J.S. BACH'S CHACONNE

TRANSCRIBED FOR THE CELLO

Harro Ruijsenaars

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WHY

A renowned Dutch violinist to whom I mentioned my project of transcribing for performance Bach's Chaconne asked me: "But why? Bach wrote six suites for the cello. Is that not enough". True enough, these suites have given me fifty years of great joy and challenge. But what about Brahms, Busoni and others who had the wealth of Bach's keyboard music at hand? What about Mendelssohn and Schumann who wrote piano accompaniments for this work for solo violin, marked "Senza Basso" by its composer?

When asked: "Why climb Mount Everest", George Mallory answered: "Because it's there". A very good answer indeed and fitting to the "Why" above.

For me as a music lover Bach's Chaconne is the ultimate work of polyphony and variation art written for a string instrument. It is a work in which the strictness of form never feels stifling because of the wide range of musical emotion and instrumental effects.

As a cellist I have been intrigued by the question how Bach would have composed for my instrument if virtuosi like Boccherini or Duport, both born after 1740, would have existed in his environment. Would he still have written for the cello restricting himself to the fourth position upwards (the minor seventh on the A string)?

Voltaire is quoted as having remarked after hearing the great Duport: "He knows how to make a nightingale of an ox". One might assume that the cellists in the German cities where Bach prevailed were not yet familiar with the thumb position, opening for extra octaves in the higher register. But later on Bach's sons, Carl Philip in Berlin and Johann Christian in London, wrote cello works in which the "nightingale" register was effectively used.

When Bach chose the Violoncello Piccolo or the Viola Pomposa it was probably for the lighter instrumental character of these instruments; he certainly wanted the higher register possibility.

It is significant that for the highest note in the Prelude of the 6th cello suite Bach uses the same interval on the E string, a minor tenth (g"), as for the highest note in the Chaconne for solo violin (g"'), demanding quasi violin left hand technique. Could he have written a Chaconne for the cello? It appears to me that the majestic sonority of the Chaconne fits the cello well. The handicap of not having an E string is after all the same as when playing the sixth suite on the four stringed cello. So I decided to put this to the test.

Having arrived at a point in life where my cello no longer is one in a crowd and where there is time for taking on challenges, I felt that my love for polyphony, double stops, triple stops and even richer harmonies needed this outlet.

HOW

There are already several cello arrangements of Bach's Chaconne. But I find that these versions elaborate far beyond the original text with many "cellistic" embellishments as well as, in my opinion, unnecessary alterations.

I have tried to follow the autograph in transcribing it for the cello, but I do not always play an octave down. Incidental excursions into the original violin register are made[1]. The result is that the texture of the work is enriched, sometimes drawn out of the darker register in order to give way for a more brilliant one. Bach meets Boccherini, as it were, but without any changes in the score.

In Bach's autograph, up and down bow signs are lacking. In fact it is very well possible and more animate to play the bowings "as they come" respecting the written slurs[2]. Therefore I have omitted bowing suggestions in my transcription.

Many four string chords are impossible to play in their entirety as the cello lacks an E string. But arpeggio playing can be accomplished quite well by using the same string for two consecutive steps in the chord. Even with a baroque style bow, three and four string chords must be played arpeggiando. Too much stringency when trying to play these strings simultaneously makes an aggressive sound. Tasteful timing is needed.

Still, even then, there are those chords where playing the exact sequence 8va bassa on the cello is impossible or does not sound well. In these chords I have tried to choose the most important harmonic lines, sometimes eliminating voices that often only occur because on the violin the corresponding string must be included in the arpeggio.

In my version episodes are frequently situated in the neck positions. It helps to be blessed with big hands and a cello that works soundwise when playing in these positions, especially on a G string not hampered by "wolf" tones. See for instance bars 107-109.

Some of my fingerings seem "uncellistic" where I avoid audible shifts from low to high positions and downward in linear passages on the A and D strings. The reason is that, on the violin, shifting of this kind is mostly unnecessary and in authentic style performance avoided or not emphasized by the players.

