Emerson's "The American Scholar": From Words to Instruments

Emory Jacobs

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Keith Dippre
Department of Music

Statement from the Artist

This musical composition was created by analyzing Emerson's speech titled "The American Scholar." I converted each major passage or repeating subject and assigned it a small melody, or in more proper musical terms, a motive. Each time Emerson mentioned something in his speech, I translated that into notation: Whenever he mentioned books, in my piece the motive I assigned to books would play. Whenever he mentioned the duties of a scholar, the scholar motive would be notated. The instruments also each loosely represented an idea, such as the earthy-sounding bassoon being the instrument that first introduces the listener to the book motive.

Other concepts—such as Emerson's position for or against certain subjects—were related to key. If Emerson was angry or disapproved of something, the motive would play in a minor key. If he talked about something for a very long time, I would stretch the motive out by several measures. If he mentioned two subjects at the same general time, both motives would play, but one would be made to sound louder or more obvious than the other. Techniques such as themes and variations were used here as well; if Emerson was repeating the same subject over and over, or was saying the same thing but with different wording, the motive would have a bit of variance.

What I ended up with was something I did not actually expect. Out of precaution, I had created the various motives to be able to play simultaneously without creating a lot of dissonance, so that any subject could be mentioned with any other subject and transition into the next topic without much trouble. But I had especially made the "religion motive" and "man motive" sound, in my opinion, very complimentary to each other. Contrary to my expectation, those two motives never overlapped. Nor was the speech very organized in practice; it was meandering, with no overarching sections. Meanwhile, some motives were never overshadowed by others or were never in anything but a major key. These sorts of details became the meat of the project, as they offered the most intriguing avenues for interpretation of Emerson's intentions and beliefs.

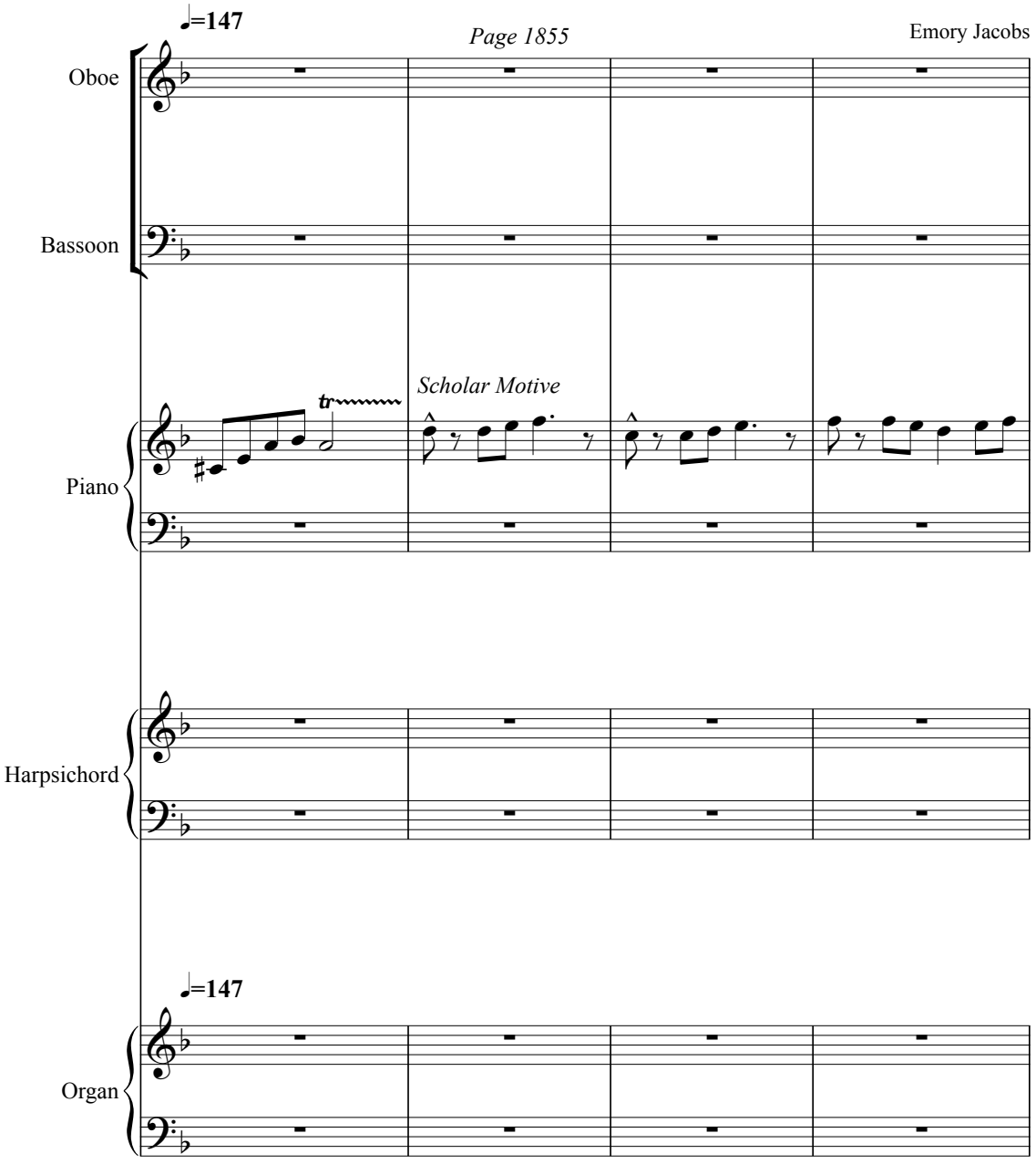
Ultimately, I tied these patterns to Emerson's personal belief system and his cultural upbringing. His ideas and beliefs at many times did translate musically. For

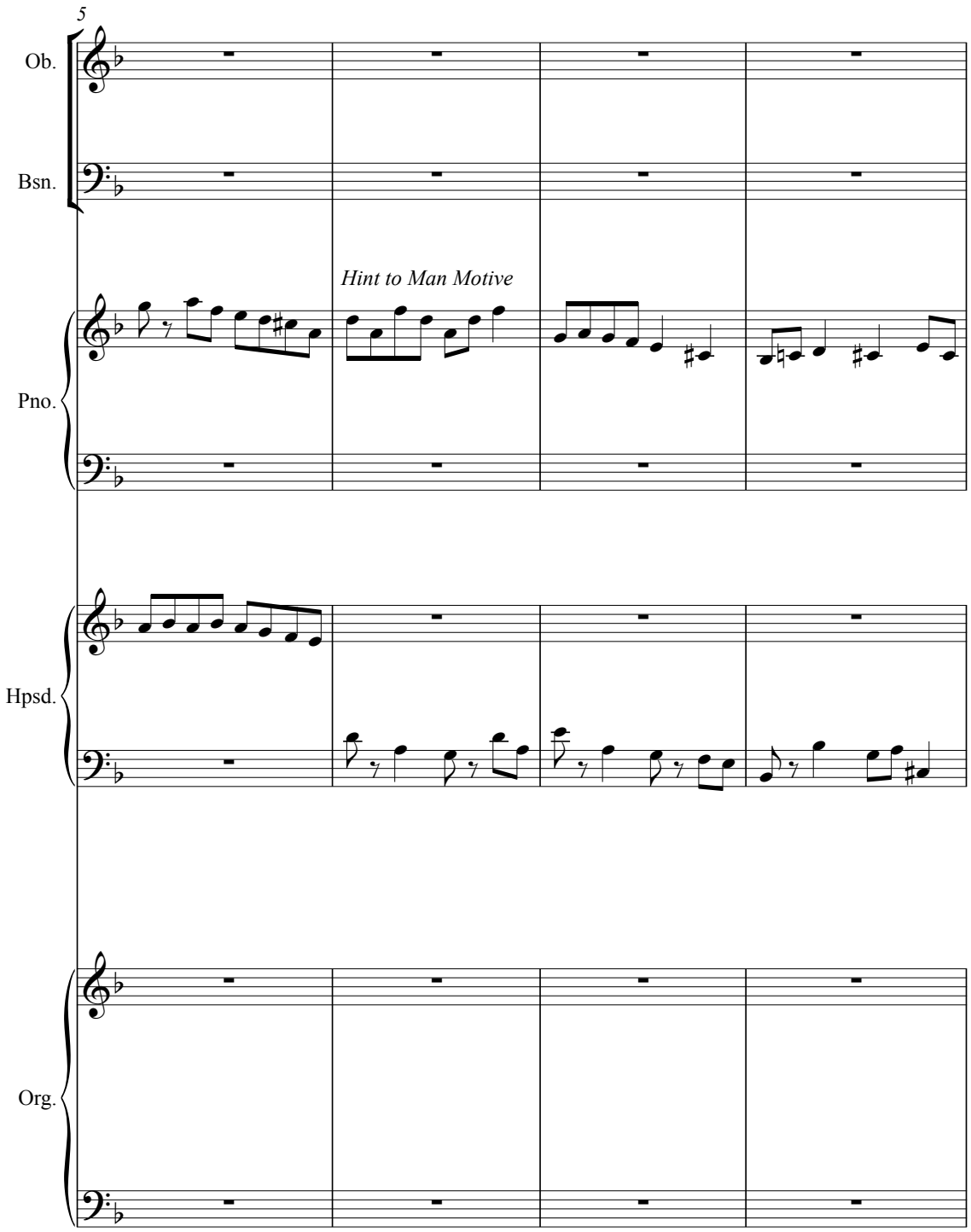
example, the "nature motive" never modulated into a minor key: Emerson viewed mankind's relationship to nature positively, and the popular Romantic movement heralded nature as a source of inspiration for man. In the same vein, the "religion motive" and the "man motive" never once crossed paths. Not only was religion so dominant at the time that many viewed the concept of God having some sort of influence on man as a foregone conclusion, but also Emerson believed that others should come to their own conclusions about spirituality. This speech in particular instructs how best to come to such conclusions and where to find inspiration; he was not there to tell the audience about his own conclusions, which explains why some possible relationships between topics were barely, if at all, explored.

