How to write Cinematic Music in 5 Easy Steps
(for Film or TV Drama)

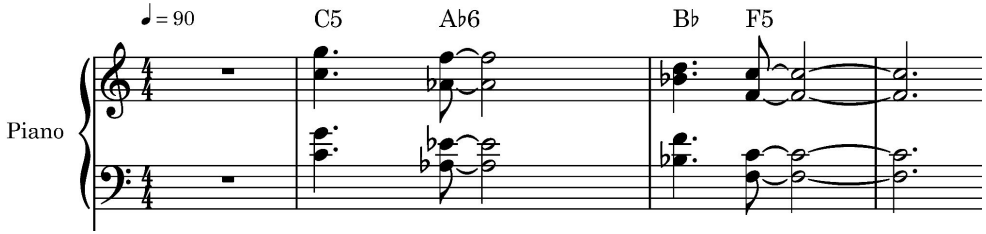
In this short guide, I'll show you a step by step process which you can use to write cinematic music that would fit as underscore in a film or TV drama. This will work well for music inspired by film composers such as Thomas Newman and Harry Gregson-Williams.

Step 1 - Choose a Chord Progression

Start by choosing 4 chords which can be played on a piano.

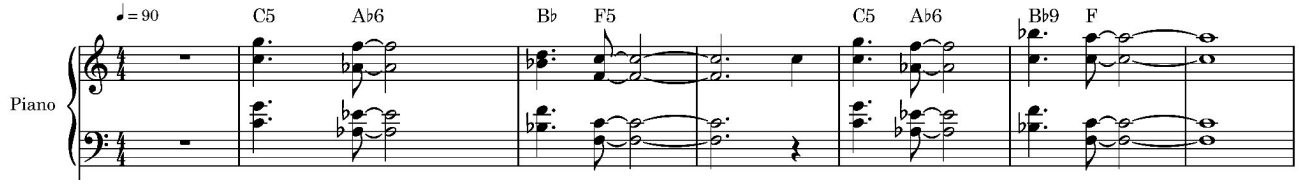
Aim to play these chords in open voicings (notes are spaced widely, such as the example below).

Having open 5th chords (no middle note) can help give the music a contemporary feel. Adding additional notes such as 9ths and 6ths can also help.

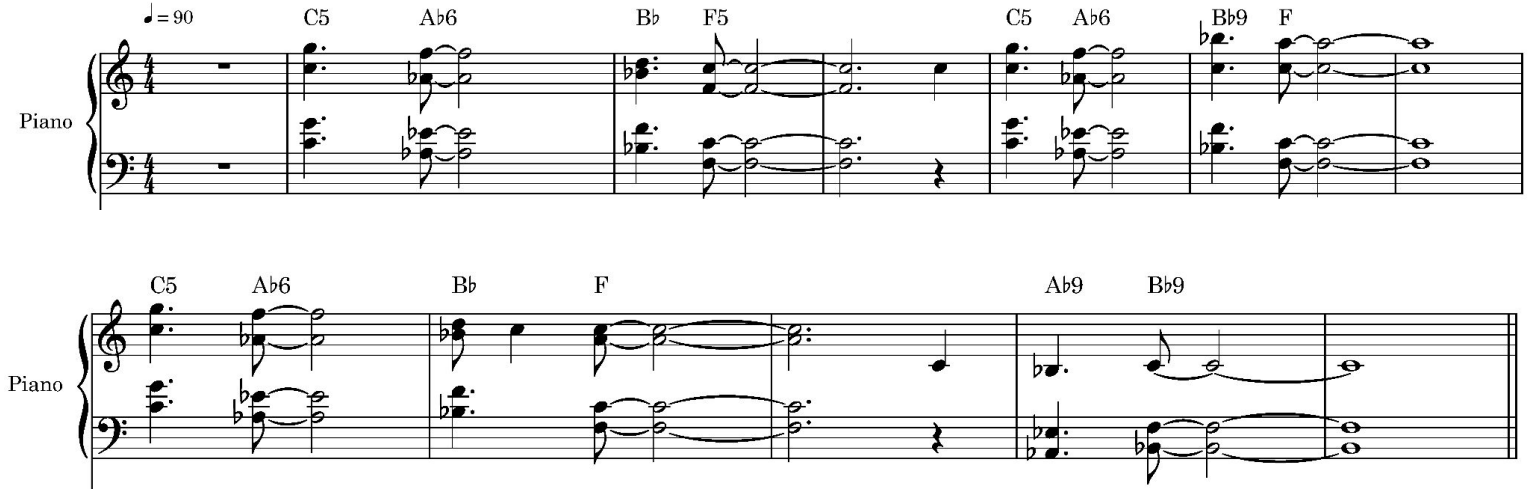


Tip - Have a go at **NOT** limiting yourself to a particular key signature - treat every major/minor chord on the piano as a potential candidate, IF it **sounds good**.

