Mukhannath Songs

for countertenor, electric guitar, string quartet, and soundtrack

Full Score

PERUSAL ONLY

Jens Ibsen

Program Notes:

This song set is focused on figures known as *mukhannathun* (singular: *mukhannath*): these were gay, queer, and gender nonconforming men and trans women in the early Islamic period who are absent from the Qu'ran and the Hadiths, but appear sporadically in other literature. Many of them were talented singers who were the first great performers and teachers of Classical Arab singing, as well as the first male singers in Islam. This work was commissioned by Carl Alexander for the Voic(ed) Project: a compilation album of works by seventeen black composers under forty. Fascinatingly, there is a direct connection between these figures and sopranists like Mr. Alexander: these men were (possibly) the earliest recorded faltettists/sopranists in Europe by way of Arab-Andalusia. Accounts from festivals during this period show that performances were divided between programs featuring female courtesans/bards, *qiyan*, and separate programs sung by *mukhannathun*. This seems to point to a special vocal quality they may have had, according to Dr. Everett Rowson, an expert on homosexuality and Islam. Additionally, while they are a dying population, even as late as the 19th Century, there were Turkish analogues to *mukhannathun* dancing and singing in the courts of the Ottoman empire. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information on these people, and the main source of historical information on the *mukhannathun* can be found in Rowson's essay "The Effeminates of Early Medina". There are three main eras in which we have documentation of their activities, particularly as performers: around 700CE, the 9th Century, and the 19th Century. These individuals have had a complicated history, wrought with periods of tense acceptance and brutal persecution. Currently, they are virtually nonexistent in the nations around the Muslim holy land (*Hijaz*). Given the rise in Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia the world over, as well as the obvious historical connection to high male singing, I felt strongly that this concept would lead to transformative, topical music. It is my sincere hope that this work succeeds at that.

Each movement is a tribute to a different *mukhannath*. My choices in texts were also historically informed: each text is chosen from the three eras in which the *mukhannaths* were known to be active. I chose to set the first two texts partly in English and partly in Arabic—both to make the texts accessible to both Western and Arab listeners, as well as give a nod to the bilingual pop music of our time. The first movement is dedicated to Ṭuways ("Little Peacock"). He was the first male singer in all of Islam and helped popularize the *mukhannaths'* trademark musical stylings. He was known for his quick wit, his habit of wearing henna, as well as being notoriously unlucky. When I found the Majnun Layla poem, I thought it encapsulated perfectly the feelings of someone extraordinarily, fantastically unlucky in love. Perhaps Ṭuways himself would have sung such a text.

The second movement is a tribute to al-Dalāl ("Coquetry"): a talented student of Ṭuways, he was a bard and matchmaker with a silver tongue and a golden voice. He was known for his unapologetic demeanor, his incredible sense of humor, and flamboyant homosexuality. Thus, I set out to find a fitting homoerotic text worthy of his name, and the al-Khuzba'aruzzī text immediately spoke to me.

The third movement is an arrangement of a Turkish song, Elem Çekme Gönül by Ottoman composer İsmail Dede Efendi (1778-1846). This was a song sung by cross-dressing young men known as *köçeks*, who were the heart of nightlife in 19th-Century Istanbul. These dancing boys could be found in every tavern across the city, singing songs of love and loss. I wanted the final movement to be a text which could be read as an allegory for the decline of the *mukhannaths* in the 19th- and 20th-centuries. The song, on the surface, is about a lover longing to meet their beloved beyond the mountains. In context of this work, I chose to set it in a darker, more brooding fashion to symbolize the *köçeks'* fall from grace at the turn of the century and their forced exodus abroad, mainly to North Africa, where many *mukhannaths* fled and ultimately faded into obscurity. This piece is dedicated to the great Bülent Ersoy, a trans female pop superstar in her native Turkey.

Special thanks to Dr. Everett Rowson, whose incredible guidance allowed this work to become a reality.

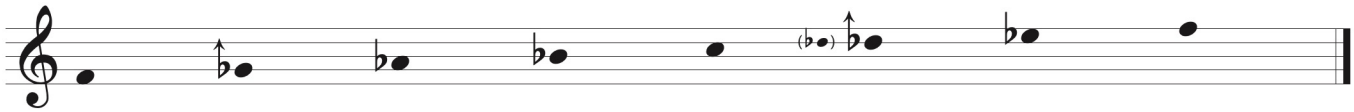
Performance Notes:

For the conductor: The conductor will use a click track. All performers should be amplified. The second and third movements are to be performed *attacca*. Care should be taken to make sure the singer does not feel too locked into the beat during the semi-aleatoric section in mm. 54-58 of movement I, as well as the improvised section in mm. 184-217 of movement III.

For the singer: Though the work was conceived for countertenor, it may be performed by any treble voice with a comfortable high range and a robust chest register. Theatricality is highly encouraged.

For the guitarist: an overdrive pedal, an echo pedal and a distortion pedal are needed for this piece. For the distortion pedal, anything with a modern "metal" sound will do. Reverb from the amp is sufficient.

For all performers: Familiarity with Arab and Turkish musical styles is recommended. For the third movement, all musicians should practice the Makam Hüseyni scale on the three tones in which it appears in the piece: F, F#, and G:



PERUSAL ONLY

Translations:
(Italicized portions sung in Arabic)

I.

I draw a picture of her in the dust
and cry, my heart in torment.
I complain to her about her: for she left me,
love-sick, badly stricken.
I complain of all the passion I have
suffered, with a plaint towards the dust.
Love makes me want to turn to Layla's land,
complaining of my passion and the flames in me.
I make rain fall upon the dust from my eyes' clouds;
my heart is in distress and grief.
I complain of my great passion
while my tears are flowing, streaming.
I'm talking to her picture in the dust:
as if the dust were listening to me,
As if I were near her, complaining to her
of my plight, while talking to the dust.
No one returns an answer to my words,
not even the reproacher answers me.
So I turn back, hope dashed, tears flowing
down as if from showering clouds,
Truly, madly possessed by her,
my heart in torment for the love of her.

-Translated by Geert Jan van Gelder

II.

O night, please linger for me--I do not wish for morning--
The face of the one I embrace is lamp enough for me!
He will do for me as a full moon, and his saliva will do
As wine, and his cheek as an apple;
And the brilliance of his teeth, when I make him laugh,
Means that I can do without a shining star.
Embracing him, I made for him a necklace of my arm,
And my (caressing) palm substituted for a veiling scarf.
That is true fulfillment so permit us to keep embracing,
For we do not want to stop!

-Translated by Everett Rowson

III.

Don't feel pain, my heart,
One cannot remain in this way.
If you yourself are well,
Won't a beloved be found?
I was a slave at your gate,
My value not understood:
Now I am going away,
What do I have here?
My only love remains on yonder mountains.

-Translated by Walter Feldman

PERUSAL ONLY

PERUSAL ONLY

Full Score

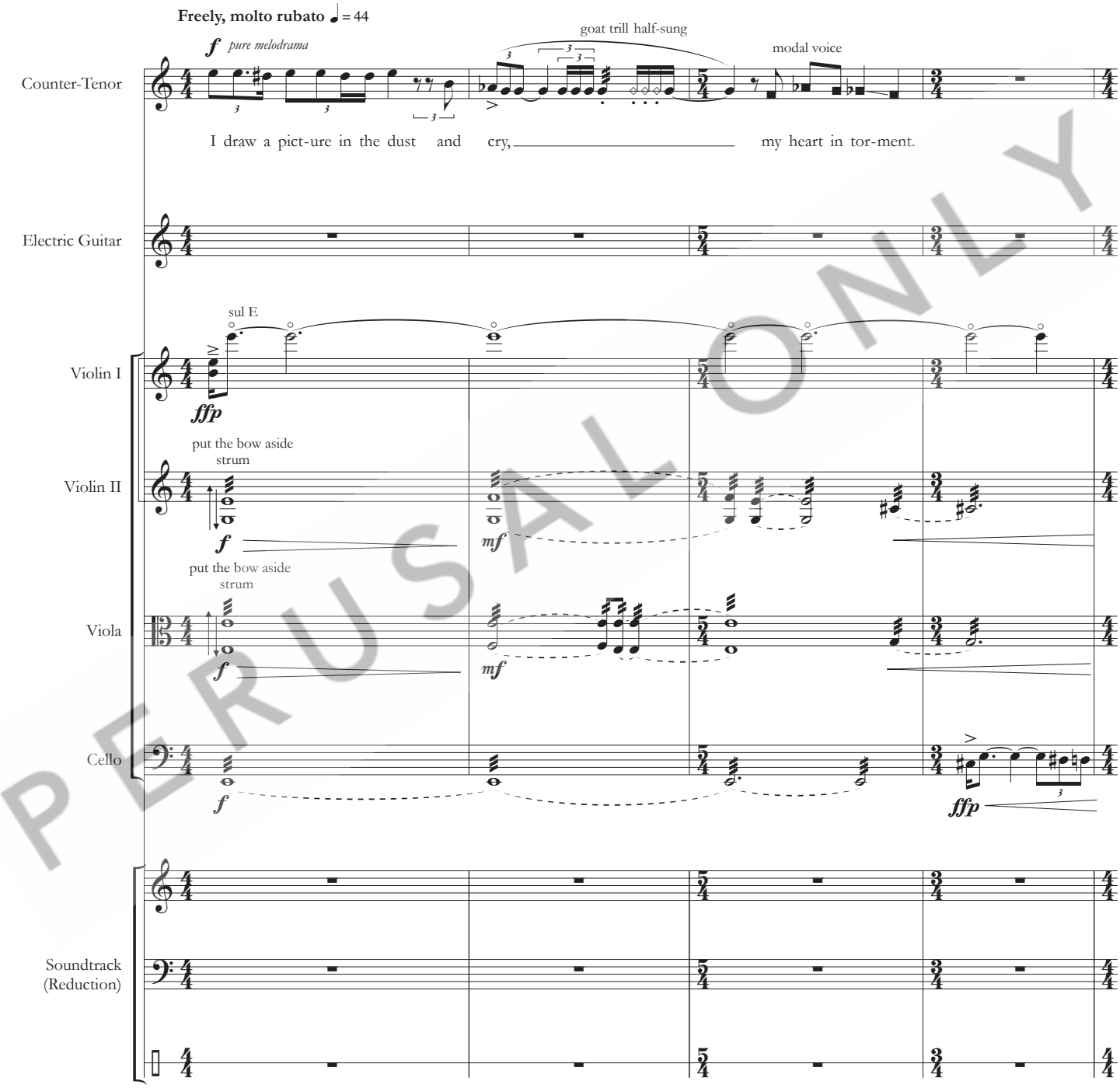
Mukhannath Songs

Commissioned for Carl A. Alexander
and the Voic(ed) Project Chicago, Illinois; April 2018.

I. Ṭuways

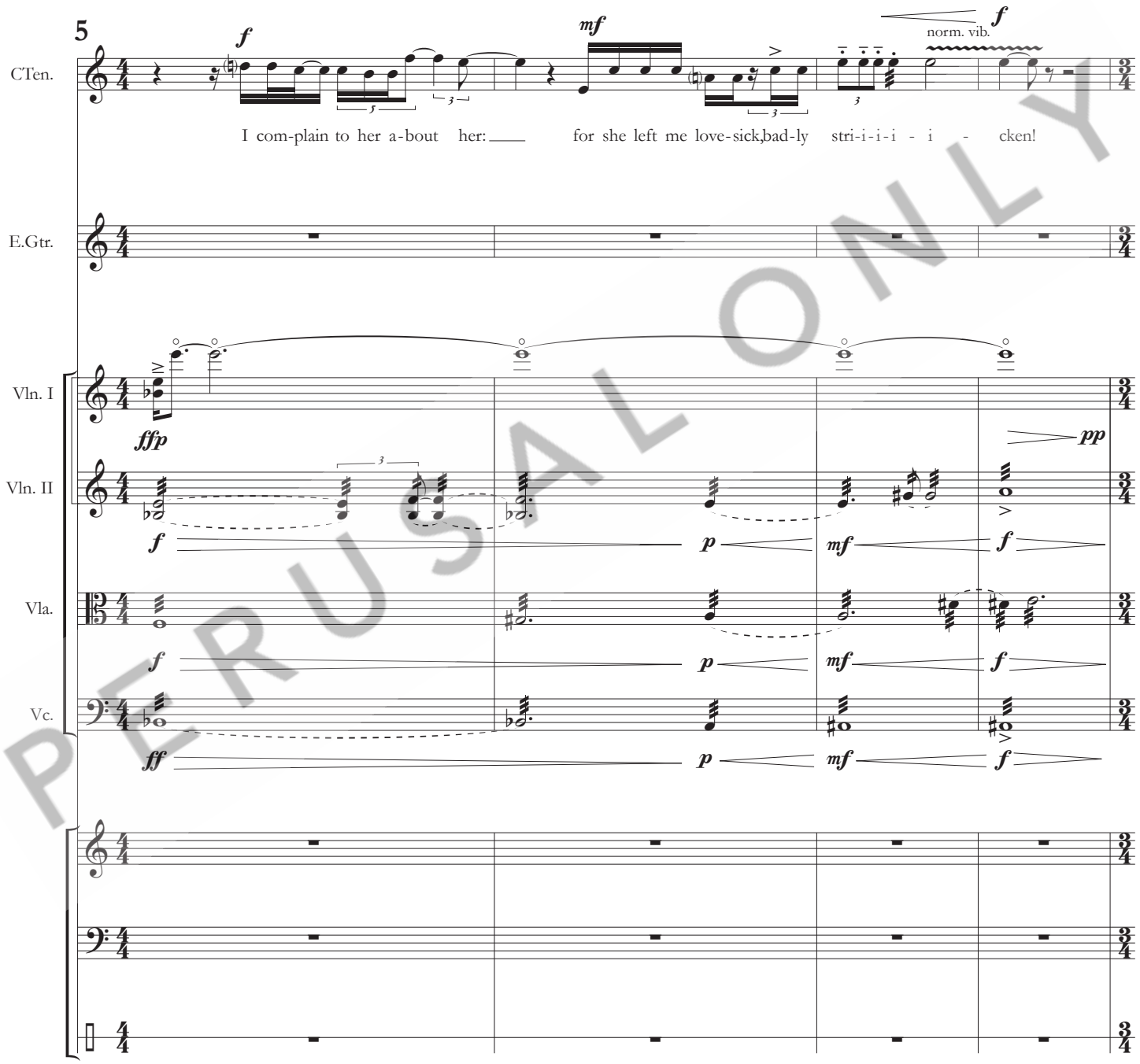
Majnun Layla (ca. Umayyad period)
Trans. Geert Jan van Gelder

Jens Ibsen (2018)

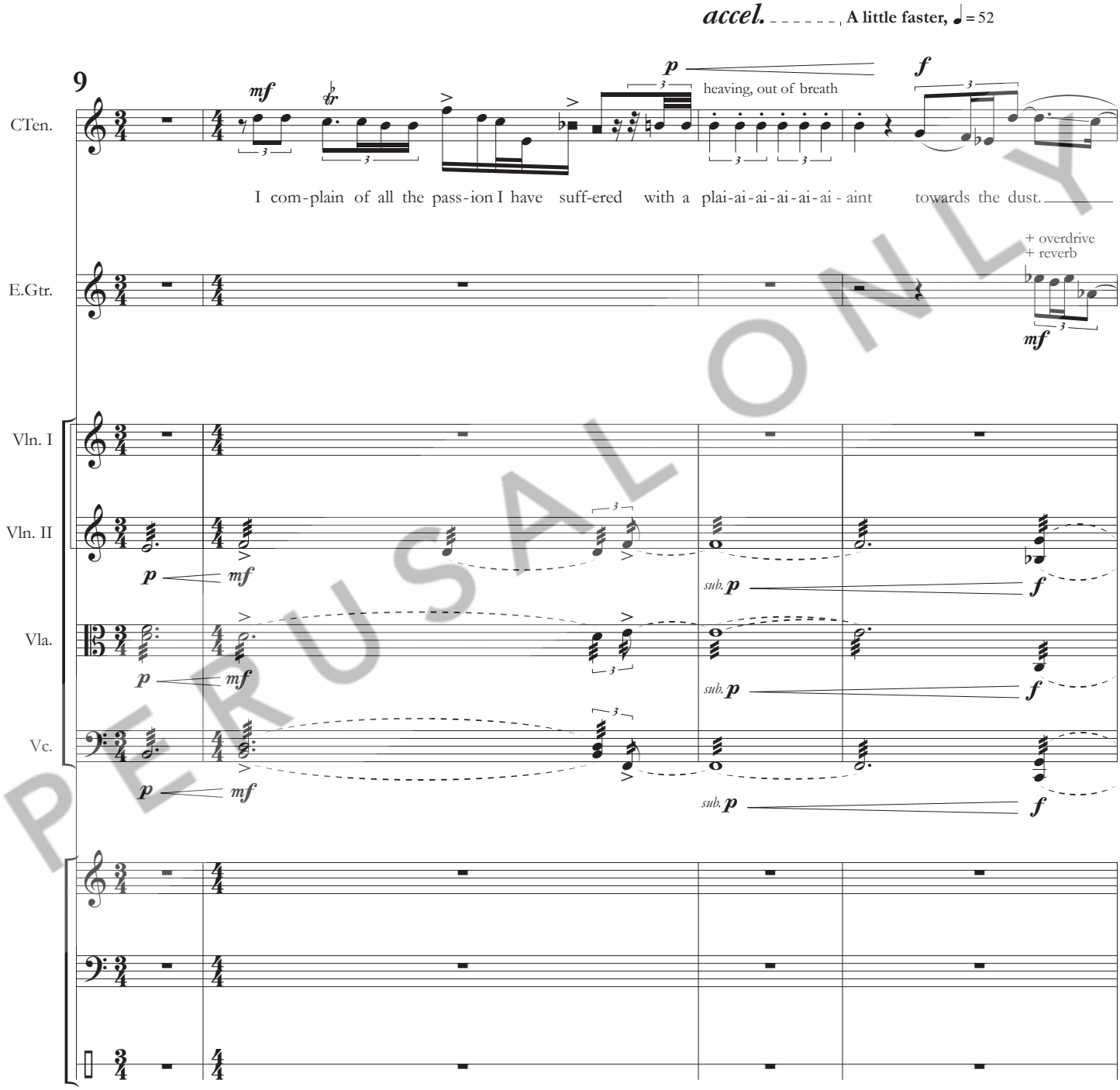


PERUSAL ONLY

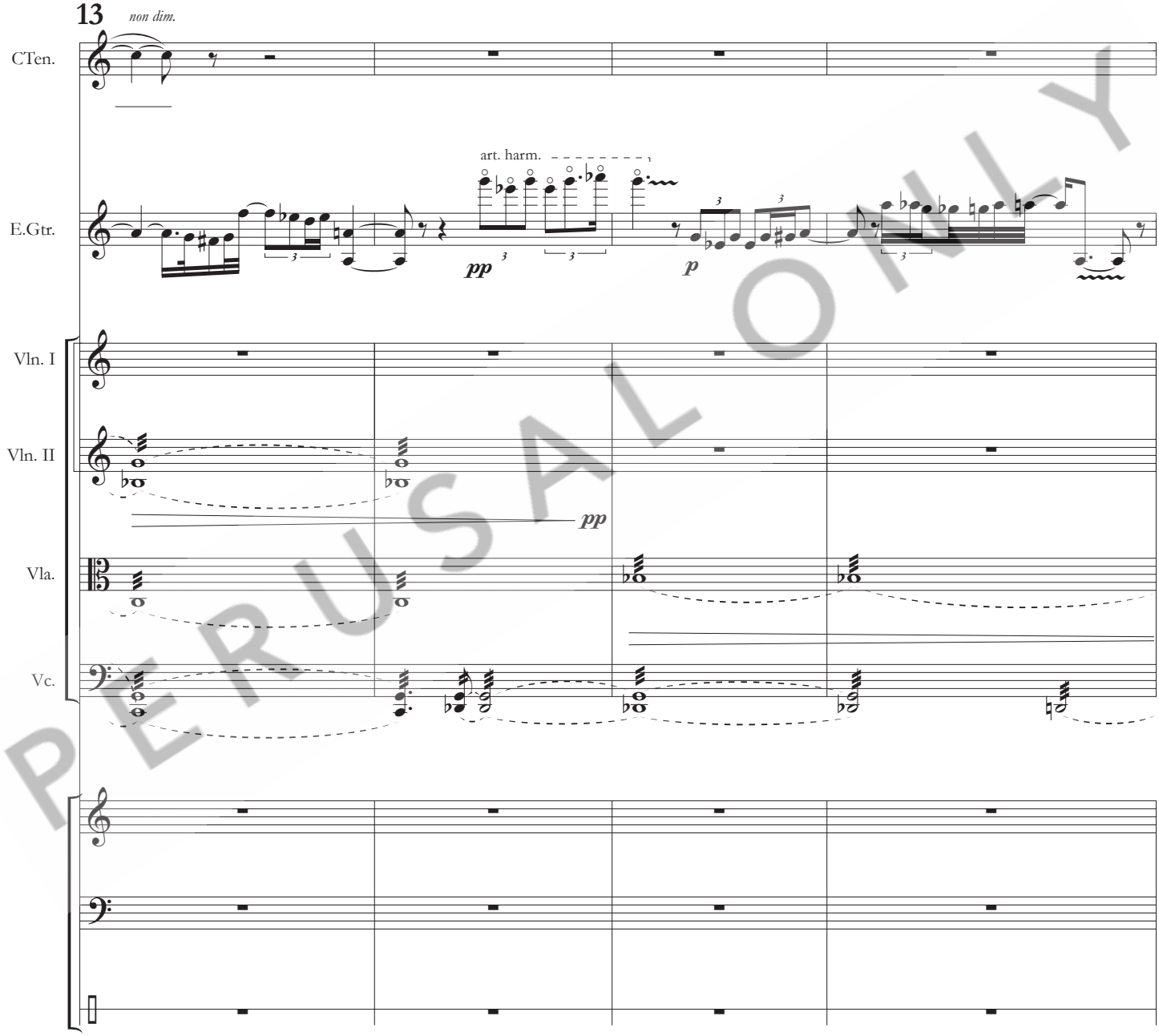
© Jens Ibsen, all rights reserved. www.composersforum.org/members/jensibsen



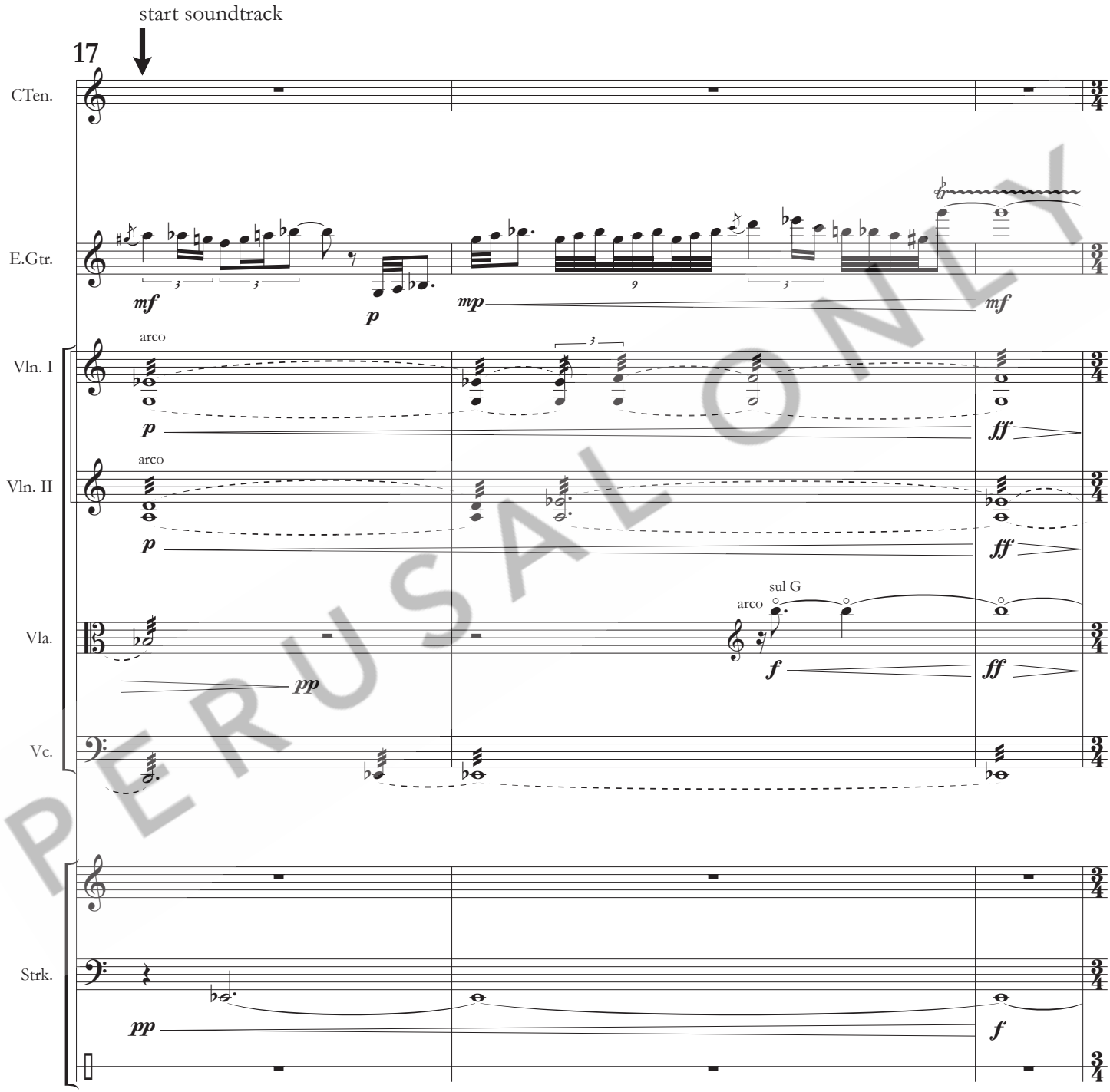
PERUSAL ONLY



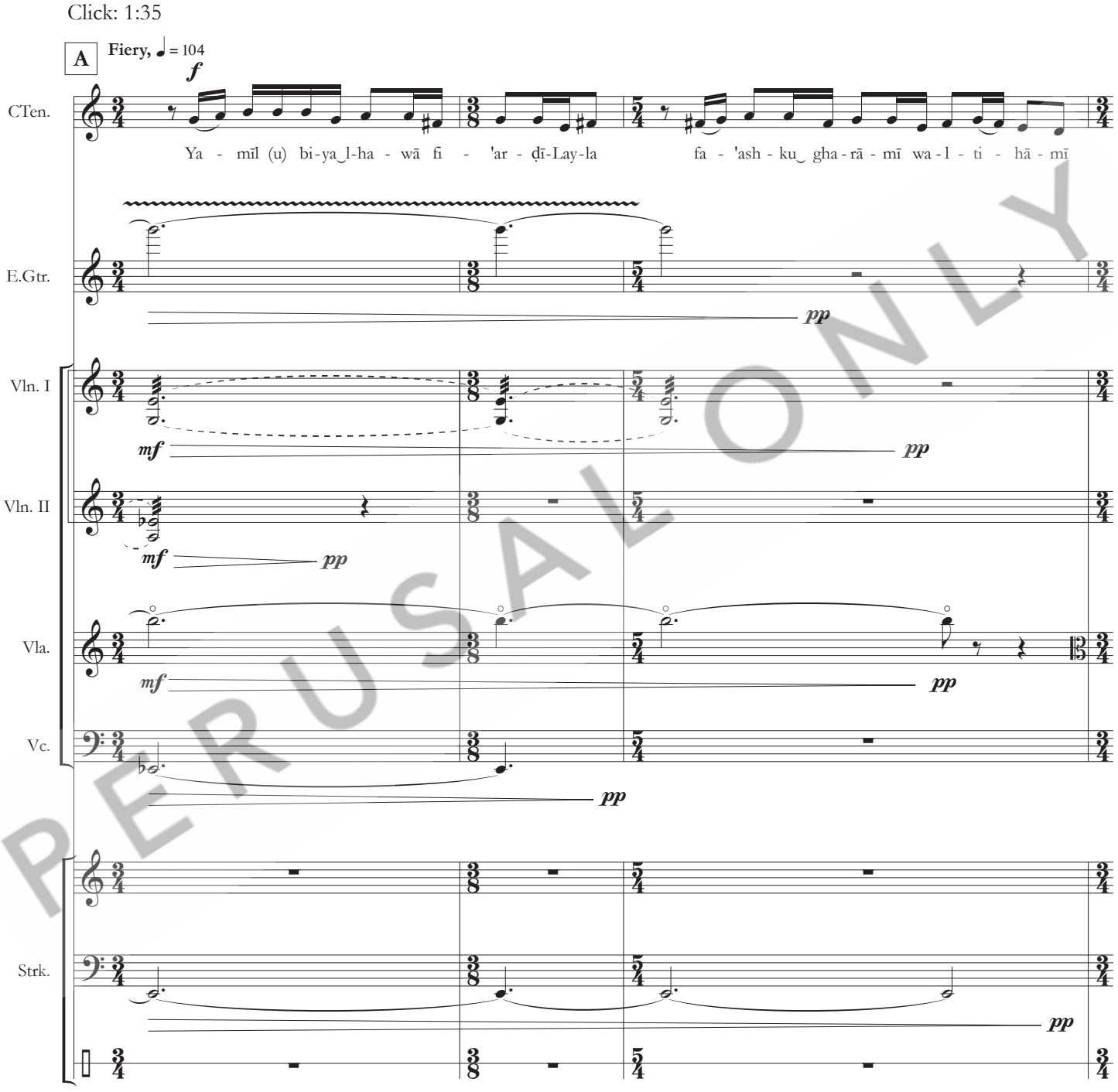
PERUSAL ONLY

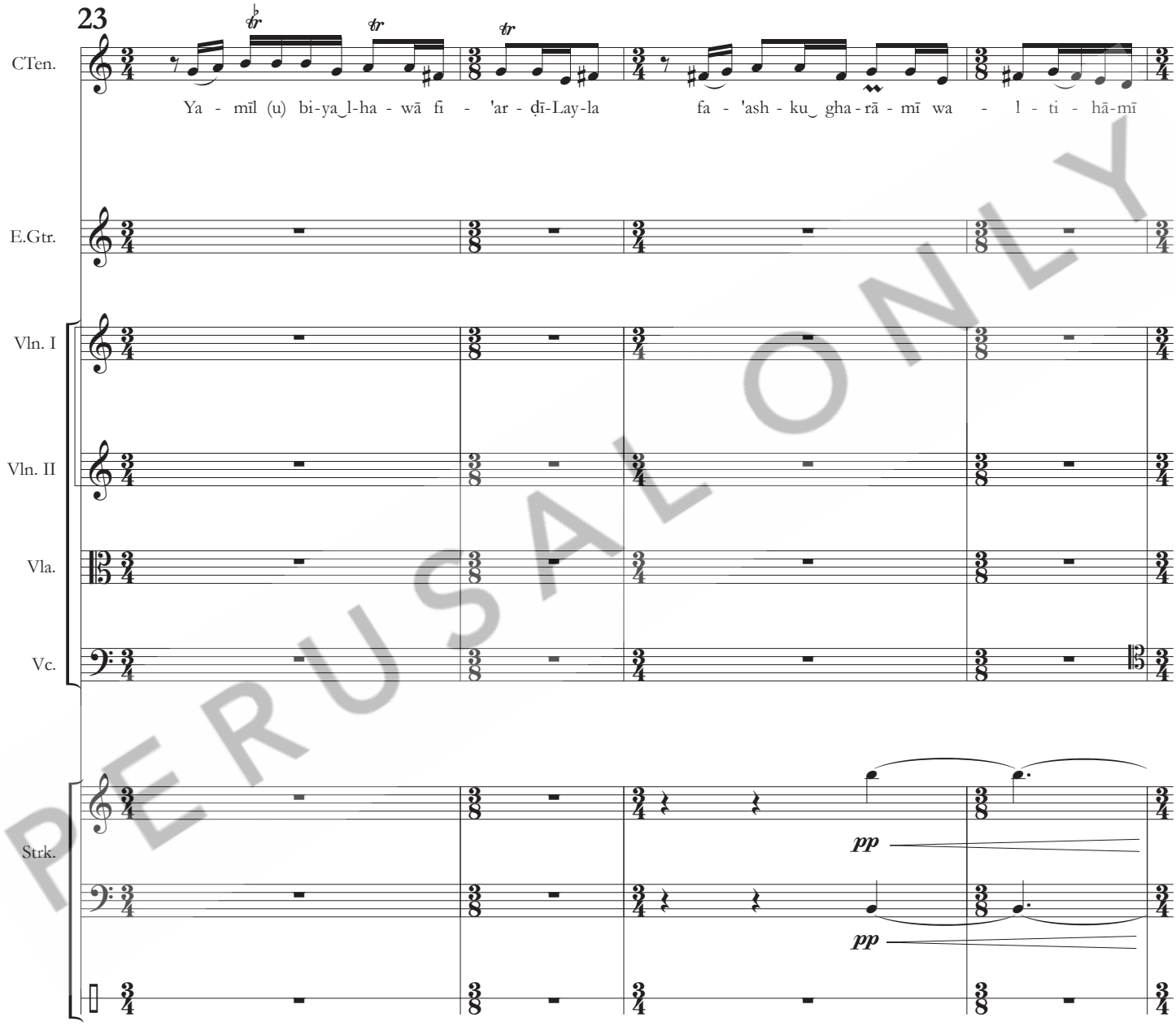


PERUSAL ONLY

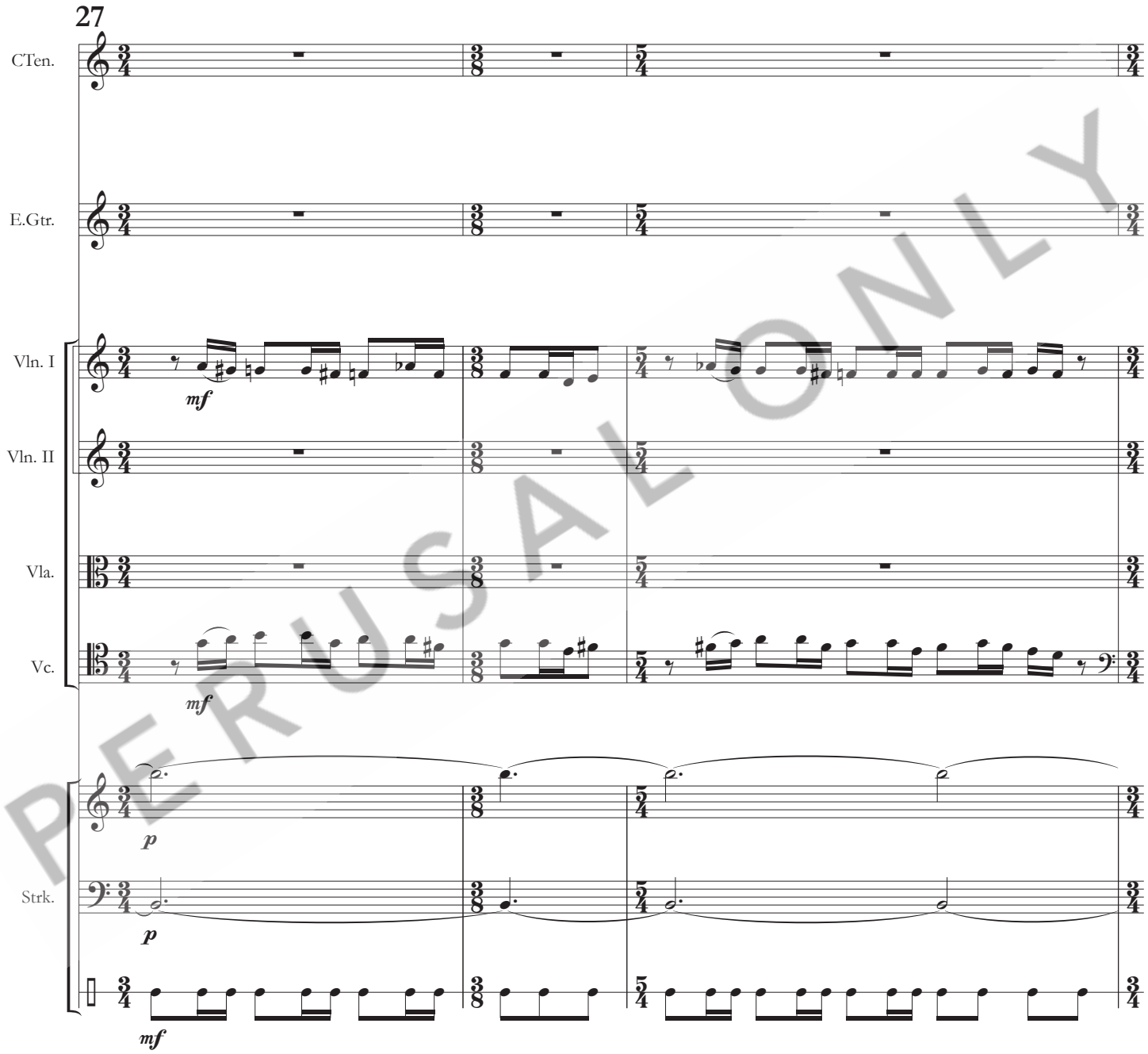


PERUSAL ONLY

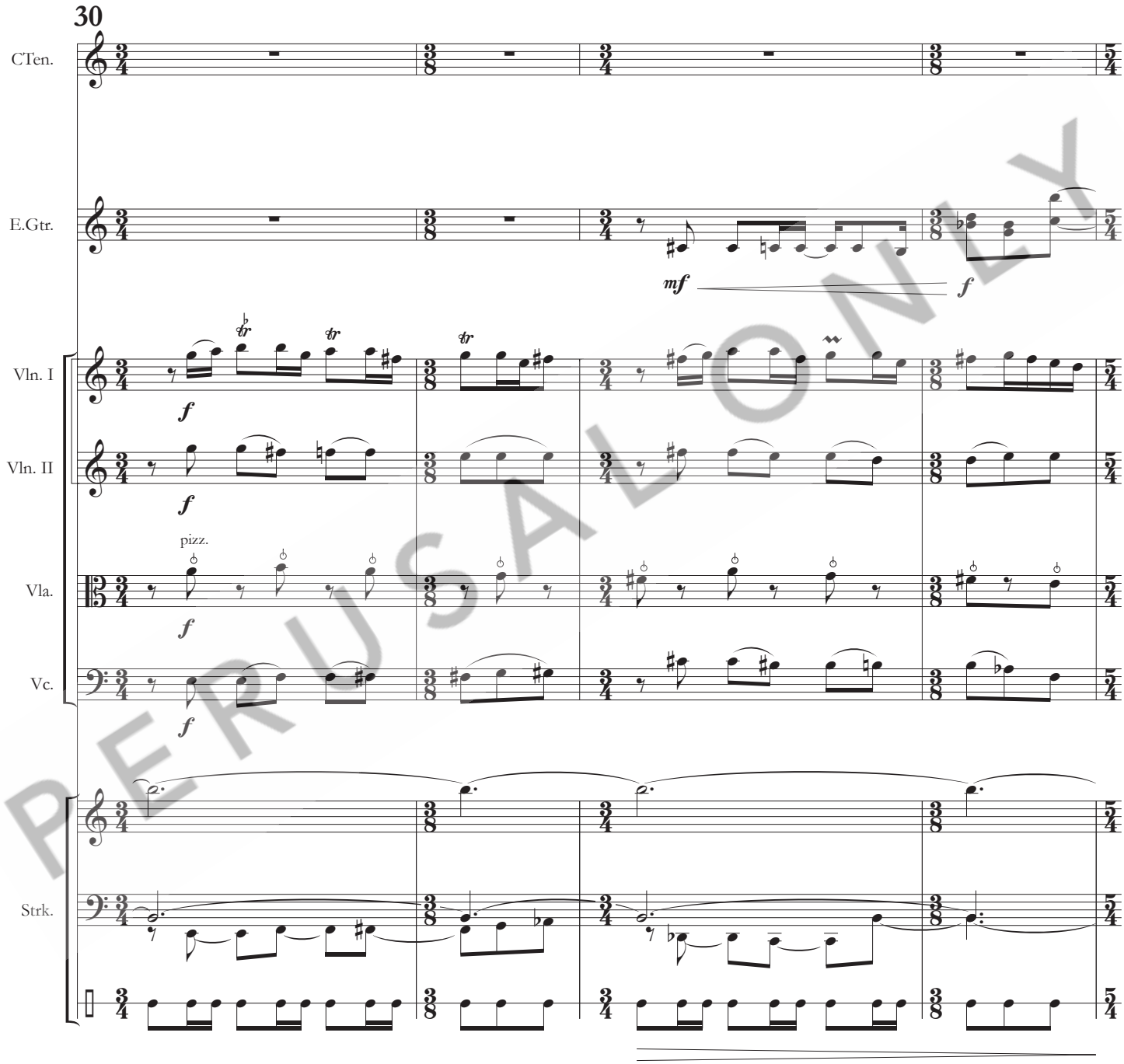

Click: 1:35
A
Fiery, ♩ = 104
CTen.
Ya - mīl (u) bi-ya‿l-ha - wā fi - 'ar - ḍī-Lay-la fa - 'ash - ku‿ gha-rā - mī wa-l - ti - hā - mī
E.Gtr.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Strk.
PERUSAL ONLY



