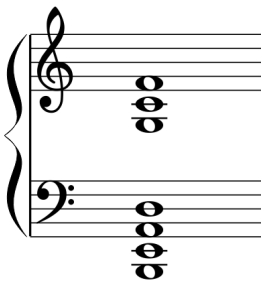
When She Dreams of Moonlight (1994)

by Gord Sellar

Notes on the Composition:

This is a slow, improvisatory work embodying a mystical sensibility and approach. It features a soprano saxophone in a soloistic capacity, accompanied by tape and piano, which alternate with one another in both accompanying and central functions.

The work is, theoretically, based on quartal harmony, specifically on stacks of fourths, six per stack, over the fundamental of concert E. The pitches used throughout--except in coloristic pitch variations chosen during the improvisatory sections, at the performer's discretion--are however drawn from a stack of seven fourths upon a fundamental pitch of C#. That is:



This is to say: the piece is a modal composition, and because it uses the concert E as its fundamental pitch, it is indeed a piece composed in the (modern, as used by jazz musicians) E Phrygian mode.

The piece was originally composed both to explore a musical structure of a more dream-like nature, and to explore the idea of the "third stream" of art music, one that blends classical sensibilities and nuances with the freedom, spontaneity, and expanded vocabulary of jazz improvisation, and the primary melody played on the saxophone was in fact based on a theme I developed in jazz improvisations with Bill Richards, my former jazz music theory teacher, during a visit he made to Saskatoon in 1994. The shifting -yet-unchanging chord was also inspired by my speculative interest in the work of Scriabin, and in struggling to understand structure in the modal music of John Coltrane, such as in his composition "Impressions."

When I composed the piece, it was dedicated to my (now former) wife Marie Vasquez. I am not so petty as to revoke the dedication, as it was her penchant for absurd dreams that inspired the dialog on the reel-to-reel tape used in the original performance of the piece. The tape may or may not survive: if it does, I will have it digitized when I can and post it. If it cannot be, it is no great loss: the piece was not a rousing success at any rate, and I have notated it here only so as not to lose all record of it completely. (Unlike the piece for tenor saxophone and mixed ensemble which apparently, according to my compositional notes for this piece, was the first version of this that I composed, and which has been lost.) If the tape cannot be

recovered, I will merely note that the majority of the sounds on the tape were derived from four basic sound types:

1. The sounds of voices and speech, sometimes modified or manipulated by traditional methods of musique concrete, with which I'd recently been acquainted in the context of a course in Electronic Music with Canadian composer David R. Scott.
2. "Cosmic" sounds produced with a decrepit, abandoned synthesizer in the electronic music lab of my university, and by manipulation of various household sounds by means of traditional methods used in musique concrete.
3. A "bass" sound, I believe performed on a string bass and a synthesizer (and then manipulated through tape manipulations), which was used for the rhythmic bass line that occurs about halfway through the piece.
4. The sounds of bells ringing in the distance, which was produced by recording a metal bowl of water, and then slowing the tape sufficiently for it to sound like (convincingly) church bells.

A Note on Compositional and Performance Methods:

At the time when this piece was composed and performed (in late 1994), the computer I owned would have been impossible to carry to a concert venue, or, rather, to do so more than once. It was ill-equipped to process live music for performance interactively. Which is to say, the piece was a product of its time. During the premiere, a friend sat on stage with the tape, and (as quietly as he could, which was not very) started and stopped the tape according to instructions in the score.

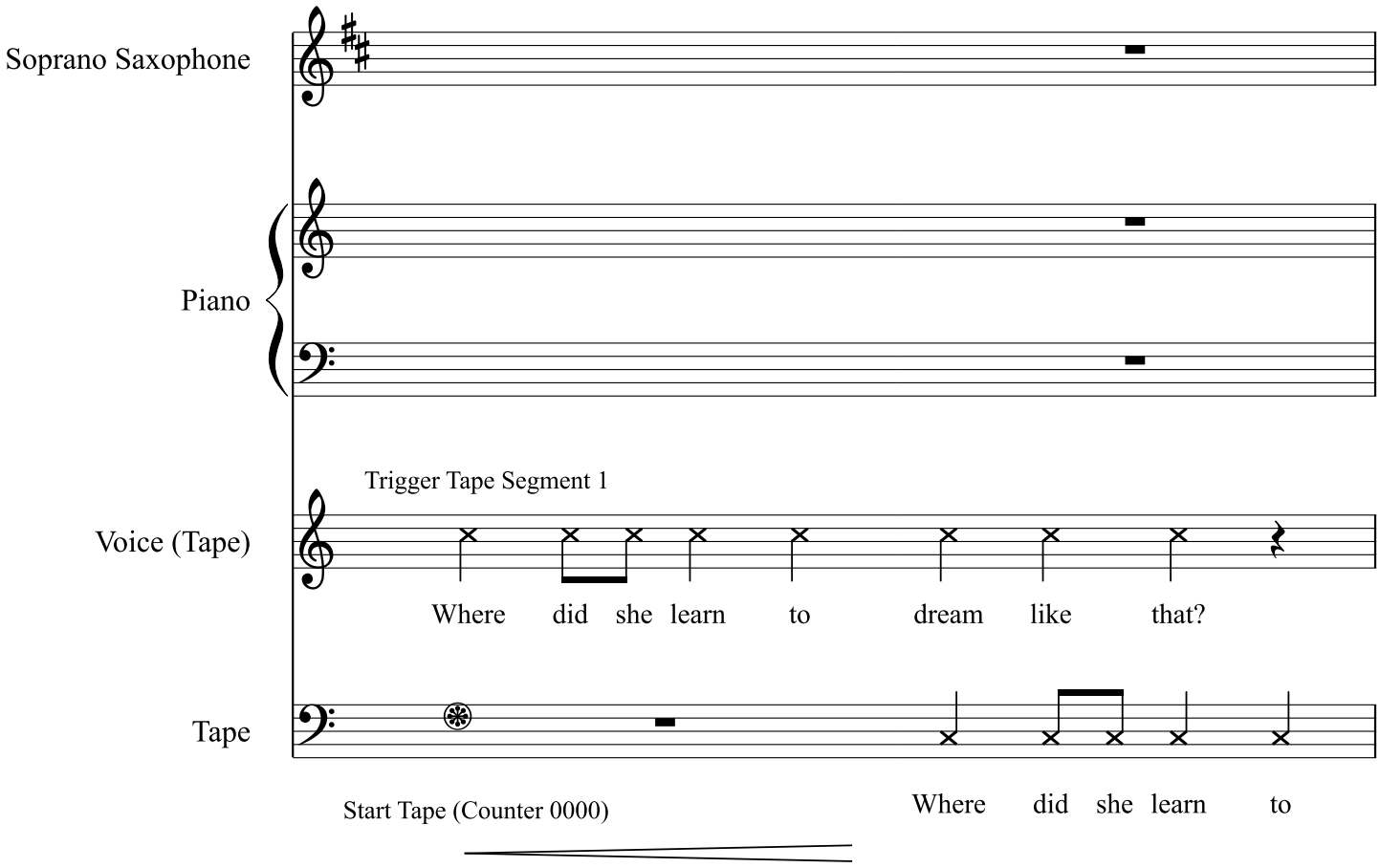
That was sloppy on my part, but the piece was an experiment, after all, and I had very limited access to equipment to do things better. (Composers with better equipment were doing amazing things at the time, which was part of the inspiration.) Were I to compose a piece like this today, it would be foot-pedal controlled, would involve far less "improvisation" of the kind outlined, and might indeed not have a live pianist, but might involve more a more complex setup, likely using software to both delay and loop elements of the saxophonist's playing, to trigger accompaniment material, and to manipulate the sounds of looped chunks of the soloist's performance.

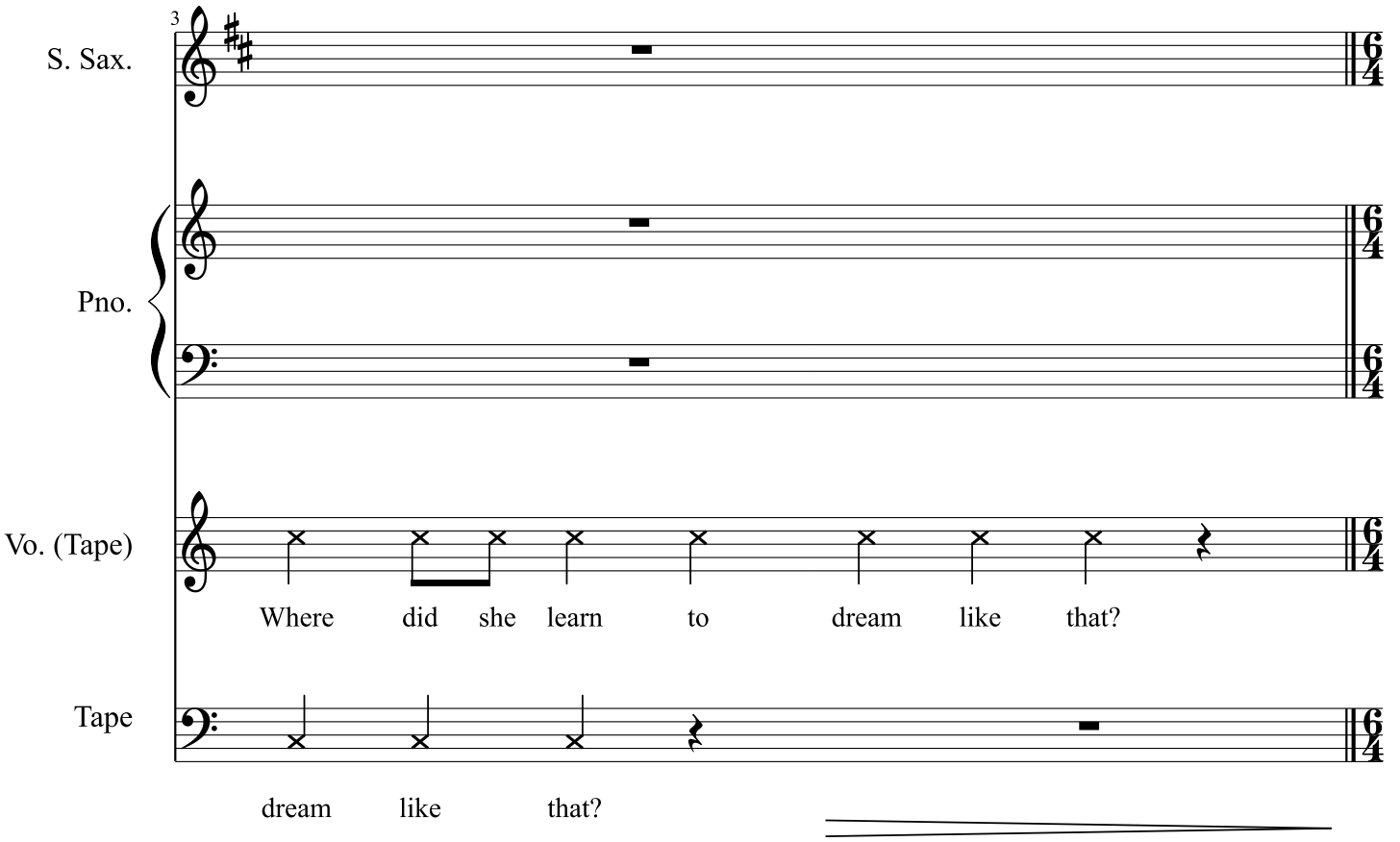
For the record, the premiere of this piece was performed by myself on soprano saxophone, with my friends Jamie Shupena on piano, and Darryl Webb operating the prerecorded tape.

