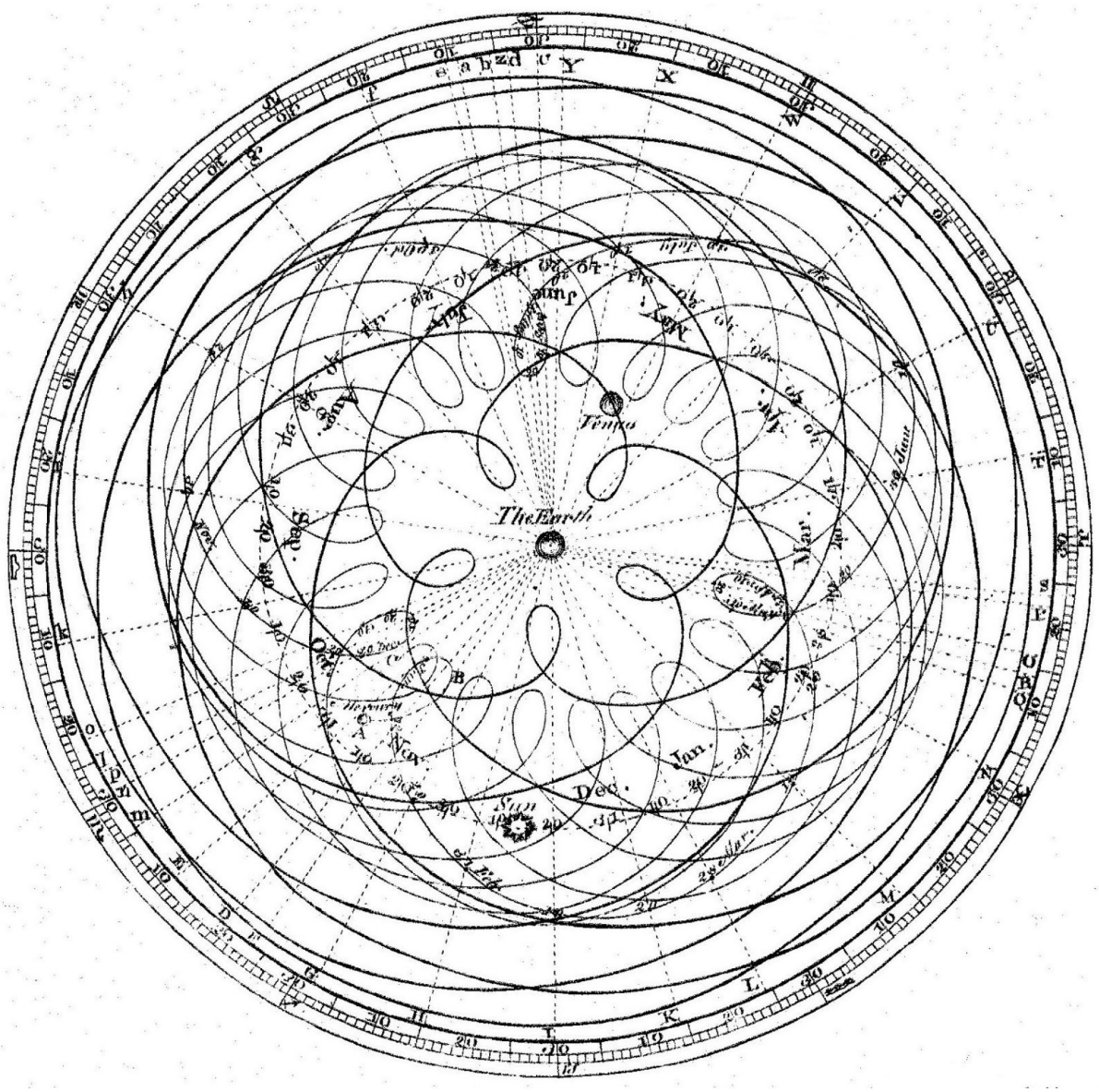
Epicycles

A composition for harpsichord, dancer and actor.

