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Jelly Roll Morton

BY ARTIS WODEHOUSE

Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton was America's first great jazz composer. Born in 1890 in New Orleans, Morton came of age at the time and in the city where jazz coalesced as a distinct musical idiom. As a young Creole, Morton received classical piano training but became attracted to mastering the vibrant new music emerging in New Orleans at that time—jazz, ragtime and the blues. He played for the many social organizations of New Orleans, as well as in the brothels of the legendary Storyville section, but in his late teen years set out on a musical and personal odyssey, criss-crossing the country for the rest of his life in search of employment and adventure. Active in the black vaudeville circuit during the early teens (he also worked as a pool shark and apparently as a pimp), Morton lived for a period in Los Angeles. Finally, in 1923 at age 33 he moved to Chicago, then the hot-bed of jazz, and began his publishing and extensive recording career. From the time he moved to Chicago, to the end of his life, Morton focused on his musical activities as composer, band leader, pianist and recording artist. He subsequently lived in New York City and Washington D.C. (where his historic series of interviews with the cultural historian Alan Lomax about his life and the early development of jazz was recorded at the Library of Congress), but returned to Los Angeles, dying there in 1941.

Morton's Piano Rolls

By the late teens and early '20s, player pianos had become a fixture of many middle- and upper-class homes. Performances by famous pianists, both classical and popular, were sold to the public in the form of piano rolls which people could play on their home player piano. During the mid-'20s Morton is listed in roll catalogues as having made rolls of sixteen tunes. Unfortunately, over the passage of time four of the titles have not been found.

Morton's rolls lacked both dynamic (i.e. volume) variation and subtle temporal shifts. Nevertheless, they are important because in terms of musical infrastructure—the notes and rhythms—the six transcribed for this folio largely represent what Morton actually sat down and played. This conclusion can be drawn by comparing Morton's phonograph recordings—particularly those from the same time period in which his rolls were made—to the rolls themselves. The fact that his roll renditions so frequently reflect what Morton's ten fingers could execute make them somewhat unusual for the period. For both technical and stylistic reasons, roll editors of the teens and '20s often cut in many more notes on a roll than was physically possible for a human being to play. In point of fact, additional notes were sometimes added by Morton's roll editors to create a fuller sound. These additional notes are fairly non-invasive, but occasionally push Morton's roll performances beyond what would have been comfortable for him (or any other pianist) to execute with ease.

How Morton's Piano Rolls Were Converted to Score

A piano roll is a long sheet of paper with holes punched in it. As the paper is fed through the player piano, it is read by the player mechanism which trips the piano hammers to strike the strings. The position of holes along the width of the roll determines the pitch of the note, the position of holes along the length of the roll determines when in time the note occurs, and the length of the holes determines how long the notes are held.

Converting the roll performances of this folio to a printed score was accomplished using new computer music technologies that came to be available during the late 1980s and through the 1990s. Morton's rolls were first read by a process devised by Richard Tonnesen and Richard Brandle which blends old and new technologies. Similar to the old player piano, a transport mechanism pulls the piano roll past a stationary reading head which contains 88 time holes, one for each key on the piano. Just as in the old player mechanism, an air pump attached to the tracker bar creates a continuous vacuum in the 88 holes of the tracker bar.

When a hole in Morton's piano roll passes over its corresponding hole in the tracker bar, the vacuum breaks, and air flows through the channel. In the old player piano, this transference of energy would have tripped a hammer to strike a piano string. However, in this new application of old technology, the breaking vacuum instead activates a tiny switch connected to a computer. As the roll travels over the tracker bar, the 88 switches move according to the pattern of the holes. Every time a switch closes or opens, the computer records which switch moves and where along the length of the roll.

Simply put, MIDI (the acronym for Musical Instrument Digital Interface, the musical language of computers) files of Morton's rolls so obtained are nothing more than a new format for the information encoded into the original piano roll. However, in MIDI format the rolls have new possibilities. For instance, they can then be used to play computerized musical instruments such as synthesizers or the Yamaha Disklavier, or, in tandem with commercially available computer notation programs, can be used to make scores. Finally, computerized files of piano rolls can function as a template for cutting new paper copies of the old rolls for those who own player pianos.

