Russell Steinberg

Bach's Vortex

Op. 89

for solo piano

PREVIEW SCORE

Blown To Bits Publications

Bach's Vortex
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PROGRAM NOTES

Not infrequently, moments in Bach's music ascends to the "nose-bleed" limit of tonality. Bach understood tonality so deeply that he was able to bend it just to the breaking point and then "return to Earth" with a sudden cadence of clarity or recognizable sequence of 5ths. But those moments "in the cracks" between key areas are quite phenomenal. They sound like portals to music written hundreds of years later.

Bach was keenly aware of what he was doing! It can't be an accident that the final section in the final fugue of the second volume of the Well Tempered Clavier includes one of these remarkable moments. It's as if Bach wanted to send off this lavish compendium of preludes and fugues that traverse *all* the tonal keys with a glimpse that an entire new world lies beyond.

In this dense, but brief and dissonant passage, I hear intimations of both Wagner and Schoenberg. I conceived of creating a short piece that would expand these handful of measures with their crazy cross relations in such a way as to make these "sounds of the future" apparent. I begin by carving away most of the notes to expose the bare-bone structure of dissonance that hovers over the entire passage. That sounds even farther than Schoenberg—all the way to Anton Webern. Then I gradually fill in Bach's actual pitches and increase the tempo until halfway through, the actual Bach passage sounds like a whirling dervish. Logically, the second half of the piece takes notes away again until the piece sounds as it began, but with a surprise ending that quotes Schoenberg's opening to his op. 11 piano pieces. By now, Schoenberg's style feels completely organic with the rest of the piece. Only "we are no longer in Kansas."

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Reduction Sketches for Bach WTC II Fugue 24
Final 9 Measures

The following 5 sketches beginning on the opposite page illustrate my imagination of the journey Bach have taken "precomposing" these final measures. Beginning with a conventional ascending sequence of fifths, he adds leading diminished chords, then passing and neighbor tones, and finally an arpeggiatedbass line that accentuates the harsh cross relations between the voices and takes tonality right up to its breaking point: F# against F, C against C#, G against G#, etc.

The last two measures finally put the wheels back on the ground and bring the music back to the key of B minor using a conventional final cadence (albeit a feminine cadence that includes the flavor of dissonance that has permeated the entire passage!).

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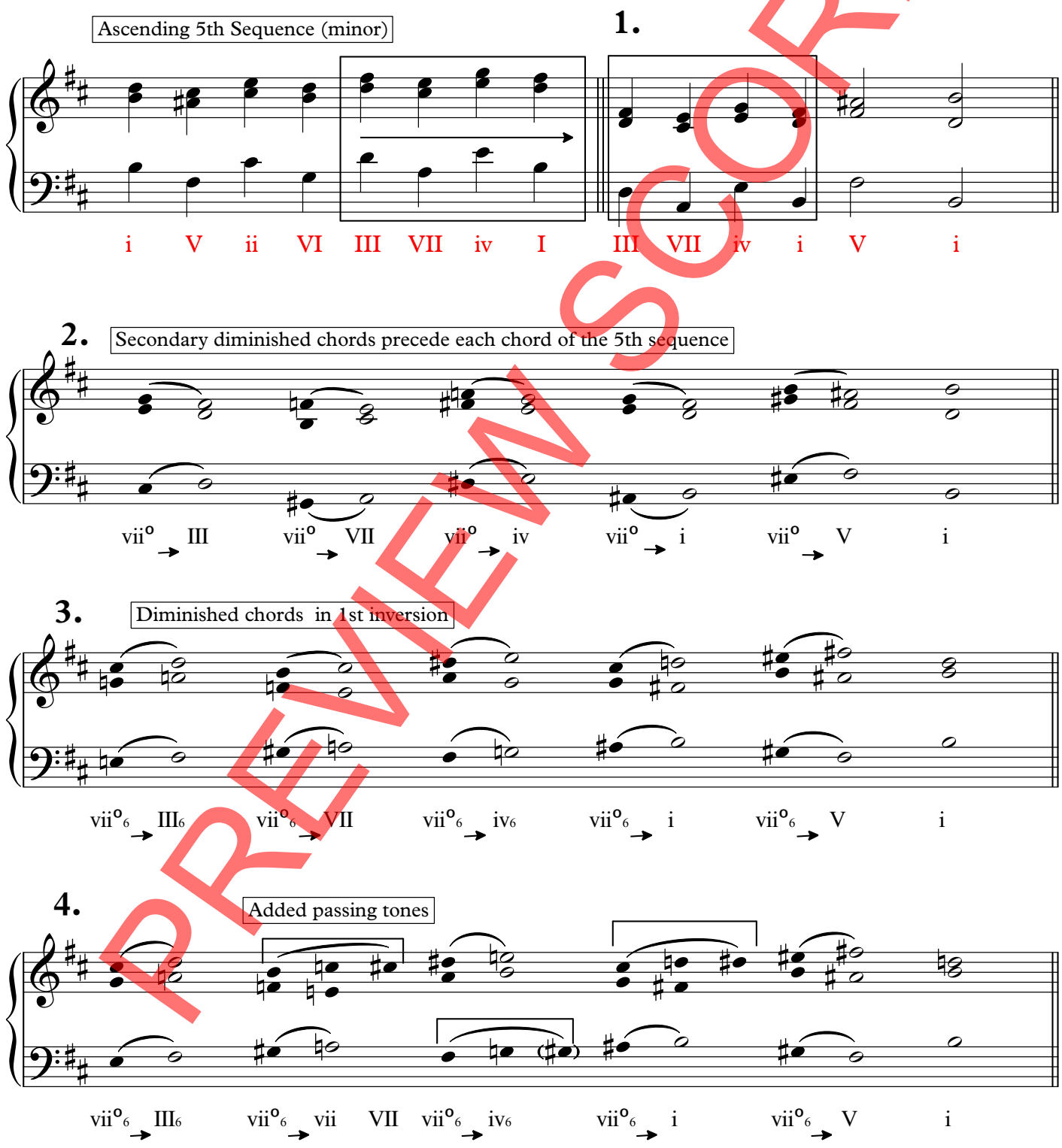
Bach elaborates a simple ascending 5ths sequence to create a remarkable dissonant passage that explores the boundaries of tonality.