Octave and fifth flageolets are used as a "bridge" for clarity in shifting but also to add resonance. Resonance is an important reason for transcribing the Chaconne for the cello: A larger acoustical body!

Harro Ruijsenaars

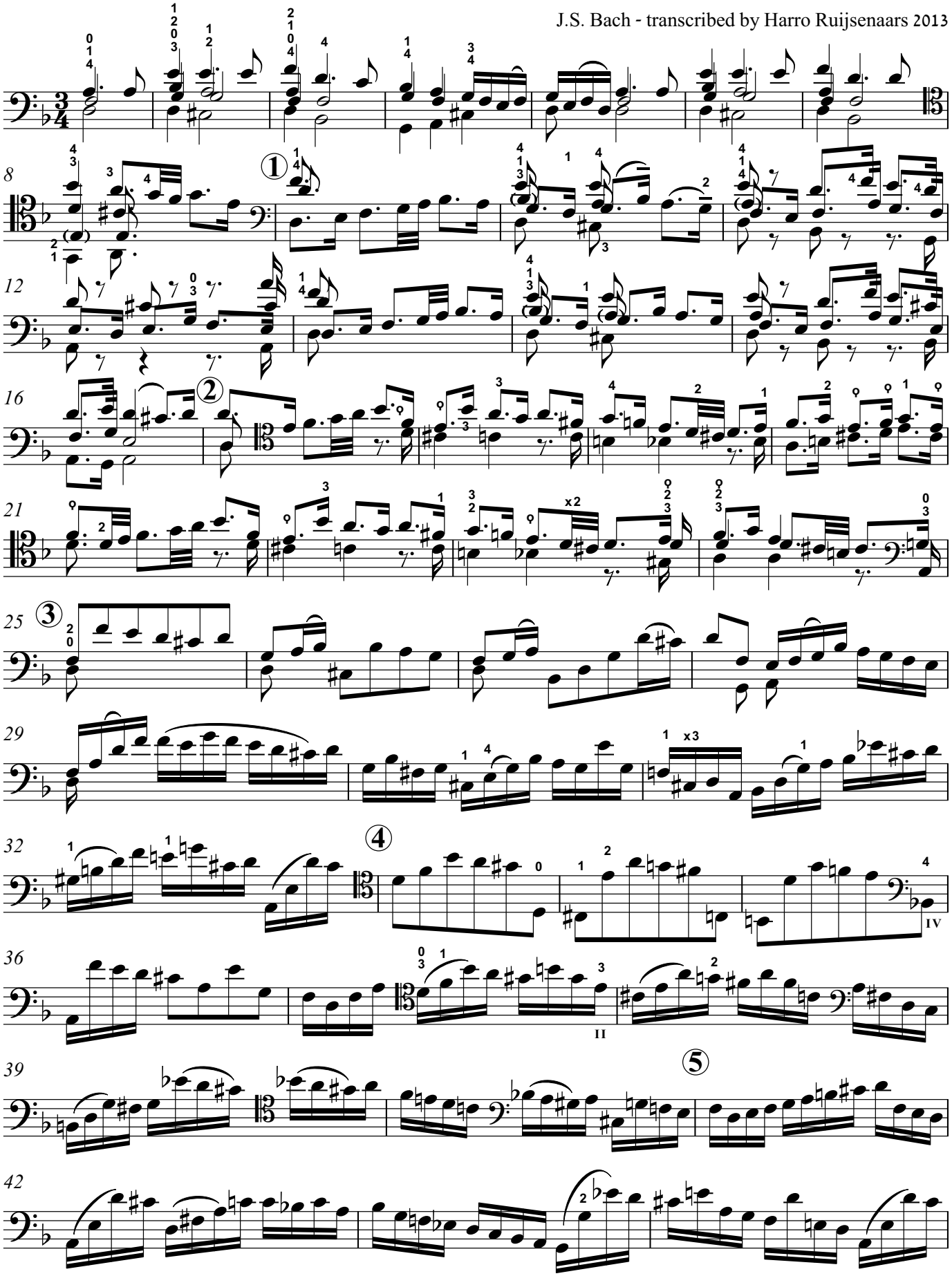
[1] Bars 48-52, 65-72 and 133-139

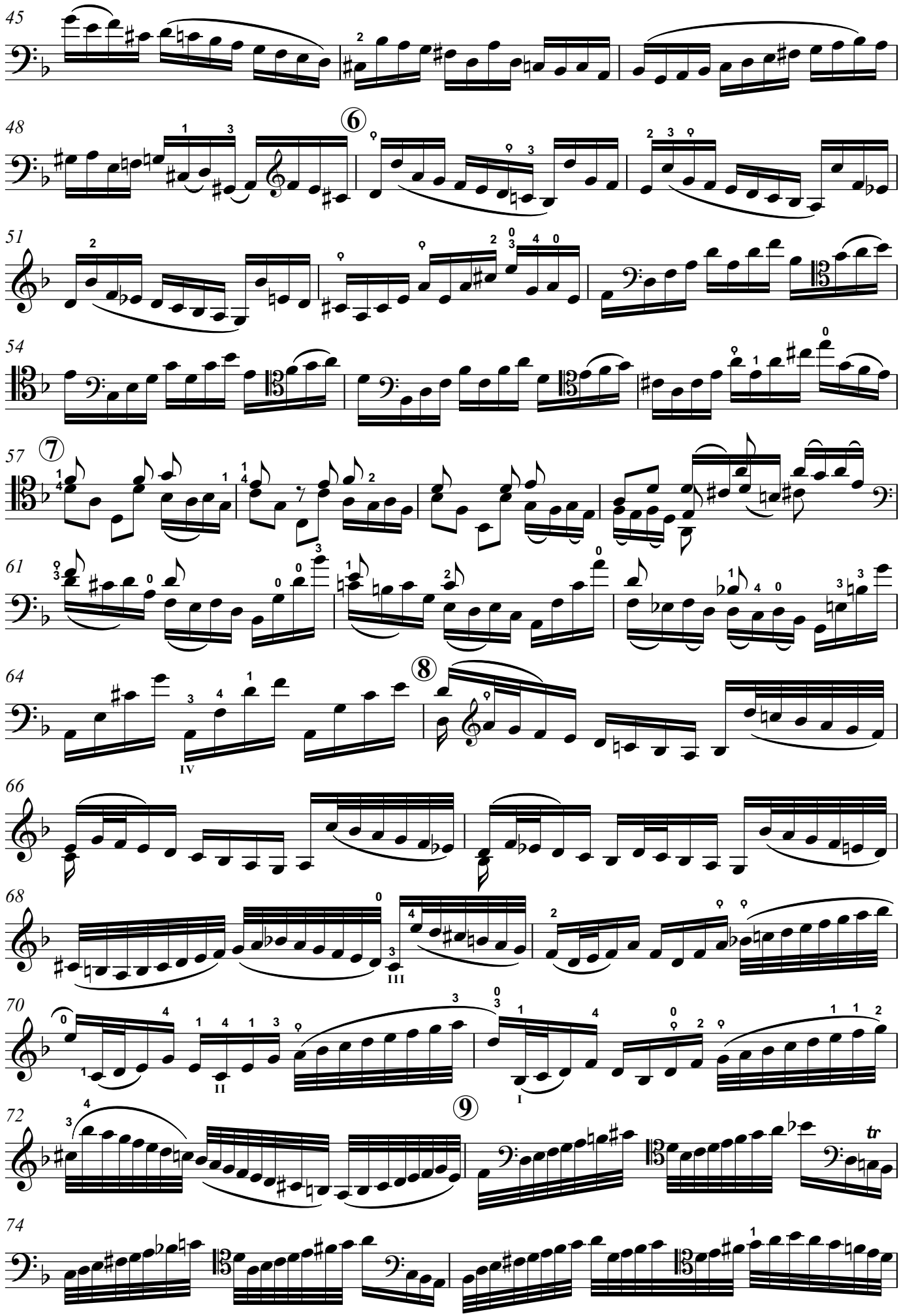
[2] About bowings in Bach see e.g. Anner Bylsma "Bach senza Basso", 2012.

