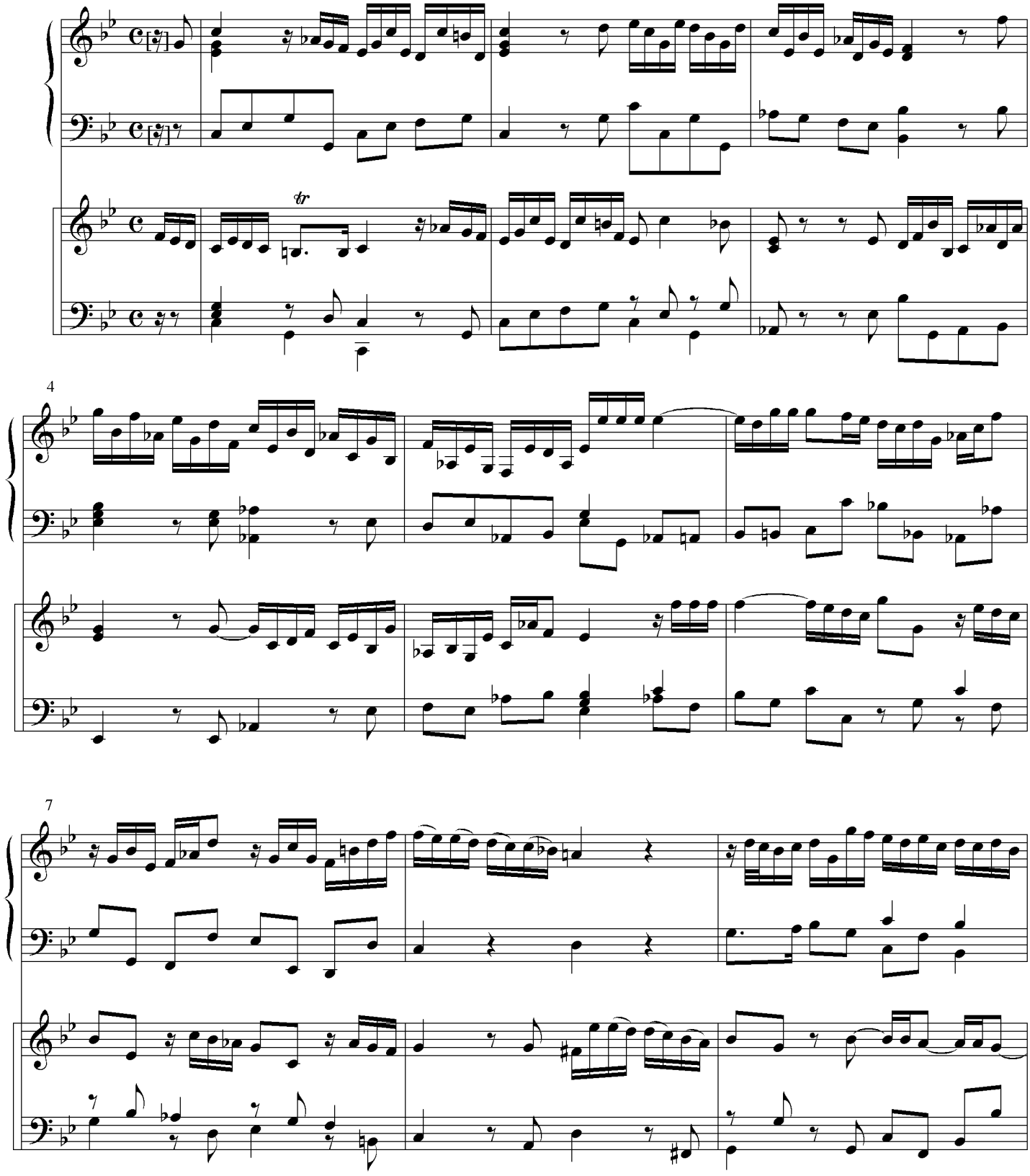
Suite a deux clavecins

Handel, HWV 446; second part by David Schulenberg

Allemande (Praeludium)



