JOHN SYKES

Theme and Variations
for
String Quartet

The JOHN SYKES PROJECT
MMXVIII

John Austin Sykes (1909 – 1962)

John Sykes was born in India in 1909 - in India because his father was in the Indian civil service. Back in England he won a music scholarship to Clifton College, Bristol, and whilst still a schoolboy gained his A.R.C.O. and F.R.C.O. In 1928 he went up to Oxford as organ scholar at Balliol. In those days, undergraduates were not able to read Music as a first degree, so Sykes read Modern History, and followed it up with a B.Mus. One contemporary source considered him to have been the most distinguished musical undergraduate of his time. He was president of the famous Oxford University Opera Club and active in the Music Club and Union. He was sufficiently important to be given a full-page spread in the undergraduate newspaper 'Isis' – which referred to his ability to 'make a piano do anything but swim'. He was a friend of the left-wing poet Randall Swingler, and also a contemporary of W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis, whom he knew, so it is perhaps not surprising that he was a fluent, though not distinguished, poet. After Oxford, he went to London, to the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition under Ralph Vaughan Williams, R. O. Morris and Gordon Jacob. In 1936 he was appointed to the staff of Kingswood School, and there he stayed, except for war service, until he died of cancer in the school Sanatorium in the summer term of 1962.

The John Sykes Project is an informal group of former pupils who are transcribing and publishing his music on the internet, and encouraging its performance.

www.jasykes.online
sykesproj@talktalk.net

Theme and Variations for String Quartet

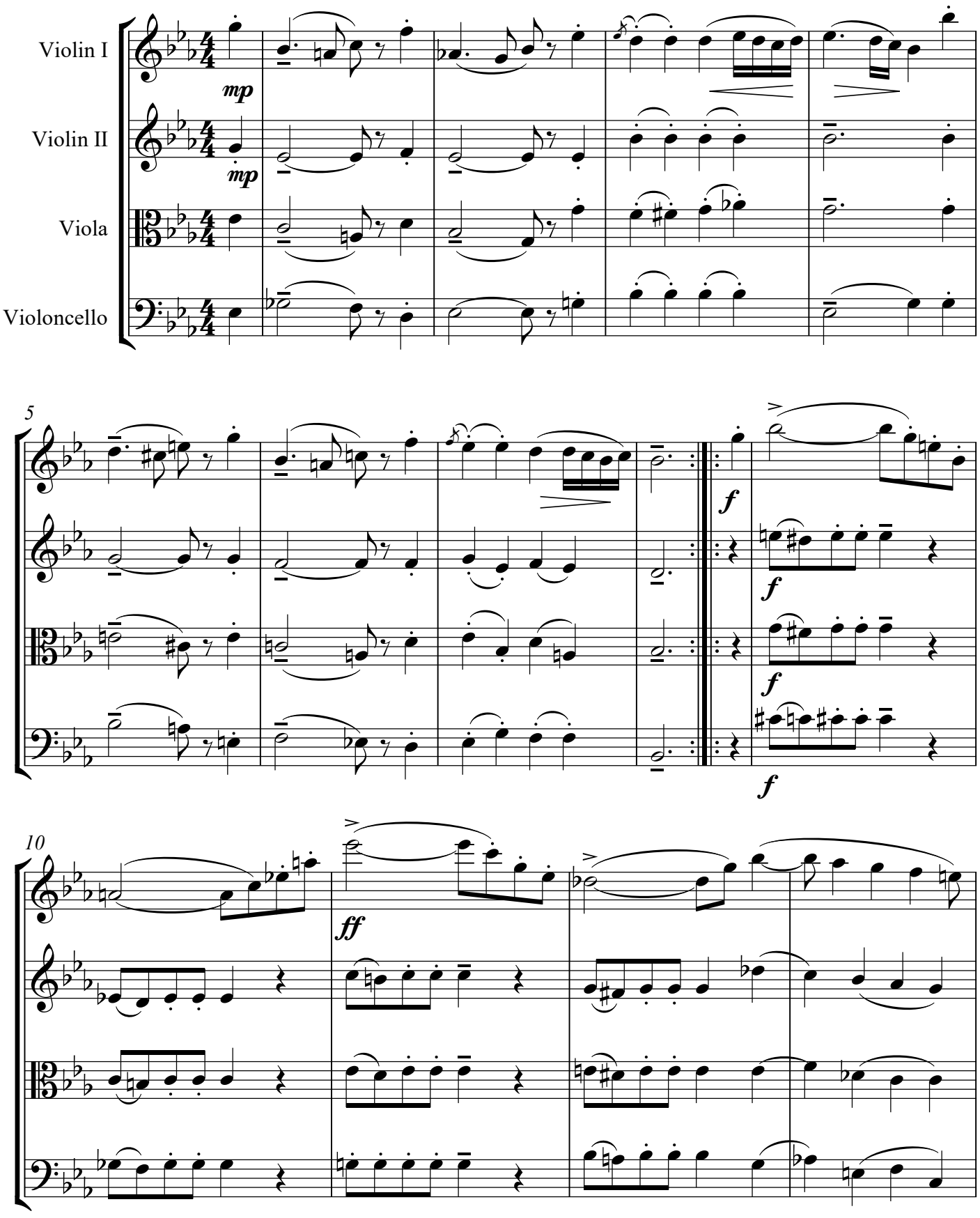
The Manuscript of this work is dated ‘Oct. - Dec. 1932’ which is during the first term of John Sykes’ year as a composition pupil of Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacobs at the Royal College of Music, and after he had completed his degree in Modern History at Oxford. Unlike the majority of his manuscripts, there are sections where he failed to include performance indications (dynamics, phrasing etc.), and one section in the fugal Finale crossed out and replaced by entirely different music (he had written himself into an impossible situation). There are also inconsistencies in some of the links between variations, and some bars in which the note lengths do not add up properly. These are all indications of writing under time constraints, and the work shows all the symptoms of a composition exercise, rather than a work he wrote for his own pleasure. This is reinforced by another unusual feature – the fugal Finale, which is the only fugue he ever wrote. Vaughan Williams was something of an expert on fugue: he wote the Groves *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* article on the subject, and I can easily imagine him setting such a task to test his pupil’s mettle.

P.J.C. July, 2018

Theme and Variations for String Quartet

John Sykes

Allegretto



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Var. I

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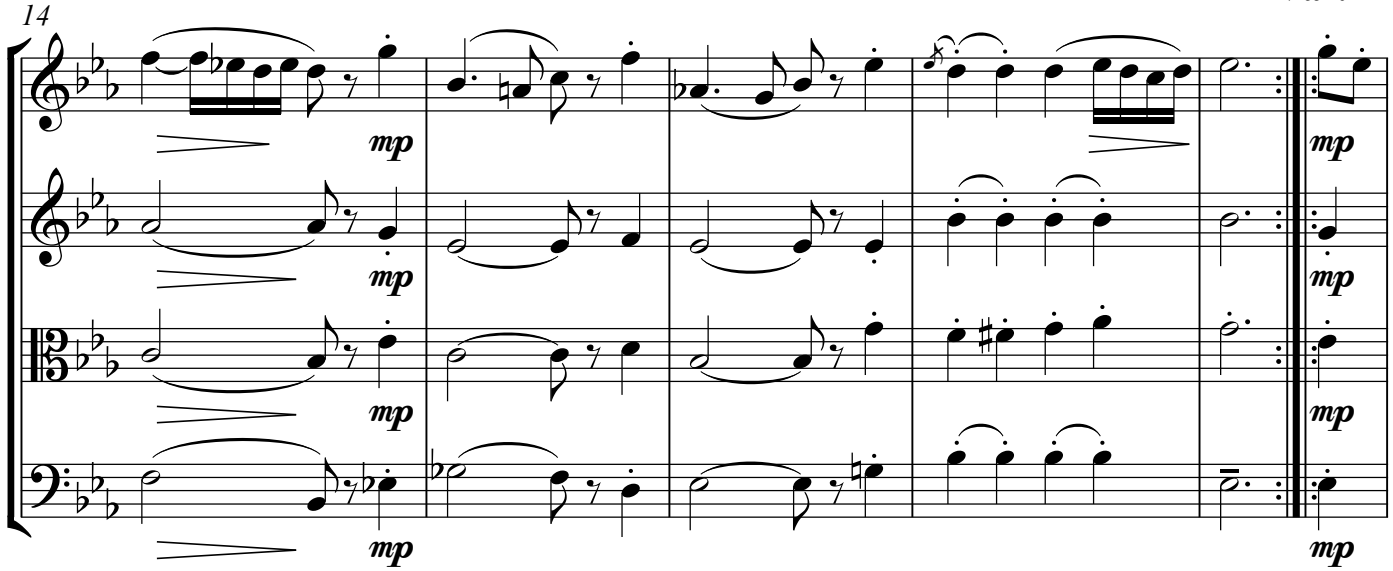

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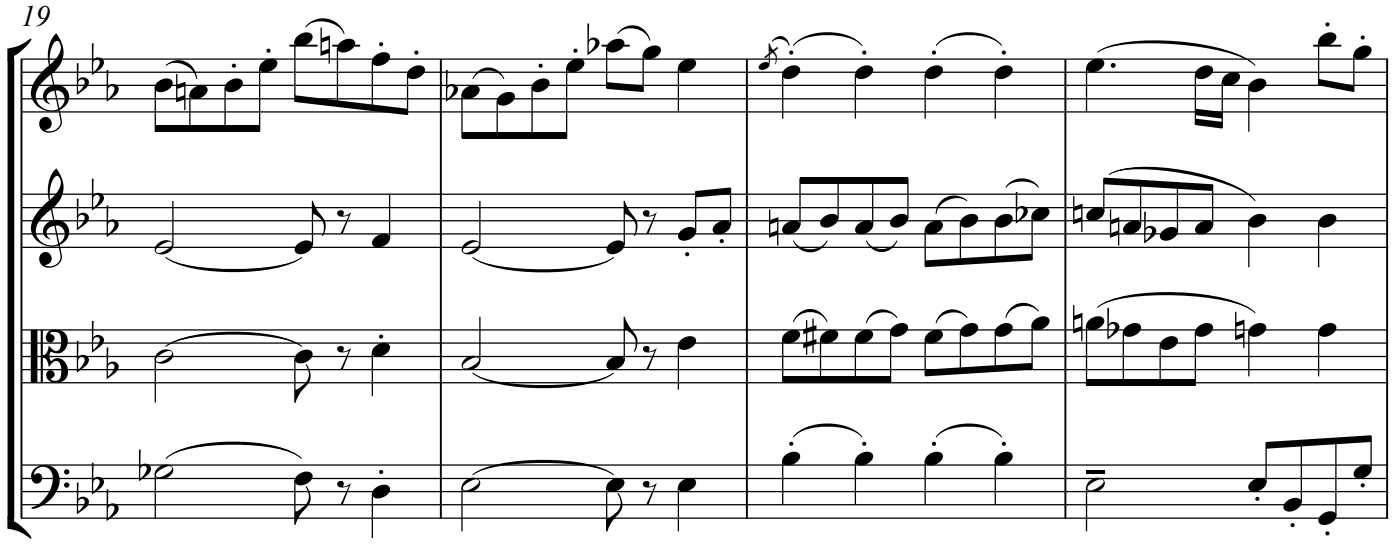

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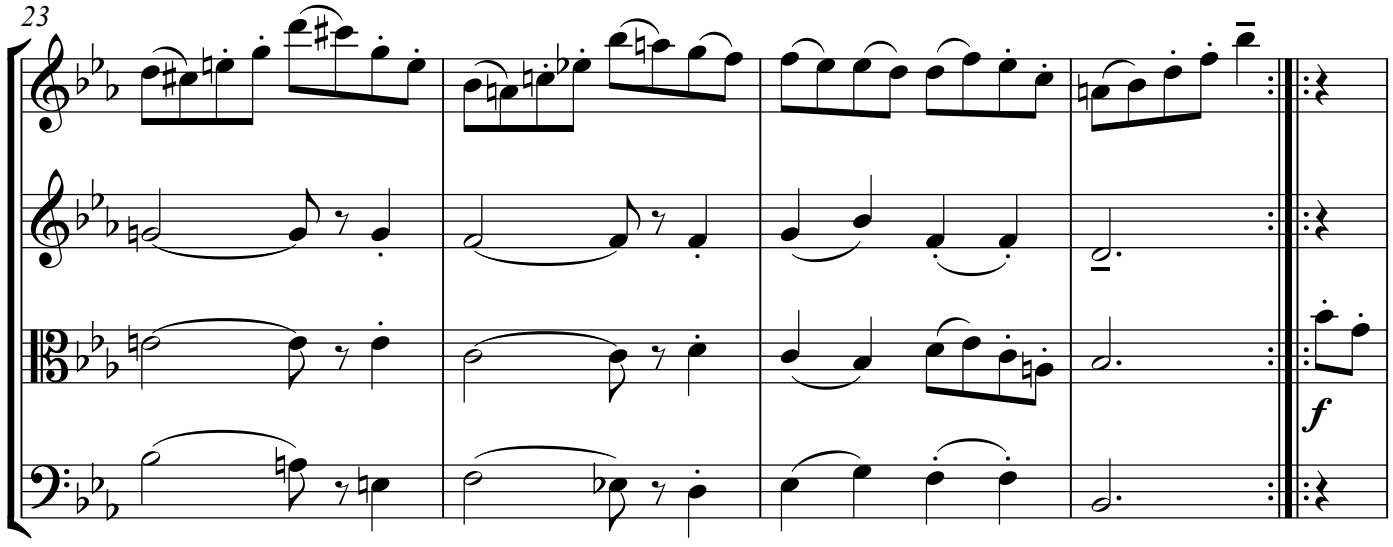
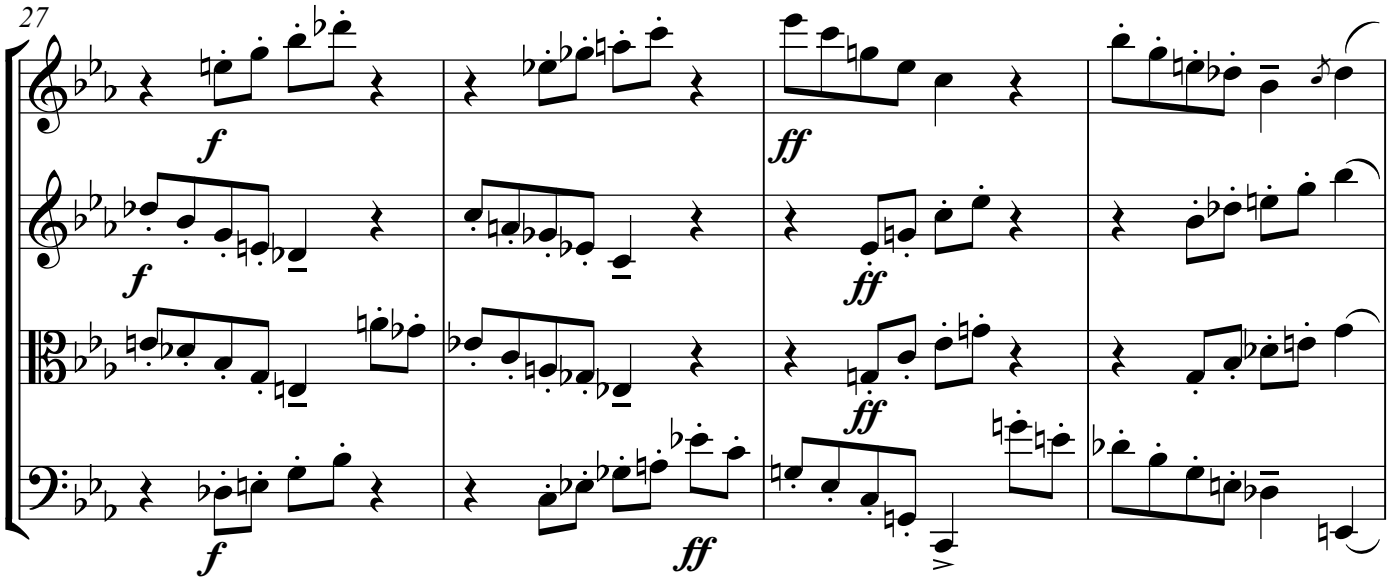
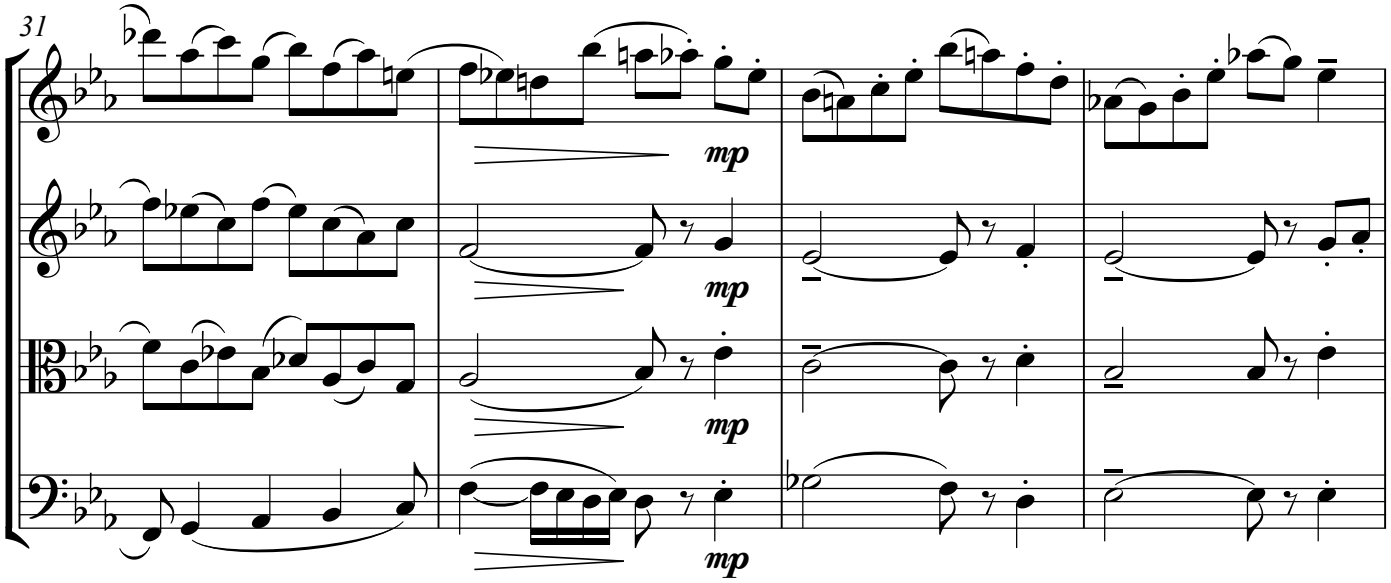
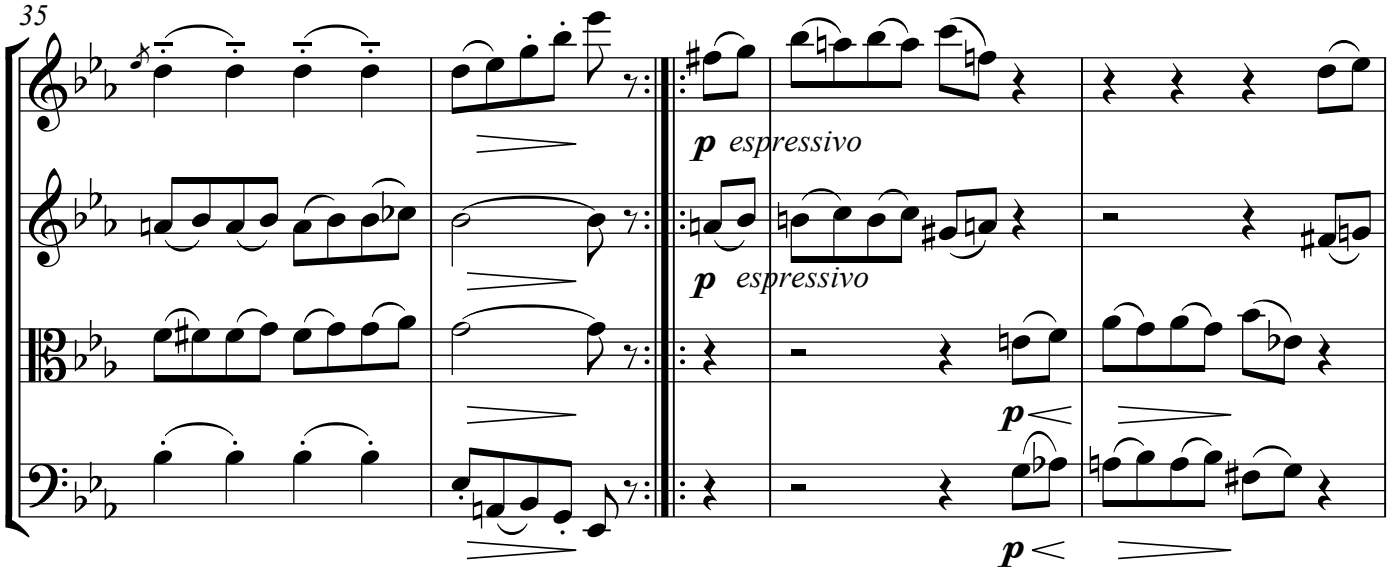