It was initially for the latter application—recutting rolls for distribution to player piano enthusiasts—that Morton's rolls were converted to MIDI data. Rob DeLand's Bluestone Music Rolls, a company which specializes in supplying recut rolls to collectors, spearheaded the effort. Bluestone obtained Morton's original rolls from collector Michael Montgomery and sent them to Richard Tonnesen's Custom Music Rolls to be read into a MIDI file as described above. The process of converting rolls into MIDI data is not always a straightforward mechanical process. To insure accuracy for this important endeavor, DeLand asked Robbie Rhodes, pianist and piano roll/computer expert, to oversee the conversion of Morton's rolls to MIDI.

In turn, Bluestone provided the MIDI data of the Morton rolls for the 1997 CD release, *Jelly Roll Morton The Piano Rolls*–Nonesuch 79370 (the Morton rolls were played back on Yamaha's updated player piano, the Disklavier)–and for generating the scores transcribed in this volume.

Editorial Procedures

This folio follows the example set by Morton scholar and transcriber, James Dapogny, whose transcriptions of Morton's music are taken primarily from Morton's solo phonograph recordings and were originally published by the Smithsonian Institution in collaboration with G. Schirmer, ISBN 0-87474-351-6. Dapogny's aim was to provide transcriptions that were both accurate and playable. According to Dapogny, exact notation of Morton's swinging eighth notes would have required a forbiddingly complicated score. Thus, he adopted the jazz convention which represents them as equal eighth notes, suggesting that performers familiarize themselves with the original recordings for insight into Morton's swing.

Dapogny's approach to rhythmic notation is especially appropriate in the case of Morton's piano rolls because in the roll manufacturing process, Morton's subtle variations in swing were standardized to a single proportional division that was maintained throughout each roll rendition. While this process (now called quantization) is authentic to the roll as manufactured, it is not an accurate representation of Morton's extremely subtle treatment of swing as documented in his live performance on phonograph recordings.

Dapogny also notes that the roll arrangements contain elongated notes that a literal human performance cannot replicate. For technical and stylistic reasons, roll editors of the day occasionally lengthened notes on the roll beyond what the roll artist recorded in order to create a smoother, more linear roll performance. But since these long notes were authentic to the original roll they can, if desired, be adapted to human performance. They are preserved in the notation of this folio.

Each of the Morton rolls has a roll speed marking called a "tempo" marking printed on the roll at its beginning. Roll speed on the original rolls is expressed in ten times feet per minute; for example: "Tempo 80" means that the roll is to pass across the tracker bar at the rate of eight feet per minute. Player pianos were equipped with a lever that could be set to the tempo printed on the roll. While the tempos printed on the beginnings of Morton's rolls may or may not reflect Morton's performance, they are authentic to the original rolls. As such, the original roll speeds were important to include with the printed score, but in a comprehensible contemporary format.

Using a mathematical formula which takes into account the original roll speed as expressed in feet per minute as it relates to the distance between note events measured on the roll, Robbie Rhodes converted the original tempo information encoded on the rolls to equivalent metronome markings. Each piece in this folio is therefore preceded by its authentic roll speed tempo as expressed as a metronome marking.

ARTIS WODEHOUSE

ARTIS WODEHOUSE is a pianist and music historian. Her realization of *Jelly Roll Morton's Piano Rolls* can be heard on Nonesuch 79370 and on PianoSoft disk number 00501222 for playback on the Yamaha Disklavier.

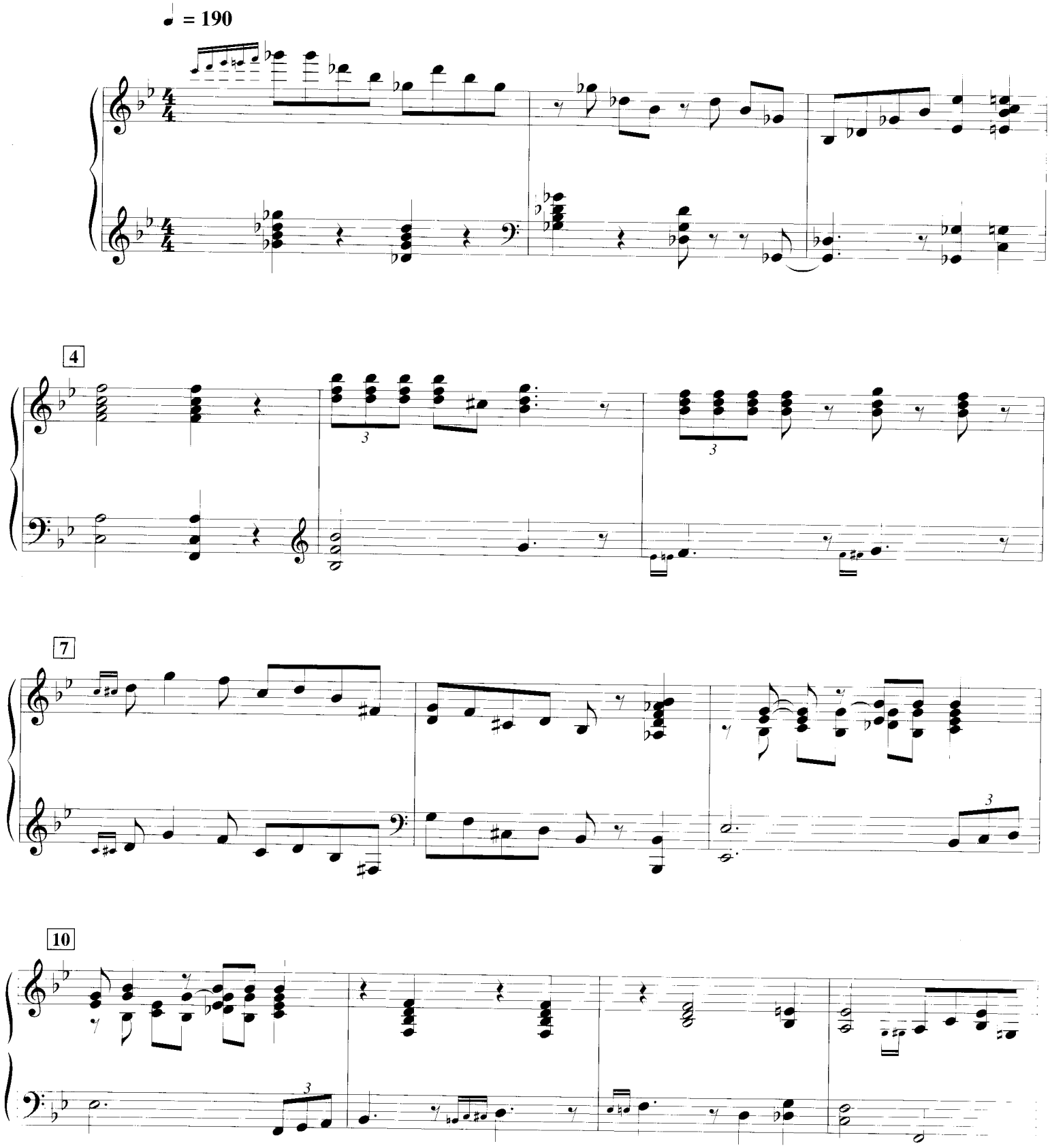
These transcriptions are dedicated to Robert Hurwitz.

ORIGINAL JELLY ROLL BLUES

(Jelly Roll Blues)

Vocalstyle Piano Roll 50505 recorded early June 1924

By Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton



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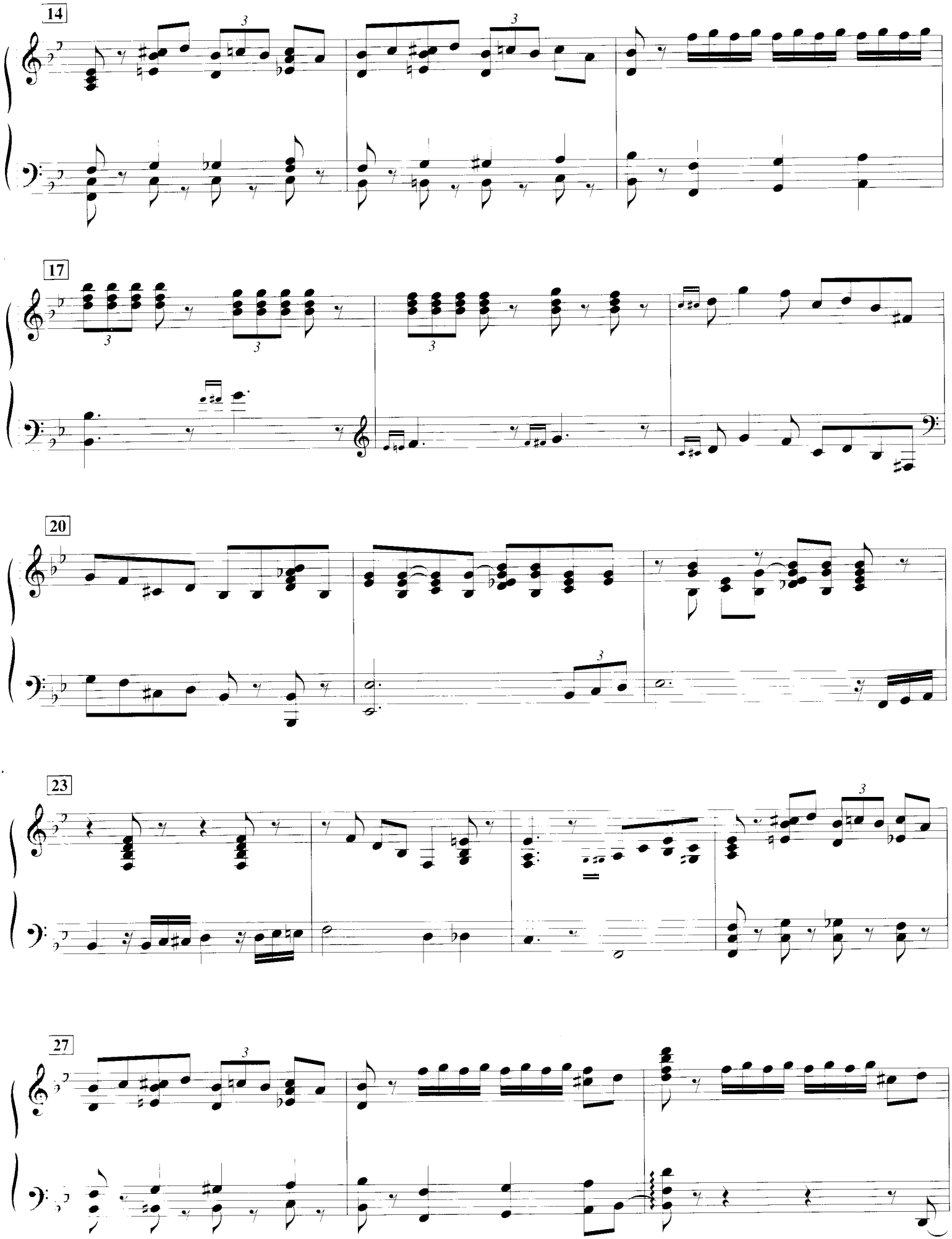
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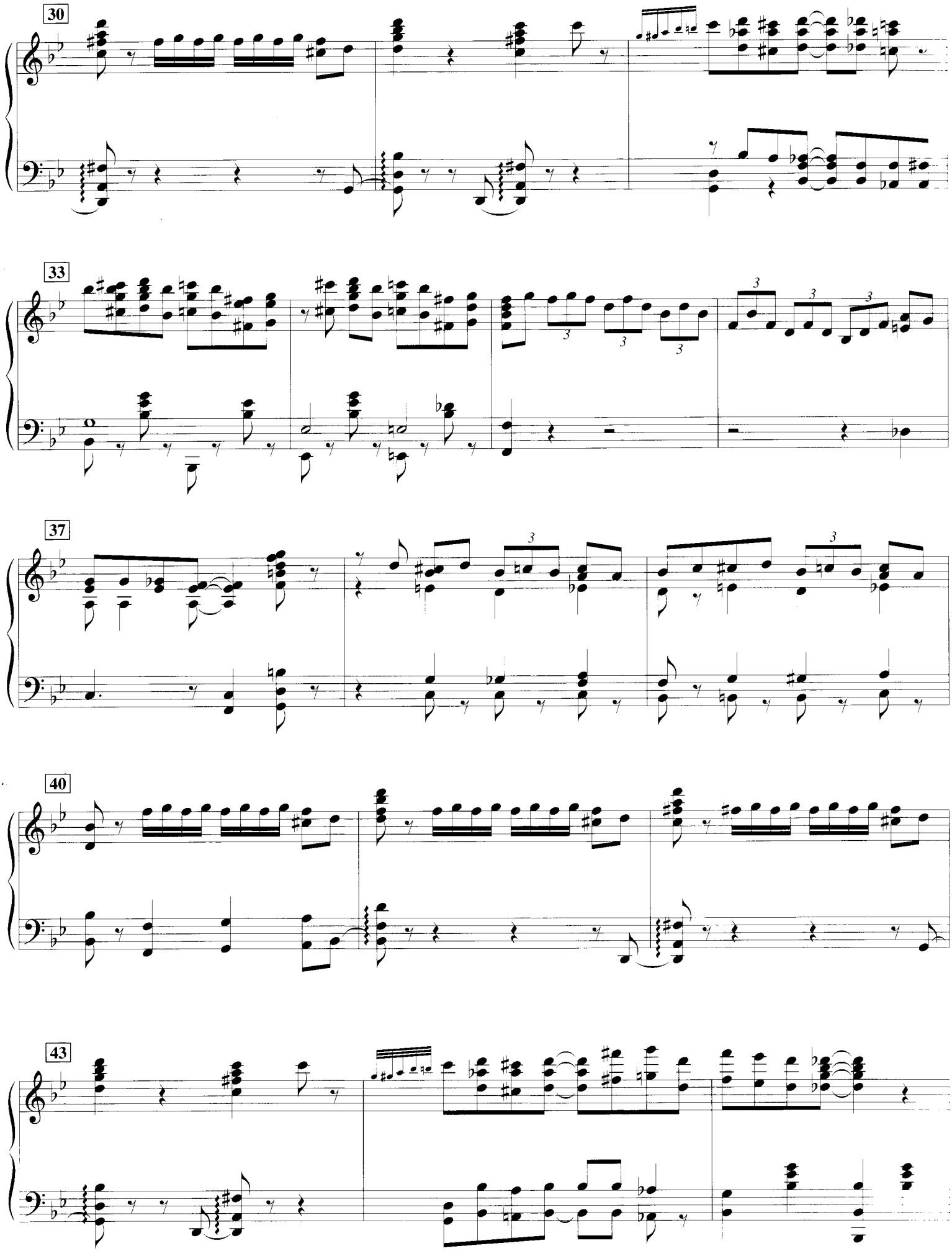
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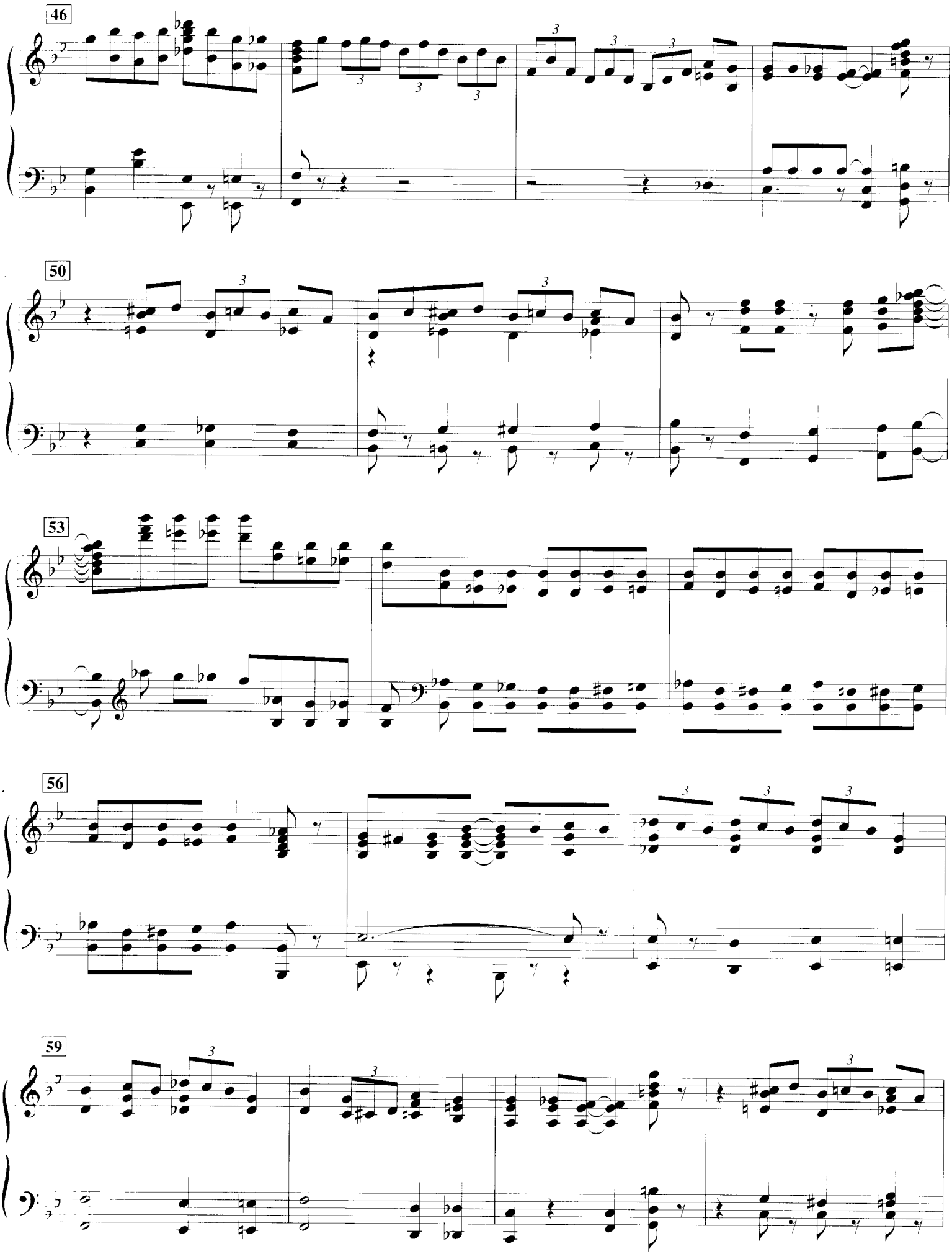
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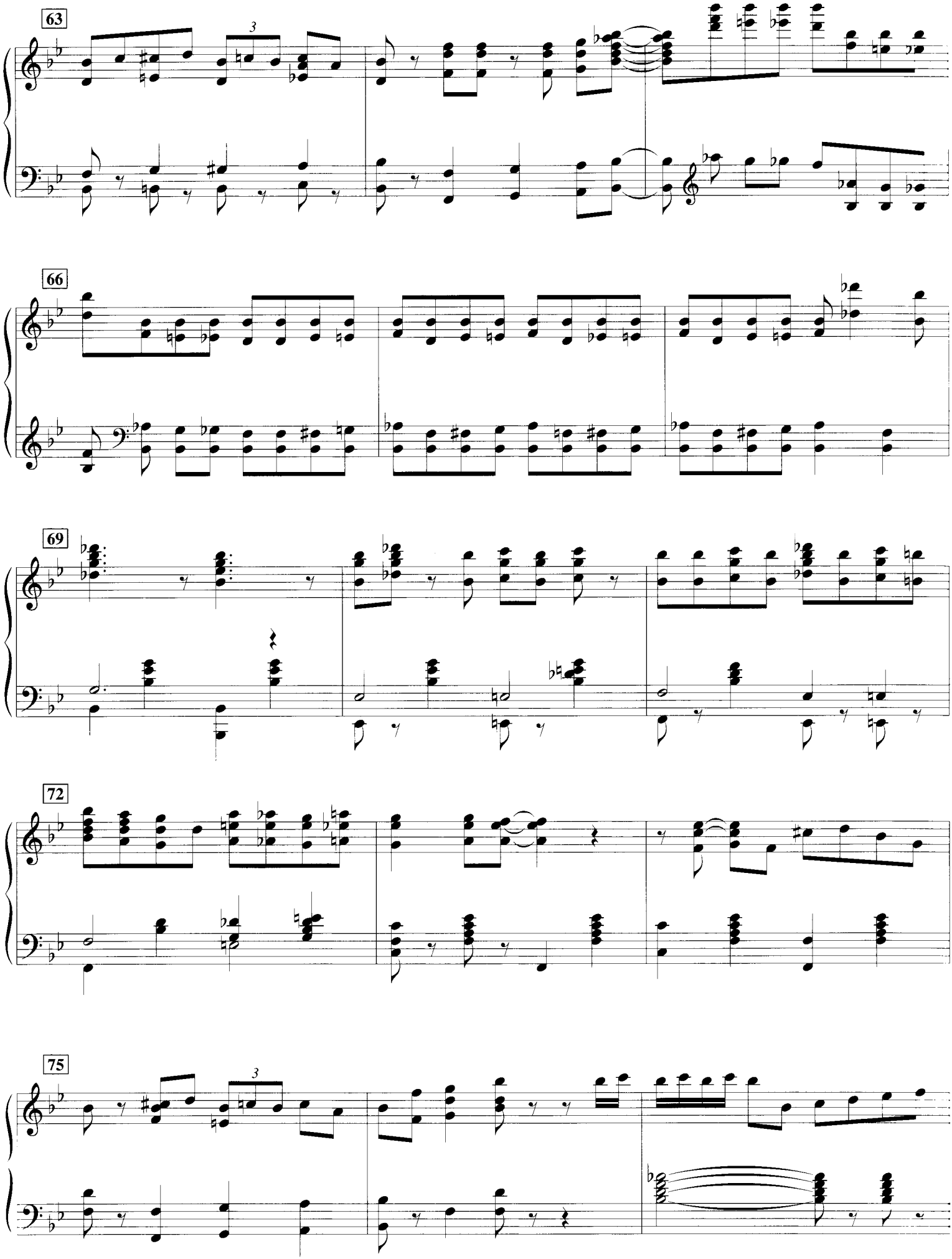
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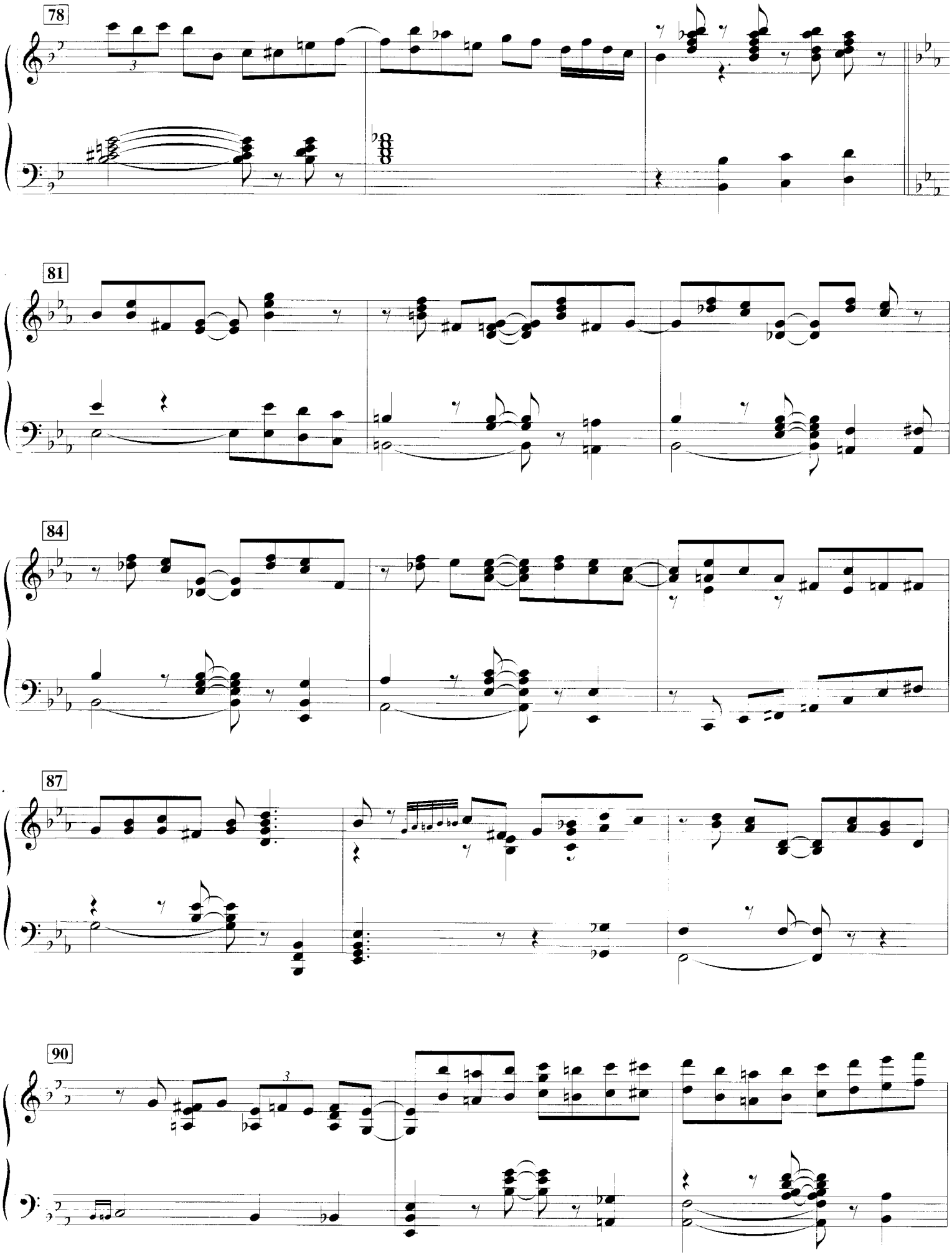
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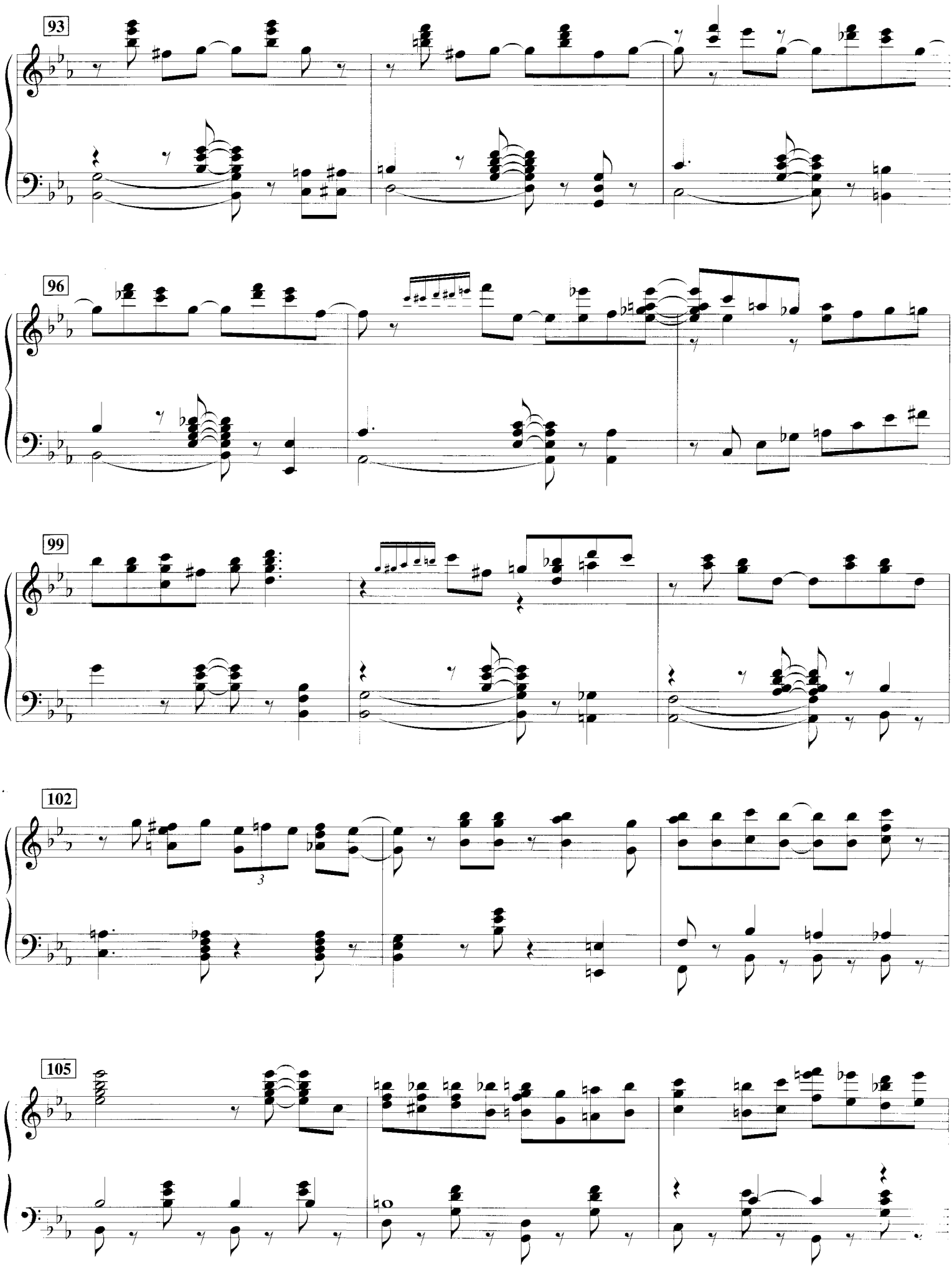
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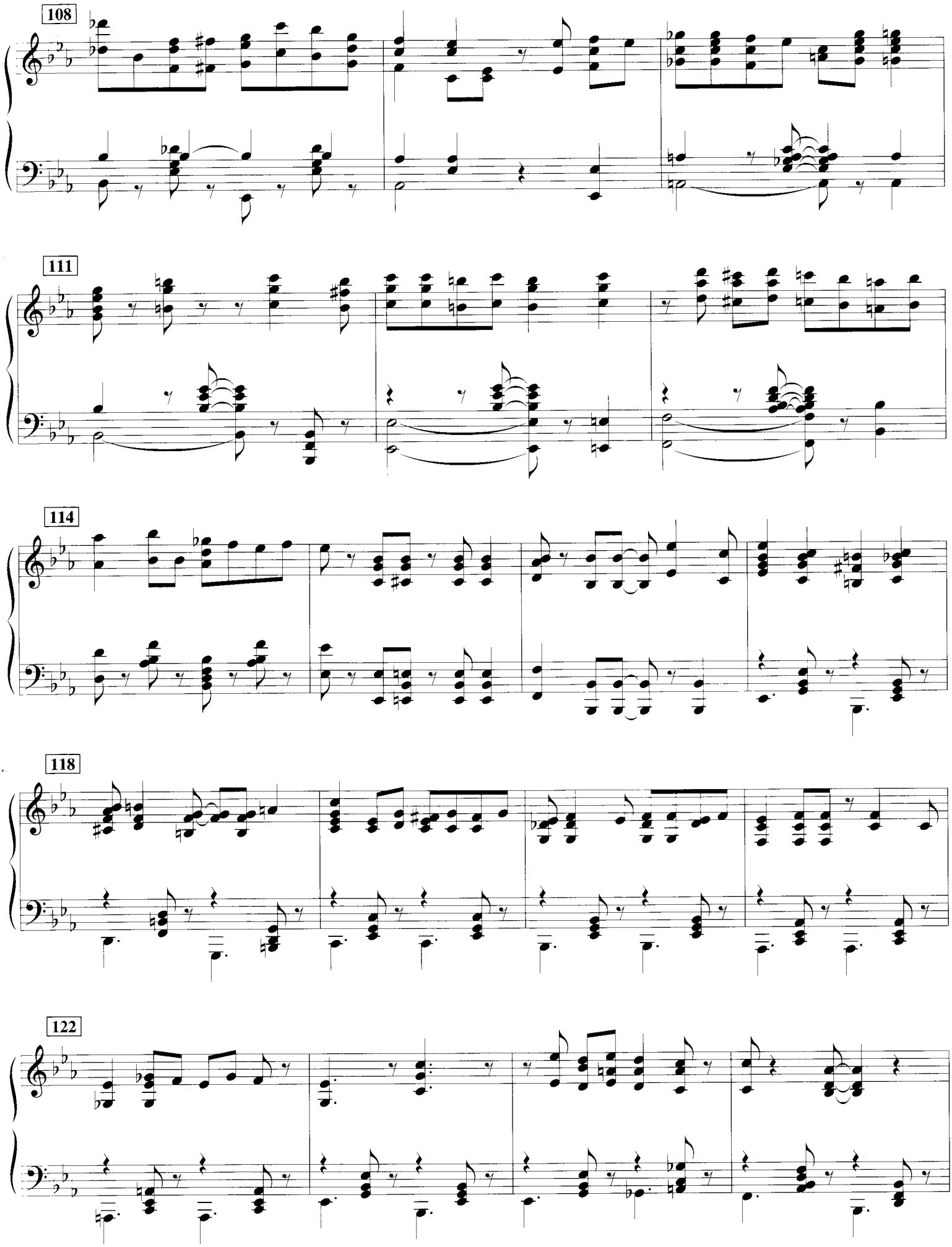
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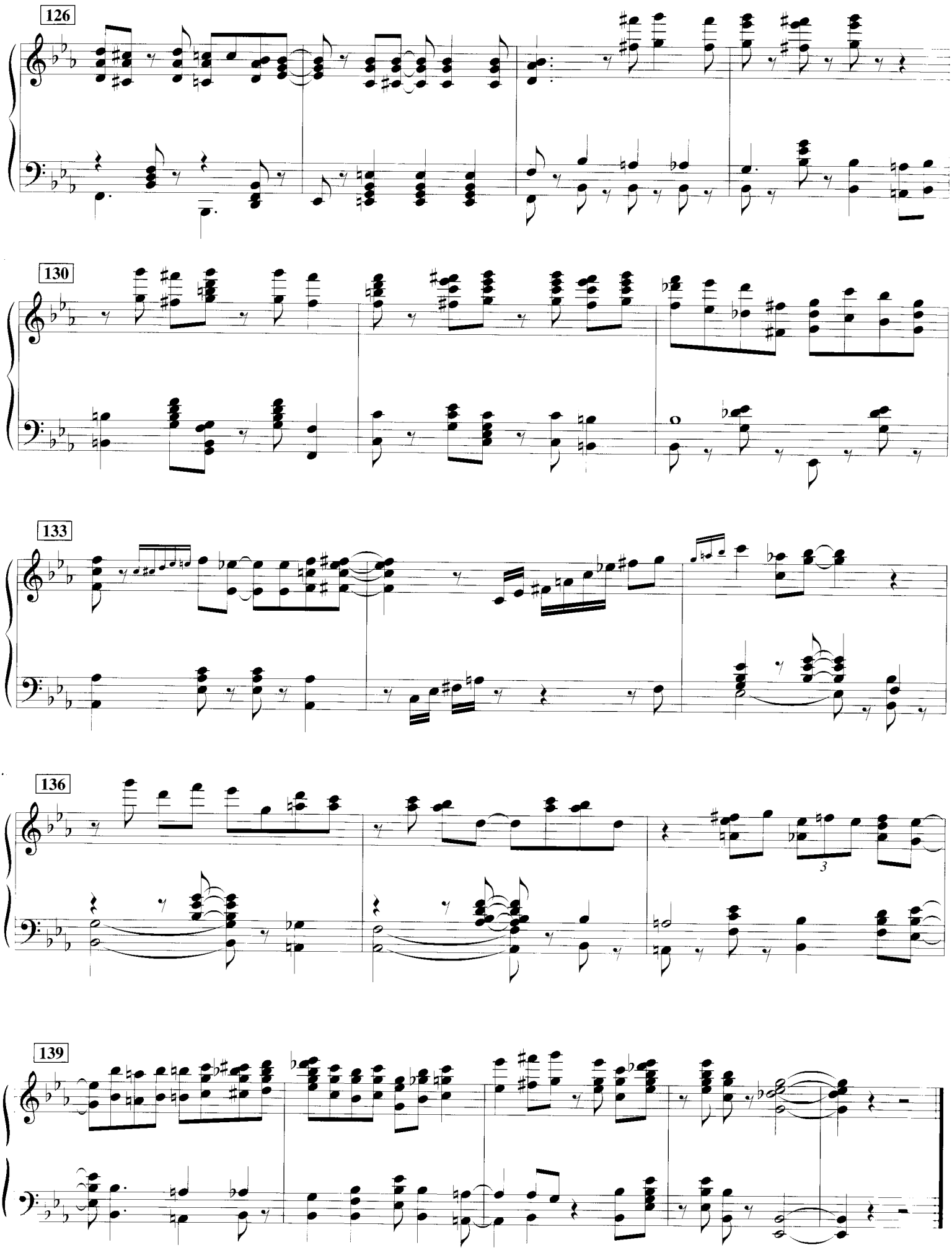
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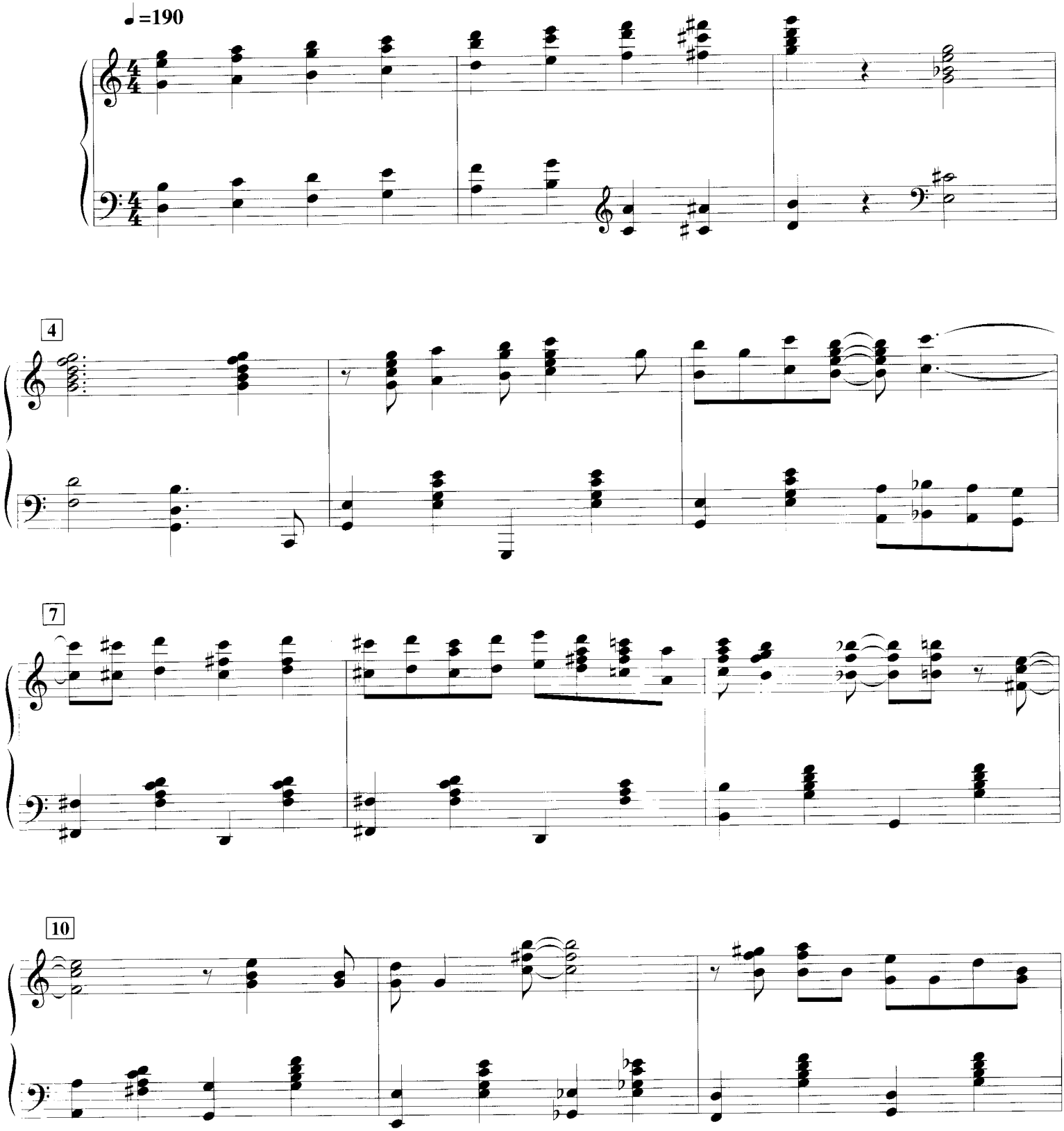
GRANDPA'S SPELLS

