Eric Ewazen:

A Critical Analysis of *Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings*

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Introduction

One of the best ways to truly understand a composer and his music is to get inside the composer's head by researching his background, identifying his influences, and analyzing his style. Likewise, one of the best ways to truly understand a piece is to examine the elements of the composition, including form, motivic transformation, and harmony.

The process of a critical analysis, while difficult, proves to be quite engaging. Whenever possible, the analysis must take into account the opinions and thoughts of the composer about the piece. Then the music is performed and studied again and again, and this reveals many complexities, not only about the music, but also about the opinions and thoughts of the person doing the analysis.

Eric Ewazen, the composer of *Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings*, is one among many important contemporary composers. Whether he is writing for a band, orchestra, vocalist, chamber ensemble, or instrumental soloist, his music always reaches within to captivate the heart of the audience. His eclectic style allows him to reflect his influences without losing his individuality.

Biography

Ewazen was born in 1954 in Cleveland, Ohio. He began composing during his junior year in high school, where hearing the music of Samuel Barber, Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein influenced him. It was during his high school years that Ewazen found that he immensely enjoyed creating something from scratch and finding ways to make it sound like the music of his favorite composers.

After graduating from high school, Ewazen continued his schooling at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. While at Eastman, he studied with many well-known composers, such as Joseph Schwantner (from 1972-1973), Samuel Adler (from 1973-1974), Warren Benson (from 1975-1976). He graduated from the Eastman School of Music with a Bachelor's of Music degree in 1976. He studied with Milton Babbitt at the Juilliard School, where he completed his Master's of Music degree (1978) and his Doctorate (1980).

Ewazen composes all types of music, ranging from instrumental chamber works and solos, wind ensemble pieces, orchestral pieces, and some vocal works. Many of these quickly became standard repertoire. His compositions allow him the privilege of working with many different types of people and ensembles. He was the Composer-in-Residence with the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, at the International Trombone Festival in 1997, and at the International Horn Society Convention in 2001. The subject of this

study, *Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings*, was one of the pieces he premiered for the International Trombone Festival in 1997. His upcoming commissions include a Concerto for Trumpet and Wind Ensemble, to be premiered by Allen Vizzutti in 2004, and a Concerto for Percussion and Wind Ensemble, to be premiered by Nexus in 2004 (Stanton).

In addition to composing musical works, Ewazen has also served as vice-president of the League of Composers-International Society of Contemporary Music (ISCM). His duties as vice-president included organizing fund-raising events for the ISCM's seven concert series in New York City, where he was a judge for the ISCM's annual composition contest. He also directed the benefit concerts in which Elliot Carter and his former teacher, Milton Babbit, were honored. While serving as vice-president, Ewazen was able to meet other composers in the New York City area, as well as top performers.

Ewazen currently serves on the music faculty at Juilliard, where he teaches classes in Music Theory and Literature and Materials of Music in the college division and Composition in the pre-college division. When asked if his teaching role helped or hindered his progress as a composer, he replied, "It helps! I get inspired by my students. I enjoy seeing how they react and respond to various music" (Ewazen interview).

History of Ballade and Ewazen's Compositional Style

Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings was written while Ewazen was at a summer music festival in Maryland, staying in a hotel overlooking Chesapeake Bay. "It

is that pastorale scene that inspired this piece, with its graceful melodies, and gentle harmonic accompaniment" (Ewazen Interview). The fast sections are described by the composer as being in an older American jazz style.

The *Ballade* began life as a clarinet piece, but after Ewazen was commissioned as the composer in residence at the 1997 International Trombone Festival (ITF), he learned that he would be composing pieces for Charles Vernon, the bass trombonist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, to premier. Ewazen then decided to turn *Ballade* from a clarinet solo to a trombone solo that would display Vernon's singing lyrical style during the slow sections and his virtuostic technique during the allegro sections. The piece was premiered at the ITF at the University of Illinois in May 1997.

Ewazen's style is neo-Romantic. The Romantic period in music was a time of great change. Tonality, which in the Classical era used scale tones and major and minor chords, began to break down as more and more composers began using Wagnerian chromaticism. There was a movement away from conventional forms and composers tried to present many ideas within a movement instead of just one or two, which was normal in the Classical period.

As a result of these changes, many works in the Romantic period were longer and more complex, with thick harmonies. Music sounded more emotional, more romantic and more passionate. This is the type of music that Ewazen composes, but with some contemporary twists.

Ewazen is a motivic composer. He will present the listener with a few different music ideas, then he will transform these motives throughout the rest of the piece. He uses primarily triadic harmony, but will use a tonal area, rather than an actual key. This allows for more freedom of expression in the piece.

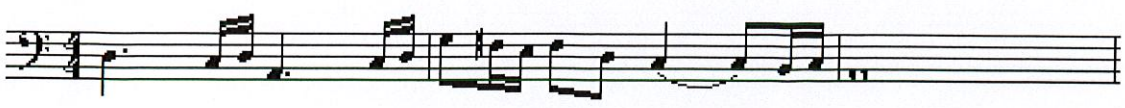
One of the biggest influences in Ewazen's music is American Jazz. He also uses the "Americana" folk-tune sound that was developed by Copland. This combination sets Ewazen's music apart from the music of most other American composers.

Analysis of Ballade For Trombone, Harp, and Strings

Section 1: Form

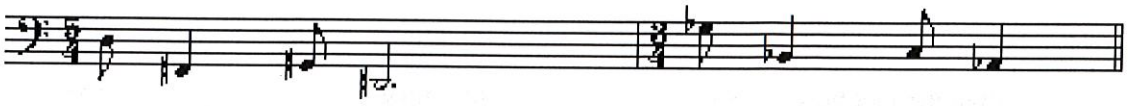
The form of a composition refers to how it is structured. Many of the classifications of form come from characteristics of music written during the Classical period (1750-1825) and the Romantic period (1825-1900s). The form of a piece can be one of two types: simple or compound. Simple form cannot be broken down into smaller forms, while compound form can.

Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings is an example of compound form. There is a distinct A section, which is very lyrical. The A section displays the ability of the trombone soloist to sing the melody through the horn. This section begins at the beginning of the piece and runs until measure 48. An example of this section is as follows (measures 2-4):



This theme returns twice more throughout the course of the piece, with different, more complicated accompaniment each time.

The second, or B section, is in direct contrast to the A section. This section is described by the composer as being playful and energetic. Like the first section, it's melodic content repeats each time it returns with a more complicated accompaniment. An example of the B theme appears below (measures 53-54).



After looking at each section of *Ballade*, it is necessary to look at the entire piece to decide how these two sections fit together to make up the large form. The layout of the repetition of the two sections makes the structure look like the following:

	A1	Trans	B1	Trans	A2	B2	A3
m.#	1-48	48-53	53-153	153-157	157-218	219-286	287-end

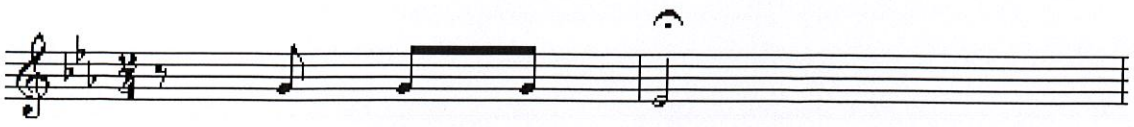
There are a few different ways to think about how these different sections fit together to make the larger form. The first way is to just take each section as it is, and say that the form is ABABA. Another way to look at it is to compound the sections into the following grouping: ABA BA. This turns the piece into a binary form (two main parts), with the first section having an incipient ternary form and the second section having a sort of binary form. Another way to look at the form is repeated binary with a coda. This can be illustrated as follows: AB AB A.

In order to determine the exact way that the sections fit together to make the whole form, one must look at the tonal center of each section. The tonal center of the first section is D, then transforms throughout the section and transition until the contrasting section comes in. This begins with the tonal center of D, and ends during the transition a fifth higher (around A). This new tonal center is sustained until measure 199, when the music returns to the old key center of D. The return of the contrasting section in measure 219 is centered around C#, which is very close to the tonal center of the ending (C).

From the tonal analysis, it is clear that the compound form of *Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings* is ABA BA. The first set of themes are related through tonal centers, while the last set of themes serves as a coda, or an extended ending.

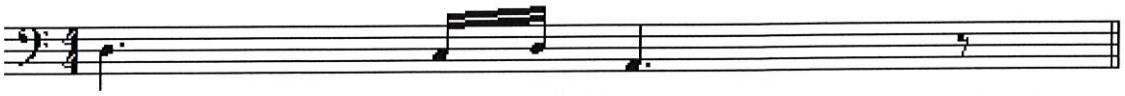
Section 2: Use of Motives

A motive is a rhythmic and or melodic idea that is able to retain its identity when elaborated upon, transformed, and combined with other material within a piece (New Harvard Dictionary 513). Motives are generally the smallest element of thematic material in a given piece. Often, it is the part of the piece that everyone recognizes. A good example of a very simple motive is the opening theme from Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony:*



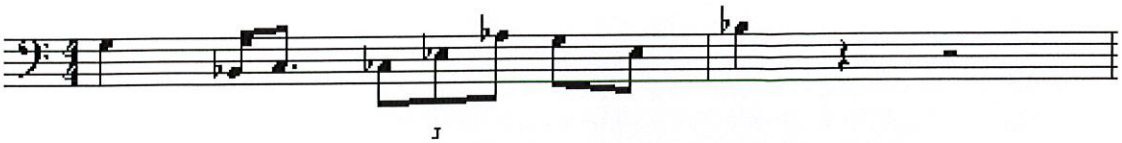
In *Ballade*, Eric Ewazen uses at least two distinct motives. The relationship between these two motives is demonstrated in the motive chart on page 11. Each of these motives plays a very important part in the development of the melody in each section; the motive is stated in the first phrase of a section and then expanded upon throughout the rest of the section.

The piece opens with the following motive (measure 2):

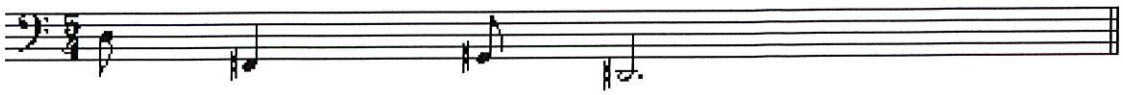


This motive is repeated many times throughout measures 2- 37. It returns in an augmented version and in a new key when the A section returns in measure 162, and in its original key (but still in augmented rhythm) in measure 199.

The second motive is slightly more difficult to spot, because it is rhythmically different the first time it occurs when compared to the next few times it occurs. This motive is one that creates a relationship to a certain set of intervals that repeat themselves as the B section develops. The first time this motive occurs is in measures 48-49, as illustrated below:



The next time the motive occurs is at the beginning of the B section in measure 53. In this case, the motive is transformed rhythmically, as shown below (also displayed in the motive chart).



Motivic transformation is a very important part of a composition. It is through the transformation of a motive that different themes and variations begin to take form and develop so the piece has direction and flows. There are many fine works that take one motive and develop it through the entire piece; most music from the Baroque period does this. Many later works, such as ones from the Romantic era, develop many motives throughout the course of the composition, but most of these motives have been related through the process of transforming a few basic ideas. As a neo-Romantic composer, this is what Ewazen does in *Ballade*.

The first motive is stated in the second measure, and sets the mood for the rest of the A section. It is then repeated with the same intervals (but starting a fifth higher) in measure 14. Although the rhythm beginning this transformed motive is augmented, the rest stays the same. The motive comes back again in measure 28, a fourth lower than the second time.

When the trombone comes in with the A theme again in measure 162, the motive is stated again as it is the second time, starting a fifth higher than the original pitch, with an augmented rhythm. The original motive returns in measure 199, again with an

augmented rhythm. The second A section ends with a statement of the original motive an octave higher.

The last time the first motive comes into *Ballade* is in measure 288. This statement of the motive is almost identical to the third time it appears in the first A section. It is then repeated a third higher in measure 291 (refer to the motive chart for comparisons of each motivic transformation).

One interesting thing about the first motive is that each time it changes pitch, it is related in the same key. The first time it is stated, it centers around D, and the second time it centers around A, which is the fifth scale degree above D. The third time that it changes pitch, it goes to E, which is the fifth scale degree above A (or the fourth scale degree below). This implies that the tonal center of the piece during the A sections is in D, with tendencies to go towards the secondary dominant.

The second motive, as mentioned above, is more difficult to see. It transforms itself not only by starting pitch, but also by time signature and general rhythm. This motive appears in each of the B themes, in many different forms. In many uses, some of the intervals between pitches are inverted, which makes the transformation easy to see but difficult to hear.

Ewazen understands motivic transformation very well. He can create two different motives and transform them so completely that listeners fail to realize that they are hearing the same ideas over and over.

Motive Chart

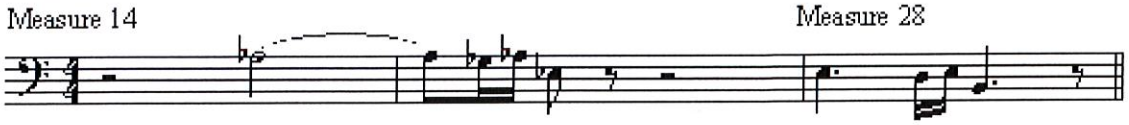
The following are examples of *Ballade's* original motives and their transformations.