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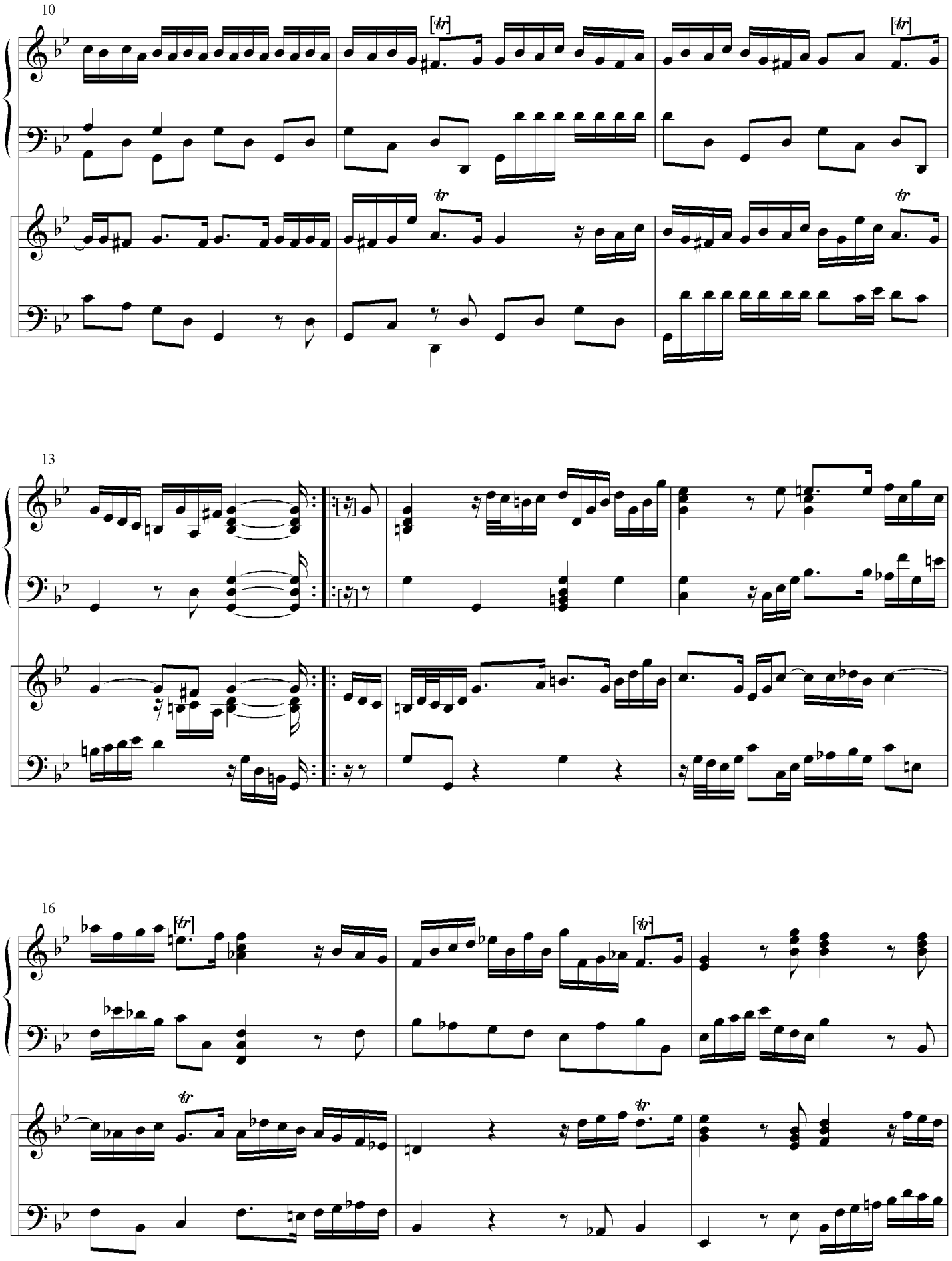
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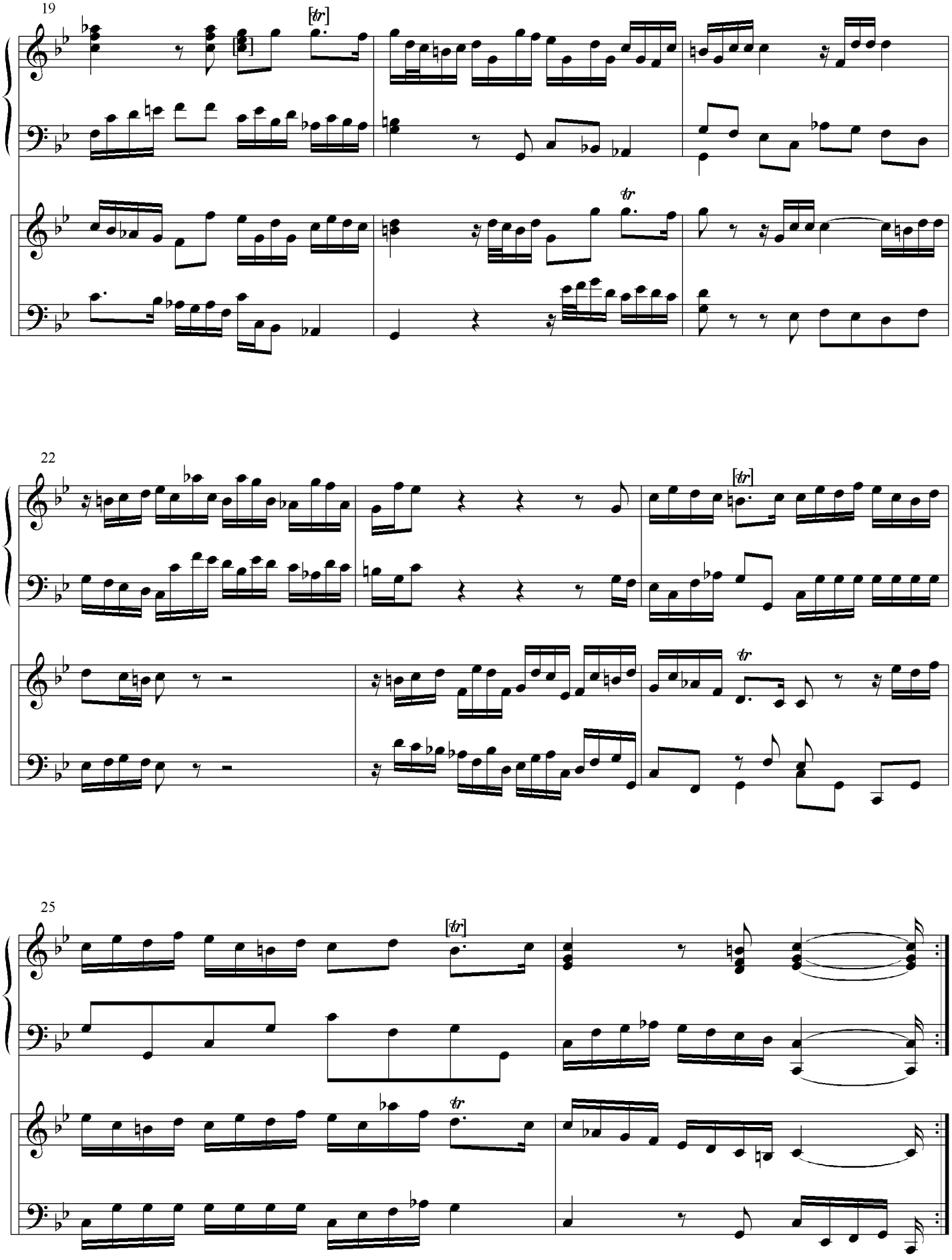
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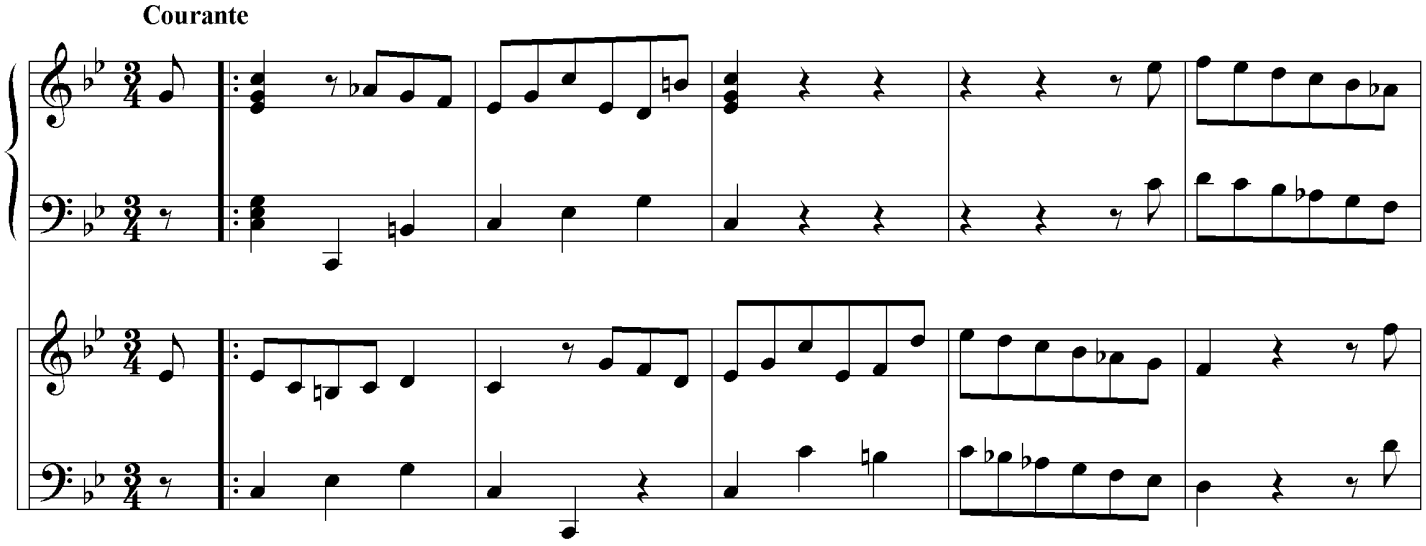
Courante



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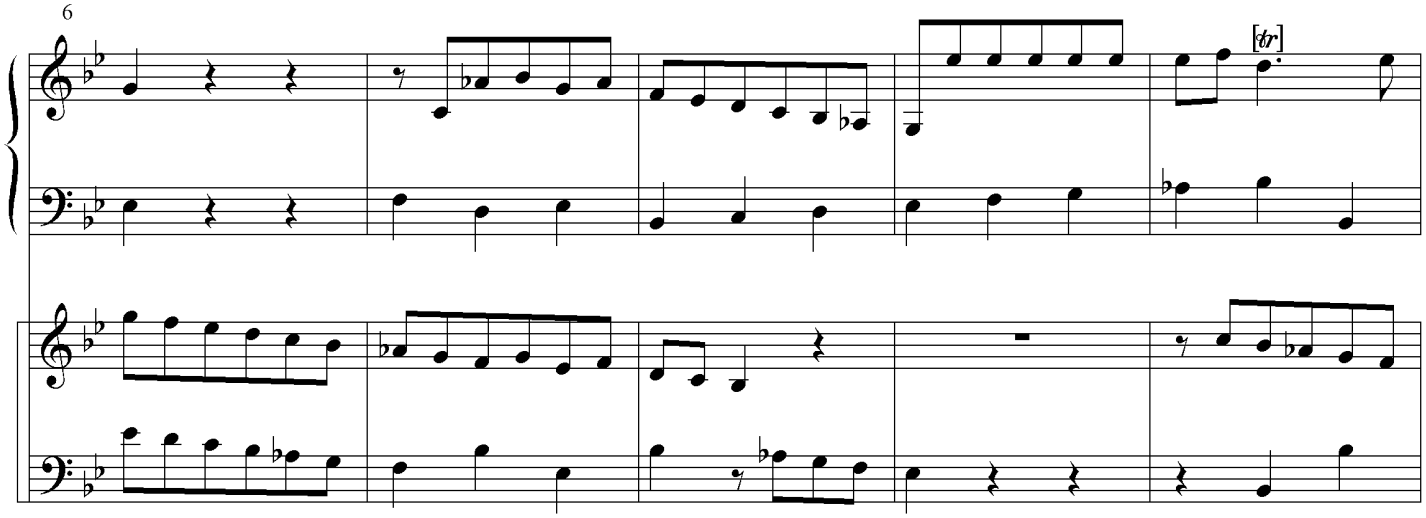

