Viola

Sing to the Corn

for Narrator & String Quartet

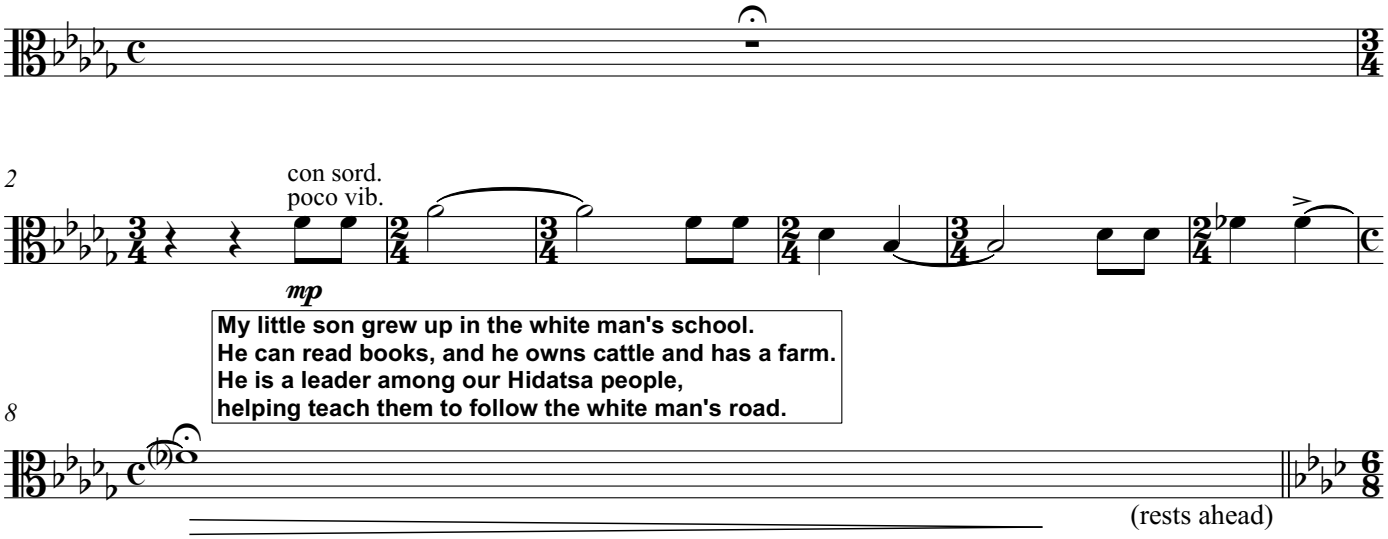
boxed bold text indicates passages
to be read by the narrator.
It is to be spoken in a simple manner.

text by Waheenee,
a Hidatsa woman born in North Dakota
around 1839

W.M. SOBIESKA

Andantino ♩ = 72
lyrical

I am an old woman now.
The buffaloes and blacktail deer are gone,
and our Indian ways are almost gone.
Sometimes I find it hard to believe that I ever lived them.



My little son grew up in the white man's school.
He can read books, and he owns cattle and has a farm.
He is a leader among our Hidatsa people,
helping teach them to follow the white man's road.

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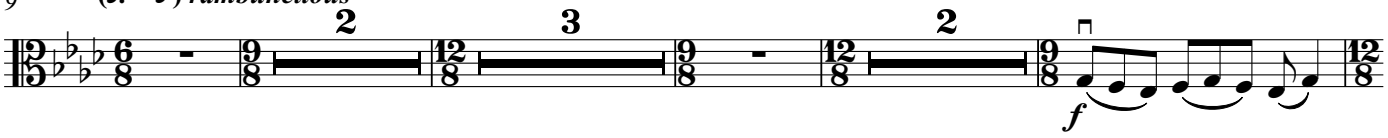
Vivace ♩. = 144

(♩. = ♪) ***rambunctious***

9



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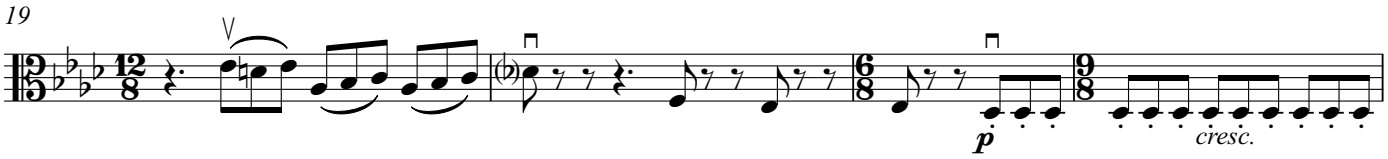

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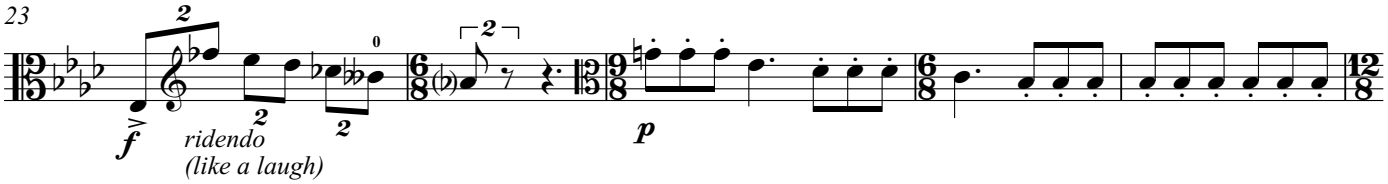

