The Uncharted Horizon

There's a moment in every physician's life when the pager stops beeping, the white coat hangs unworn, and the stethoscope no longer presses cold against a patient's skin. For decades, my identity was inseparable from my profession. I was Dr. Heston, the healer who could interpret the language of health and illness, of joy and depression. My skills were honed to precision. Even in moments designated as "time off," I remained tethered to that identity—reading about patients, attending medical conferences disguised as vacations, always connected to improving my clinical ability. Medicine was my calling. Then, it all ended. The moment had arrived. I retired.

With retirement comes a particular vulnerability: stepping back from being excellent at your job to being relatively mediocre at the new tasks. My days were filled with routine chores that demanded none of the expertise I had spent a lifetime cultivating. This unsettling transition required long moments of reflection—a pause, a breather in life's journey. It was as if my sailboat had gotten untethered, set adrift without the foundation that had anchored me for so long. Where had my bearings gone?

The Uncharted Horizon, the first song I wrote after retirement, reflects this initial uncertainty. Surprisingly, it also provided me with a profound rebirth. The song starts with a quiet melody, then rests on a C#m7 chord in measure 4. It's a deliberate slowing that invites a pause, a deep breath. Then, as the music tentatively resumes, the restful melody continues but soon pauses again, this time much deeper, on a key change with the chord Cmaj7 in measure 20.

These pauses were healing to me. The rest, the deep breaths, the reflection provided the beginning of a recalibration. But then, something unexpected happened. It wasn't by my design but came from somewhere outside of me. Somehow, this same chord effortlessly became the foundation for a new theme (measure 55). Then, boldly, at the end, it became the bedrock of an energizing, strong rejuvenation.

My life in medicine has been like a wonderful chaotic symphony—Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, if you will—yet so much more. From the harmonies of a Gabrielli quintet to the raw energy of rock and roll; from the peace of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata to the questions raised in John Cage's 4'33"; from smooth jazz to the pure joy I felt as a father attending my child's school concert; from the complete wonderment from holding a newborn, to providing comfort to a dying patient taking their last breath; from the profound friendships with colleagues forged on medicine's front lines, to working as a team to try to give our patient one more day to live. Yet, somehow, I always felt centered. Medicine gave me a strong purpose. I knew I was doing my best at something profoundly meaningful.

Then the music stopped; I was off the clock. The echoes from the final cannon blast in Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture had faded. I felt I had lost that sturdy rudder of meaning that had guided me through decades of practicing medicine. But I was wrong. What initially appeared as an ending revealed its true nature: a pause, then a renewal. My C#m7 moment was complete when I heard a strong call from an uncharted horizon. And I'm answering the call.

