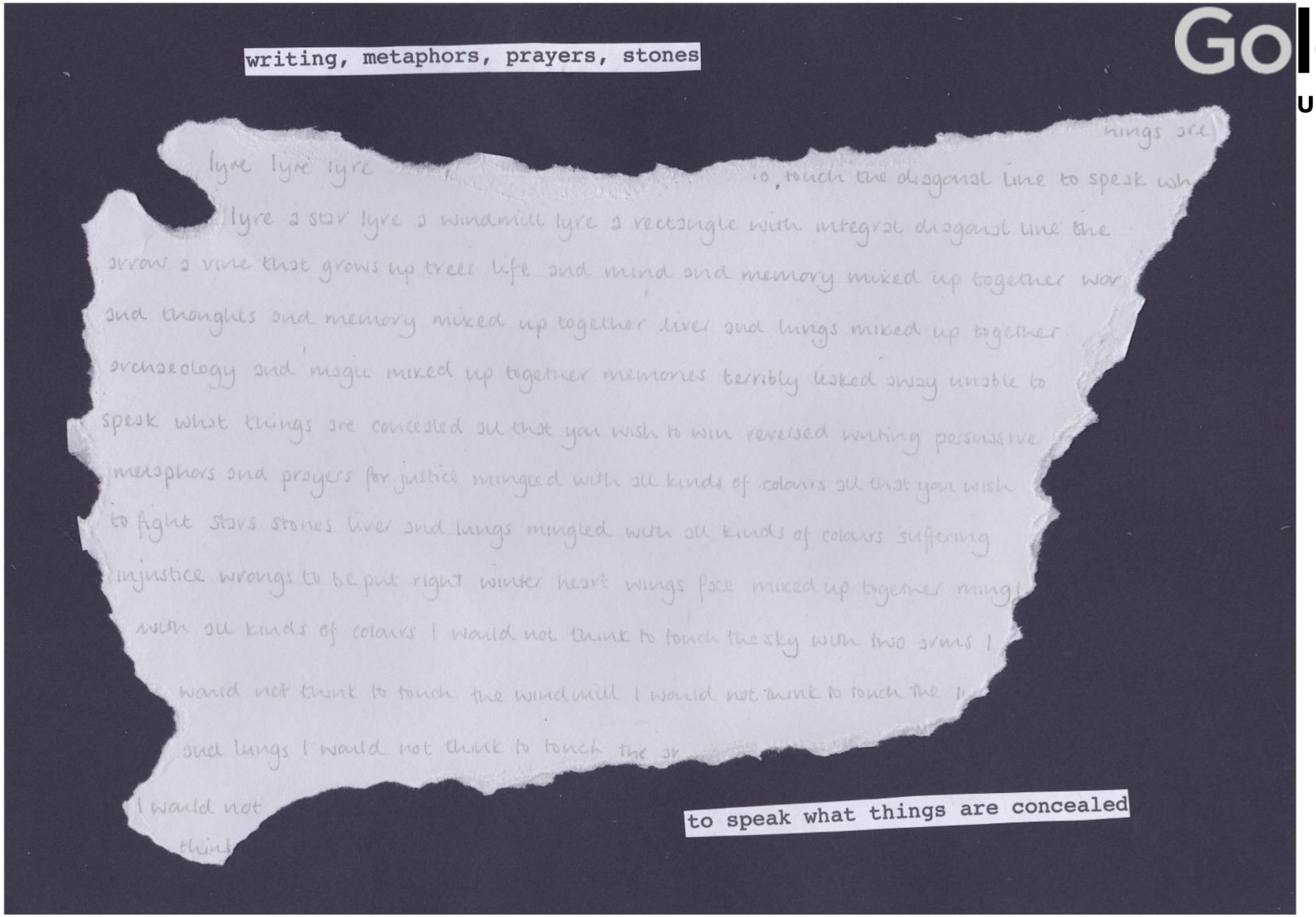
writing, metaphors, prayers, stones



to speak what things are concealed

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Lauren Redhead
curse tablets

image, previous page: curse tablets, *graphic score detail.*

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300 Word Statement

‘curse tablets’, is a collection of six miniatures for keyboard instrument or organ manuals, six experimental graphic scores, and a text created for use in performance. Interpretations of the piece can combine these materials freely for any instruments or combinations of instruments. Each of the six miniatures is dedicated to another composer with whom I have previously worked or whom I admire; this is used to emphasise the petitionary element of archaeological finds of curse tablets in the piece. Taken as a whole, this combination of composition methods consider the possibilities of existing curse tables as forms of speculative notation. Rather than simply re-presenting these as materials for performance, they are subject to multiple processes of musical translation into scores, performances and recordings; here I emphasise the production of the score and the creation of an album as a statement that represents my holistic perspective on the music. This perspective has been further influenced by the translation of the musical materials by several performer-collaborators who have engaged with the piece and its materials, sometimes creating additional materials themselves. In order to integrate these approaches into the identity of the piece, a further method of composition has been integrated into the project: that of creating remixes that combine many elements of multiple performances into a single, composed piece that reflects the emerging aspects of a single performer’s approach to the music, or that of a duet or group of performers. This further method of musical translation has also proposed ways of thinking about the notation’s diversity and the music’s identity, and the ways that that identity might propose what a musical ‘curse tablet’ might be. As a corollary, the nature of speculative notation is also considered to be a musical proposition.

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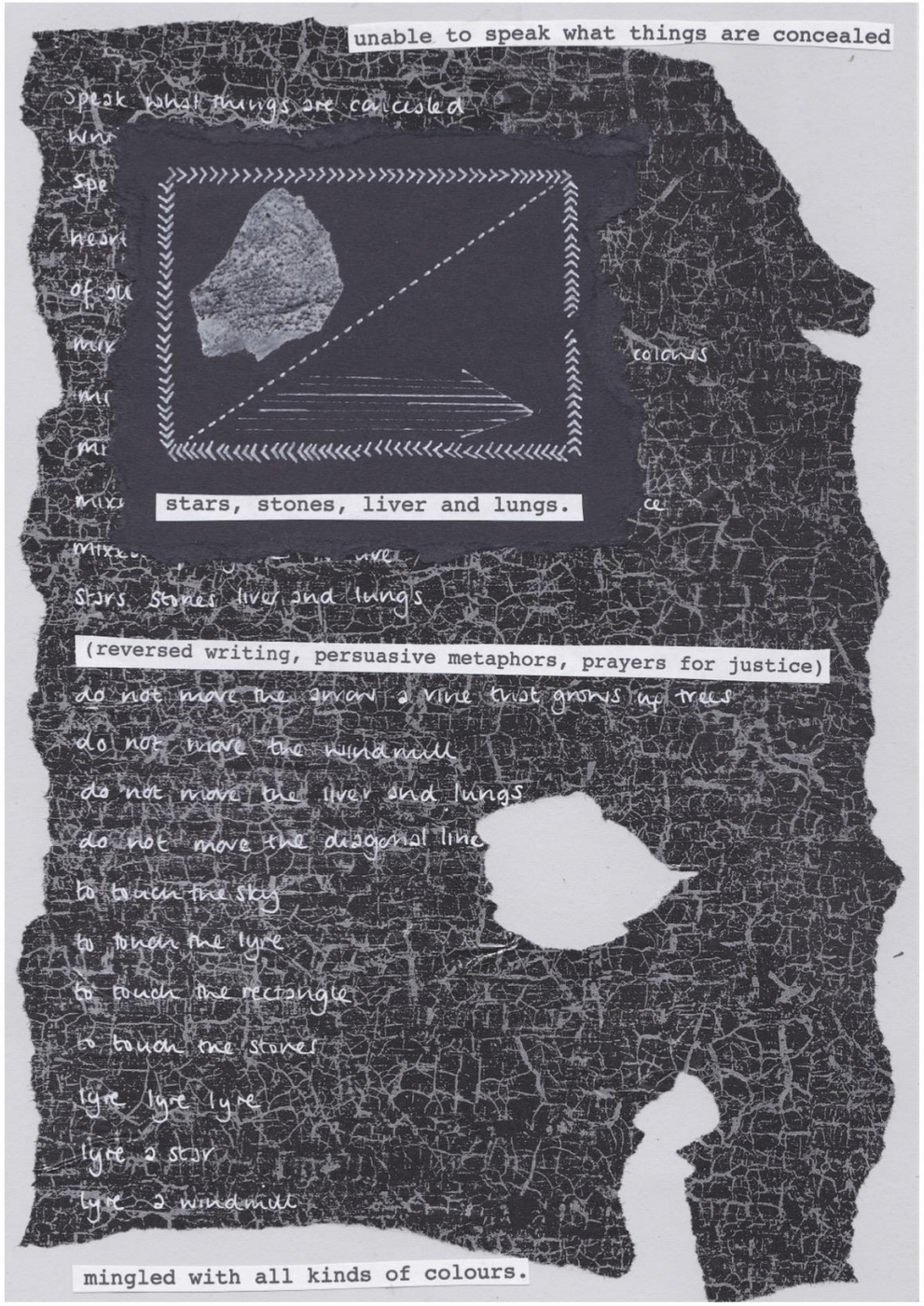

image: curse tablets, *graphic score detail.*

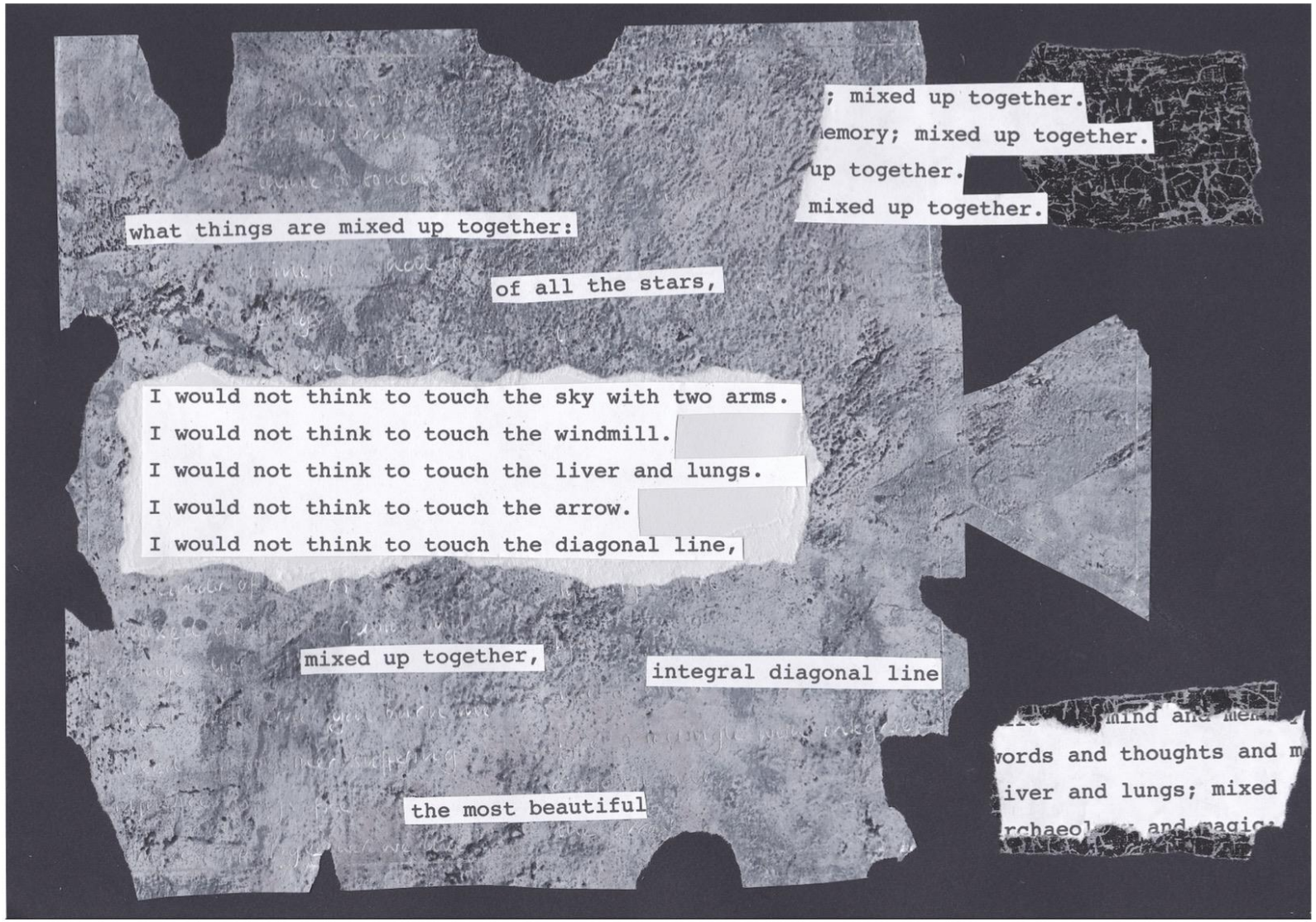

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image: curse tablets, *graphic score detail.*

Project Concept

'curse tablet' is a name for an archaeological find that is usually a small stone or piece of lead, upon which a message requested of a god or gods is written. Many such finds - but not all - date from the Greco-Roman period. Curse tablets are petitionary prayers that request for intervention on the writer's behalf; often to right a wrong, exact revenge, or find favour for the petitioner.

This composition takes this idea as its starting point in three ways:

- by creating a form of collage notation based on images of archaeological finds, so that the speculative sounds of those images can be explored through performance
- by applying those principles of fragmentation and collage to creating a text that can form part of the visual and sonic identity of the piece
- by applying the principle of the 'curse tablet' to notated miniatures, each dedicated to other composers—not composers whom I wish to curse but to whom I dedicate a petitionary prayer.

In this way, the totality of the notation reflects the visual, aesthetic, and functional elements of the point of influence for the piece.

Performers of the piece are given the freedom to choose from any of these forms of notation, and to combine them in any way they choose.

Research Questions

There are some elements of this piece that relate to broader research questions that relate to my compositional practice as a whole. These include the development of experimental forms of notation including image and text, and also the assessment of the potential of the combination of composition and improvisation approaches as methods. These research themes are not addressed in this portfolio.

Within this piece, I further ask the following research questions that relate to its materials:

- Can a musical ‘curse tablet’ be conceived or composed?
- What might ‘curse tablets’ sound like and how might they be treated as a form of speculative notation?
- What forms of response might this variety of notation engender and how can a diversity of approaches be reconciled with the identity of the piece?

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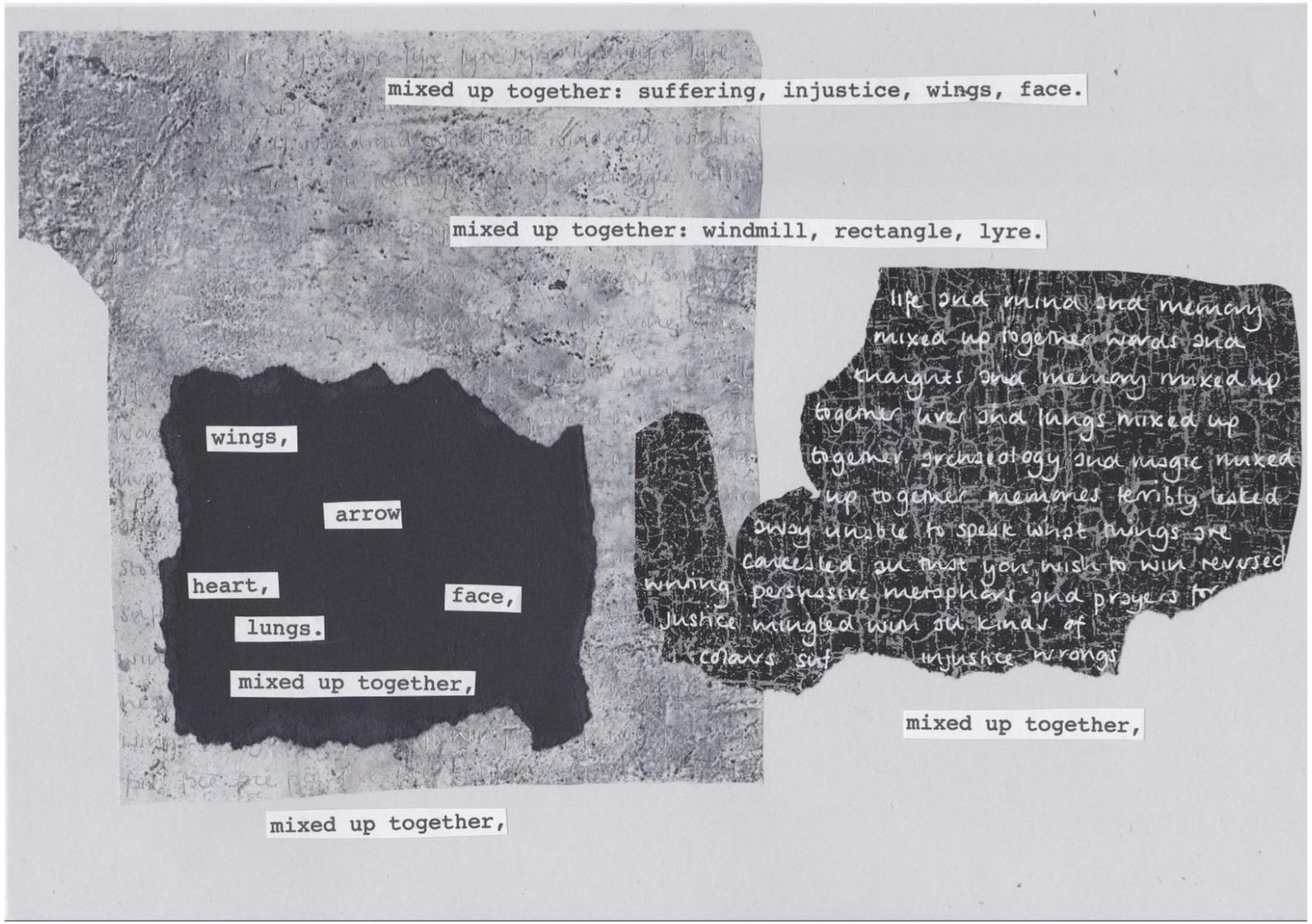