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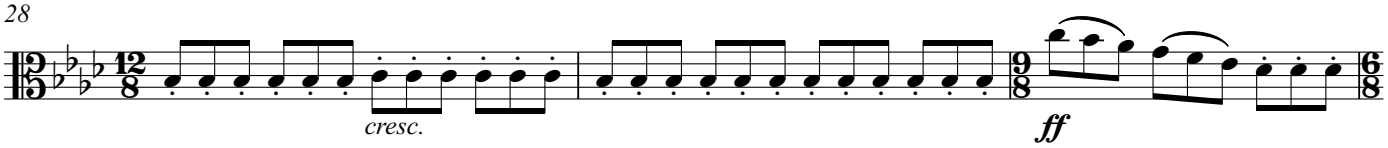

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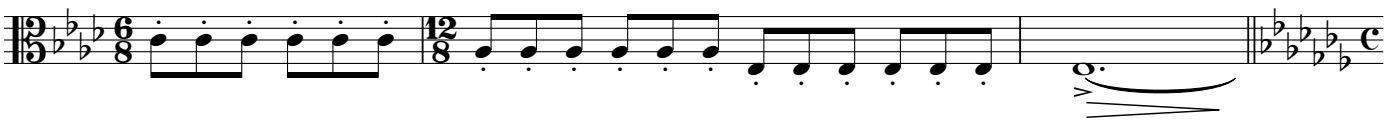

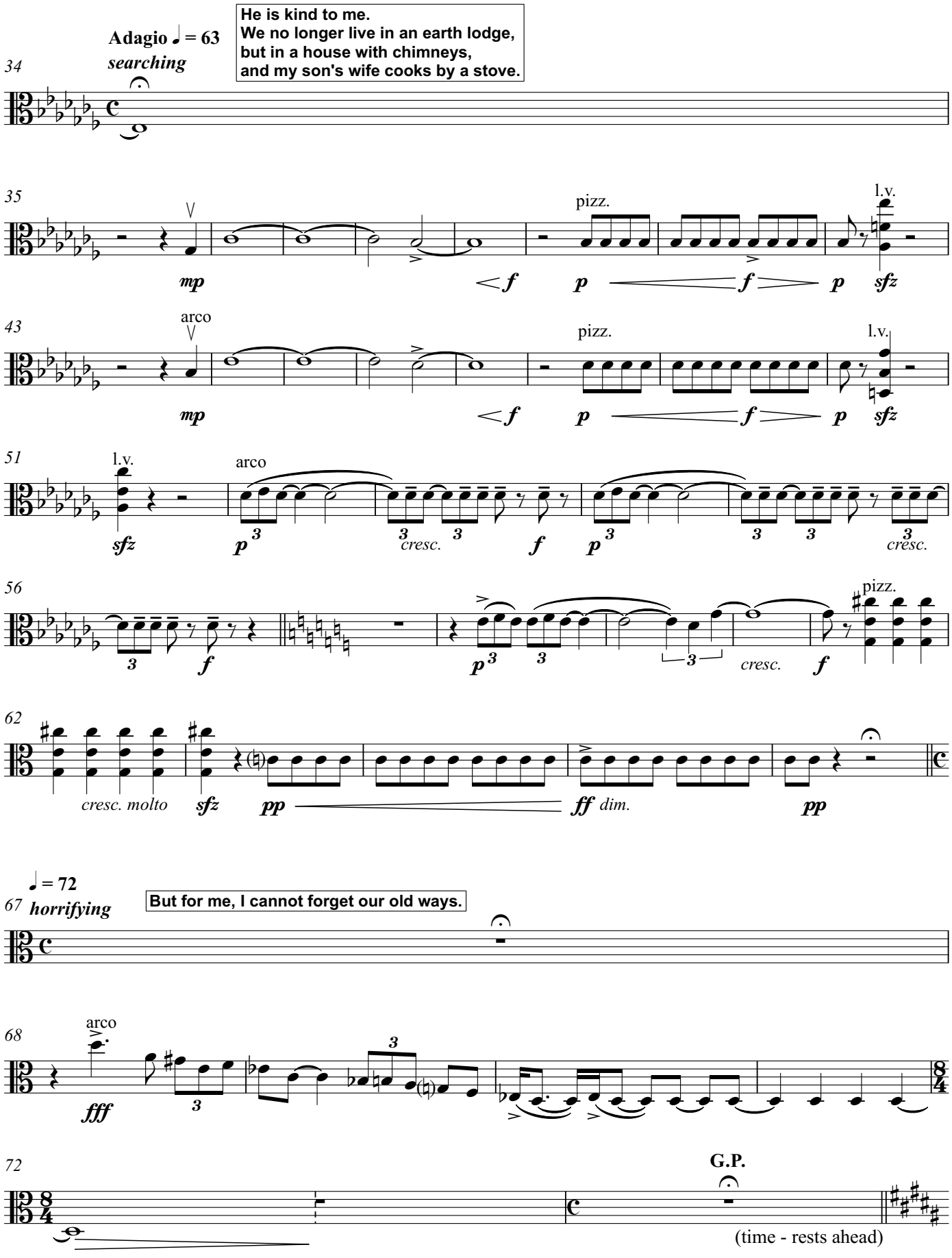
Adagio ♩ = 63
searching
He is kind to me.
We no longer live in an earth lodge,
but in a house with chimneys,
and my son's wife cooks by a stove.
34
35
pizz.
l.v.
mp
f
p
f
p
sfz
43
arco
pizz.
l.v.
51
l.v.
arco
sfz
cresc.
56
pizz.
cresc.
62
cresc. molto
sfz
pp
ff dim.
pp
♩ = 72
67
horrifying
But for me, I cannot forget our old ways.
68
arco
fff
72
G.P.
(time - rests ahead)

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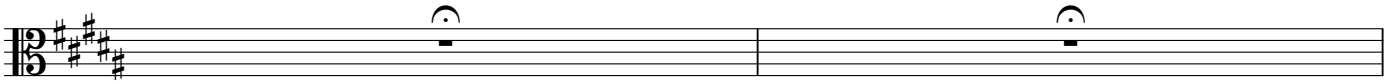
Tempo giusto ♩ = 50

direct

74

Often in summer I rise at daybreak and steal out to the corn fields,

and as I hoe the corn I sing to it, as we did when I was young.



