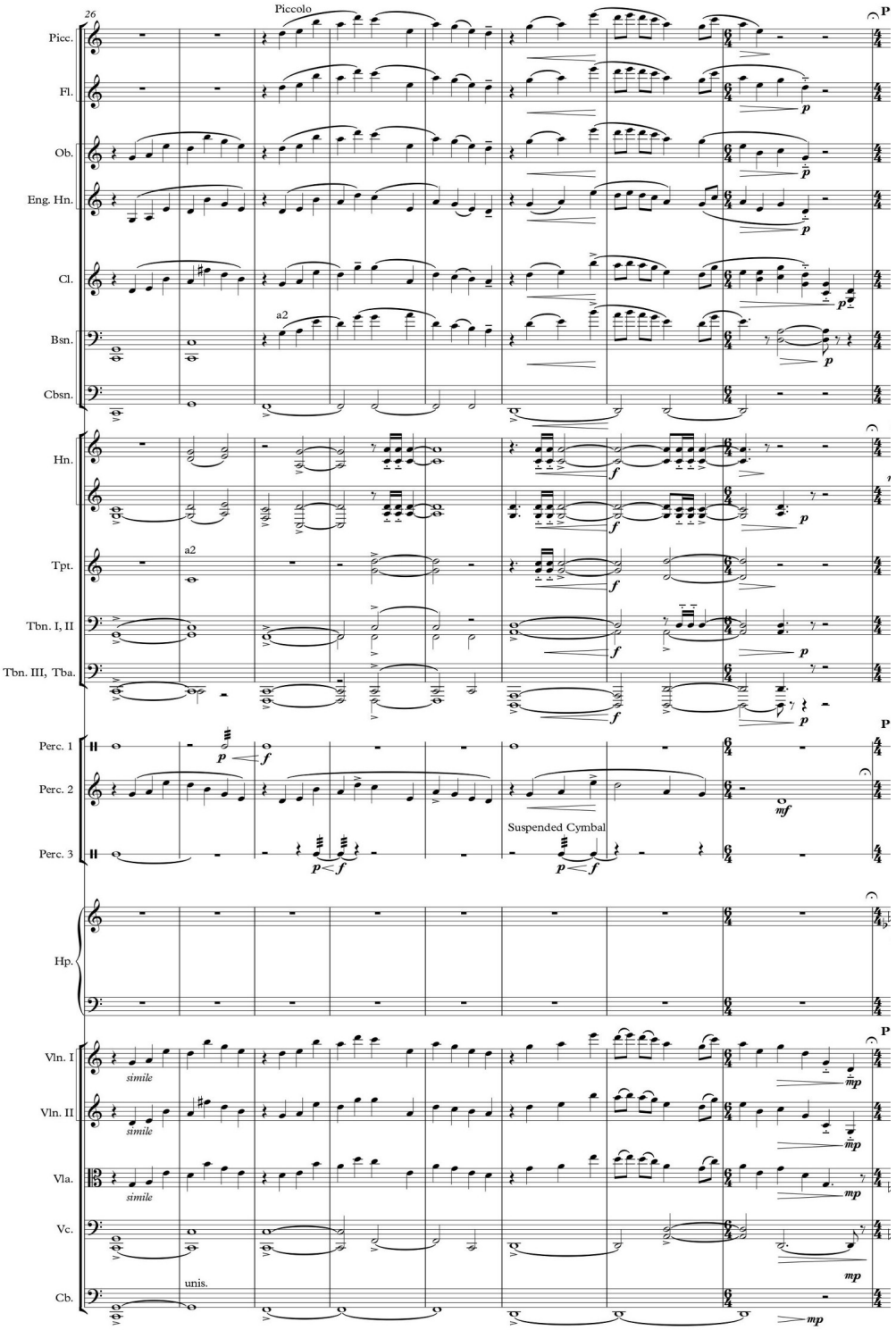
brought from China to Japan. Miraculously, such instruments as the biwa and the shō have barely changed in the past millennia, telling their ancient stories intertwined with Chinese history as living fossils.

It is from these roots that my own Chinese art music has grown. Firstly, in the realm of harmony – the parameter of my greatest interest, I have often sought for quintal sonories as my material and aesthetic foundation. The soul of the perfect 5th permeates beyond harmony into other realms such as voice leading, as seen in the following two examples in my "Beyond the Gate of Supreme Harmony", inspired by the architecture of the former Chinese imperial palace, The Forbidden City.

Integration, reconciliation, and bridging the gap – such is the task of even greater meaning and challenge, working in the milieu of western art music. Undoubtedly I have never entertained the idea of restricting my harmonic vocabulary to 5th's and 2nd's, while suffering from severe musical split personality syndrome with the temptations of the rich and vast harmonic tradition of the west for the past five centuries. My attempt at an organic marriage of the two worlds in my harmonies can beseen, and best represented by, the following section of my "Call of the Paper Kite" for Solo Piano (2014). While most chords here are of tertian nature and embody my influence from jazz with their ii – V – I functions and tall extensions, certain chords are in fact of quintal construction, carefully arranged in voicings more compatible with their tertian context. The B chord in mm. 36, where it should have been a B half

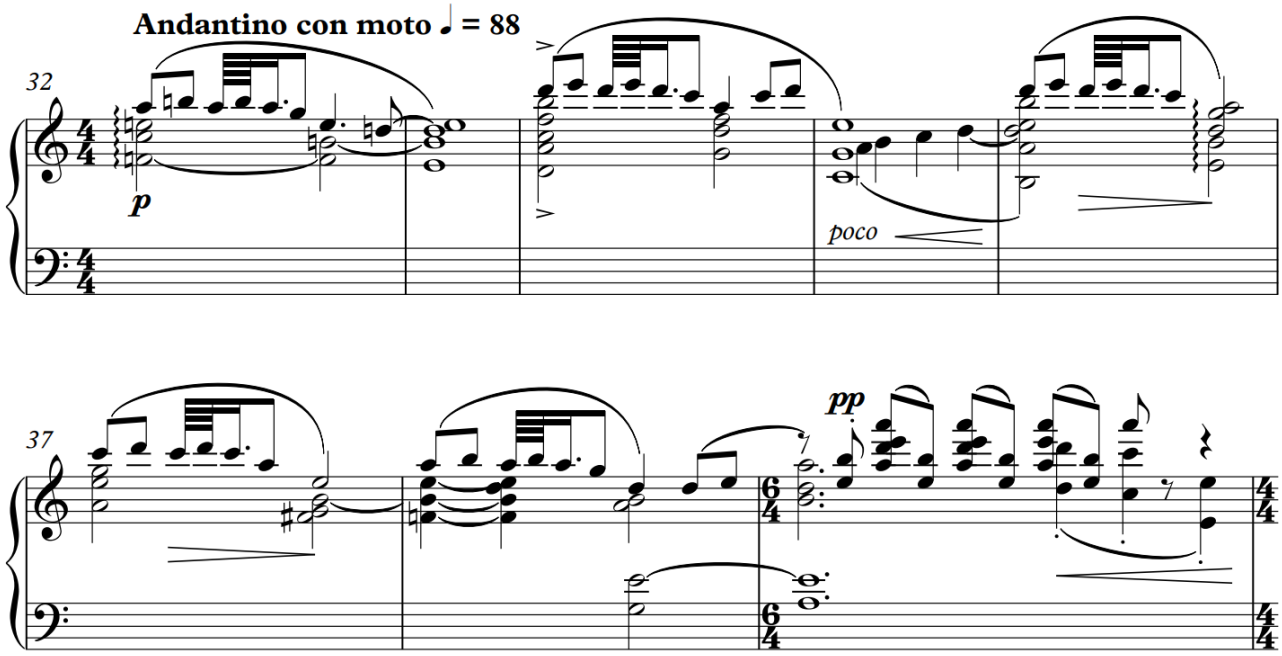


The opening measures of "Beyond the Gate of Supreme Harmony" for Orchestra (2013, 2015 orch.), with parallel 5th voice leading above open 5th harmony



"Beyond the Gate of Supreme Harmony" mm. 28-33. The chord in the brass section in mm. 30, is in fact the five-note quintal chord of F – C – G – D – A in a different voicing, while the strings melody is thickened by perfect 5th in parallel motion, doubled in the wood winds

diminished 7th chord diatonically in A minor, has an added 11th while lacking the 5th, therefore blurring its colour between minor 7th and half diminished 7th. A more truthful and telling understanding of this chord, however, reveals that it is in fact an all 4th's quartal chord of B – E – A – D with E voiced on the top, rendering the bottom three notes as the impression of the root, 3rd, and 7th of a tertian chord. The following chord, in the same vein, appears to be an E minor 7th chord with added 11th, while it is in fact a five-note quintal chord, G – D – A – E – B in "root position".



