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A Profile of Anna Bon, 18th Century Venetian Composer

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This honors thesis submitted by Kathleen Abromeit has been read and found acceptable for Honors in Independent Studies.

Ernestine Whitman

Madelon Lief

Paul Hollinger

Marjory Mrvin

"A PROFILE OF ANNA BON,
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By

KATHLEEN ABROMEIT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Deborah Hayes at the University of Colorado-Boulder for sharing the music of Anna Bon with me. For without her generosity, this project would have been impossible. I would also like to extend a warm thank you to Marjory Irvin for her continuous support and guidance with the project.

"Nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century." This extraordinary statement comes from Virginia Woolf in her book, *A Room of One's Own,* and was inspired by her fruitless search for information on Elizabethan women. Woolf, expressing her frustration, writes this:

> She never writes her own life and scarcely keeps a diary; there are only a handful of her letters in existence. She left no plays or poems by which we can judge her. What one wants ... is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? All these facts lie somewhere, presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it ... They should re-write history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history? ... Nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century. I have no model in my mind to turn about this way and that. Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age, and I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting-rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty-one; what in short, they did from eight in the morning til eight at night. [1]

Anyone who has searched for information about women has experienced that "lop-sidedness" of history and can easily identify with the array of questions posed by Virginia Woolf. In comparison with the Elizabethan era, Woolf apparently viewed the 18th century as a gold mine of information about the lives of women. In a generic sense, she was right: a wealth of knowledge can be gained, particularly from the

women writers who addressed the social and political issues of the day.

Certainly there is no shortage of historical background concerning 18th century women in general, but the horse changes color when one chooses to pursue the life and works of an individual woman. We know that there were outstanding women scientists, scholars, artists and musicians, but unearthing their works is accomplished, if at all, with an incredible amount of painstaking research, and the problem of finding information about their lives - professional or personal - verges on the insurmountable.

Many of the outstanding women scholars and scientists of the 18th century were found in Italy. Three extraordinary women were born within eighteen years of each other in Bologna and Milan: Lauri Bassi, physicist (1700-1778); Anna Manzolini, anatomist (1716-1774); and Maria Agnesi, mathematician (1718-1799). Bassi, professor of physics at Bologna, was already famous at twenty-one. Her public disputations drew scholars from all over Europe and continued to do so until her death. Also holding a professorship at Bologna was Manzolini. She was noted for both her anatomical discoveries and for her creation of wax anatomical models which were copied and widely used around Europe even after her time.

Maria Agnesi was a different case altogether. At the age of nine, she gave learned discourses in Latin to the city fathers of Milan and, by her teens, could speak seven languages. The work that ensured her fame in mathematics,

Le Istituzioni Analitiche, was begun when she was twenty and took her ten years to complete. She continued to make advancements in mathematics and was appointed to the chair of higher mathematics at Bologna, but she did not accept the position. Instead, to the amazement of her contemporaries, she retired from the world of mathematics at the age of thirty and devoted the next fifty years to the care of the "poor, the sick and the helpless in her native city." [2]

During the 1700's, music was flourishing in Italy and Italy was regarded as the country of true musicians. Italian musicians and composers were frequently imported by courts in other countries. Italy's economic situation was such that she could support the musical experiments that were taking place. Moreover, because Italy had not taken part in the Protestant Reformation, the need to develop a new liturgy had not deflected the focus of Italian composers. Thus, in the realm of secular music, new vocal forms, instrumental forms, and opera could flourish in Italy.

From St. Mark's Cathedral to the private courts, Venice was rich with musicians and was one of several cities where women played a major role in the musical output. One Venetian woman composer of the time was Anna Bon. There is very little known about her life beyond that which appears on the title pages of her published works. There is no article on her in Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart (MGG) or New Grove's Dictionary. Her known published sonatas include Opus 1 for flute and continuo, Opus 2

for harpsichord, and Opus 3 for two flutes and continuo.
A modest amount of information on Anna Bon appears in Eitner's *Quellenlexikon* (1898); Eitner gives her birth year as 1738, identifies her as a chamber music virtuoso from Venice, and gives the library locations for two of her published collections, opus numbers 1 & 3.

The exact year of her birth, however, is uncertain: the title page of her Op. 1, published in 1756, gives her age as 16, (i.e. born in 1740), which contradicts Eitner's 1738. Her Op. 3, published in 1757, gives her age as 18, (i.e. born in 1738), from all of which we can conclude that she might have been born later than 1738, but that she probably was not born earlier than that date.

The title pages of Opus numbers 1 & 2 identify the composer as a "chamber music virtuoso" in the service of "Frederick, reigning margrave of Brandenburg Culmbach etc: etc' etc." According to Deborah Hayes, music historian at the University of Colorado, the "Frederick", to whom these sonatas are dedicated, is Frederick the Great or Frederick II, King of Prussia (reigned 1740-1786). The Opus 1 sonatas for transverse flute and violoncello and/or harpsichord, are dedicated to Frederick, who was an accomplished flutist. The Opus 2 sonatas are for solo harpsichord and are dedicated to Ernestina Augusta Sophia, Princess of Saxe Weimer, an accomplished harpsichordist, ("molto versata", according to the preface). The six "divertimentos" for two flutes and (continuo) bass, Opus 3, are dedicated to Karl Theodor, Elector of Bavaria.

One cannot help wondering where Anna received her musical training. There is a slight possibility that she was from a family of musicians, but in looking for the family name in MGG and New Grove's Dictionary, there are no entries under "Bon". Another possibility is that she was an orphan and studied in a conservatory at one of the four institutions for orphans in Venice: Pietà, Incurabili, Derelitti or Mendicanti. The conservatories were maintained at state expense, and orphan girls, as well as girls born out of wedlock, were trained in vocal and instrumental music by famous choir masters, among them Monteverdi, Cavalli, and Lotti.[3] Francesco Gasparini was the continuo teacher at the Pietà for some time; Onofrio Penati taught woodwinds; and for thirty-four years Antonio Vivaldi taught violin and viola in addition to composing music for the girls.

The conservatory, Pietà, which was the most renowned of the four, opened as early as 1615 when boys were taught music so they could sing in chapel. But the institution traces its origin to 1346 when Friar Pietro of Assisi opened it as a hospital.[4]

The first signs that music was assuming more than a rather casual role in the conservatories was in 1656 immediately following the devastation of the plague. This disaster increased both the need for charity and the difficulty in obtaining it. The governors of the orphanages had, therefore, to use all available resources to stay afloat. After many long hours of contemplating some sort of financial solution, they suddenly realized that the musical talents of

the orphans were saleable. Not only was the performance of the music a source of income, it was also a socially acceptable skill that the girls could utilize in snaring a husband. Providing music for churches and religious confraternities may have been a source of income, and probably even secular music added to the financial solvency of the orphanages.[5]

In the unanimous opinion of all who heard them, the girls could satisfy the tastes of even the most difficult-to-please listeners. King Frederick IV of Denmark, Emperor Joseph II, Pope Pius VI, Grand Duke Paul of Russia, the Grand Duchess, his wife, Sophia and King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden all visited the orphanages to hear concerts by these young artists.[6] From this list, it is apparent that nobility traveled to Venice from all over Europe, and that one of the city's attractions was the music produced by these talented and well-trained young women. The leaders of the institutions knew how to publicize the sweet sounds that were echoing through the halls. By 1600 we find a famous guide book, comparable to today's Chamber of Commerce guide, recommending that visitors partake of the enriching musical experiences at the Mendicanti which

> supports about four hundred or five hundred poor persons. They teach the children good pursuets, and those instructed in the art of Music sing to the accompaniment of various instruments at the solemn Feasts throughout the year, at Mass, Vespers and Compieta; and especially during Lent when there is a great congregation of people. This is done also at the other three main Hospitals of the city.[7]

Rousseau was very enthusiastic about the conservatories and, when in Venice, he never missed Sunday Vespers at the Mendicanti. Referring to the motets he wrote, "I can imagine nothing as voluptuous and as touching as this music ... everything in these delightful concerts combines to produce an impression ... which I feel no human heart could be unmoved by." In 1784 Goethe was just as fascinated by an oratorio which he heard at the Mendicanti and he wrote, "a soprano was singing the part of Saul, the protagonist in the drama. For my part, I have never heard such a voice: in some parts the music was indescribably beautiful." [8]

These institutions reached the height of their renown around 1770, and soon thereafter they began to decline. The reasons for this were largely economic. In Venice, the state no longer had great riches to distribute, and the nobility were not able to support charities in the way they had been able to in the early decades of the eighteenth century. As a result, the conservatories were totally bankrupt by 1780. It is possible that the quality of teaching and performing found in the Venetian conservatories may have been a model for the conservatory system of today. Thus, one cannot be anything but grateful to the men like Vivaldi who contributed to the teaching of music. In a letter from Vivaldi to Marquis Guido Bentivoglio D'Aragona, he comments about his enjoyable stay at the Pietà and praises the wonderful environment in which to work.[9] Hundreds of girls through many generations had the honor of learning the craft of music from the masters such as Monteverdi, Gasparini and Vivaldi.

It was not uncommon for foreign nobility to visit the orphanages while in Venice. If they heard a composition that they found exceptionally favorable, often they would ask the composer to write a piece for their court. The composer would often return the compliment by requesting permission to dedicate the work to the noble patron. In the case of the Six Sonatas for Flute and Continuo Op. 1 by Anna Bon, the collection was dedicated to Frederick the Great. We do not know where Anna met Frederick, but it seems improbable that Anna should have traveled to the Prussian court. It is more likely that Frederick heard her works at one of the Venetian conservatories - that is assuming that she was, in fact, an orphan at one of the four institutions.

Travel at this time was not a convenient first-class seat on a Boeing 747 complete with champagne and caviar. Instead, one would experience a horse-drawn carriage with primitive springs traveling over rock-strewn roads. Goethe compared such carriages to the old-time litters in which women and important people were carried by mules. "They have put two wheels on them, without adding a single improvement," he wrote, "you are tossed about as you would have been centuries ago."[10]

When Frederick came to the throne in 1740, a young man of twenty-eight, his musical sophistication, as distinct from his taste, was limited. He had heard, as far as is known, two operas, neither of them on a particularly grand scale. Apart from these he had heard excerpts from Handel

and Telemann and a quantity of instrumental music, primarily provided by his own musicians, the Grauns and the Bendas. [11] This was scarcely a broad exposure to music, and Frederick took no definitive steps to expand his musical horizons. His education in the theoretical and technical aspects of music, however, had been excellent. His earliest teacher had been the organist of the Berlin Domkirche, a musician of the old school who discoursed at length about the ecclesiastical modes. This modal teaching can still be traced in Frederick's phrygian tendency to write a minor key signature with one less sharp or one more flat than usual. Shortly after Frederick's reign began, Quantz, composer and flutist, began writing sonatas and concertos for him.

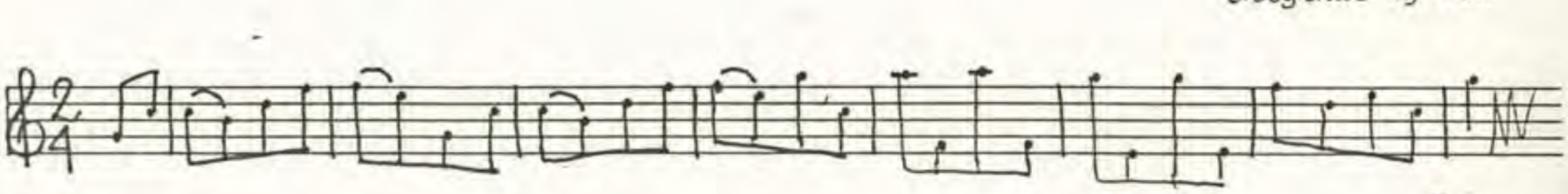
Alan Yorke-Long, in his book *Music at Court,* indicates that from the works Frederick played, it is evident that:

> Frederick was no mean performer on the flute. The concertos and sonatas were written with an eye to his technical abilities, and the rapid movements, with their lengthy passage-work in the middle register and infrequent pauses for breath, are taxing even for a virtuoso of today, with an improved instrument. Presumably it was calculated that Frederick could manage these passages when they were written. In general he succeeded, but occasionally his technique failed him, and he yielded to the easy alternative and took the difficult passages more slowly than the rest, while the accompanying musicians dutifully fell in with these vagaries of tempo. According to Nicholai, Quantz wrote his slow movements to suit the King's taste, "either peaceful and contented (zufrieden ruhig) or seductive (schmeichelnd) or soothing (herzrubrend), never mournful or sad, for the king did not like that"; and Nicolai goes on to say that

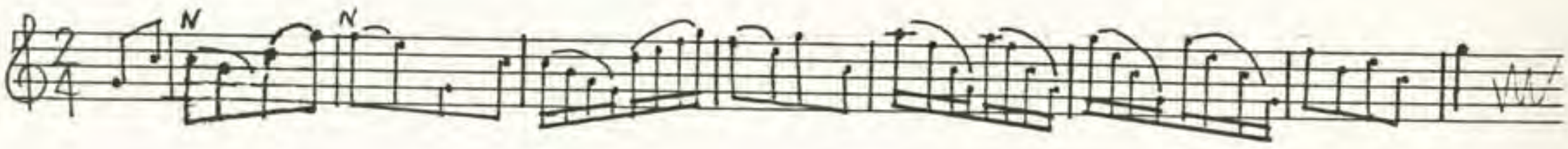
> he never heard anyone play adagios more beautifully, "with a simplicity and intimate feeling (innere Empfindung)," which many virtuosi lacked. Frederick was frequently complimented on his tasteful ornamentation and apt cadenzas.[12]

In examining the Op. 1 sonatas, it seems likely that Bon knew of Frederick's taste and technique. Both Sonatas I & V contain extensive technical passages in the middle register with infrequent opportunities for breath. Catering to Frederick's dislike for mournful or sad adagios, the adagio in Sonata I is in C Major and, with its dotted rhythmic figures, is far from mournful. In the second movement of the g minor sonata, Bon avoids any suggestion of a mournful quality with her performance directions of 'andante staccato'. The movement appears to be closer to a French overture style than to a Germanic slow movement. Another example of Anna's writing in a style that suited Frederick is in her simple melodies that lend themselves to ornamentation. A good example of this is in the Presto from Sonata I:

Original by Bon

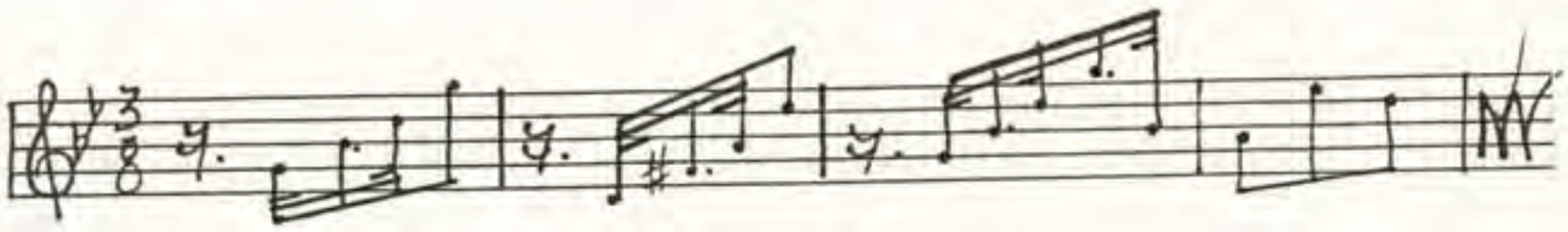


Ornamentation by Abromeit



Another example is found in the Andante Staccato from Sonata V:

Original by Bon



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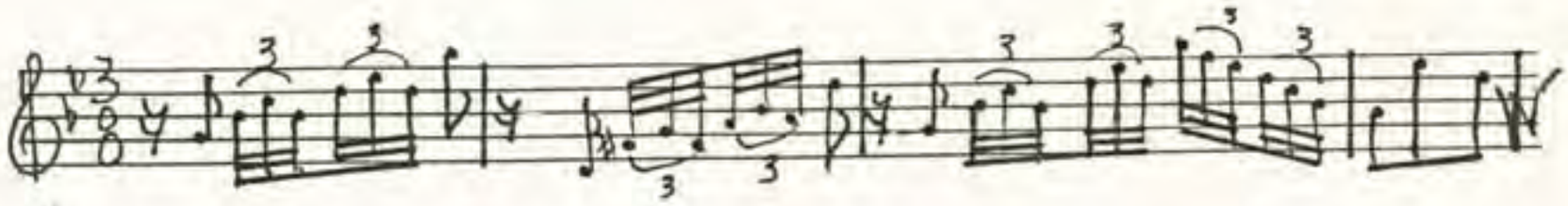

The Op. 1 collection which dates from 1756, falls into the transitional period between the baroque and classical periods. It is difficult to articulate the specific differences between late Baroque and early Classical styles, but philosophy played a major role. In *The Music of the Baroque,* Edith Borroff writes:

> The philosophy centered in a view of music as a working out of musical elements, notably subject within a meter and harmonic functions within a key. In a new Classical style, the idea of polarity of harmonic bass and melodic treble would be replaced by a concept of musical space stratified in a general way into three layers, roughly high, middle, and low, any of which might carry the functions of melody or harmony. The excitement lay in the musical ideas, the interplay of key and subject, conceived separately from their instrumentation even when wedded to it. It was thus to be more abstract than Baroque structures, which more often resulted from interplay of the performing forces themselves. The basso continuo - not just its notated form of figured bass - was discontinued as functions requiring notation entered the middle range and the harmonic aspects were no longer always in the bass. [13]

In analyzing Op. 1 Sonatas I & V, one can find both early Classical and late Baroque idioms. The form of these two sonatas is three-movement, which is typically associated with the early Classical period, and all the movements are in the same key, a tradition associated with the Baroque dance suite. In a paper delivered by Deborah Hayes at the A.M.S. meeting in April of 1984, she stated that the three-movement work in which all the movements are in the same key was typical of the early works of Haydn. He utilized the key continuity in his first sonatas of 1750 and called the works Partitas, acknowledging the suite connection. In Anna Bon's sonatas, with the exception of the minuets, no dance title is used; the movements are simply marked allegro, adagio, etc.

In the individual movements, as in most early Classical sonata movements, the form is binary or, rather, rounded binary. Bon wrote clearly demarcated phrases, and, with the exception of a few extended phrases, they are equal in length. This, too, is typical of Classical phrase structure. In general, each movement is thematically independent. Individual movements tend to be mono-thematic: there are no contrasting or "secondary" themes. The subject of the whole musical discourse to come is stated at once in a complete sentence with a definite cadence; from then on the music unfolds in a continuous expansion of this subject. The steady unfolding of a single theme is highly characteristic of the late Baroque. It is not the same as the later Classical development of motives from a

theme, but rather involves an unbroken and unconstrained flow of musical thoughts that seem to be generated spontaneously out of the original idea. [14]

Bon's Baroque lineage is evident by her use of sequence. Anna spins her sequential material from the tail of a melody and simply allows the evolutionary process to take over. The simplicity of her thematic material can be attributed to both the Baroque and early Classical periods. In general, the range of her melodies is kept within an octave, and frequently chordal outlines are used as melodic material.

Harmonically, most of the movements follow the standard practice of modulation to the dominant if coming from a major key or modulation to the relative major if coming from a minor key. Her modulations are logical and clear and reaffirm the principles of tonal architecture. In terms of chromaticism, Anna goes so far as to utilize an occasional secondary dominant, but for the most part, her harmonies are diatonic. Like J. S. Bach, an early contemporary of Anna's, she does not often employ the augmented sixth or the Neapolitan sixth chords. A Classical trait that can be found in Anna's harmonic writing is her emphasis on tonic and dominant harmony. As one might expect, her harmonic rhythm is slow in fast movements and fast in slow movements.

The bass lines of these two sonatas serve different purposes, depending on the movement. In the Presto of Sonata I, the bass line resembles that of an early Classical line in that it leaps from chord root to chord root. It is not itself a melodic line; rather, it functions

harmonically to support the melody. In the Allegro of Sonata V, the bass line is melodic and is combined with the flute line to create a contrapuntal texture. Thus, the bass line serves a dual function, while being important melodically, it also lays a harmonic foundation for the movement.

The chamber sonata in the mid-1800's was a piece of music with recreational value in that it called for a small group of people to work together and lent itself to an enjoyable afternoon of combining musical tastes and ideas. Flexibility of instrumentation was common in the performance of the 18th century sonata in Italy. A performance of the Bon Op. 1 Sonatas might have been accomplished with only the flute and cello, with their two extreme ranges emphasizing the duality of the Baroque. More likely, the performance would have included three performers, with the harpsichord filling in the implied harmonies and combining three different timbres to create a new sonority. Another possibility would have been harpsichord alone or harpsichord playing both written parts and flute doubling the upper line. Informed sources also suggest the possibility that bassoon or trombone might have played the cello line. The idea of a bassoon does not seem too offensive, but the thought of a trombone pinning down the delicate sonority of harpsichord and flute seems quite grotesque!

Sonata I is a three-movement work: Adagio, Allegro and Presto, and all three movements are in C major.

The adagio has a rather interesting flute part in that it contains both unaccompanied bridge passages and two little cadenzas. Bon provided the ornamental bridge passages, but left the cadenzas to the ingenuity and imagination of the performer. The bass line serves a dual purpose in that it establishes a harmonic foundation but also serves melodic purposes.

The key relationships in this movement are unique in that the composer modulates from a major key to the relative minor rather than to the dominant. The modulation from C major to A minor creates a duality in mode which in turn creates a contrast in mood.

The second movement has a melodic bass line which, like the Allegro of Sonata V, is combined with the flute to create a contrapuntal texture. During the long sequence, its role changes, becoming supportive rhythmically and clearly functional harmonically. The sequence in this movement is the epitome of what Frederick liked - a long brilliant passage in the middle register uninterrupted by pauses to breathe.

Sonata V is also a three-movement work with the movements being: Allegretto, Andante Staccato and Allegro. The piece is in G minor, and, predictably, each movement modulates to B flat Major. An interesting feature in the Allegretto is that the B flat Major section is only four measures in length. Rhythmically she slows the harmonic motion for the final cadence by abruptly switching from triplet to duplet subdivision in the last ten measures. In this section, she

also introduces a fully diminished seventh chord, one of only three such sonorities in these two sonatas.

As previously mentioned, the thematic material in the Andante Staccato is very simple and for the most part merely outlines chords, thus lending itself to ornamentation. An interesting feature of this movement is that the final cadence is followed by the directions "Segue allegro si volti," an indication to proceed immediately to the allegro. Normally this instruction was not written out in the Baroque period; rather, if a movement ended on dominant harmony, it was assumed that one would immediately begin the next movement. An example of this is in Bach's second Sonata for violin and clavier dating from the period of 1718 to 1723. The third movement is in F# minor and ends on a major V chord in F# minor which leads directly into the fourth movement beginning with an A Major chord. The unusual feature of the Bon work is that she concludes not on a dominant harmony but on a perfect authentic cadence and follows with the directions to proceed without pause to the allegro.

The Allegro that follows the Andante Staccato starts with a beautiful little imitation between the flute and bass. Once again we experience the extreme contrast in pitch range which embodies the spirit of the Baroque and its delight in diversity. In the second half there is another imitative section which combines the two lines to create a constant triplet effect through a hocketing technique.

Through the evolution of her thematic material, we see the unfolding of an idea. The theme expands and, finally, it returns to itself, meanwhile having traversed the whole of its existence. With these sonatas, we experience the dynamics of loud and soft, contrasting ranges and timbres between the flute, harpsichord and cello, and even the duality between the Baroque and Classical idioms. But Bon goes beyond this: she embraces the differences and has woven them together to create a new whole - a tapestry of various colors, textures, and dimensions.

The music of Anna Bon exemplifies her fine craftsmanship. She cleverly captured the delight in diversity found in the late Baroque, and at the same time, she embraced the newly found concept of musical form and space associated with Classical style. Her music is well constructed and demonstrates a firm grasp of tonal architecture. It's amazing to think that this work of art was written by an 18-year-old girl. One cannot help wondering if there are more works by Anna sitting in a dusty attic in Venice. For that matter, how many hundreds of works by other women are sitting in other attics, unheard and unknown.

Historians have done a real injustice to women by failing to record their contributions to the march of culture and civilization. We are fortunate to have the surviving collections of Anna Bon's chamber sonatas. Granted, this may represent only a fraction of her music, but rather than bemoaning the unrecorded notes of Anna Bon, let us celebrate the survival of these sonatas.

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[3]Vaussard, Maurice, Daily Life in 18th Century Italy. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 168.

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[5]Arnold, Denis, "Instruments and Instrumental Teaching in the Early Italian Conservatories," Galphin Society Journal, 18: 1965, pp. 72-81.

[6]Vaussard, p. 168.

[7]Arnold, Denis, "Orphans and Ladies: The Venetian Conservatories (1680-1790)," Royal Musical Association, 89: 1962-63, pp. 31-48.

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[10]Vaussard, p. 50.

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Two Sonatas
for flute & continuo
Op. 1, Nos. 1 & 5

