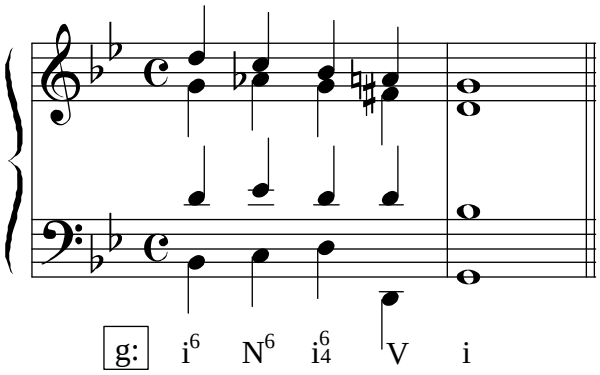
UNIT XII: THE NEAPOLITAN SIXTH; AUGMENTED SIXTH-CHORDS

The Neapolitan Sixth (N^6)

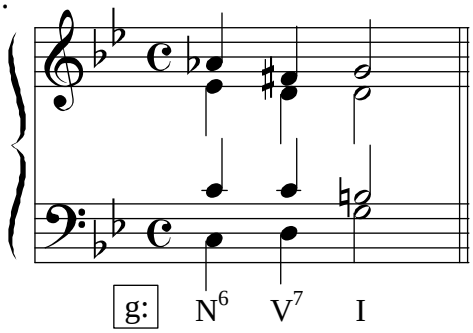
This chord is a major triad rooted on the flat second degree of the scale. It is found most often just before the dominant chord in a cadence, and is usually in first inversion – hence "sixth". It is called "Neapolitan" from the supposed preference for the chord by composers of early 18th-century "Neapolitan" opera (who, however, used it no more often than their transalpine contemporaries).

The typical progressions are:

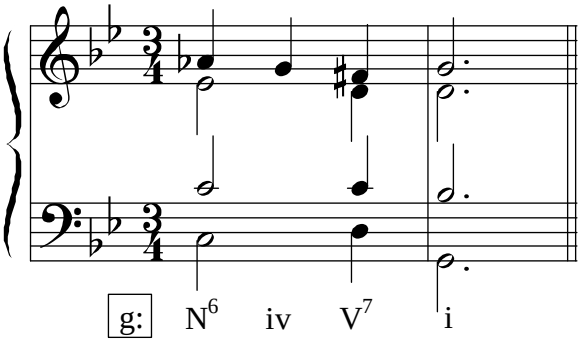
to i^6_4: EXX 12, 15, 16



to V^7: EXX 3, 7, 8, 14



or to iv, then V: EXX 13, 16



Other possibilities include $N^6 \rightarrow V^4_2$ (EXX 2, 4, 5, 6) and $N^6 \rightarrow {}_{o}vii^7/V$ or V/V (EXX 1, 3, 13).

The Neapolitan sixth is useful in a chain of descending sixths: EX 10.

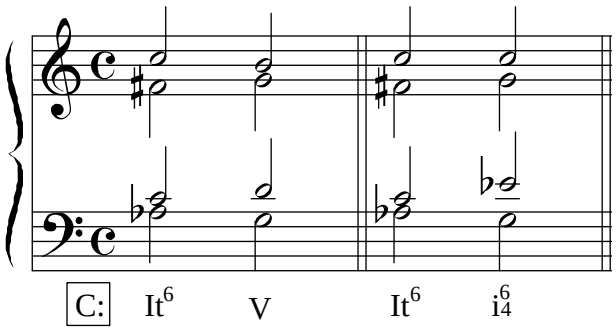
A favorite late-18th-century device was the use of the Neapolitan key-area for brief periods: EX 11.

N^6 can also be used in a kind of plagal cadence: EX 18.

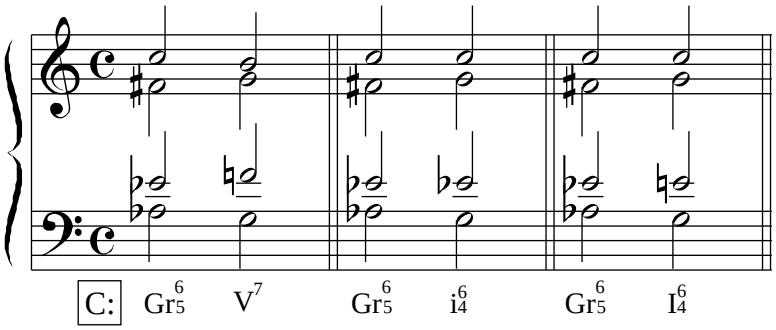
EX 1 shows the only occurrence of the N^6 in the Bach Chorale harmonizations.

The Augmented Sixth Chords

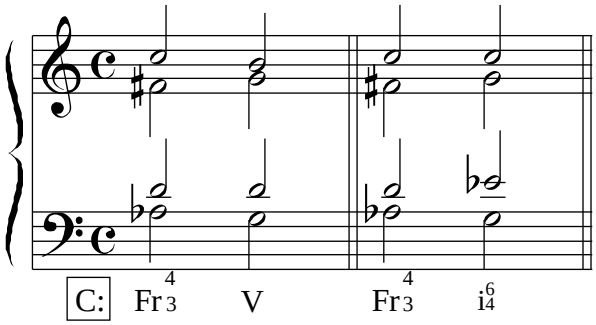
An augmented-sixth chord is one whose bass is most often the lowered 6°, and which also includes the tonic and the raised 4°. If there are just these three pitches, it is known as an "Italian sixth" (It^6):



If the fifth above the bass, the (lowered) 3°, is present as well, it is called a "German sixth" (Gr^6_5):



If instead of the 5th above the bass, we have an augmented fourth – the 2° of the scale – it is a "French sixth" (Fr^4_3):



The generic name for these chords is derived from the interval from the lowered 6° to the raised 4°, an augmented sixth. Note that the It^6 and the Gr^6_5 are enharmonically equivalent to a major-minor seventh chord built on the lowered submediant.

The Fr^4_3 is a chord with an interval structure not elsewhere encountered: two tritones a whole-step apart (or two major seconds a tritone apart), a fragment of a whole-tone scale. It is also a symmetrical chord – a transposition of its own second inversion.

The peculiar spelling of these chords derives from their customary voice-leading, progressing almost always to V (V^7), or to i^6_4 (I^6_4) as shown above. The raised 4° and the lowered 6° proceed by ½-steps in contrary motion to an octave on the dominant. Augmented sixths are equally effective in major or minor.

The spelling of the chords in turn means that the theoretical "root" of an augmented sixth – the note on the bottom when the chord is arranged as a stack of thirds – is the raised 4°, for the It6 and GR, and 2° for the FR. Many theorists label the chords IV^{+6}, IV^{+6}_5, and $II^{+6}_{4\ 3}$, and we will preserve the fictional root by marking the normal chords It^6, Gr^6_5, and Fr^4_3, with the infrequent inversions of these chords (a note other than the lowered 6° in the bass) marked correspondingly: with the raised 4° in the bass, for example: It^7, Gr^7_5, Fr^6_5.

In the It^6, the tonic is usually the doubled pitch in SATB writing. The parallel fifths that can arise from the resolution of Gr^6_5 are often tolerated in practice. The Gr^6_5, however, more often proceeds to the tonic 6-4, while in resolutions to V a Fr^4_3 is preferred. The It^6 resolves acceptably either way.

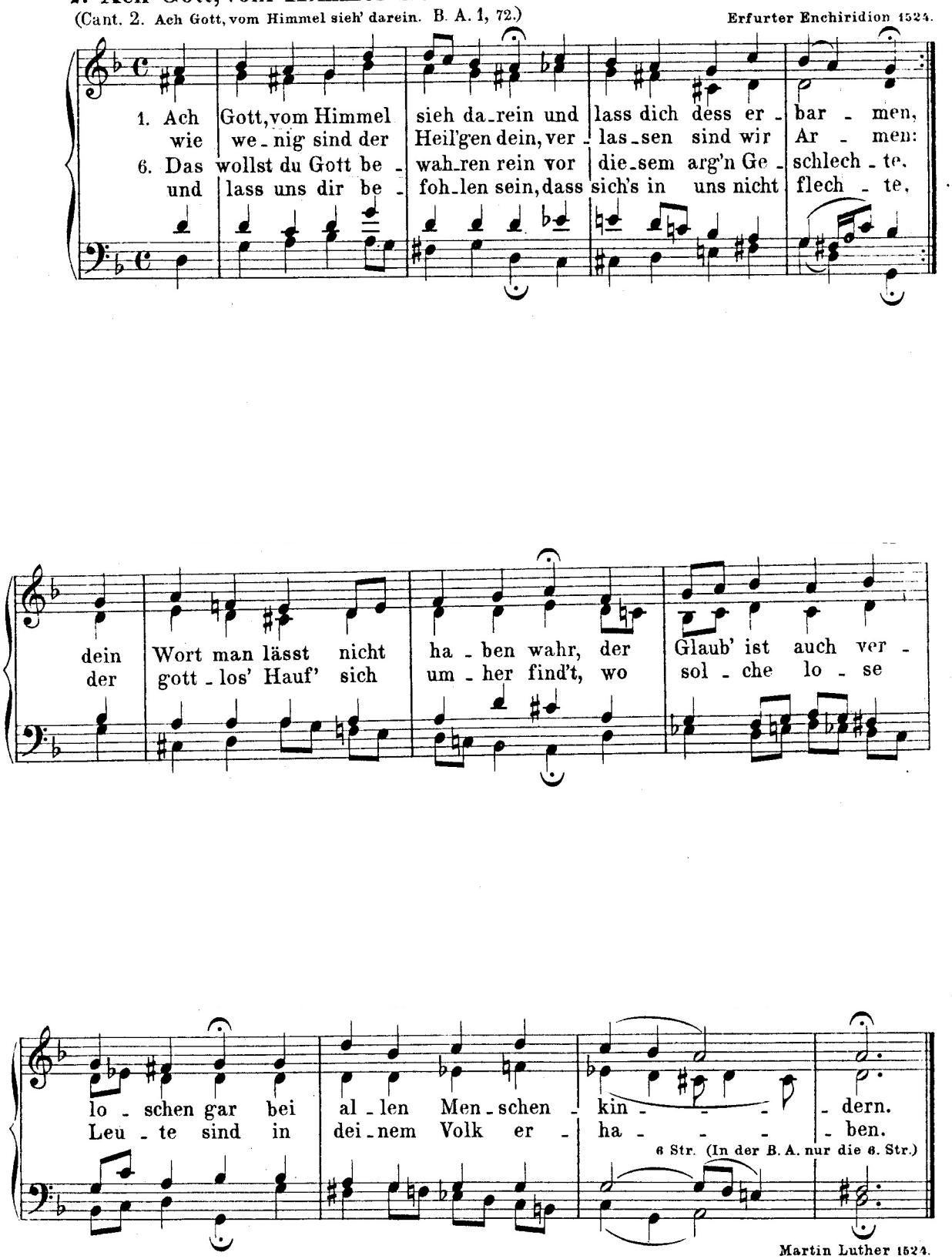
The augmented sixth, like the Neapolitan sixth, is not really much a part of the style of Bach's Chorale harmonizations; EXX 19-22 are the complete examples of such harmony in the Chorales. Notice in EX 21, the augmented sixth is a secondary chord; this is a common usage: EXX 27, 30.

The augmented sixth chords appear at times in other inversions, most often with the raised 4° in the bass: EXX 23, 24.

The It^6 and the Gr^6_5, as we have noted, are enharmonically equivalent to a major-minor seventh, and the remote modulations made possible by re-interpreting the chord as a dominant, or vice-versa, have been a favorite device of composers since the Classic period: EXX 29, 31, 32.