Call of the Paper Kite for Solo Piano (2014), second theme, mm. 32-39

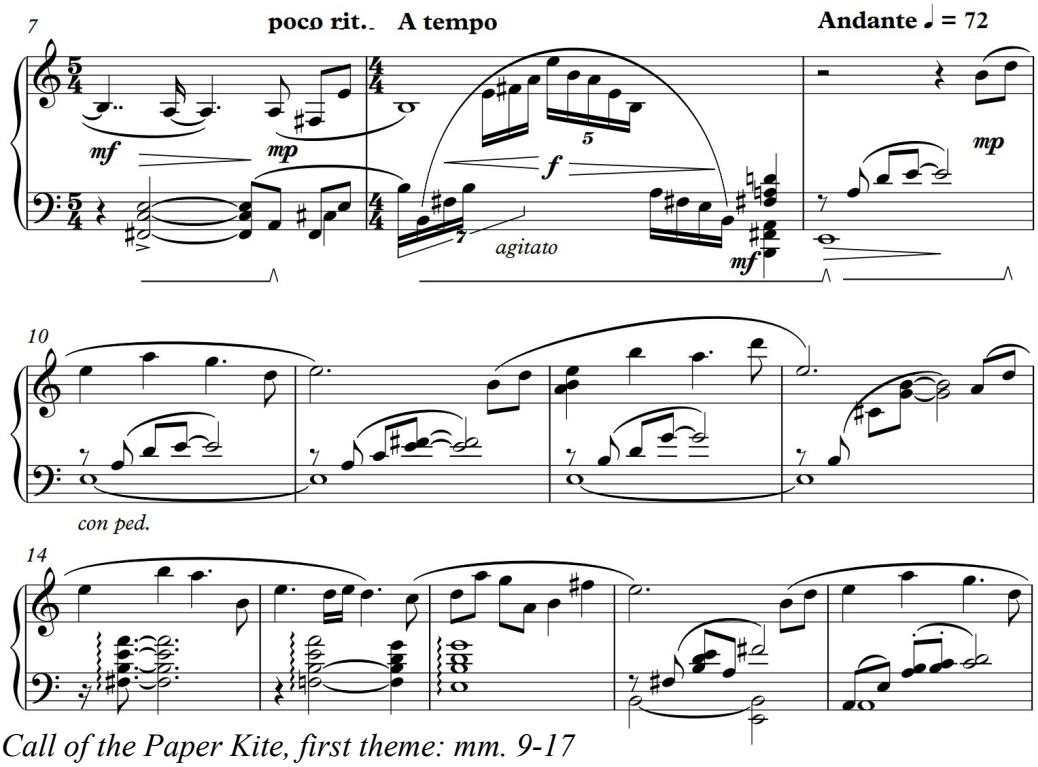
In the melodic realm, I have sought for a Chinese ethos by limiting the kinds of intervals that would construct the melody horizontally, and by incorporating elements and techniques from the Chinese operas. Firstly, the vast Chinese landscape is blessed with folk music with distinctly recognizable flavours from each province. A significant contributor to these regional identities is the emphasis on one or two exclusive intervals in the linear flow of melodies. As demonstrated by the following score of the Shaanbei Province folk song "Gan Sheng Ling", the melody is characterized by

prominent use of the perfect 4th and minor 7th intervals, both ascending and descending, with the occasional perfect 5th's assuming a secondary significance.

Such is the genetic construction of many of the Chinese melodies of my own, for the desired flavours. The first theme of, once again, my Call of the Paper Kite, may very well give the impression of a tune heard on the rural paths through the Shaanbei villages, whereas it is entirely my own.

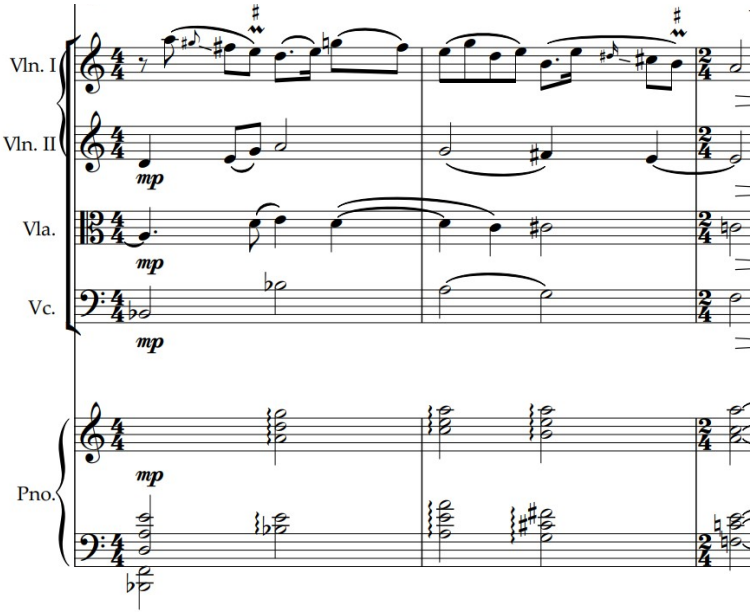
Shaanbei Province folk song "Gan Sheng Ling" (The Drovers Spirit), with prominent perfect 4th 's and minor 7th's in the linear making of the melody

This melody is written with almost entirely ascending and descending perfect 4th's, perfect 5th's and minor 7th's, or, in other words, interval classes 2 and 5.



Call of the Paper Kite, first theme: mm. 9-17

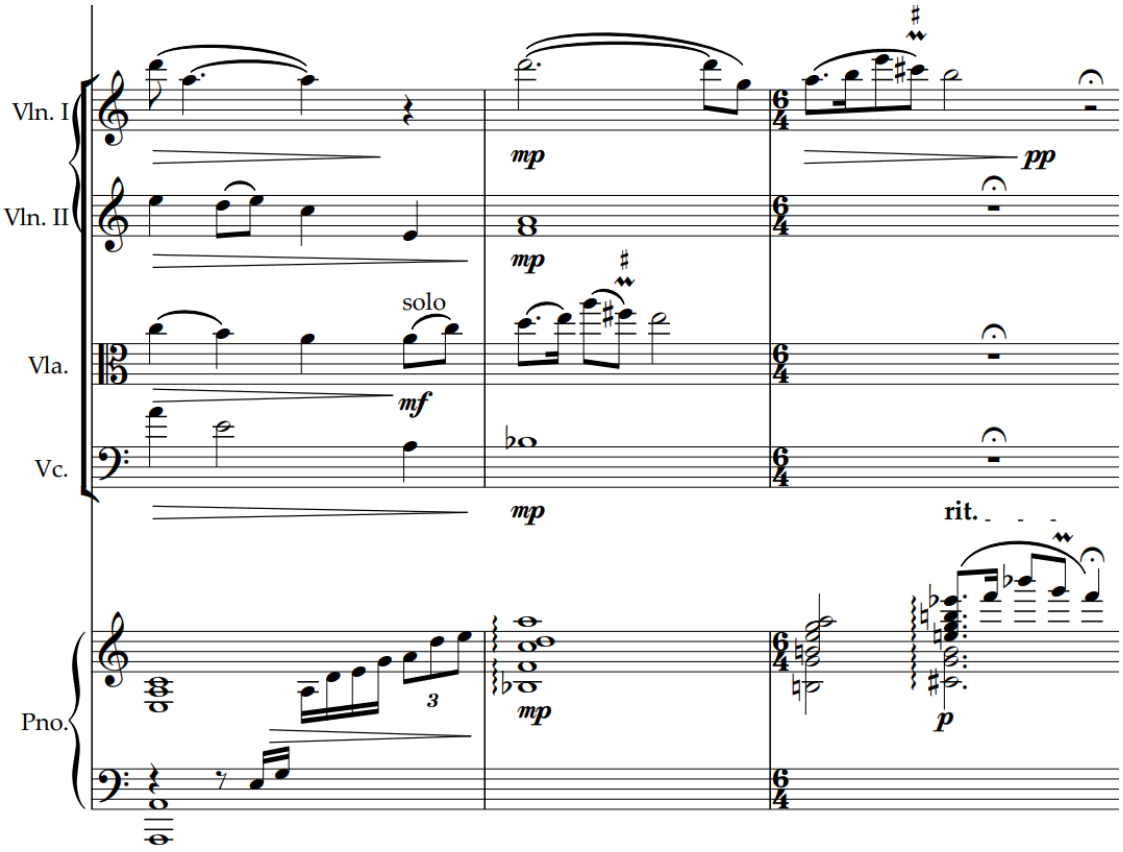
Secondly, I have found elements of the Chinese operas making their way into my melodies, sometimes perhaps subconsciously. A signature feature of Chinese operas and, more broadly, traditional Chinese music in general, is the indefinite quality of pitch. Notes always seem to escape the string or the vocal cord elusively in trills and wide vibratos, sliding from one pitch to the next with no clear boundaries. In my "Die Lian Hua", Poem of Song Dynasty for Soprano and Chamber Ensemble (2017), an instrumental motif, characterized by a "Chinese opera glissando", appears extensively across different instruments throughout the structure. This occurs, for instance, in the first violin in mm. 26-28.



