Passacaglia, Spanish Interlude and Fugue for organ, op. 23

The two Cyrillic letters that comprise Shostakovich's initials require three letters in English, since in our language we need two just to indicate the "sh" sound. But in German, that sound requires three letters (sch), and so the composer's initials in German would be DSCH. The sound "Es" implies the note E-flat to the ears of a German musician. What is more, their musical orthography uses H where we would say B-natural. In a moment of introspection Dmitri Shostakovich hit upon D–E-flat–C–B as a kind of motivic signature and these notes figure in quite a few of his works, most prominently in the self-assertive Tenth Symphony.

Usually the DSCH motive is rendered within the span of a diminished fourth, but improvising at the organ one day I found myself replacing the usual minor seconds between D and E-flat, and between C and B, with minor ninths on the pedalboard. These formed the opening notes to a ground bass, completed by five more notes of the octatonic scale Shostakovich so often used (an aspect of his Russian heritage, inasmuch as Rimsky-Korsakov was the first composer to use it systematically). An octatonic canon in four voices over the ground bass ensued, followed by episodes where either the more dense chromatic scale or the more diaphanous diatonic scale figured in the two hands. (The passacaglia theme will be more recognizable to those who know the motive from Shostakovich's music when it passes into the right hand. The minor ninths in the theme are altered to seconds, which idiomatically suit the hand better, and that, again, is how we're used to hearing them.)

The improv was recorded, and I liked what I played enough to transcribe it, and put the music away. When I came across it several months later last year, I found myself wanting to complement it, and began to work out another DSCH piece, this one with a Spanish flavor, for manuals. My intention at first was to reintroduce pedals again at the end of this number to round things off, but this did not happen. There was no C minor (or major) cadence, as I had anticipated. Instead, after these two numbers counted in three, the DSCH motive transformed itself into a fugal subject in common time.

The fugue has three sections. A rather standard exposition gives way to an octatonic episode, where the theme is jacked up a semitone so as to cadence on the tonic note, C. (If one can really speak of cadence in an octatonic context…. The motive is of course still quite recognizable as E-flat, E, D-flat, C.) Perpetual motion eighth-notes bring matters to an urgent climax, but as the right hand holds its last note, quiescent quarters in the lower voices revert to the familiar, diatonic form of the motive (D, E-flat, C, B) in this, the fugue's final panel, with its Picardy third.

My opus 23 is dedicated to the outstanding composer and organist David Hurd.

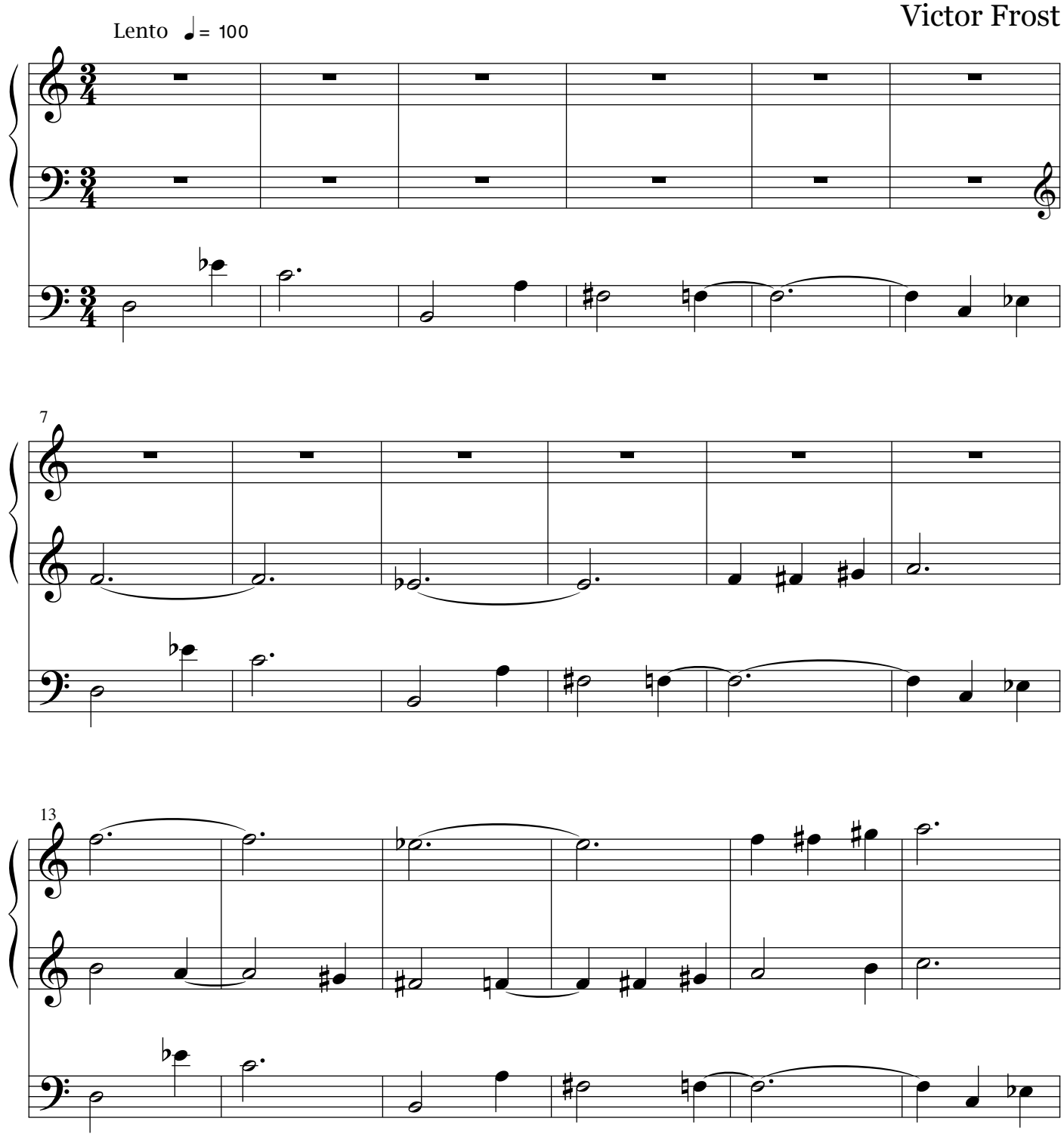
Victor Frost
3 II 81
Weehawken, New Jersey

