VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY O'CAROLAN

For two guitars

Theo Radić

Syukhtun Editions

PREFACE

Turlough O'Carolan (Toirdhealbhach Ó Cearbhalláin) was born in 1670 near Nobber, County Meath, Ireland, and died March 25, 1738 at the home of his patron Mrs. MacDermott Roe in Alderford, County Roscommon. He was one of the last Irish harper/composers and a significant number of his works survive in single line melody. His fame was not due to his skill with the harp, but to his gift for composition and verse. O'Carolan was not highly regarded as a performer. His gift was in musical composition and poetry. His practice was to compose the tune first and then write the words. This was opposite of the traditional Irish practice. At first, he was not considered a great musician. The ancient bards were supposed to have started their training when they were still young children and O'Carolan didn't start until he was eighteen.

O'Carolan's father was either a farmer or a blacksmith. He moved his family to Ballyfarnon when O'Carolan was fourteen to take employment with the MacDermott Roe family. Mrs. MacDermott befriended the boy and gave him an education. Around the age of eighteen O'Carolan was blinded by smallpox. He had shown talent for poetry and may have been taught, even before his illness, by a harper named MacDermott Roe. O'Carolan studied for three years at the end of which Mrs. MacDermott Roe gave him a harp, a horse and some money to begin his career as an itinerant harper. For forty-five years O'Carolan traveled throughout Ireland composing tunes for his patrons. He made his living by traveling from manor to manor, from castle to castle, entertaining the households and the friends of some of the most famous and wealthy people of Ireland at the time. Often, as a special favor, he would write a tune in honor of the man of the house, or his wife or daughter. He called these tunes "planxties". He was very successful and people would often delay weddings and funerals until he could be present to play the appropriate tune. His first patron, George Reynolds, suggested that O'Carolan try composing. With this encouragement O'Carolan began composing, and thereafter regularly composed tunes for his patrons, usually on his journeys throughout Ireland. In 1738 Carolan returned to the home of Mrs. MacDermott Roe because of illness. A few days later he asked for a drink and recited these lines to his first patron:

Mary Fitzgerald, dear heart,
Love of my breast and my friend,
Alas that I am parting from you,
O lady who succored me at every stage.

His final composition was to the butler, Flinn, who brought him his last drink. O'Carolan's funeral was widely attended and, in fitting tribute to the bard, the wake lasted four days.

The tradition of harpers in Ireland bridged classical and folk music and was the primary accompaniment for the oral tradition. O'Carolan created a unique style by not only combining the two art forms but by adding influences of contemporary composers like Vivaldi and Corelli. He greatly admired Geminiani, whom he probably met in Dublin. O'Carolan's melodies survive only as single line melodies, with no a clue as to how he accompanied or harmonized them.

When O'Carolan was a very young man, before his blindness, he met and fell in love with a young woman named Bridget Cruise. Bridget was part of a noble family and O'Carolan's family

was of skilled laborers, so marriage was out of the question. Throughout a very successful life, he never forgot Bridget and wrote three planxties in her honor. Many years later, near the end of his life, when he was on his way to a religious retreat in County Donegal, he was helping people out of the boat by taking their hands. He happened to touch a woman's hand and instantly recognized that it was Bridget's.

The planxty "Fanny Power" was named after Frances "Fanny" Power, a girl from a kind family who were his patrons for a period in his life. (William Butler Yeats was to write a song of the same name.) One of his most famous melodies, O'Carolan composed and then sang these lines as he played the harp:

PLANXTY FANNY POWER (MRS. TRENCH)

I wish to speak of a gracious young lady,
A loveable lady of beauty and reputation,
Who lives in the town near the bay of Loch Riabhach.
I'm thankful that I had the chance to meet her.

She's lively, airy – a cultured fine maiden,
The love of all Ireland and a nice cultured pearl.
O drink up now and don't be slack!
To Fanny, the daughter of David.

She is the swan at the edge of the bay,
Crowds of men are dying for her love.
She's nice gentle Fanny of locks and braids,
Who often gets the prize for beauty.

May I not leave this world, if I may be so bold,
Unless I can first cheerfully dance at your wedding feast.
I challenge the one who would ever ask a dowry for you,
O Pearl-Child of white hands.

These variations for two guitars take the harp as model, and meander into different keys and styles, from baroque to jazz, from consonance to dissonance back to consonance. I composed them after greatly enjoying playing El McMeen's fine arrangement of "Fanny Power" for solo guitar.

Theo Radić
Stockholm, Sweden
November 23, 2007

Source: http://www.contemplator.com/carolan/carlnbio.html
Cover: This is the only known contemporary portrait of O'Carolan, painted by Francis Bindon (c.1690-1765). He was a gentleman amateur painter, born in county Clare and best known for his portraits of Jonathan Swift, who was a friend of O'Carolan. *Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland*

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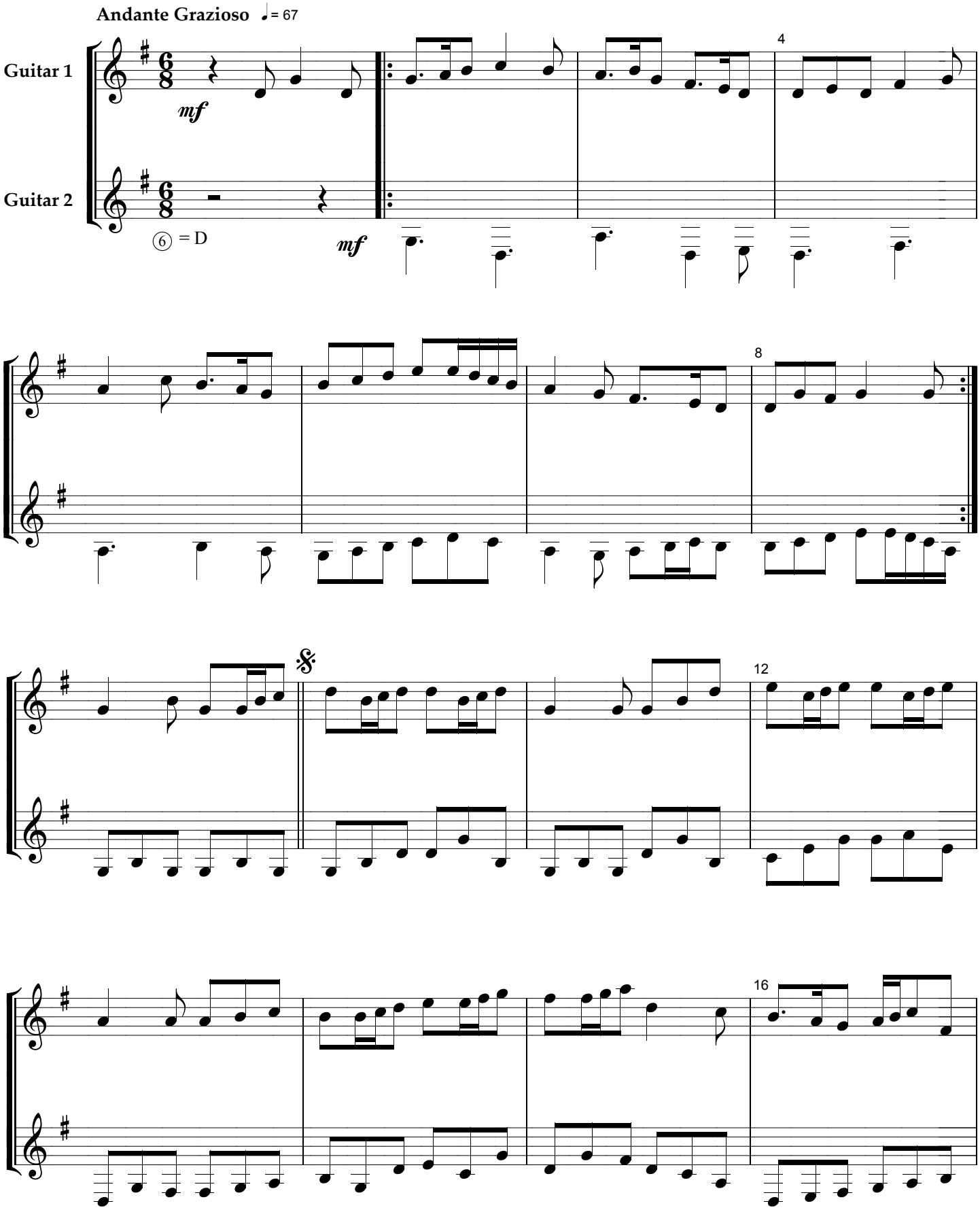