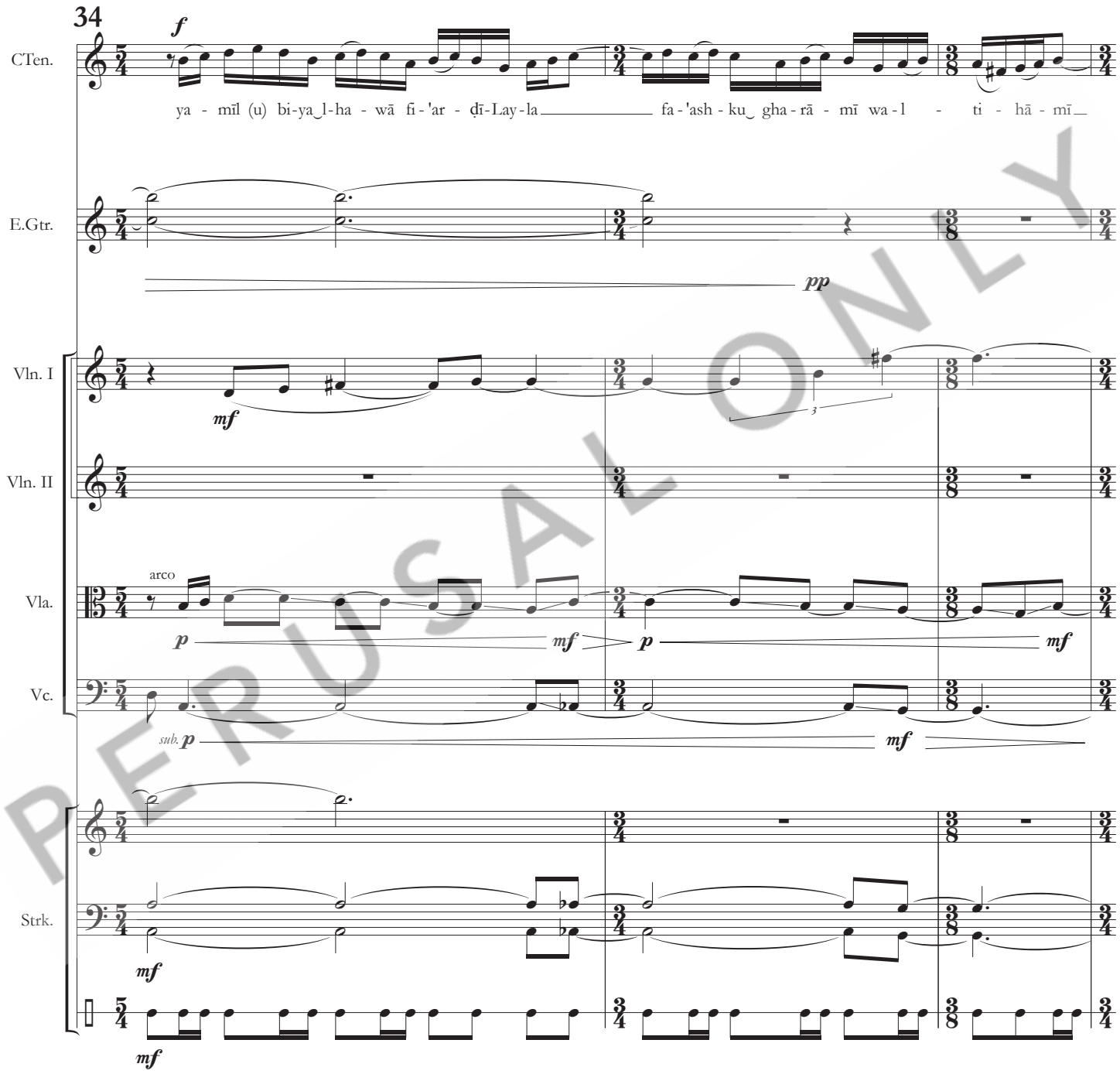
PERUSAL ONLY



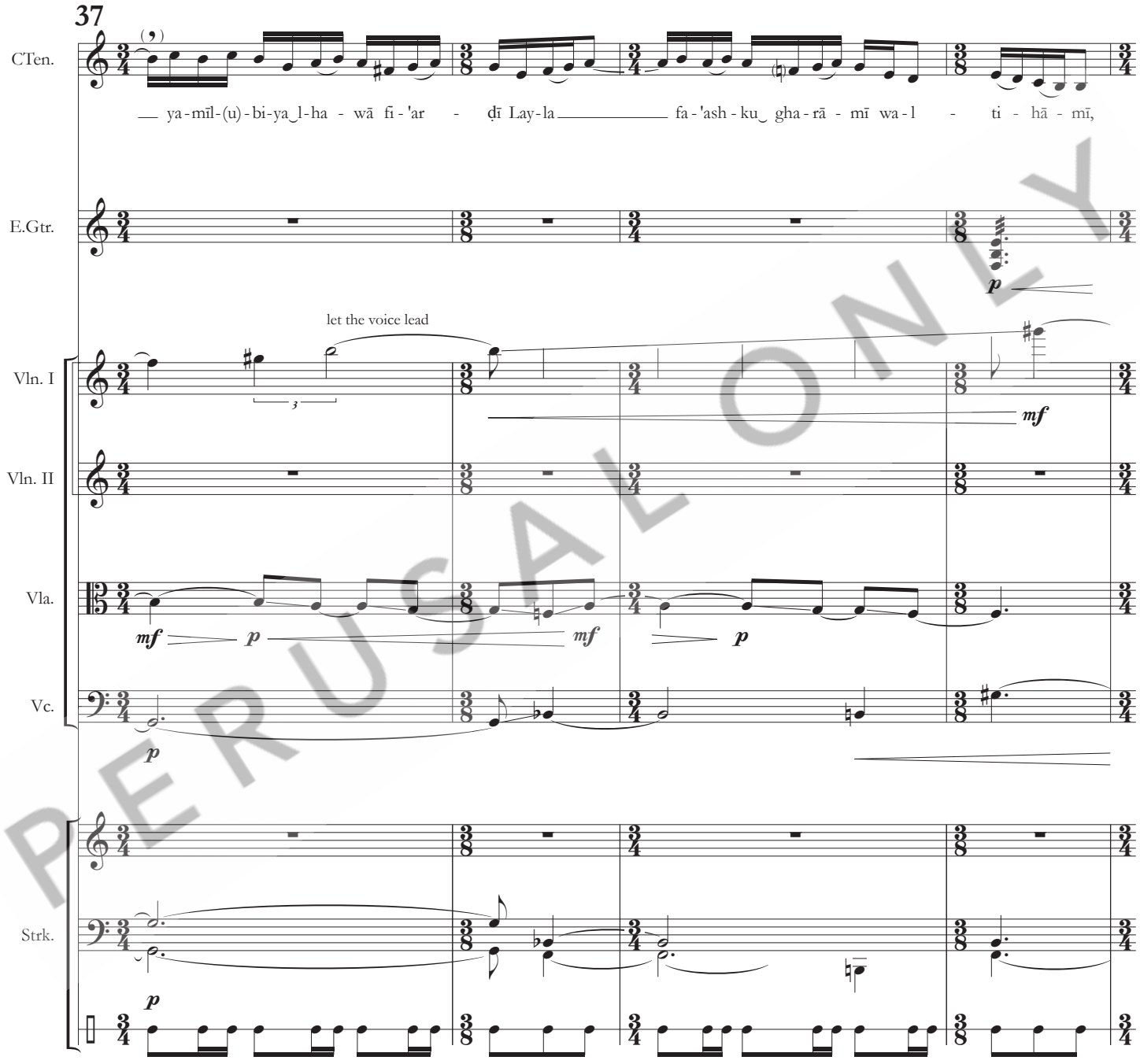
PERUSAL ONLY



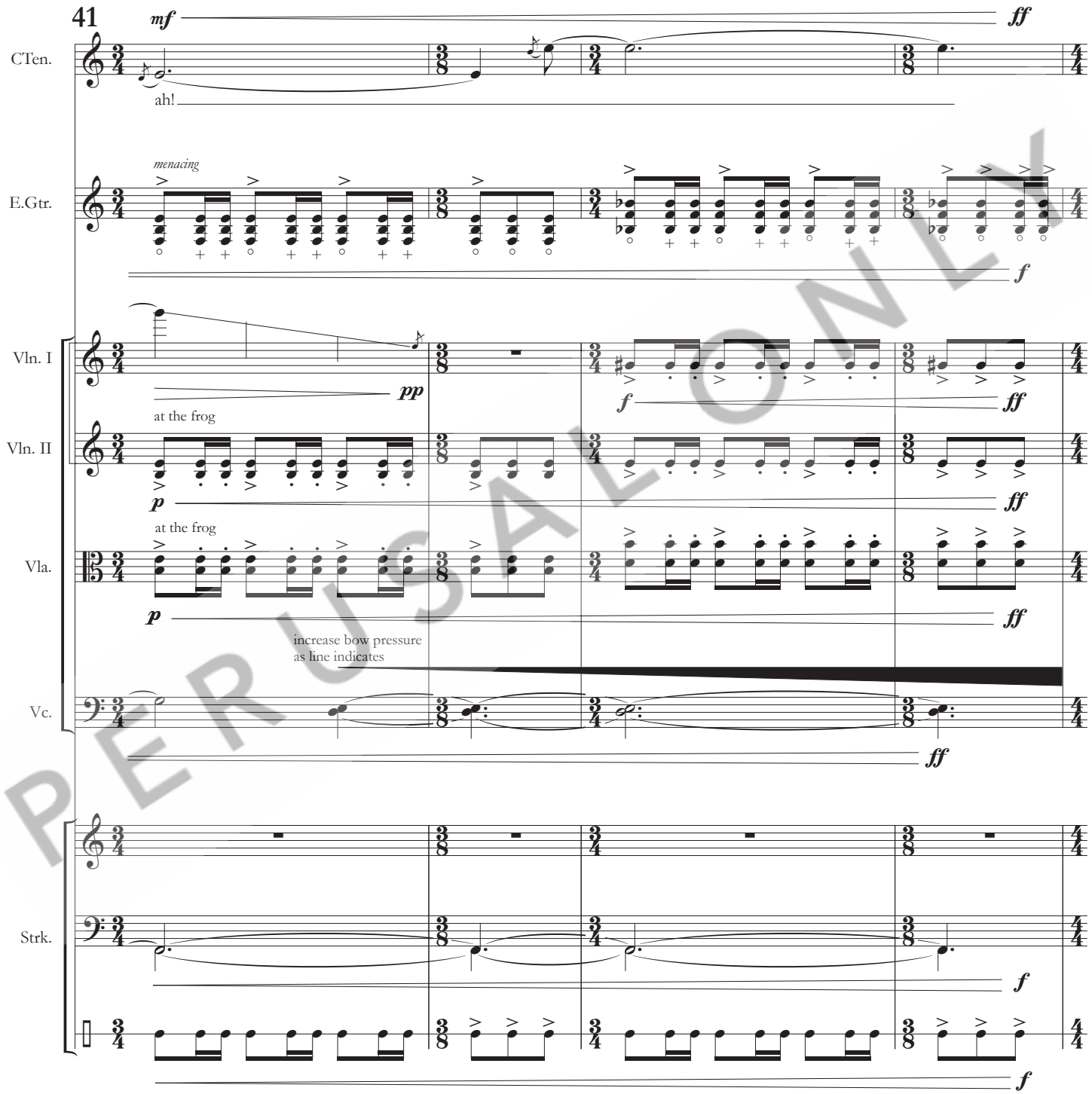
PERUSAL ONLY



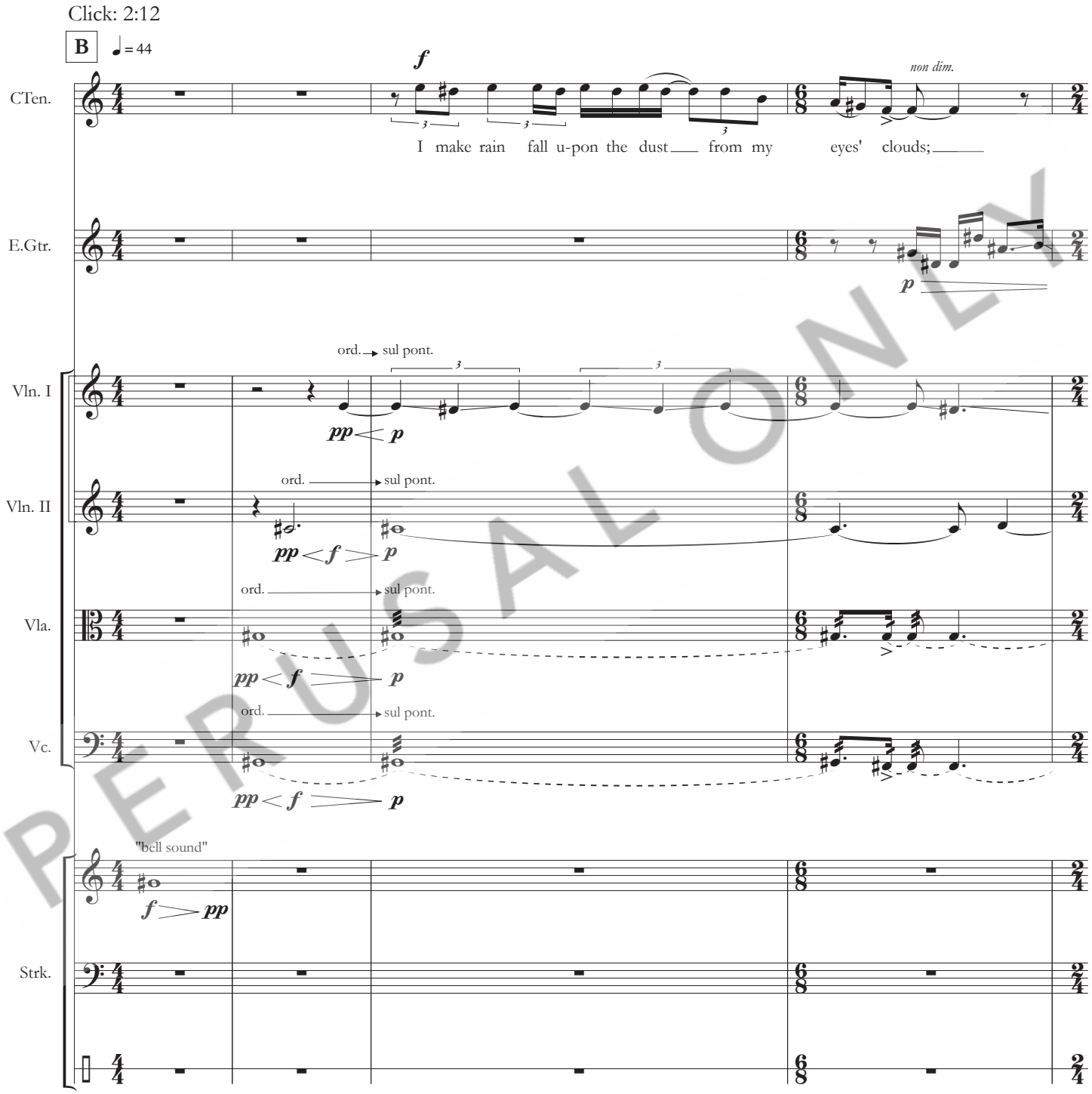
PERUSAL ONLY



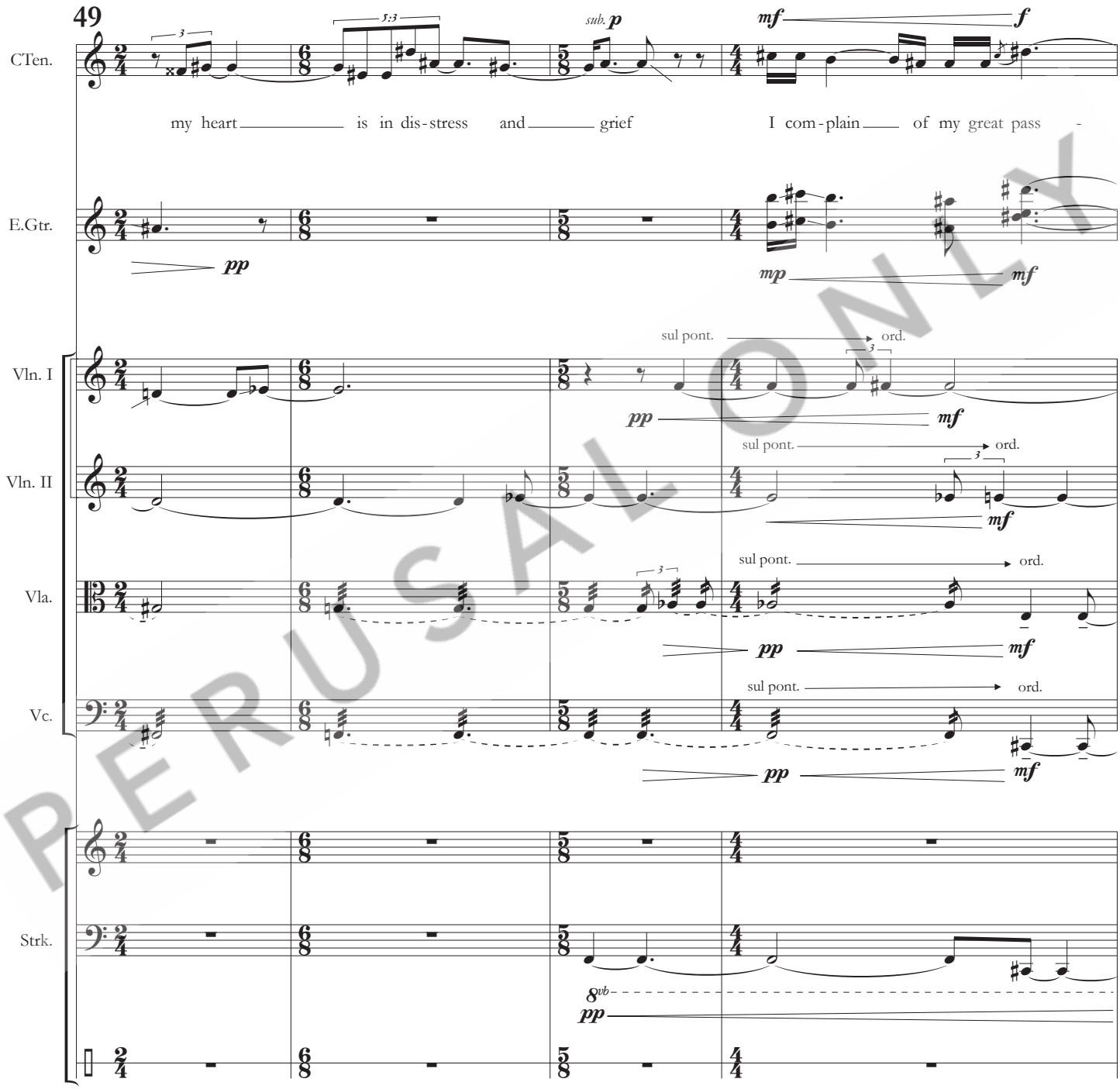
PERUSAL ONLY



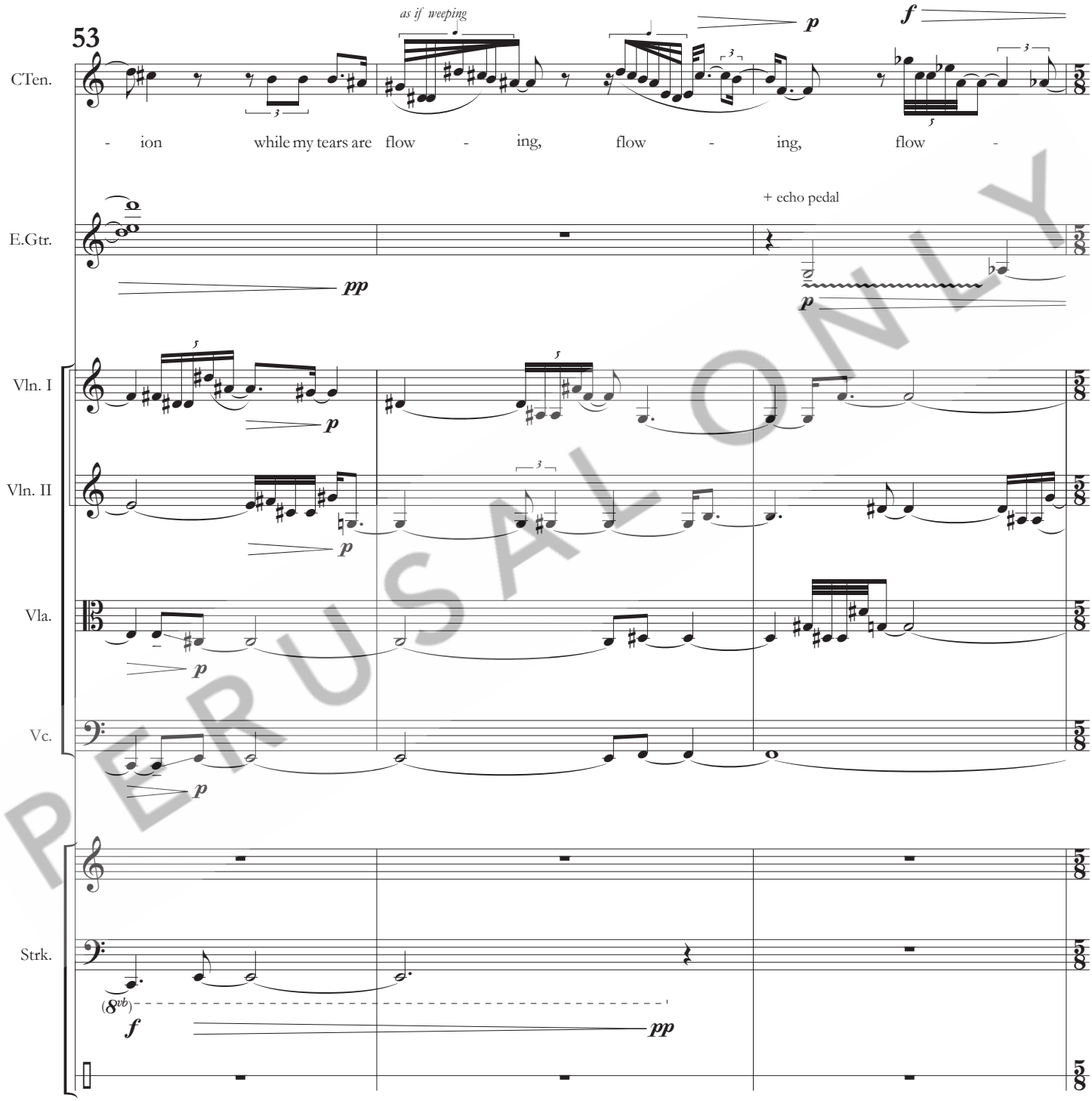
PERUSAL ONLY



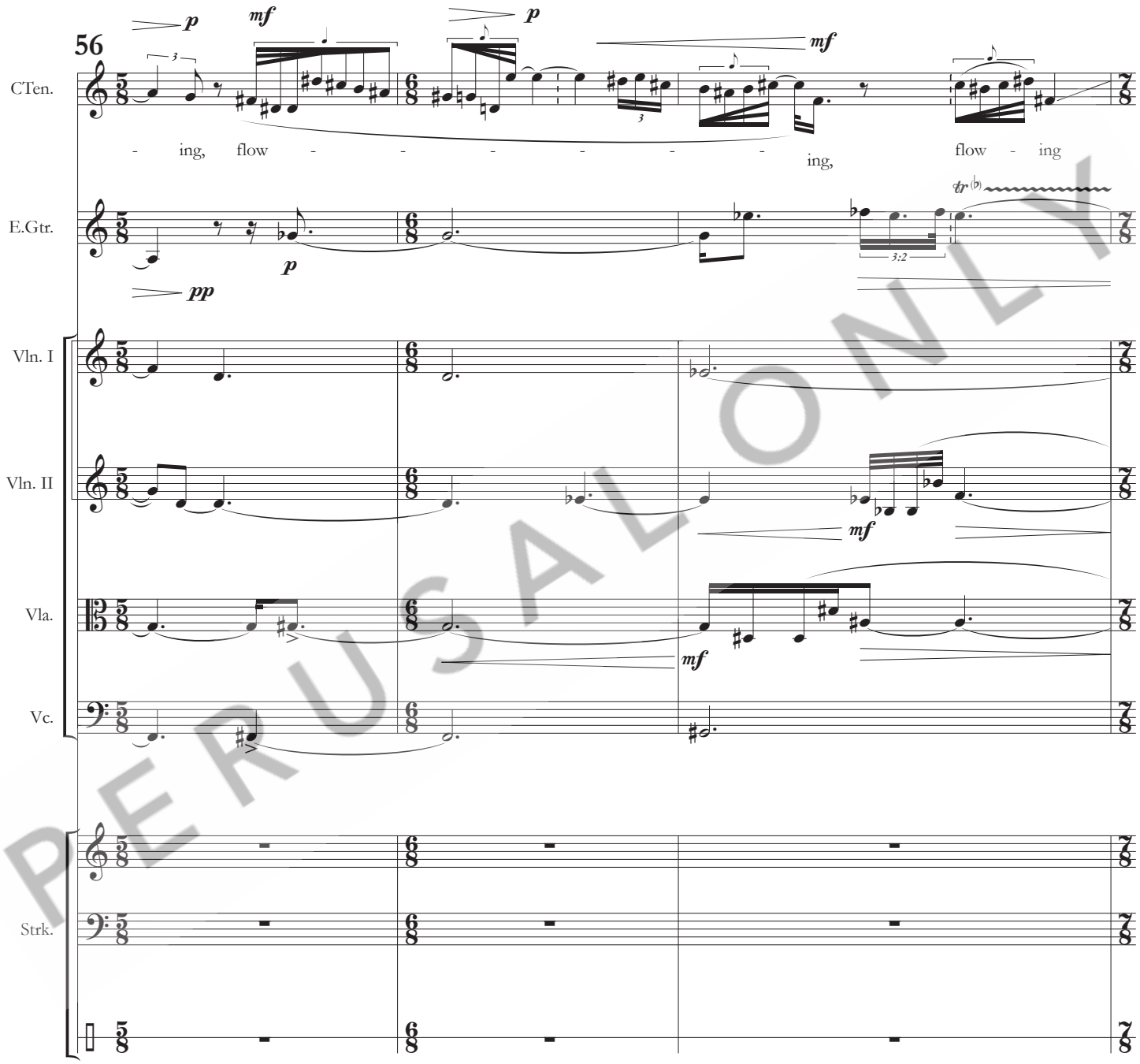
PERUSAL ONLY



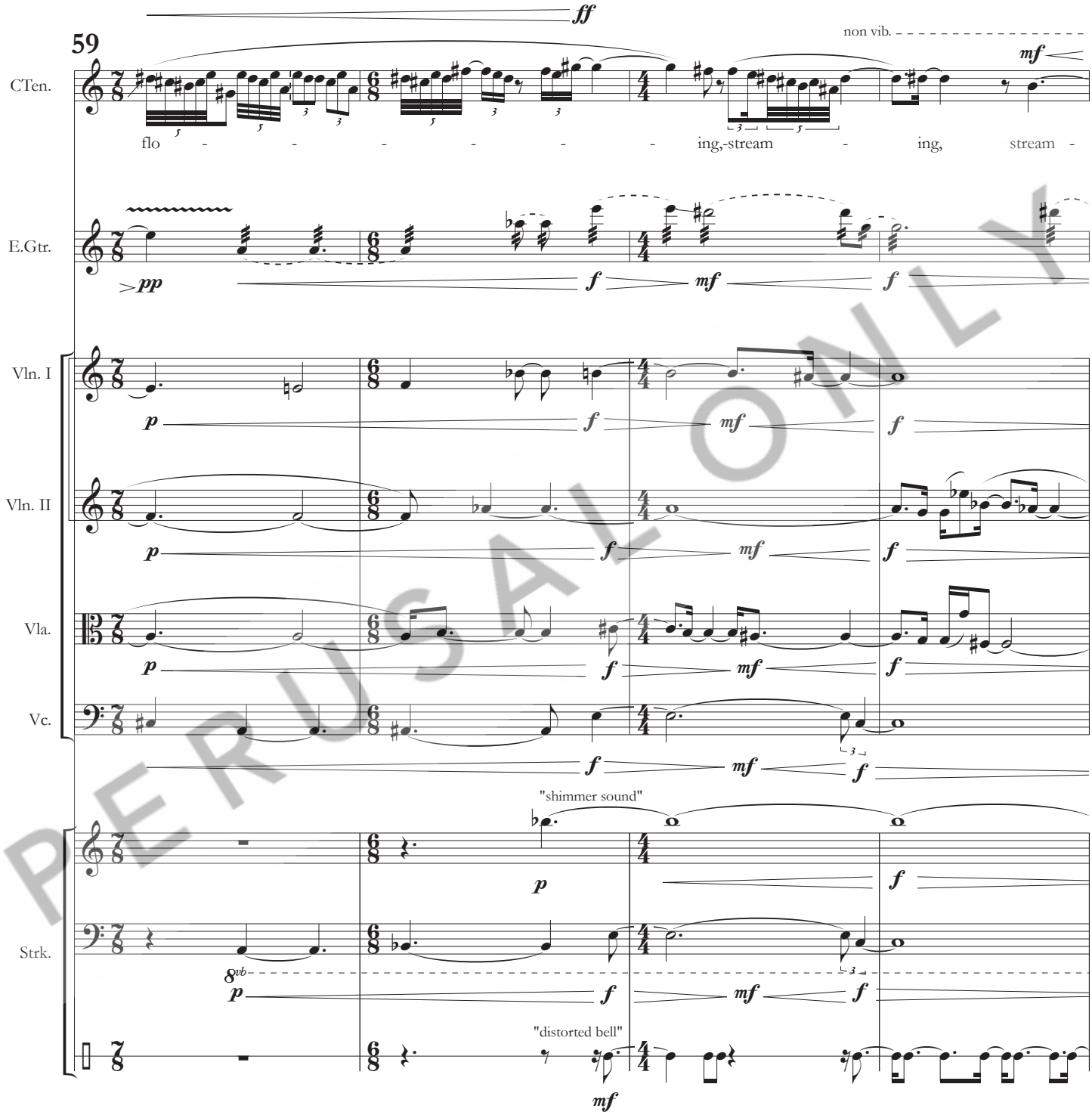
PERUSAL ONLY



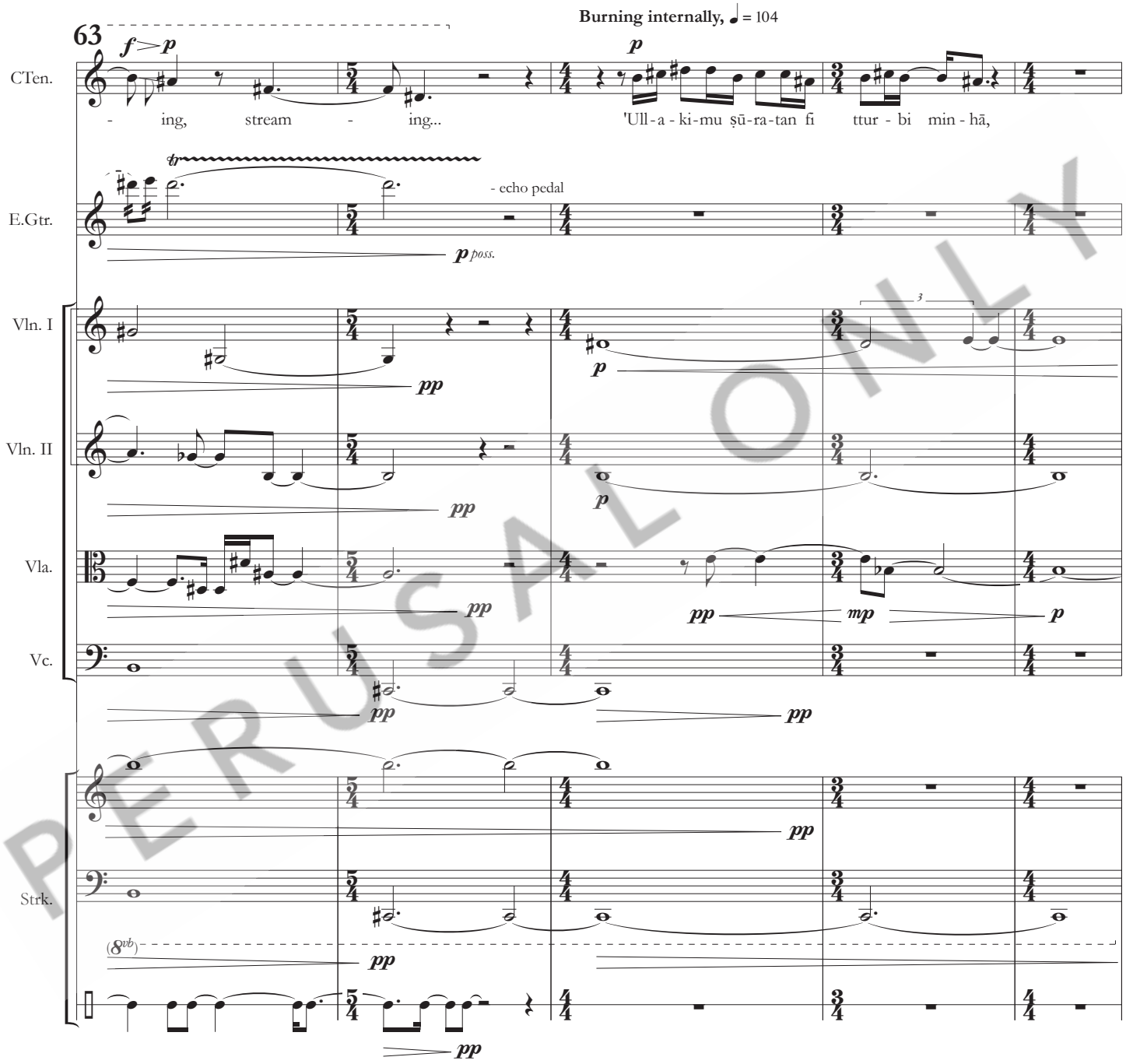
PERUSAL ONLY



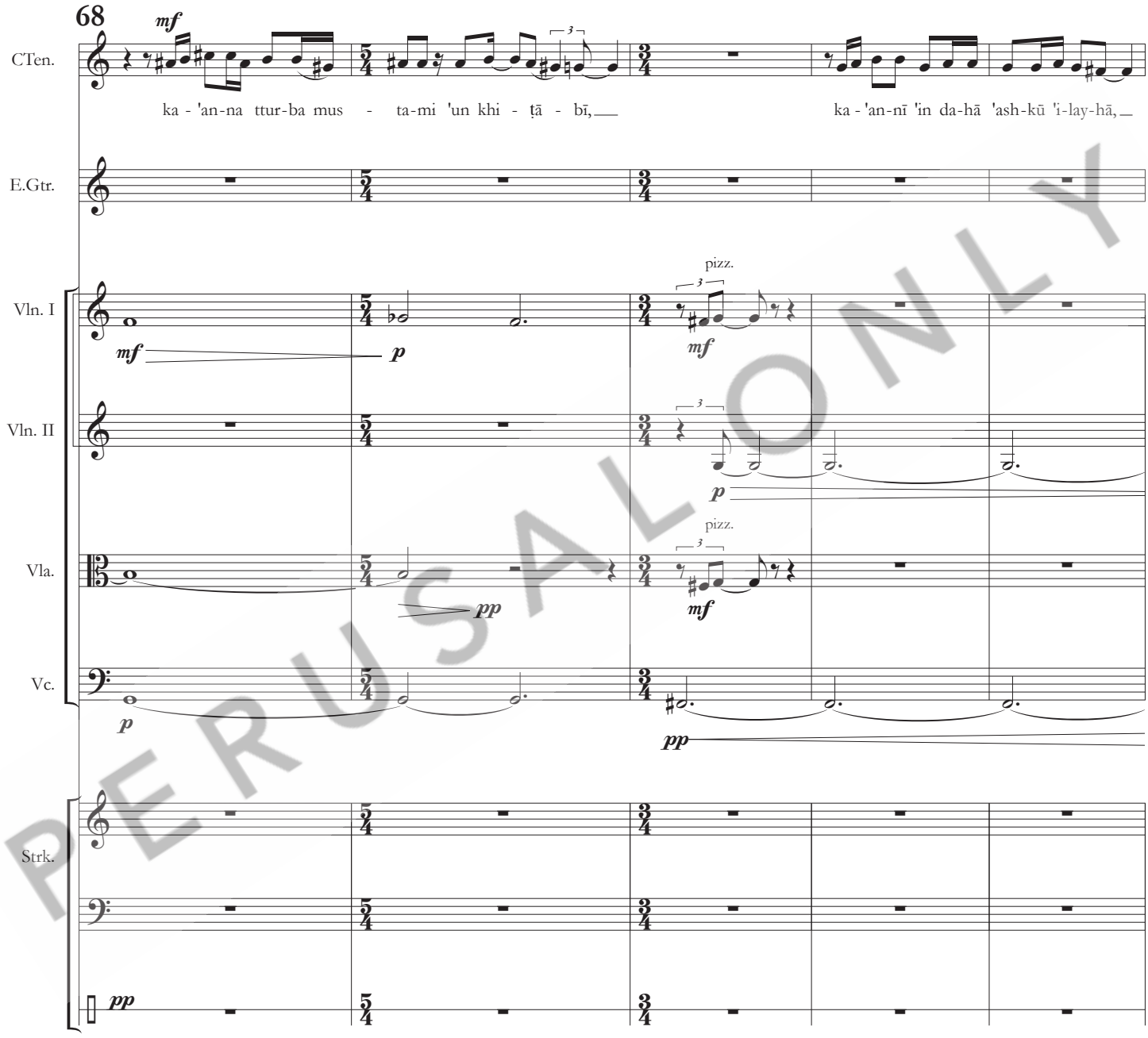
PERUSAL ONLY



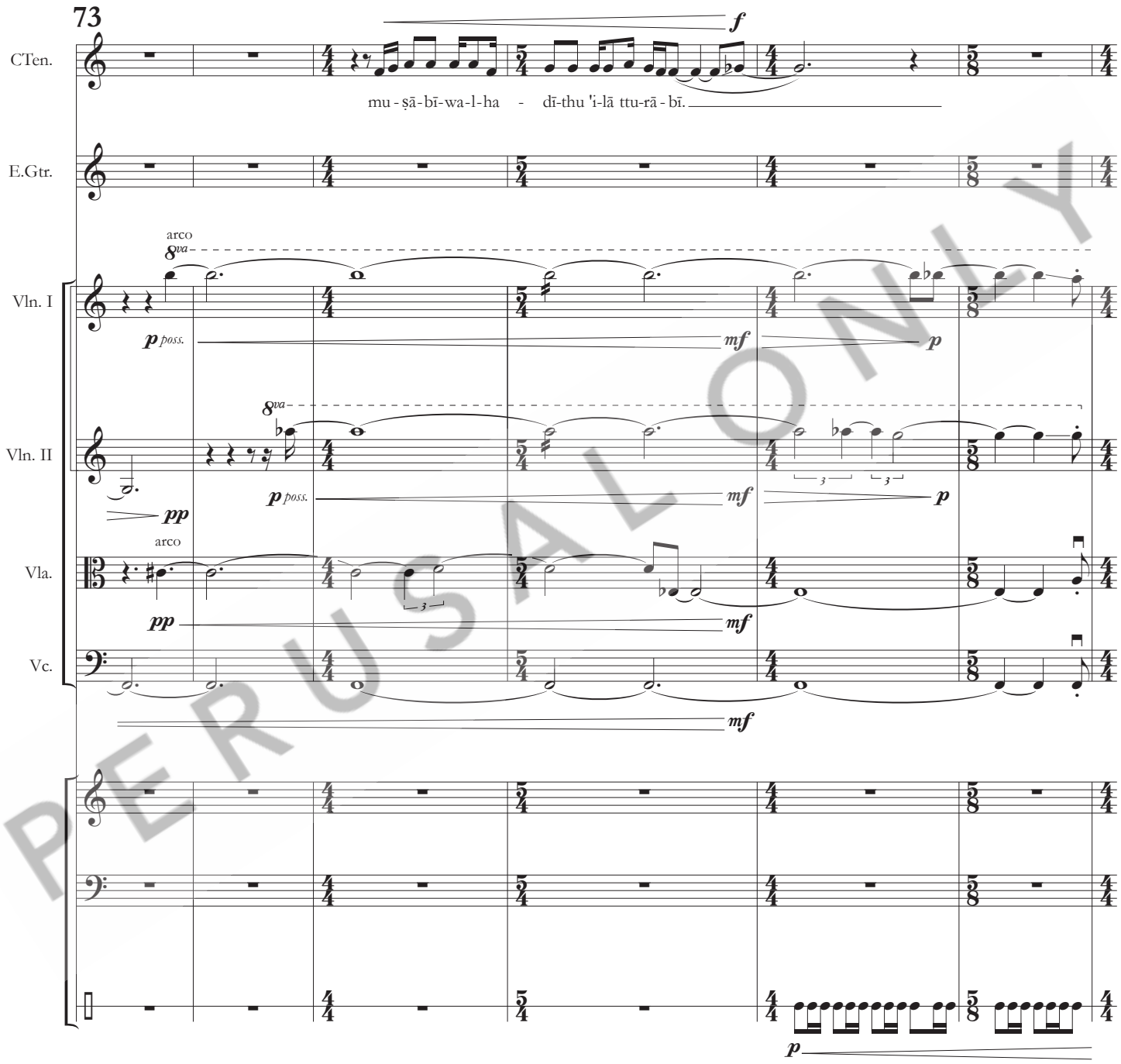
PERUSAL ONLY



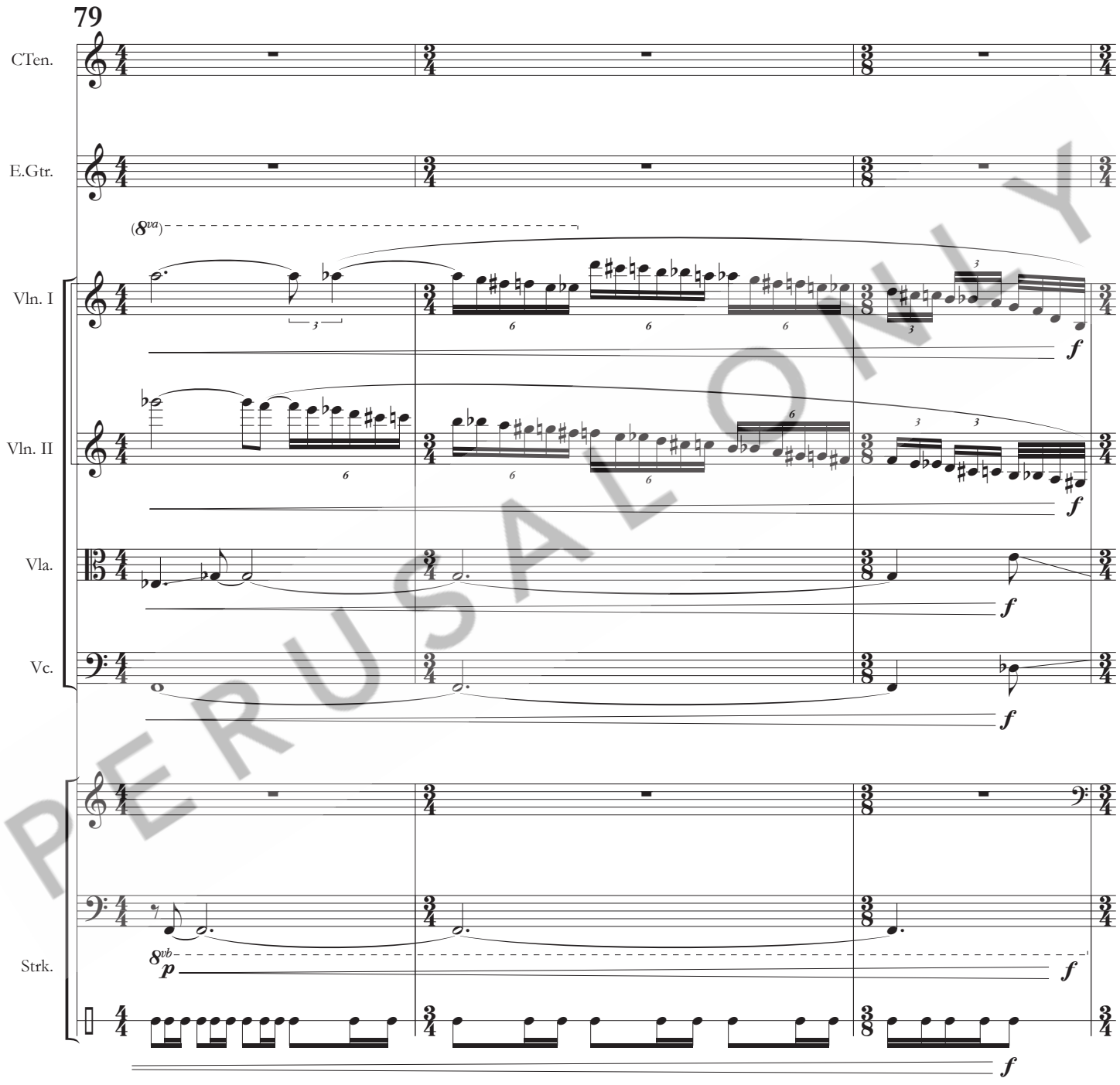
PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY

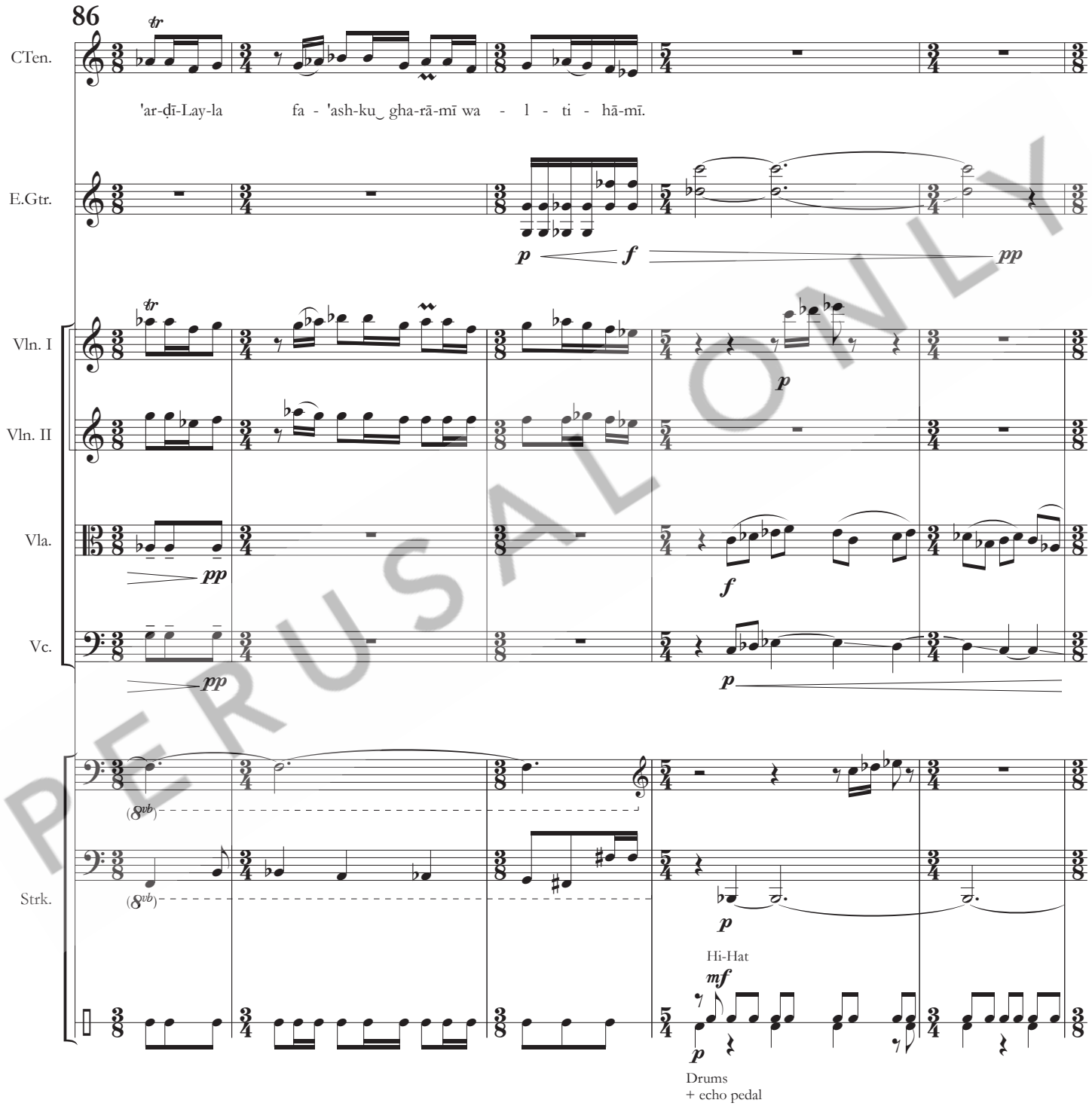


PERUSAL ONLY

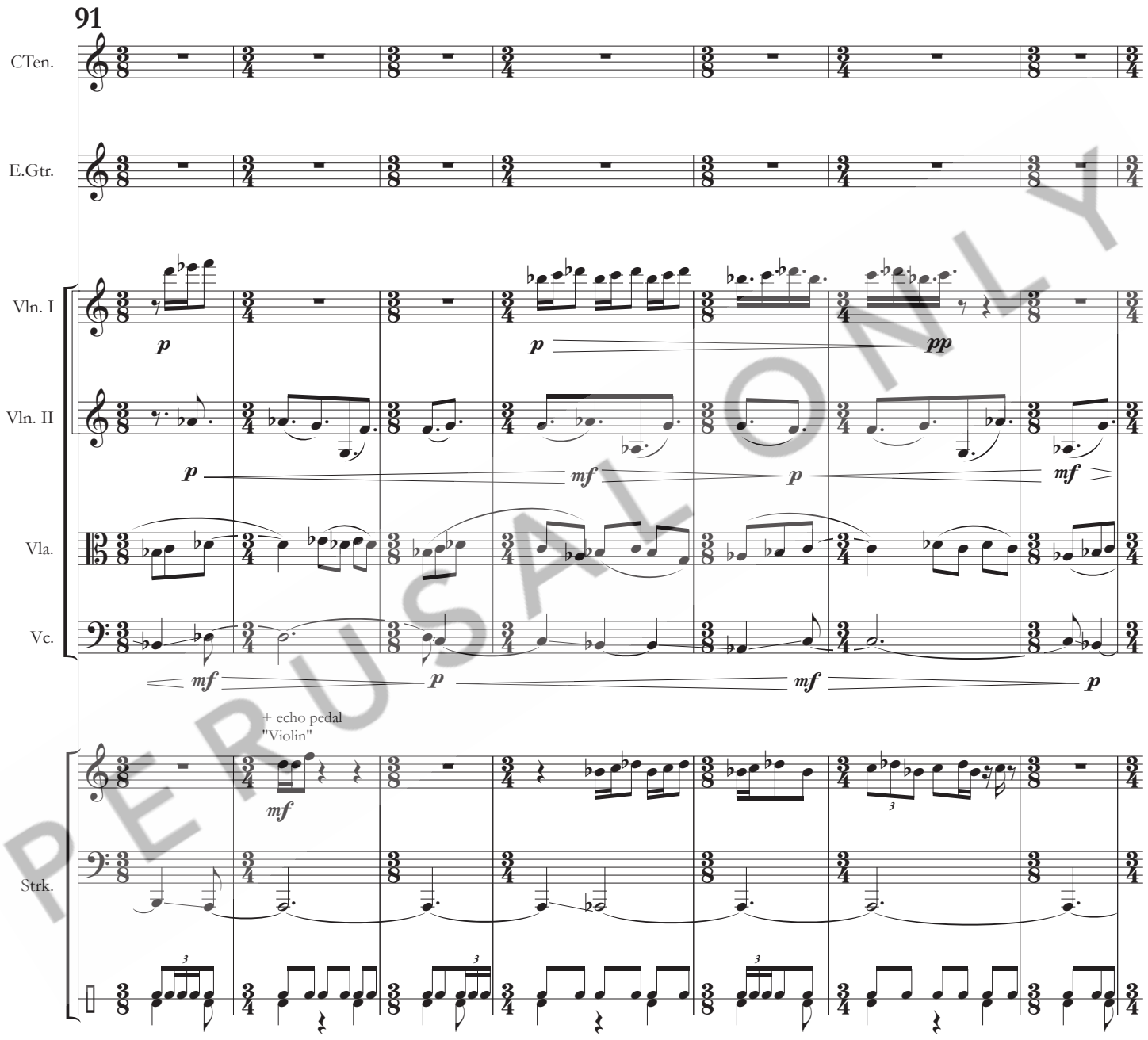


PERUSAL ONLY

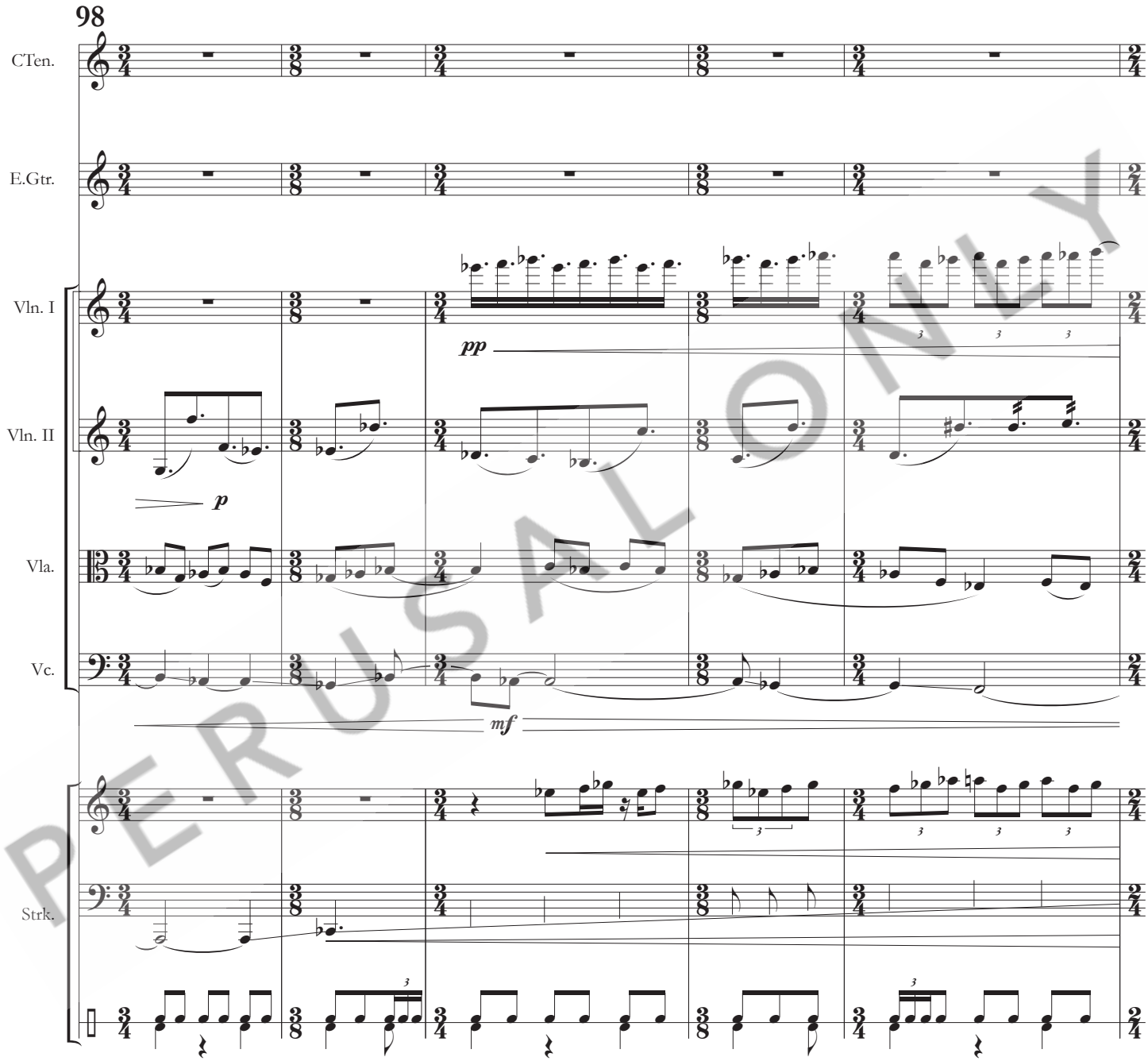
Click: 4:22
C
CTen.
Ya - mīl (u) bi-ya‿l-ha-wā fi - 'ar-ḍī-Lay-la fa - 'ash-ku‿gha-rā-mī wa-l-ti - hā-mī, ya - mīl (u) bi-ya‿l-ha-wā fi-
E.Gtr.
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
Strk.
PERUSAL ONLY