to David Hurd

Passacaglia, Spanish Interlude and Fugue

for organ, op. 23

Victor Frost



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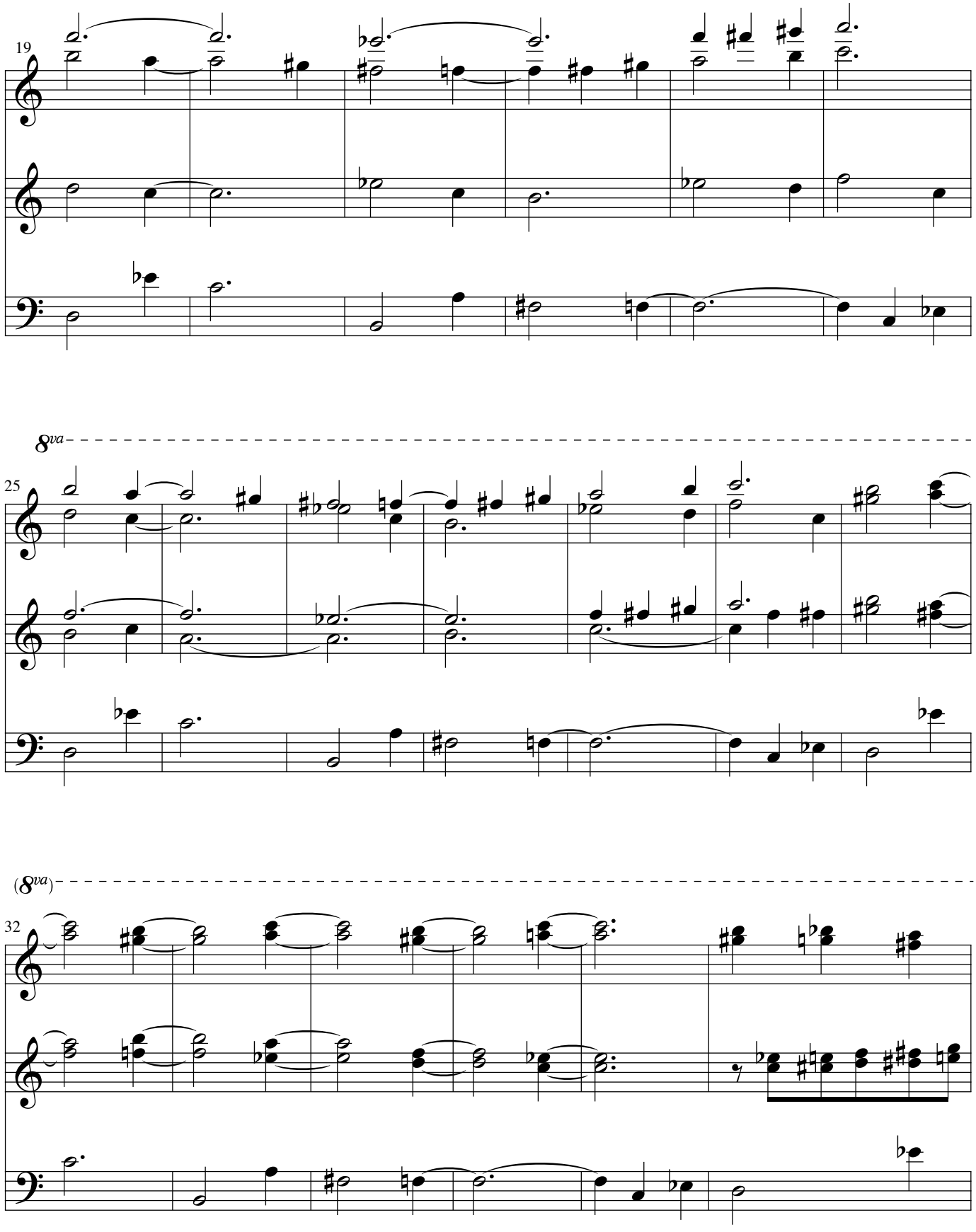
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8va