Final measures Bach, WTC Bk. II Fugue



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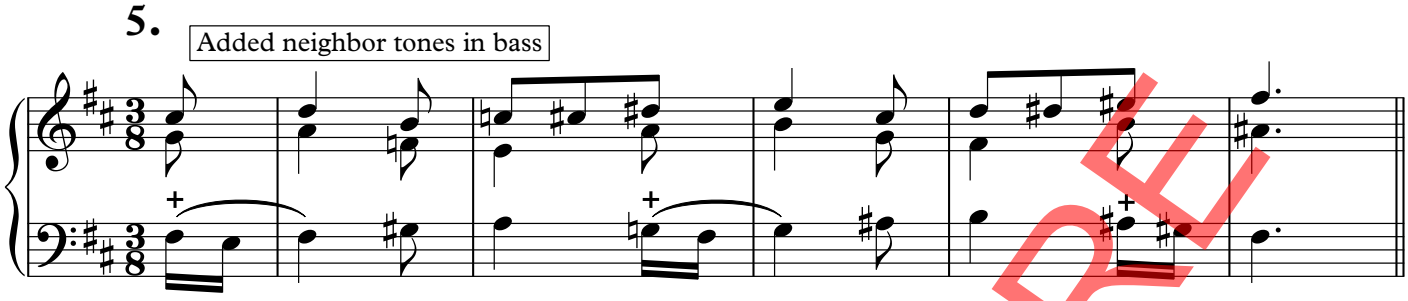
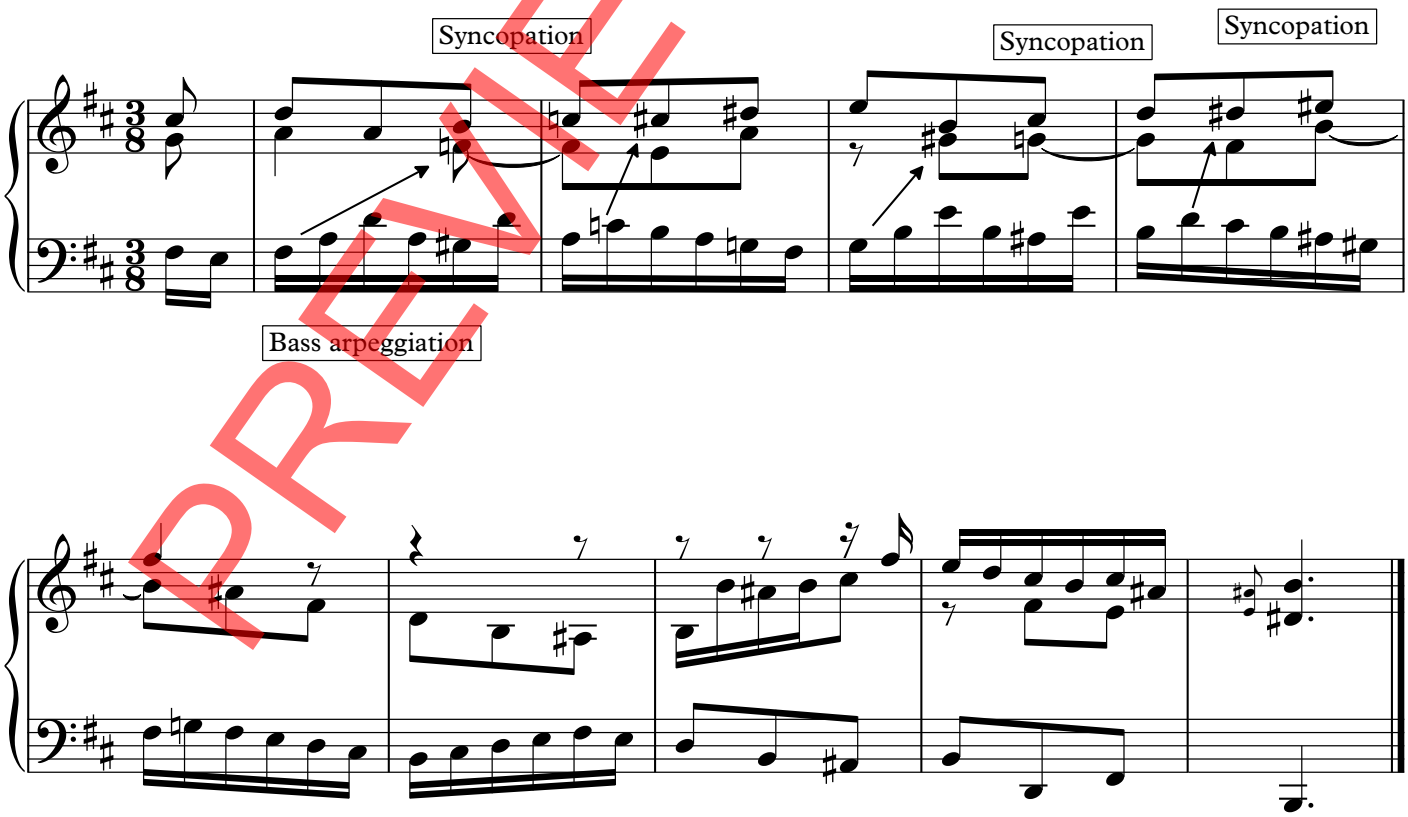
5.