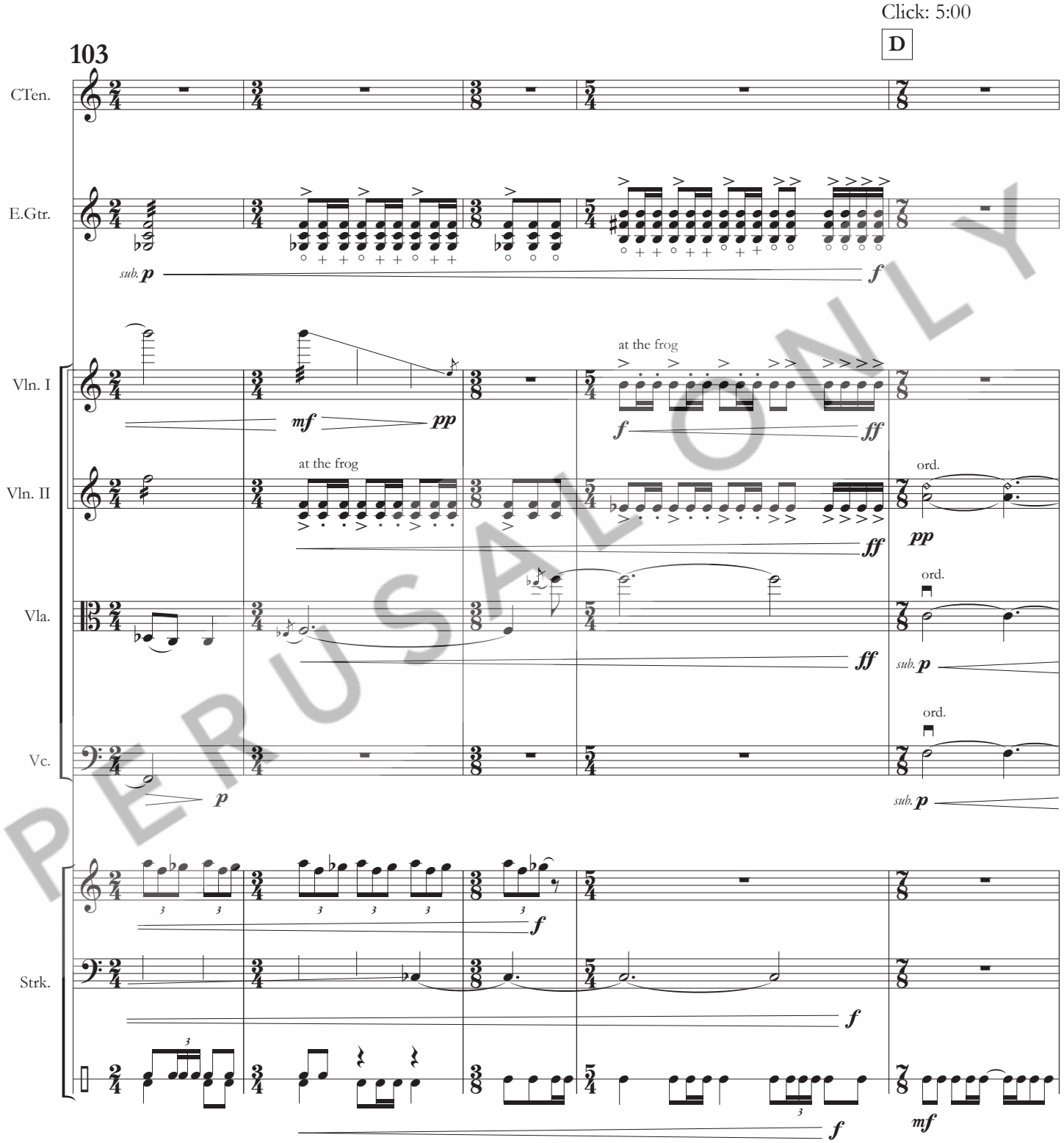
PERUSAL ONLY



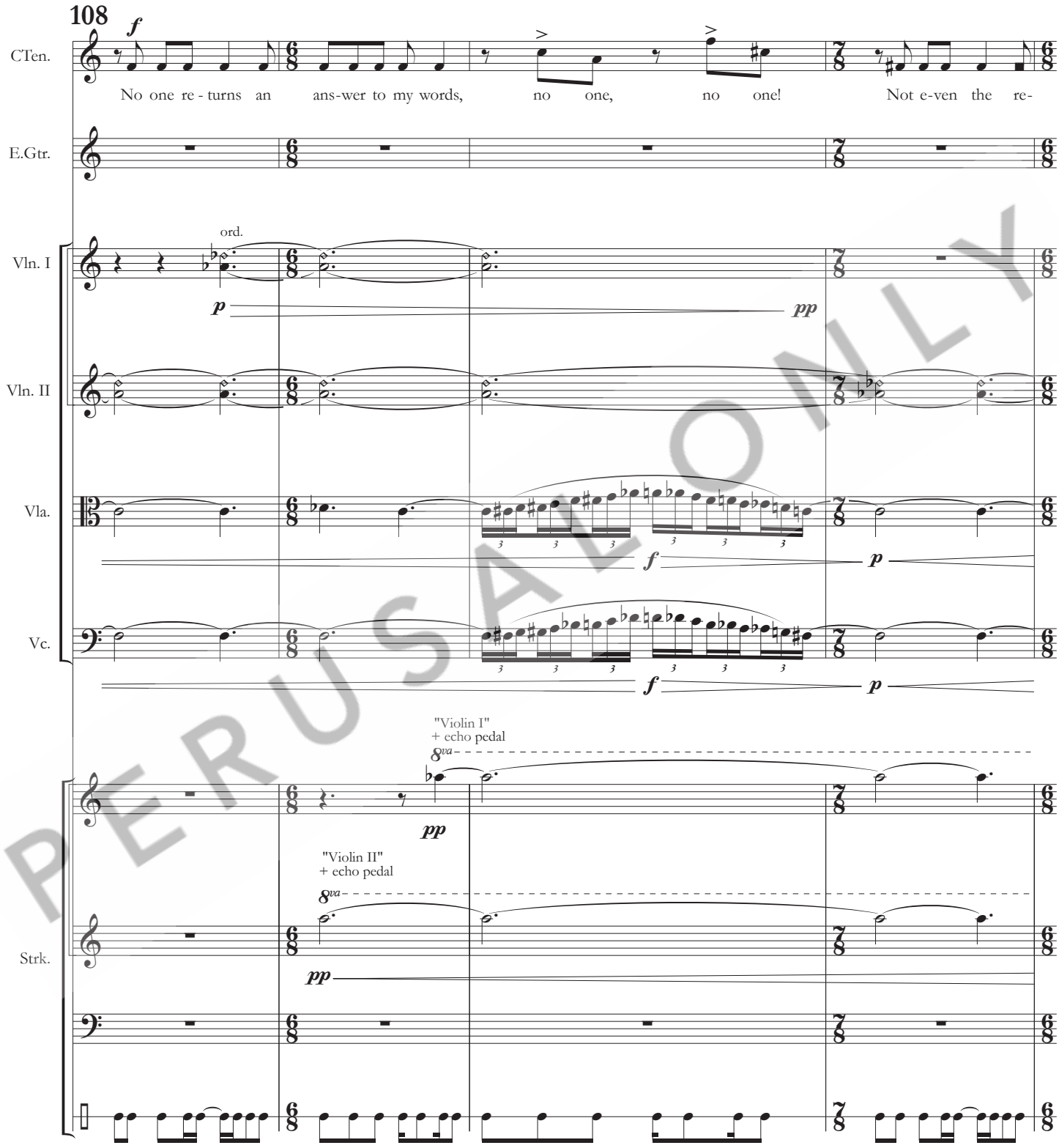
PERUSAL ONLY



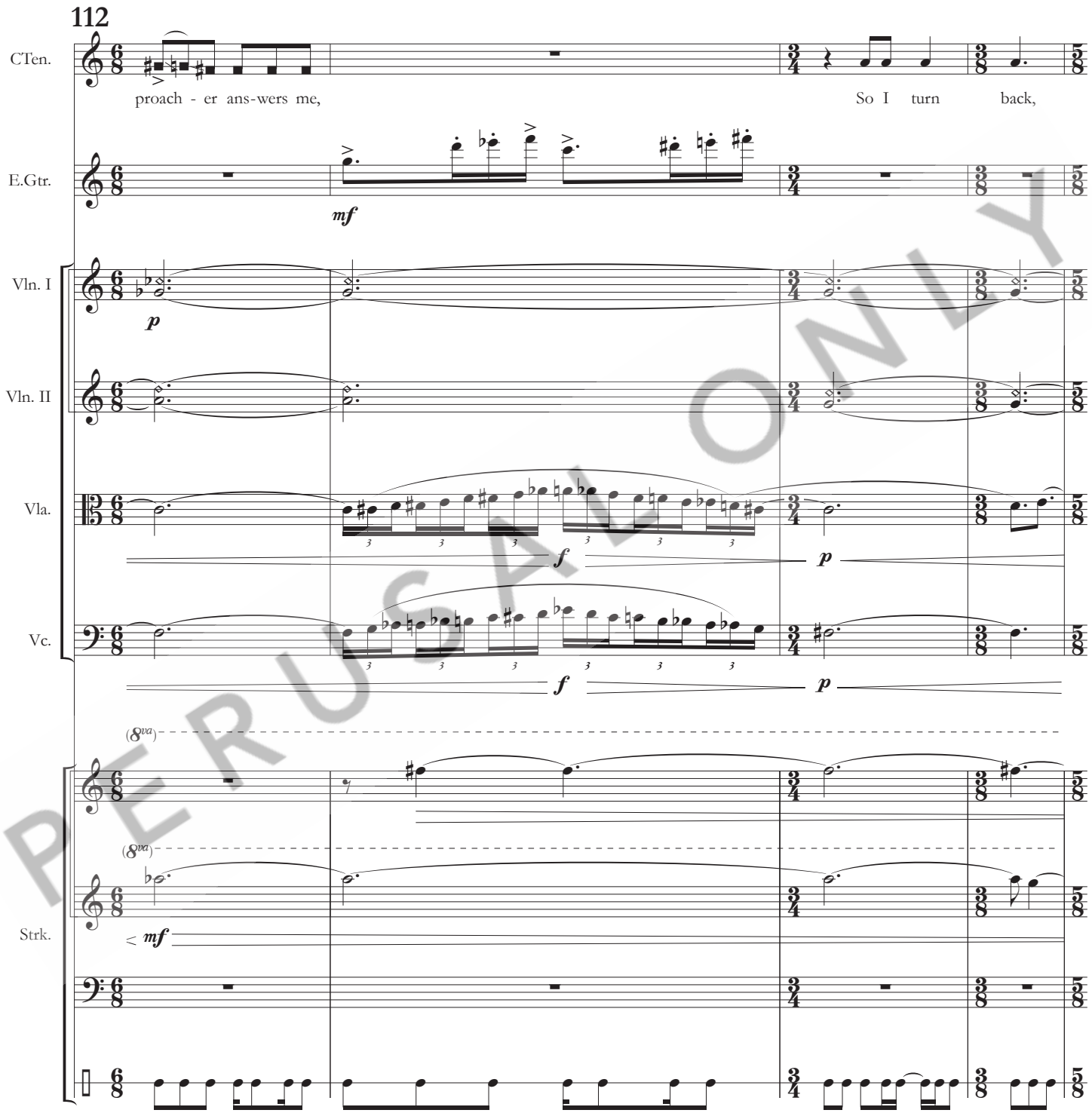
PERUSAL ONLY



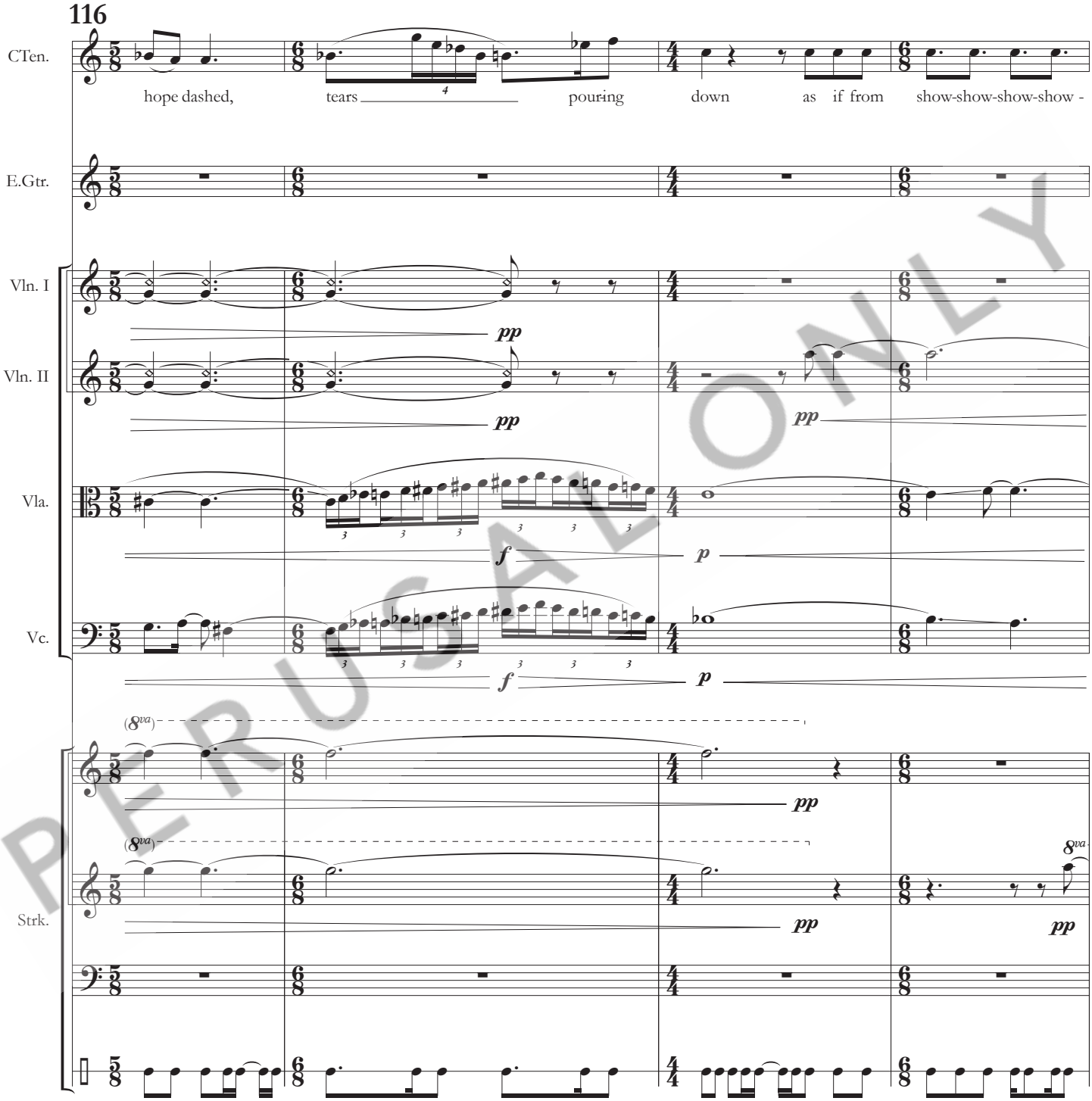
PERUSAL ONLY



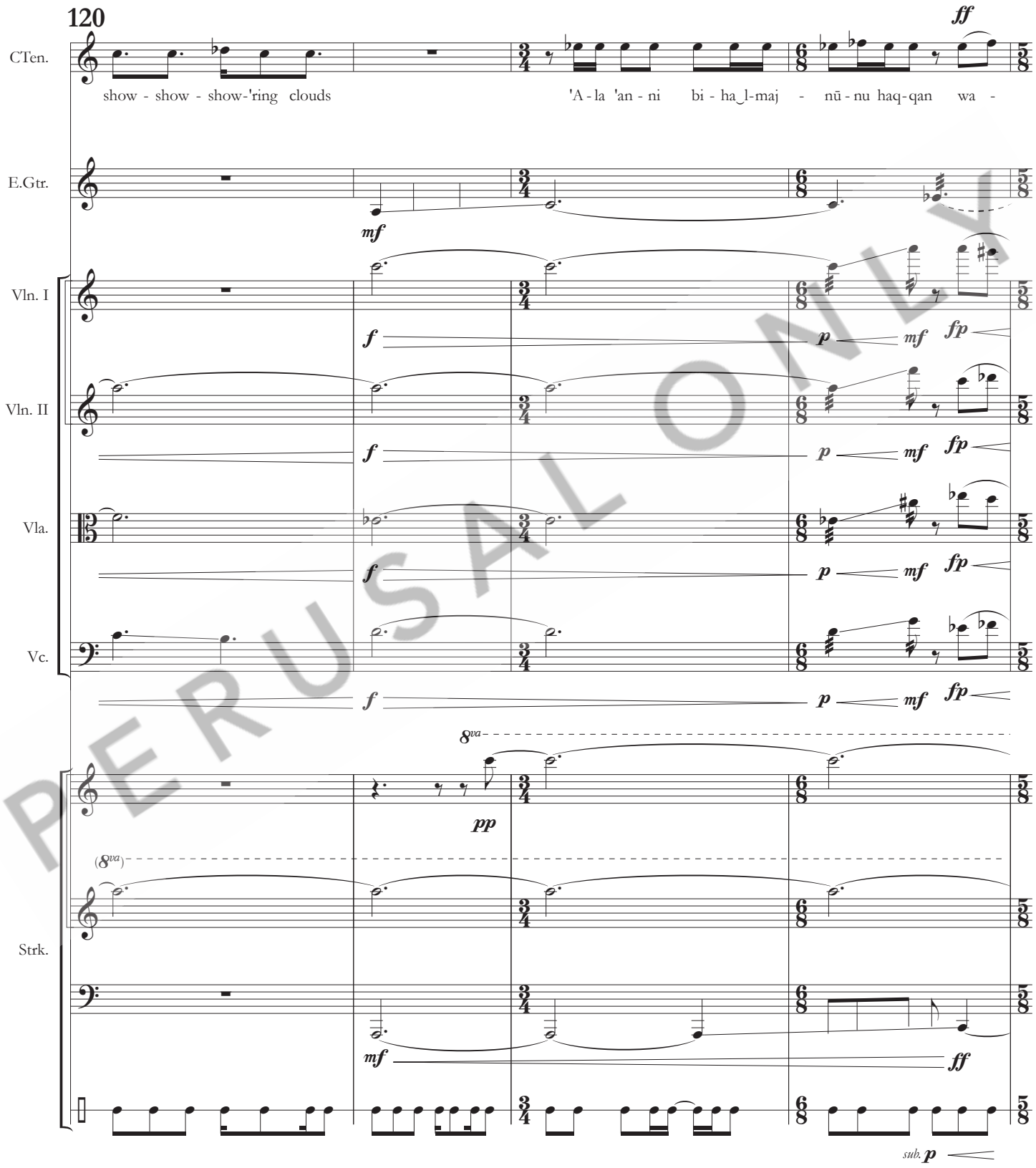
PERUSAL ONLY



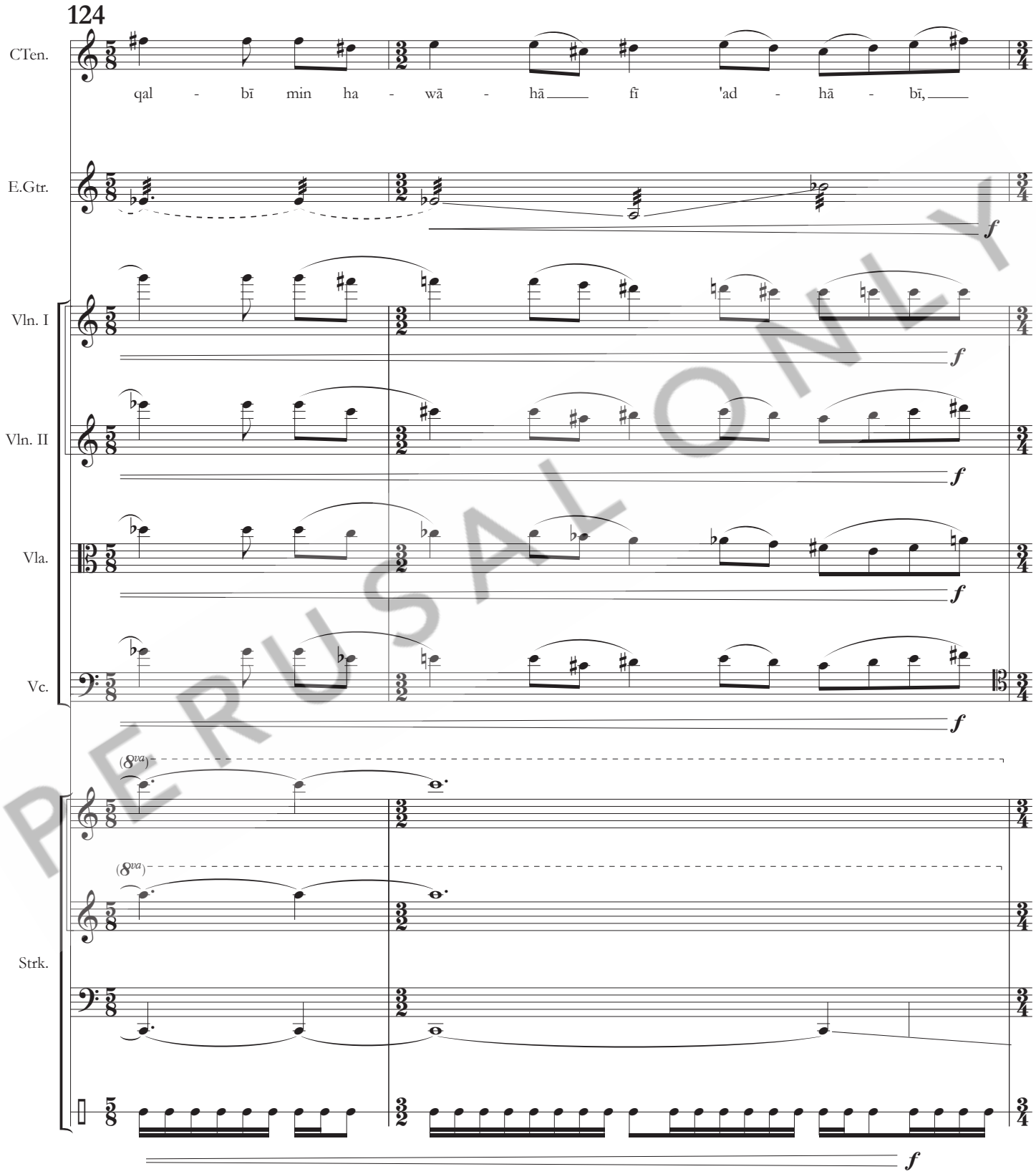
PERUSAL ONLY



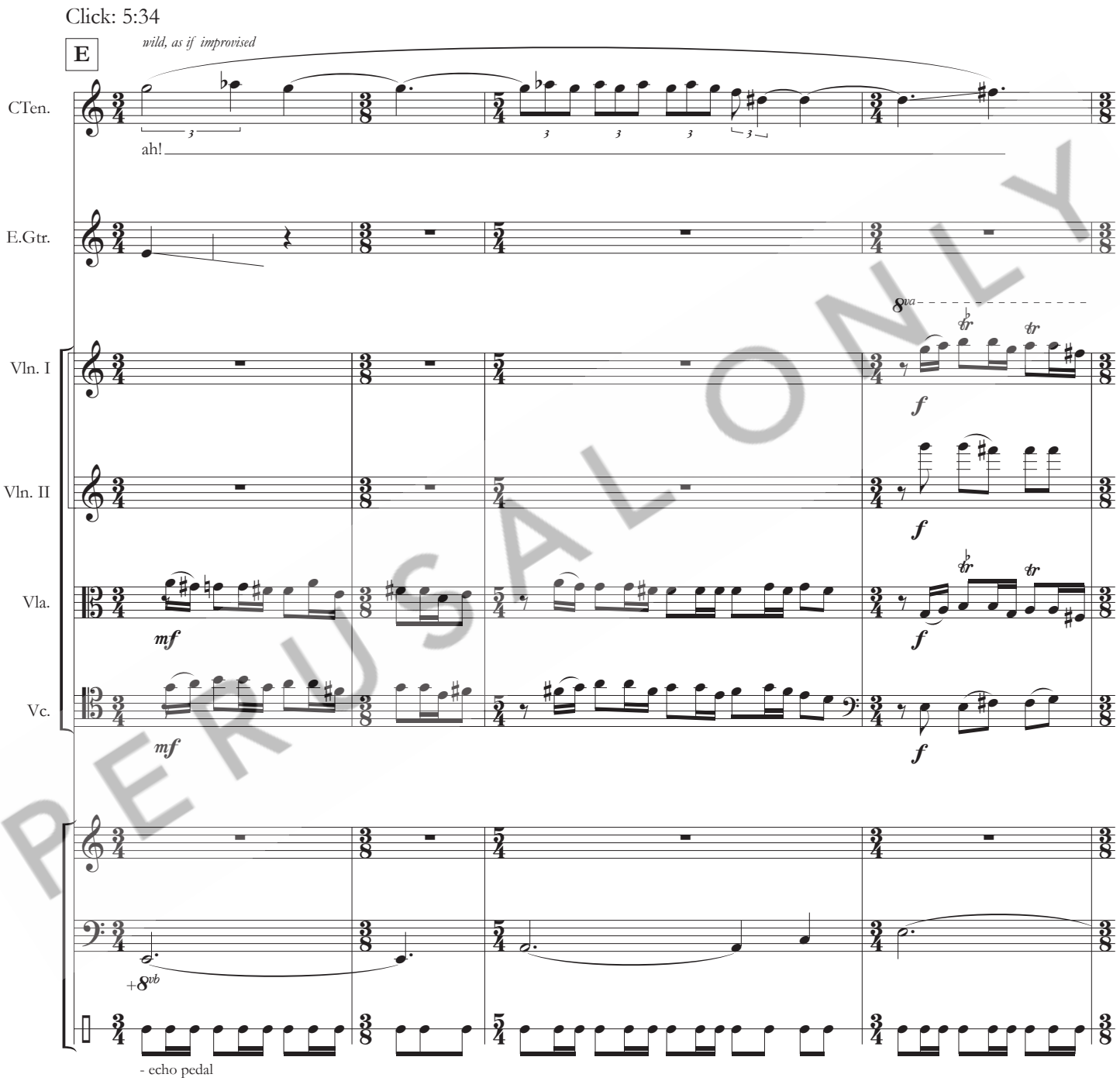
PERUSAL ONLY



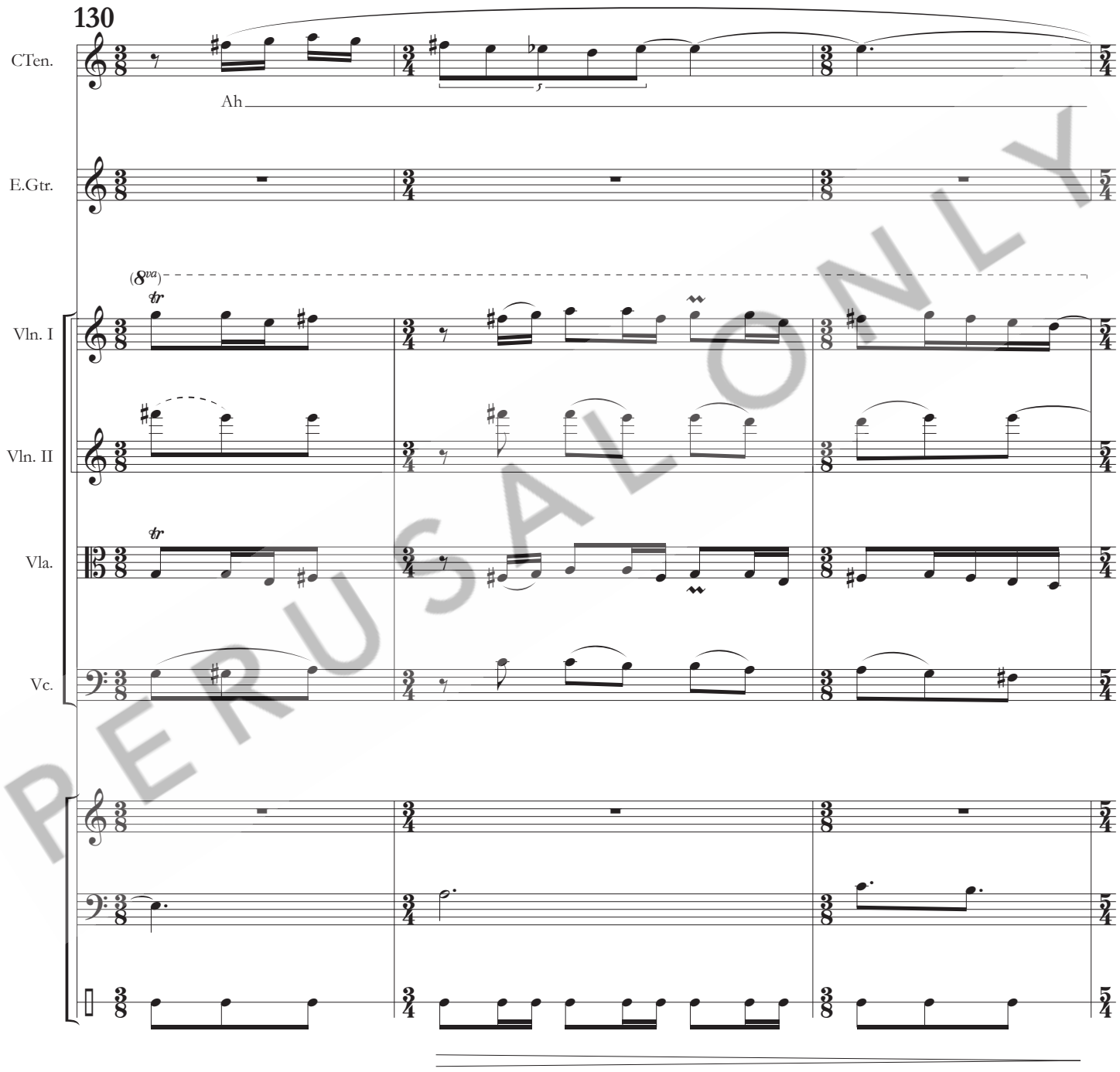
PERUSAL ONLY



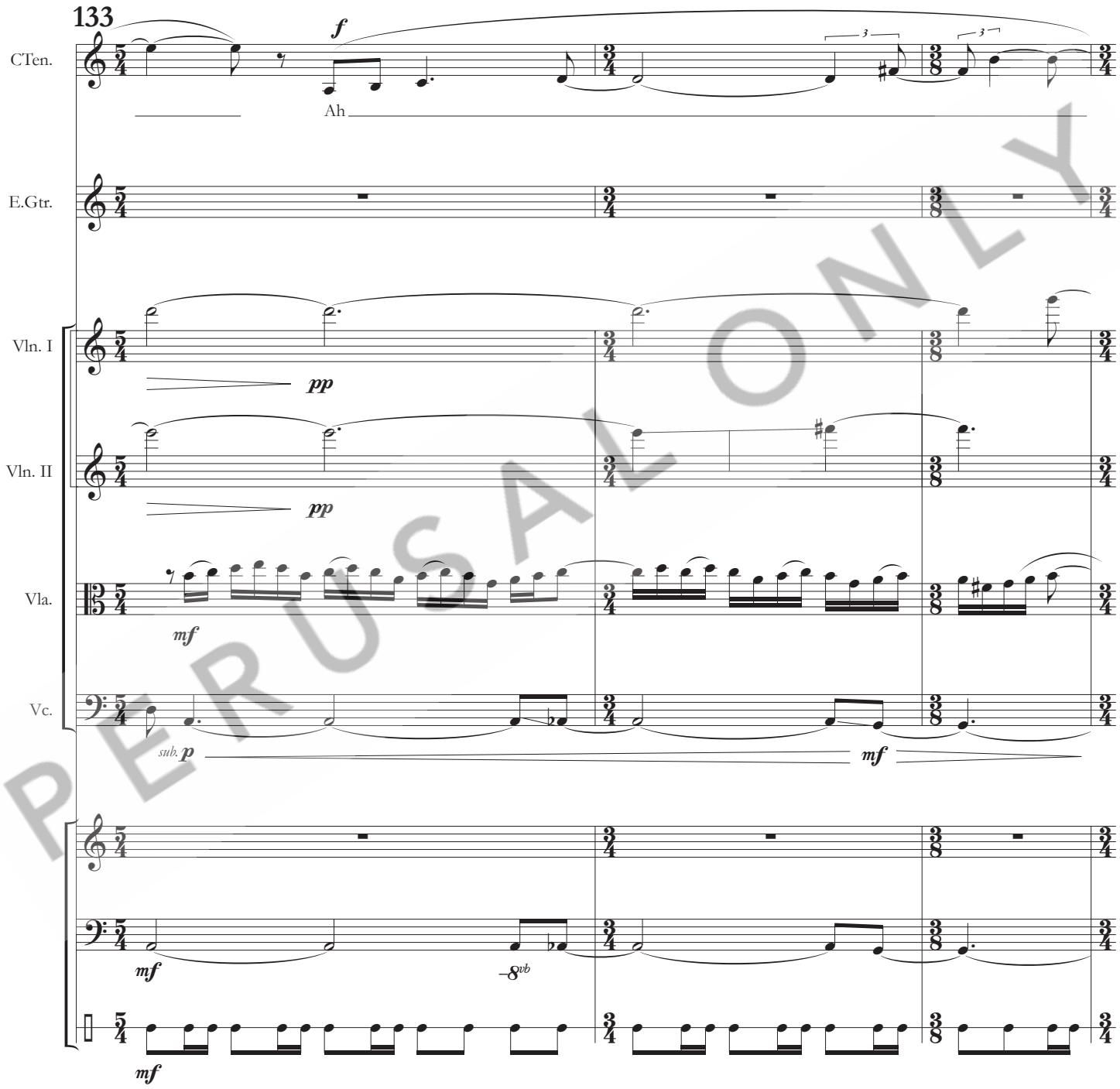
PERUSAL ONLY



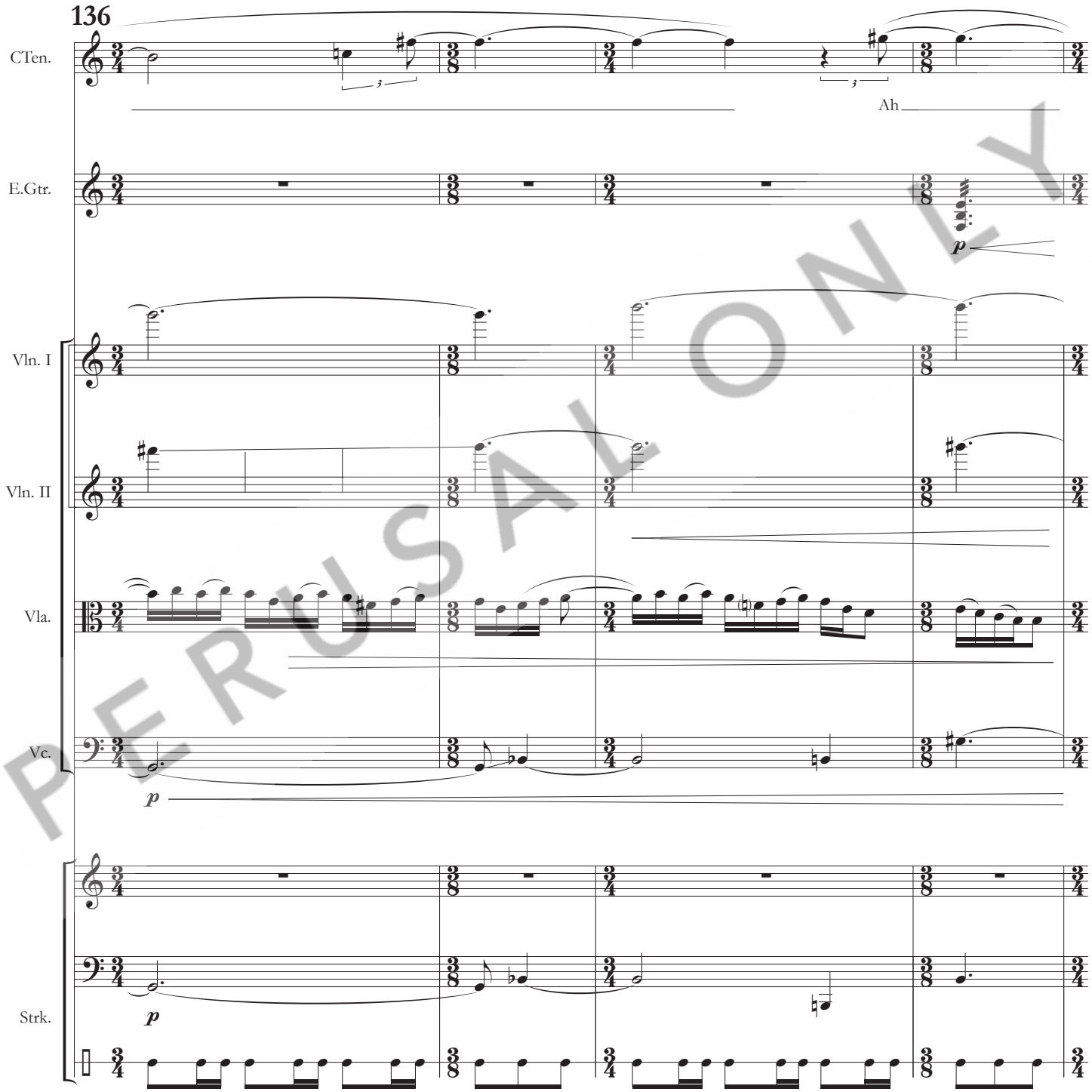
PERUSAL ONLY



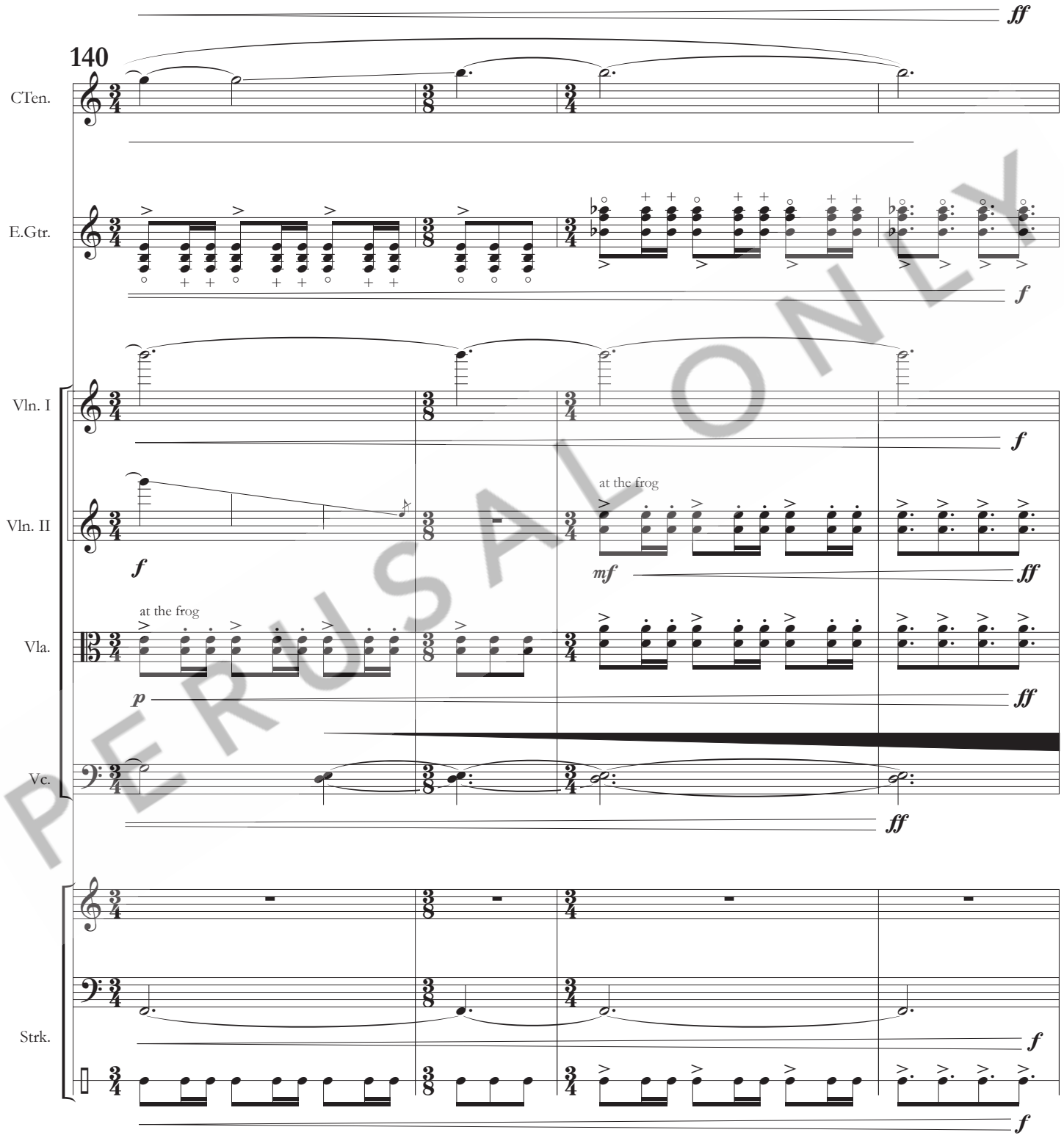
PERUSAL ONLY



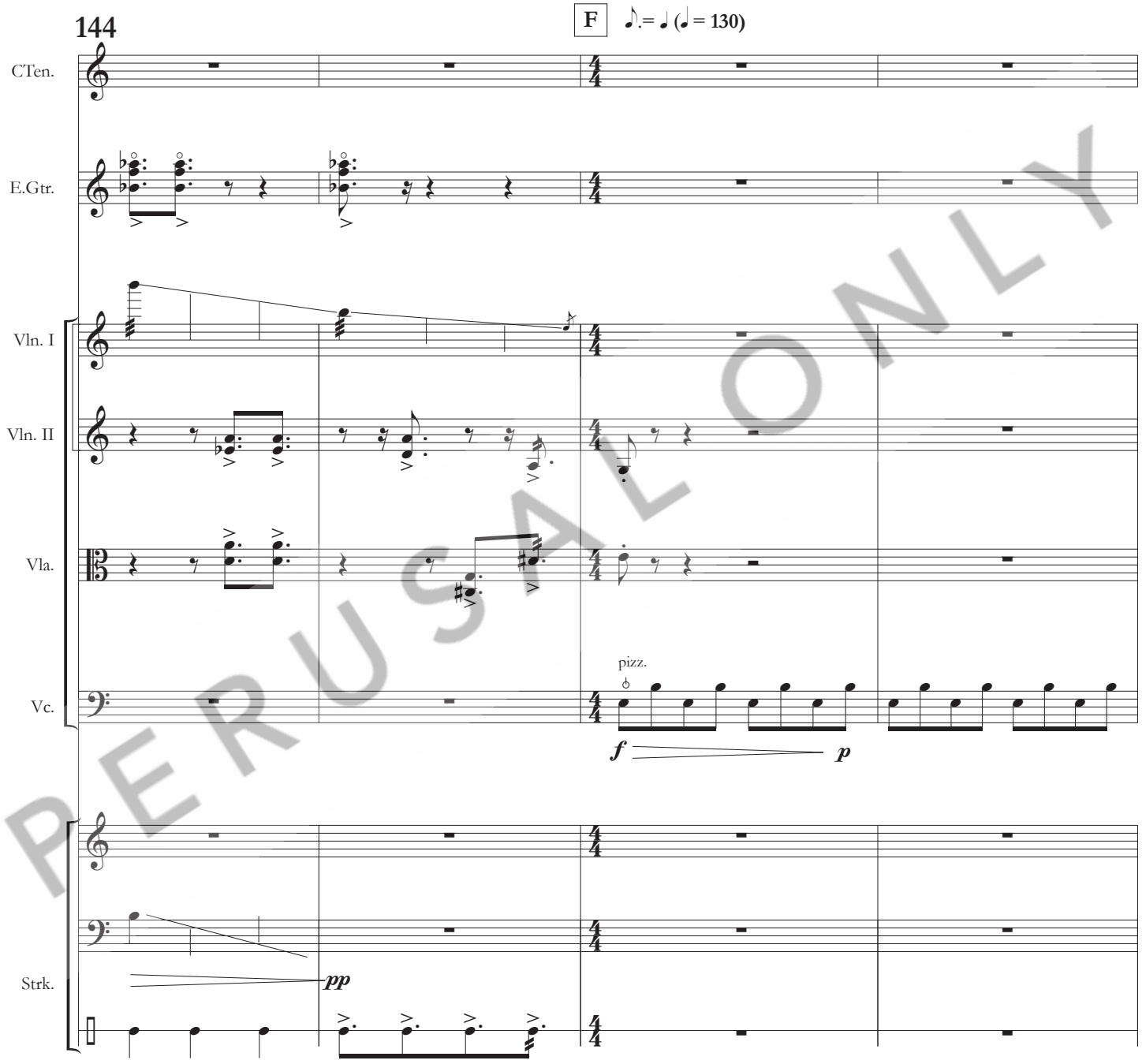
PERUSAL ONLY



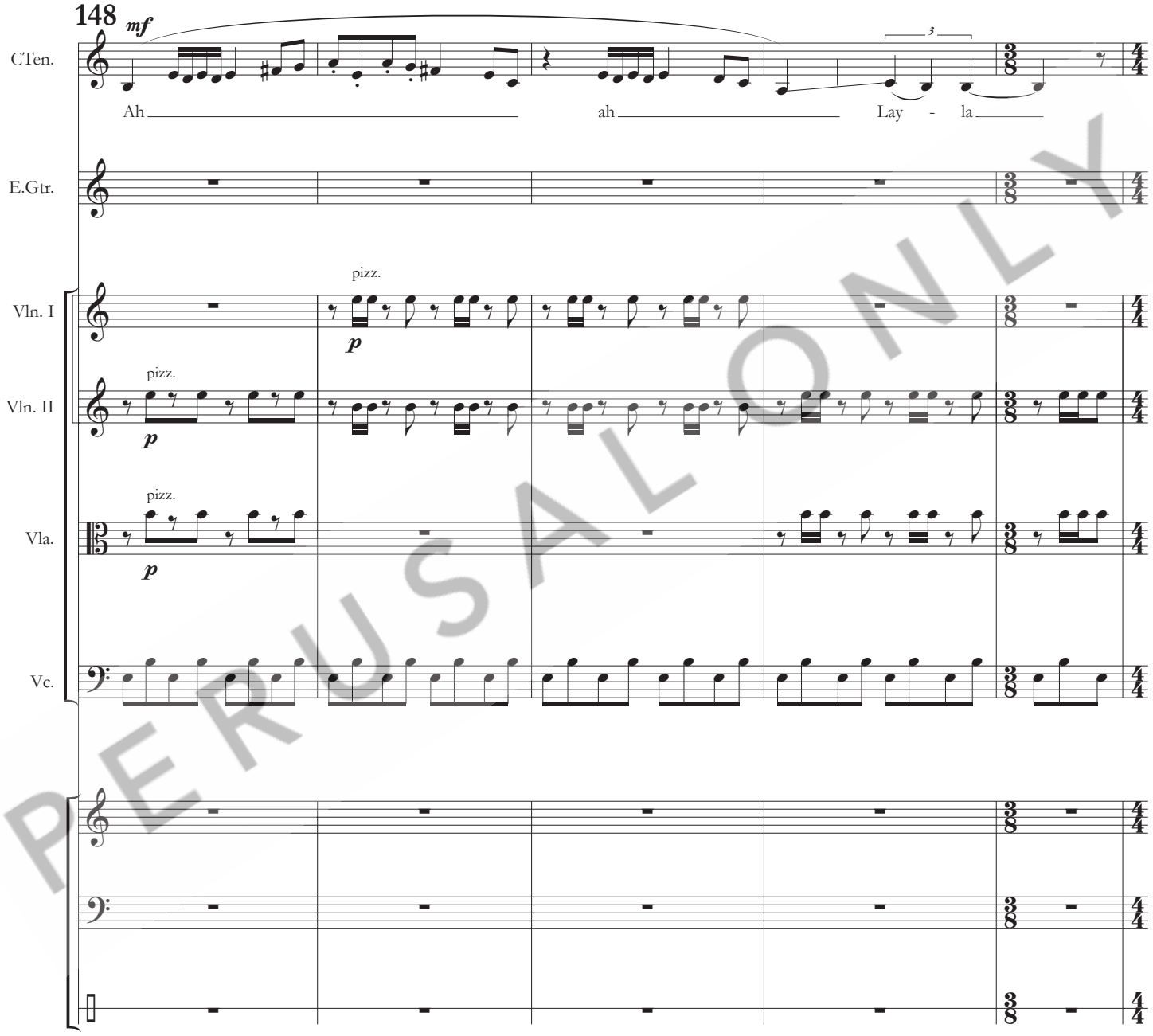
PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY

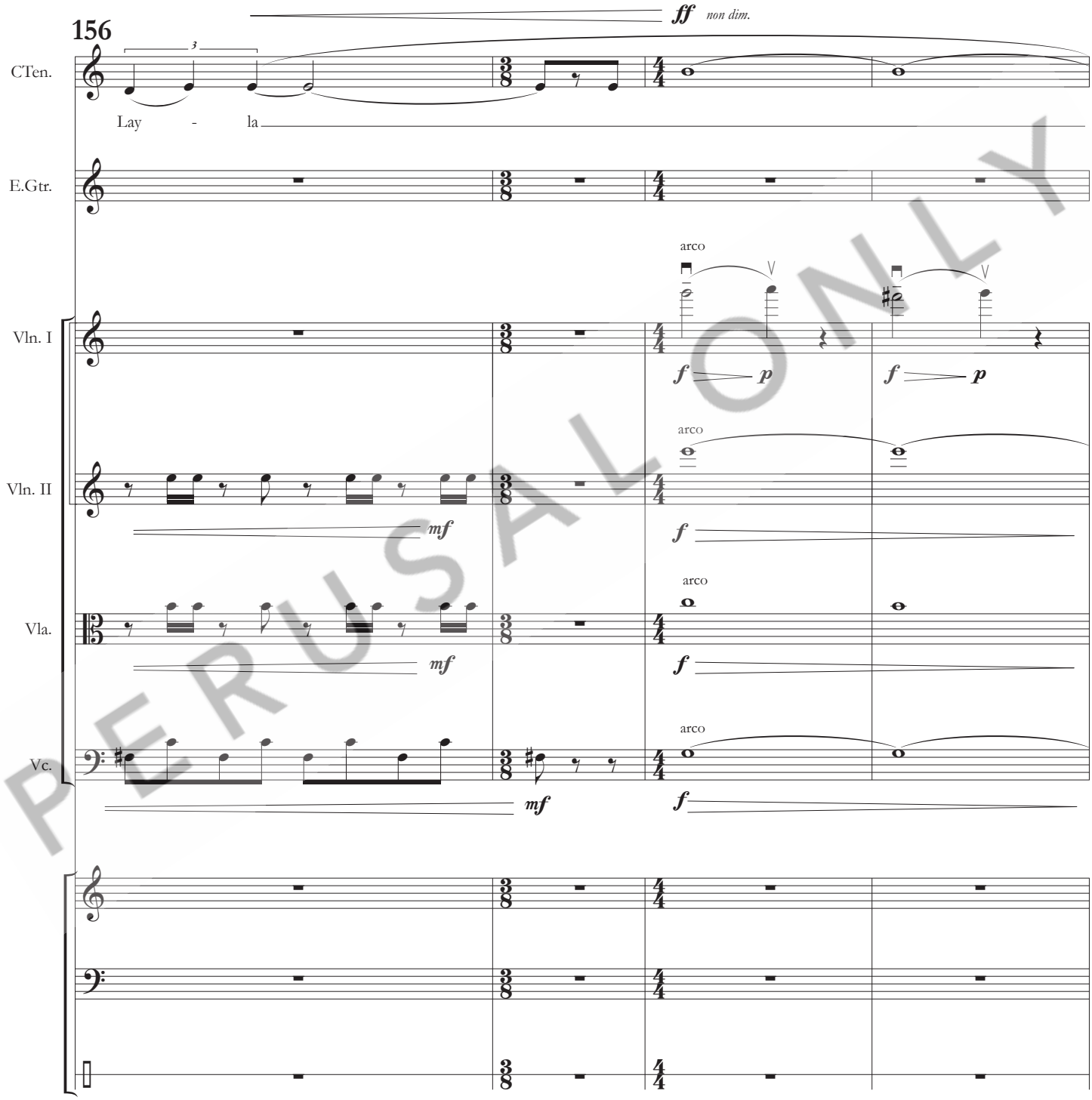


PERUSAL ONLY

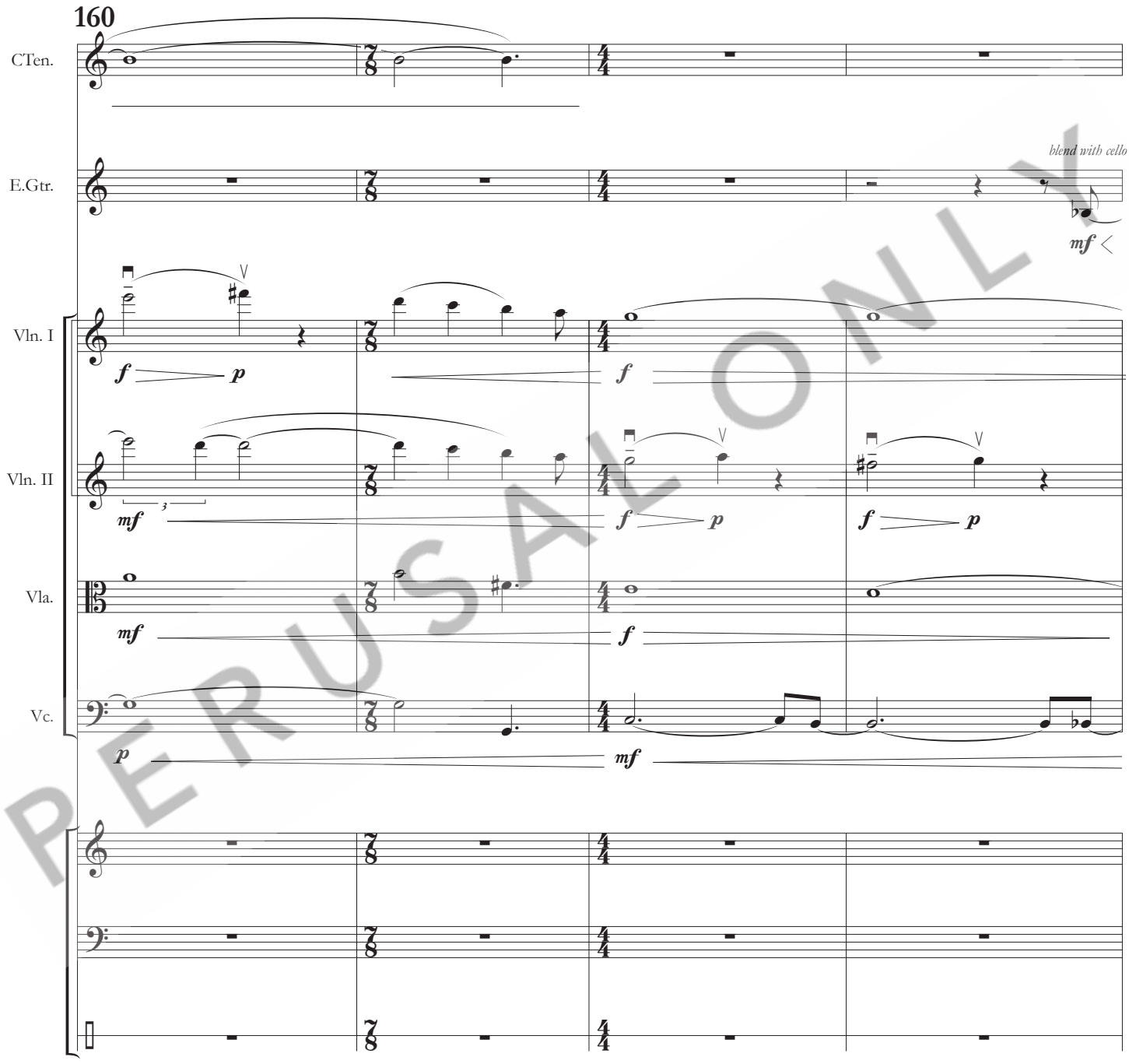


PERUSAL ONLY

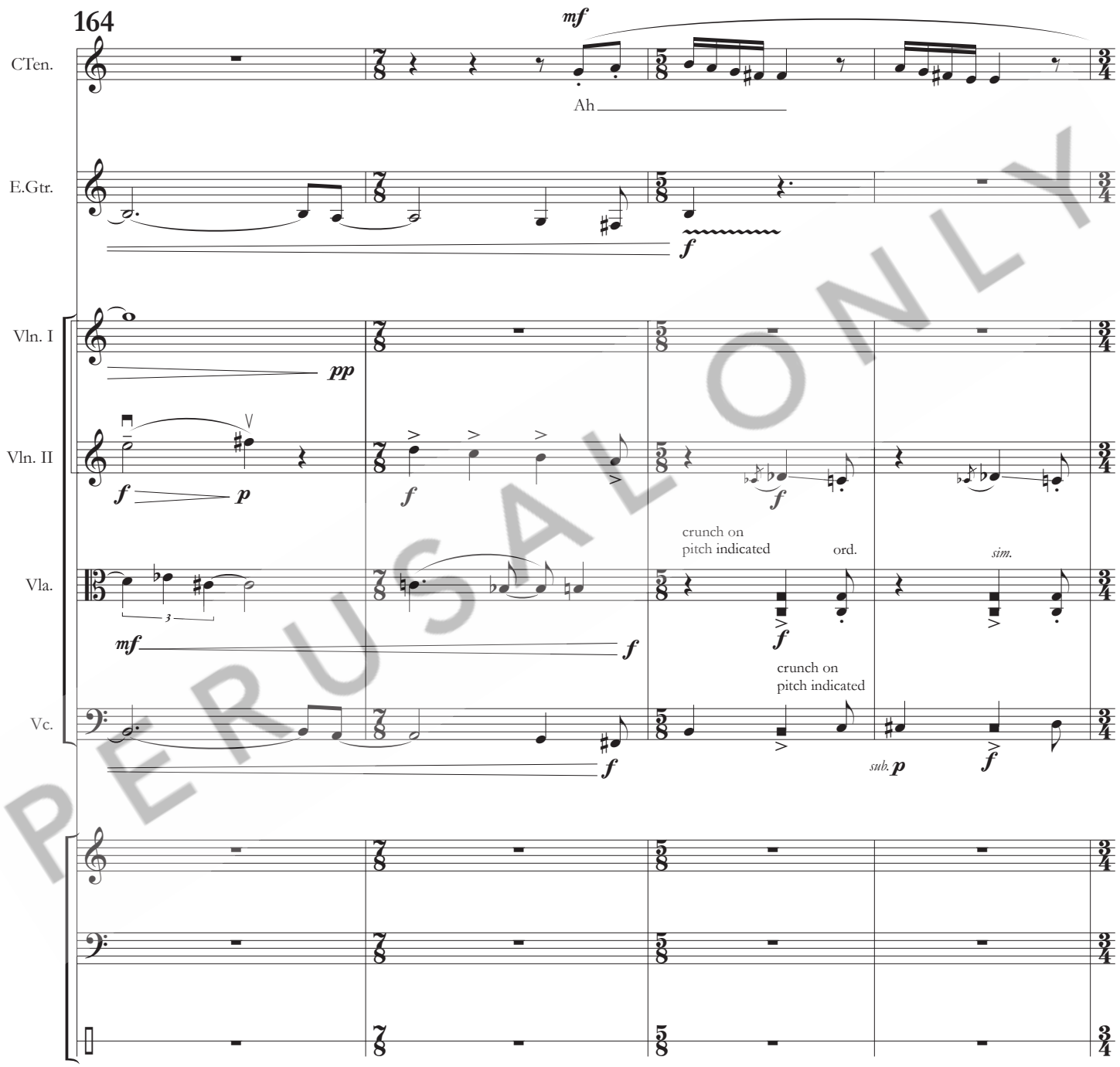
PERUSAL ONLY



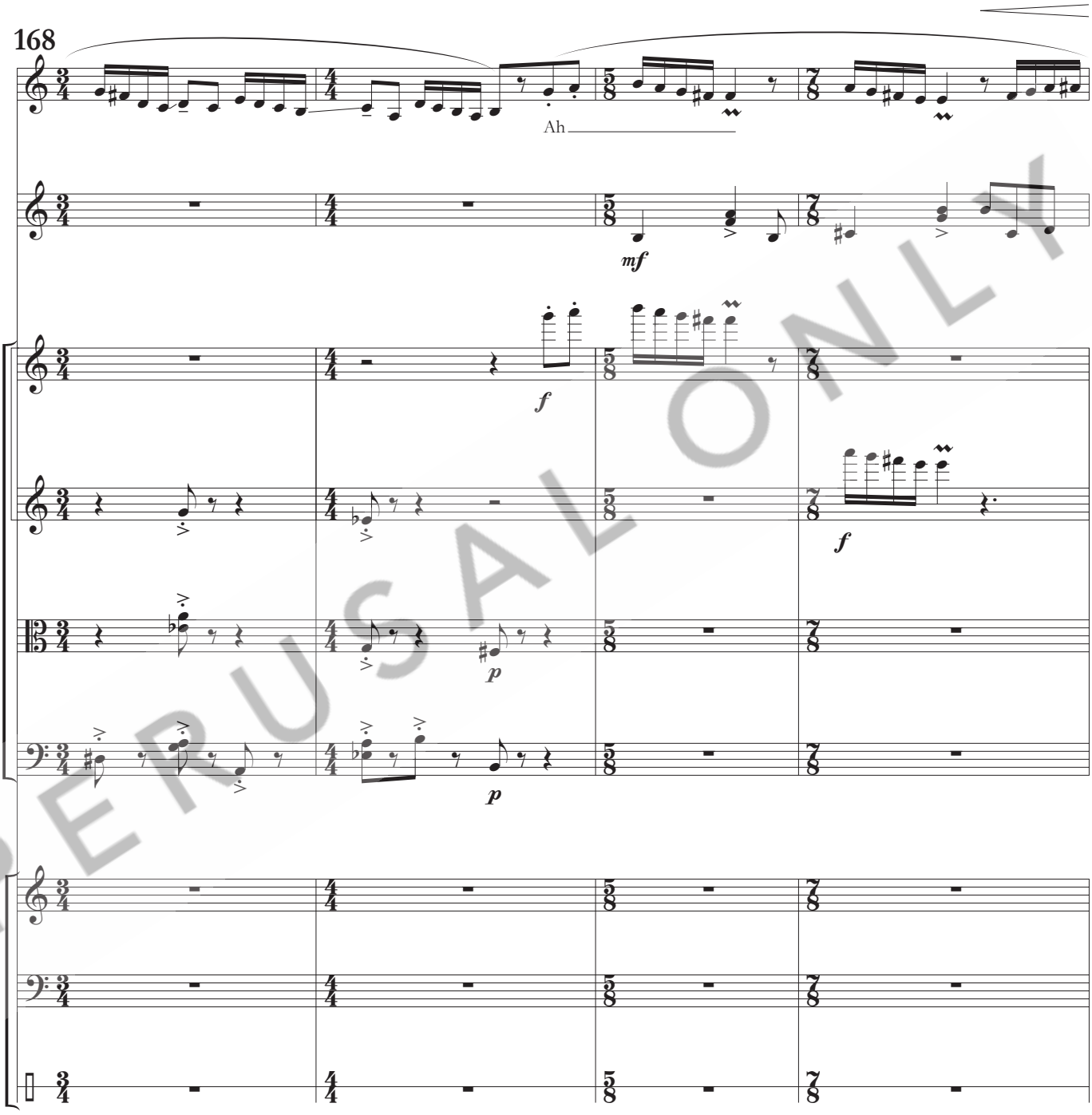
PERUSAL ONLY



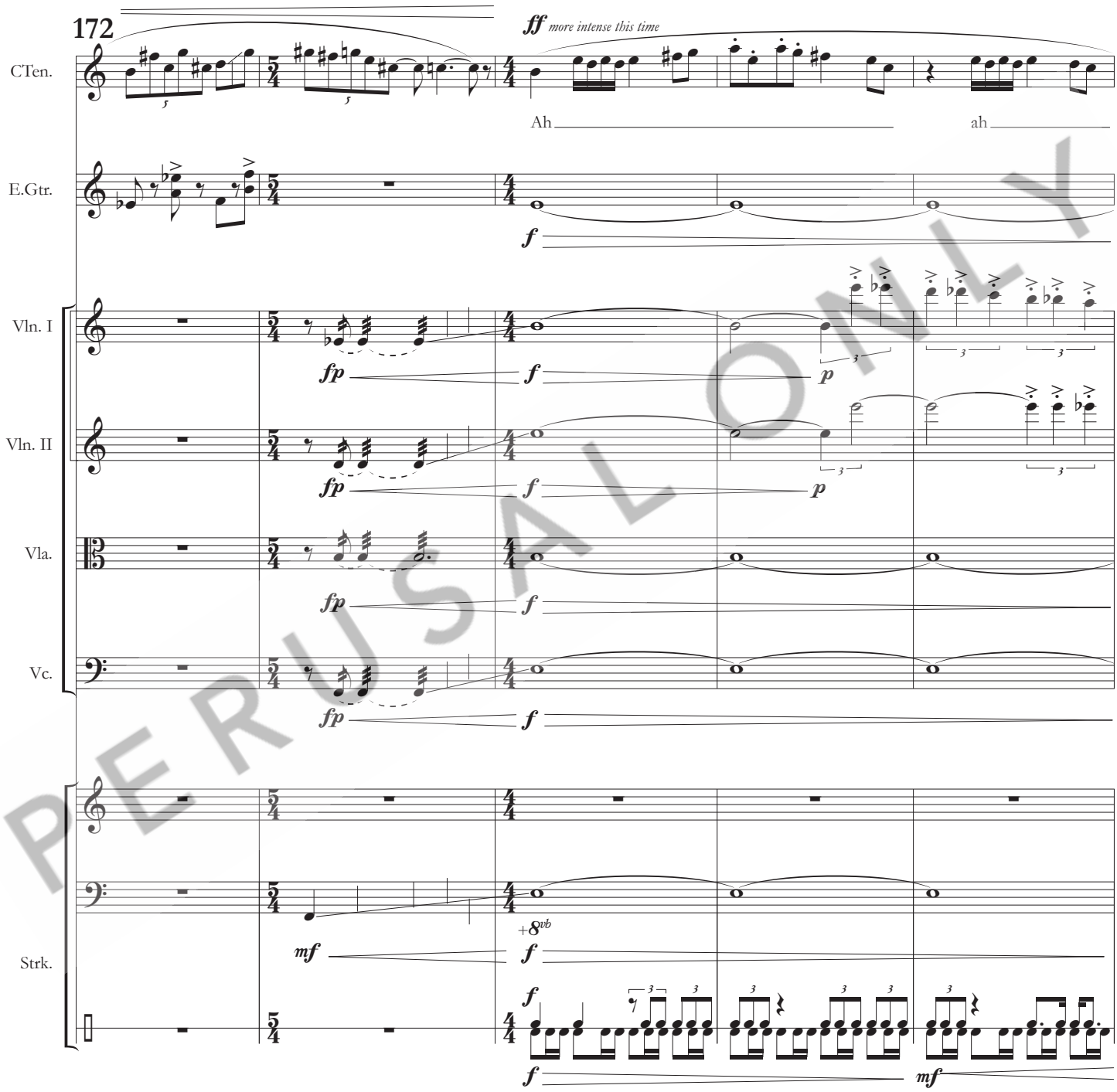
PERUSAL ONLY



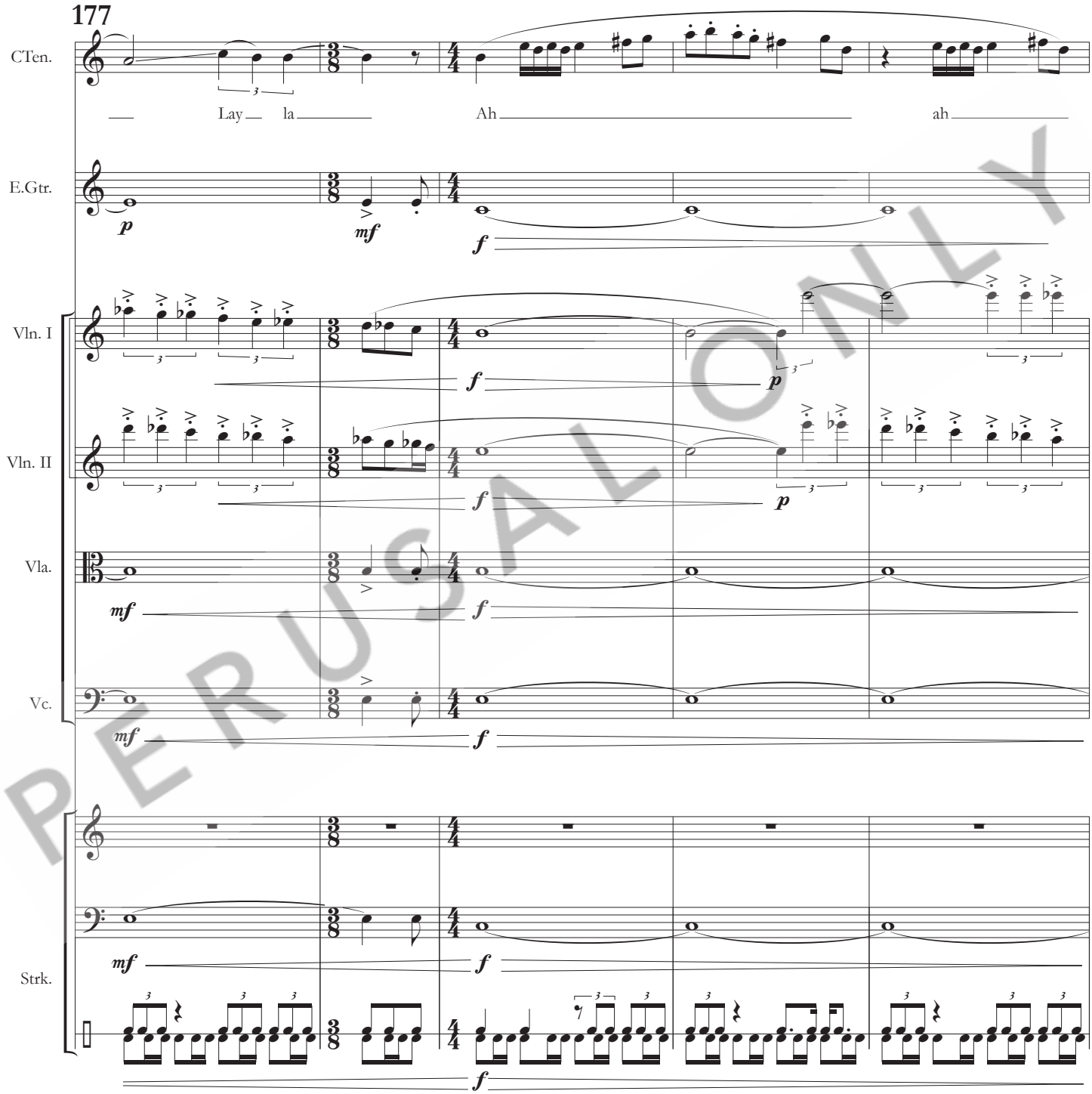
PERUSAL ONLY



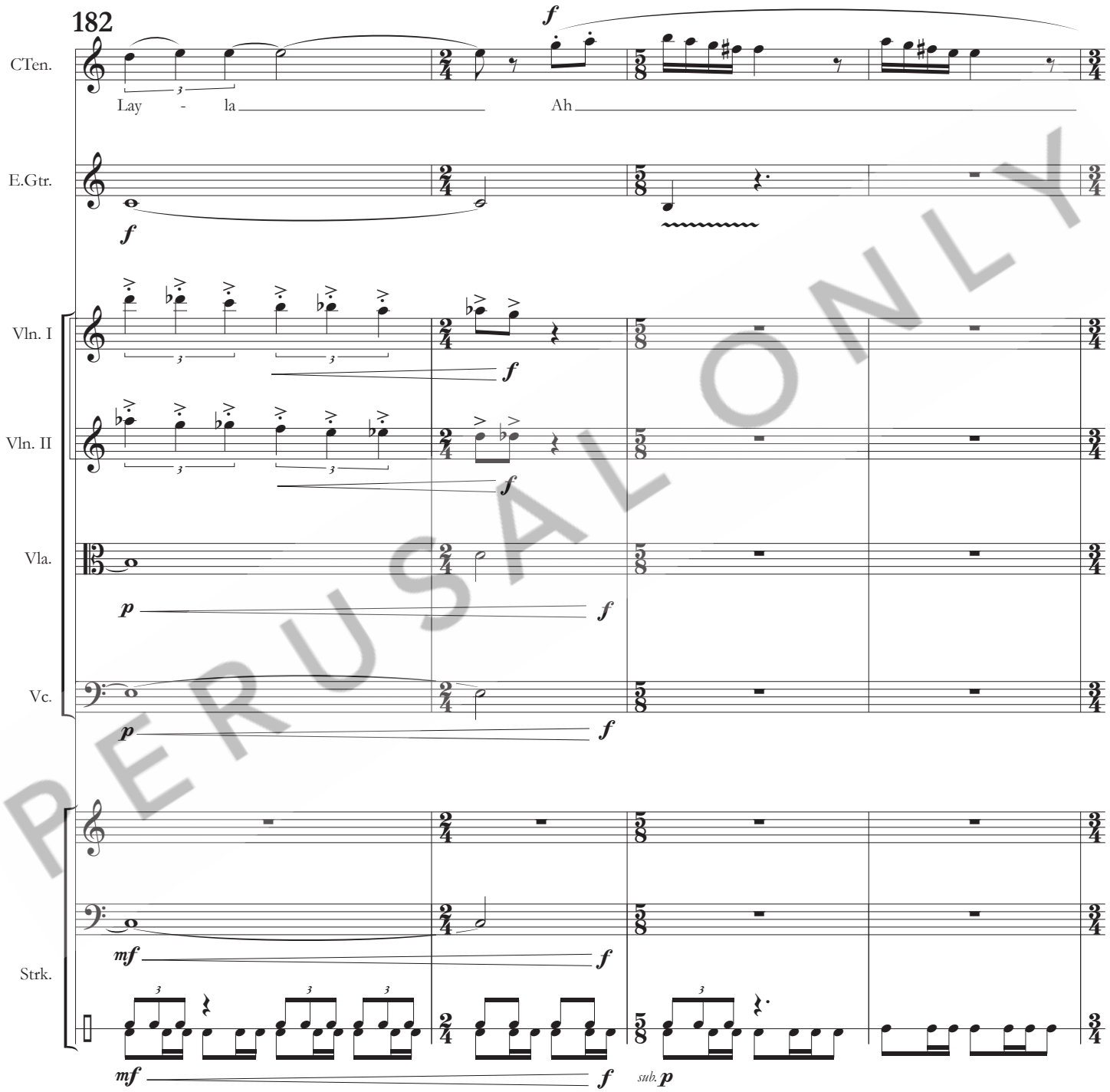
PERUSAL ONLY



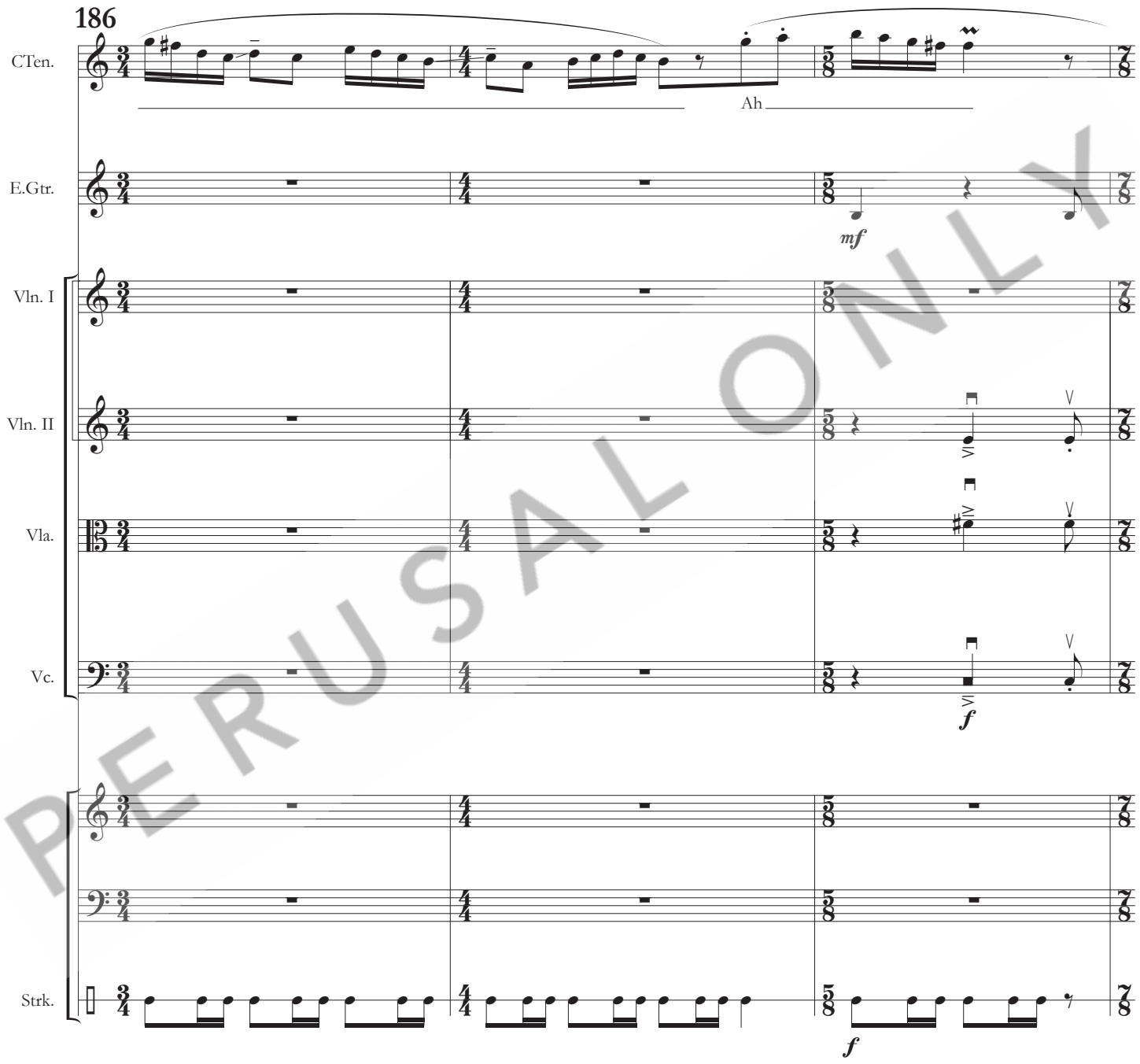
PERUSAL ONLY



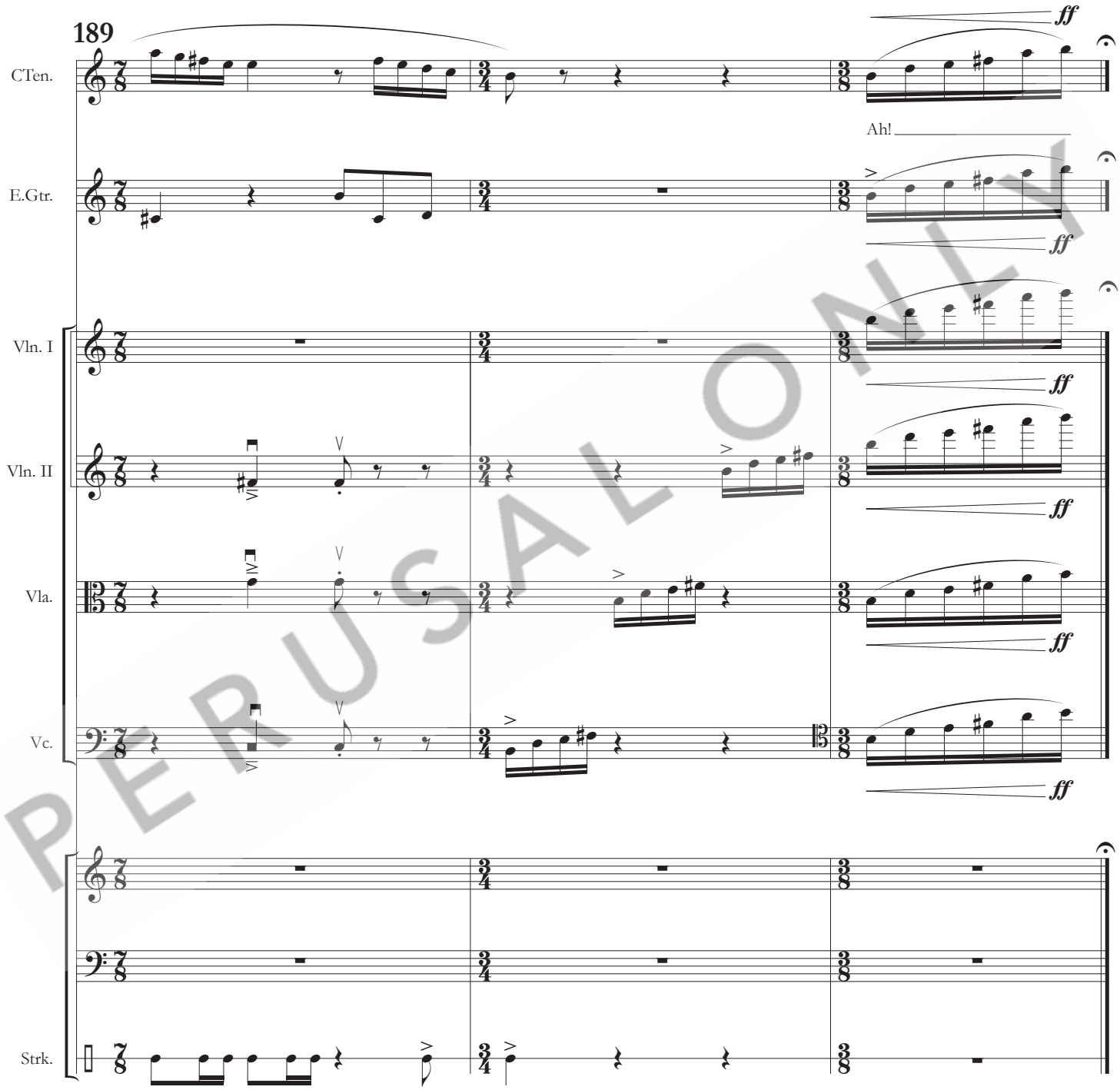
PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY

