JOHN SYKES

SEVEN DIVERSIONS

on a

LANCASHIRE SEA-CHANTY

(Donkey Riding)

for

TWO PIANOS

The JOHN SYKES PROJECT

MMXIV

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.

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SEVEN DIVERSIONS for two pianos
on a
LANCASHIRE SEA-CHANTY

John Sykes was an outstanding pianist and wrote a lot of music for the instrument. His style was eclectic – he had a gift for pastiche – and invariably pianistic. He enjoyed writing for two pianos and produced half a dozen pieces in this medium, ranging from an early transcription of Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* to the Percy-Grainger-like style of this piece – a fine encore item for any duo.

It is possible that Sykes' friendship with Randall Swingler (who married Geraldine Peppin – one of the Peppin twins who were concert pianists and often performed together) ignited his interest in two-piano music, since the twins provided a ready market for such music. In his later years at Kingswood, the school hall boasted two pianos, so Sykes sometimes wrote incidental music to school plays for the two instruments. Perhaps the best of these is the *Polonaise (Assyrian Festive Dance)*, originally part of the incidental music for a production of James Bridie's play *Jonah and the Whale in 1952.*

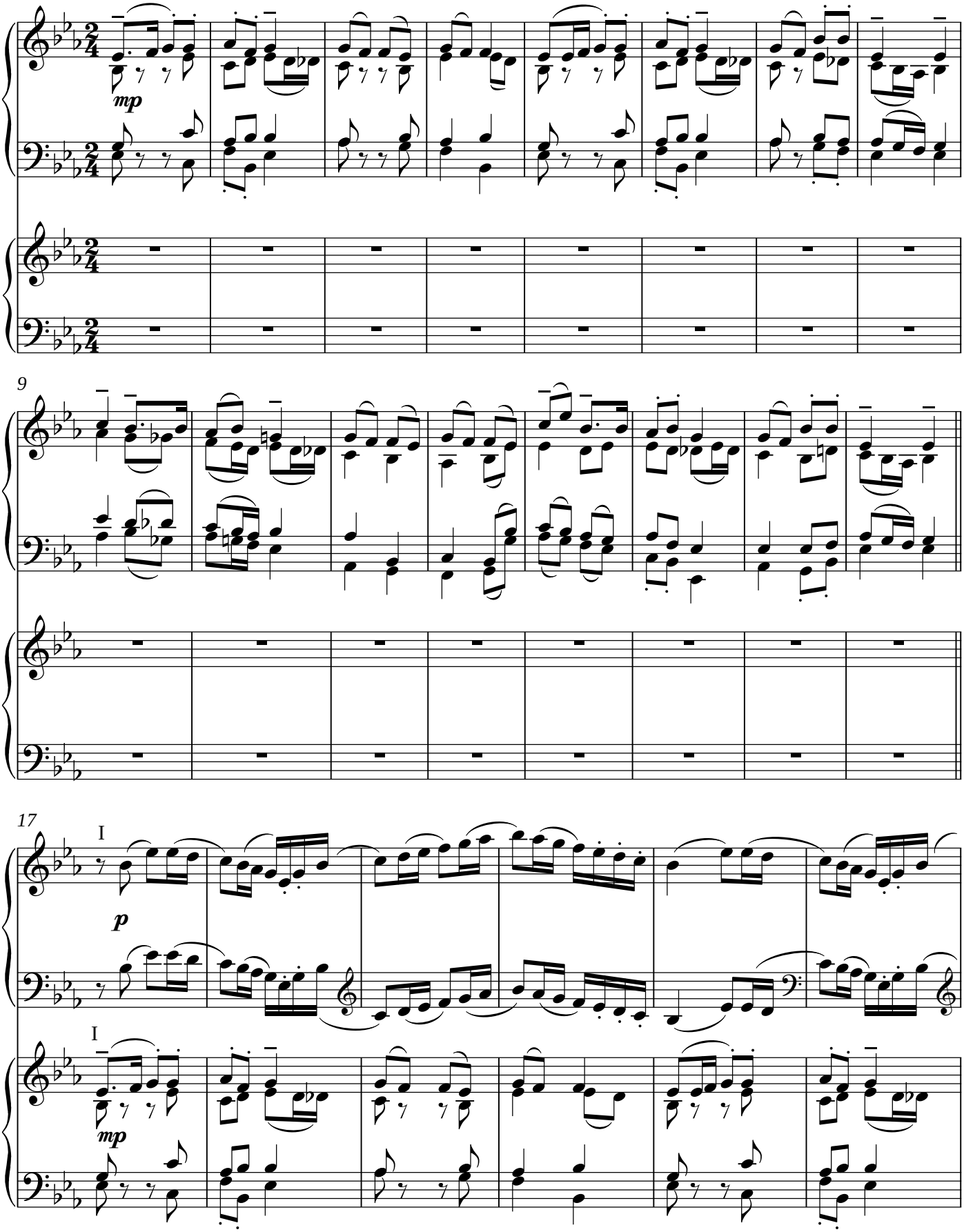
The *Seven Diversions* were written in 1938, the same year as *The Keel Row* – another 'Diversion', this time for piano solo, and a piece which again is reminiscent of Percy Grainger. Sykes noted 'The tune is called “Donkey Riding” and is in the Oxford Song Book, Volume two.'