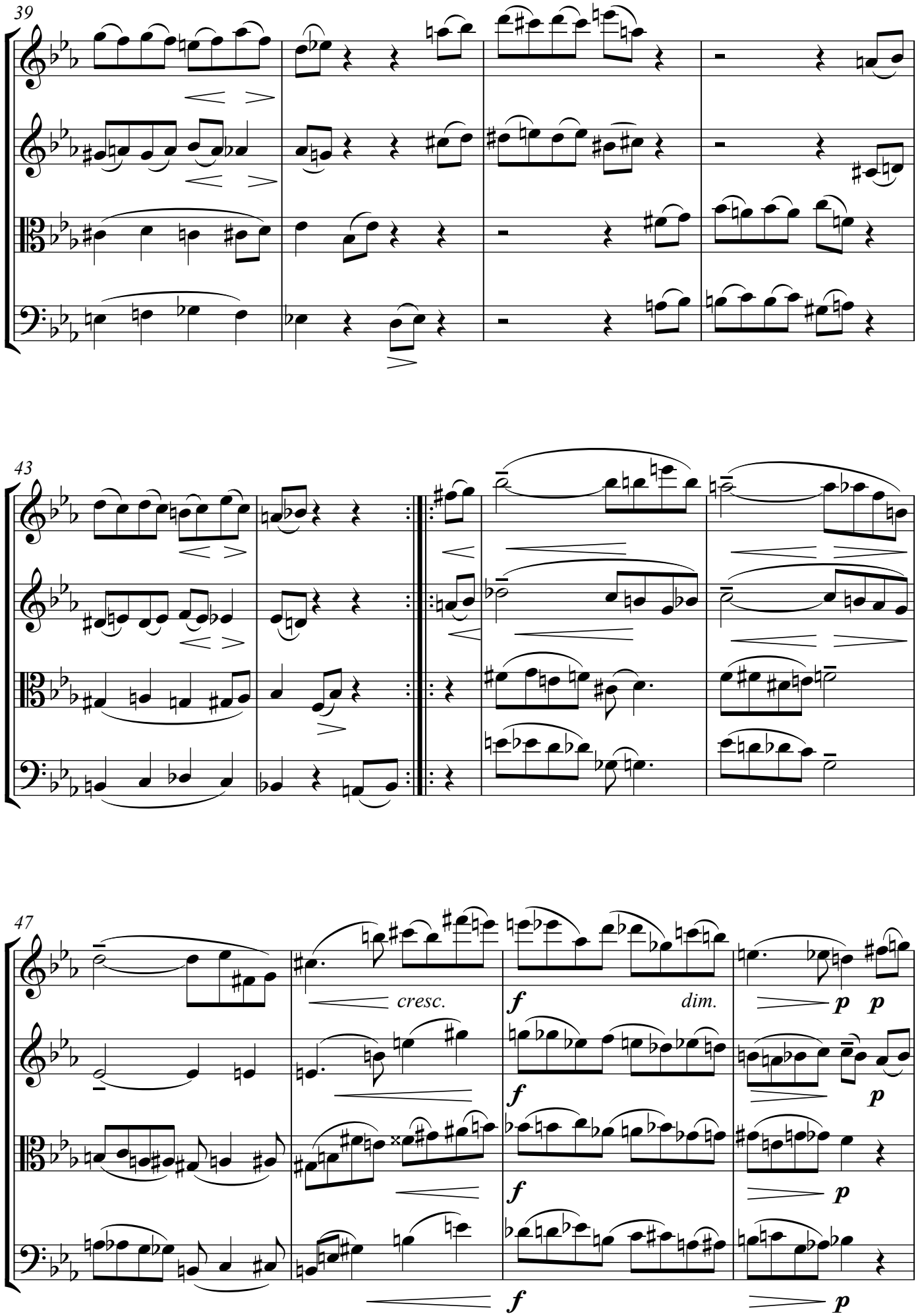




Var. II

Piu Andante

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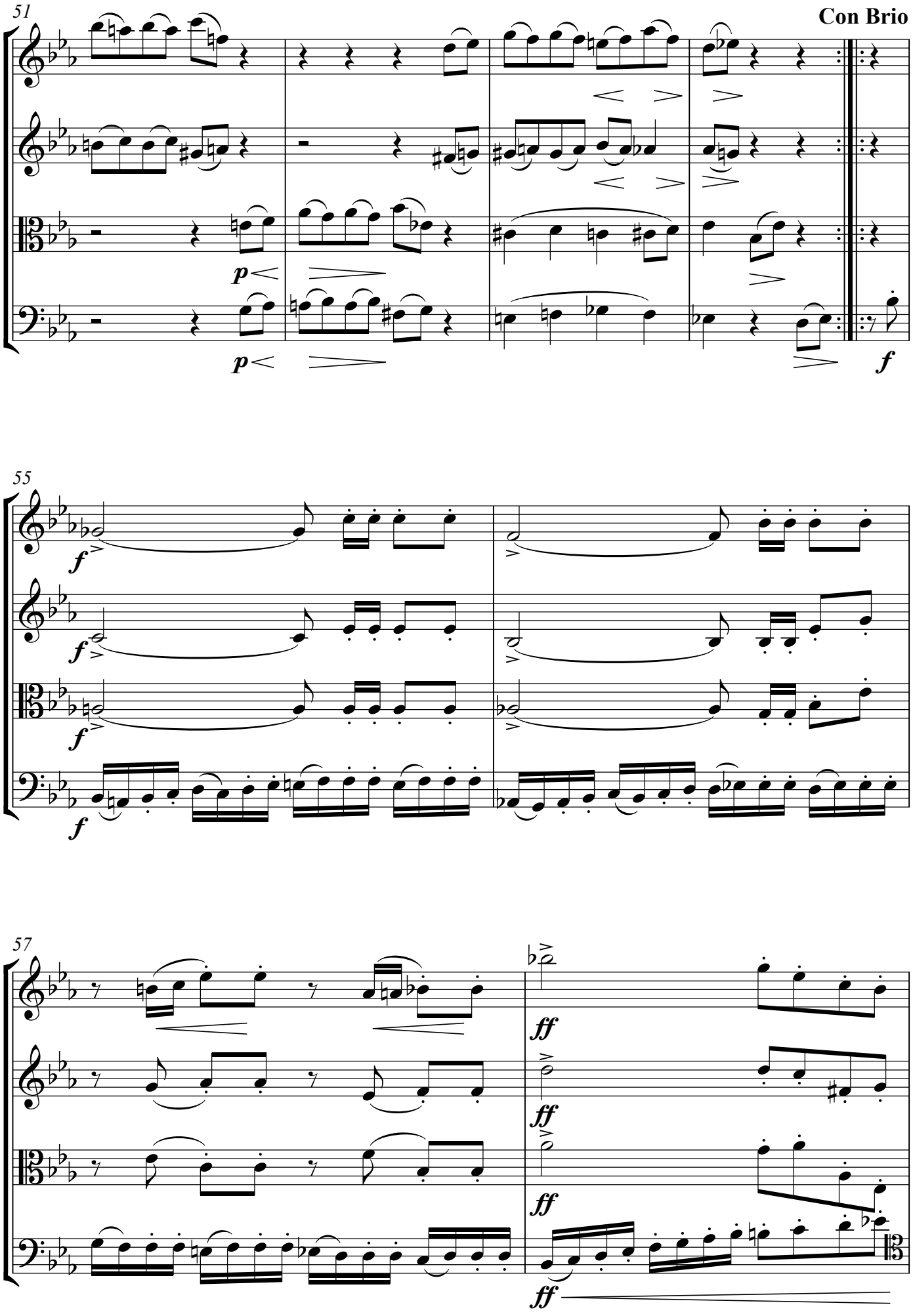
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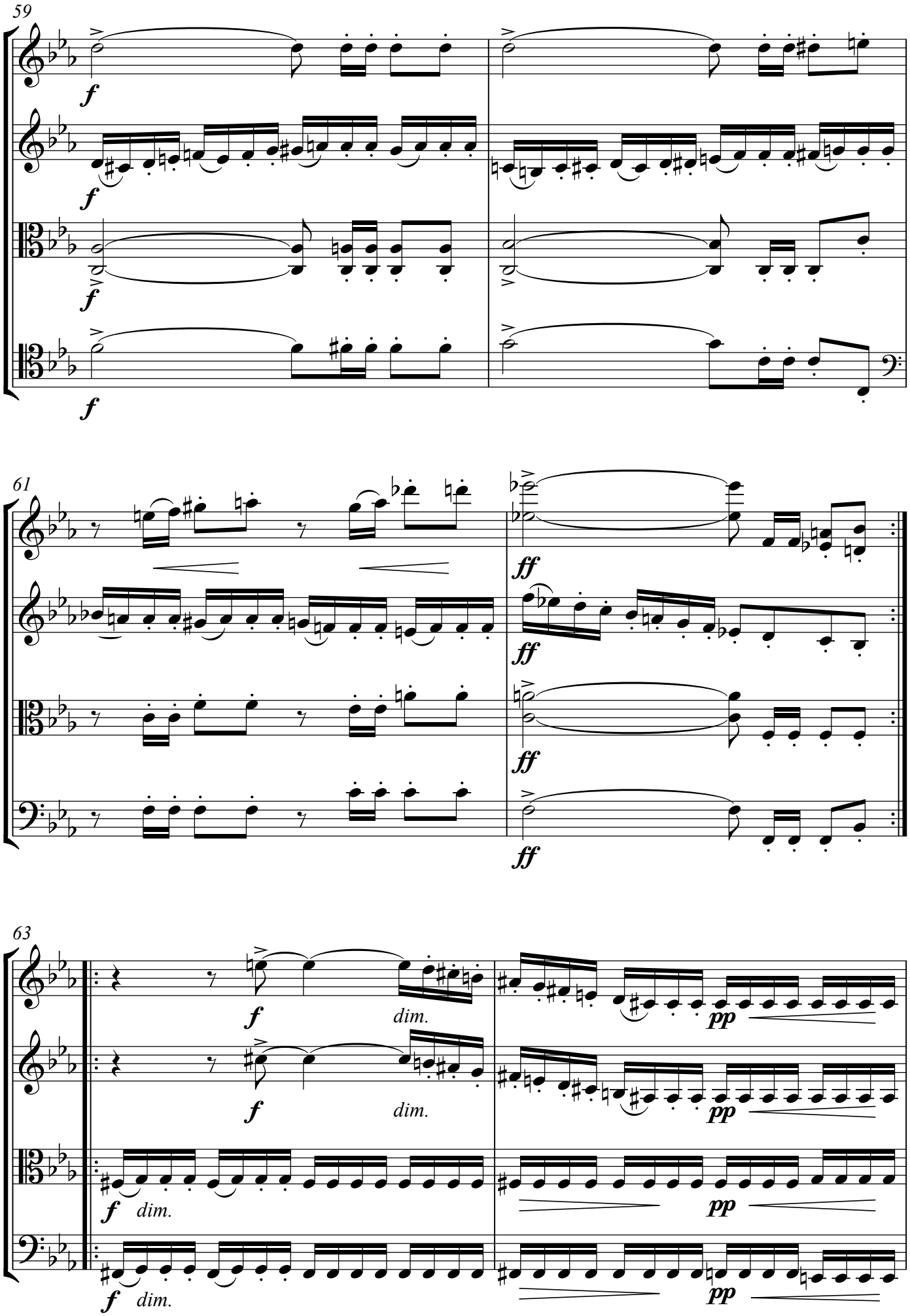
ff
ff
ff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ff
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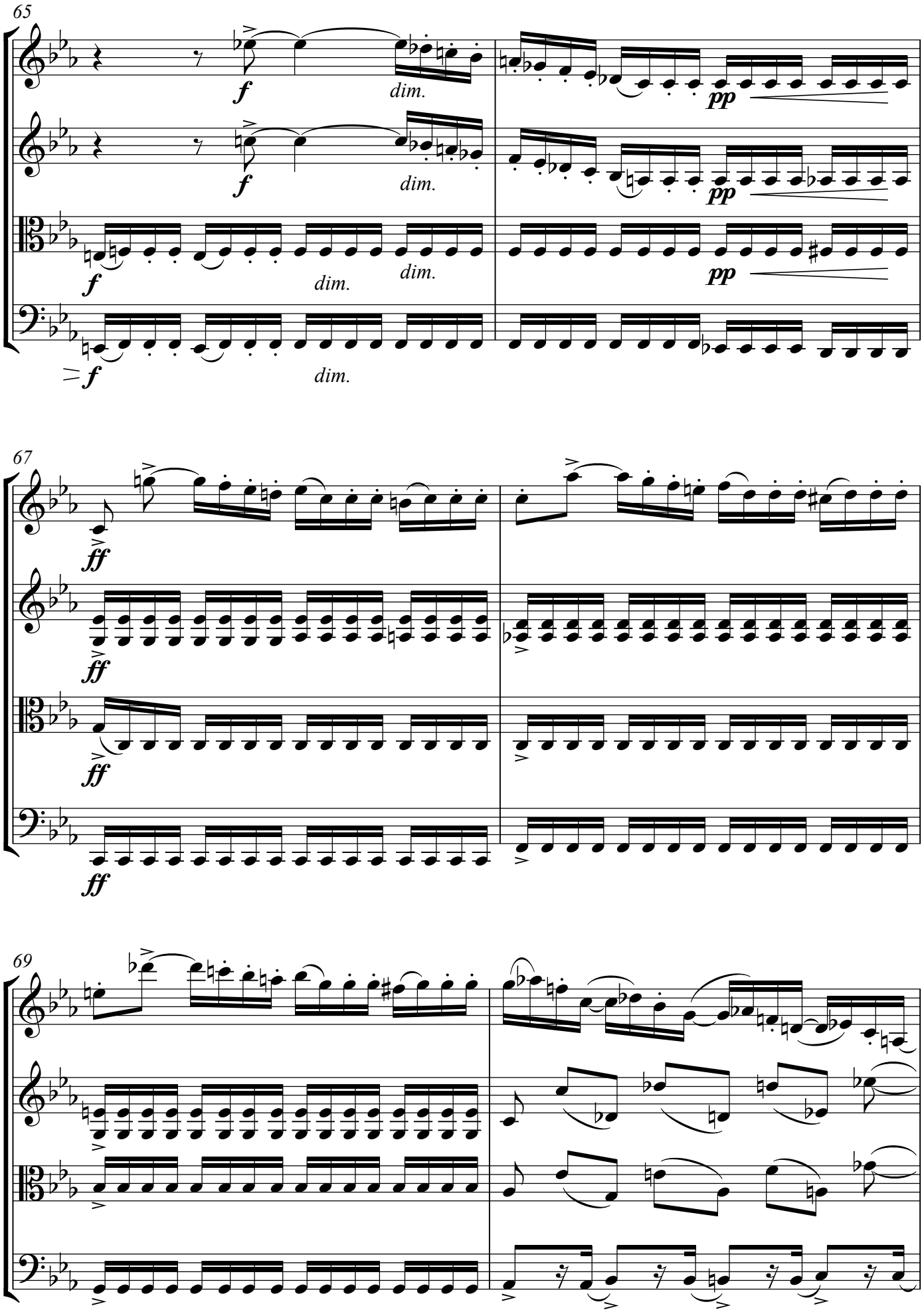
dim.
pp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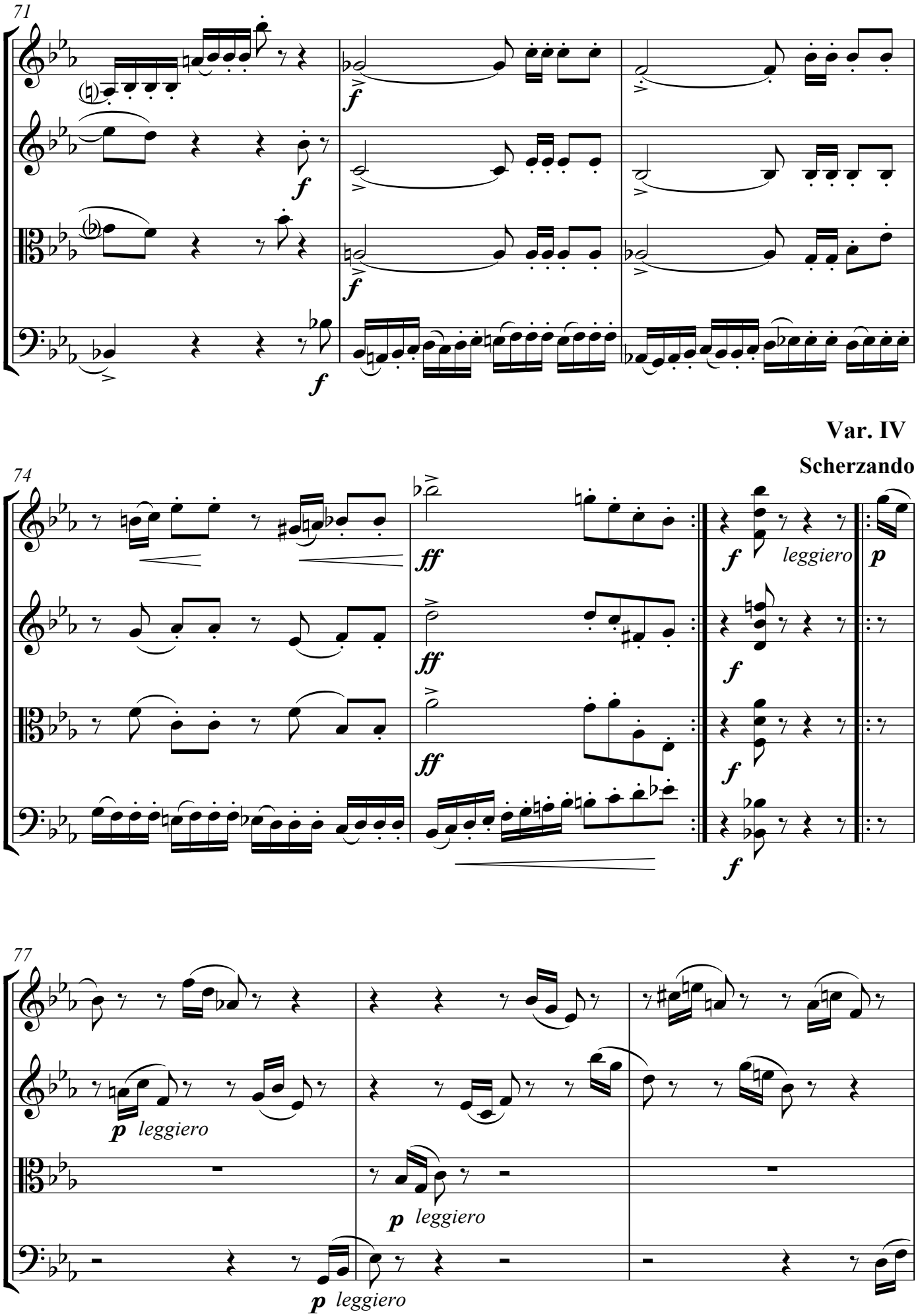
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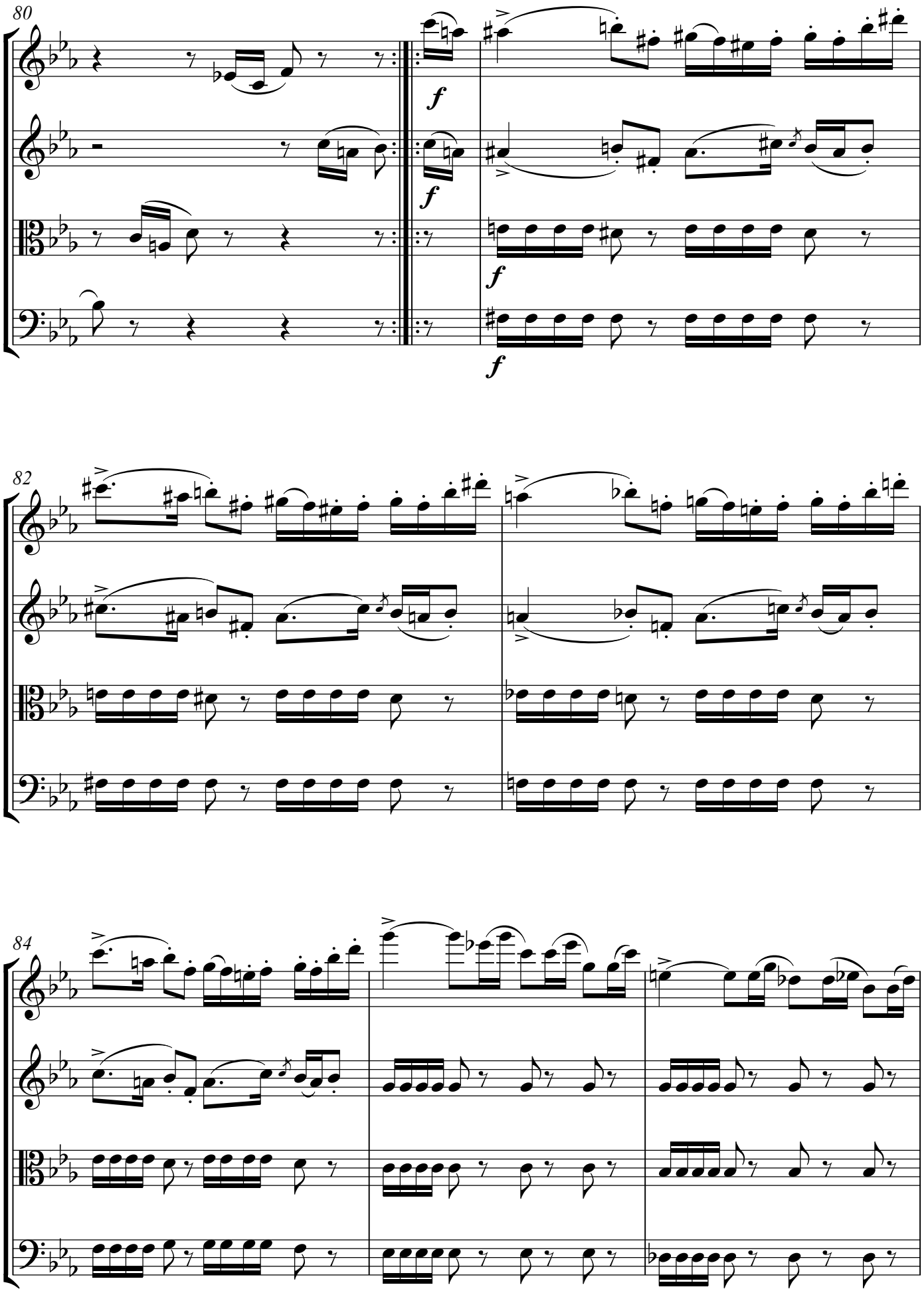
Var. IV
Scherzando
leggiero
leggiero
leggiero
leggiero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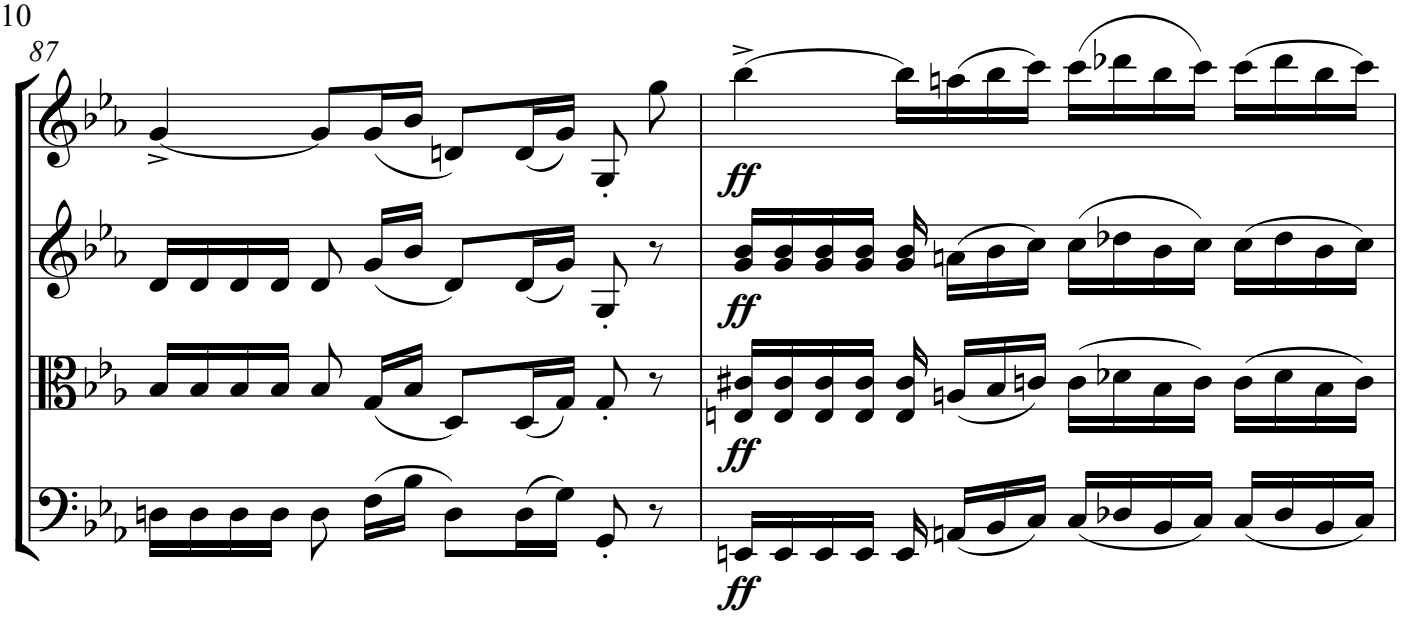
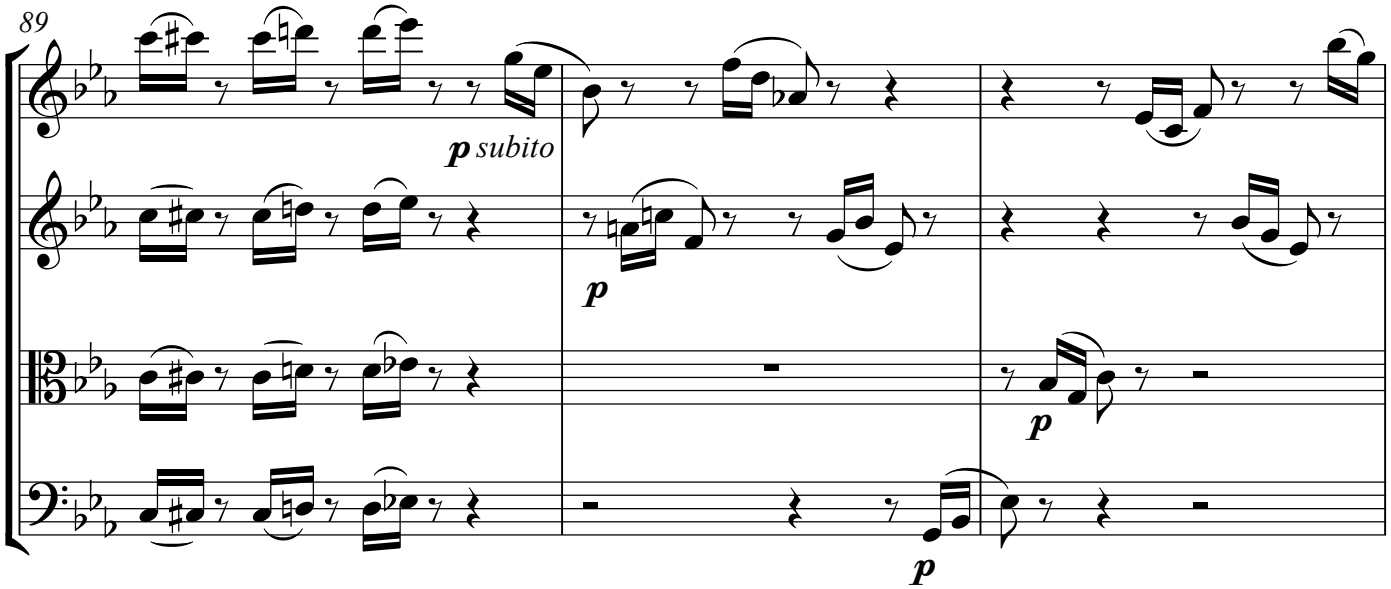
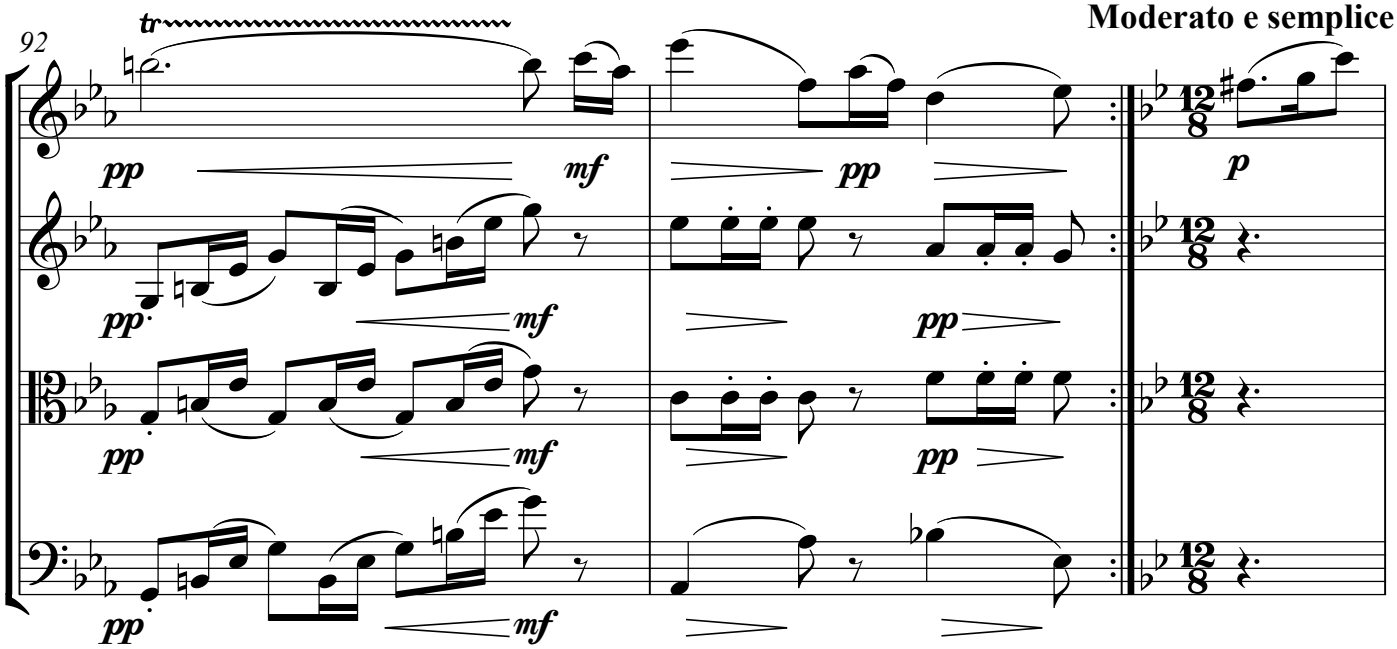
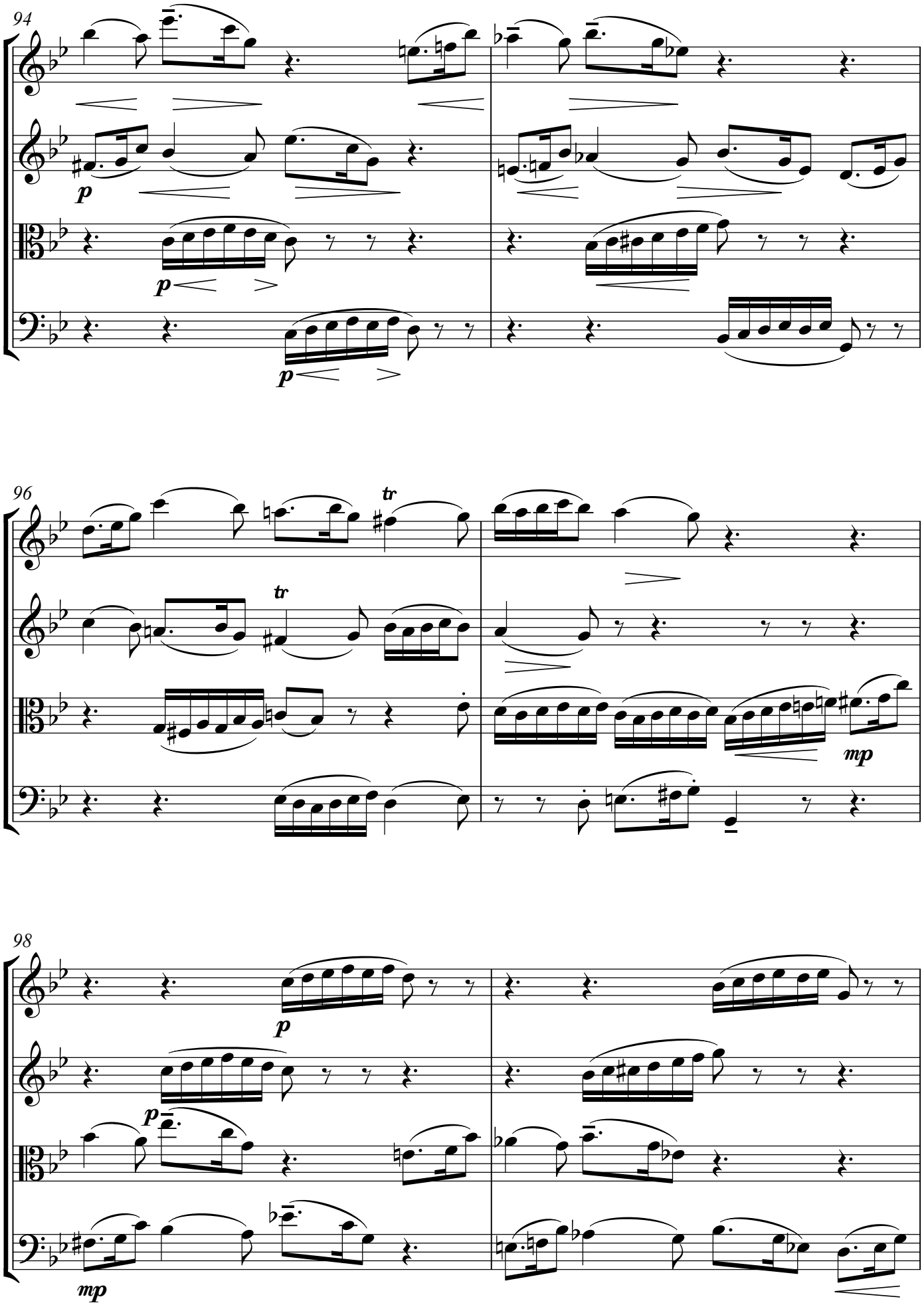