25
(8va)
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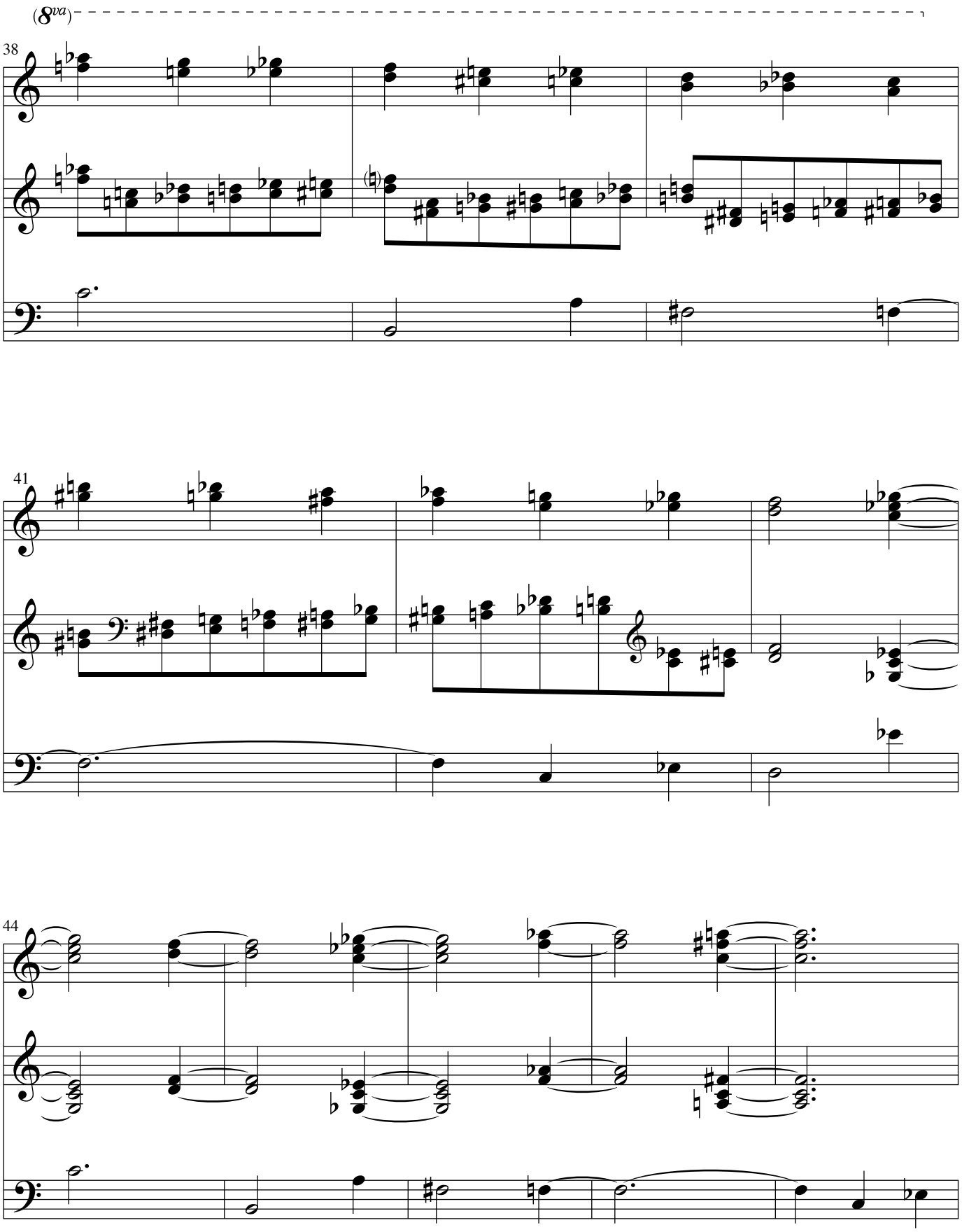
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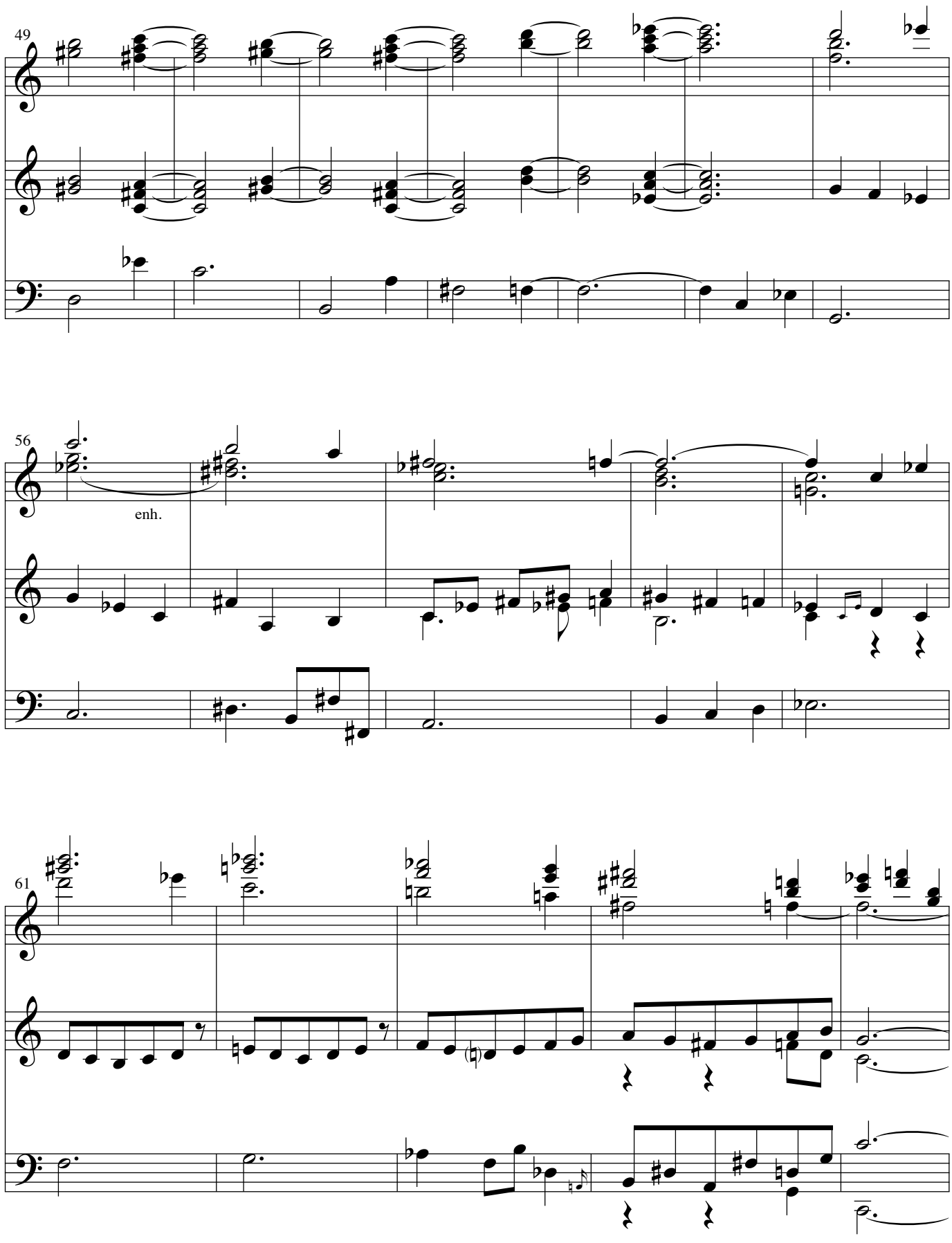