Vocalstyle Piano Roll 50487 recorded early June 1924

By Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton



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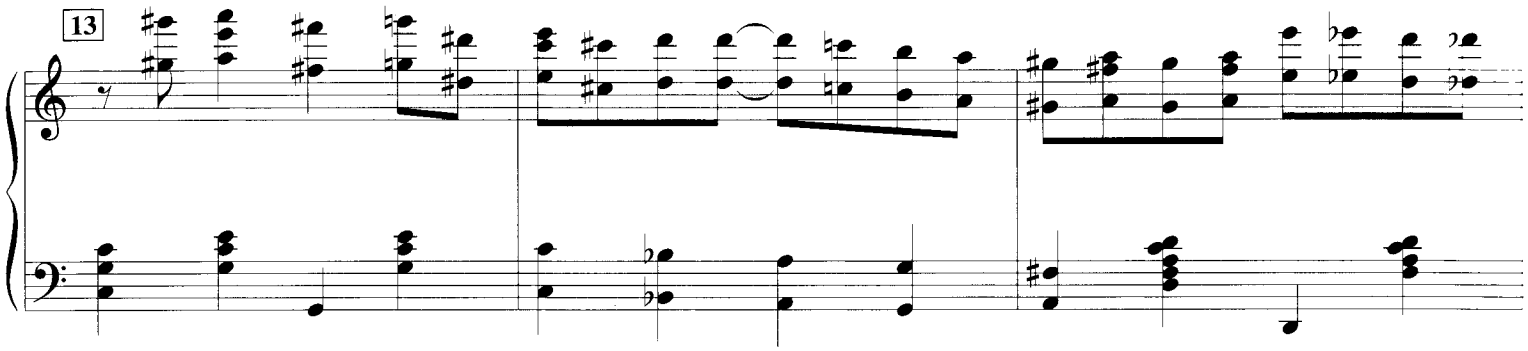

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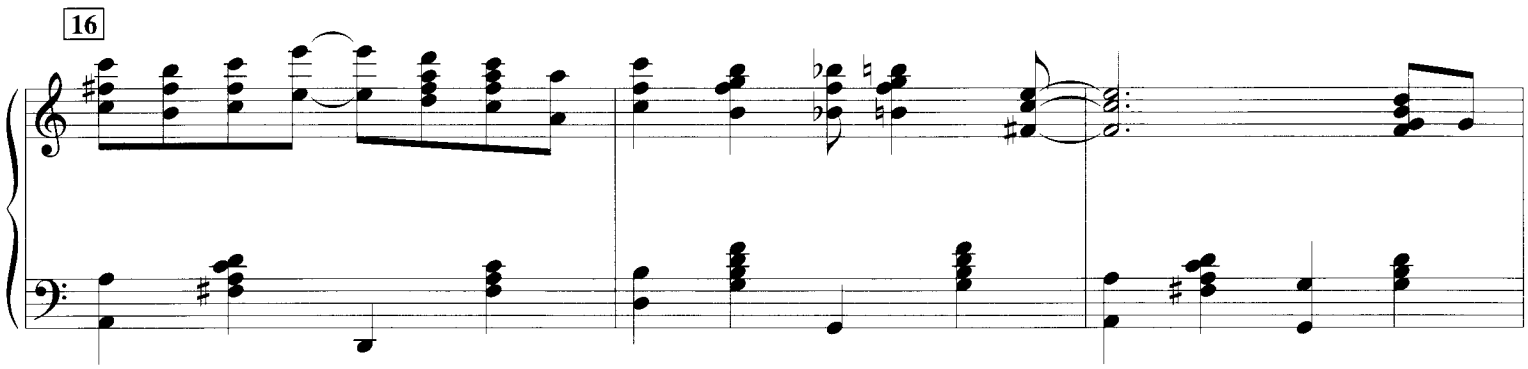

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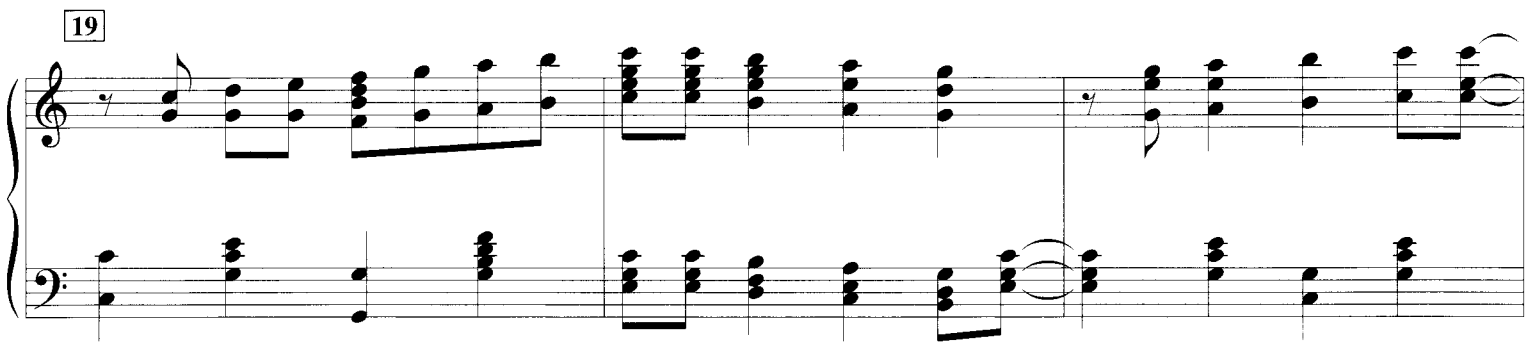

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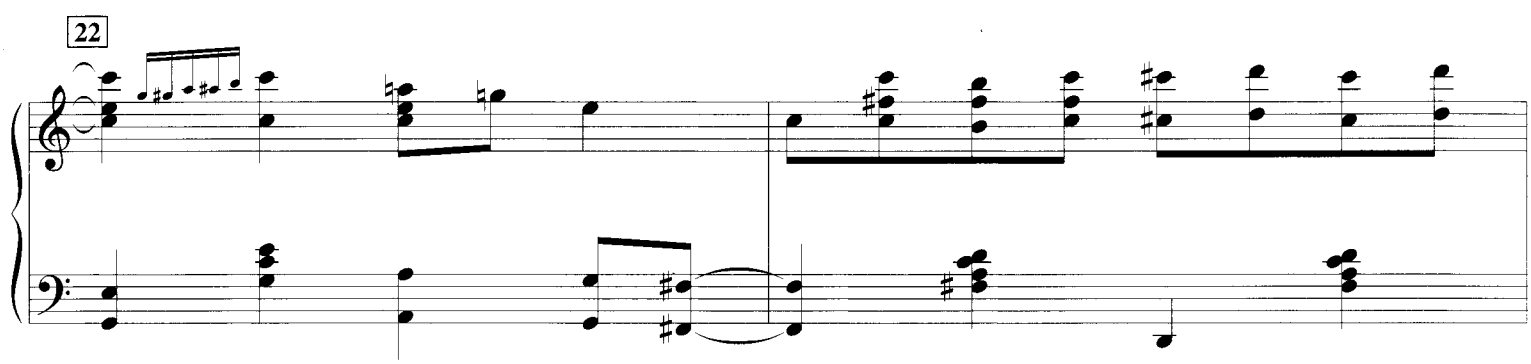

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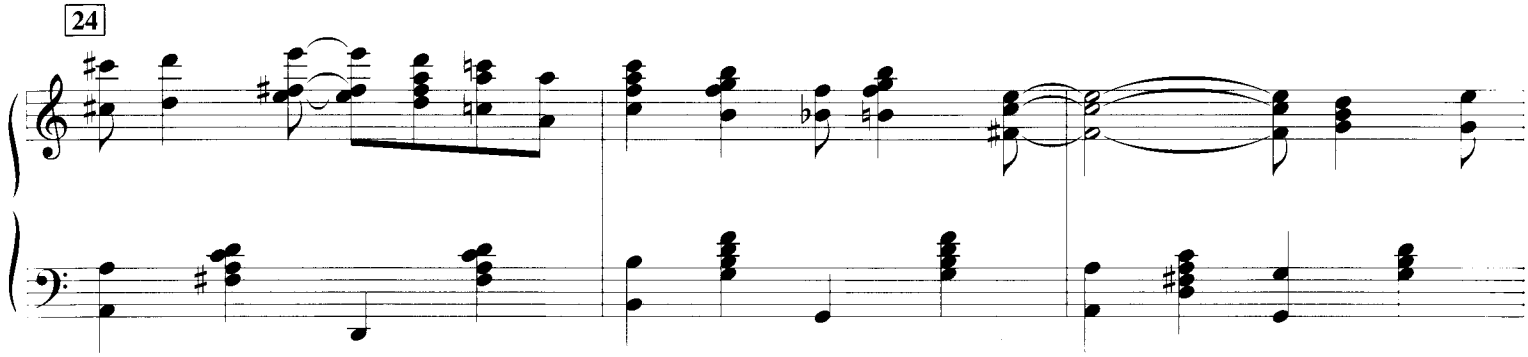

