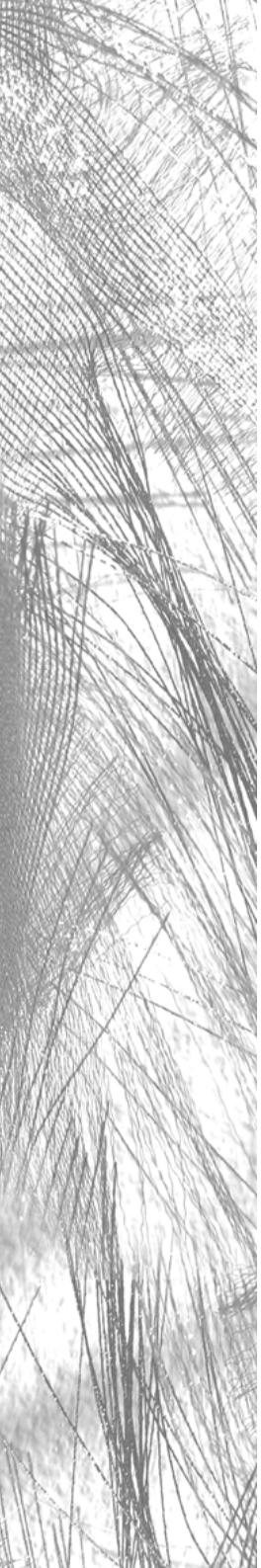

Omphalos

For (Prepared) Piano and Percussion

Nigel Morgan

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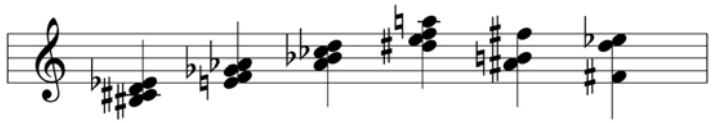
Omphalos

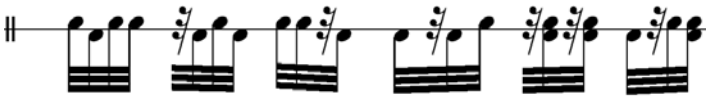
For (Prepared) Piano and Percussion

Nigel Morgan

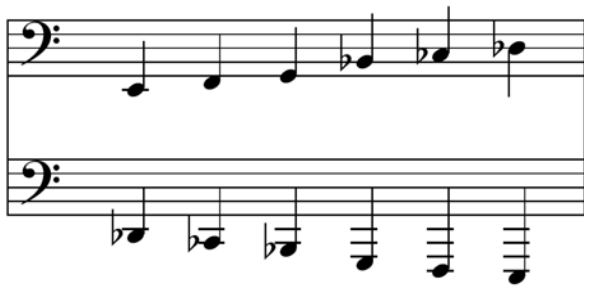
Omphalos is the first part of a four movement work written in 1997 for Joanna MacGregor and Ensemble Bash. The music is an uncompromising toccata for five percussionists, the pianist playing the piano predominantly as a percussion instrument. The work is entirely computer-generated using the following source material: a sequence of 'found' chordal clusters, a collection of rhythmic gestures associated with particular instruments or pairs of instruments, a pattern from Nicholas Slonimksy's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* arranged for the fingers as though for an African mbira.



Six clusters



Six rhythmic gestures



Slonimsky pattern No.6 as spread out across two hands

The music is in three sections:

Section 1 focuses on a play of clusters and rhythmic gestures. These two elements are passed through a neural net programmed to vary their content and structural combinations and associations. The result appears like a complex improvisation in which the percussionists gradually establish formal responses to patterns the pianist creates.

Section 2 rearranges the relationship between pianist and percussionists. The pianist plays a continuous evolving music devised from just six pitches of Slonimksy's tritone pattern 6, calling for a complex interplay of fingers as though playing the mbira. Above this *perpetuum mobile* the percussionists in pairs mirror each hand of the piano for a couple of bars only to break away into variations and then return into the piano's groove before starting the whole process of variation and 'escape' once more.

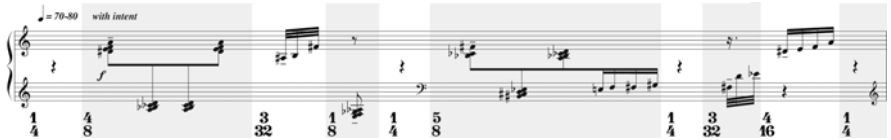
Section 3 revisits the opening music, only this time the chordal clusters are inverted, stretched, arpeggiated. The percussion gestures are extended by accessing a library of 8-bit binary rhythmics again processed using a neural net.

The title *Omphalos* comes from the Greek for navel. It was the title of a celebrated mid 19C book by Philip Henry Gosse who was the David Attenborough of his day, described by Stephen Jay Gould as 'Britain's finest popular narrator of nature's fascination'. The reason for choosing this title is its historical notoriety as an argument by Gosse that 'creation has only the appearance of pre-existence'. In other words, in providing us with the fossil record God lied. Transfer this notion if you will to the creation of music by algorithmic means . . . and perform the work with intent, fervour, deliberation, and utter obedience to its own logic . . . but knowing that its creation is prochronic rather than diachronic. Adam's navel was prochronic, the 930 years of his earthly life diachronic.

Performance instructions

The music should be played without a pre-ordered dynamic scheme. In section 1 and 3 the pianist should initiate dynamic contrasts, although such contrast may be immediately revoked by the percussionists. In section 2 the pianist provides a continuum, which may include improvised and unprepared accents; the percussionists should follow the dynamic scheme come what may .

The musical structure is emphasised by its division into bars. The performers should play to the denominator value of the time-signature for each bar. Note in the example below that the only emphasis is to occur on the first beat of the division, which is indicated here by accents:

