was a photograph

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of Washington

2025

Reading Committee:

Joël F Durand, Chair

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Music

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University of Washington

Abstract

was a photograph

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Joël F Durand

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In *was a photograph,* displacement, myth, constricted spaces, and authority are explored through the poetics of an imaginary world. In a dream-like scenario, the sonic elements blur in and out of focus as the visual imagery shifts from abstract hallucinations to absurd realism. Until the last section, the natural sound of the guitar strings is immediately dampened by touching a contact mic on the vibrating string. This act of suppression is performed using various techniques, such as hammer-on, buzzing, and tapping, where the original sound is transformed into an amplified and noisy musical gesture. The pitch material is constricted to an E minor triad and notes that are an interval of a minor or major second away from it. The foregrounded performance techniques distort, bend, and obscure the pitches while never presenting them in a manner that is idiomatic to the instrument. In *was a photograph,* disruptions, and dream-like transitions affect the form of the piece, reflecting on the lived experience of individuals displaced due to inequitable political and social systems.

was a photograph

for two classical guitars, electronics and video projection

commissioned by Seattle-Isfahan Project

Sandesh Nagaraj

(2025)

Instruments and setup

2 nylon string guitars

2 "tiny bite" contact microphones

2 amplifiers

Mixer

Pitch shifter

Distortion pedal

Loop pedal

Video projection

House amplification

Contact microphones

The contact mics are used like guitar slides in the way in which the gestures are performed with them

Signal chain

Contact microphones---›Mixer---›Pitch shifter---›Distortion pedal---›Loop pedal---›Amplifiers

House amplification

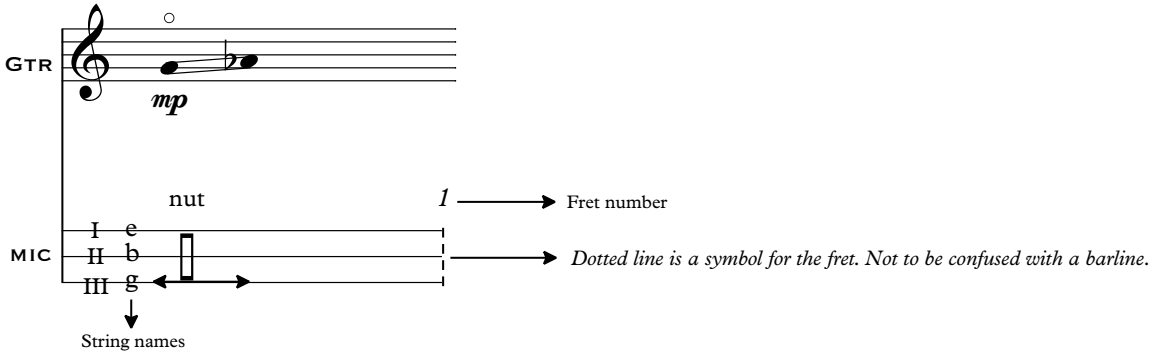
Microphones used by the venue to amplify the guitars must be turned off until the last section of the piece which starts at 11' 00"

Explanation of techniques and symbols

A NOMADS OF AN ENDLESS NIGHT

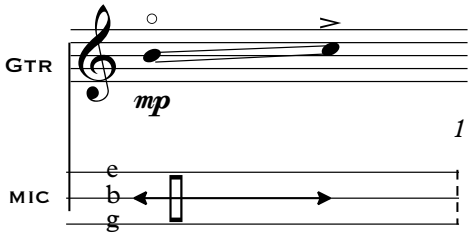
Pluck the open string and immediately slide the edge of the mic on the string starting just behind the nut--
over the nut--along the notated length of the fret area --back over the nut and ending behind the nut. This is one single gesture. The doubled headed arrow shows the movement of the left hand.

When there's a double headed arrow, the movement of the mic always starts from Left to Right and then Right to Left.



A1

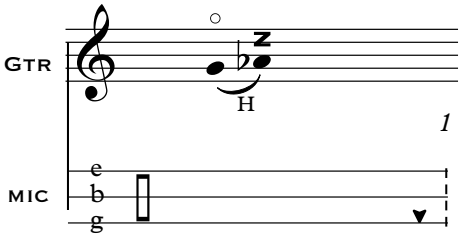
Similar to A, except at the end of an ascending glissando, the string is plucked again which is marked by an accent while the mic is touching at the indicated position within the fret. After the string is plucked, the mic slides back on the string and behind the nut.



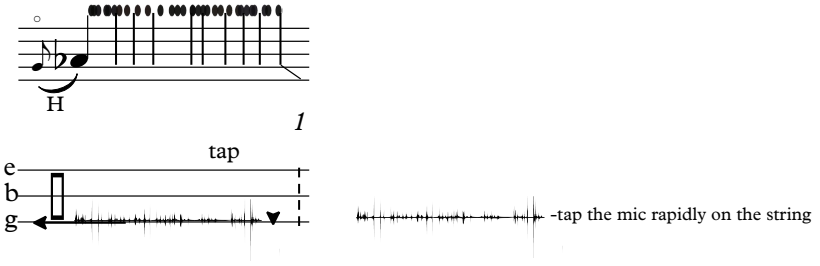
B

H - hammer on ▼ - indicates the approximate node within the fret where a hammer on is performed -short articulated notes. Granular.

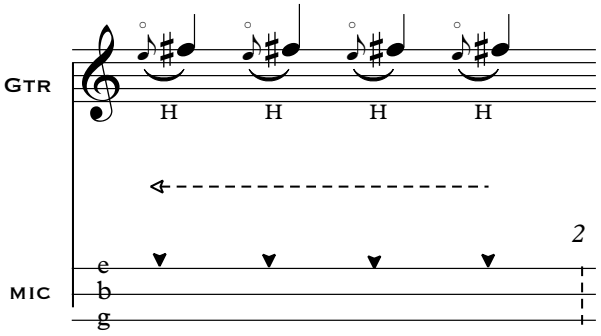
pluck the open string and gently bring the edge of the mic in contact with the vibrating string at the indicated position within the fret. This should produce a buzzing sound.



pluck the open string and immediately tap on the string using the edge of the mic rapdily. The tapping direction is indicated by the horizontal arrow which is right to left in the example below. After tapping, slide the mic over and behind the nut. This is one single gesture.

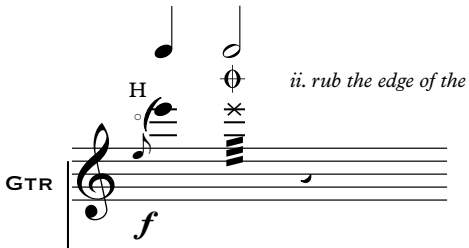


pluck the open string and hammer on the edge of the mic on the string. This is performed at various nodes indicated by a downward arrow within a particular fret. The direction of the gesture is indicated by the horizontal dotted arrow.



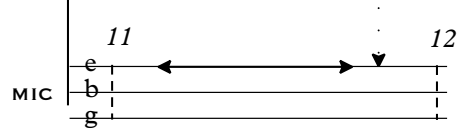
C A DESOLATE CHANT

i. pluck the open string and hammer on with the edge of the mic. The approximate node for the hammer on is indicated by the downard arrow.



ii. rub the edge of the mic back and forth on the string while muting the string. This is indicated by the double headed arrow. Quasi scratch sound.

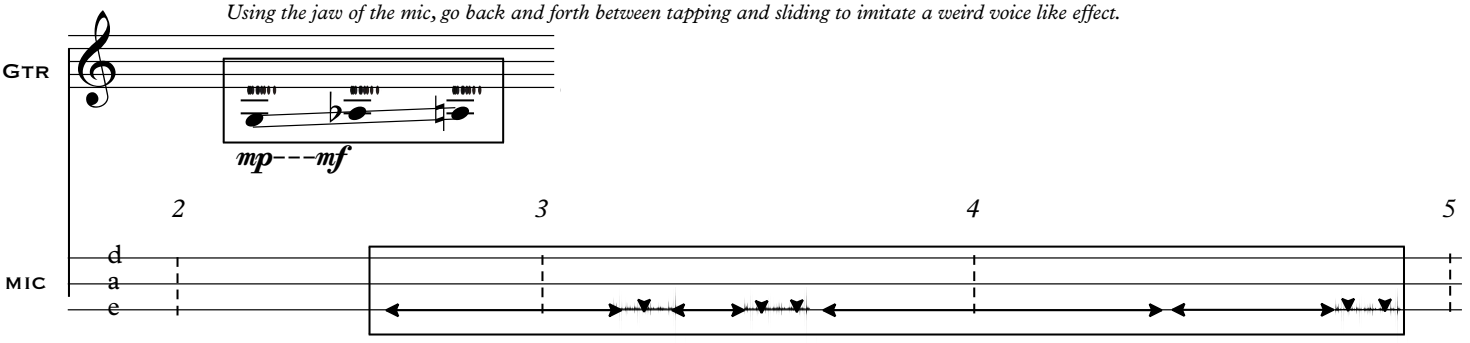
The horizontal dotted arrow shows the direction of the gesture



D DEPT. OF DISLOCATION

Improvise the gestures and imitate a voice like contour. Imagine you are speaking your dialogue (refer score) through your left hand.