Once you have the four chords, copy and paste these to add another four chords. Make subtle changes though, such as adding additional notes, or changing one or two of the chords:



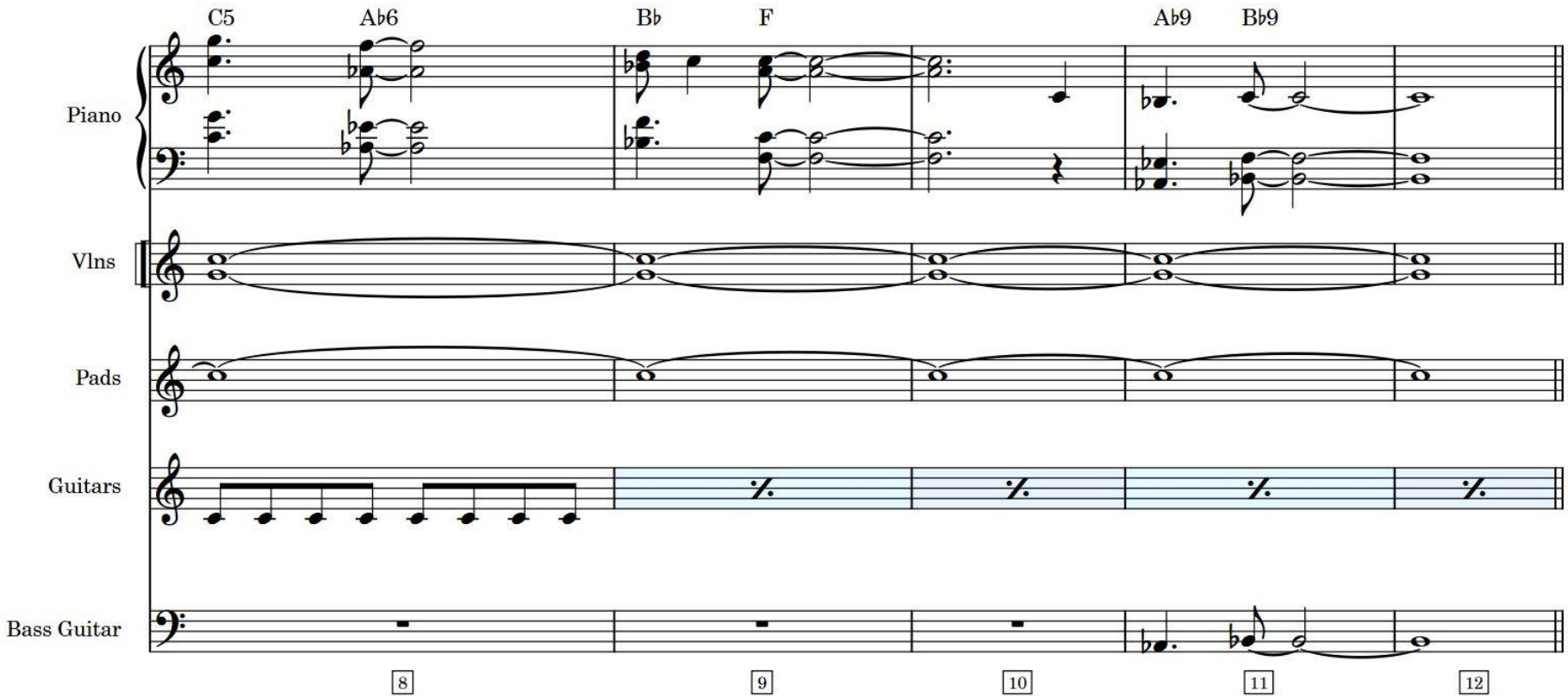
Optional - copy and paste your original four chords two more times, to form a longer section of music:



Step 2 - Add a simple accompaniment to your piano chords

Instruments such as the examples below can be great for this style of music:

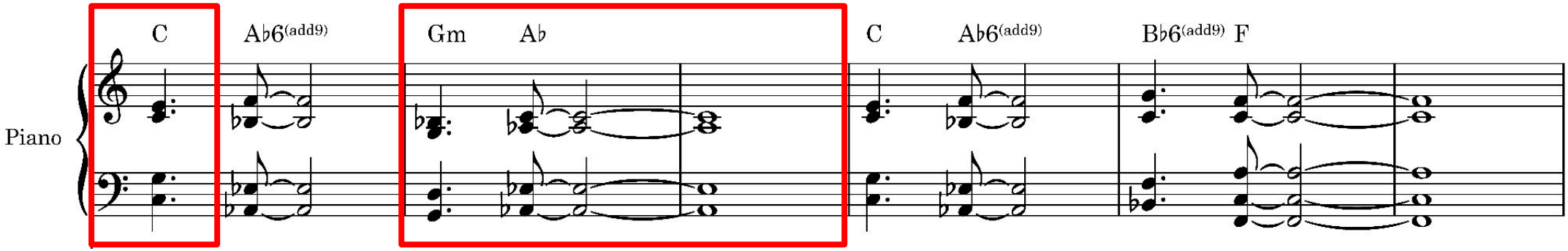
Pads - long sustained synth sounds
Strings - long sustained violins (outlining the piano chords)
Mandolin/Acoustic Guitar
Dulcimer
Reverse Piano
Bass Guitar



