Peter McKenzie Armstrong

JE: A Mural

for piano solo

2019

Edition Ottaviano Petrucci

NOTES

This work is inspired by John Elliot's mural, "Yesteryear on the Hudson". Painted outdoors at Burd Street, Nyack, NY in 1984, it won the only ever Friends of the Nyacks arts competition. A photo is online at the Hudson River Valley Heritage site, <https://hrvh.org/cdm/ref/collection/nyacklib/id/218>, and documentation on Elliot's work overall can be accessed at <http://www.johnelliot.com/index.htm>. My comments on the music follow, grouped by movement number.

COMPOSITION

1. With middle−D symbolically as the shoreline, nearly broken chords in the treble ring over a compatible linear flow in the bass. Harmonies, essentially two, alternate downbeat tonic and upbeat dominant. There are three 12−bar subsections, each with its treble second half inverted, yielding modal alternation per phrase. Chord pair members are chosen for increasing cragginess in their melodic succession. Bass figuration per bar meanwhile changes almost perpetually.

2. "Flaps" (single−staff passages) represent the boat's flags: Elliot's "JE" pennant at the bow, its characters mapped to the pentatonic scale; and Old Glory at the stern, its vintage−1848 star field mapped to the chromatic. The patterns separately rotate and expand, then merge for a mutual buffeting.

   "Chugs" conjures the engine sounds of two riverboats in passing each other. Their shared two−bar motif repeats perpetually but with unequal interim pauses, yielding phase shift such that the motifs re−juxtapose always differently: the first series nudges them into sync; the second takes them out again.

3. Each bar consists of one downward−rolled chord, notated to indicate hand distribution. Each chord contains two intervals, alternating until just short of pitch−class redundancy. No two interval parings are the same. The V−shaped bottom−pitch succession is meant to suggest the mural's pattern of sunbeams striking the river surface.

4. Not least among Elliot's achievements was his place as a mandolin virtuoso and as concertmaster of the Bloomfield Mandolin Orchestra, then conducted by Gabriel Navola. He videotaped this melody in a hospital bed shortly before his death. I have attempted to emulate the performance, adding counterpoint to imagine his carrying − as surviving grandson of Tsar Nicholas II − bits of Mussorgsky in the back of his mind.

PERFORMANCE

1. Stresses, stretches and leaps in the treble chords are likely to impede needed smooth flow. I recommend, upon striking the onbeat interval, releasing its outer key and pivoting on the inner towards the melodic offbeat. Bass dynamics should make its figuration "well up" from the low D in minor mode, then instead "suspend" from the high A in major.

2. "Flaps" are to be divided between the hands at performer's discretion. "Chugs" in their per−beat phase shifting pose hefty challenge for the player's immediate short−term memory, in that each beatwise juxtapo−sition of hands belies both the prior one (at that beat two bars before) and the next (two bars later). I can play this only from score, fixed on keeping the 5/4−consistent part firm and fitting in the other per force.

3. The pitches of each bar are to be rolled evenly downward as a single chord, with the 2/4 bar−lengths essentially equal. Dynamics need to ensure that the sounding unit note group is a pair − not a threesome, as some hand distributions inadvertently suggest.

4. This tremolo, nearly unbroken, must suggest the strumming of a man−dolin. Its triplets (tempo compels these, though quadruplets would be ideal) can do this via their pairing, if the initial note of each first is slightly stronger than that of the second. Tremolo fingering, then, is to be 3−2−1−3−2−1 throughout with 3's volumes adjusted accordingly. Meanwhile, the sustain pedal is to flutter by the 8th.