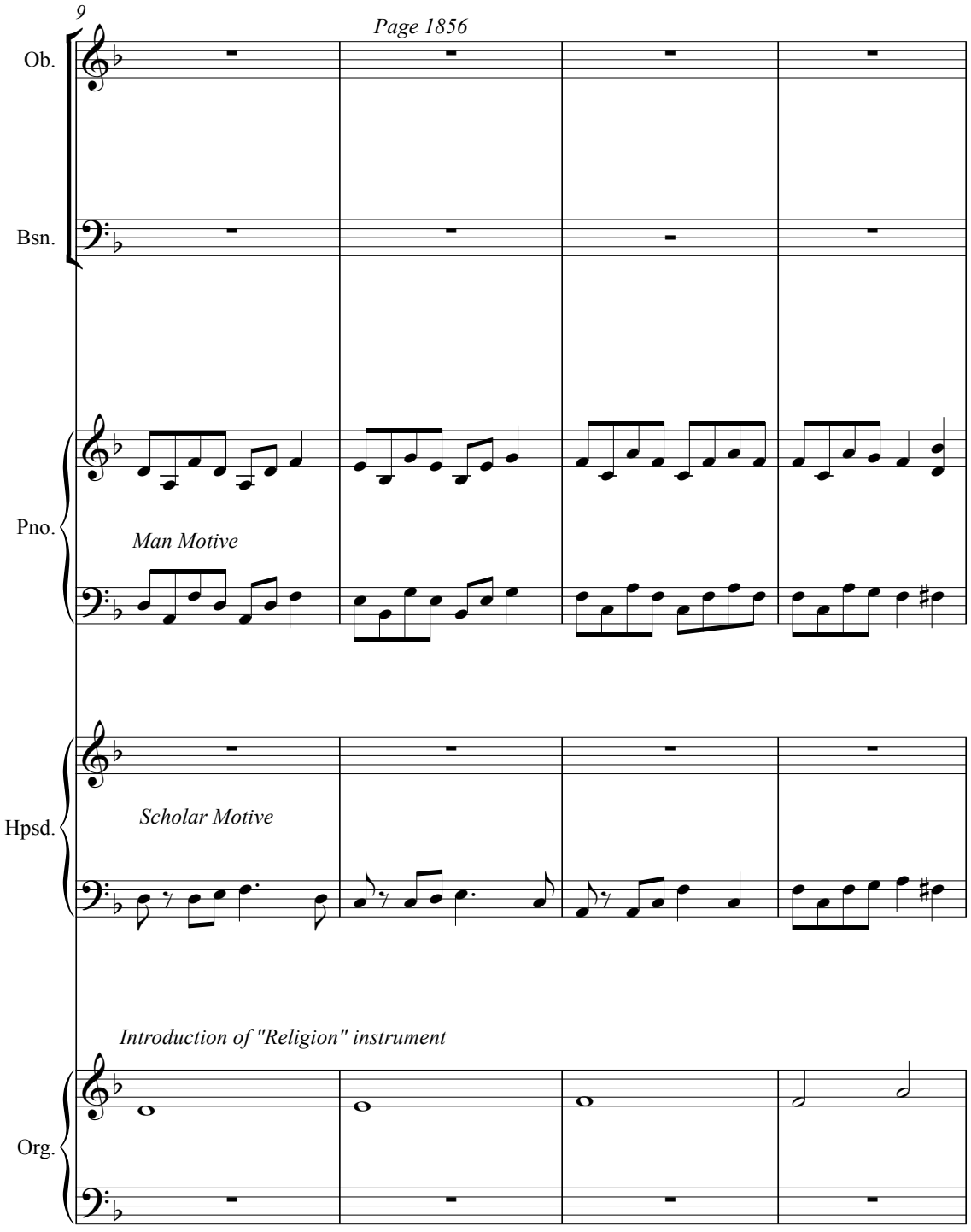
The oddities and patterns of the musical composition succeeded as simplifications of Emerson's personality and belief system. His ideals stayed intact, even when his words were stripped away and made into something else entirely.

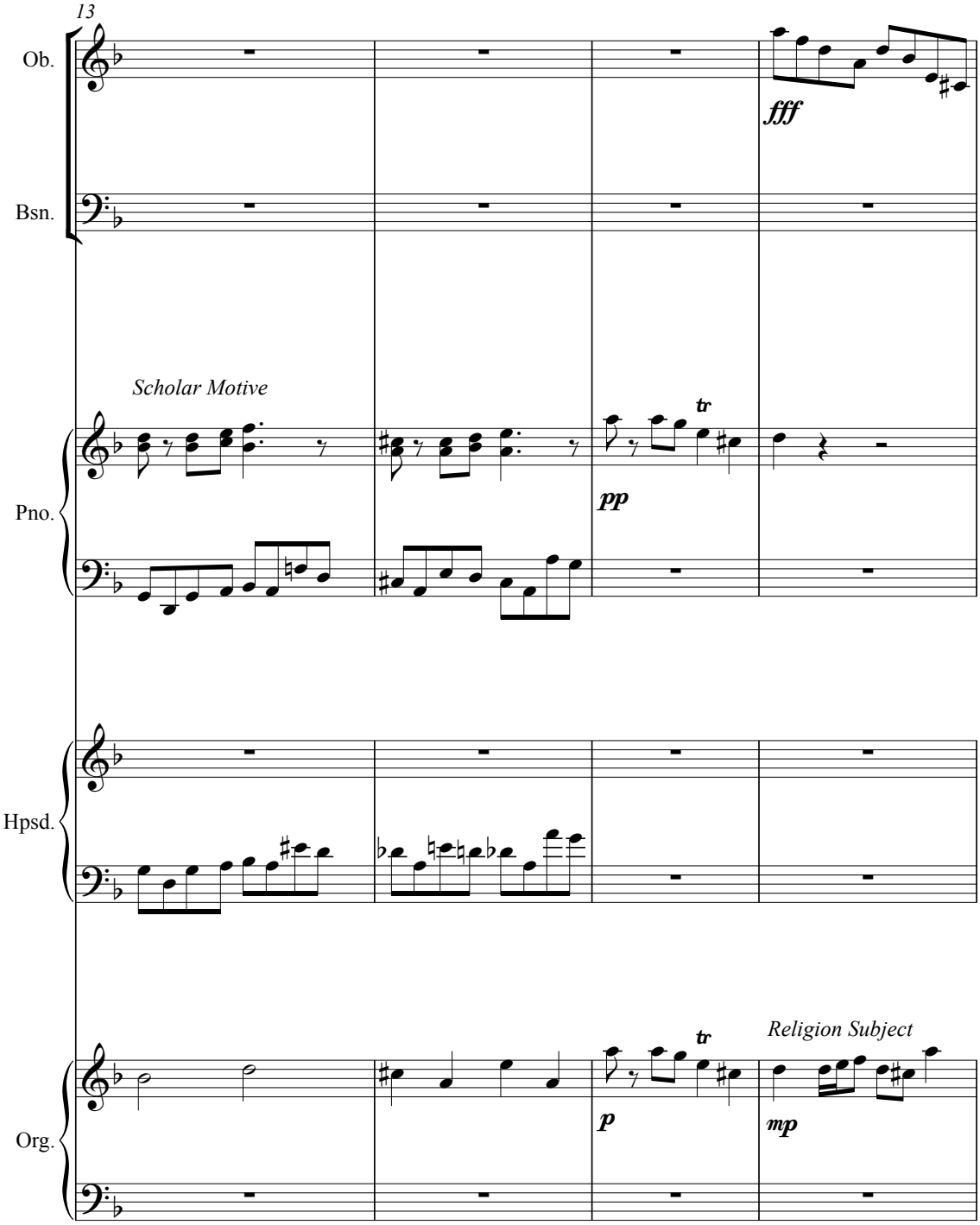
An audio recording is available at
soundcloud.com/e-jacobs/emersons-score
as well as through the online edition of the
Monarch Review, volume two, at
www.methodist.edu/monarch-review-2
and at

