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NIKOLAI

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF GLINKA

for Solo Oboe and Military Band (1878)

Edited by CLARK McALISTER

CONDUCTOR'S SCORE

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RIMSKY-KORSAKOV AS BANDMASTER

Although the broadest outlines of the life and career of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov are generally known, it may not be appreciated that his first professional musical position was as a bandmaster or, more specifically, as Inspector of Music Bands for the Russian Navy. In his memoirs *My musical life* Rimsky-Korsakov speaks at some length about this position and its significance for his career; extensive quotes from these memoirs appear below. But first, let us review a few elements of Rimsky's life up to that point.

Nikolai Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov was born 18 March 1844, and showed, by his own account, an early aptitude for music, if no particular enthusiasm for it. His only formal musical studies during childhood were piano lessons, the repertoire for which consisted almost entirely of the easier Beethoven sonatas and piano fantasies of Italian operas, of which he was more fond. More for the sake of a game and for a way of getting together with other children, Rimsky tells us, he tried his hand at composition, with "coherent" results. In this effort he was completely self-taught, as was to be the case for the majority of his musical career.

If Rimsky did not take music seriously as a child, it was because his mind had already settled on the navy as a career, out of admiration for his older brother, and he was in fact commissioned as an officer. After his initial tour, he found that his naval duties in port required only two to three hours of his time each day, and the remaining time was given over to music. During these years he was writing a symphony now and again, under the supervision of Mily Balakirev. Up to this time (middle 1860s), Rimsky still had not had any formal training in music theory or orchestration, but his natural gift for orchestration was beginning to be recognized professionally.

By the spring of 1873, Rimsky's musical accomplishments included the following: he had completed and seen performed two symphonies (though both would be extensively revised in later years) and his first full-length opera, *The Maid of Pskov* (all published) he had been offered the position of professor of practical composition and orchestration at the St. Petersburg Conservatory; he had completed the orchestration of Dargomizhsky's final opera *The Stone Guest* (at the request of the dying composer) and seen it into performance, and had been involved with composers Cui, Borodin and Mussorgsky in the creation of an "opera-ballet" entitled *Mlada* (which was not performed). (If we again point out that all of this was achieved by Rimsky without benefit of formal musical training, we do so not to disparage such training, but to illustrate just how remarkable and disciplined an individual Rimsky was.)

At this point, Rimsky was permitted to resign his naval commission, but events took another turn, as Rimsky himself relates:

> In the Spring of 1873 the Director of the Chancellery of the Navy Department . . . summoned me and told me that there had been established a new post of Inspector of Music Bands of the Navy Department; that I had been chosen for the post; that a complement of musician pupils was being organized, as holder of the Navy Department fellowships at the St. Petersburg Conservatory; ant that their immediate supervision was entrusted to me. My duties included the inspecting of all Navy Department Music Bands throughout Russia; thus I was to supervise the bandmasters and their appointments, the repertory, the quality of instruments, etc.; I was also to write a program of studies for the newly appointed fellows, and to act as intermediary between the Navy Department and the Conservatory. . . . Henceforth I was a musician officially and incontestably.[1]

This appointment provided the impetus for two very important further examples of the new Inspector's industry and discipline:

> My appointment. . . stirred up a desire of long standing in me, to familiarize myself thoroughly with the construction and technique of orchestral instruments. I obtained some of these--a trombone, a clarinet, a flute, etc.--and, with the aid of tables existing for that purpose, set out to discover their fingering. At our summer home in Pargolovo I played these instruments, so to speak, for all the neighbors to hear.[2]

Rimsky modestly admits that his performance ability on almost all of the wind and brass instruments left a great deal to be desired, but--

> . . .I became rather thoroughly acquainted with them after all. With the peculiar haste of youth and a certain rashness in the matter of self-instruction, I immediately conceived the idea of setting out to write the fullest possible textbook of instrumentation; and, with this end in view, I made various outlines, memoranda, and drawings which had reference to a detailed explanation of the technique of the instruments. I was eager to tell the world no less than *all* on this score.[3]

Before too long, however, Rimsky realized that this second undertaking was virtually an impossibility, due to inconsistencies and differences of designs from one maker of instruments to another. It would be possible, of course, to catalog all of these various instrumental peculiarities, but what would be the point? To whom would such a book be of use? But Rimsky very correctly understood that all of his efforts on this treatise of orchestration were far from wasted:

> . . . I personally had amassed considerable information on the subject [of instrumentation] by constantly checking myself up in the music bands of the Naval Department, in a practical way, and in the work over my textbook, in a theoretical way. I had learned what every practical musician (a German military bandmaster, for example) knows, but what, unfortunately, artist-composers do not know at all. I understood the basic principle of convenient and inconvenient passages, the difference between virtuoso difficulties and impracticability; I came to know all the uttermost tones of all instruments and the secret of producing some notes which everybody avoids through ignorance. I came to see that all I had known of wind instruments was wrong and false; and from now on I began to apply this newly acquired information in my compositions, as well as to strive to impart it to my Conservatory pupils and give them at least a clear conception, if not a full knowledge, of instruments of the orchestra.[4]

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Although it was Rimsky's own efforts which led to this accomplishment (at this same time he was also studying harmony and counterpoint by the same method of self-instruction--with the aid of appropriate textbooks!), in his characteristic modesty, he felt that it was from his good friend Borodin that he had acquired the greatest understanding of orchestration:

> Generally speaking, I'm indebted to Borodin for the introduction of strings into my scores; before this, I had avoided them whenever possible, entrusting what was most important to the winds.[5]

It might be of interest to read Rimsky's account of the programming and preparation of one of his concerts with his band:

> As for my work as Inspector of Naval Bands, I exploited it that season, arranging, in the autumn [of 1874], a grand concert of the united bands of the Navy Department, in Kronstadt. . . .Among the numbers performed were several of my arrangements, including the *Egmont* overture,the March from *Le Prophete,* and *Slavsya! (Be Glorified!).* The concert went with unanimity and precision under my direction. I stayed a whole week in Kronstadt for the rehearsals. There were two and sometimes even three rehearsals a day, seperately for the wood and the brass, and jointly for all. On these I spent my time from morning till night with brief respites, and, truth to tell, I was tireless. I don't know whether the naval bands will ever again play with the same finish and unanimity as they did then, but of this I am positive, that never before had they been compelled to pull themselves together to such an extent.[6]

Rimsky retained the position of Inspector until 1884, at which time it was abolished. The naval band program was made the responsibility of the Navy Staff, as part of a program of civil service reform.

THE ORIGINAL WORKS FOR BAND

Regarding these solo works for oboe, clarinet and trombone, let Rimsky describe them and their genesis:

> During 1876-7 I composed--so to speak, "by the way"--variations for the oboe on a theme of Glinka's song *Chto krasotka molodaya (Wherefore doth the beauteous maiden?)* and a concerto for the trombones [sic]; both of these with the accompaniment of a military (wind) band. These pieces were performed by the oboist Ranishevsky and the trombonist Leonov at the Kronstadt concerts of the United Bands of the Navy Department, under my direction. The soloists gained applause, but the pieces themselves went unnoticed, like everything else performed at Kronstadt. The audiences here were still in that stage of musical development where no interest is taken in the names of composers, nor indeed in the compositions themselves; and in fact it never occurs to a good many to speculate on whether a composition has such a thing as a composer! "Music is playing," "He played that fine"--that is as far as they got in Kronstadt.[7]

One suspects that this state of affairs was not limited to Kronstadt, nor is it exclusively a thing of the past. Rimsky tells us his purpose in writing these works:

> These compositions of mine were written primarily to provide the concerts with solo pieces of less hackneyed nature than the usual; secondly, that I myself might master the virtuoso style, so unfamiliar to me, with its solo and tutti, its cadences, etc. The finale of the trombone concerto was not bad, taken all in all, and was effectively orchestrated. My third and last composition of this character was a *Konzertstueck* for the clarinet with the accompaniment of a military band; but this was not performed at the Kronstadt concerts, as I did not like its heavy accompaniment when I tried it at rehearsal.[8]

The trombone concerto was performed for the first time on 16 March 1878, along with the oboe variations. Although one may wish to respect the composer's feelings about his own work, one cannot help feeling that Rimsky was perhaps too severe in his evaluation of the scoring of the clarinet piece. Though the scoring is indeed more full than that of the other two works, performance shows that, when played by an ensemble of a reasonable size, the accompaniment is quite manageable.

INSTRUMENTATION

These important works for band are presented here in a version that conforms to the composer's original scoring as closely as practical considerations will permit. Those few changes which have been made in the composer's instrumentation are detailed below, and involve mainly differences of transposition to suit modern instruments.

1. Basset horn in F transposed up a major second for Alto Clarinet in Eb.
2. Horns transposed to F, where necessary.
3. Trumpets transposed to Bb, where necessary.
4. Trombones written in bass clef, occasionally tenor clef.
5. Basset in B is Bass clarinet in Bb. (this is not really a change, merely a clarification)
6. According to Russian sources, the part labeled Corno basso was intended for an instrument known as the baritone clarinet. This writer has been unable to locate any information concerning such an instrument. The nature of the music that Rimsky has written for this instrument is such, however, that it seems appropriate to assign it to a euphonium, and this has been done.

Other than the minor modifications listed above, the composer's original scoring has not been altered in any manner. To this writer, it seems totally unjustifiable to presume to attempt to improve upon or "adapt" the instrumentation of such a master, not only of orchestration generally, but of wind orchestration in particular.

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SIZE OF ENSEMBLE

Although it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to establish from external evidence exactly the size of the ensemble for which Rimsky wrote these works, one can come to a reasonably precise conclusion both by analogy with the size of other service bands whose complement was known, and by examining the character of the music itself. Most service bands of the early part of this century were relatively small, as compared with our concepts of the present day--generally their number was below forty, sometimes well below forty. If one were to perform these pieces of Rimsky's with one player per part, one would need a group consisting of between thirty-two and thirty-four players. However, Rimsky occasionally specifies a division between solo and tutti among the clarinets, which implies perhaps as many as three players to a part (see rehearsal 12 of the oboe variations). Further, at rehearsal 13 of the clarinet concerto, he specifies "soli div.," which might indicate either the relative importance of the part, or might imply two soloists from within a section of as many as four players. Conductors will, of course, make this determination according to their own perception and resources. Regarding all other instruments in the score, this writer feels strongly that doublings should be avoided; there is no justification for making them, and doing so will render the obtaining of satisfactory balance between solo and accompaniment extremely--and needlessly--difficult. Thus, an ensemble of not more than forty musicians will probably be the most nearly ideal for the realization of these marvelously satisfying works.

Clark McAlister
December 1986

1. Rimsky Korsakov, Nikolay Andreyevich: *My musical life,* translated from the fifth revised Russian edition by Judah A. Joffe (New York, 1942), pp. 135-136.
2. *Op. cit.*, p. 136.
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 136.
4. *Op. cit.*, pp. 137-138.
5. Yastrebtsev, Vasilii Vsailevich: *Reminiscences of Rimsky-Korsakov*, edited and translated by Florence Jonas (New York, 1985) p. 38.
6. *My musical life,* p. 155.
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 181.
8. *Op. cit.*, pp. 181-182.

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for Solo Oboe and Military Band (1878)

Introduction

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
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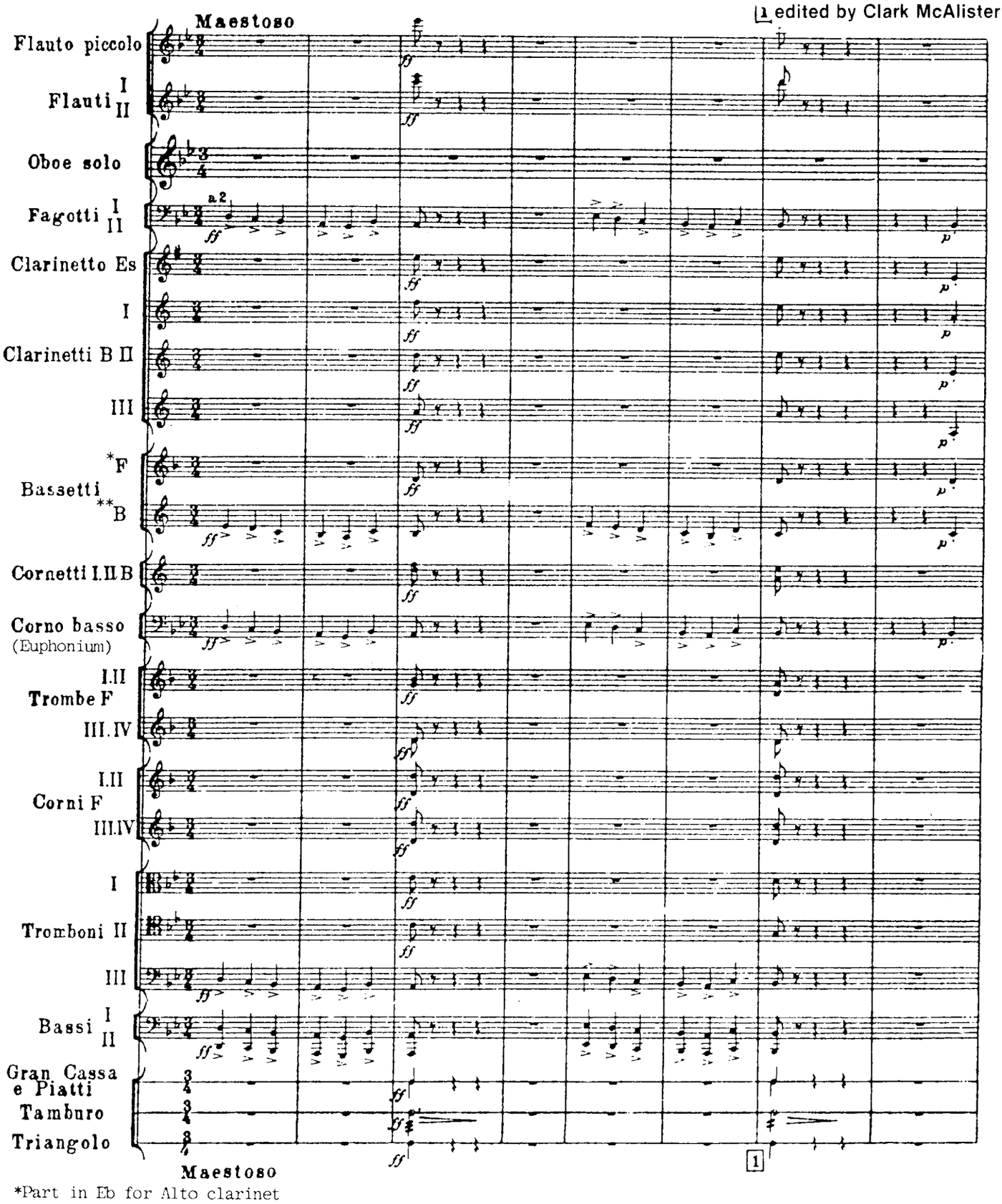

*Part in Eb for Alto clarinet
**Bass clarinet (in Bb)