Motive 1:

Measure 2

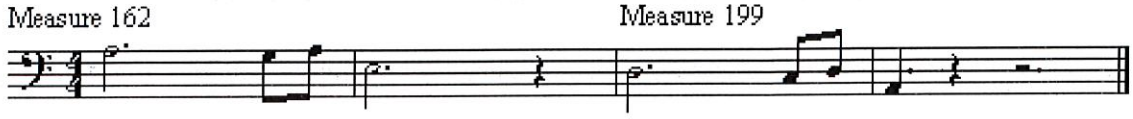
Transformations:

Measure 14



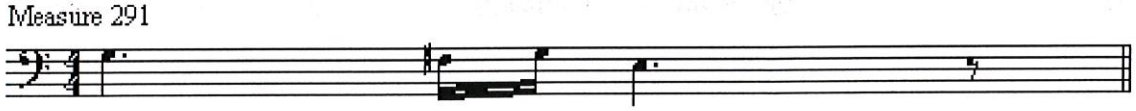
Measure 28

Measure 162



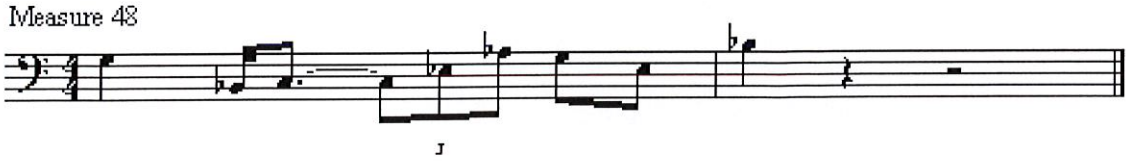
Measure 199

Measure 291



Motive 2:

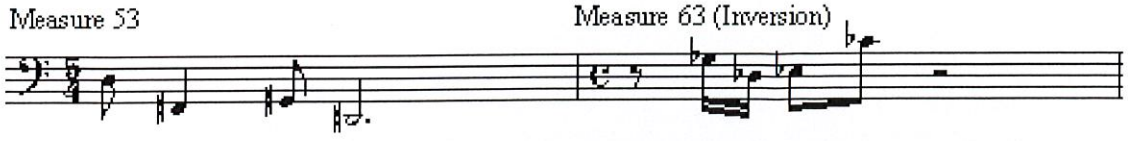
Measure 48



Transformations:

Measure 53

Measure 63 (Inversion)

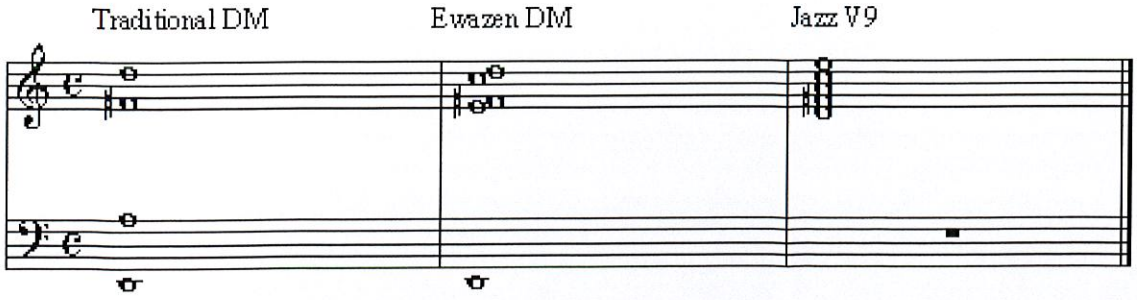


Section 3: Harmonic Technique

Harmony is the basis for sound in Western music. The use of tonality in a piece can determine many things, including what historical period it is from, and the methods used to compose the selection. Each period in musical history except the Early Christian Era has a distinct harmonic style.

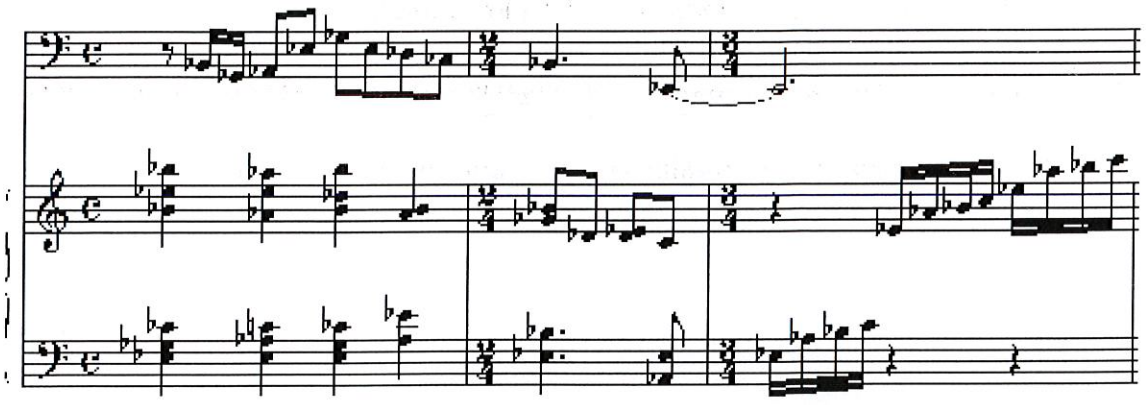
Although Ewazen is a contemporary composer, he uses neo-romantic harmony in *Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings*. His chords are usually triadic (stacked in thirds), but he makes use of chromaticism (harmonic movement by semitones), which is one of the more significant characteristics of Romantic harmony. His compositions also use harmonic devices (modulation, sequence) invented in the baroque period. Finally, Ewazen uses jazz harmony in combination with neo-Romantic and Baroque techniques.

Although Ewazen uses the triad and its extensions, he does not use them in the traditional way. An example of this occurs in the first measure of *Ballade*, which begins on a D Major Chord. A traditional voicing is shown first, followed by how Ewazen voices the chord. This is in turn followed by an example of a Jazz style V9 chord, which will demonstrate the strong influence Jazz has on Ewazen's harmonic methods.

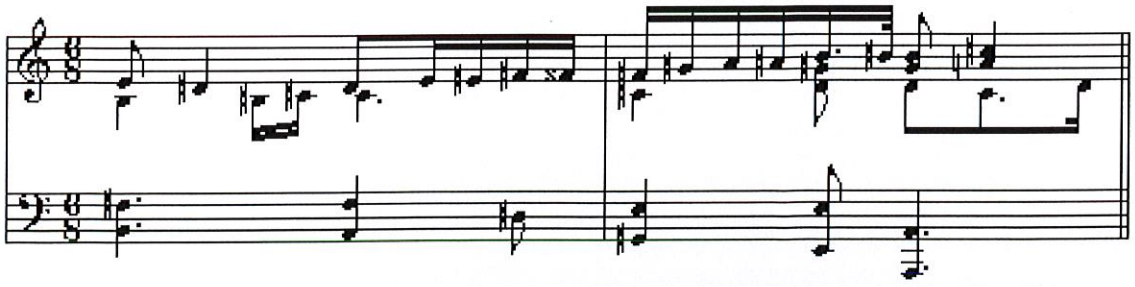


Another method Ewazen uses in *Ballade* is chromaticism. This reflects Ewazen's neo-Romantic style, as chromaticism began to take over functional harmony in the beginning of the Romantic period; Beethoven and Wagner played a large role in this. Because of this, one can relate the chromaticism used in *Ballade* to the chromaticism used in Wagner's *Triston und Isolde*, as shown below:

Chromaticism in *Ballade* (measures 65-67)



Chromaticism in *Tristan und Isolde*

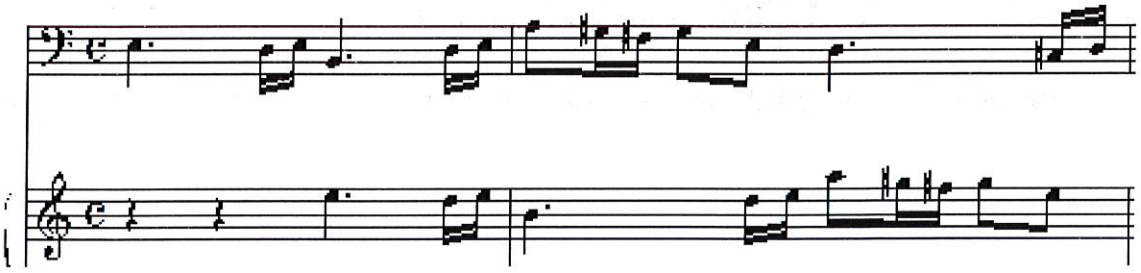


Although Ewazen's compositional style is very neo-Romantic, he draws heavily on methods used as early as the Baroque period. Within *Ballade*, there are many

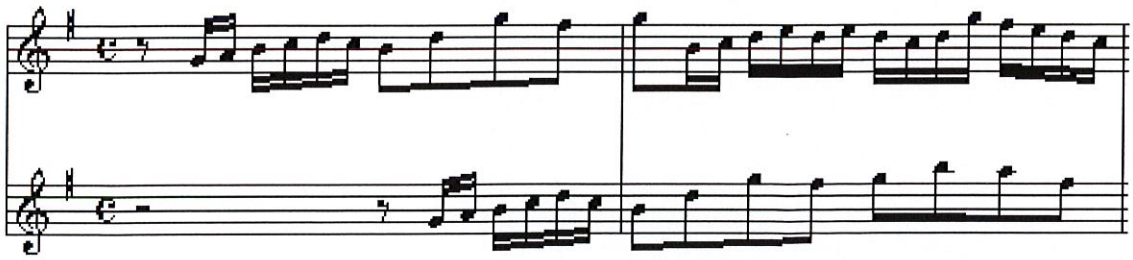
examples of Baroque-style counterpoint, the use of ostinatos, and Bach Chorale-type harmony.

One typical contrapuntal technique that came out of the Baroque period is the canon. In a canon, a voice (the leader voice) will start, and another voice (the follower) will enter or interrupt with an identical phrase, a few beats later. Ewazen's use of canon is demonstrated below, along with an example of a canon in Bach's *Herr Jesu Christ, dich ze uns wendí.*

Ewazen canon (measures 28-30):

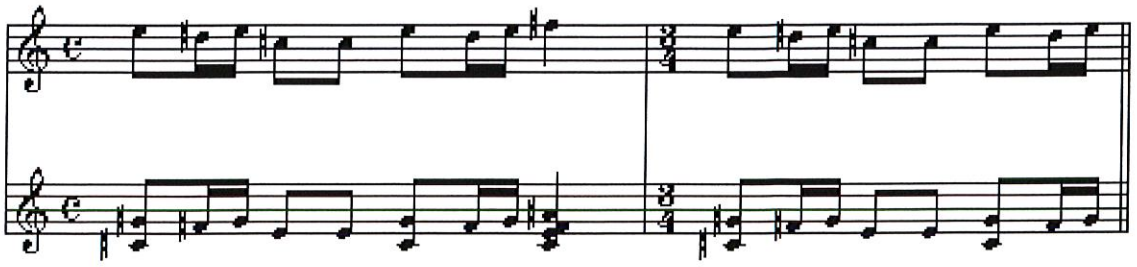


Bach canon (*Herr Jesu Christ, dich ze uns wedn'*):

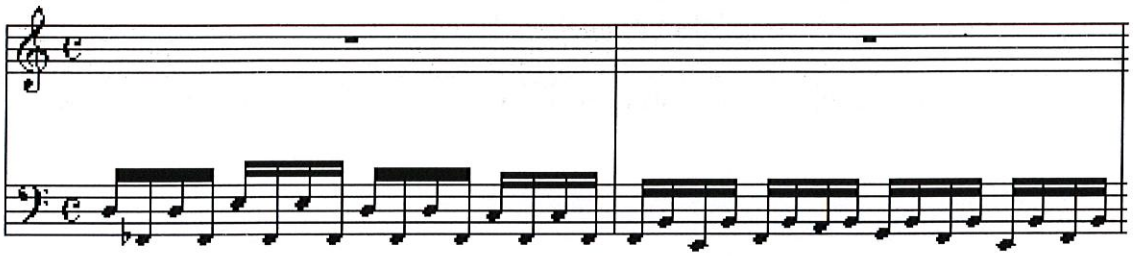


Another Baroque era technique is the ostinato. Ostinatos are accompanying figures that occur over and over again underneath a melody or harmony. The effect of an ostinato builds tension that is later released when the ostinato stops. The ostinato figures in *Ballade* are similar to Baroque ostinatos, as shown below:

Ewazen ostinato (measures 17-18):

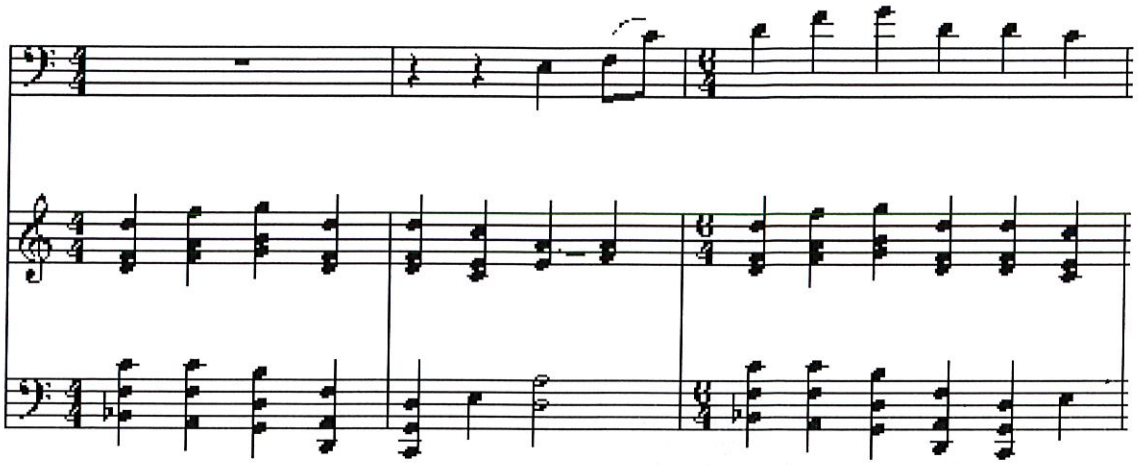


Baroque ostinato (Bach: *Ach bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ*):

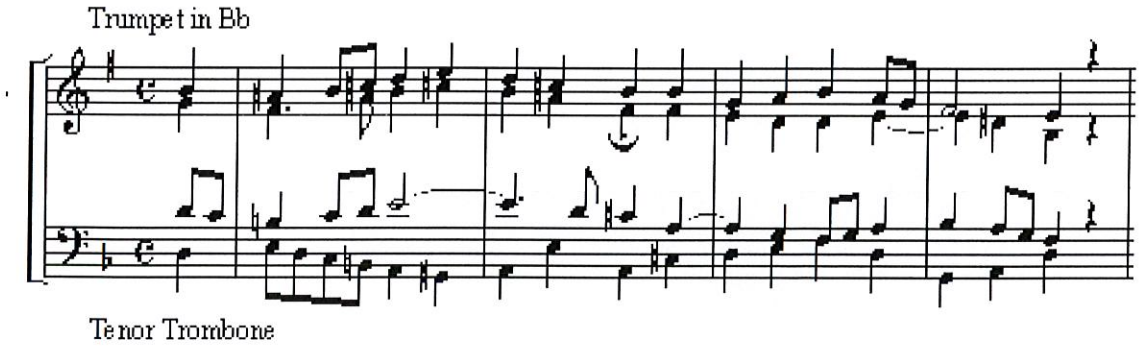


The last Baroque idea that is found in *Ballade* is that of chorale-style harmonization. For his work as a church musician, Bach harmonized many Lutheran chorale melodies. The harmonies and progressions in these chorales are the basis of most hymnals in the Catholic and Lutheran churches today. An example of Ewazen's chorale-like harmony can be seen below, along with an example from Bach's *Christ lag in Todesbanden.*

Ewazen chorale (measures 212-214):

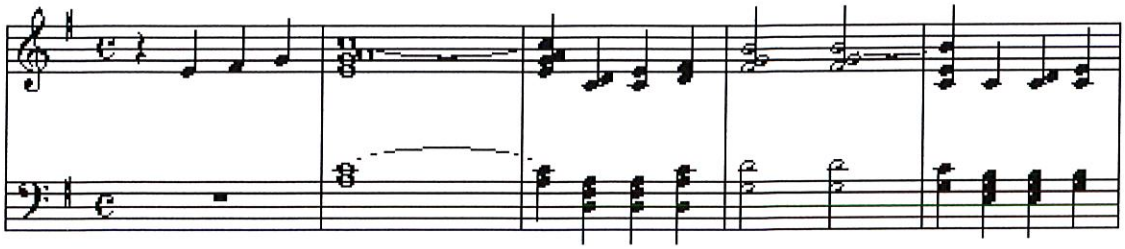


Bach chorale (*Christ lag in Todesbanden*):

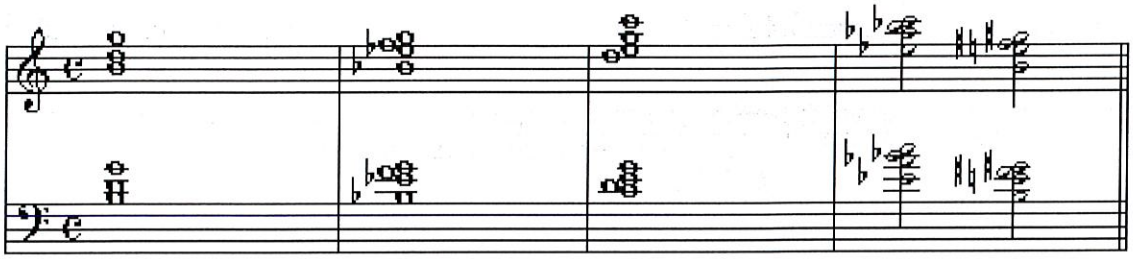


Perhaps one of Ewazen's greatest influences when harmonizing a melody is Jazz. When he is not using techniques based on older styles, he is using techniques that originated with early Jazz. One of these techniques is blocked chords. An example of a well-known Jazz song that uses blocked chords for harmony is *Autumn Leaves*, as shown below:

Autumn Leaves:



Ewazen uses these blocked chords in *Ballade*, as shown below:



Harmony is an element that can determine when a composition was written, and/or what style in which the composition should be classified. It is very important to understand the harmonic structure and techniques, for it is through harmony that a piece will have direction.