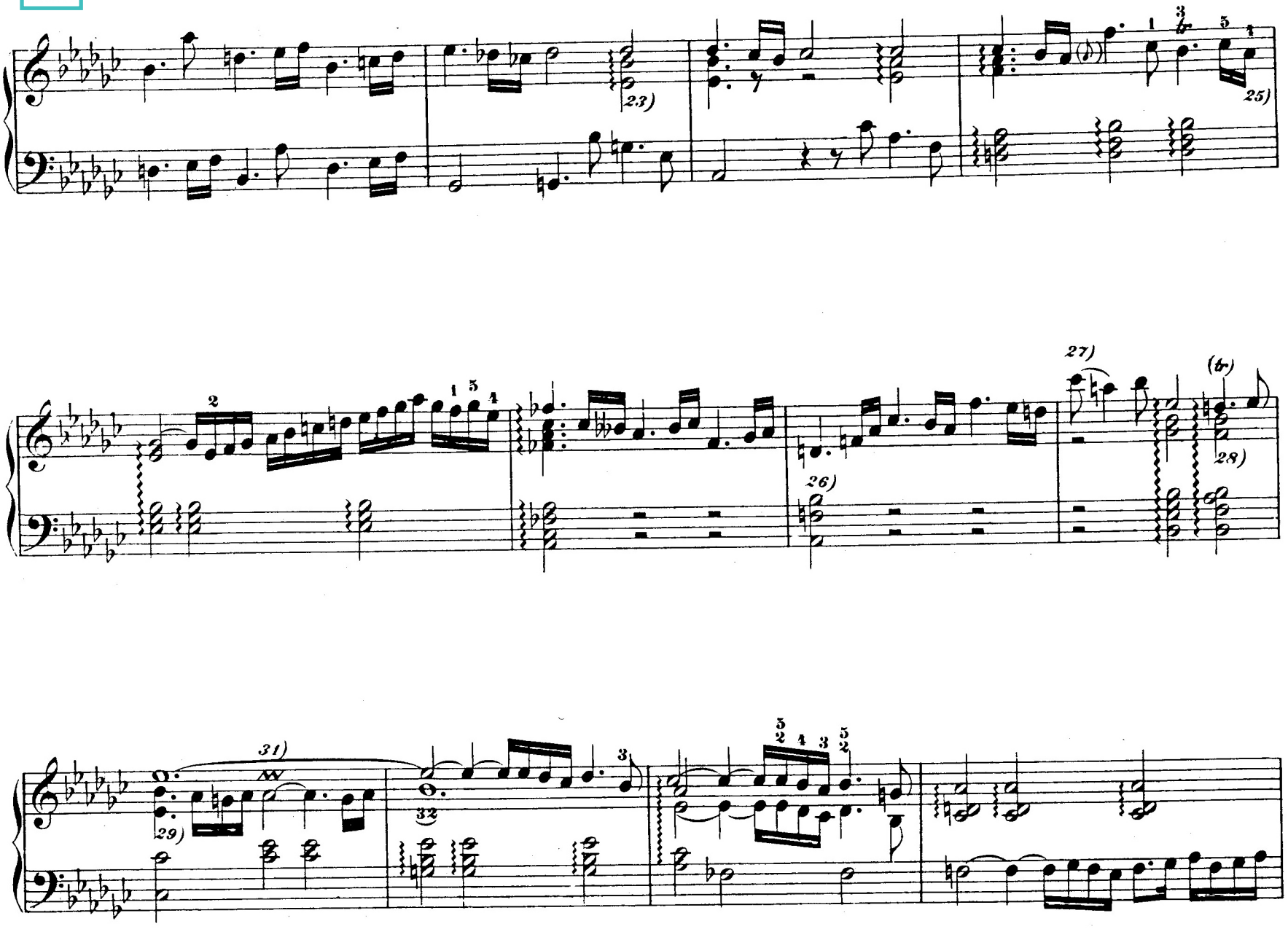
Examples, Unit XII

EX 1

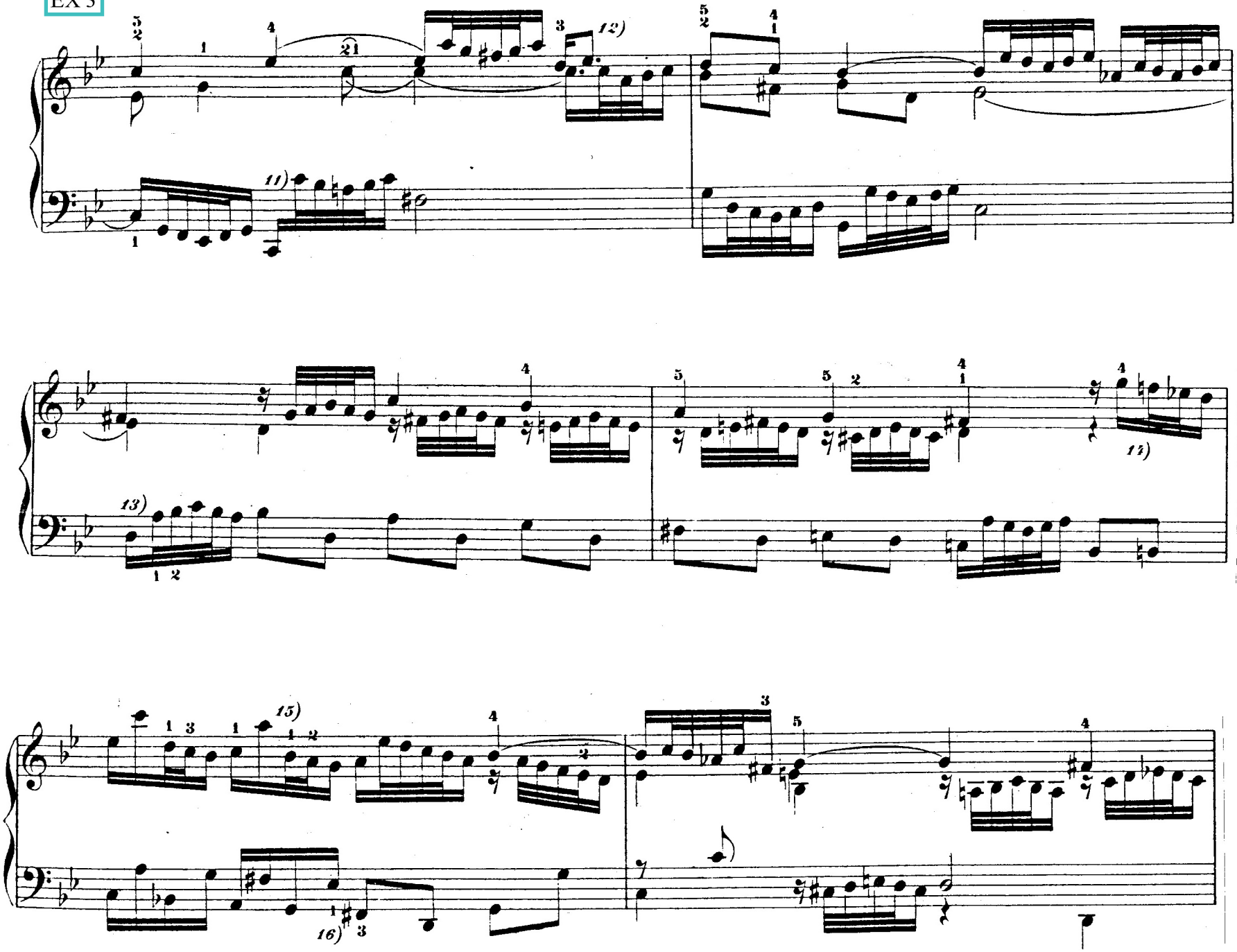


EX 2

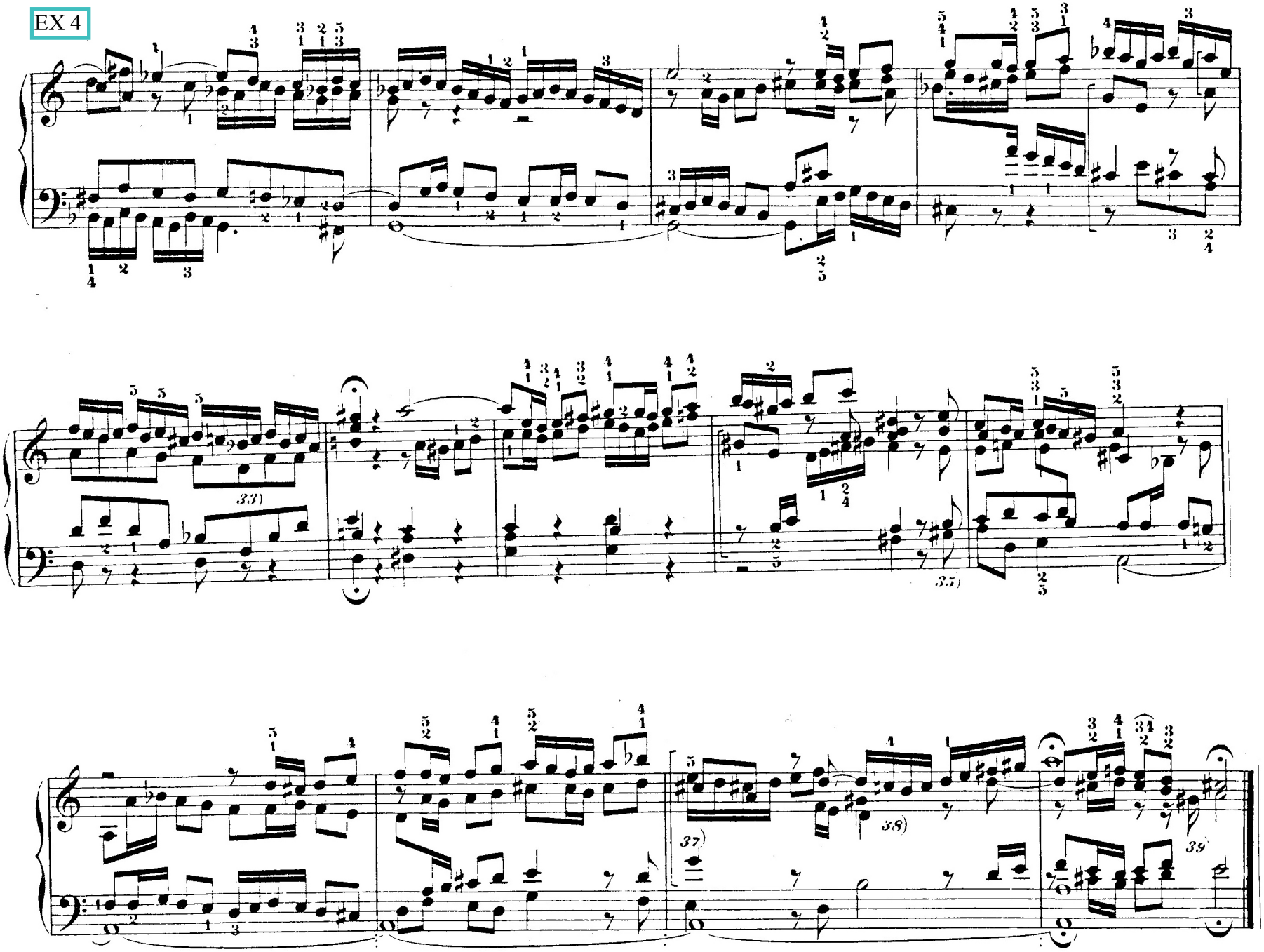
J.S. Bach, *WTC I*, Prelude VIII



EX 3

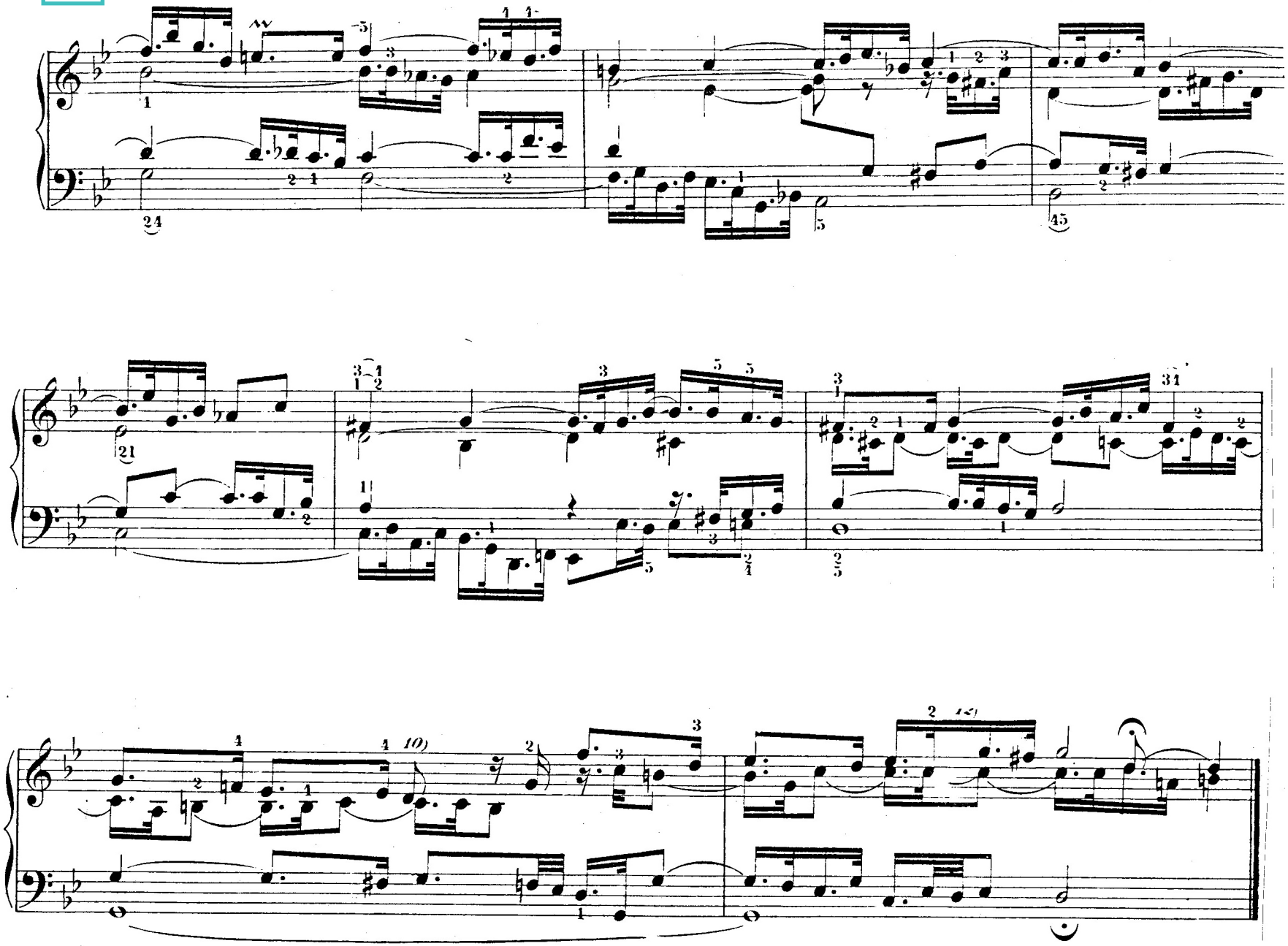


EX 4



EX 5

J.S. Bach, *WTC II*, Prelude XVI



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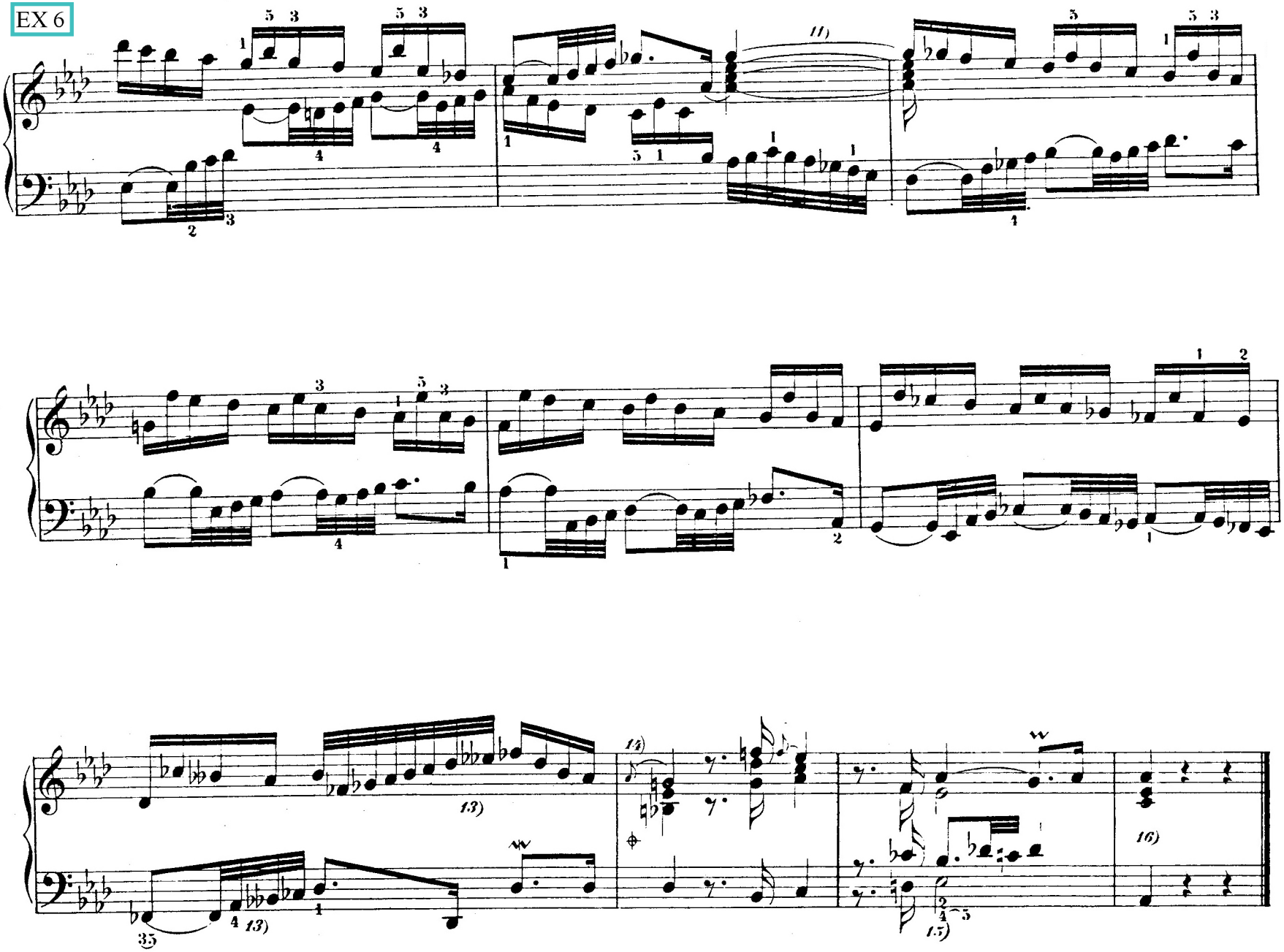

