INTRODUCTION

With the exception of the lightweight *Sonatina Romantica*, left unfinished in 1940, Britten composed nothing for piano alone after *Holiday Diary* in 1934 until 1963, when he was asked to write a test piece for the first Leeds International Piano Competition. *Night Piece* (also known as *Notturno*) was the unconventional but highly successful result, and Marion Harewood, the competition's co-founder with Fanny Waterman, asked him to write a further piece for the 1966 competition. He began a set of variations in the autumn of 1965, but the manuscript breaks off just before the end of the sixth of what appear to have been intended to be at least ten variations. I have added a further 8 bars to conclude the sixth variation, as the music stops in mid-flow.

The work can be dated approximately by a sketch page which began life as an ink copy of the song cycle *The Poet's Echo*, composed in the USSR in August 1965: this progressed no further than the word 'Echo', written in Cyrillic, and the first right-hand piano chord. Underneath is a sketch for the beginning of Variation IV, written in firm pencil, followed by much hastier sketches – one for the figuration of Variation VI, and then what are clearly brief ideas for four further variations. These are reproduced exactly as they appear in the manuscript as Appendix 1 (see p. 10); Appendix 2 is a rejected first attempt at Variation V (p. 11).

It is not known why Britten left the work incomplete, but it may have been due to the pressure to begin work on *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, whose first drafts date from October 1965. The stylistic influence of the Church Parables on these variations is very clear to see, with their free improvisatory rhythms and the use of the 'Curlew' sign. The manuscript of the variations has no title.

EDITORIAL NOTE

The manuscript of the *Variations* is fluent and relatively free from indecision, apart from the first version of Variation V and one deleted bar in each of Variations V and VI. In spite of the rhythmic complexity of the piece there are only three (bracketed) time signatures given, and the notation implies a great deal of freedom – 'Like an improvisation' at the head of Variation I could equally apply to the subsequent four variations. This score follows Britten's idiosyncratic spacing as closely as possible, but inevitably lacks the flexibility of the manuscript, whose visual aspect is the key to performance (see the reproduction of the first page, over). Britten's suggested fingering for the first twelve bars has been omitted, since it is not carried through in the rest of the work. The only other editorial change is in the final bar of Variation II, where Britten's mistaken use of the 'Curlew' sign (see below) has been replaced by a normal fermata.

