JOHN MACKEY

Divine Mischief

Concerto for Clarinet

Piano Reduction

i. A stranger and a game
ii. Disappointment, regret, regression: a waltz
iii. Spellbound

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Program Note

I have been asked several times if I would write a clarinet concerto, but the question only resulted in one thing: fear. I love the instrument – my grandfather was a clarinetist! – but when I was still a teenager, I heard John Corigliano's clarinet concerto. On one hearing, I loved it so much that I decided it was my favorite piece by any living composer, and, to me, the greatest wind concerto I'd ever heard. Based on that piece, and later hearing it live, I essentially stalked Corigliano, resulting somehow not in a restraining order, but in an invitation to study with him at Juilliard. (To any aspiring composers reading this, please don't try that.) To this day, several decades later, I consider Corigliano's concerto an absolute masterpiece.

So when asked if I'd write a concerto, I always just claimed to be busy, when in reality, I was terrified. But as my brilliant spouse Abby tells me, sometimes the reason to do something is because it's scary.

Not so long ago, Julian Bliss contacted me and asked that same question. Maybe I'd had too much tequila when he asked, or maybe I was as scared as always, but smart enough to know that if somebody at Julian's level of skill asks you to write for them, you do it. So I agreed, and the result is "Divine Mischief."

If you see Julian play, you immediately sense his charisma. This guy is a rock star on clarinet. And if you speak to him, you may sense that maybe he could cause some trouble – all in good fun, of course.

As I always do with large pieces, I discussed all of this with Abby, with whom I'd just seen the Tchaikovsky ballet, "Swan Lake." We had the idea for Abby to write a synopsis – a story, conceived as if it were a ballet, and I would write the concerto as if it were a ballet score for her story. Inspired by Julian's personality, Abby decided that Julian would play the role of a trickster figure, like Loki, Tom Sawyer, or Till Eulenspiegel.

Below is her synopsis.

i. A stranger and a game

The town square is as bustling as you would expect on market day, but neither shoppers nor sellers are to be found in the stalls. All eyes are fixed on a stranger wearing peculiar clothes and carrying a spectacular instrument who has appeared as if from nowhere. The stranger surveys the waiting audience, but does not play. The throng chants a fanfare, urging the stranger to perform.

The stranger begins, disastrously. The crowd cannot believe that the bearer of such an extraordinary instrument is unable to play, and vents its frustration at the horrific noises—until they transform into a delicate, lyrical melody. The audience sighs its approval. But as soon as the listeners begin to relax into the music, the stranger changes it. Slow becomes fast, discord disrupts delicacy, chaos creeps in—but only until the audience accepts the raucous new reality, at which point the player swerves again. And again. And again. The rules of the stranger's game become clear: Follow me, as I leave you behind.

ii. Disappointment, regret, regression: a waltz

Realizing that the only way to win this game is not to play, the crowd begins to disperse, grumbling with disappointment. The stranger replies with a slow, sad waltz of apology, pleading for the people to return. Hesitant but eventually persuaded, the townspeople join in the dance.

Of course, this enchantment can't last. Soon the stranger transforms the penance into parade and back again, making a joke of the crowd's displeasure.

iii. Spellbound

The townspeople revolt. The stranger again tries to tempt them with apologies, to charm them with amusements—but the angry mob has had enough, even before the stranger undermines these overtures by mocking the very idea of sincerity. Yet the stranger plays on, sure the audience will succumb eventually. When the crowd registers the depth of the stranger's determination to toy with them, the extremity of the stranger's appetite for amusement, they recognize the stranger at last: this is the Trickster. A plan forms.

They play a snippet of a slow chorale, knowing the Trickster will echo and taunt them. And when the Trickster does just that, something happens; magic crackles in the air. The people play another snippet; the Trickster mocks them again—and that taunting echo casts a powerful spell, one that passes in shadow over the whole assemblage.

The shadow is the spell seeking its target, the one the spell will condemn to perform ever more stupendous feats for the amusement of the spellcaster. Who does the shadow seek? "Whosoever displeases by failing to amuse."

But that, of course, the Trickster—the one who has spent all day taking pleasure at others' expense, providing none in return. And so the Trickster is not only the spellcaster but also the spell's target, self- condemned to play until the god's own insatiable need for entertainment is satisfied. Which is to say, self-condemned to play forever.

The spell takes hold; the stranger-god plays. The townspeople celebrate the performance they have been waiting for all day. Divine virtuosity pours out, turning from trickle to torrent to flood. But the deluge can do nothing to slake the god's endless thirst, nothing to fulfill the god's now-eternal task.

The spectacle may pause, but only because ceaseless revels lose their charm. The show must go on. (And on, and on.) The player has become the plaything, the Trickster has been tricked.

Or so it seems. It's so hard to tell, with Tricksters.

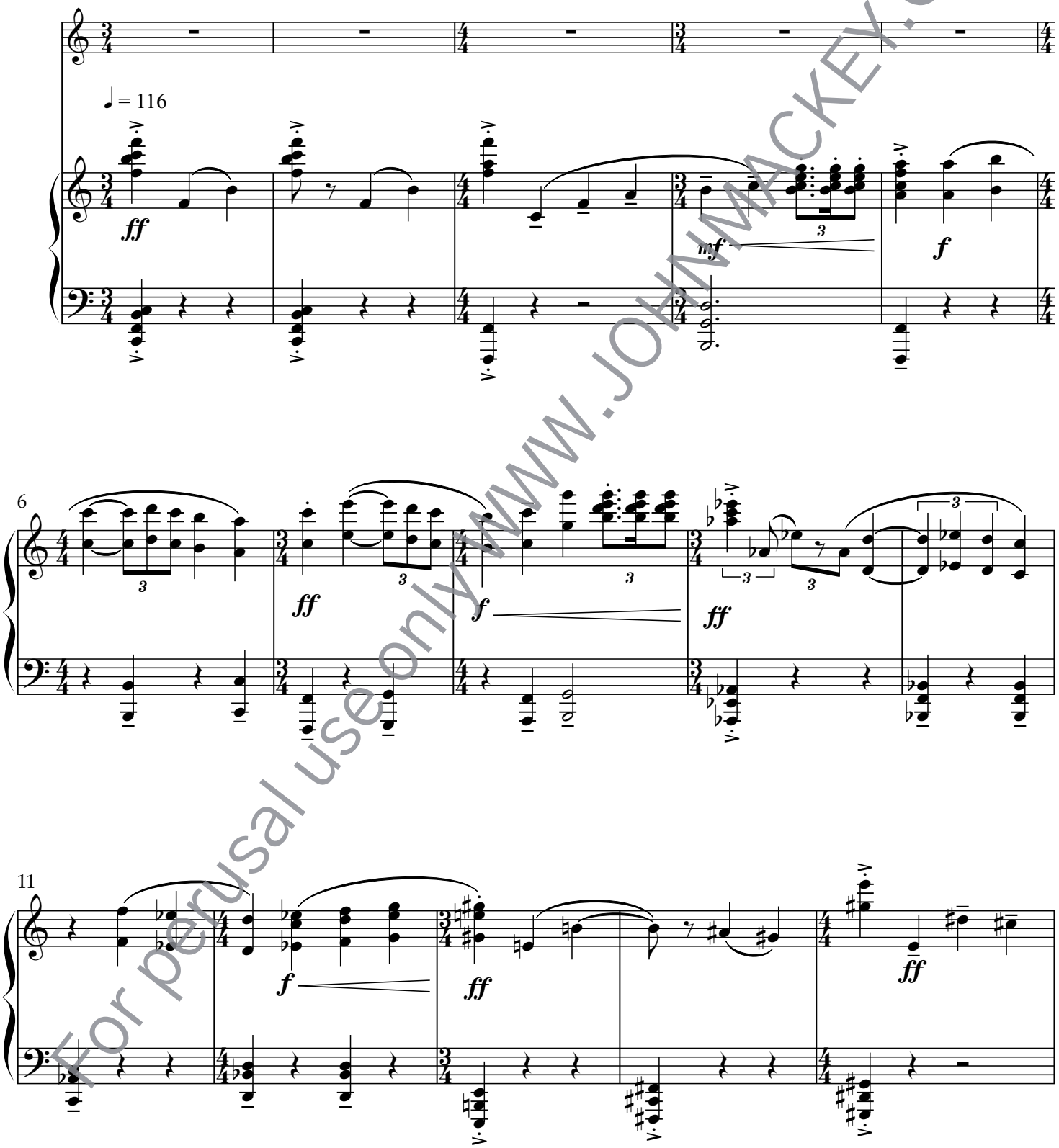
Program note by A. E. Jaques

Divine Mischief

i. A stranger and a game

John Mackey

piano reduction prepared by Liz Ames



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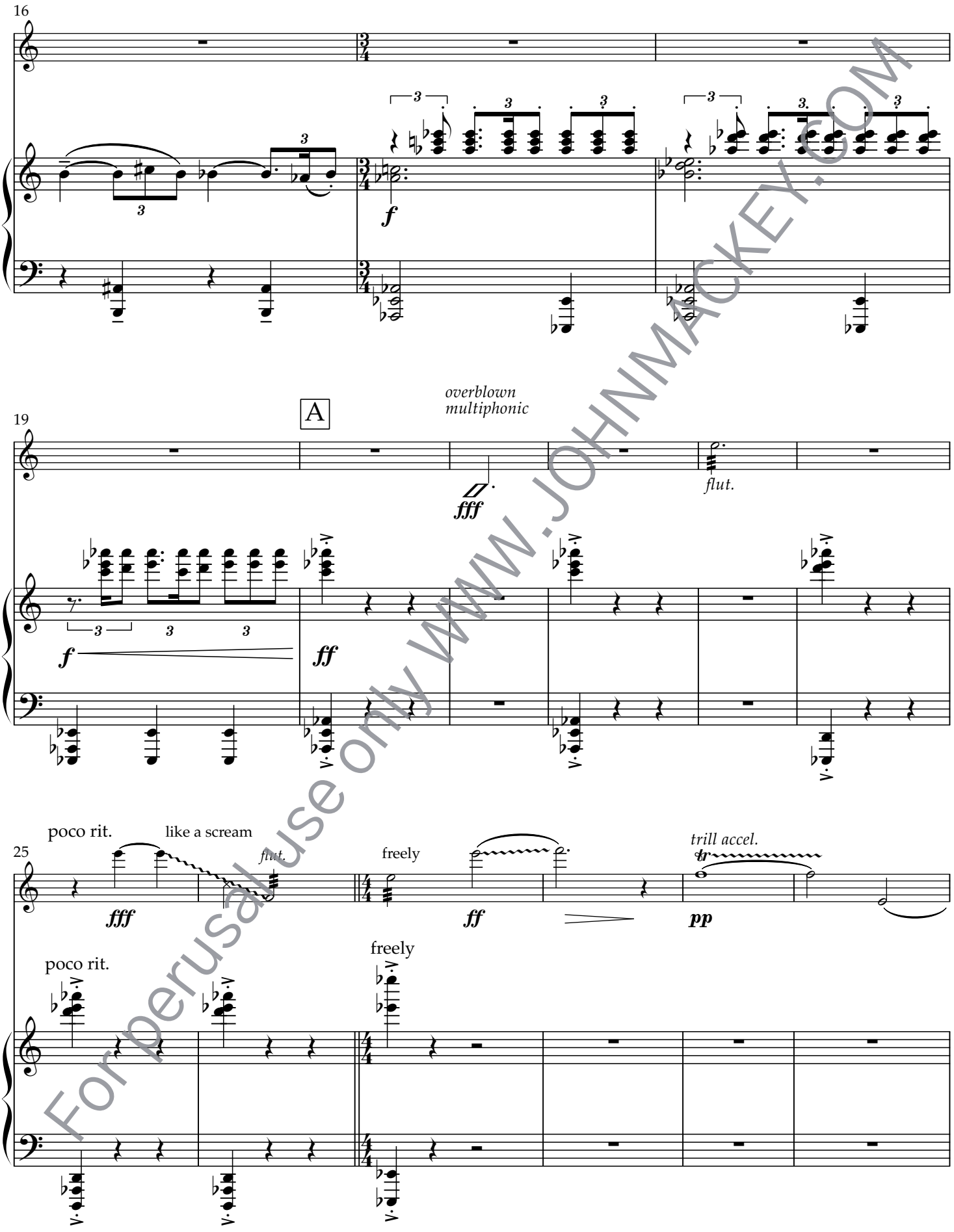

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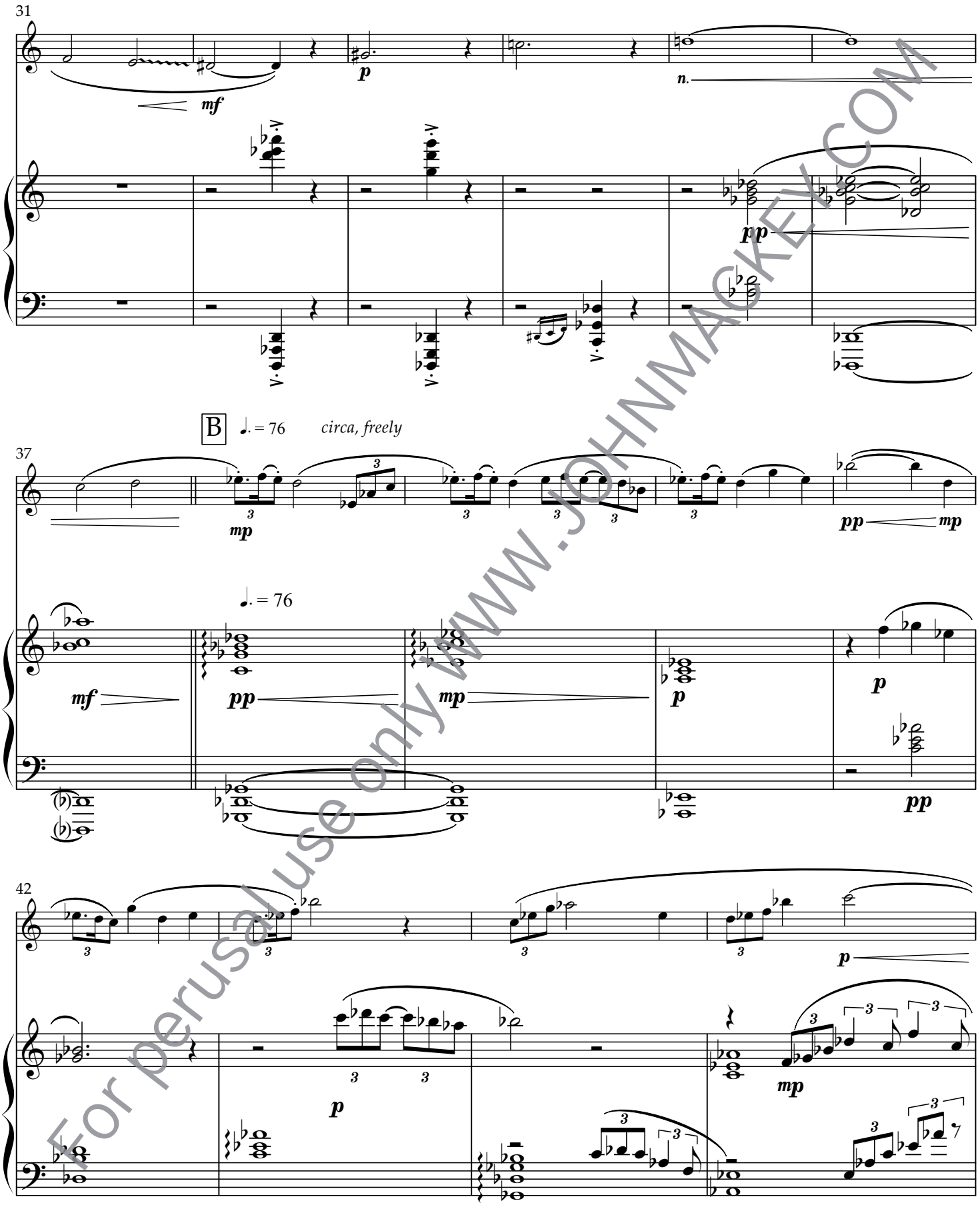

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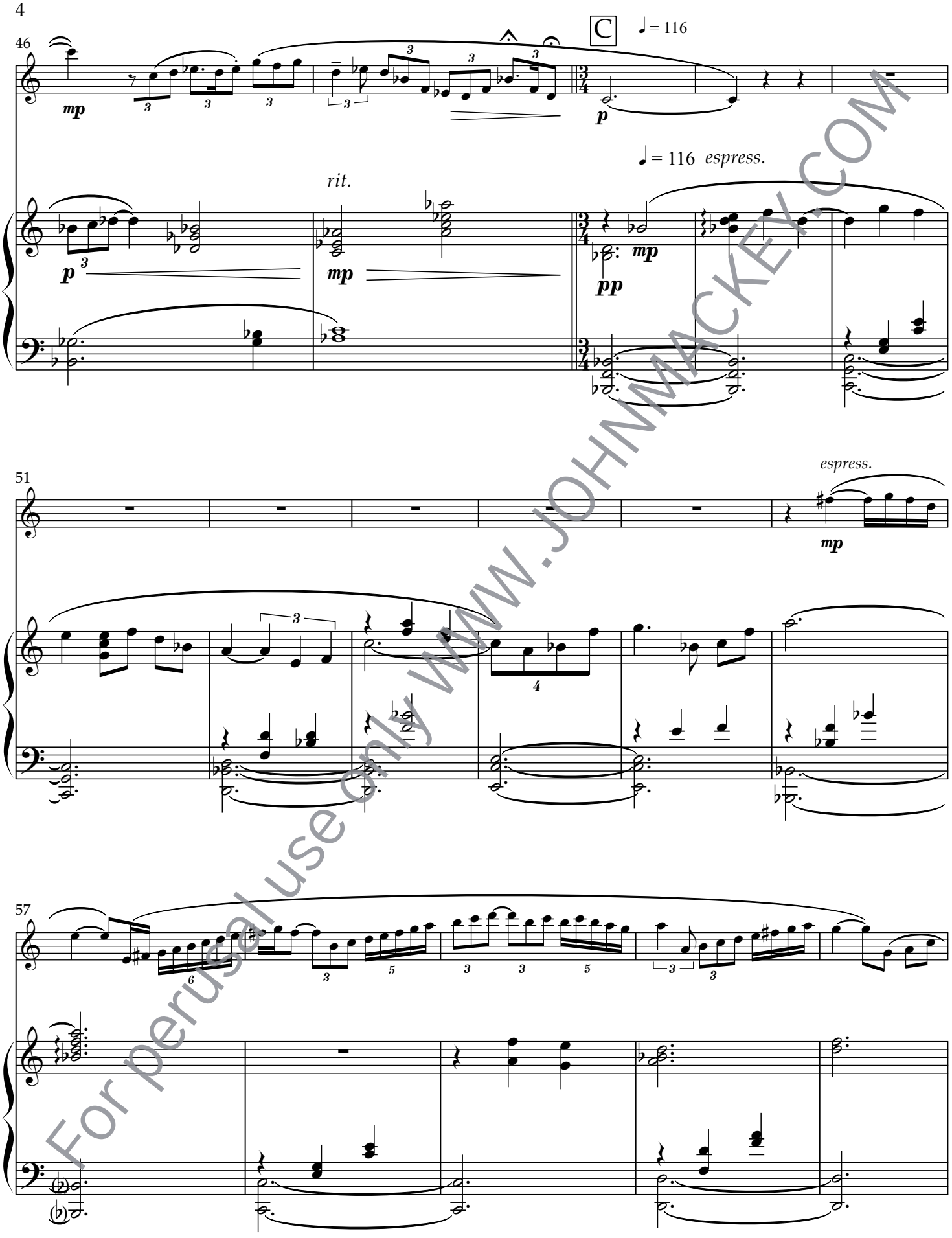

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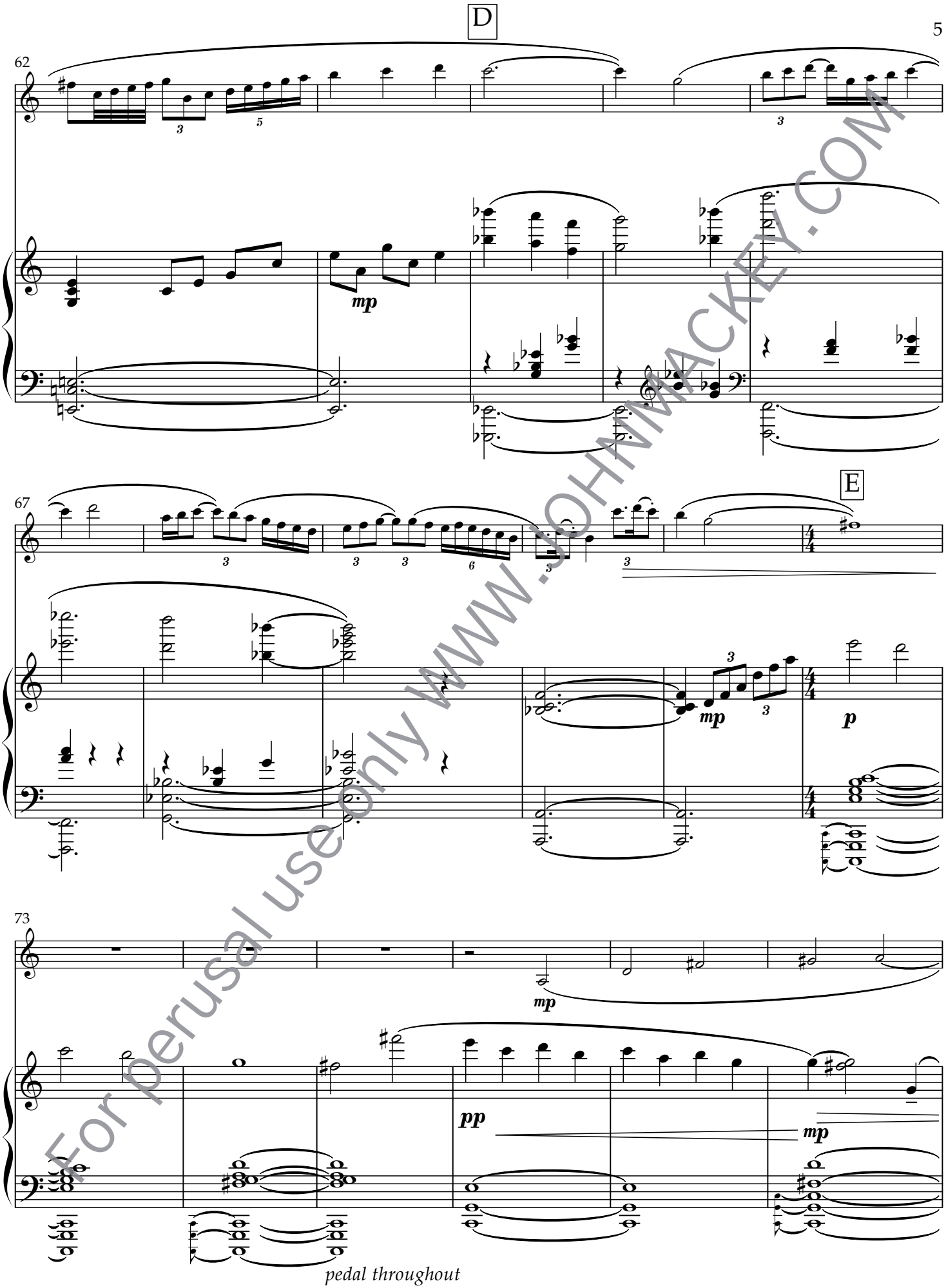

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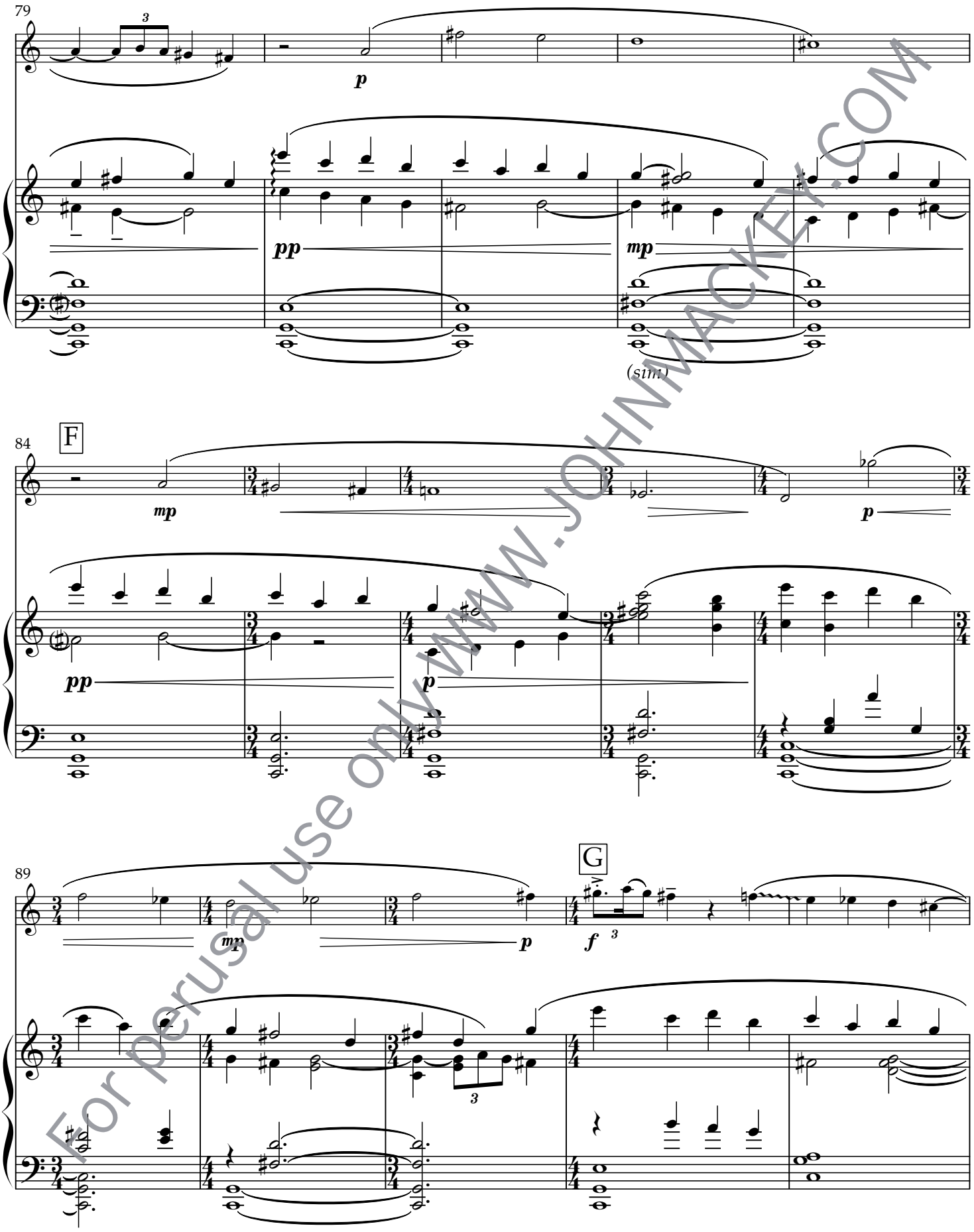