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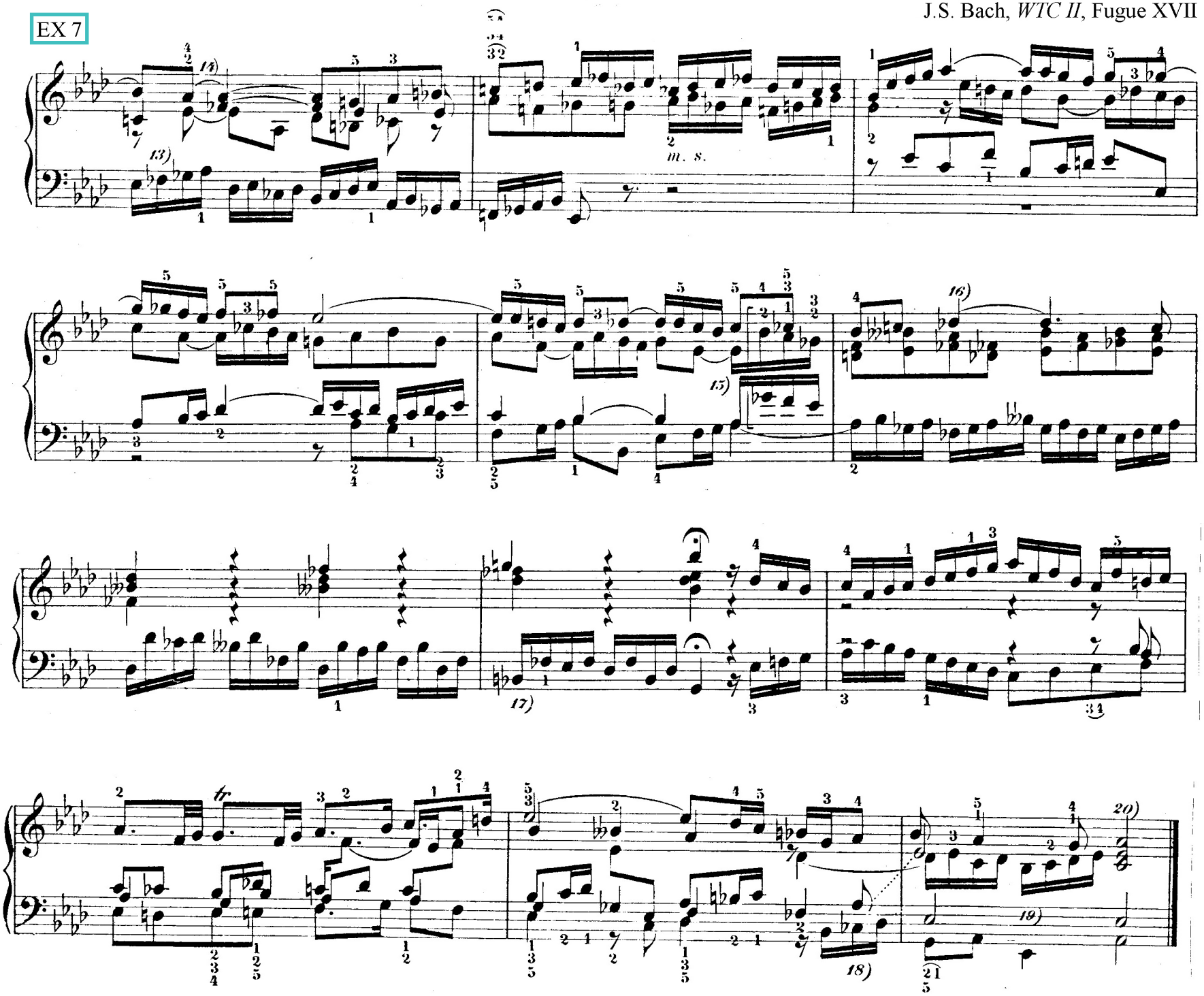
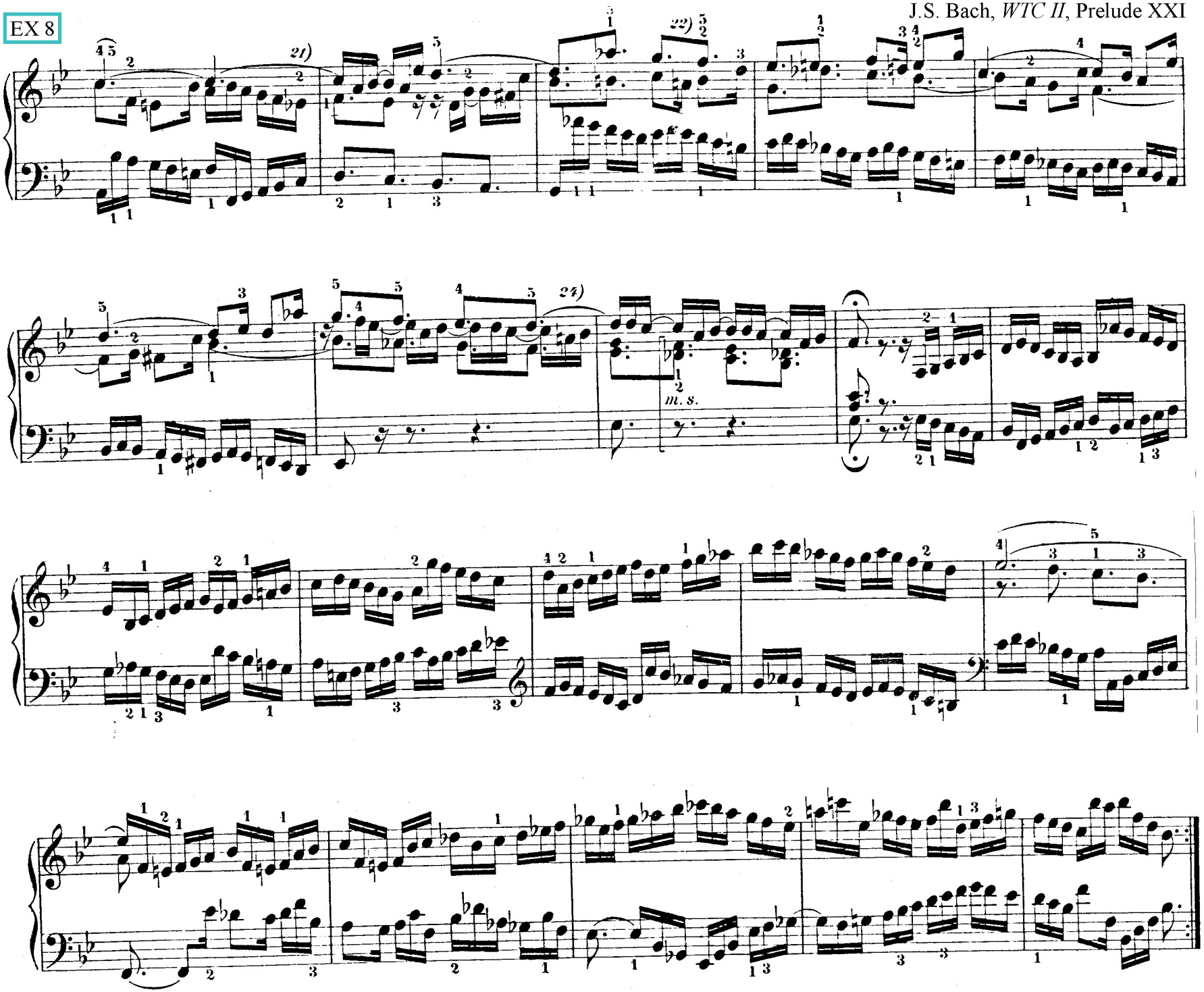
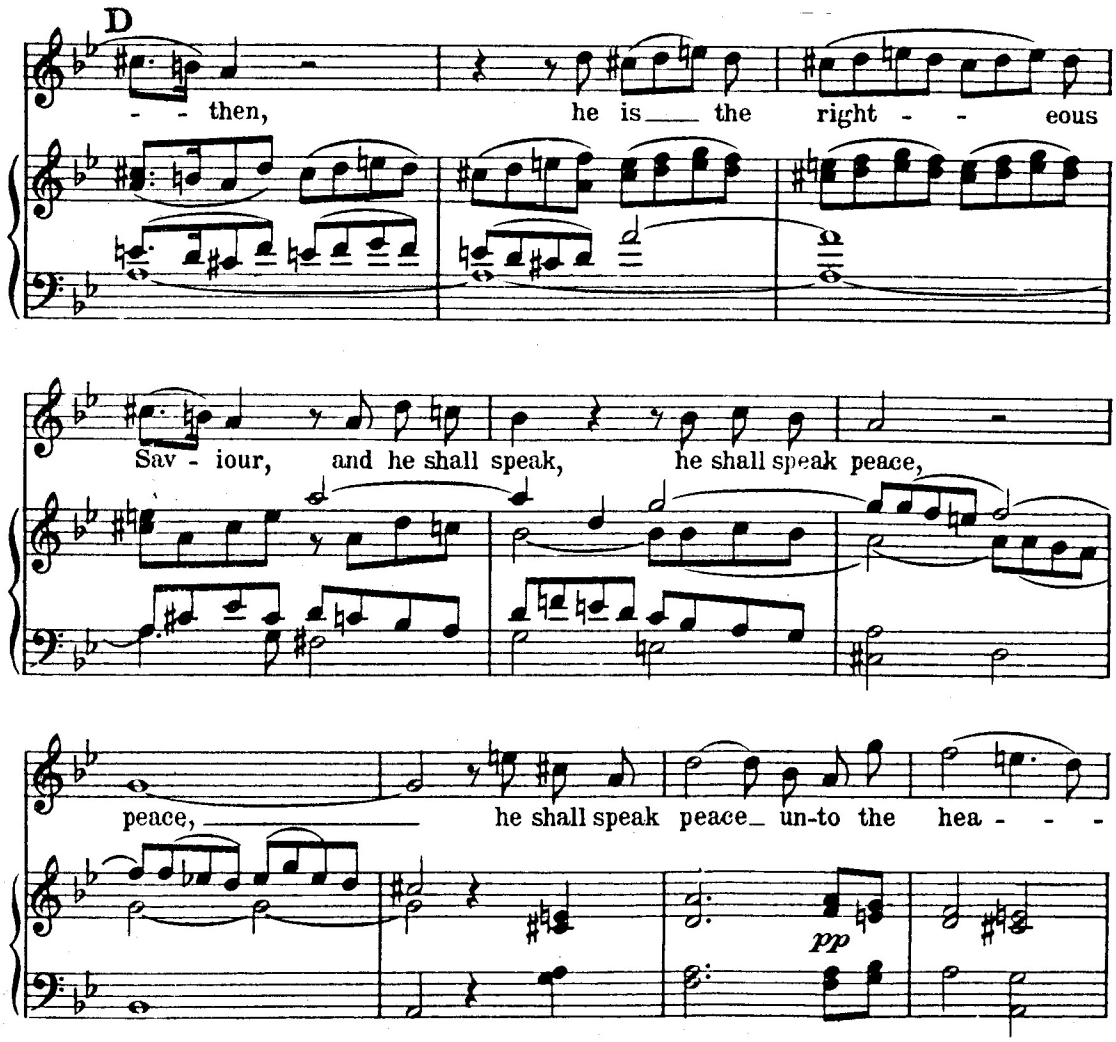