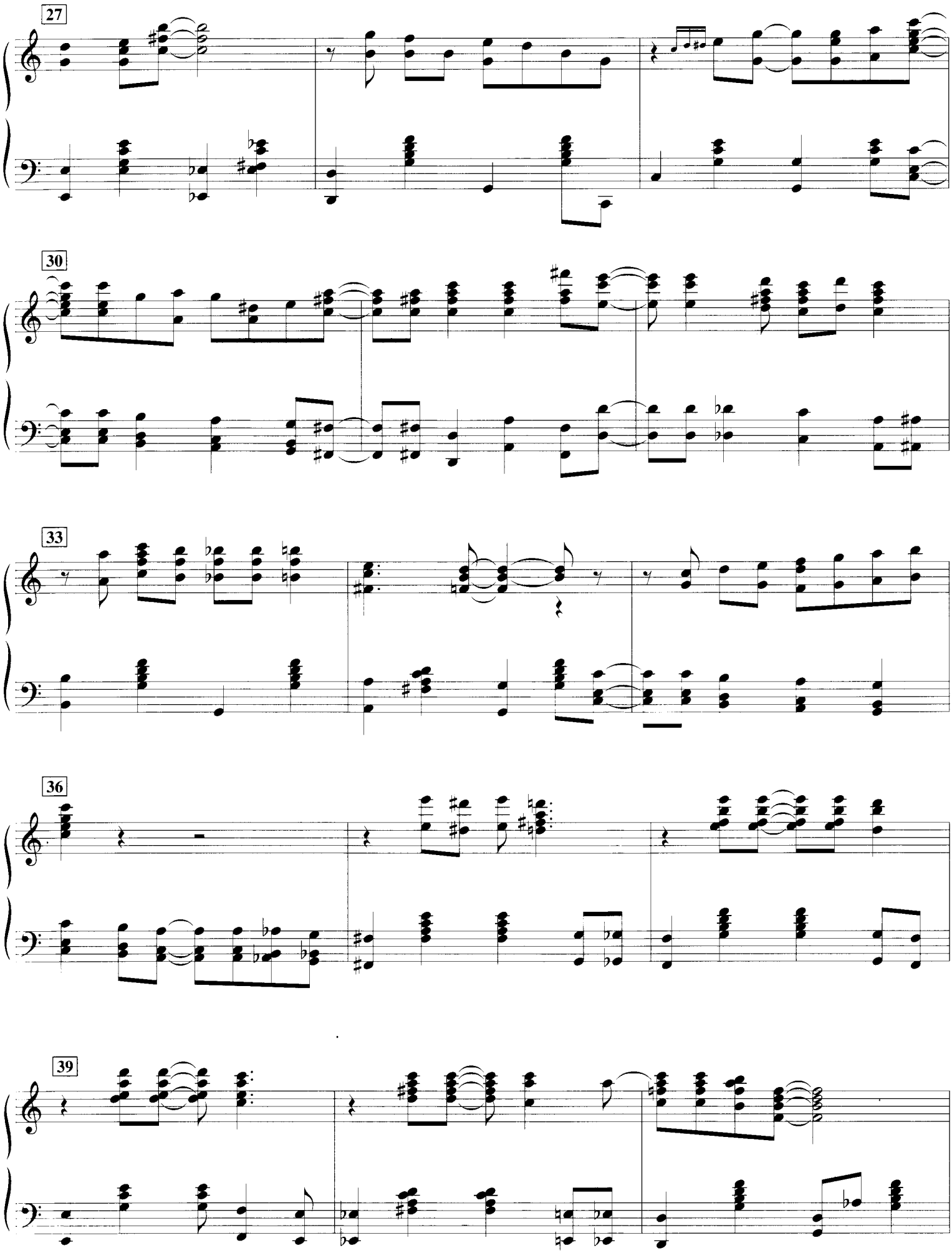
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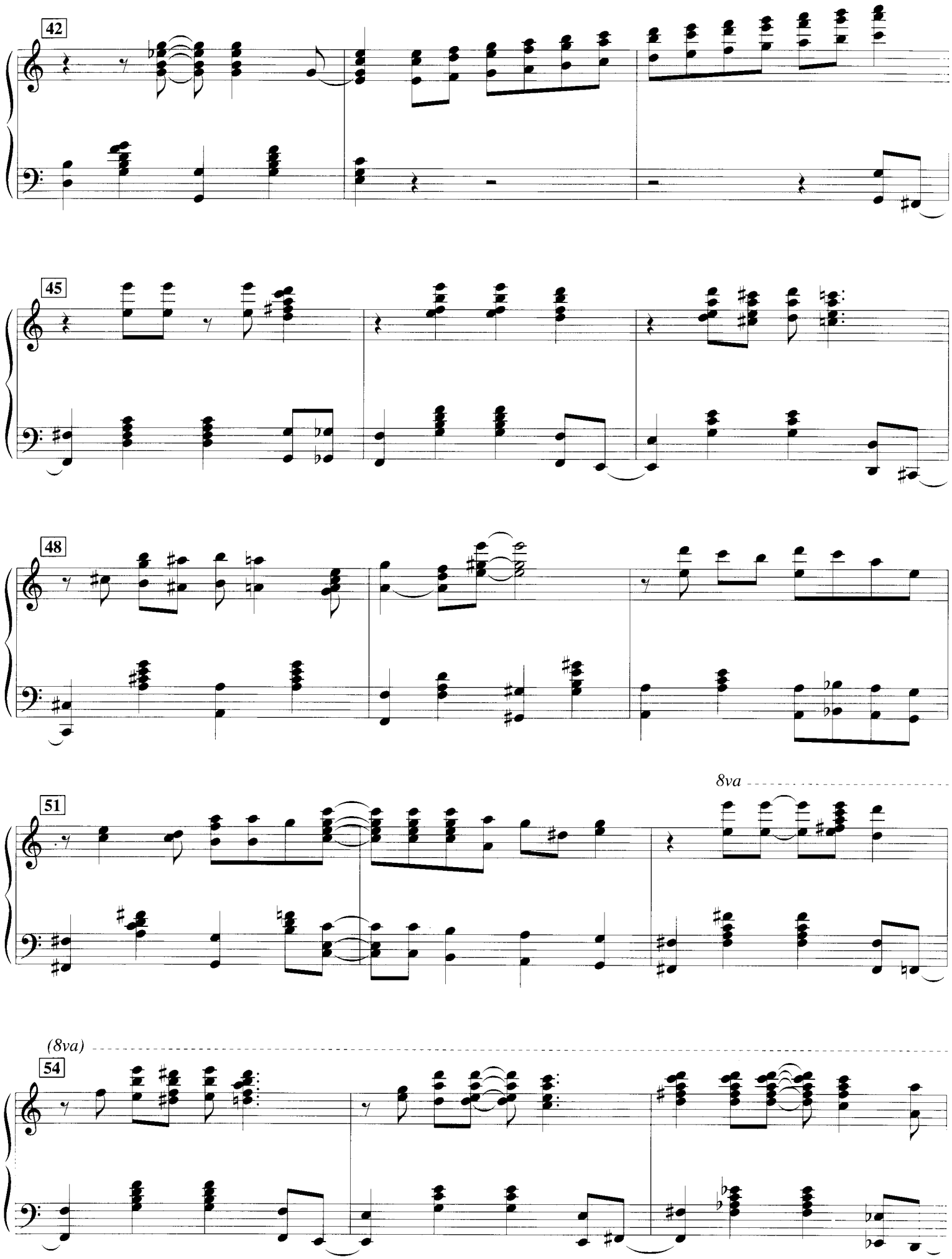
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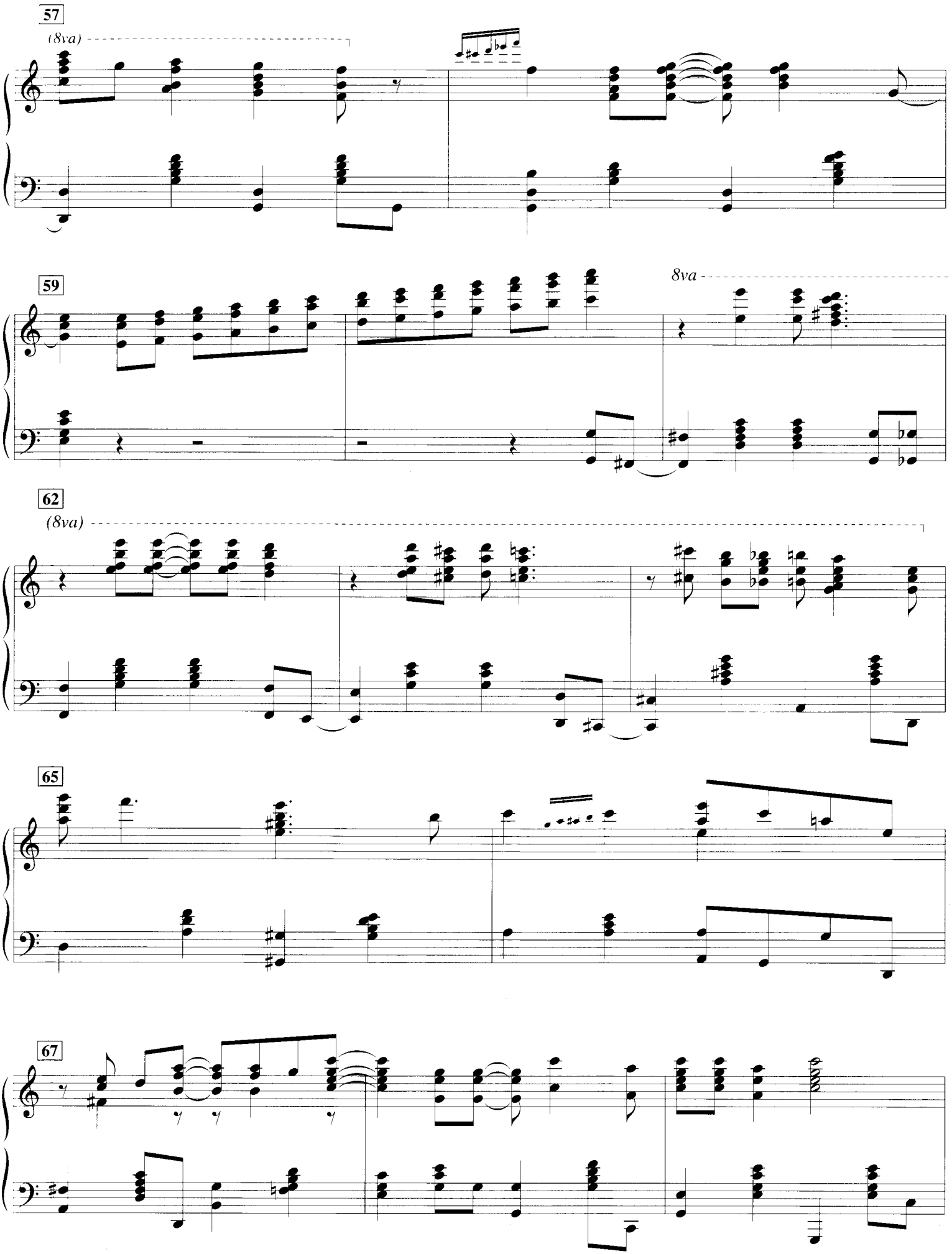
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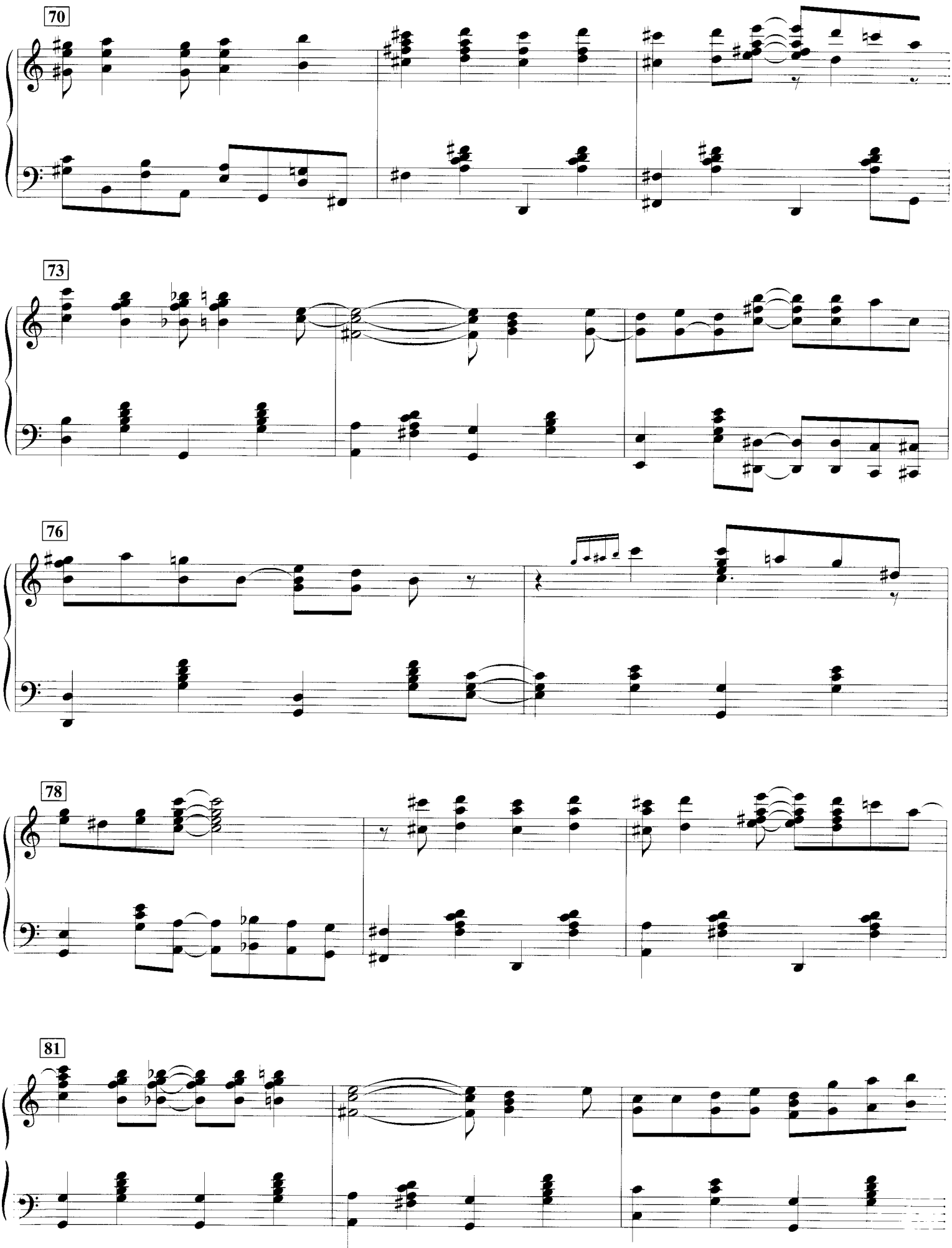
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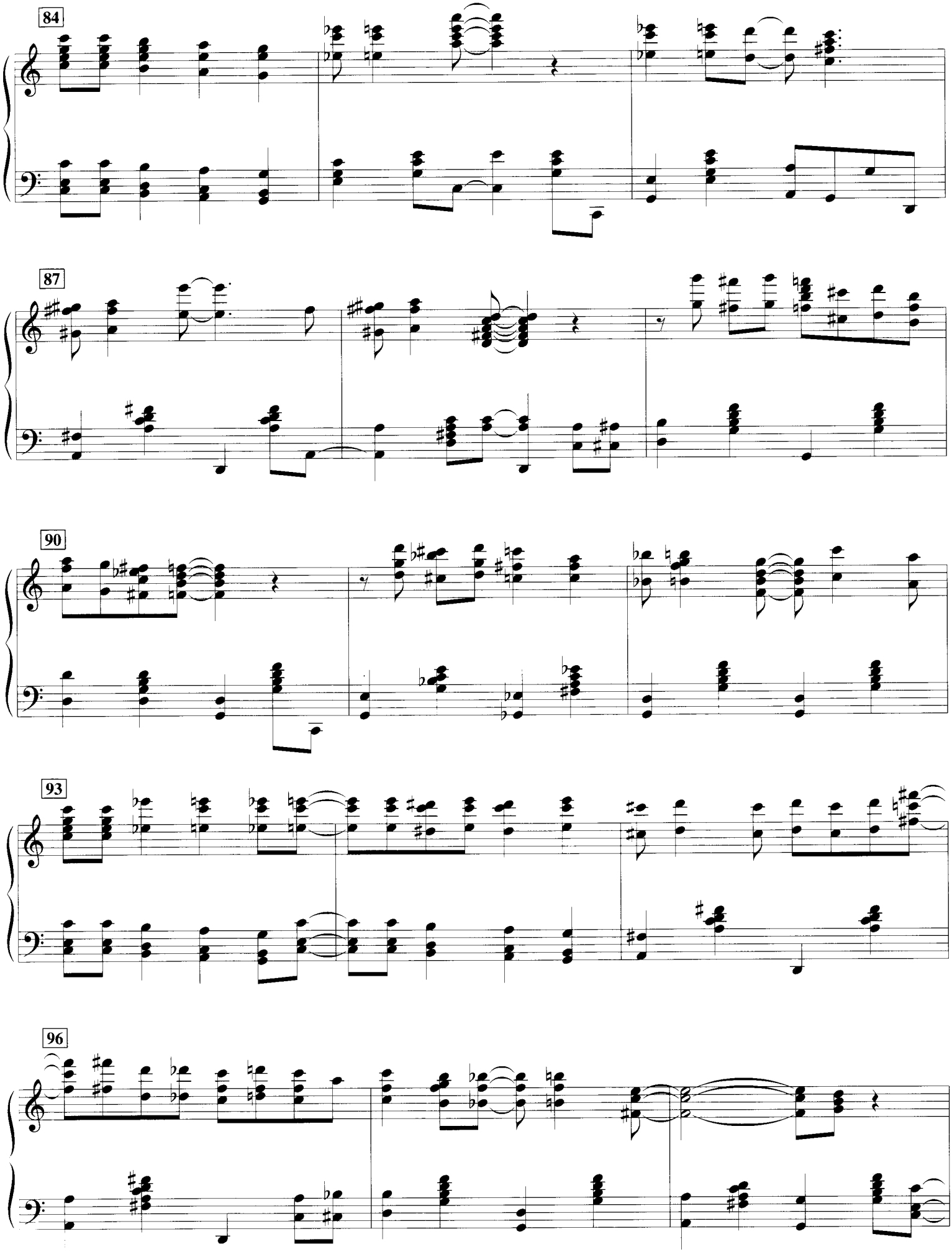
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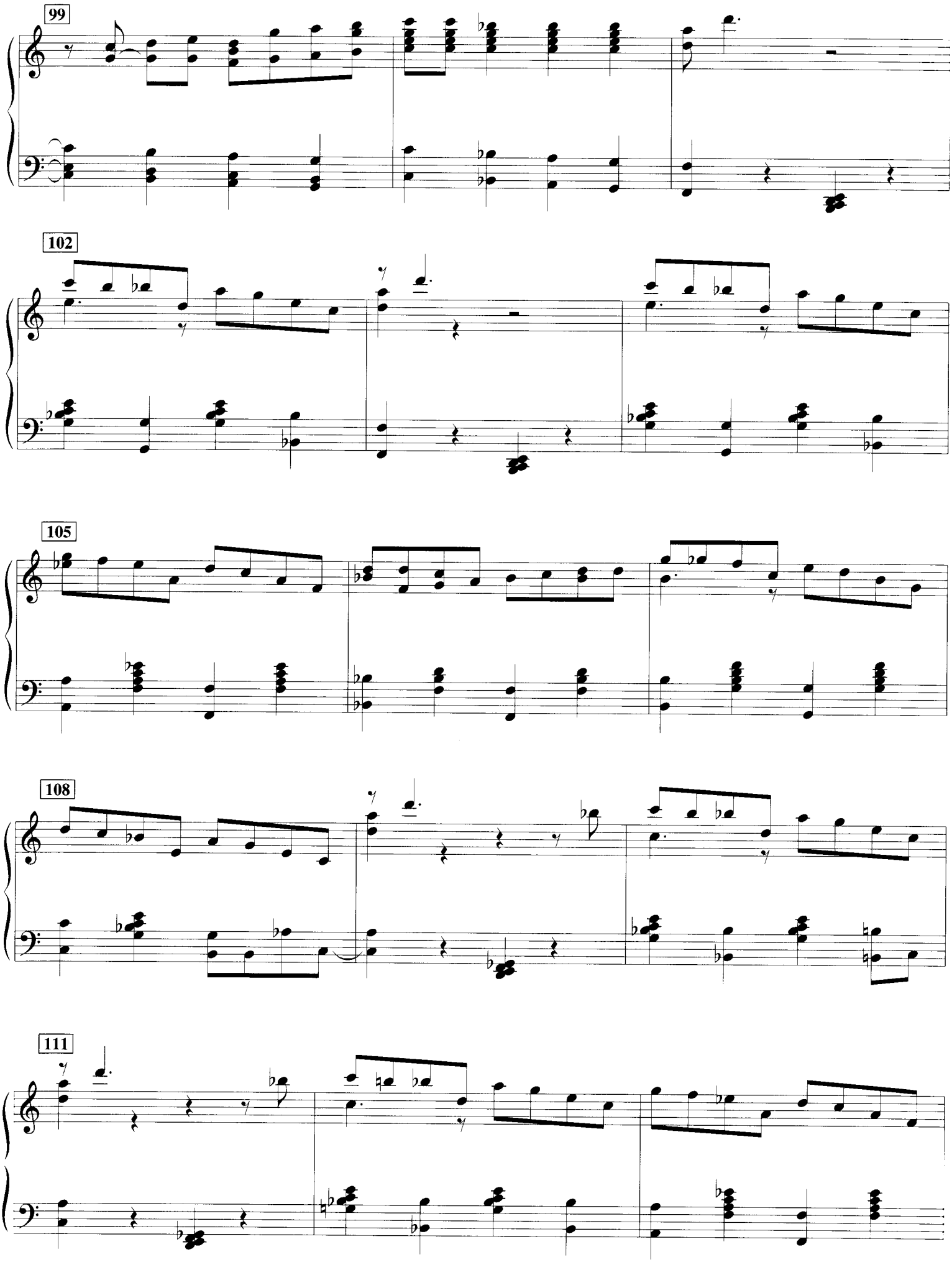
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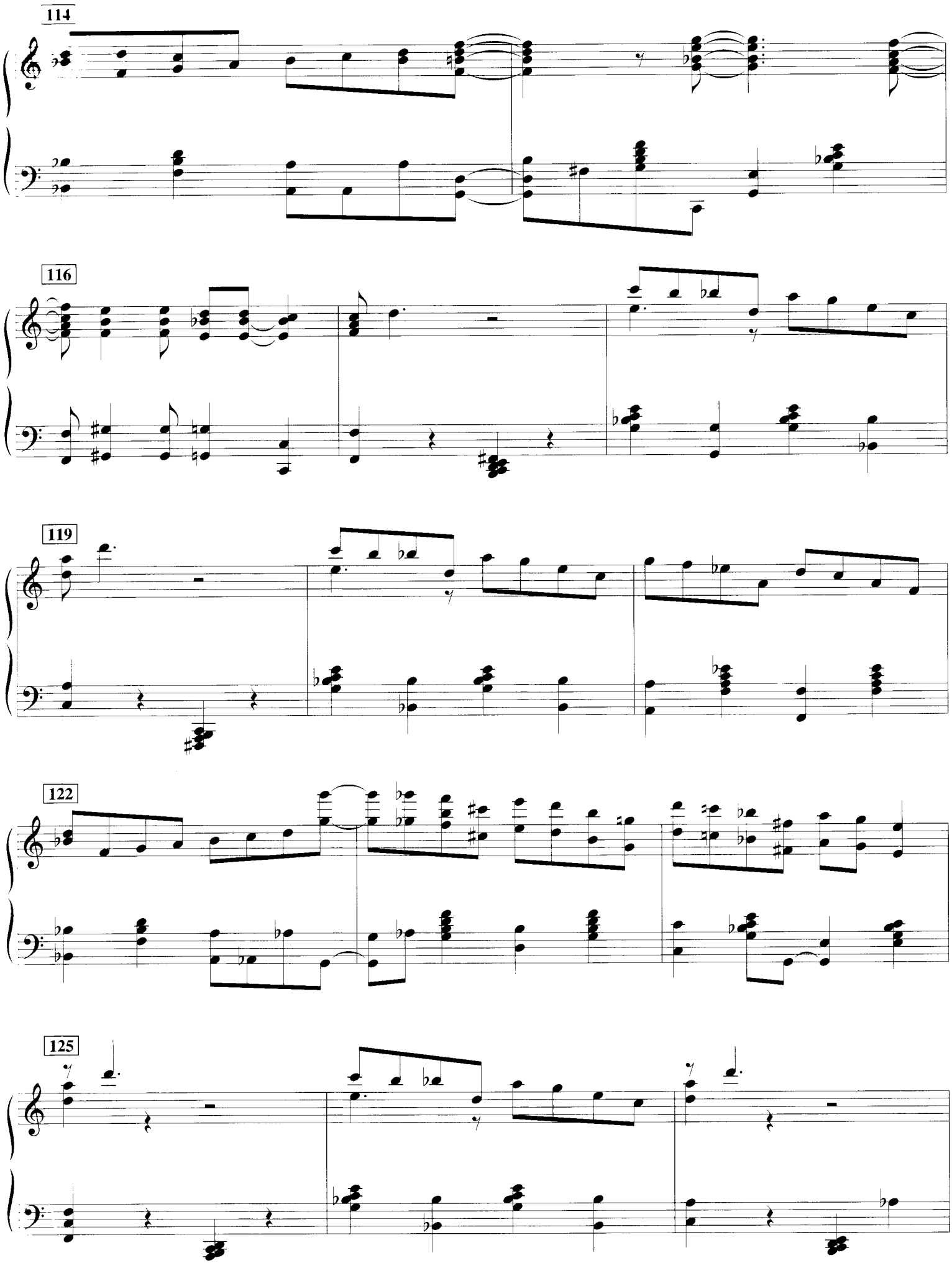
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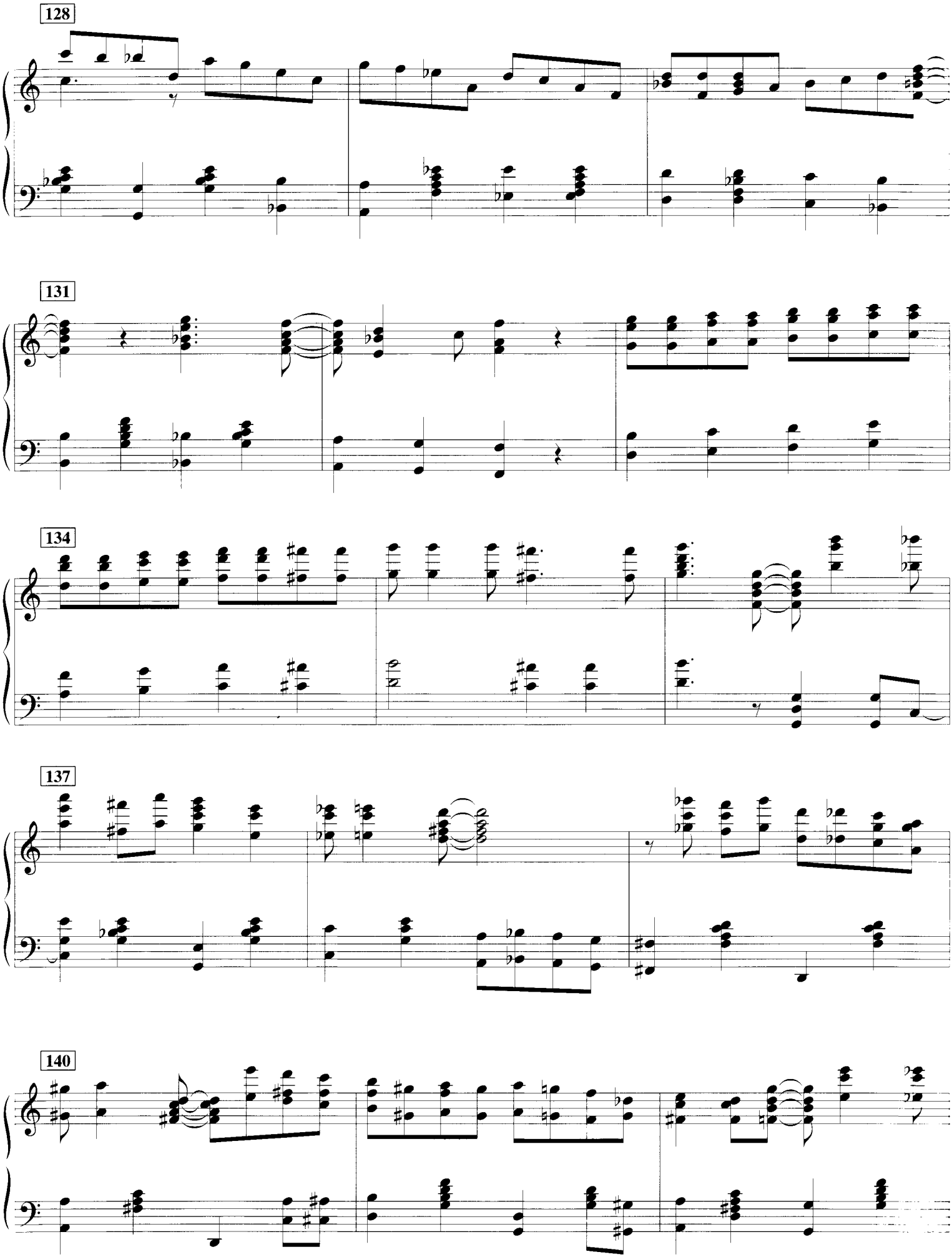
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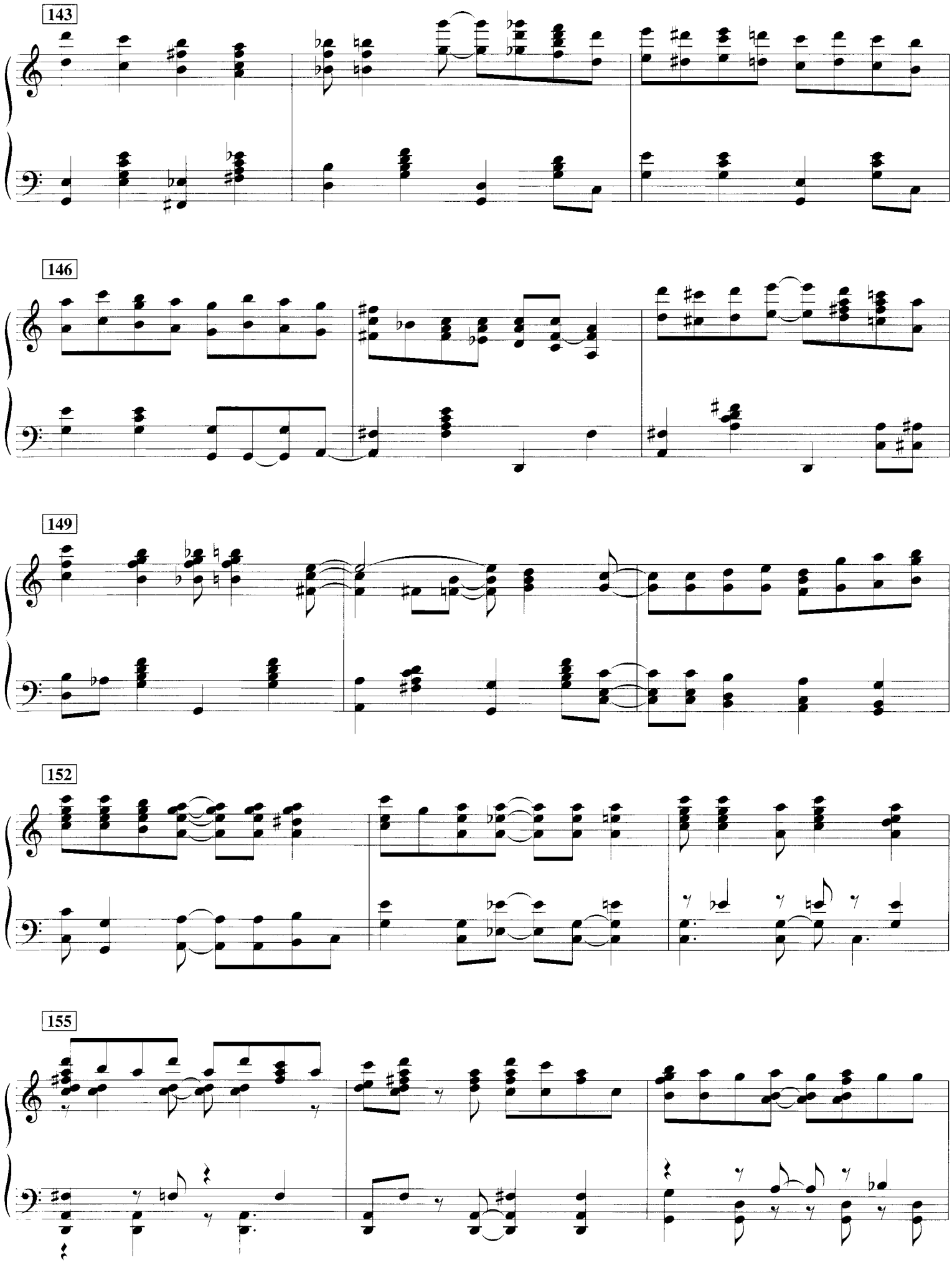
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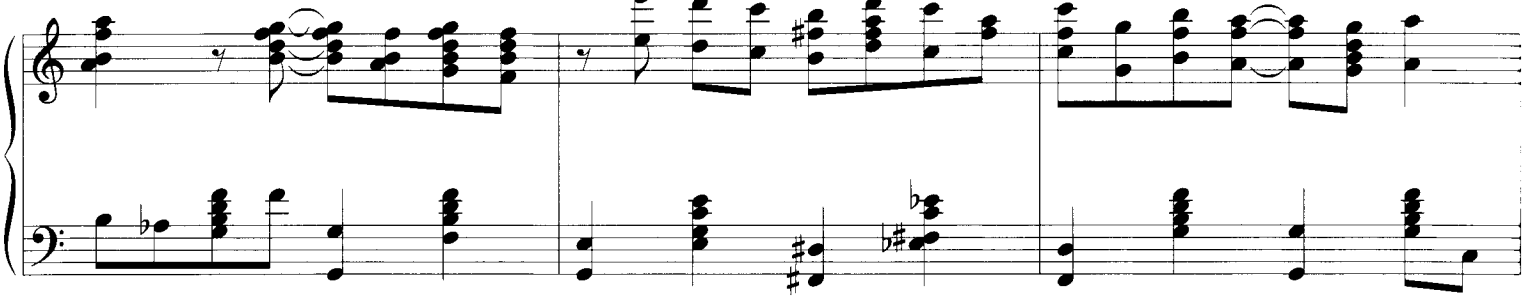