“I know that I am mortal by nature, and ephemeral; but when I trace at my pleasure the windings to and fro of the heavenly bodies I no longer touch the earth with my feet: I stand in the presence of Zeus himself and take my fill of ambrosia.”
Claudius Ptolemy



By Jamie Howell

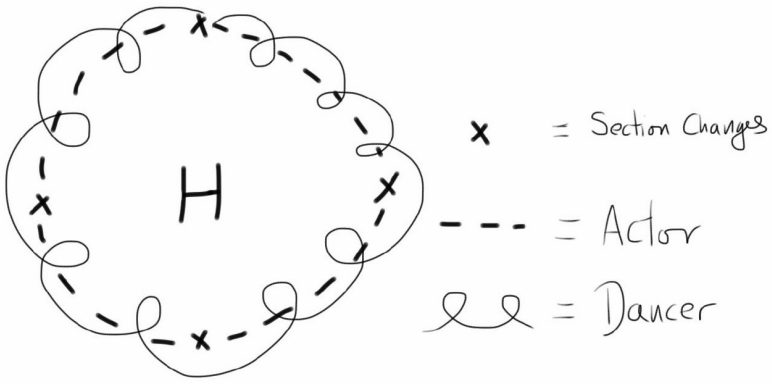
Epicycles are cycles occurring within larger cycles; an idea which is central the 1st century astronomer Ptolemy's attempt to describe the orbits of the planets. His assumption of geocentrism meant that he required an explanation of the apparent retrograde motion of some of the planets across the sky. His conclusion was that as the celestial bodies made their grand orbit of the Earth they did so in a continuously cycling motion creating a complex looping path around us. This model was further developed by Islamic astronomers in the middle ages and remained the prevailing view until the Copernican revolution of the 16th Century.

The piece is divided into four sections. Together, they represent one complete orbit of a planet around the Earth (as in the Ptolemaic model) as experienced from a fixed viewpoint. They are also representative of the intellectual journey of humanity from the birth of religious thinking to modern times:

- *Rising (approx. 1 ½ mins)*: The development of monotheistic religion placing humans at the centre of creation.
- *Setting (approx. ½ min)*: The institutionalisation of religion and abuse of power justified by the church's view of the place of humans in the universe.
- *Emerging (approx 1 min)*: The emergence of the Copernican model and evolutionary theory threatening to dethrone the anthropocentric view.
- *Receding (approx 20 sec)*: The acceptance of life in a universe in which we are ultimately insignificant but where we find our own purpose.

The actor plays the role of an orbiting planet and represents the unchanging view that humankind is at the centre of creation. The dancer is both a planet making smaller orbits of the actor's planet and represents humankind's developing relationship with the anthropocentric model. The harpsichord is taken as the fixed viewpoint around which the actor and dancer orbit (not necessarily in a strictly elliptical or circular fashion) with the four approximate points marked (*fig. 1)* being arrived at as the sections begin and end. The progress around the orbits should be made whilst using cyclical motions with the hands, head and other parts of the body.

