The Careful Plaiting of Weak Ties

Scott Mc Laughlin (2017)

Prepared String Quartet (preparations supplied by composer on request)

Programme note:

Two spectral worlds of the bowed string, the harmonic and inharmonic, connected by ‘A’.

"Strength does not come from concentration, purity and unity, but from dissemination, heterogeneity and the careful plaiting of […] ties that are weak by themselves, and that each tie, no matter how strong, is itself woven out of still weaker threads” - Bruno Latour

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Performance:

- Everyone plays independently, but see below for some structural cues. The cello leads the structure and cues all parts (when needed).
- The structure below is timed very approximately: changes to not need to happen at precisely those times (use timer but not slavishly).
- Each player has two types of material [1] and [2] that they move back and forth between (see **structure** below). Try to pick up from where you left off when returning to material. Changes between material should not be hurried: when cued, finish your current bow then gently re-enter with the new material.
- **Time:** Each system in the score should take about one minute to play, but this is very loose; let your speed be responsive to the instrument. Glissandi etc. are **very very** slow. Focus on the harmonics that emerge as you slowly move along the string; be drawn by them. When (any) harmonics sound strongly, slow down and wallow in the sound, and feel free to occasionally go back and forth between strong harmonics that are beside each other. If your sound matches/blends/interacts with another player, make the most of that for as long as it last, encourage it.
    - Vlns play the same material and begin together, but should come apart quite soon as you both move at different rates, and may find different harmonics.
- **Material [1]** is time-spaced: events take as long as they look on the page, there's no tempo. *Sul pont/tasto* instructions should be fairly extreme: don't allow the sound to break up completely, but do try to force a change of harmonic (i.e. *s.p.* might make harmonic jump an octave, *s.t.* should bring out a subharmonic or a wolf-note/beating).
    - Sounding pitches for harmonics are sometimes given as a guide, these won't always be the pitches that emerge.
- Insert your plastic **preparation** on lowest two strings (with point on lowest string) to sound an A pitch (ideally A5) when bowed near the bridge. Cello changes prep. position in each section, take your time with this.
- **Material [2]** is played on the lowest string: r.h. only. The graphic notation indicates bow position between the bridge (top) and preparation (bottom). Thickness of line is (more-or-less) like bow pressure, but should be thought of more like 'intensity' of sound; so may also involve changes of bow speed/angle etc.
    - While the graphic here looks very continuous, it should be treated discretely as a 'per bow' movement along the string: i.e. change bow position on each up/down bow, but don't continuously drag the bow along the string as this will make the sound too broken/noisy. Focus on allowing harmonics/multiphonics to emerge and sing.
    - Vc/Vla have two systems, you can play either or both.
- General **dynamics** are quiet and restrained, but do allow the harmonics to sing out.

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Vln 1	[1]							[2 'A']	[1]	[2 'A']
Vln 2	[1]					[2 'A']	[1]	[2 'A']	[1]	[2 'A']
Vla	[1]			[2 'A']	[1]	[2 'A']	[1]	[2 'A']	[1]	[2 'A']
Vc	0–1:00 [1]	1:00–1:40 [2 'A']	1:40–3:00 move prep. to G (7th of A) then play [1]	3:00–3:40 [2 'G']	3:40–5:00 move prep. to E (3rd of A) then play [1]	5:00–6:00 [2 'E']	6:00–7:00 move prep. to G (7th of A) then play [1]	7:00–8:00 [2 'G']	8:00–8:30 move prep. to A then play [1]	8:30–10:00 [2 'A']
Vc cue	All start together. Vc pizz A string *mf* (let ring always)								All play [1] when Vc pizz C string	All play [2] when Vc pizz A string. ***** All fade out gently when Vc pizz C string.

Vc starts with pizz open A-string mezzo-*forte* and let ring until sound dies away. Vlns/vla start with the pizz.

Vc stops piece with pizz C string. All other players gently fade out then (across 3–4 seconds).

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Violins

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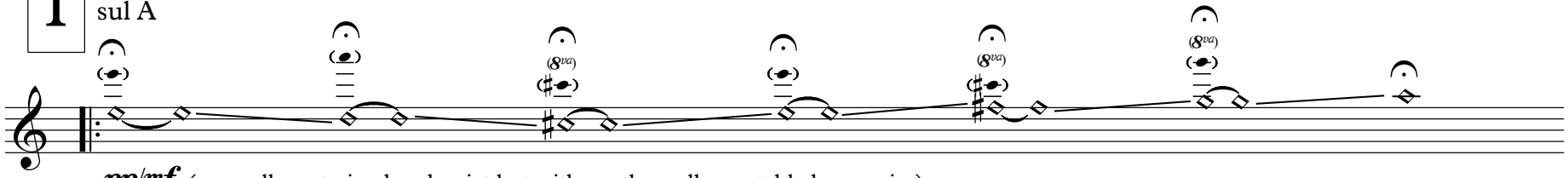
long slow bows. Support any harmonics that try to emerge during (very) slow glissandi