Step 3 - Develop the initial idea

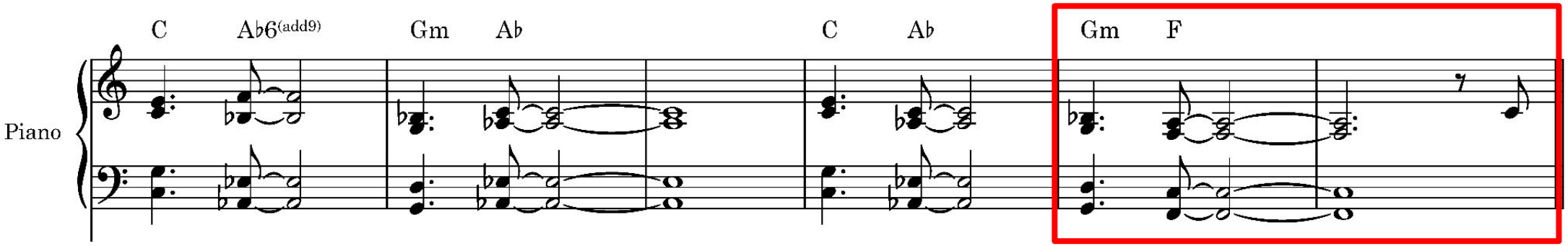
To develop and extend your initial idea into a longer piece, you could try developing both the harmonic content (chords) as well as changing the instrumentation/orchestration.