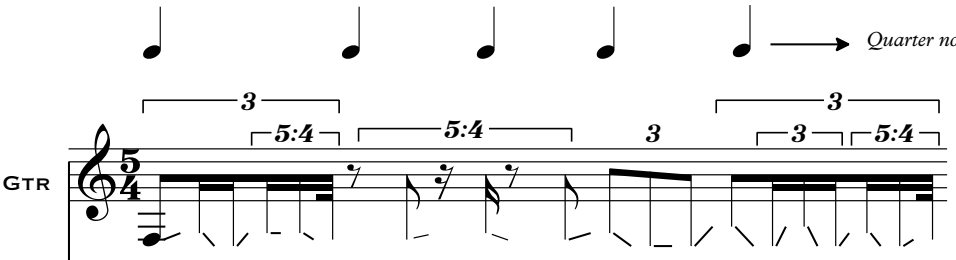
Dampen all strings with right hand
Using the jaw of the mic, go back and forth between tapping and sliding to imitate a weird voice like effect.



E IRREVERSIBLE

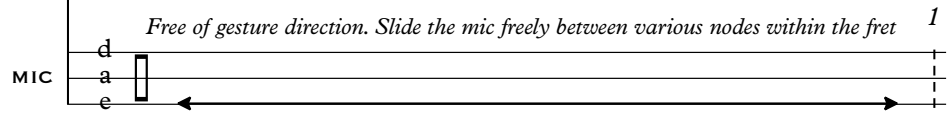
Heavy like a metal riff

Quarter note reference



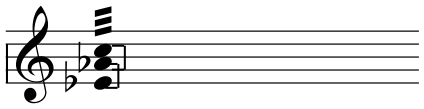
f molto sul tasto -- picking hand is near the 12th fret. Similar to a fingered bass technique. All the headless notes are picked.

Free of gesture direction. Slide the mic freely between various nodes within the fret



F HERE AND NOW

1. Tremolo between the bottom two and top two voices using the whammy bar. Part of the whammy bar is placed in between the strings and tremolo picking action is performed. Vary the tremolo speed freely.
2. While performing 1., rub the whammy bar on either of the three strings intermittently. Vary the rubbing speed and length freely. Quasi scratch sound.
Alternate between the above playing techniques 1 and 2 freely and move between the normal position along the string until you are close to the bridge and back.

GTR 

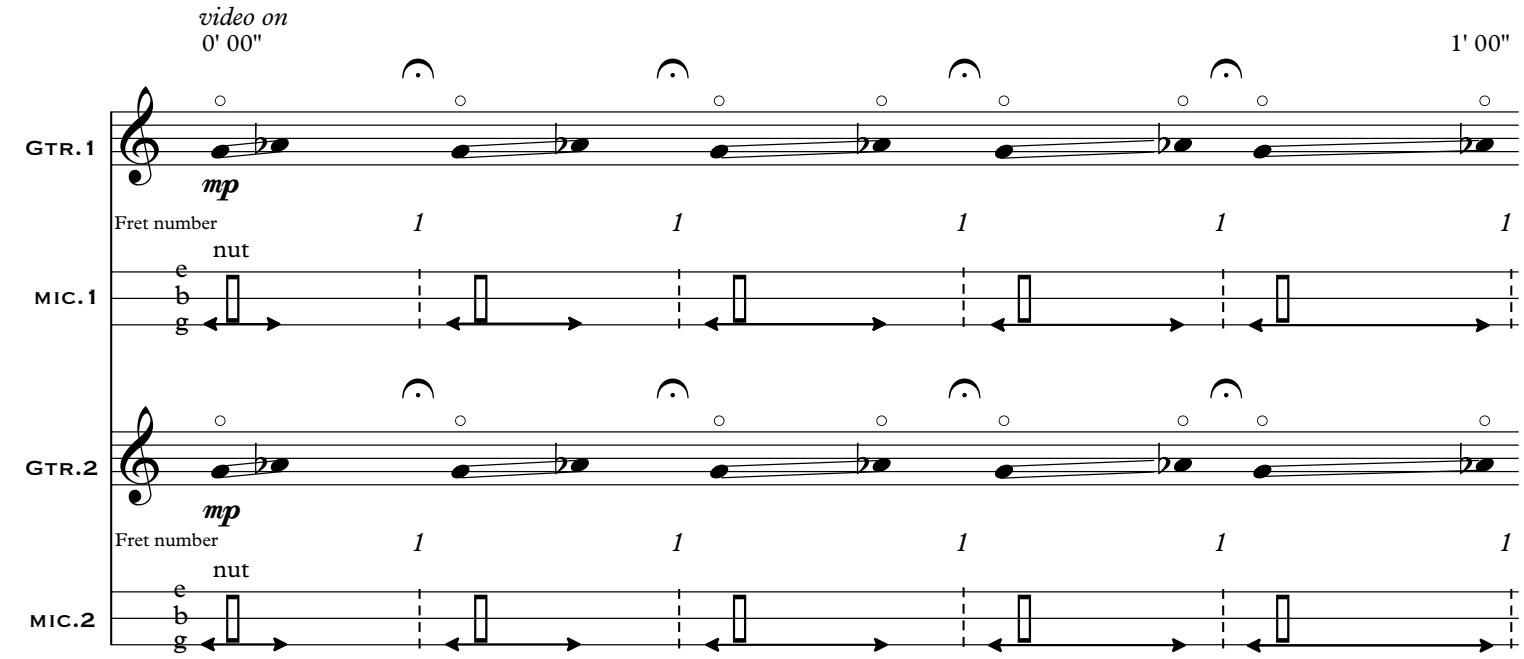
normale ⟷ molto sul pont.

A **NOMADS OF AN ENDLESS NIGHT**

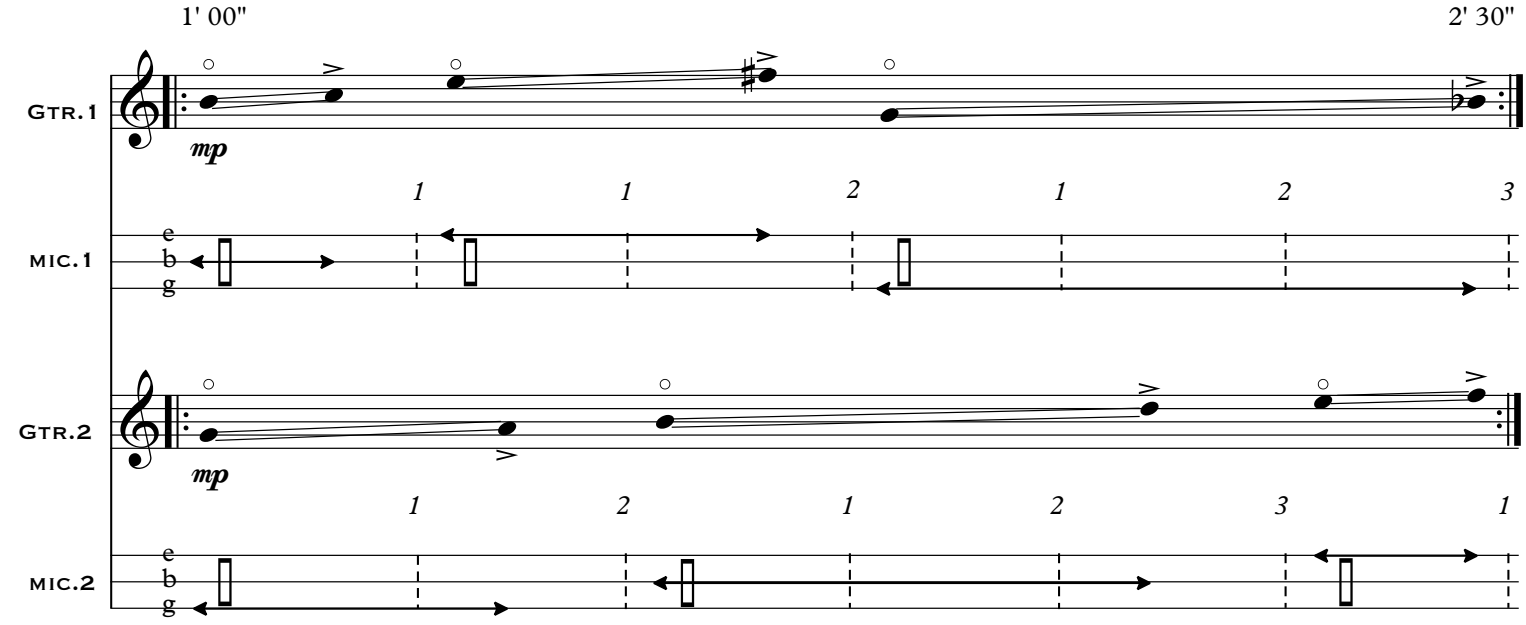
House amplification DOWN

slow and aimless

Gtr.1 cues entrance after each fermata.
Except for the entrances, the two guitars don't need to be in sync.