Conclusion

Eric Ewazen has quickly become one of the more influential composers in modern times. He has studied with many well-known composers, all of whom have influenced him in some form. Ewazen composes all types of music, and is knowledgeable in what the people and instruments he composes for can do.

Ewazen has a unique style of composition, in which he develops a nice blend of neo-Romanticism with Jazz harmonies and an "Americana" sound. *Ballade* is a good example of Ewazen's compositional style.

To truly analyze a piece of music, one must look at the main components of the piece, including form, the use of motives, and harmonic technique. Through this critical analysis, we found that Ewazen composed *Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings* in compound form (ABA BA). He is a motivic composer who develops and transforms motives until they are almost unrecognizable to the listener. Ewazen uses many different harmonic techniques in his compositions, all of which reflect on the people and genres that have influenced him. These include using jazz harmonies with close voicings and blocked chords, chromaticism, canon, ostinato, and chorale-type harmonization.

Once a critical analysis is complete, one has a complete understanding of the piece and the composer's intentions with the piece. It goes beyond looking at the surface, and goes deeper into the heart of the selection. A critical analysis can be a lot like getting to know another person. The first thing impression is always about appearance (does it look like a piece I can perform?); then the connection is based on general personality (do I really like this piece now that I have been practicing it?); eventually the connection is so deep, that the two people know what each other is thinking (when I go to perform this piece, it will be exactly what the composer was expecting). This is the type of connection between the composer and performer that makes music that touches the audience, much like *Ballade for Trombone, Harp, and Strings* has touched me.

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Ballade
for
Trombone and Piano

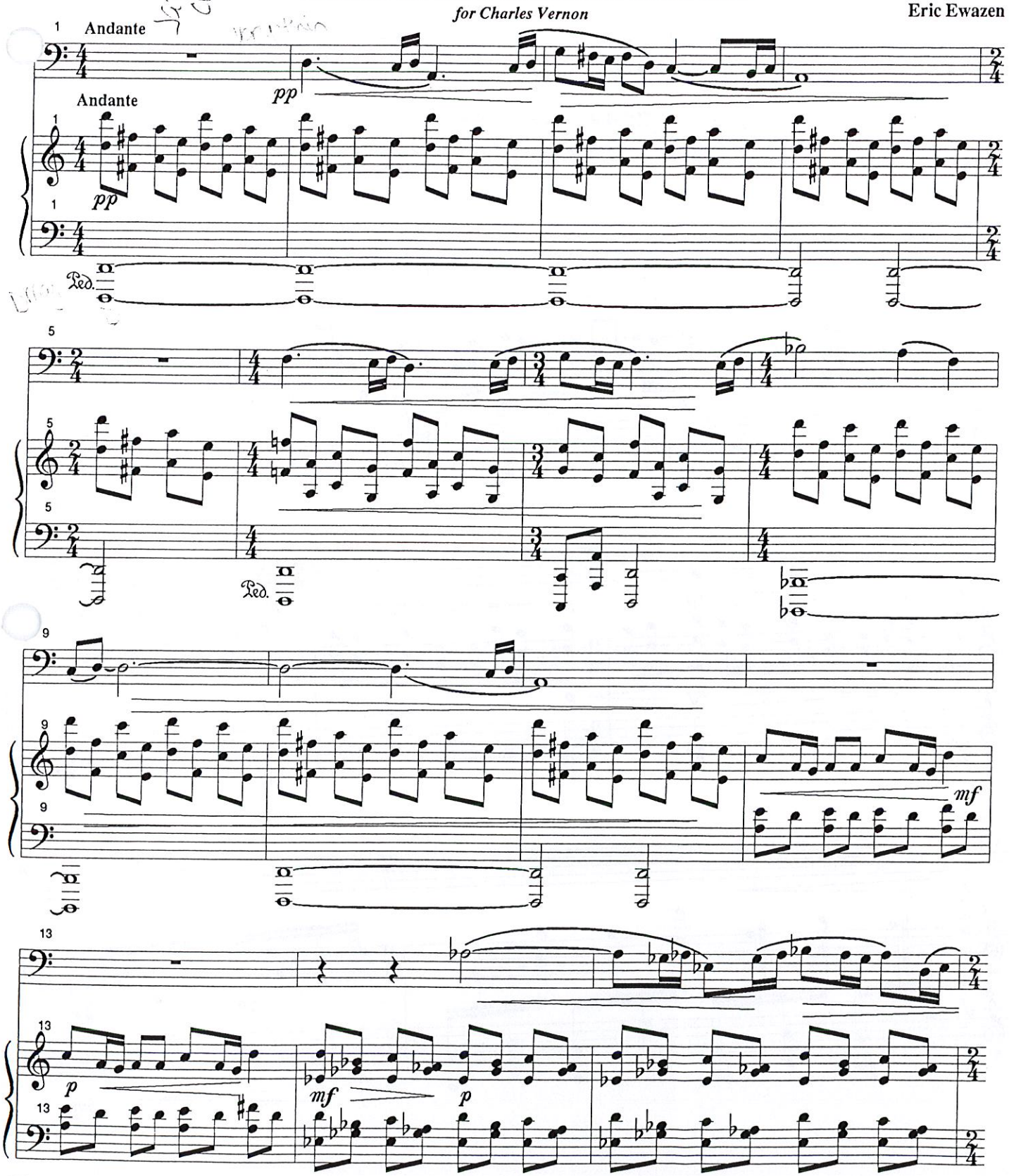
by
Eric Ewazen

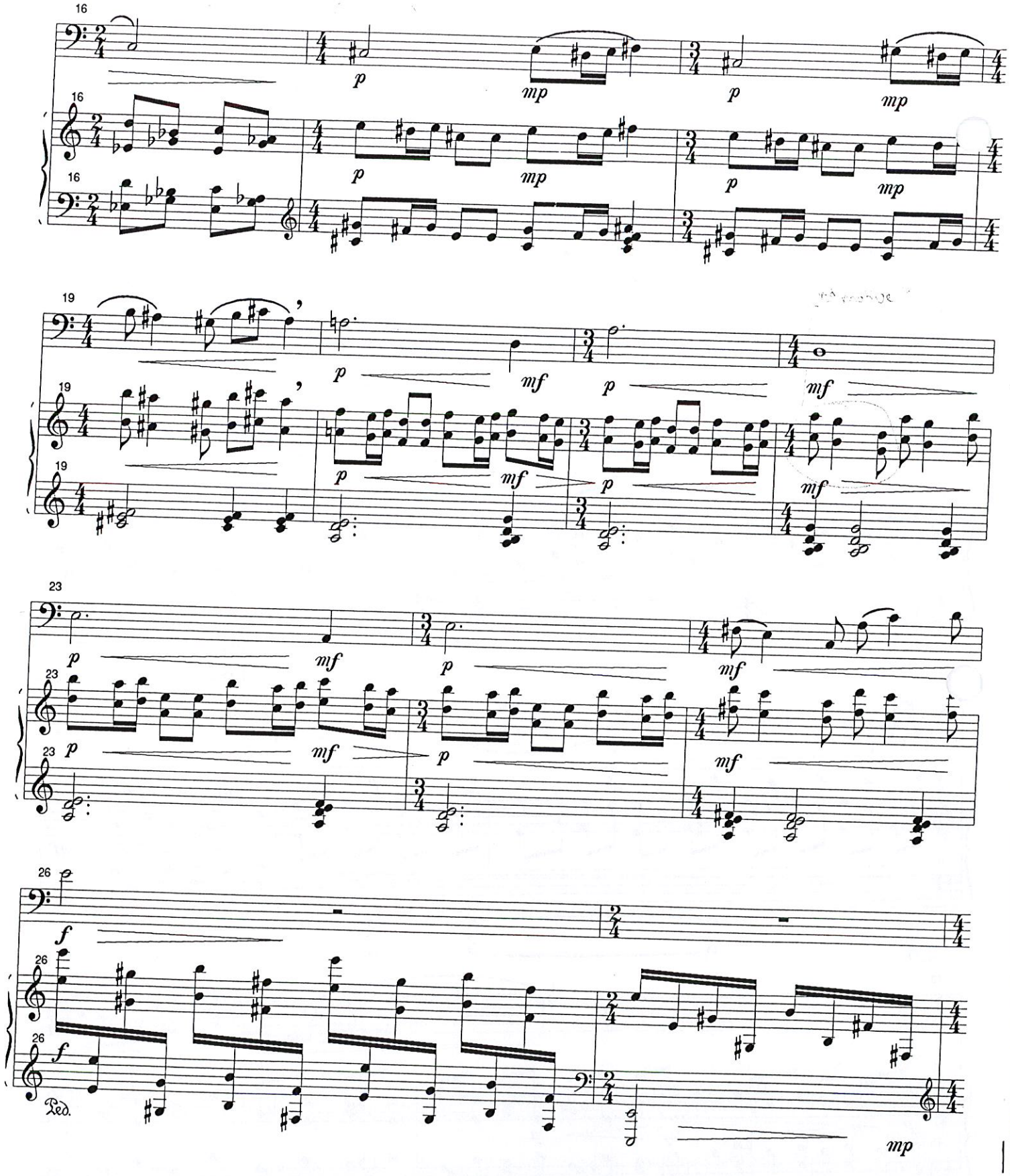
Premiered at the 1997 International Trombone Festival
by Charles Vernon and Eric Ewazen
May 31, 1997
University of Illinois