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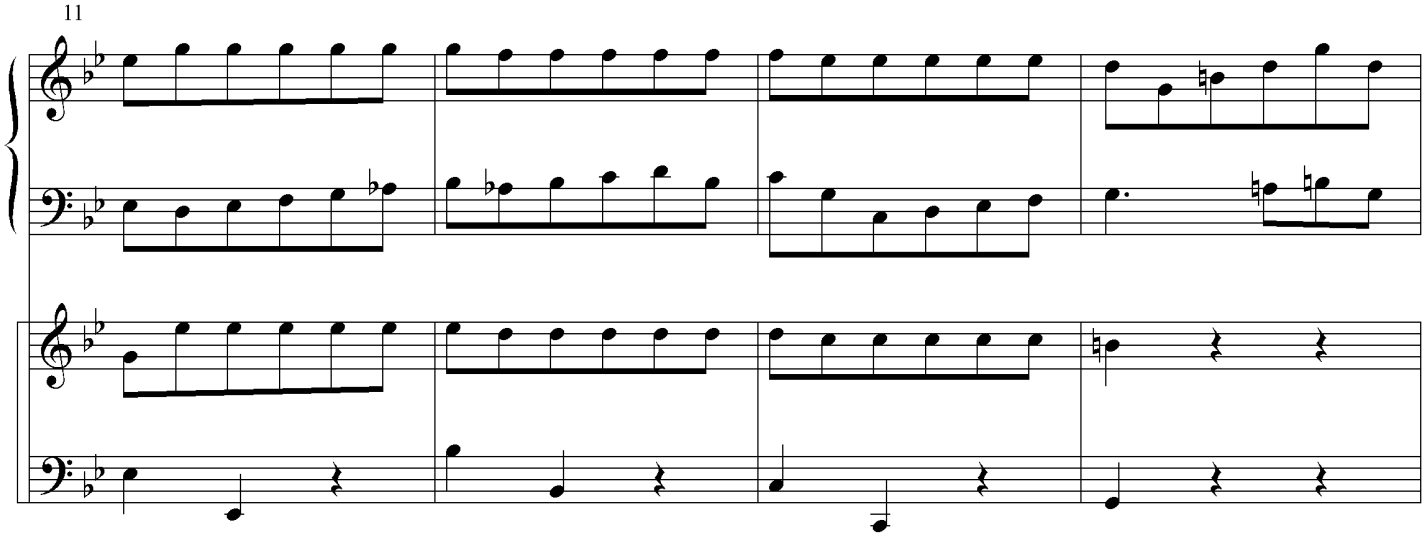