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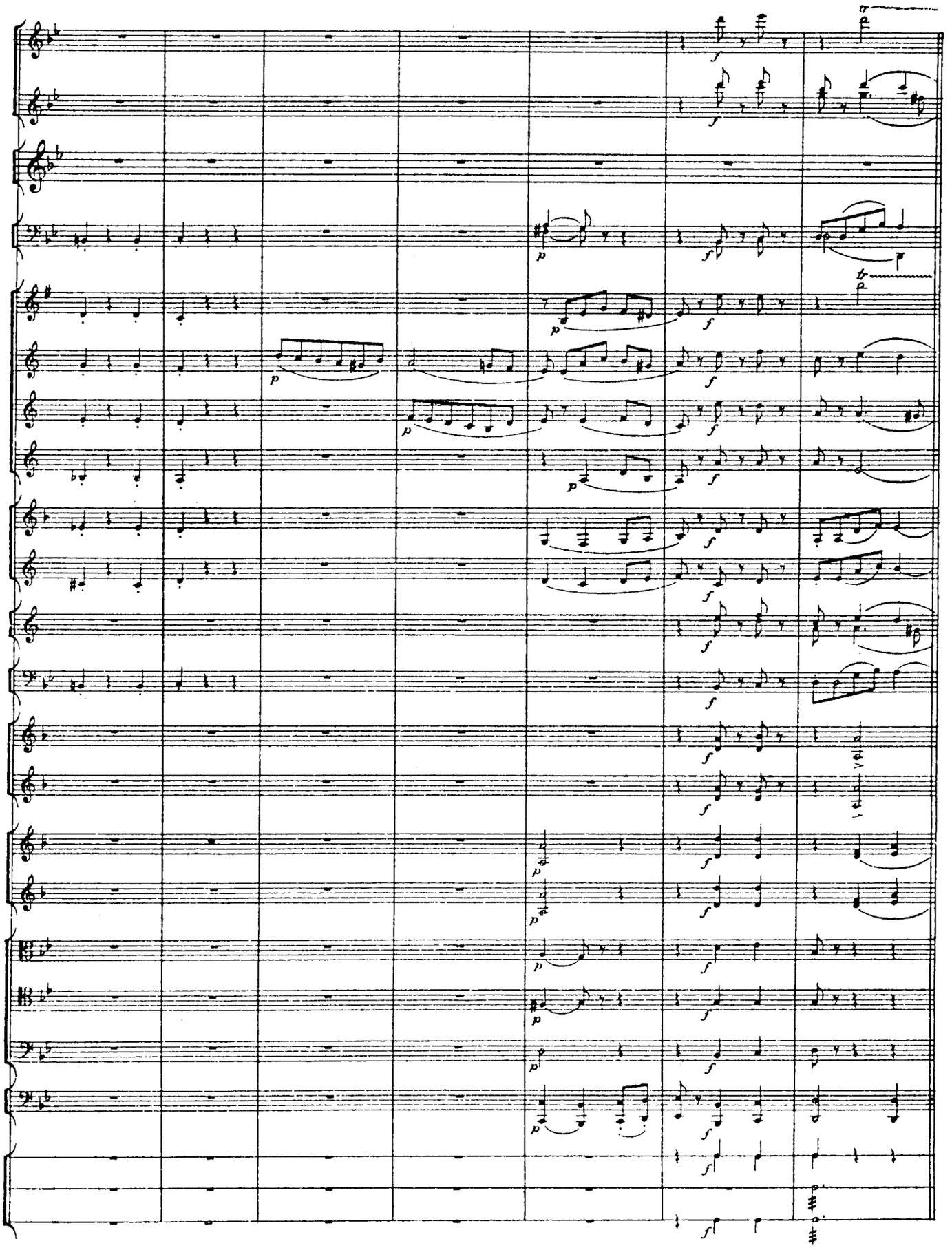

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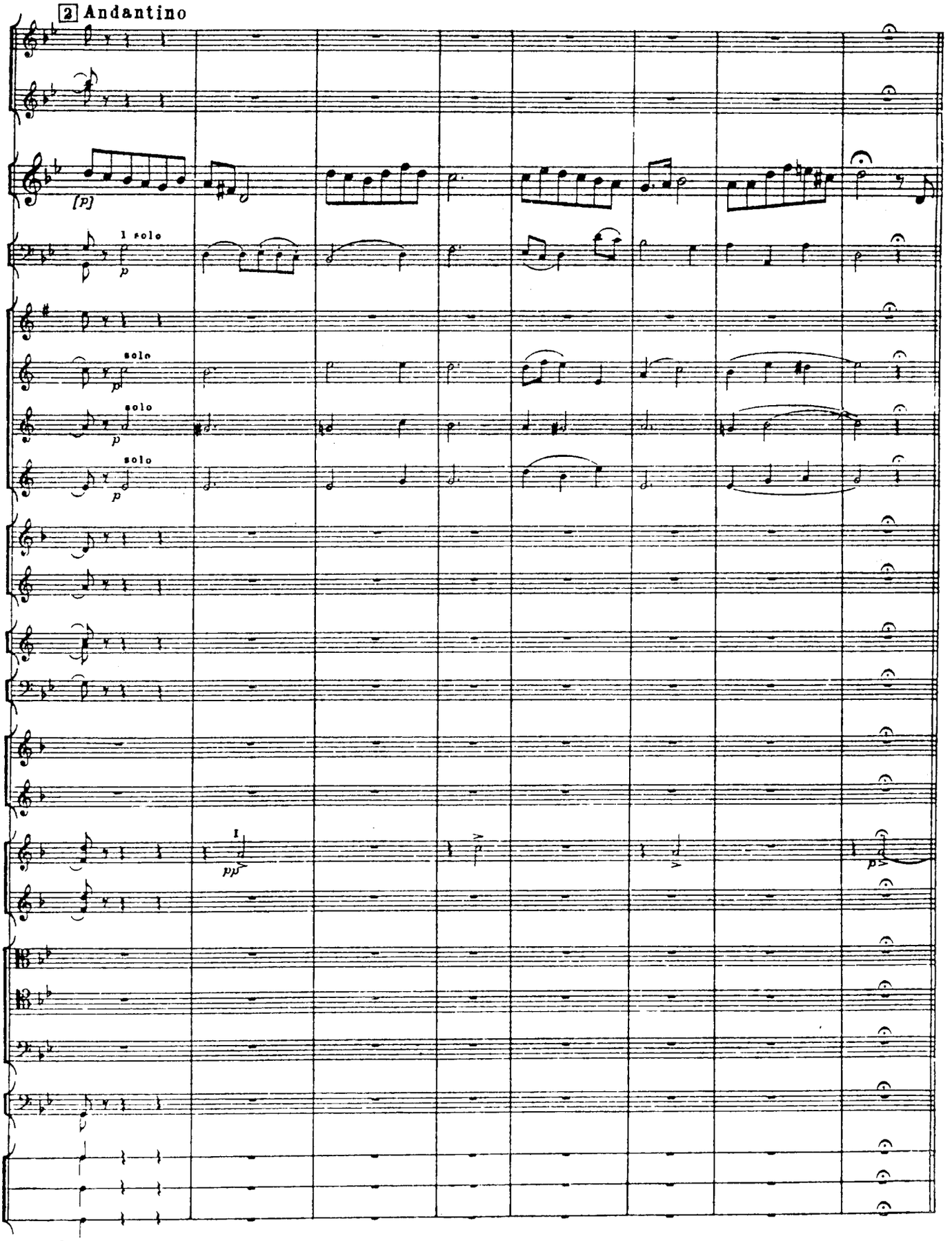
Thema

2 Andantino



2 Andantino

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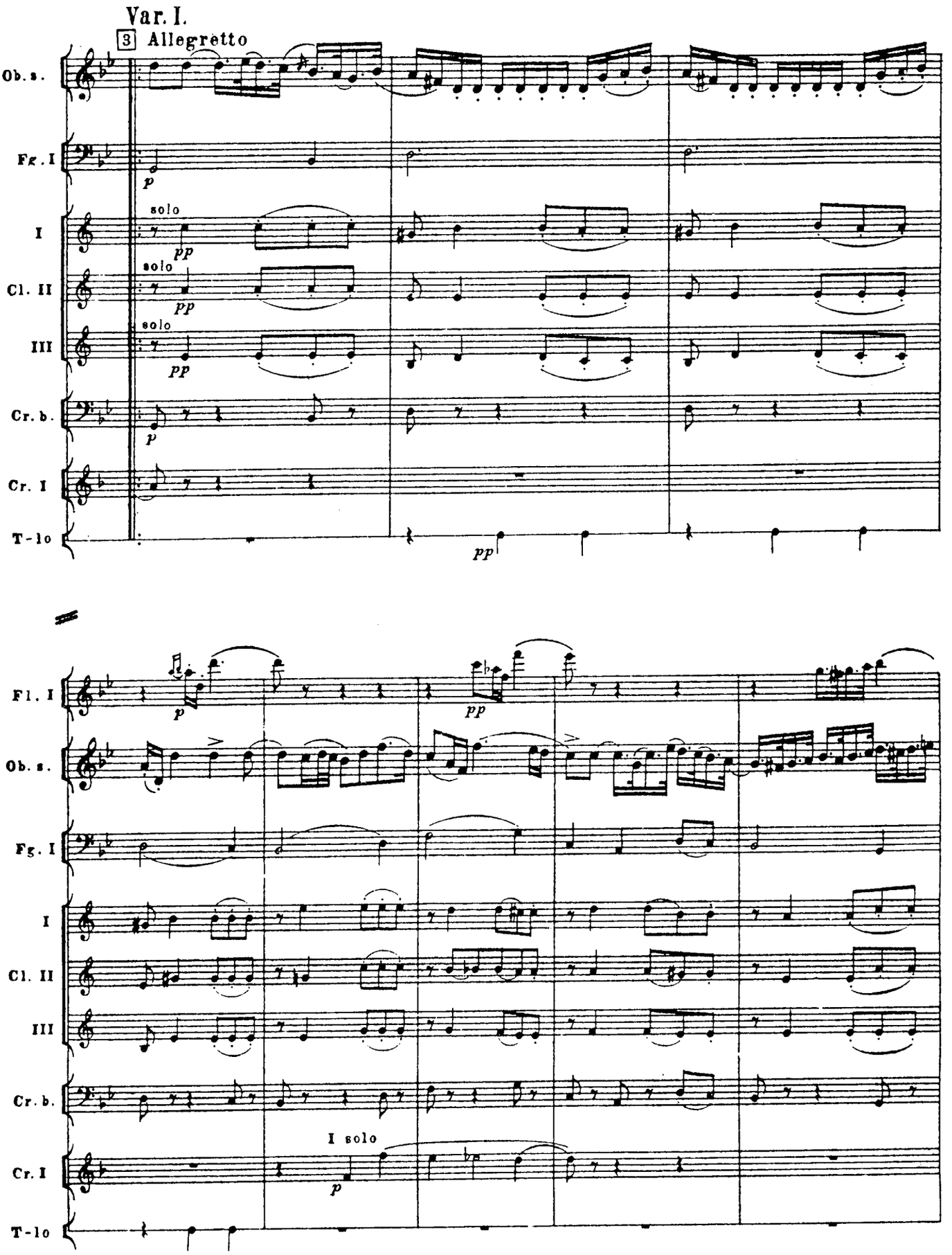

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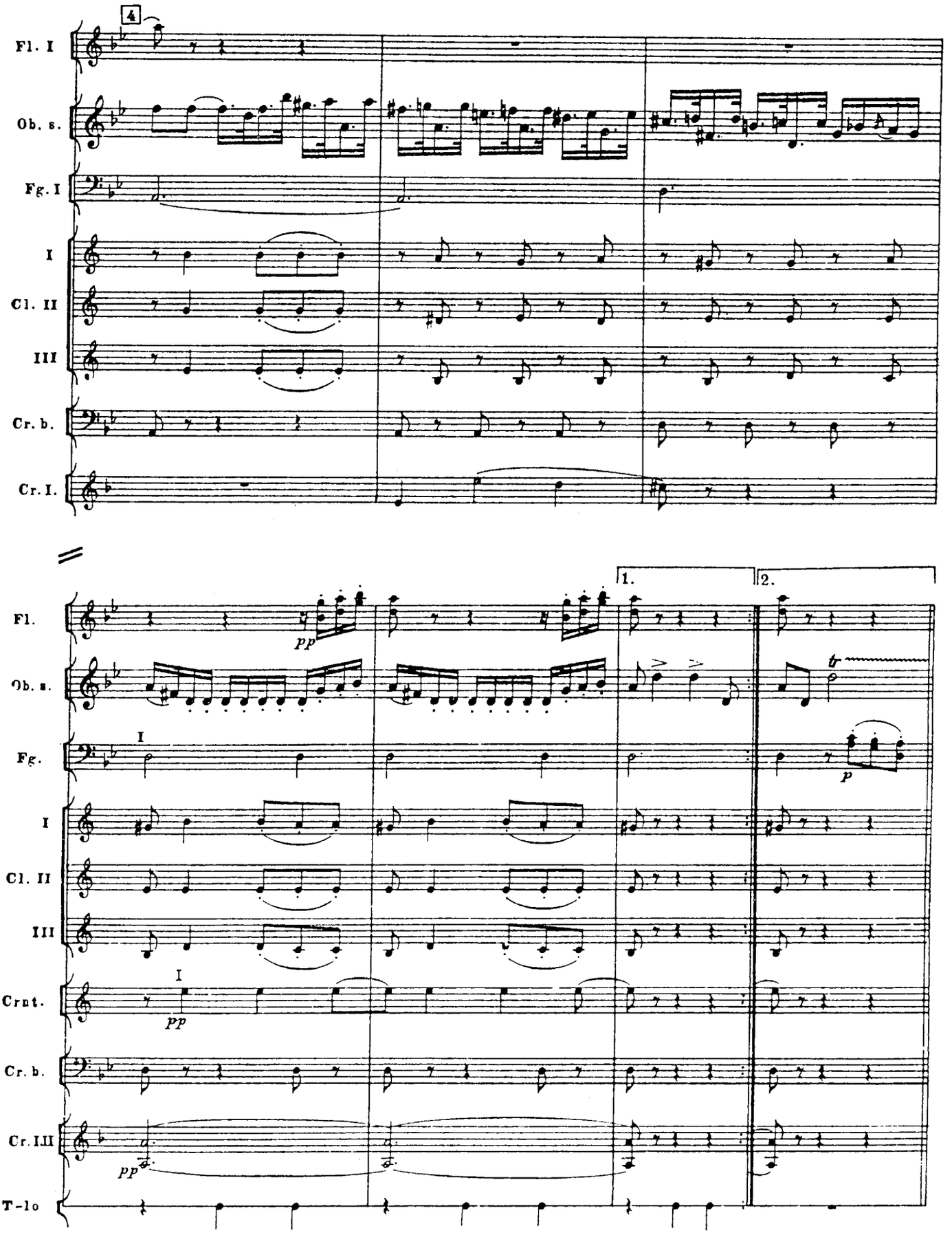