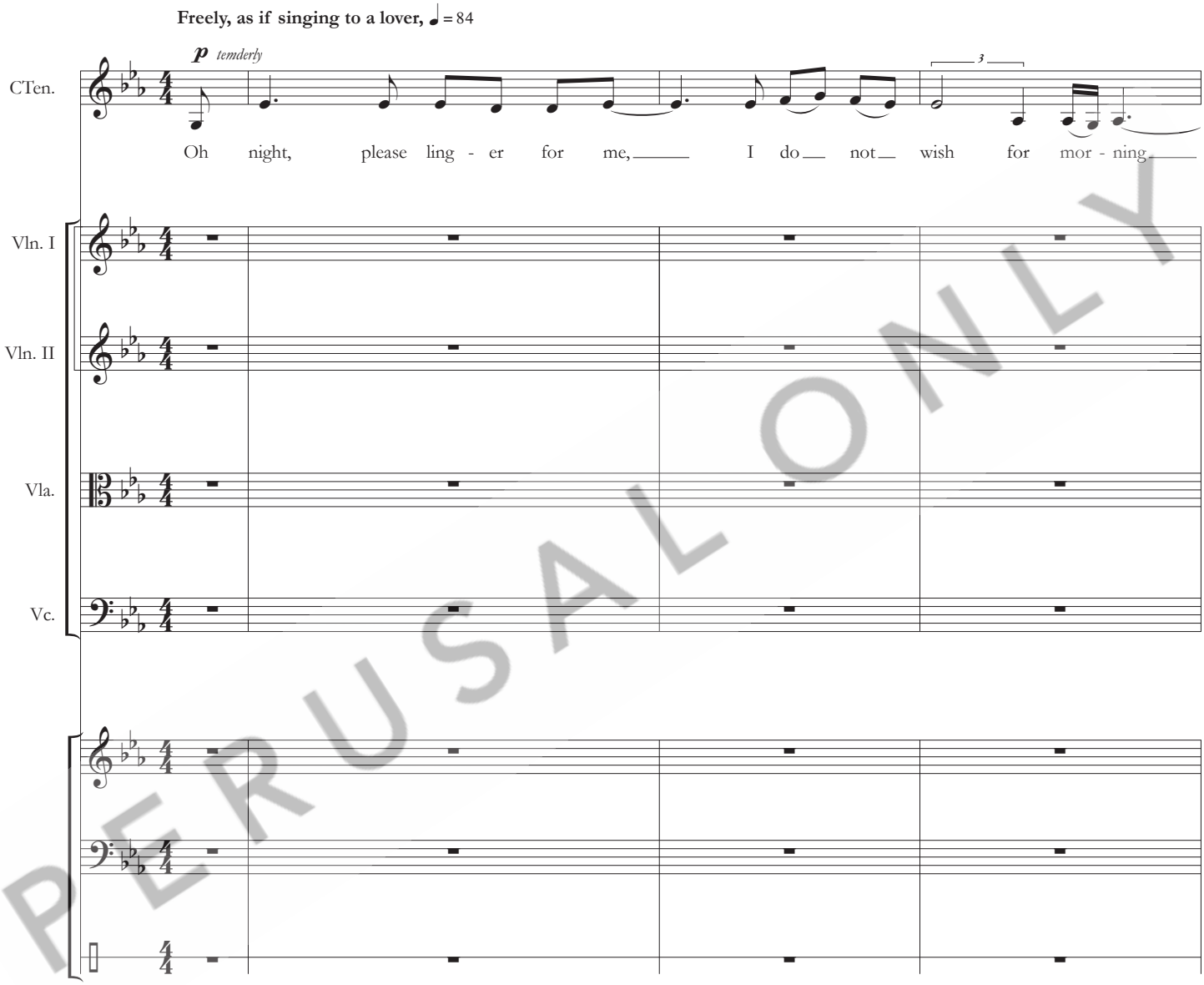


PERUSAL ONLY

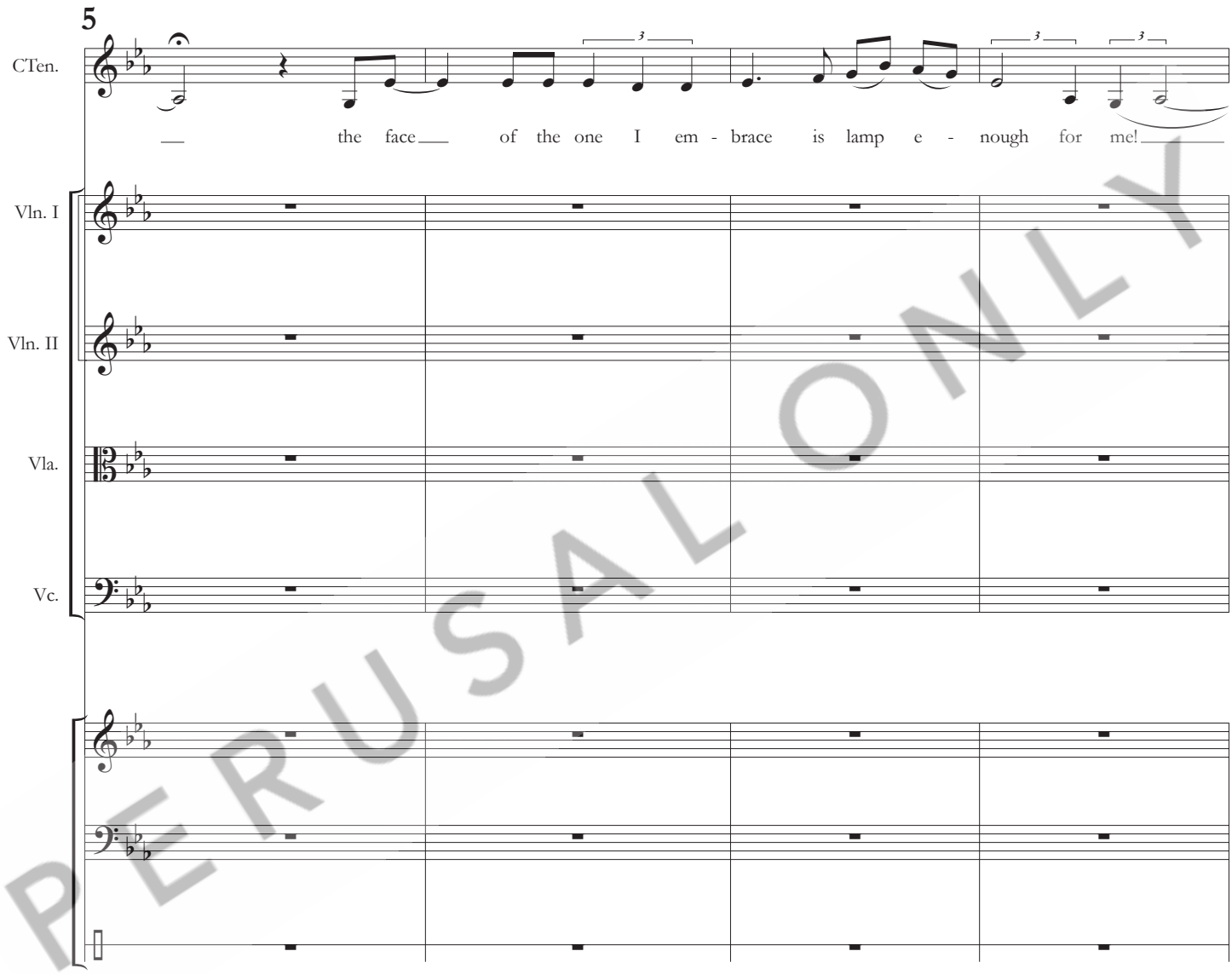
II. al-Dalāl

al-Khuzba'aruzzī (d. ca. 939)