Var. V

Moderato e semplice

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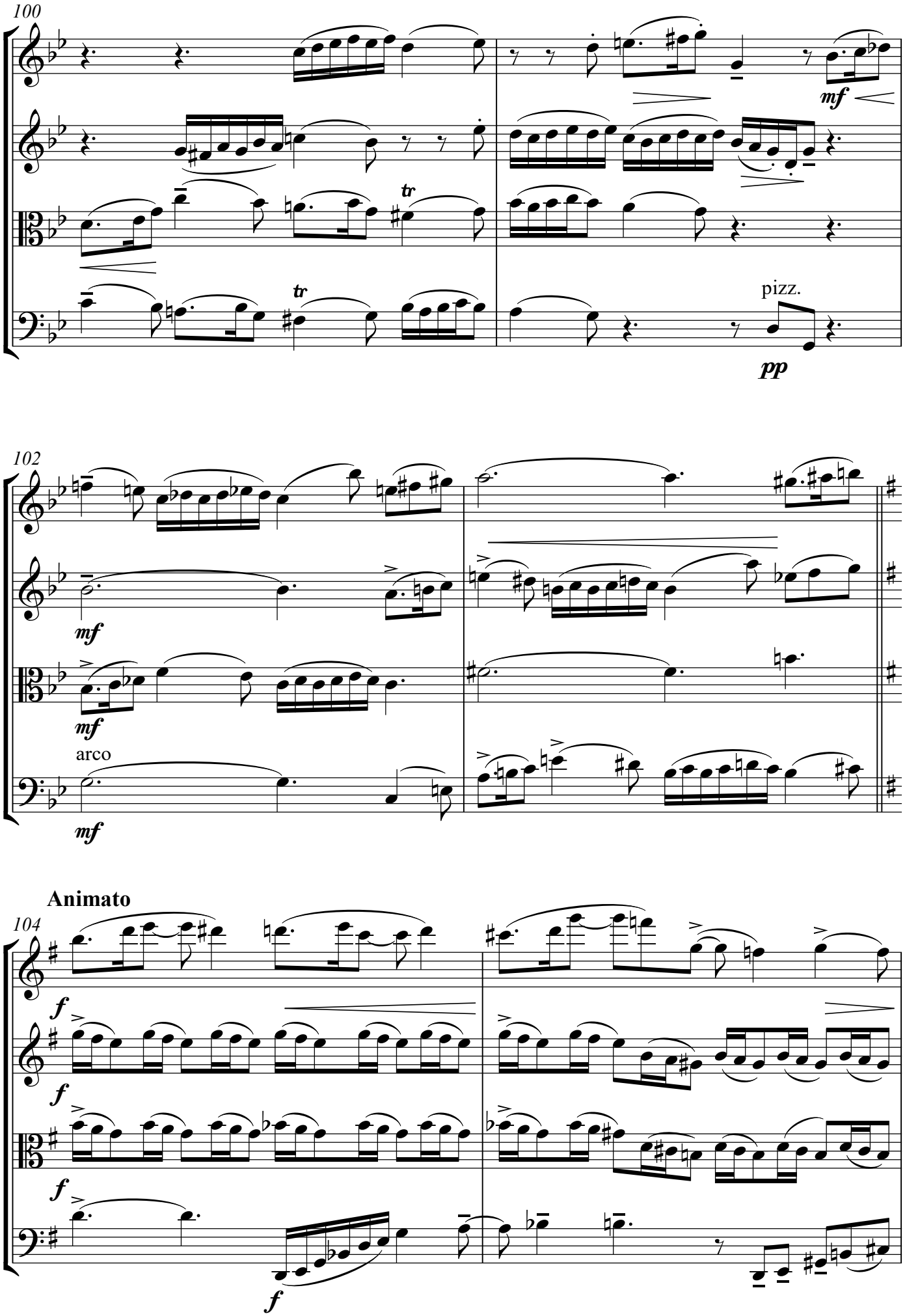
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arco
mf
Animato
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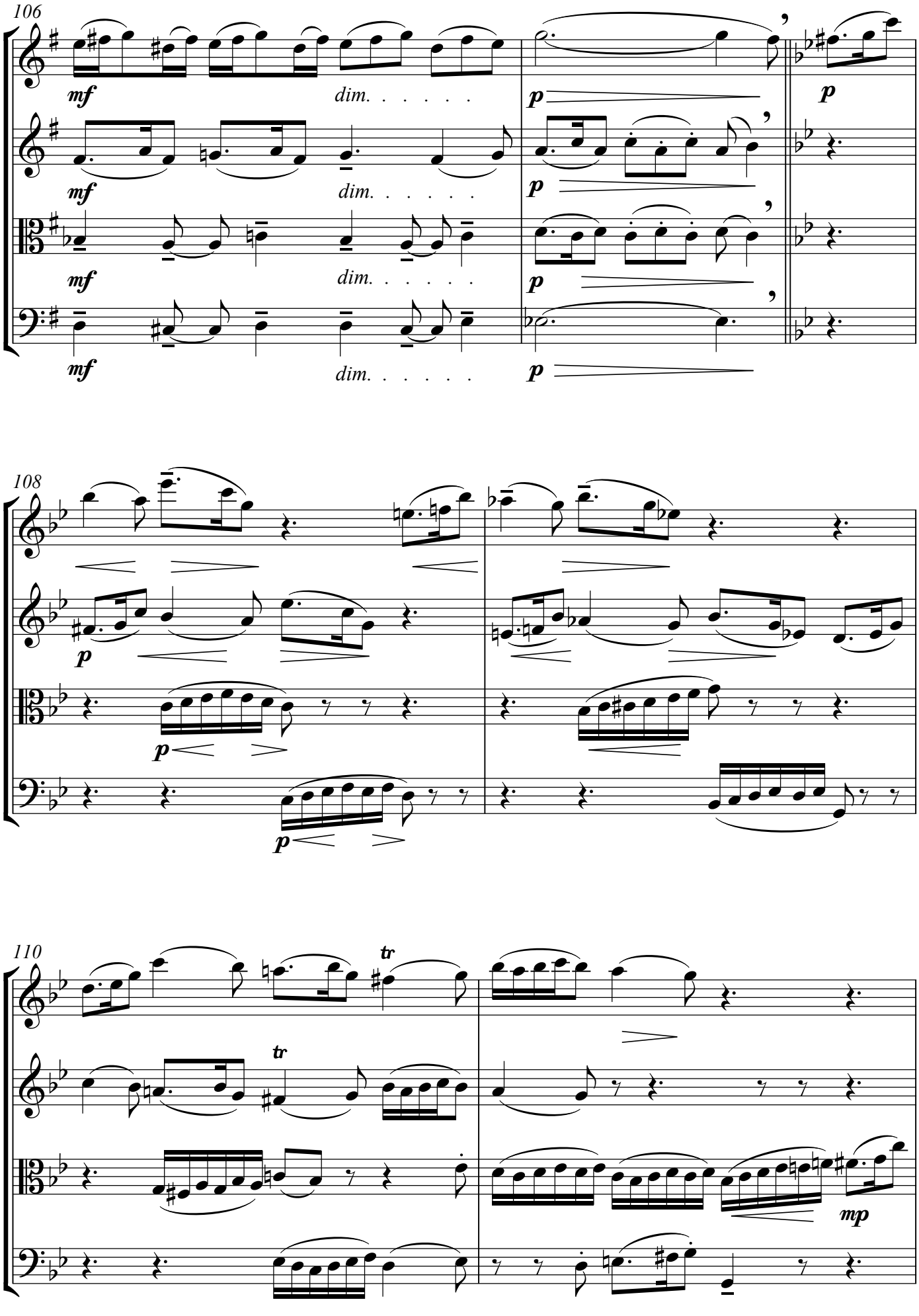
f
f
f
f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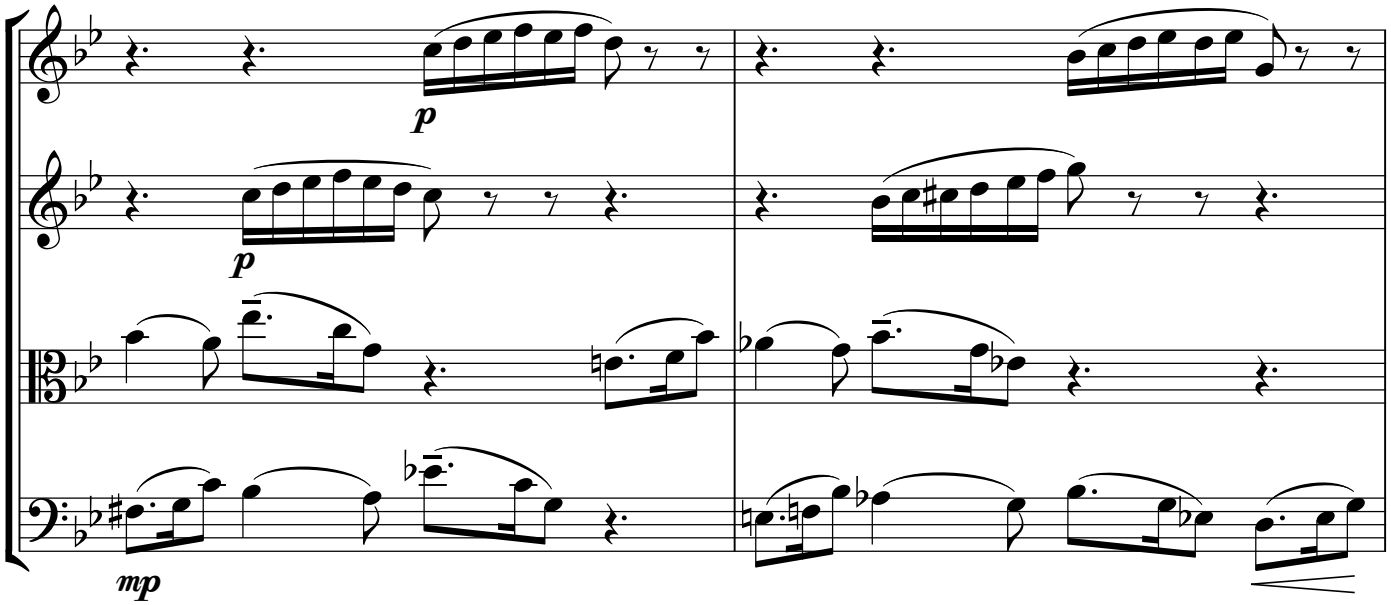

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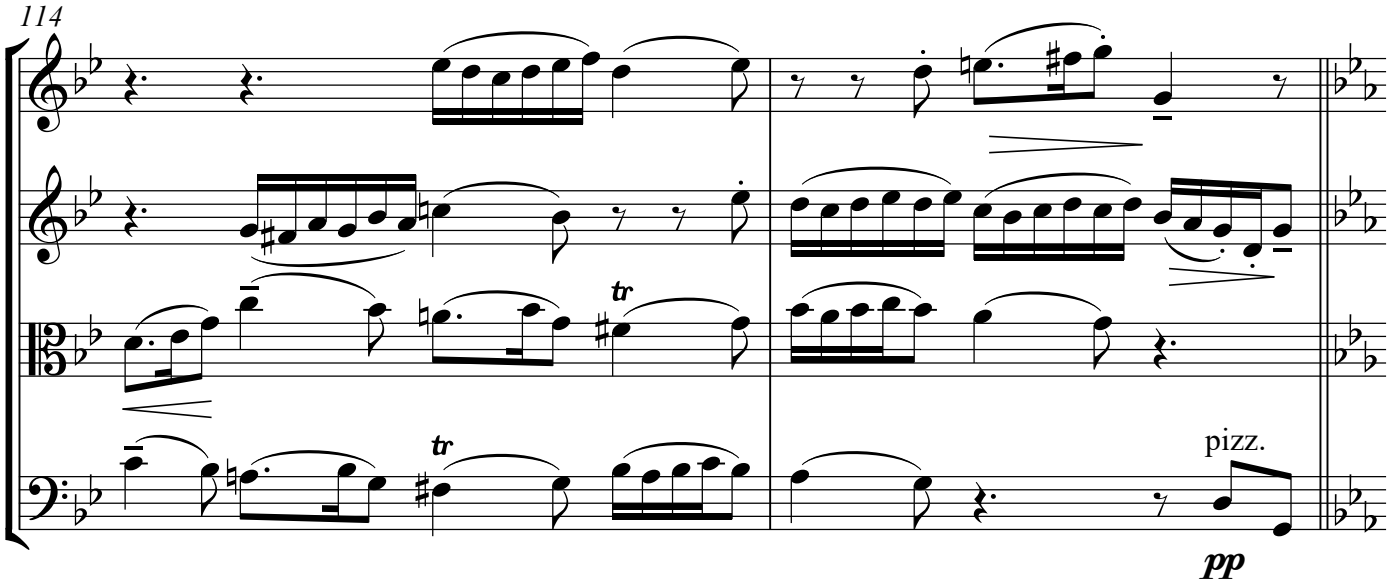

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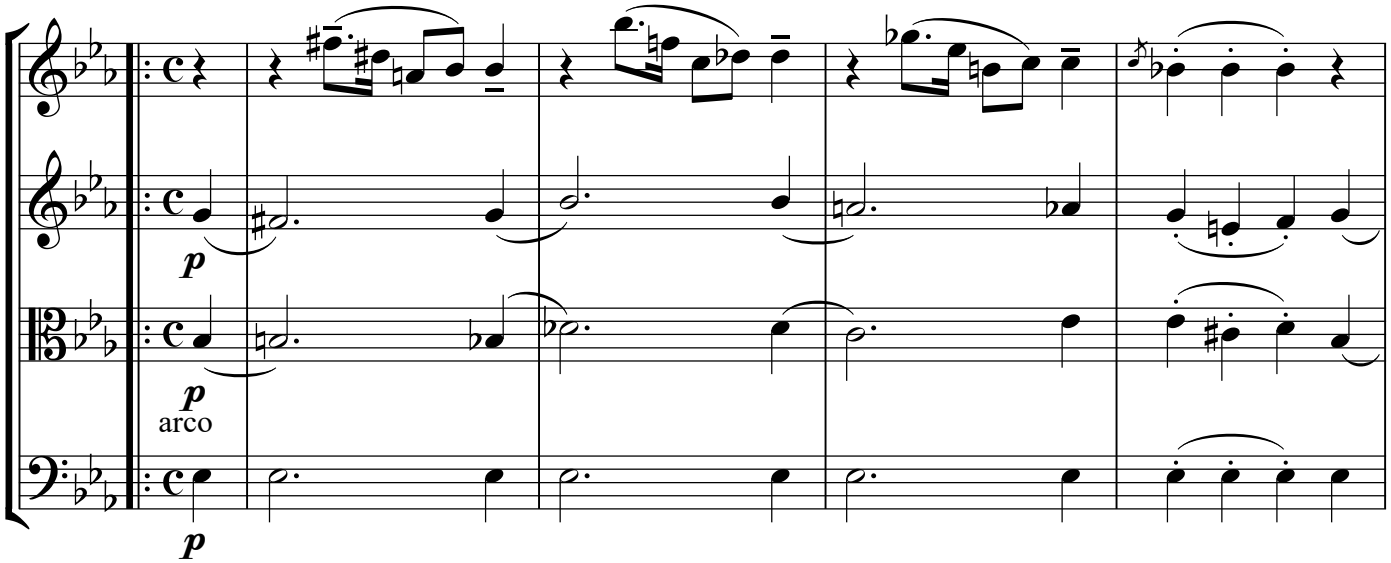
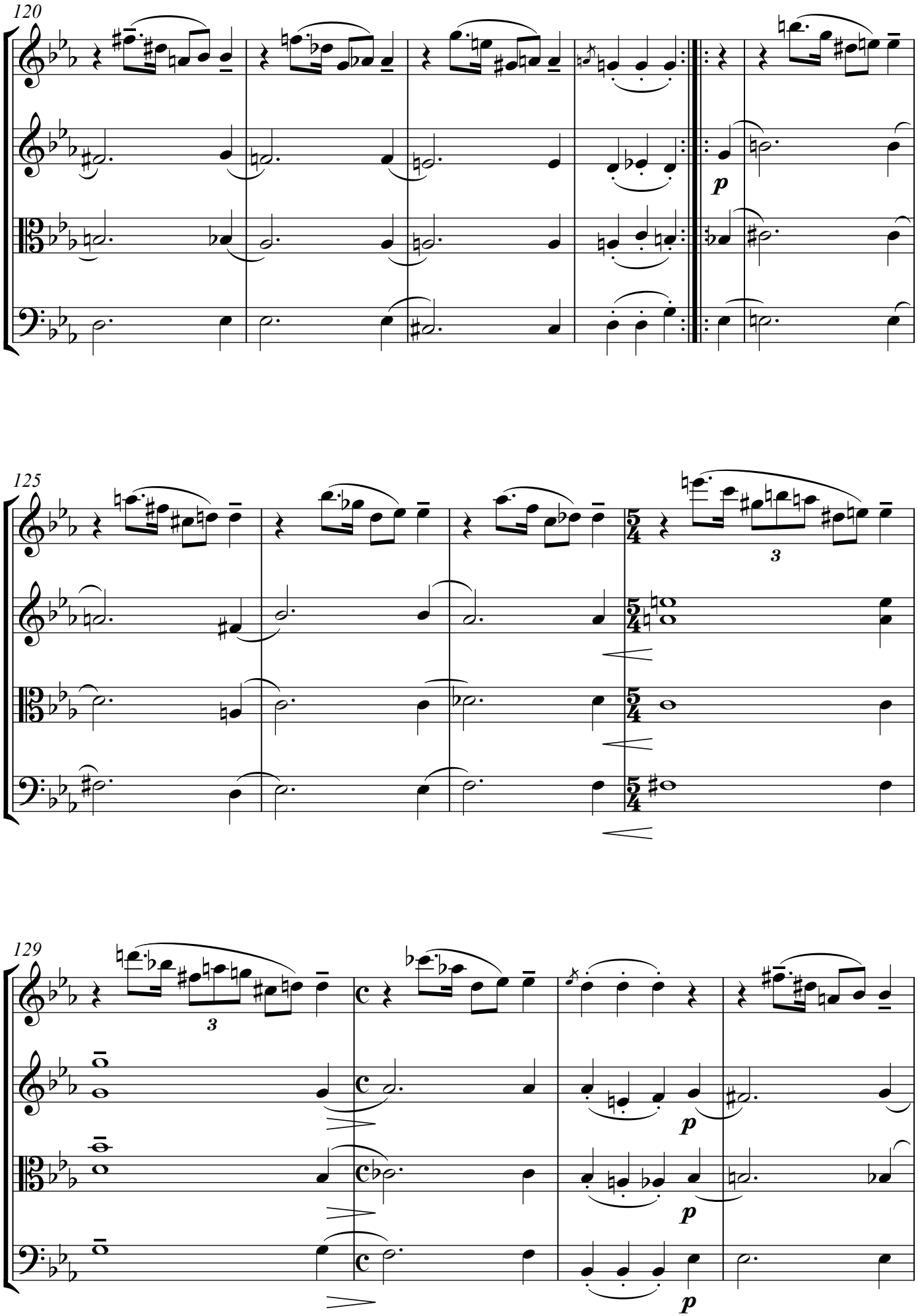
Sostenuto e dolce

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p

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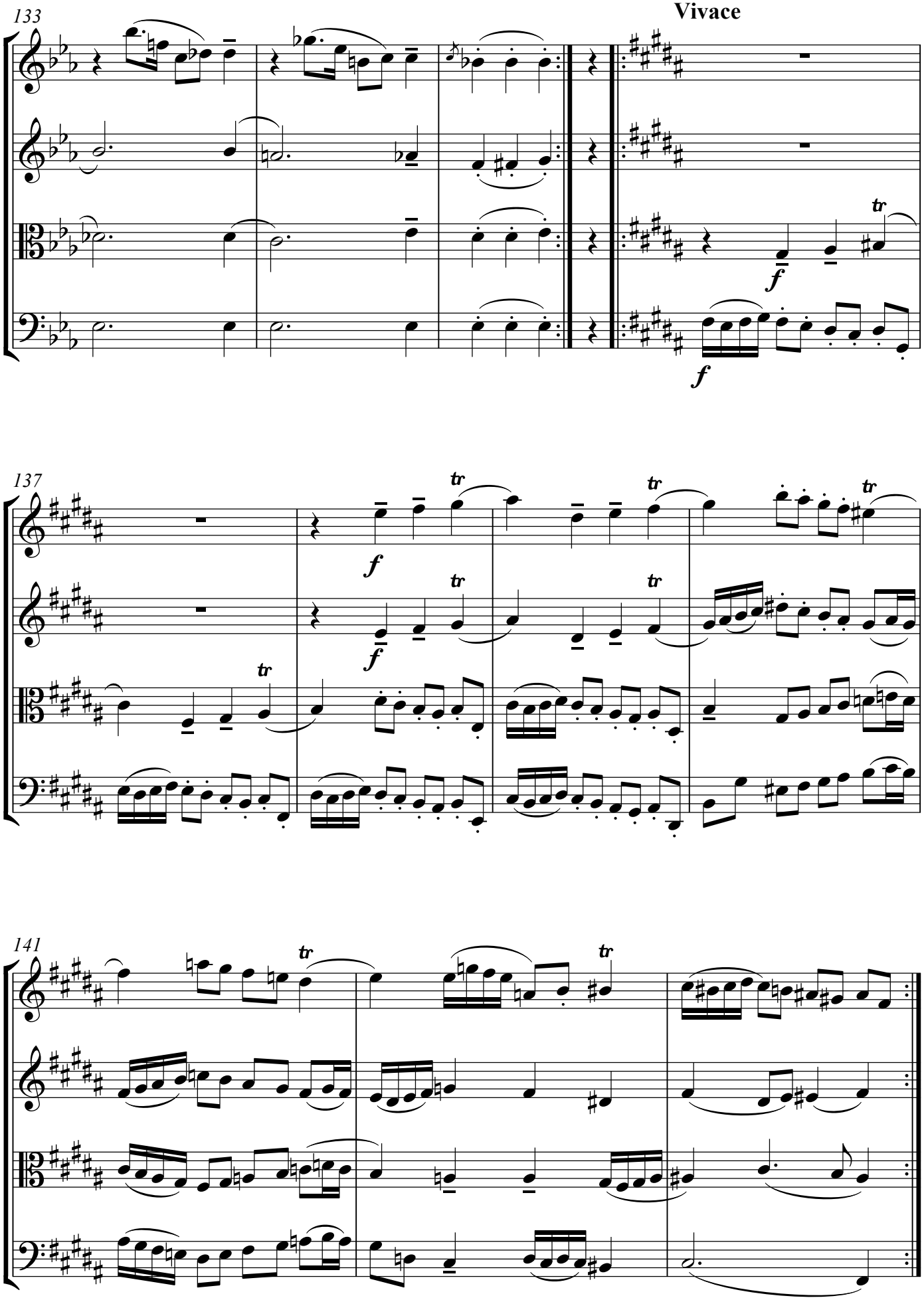

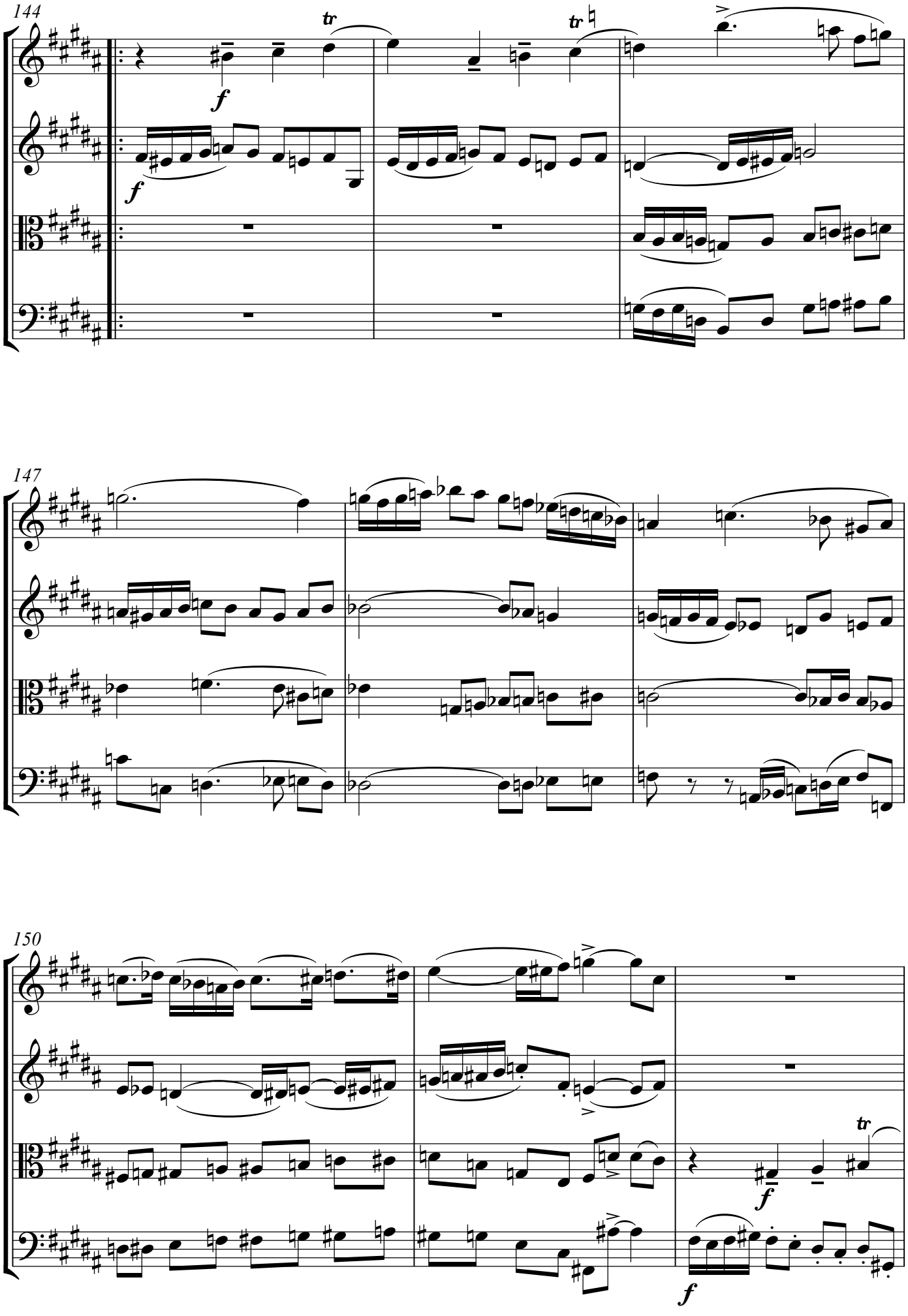
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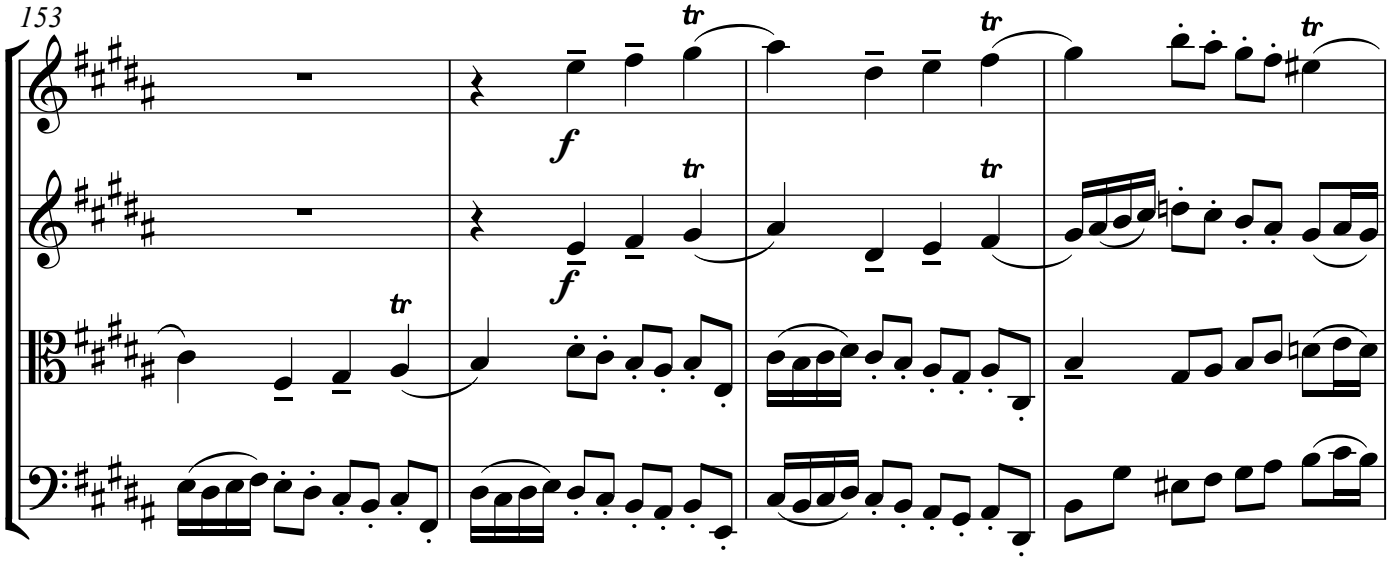