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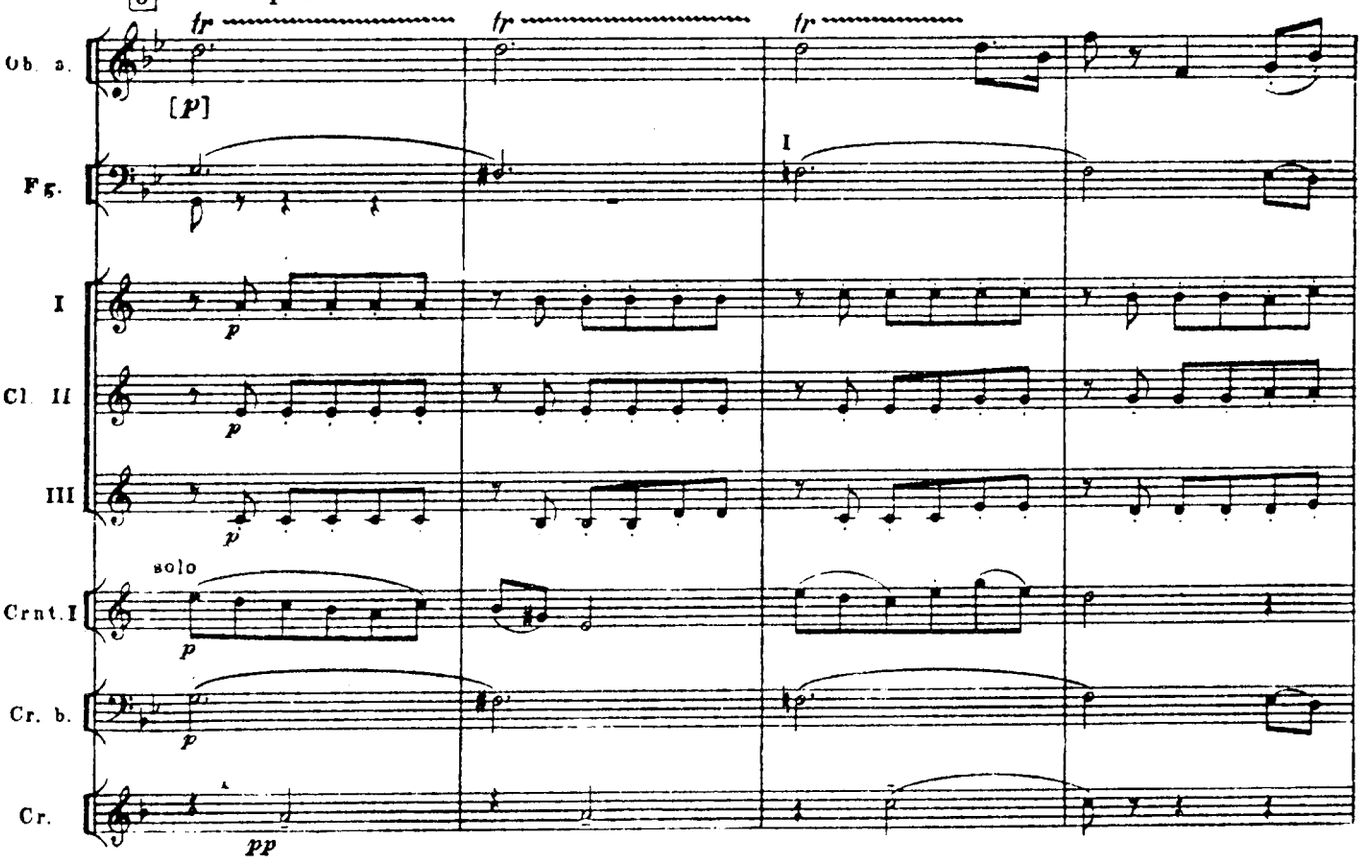
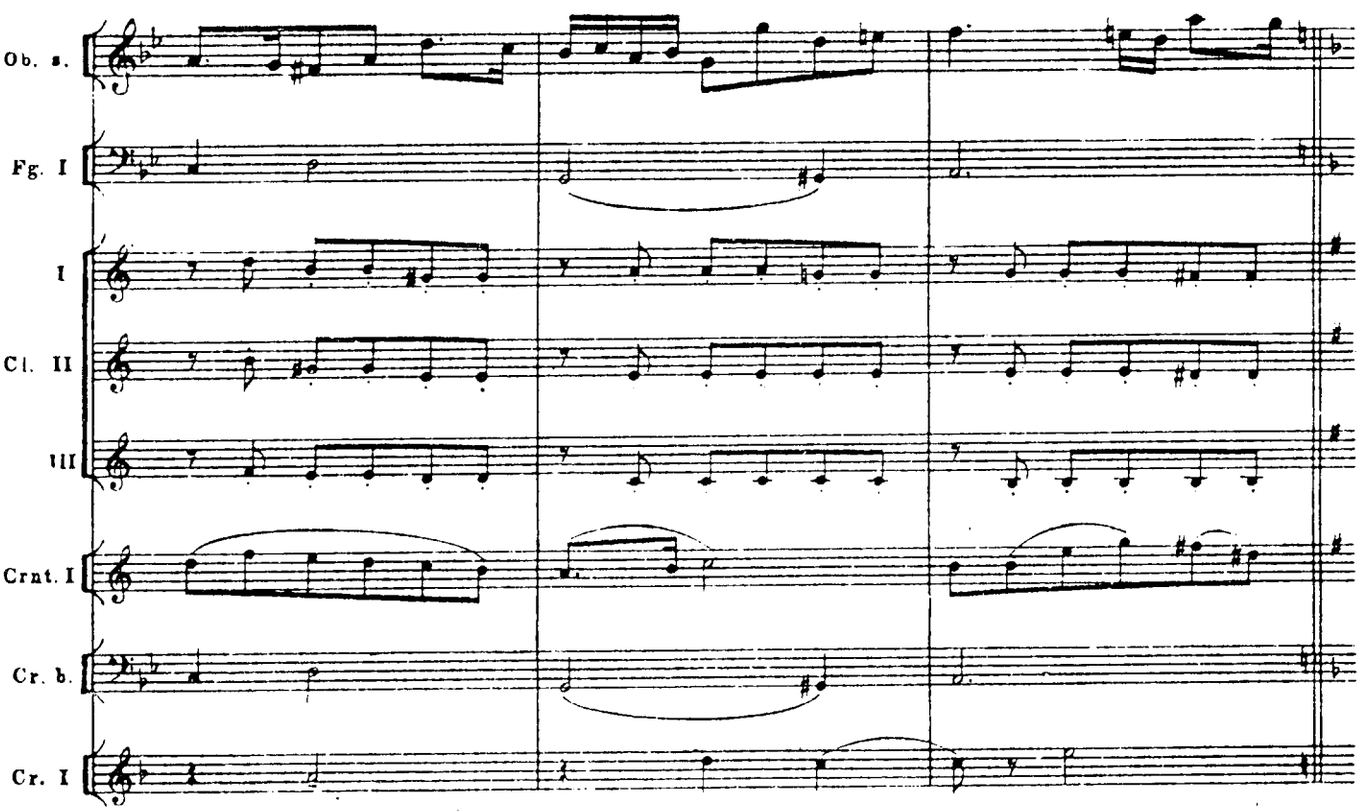
Var. II

5 Poco più mosso





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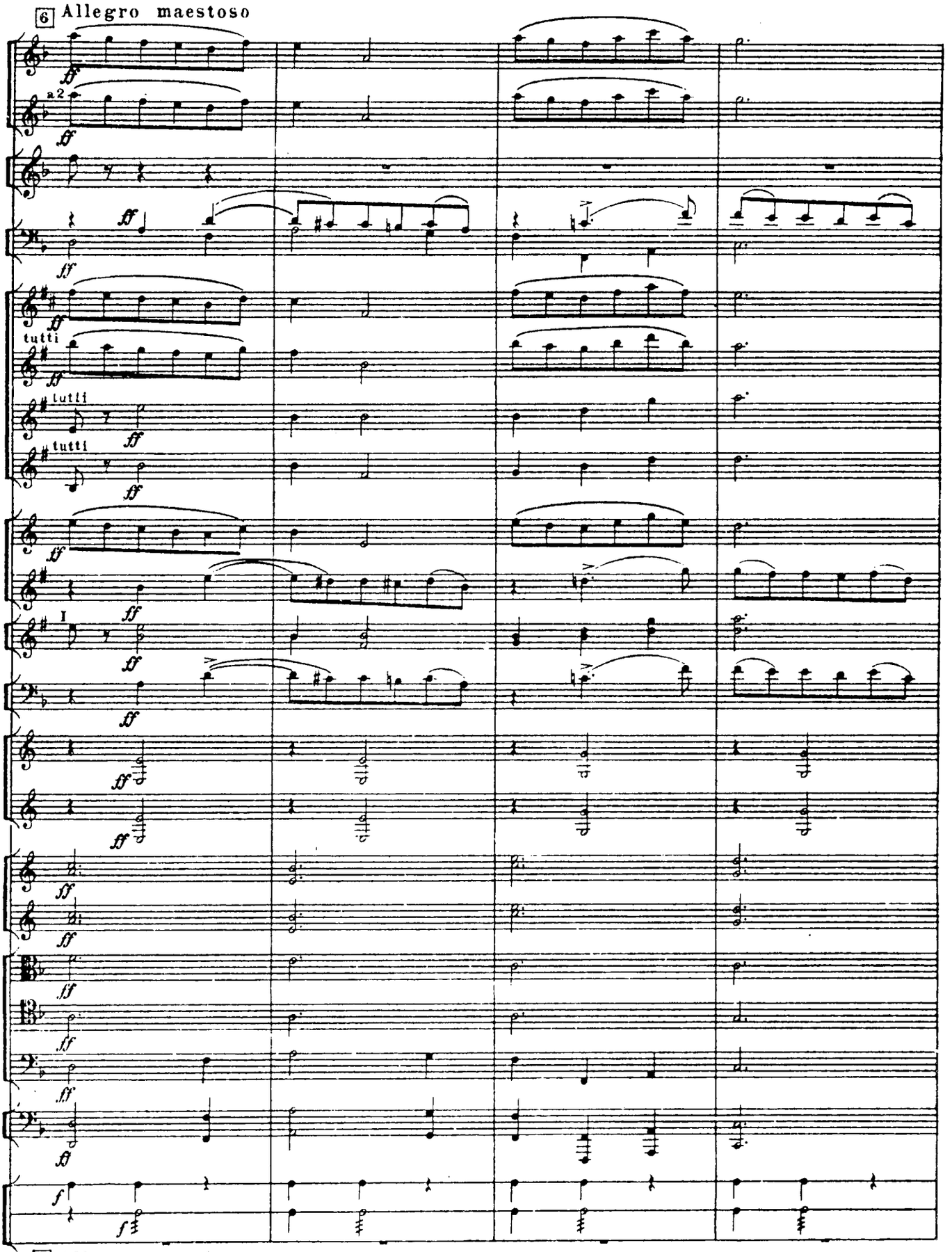
Var. III

6 Allegro maestoso



6 Allegro maestoso

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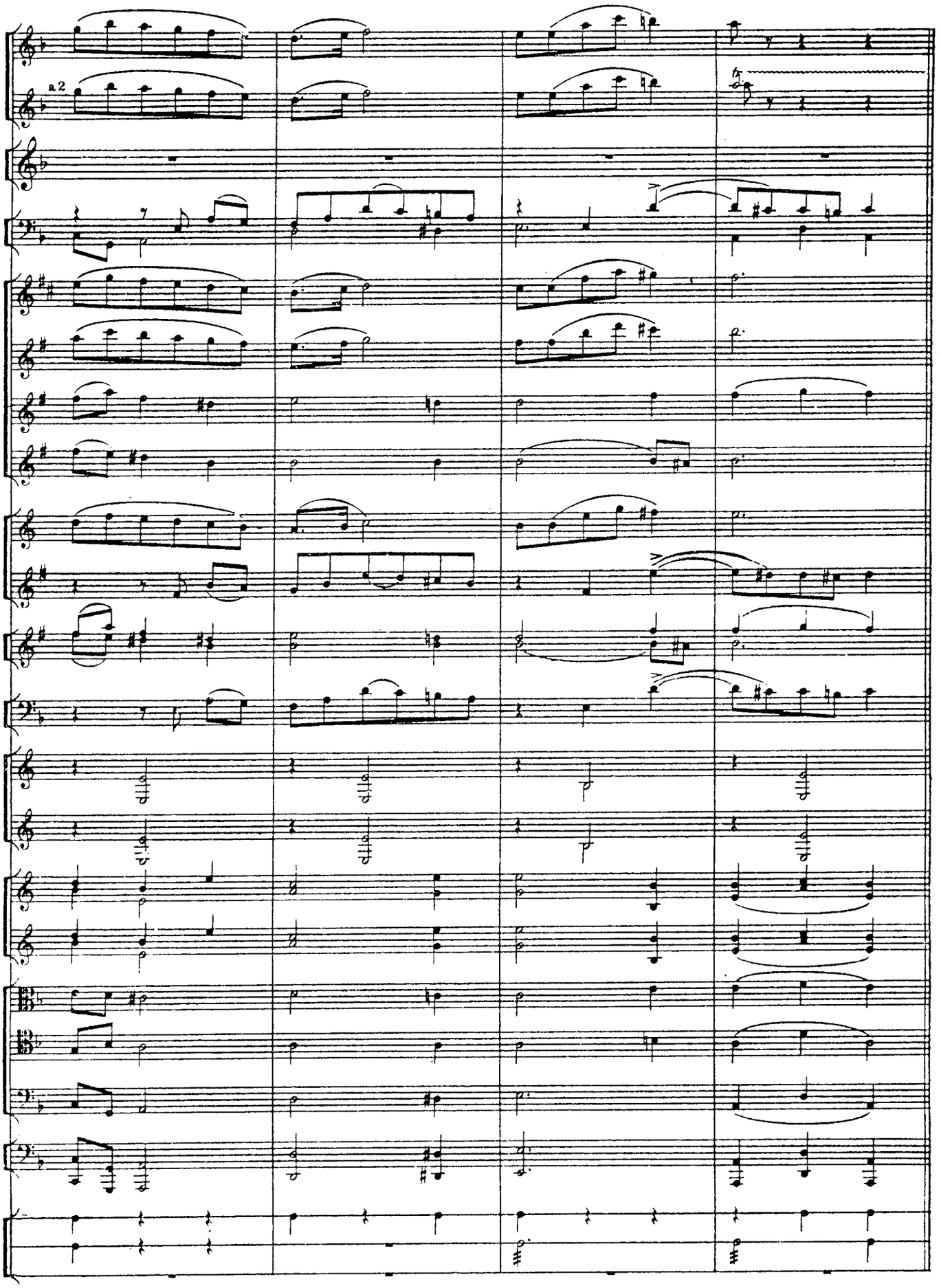

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Var. IV

Quasi recitativo

Fl. I

Ob. s.

Crnt.

Cr. I.II

Cadenza

Tempo

[Quasi recitativo]

*(II)

Crnt. I

solo

*Conductors may find it more convenient to divide this long trill between two solo flutes; accordingly, the trill on C above has been written into the second flute part (the complete trill is of course in the first flute part).

7

(I)

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Var. V

8 Tempo

mf espressivo

pp

tutti

ppp

tutti

ppp

tutti

ppp

pp

I solo

p

pp

pp

pp

[I]

pp

T-ro

pp

8 Tempo

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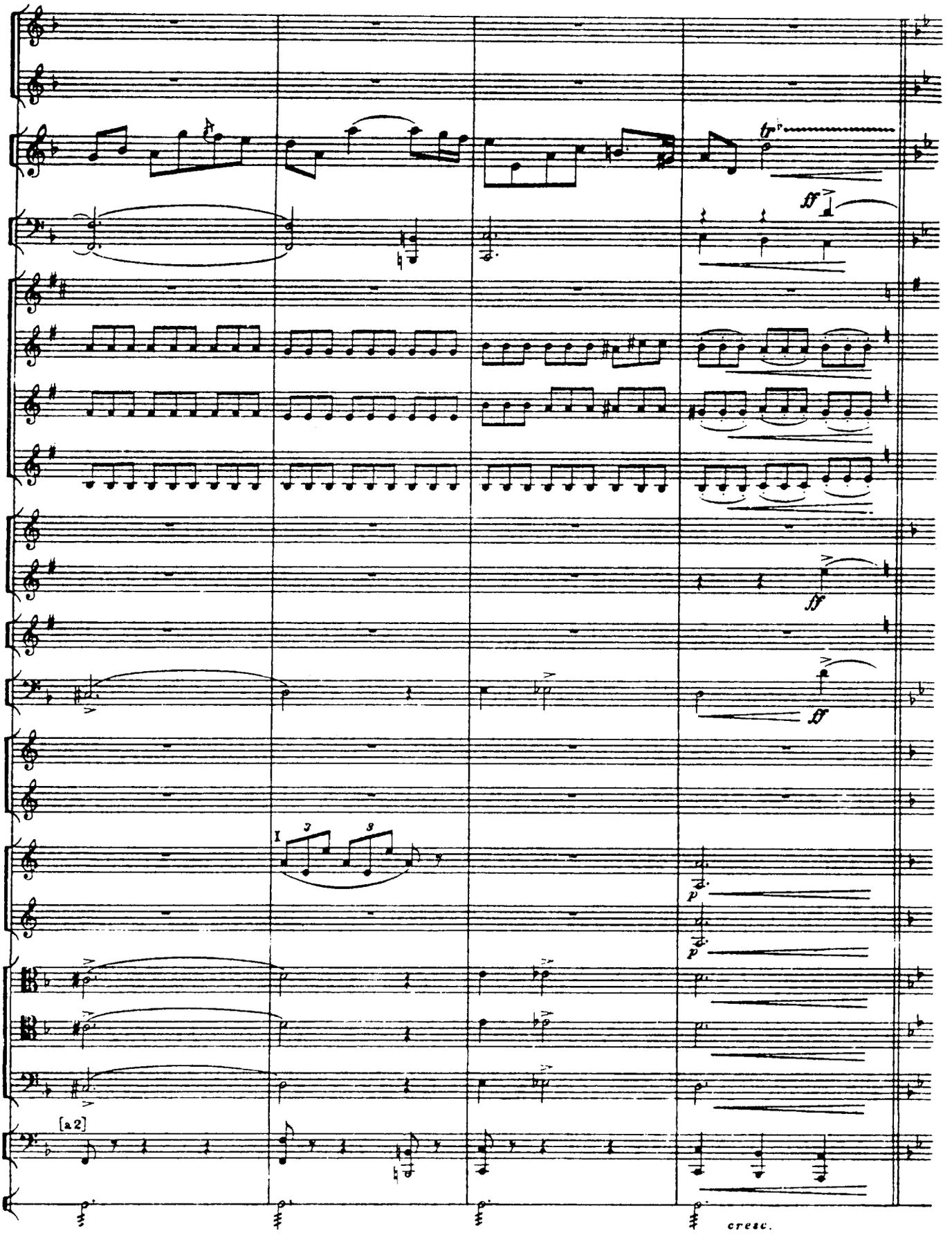