EX 8



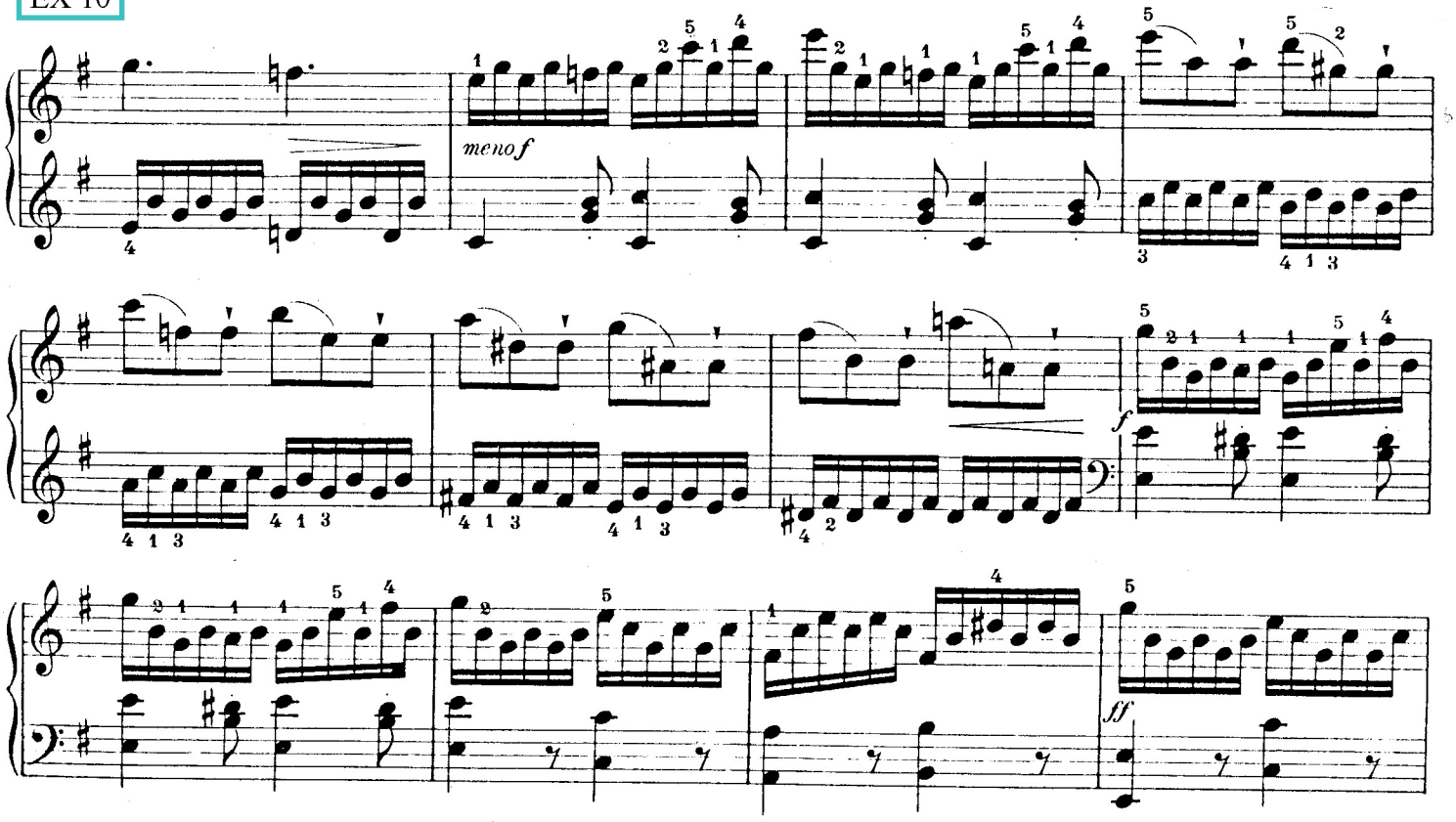
EX 9

Handel, *Messiah*, #18



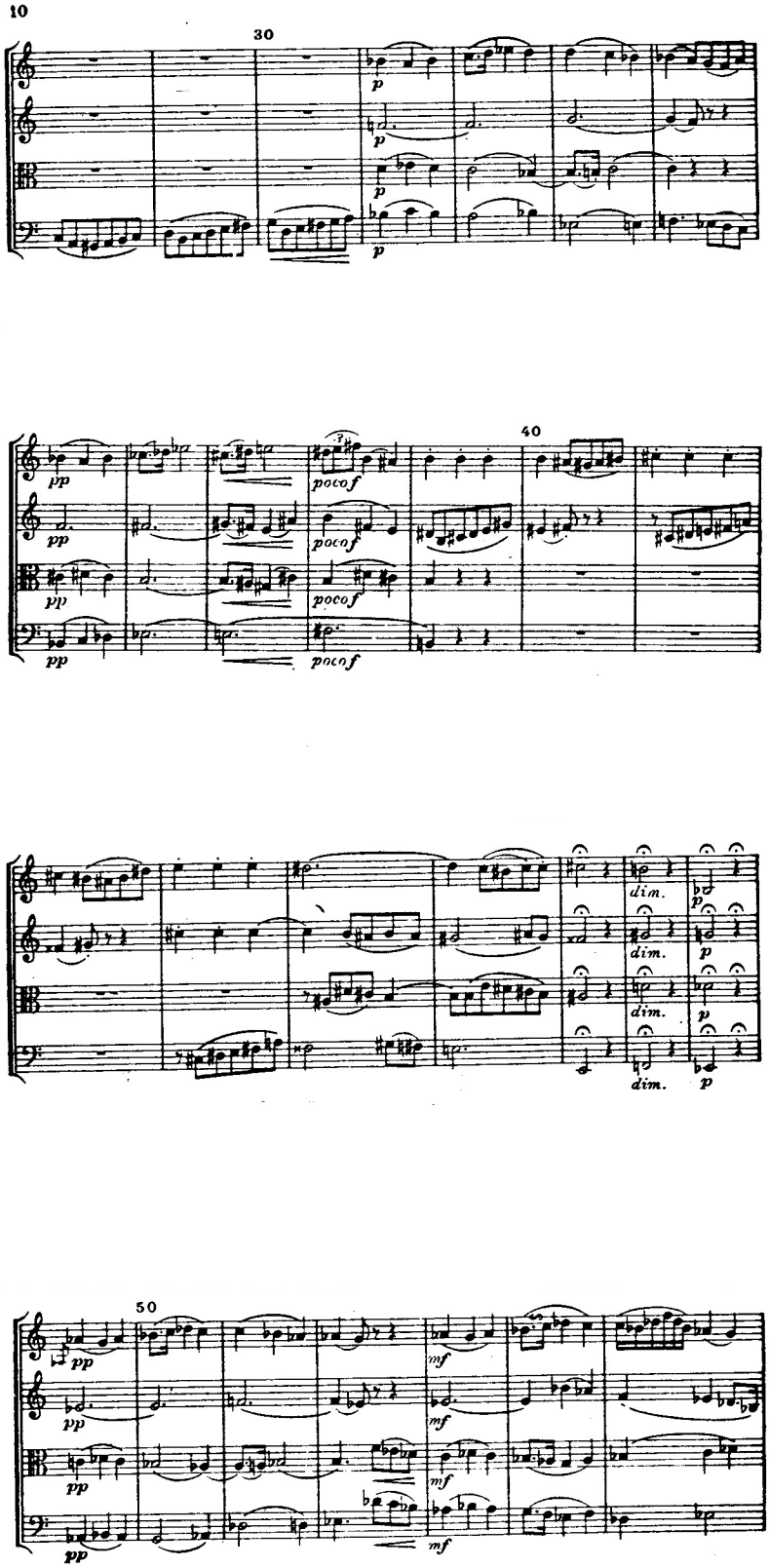
EX 10

Haydn, Pf Sonata H.34/i



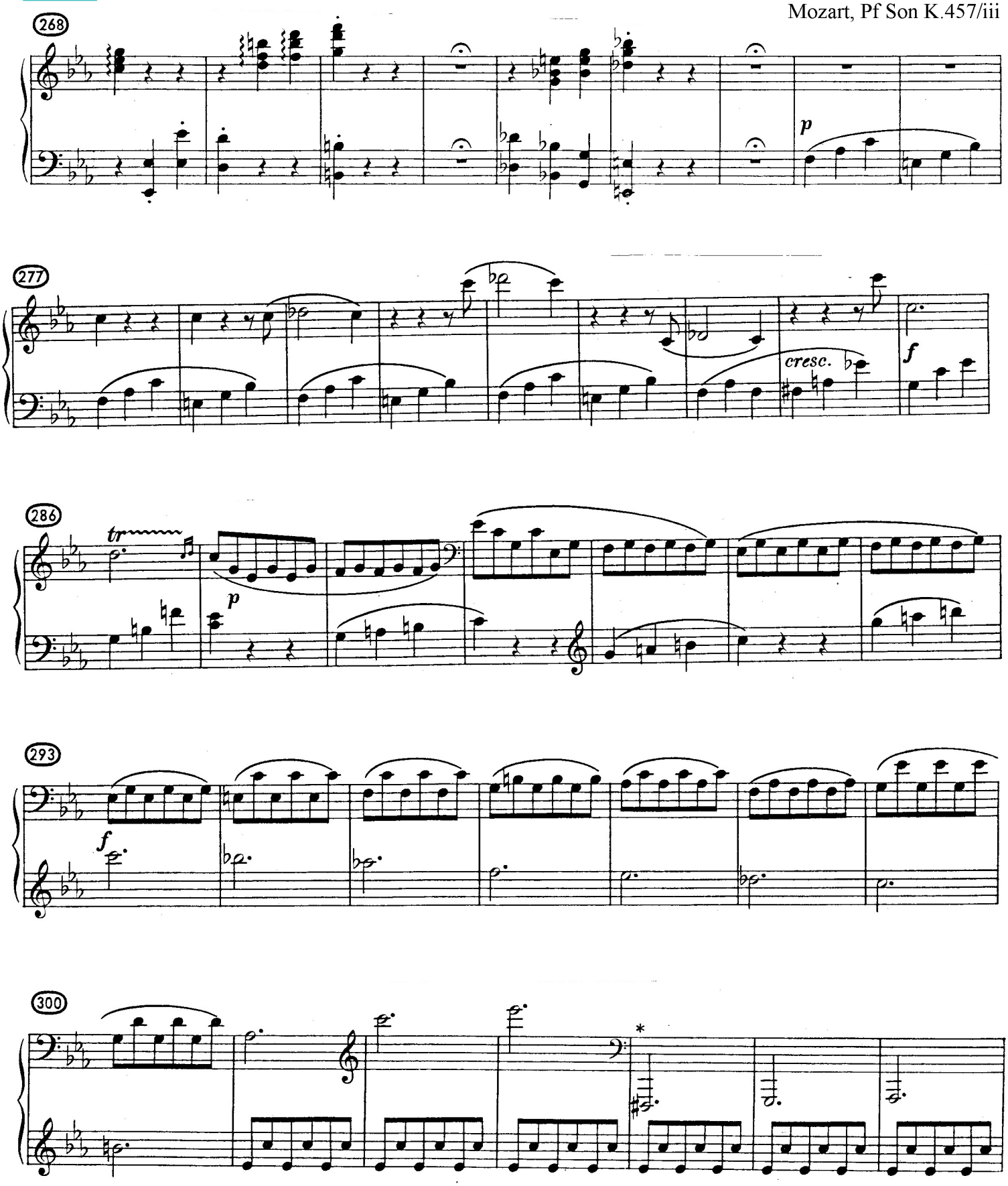
EX 11

Haydn, String Quartet Op 76#6/ii



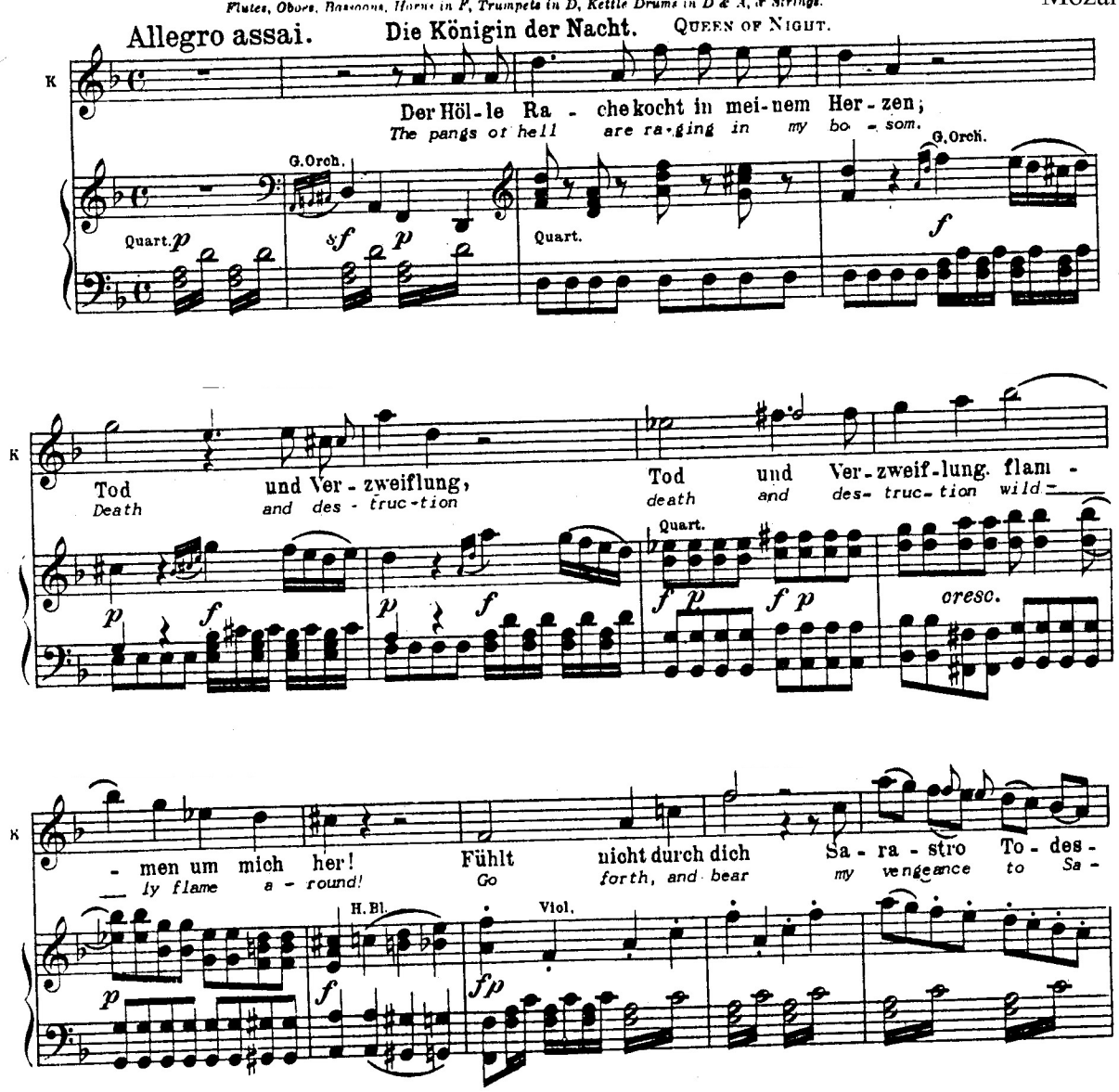
EX 12

Mozart, Pf Son K.457/iii



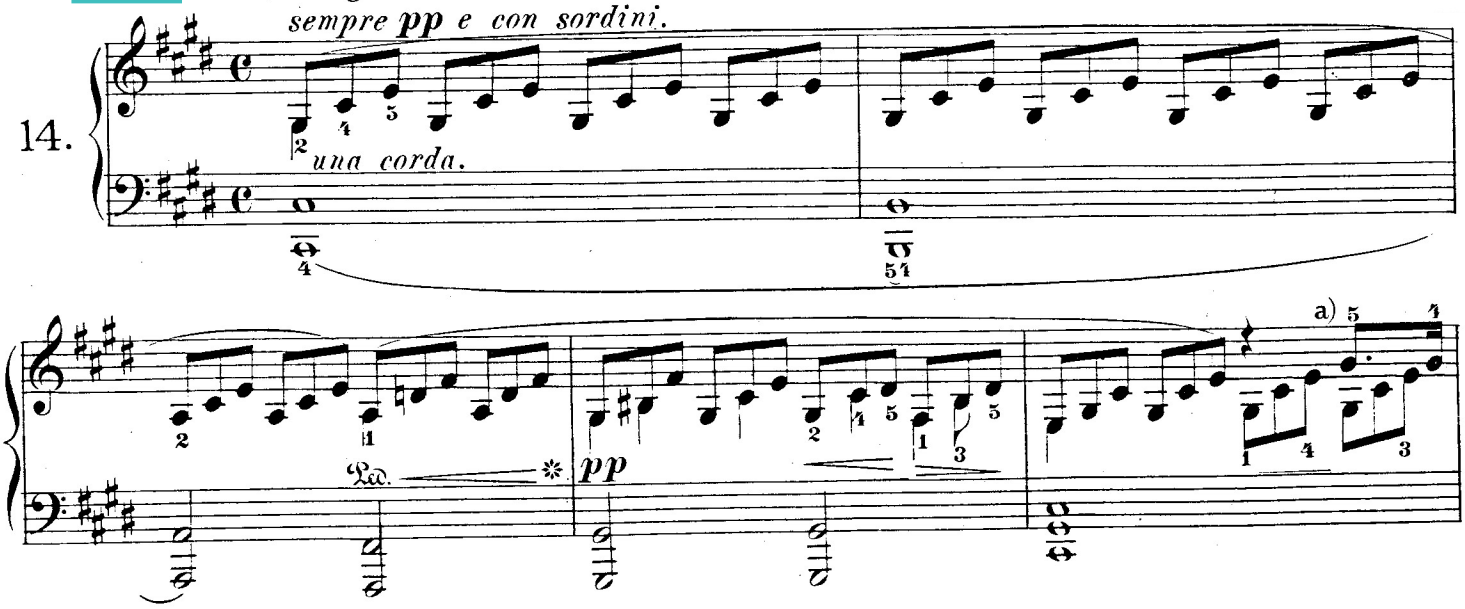
EX 13

Mozart, Die Zauberflöte, #14

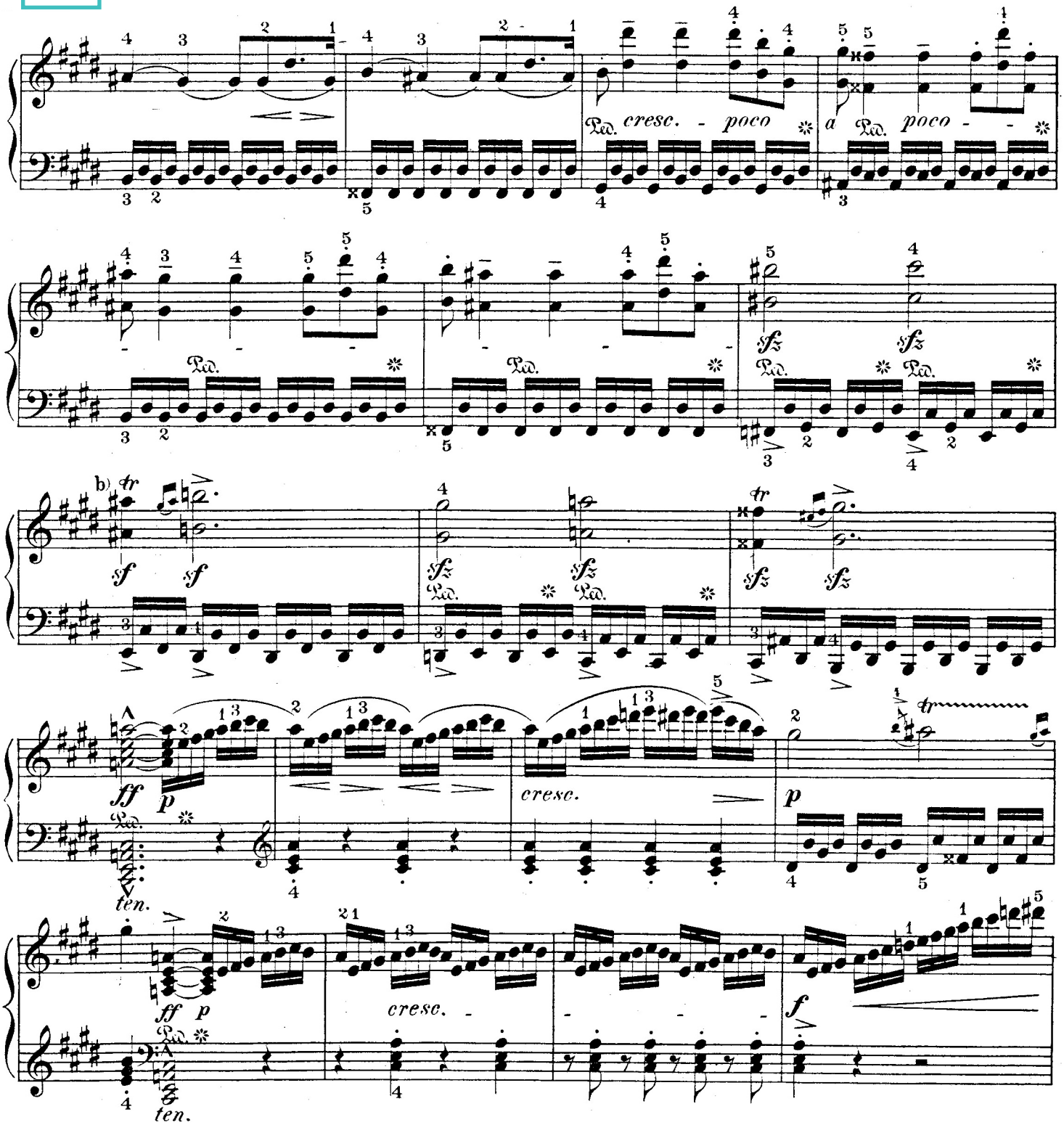


EX 14

