SCORE

SO VAST A SWEETNESS/ AMHERST

FOR SOLO PIANO

JON PAUL MAYSE

PROGRAM NOTES

In August 1870, after 8 years of exchanging correspondence, the minister, author, abolitionist, and publisher Thomas Wentworth Higginson and poet Emily Dickinson met at her home in Amherst. He was only there for an hour, during which he sat, unable to get a word in edgewise, as this faint, childlike figure spoke unbroken about her life and her thoughts. He left, feeling she had "an excess of tension...[from] an abnormal life...She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods..."

After he left, he received a letter, which began:

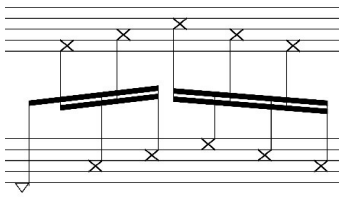
Enough is so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs, only pathetic counterfeits.

I'm struck by an image of this woman, seated at her desk by the window of her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, writing in her private journal these little poems, these little crystalline perfections, of such precision, clarity, and profound humanity, poems which would echo out like ice cracking on a frozen pond in a Massachusetts winter. And to this woman, whose inner thoughts would become part of the American consciousness, her dear friend Thomas' act of listening in that single hour they would share together was Enough.

I imagine this piece to be something like those poems. A tiny, human sound resonating over a quiet flurry of activity, asking to be listened to.

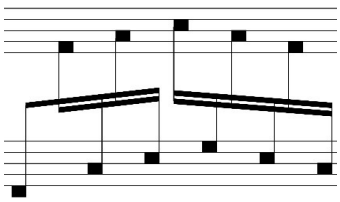
TECHNICAL NOTES

'X' Noteheads:



Strike the fallboard of the piano. Downward triangle noteheads indicates the wood at the left end of the keyboard. Pitches suggest a sensation of rising and falling to be made in the sound, not actual pitches. Ideal sound is round, not sharp and bright.

Square Noteheads:



Strike the top of the keys with the tips of your fingers, without triggering the hammer. Again, suggest the rising and falling of a barcarole, but not actual pitches. Ideal sound should be brighter than the wood, but never tinny.

Sound and Touch:

This is not a virtuosic piece. The pianist should cultivate a relaxed presence, even during difficult passages.

The sound-world should be resonant, with the pedal down for entire piece. Percussive sounds on the wood should be hard enough to cause the strings to resonate, but not so present that they overwhelm the resonance. Pitched notes should accumulate in the resonance, then be allowed to dissipate when there are repetitive gestures.

There should be a close balance between the percussive sounds and the pitched sounds. While there is a global *p* dynamic, there is flexibility within that dynamic. Most shaping should be done with touch rather than great dynamic contrasts.

Meter is extremely important. Follow the basic 6/8 pulse (duple with compound subdivision) and accent/gravity (accent on the downbeat, rising softly to a lighter '4,' falling back to a strong '1'). Support this with tasteful rubato, if desired, never Romantic.

When there are short repetitive gestures (m. 9, 21, 40, 51, 79), play evenly without accent, allowing the pulse to dissipate.

For m. 32, allow for plenty of time in the middle of the bar for the grace note gesture, making sure to bring the pulse back in the next beat.

Pitches and rests are placed very carefully within the prevailing 6/8 pulse. Offbeats are meant as anticipations on the first half of the bar and resolved suspensions on the second half.

Touch, for notes played normally, should always be light. Often, a touch just past escapement is enough. The ideal balance is muted, with a sharp onset, to crack the resonance, but with enough power to create a sustaining sound.

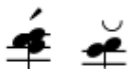
Arpeggio lines indicate chords which should be played without coordination. Those with arrows indicate a directed arpeggio.

Individual Moments

In m. 43, do not emphasize the octave sound. This sonority has the tendency to stick out, which should be avoided.