Ballade for Bass Trombone and Piano

for Charles Vernon

Eric Ewazen

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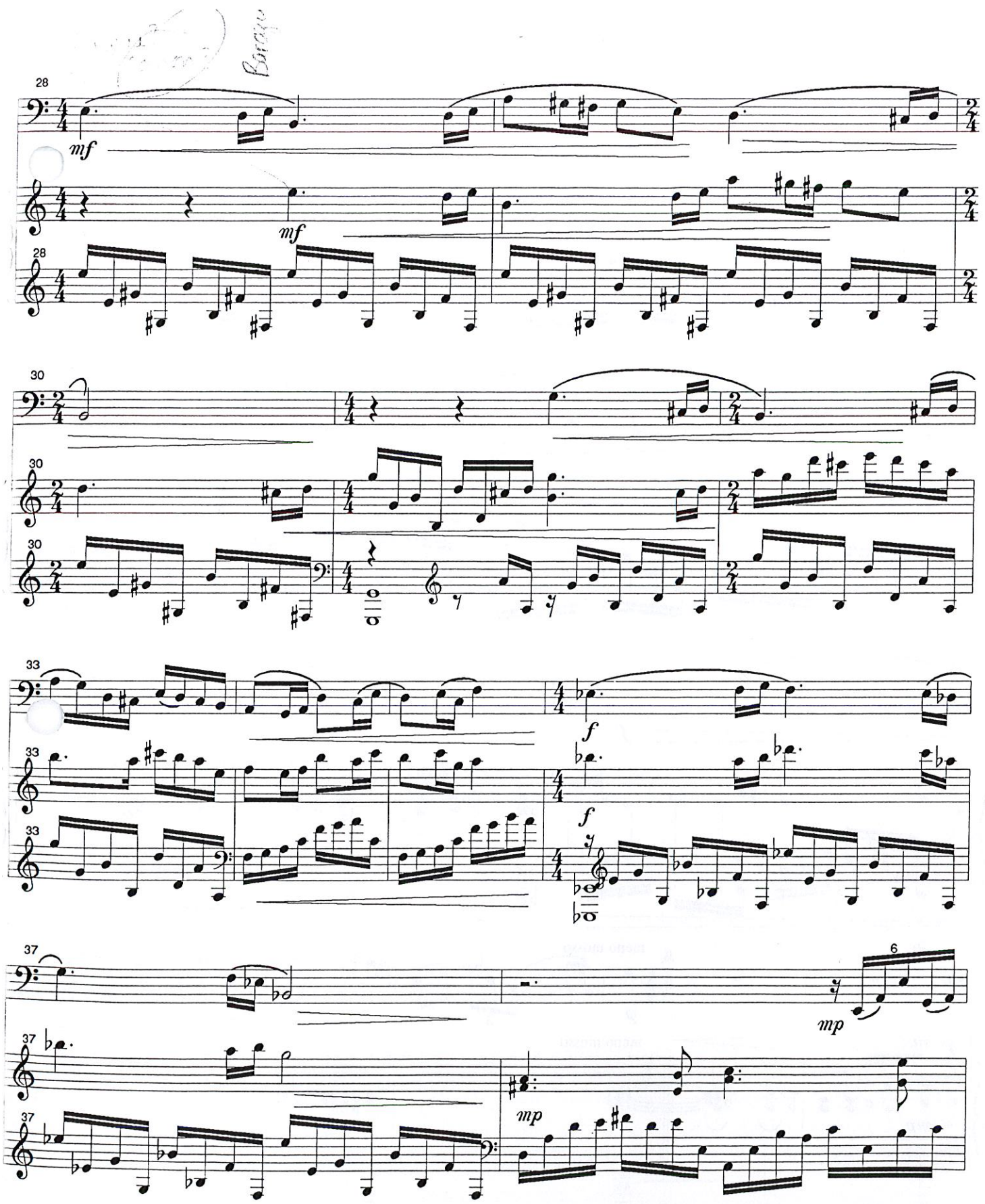
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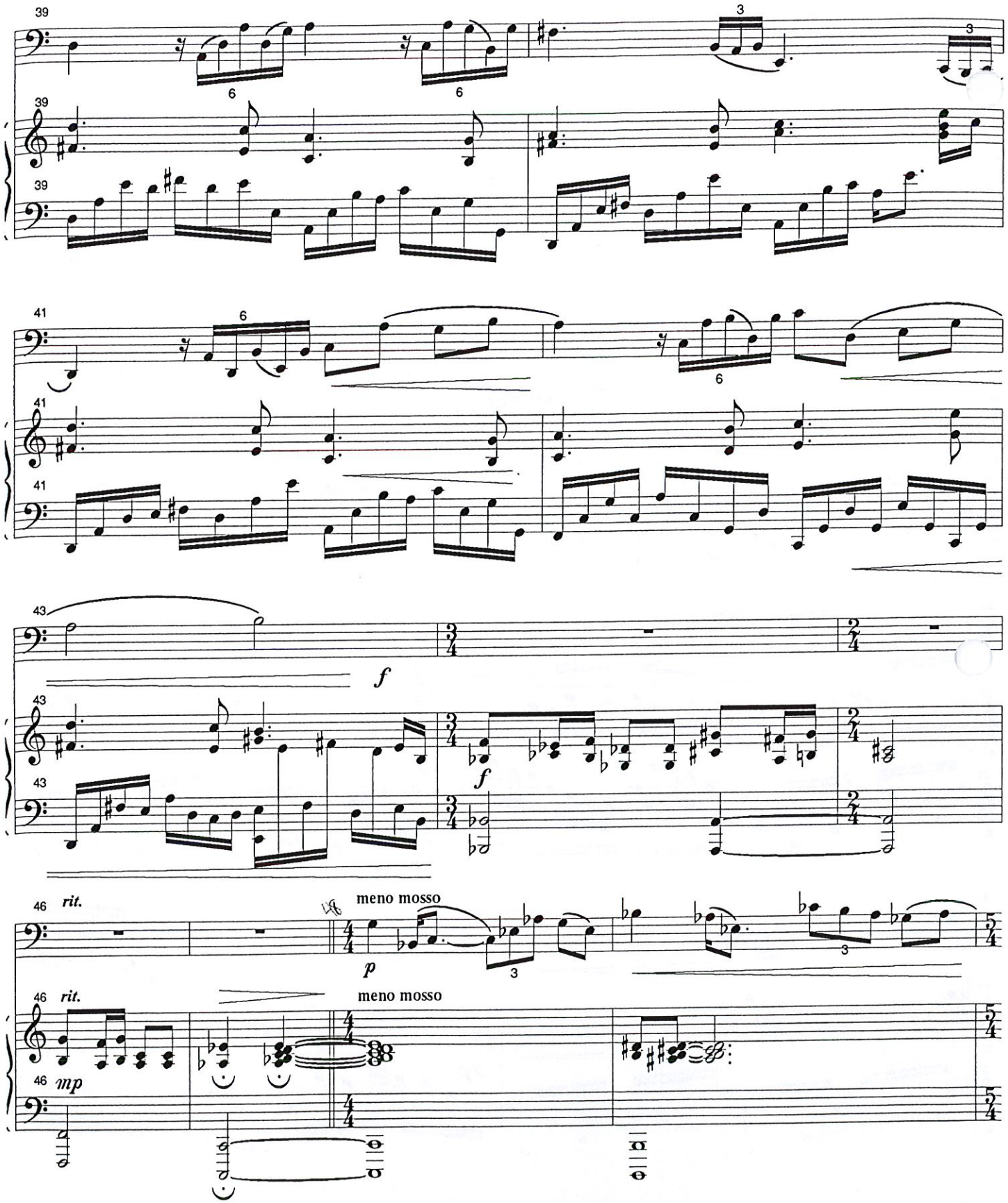
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43
46
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meno mosso
p
f
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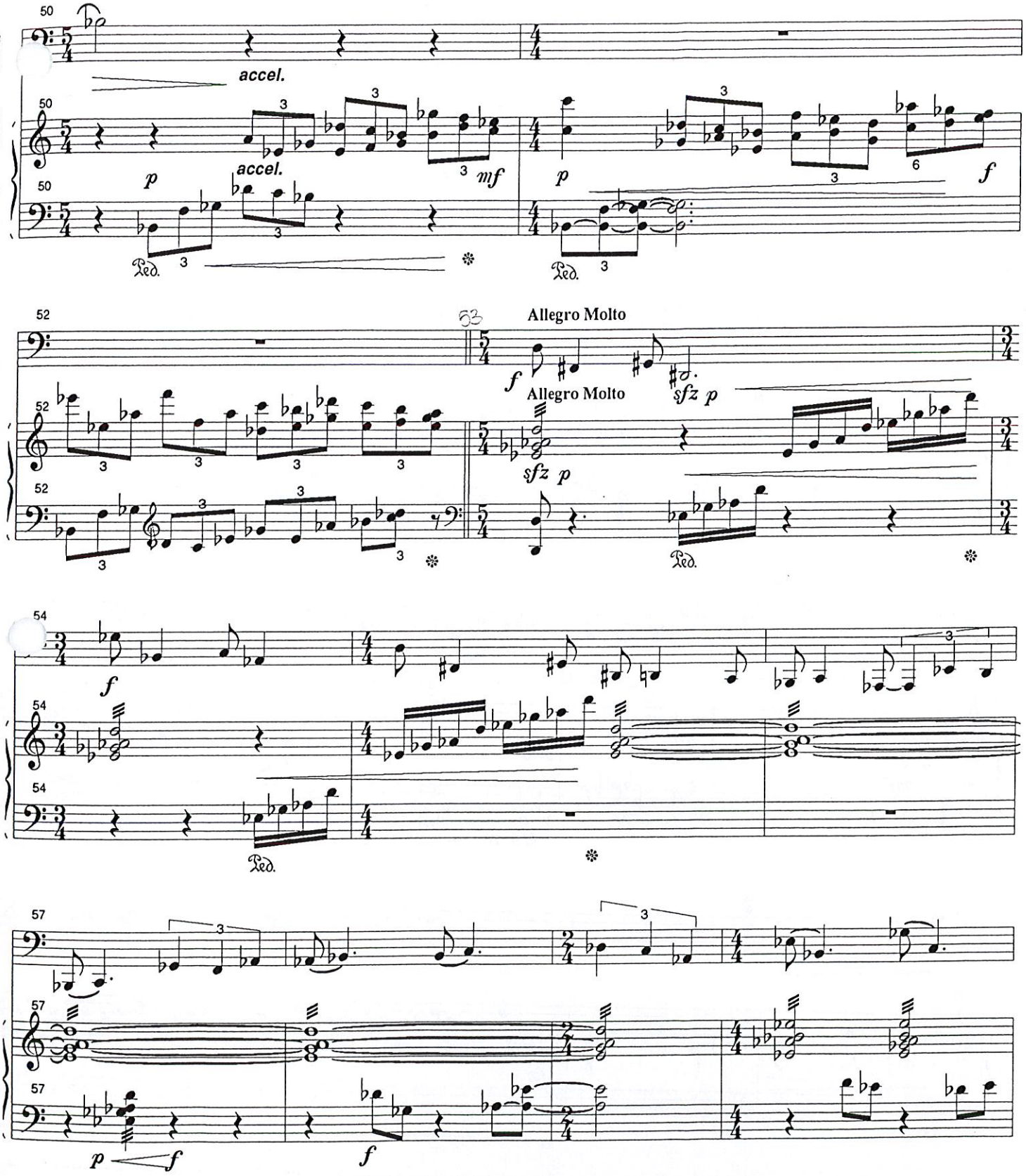