"Die Lian Hua", mm. 26-28

It is worth noting that this was my first experimentation with bi-tonality that resulted from the search for melodic motifs that are Chinese-opera in spirit. Here the first violin melody, undoubtedly, would have been harmonized with a D chord as the most logical tonal practice; yet it is supported with a B-flat chord. The false relation between the F-sharp in the melody and the F-natural in the harmony, which would have been quite harsh in such a context, is made more smooth from being hidden under the glissando. This false relation occurred very much by chance from the melodic writing, without conscious planning. I accepted it right since its conception, and have found myself developing it into a systematic practice in my subsequent "Chinese compositions". A similar and more dramatic use of this practice is demonstrated later in this piece in mm. 55-57, where the viola clashes with the piano with F-sharp against F-natural, followed by the piano melody clashing with its own harmonization with E-flat and B-flat clashing with E-natural and B-natural, in a canonic imitation between viola, first violin and

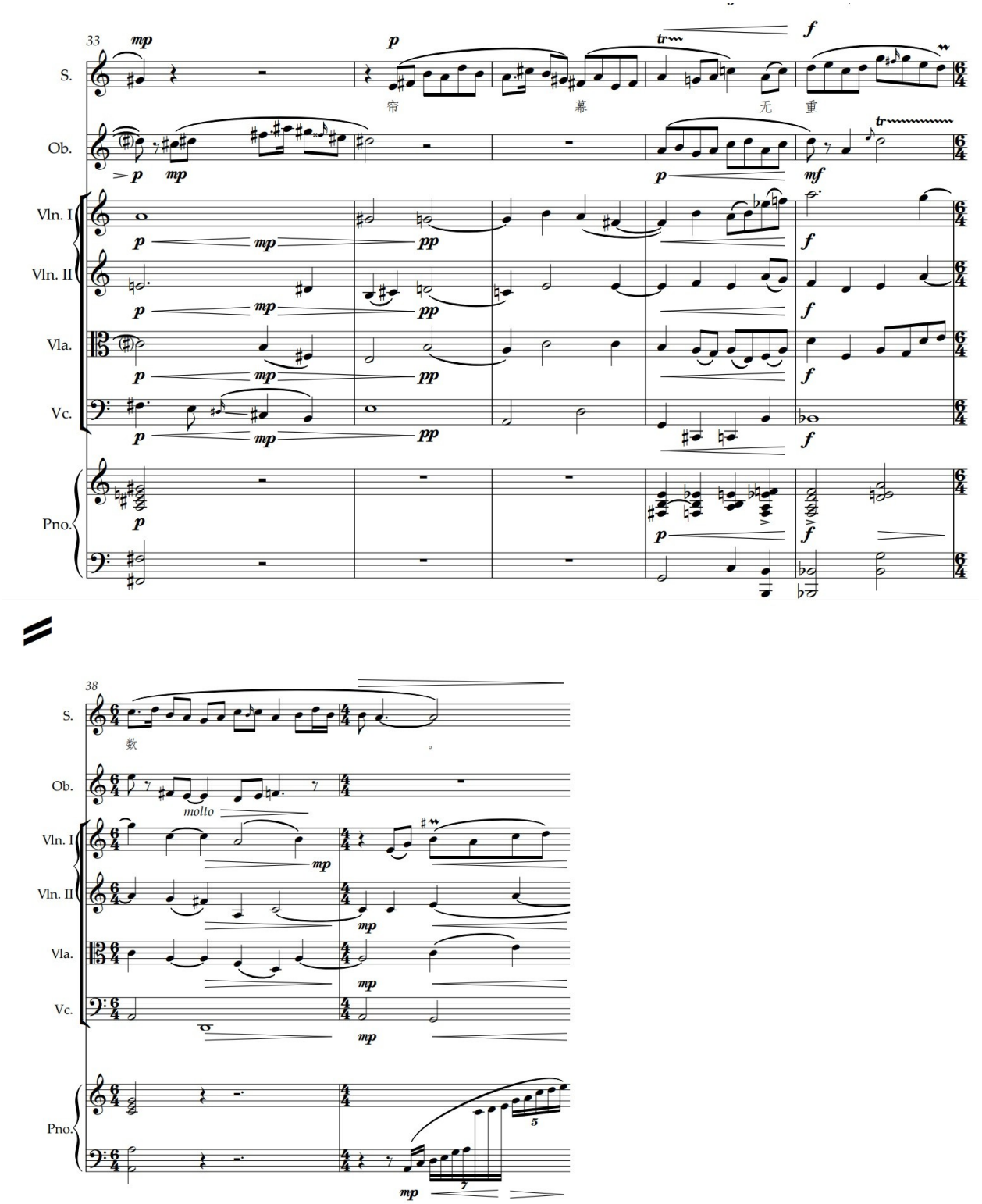
piano. The false-relations in the piano part in mm. 57 is, likewise, the symptom of my subconscious bi-tonal thinking, which clearly facilitates an E-flat major melody harmonized in the key of either E minor or B minor with the C-sharp half diminished 7th chord. Such a bi-tonal practice is among my most significant attempts to harmonize traditional Chinese musical elements with Western art music compositional techniques.



"Die Lian Hua", mm. 55-57: false relations resulting from bi-tonality

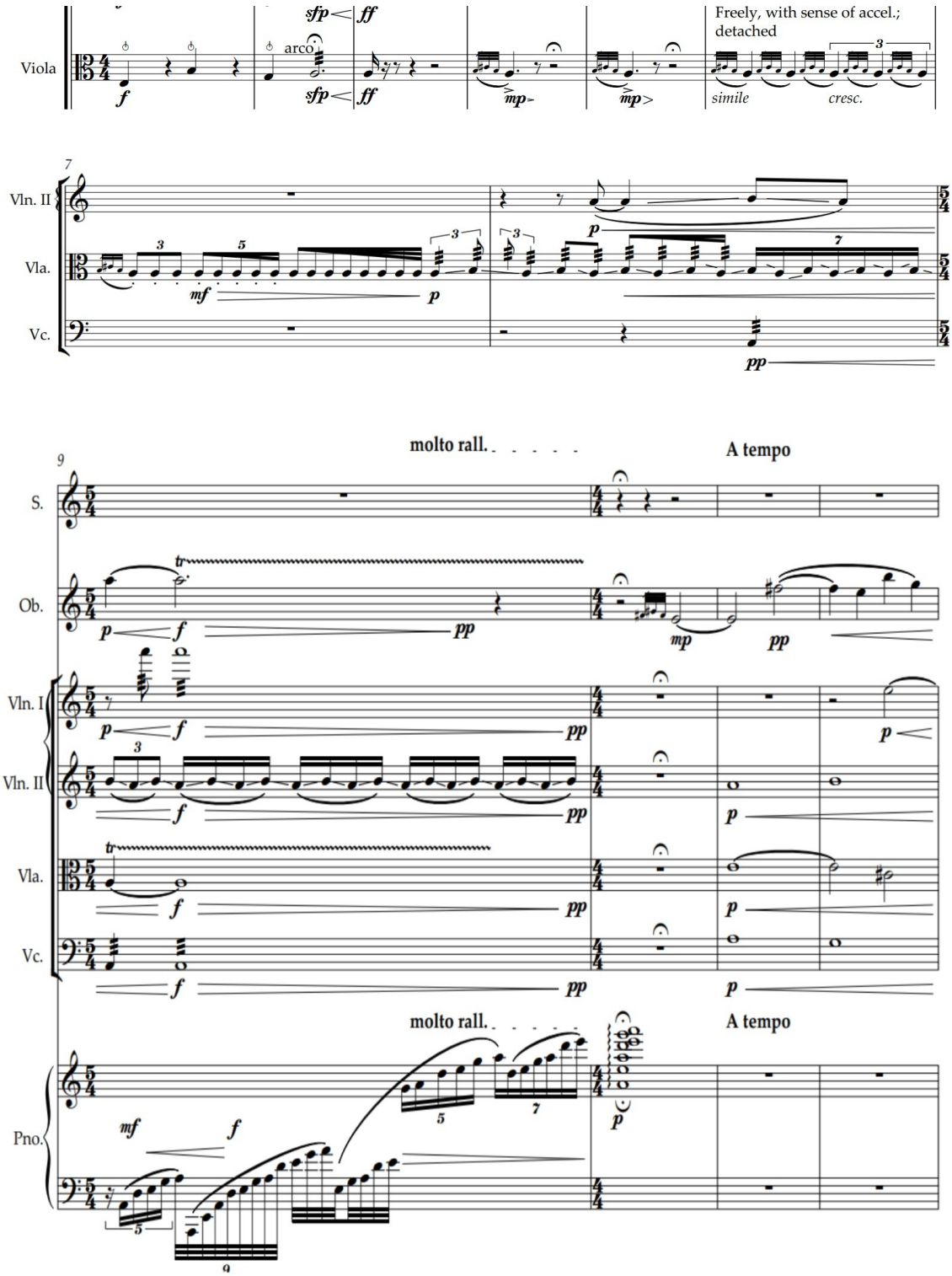
Another melodic practice of mine that is Chinese-opera in spirit is the use of long melisma of texts in delicate turns and winding contours of pitch. The entire soprano part of "Die Lian Hua" is a not-so-subtle homage to the Qu-ju, the opera style of my home province of Henan. I have crafted the melodic contours and just enough traditional ornaments so that when handled by an experienced singer - my mother, in this case - the melody will truly come to life, enriched by an abundance of unmarked ornamental singing techniques from the performer's ad-lib interpretation.