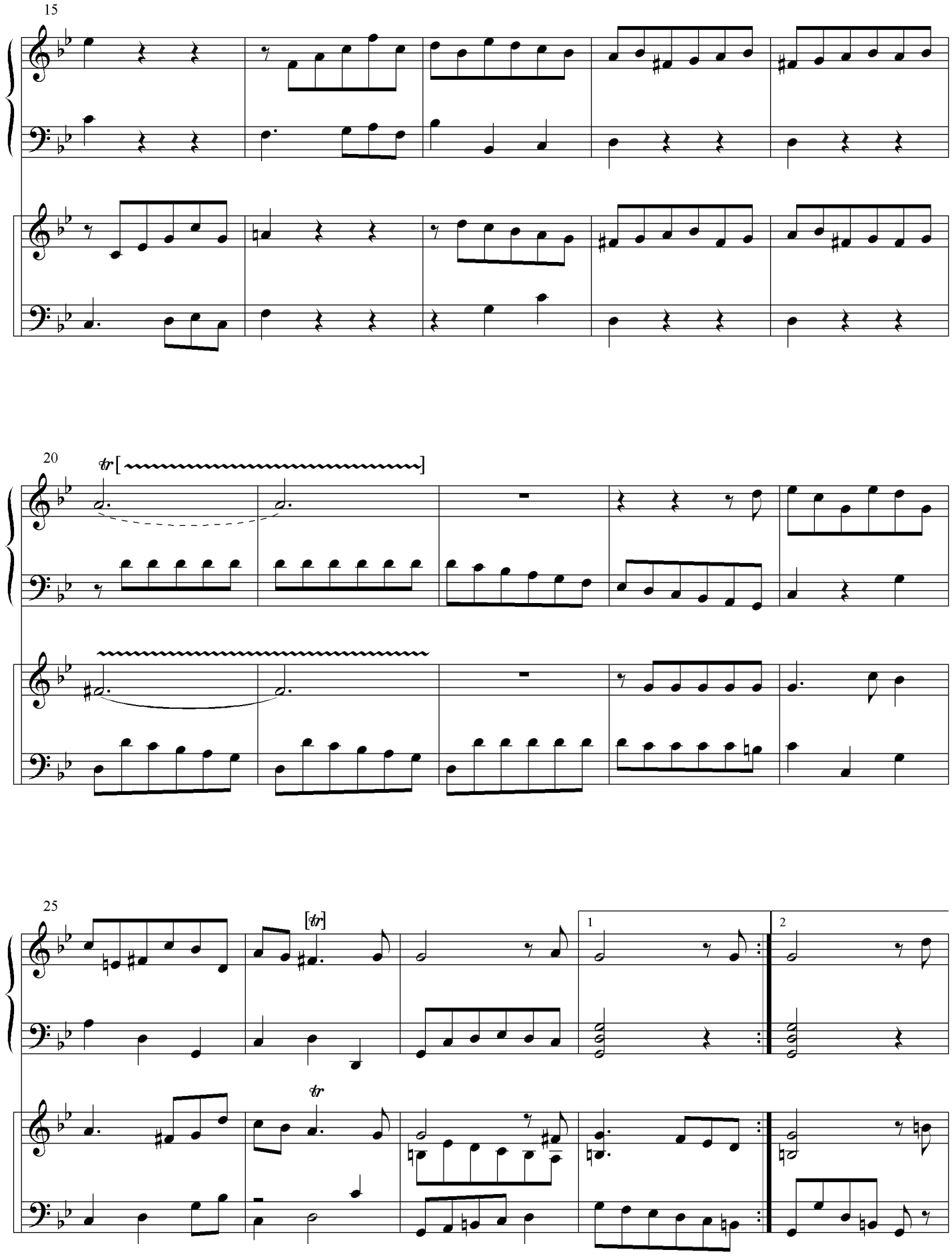
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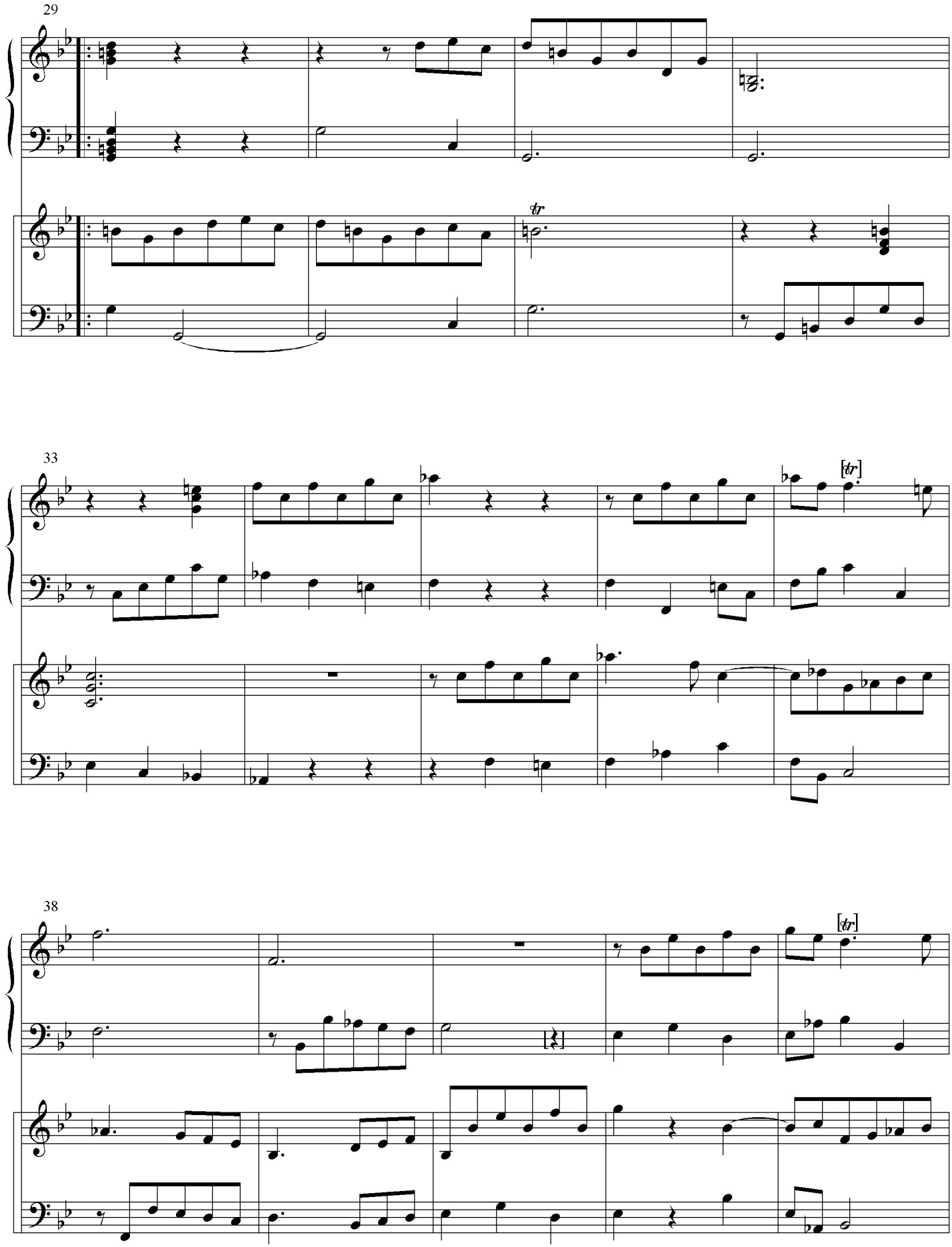
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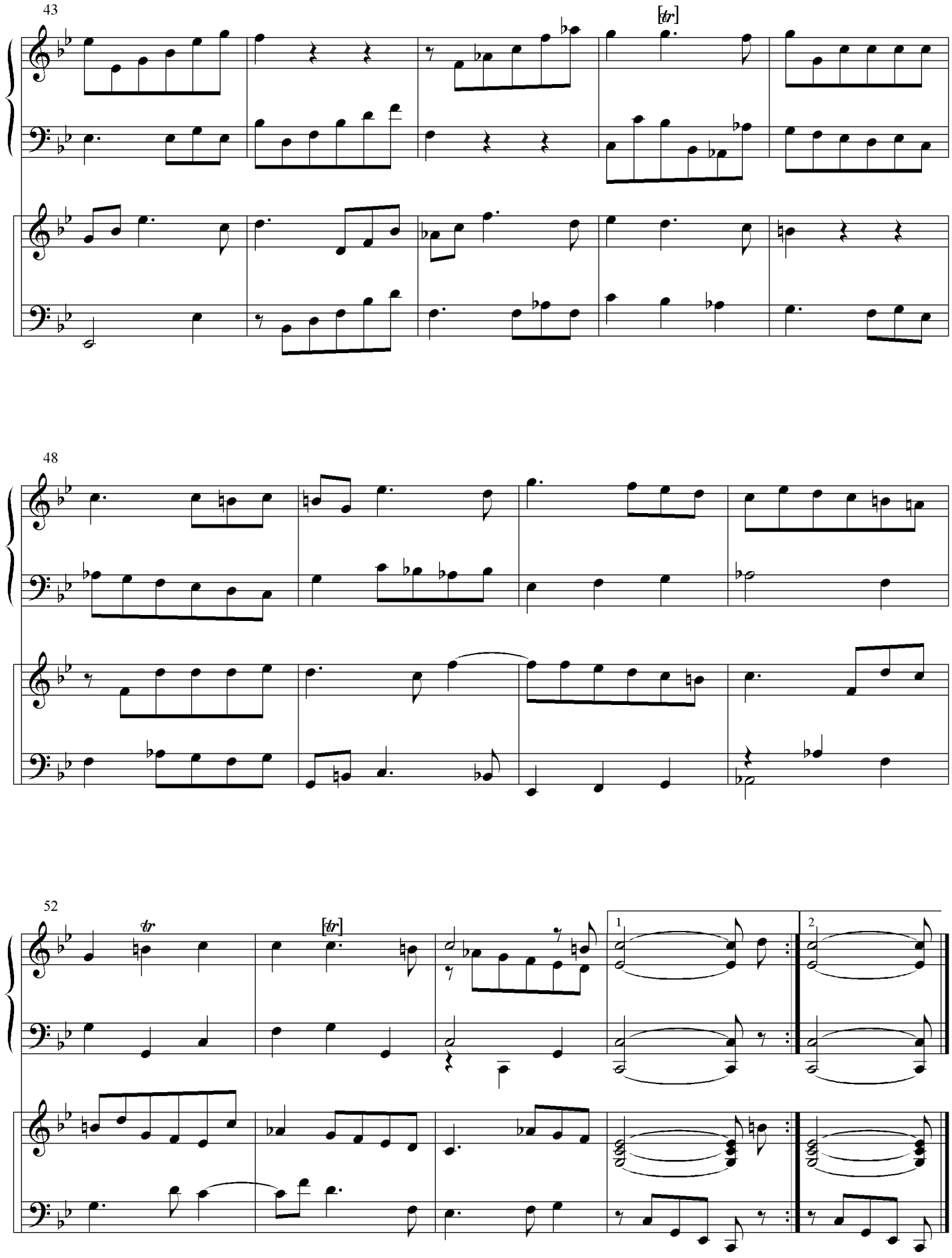
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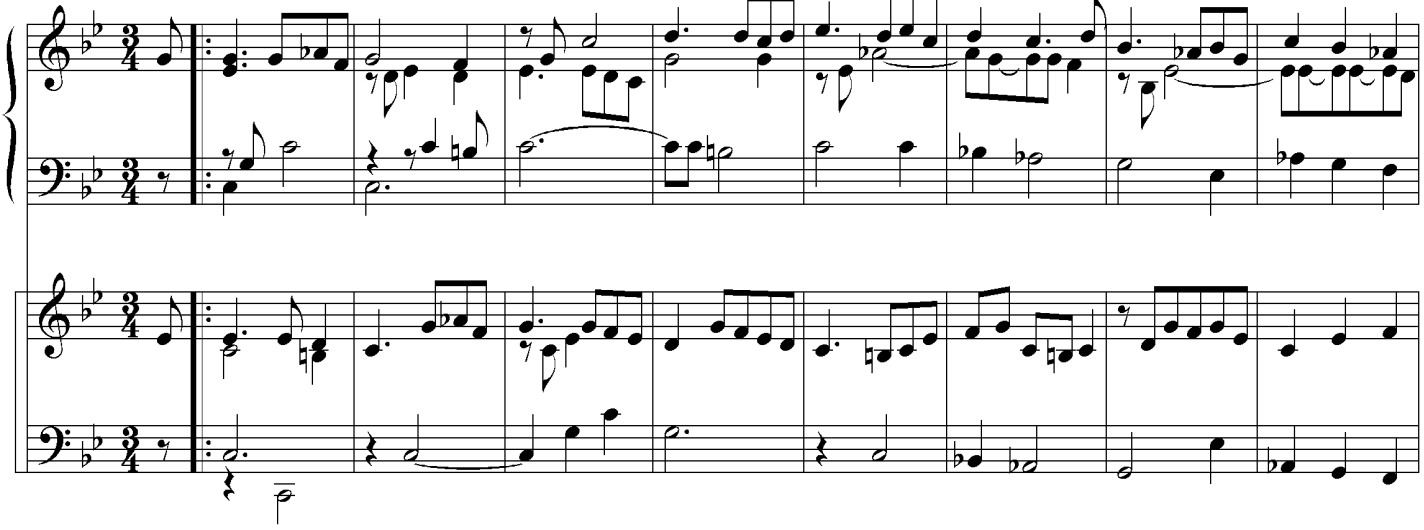
Sarabande [Courante II]



