Marin Marais

COUPLETS DE FOLIES

transcribed for modern viola in C minor

Preface

Until fairly recently the music of Marin Marais was not particularly well known and his life was somewhat shrouded in mystery.

We know that he was born in 1756 of humble Parisian origins, that he was particularly gifted at the *viola da gamba* at a very young age, and that he was taken as a pupil by the great master of the era Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe. He is said to have progressed to professional status after only six months with Sainte-Colombe, and after playing in the Opéra, was taken under the wing of the omnipotent Lully who elevated him to the courtly position of *ordinaire* in the *musique de la chambre du roy.*

Commentators would later describe Marais' playing as "like an angel" and "an incomparable French violdigambist" whose works "were known by the whole of Europe". They speak not only of the sweetness and expressivity of his playing, but of the fire and flamboyance of his virtuosity.

It seems to have been Lully who fostered Marais' interest and progress in composition. Under Lully's tutelage and sponsorship Marais wrote some quite successful dramatic music for the Sun King at Versailles. However it is largely his instrumental music for which he is most celebrated. The fact that we know relatively little about his life is partly explained by the esoteric nature of his chamber repertoire, mostly for viols. His membership of the *chambre du roy* placed him in the elite of the amazingly rich and diverse musical life at Versailles at the very height of its ascendency. His repertoire would have been played and heard largely by the afficionados and connoisseurs, many of whom probably also played.

It must also be conceded that, in the glittering array of musical talent at Louis' court, Marais was but one of the great masters. His output was not exactly eclipsed but rather seen as the natural product of such a rich environment. It is also important to bear in mind that by the end of his career his beloved *gamba* was rapidly being overtaken by the new Cremonese fiddle family. He was a central figure in the acrimonious debate about the ascendency of French or Italian music. This debate and the comparisons to Corelli's new school of violin music, especially his *Follia* variations puts the *Couplet de Folies* in a very special light. The controversy about who copied whom, and the relative merits of both compositions is fascinating. However it is now clear that Marais' *Couplets* predate Corelli's by about twenty years.

To sum up, Marais' musical output has been, until fairly recently, the specialised province of viola da gamba enthusiasts, historians of French culture and particularly those interested in the glorious musical life at the court of the Sun King in Versailles.

In the wake of the early music rediscovery over the last 40 years or so (lead in no small measure by gambists, harpsichordists and recorder players, and fuelled by the recording industry), performers and musicologists look back with renewed interest at Marais and his contemporaries. Since the production of the film *Tous le Matins du Monde* there has been great popular interest in rediscovering his music. It seems to me that the wonderful playing of Jordi Savall can claim a great deal of the credit for this interest. His recorded performance of the *Folies* is revelatory and highly recommended for players of all instruments who contemplate studying this work.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

I never actually intended to produce a 'modern' version of the urtext for *Folies* but rather a complete and usable edition for modern viola and possibly the violin or cello, plus a study score for students of historical forms. This score was both the starting point and by-product of the process. It is based on a copy of the original 1701 version of the Second Book of Pieces for the Viol in the Paris Bibliotèque Nationale (rather poignantly containing the stamp of the Bibliotèque Royale). This same source is (I imagine) the basis of a facsimile version by Editions Fuzeau. I didn't work from this edition, which I assume is superb and highly instructive, but rather a copy of the original which my university library posesses.

The original published manuscript is beautifully and highly legibly engraved. Marais' intentions are very clear and this version contains his figured bass (unlike the earlier Edinburgh *ms* version). I recommend every serious student to see the original. Although I feel a little like a cultural vandal, from a practical point of view a modern typesetting is justified and necessary. For one thing the solo and the basso continuo are in separate parts. There is no duo score. For another, the notation is 'old fashioned' and in some cases a little puzzling to the modern reader. I am certainly no expert in French baroque music, nor am I a viola da gambist, but I can see that some of the particularity in the notation is very expressive (eg. *Couplet 12* where Marais has used every visual device available to insist on equal *staccato*). However in other cases the beaming of notes seems a little arbitrary and beholden to changes in clef or register. Although I have faithfully retained every slur and articulation I have sometimes modernized beaming (eg. *Couplet 7* or *Couplet 14* where the beaming might suggest an accent on the bow change). In such cases I hope my rendition both complies with modern rhythmic conventions but retains the ambiguity of the original.

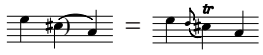
Clearly the whole question of ornamentation is a huge issue in late 17th Century instrumental music. Marais is very detailed and precise. I have tried to render the ornaments (the *tremblement*, the *batement*, the *plainte*, the *port de voix* and the *staccato* markings) in modern notation according to his own *Preface* to Books 1 & 2, but I have misgivings about using the ***tr*** sign as a substitute for the *tremblement*. If our modern sign for the 'inverted mordent' was more recognizable from the 'regular' mordent, and if modern players used it more intelligently I would have employed it. Perhaps I should have used the + sign from Italian and German instrumental music.

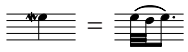
The two things I have **not** retained are the occasional bowing indications and the numerous fingerings. The *tirez* and *poussez* strokes are contrary to the modern fiddle's strong-weak strokes and are anyway available to the serious gambist in the facsimile. Likewise the fingerings are not essential for my current purposes.

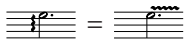
The following rules for ornamentation are quoted and very slightly adapted from the Preface to Books I & II.

THE RULES FOR GRACES (ORNAMENTS)

(According to the *Preface* to Books I and II)

The *Tremblement* (shake/trill) 

The *Batement* (mordent) 

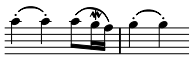
The *plainte* (vibrato) 

is usually played with the little finger, pivoting the hand back and forth.

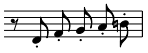
The *port de voix (appoggiatura)*

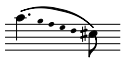
is indicated by a single small note which does not belong to the measure, called a "lost note"; when several of these grace notes appear together, they do not indicate a *port de voix*, but slides which may or may not be played without affecting the piece, and which I have indicated simply to provide variety in interpretation.

(*Staccato*) dots placed above or below slurred notes indicate that several notes must be taken with a single bow stroke as if each were bowed separately, achieved by lightly pressing the finger resting on the hair of the bow.



Dots placed above (or below) non-slurred notes indicate that each note must be given equal value, instead of being played in dotted rhythm as is customary: when no such dots appear the notes may still be played as if they were there, since the style of the piece sometimes calls for this naturally, for example *Allemandes* which do not require this notation and I have given it only in places where some doubt might occur, even in the thoroughbass parts; these dots are very much in use abroad.



Dots set out as in the example: 

Represent small grace notes which may be played, or not played if one prefers to perform the piece in straight fashion.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more detailed discussion of the earliest versions and aspects of playing the *Couplets* on the viola da gamba, I recommend Jonathan Dunford's essay at *jonathan.dunford.free.fr.* For a fascinating and comprehensive overview of musical life at the court of the Sun King I can recommend Christopher Hogwood's book "Music at Court" (1977, The Folio Society, London), plus my most favourite history text "Music in Western Civilization" by Paul Henry Lang (1941, W.W. Norton & Co, New York).

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August 2016
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ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPTION

It is not really necessary to justify transcribing a work like this for an instrument other than the viola da gamba, but for what it's worth Marais himself encouraged it. In the Preface to the Second Book of Pieces for the Viol (1701):

> *"These pieces are fashioned in a different manner from those of my first book; in composing them I made sure they were suitable for playing on different kinds of instruments such as the organ, harpsichord, theorbo, lute, violin, German flute, and dare I flatter myself that I have succeeded, for I have tried them out on the latter two.*
> *The thoroughbass is rather melodious, which will greatly facilitate the task of anyone caring to take the trouble to adapt it to each particular instrument."*

Having said that, there are clearly some problems associated with the job of transcribing any viola da gamba music for the modern viola.

1. The gamba Marais used had seven strings, tuned to A1, D, G, c, e, a, d, vaguely similar to the lute or guitar (plus the extra low string). This means it could play six-note chords easily.
2. This tuning means that the key of D is "native" to the instrument, with the low A1 providing the lower dominant at cadences.
3. The figurations, especially those employing broken chords, make perfect sense on the gamba, but much less sense for the modern viola or cello.
4. The *tirez* and *poussez* bowing indications are contrary to the natural down-up emphasis of the modern fiddle.
5. The low *tessitura* of most of the writing, if retained, creates a few problems for a continuo accompaniment realization.

I have attempted to solve these dilemmas by firstly transposing the piece into the more "native" key of C minor, and in the case of the viola, transposing some of the material up an octave. Where and how to do this without distorting the line is a matter of judgement and preference. Most of it now sits quite well on the instrument and the tonic-dominant chords can be played with the same flourish clearly intended in the original.

In some cases I have included an *ossia* line where players can decide which octave register for themselves. However I have tried to retain the colour and variety of the original sonorities as much as possible.

Where the solo line or the bass line stray outside the range of viola and cello (and this is the case even in D minor) I have tried to retain the original shape of the line while displacing the octave. Where and how to do this is again a matter of personal preference. It is an issue (e.g.) at final cadences where the 7th string on the bass gamba provided a low A to approach the bottom D upwards. However approaching from below does not seem to be an invariable rule.

I have faithfully retained all of Marais' slurs, bowings and articulations. Bowings are usually quite symmetrical and emphasise the first beat as one should in a Sarabande. Very rarely is it necessary to depart from the original bowings, even though they were once back-to-front.

PERFORMANCE SUGGESTIONS

Every effort should be made to capture the *affect* of the individual variations. Without this they will sound dull and characterless. Every expressive resource should be employed–dynamics, ornamentation, colouration, articulation and rhythmic inflection.

