The Severn Suite (Op. 87)

Edward Elgar

The Severn Suite (Op.87) was composed by Elgar when he was 73 as a test piece for the 1930 British National Brass Band Championships. Elgar dedicated it to his friend, the author and critic George Bernard Shaw. Some critics consider the Severn Suite to be Elgar's best work in his later years, arguing that is a neglected masterpiece. The work is very "Elgarian" in the high Romantic style. It is fine music originally composed for brass by a famous acknowledged master that will be enjoyable for players and audiences alike. The duration of the full piece is around 16:30 and includes five movements, that follow each other without breaks: 1) Introduction (Worcester Castle) – *Pomposo (2:10)*, 2) Toccata (the Tournament Grounds) - *Allegro molto (4:20)*, 3) Fugue (The Cathedral) – *Andante (3:00)*, 4) Minuet (in the Commandery) (5:00) – *Moderato*, and 5) Coda - *Lento – Pomposo (2:00)*. The River Severn runs through the center of Worcester, England where Elgar spent his childhood and again lived in later life.

Despite what was thought for decades, it is now clear that Elgar produced a manuscript score for the full brass band written in C but intended to sound in Bb as had been the tradition for brass band transposed scores. That score surfaced in the late 1990's and is now in the Elgar Museum. Dr. Stephen Allen, professor of Music at Rider University and recognized Elgar scholar, utilized that Elgar manuscript to prepare a new 90th anniversary urtext critical edition of the brass band score and parts in 2020. The present arranger is grateful to Professor Allen for the opportunity to utilize his new critical edition as source material for this arrangement and for his suggestions.

The subtitles refer to historic places in Worcester, though the subtitles did not appear in Elgar's original brass band score and may have been added by the original publisher and perhaps not Elgar himself. It is however interesting to note that the subtitles do in fact appear on Elgar's own manuscript for his version for full orchestra, though they are said to be in someone else's handwriting.

For more information, there are at least 2 fairly recent articles that provide excellent information about the work.

Allen, Stephen Arthur (Spring, 2019). *Sepia Tones and Ghosts Pictured Within: Late Style and Elgar's The Severn Suite,* The Musical Times pp1–32.

Kay, Robert (December 2013). *The Severn Suite: Manuscripts, Music and Myths. Elgar Society Journal.*

Professor Allen suggests that the work is not merely a sight-seeing tour of Worcester, but rather is a nostalgic musical work largely focused on Elgar's later life. Note for example that Worcester Castle has not existed for centuries, except for occasional small sections of walls in various place in and around the city. Professor Allen suggests that the first *pomposo* (The Castle) section theme, represents Elgar as an old man and widower returning from his London life as a celebrity to live and walk around Worcester seeing the sights in Worcester. The tender ¾ time legato tune that appears after the *pomposo* perhaps represents his deceased wife Alice, whom he recalls as he walks the routes they used to walk together. Both of these melodic themes reappear later in the work, sometimes inverted. Allen also suggests that the second movement (Toccata-the Tournament Grounds), may not have anything to do with medieval jousting tournaments, rather

it may represent Elgar recalling racing through the city on wild bicycle rides as he was known to do as a younger and even middle-aged man. The third movement (Fugue-the Cathedral) is a serious and prayerful fugue. Does it represent the still in use old majestic Worcester Cathedral itself, or should it be subtitled "*in* the Cathedral" recalling Elgar's prayers and longing for Alice whenever he visited the Cathedral? It builds to an emotional climax, before yielding to the fourth movement Minuet. The Minuet's subtitle *In the Commandery* refers to a building that dates back centuries. At various times in its history it has been used for a military HQ, residences, a church, a monastic hospital, a hotel, a museum, a printing factory and now for city functions. The tunes in the Minuet are adapted from early wind quintets it is said Elgar composed when he was a young church organist at St. George's Catholic Church that is still in use in Worcester, perhaps during homilies that did not keep Elgar's attention. The final Coda returns to the *Pomposo* Worcester Castle theme and the lovely ¾ melody Allen suggests represents Alice.