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enh.
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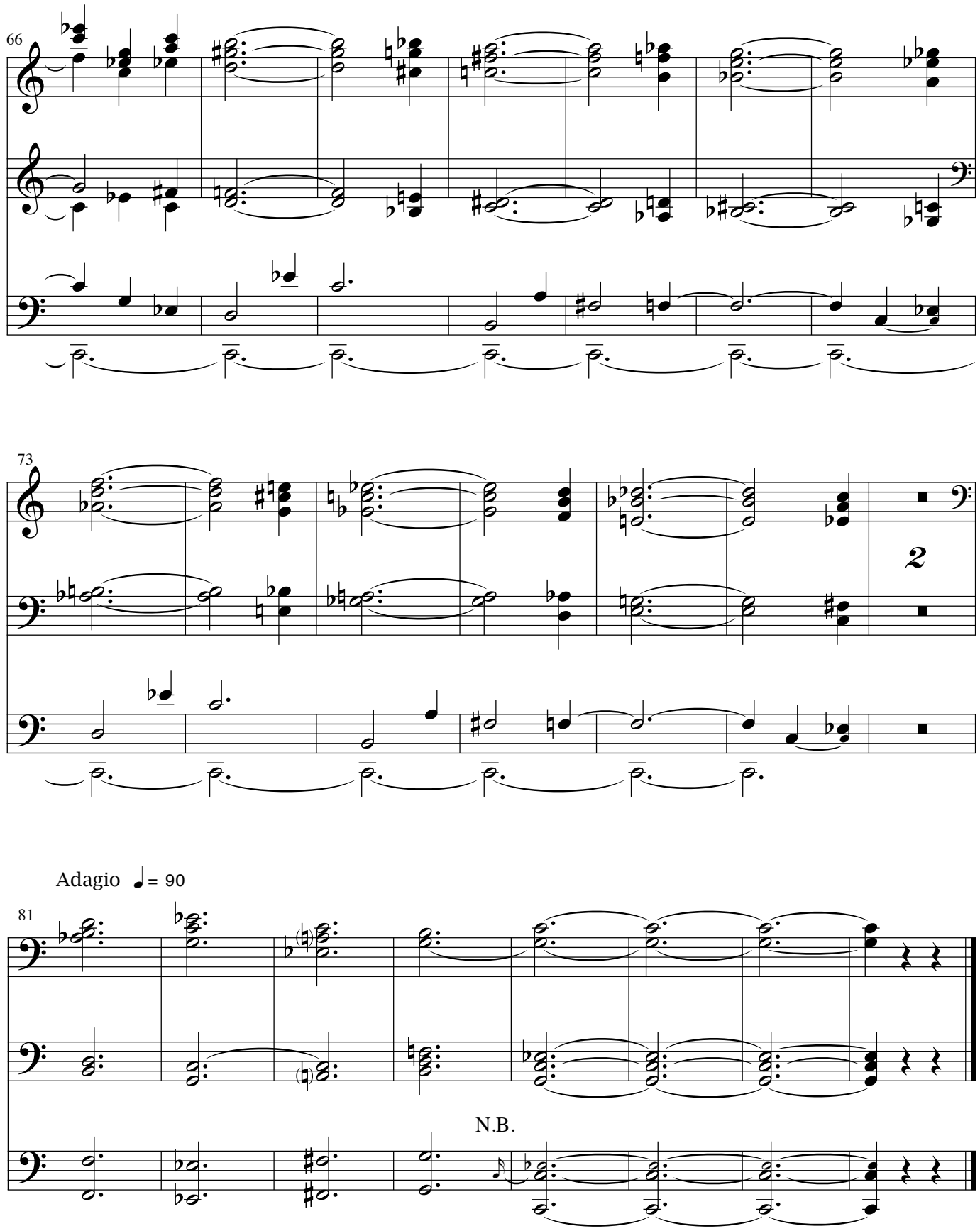
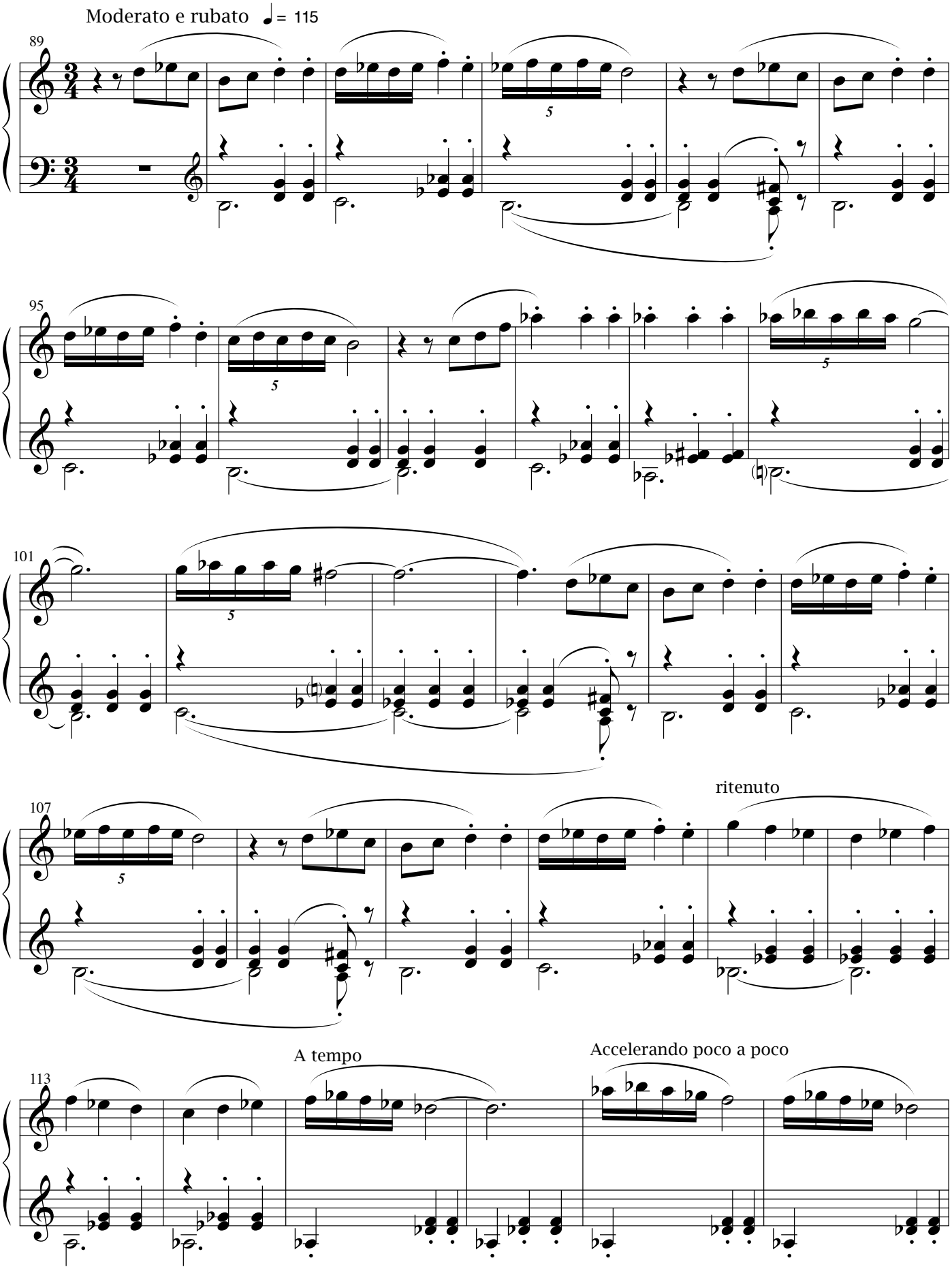
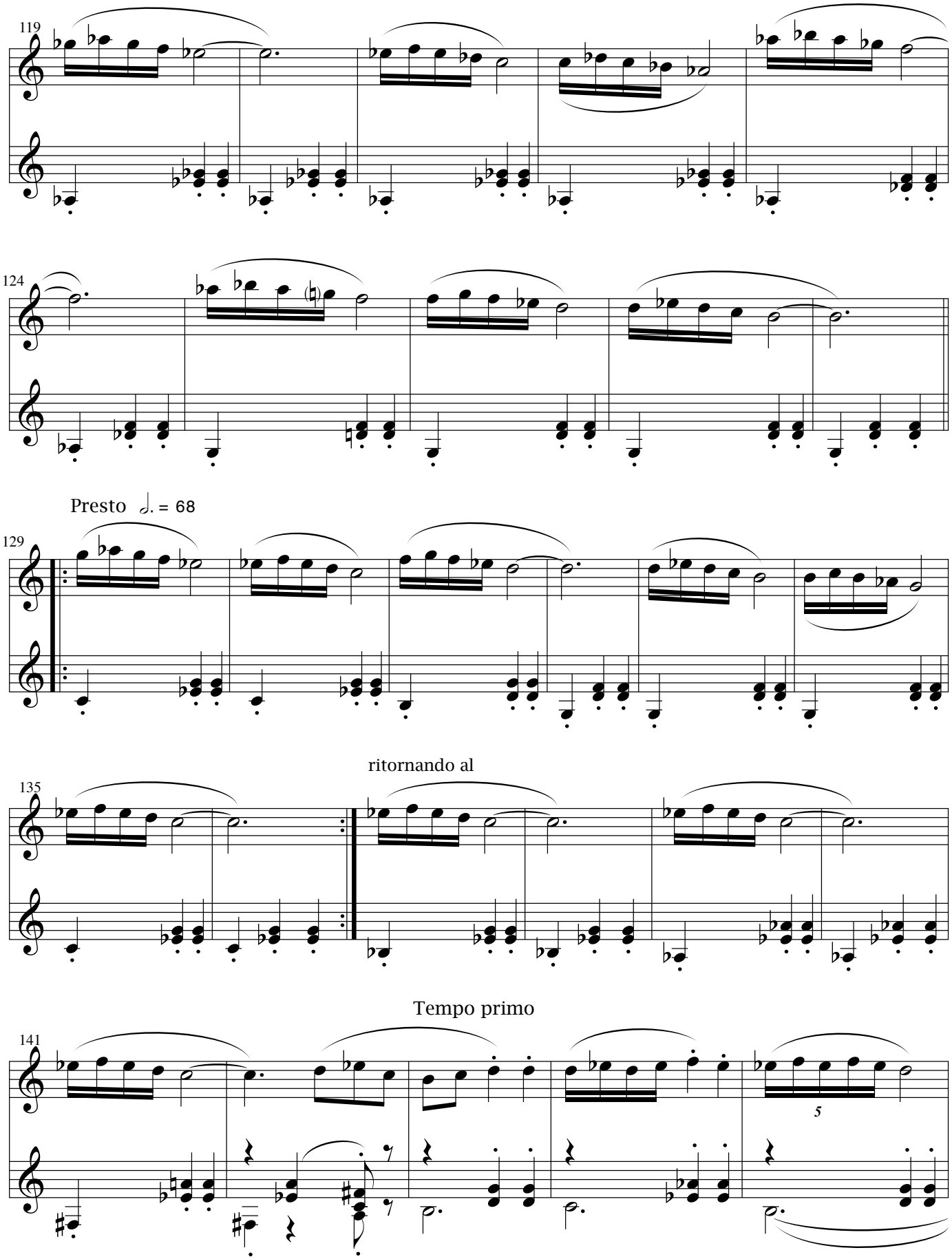