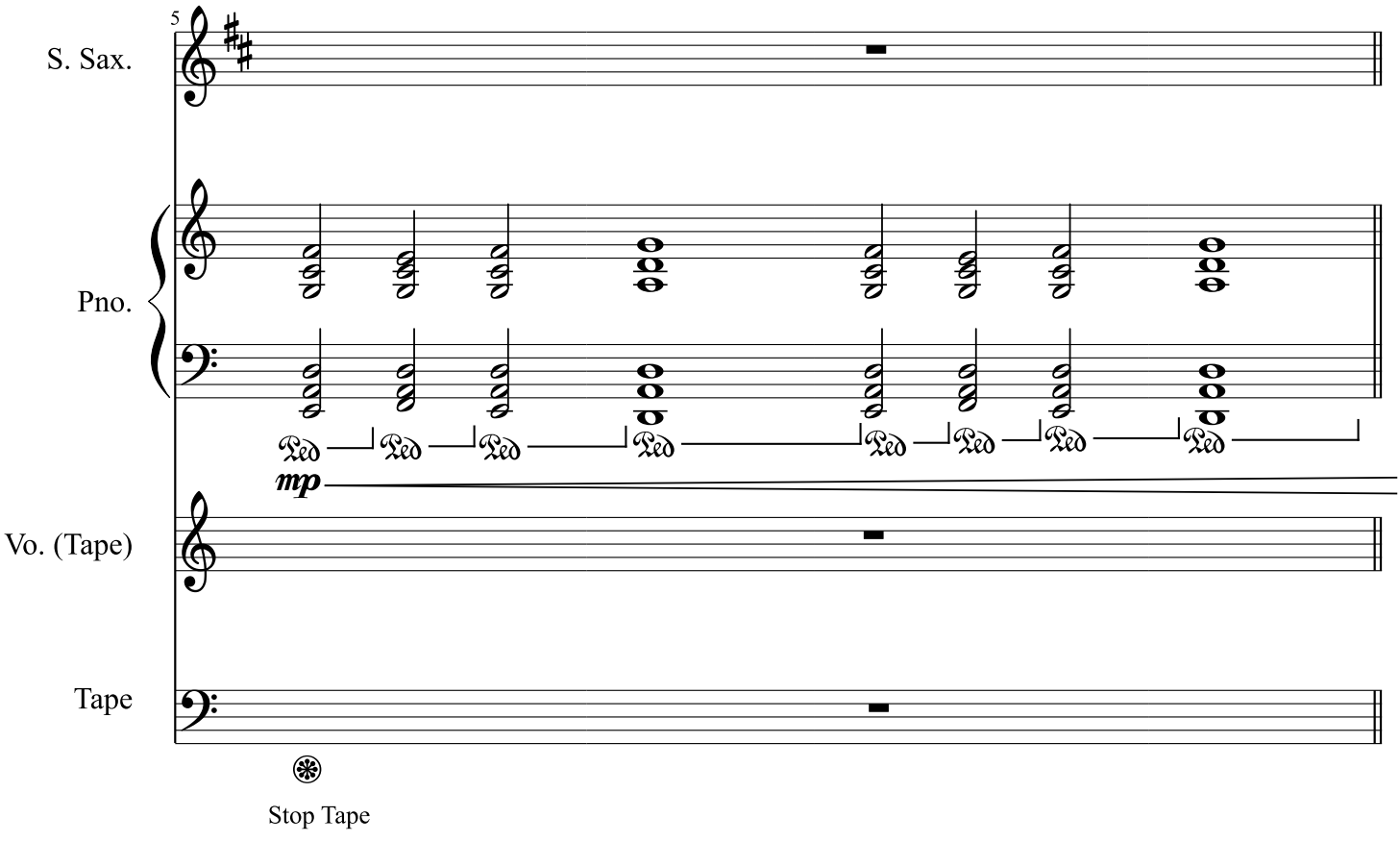
When She Dreams of Moonlight

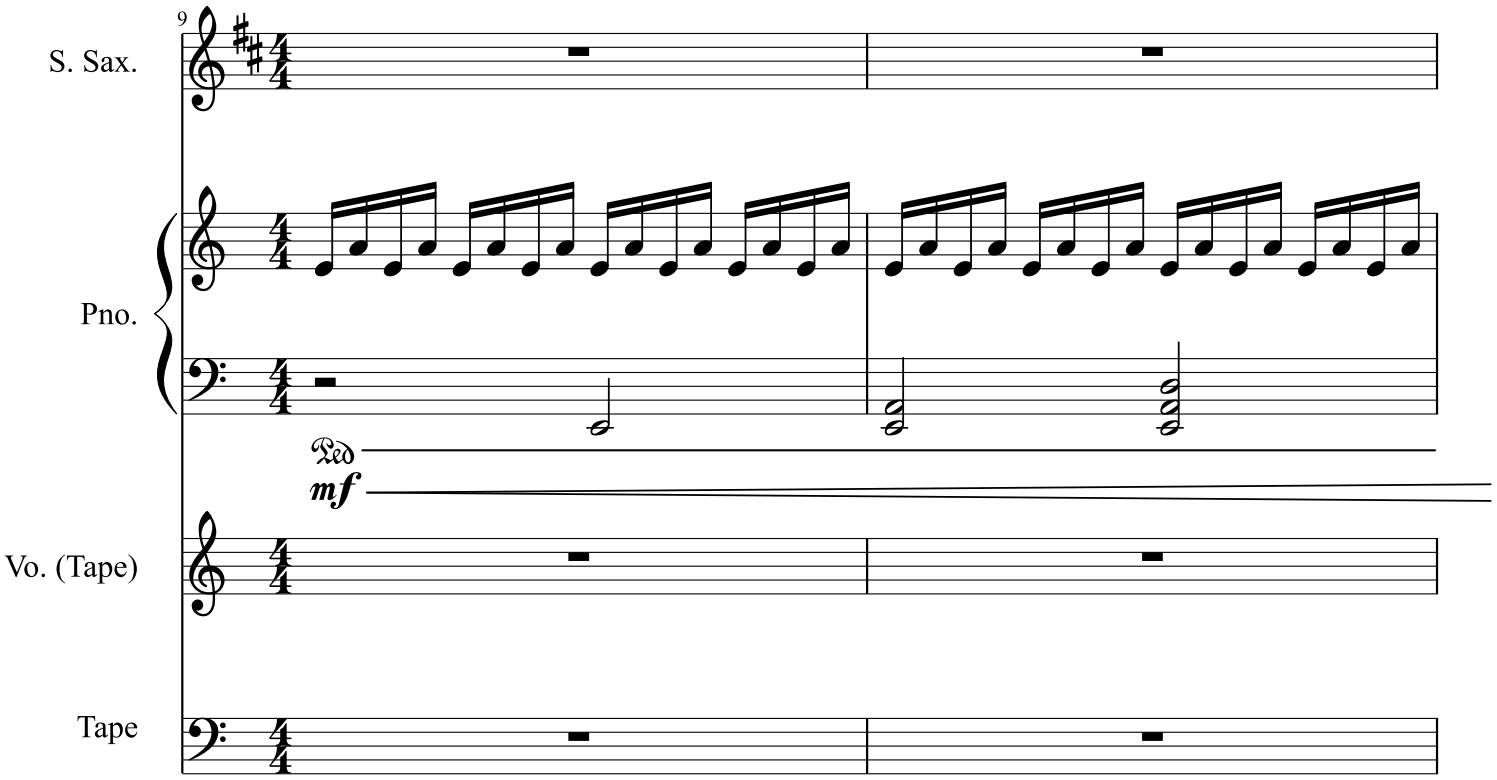
(for Soprano Saxophone, Piano, and Tape)