Developing Harmonic Content



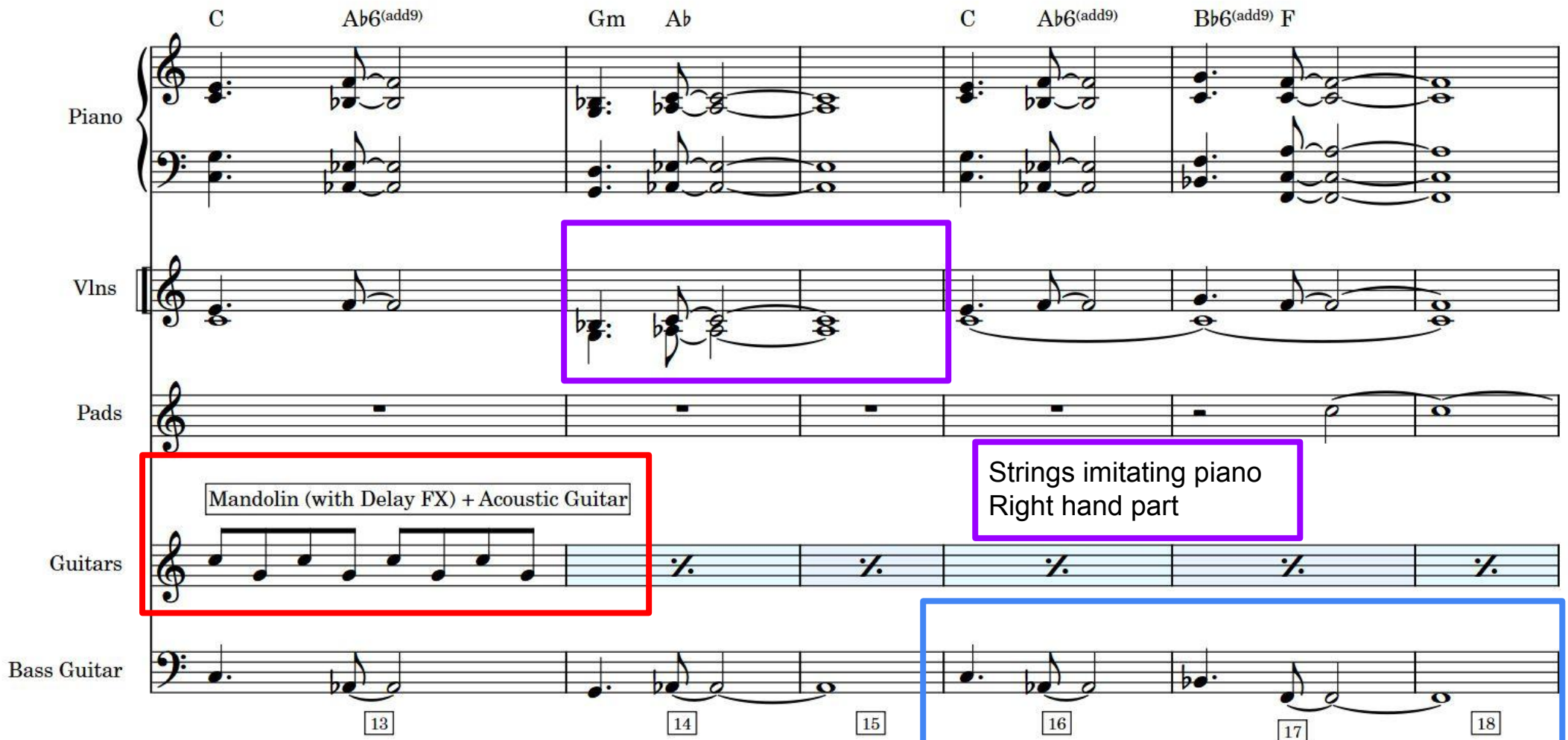
Before - C5 Now - C major

Before - Bb & F5 Now - Gm & Ab



Before - Ab9 & Bb9 Now - Gm & F

Developing using Instrumentation changes



Strings imitating piano
Right hand part