The question as to the proper key for the piece has been controversial over the decades. To make a long story short, the present arranger is persuaded that Bb is the proper key for the brass band, and for a quintet of brass instruments. It is discussed thoroughly in the Elgar Society Journal article by Robert Kay mentioned above. Contrary conclusions as to the proper key have been reached by others. The original publication of the work for brass band is in fact in Bb. However, at least two brass band editions have been published with the parts for the Bb instruments shown in D so as to sound in C. There is also an arrangement for orchestral brass section by a famous British trombonist sounding in C. In addition, Elgar worked with organist and friend Ivor Atkins who fashioned the Severn Suite into what appears in the Elgar catalog of works as Organ Sonata No. 2 (omitting the Minuet). It is in Bb as well. Ian Farrington and Thomas Murray each produced and recorded a complete version for organ in C. Elgar himself rescored the Suite for full symphony orchestra in 1931 and it is in C, as he said the piece should be in the best key for the instrumentation, hence Bb for brass band and C for orchestra. Each of these arrangements is published by publishers other than the original publisher. The current editor has seen most of these and all claim their own copyright without any reference to any other of the publishers that published earlier versions.

Mark J. LaFratta

09/2021

Dedicated to my friend, George Bernard Shaw

Full Score

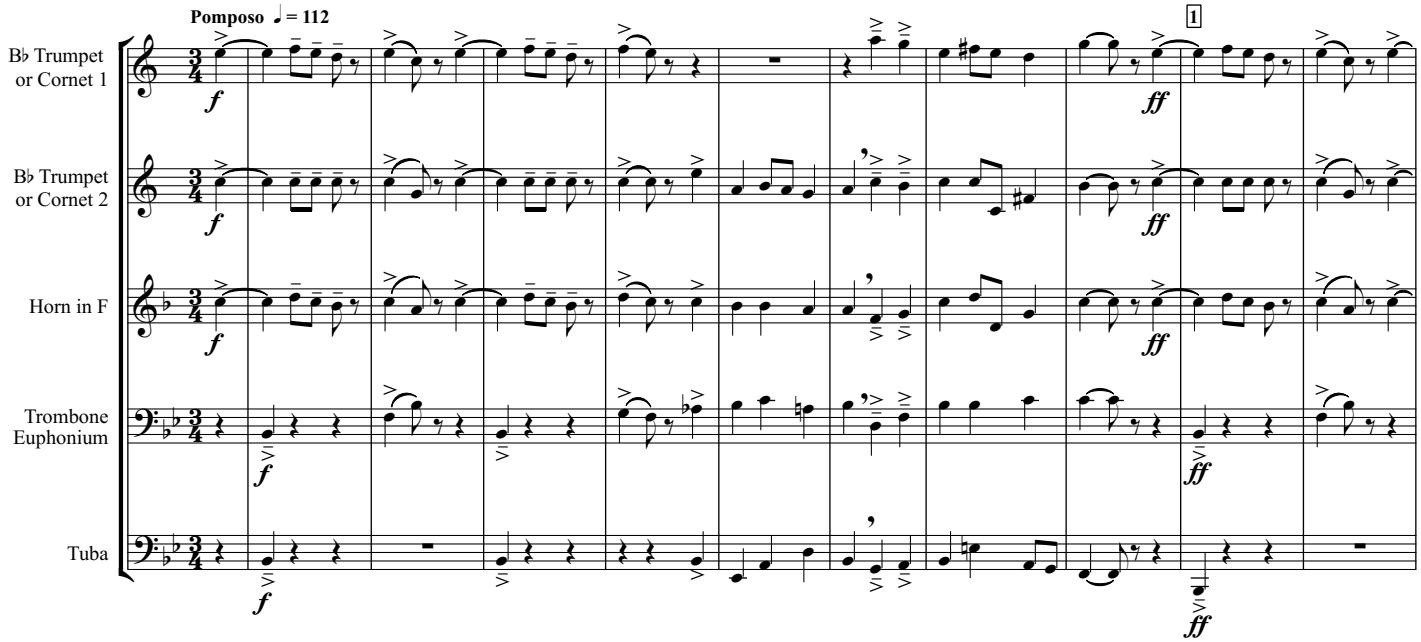
THE SEVERN SUITE

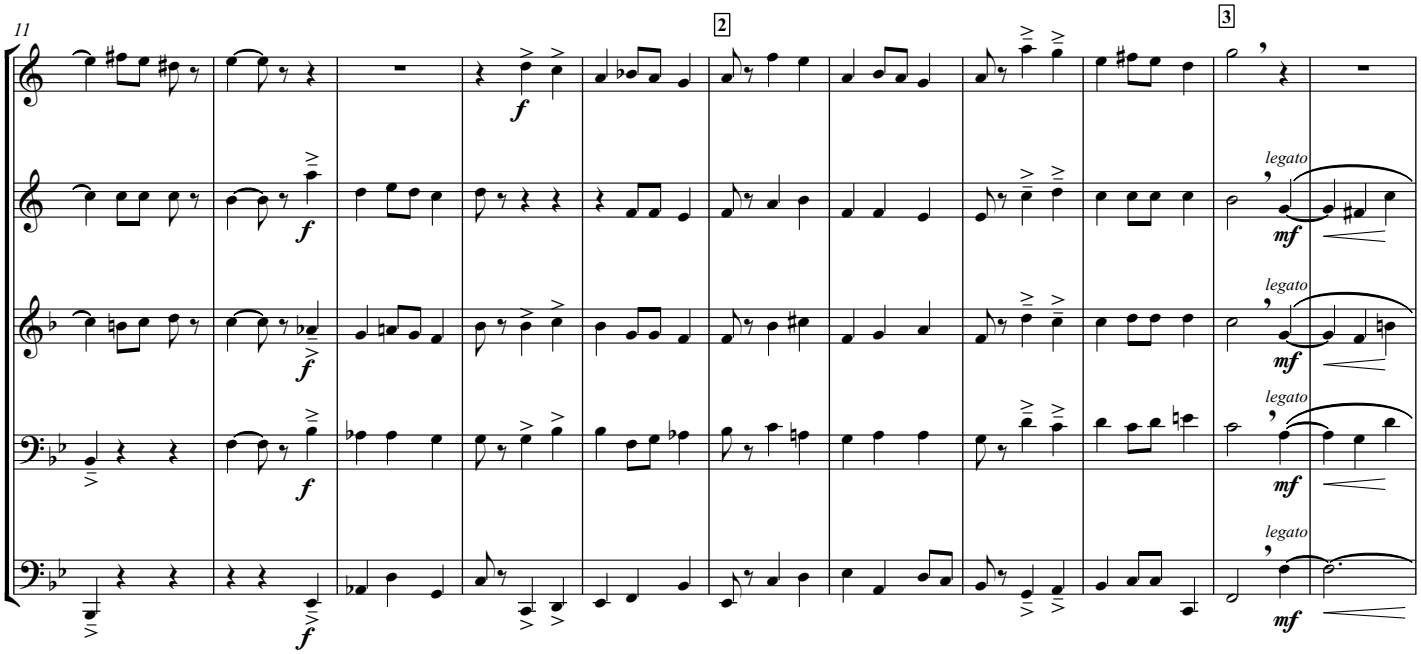
(Op.87)