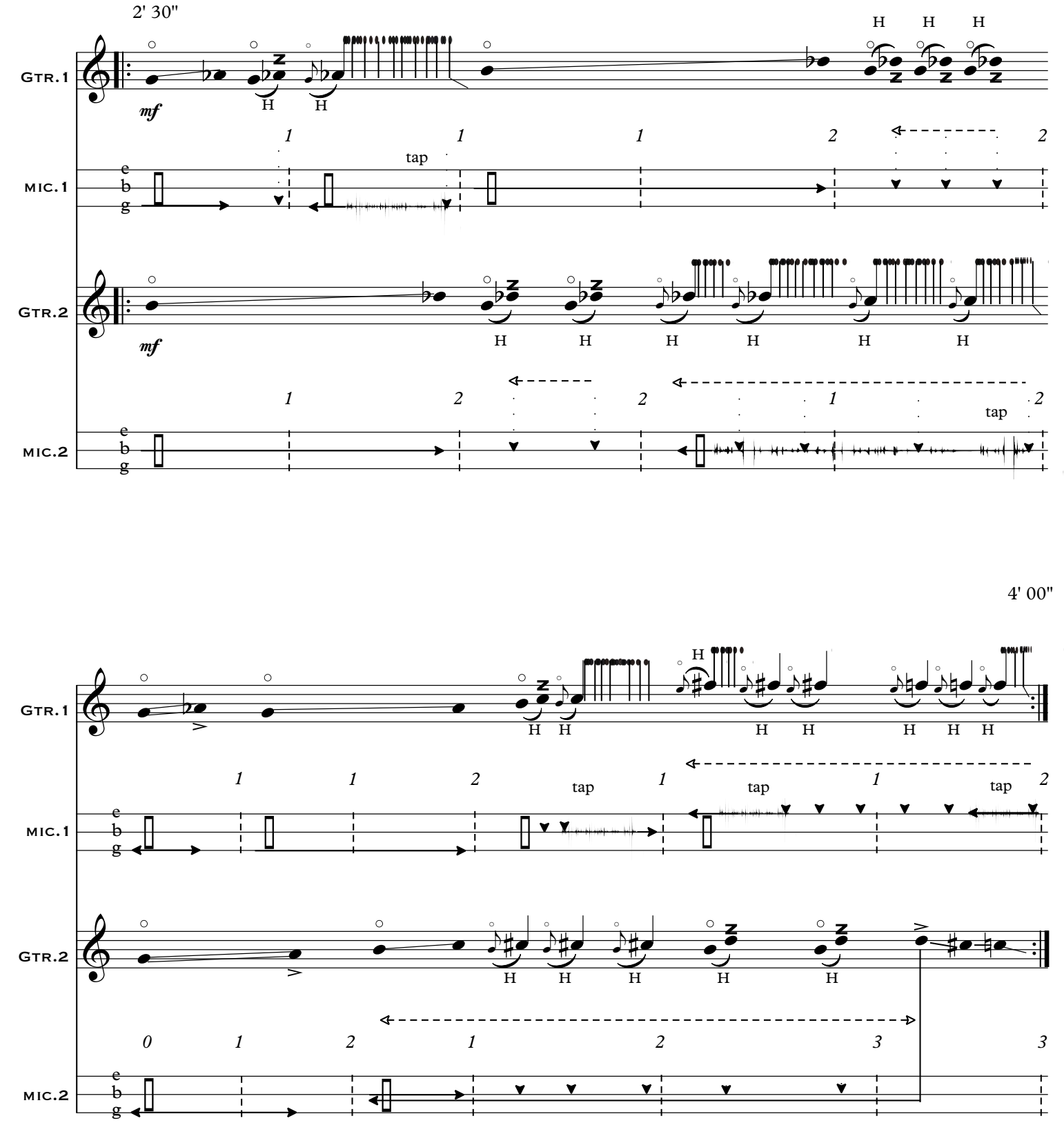
A1 *Play independently. Gtrs. need not sync up on repeats either. Number of repeats is indeterminate.*
On repeats, change the order of the strings for the gesture and the length of the glissando.

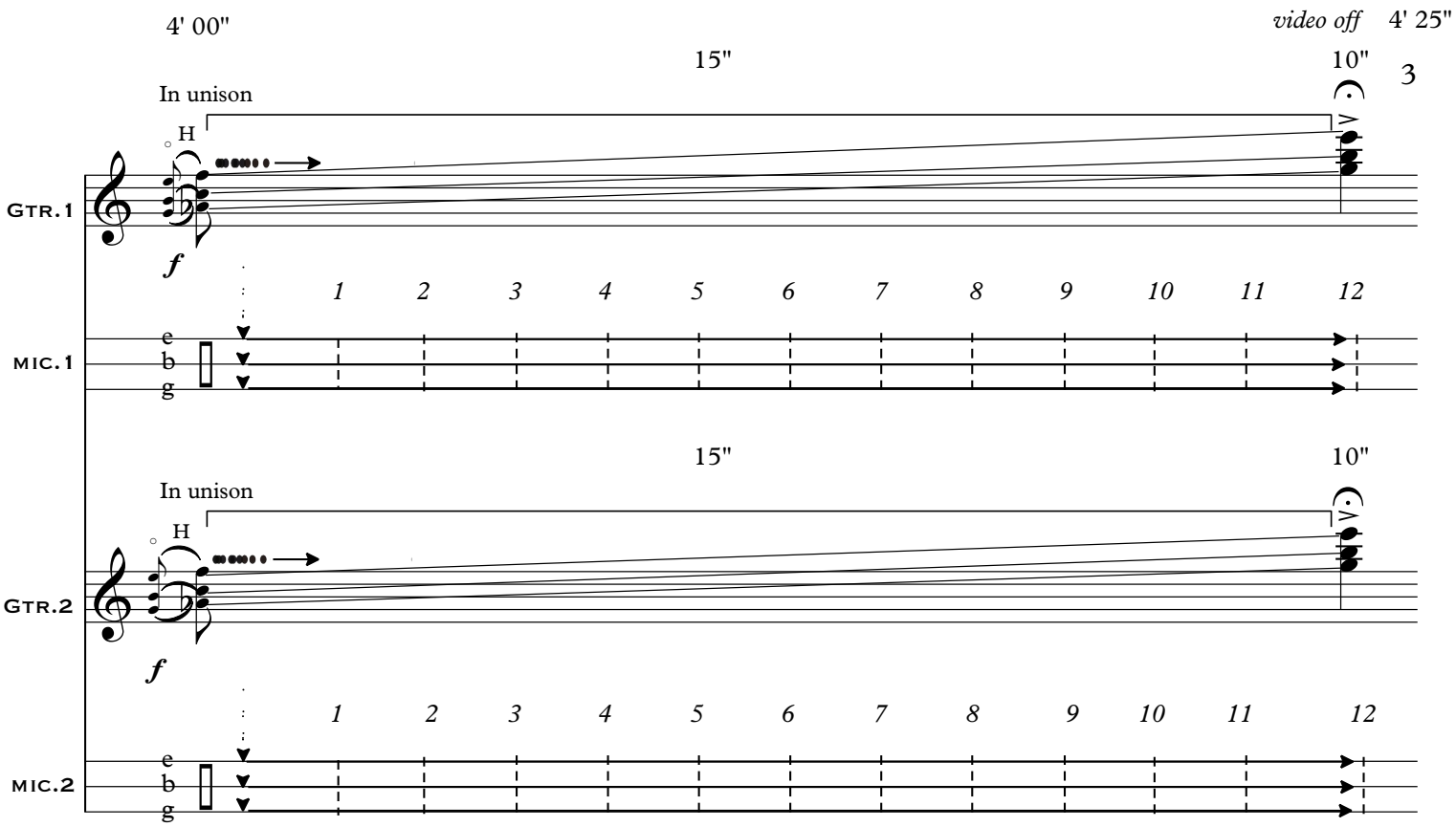


B NOMADS OF AN ENDLESS NIGHT

aimless and restless

Agitated and louder on the repeat. Play independently of each other. Number of repeats is indeterminate.




4' 00"
video off
4' 25"
3
15"
10"
In unison
H
GTR.1
f
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
e
b
g
MIC.1
15"
10"
In unison
H
GTR.2
f
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
e
b
g
MIC.2