N.B.: Grace note should be played even if the optional E-flat in the right foot is being omitted.


Moderato e rubato ♩= 115
89
95
101
107
ritenuto
113
A tempo
Accelerando poco a poco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124
Presto ♩. = 68
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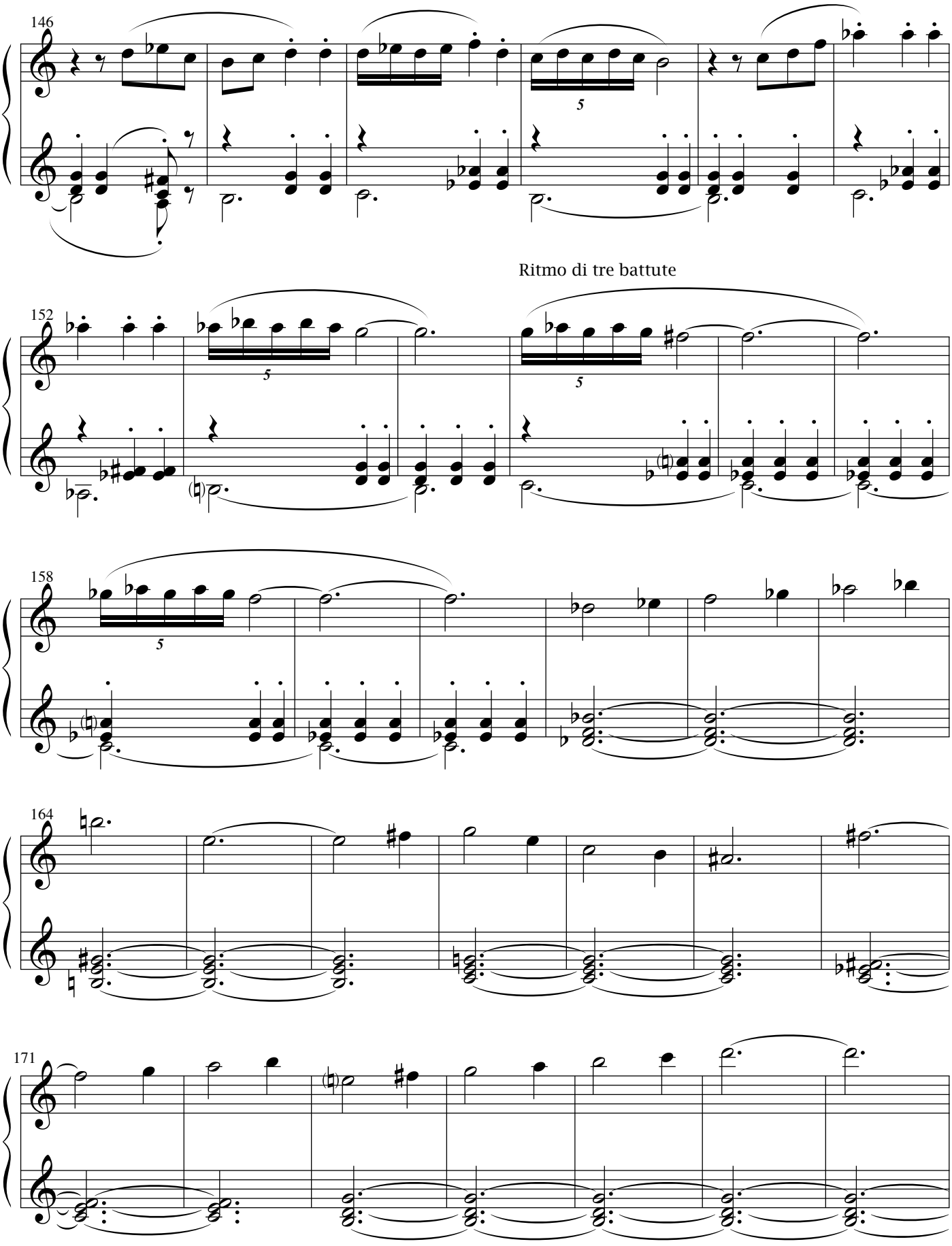
ritornando al
135
Tempo primo
141
5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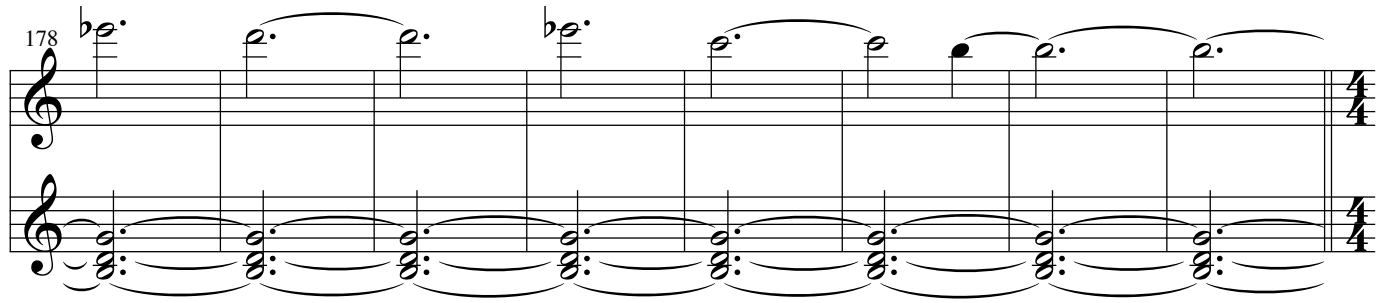
Ritmo di tre battute
152
158
164
171