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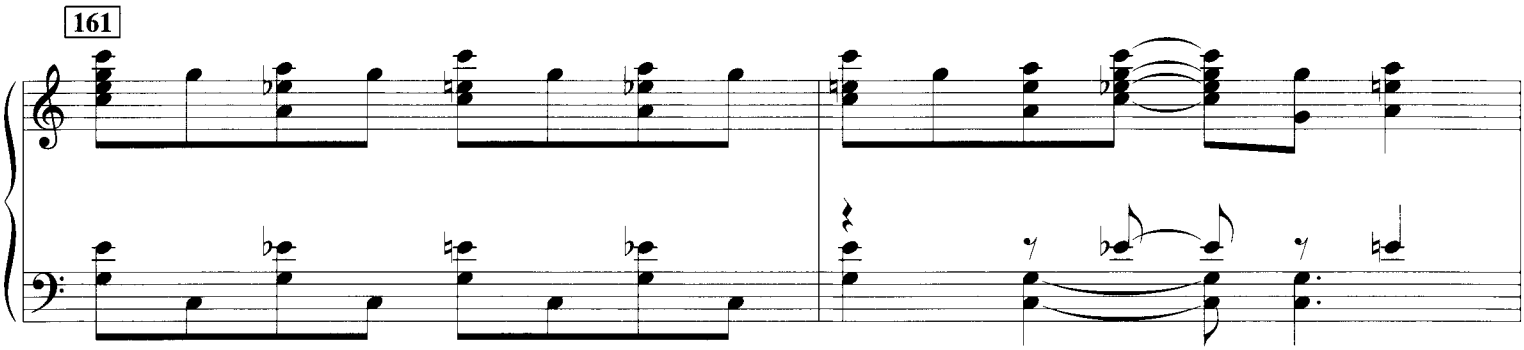

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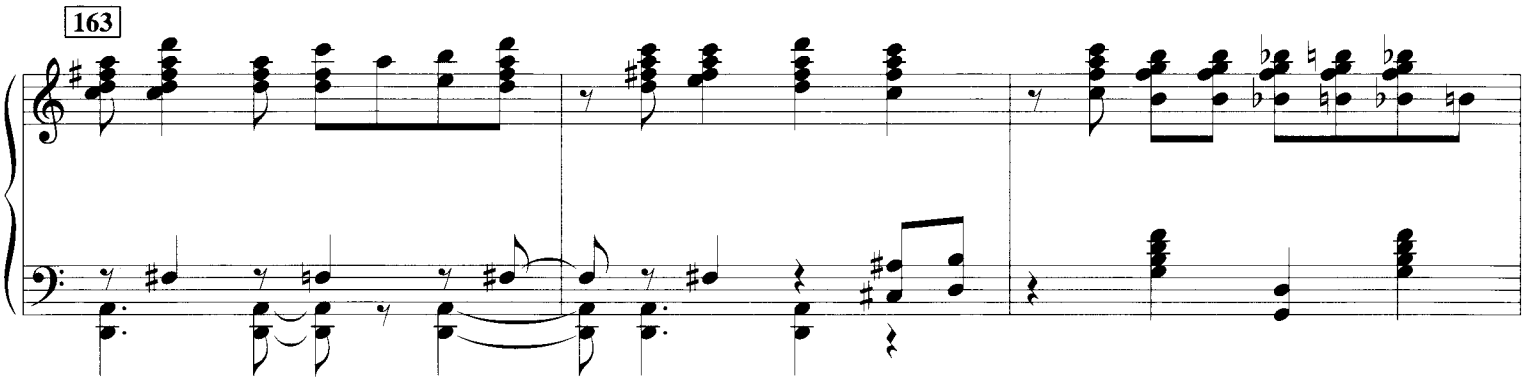

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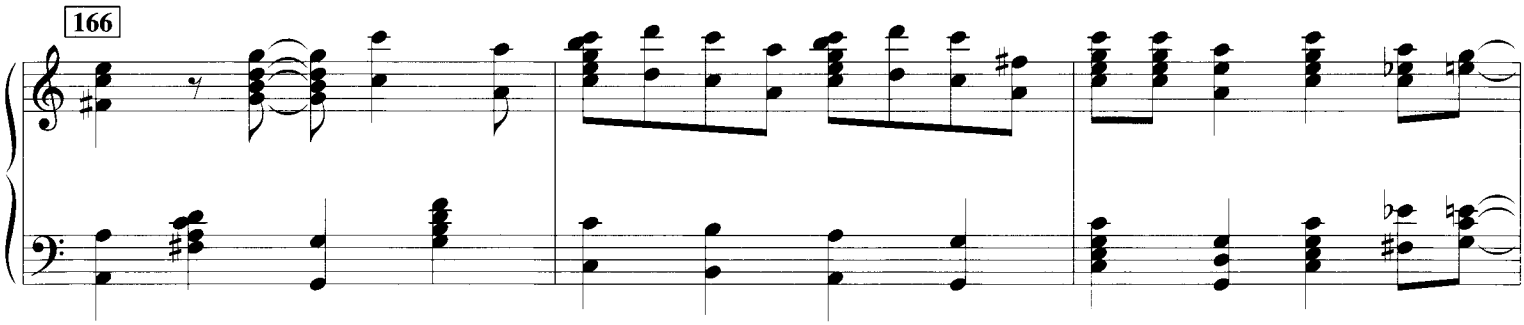

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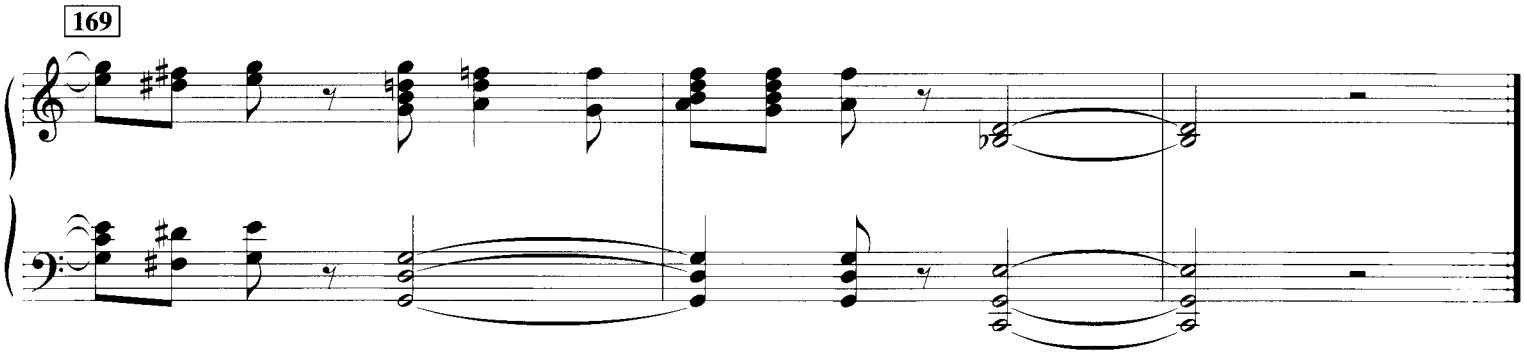
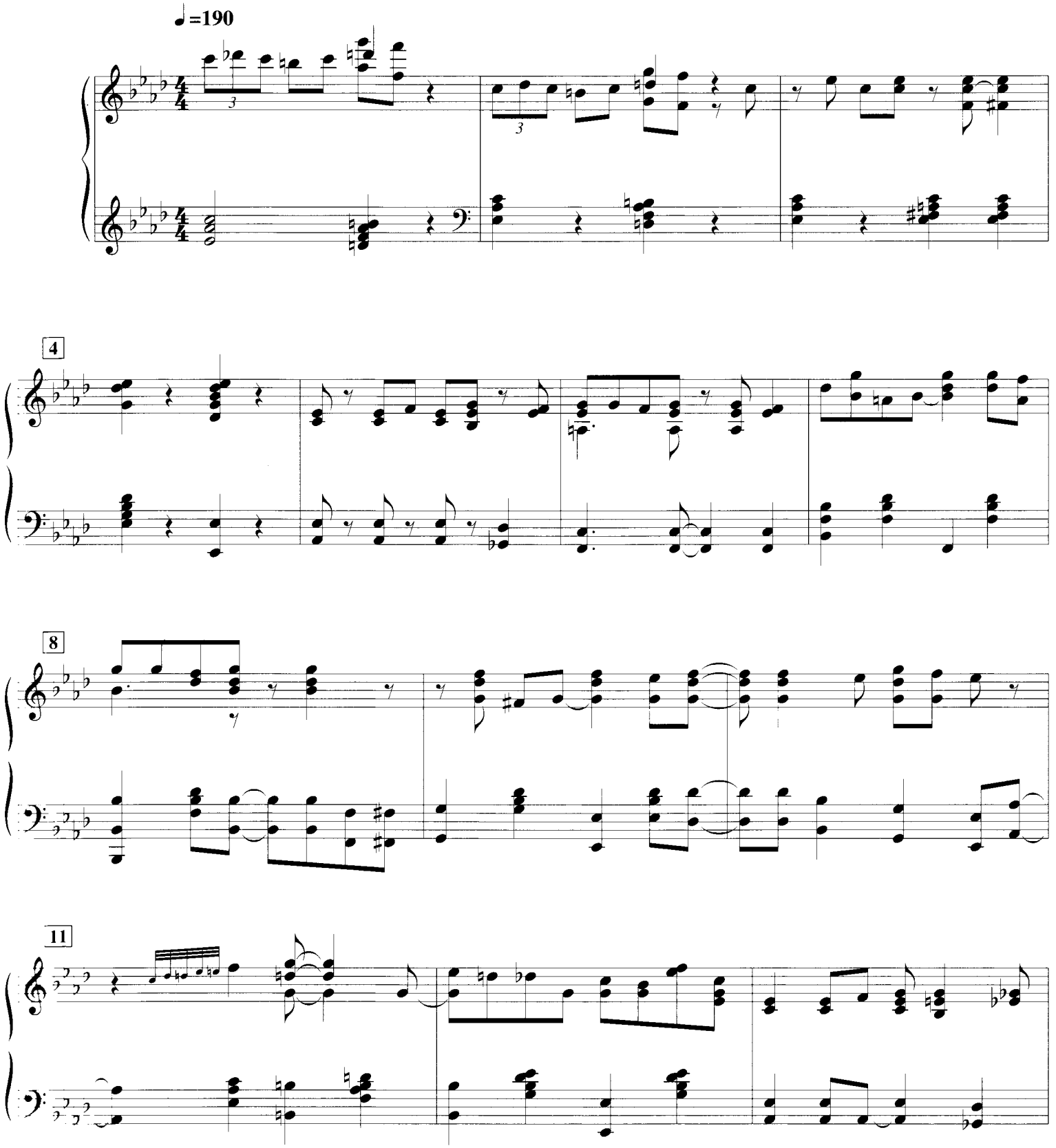


KING PORTER STOMP

Vocalstyle Piano Roll 50480 recorded early June 1924

By Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton



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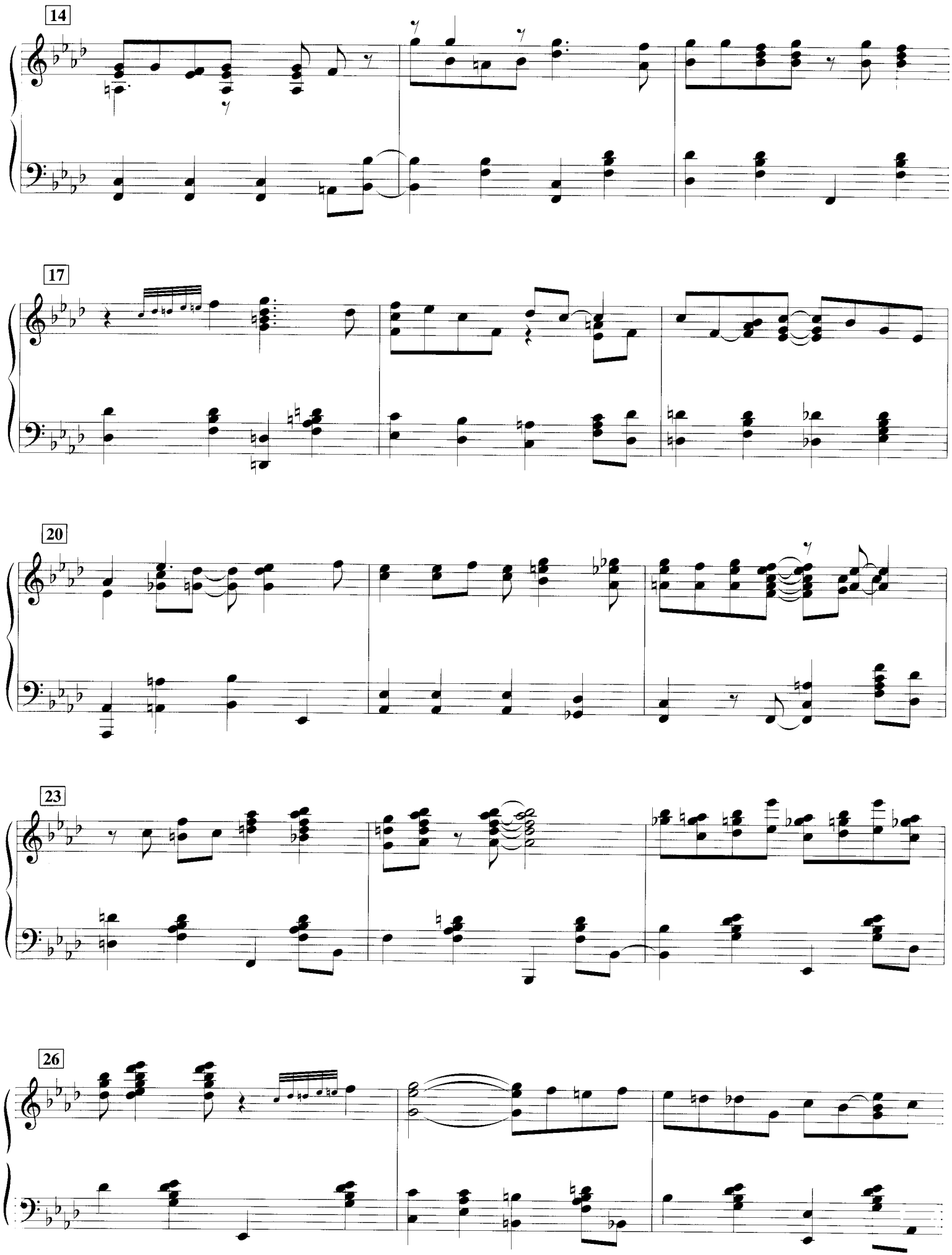
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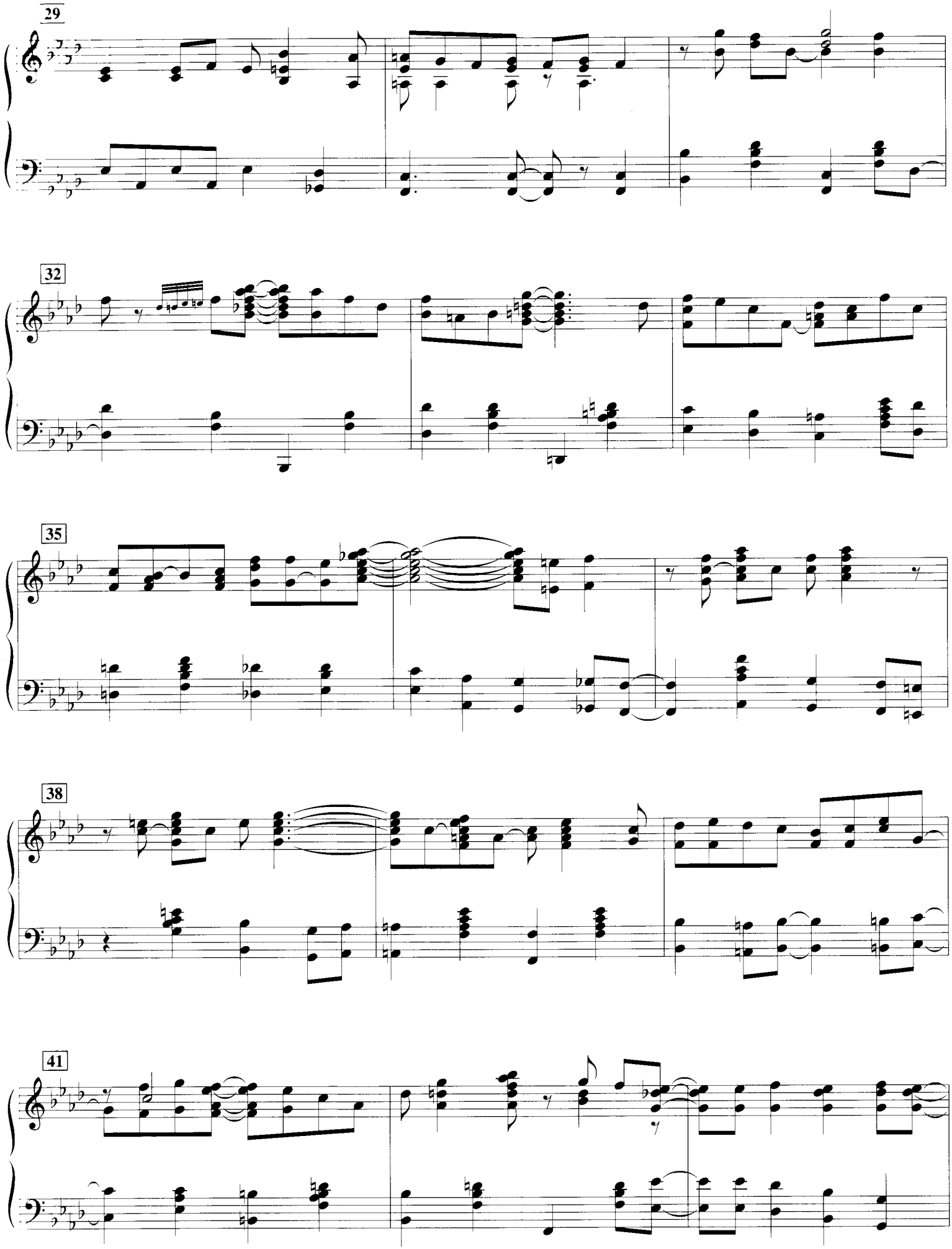
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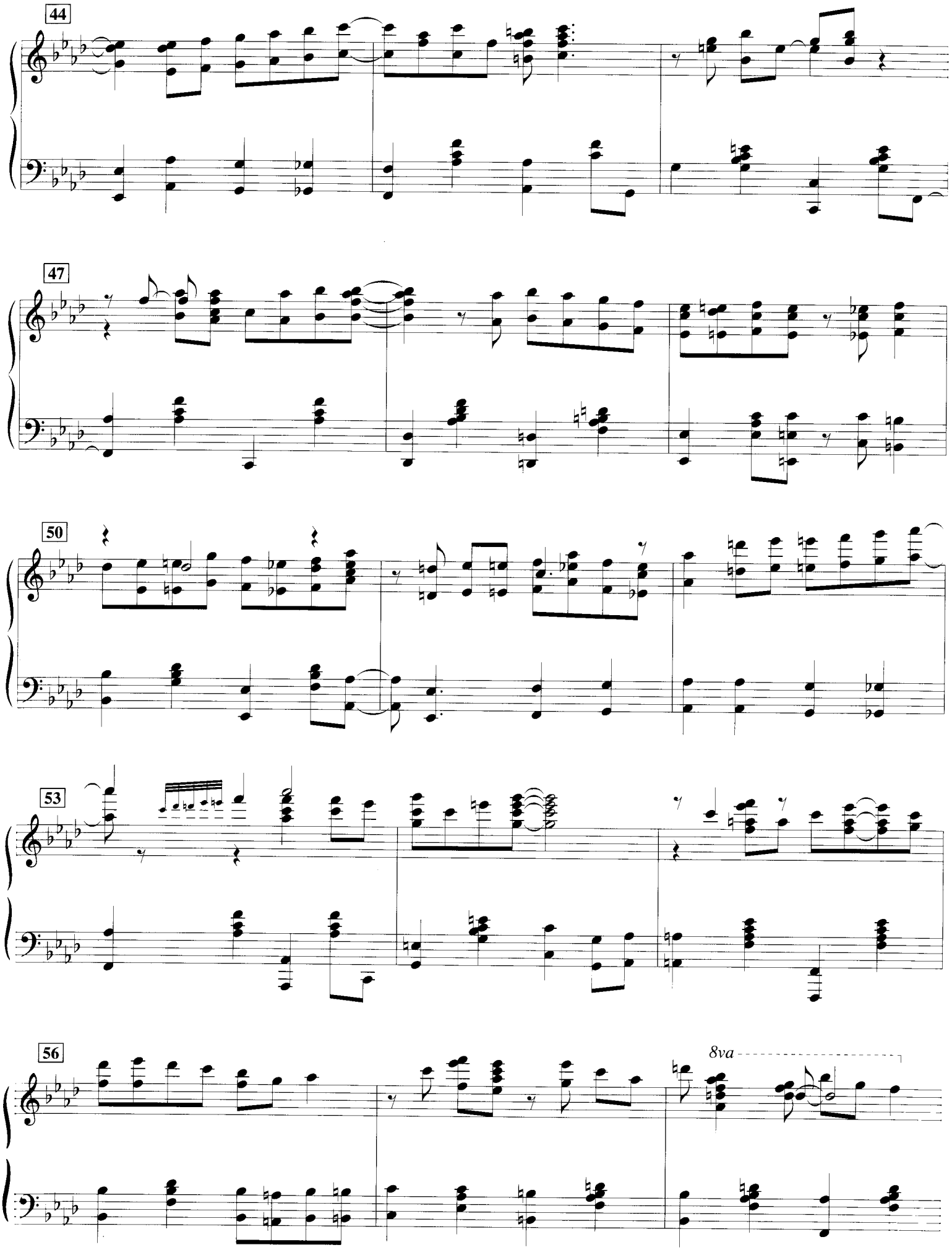
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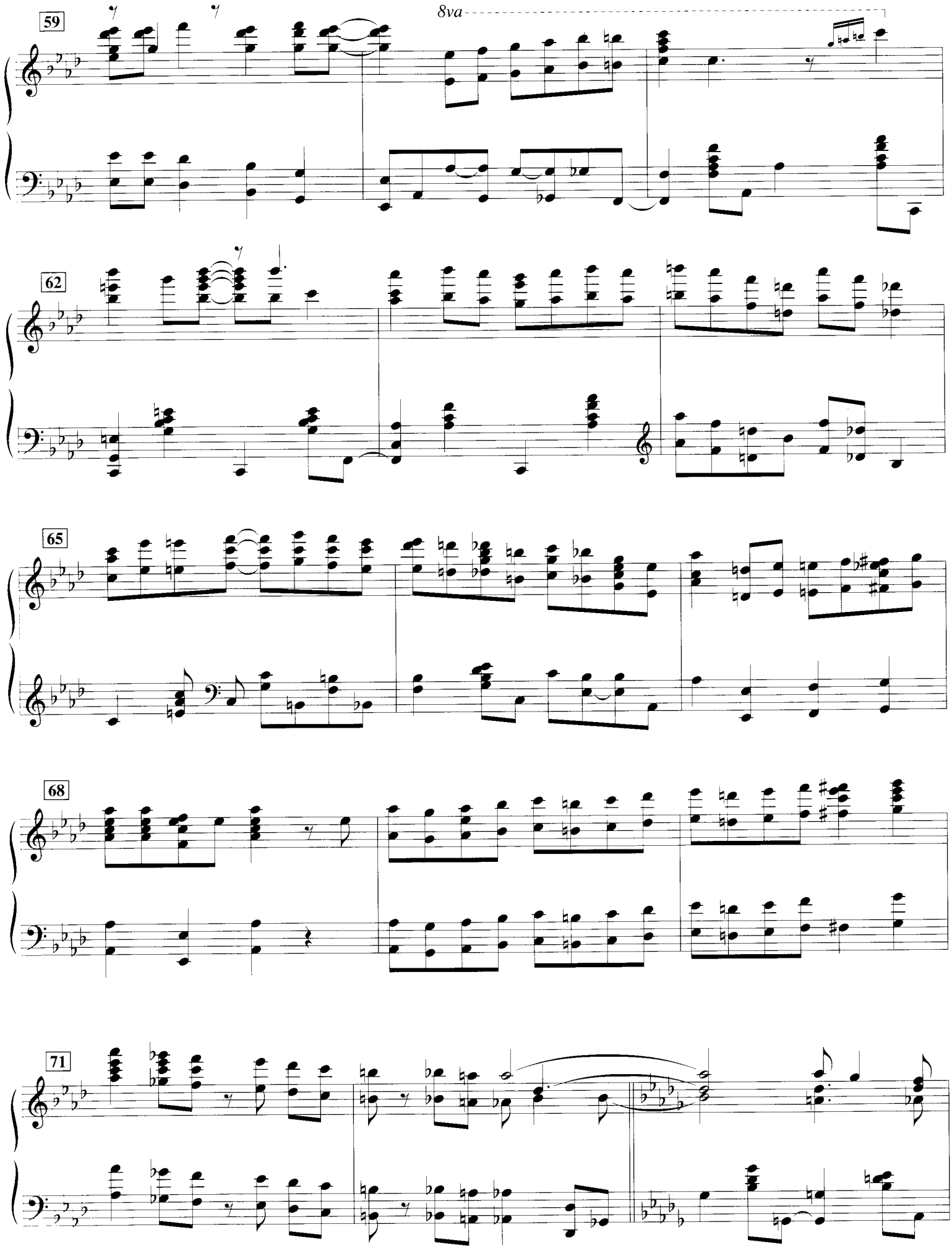
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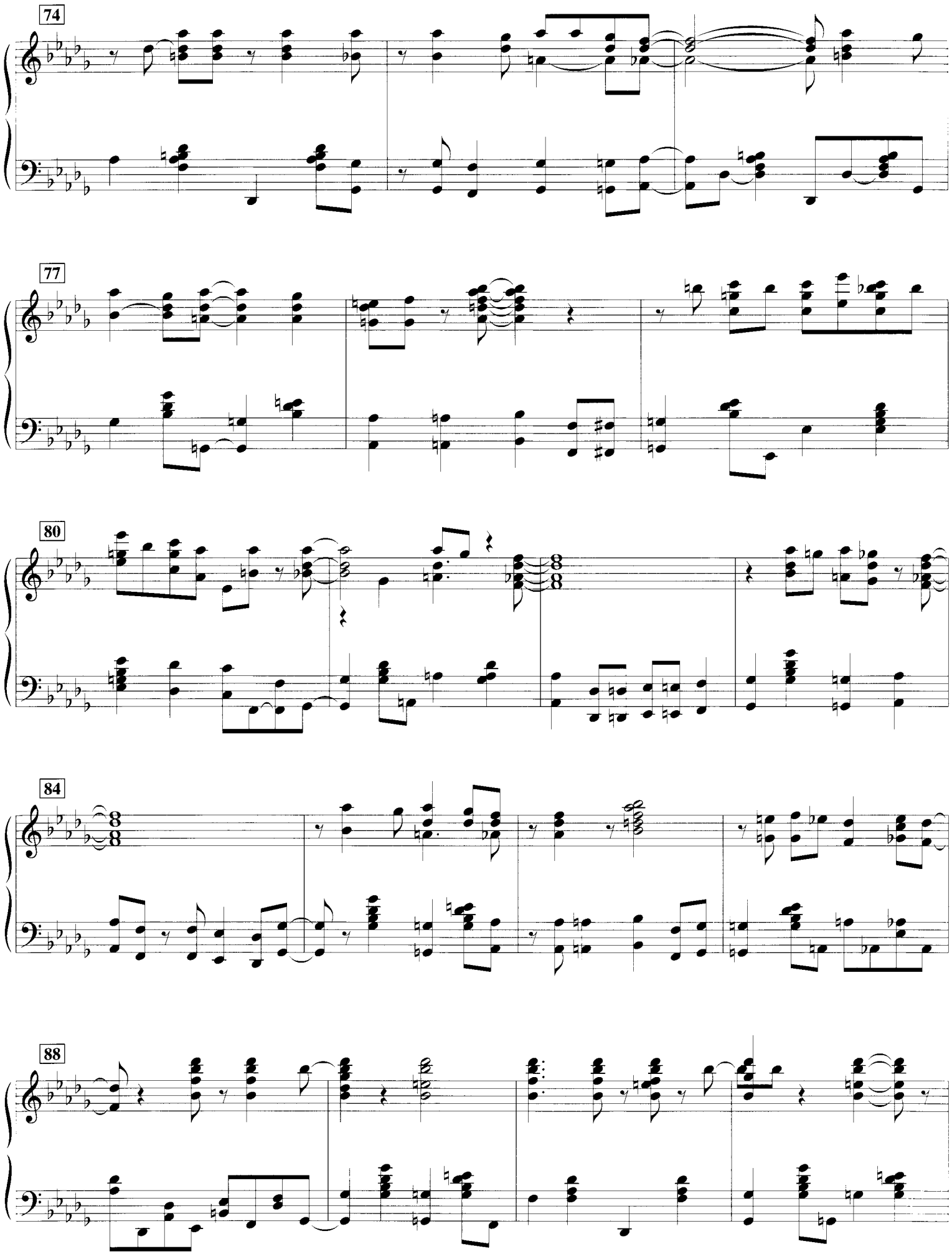
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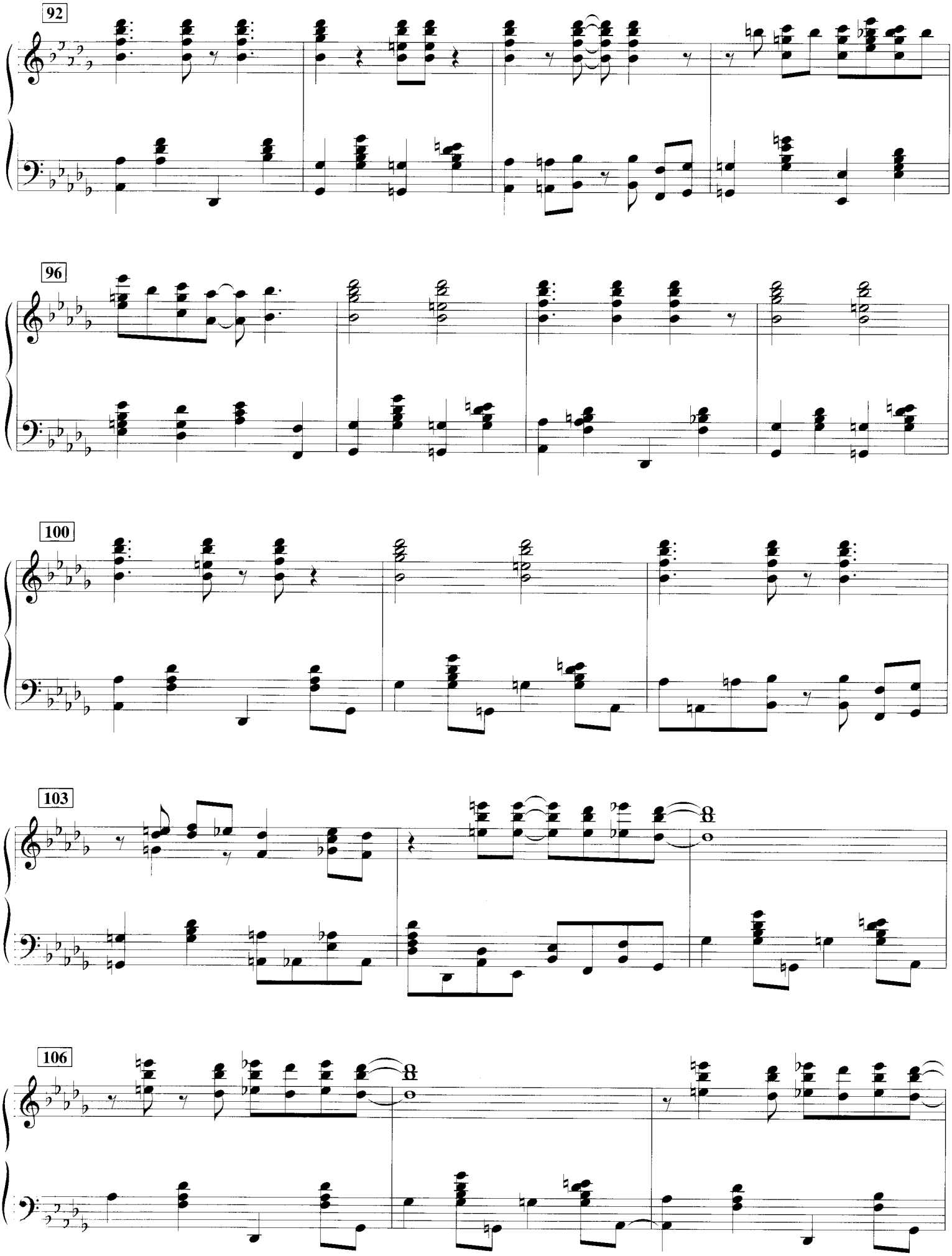
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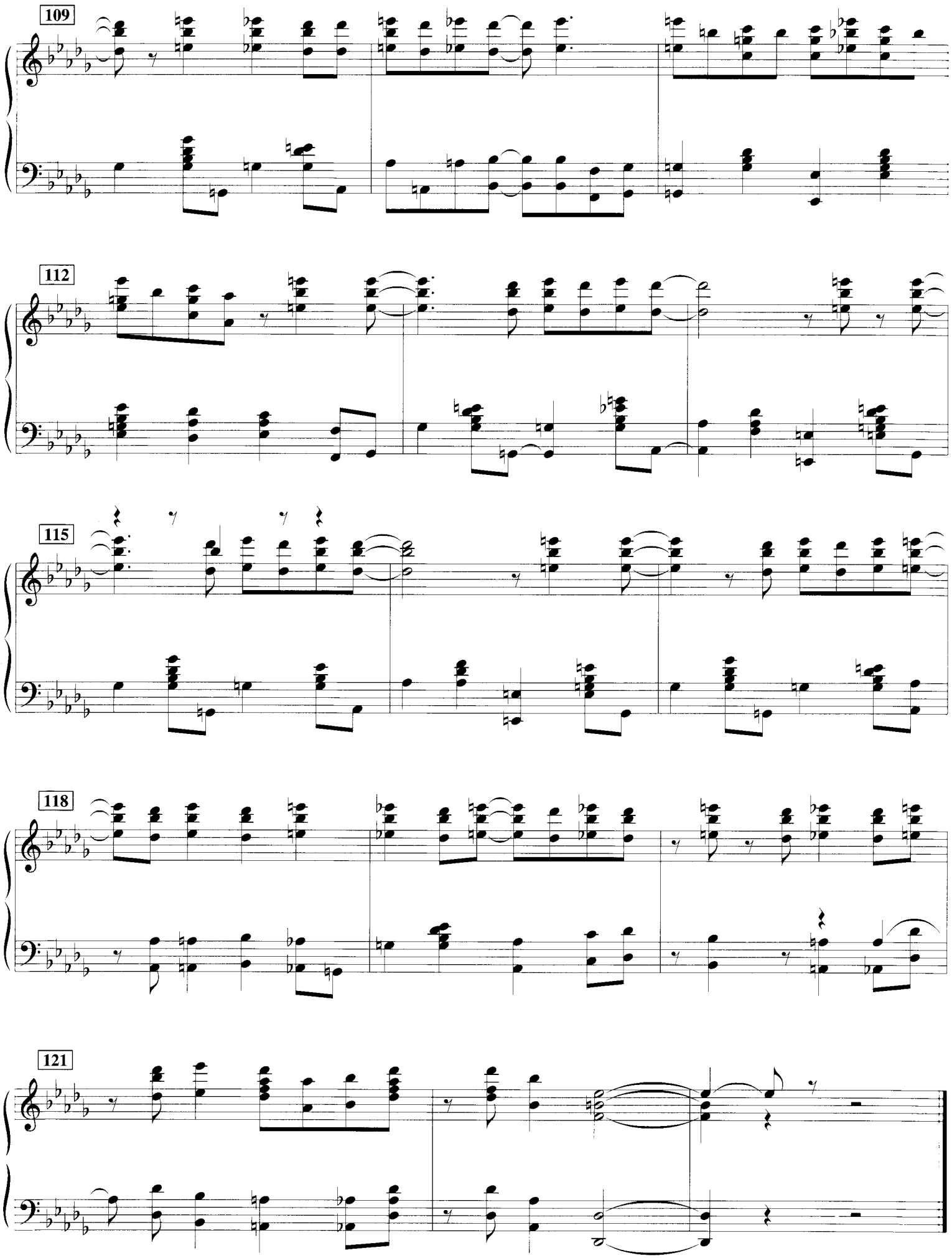
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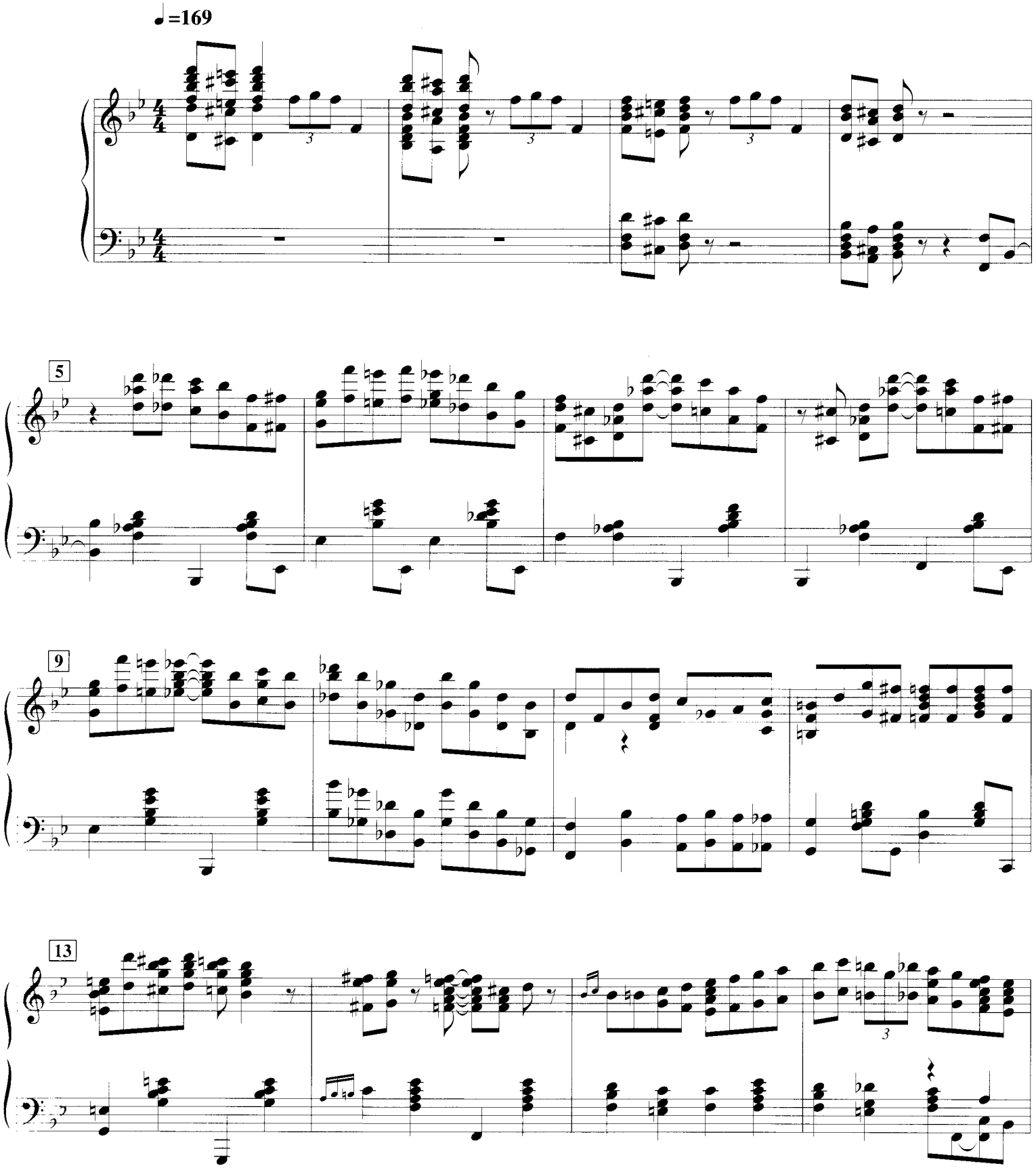
LONDON BLUES