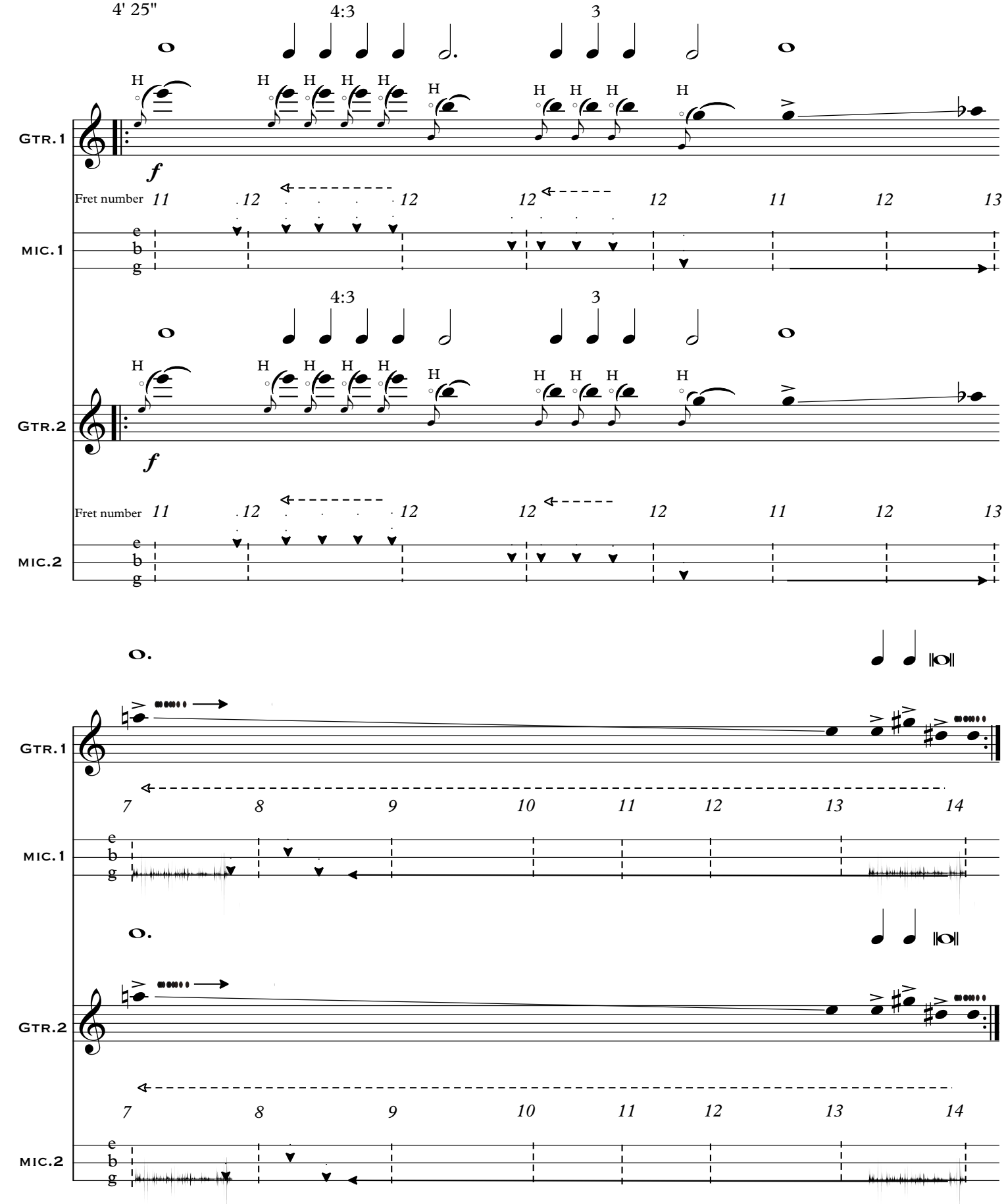
C **A DESOLATE CHANT**

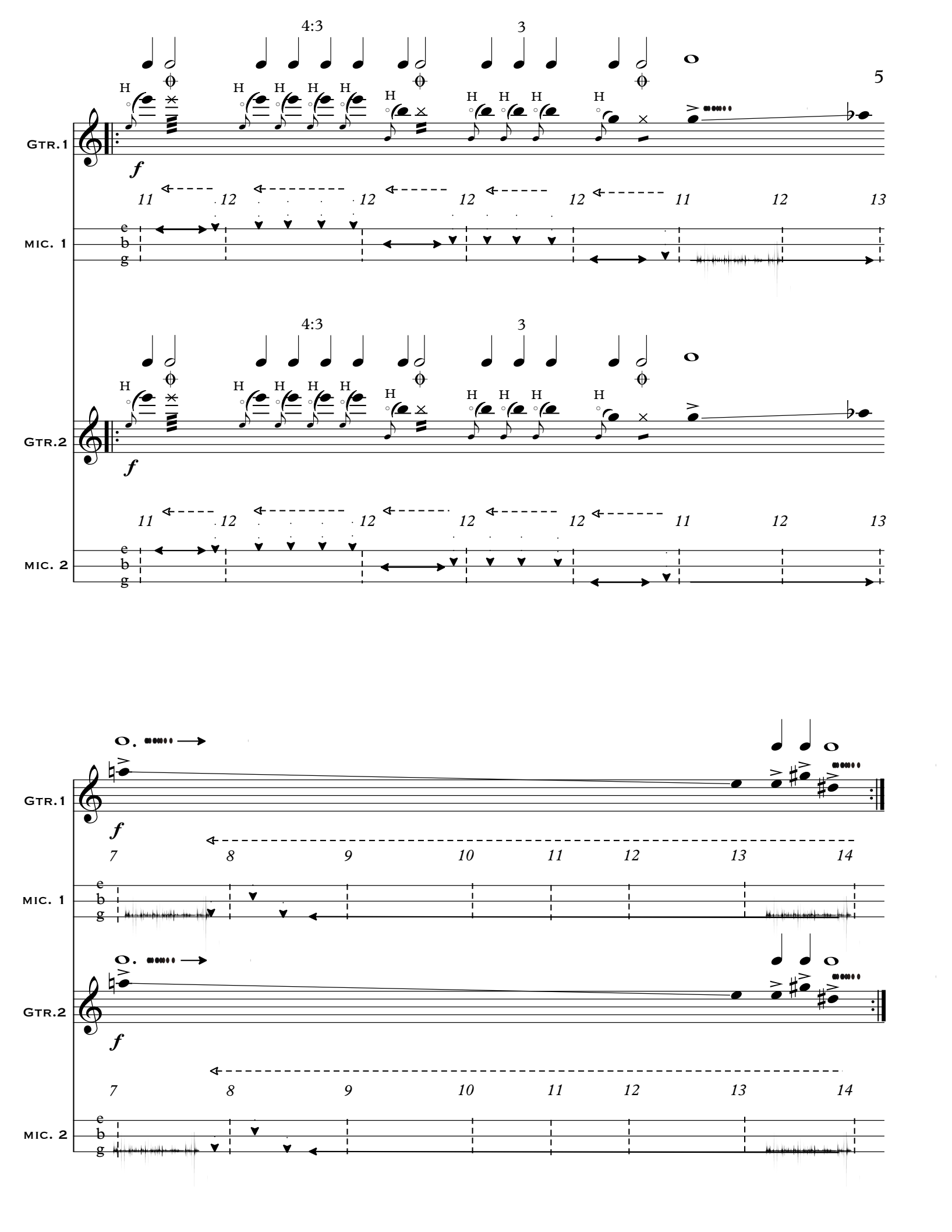
♩ = 75 ***Epic***

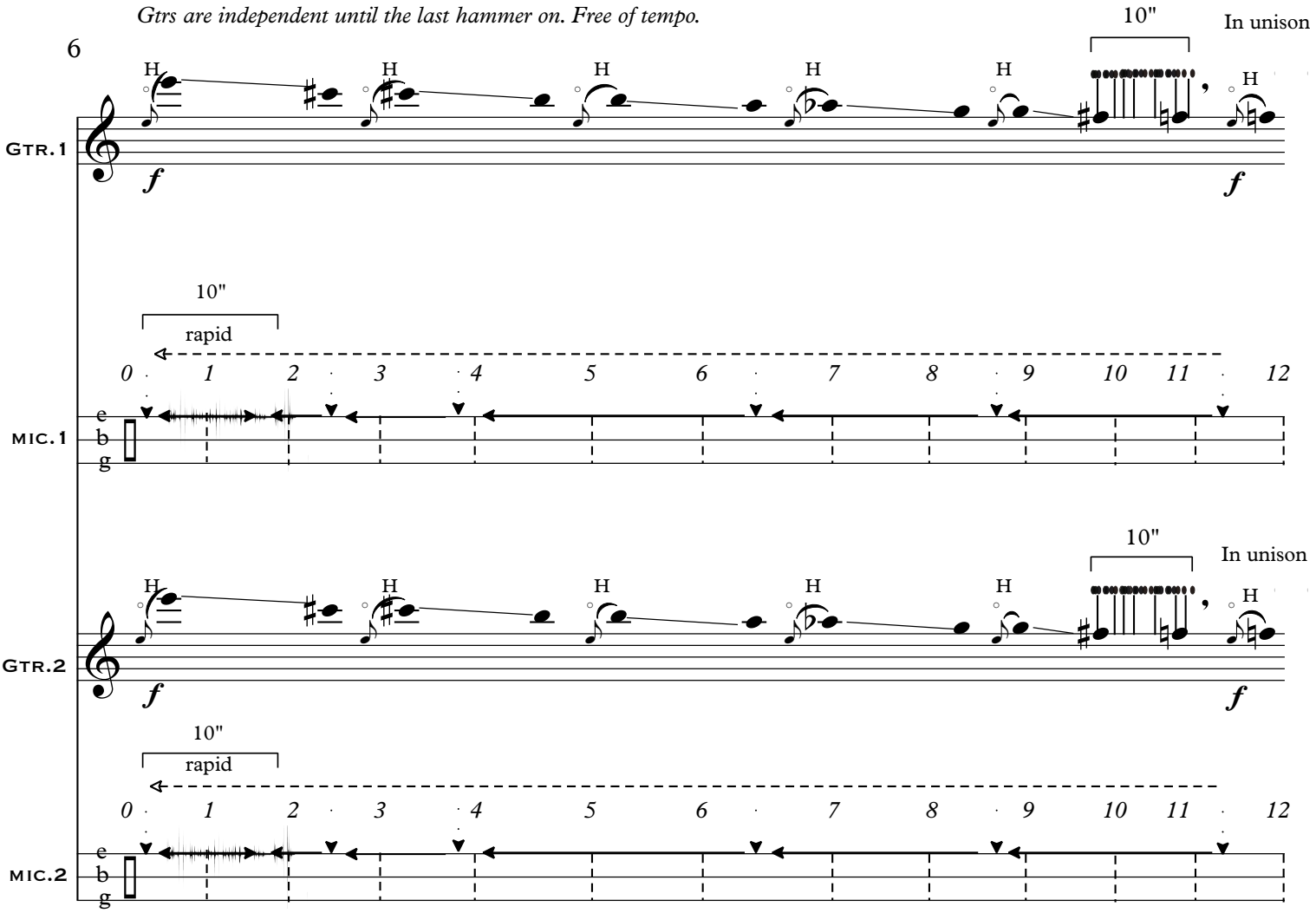
At tempo. Gtrs.are in unison the first time and independent on repeat. Delay like effect on repeat.