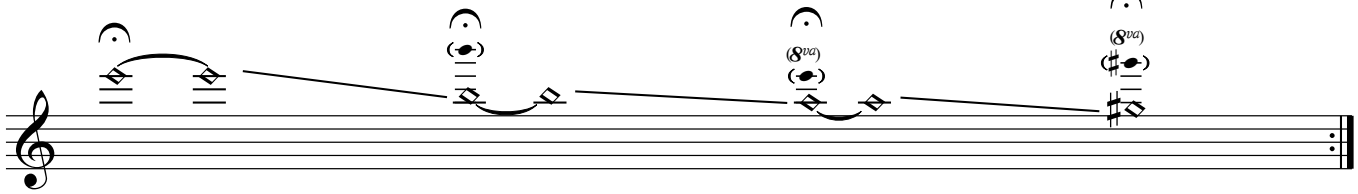
1

sul A



pp/mf (generally restrained and quiet but with gentle swells on stable harmonics)

sul E



2

sul G

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Viola

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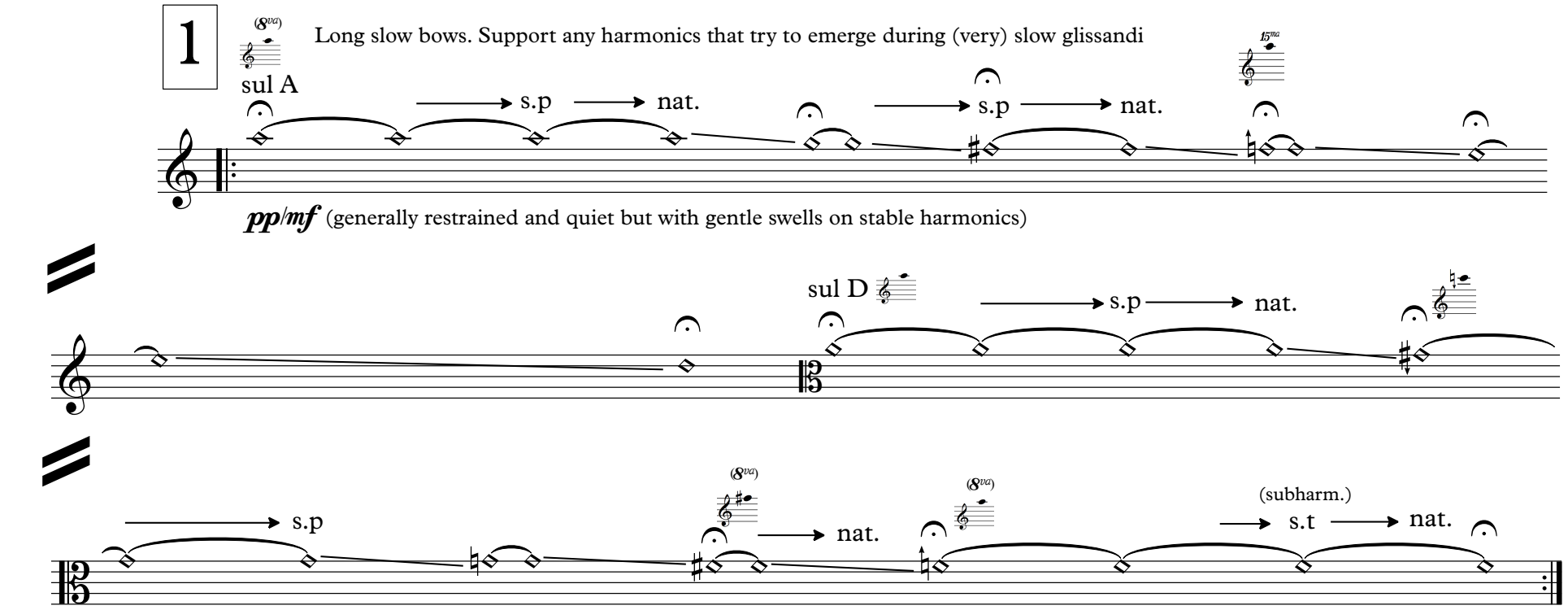