Chords, especially the three and four note variety, should mostly be broken or spread like strumming the lute.

Wherever possible choose 1st position fingerings for the longest and most resonant string length. Use lots of open strings for the "native" resonance.

Do not be afraid to let the bow leave the string. Many of the flamboyant gestures benefit from this and the chords ring longer if not stifled by a stationary bow.

The question of *notes inegale* is tricky and hotly debated by early music enthusiasts. Donington gives an excellent overview of the topic. Marais himself gives us a clue in his Preface when he said that it was more the rule than the exception to play passages of unslurred notes with a "dotted" rhythm. A modern equivalent is the way that Scottish and Irish folk-fiddlers "bend" the rhythm to give an extra lilt or swing. So do jazz players. It's part of the "feel" or style.

Although Marais indicates the *plainte* (vibrato) notes quite clearly, I doubt it should be restricted to just those few notes on the modern instrument. However it should definitely be seen as another ornament, a means of intensifying the expression of special notes, and not an habitual tremble on every note like post-19th century fiddling. The agogic accent (the long 2nd beat in the Sarabande) particularly benefits from this intensification.

Marais never indicates different tempi between variations (unlike Corelli where they are quite specifically indicated). Marais probably assumed that all performers would recognise the *affect* of each variation according to its rhythmic subdivisions and melodic inflections. My advice is to listen to performances by experts like Savall, Dunford *et al.*

The same is true for dynamic markings. They too should be the servant of the prevailing affect. Every effort should be made to characterize each variation dynamically and colouristically.

The actual ornaments have been spelled out according to Marais' Preface, but actually playing them should never be perfunctory or mechanical. For example the length of the preparatory note to the *tremblement* or the *port de voix* itself should be taken in context and by feel, again according to the *affect*. In slow variations they should have a langorous expressive quality whereas in quicker variations they should be more vigorous and snappy.

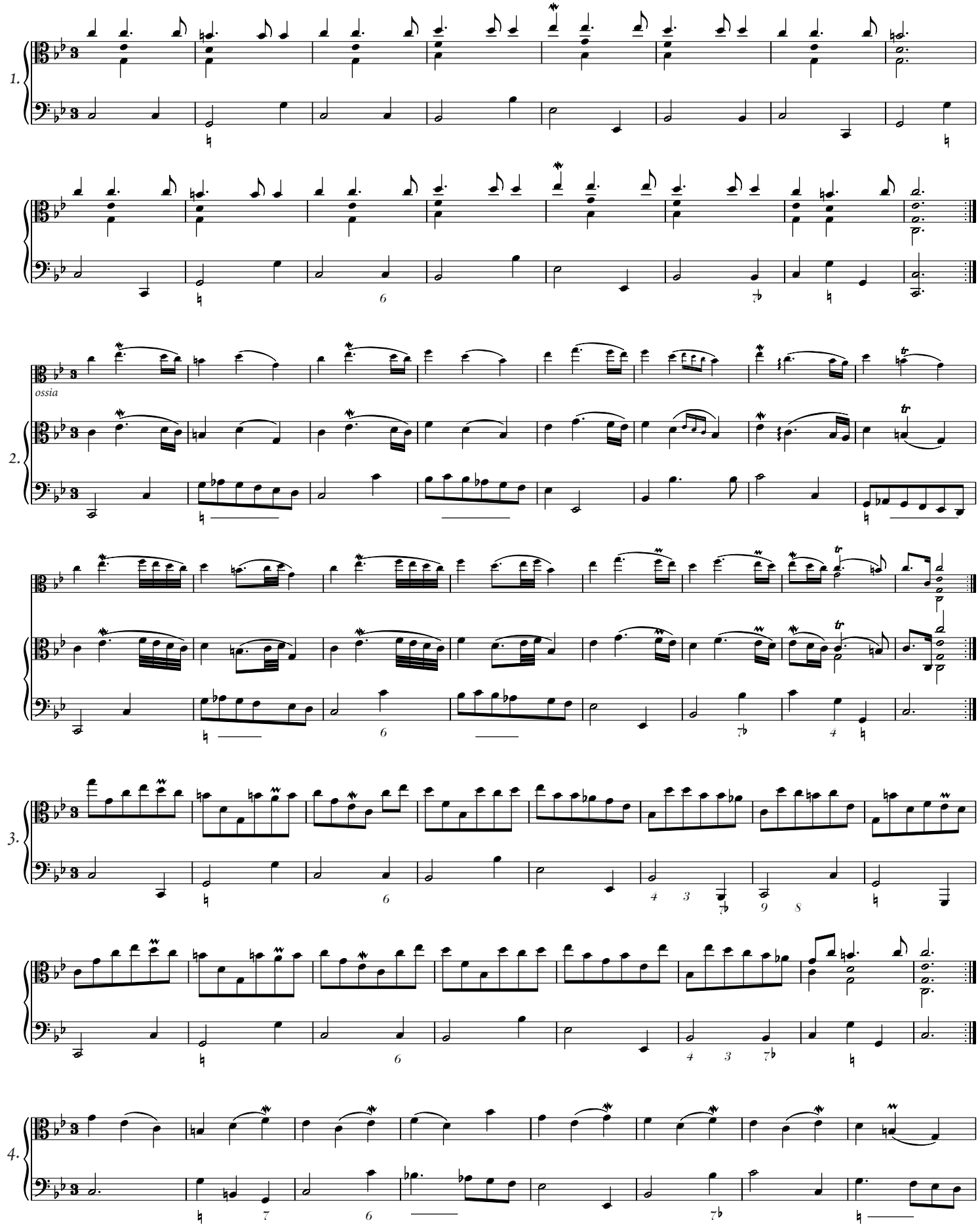
I thoroughly recommend either the harpsichord or lute as an accompaniment (plus or minus a cello). Balance for a viola or cello with keyboard is always an issue, especially in the low-middle registers. Playing with the piano makes this even more of an issue. If played only with a cello, the full minor chord at cadences should be included, possibly using the cello's E flat on the D string as part of a 3-note chord.

