Before Light Ends

in memoriam Robert Sherlaw - Johnson

This piece for piano is permeated by the plainsong chant, *Te Lucis Ante Terminum;* fragments of the chant are diffused throughout, emerging coherently only in the last coda. The old hymn asks the creator of light to illuminate us as night approaches with its fears and dreams. In writing it I remembered the impressions that Robert Sherlaw-Johnson's dazzling piano performances first made on me as a student; and how the inspiration of his quiet gentleness nevertheless made exacting demands on my early efforts as a composer. As I began to write, a vivid sense of him returned to me; I have included a simple non-tonal triad which we once discovered we had both used on the same day.

Julia Usher
read music at Newnham College Cambridge, and while there studied composition with Richard Orton. His involvement with contemporary music encouraged Julia to continue her studies at York University - where she first met Robert Sherlaw - Johnson, and heard his piano works and other performances. She went on to study with him privately in Oxford.

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Since then she has written many works for chamber ensemble, orchestra and voices; and developed a great interest in music theatre, including *The Orford Merman*, directed by Michael Finnissy. Her list of works includes *A Reed in the Wind* , now a much performed piece for solo oboe, *Le Isole della Laguna*, one of several pieces written for the recorder player John Turner; and *Mental Maps and Perceived Distance* , commissioned by Sounds Positive. *A Grain of Sand in Lambeth* was a large-scale oratorio on texts of William Blake conducted by Ivor Bolton at St James' Piccadilly. Her year at York left a continuing interest in electroacoustic music, and in *Unfinished Business* she explored live electronics and computer sequences in theatrical combination with the sound sculptures of Derek Shiel. Julia has a fascination for combining visual and aural arts, and went on with Derek to explore live painting and musical improvisation in interactive performance art: *SoundPaint*.

As well as her intensive composing work, Julia is also a professional music therapist, working with a wide variety of people. Her interest in the scientific basis of music in therapy led to a research project supervised by Professor Susan Greenfield at Oxford.

She now lives in Colchester with her husband Rod, where she is also engaged in community arts projects in Essex.

January 2001

Performance Notes

The score is written on four staves- because I have used extremes of piano register, both in the bass and treble. The outer parts are an octave above and an octave below, respectively.

articulation:
the piece calls for delicate clarity in the simple, hymn-like sections; but also in the faster allegro patterns. Here the figures are not "effects" arpeggios, but arpeggiated melodies, and their articulation needs to allow each note to be heard.

accents:
this does not remove the relative values of accents within a phrase, as normal.

elastic rhythms:
in many sections, combinations of triplets and quintuplets are labelled "erratic", which requests a stretching and contracting of beats within a short phrase;- unpredictably erratic.

laisser vibrer:
I have used a number of accumulated chords which are left to resonate with the pedal; I would like these to last until you begin to hear the emerging super-harmonics.

arrows:
in a few places there are dotted arrows, which lead one voice into the part in the other hand.

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pedalling:
the score seeks to show pedalling accurately. However, the pianist may like to experiment with various other pedalling techniques, and to try out more extensive use of the sustain pedal.
In addition, I found on my own Bechstein piano that releasing the damper pedal sharply produced a wonderful howl of low harmonics from the frame. I would have loved to have included this effect in the flickering descent after figure ; but discovered that I could not repeat this effect on other, better-damped pianos!

piano strings:
in Robert Sherlaw - Johnson's memory I would also like to have included more work inside on the strings, but have avoided it (except in the last bar) so that the pianist does not have to disturb the performance by rising and negotiating the music desk.