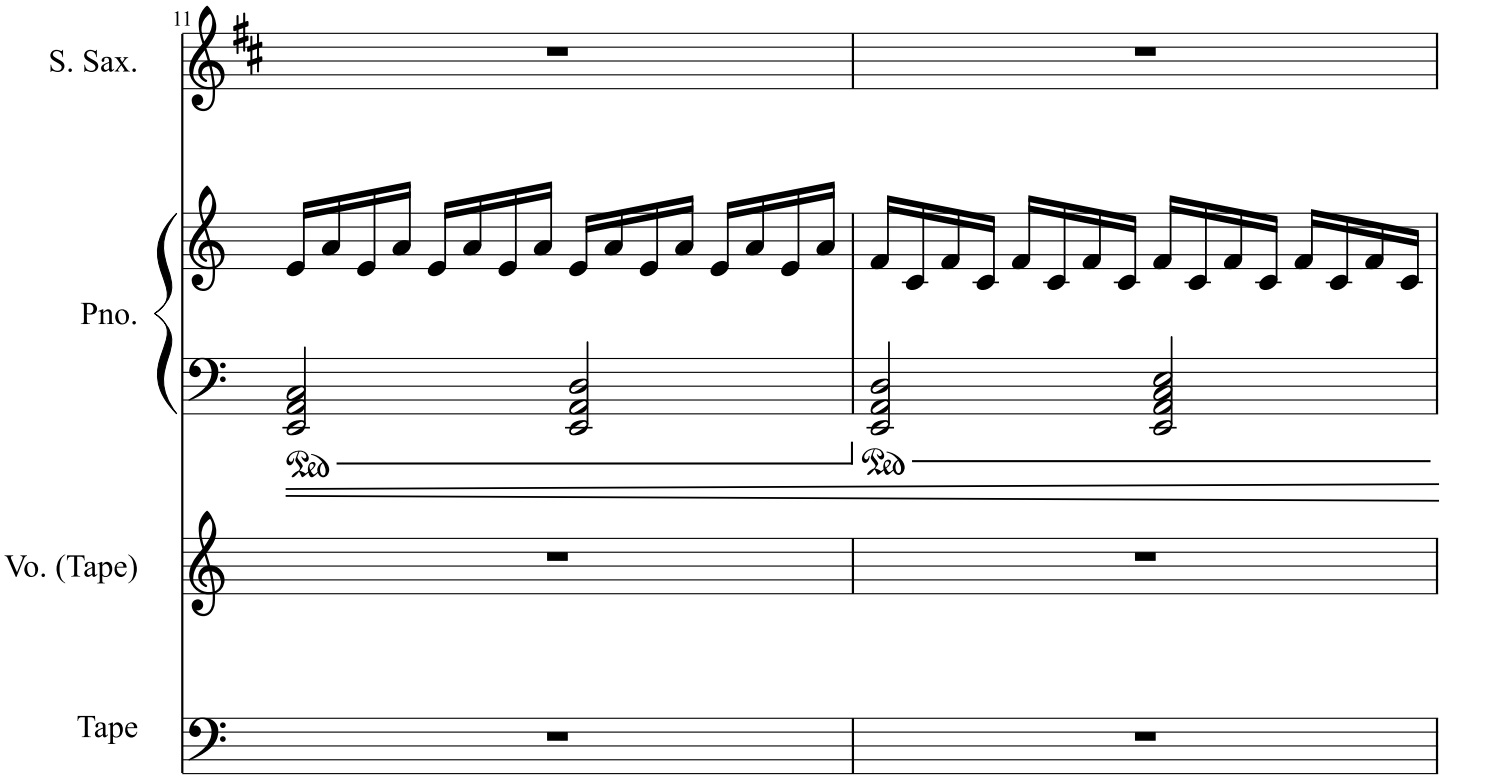
Gord Sellar

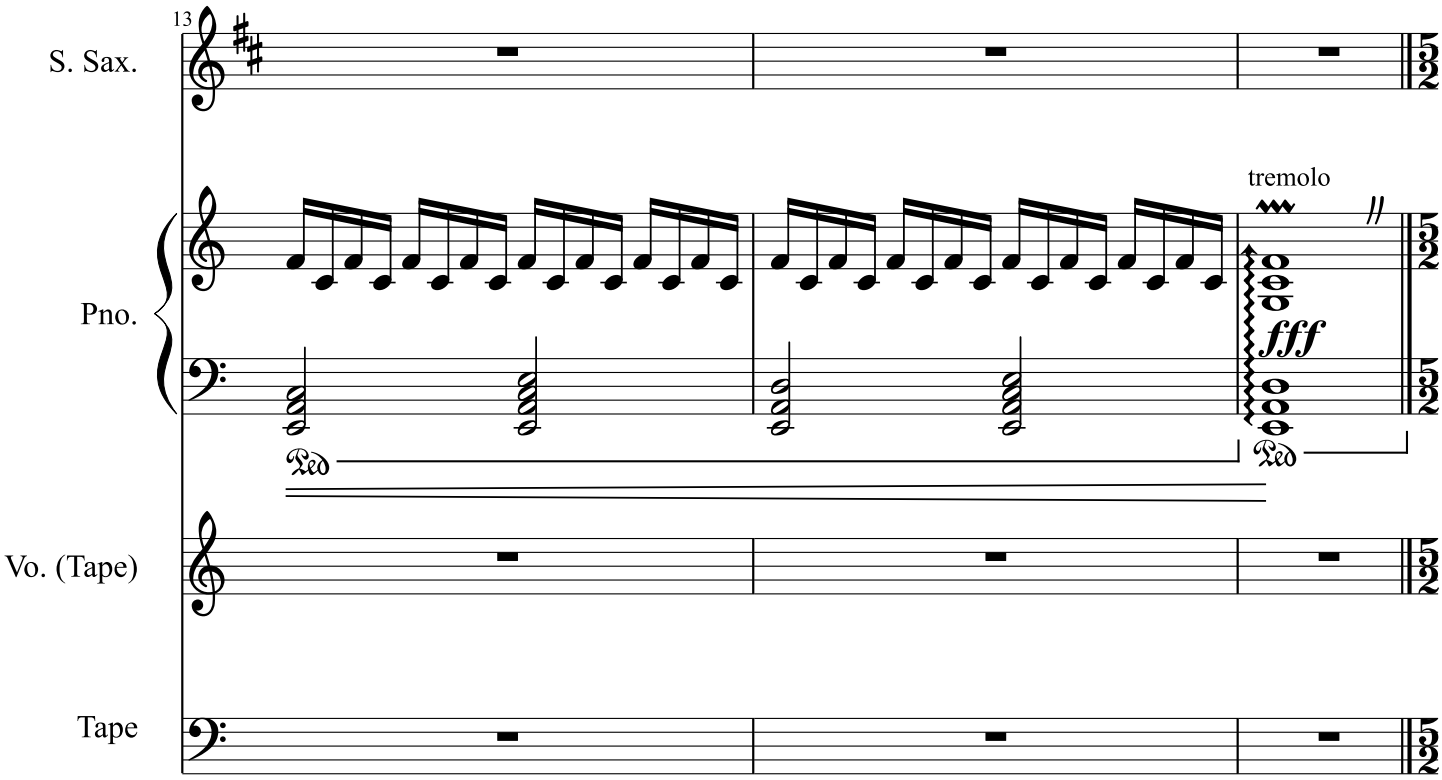


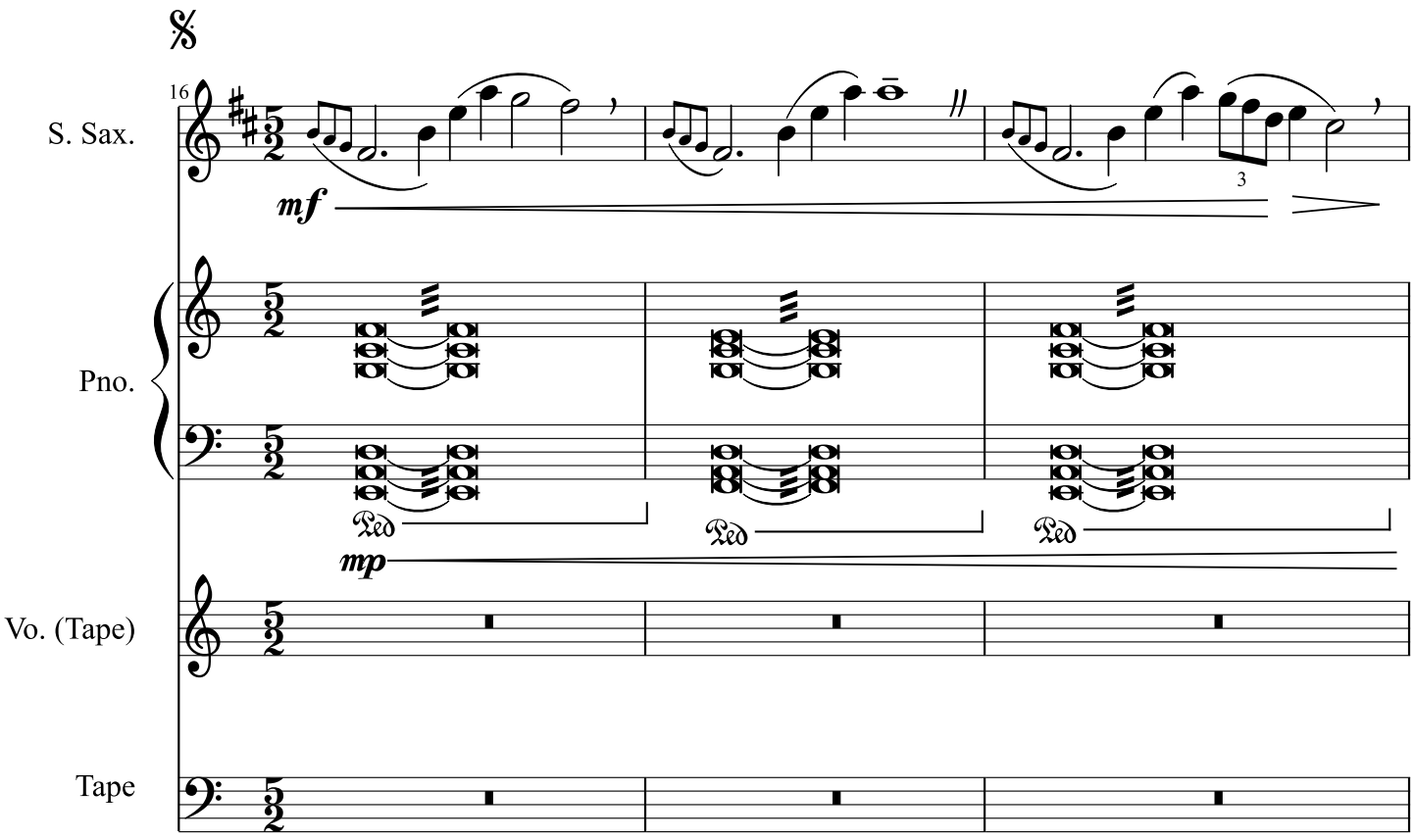

3
S. Sax.
Pno.
Vo. (Tape)
Where did she learn to dream like that?
Tape
dream like that?