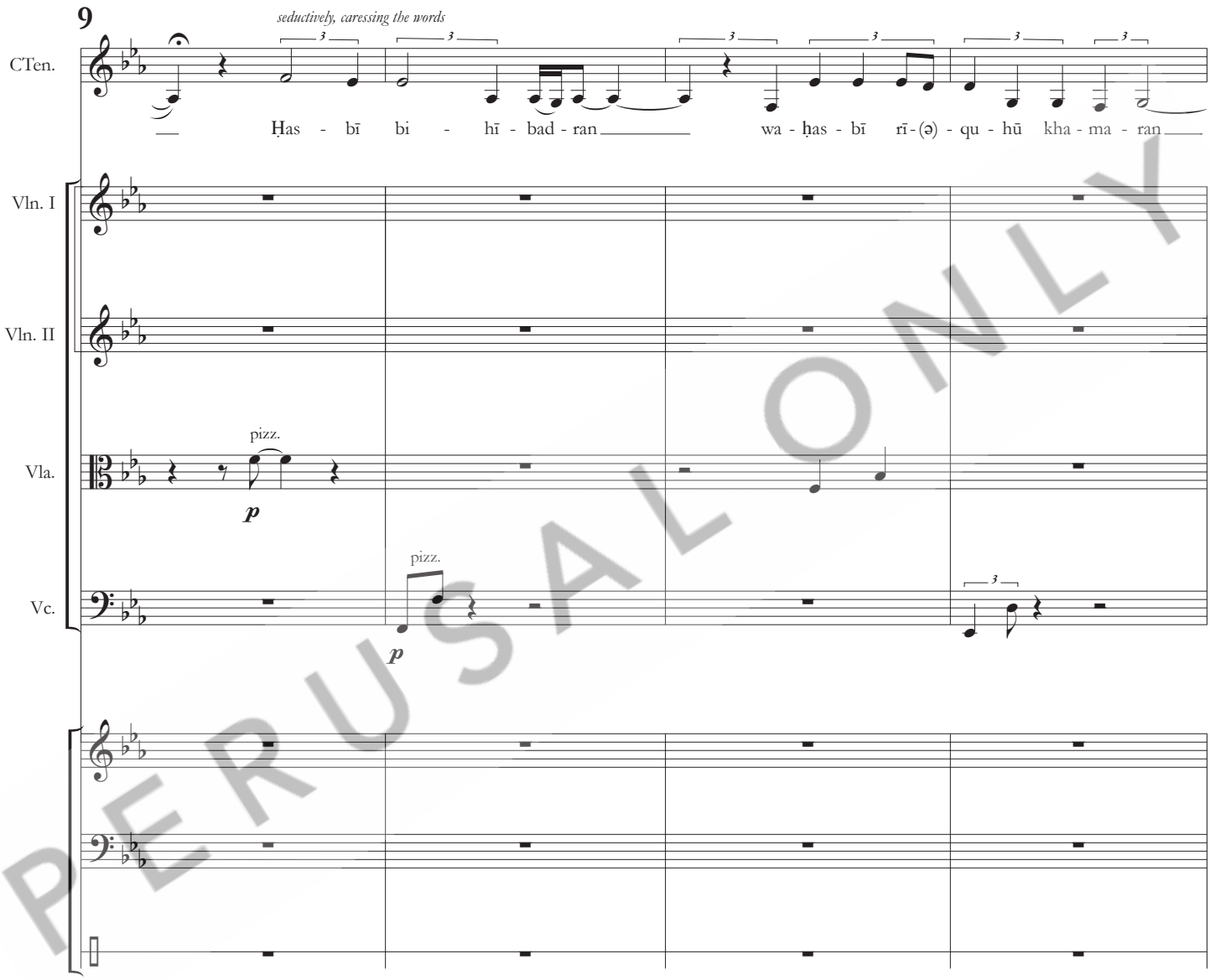
Trans. Everett Rowson



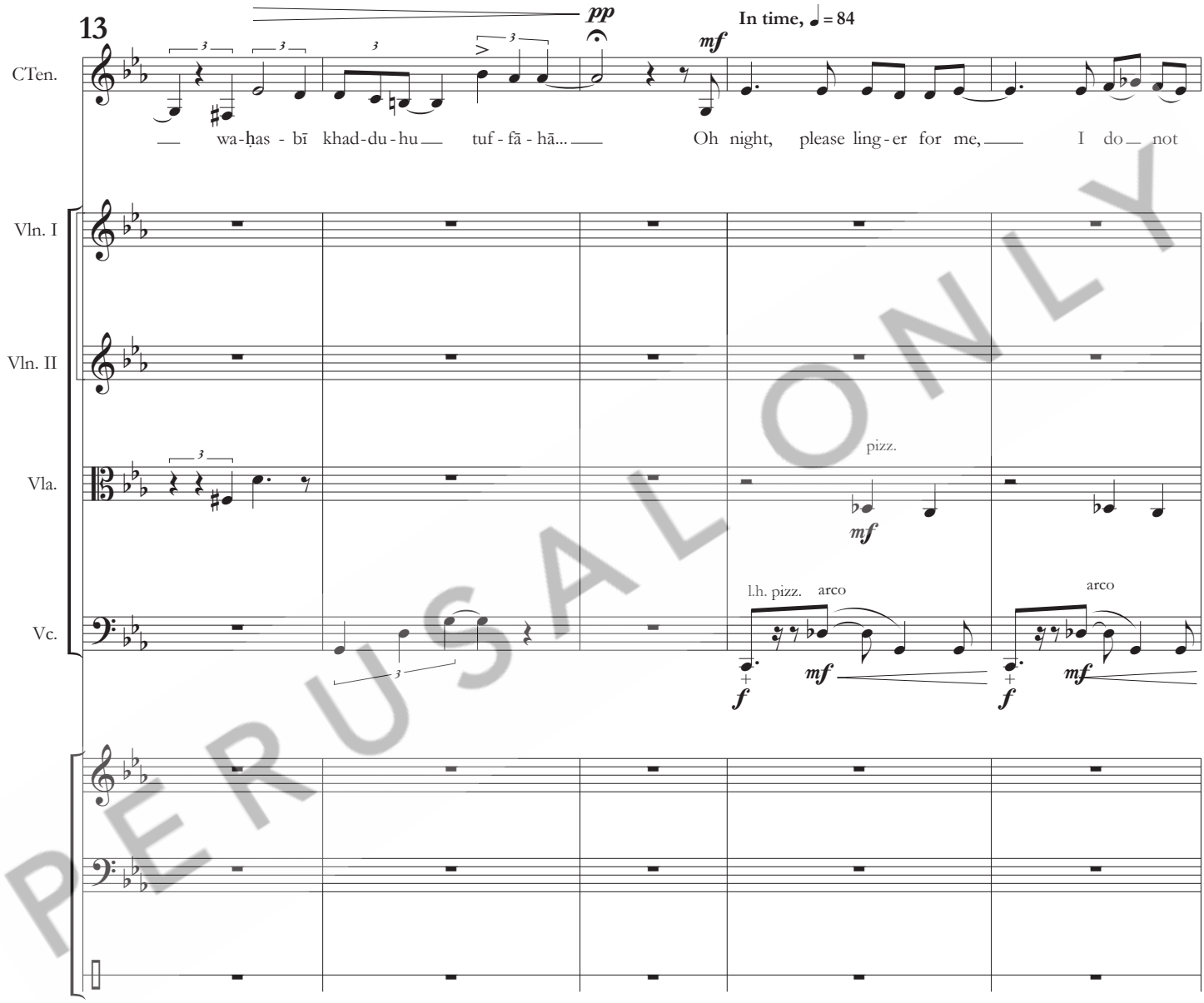
PERUSAL ONLY



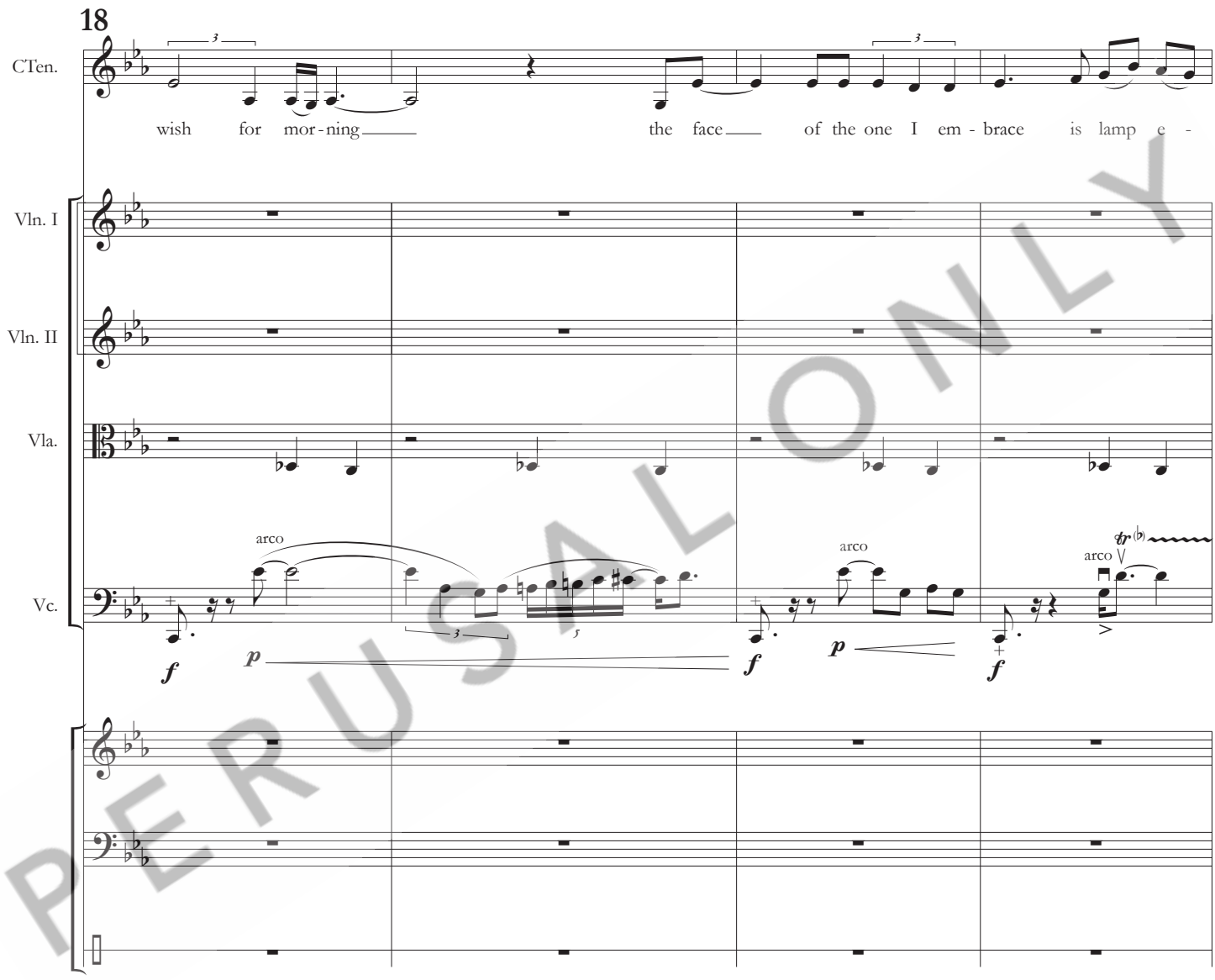
PERUSAL ONLY



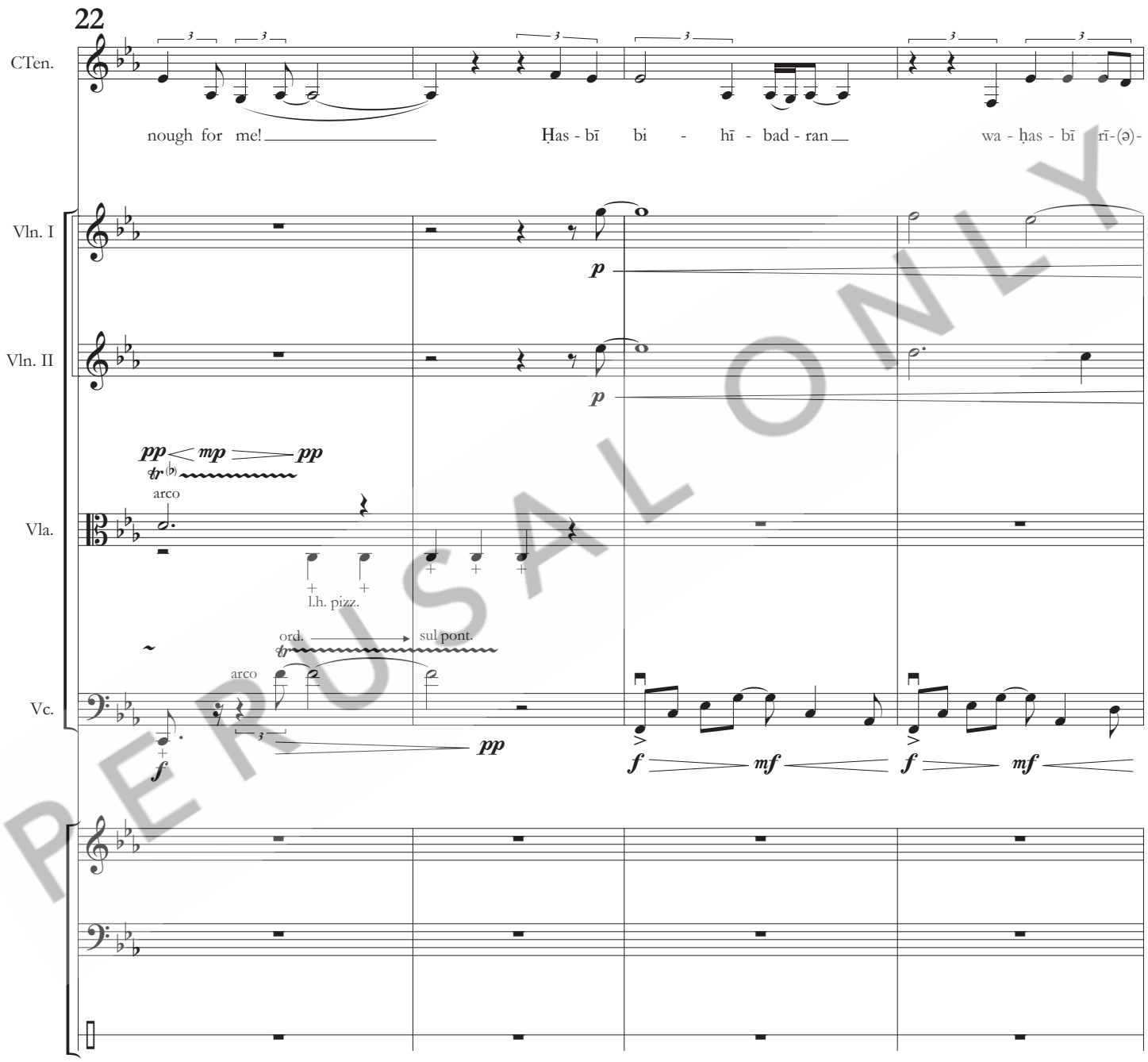
PERUSAL ONLY



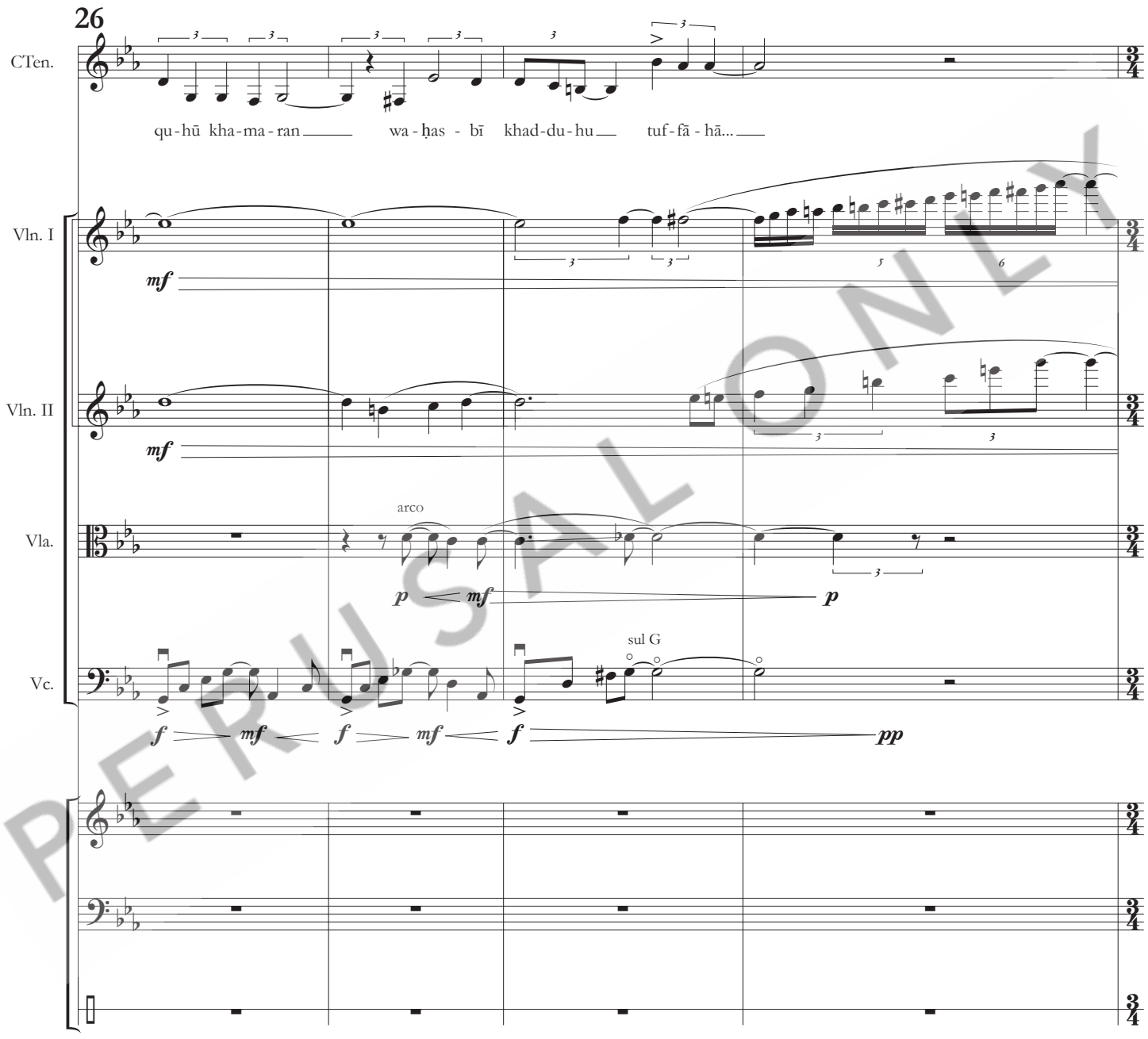
PERUSAL ONLY



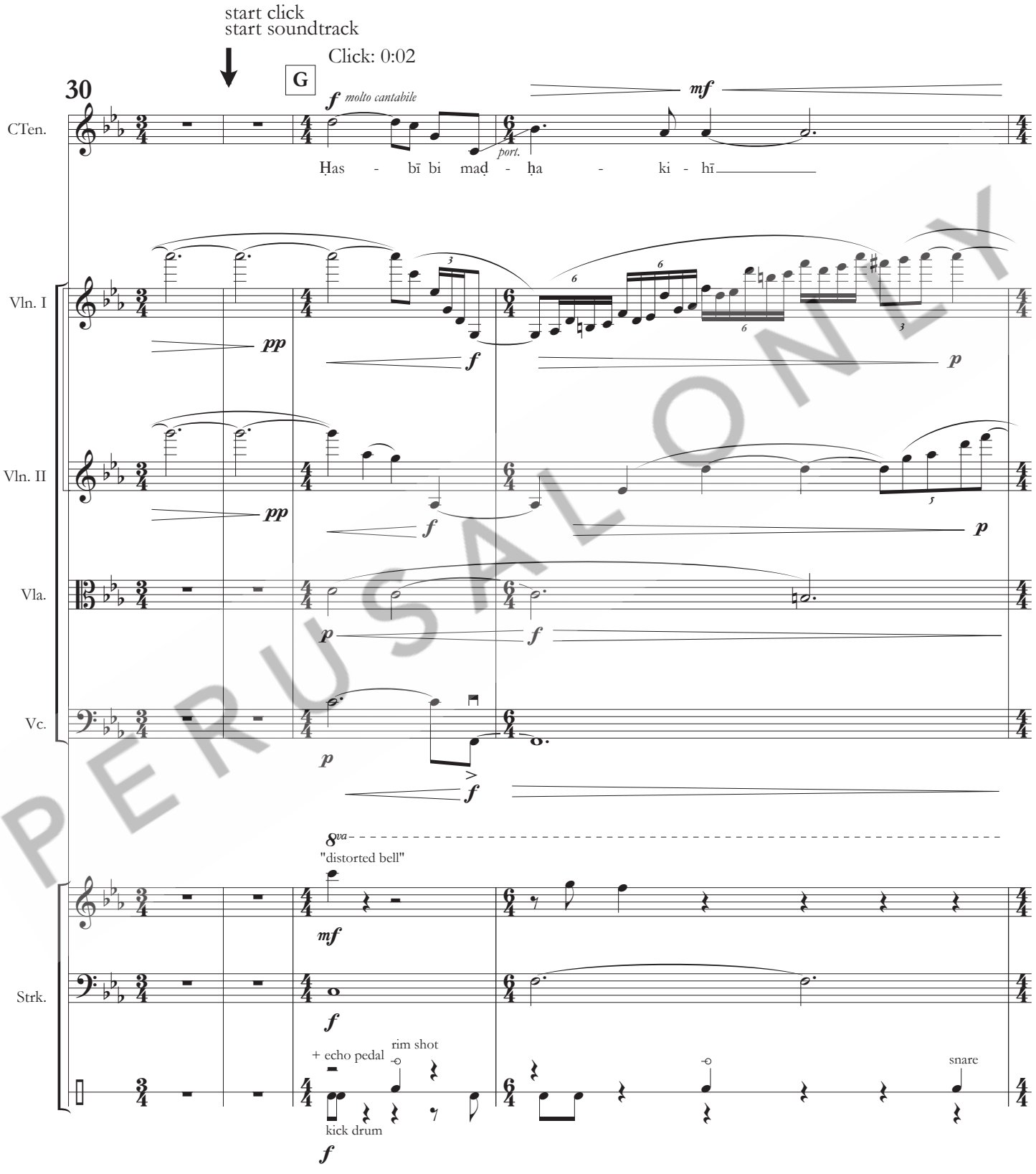
PERUSAL ONLY



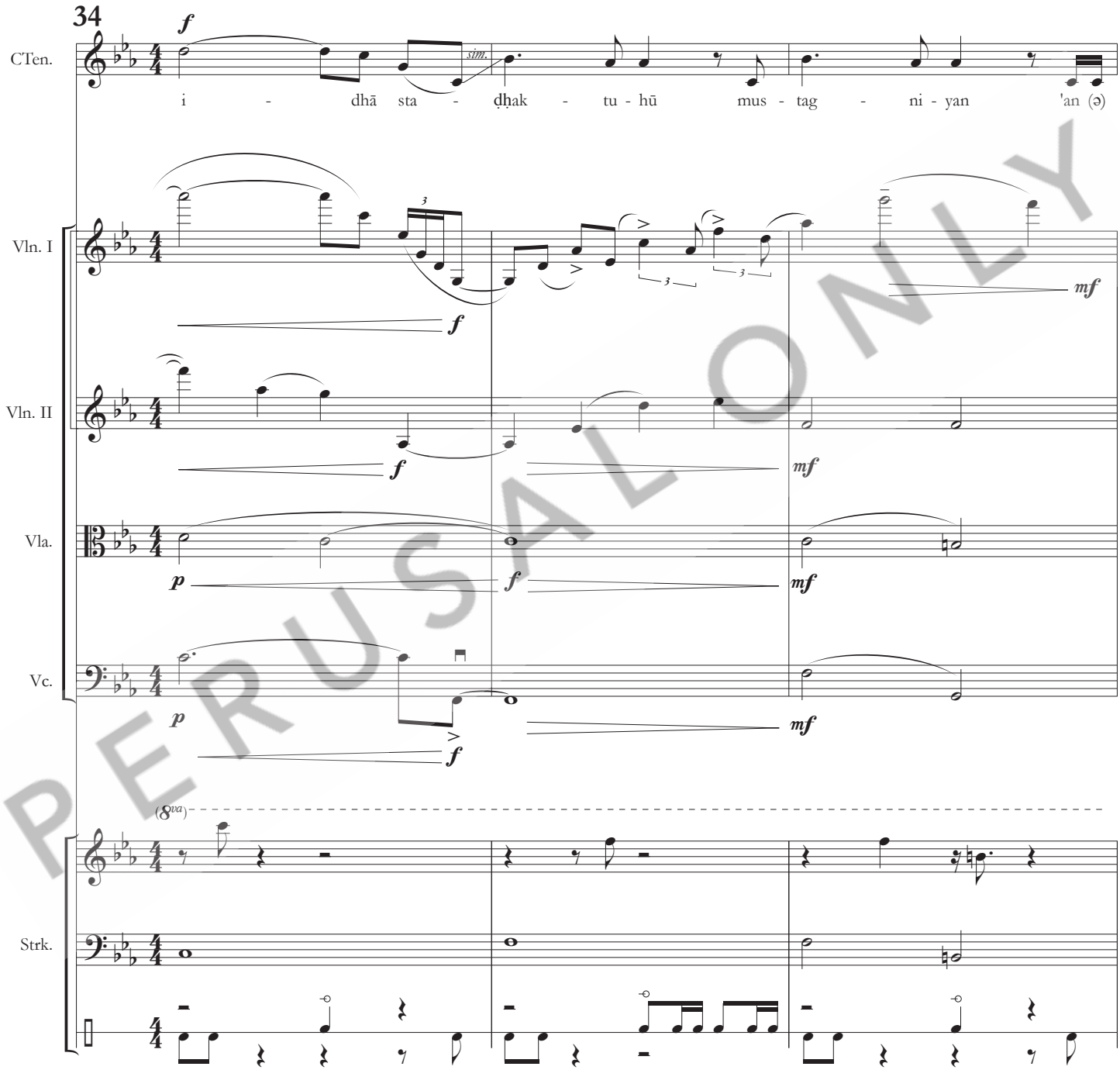
PERUSAL ONLY



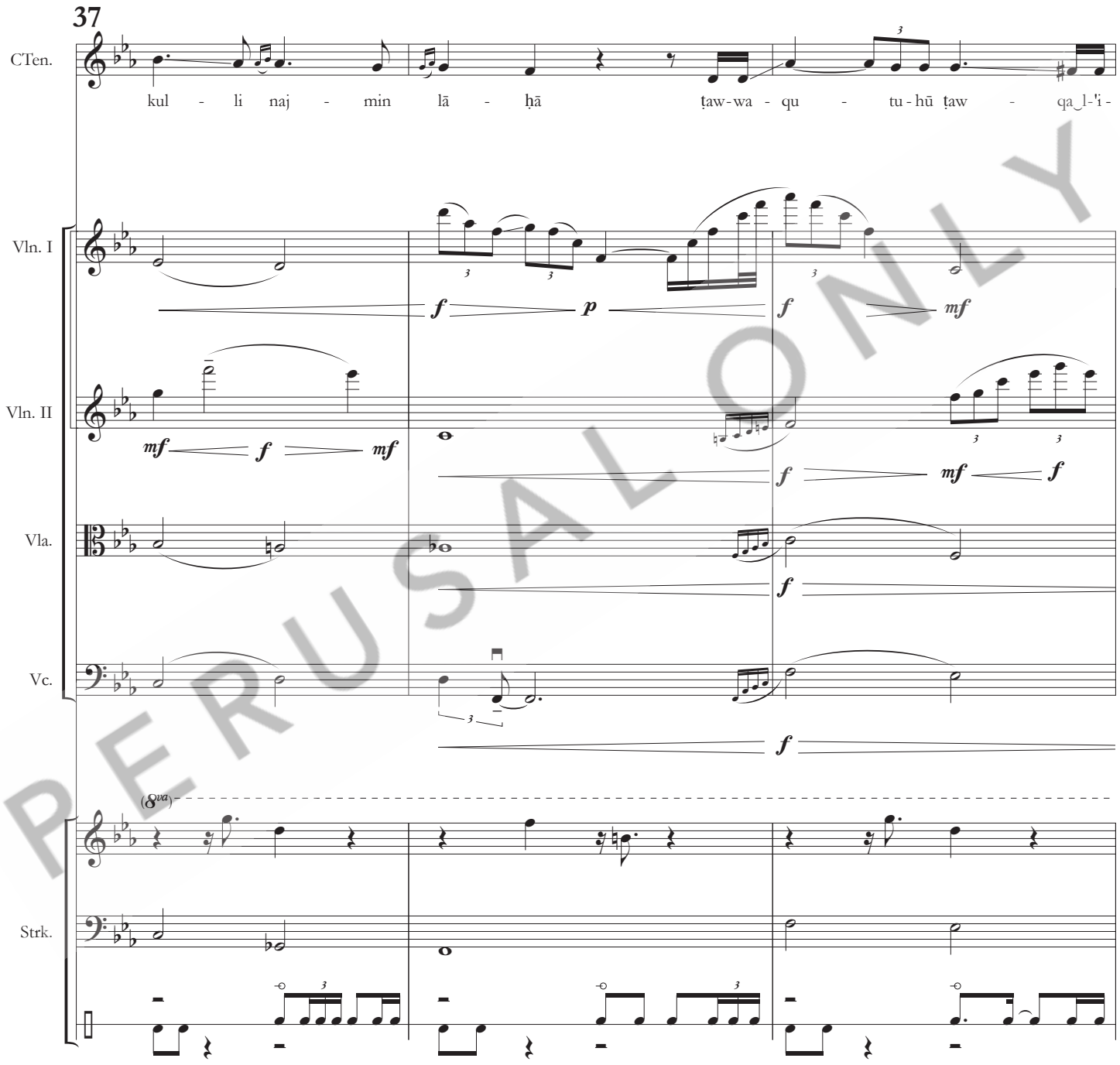
PERUSAL ONLY



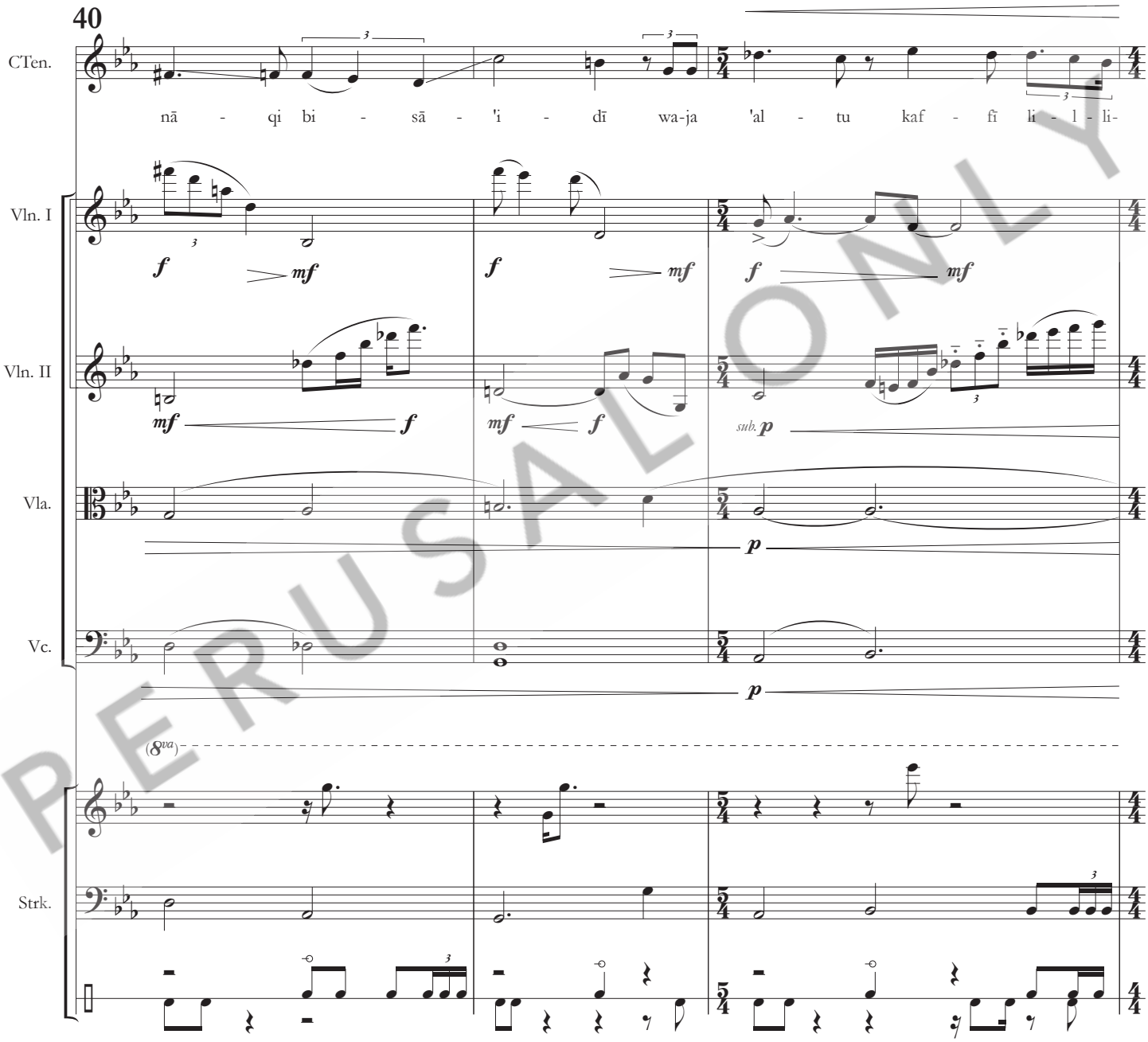
PERUSAL ONLY



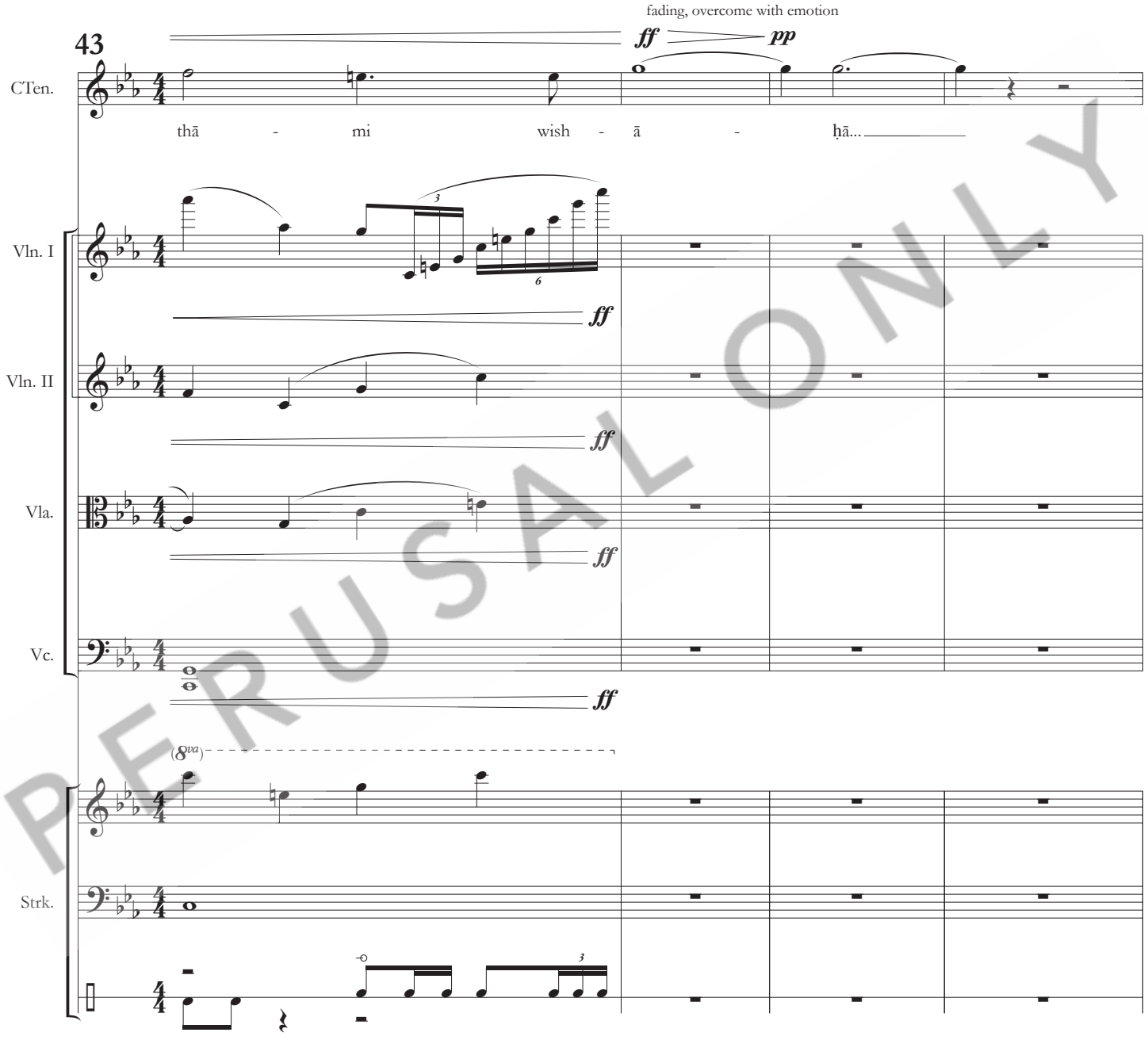
PERUSAL ONLY



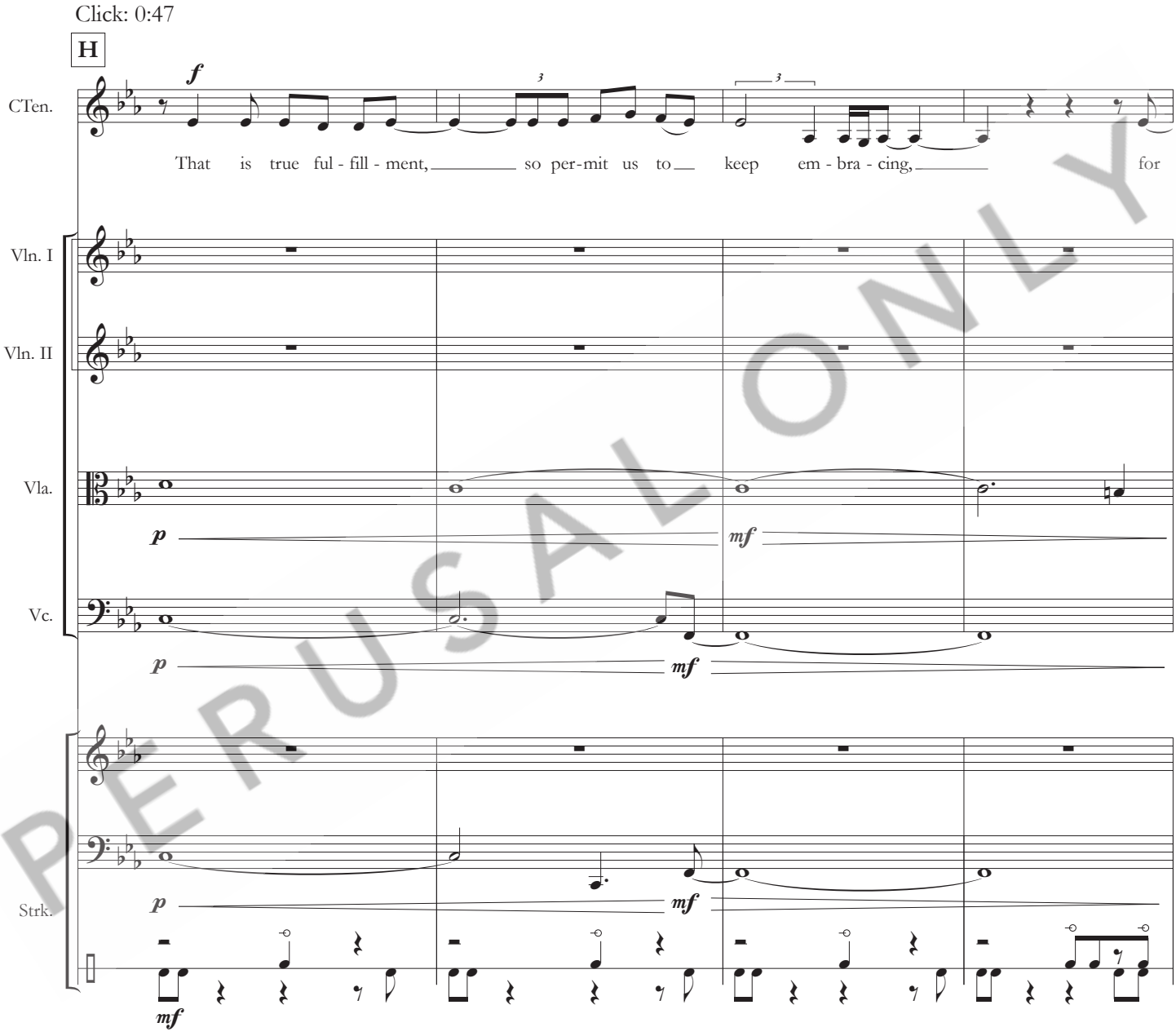
PERUSAL ONLY



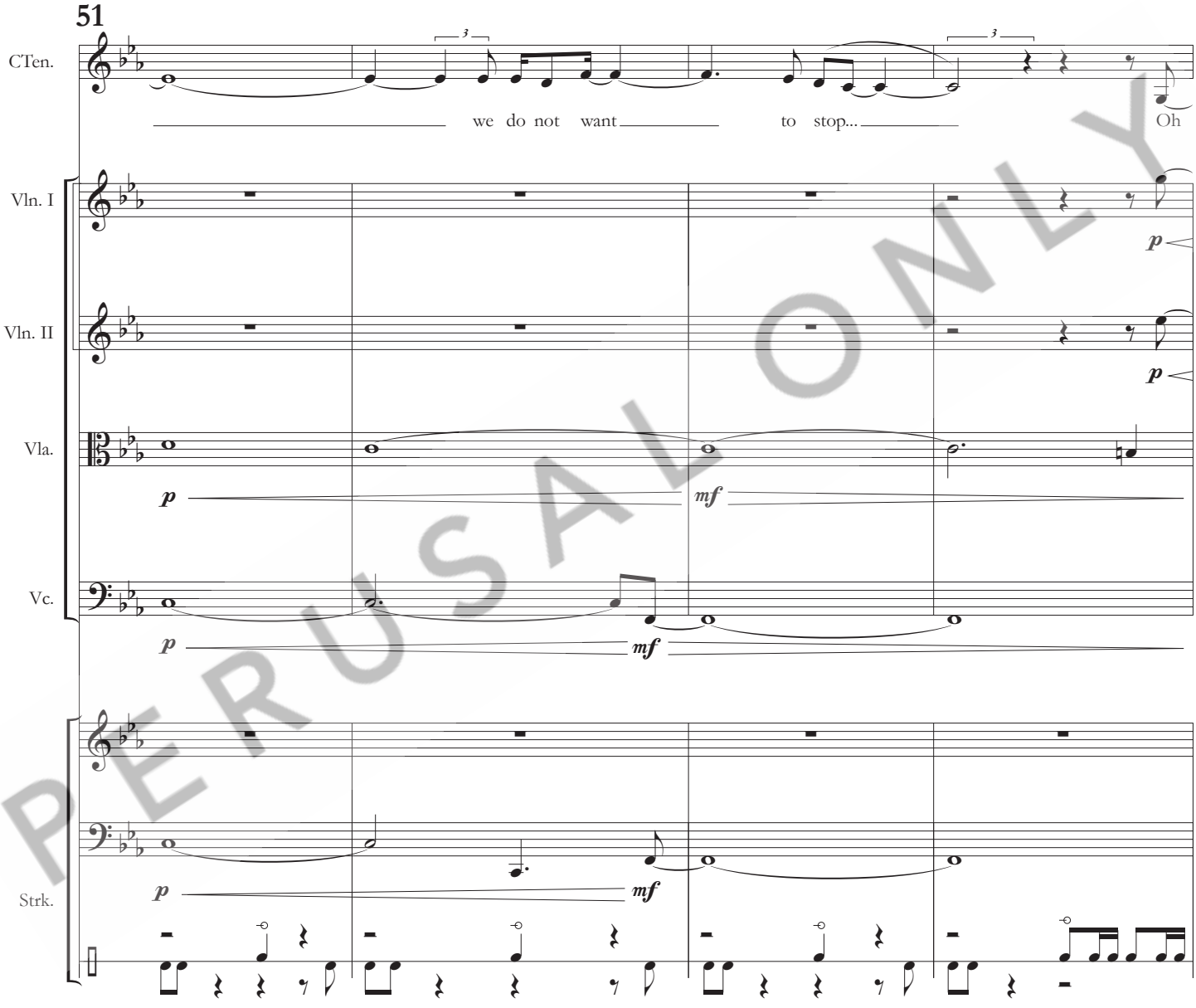
PERUSALONLY



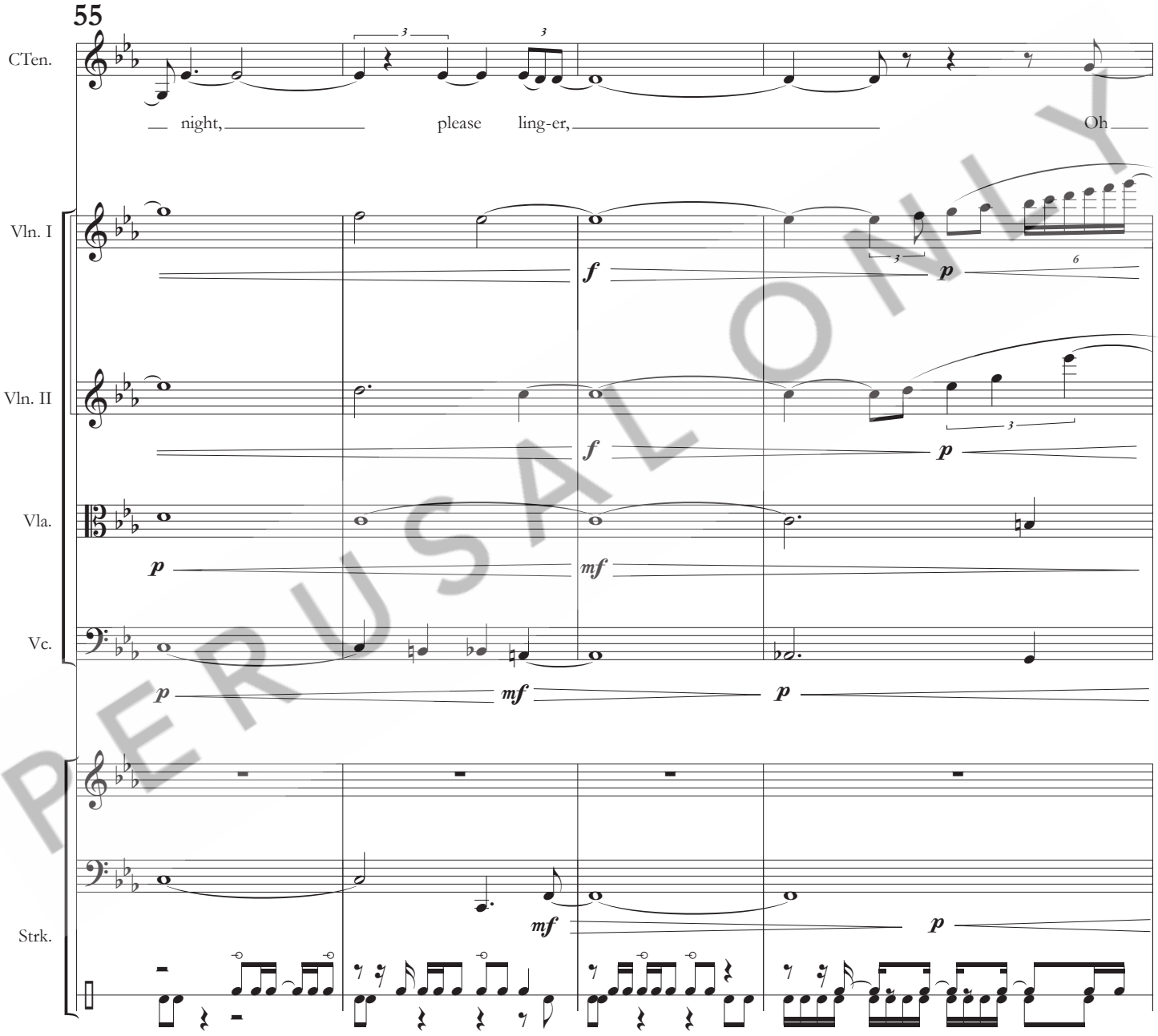
PERUSAL ONLY



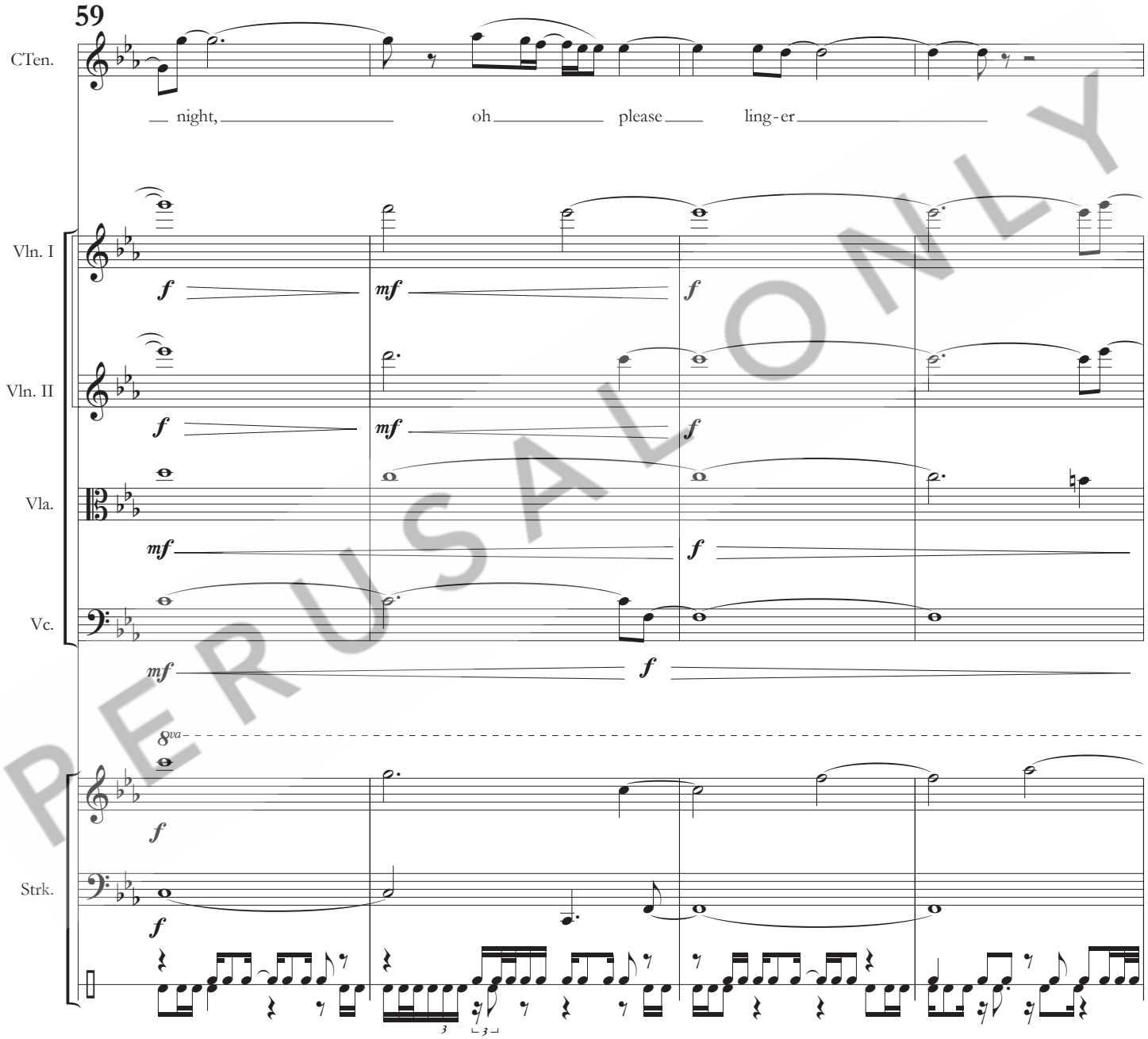
PERUSAL ONLY



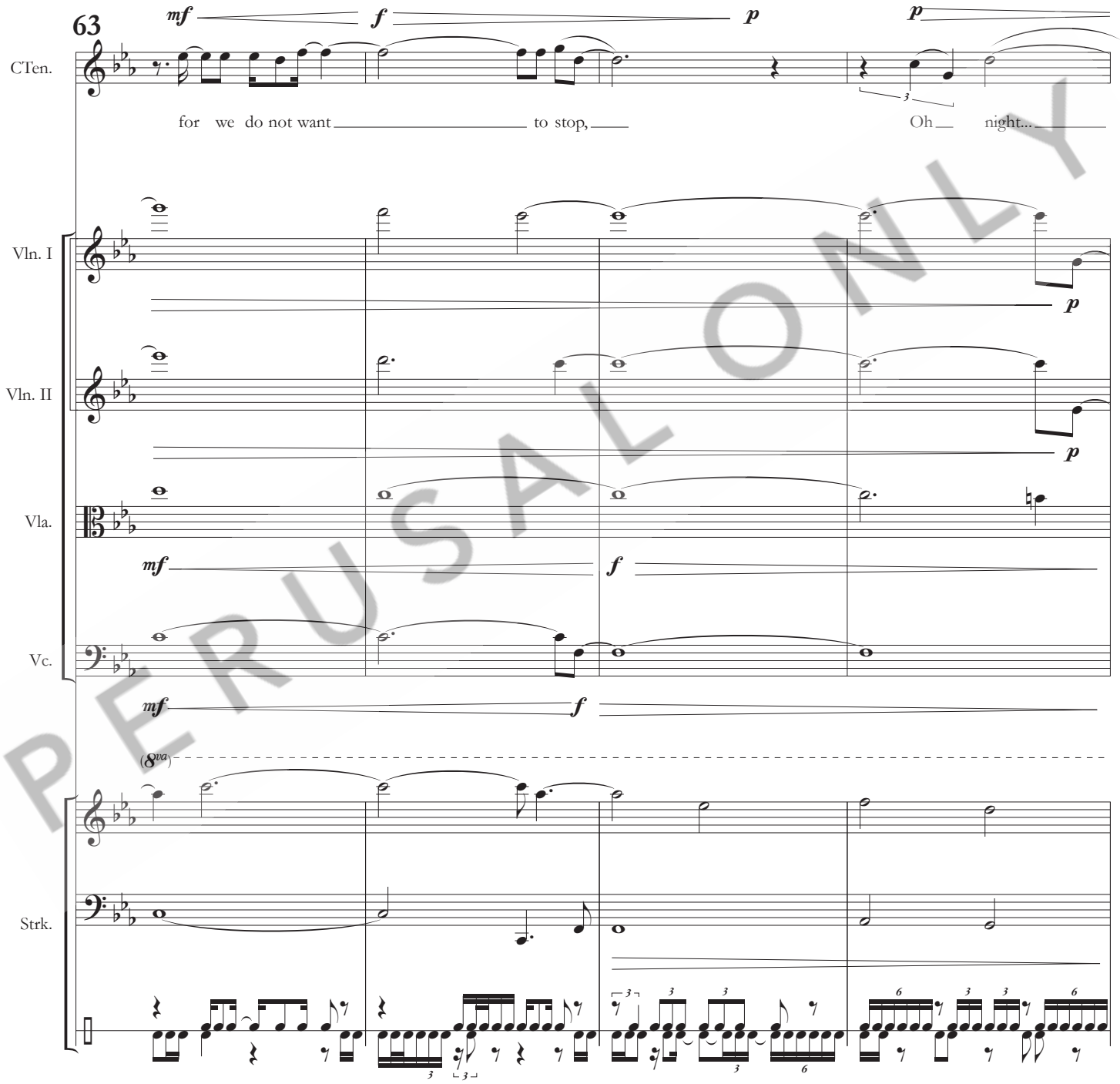
PERUSAL ONLY



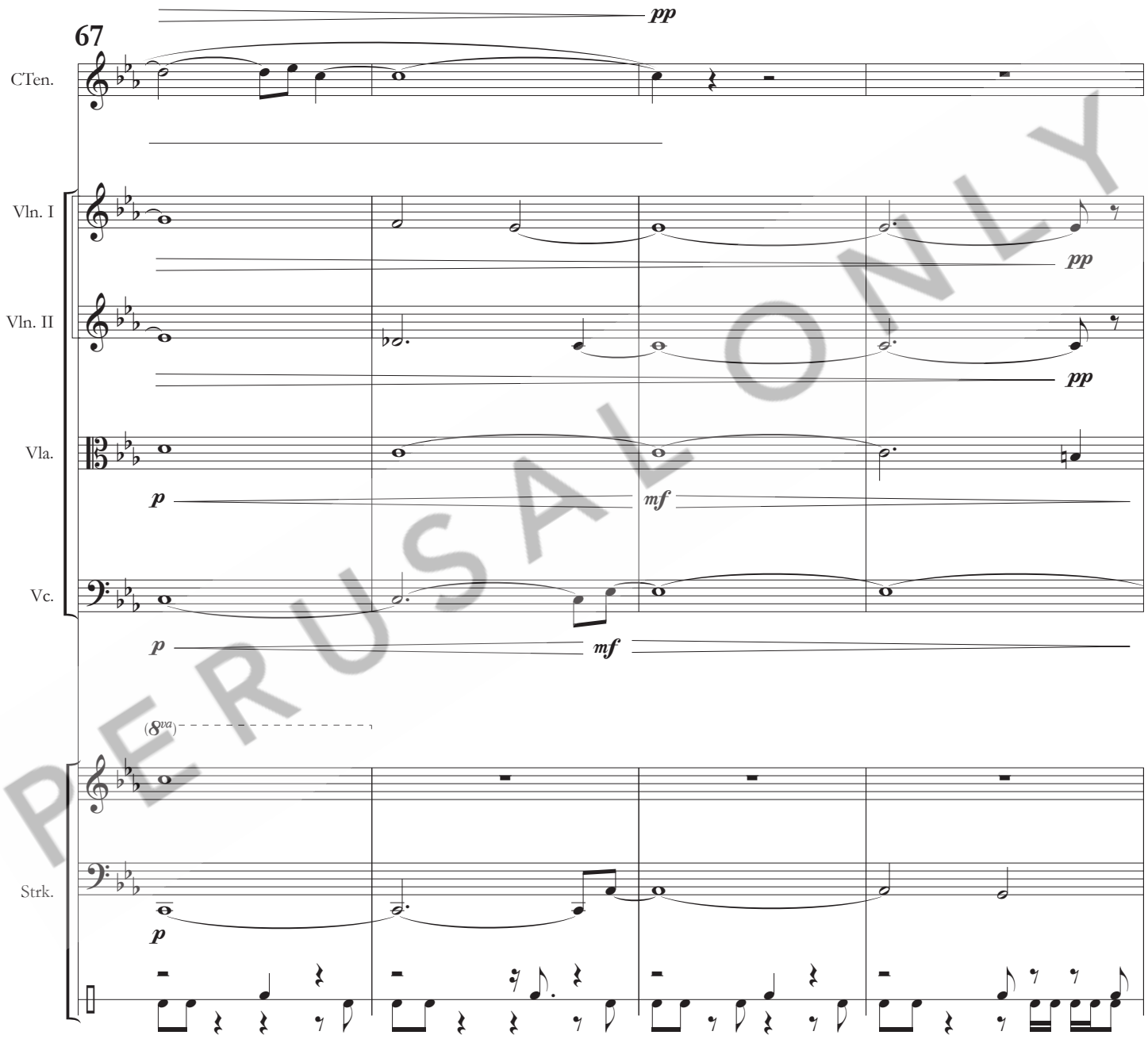
PERUSAL ONLY



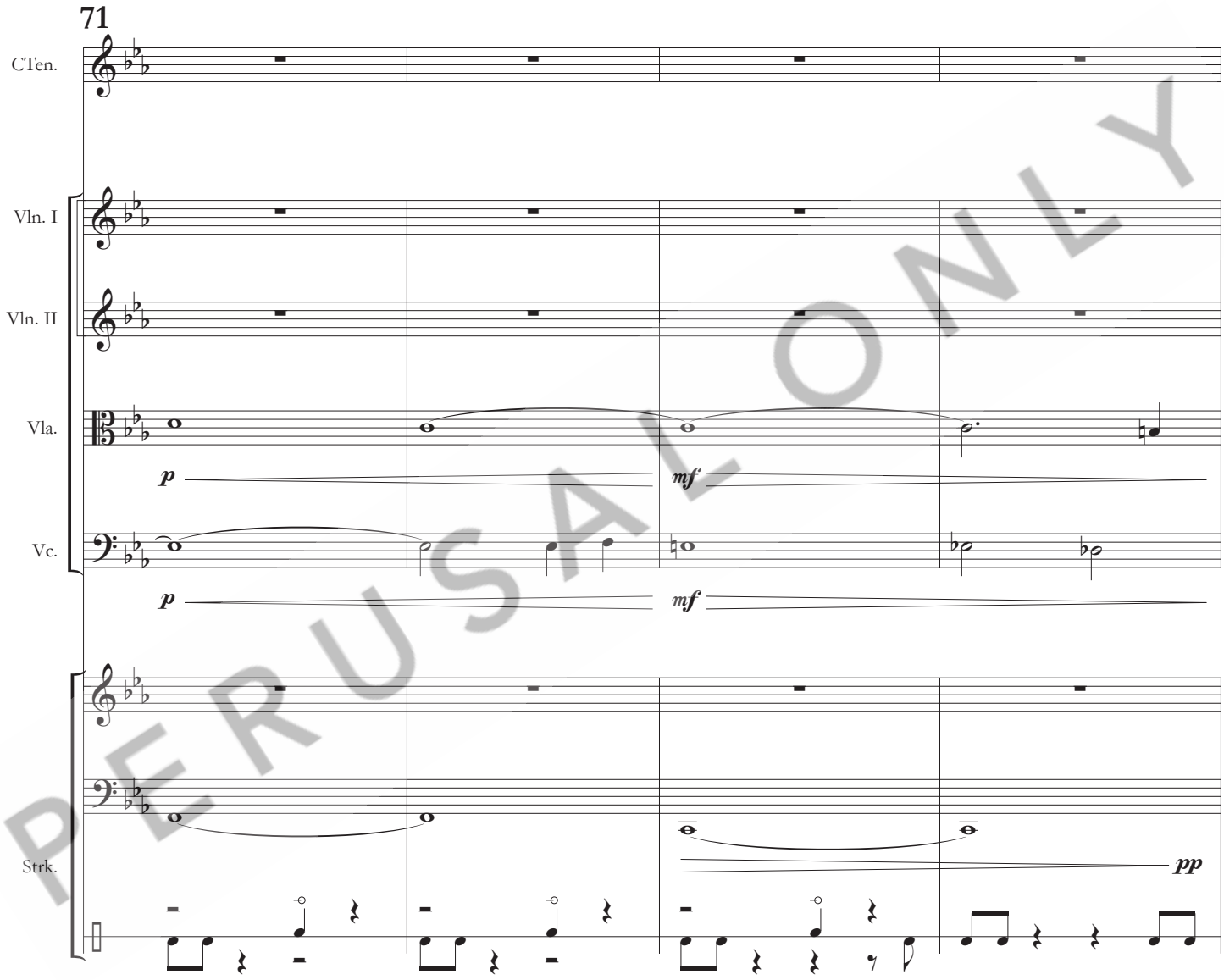
PERUSAL ONLY



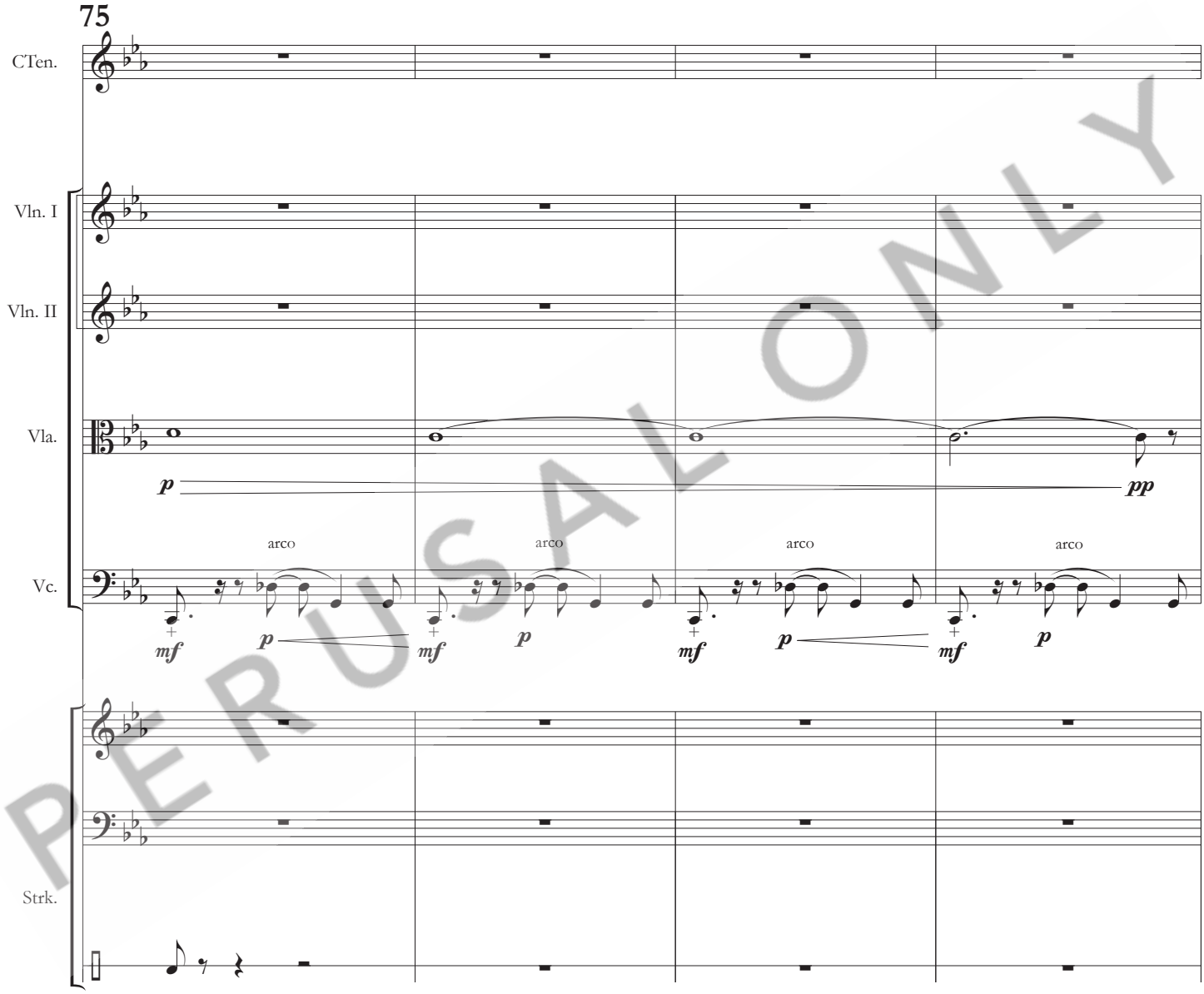
PERUSAL ONLY



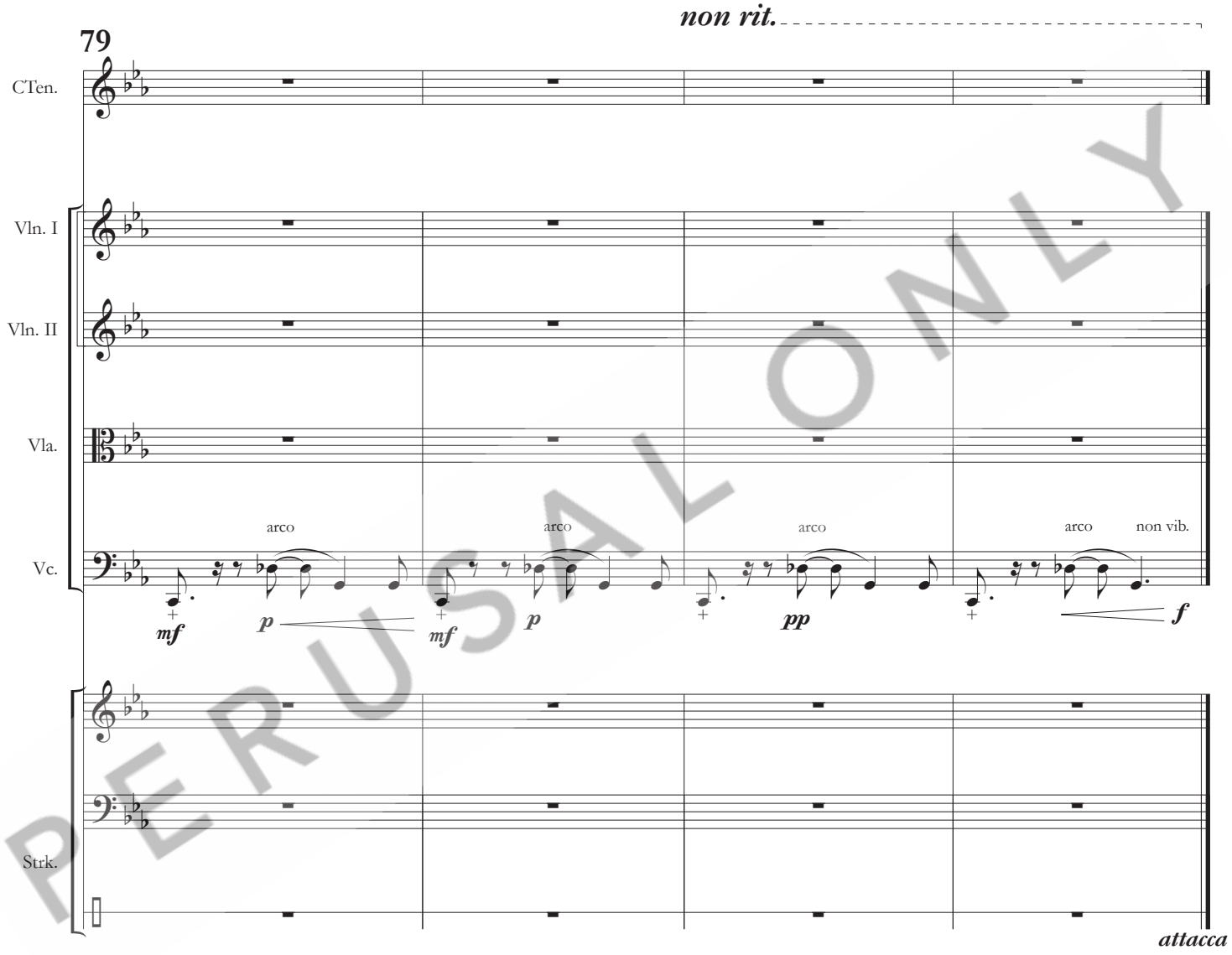
PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY



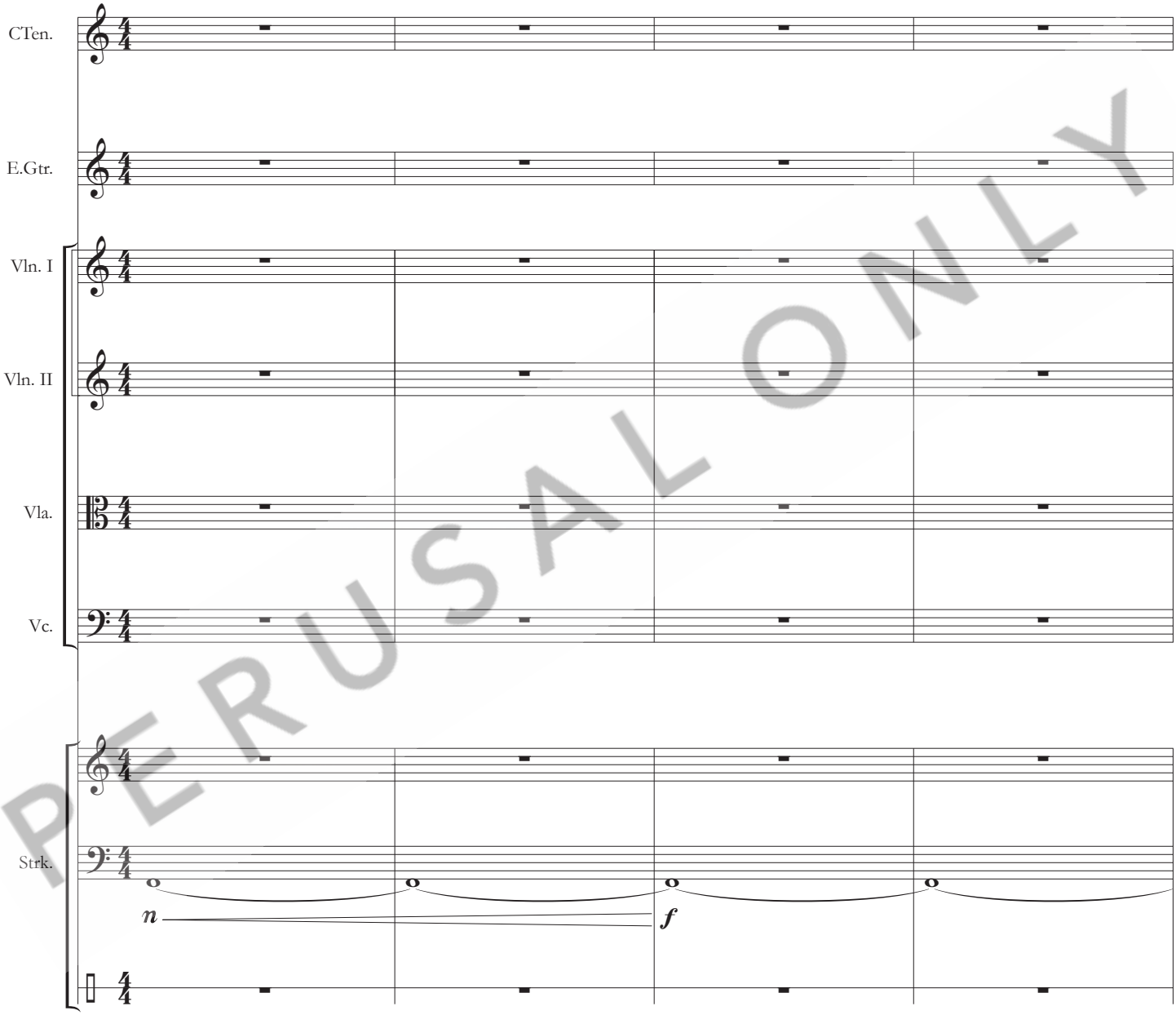
PERUSAL ONLY

III. Ersoy

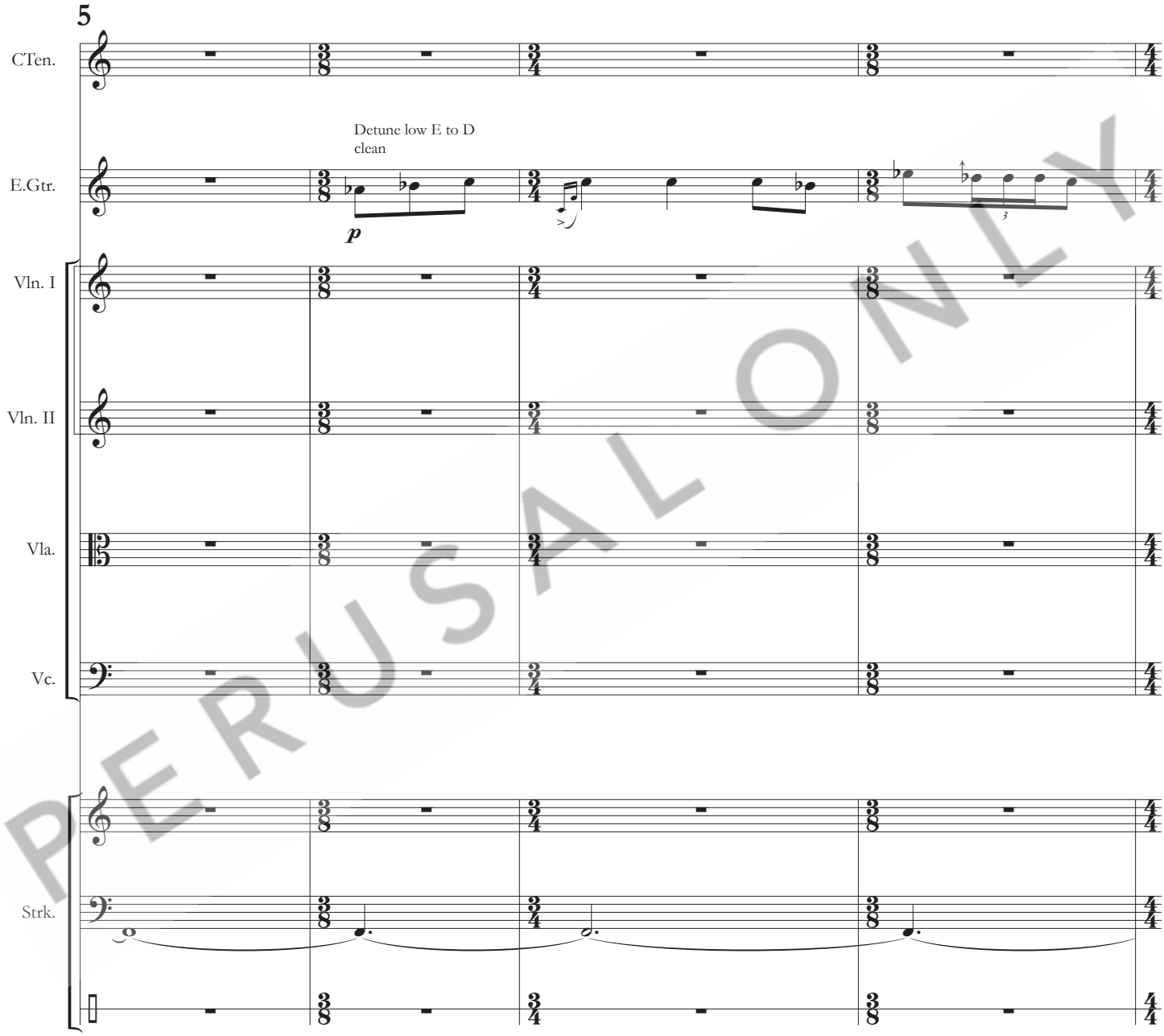
Melody: İsmail Dede Efendi
(1778-1846)

Text: Trad.

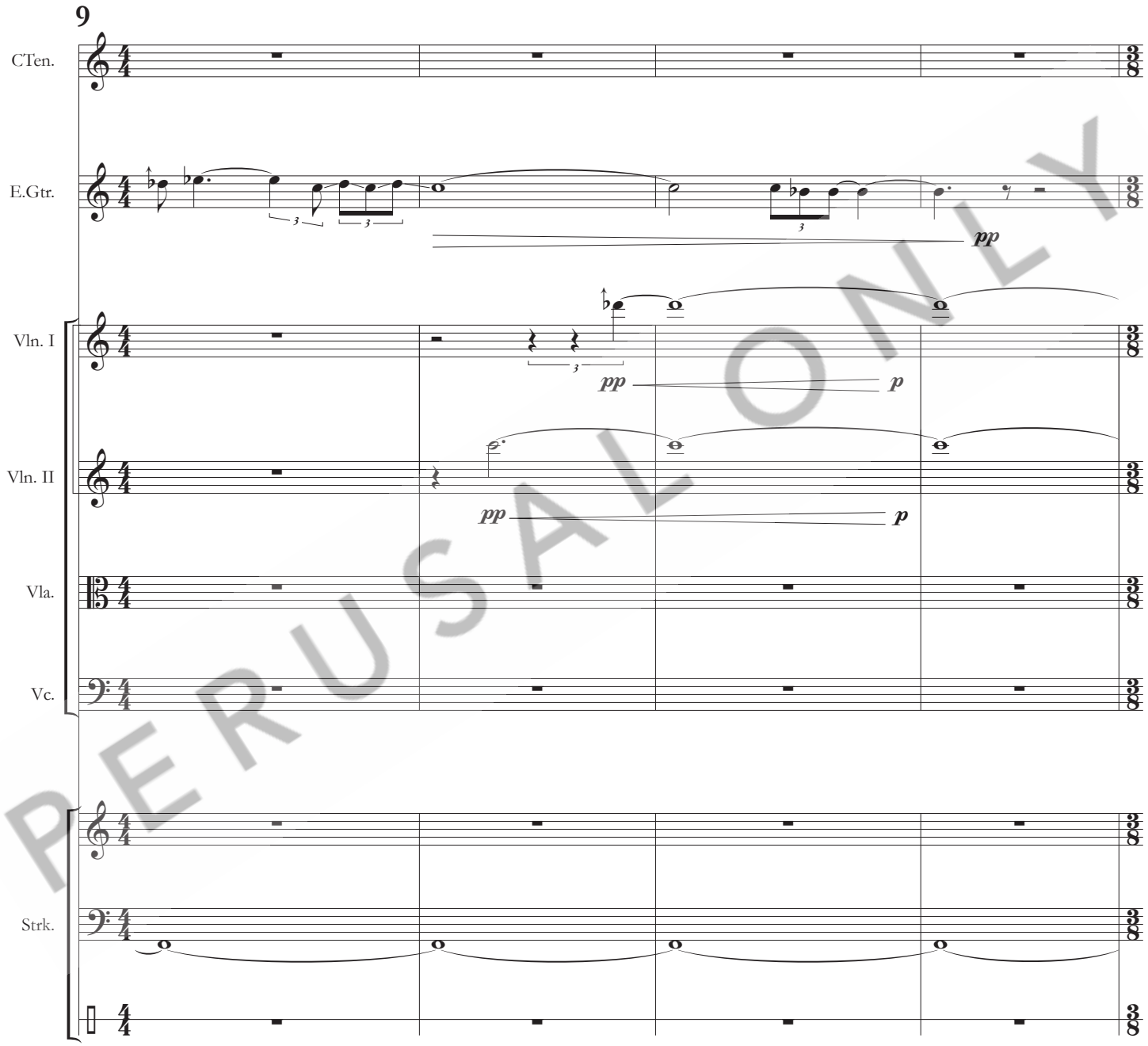
Longing for what is forever lost... ♩ = 104