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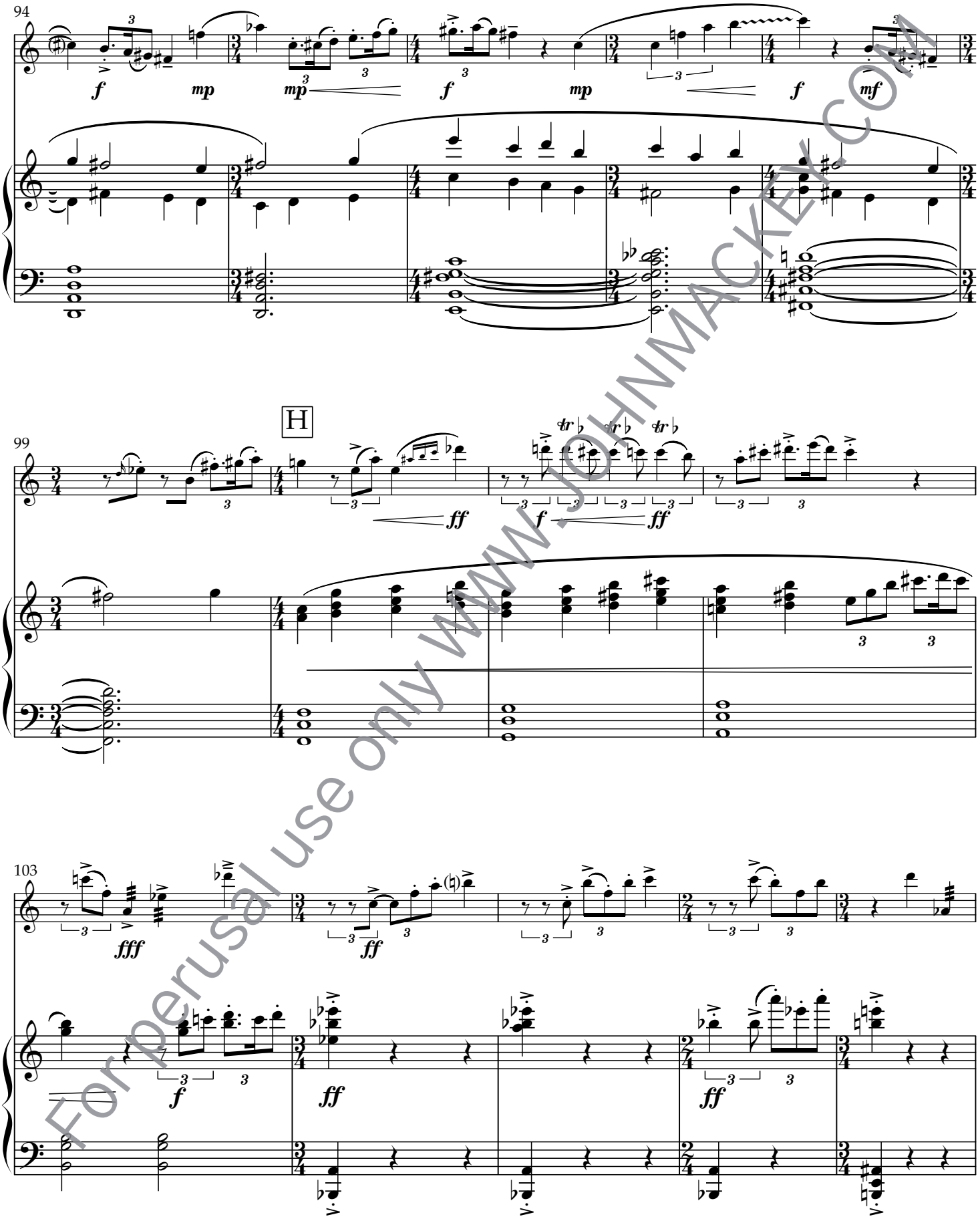

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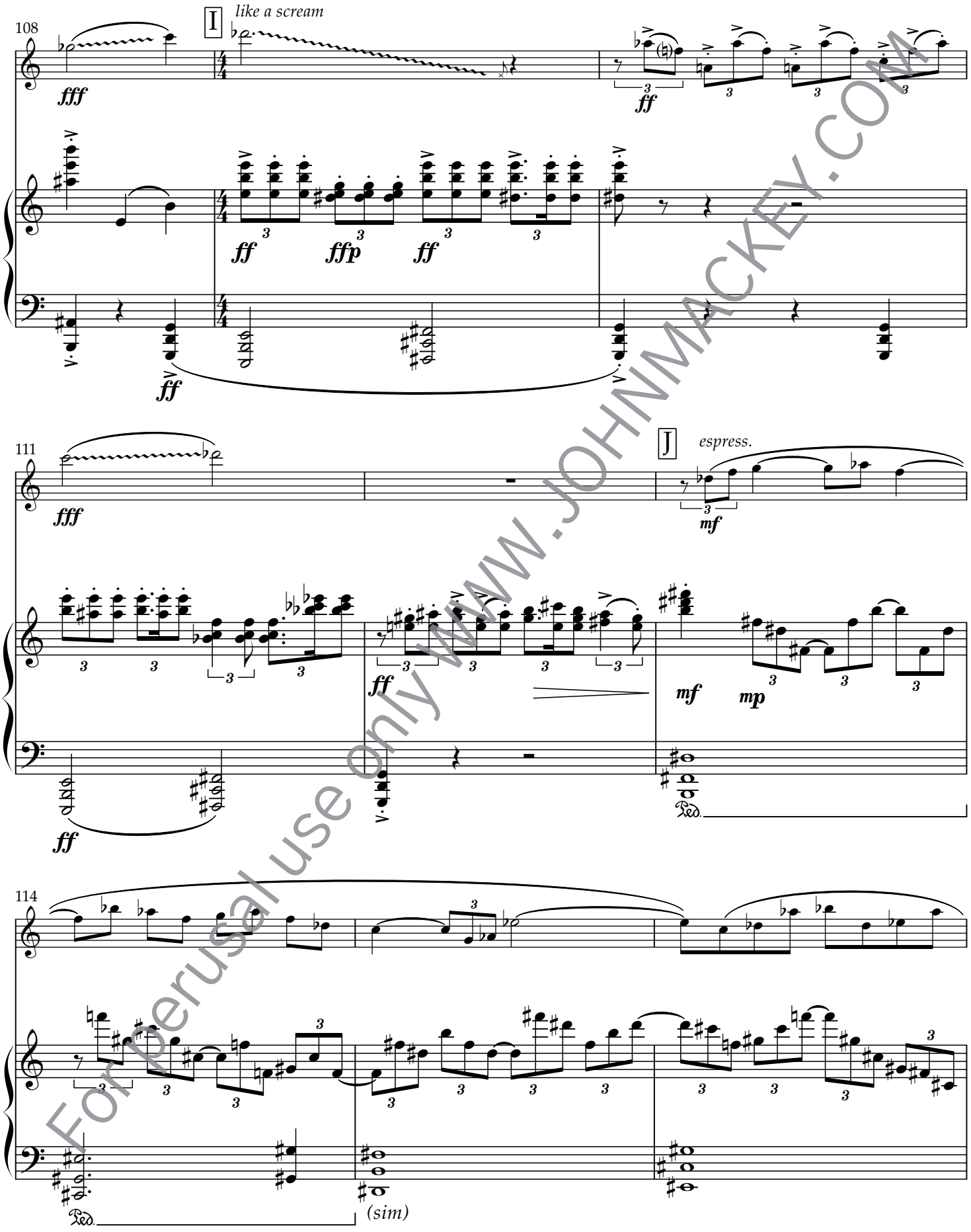

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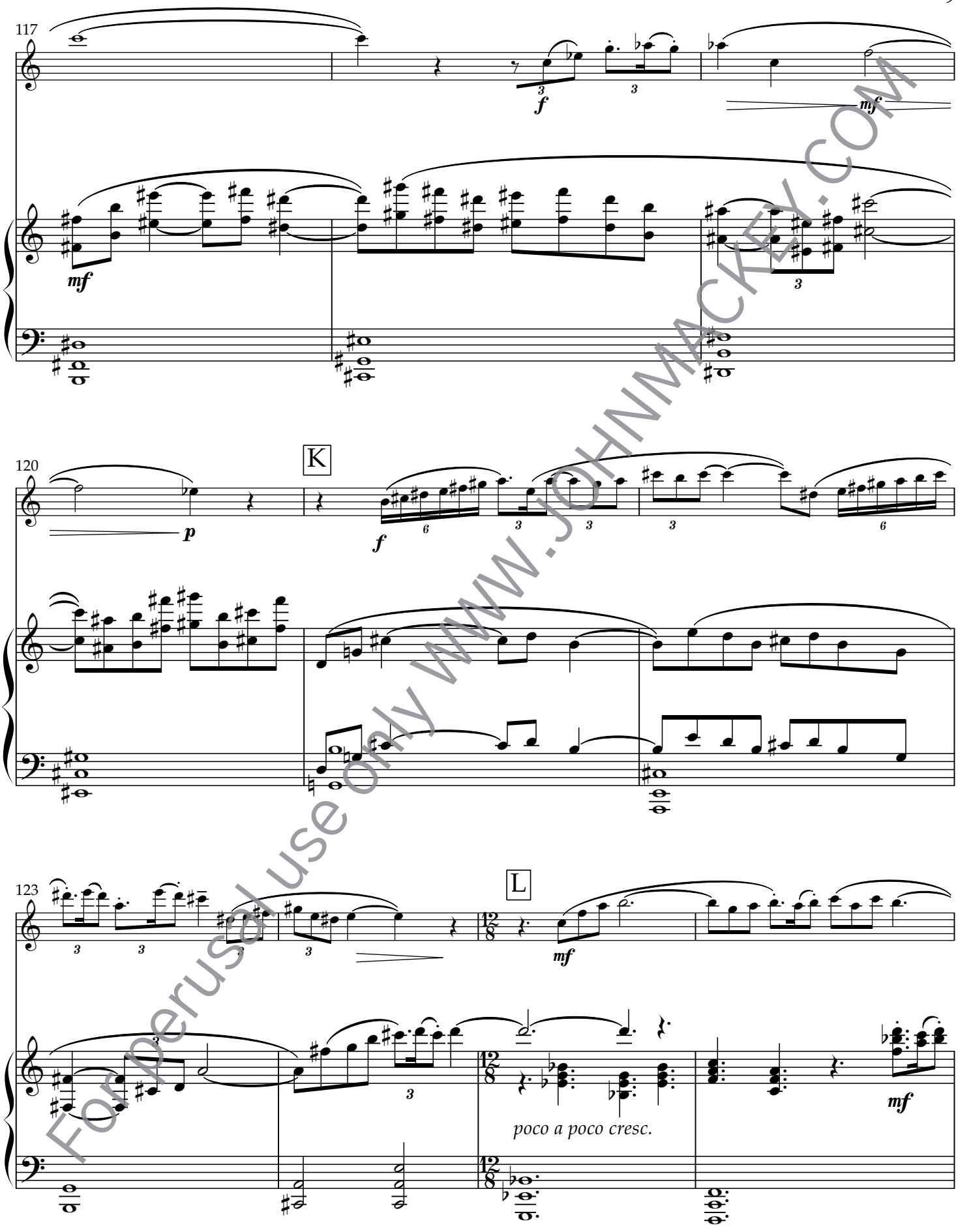

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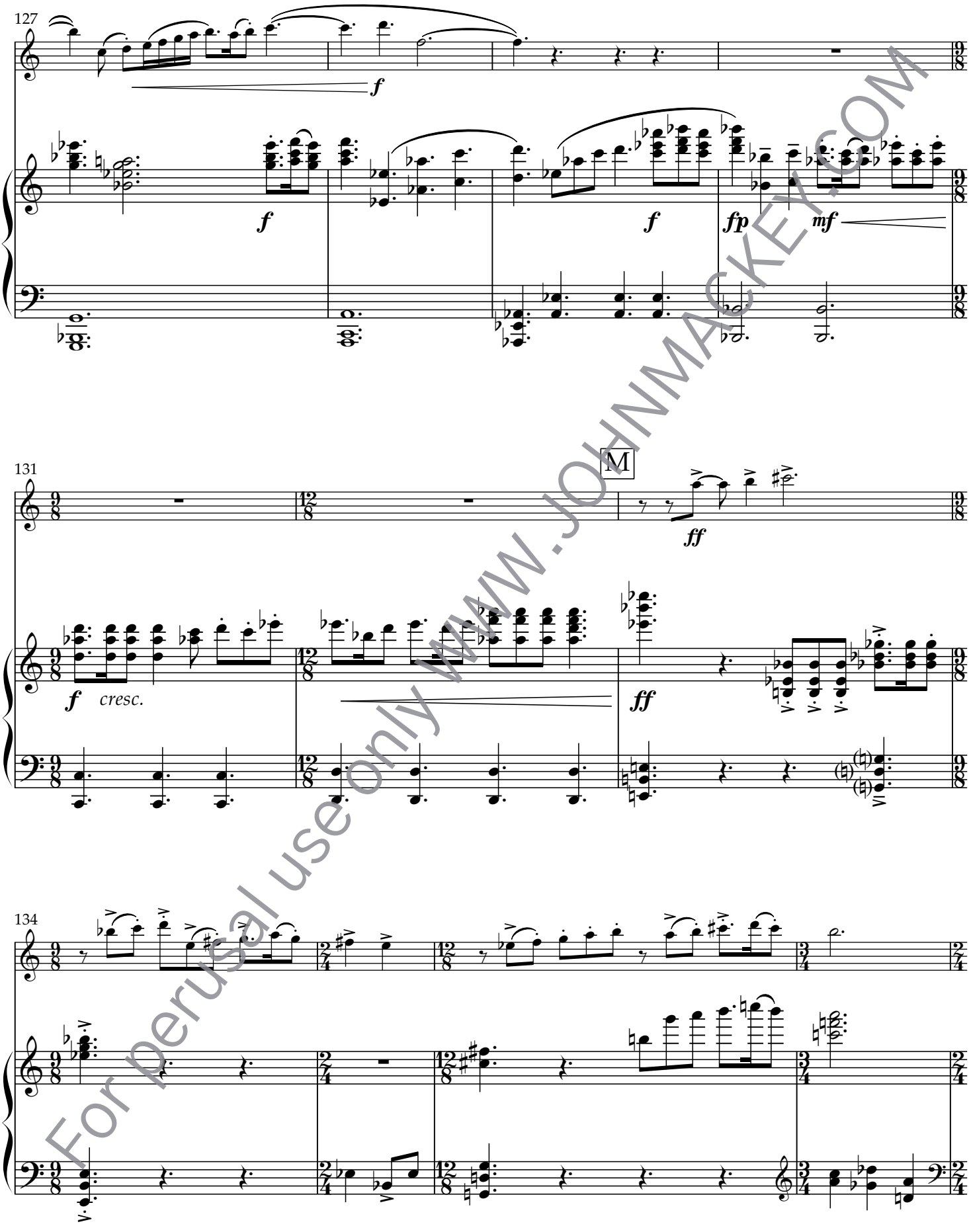

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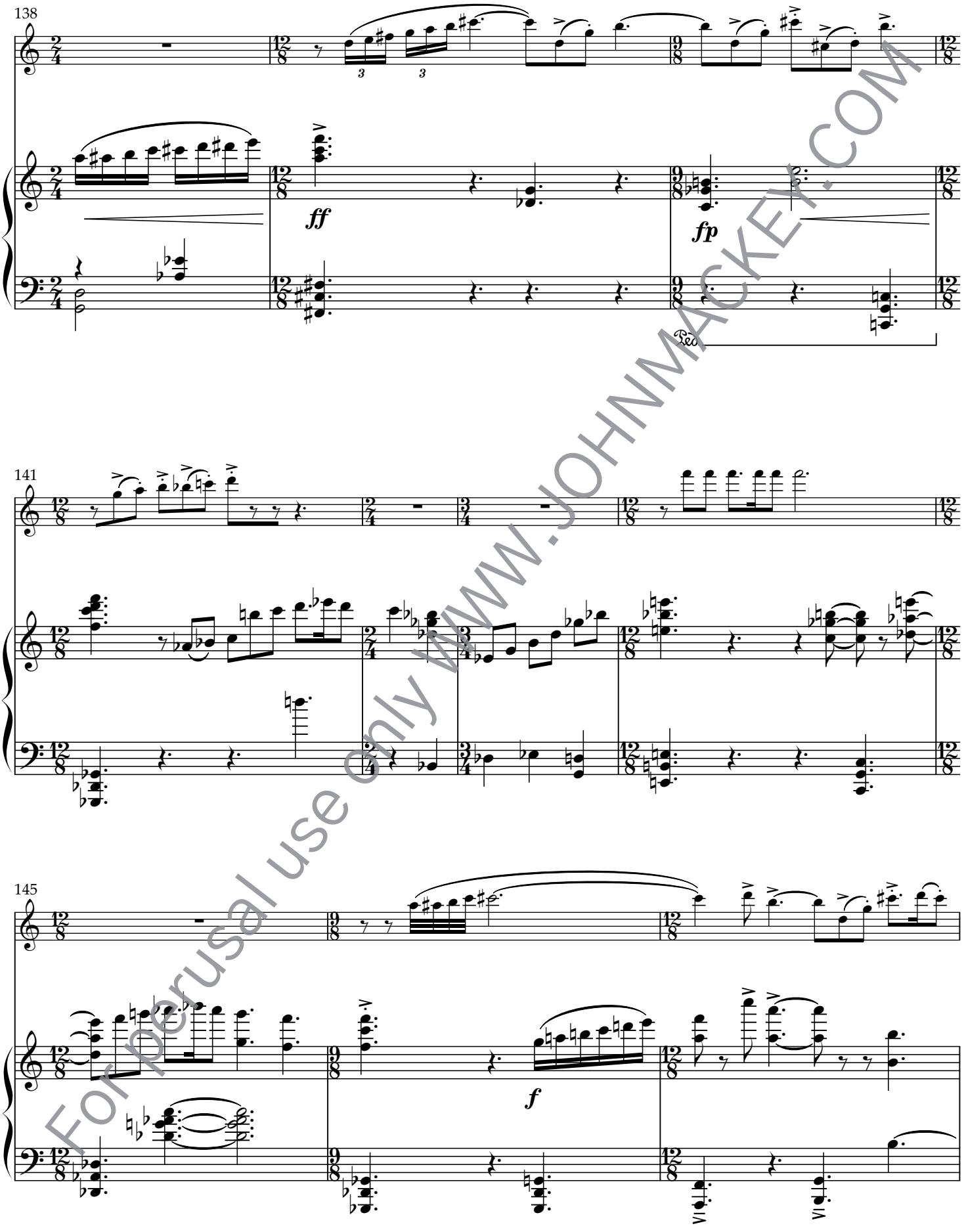

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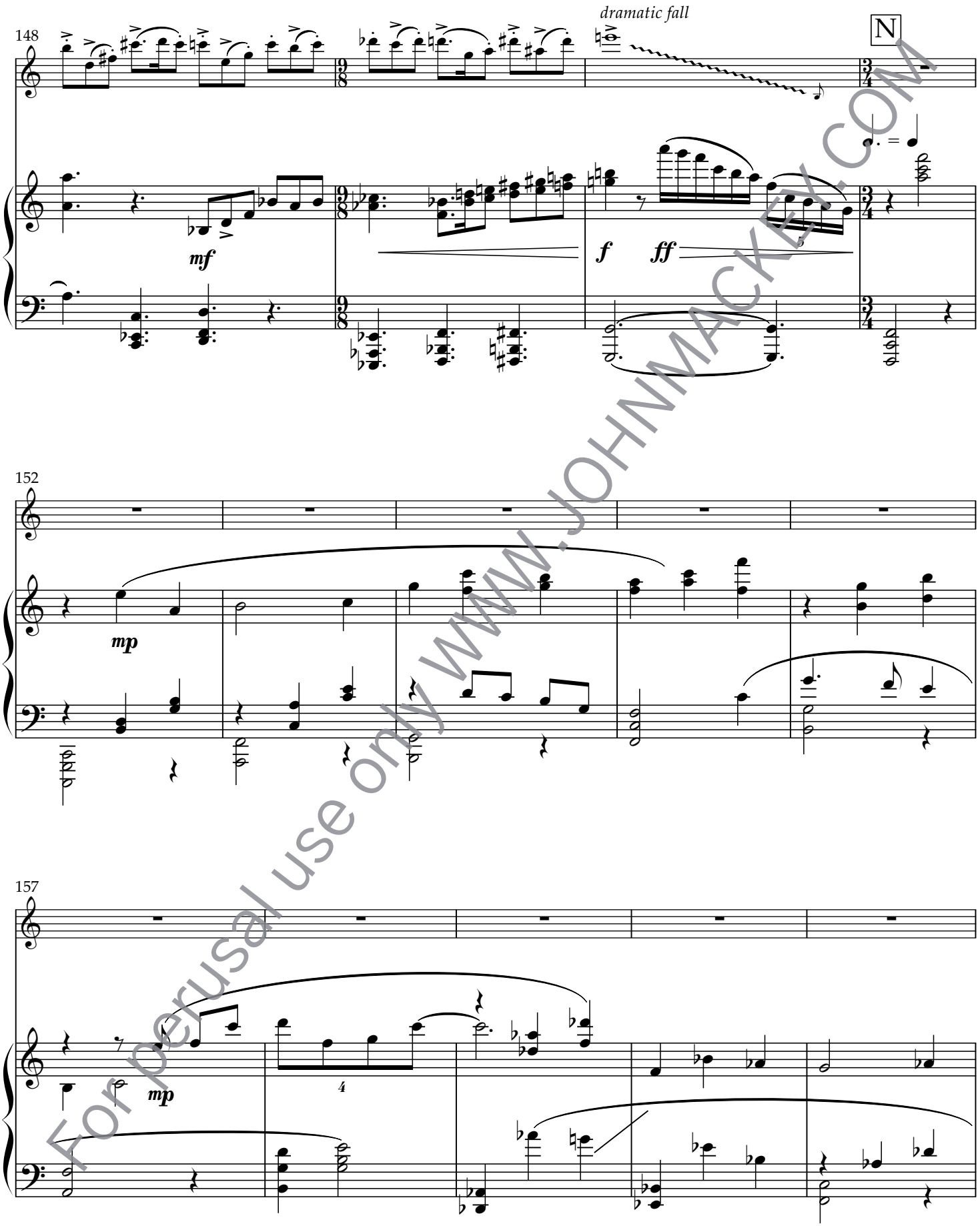

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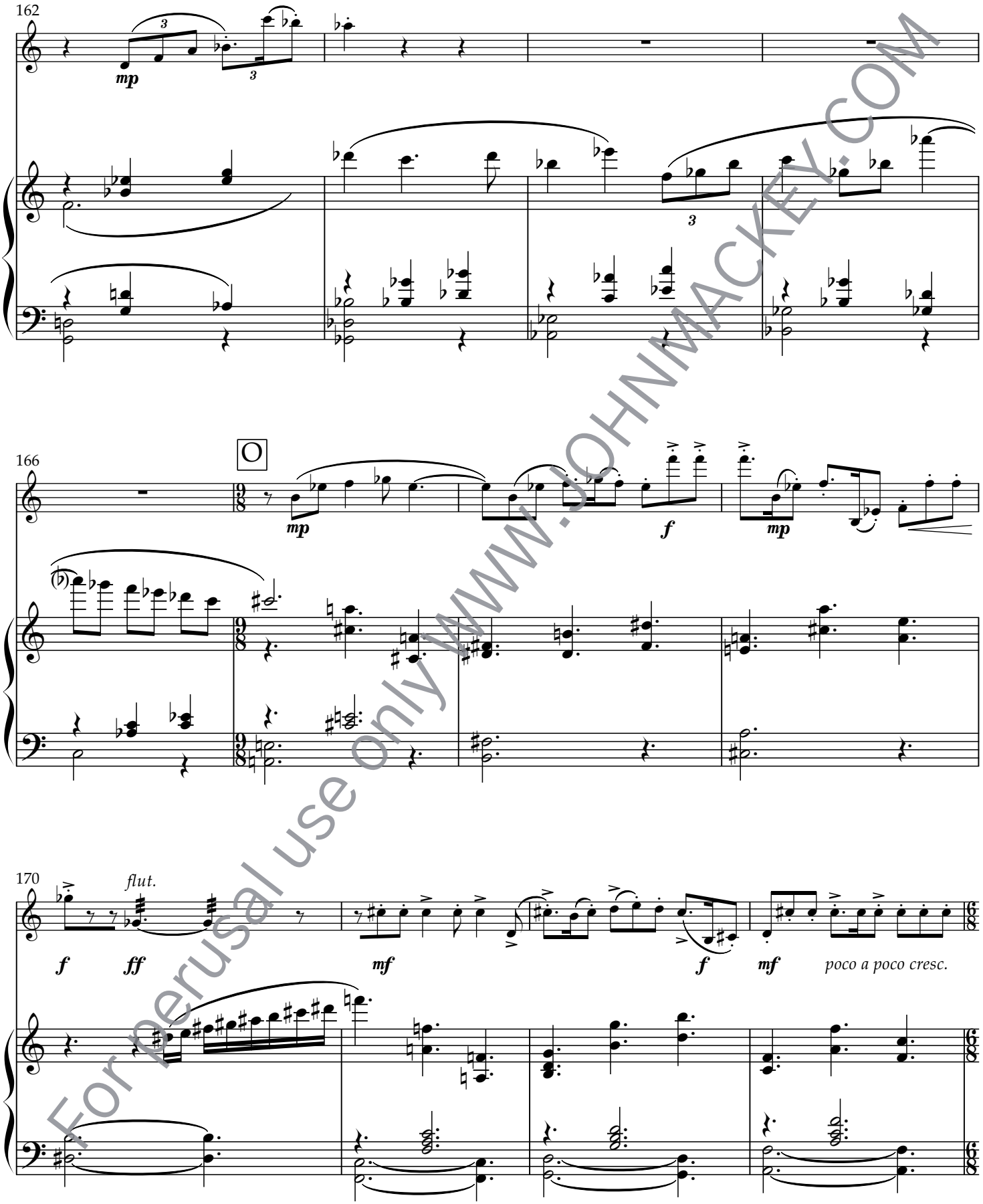