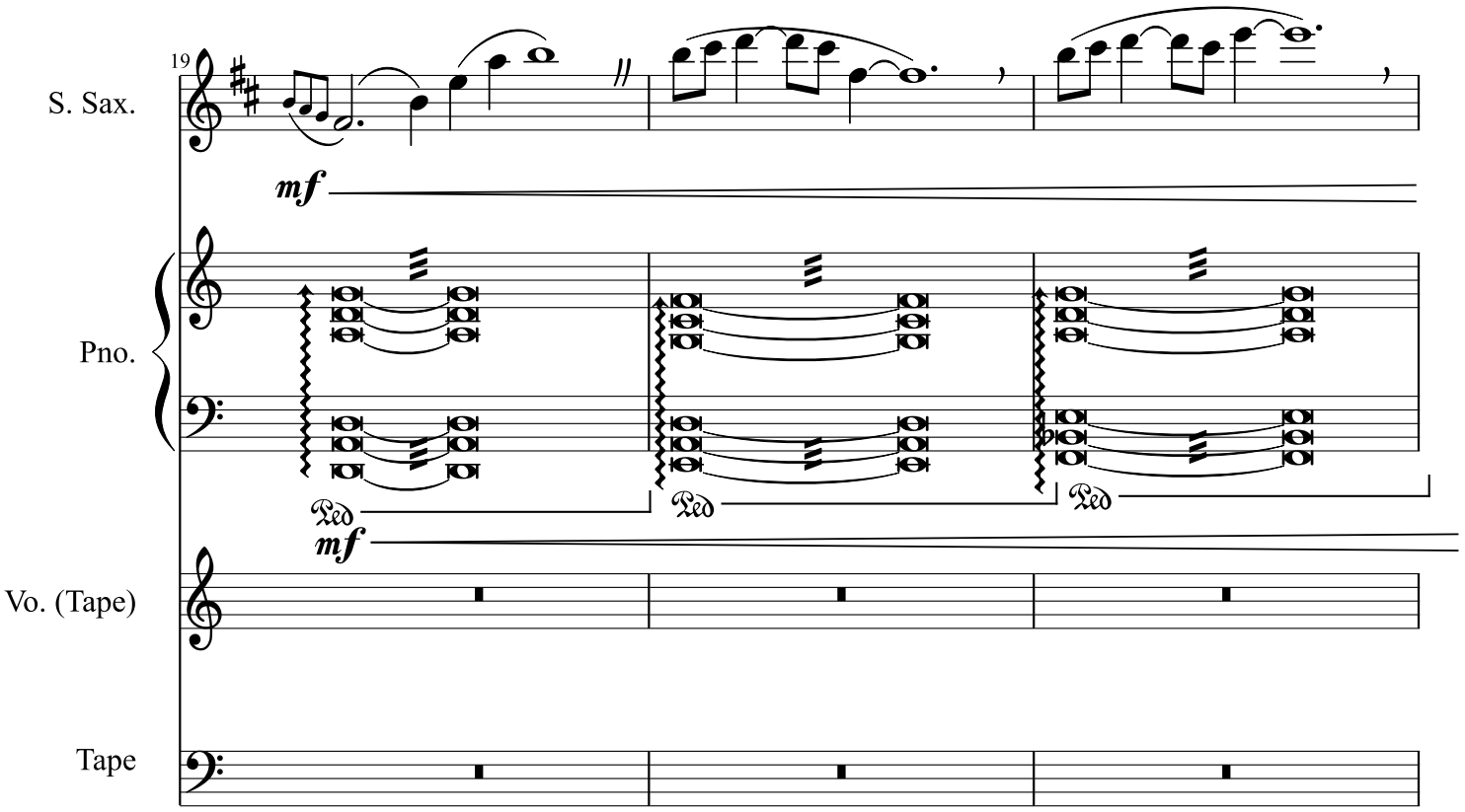

5
S. Sax.
Pno.
Ped
mp
Vo. (Tape)
Tape
Stop Tape

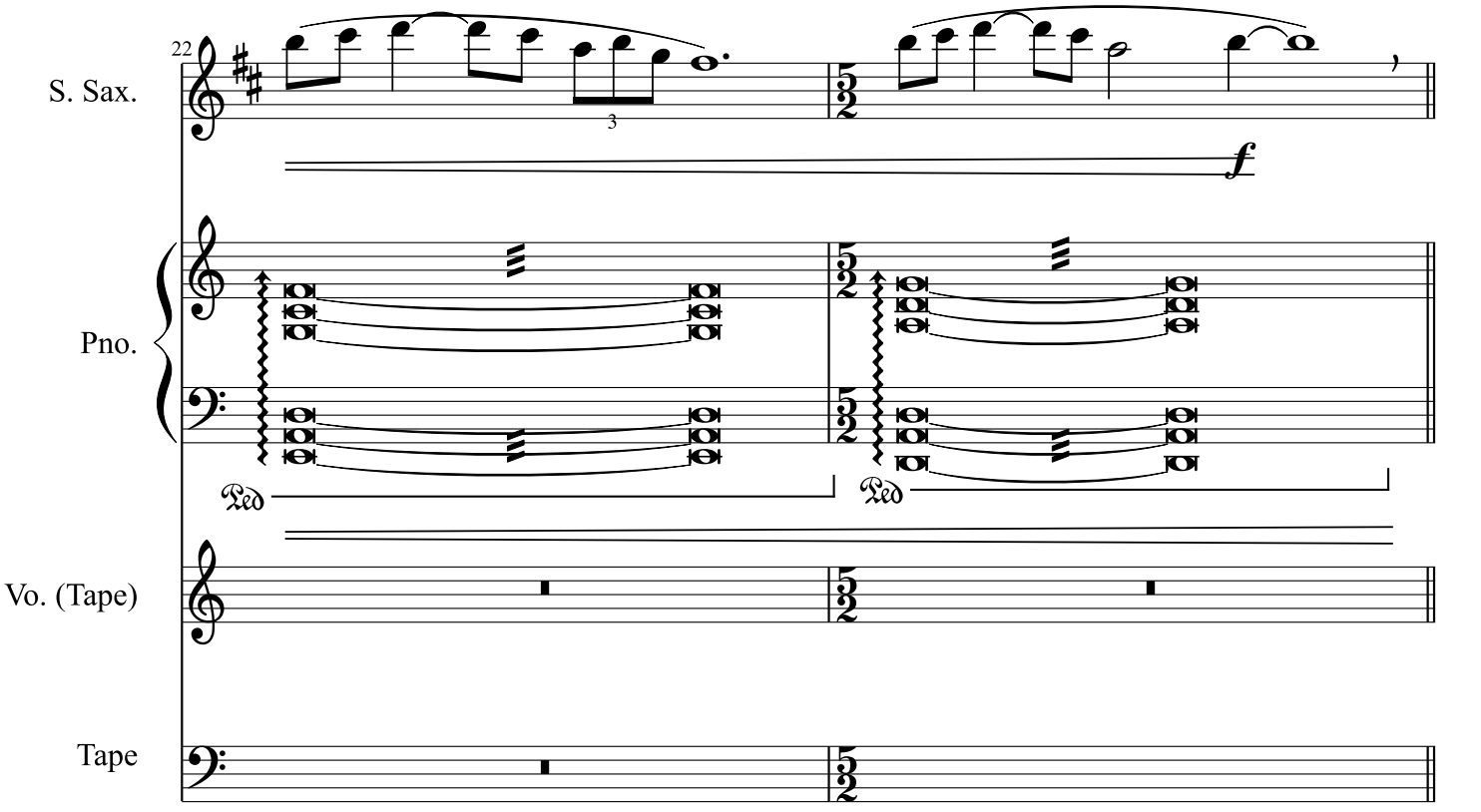

9
S. Sax.
Pno.
Ped
mf
Vo. (Tape)
Tape

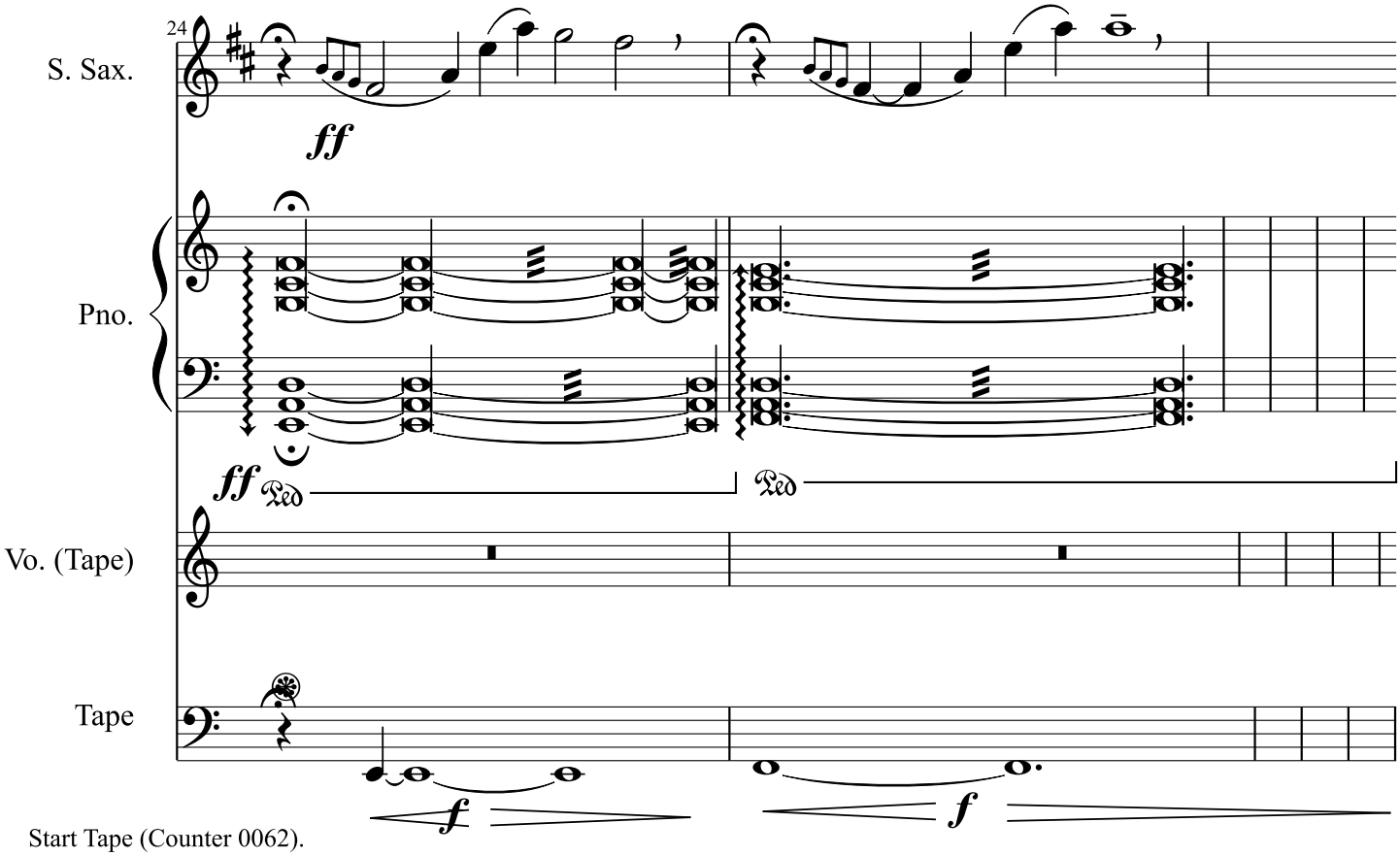

11
S. Sax.
Pno.
Ped
Ped
Vo. (Tape)
Tape


13
S. Sax.