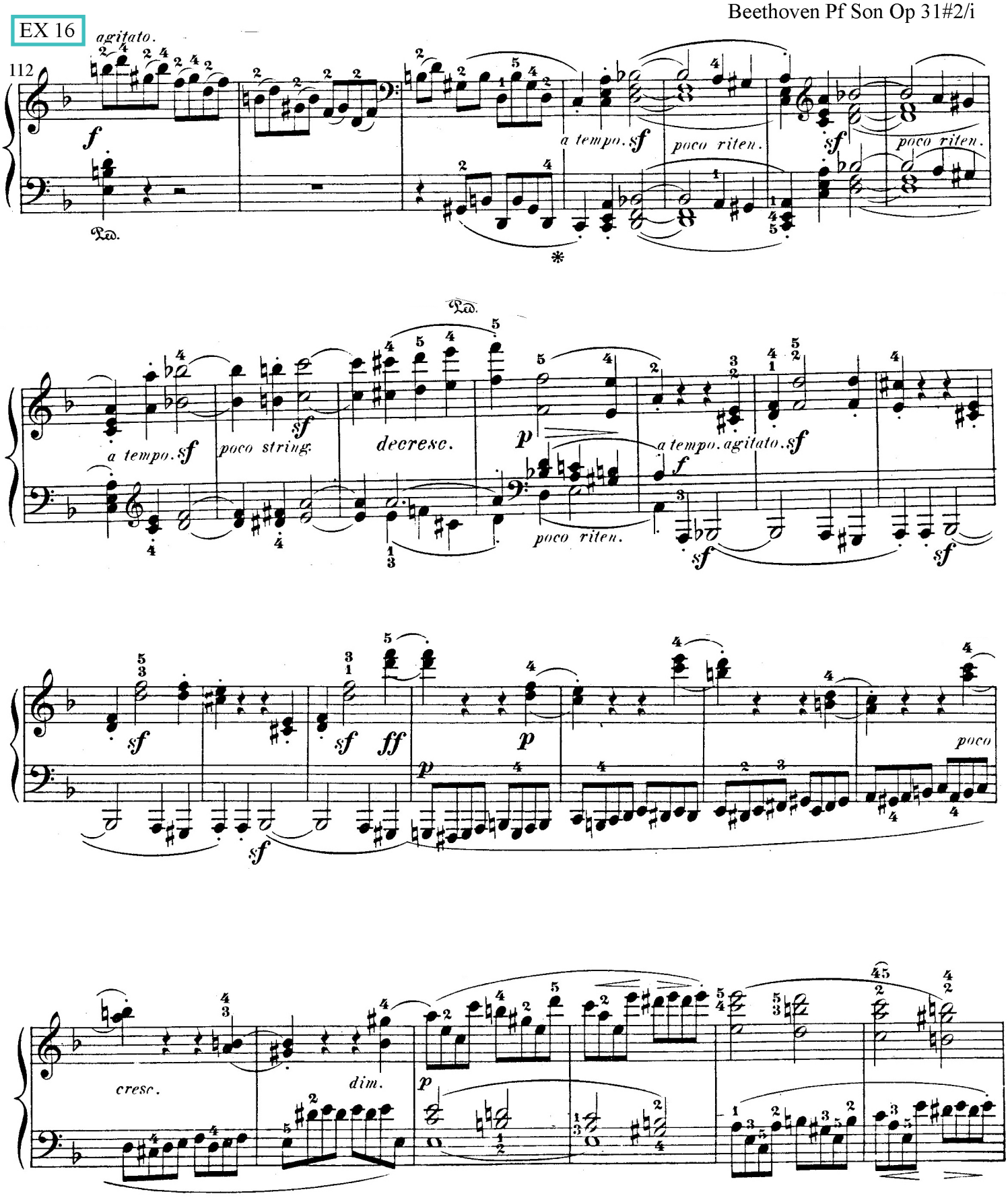
Beethoven, Pf Son Op 27#2/i



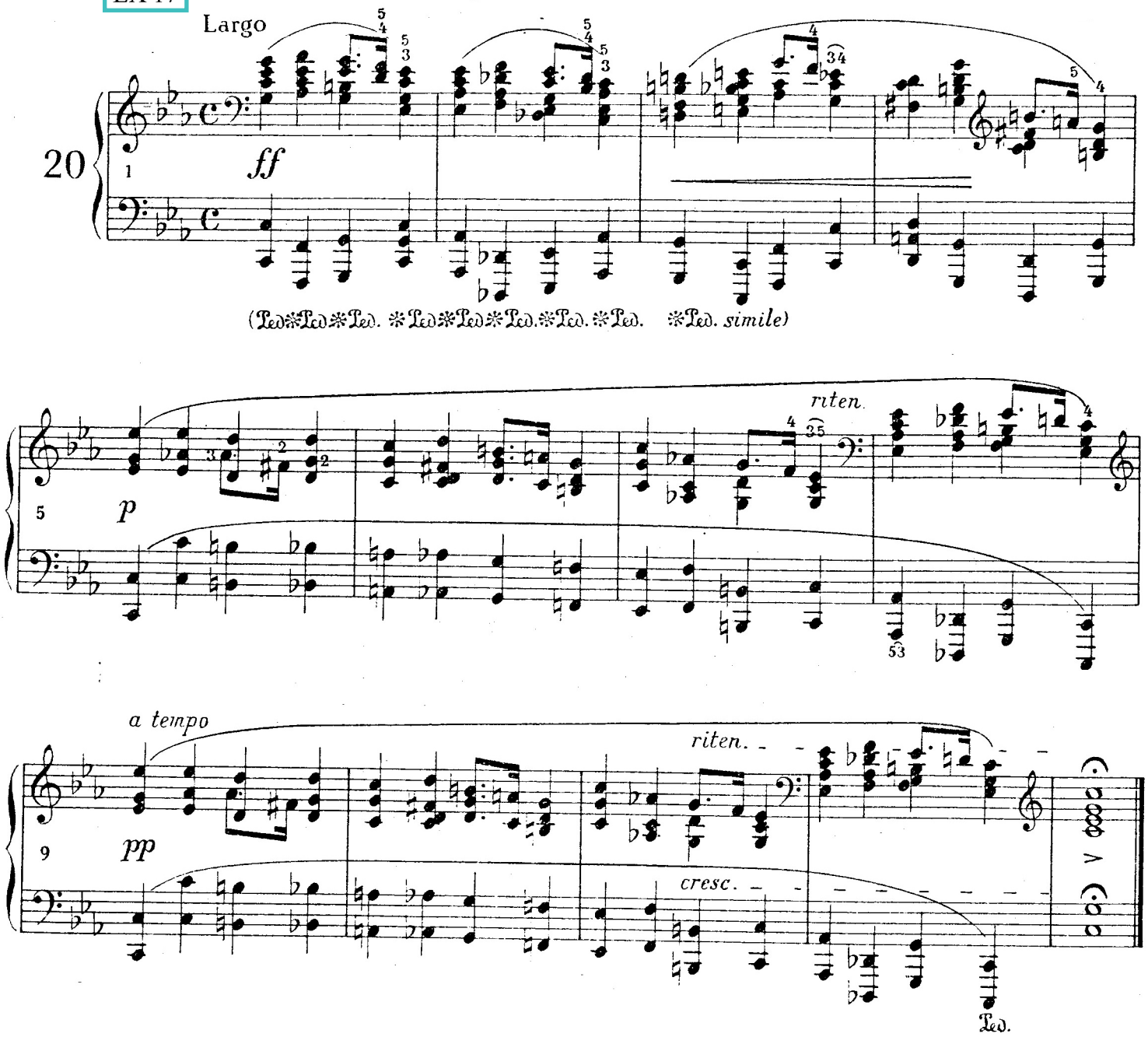
EX 15



EX 16

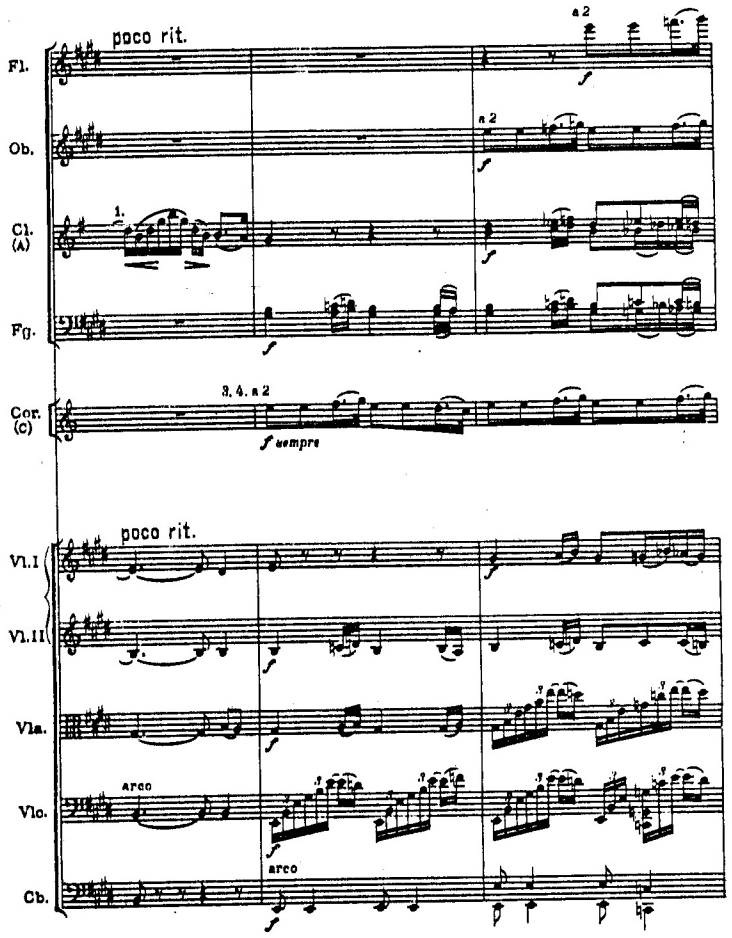

112
agitato.
a tempo. sf
poco riten.
poco riten.
a tempo. sf
poco string.
decresc.
poco riten.
a tempo. agitato. sf
poco
cresc.
dim.

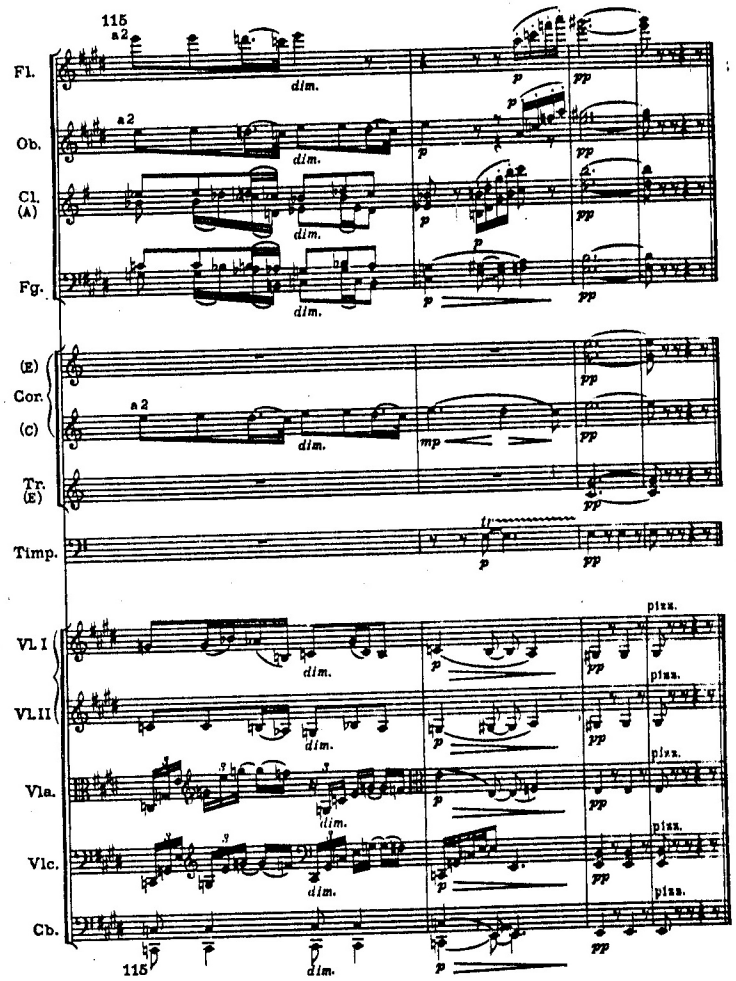
EX 17


Largo
20
ff
(Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. simile)
riten.
p
a tempo
riten.
pp
cresc.
Ped.