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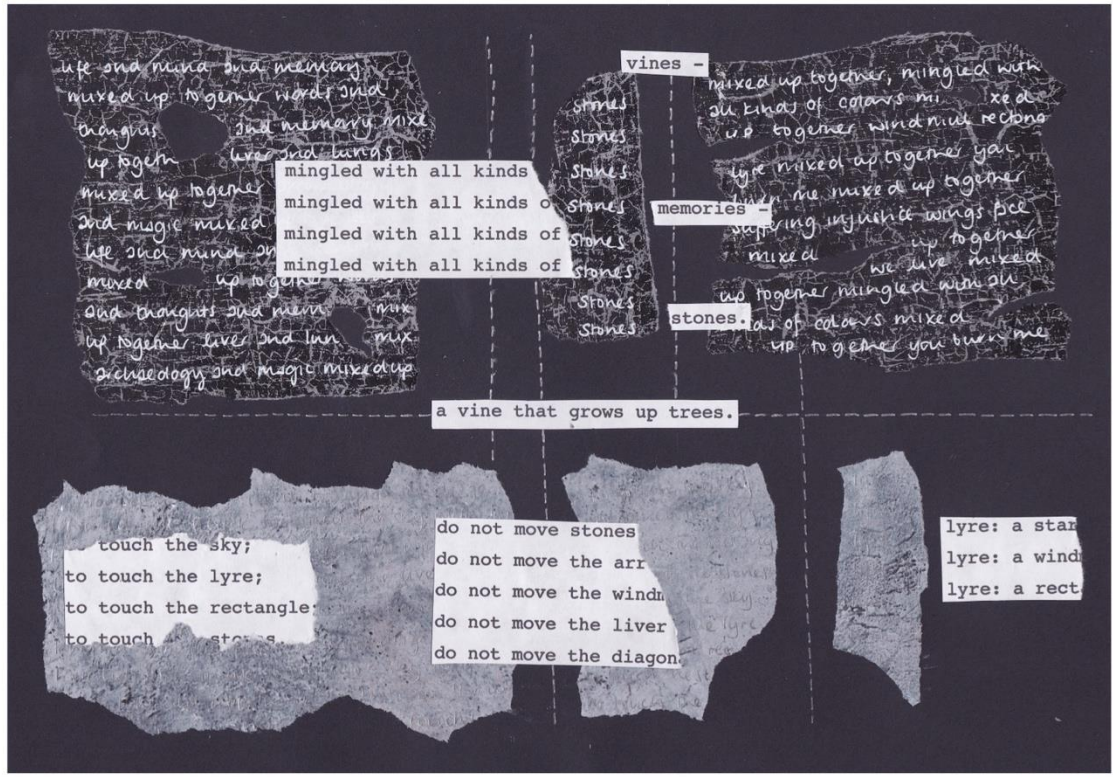

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image: curse tablets, *graphic score detail.*

Methods

Some composition methods at work in this piece relate to the composition of the score and notation, while others to the presentation of the piece in the format of an album, and the 'remix' method used to gather the materials together. This reflects the different moments of composition in the project, creating the scores and the album at separate times.

Collage Score:
Graphic notation was created by combining paper materials in collage method. Images of curse tablets were re-created by tearing paper materials by way of a mimetic process, using resources such as:

- Curse tablets of Roman Britain (an unfinished/fragmented documentation created by the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents at the University of Oxford)
- Roman Curse Tablets found in Bath

These fragments were then sometimes intervened in by way of written text or graphic symbols. The former is taken from the text created for the piece and the latter from images on archaeological finds. Notational elements were further conceived as ways to connect the fragments together, or else to 'frame' or 'interpret' them as might be the case for such finds that are now placed in a museum context rather than the devotional one for which they were originally intended. As such these elements demonstrate how the notation also invites a reinterpretation of these fragments.

Creative Textual Practice
The text within the piece was also composed of fragments. These include text or fragments of text found on existing curse tablets and translated, such as

- RIB 154. Curse upon thief of 'Vilbia'

and poetry by Sappho, which is similarly fragmented in its extant documents, from:

- Anne Carson (2003) *If Not, Winter: The Complete Fragments Of Sappho*. London: Virago.

These are combined using processes of layering and repetition similar to the graphic notation, to create a text that can form an additional notational element to the piece in terms of its sound when spoken, its rhythm, or its shape.

Methods

Notated Miniatures:
The miniatures (short pieces in stave notation, suitable for keyboard instrument or organ manuals) have been composed through a fairly straight-forward compositional process. The list of dedicatees was finalised prior to the composition of the pieces and has informed some of the compositional choices, but not all. These dedicatees are all composers with whom I have previously worked, and the pieces either somewhat reflect influence or admiration. A set of harmonic progressions that are reasonably abstract but have Db/Eb as harmonic centres were first composed. These were composed at the organ although not voiced so as only to be played at the organ. These progressions were then used as the material via which the textural and timbral ideas articulated in the miniatures could be composed. In the recorded versions of the miniatures presented on the album, work with the 1745 Nacchini Organ in the chapel on the island of San Servolo, Venice, was undertaken to identify specific registrations and timbres for each piece, making use of the mechanical action of the instrument. Such specifically-created registrations using half stops are possible in recording but not re-creatable spontaneously in performance or reliably on multiple occasions. This makes each recording a unique performance event.

Remixes:
For each remix, all available recordings of all performances by the named musicians were considered as materials, with prior permission from each of the collaborators. Selections of material were made sonically—in order to find connections between separate performances—and organically, using techniques such as granular synthesis, reversed recordings, changes of tempo and pitch, layering and collage to concurrently realise an intensification of the ideas from those sampled performances and new, serendipitous exchanges. This is both a reflective and creative method of composition.

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images: the unusual organ at St Swithun's, Worcester the venue for the presentation of two performances by different musicians on the same day (10 December 2022).

Dissemination: Album

[Album released via Bandcamp on 22.05.2025.]

This album presents a range of perspectives on the scores that make up *curse tablets*: I recorded all of the miniatures for the 1745 Nacchini Organ in the chapel on the island of San Servolo, Venice, as part of a residency for the Festival Registri in October 2023. These recordings take advantage of the unique tuning, temperament, and sonic possibilities of that instrument. The recordings combine the sound of the organ in the space with a close recording made inside the instrument, creating a picture of what the organ sounds like to the organist while she is playing.

These recordings are interspersed with remixes that have been created from multiple recordings of performances by musicians who have all worked on their own interpretations of these pieces. These remixes often present, layer, and intersperse multiple performances combining the scores and materials in different ways. Each remix is my portrait of the work and interpretations of the featured musicians and presents a snapshot of how this 'curse tablets' music has expanded as a result of these collaborations. My intervention in composing these remixes has been to highlight the different sounds, perspectives and innovations that these musicians bring to the piece.

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image: curse tablets, *album cover*

Dissemination: Album (remixes)

Album released via Bandcamp on 22.05.2025.

remix i – Alistair Zaldua: Alistair Zaldua explores a dark, textured, and sometimes noisy sound-world through the medium of e-violin and processing with pedals and max/msp; these sounds can be combined with additional electronic elements, or become those elements themselves. This remix explores Alistair's violin sounds through further processing possibilities for the e-violin in the form of a labyrinth.

remix ii – Huw Morgan: The piano and organ recordings heard in this track come from performances by Huw Morgan, most of which were made as part of his hugely influential Mainly Slow Organ Music series (in Bristol and beyond). Huw has presented a number of the miniature pieces in concert, as well as developing original electronic sounds as part of his performances that can also be heard in this remix.

remix iii – Micahel Bonaventure, Richard Craig and Huw Morgan: Together, Michael Bonaventure and Richard Craig have created a unique perspective on the music of the 'curse tablets' miniatures that extends the harmonies, fading them in and out while overlapping with the organ. Michael extends this approach further in the creation of electronic materials for performance. This remix takes that approach further, adding to the layering and dialogue between the instrumental parts. An additional organ performance, by Huw Morgan, is also layered, suggesting a concord between the flute and higher organ registers.

remix iv – Christoph Gallio and Alistair Zaldua: In 2023, Christoph Gallio and Alistair Zaldua released interpretations of all of the 'curse tablets' graphic scores as part of their improvisation album, 'curses and spirits' on scatterArchive. I used additional recordings from the session to create this remix which refracts their musical ideas through a sonic kaleidoscope.

remix v – Alywnne Pritchard and Alistair Zaldua: Alwynne Pritchard and Alistair performed 'curse tablets' on their tour of the UK in early 2023. Their performances showcase their improvisation duet and Alwynne's virtuosic and theatrical vocal style. In this remix, I have taken audio from their performances at Goldsmiths, University of London and from the free range concert series in Canterbury.

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image, top: Alwynne Pritchard and Alistair Zaldua at Goldsmiths, University of London
image, middle: Richard Craig and Michael Bonaventure, programme image for Sound Festival,
image, bottom: Alistair Zaldua and Lauren Redhead at Access Space, Sheffield

Performance History

- 25th June 2022 by Huw Morgan, Mainly Slow Organ (piano) Music, St Stephen's Church, Bristol
- 13th October 2022 by Alistair Zaldua at Access Space in Sheffield
- 10th December 2022 by Lauren Redhead and Alistair Zaldua at St Swithuns, Worcester
- 10th December 2022 by Huw Morgan at St Swithuns, Worcester
- 25th March 2023 by Alistair Zaldua and Lauren Redhead at Access Space, Sheffield
- 26th March 2023 by Alistair Zaldua and Lauren Redhead at Mopomoso, Vortex Jazz Club
- 28th March 2023 by Alistair Zaldua and Alwynne Pritchard at Goldsmiths, University of London
- 30th March 2020 by Alistair Zaldua and Alwynne Pritchard at free range, Canterbury
- 19th May 2023 by Michael Bonaventure and Richard Craig at St Peter's Lutton Place, Edinburgh
- 17th June 2023 by Huw Morgan, Mainly Slow Organ Music at All Saints, Pembroke Road, Bristol (recording here)
- 23rd September 2023 by Huw Morgan, Mainly Slow Organ Music, St Stephen's Bristol
- 28th September 2023 by Michael Bonaventure (with electronic audio featuring Luiz Henrique Yudo), THE SONORITY CABINET VII (The MAGIC CABINET), Grote Kerk, Oosthuizen, the Netherlands (recording here, begins 5'08")
- 8th October 2023 by Huw Morgan, Mainly Slow Organ Music, Lazarus-Haus, Berlin Friedrichshain
- 27th October 2023 by Lauren Redhead and Alistair Zaldua, Festival Registri 2023, San Servolo Island, Venice, Italy (recording here)
- 28th October 2023 by Richard Craig (flutes) and Michael Bonaventure (organ), sound festival: PNEUMA, St Machar's Cathedral, Aberdeen
- 15th March 2024 by Goldsmiths Laptop Ensemble, Goldsmiths, University of London (recording here: first piece in this video)
- 6th September 2024 by Alistair Zaldua and Lauren Redhead, at the conference *The Pipe Organ as a Site for Musical and Technological Innovation*, St John the Evangelist, Islington.
- 5th October 2024 by Huw Morgan, at Mainly Slow Organ Music at St John on the Wall, Bristol.

Performance History: Recording

Released 01.12.2023 on the scatterArchive label.

Curses and Spirits is an album of free improvisation and experimental compositions by Christoph Gallio, Alistair Zaldua, and Lauren Redhead.

The album opens with six short 'Curse Tablets'. On this album these comprise interpretations of the full set of graphic scores that combine ancient historical images with text fragments.

These performances were recorded 21.09.2022 for the purposes of this release, at Goldsmiths, University of London. The album was mixed by Alex Ward in London and mastered by Michael Brändli at Hardstudios in Switzerland.

Lauren Redhead
curse tablets
Music
Goldsmiths, University of London

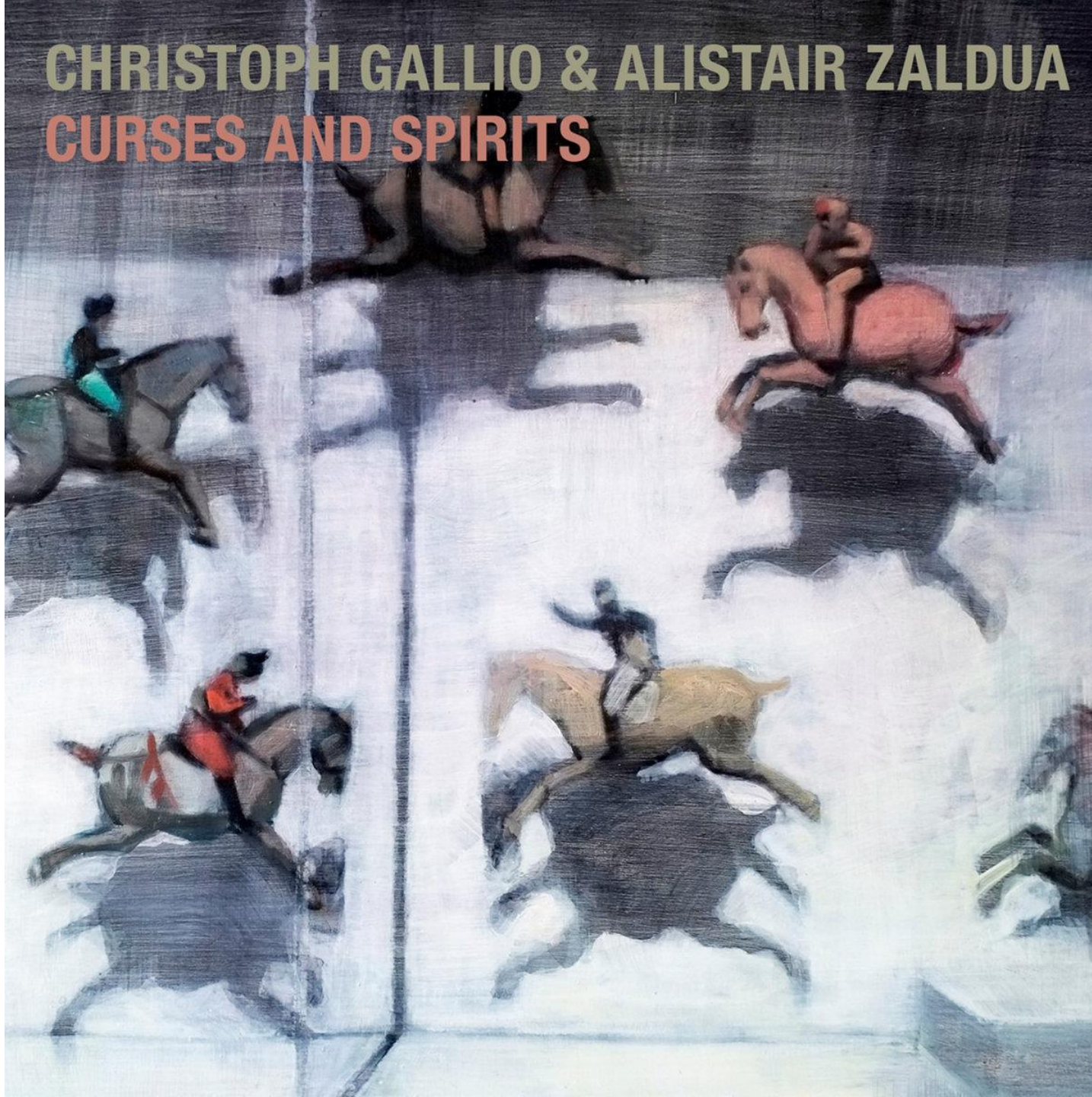

image: Curses and Spirits *cover art by Corinne Güdemann "Galopp" 2016, Musée Guimet (detail)*

Research Insights

Music as Curse Tablets
While the graphic notation of this project evidently depicts curse tablets, the miniatures most closely mirror what a curse tablet might be. In relation to the actual archaeological finds, and particularly those from Roman Britain, the majority of curse tables address stolen or lost property and reparations for this; my curse tables do not explicitly explore this theme but rather extend the petitionary element of the archaeological finds through musical voice. It is left open who is petitioned.