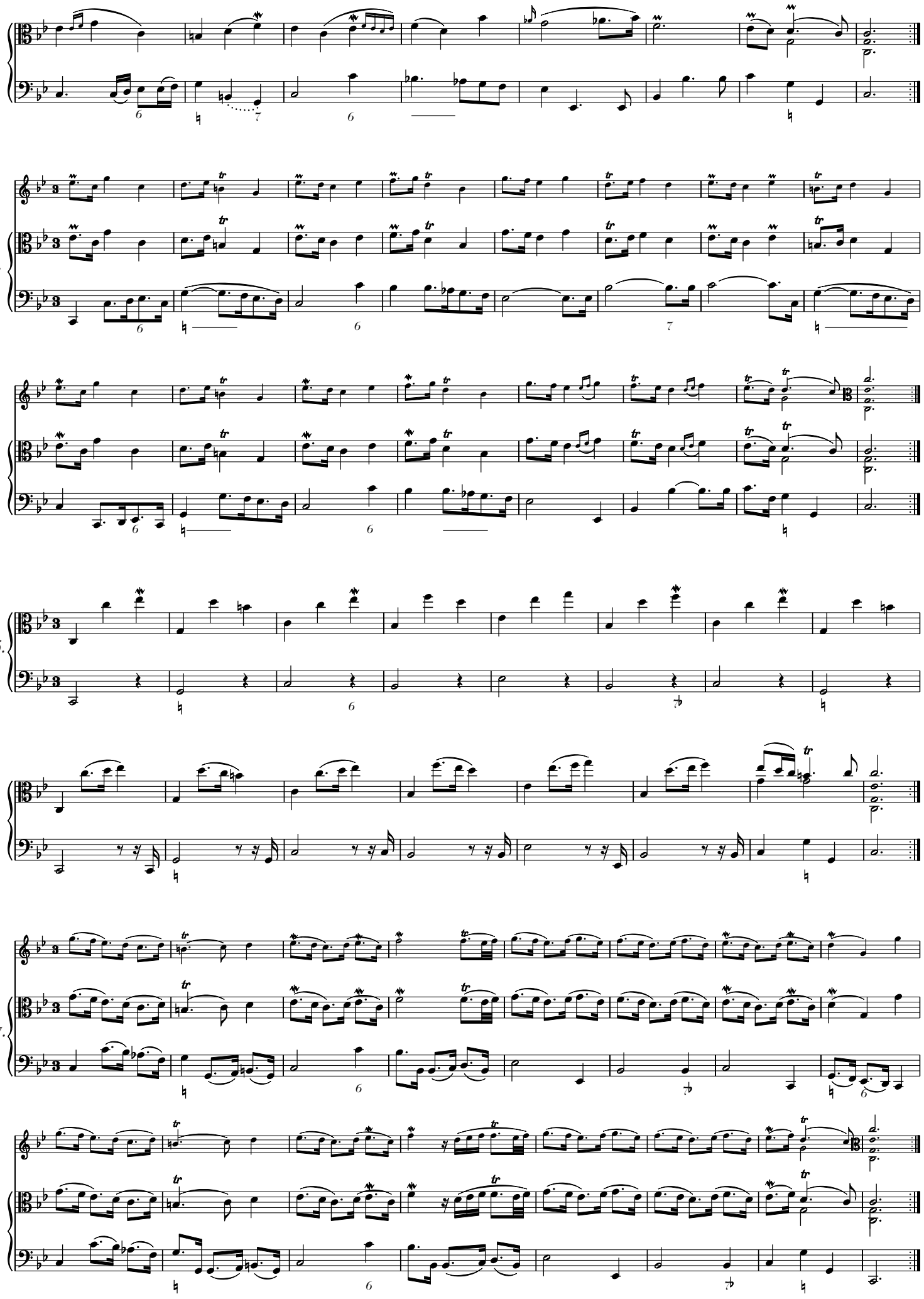
COUPLETS DE FOLIES D'ESPAGNE

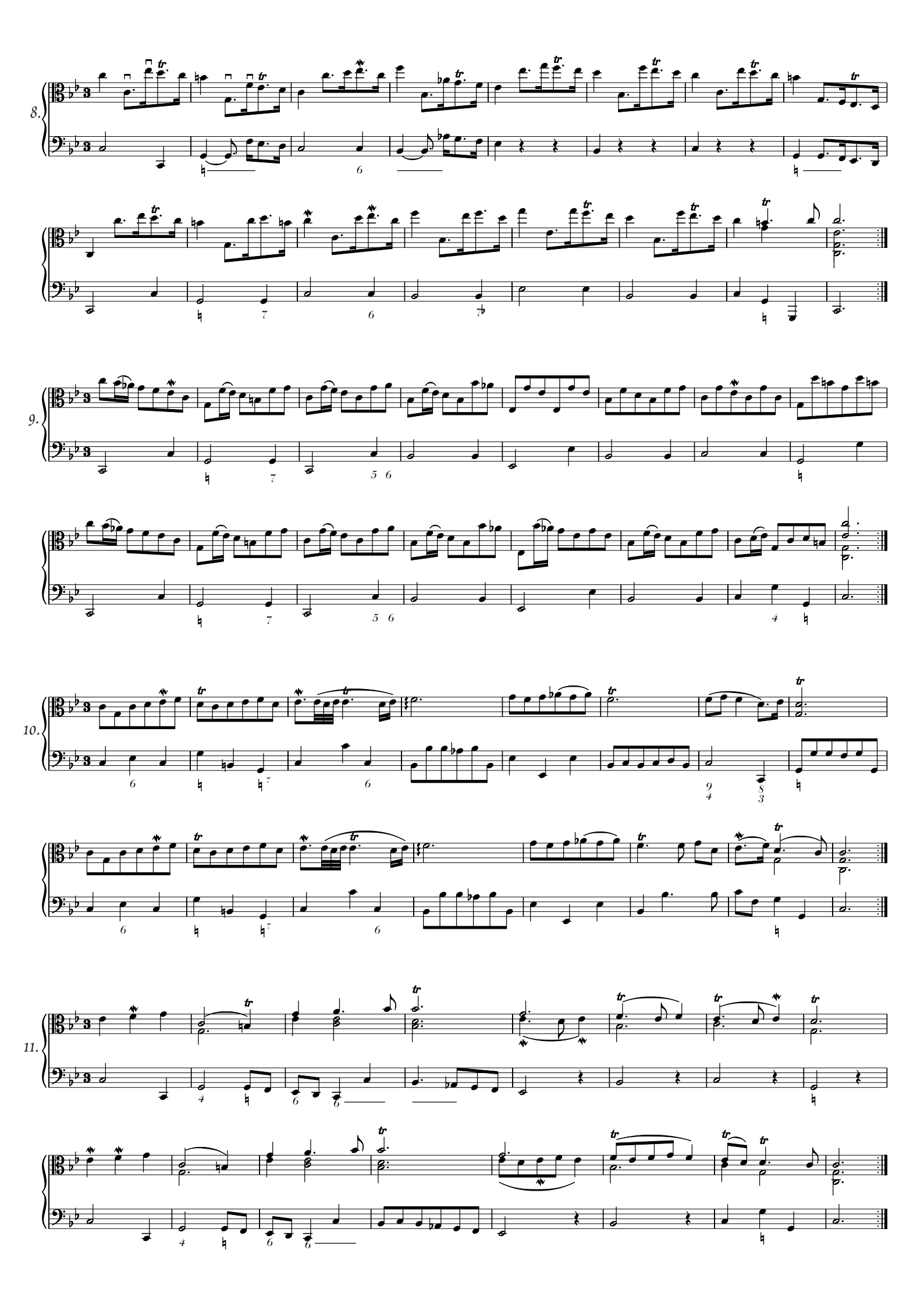
32 VARIATIONS ON FOLIA

Transcribed and arranged for viola
and continuo by Alan Bonds

Marin Marais (1701)