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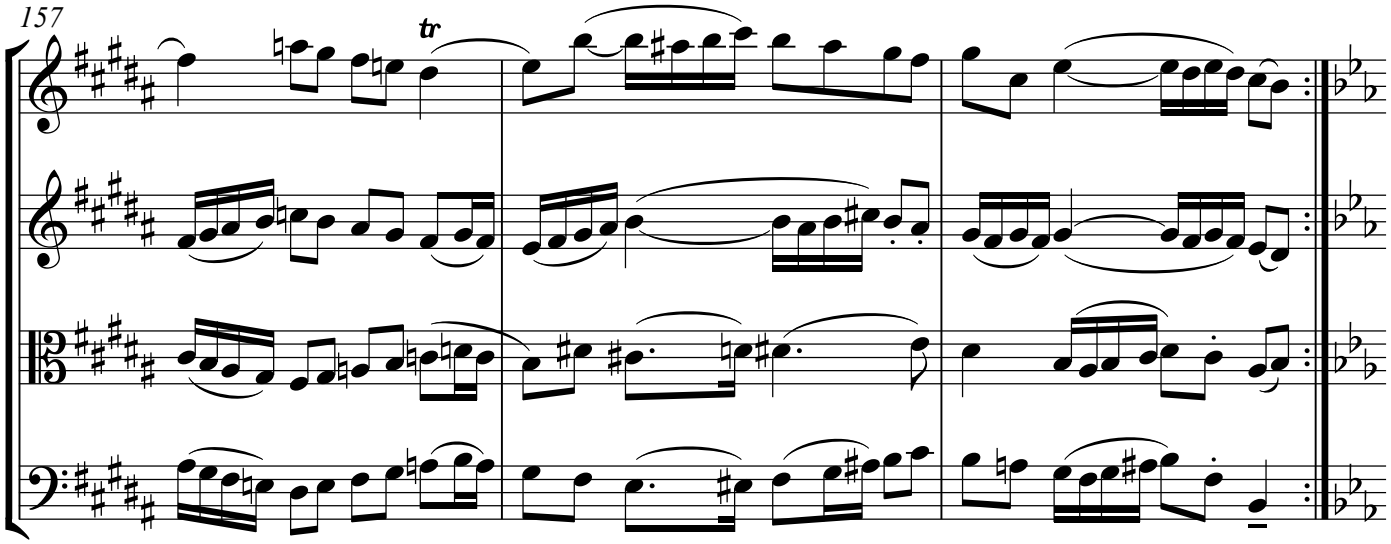

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Tempo di Marcia: Allegretto

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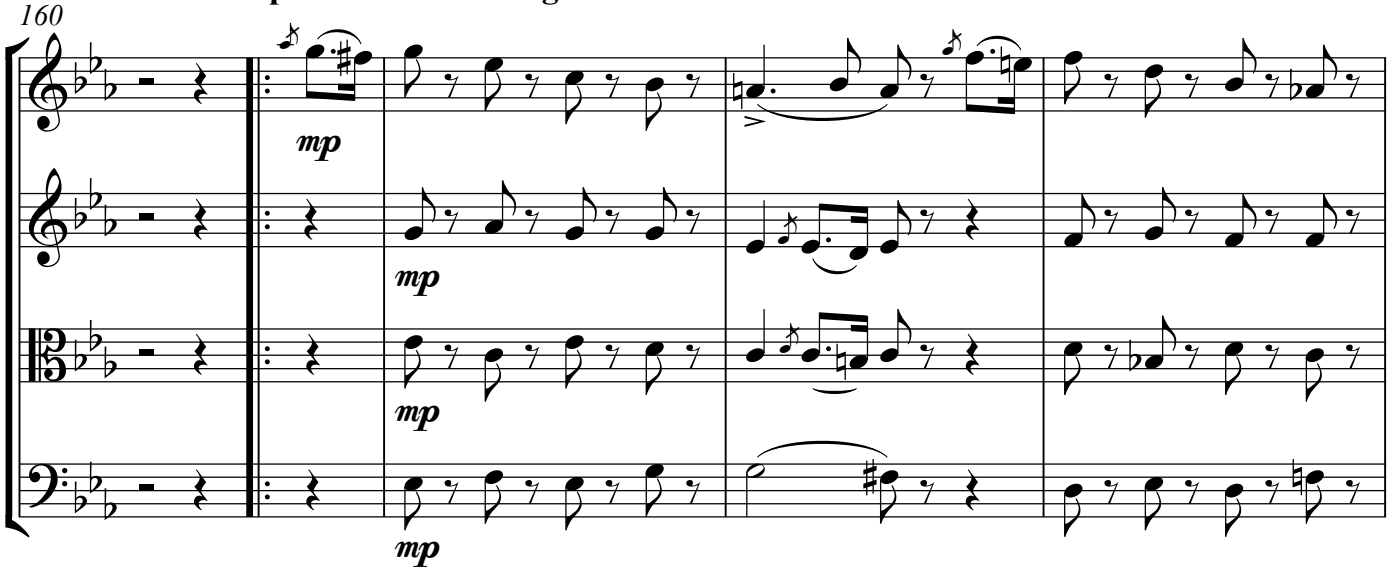

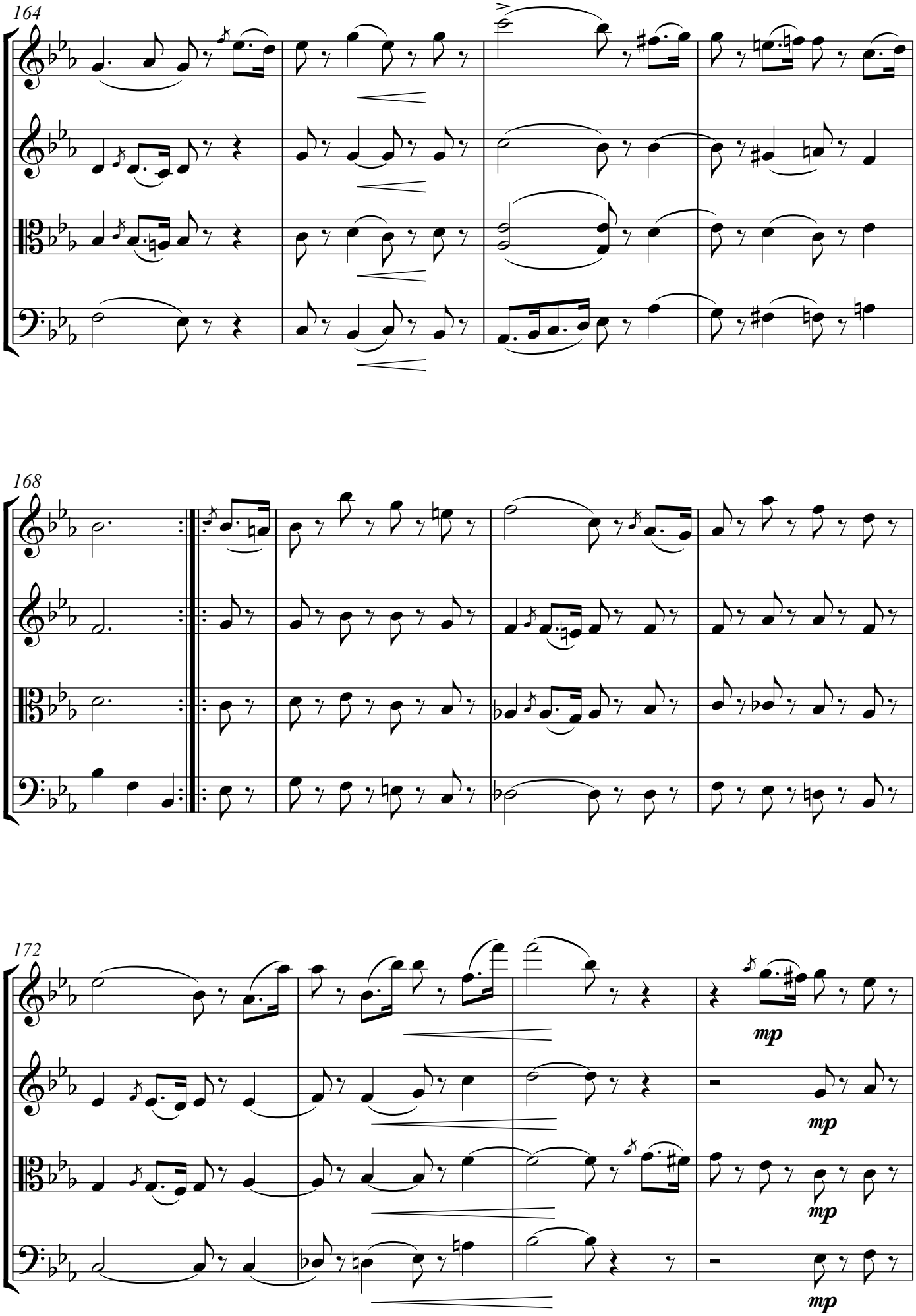
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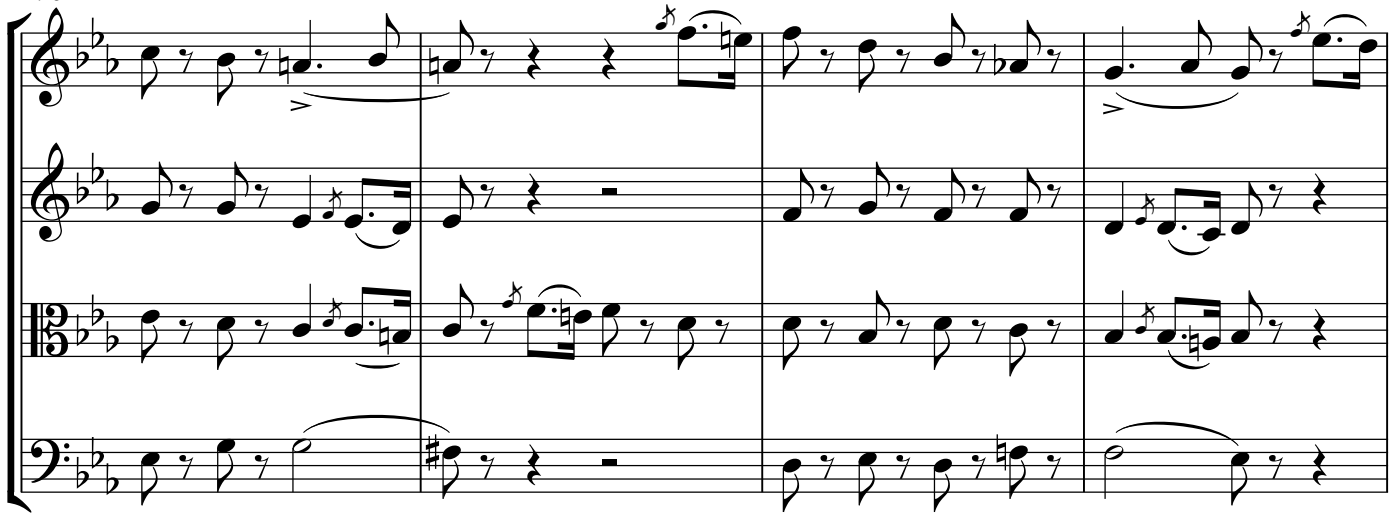

Var.IX

Agitato

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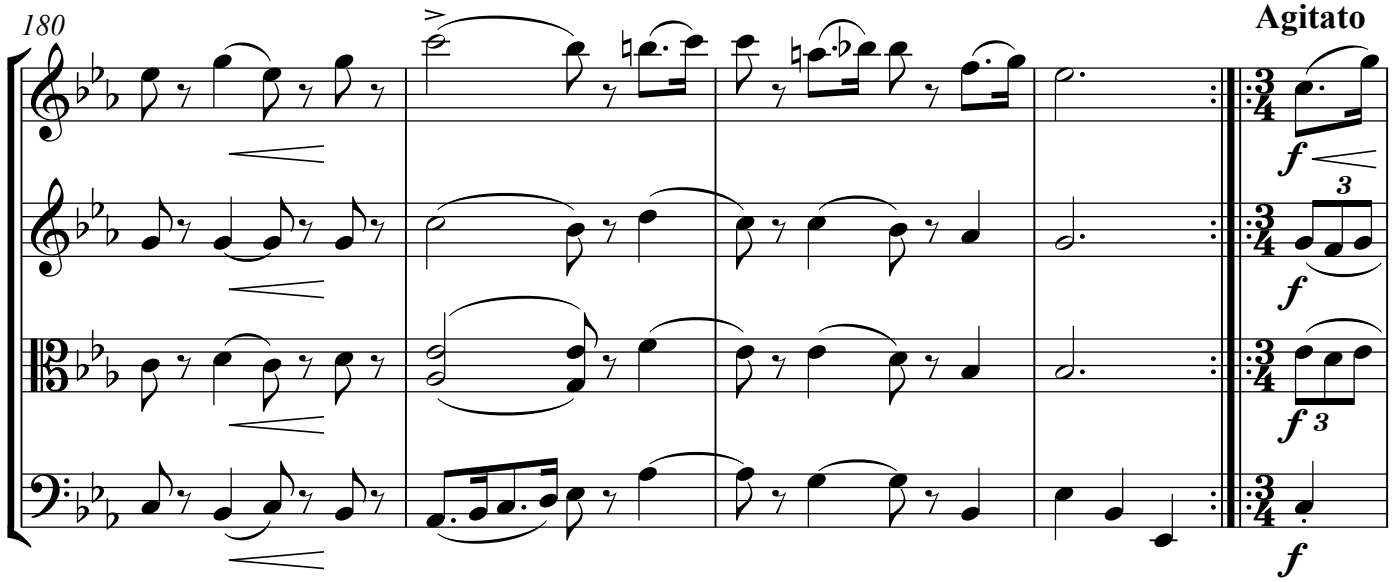

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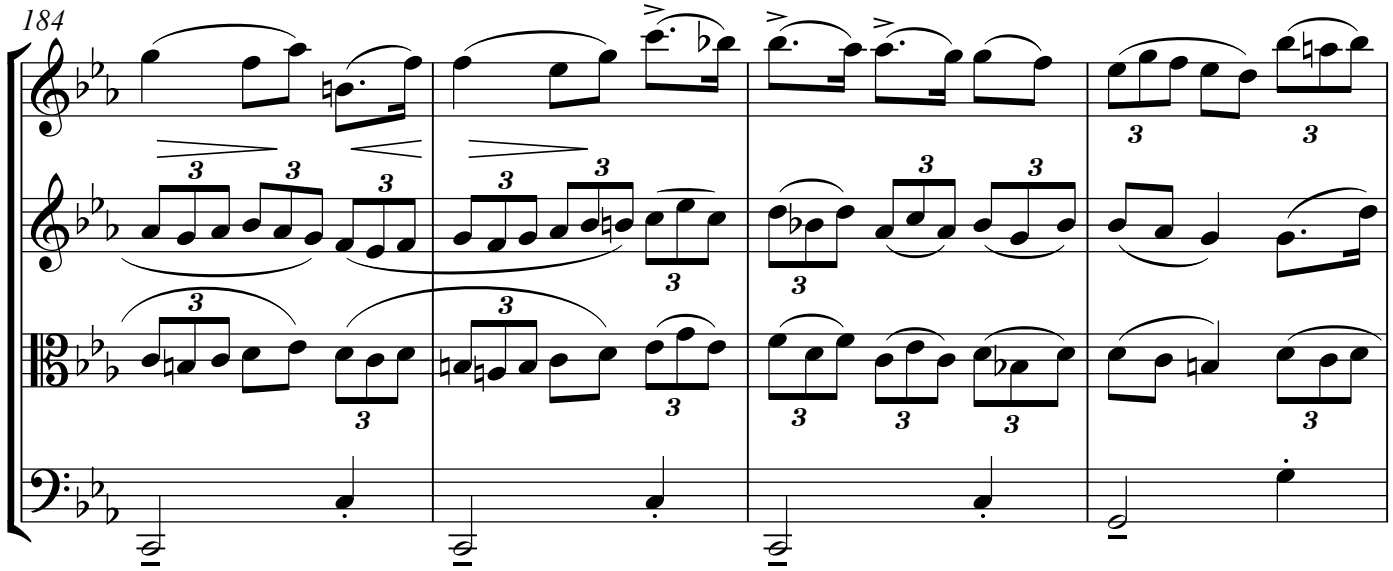

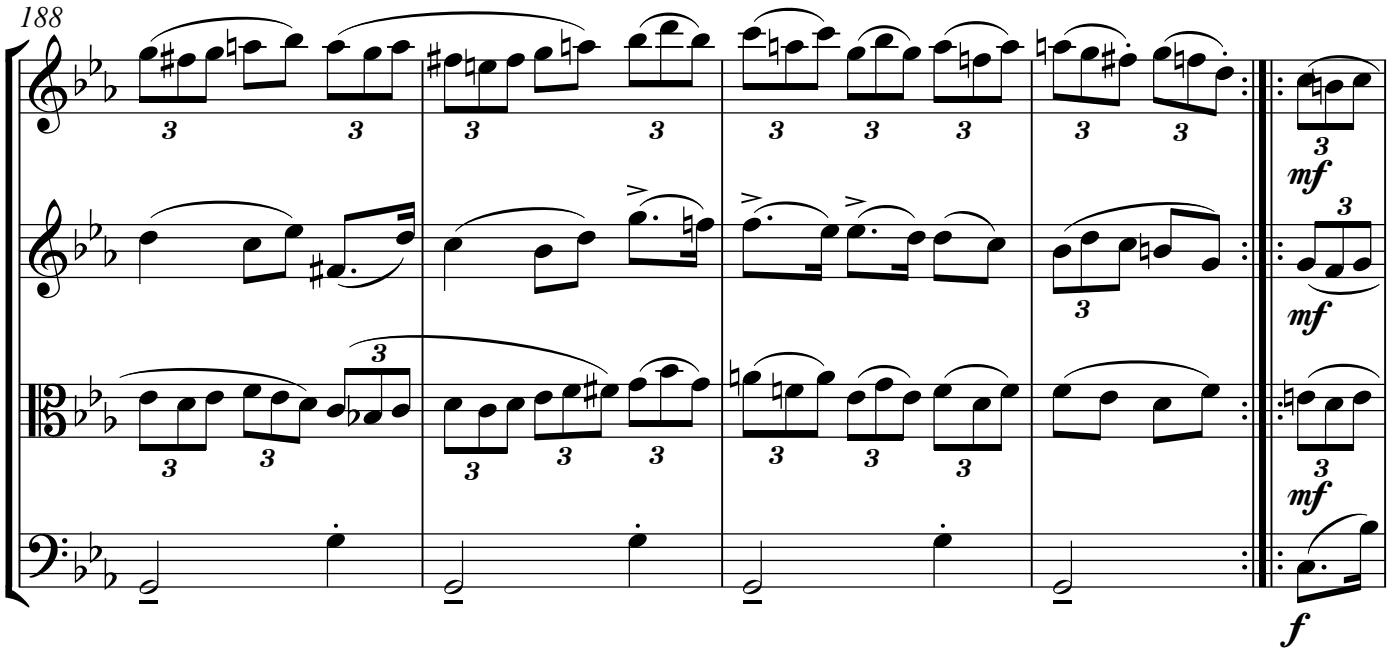
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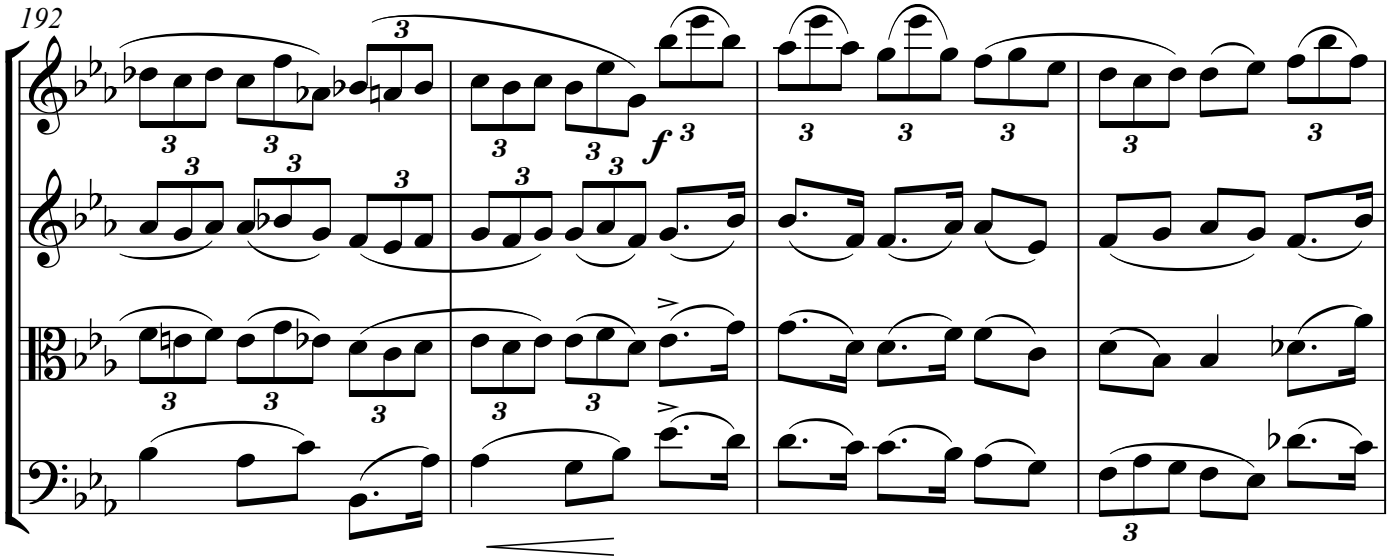
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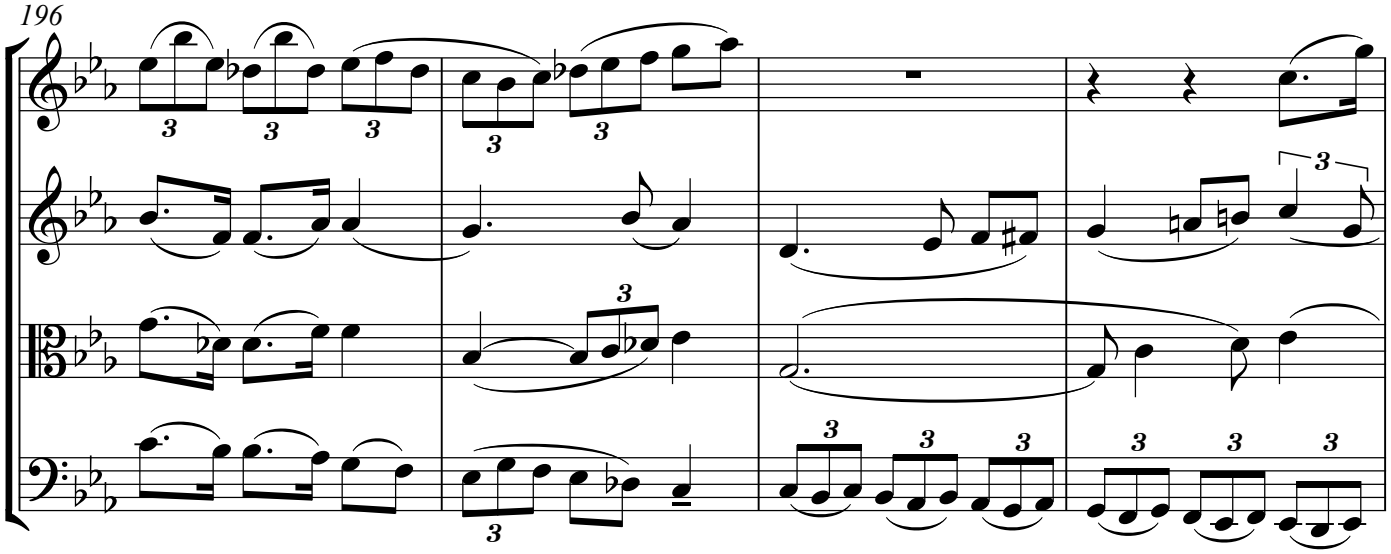
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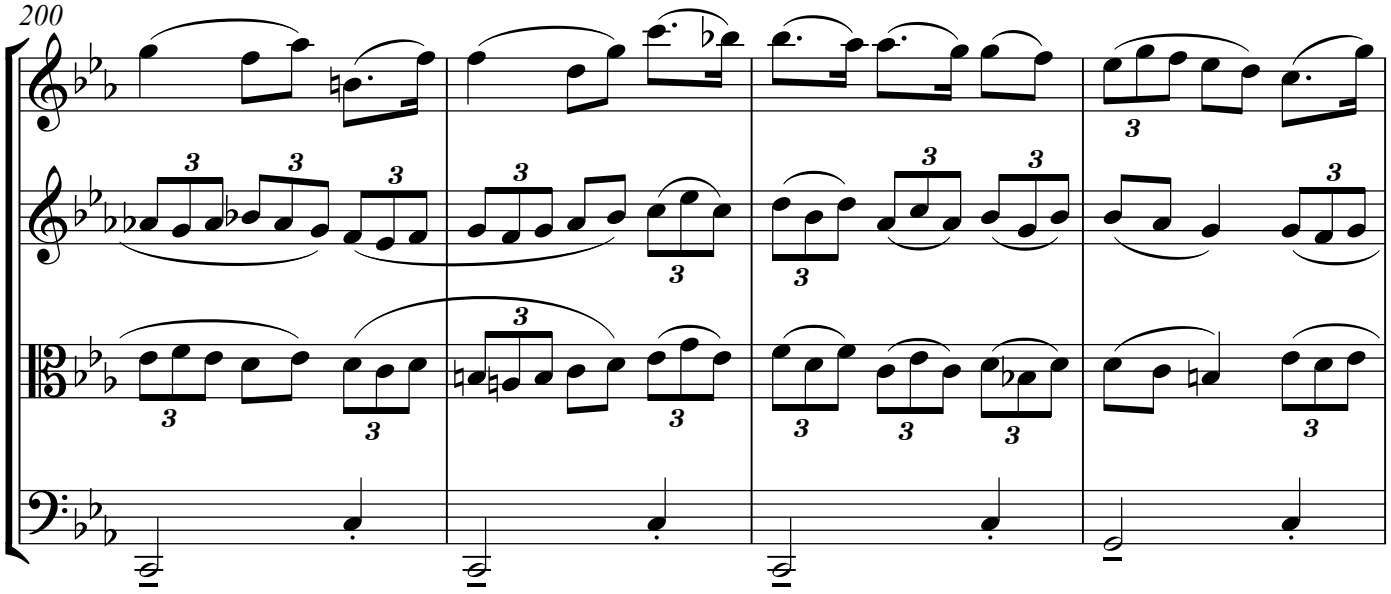