* Fanny Power

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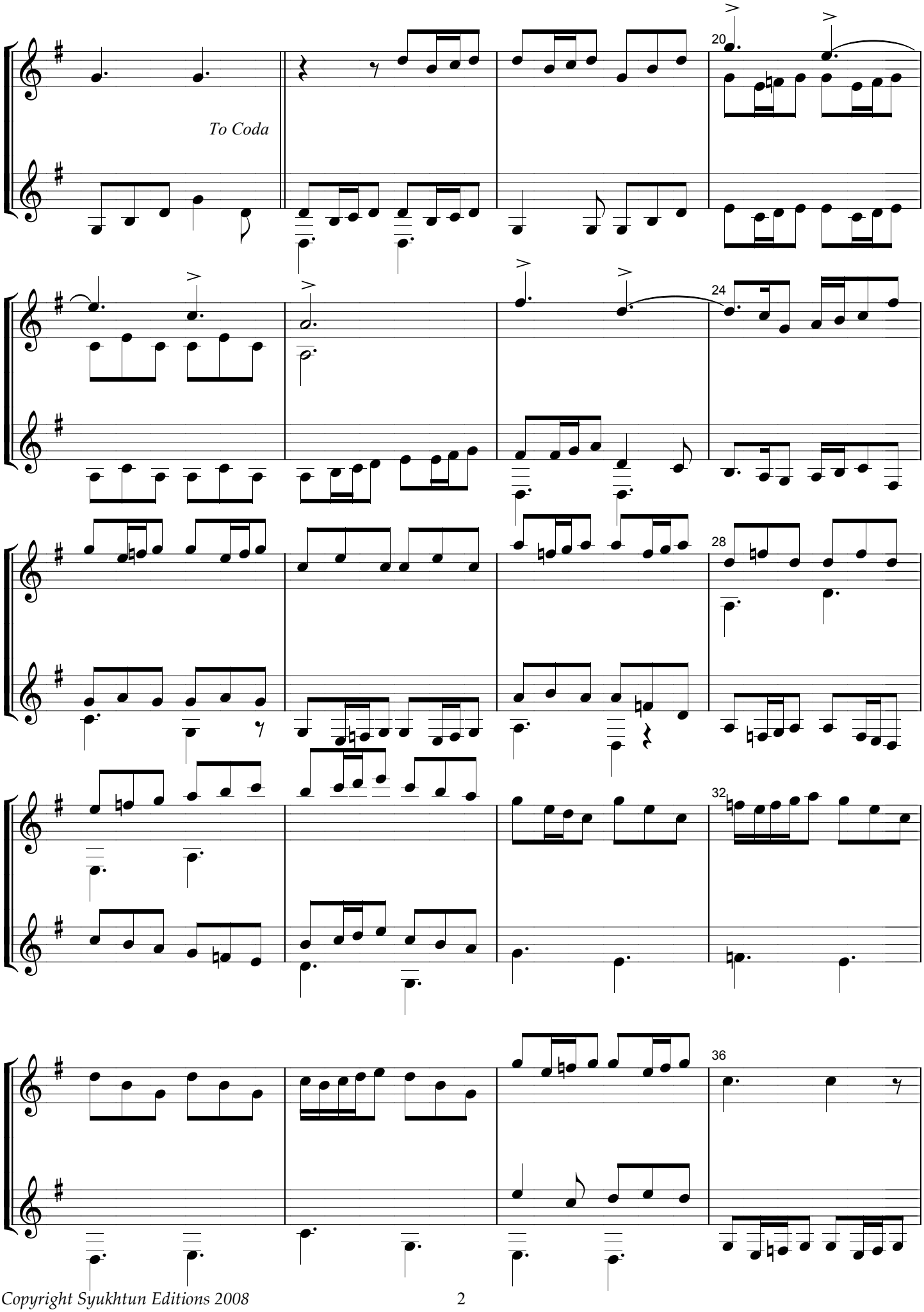

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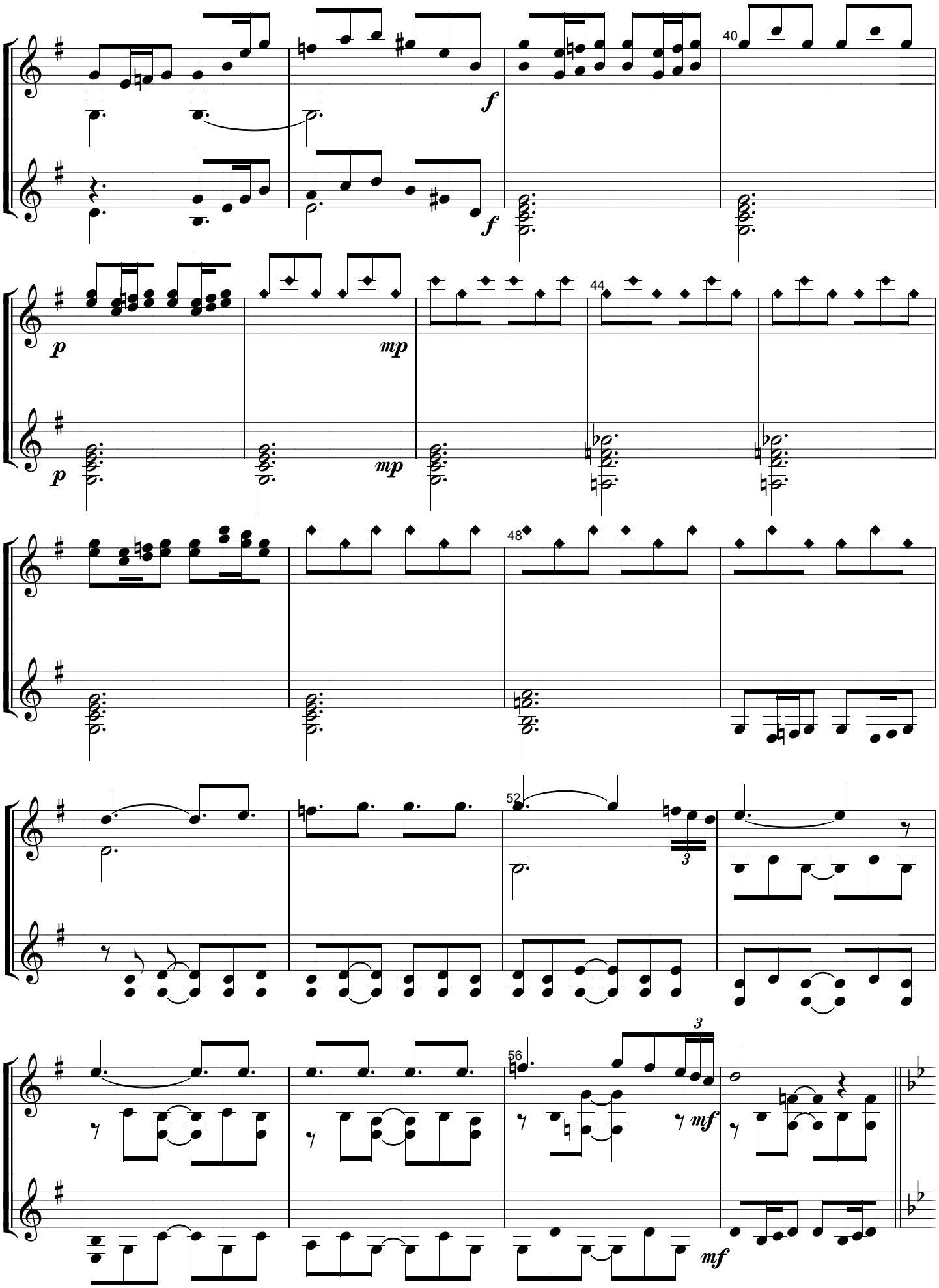