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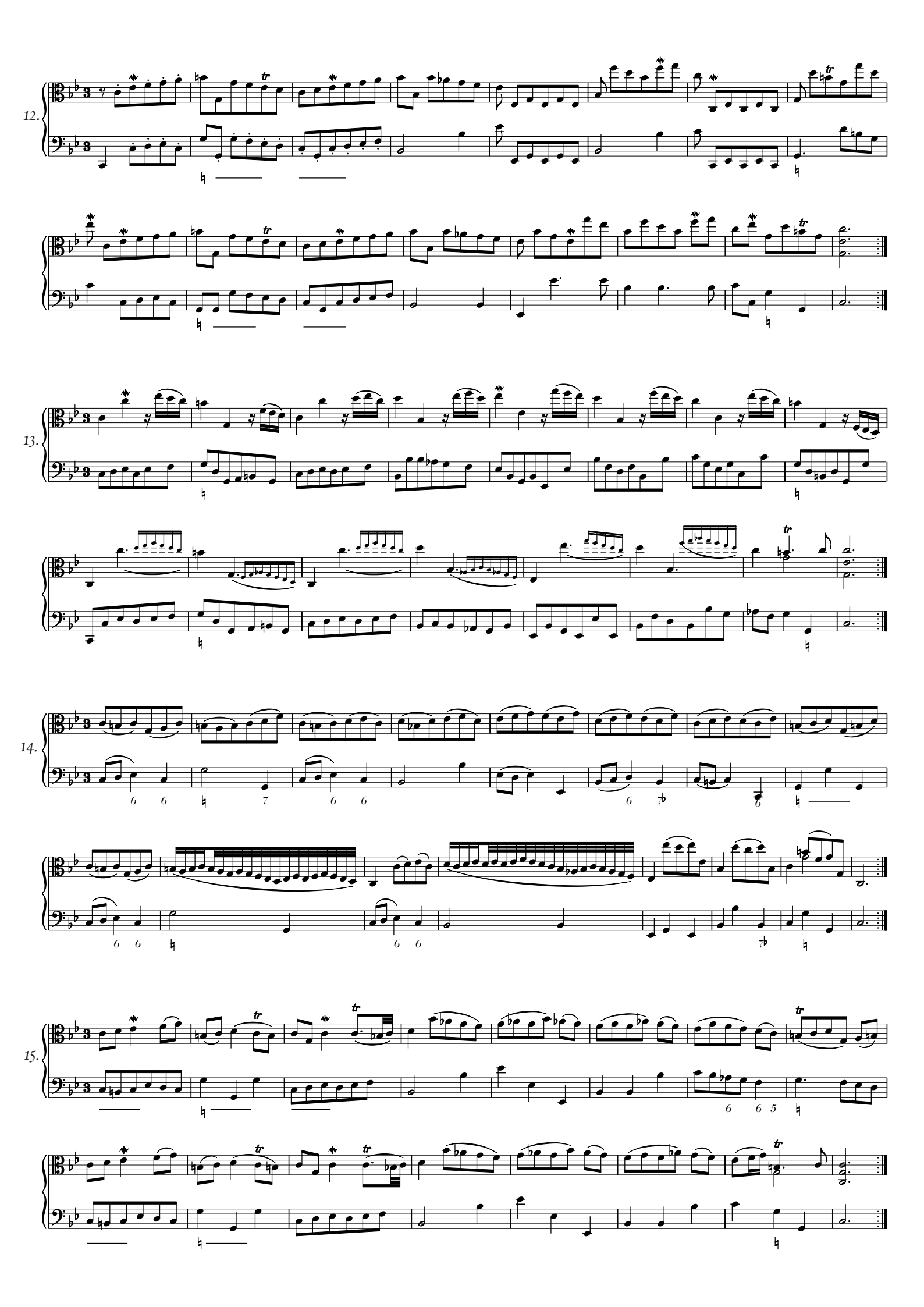
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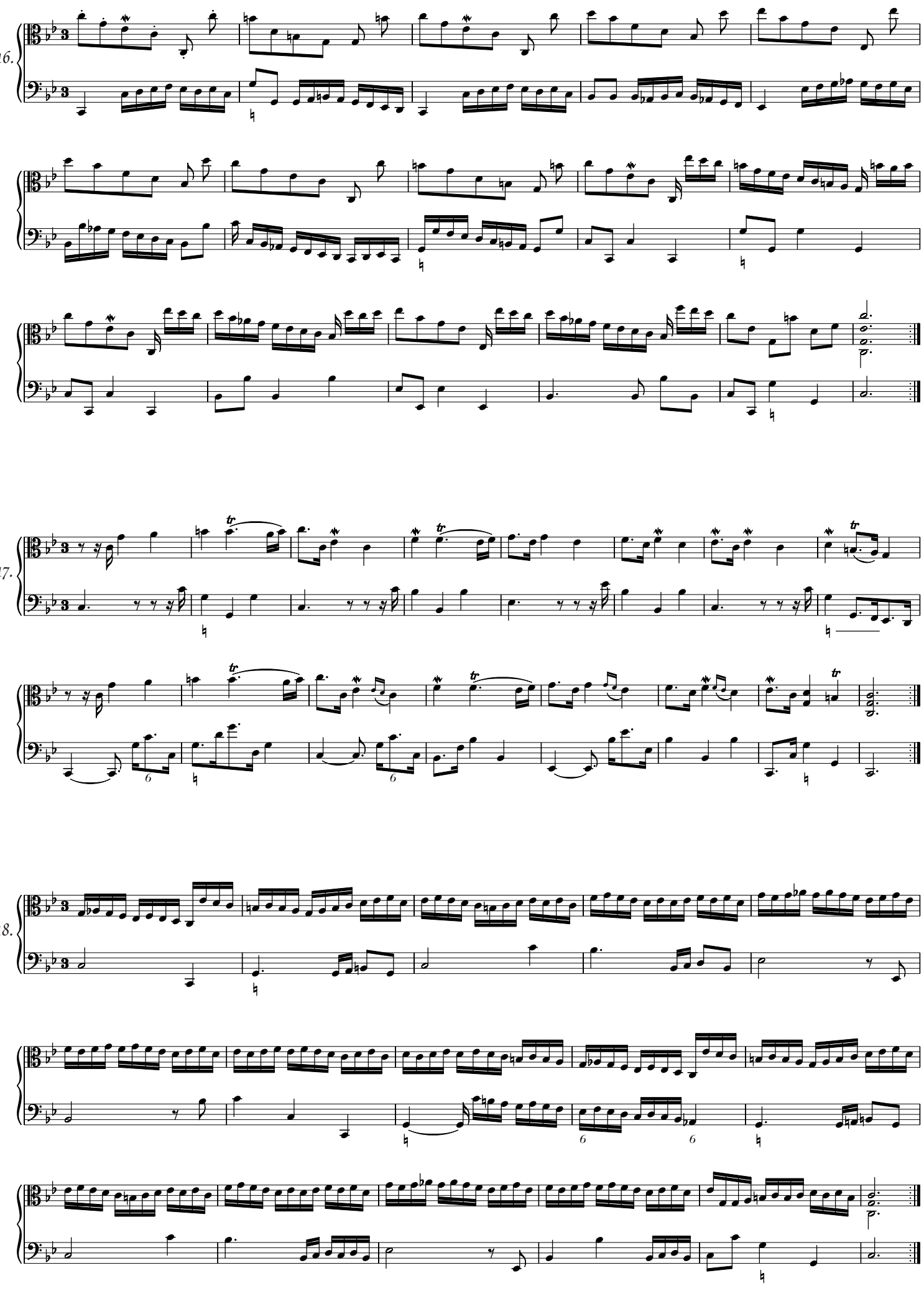
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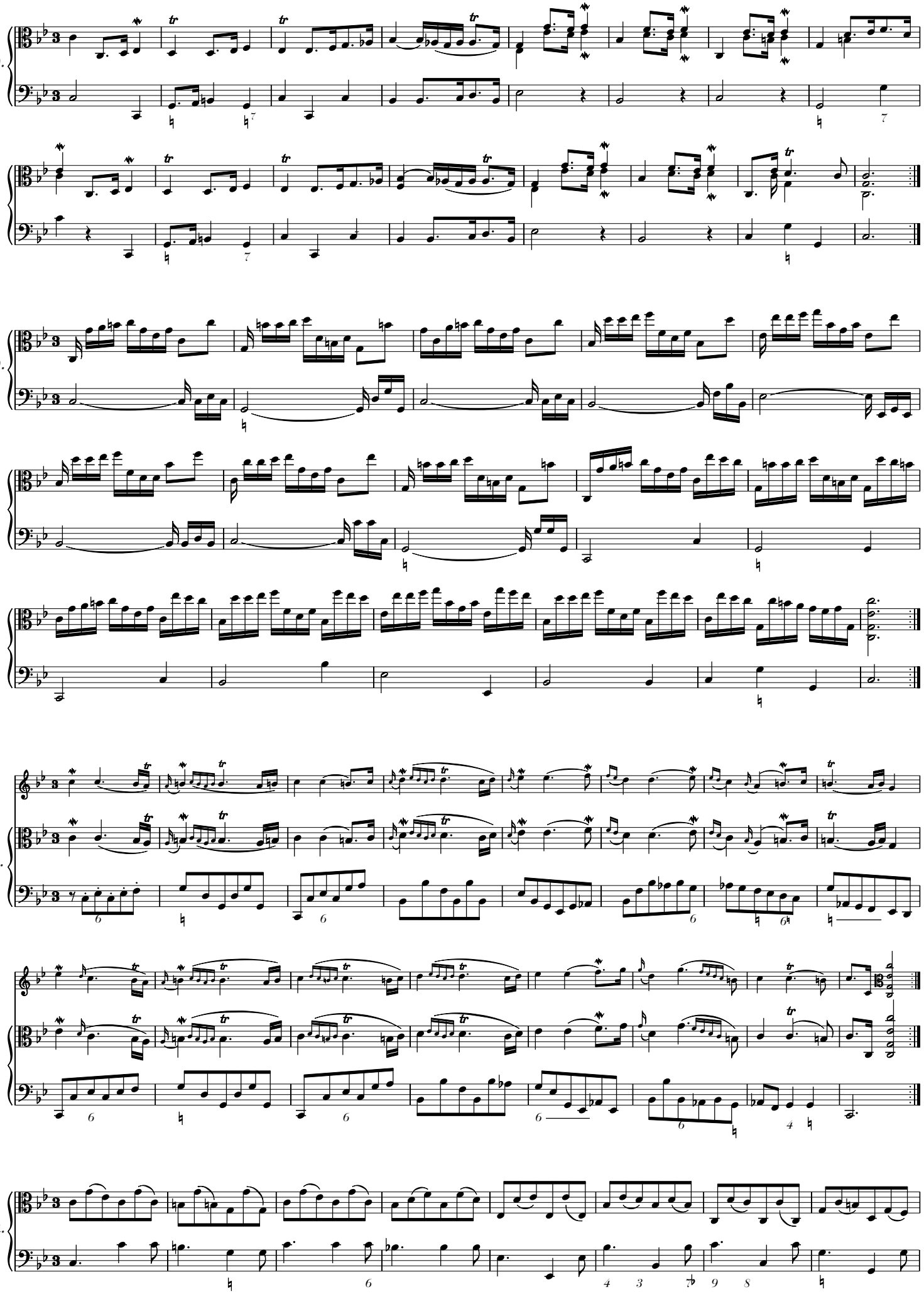