Thomas F Heston MD, March 2025

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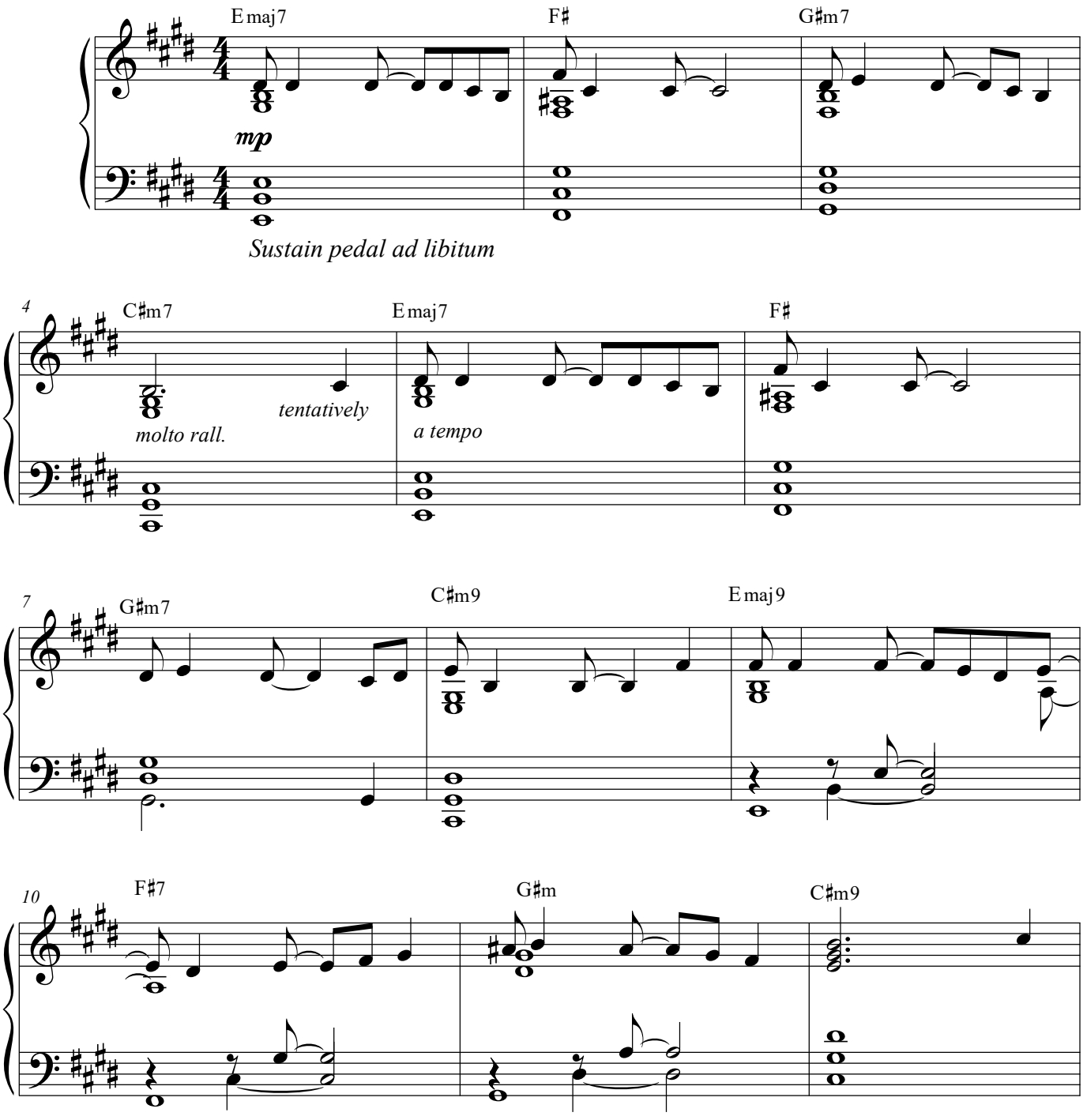
Larghetto ♩ = 55-65