Fig. 1



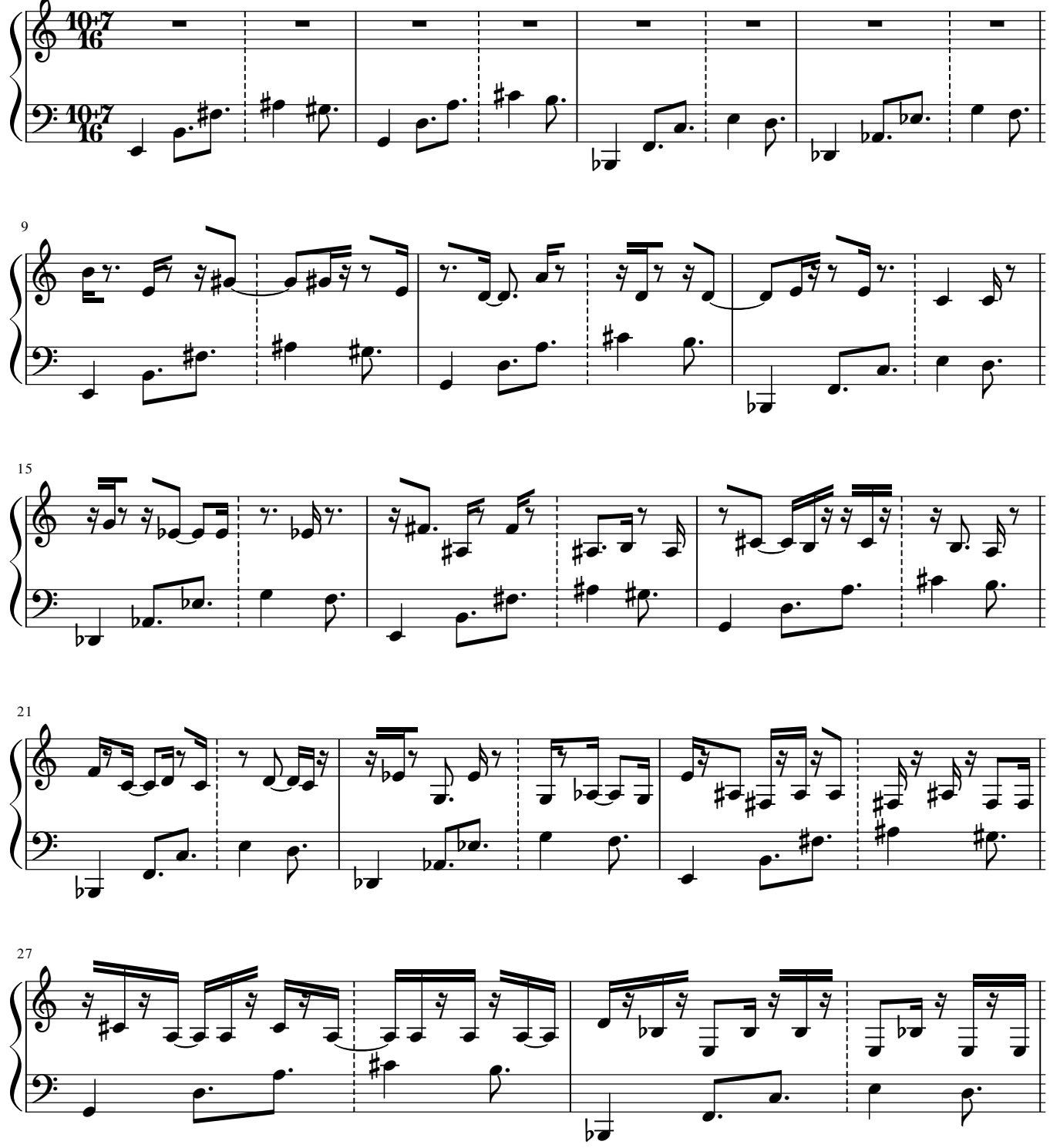
The interaction of the two players should reflect the conflict and resolution implied by the descriptions given above for each section. (D - dancer, A - actor)