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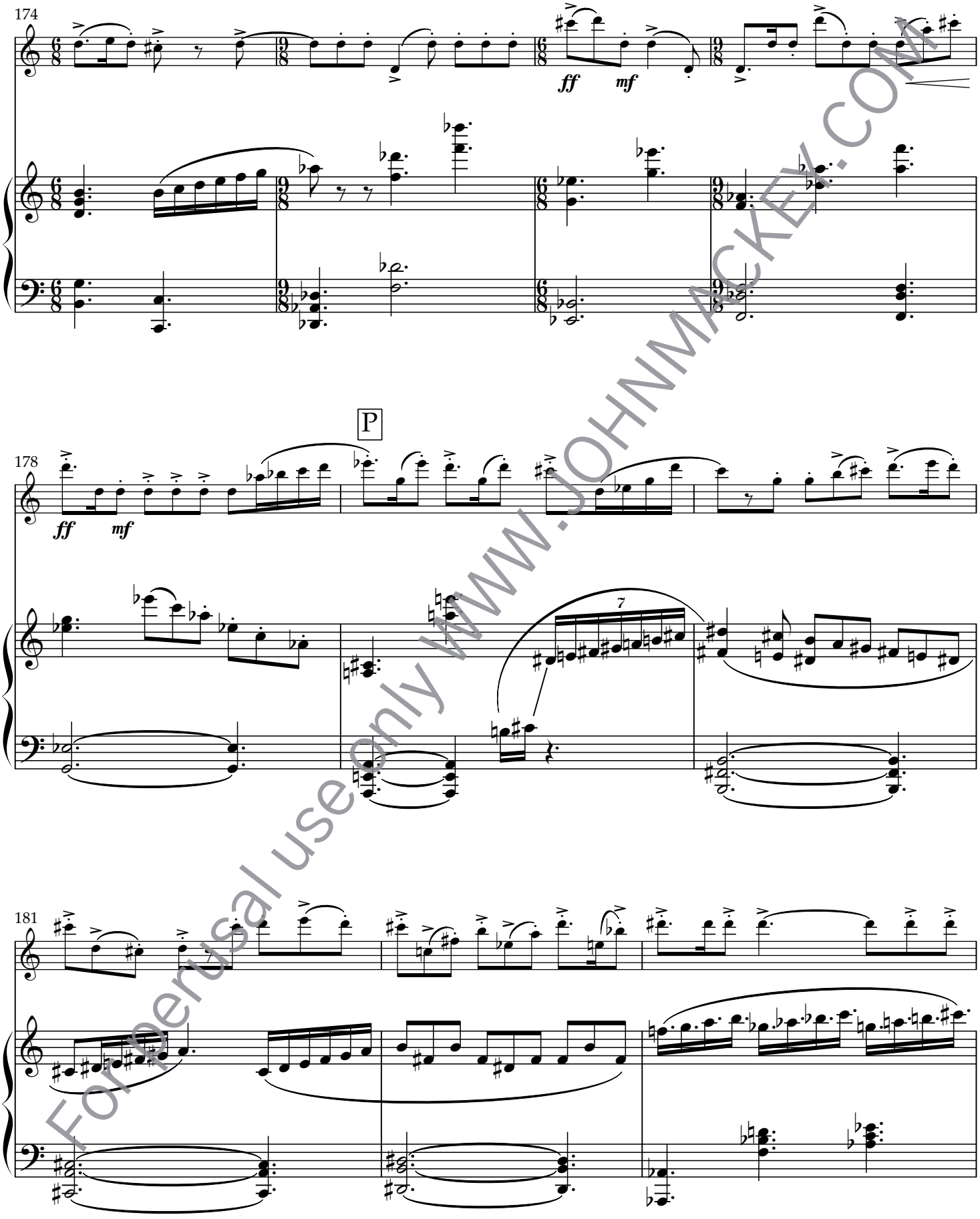

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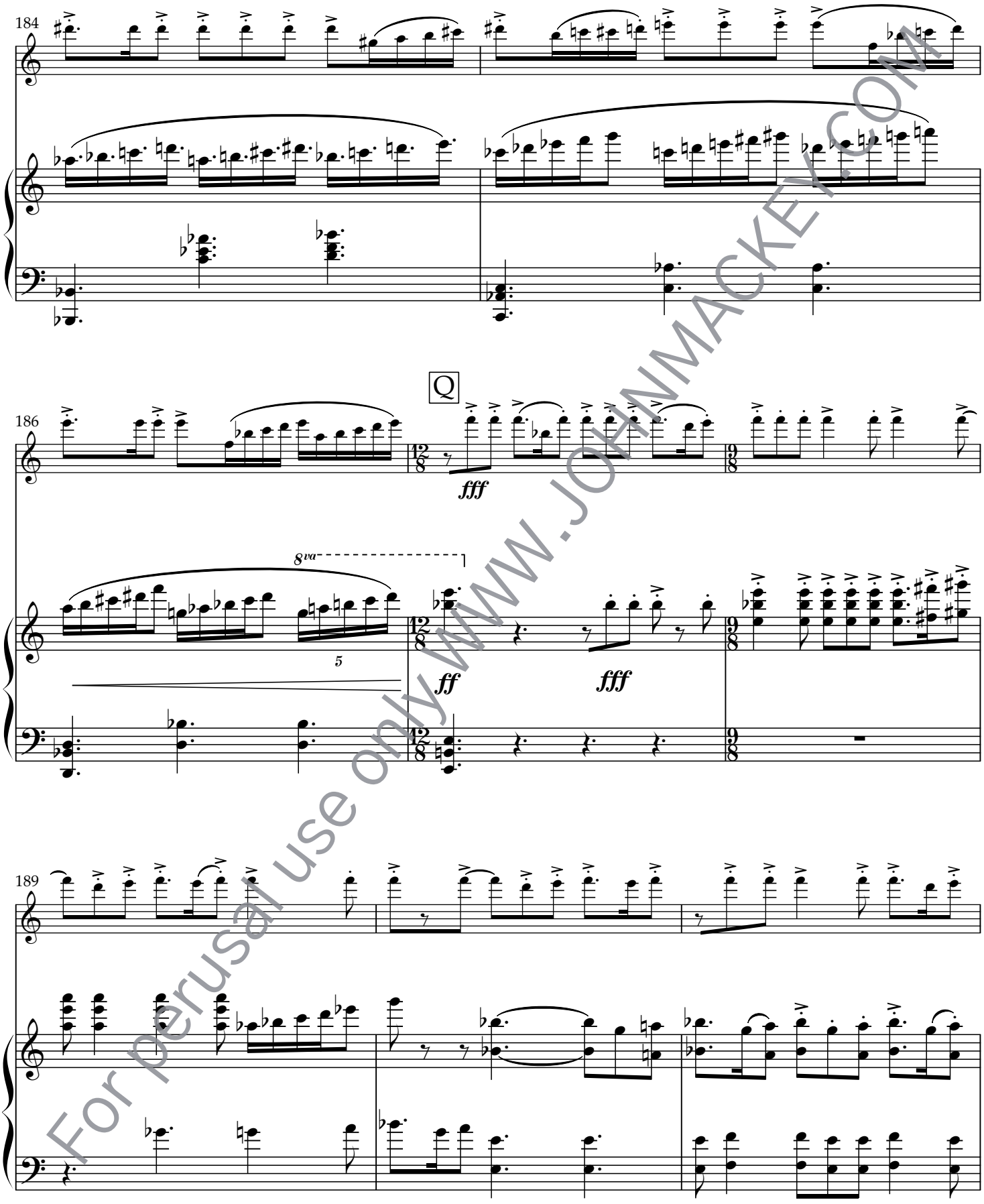

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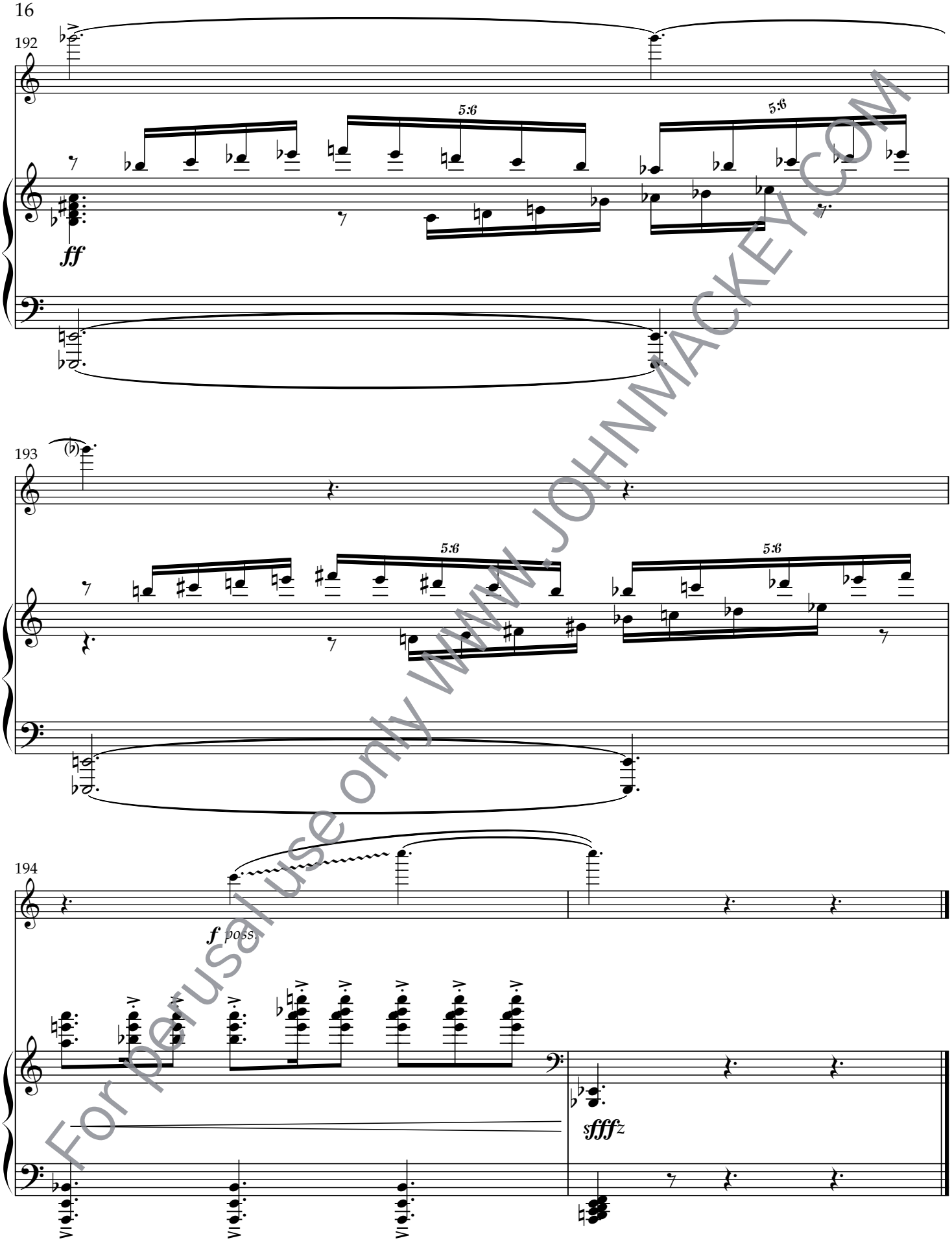

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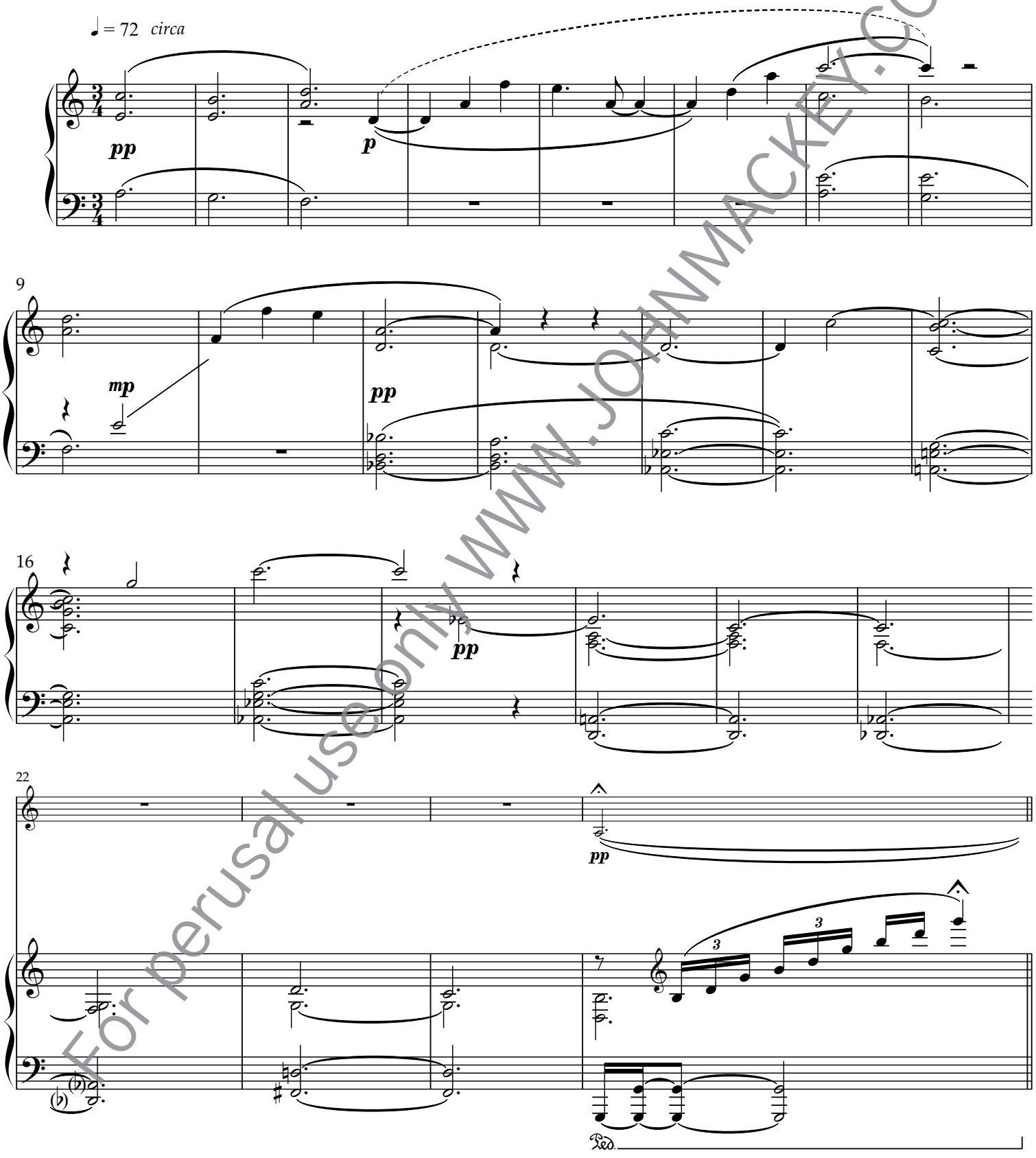
ii. Disappointment, regret, regression: a waltz



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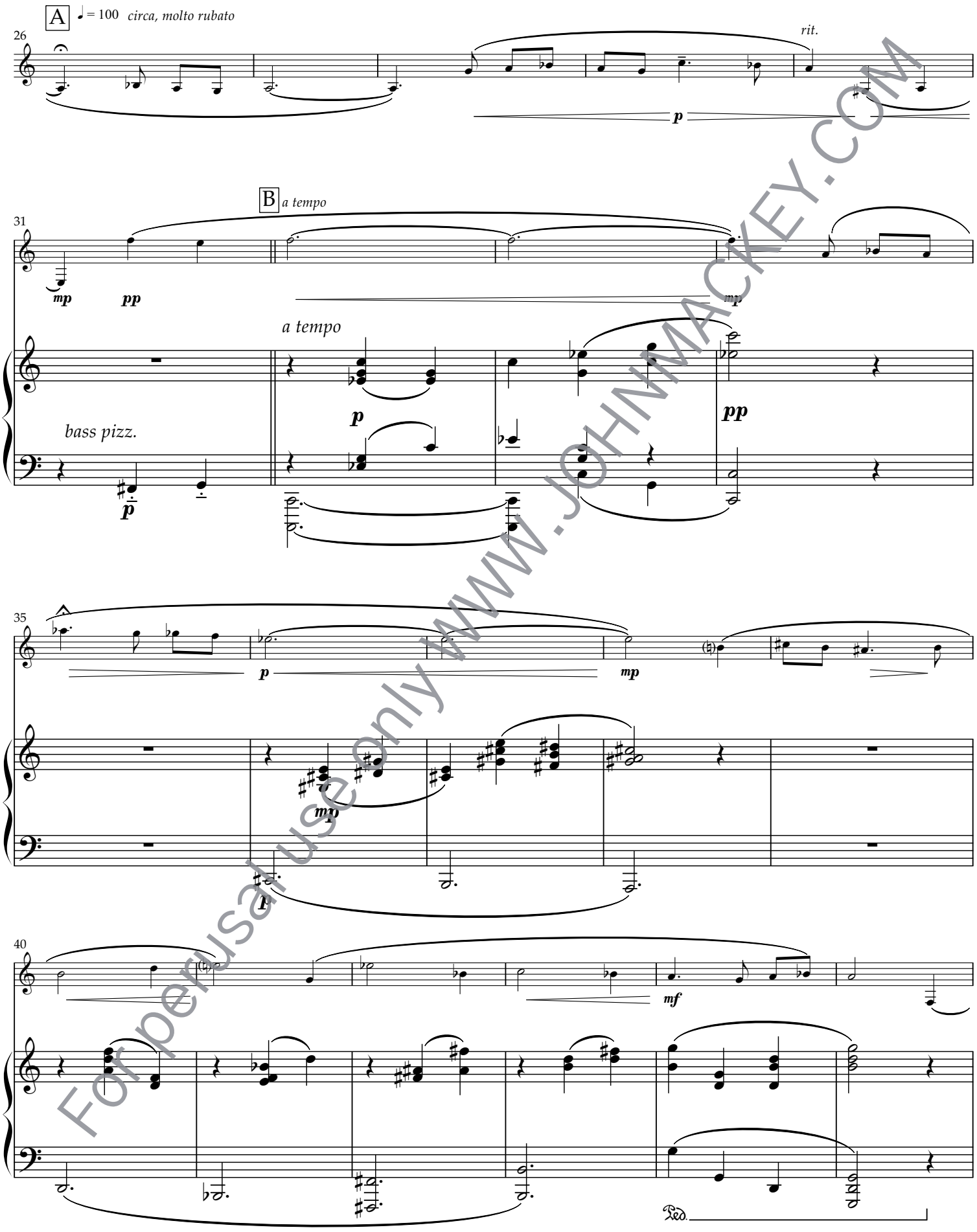

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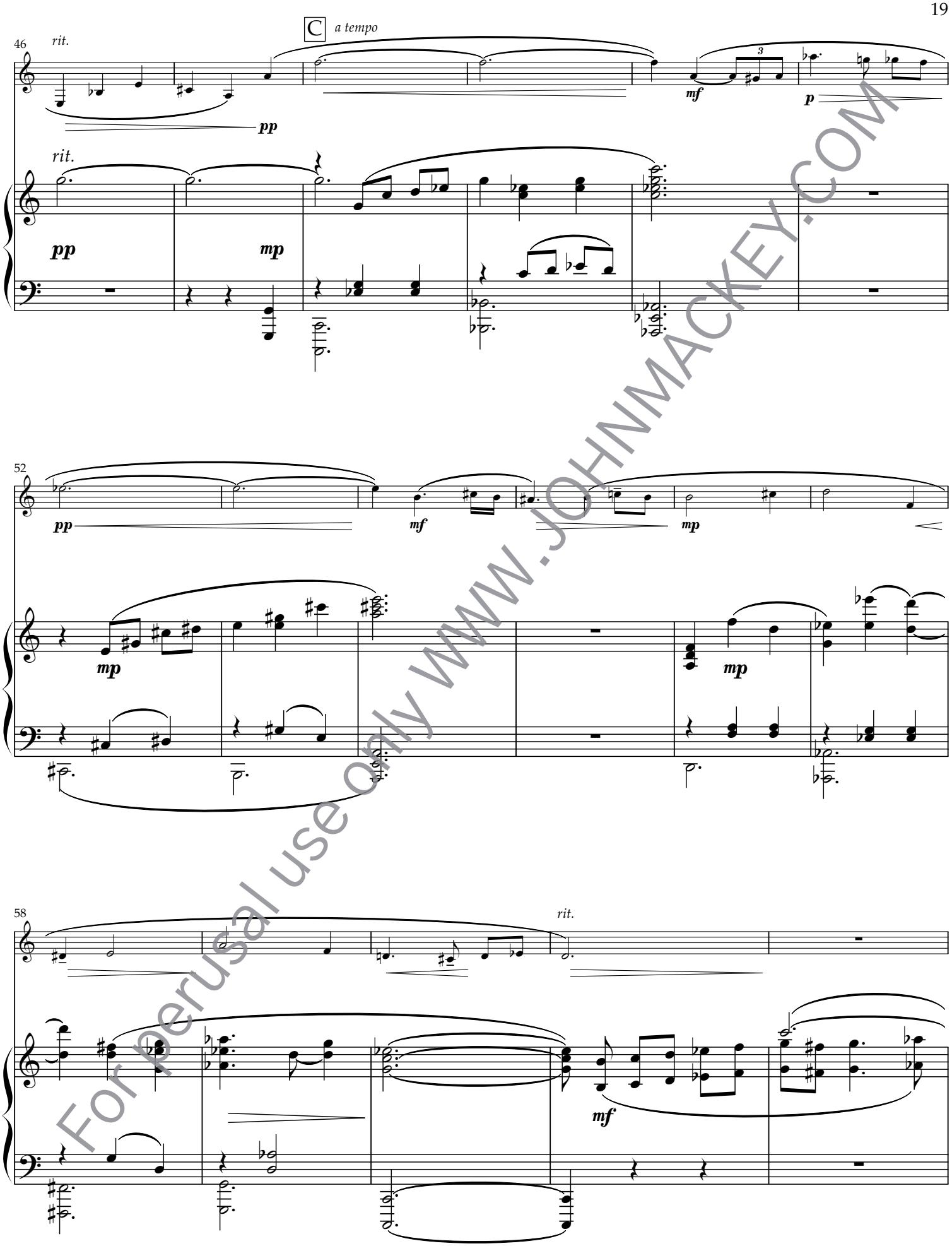

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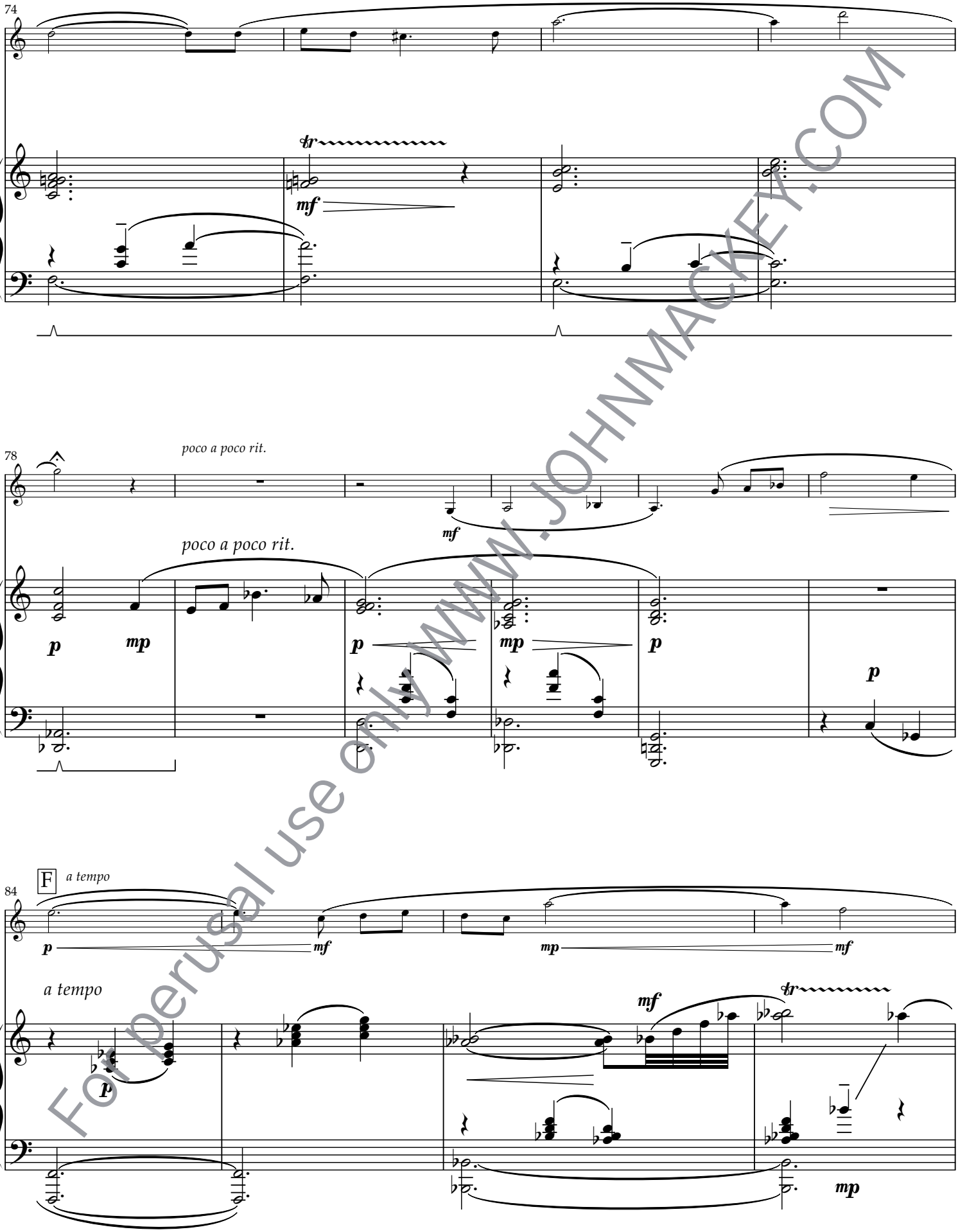