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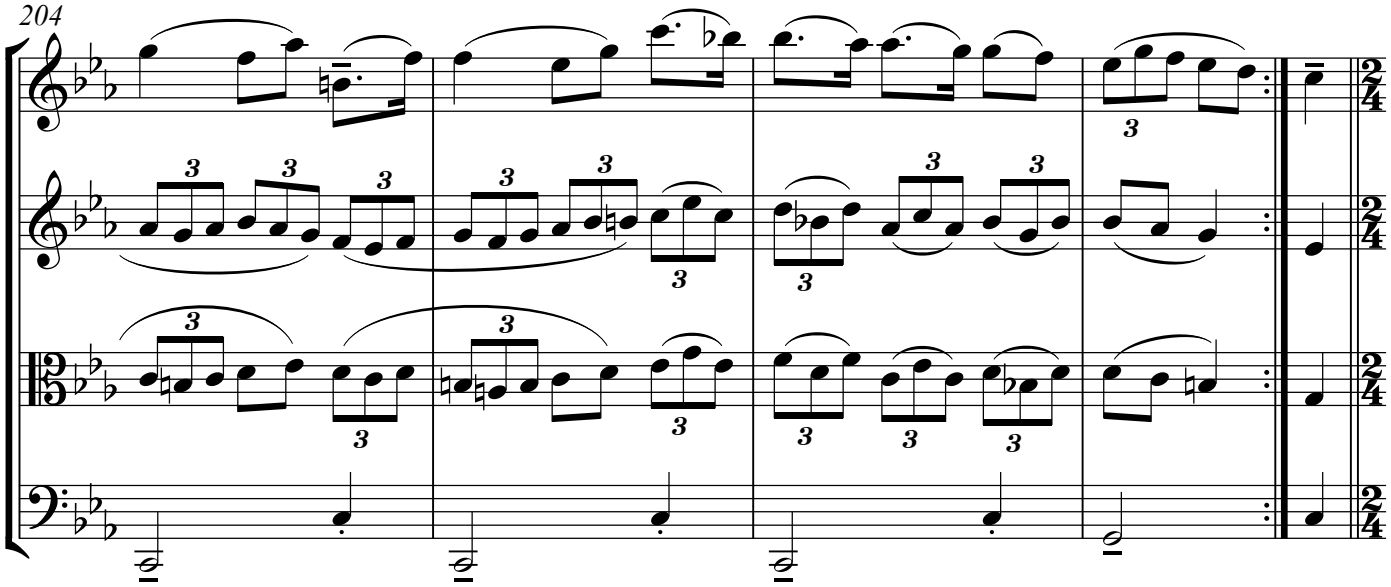
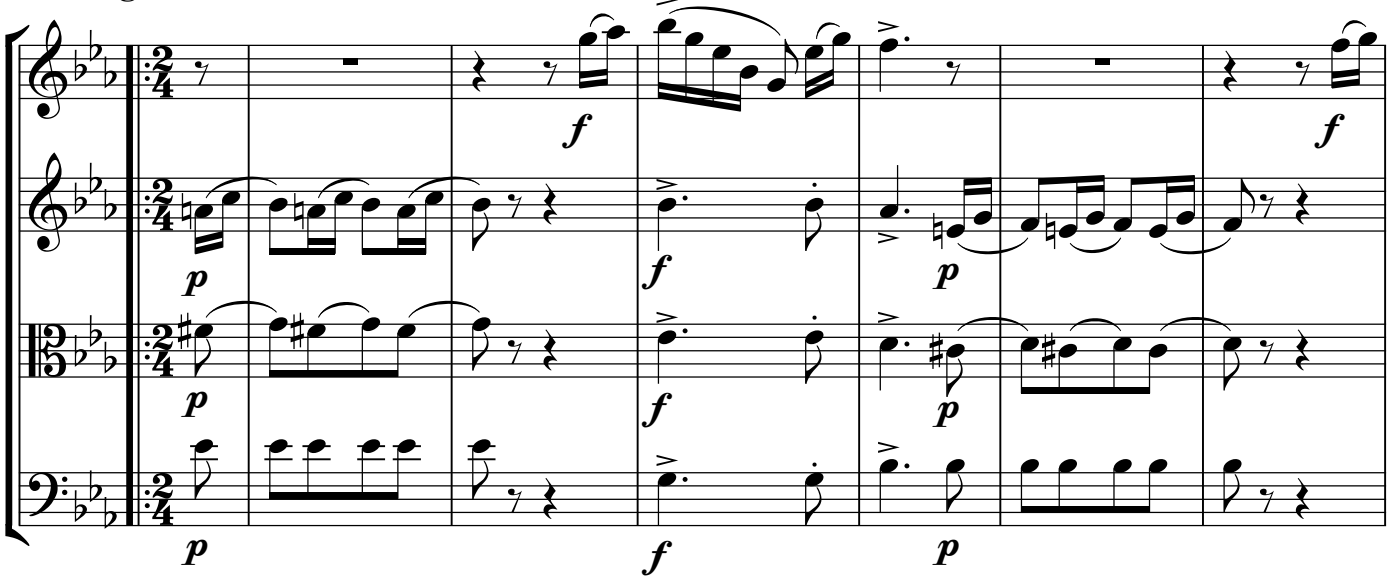
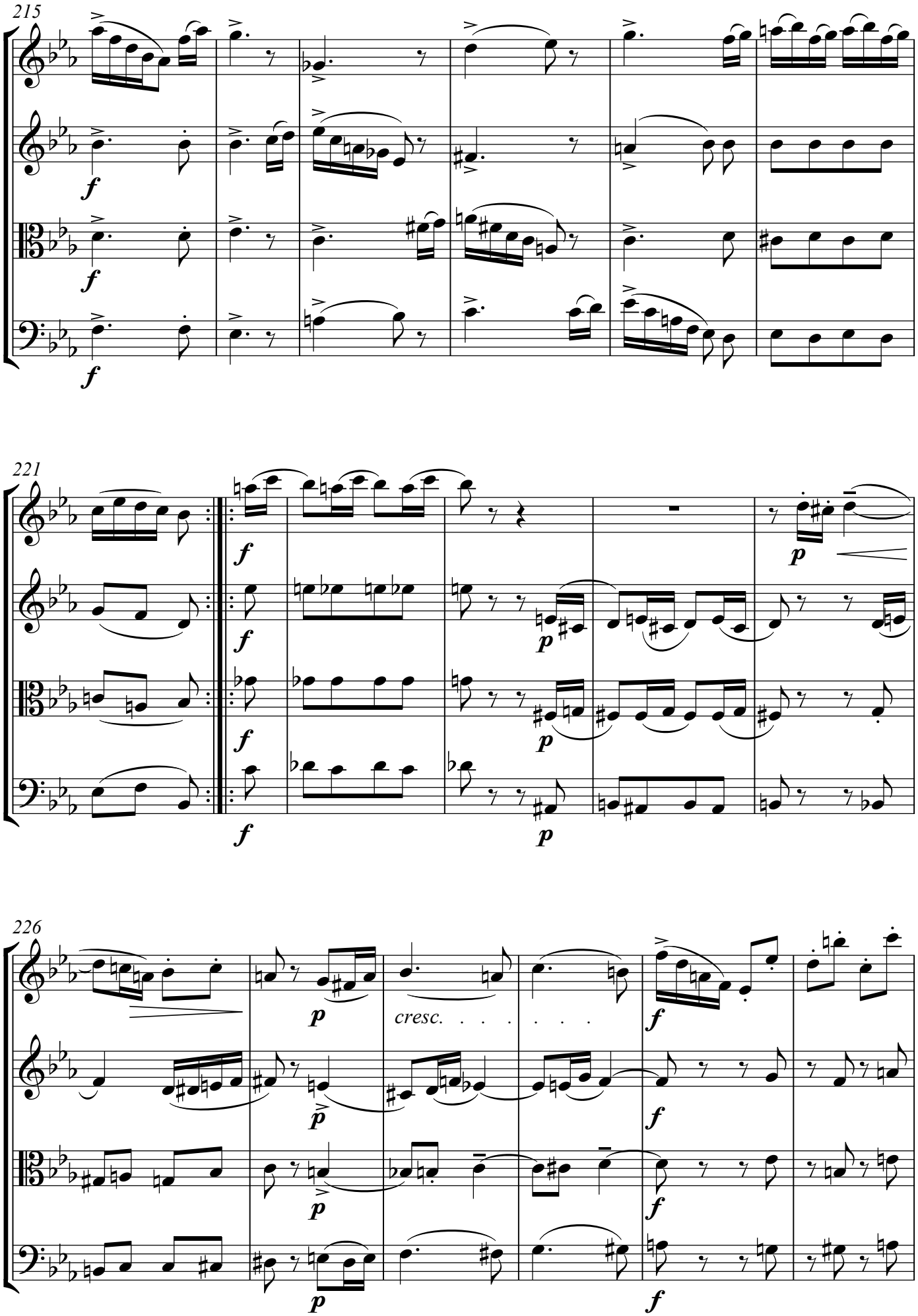


Var.X

Allegro molto

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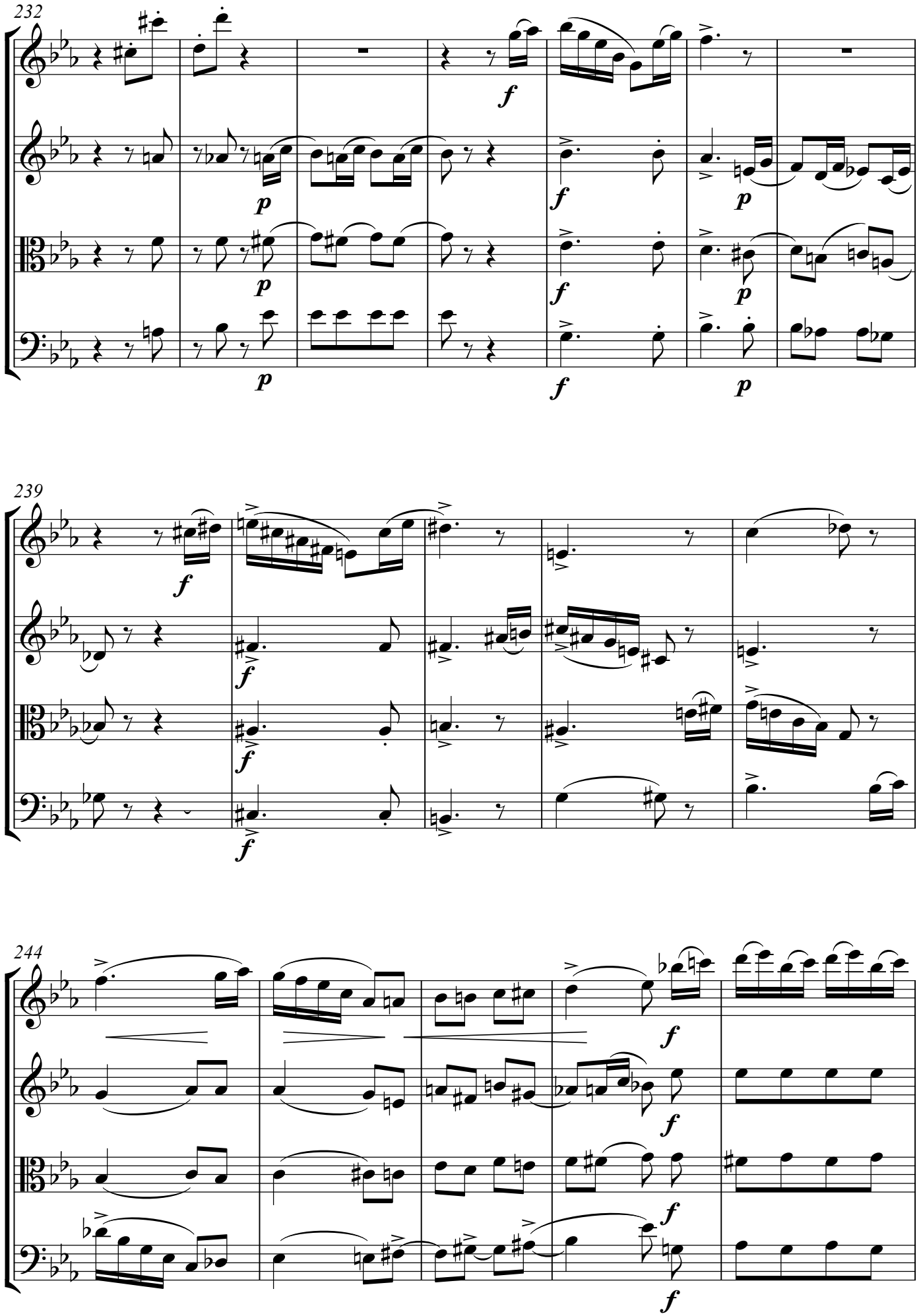
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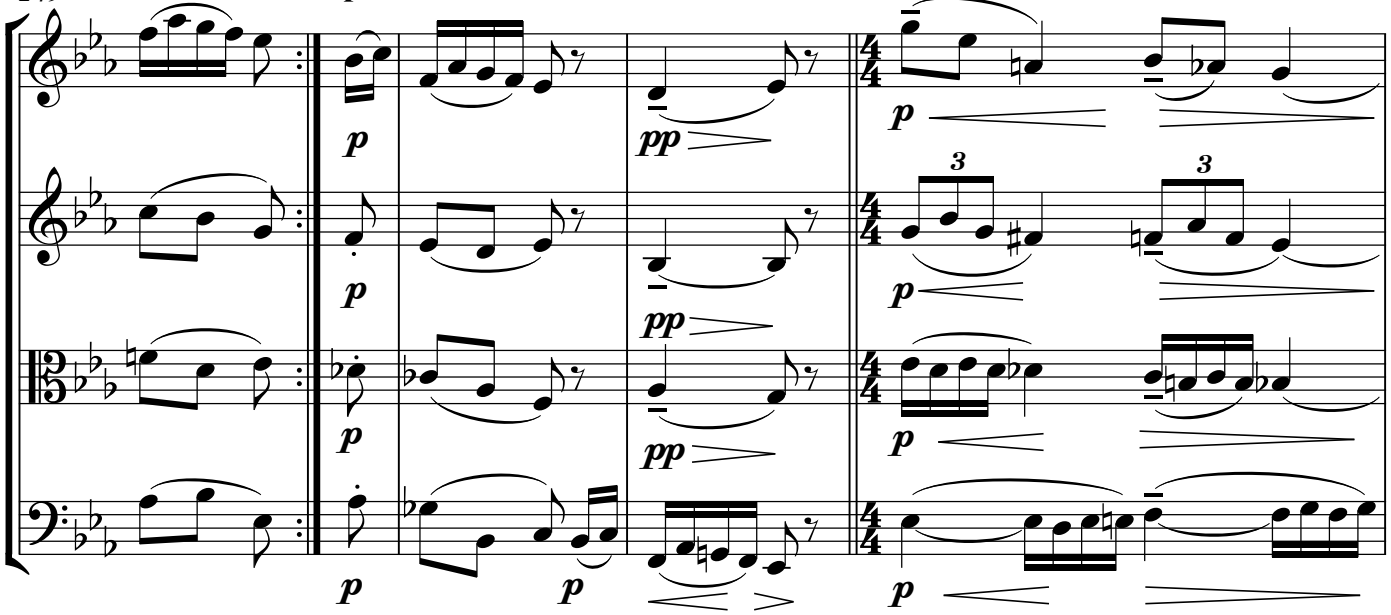
Var.XI & Finale

Adagio: quasi recitativo

249

poco rall. . . . . .



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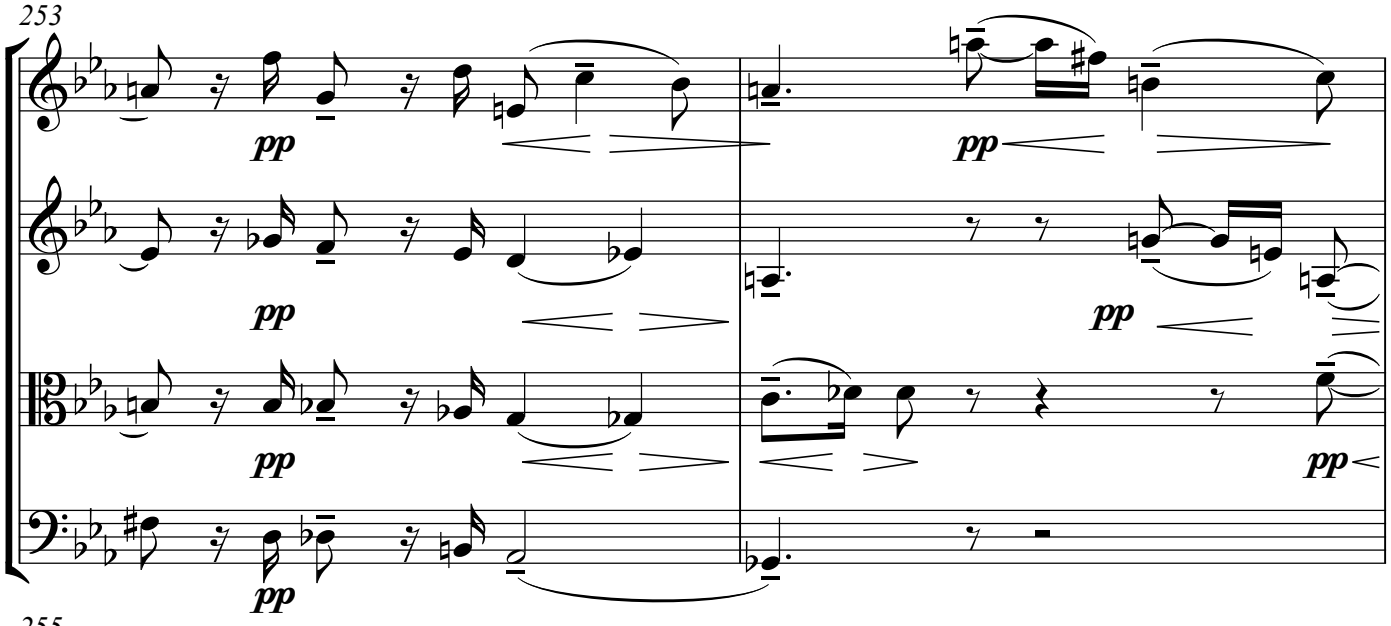

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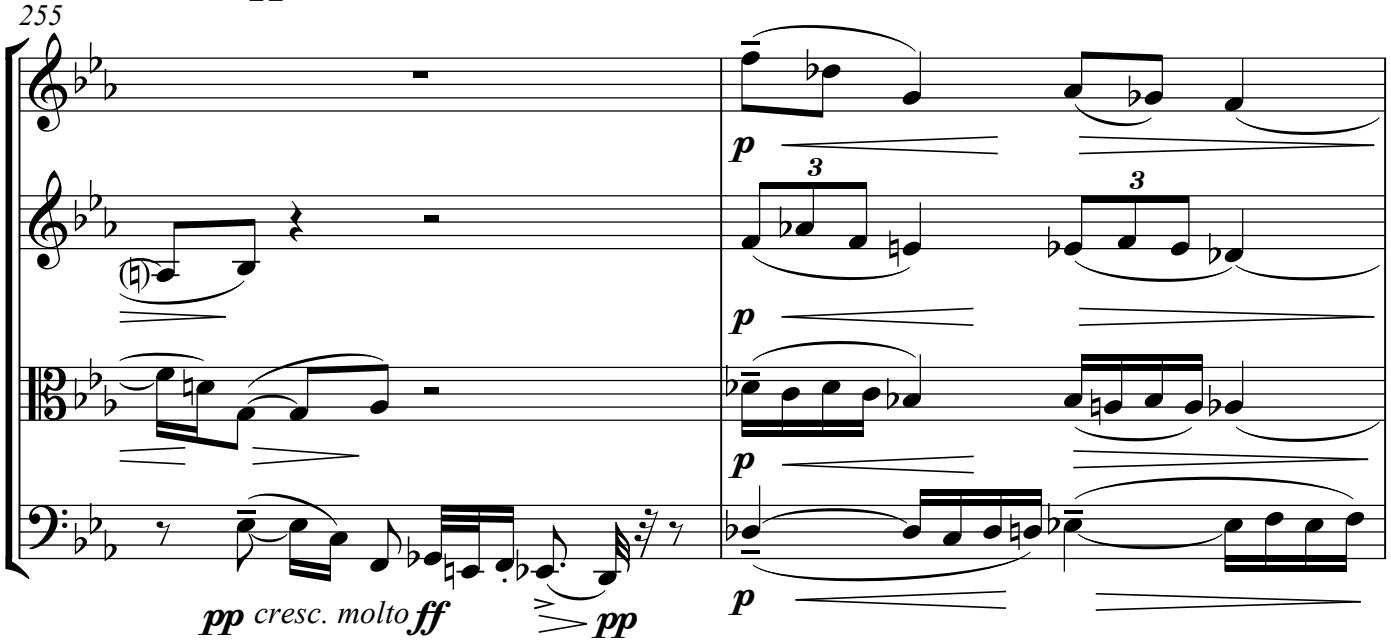

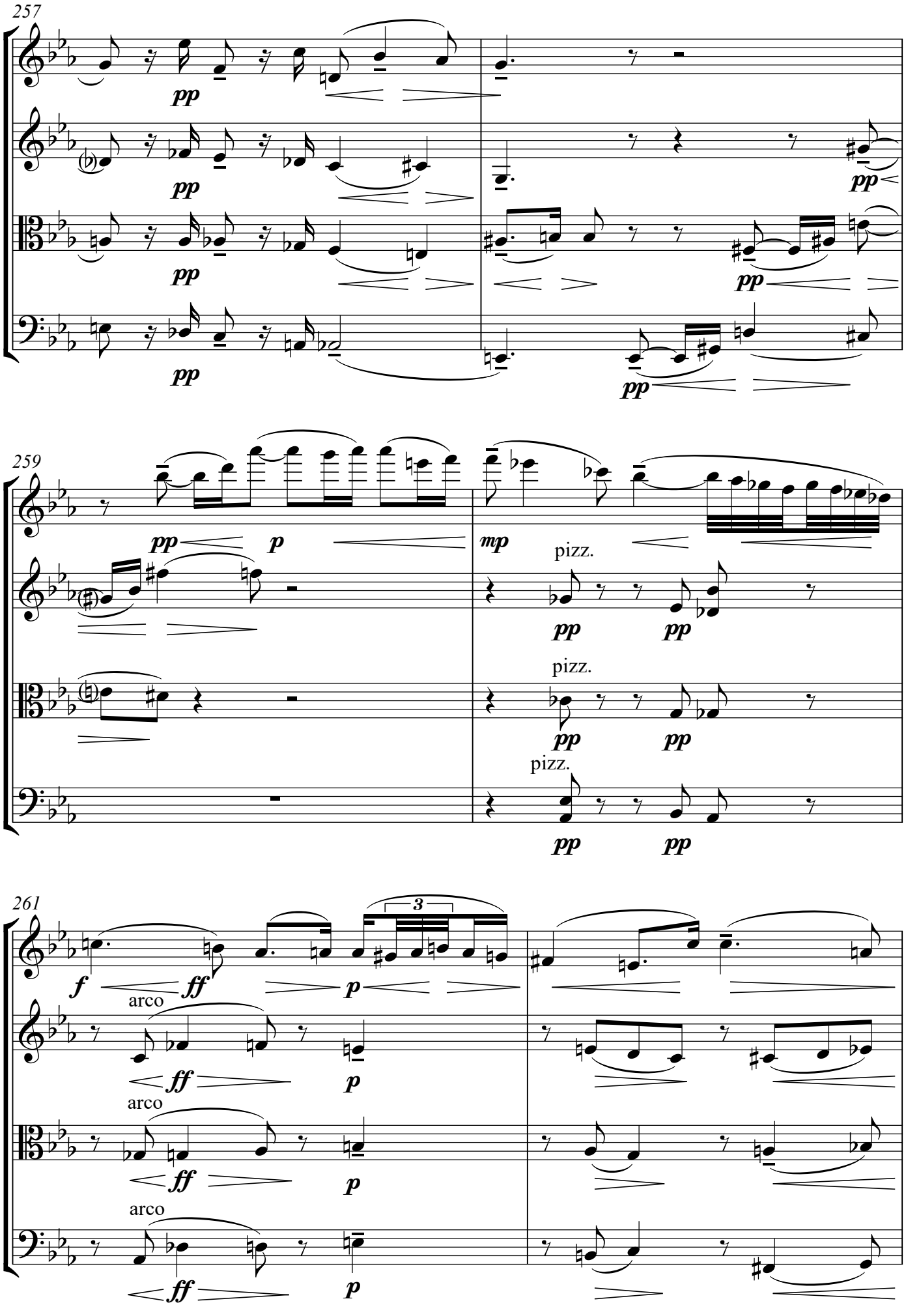
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ff
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arco
ff
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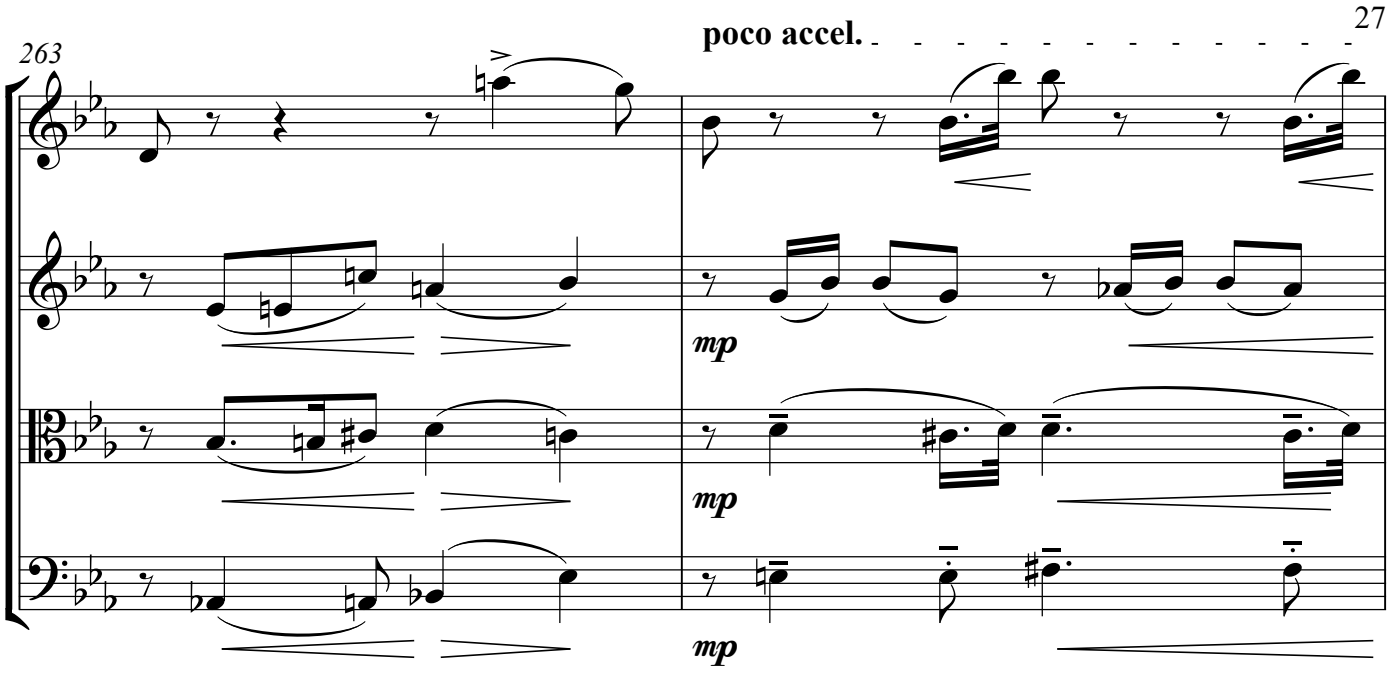
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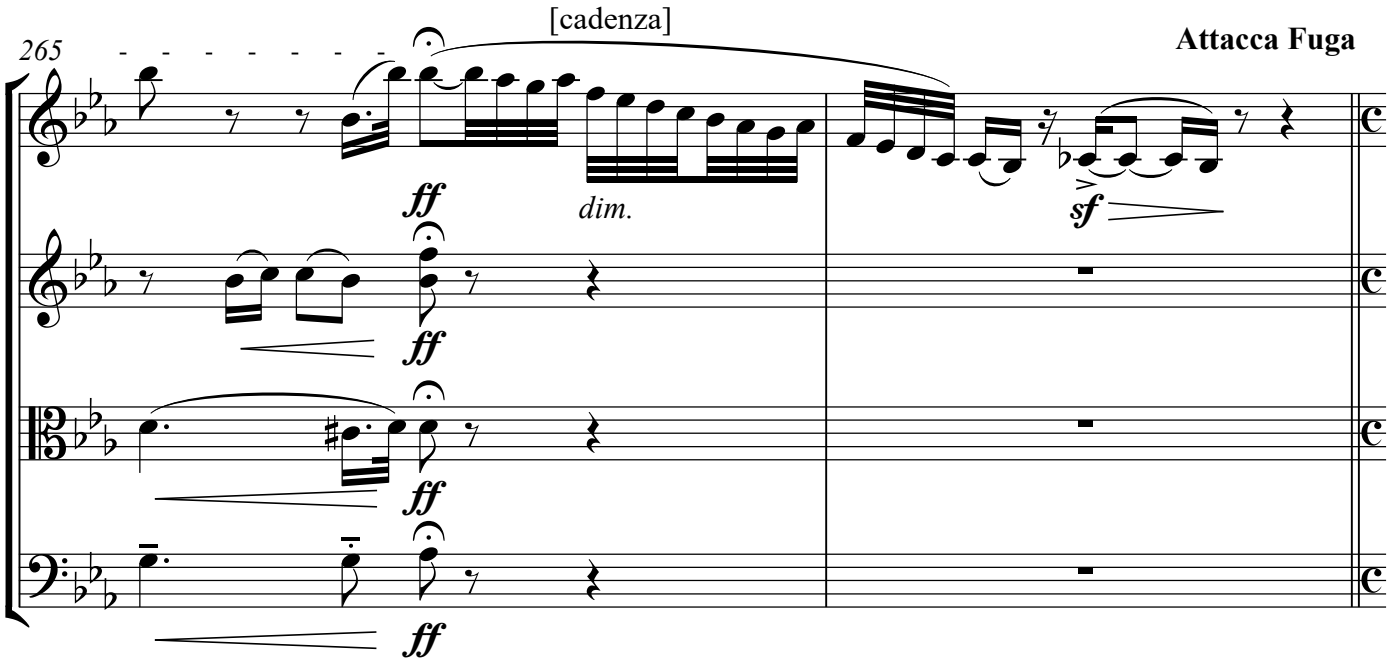
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Attacca Fuga
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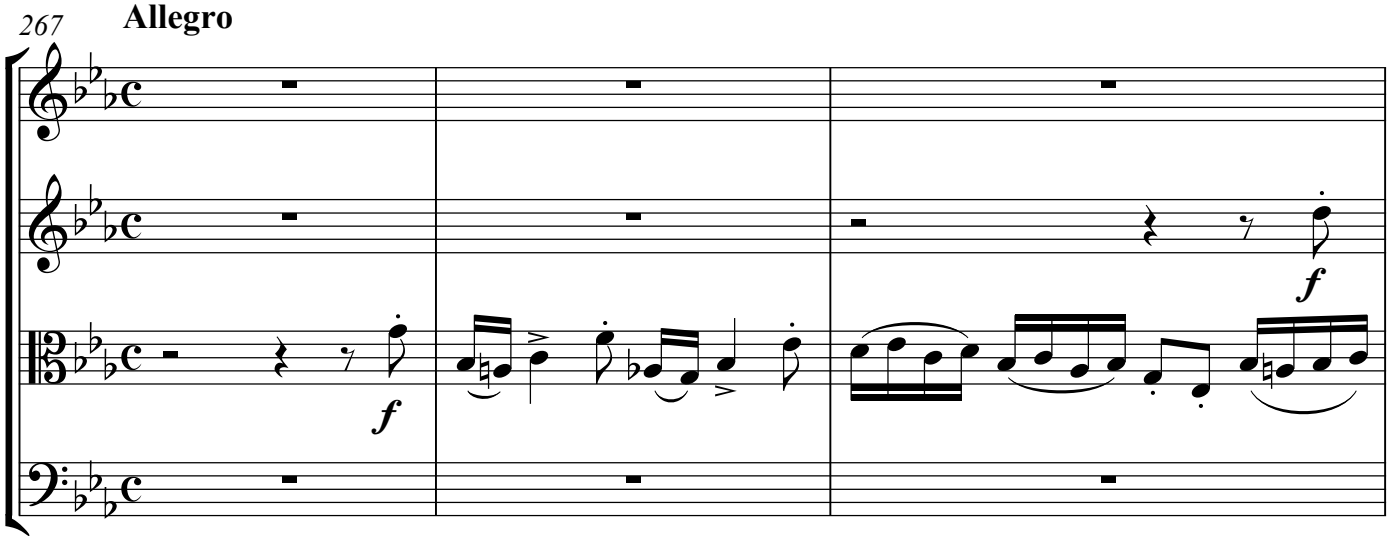
ff
dim.
sf
ff
ff
ff

