

ifs of color, devout conditions

for solo violoncello

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2018

composed for Séverine Ballon

Performance Notes

General description of the sound and gesture world of the piece

The sound world of this piece is often situated at the threshold between silence and audibility. Conceive of this threshold region as vast and nearly limitless, a rich gradation of volumes that approach but never cross into silence. In moments of extremely low volume, the audience should be left wondering whether the sound has completely died away, is continuing to fade, or is merely maintaining a stealthy but persistent presence. Rather than merely controlling the sound to make it softer or slightly louder, try to make the sounds you produce ask questions : where does this phrase, sound or moment end, and the next begin?

Gesturally, this piece often relies on extremely slow movements of the bow and/or left-hand fingers. These slow-motion bowings and/or glissandi are sometimes combined with extremely low volumes, but they are also combined with gradual increases in bow pressure and volume. In both cases, the audience should be left visually in doubt as to whether your hands are still moving or whether they have reached a moment of repose.

Rhythmic Notation

The entire piece is notated proportionally. Durations should be interpreted spatially: the closer together two events appear, the faster they should be played in succession. While exact timings are always left open to the performer, *each stave should have a duration of at least 10 seconds*. This 10 second limit is a rule of thumb, not a rigid guideline. The piece should not be performed for audiences using a stop watch.

Occasionally, rhythms are notated more precisely using traditional beaming. These rhythms should have the character of fast human speech - like someone nervous murmuring to themselves, or a ghost calling out from somewhere in an overcast sky.

Left and Right Hand De-coupling

Right hand bowing and left hand fingering indications are de-coupled from each other. *Both hands are notated on a single staff that represents the continuous length of the instrument, from the nut to the fine tuners on the other side of the bridge*. This space is further divided with lines representing the top of the body, the end of the fingerboard and the bridge. *The right and left hand lines always show where to place the bow and left hand fingers on the string:*

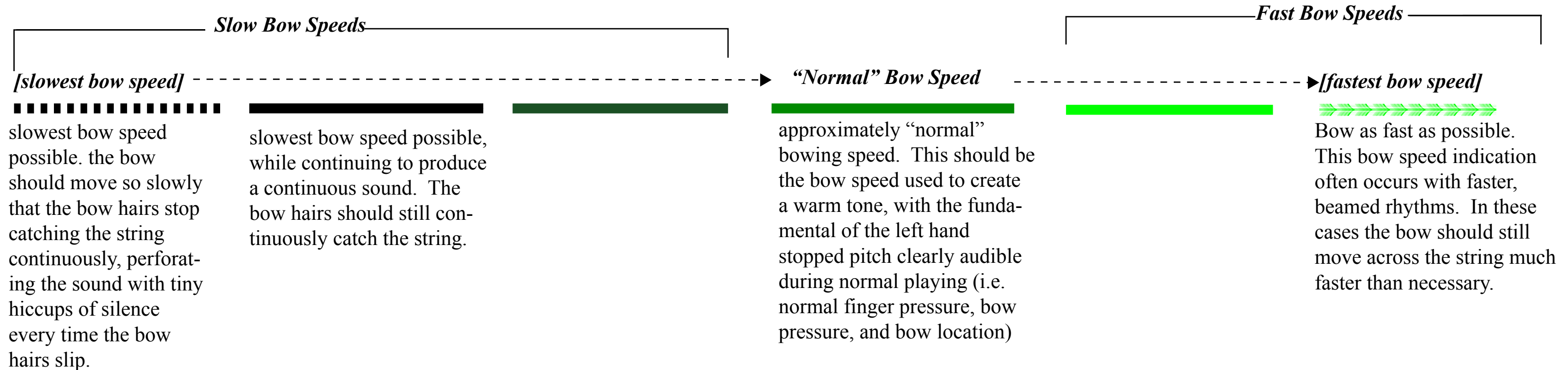
Bowing

Bow Changes

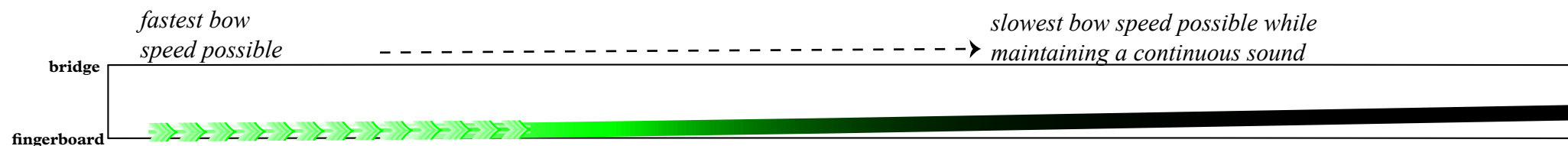
All bow changes are indicated using the standard symbols for up and down bowing. In sections where beams are not used, these symbols appear directly above the line that indicates the location of the bow; the rhythm of bow changes is represented spatially, with exact timings left open to the performer.

Bow Speed

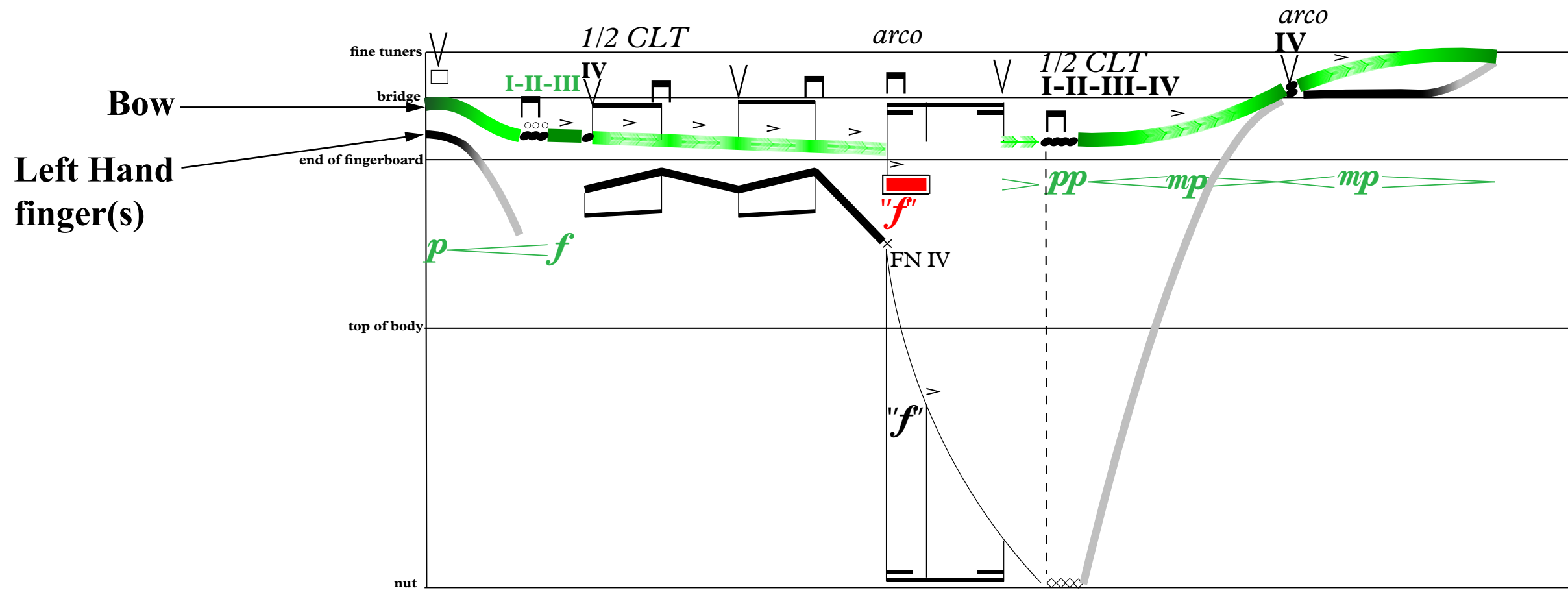
Bow speed is notated using changes in the color and texture of the bow line:



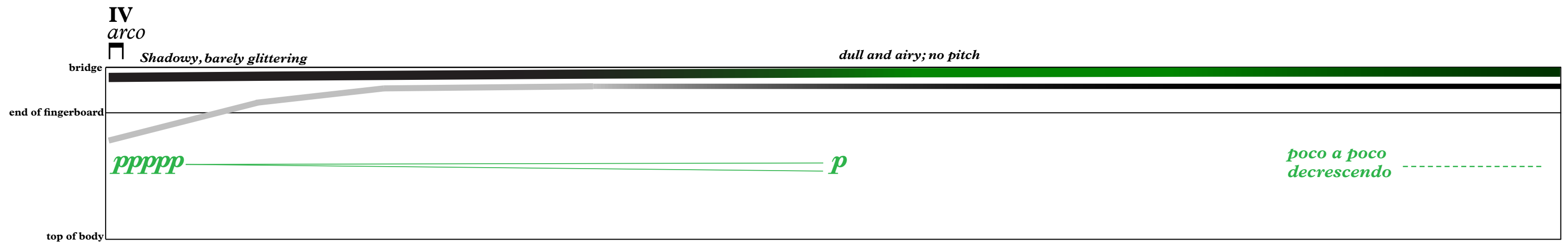
Gradual changes between different bow speeds are shown with different color gradients:



Slowing down the bow from as fast as possible to nearly as slow as possible.



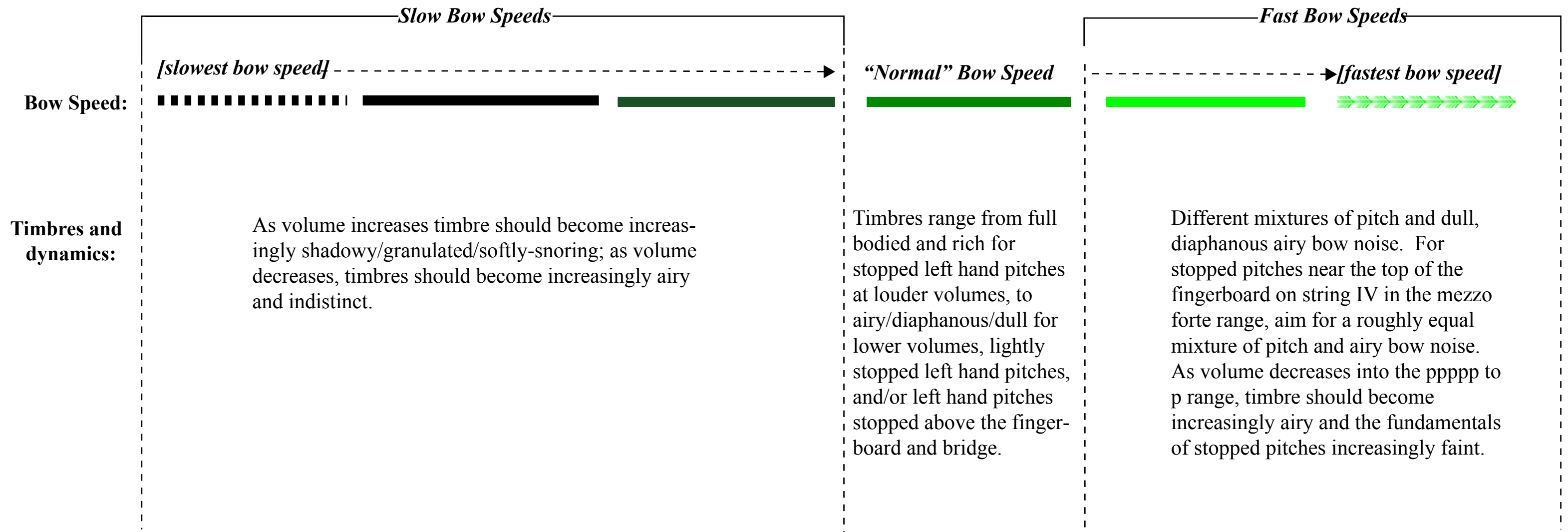
When only a specific area of the instrument is being used, only this area is shown and the rest of the staff disappears:



Bow Pressure, Dynamics and Timbre

Dynamics are controlled using bow pressure, and should be approached independently from bow speed. Because much of the piece relies on very slow bow speeds, a wide range of bow pressures will be necessary. In general, as bow speed decreases, a progressively greater range of bow pressures are needed to achieve dynamic control and variety; pressure levels should range from extremely light to relatively heavy [over pressure sounds are notated separately]. At normal to very fast bow speeds, only light bow pressure should be used.