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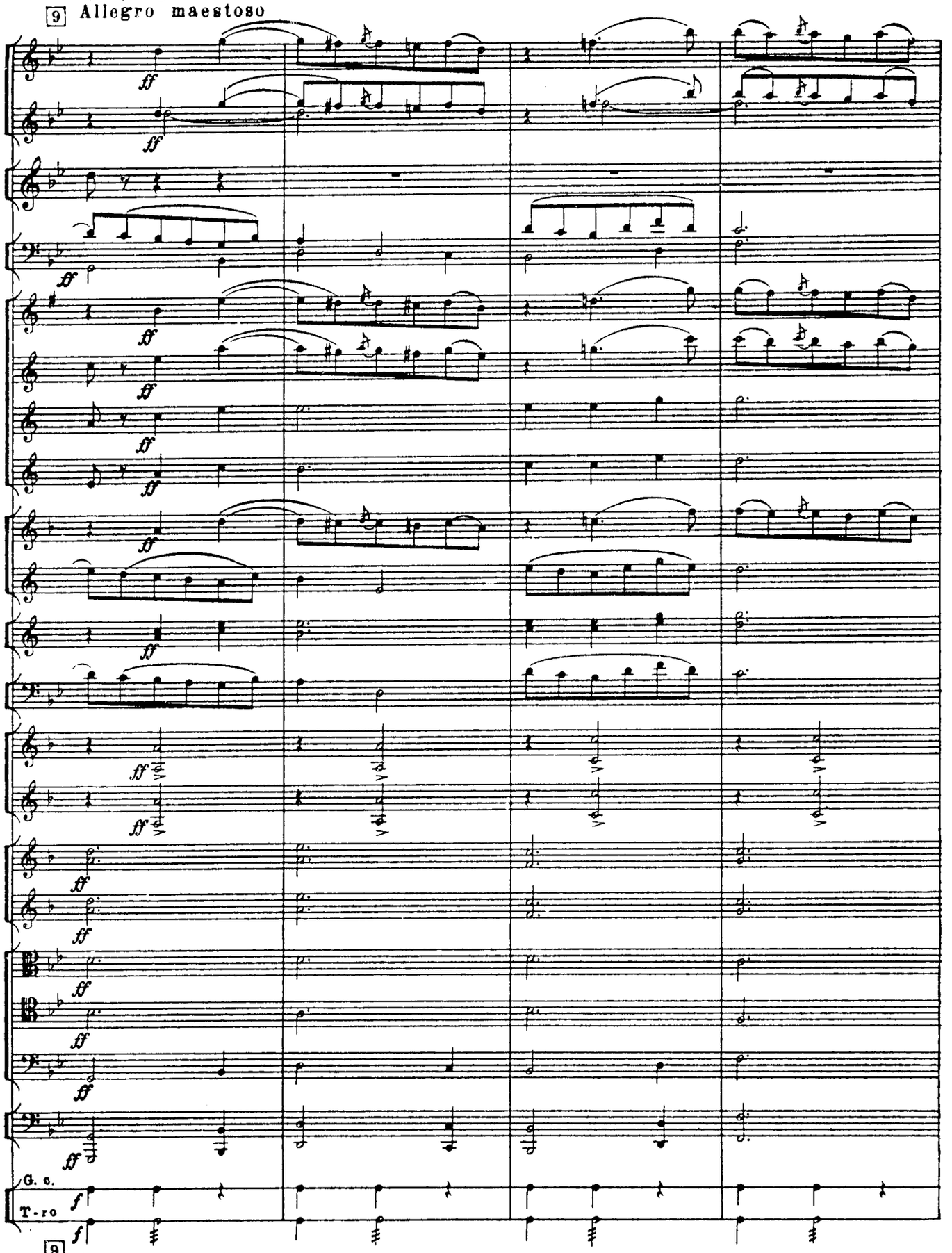
Var. VI

9 Allegro maestoso



9 Allegro maestoso

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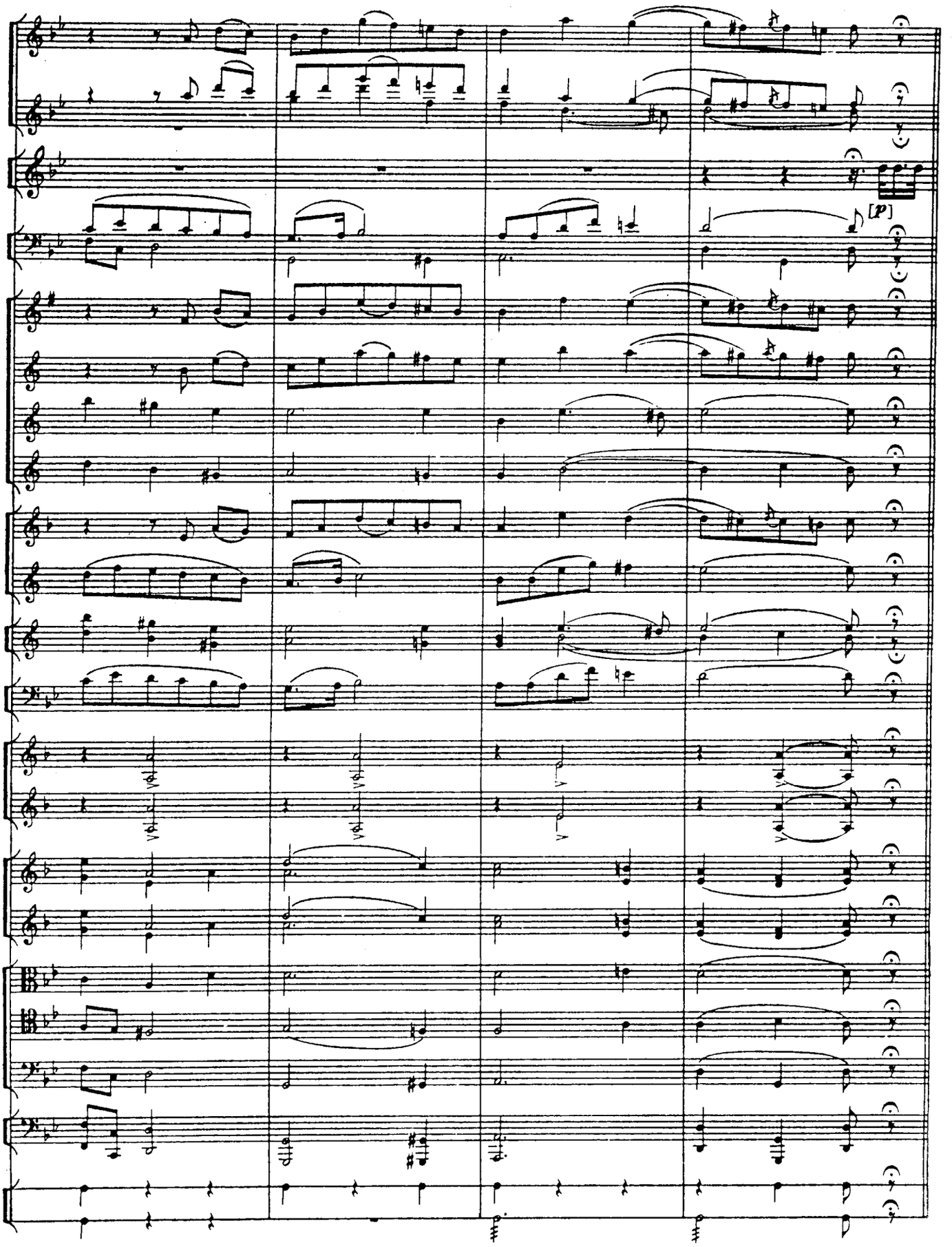

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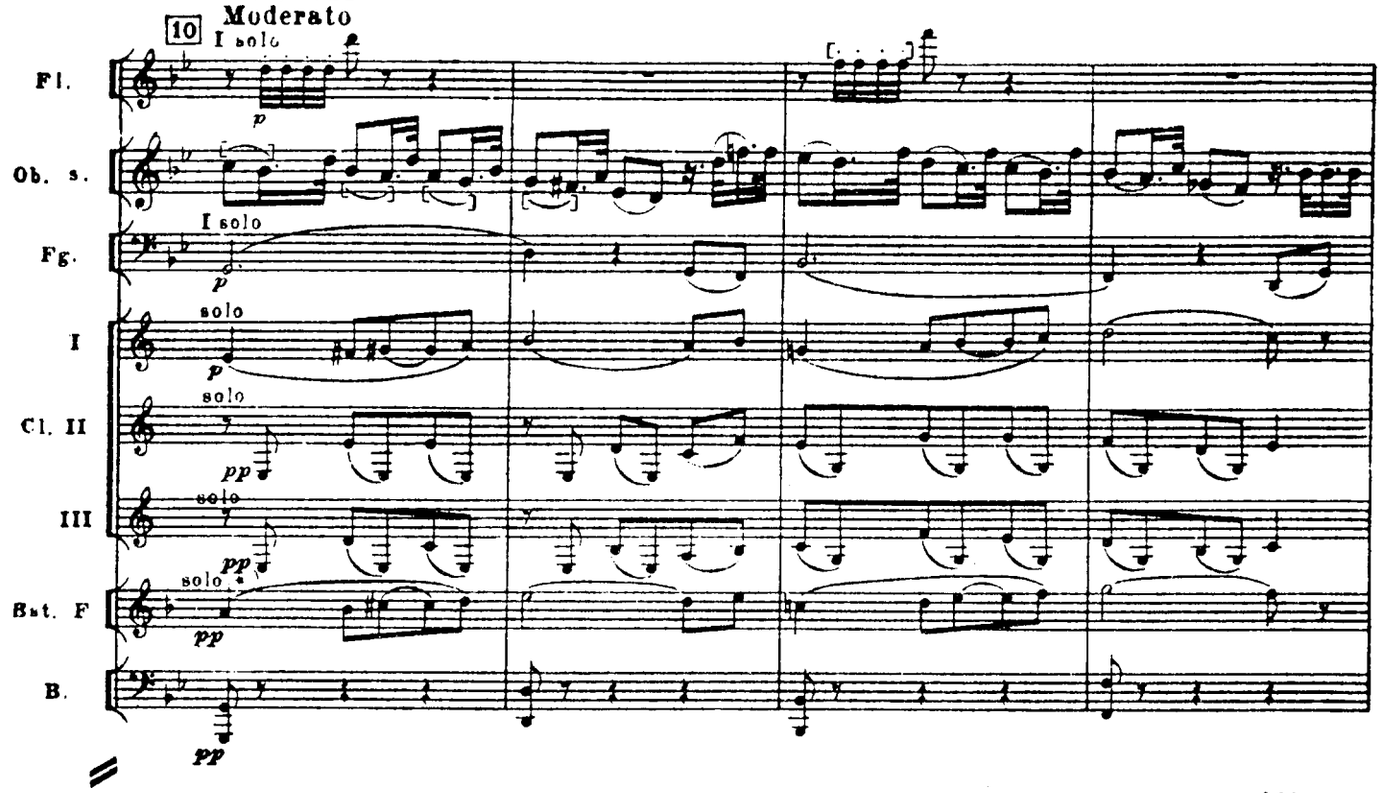
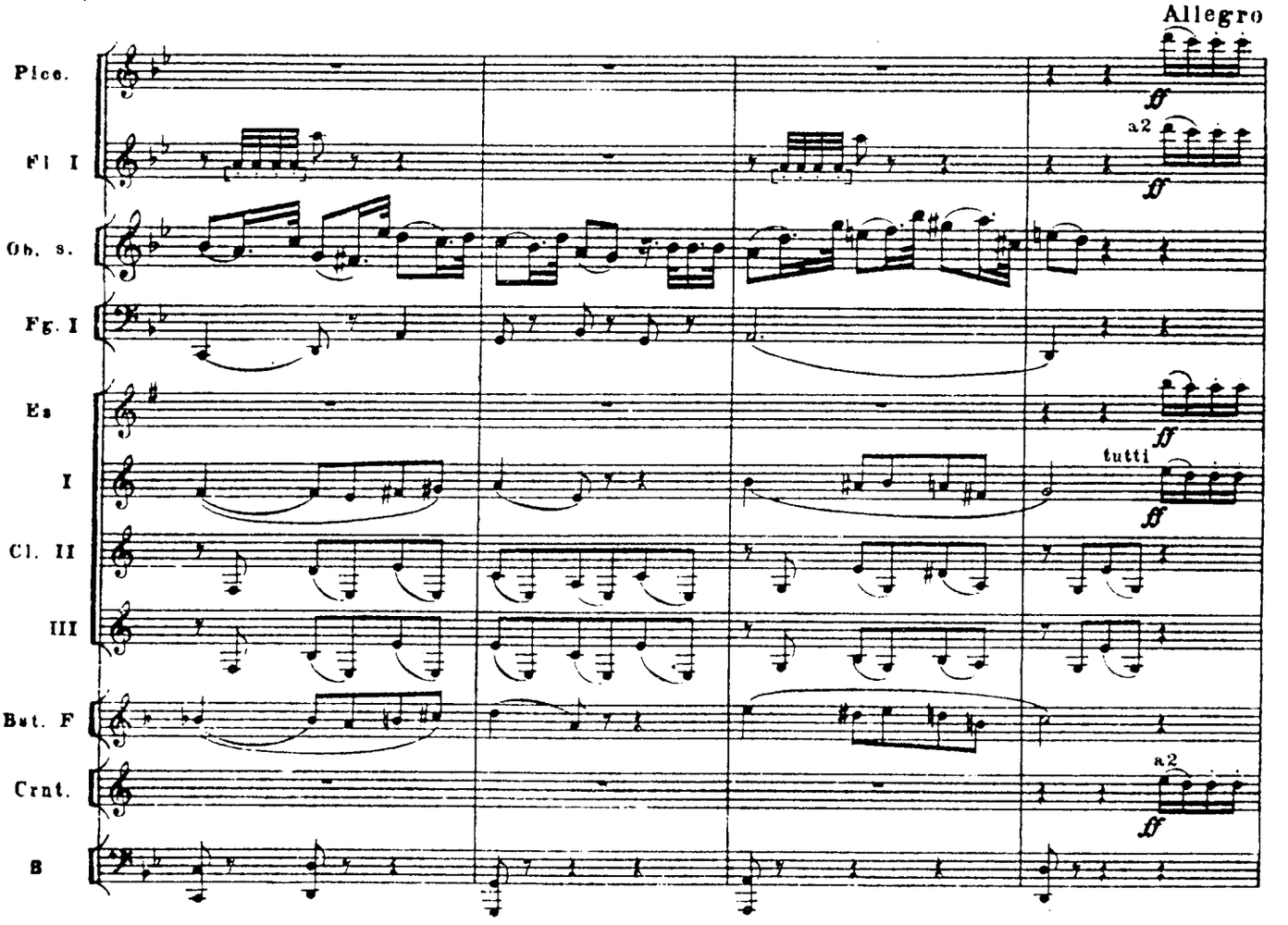
Var. VII