Anna Bon

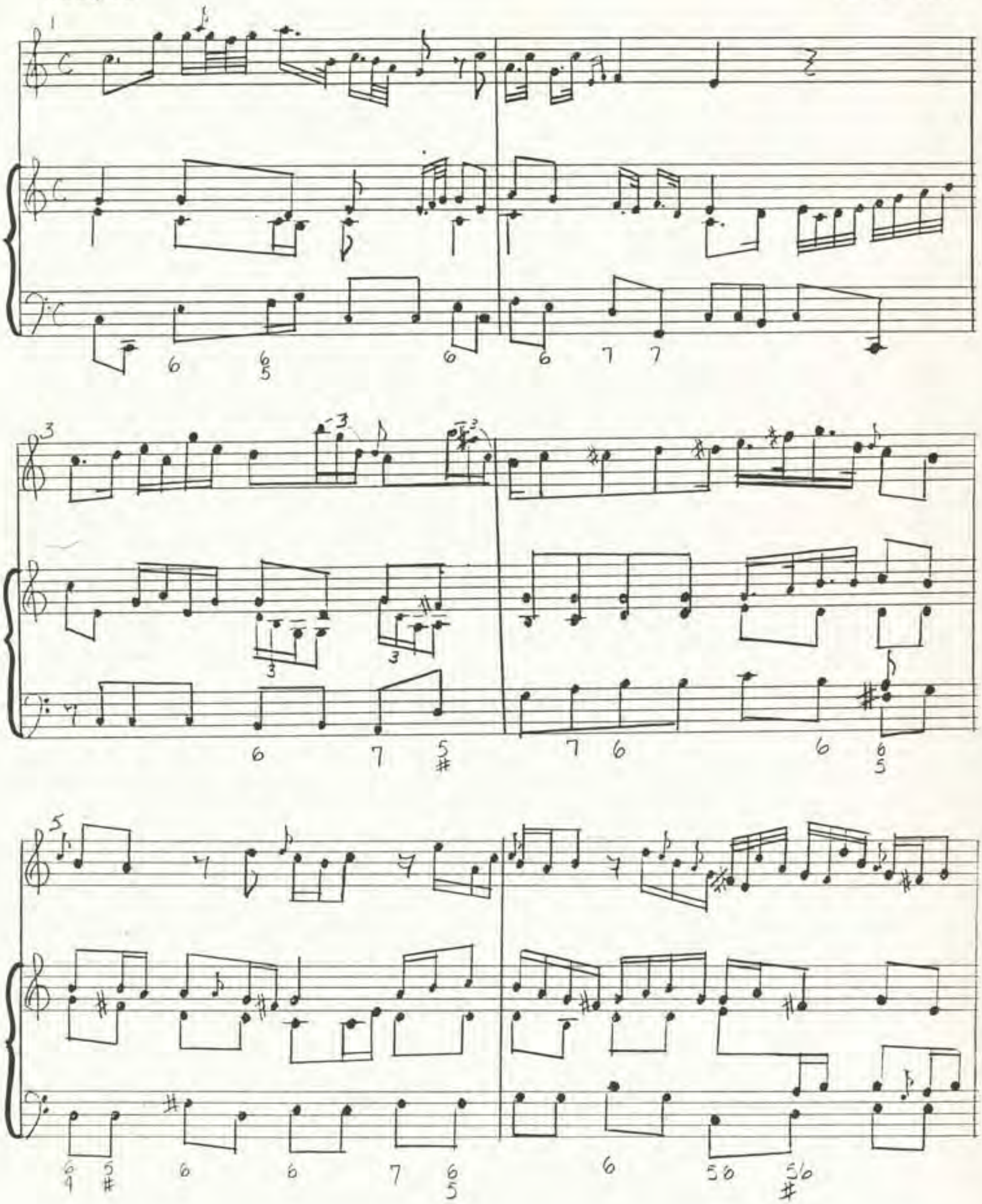
Realization by

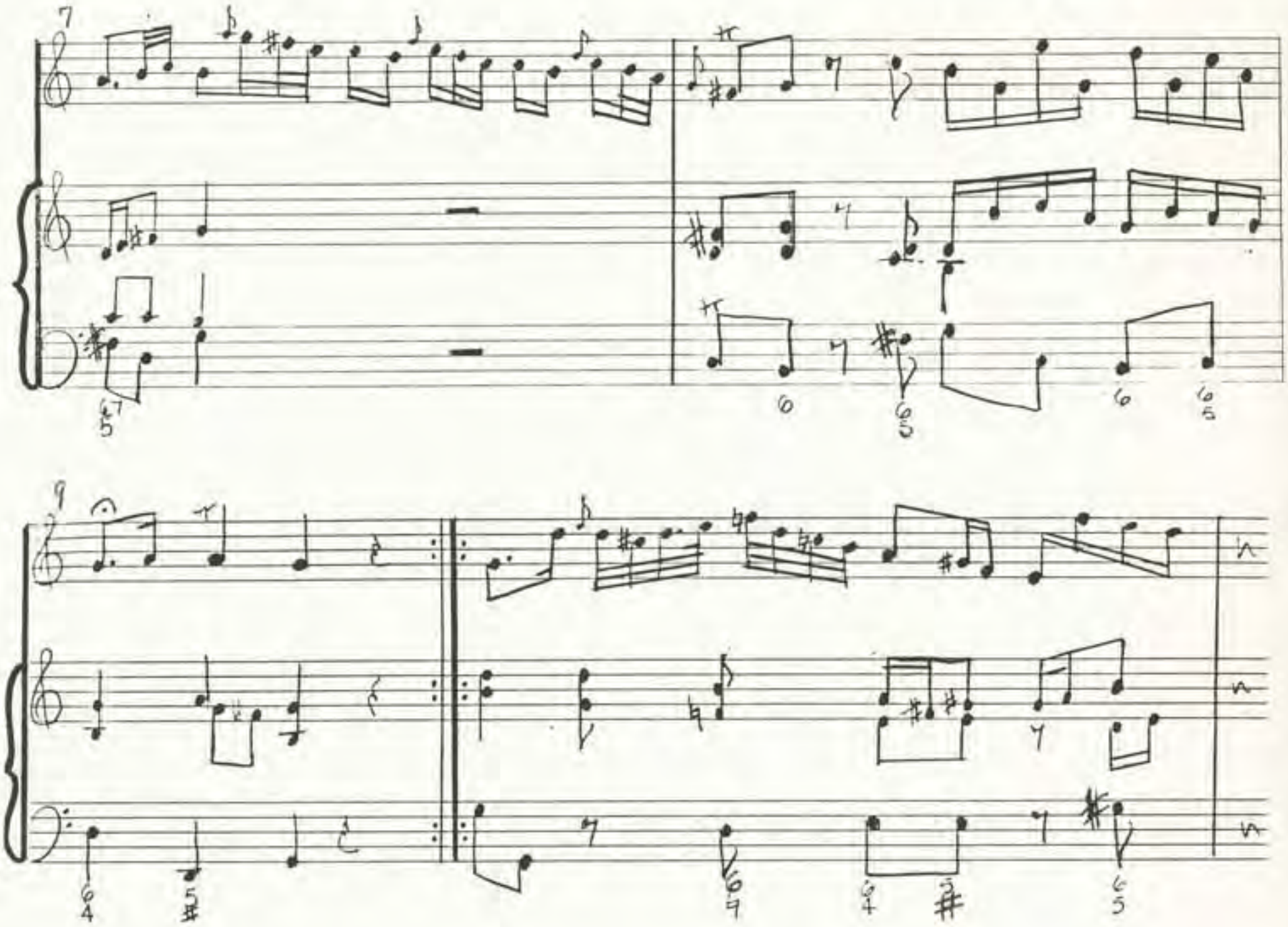
Kathleen Abromeit

Sonata I

Adagio

Anna Bon

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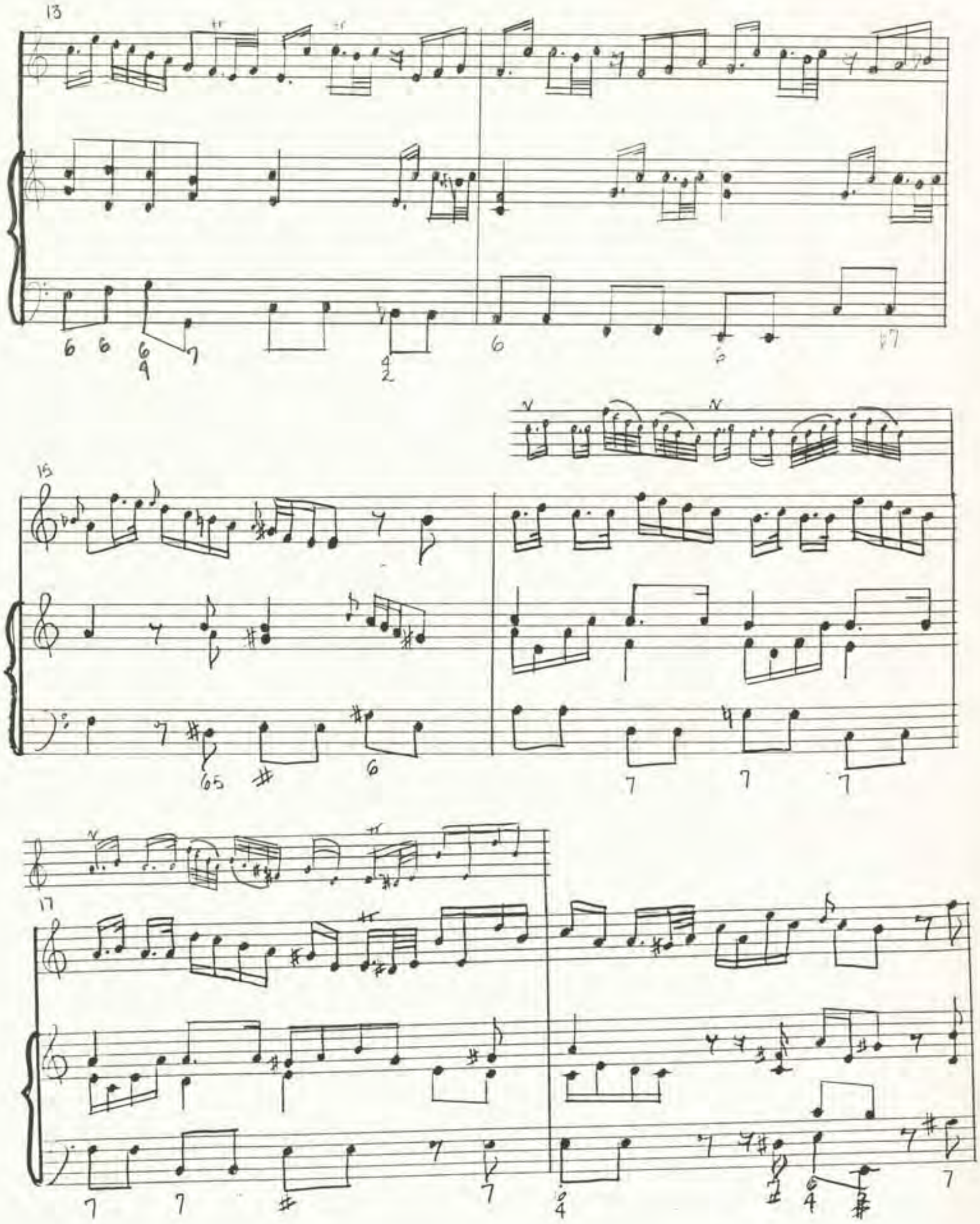
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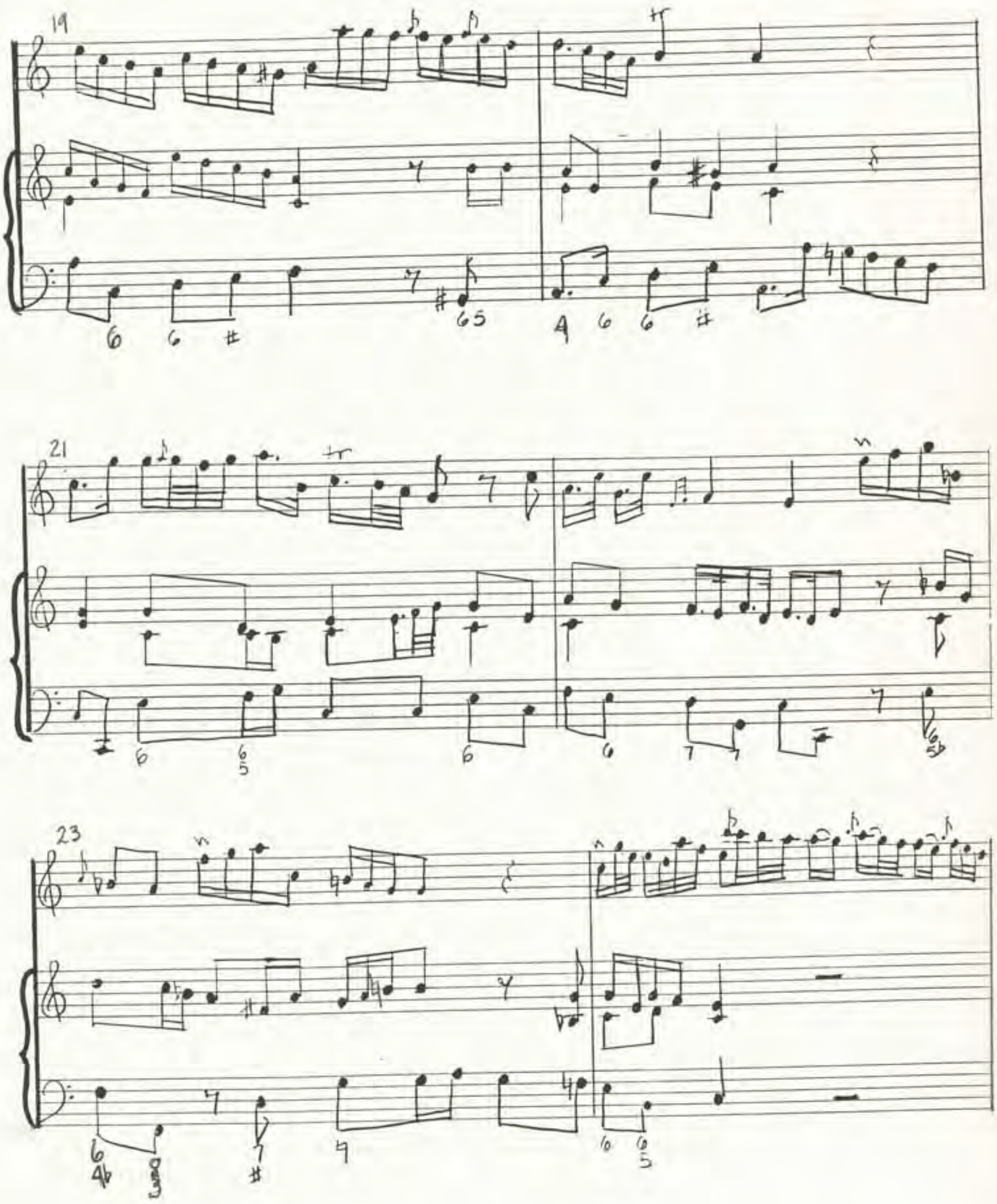
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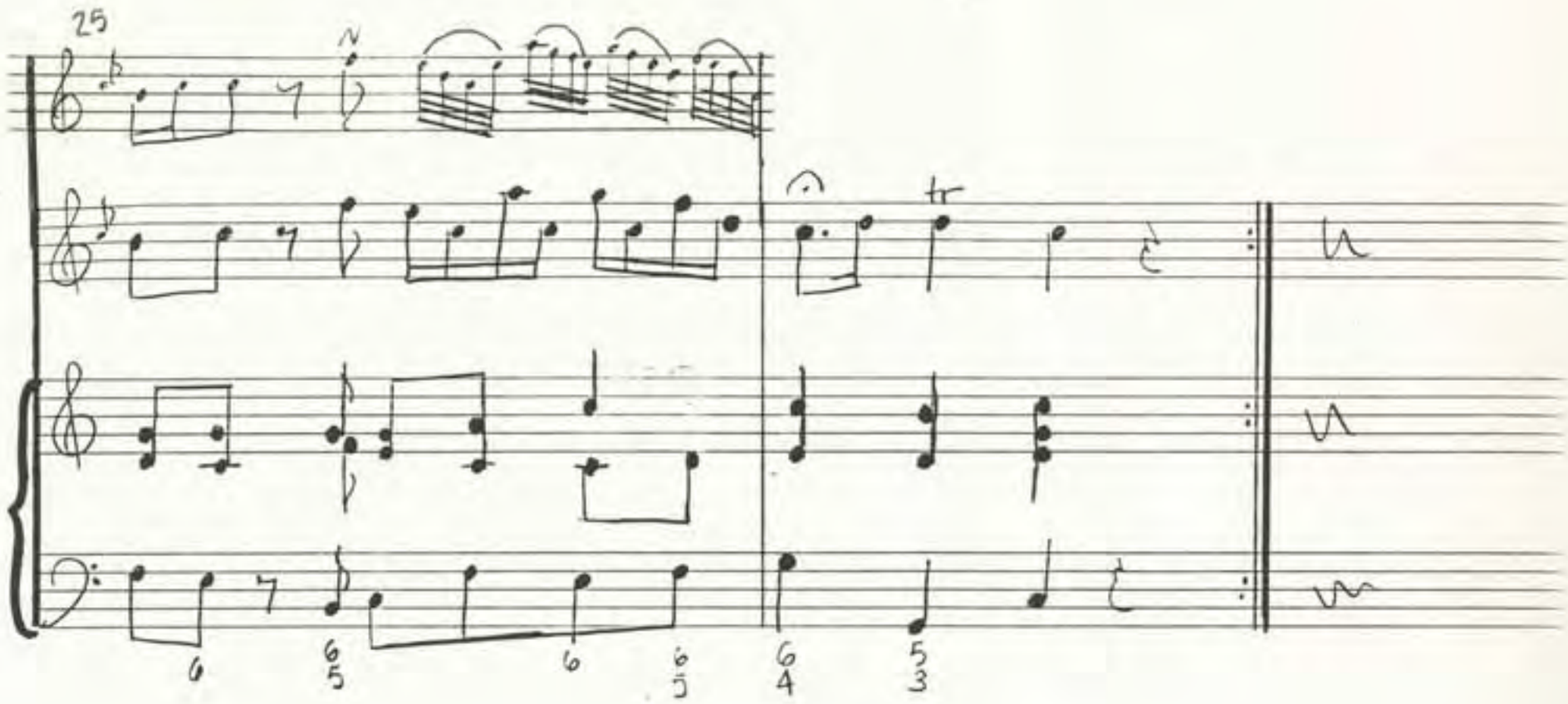
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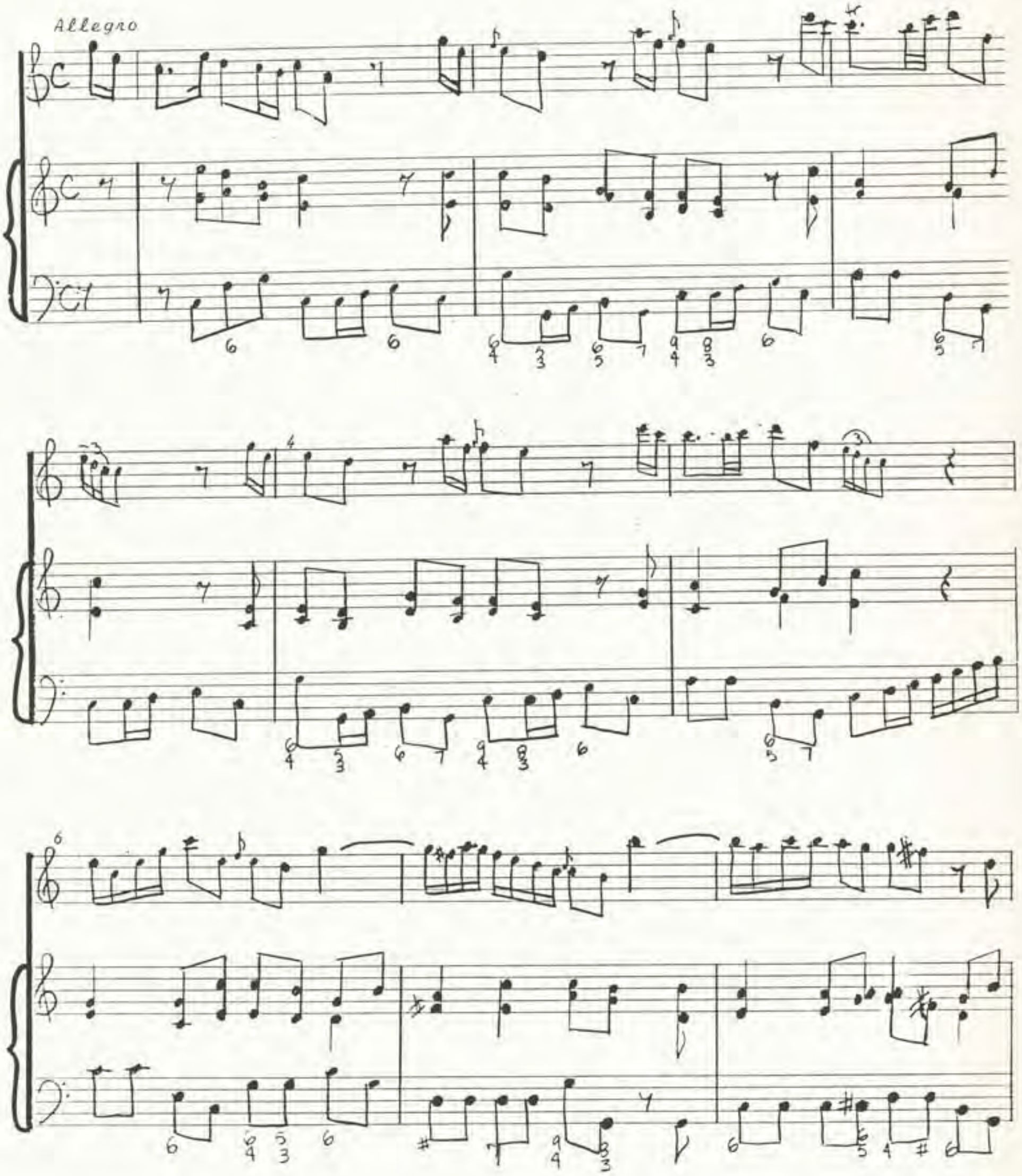