Giving Mandolin a more prominent part

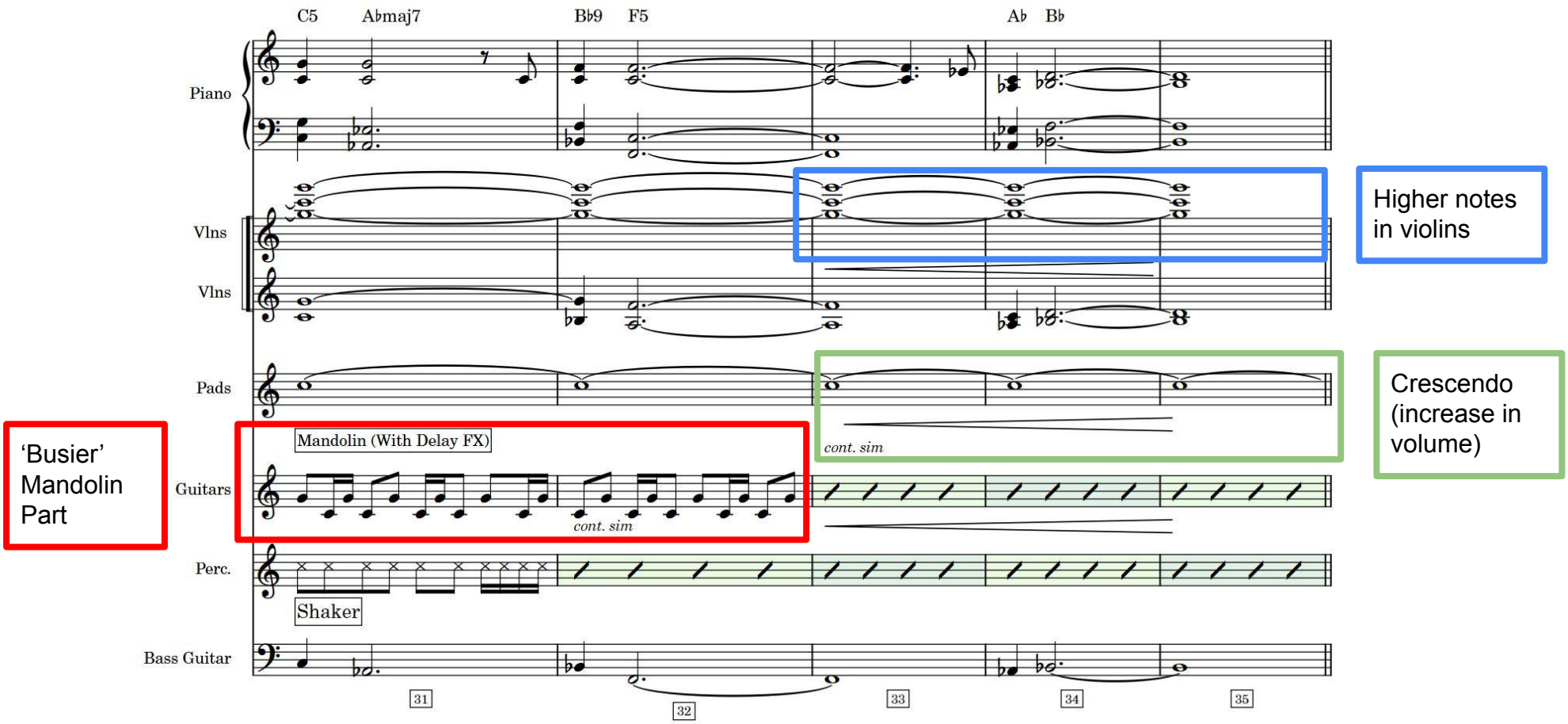
Introducing Bass Guitar

Step 4 - Growing the intensity

Aim for your music to ‘travel on a journey’ as it progresses. This can be achieved by growing the intensity of the music.