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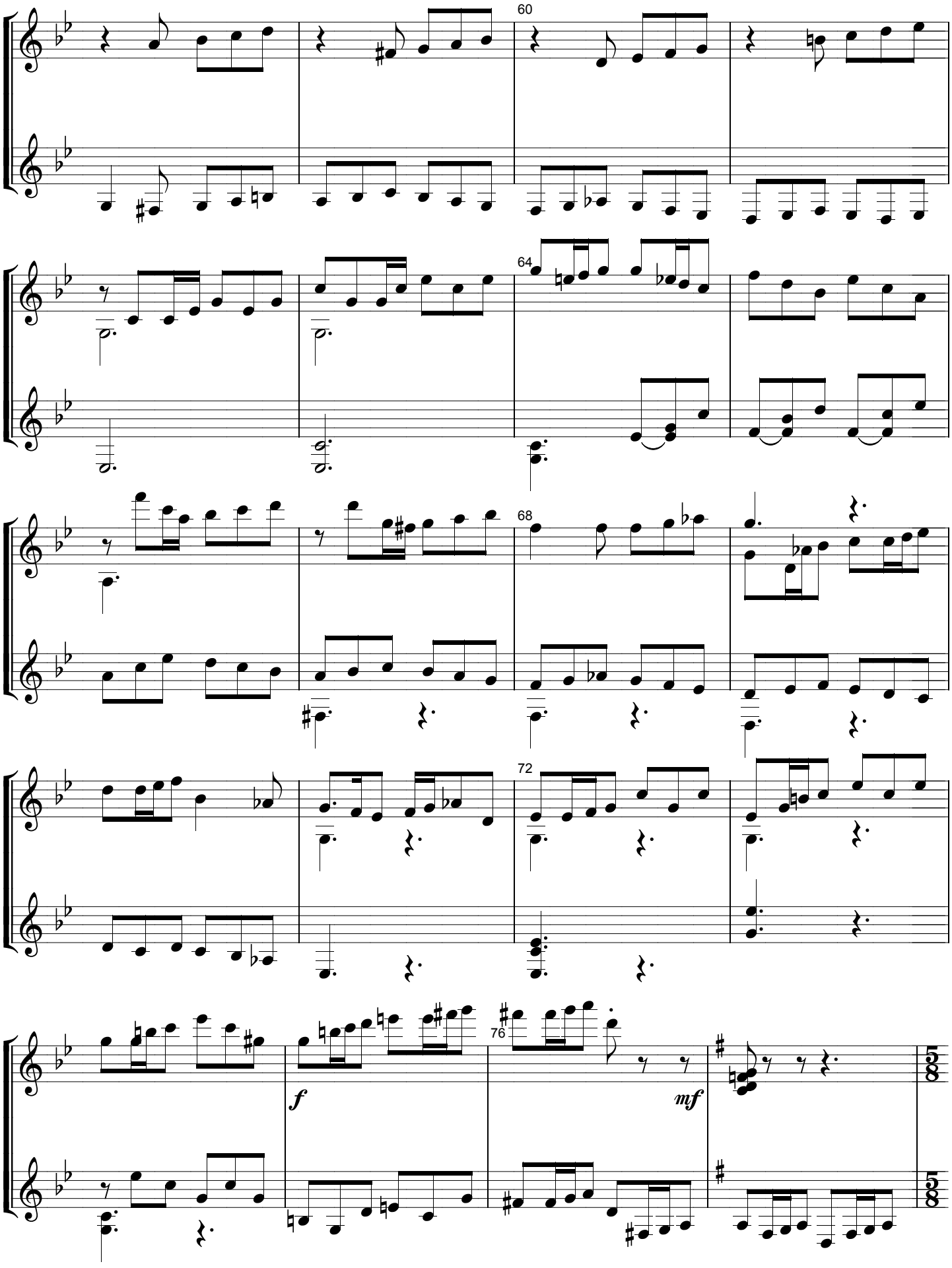

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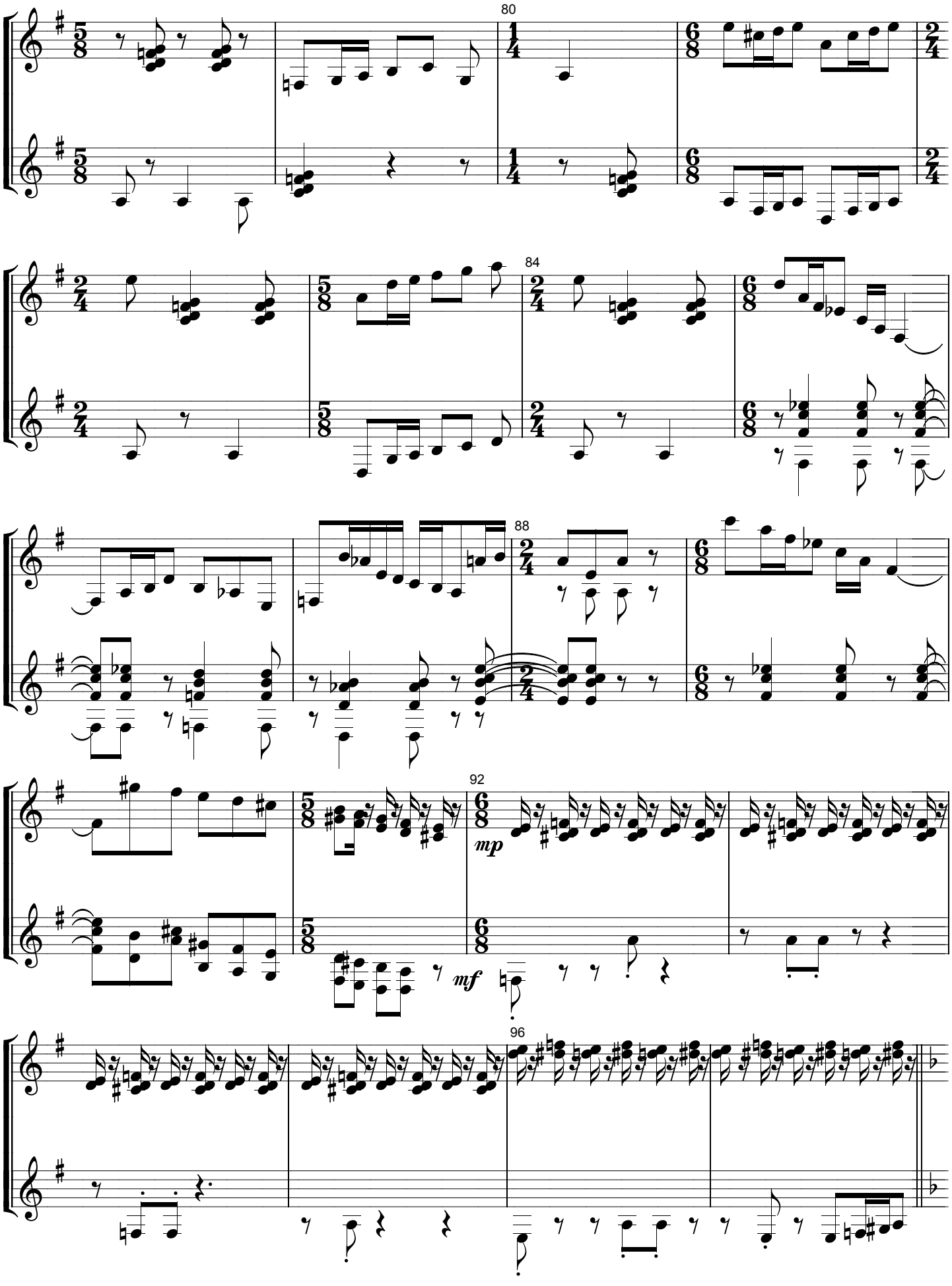