Chaconne

transcription for violoncello

J.S. Bach - transcribed by Harro Ruijsenaars 2013

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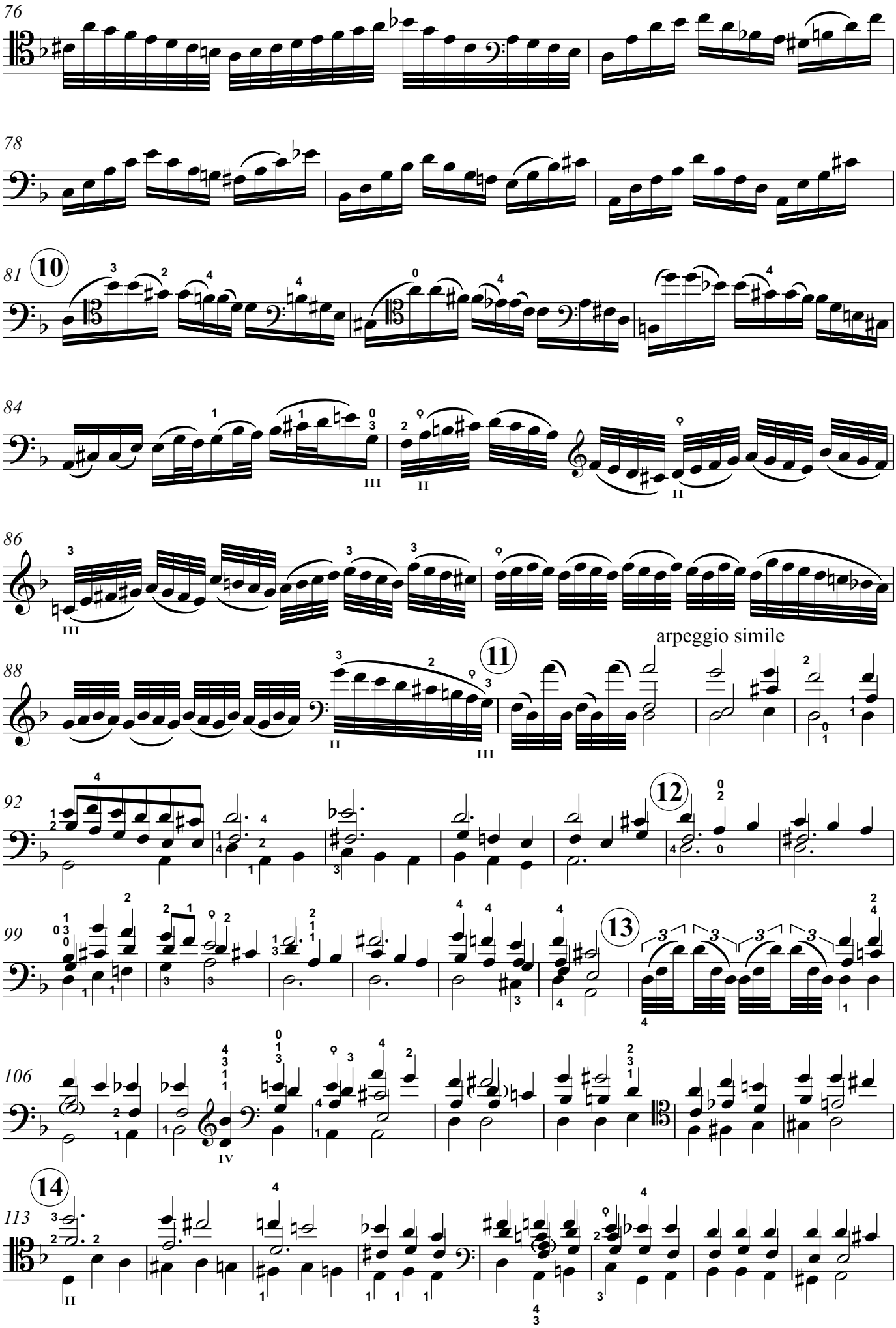
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