Finale: Fuga


Allegro
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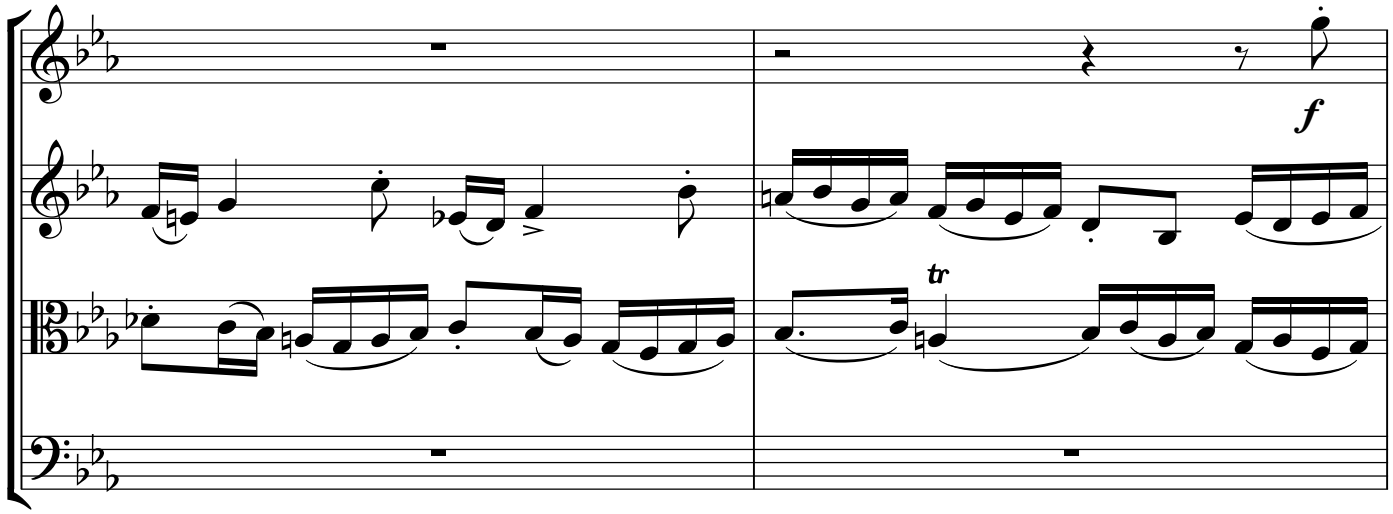

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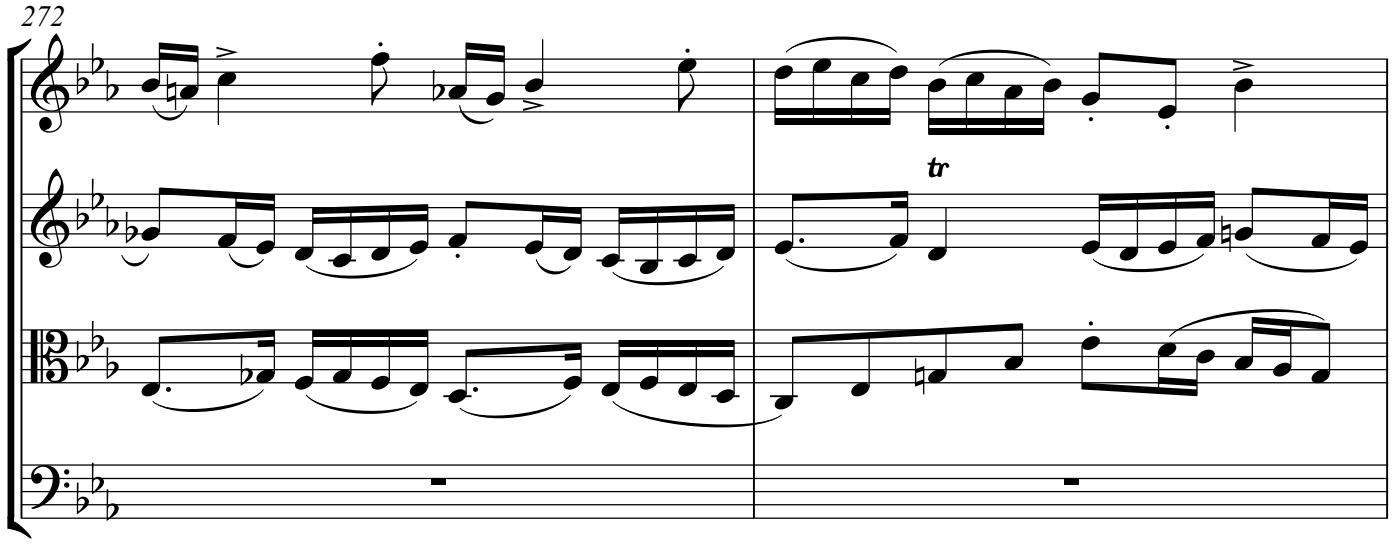

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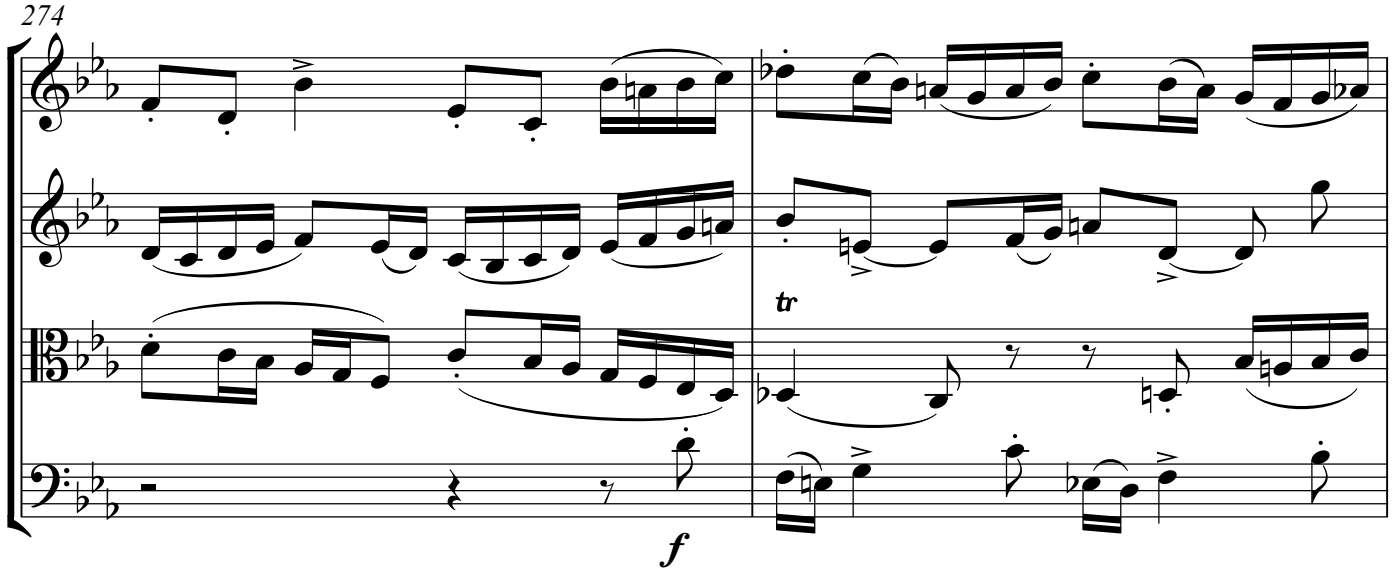

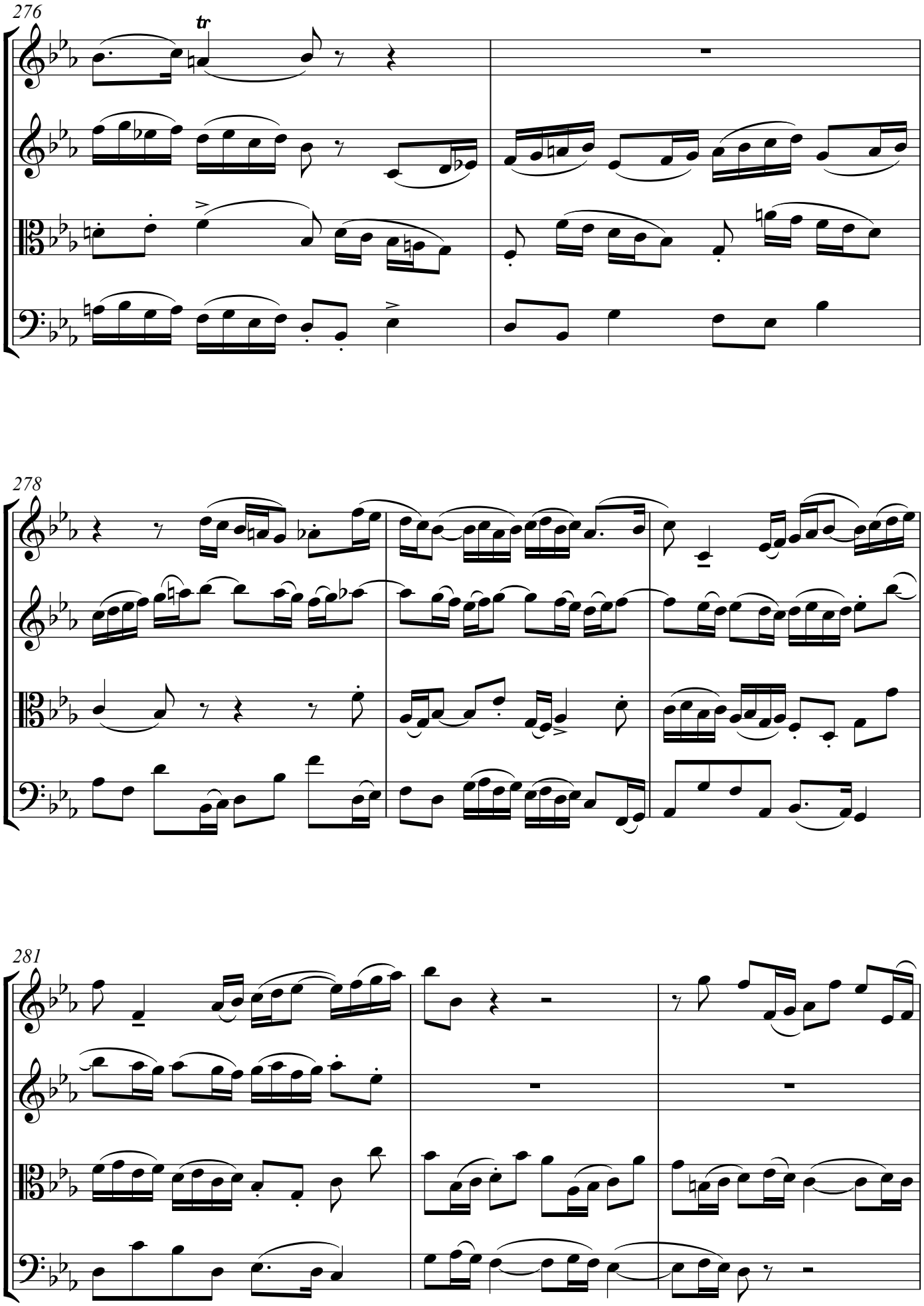
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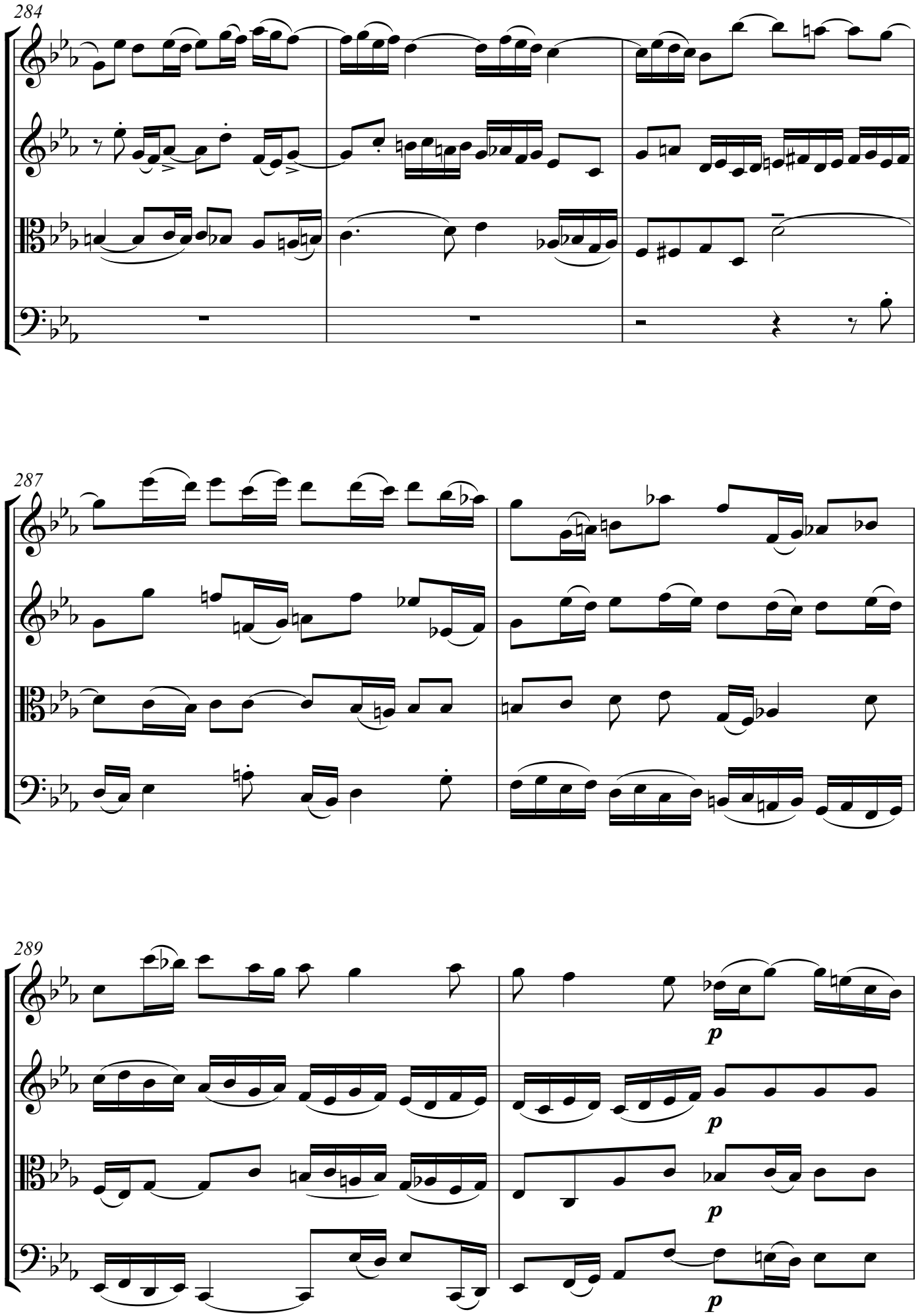
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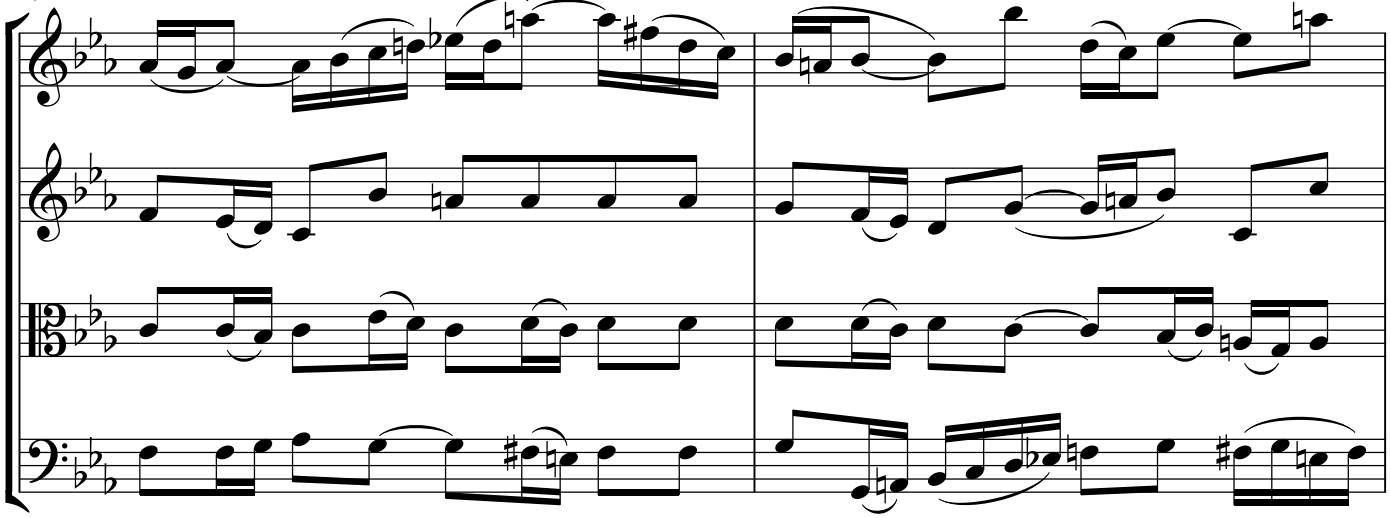

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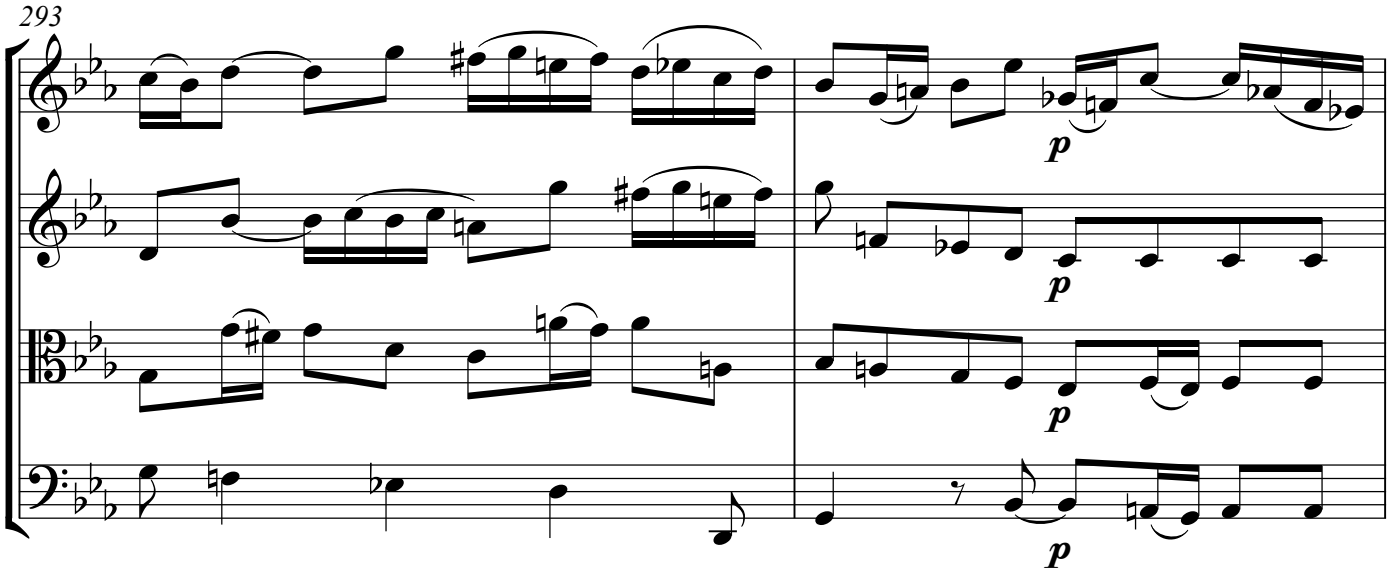

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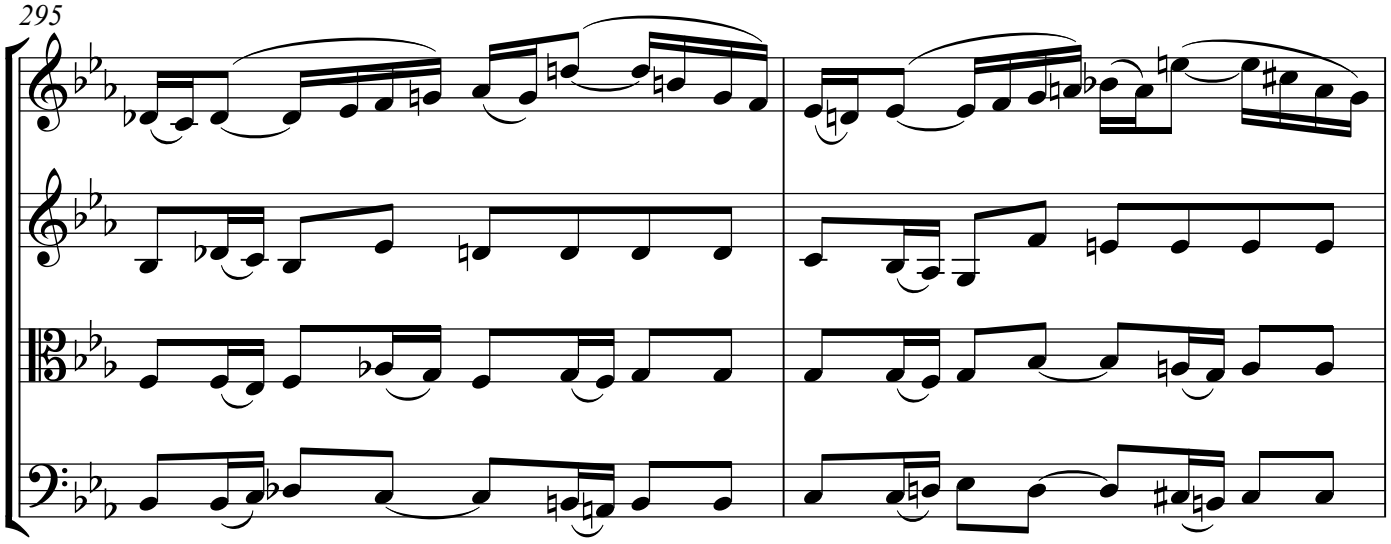