Moderato

10





*) ad libitum

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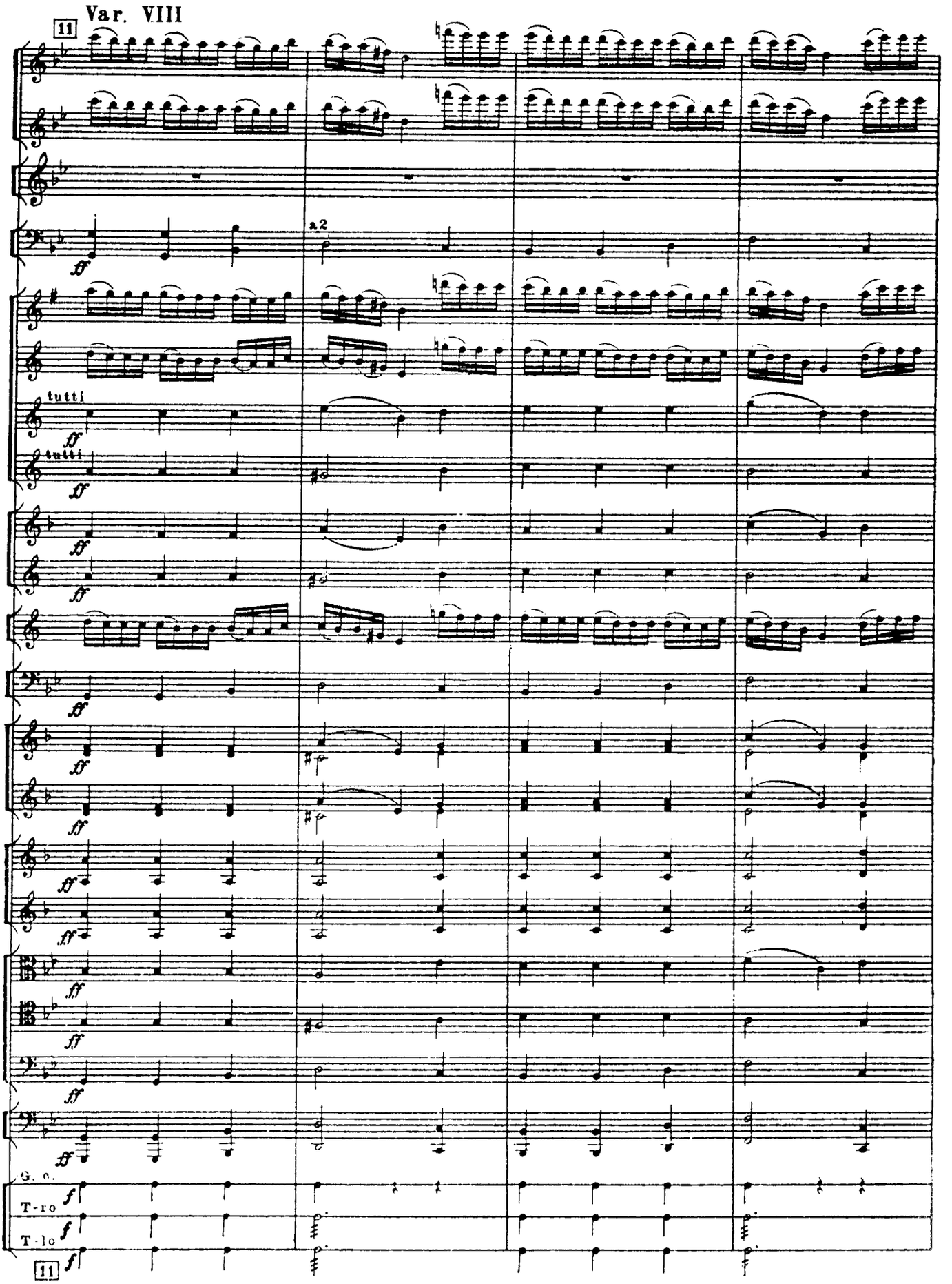

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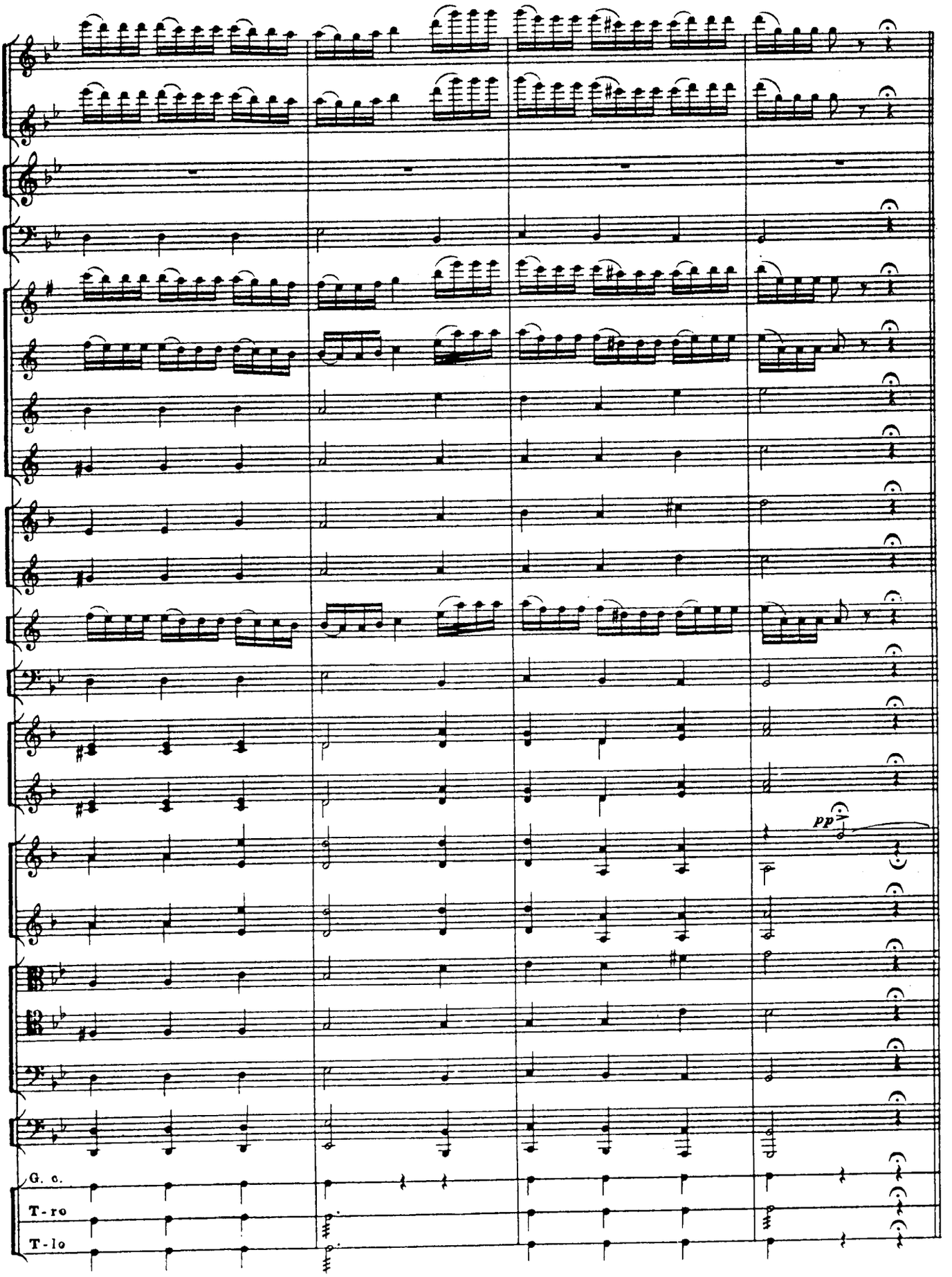

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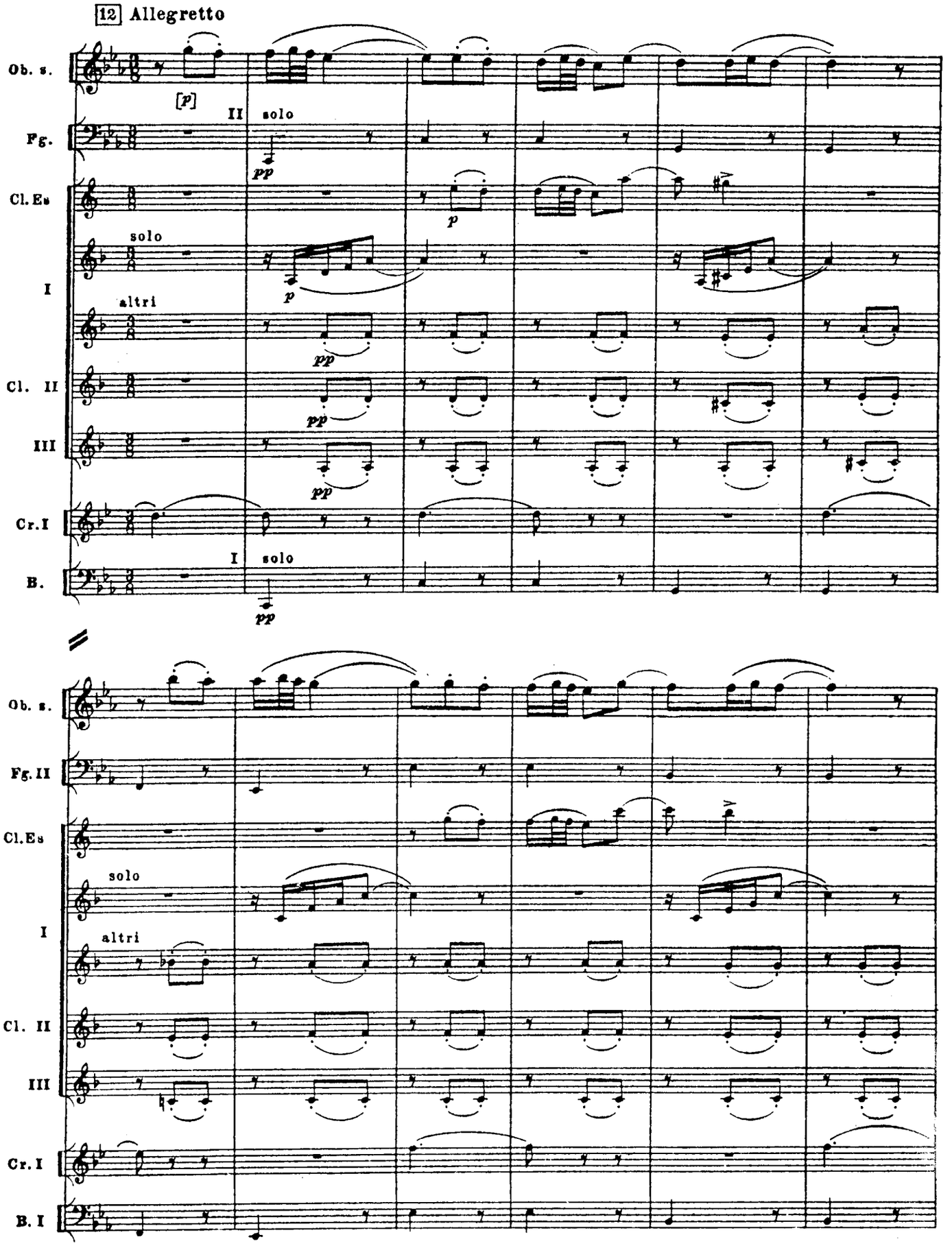
Var. IX

12 Allegretto



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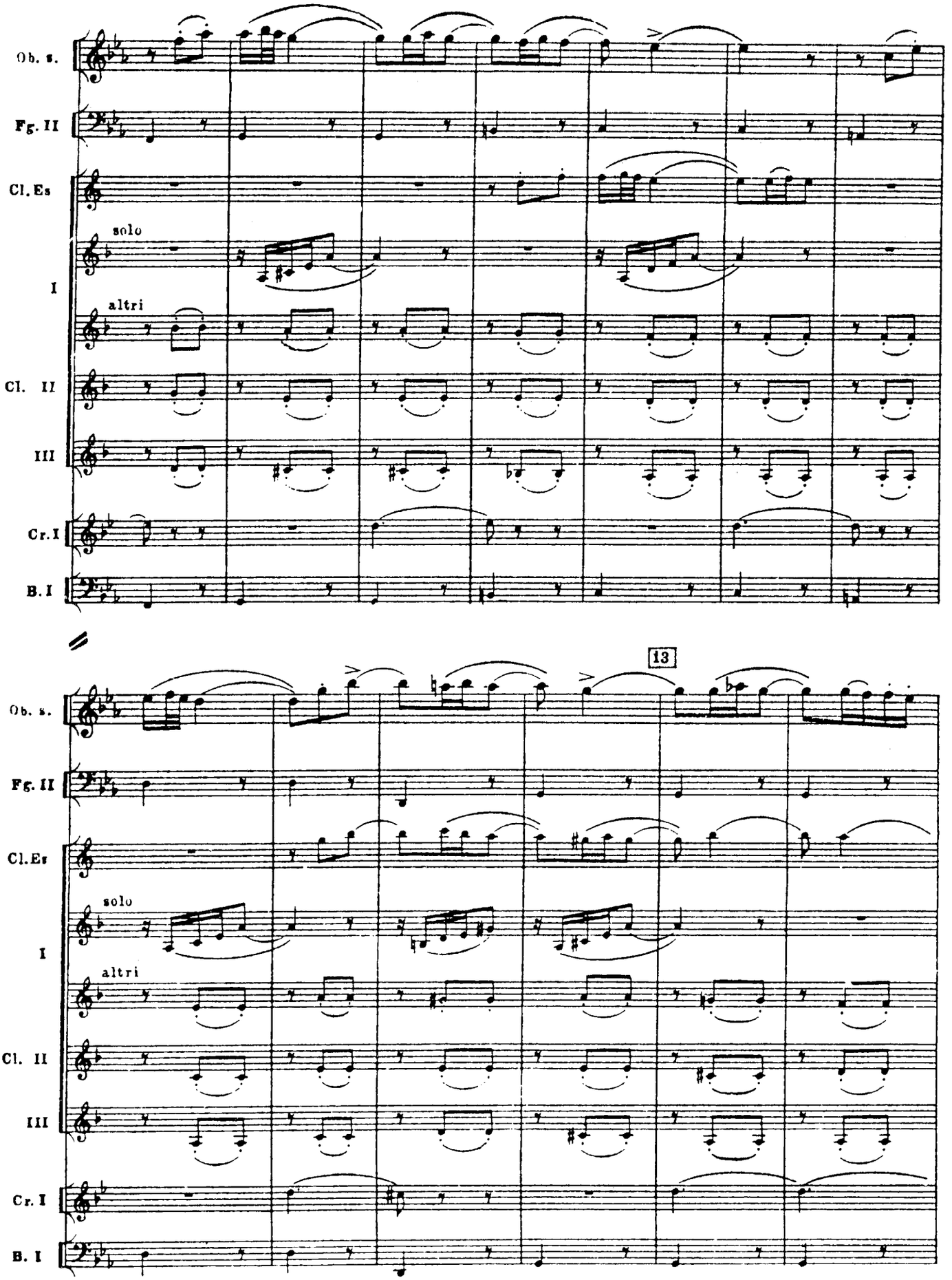