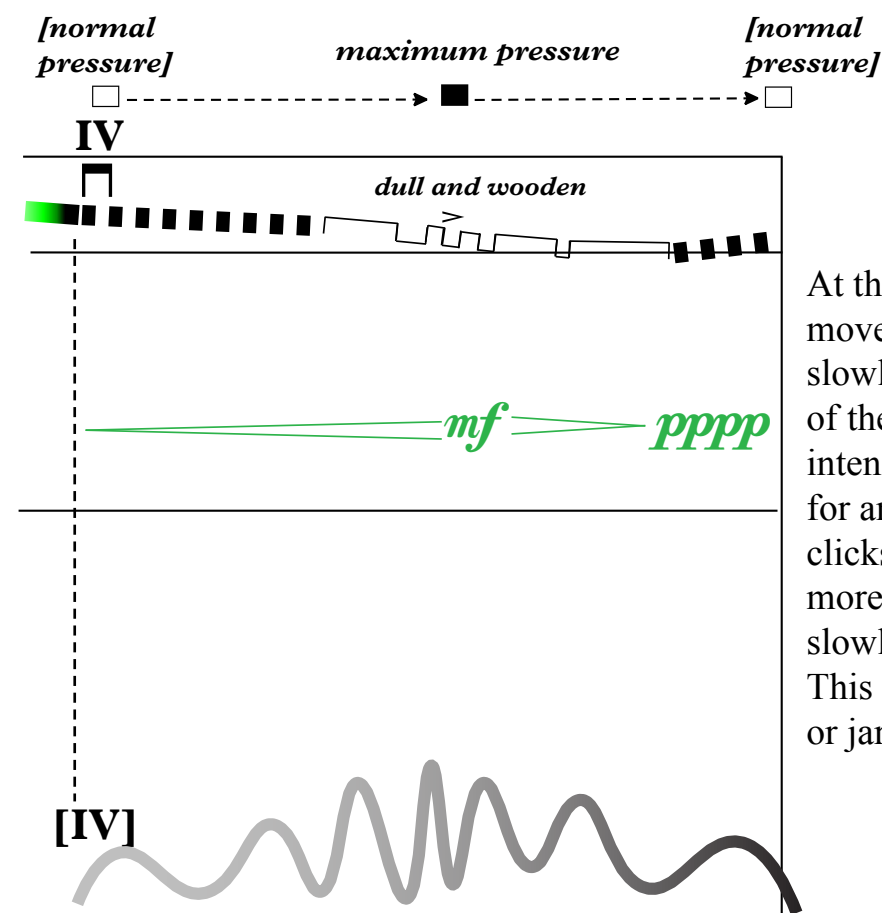
Timbral descriptions have been added to the score to help unlock the notation at important or potentially ambiguous moments. While timbre cannot be reduced to the speed and pressure of the bow alone, the bow should be used to help produce timbres that range from shadowy/granulated/dimly-glittering/softly-snoring to dull/diaphanous/airy regardless of bowing location, left-hand register and left-hand finger pressure. ***The timbre should never be metallic, grating, and/or harshly distorted.*** Due to the very quiet character of the piece, a wider range of timbres are possible as bow speed decreases. At very fast bow speeds, the timbre should become increasingly airy/diaphanous with the fundamental of stopped pitches becoming increasingly obscured by soft, airy bow noise.



Bow over-pressure sounds

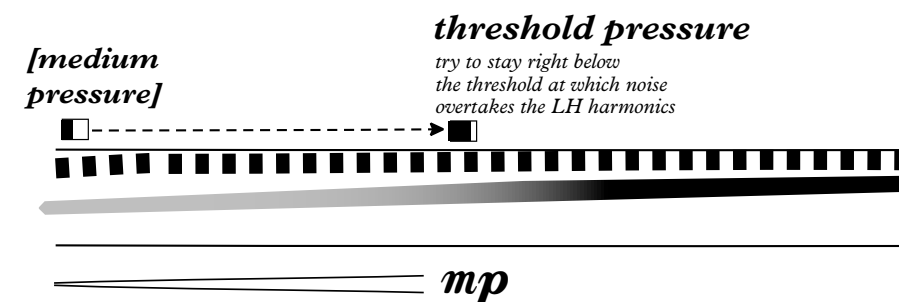
Bow pressure is occasionally used to produce specific over-pressure sounds not included in the descriptions above. Pressure is notated using small shaded boxes that appear above the staff. Two different over-pressure techniques are used:

1) Dull wooden, clicking noises



At the serrated line, begin to move the bow vertically and very slowly. The rigid, wooden quality of the sound should increase in intensity with bow pressure. Aim for an irregular burst of wooden clicks, that emerges out of the more airy sounds of the bow slowly rubbing against the string. This sound should never be loud or jarring.

2) "Threshold" pressure gestures



Moving the bow as slowly as possible, increase the pressure extremely gradually, until bow over-pressure noise nearly overwhelms pitched noise. As bow pressure increases, the rate at which the bow catches the string will decrease, introducing more and more gaps in the sound. This gesture should communicate as very tense, constricted and painfully stretched/expanded without being abrasive or startling: try to make the search for the threshold between noise and pitch palpable in the sound, always listening and adjusting your movements according to your sense of where you are in relation to this limit zone.

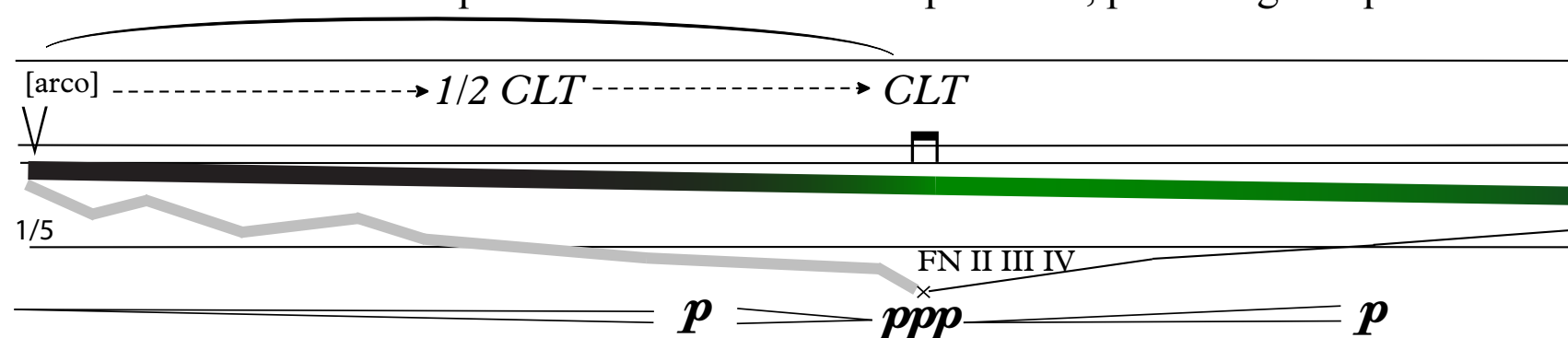
This bow technique is almost always played near the bridge and combined with long harmonic glissandi in the left hand. Little fragments of the glissandi should burst out at irregular intervals when the bow catches the string, becoming increasingly strangled by metallic bow distortion. It's very important that the dynamic level remain relatively soft. Aim for a "strangled" sound, rather than loud, harsh distortion.

Col legno tratto and 1/2 col legno tratto

Col legno tratto [CLT] - bow with the wood of the bow

1/2 col legno tratto [1/2 col legno tratto] - bow with a combination wood and hair.