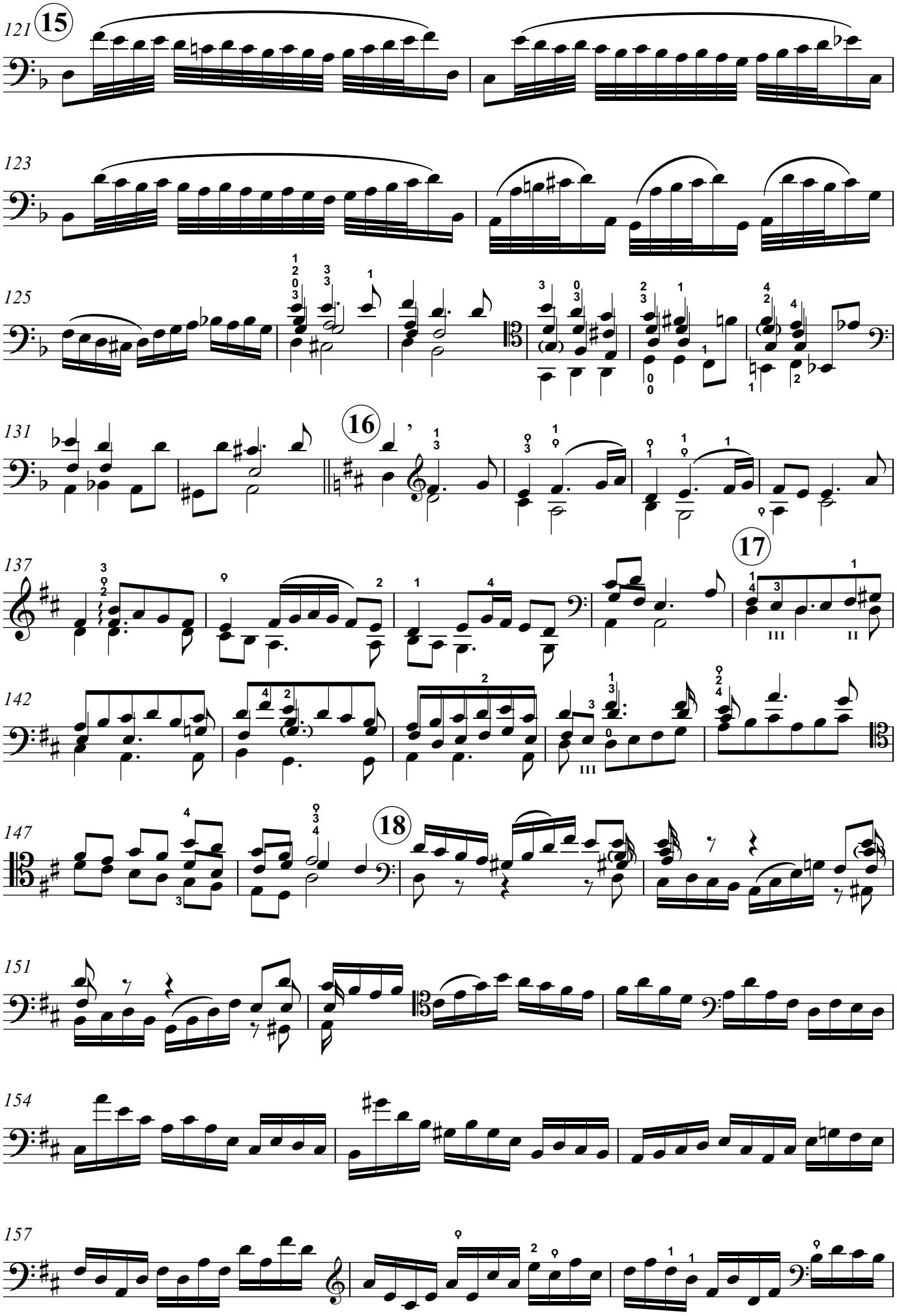
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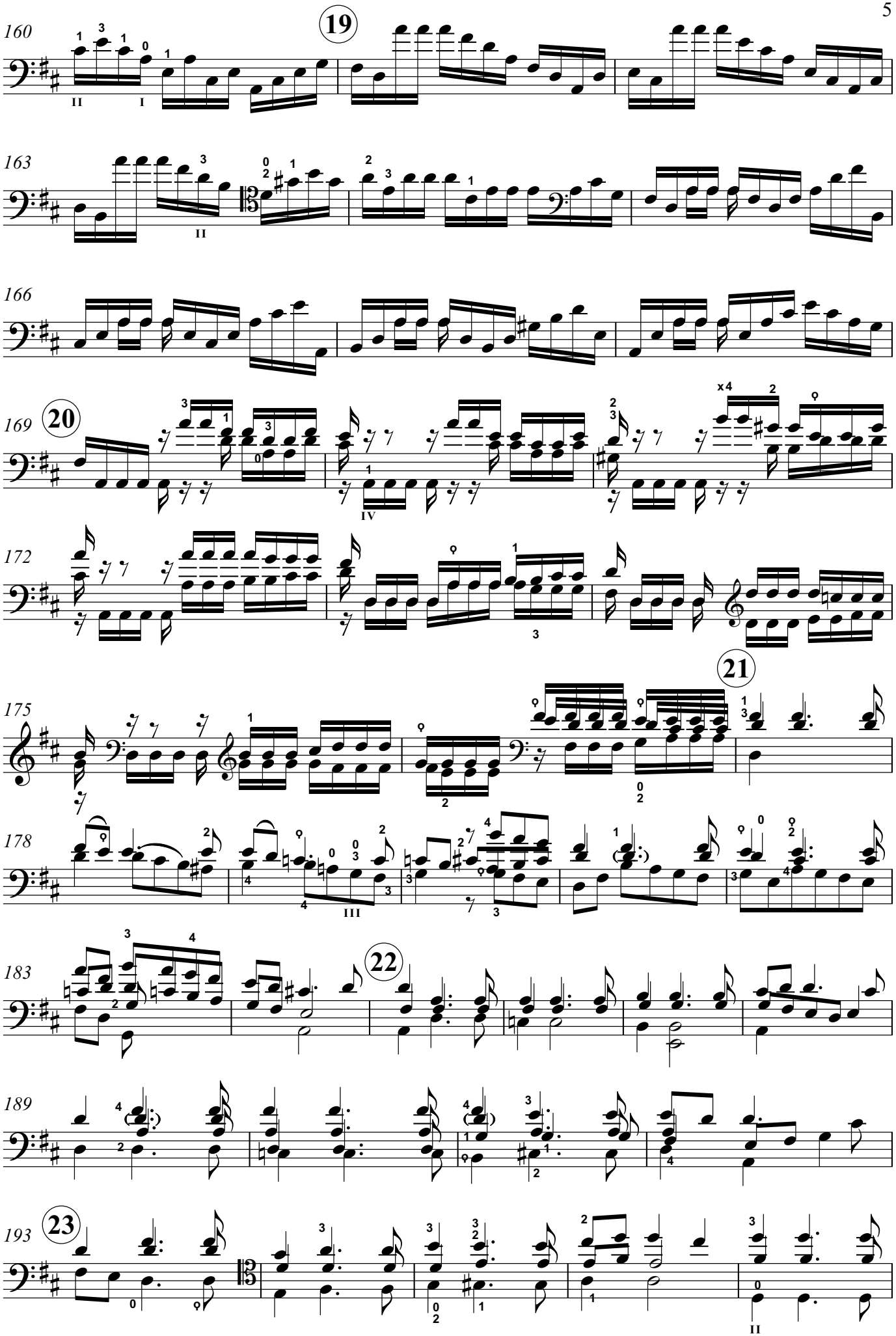