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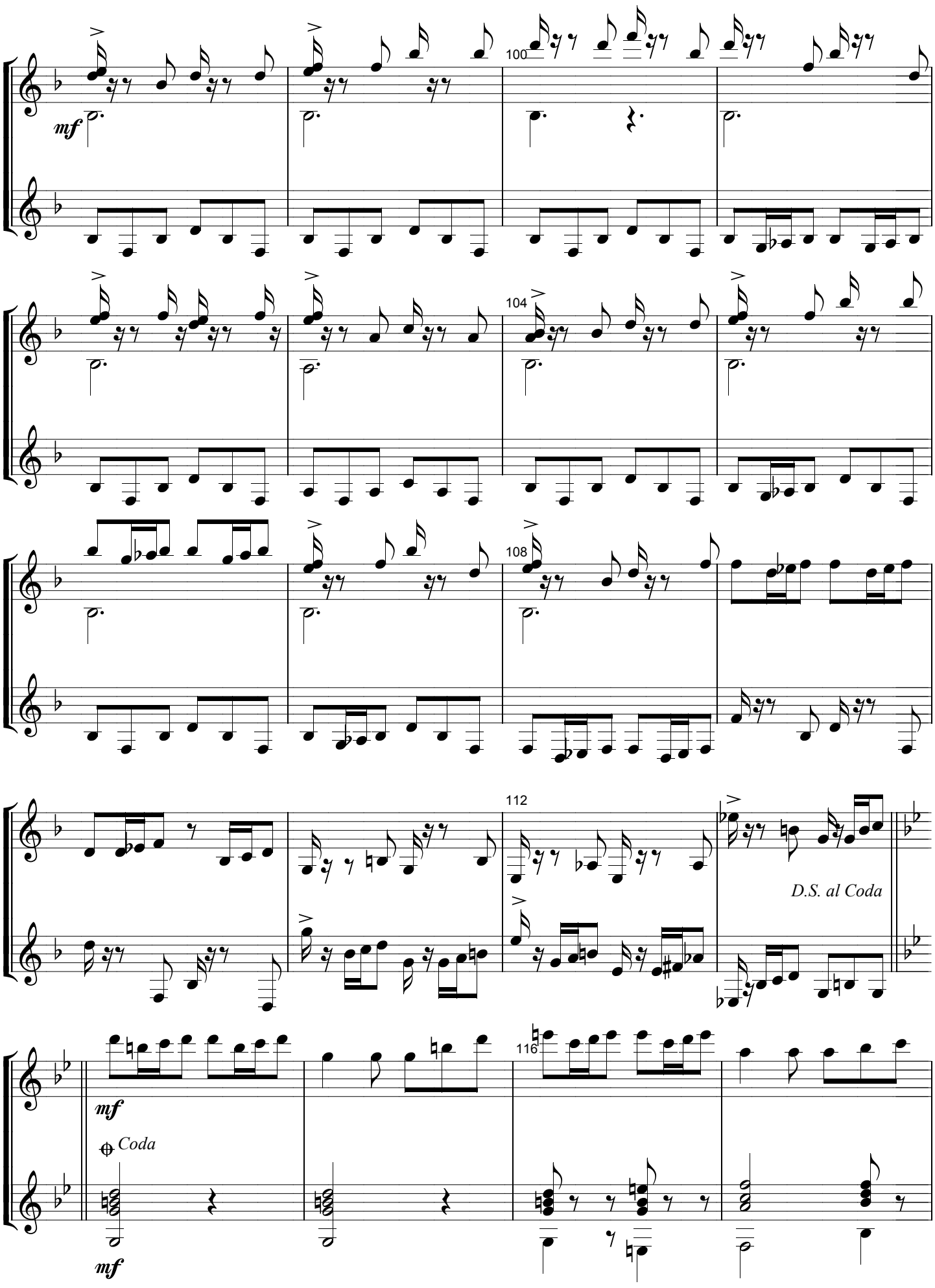

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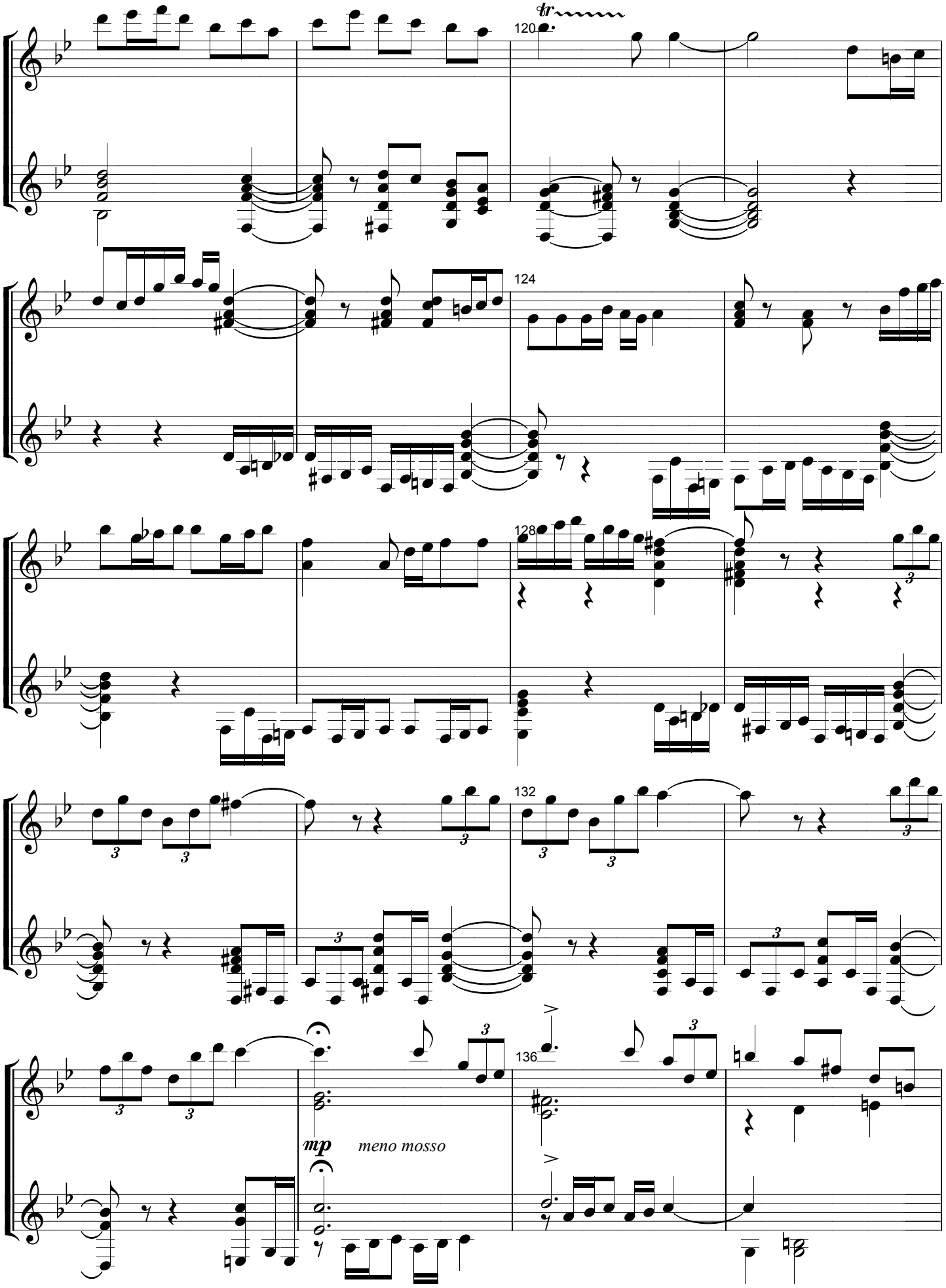