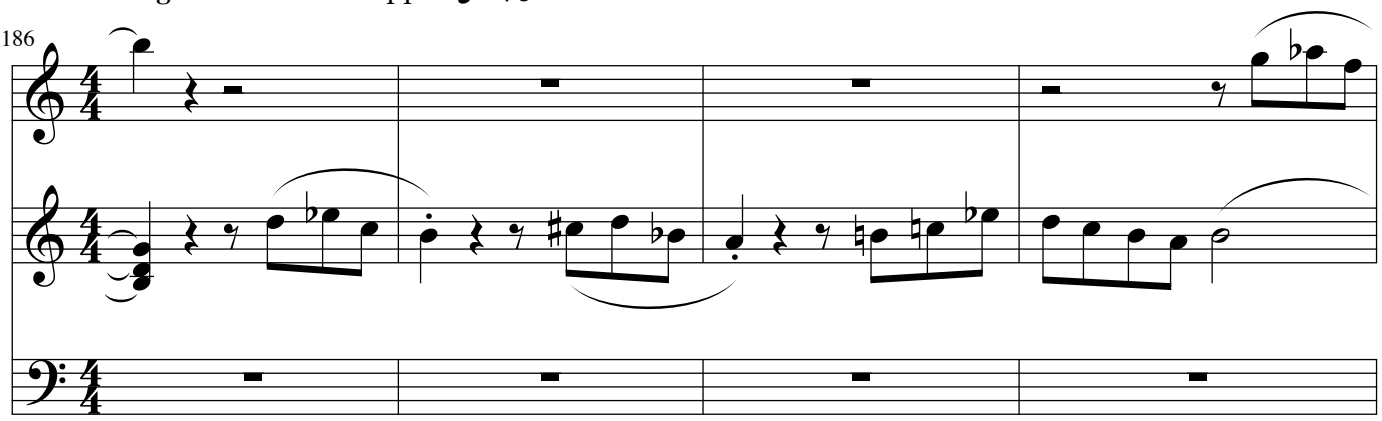
Ritmo di quattro battute

178



Allegretto ma non troppo ♩= 78

186



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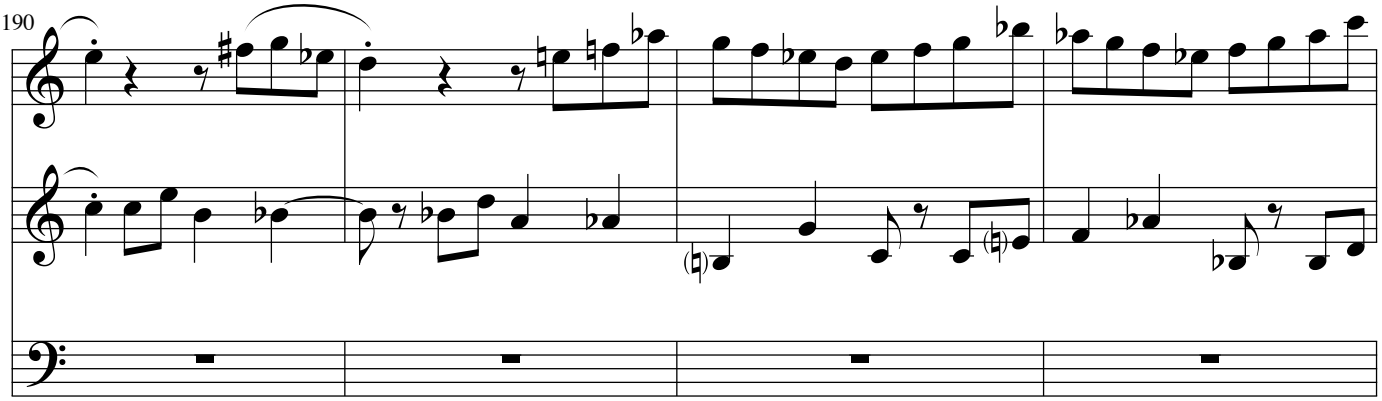

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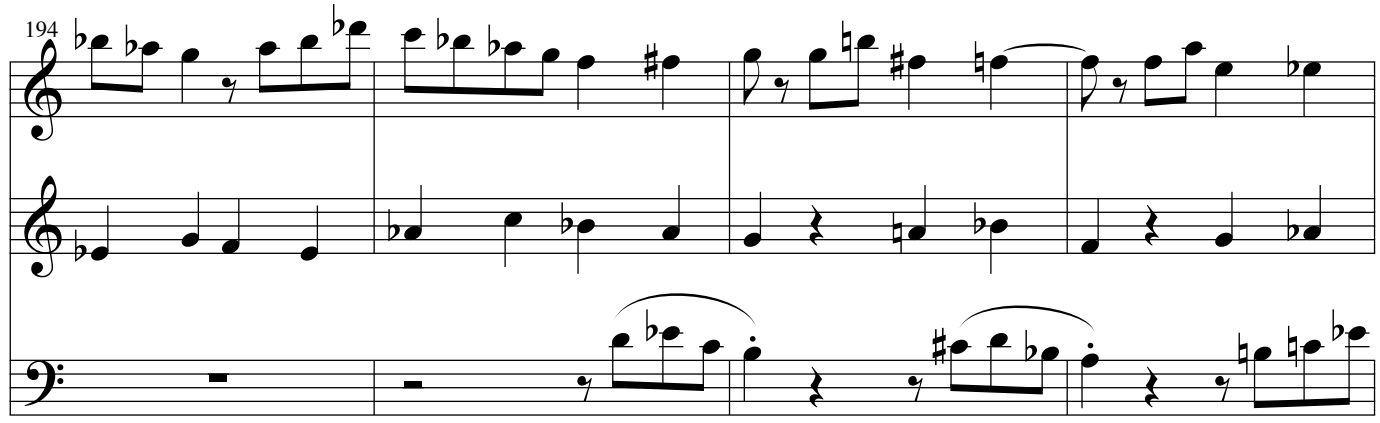