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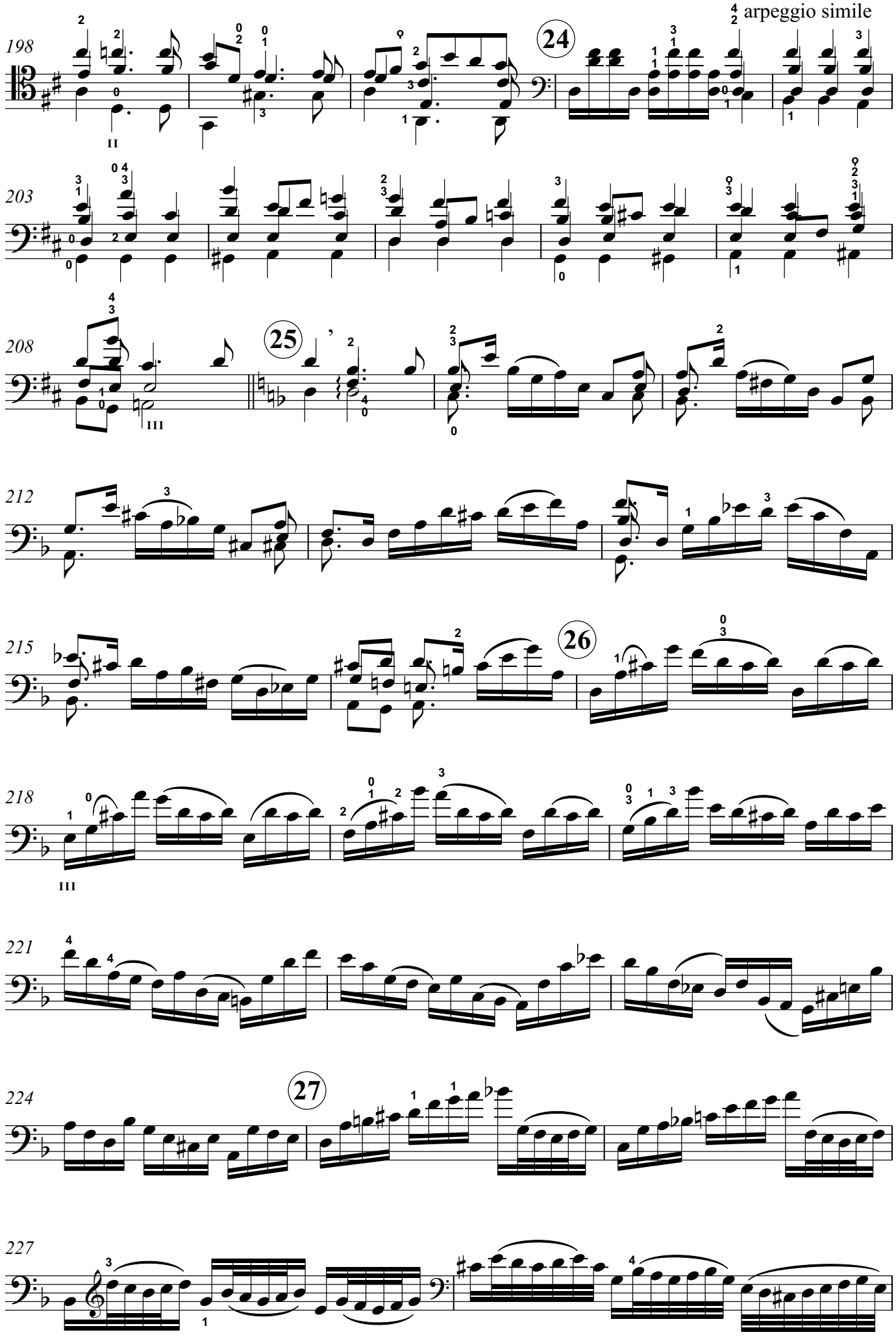