− PMA

to Faith and Hope Elliott in memory of their father

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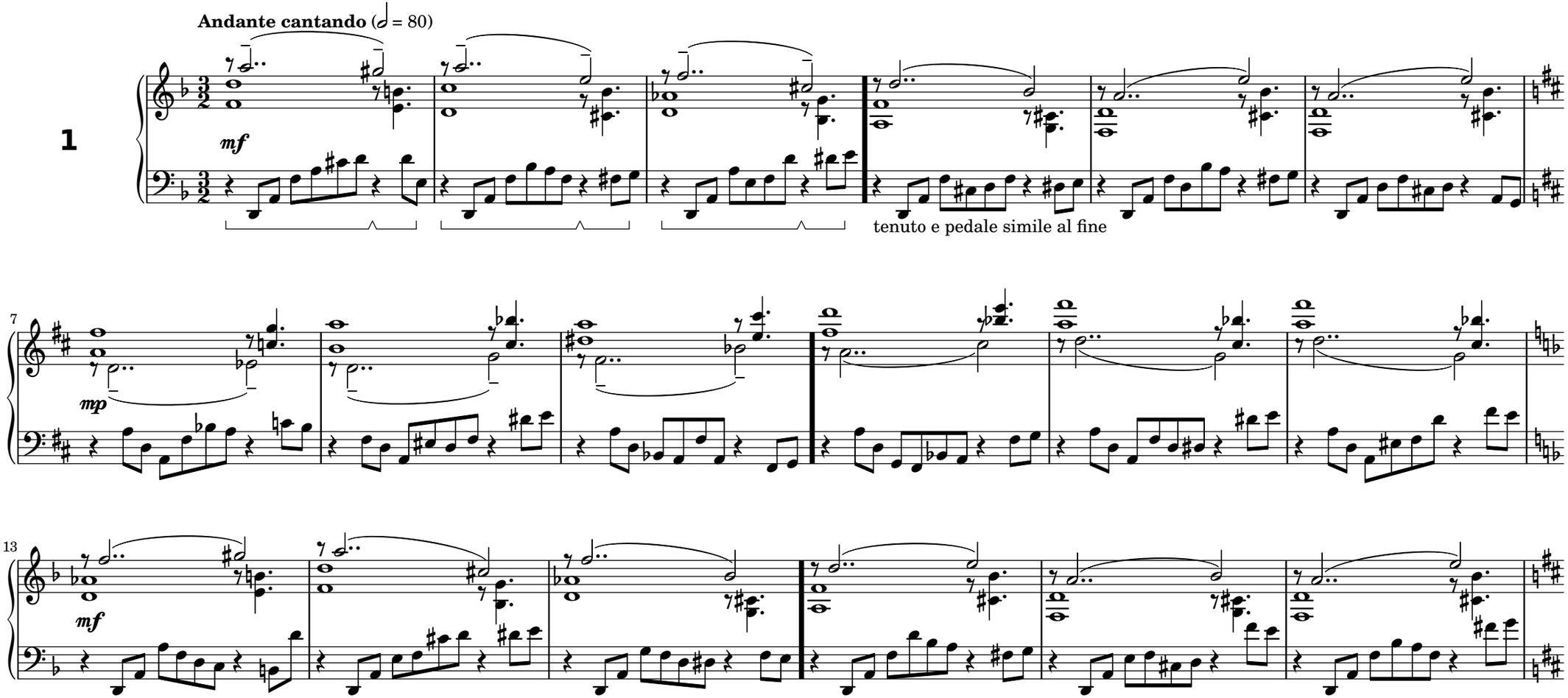
Mountain Meets River