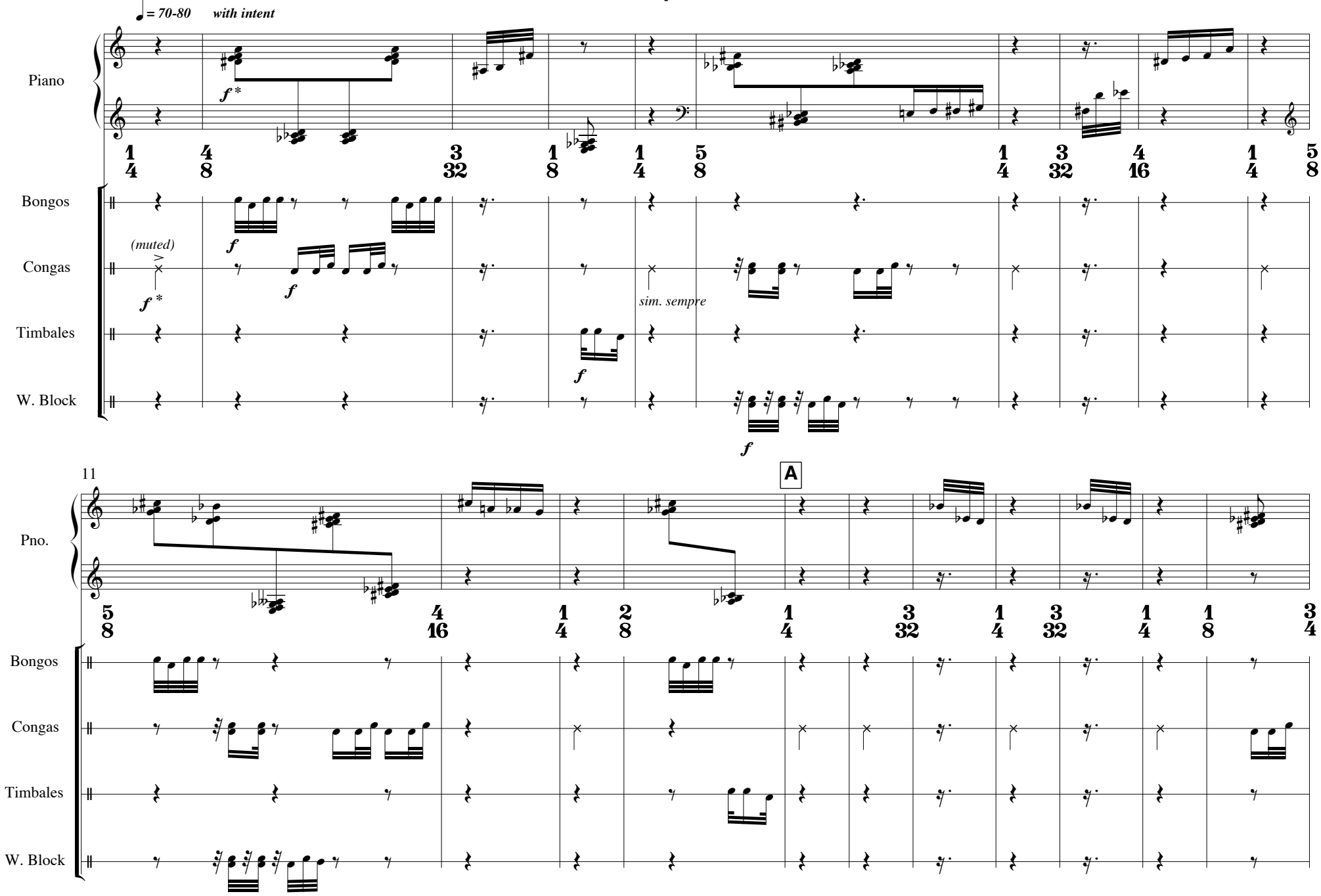


In bars where an instrumental part is silent the rests indicated don't always reflect the denominator value, thus a 4/8 bar may show two 1/4 rests rather than 4 1/8 rests.

In the percussion parts rolls and ornaments may be added ad lib, particularly on tied notes.

The piano may be 'prepared' in any way appropriate to the performers' concept of the piece. Such preparation should not be too 'intense' in the middle and higher registers but should tend towards an imitation of the buzzing of the mbira in the lower regions of the piano's compass. There are 3 pitches in bar 234 that should not be 'prepared' in any way. The sustaining pedal should not be used.

Omphalos



* dynamics should be initiaed by the pianist, but may be revoked by the percussionists.