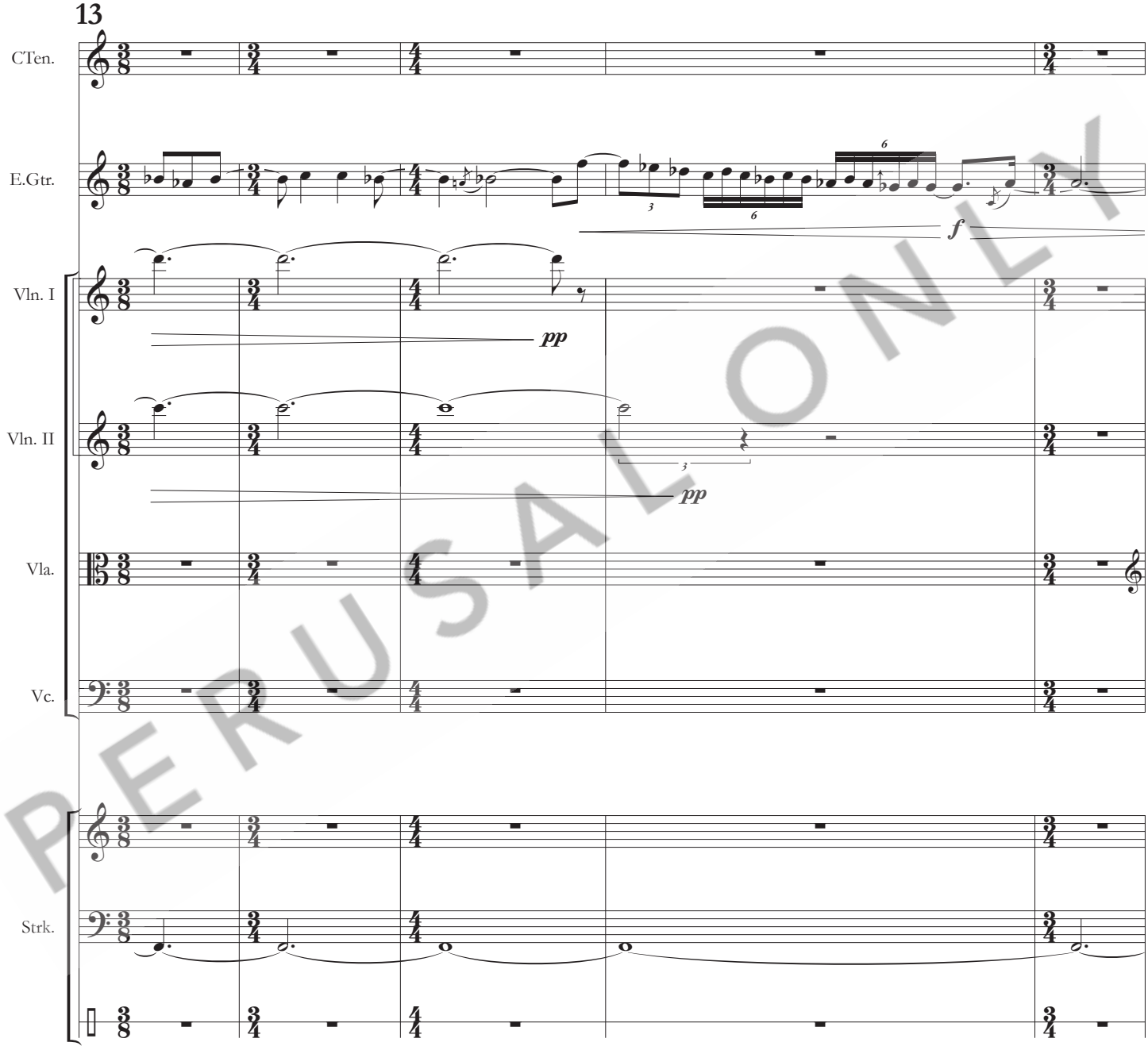
PERUSAL ONLY



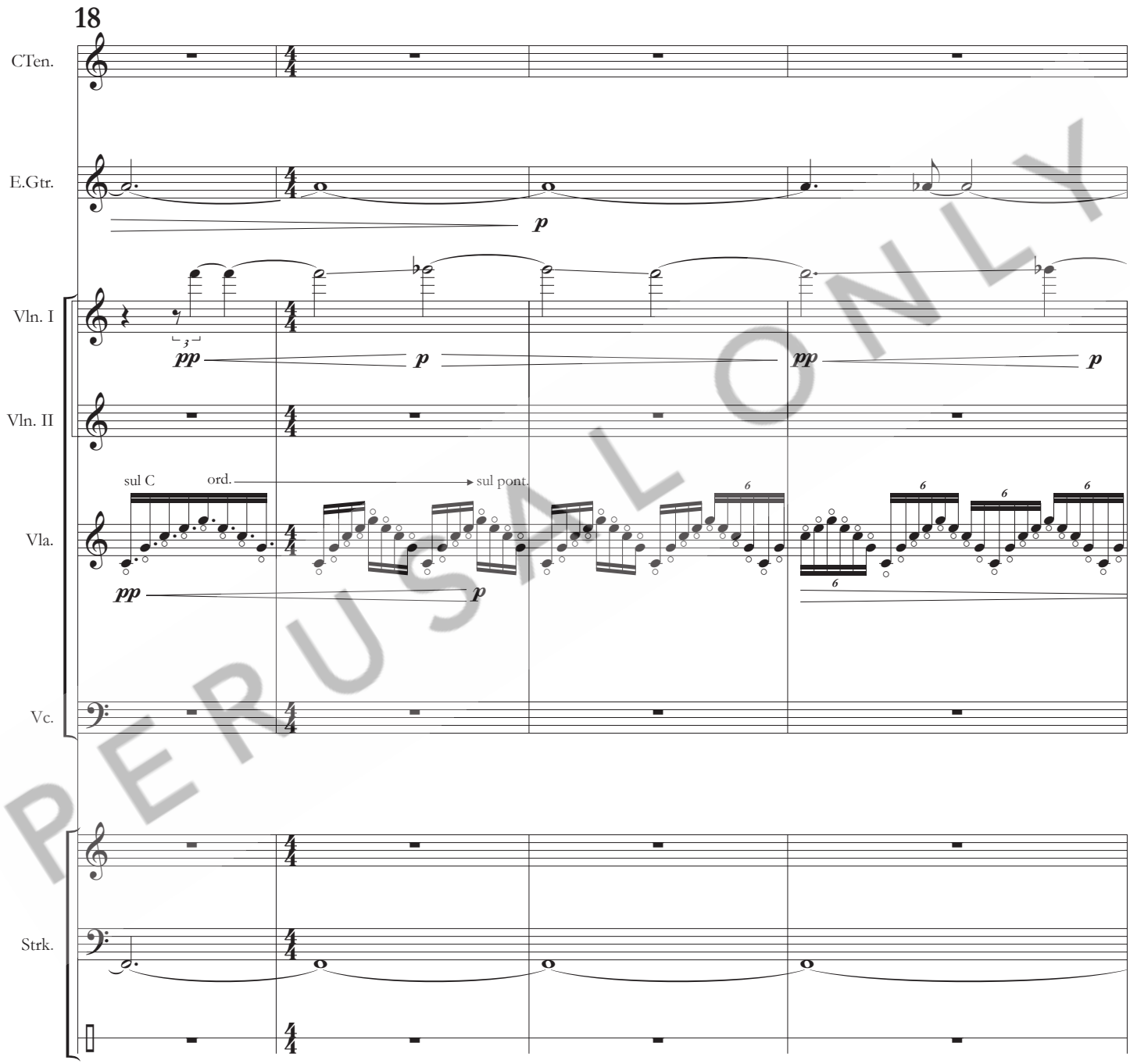
PERUSAL ONLY



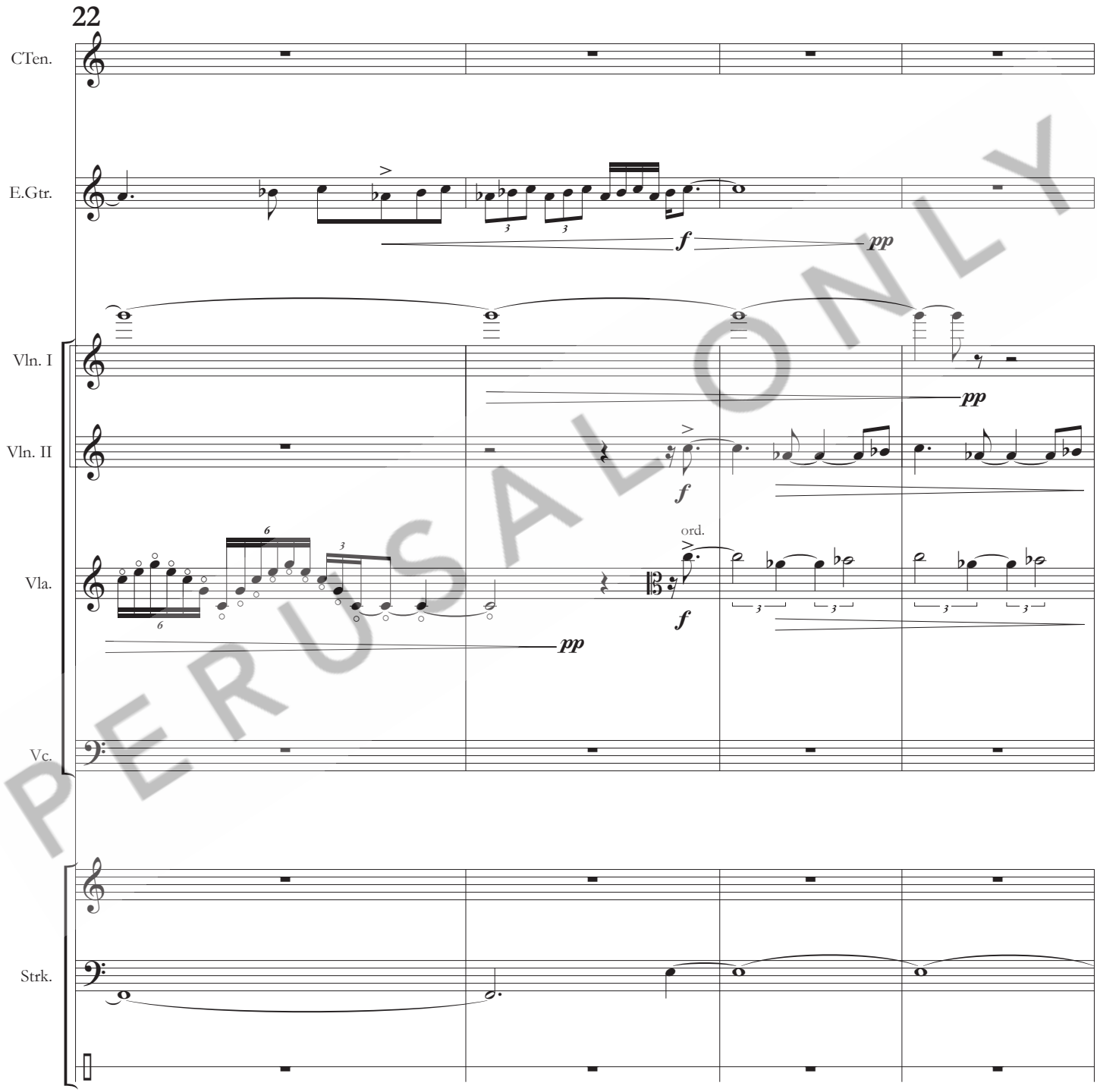
PERUSAL ONLY



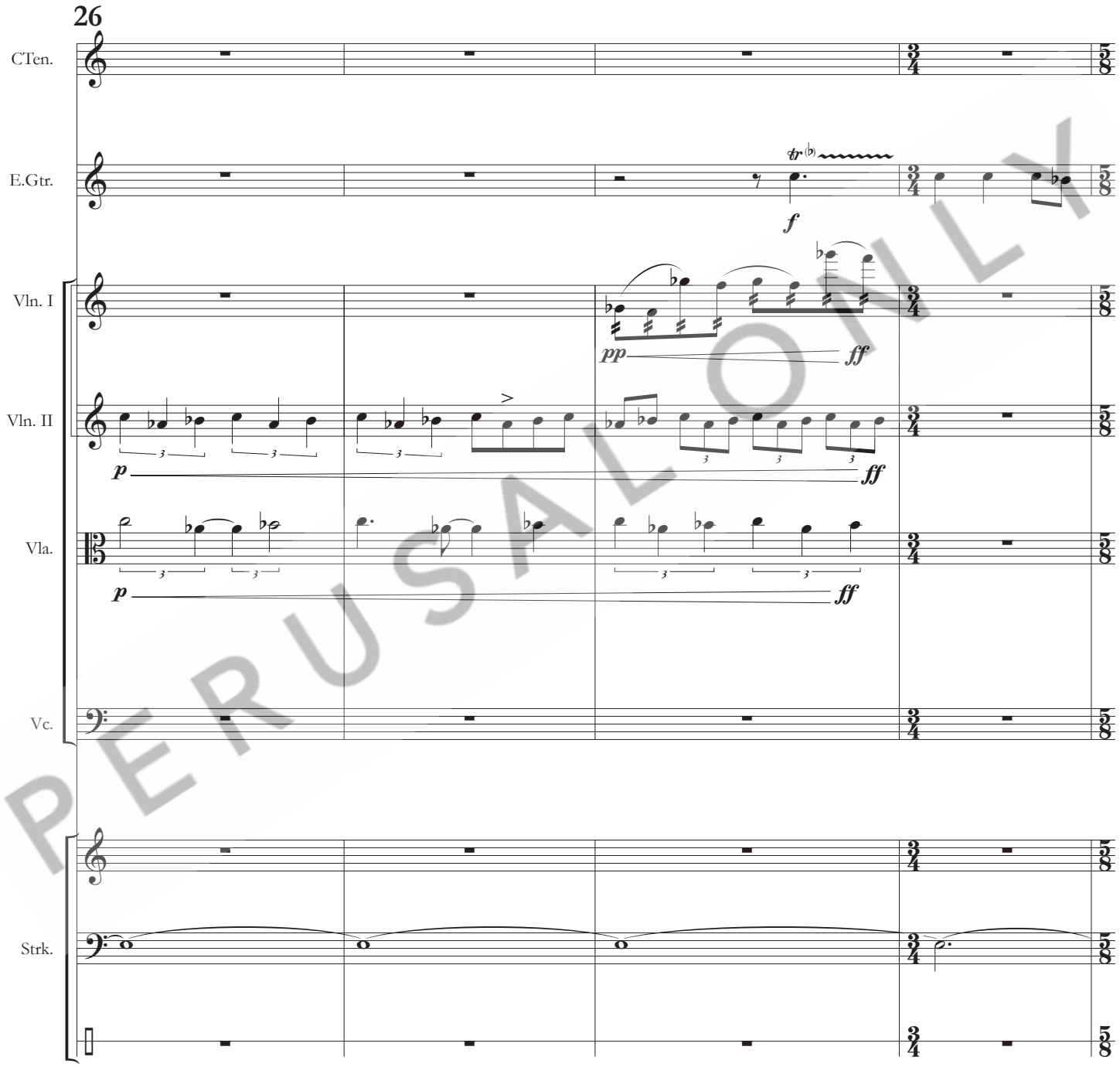
PERUSAL ONLY



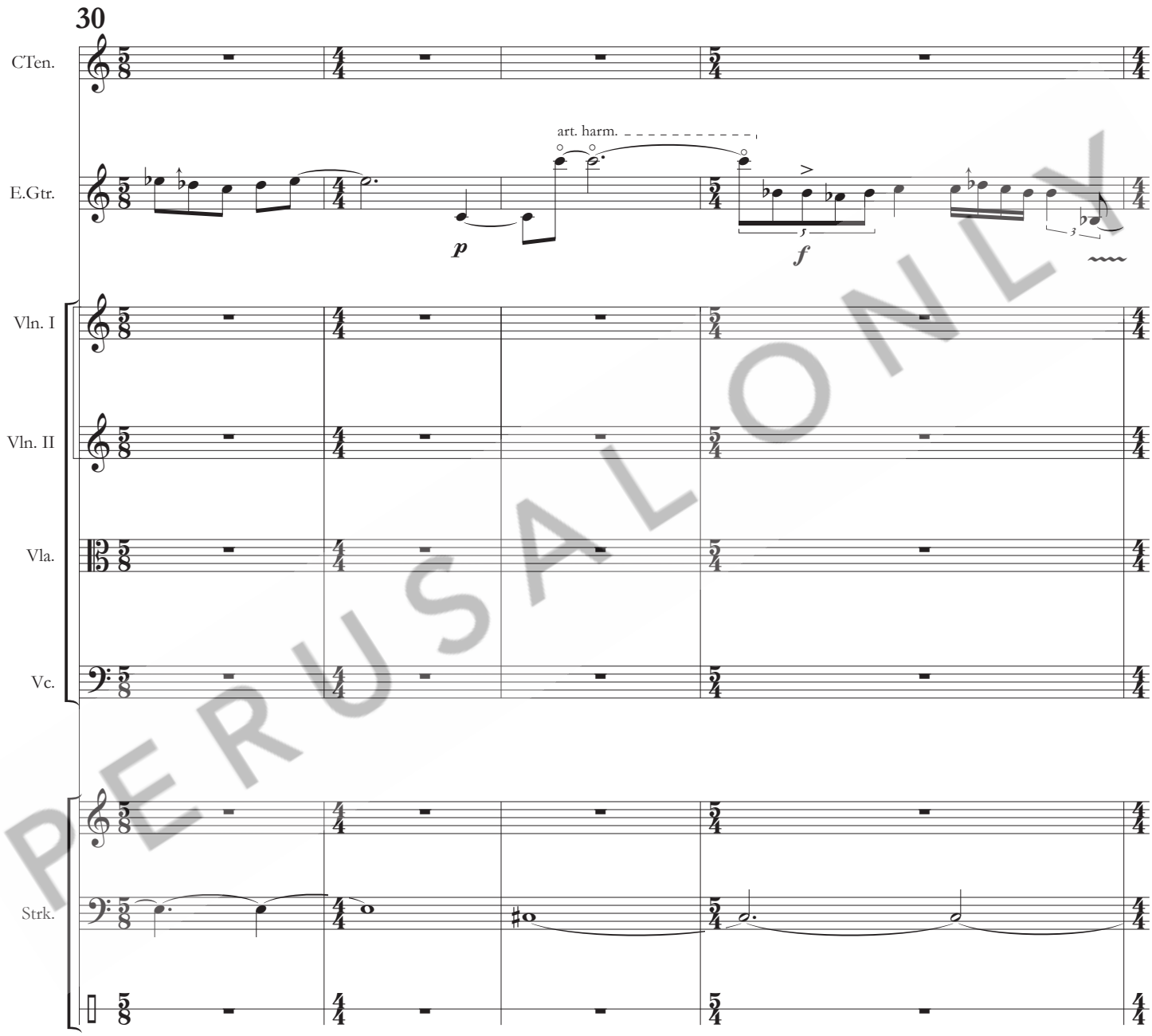
PERUSAL ONLY



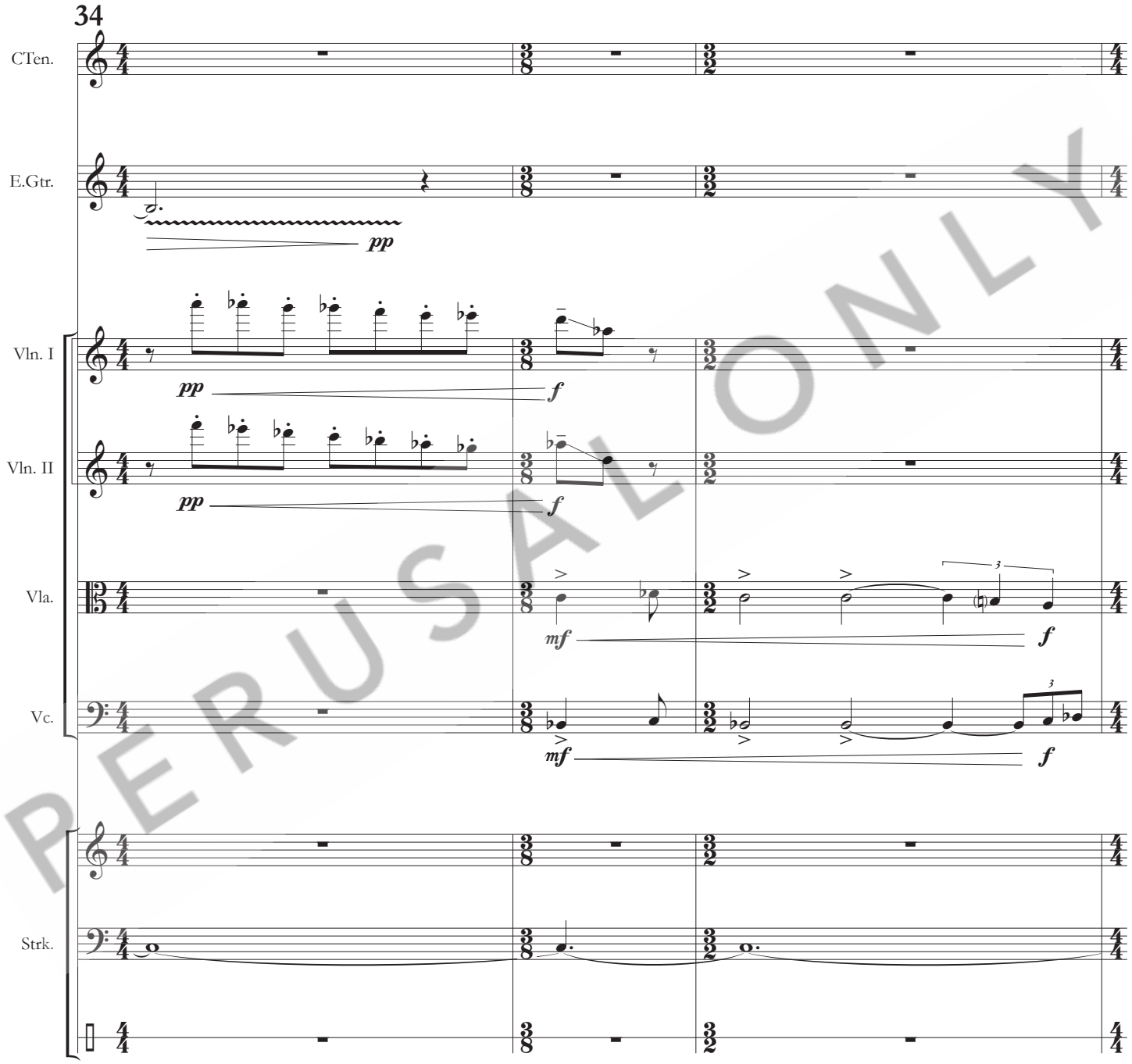
PERUSAL ONLY



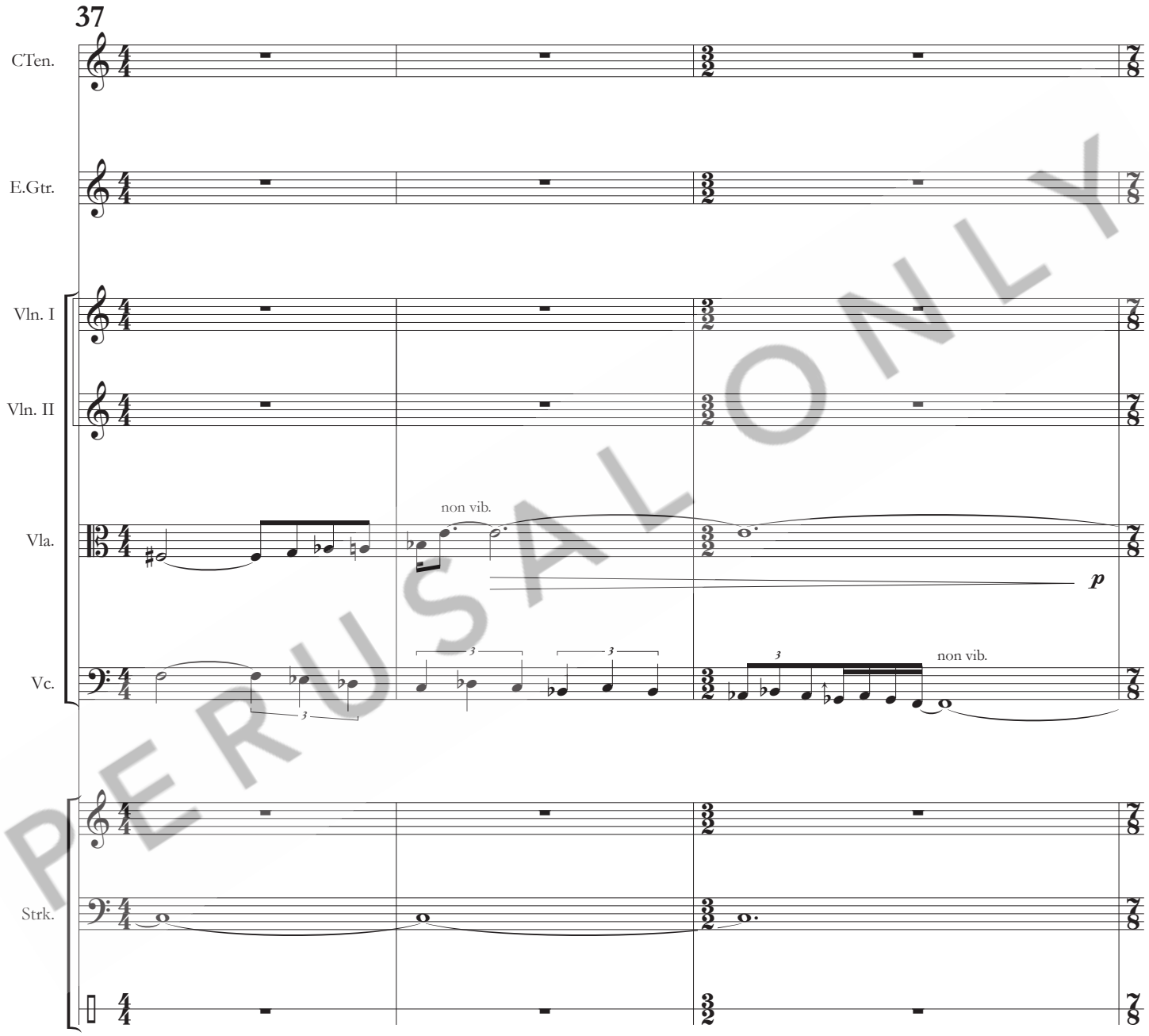
PERUSAL ONLY



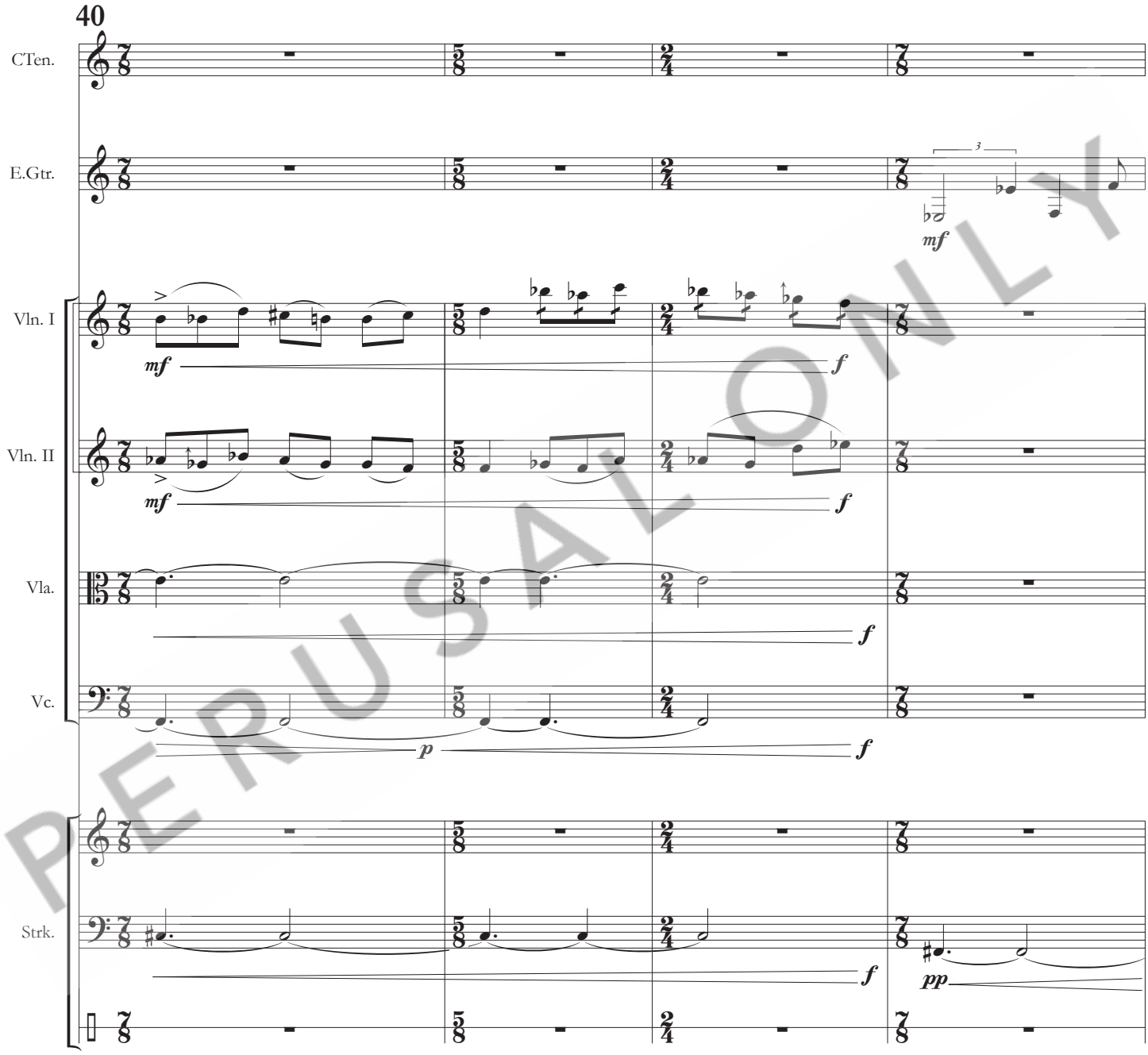
PERUSAL ONLY



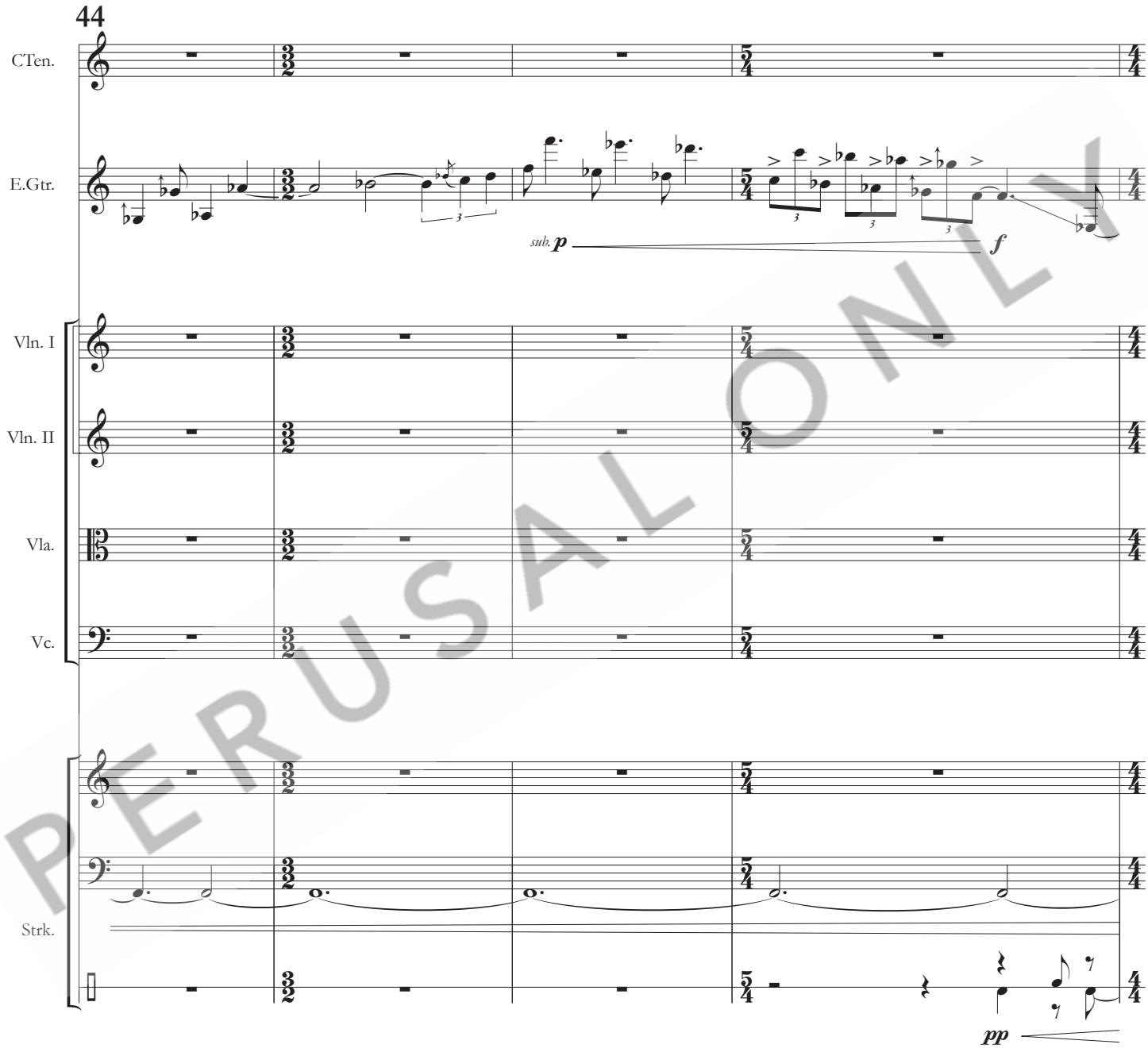
PERUSAL ONLY



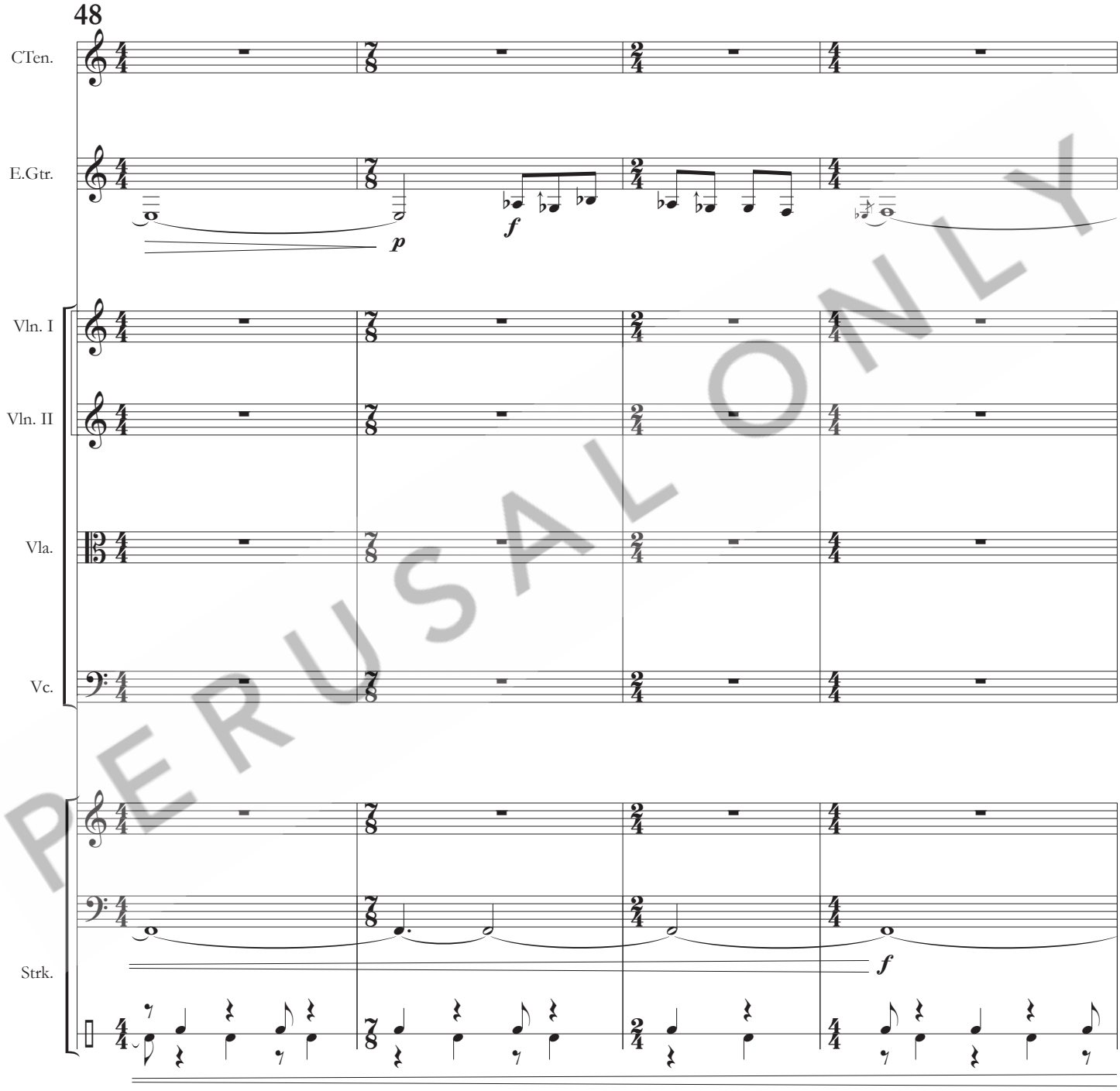
PERUSAL ONLY



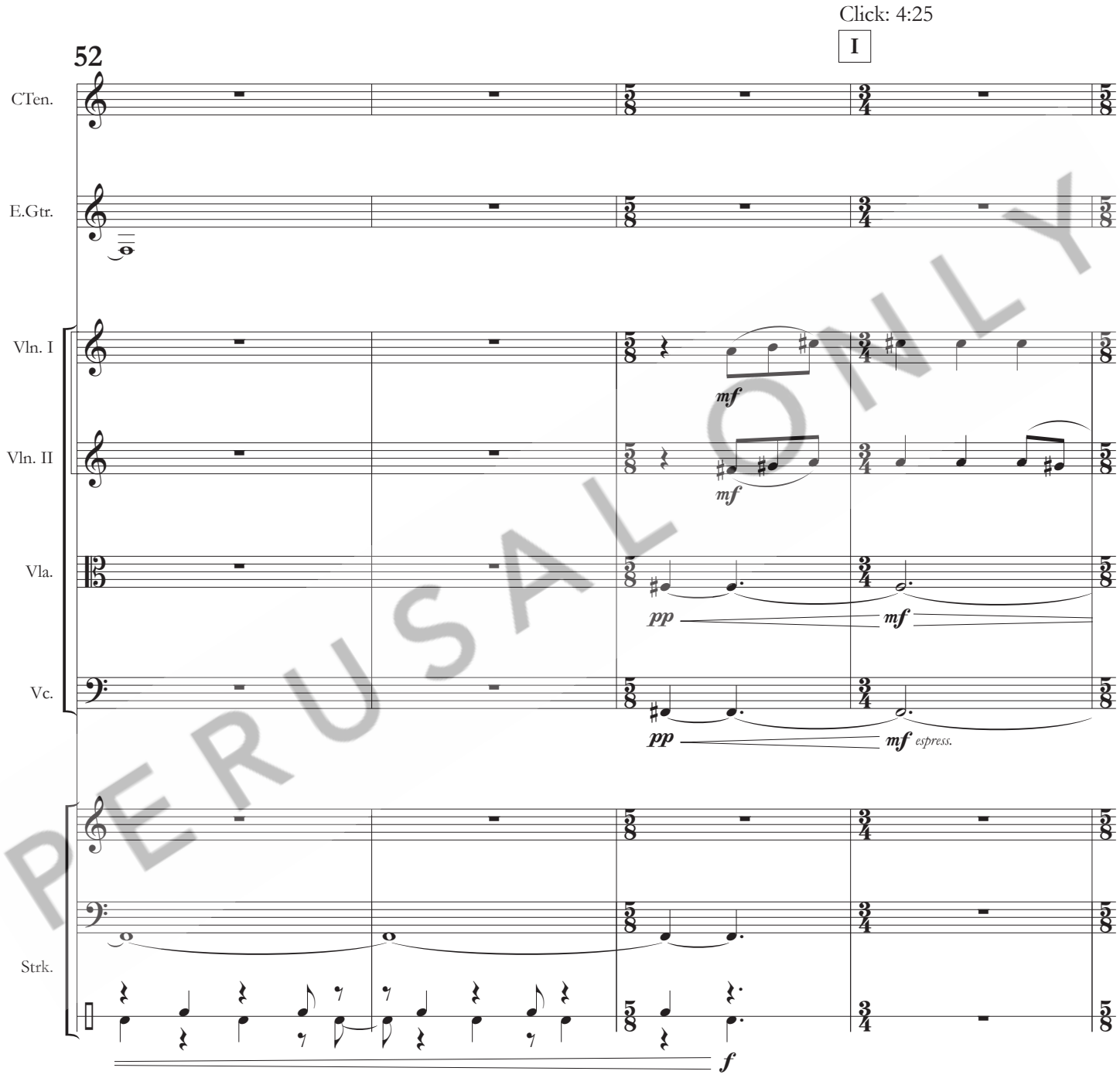
PERUSAL ONLY



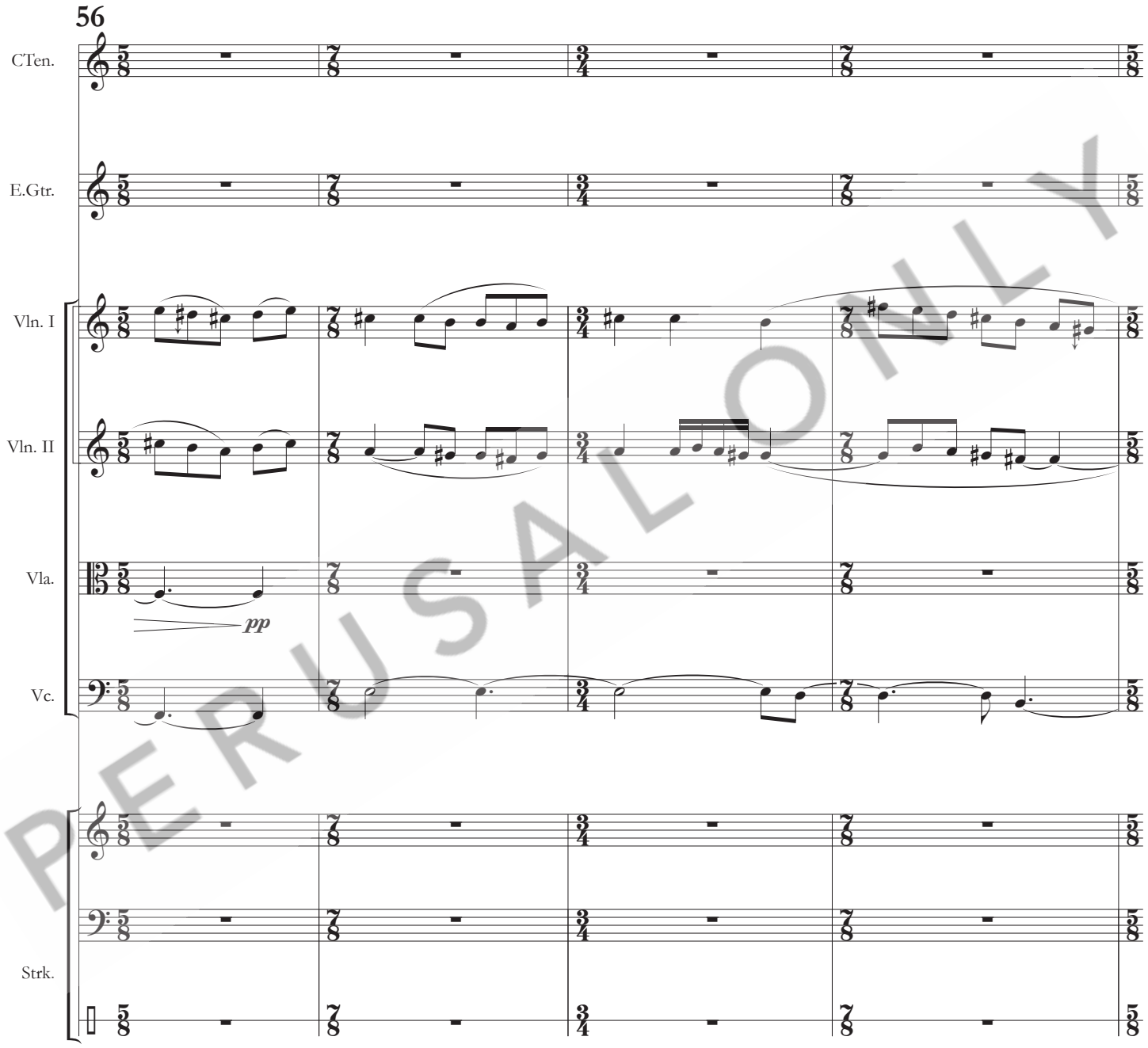
PERUSAL ONLY



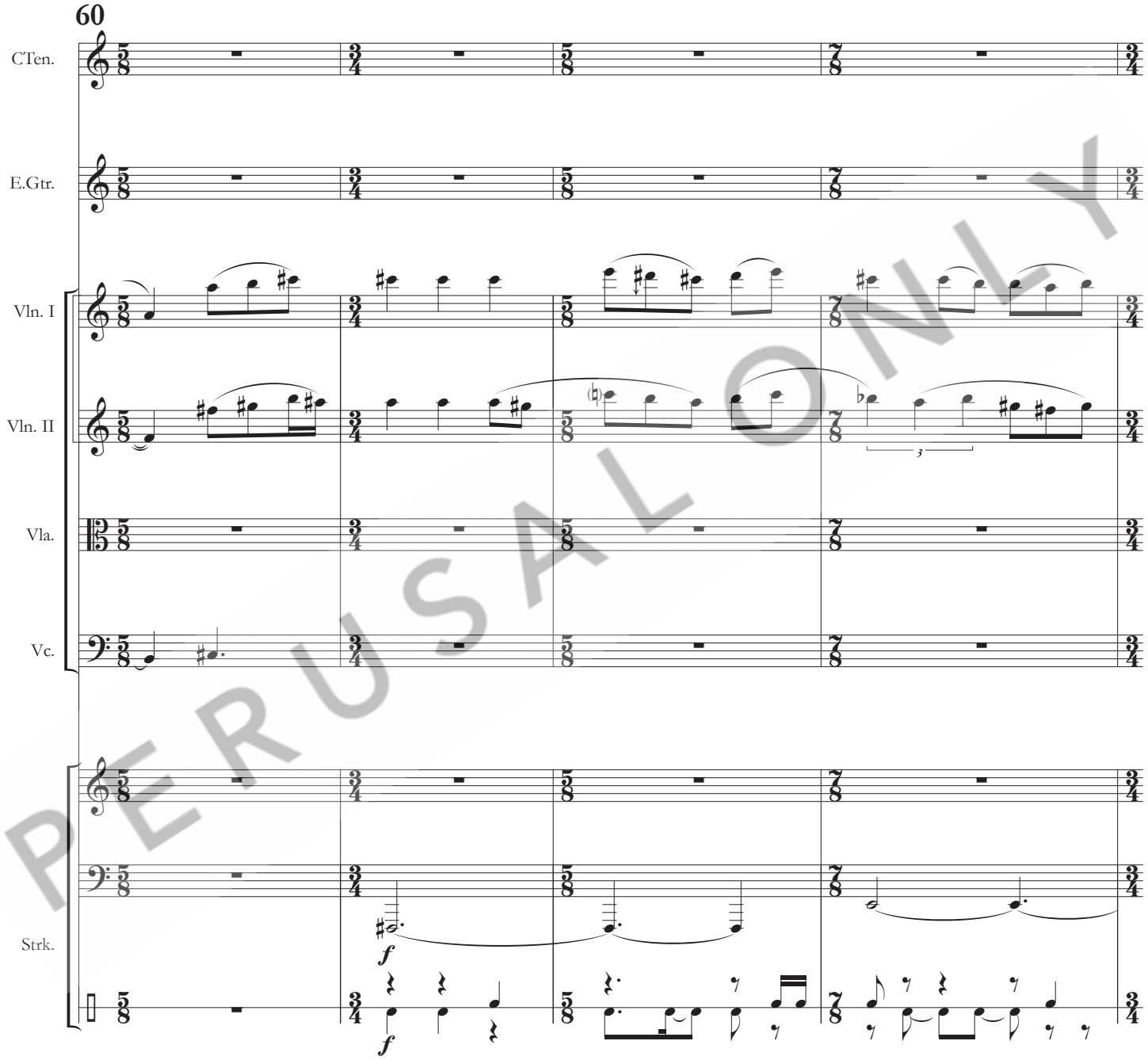
PERUSAL ONLY



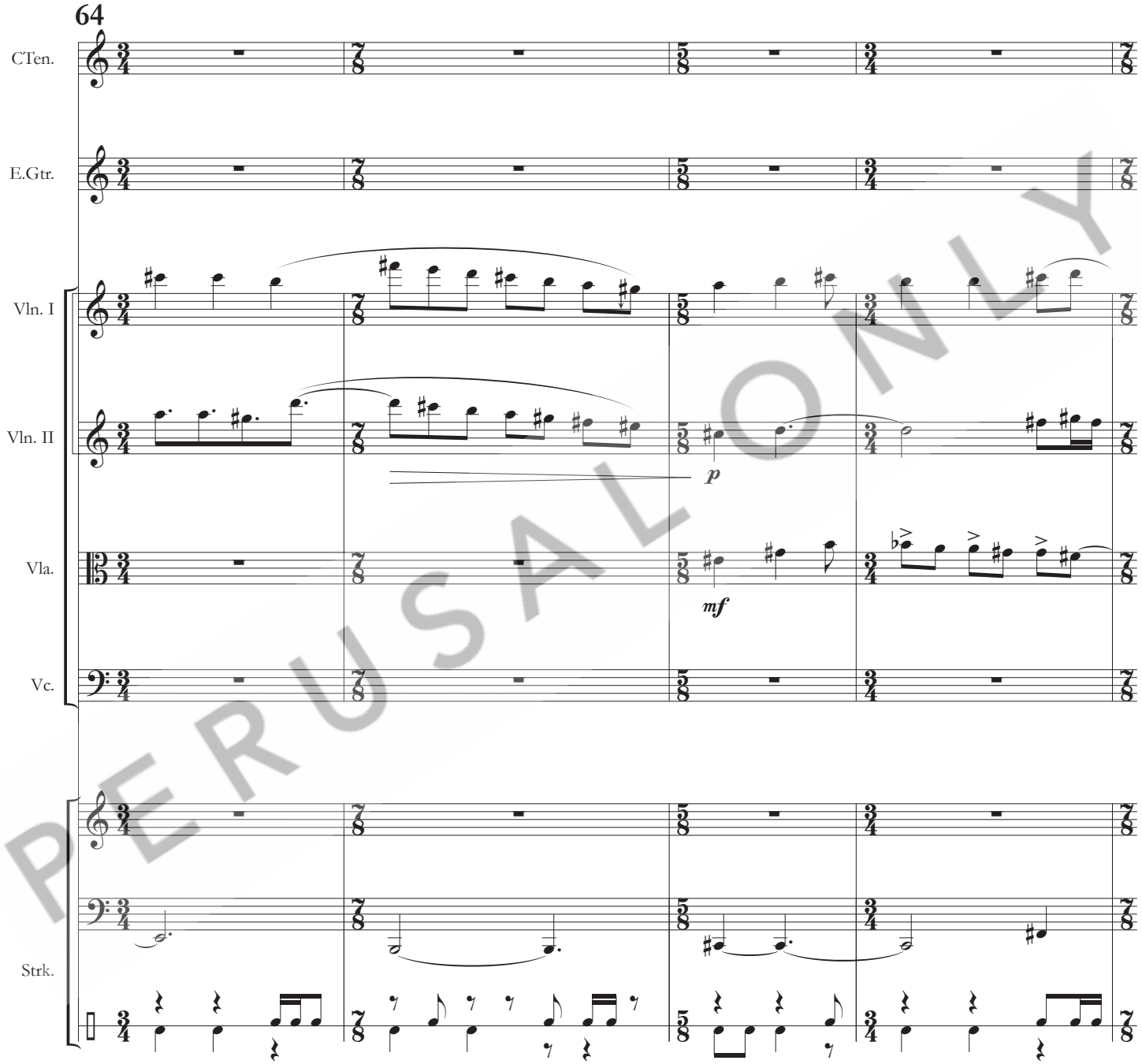
PERUSAL ONLY



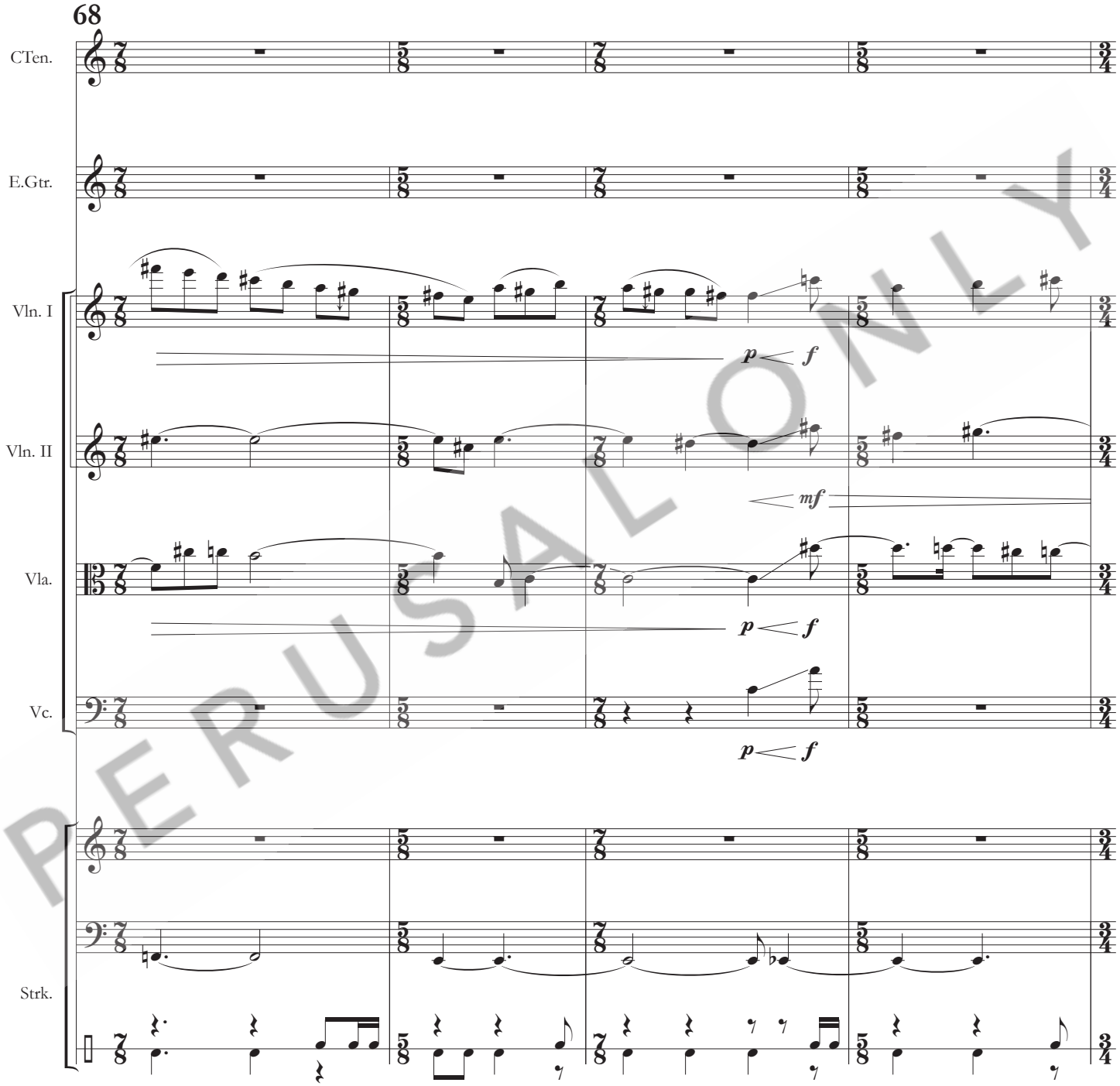
PERUSAL ONLY



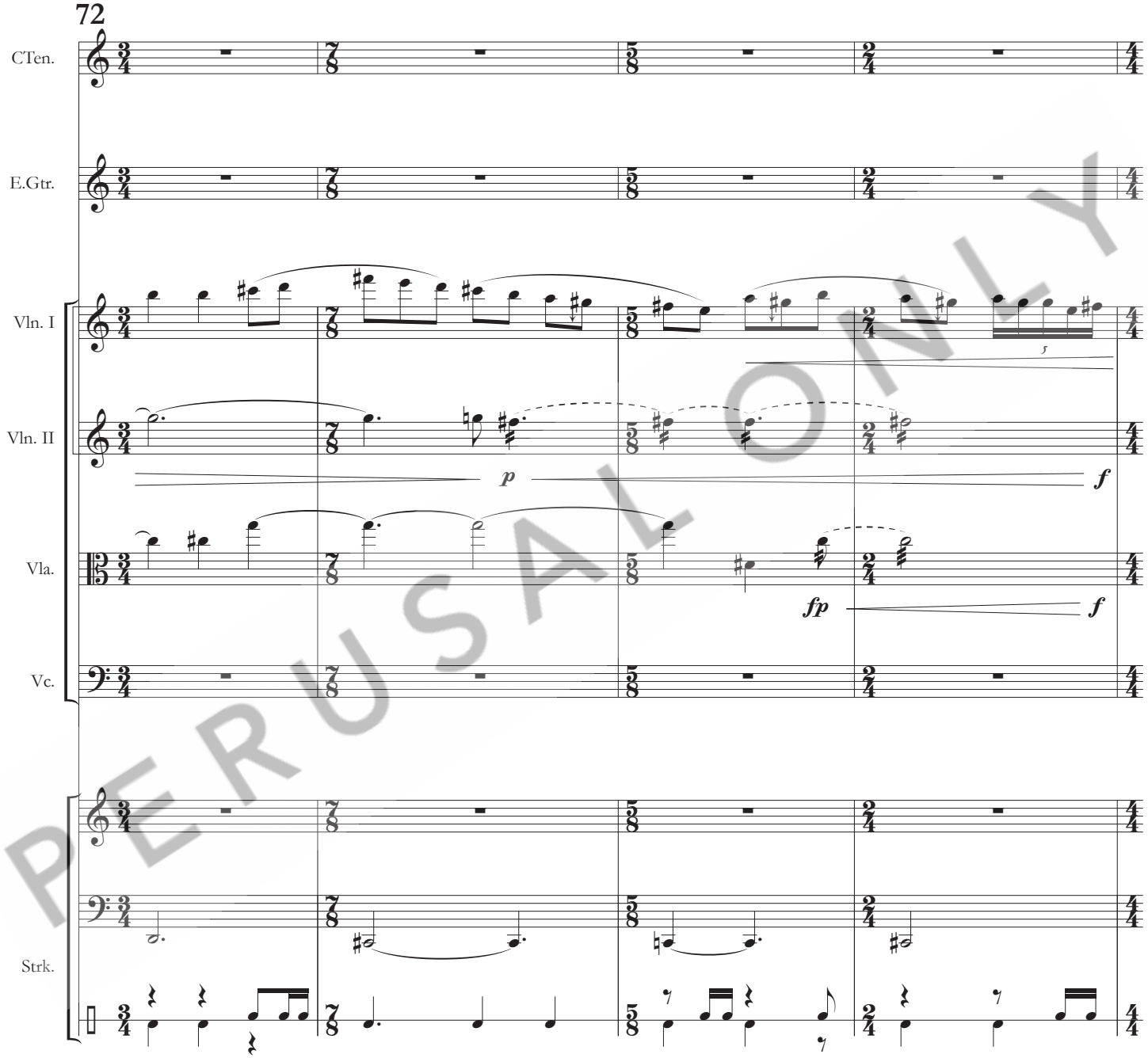
PERUSAL ONLY



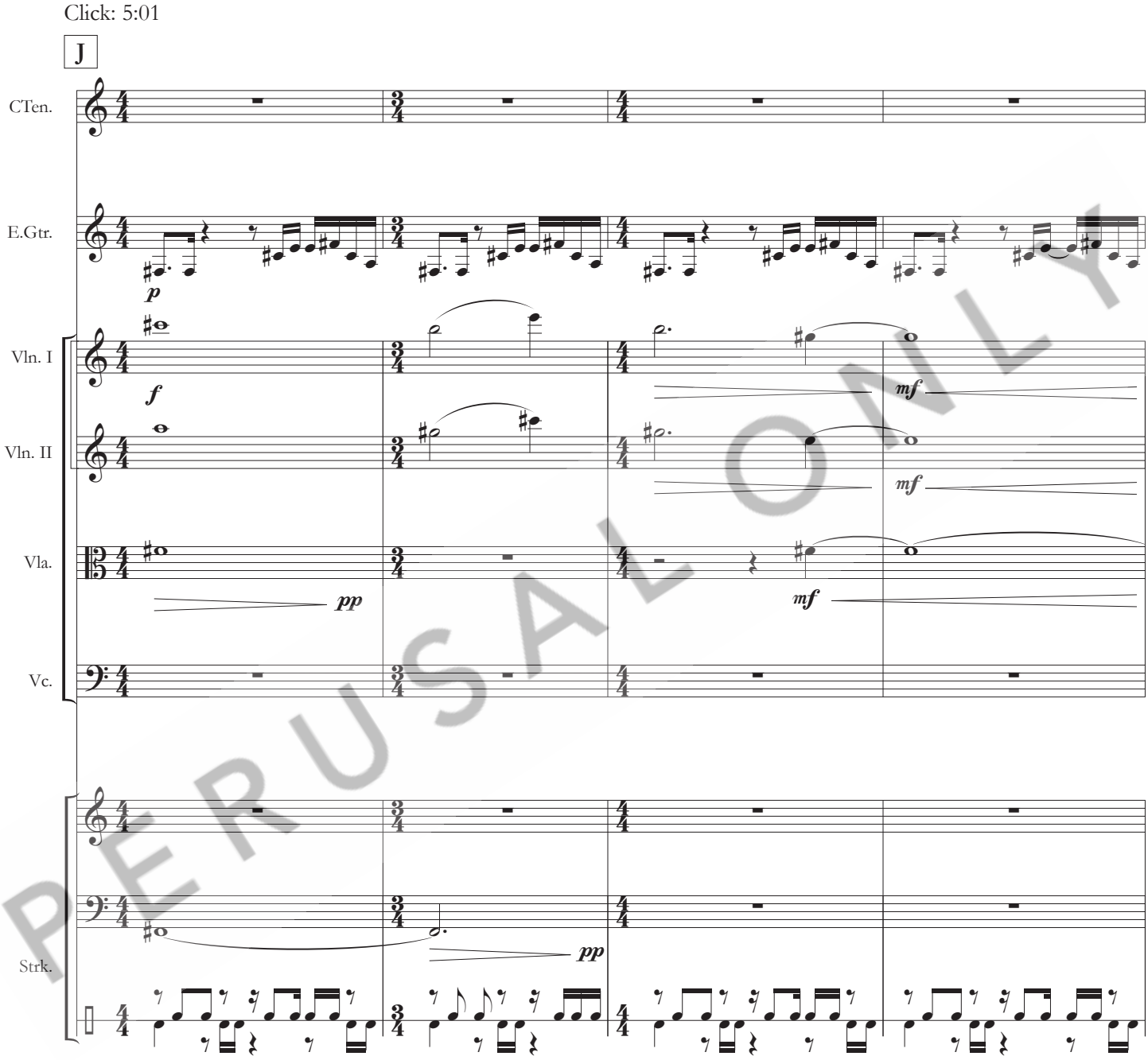
PERUSAL ONLY



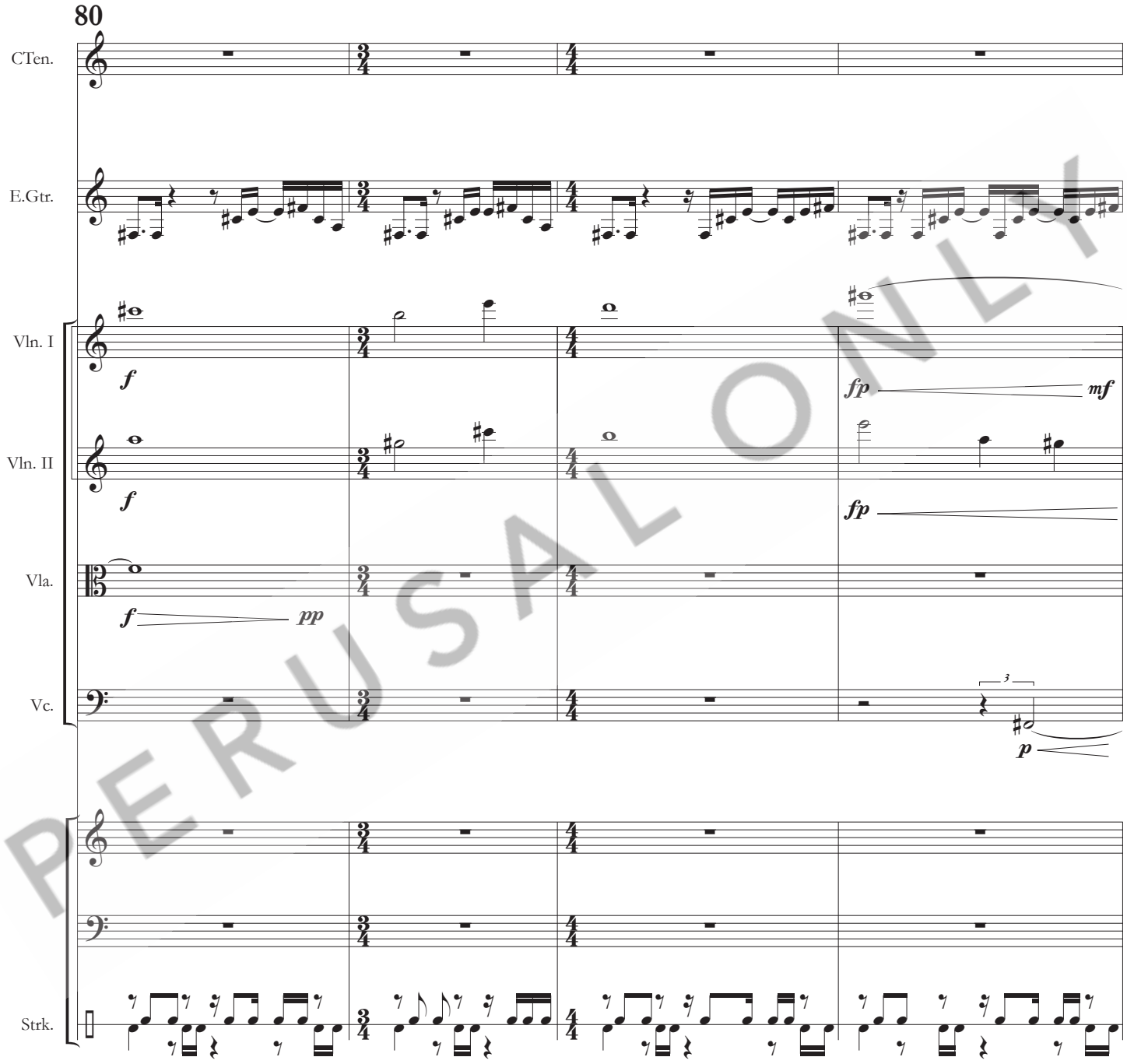
PERUSAL ONLY



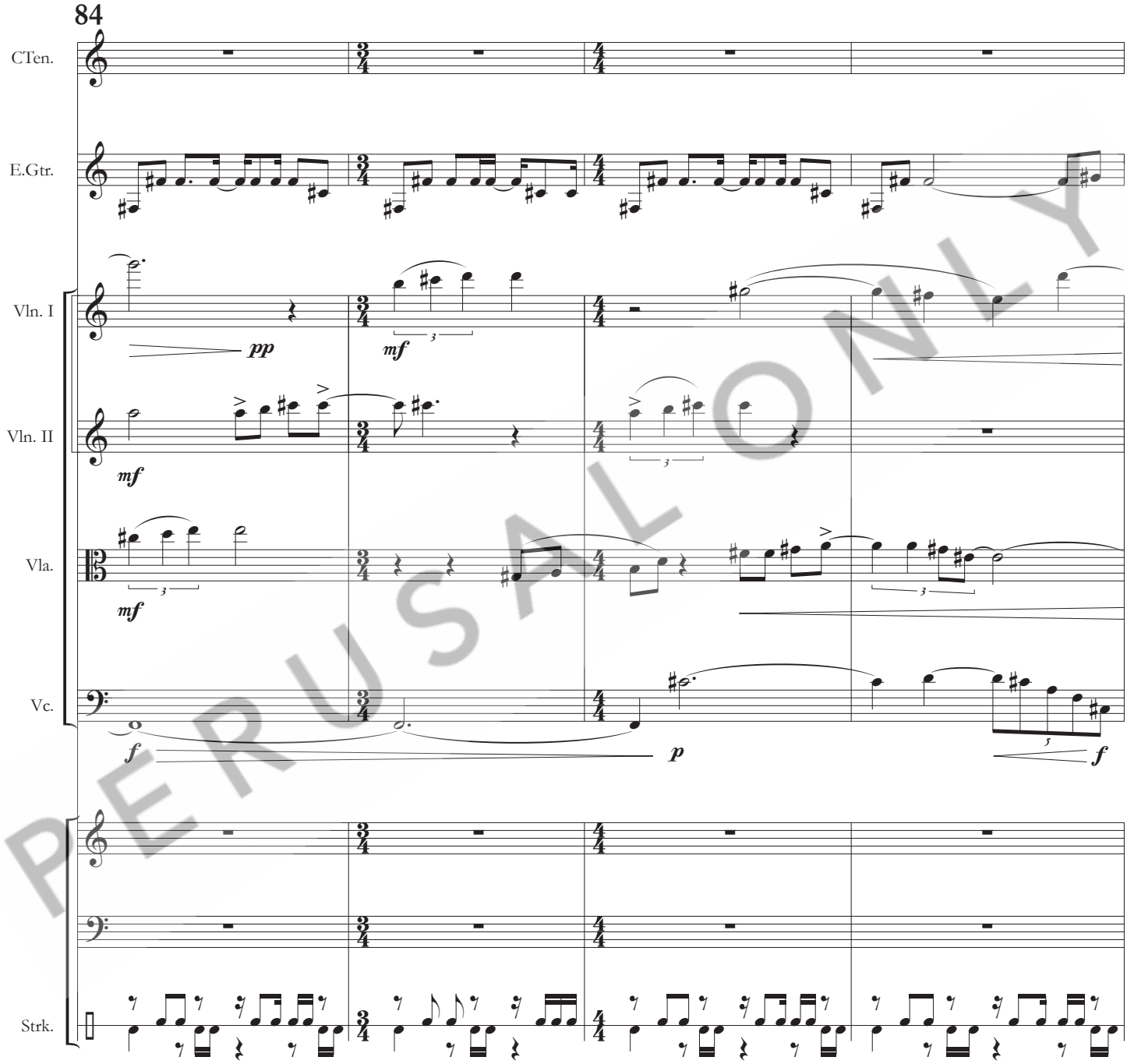
PERUSAL ONLY