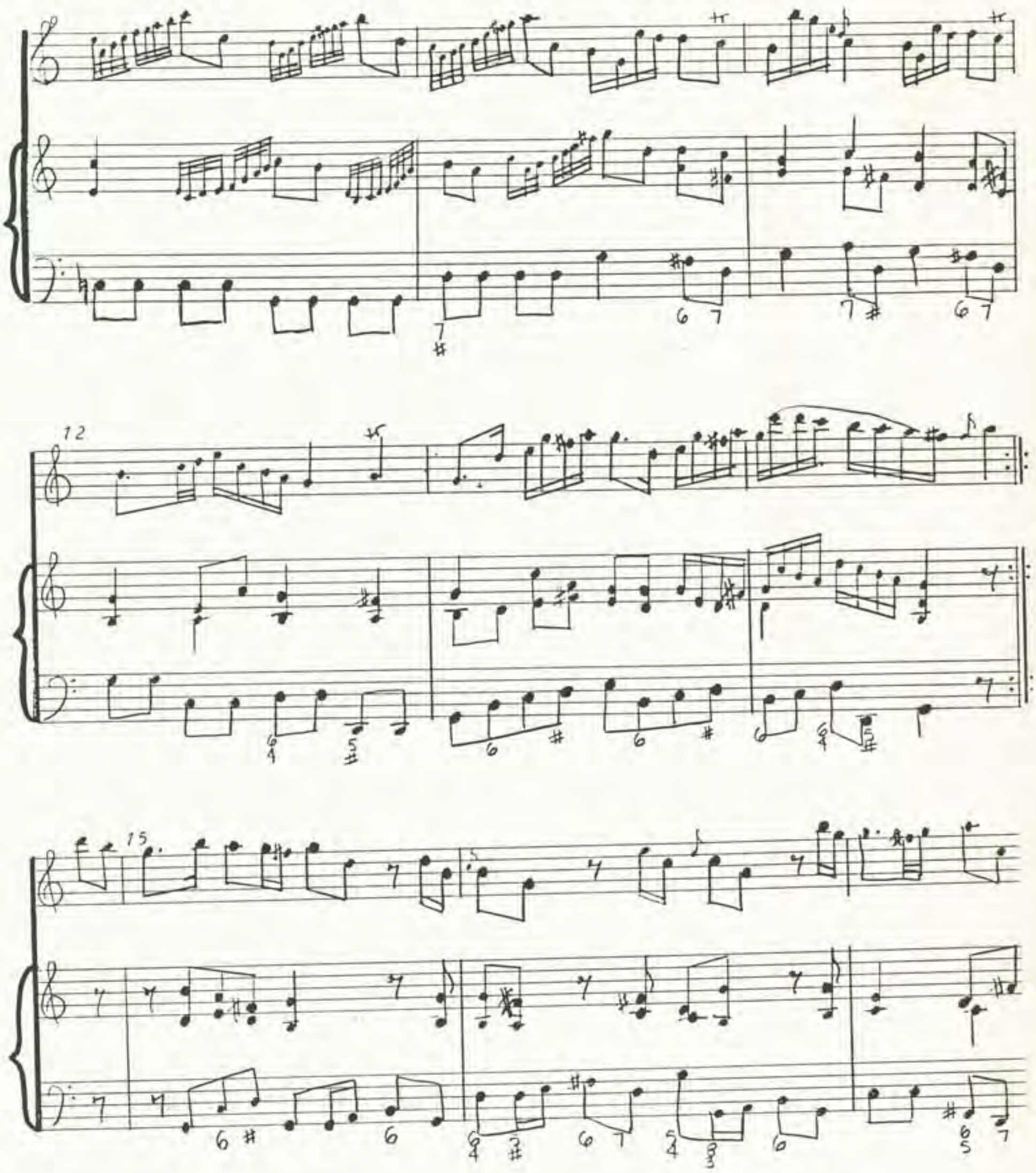
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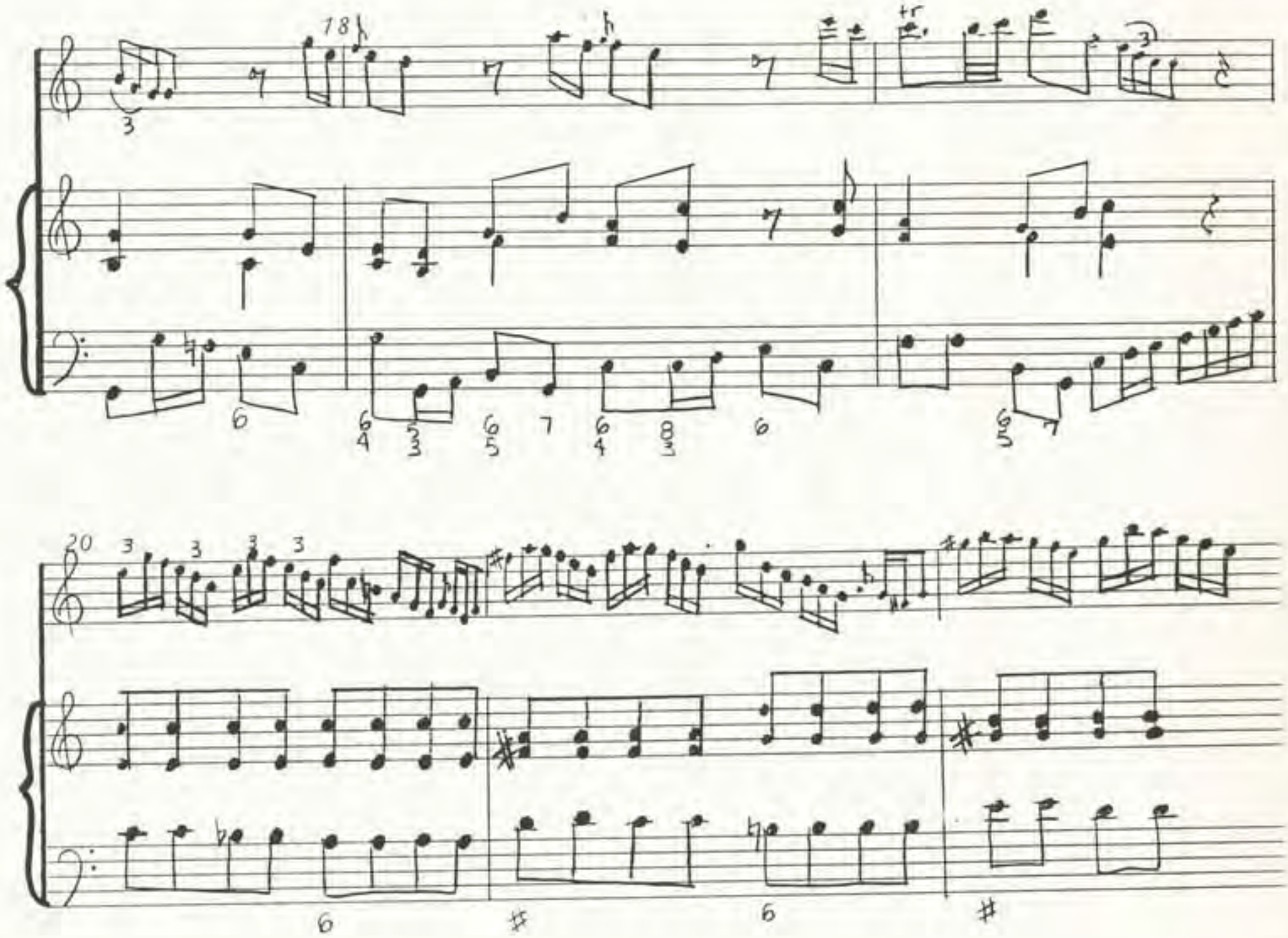
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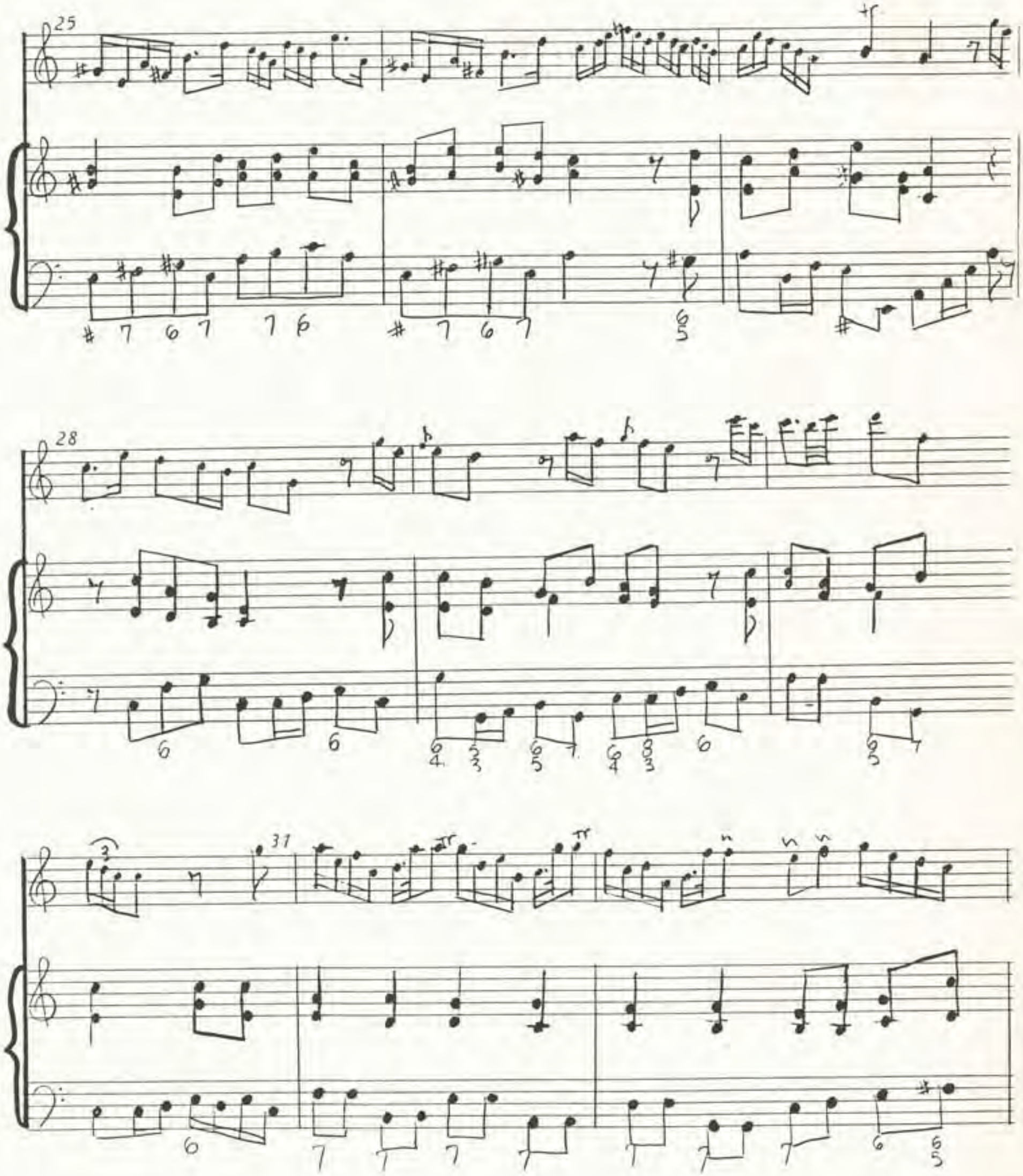
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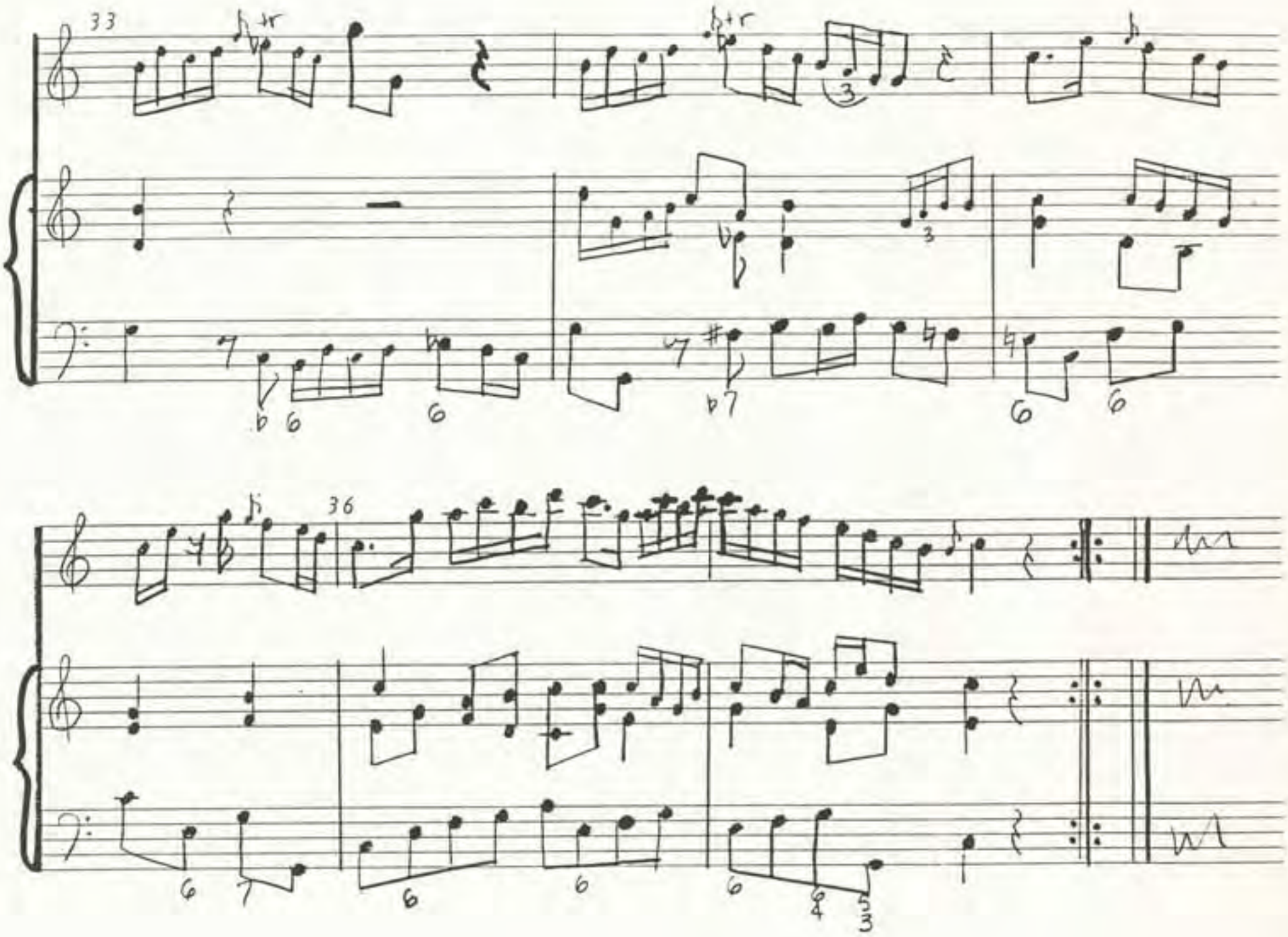
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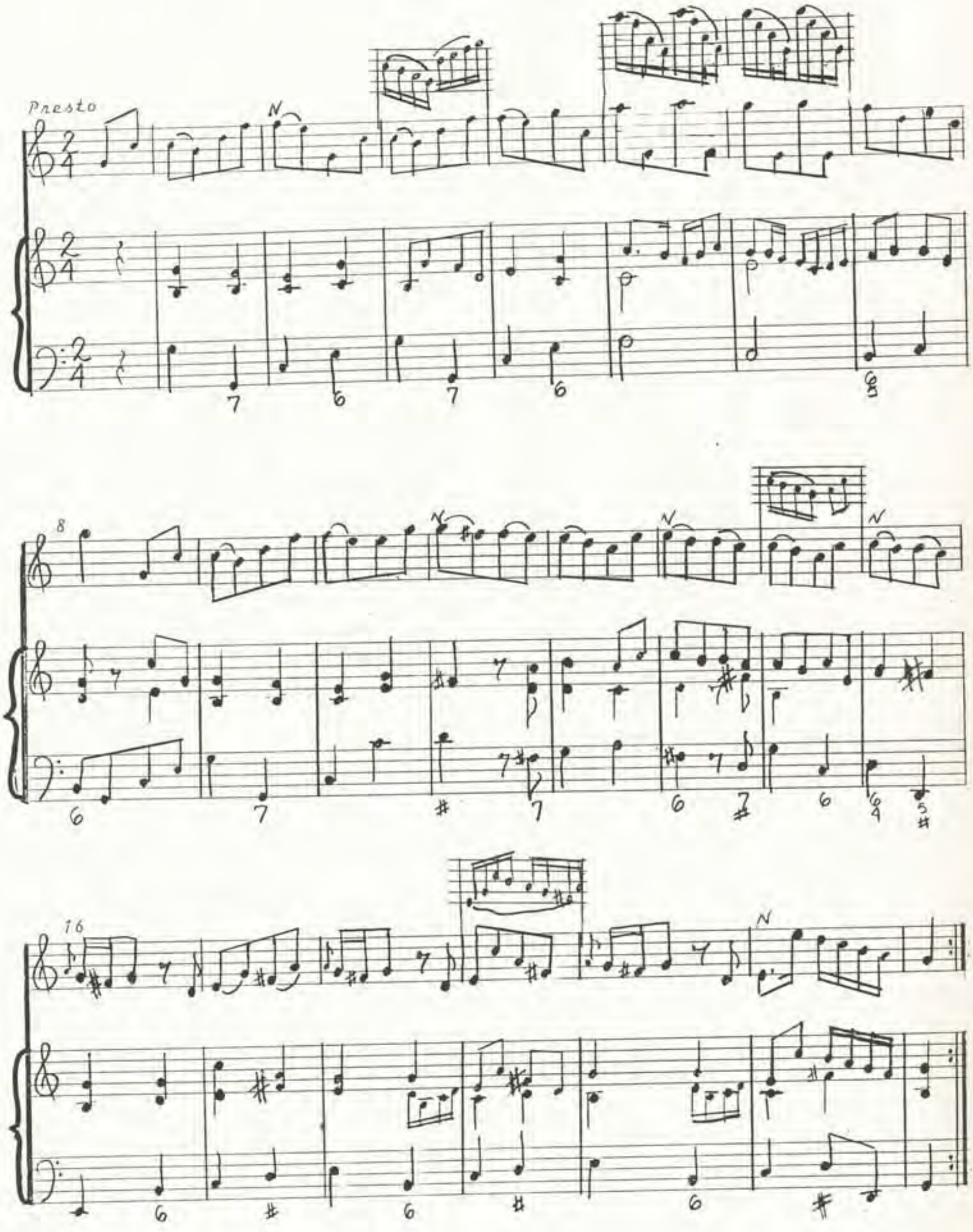
