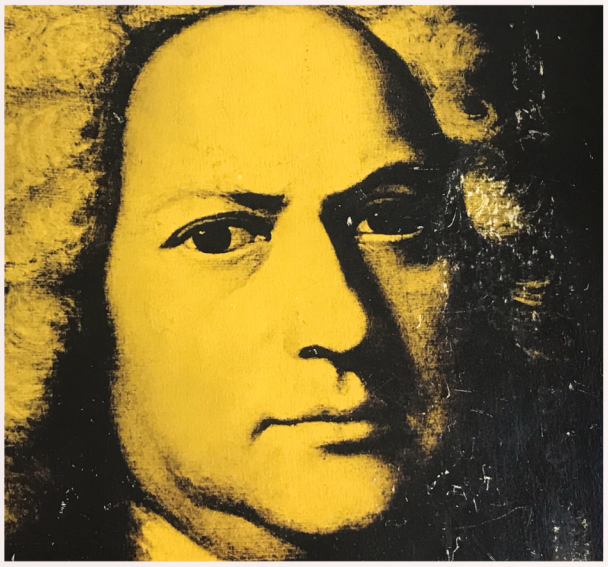


ABSOLUTE BACH

J.S. BACH
Lute Suites BWV 996-998

Transcribed for piano

by Eleonor Bindman

©2025

"Bach, Johann Sebastian, supreme arbiter and lawgiver of music, a master comparable in greatness of stature with Aristotle in philosophy and Leonardo da Vinci in art."

"The word "Bach" means "stream" in the German language; the rhetorical phrase that J.S. Bach was not a mere stream but a whole ocean of music ("Nicht Bach aber Meer haben we hier") epitomizes Bach's encompassing magnitude."

Nicolas Slonimsky
Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians.

J.S. Bach

Suites BWV 996 – 998

Transcribed for piano by Eleonor Bindman

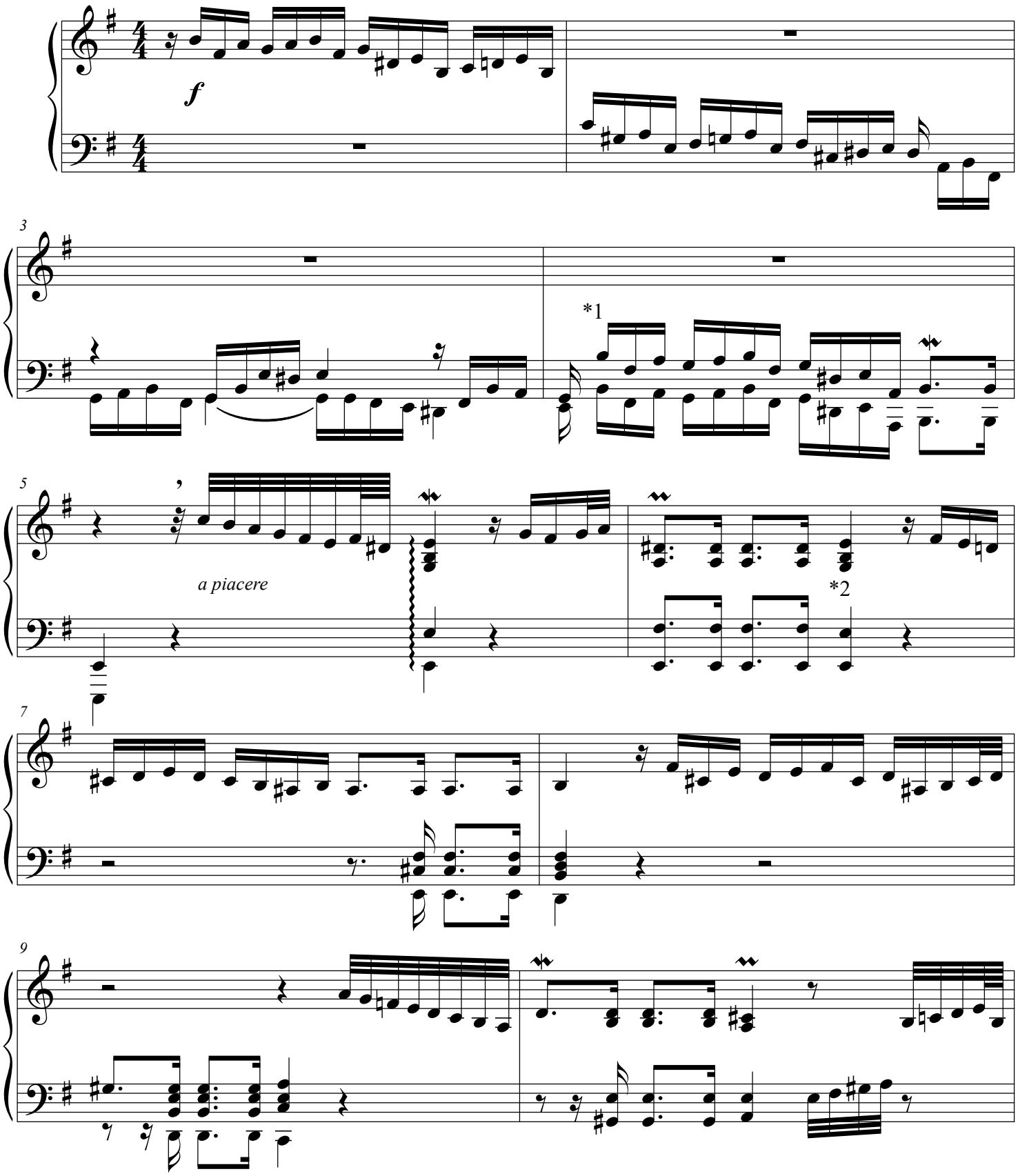
©2025

Melozzo da Forli, c. 1480
Angel with Lute, Looking Down
Fresco fragment, St. Peter's Cathedral, Rome

Suite in E Minor, BWV 996

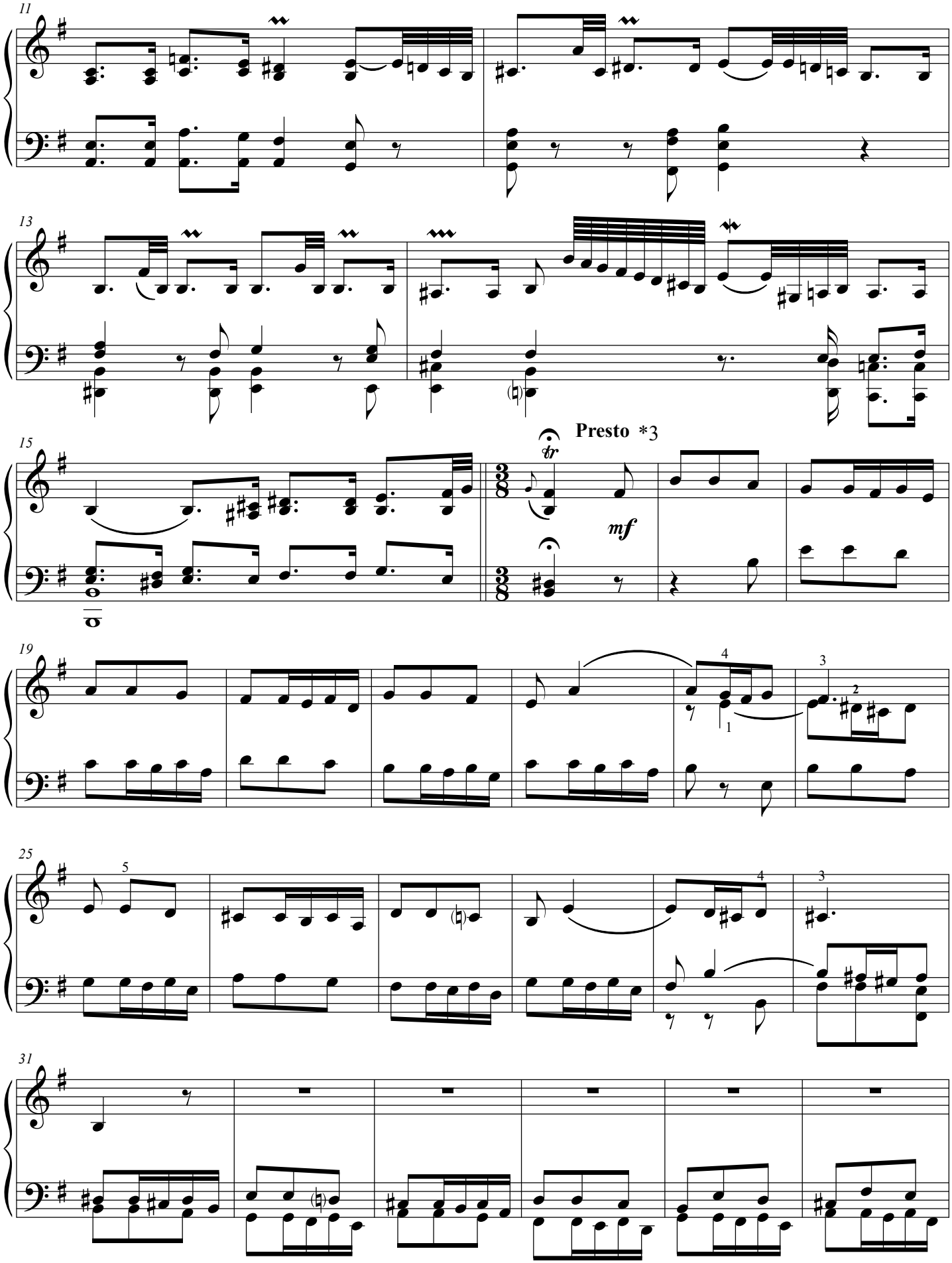
J.S. Bach
Arr. E. Bindman

Passaggio

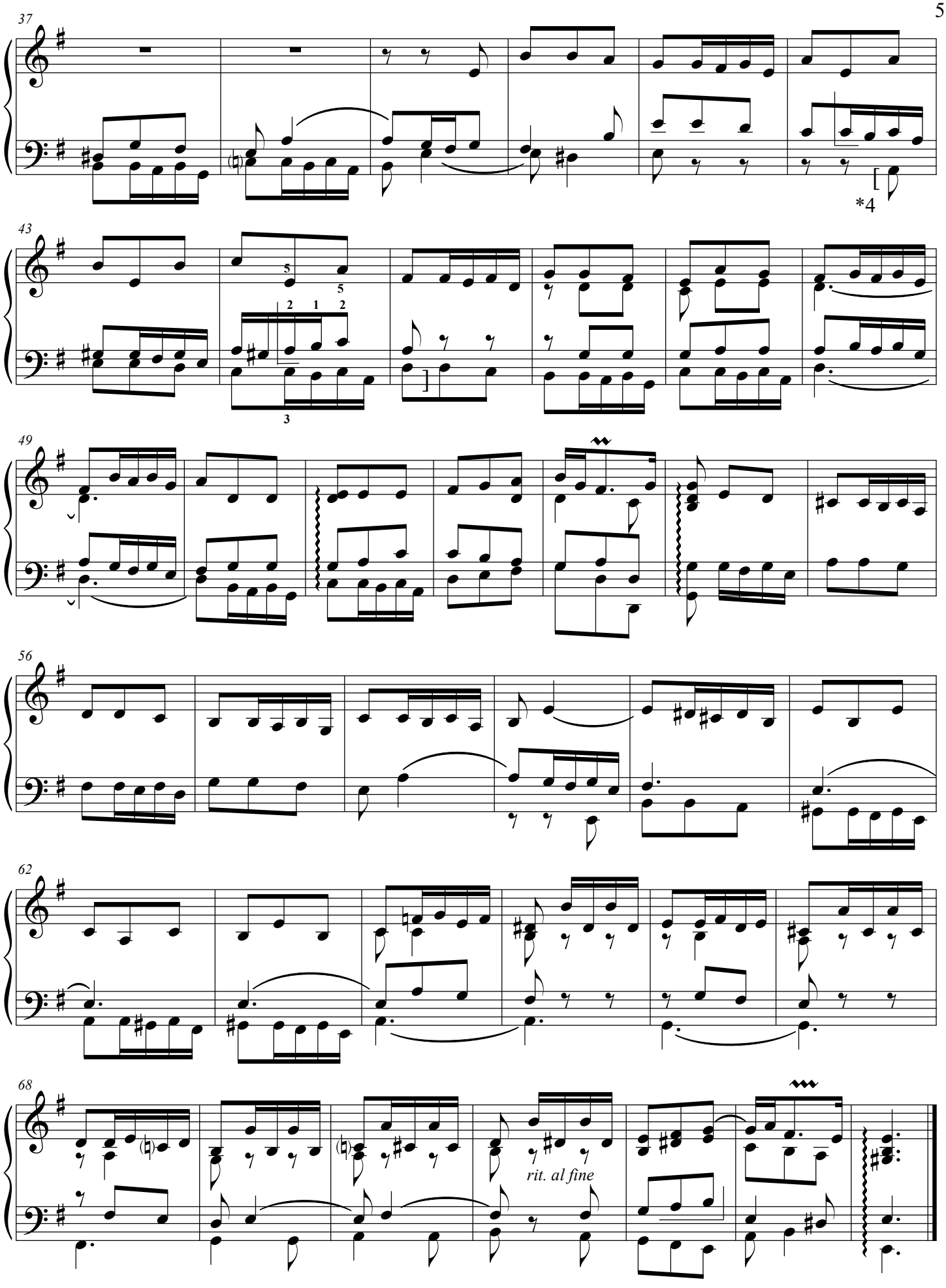


*1 I added the lower octave for a more definitive statement. The same doubling is used in the repeat of the Gigue.

*2 Most chords, especially those at the end of a phrase, were usually arpeggiated on the lute and harpsichord.

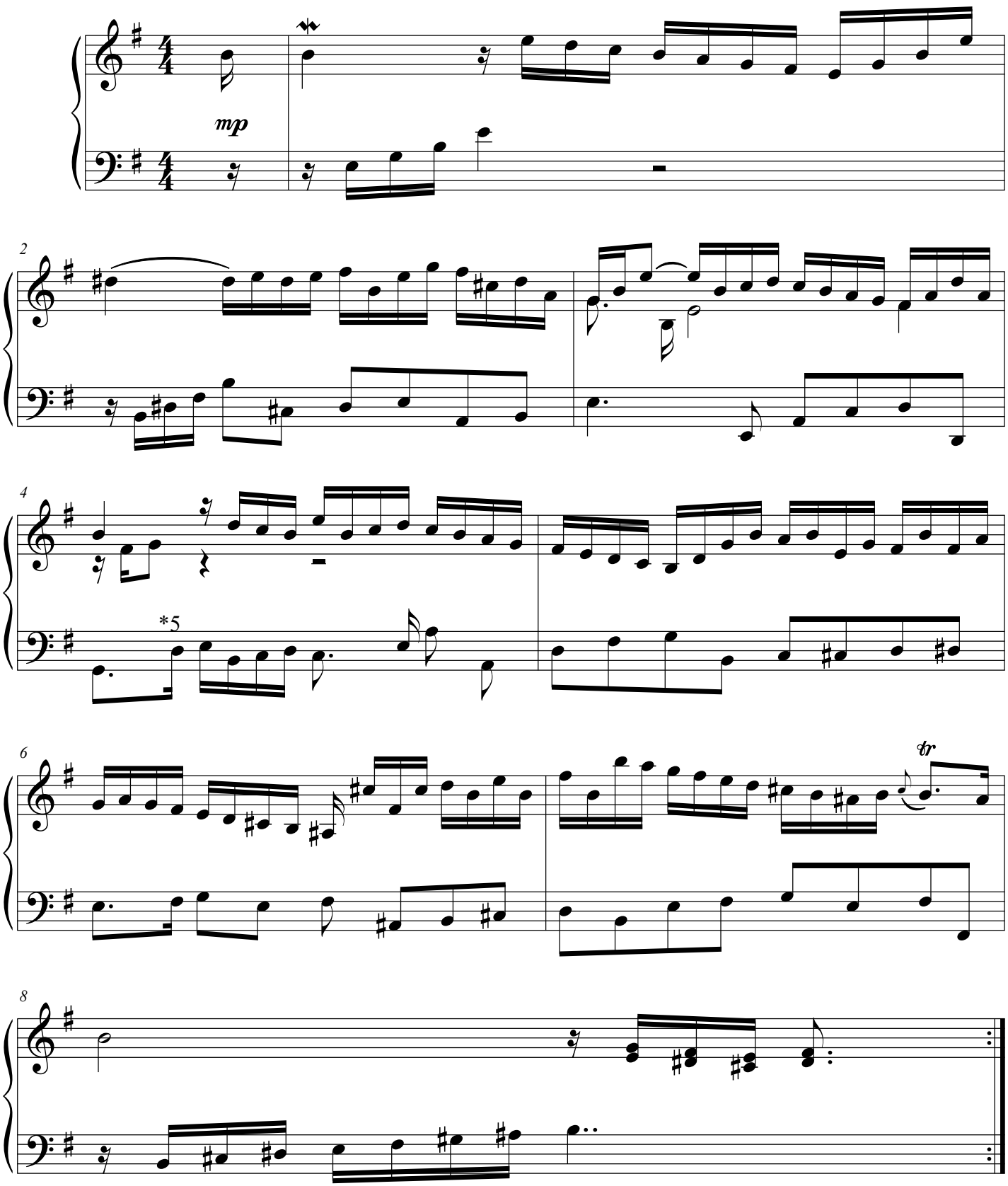


*3 The “Presto” should not be taken literally but as a relatively fast section after the recitative-like Passaggio.

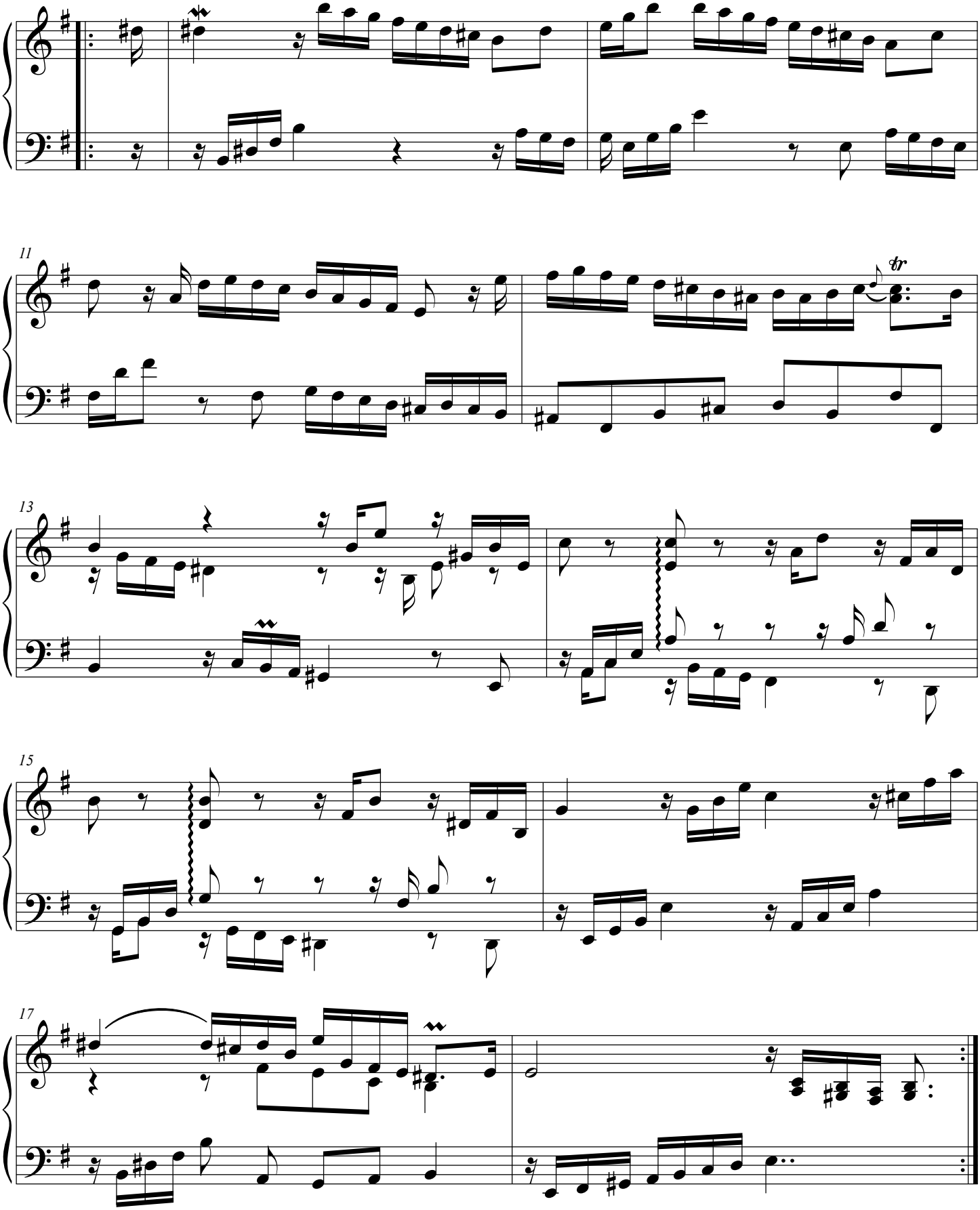


*4 The bracketed start of the subject is not in Bach's score. I added it because it fits perfectly and is fun to play.

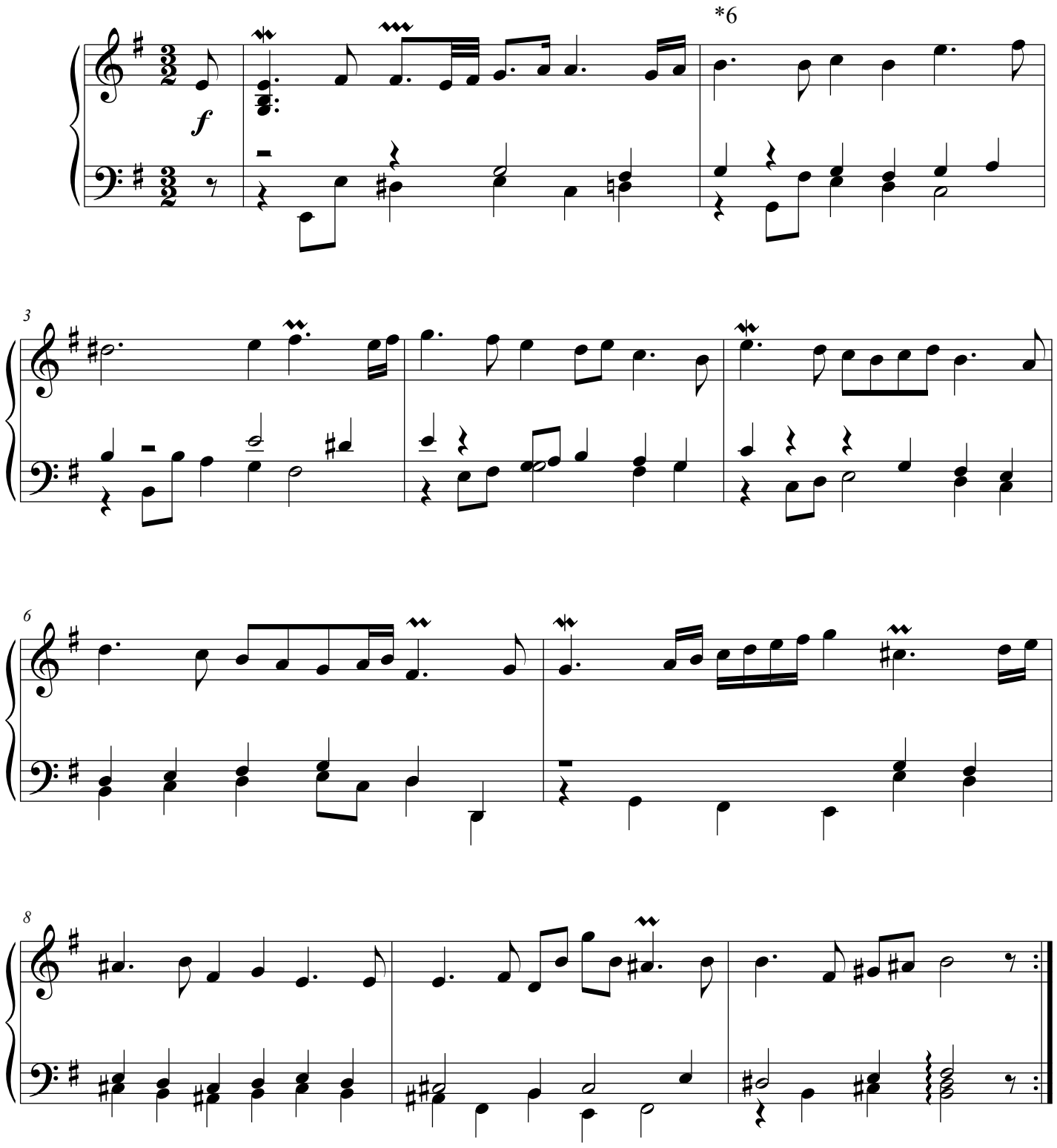
Allemande



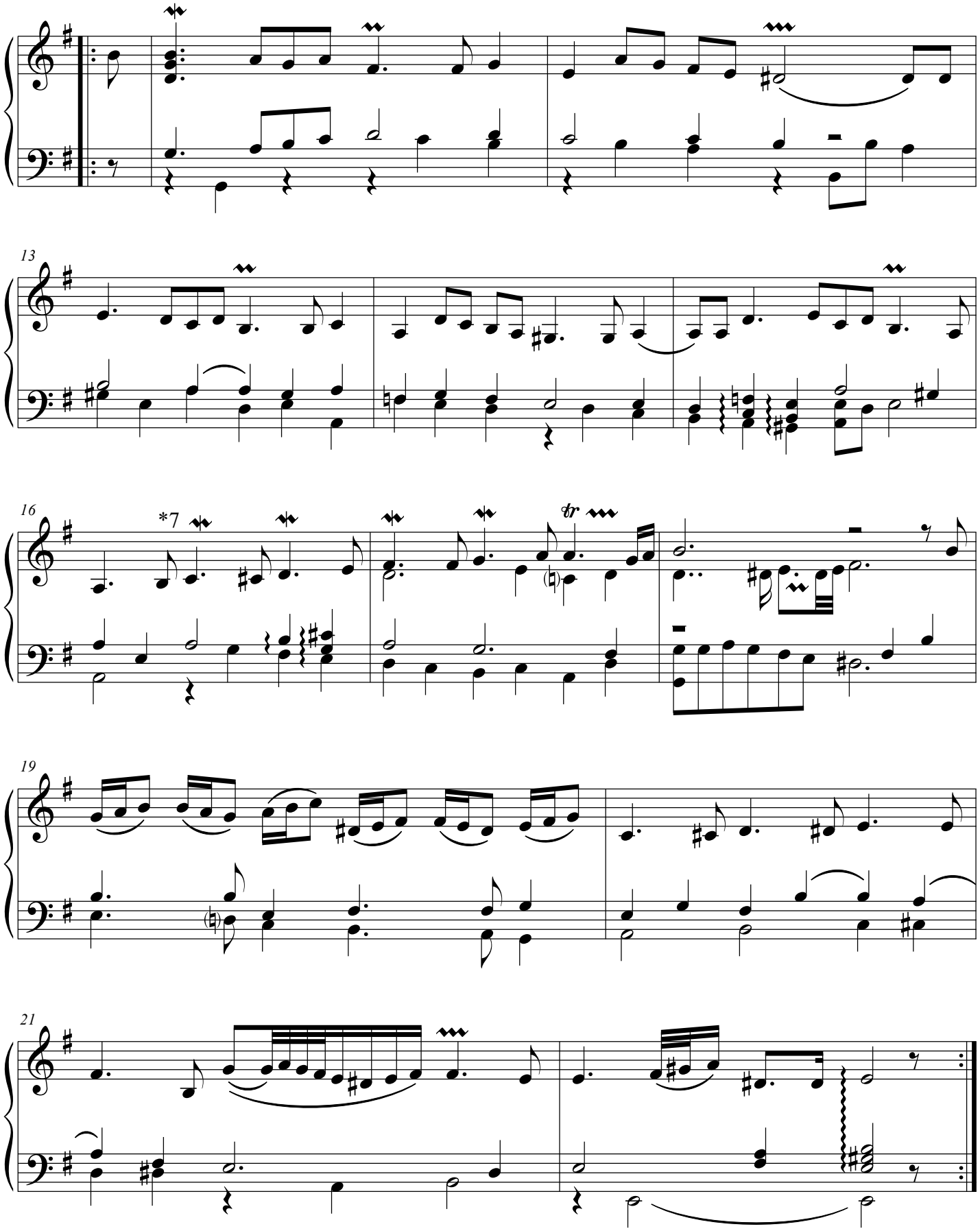
*5 In this Allemande, I added some notes in the left hand to fill in gaps in the dialogue of the original score.