video on 4' 25"

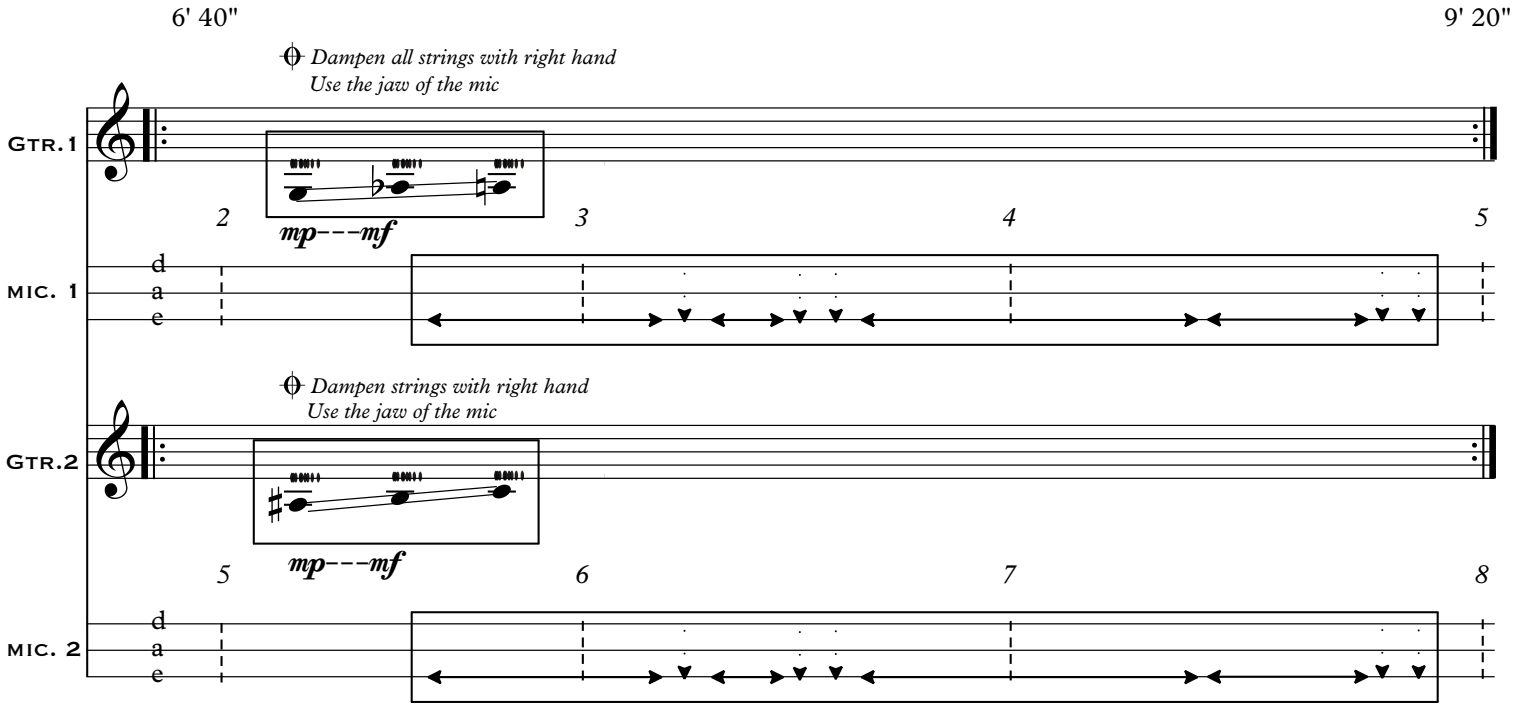
Dampen bottom three strings with right hand




5
4:3
3
Gtr.1
f
11 12 12 12 12 11 12 13
mic. 1
e
b
g
4:3
3
Gtr.2
f
11 12 12 12 12 11 12 13
mic. 2
e
b
g
Gtr.1
f
7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
mic. 1
e
b
g
Gtr.2
f
7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
mic. 2
e
b
g



10" video break - blank wall



ELECTRONICS - Pitch shifting between two and three octaves below and muffled audio of voices

GTR.1: *(IN A MONOTONE VOICE)* ANOTHER ONE FOR ASSESSMENT?
GTR.2: *(WITH A HINT OF WEARY CYNICISM)* INDEED. ANOTHER SOUL SEEKING REFUGE IN OUR LABRYNTHINE BUREAUCRACY.
GTR.1 AND 2: LOOK AT THE SCREEN FOR A RESPONSE. BEGIN ONCE THE PETITIONER RESPONDS AND STEPS BACK.
GTR.1: *(FLIPING THROUGH DOCUMENTS)* THIS ONE CLAIMS PERSECUTION IN HIS HOMELAND. THE USUAL LITANY OF WOES.
GTR.2: *(SARDONICALLY)* YES, THE HUMAN CONDITION DISTILLED INTO A SERIES OF CHECKBOXES AND AFFIDAVITS.
GTR.1: *(TAPPING HIS PEN THOUGHTFULLY)* WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF HIS STORY? CLAIMS OF POLITICAL DISSENT AND FAMILIAL THREATS.
GTR.1 AND 2: LOOK AT THE SCREEN FOR A RESPONSE. BEGIN ONCE THE PETITIONER RESPONDS AND STEPS BACK.
GTR.2: *(DRYLY)* THE NARRATIVE IS AS THREADBARE AS THE FABRIC OF REALITY ITSELF. STORIES WOVEN WITH SUCH INTRICATE BANALITY THAT THEY UNRAVEL UPON INSPECTION.
GTR.1: *(NODDING)* AND YET, WE ARE TASKED WITH PARSING TRUTH FROM FICTION, AS IF WE WERE ARBITERS OF SOME COSMIC JUSTICE.
GTR.2: *(GESTURING TOWARDS THE IMMIGRANT)* LOOK AT HIM. PALE AND TREMBLING, LIKE A MOTH DRAWN TO A FLAME THAT CONSUMES MORE THAN IT ILLUMINATES.
GTR.1 AND 2: LOOK AT THE SCREEN FOR A RESPONSE. BEGIN ONCE THE PETITIONER RESPONDS AND STEPS BACK.
GTR.1: *(LEANING BACK, CONTEMPLATIVE)* IS HE ANY DIFFERENT FROM COUNTLESS OTHERS WE'VE PROCESSED? EACH CARRYING A FRAGMENT OF DESPAIR, SEEKING SOLACE IN OUR INDIFFERENT EMBRACE.
GTR.2: *(ALMOST WHISPERING)* OUR DUTY IS TO ASSESS, NOT TO EMPATHIZE. TO SCRUTINIZE THESE FRAGILE TALES WITH THE DISPASSION OF AN EXECUTIONER.
GTR1: *(CLOSING THE FILE WITH A SIGH)* YET, IN OUR SCRUTINY, DO WE NOT BECOME COMPLICIT IN A GREATER NARRATIVE? A NARRATIVE OF CONTROL AND CONTAINMENT.
GTR2: *(BITTERLY)* AH, THE ILLUSION OF AGENCY IN A WORLD WHERE WE ARE BUT PUPPETS MOUTHING PREDETERMINED LINES.
GTR1: *(RISING FROM HIS SEAT)* WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH HIM, THEN? SEND HIM BACK TO THE ABYSS FROM WHENCE HE CAME?
GTR.1 AND 2: LOOK AT THE SCREEN FOR A RESPONSE. BEGIN ONCE THE PETITIONER RESPONDS AND STEPS BACK.
GTR2: *(WITH RESIGNATION)* NO. WE SHAL GRANT HIM ASYLUM, AS WE HAVE DONE WITH THE OTHERS. FOR IN THIS DILAPIDATED THEATER, EVEN THE BLEAKEST OF NARRATIVES DESERVES A FLEETING MOMENT OF REPRIEVE.
GTR1: *(NODDING SOLEMNLY)* AND SO, ANOTHER CHAPTER UNFOLDS IN THIS TRAGICOMEDY OF EXISTENCE. ANOTHER SOUL GRANTED PASSAGE, WHILE WE REMAIN THE INDIFFERENT GATEKEEPERS OF AN INDIFFERENT WORLD.
GTR2: *(LOOKING AT THE IMMIGRANT WITH A MIXTURE OF PITY AND DETACHMENT)* WELCOME TO YOUR NEW PURGATORY, DEAR PETITIONER. MAY YOUR SANCTUARY BE AS FLEETING AS YOUR SUFFERING IS ETERNAL.
GTR.1 AND 2: LOOK AT THE SCREEN FOR A RESPONSE. BEGIN ONCE THE PETITIONER RESPONDS AND STEPS BACK.
GTR1: *(TO HIMSELF, AS THEY PREPARE TO FINALIZE THE PAPERWORK)* IN THE END, WE ARE ALL IMMIGRANTS, WANDERING THROUGH THE CORRIDORS OF OUR OWN UNCERTAINTIES, SEEKING ASYLUM FROM THE IMPLACABLE SHADOWS THAT HAUNT US.