"Die Lian Hua" also serves as an effective embodiment of traditional Chinese instrumental techniques making their way into my compositions. Apart from extensive use of trills and glissandi, the



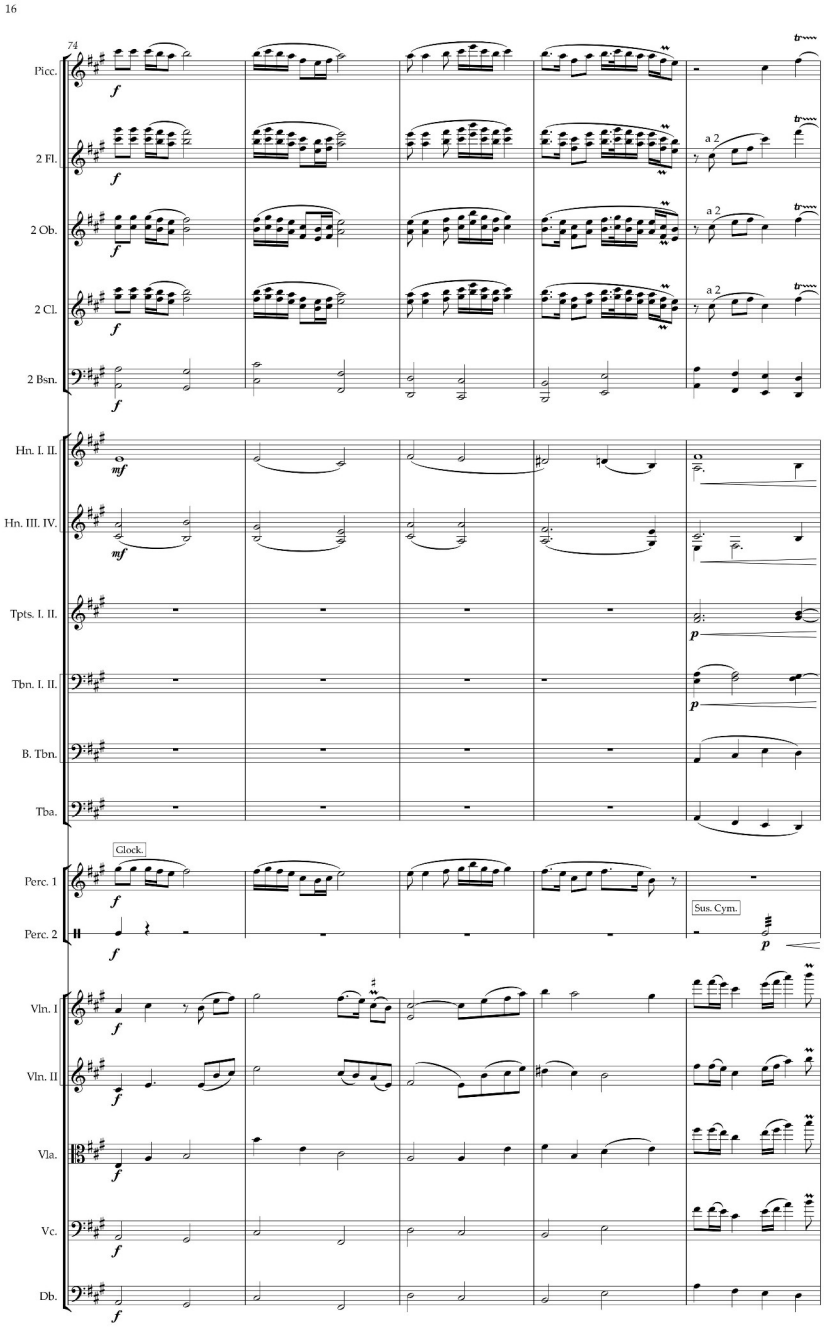
Elaborate long melisma of text in "Die Lian Hua", reminiscent of the Chinese opera style of the Qu-Ju

viola solo at the beginning starts each note with a swift three-note figure, immediately calling to mind the standard practice of "warming up" a note on the erhu, before leading the texture to a full blossom. Such three-note figures would warm up the beginning note in the strings and the oboe throughout the composition.

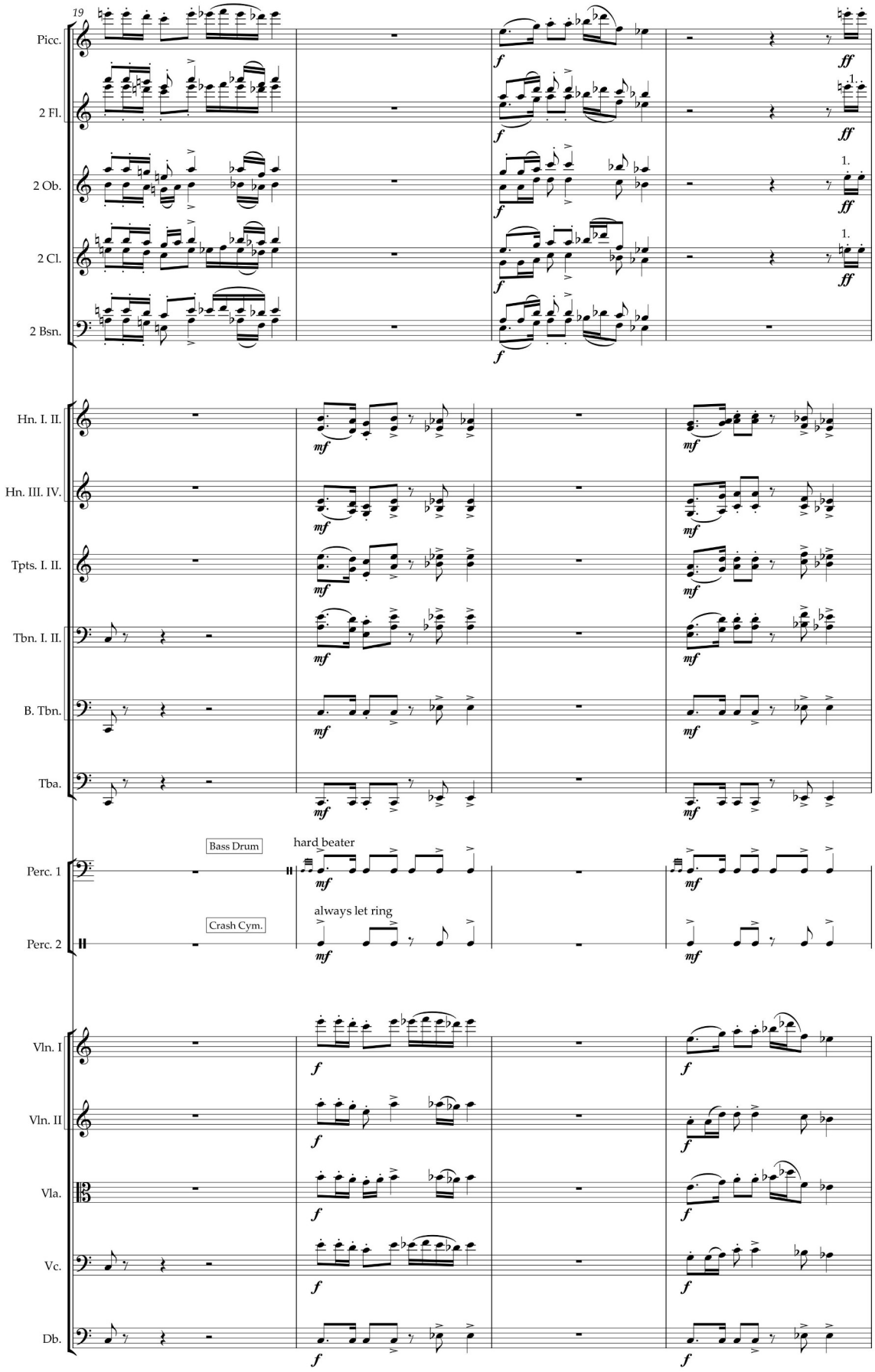


Another direction I have explored is the more direct borrowing of Chinese folk materials. My orchestral overture Spring in Old Town was my playground for quoting various jingles heard in old Beijing since the 19th century. The opening bassoon solo is in fact the chanting of craftsmen selling their service of sharpening scissors and knives, while a few measures before the end, pizzicato celli and solo bassoon reference a jingle commonly played on the sanxian. More significantly, I have directly borrowed the song from the traditional musical form of Tai-Ping Ge-Ci (literally "Verses of Supreme Peace"), "Tan Qing Shui He".