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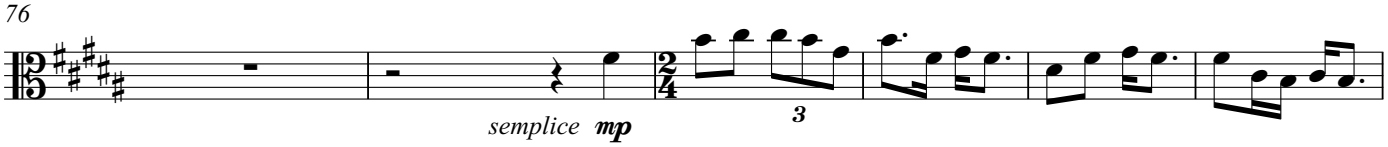
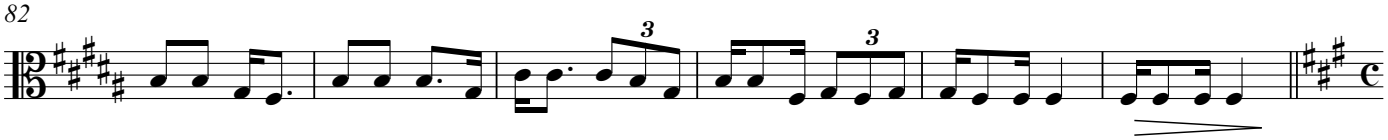
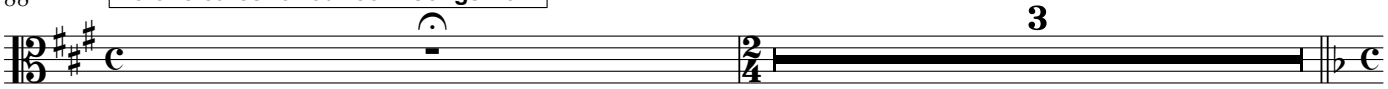


82



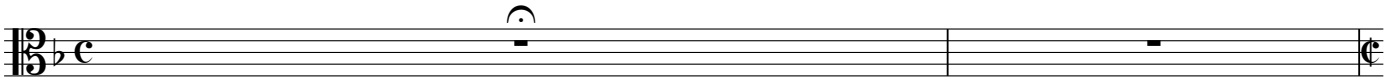
88

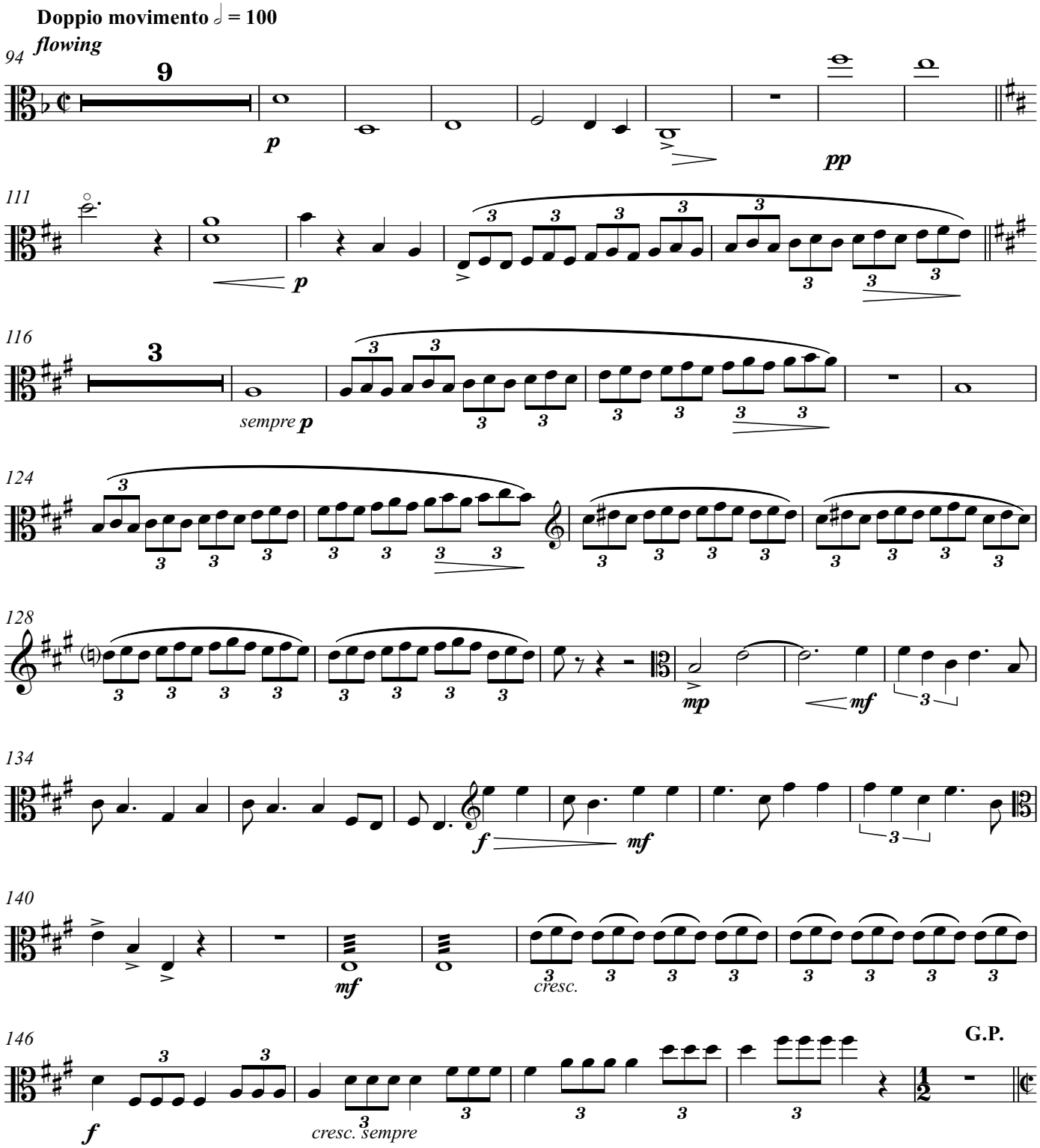
No one cares for our corn songs now.