Bach WTC II B minor Fugue Ending

Bass arpeggiation and passing tones in middle voice create dissonant cross-relations (see arrows)



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Bach's Vortex

Building toward and then erasing the last nine measures of
Bach's B Minor Fugue WTC II to explore the boundaries of tonality

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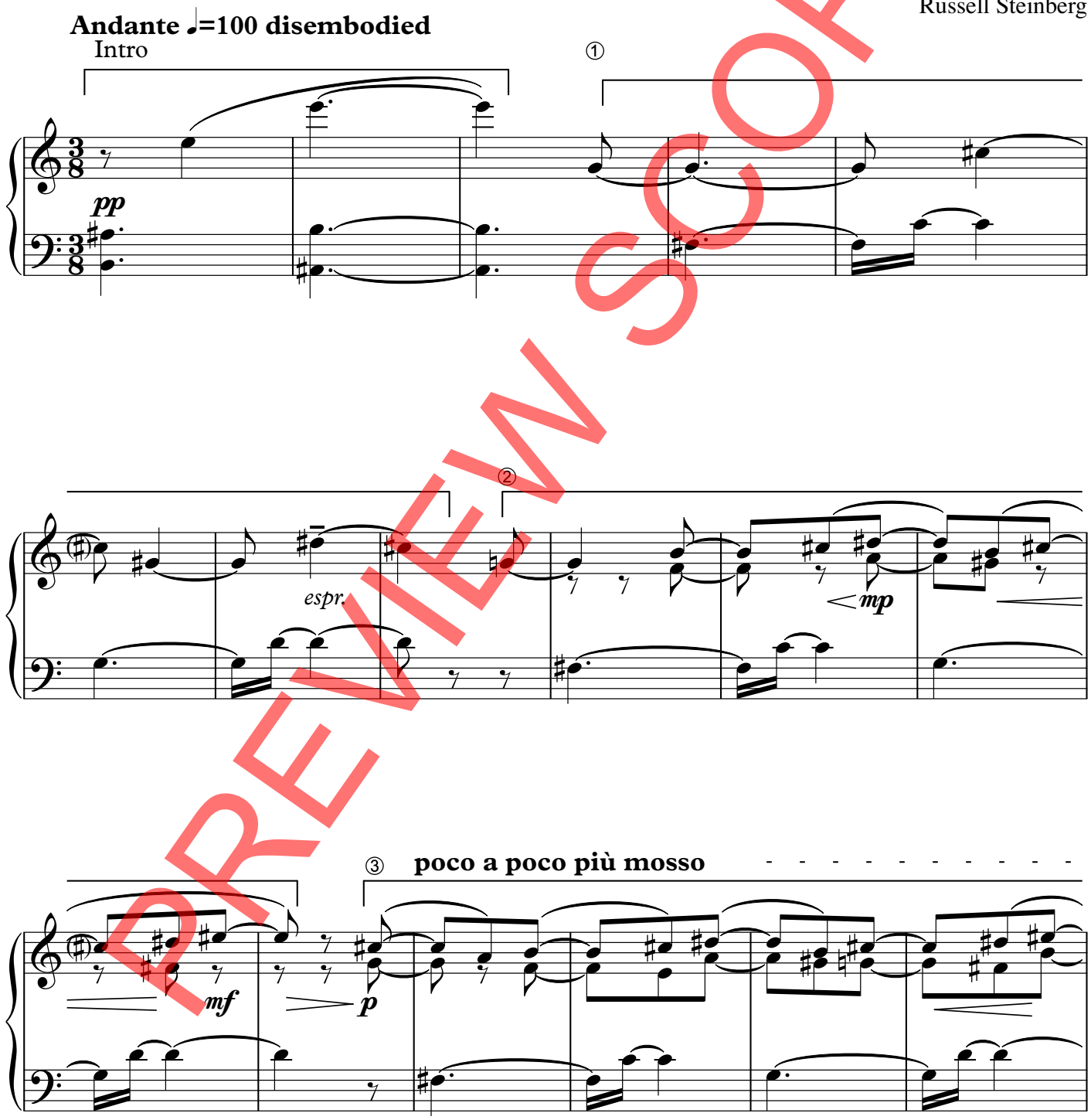

