Prelude and Fugue in A Minor

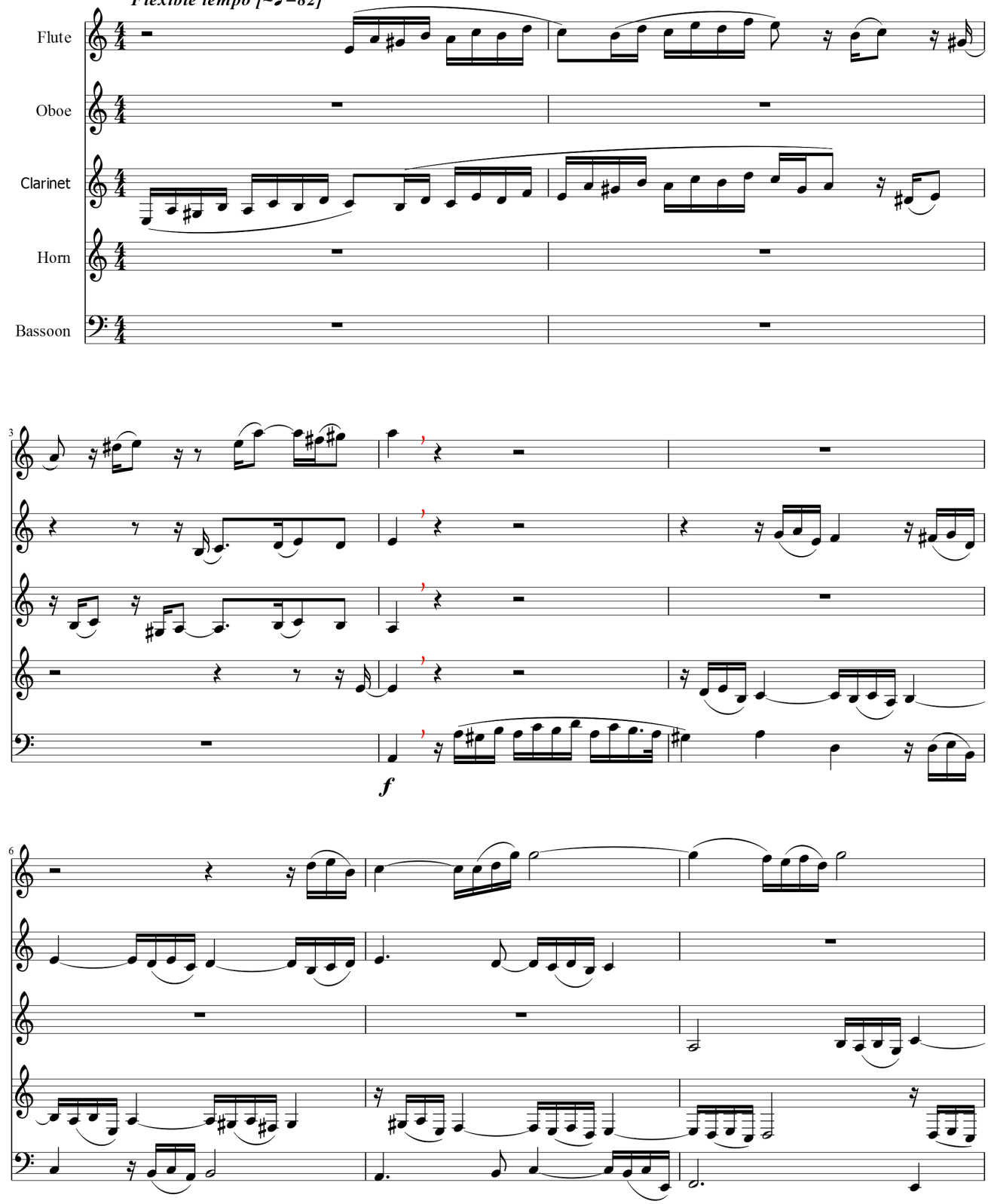
BuxWV 153

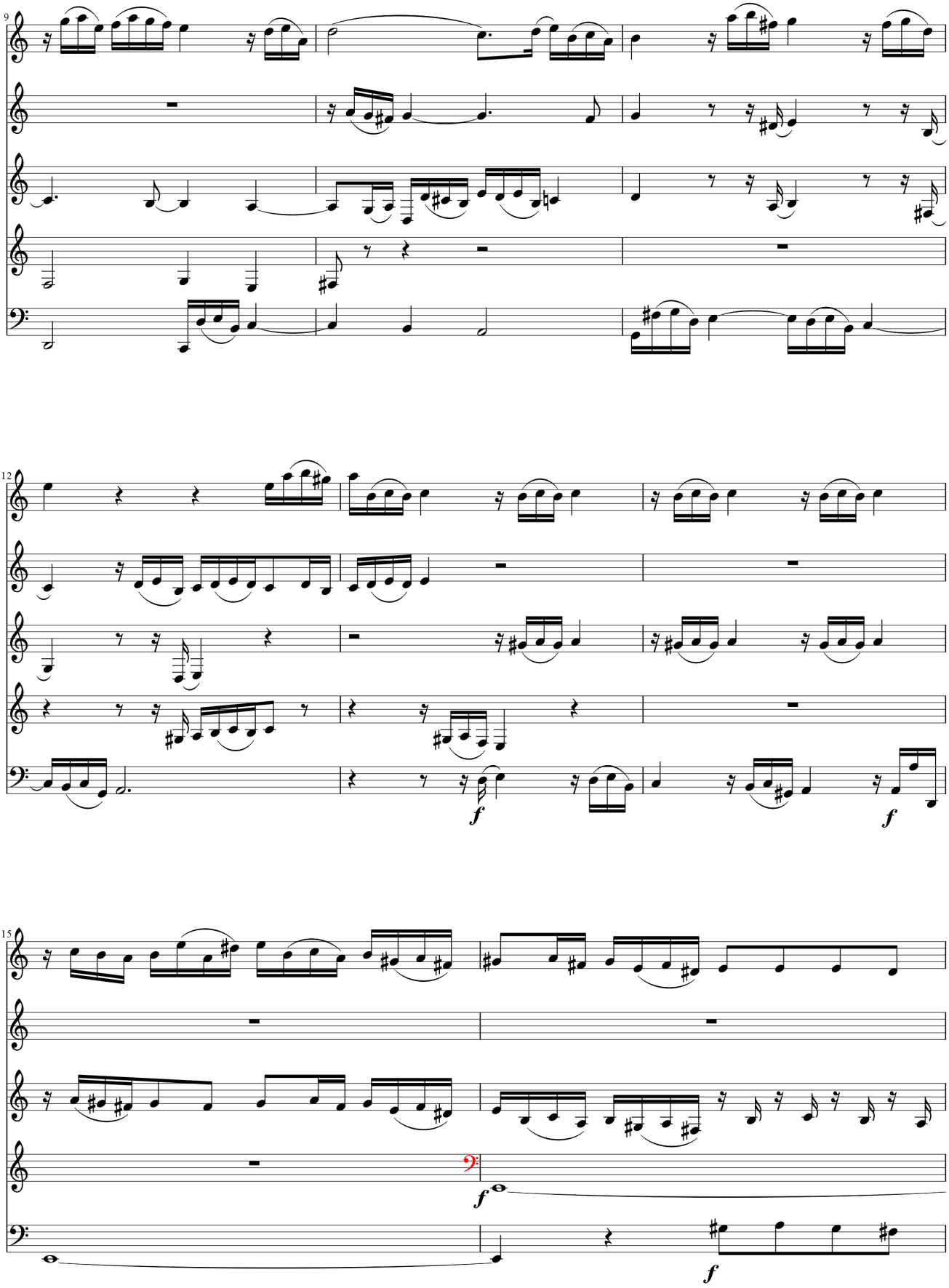
Score (concert pitch)