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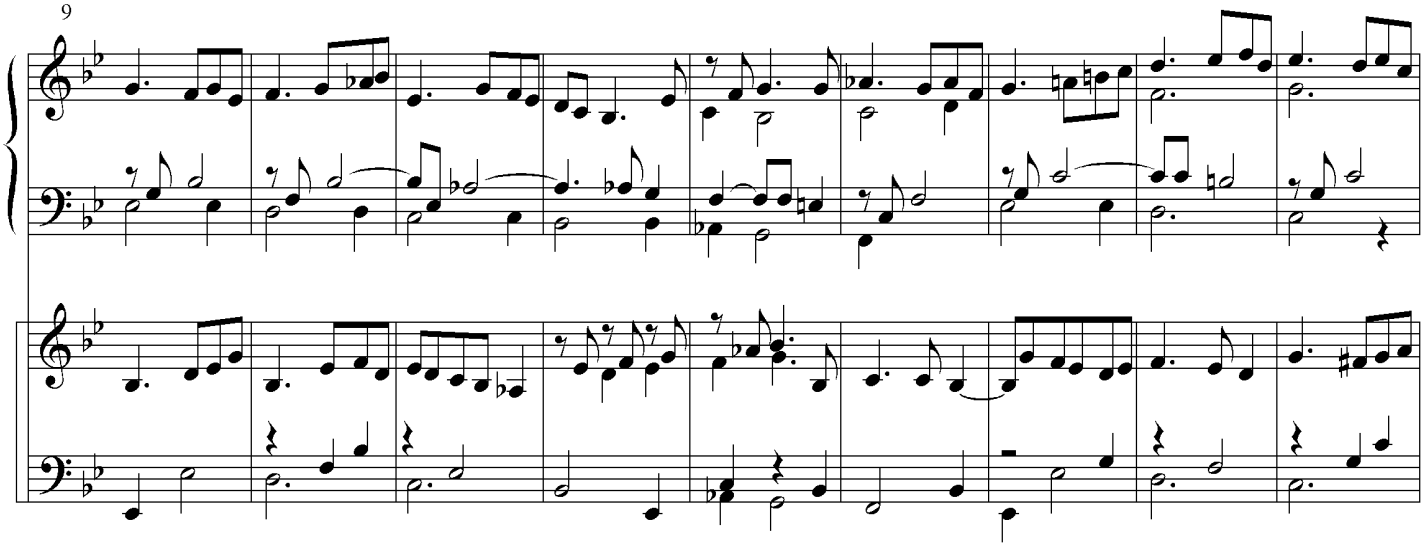

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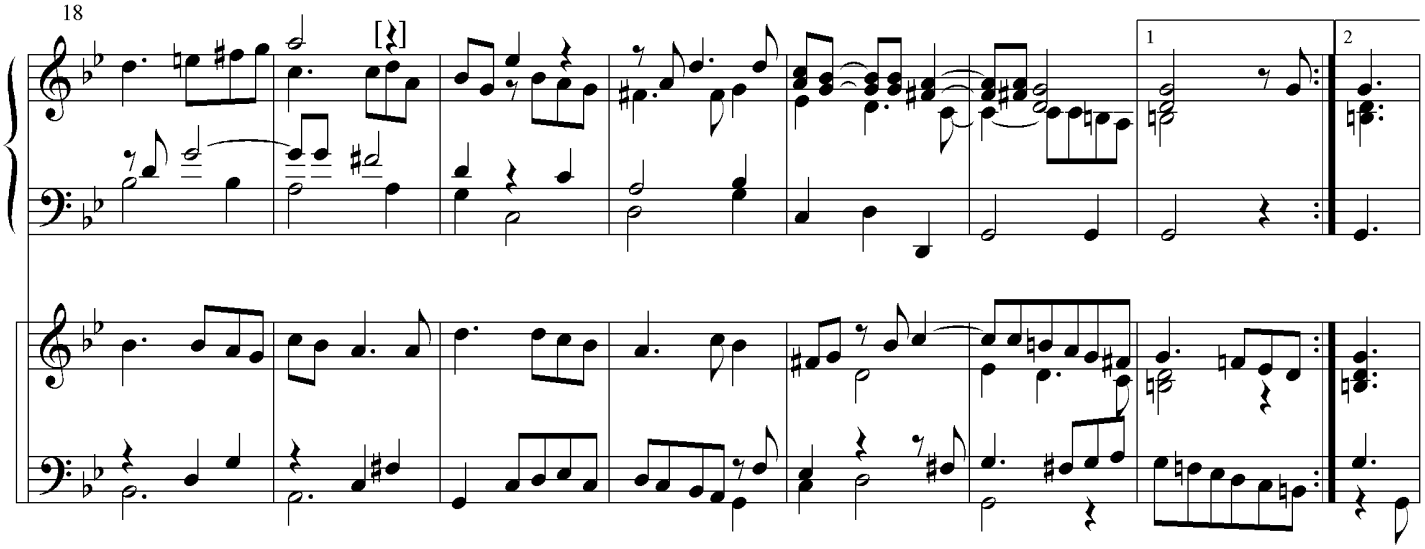