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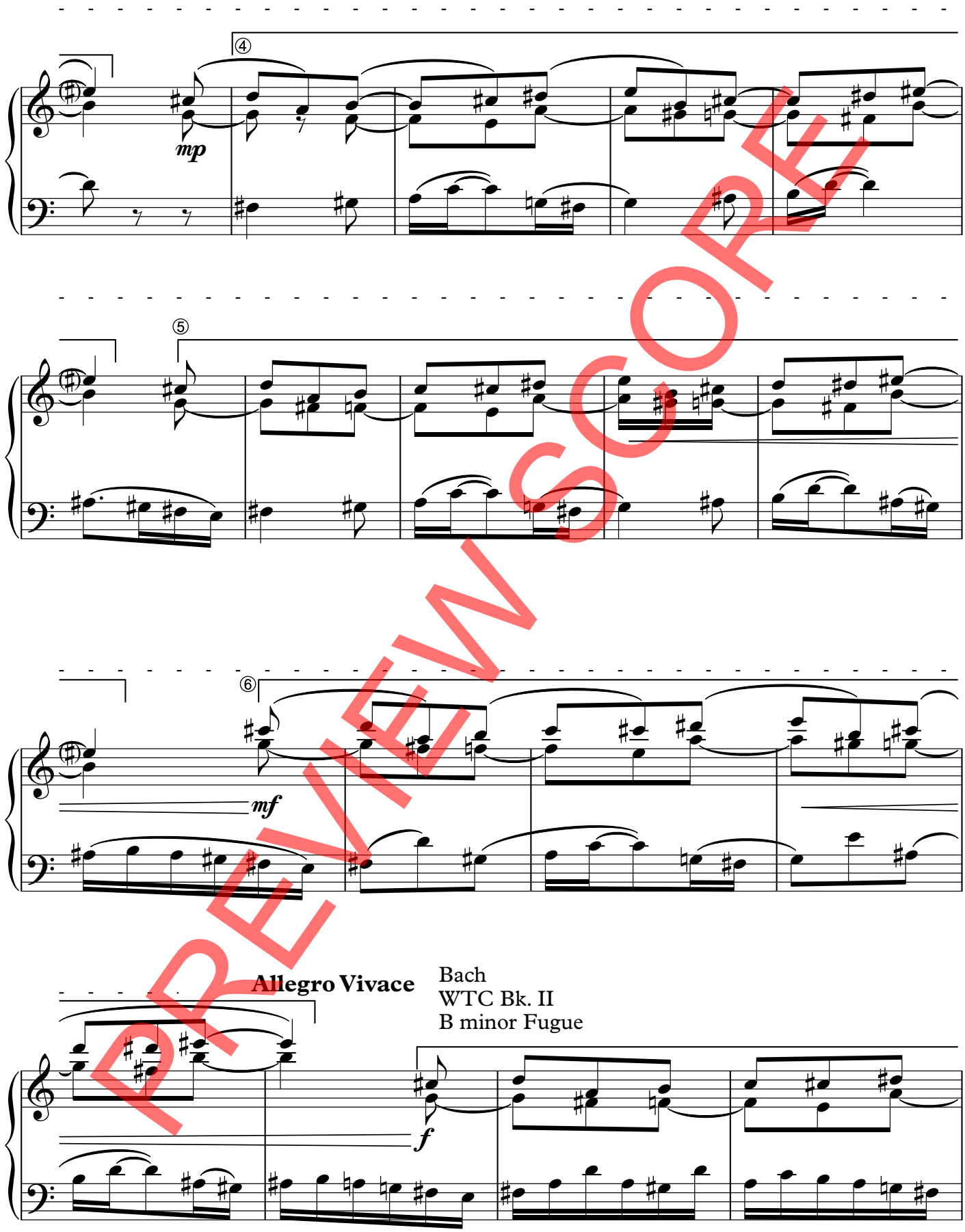