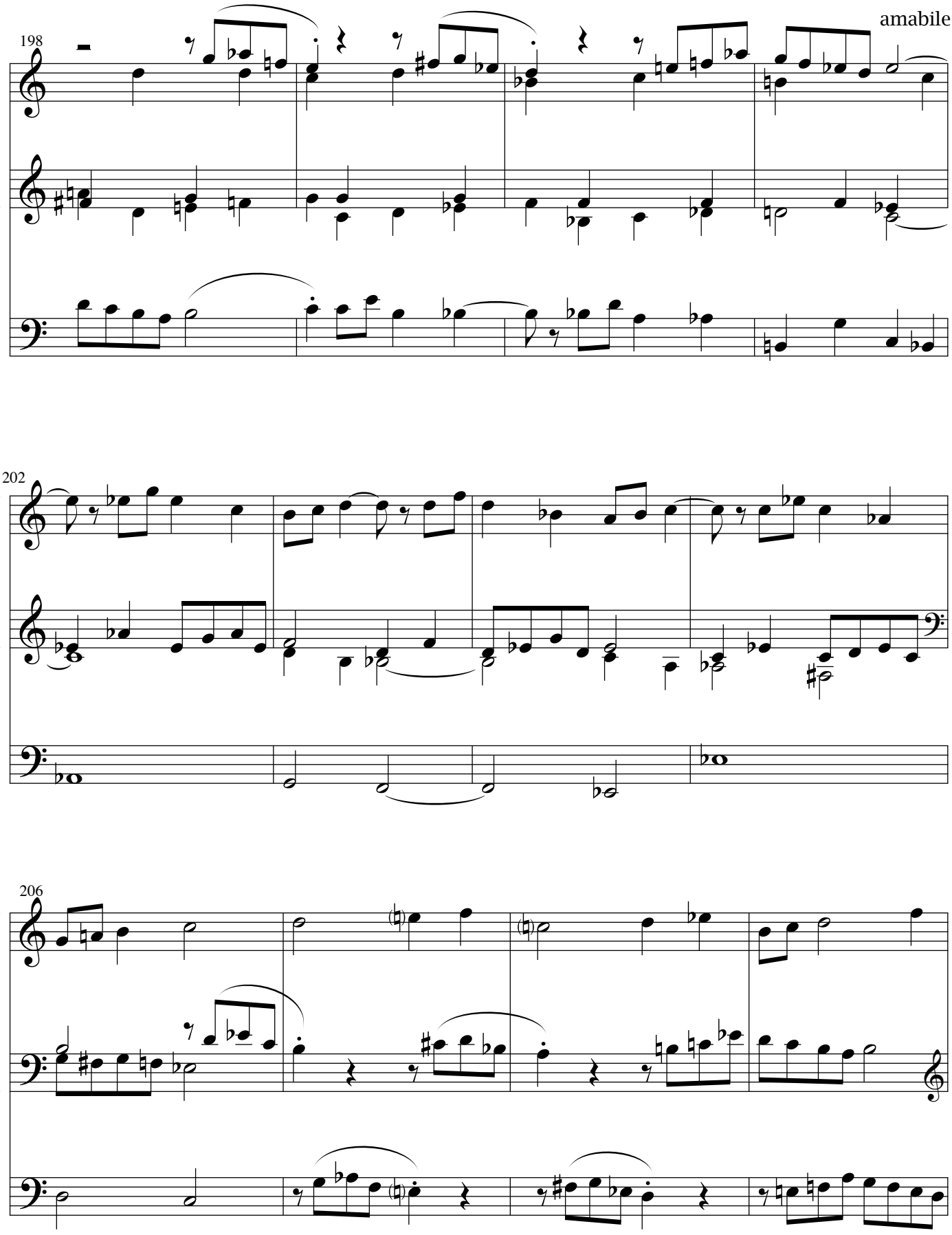
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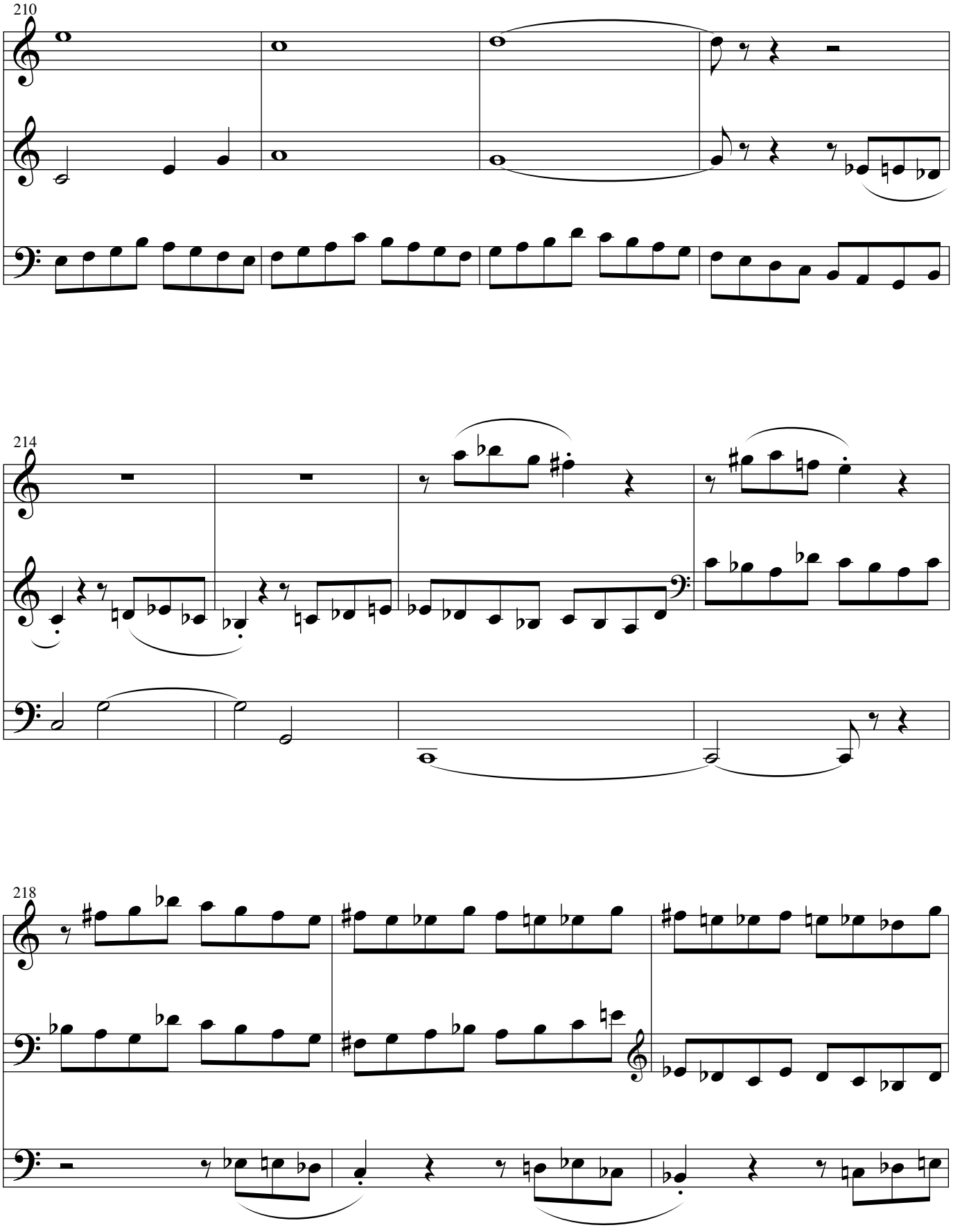