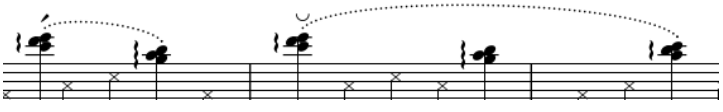
In m. 51-56, continue tapping on the keys indicated while under the dashed line. Introduce and take away the pitches while maintaining the tapping of the indicated keys.

Stress



Stressed (') and **Unstressed** (ᵕ) markings.

Stresses are different than standard accents in that they shouldn't be 'sharper' in tone; rather, stressed notes should be emphasized with weight, as you would in vocal/musical phrasing. These markings represent how you should stress the pitched material in relation to other pitched moments, regardless of the usual metrical accent structure (which should still be present).



When placed with dotted slurs, the stressed and unstressed symbols refer to the slurred phrases.

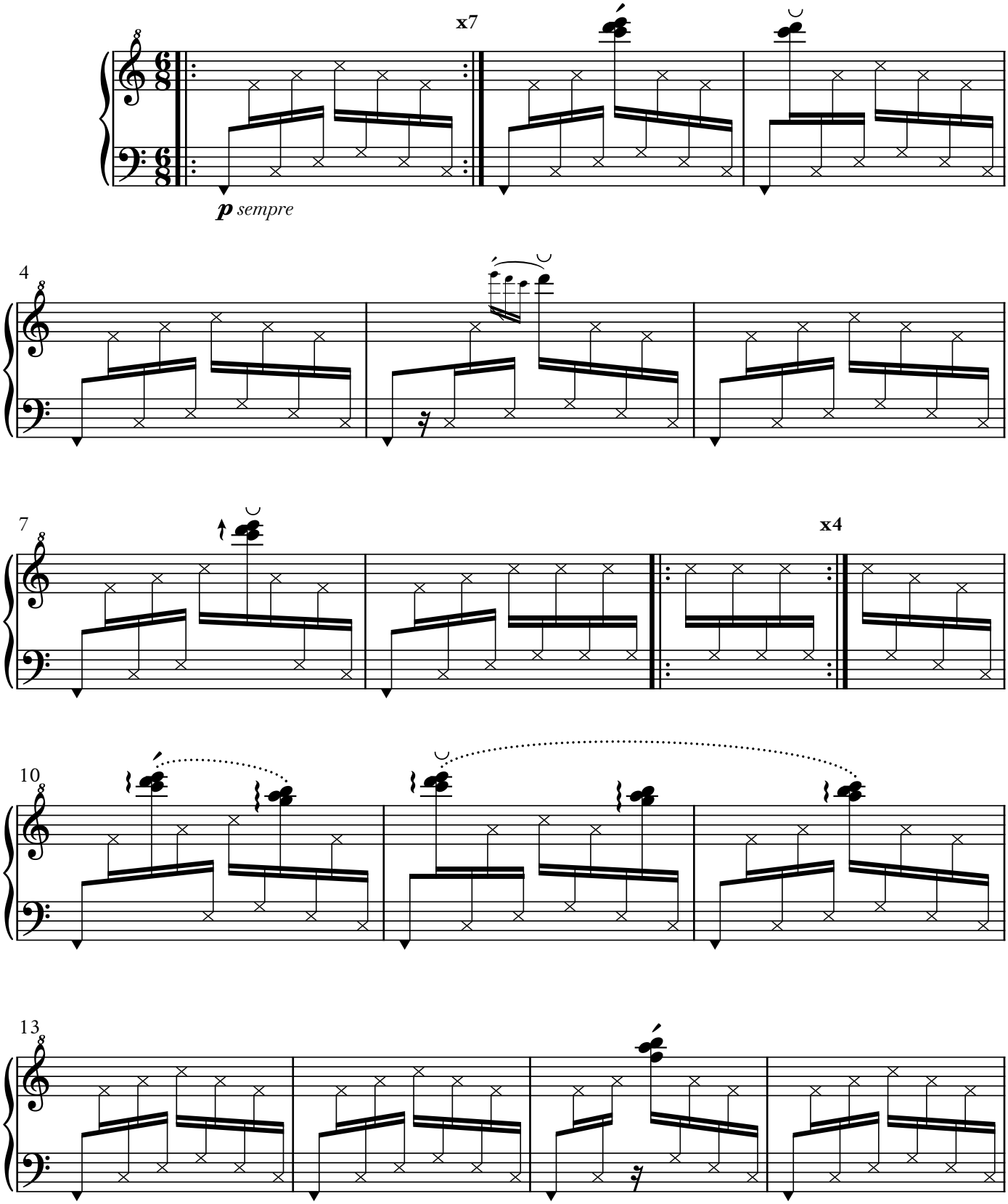