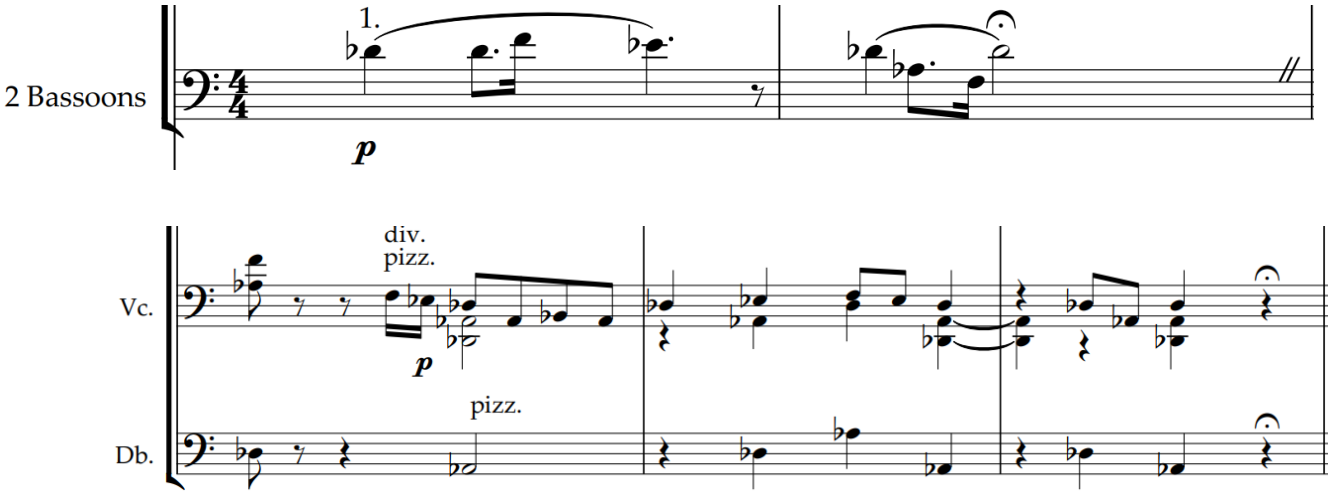
While the A section consists entirely of my own materials, it is worth noting my homage to a particular practice in traditional Chui-Da music (wind and percussion ensemble), where solo winds state a question, the tutti ensemble with percussion answer in full force in a call and response play. Such is precisely how I have composed parts of the A section, demonstrated by mm. 19-22:



Traditional tune "Tan Qing Shui He", borrowed as theme and harmonized in Sping in Old Town for Orchestra (2019)


19
Picc.
2 Fl.
2 Ob.
2 Cl.
2 Bsn.
Hn. I. II.
Hn. III. IV.
Tpts. I. II.
Tbn. I. II.
B. Tbn.
Tba.
Bass Drum
hard beater
Perc. 1
Crash Cym.
always let ring
Perc. 2
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Db.
1.
f
ff
mf

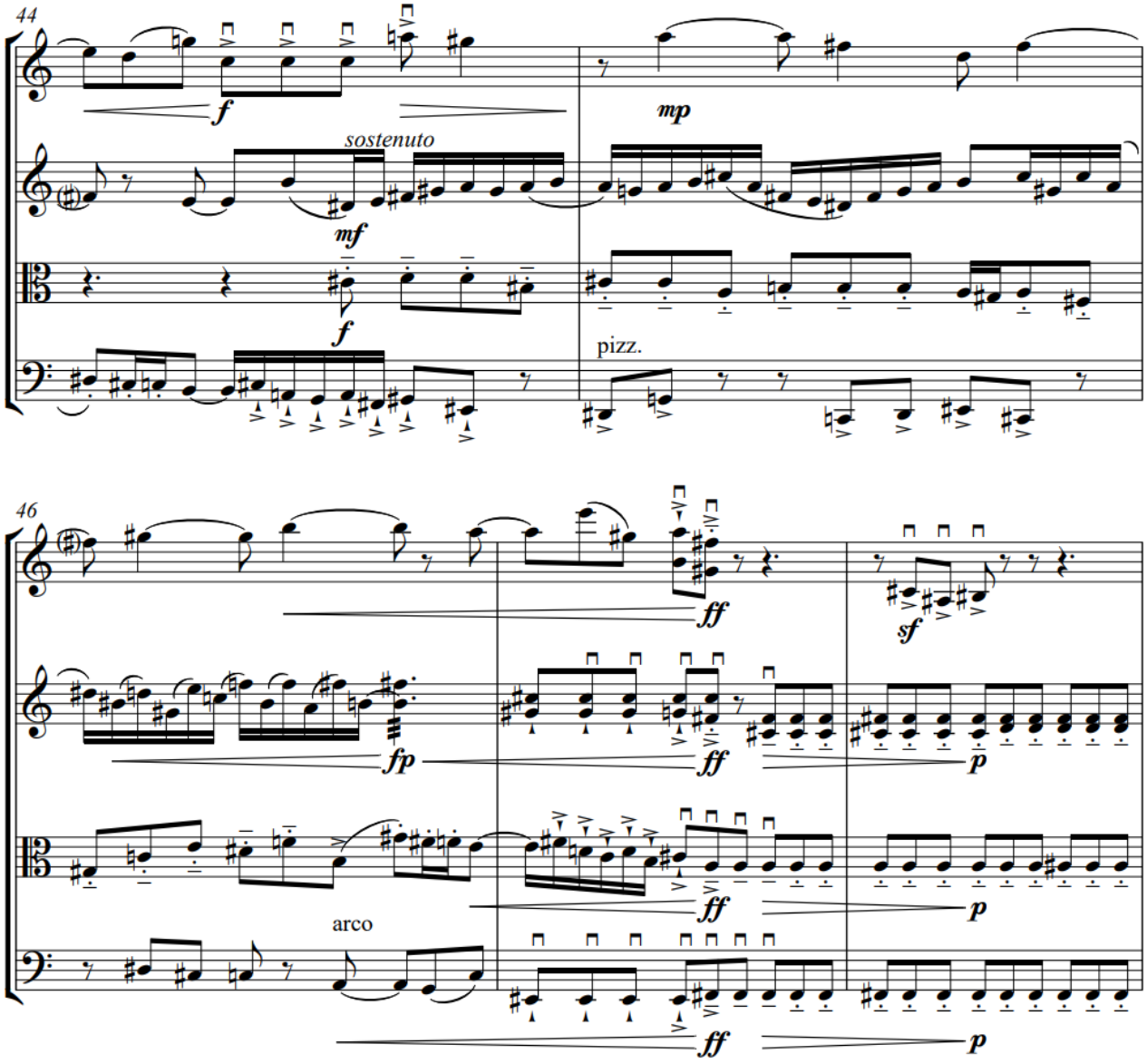
Contained in this call and response reference is also my own innovation in pitch material that makes the music my own. As a diatonic melody to C major, the second half of each measure has been shifted up parallel by a minor second, creating a change of colour and tonal disorientation. Such a semitone shift of pitch materials in the middle of phrases would remain consistent throughout the A and A' sections; the bassoon solos in D-flat major that begin and end the C-major piece also remain spiritually cohesive to this tonal play.



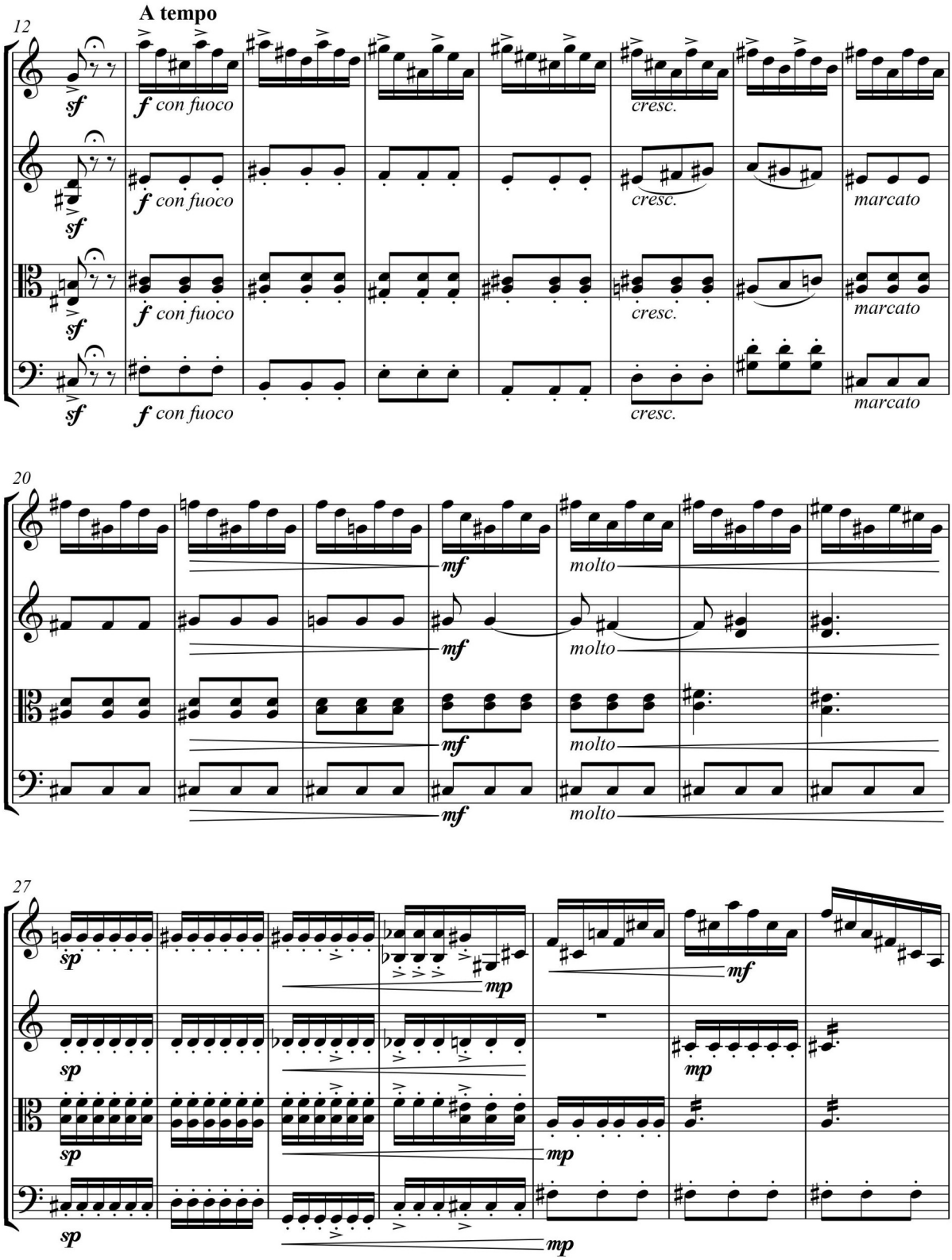
The quotations at the beginning and end of Spring in Old Town, shifted up by a semitone to D-flat major