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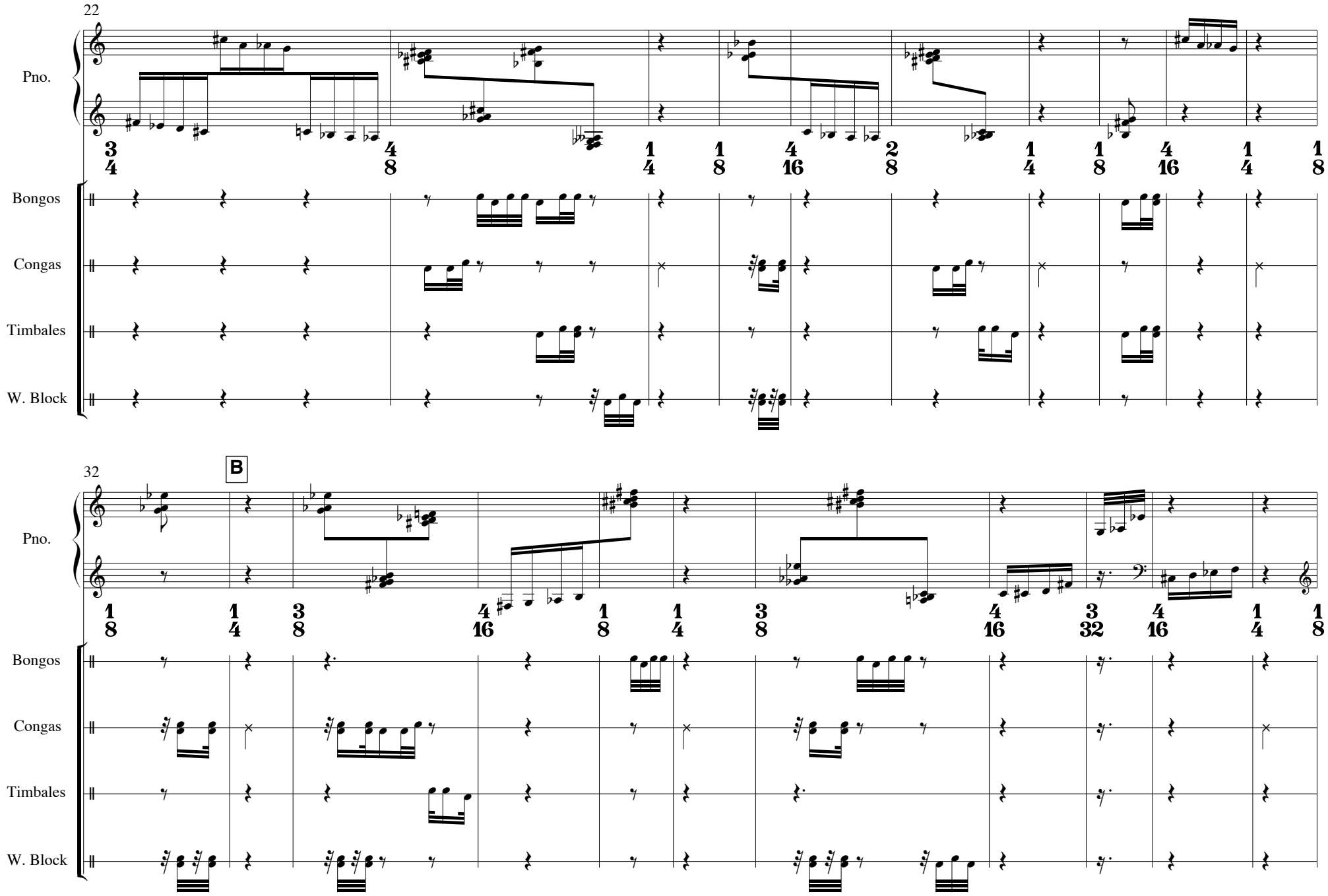