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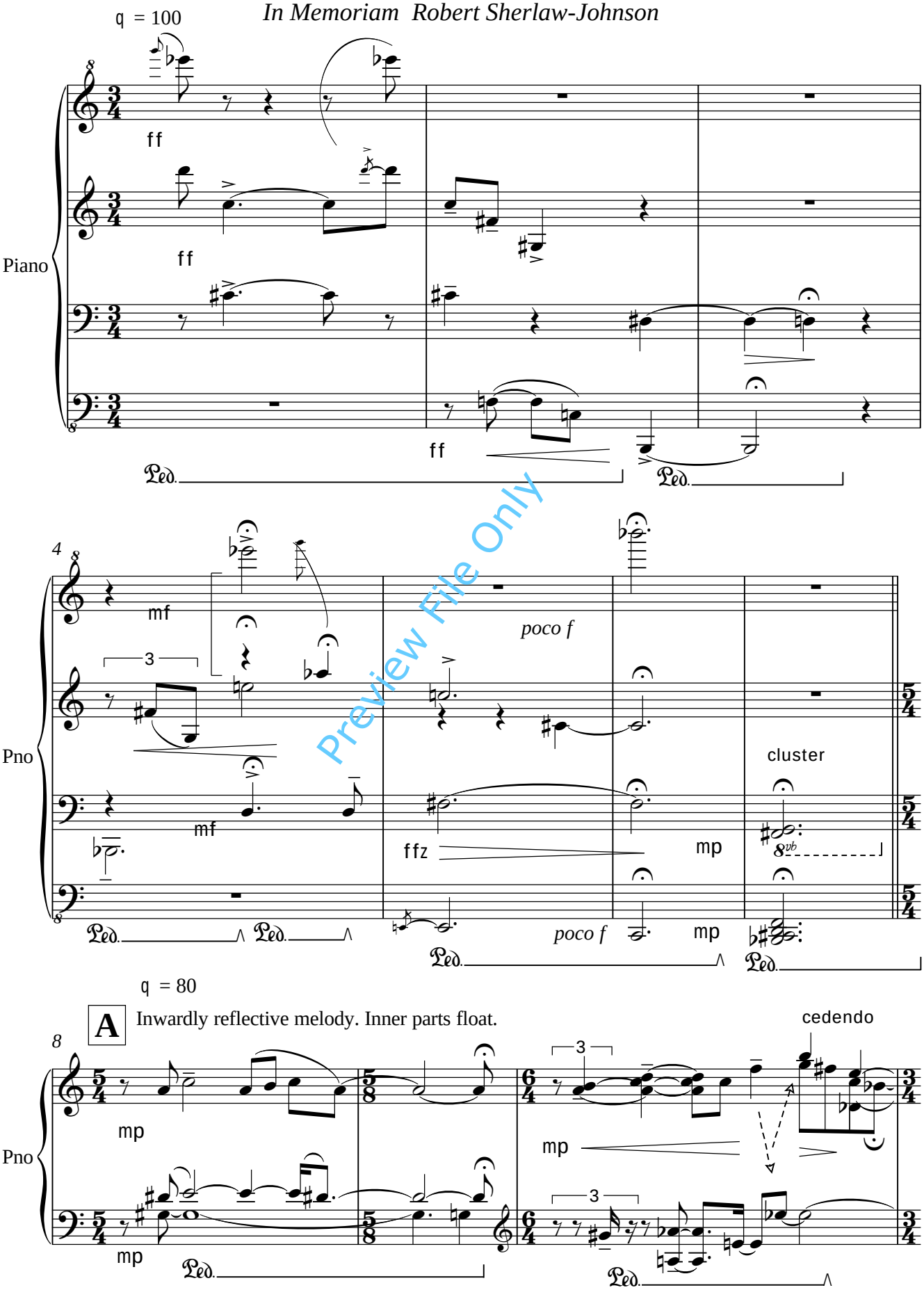