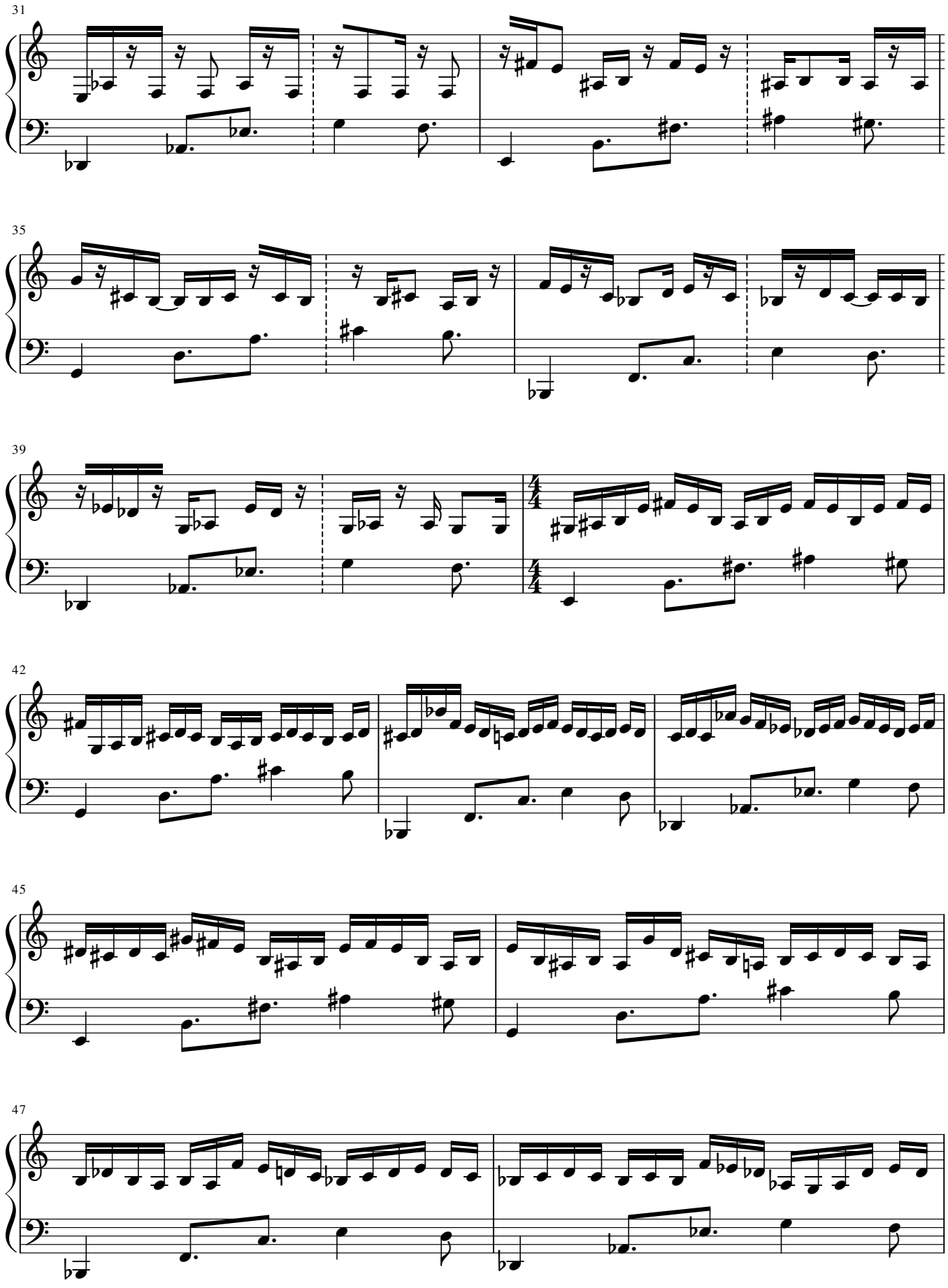
- Humans (D) worship the idea that their place is at the centre of universe (A)
- Humans (D) becoming oppressed by this idea (A)
- Humans (D) pushing back against tradition (A)
- Humans (D) breaking free of age old constraints (A)