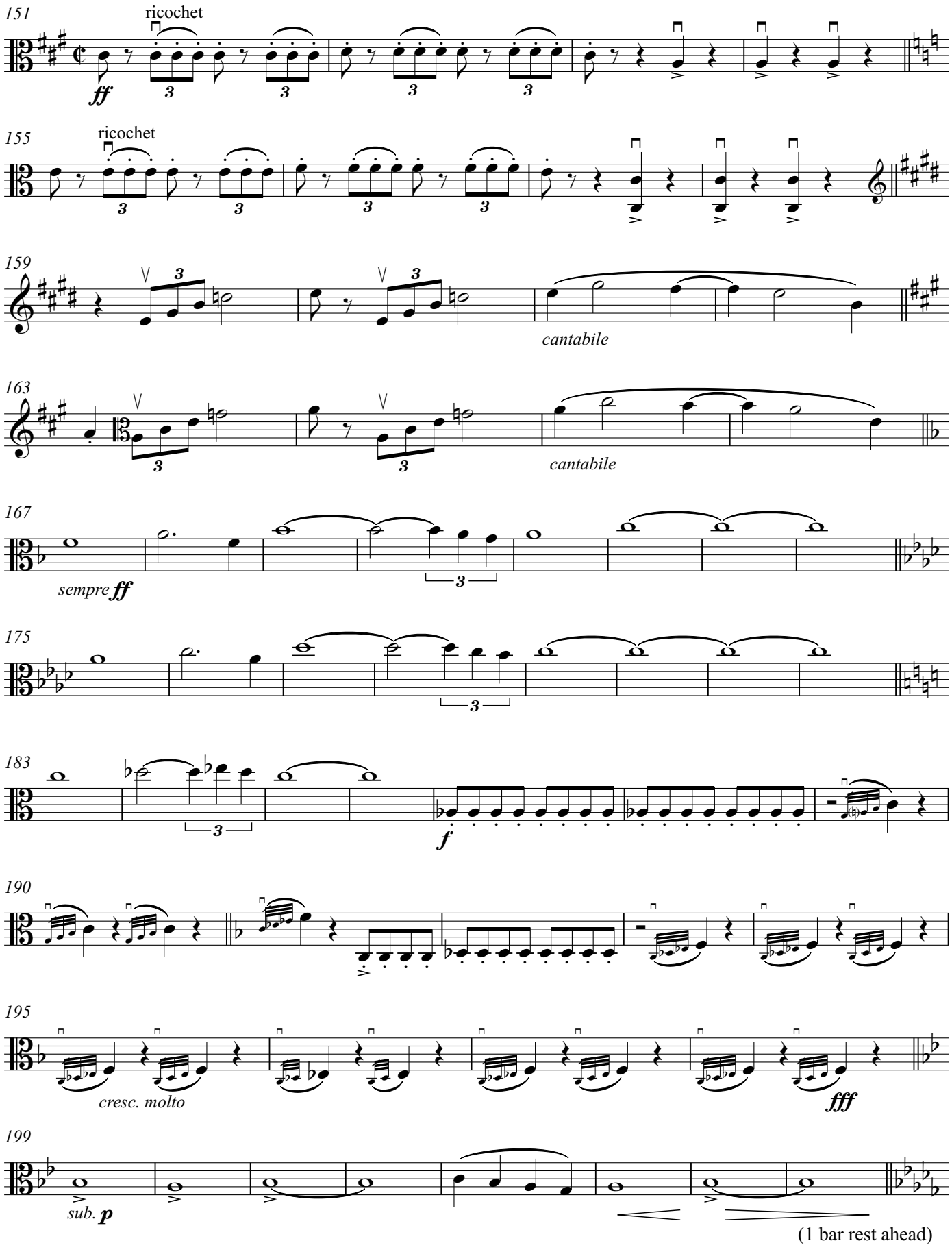
Sometimes in the evening I sit,
looking out on the big Missouri.
The sun sets,
and dusk steals over the water.
In the shadows I seem again to see our Indian village,
with smoke curling upward from the earth lodges,
and in the river's roar I hear the yells of the warriors,
and the laughter of little children as of old.