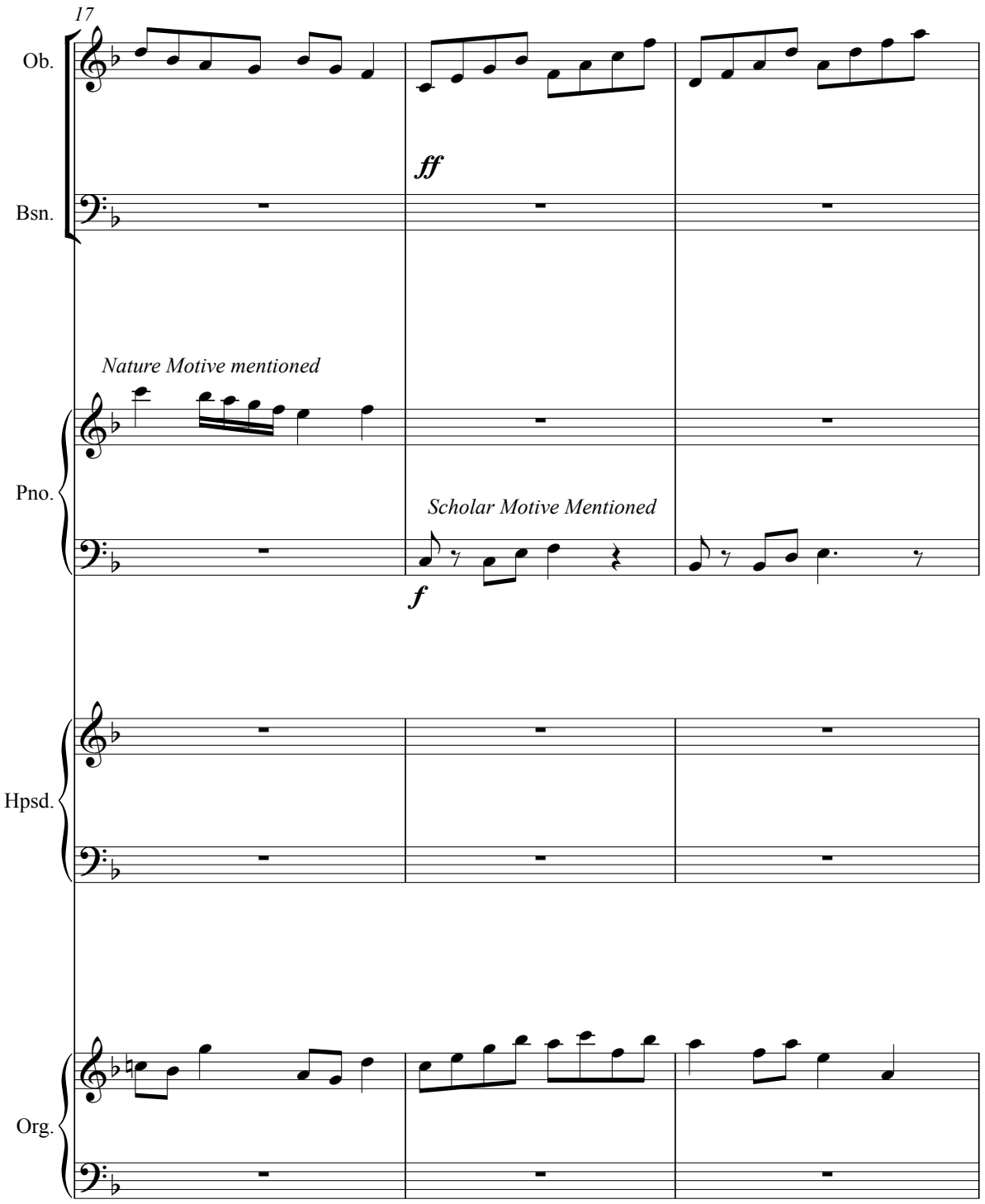
Emerson: From Words To Instruments

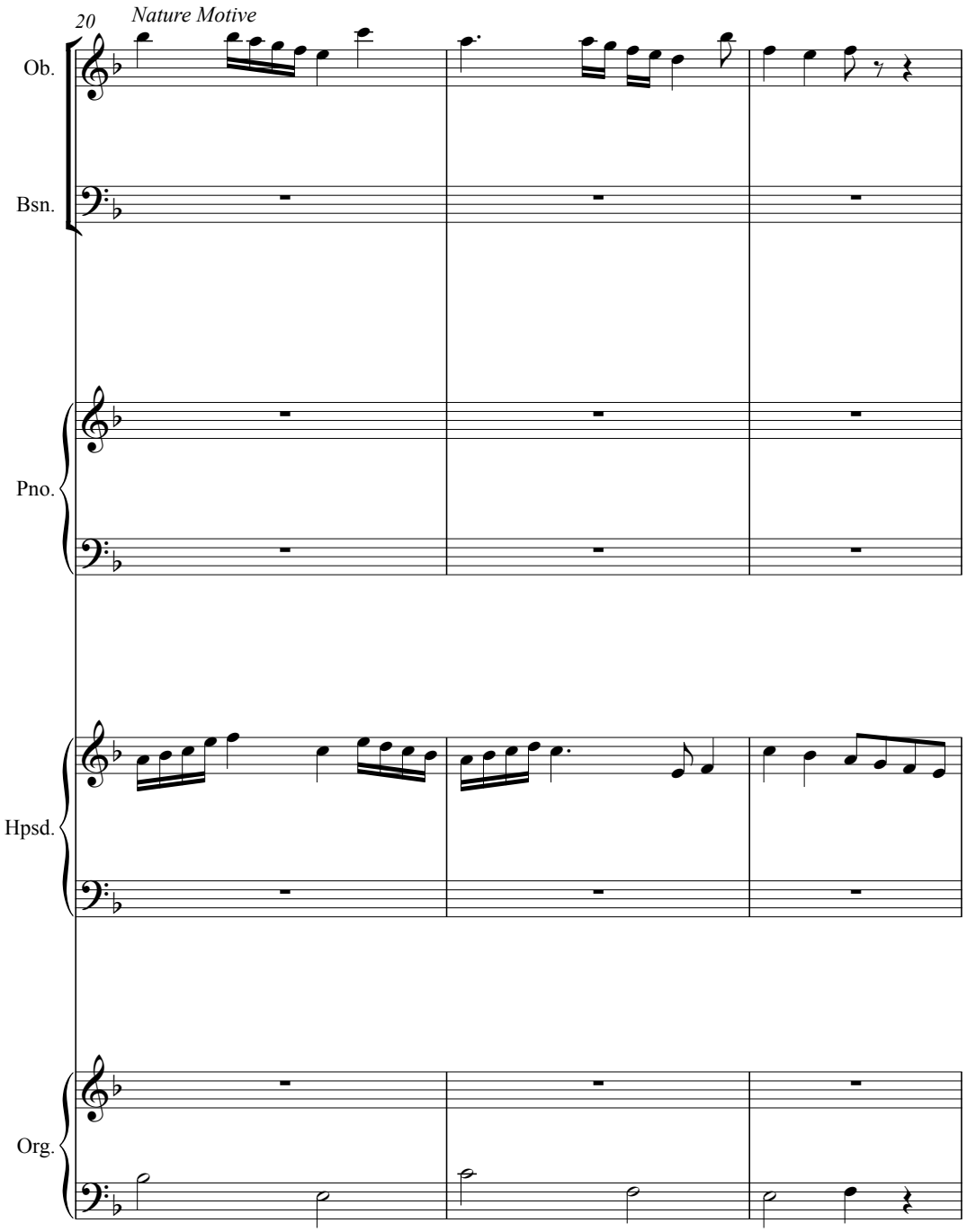


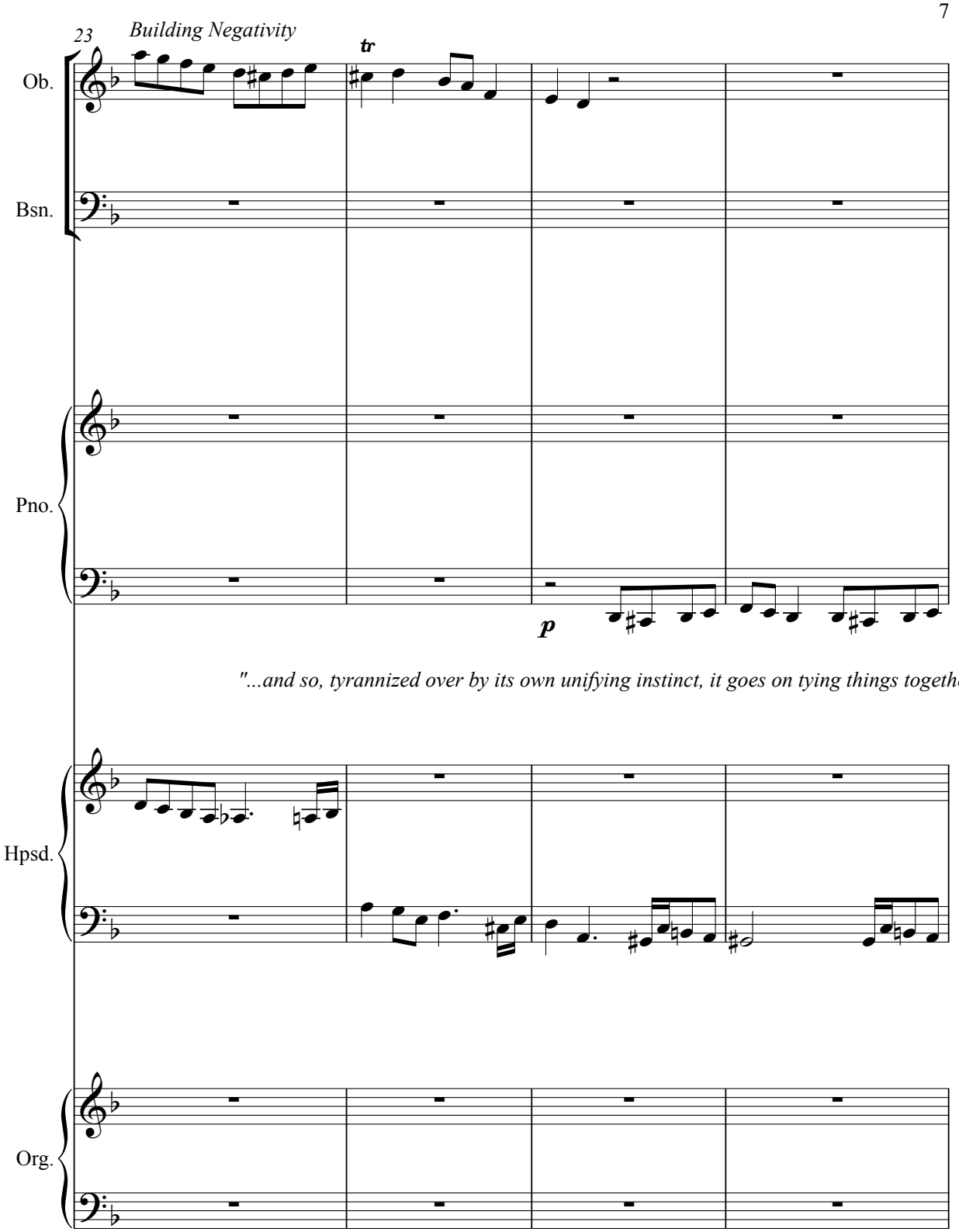

5
Ob.
Bsn.
Hint to Man Motive
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.

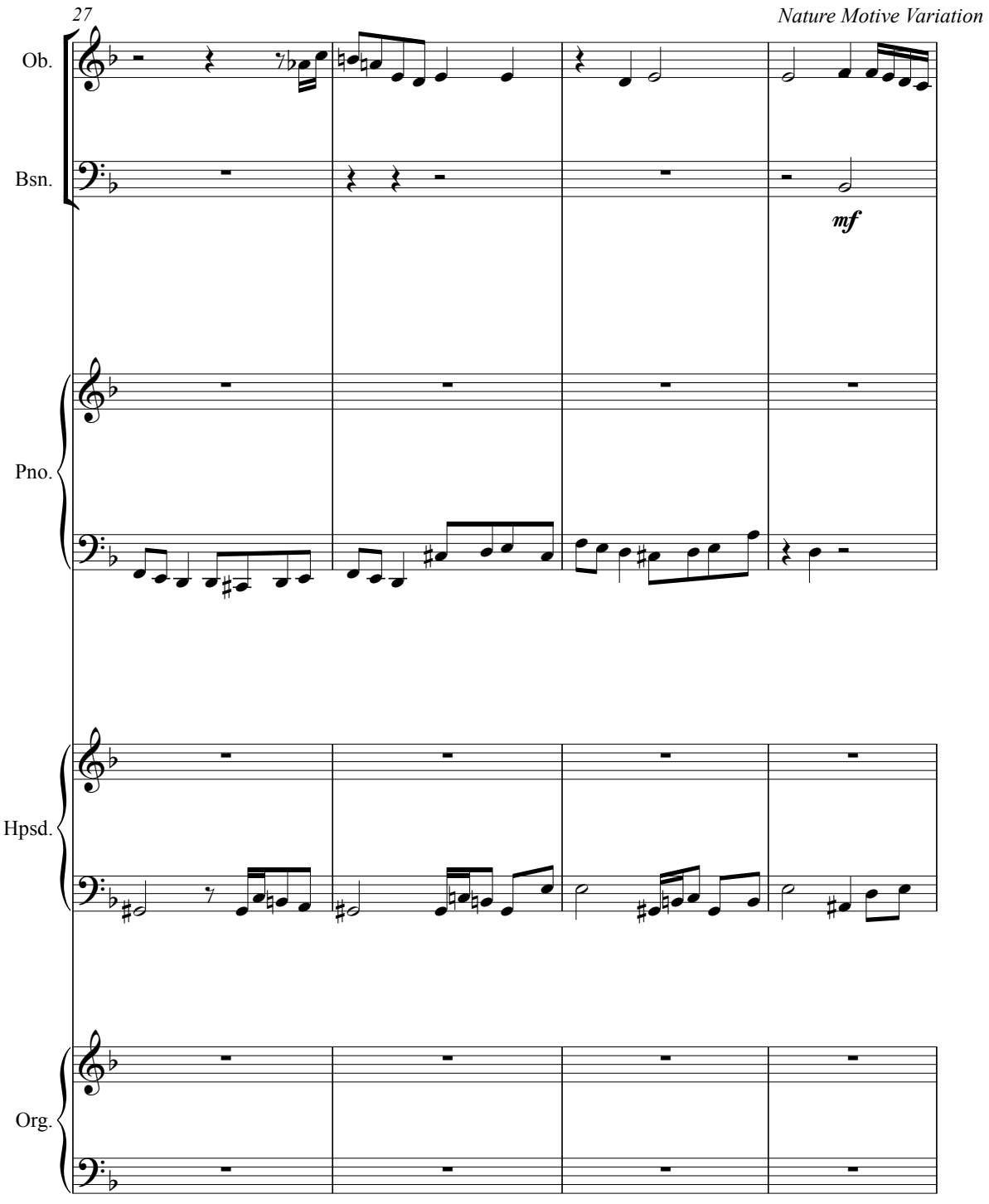

9
Page 1856
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Man Motive
Hpsd.
Scholar Motive
Introduction of "Religion" instrument
Org.

