Bach Revealed

A Player's Guide to the Solo Cello Suites by J.S. Bach

Volume Three – Suites V and VI
BWV 1011–1012

Selma Gokcen
Kenneth Cooper

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Foreword

The Suites for Solo Cello by J.S. Bach represent the pinnacle of literature for the instrument, engaging the curiosity and love of cellists everywhere for the instrumental and musical challenges they present. Rescued by Pablo Casals (1876–1973) from obscurity and brought to the concert stage, these suites are enjoyed and performed by young cellists, advanced students and professionals. Their dance movements never seem to lose their appeal and have even been transcribed for instruments as diverse as the marimba, saxophone and trombone.

Confronted by primarily a single line of music, cellists may ask themselves a series of questions. How is this music to be played? Where is the counterpoint? What is the musical structure? Where do the voices enter and depart? How are the harmonies sustained and resolved? Is there a bass line hidden somewhere along with the melody or does one simply play the single line, punctuated by the occasional chords, and hope that the music will reveal itself?

This edition aims to answer these questions as follows:

- to set forth the underlying two-, three- and sometimes four-voice texture in versions for two, three or four cellos
- to provide the implied bass line
- to simplify the melodic line and thereby
- to clarify what is structural versus what is ornamental.

This edition is an indispensable teaching tool, allowing student and teacher (or even groups of students) to play the movements together and to hear the implied counterpoint. Questions about performance of these suites – appropriate tempo, character, articulation, and voicing, for example – can be considered in relation to each other when the underlying structure is clearly understood. The bare contours of Bach's work also offer players of all instruments the opportunity to explore creative ornamentation of the melodic line.

Bach was mindful of preparing keyboard players to understand the challenges of his contrapuntal writing; from specific instructional items in the *Notebooks for Anna Magdalena Bach* and the two- and three-part *Inventions and Sinfonias* to the 48 preludes and fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier,* the French and English Suites, the Toccatas and the Six Partitas, the player is taken through an ever more difficult instrumental and intellectual journey, one based upon the study of preceding simpler forms. Cellists have no such gift from Bach. Perhaps this edition could be said to provide such a basis.

Selma Gokcen
London, June 2021

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Introduction

On May 14, 1737, Bach's former student Johann Adolph Scheibe published a letter in his *Critische Musikus* criticizing Bach for composing pieces in a manner that "darkens their beauty by an excess of art. Every ornament, every little grace, everything […] that belongs to the realm of performance practice he expresses completely in [written] notes." While Scheibe has been taken to task by centuries of Bach-worshipers, his point – mocked but not easily dismissed – suggests that these superfluous "notes" interfere with our ability to find and understand the basic beauties of the pieces, and that the composer has usurped the performer's prerogative to "grace" the music as seen appropriate.

Bach's work was defended (in 1738) by Johann Abraham Birnbaum, an articulate and knowledgeable professor of rhetoric at Leipzig University:

> If [performers] were sufficiently instructed in a truly beautiful style […], it would be unnecessary for the composer to write out in notes what they already know. But only the fewest have a sufficient knowledge […] So every composer […] is entitled to set the wanderers back on the right path by prescribing what he believes is right.[1]

"Setting the wanderers back on the right path" – what an extraordinary way to describe Bach's art, or at least that aspect of his art that prompted him to write out in full so many spontaneous and personal elements. Exactly how Bach created this overlay of ornament over structure – or ornament within structure – will always remain a mystery, like all intellectual and creative activity. But there are many fascinating processes in Bach's work which can be illuminated and clarified by study and experience, and which are well worth our attention, especially if, as Professor Birnbaum adds, "everything depends on performance." Bach has done his job – it is our turn now.

Just as every dance movement has its own natural rhythm, intimately related to the steps for which it is designed, every dance has developed, through the efforts of composers and performers, its own natural or traditional style of ornamentation or variation. Most of the time, this ornamentation consists of *divisions*, which are faster note values within the beats, such as eighth notes (quavers) or sixteenth notes (semiquavers). As Bach has written out these divisions in prolific quantity, the challenge for us is to discover the dance rhythm within those divisions; otherwise we are playing (or hearing) continuous melody without any sort of internal rhythm, and sending (or receiving) the message that all eighth notes (or sixteenth notes) are created equal. Even in the deceptively simple *sarabande* of Suite V, which can survive almost anything, one needs to feel a firm structure beneath (or within) the eighth-note decorations.

What we have aimed to do in *Bach Revealed* is to remove the outer layer – the layer that makes Bach Bach – so that the reader can see what the skeleton is and, consequently, be dazzled by what Bach has done with it. In the dance movements, we have tried to find structures resembling what the original dances might have been, to enable the performer to feel the basic lilt before embarking on their own or Bach's decorations. The dances in our edition should look similar to those of Handel, Telemann, Corelli, Couperin and many others, which appear unadorned in eighteenth-century prints, awaiting the input of an imaginative performer. In some of the preludes, we have reduced Bach's spectacular luxury to a basic chord progression, hoping that playing and absorbing that chord progression (also a product of Bach's greatness) will help bring Bach's final realization to life. In some cases, we have supplied bass lines, inner voices and voice leading, which could not realistically be played on the cello, but can be effective on other instruments including keyboards. In shrinking Bach's phenomenal constructs, we were sobered by the experience (paraphrased here) of theorist Heinrich Schenker, when he proudly showed his elegant linear analysis of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony to Arnold Schoenberg, who responded, "Very good, Heinrich, but where are my favorite passages?"[2] We hope that after discovering the charms of *Bach Revealed*, your favorite passages will be more favorite than ever.

Kenneth Cooper
New York, January 2021

[1] Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 238–246; Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, rev. Christoph Wolff (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 330–339.
[2] Charles Rosen: *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 35.

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Notes

The *6 Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso composées par Sr. J.S. Bach. Maitre de Chapelle*, probably date from Bach's Cöthen years (1717–1723). As the autograph has disappeared, our primary source is the copy presumably made by Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, circa 1727–1731. The first four suites are scored for four-string cello, Suite V for four-string cello with *scordatura* (altered tuning, with the A-string tuned down to G), and Suite VI for five-string cello with a high E-string added to the normal tuning. The *scordatura* tuning produces a somewhat darker arena of sound for Suite V, while the added E-string in Suite VI generates not only extra brilliance but a greater illusion of space and grandeur. The suites were not published in Bach's lifetime, but at least ten editions came out between 1824 and 1911 (most were called *Sonatas* or *Études*), including the 1879 *Bach-Gesellschaft* edition – the first to unequivocally call them *Suites*. There are three types of pieces in the *Six Suites* – ***Preludes***, ***allemandes*** and ***dances*** – and the two most fashionable early eighteenth-century styles are represented – Italian and French.

Preludes have two roles – function and identity. As function, they introduce something: in a church context, the organist's traditional improvisation clarifies for the congregation the key in which to sing the initial hymn or chorale. As a gesture of greeting, the prelude allows its lack of obvious melodic material to transfer greater importance to the movements immediately following it. *Preludes*, however, also have identities – identifiable characteristics – otherwise, we would not understand the concept of collections of *preludes* by Chopin, Debussy – or even Bach (*The Well-Tempered Clavier*). The *prelude*'s nature is usually identified by an arpeggiated figuration of a chord progression; for Bach, whose work is often described as undramatic, this combination indeed becomes a drama. The chord progression, in Bach's hands, is a gorgeously sculpted adventure, ever-changing in its harmonic rhythm and implied meaning. Against it, the keyboard-like arpeggiation remains essentially unchanged, creating an uneasy tension between the two elements. Sometimes Bach allows the two protagonists to work it out, as in Suites I and II; sometimes he stops the show when the two can no longer get along, as in Suite III (last 12 bars) or Suite IV (bar 49, where the disorder of introversion interrupts the extroverted formality).

The *preludes* to Suites V and VI are not indebted to keyboard tradition at all; the term simply announces the beginning of the suite. The French *ouverture*, which opens Suite V, boasts the traditional regal *grave* with its over-dotted rhythms and its *alla breve* time signature indicating that the royal "we" move at two steps to the bar, not four. The faster section is a fugue, or a fugal concerto, structured like a *concerto grosso*, with soloistic passagework acting as episodic fugal development. This *ouverture* strongly reminds us that we should be thinking of an orchestra rather than a solo cello. The *prelude* to Suite VI could easily be called a *sinfonia* (the traditional term for an instrumental piece in the context of an opera, oratorio or cantata). Here we need to expand our sights, as Bach does: if Suite V evokes a string ensemble, Suite VI features winds, trumpets and timpani. The sense of huge space created in the Suite VI *sinfonia* is strikingly dramatized by the dangerous descent through the entire instrument beginning in bar 74, having risen to that point from a one-note, timpani-like kick-off.