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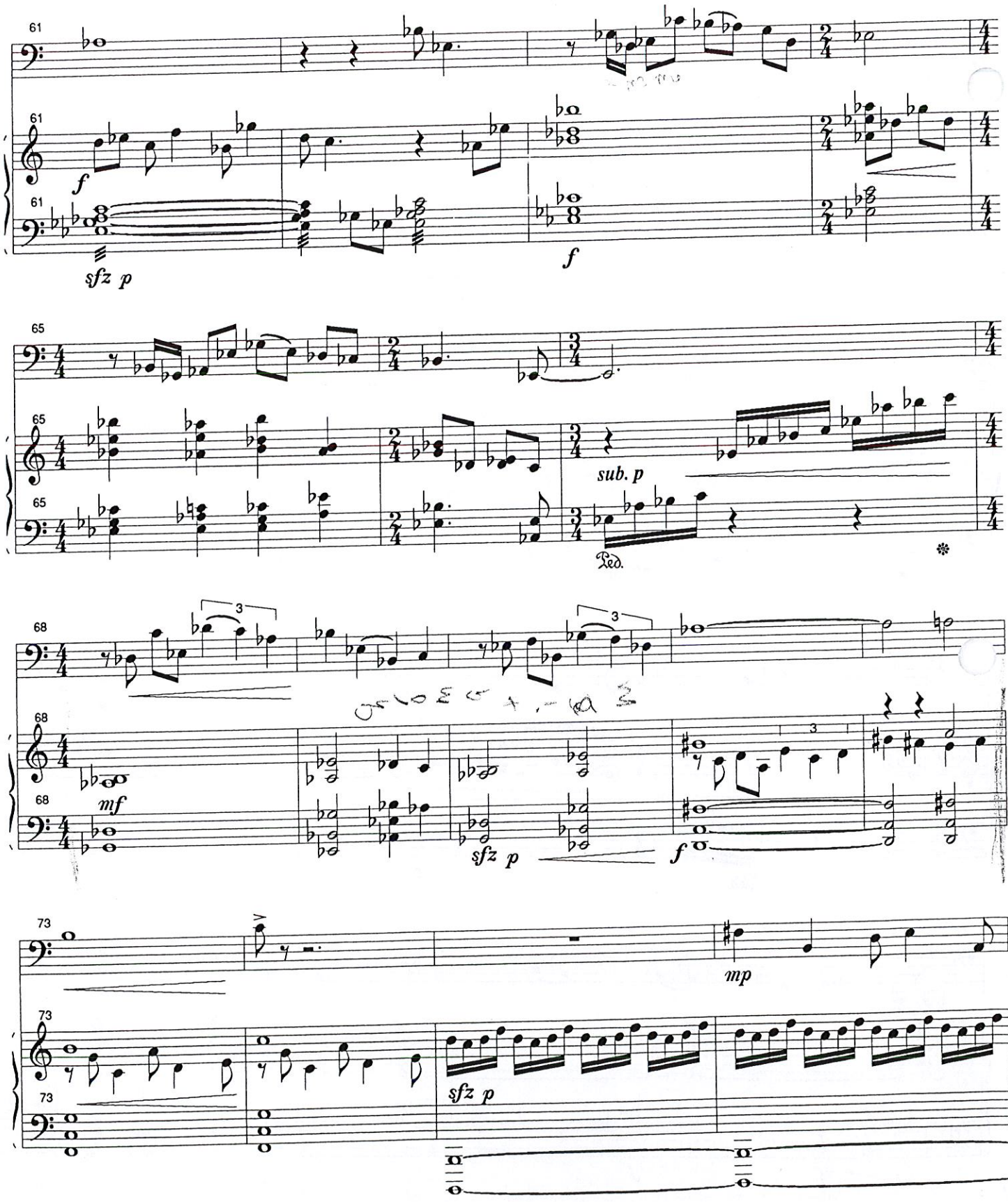
accel.
Allegro Molto
Allegro Molto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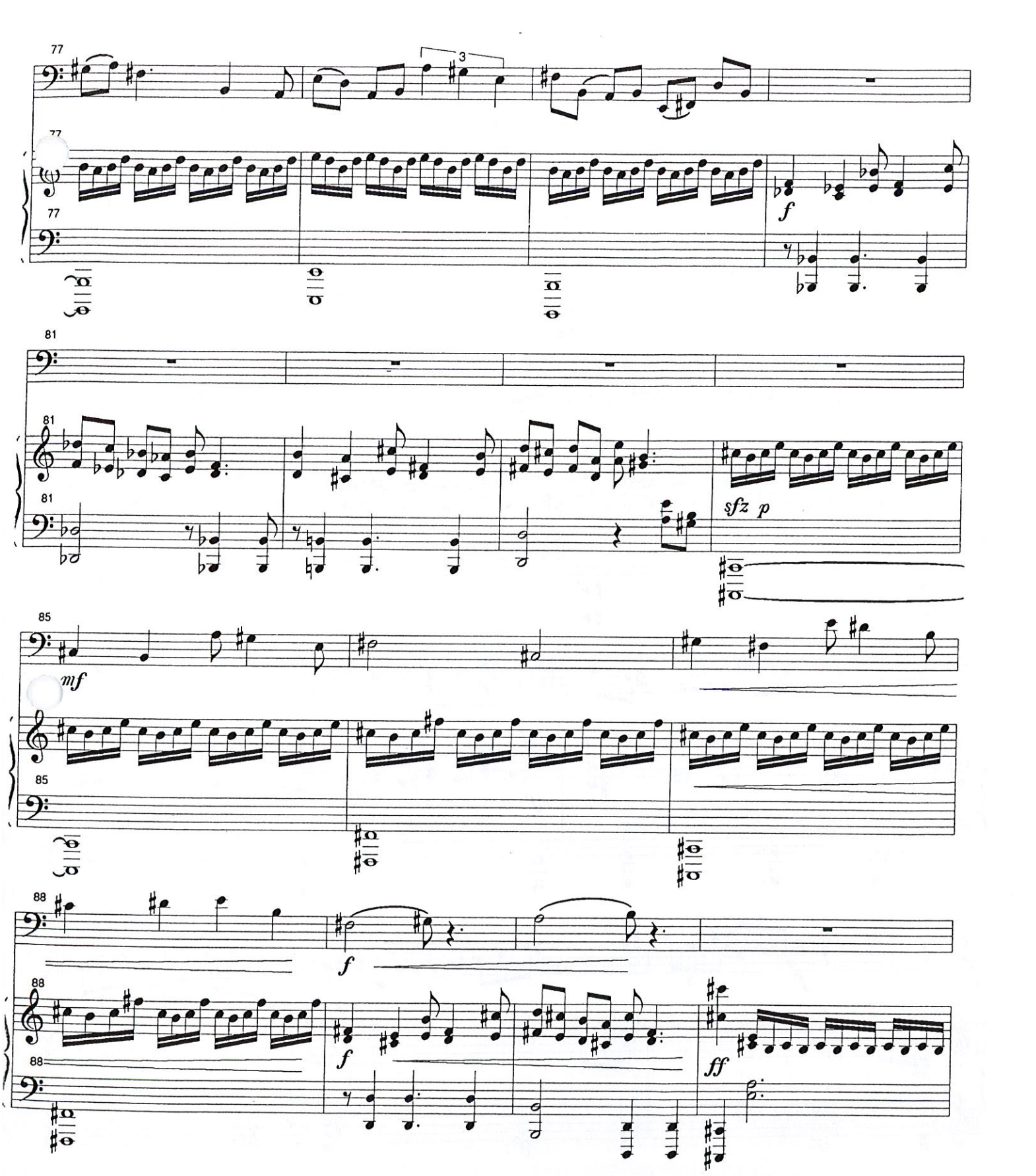
mp
sfz p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f
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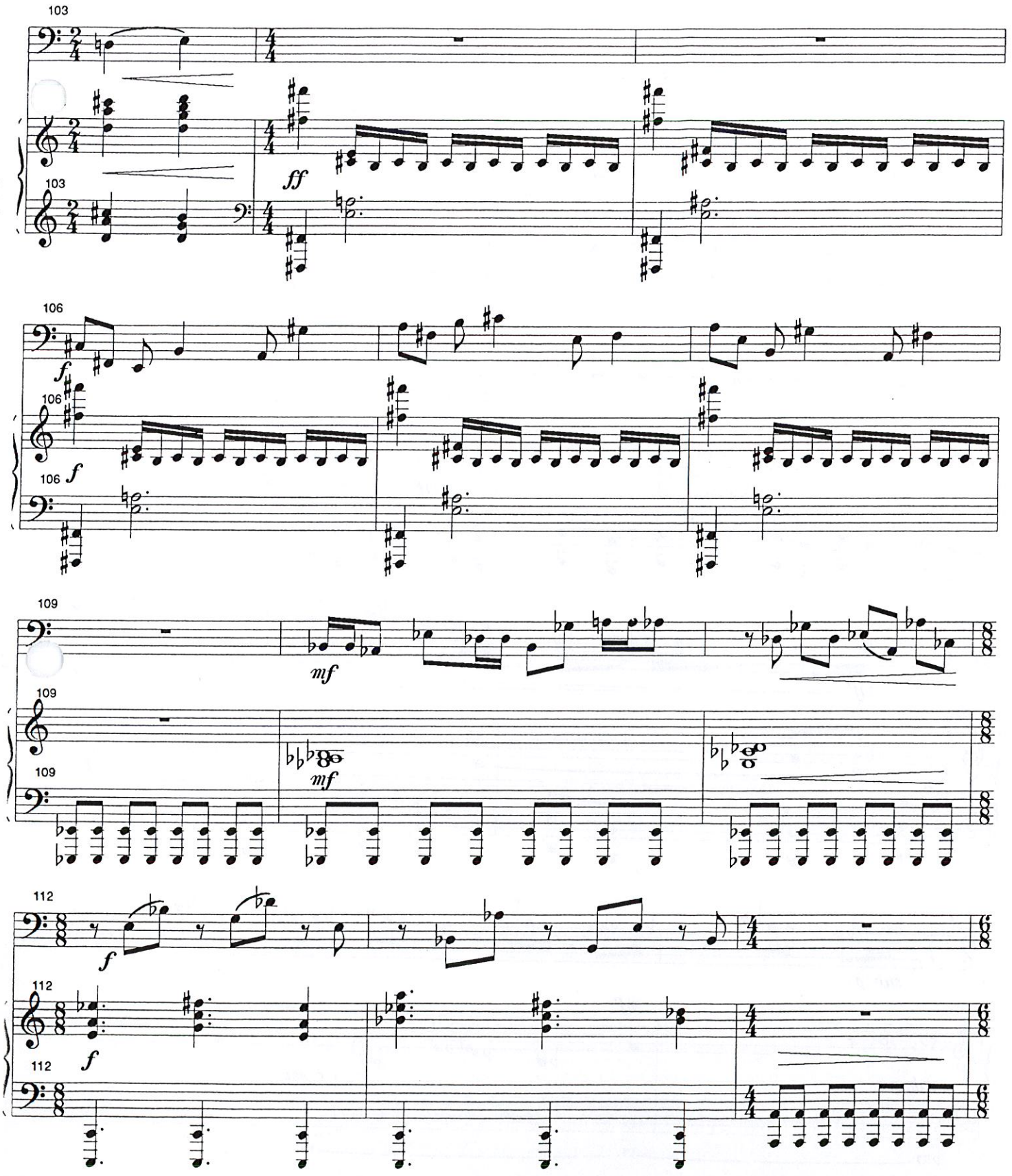
ff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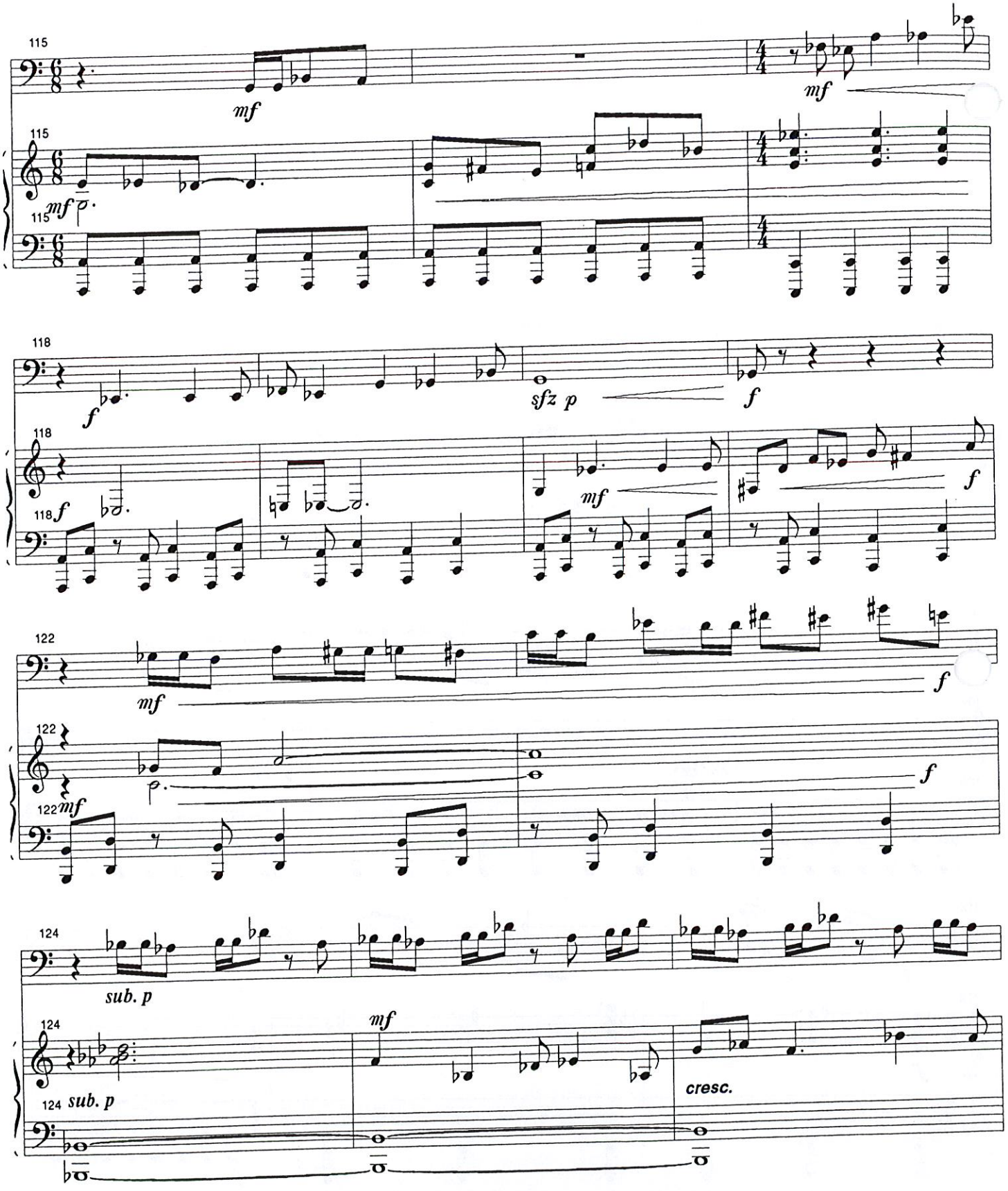