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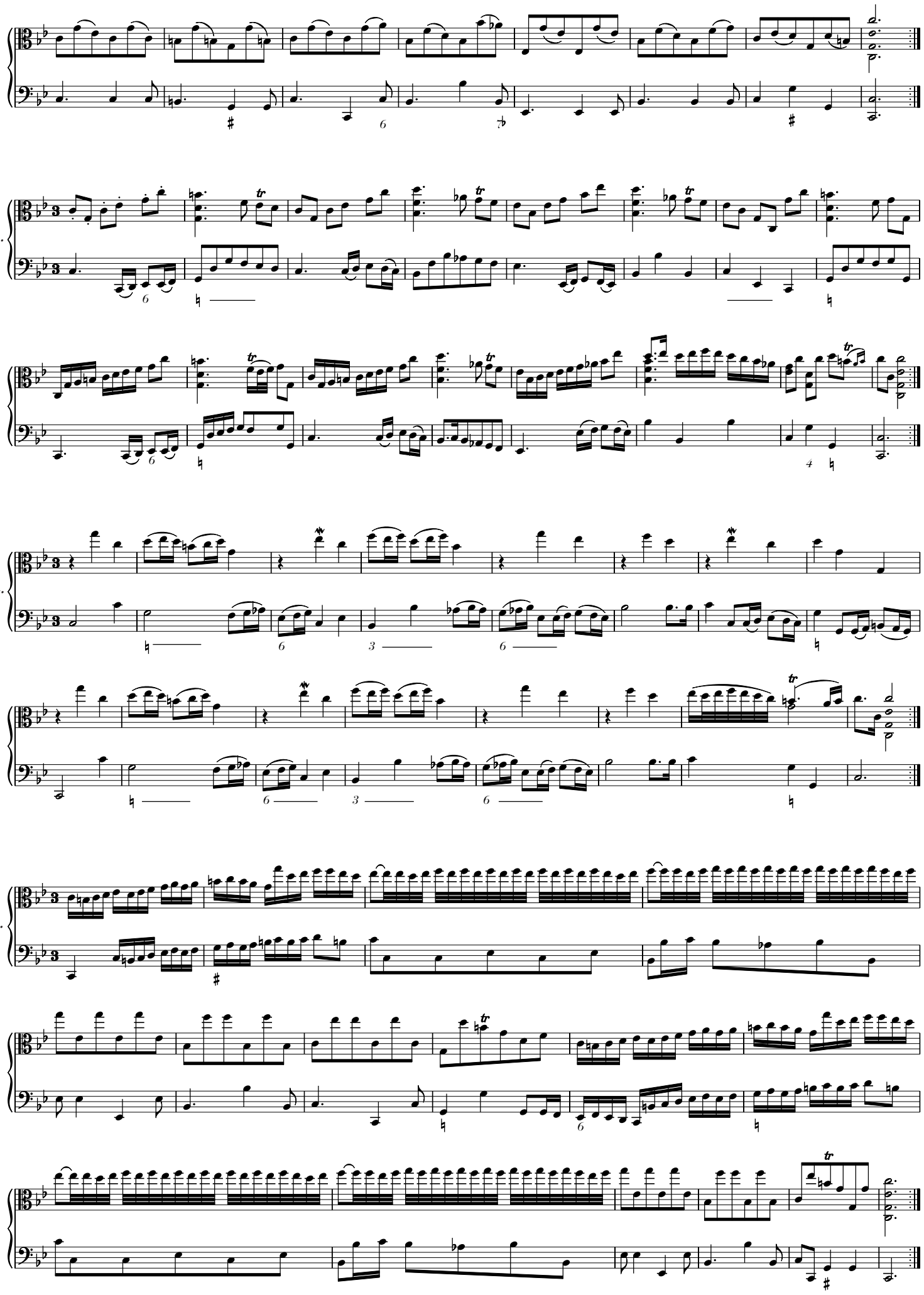
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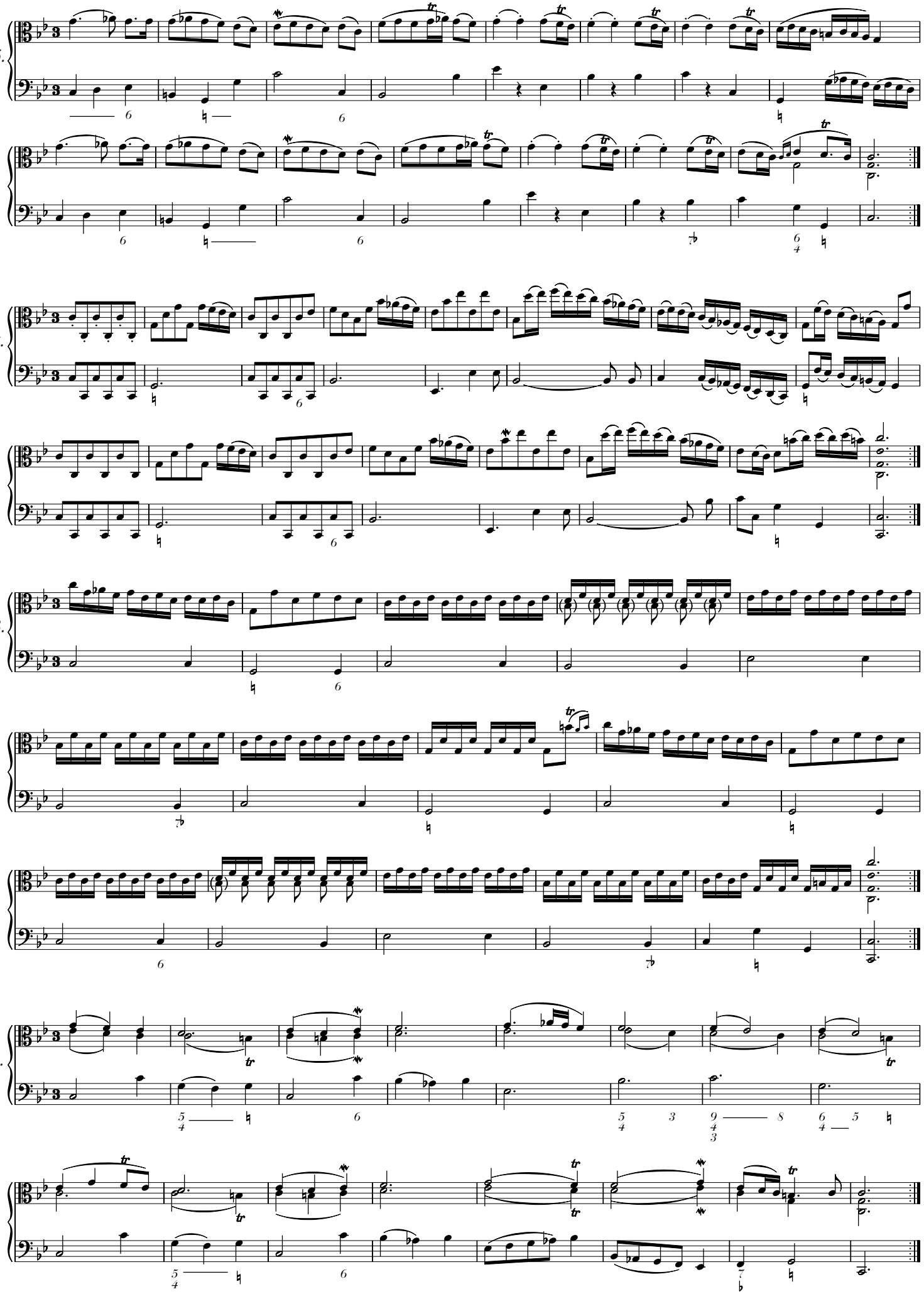
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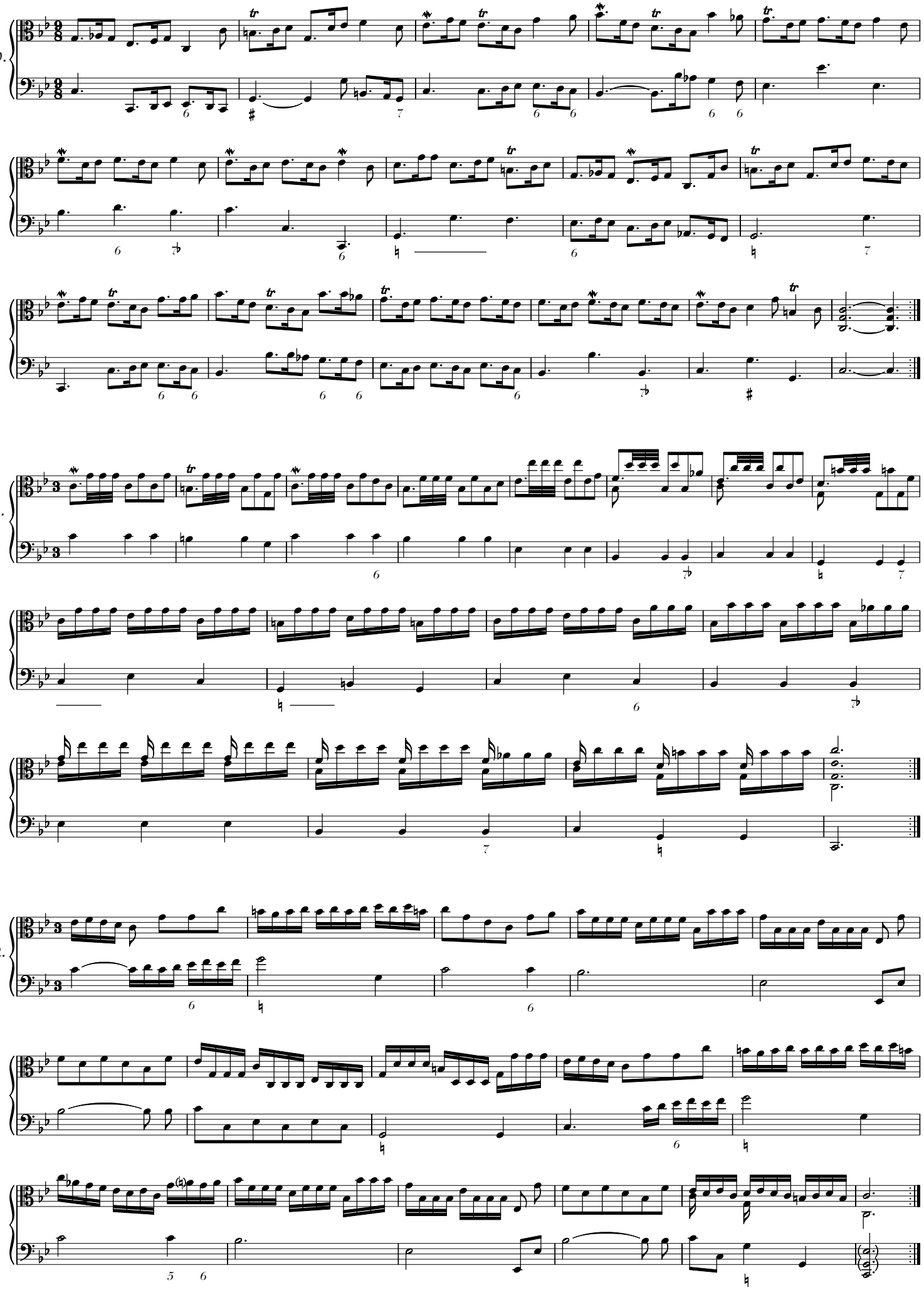
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COUPLETS DE FOLIES D'ESPAGNE