As for the dances, controversies have arisen over the years as to whether Bach's suite movements were composed to be danced to or to be listened to as "concert" music. The latter viewpoint has been advanced by instrumentalists who feared that knowledge of Baroque dance rhythms and experience in ornamentation might lead them too far from the printed page. They have also been anxious (as have early nineteenth-century publishers) to avoid any suggestion that Bach might have been tainted with theatricality. These notions ignore Bach's early training in the French style and bypass evidence that public recitals were rare and would probably not have included performances of solo cello suites. Bach loved the medium of the suite and, along with many of his colleagues, transformed the extravagant, fashion-oriented, society-conscious French ballet into an intimate, poetic, family-friendly genre – an extraordinary accomplishment. This metamorphosis, however, did not preclude many suites and partitas from evoking the sounds of big orchestras and festive atmospheres in an era long before the invention of recording devices.

It is our opinion that if Bach called a piece a "Gavotte," it was a *gavotte*, whether it was actually danced to or not. It needed to *sound as if* it could be danced to and fire the imagination if not the feet.

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The idea was concisely expressed by the great actor Laurence Olivier who, when asked how he could play a murderer without having murdered anyone, responded: "That's why we call it *acting*." As players and listeners, even if we are not dancers, we need to feel the lilt and character of the various rhythms and feel encouraged to dance, even if we prefer a more sedentary lifestyle. All dance rhythms have two stressed beats – a comfortable downbeat and a more strongly stressed "kick" beat, which is syncopated against that downbeat. Neither can exist without the other. Tempos must be organized so that those beats are easy to hear, although none of these stresses need to be treated heavy-handedly.

Among the ways French musicians made the dance rhythms clear to the dancers was by allowing the inner parts (*divisions*) of the beats (eighth notes, for example) to be slightly unequal, rendering the beats themselves (quarter notes) more audible. In French *allemandes* and other movements where the beats are slower, it is the sixteenth notes that become unequal. This style is called *notes inégales*. Exactly how or when this inequality was executed is not fully known, nor would it be if we had ever asked Louis Armstrong or Fats Waller how much swing they used and where. What we can experience for ourselves, however, is that when long stretches of eighth notes or sixteenth notes (ornamental notes, that is) are rhythmically equal, the lilt of the dance rhythm is weakened and hence very difficult to hear.

The ***allemande***, by Bach's time, was no longer a dance. It had been very popular a century earlier, in Shakespearean times, when it was called *alman*, *almain* or, in Italian, *allemanda*, and was of moderate tempo in duple time. It went out of fashion in about 1620. When the name was revived in the 1650s, first by the French clavecinist Chambonnières and the French lutenist Gaultier, then by the German composer Johann Jakob Froberger, the term *allemande* (in France) conveyed an elegy-like, lavishly ornamented keyboard or lute genre, often called *tombeau* and dedicated to a recently departed friend. How (or if) the Shakespearean *alman* developed into the French *allemande* is not clearly understood, although there exist some keyboard versions (e.g., Pachelbel) that suggest a gradual development. Some scholars have interpreted the name *allemande* (the French word for German) to be a corruption of the words *à les mains* (with the hands), a reference to the degree of ornamental decoration. Although an occasional *allemande* has been choreographed, it never became a social dance in the early eighteenth century. By the 1780s, the term referred to a waltz-like German dance, called *tedesca* in Italian. Italian Baroque *allemandas* were popular by the 1660s and in fact Bach chose the lighter, more fluid, more melodic Italian style for the *allemandes* of his first four cello suites, despite retaining the French name. The more serious French style appears in Suites V and VI.

The ***courante*** was one of the most complex, most difficult, of all the French dances and was made even more cumbersome by the weight of the clothing that was worn at the time. So although the word *courante* is derived from the French word *courir* (to run), it is not a tremendously fast dance, at least not by our current standards of fast. One of the greatest Baroque dance experts, the late Wendy Hilton, pronounced the dictum, accompanied by her famous English glare: "I want it inscribed on my tombstone – *Courantes* should not be played fast." French *courantes* feature a delightful 3/2–6/4 ambiguity descended from the Shakespearean-period *galliard*. Bach enjoyed using both meters separately as well as together – in other words, there are measures where the stress pattern is 3 to a bar (3/2), other measures where it is 2 to a bar (6/4), and some passages where the player (and listener) can have it either way.

Exact terminology and correct spelling were not standardized in eighteenth-century writing styles, except perhaps in the hands of the greatest writers. Publishers particularly enjoyed the confusion of terminology – the word *Clavier*, for example – because it was inclusive and encouraged all players to buy their wares. The word *courante*, especially in Germany where French terminology for dance suites was more fashionable than Italian, easily swamped the term ***corrente***, the Italian form of the *courante*. Anna Magdalena Bach seems not to have known the difference between the two dances, but it was probably not her fault alone. Bach himself may have accepted the more generic term.[3] The 3/4 or 3/8 *corrente*, however, is not a corruption or simplification of the more complex French *courante*, as it preceded the French fashion by more than a century. Bach often presents this dance completely ornamented in a string of eighth notes or sixteenth notes. While the basic *corrente* rhythm within the ornamental lines (dotted quarter note + three eighth notes) does not always have to be pointed out, the player needs to know that the rhythm is there and that it occasionally needs a kick. The *courantes* in Suites I–IV and VI are Italian style *correntes*, while Suite V contains a real French *courante*.

[3] Bach's wife did *not* compose these suites, as one scholar has suggested, even though they are apparently in her handwriting!

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SUITE V

Scordatura

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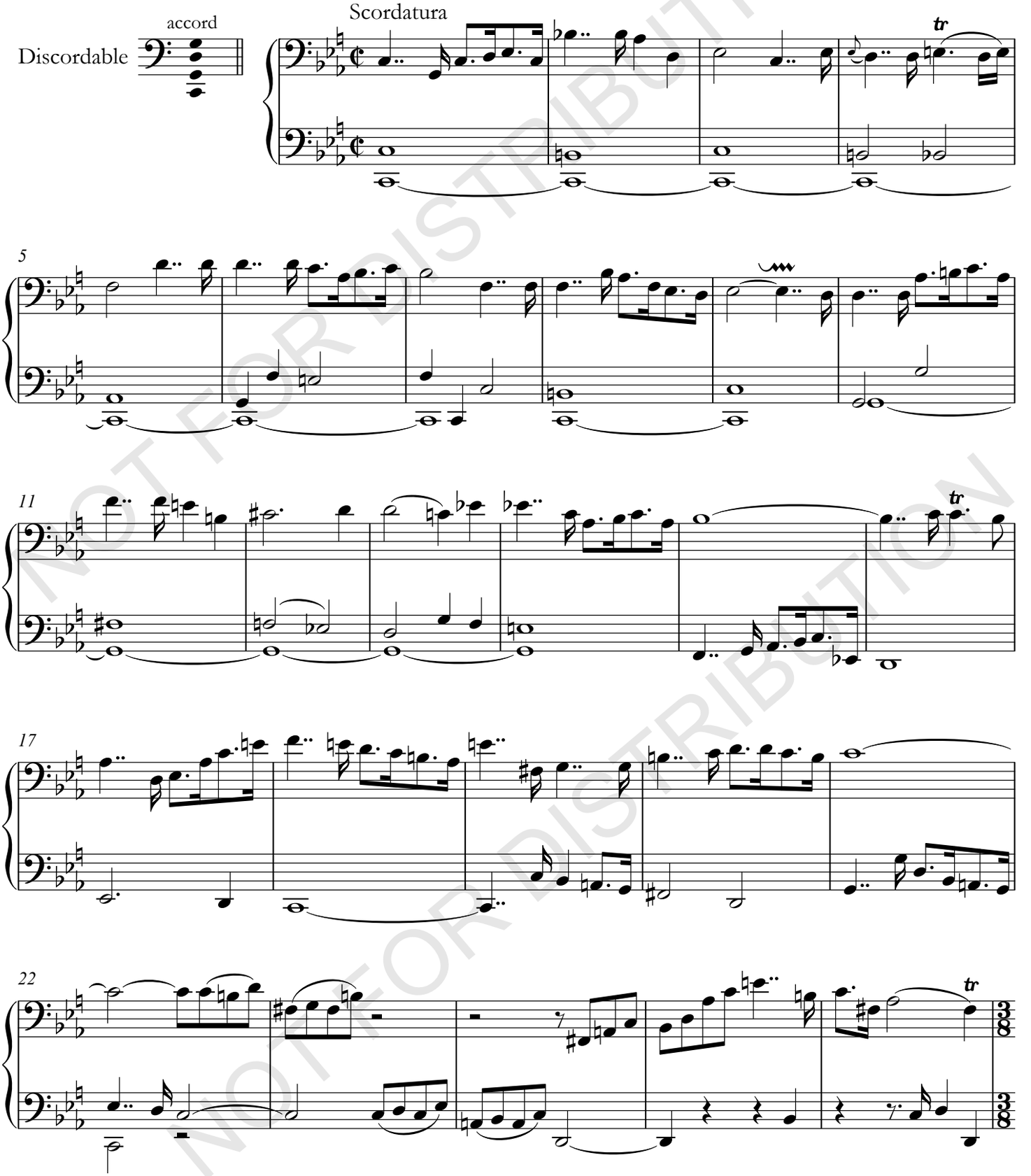
Suite V

BWV 1011

Prelude*



*) This Prelude is in the form of a French *ouverture*.