P.J.C. January 2014

Seven Diversions on a Lancashire Sea-Chanty

John Sykes

Allegro ma non troppo (with an easy swinging movement)



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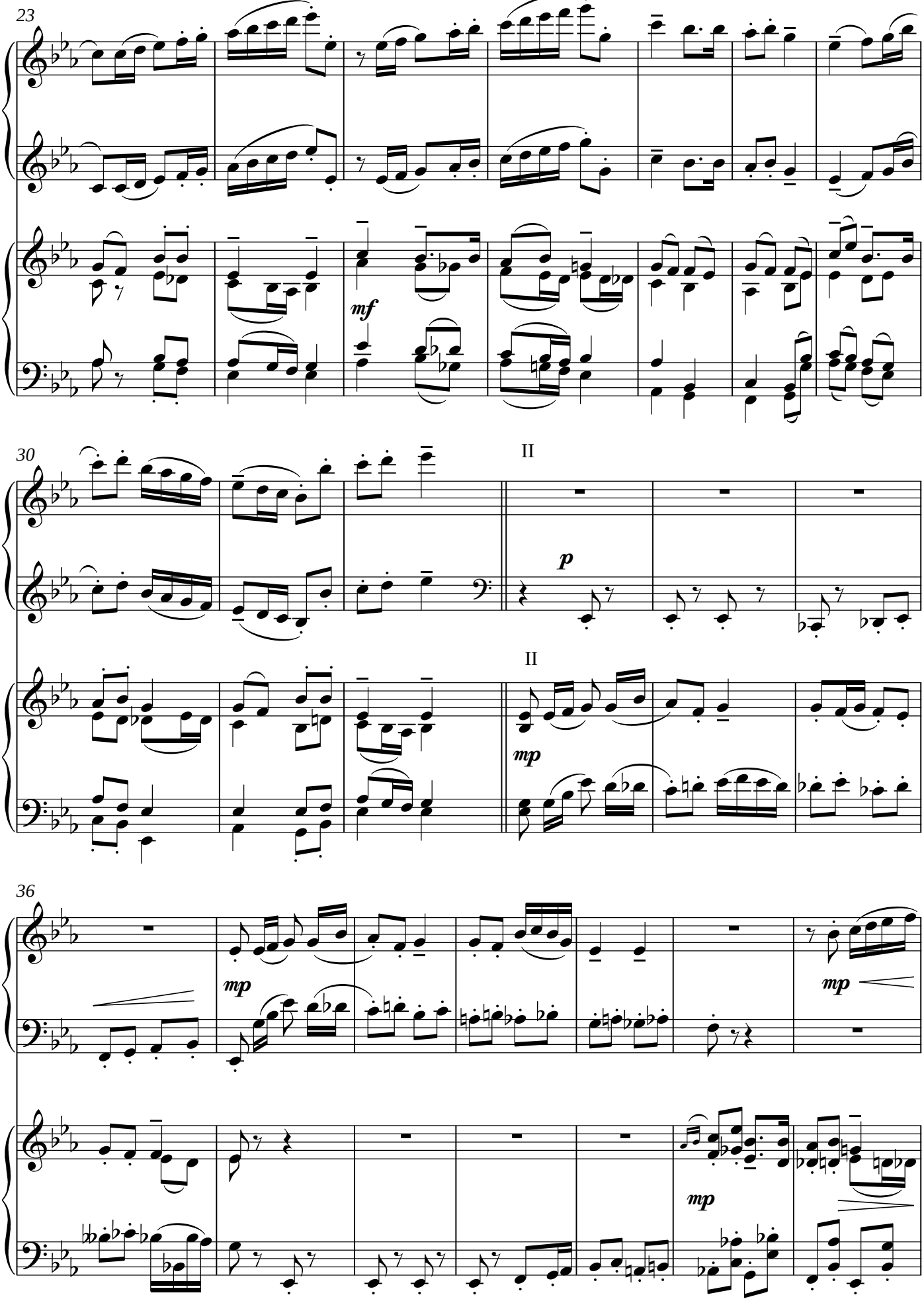
23
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II
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