92

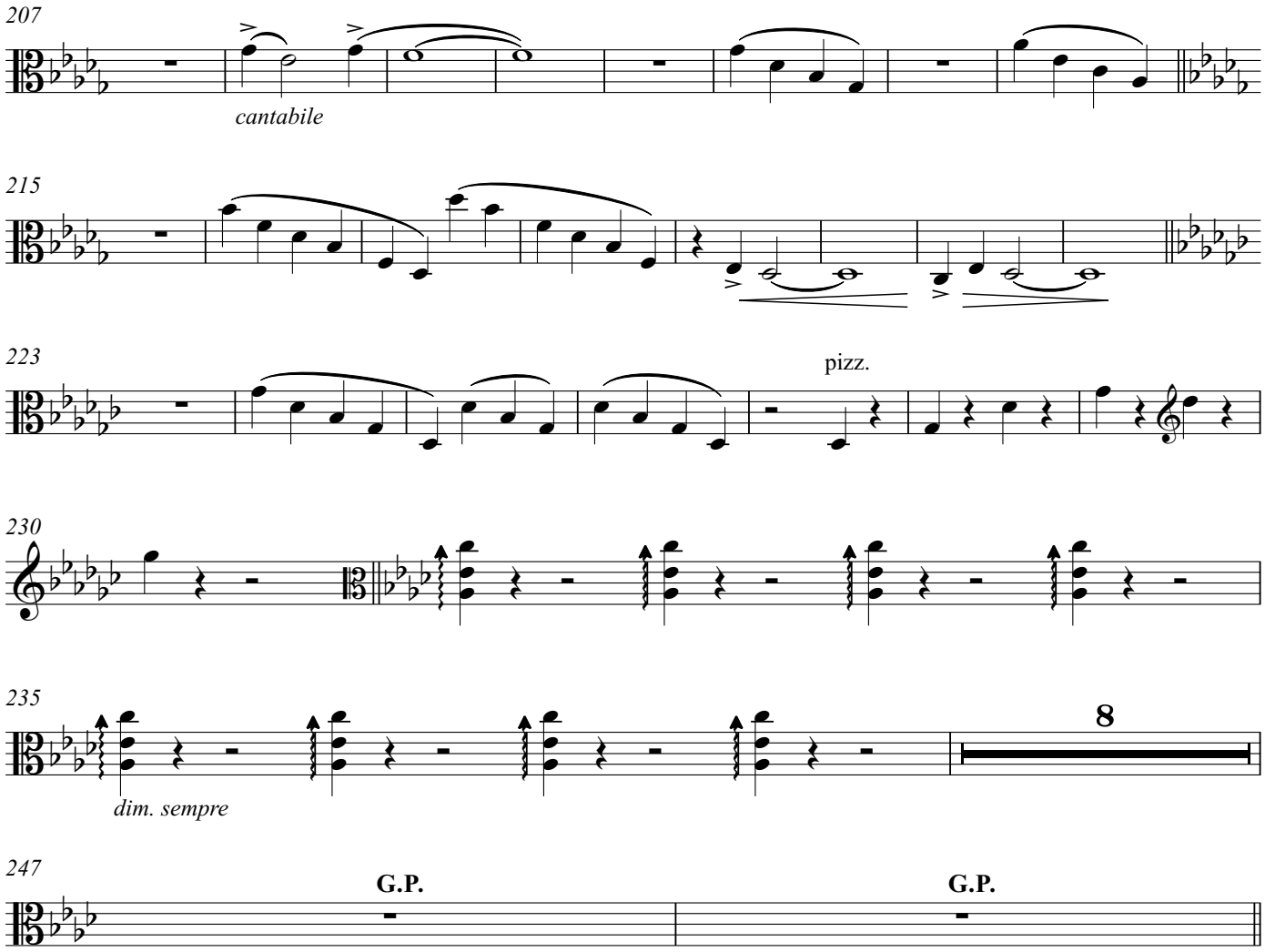



Doppio movimento 𝅗𝅥 = 100
flowing
94
9
p
pp
111
p
116
3
sempre p
124
128
mp
mf
134
f
mf
140
mf
cresc.
146
f
cresc. sempre
G.P.

L'istesso tempo ma vigoroso (𝅗𝅥 = 100)
allegro molto
steady, but always moving forward



V.S.
(1 bar rest ahead)


207
cantabile
215
223
pizz.
230
235
8
dim. sempre
247
G.P.
G.P.

