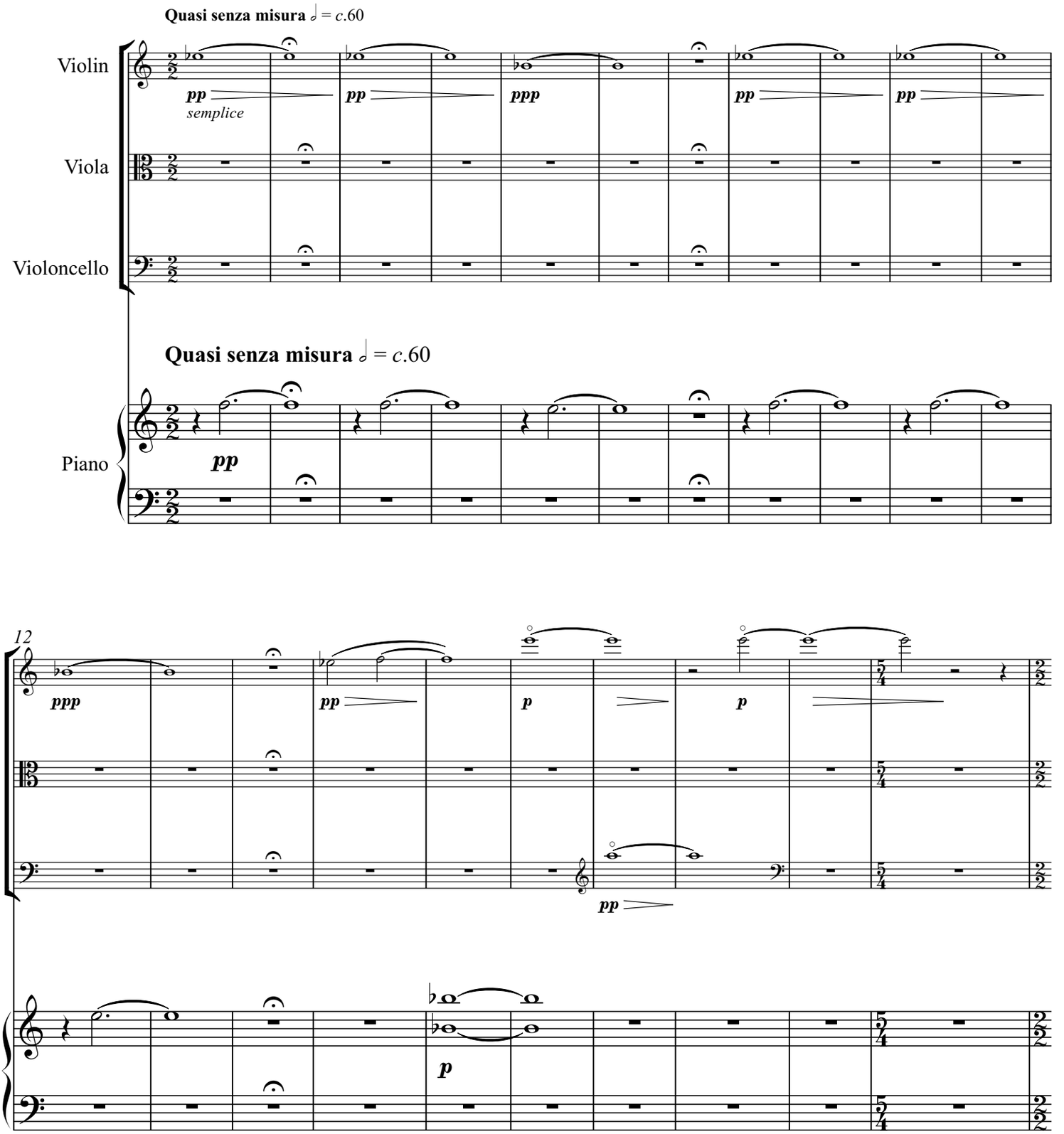
Spell

Sally Beamish



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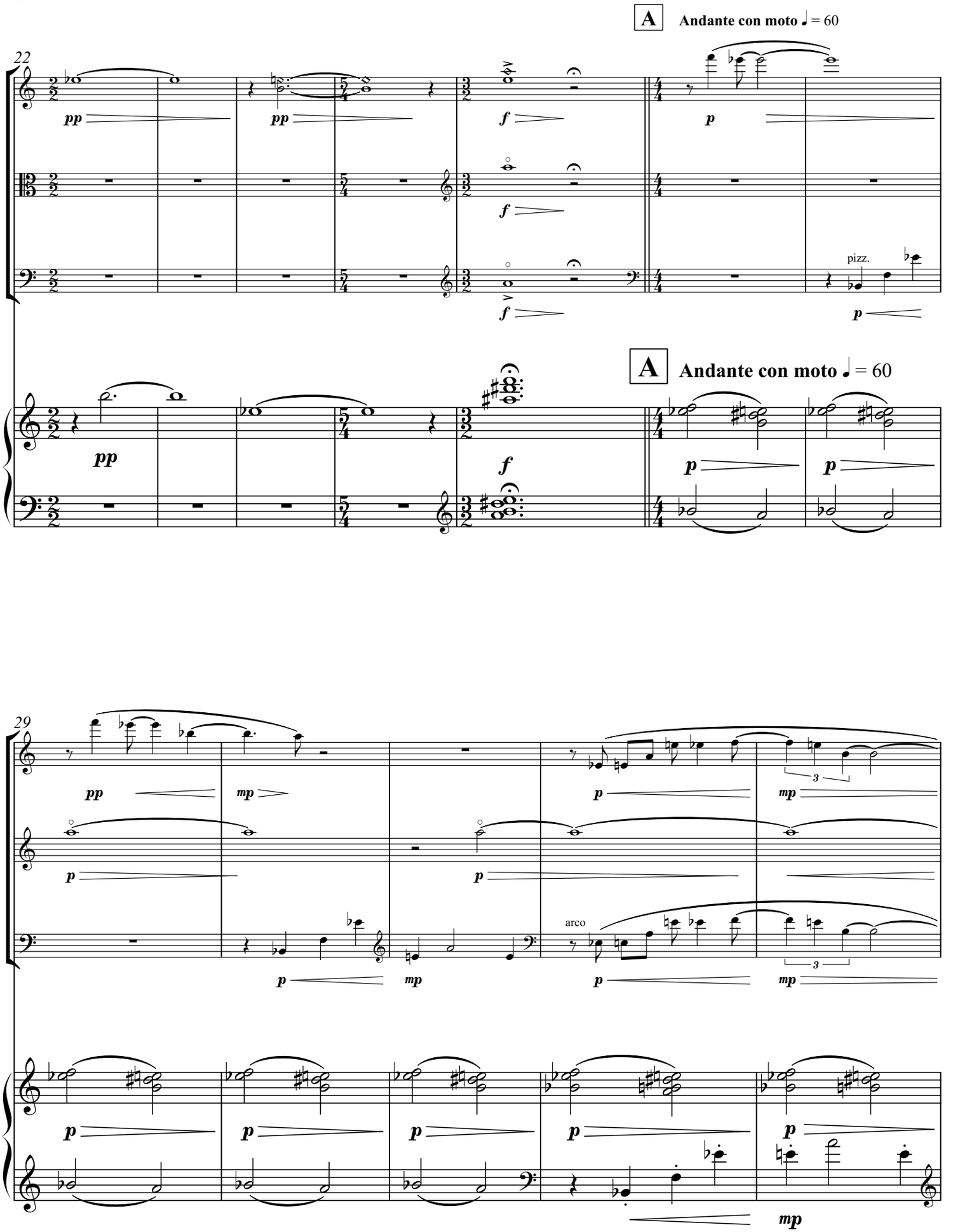
A
Andante con moto ♩ = 60
22
pizz.
A
Andante con moto ♩ = 60
29
arco

I was asked to write this short piano quartet by the 'Musik in der Pforte' concert series, with the brief that the motto of the season 2024 would be a quote by the American writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987):

Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors where there were only walls.

Joseph Campbell's concept is the 'hero's journey', which he found in myths of all cultures. Each concert would take an aspect of this journey as its theme and, for my new work, they suggested to me: The Initiation: Between Courage and Despair. I decided to relate this to my own journey and to the moment which marked the beginning of my commitment as a professional composer, which in turn led to a journey – a move from England to Scotland – and then a return 28 years later.

The event which initiated this journey was traumatic: the theft of my viola from a house in South London. I knew immediately that somehow I needed to turn the despair I felt into something positive: I stopped playing, moved to Scotland, and focused fulltime on composing.

25 years later, by an extraordinary turn of events, my youngest child became a luthier. Her first instrument was a viola, which gave me back my voice and a return to performing – coinciding with a return to England. This echoes the aspect of Campbell's 'journey' wherein the protagonist returns with a lost treasure.

This piece is the second* in which I've used a spelling of my own name, translating the letters (SFBEAMISH) into musical notation. All of these are readily available in the German musical scale, apart from 'MI', which of course is the note E in solfège.