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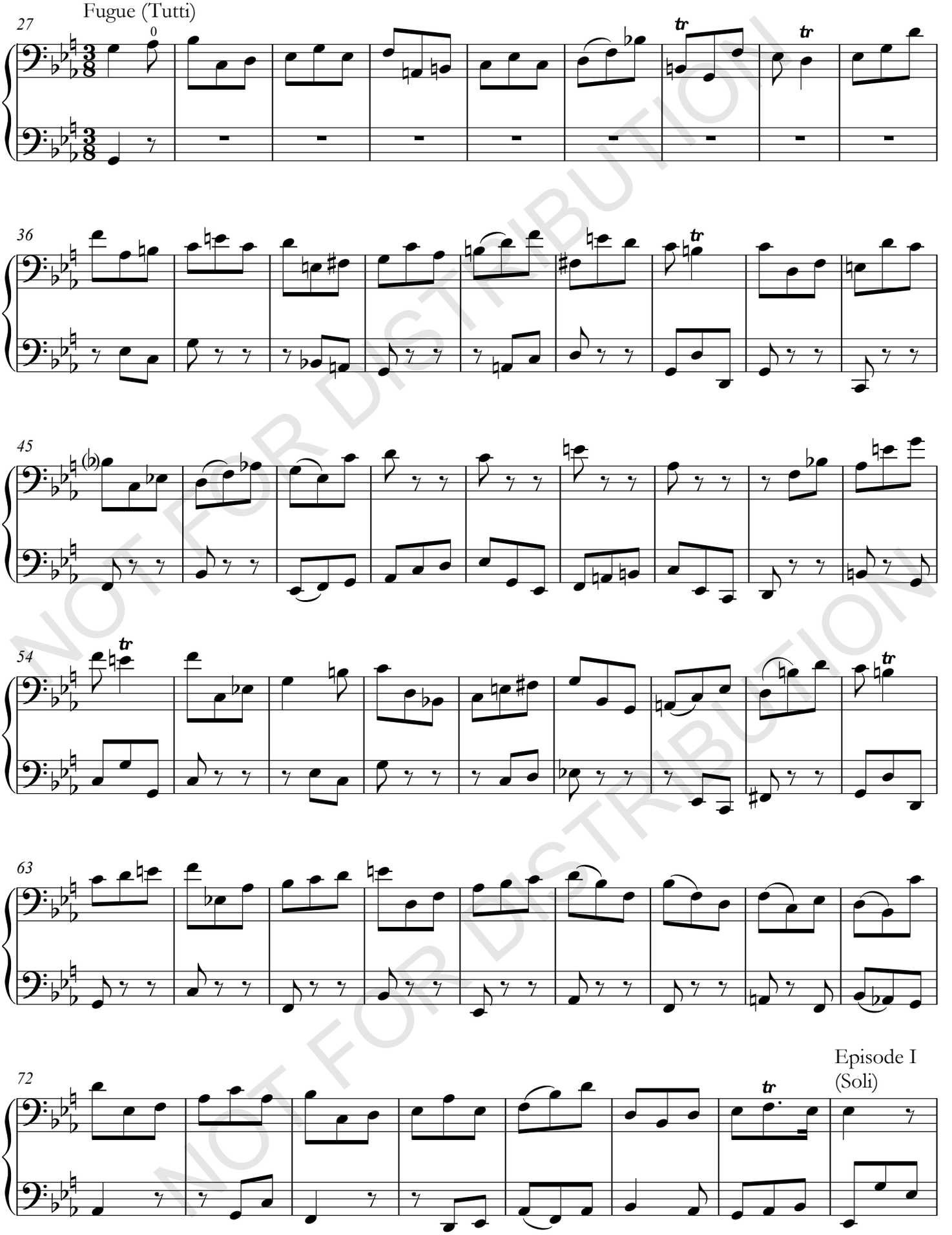

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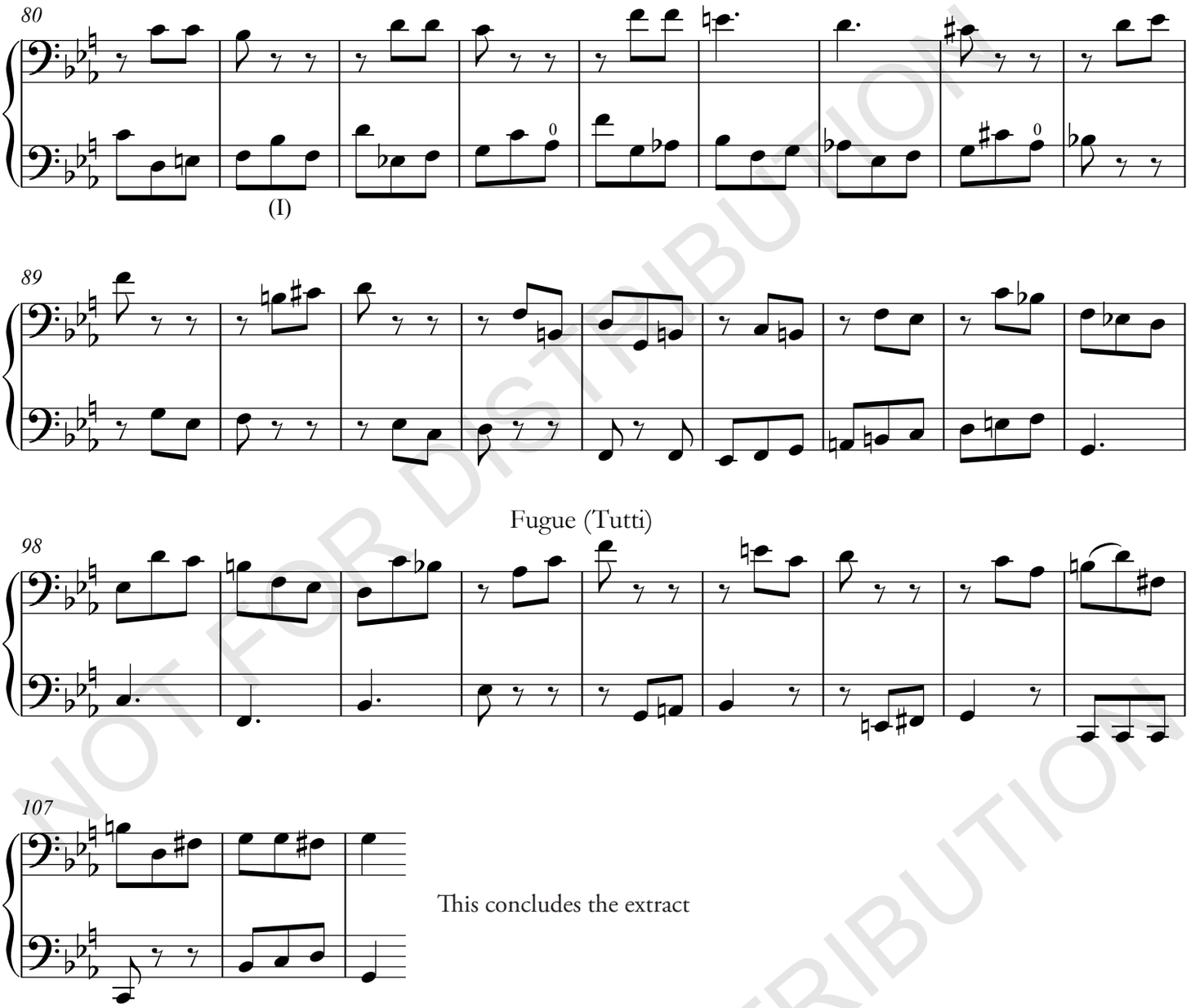