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sub. p
mf
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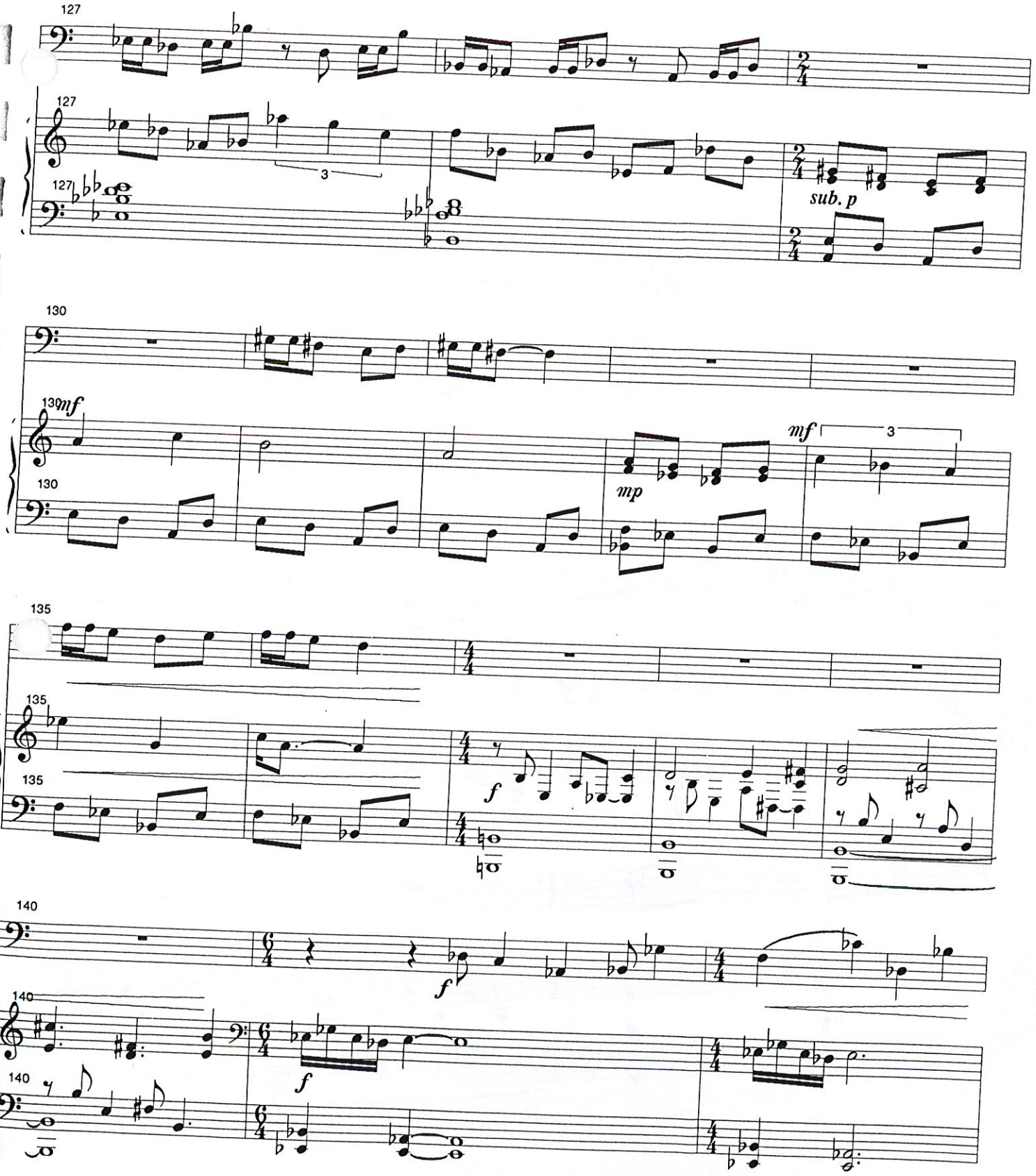
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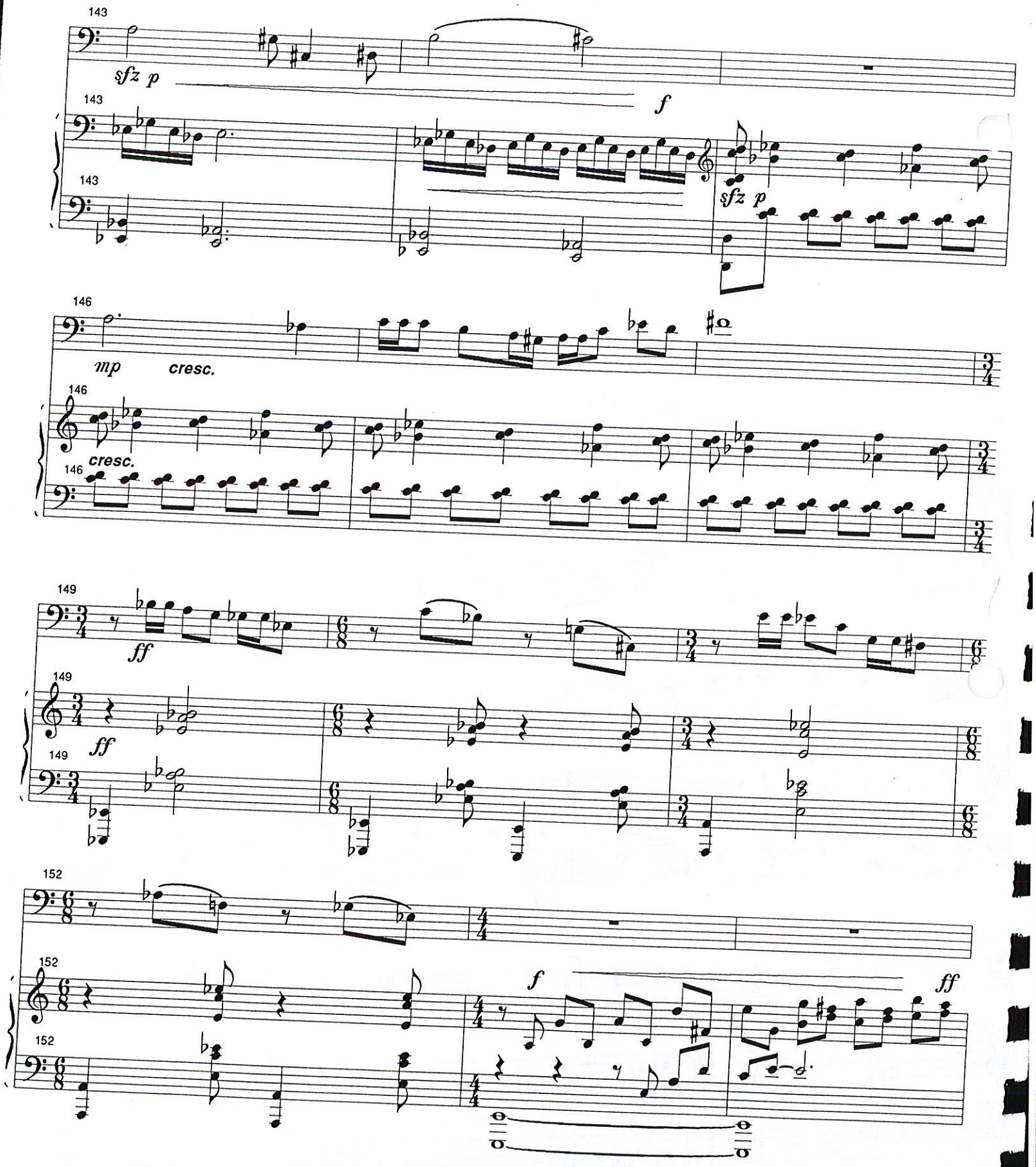
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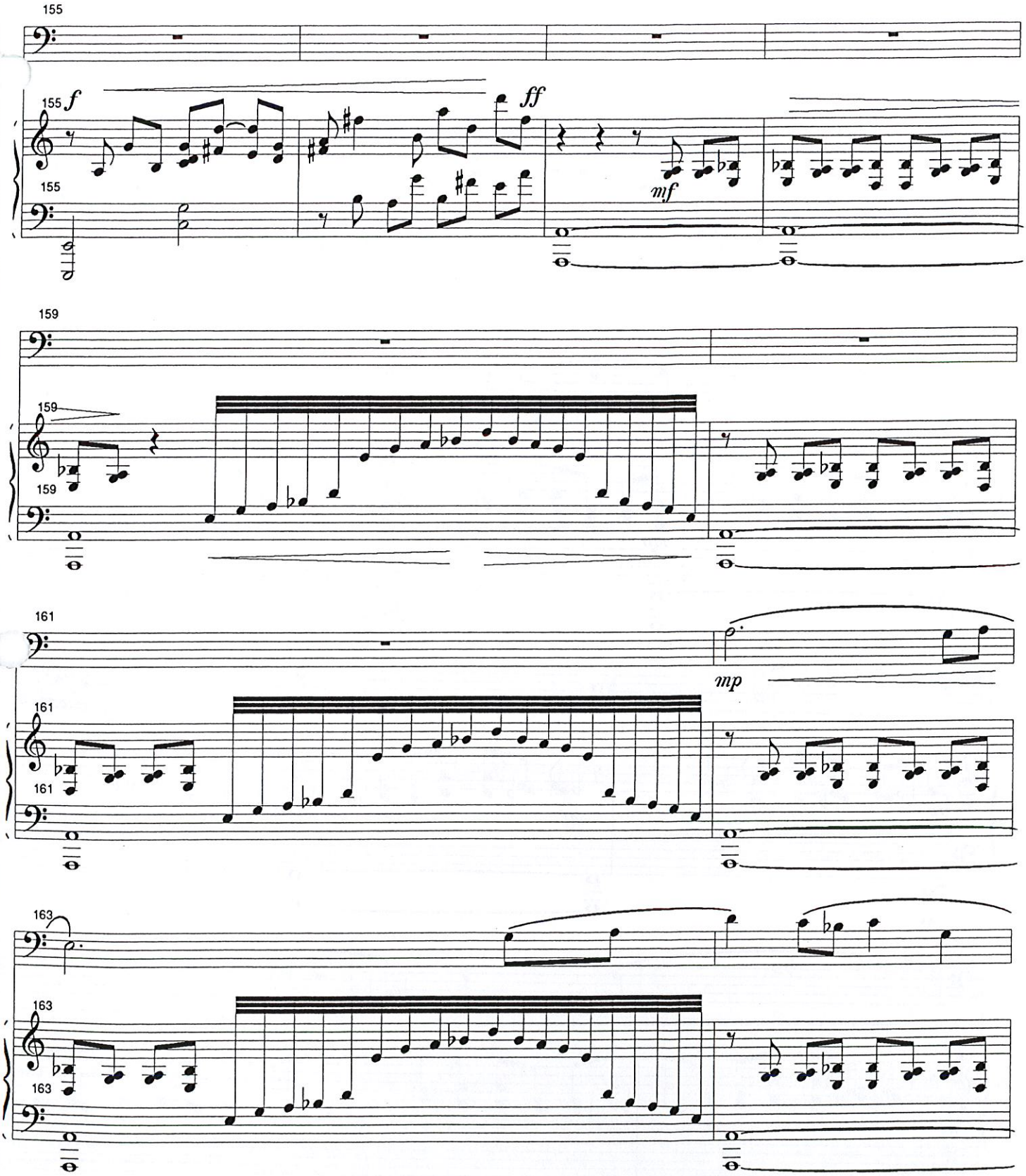
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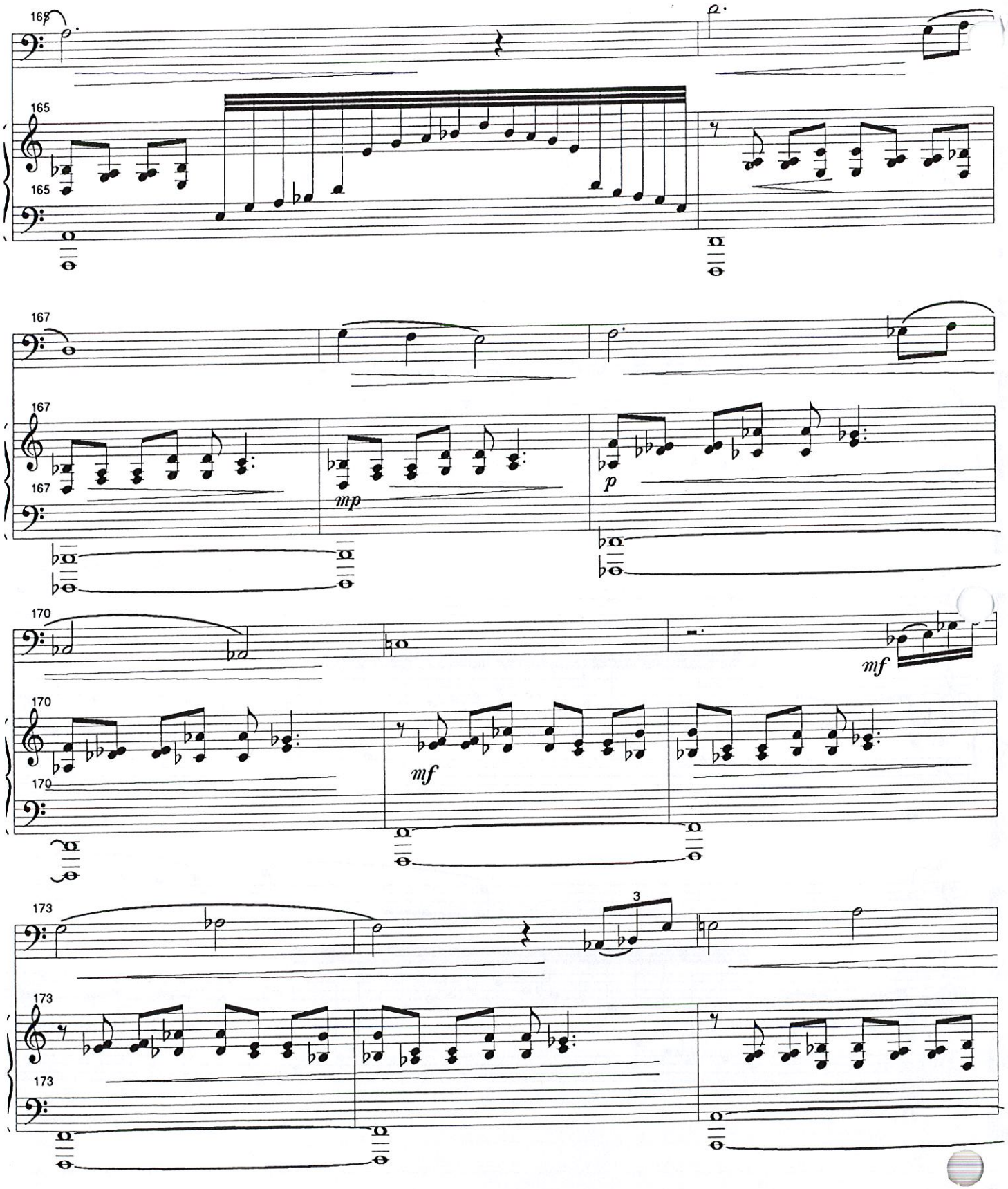