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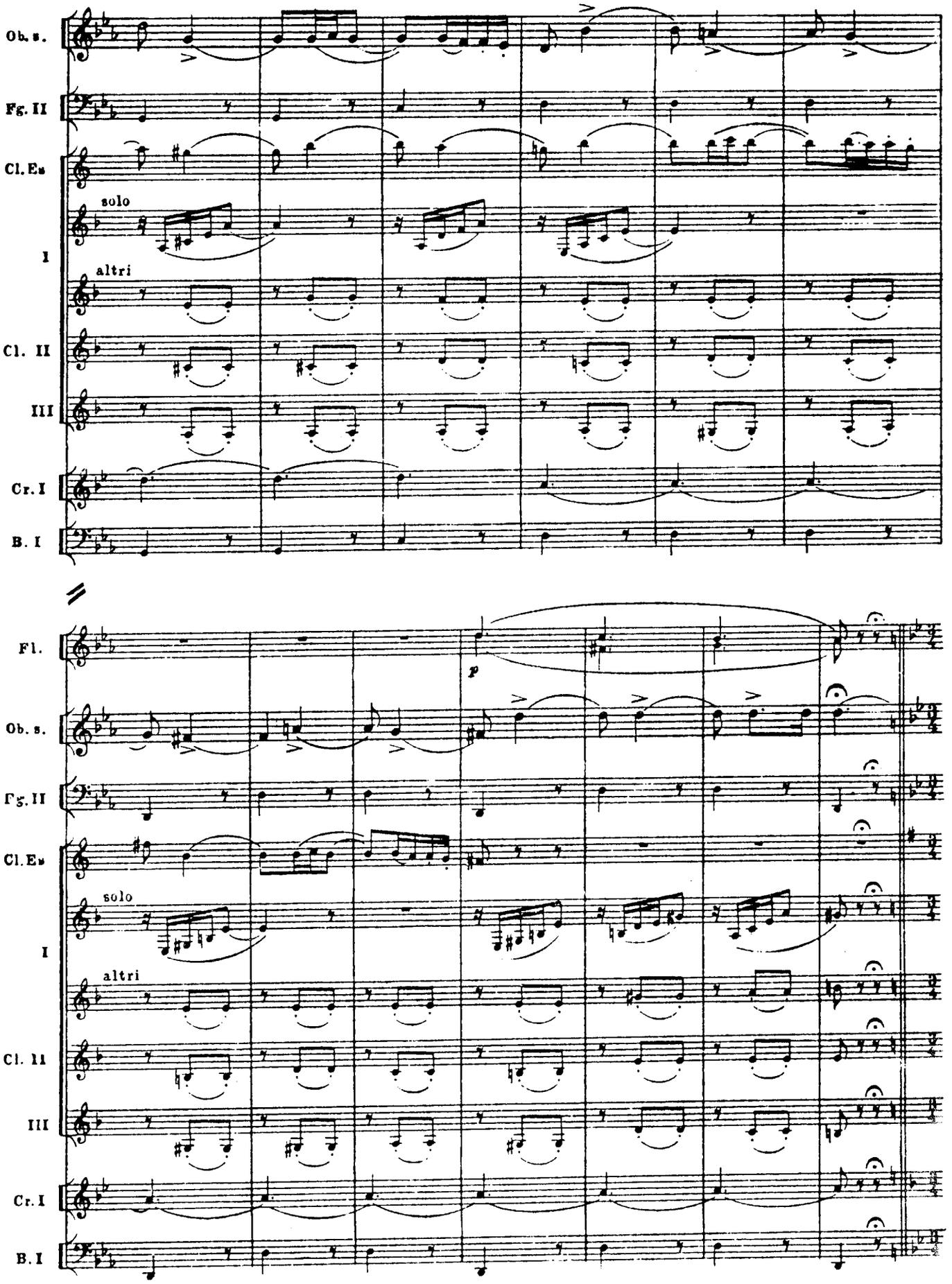

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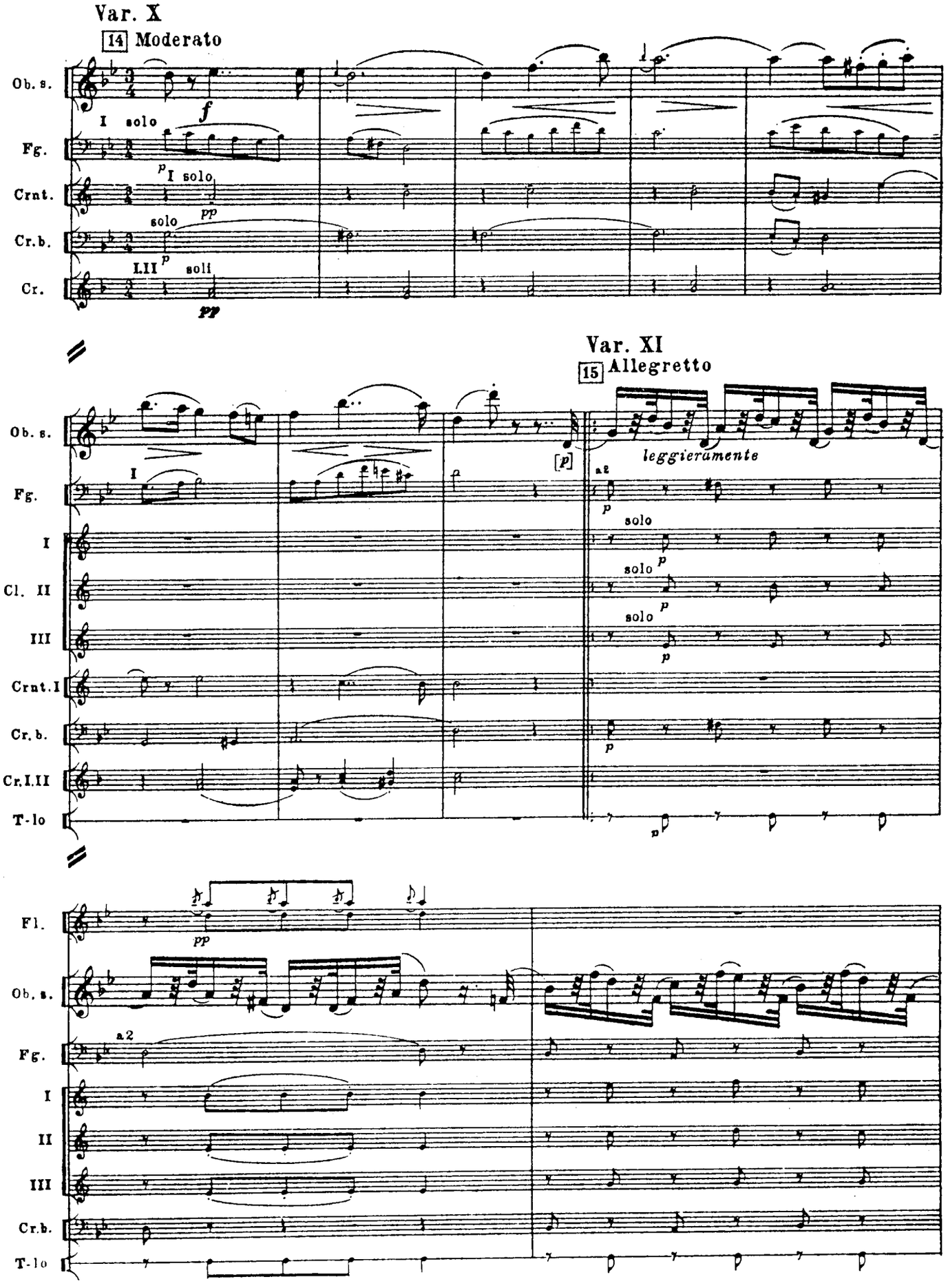

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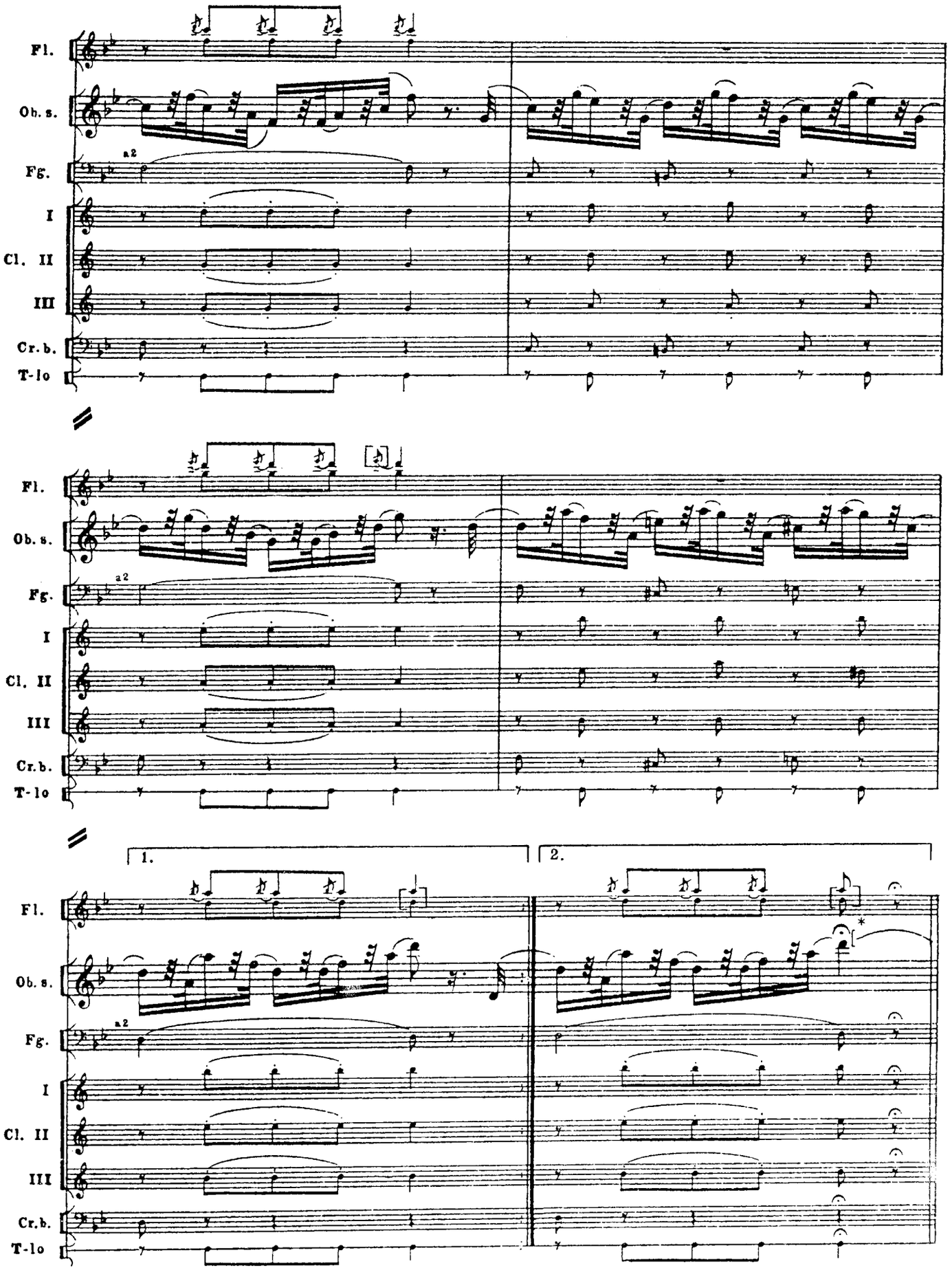

*The tie after the fermata should be considered ad lib; if necessary, soloist may take breath after observing the fermata.

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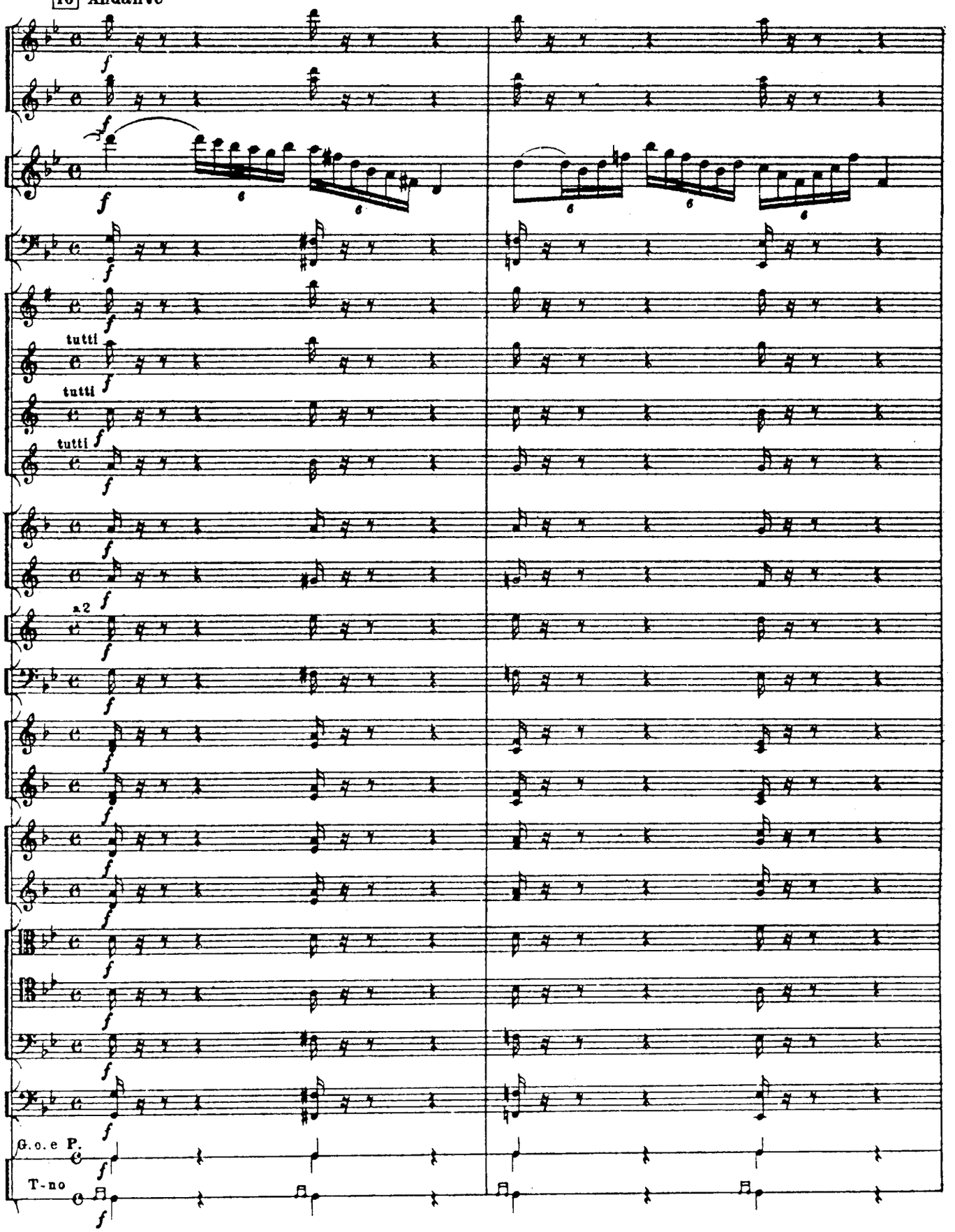
Var. XII

16 Andante



16 Andante

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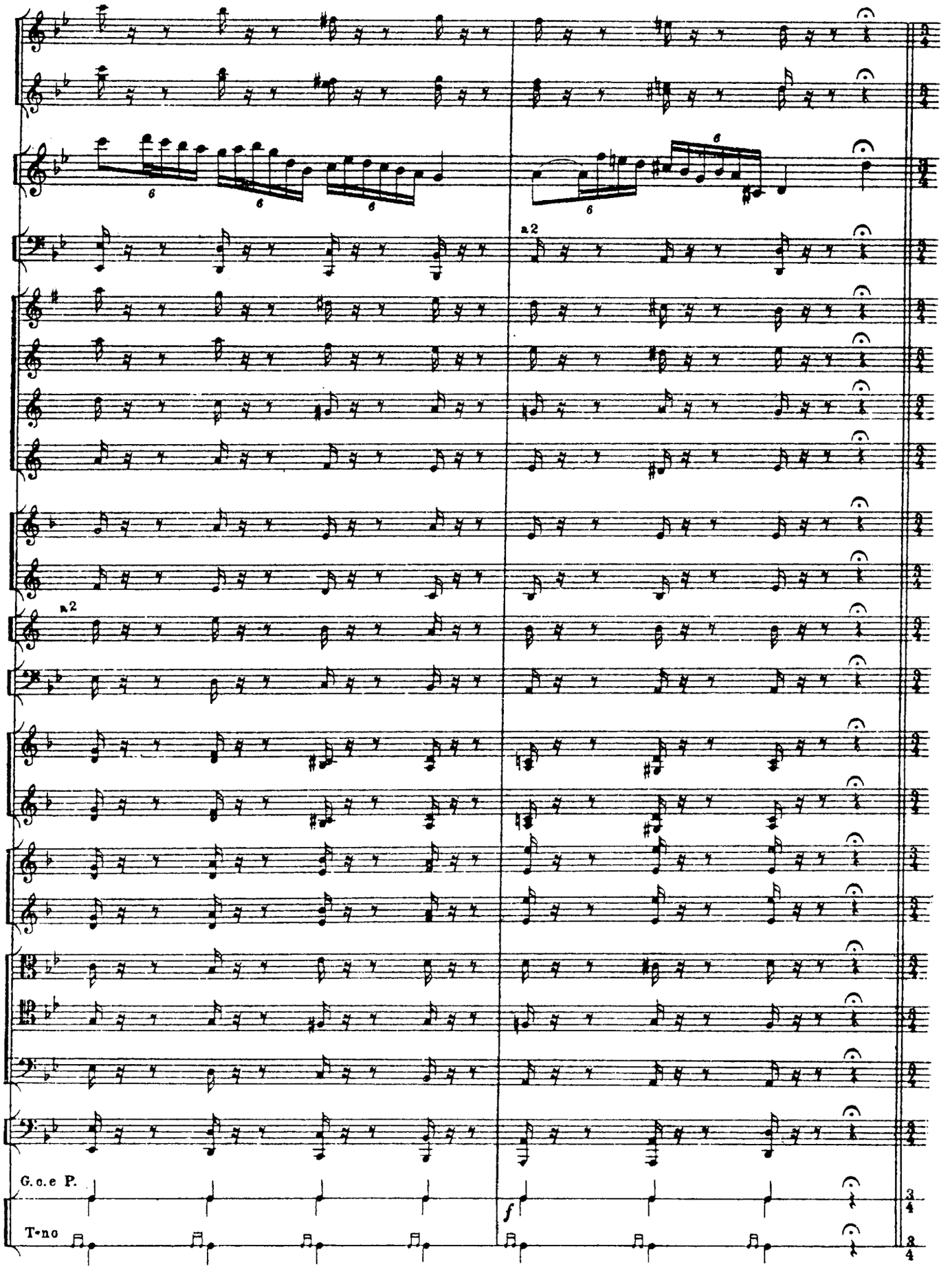