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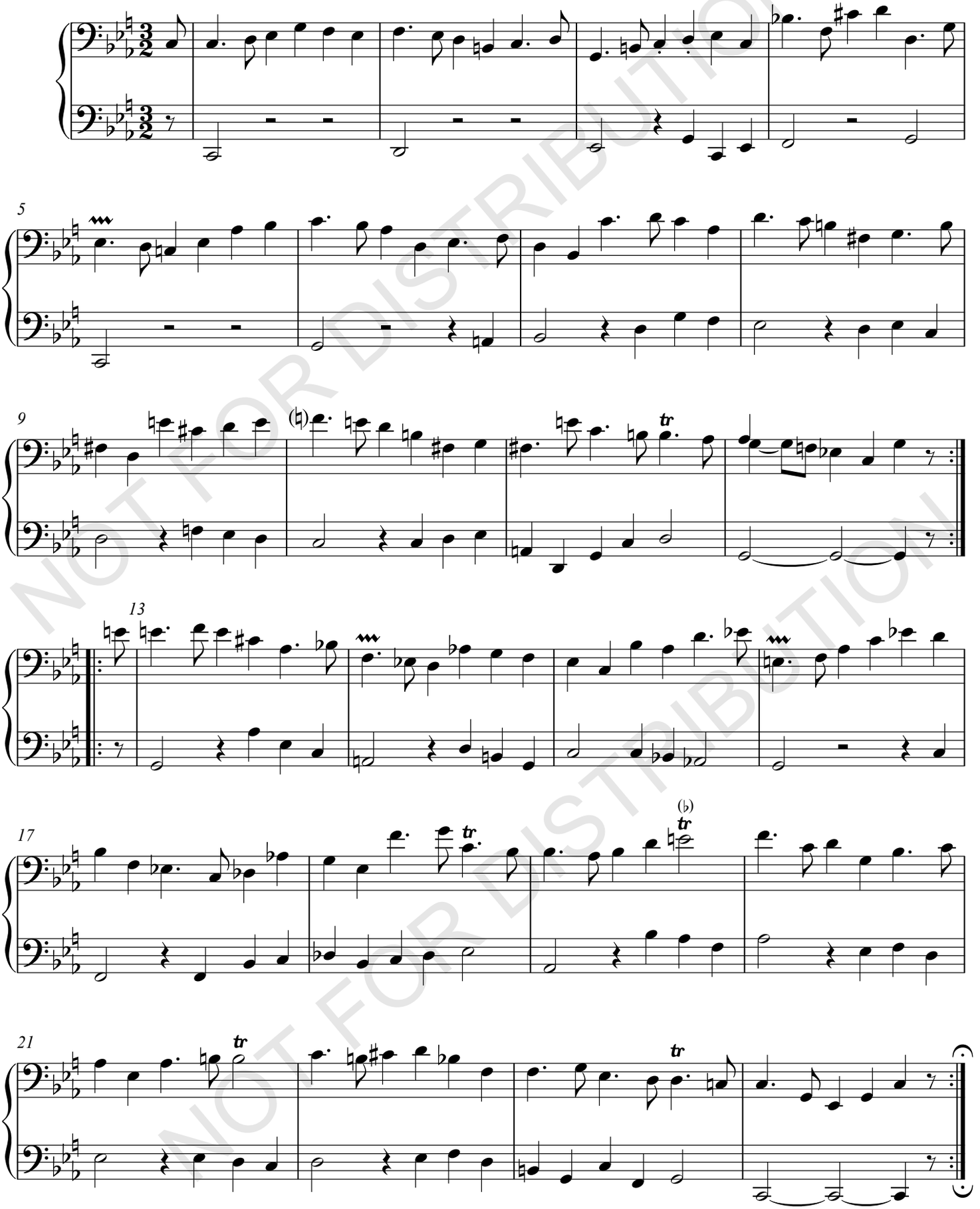
Courante



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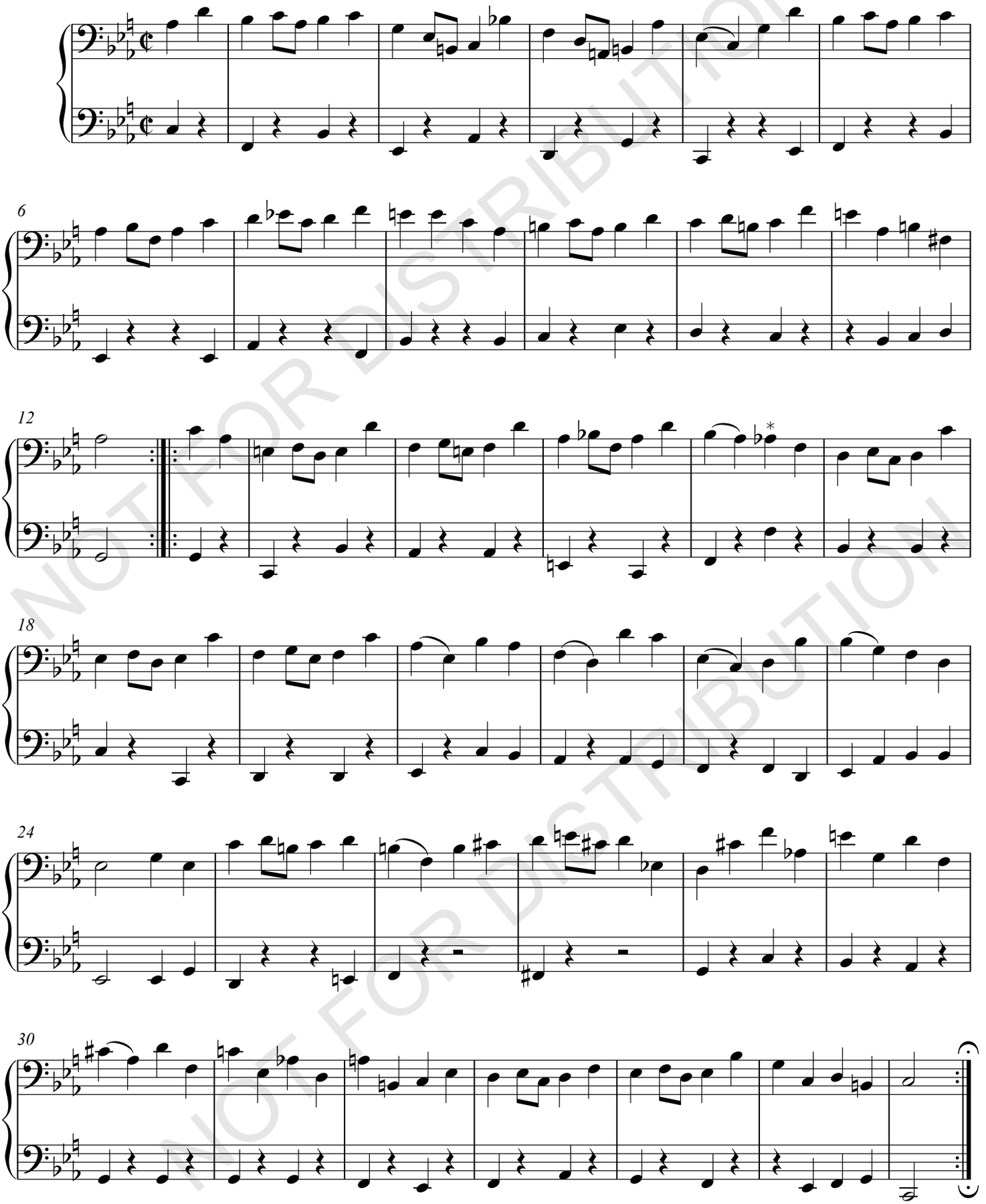
Gavotte I



*) A.M. Bach's notation.

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SUITE V

Standard Tuning

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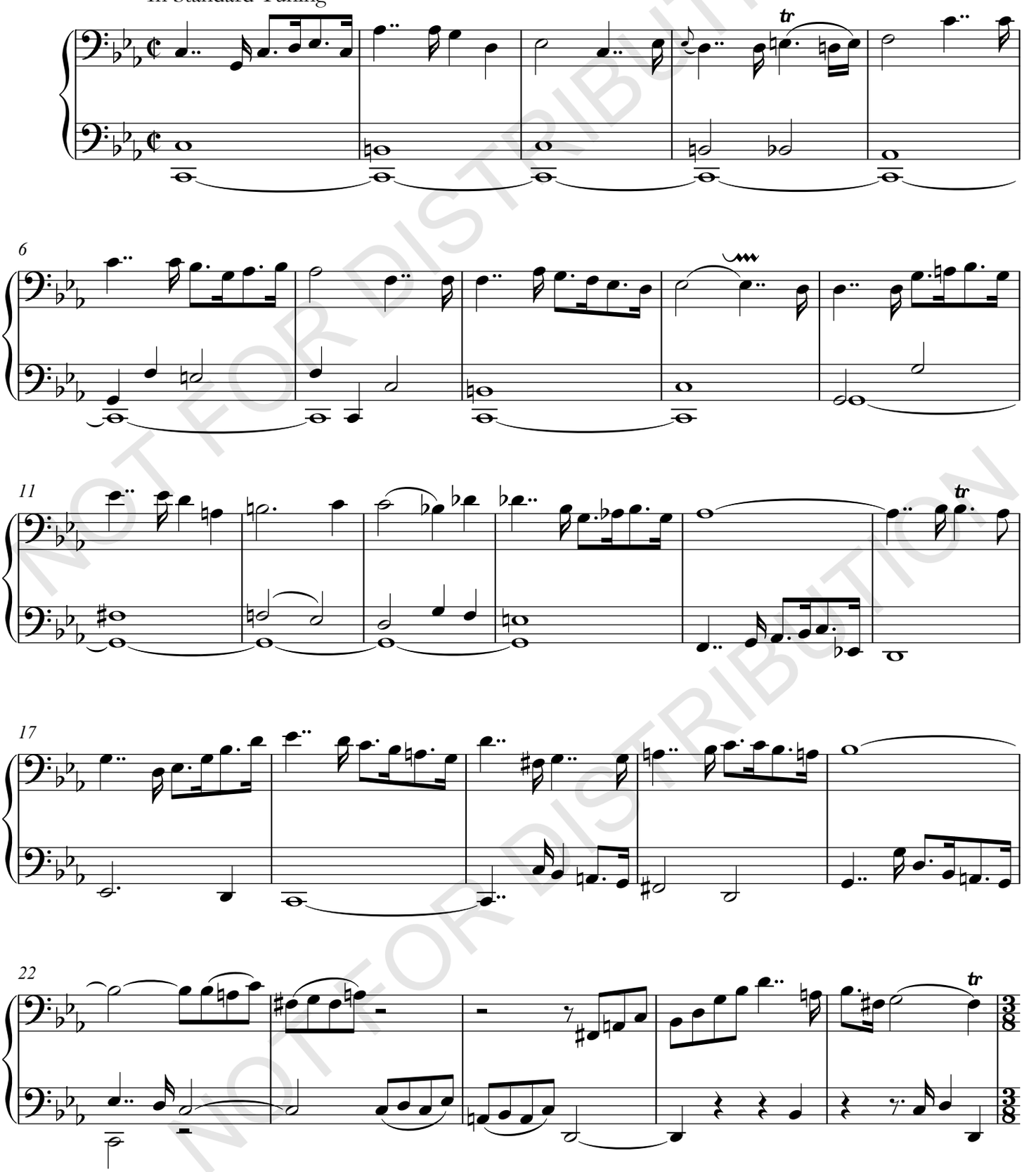
Suite V

BWV 1011

Prelude*

In Standard Tuning



*) This Prelude is in the form of a French *ouverture*.