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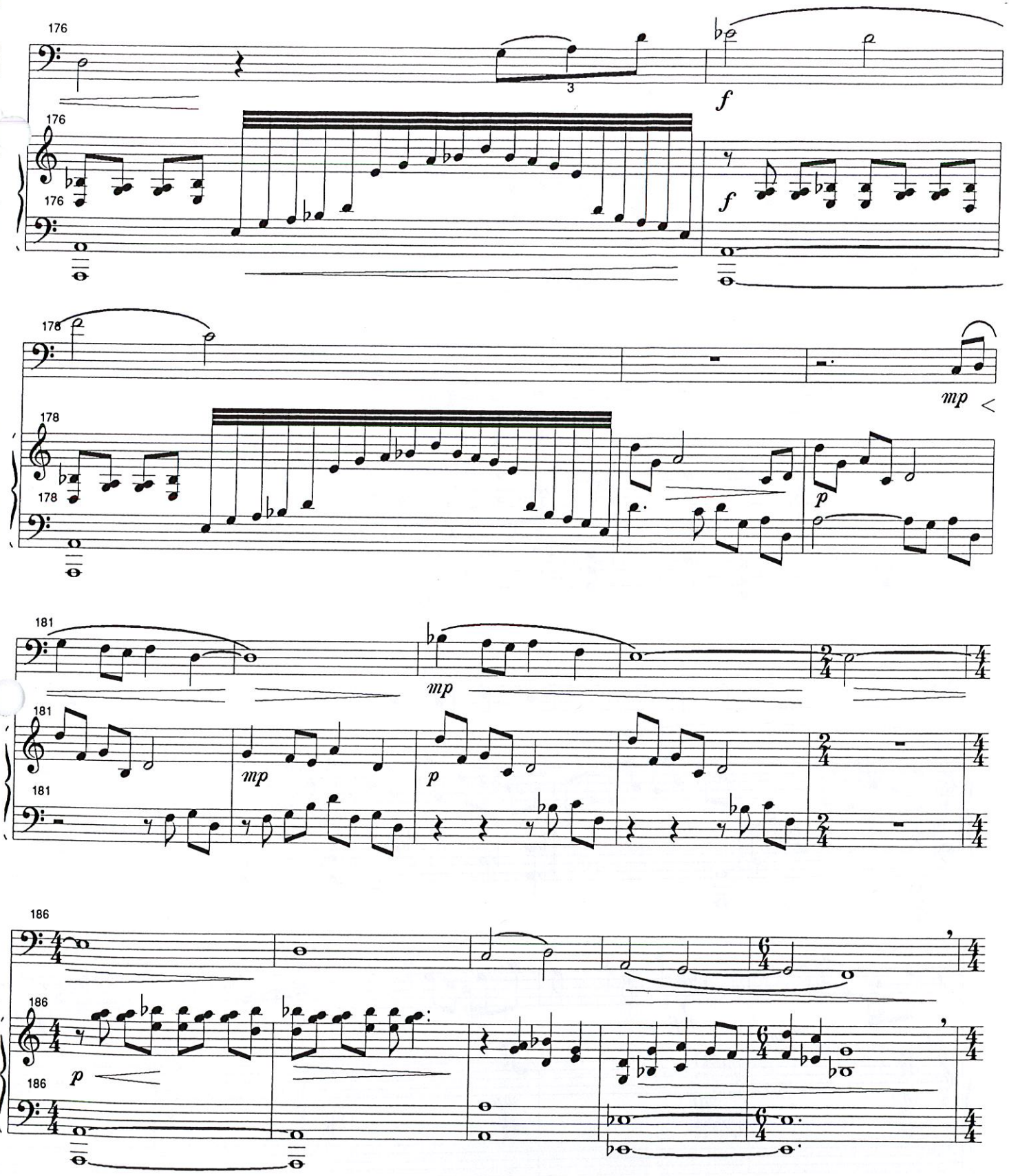
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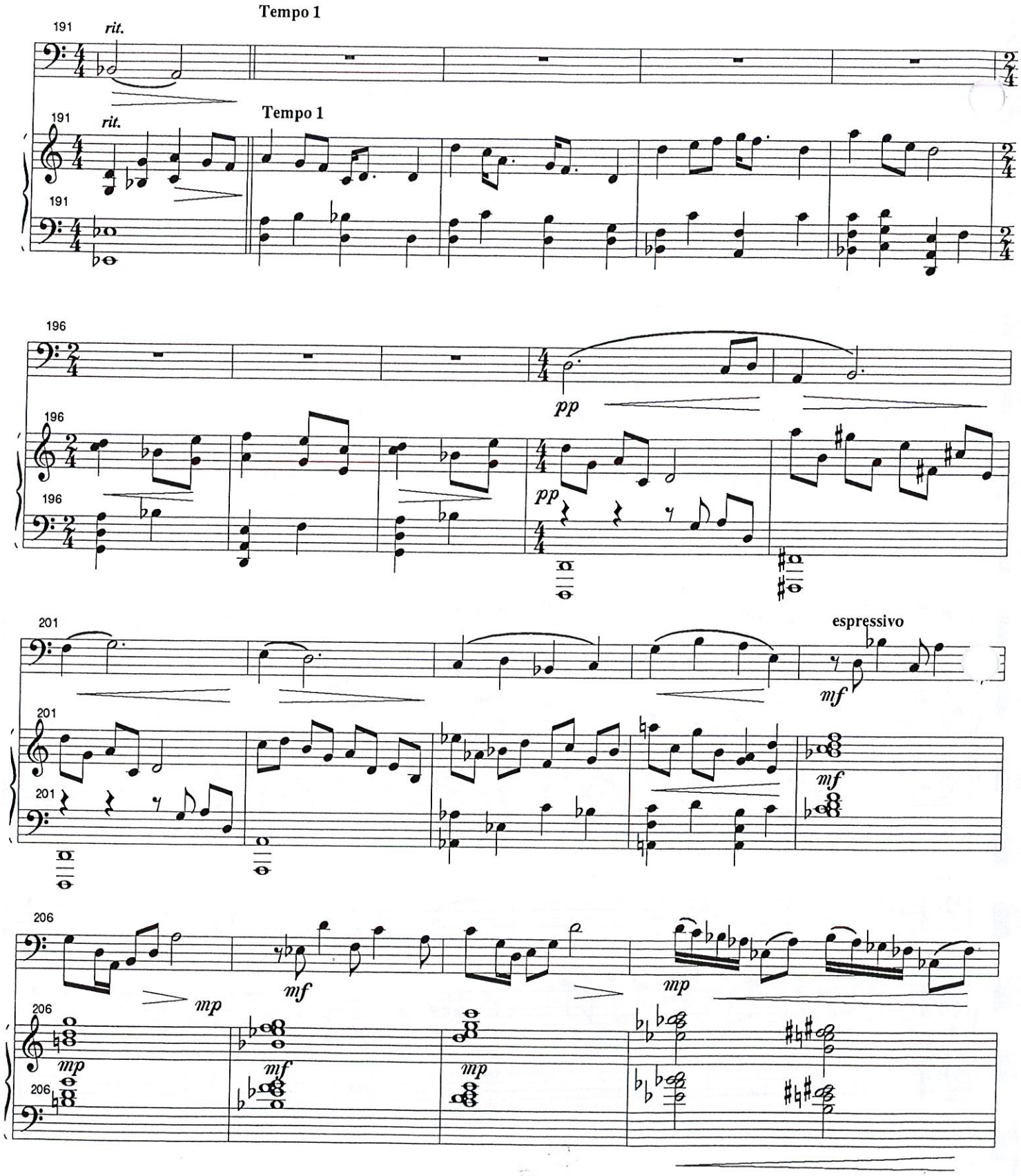
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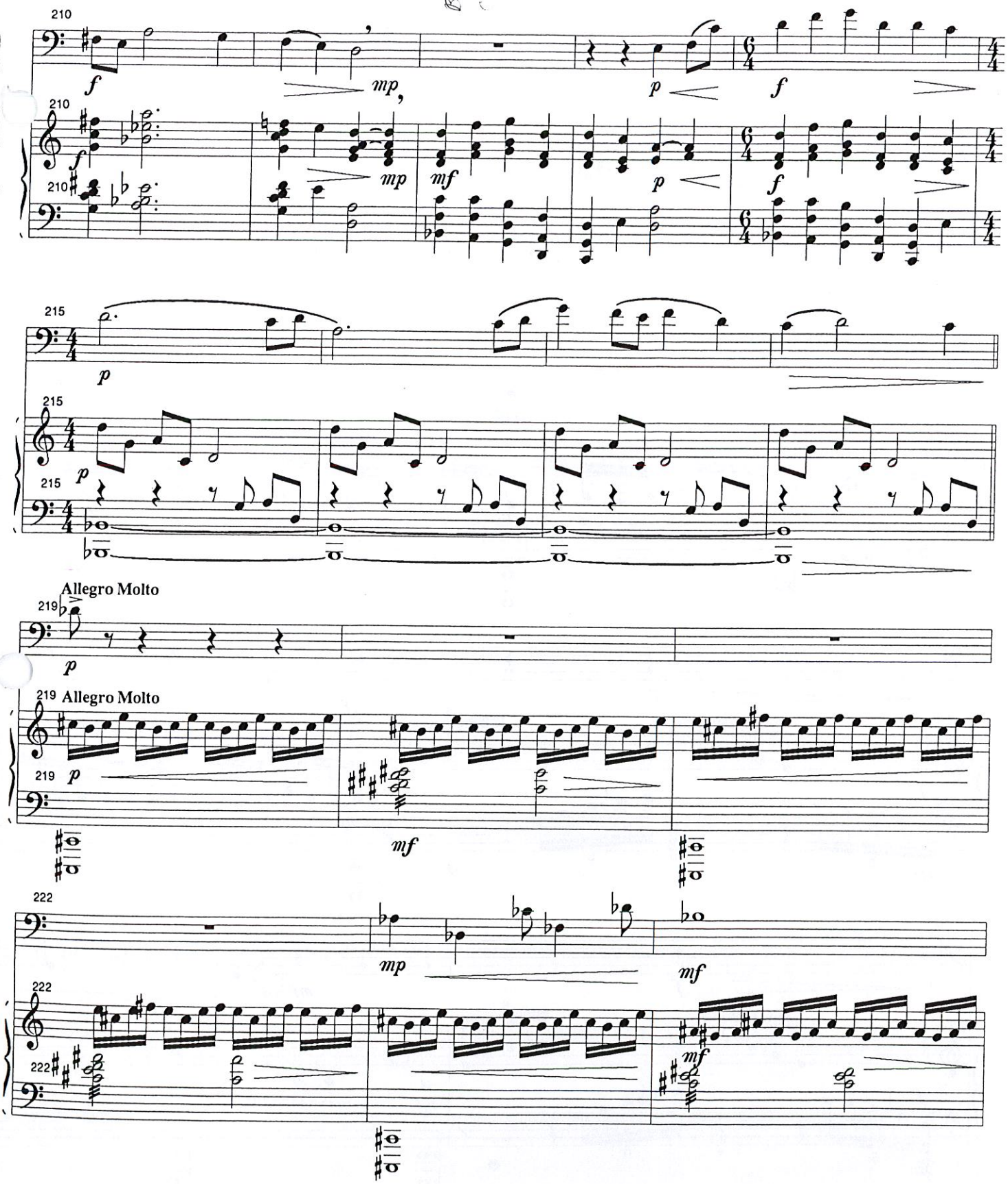
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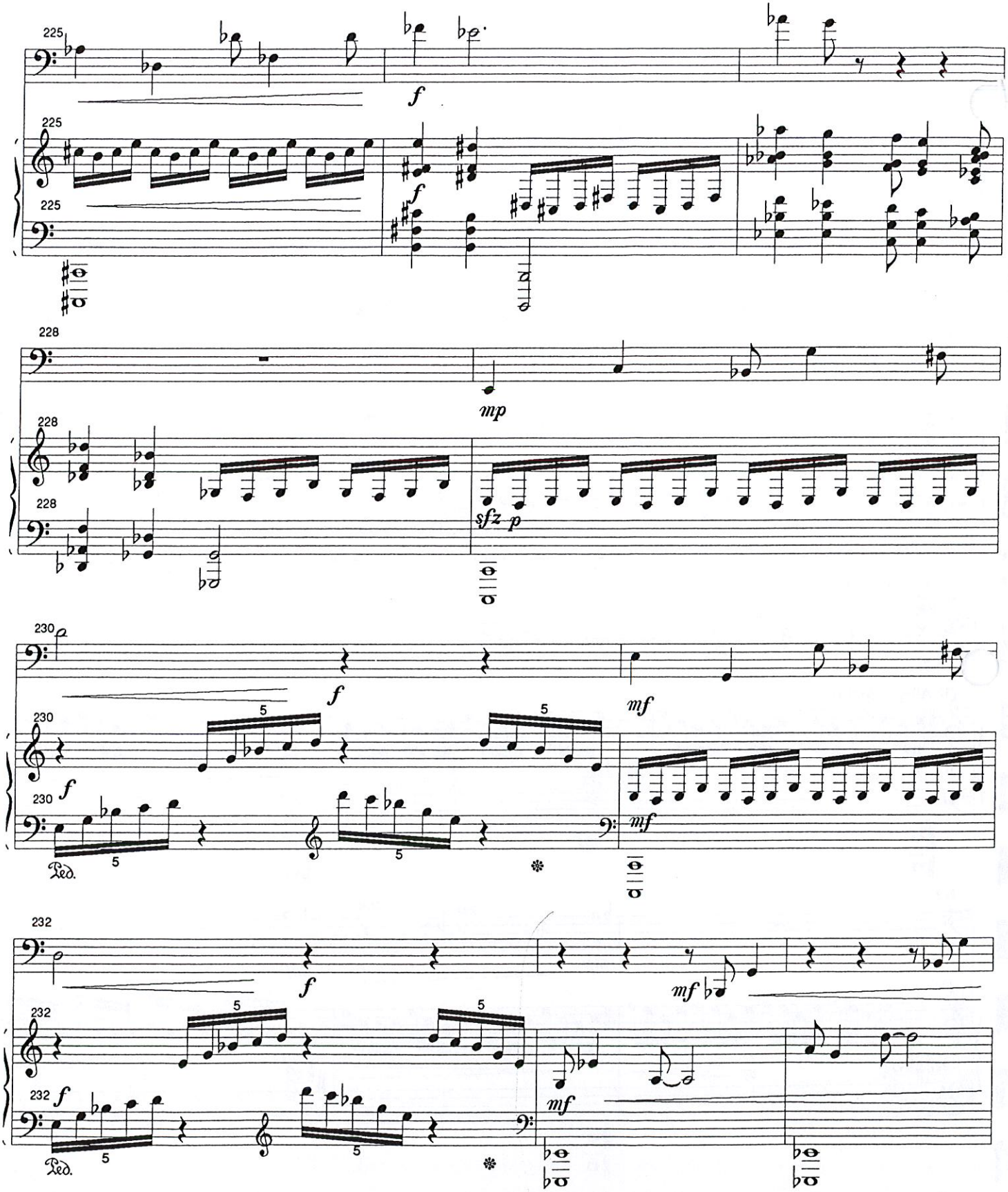
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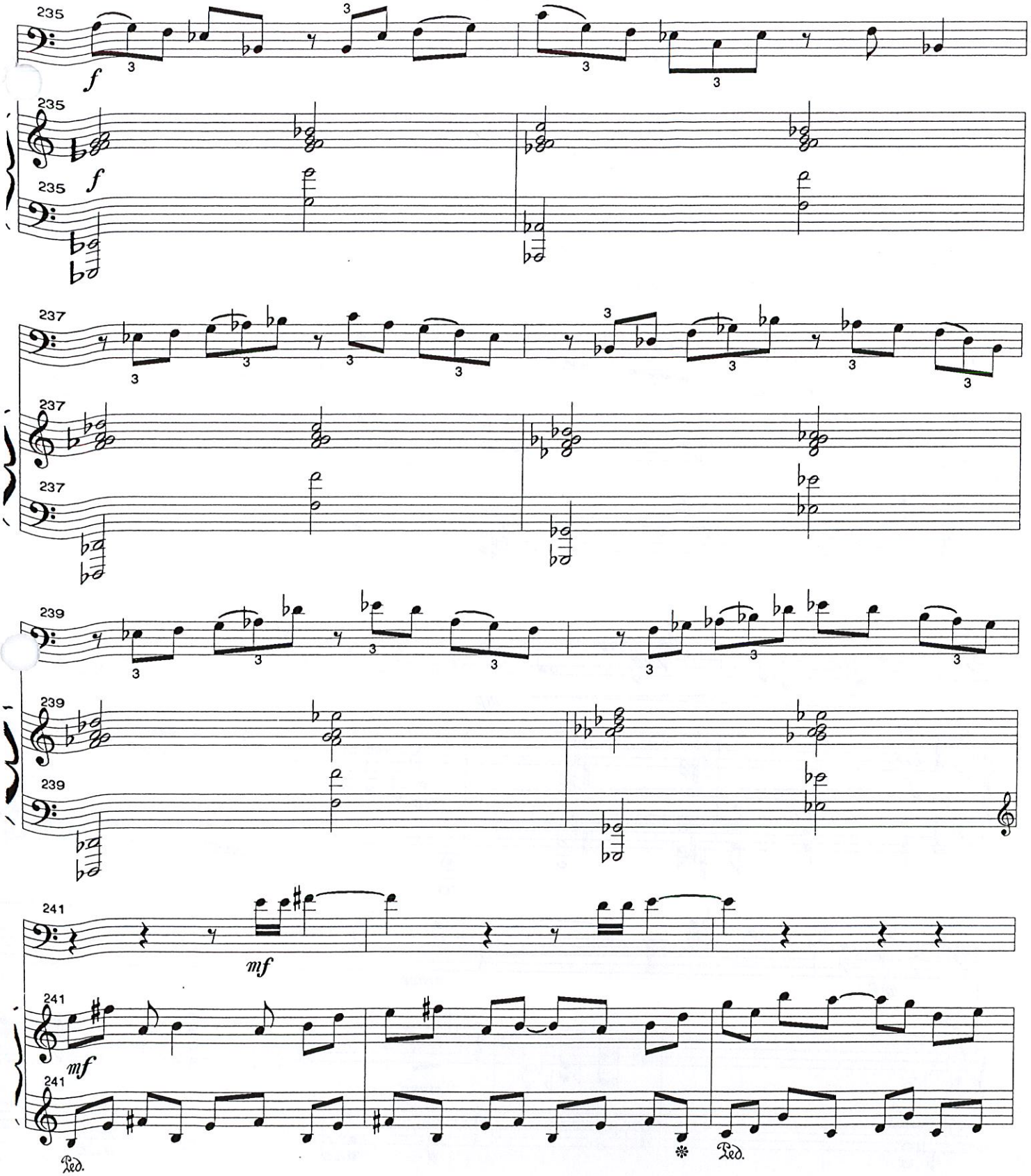