Epicycles

Jamie Howell

♪ = 220 **Rising**

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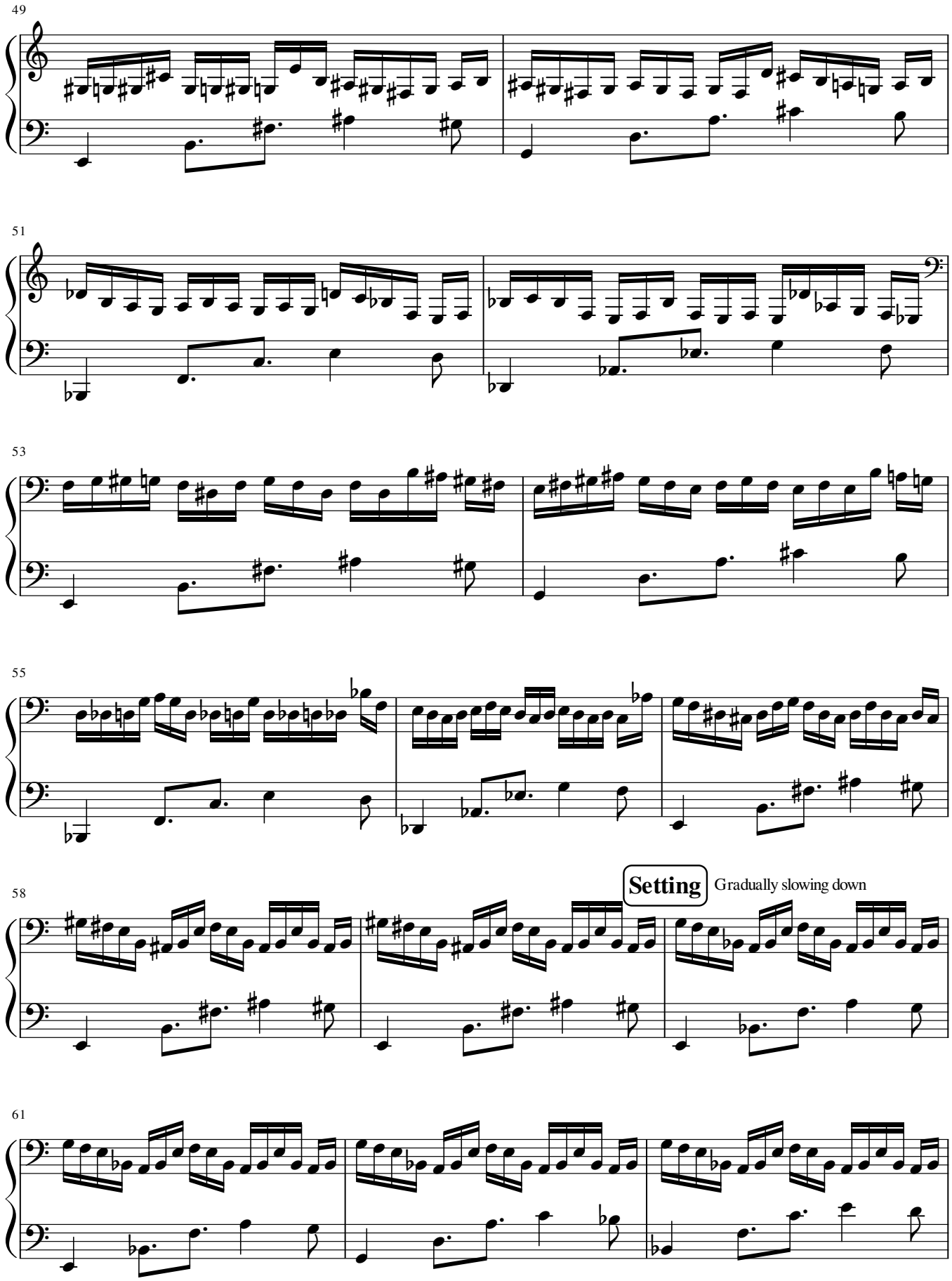