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Manic interlude

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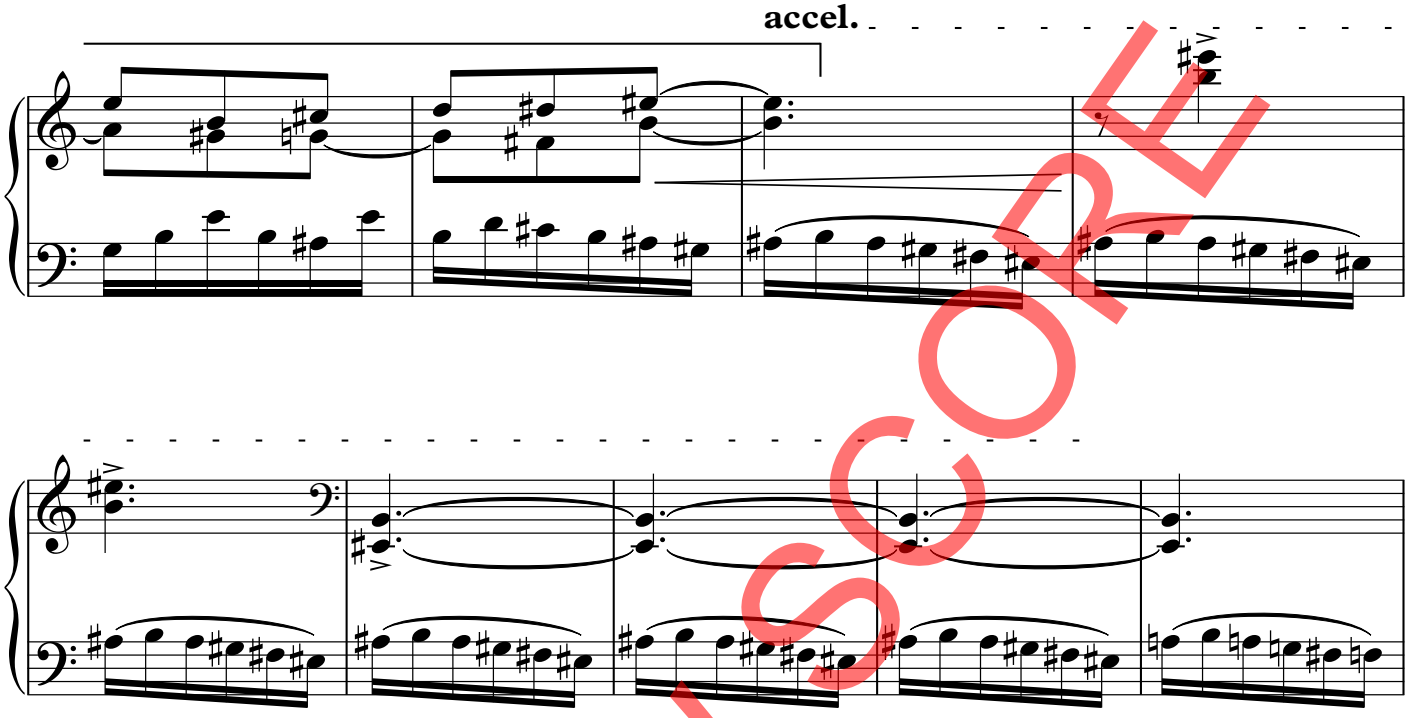
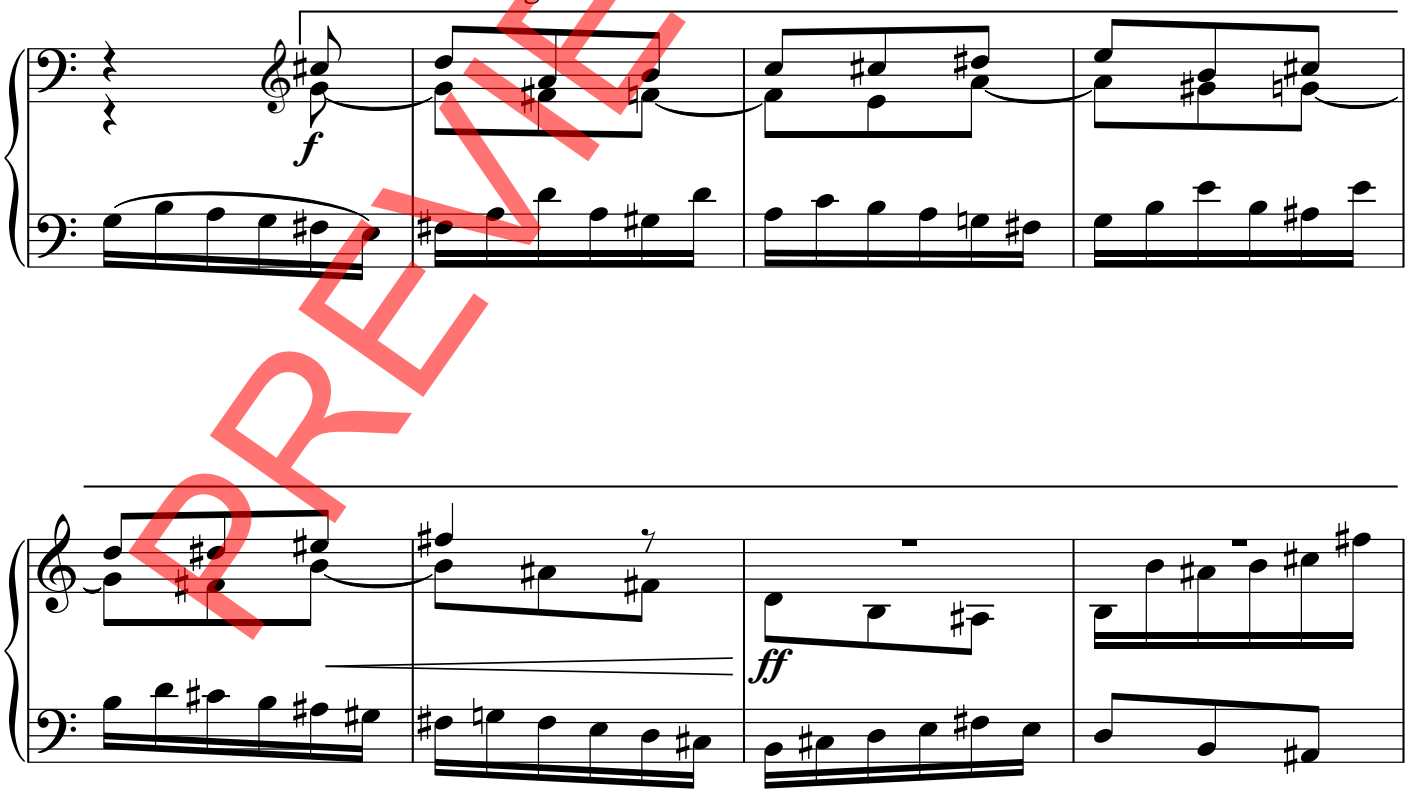