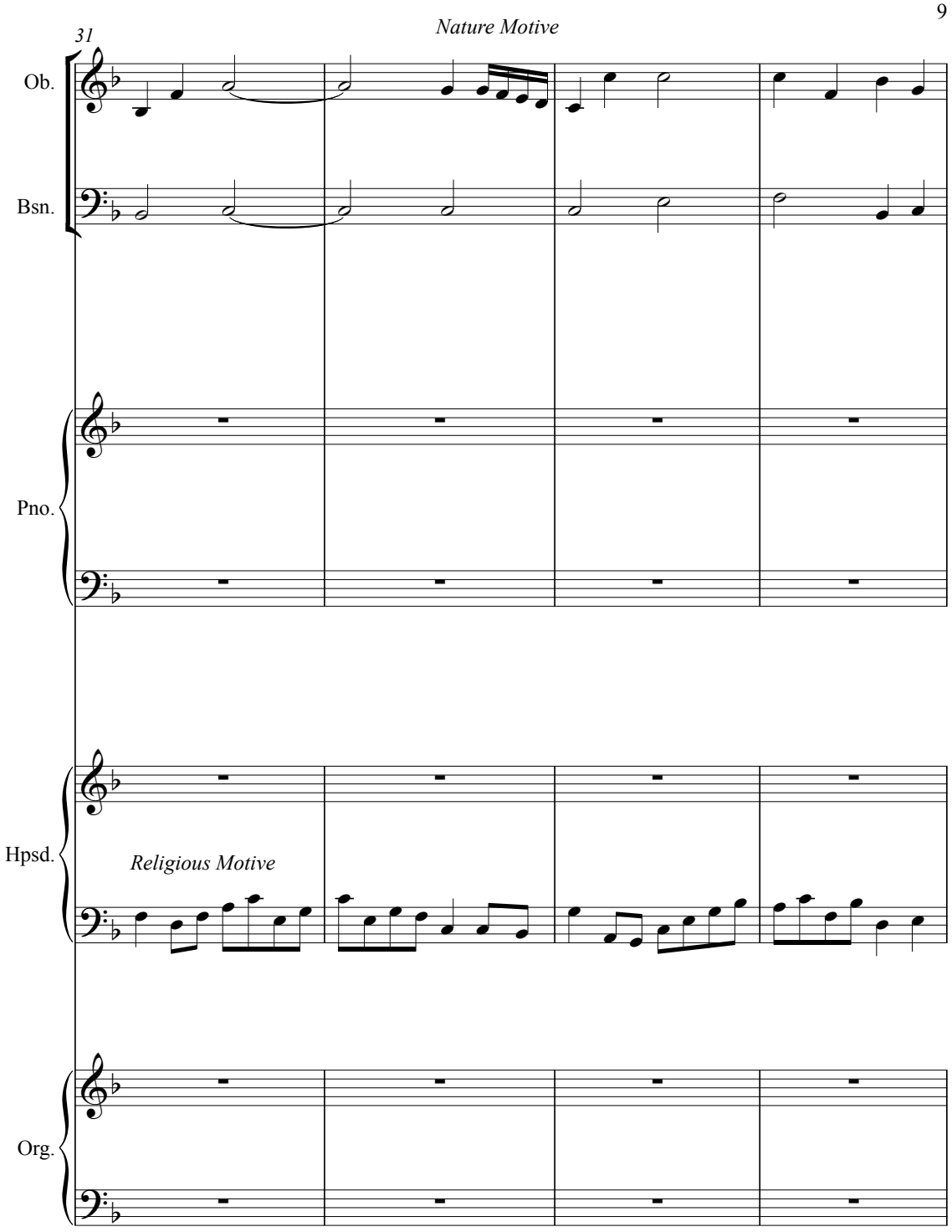

13
Ob.
Bsn.
fff
Scholar Motive
Pno.
tr
pp
Hpsd.
Org.
tr
p
Religion Subject
mp

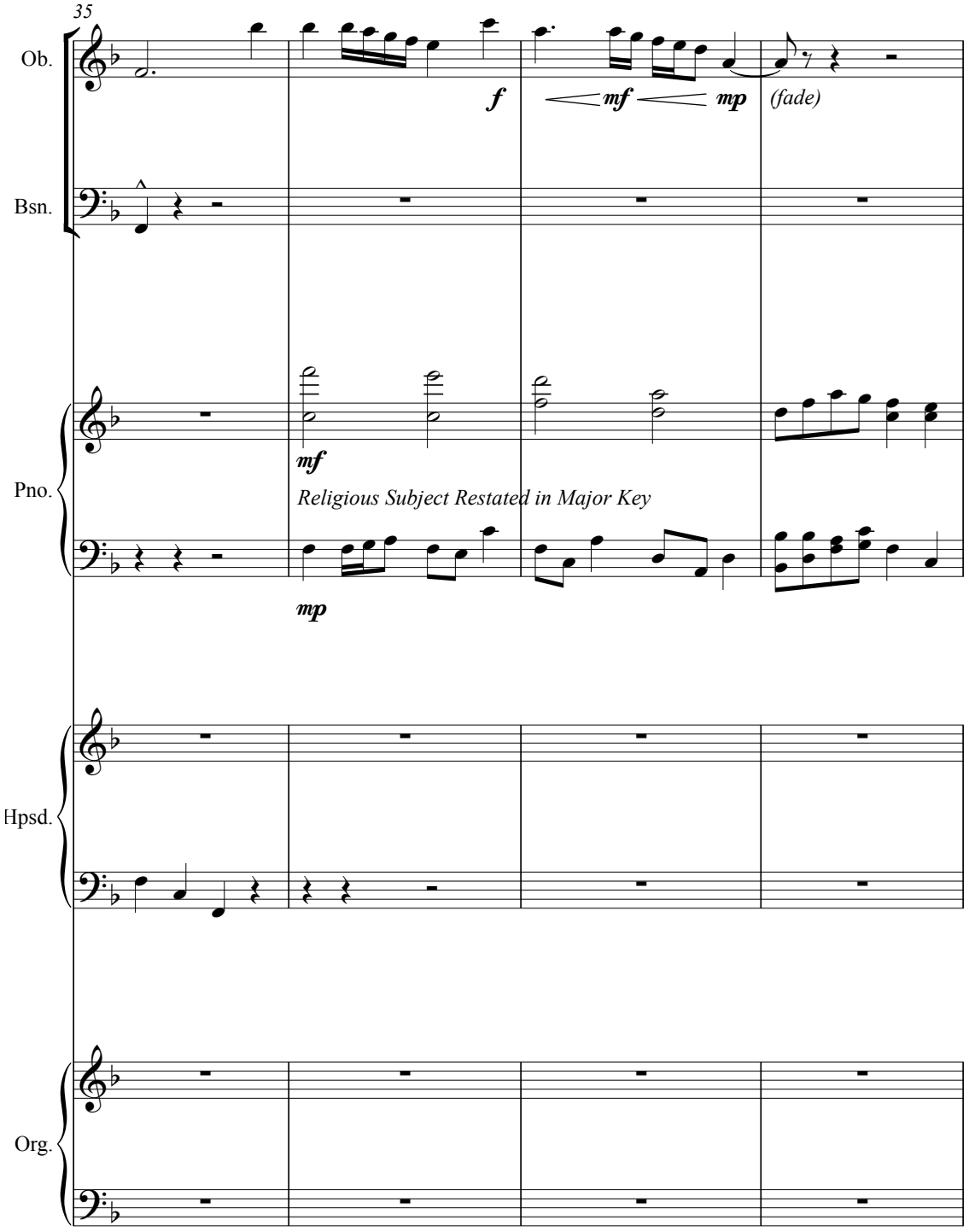

17
Ob.
Bsn.
ff
Nature Motive mentioned
Pno.
Scholar Motive Mentioned
f
Hpsd.
Org.

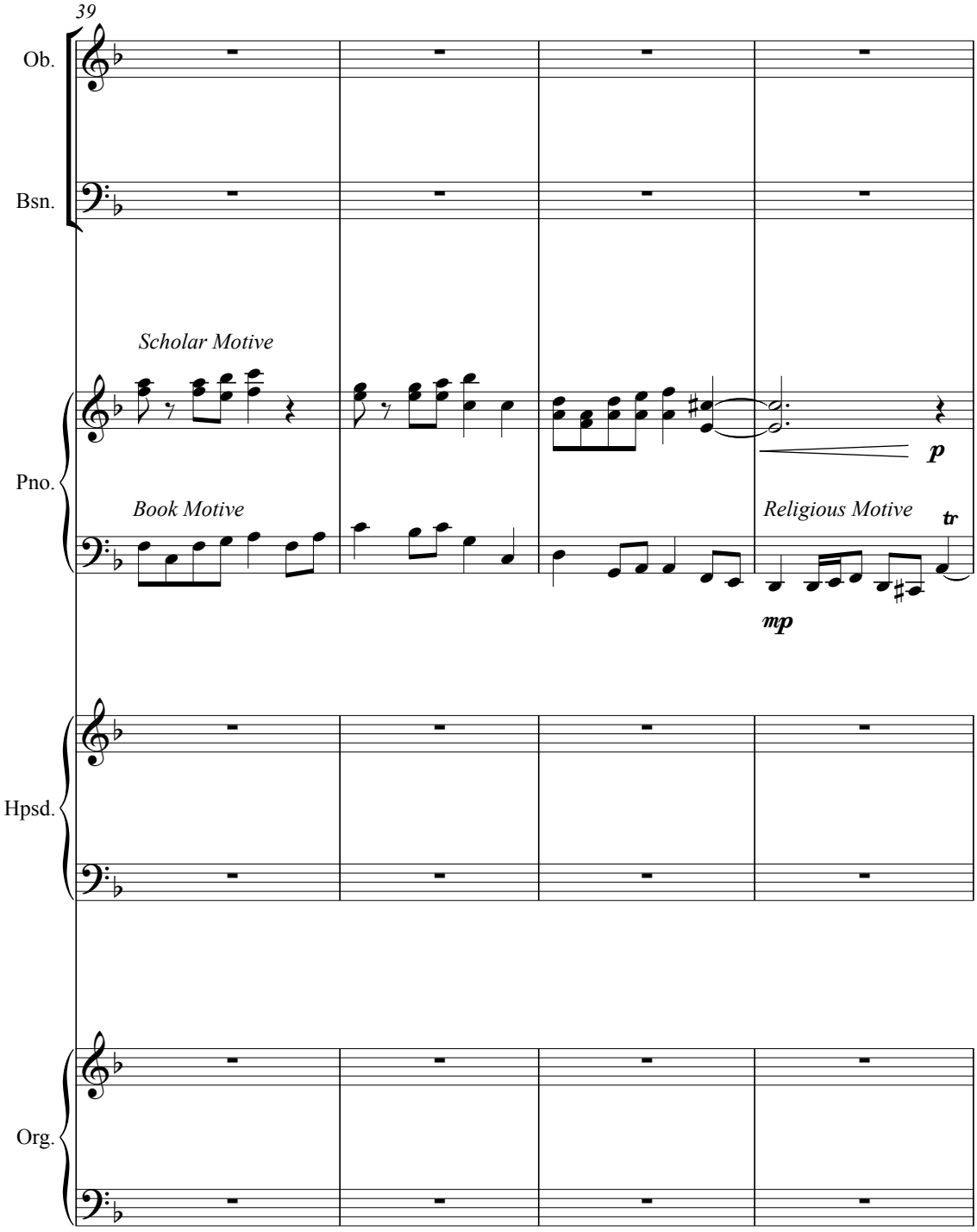

20
Nature Motive
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.

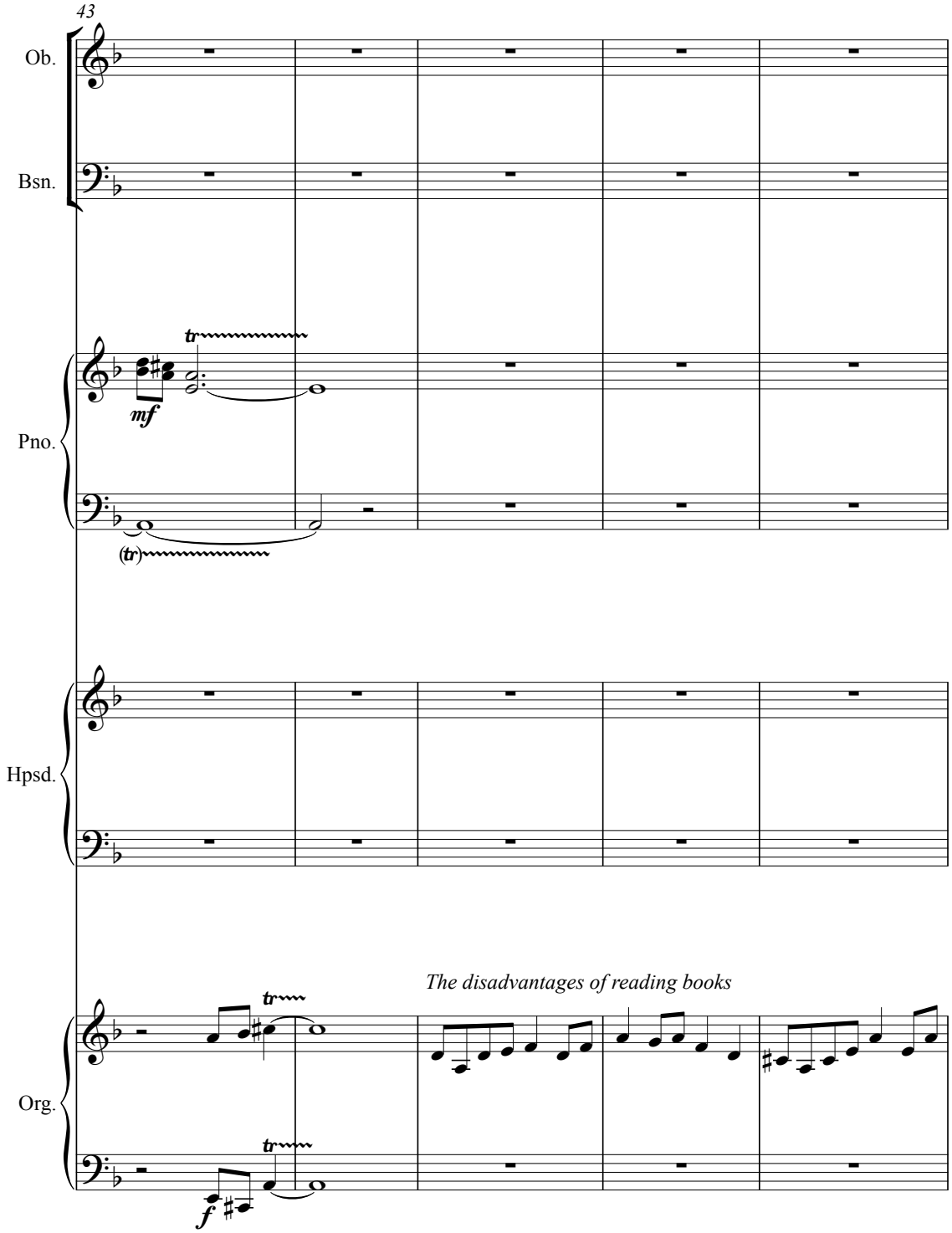

23
Building Negativity
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
tr
p