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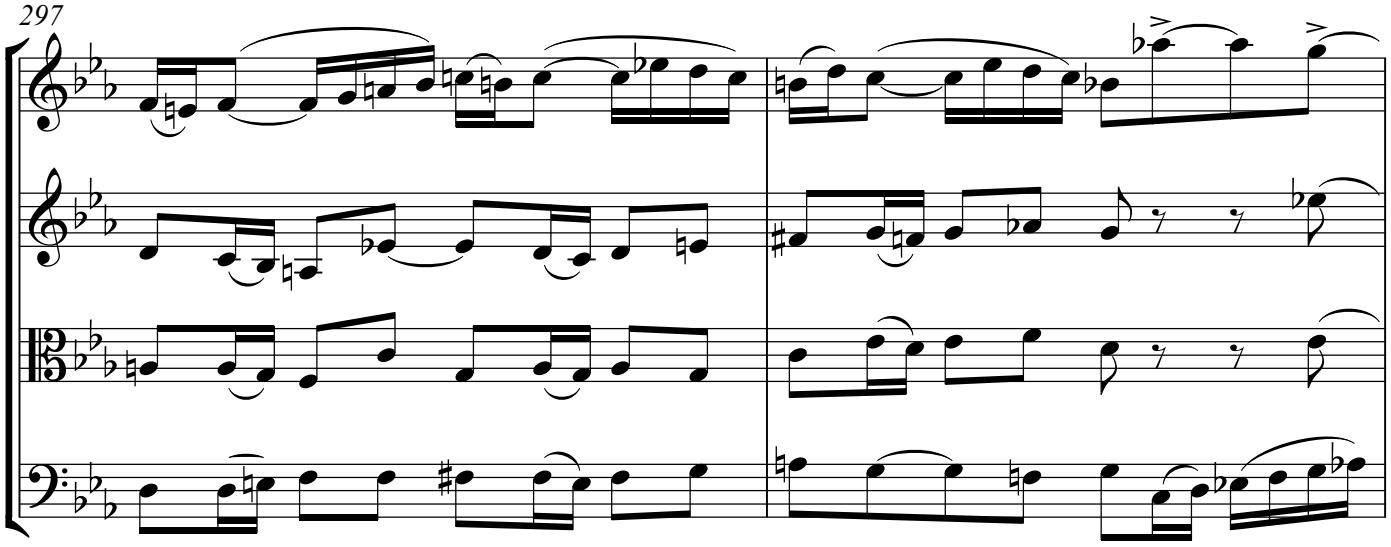

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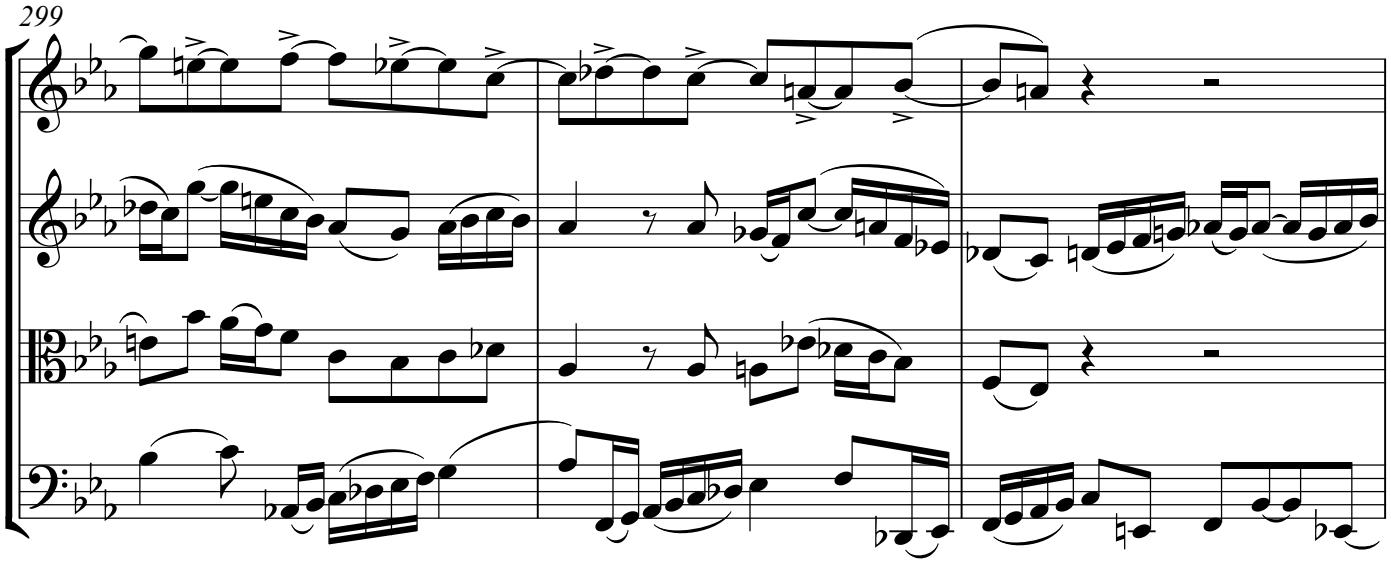

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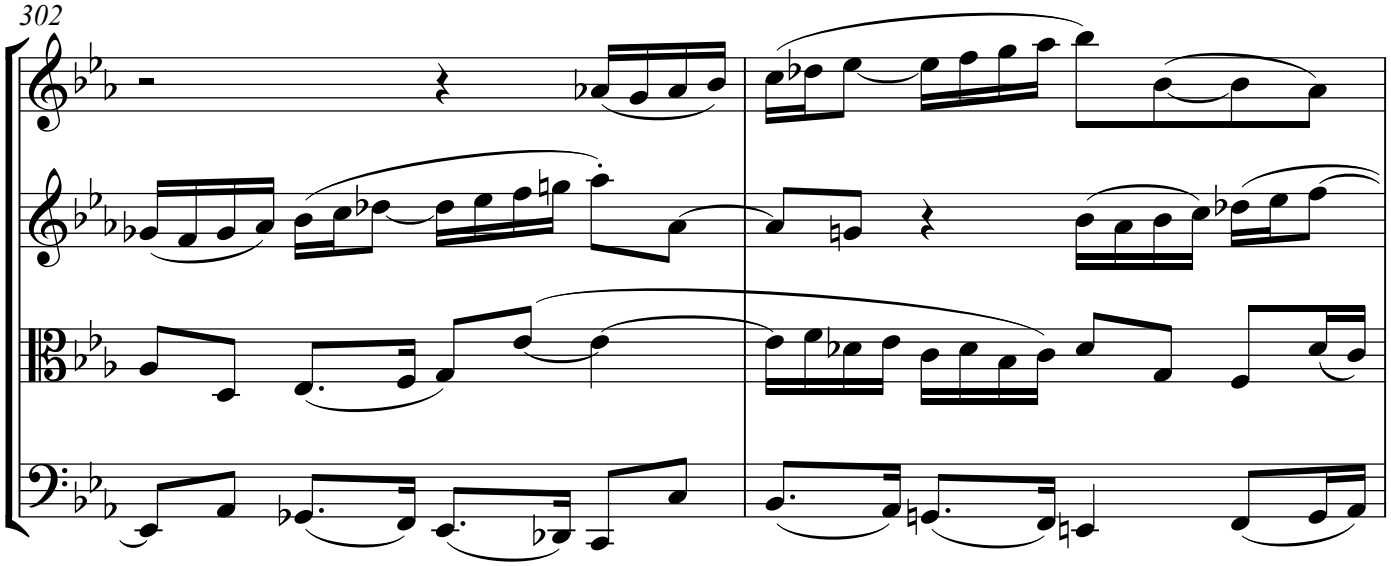

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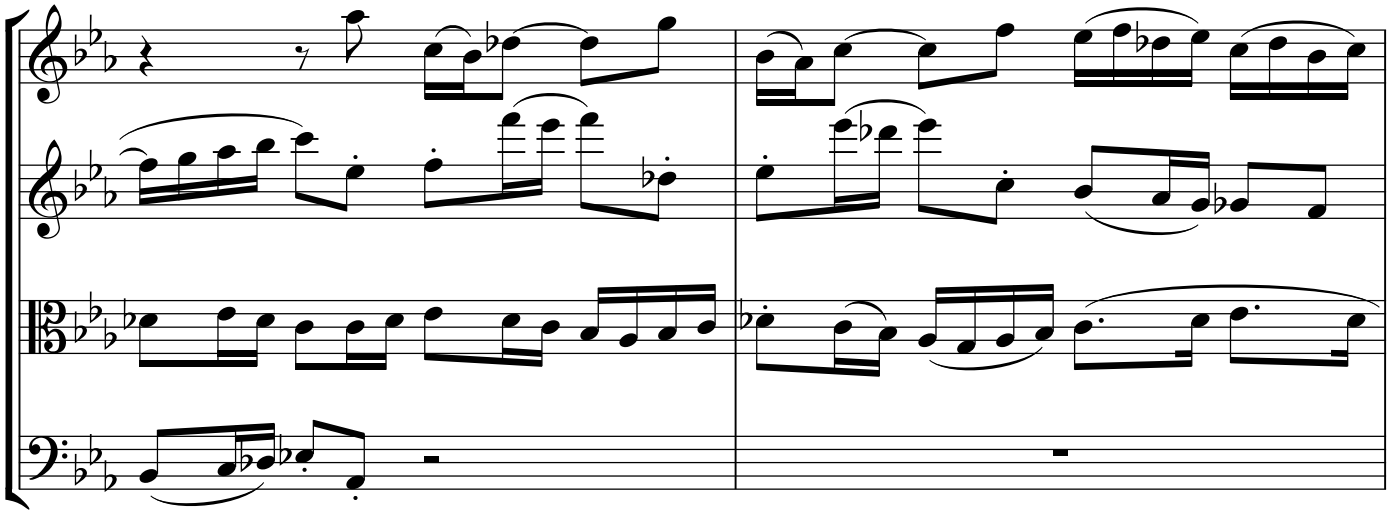

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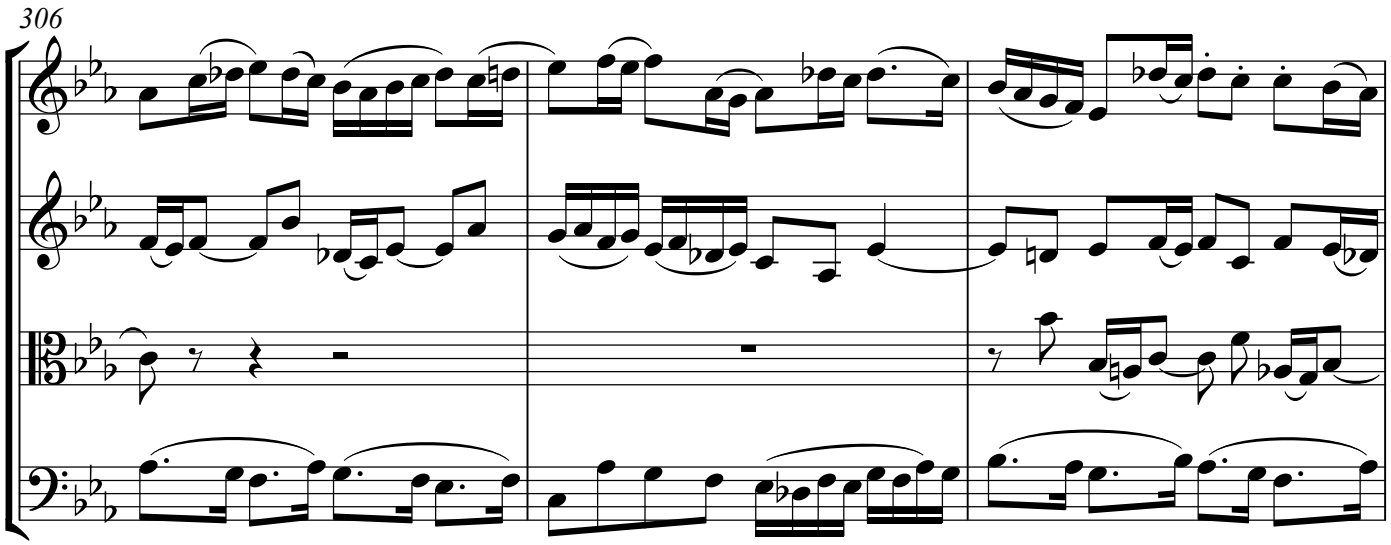

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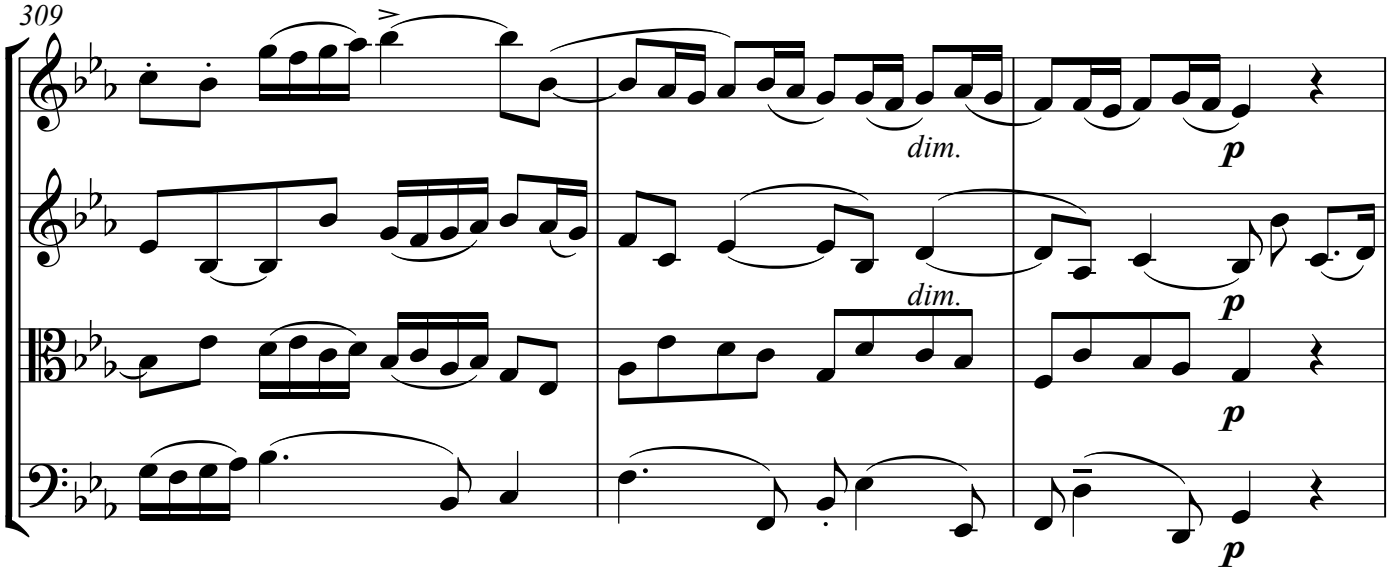

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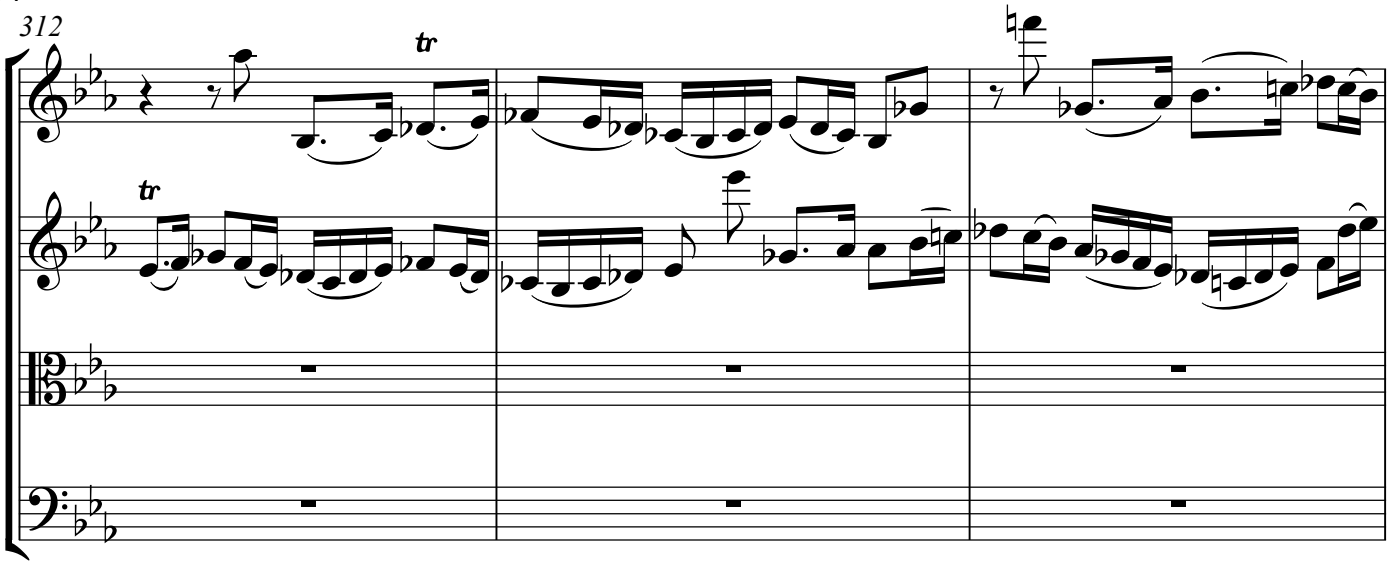

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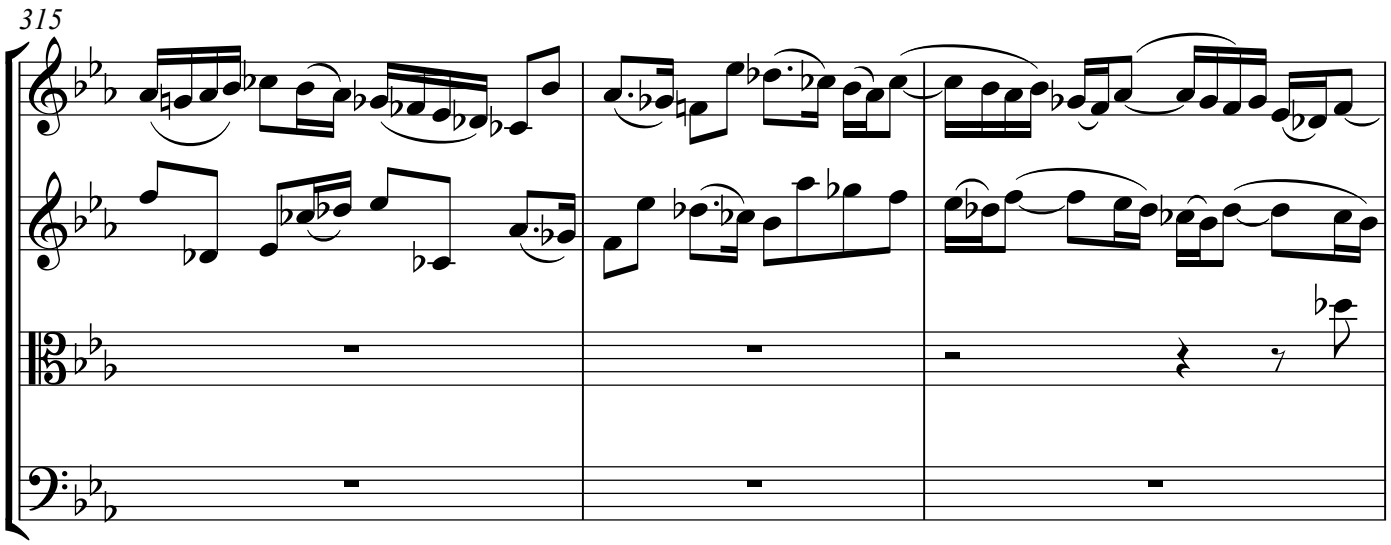

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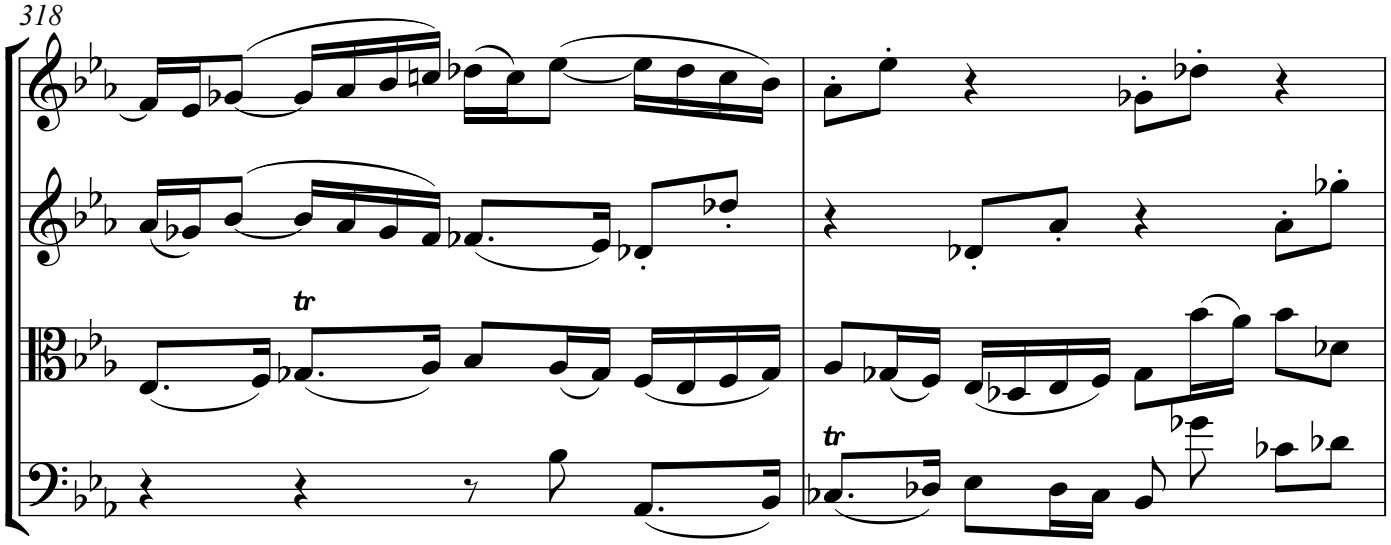

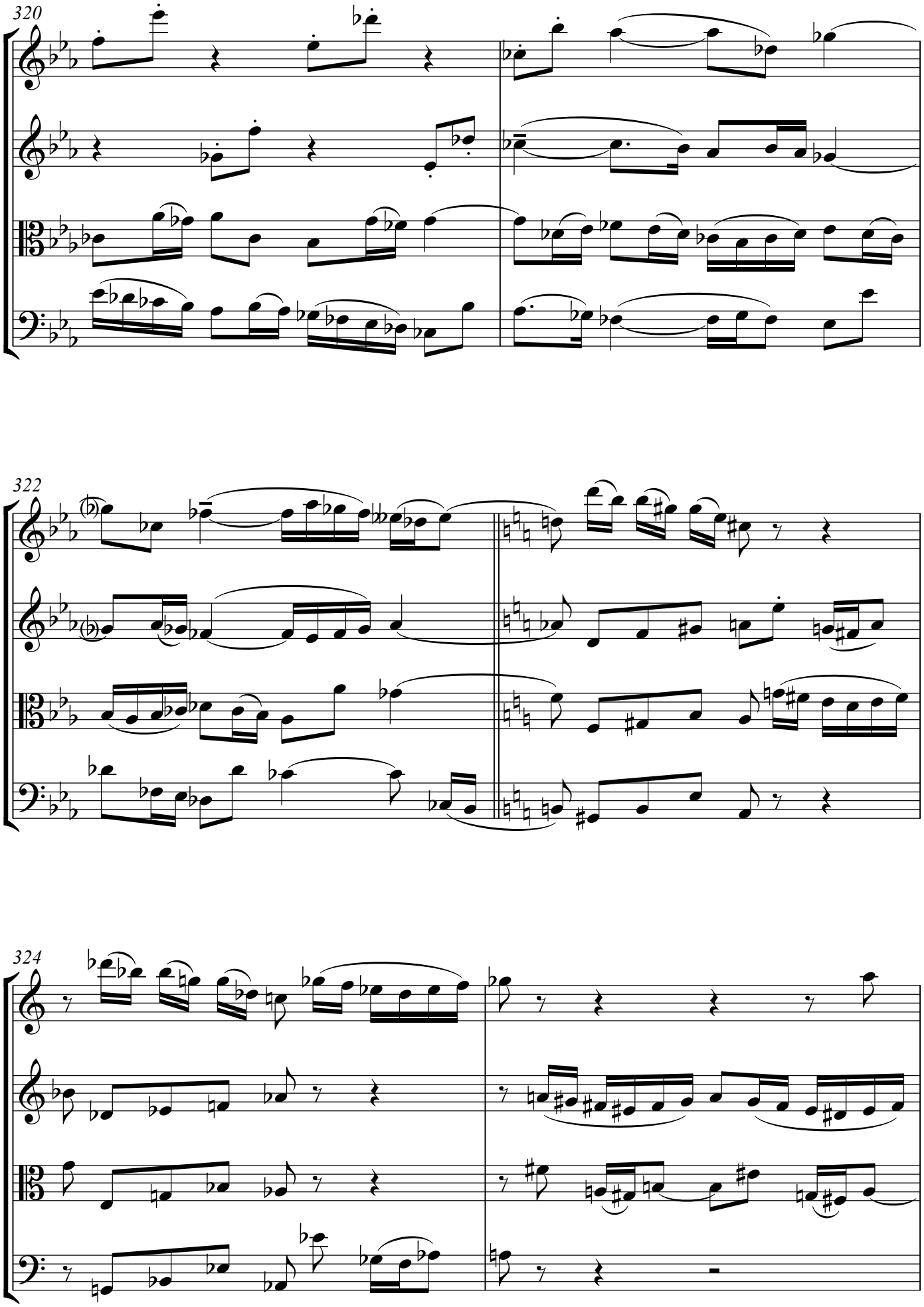
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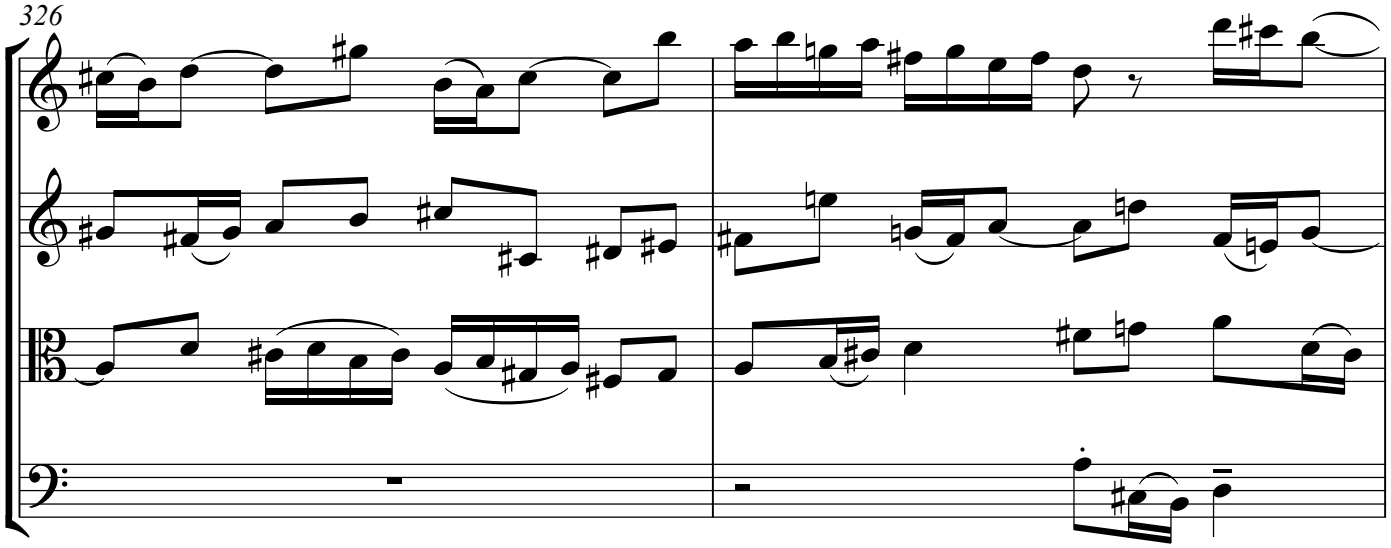