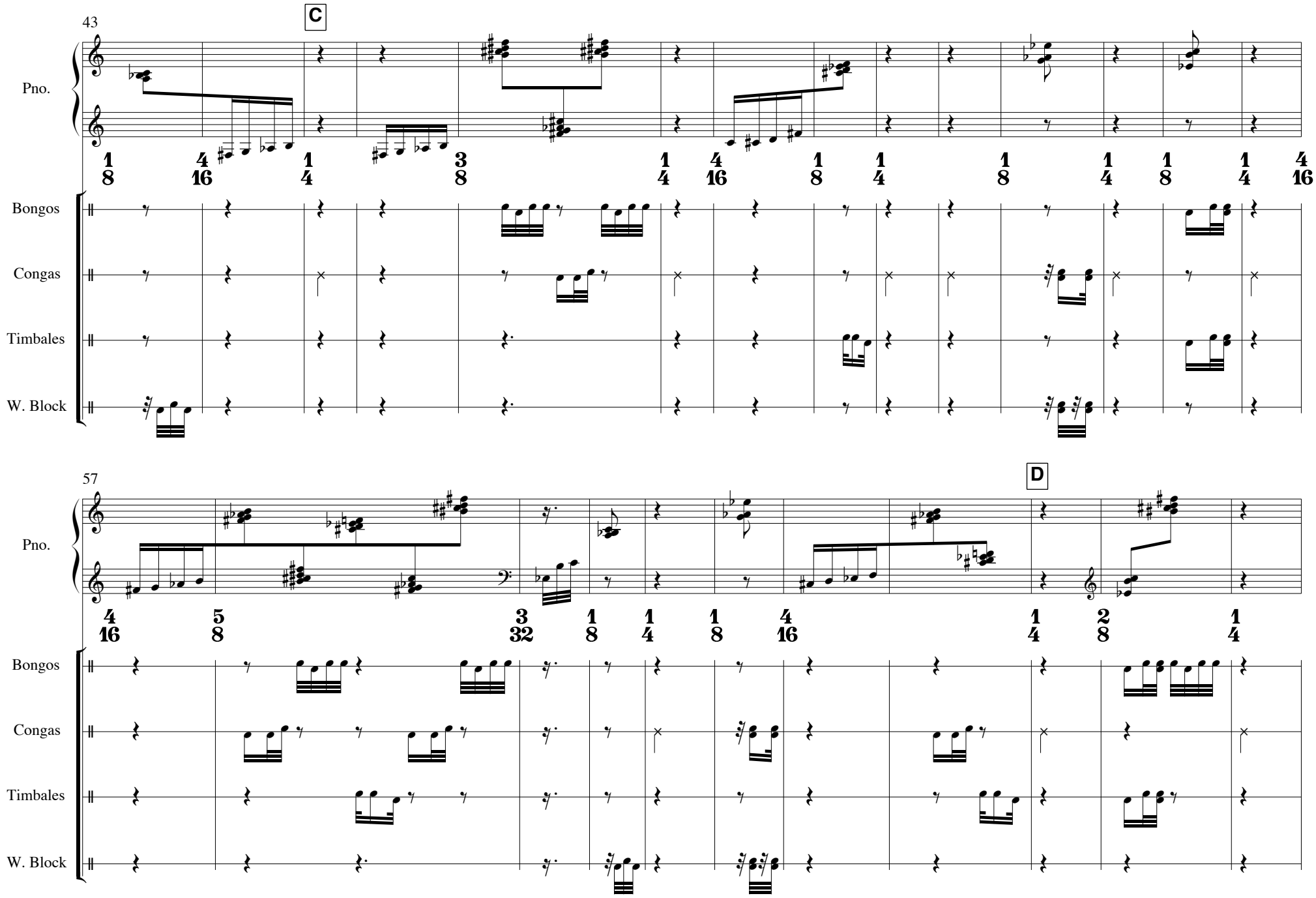
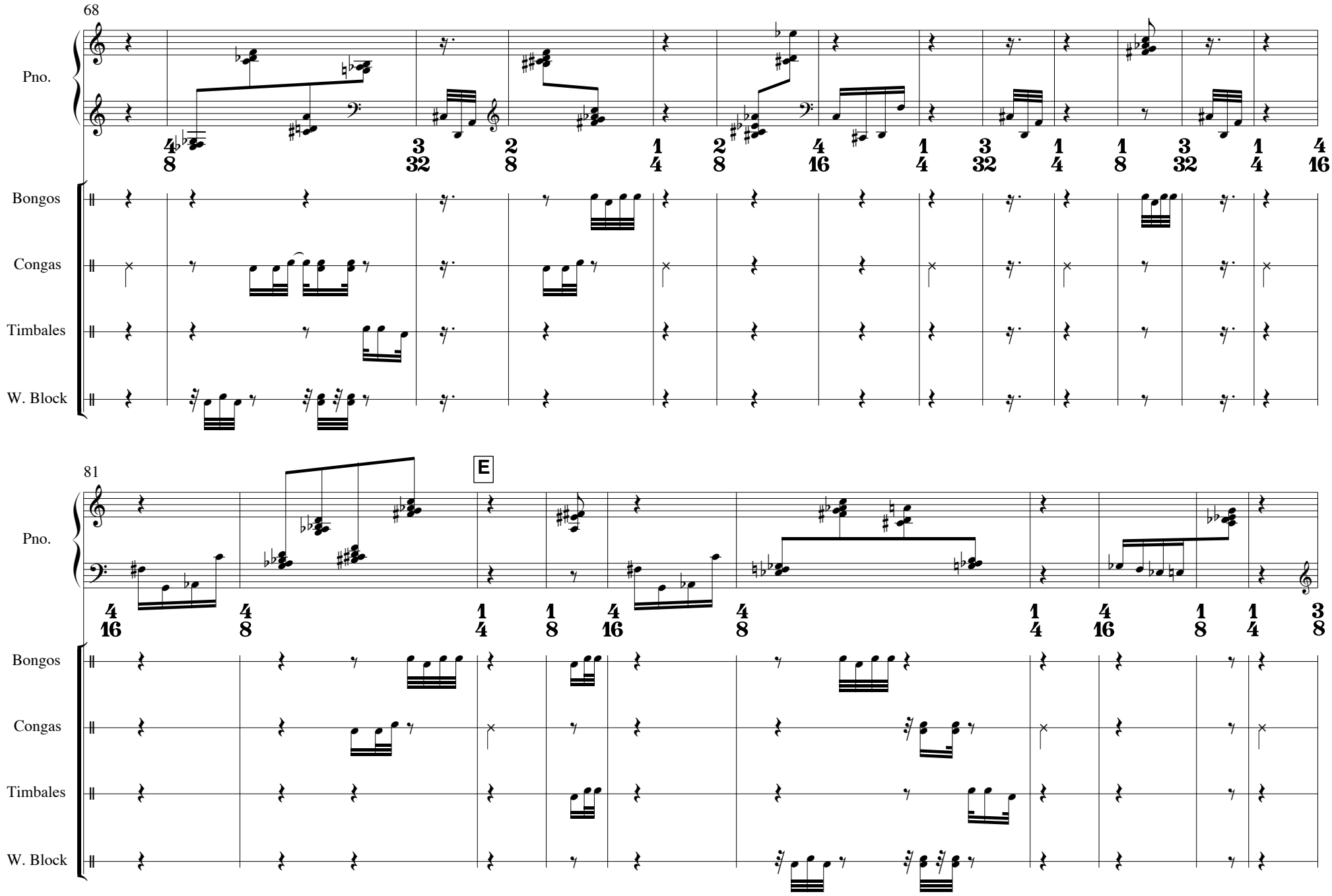
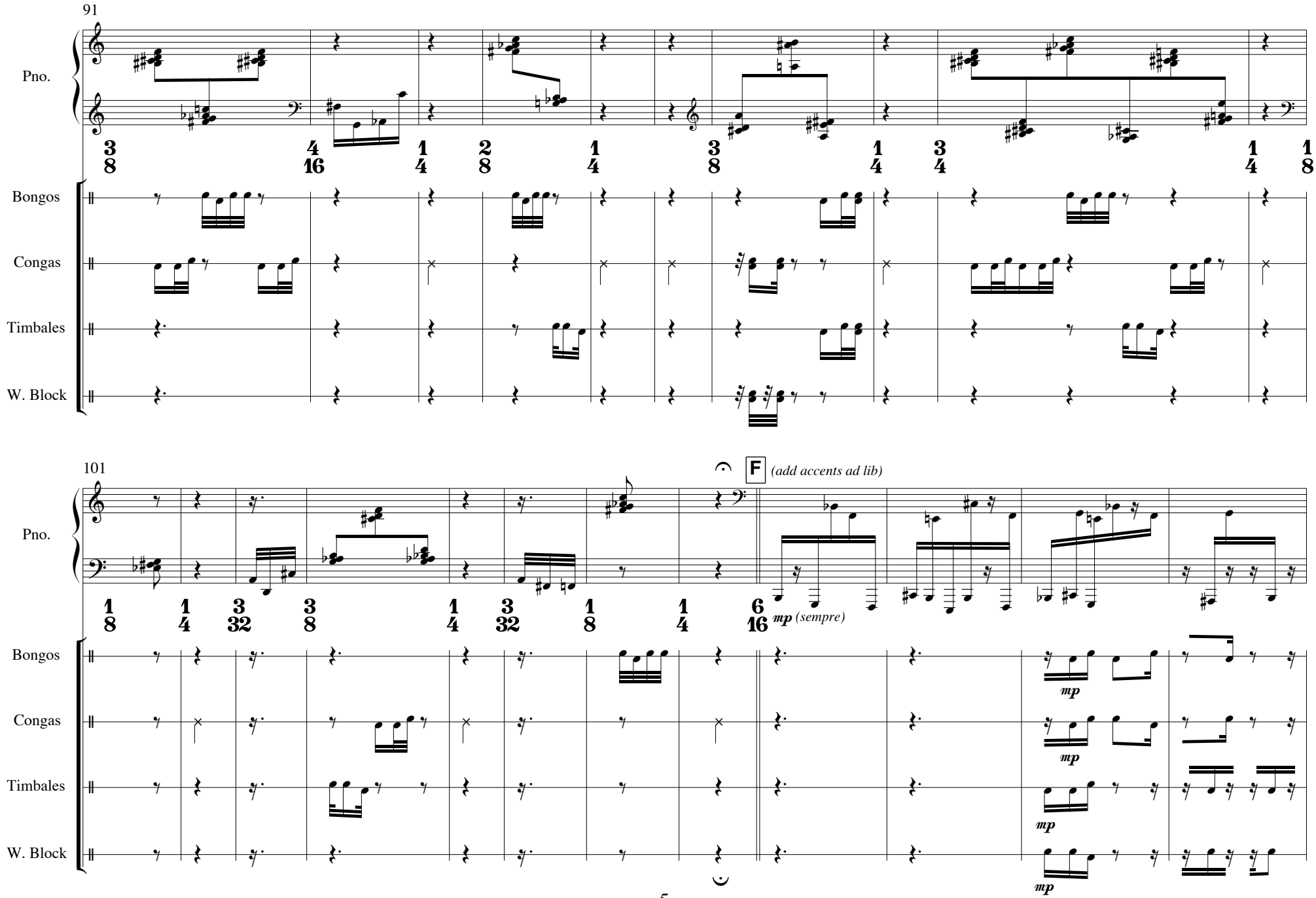
