

lathyrus

2007



by
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written for
berlin laptop orchestra

lathyrus is a structured, improvisatory, game-like piece modeled much like the choose-your-adventure books. The ensemble travels down various 'musical paths' in search of a suitable ending. Multiple endings are possible. Some may be expected, others sudden, and still others may be at times undesirable if not dangerous. The performers self-organize, interrupting the navigation of the score, until agreeing upon a path. Each musical choice is negotiated, a balance between coherence and surprise. *lathyrus* was commissioned by the Berlin Laptop Orchestra and is dedicated to them.

The following outline explains the instrumentation, possible progressions for the piece, and the notation utilized.

- I. Instrumentation
- II. Beginning the Piece: Becoming "P1"
- III. The Definition of "P2", "P3", and "P4"
- IV. Sample Progression
- V. The Interruptive Gesture
- VI. Notation Utilized

I. Instrumentation

The instrumentation is for four to eight laptop performers. When there are more than four players present, individual "parts" (or "roles") must be doubled. This means, that when a part is doubled, both performers must enter as "P1" together. Each role; i.e., "P1", "P2", "P3", and "P4", should be assigned to a different, discrete speaker.

II. Beginning the Piece: Becoming "P1"

Whoever begins the piece becomes P1, or "Player 1." Anyone may begin the piece at any time and thereby become P1. Whoever begins the piece must do so by selecting from a specific bank of samples, either "drone", "instrumental", "field recordings", or "rhythmic". Samples for each of these groups are provided, and the performers may add their own samples as well so long as they clearly and unambiguously fit with one of these four categories.

When selecting an initial set of samples to loop, the processing applied to them initially should be relatively simple and not over-distort the source. In this way, it should be clear to the rest of the ensemble as to which page of the score they should turn to. Thus, if someone becomes “P1” by playing field recordings, the rest of the ensemble then turns to the page marked “FIELD”. This paves the way for the other performers to become “P2”, “P3”, and “P4” respectively.

III. The Definition of “P2”, “P3”, and “P4”

The next performers, entering sequentially, will become “P2,” “P3,” or “P4.” When P1 enters, he or she will remain P1 for the remainder of the piece unless the “interruptive gesture” (explained later) is performed. Thus, the designations of “P1,” “P2,” “P3,” and “P4” are not pre-assigned, but assumed through the course of the piece.

Depending on the interpretive choices employed by P1 for the beginning sample, the remaining performers of that instrumental group will turn in response to one of four pages. These are “FIELD” (for field recordings), “DRONE” (for synthetic drones), “INSTRUMENTAL” (for instrumental samples), and “RHYTHMIC” (for beat samples).

The next person (or group of two when doubled) to enter becomes “P2” by playing samples in the style notated in the box notated “P2”. P2, and all subsequent players, draw from the same bank of samples as originally selected by P1. All samples are looped, so that successive layers build upon one another as performers enter and later transform the samples. P2’s selection of sample and manner of performing it (as in relative register and dynamic level employed) influences subsequent choices made by the remaining performers.

If P2 is playing relatively “high” in register, then the next person to enter, and thus become P3, will perform a selected sample and repeat the procedure described in the box that has the arrow pointing to it with the words “**if HIGH**” above it. If P2 plays relatively “low” in register, then the next performer to enter, and thus become P3, would play the “musical tile” that has the arrow “**if LOW**” pointing to it. If P3 plays the motive w/ the “**if HIGH**” arrow pointing to it and is fairly loud, then P4 performs repeatedly the musical tile that has the arrow “**if LOUD**” pointing to it.

IV. Sample Progression

As a matter of example, if someone begins playing a group of samples that are “instrumental”, everyone then turns to the page marked “INSTRUMENTAL”. The next person to enter becomes P2, by continuing to draw from the “instrumental” sample bank. P2 can perform the sample in any manner preferred, emphasizing a certain register if he wants to influence which musical path becomes selected. When the next performer enters, thereby becoming “P3”, if he determines that P2 is playing “high,” he then continues this direction by transposing samples up and/or emphasizing high frequencies. If the final performer (or pair of performers) determines that P3 is playing loud, he then follows the arrow to the “if LOUD” box, and then, drawing from the same sample bank, plays the samples loud, high, and adds distortion to the samples. As an entire ensemble, the group then follows the procedure described in the following “TUTTI” box, thereby adding distortion and introducing *crescendi*. The group then ends the piece by following the process described in the “ENDING” box. In this case, the group begins performing the *crescendi* in unison, and then cut off suddenly.