11
tr
13
15
17

Courante

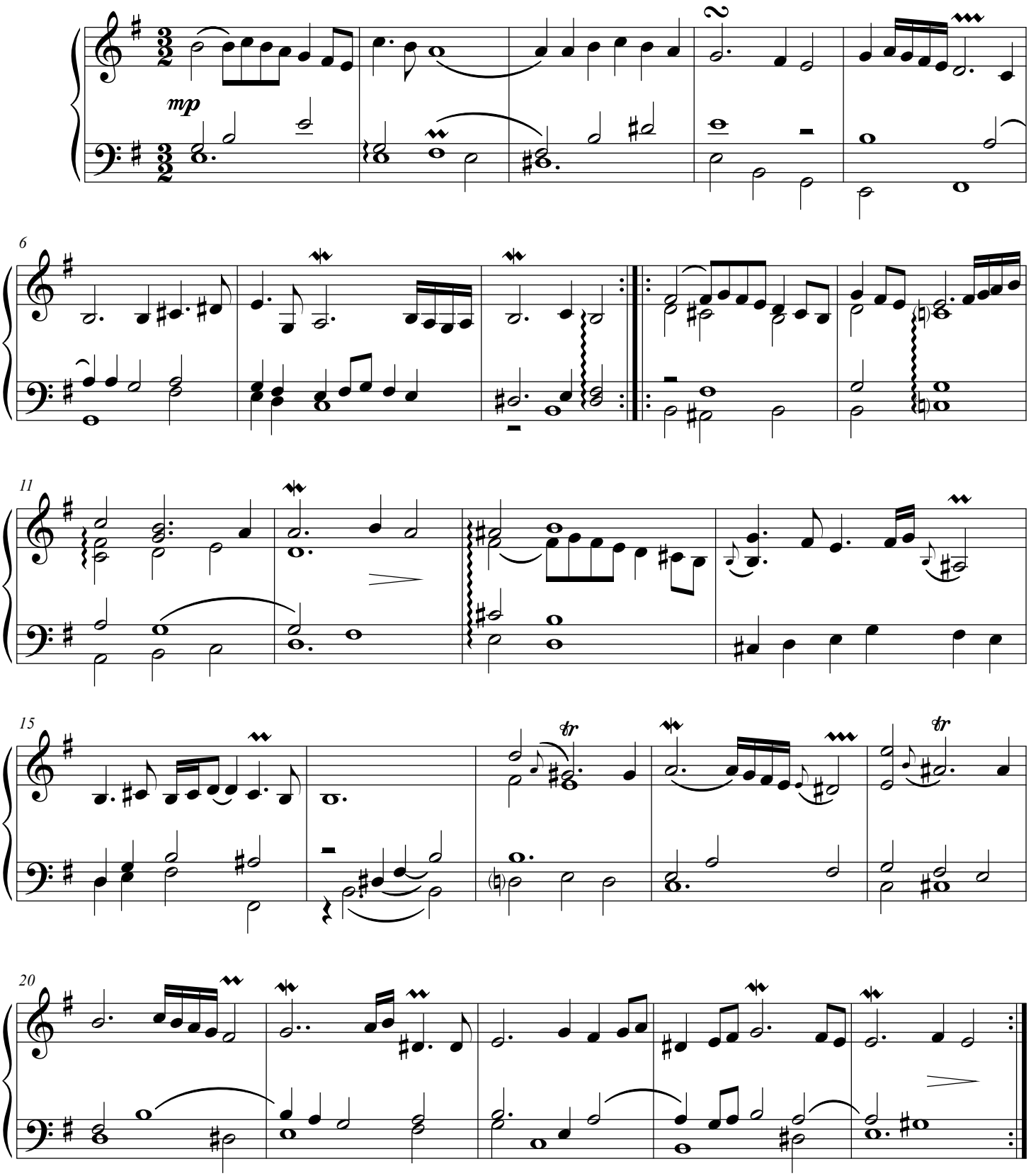


*6 Notice how Bach switches the pulse of this Courante from 2 (dotted half note) beats per measure to three (half notes) beats per measure. It's clearly shown by the note values he chooses.

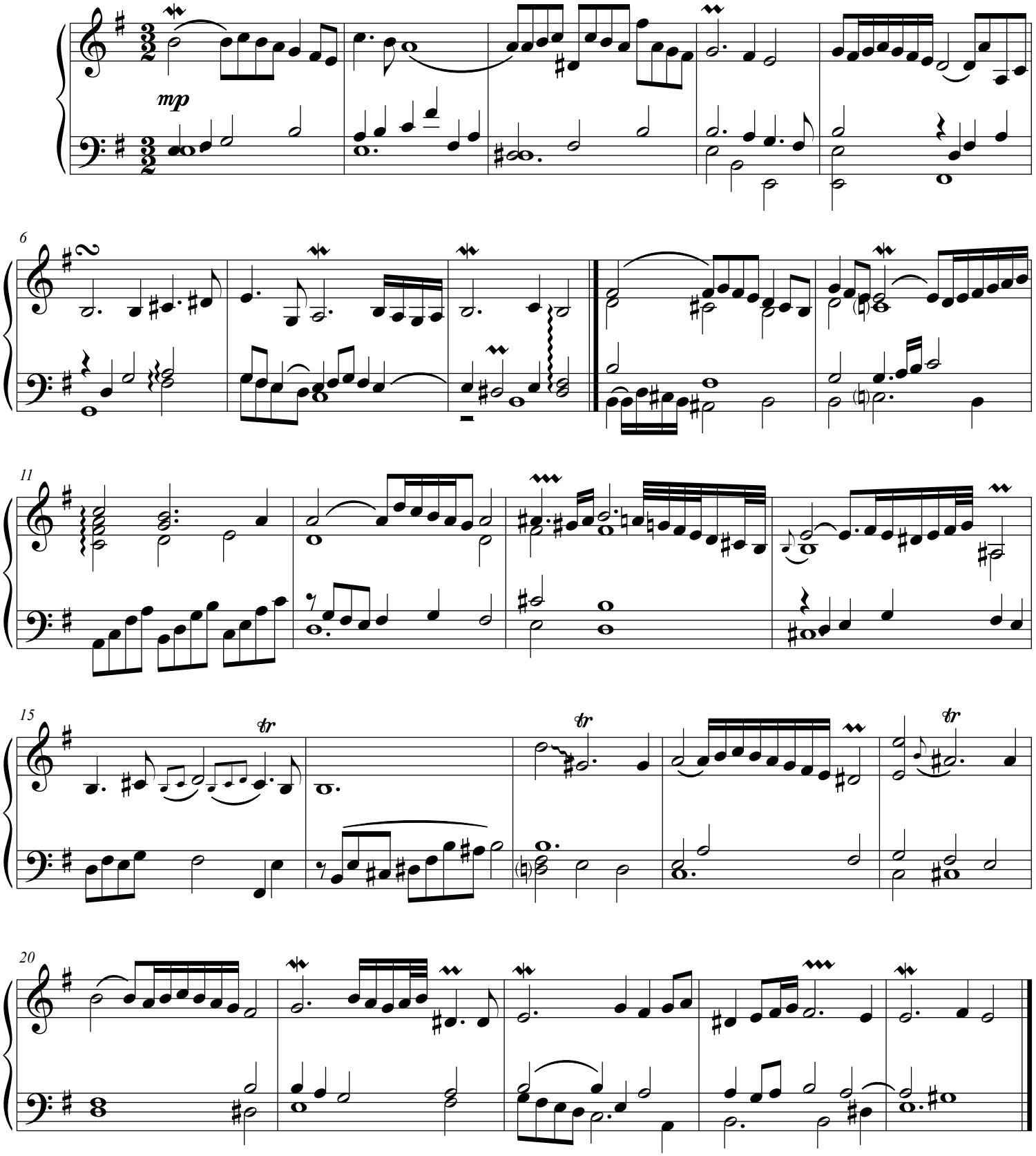


*7 Throughout this volume, I add my preferred embellishments to the ones in the existing editions. Naturally, they can vary accourding to taste.

Sarabande



Les agréments de la Sarabande

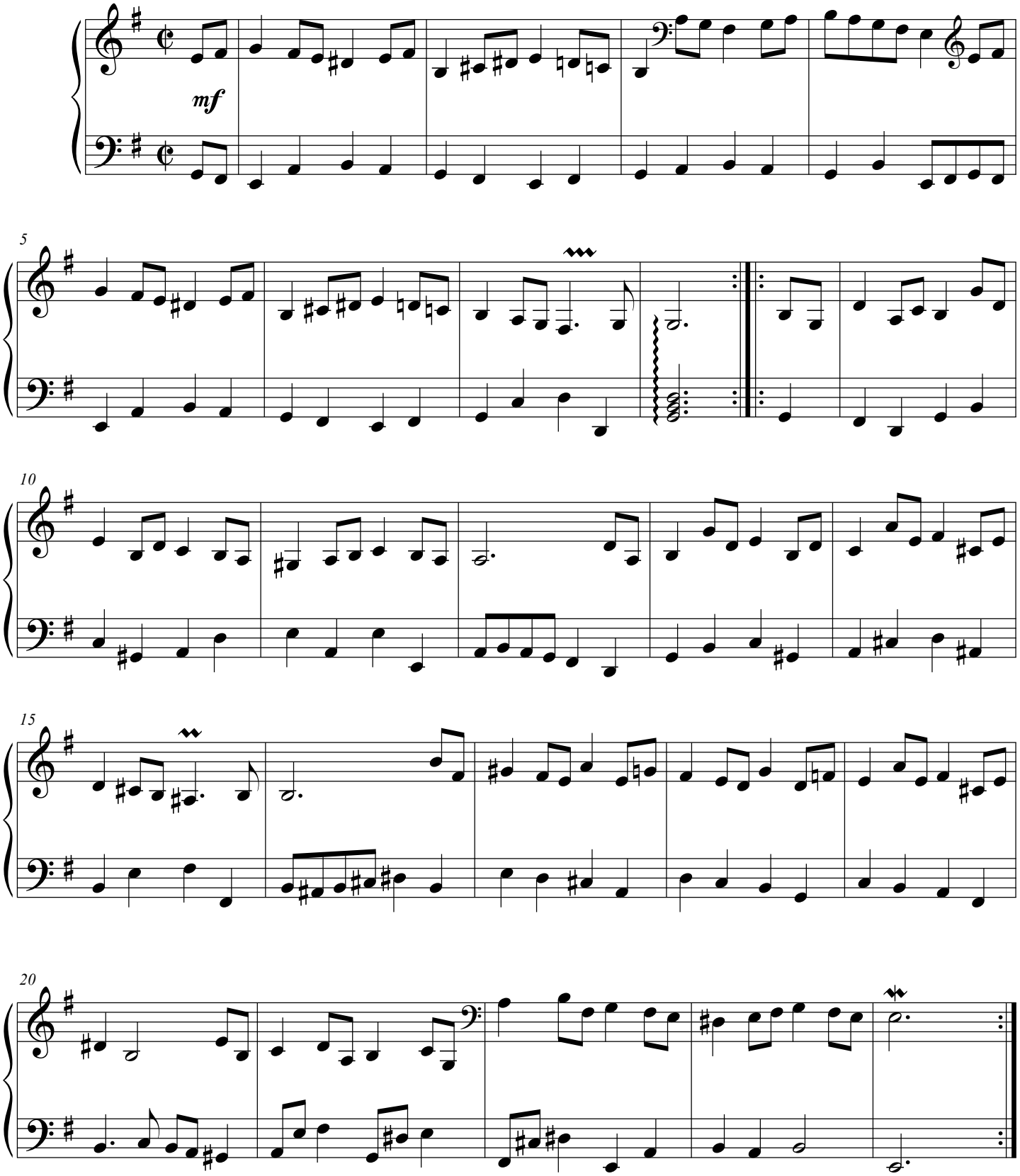


When performing baroque Suites, most musicians repeat and embellish the dances, as was customary in Bach's time. With due respect to "proper" performance practice, I approach ornamentation as a creative process, so my own choices for repeats range from conventional to extremely personal.

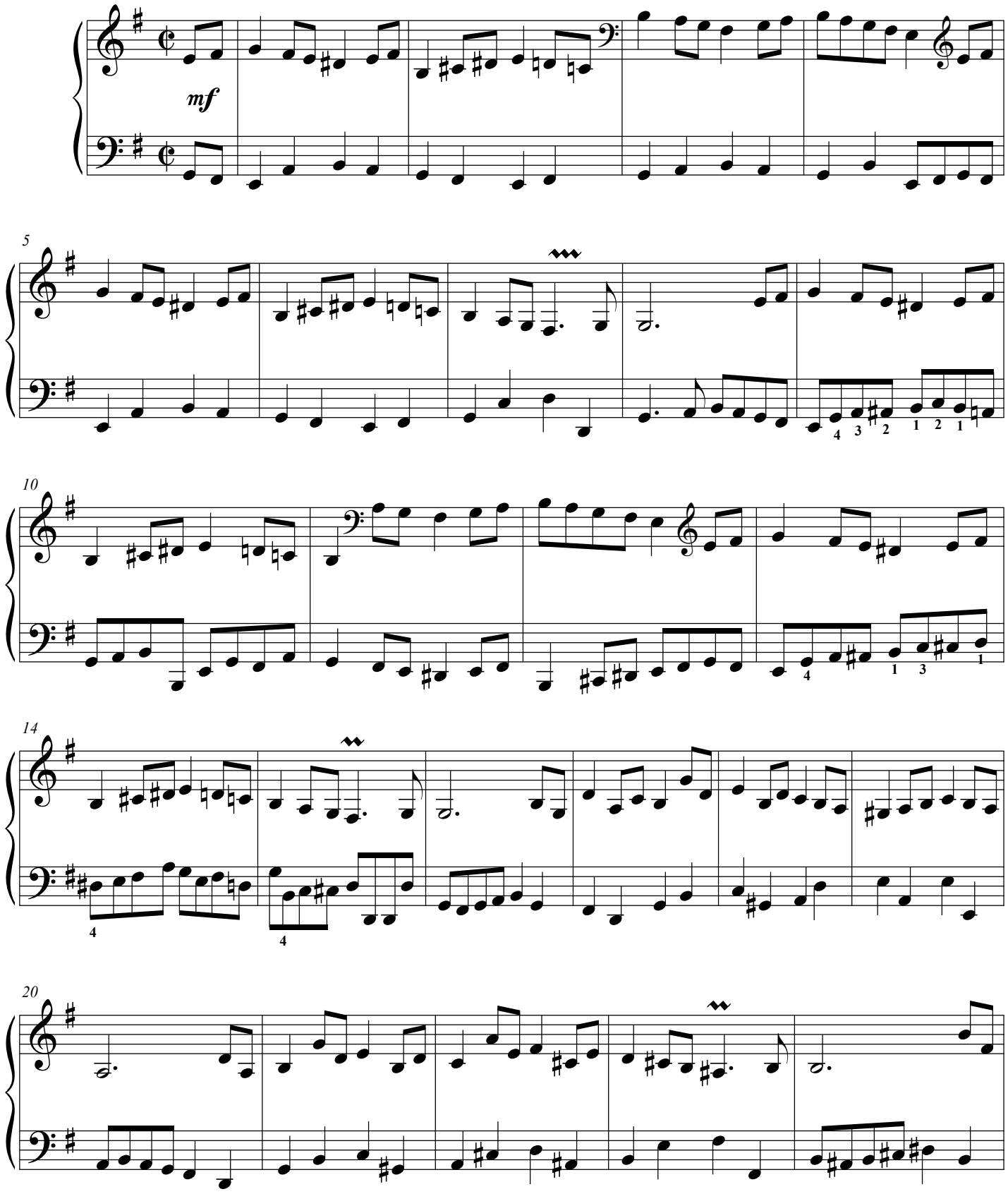
To demonstrate and inspire you to experiment, I included selected examples from my ABSOLUTE recording in this score: *Sarabande*, *Bourrée* and *Gigue* from BWV 996 and *Allegro* from BWV 998. Bach himself sometimes provided repeats of Sarabandes, called "Agréments" and I do the same here. Page 14 has the complete "jazzy" version of the *Bourrée* and the difficult *Gigue* repeat with doubled bass octaves can be found on p. 18. The exuberant BWV 998 *Allegro* has another unorthodox repeat, with richer texture and implied polyphony in the left hand.

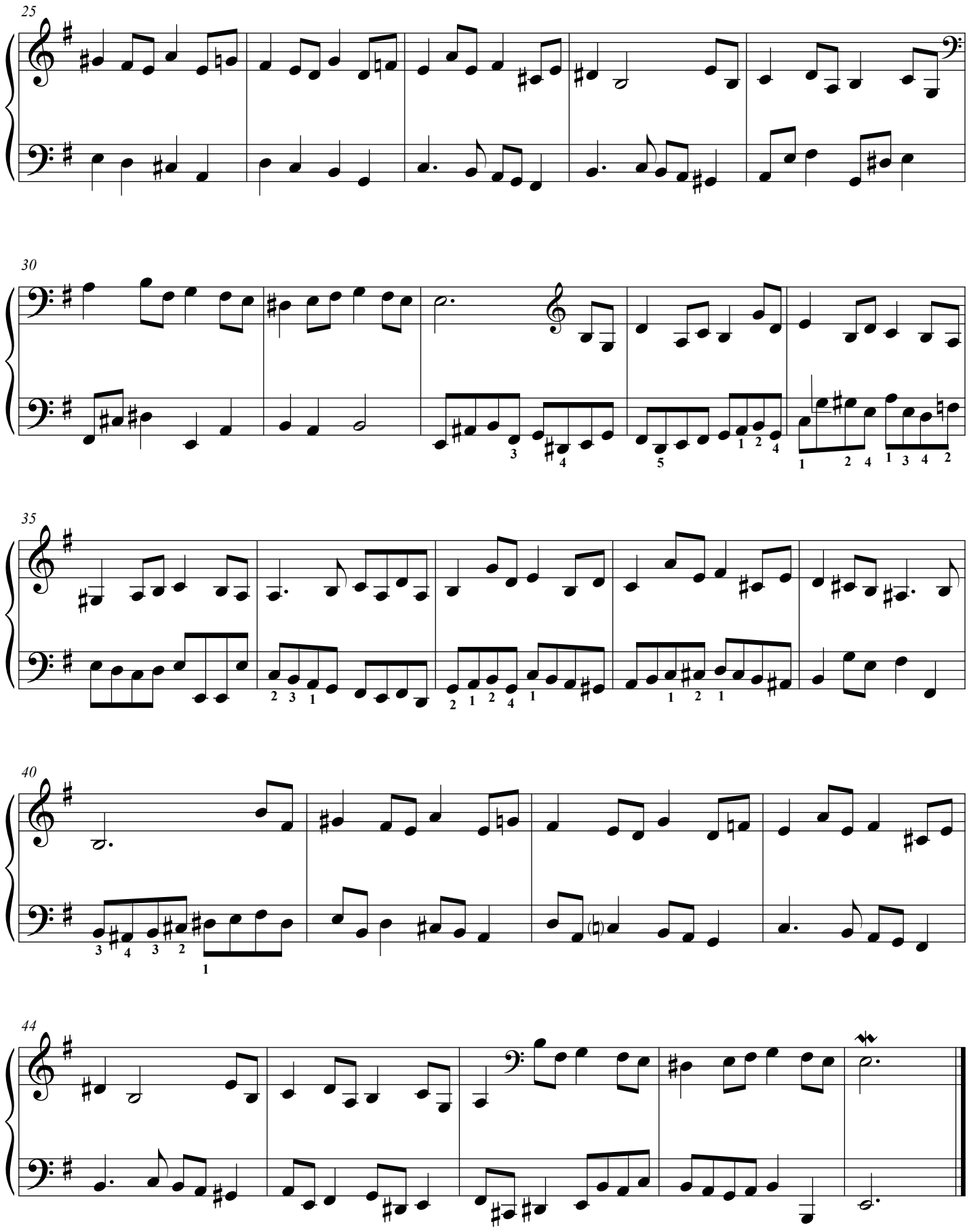
Israhel van Meckenem,
Germany, c. 1445 – 1503
The Lute Player and the Harpist
Engraving