Gradual shifts between arco, 1/2 CLT and CLT are notated with dotted lines and slurs. Slowly and deliberately twist the bow while maintaining a constant bow pressure. Listen for the sound each successive unique ratio of wood and hair produces, providing adequate time for each mixture to subtly influence the sound:



Bowing the cello body

The cello body is sometimes bowed on the rim of the c-bout next to the IV string. In these cases an extra bow line appears above the staff. Sometimes the body is bowed alone, and sometimes in combination with the IV string:

1) *The cello body is initially bowed together with the IV string. After bowing the IV string, drop the lower part of the bow down to the rim of the c-bout while continuing to bow the string with the upper part of the bow; try to cross fade the sound of bowed string and bowed body.*

2) *Quickly lift the upper part of the bow away from the string. Continue bowing the body with the lower part of the bow.*

3) *Lower the upper part of the bow back on to the body. Continue bowing both the body and string IV.*

bow the rib of the c-bout next to string IV

Steps 1 - 3 need to be accomplished in a single bow.

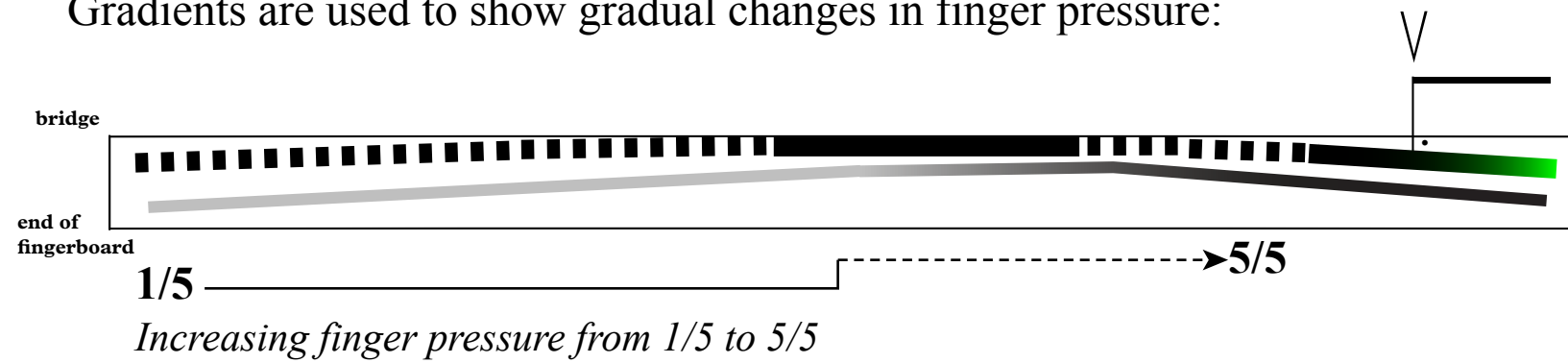
The Left Hand

Finger Pressure

Five distinct finger pressures are used. They are notated using shades of black and gray; fractions are also used for clarification:

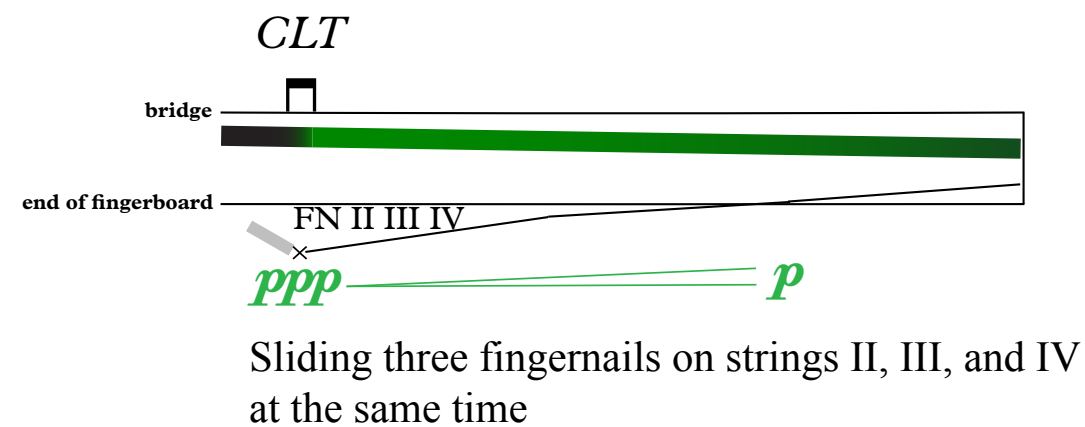
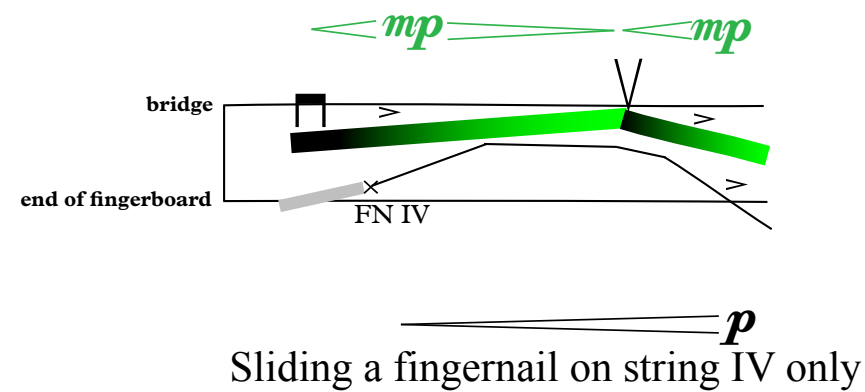
$5/5$	$4/5$	$3/5$	$2/5$	$1/5$
■	■	■	■	■
ordinary finger pressure	stopped string pitch with low overtone content.	mixture of stopped pitch and harmonic pitch, depending on location on the string. harmonic is slightly louder relative to the stopped pitch, and may be slightly sharp	harmonic finger pressure	barely any finger pressure; mixture of harmonic, open string and un-pitched noise

Gradients are used to show gradual changes in finger pressure:



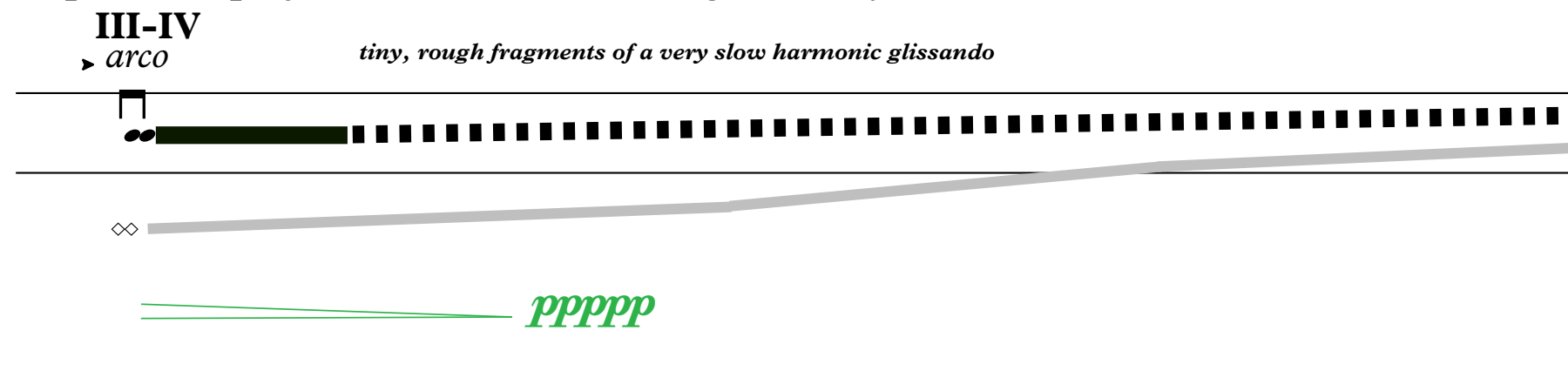
Fingernails

The left hand fingernails are also used to produce sound. “x” noteheads are used only for fingernail playing and are followed by traditional narrow black lines which show how fast and where to slide the fingernail [FN] along the indicated string. If more than one string is indicated, slide a fingernail down each string at the same time using the same trajectory:



Double-stops

The only double-stops used in this piece are perfect 5ths. In the IV string clef, they are notated with a double notehead on the lower IV string finger location:



Touch strings III and IV with 1/5 finger pressure at the same parallel location (forming a perfect 5th) while bowing both strings. Glissando upwards until the LH is about half way between the end of the fingerboard and the bridge, and the RH is relatively close to the bridge.

Double-stops on strings I-II or II-III are also notated using a double notehead to indicate the location of the stopped pitch of the lower string (III or II).

Scordatura

Ideally, strings I, II and III should be detuned downwards until they are right on the verge of becoming so slack they no longer produce pitch when bowed. They should still be playable but only barely. Strings IV uses standard tuning.

The exact tuning used for strings I, II and III is up to the performer. Lower the strings as close to this ideal tuning as feels safe and comfortable with your instrument.

The score is transposed.

ifs of color, devout conditions

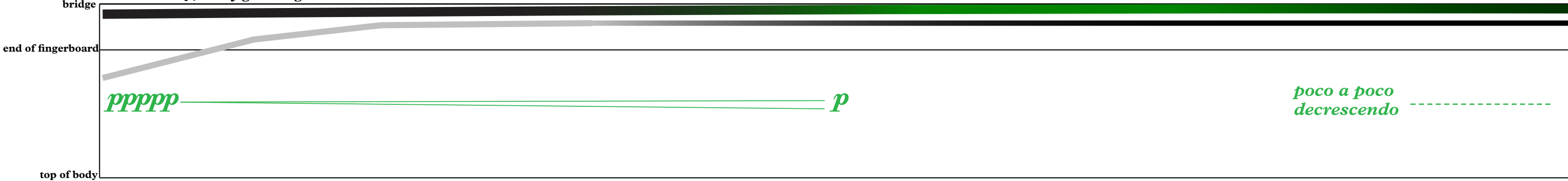
IV

arco



Shadowy, barely glittering

dull and airy; no pitch



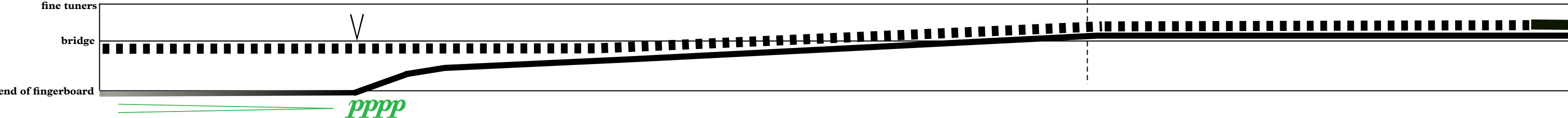
[:10]

Long and weary movements. Search for the threshold seperating silence and the grain of bow hair and finger on string and bridge

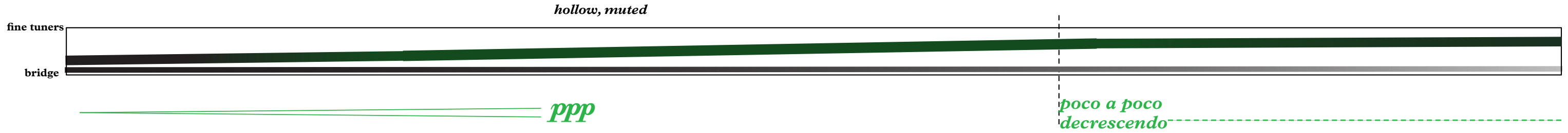


[:20]