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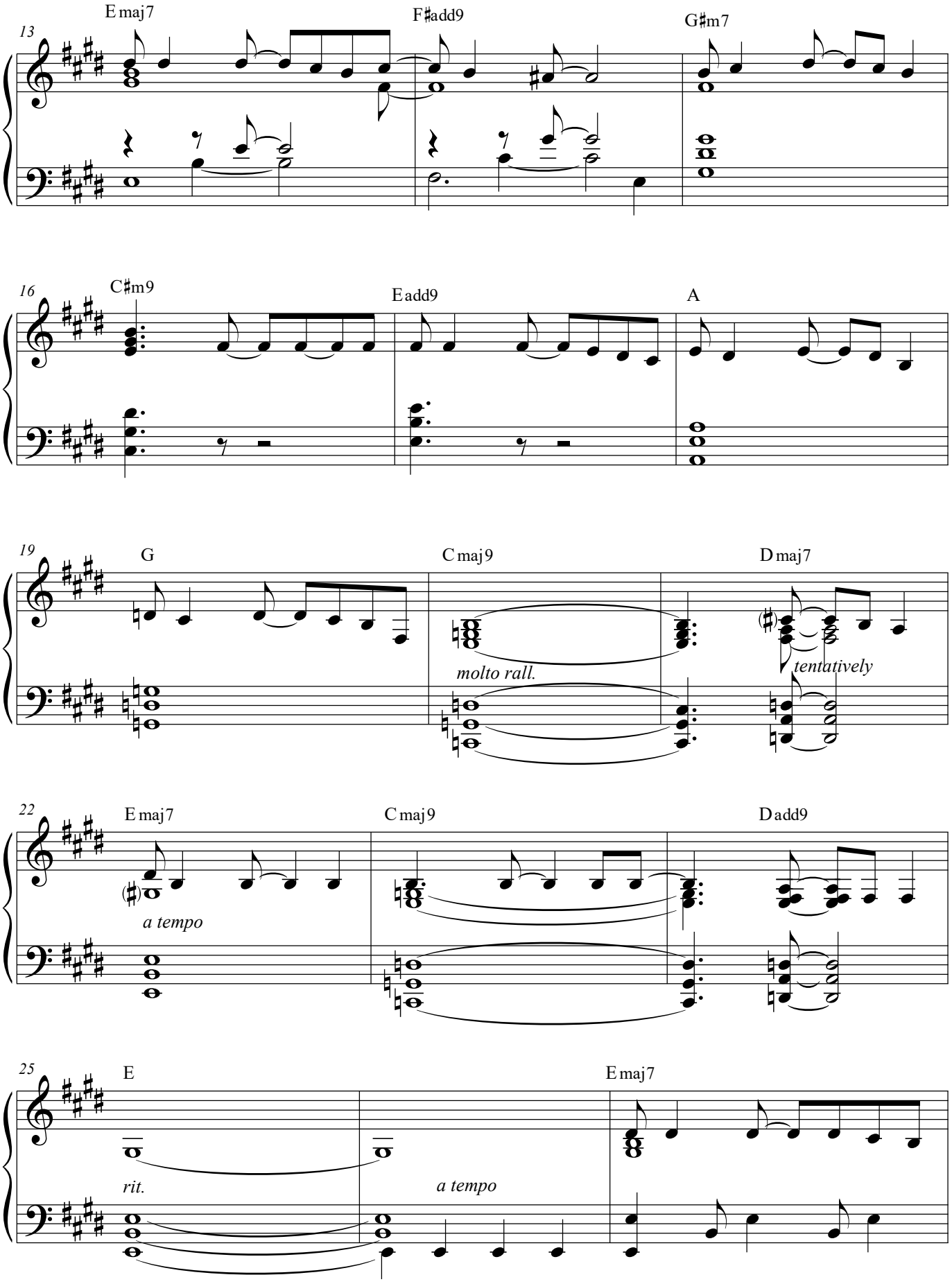
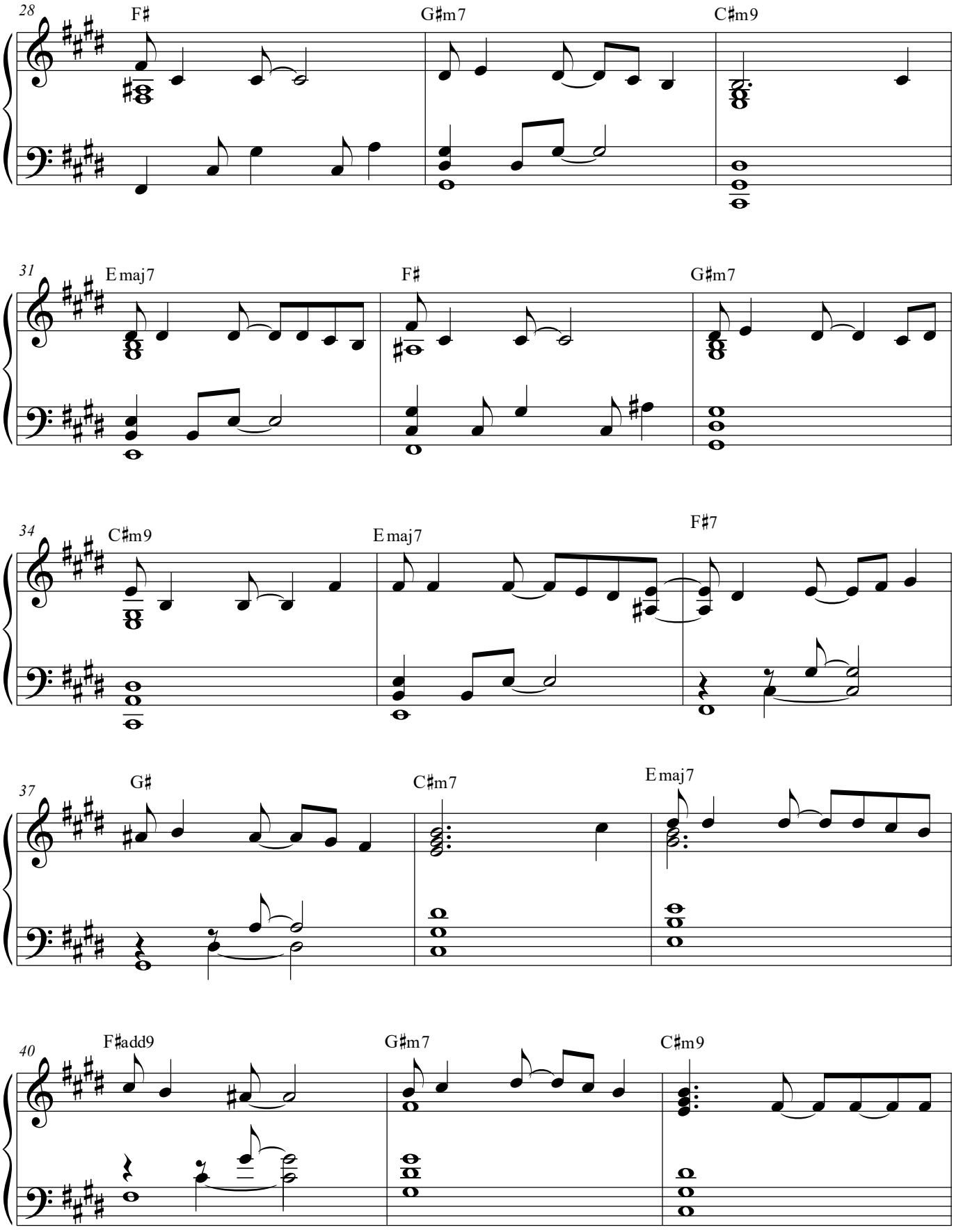
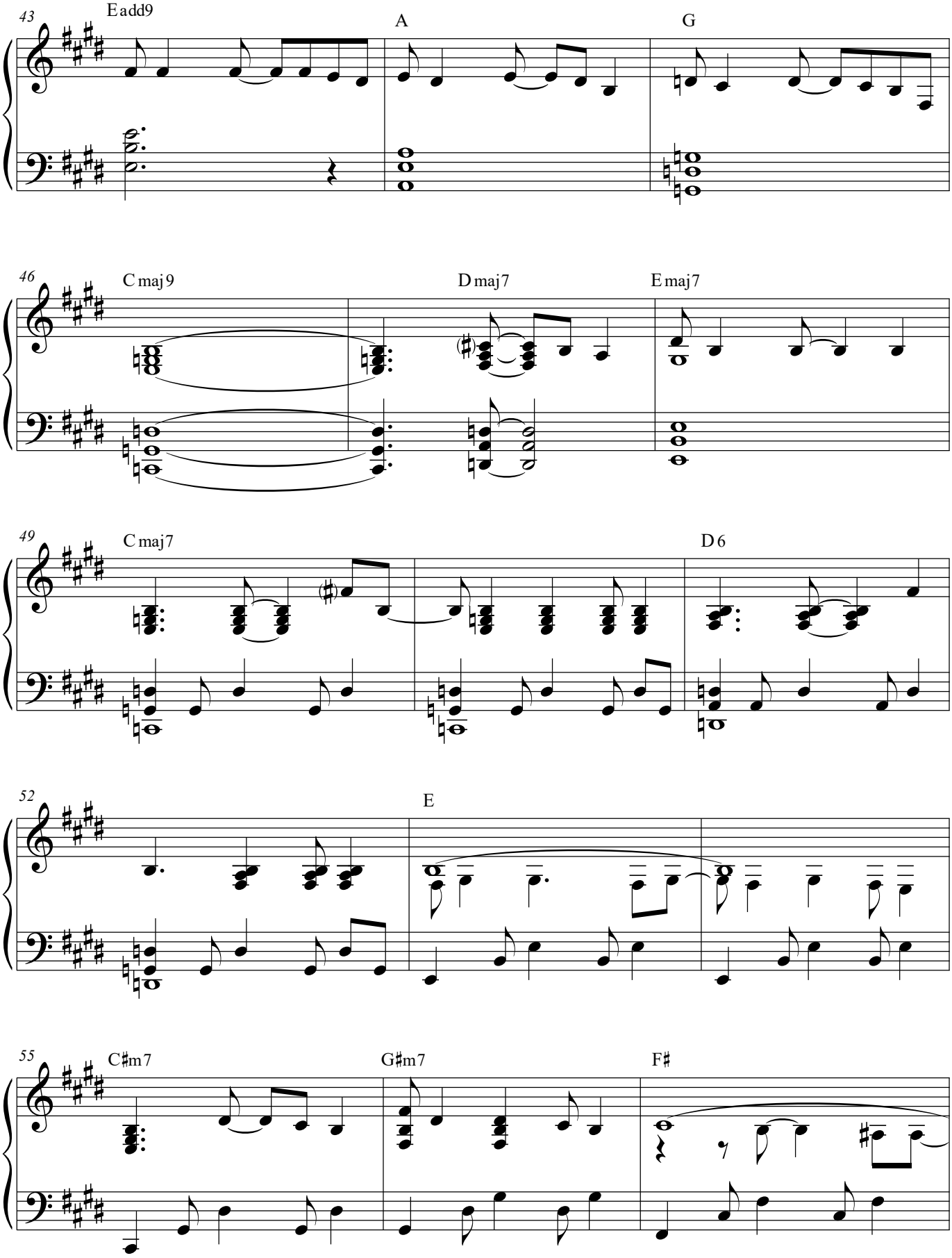