While embodying traditional Chinese ethos remains a central interest of mine, it is far from the only. Polyphony has served as a dominating technical foundation and aesthetics of my compositional practice, hardly surprising given my passion in early music and experiences playing the cello in Baroque ensembles. As a summary to all of the polyphonic instances in my music, I shall zoom in to my String Quartet No. 1 for a definitive demonstration. Entitled "Prelude and Fugue", the first two movements, to be played continuously, are very much Baroque in spirit. The fugal subject almost makes sense in the key of F-sharp minor, yet hardly remotely tonal. The would-be-diatonic relationships have been carefully offset by semitones, resulting in a highly chromatic linear vocabulary and harmonic language. The last movement of the quartet, in a frantic and escaping presto, does not

hide its inspiration from the Vivaldi concerti; its descending 5th progressions have undergone, once again, chromatic adjustments in all voices for a familiar yet strange outburst of colorus.

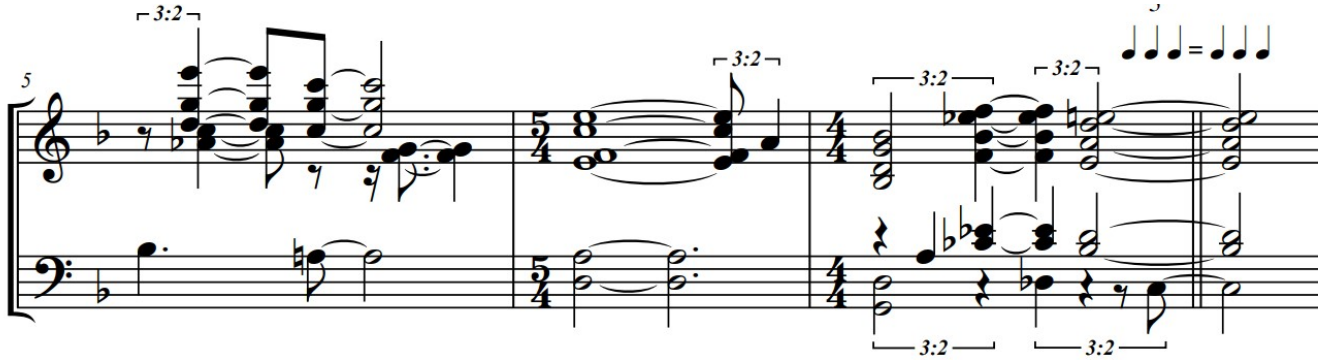


String Quartet No. 1 (2014), Movement II: the 4th and final statement of the fugal subject as an answer in the viola, with complete counter subjects


12
A tempo
sf
f con fuoco
cresc.
marcato
20
mf
molto
27
sp
mp

Among my multifaceted passions and techniques of composition, it is my inspiration from my favourite jazz pianist Bill Evans that deserves the remaining focus of discussion. Having long considered Evans the poet in jazz piano, I have always been deeply mesmerized by the dazzling yet delicately nuanced colours in his voicings of chords, so much so that I composed my first major composition for violin as a challenge to embody as many of my favourite things about Evans, eventually dedicating the piece to him as my tribute. The title "I Dreamed of Spring" proudly calls to mind, for all who are familiar, its secretive tie to the performance of the jazz standard "You Must Believe in Spring" that Evans recorded with Tony Bennett in 1975.

Technically, I aimed to steal two signature practices from Bill Evans' playing aesthetics – "tall" extended chords with inner notes voiced closely together as dissonances, and embracing the rootless voicing of chords and using the root carefully and sparingly. As much as I adore Evan's 1962 performance of the tune "Like Someone in Love", I shall present here only measures 5-7 of this transcription, for I think they already contain the prototype of every feature of his harmonic thinking that fascinates me. Firstly, it is no surprise that a jazz master would spice up his harmonies with rich and intricate tertian extension notes, but Evan's handling of such a practice has always felt particularly magical to me, largely due to his voicing of such harmonies that seem unorthodox, at least in terms of classical theory. He would often voice the extensions adjacent to each other in the inner voices, creating rich sonorities of dissonance, as found in the C – D clash in measure 5. The dissonances in measure 7

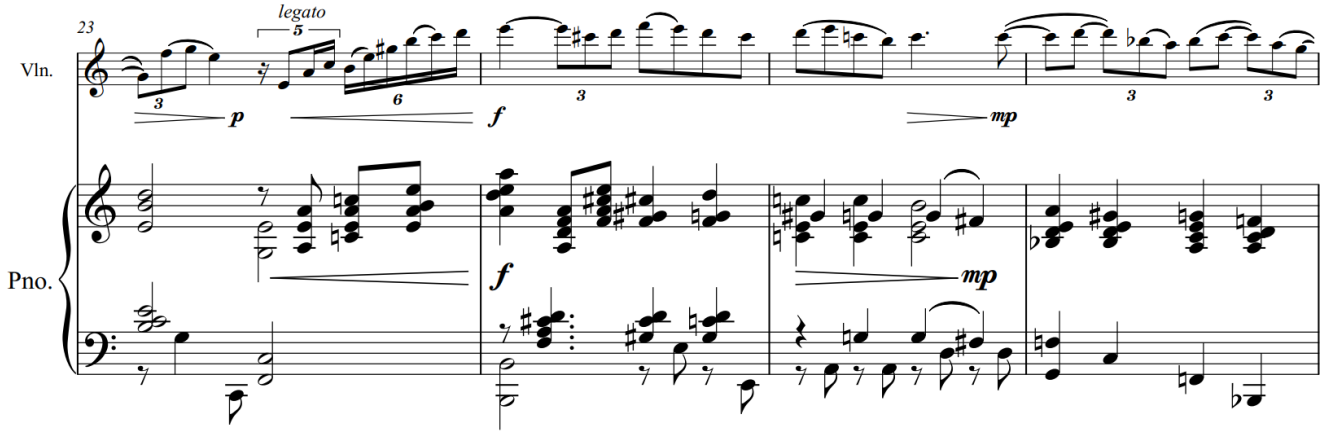


Mm. 5-7 of transcription of "Like Someone in Love" as played by Bill Evans, solo piano, recorded in 1962

sound even more pronounced, with the upper structure appearing to be a quartal sonority of C-flat – F – B-flat – E-flat, with the major second clashes on the top. Why the quartal dissonance particularly shines out brings me to the next point.

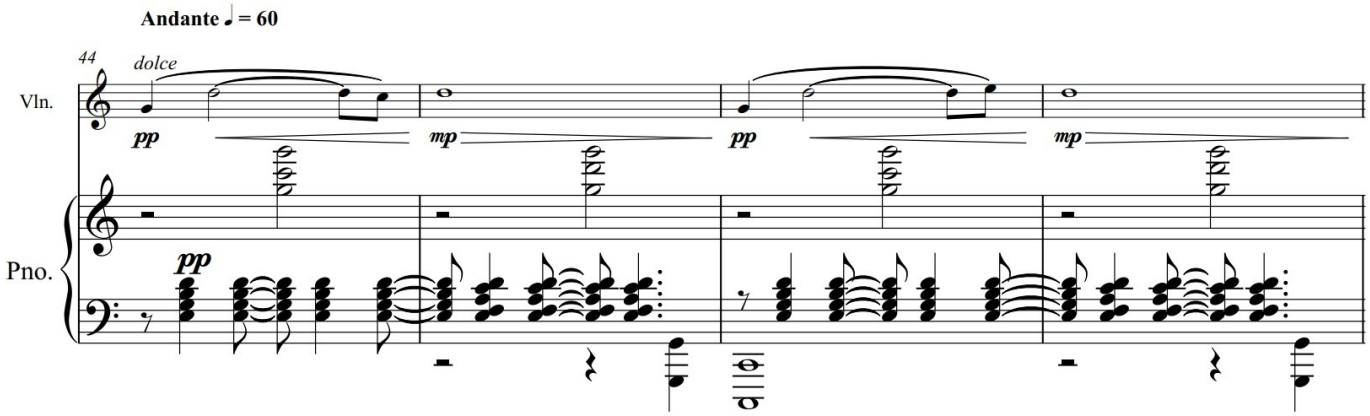
Secondly, Evans is a master of leaving the root out of the chord for as long as possible, sometimes never giving it. It is precisely because of the absence of the root notes of the last two chords in measure 7, the upper quartal voicing of these tertian chords has no root to give them context or justify them as a voicing of a tertian sonority, so that they have an ever so brief opportunity to be disguised as dissonant and even detached from their tonal context, in a surprising effect. When the root does drop, it is upon the realization of the true meaning of those upper structure sounds as a tertian whole that we perceive the most exquisite beauty. Such rootless operations would appear throughout this transcription, and found prominently in the piano solo of the Evans/Bennett recording of "You Must Believe in Spring", namely between 2:38 and 4:45, where, stunningly, almost every single root note is delayed and played after the upper structure of chords.