Pno.
tremolo
fff
Ped
Ped
Vo. (Tape)
Tape

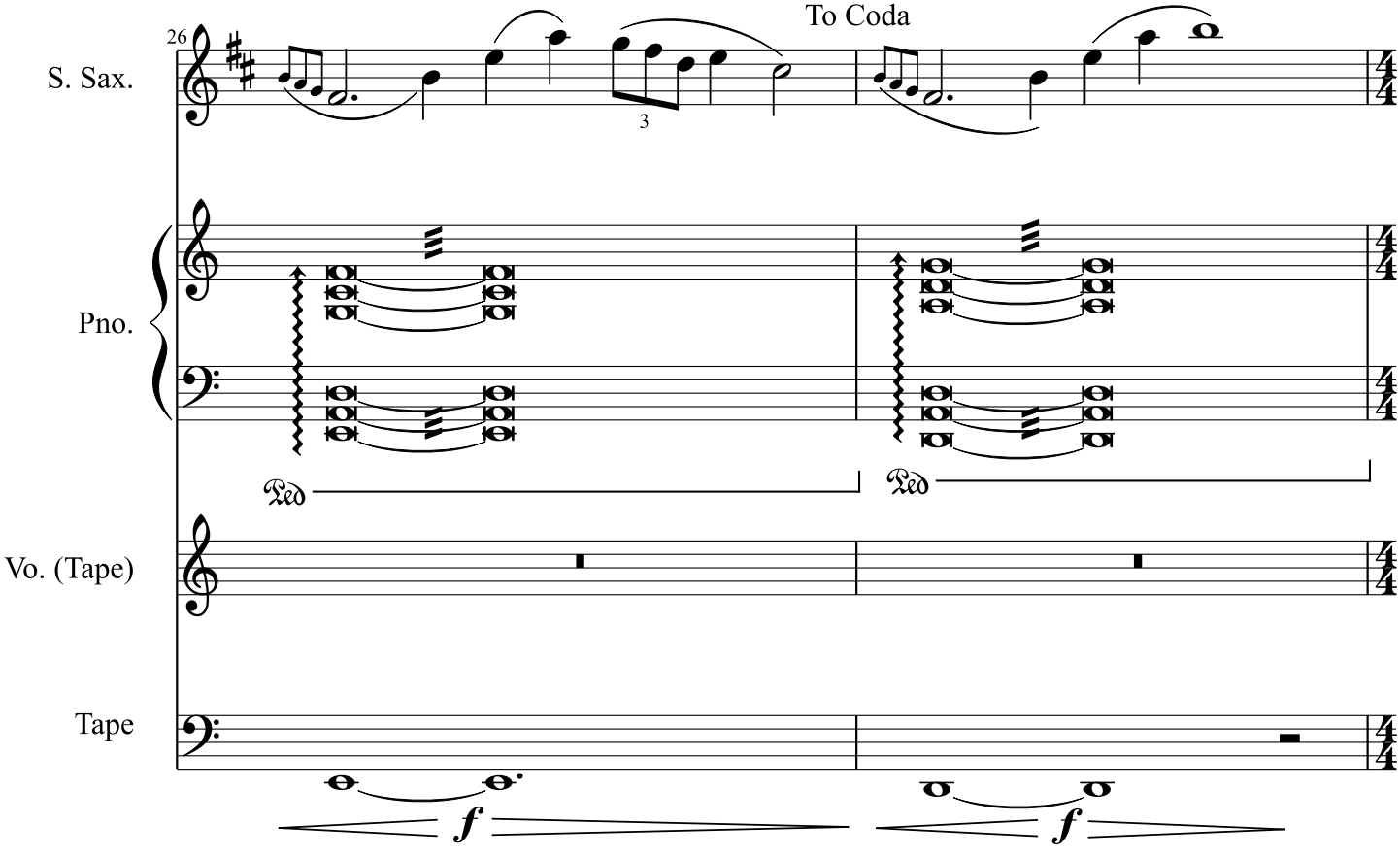

16
S. Sax.
mf
3
Pno.
Ped
Ped
Ped
mp
Vo. (Tape)
Tape

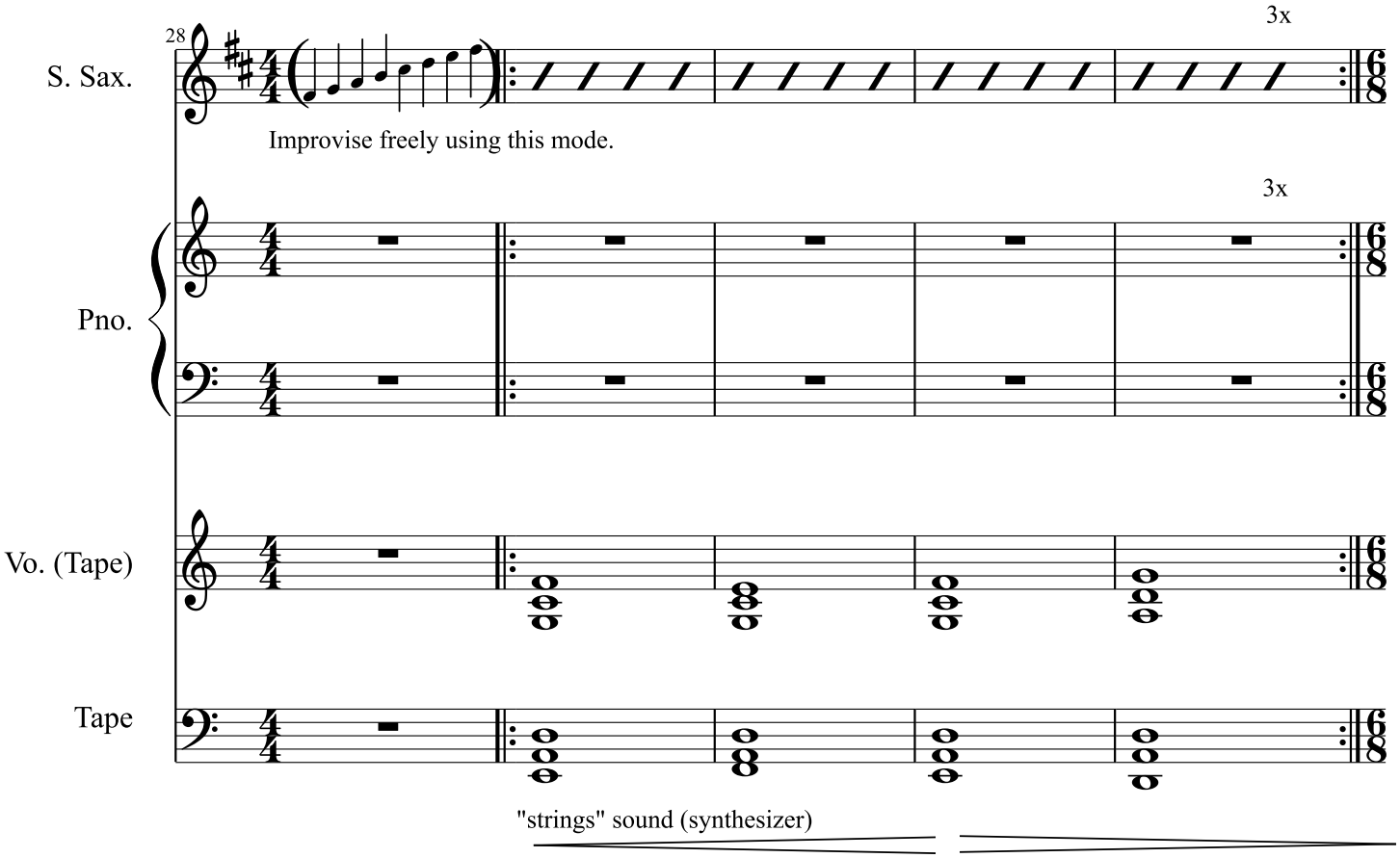

19
S. Sax.
mf
Pno.
Ped
Ped
Ped
mf
Vo. (Tape)
Tape


22
S. Sax.
3
f