An easy way of achieving this is to use instrumentation to increase the thickness of your music’s texture.

Gradually introduce more instruments and increase the range and volume, to help add more intensity:

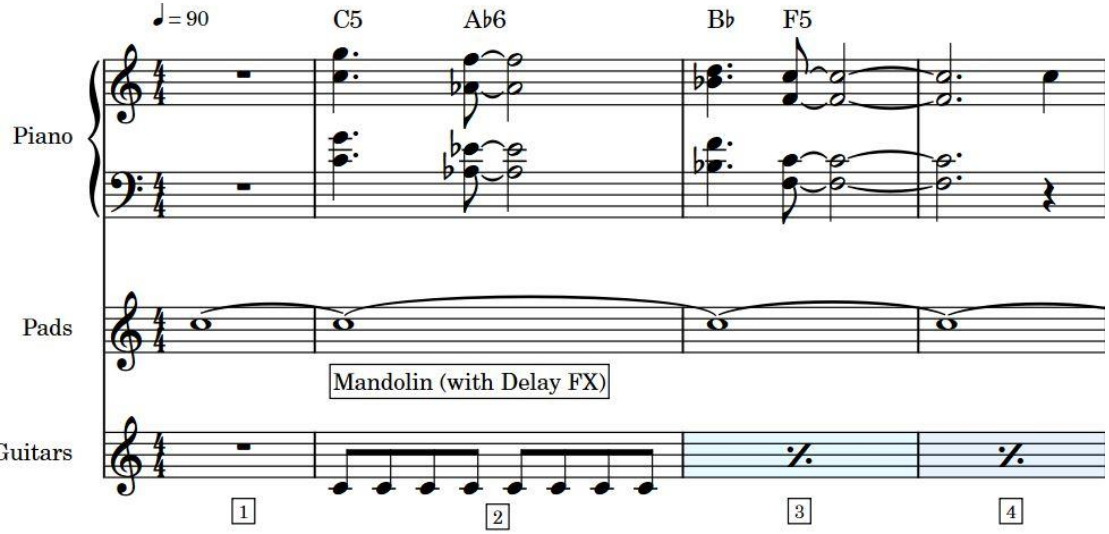


Step 5 - End as you began

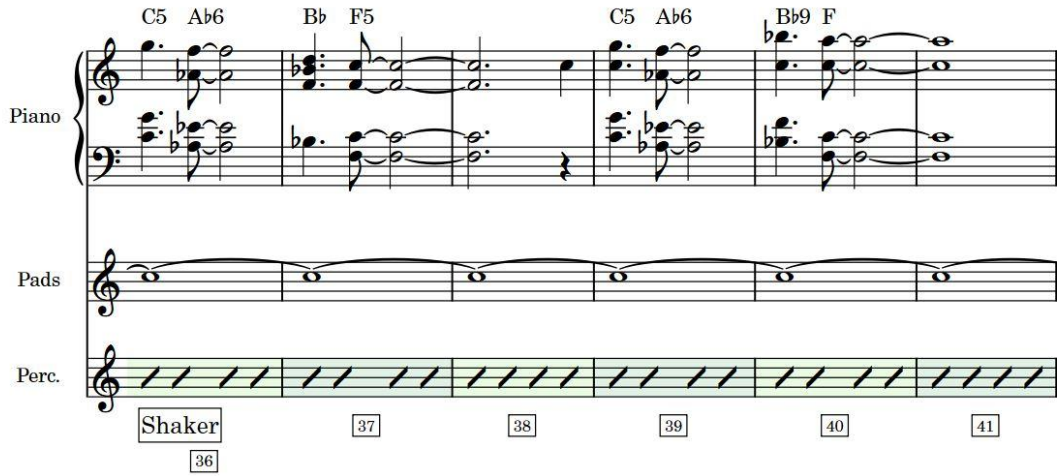
Ending your piece in the same manner that it began, can be an effective structure. After the musical climax, have a go at returning to the open bars, to give a calmer ending.

I've carried over elements such as the Shaker pattern and pad from the previous section, to provide an element of cohesiveness from the previous bars.