EX 18

Brahms, Symphony IV/ii

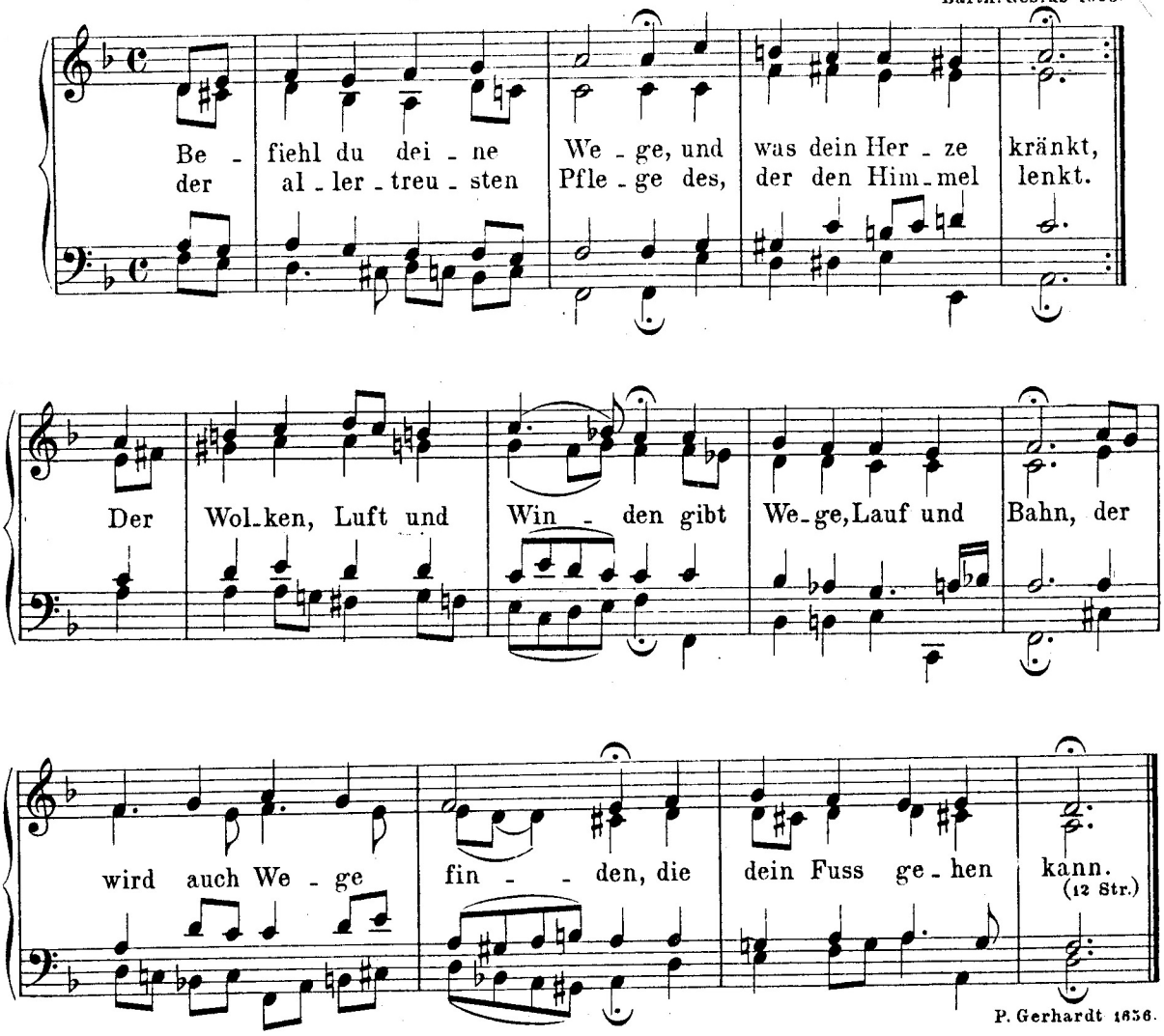




EX 19

32. Befiehl du deine Wege. (B. A. 39, Nº 20.)

Barth. Gesius 1603.

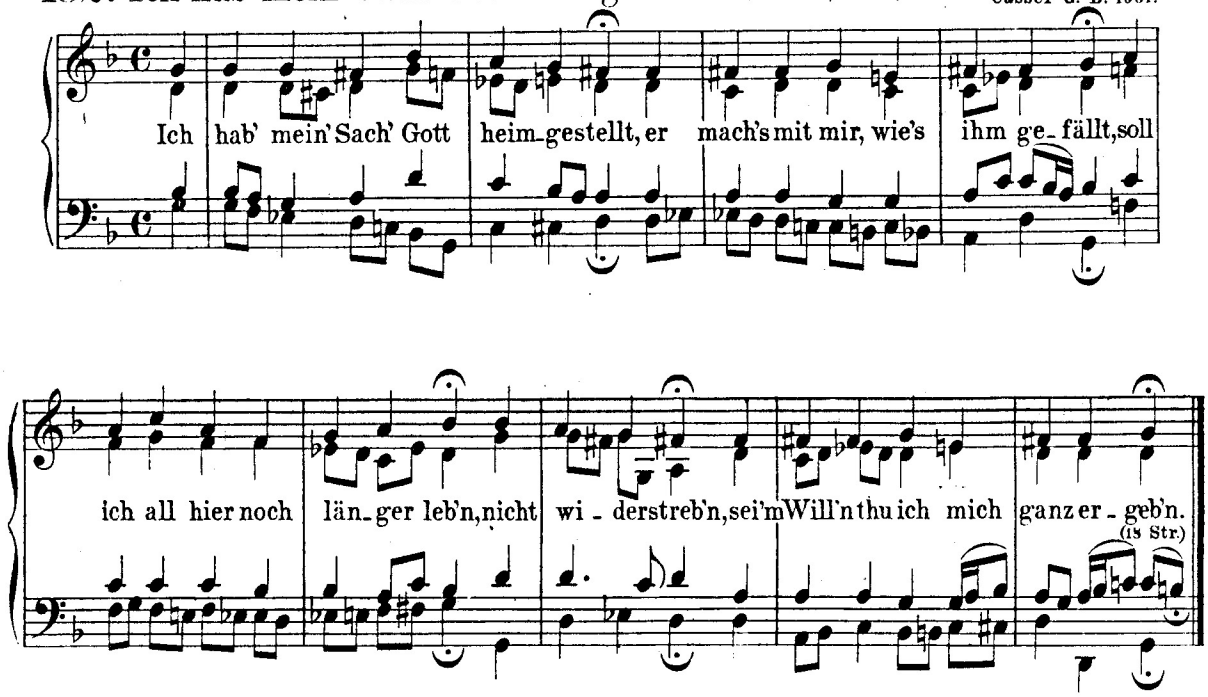


P. Gerhardt 1656.

EX 20

182. Ich hab' mein' Sach' Gott heimgestellt. (B. A. 39, Nº 38.)

Cassel G. B. 1601.

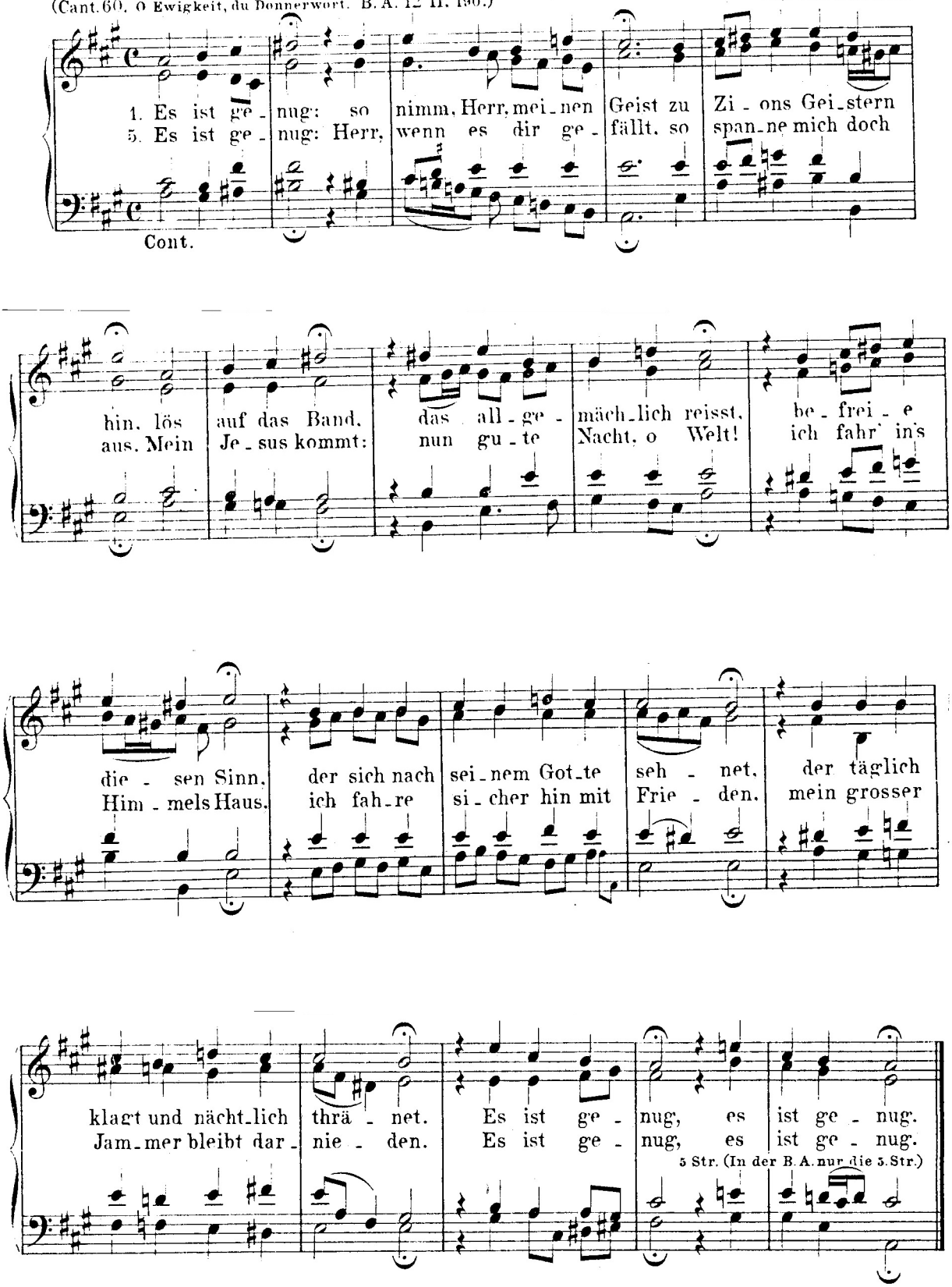


EX 21

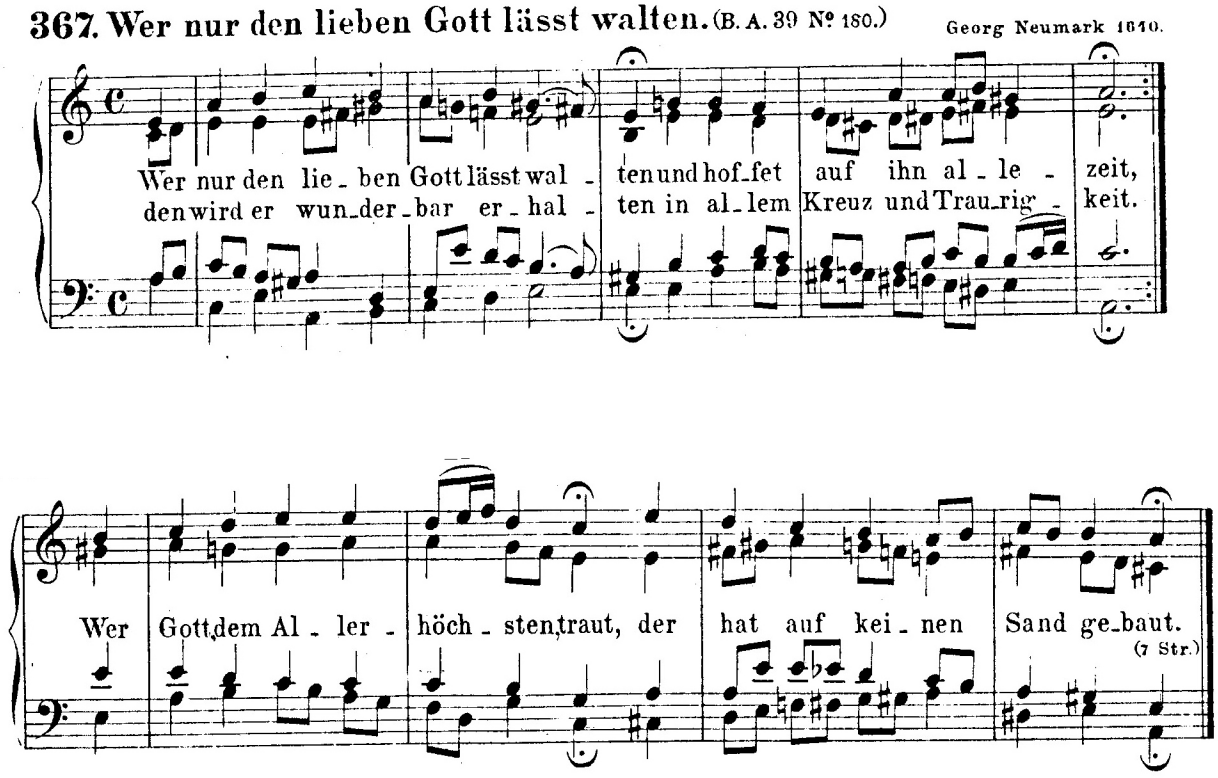
91. Es ist genug; so nimm, Herr, meinen Geist.

(Cant. 60. O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort. B. A. 12 II, 190.)

Joh. Rud. Ahle 1662.