Bourrée

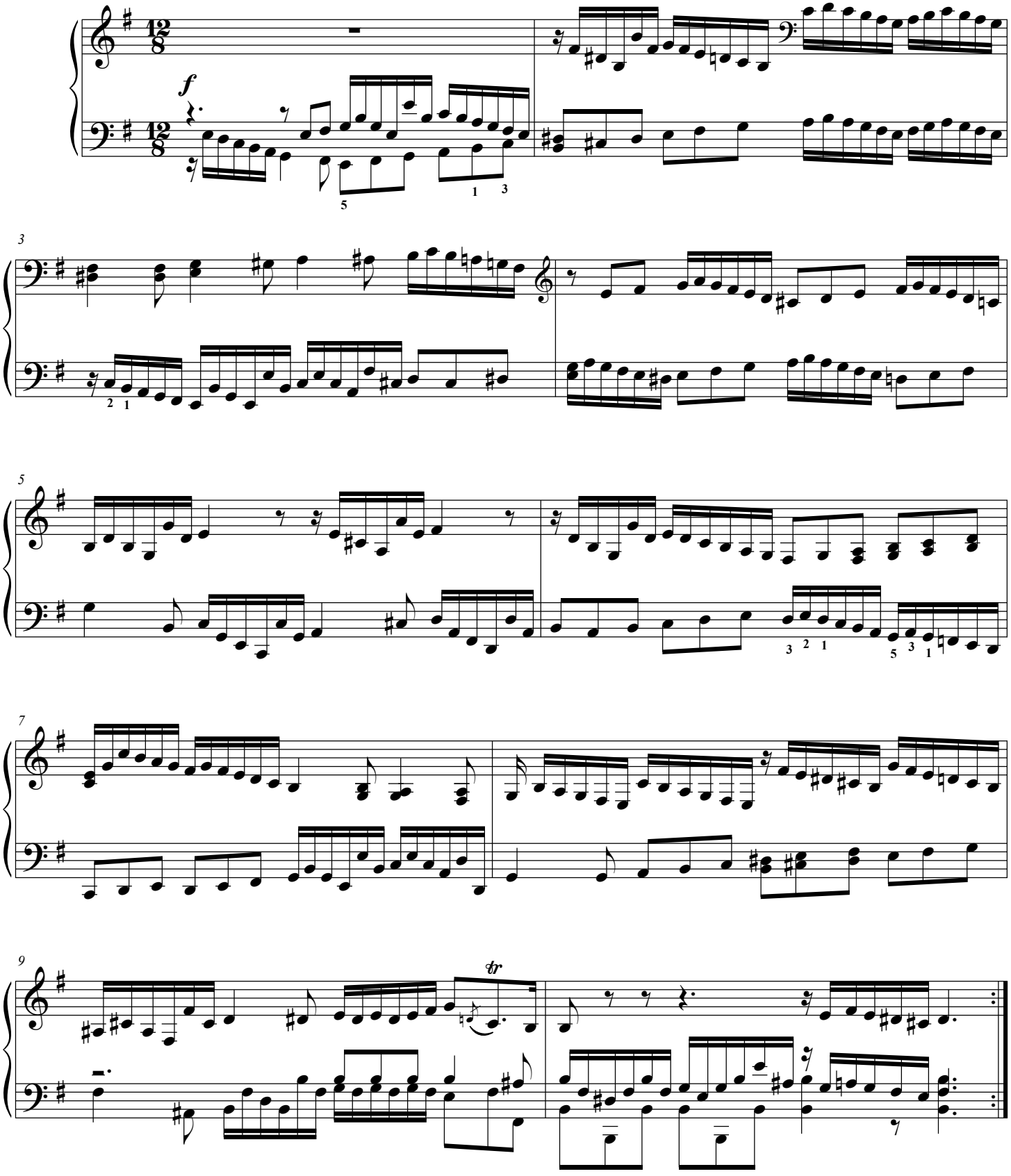


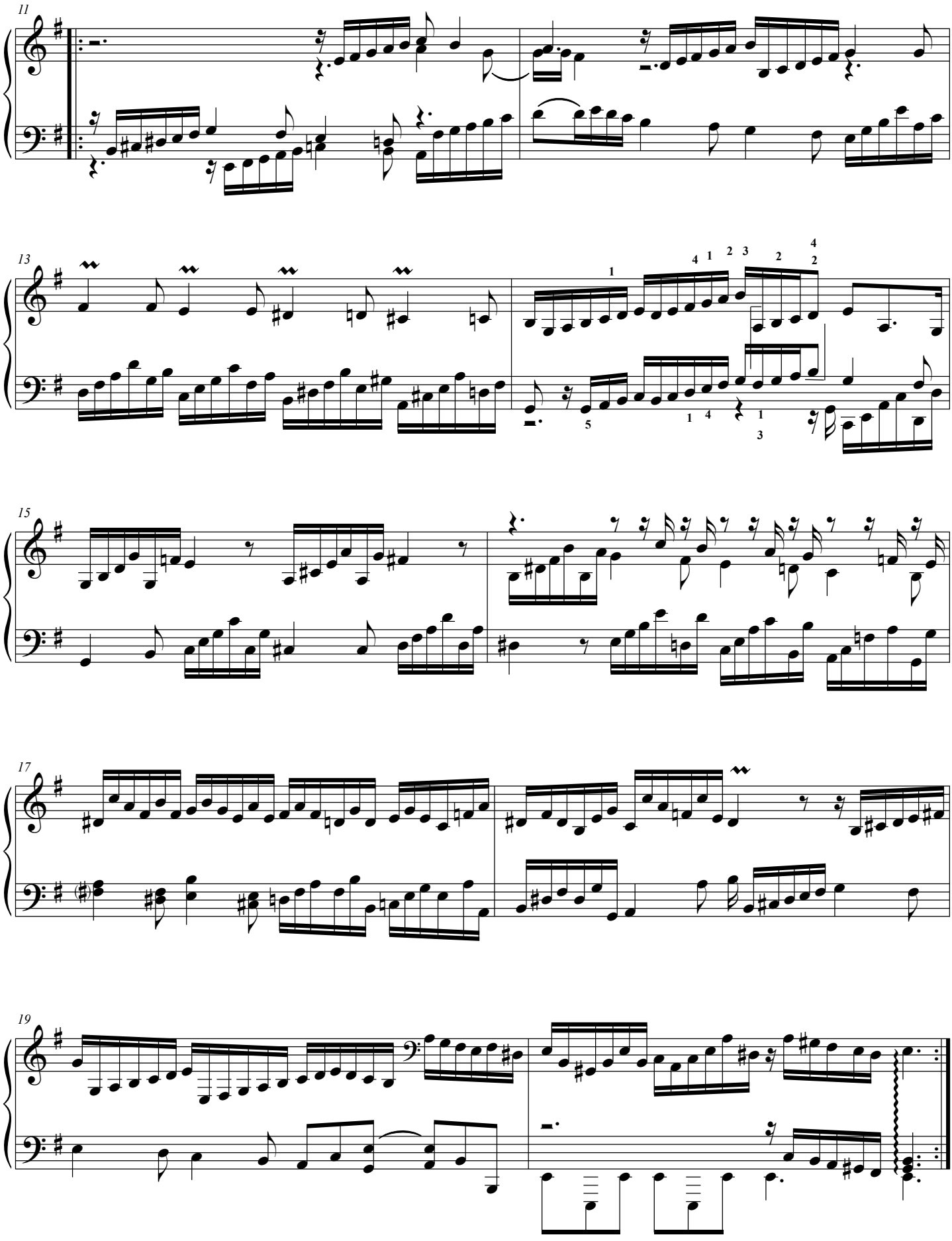
Bourrée with repeat



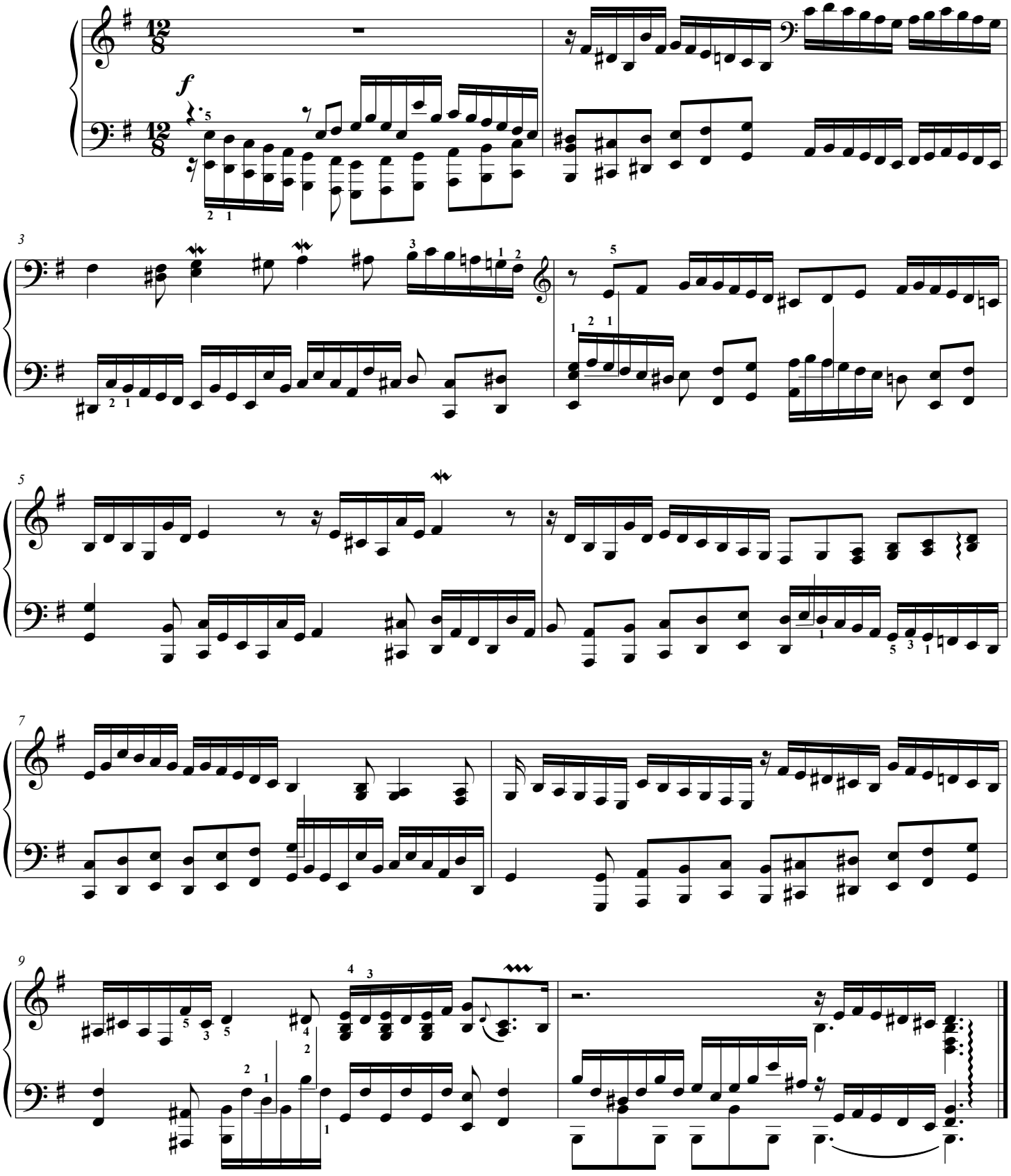

25
30
35
40
44

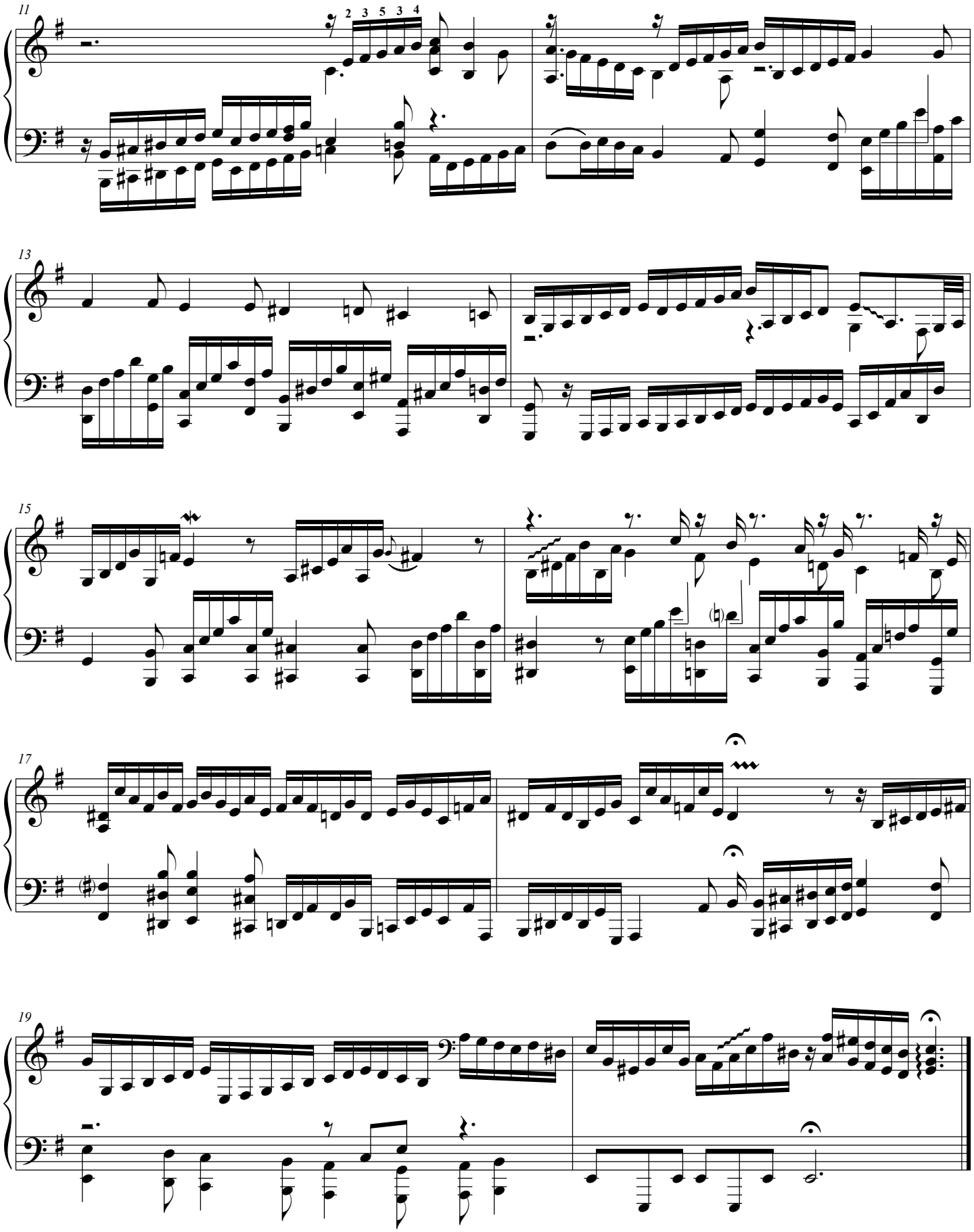
Gigue




11
13
15
17
19

Gigue repeat

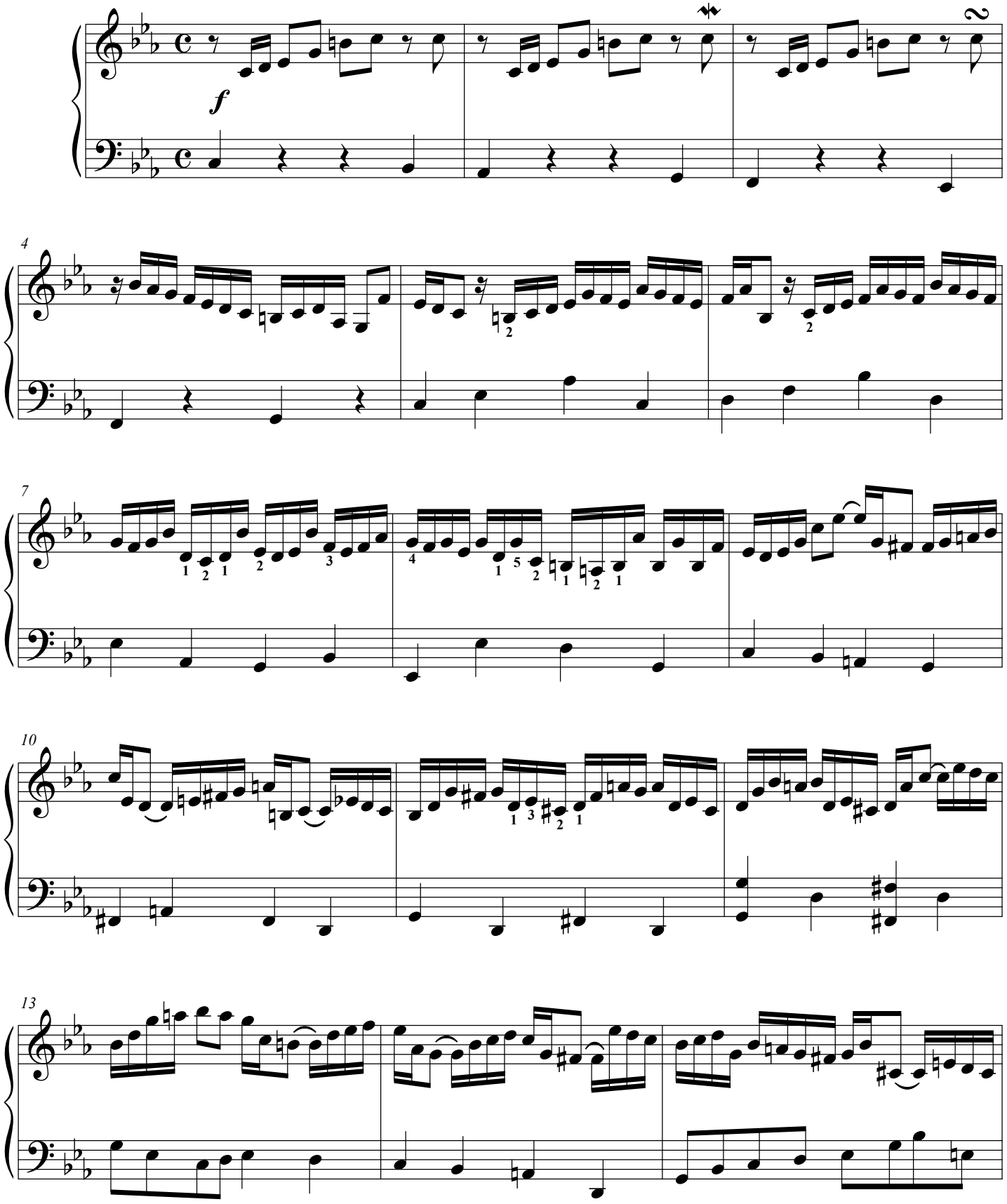


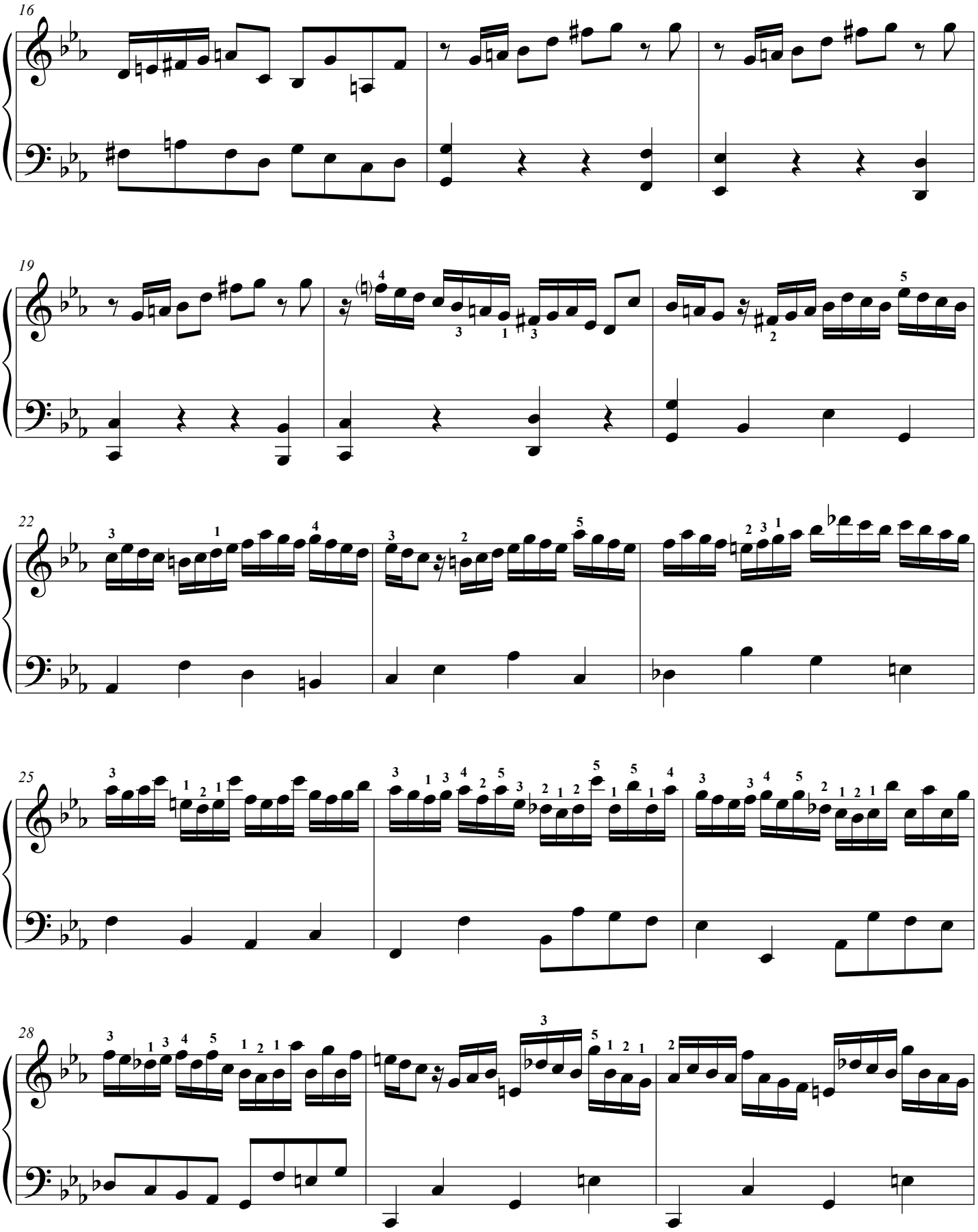

11
2 3 5 3 4
13
15
17
19

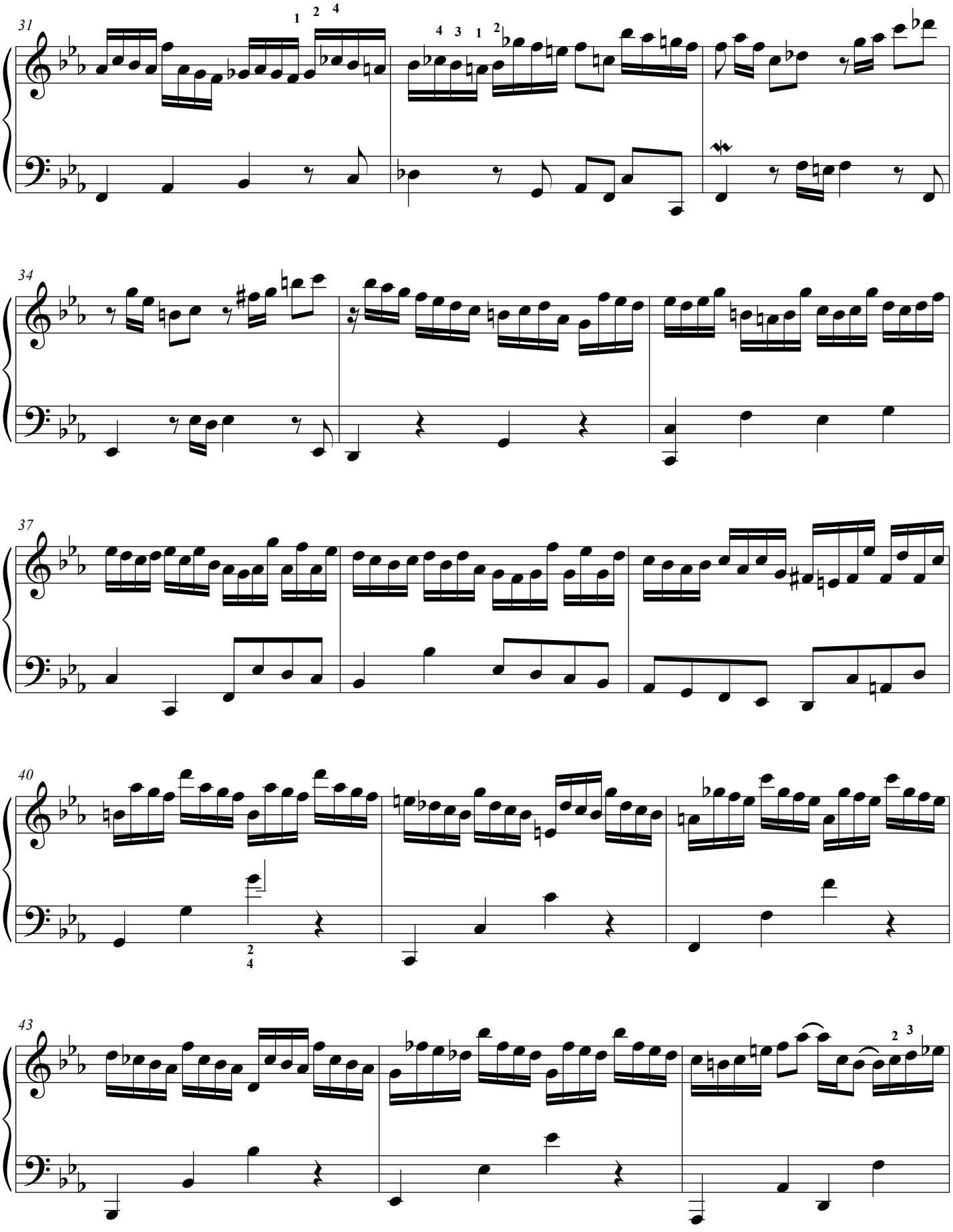
Suite in C Minor, BWV 997

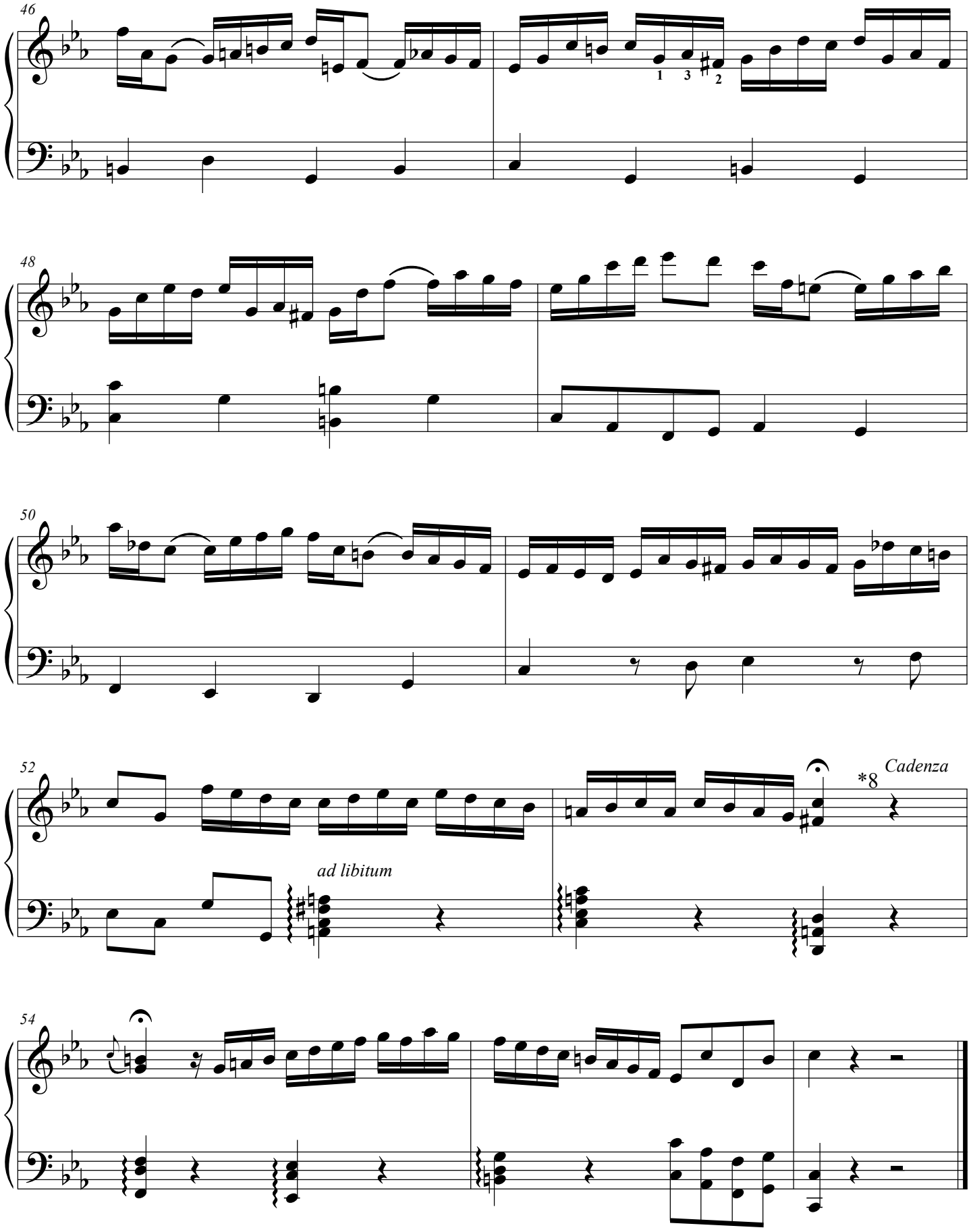