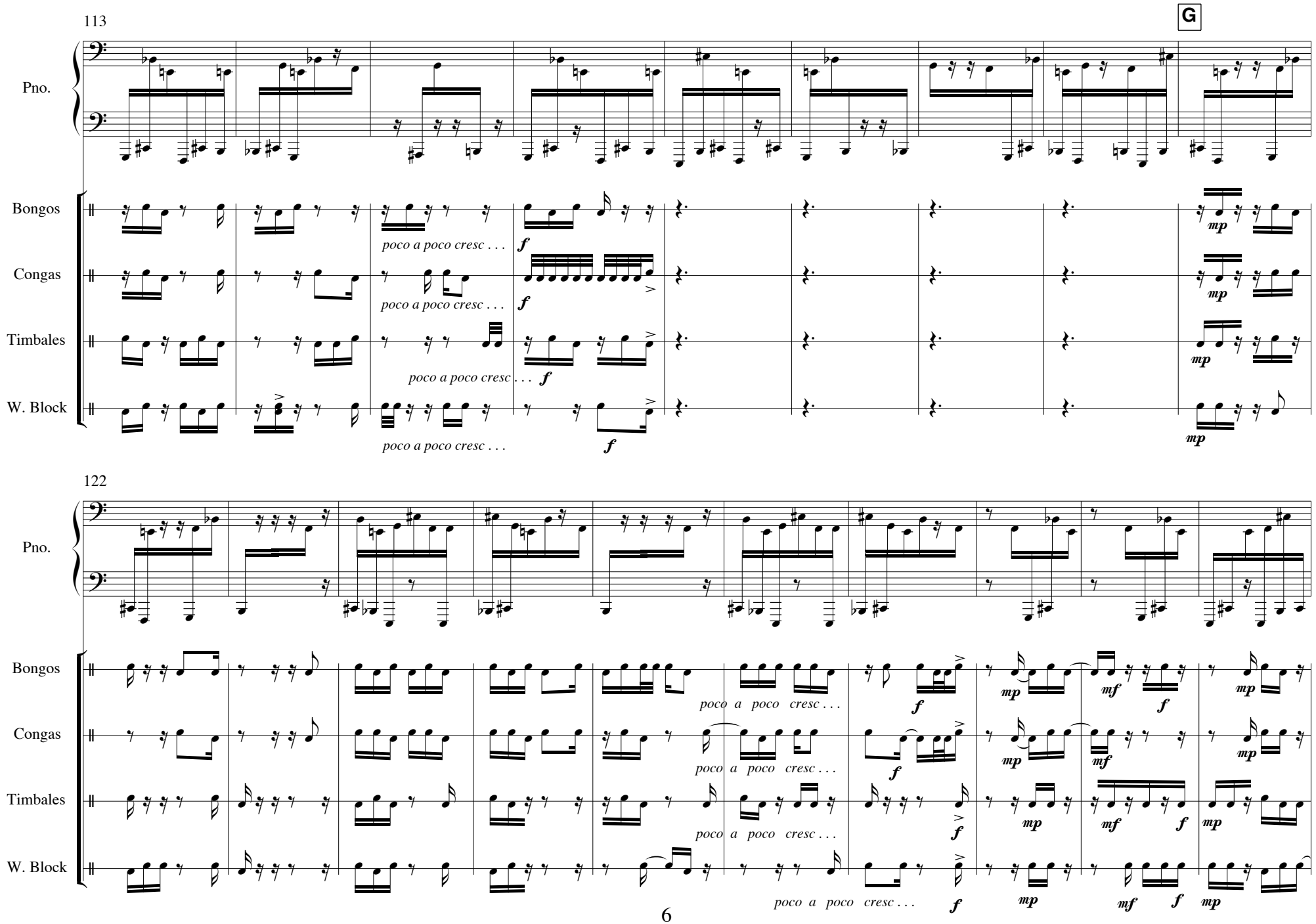
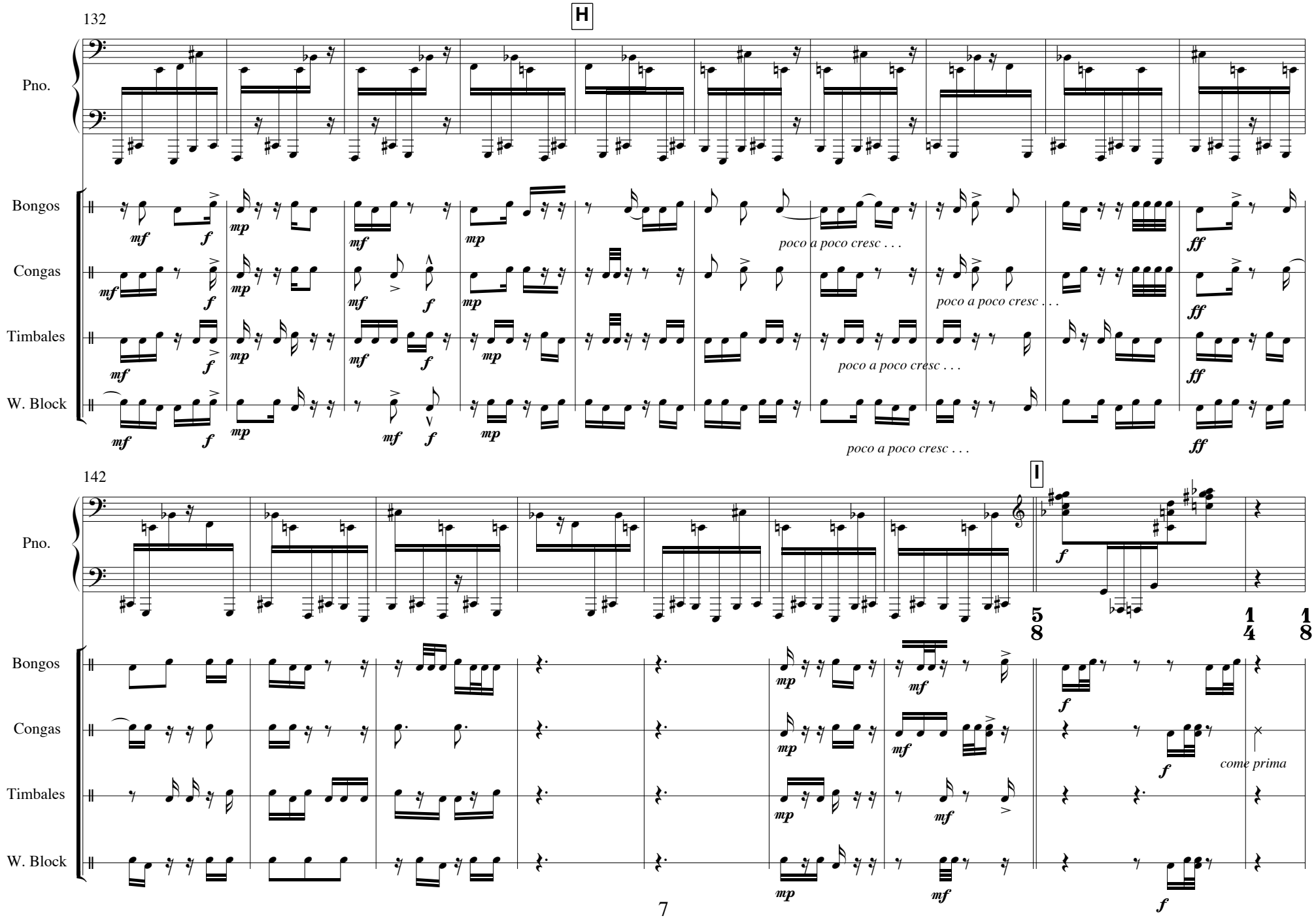