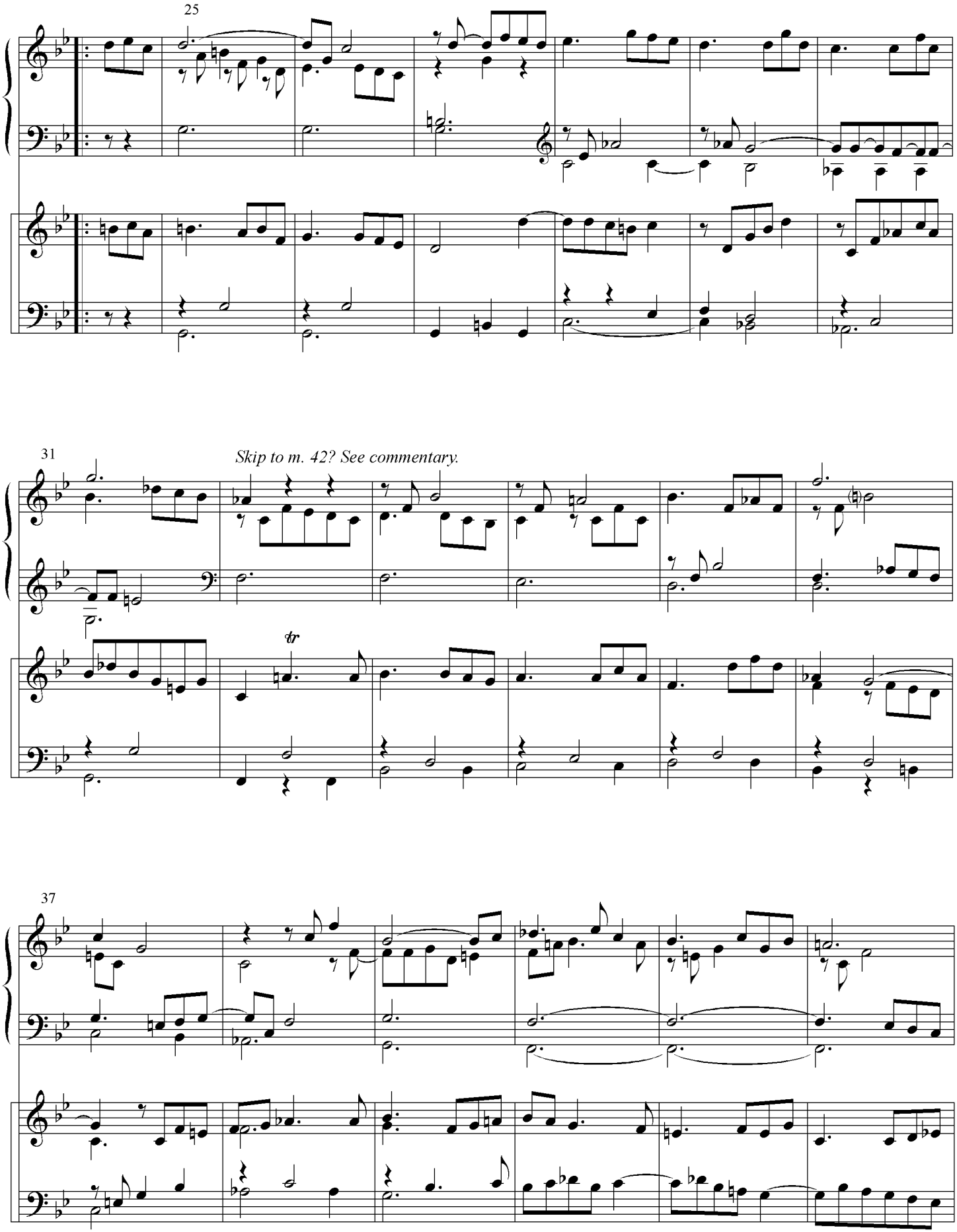
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Skip to m. 42? See commentary.
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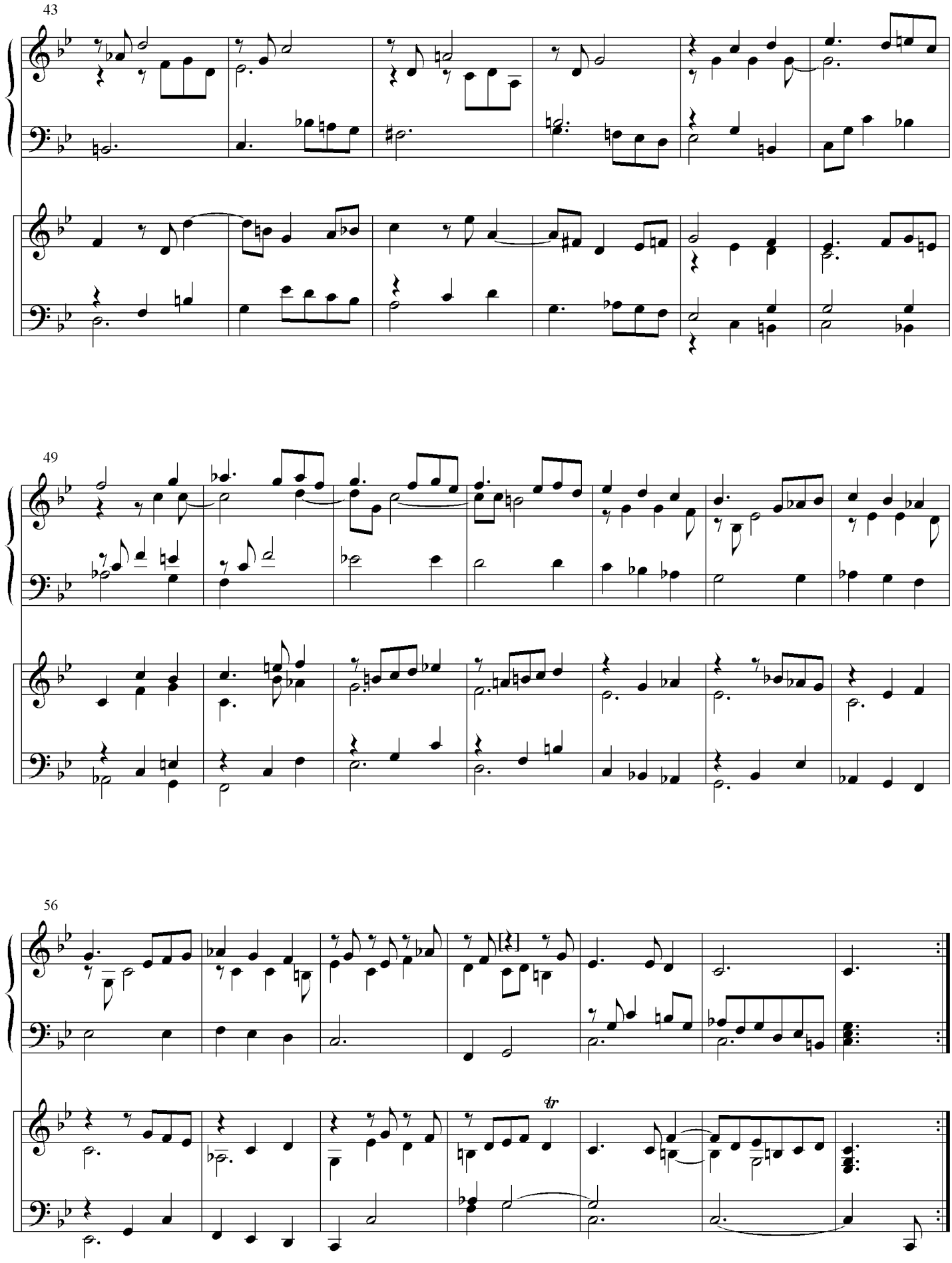
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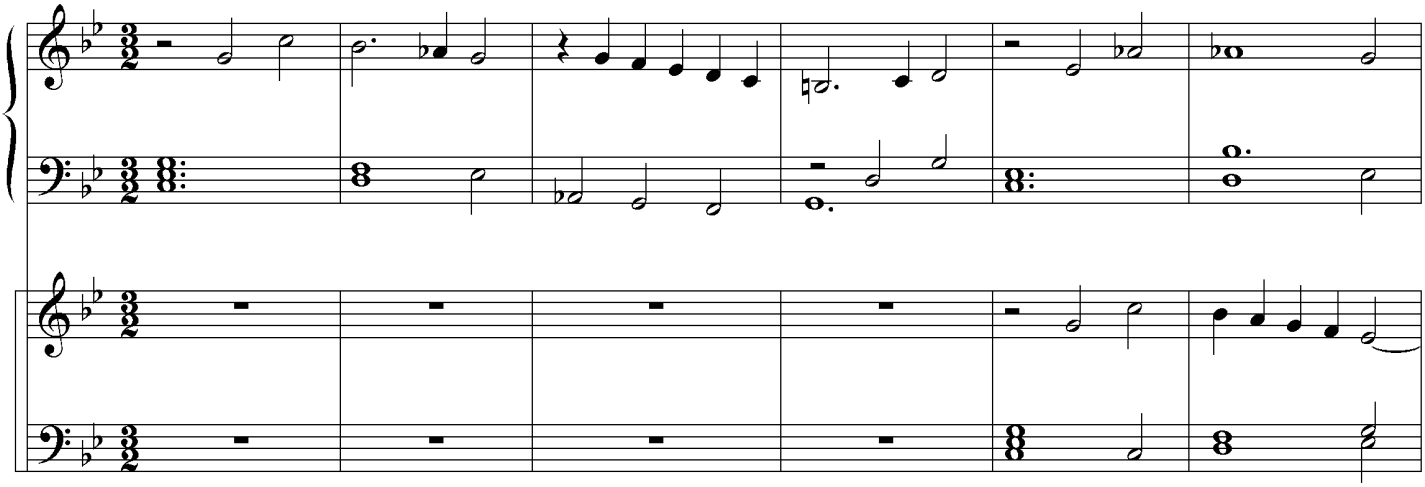
Chaconne