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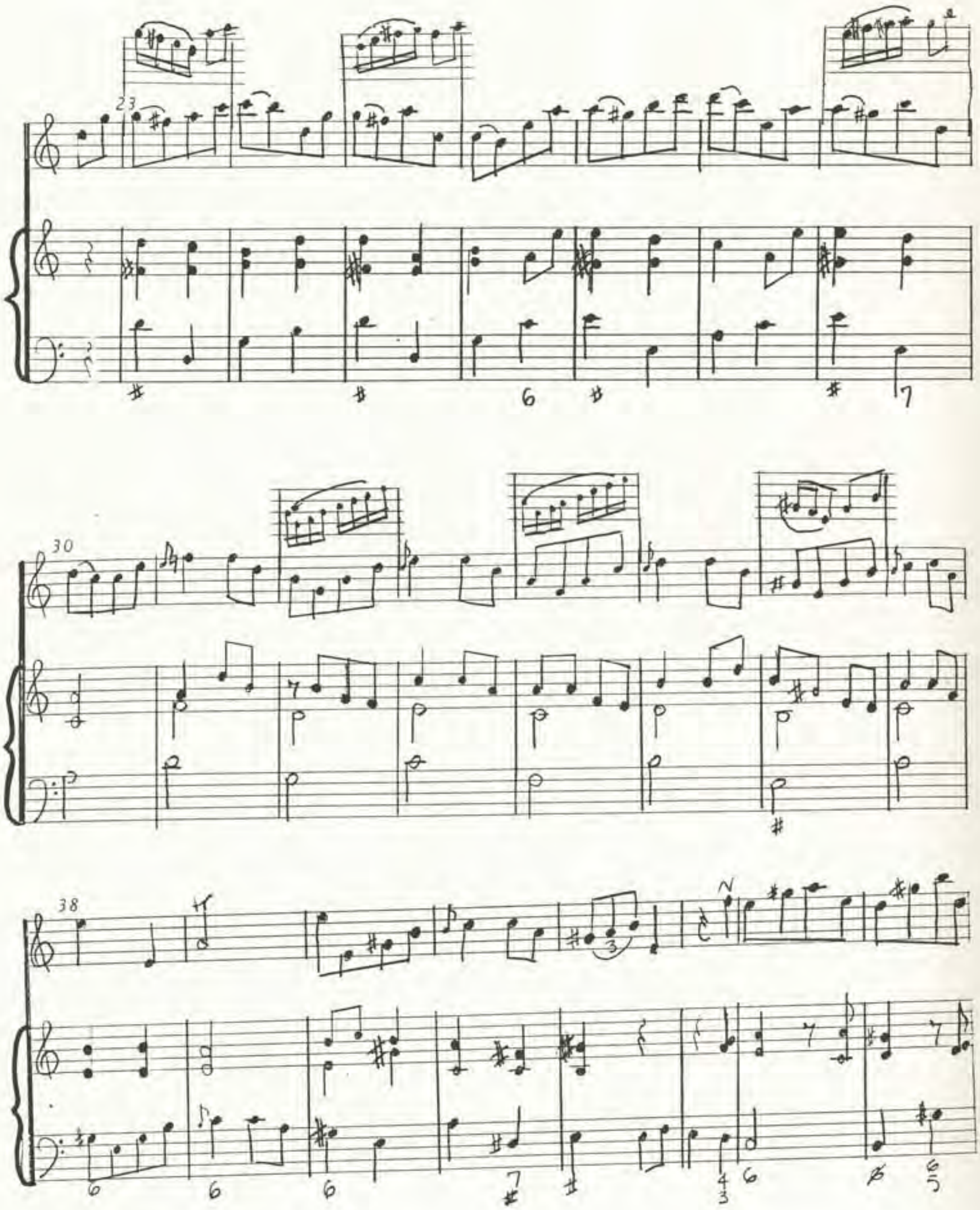
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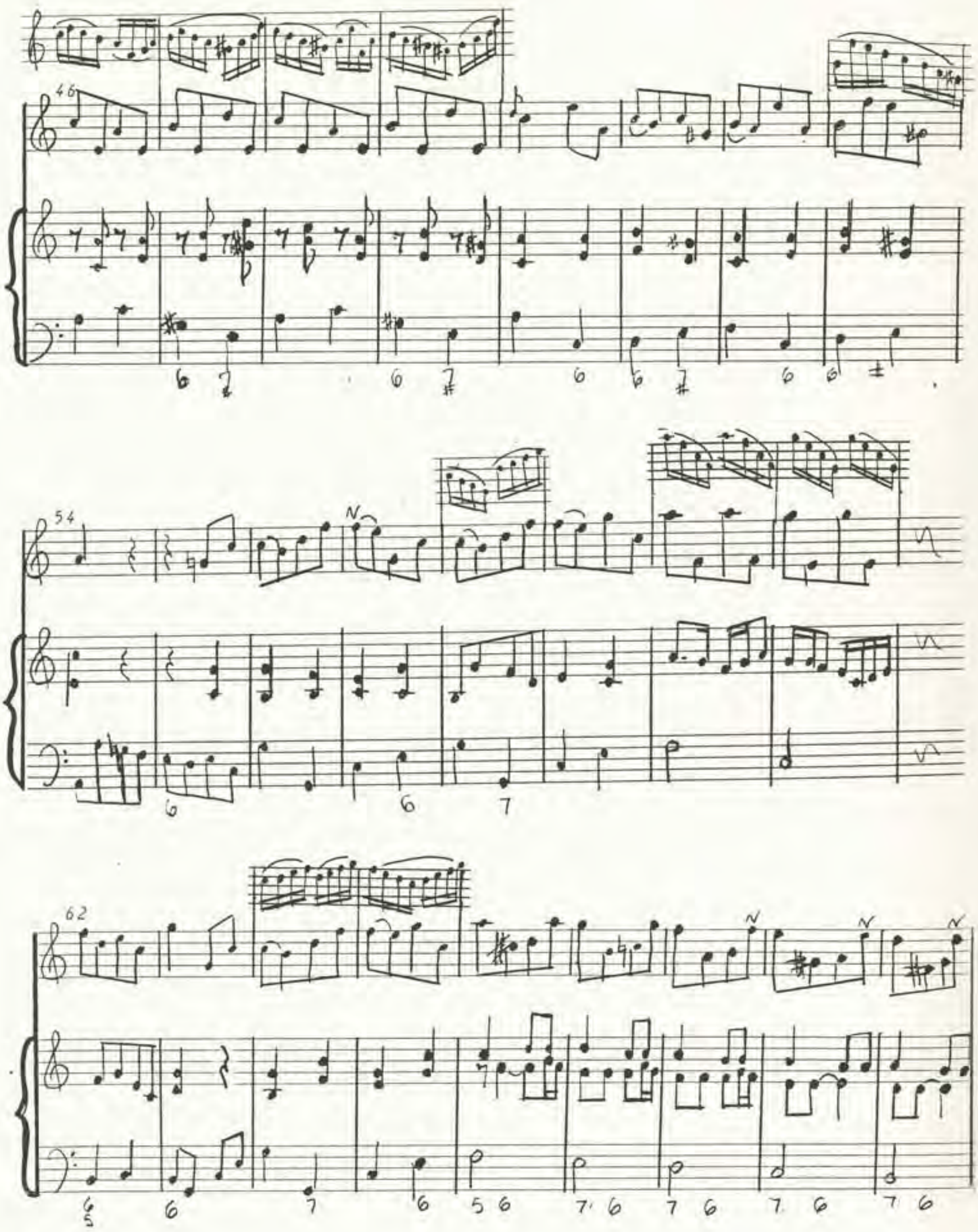
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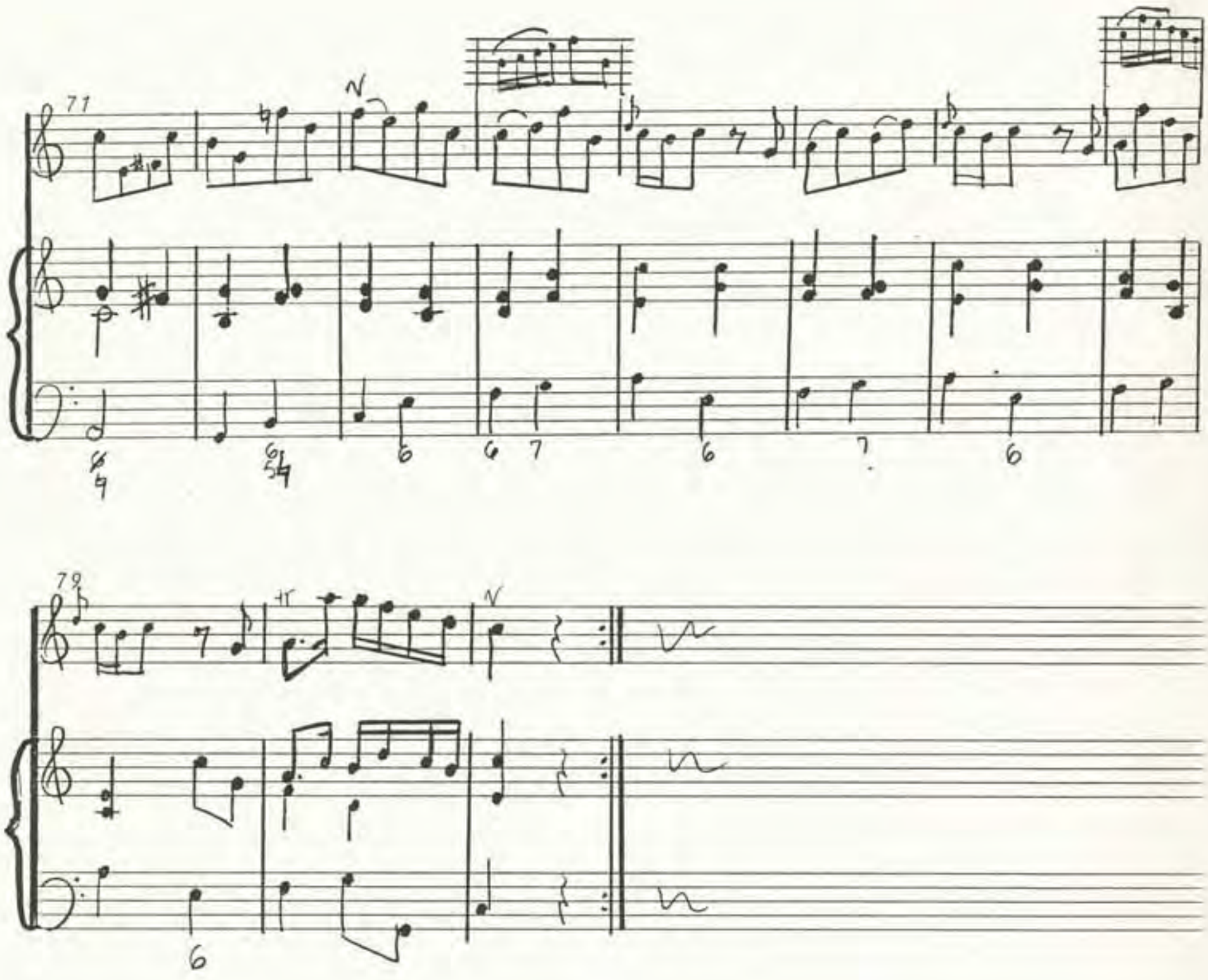
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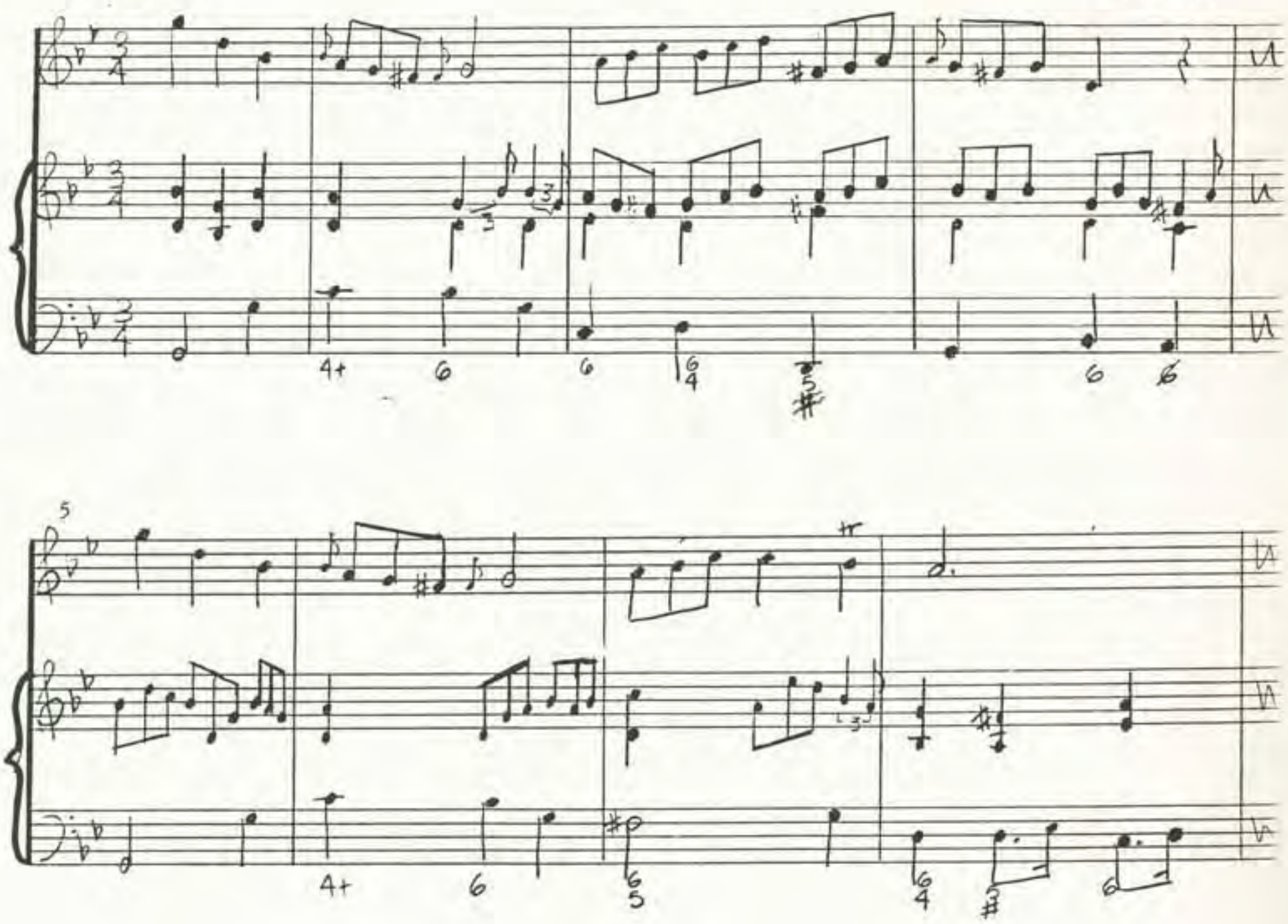