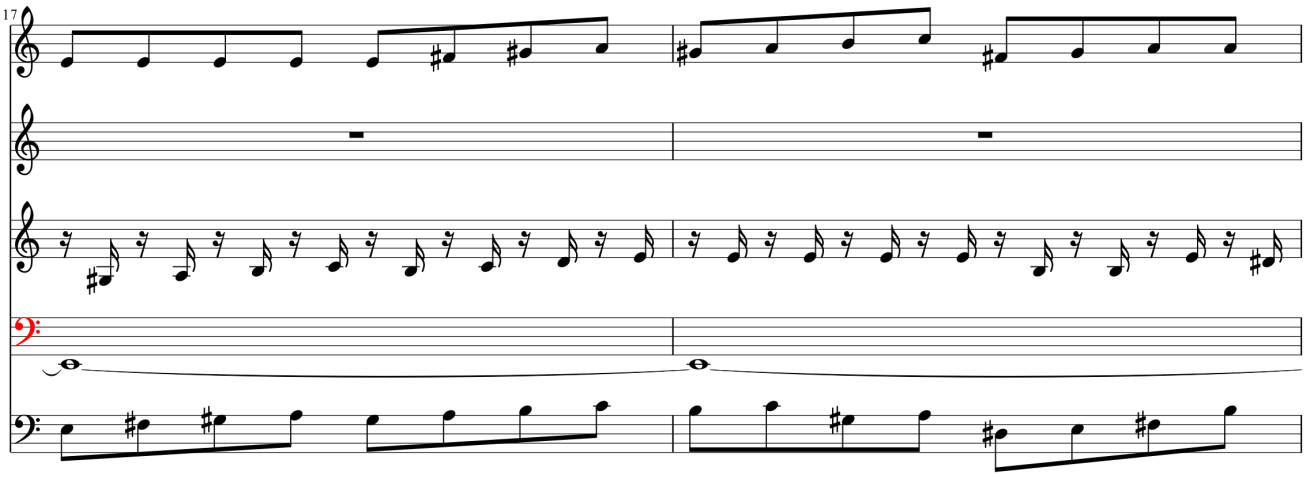
Buxtehude

Praeludium **Moderato**

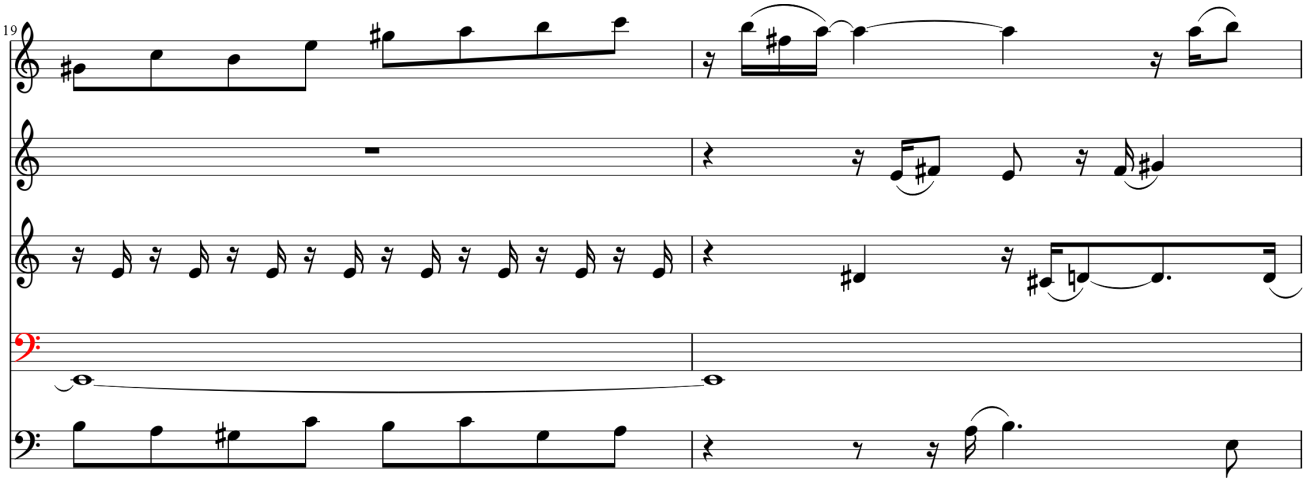
Flexible tempo [~♩=82]