Prelude

J.S. Bach
Arr. E. Bindman



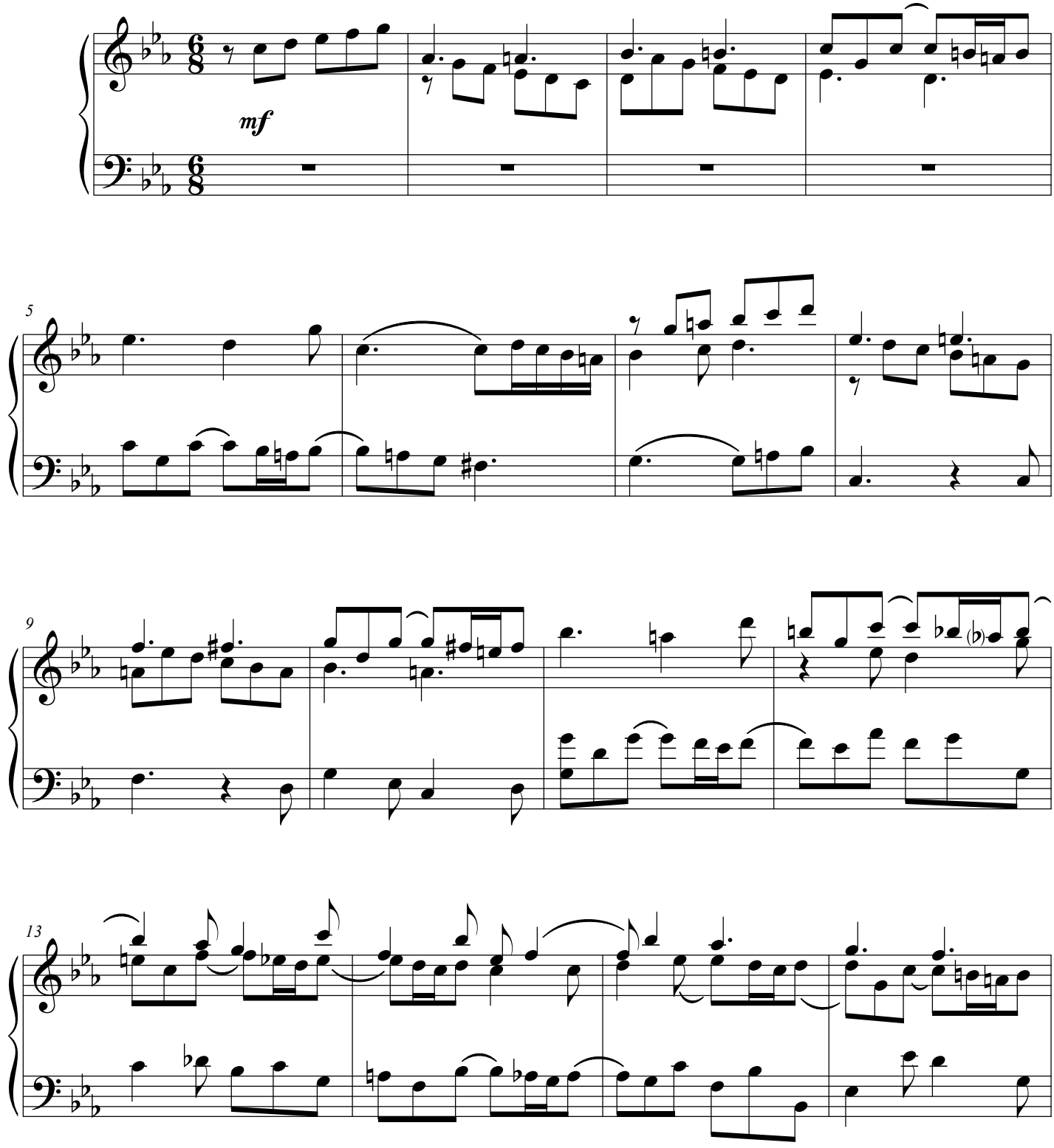

16
19
22
25
28

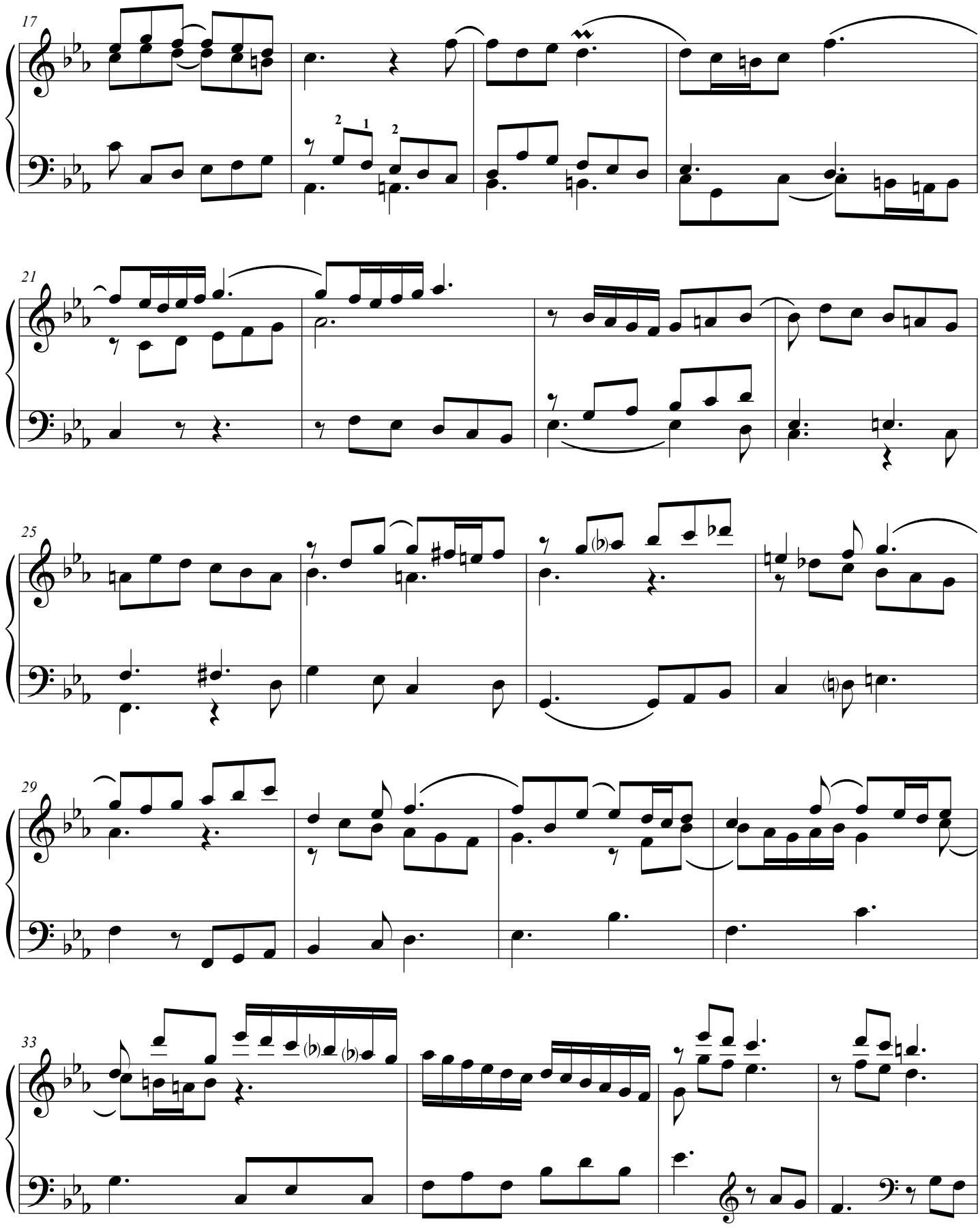

31
34
37
40
43

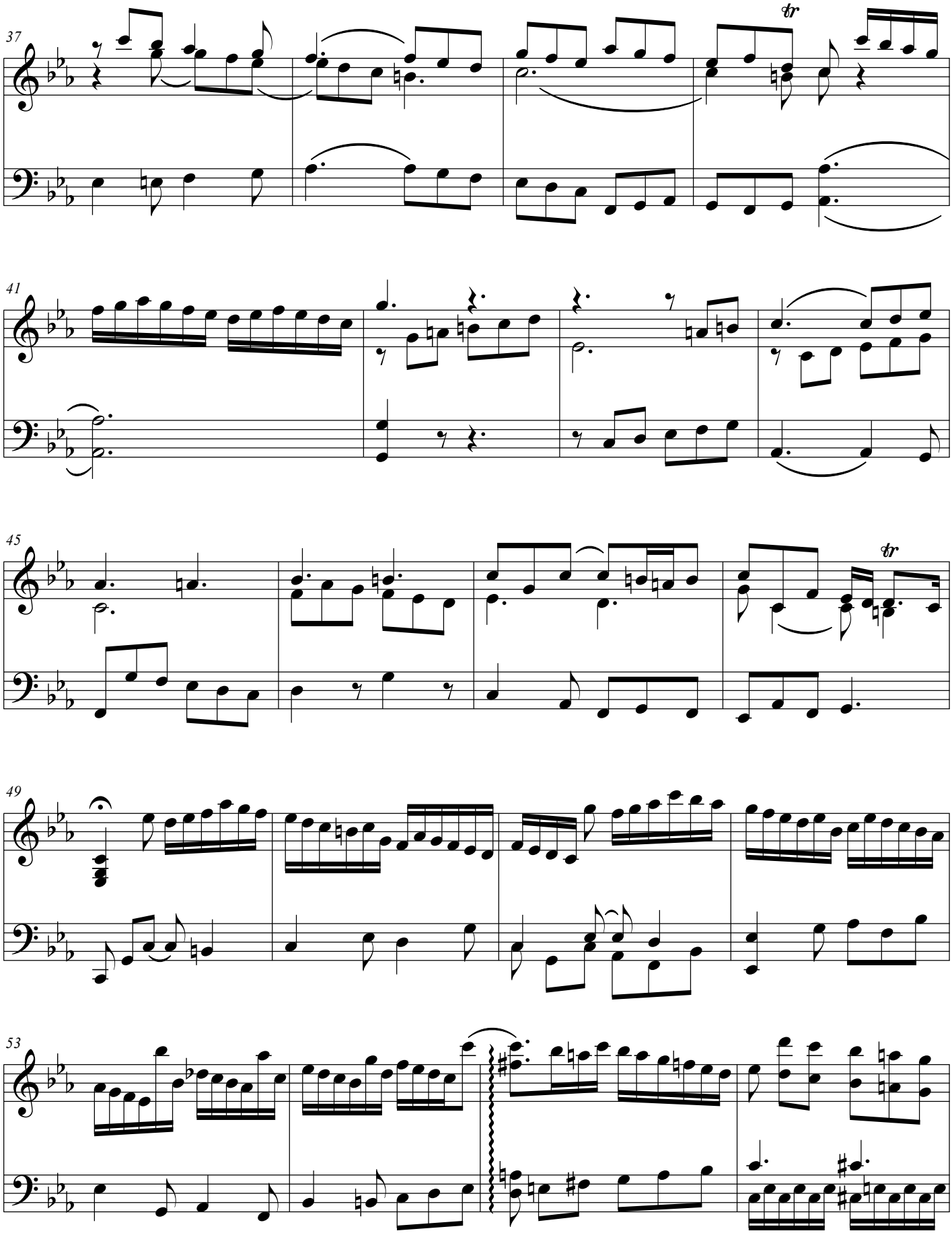


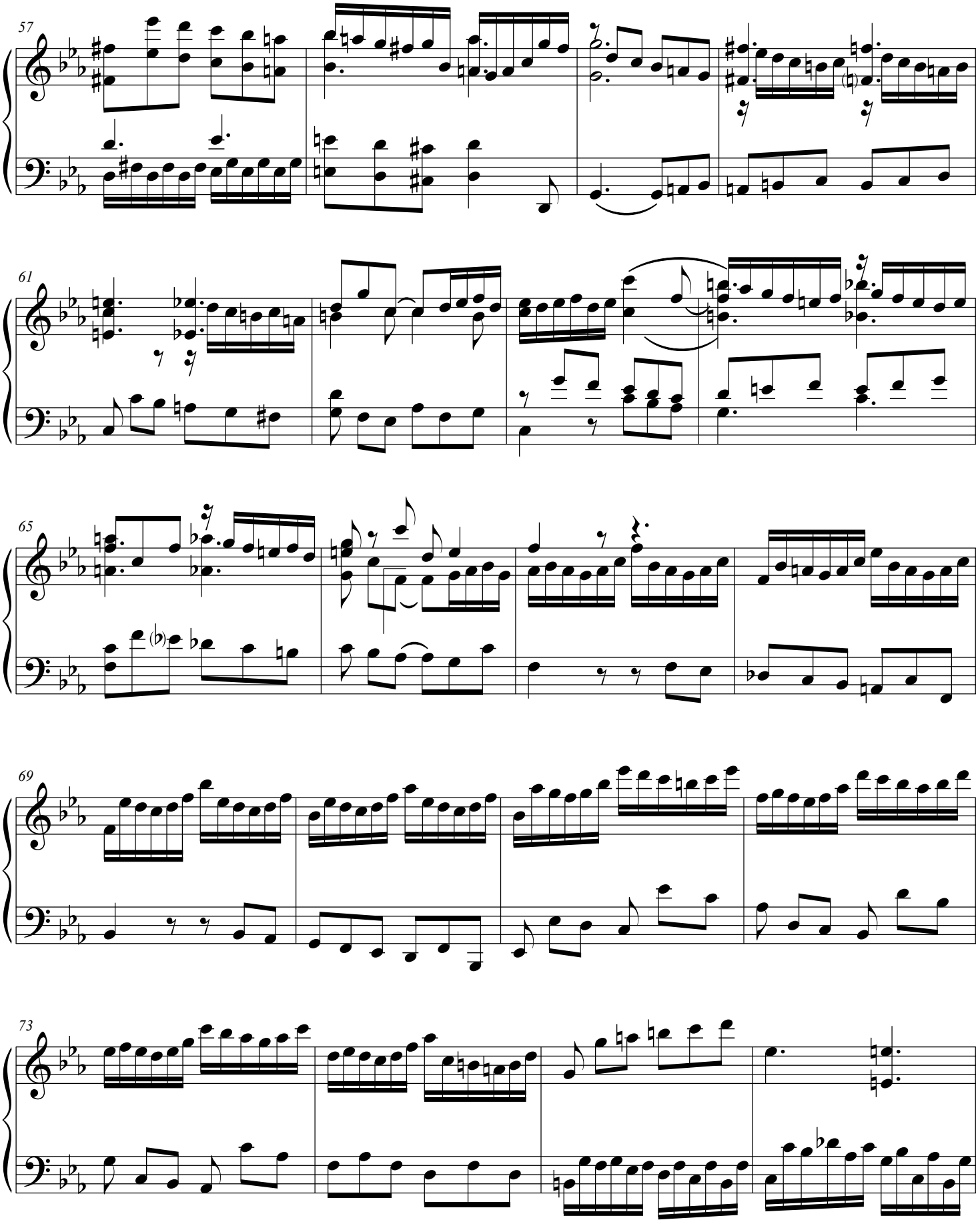
*8 Ideally, a cadenza should be improvised between these chords.

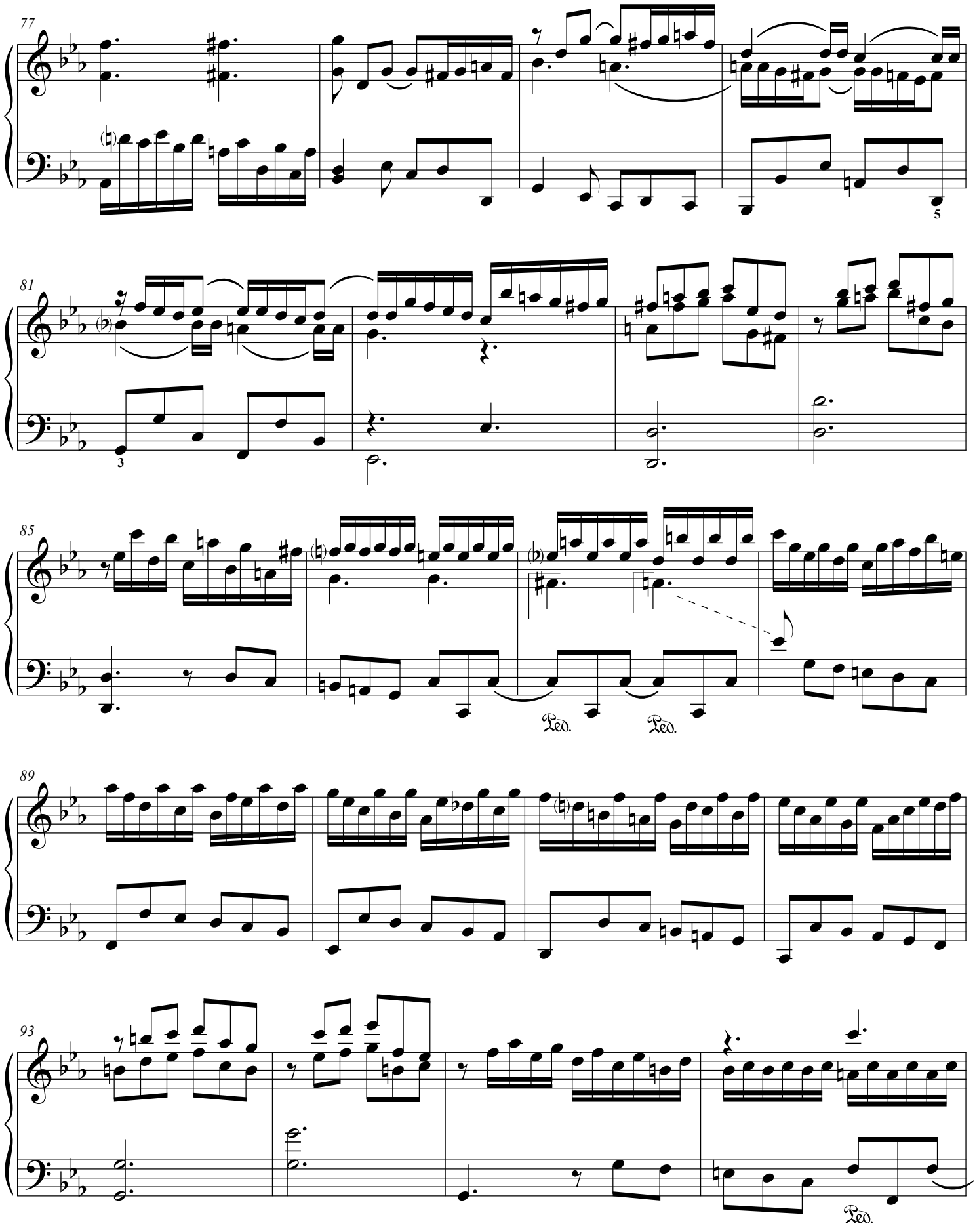
Fugue

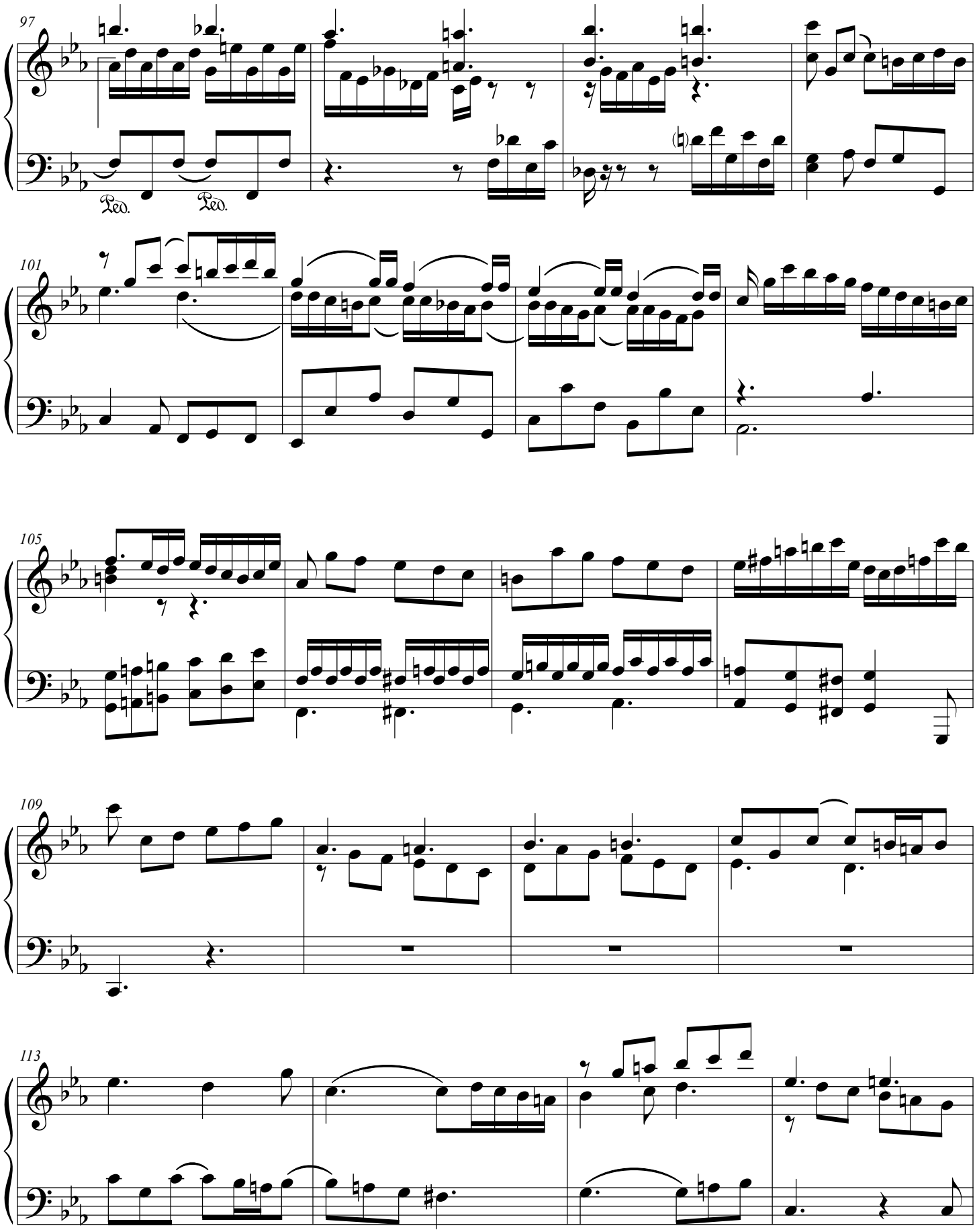


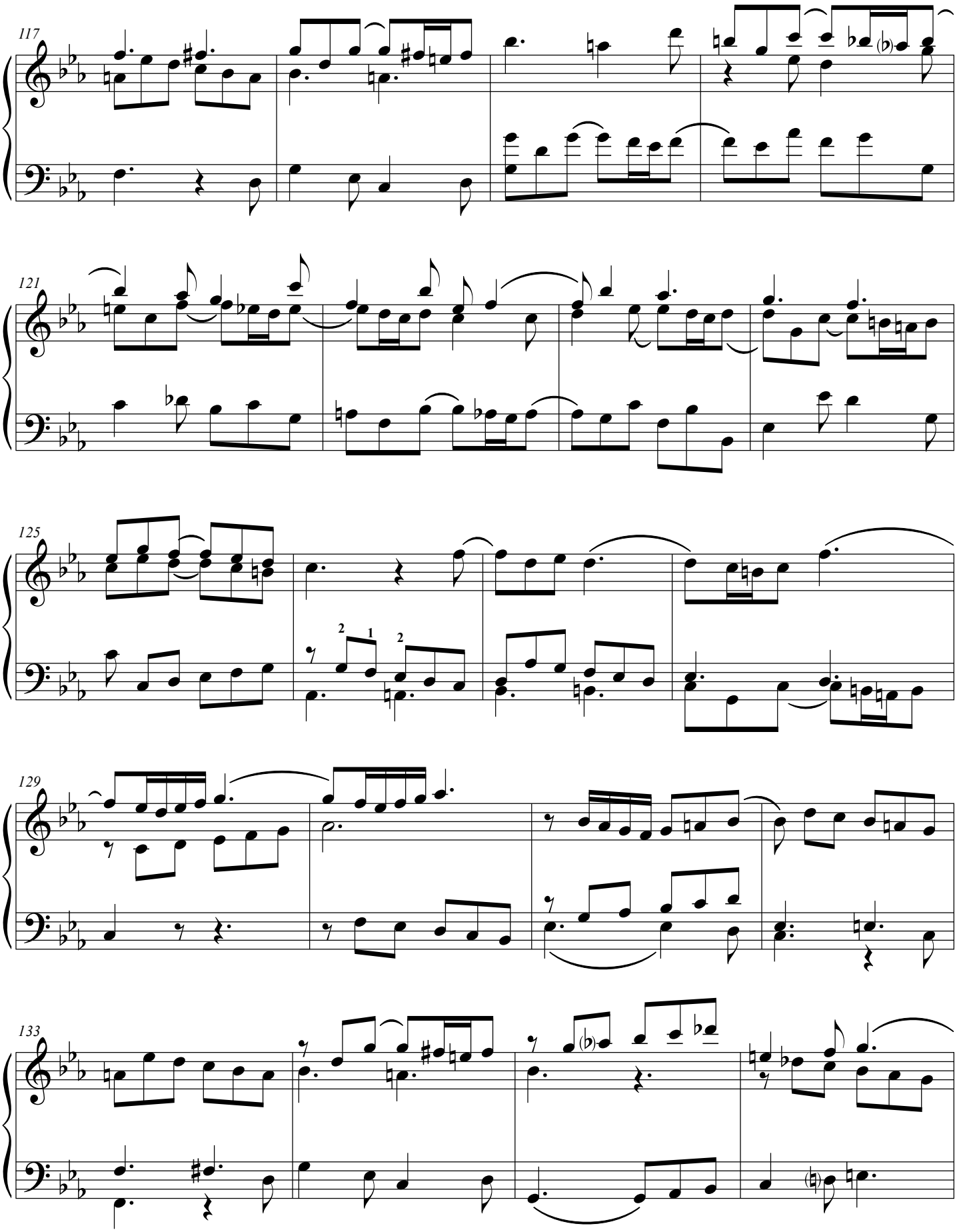

17
21
25
29
33
Sost. Ped.