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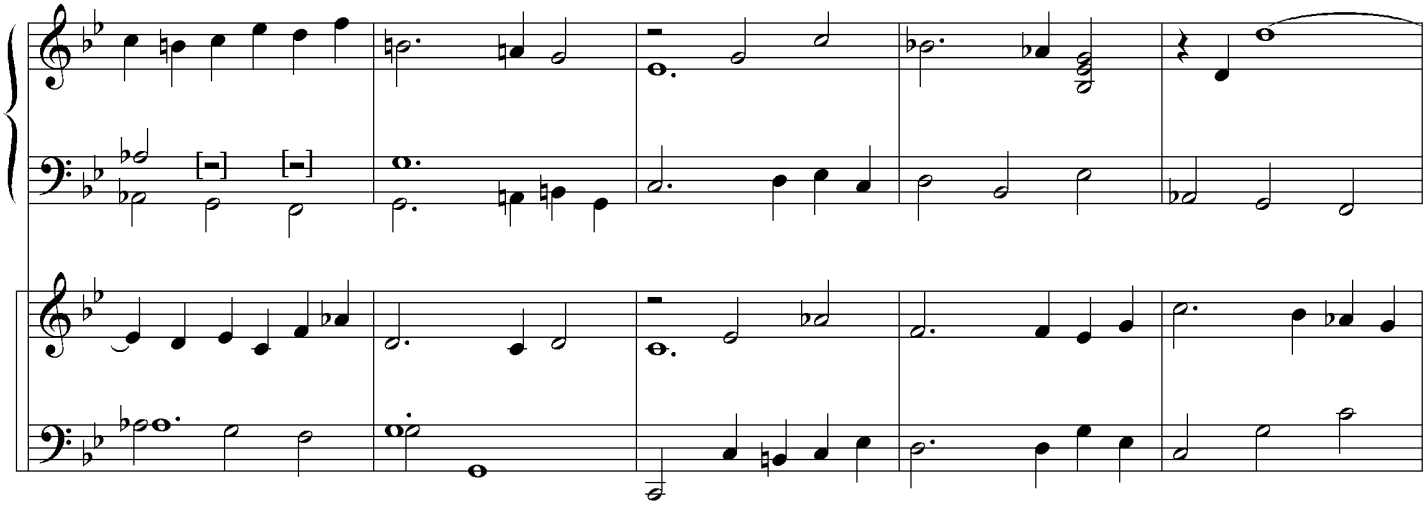

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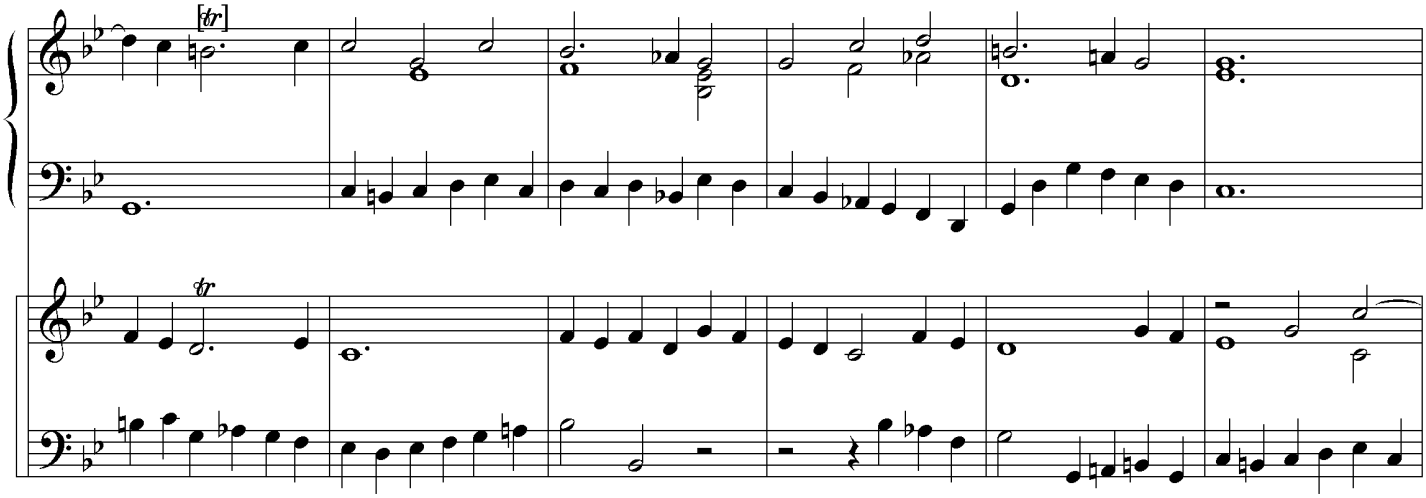

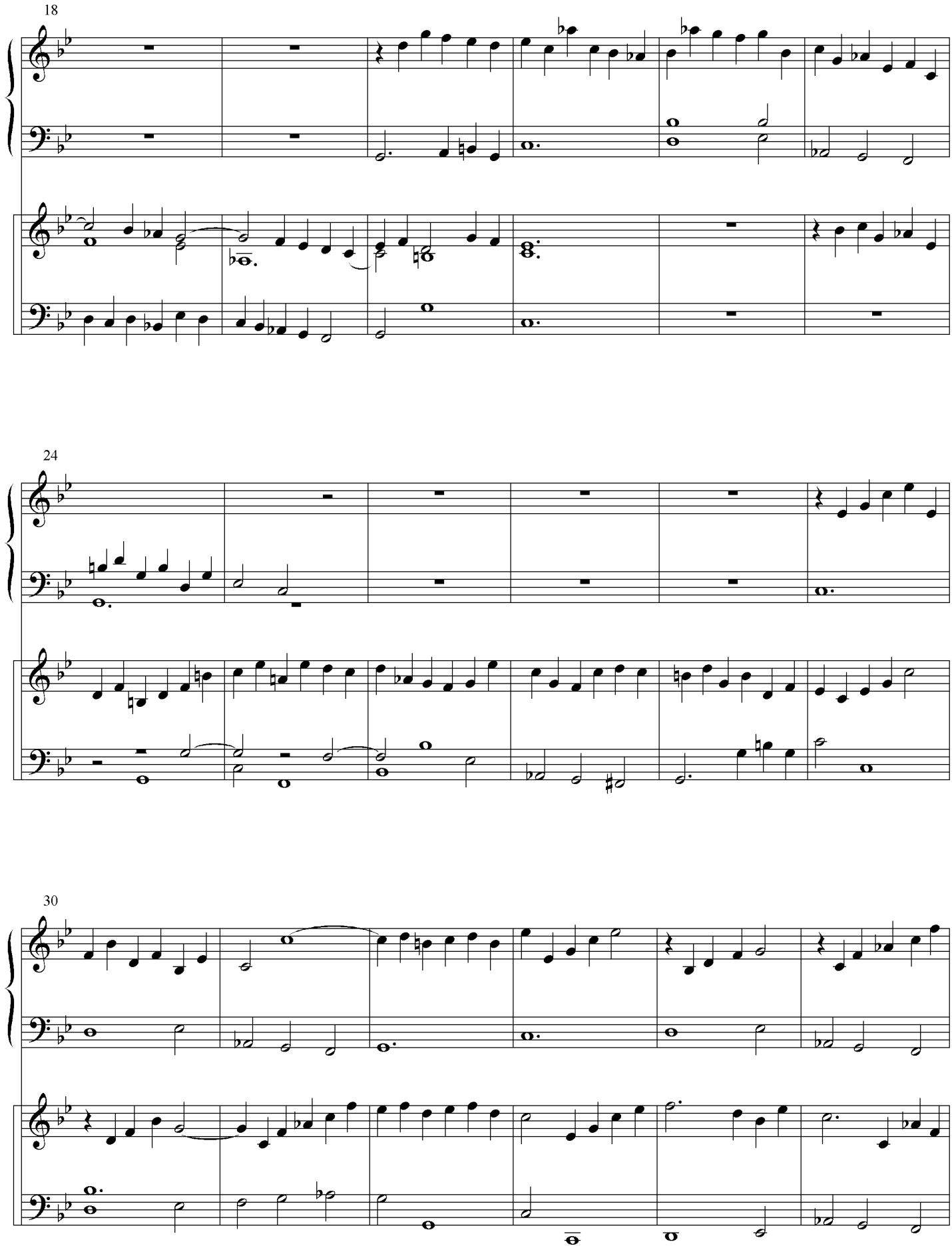
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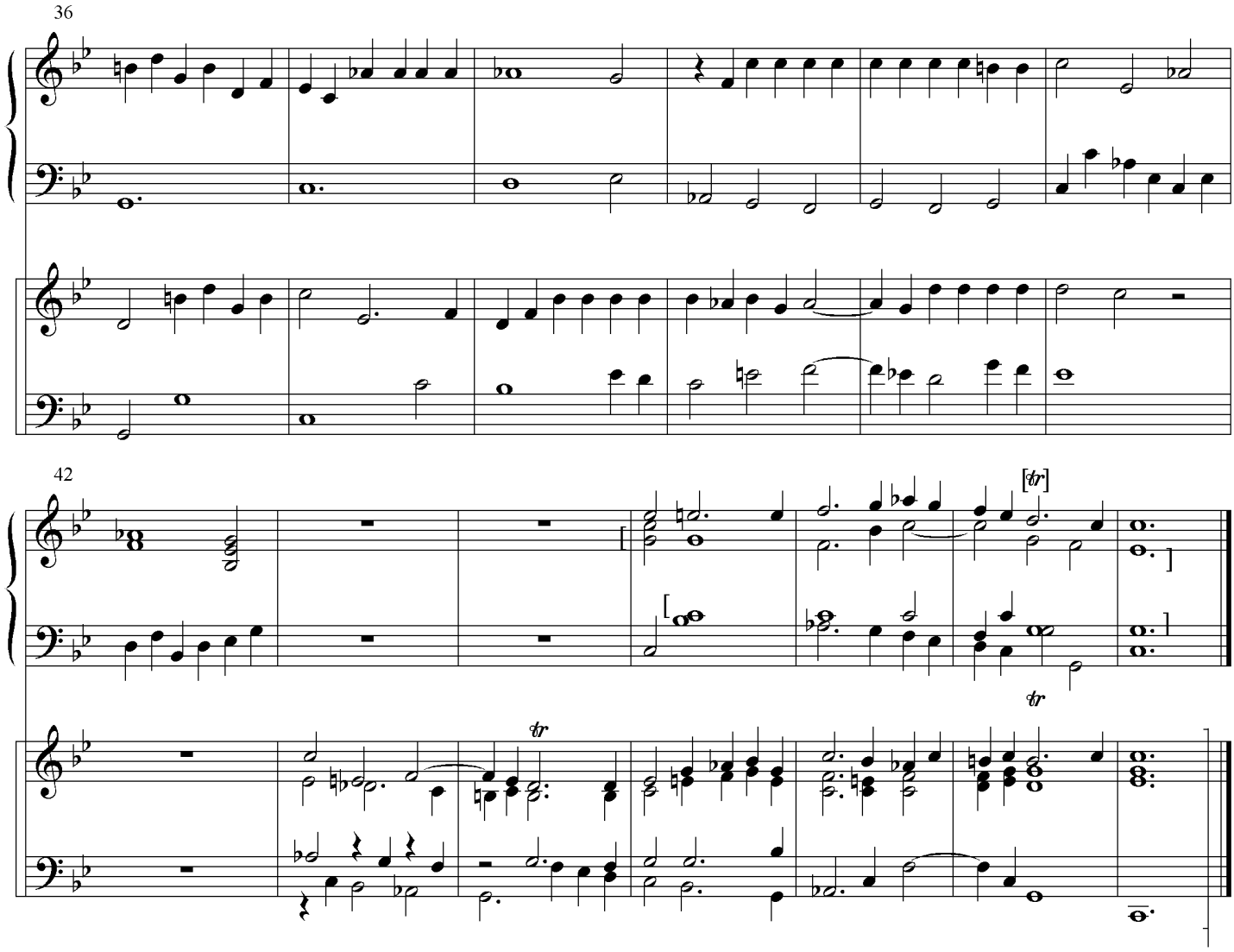
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Suite à deux clavecins, HWV 446