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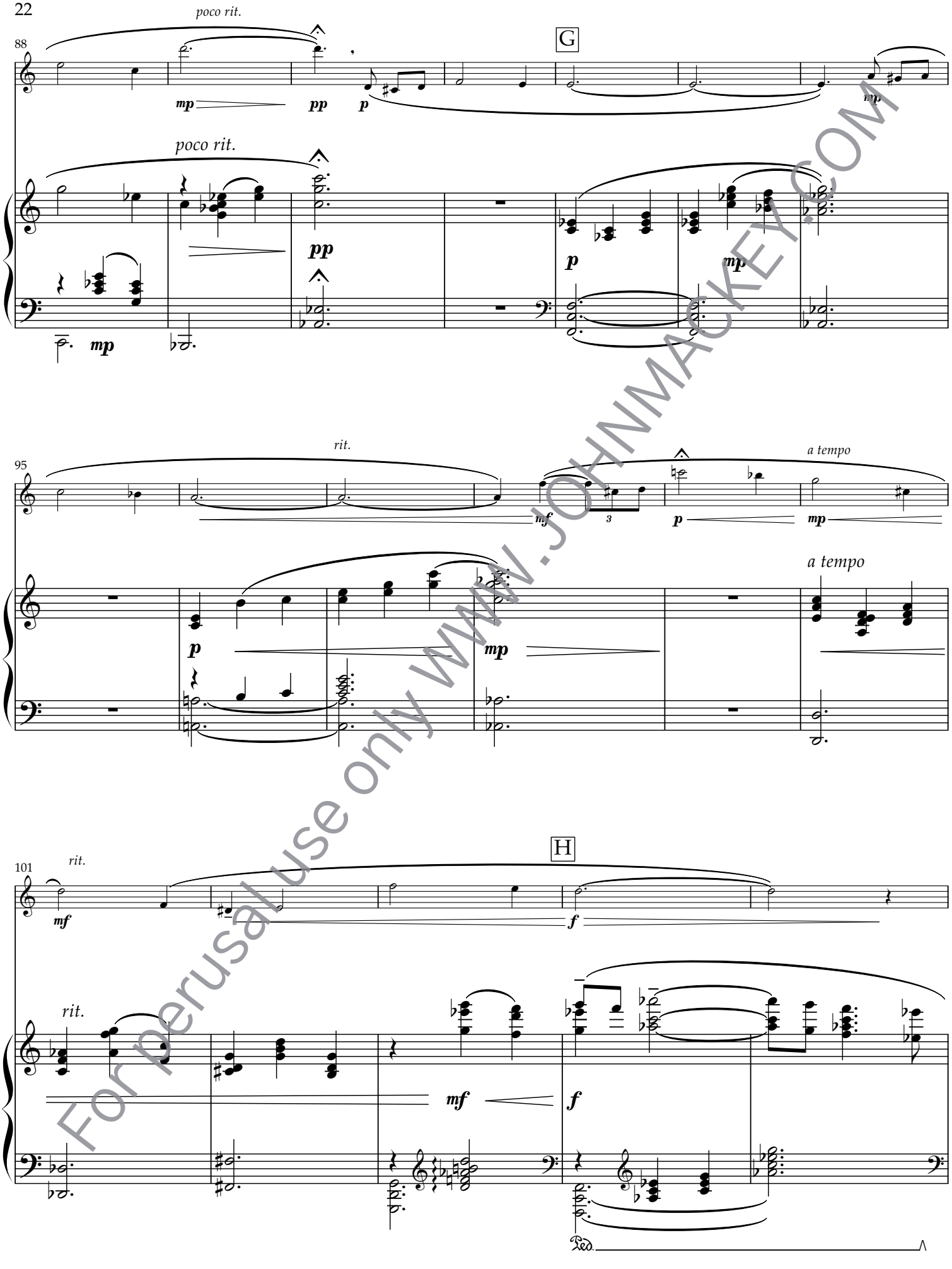

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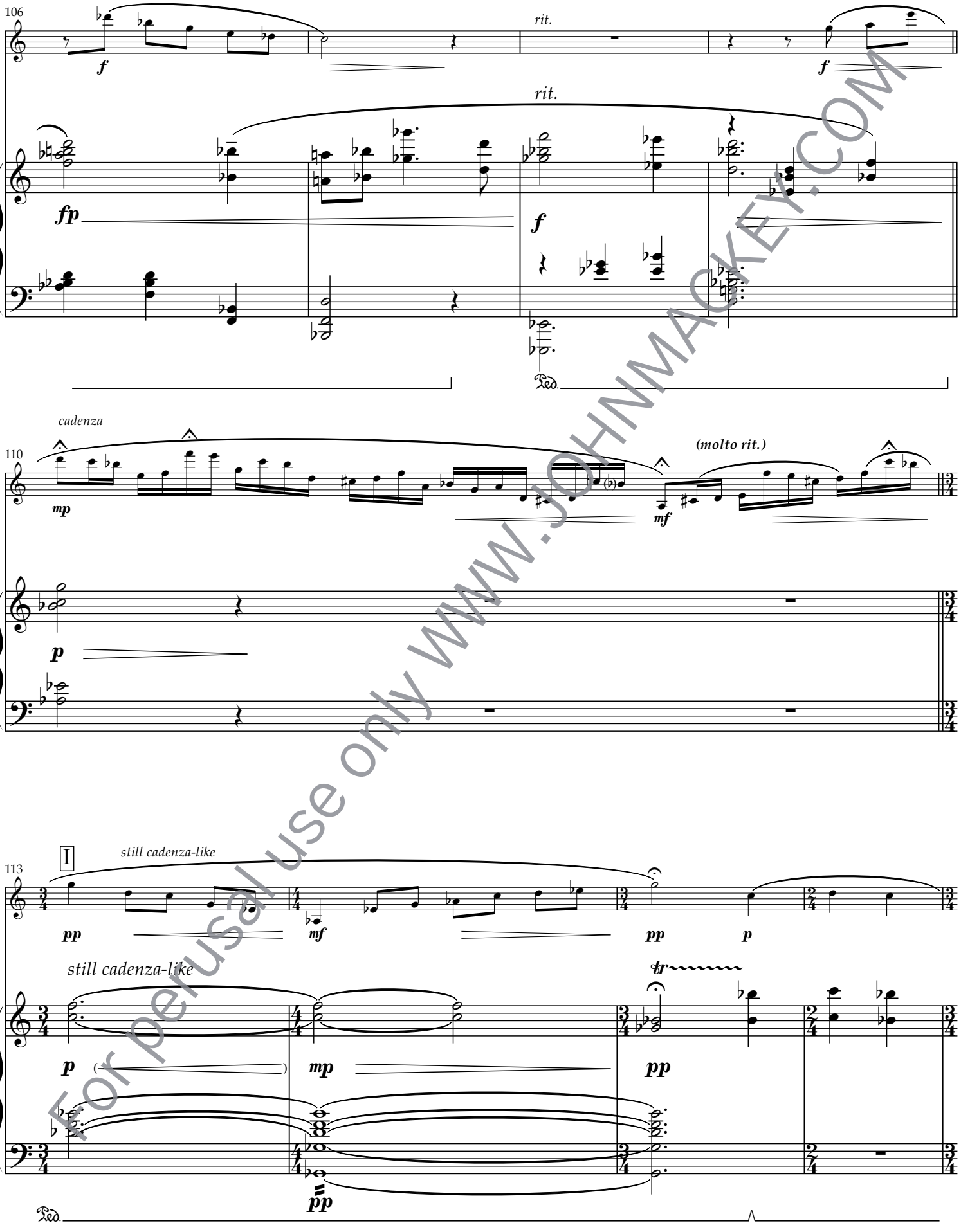

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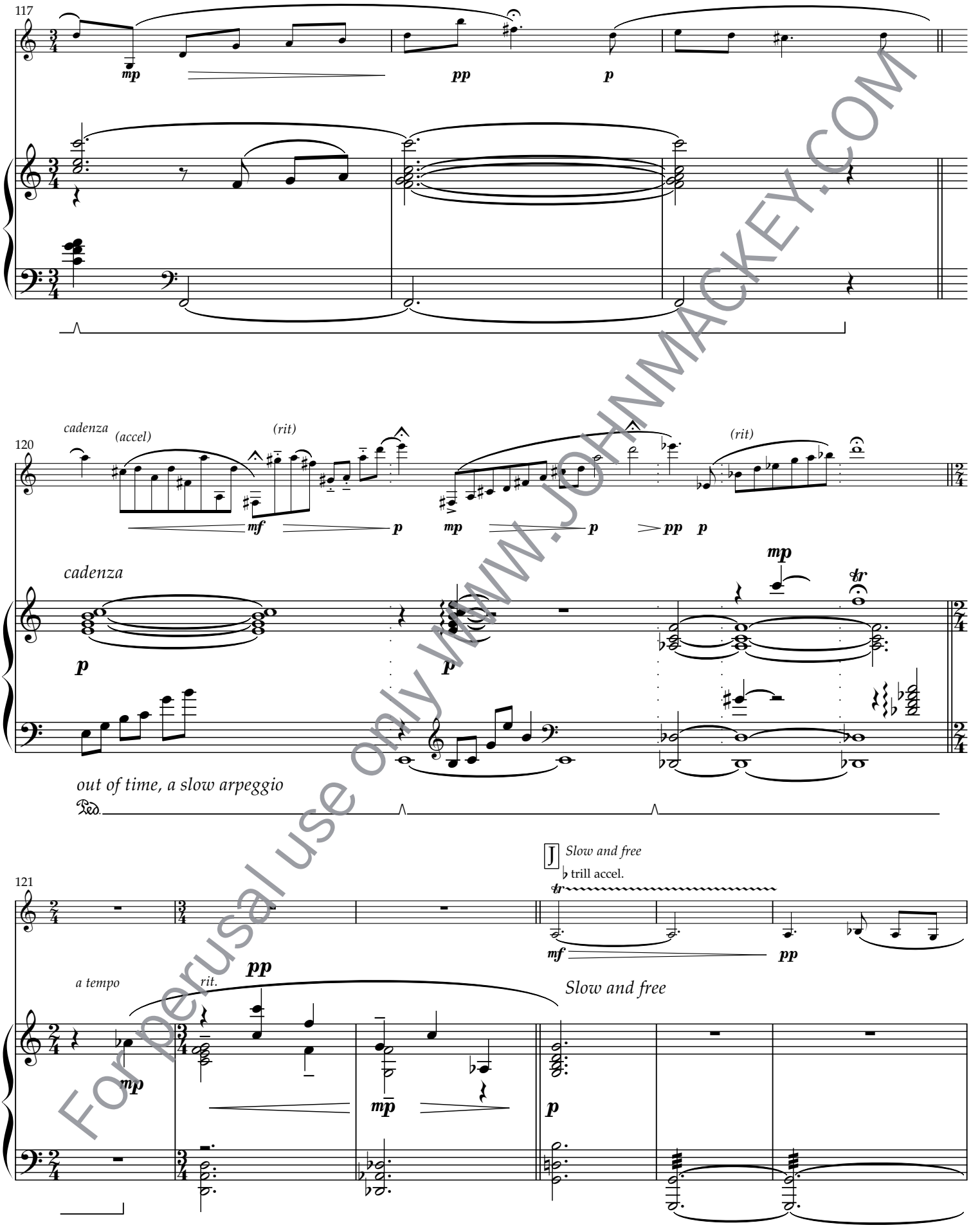

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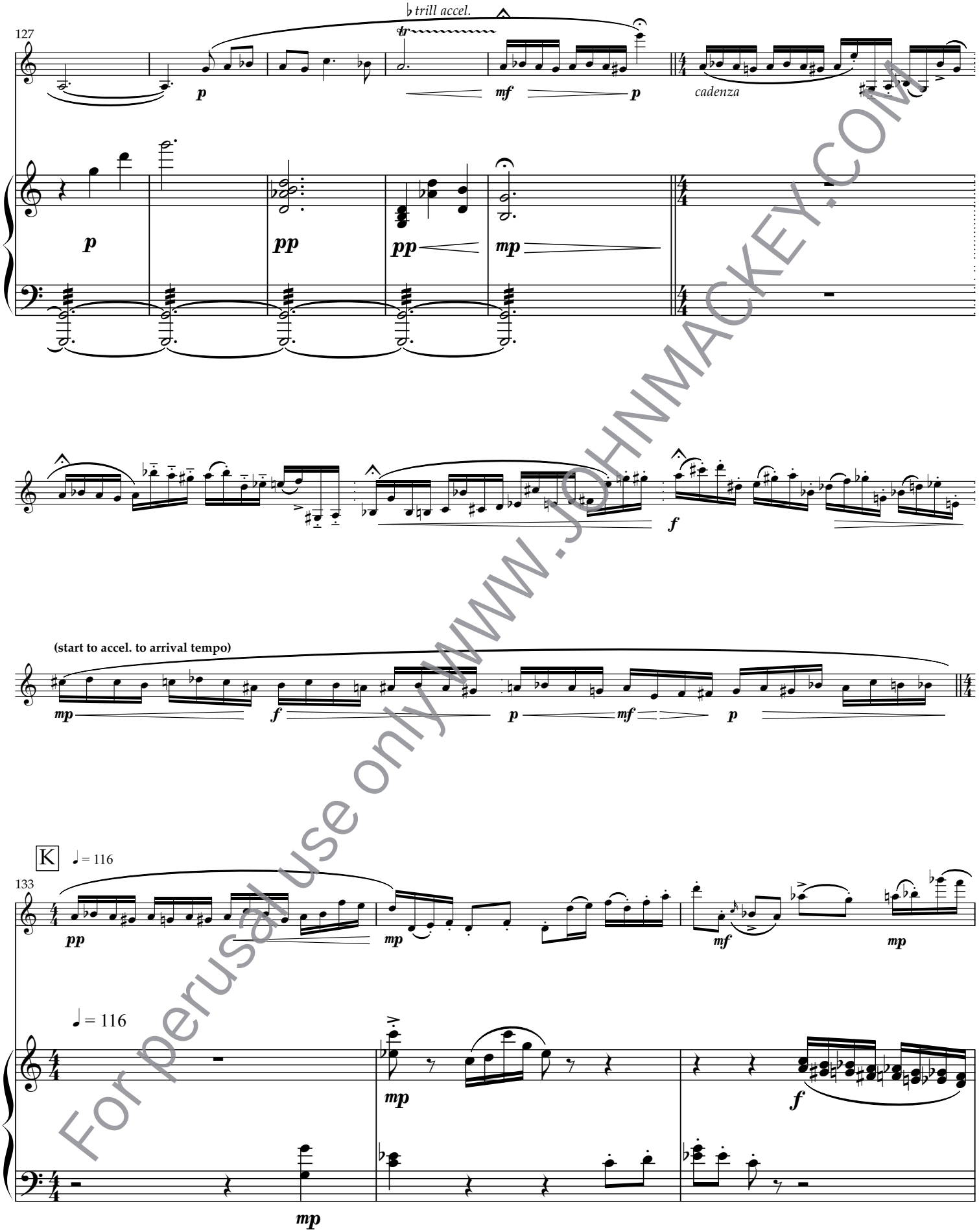

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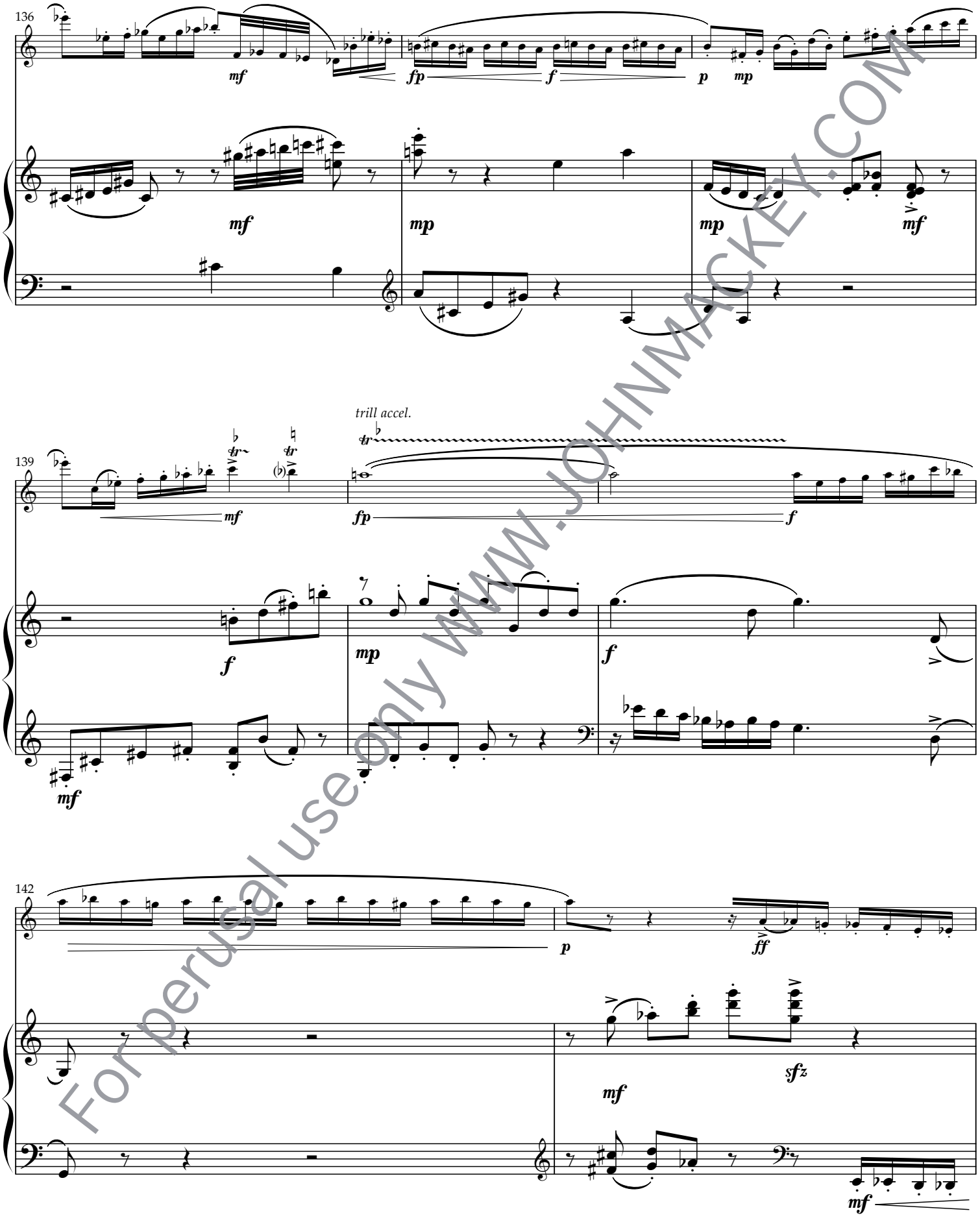

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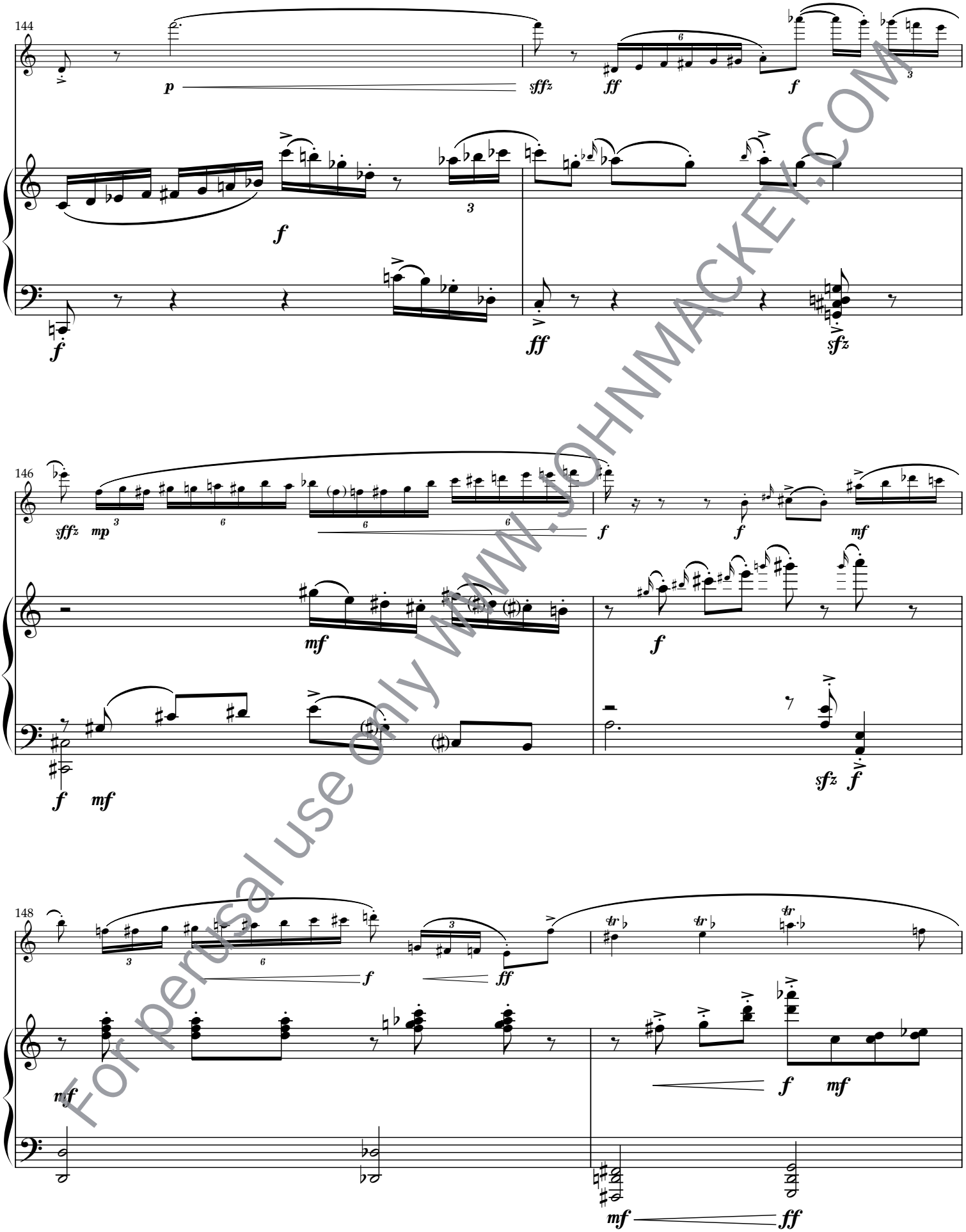

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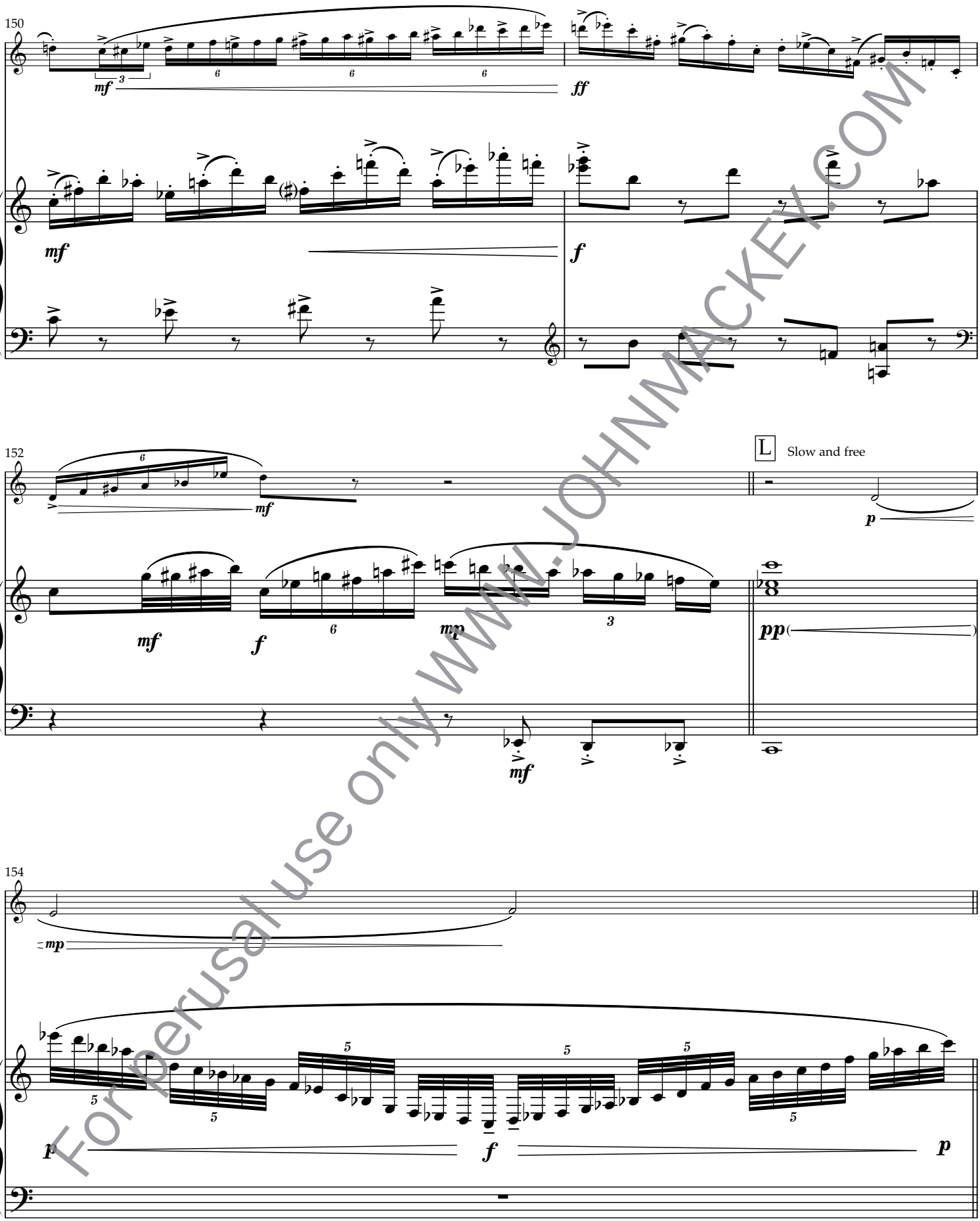