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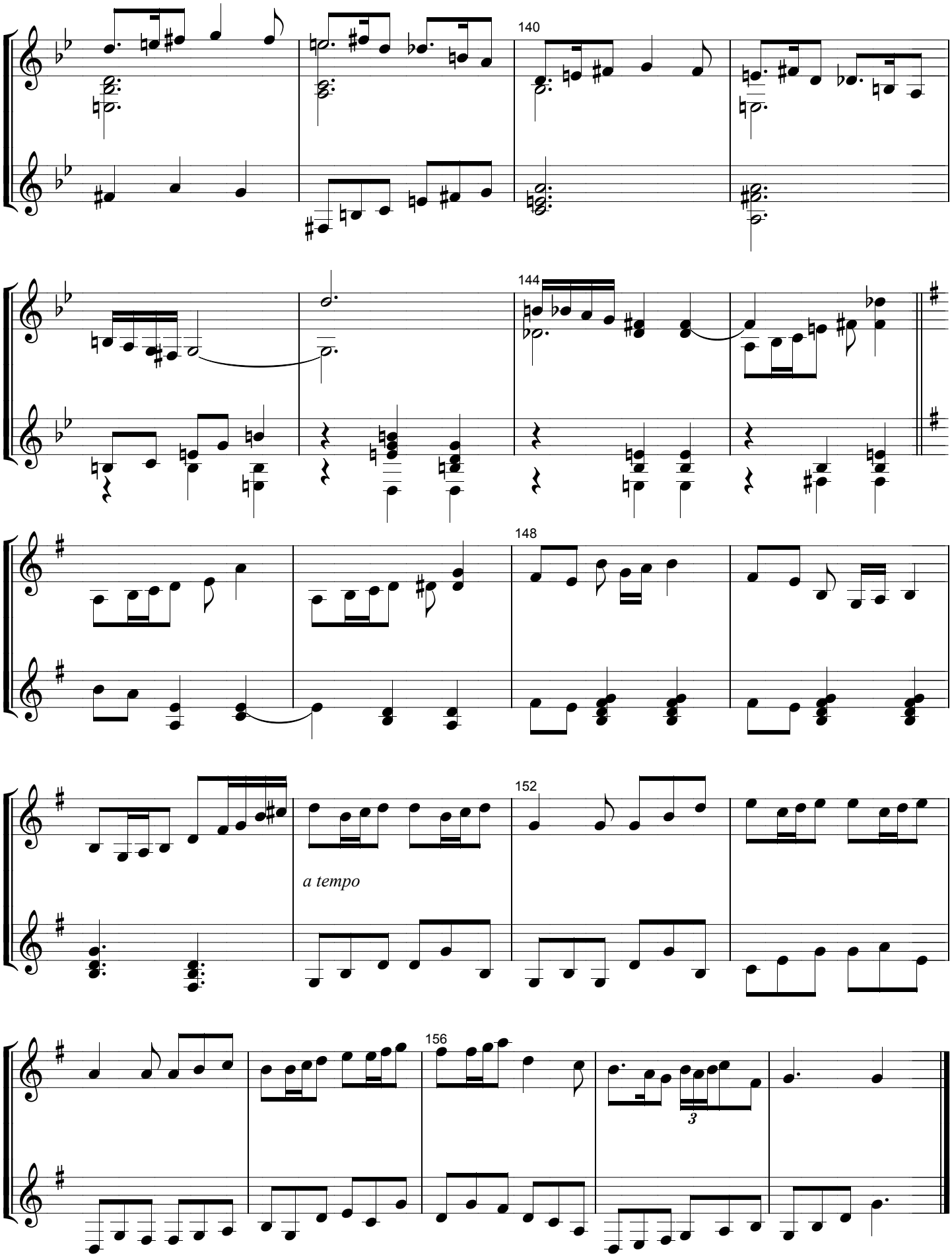

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VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY O'CAROLAN*

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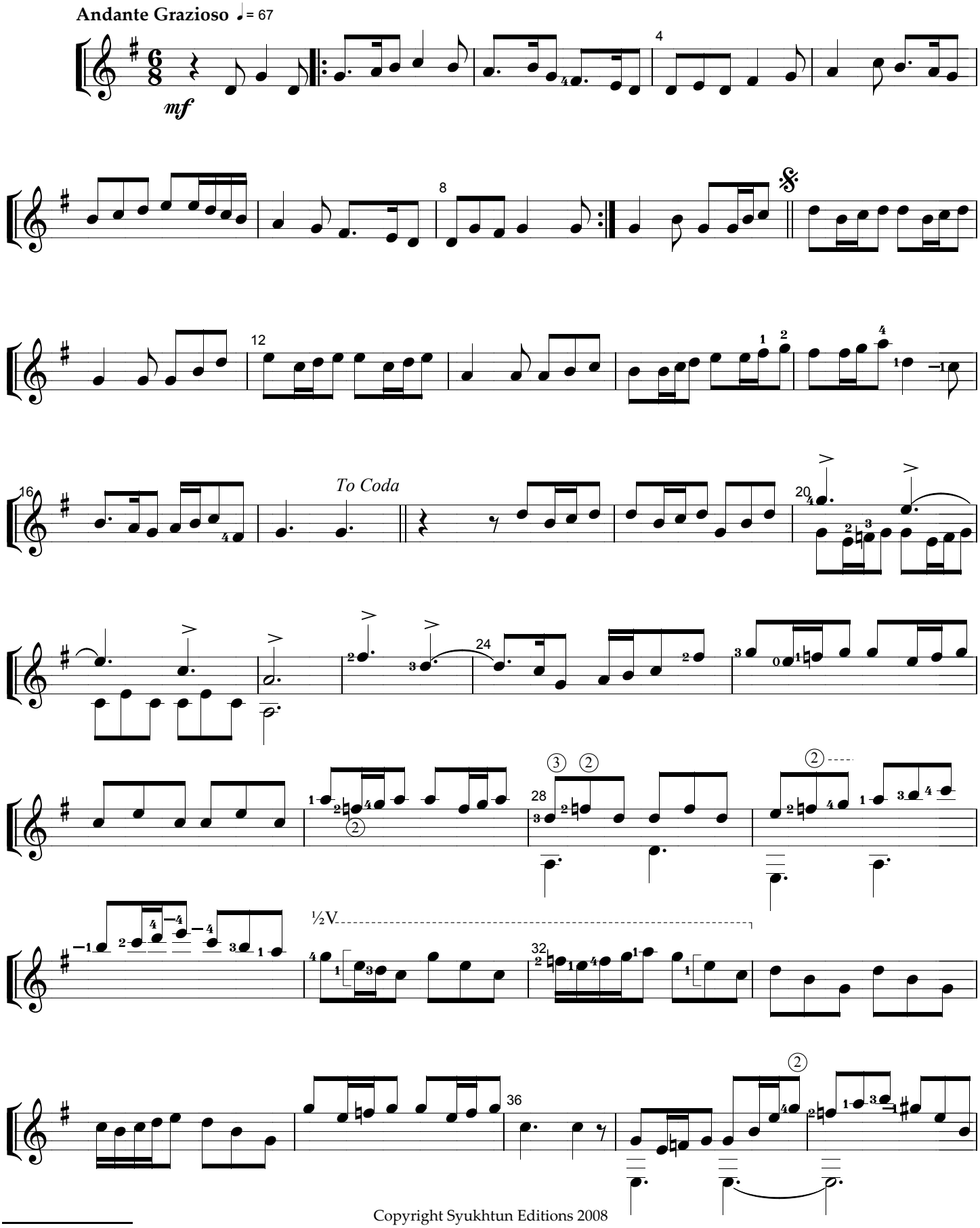
Guitar 1