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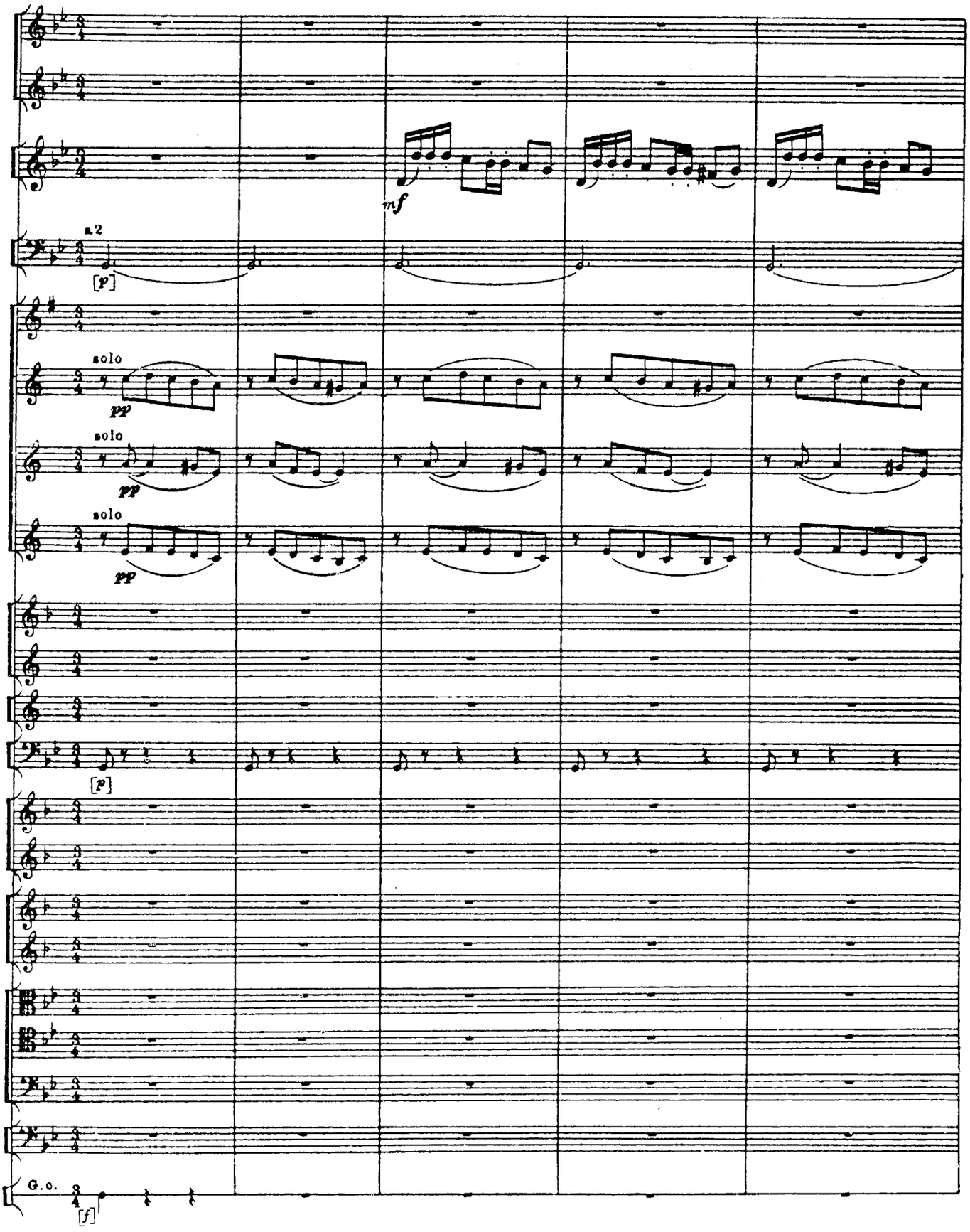
Finale

17 Allegro moderato



17 Allegro moderato

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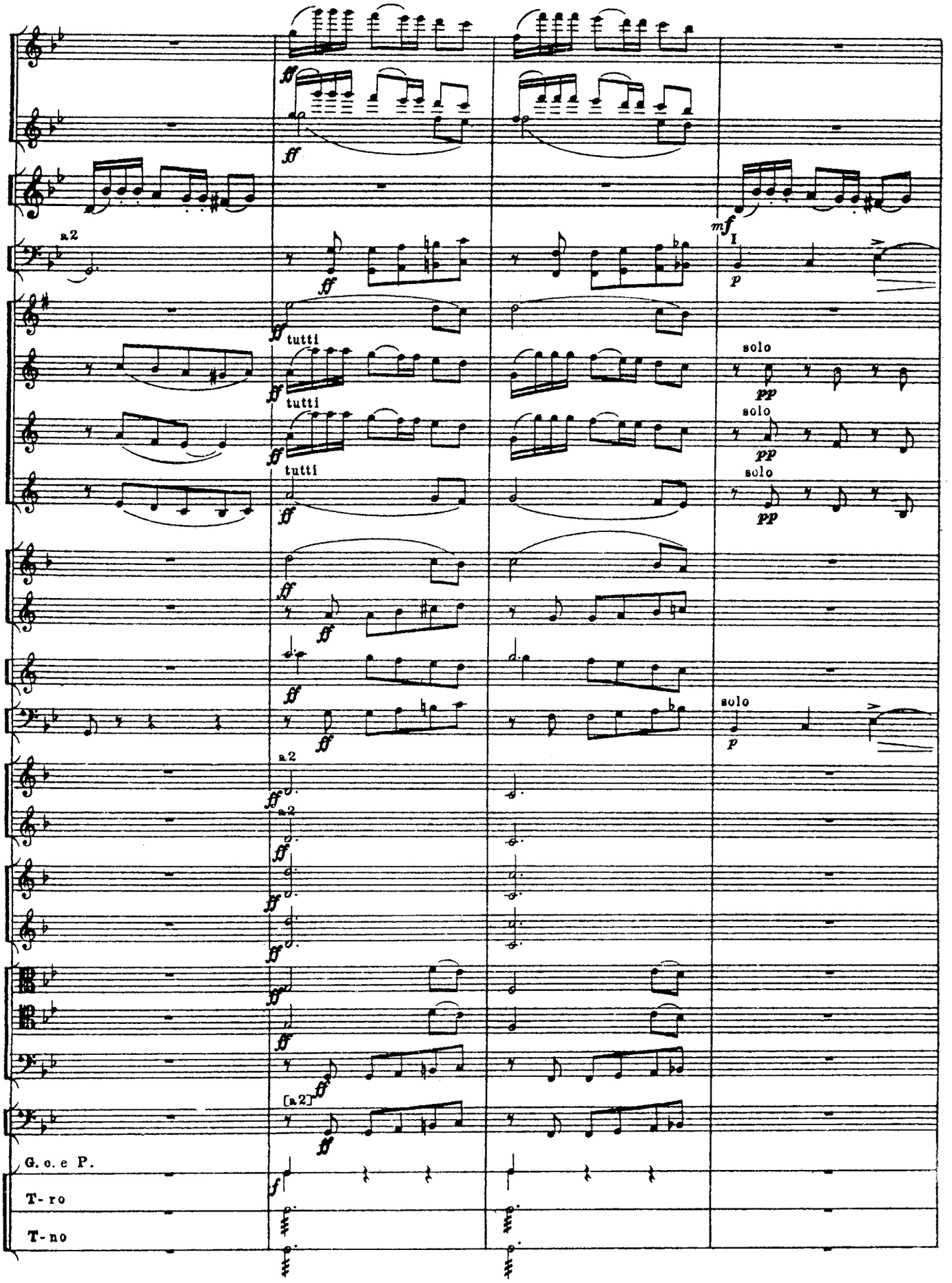

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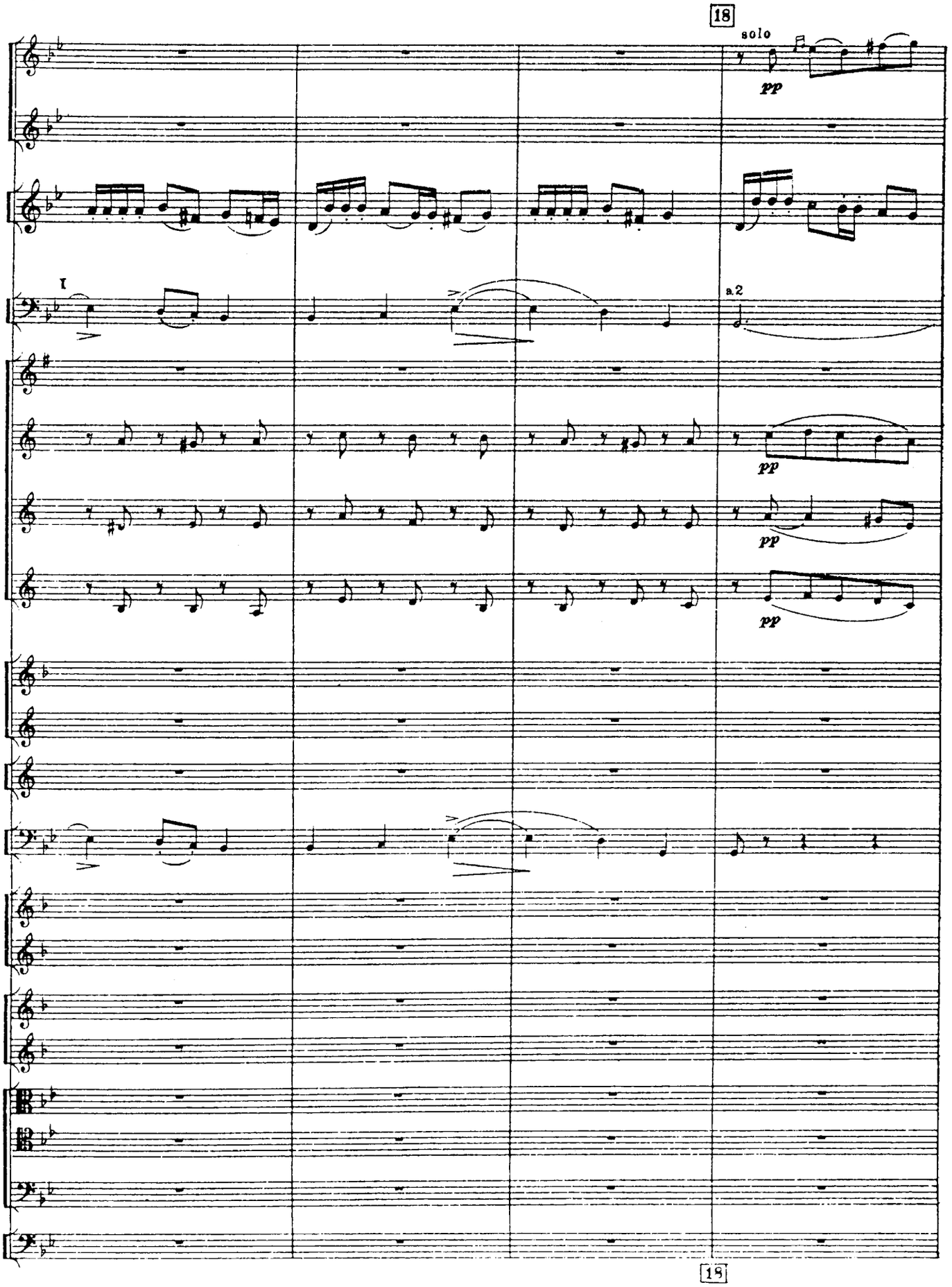

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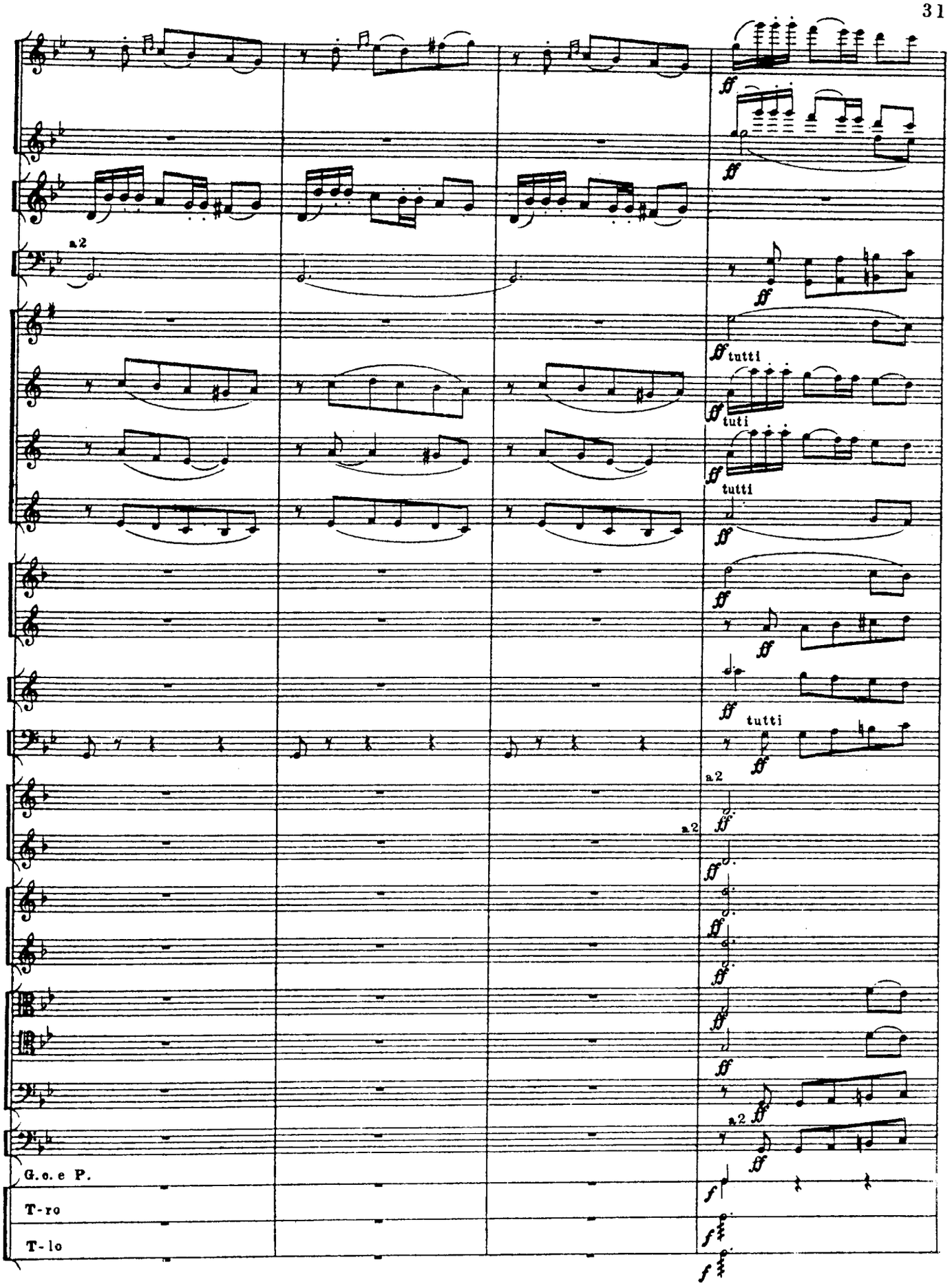