In terms of the graphic scores, by being subject to an aesthetic process of translation through the composition of the piece, curse tablets as a speculative form of notation are realised. This is different to simply presenting the original objects or images of them as catalysts for improvisation: the notational process of translation highlights some symbols or markings over others and makes explicit connections that do not exist elsewhere. Therefore, the scores facilitate the suggestion of new sounds, ideas and objects, as well as connections with the text and notations that exceed the original source images. This suggests that new curse tablets have been created through this process.

Lauren Redhead
curse tablets
Music
Goldsmiths, University of London

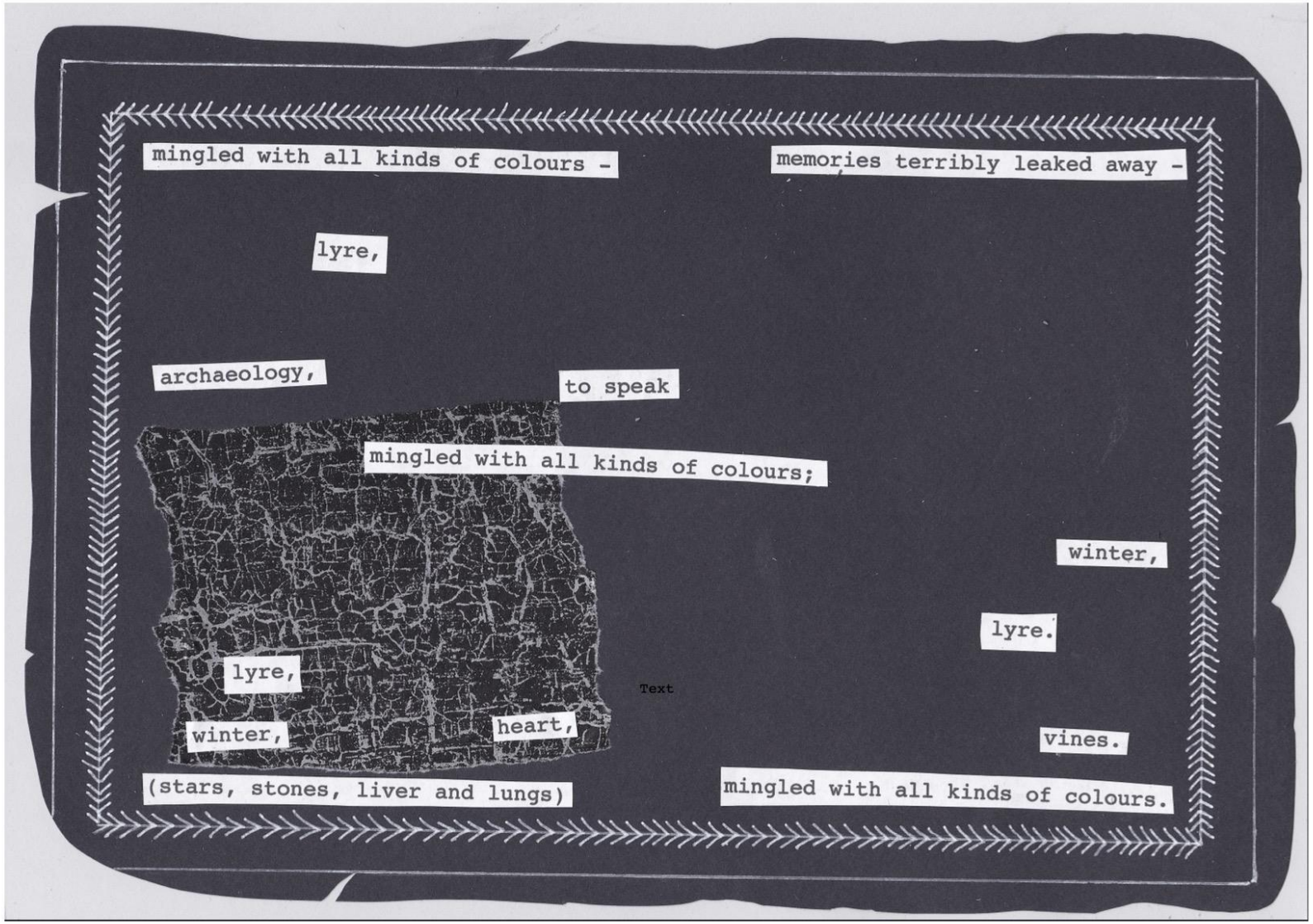

image: curse tablets, *graphic score detail.*

image: Goldsmiths Laptop Ensemble performing curse tablets, *Goldsmiths, University of London (15 April 2024).*

Lauren Redhead
curse tablets
Music
Goldsmiths, University of London

Research Insights

Responses, Diversity and Identity

The responses to the notation – across many performances and recordings – are obviously varied. What has stood out to me across these difference performance instances was the interest that performers had in combining elements of the notation, such as the graphic scores and text, or all three notational components. In addition, the openness of some elements of the notation (such as the graphic scores) suggested an open approach to the stave notation: for example, in the addition of flute to Michael Bonaventure's performance at the organ manuals, and the use of this instrument to extend the harmonies beyond what was notated. This further extended into the creation of electronic materials to use in performance such as by Huw Morgan and Michael Bonaventure. This diversity in performance suggest the identity of the piece lies both within and outwith its notation and sound. The accumulation of performances of the piece, and my album version, has created a sonic identity for the music, and the presence of some or all of the scores as materials in all of the performances has also connected them. The creative act of interpretation of these materials, and the positioning of that creative act as the creation of a curse tablet rather than only the reading of one, links all of these musical events and artefacts.

Speculative Notation

All of the performances equally dealt with the question of how curse tablets as speculative notation can be sounded, and what it means to do so? The personalisation of such responses is clearly invited and welcomed by the notational approach, as discussed above. This piece and its sonic and performative outcomes have all invited a narrative of re-making through openness, performer engagement, and recycling. As a form of practice, this suggests that this question does not have a definitive answer but rather demonstrates how a piece of music might itself be a proposition for answering such a question. The identification of one form of speculative notation therefore suggests others.

Score

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Music
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curse tablets
lauren redhead
2022

curse tablets

This piece comprises a poem, six graphic scores, and six miniatures for piano or manuals.

The piece might be realised as a combination of movements that are separate or layered; the scores may be realised in any order and in any combination.

The miniatures may be interpreted by other keyboard instruments, or other instruments, where desired.

The graphic scores may be performed separately, used to inform the interpretation of the miniatures, or ignored.

Similarly, the poem may be spoken in performance, printed, interpreted in sound, or ignored.

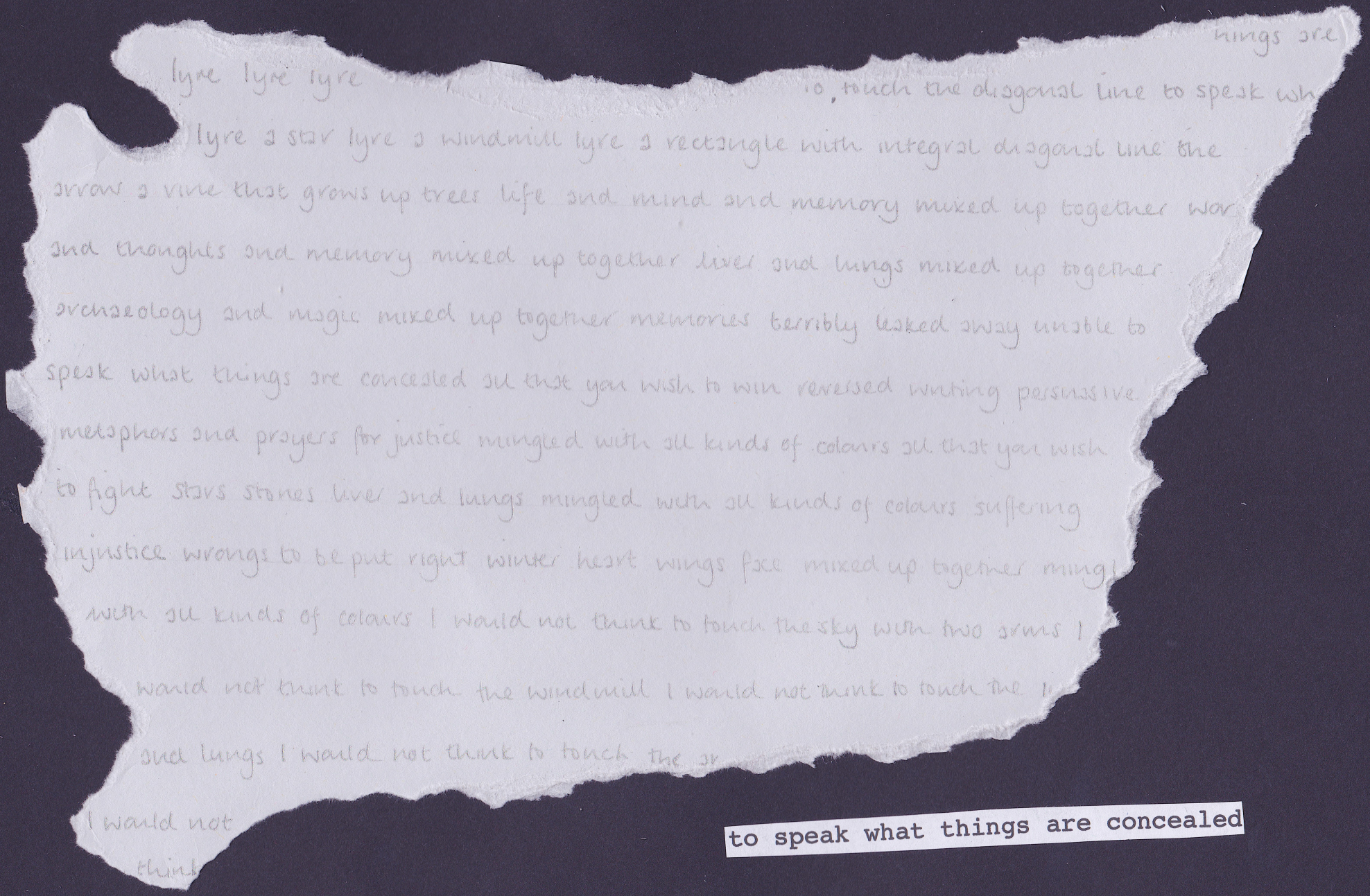
Each of the six miniatures is dedicated to another composer to whom I would like to dedicate a petitionary prayer, and to whom I am also grateful.

curse tablet

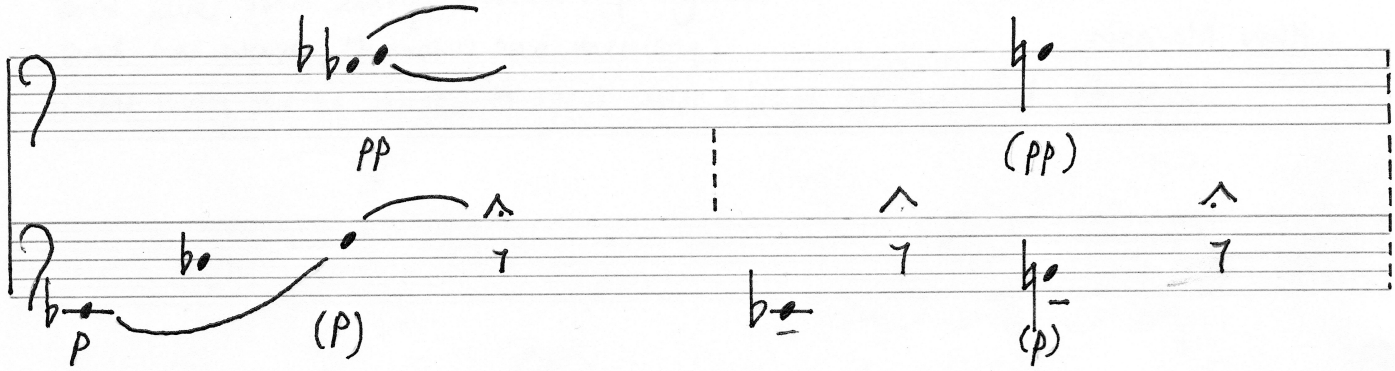
lyre, lyre, lyre.
lyre: a star.
lyre: a windmill.
lyre: a rectangle with integral diagonal line -
the arrow:
a vine that grows up trees.
life and mind and memory; mixed up together.
words and thoughts and memory; mixed up together.
liver and lungs; mixed up together.
archaeology and magic; mixed up together.
memories terribly leaked away -
unable to speak what things are concealed -
all that you wish to win
(reversed writing, persuasive metaphors, prayers for justice)
mingled with all kinds of colours;
all that you wish to fight
(stars, stones, liver and lungs)
mingled with all kinds of colours.
suffering, injustice, wrongs to be put right,
winter,
heart, wings, face, mixed up together,
mingled with all kinds of colours.
I would not think to touch the sky with two arms.
I would not think to touch the windmill.
I would not think to touch the liver and lungs.
I would not think to touch the arrow.
I would not think to touch the diagonal line,
to speak what things are concealed:
writing, metaphors, prayers, stones;
to speak what things are mixed up together:
heart, winter, archaeology, vines.
of all the stars, the most beautiful
mixed up together, mingled with all kinds of colours -
mingled with all kinds of metaphors -
mingled with all kinds of vines -

mingled with all kinds of memories -
mingled with all kinds of stones.
mixed up together: windmill, rectangle, lyre.
burning, mixed up together.
mixed up together: suffering, injustice, wings, face.
living, mixed up together;
stars, stones, liver and lungs.
do not move stones.
do not move the arrow; a vine that grows up trees.
do not move the windmill.
do not move the liver and lungs.
do not move the diagonal line
to touch the sky;
to touch the lyre;
to touch the rectangle;
to touch the stones.