Pno.
Ped
Ped
Vo. (Tape)
Tape

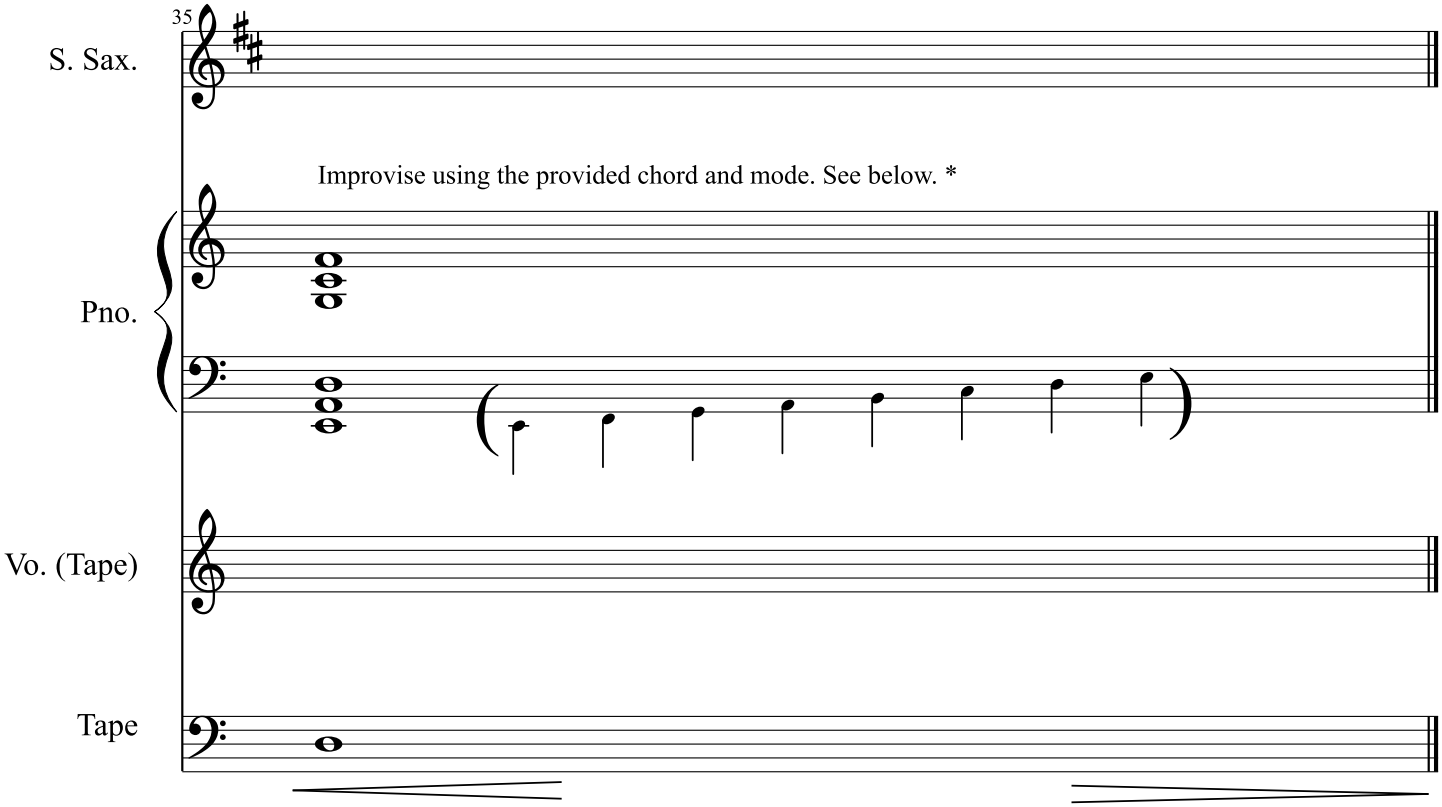


Start Tape (Counter 0062).



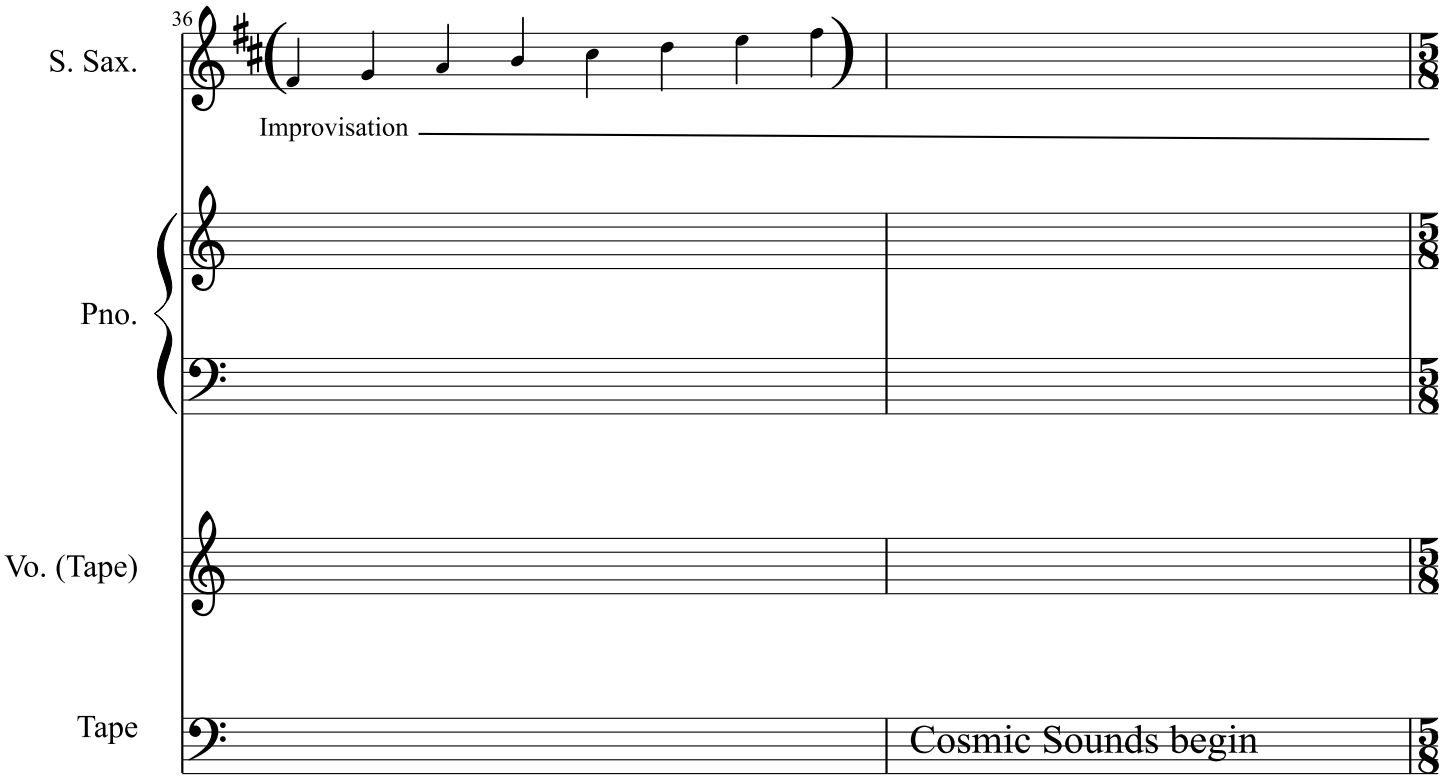

28
3x
S. Sax.
Improvise freely using this mode.
3x
Pno.
Vo. (Tape)
Tape
"strings" sound (synthesizer)