Theo Radić



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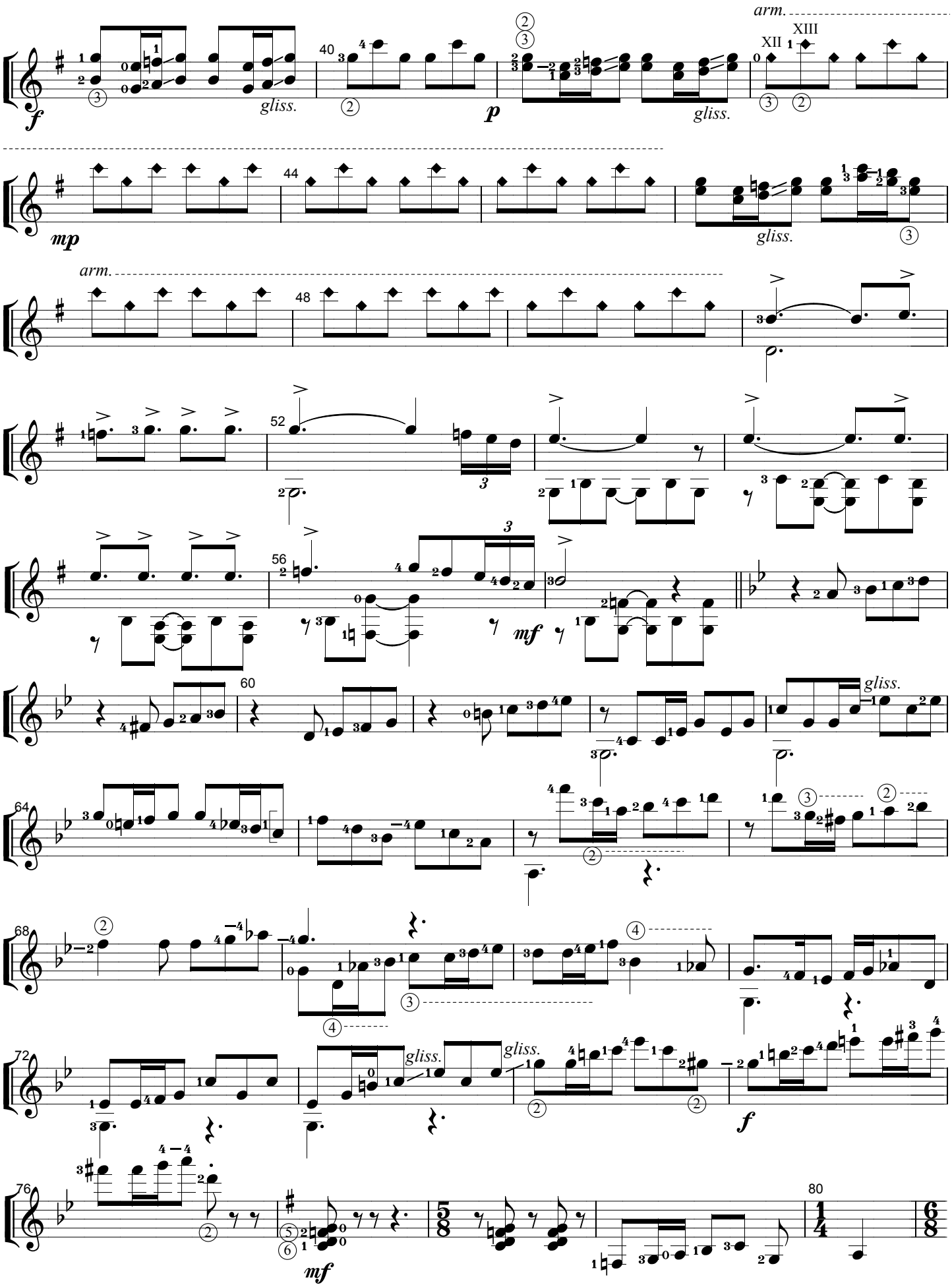

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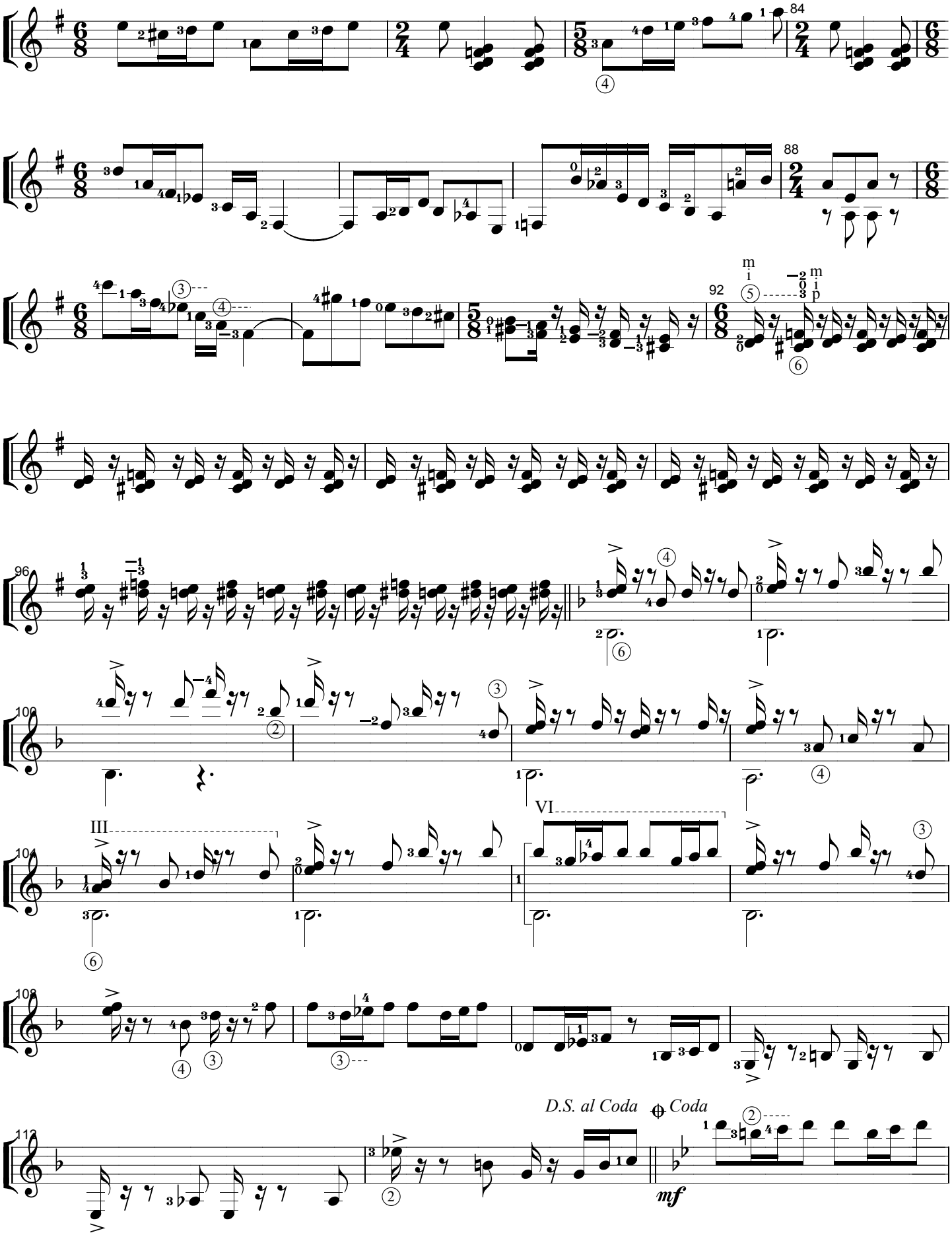