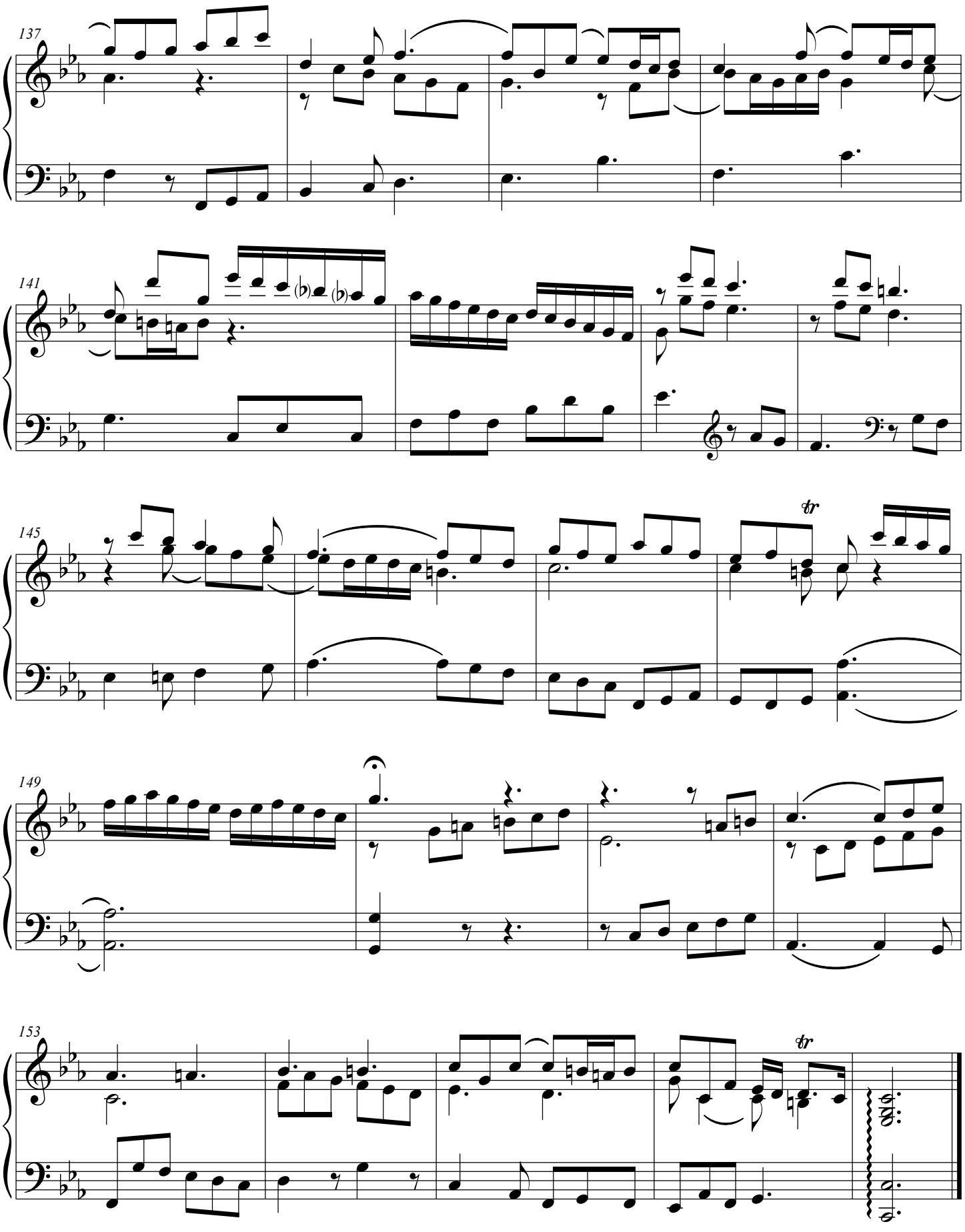

37
tr
41
45
tr
49
53


57
61
65
69
73

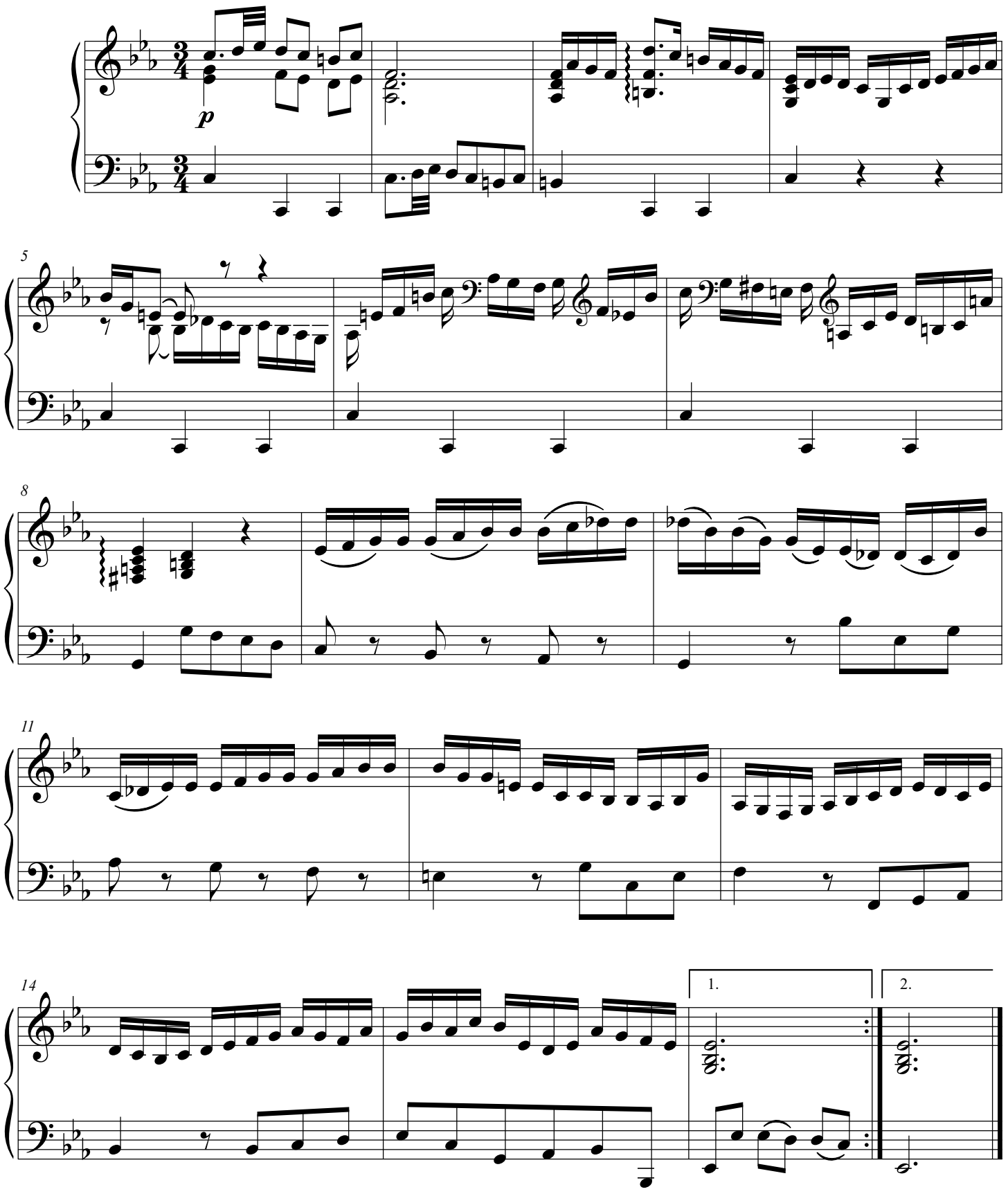

77
5
81
3
85
Ped.
Ped.
89
93
Ped.

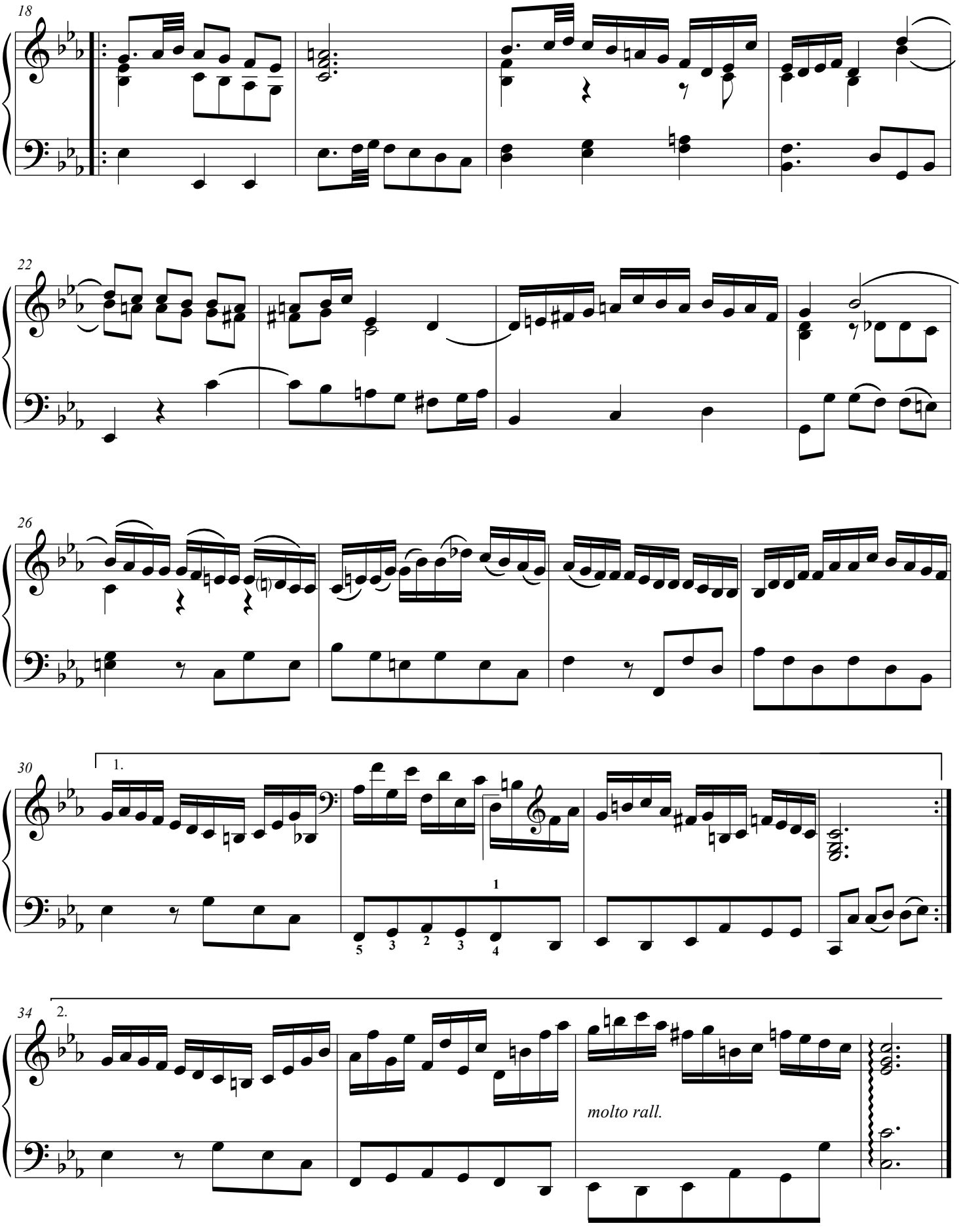

97
Ped.
Ped.
101
105
109
113


117
121
125
129
133

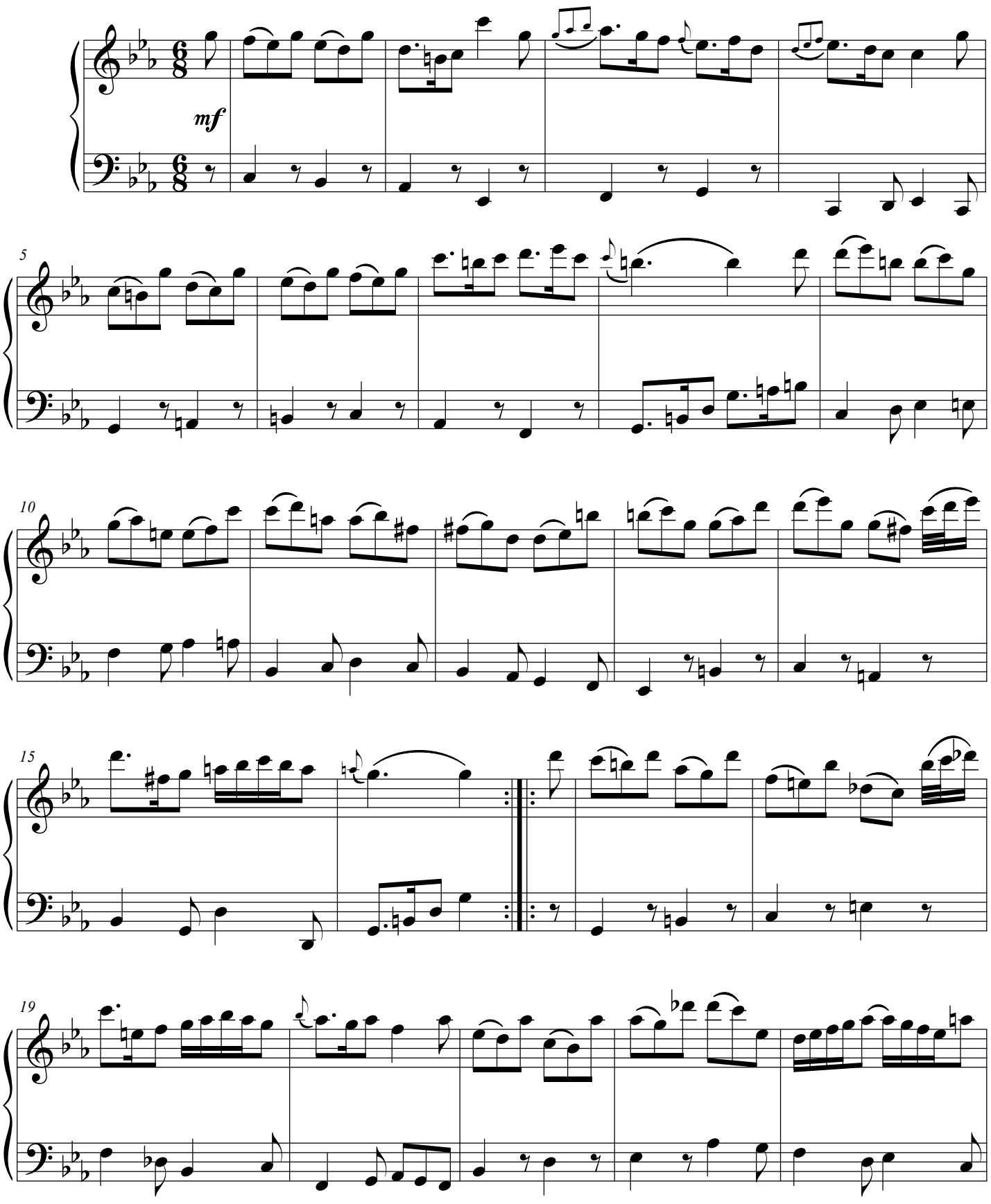

137
141
145
tr
149
153
tr

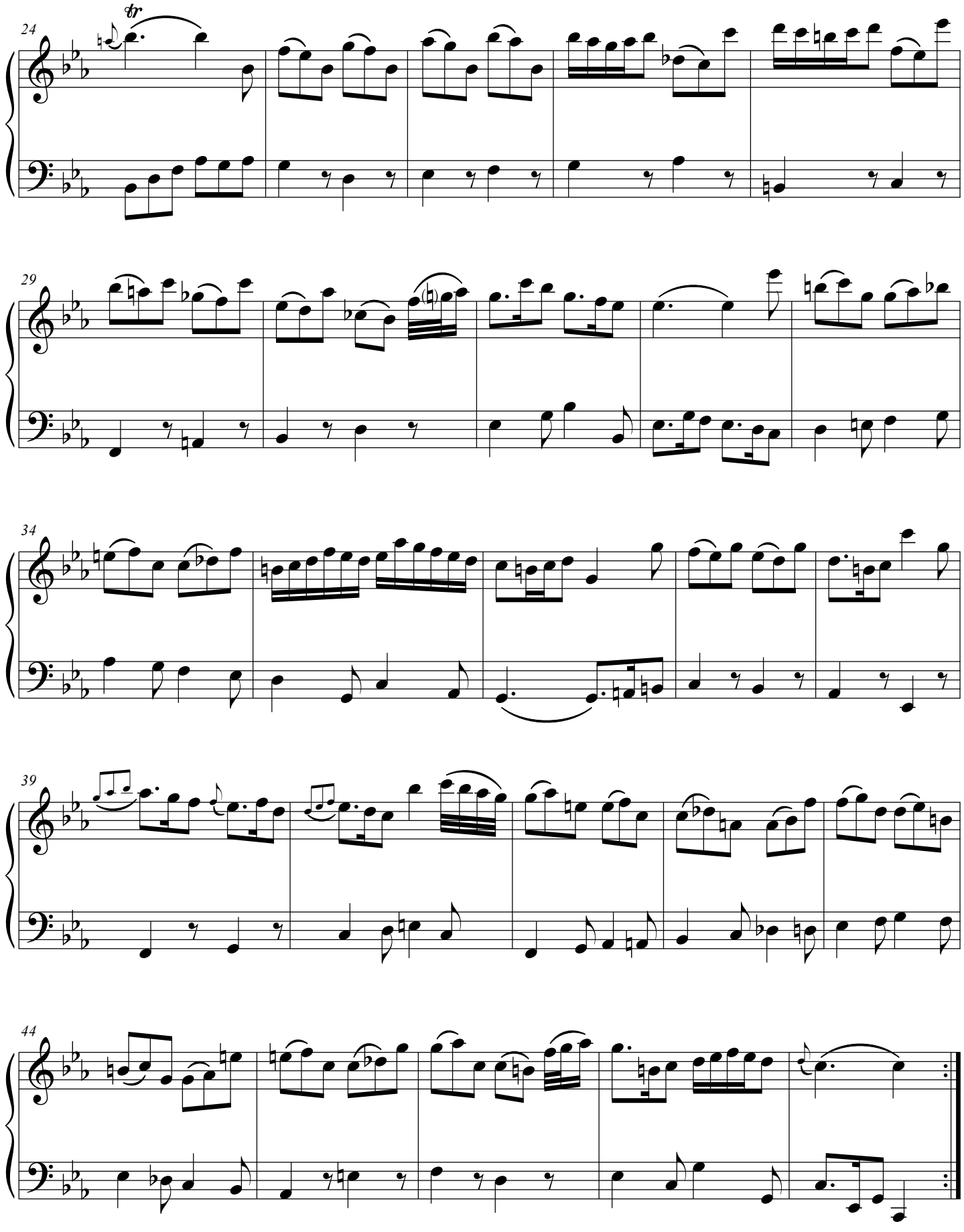
Sarabande



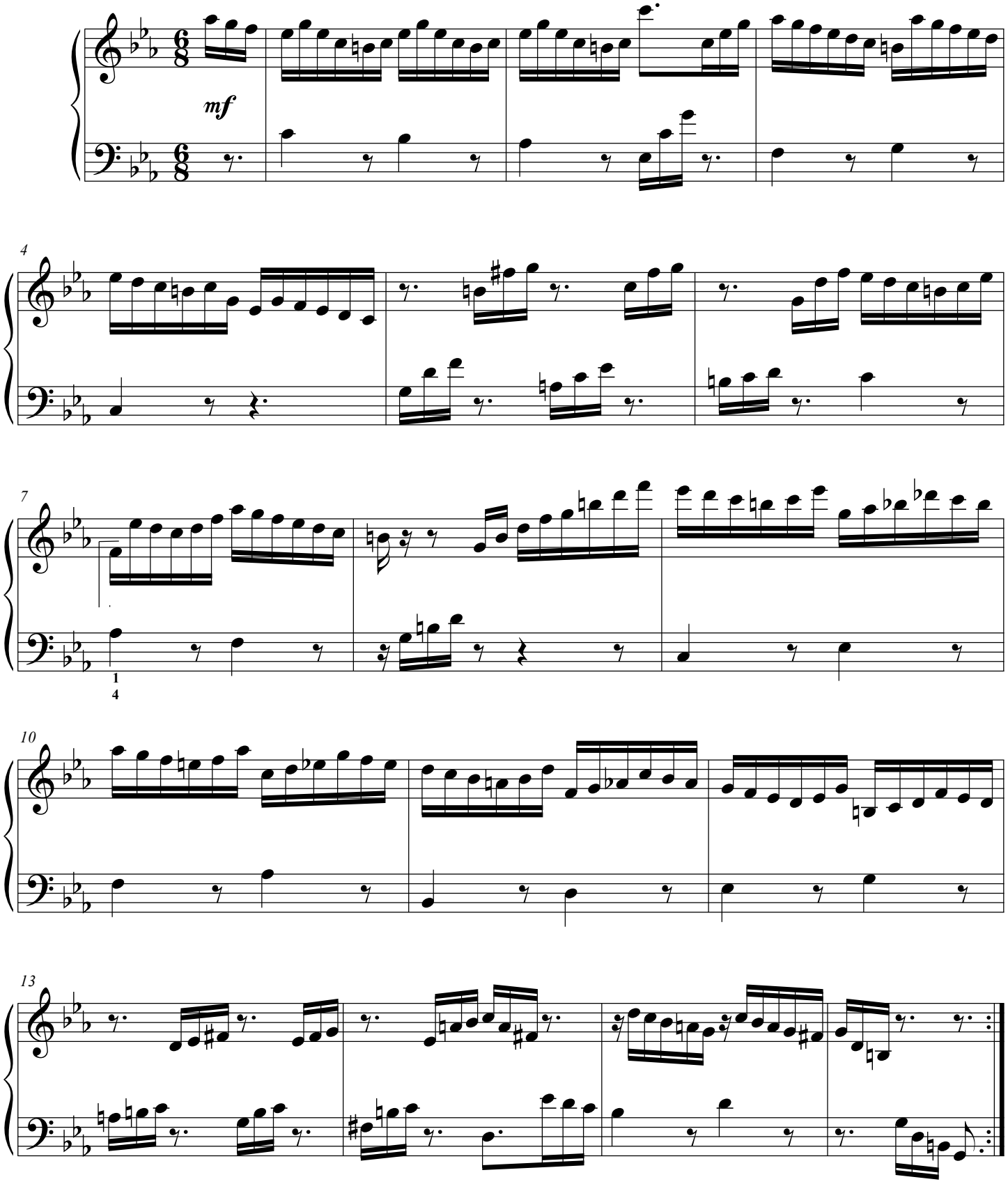

18
22
26
30
1.
1
5 3 2 3 4
34
2.
molto rall.