writing, metaphors, prayers, stones



to speak what things are concealed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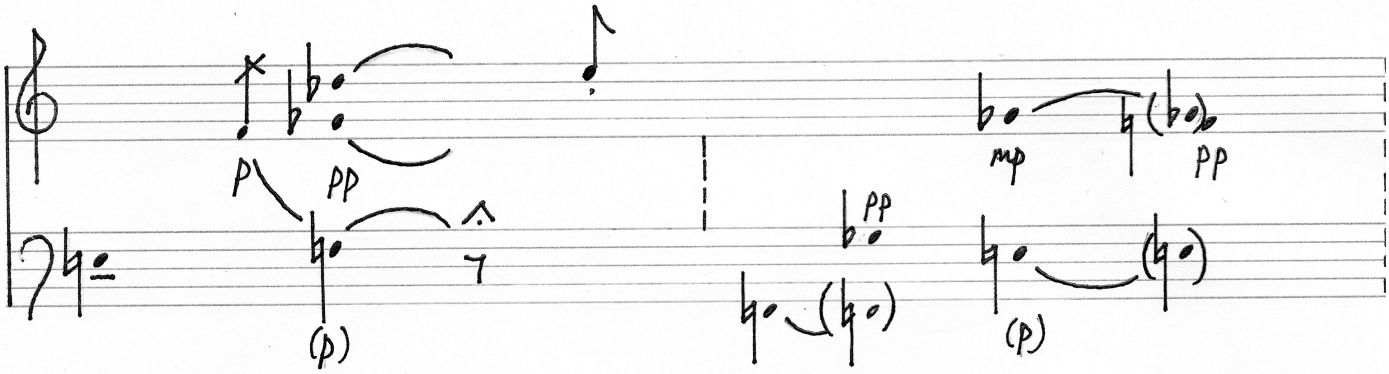
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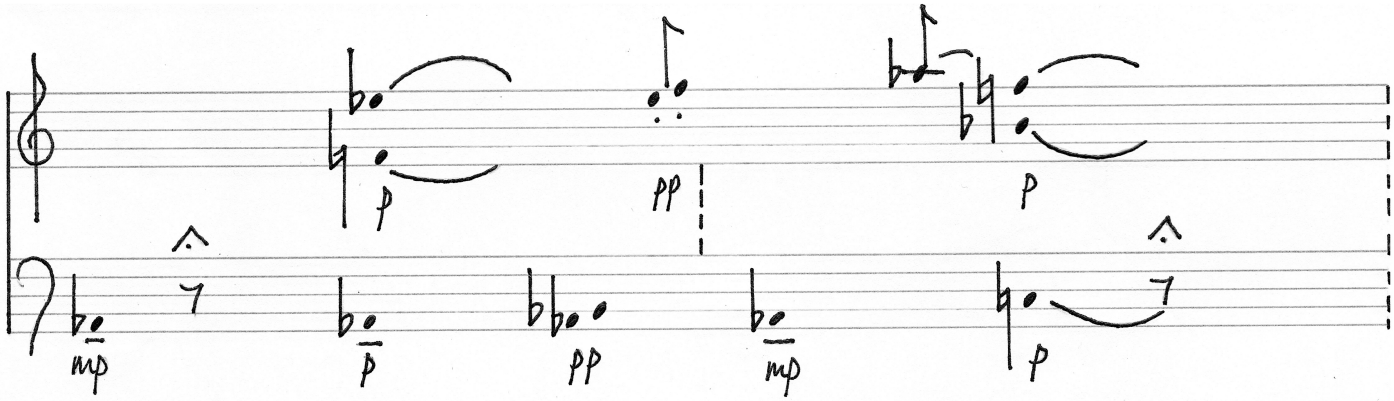
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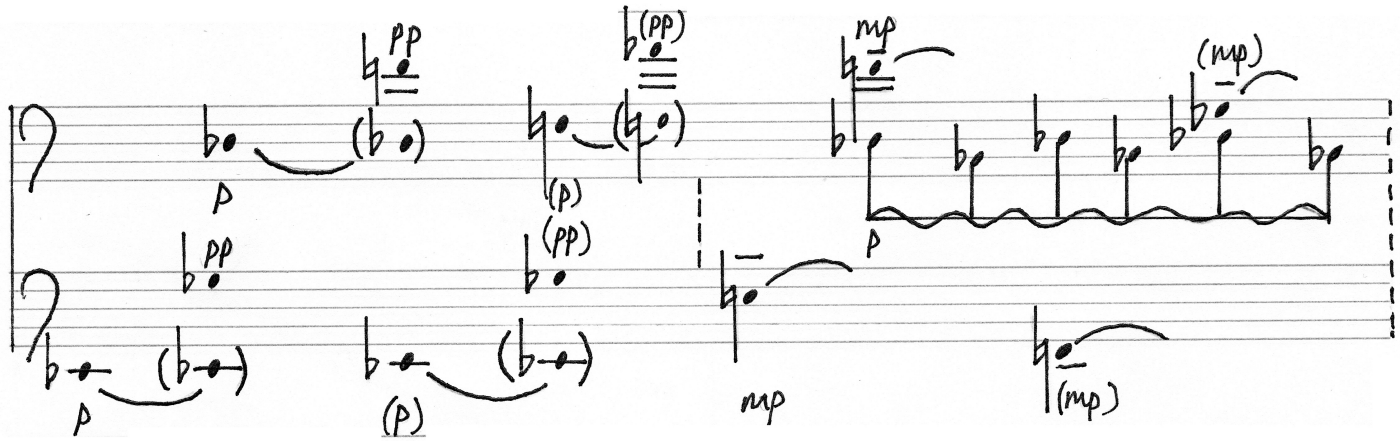
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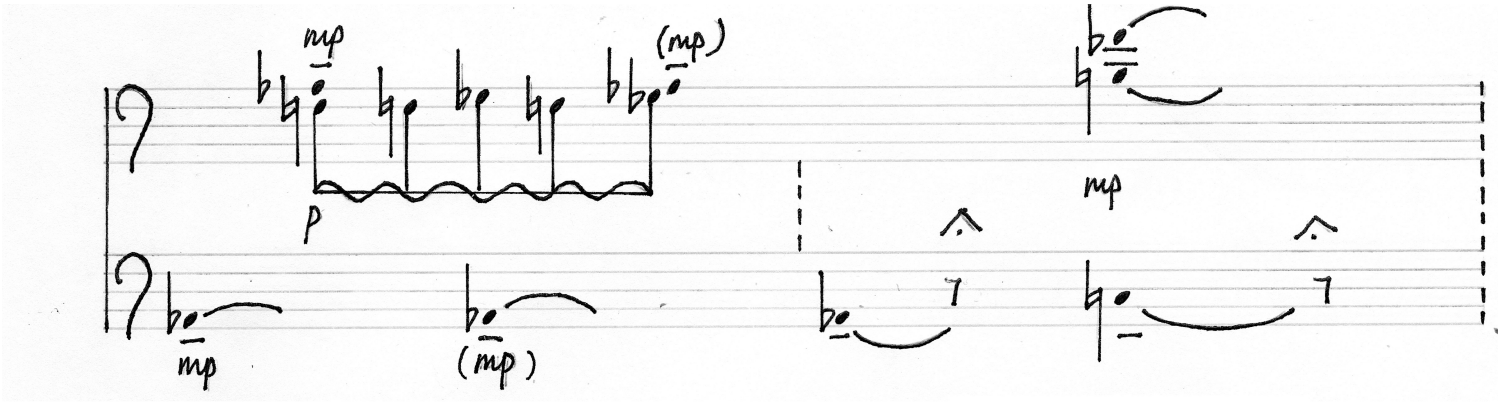
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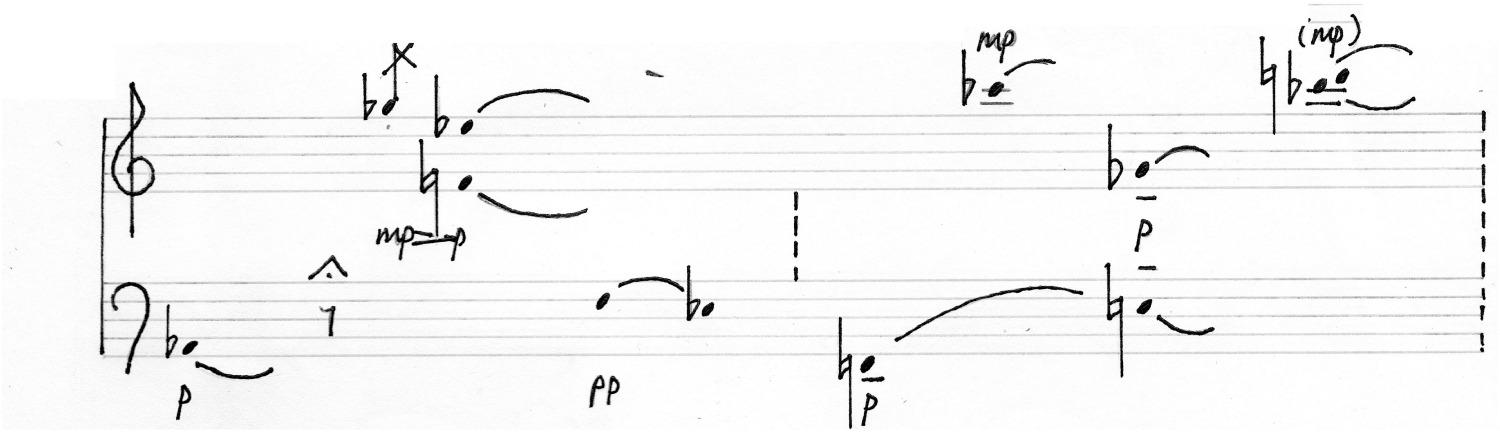
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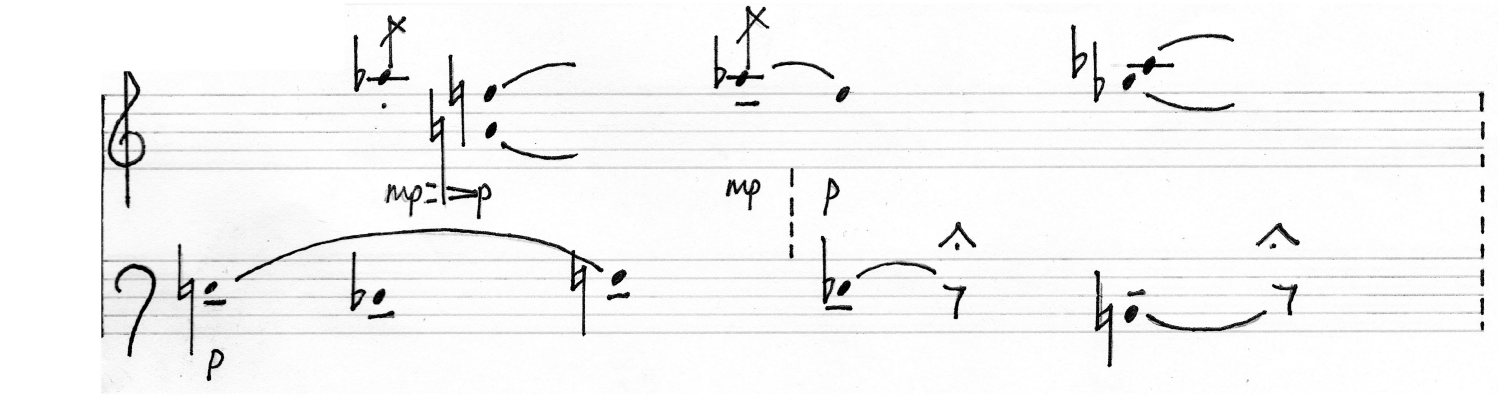
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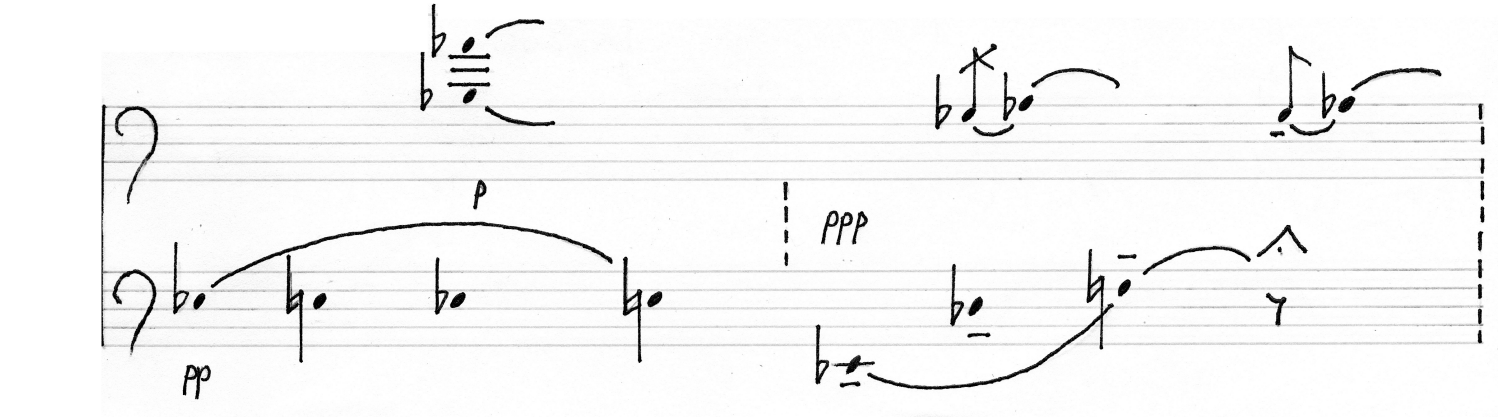
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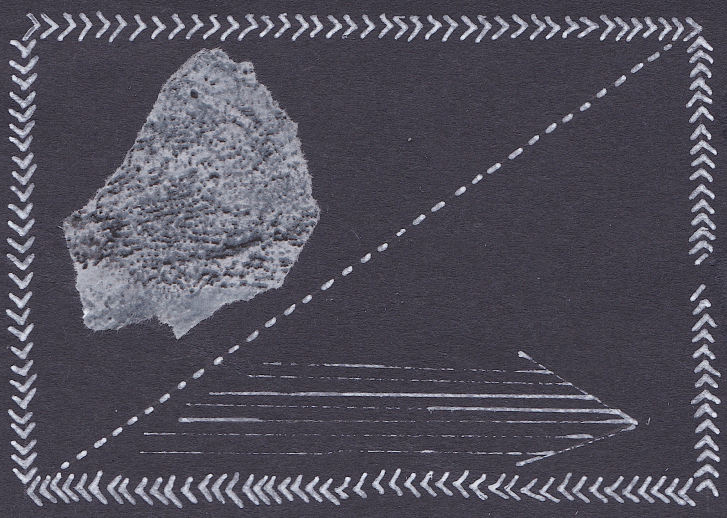
unable to speak what things are concealed



stars, stones, liver and lungs.

(reversed writing, persuasive metaphors, prayers for justice)