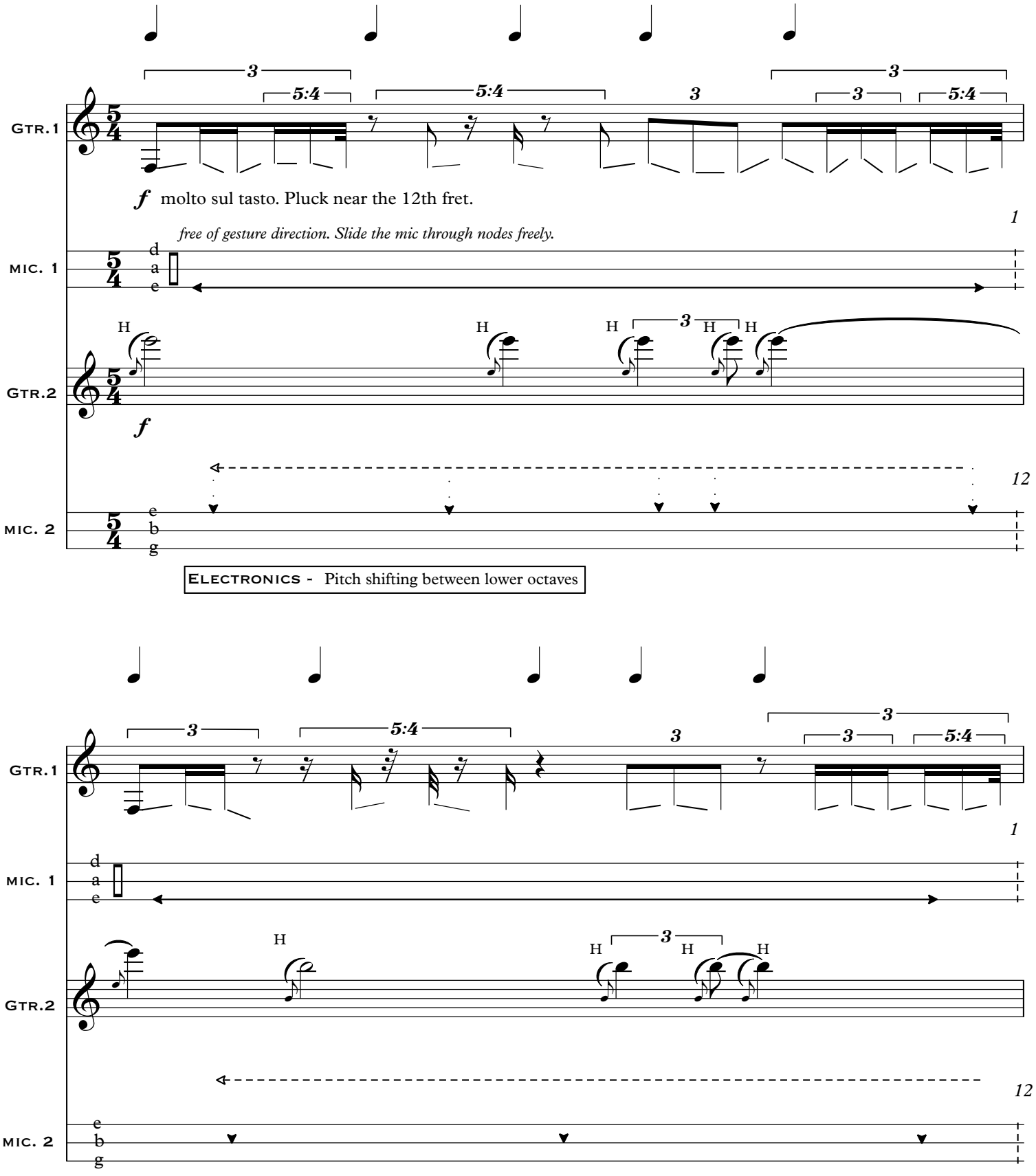
10" video break - petitioner walks away

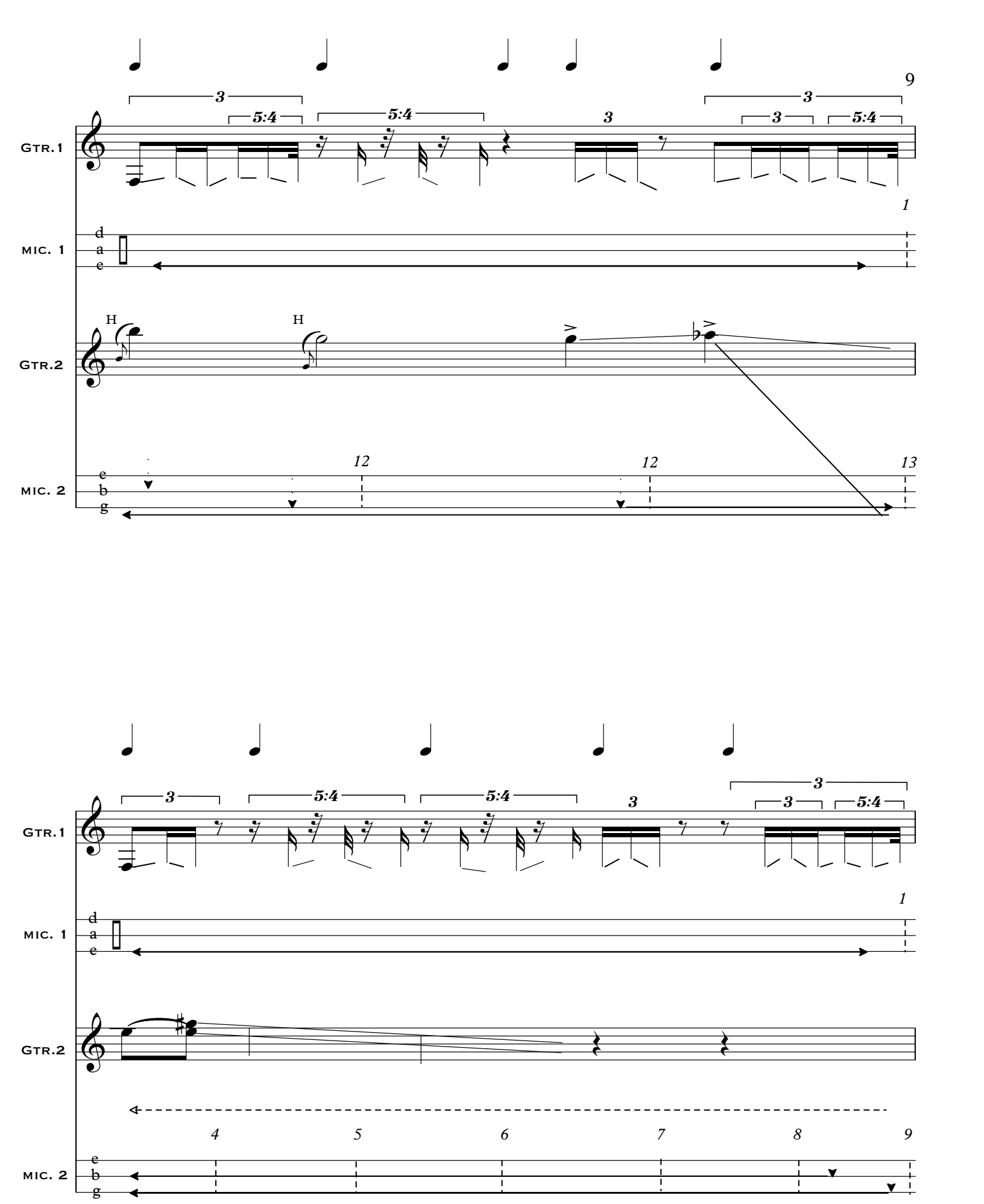
E **IRREVERSIBLE**