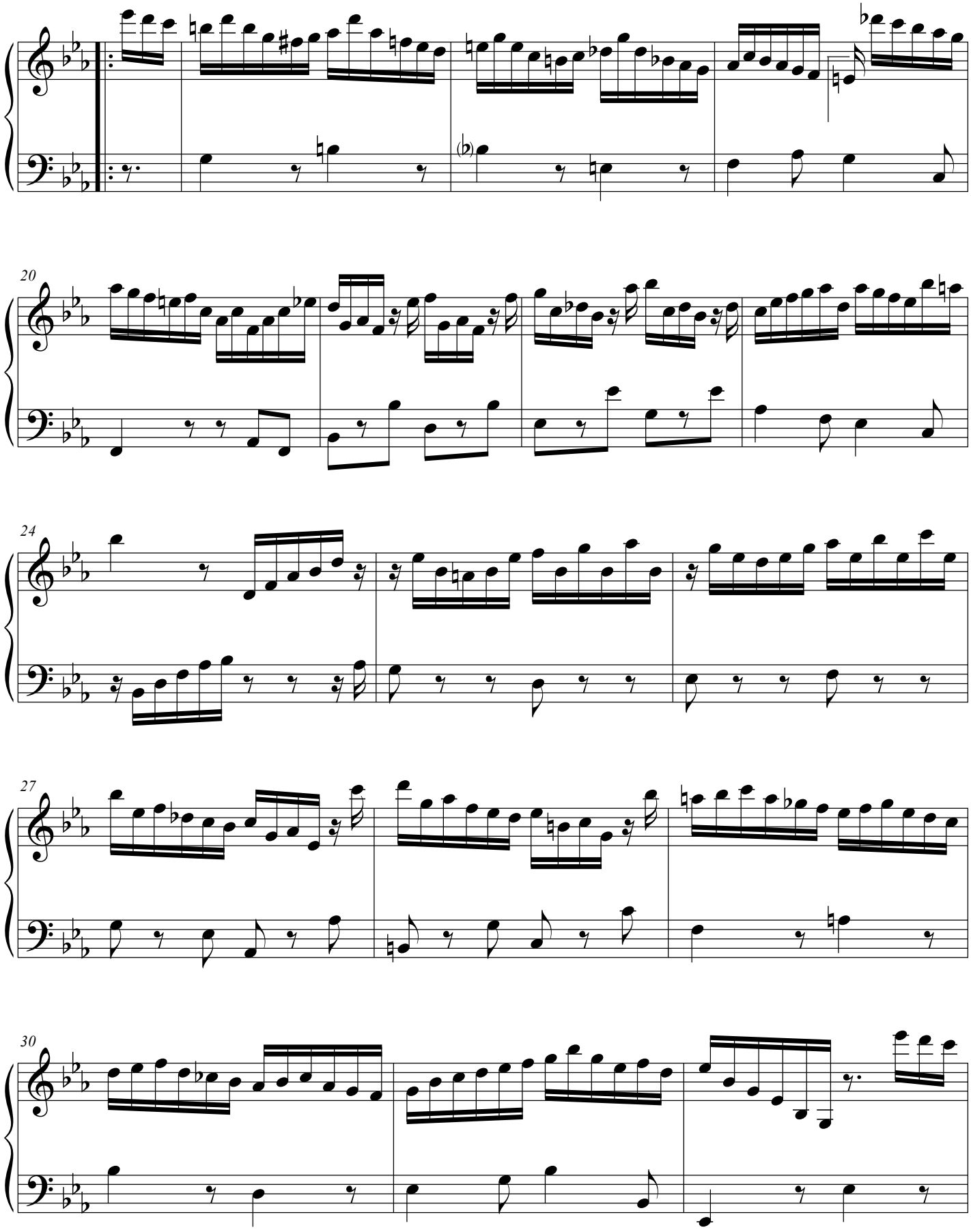
Gigue

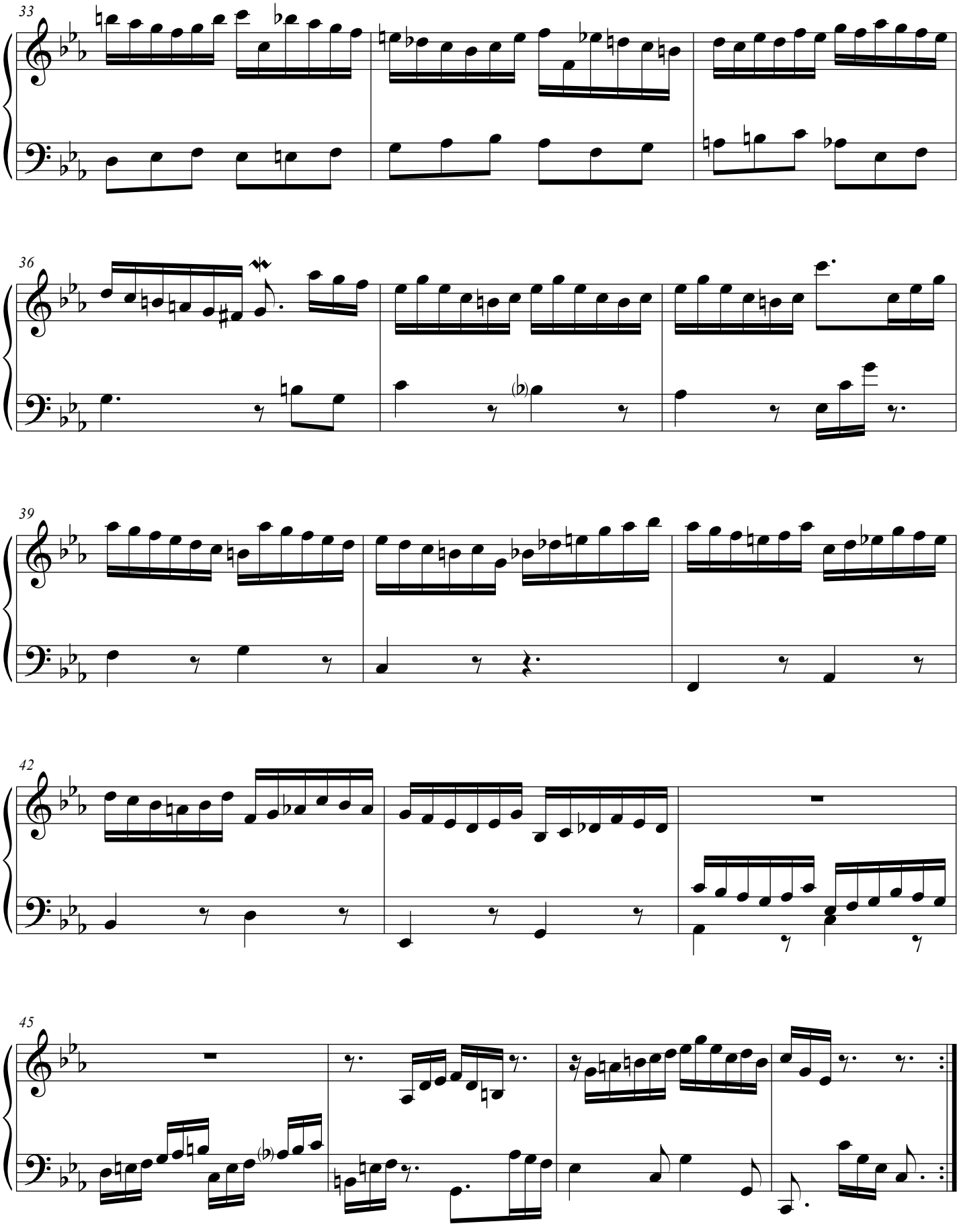



24
tr
29
34
39
44

Double




20
24
27
30

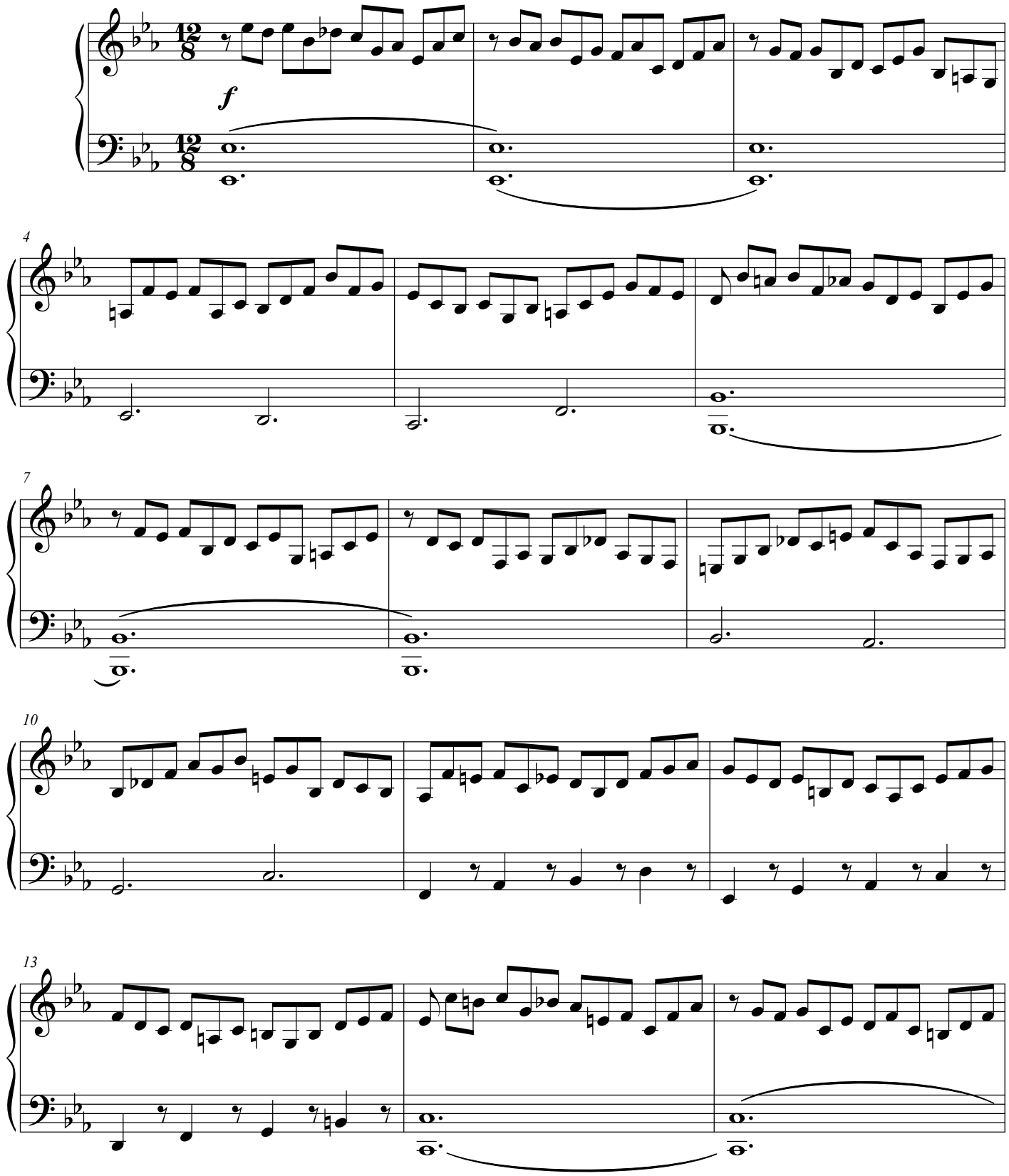

33
36
39
42
45

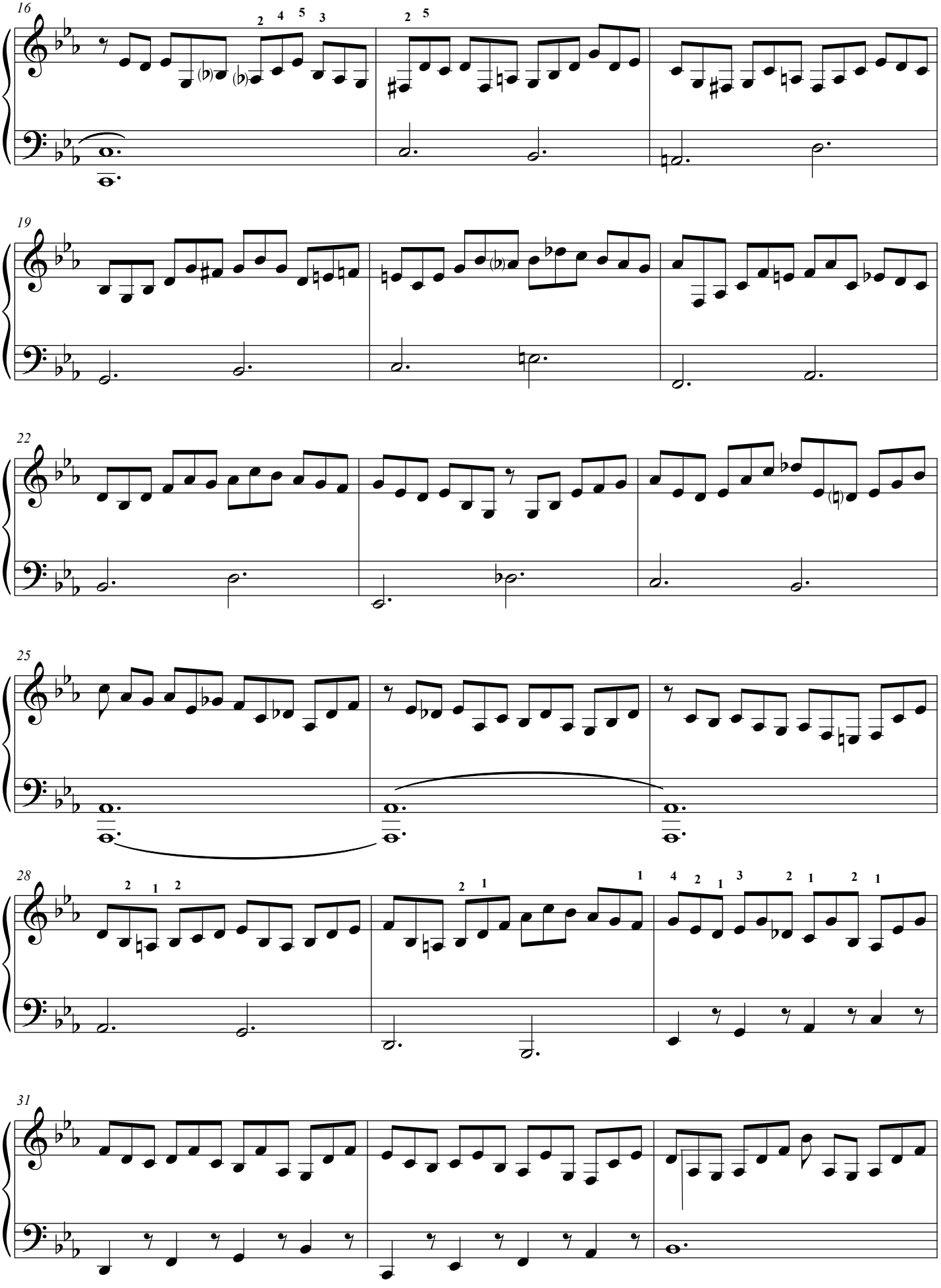
Prelude, Fugue and Allegro, BWV 998

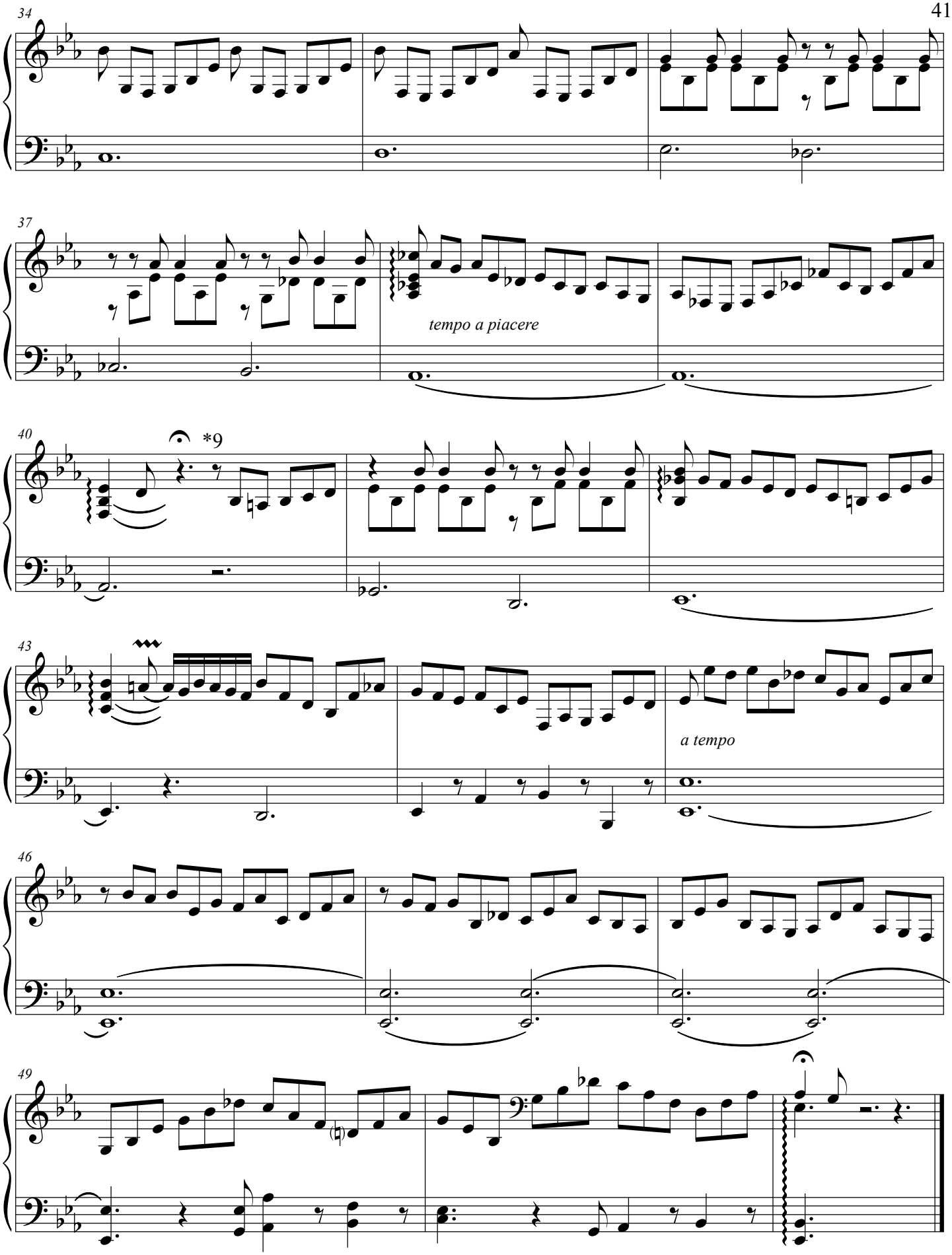
Prelude

J.S. Bach
Arr. E. Bindman

Con spirito



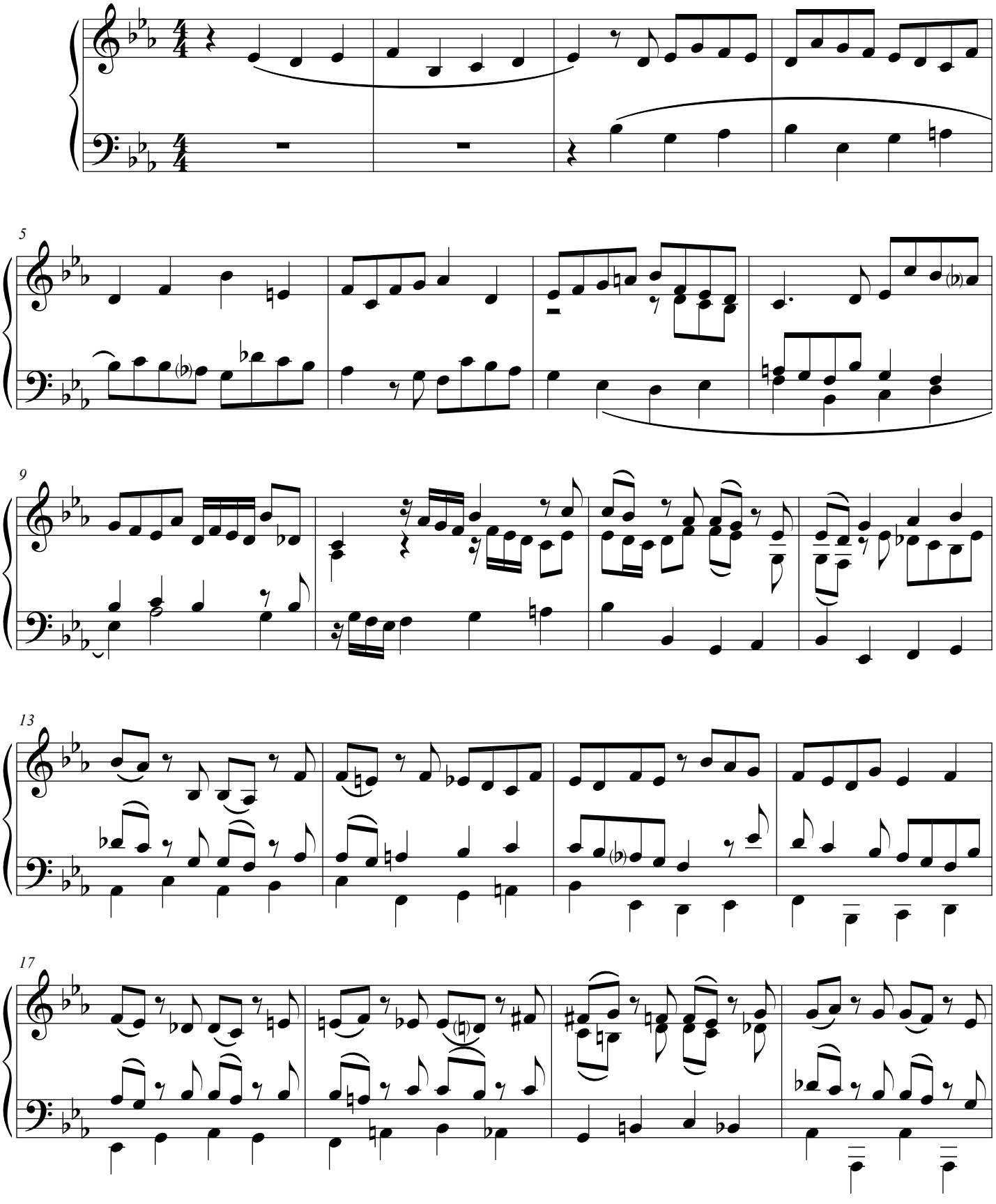

16
19
22
25
28
31

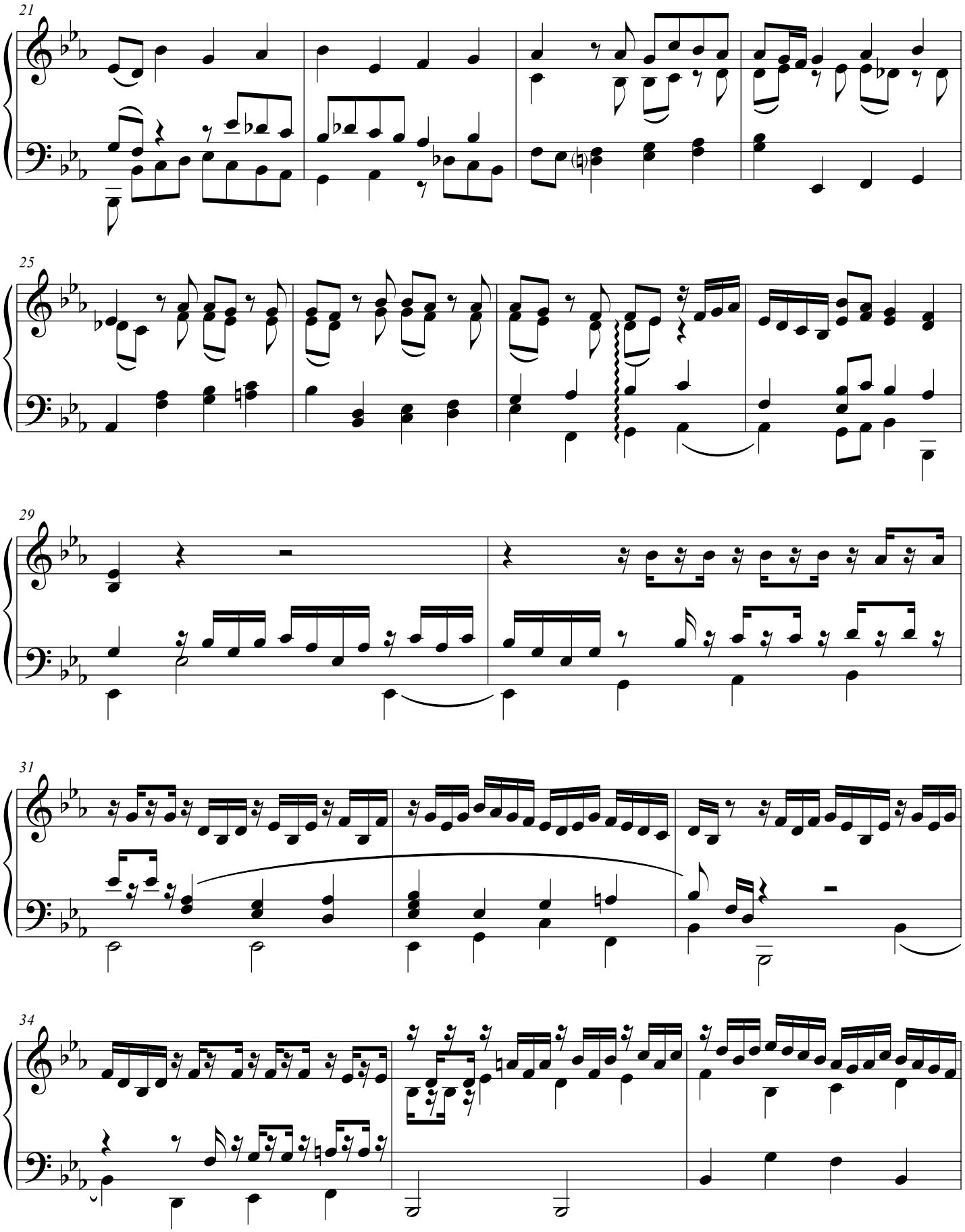


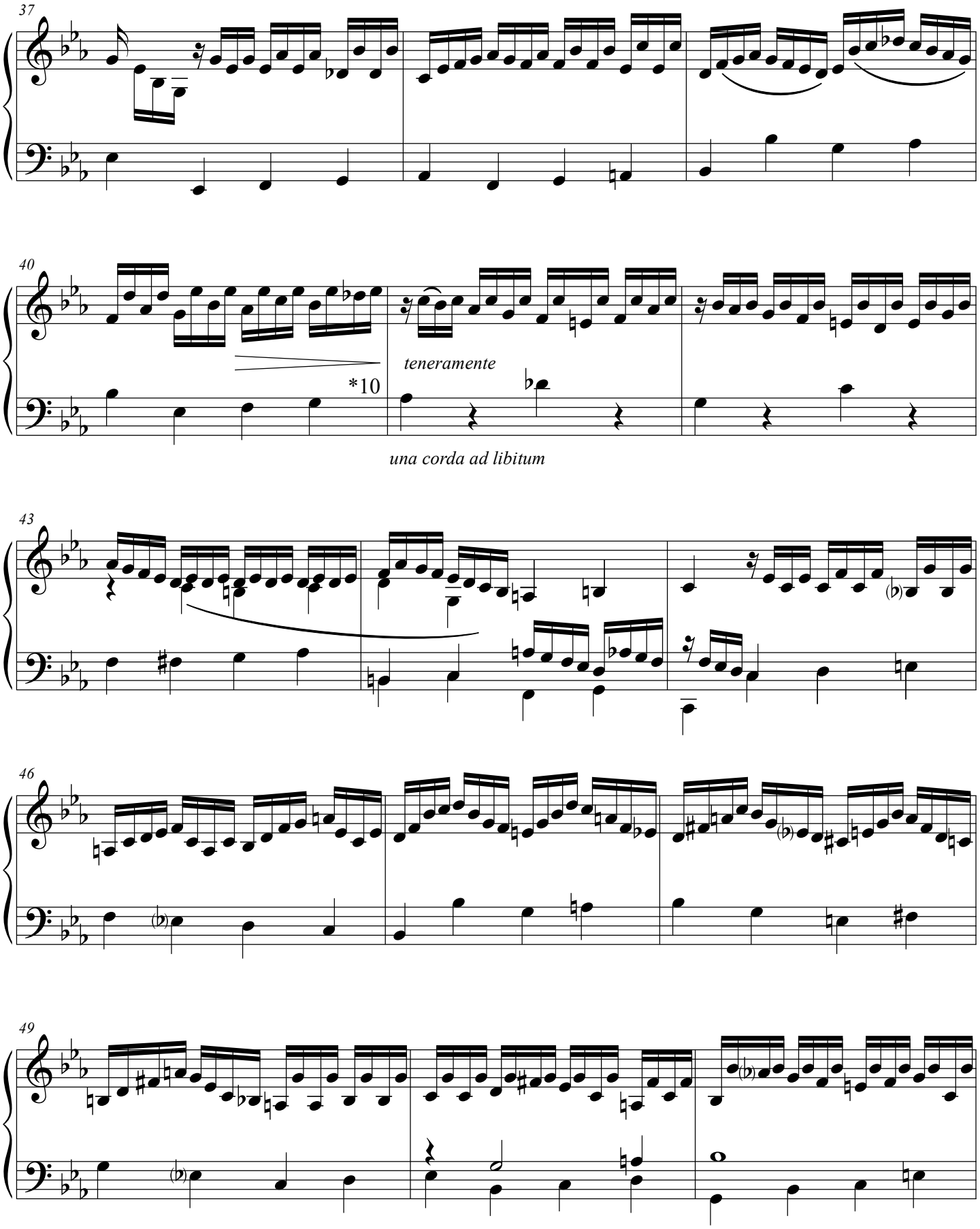
*9 I added 3 measures (40-42) to fill the gap between Fb major arpeggios going straight to the F7 chord. The number 3 is of utmost importance here – see my comments at the end of this volume.