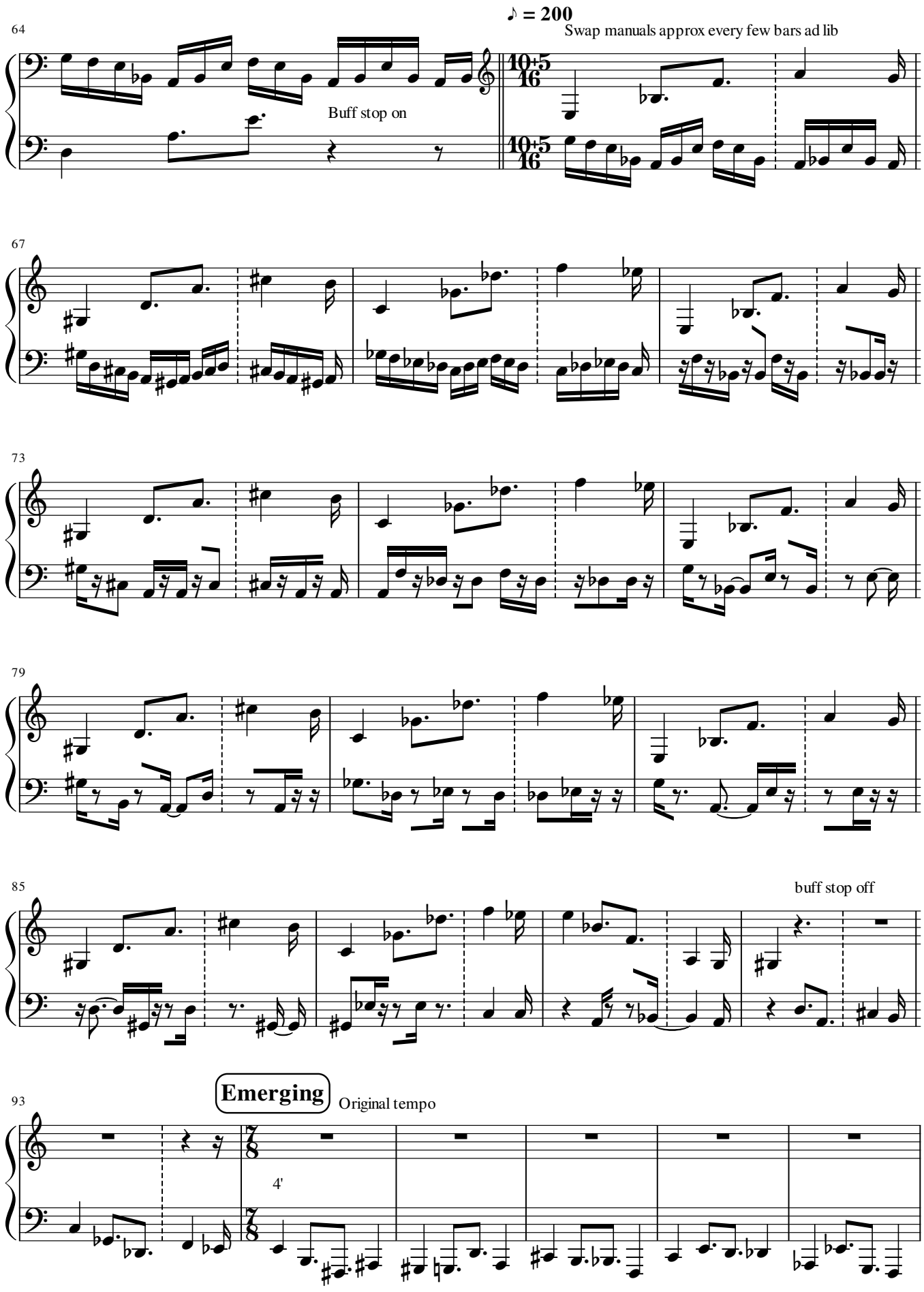
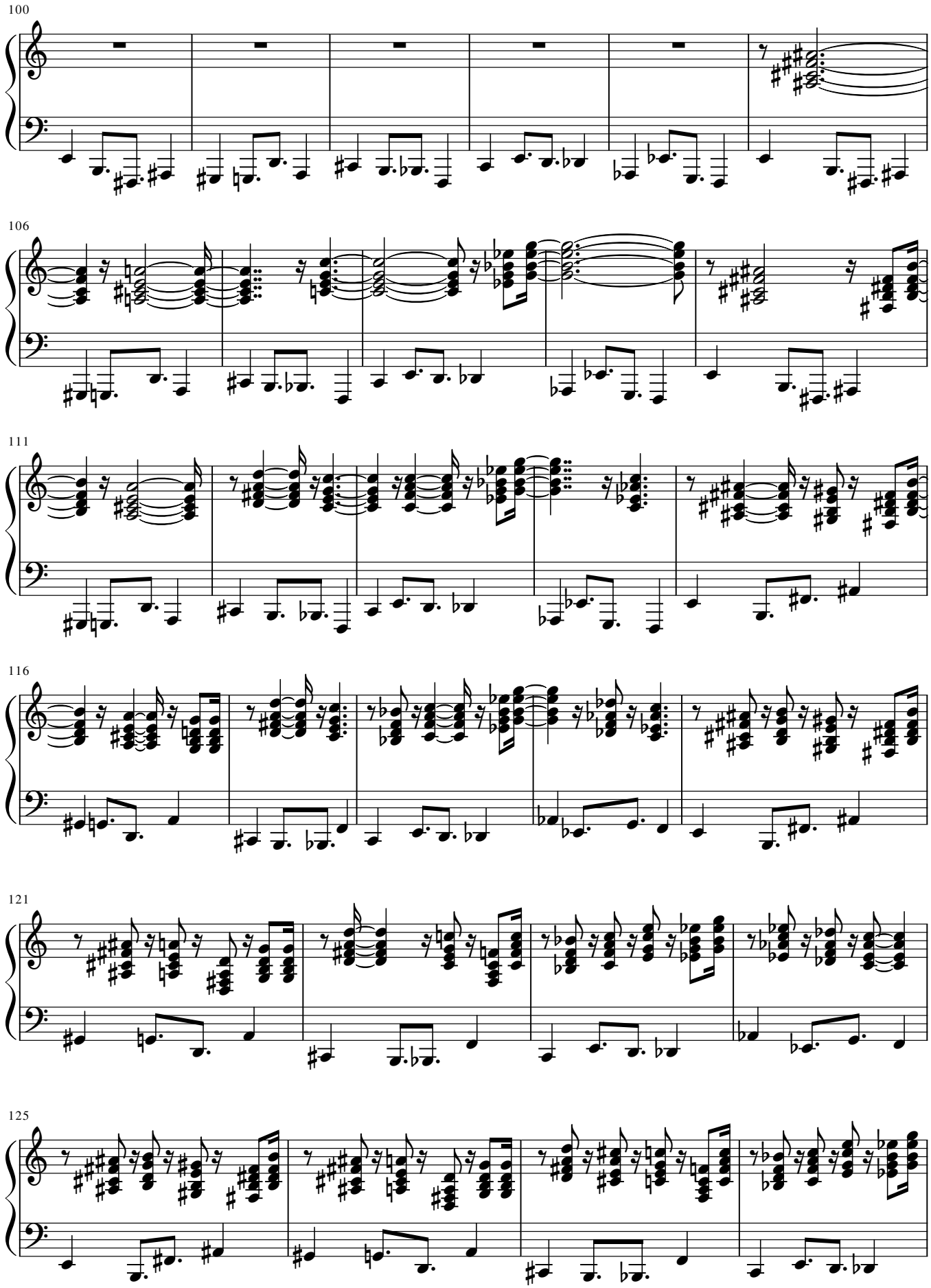
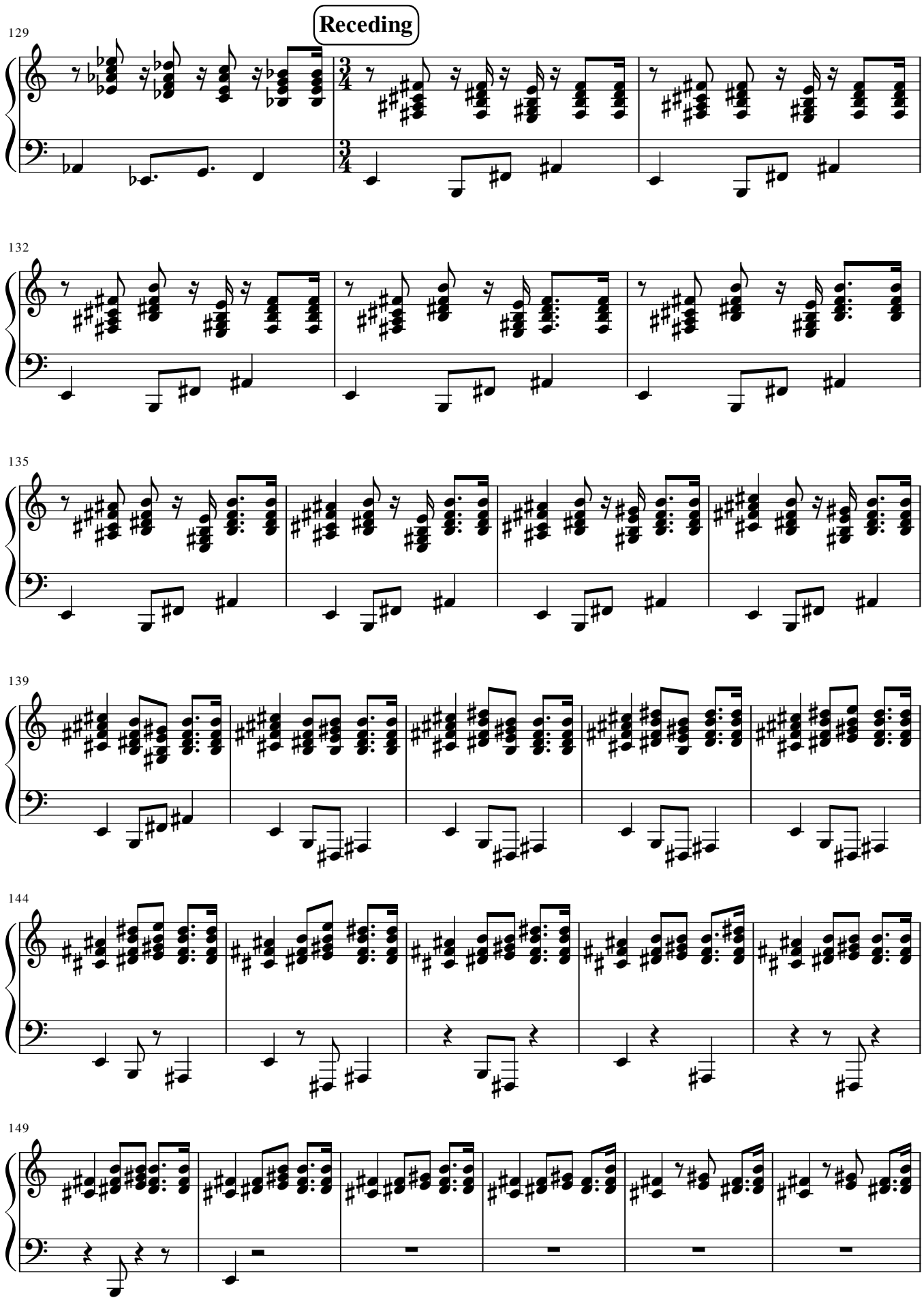
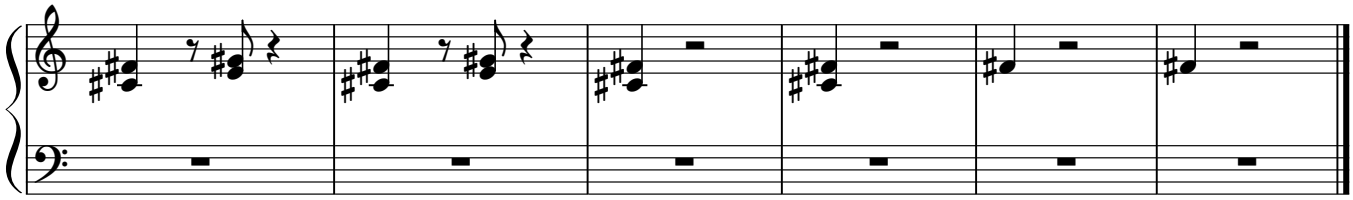
35
39
42
45
47


49
51
53
55
58
Setting
Gradually slowing down
61


♪ = 200
64
Swap manuals approx every few bars ad lib
Buff stop on
67
73
79
85
buff stop off
93
Emerging
Original tempo
4'


100
106
111
116
121
125


Receding
129
132
135
139
144
149

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