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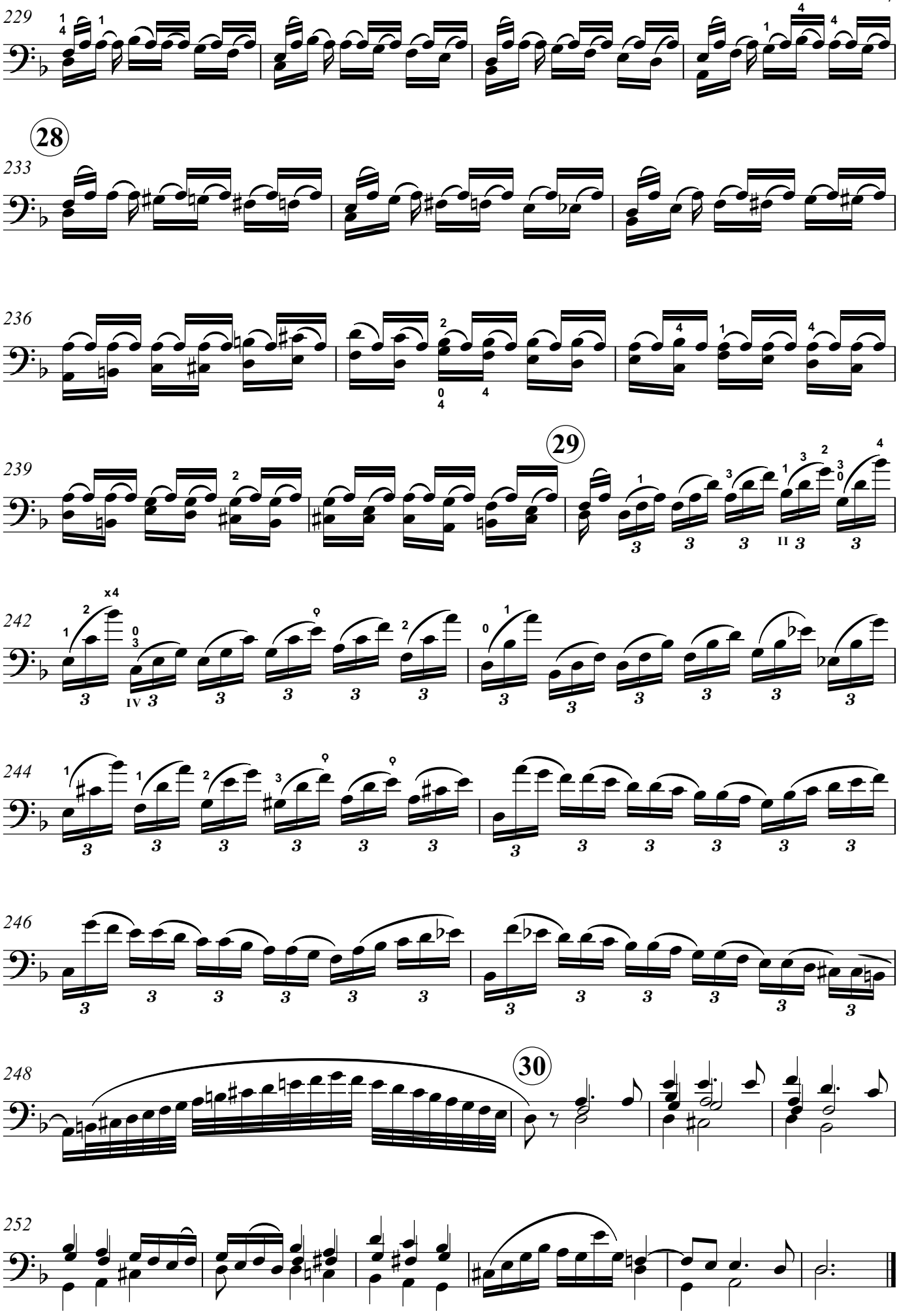
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