32 VARIATIONS ON FOLIA

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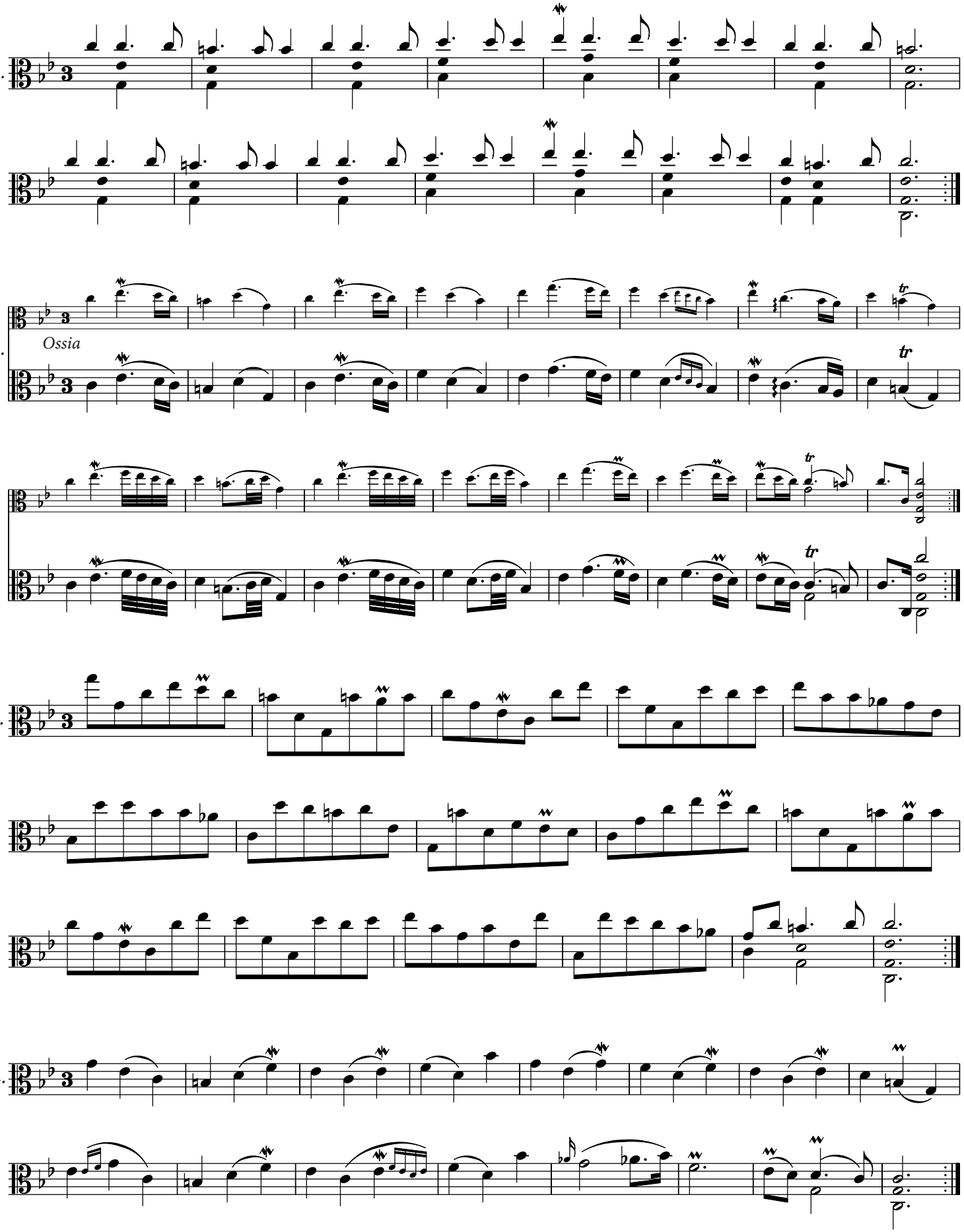
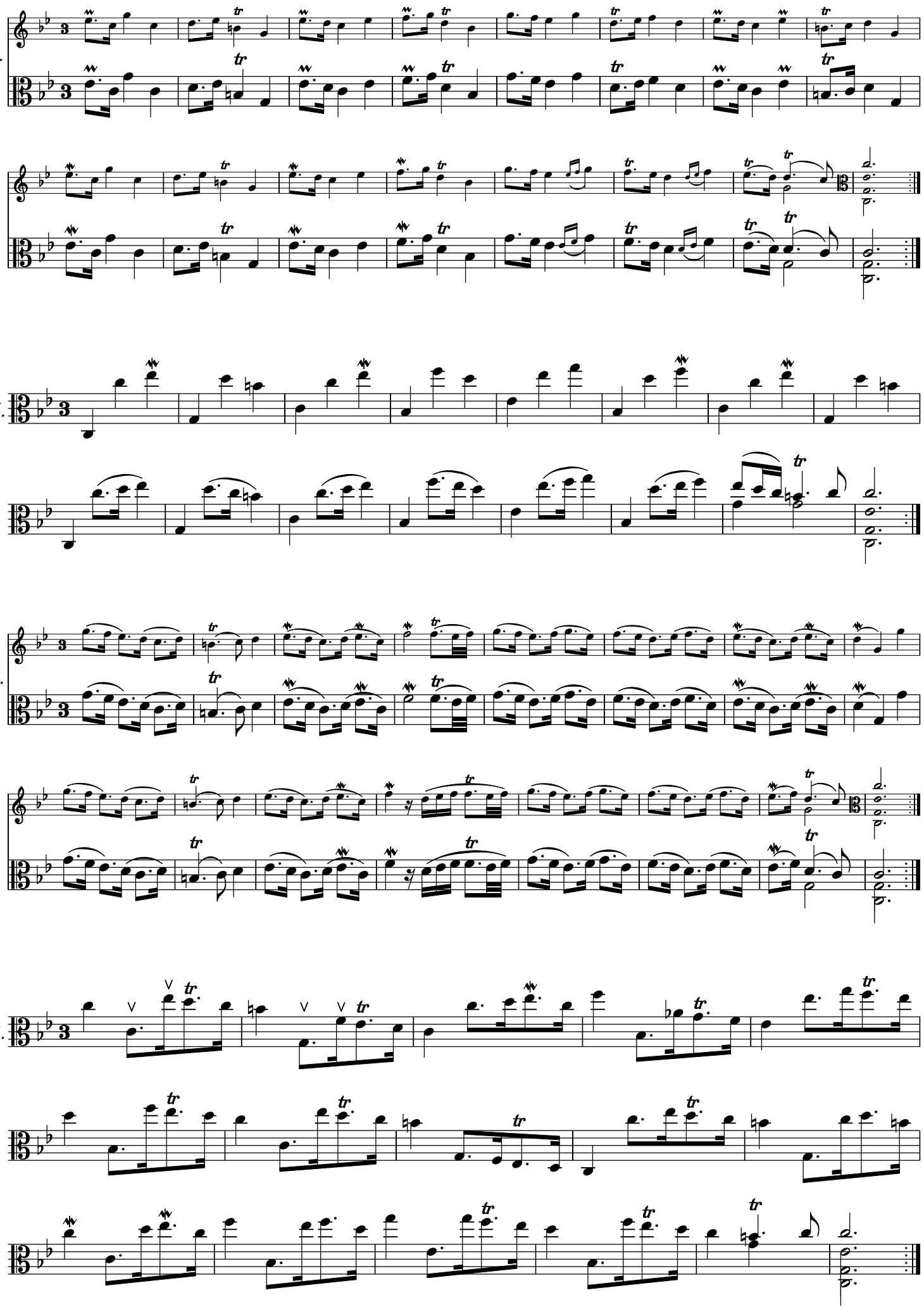
Marin Marais (1701)