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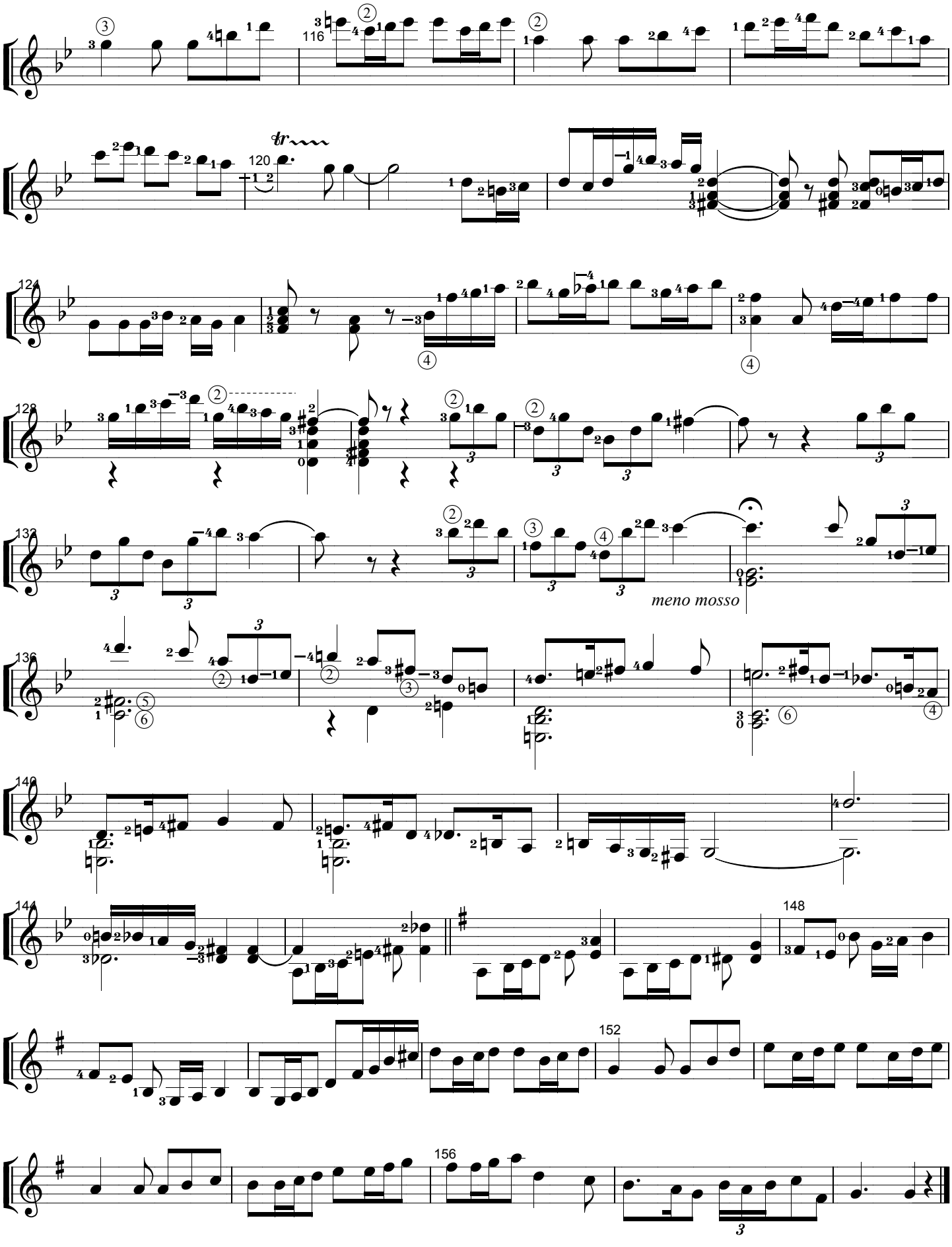

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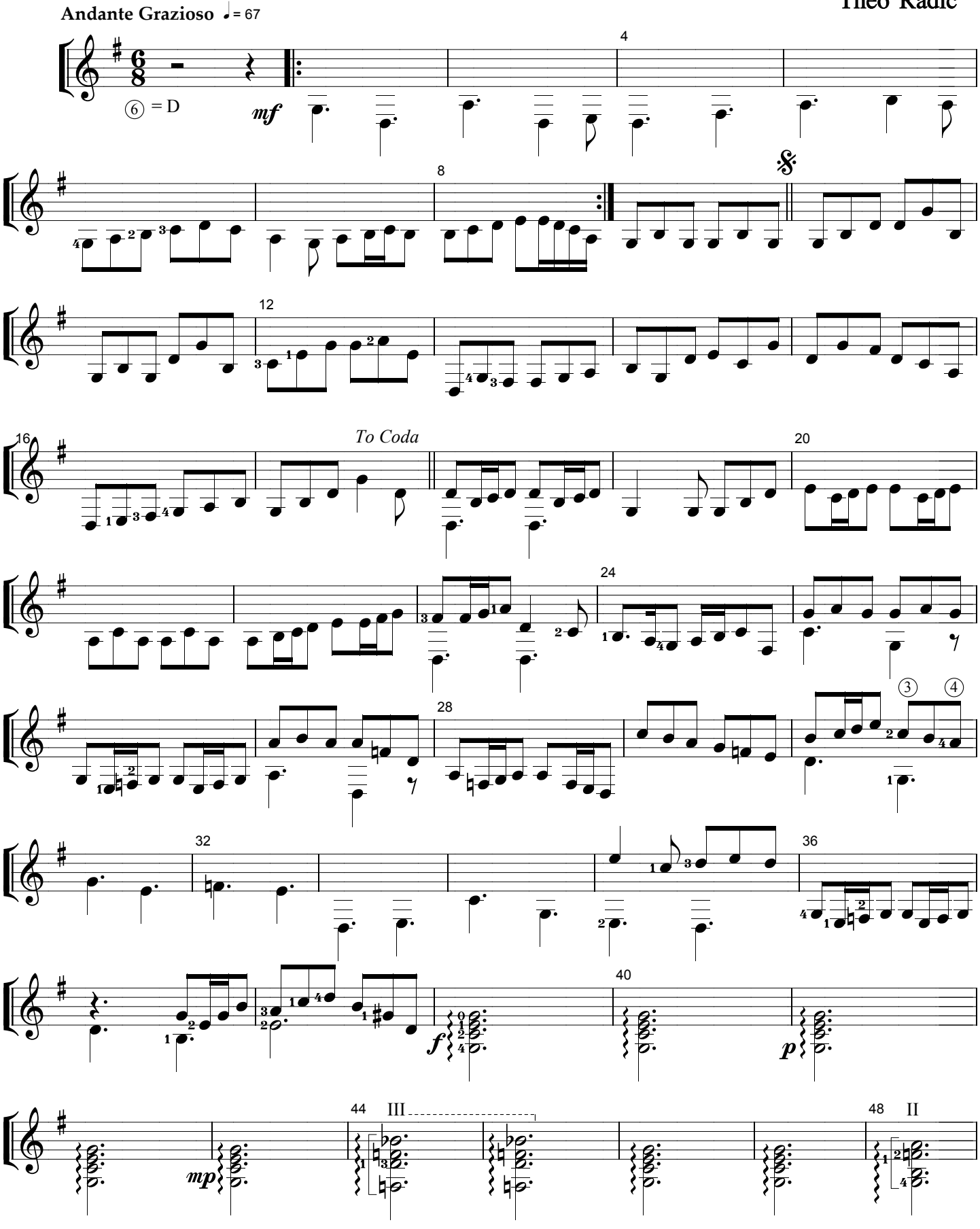
VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY O'CAROLAN*