9
12
15
f
f
f
f

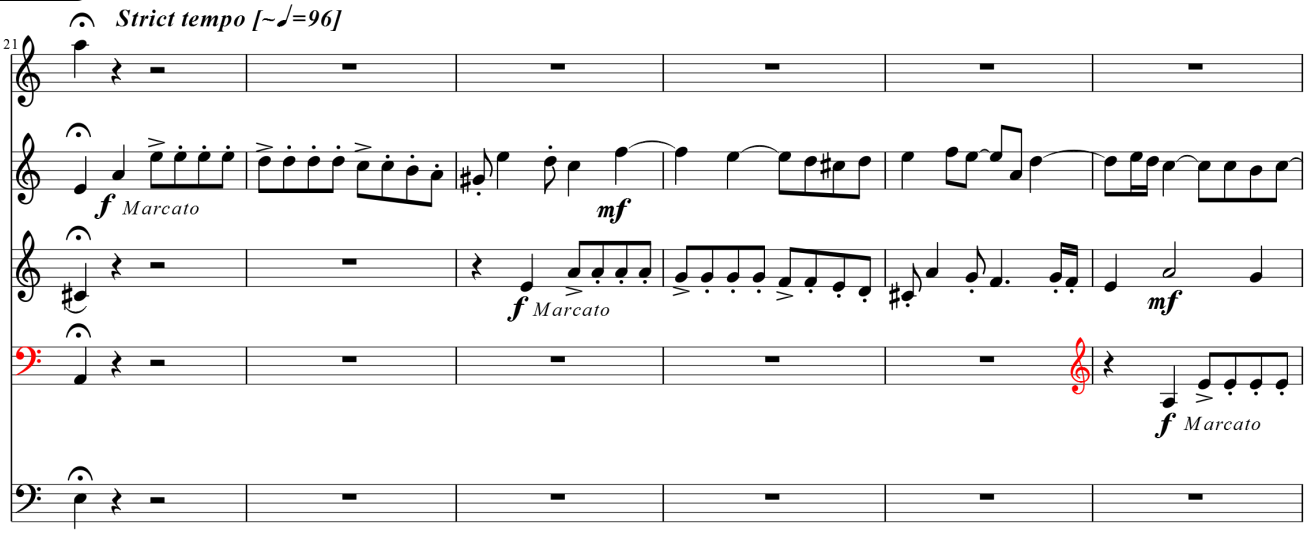


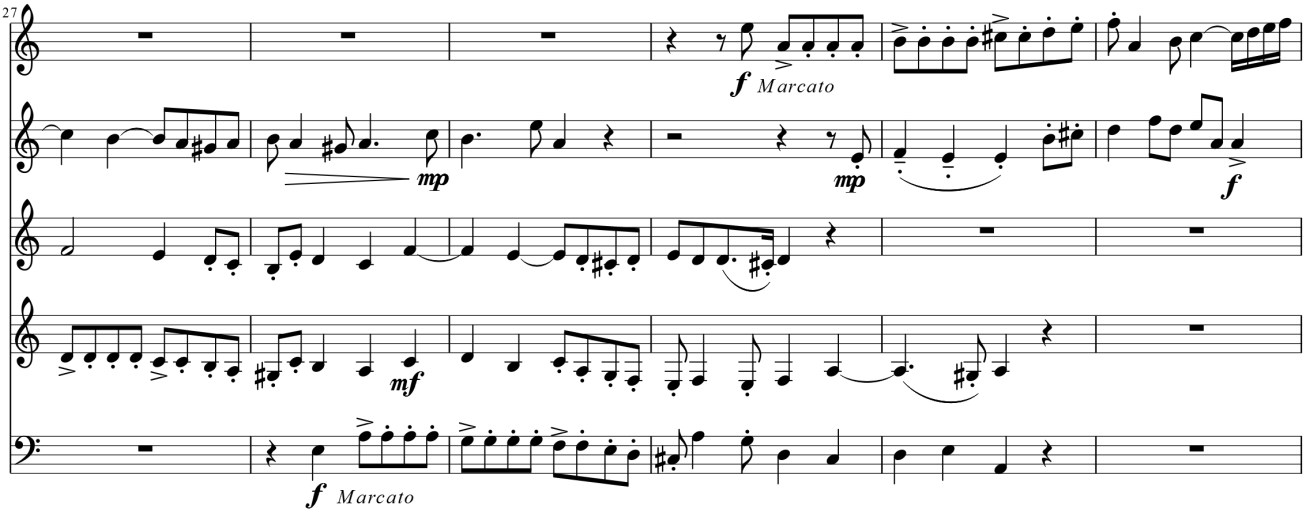
più Lento e rit.....