(Shoe Shiner's Drag)

Vocalstyle Piano Roll 50479 recorded early June 1924

By Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton



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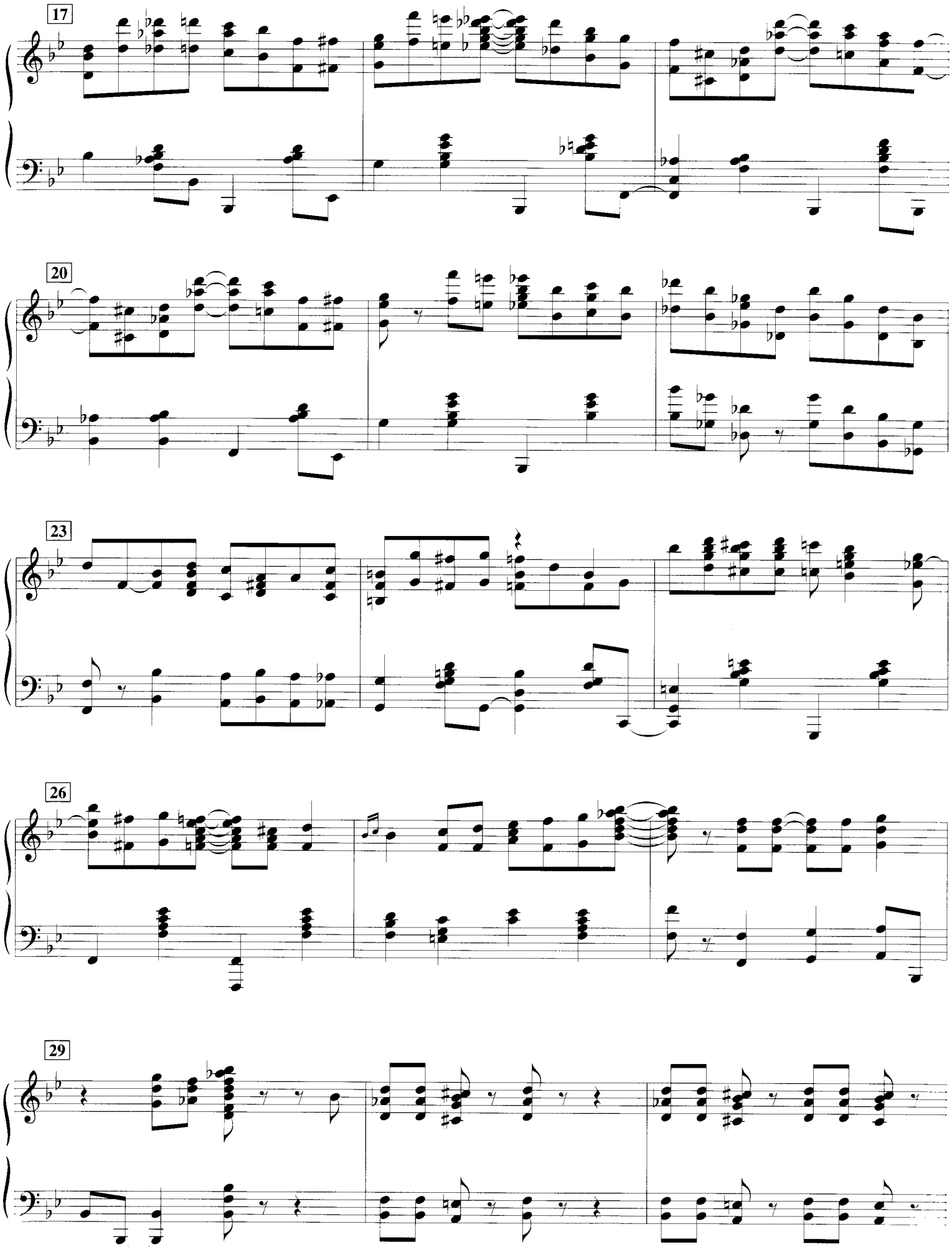
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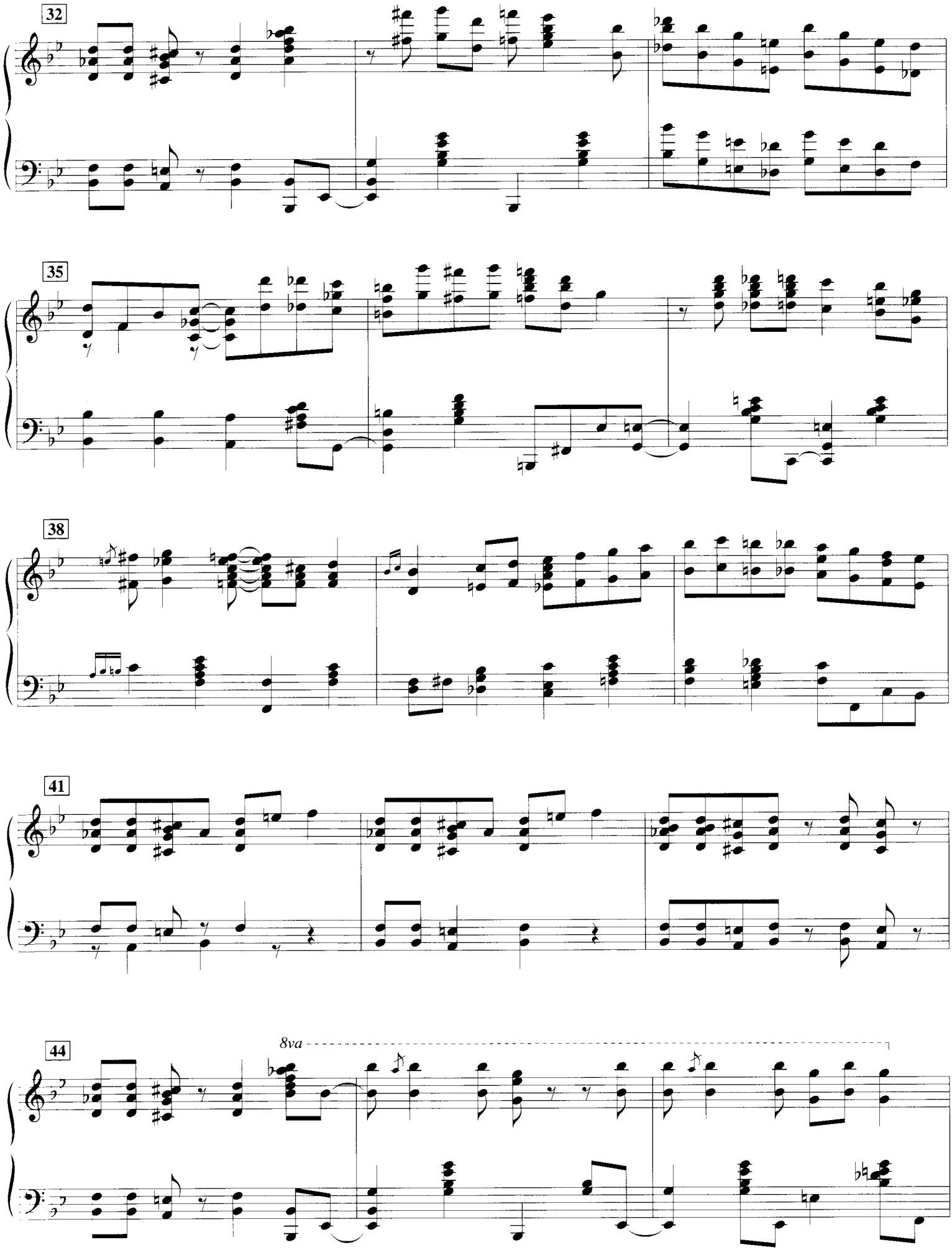
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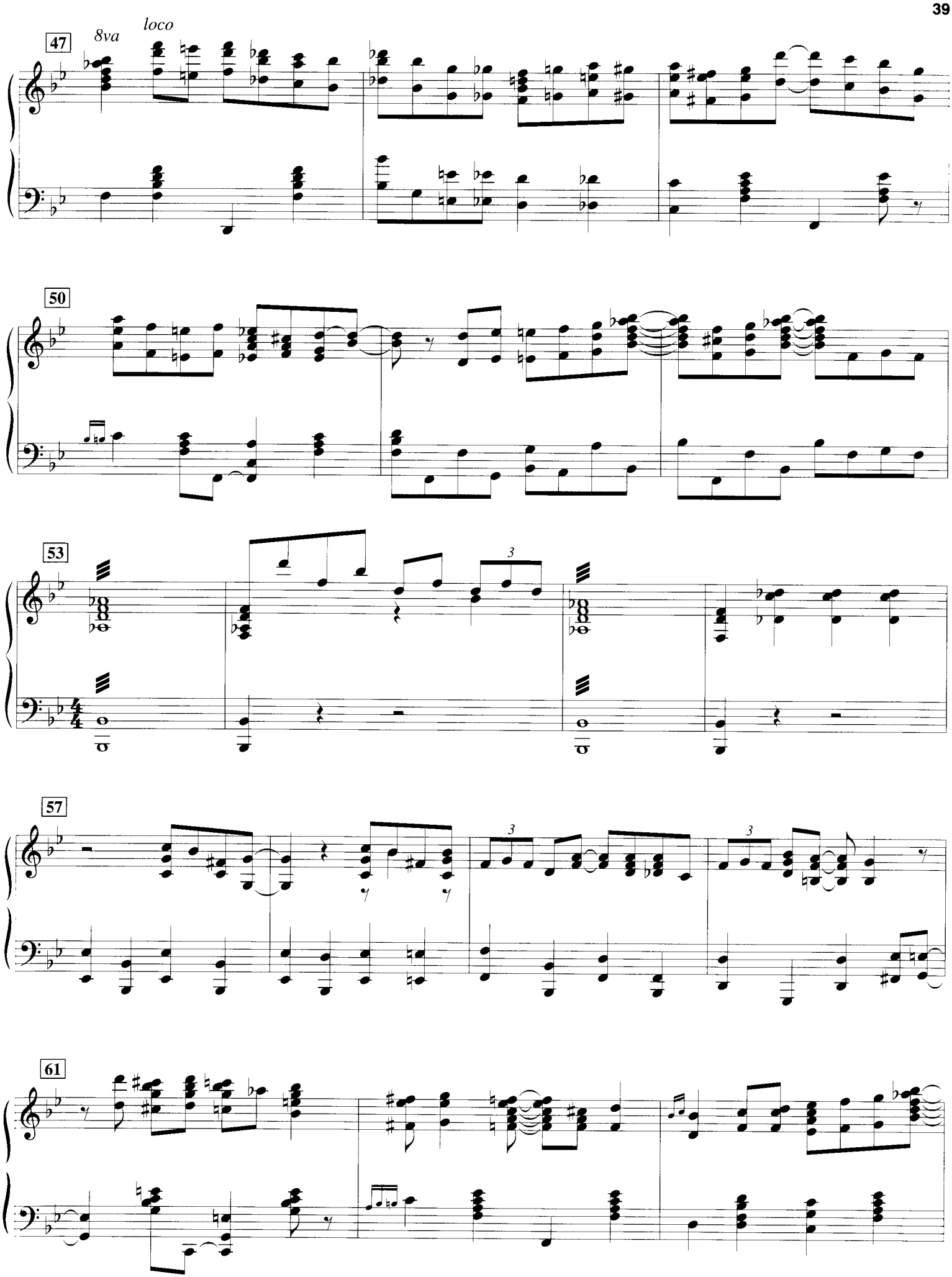
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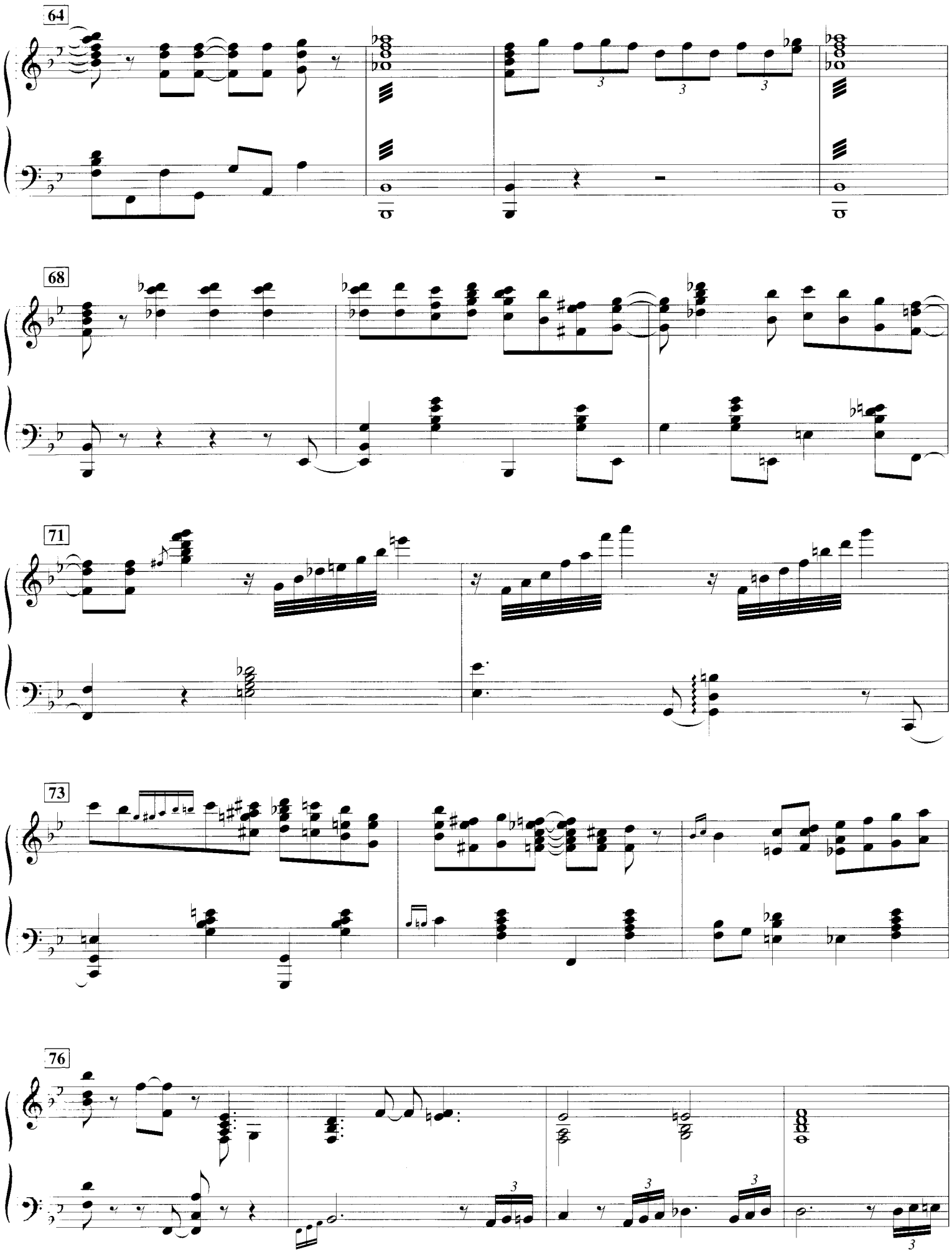
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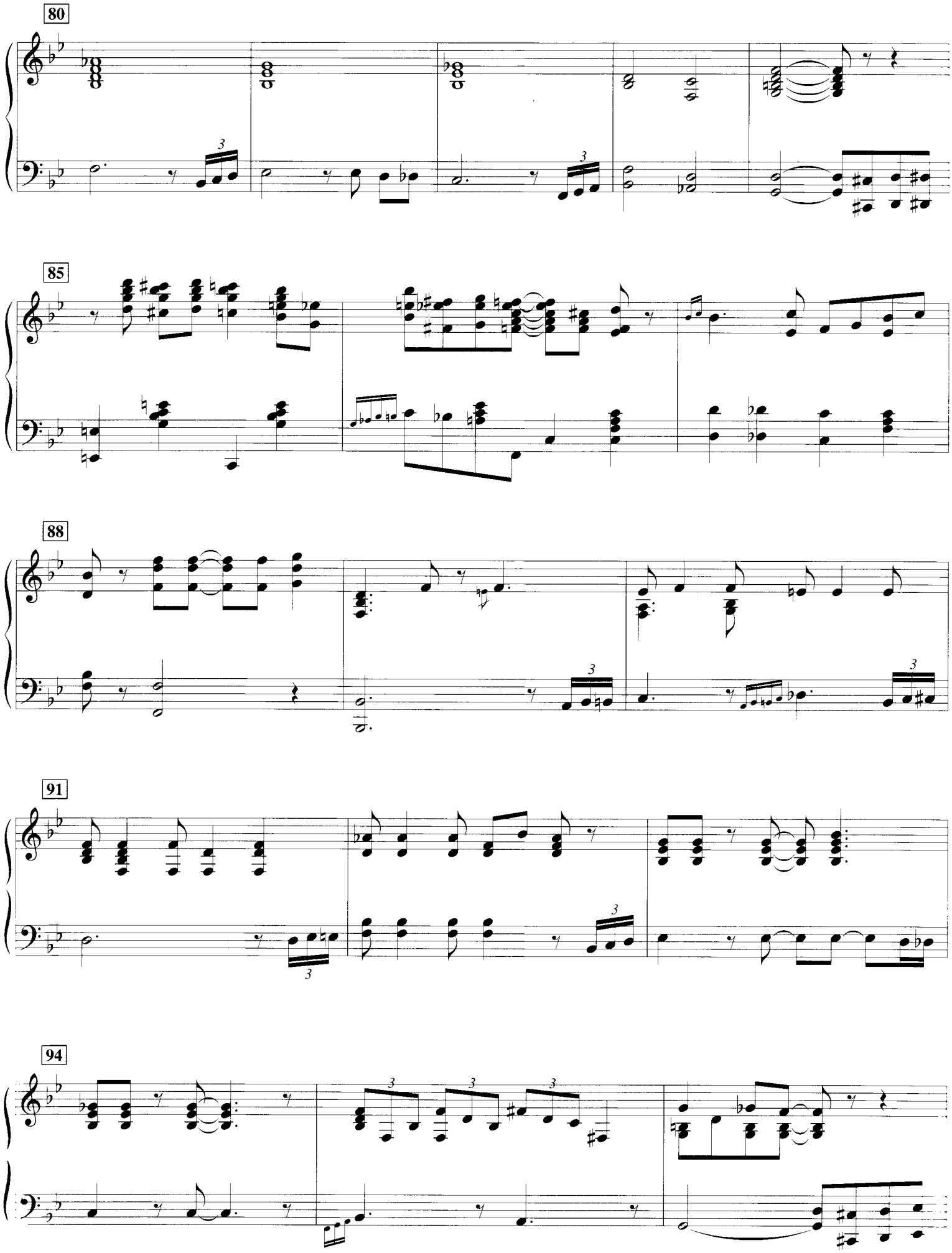
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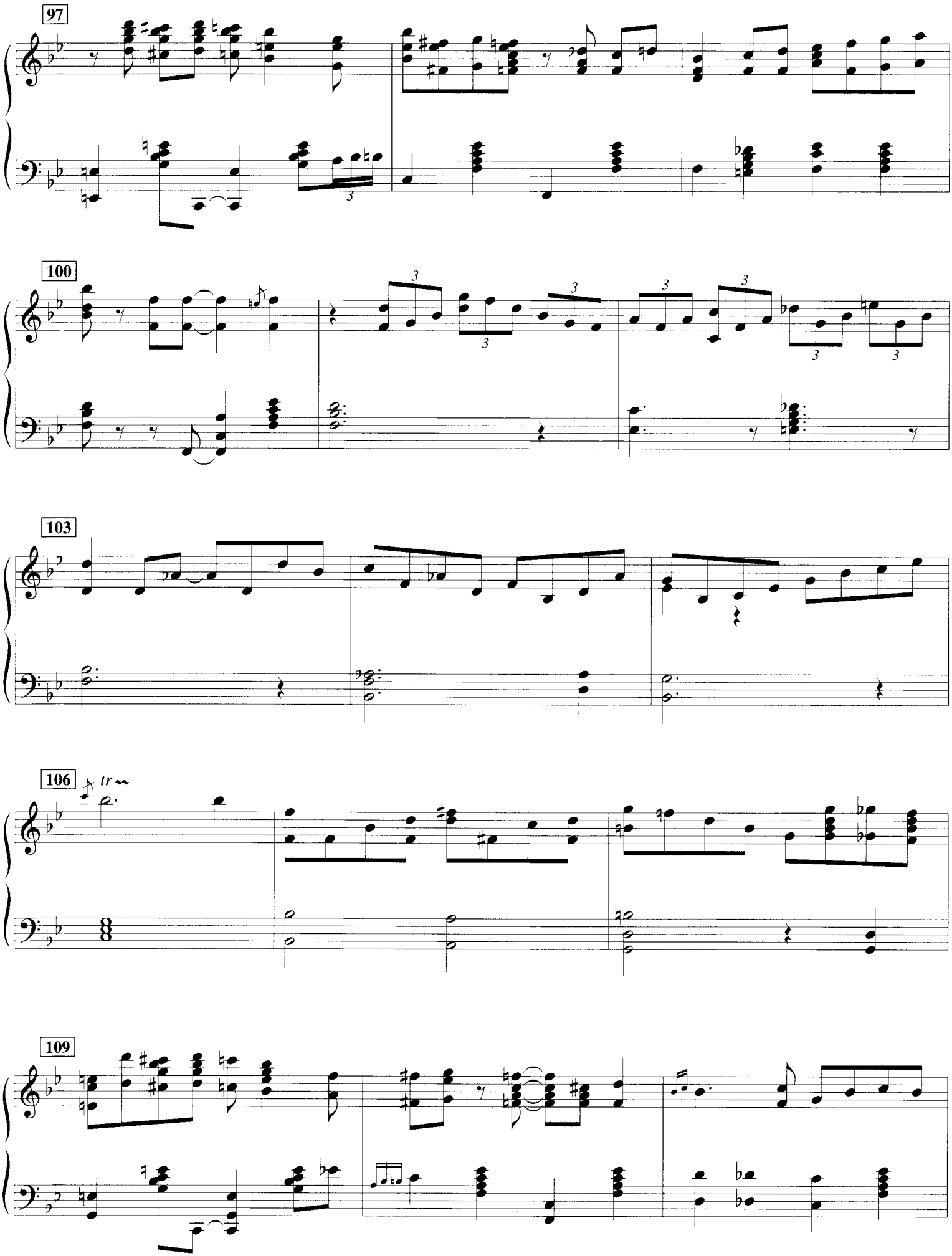
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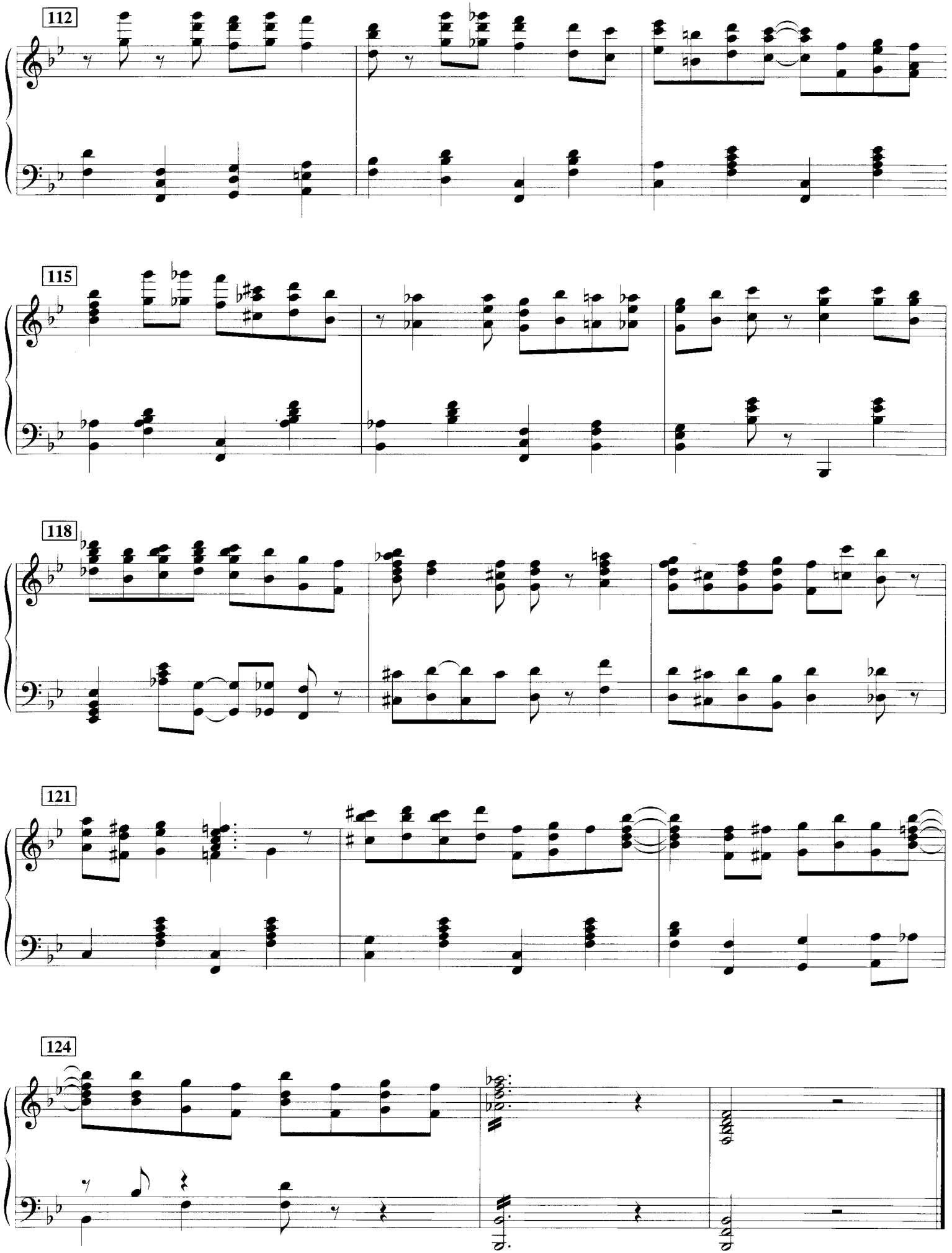
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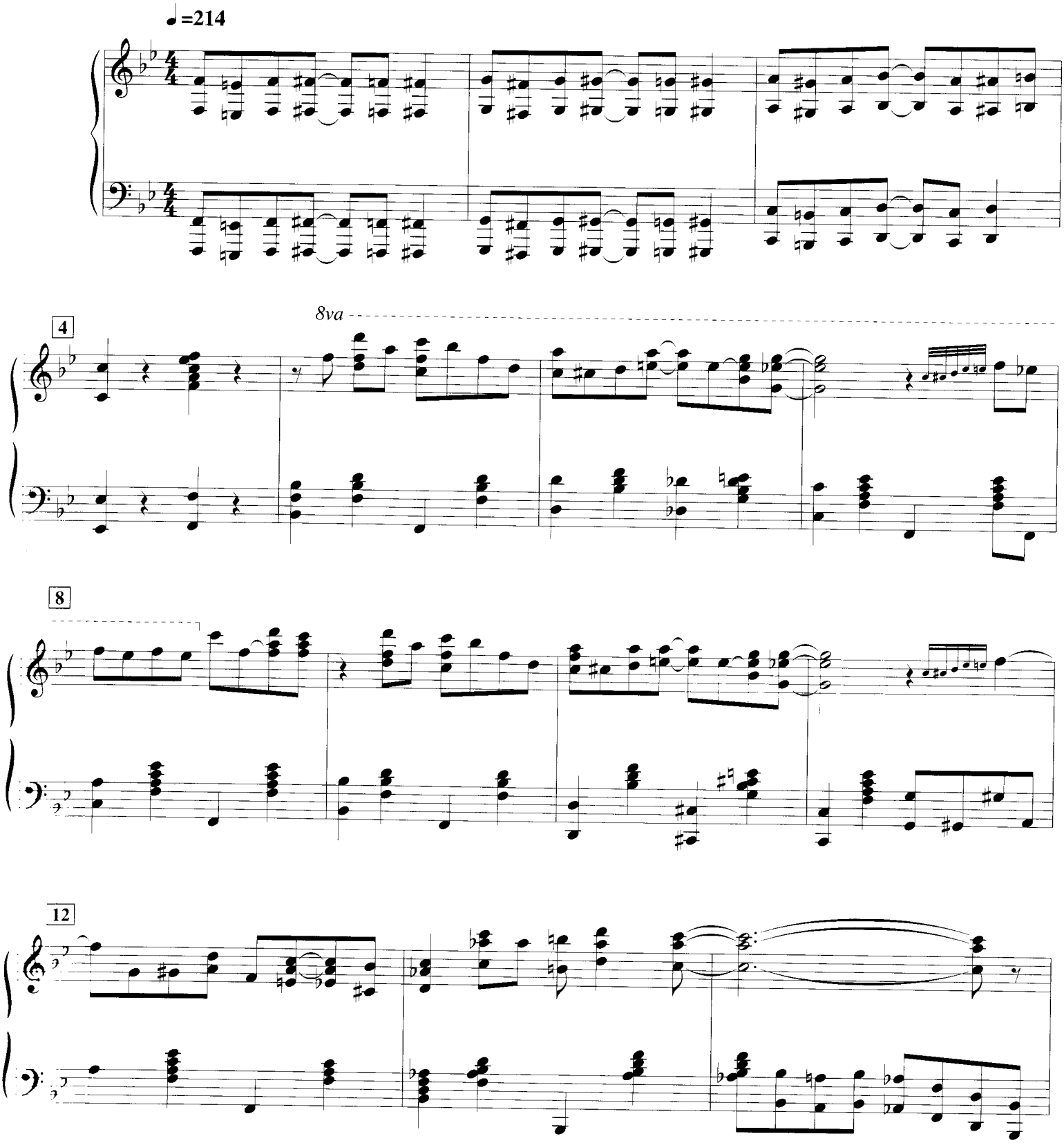
SHREVEPORT STOMPS