22
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
32
B
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block

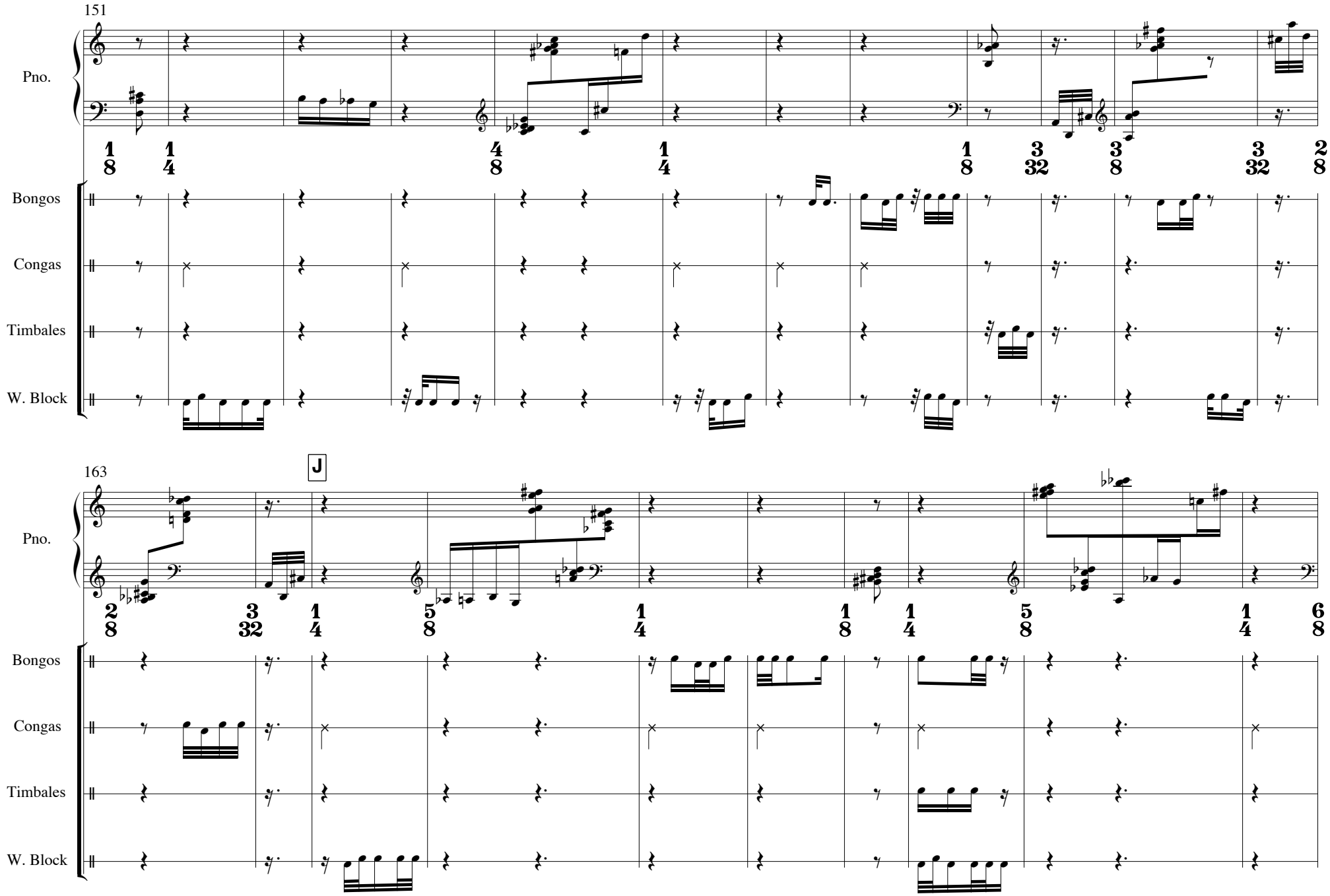

43
C
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
57
D
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block