do not move the swan a vine that grows up trees

do not move the windmill

do not move the liver and lungs

do not move the diagonal line

to touch the sky

to touch the lyre

to touch the rectangle

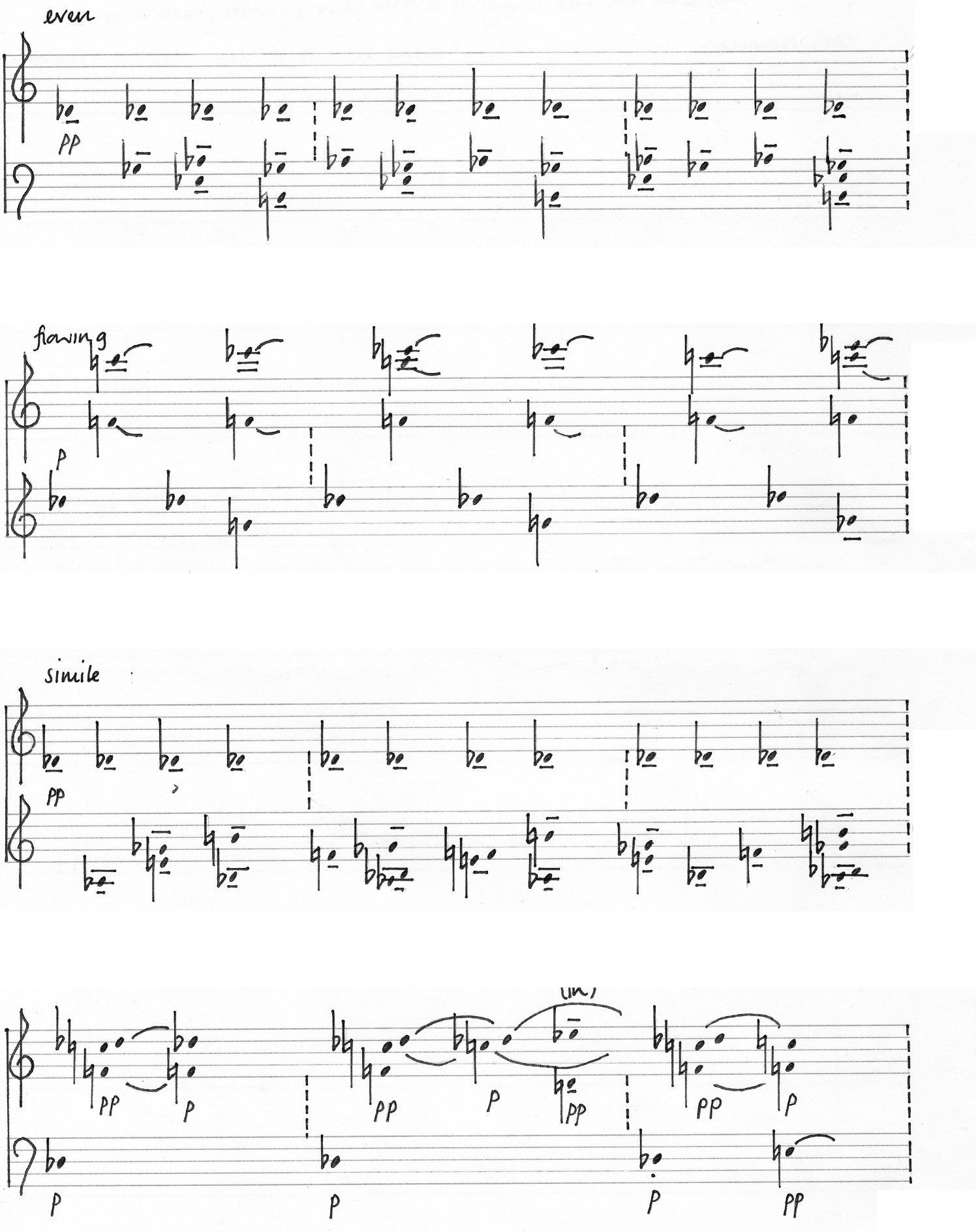
to touch the stones

lyre lyre lyre

lyre a star

lyre a windmill

mingled with all kinds of colours.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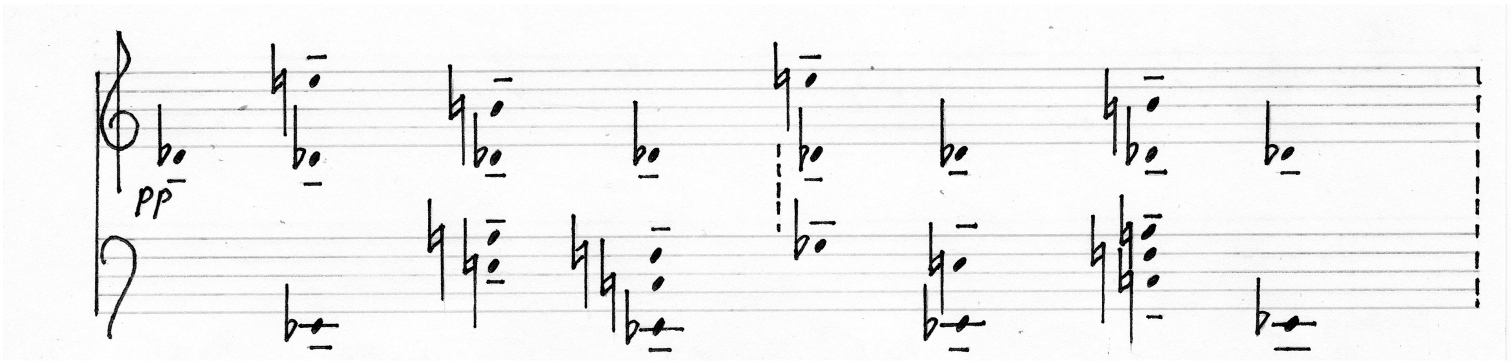
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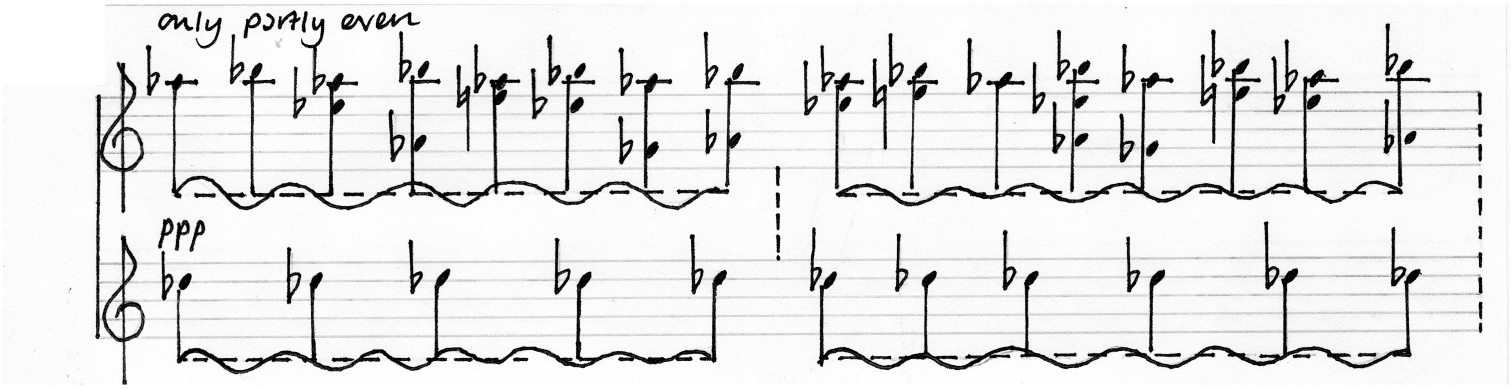
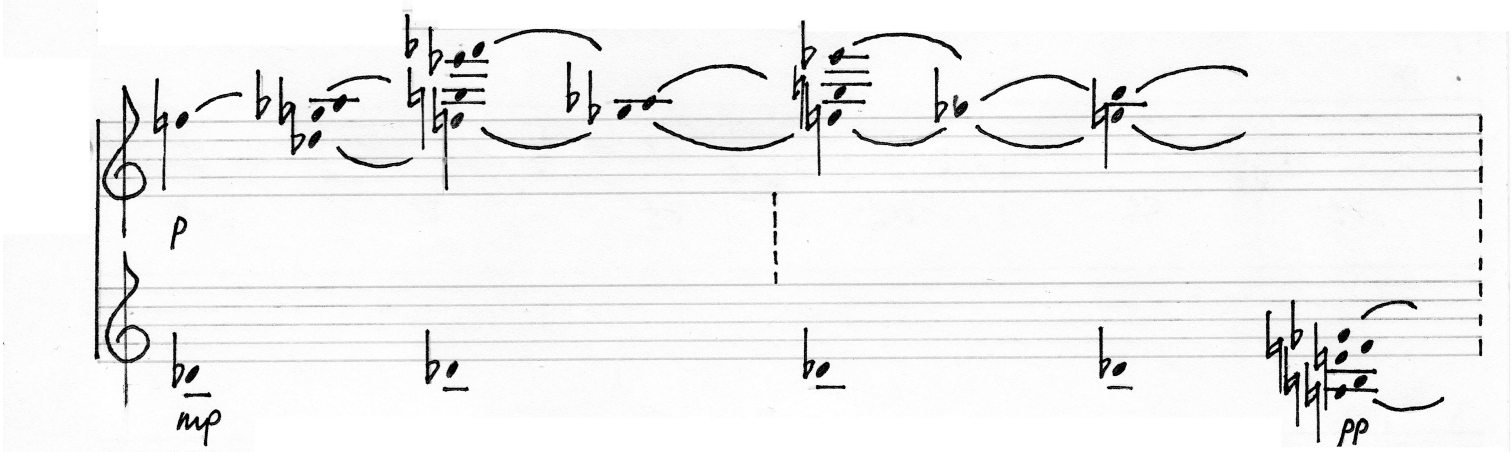

only partly even
ppp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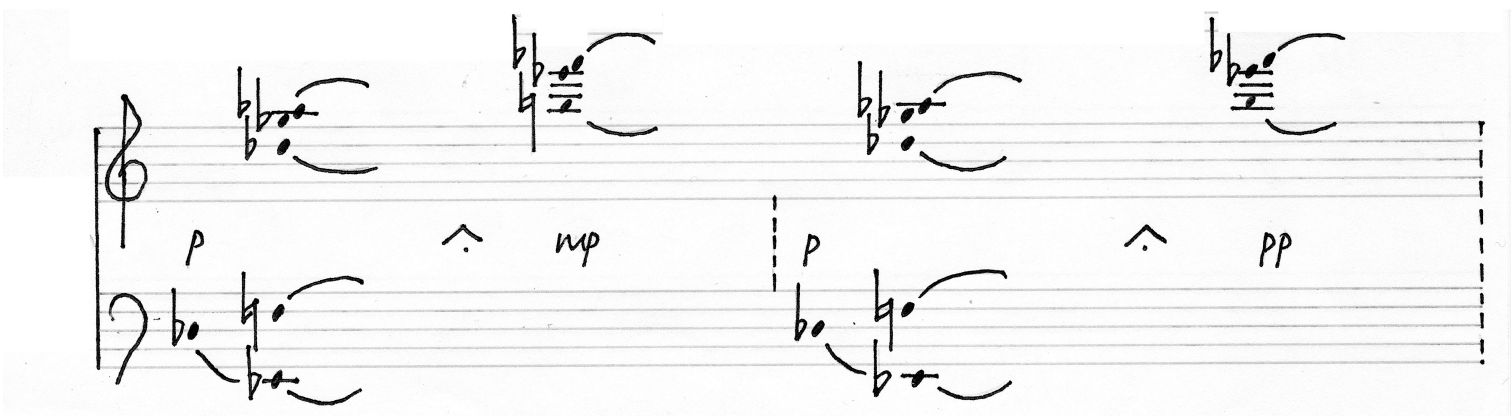
p
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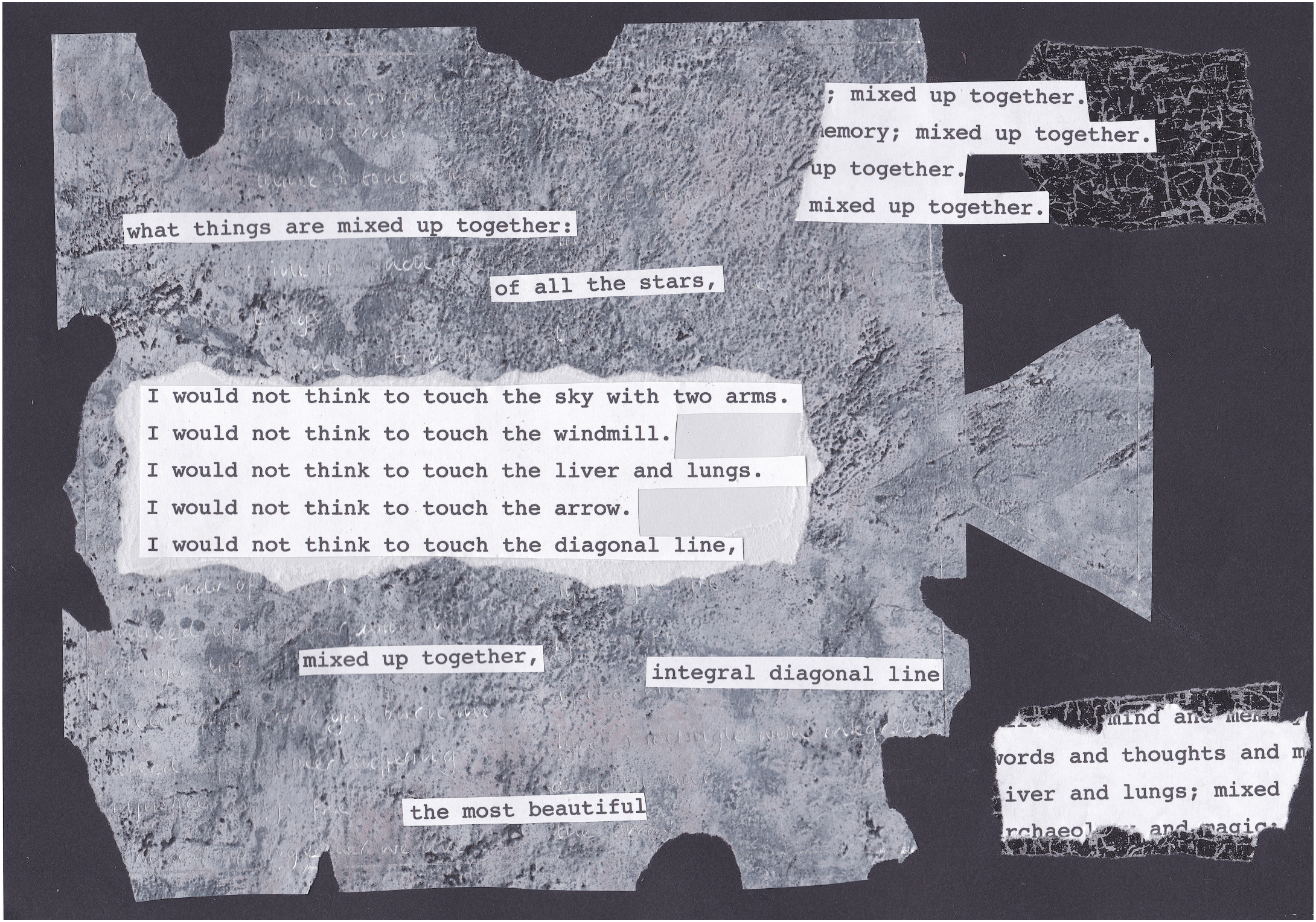
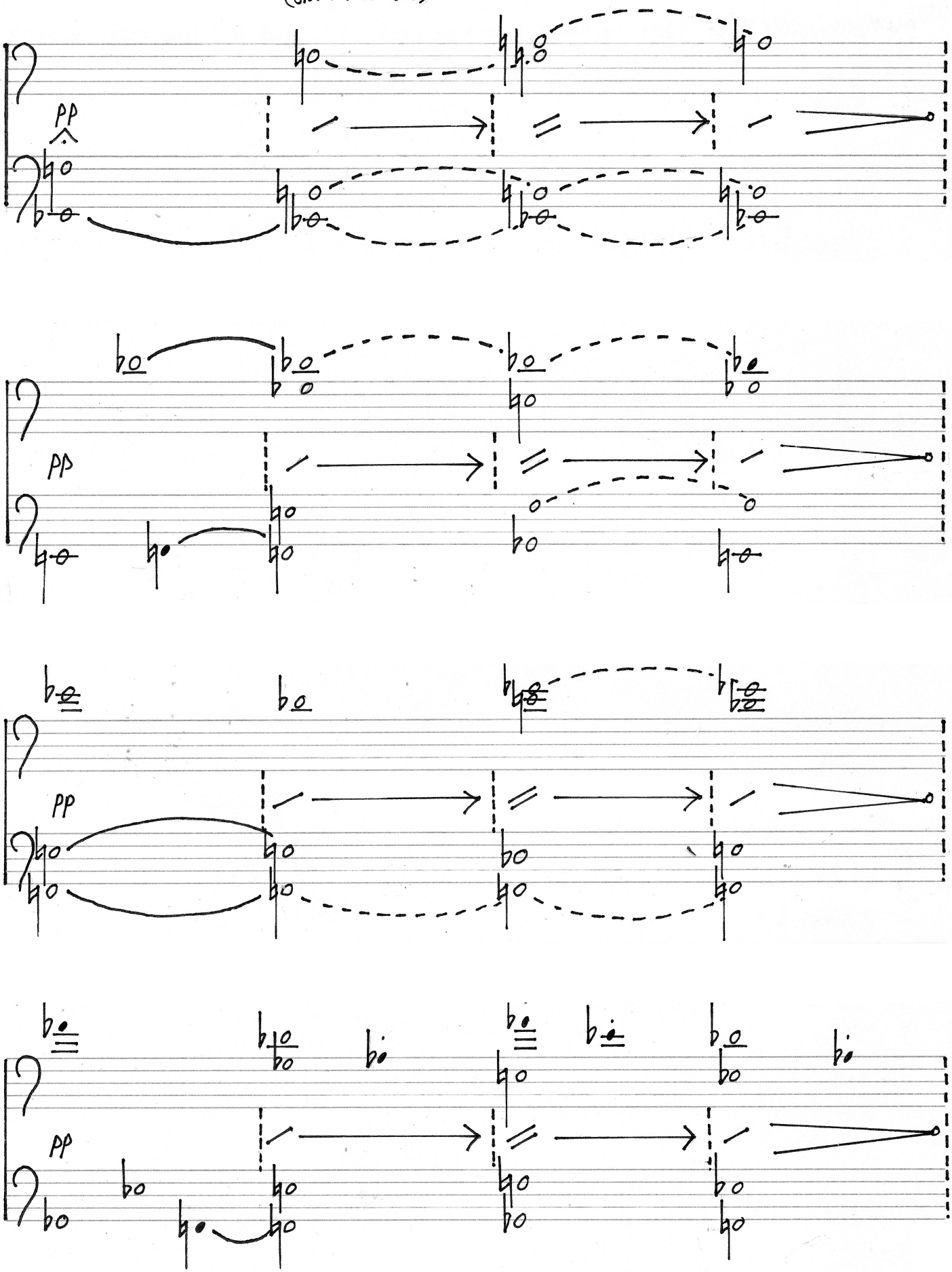
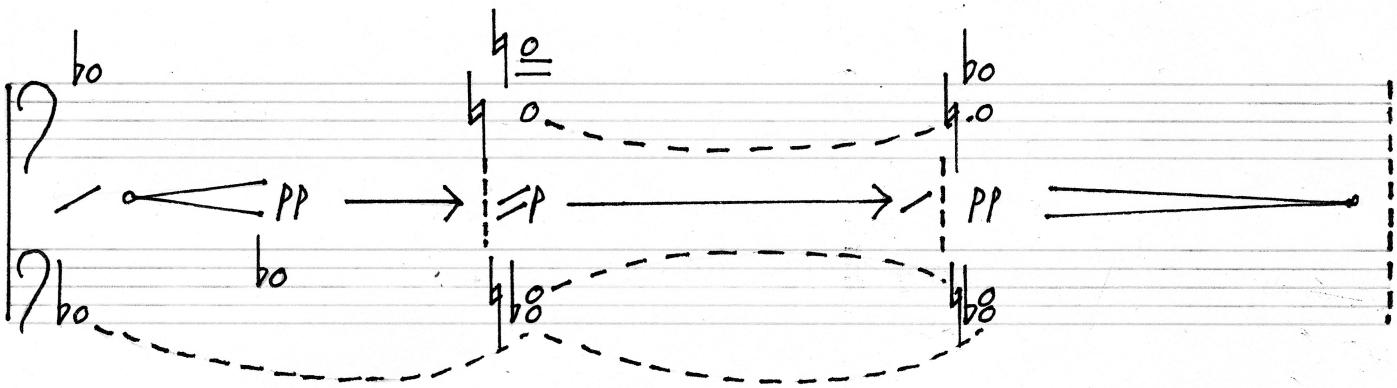
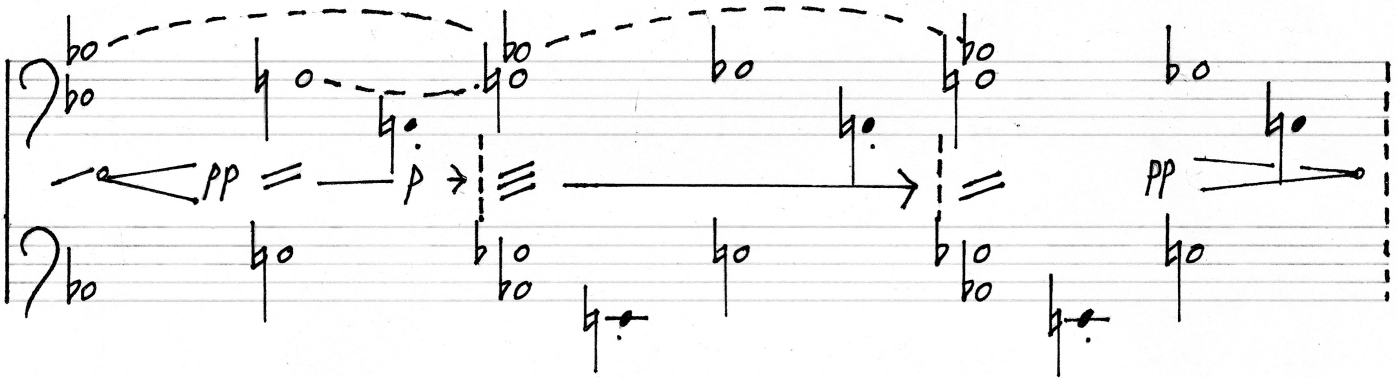