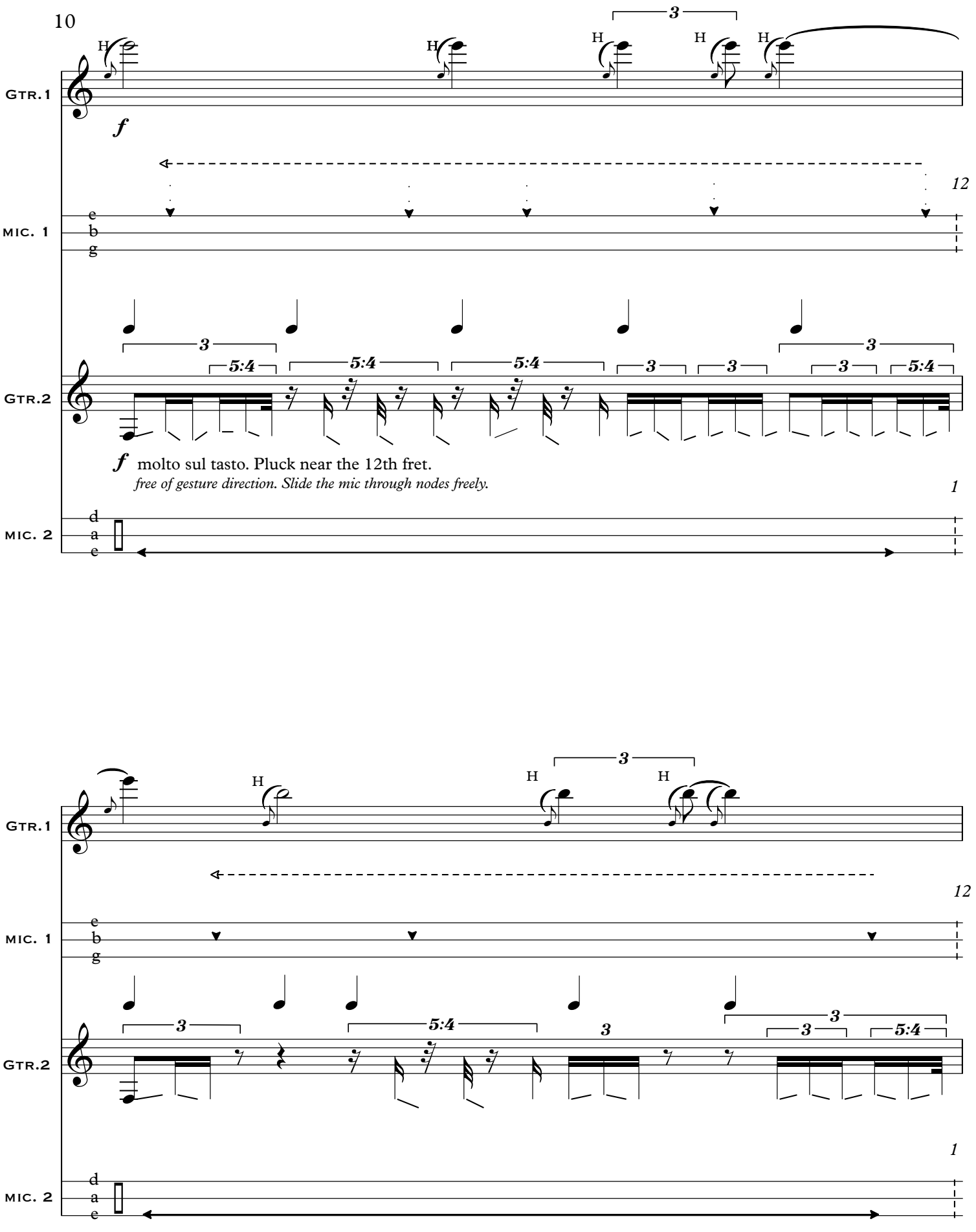
♩ = 40 ***Heavy like a metal riff***

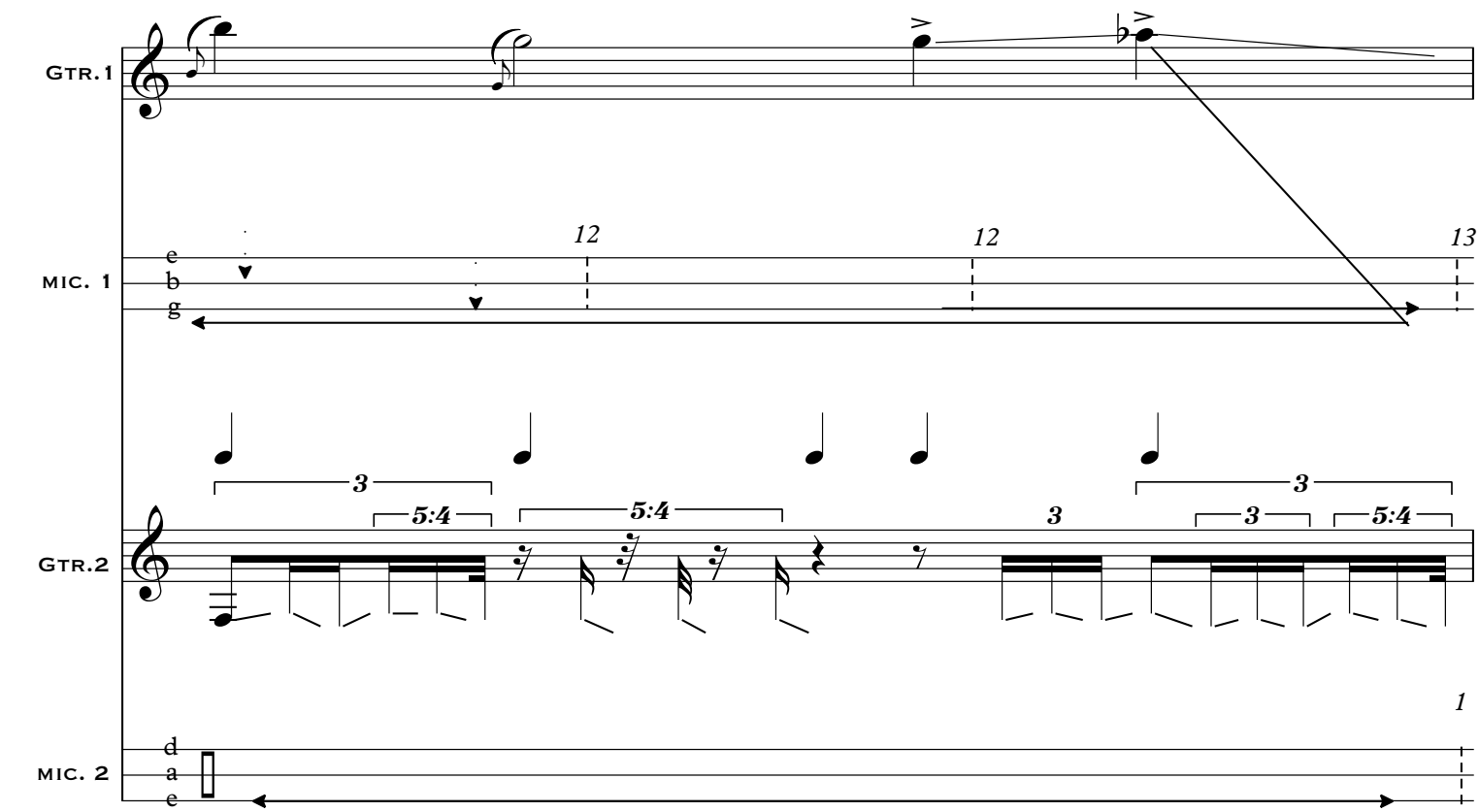
At tempo

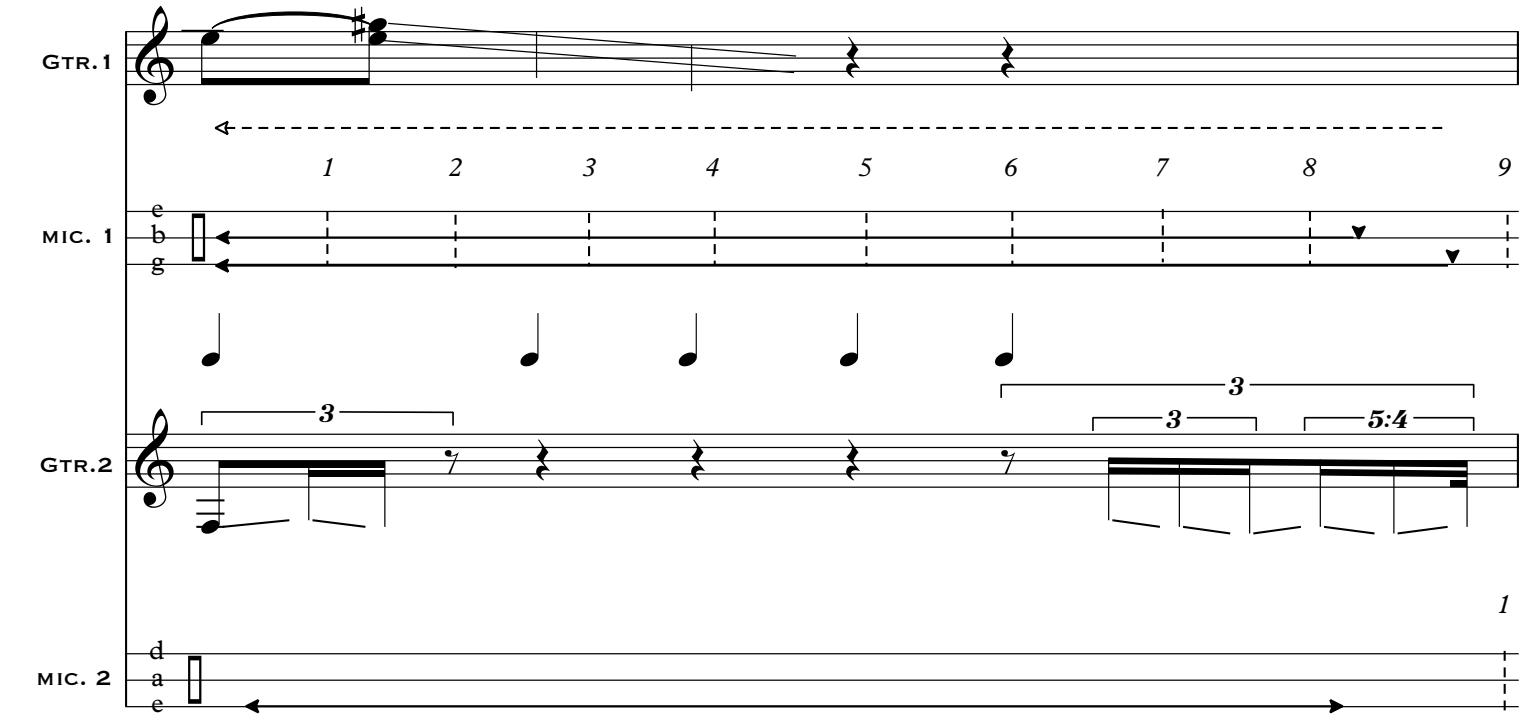
9' 30"