Vocalstyle Piano Roll 50481 recorded early June 1924

By Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton



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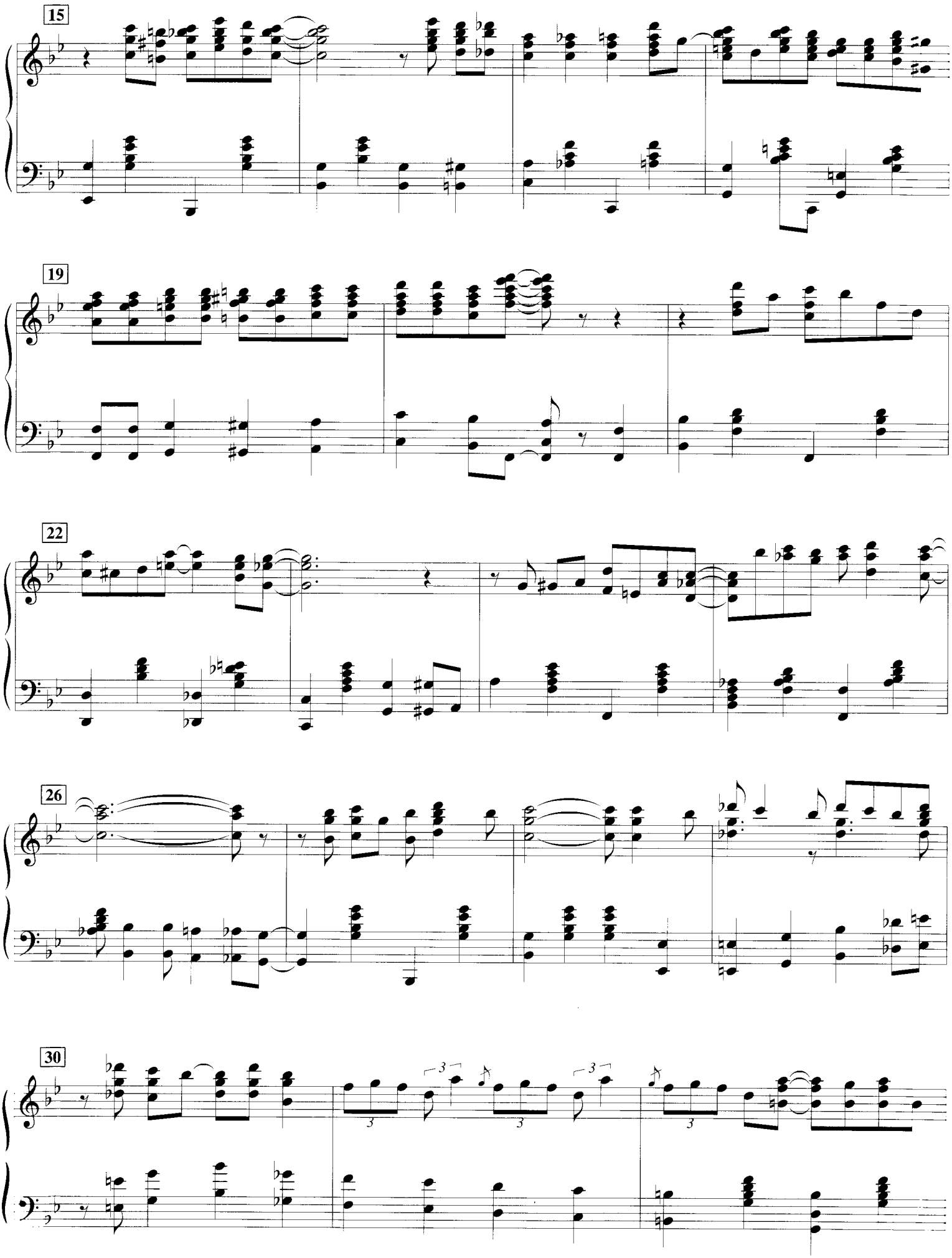
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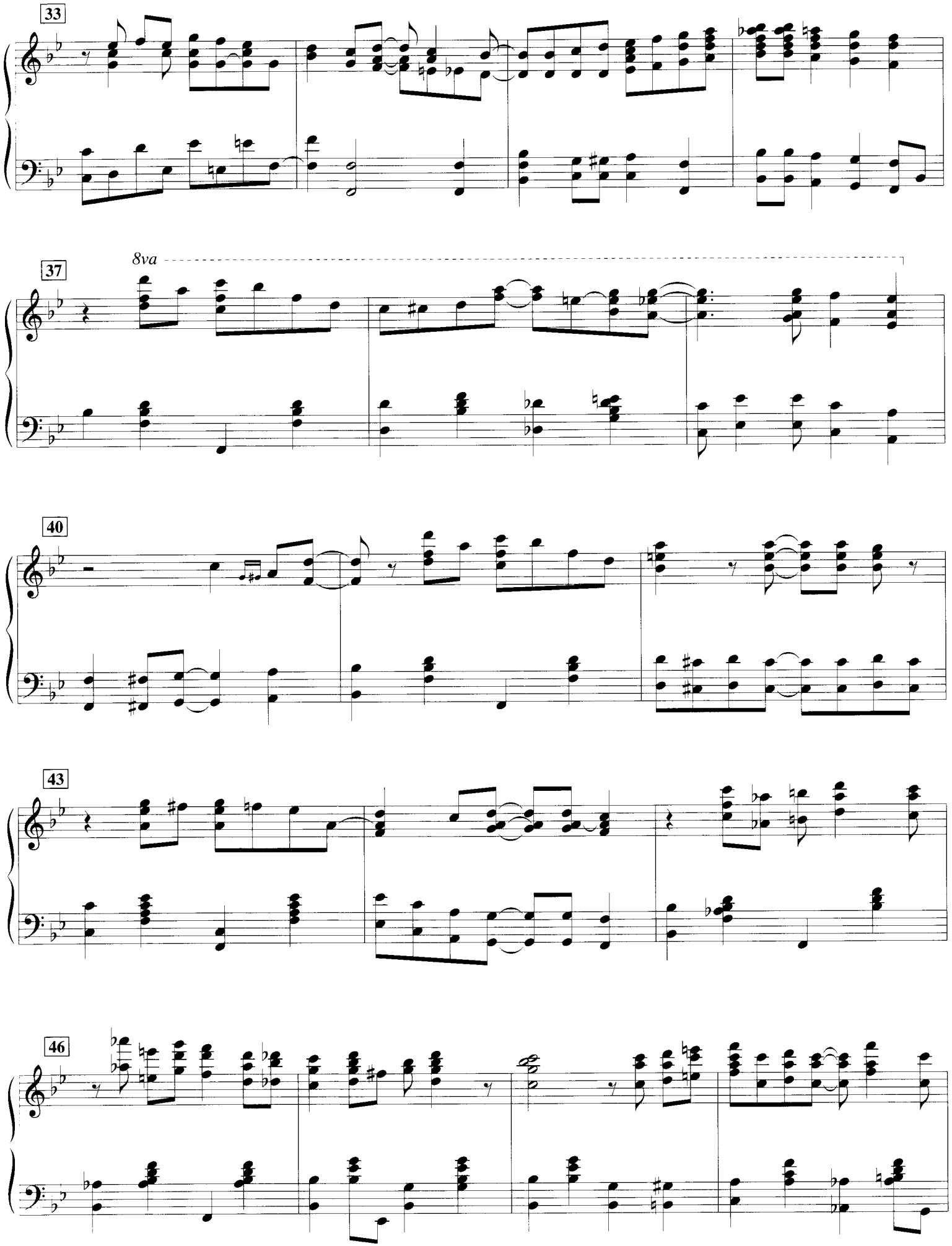
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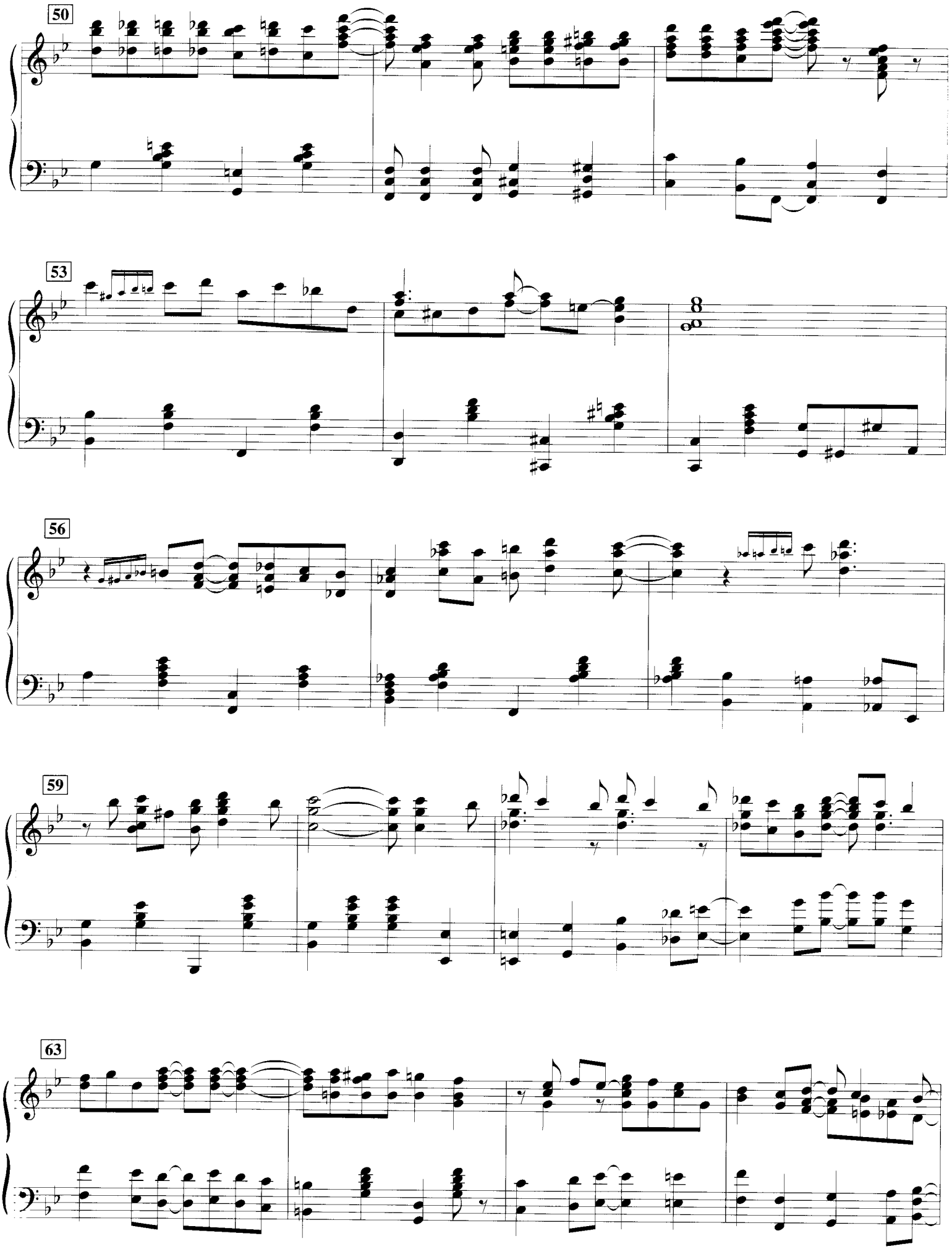
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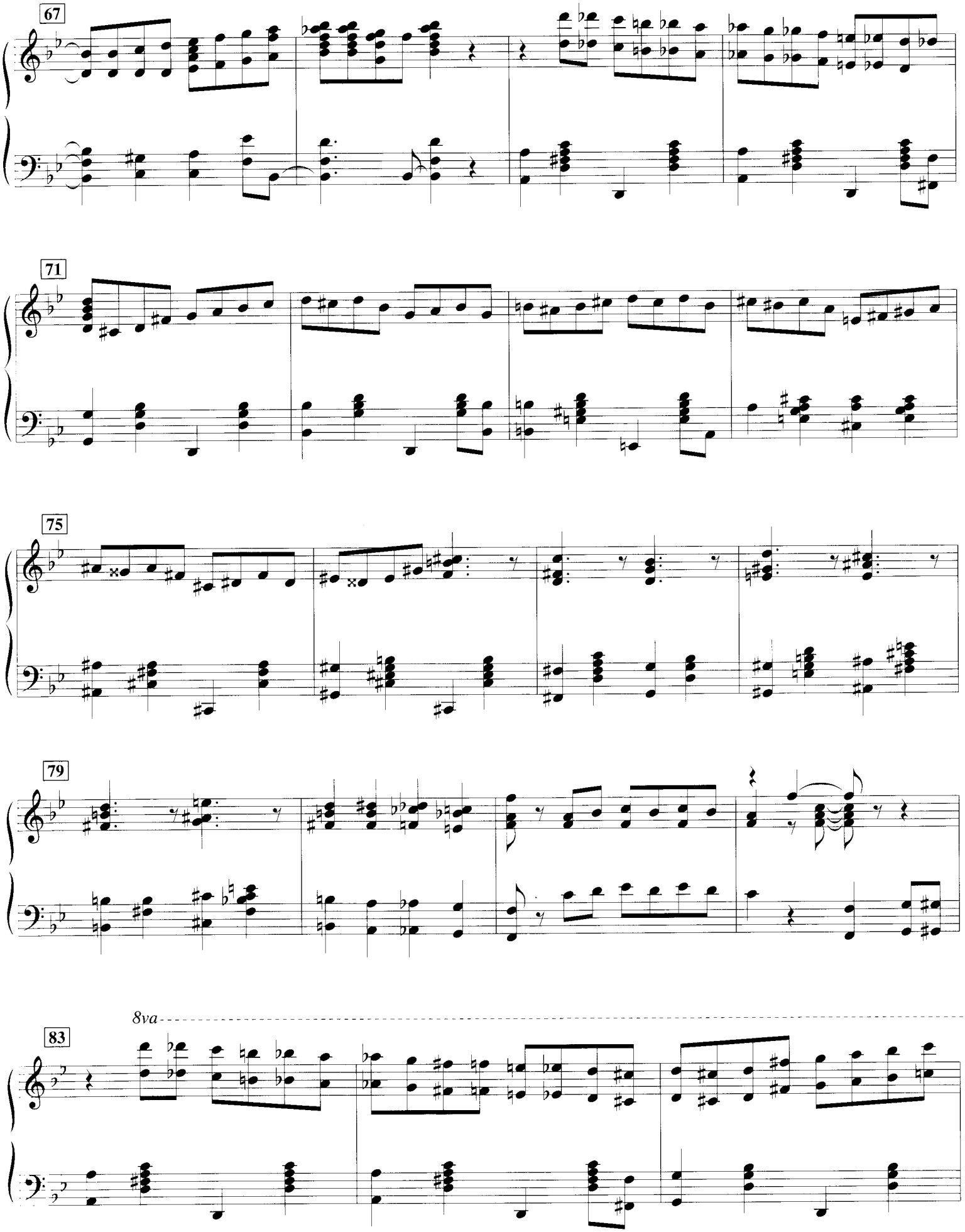
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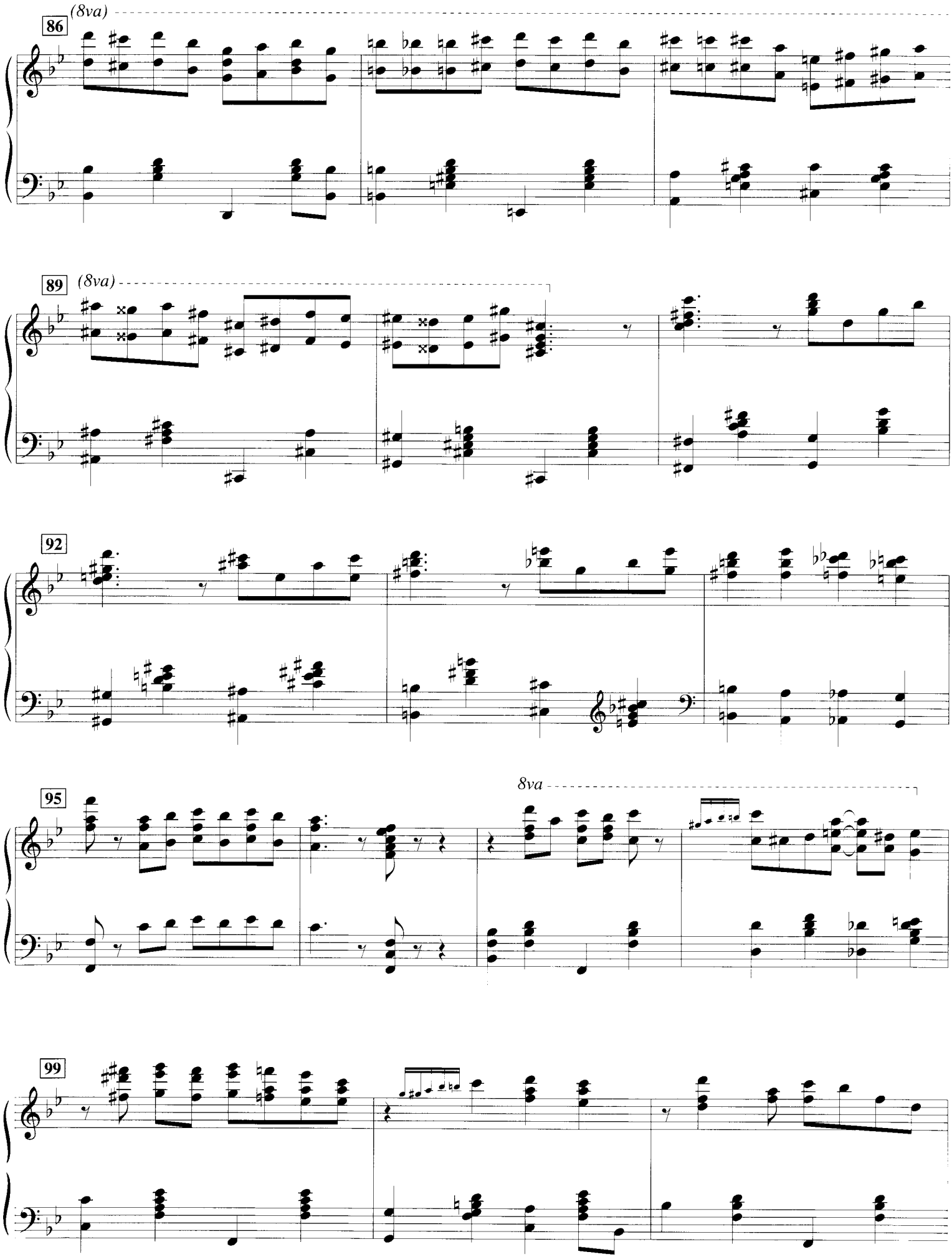
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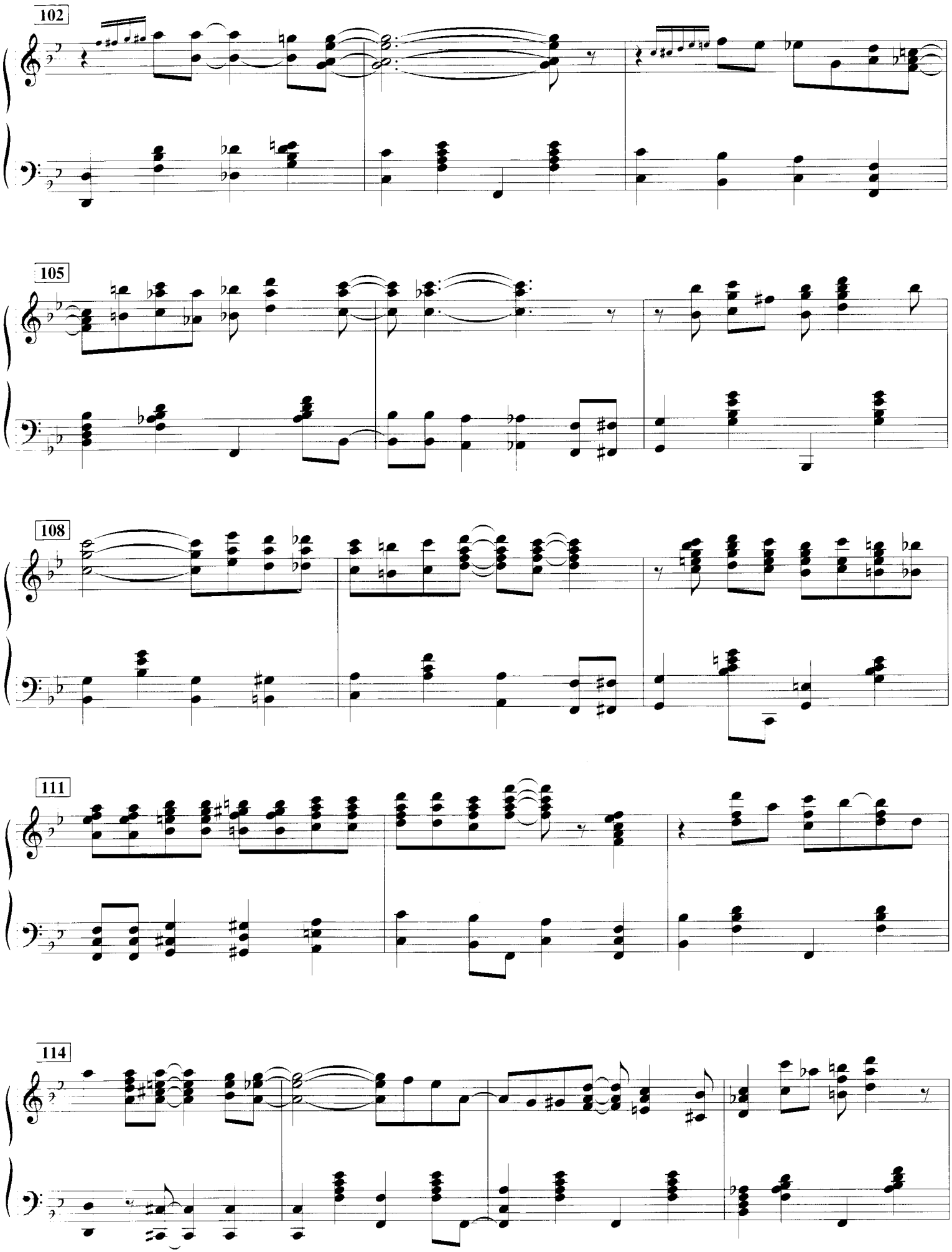
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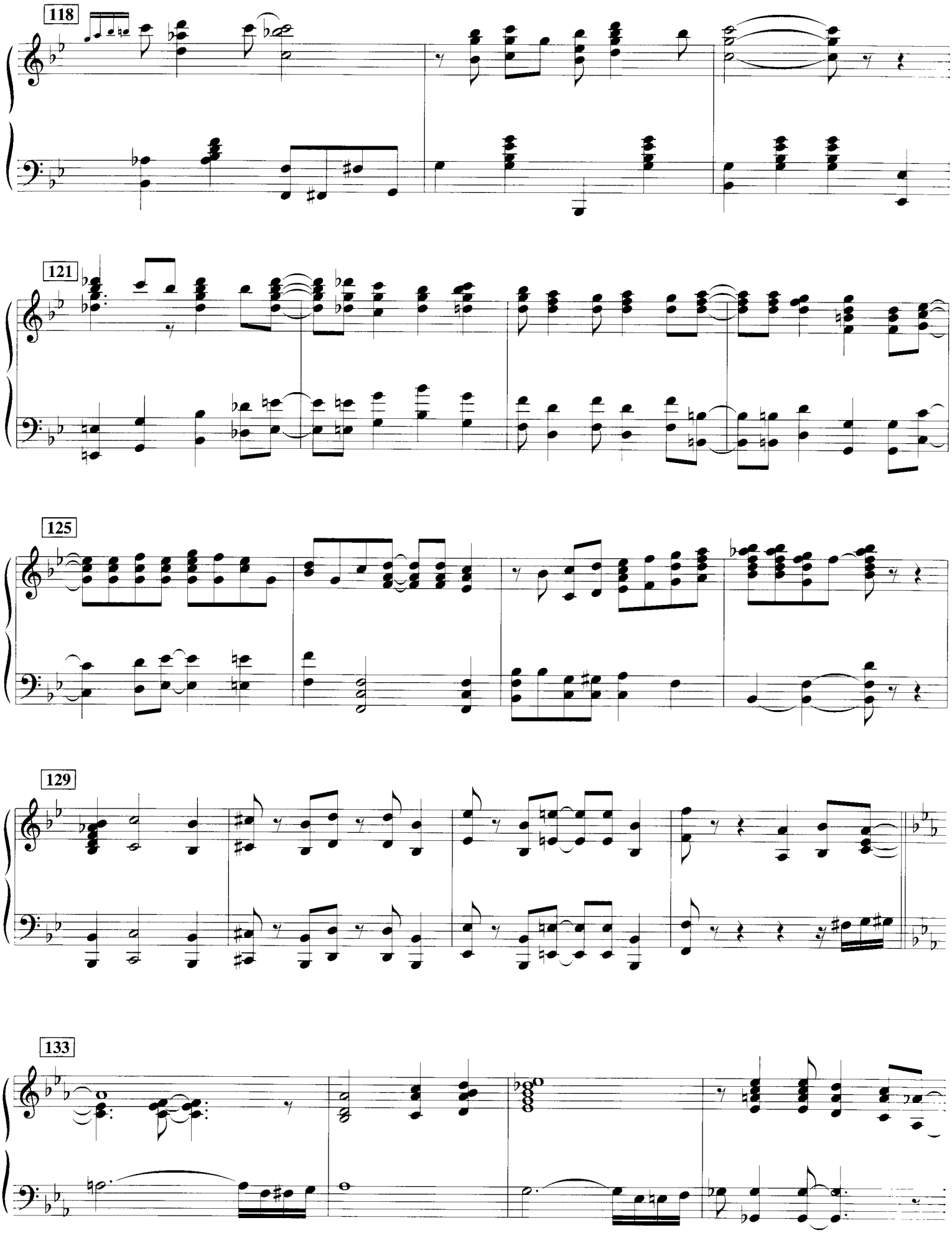
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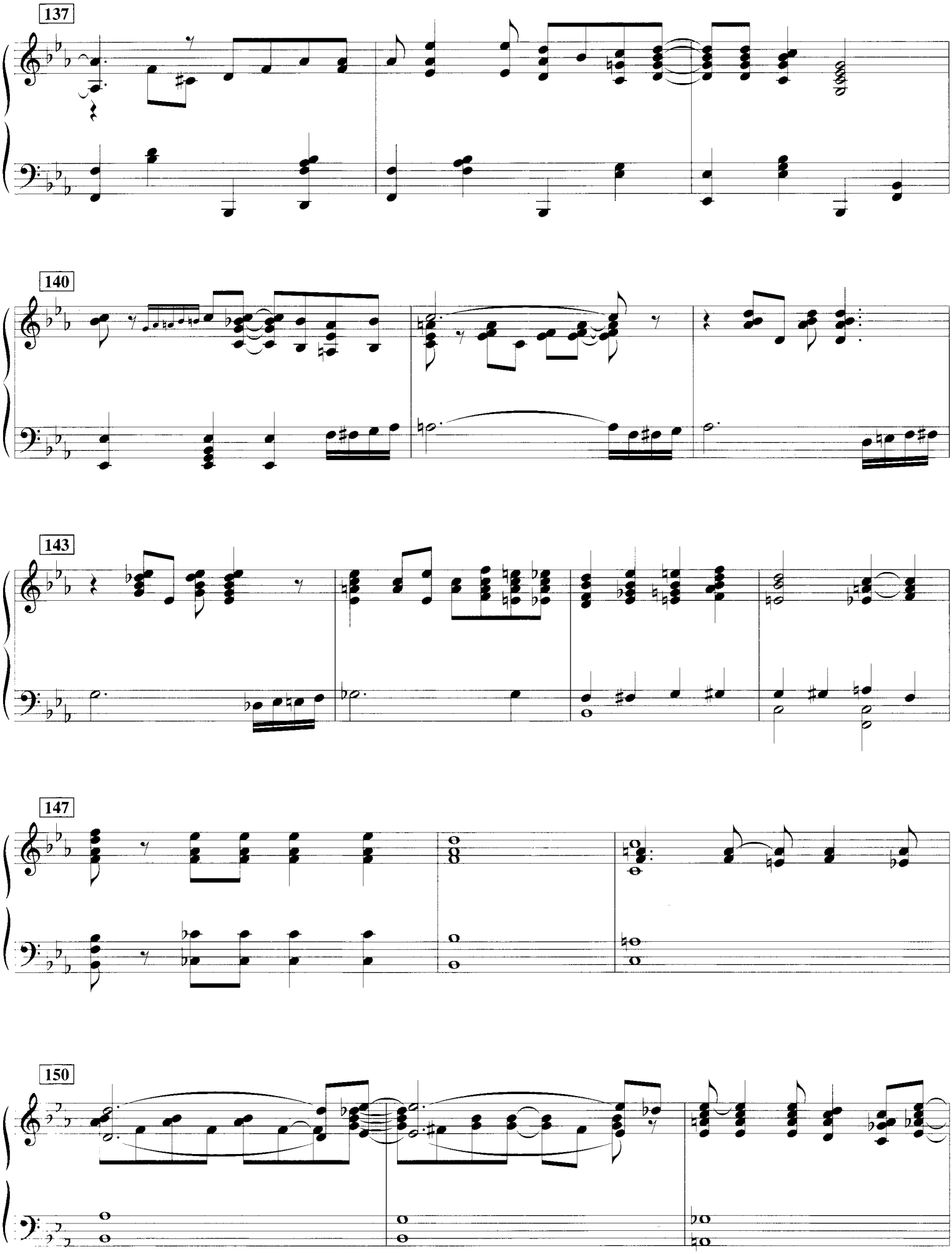
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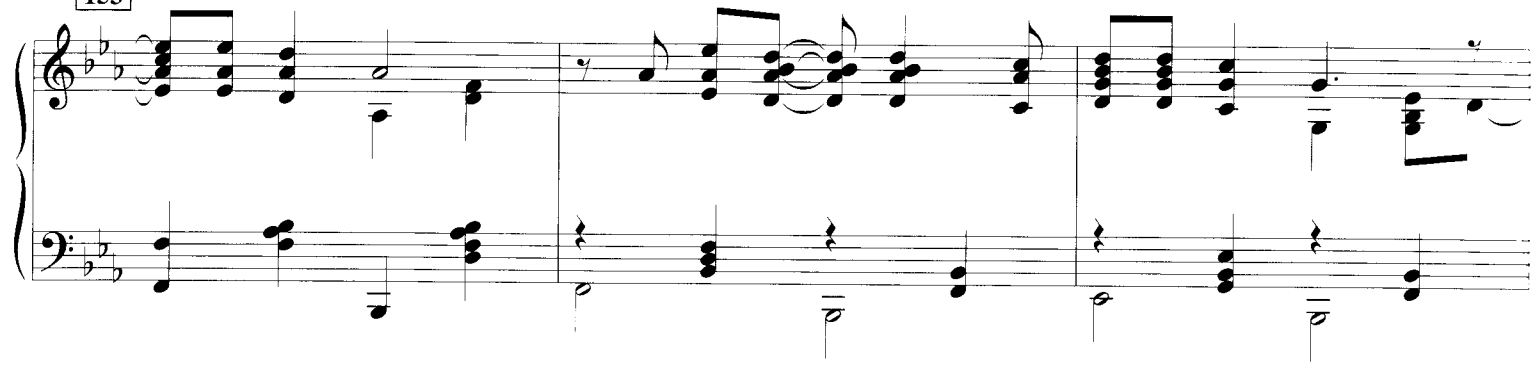

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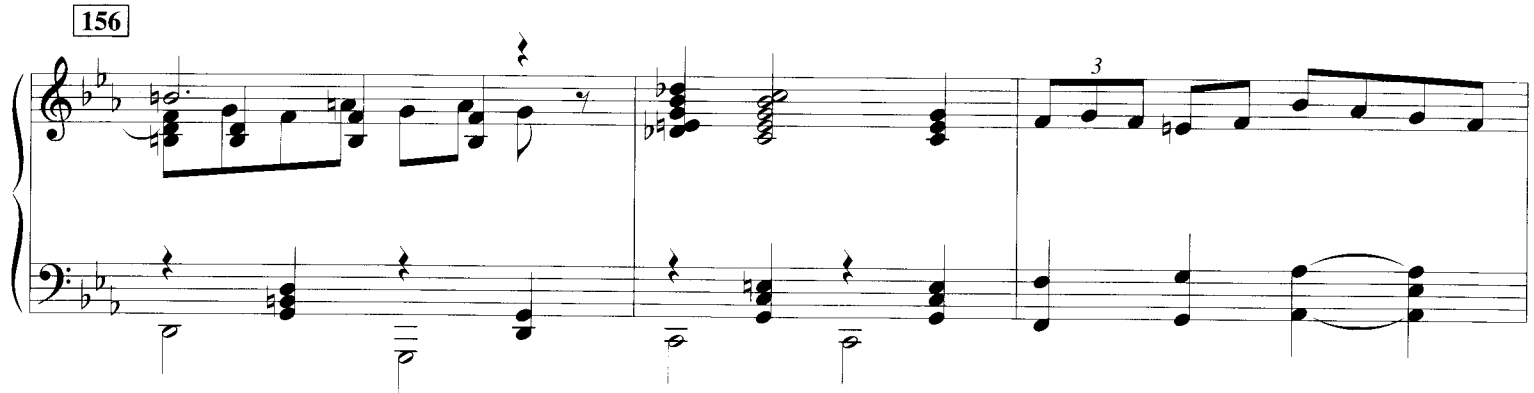

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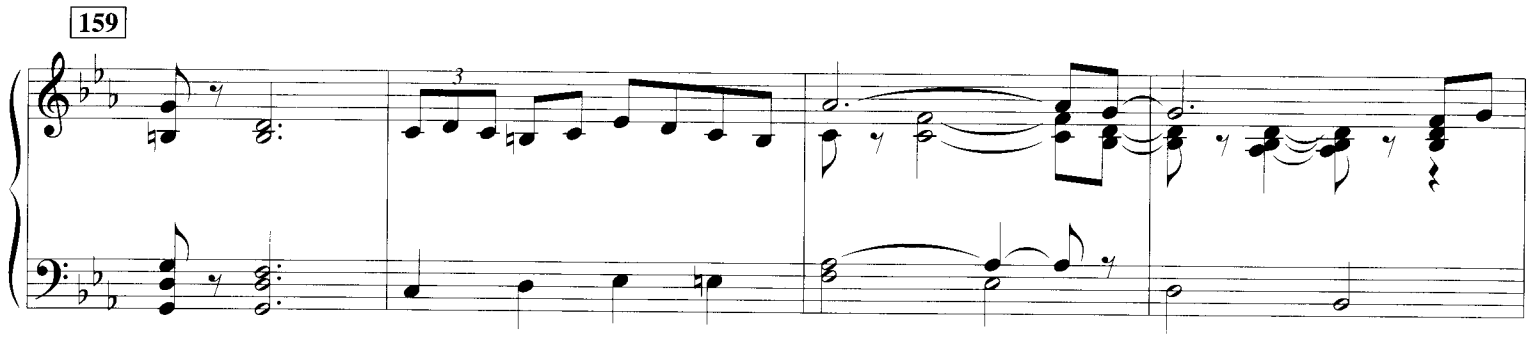

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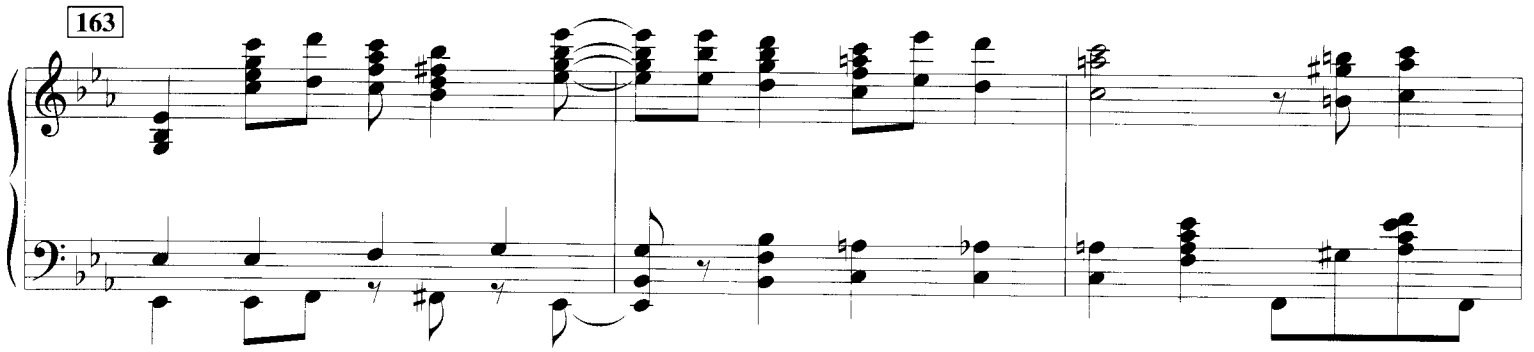

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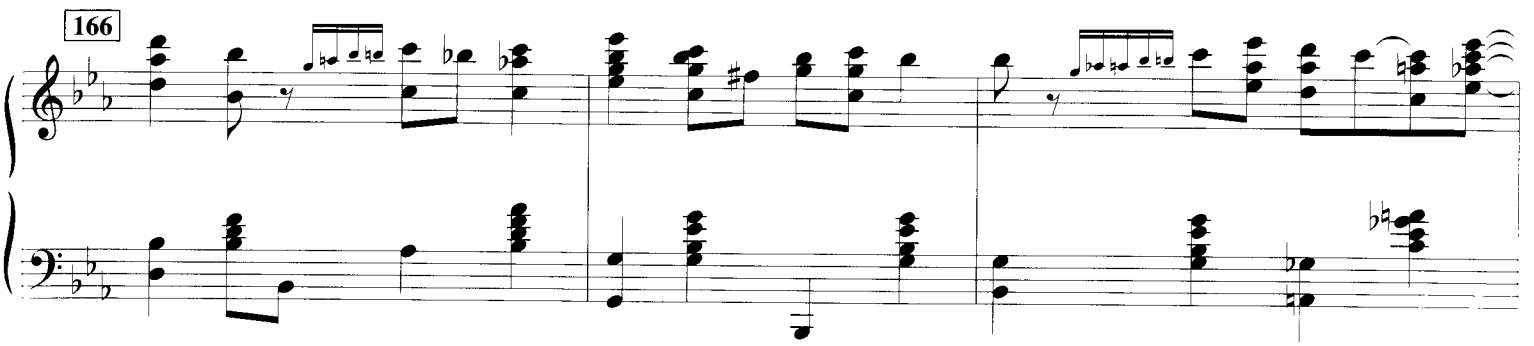