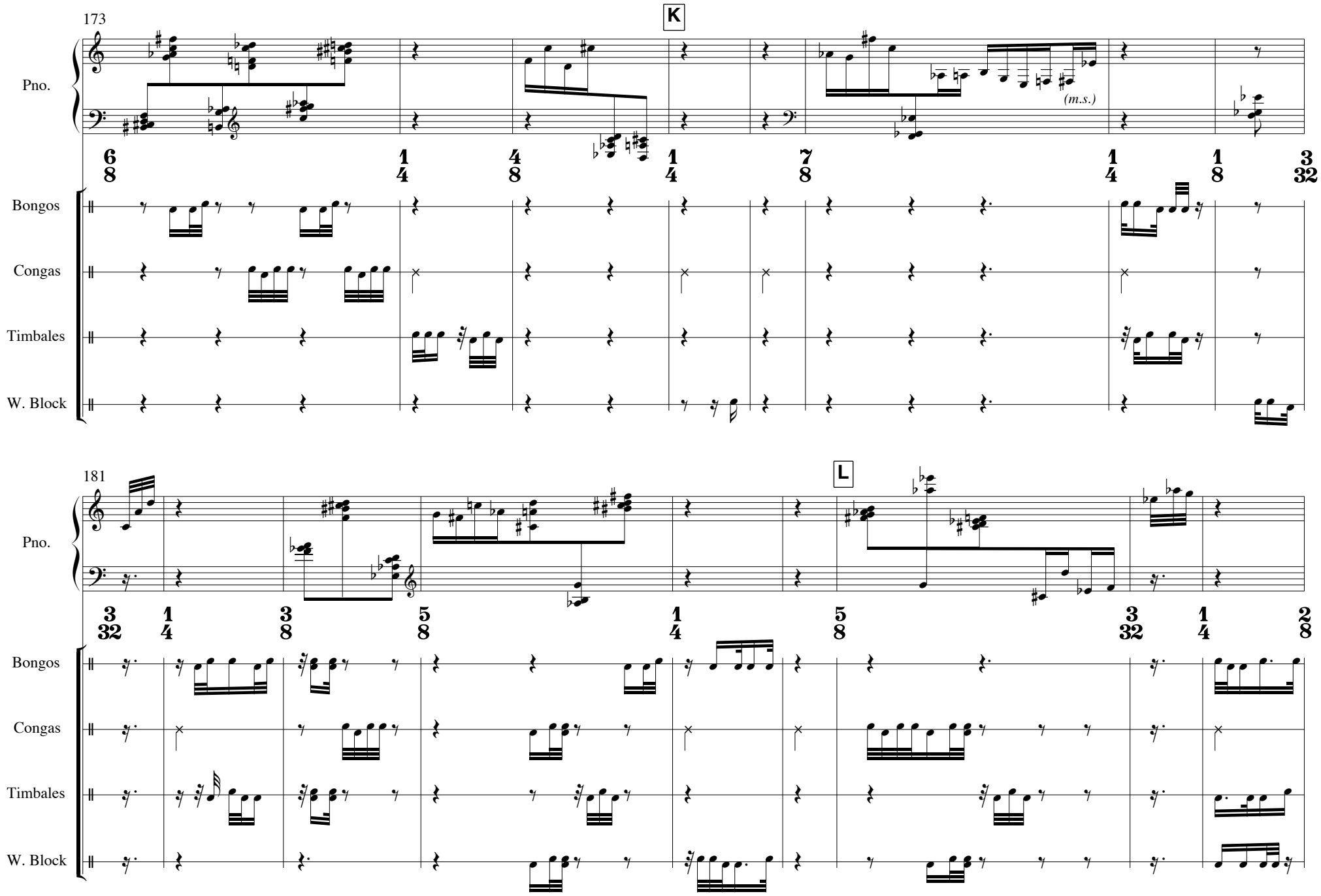

68
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
81
E
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block

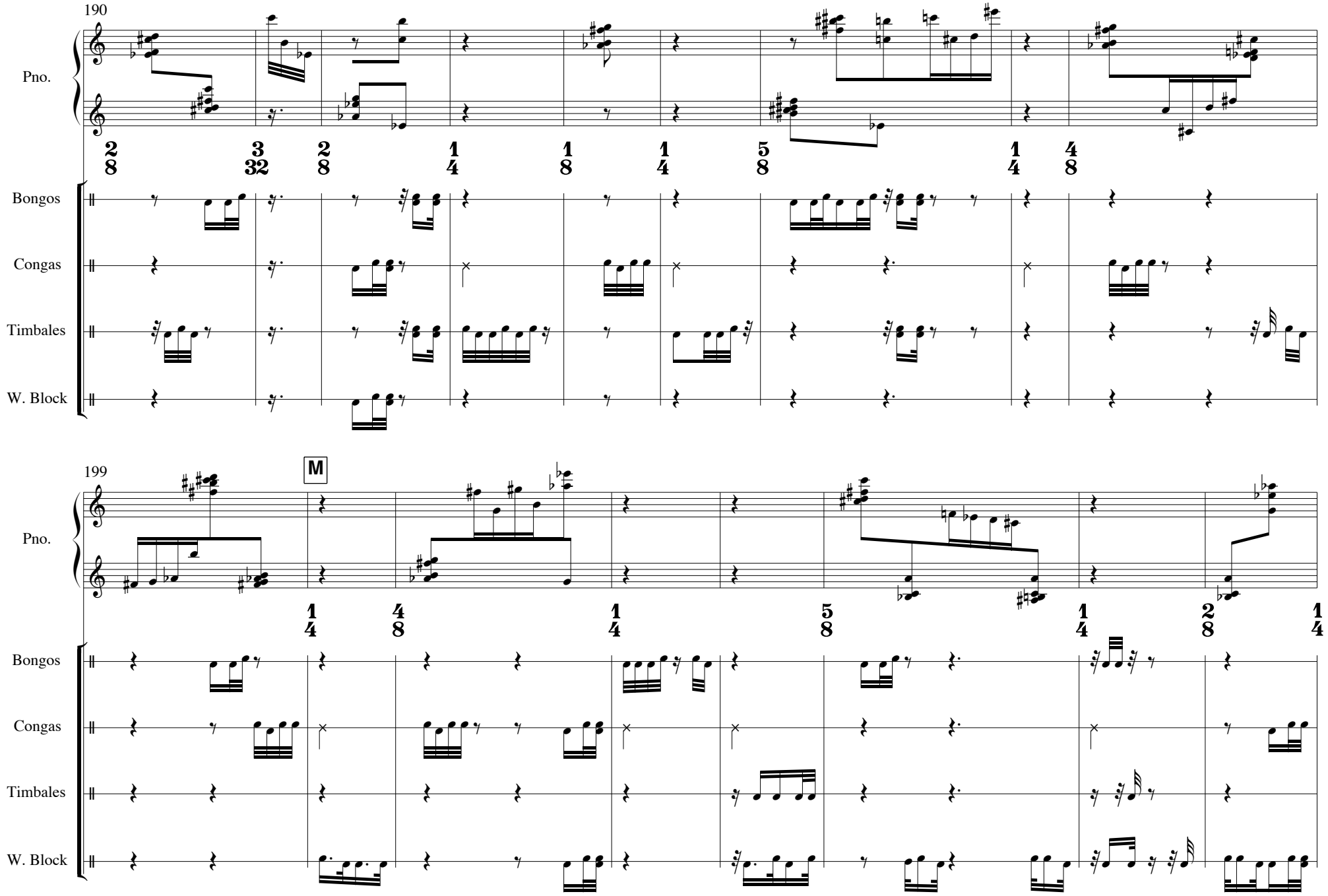

91
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
101
F
(add accents ad lib)
mp (sempre)
mp