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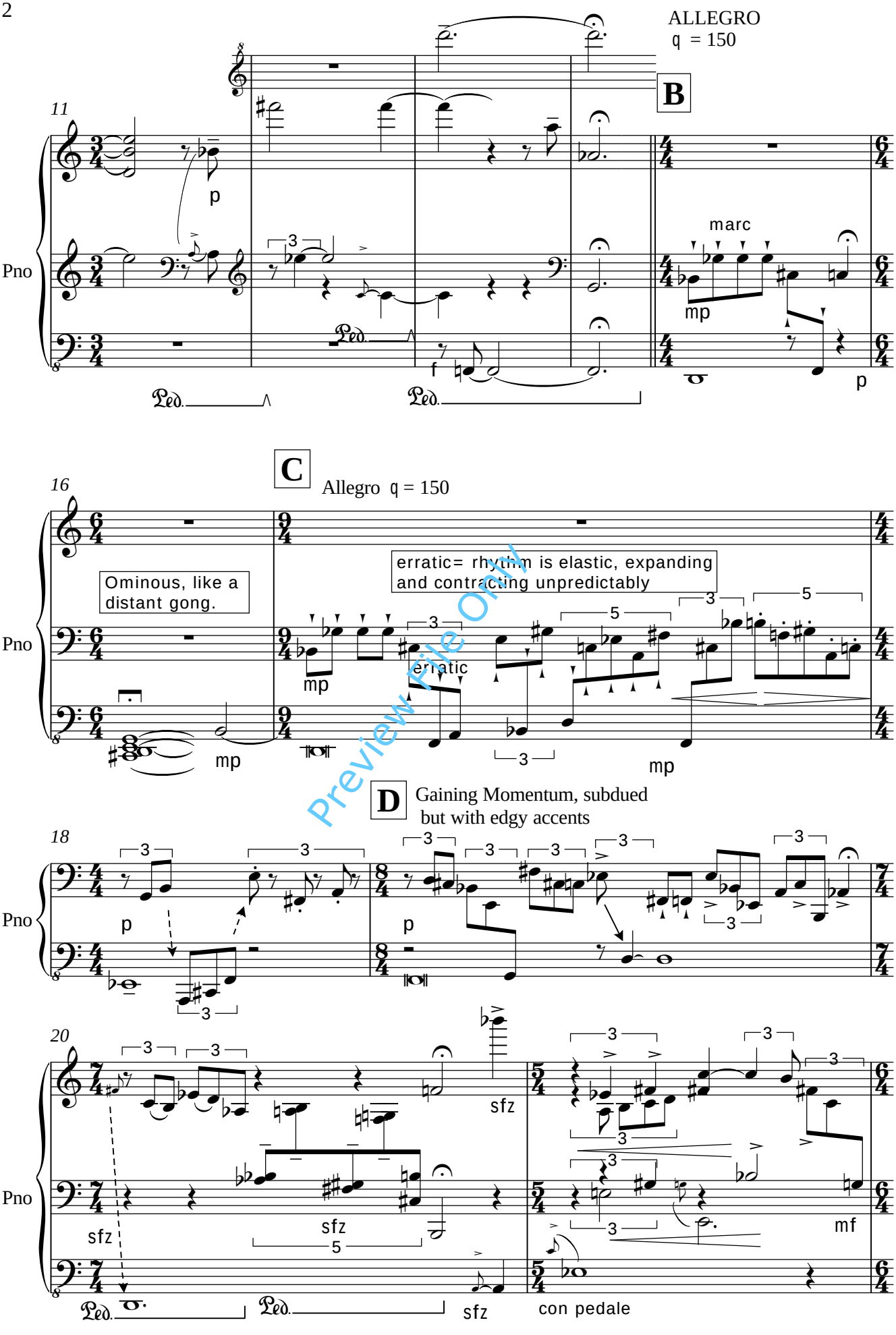

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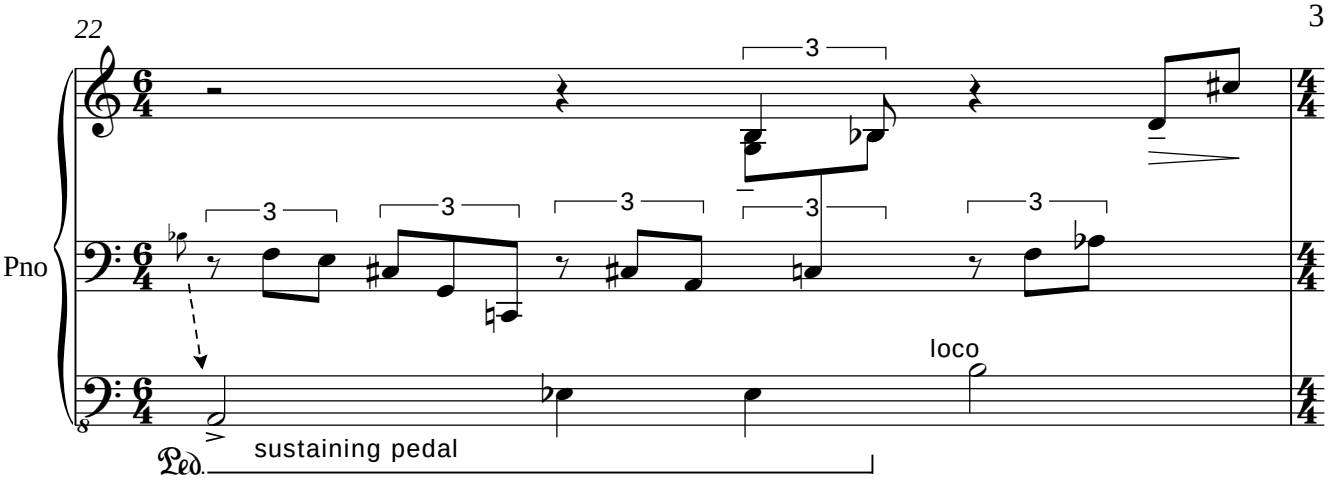