210
214
218

ritenuto

221

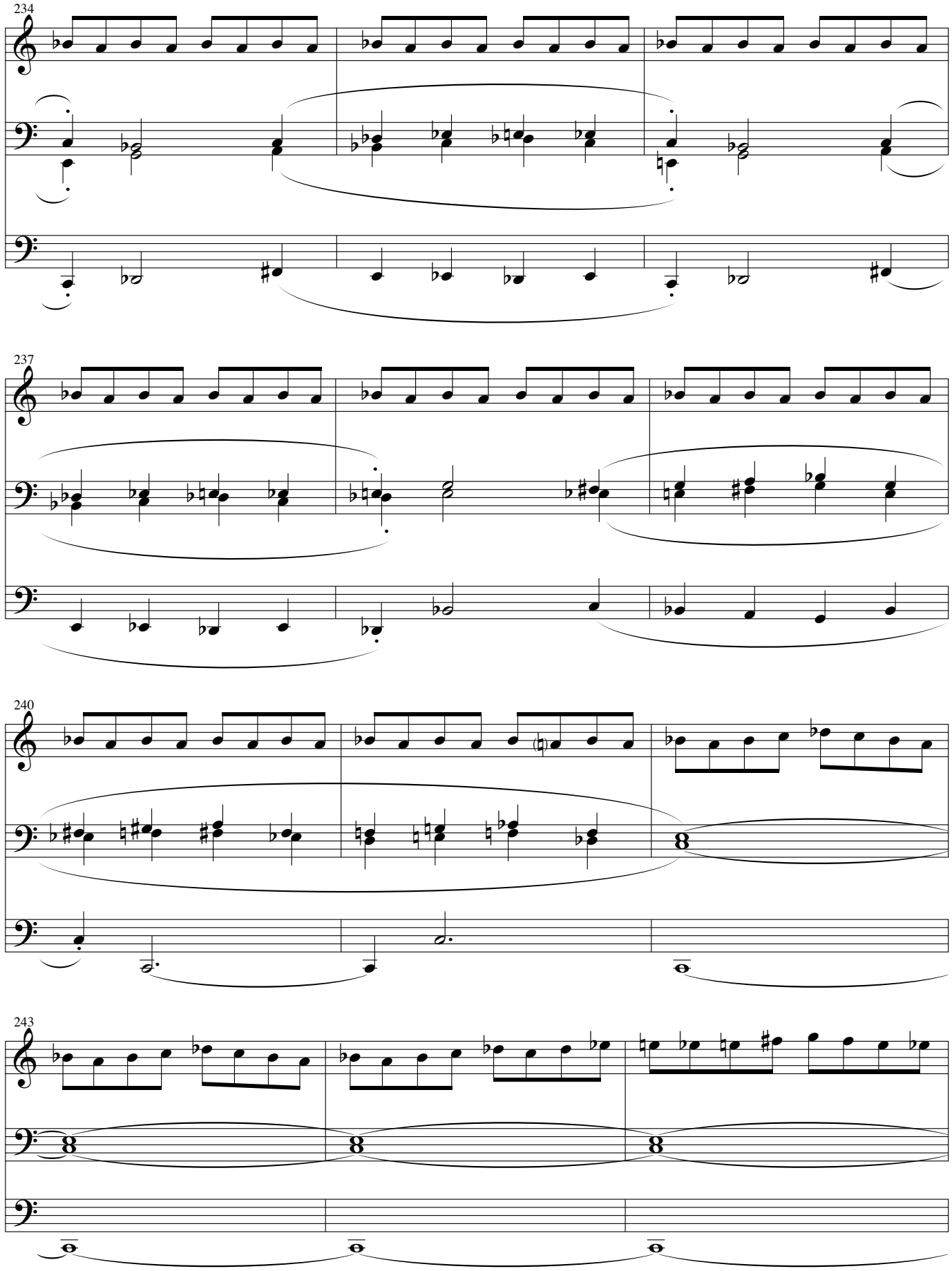
A tempo

224

espr.

228

231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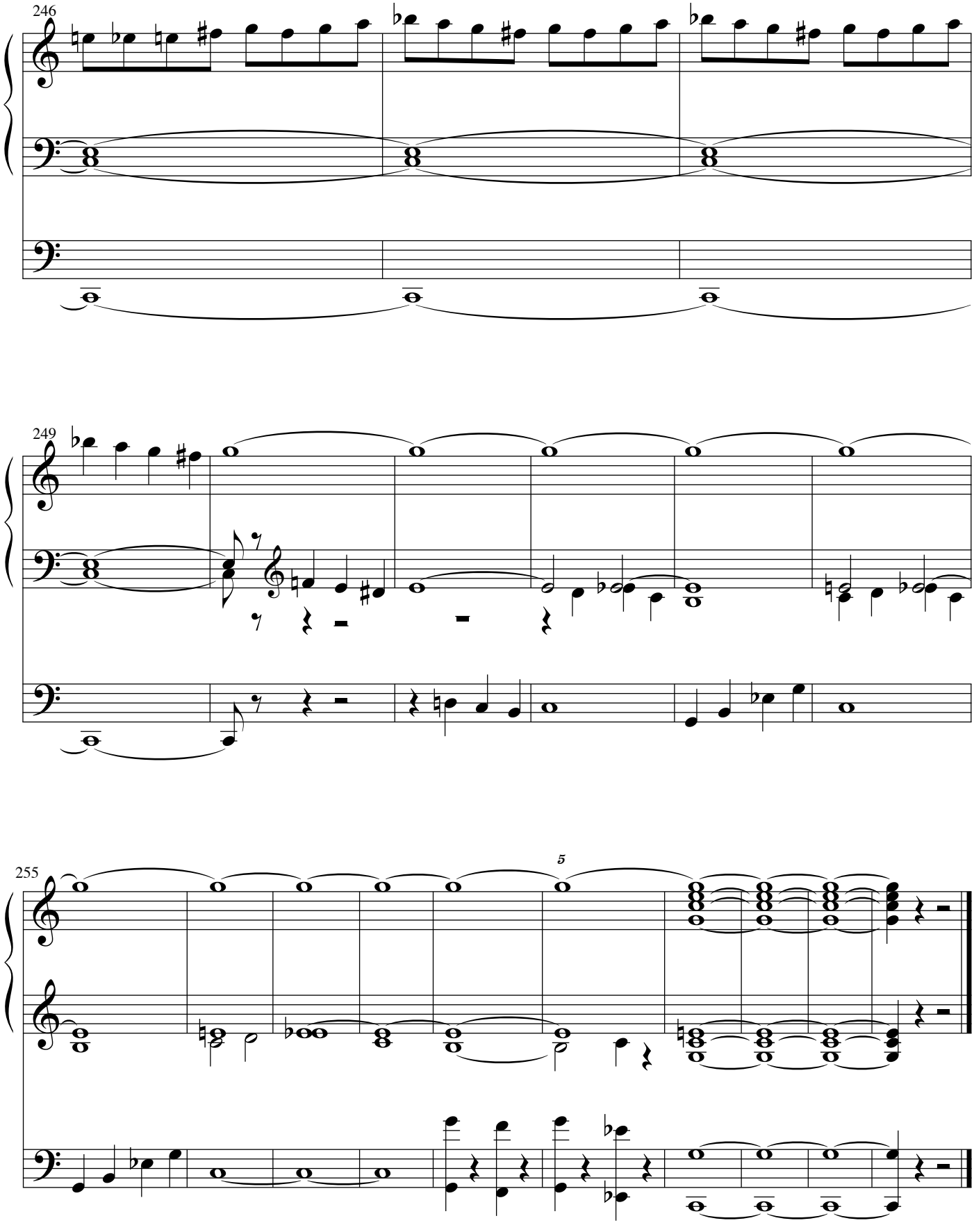
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5

Performance note

I was once asked something about the end of the Passacaglia, and I feel my answer bears repeating. The performer had gotten used to a certain amount of overhang of the relinquished diminished chord at the two-m. rest, this owing to the lively acoustic of his home church where he had done his practicing. But he was about to perform the piece in another church with a very dry acoustic. He asked whether it were permissible in such circumstances to hold the chord, to replicate the effect to which he was accustomed. I said that a performance space defines its own terms, and it could never sound like reverberation if there had been none or little before: it would simply sound as if the chord were longer than a quarter beat. And, although sometimes such liberties enhance the musical experience (and I have certainly had recourse to such in my own performances of other music), here it would be a bad idea. The six-m. ground bass has been presented relentlessly, and without any rhythmic variance (even in the treble), since the piece started. The rest is an unexpected lurch out of the established pattern. This effect would be mitigated if the chord were held.