for Brass Quintet

Edward Elgar
arr. M. J. LaFratta

I. Introduction: Worcester Castle





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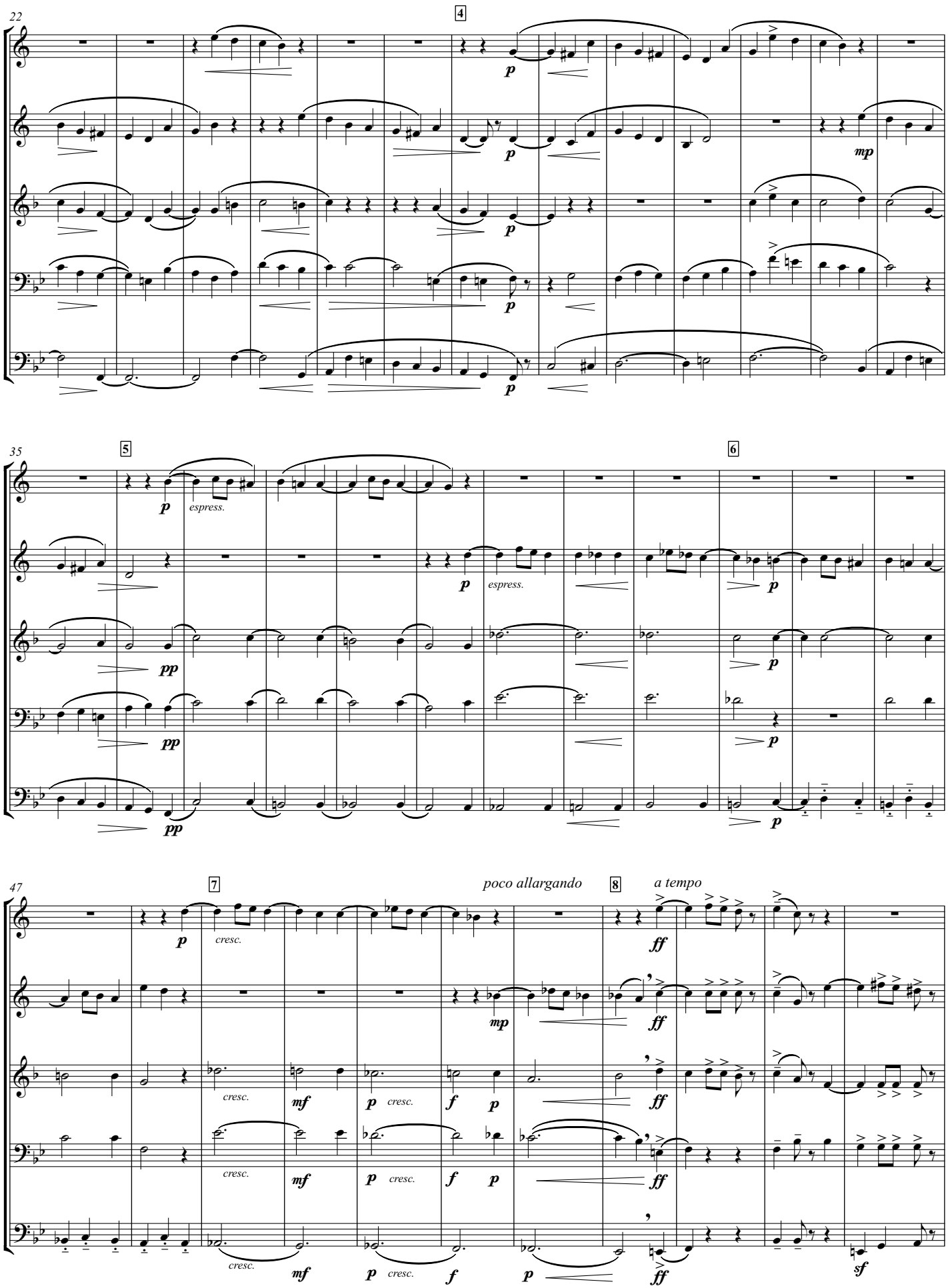
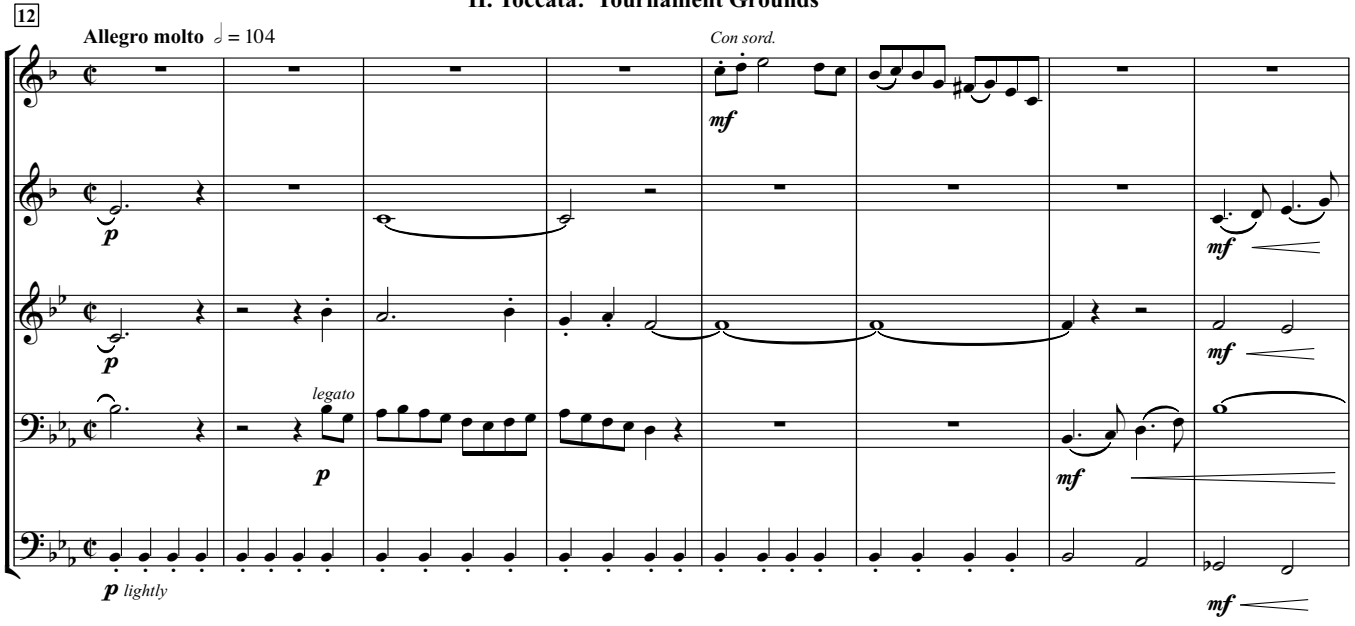