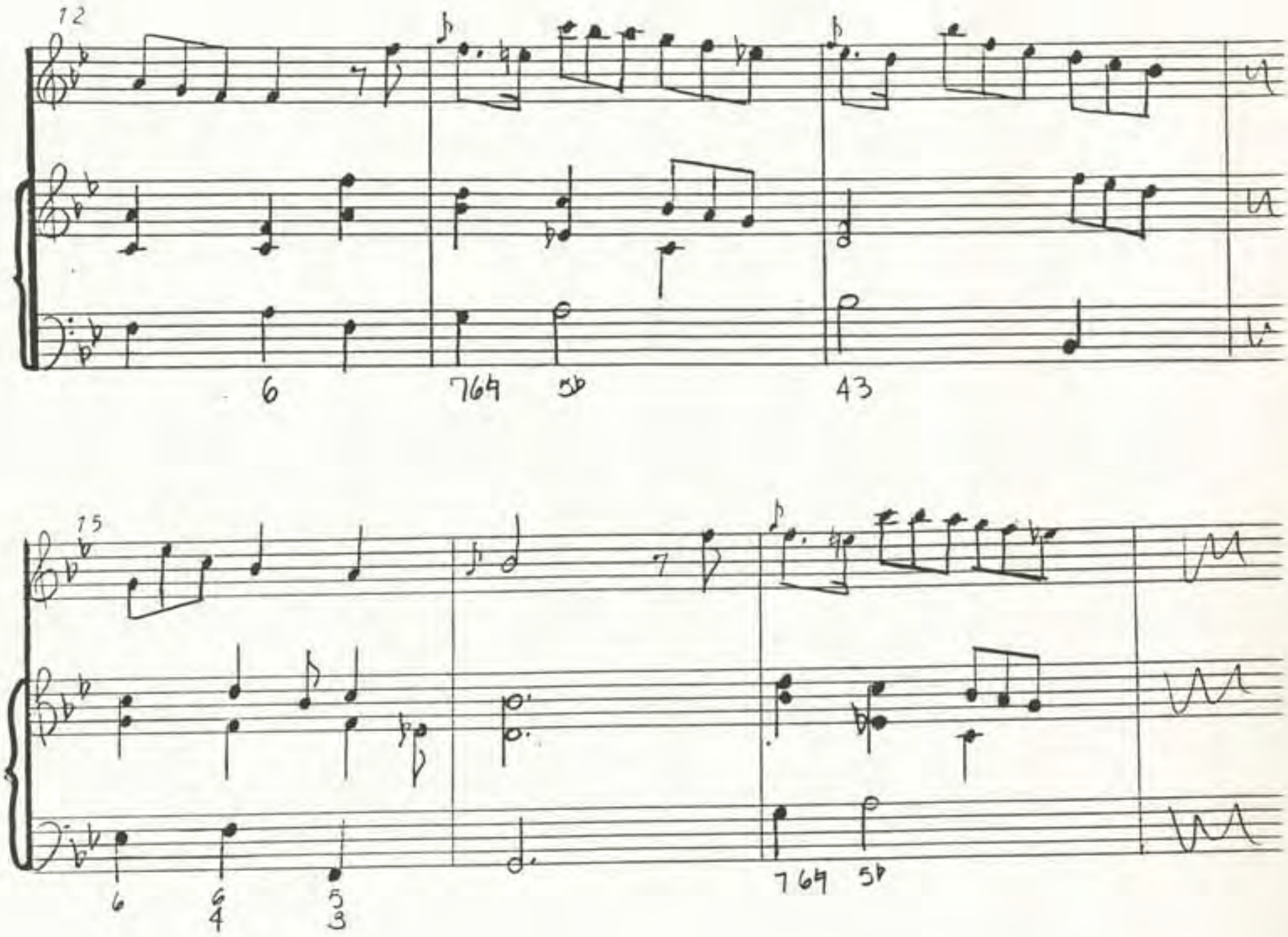
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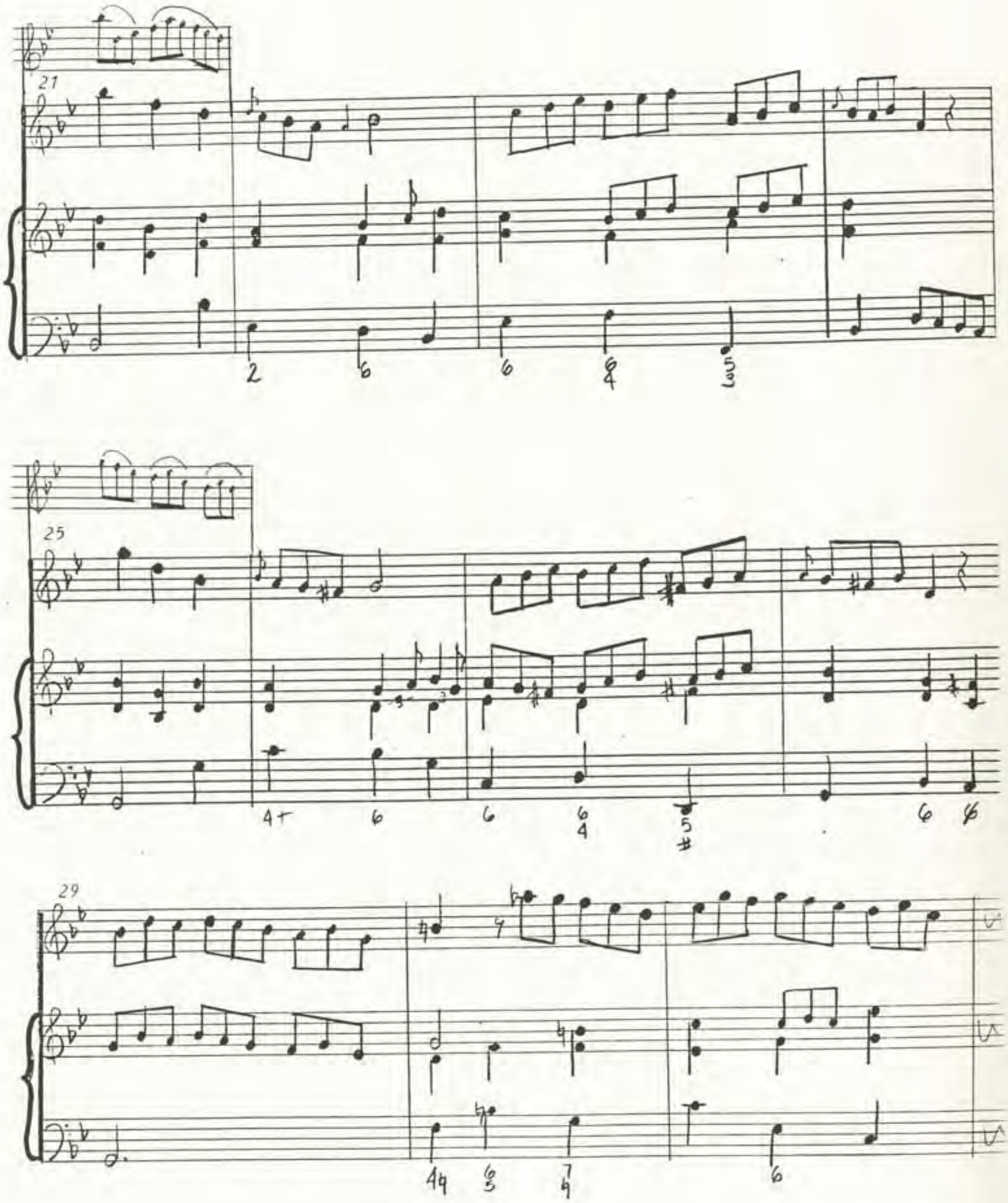
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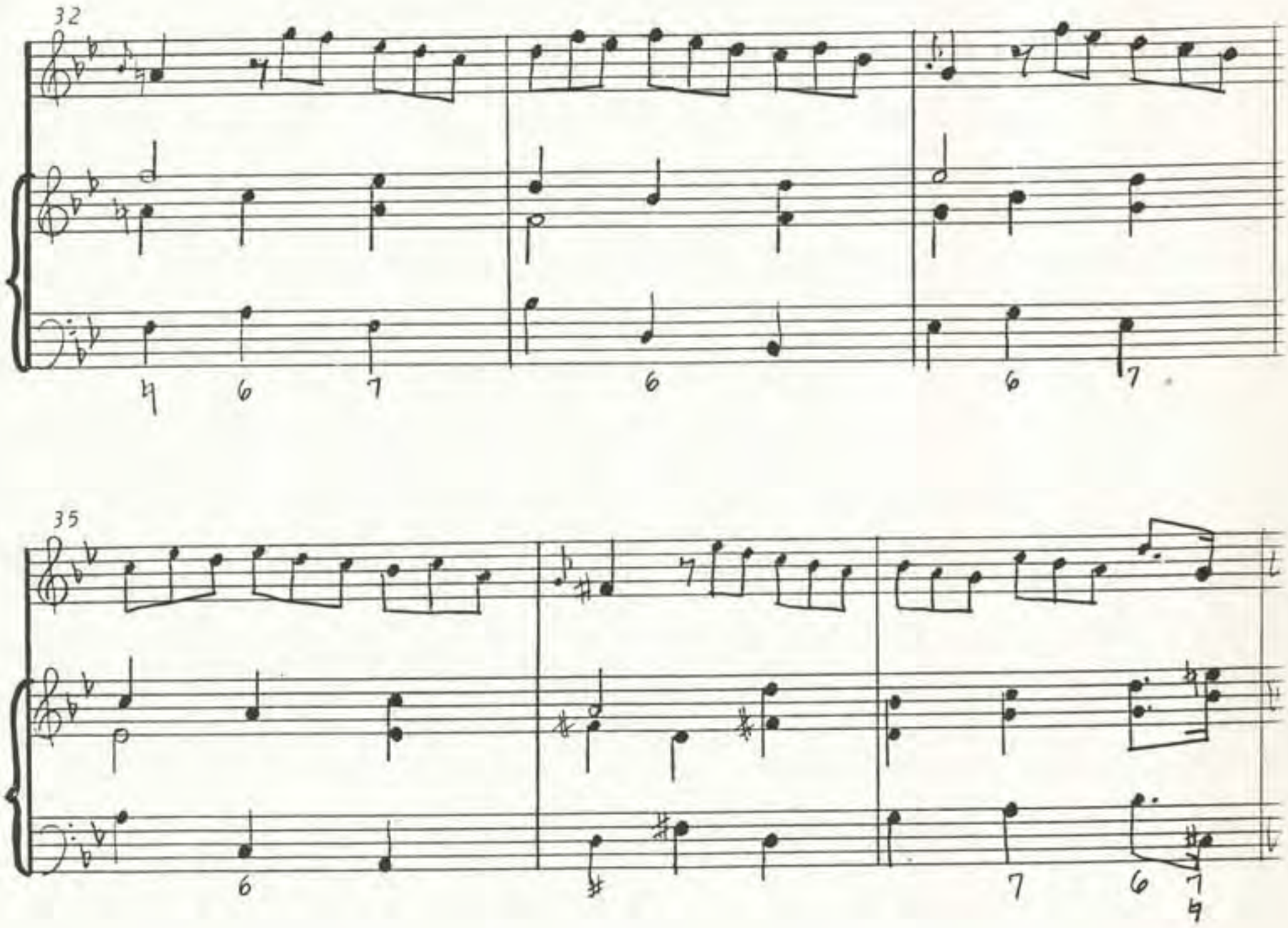