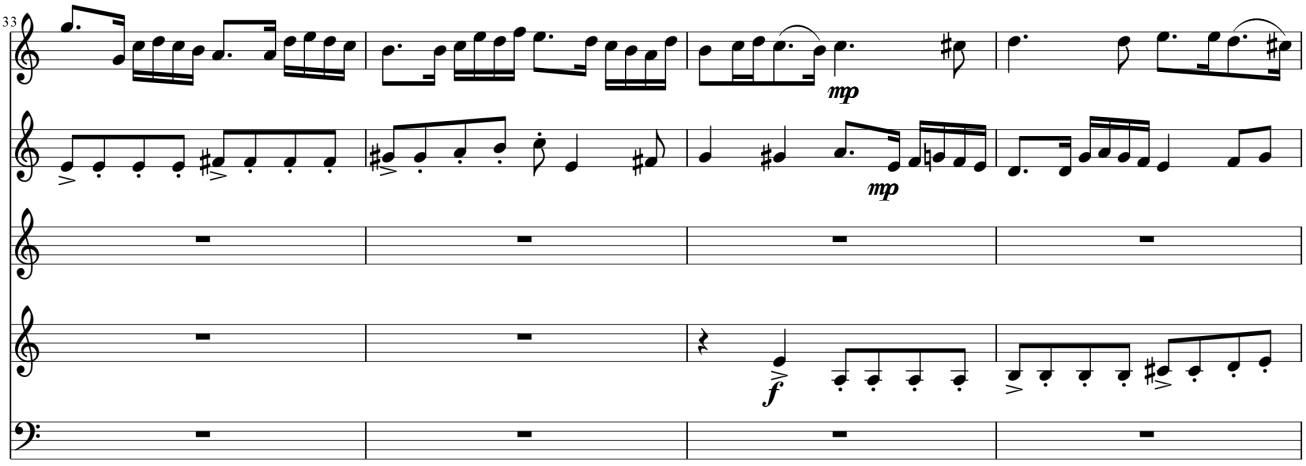


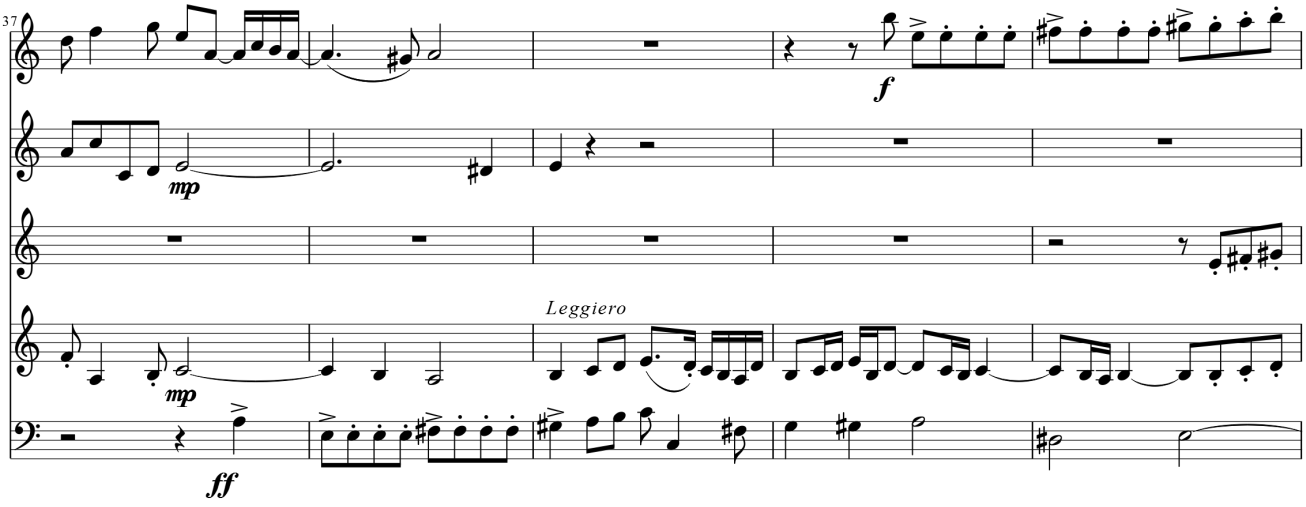
Fuga 1 **Vivo**

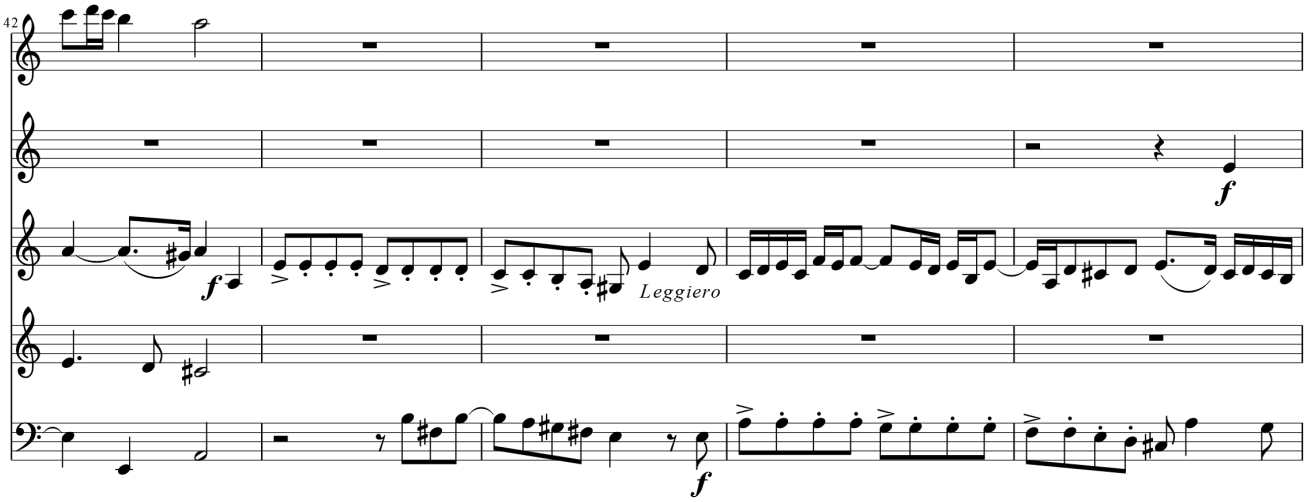
Strict tempo [~♩=96]