slowly slide bow and finger across the bridge beyond the bridge



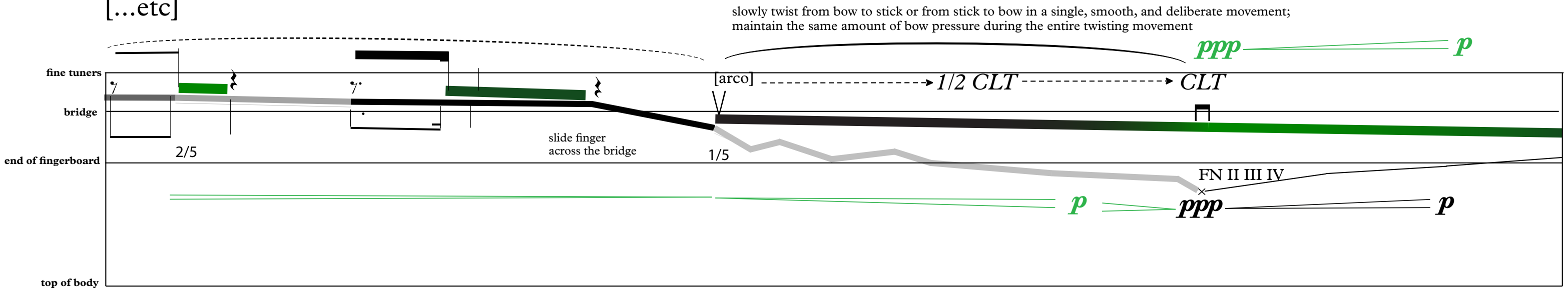
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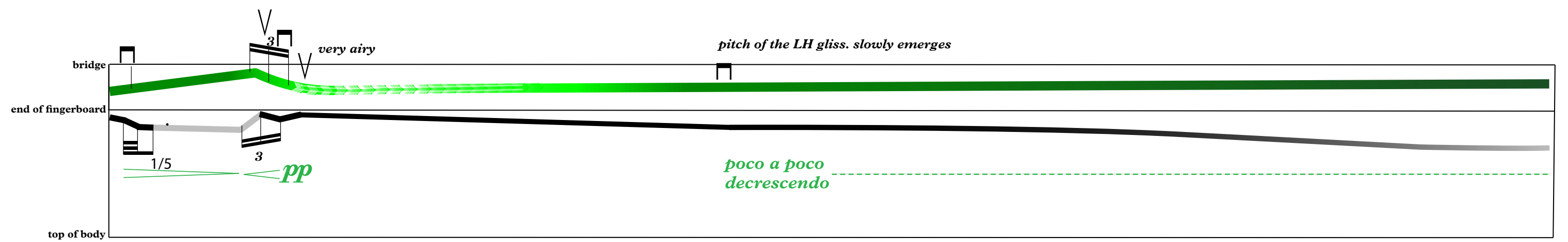
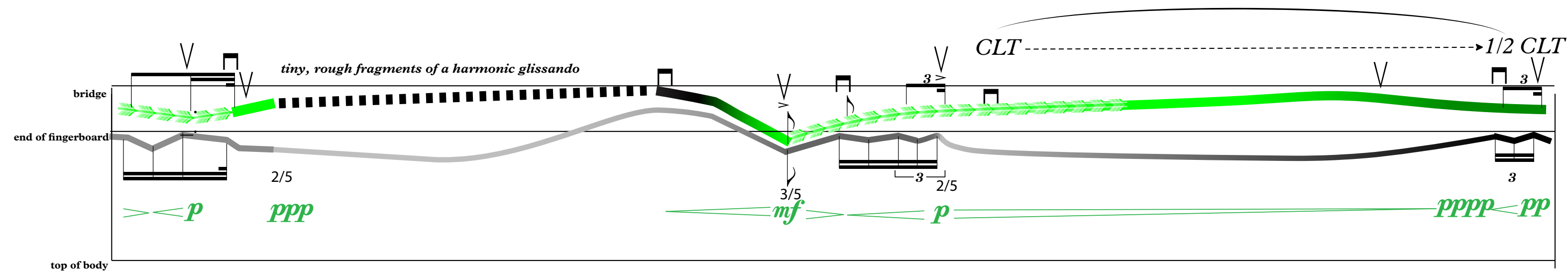
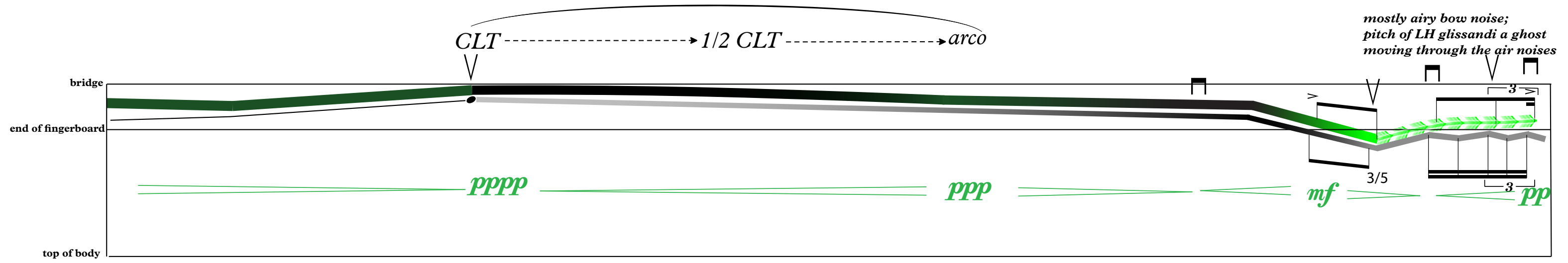


[:40]



[...etc]



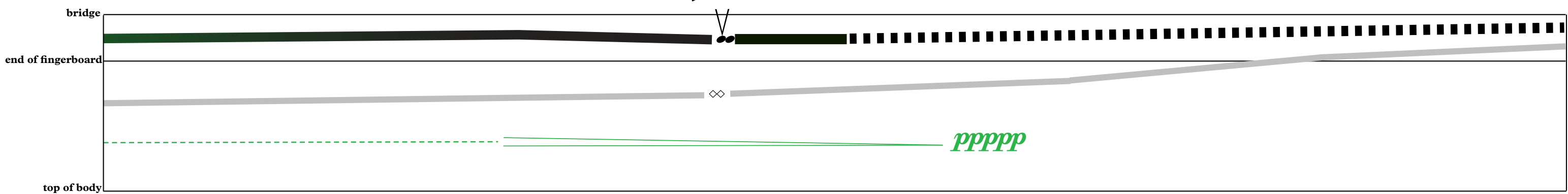


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*pitch of LH gliss. swallowed
by granulated air noise of the bow*