For two guitars

Guitar 2

Theo Radić



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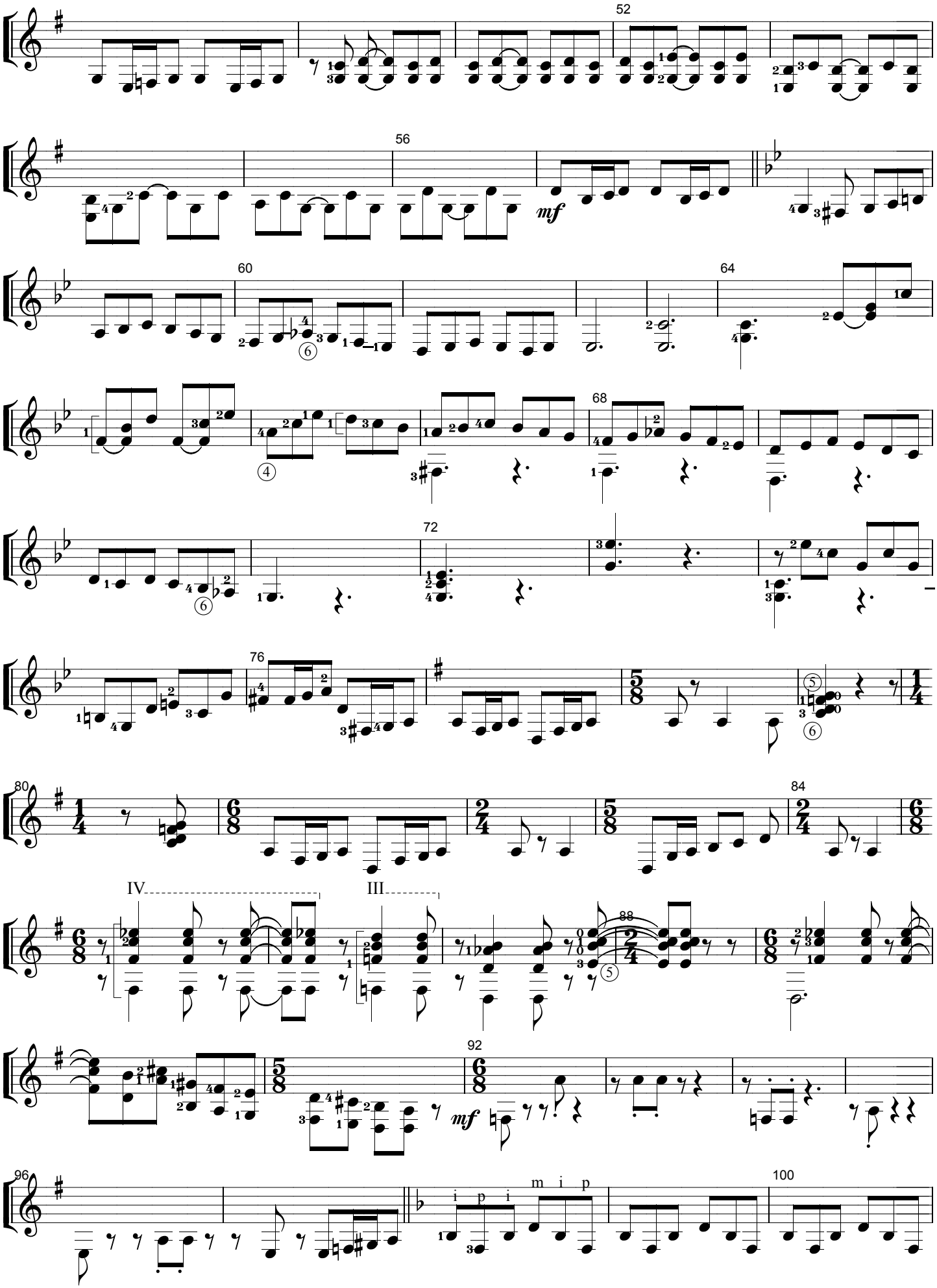

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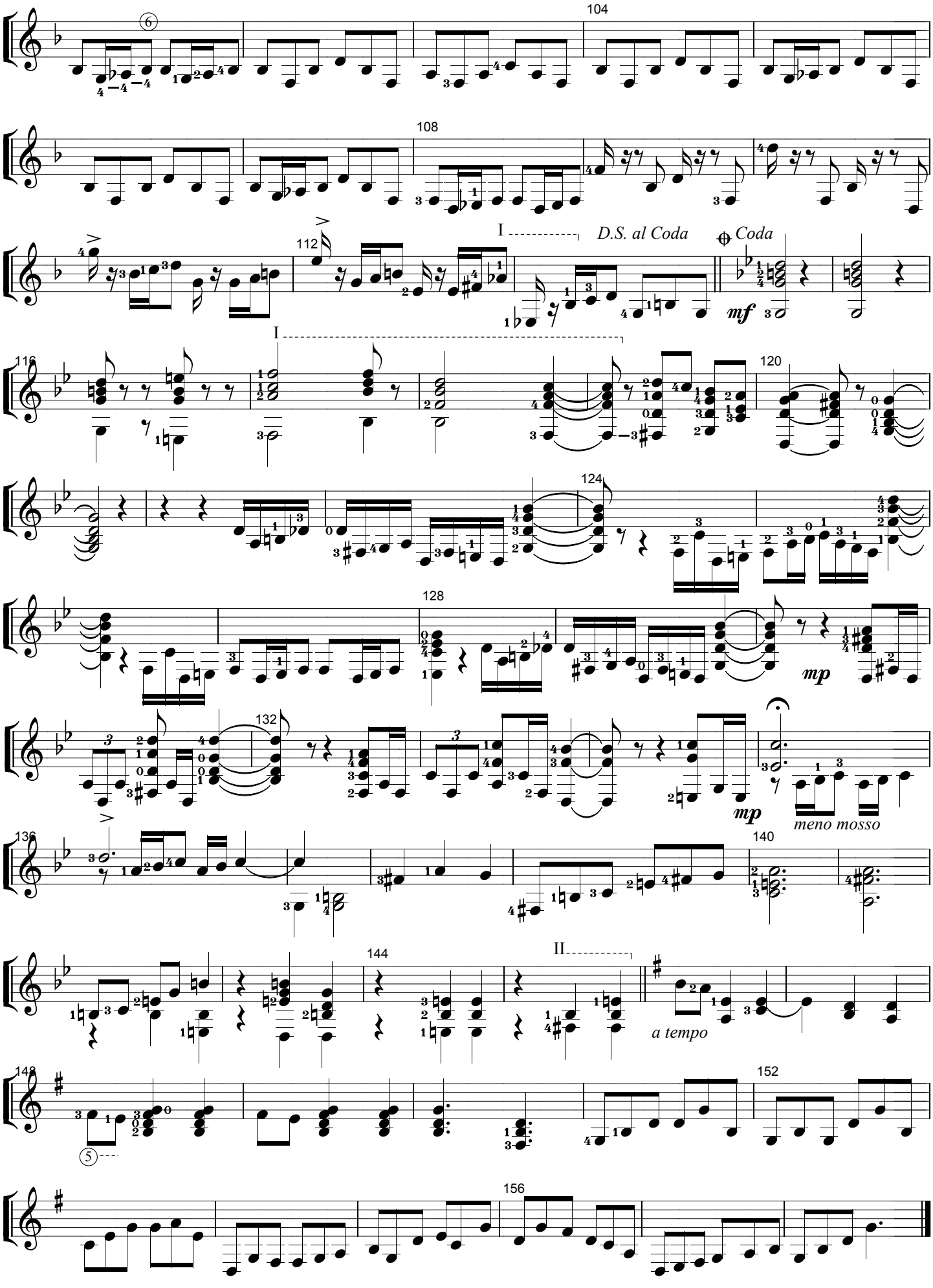

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