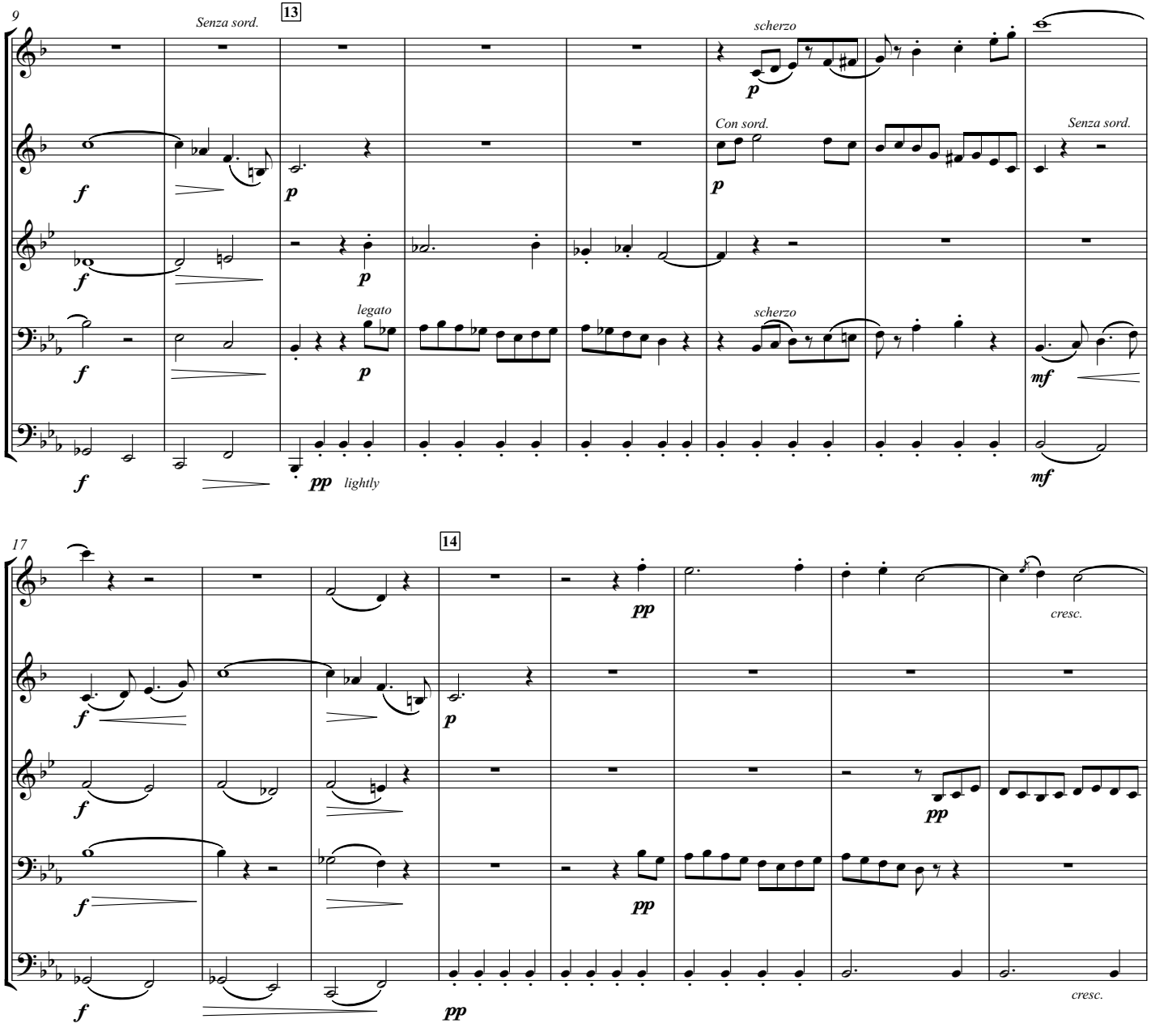
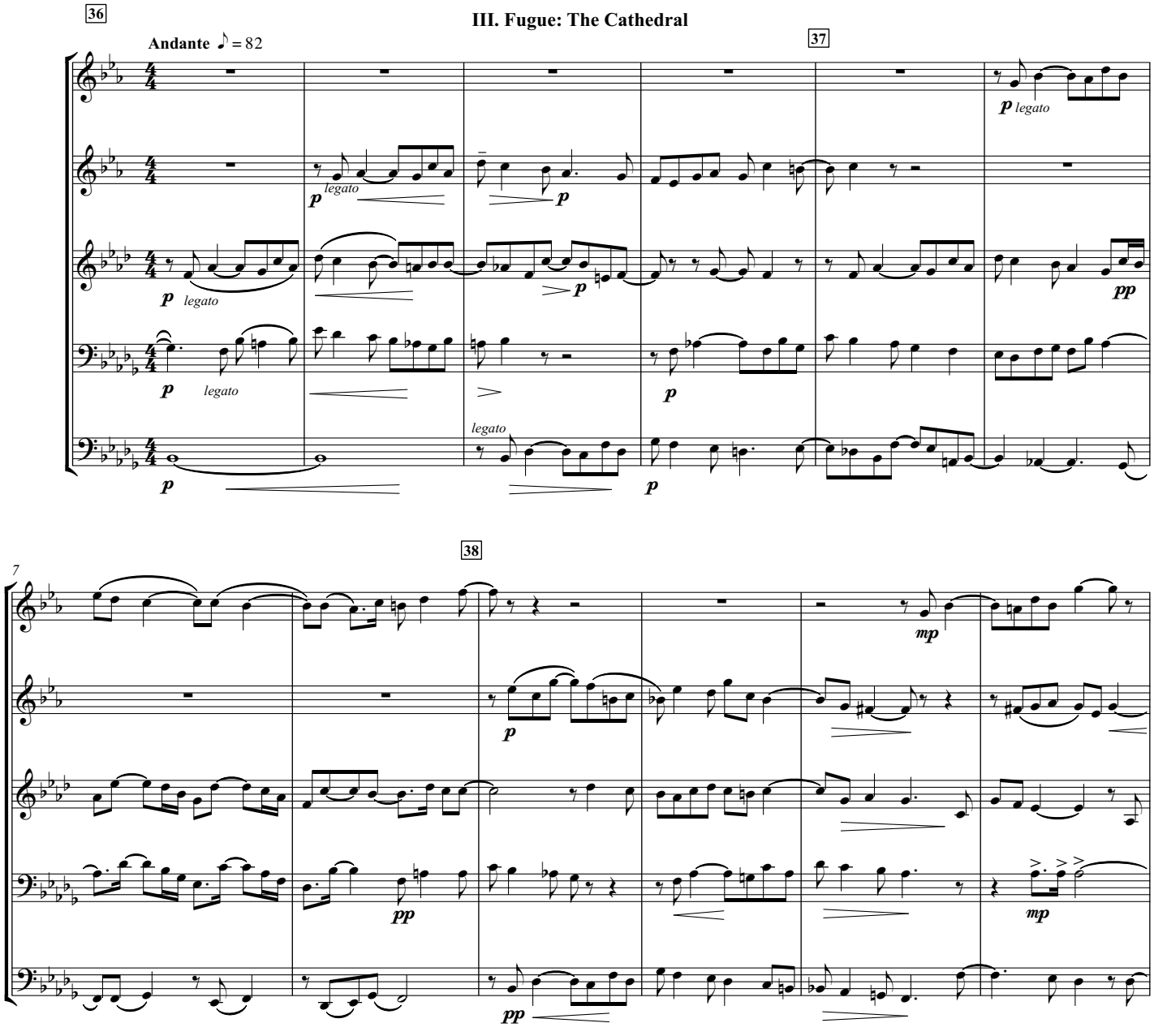
* All movements to be performed attacca