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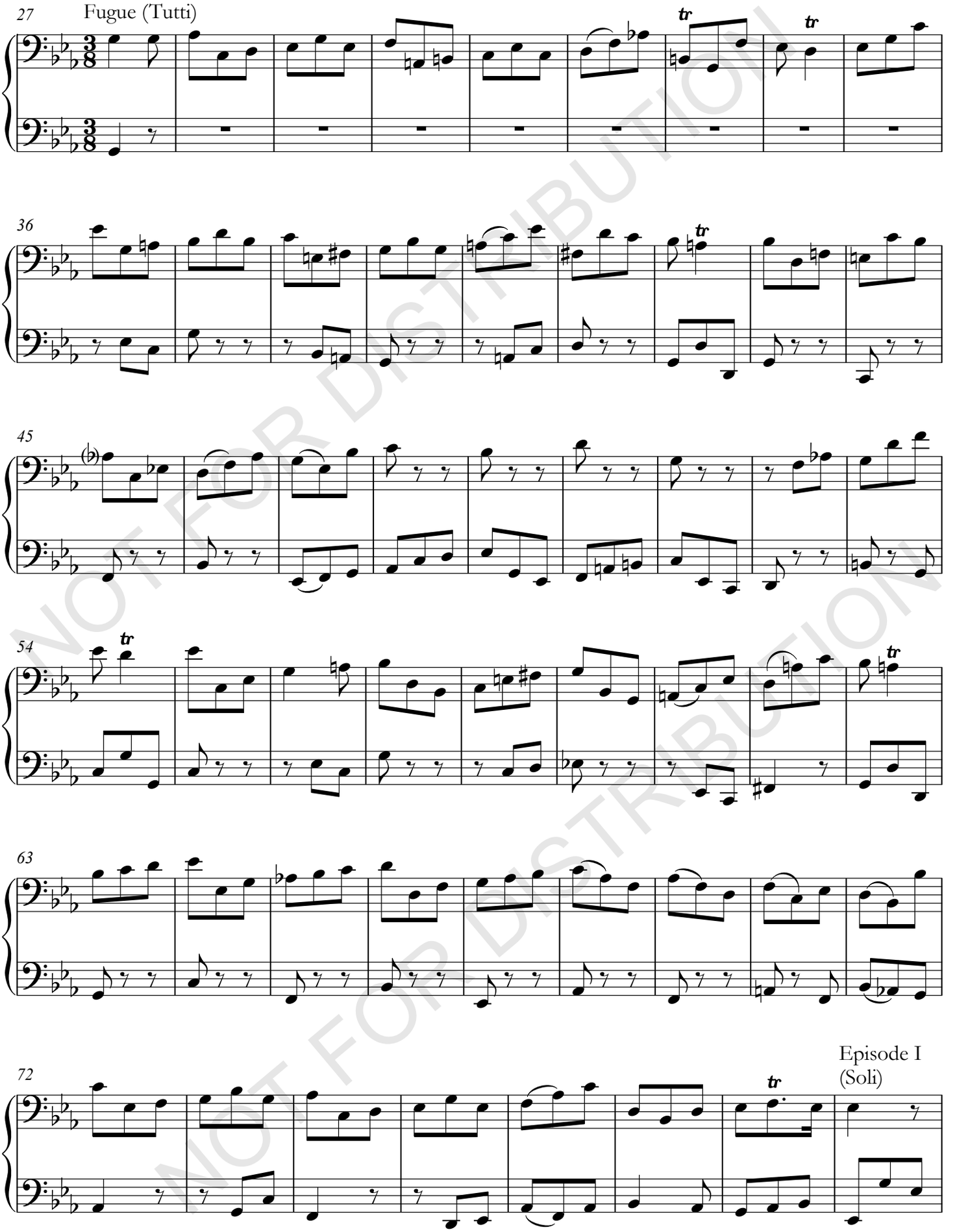

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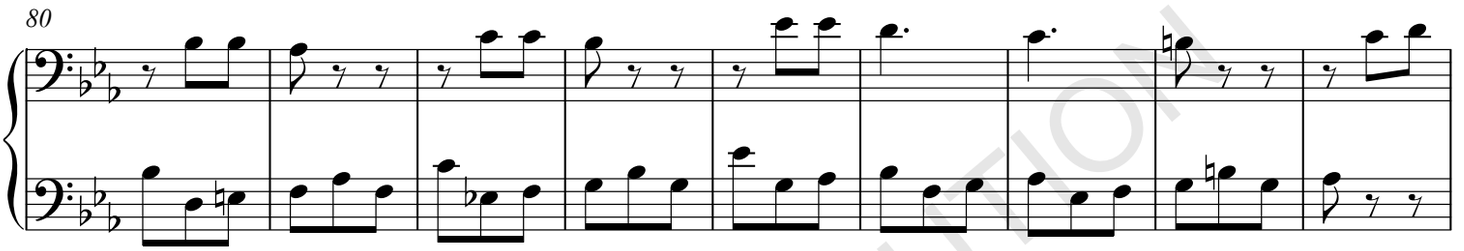
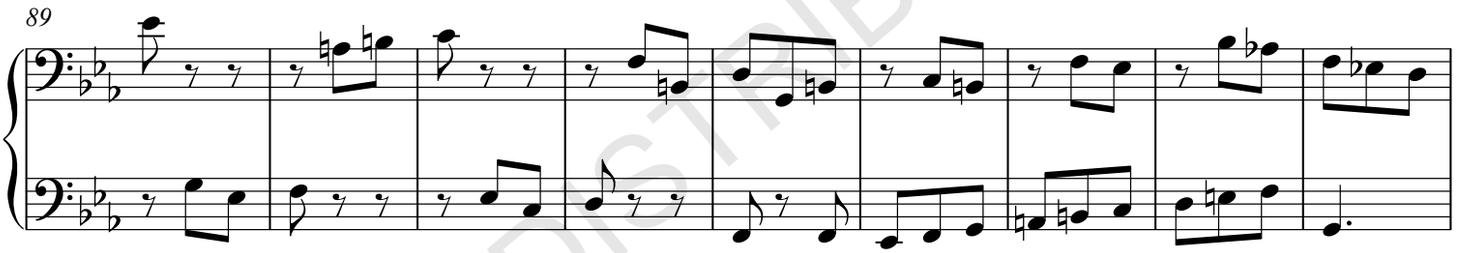
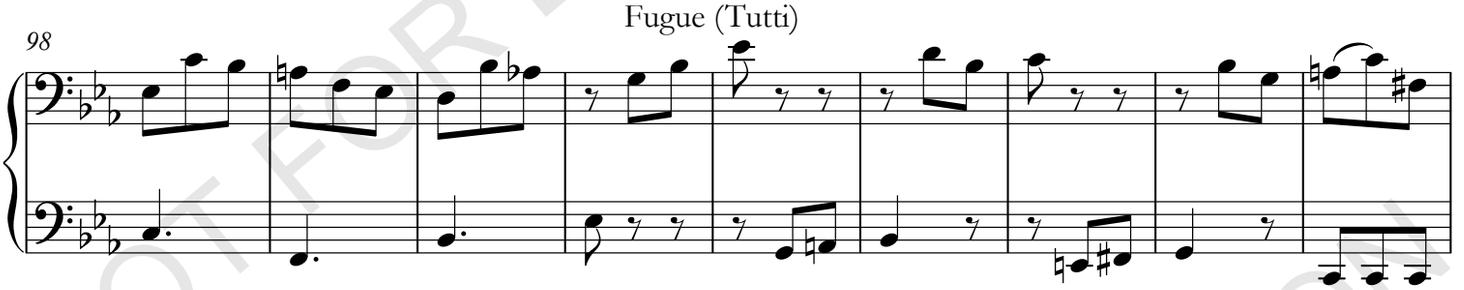
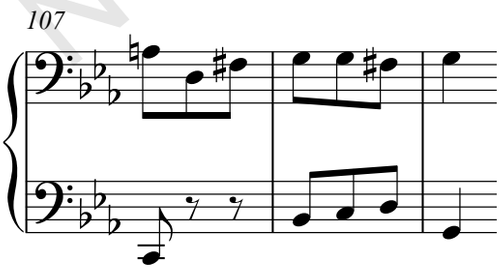