Below is but one of many examples of my own utilization of the aforementioned two practices favoured by Evans in my own "I Dreamed of Spring" for Violin and Piano (2019). In measure 24, on beat three, the 13th, becoming flat 13th the next beat, is placed right against the 7th in the left hand, resulting in the dissonant C-sharp against D and, later, the C-natural against D clashes, while on the

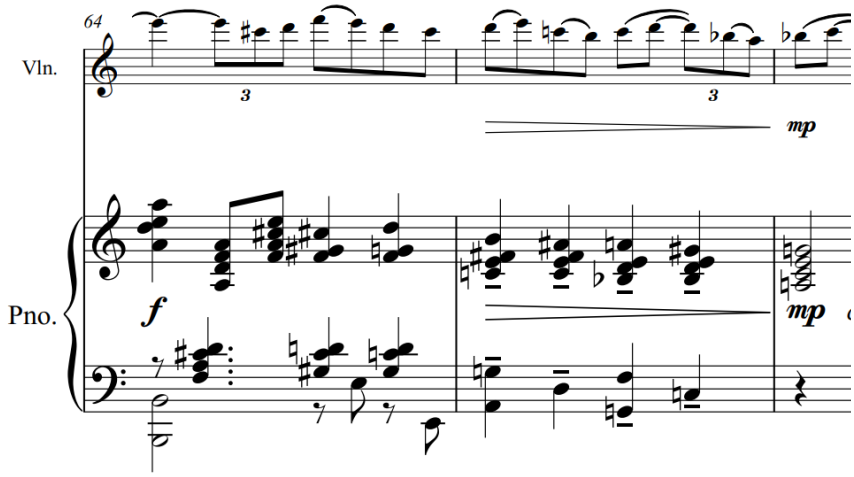


"I Dreamed of Spring" for Violin and Piano (2019)

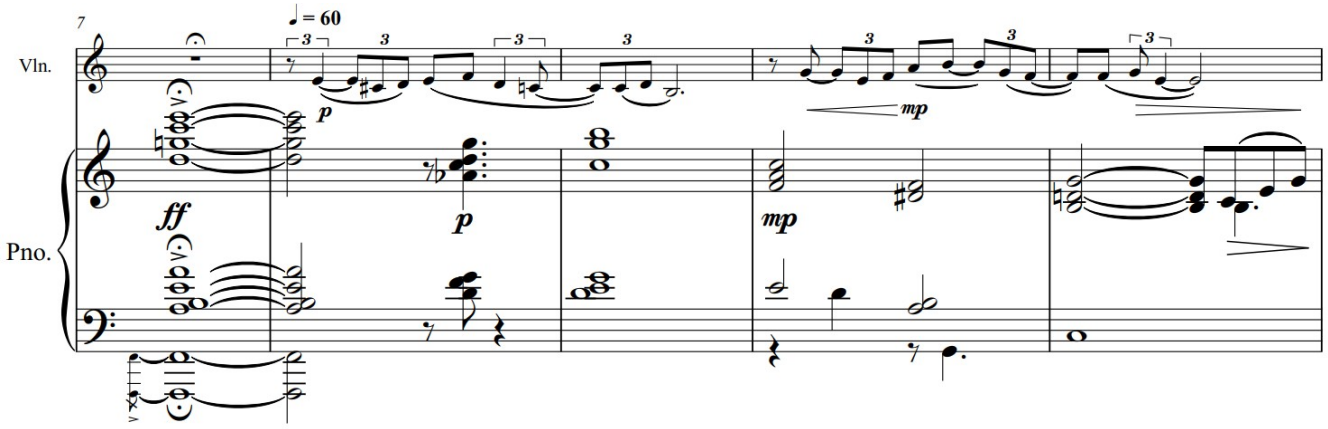
fourth beat in the right hand, the introduction of G-natural as the flat 10th, or the split minor 3rd note of the chord, creates another whole-step clash with the 7th note of the F. Notably, for six continuous chords starting from mm. 24, I have delayed the root notes, allowing delicate and temporary colours to form on top and shine, before validated by the root. A more delicate effect from rootless voicings can be heard in mm. 44-47, where the left hand upper voices in the harmony create a warm, fleeting, and delicate affect before the dropping of the root:

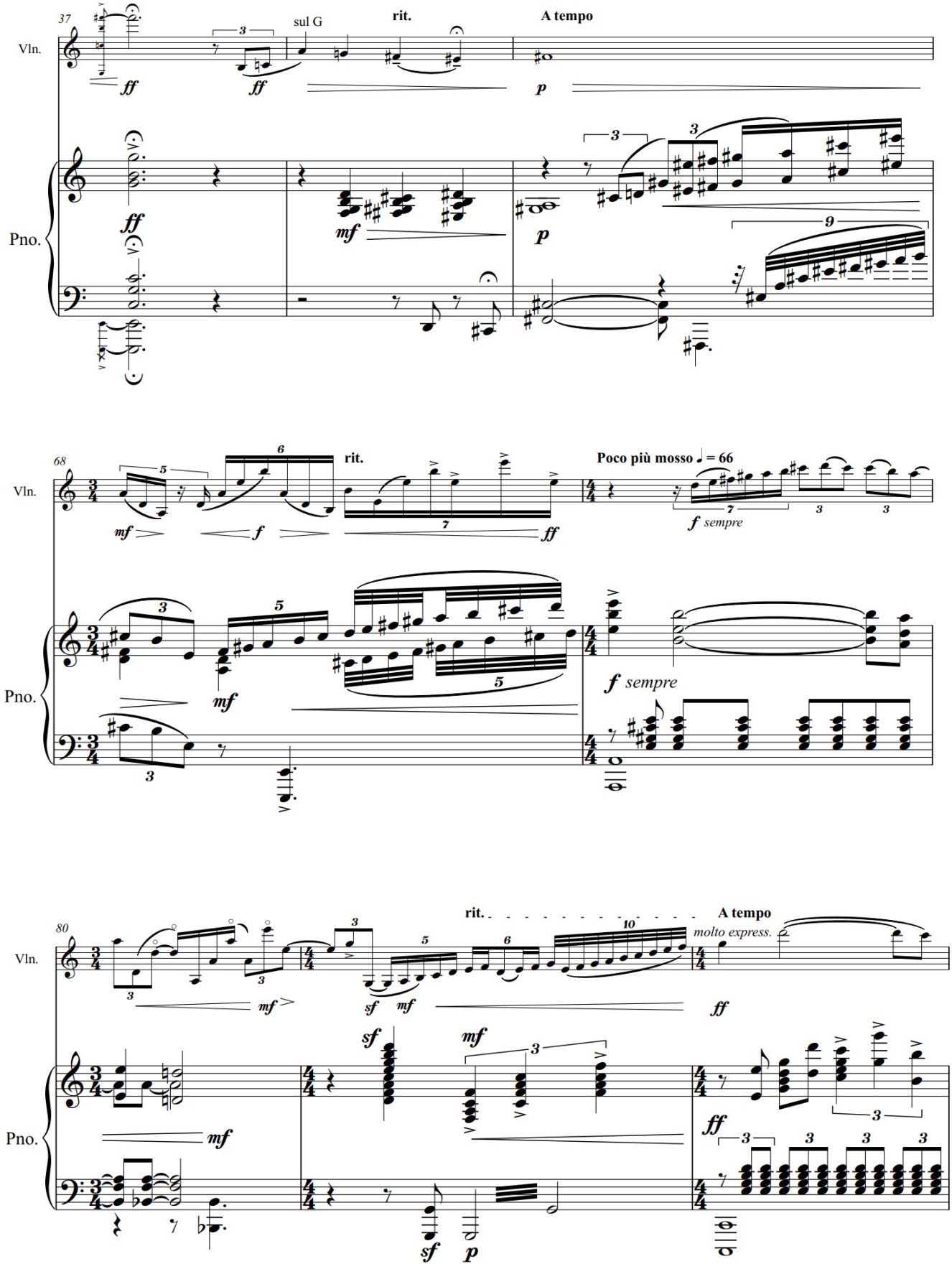


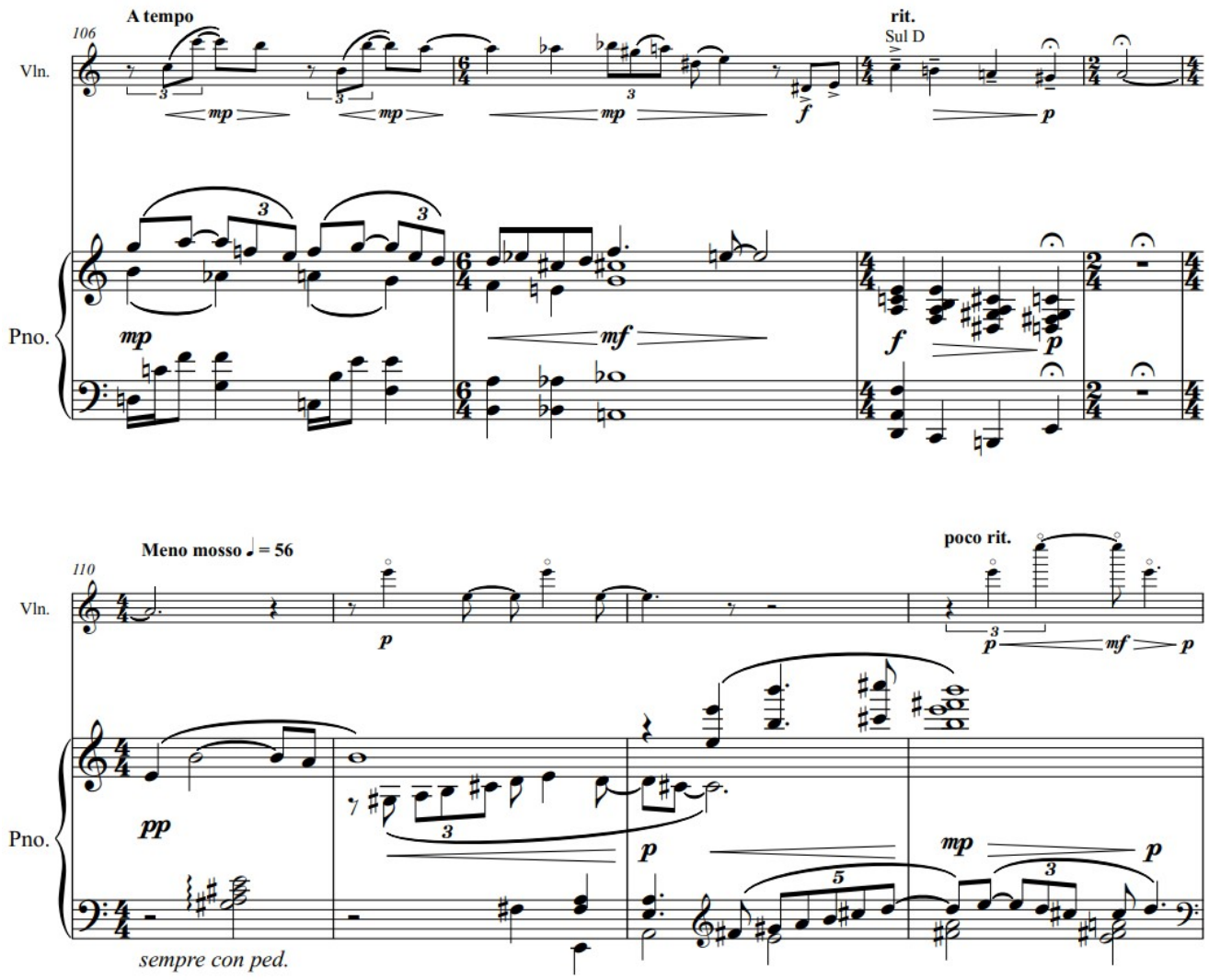
Although "I Dreamed of Spring" was my tribute to Bill Evans in my mind, I realized in hindsight that it is in fact an equal and organic symbiosis of romanticism and jazz vocabulary, and more personal than it is an homage. This is a composition that can also serve as a total outlook of my philosophy on pitch materials. Firstly, apart from the aforementioned Evans inspired aesthetics, an overarching and significant practice in this composition is chromaticism. Playing with lush, delicate big extended harmonies in such depth creates an opportunity to organize the extension notes carefully to conceive chromatic voice leading in inner voices, such as the chromatic descending line in the top voice of the piano in mm. 65:



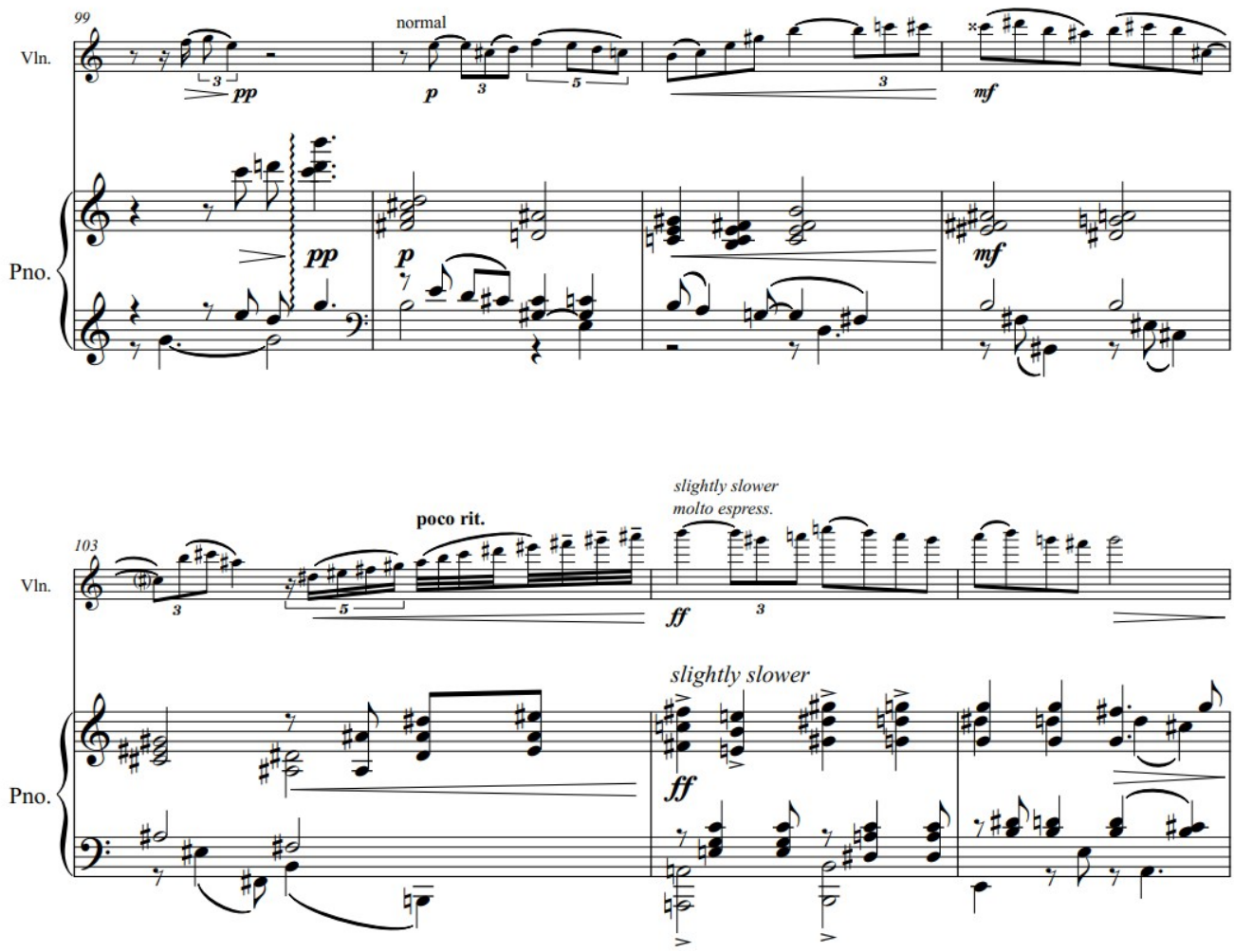
Secondly, “I Dreamed of Spring” is the culmination of an experiment and an essential aesthetic principal of mine that I started with my very first serious work back in 2011 – “regional tonality”. Not an official or even very serious term at all, “regional tonality” is my attempt to describe my way or composing in a tonal framework that maximizes my exploration of colour in pitch materials, without constraining my writing to any system. It is very much like starting from a place and wandering off with no destination, getting lost at every beautiful turn of tonal development along the way. Specifically, my “free tonal” pieces are all very much tonal and have no key at the same time. Using no key signatures, I freely modulate at the discretion of my intuition, as frequently as a new key every two measures. In “I Dreamed of Spring”, for instance, I cannot begin to list all the numerous keys and modulations I have gone through. However, when isolating individual fragments of music as short as one measure, there is never any ambiguity of what key that particular moment is in, hence I have coined the term “regional tonality”. Nonetheless, it is not to say that I pay no mind to the structural and logical overall picture of tonality and key in my music. The entire structure seems to pivot in a struggle between the areas of no sharps and three sharps. Starting in A minor, by mm. 39 the music has cadenced in F-sharp minor. The B section eventually settles on A major and C major respectively, with the return of the latter symbolizing a triumph. The ending A’ section recycles the materials from the beginning, while transposing the same cadence in the “home key” of A minor in mm. 119, before immediately entering the parallel key of A major, as a final reconciliation of reality and the ideal.




37
Vln.
Pno.
sul G
rit.
A tempo
68
Poco più mosso ♩ = 66
f sempre
80
molto express.



Sections of tonal importance from my "I Dreamed of Spring", marking the key moments of struggle between C major/A minor and A major/F-sharp minor



"I Dreamed of Spring", mm. 102-104, surprising modulations driven by chromatic voice leading enharmonic respellings