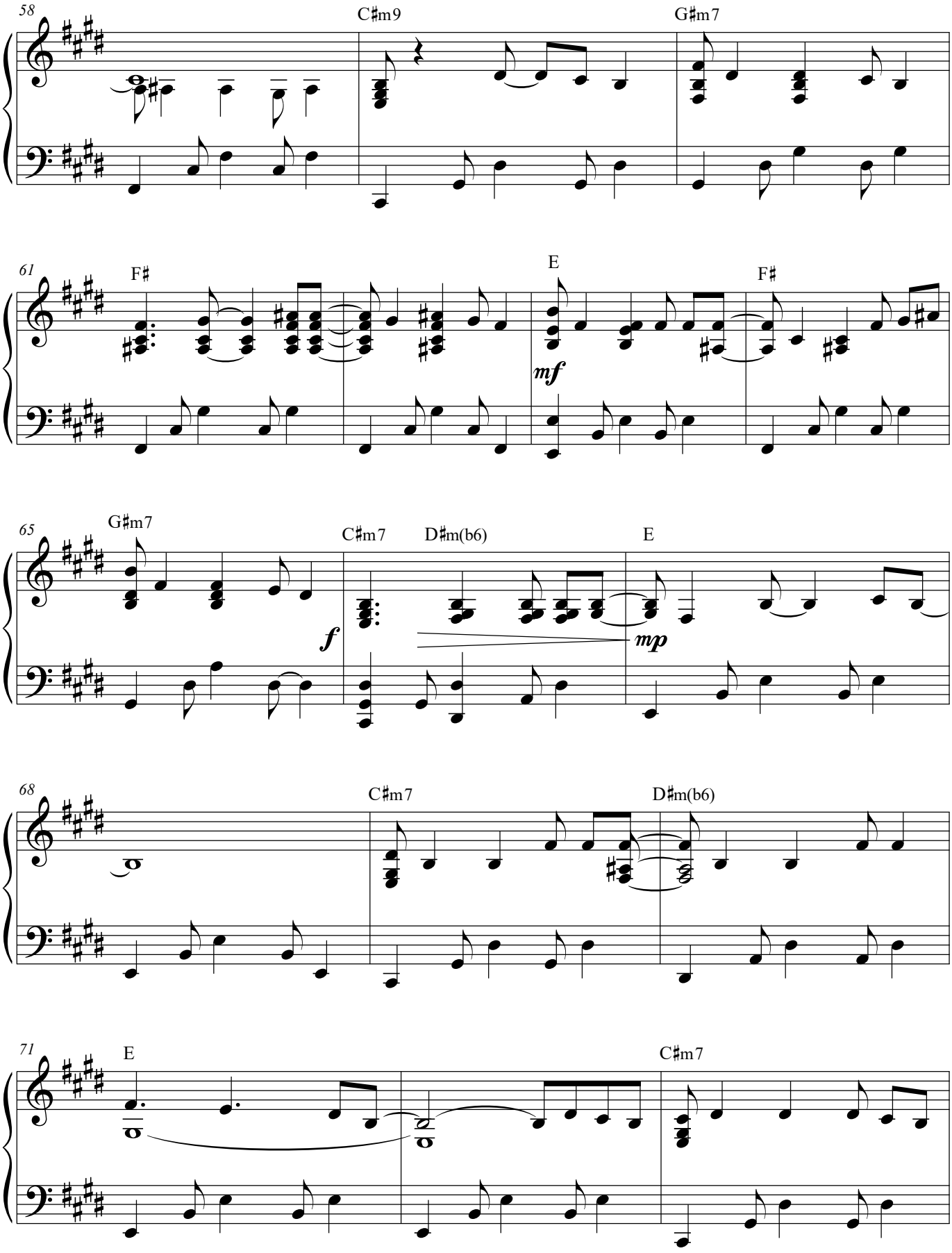
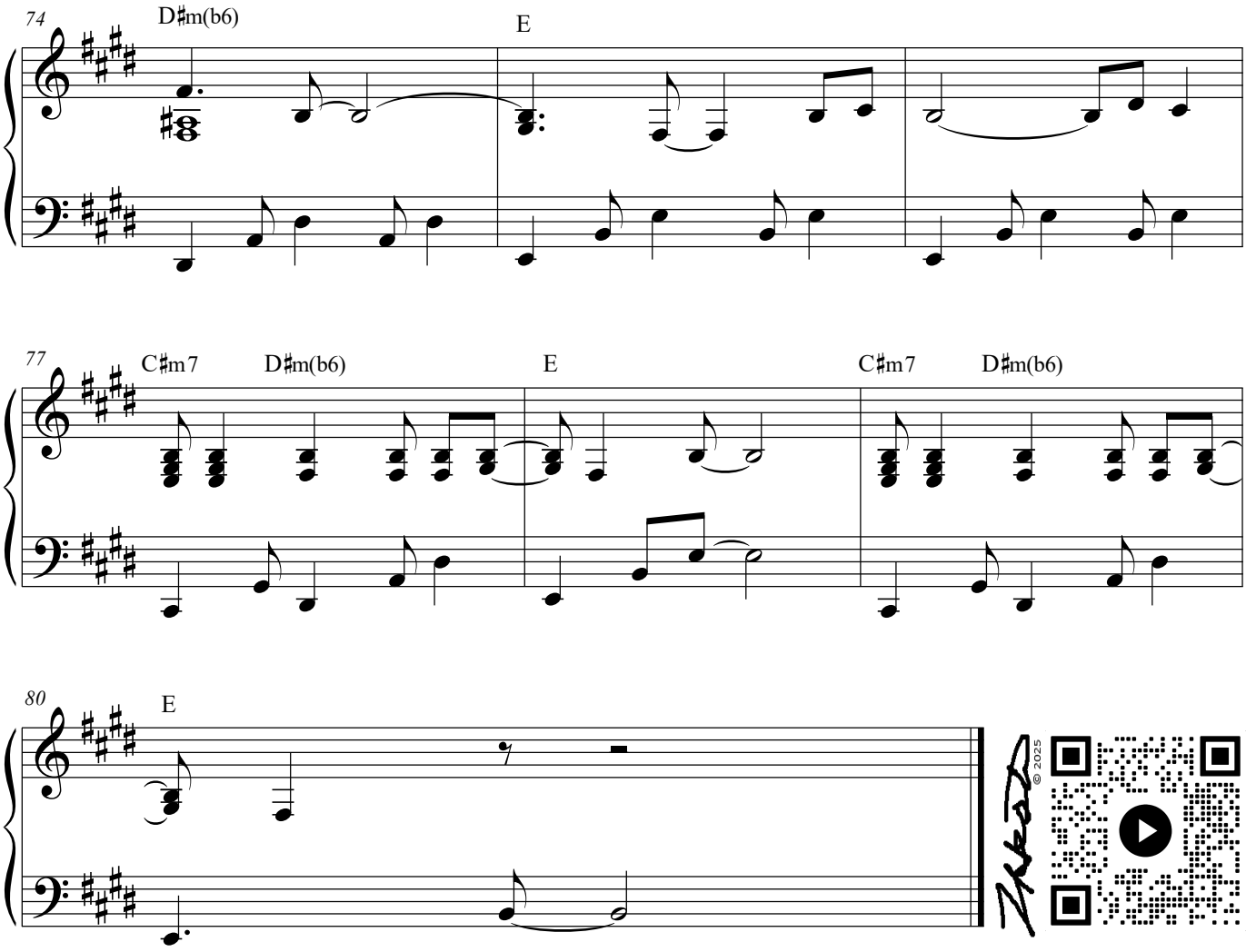

13
E maj7
F♯add9
G♯m7
16
C♯m9
E add9
A
19
G
C maj9
molto rall.
D maj7
tentatively
22
E maj7
a tempo
C maj9
D add9
25
E
rit.
a tempo
E maj7


28
F♯
G♯m7
C♯m9
31
E maj7
F♯
G♯m7
34
C♯m9
E maj7
F♯7
37
G♯
C♯m7
E maj7
40
F♯add9
G♯m7
C♯m9


43
Eadd9
A
G
46
C maj9
D maj7
E maj7
49
C maj7
D 6
52
E
55
C♯m7
G♯m7
F♯


58
C♯m9
G♯m7
61
F♯
E
mf
F♯
65
G♯m7
C♯m7
D♯m(b6)
E
f
mp
68
C♯m7
D♯m(b6)
71
E
C♯m7


74
D♯m(b6)
E
77
C♯m7
D♯m(b6)
E
C♯m7
D♯m(b6)
80
E