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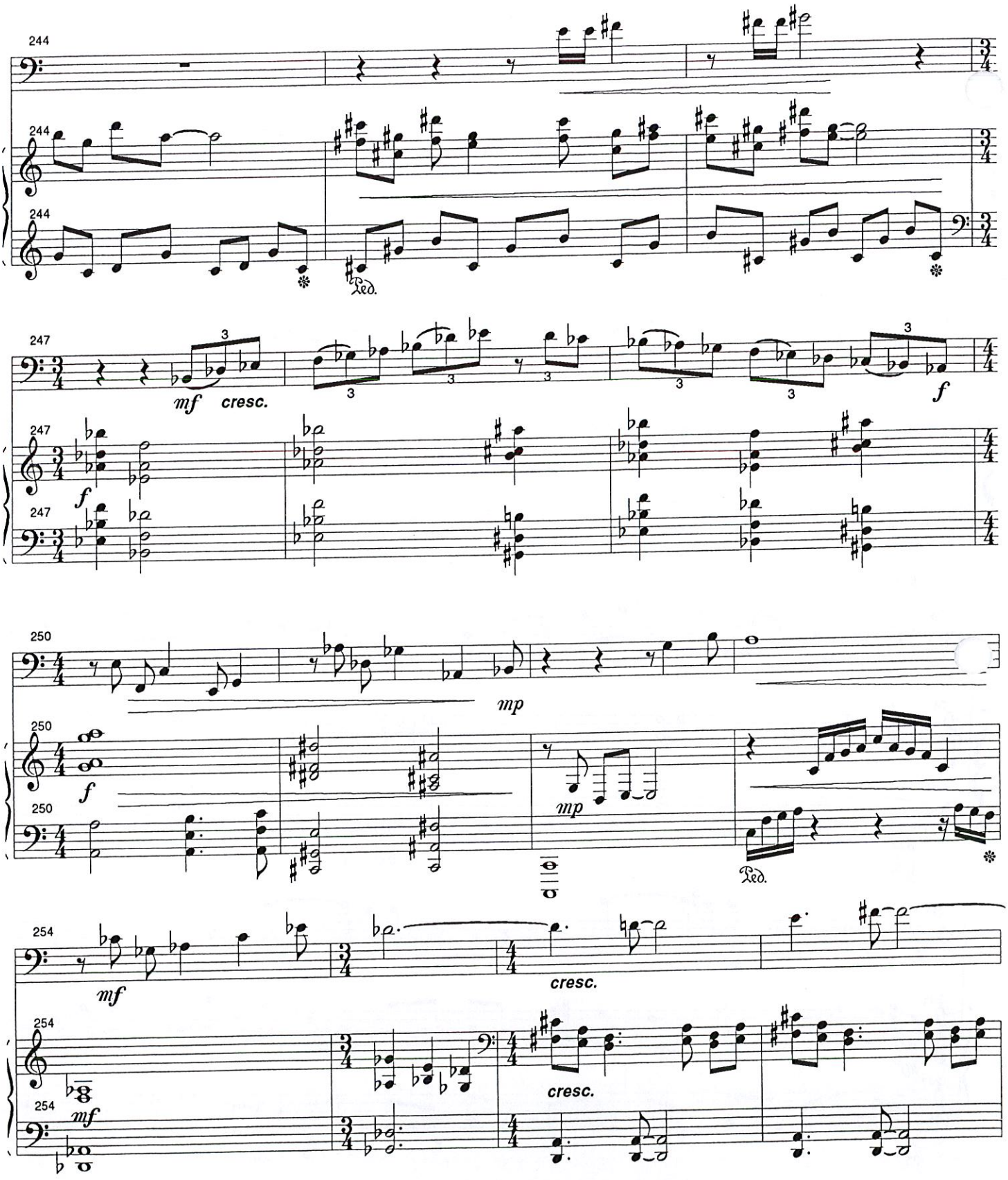
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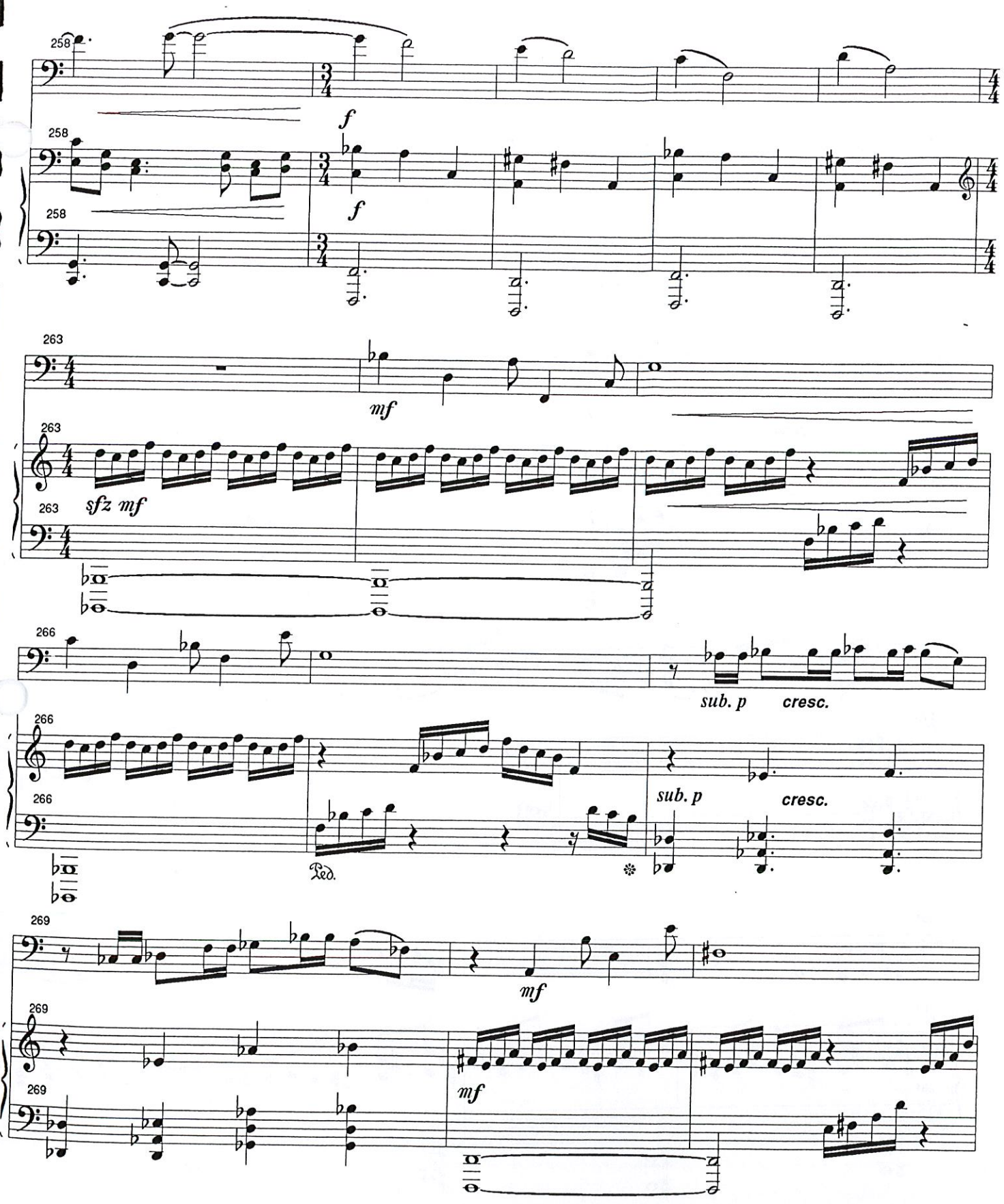
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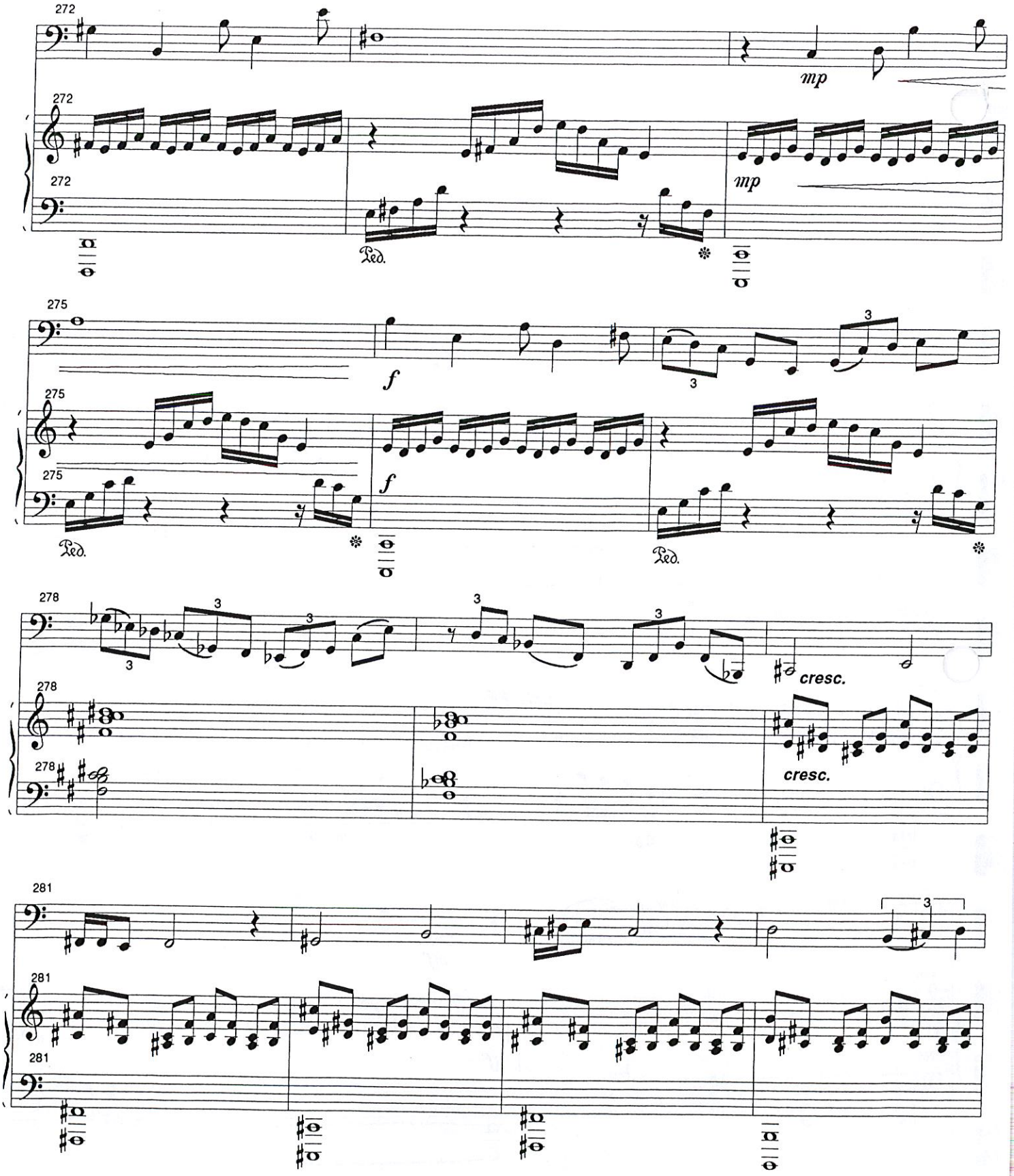
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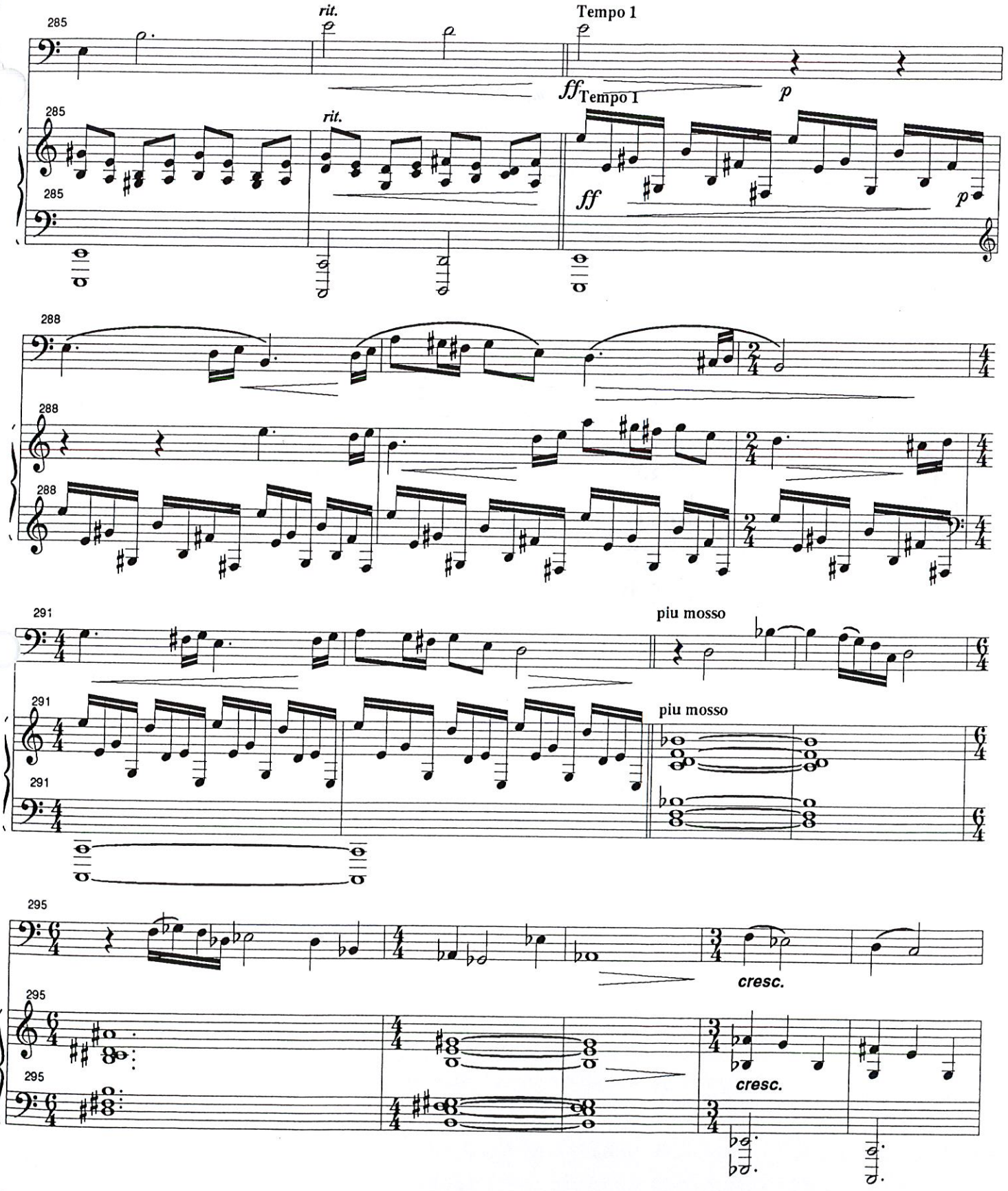
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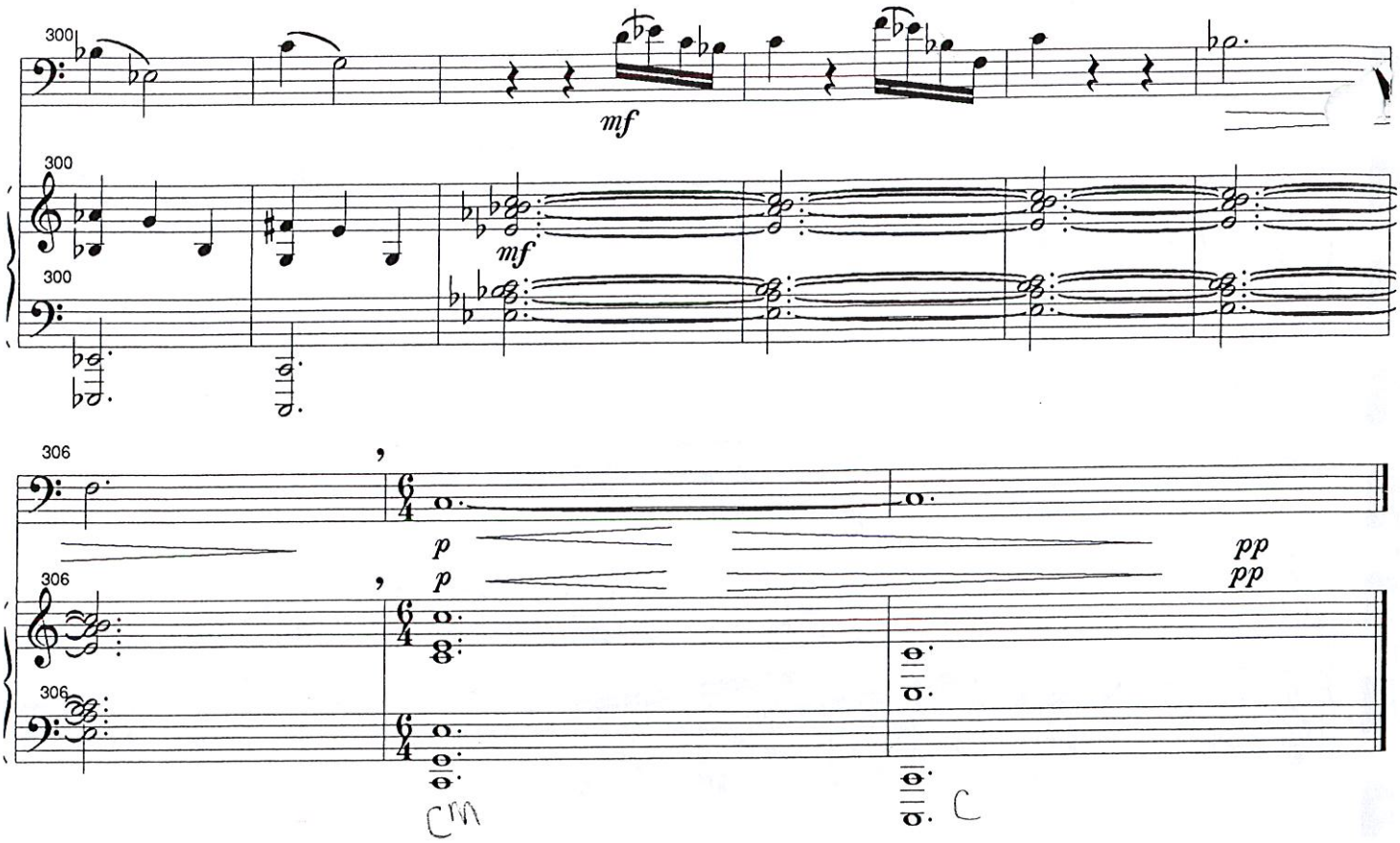
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