The above describes one possible scenario for a complete performance. Each performer, in other words, enters in a manner that exaggerates the previous performer’s musical choices. The samples may be transposed to any octave, but once a given sample type is selected, the performers must continue to use it until the piece has ended or an “interruptive gesture” is used.

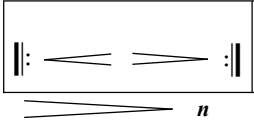
V. The Interruptive Gesture

The interruptive gesture provides any performer the means of halting the progression down a particular musical path if he chooses. An example of an interruptive gesture is provided with the sample collection (interruptive.aif). A different sample source may be used for the interruptive gesture, but the same sample must be shared amongst the group and selected prior to performance. When performed, the sample should be relatively unprocessed so that it serves as a recognizable cue for the other performers.

Any individual can interrupt another individual any time before all four begin an ending procedure. Whoever interrupts a musical pathway resumes the piece, selecting another sample from one of the four sample banks, thereby becoming the “new” P1 and restarting the piece.

VI. Notation Utilized

The specialized notation in the score and parts includes the following:



Gestures with repeat marks within a box mean to continue repeating that particular gesture. Dynamic markings included underneath the repeated box indicate a general progression that should be applied to the repeated gesture. In this case, the *crescendo* and *decrescendo* should be continuously, gradually becoming softer over all until eventually fading out (*niente*).



Emphasize high frequencies. This can be achieved by any means preferred by the performer (e.g., filters, spectral mapping, sample acceleration).



Emphasize low frequencies (similar to the process described above).



Irregular *crescendi/decrescendi*; i.e., the lengths of each *crescendo* and *decrescendo* should continuously change.



Add distortion.



Add reverb.



Super-accelerate samples; i.e., drastically increase the playback speed of the looped sample.



Time-stretch samples.