22
4
35
5
6
47
7
poco allargando
8
a tempo

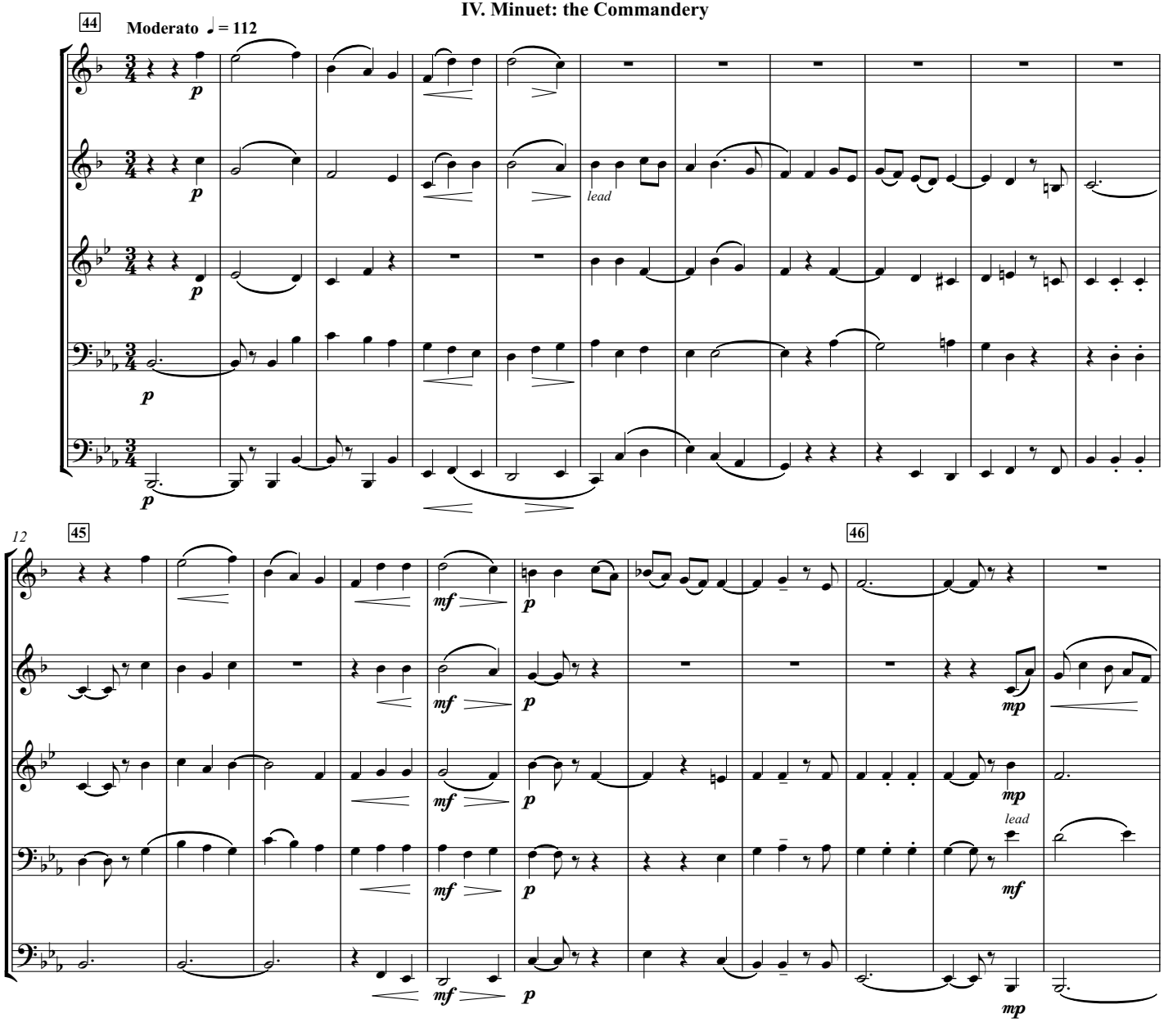
II. Toccata: Tournament Grounds

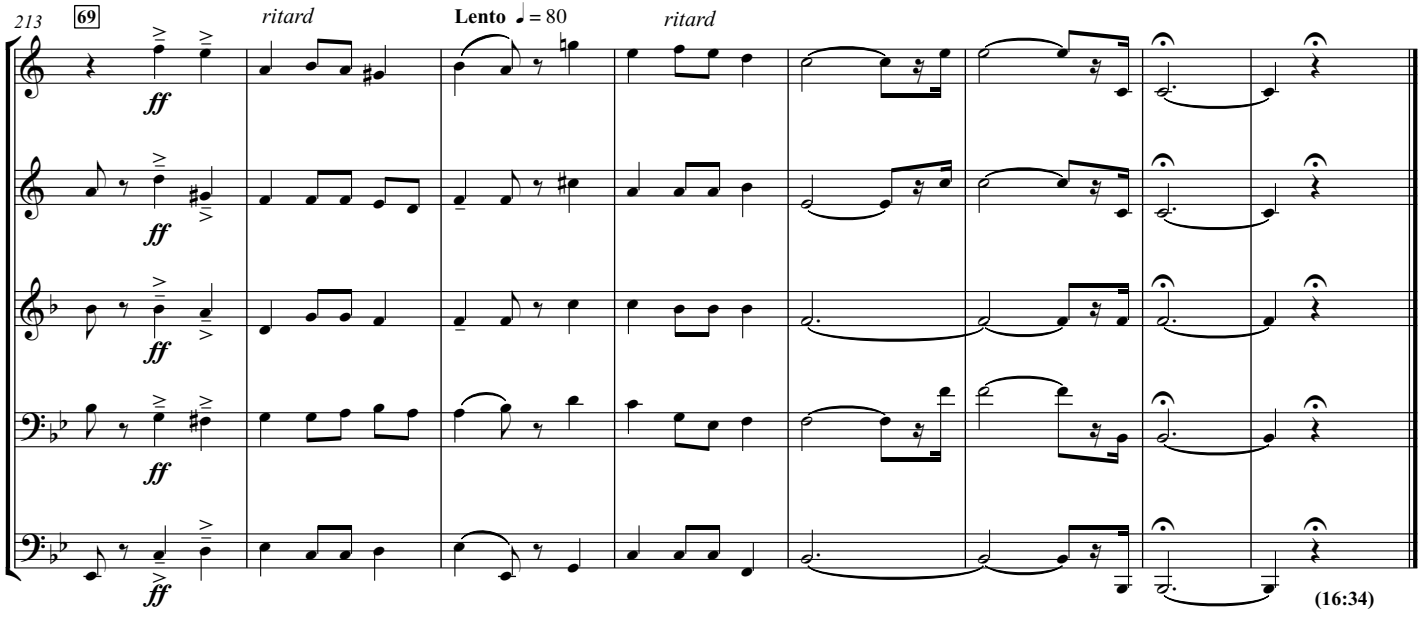



9
Senza sord.
13
scherzo
Con sord.
Senza sord.
legato
scherzo
lightly
17
14
cresc.
cresc.


III. Fugue: The Cathedral
36
Andante ♪ = 82
37
38
7
p legato
p
pp
mp

IV. Minuet: the Commandery




213
69
ritard
Lento ♩ = 80
ritard
ff
ff
ff
ff
ff
(16:34)