Fugue

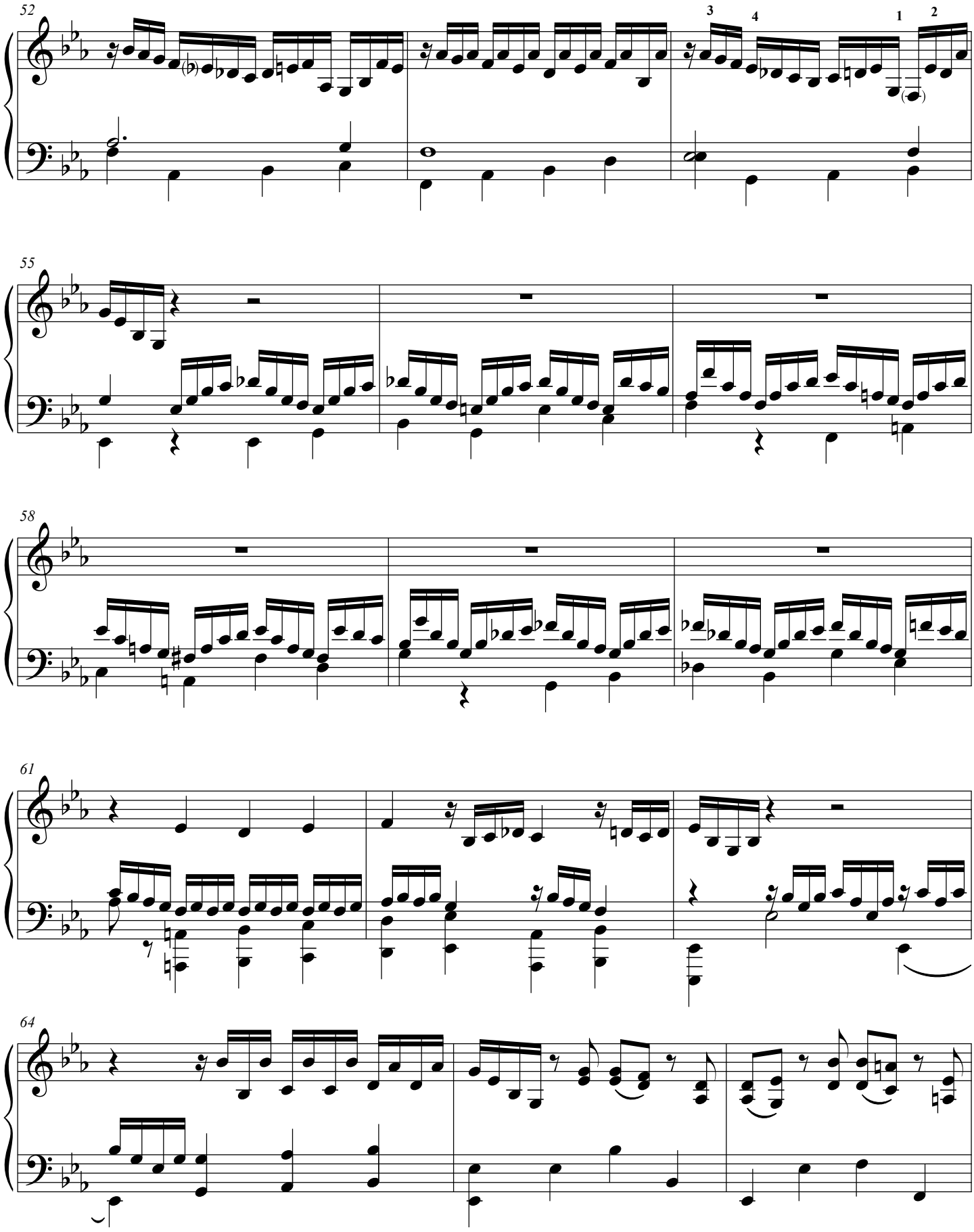
Tranquillo

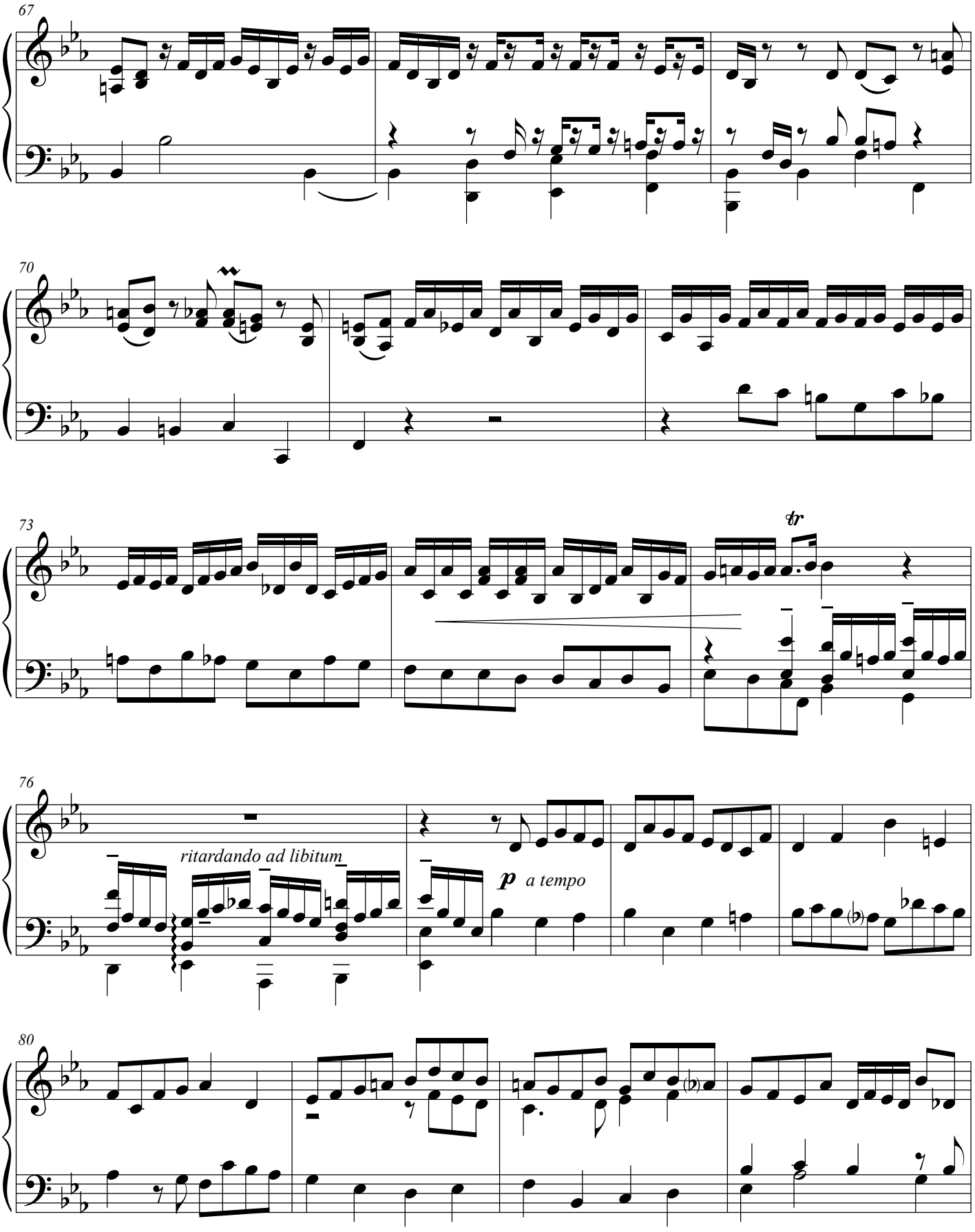


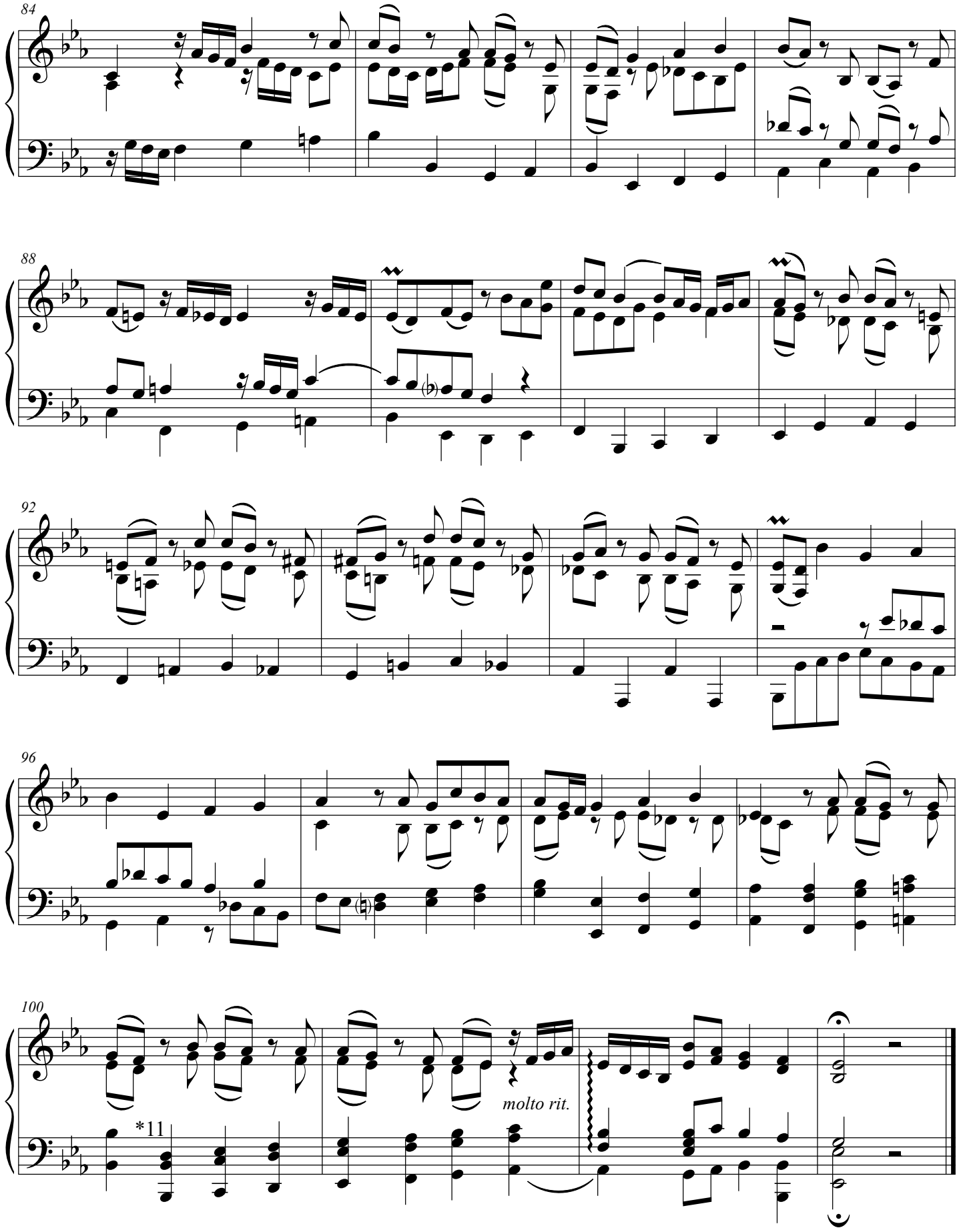

21
25
29
31
34



*10 I usually refrain from imposing dynamic nuances but this place deserves very special treatment.

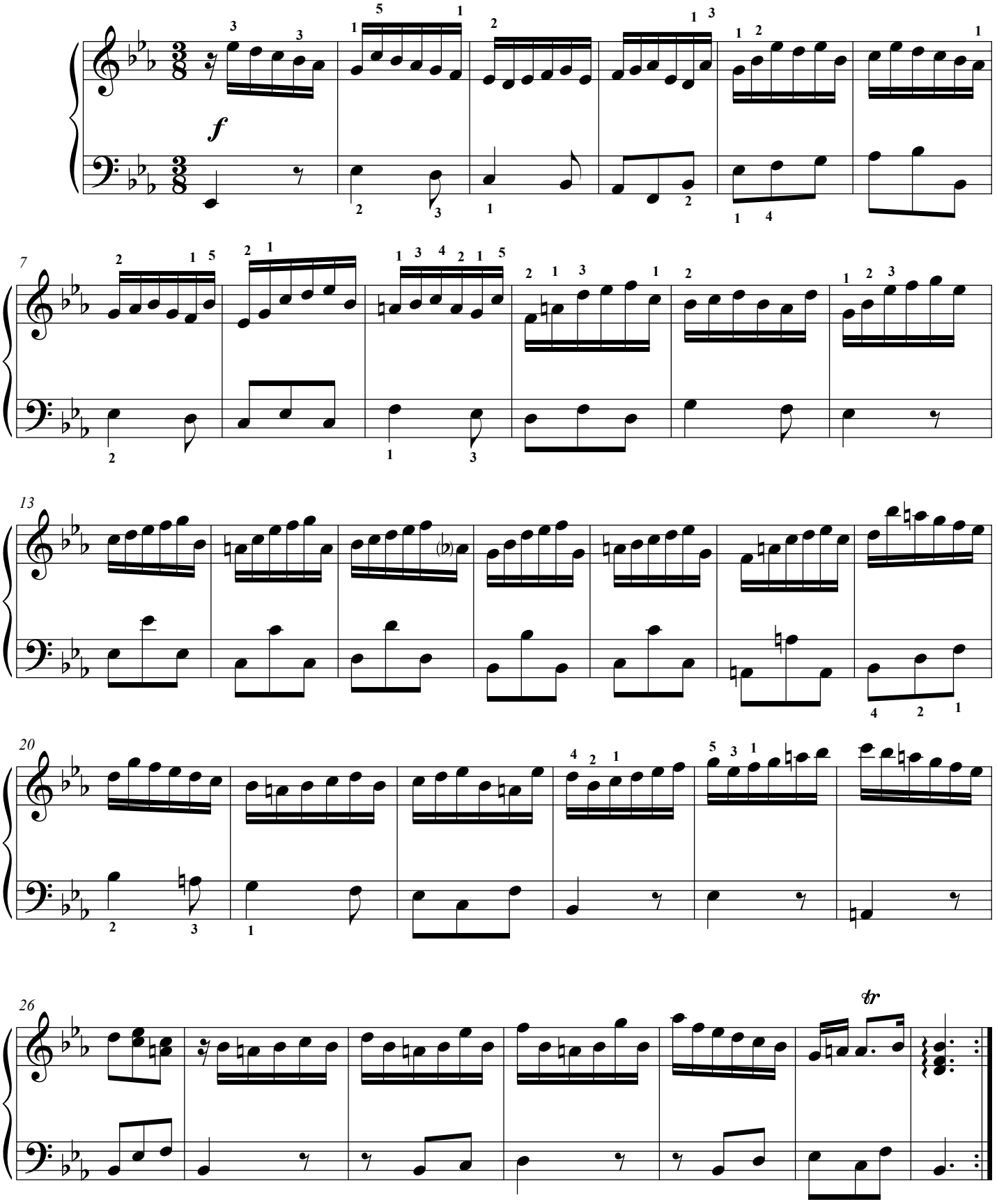

52
3
4
1
2
55
58
61
64

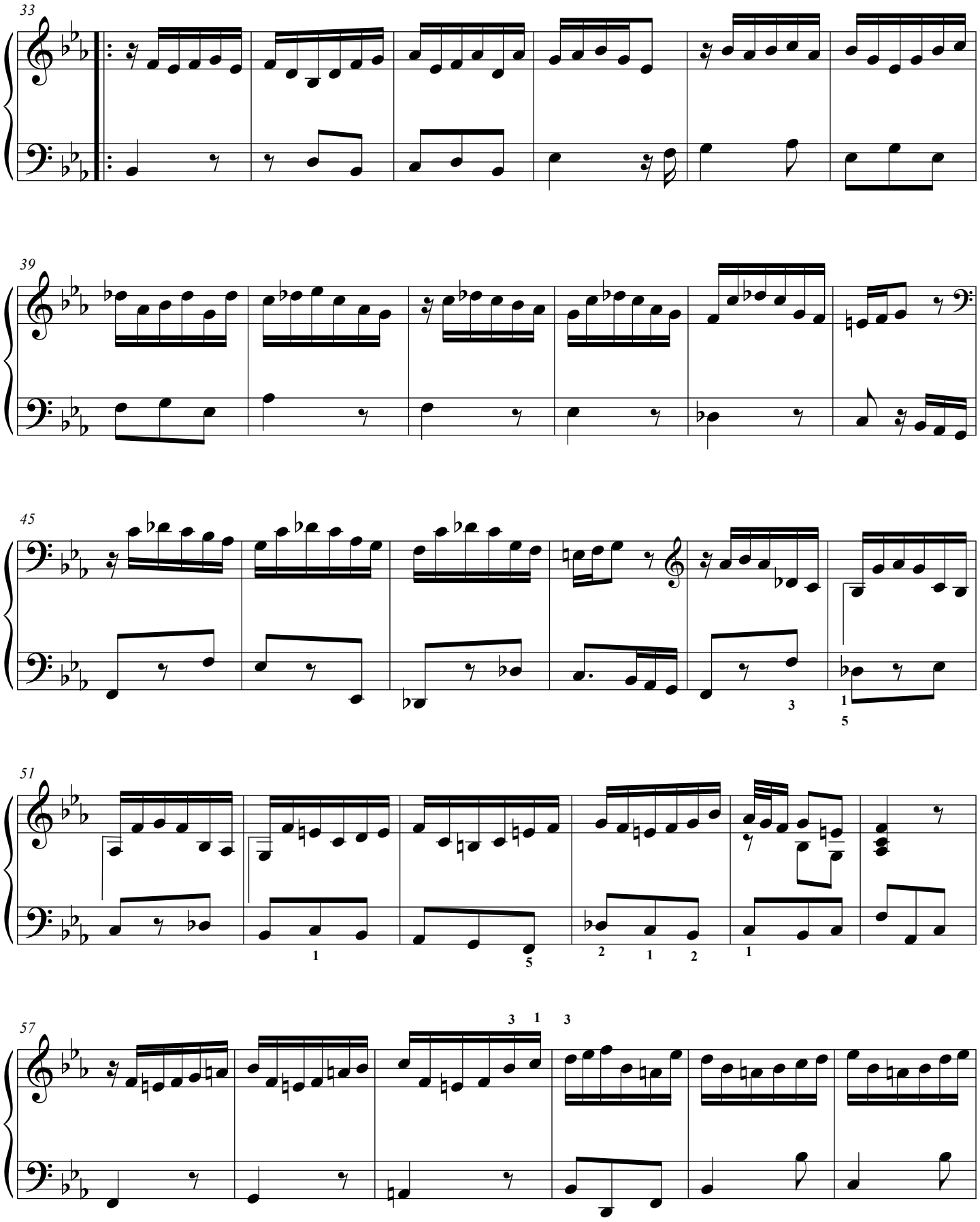

67
70
73
tr
76
ritardando ad libitum
p a tempo
80

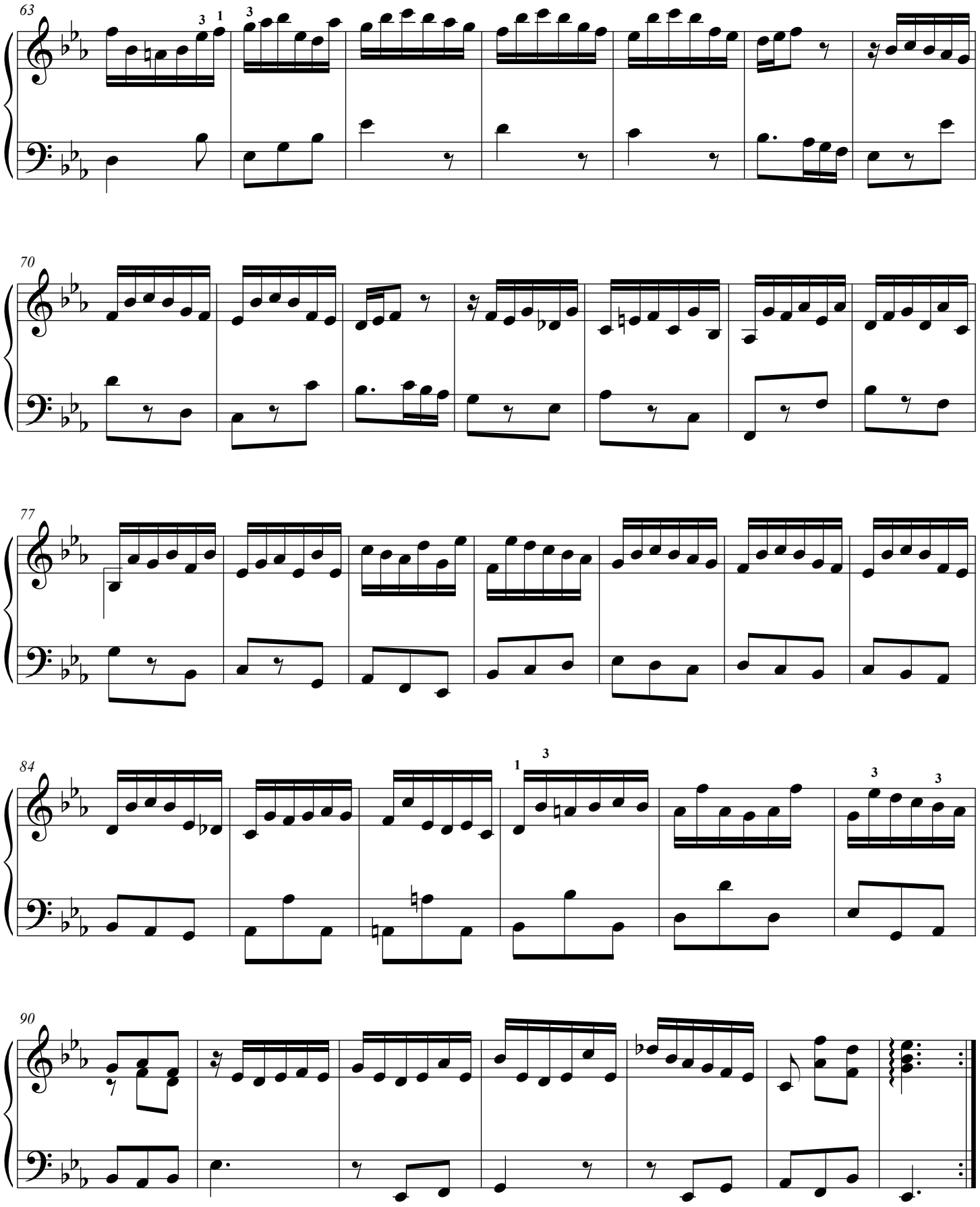


*11 Some of these chords have to be broken, some don't, it's up to you to discover what sounds good.