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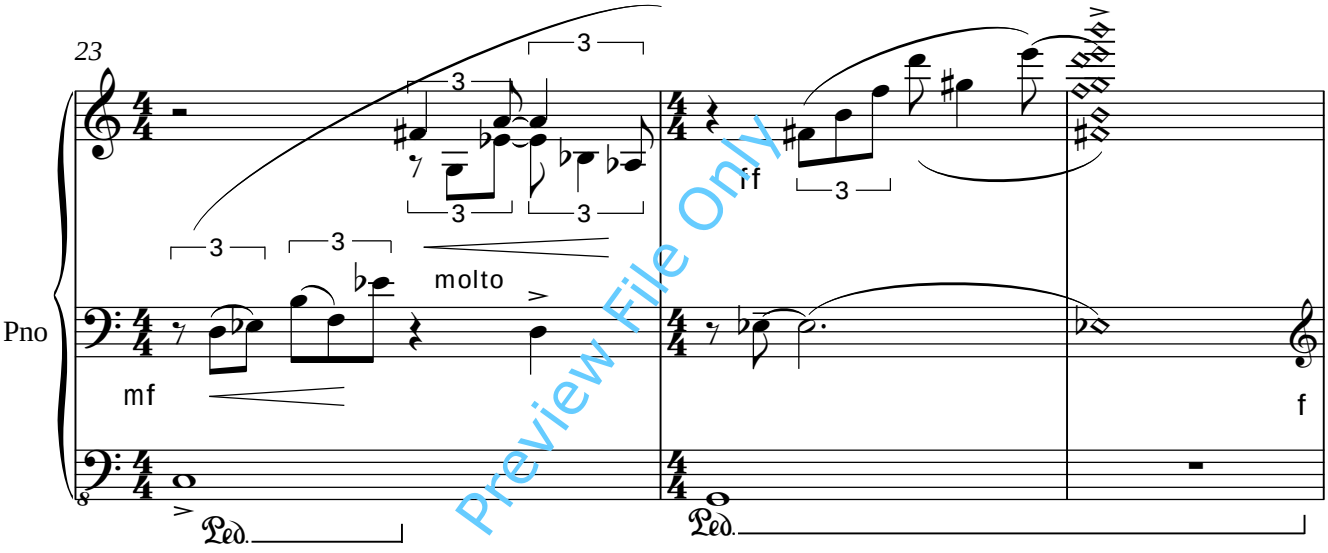

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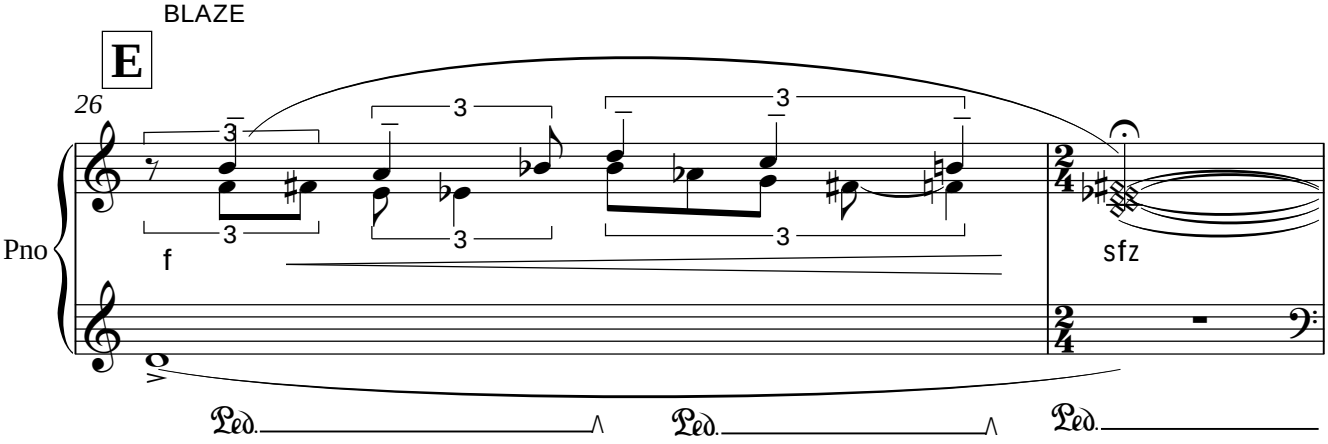
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