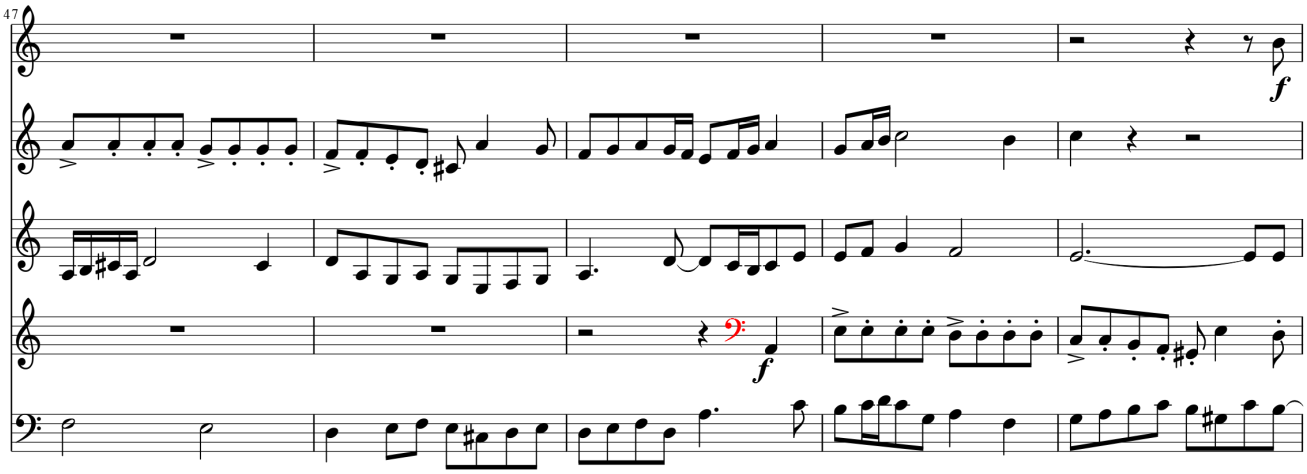


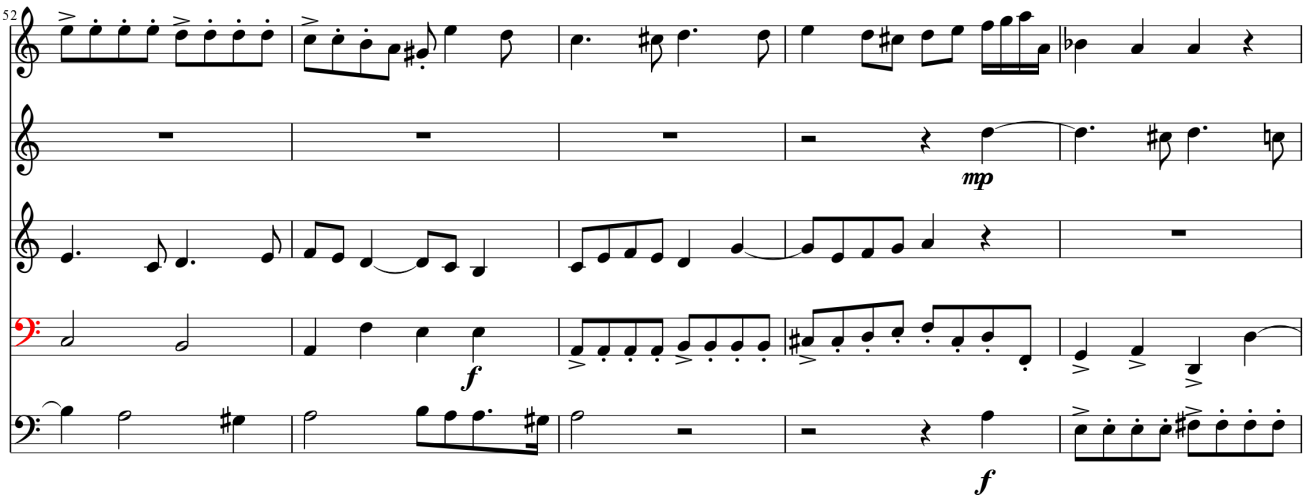

27
f Marcato
mp
mp
f
mf
f Marcato

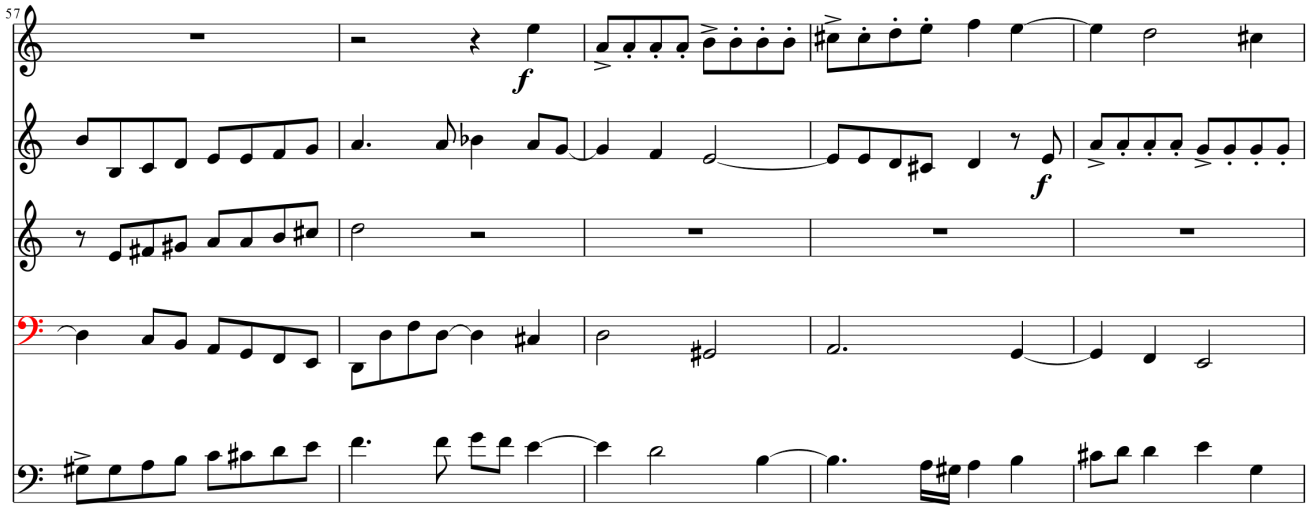

33
mp
mp
f


37
f
mp
mp
Leggiero
ff

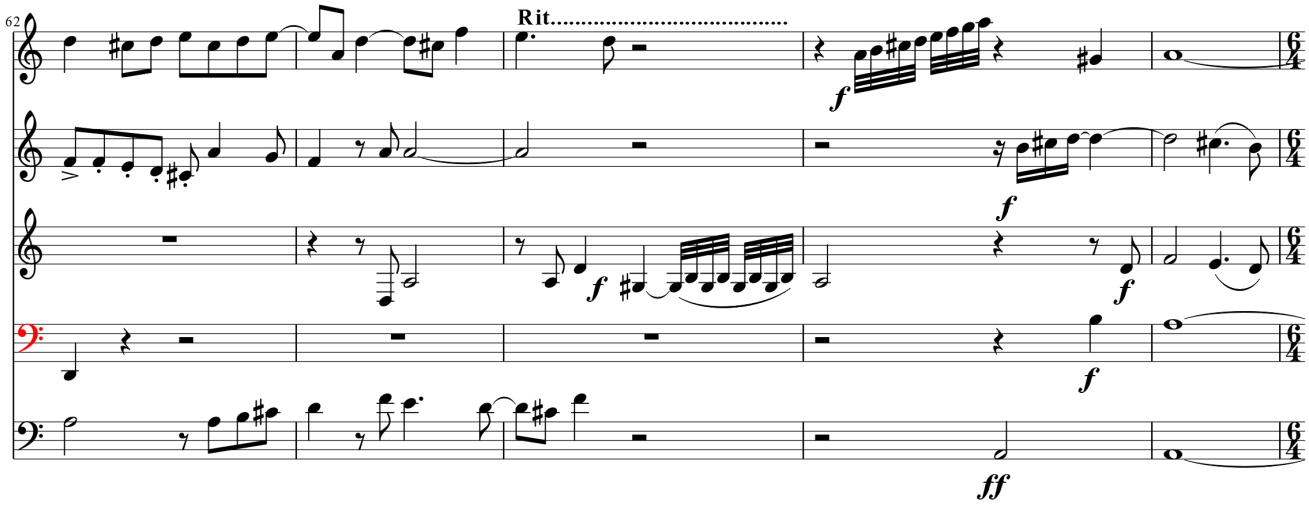

42
f
f
Leggiero
f


47
f
f


52
mp
f
f

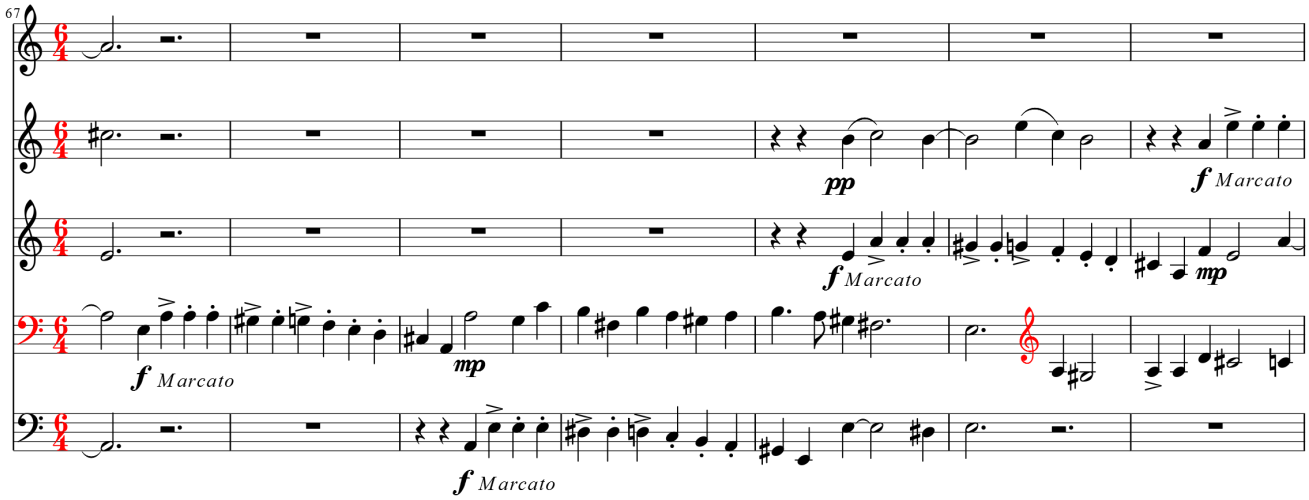


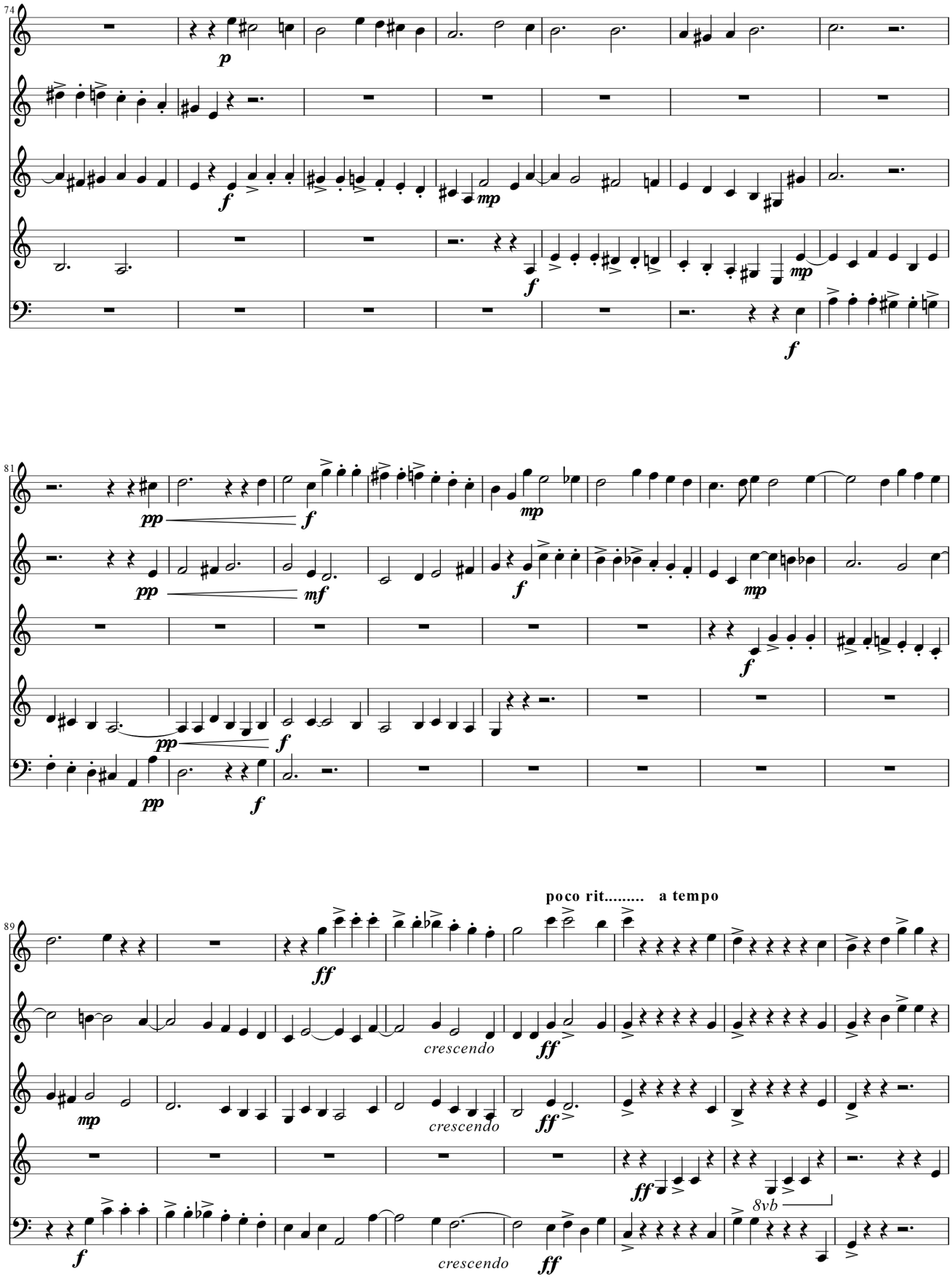
Recitativo **Flexible tempo**

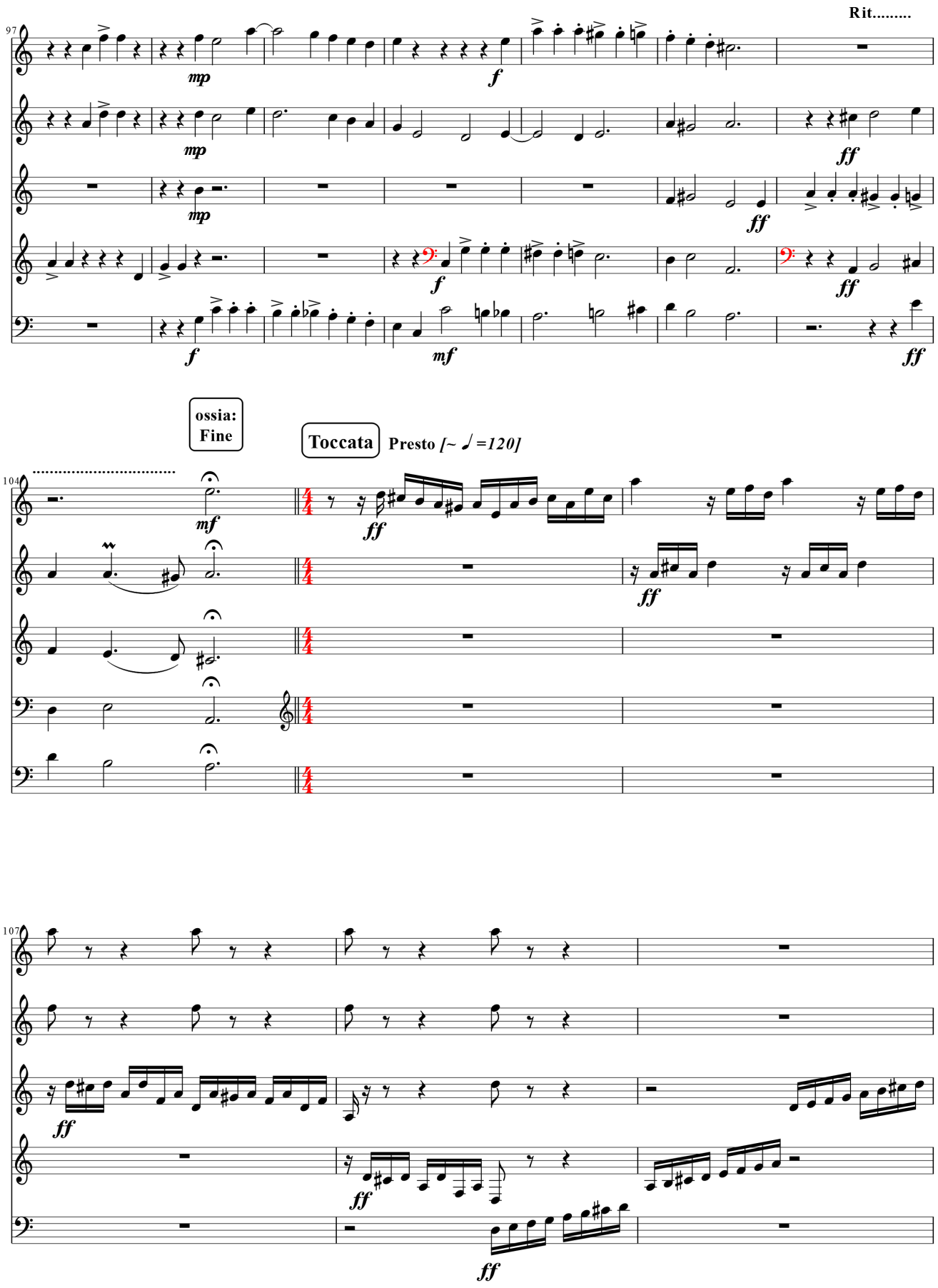


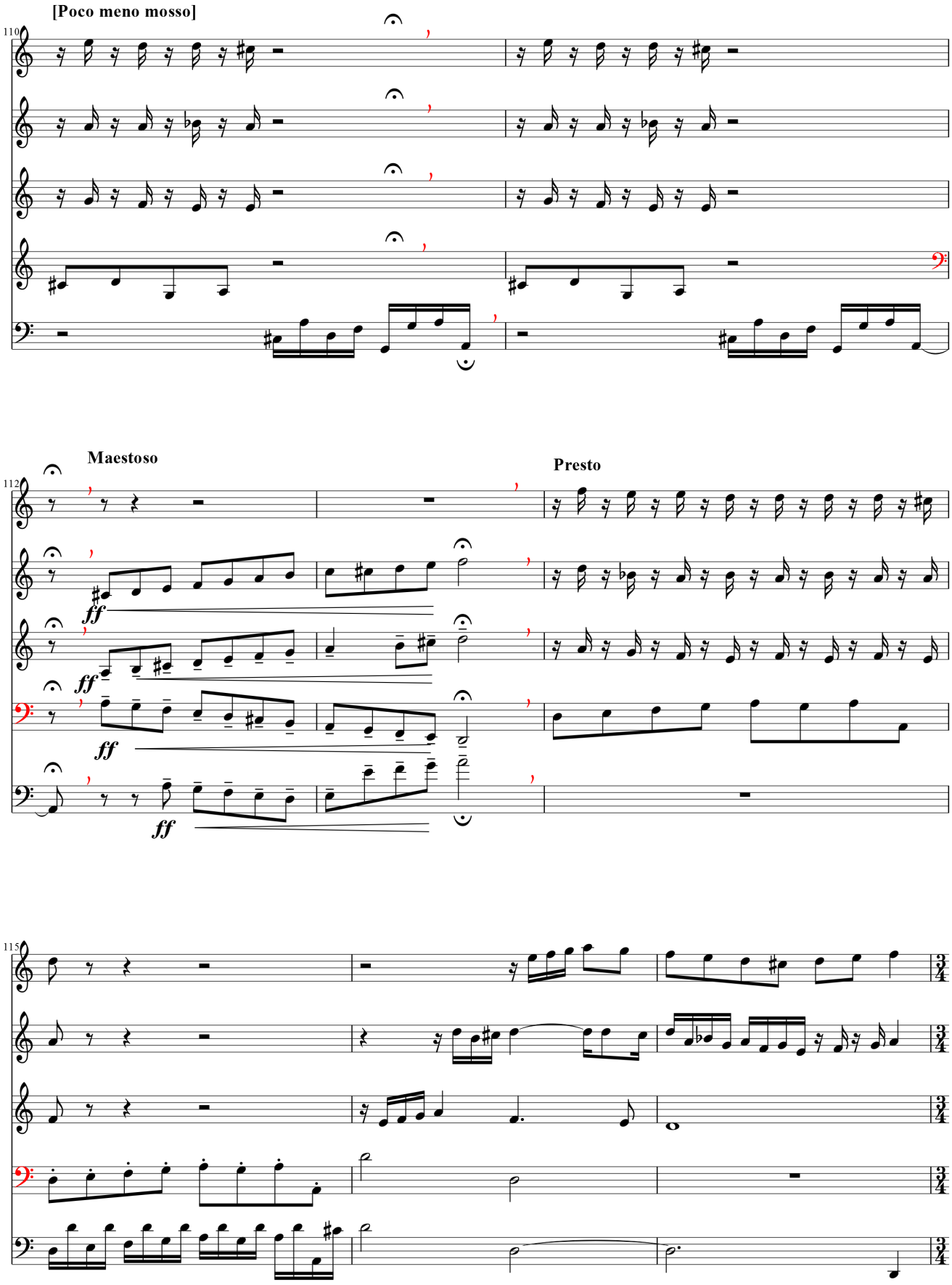
Fuga 2 **Con moto**

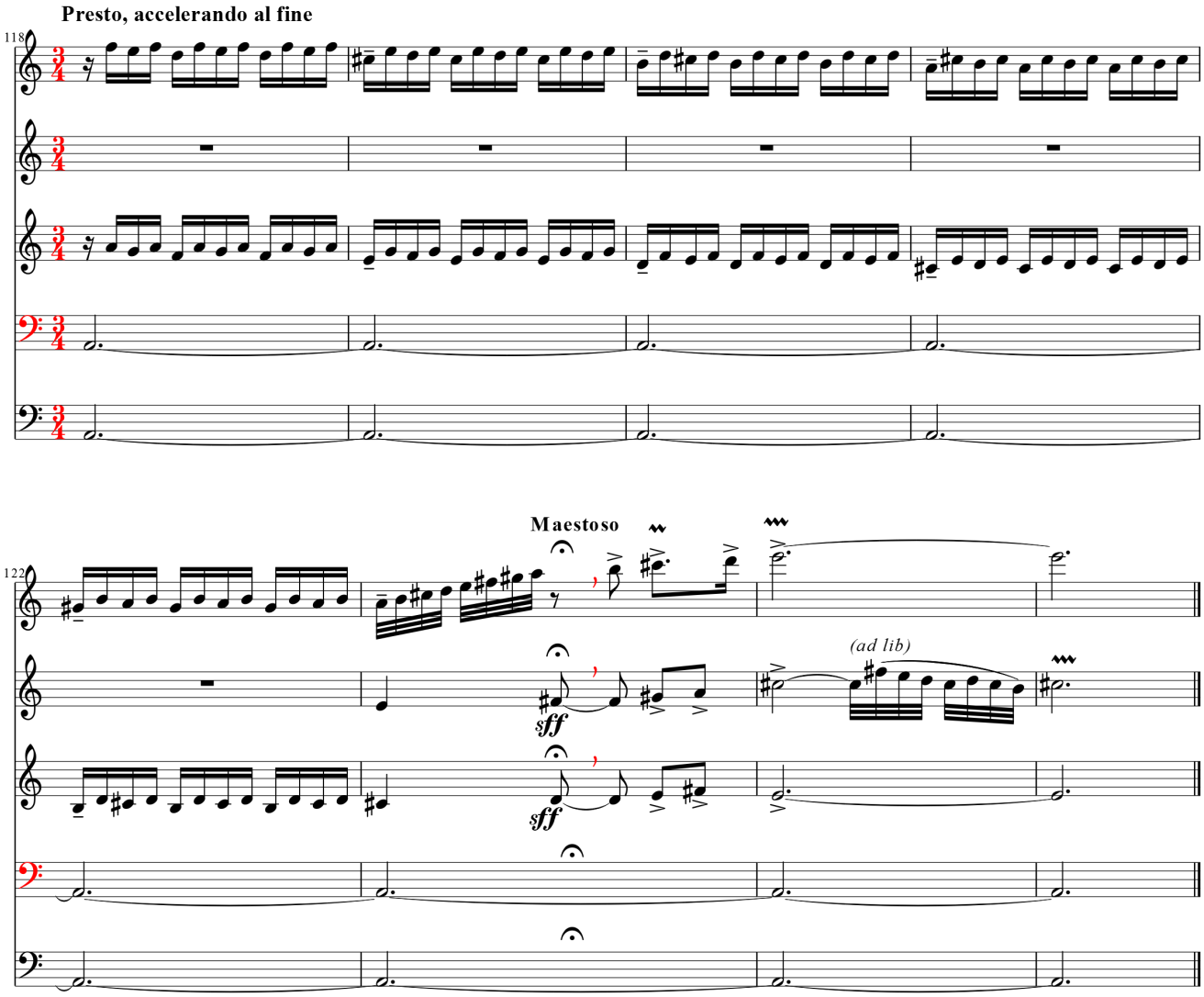
strict tempo [~ ♩=165]




74
p
f
mp
f
f
81
pp
f
pp
mf
f
mp
f
pp
f
pp
f
89
poco rit..... a tempo
ff
crescendo
ff
mp
crescendo
ff
ff
crescendo
ff
8vb


Rit.....
97
mp
mp
mp
f
ff
ff
f
f
mf
ff
ossia:
Fine
Toccata
Presto [~ ♩ =120]
104
mf
ff
ff
107
ff
ff
ff


[Poco meno mosso]
110
Maestoso
112
Presto
ff
ff
ff
115


Presto, accelerando al fine
118
Maestoso
122
sff
sff
(ad lib)