Handel's Suite for two harpsichords in C minor is a problematical early work. Although preserved in six eighteeth-century manscript copies, all lack the second part. Moreover, the third movement, designated a sarabande, exists in a later version for one keyboard instrument as the courante of the C-minor suite HWV 445.

David Burrows, in his critical edition and reconstruction of the work (Wiesbaden: Breitikopf und Härtel, 1998), supposes that the second part was meant to be improvised. But if so Handel must have intended it only for himself to play; improvising it would require the player to have a thorough grasp of some tricky contrapuntal relationships between the two parts. It is also possible that Handel wrote a second part but withheld it for his own use, perhaps because he never polished it or wrote it out clearly enough for dissemination. If such a part ever existed, it must have become lost at an early stage in the work's history.

The suite probably dates from the composer's Hamburg years (1703–6). It could have been suggested by the somewhat similar suite for two harpsichords by Handel's Hamburg friend and fellow composer Johann Mattheson; both works might have been inspired by the pieces for two harpsichords published by Gaspard Le Roux in 1705. But unlike other early works by Handel, the composer apparently never revised or re-used the present suite, apart from its third movement. One reason may be that it seems not to be particularly imaginative or musically successful. Hence modern efforts to reconstruct it have been inspired more by its novelty than by any compelling musical reason. There exist earlier reconstructions by Thurston Dart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950) and David Vine (Albany, Calif.: PRB Productions, 1992). Neither reflects a critical examination of the sources or the musical text.

The third movement presents a number of problems for the present reconstruction. Although designated a sarabande, the movement lacks the characteristics of that dance. A later version, however, serves as the second movement of the suite HWV 445, where it is labeled as a courante. This later version is for a single keyboard instrument, but in the present suite the first part is also self-sufficient. Burrows therefore does not provide a second part for this movement in his edition. Perhaps, however, Handel envisioned for this movement the type of optional accompaniment part that Le Roux provided for some of the pieces in his 1705 book. The present reconstruction follows Le Roux's model, although the second part can be omitted (or added for the repeats only).

The third movement presents further problems in mm. 33–40, where the manuscripts give various readings. One copy breaks off entirely after m. 38, and another lacks m. 39. Evidently the material available to copyists was faulty or difficult for them to interpret, perhaps due to corrections or cancelled measures in the lost autograph. The problems in the sources reflect a musical problem, for mm. 33–42 essentially repeat the material of mm. 28–32. This suggests that the passage preserved as mm. 33–42 may comprise matter drafted or sketched in the autograph that was not meant to be played. Reflecting that possibility, the present version is designed to allow players to skip from m. 31 to m. 42, omitting mm. 32–41.

The later version of the second movement (HWV 445/2) departs from the present one beginning

at m. 28, although it continues to develop ideas from the early version. The latter modulates to F minor around m. 37, then returns to the tonic via an ascending sequence in mm. 43–6. The later version substitutes a descending sequence in mm. 35–8, and it makes more clearly articulated arrivals on F and G, avoiding the lengthy dwelling upon the subdominant that dominates the second half of the present version.

The chaconne which follows is shorter than other chaconnes by Handel, barely suggesting the possibilities inherent in a movement of this type for two keyboard instruments. It seems to end prematurely, and it is possible that Handel abandoned the present suite, leaving both the third and the fourth movements unfinished or in draft form. This may explain why one copy contains only the first two movements; conceivably, the copyist of that manuscript saw that the third movement was cancelled or unfinished, overlooking the brief chaconne.

There are many further textual problems in the extant first part. The old edition by Chrysander (Handel-Gesellschaft edition, vol. 48, pp. 162–66) is unreliable. It does, however, transmit some readings from a now lost manuscript copy that Burrows regards as reliable (see his edition for further information on the sources and their relationships). Dart's edition was based on GB Lbl Add. 31577 (Burrows's source A) and therefore does not incorporate the sometimes superior readings from the lost copy.

The present reconstruction was originally prepared for a performance at Stony Brook, N.Y., in 1981 and was based on my consultation of Dart's edition as well as the inaccurate manuscript by Handel's copyist J. C. Smith in US NYp Drexel 5856 (Burrows's C). I subsequently made a number of corrections and revisions on the basis of Burrows's critical commentary, and I revised the score in 2011 for a performance with Christa Rakich during the 2011 Boston Early Music Festival. As the present reconstruction is not a critical edition, it incorporates a number of silent emendations of the text of the first part.

The identification of the first movement (allemande) as a praeludium, as in Chrysander's edition, apparently follows the lost manuscript source. This might reflect Corelli's use of the the term *preludio* for somewhat similar first movements in his trio sonatas. The second movement (the first courante) is a free variation of the allemande, as in other early suites by Handel and his older north-German composers contemporaries. This is a further indication that Handel wrote the work before leaving Hamburg in 1706.

David Schulenberg (11/23/11)