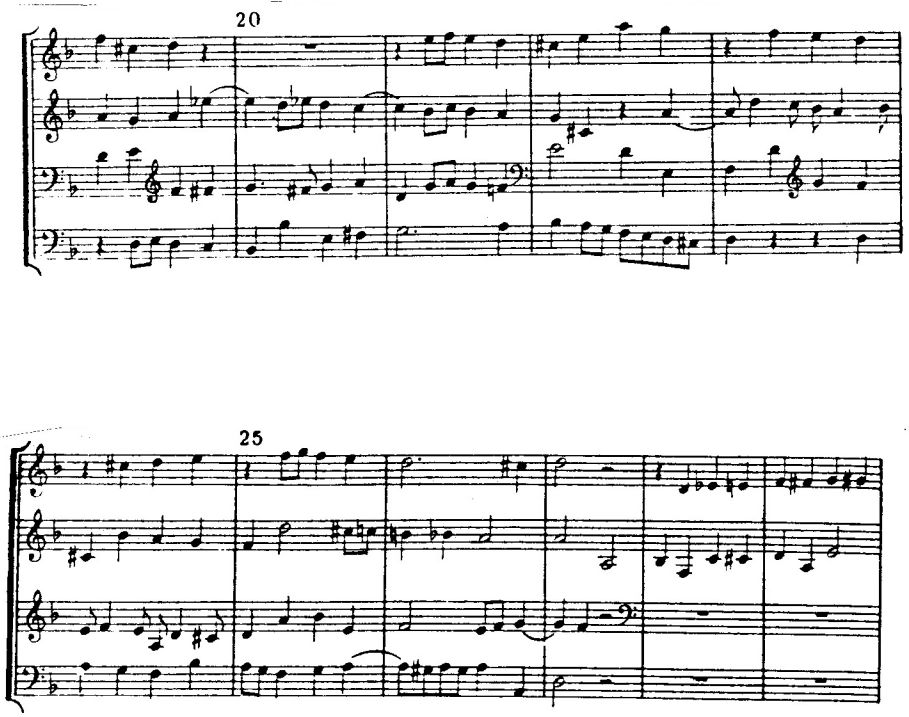


EX 22



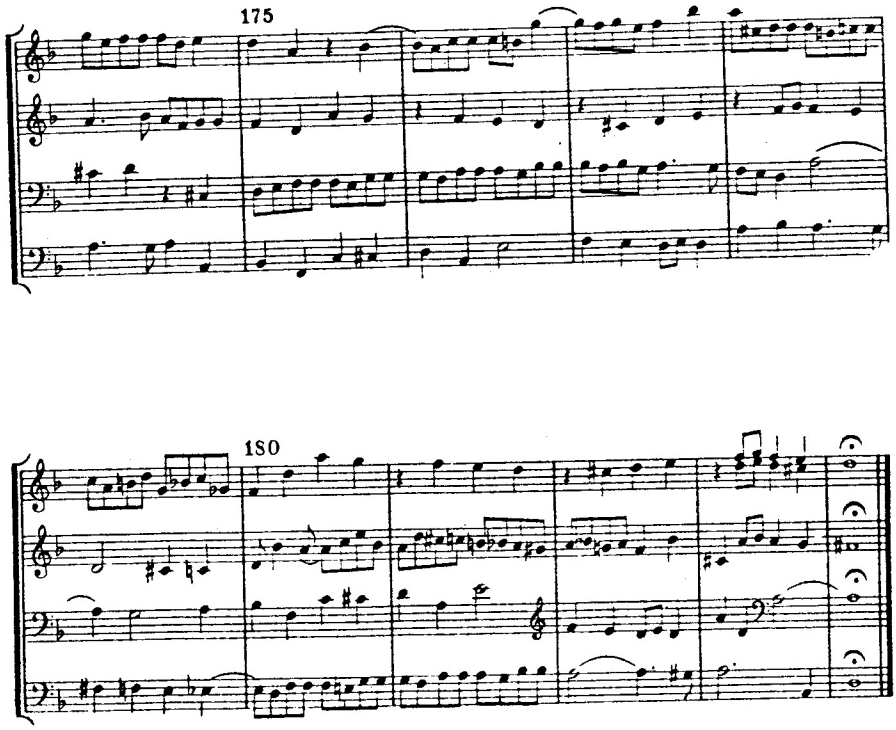
EX 23

Bach, Contrapunctus XI, *Die Kunst der Fuge*



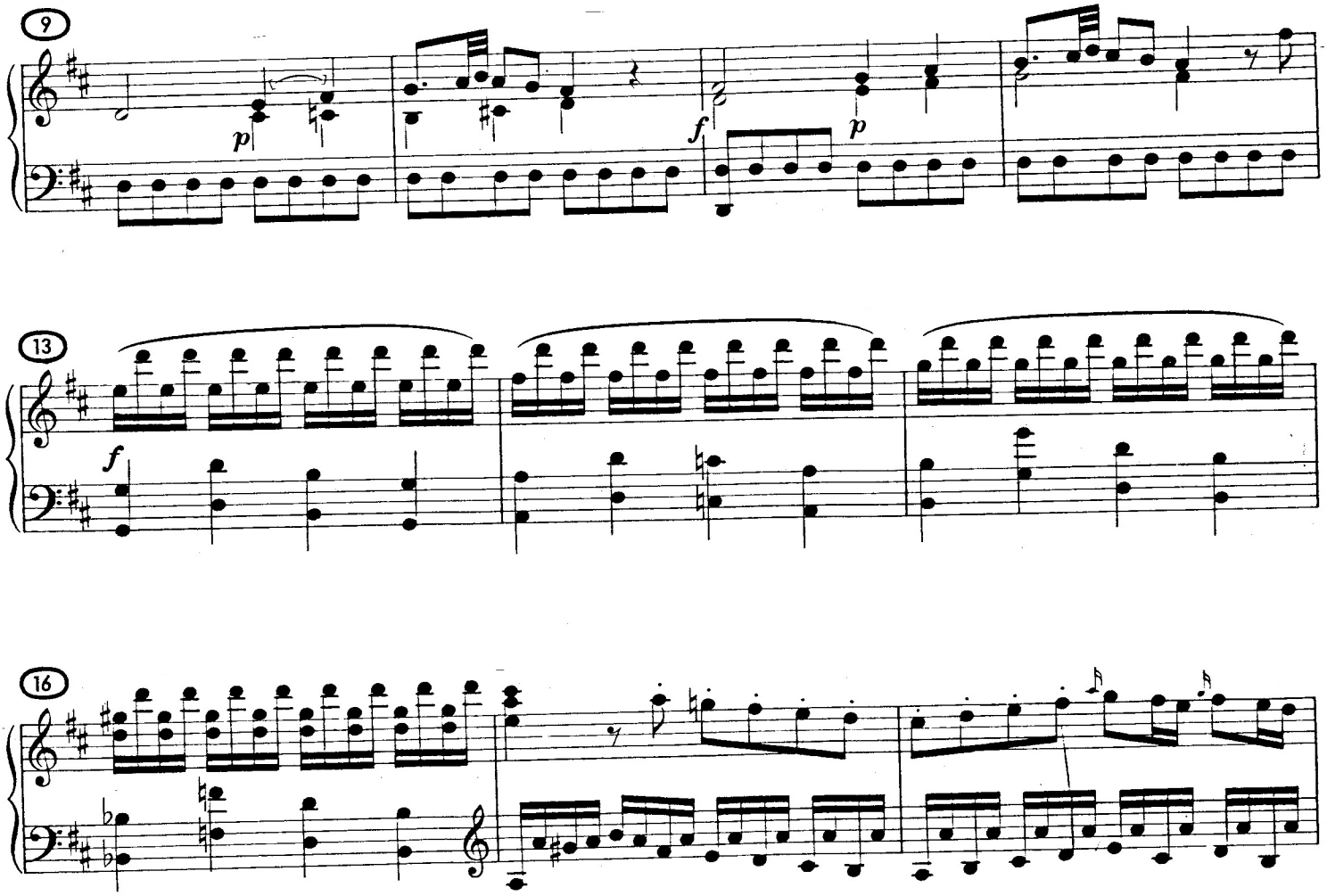
EX 24

Bach, Contrapunctus XI, *Die Kunst der Fuge*



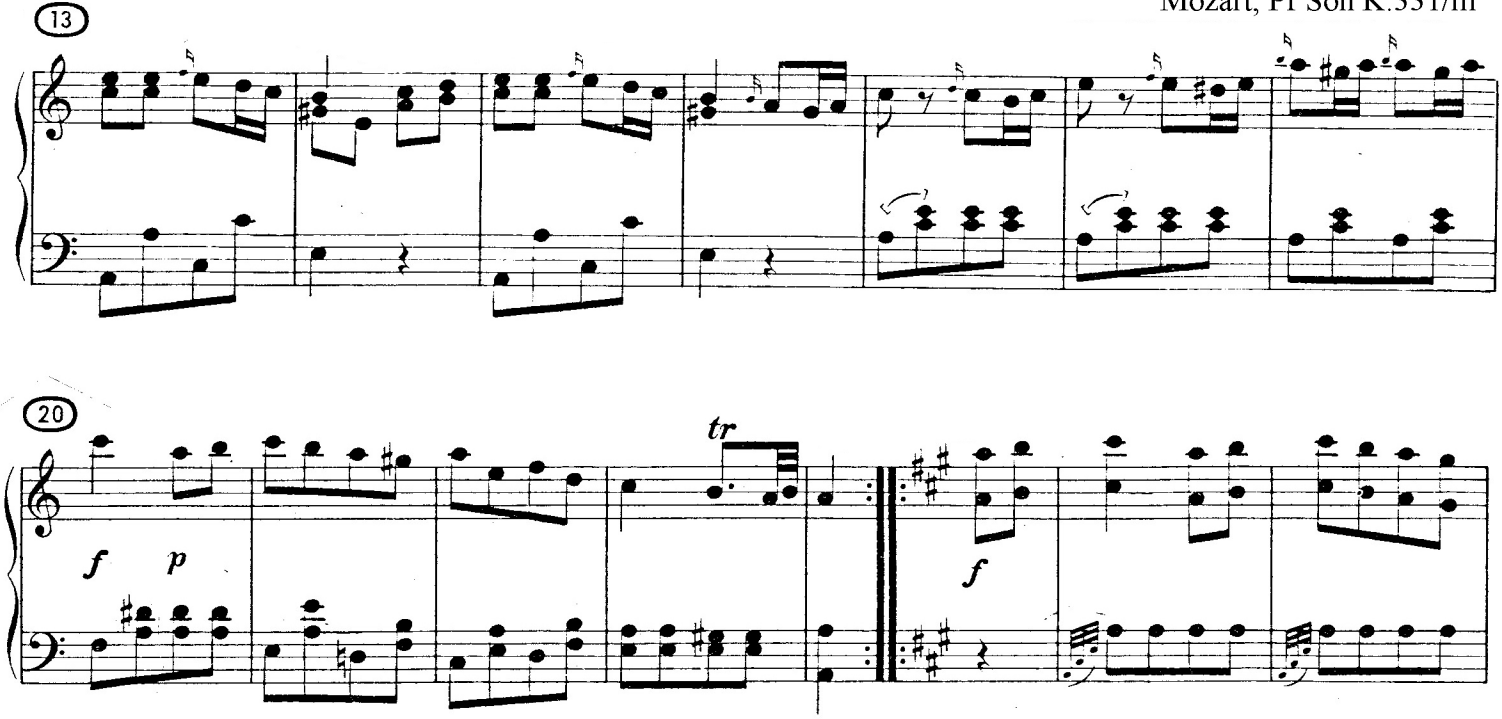
EX 25

Mozart, Pf Son K.284/i



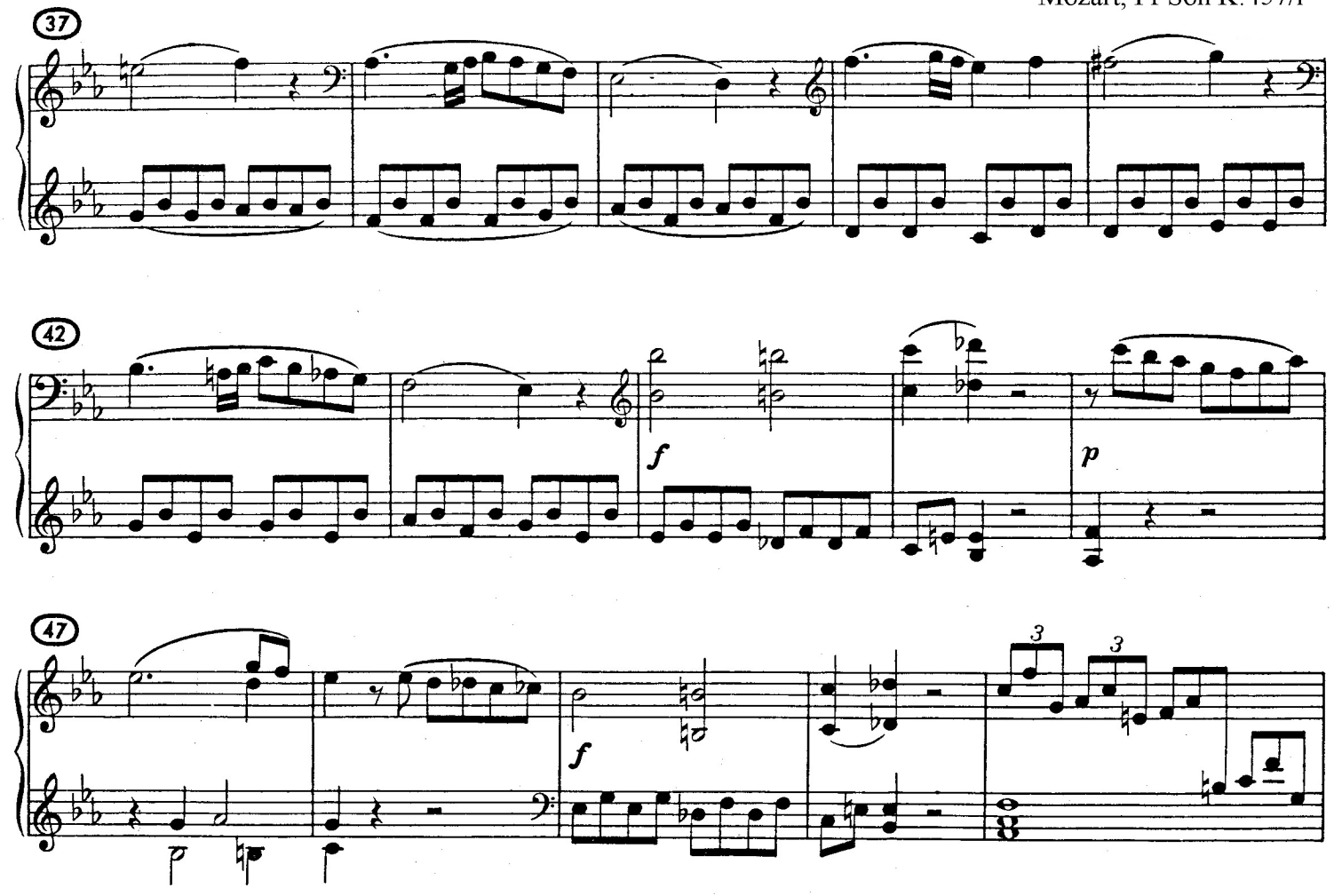
EX 26

Mozart, Pf Son K.331/iii



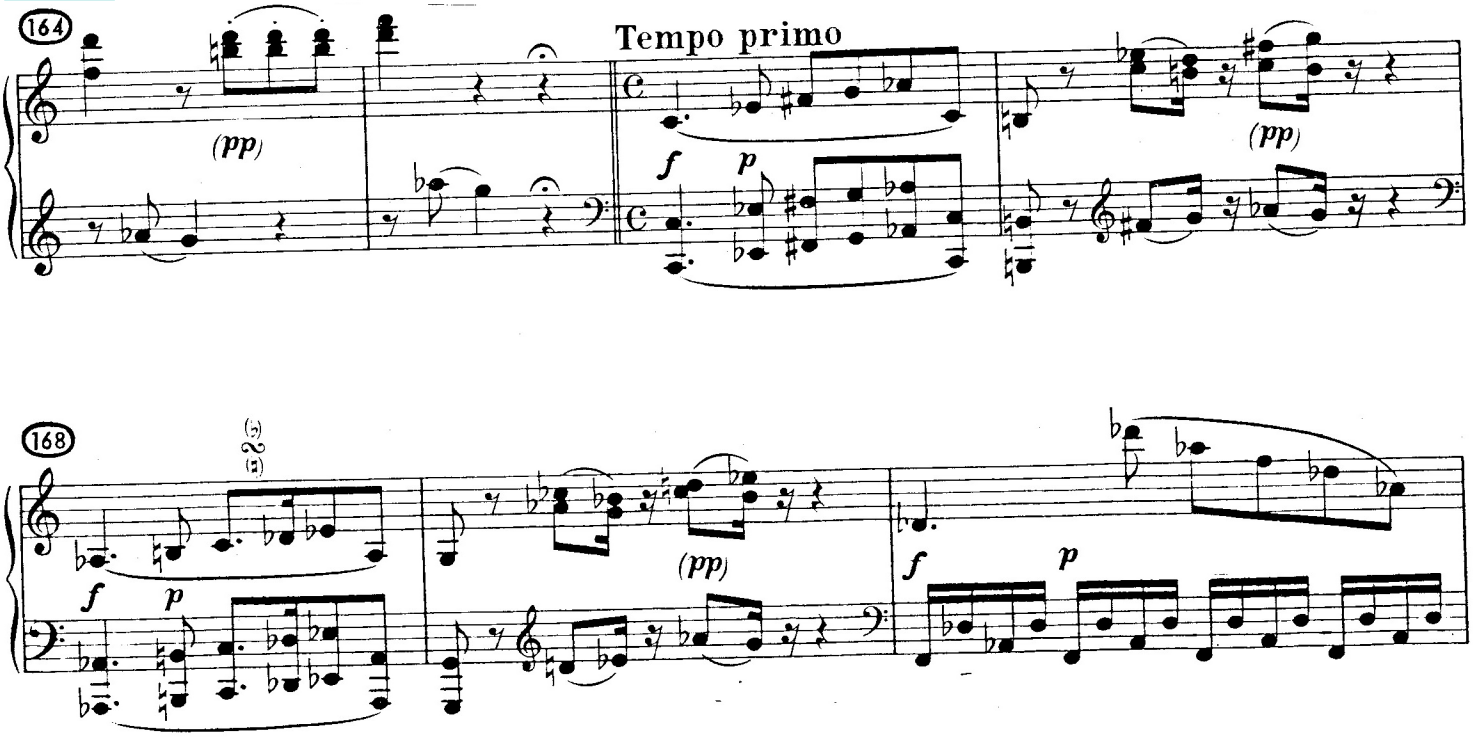