Fugue (Tutti)





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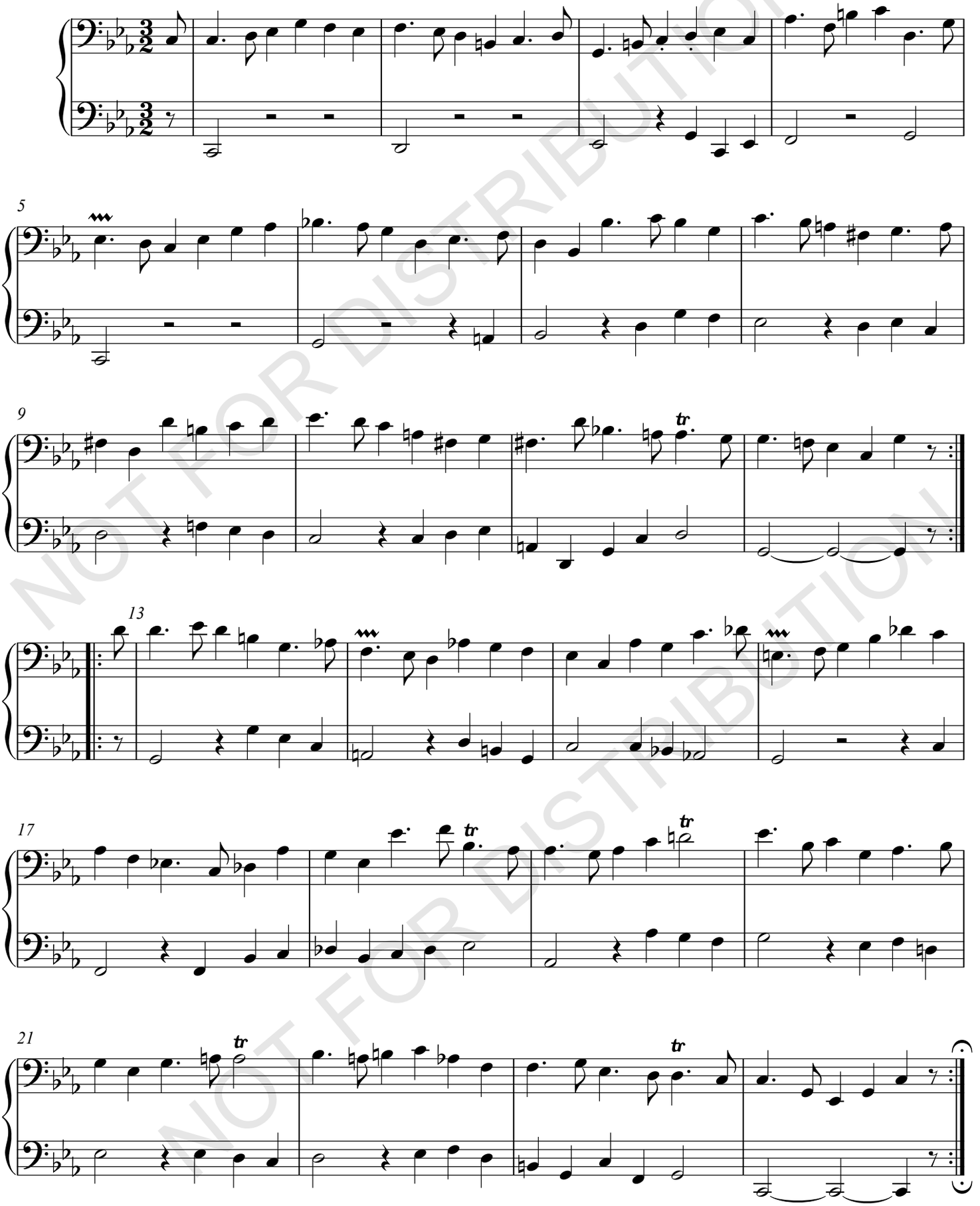
Courante



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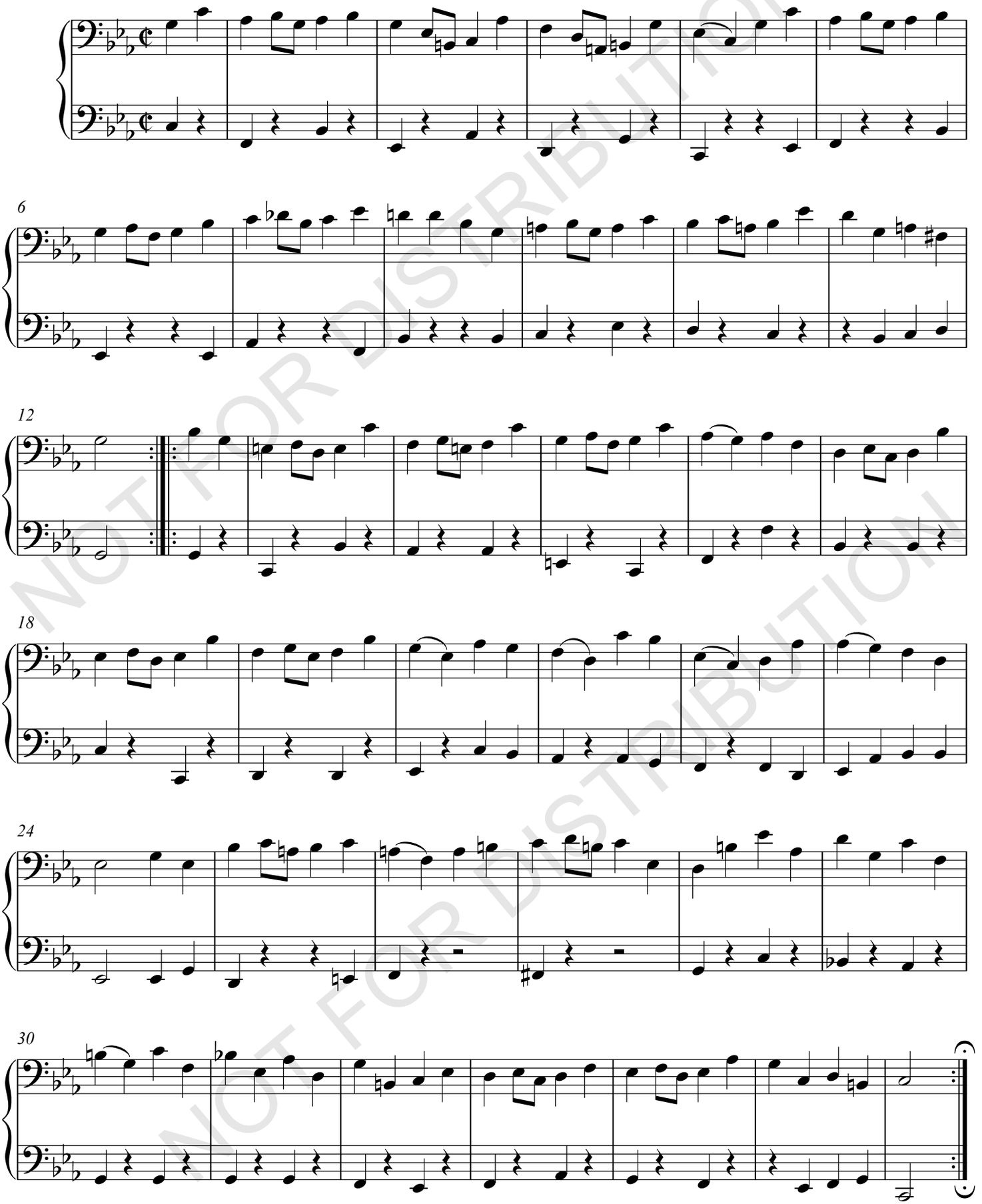
Gavotte I