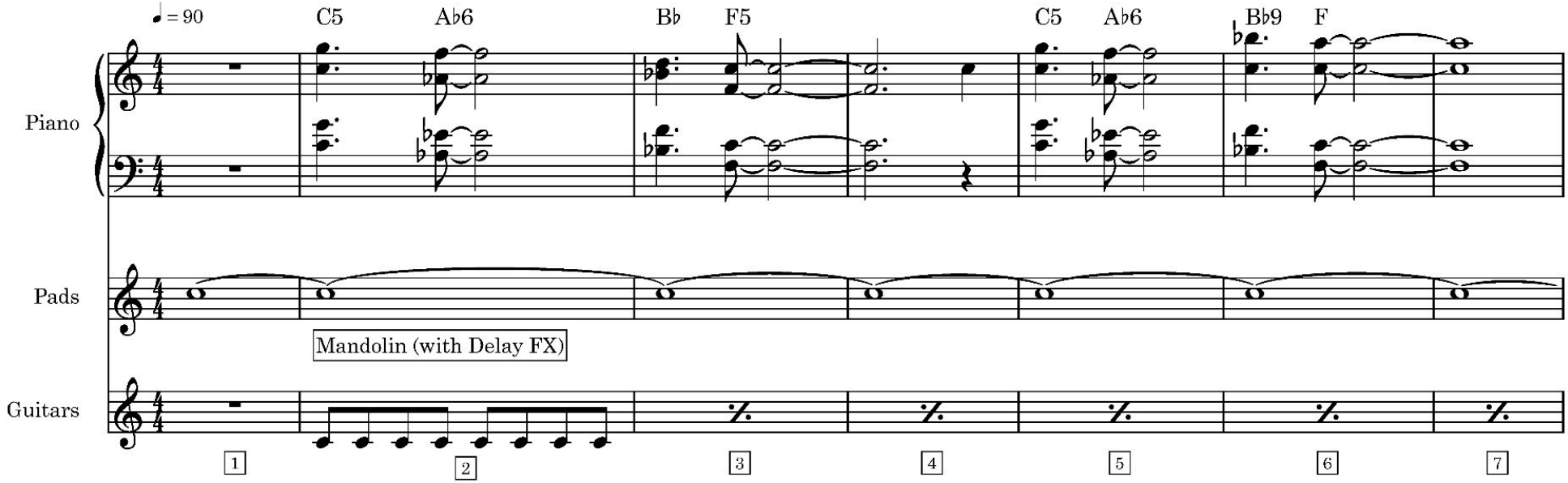
Opening



Ending

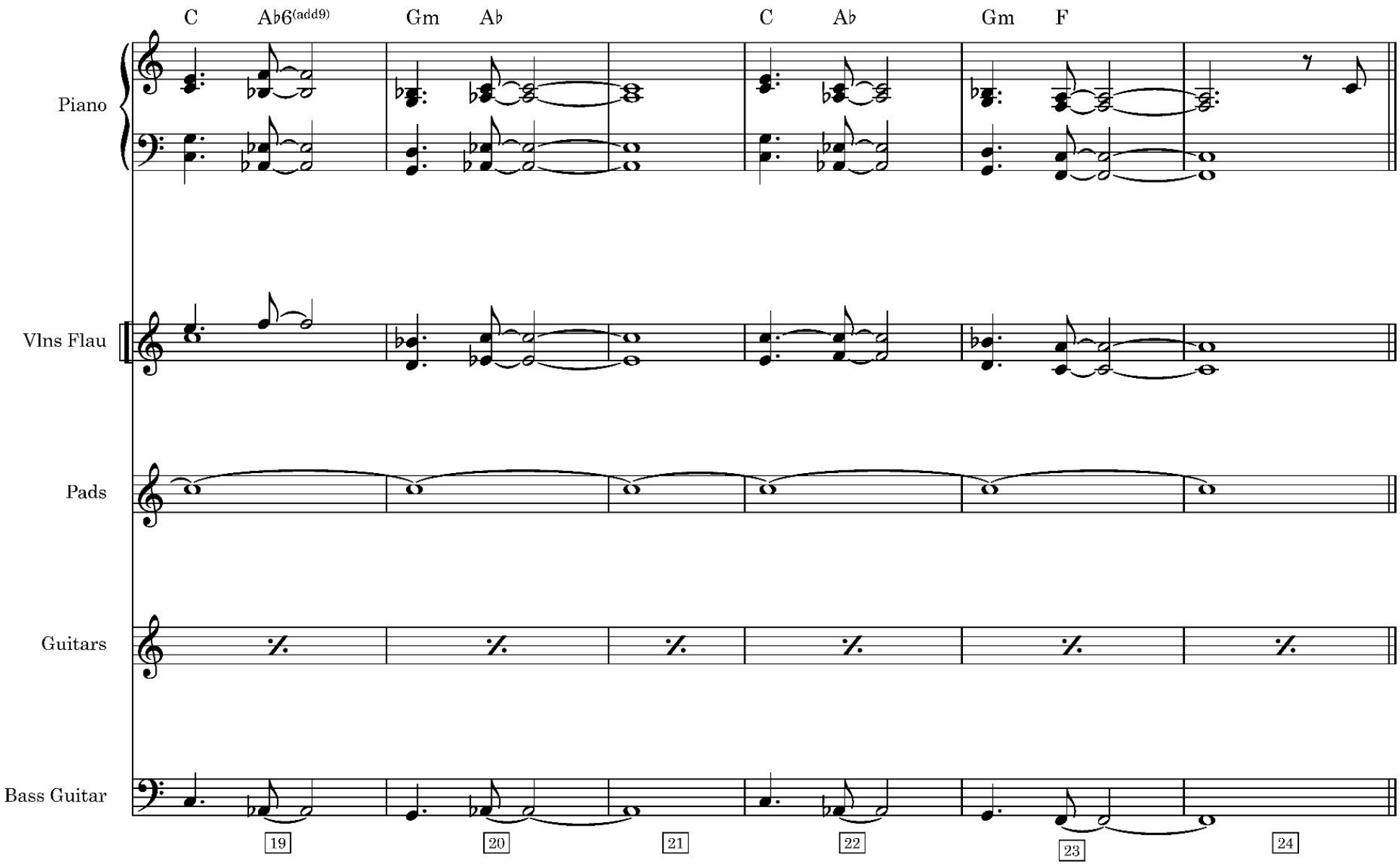


Full Score


♩ = 90
C5
A♭6
B♭
F5
C5
A♭6
B♭9
F
Piano
Pads
Mandolin (with Delay FX)
Guitars
1
2
3
4
5
6
7

C5
Ab6
Bb
F
Ab9
Bb9
Piano
Vlns Flau
Pads
Guitars
Bass Guitar
8
9
10
11
12

C
Ab6(add9)
Gm
Ab
C
Ab6(add9)
Bb6(add9)
F
Piano
Vlns Flau
Pads
Mandolin (with Delay FX) + Acoustic Guitar
Guitars
Bass Guitar
13
14
15
16
17
18


C
Ab6(add9)
Gm
Ab
C
Ab
Gm
F
Piano
Vlns Flau
Pads
Guitars
Bass Guitar
19
20
21
22
23
24