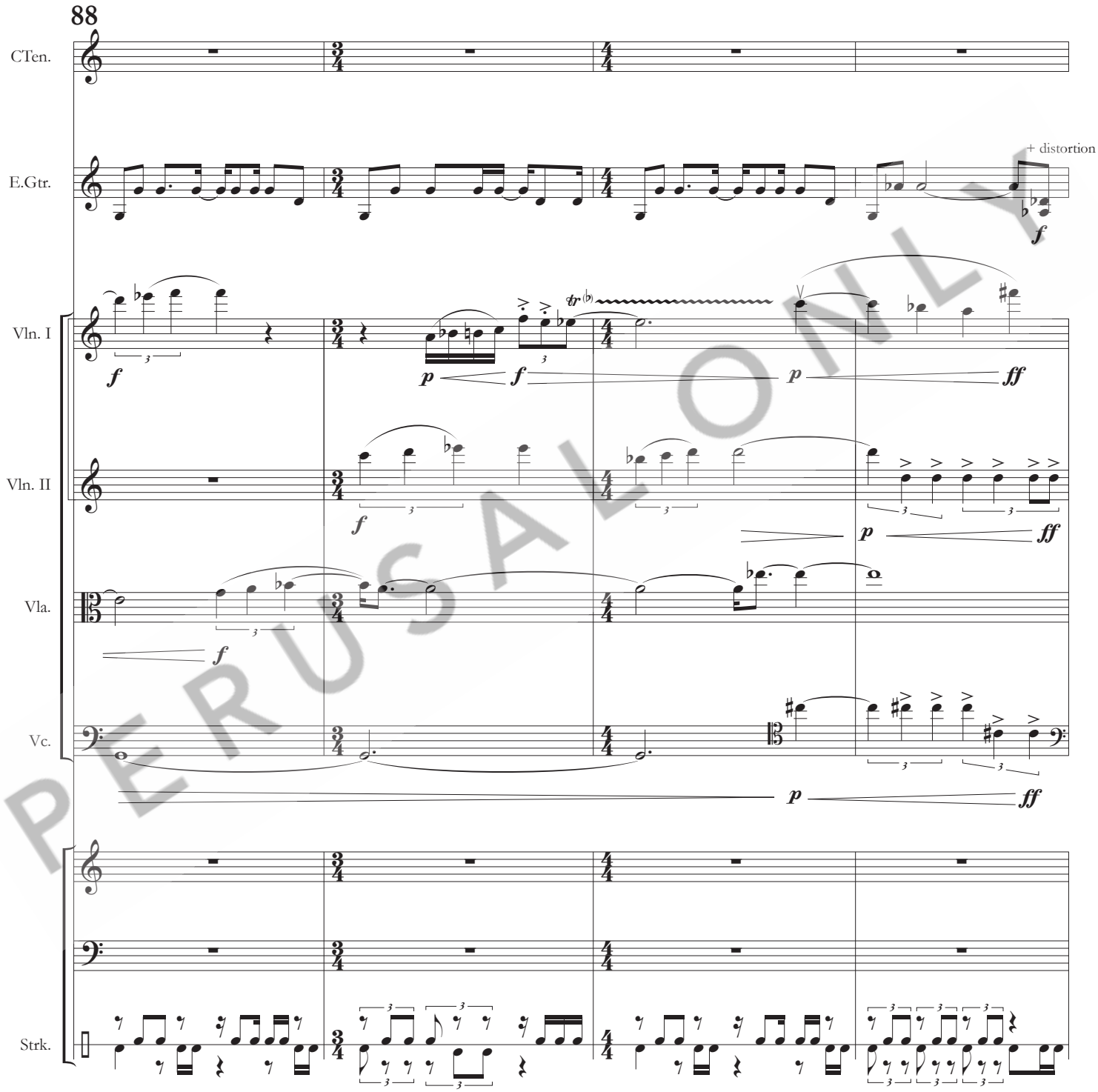
PERUSAL ONLY



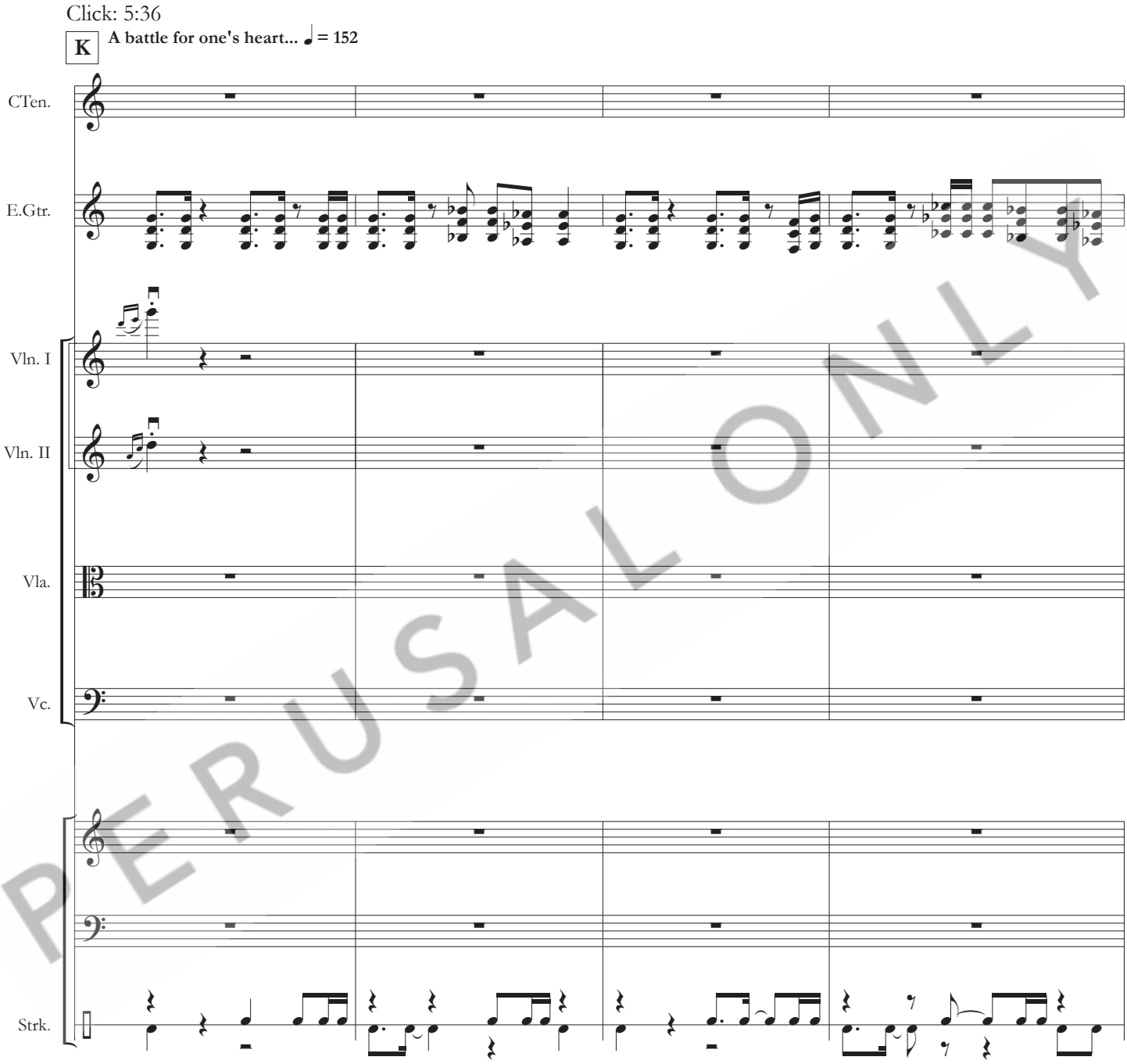
PERUSAL ONLY



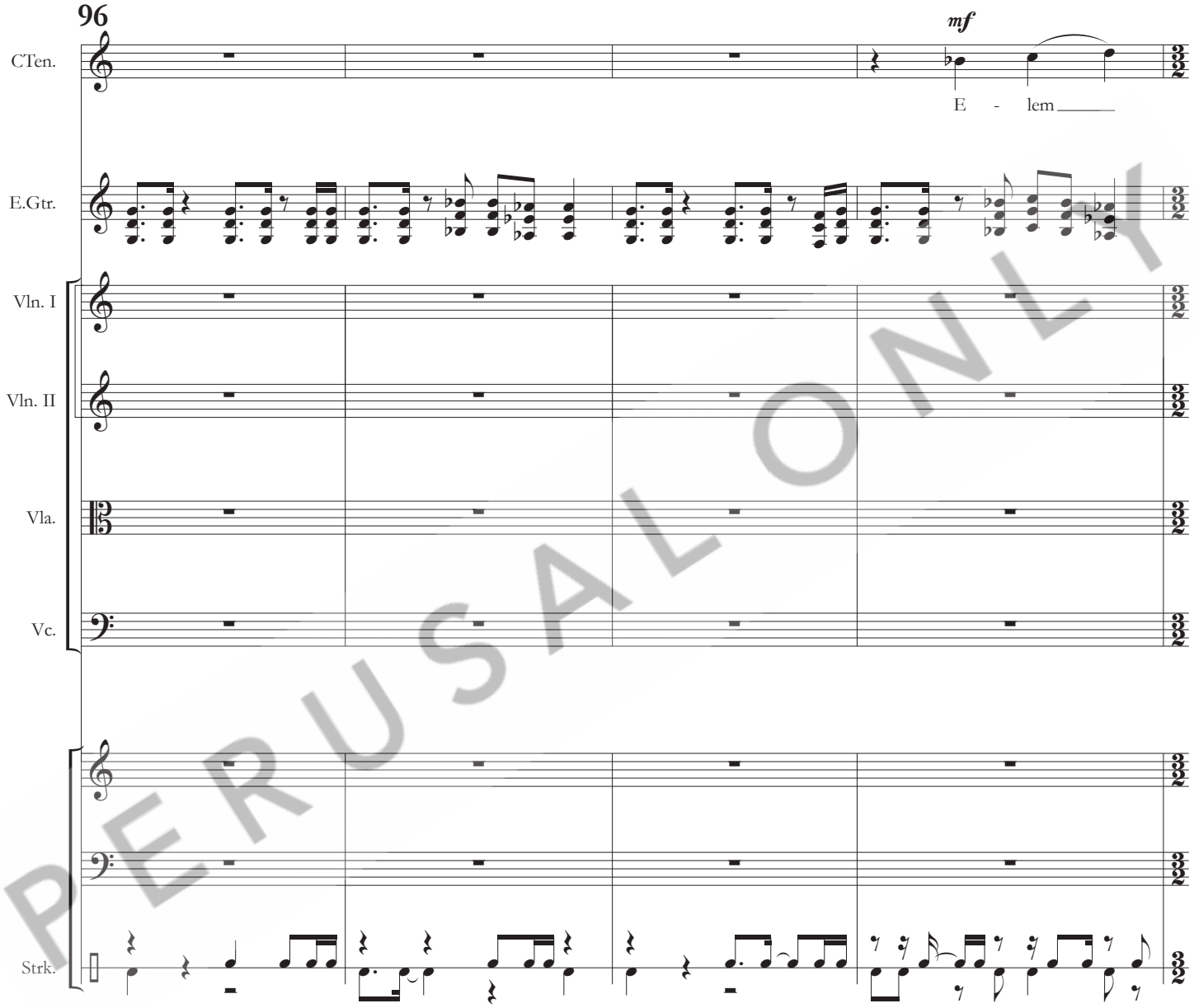
PERUSAL ONLY



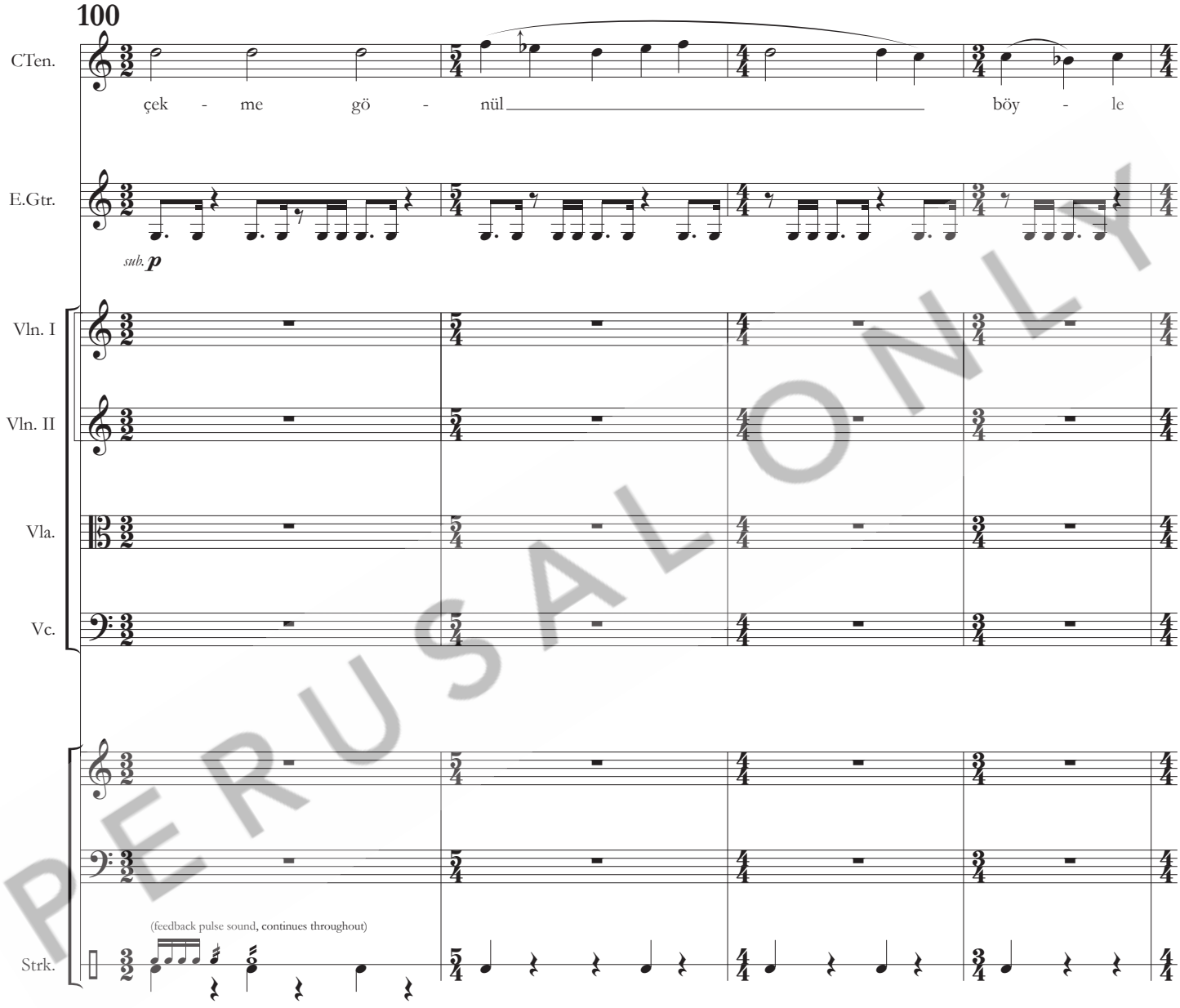
PERUSAL ONLY



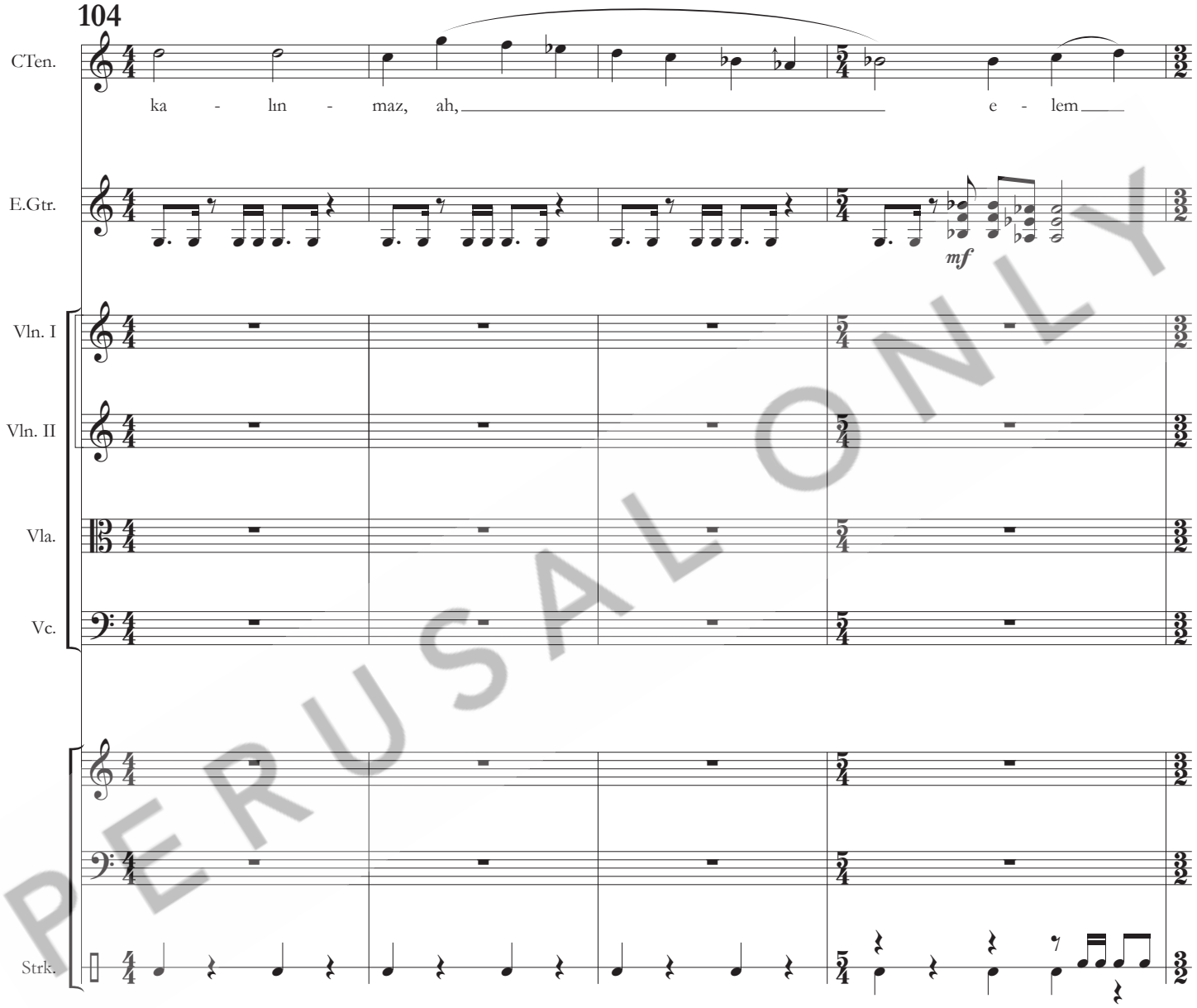
PERUSAL ONLY



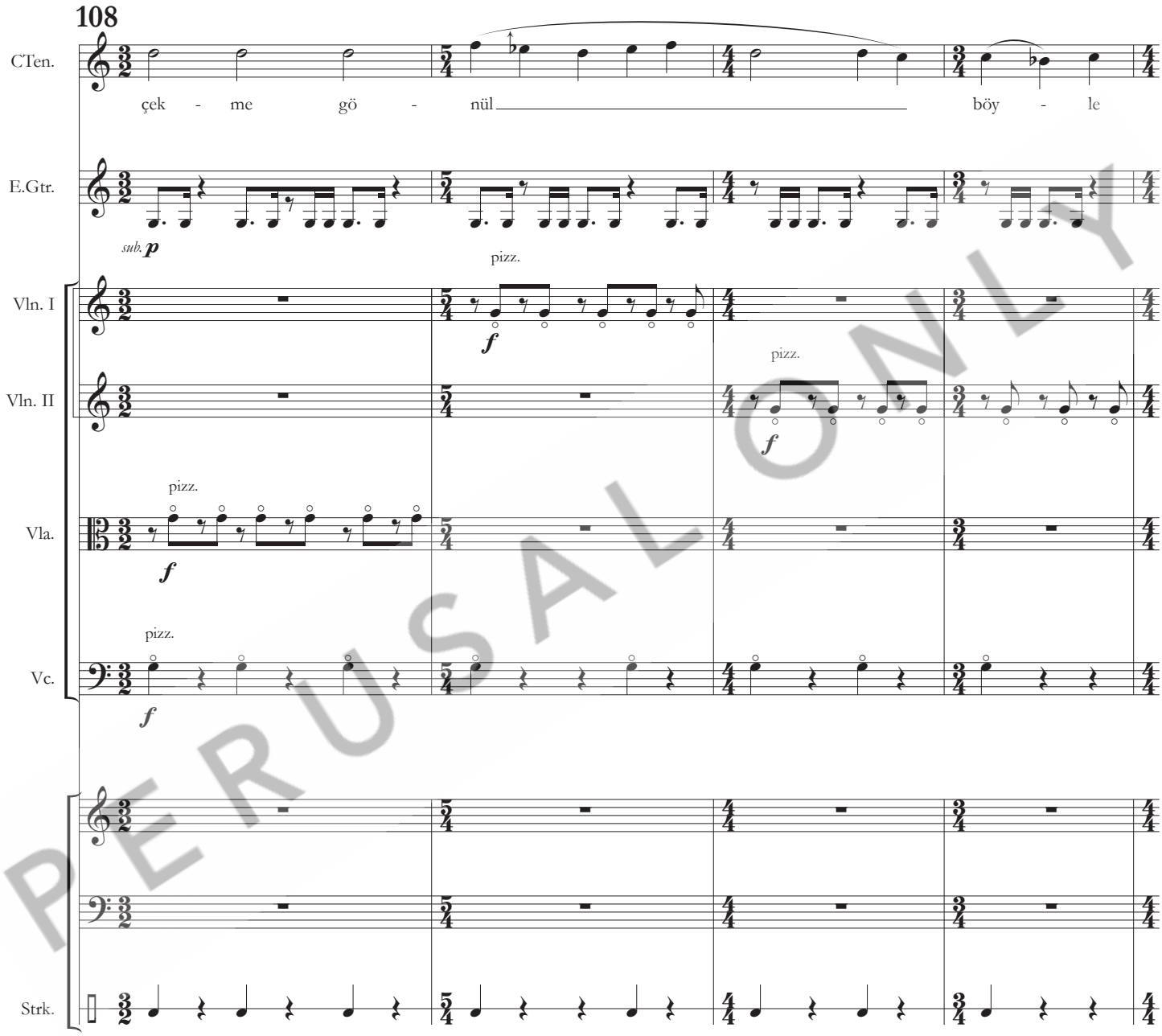
PERUSAL ONLY



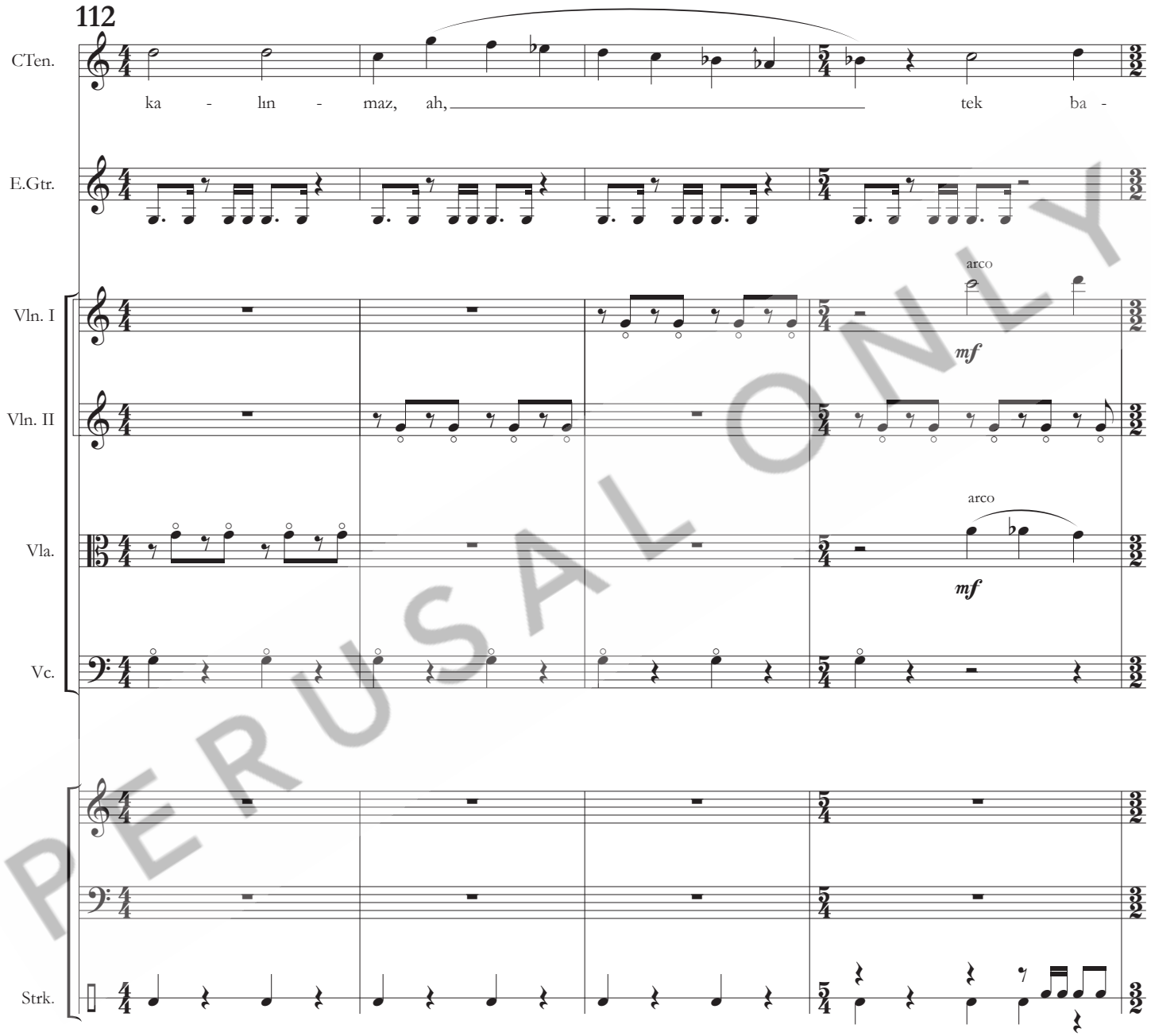
PERUSAL ONLY



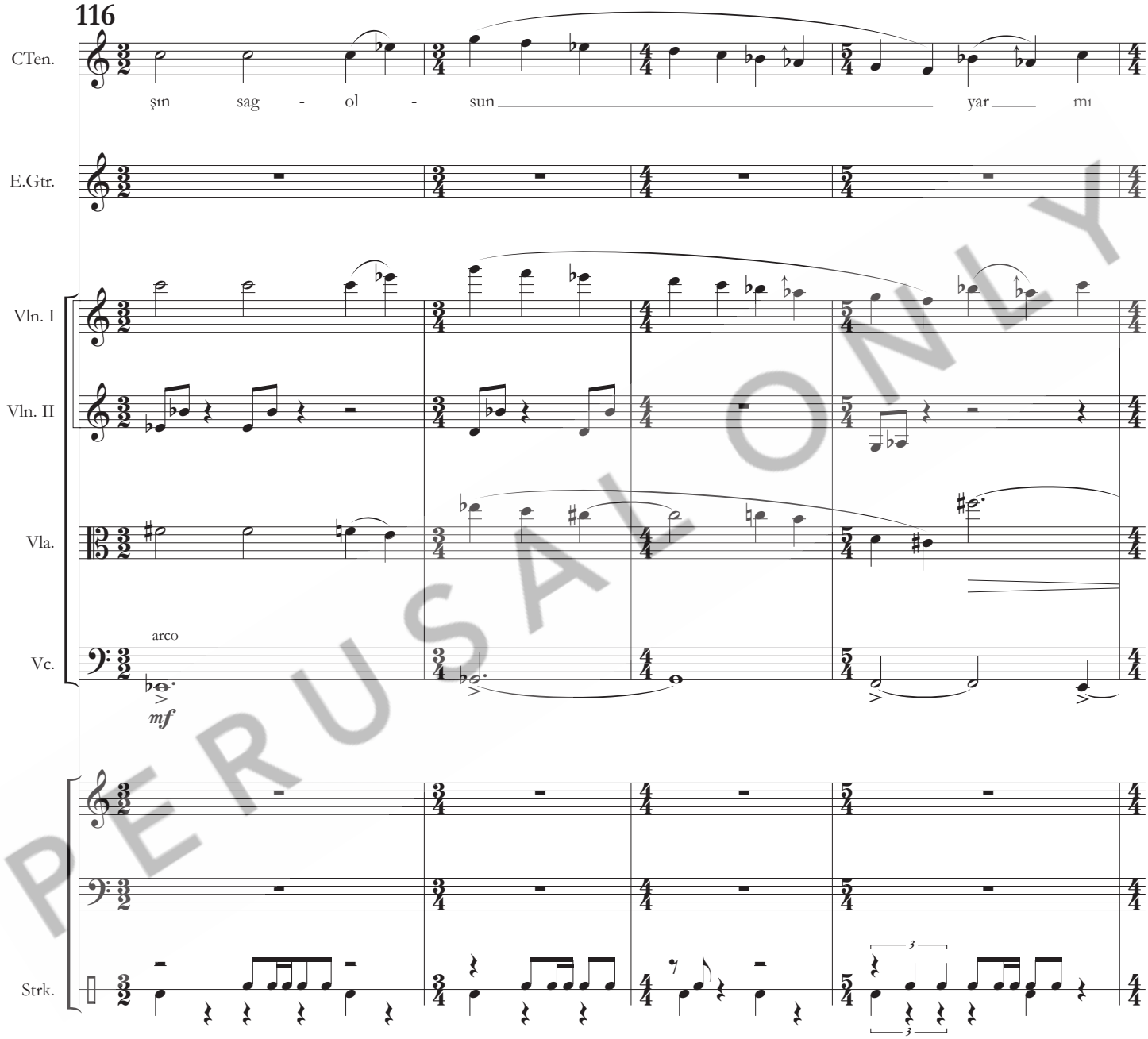
PERUSAL ONLY



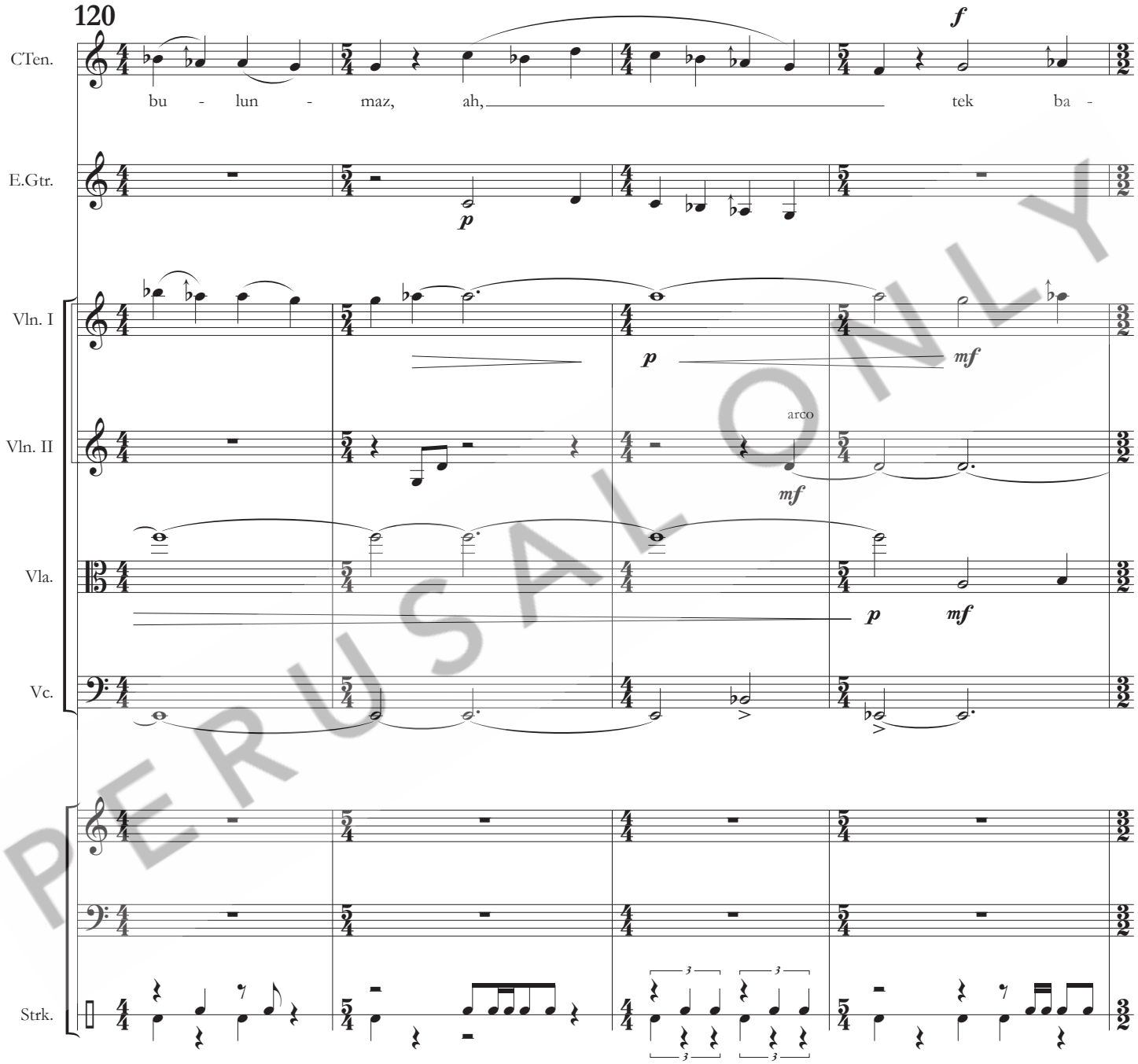
PERUSAL ONLY



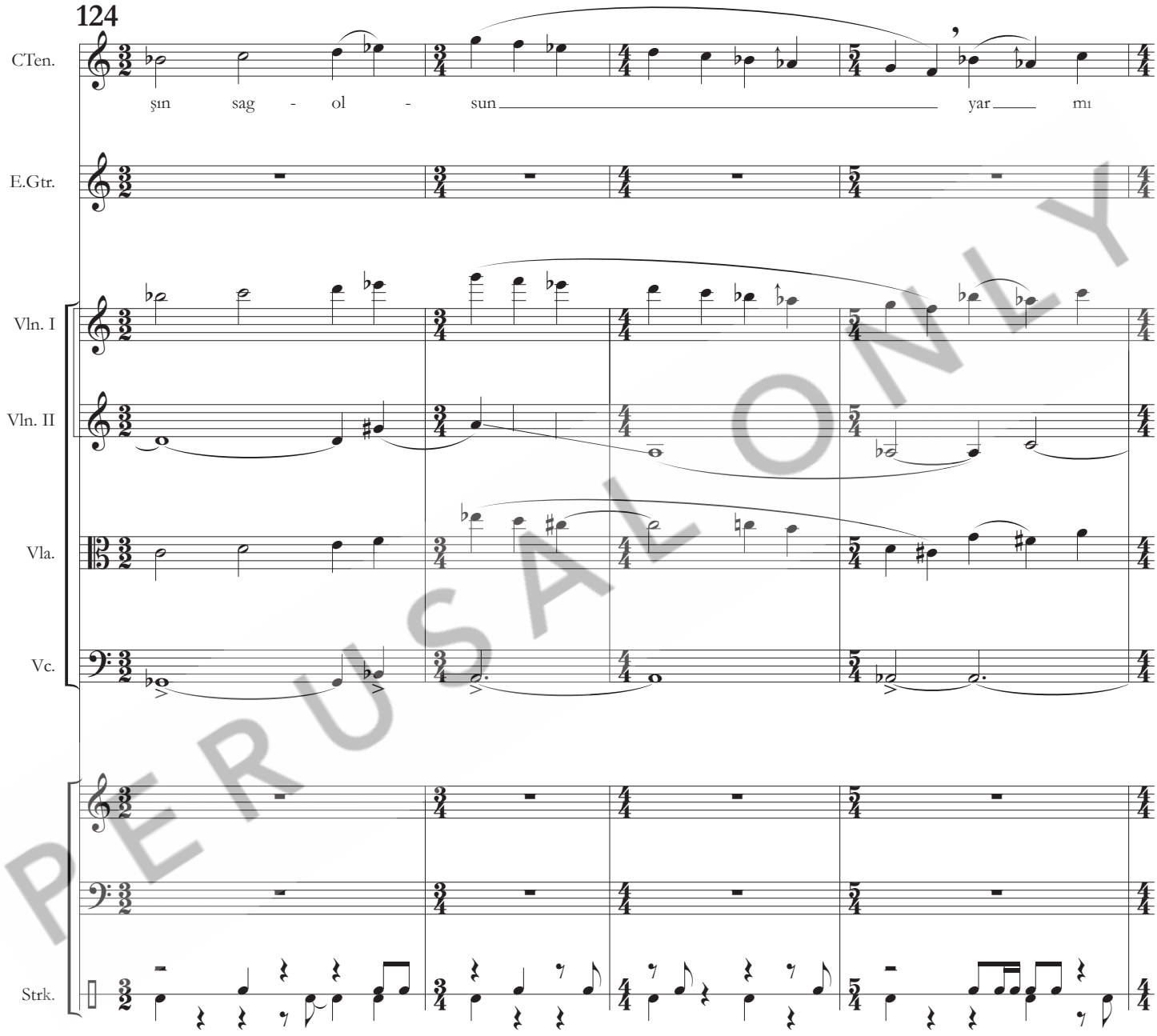
PERUSAL ONLY



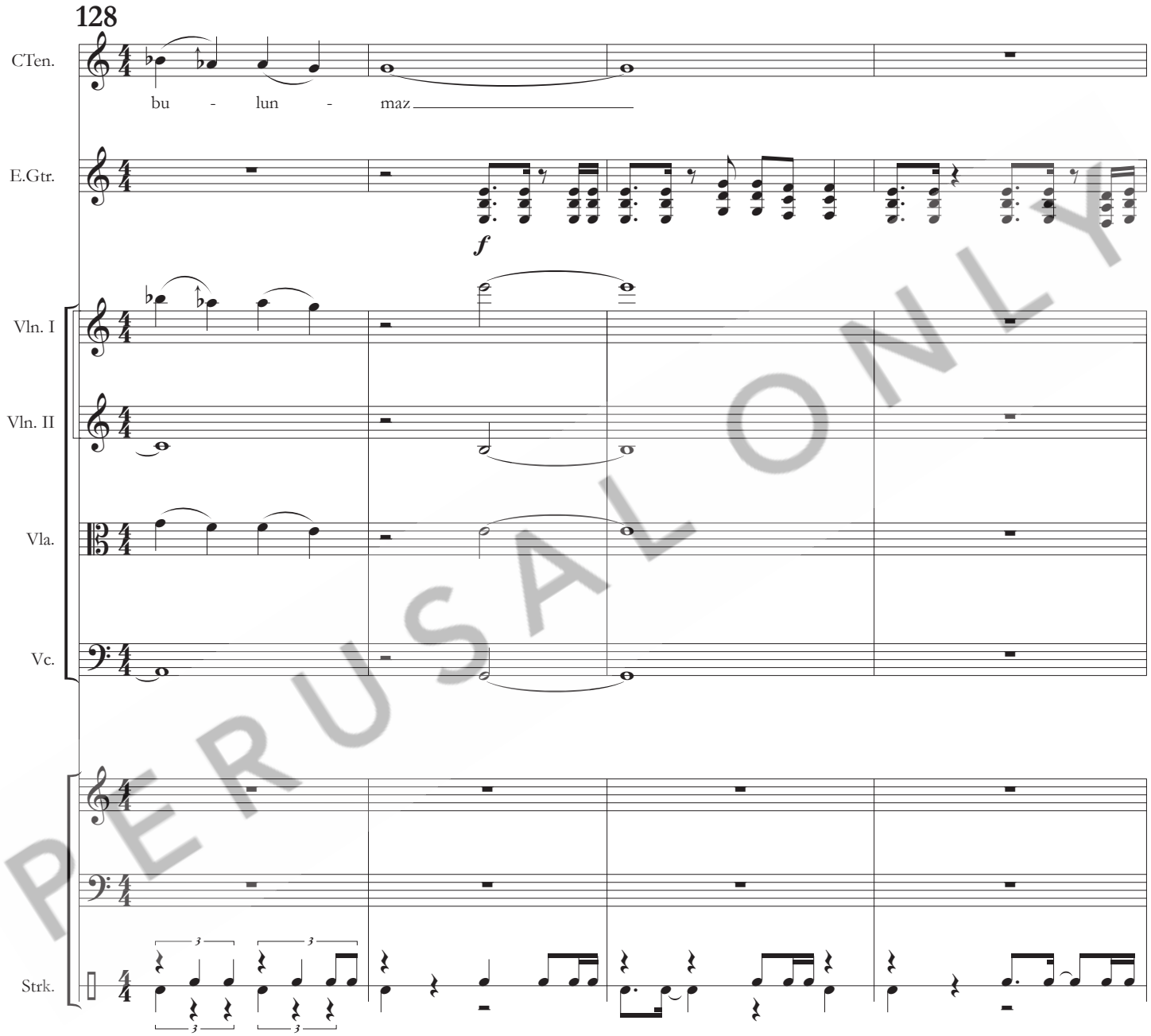
PERUSAL ONLY



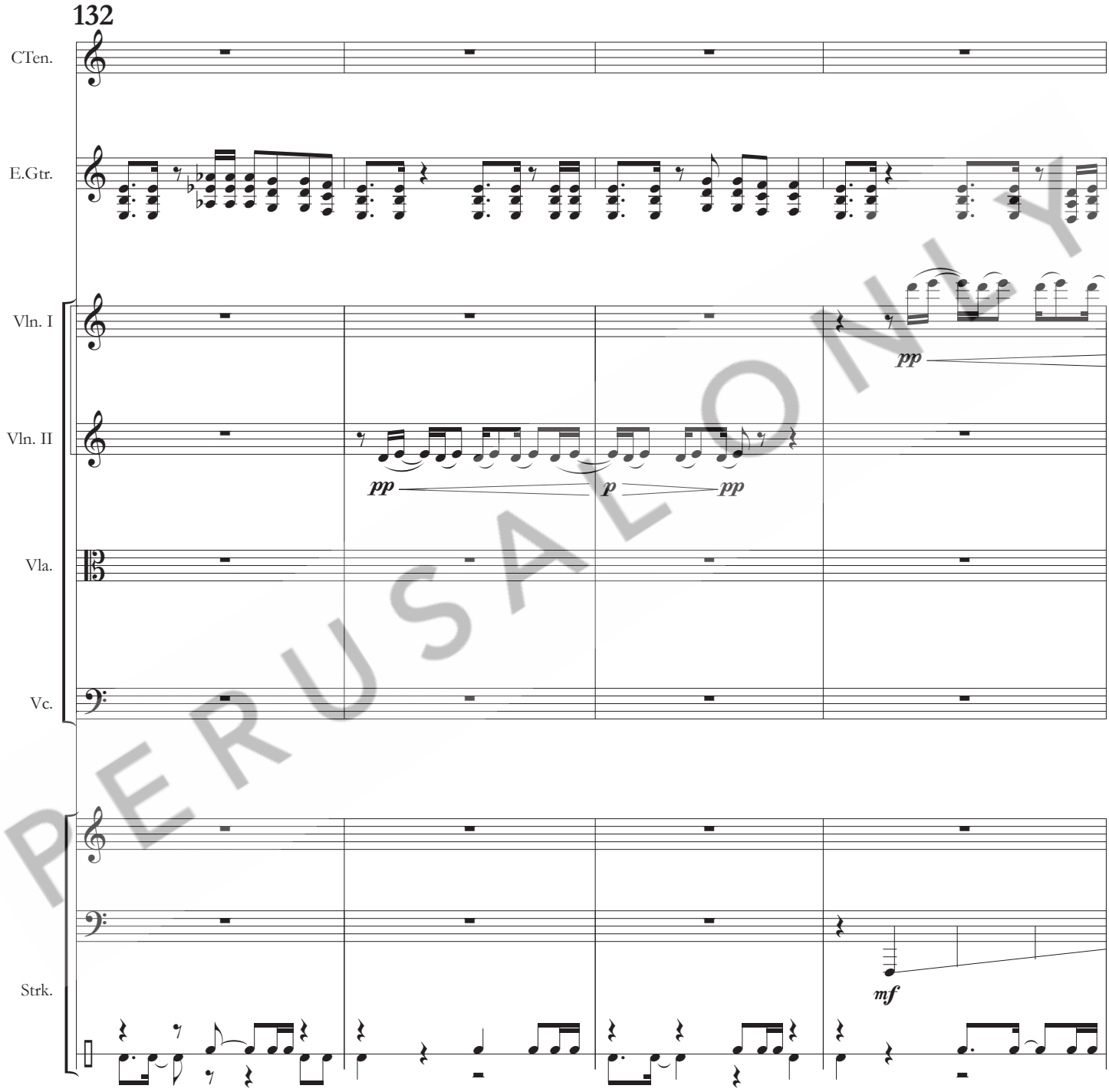
PERUSAL ONLY



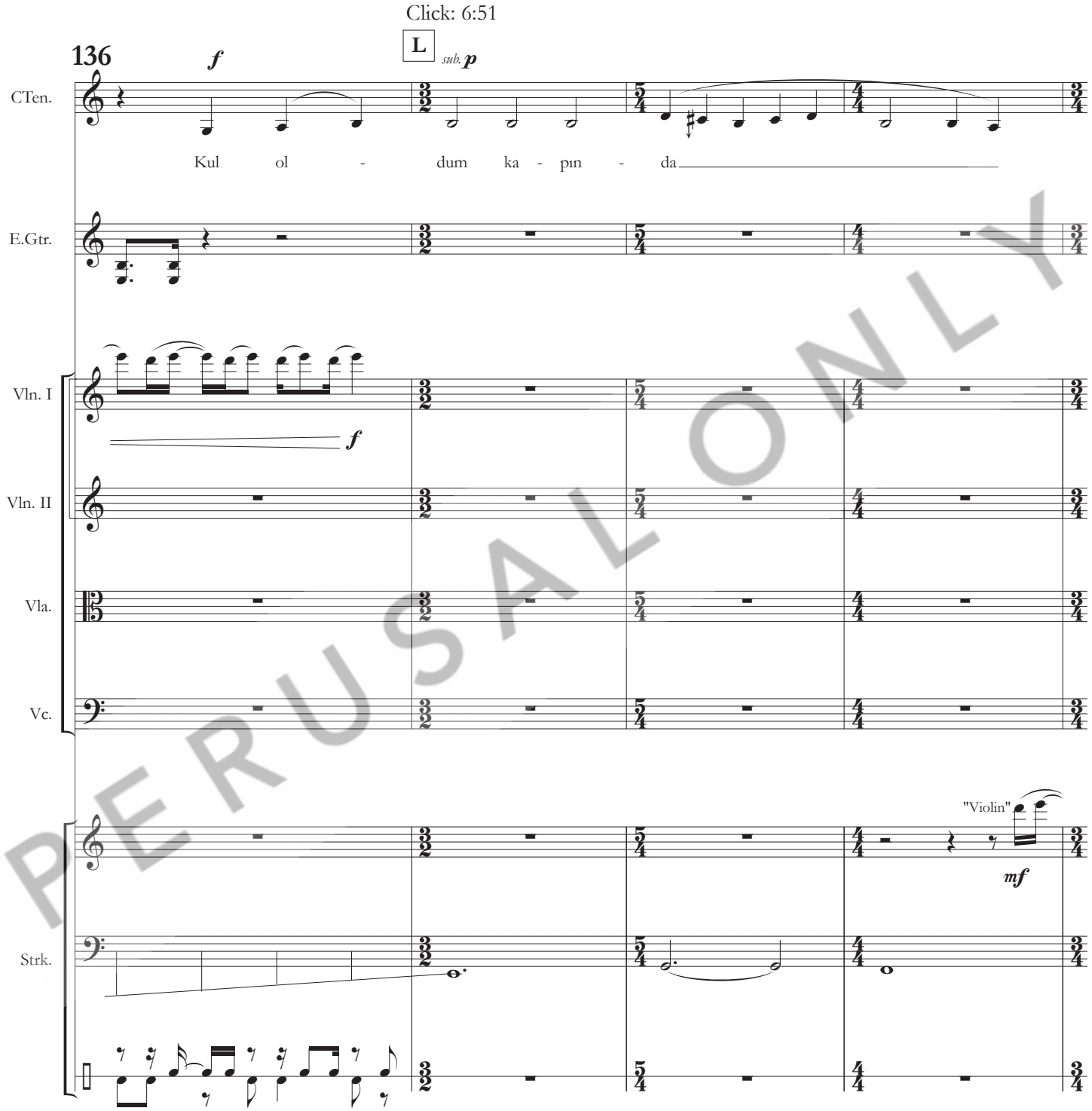
PERUSAL ONLY



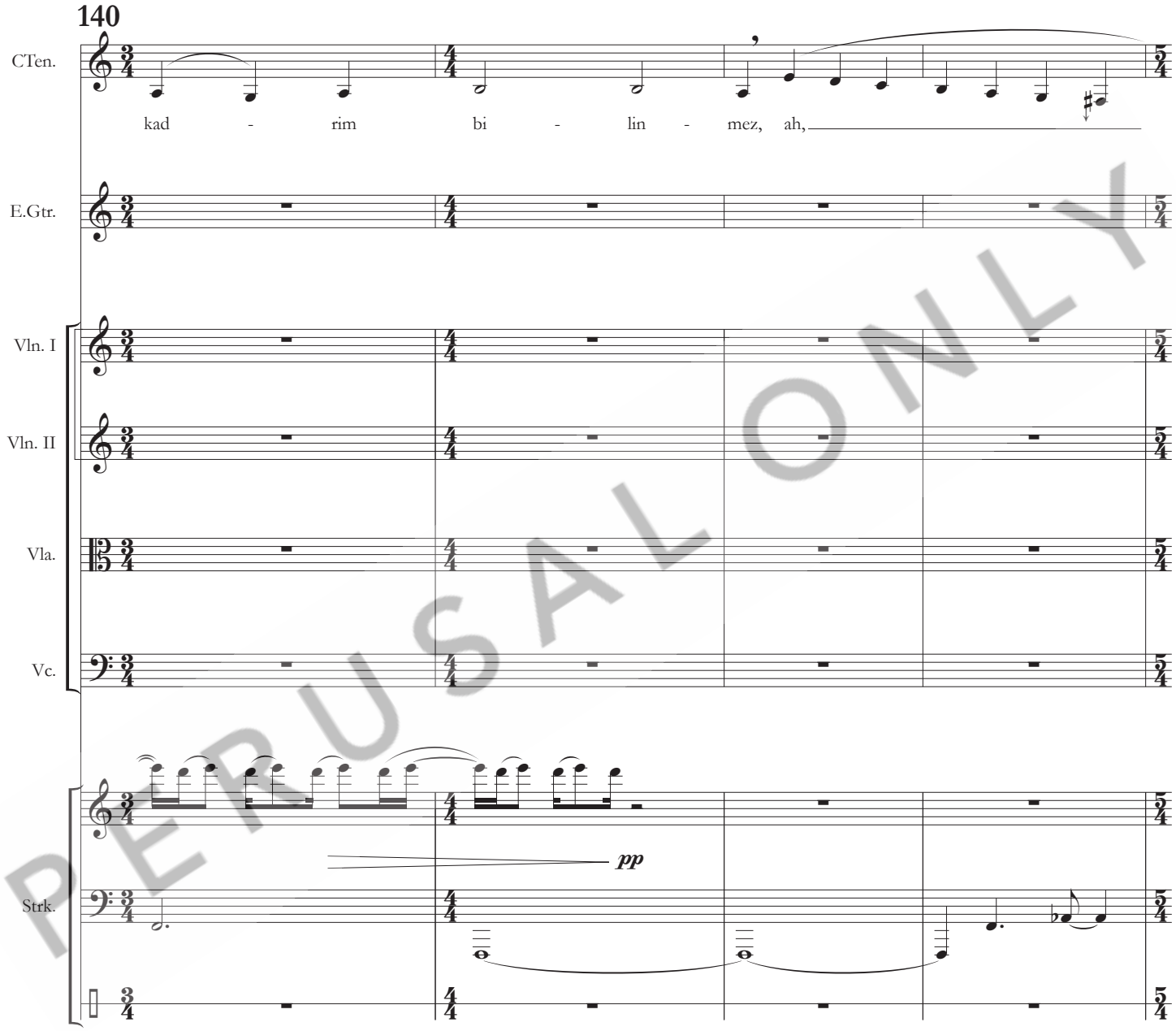
PERUSAL ONLY



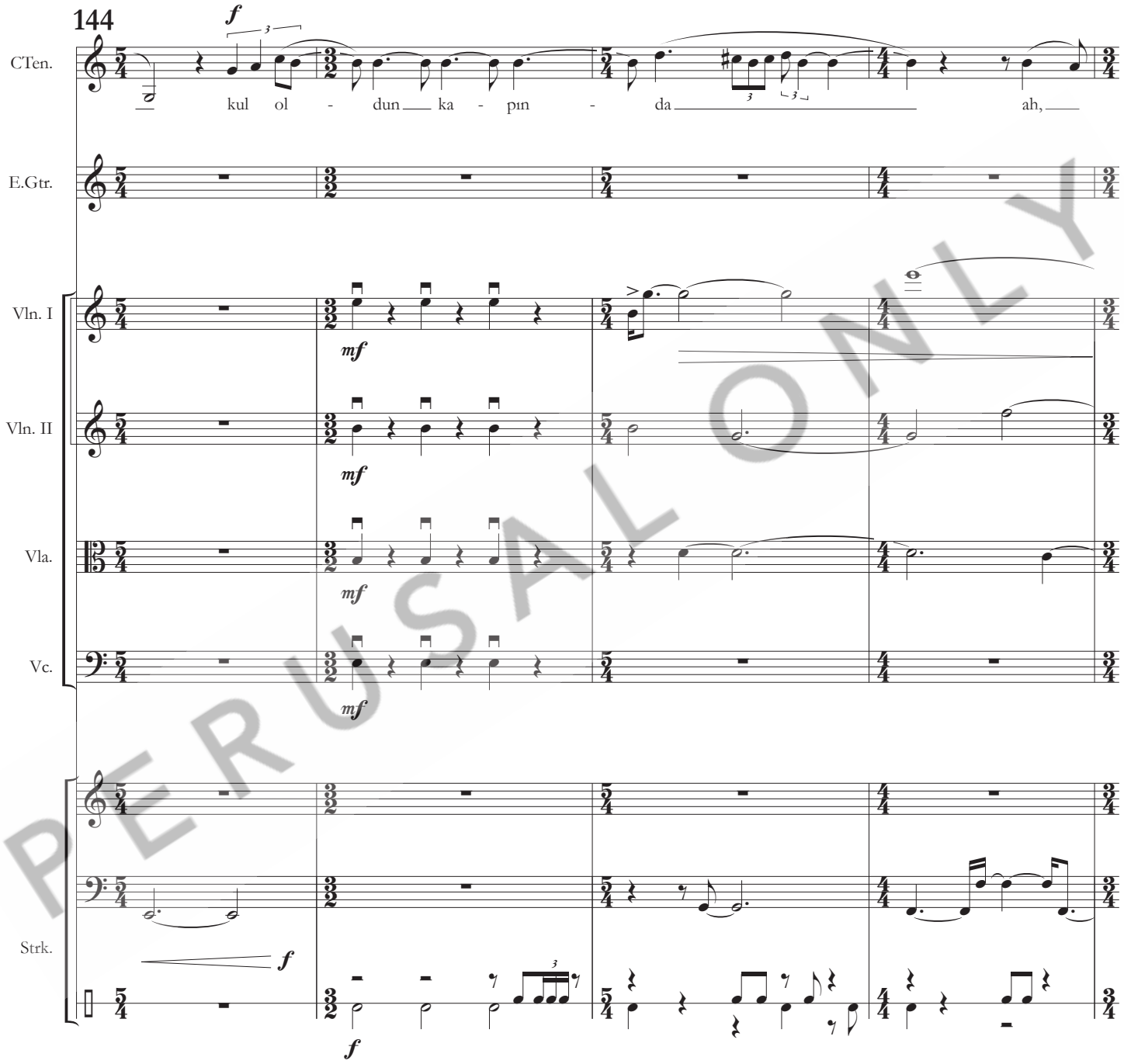
PERUSAL ONLY



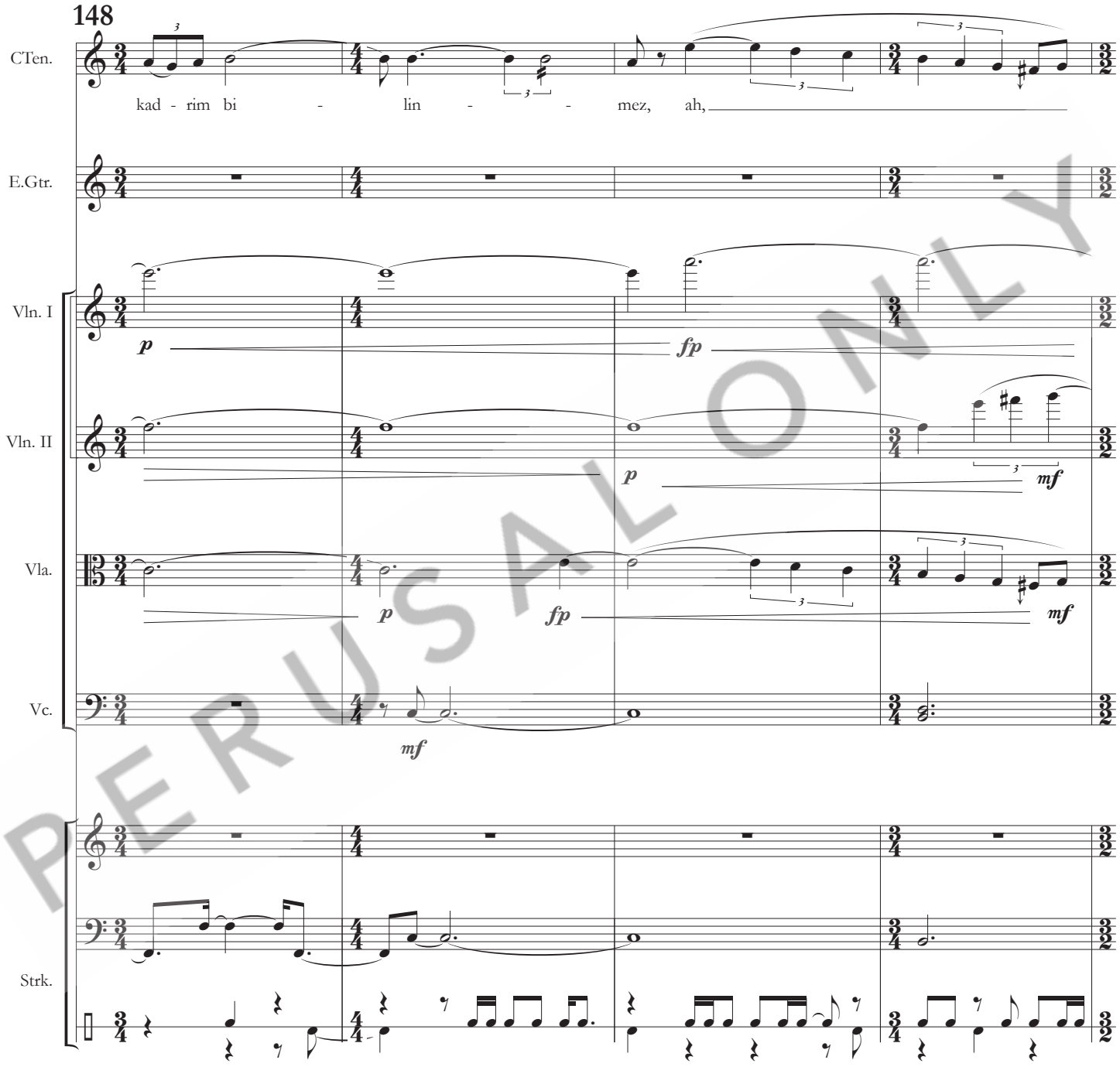
PERUSAL ONLY



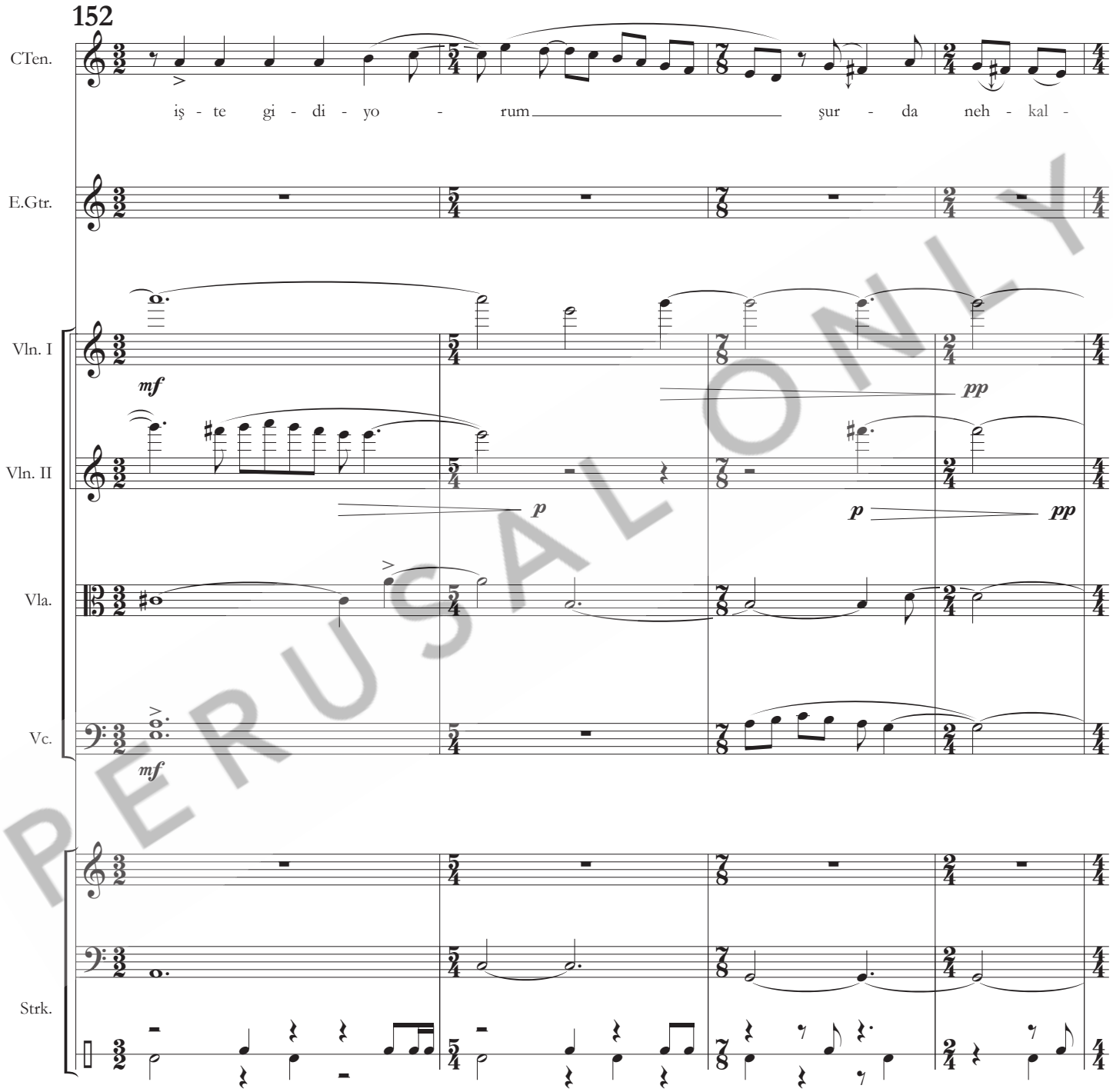
PERUSAL ONLY



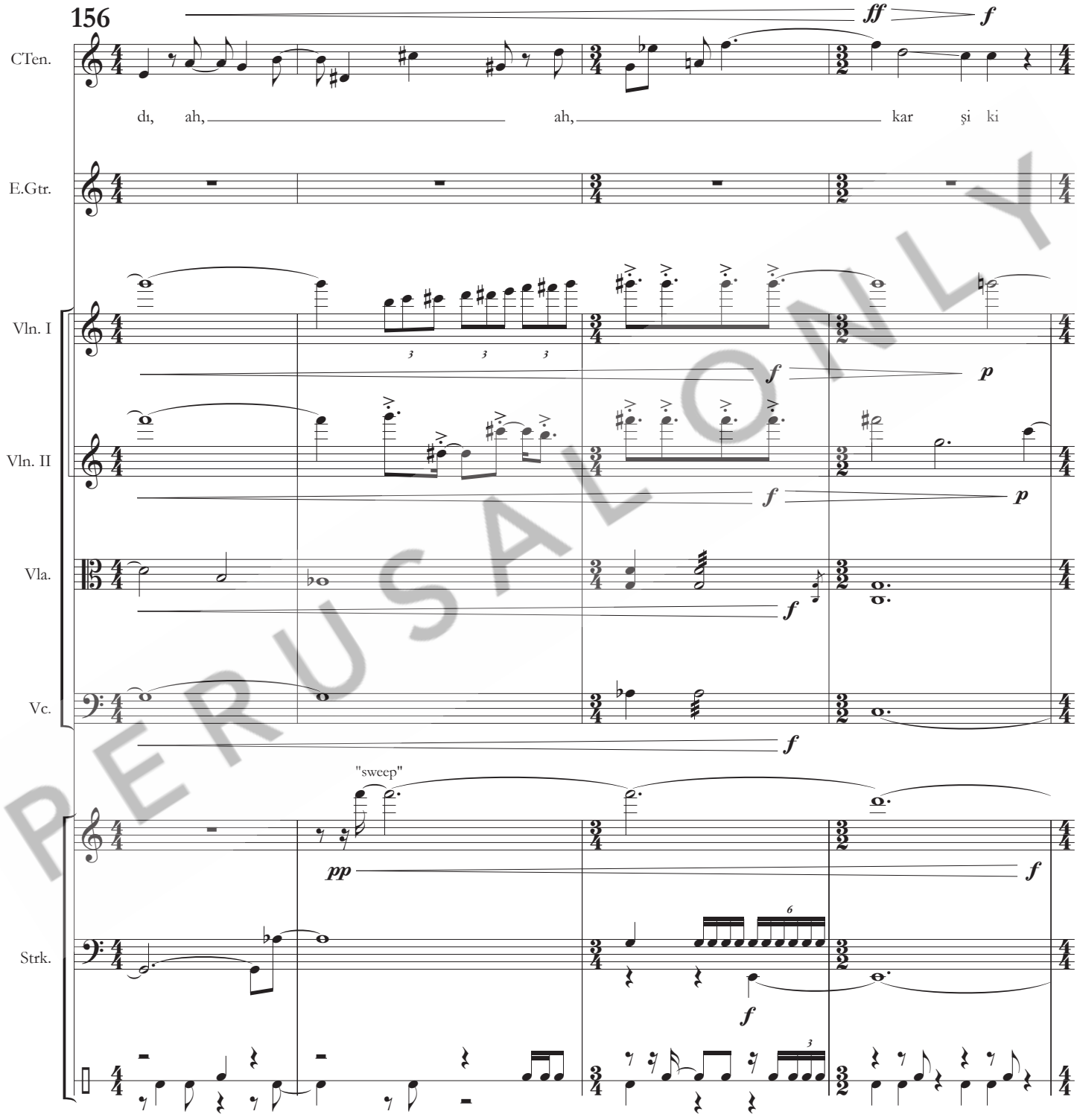
PERUSAL ONLY



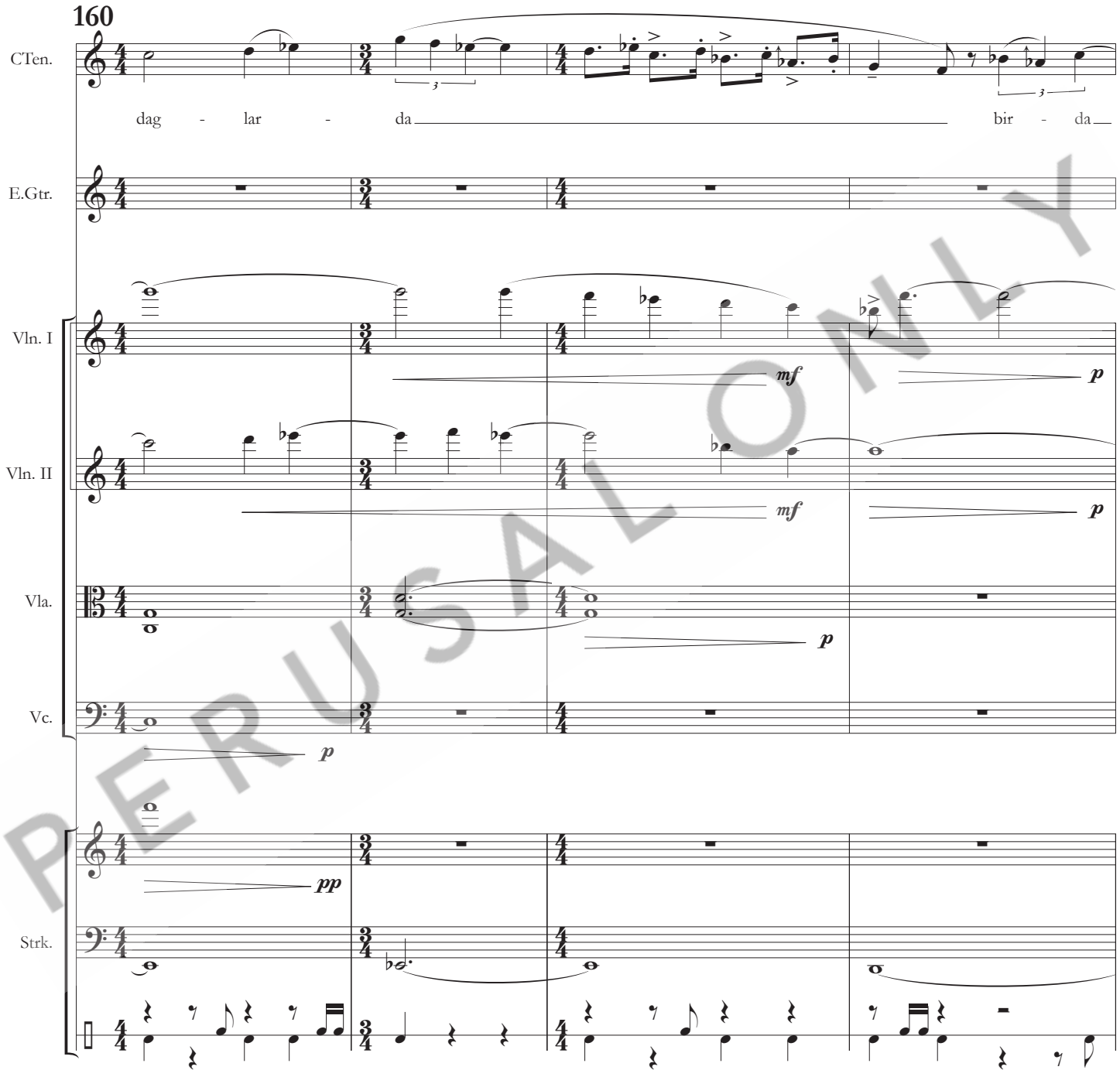
PERUSAL ONLY