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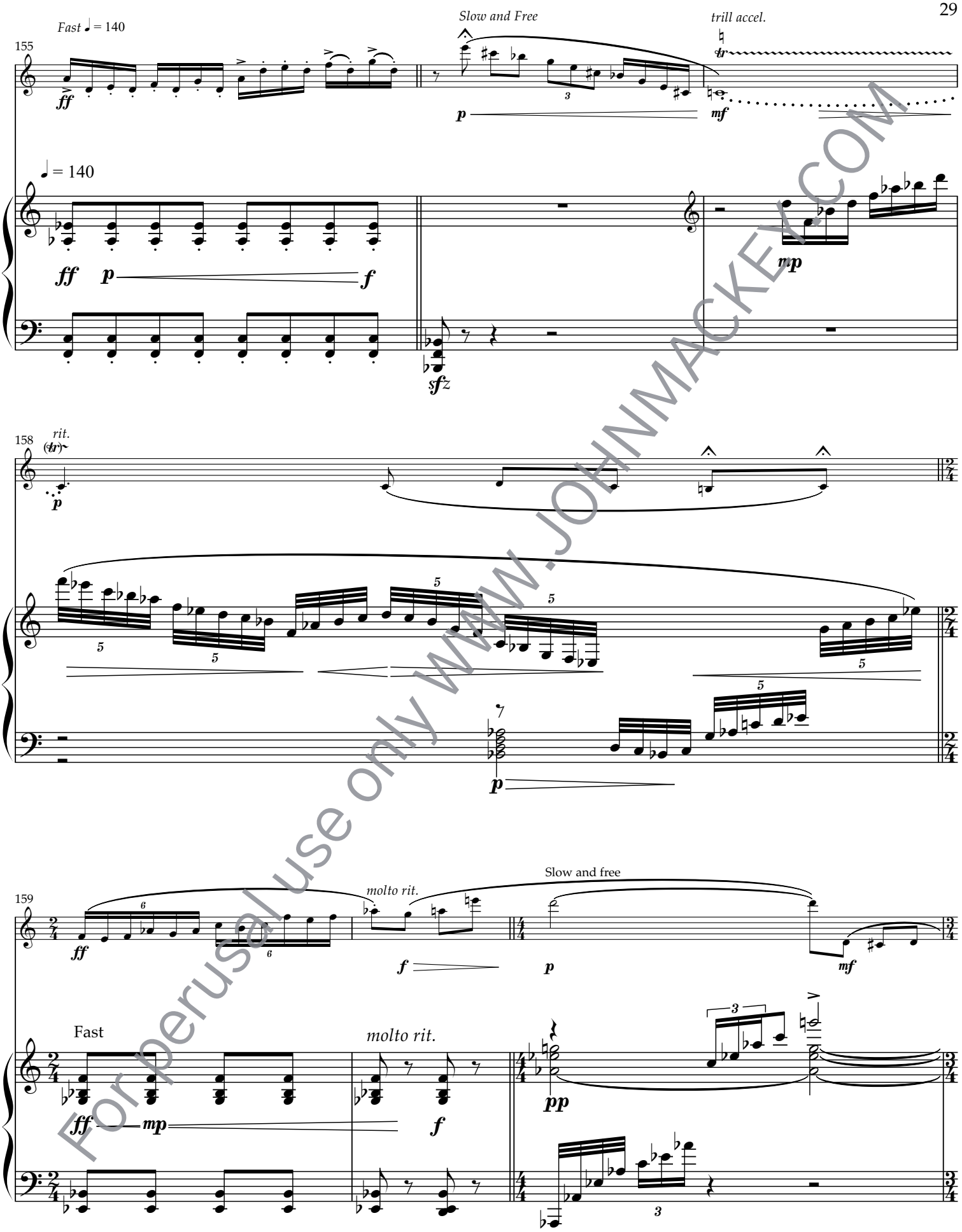

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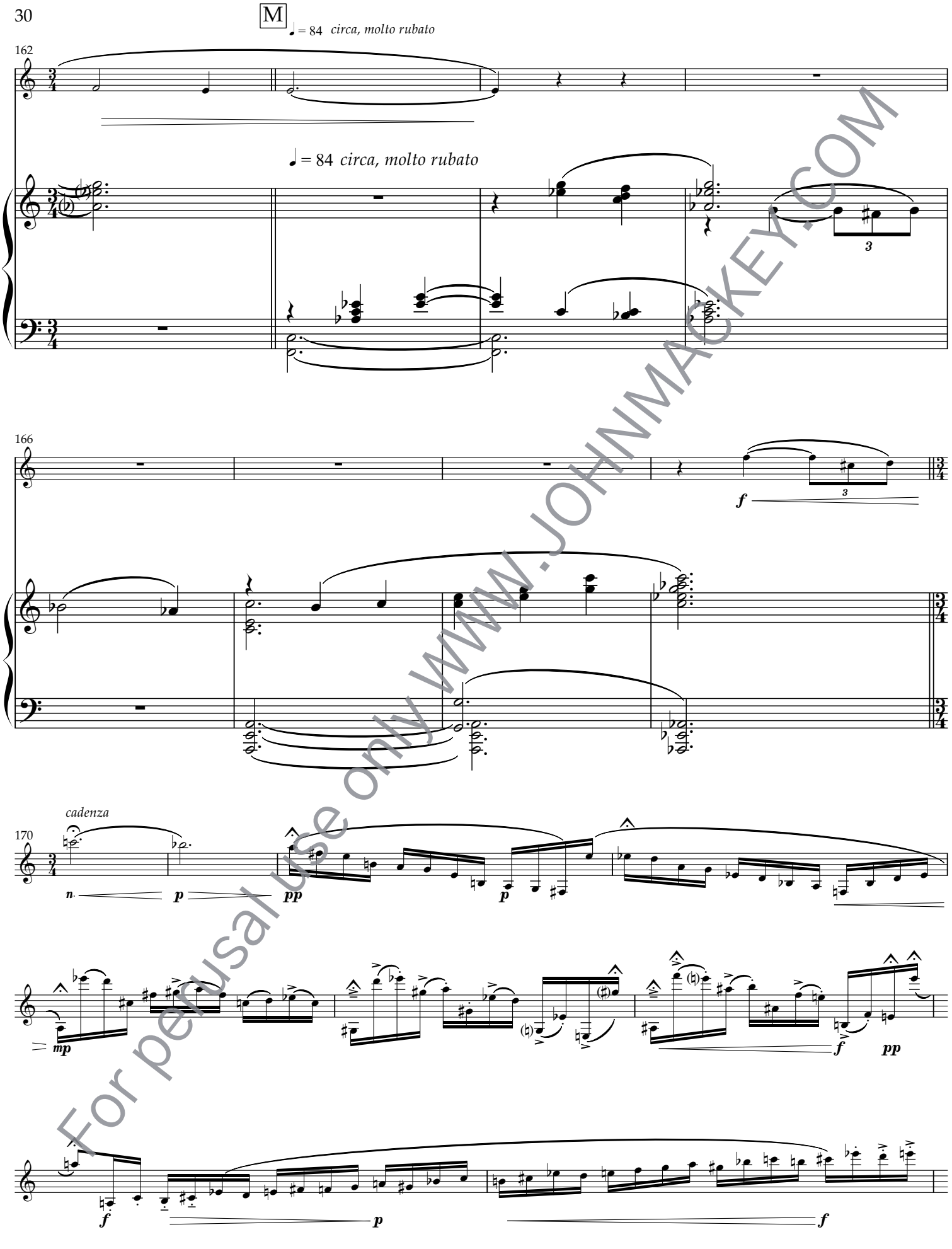

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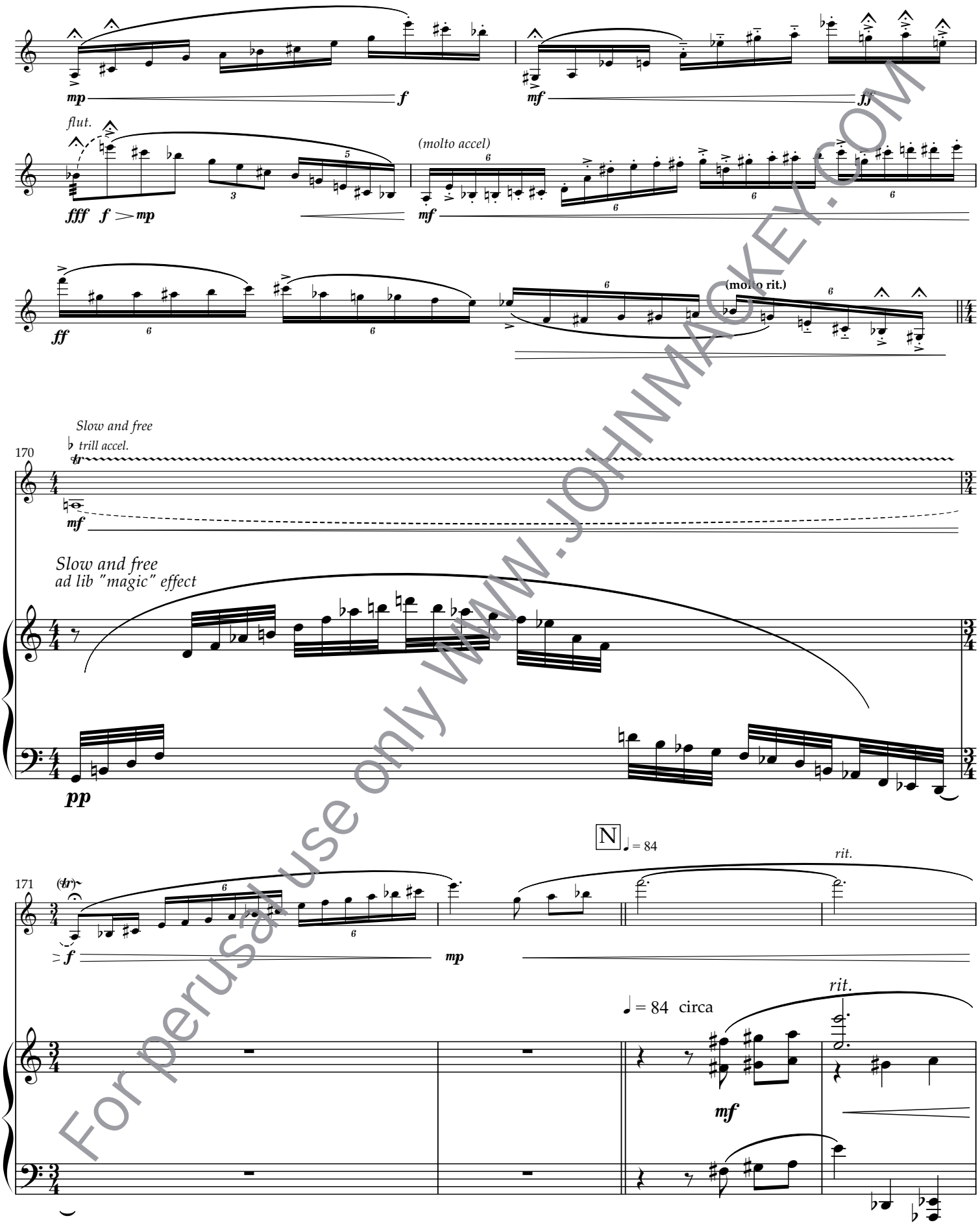

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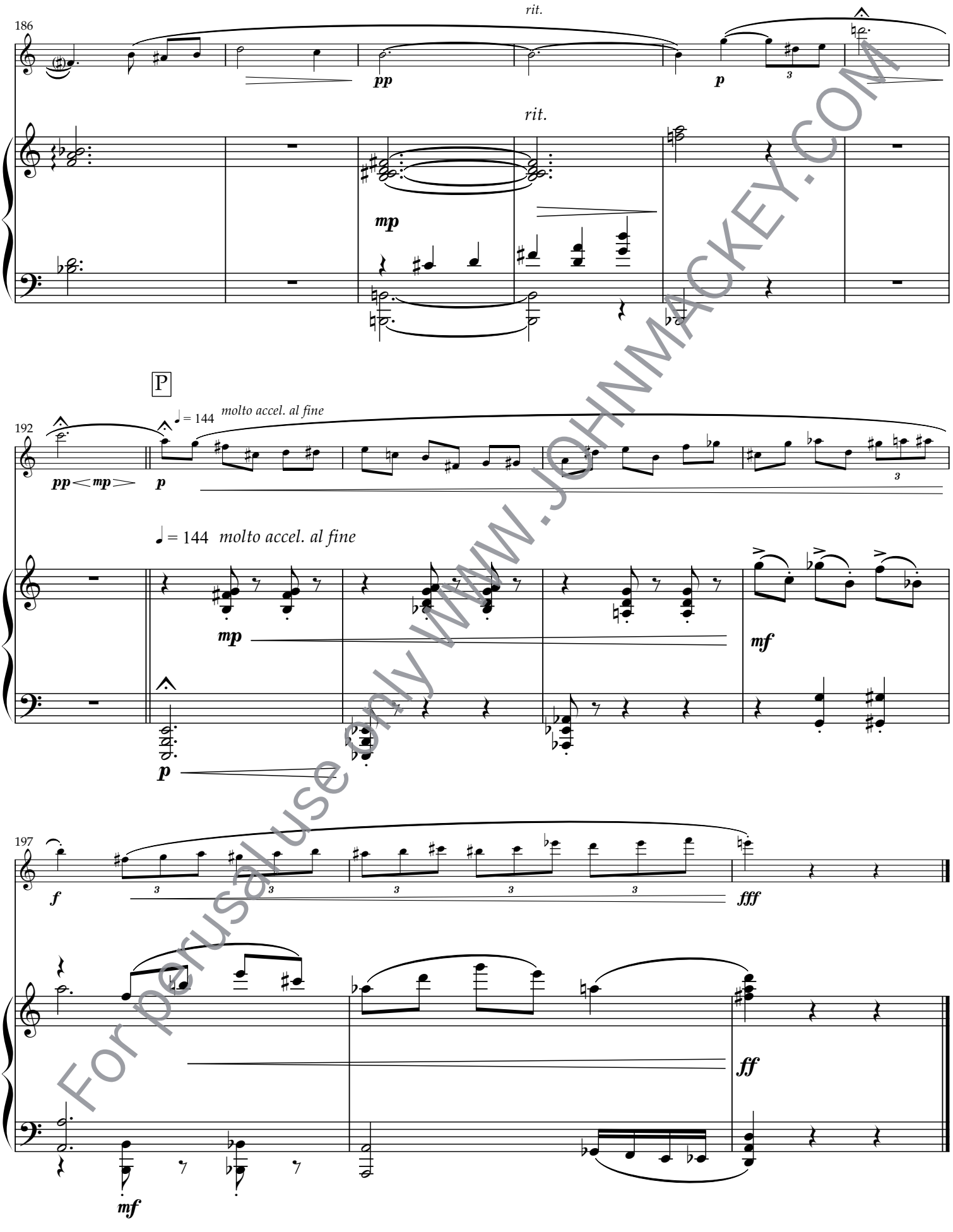

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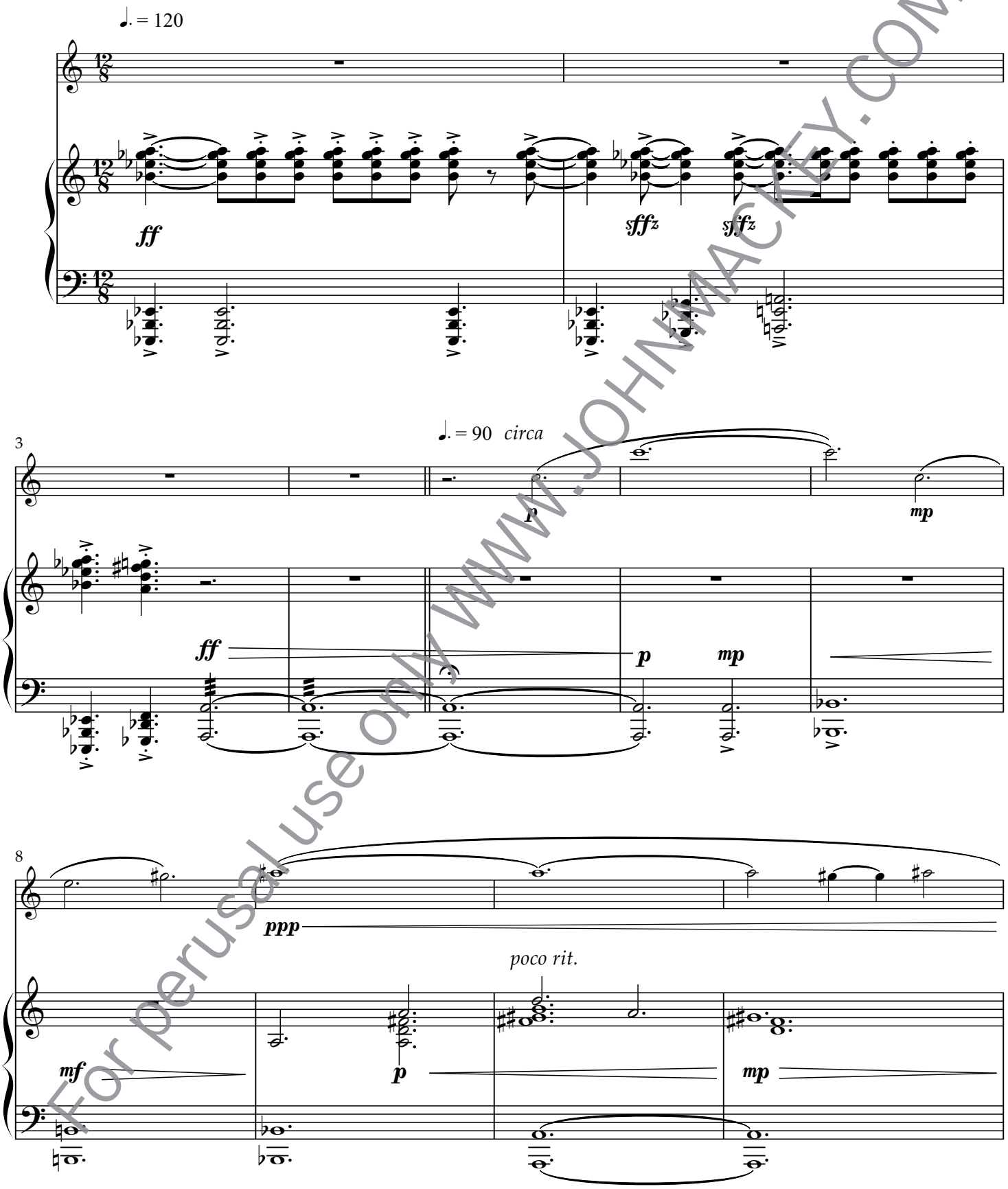
iii. Spellbound



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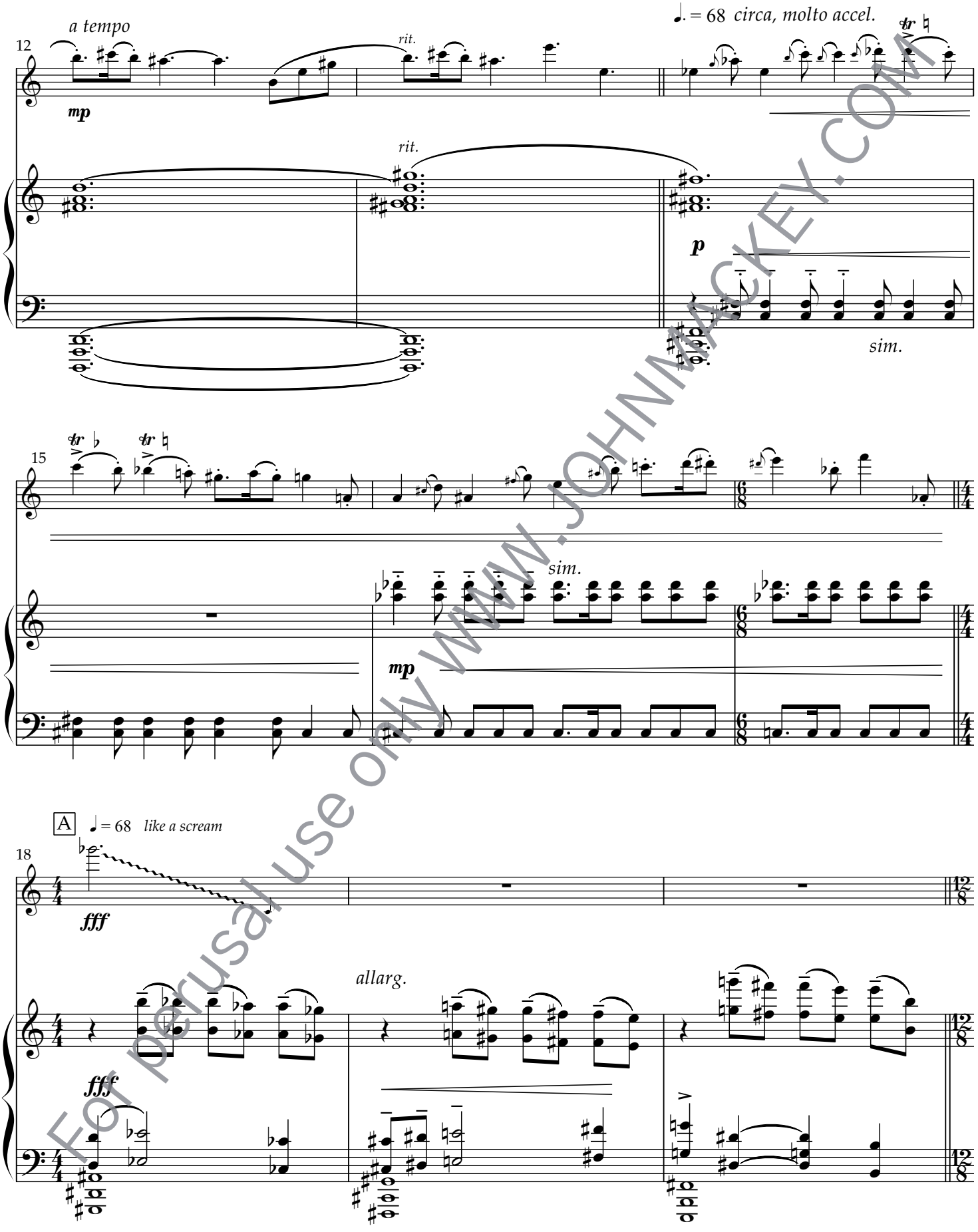

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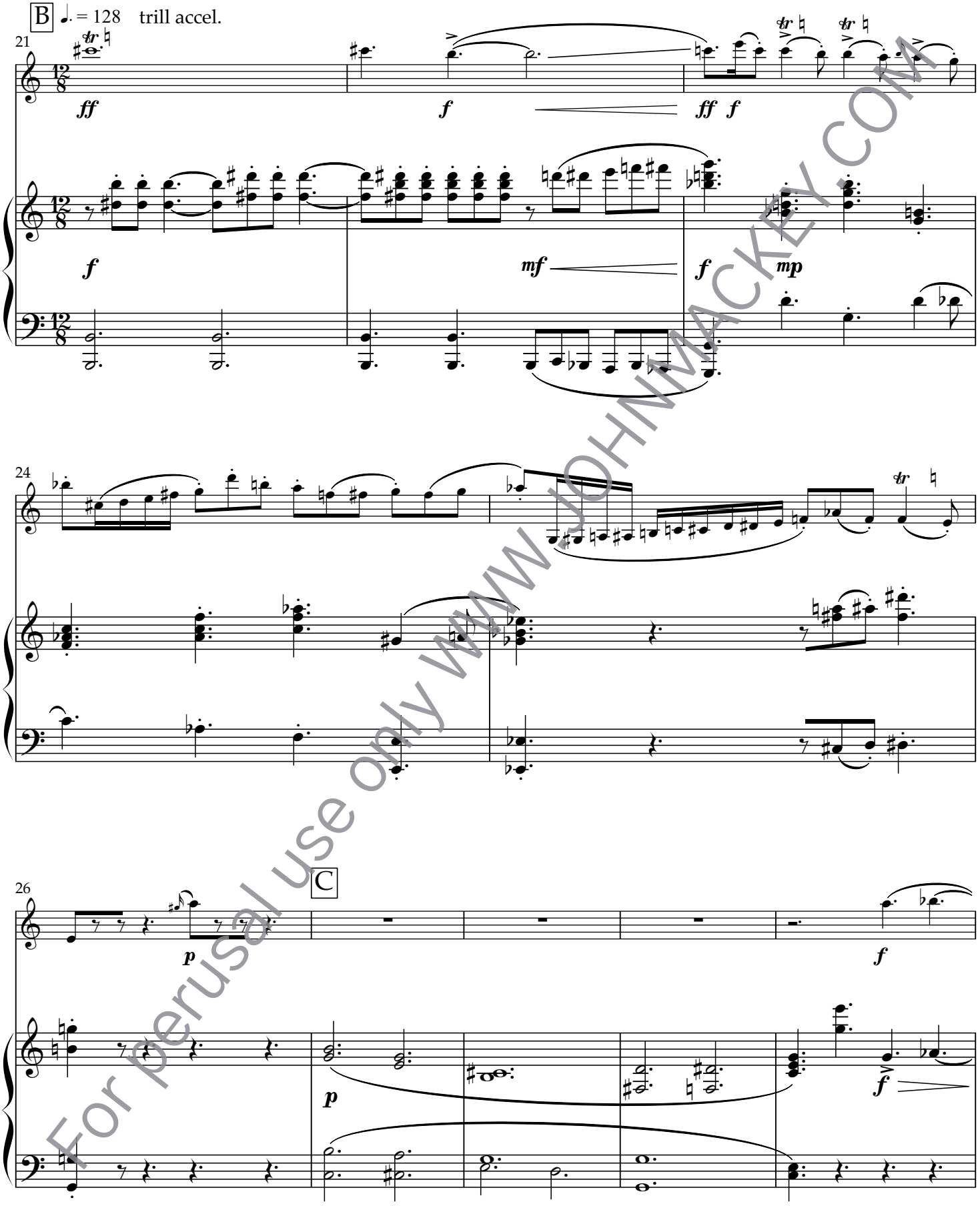