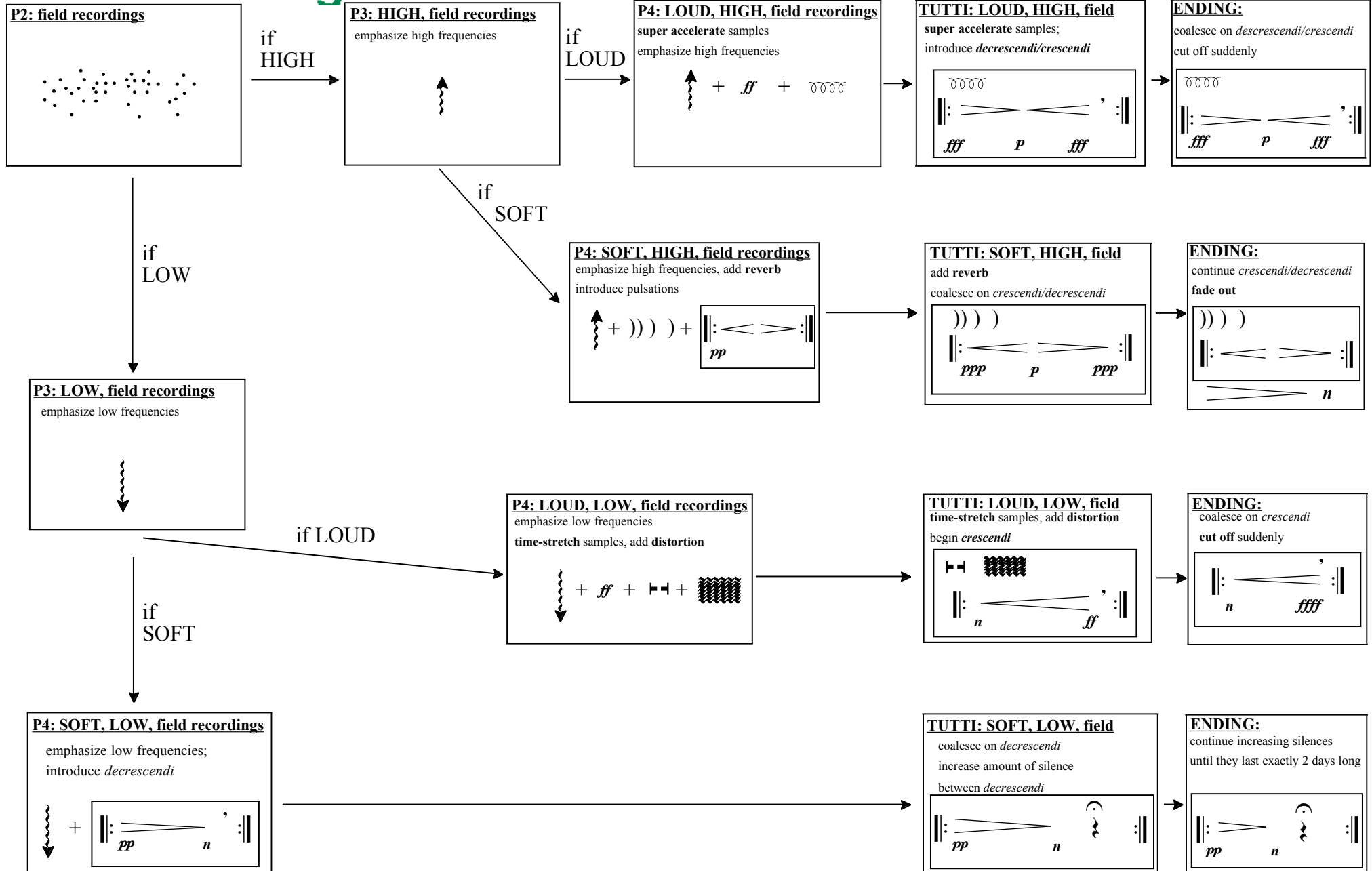


Shorten the portion of the sample that is looped.

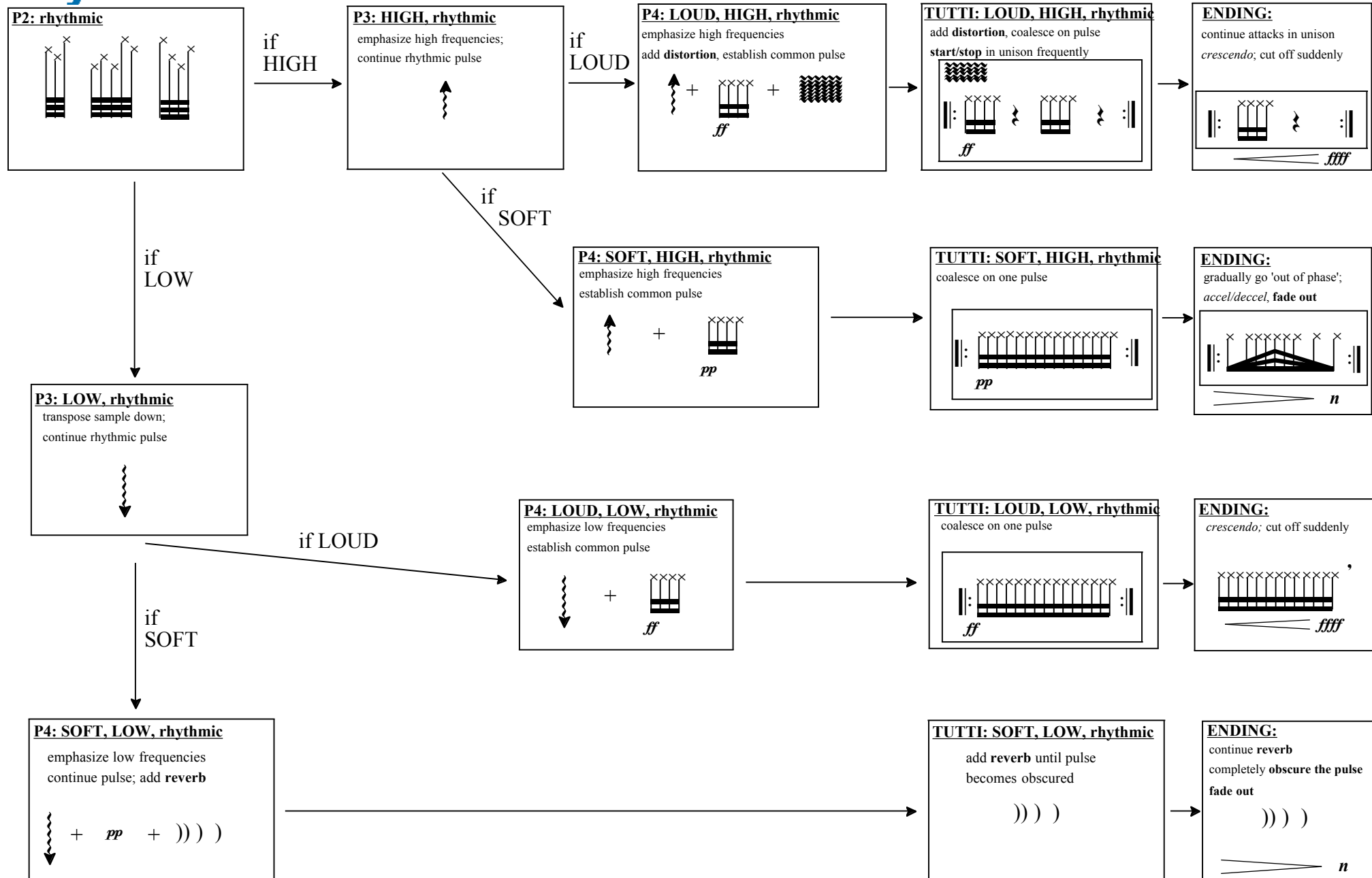


Seek beating/interference patterns.