"...and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together..."
Hpsd.
Org.

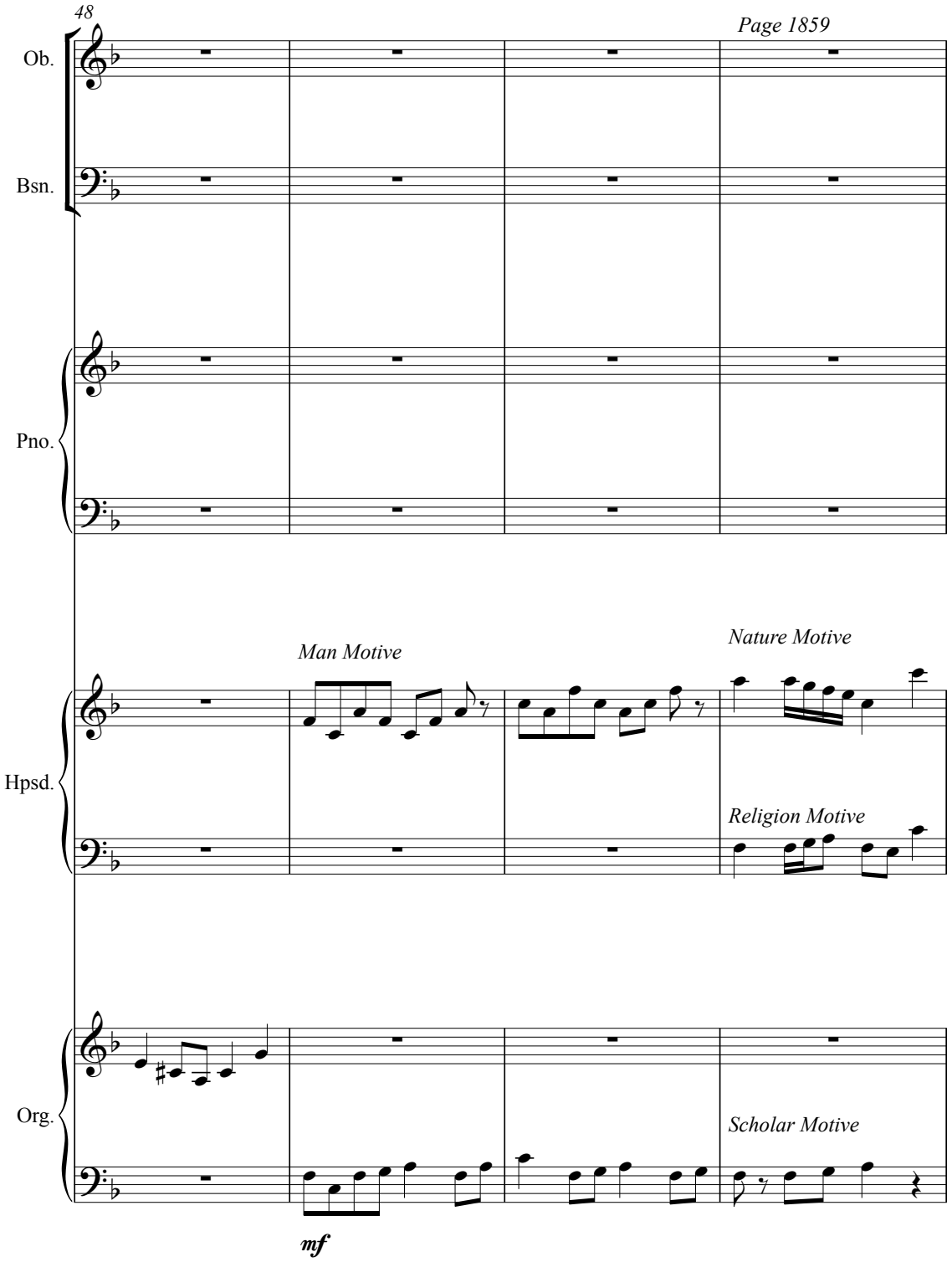

27
Nature Motive Variation
Ob.
Bsn.
mf
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.

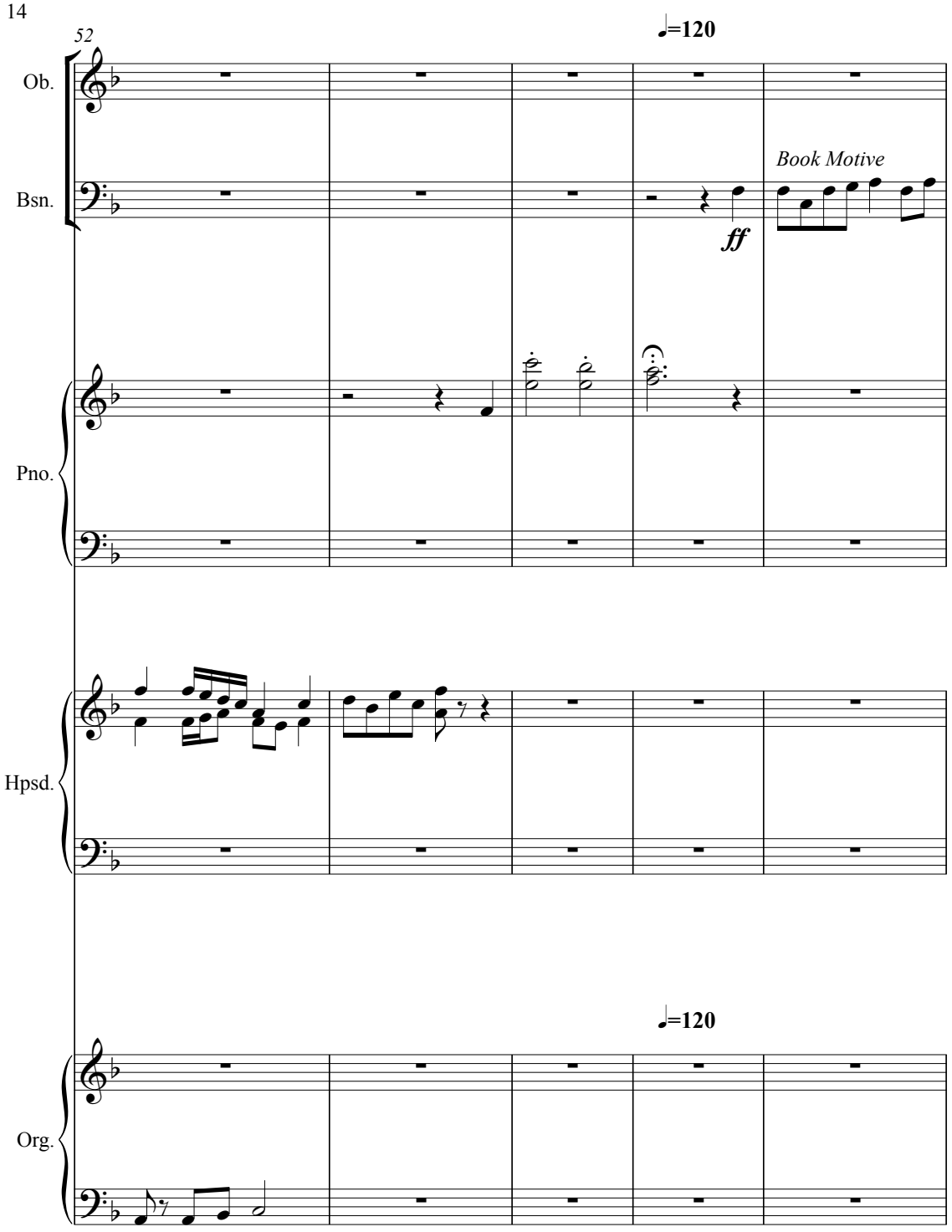

31
Nature Motive
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Hpsd.
Religious Motive
Org.


35
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.
f
mf
mp
(fade)
mf
Religious Subject Restated in Major Key
mp