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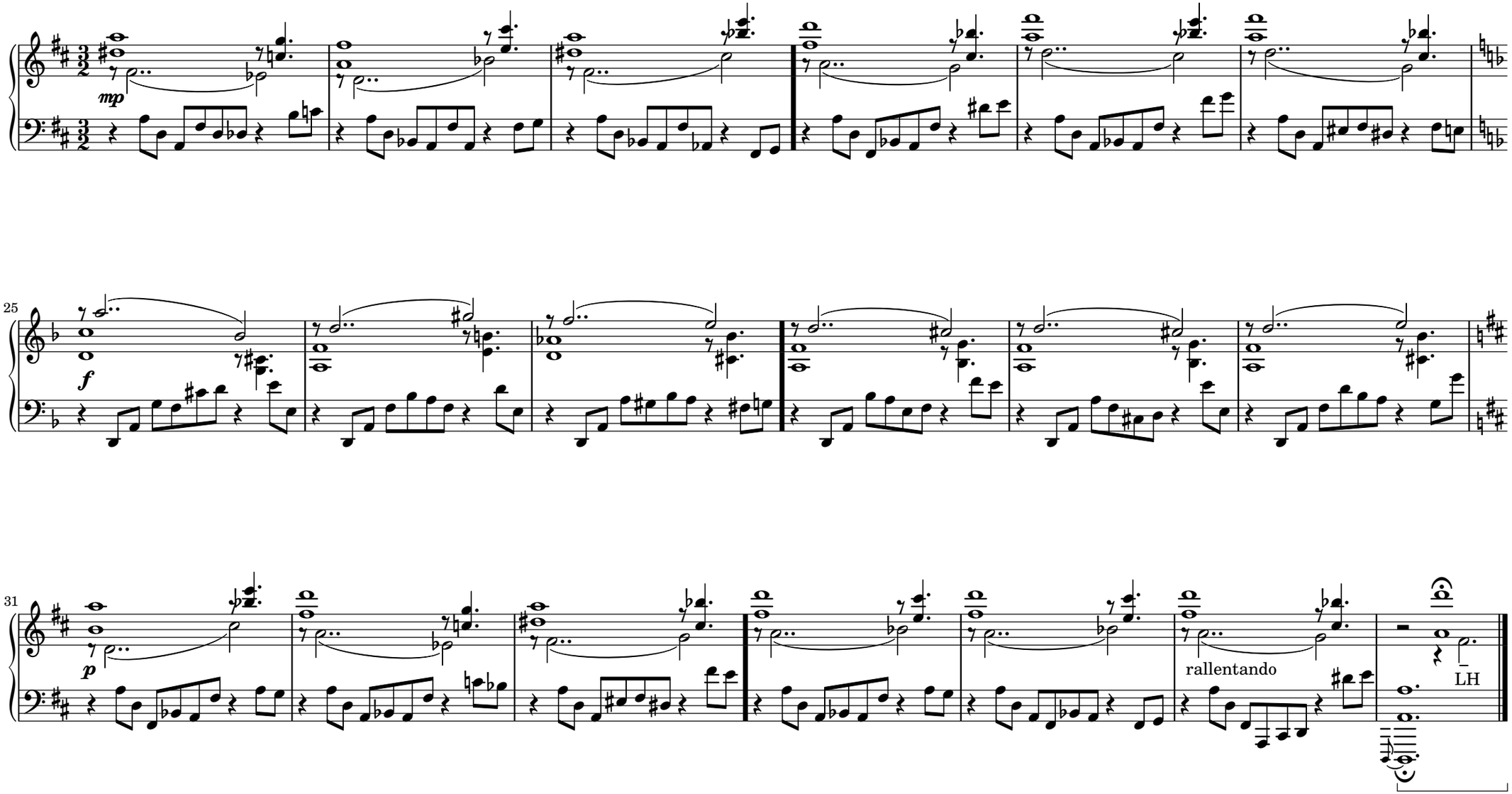

mp
25
f
31
p
rallentando
LH

Steamboat (Chugs & Flaps)

2

Buffetto gioioso (♩. = 132)

f

Allegro persistente (♩ = 160)

9

pp

p

13

mp

mf

17

f

ff

21 **Buffetto rudo** (𝅗𝅥 = 132)