The music explores many emotions, beginning with a gentle exposition leading to a sighing, lyrical second section, then an ebullient scherzo focusing on viola and cello. The music uses solely the letters of my name until the fourth episode, which abandons some notes and adds a 'G' to create a pentatonic sound-world – from which emerges a lullaby I wrote when I was first in Scotland. The viola is a ghostly presence in this section, finally calling the instruments back to the original melodic material and leading them in a canon. The penultimate section is a return to the sighing theme at the beginning, this time boldly expressive and building to a climax, followed by a meditative viola cadenza.

Predominant throughout the music is the idea of bells. The six sections are punctuated by bell-like refrains, beginning with a single chime, and adding one more at each new section. The final coda consists of six bell chimes, fading into the distance.

The title Spell has a variety of resonances. The 'spelling' of my name, of course, but also the idea of an event 'spelling' something portentous. It can also mean a spell, or period, of time – often of work. And equally significantly, a 'spell', or charm, which transforms life in unexpected and magical ways.

> *The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there is something lacking in the normal experience available or permitted to the members of society. The person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a coming and a returning.*
>
> Joseph Campbell

Sally Beamish 2024

Duration: approx. 9 minutes

Commissioned by Musik in der Pforte, and first performed on 23 May 2024 by Katya Apekisheva, piano, and The Ensemble Louise Farrenc (Berit Cardas, violin, Klaus Christa, viola, Mathias Johansen, cello) at Pförtnerhaus Feldkirch, Austria

* *Crescent* for trumpet, viola and piano also uses these notes.