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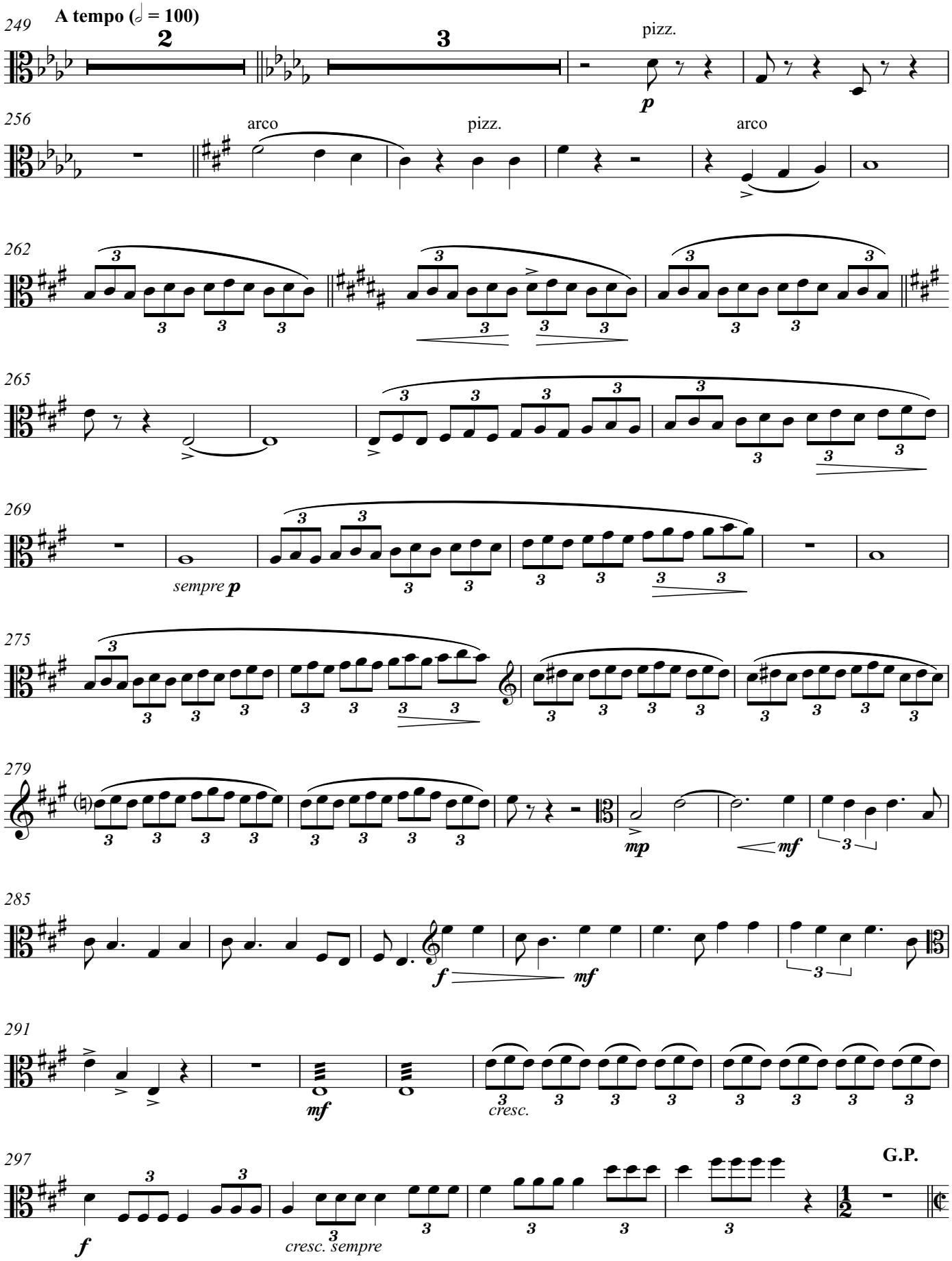
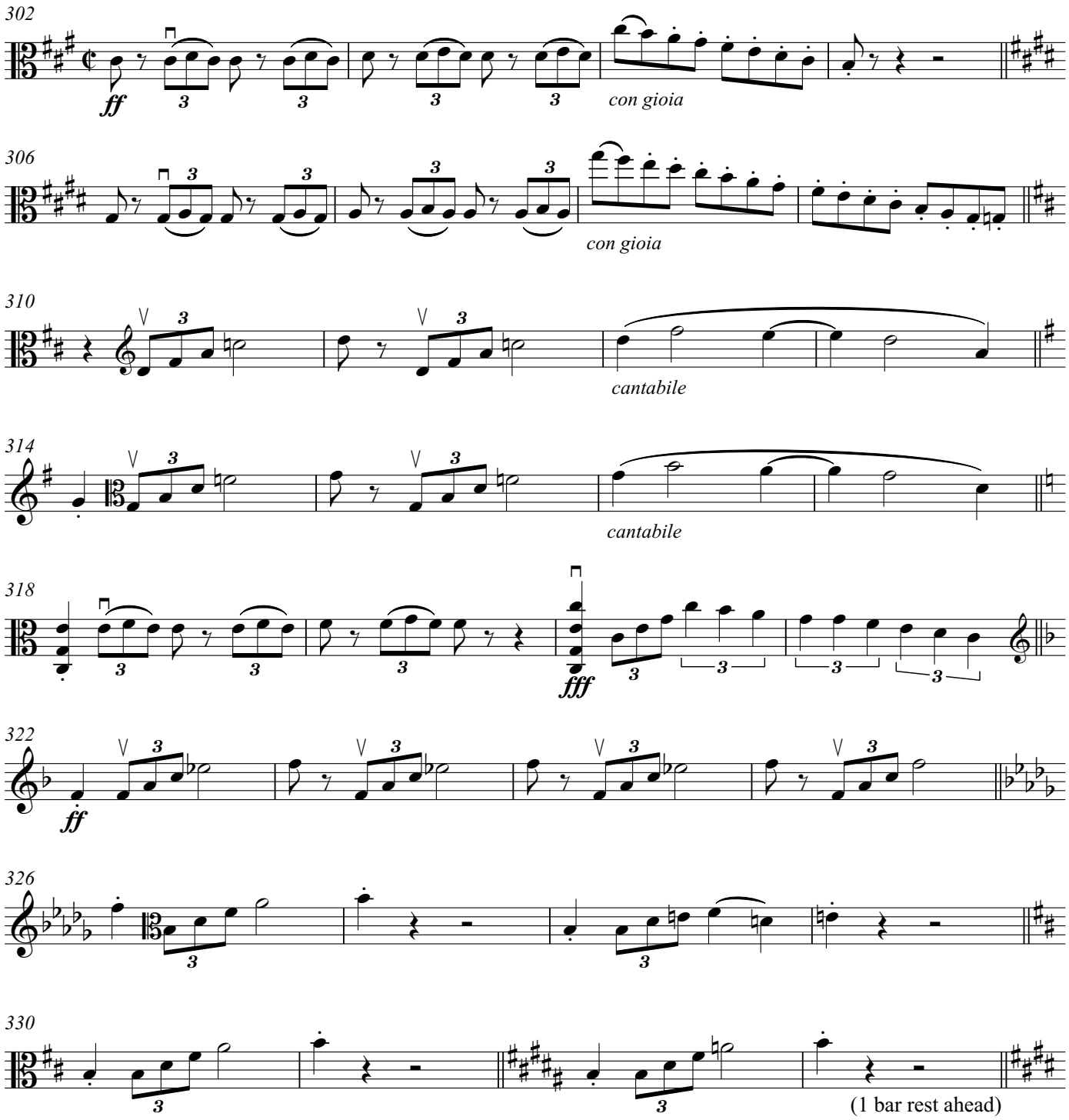
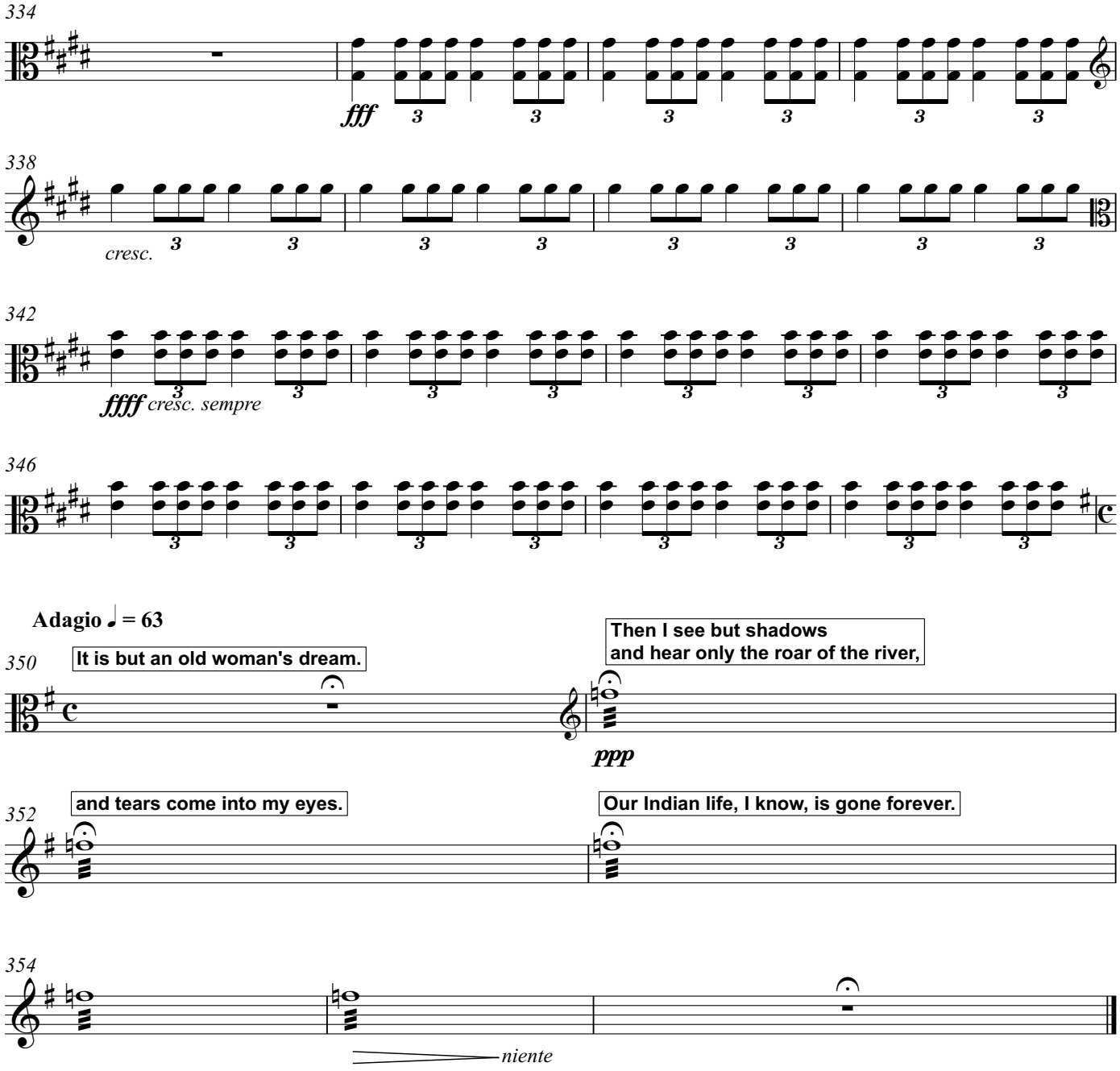