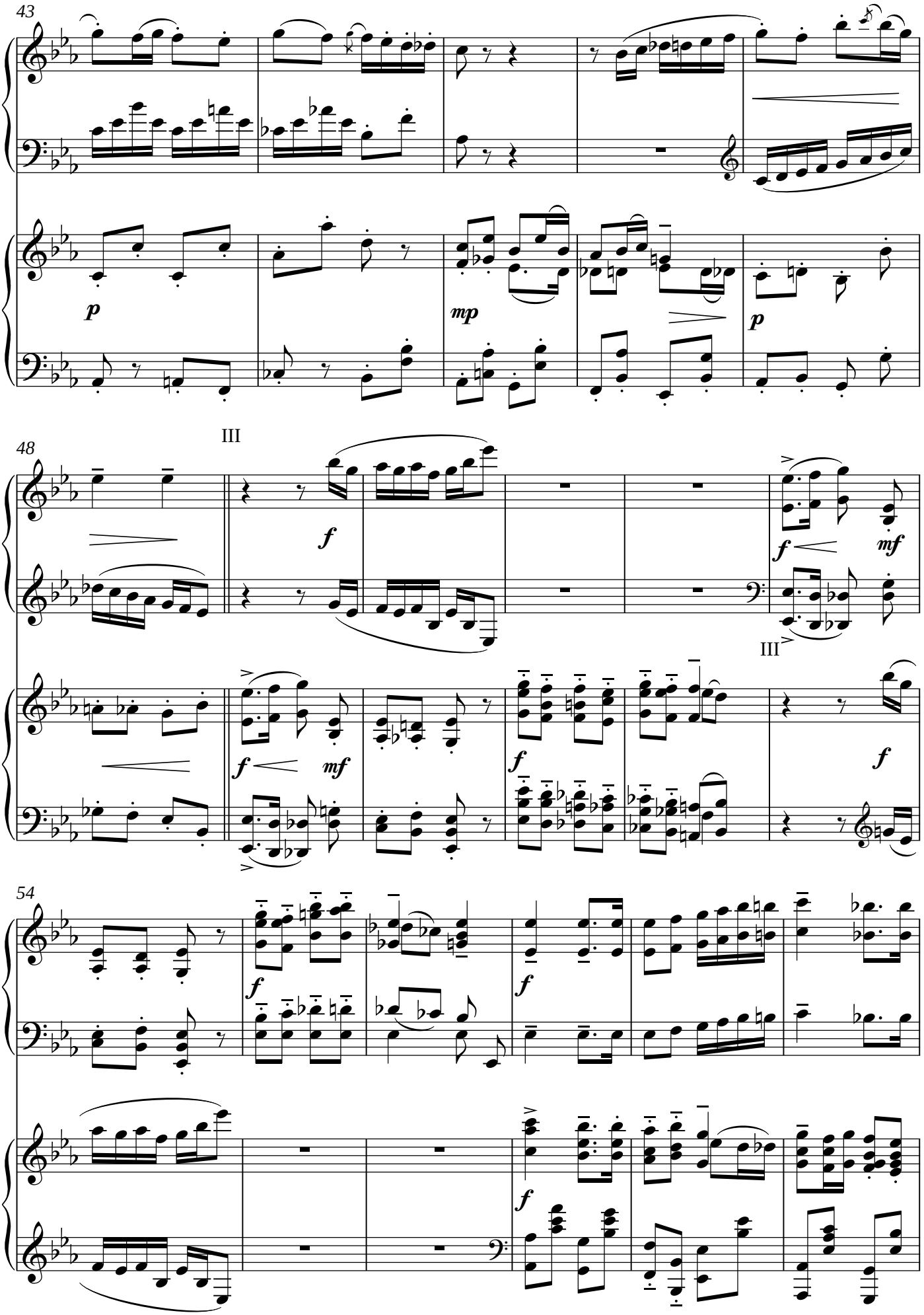
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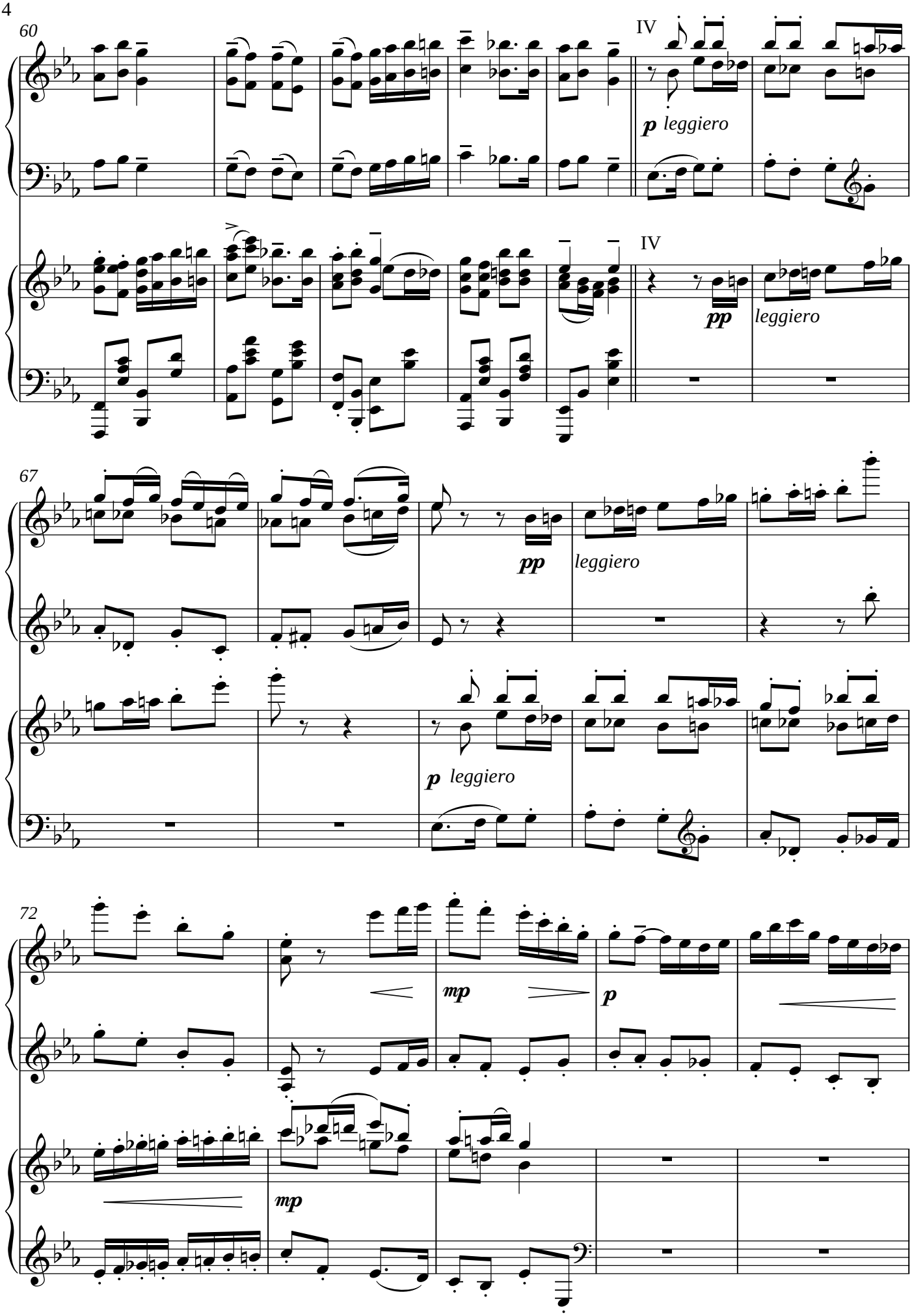