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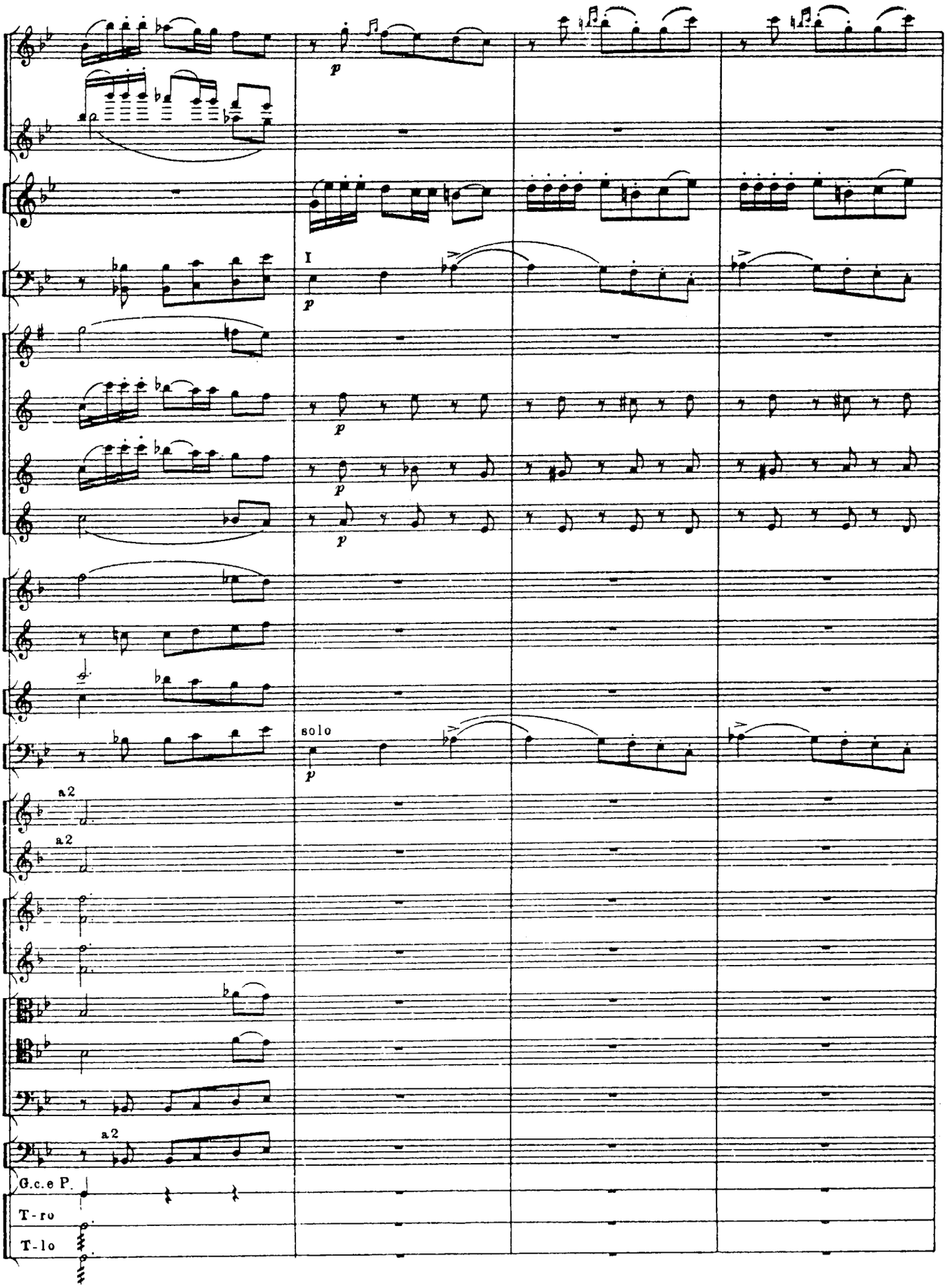

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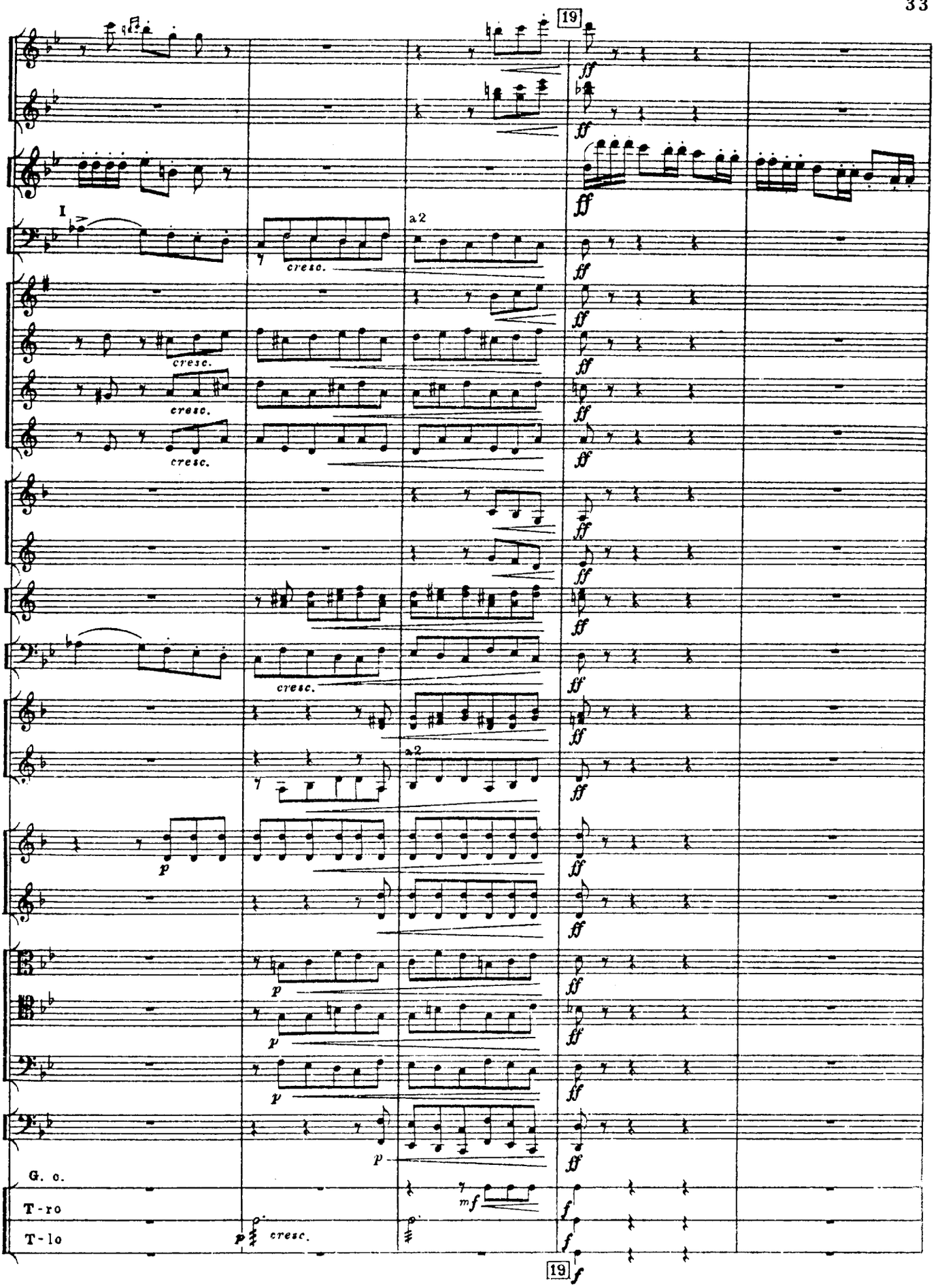

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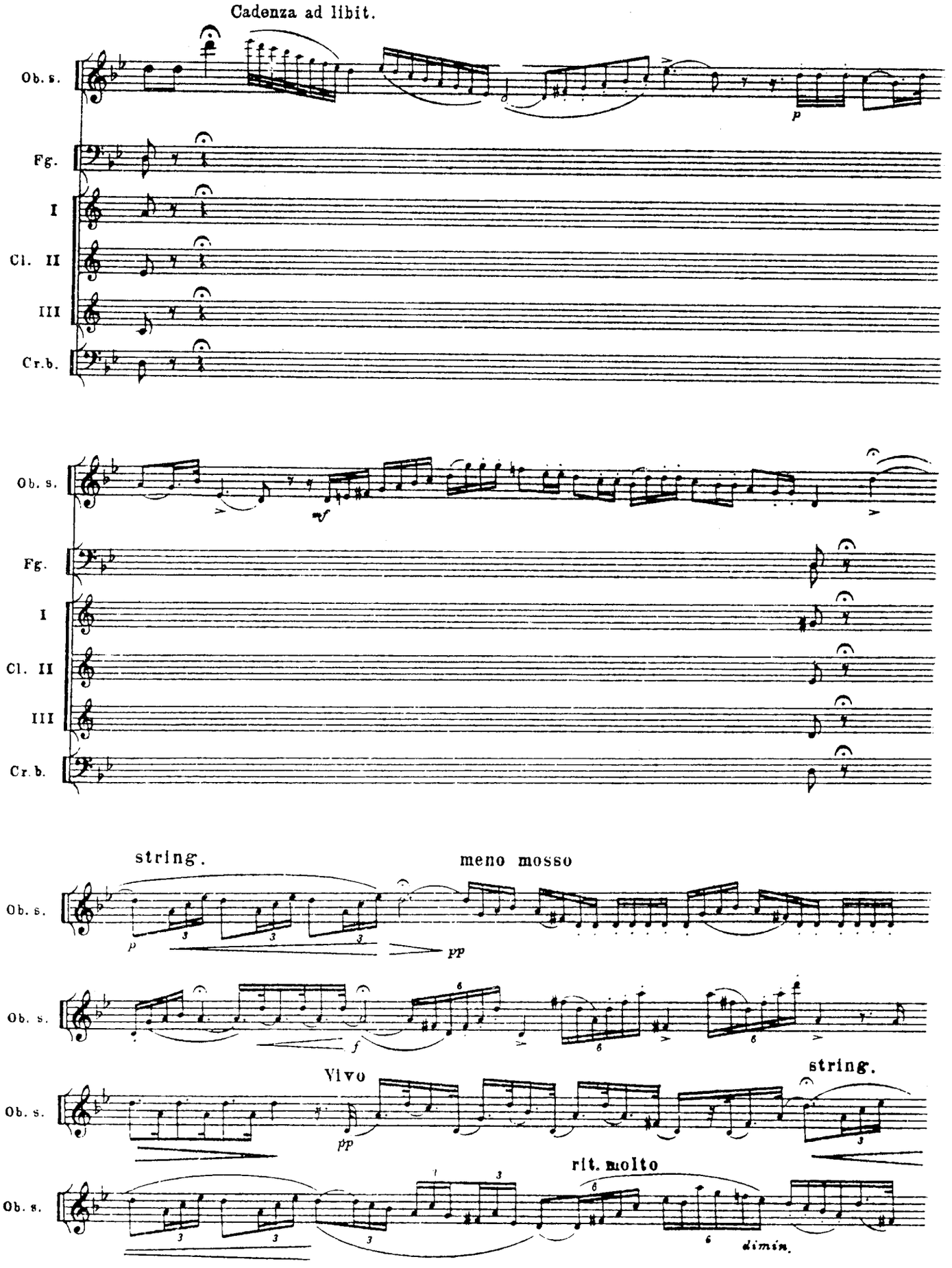
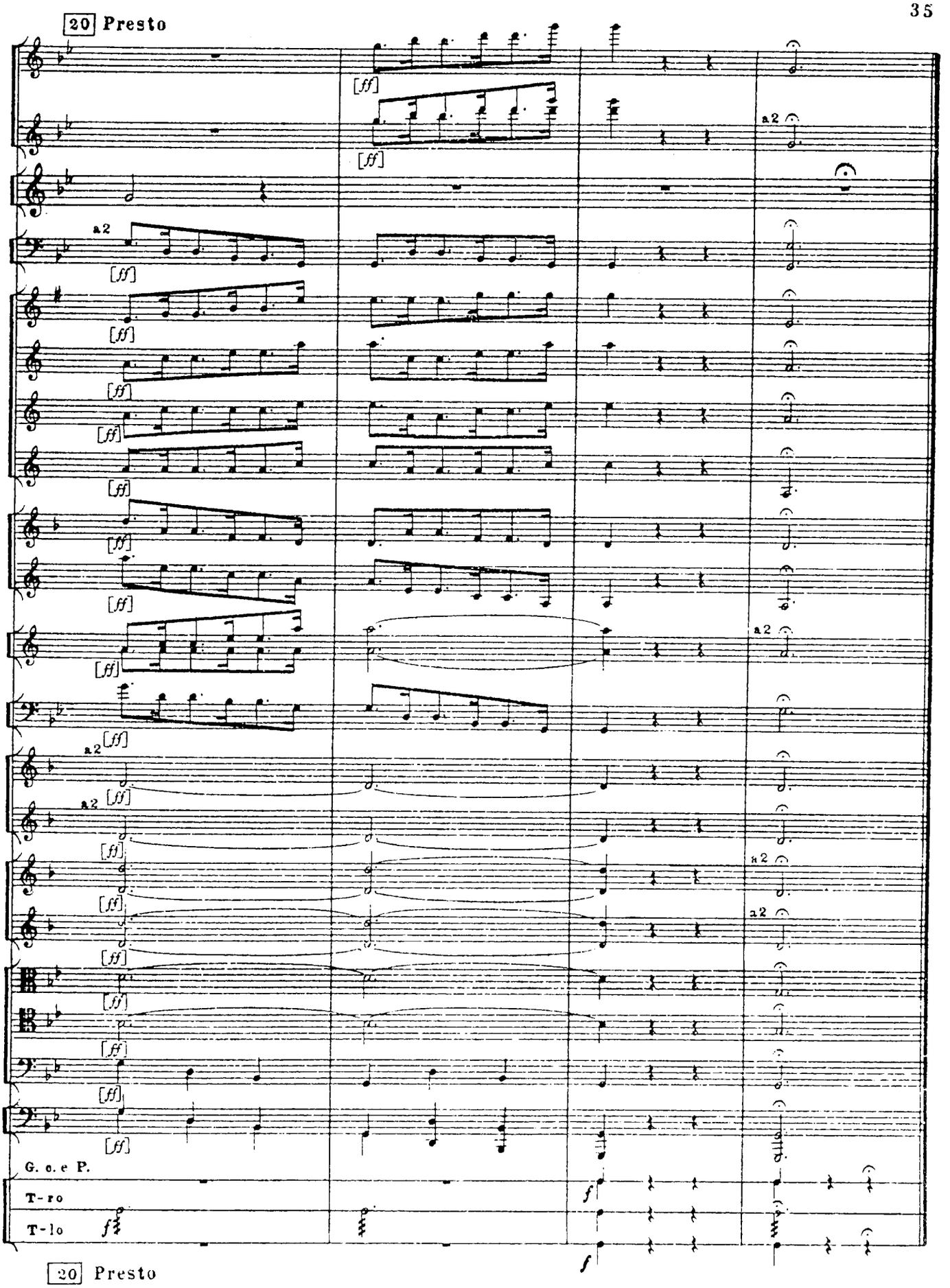
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