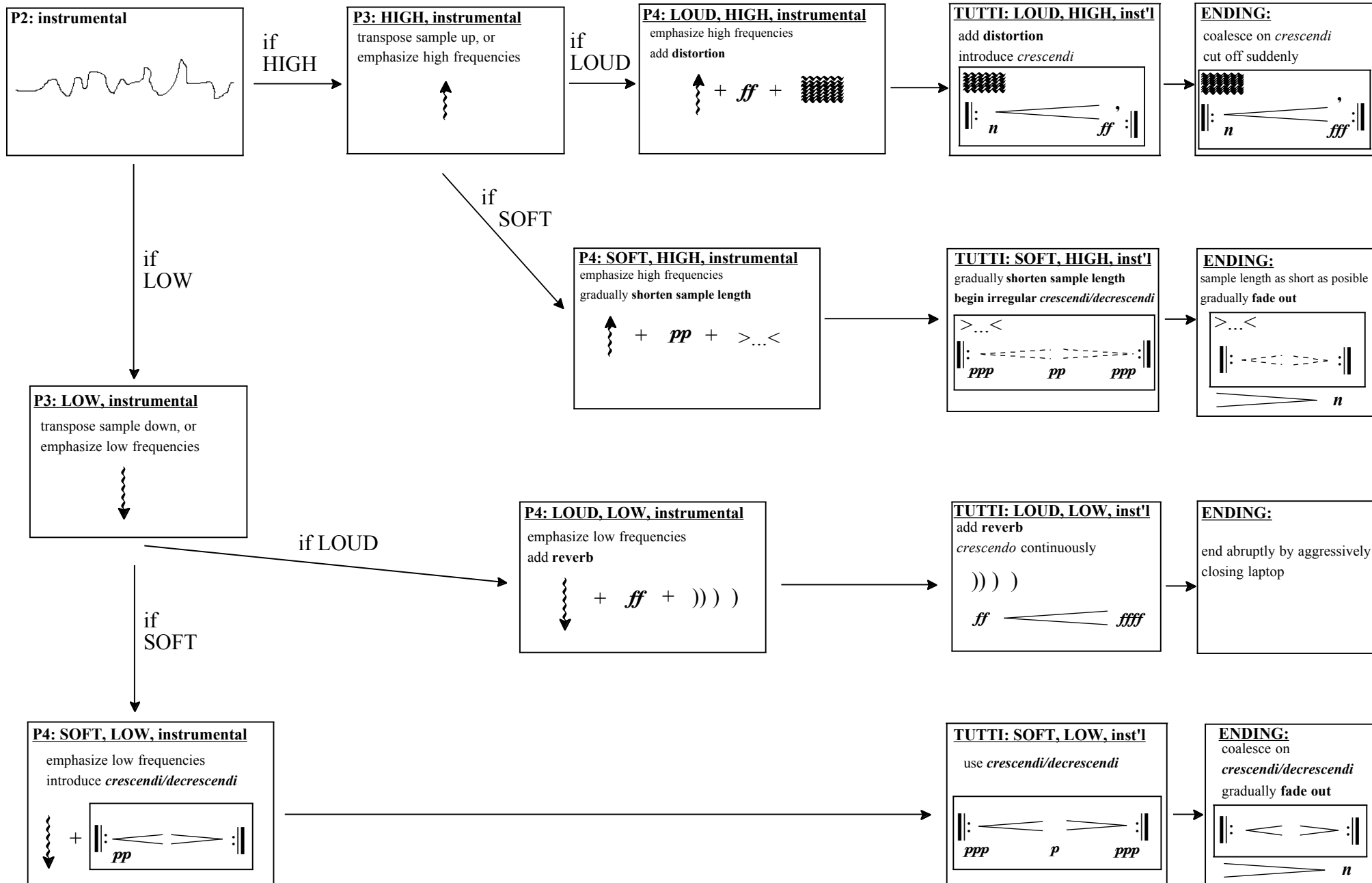
field recordings



rhythmic



instrumental



drone