©2021 Jon Paul Mayse

so vast a sweetness / Amherst

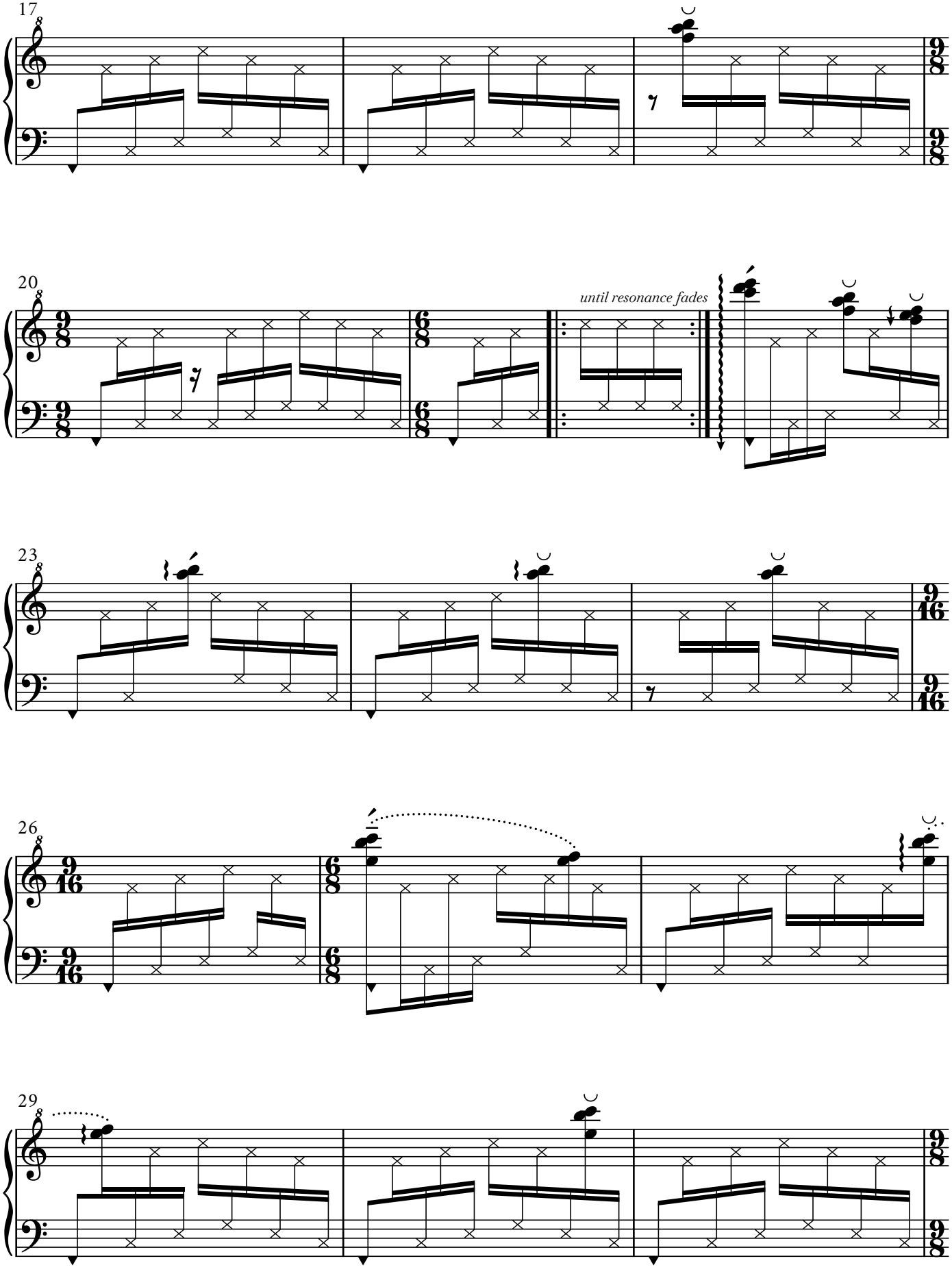
for solo piano

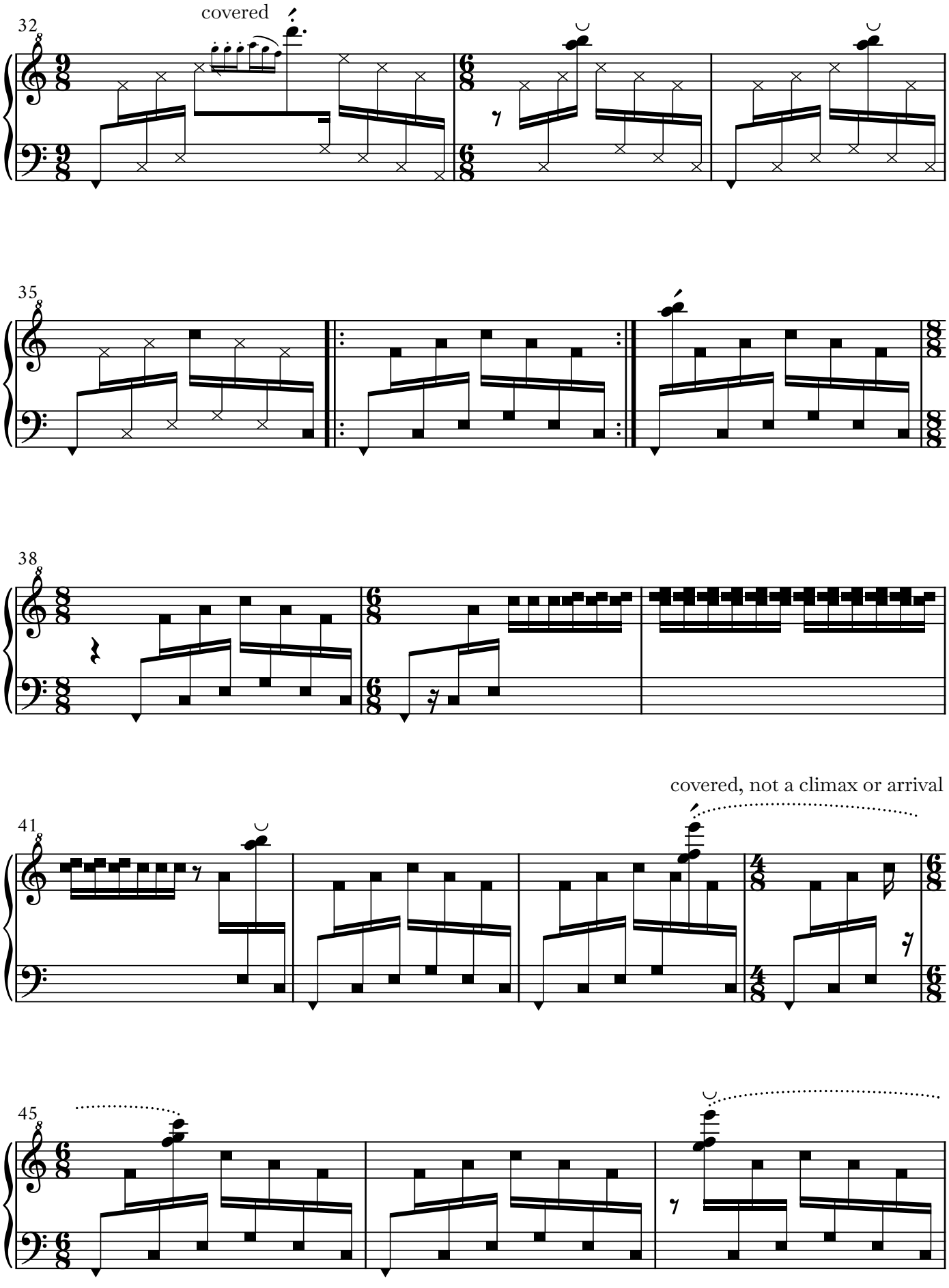
Jon Paul Mayse

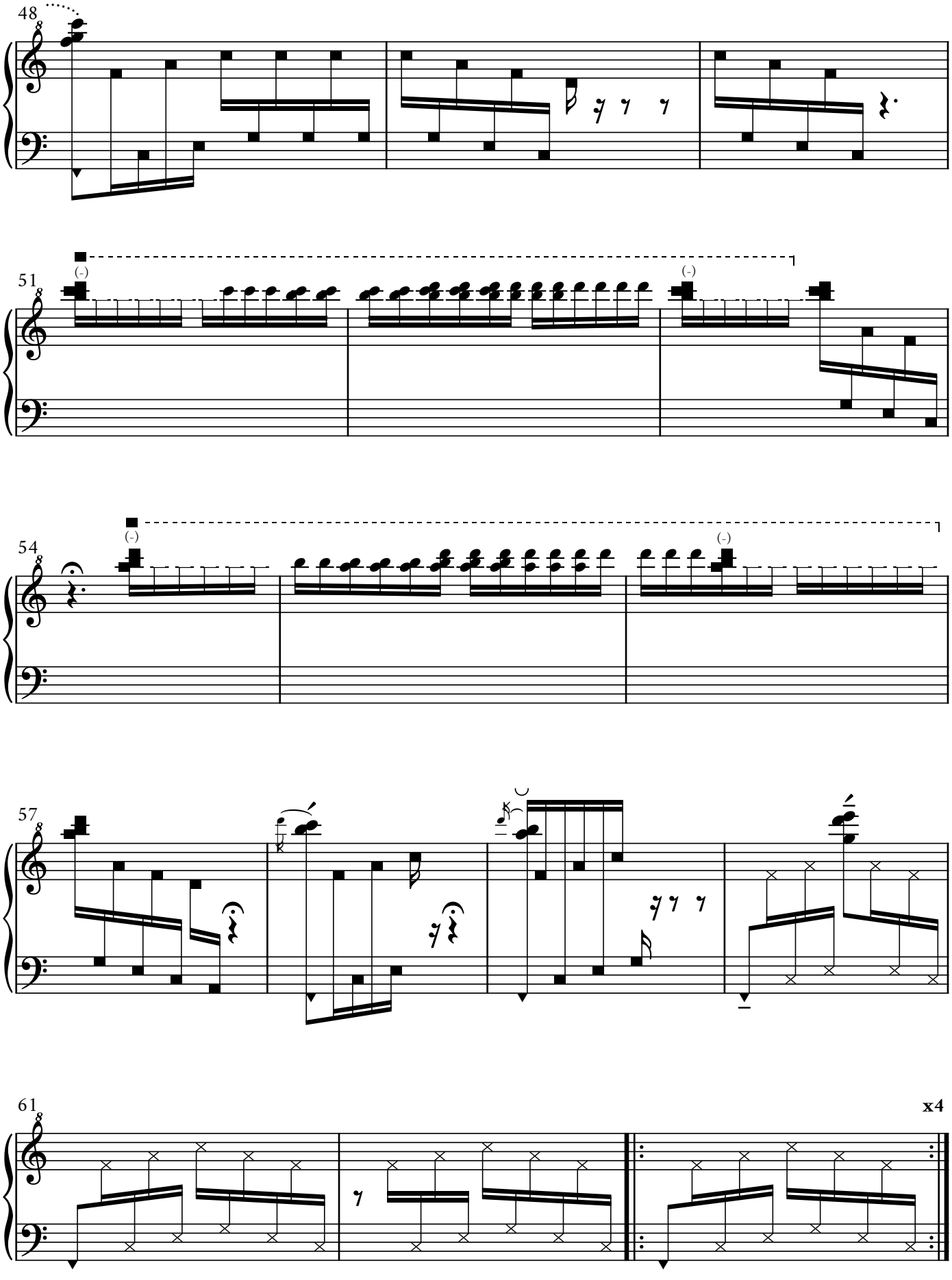
placid, like ice cracking on a frozen lake ♩. = 56