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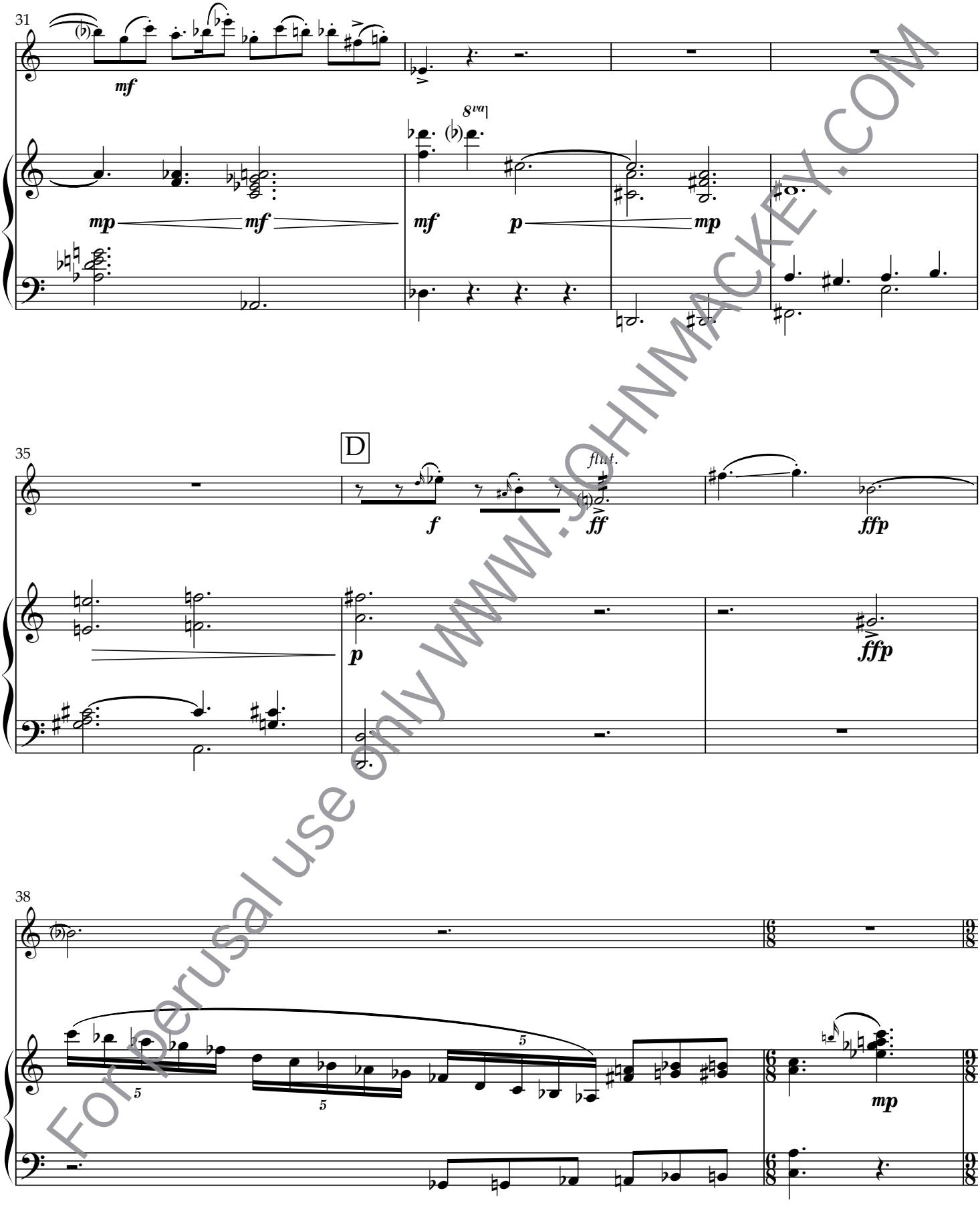

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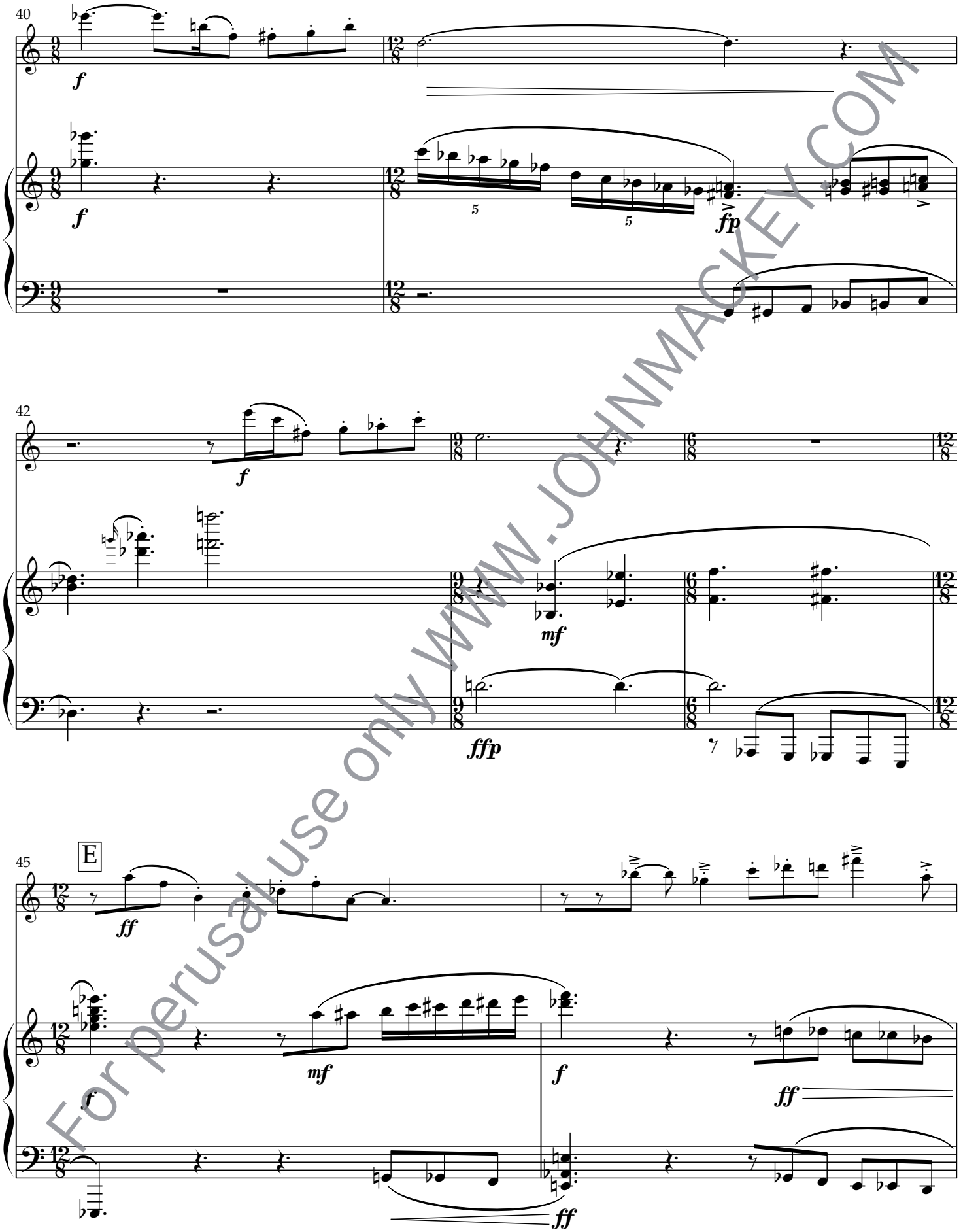

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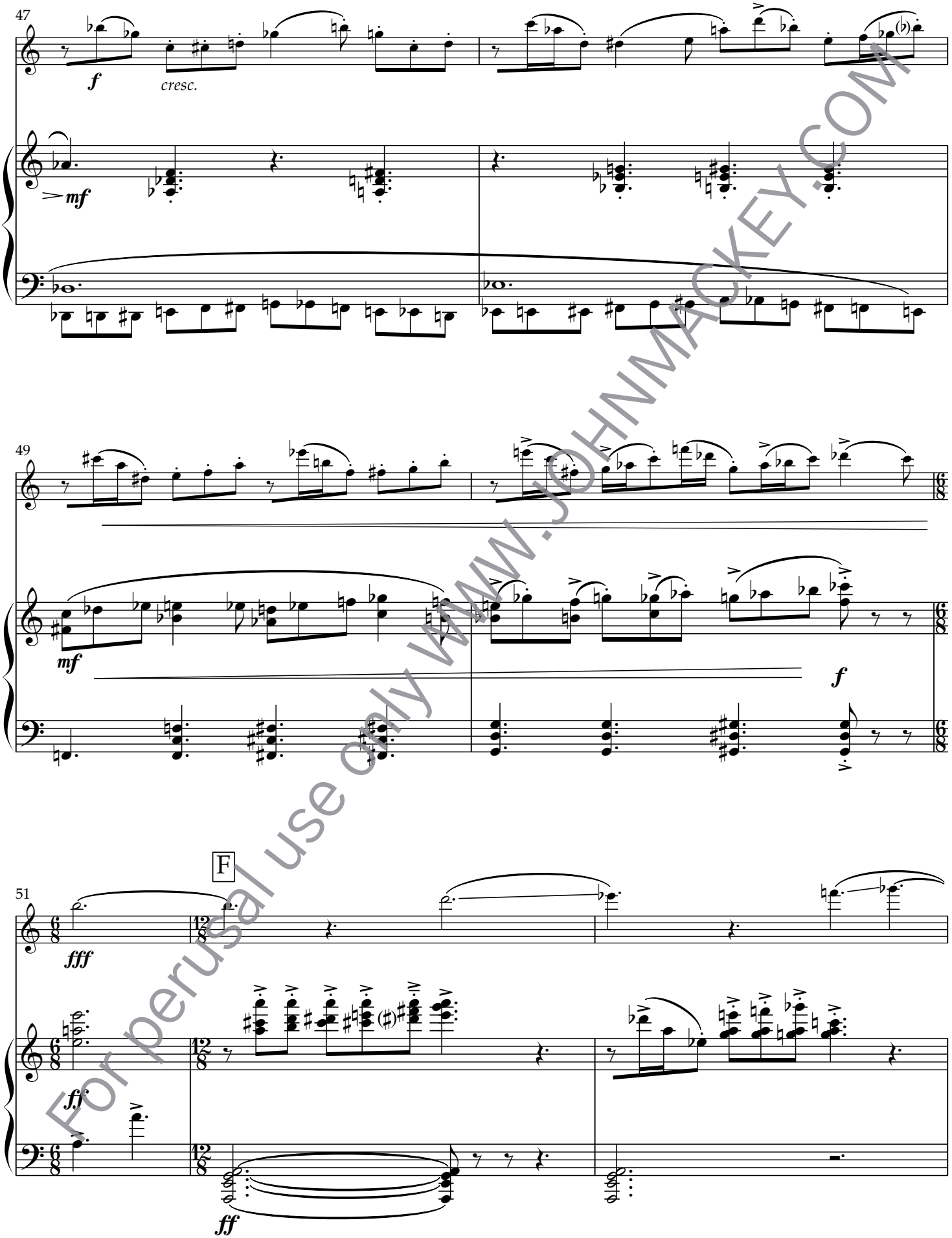

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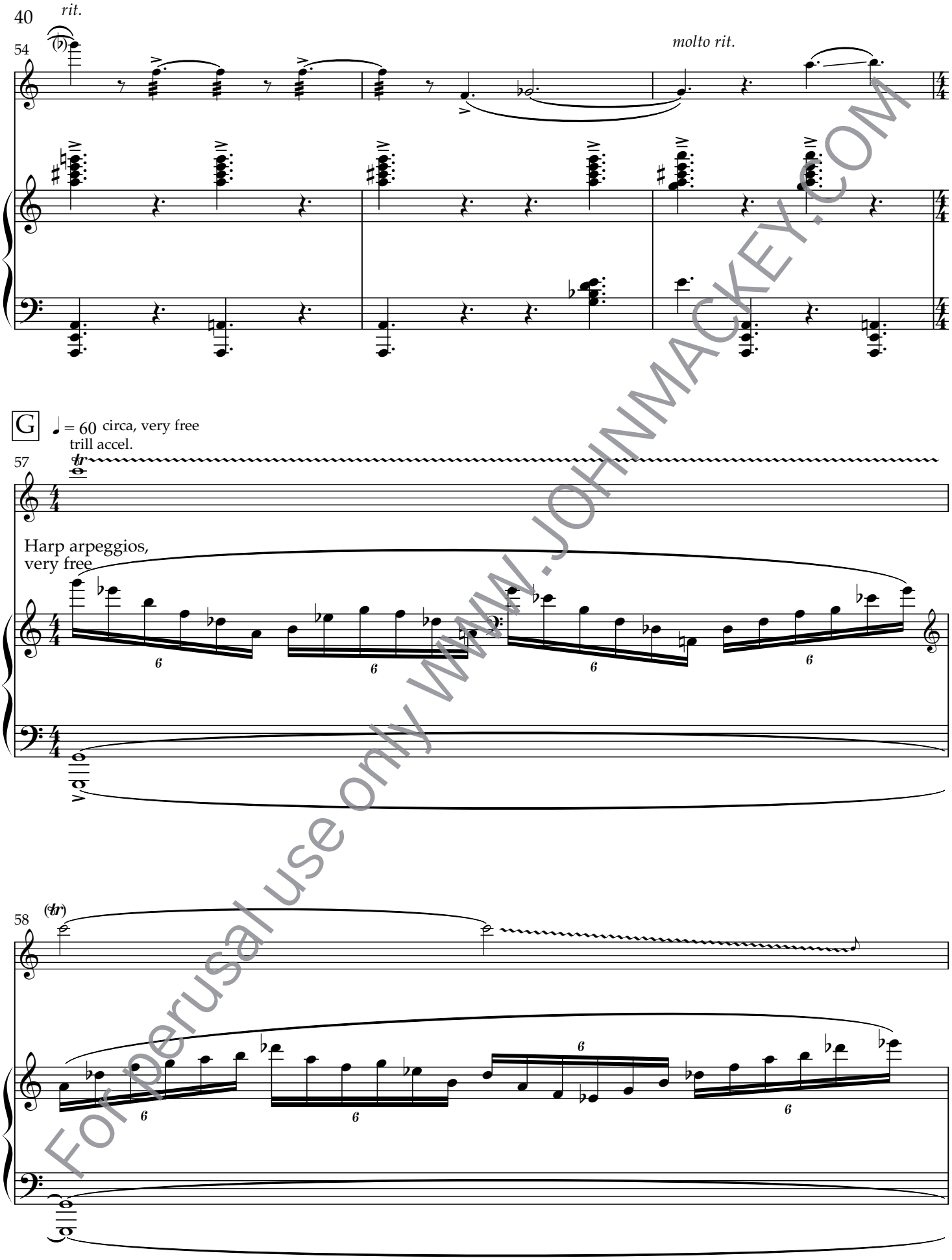

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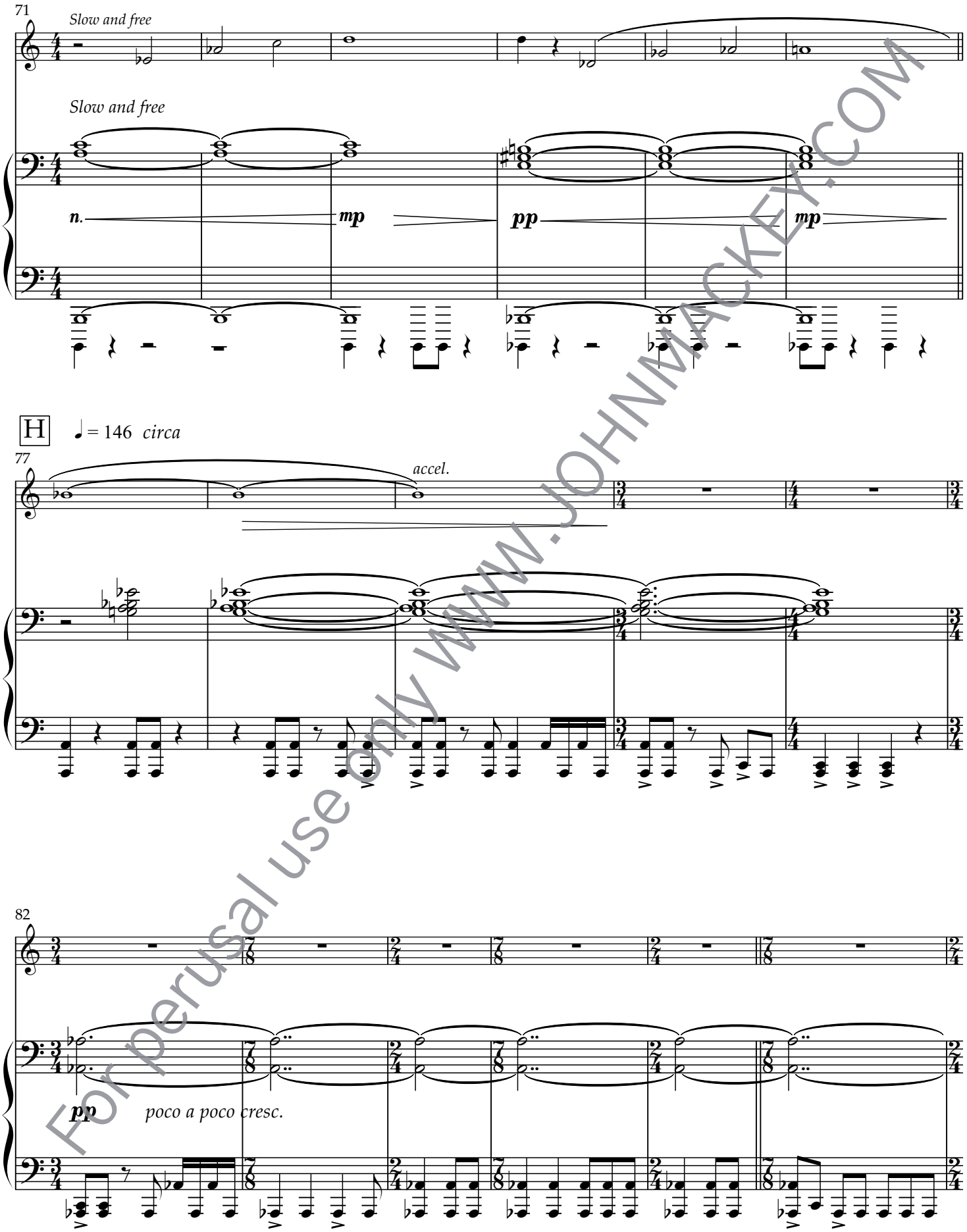

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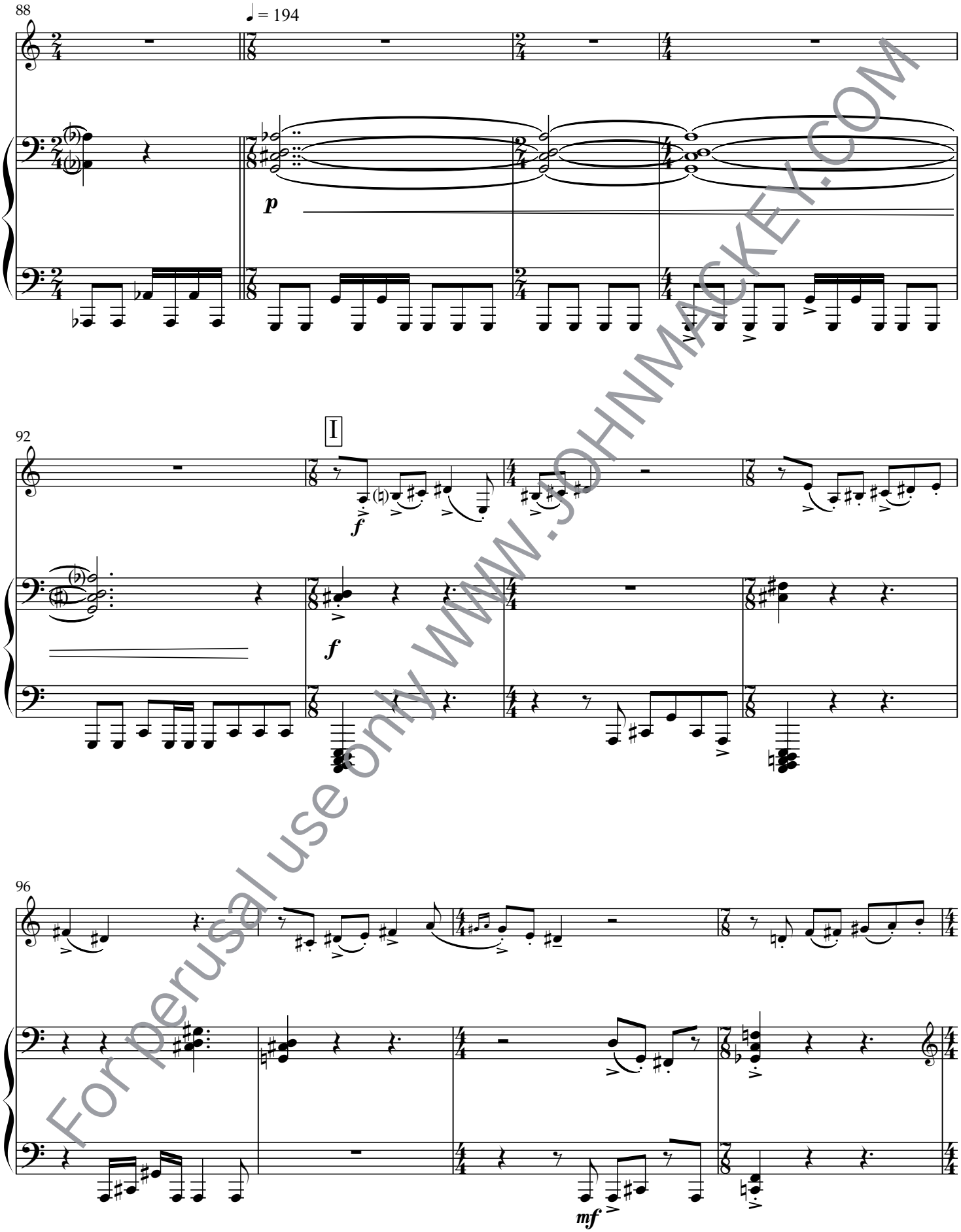

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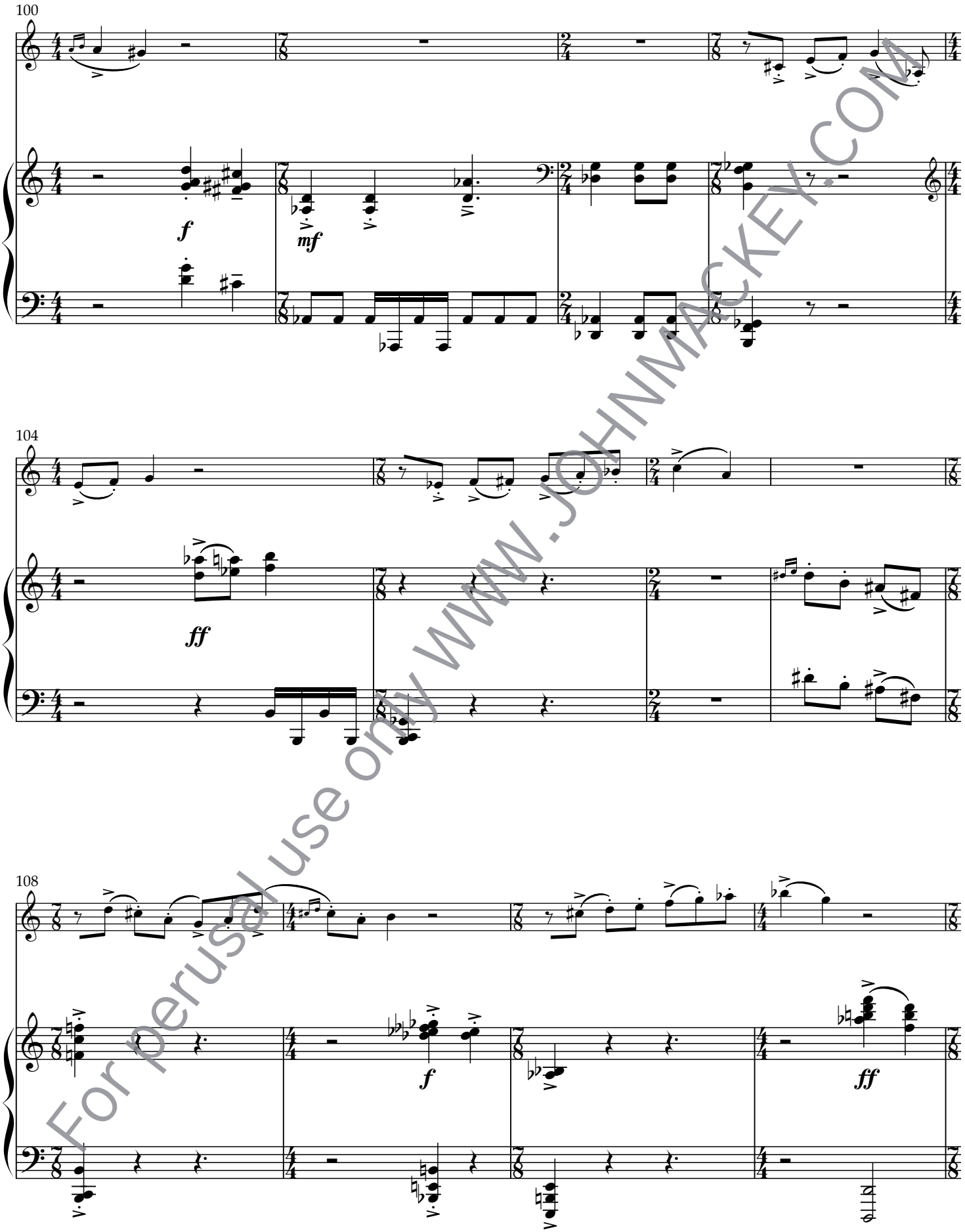