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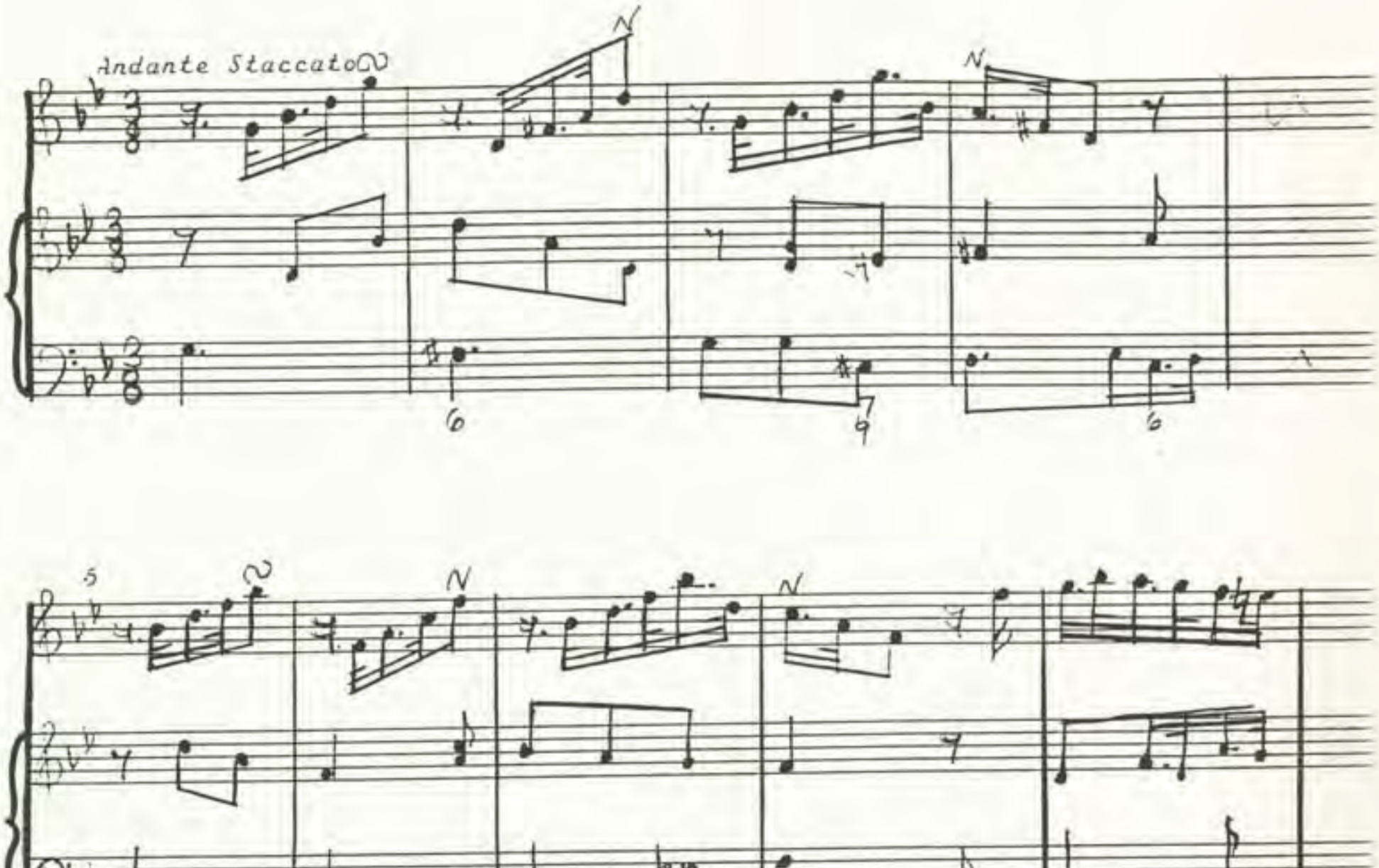
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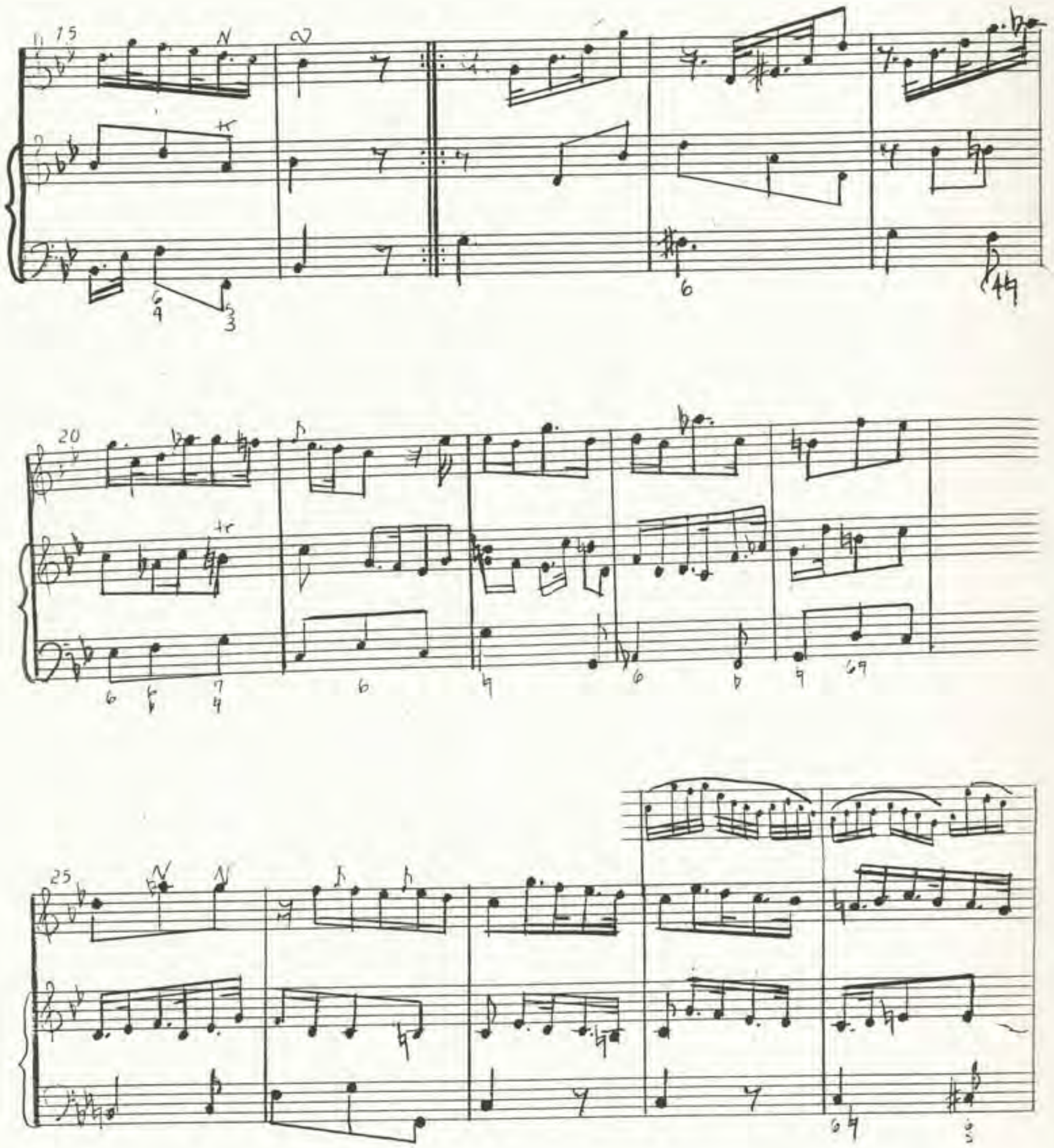
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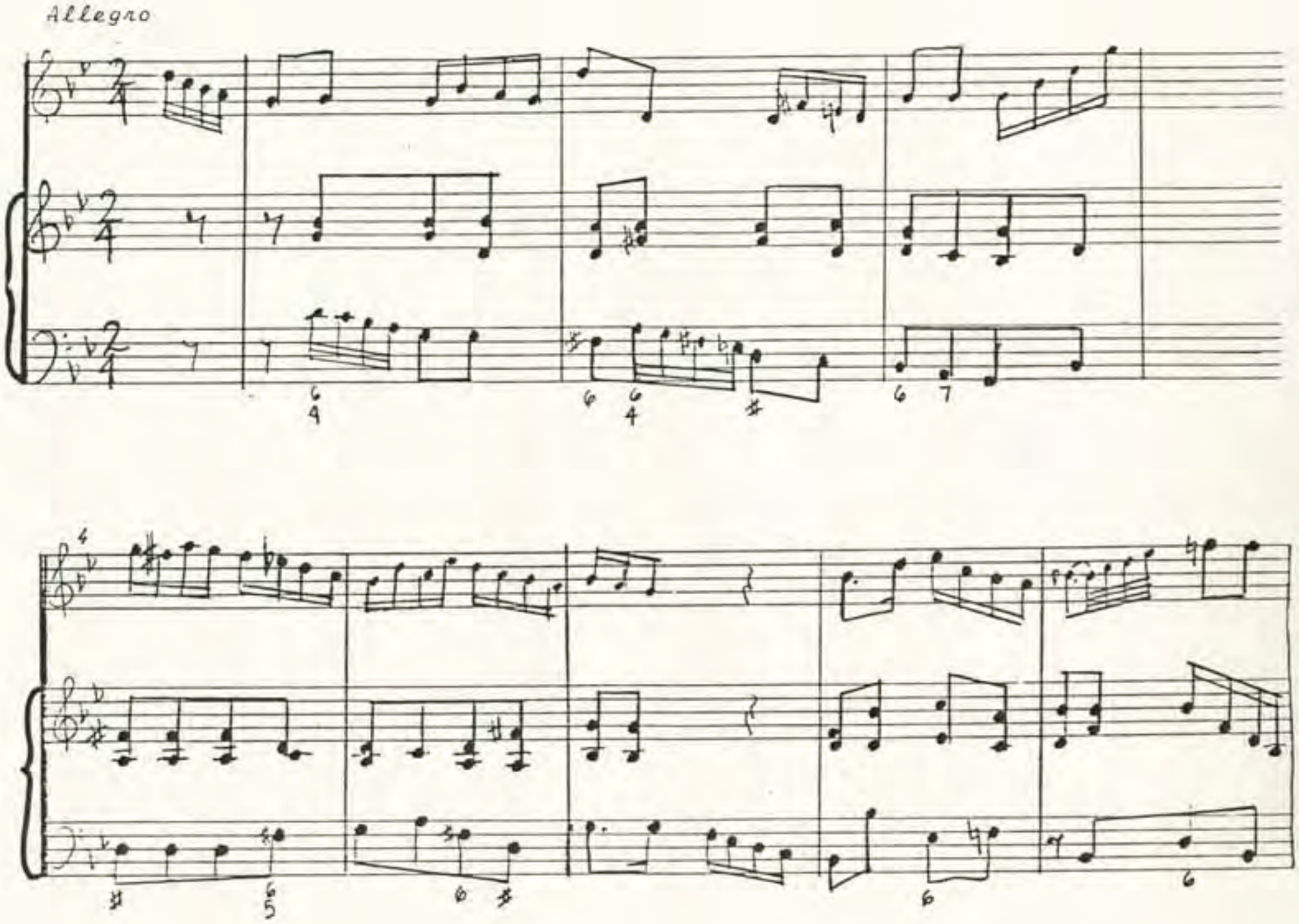