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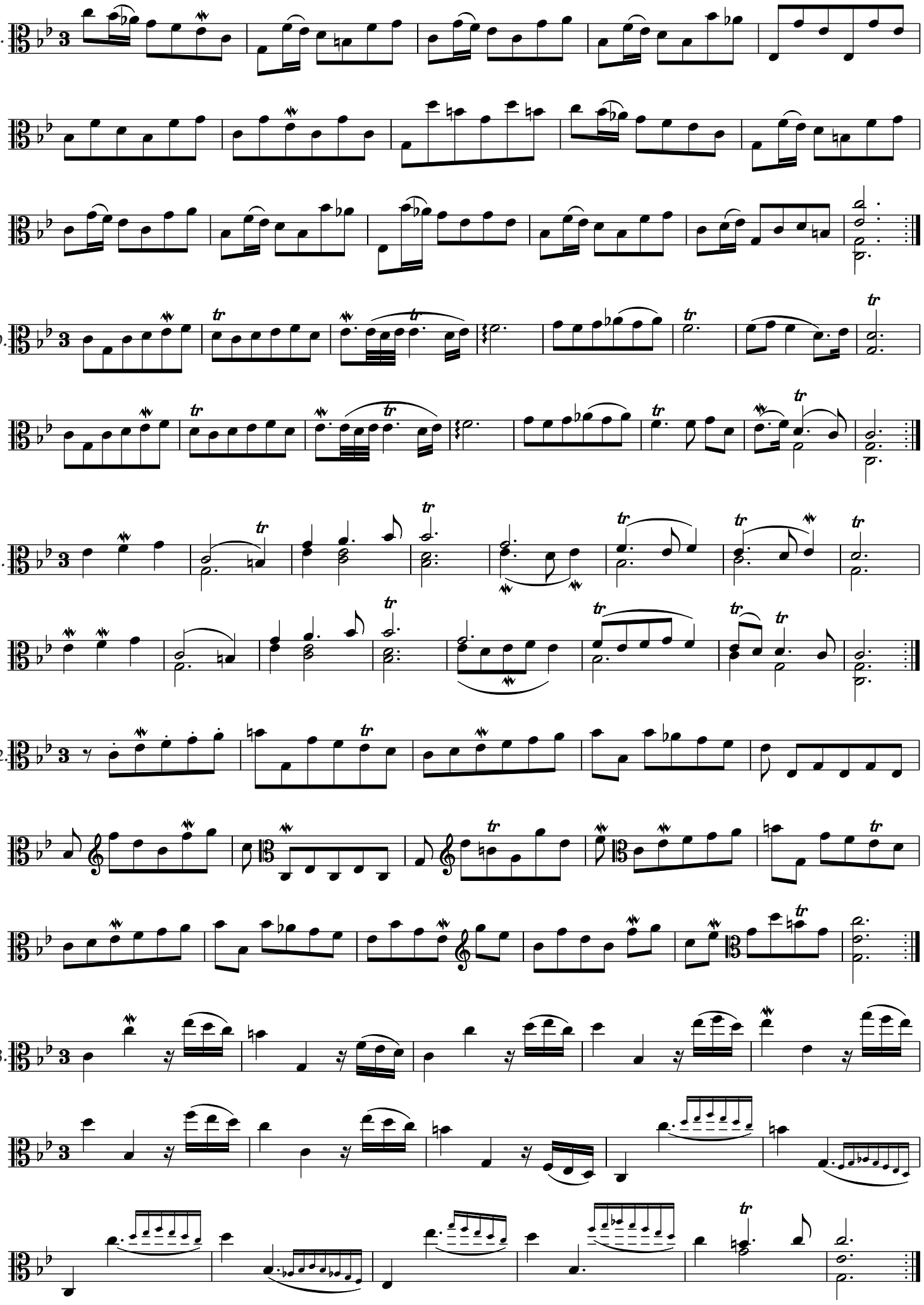
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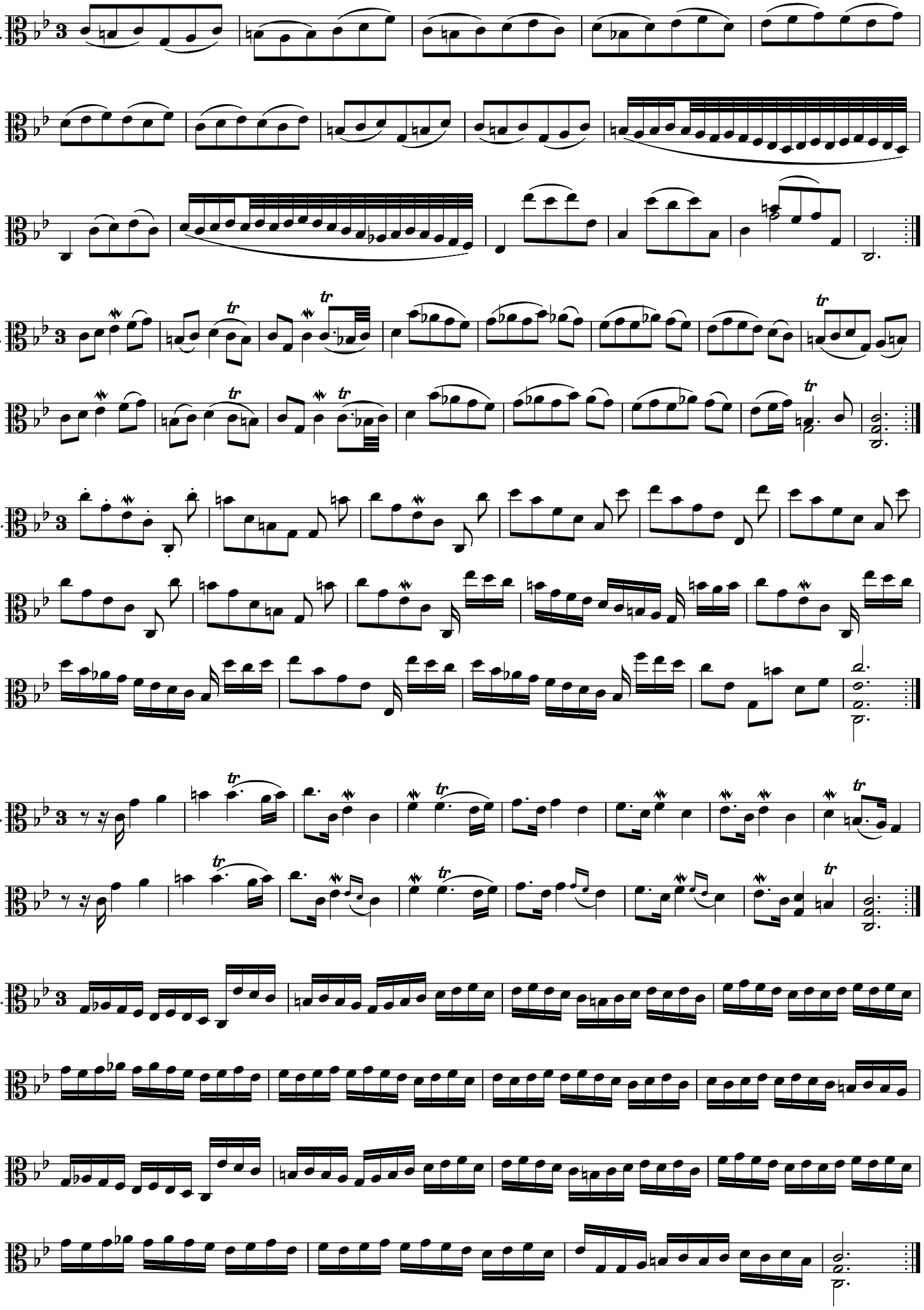
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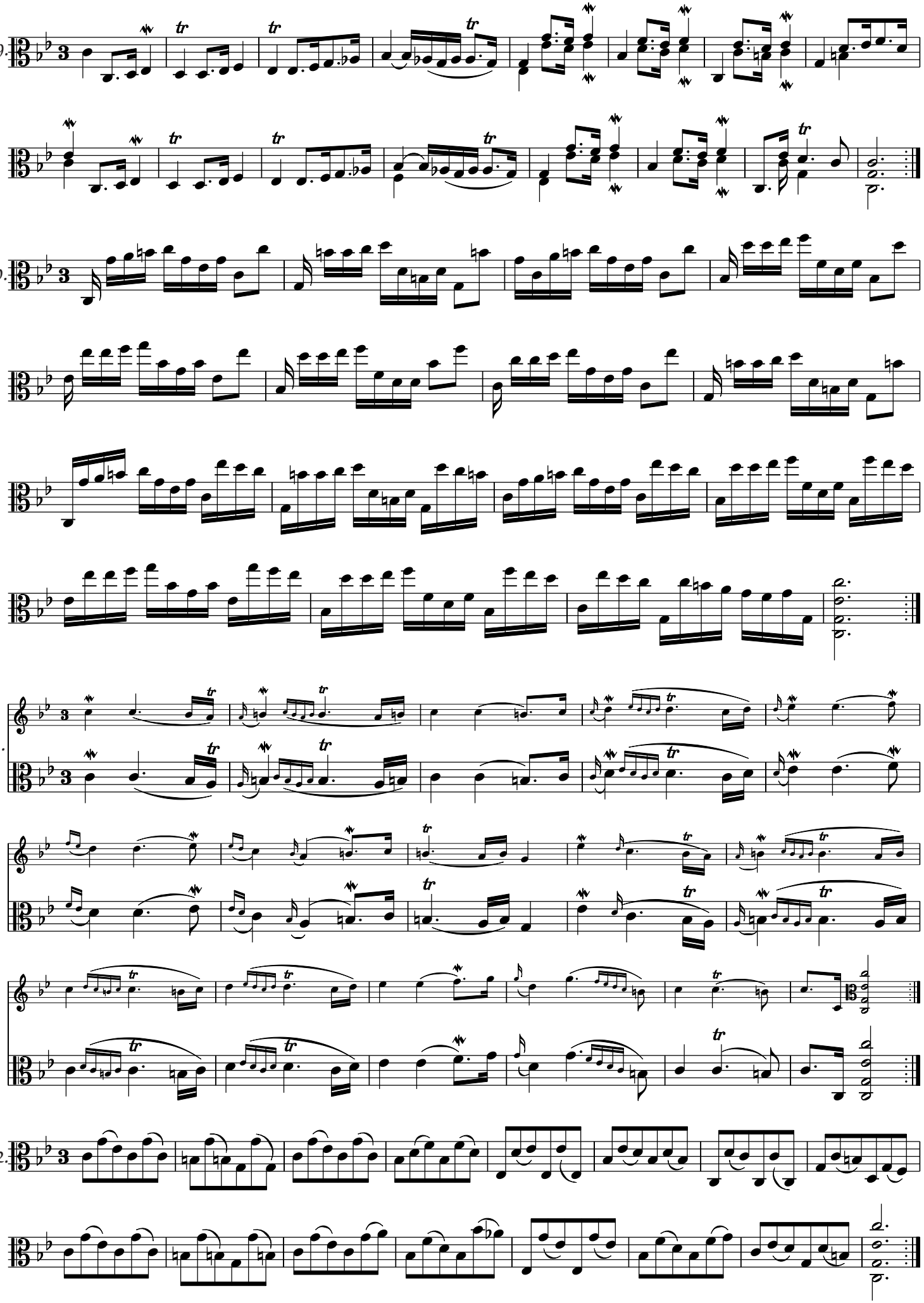