28 **Di nuovo persistente** (♩ = 160)

ff *f*

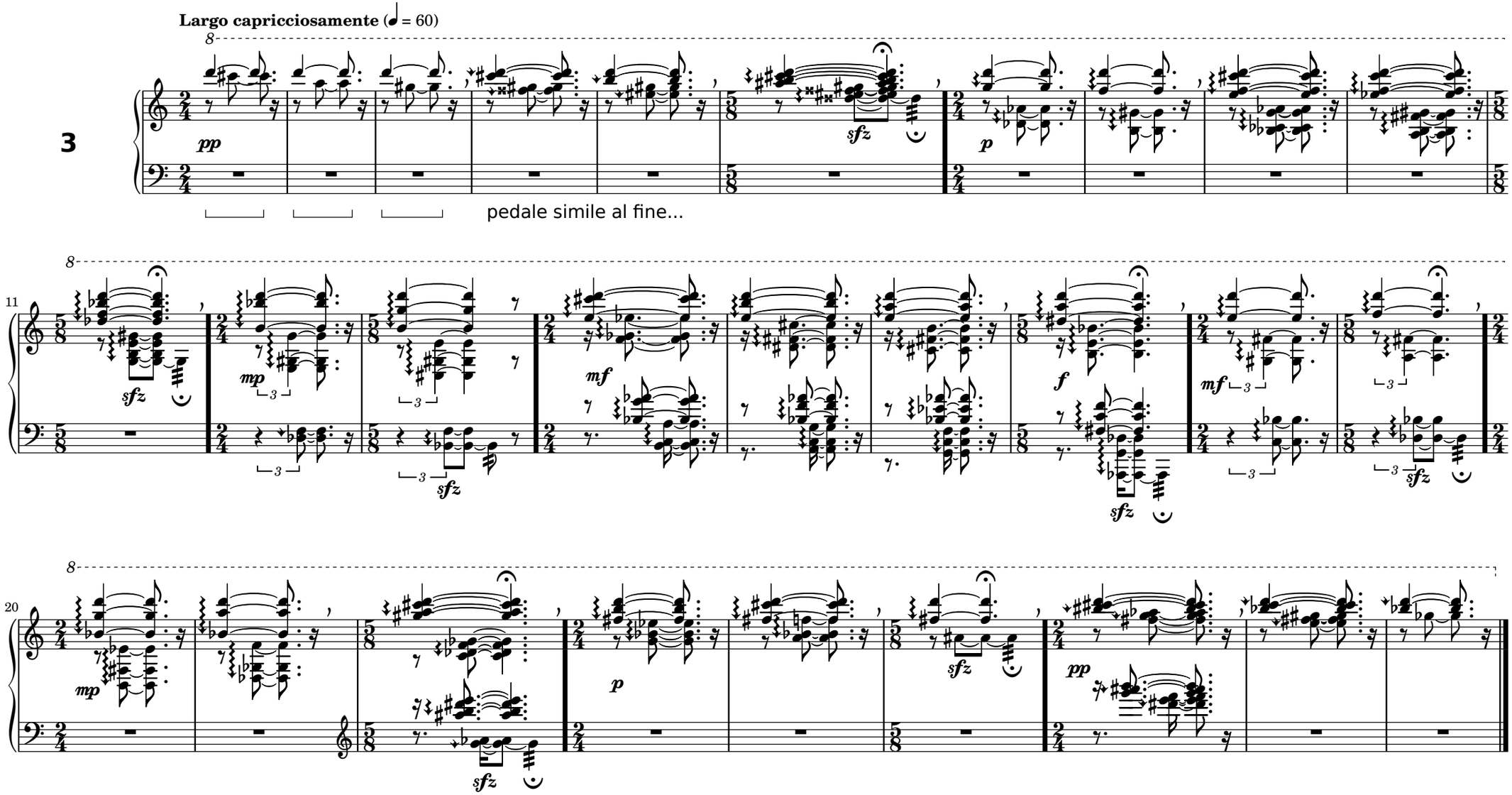
32 *mf* *mp*

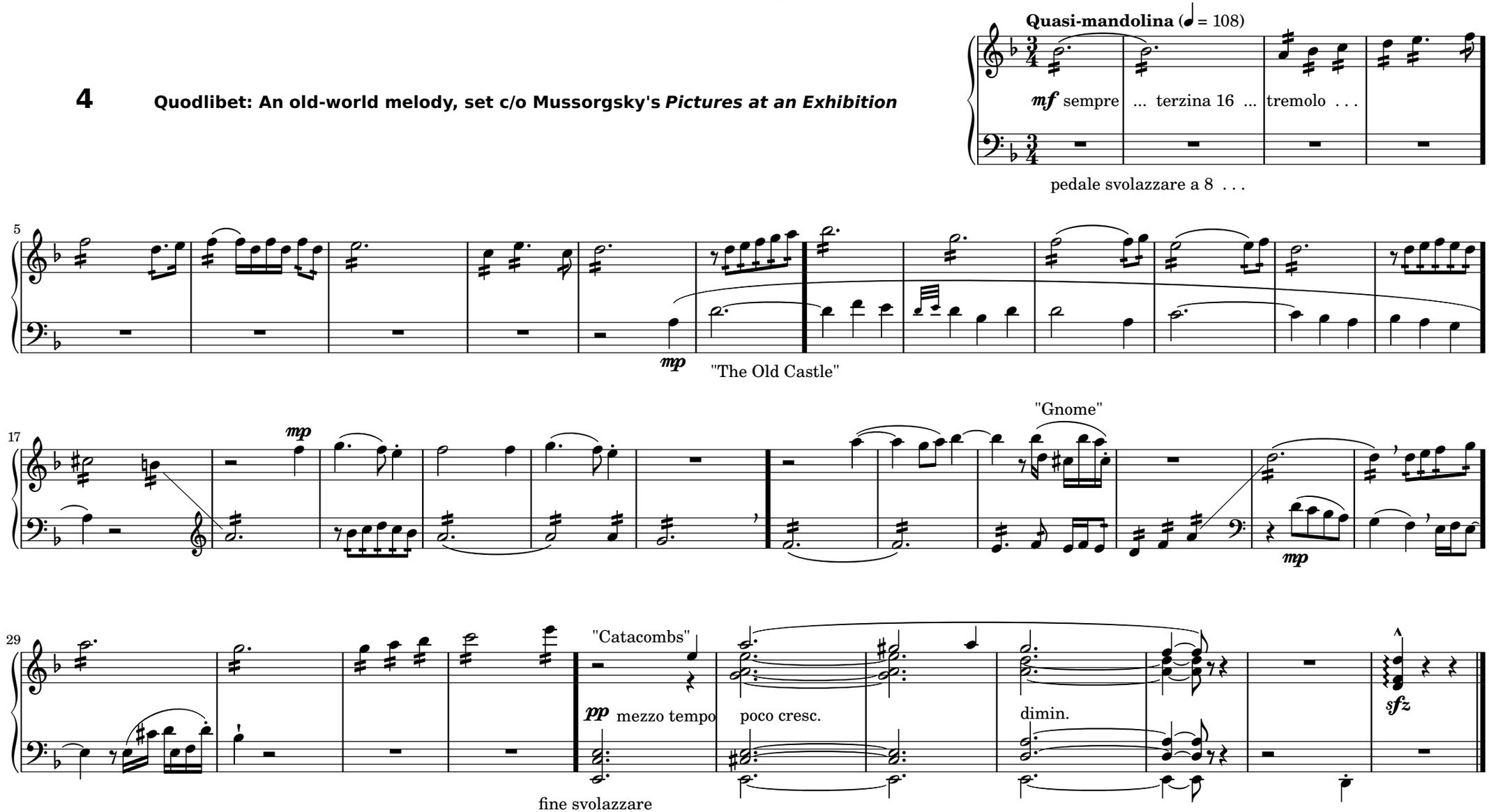
36 *p* *pp*

40 **Buffetto contesto** (♩. = 116)

pp cresc. ... al ... *ff* *sfz*

Sunbursts


Largo capricciosamente (♩ = 60)
3
pp
sfz
p
pedale simile al fine...
11
mp
mf
f
20

Man In Skiff

4 Quodlibet: An old-world melody, set c/o Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*