; mixed up together.
emory; mixed up together.
up together.
mixed up together.
what things are mixed up together:
of all the stars,
I would not think to touch the sky with two arms.
I would not think to touch the windmill.
I would not think to touch the liver and lungs.
I would not think to touch the arrow.
I would not think to touch the diagonal line,
mixed up together,
integral diagonal line
the most beautiful
words and thoughts and m
iver and lungs; mixed

(for piano ossia 8vb where desired)

(slow tremolo)




PP
P
PP


PP
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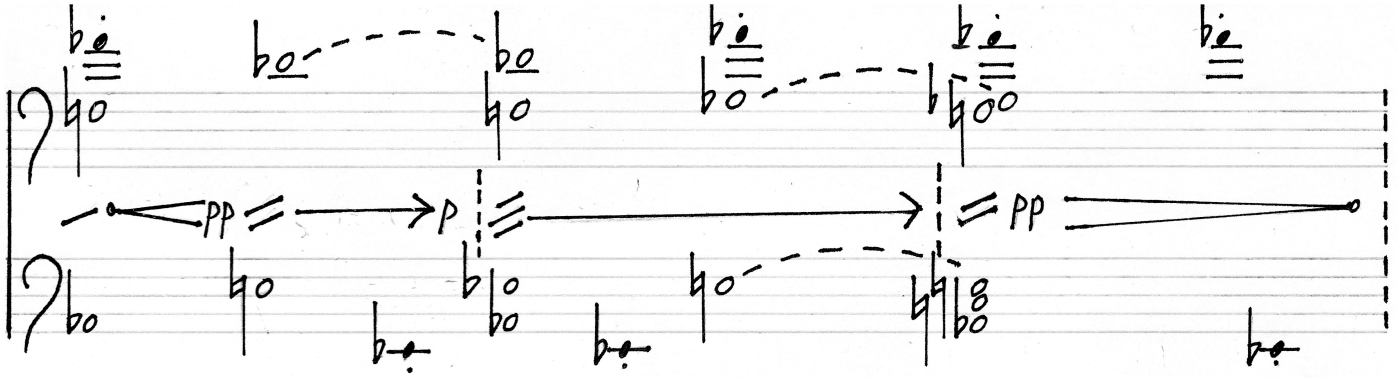
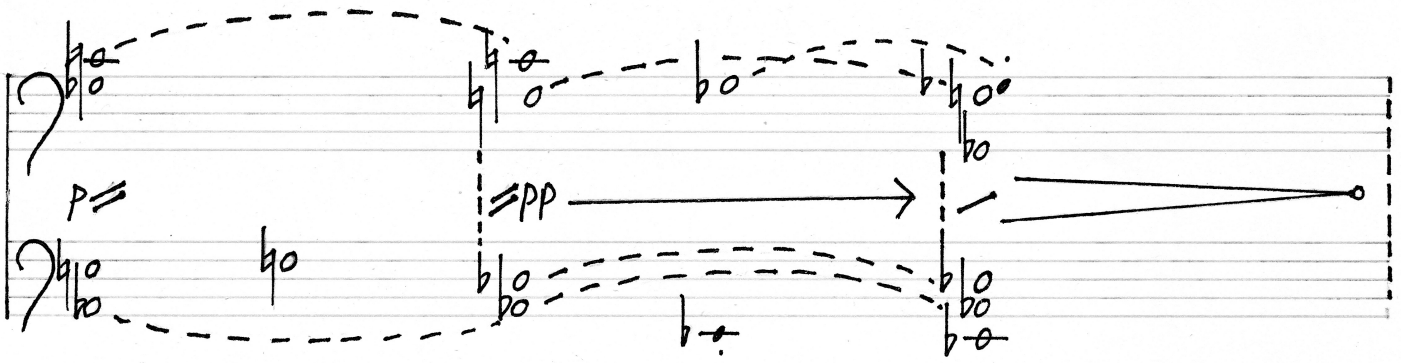
PP


PP
P
PP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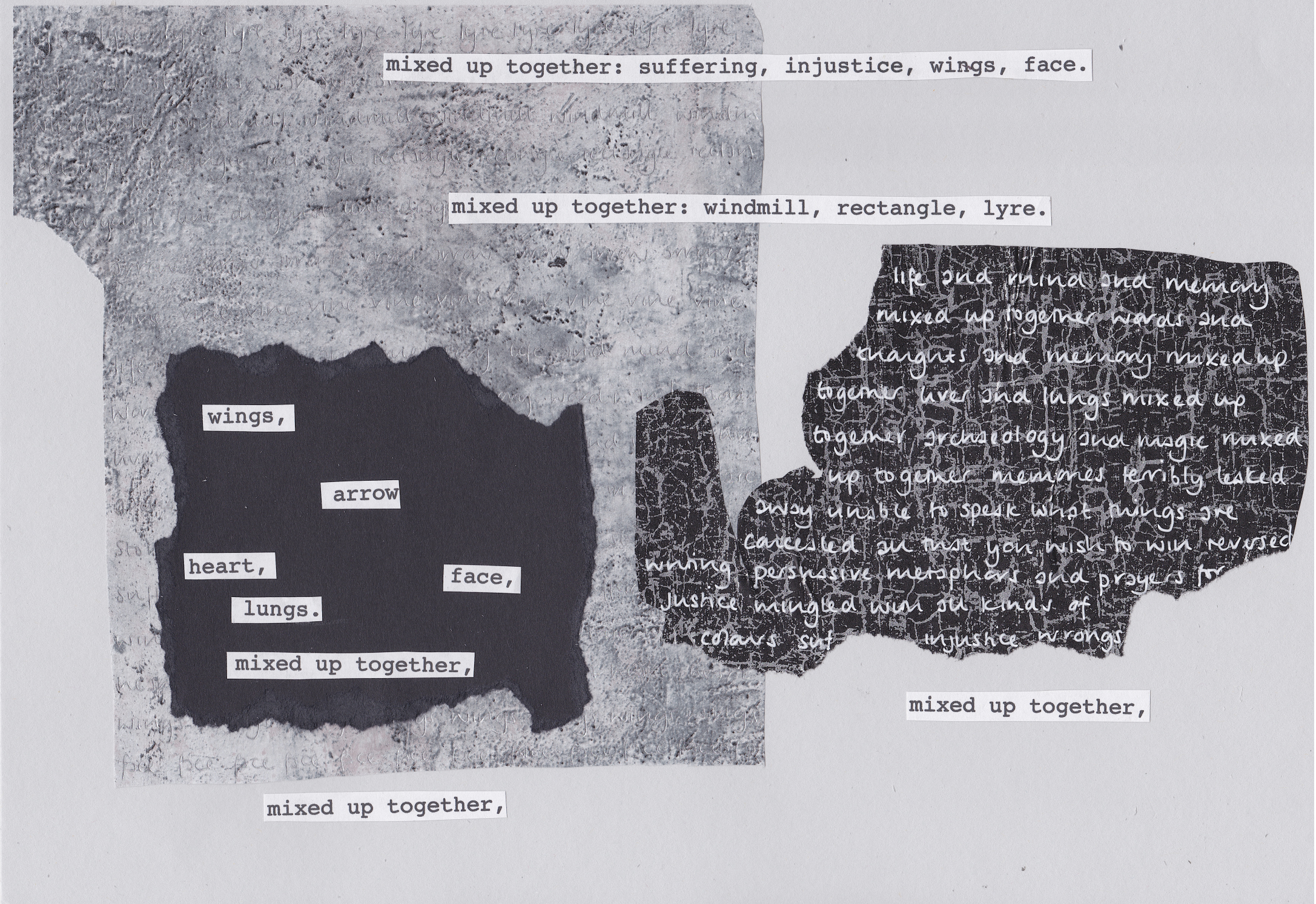
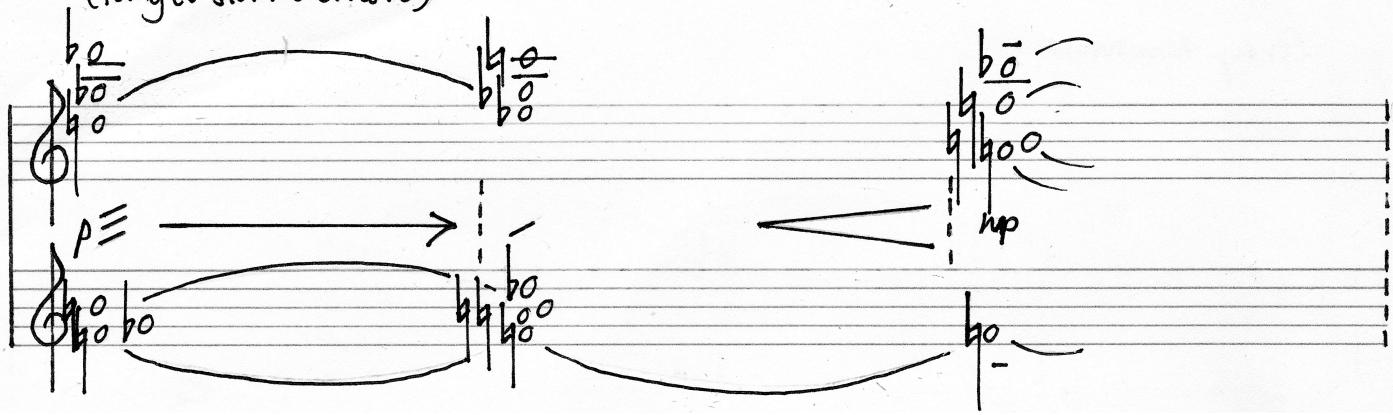
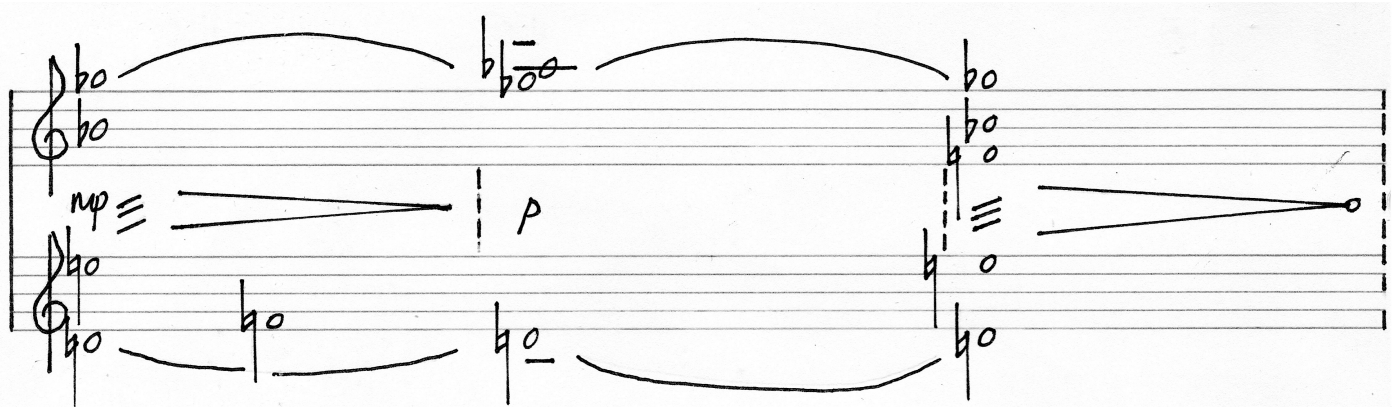
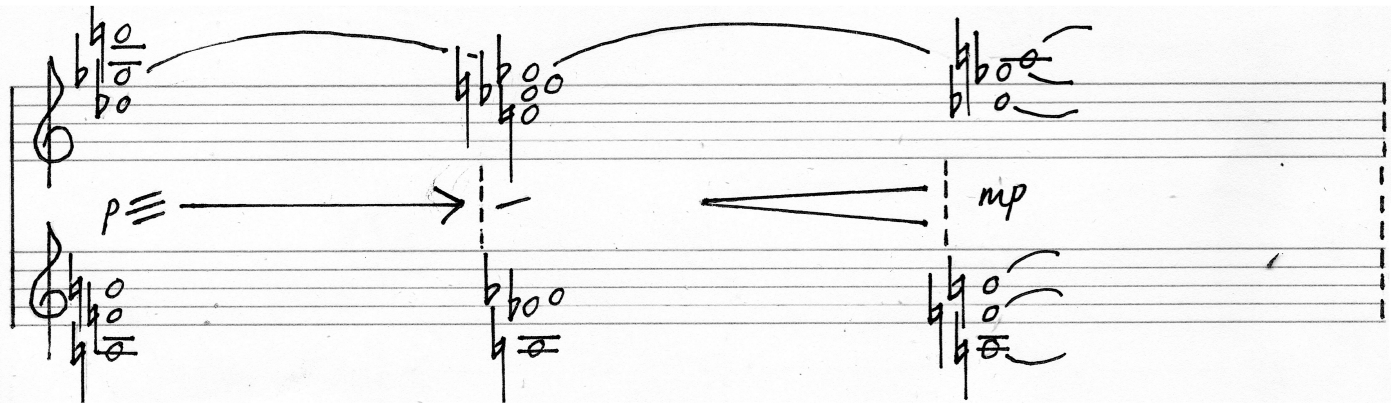

mixed up together: suffering, injustice, wings, face.
mixed up together: windmill, rectangle, lyre.
wings,
arrow
heart,
face,
lungs.
mixed up together,
life and mind and memory
mixed up together words and
thoughts and memory mixed up
together liver and lungs mixed up
together archaeology and magic mixed
up together memories terribly tasted
away unable to speak what things are
caressed or that you wish to win reversed
writing persuasive metaphors and prayers for
justice mingled with old kinds of
colours cut injustice wrongs
mixed up together,
mixed up together,

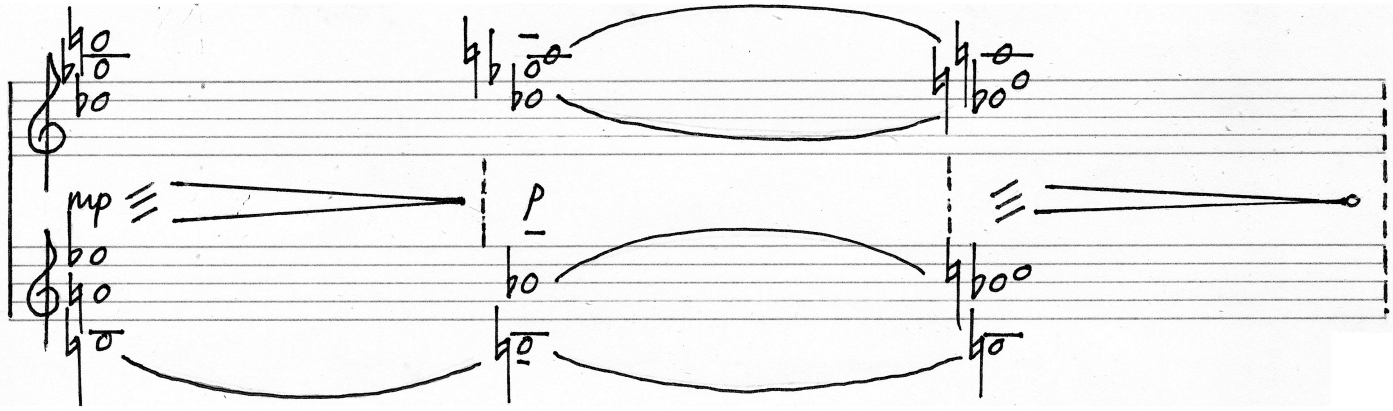
(piano ossia 8va where desired)

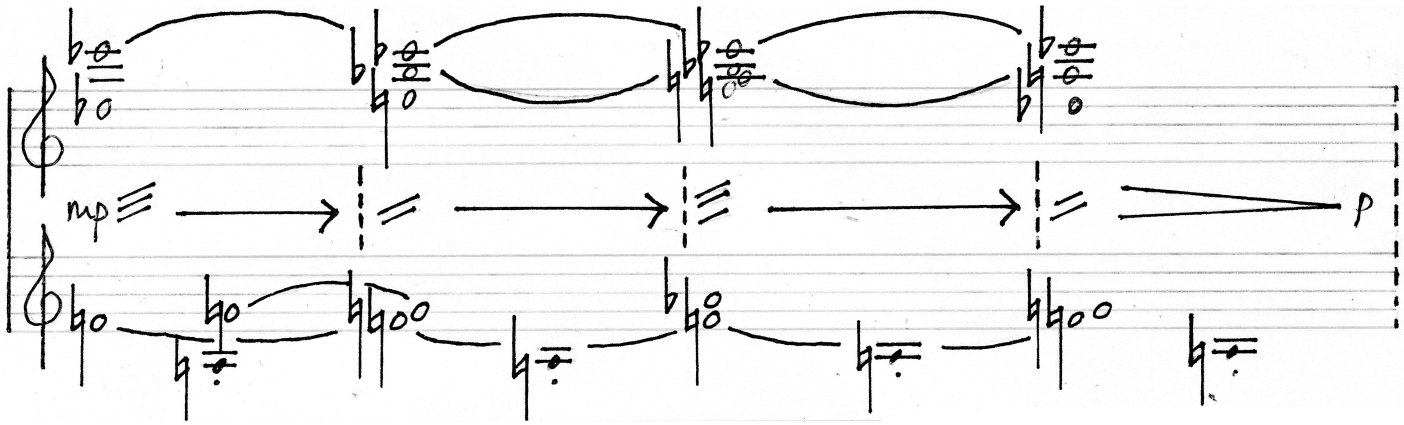
(long to slow tremolo)