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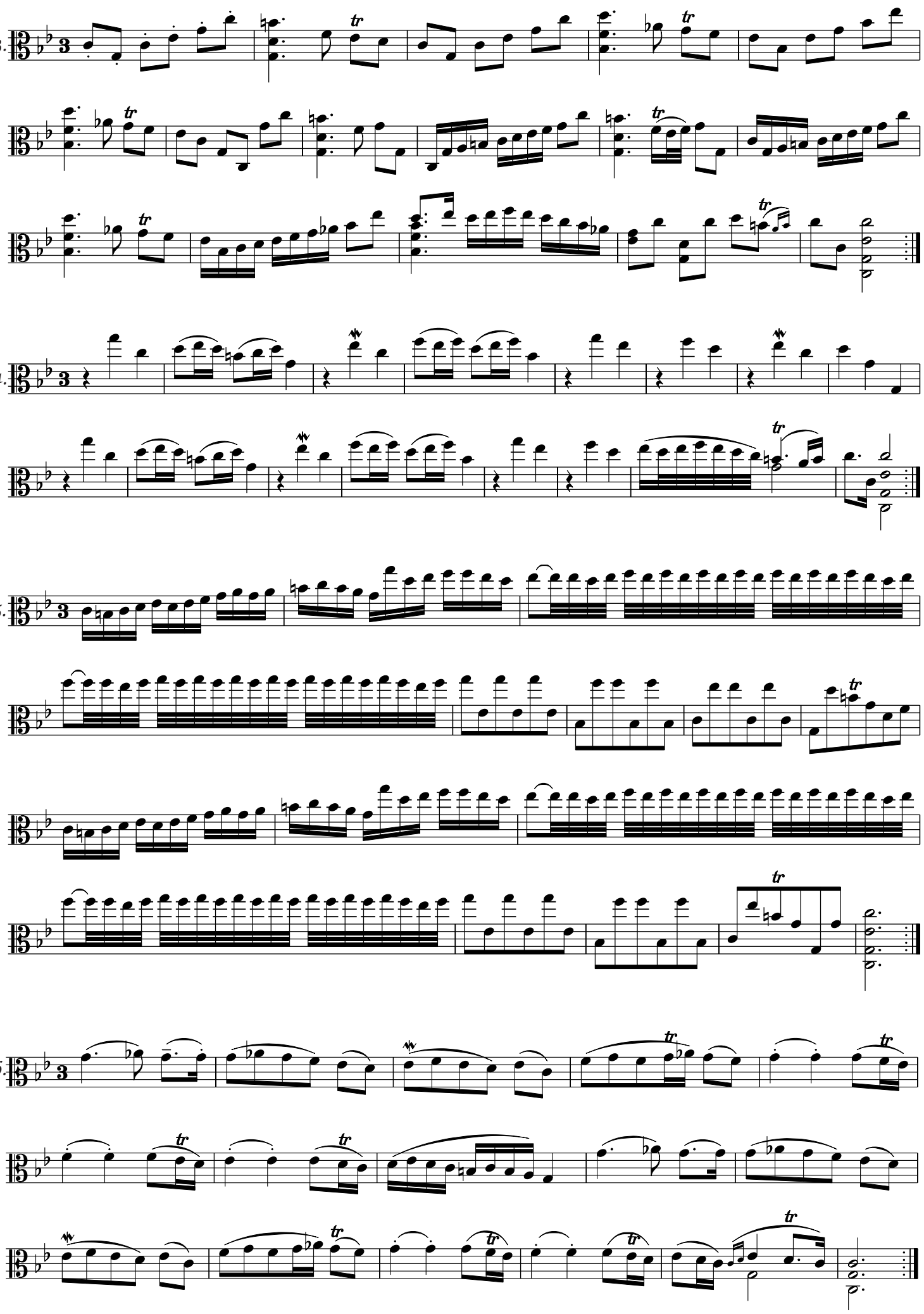
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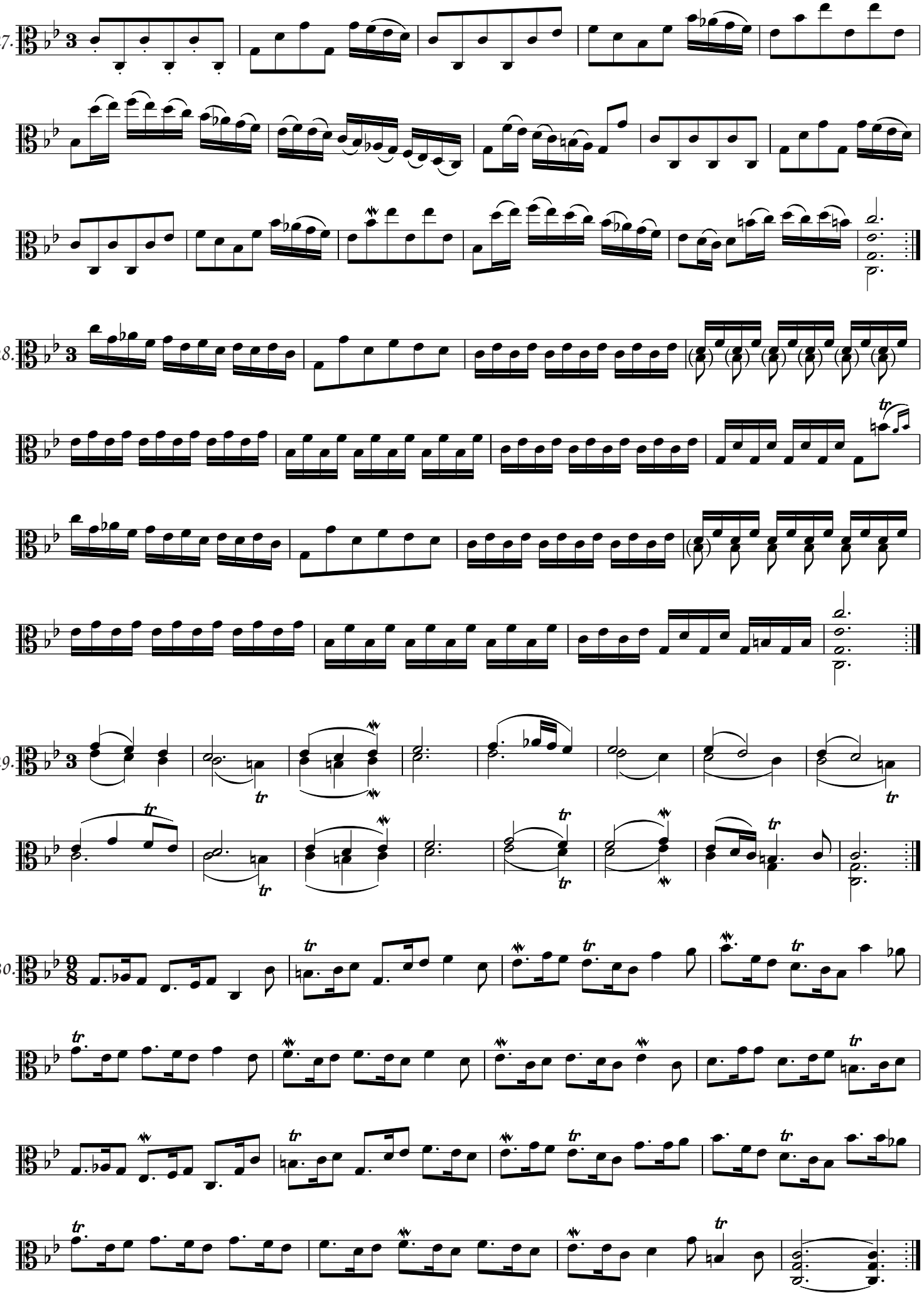
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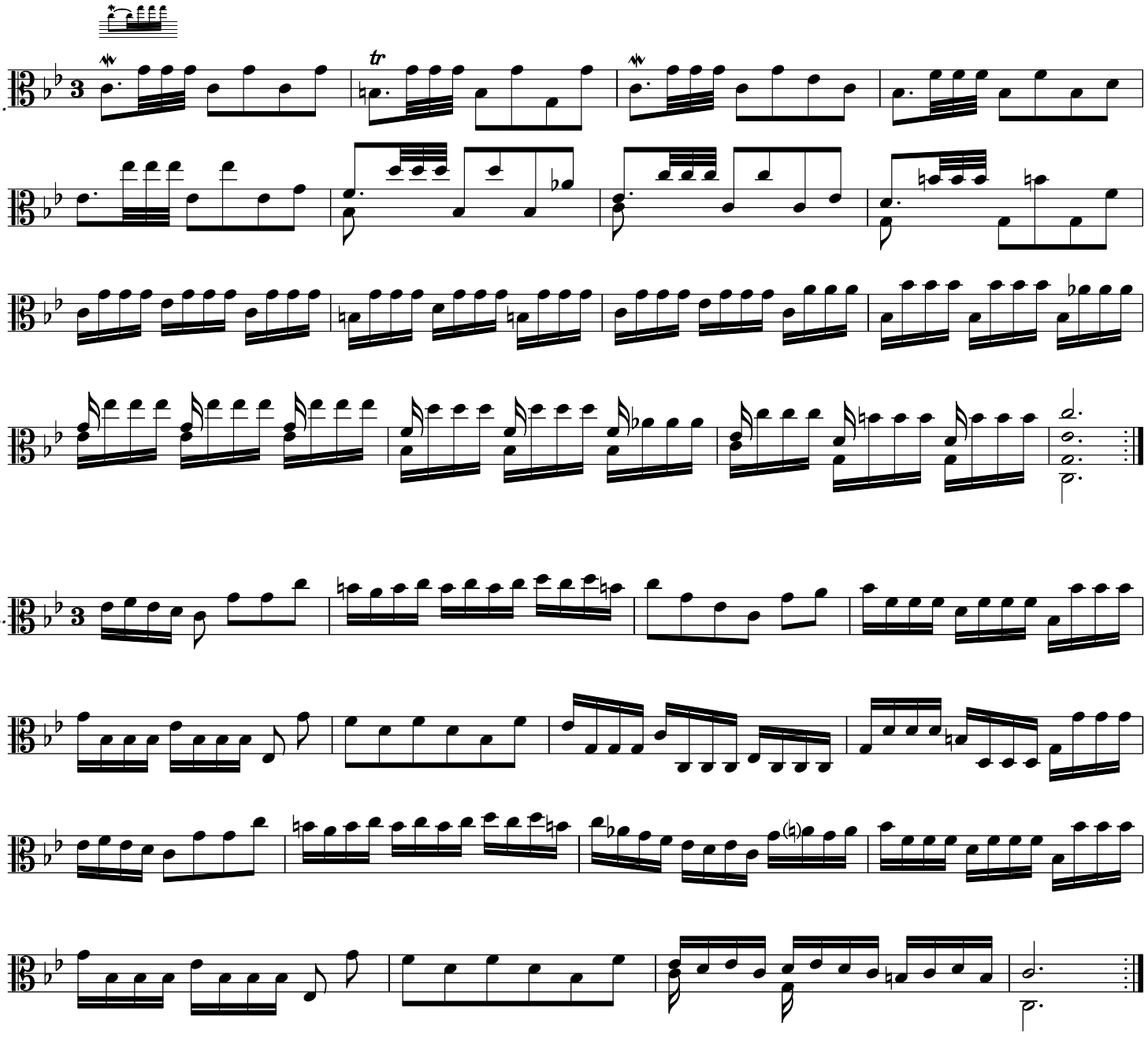

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