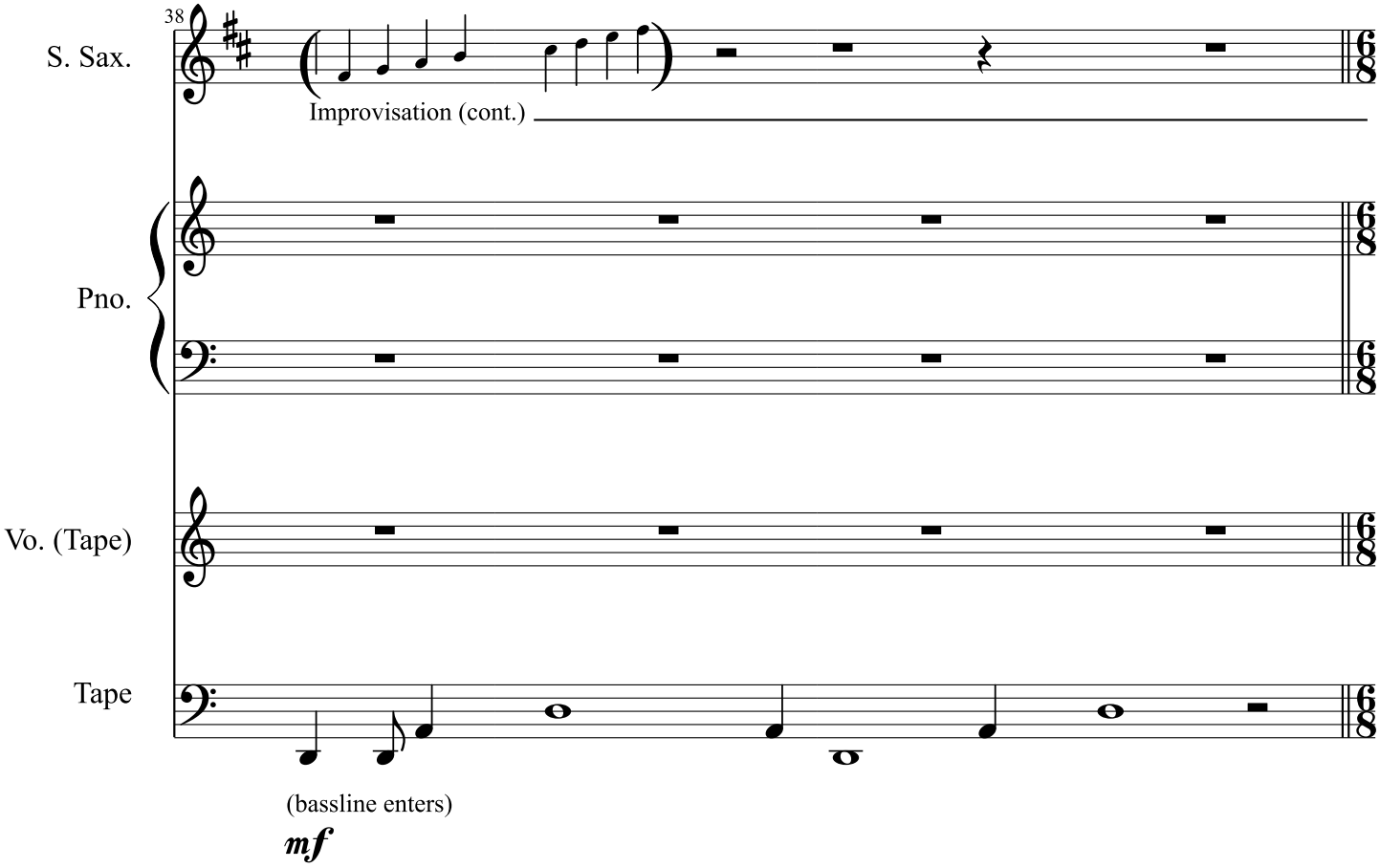

33
3x
S. Sax.
3x
Pno.
3x
Vo. (Tape)
Tape

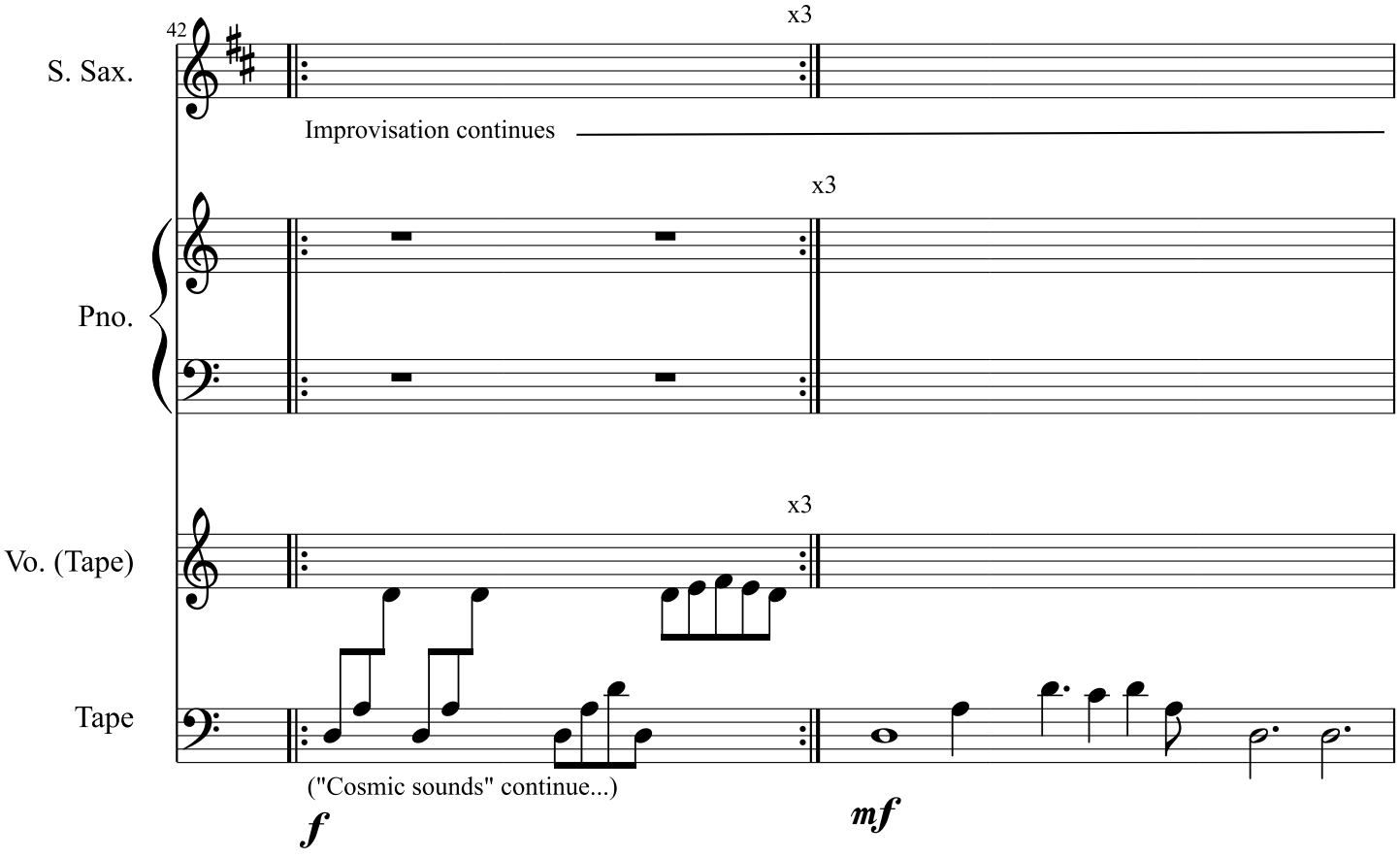


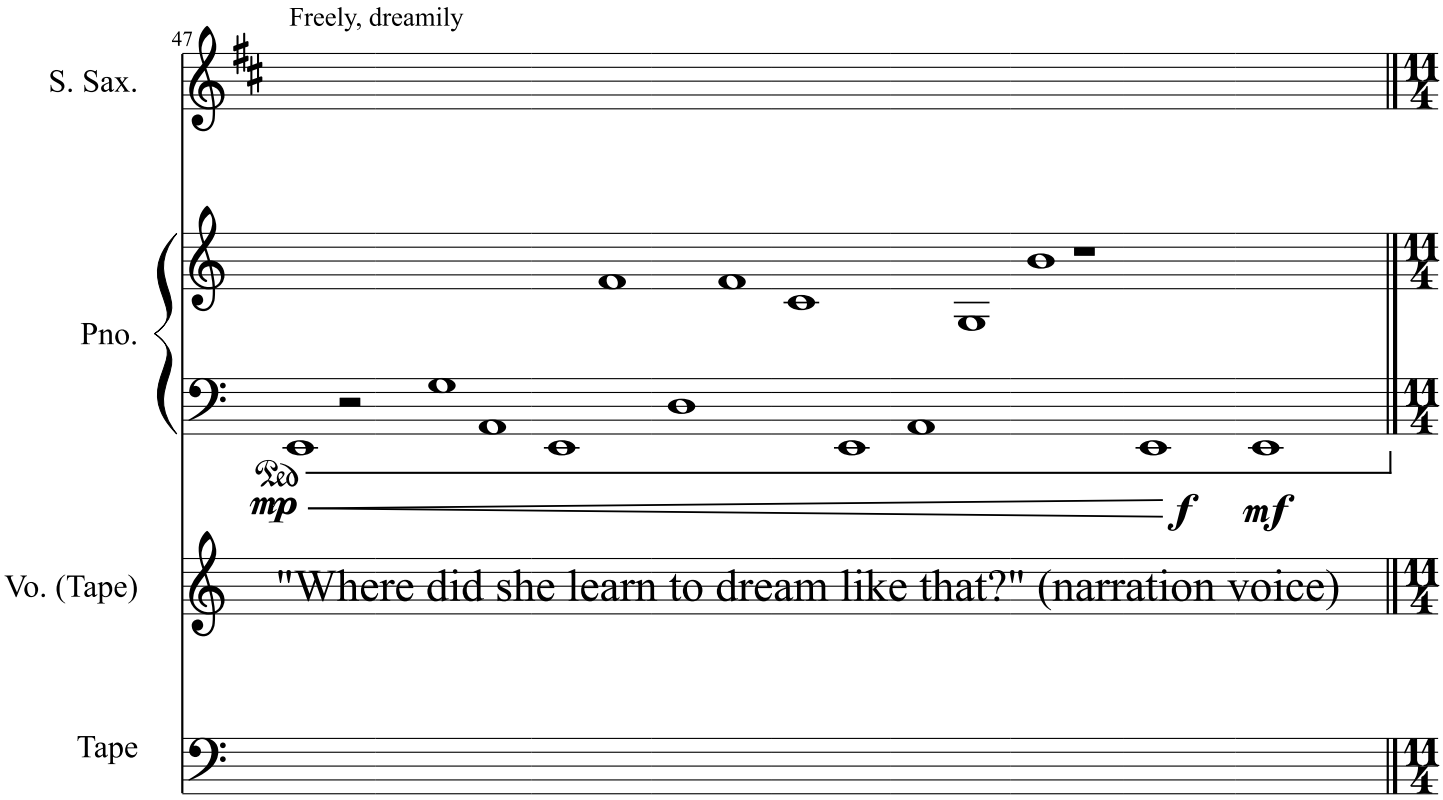
* Try to explore the possibilities of your instrument and the materials provided in the context of interaction against the sustained drone-like feedback from the tape. Examine long and short tones, and different colors and textures. Pizzicato and other inside-the-piano effects (using jars to bend pitches, especially those of the main chord) are strongly encouraged.