III-IV
arco

tiny, rough fragments of a very slow harmonic glissando



bridge

end of fingerboard

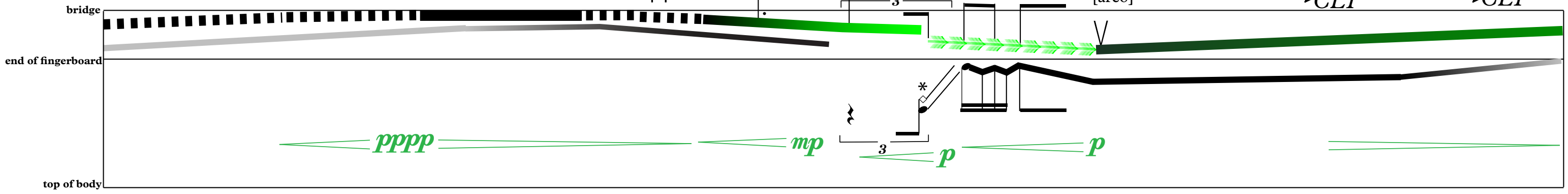
top of body

ppppp

IV

arco

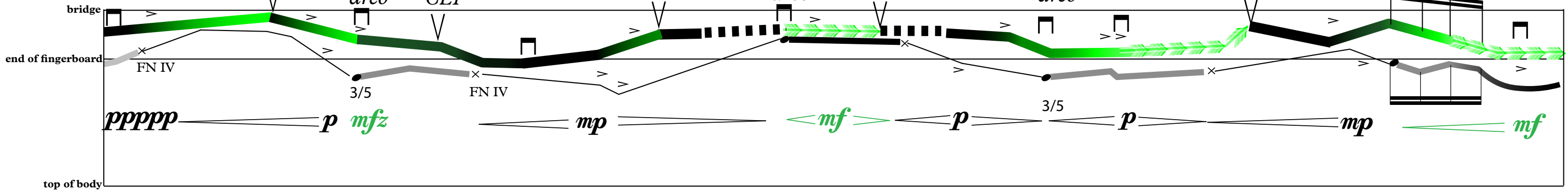
$\frac{1}{2}$ *CLT* *CLT*

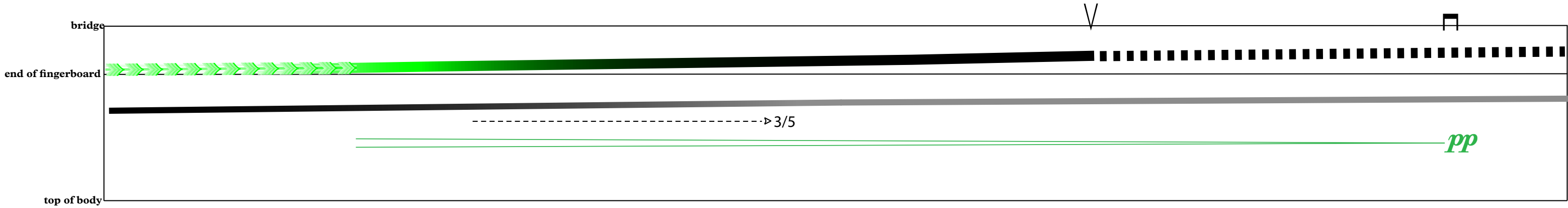


*touched-fourth artificial harmonic

*sharp gusts of air interrupted
by fragments of voice like,
murmuring glissandi*

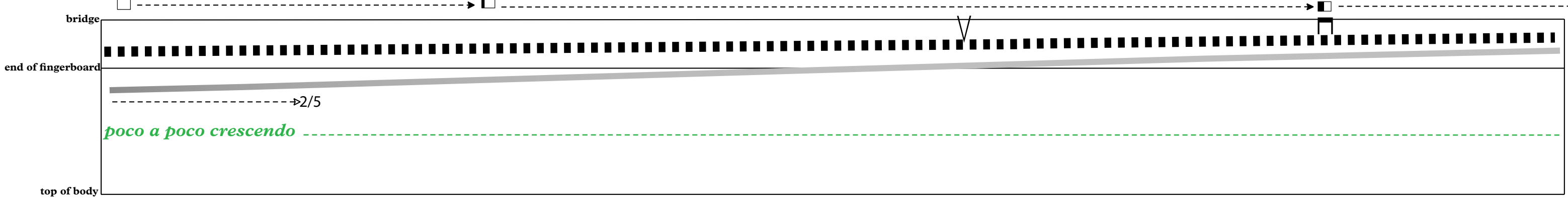
mp *mp* *ppppp* *p* *mp* *mp* *arco* *CLT* *arco* *CLT* *arco* *CLT* *mp* *arco*





poco a poco increase bow pressure
LH harmonics should always be perceptible: aim for a soft, gritty, distorted harmonic sound