249
A tempo (♩ = 100)
2
3
pizz.
p
256
arco
pizz.
arco
262
265
269
sempre p
275
279
mp
mf
285
f
mf
291
mf
cresc.
297
f
cresc. sempre
G.P.


302
ff
con gioia
306
con gioia
310
cantabile
314
cantabile
318
fff
322
ff
326
330
(1 bar rest ahead)


334
fff
338
cresc.
342
ffff cresc. sempre
346
Adagio ♩ = 63
350
It is but an old woman's dream.
Then I see but shadows
and hear only the roar of the river,
ppp
352
and tears come into my eyes.
Our Indian life, I know, is gone forever.
354
niente

Composer's Notes

[CONTEXT]

This piece is a musical setting of a text recorded from Waheenee, a Hidatsa woman born in the Knife River area of present North Dakota around 1839.

The Hidatsa people, a northern Plains Indians culture, are among the oldest to have lived on this land, with the first villages dating back to the 13th century. While hunting was an important part of their lifestyle, the Hidatsa also very much relied on agriculture.

Historically, their agricultural surplus, combined with artisans' crafts and an advantageous geographical position, granted them a central role in the Great Plains Indian trading networks.

The Hidatsa traditionally lived in permanent villages composed of distinctive, large, circular earthen lodges. They were not a nomadic people.

[STRUCTURE]

The piece is comprised of seven deliberately uneven sections.

It deals with transition and treats not only the subject of time but also our perception of it. In this sense, it is a sequence of states -- physical, cultural, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

The final graphic complements the fourth section, central to the work. Its symbolic aspects address a torn fabric of time and the roots of a tree, the longest of which penetrate both the depths of the earth and of our subconscious.

As such, the piece operates in both a sequential and a simultaneous mode.

[MATERIAL]

The work quotes two traditional songs. Suitable Hidatsa material was not available at the time of writing, so the songs quoted are from the closely related Mandan culture.

The very beginning quotes the first fragment of the "Song of the Black-Tailed Deer", which is narrative in nature.

In the fifth section, the viola plays the "Song to the Corn" in its entirety. In traditional use, this song would have served a slightly different purpose than that described by Waheenee, but the spirit of it remains true to form.

Both songs appear again and are reworked in the sixth section.

The original source material for the songs is provided further below. Groups performing the piece are encouraged to study it.

As the songs are crucial to understanding the core of the work, one possibility when rehearsing would be to play, or preferably, sing the songs together in unison.

[CREDITS]

I could of course never say enough to the power of Waheenee's words and the amazing cultural heritage of the Hidatsa people. They are true sources of inspiration, of which this piece is a meager and very fragmented reflection.