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SUITE VI

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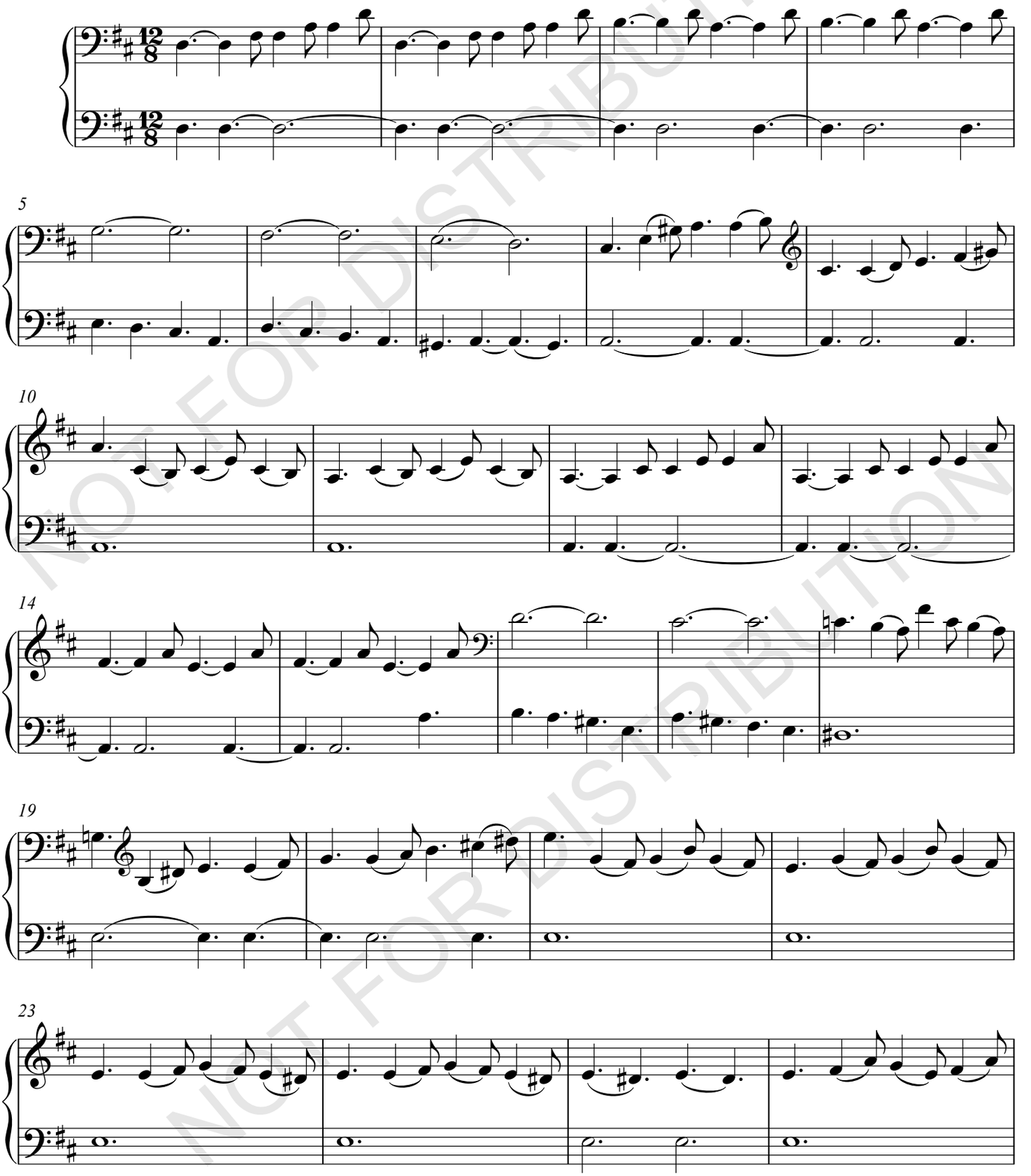
Suite VI

BWV 1012

Prelude



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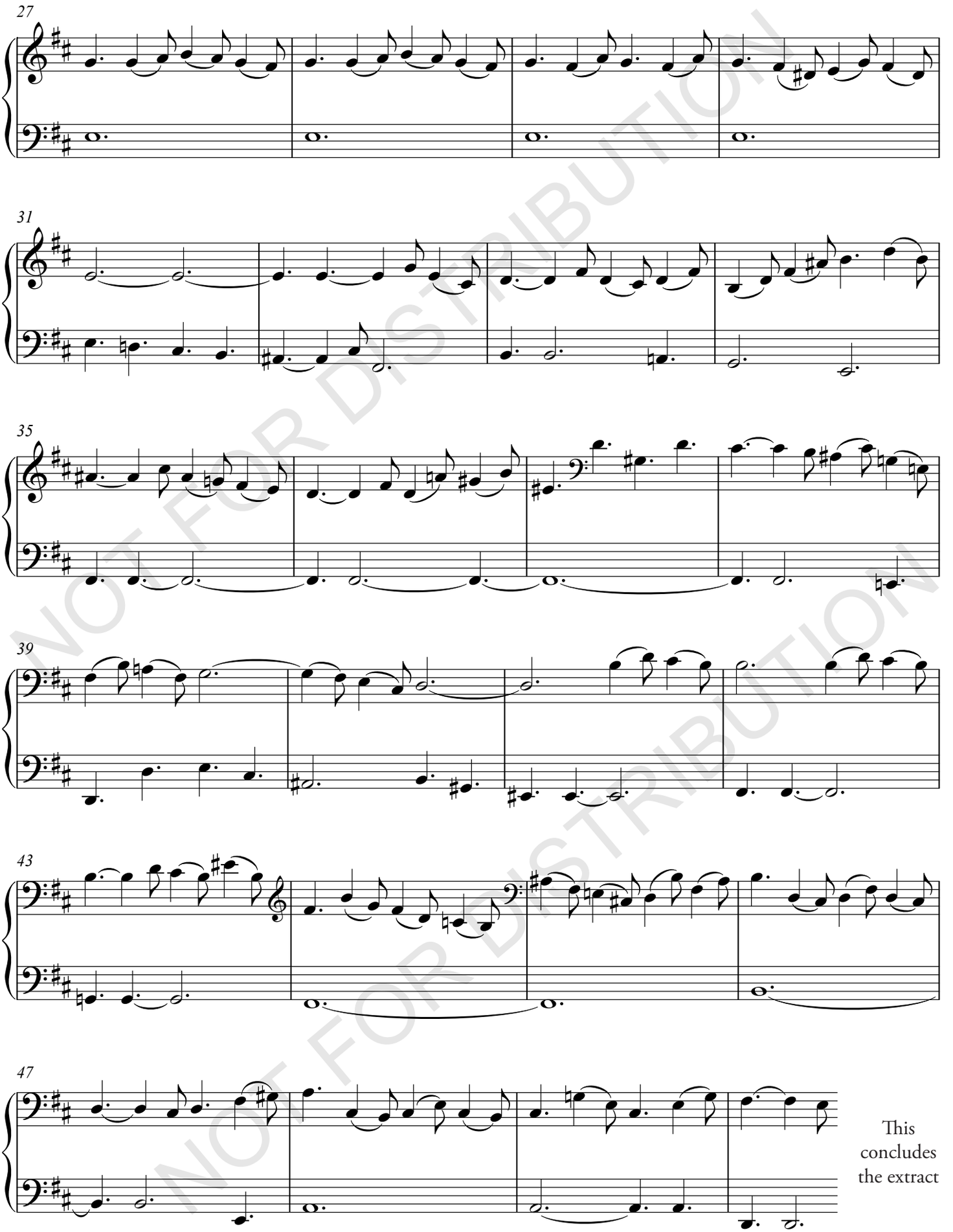

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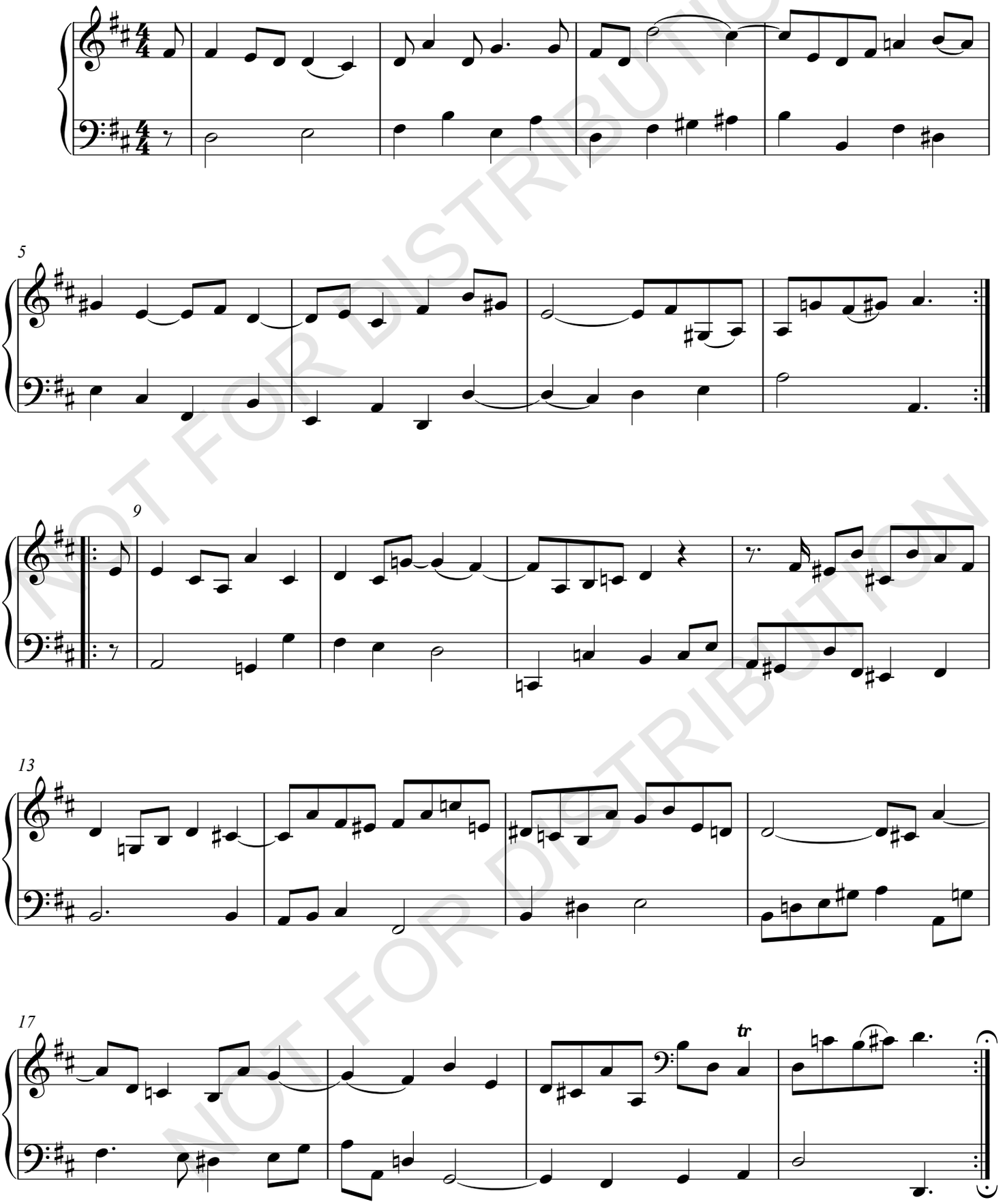
Allemande