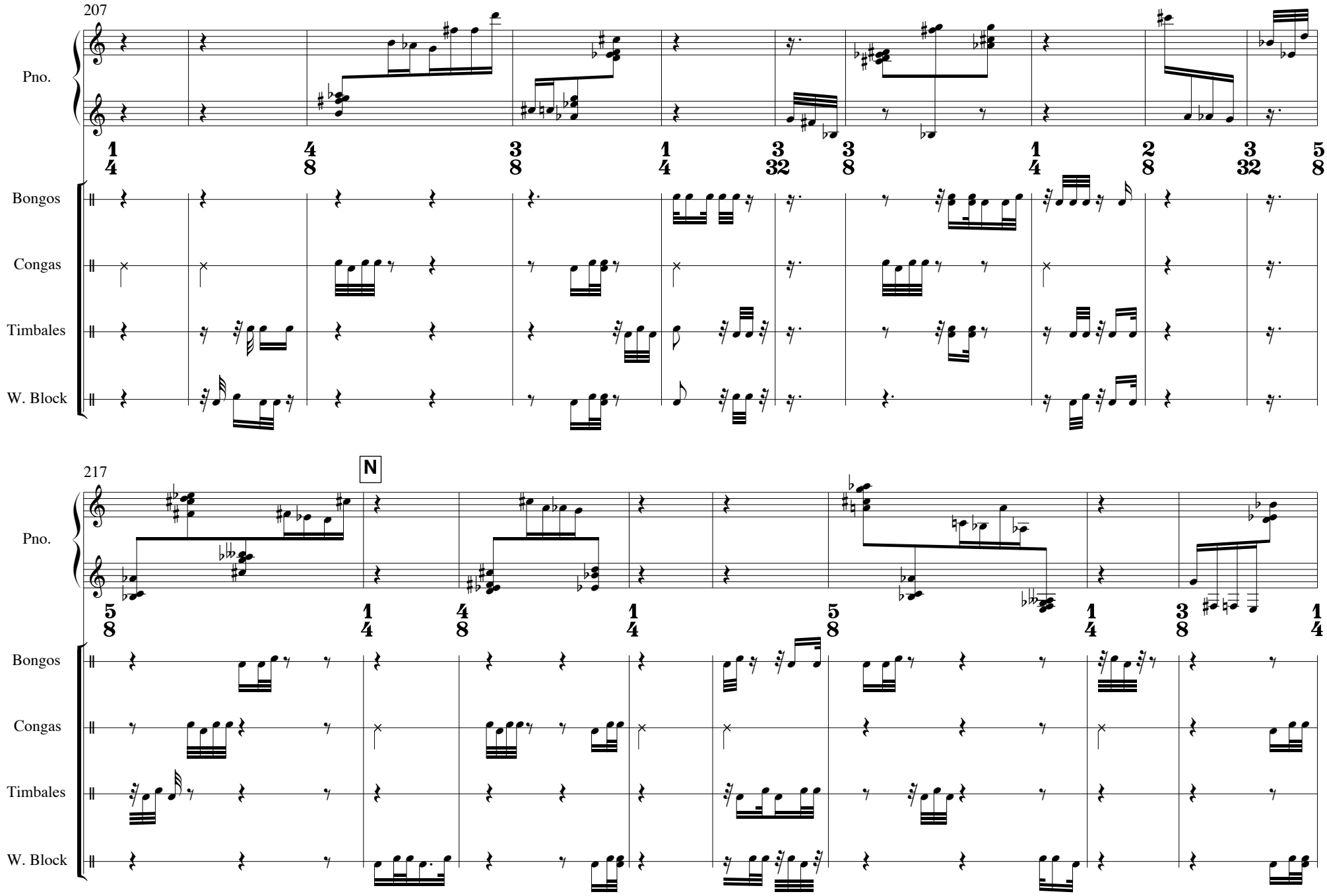

113
G
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
poco a poco cresc . . .
f
mp
122
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
poco a poco cresc . . .
f
mp
mf

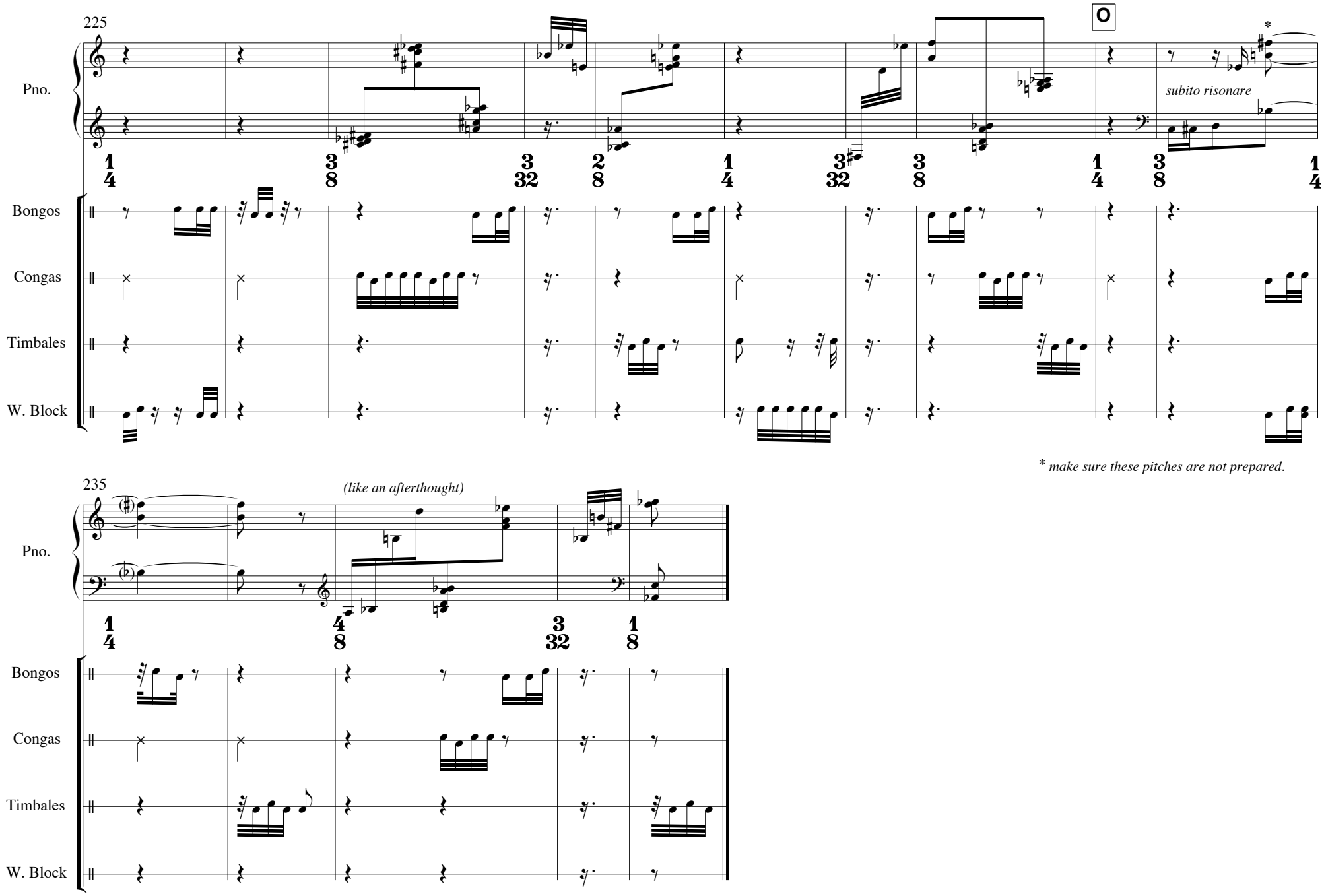

132
H
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
poco a poco cresc . . .
poco a poco cresc . . .
poco a poco cresc . . .
poco a poco cresc . . .
142
I
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
come prima


151
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
163
J
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block


173
K
Pno.
(m.s.)
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
181
L
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block


190
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
199
M
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block


207
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
217
N
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block


225
O
Pno.
subito risonare
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block
* make sure these pitches are not prepared.
235
(like an afterthought)
Pno.
Bongos
Congas
Timbales
W. Block