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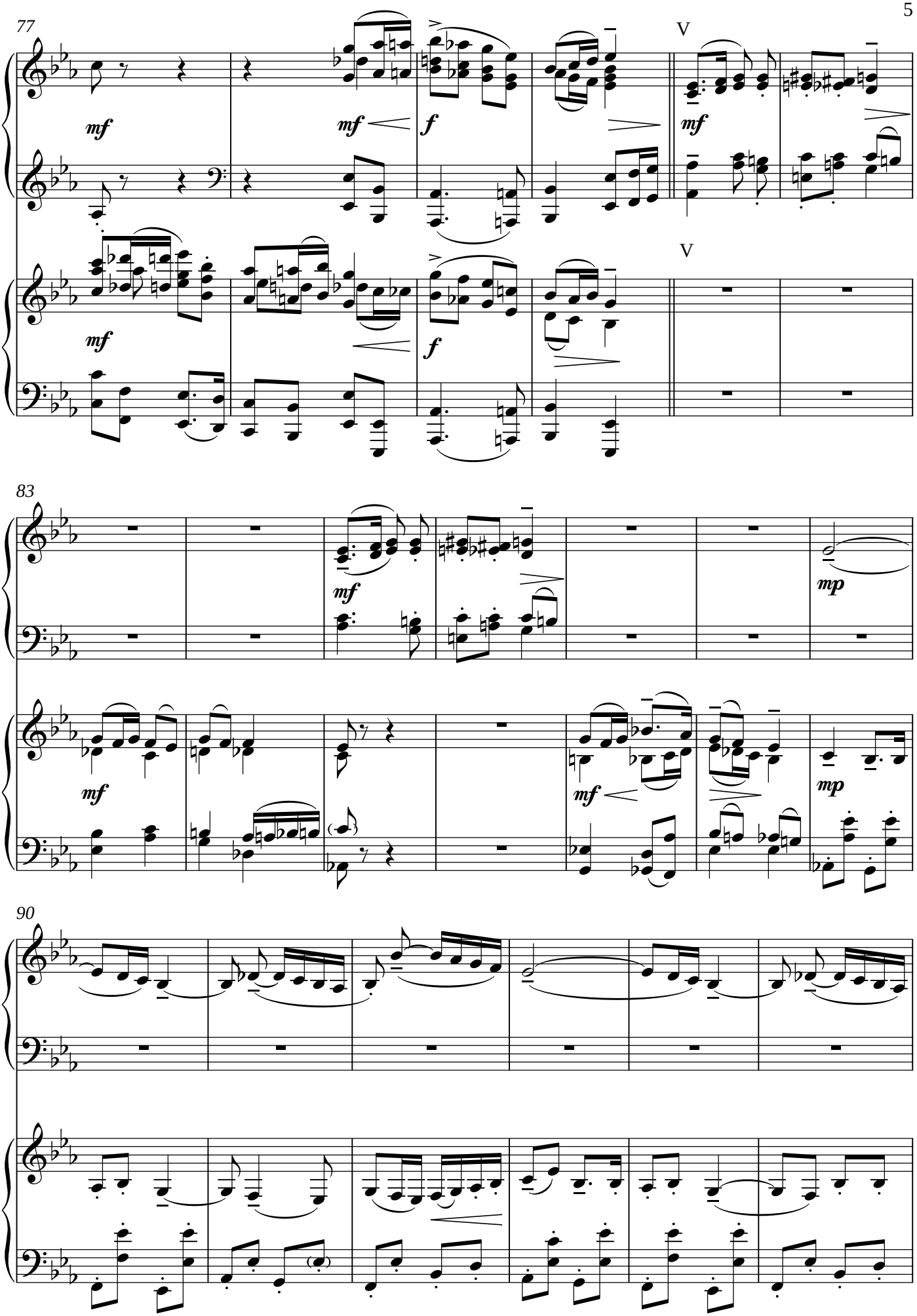
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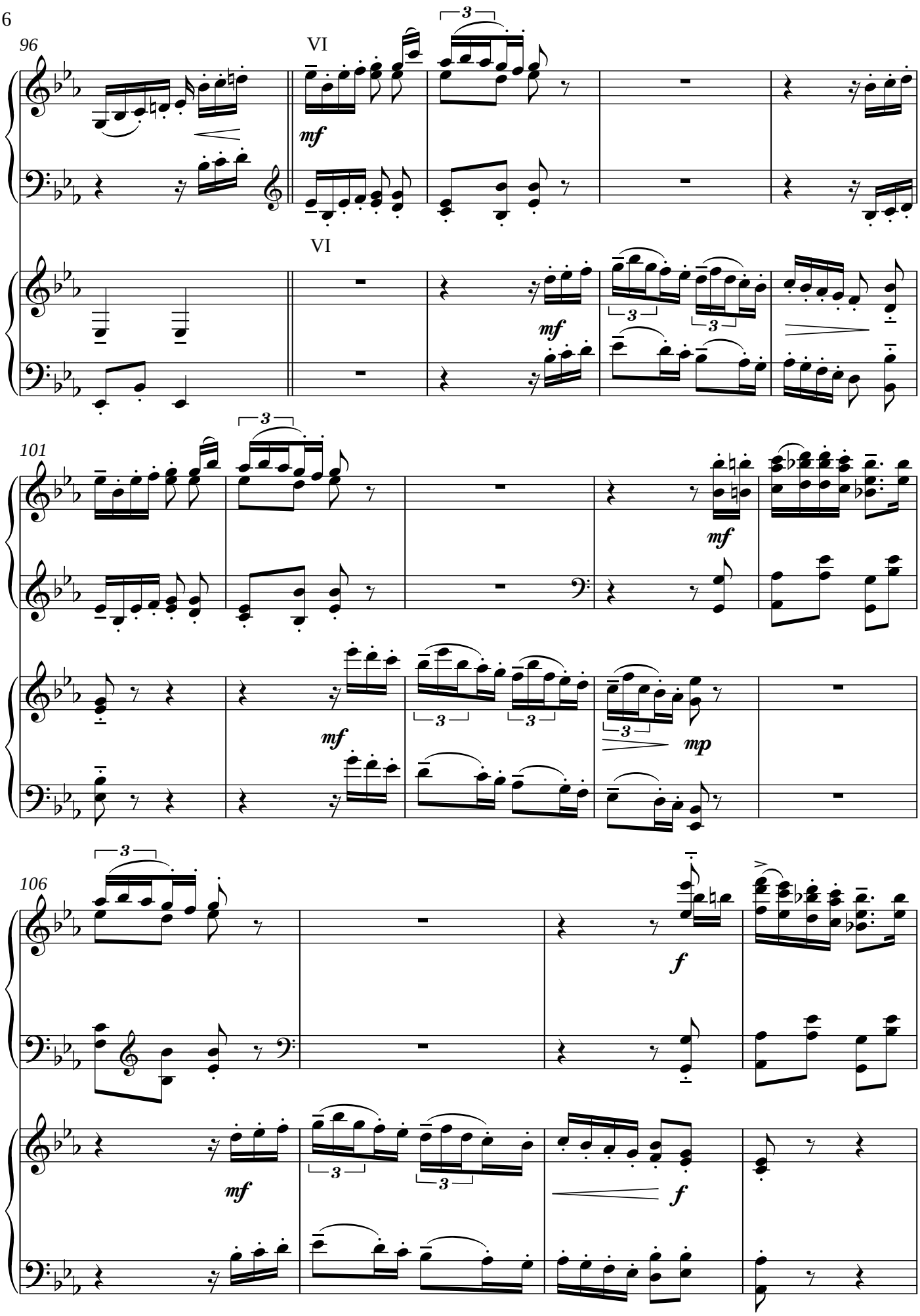