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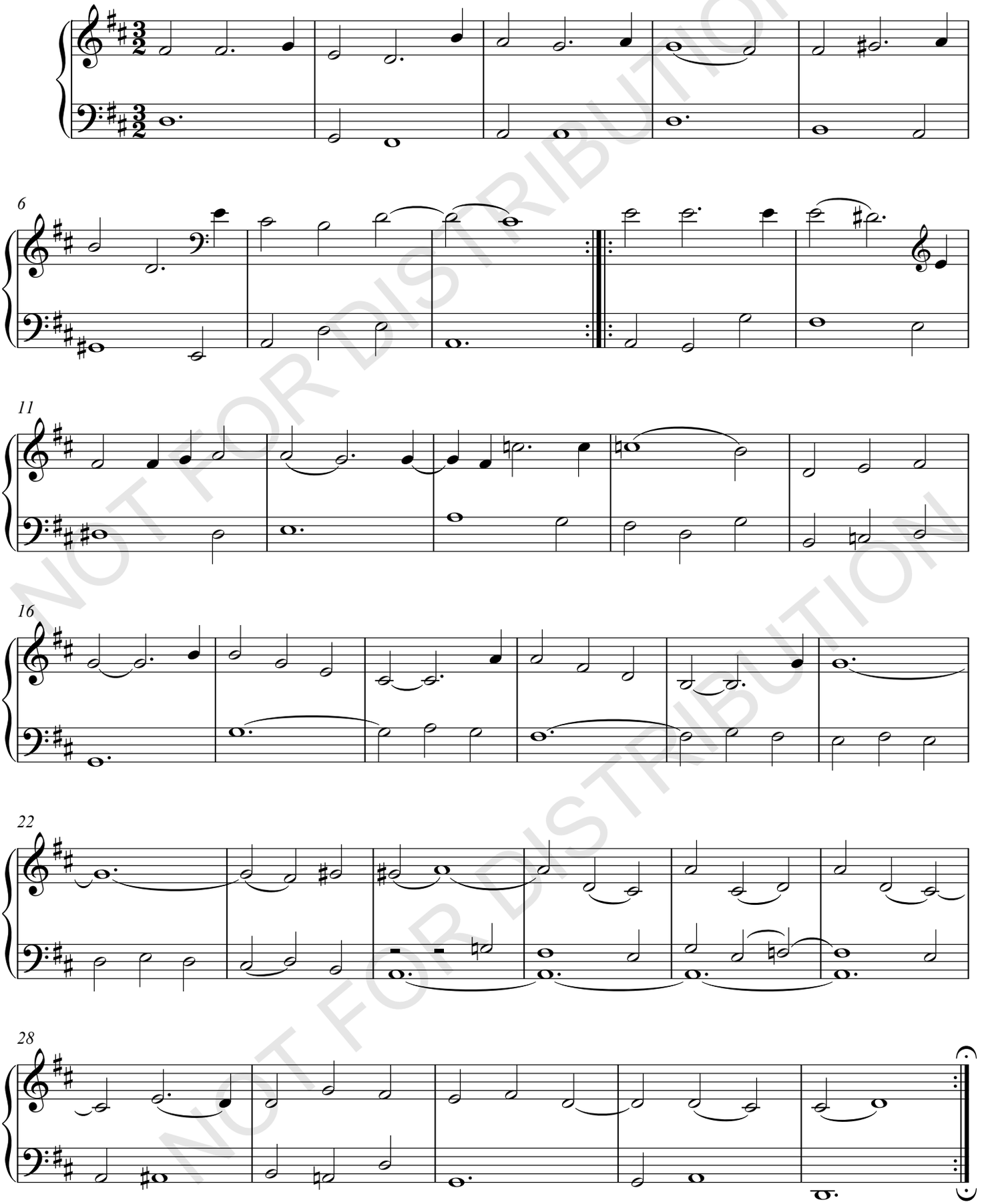
Sarabande



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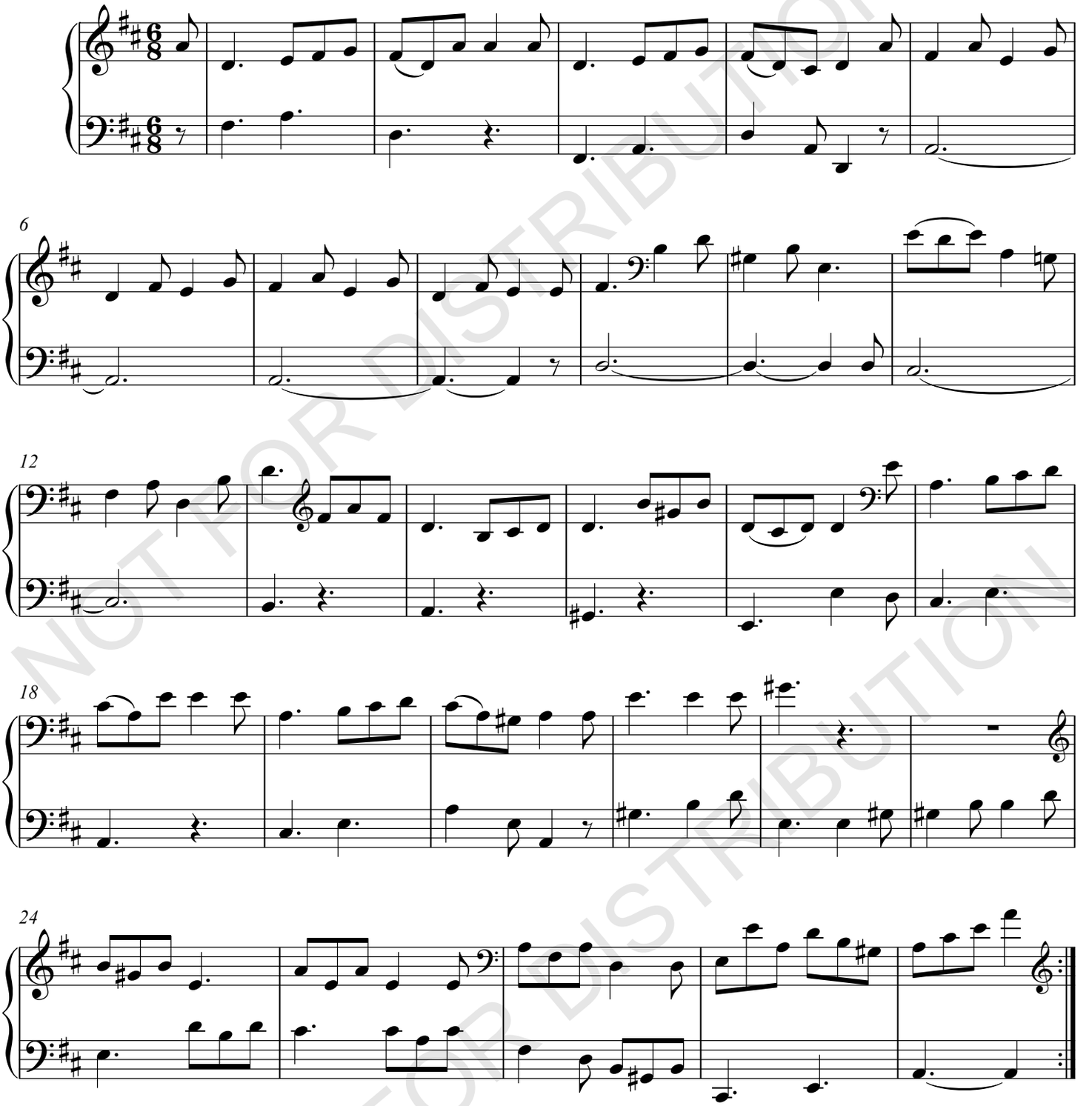
Gigue



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