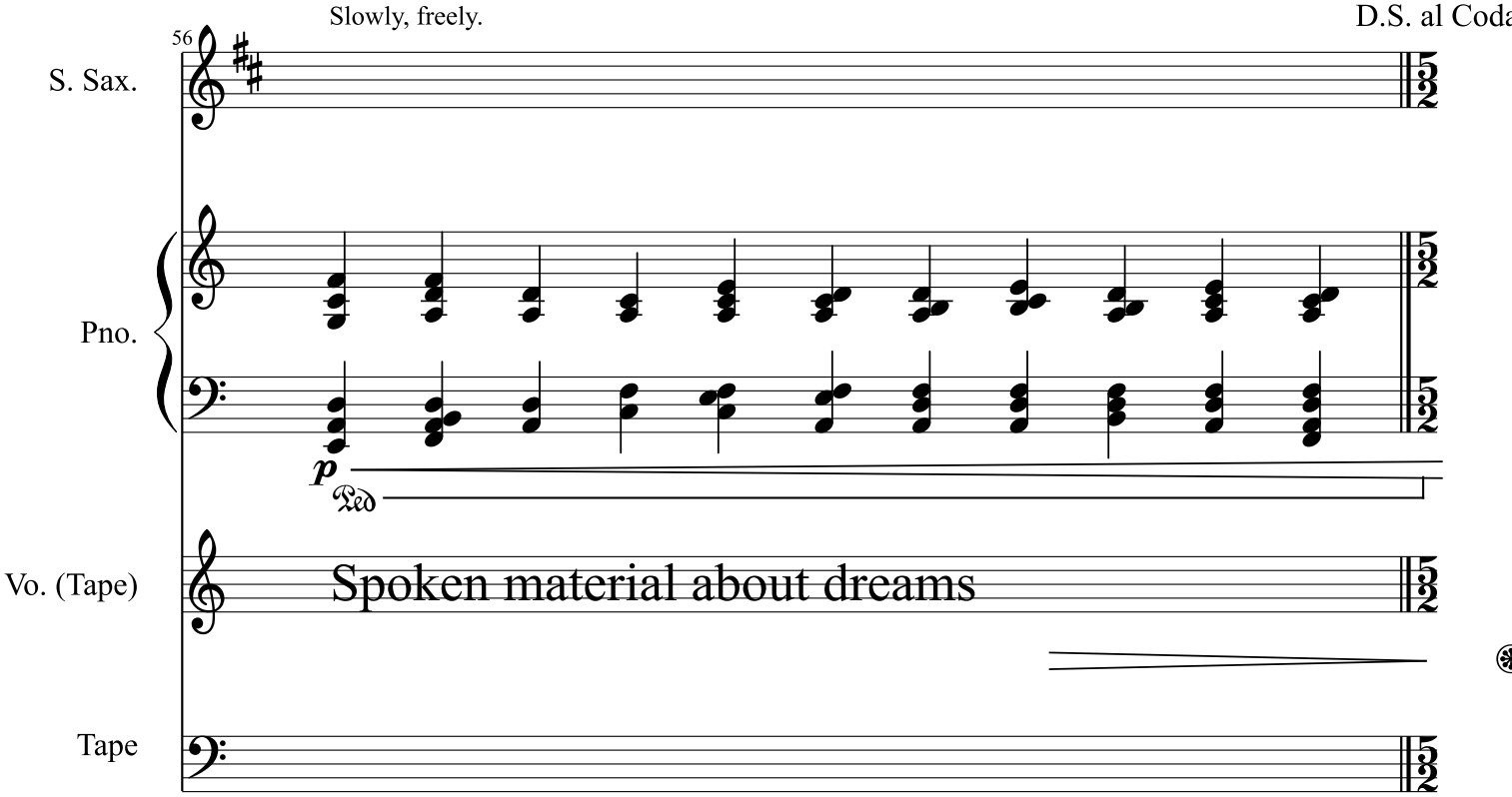
Improvise, using the mode provided, as per instructions give to the piano.

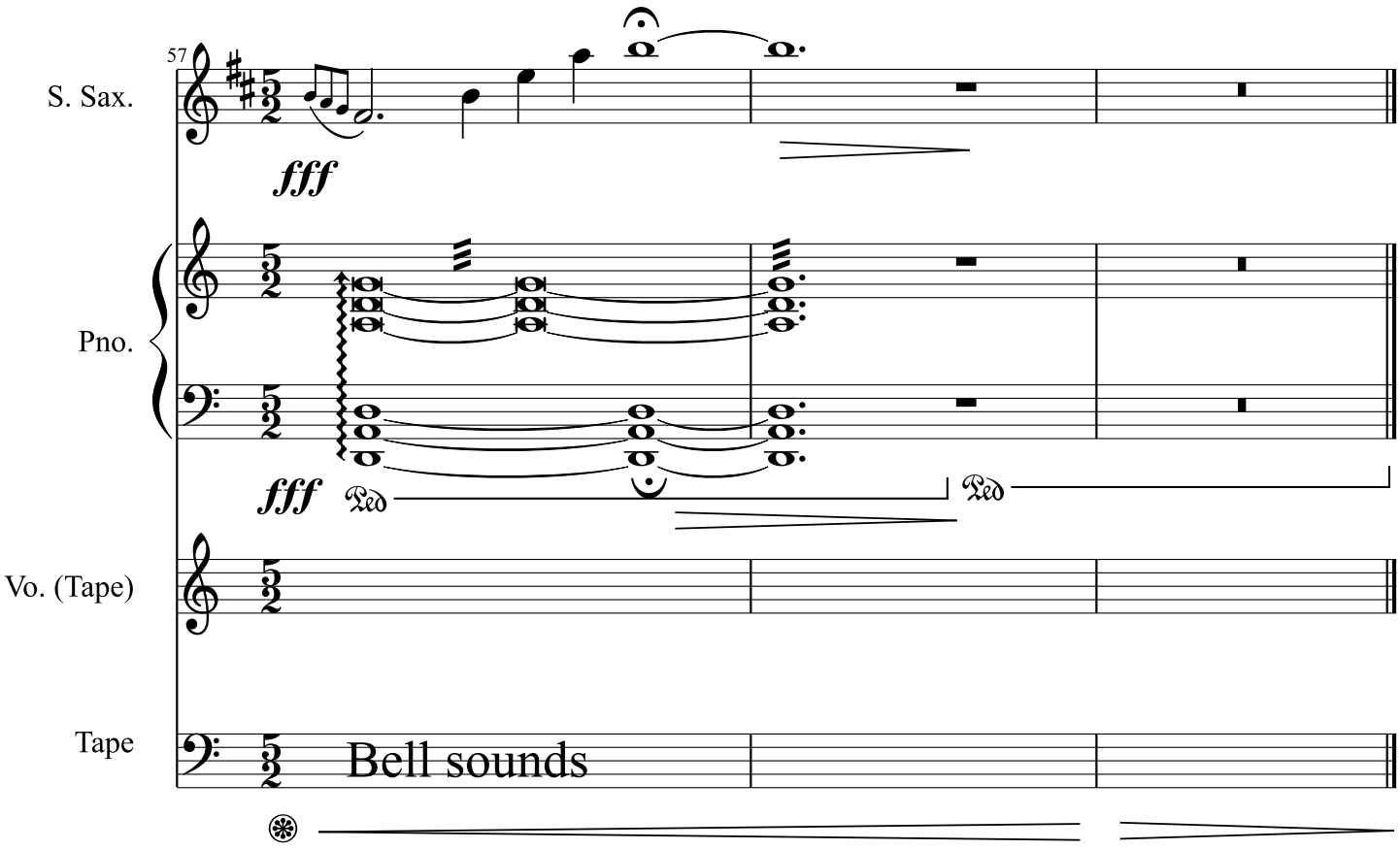



38
S. Sax.
Improvisation (cont.)
Pno.
Vo. (Tape)
Tape
(bassline enters)
mf


42
S. Sax.
x3
Improvisation continues
Pno.
x3
Vo. (Tape)
x3
Tape
("Cosmic sounds" continue...)
f
mf


Freely, dreamily
47
S. Sax.
Pno.
Ped
mp
f
mf
Vo. (Tape)
"Where did she learn to dream like that?" (narration voice)
Tape


Slowly, freely.
D.S. al Coda
56
S. Sax.
Pno.
p
Ped
Vo. (Tape)
Spoken material about dreams
Tape


57
S. Sax.
fff
Pno.
fff
Ped
Ped
Vo. (Tape)
Tape
Bell sounds