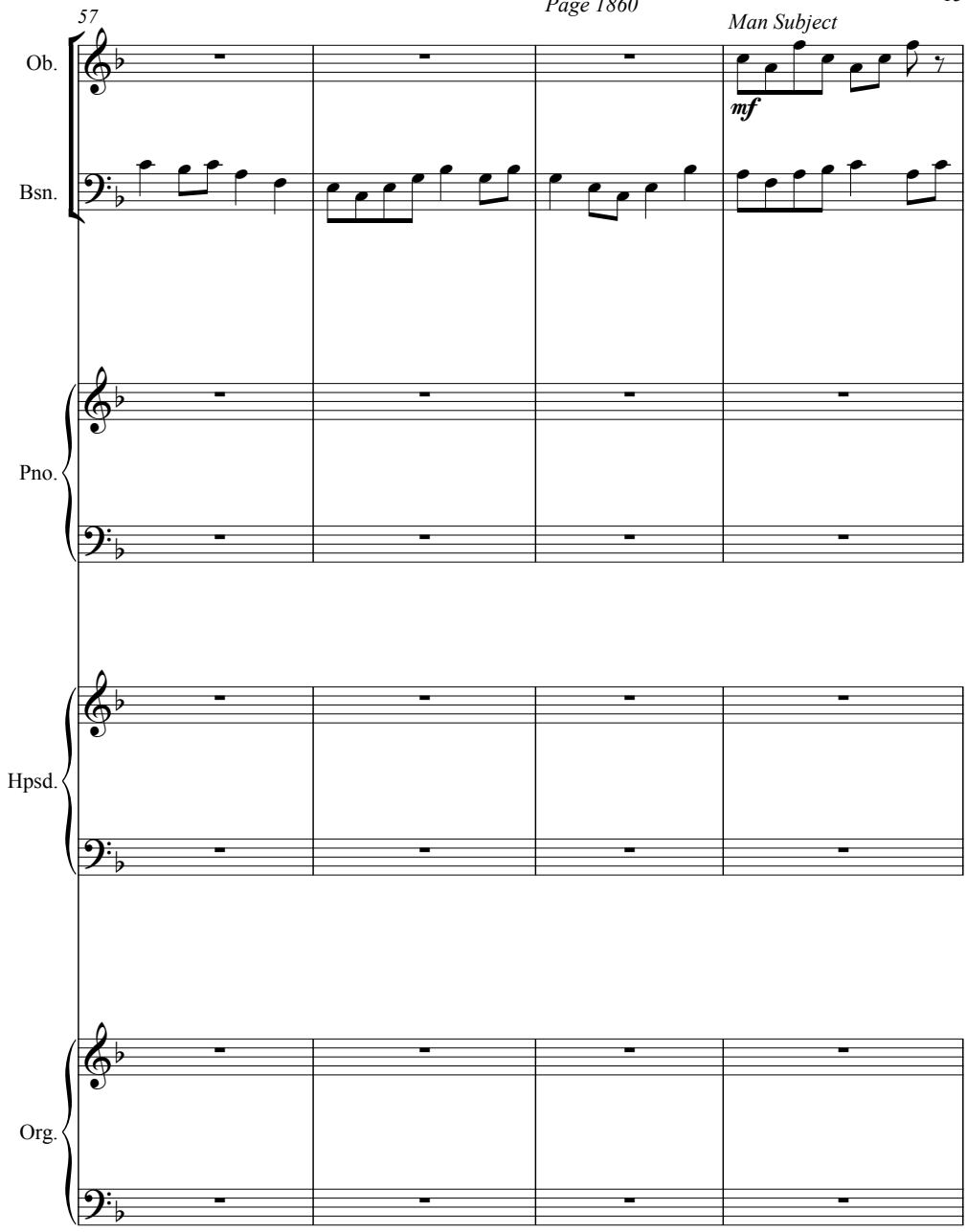

39
Ob.
Bsn.
Scholar Motive
Pno.
Book Motive
Religious Motive
p
mp
tr
Hpsd.
Org.

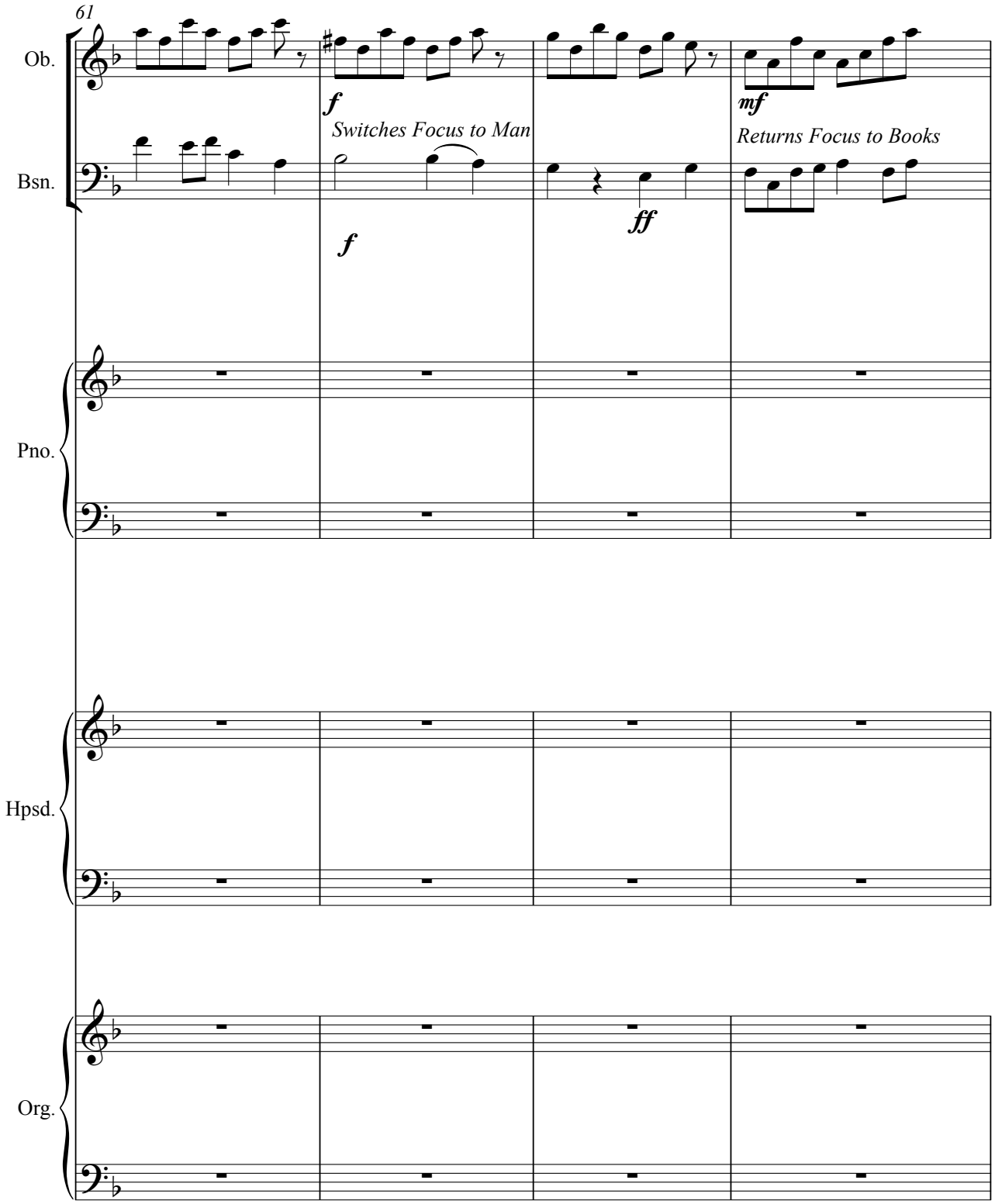

43
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.
mf
tr
(tr)
f
The disadvantages of reading books

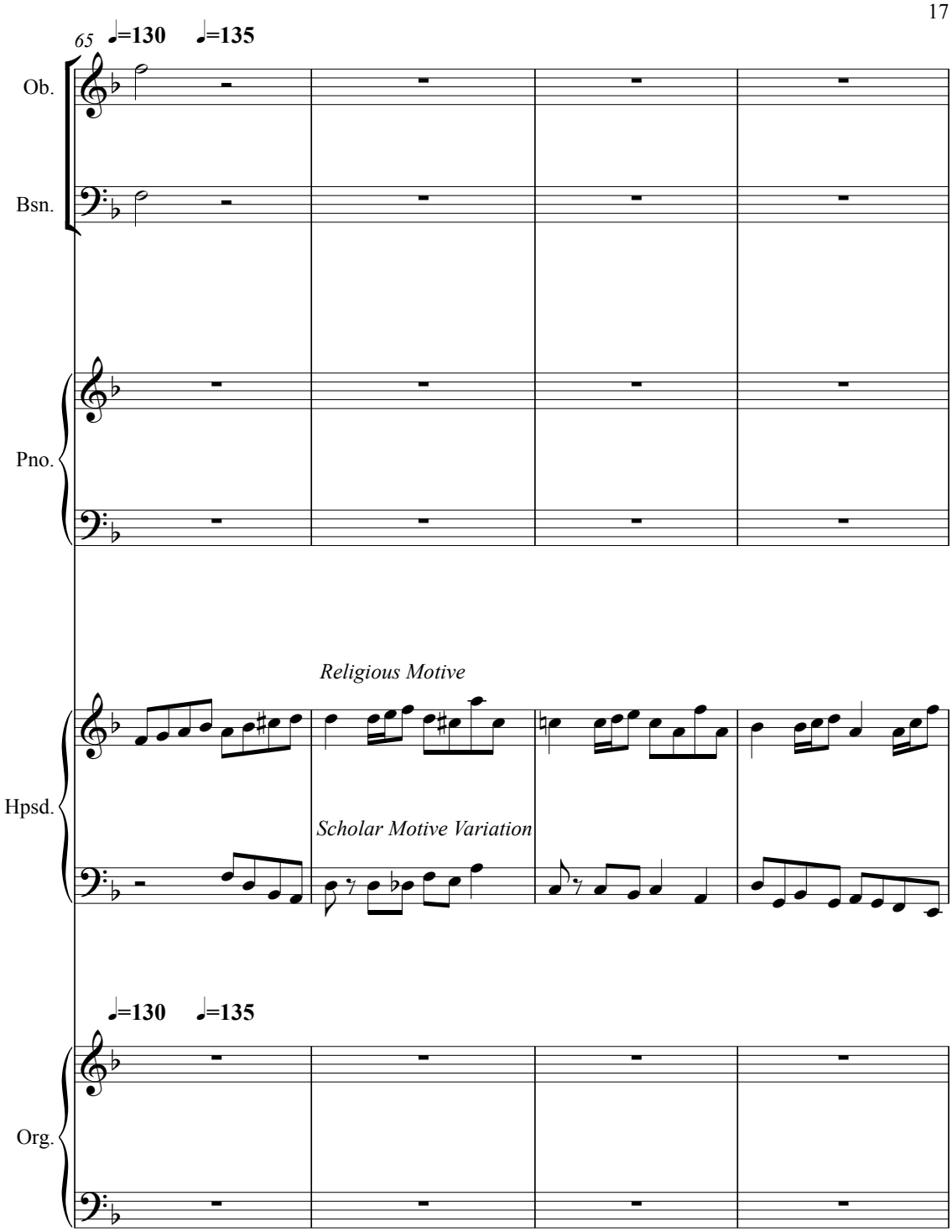

48
Page 1859
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.
Man Motive
Nature Motive
Religion Motive
Scholar Motive
mf