90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106
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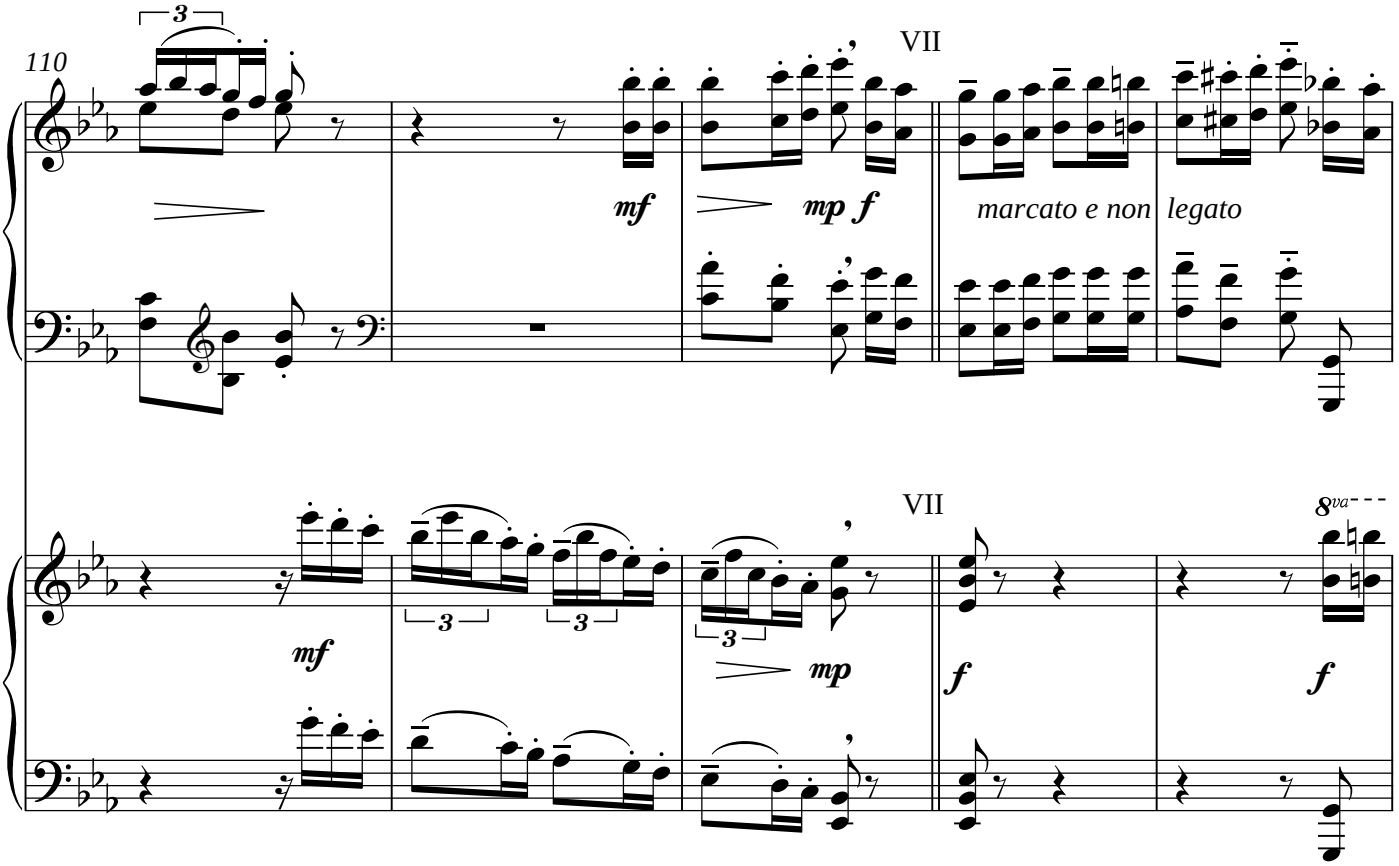