Presto ♩=200

Bach
WTC Bk. II
B minor Fugue

f



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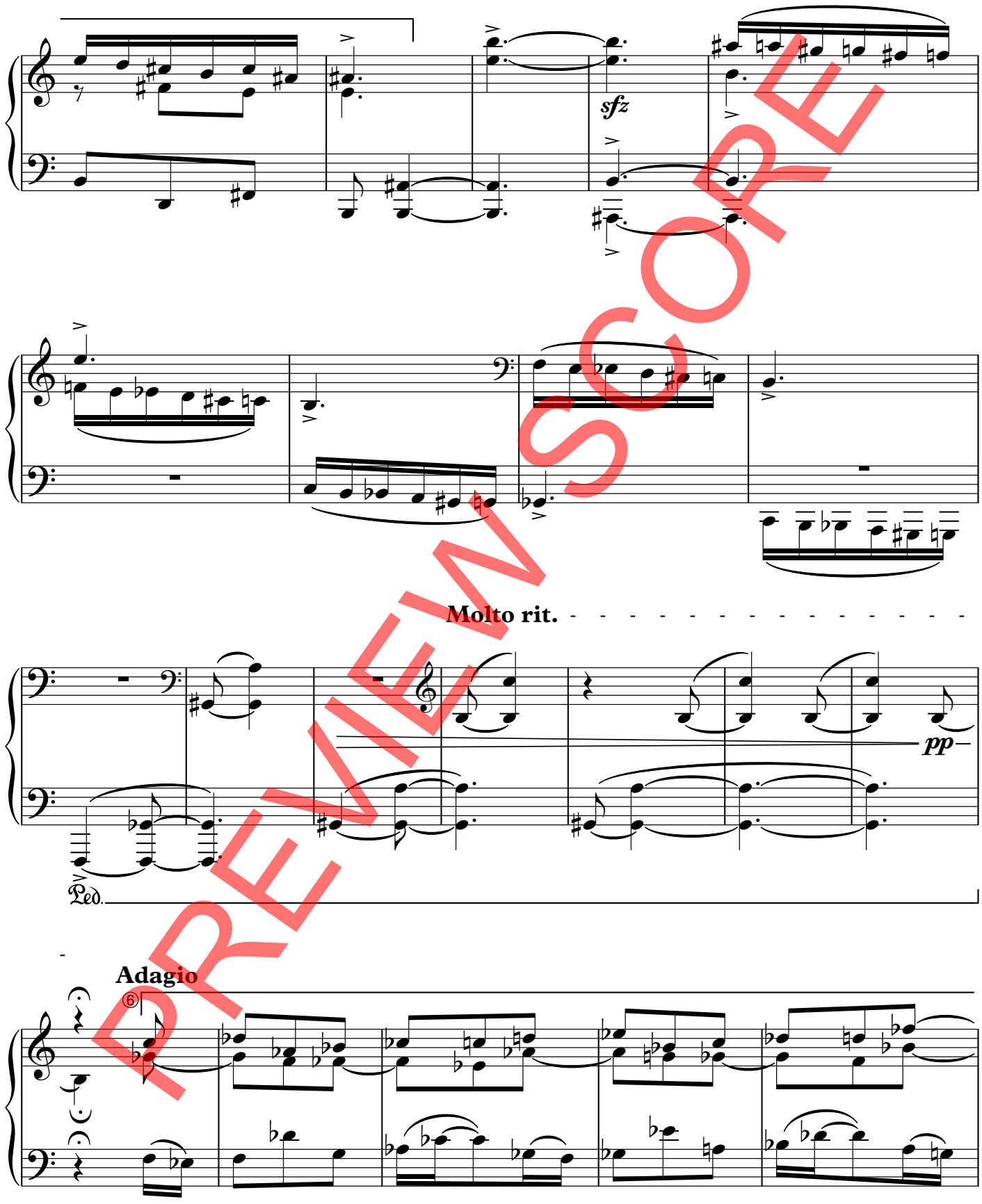