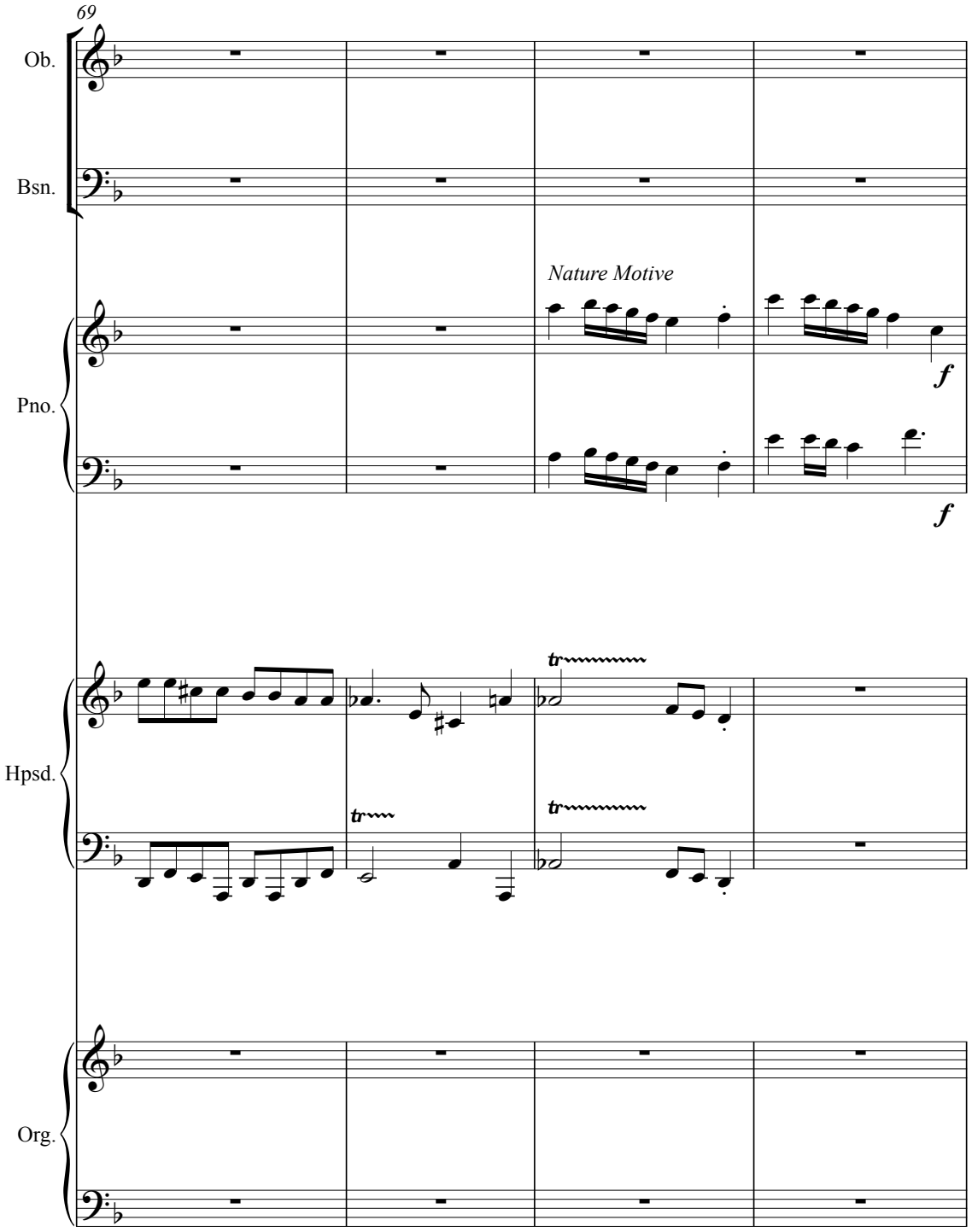

52
♩=120
Ob.
Bsn.
Book Motive
ff
Pno.
Hpsd.
♩=120
Org.