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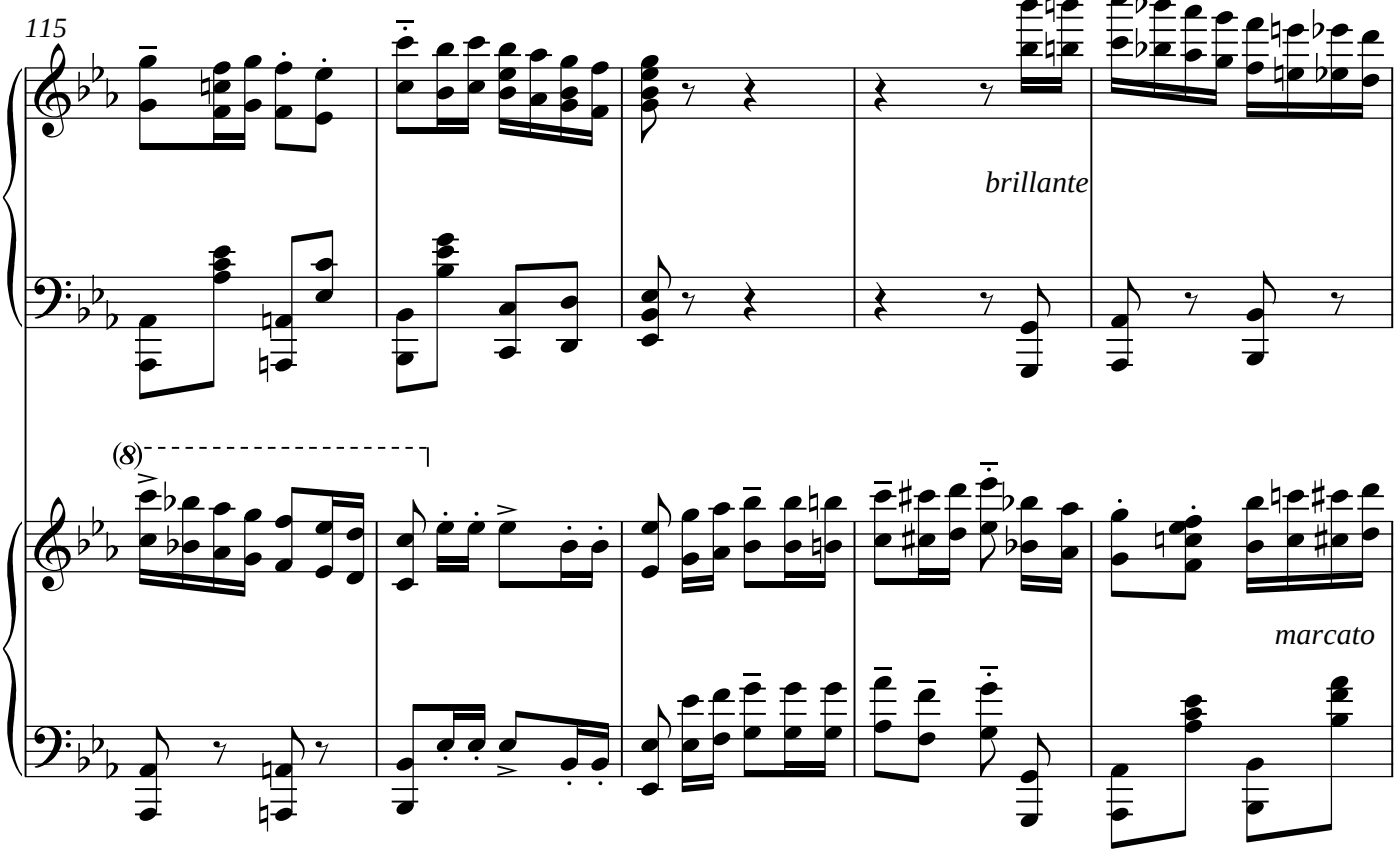
115
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