ord. pressure



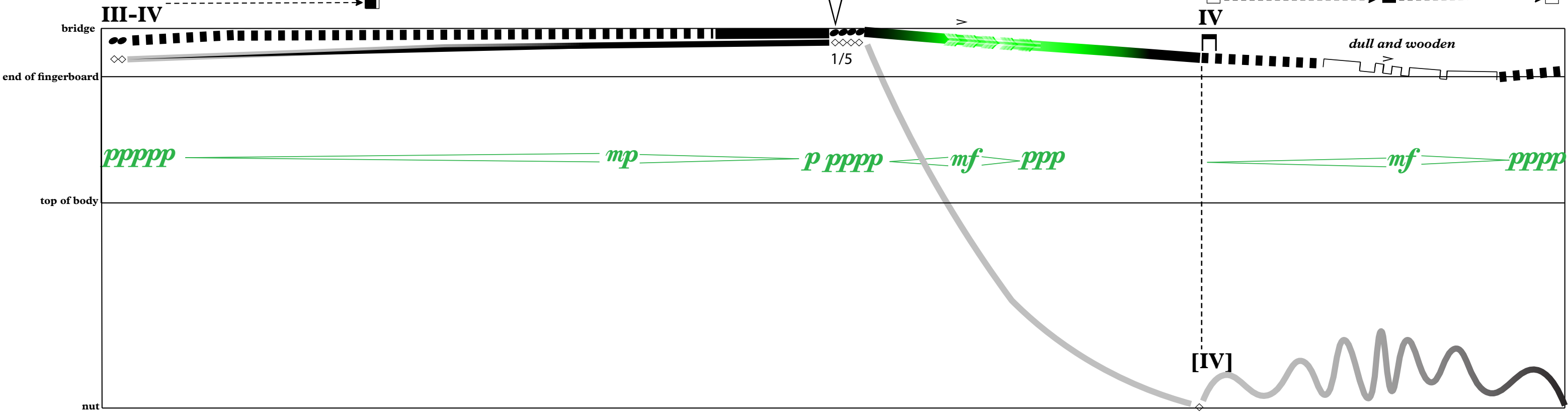
threshold pressure

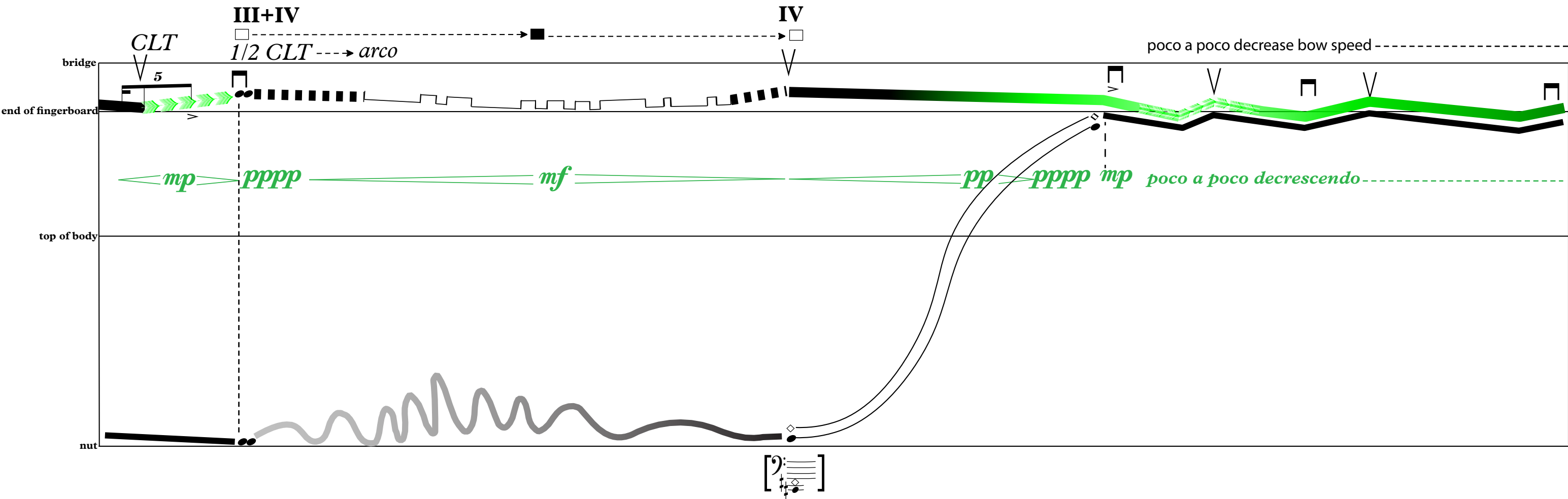
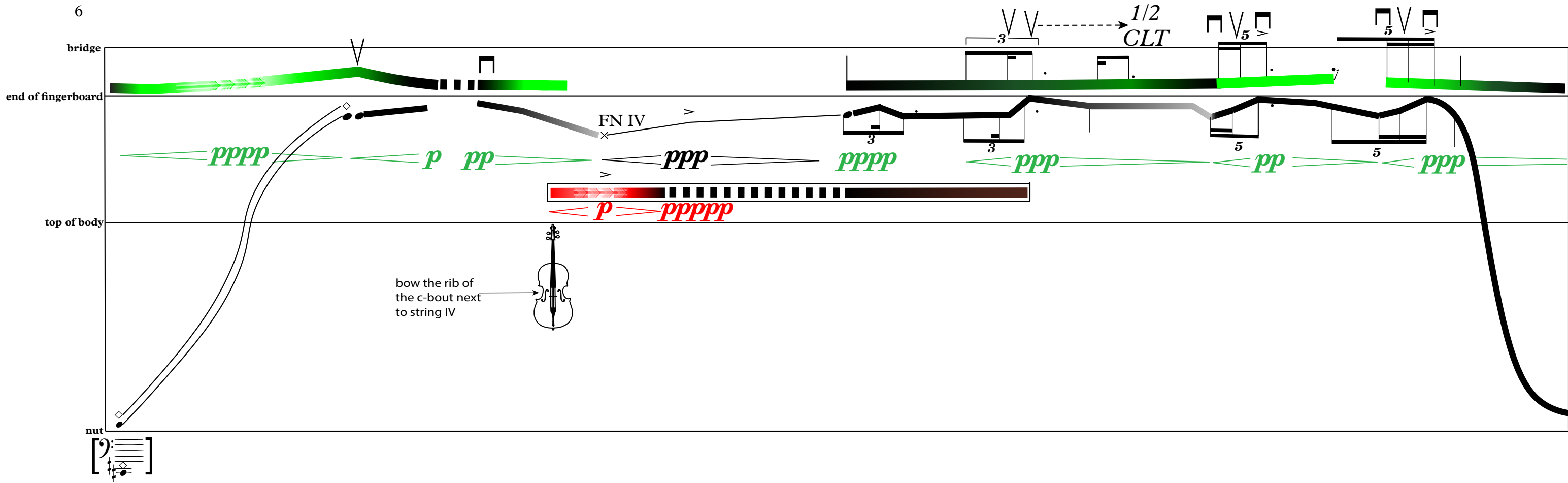
try to stay right below the threshold at which noise overtakes the LH harmonics

ord. pressure

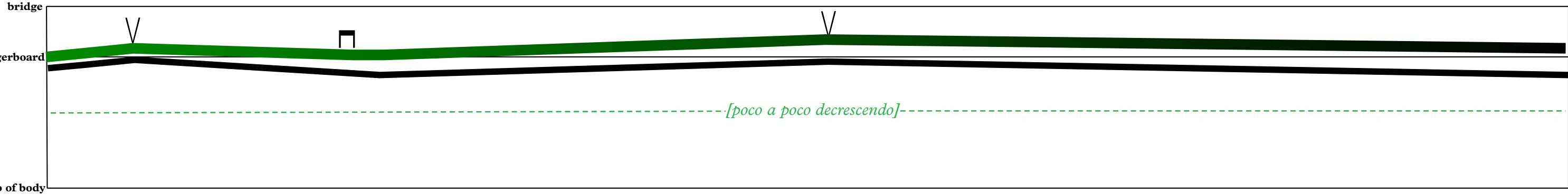
I-II-III-IV

maximum pressure



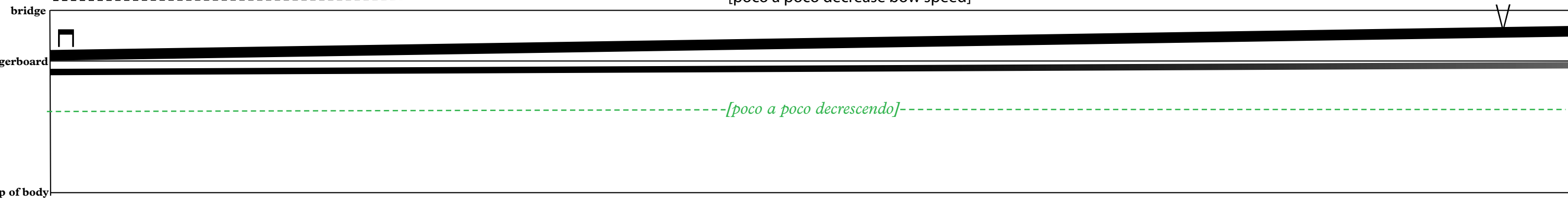


[poco a poco decrease bow speed]



poco a poco increase bow pressure

[poco a poco decrease bow speed]

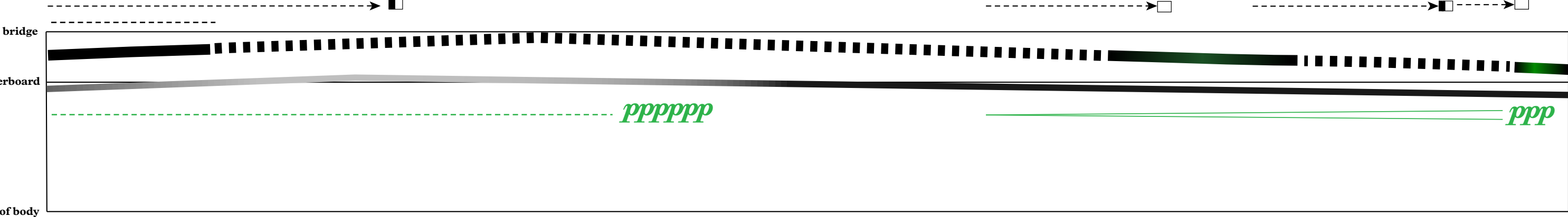


strangled; barely glittering

LH glissando emerges in little gasps

pppppp

ppp



8