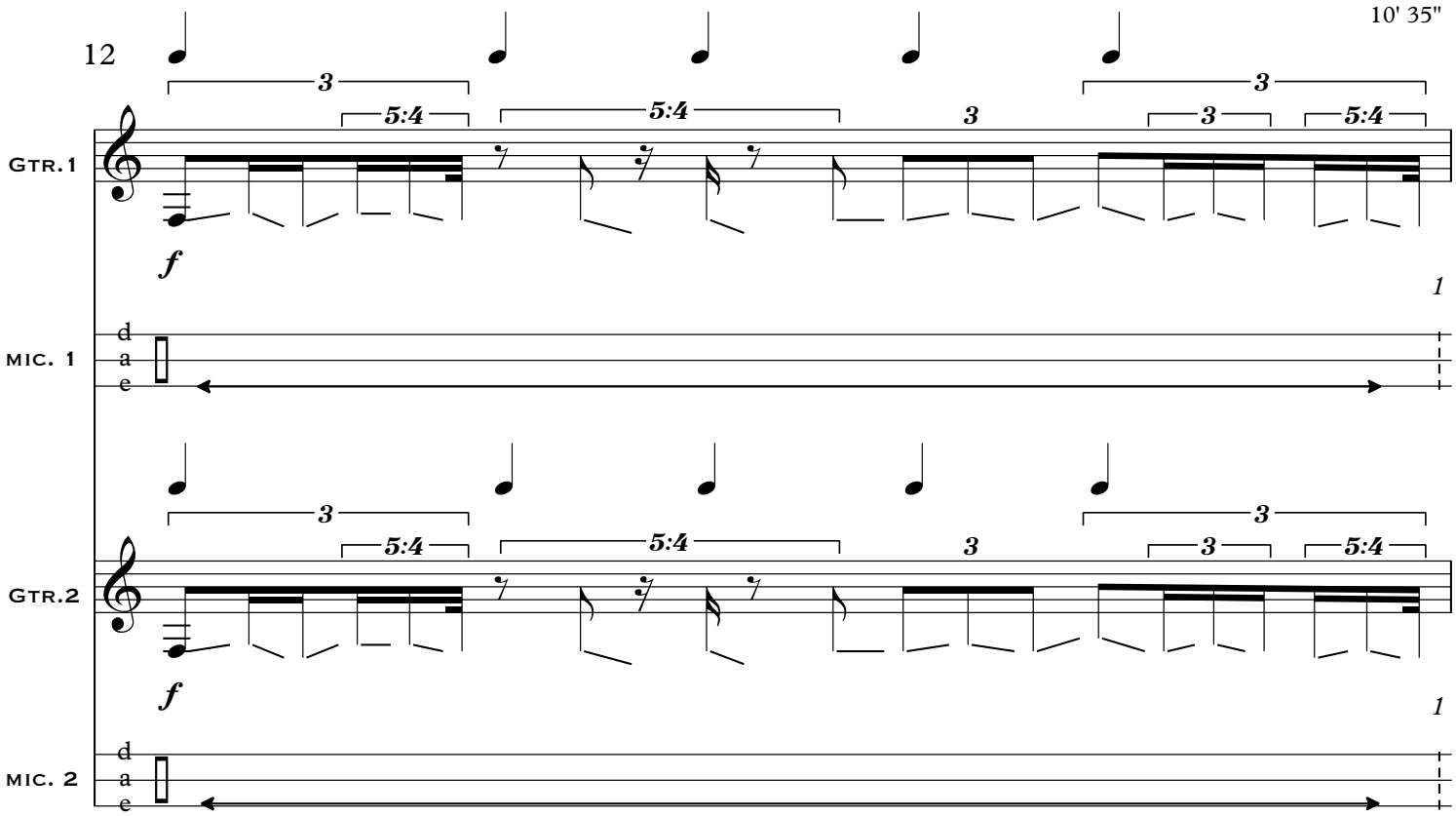



9
3
5:4
5:4
3
3
5:4
Gtr.1
1
d
a
e
Mic. 1
H
H
Gtr.2
12
12
13
e
b
g
Mic. 2
3
5:4
5:4
3
3
5:4
Gtr.1
1
d
a
e
Mic. 1
Gtr.2
4
5
6
7
8
9
e
b
g
Mic. 2


Gtr.1
Gtr.2
Mic. 1
Mic. 2
H
3
5:4
12
1
f
molto sul tasto. Pluck near the 12th fret.
free of gesture direction. Slide the mic through nodes freely.


Gtr.1
mic. 1
e
b
g
12
12
13
3
5:4
5:4
3
3
3
5:4
Gtr.2
1
mic. 2
d
a
e

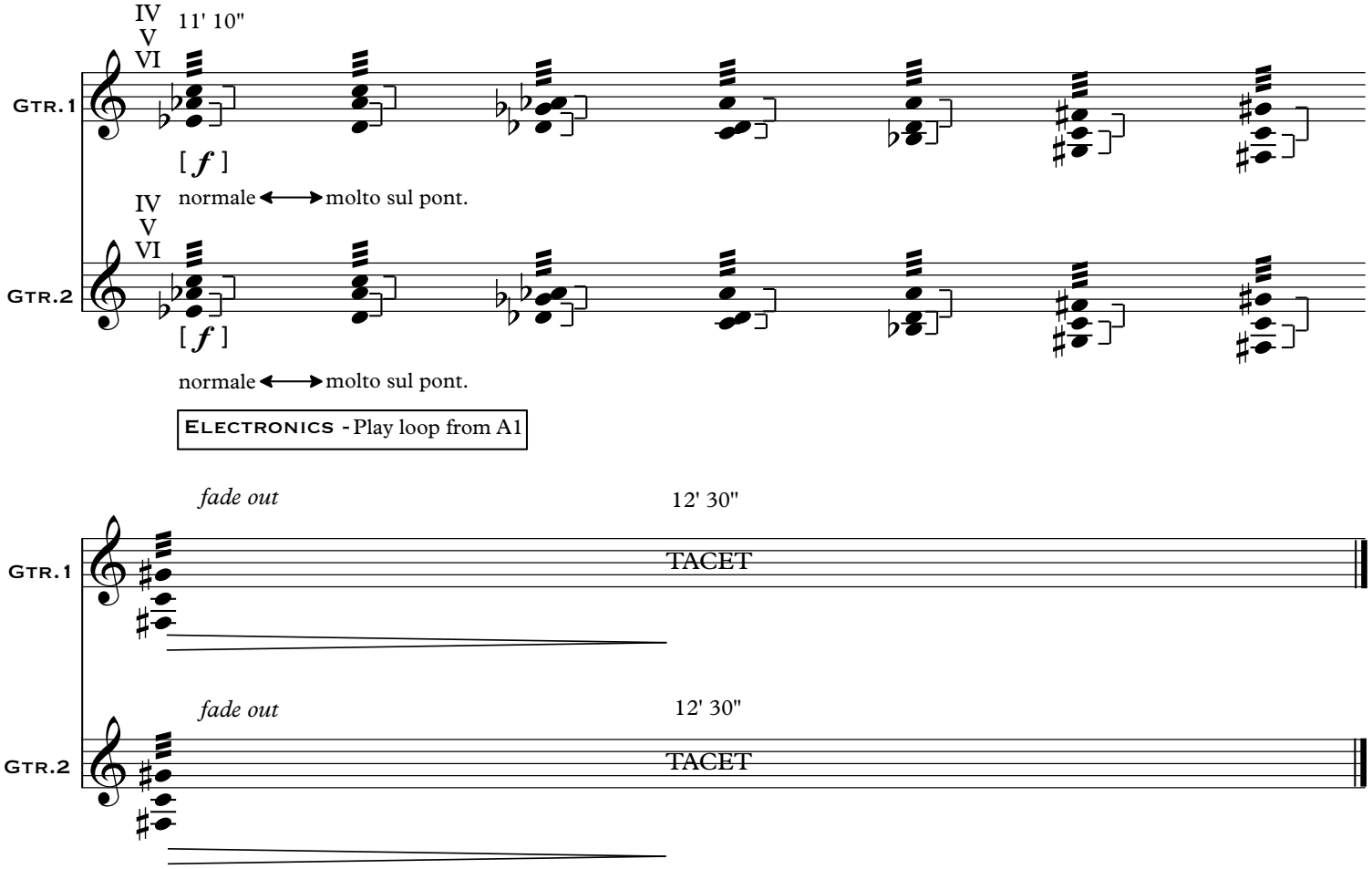

Gtr.1
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
mic. 1
e
b
g
3
3
3
5:4
Gtr.2
1
mic. 2
d
a
e



20" video break - bulldozer

House amplification UP

F HERE AND NOW

House amplification UP

Guitars don't change chords at the same time. One of them is always behind. Dovetail effect.
Notes without an accidental are natural.
Freely