Credit must also be given to Frances Densmore for her visionary foresight and incredible dedication in recording the music of the Hidatsa and related cultures and preserving it for future generations. The resources below are pulled from her book "Mandan & Hidatsa Music", published in 1923.

[THEME]

As stated previously, the piece reflects on the nature of time and the passing thereof.

While it was written specifically in the context of the Hidatsa culture, it in this way offers a theme that is universal to humanity.

It is my wish that in this way, the music may speak to the heart of anyone, young and old alike, who has experienced loss, death, transition, remembrance, and a particular sort of inward reflection -- be it upon a person, a culture, a place, a time, a dream, or a hope.

[STYLE]

While the music does make use of authentic quotes, it was never the goal of this piece to accurately emulate the whole of that cultural tradition.

As Waheenee herself stated, "Our Indian life, I know, is gone forever." While, fortunately, many aspects live and thrive in the present day, her assessment is also sadly accurate in a number of ways. What is gone is gone, and she is absolutely right.

Instead, the work reaches to music as a tool that is universal to humanity so that it may speak across the boundaries of space, time, and prejudice, and in doing so share a deeper understanding of existence.

[PERFORMANCE]

The narrator should be a woman with a low voice.

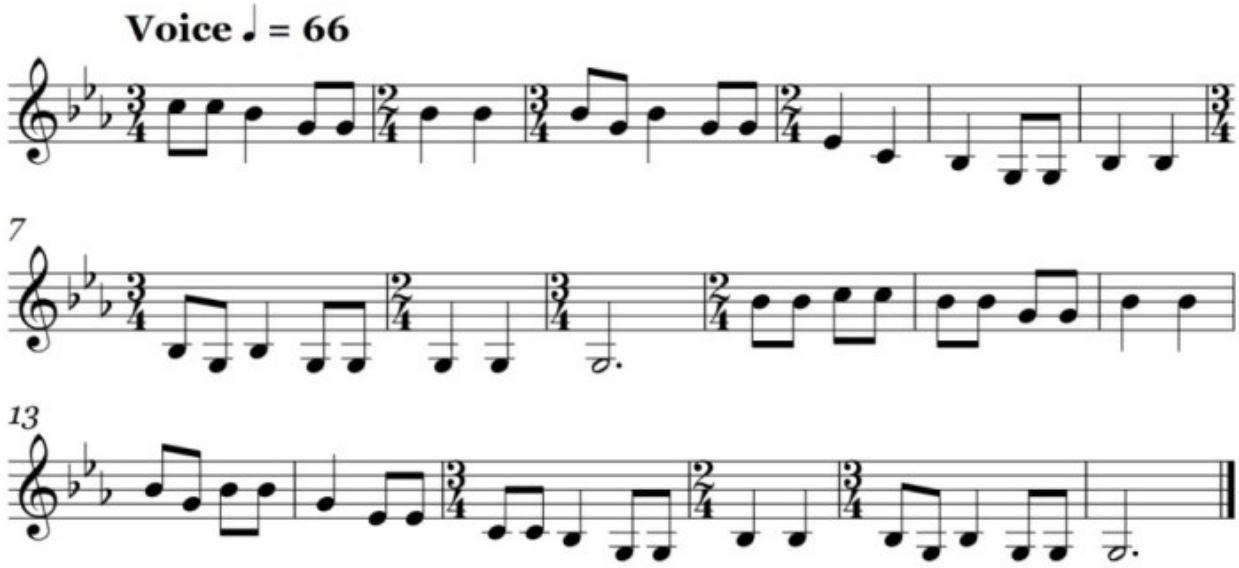
I humbly request that the cellist sit on the outside when performing this piece.

[RESOURCES]

Drum not recorded.
Originally in E major,
bass clef.

Song of the Deer

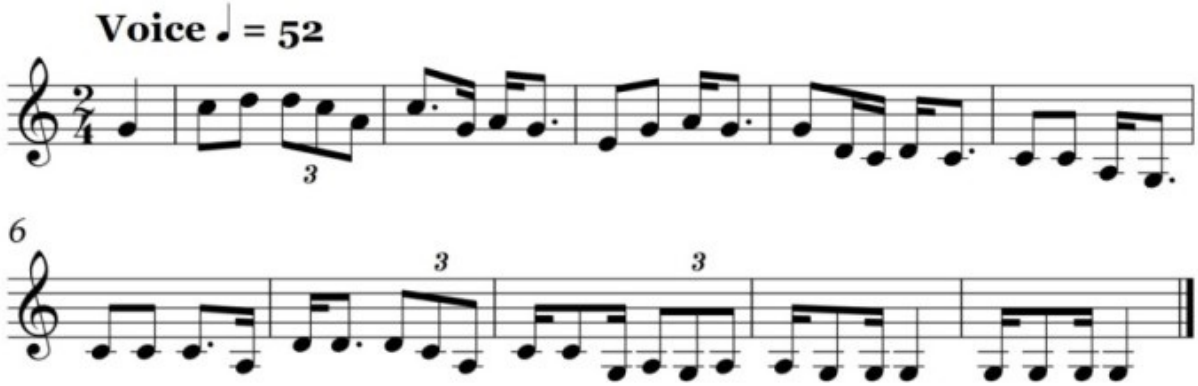
recorded by Bear-on-the-Flat



Drum not recorded.
Originally in
B-flat major.

Song to the Corn

recorded by Otter Woman



Hidatsa women tilling the soil. Nine varieties of corn were grown. "Soft white" could be used in any kind of corn food. "Soft yellow" was easy to pound and turn into meal. Each variety had a distinct taste. Besides corn, the women had beans, sunflowers and squash in their well cared for gardens. [courtesy of Wikipedia; downloaded Feb. 2020]

BUT FOR ME,
I CANNOT FORGET
OUR OLD WAYS.