EX 27

Mozart, Pf Son K.457/i



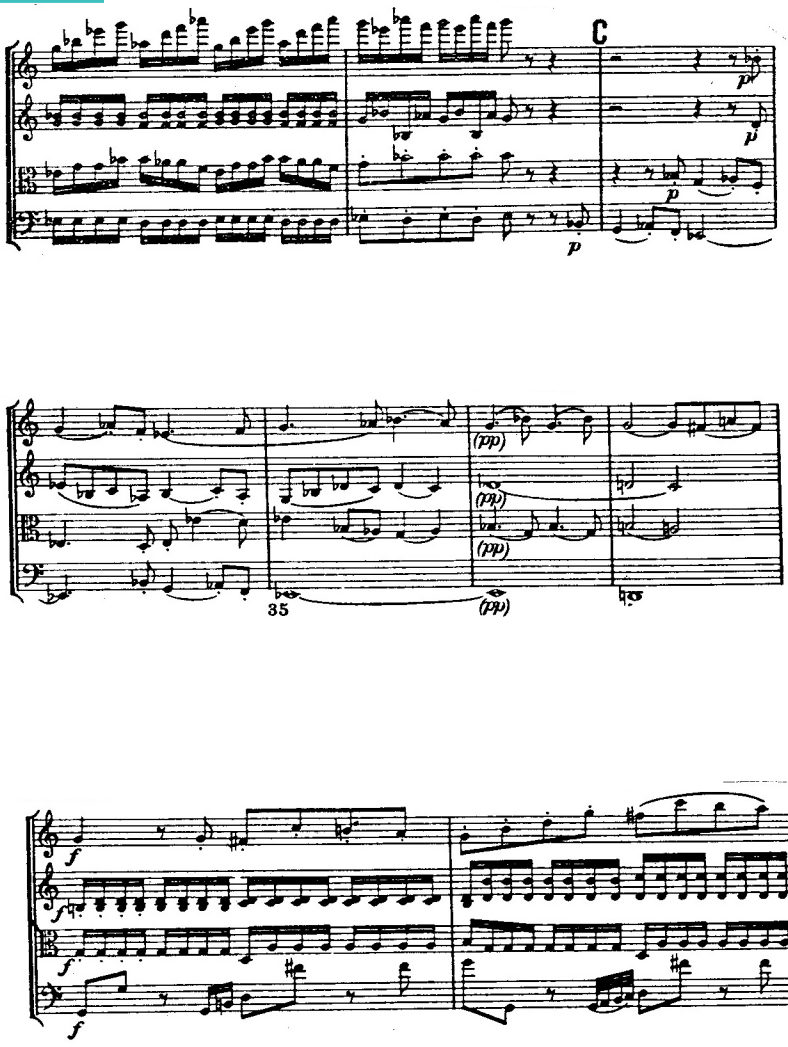
EX 28

Mozart, Pf Fant K.475



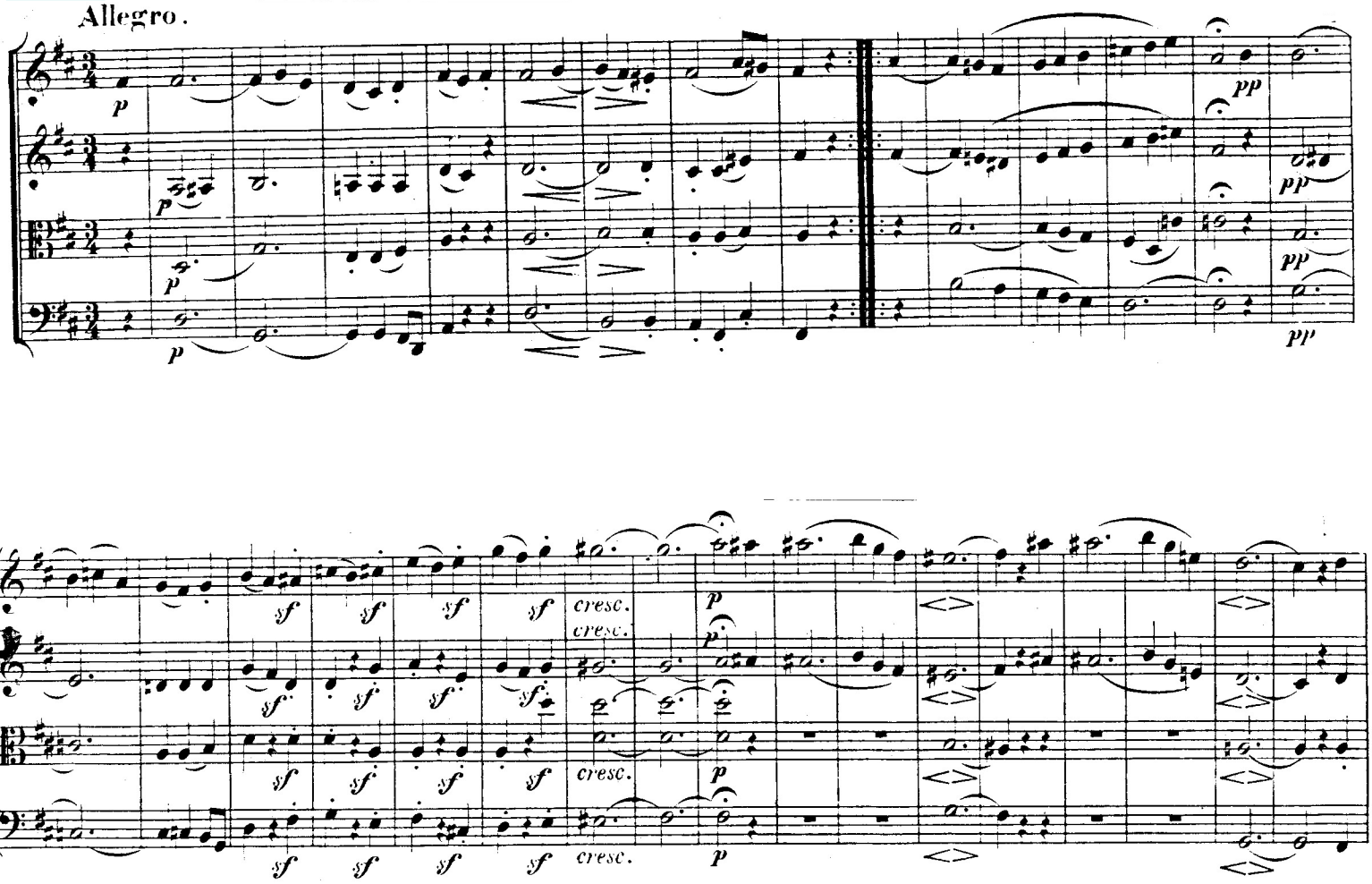
EX 29

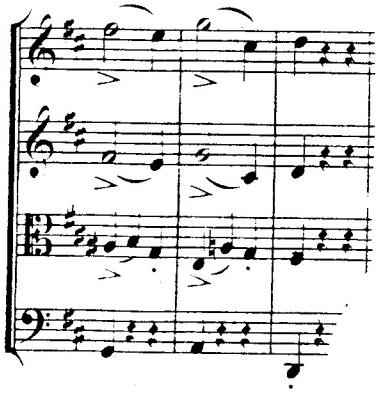
Haydn, String Quartet Op 76#3/i



EX 30

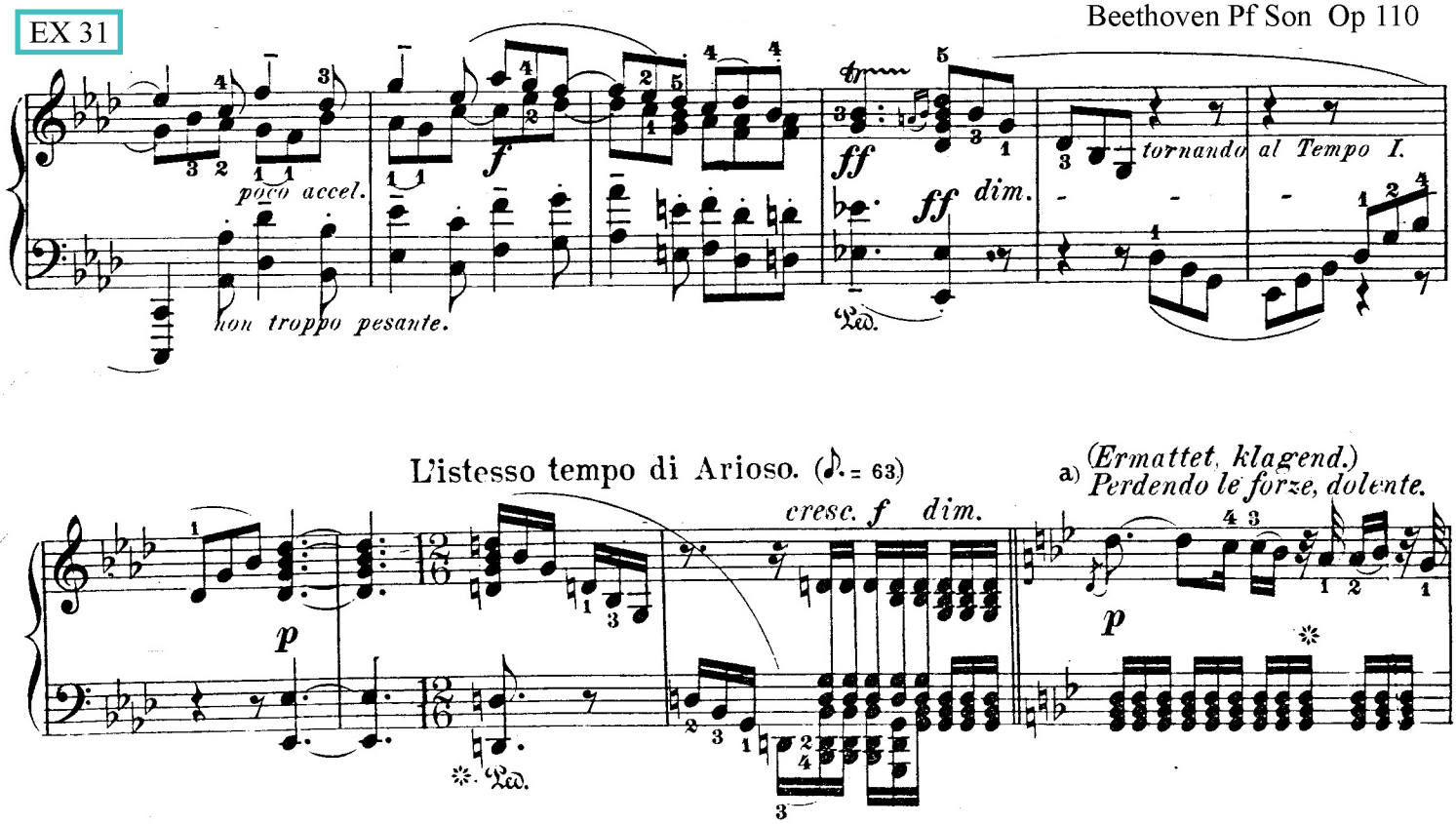
Beethoven, String Quartet Op 18#3/iii

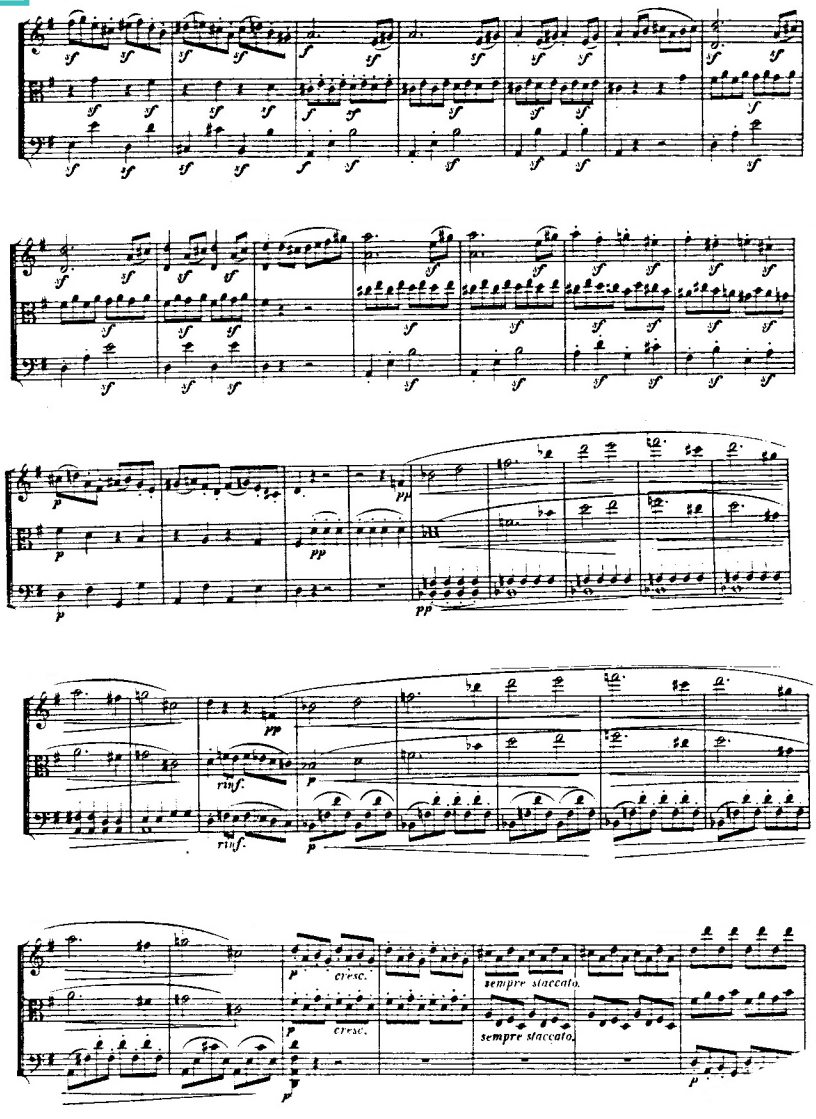




EX 31

Beethoven Pf Son Op 110



EX 32

Beethoven String Trio Op 9#1/iv