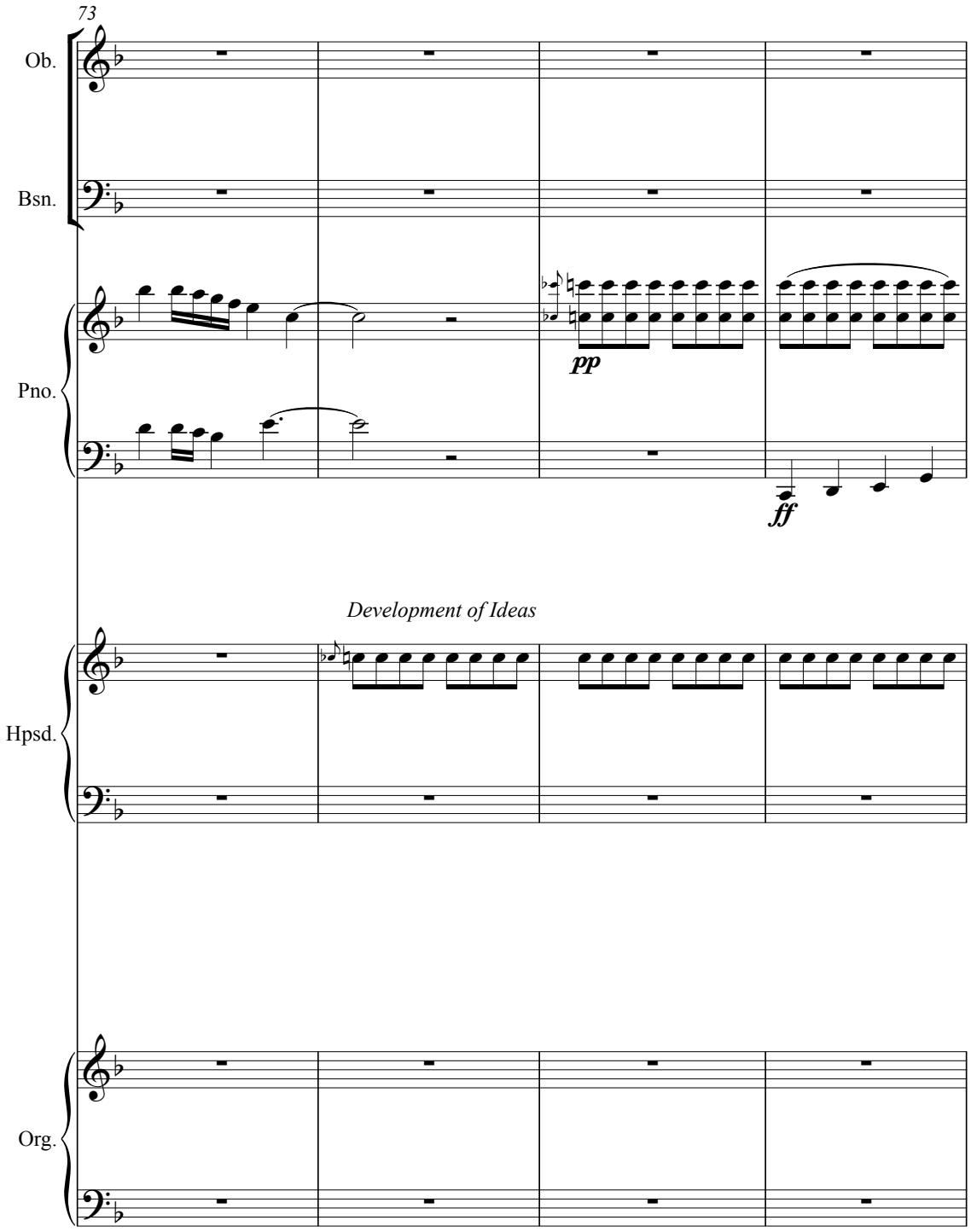
Page 1860

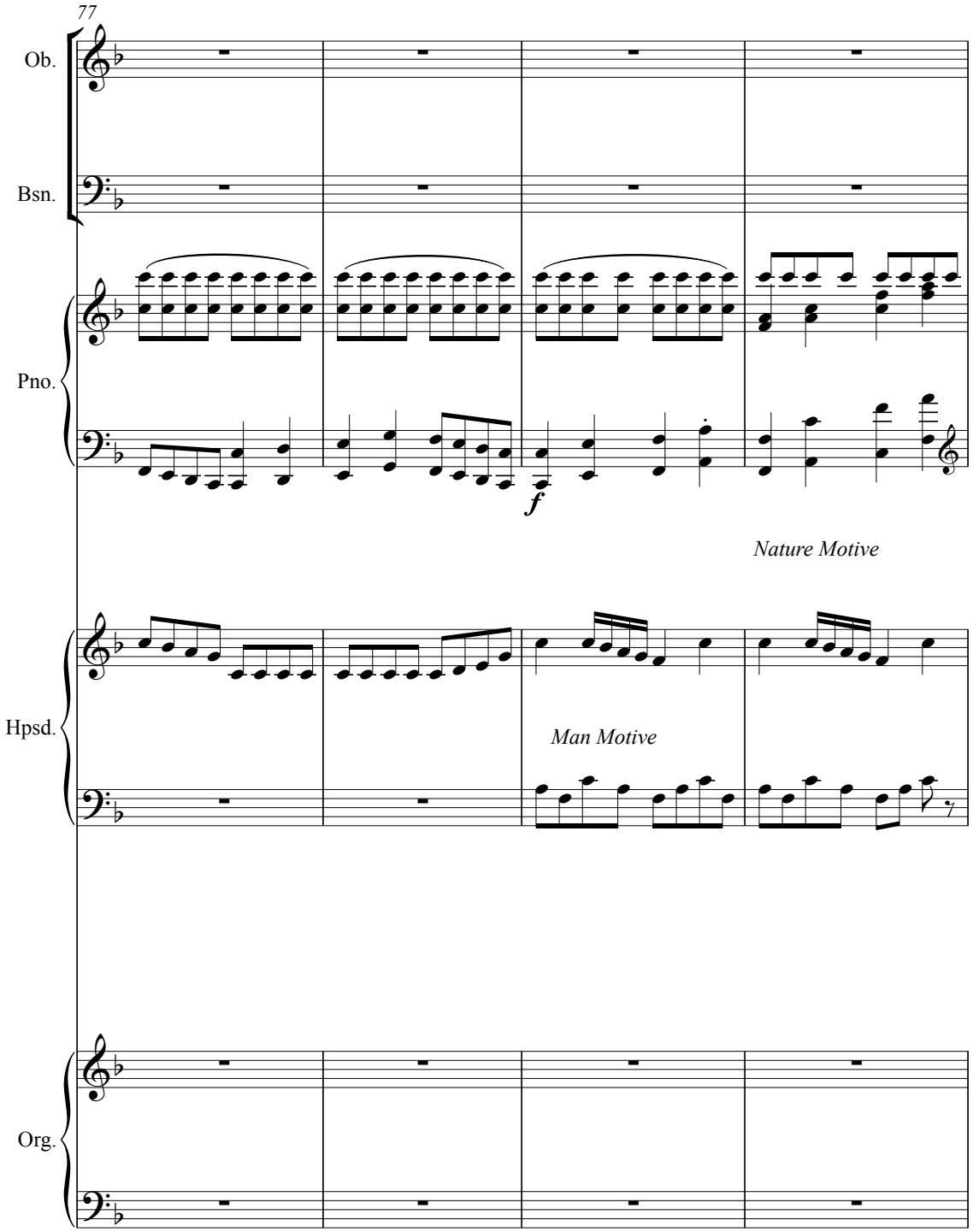


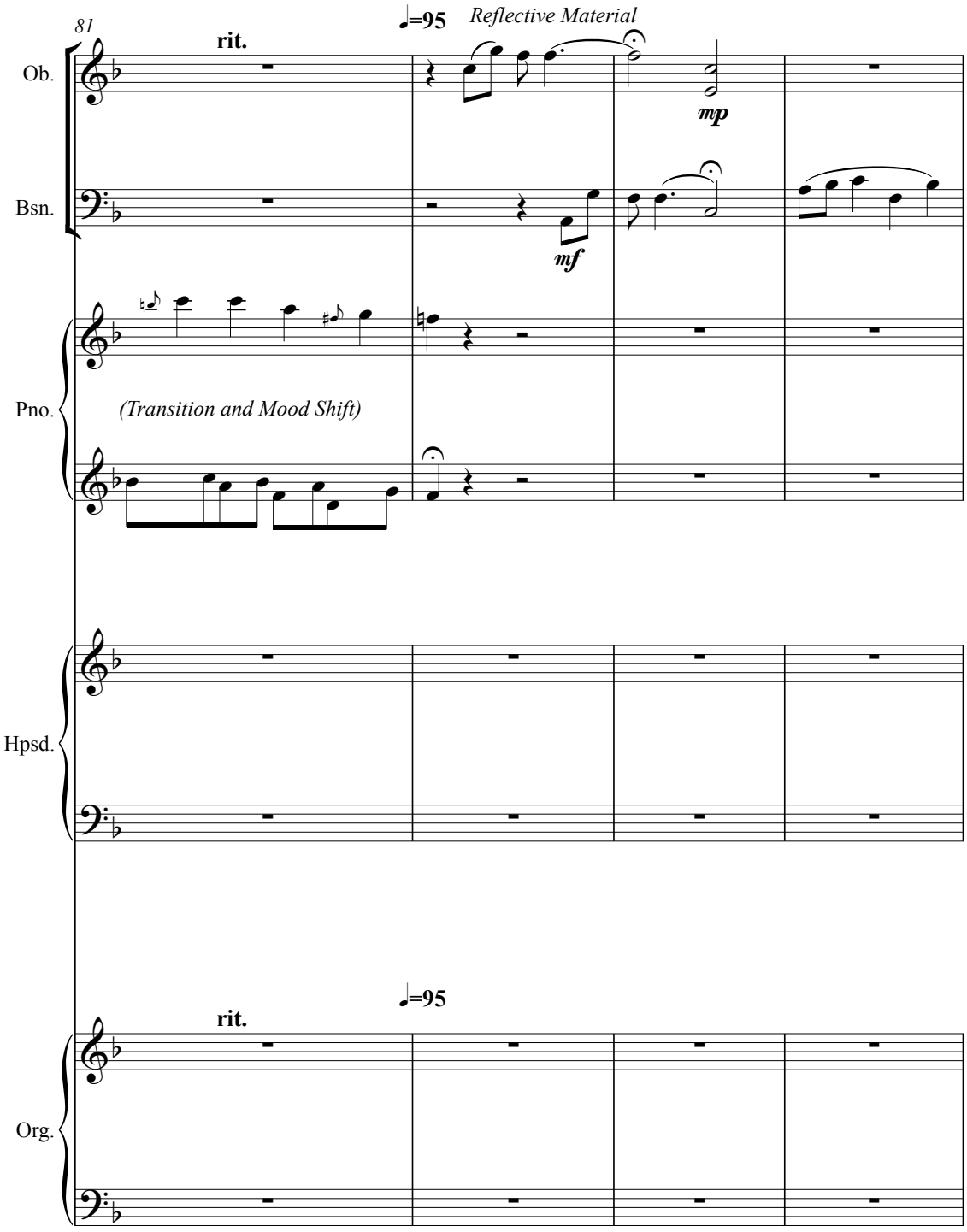

61
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.
f
Switches Focus to Man
mf
Returns Focus to Books
f
ff

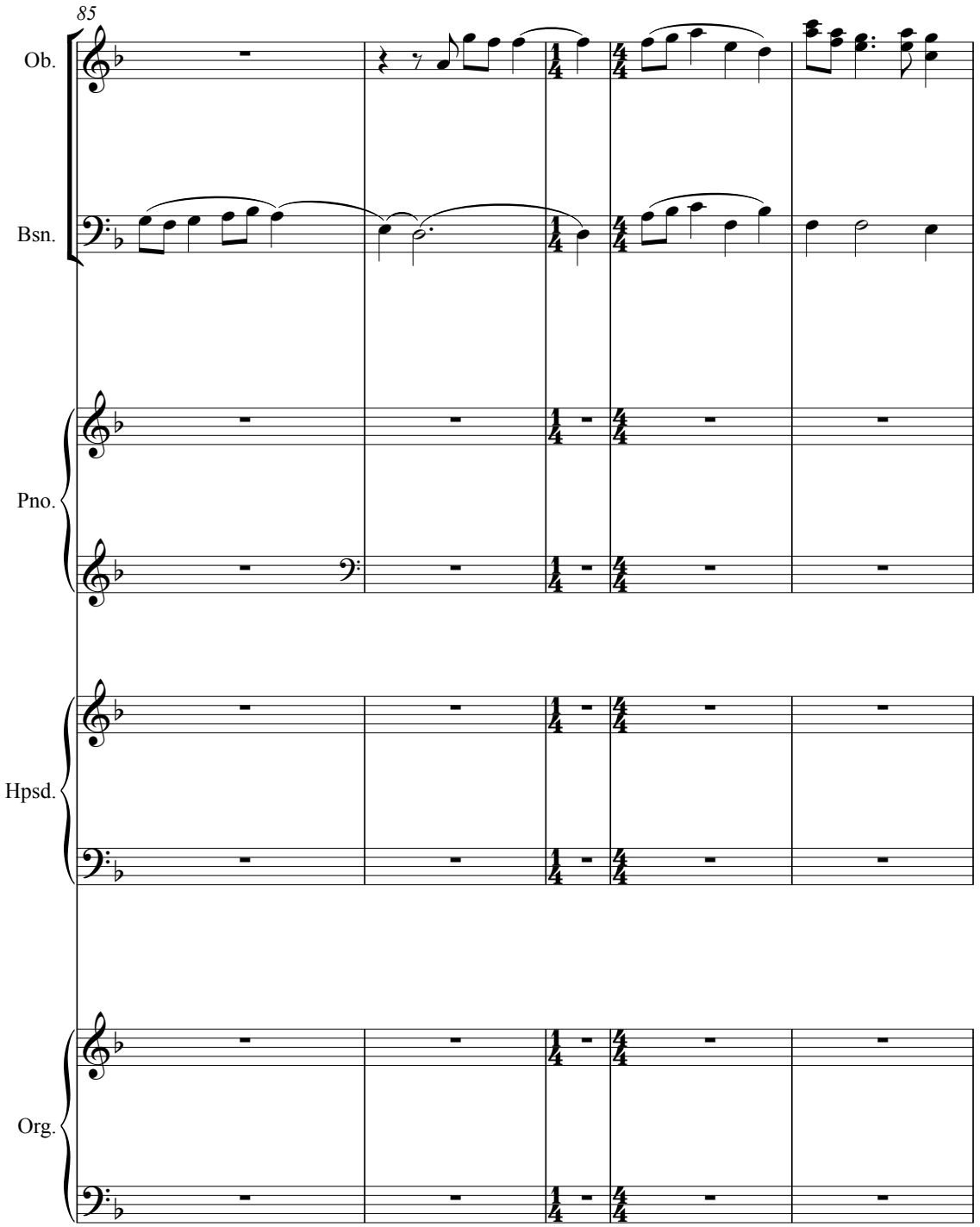

65
♩=130 ♩=135
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Religious Motive
Hpsd.
Scholar Motive Variation
♩=130 ♩=135
Org.

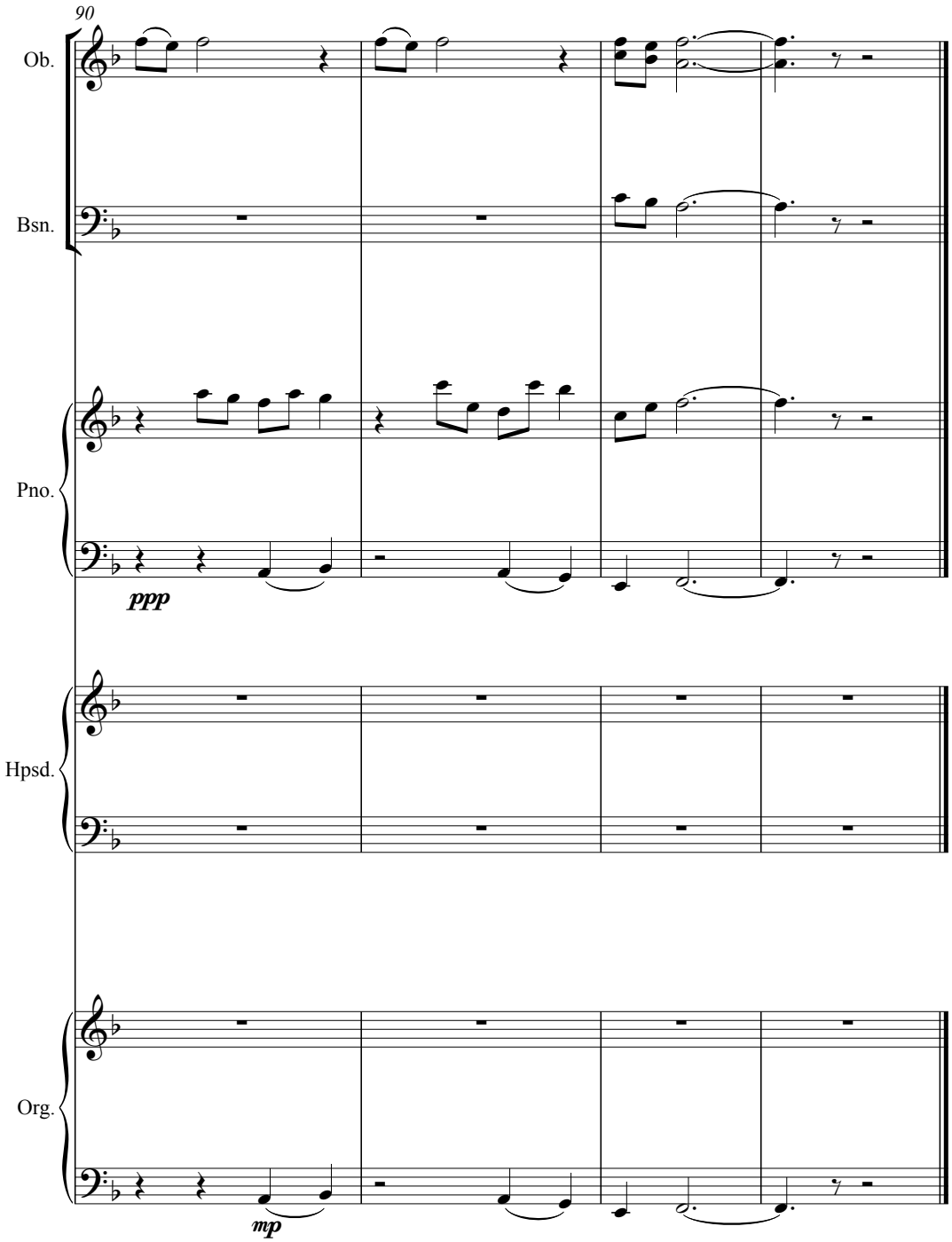

69
Ob.
Bsn.
Nature Motive
Pno.
f
f
Hpsd.
tr
tr
tr
Org.


73
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
pp
ff
Development of Ideas
Hpsd.
Org.


77
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
f
Nature Motive
Hpsd.
Man Motive
Org.


81
rit.
♩=95
Reflective Material
Ob.
mp
Bsn.
mf
Pno.
(Transition and Mood Shift)
Hpsd.
rit.
♩=95
Org.


85
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
Hpsd.
Org.


90
Ob.
Bsn.
Pno.
ppp
Hpsd.
Org.
mp