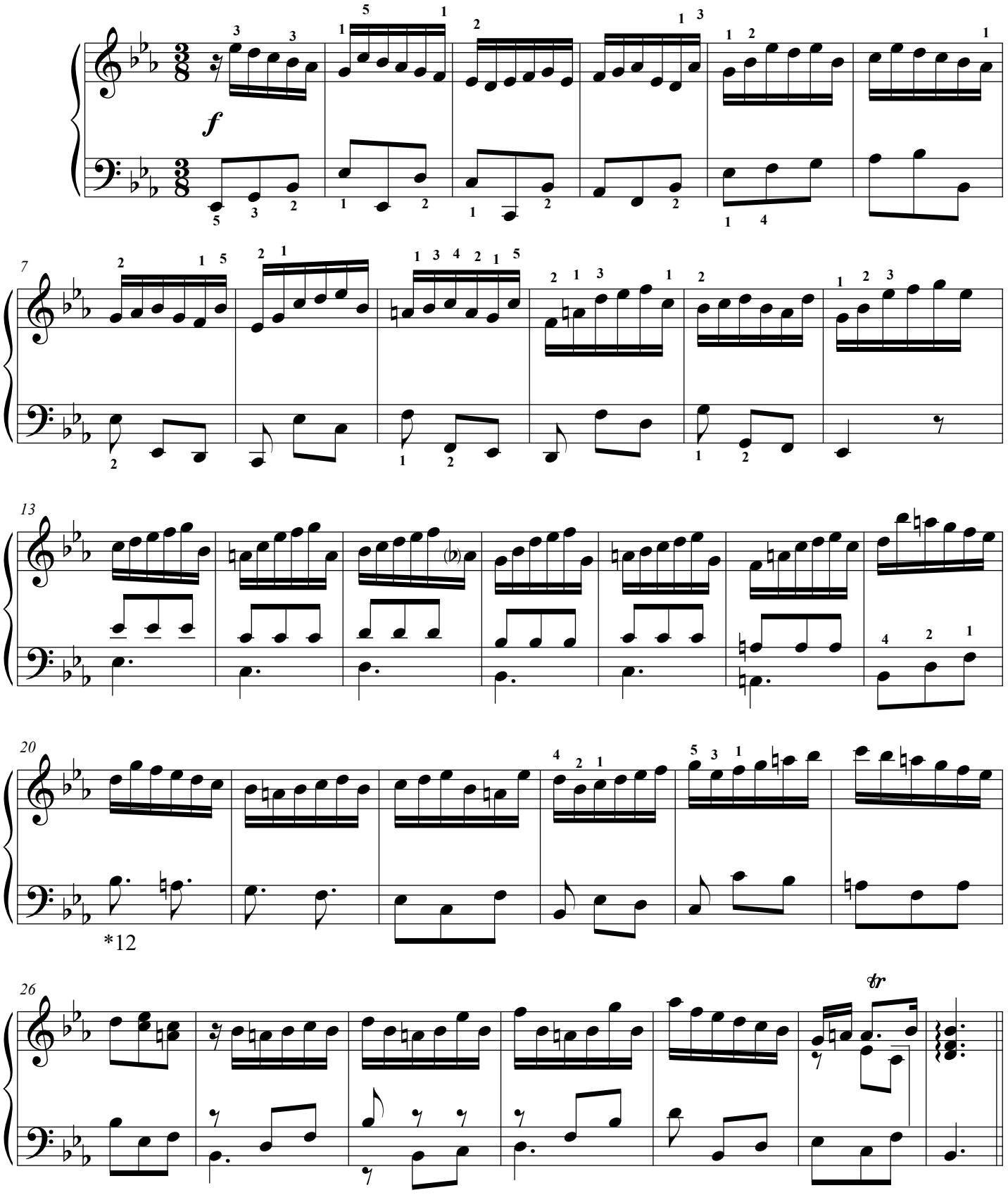
Allegro



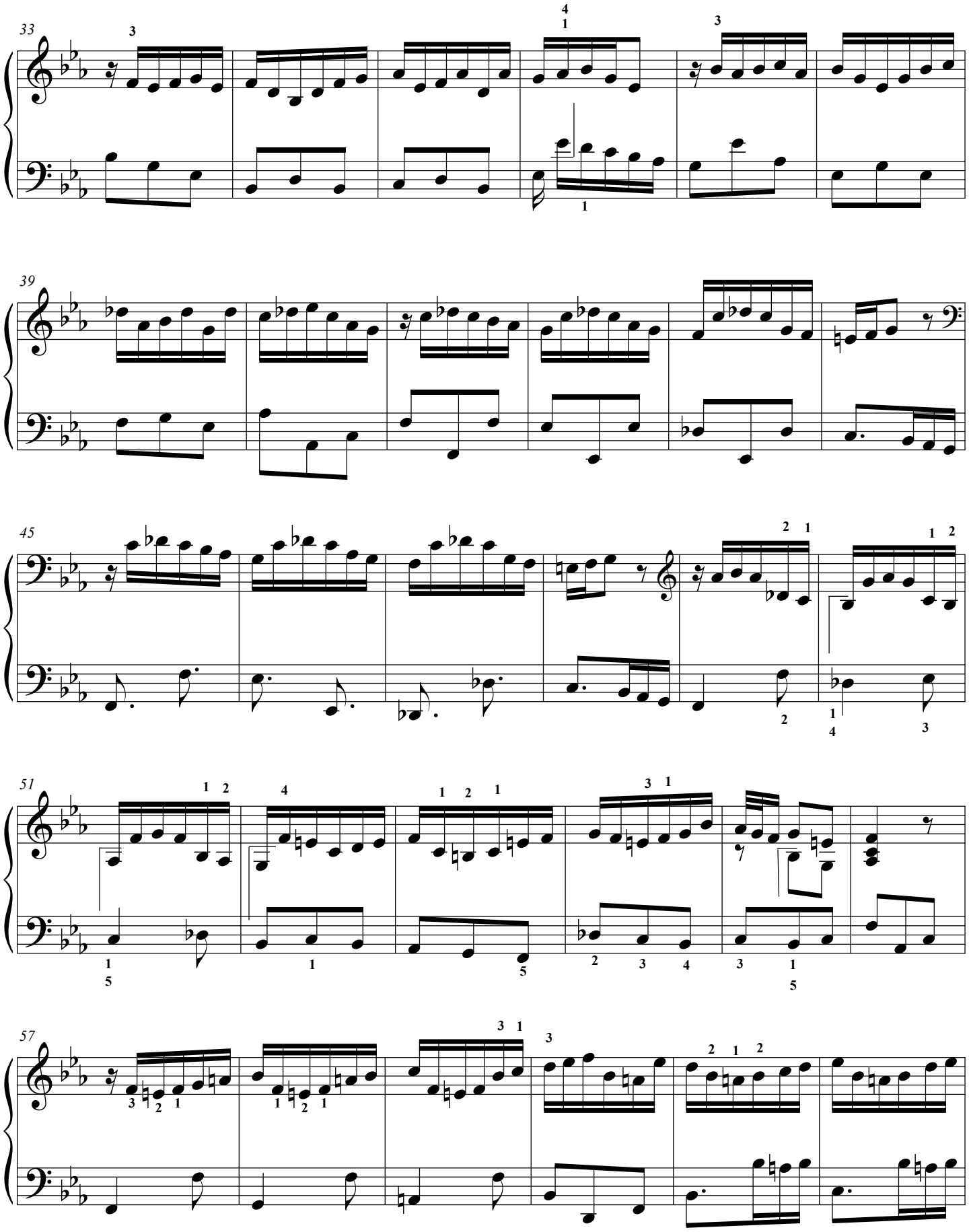

33
39
45
51
57

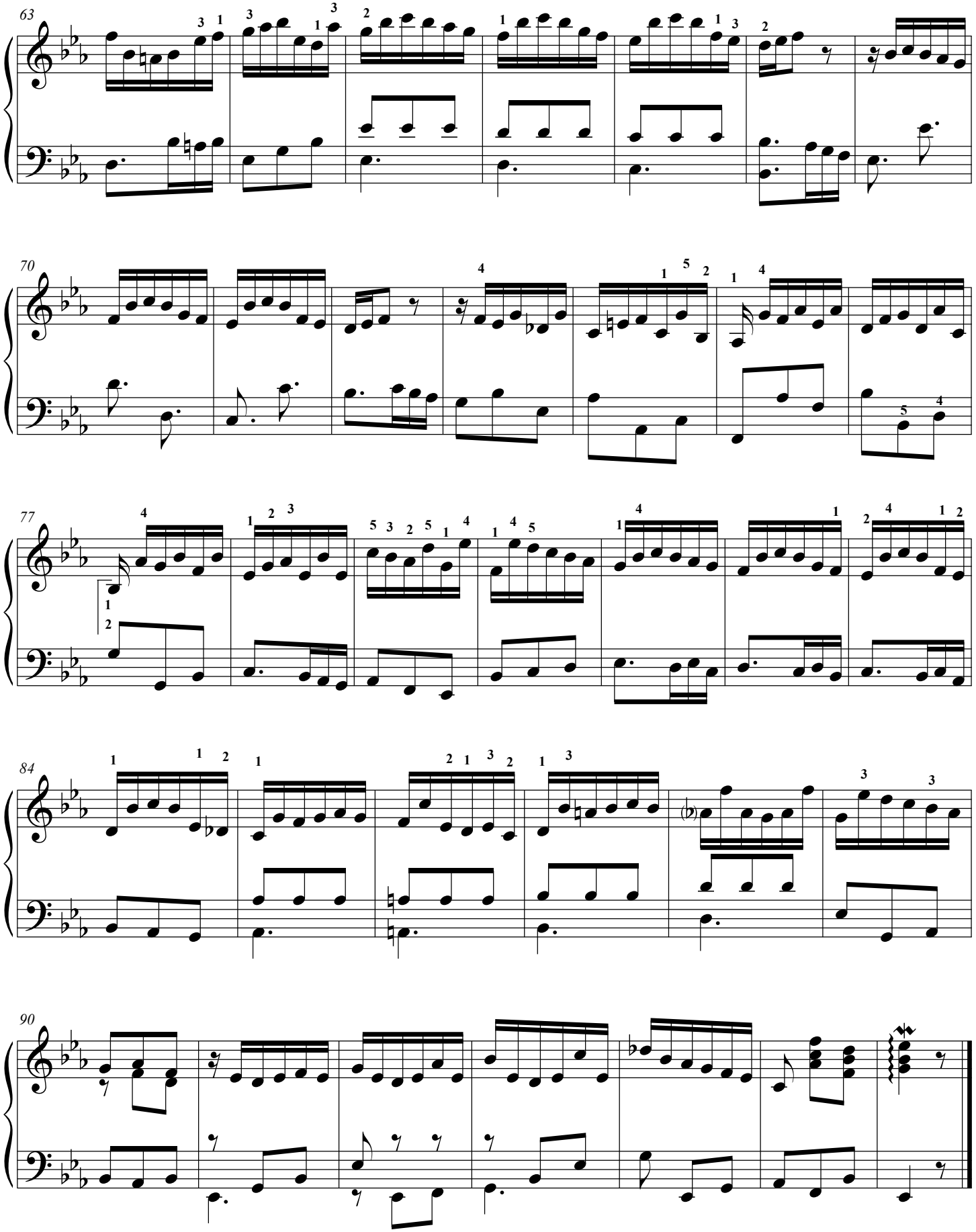

63
70
77
84
90

Allegro repeat



*12 These bass hemiolas are fun to use during the repeats but they are certainly not a traditional choice.


33
39
45
51
57


63
70
77
84
90

Albrecht Dürer
Angel Playing the Lute
Pencil drawing, 1497

Introducing Bach's Lute Suites for Piano

Booklet Notes from the ABSOLUTE recording (Orchid Classics, ORC100366, March 2025)

J.S. Bach's music has always been subject to a kaleidoscopic variety of permutations, starting in the 1700s with his own frequent re-instrumentations of the same pieces. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw Liszt, Busoni, Siloti and Rachmaninov employing the new capabilities of the piano to create and perform their virtuosic transcriptions and paraphrases. In the swinging 1960s, The Swingle Singers, Jacques Loussier and Wendy Carlos expanded Bach's sphere of influence into the domains of jazz and electronic music. Purists like Wanda Landowska, renegades like Glenn Gould, and thousands of other musicians found his works equally inspiring of awe and play, of homage and recreation.

Arnold Schoenberg called Bach "the first 12-tone composer" referring to the conceptual nature and the visionary quality of his music. Rosalyn Tureck played Bach on the harpsichord, clavichord, piano, the Moog and the theremin, asserting that his music is defined primarily by the principle of organization, not by a particular sonority or instrument. Indeed, Bach's output is a paragon of Absolute music: compositions that represent nothing but music itself, disconnected from any extraneous "program" or idea. Even his sacred choral works wield their power over the listener not through the devotional context but through the synergy of melodic and rhythmic patterns, simultaneously engaging our emotions, minds and spirits beyond any graspable meaning. He crafts building blocks of a few interrelated pitches into melodic fragments, then extends them horizontally, layers vertically and juxtaposes polyphonically. These patterns merge into ever-shifting sonic energy fields, gateways into immaterial dimensions of the abstract, the Absolute. They have been traveling through time and space for over 300 years without losing their charge.

Transcriptions can revive interest in original compositions, and I am hoping that a piano version of Bach's Suites BWV 996, 997, and 998 will increase their popularity. There is no consensus as to exactly what instrument each suite was designated for, but the choices narrow down to either the lute or the lute-harpsichord, an instrument then known as "lautenwerk." Existing autographs and manuscripts are mostly in staff notation with a few lute tablatures since only professional lute players could produce those. Recorded versions are usually titled "lute suites" and performed either by guitarists, lutenists, or harpsichordists. Just like Bach's other solo collections, these suites present a technical and musical tour de force for their performers and deserve their rightful place alongside Bach's suites for keyboard, violin, and cello.

Suite in E minor BWV 996 closely resembles Bach's keyboard suites in structure and texture and therefore was most likely written for the lautenwerk, not the lute. Bach assigns plenty of 16th notes and consistent counterpoint to the low voice, resulting in a rich texture which can only be ploddingly rendered on the baroque lute. The introductory movement is in two parts: **Passaggio and Presto**. The Passaggio combines Recitative and French Overture elements, punctuating improvisatory solo passages with dramatic chords in dotted rhythms. After a rest, new phrases occur in the same fashion and modulate until the last stretch of dotted chords ends on the dominant, setting up the Presto, a vivacious fughetta in 3/8 time. In this piano version, I added a few notes in the bass in measures 42-44, resulting in a full iteration of the subject and a smoother transition from two to four voices.

Allemande is the first of five traditional suite dances in BWV 996. Like most of J.S. Bach's keyboard Allemandes, it is a tender story, a meditative palate cleanser between the dynamic Presto and lively Courante. I take advantage of the piano's acoustical features here, as I do throughout this recording, prolonging some notes to expand implied counterpoint into a fuller, more imitative texture. The Courante's faster pace and florid ornamentation also benefited from the piano's capabilities. My rendition of this movement, with added runs and more density in the bass during repeats, results in a viscerally gratifying and virtuosic reading. The melancholic **Sarabande** sustains its introverted mood through many unexpected modulations and a prolonged middle section in B minor, Bach's most tragic key. It is followed by the wonderful **Bourrée**, so beloved by guitarists. Transcribing Bach's "greatest hits" such as this one is always daunting because the choice narrows down to being predictable (read: boring) or unpredictable (read: objectionable). Fortunately, the tradition of repeating Baroque dance movements allows for both, so to create a fun repeat I took a cue from Bach's own treatment of the basic unit: a three-note (short, short, long) pattern which he uses incessantly in the upper voice. The long notes occur on every strong beat and have to be deliberately understated, creating a rhythmically ambiguous feel. In the last phrase, Bach juxtaposes the same syncopated pattern in the lower voice a beat later, clearly affirming that he was playing with rhythm all along. Compelled to join in the fun, I decided to repeat each section using a jazzy "walking bass" in the left hand. The energetic **Gigue** is our final clue that this suite was meant for the keyboard, its highly contrapuntal texture unplayable on the lute faster than Moderato. To invigorate this closing movement, I add octaves in the left hand for the repeats, imitating the double-stop effect of a baroque keyboard.

Suite in C Minor BWV 997 is traced to disparate versions, including a manuscript endorsed by C.P.E. Bach as "fur Clavier" and a copy of movements one, three and four in French tablature titled "Partita al Liuto." Other than in the Fugue and a few "echoes" in the Sarabande, the lower part consists of single bass notes, making it equally suitable for a fretted or a keyboard

instrument. The spirited **Prelude** opens with three exact repetitions of an upward sweep in C minor, establishing a no-nonsense attitude and verve reminiscent of the start of the D minor harpsichord concerto. It's written in ritornello form, with prominent syncopations and unyielding drive, except for two fermatas on the D7 chord (secondary dominant) and the G major chord (dominant) which imply a break for improvisation. My recorded cadenza is built on previous material and includes an open-ended anticipation of the next movement. The dramatic **Fugue** features a wonderful subject of a five-note ascent from tonic to dominant followed by a five-note chromatic ascent continuing through the octave to the upper tonic. The chromaticism creates enduring tension which Bach skillfully dissipates through playful episodes based on the interval of a fourth and a lower mordent. It is an unusual da capo fugue structure featuring a beautiful B section with a textural layer of constant 16th notes typical in baroque lute parts, followed by a verbatim return of section A. The **Sarabande** bears a strong motivic resemblance to the final chorus of St. Matthew's Passion. Each section starts with stately eight measures of rich orchestral texture which are balanced by eight measures of running 16th notes accompanied by single bass notes. The **Gigue and Double** of this suite are often presented as a single movement since the Double is always a variation of the preceding dance. I chose to record them as separate movements, repeating each one. Here, the upper voice of the Double presents an embellished version of the Gigue in shorter notes (16ths or semiquavers) and the lower voice changes registers and sometimes participates in the upper voice's passagework. Going a step further, I "doubled down" on the Double, using passages of 32nd notes (demisemiquavers) to embellish the repeats.

Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro BWV 998 is the only set on this recording with an authenticated autograph, the front page of which reads "Prelude pour la Luth. ò Cembal, par J. S. Bach." This unusual three-movement set in "celestial" Eb major with its key signature of three flats is believed to suggest a theological message of the trinity. Indeed, the remarkable **Prelude** is a treasure trove of structural and melodic references to the number three. It opens with a three-measure statement of triplets (the time signature is 12/8) over three E-flats repeated in the bass. In this piano arrangement, I opted for an Eb octave held for all three measures since that reflects Bach's conception but could not be realized on either a lute or a harpsichord. As unusual as a three-measure unit is, Bach underscored this quaint structure further by writing connective material of three, two, or a combined five measures in length. Melodically, each measure of the main statement begins with a three-note lower mordent pattern (EbDEb, BbAbBb, GFG) outlining a downward inversion of a triad (Eb – Bb – G). Bach uses this three-note shape in almost every measure throughout the Prelude, shifting its placement, outlining more triads, repeating it twice or three times on the same note and steadily increasing its occurrence. This demonstrates a most striking example of the composer going through extreme efforts to emphasize a structural element. Between measures 39 and 40, the "Neapolitan" Fb major chord

passing into an inversion of an F7 chord sounds so disjointed and inconsistent with the rest of the piece that I added three extra measures for a smoother harmonic transition, an improvisatory solution justified by the fermata.

The BWV 998 **Fugue** is, like its sister from Suite BWV 997, a grandiose da capo construction but because of the difference between C minor and Eb major, it's not as intense and is more majestic. Here, the subject is a stately succession of eight quarter notes (crotchets) which starts from the Eb-D-Eb grouping of the Prelude and ends on Eb, within a range of only a fifth. The countersubject is laid out in eighth notes (quavers) and similarly lacks specific direction, so my preferred interpretation is one of tranquility, almost detachment, just allowing every line and turn of the architecture to unfold and settle on its pillars. The middle section here, just like in BWV 997, is enveloped by flowing 16th notes (semiquavers), an enhancement further transporting us into greater equanimity, as if receiving divine grace coming down from the Absolute. Bach artfully weaves the return of the subject into the last undulating passages of the middle section (mm 75-77) for a beautifully seamless da capo transition. This is decidedly the most sublime fugue I have ever played; experiencing it is akin to meditating. At the conclusion, one's spirit is refreshed, exactly what Bach referred to as "the final end of all music" in his famous quote. Completing the BWV 998 trifecta, the **Allegro** in 3/8 time ended up being the most pianistically daunting of all the movements on this album for me. Despite the simplicity of the material, the right-hand perpetuum mobile lies so awkwardly on the keyboard that I suspect it was intended for the lute after all. The knotty and unusual hand positions strain the forearm so consistently that even practicing it at a slower tempo needs to be judiciously budgeted to avoid a case of "BWV 998 tennis elbow." Be that as it may, finally mastering this movement will certainly result in a jubilant mood which the music is meant to convey.

Thank you for your interest in this transcription! I hope that you will also enjoy the *ABSOLUTE* recording which includes a bonus track of *Betrachte, meine Seele* from St. John's Passion. The QR code below will help you find a streaming platform or a retailer of your choice.

Eleonor Bindman
March 2025

ABSOLUTE
Recording

Table of contents

Suite in E minor, BWV 996
Passaggio – Presto……..….3
Allemande……....6
Courante……...8
Sarabande……...10
Sarabande agréments ……11
Bourrée…….……..13
Bourrée with repeat…….....14
Gigue……...…16
Gigue repeat…….……..18

Suite in C minor, BWV 997
Prelude…….……..20
Fugue……...24
Sarabande……....32
Gigue……..…….34
Double……36

Prelude, Fugue and Allegro in Eb major, BWV 998
Prelude……..……...39
Fugue……...42
Allegro.....……48
Allegro repeat…….……..……..……51

Booklet notes from the ABSOLUTE recording…….….55

Coryn Boel, Flemish, 1620 - 1668
Monkeys Singing and Playing the Lute
Print

ABSOLUTE BACH
J.S. Bach: Lute Suites BWV 996-998
Transcribed for Piano by Eleonor Bindman

©2025
All rights reserved, please do not reproduce.

"Prepare to be surprised" (Classical Archives) by pianist, arranger, and teacher Eleonor Bindman. Known worldwide for "Bach playing of the highest order" (Pianodao) after releasing recordings of her original transcriptions of J.S. Bach, Bindman combines her passions of teaching and performing to bring great new repertoire to piano lovers of all kinds through her transcriptions, scores, and recordings.

Recordings, scores, and more available at EleonorBindman.com

ABSOLUTE BACH

©2025 Eleonor Bindman