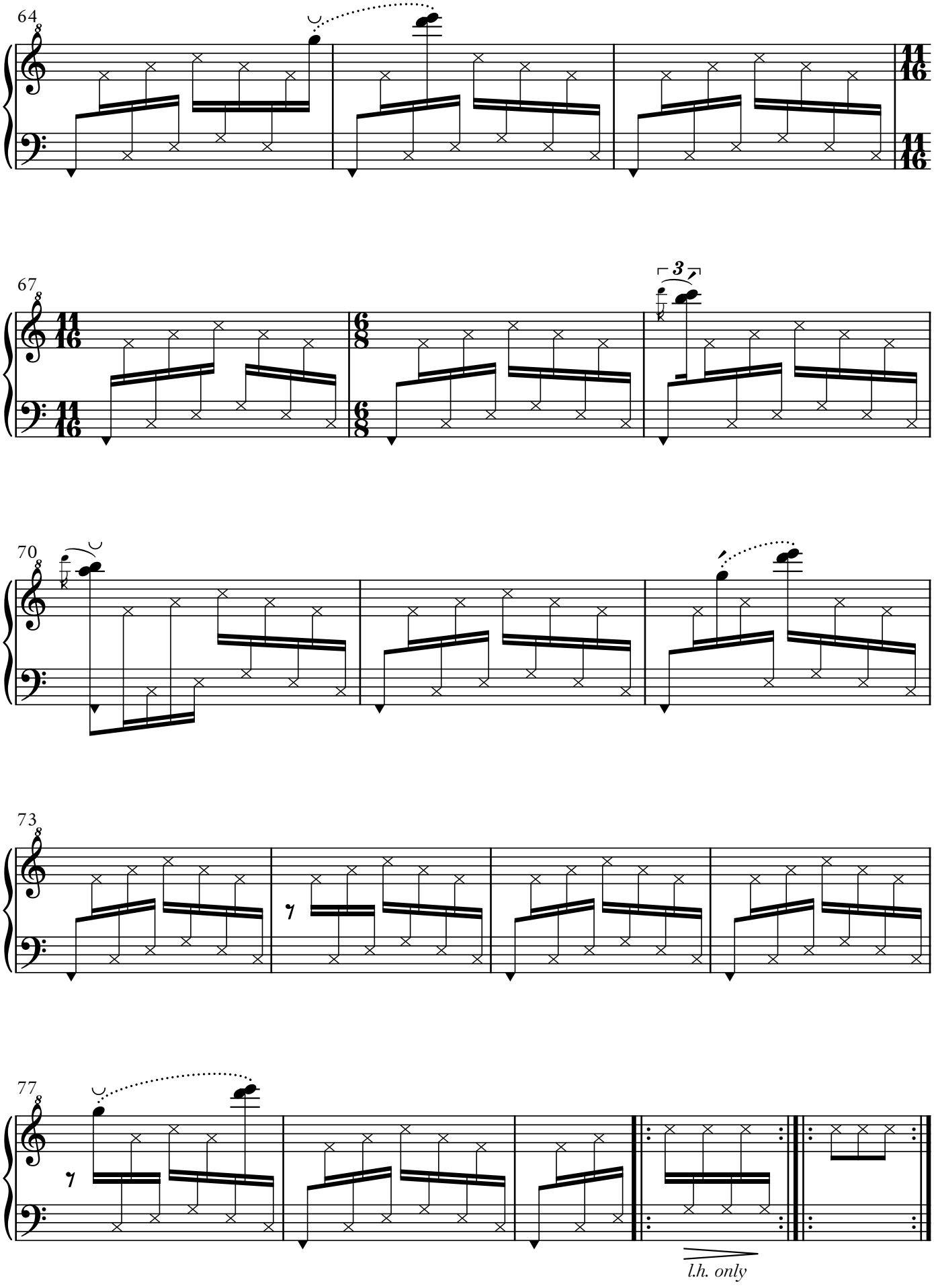


©2021 Jon Paul Mayse

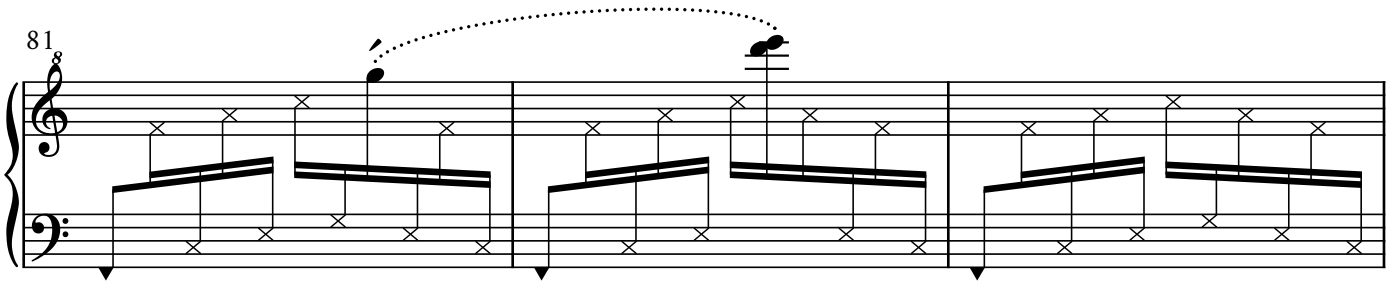

17
20
until resonance fades
23
26
29


32
covered
35
38
41