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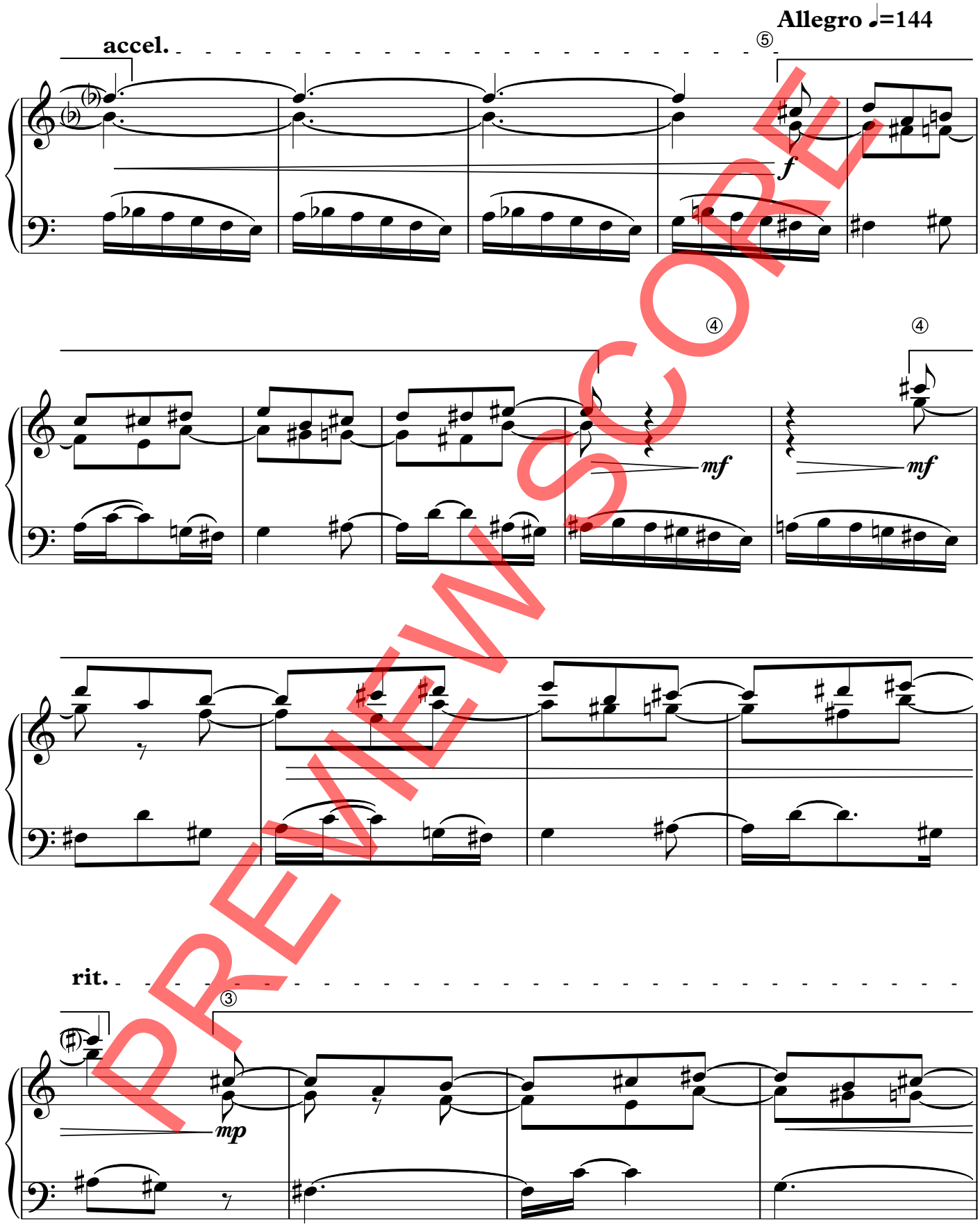