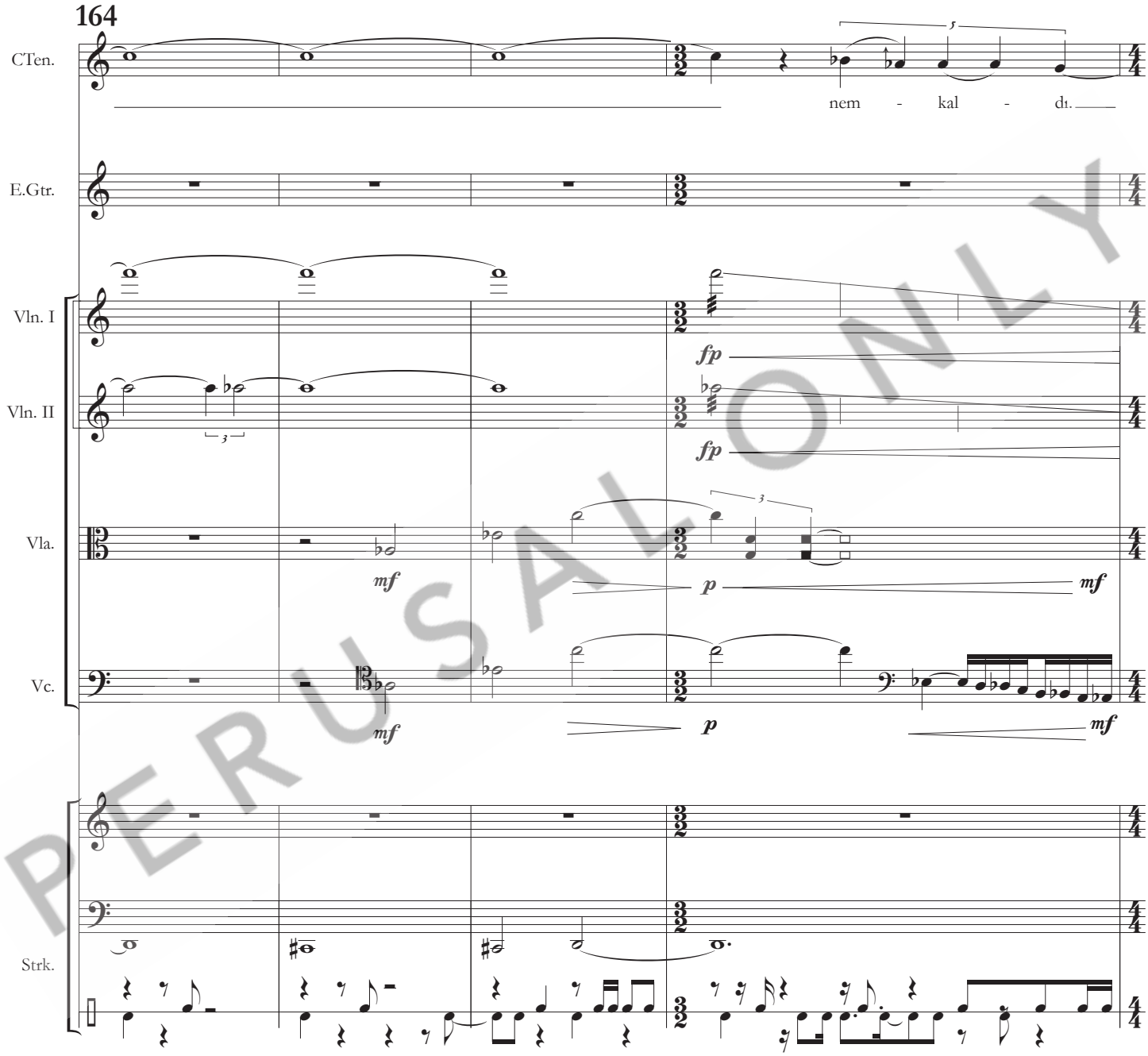
PERUSAL ONLY



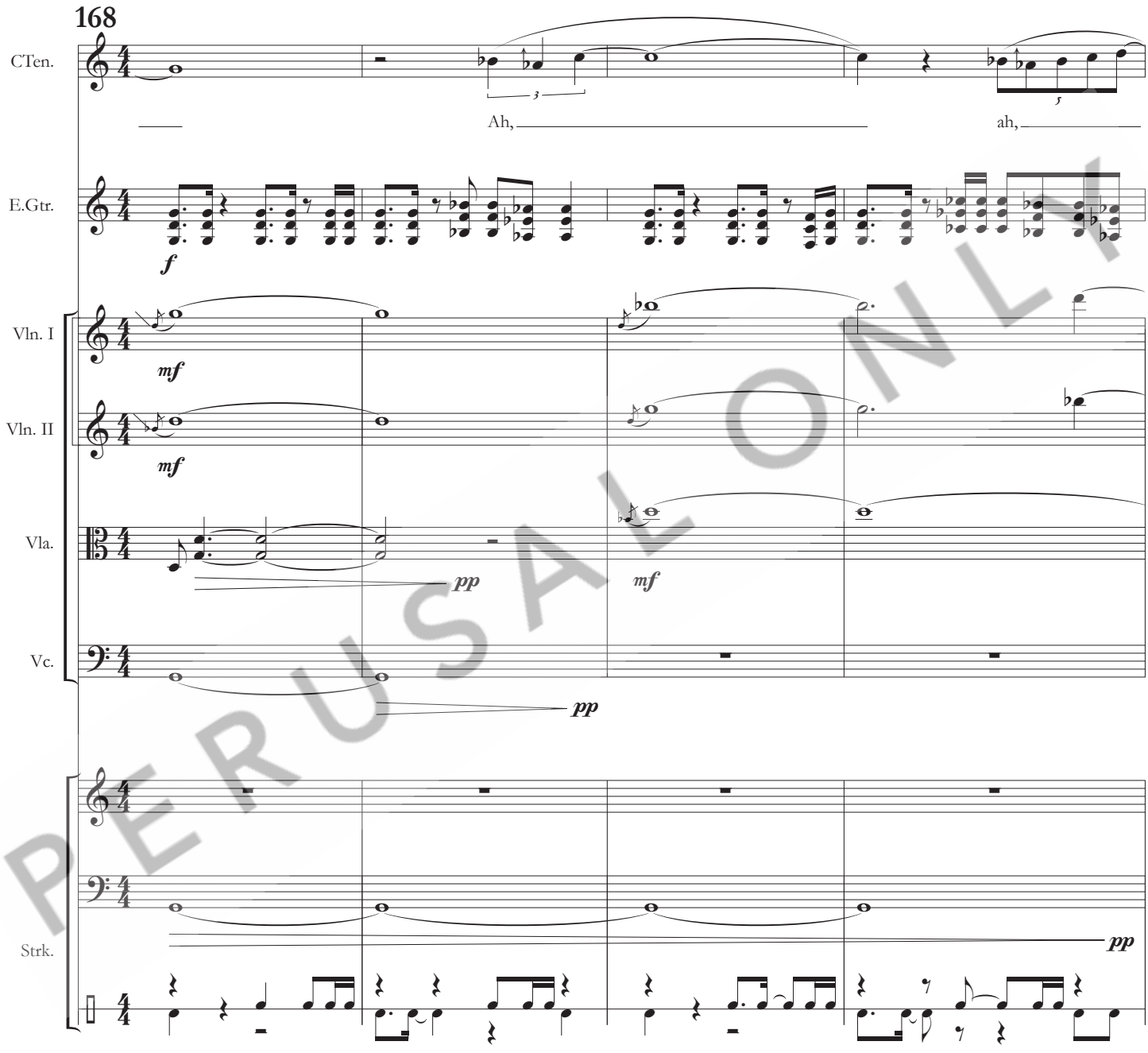
PERUSAL ONLY



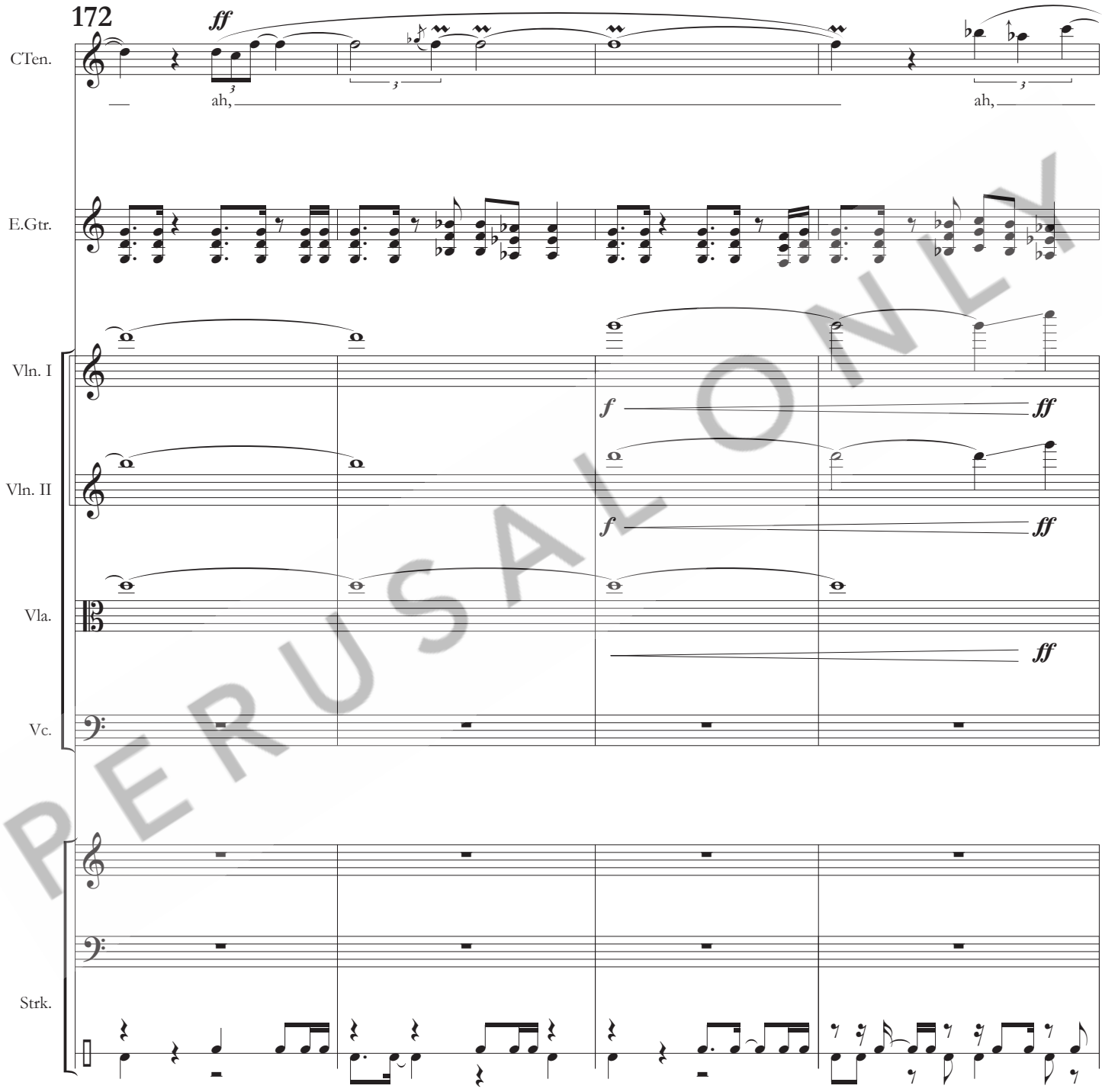
PERUSAL ONLY



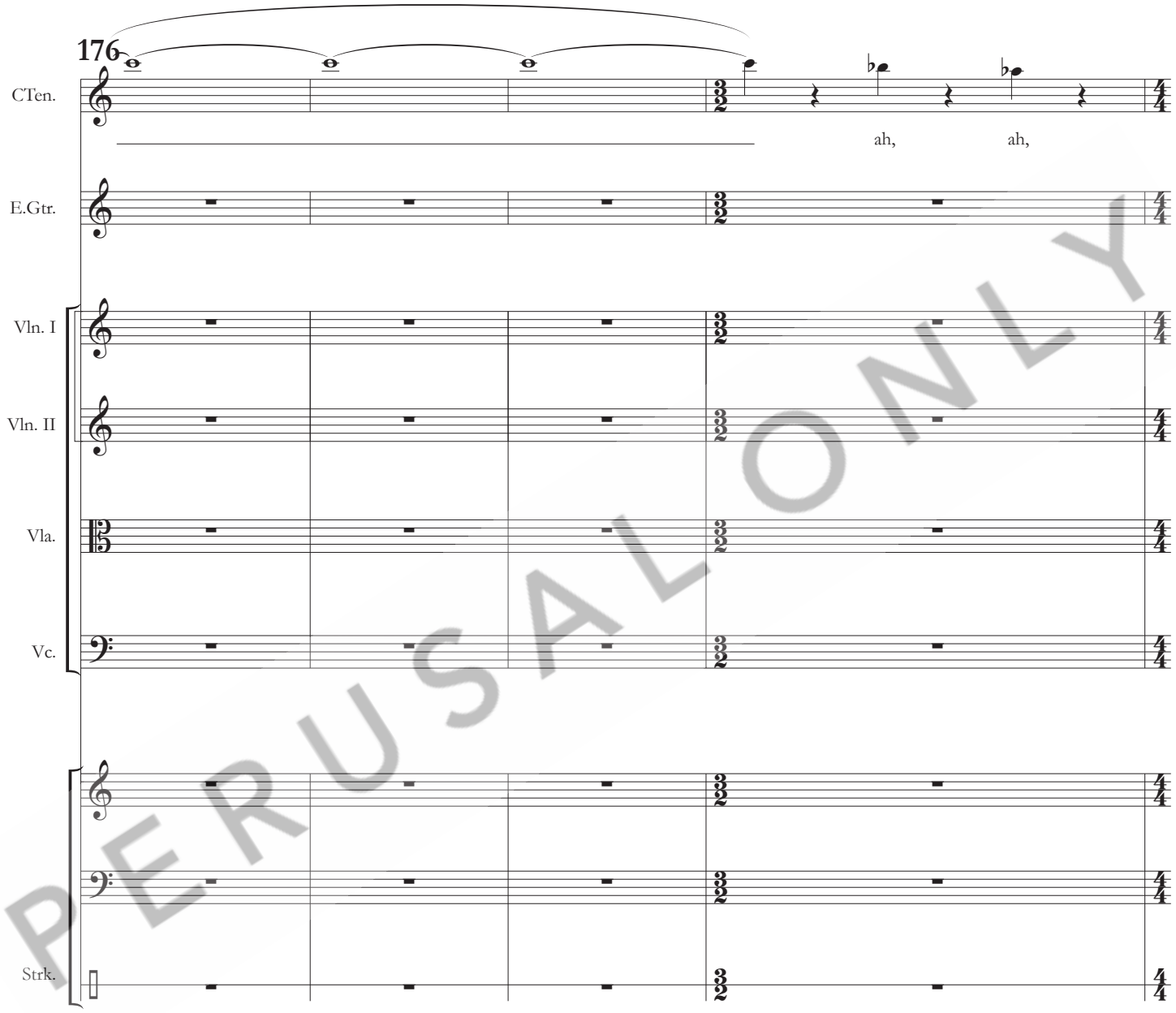
PERUSAL ONLY



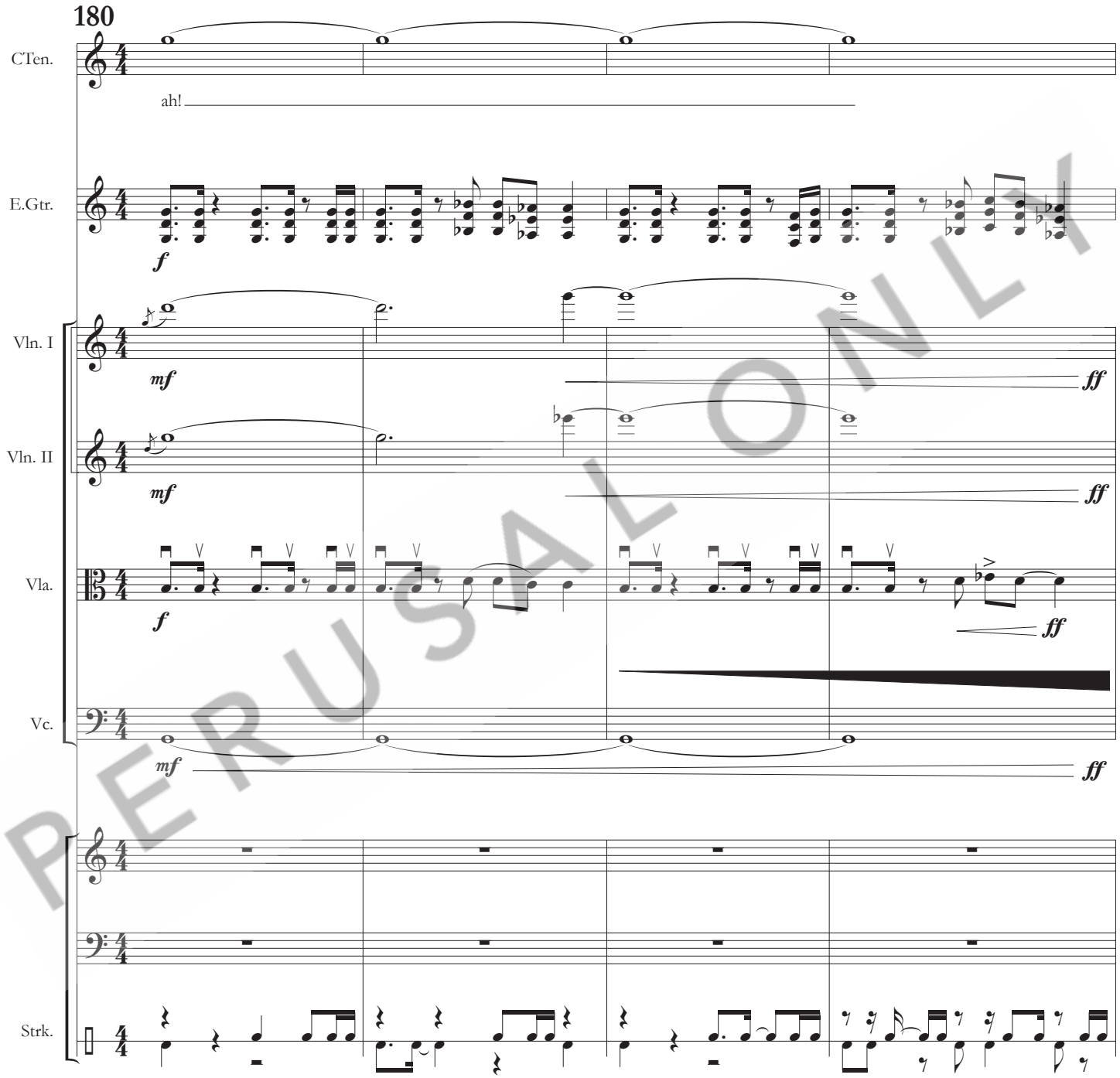
PERUSAL ONLY



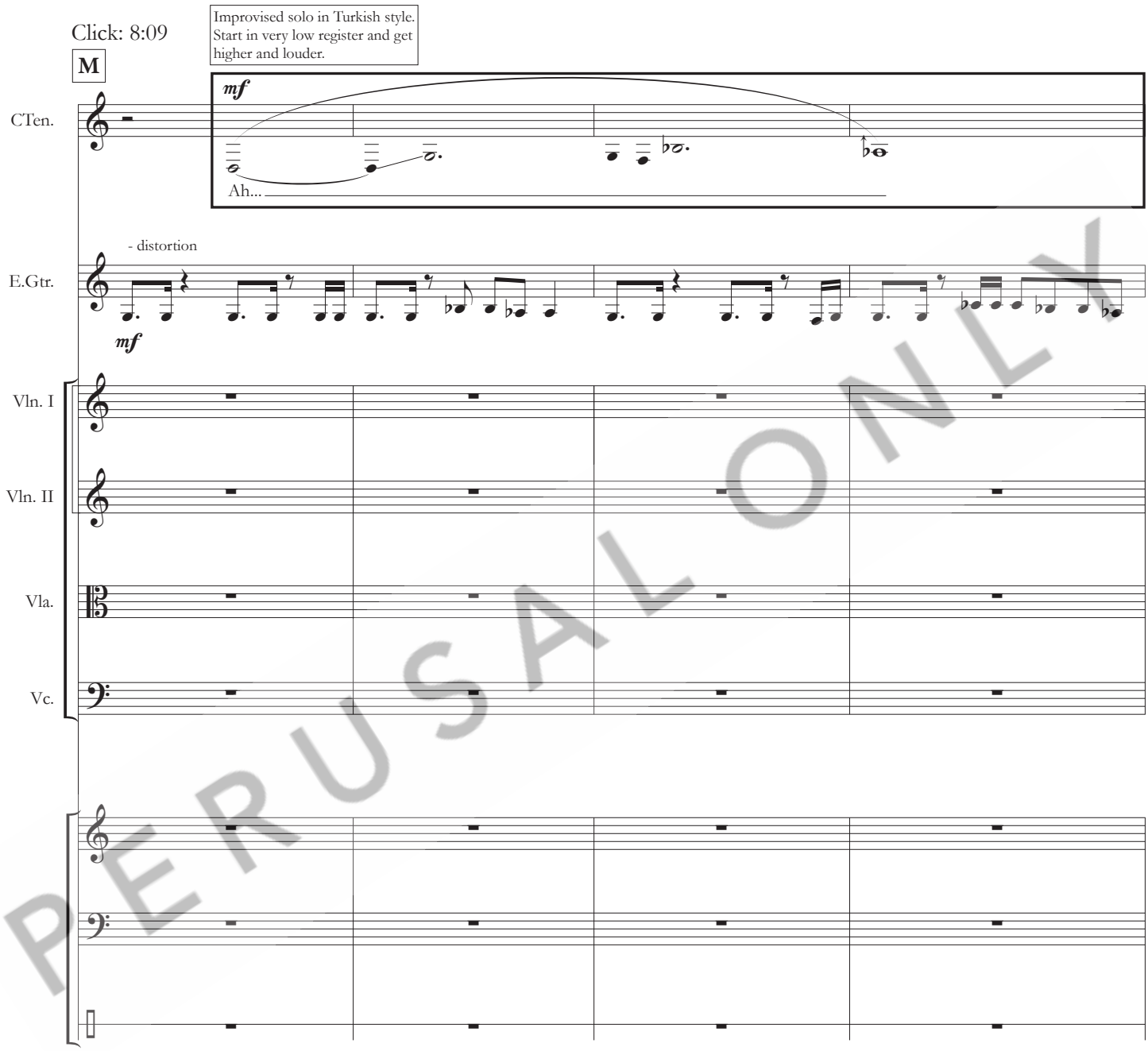
PERUSAL ONLY



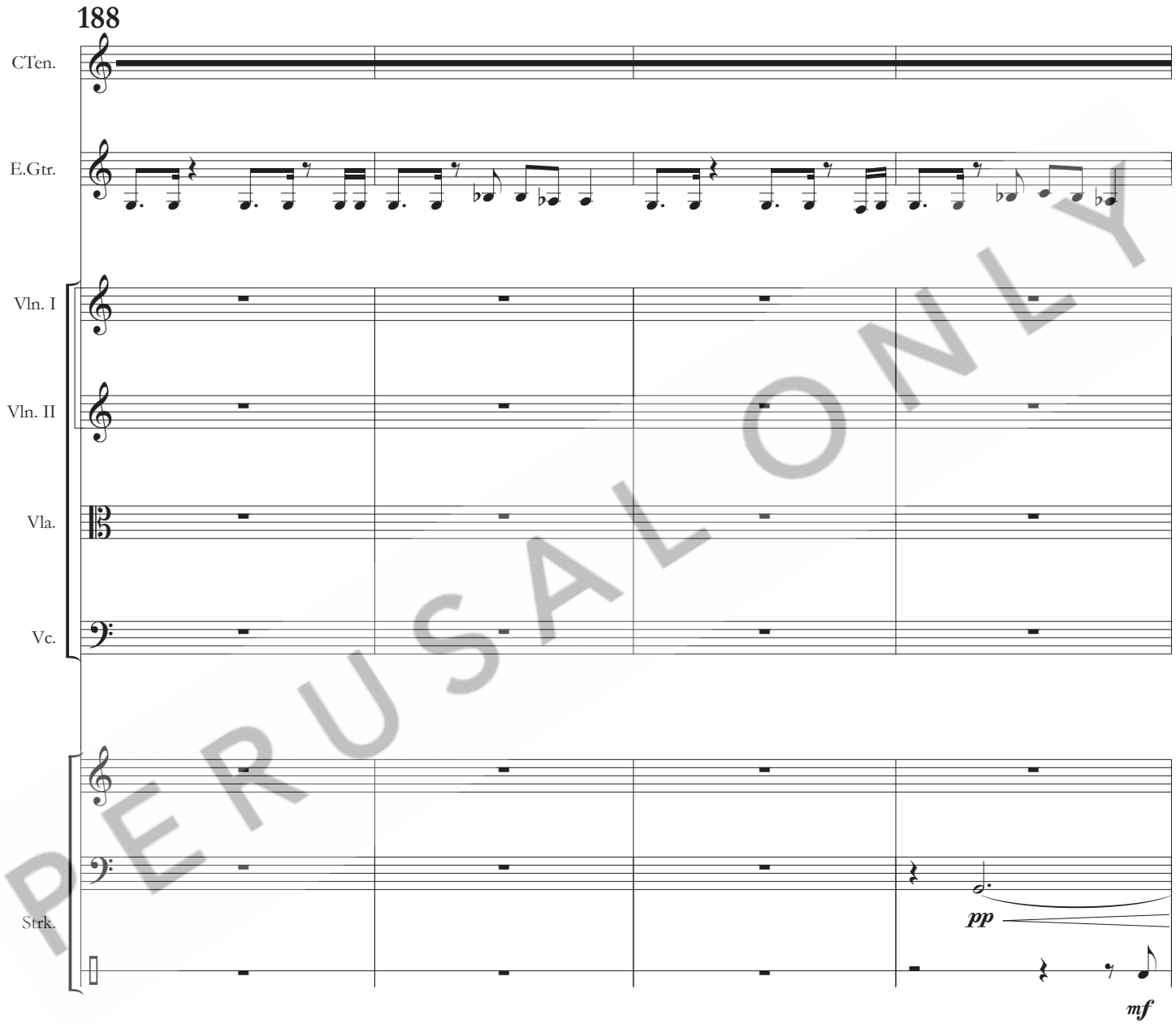
PERUSAL ONLY



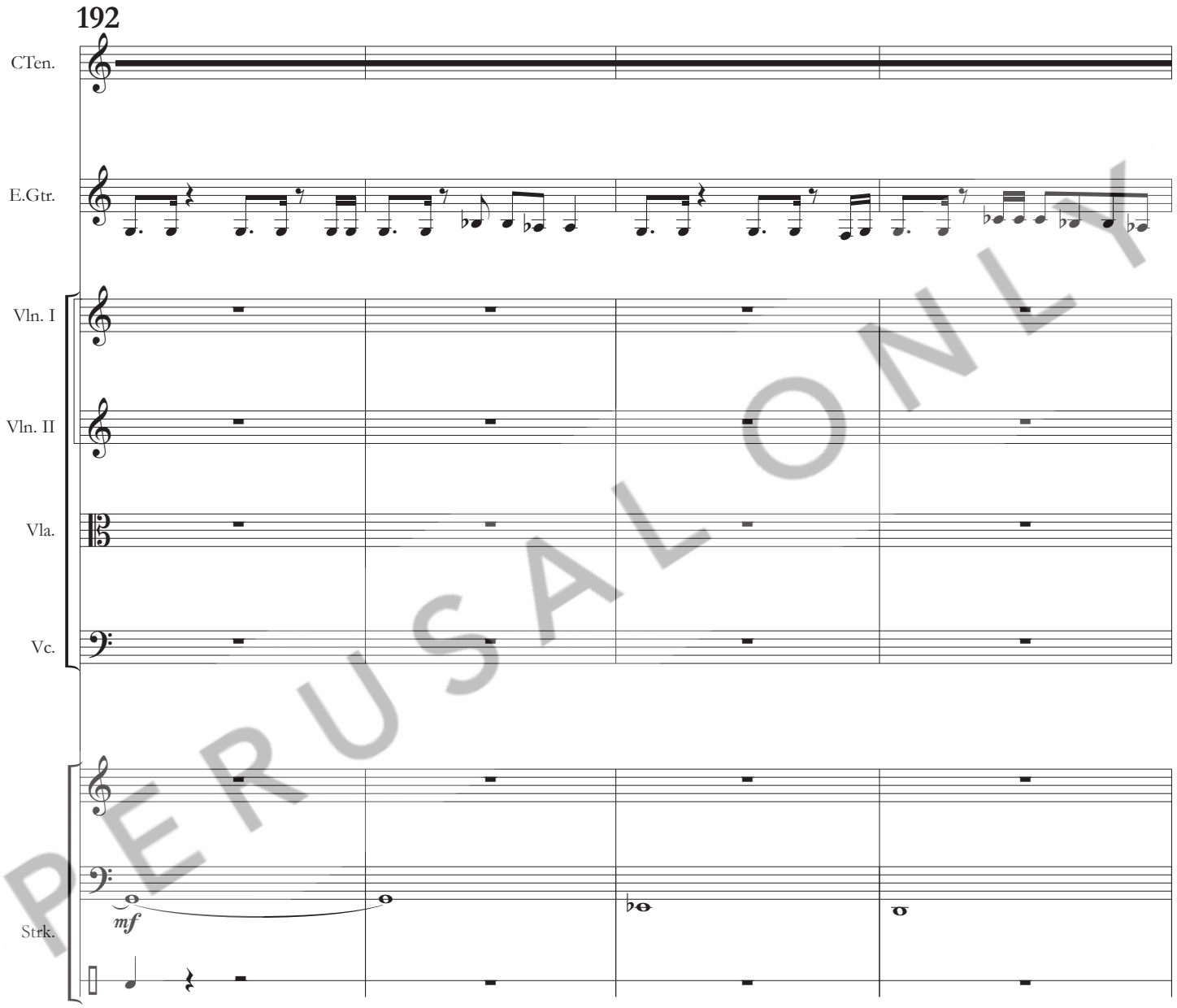
PERUSAL ONLY



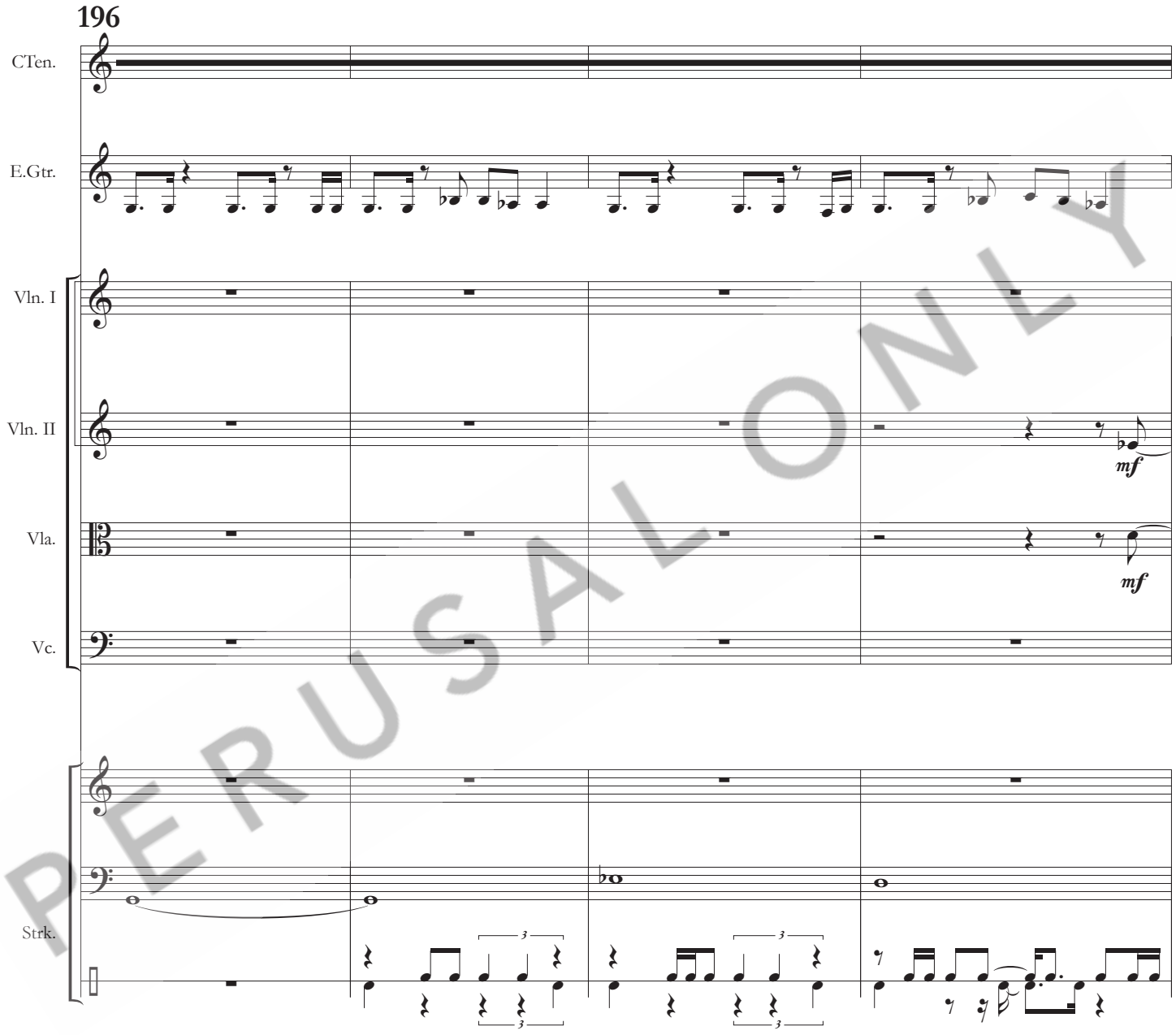
PERUSAL ONLY



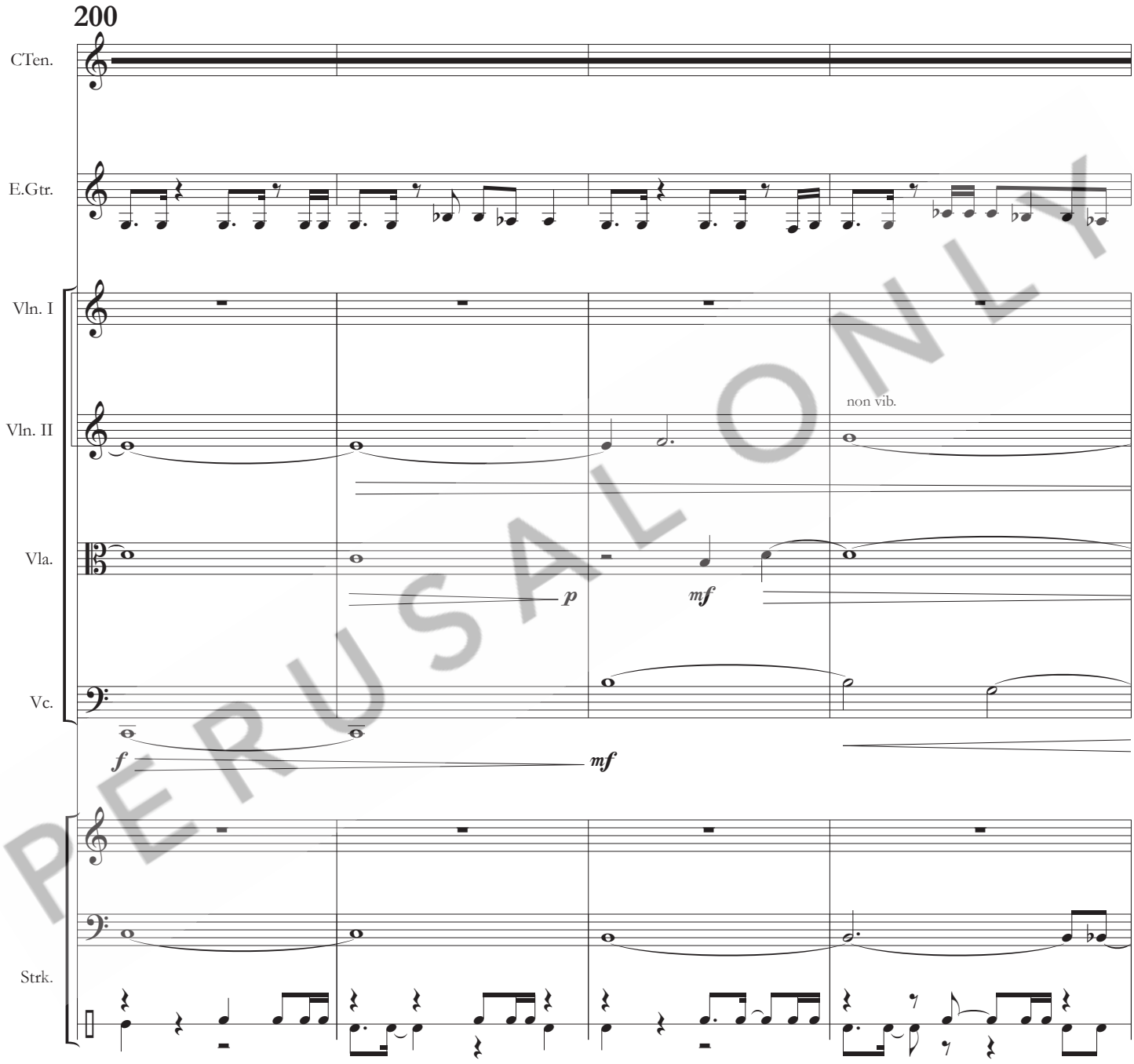
PERUSAL ONLY



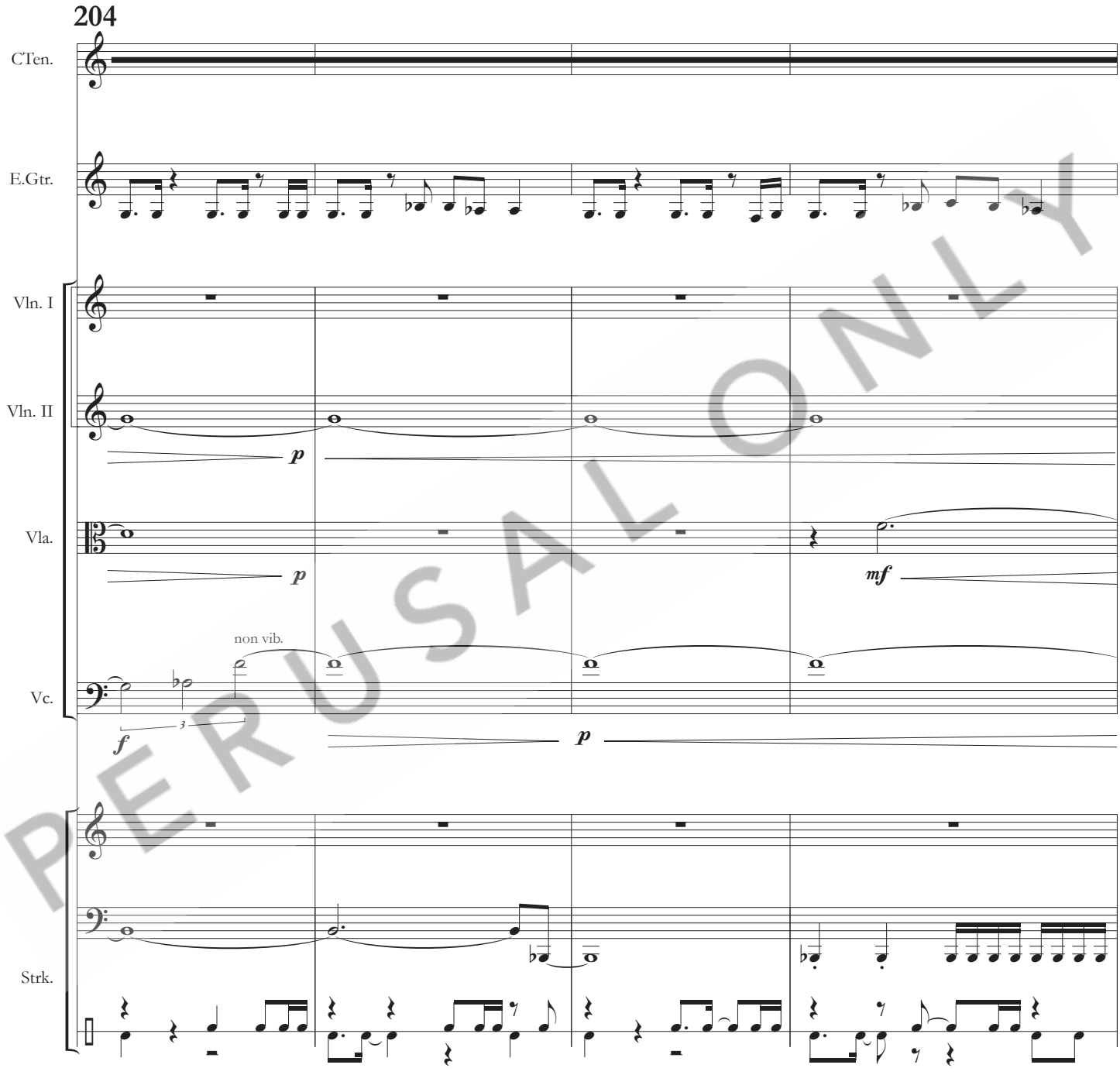
PERUSAL ONLY



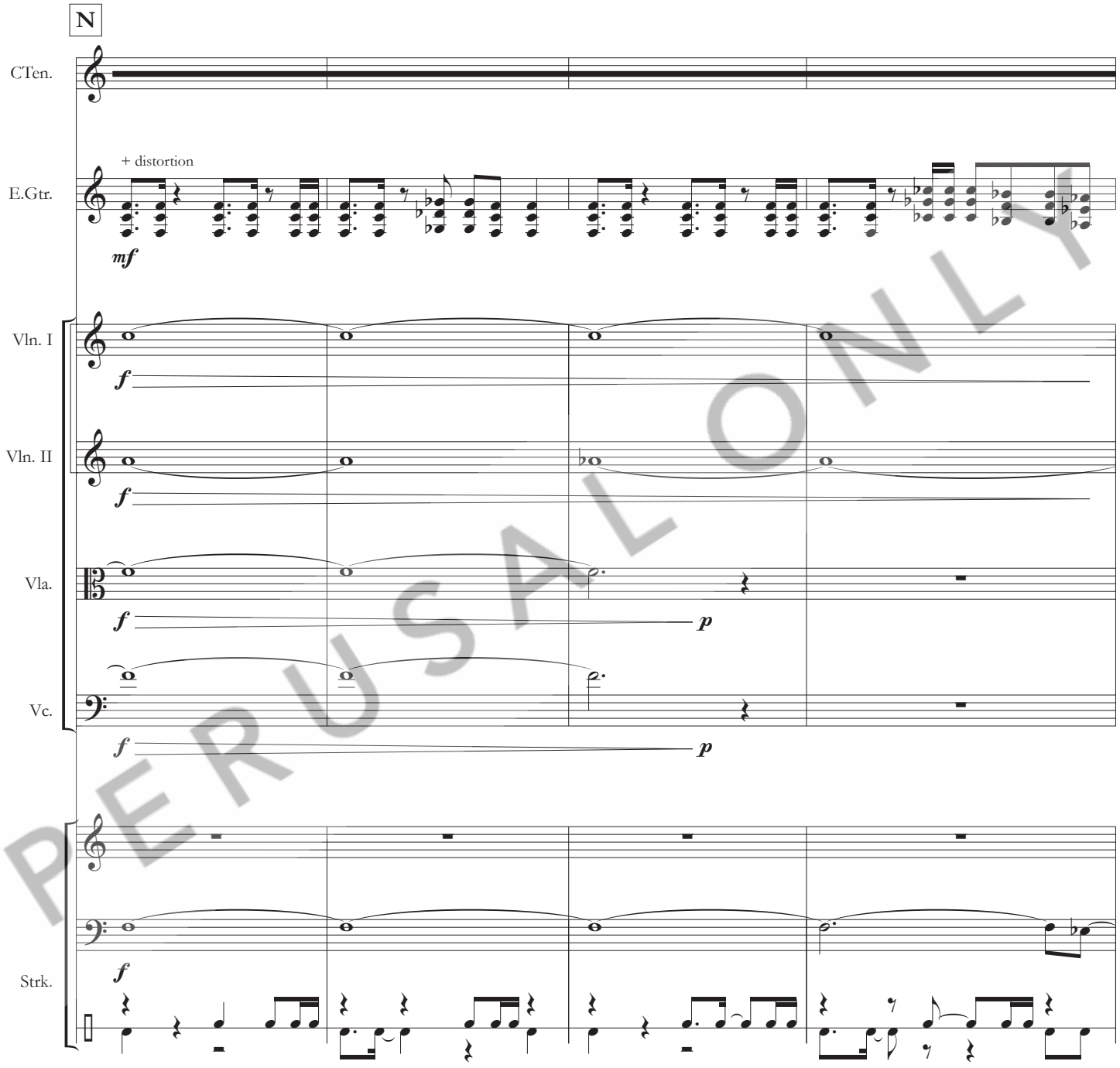
PERUSAL ONLY



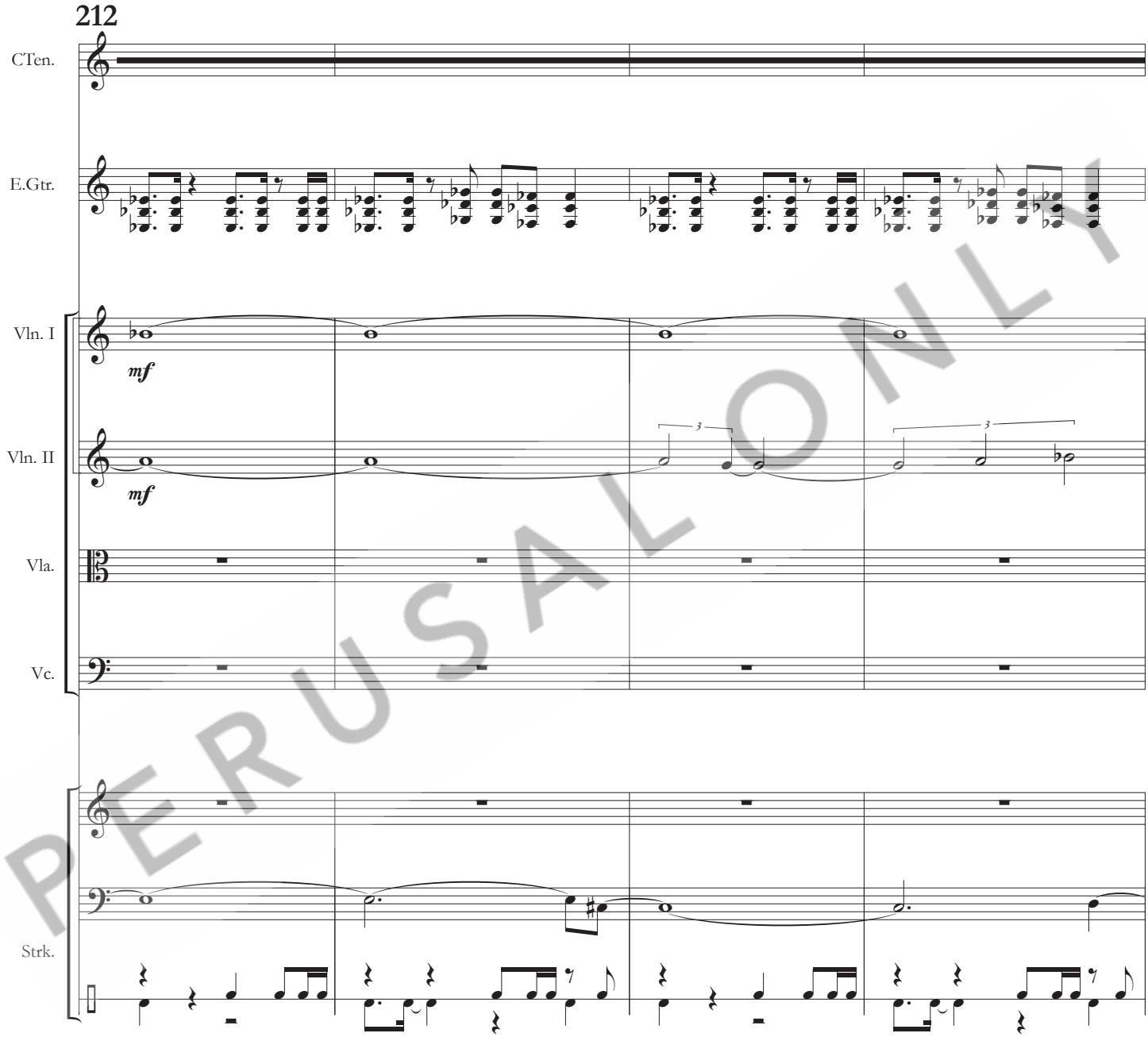
PERUSAL ONLY



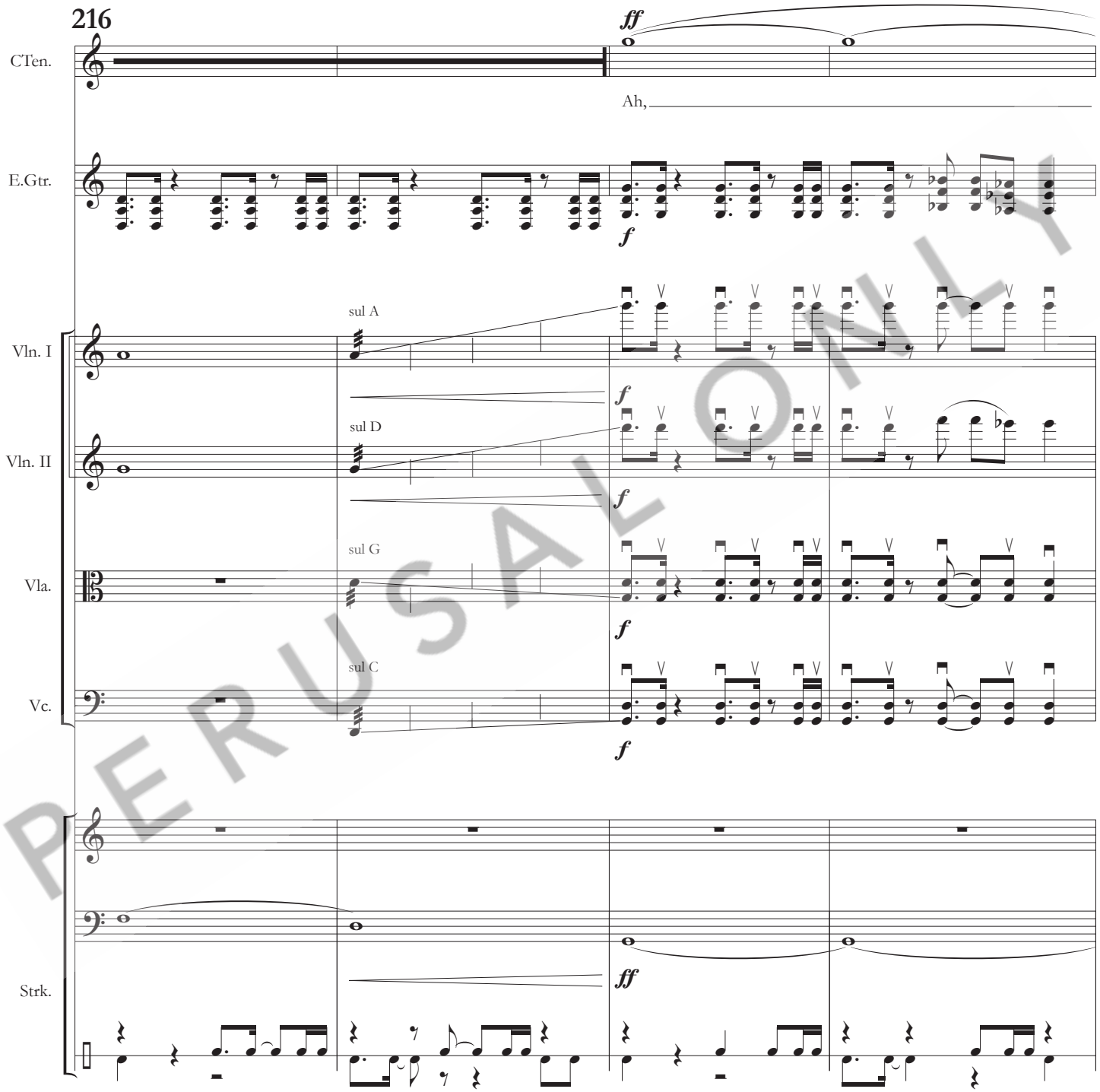
PERUSAL ONLY



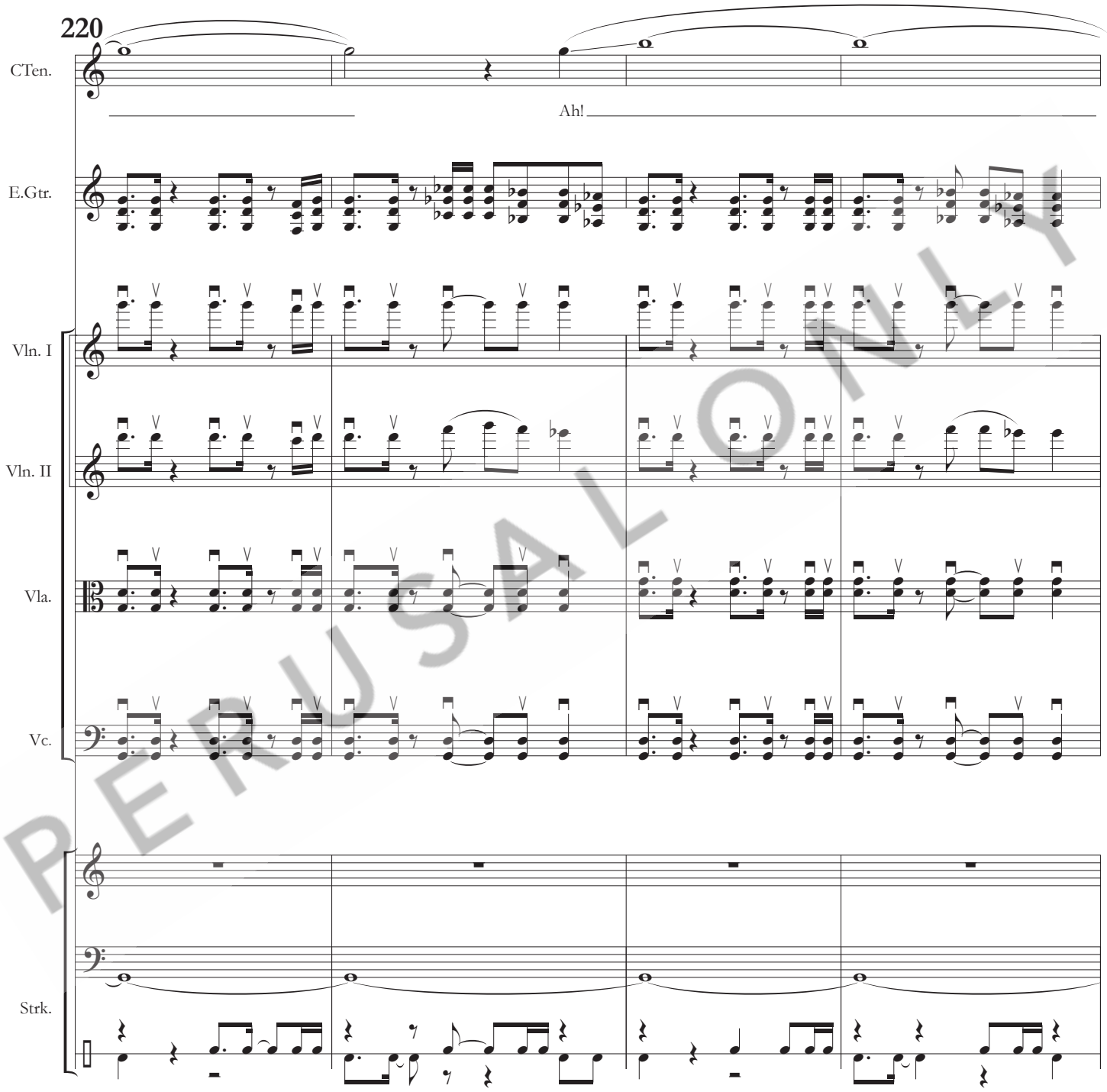
PERUSAL ONLY



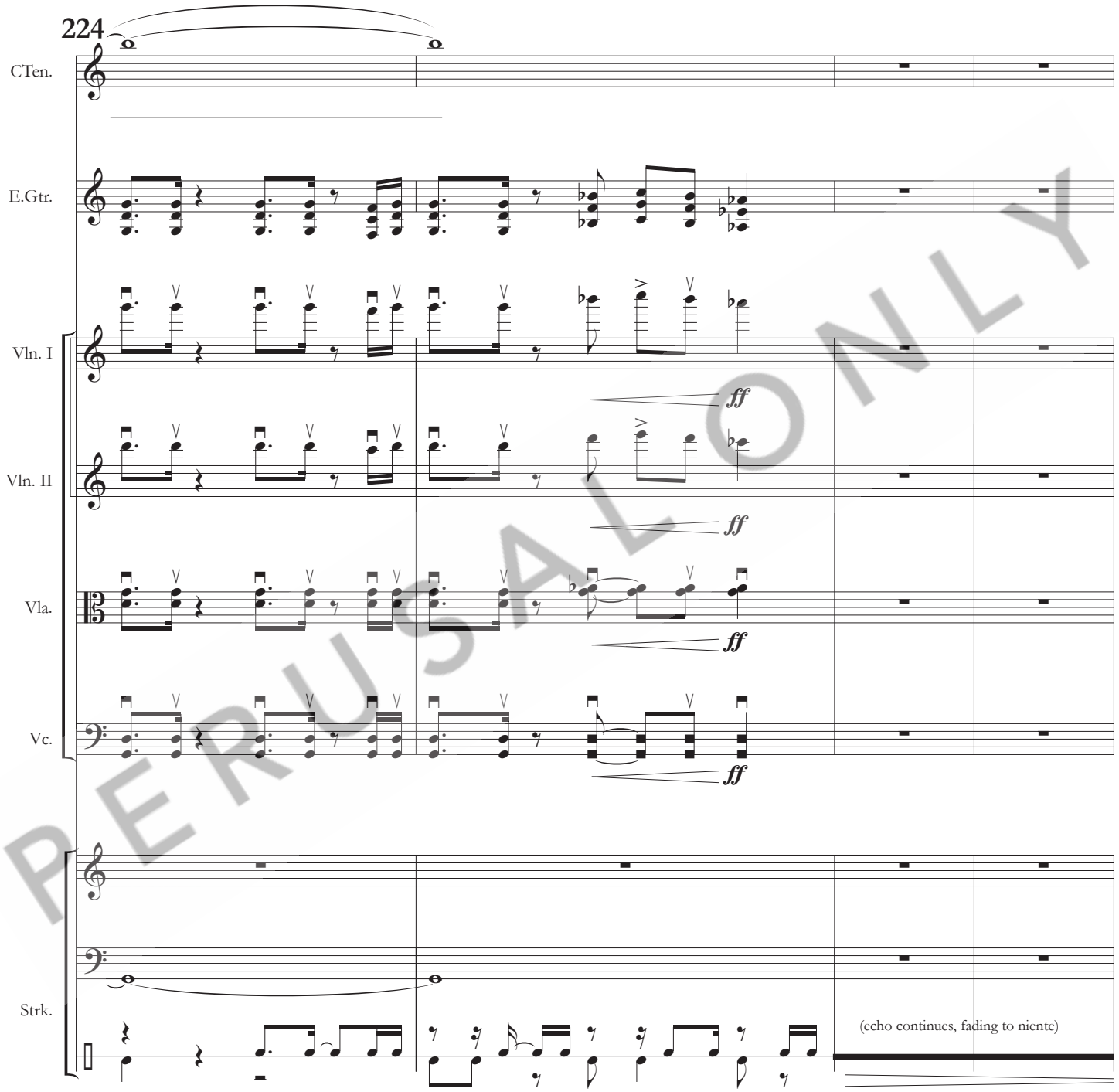
PERUSAL ONLY



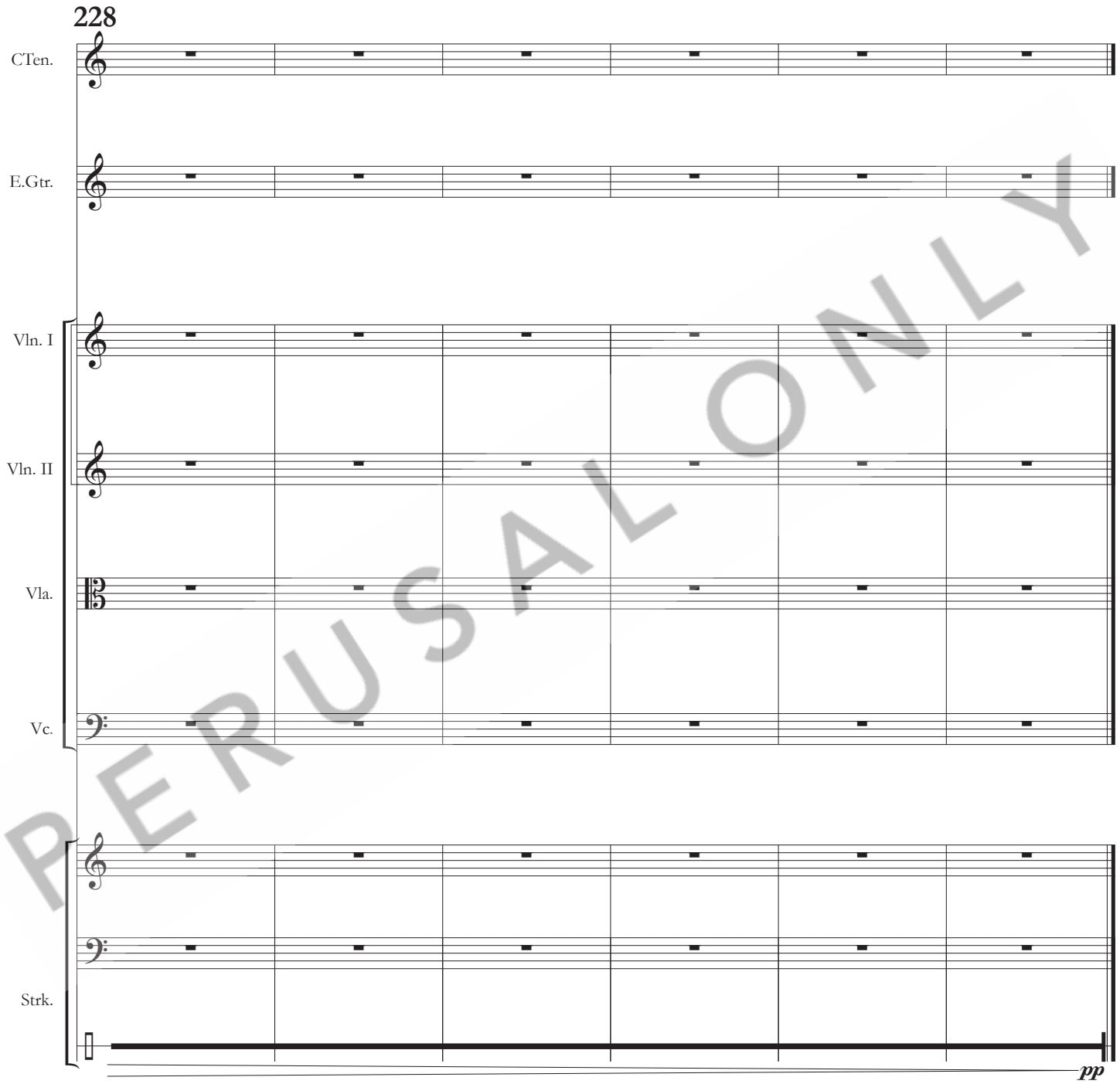
PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY



PERUSAL ONLY

January 15th, 2018
San Francisco, CA

PERUSAL ONLY