Diderich Buxtehude was born at Helsingborg, now in Sweden but then part of Denmark, probably in 1637. His father was an organist in Helsingør (Shakespeare's Elsinore), and Diderich followed in the profession, first at Helsingborg and then succeeding his father in Helsingør. In 1668 he moved to his final job at the Marienkirche in Lübeck, where he remained until his death in 1707, eventually Germanizing his name. As well as organist, Buxtehude was church treasurer, and he also developed his predecessor's tradition of promoting regular 'Abendmusik' concerts of both secular and religious music.

When Buxtehude wrote down his music it was in 'tablature' (alphabetic note names in long strings, one for each part in the counterpoint), a style that had some ambiguities and was perhaps more an aide-memoire to the composer or rough guide to the performer, and one which was already becoming old-fashioned. Everything that survives now (a fraction of his total output) was either copied by other composers, written out as training material for pupils or sent as presents to Buxtehude's friend Gustav Düben in Sweden. Famously, the young JS Bach walked 300 miles to Lübeck to hear the master performer /composer, to copy his music and learn all he could about the practicalities of the job: Bach's one month's approved leave of absence extended to three, to the annoyance of his employer.

Buxtehude's "Praeludia" are divided into those with pedal parts, which were written for organ but probably practised at home on a pedal clavichord, and those written for hands only (e.g. harpsichord). The more complex pedal pieces alternate contrasting episodes: free improvisatory or recitative-like passages, and formal fugues. The influence of this 'fantasia' style on Bach's early organ music is very clear. Buxtehude played before the advent of compromise tuning, which Bach helped to cement as the standard we know today. However some of the Schnitger organs Buxtehude played on had ingenious 'alternative' semitones for the different sounds of $G^{\#}$ and $A^{\flat}$ (for example), and he pushed the boundaries of the less flexible mean-tone tuning of his organs with complex modulations and pieces in unusual keys (one famous Prelude is in $F^{\#}$ minor).

This energetic prelude demonstrates Buxtehude's fondness for repeated notes in his fugue subjects. After a rhapsodic introduction with repeated suspensions, there are two formal fugues which are closely related - the second differentiated (as often) by its compound time —separated by only 3 'free' bars. The second fugue modulates to C major and terminates triumphantly (forming an alternative ending to the piece in transcription), but there follows a fiery Toccata-like virtuoso tailpiece full of contrast, which finally resolves in a resounding A major.