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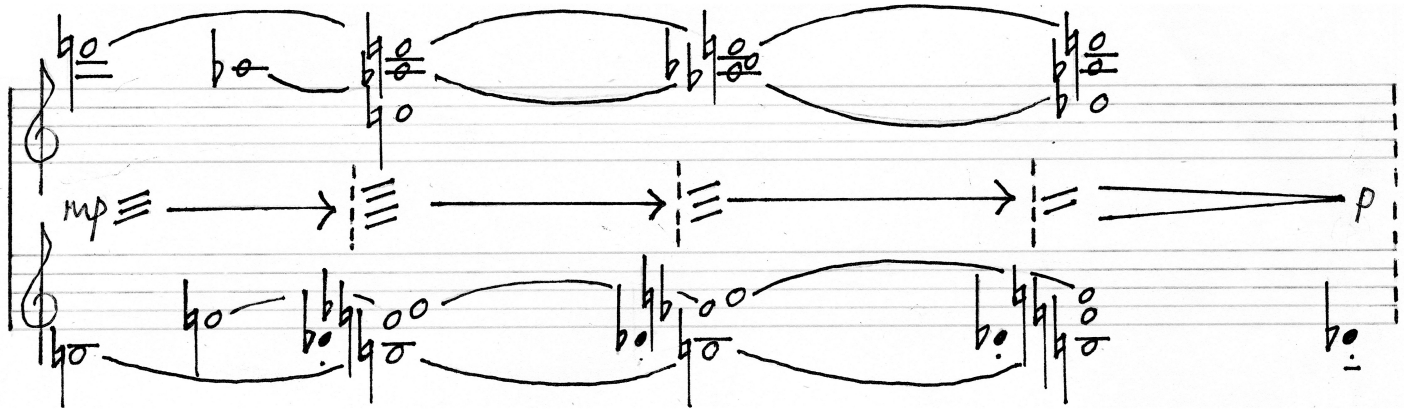
mp
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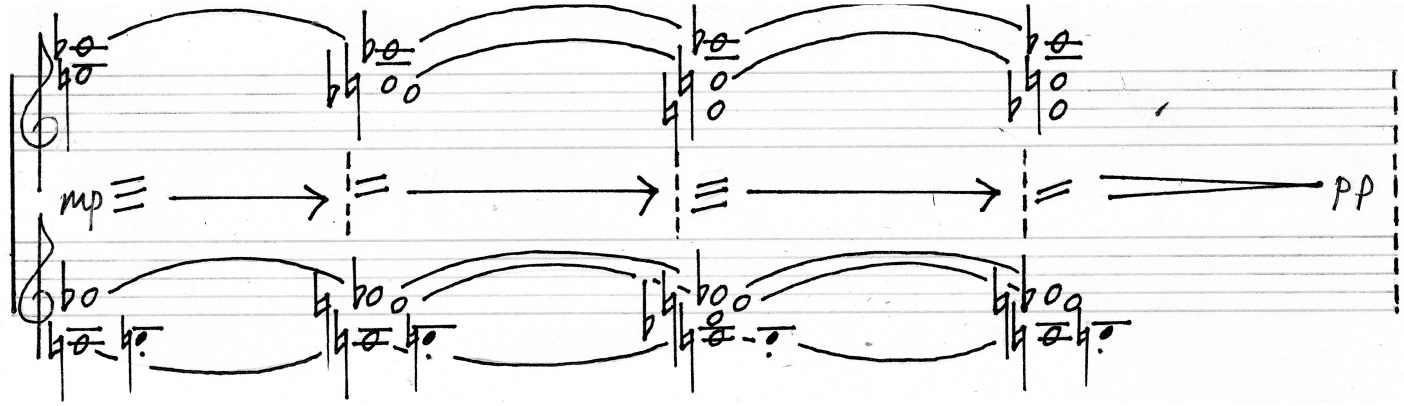
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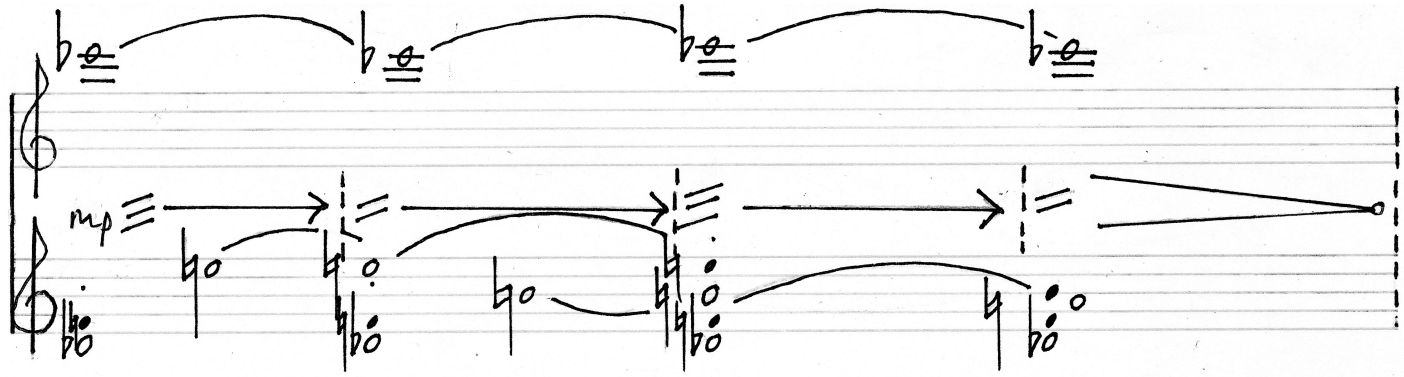
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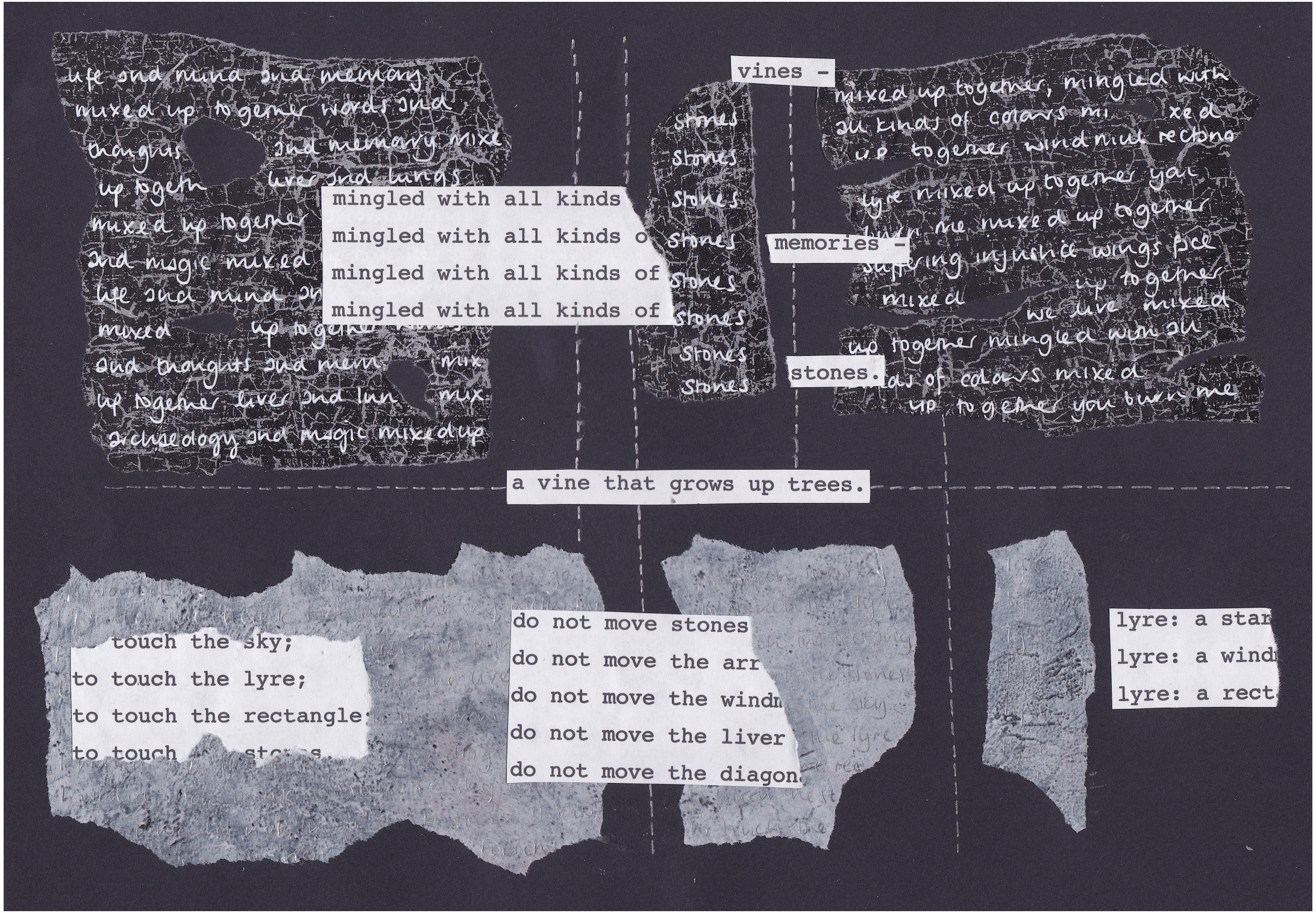
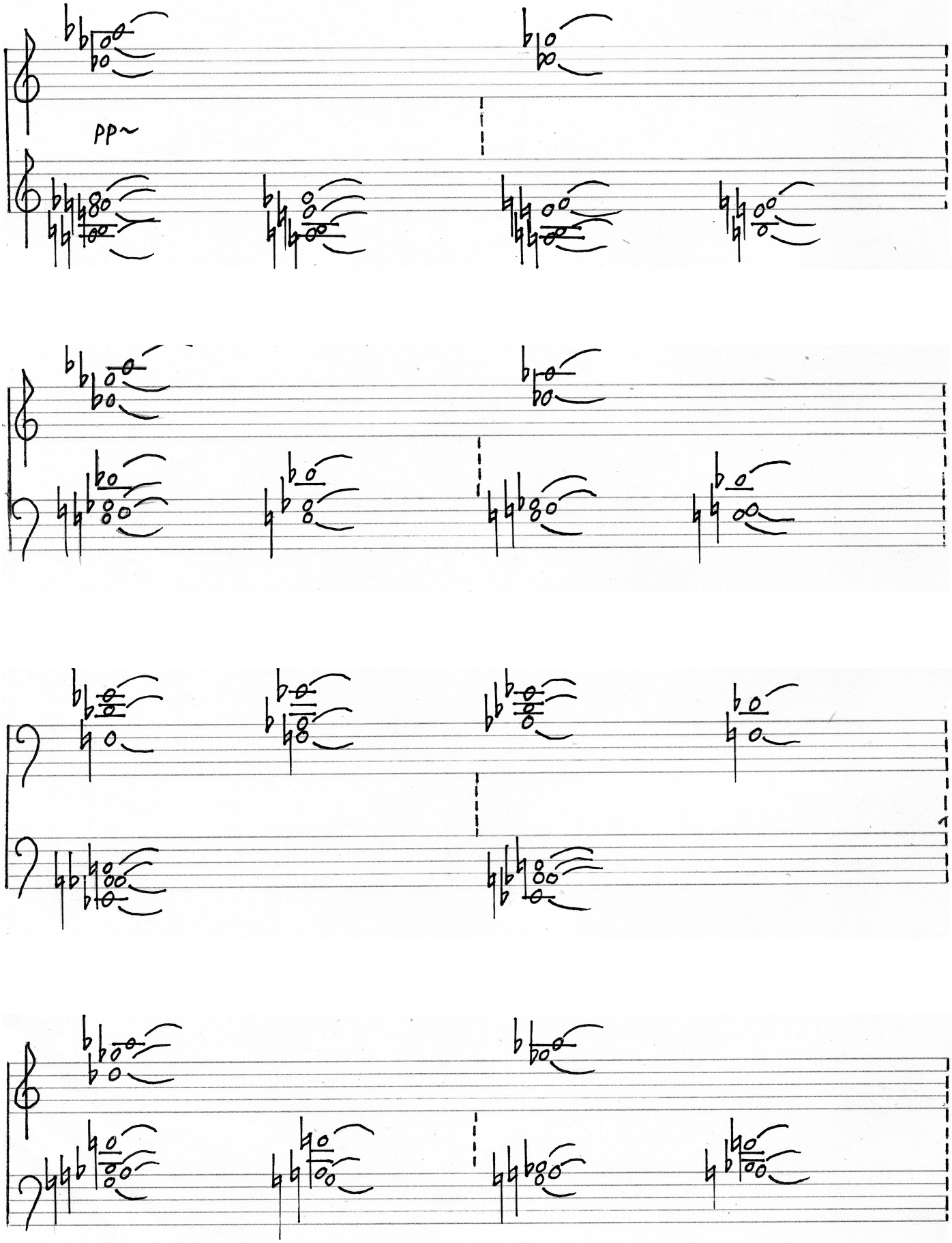
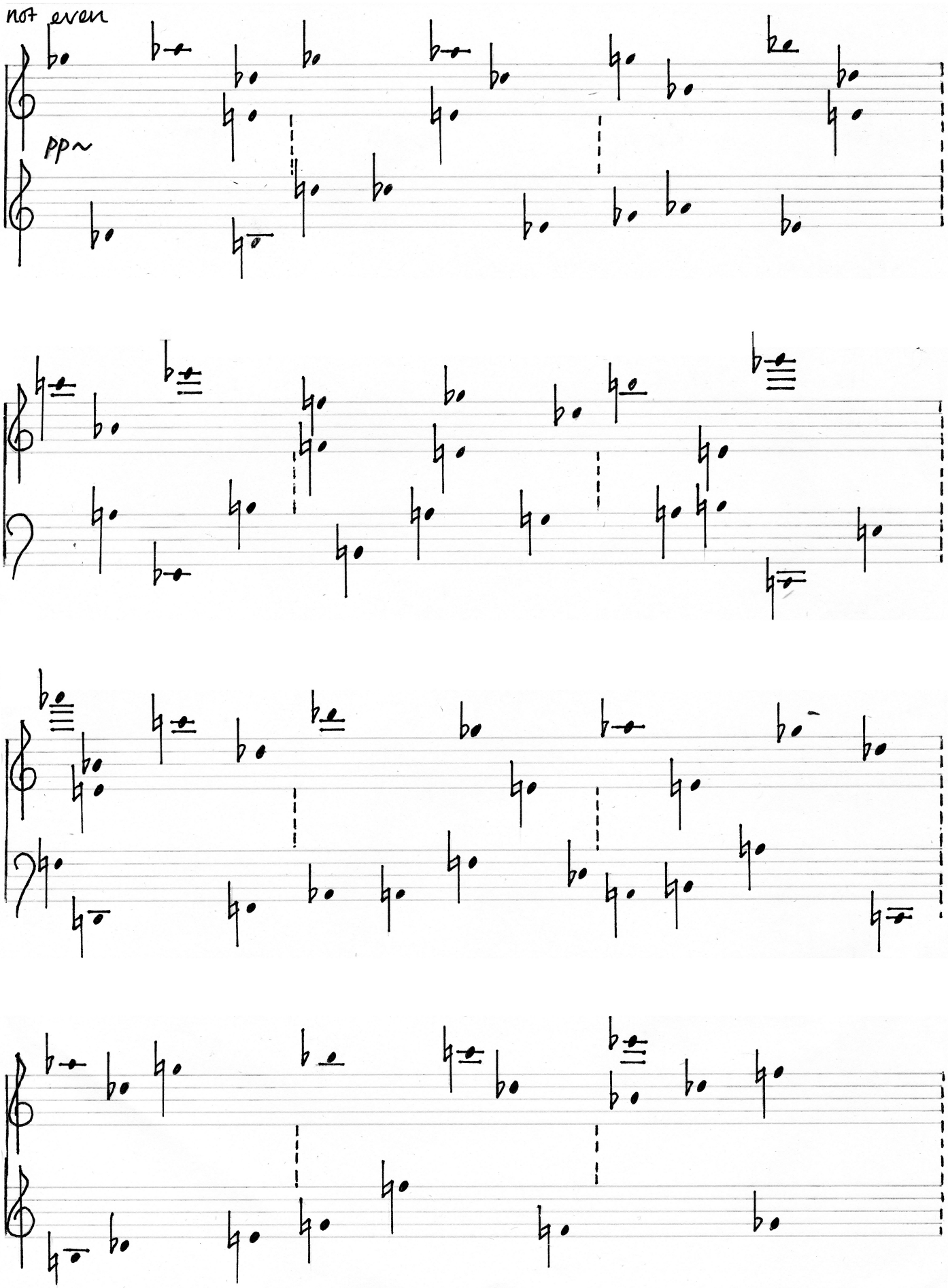

life and mind and memory
mixed up together words and
thoughts and memory mixe
up togeth liver and lungs
mixed up together
and magic mixed
life and mind
mixed up toge
and thoughts and mem
up together liver and lun
archaeology and magic mixed up
mingled with all kinds
mingled with all kinds o
mingled with all kinds of
mingled with all kinds of
vines -
stones
stones
stones
stones
stones
stones
stones
memories -
stones.
mixed up together, mingled with
all kinds of colours mi xed
up together wind mill rectang
lyre mixed up together yar
liver me mixed up together
suffering injustice wings pce
mixed up together
we live mixed
up together mingled with all
kinds of colours mixed
up together you burn me
a vine that grows up trees.
touch the sky;
to touch the lyre;
to touch the rectangle
to touch
do not move stones
do not move the arr
do not move the windm
do not move the liver
do not move the diagon
lyre: a star
lyre: a windm
lyre: a rect

piano : allow to fade out / manuals : slowly release one note at a time

(snow flakes)