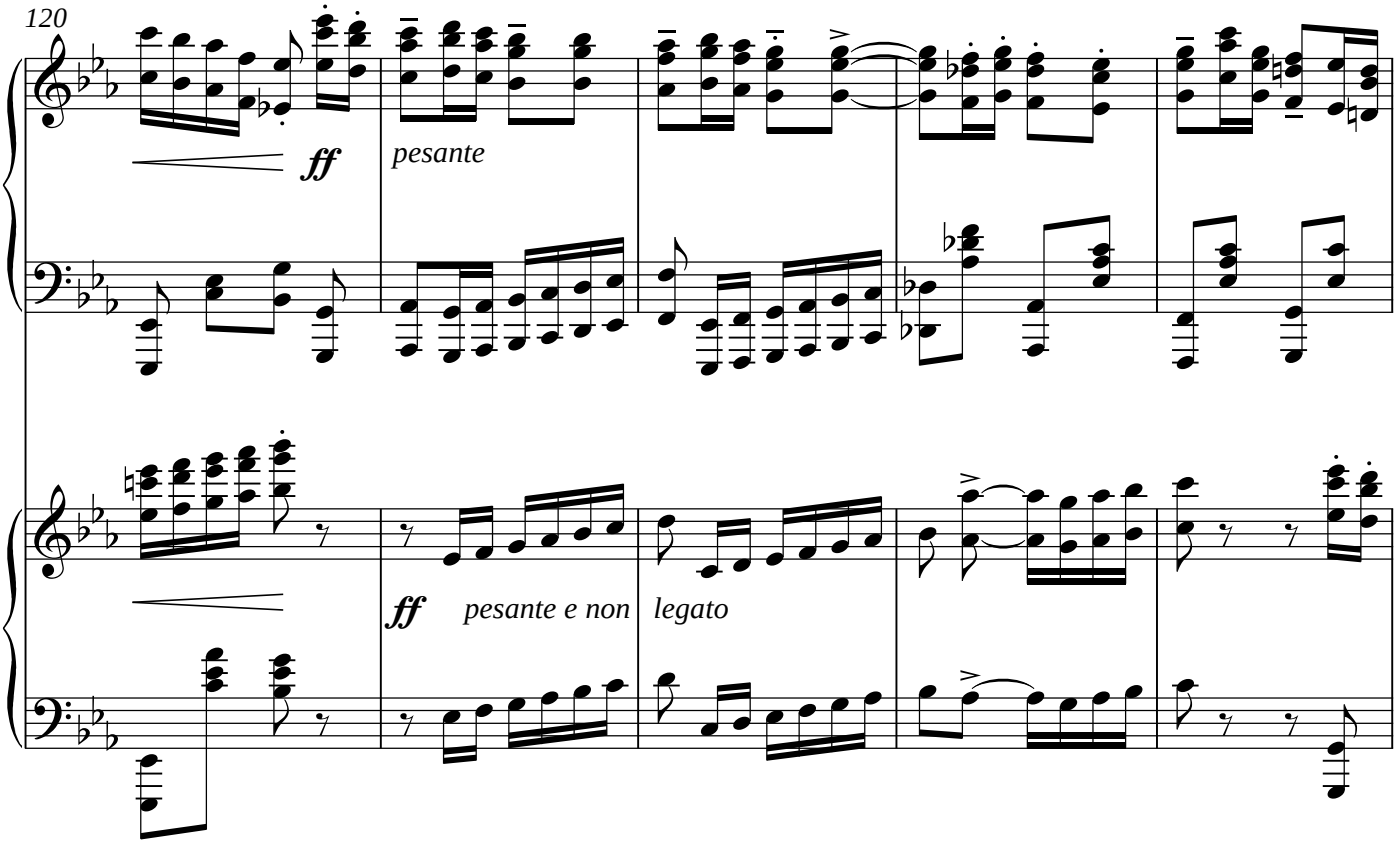
120
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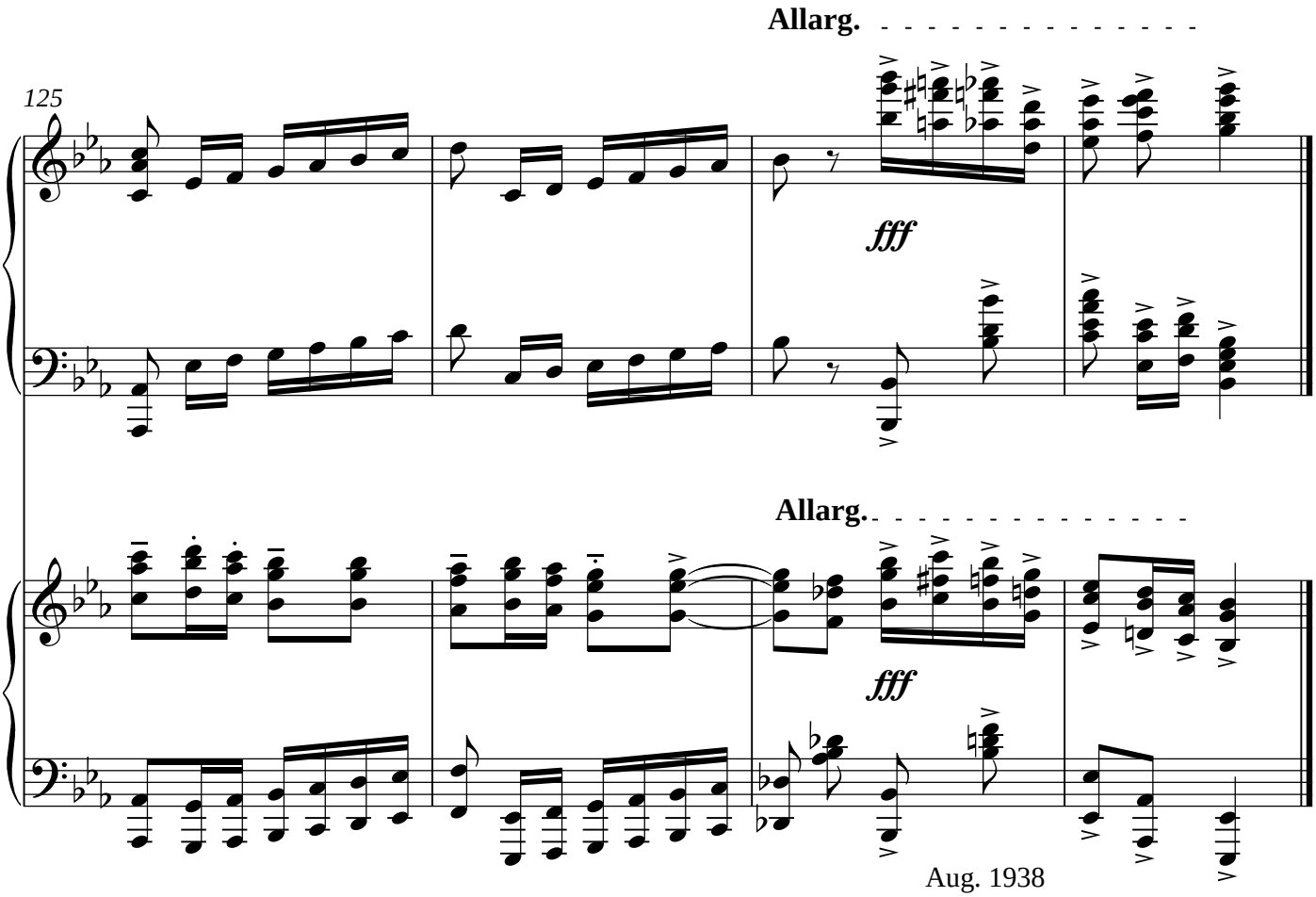
Allarg.
125
fff
Allarg.
fff

Aug. 1938