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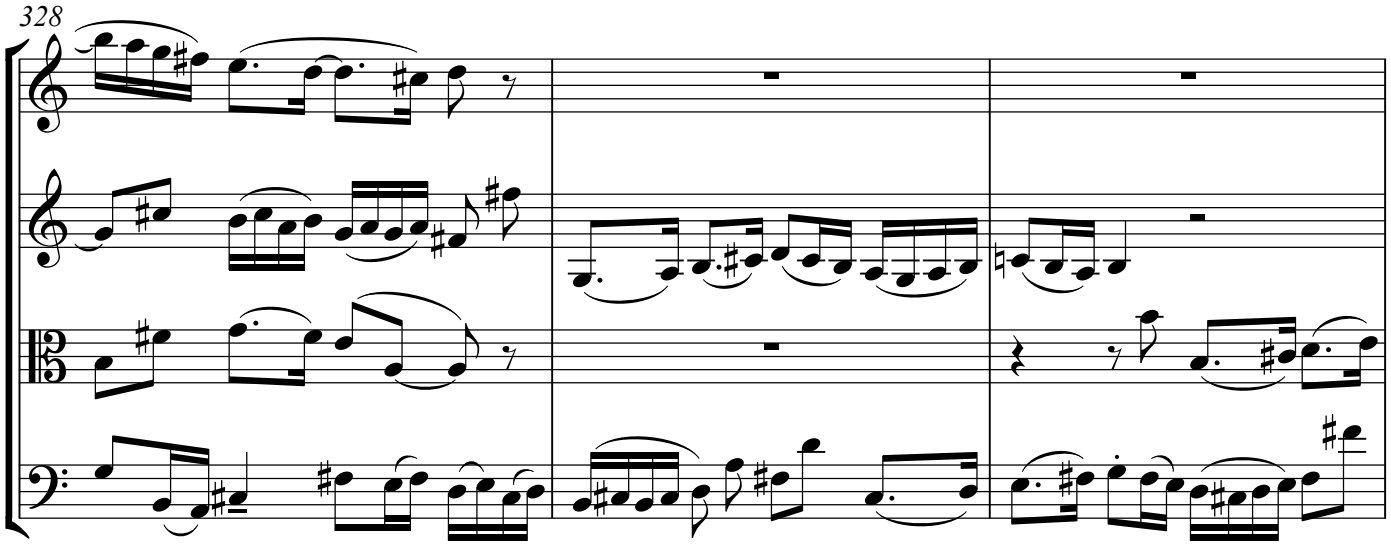

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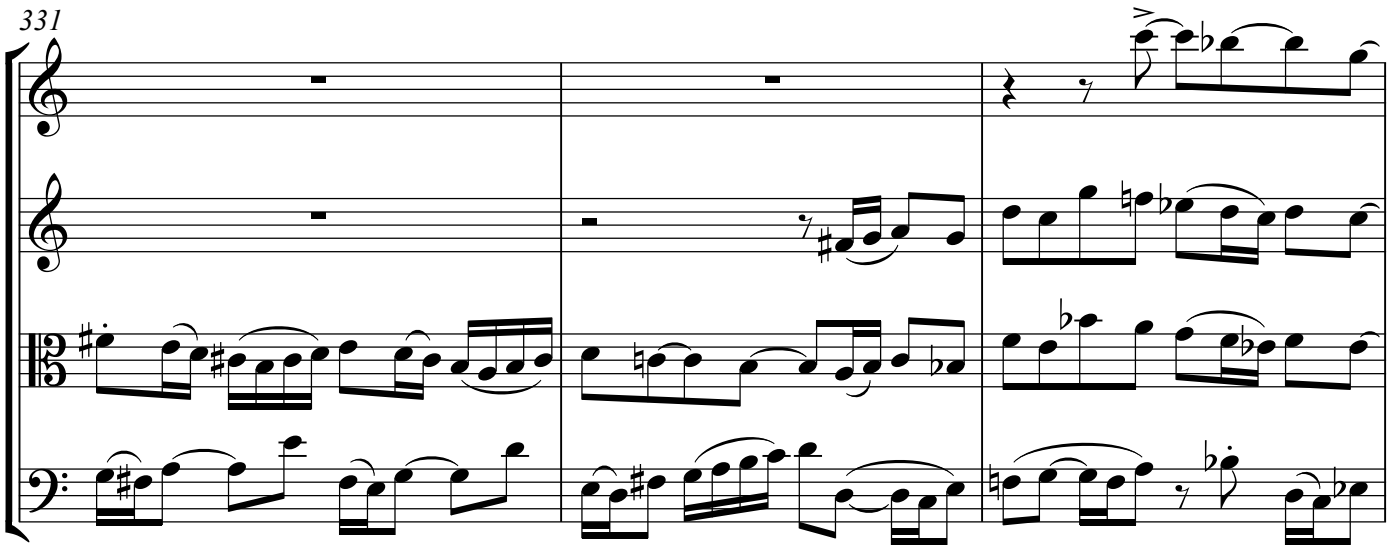

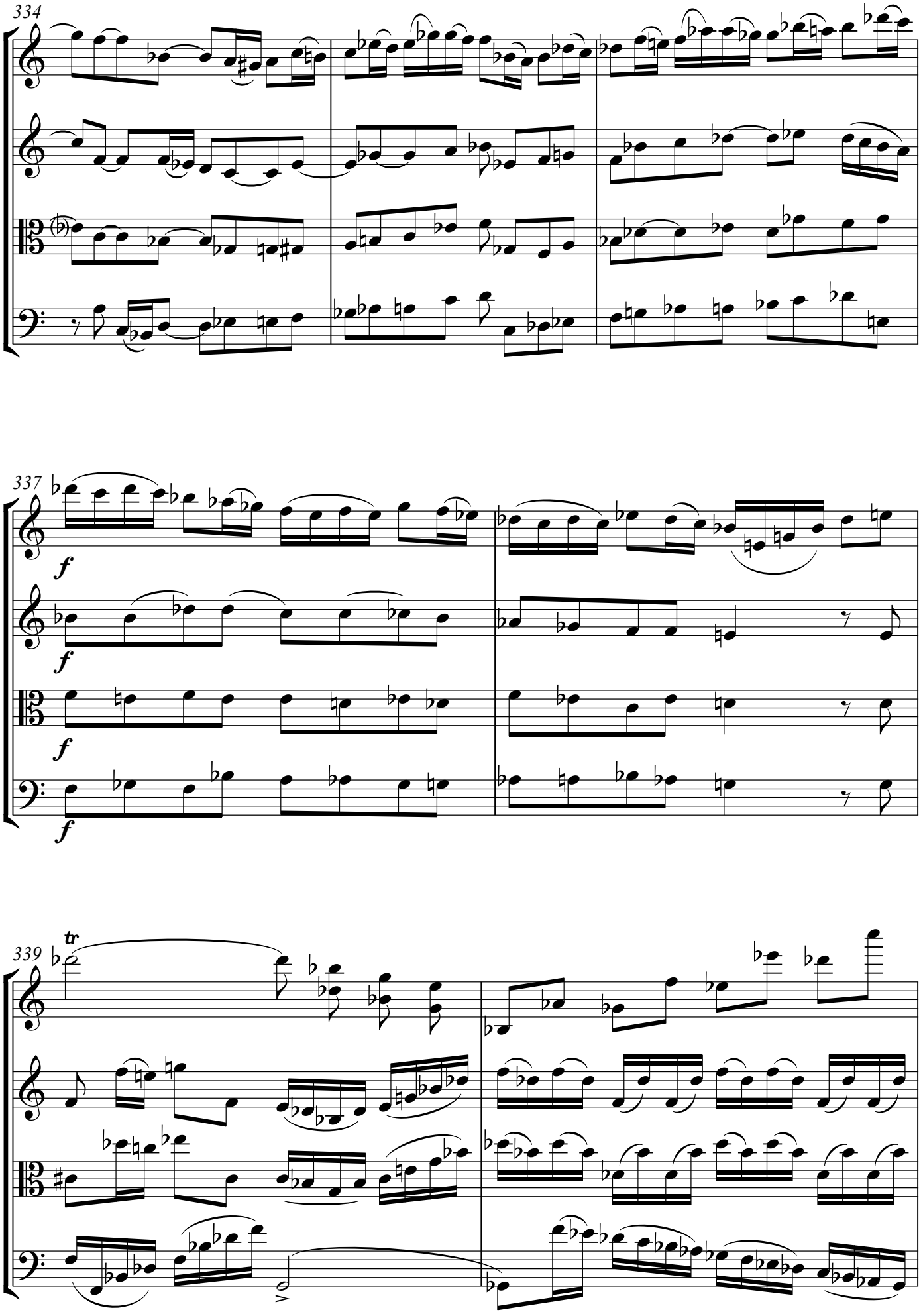
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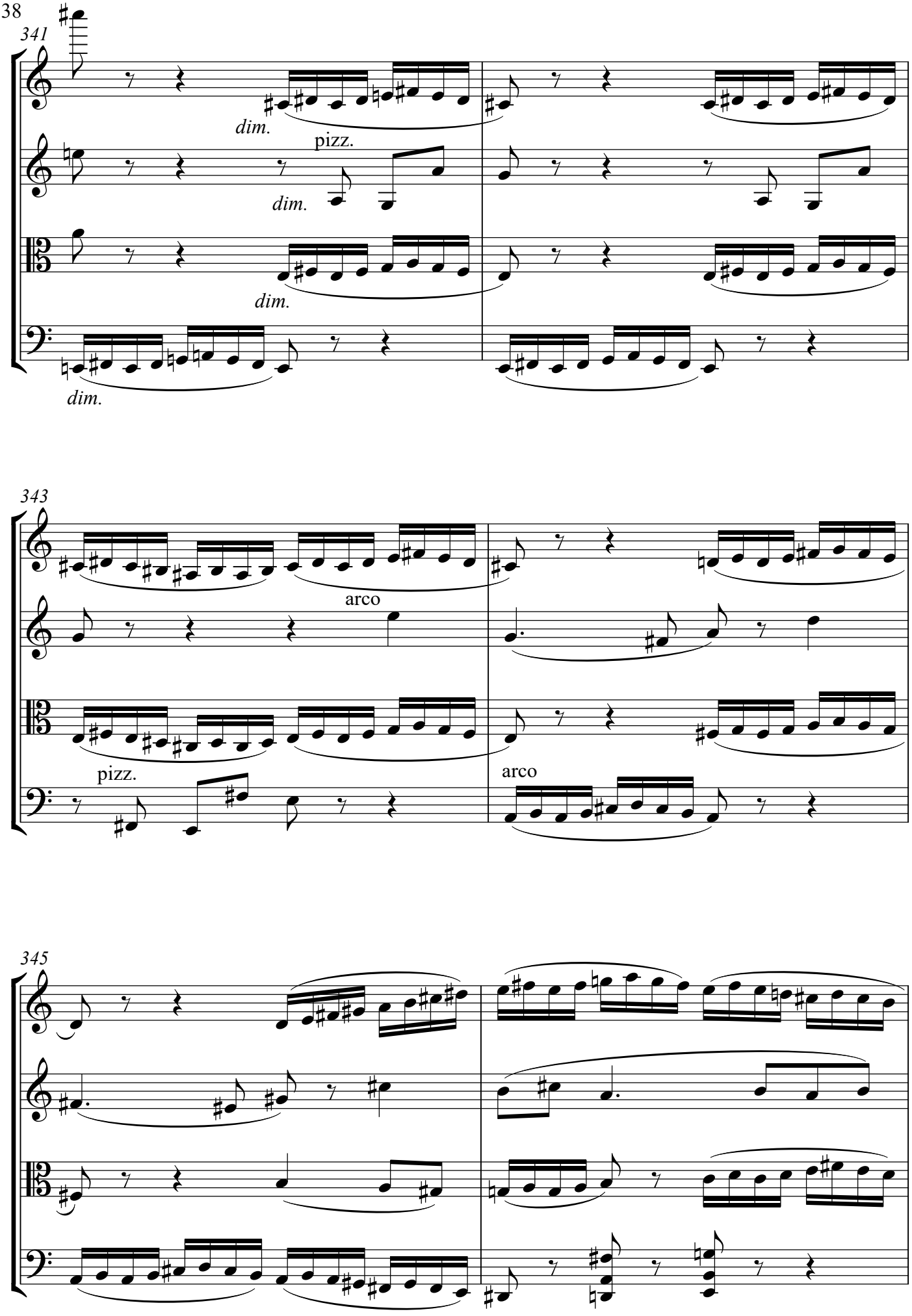
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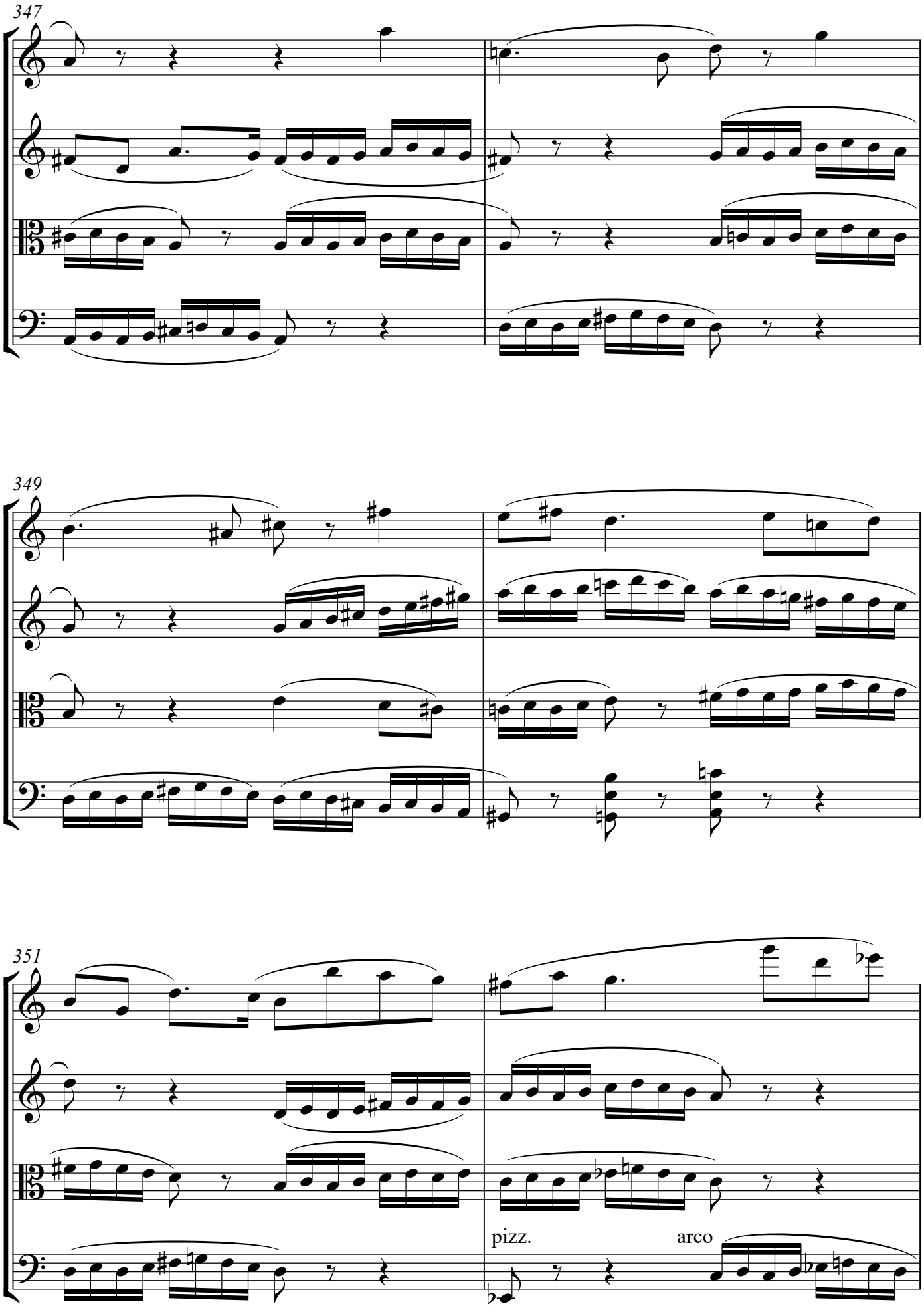
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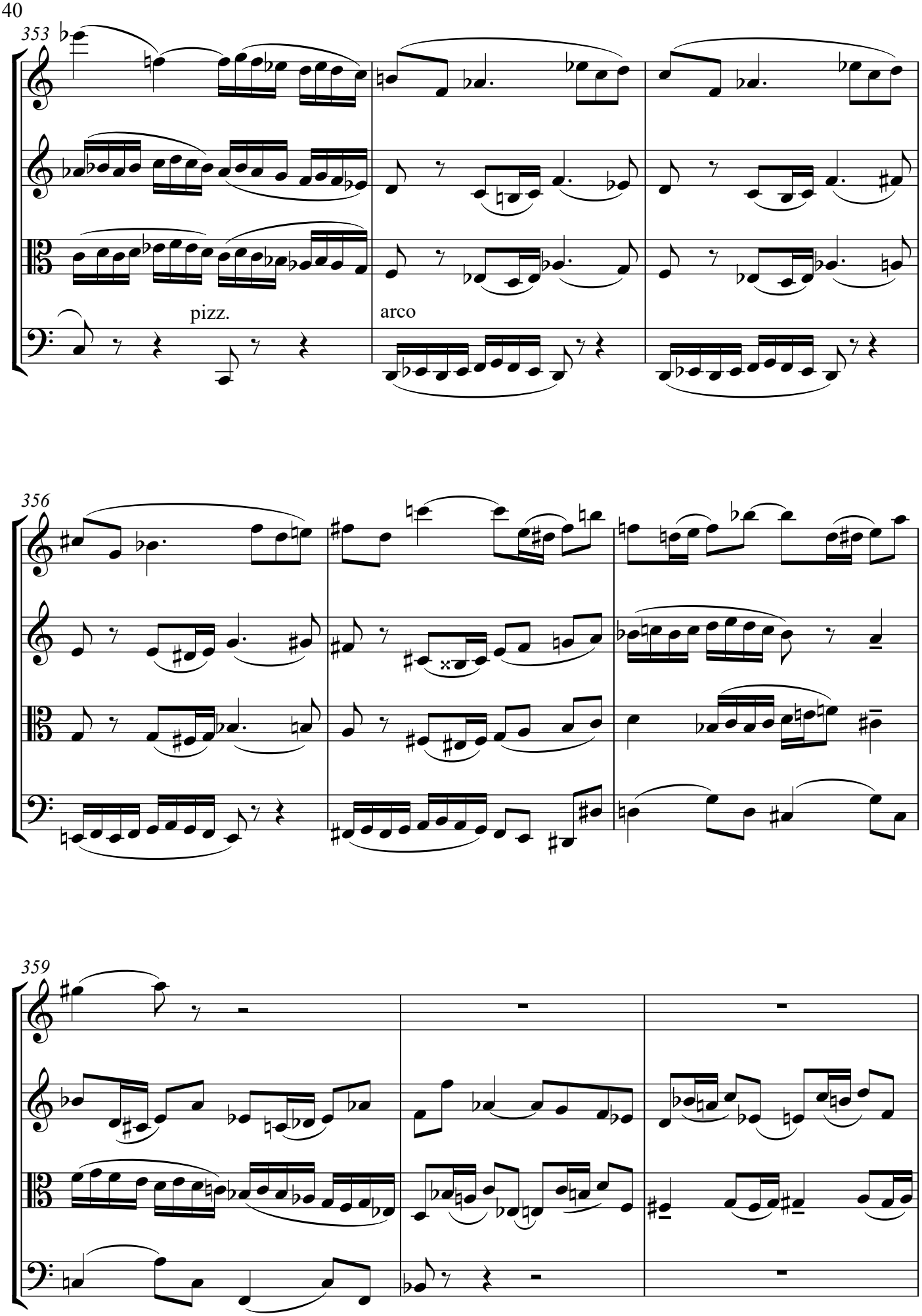
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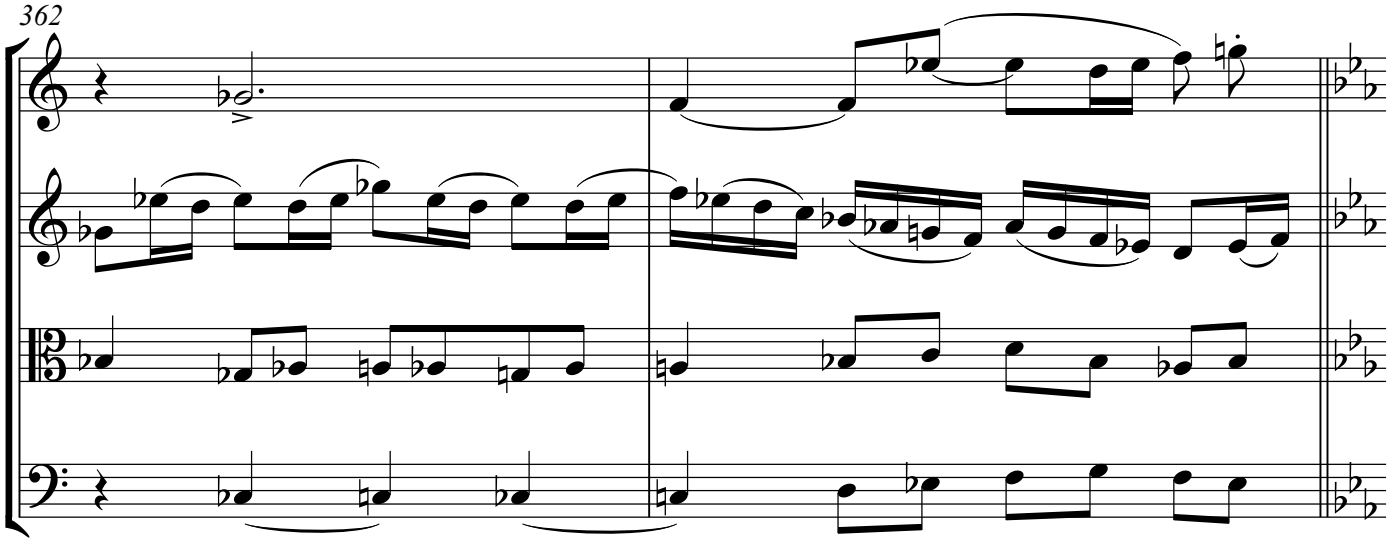

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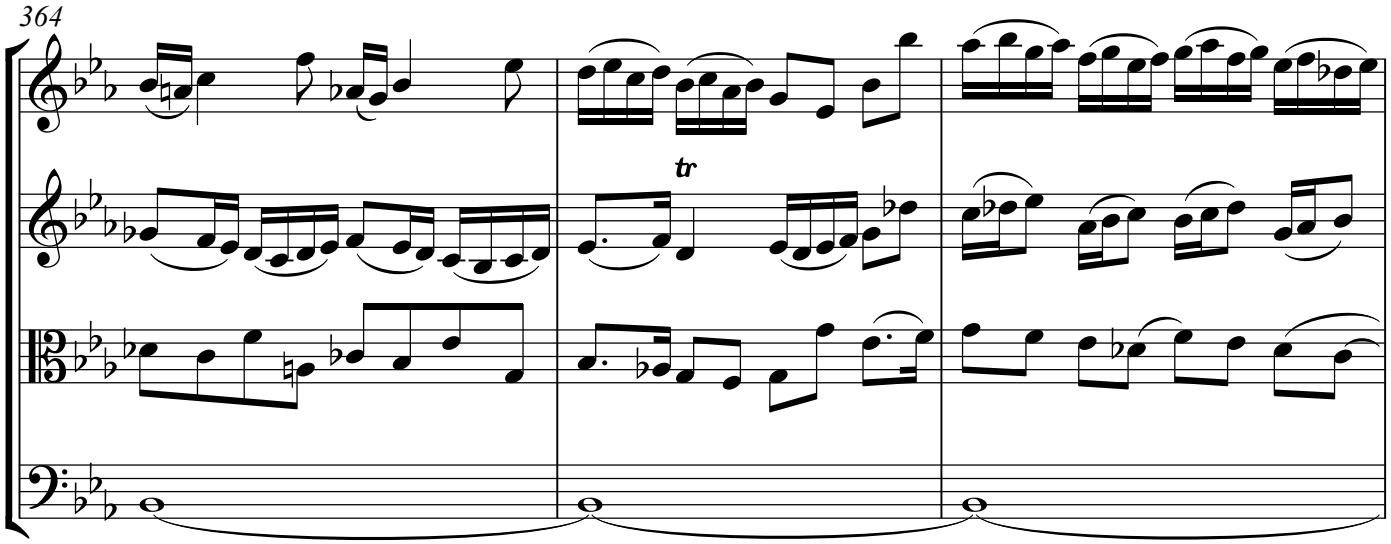

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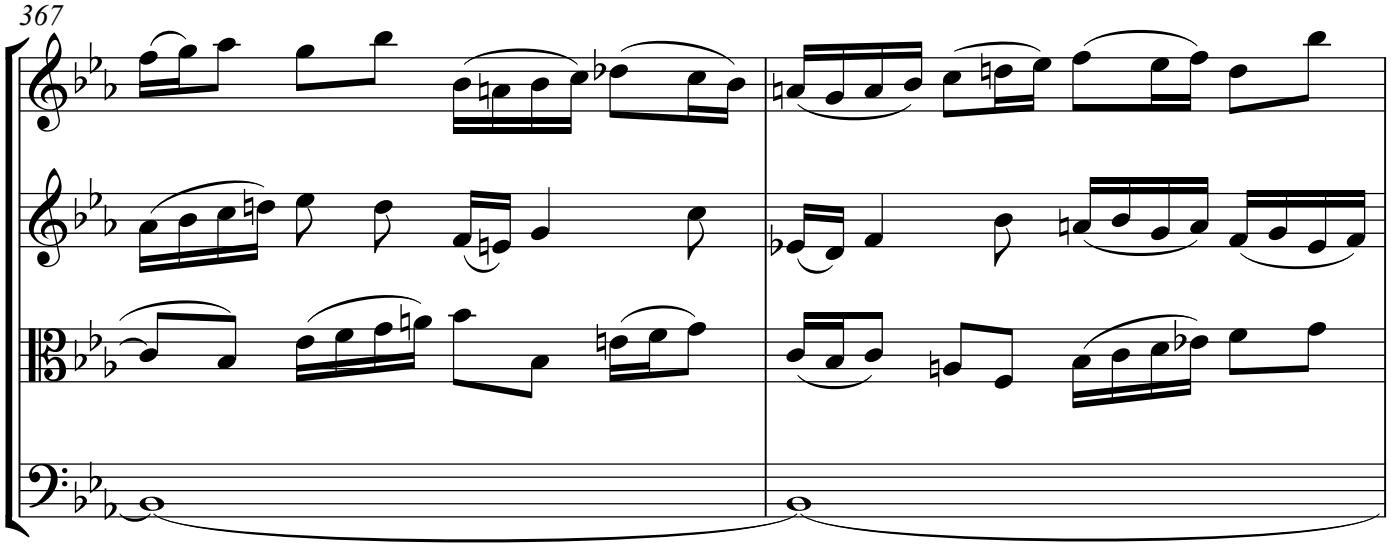

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Oct - Dec 1932