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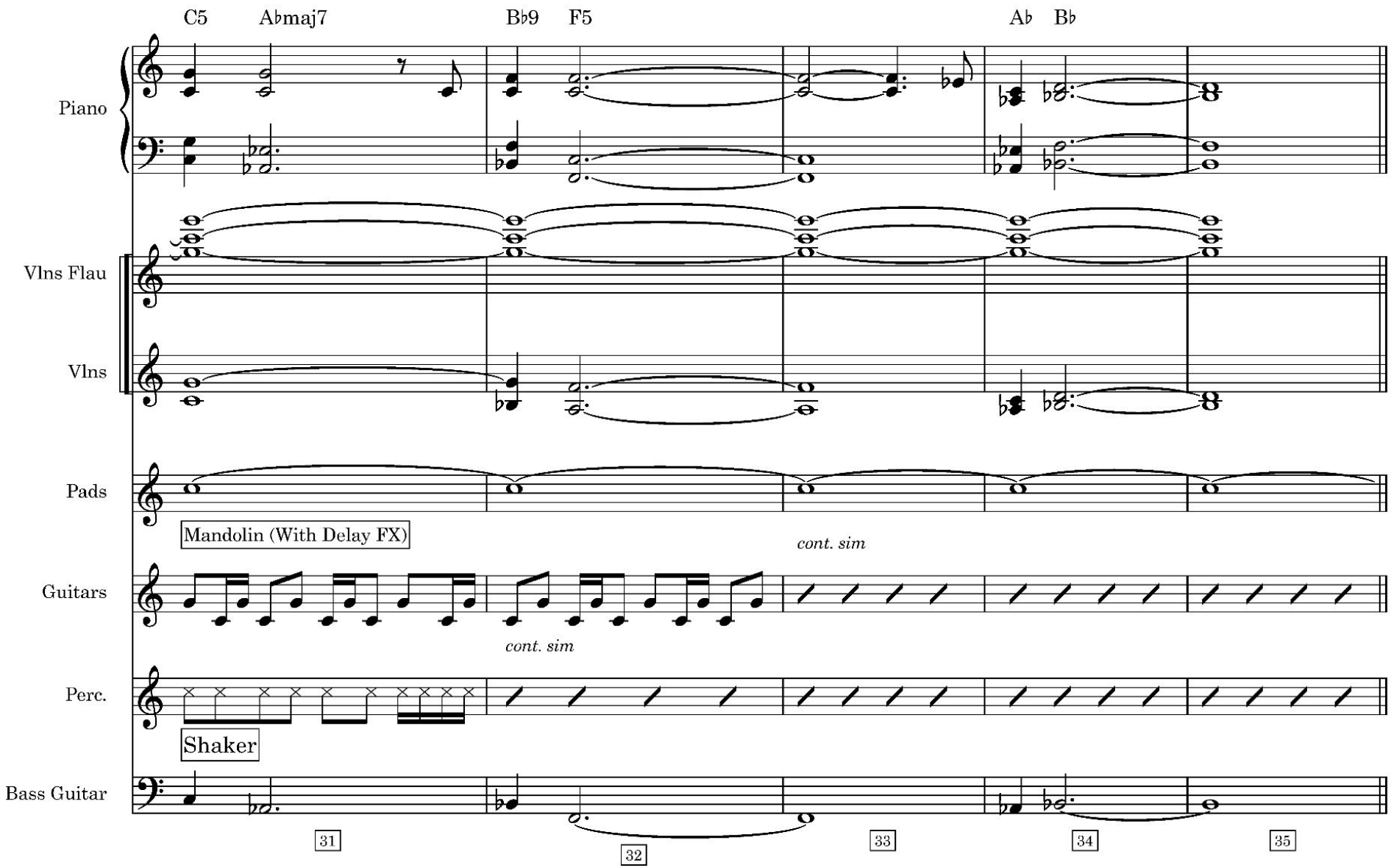
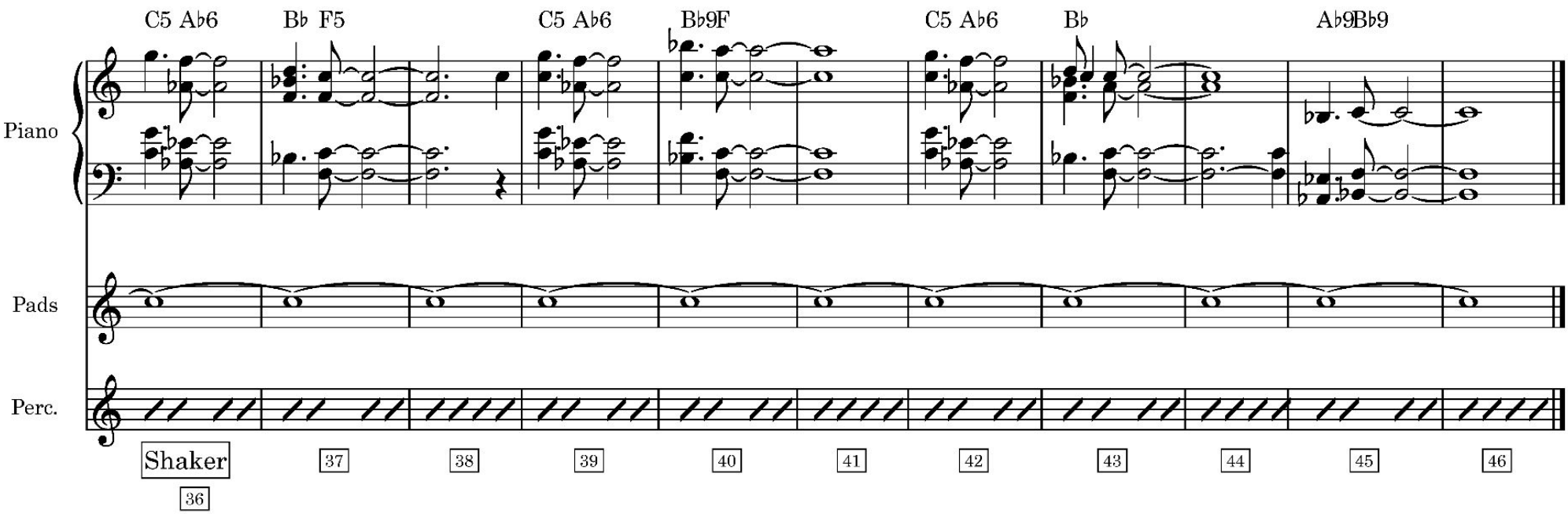

C5
Abmaj7
Bb9
F5
Ab
Bb
Piano
Vlns Flau
Vlns
Pads
Mandolin (With Delay FX)
cont. sim
Guitars
cont. sim
Perc.
Shaker
Bass Guitar
31
32
33
34
35


C5 A♭6
B♭ F5
C5 A♭6
B♭9F
C5 A♭6
B♭
A♭9B♭9
Piano
Pads
Perc.
Shaker
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46