covered, not a climax or arrival
45

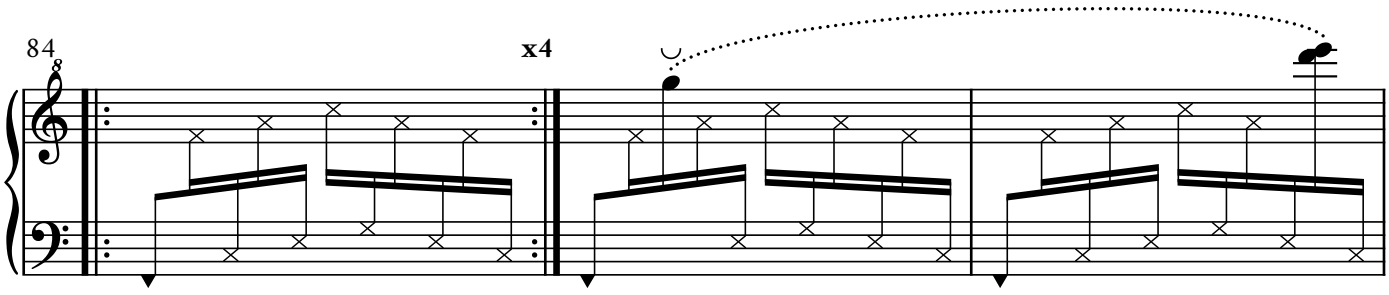
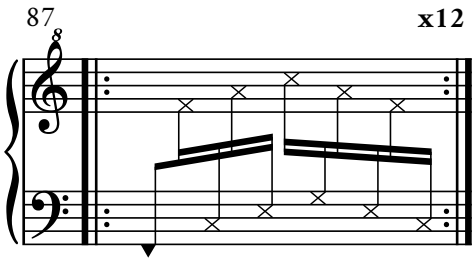

48
51
(-)
(-)
54
(-)
(-)
57
61
x4


64
67
3
70
73
77
l.h. only

81



84



87