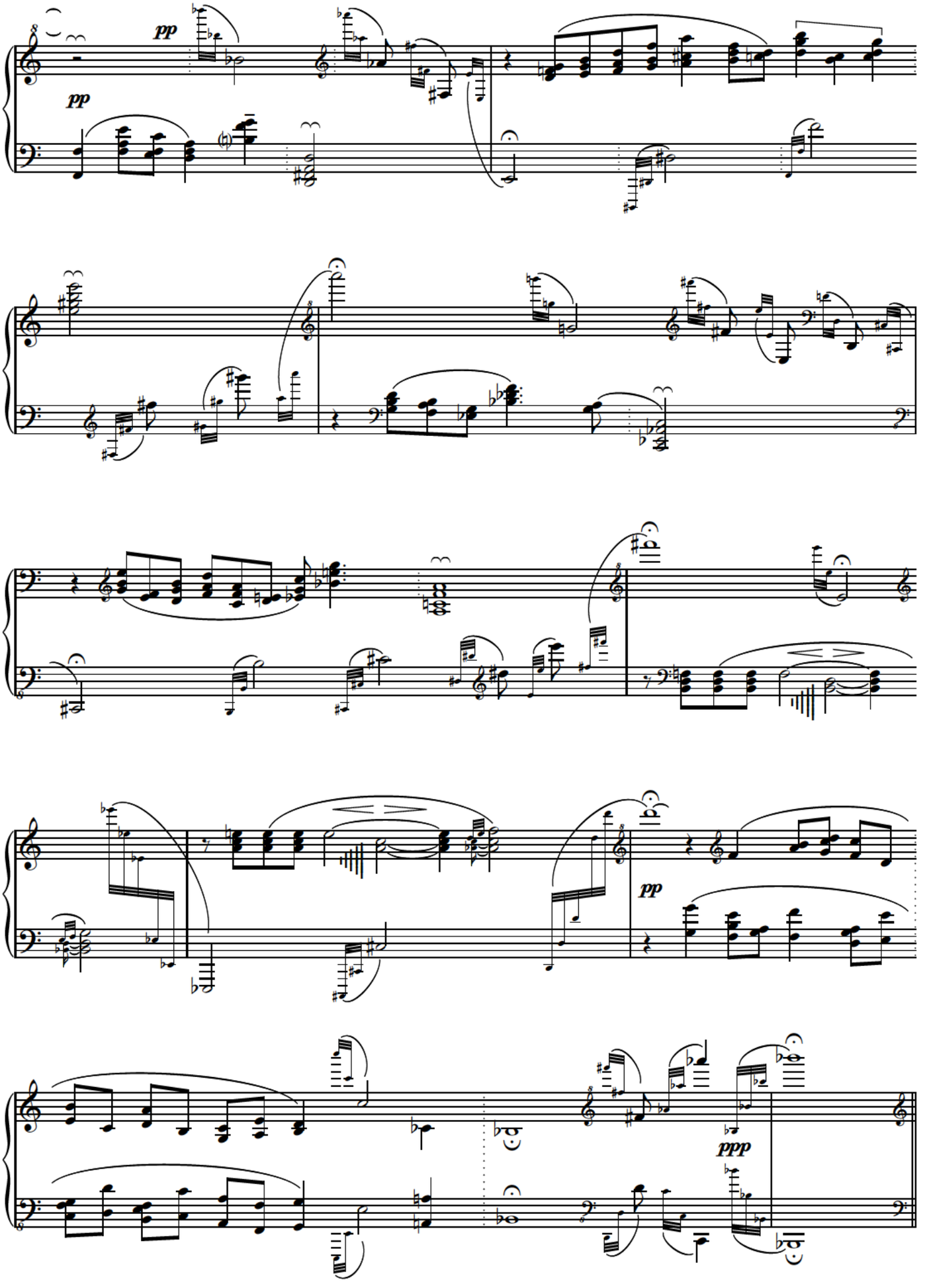
PERFORMANCE NOTE

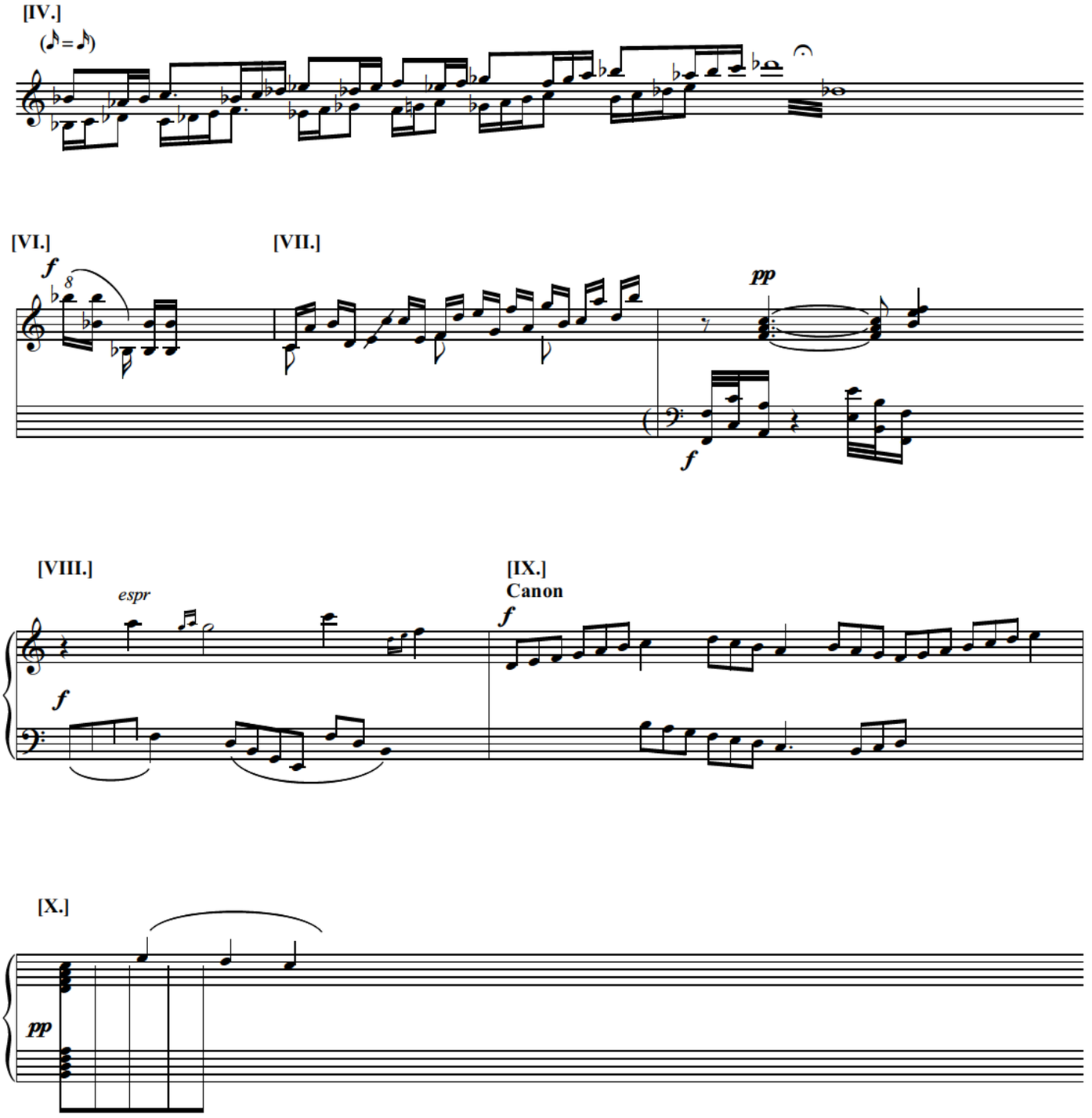
Britten introduced the Curlew sign in his church parable *Curlew River*. There it is used to coordinate individual players in free notation, indicating that they should wait until the other players have reached the next barline. For the two hands of the pianist, the implication is that the note in question can be either shorter or longer than notated.

The sign indicates a tremolando with gradual measured accelerando.

Colin Matthews

V. Quietly



Appendix 1

Sketches, and incipits for unwritten variations