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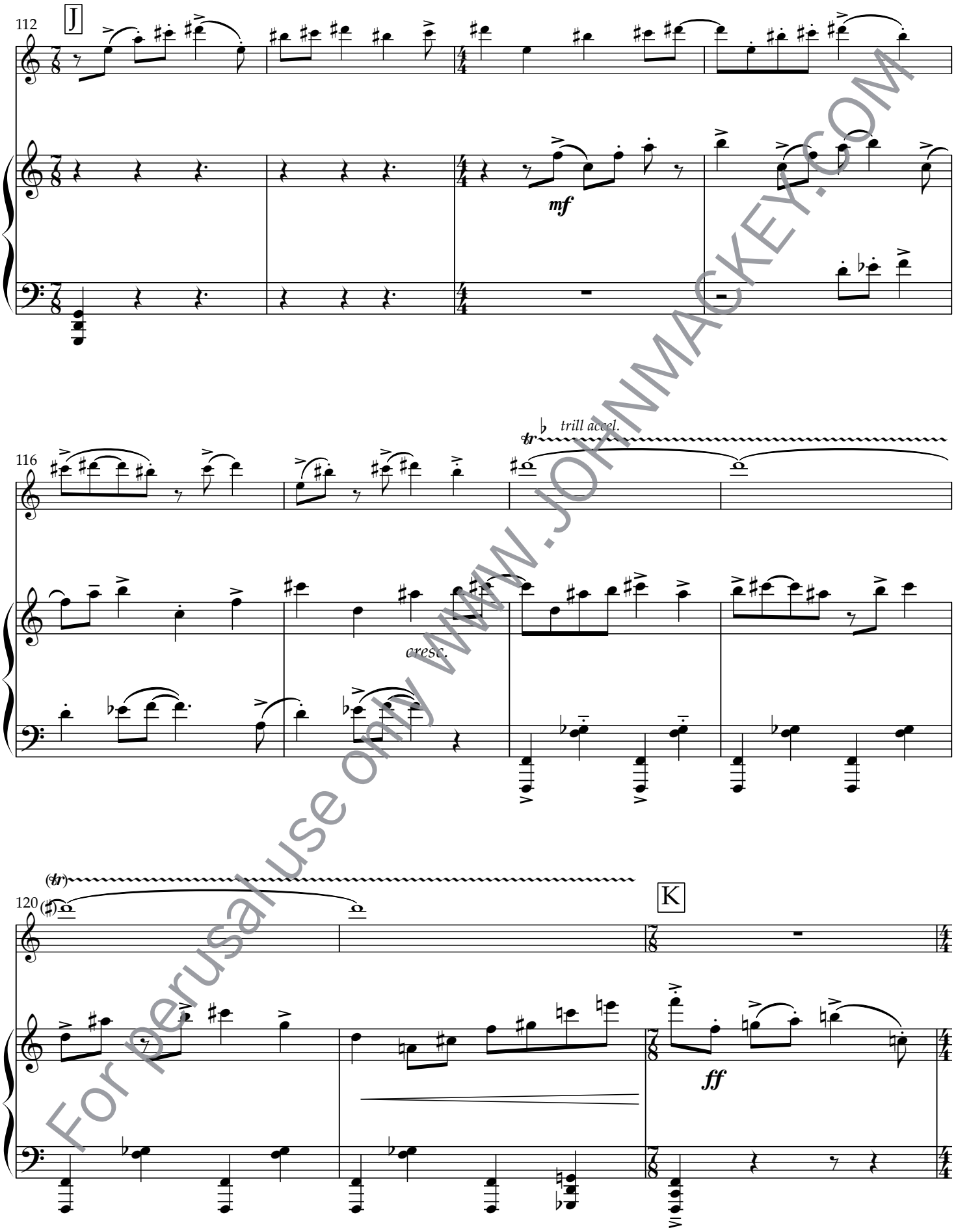

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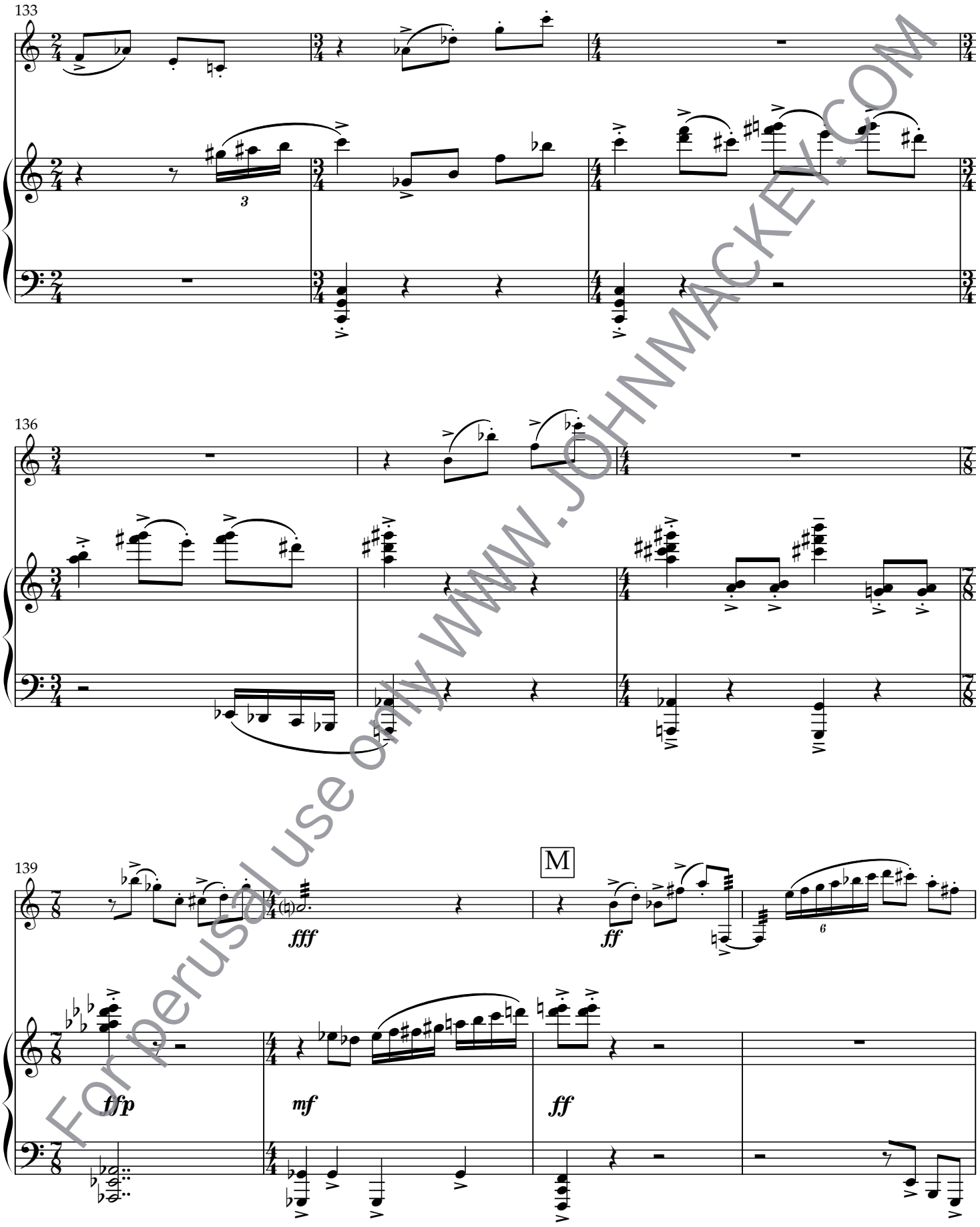

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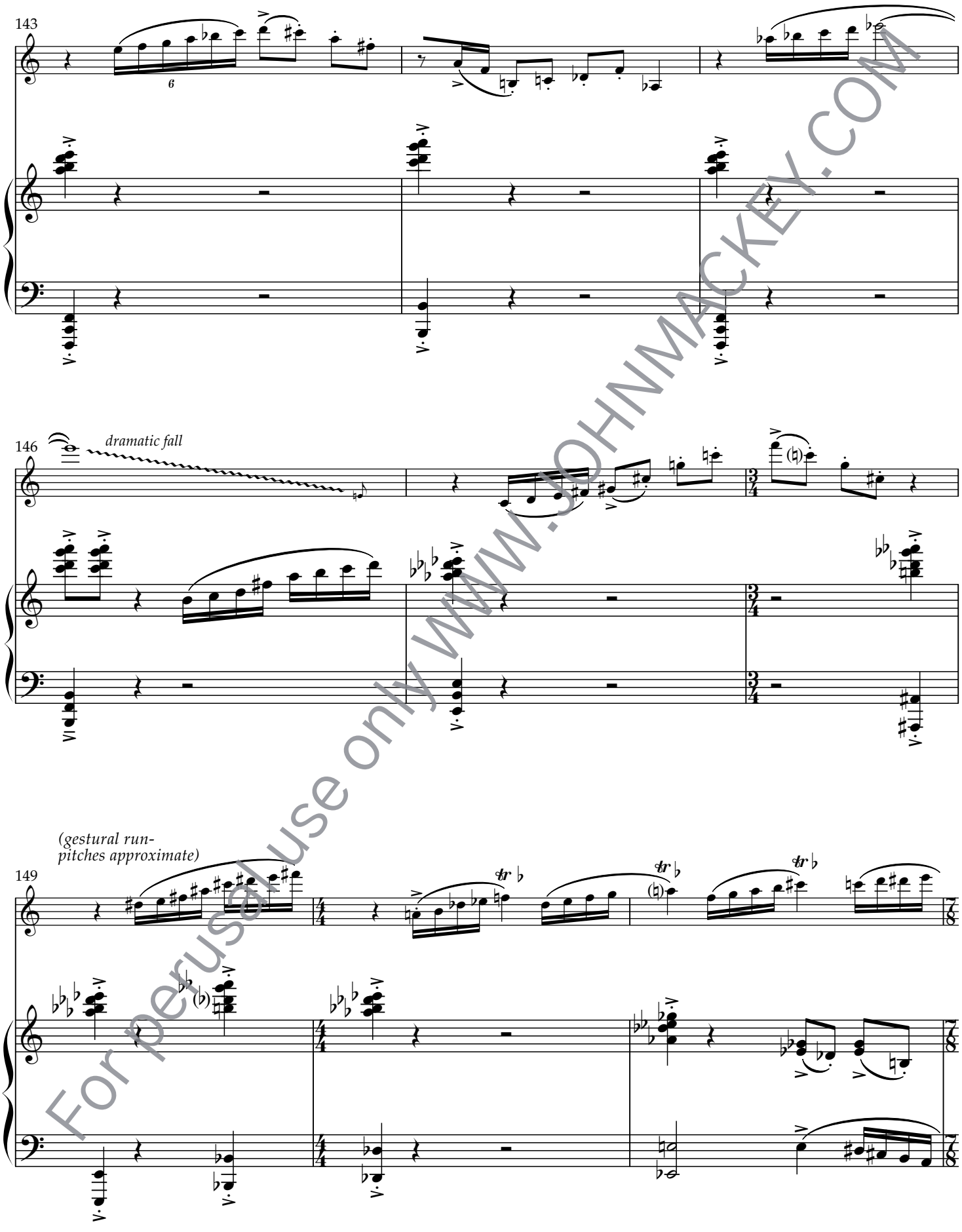

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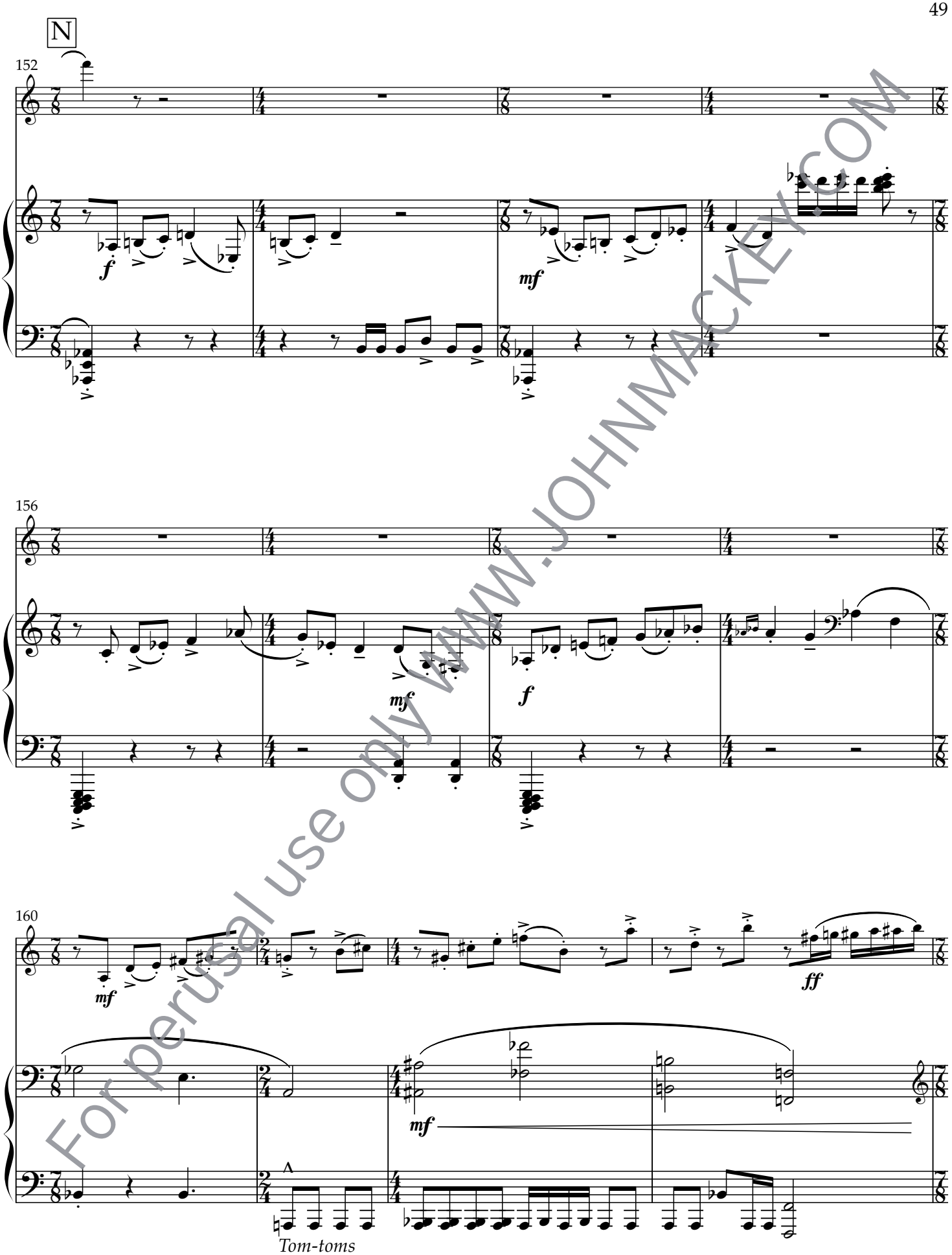

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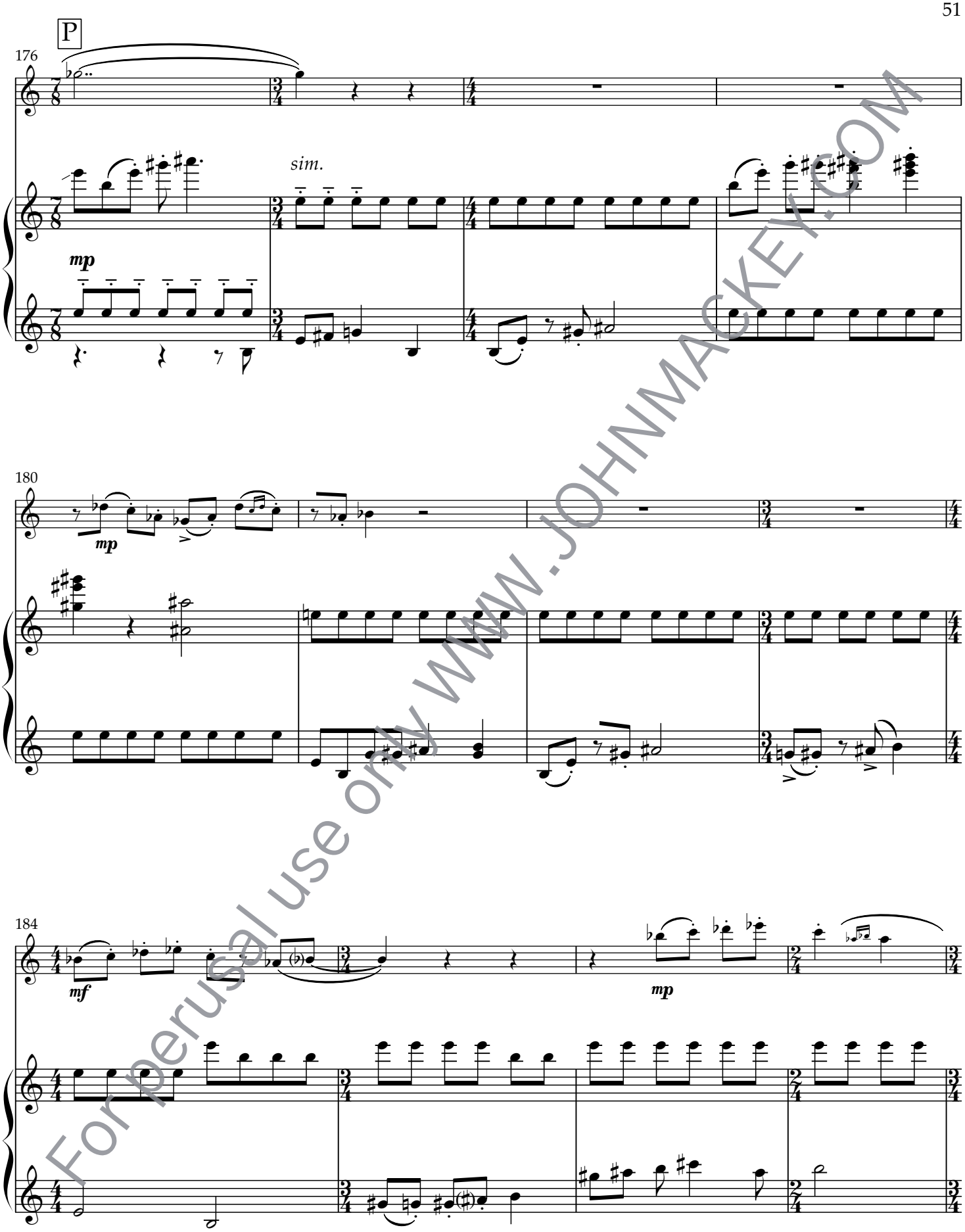

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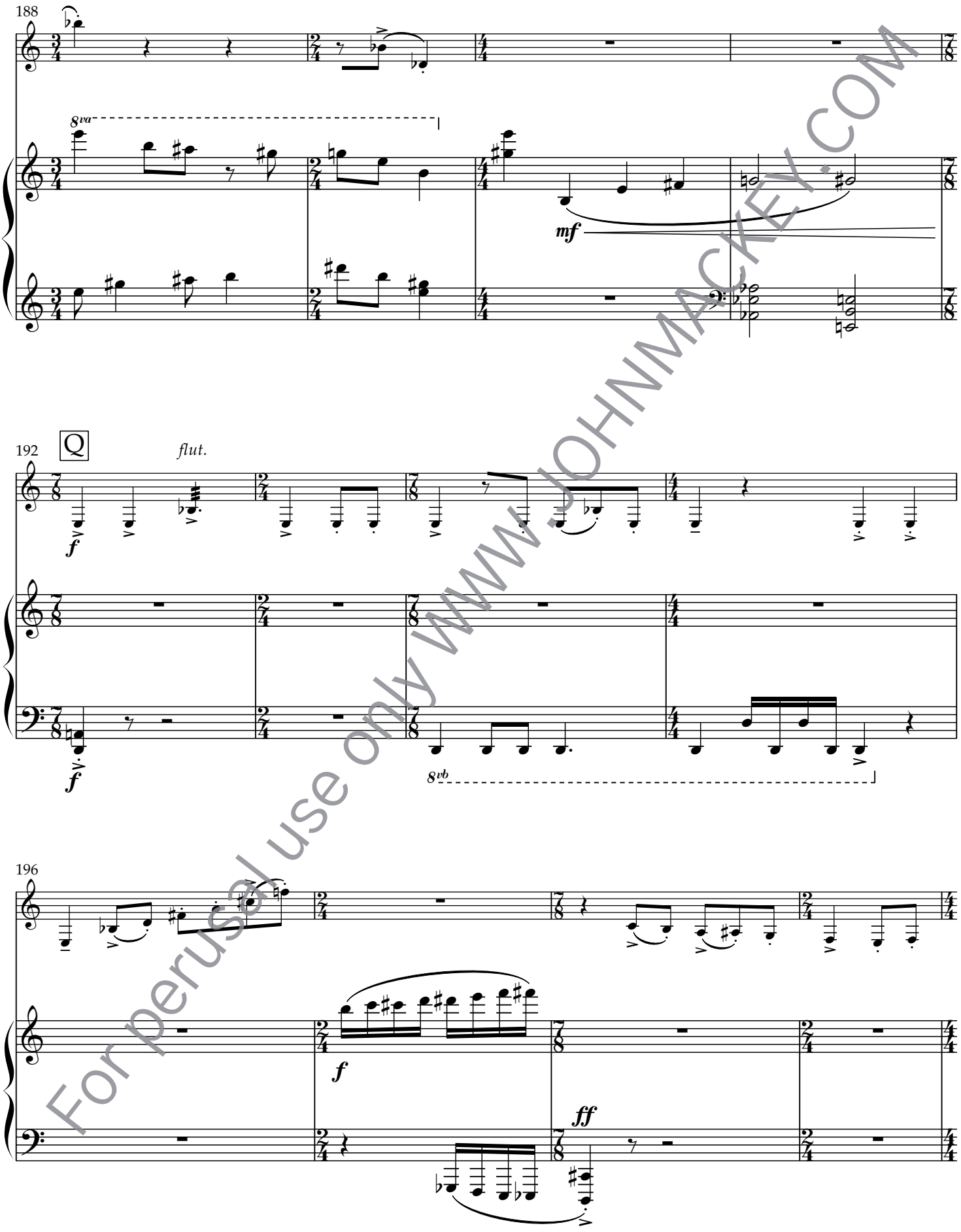

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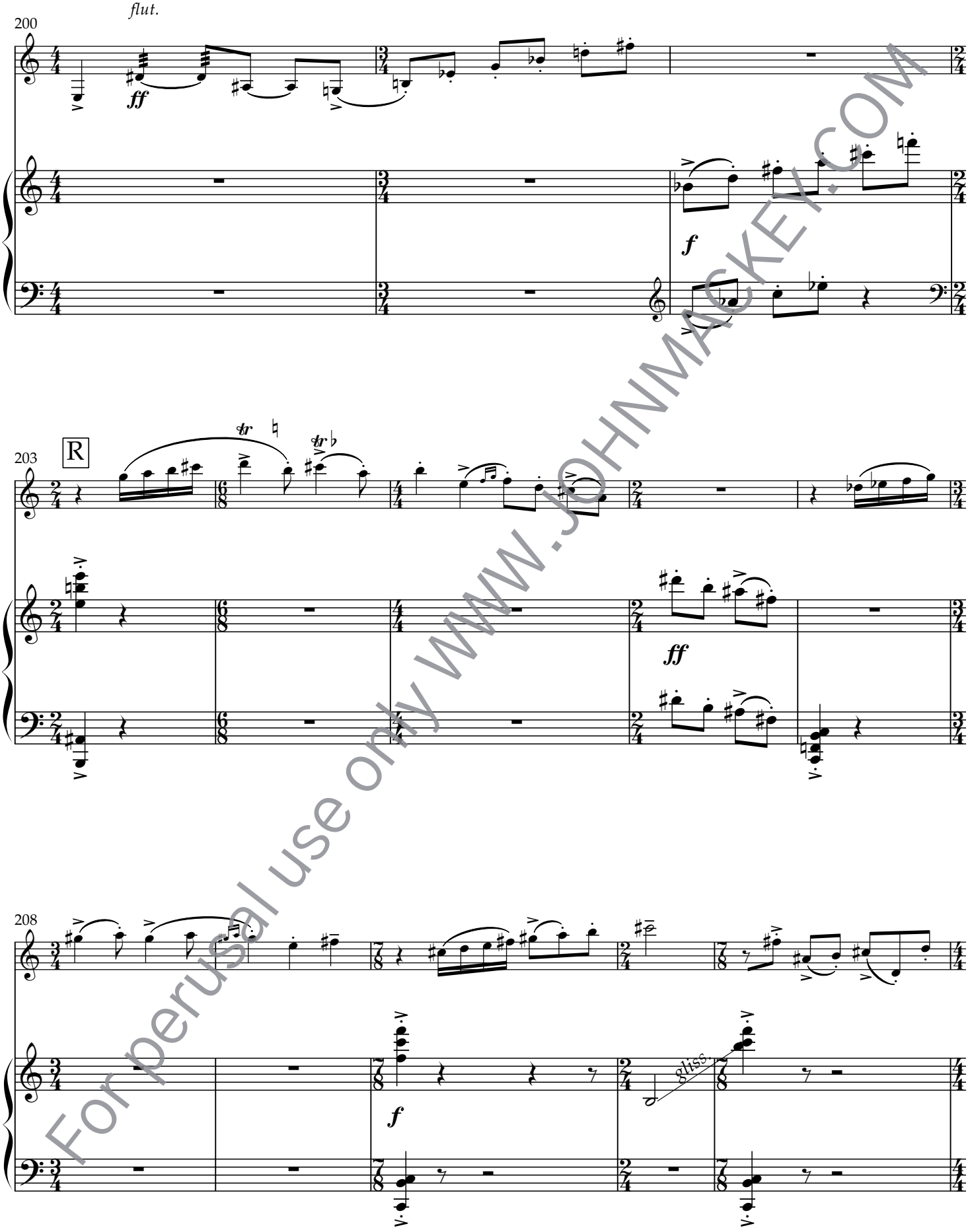