(rain drops)



mingled with all kinds of colours -

memories terribly leaked away -

lyre,

archaeology,

to speak

mingled with all kinds of colours;

winter,

lyre.

lyre,

winter,

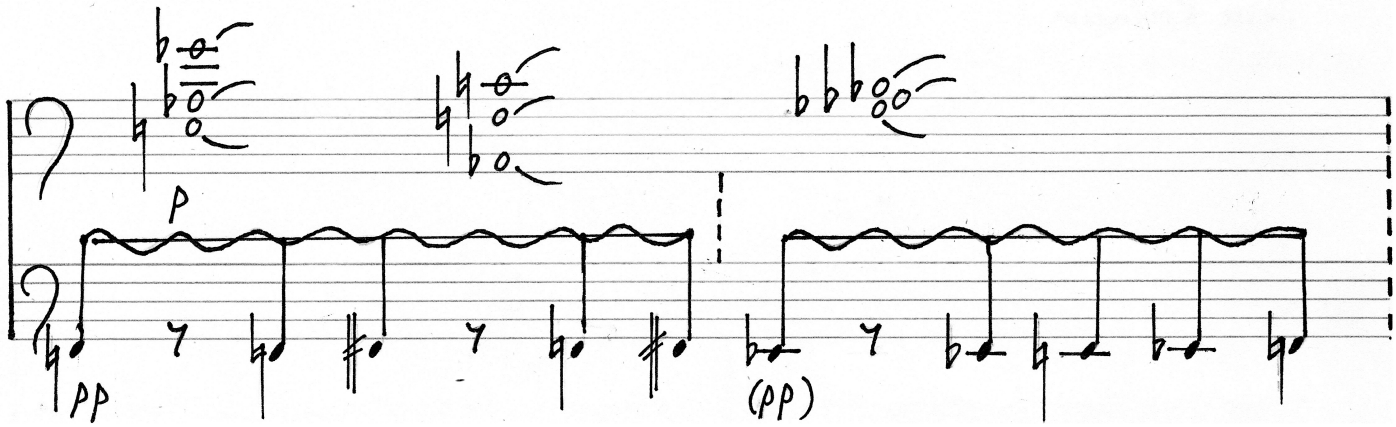
heart,

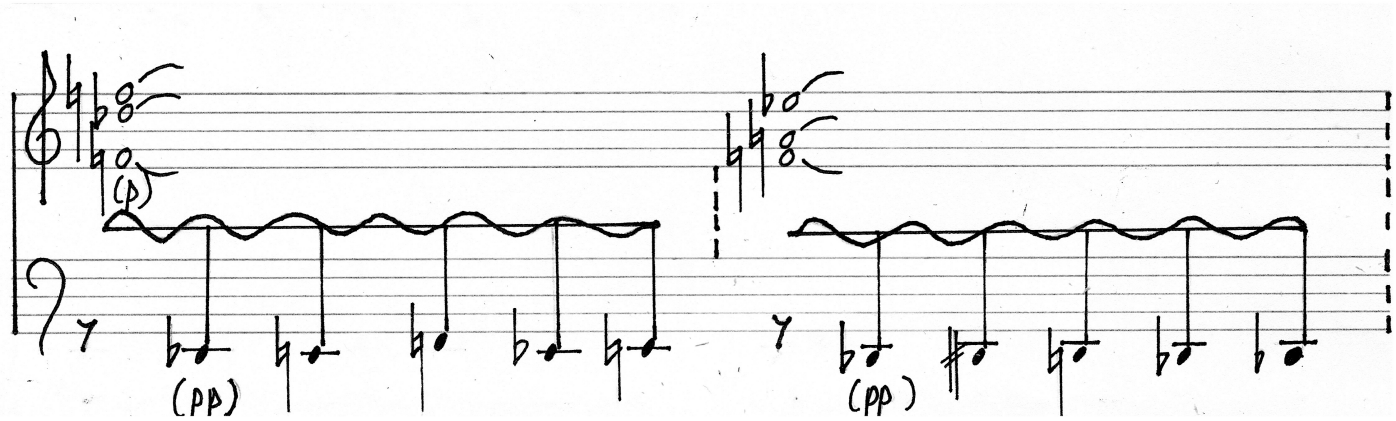
vines.

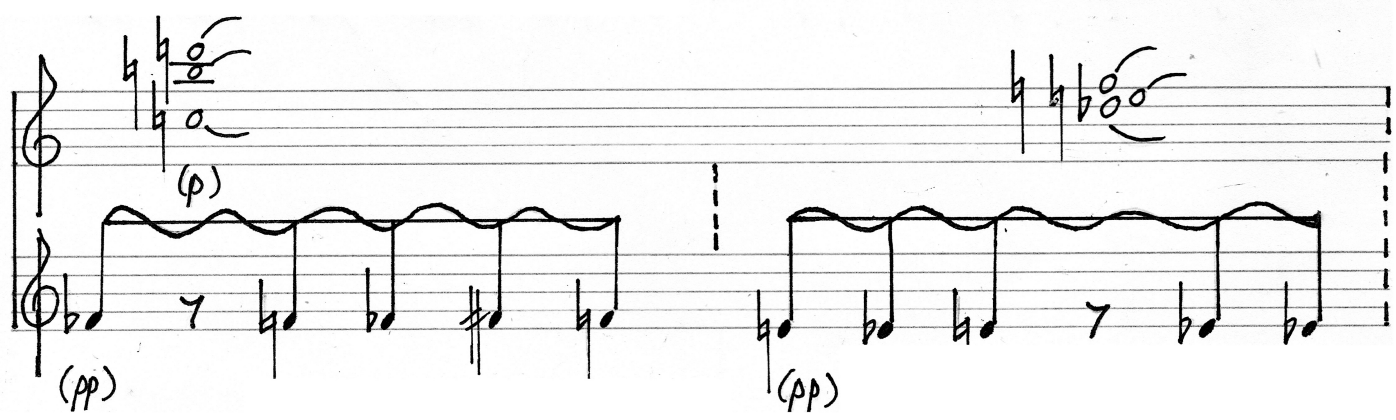
(stars, stones, liver and lungs)

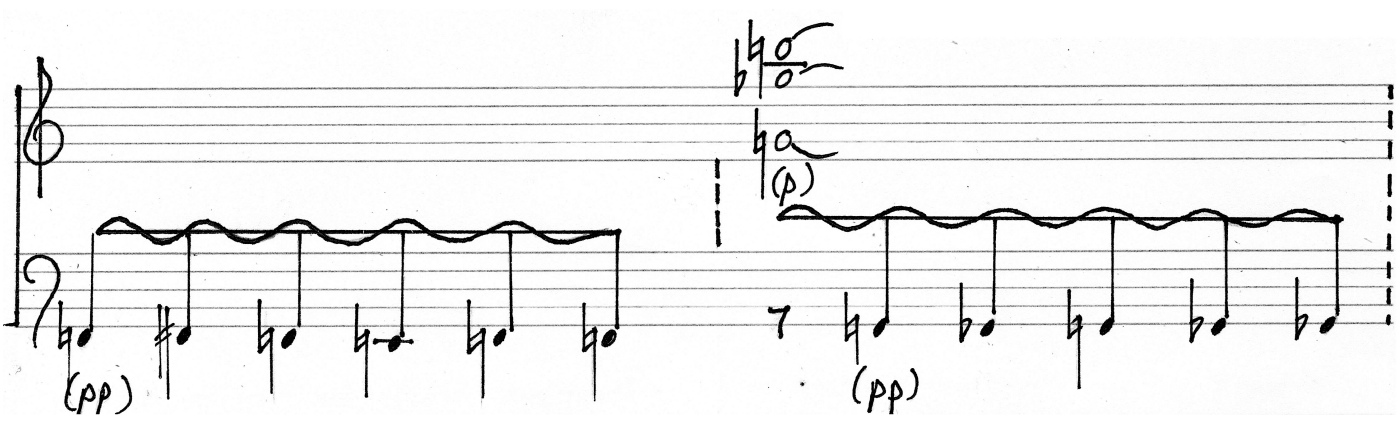
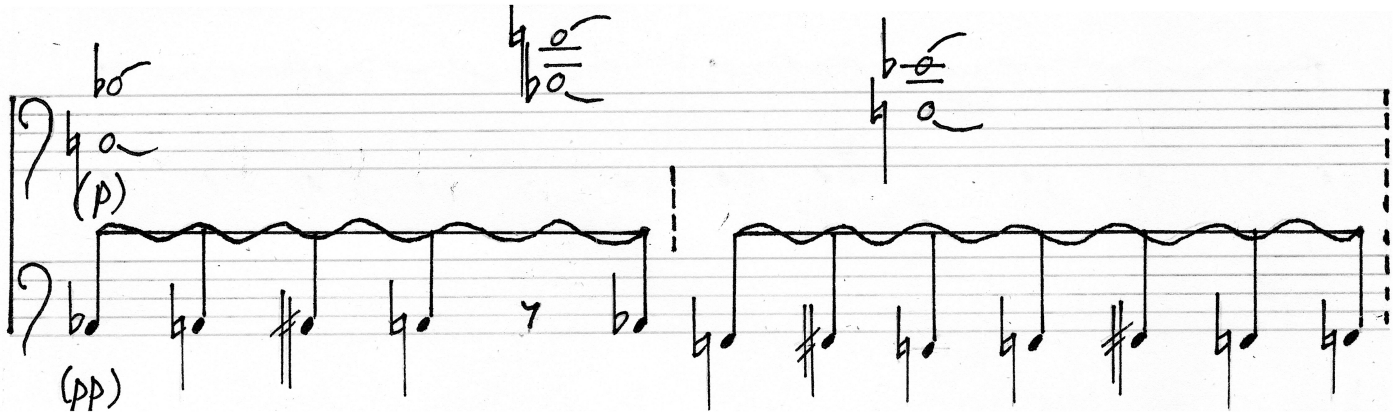
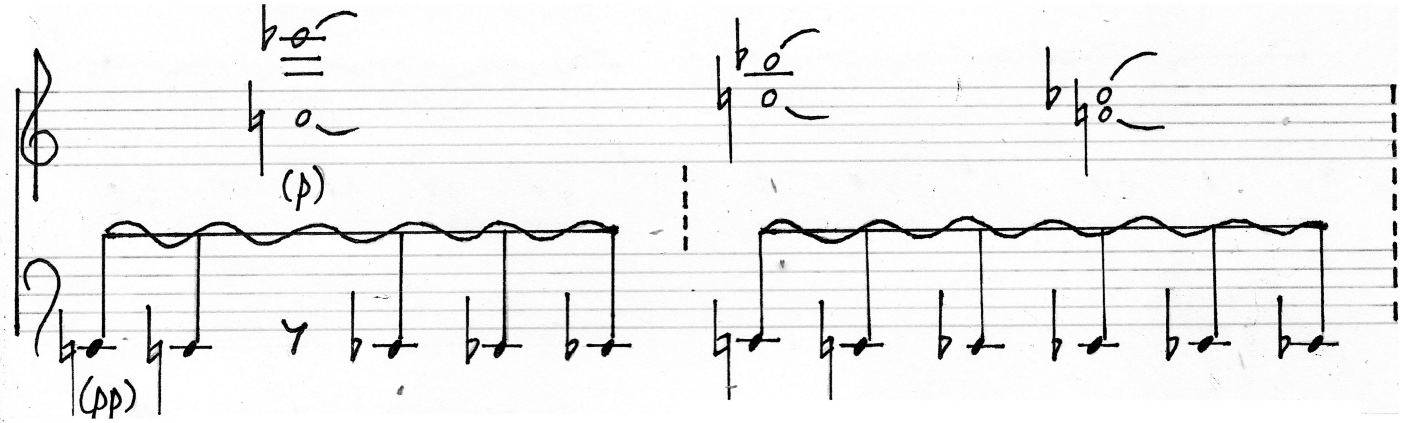
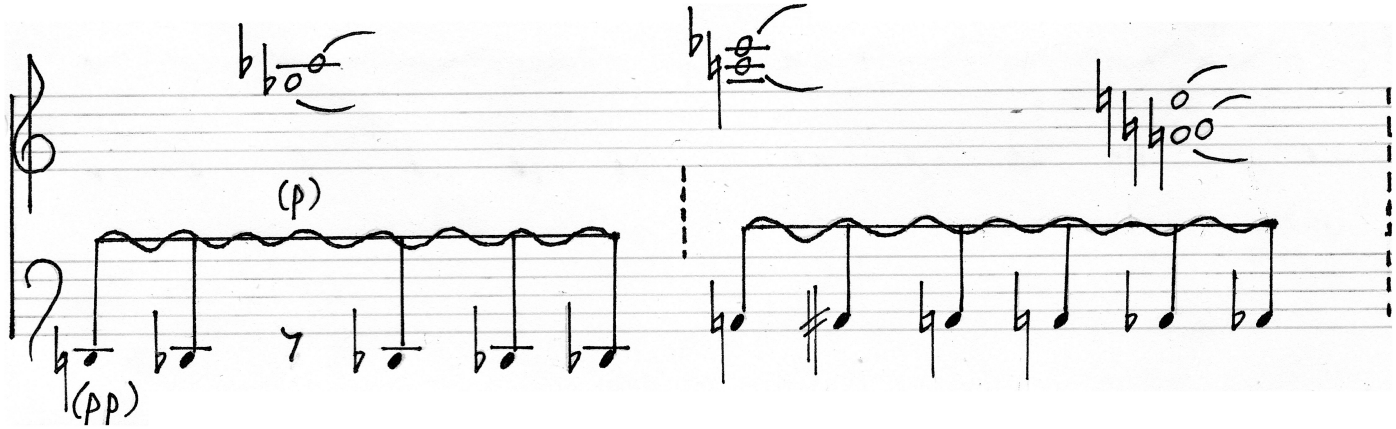
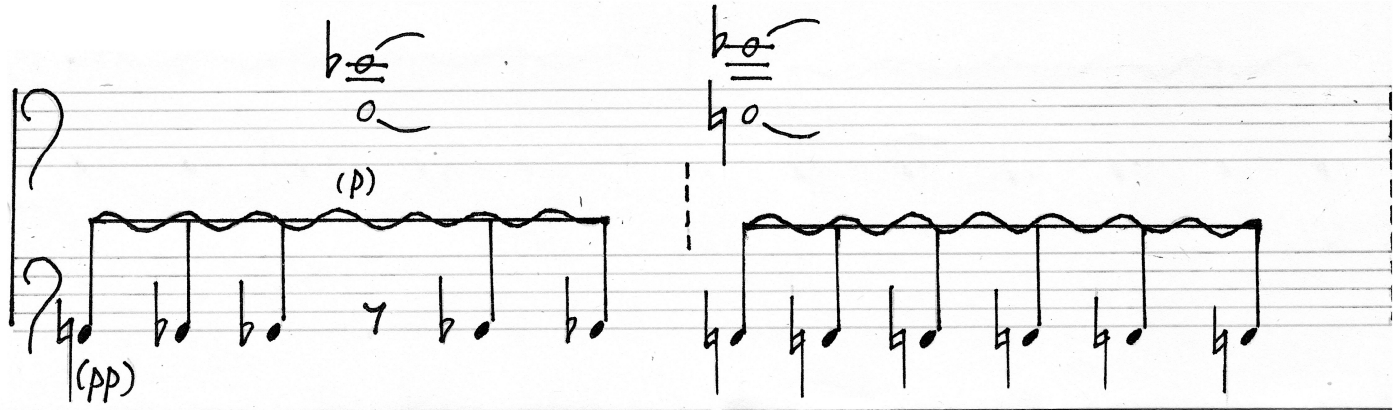
mingled with all kinds of colours.

moving, but without a clear sense of regularity









increased hesitancy, slowness, quietness