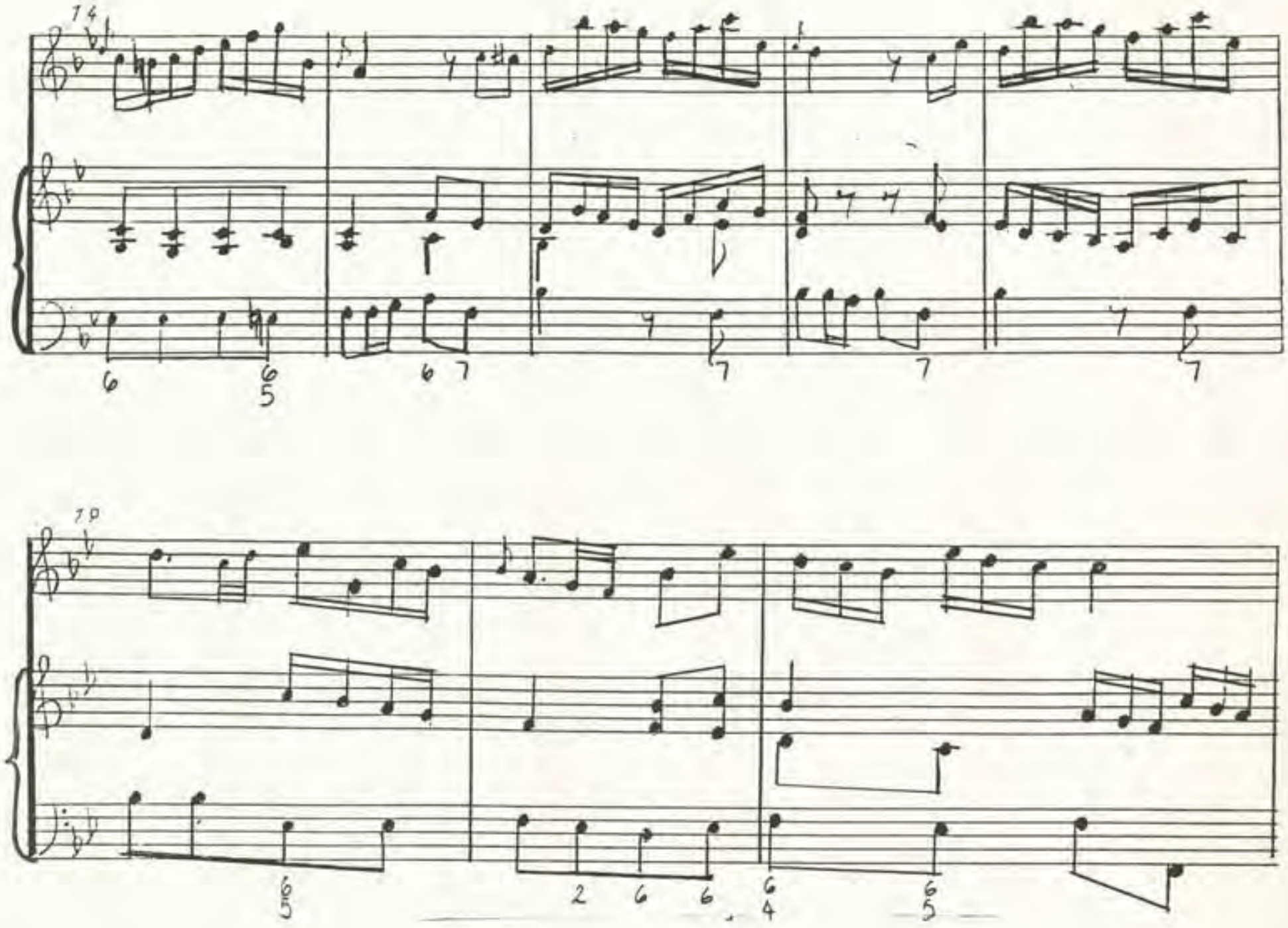
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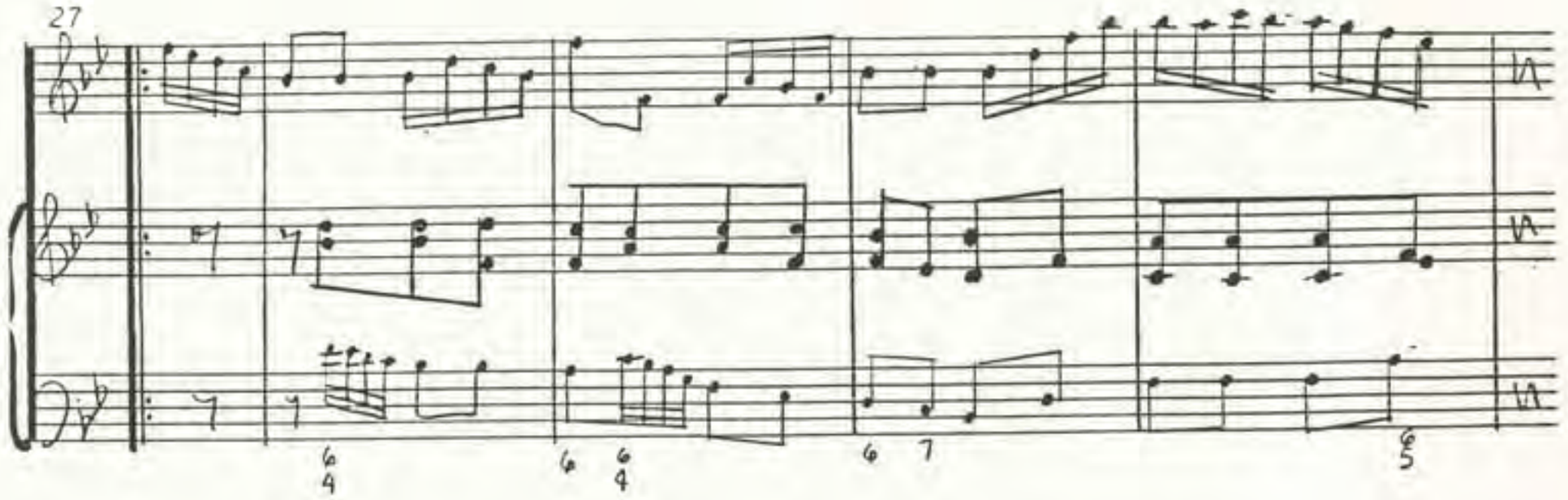
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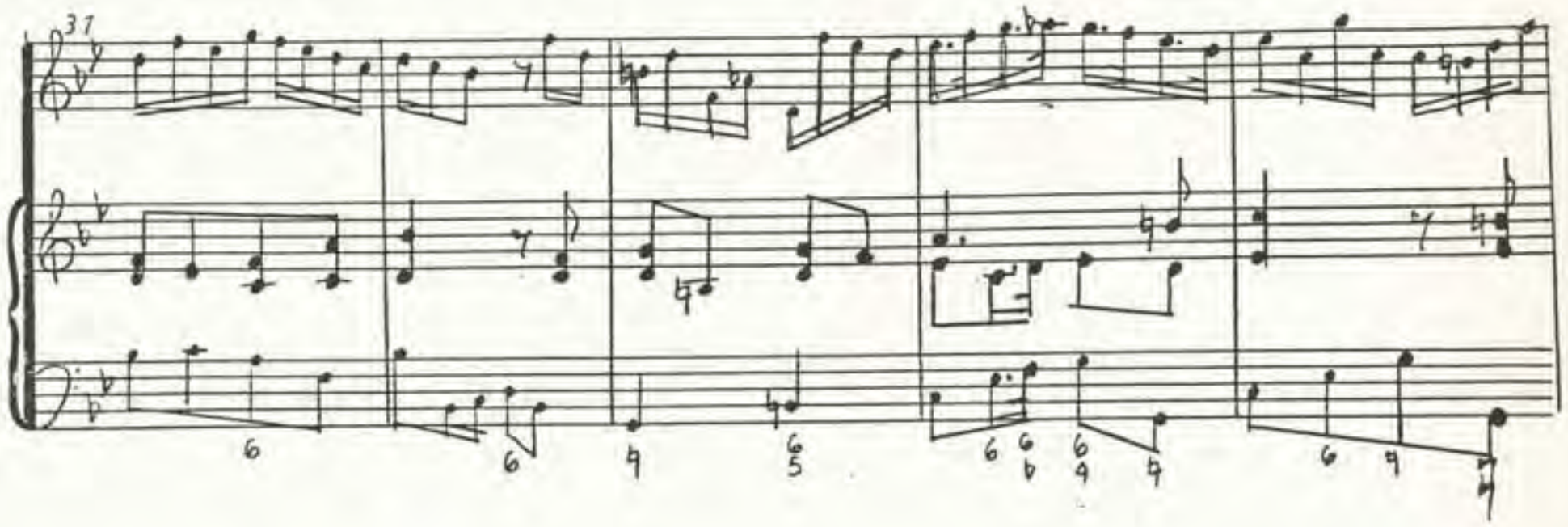
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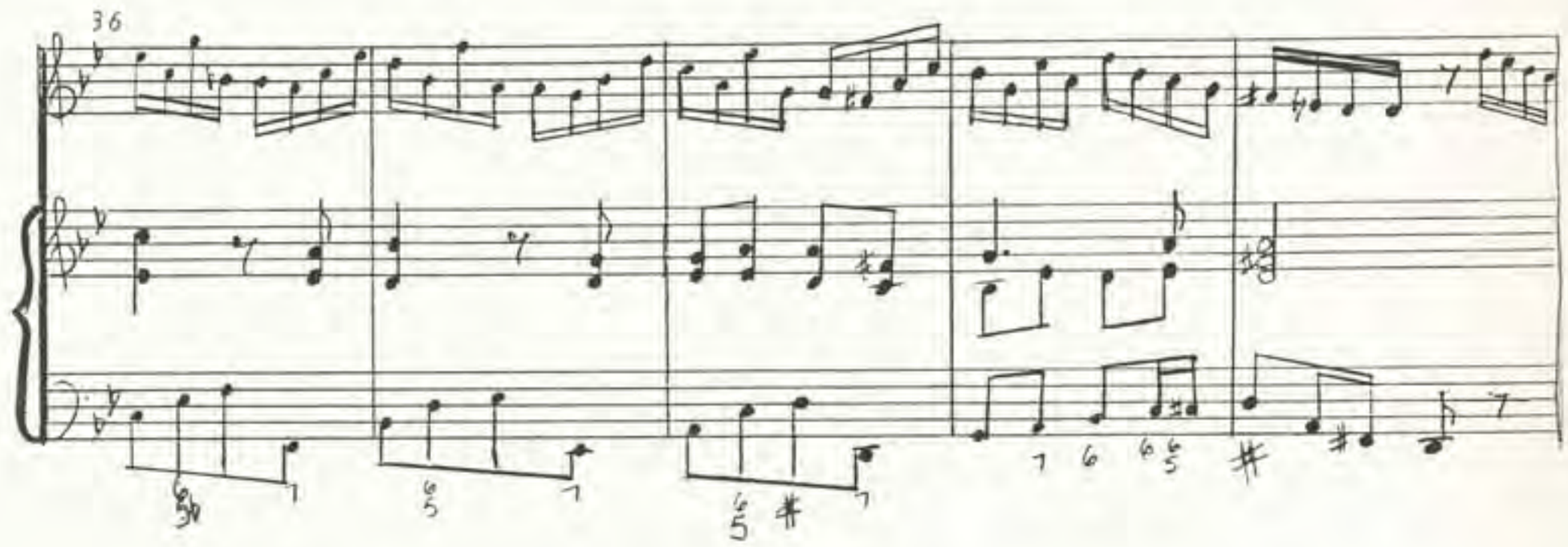
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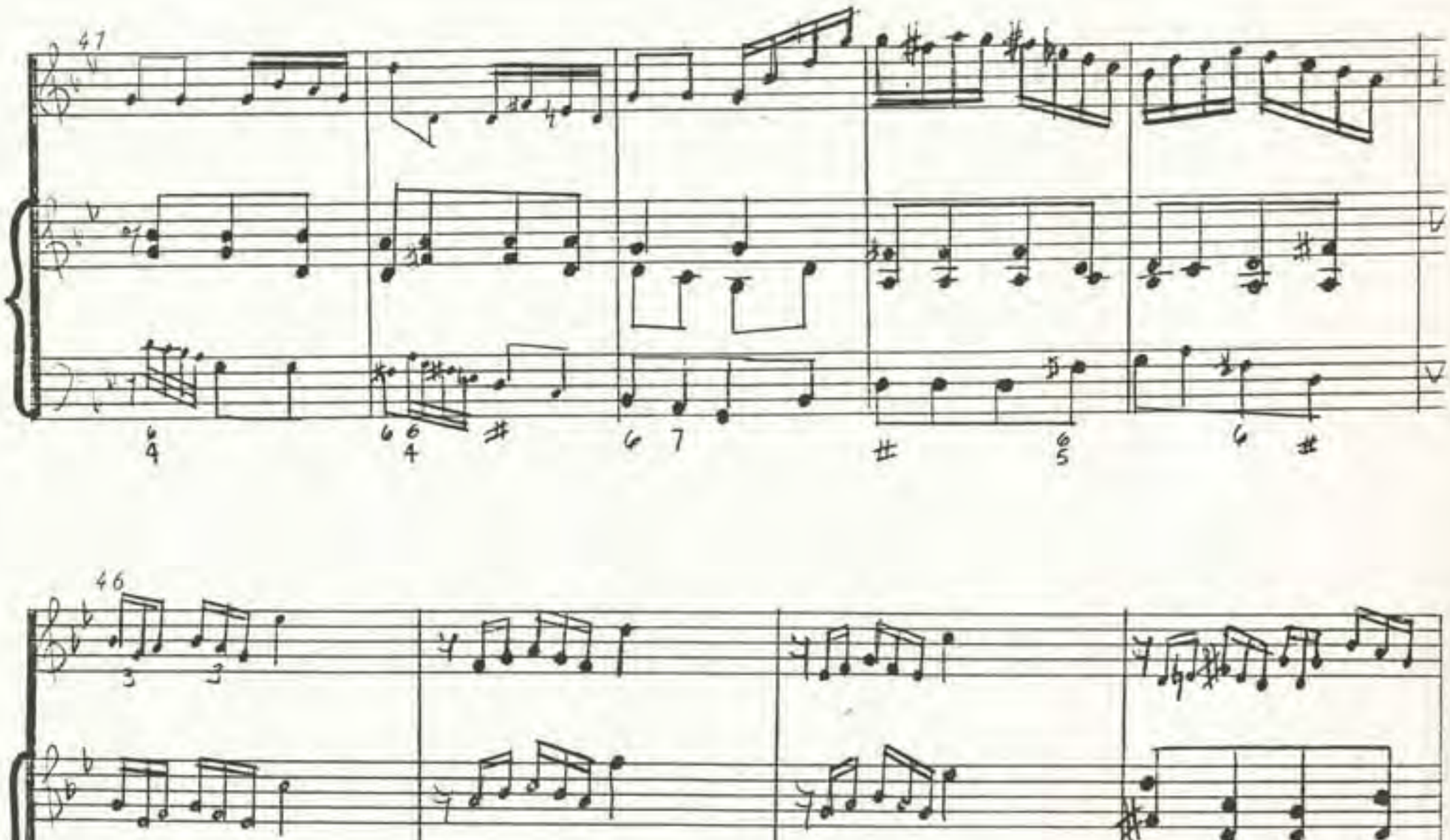
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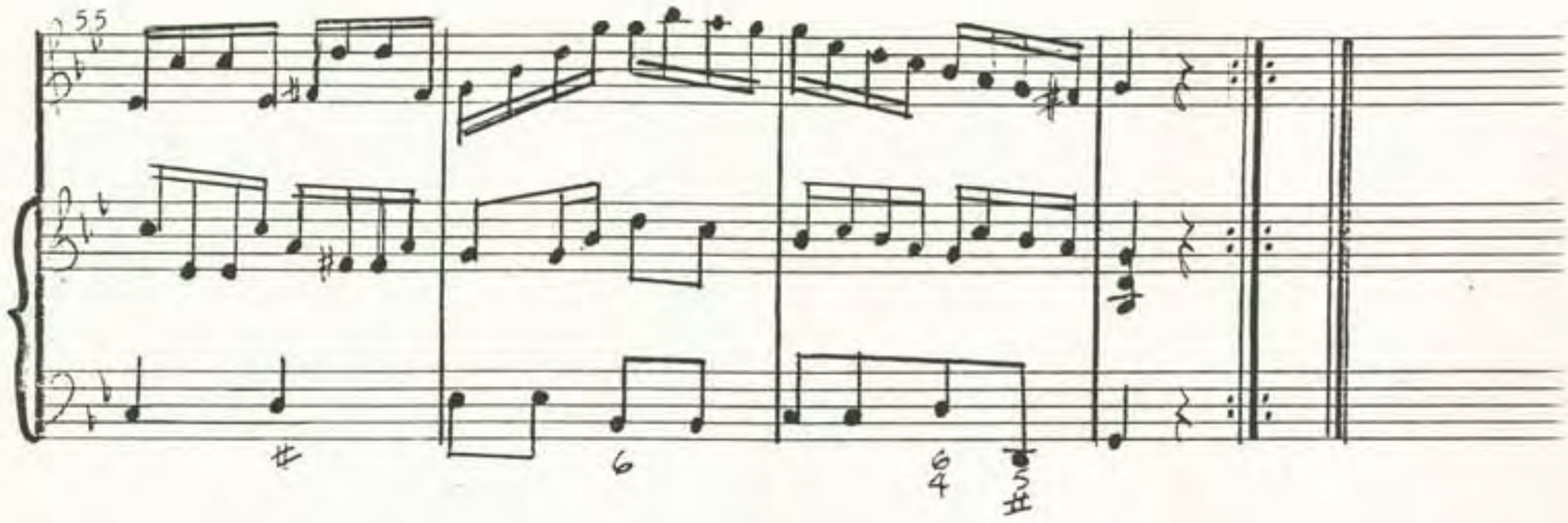
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