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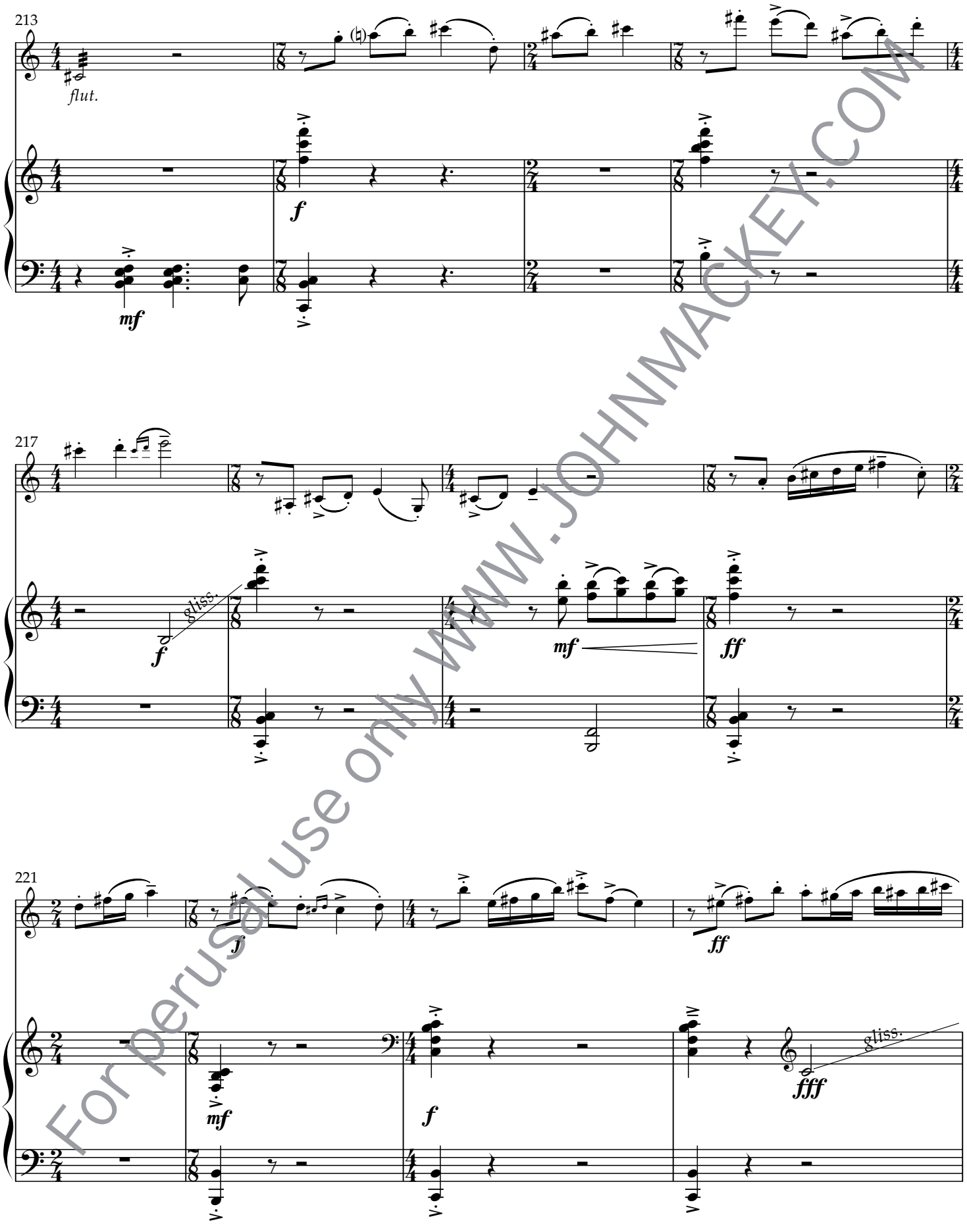

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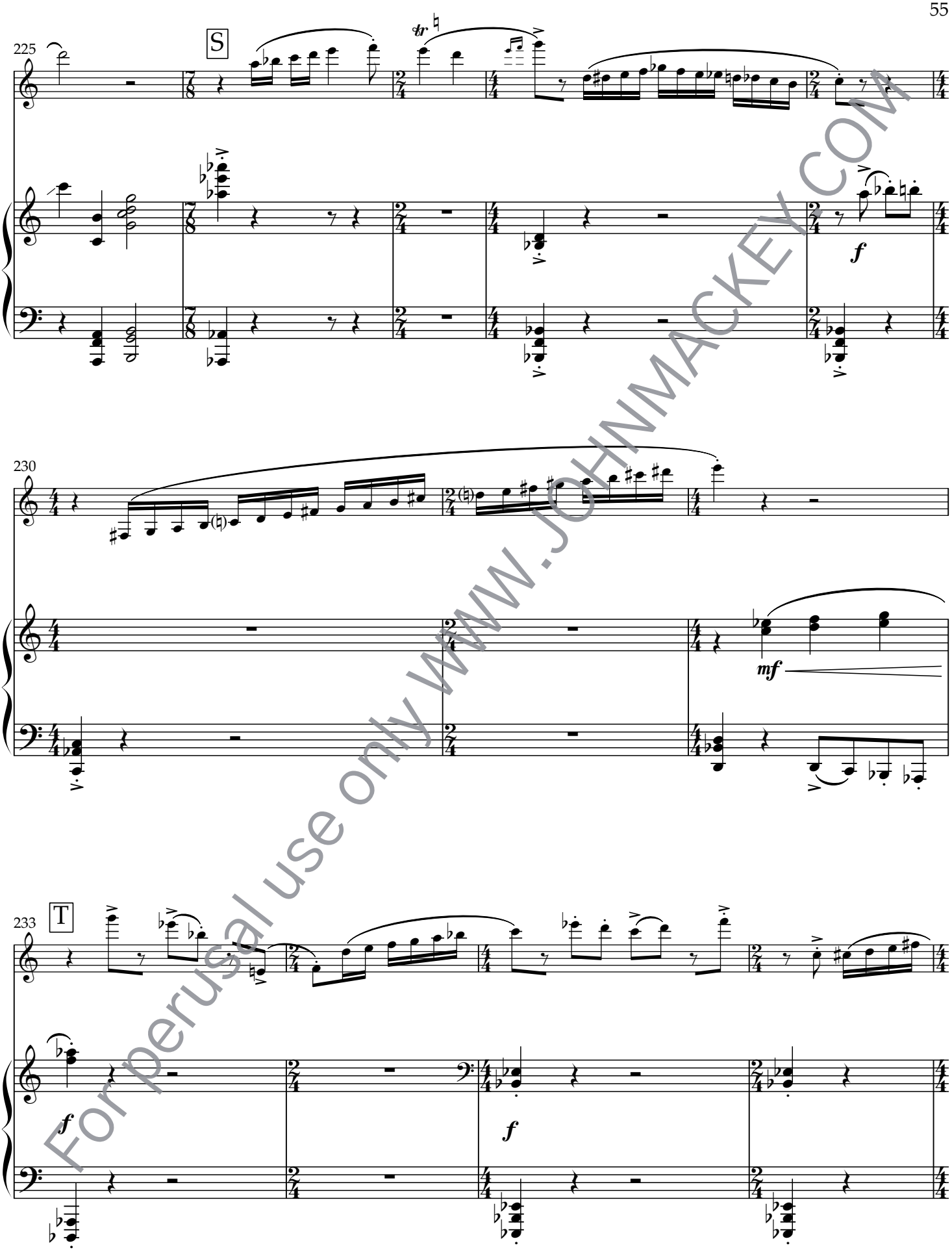

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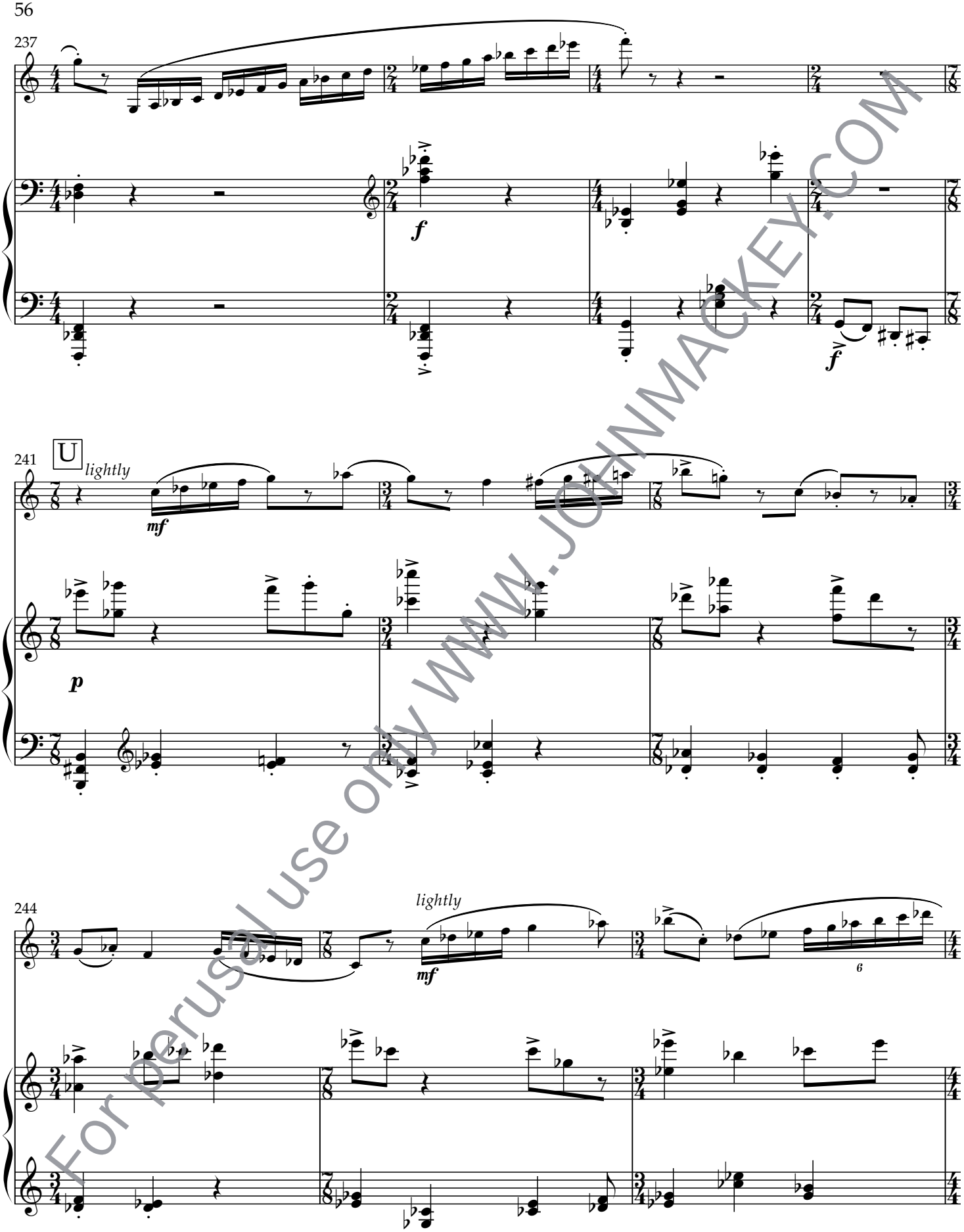

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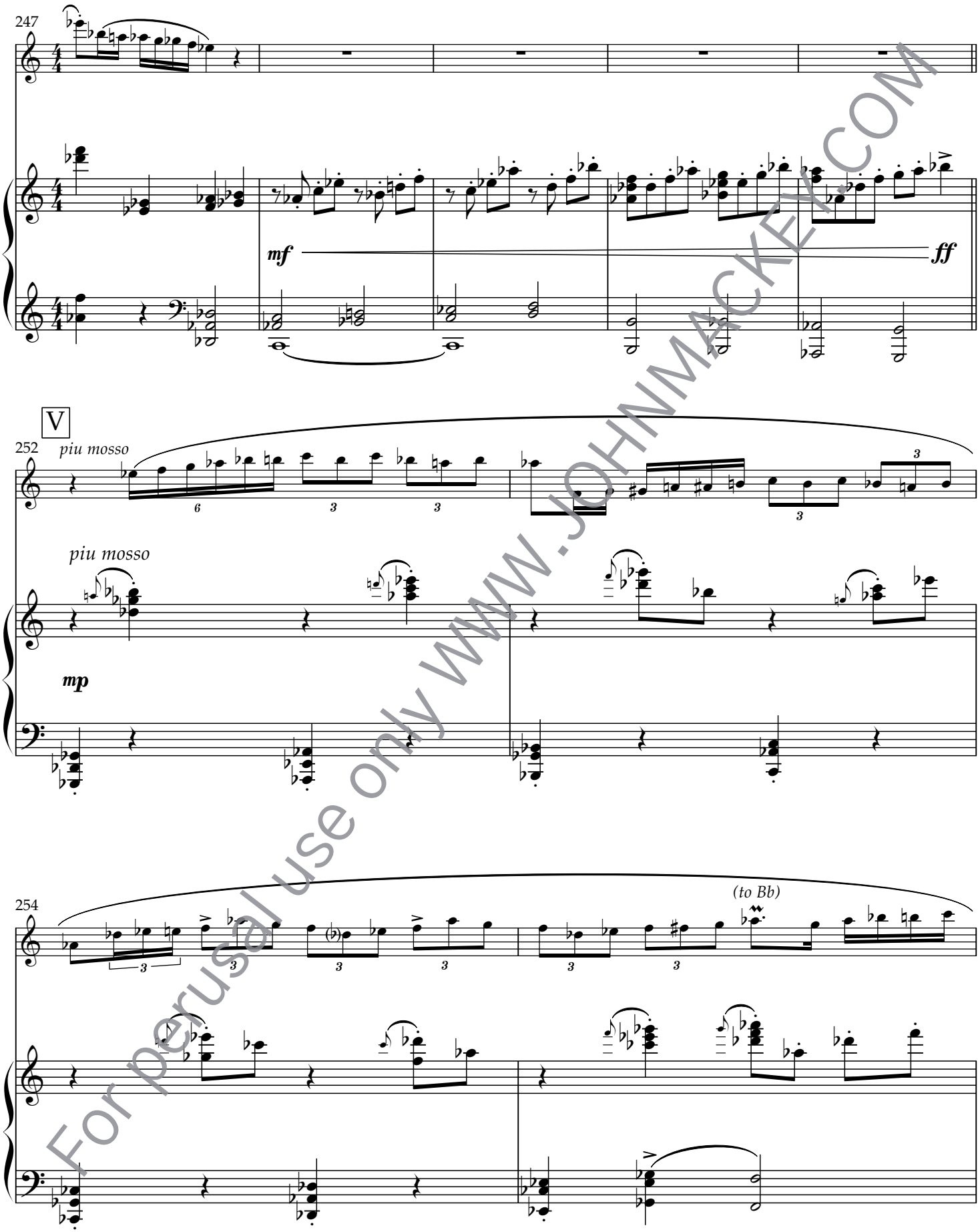

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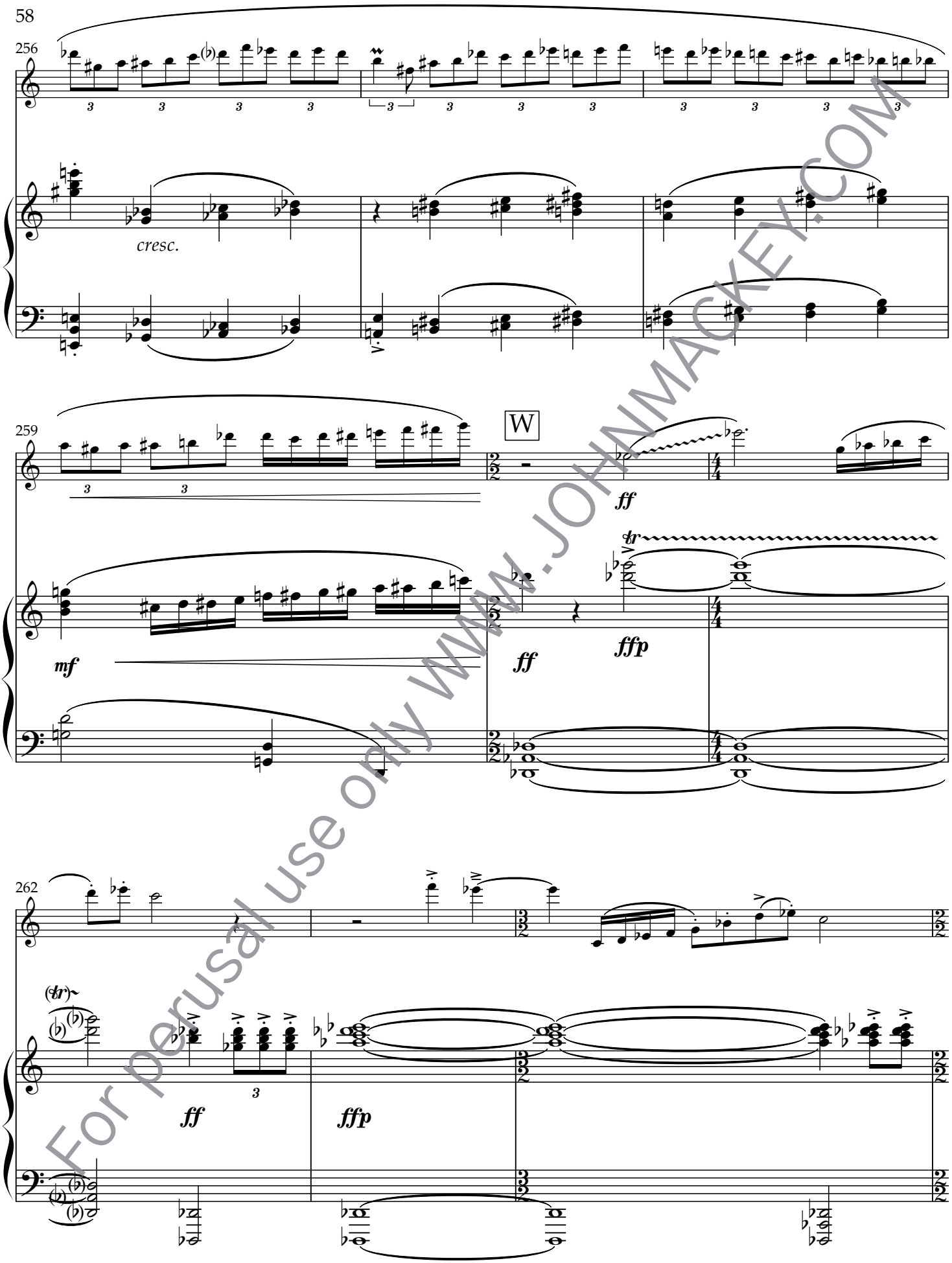

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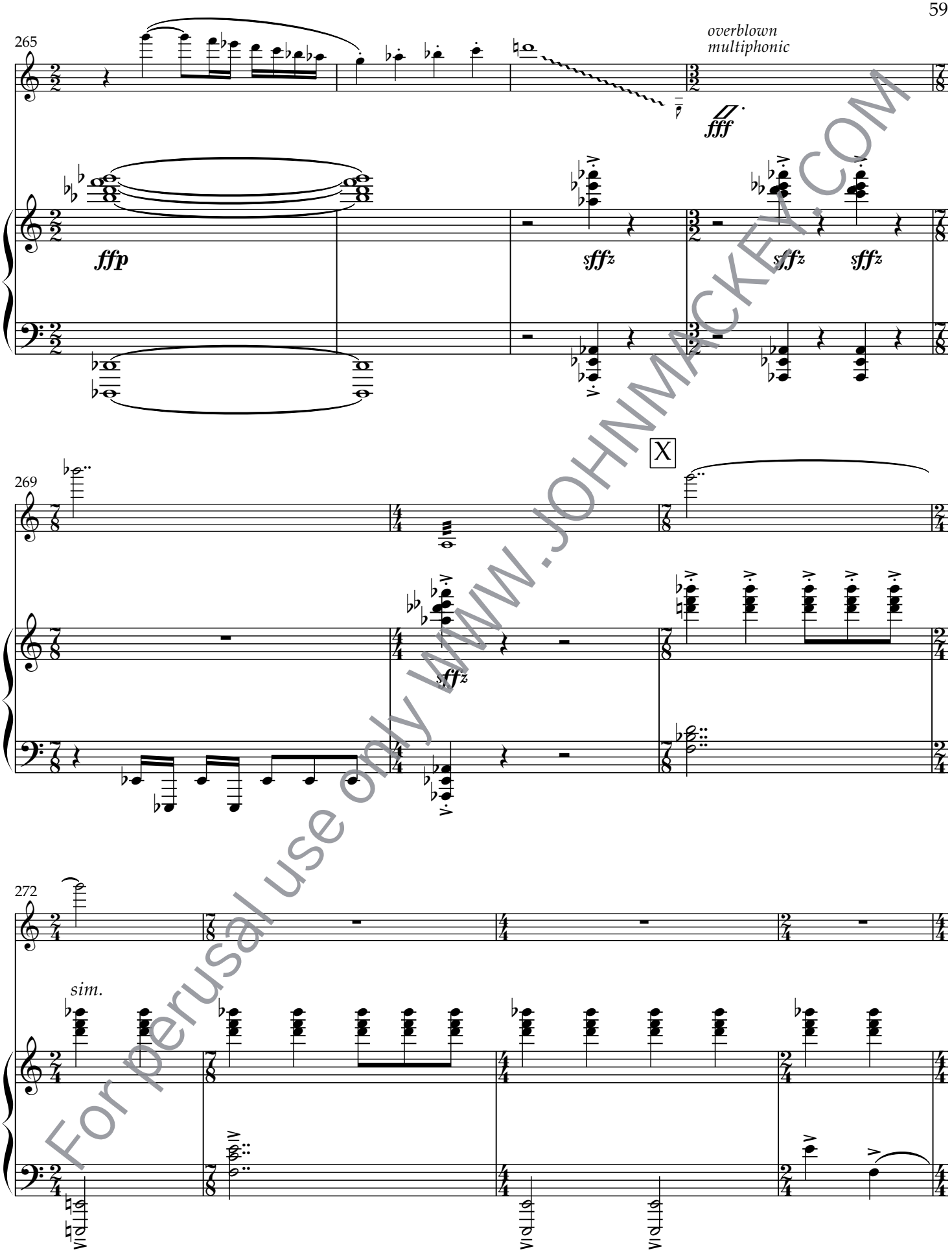

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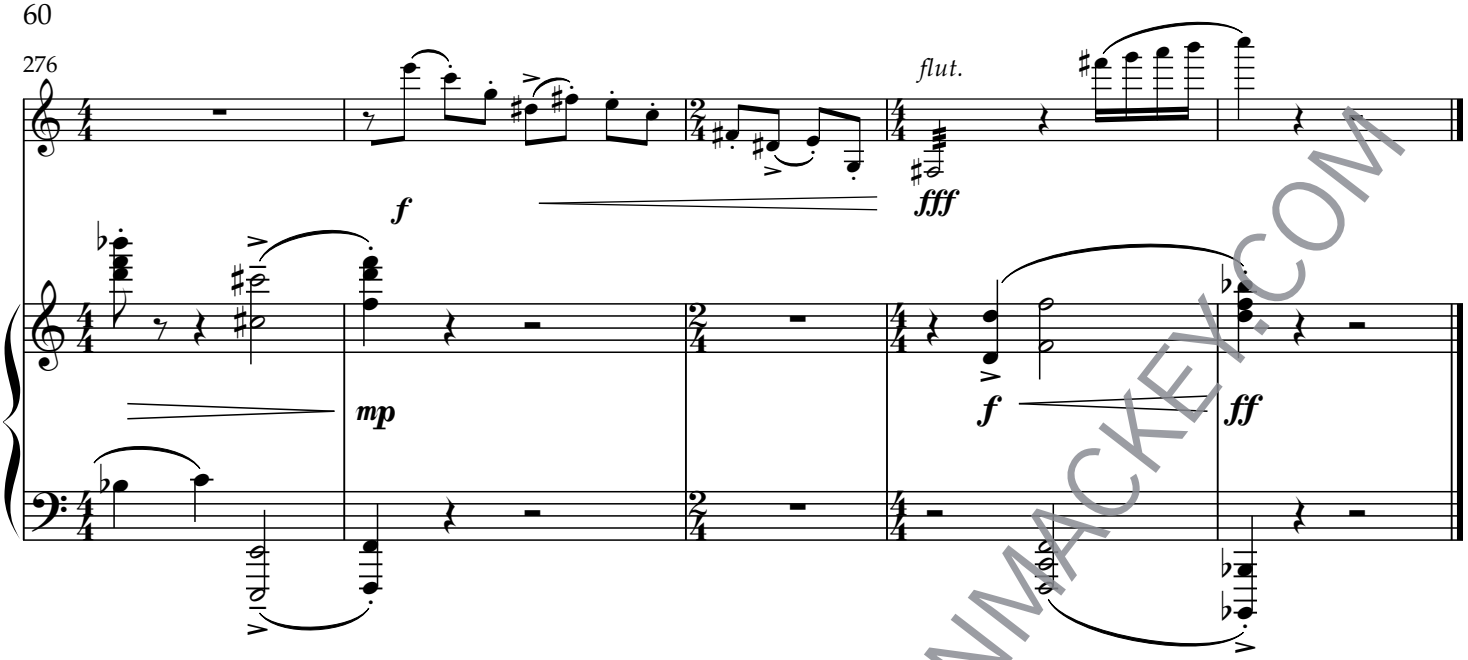

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