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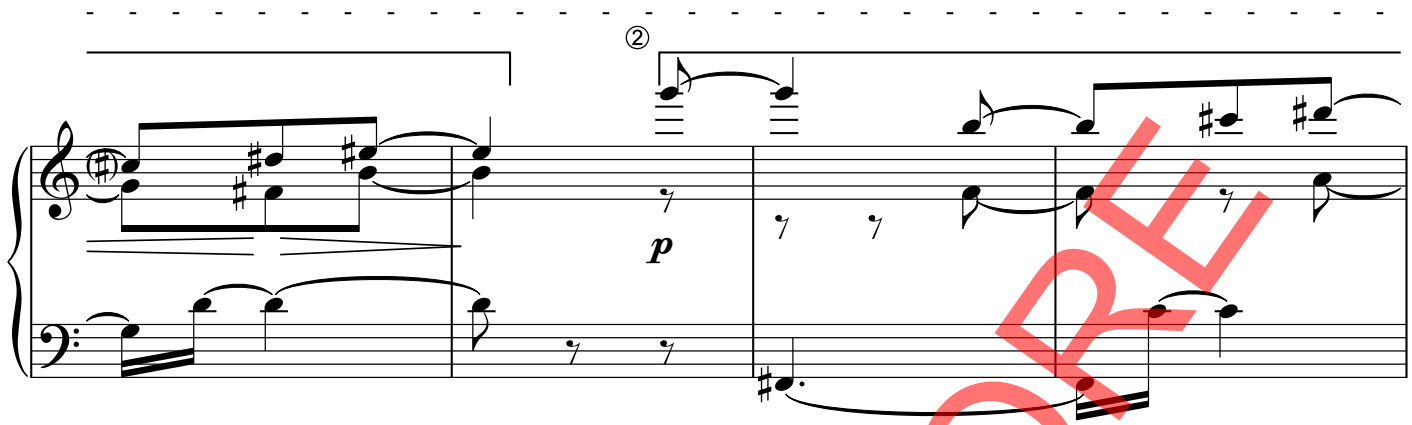
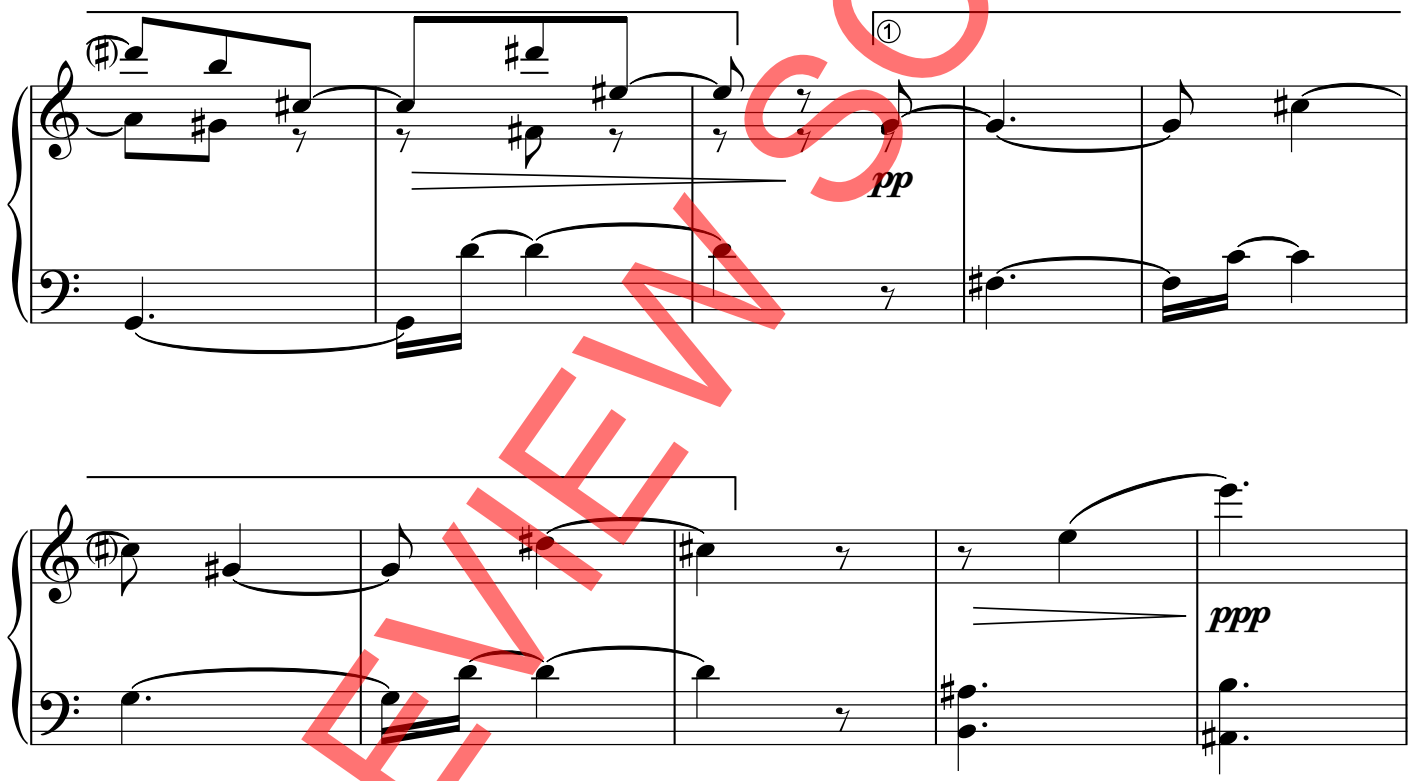


Andante ♩=100 disembodied



Schoenberg op. 11#1
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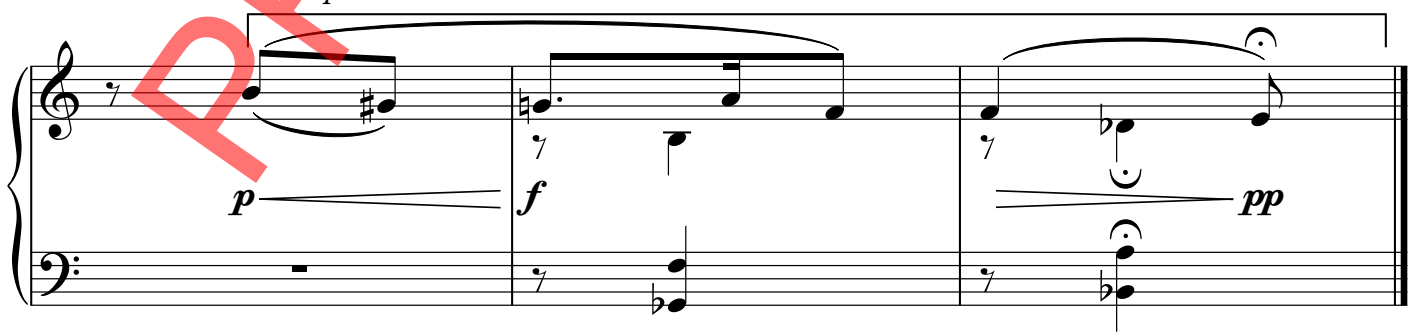

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