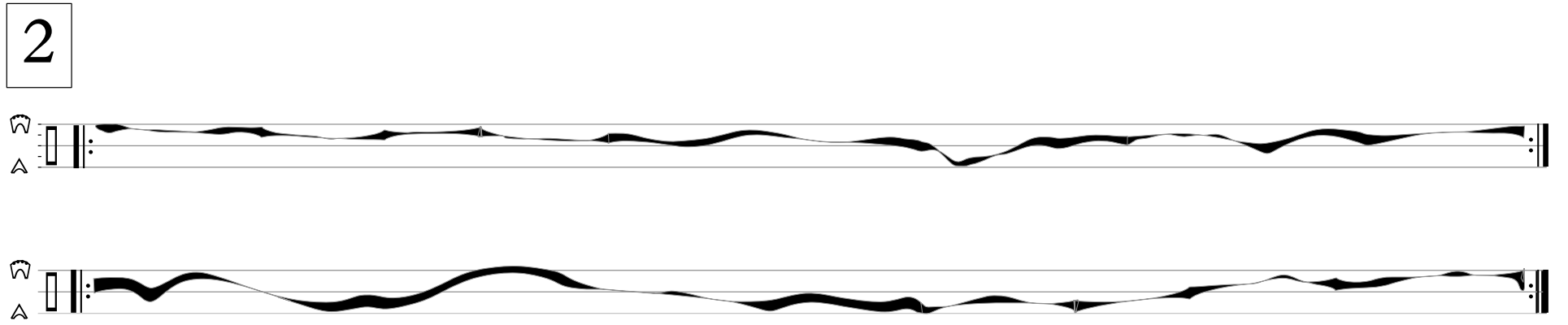

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Violoncello

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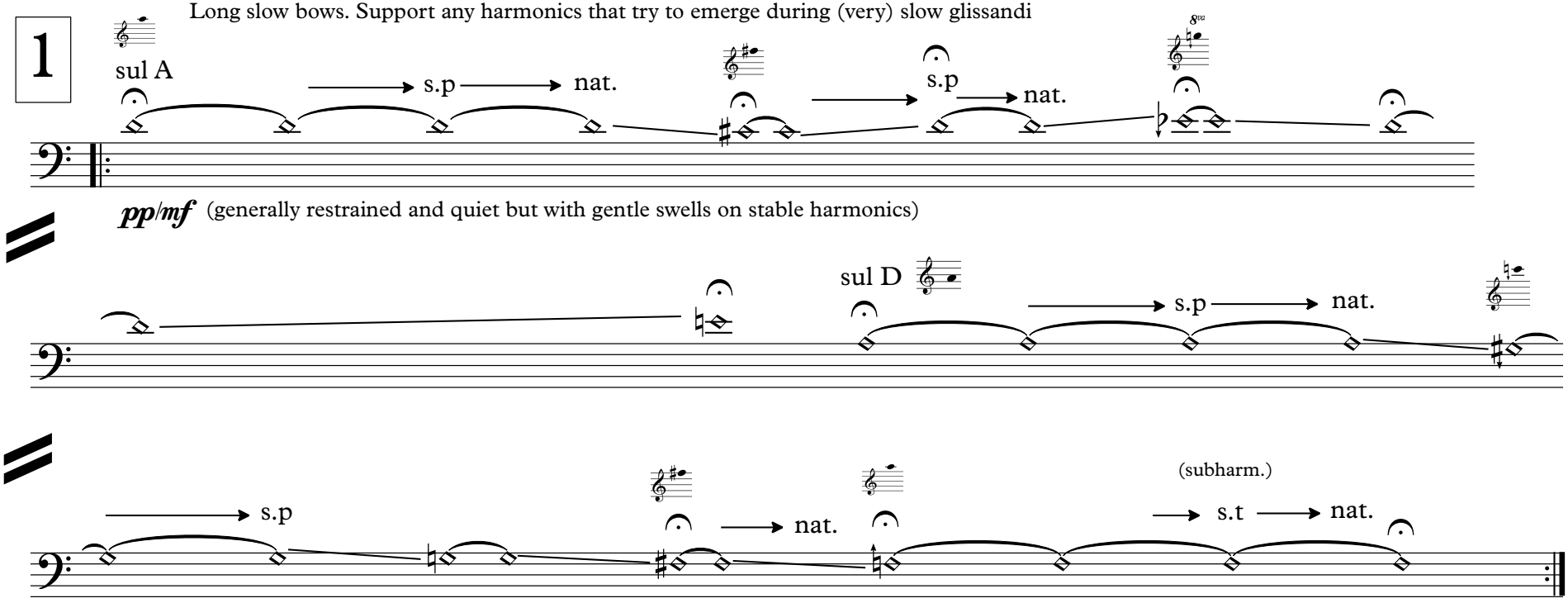
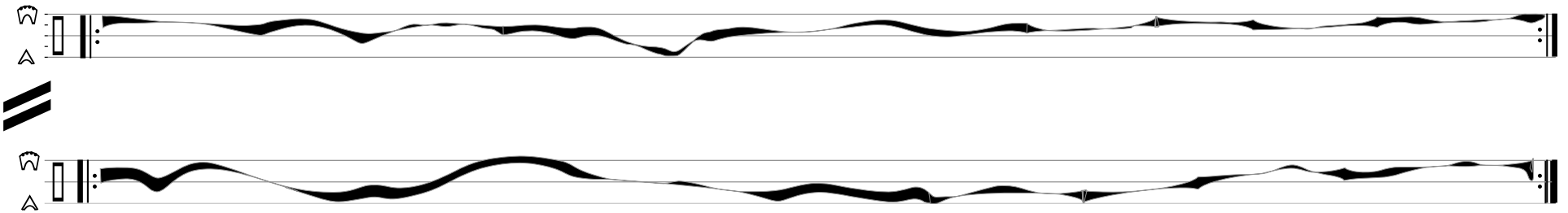
Long slow bows. Support any harmonics that try to emerge during (very) slow glissandi

1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