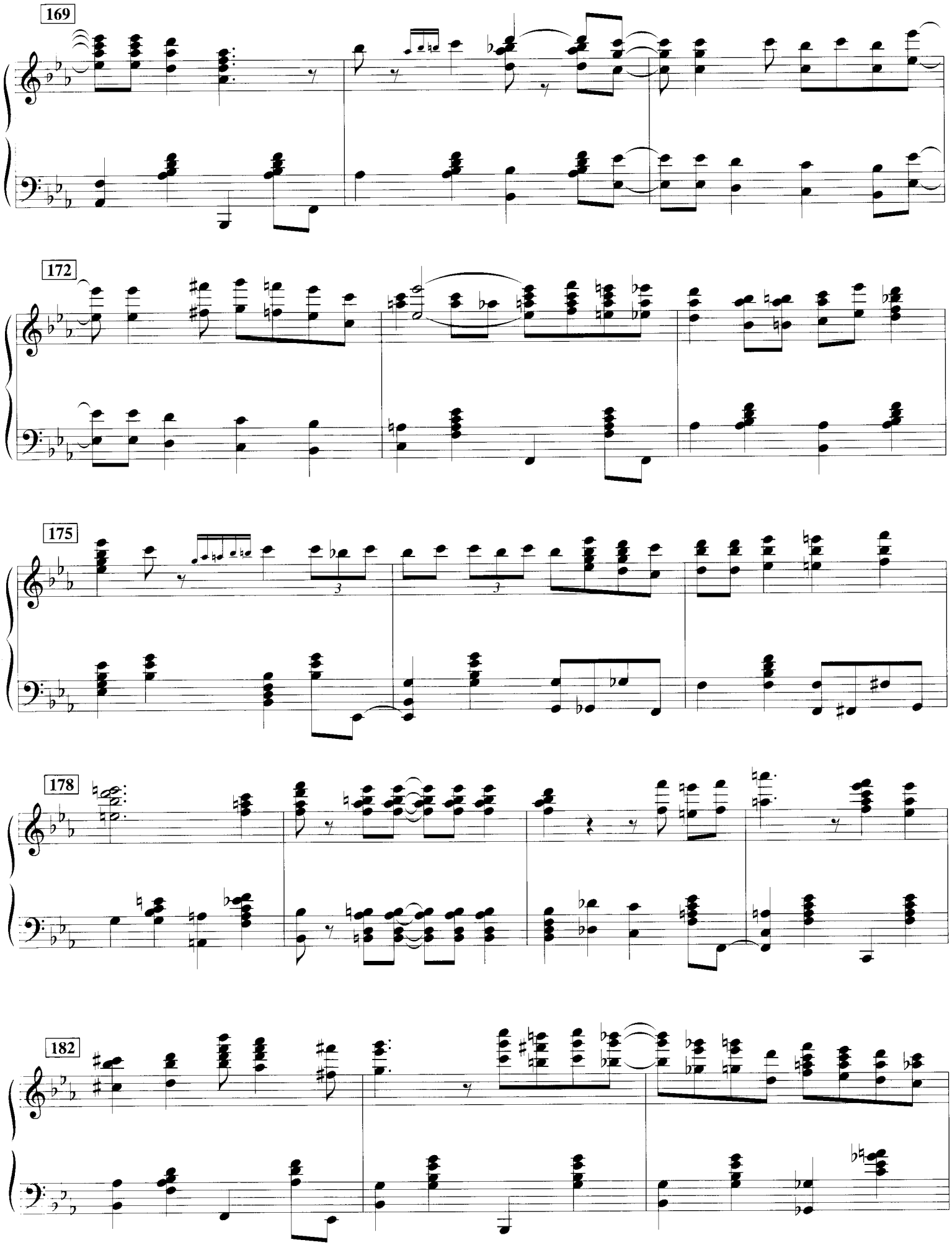
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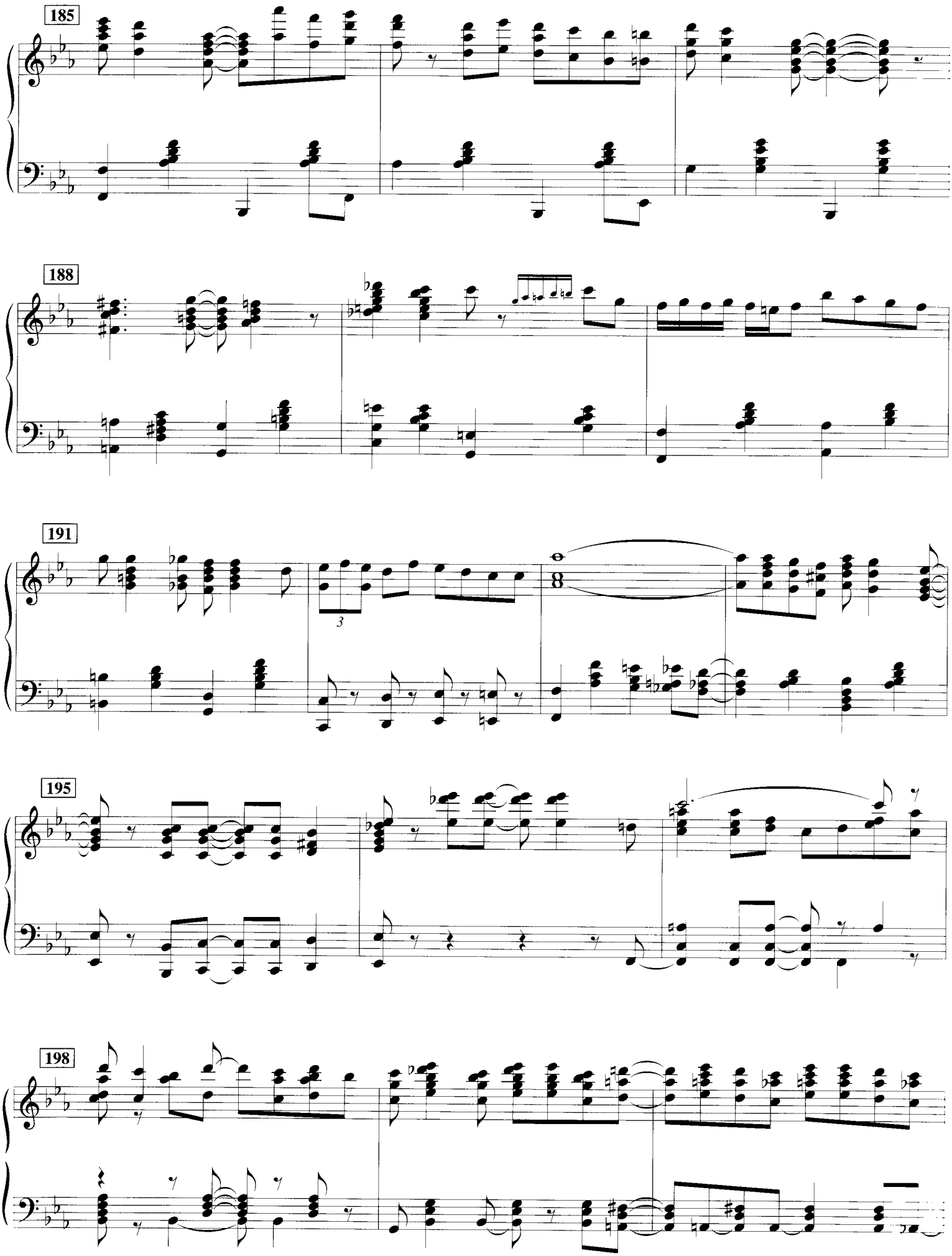
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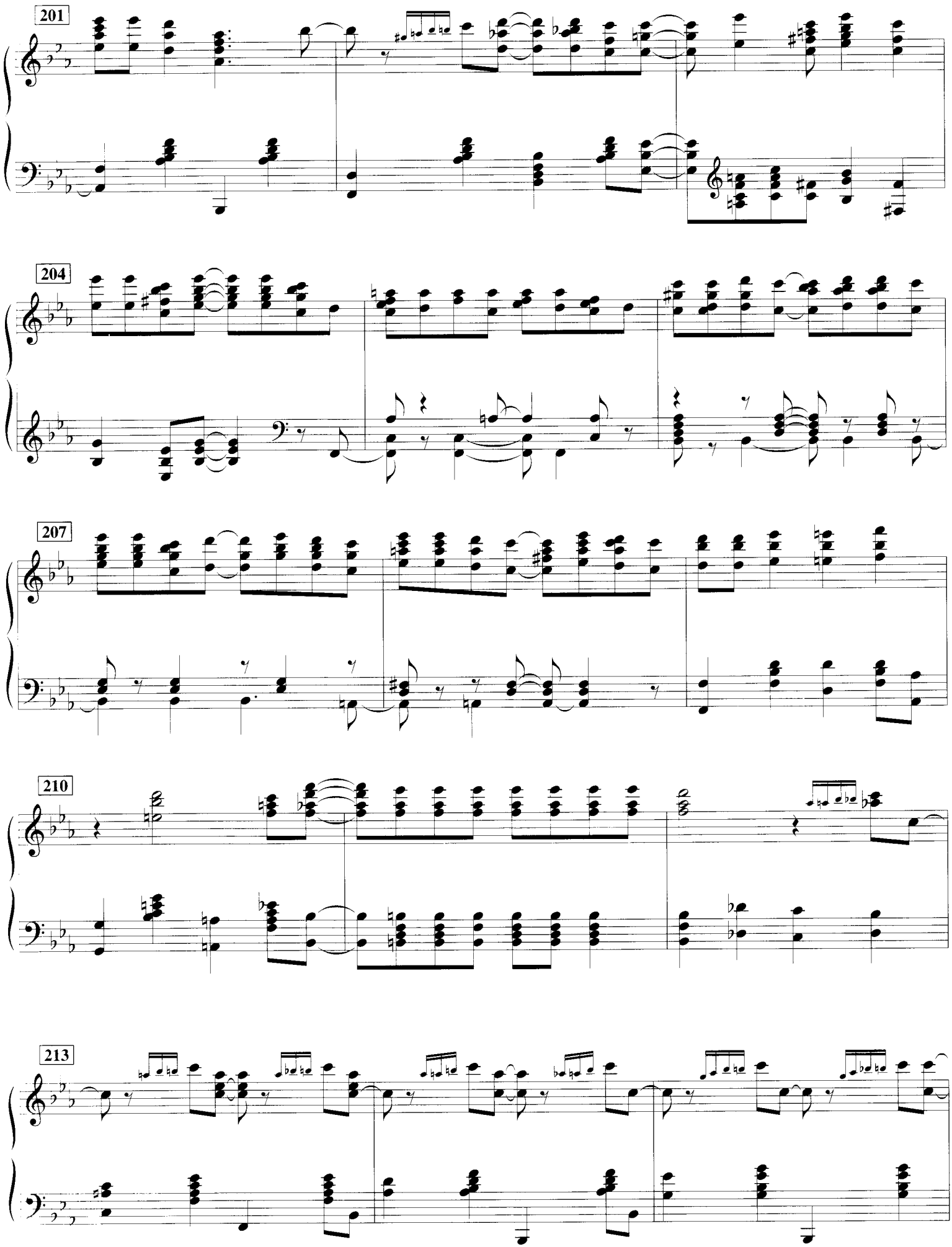
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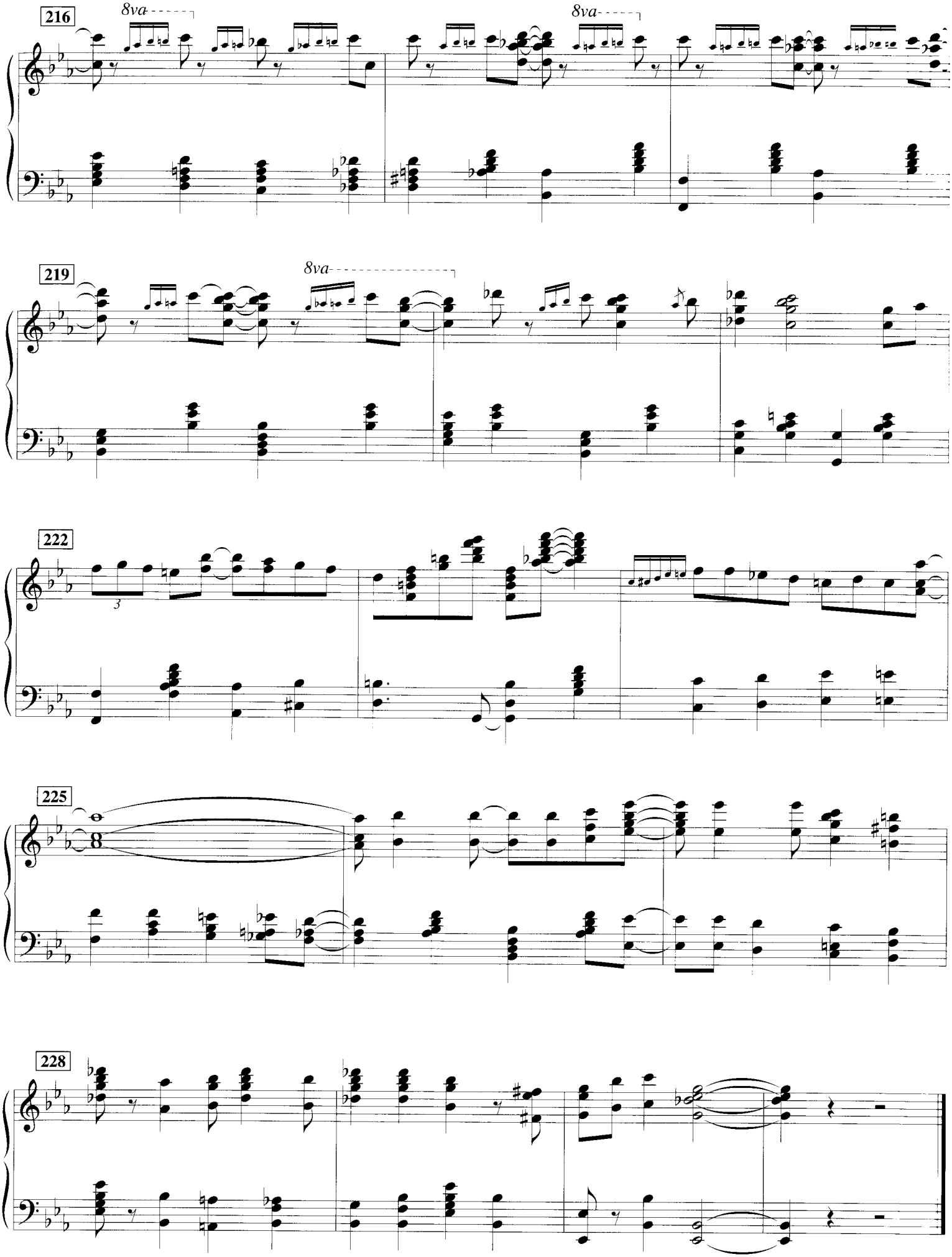
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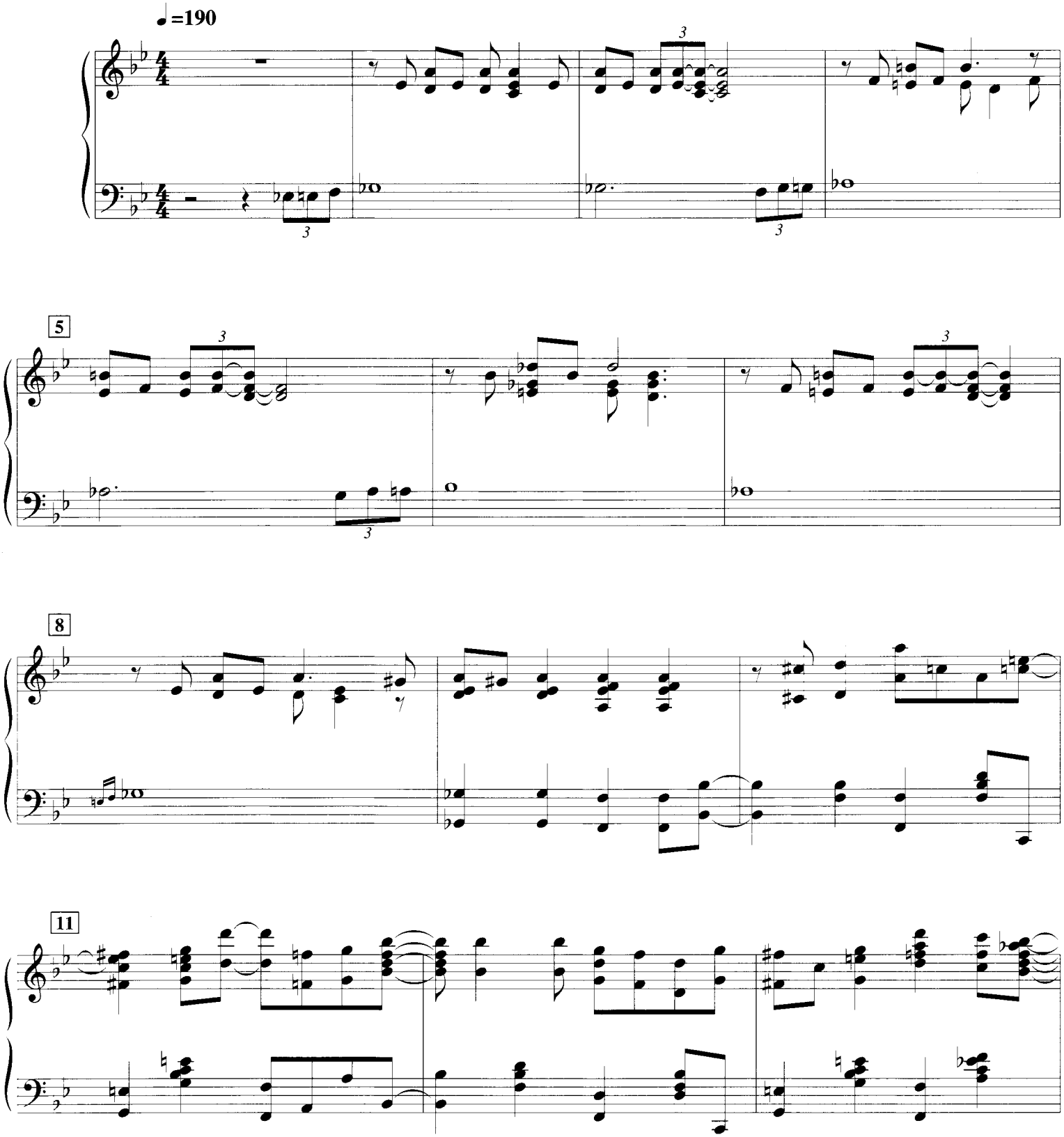
STRATFORD HUNCH

(Chicago Breakdown)

Vocalstyle Piano Roll 50485 recorded early June 1924

By Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton



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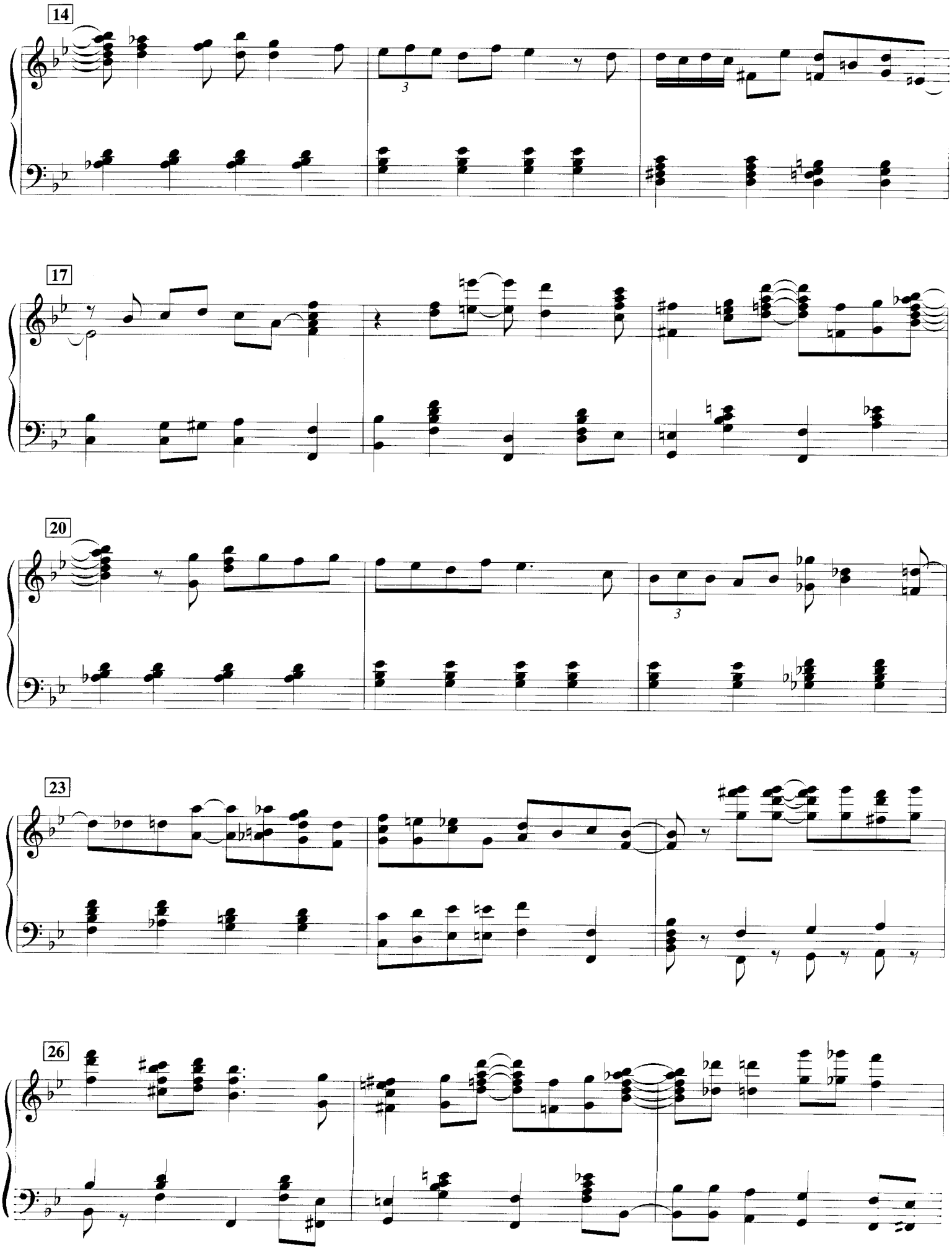
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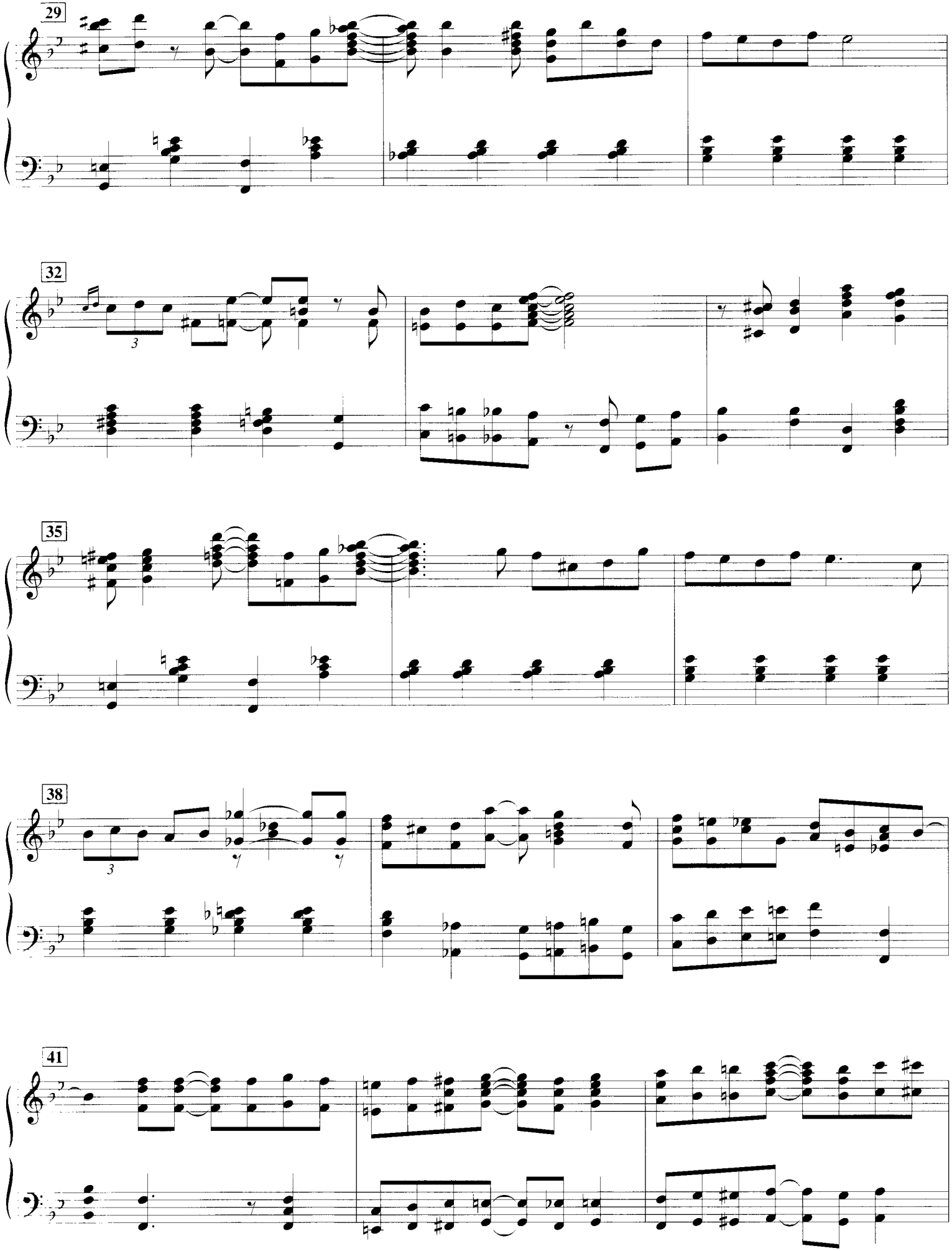
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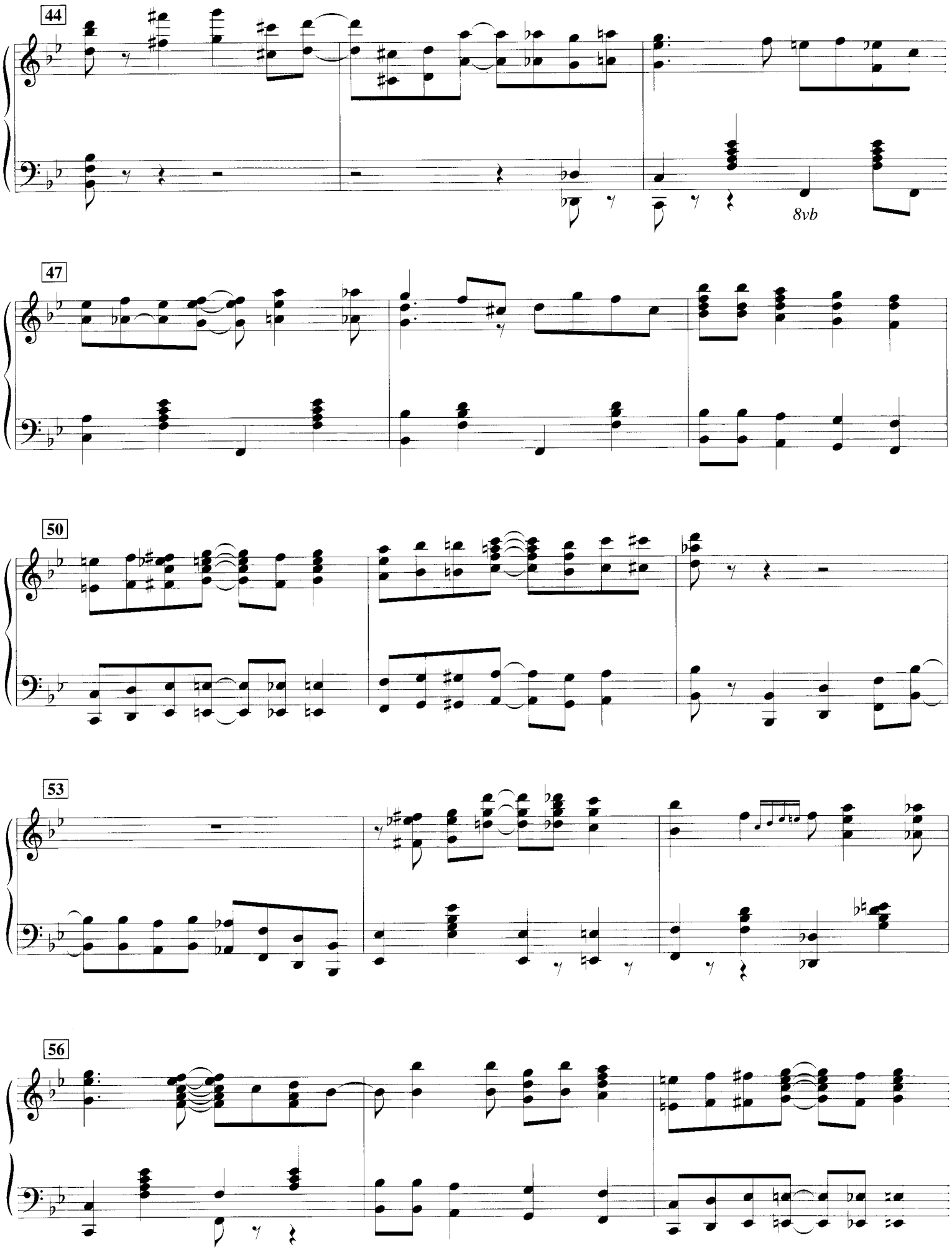
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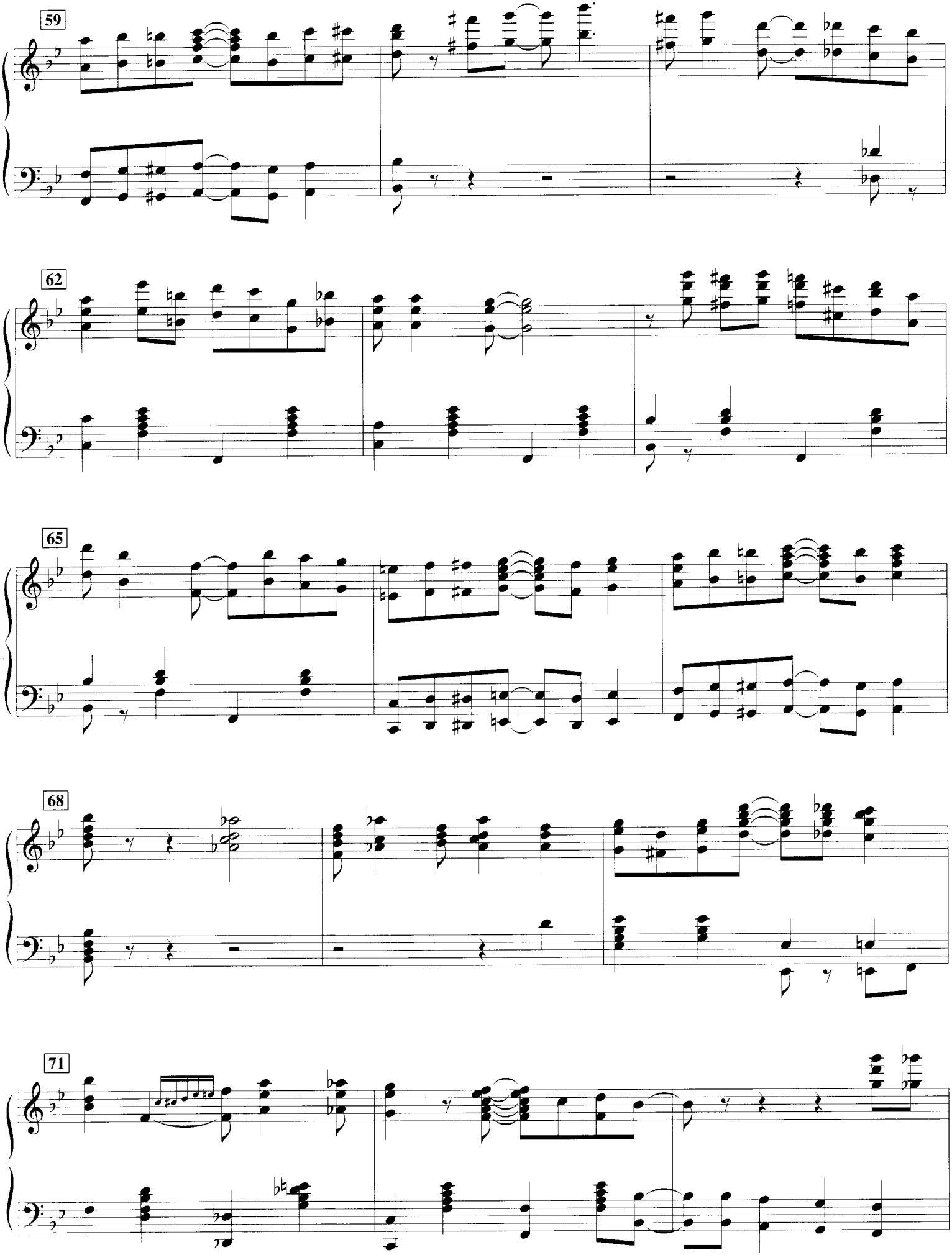
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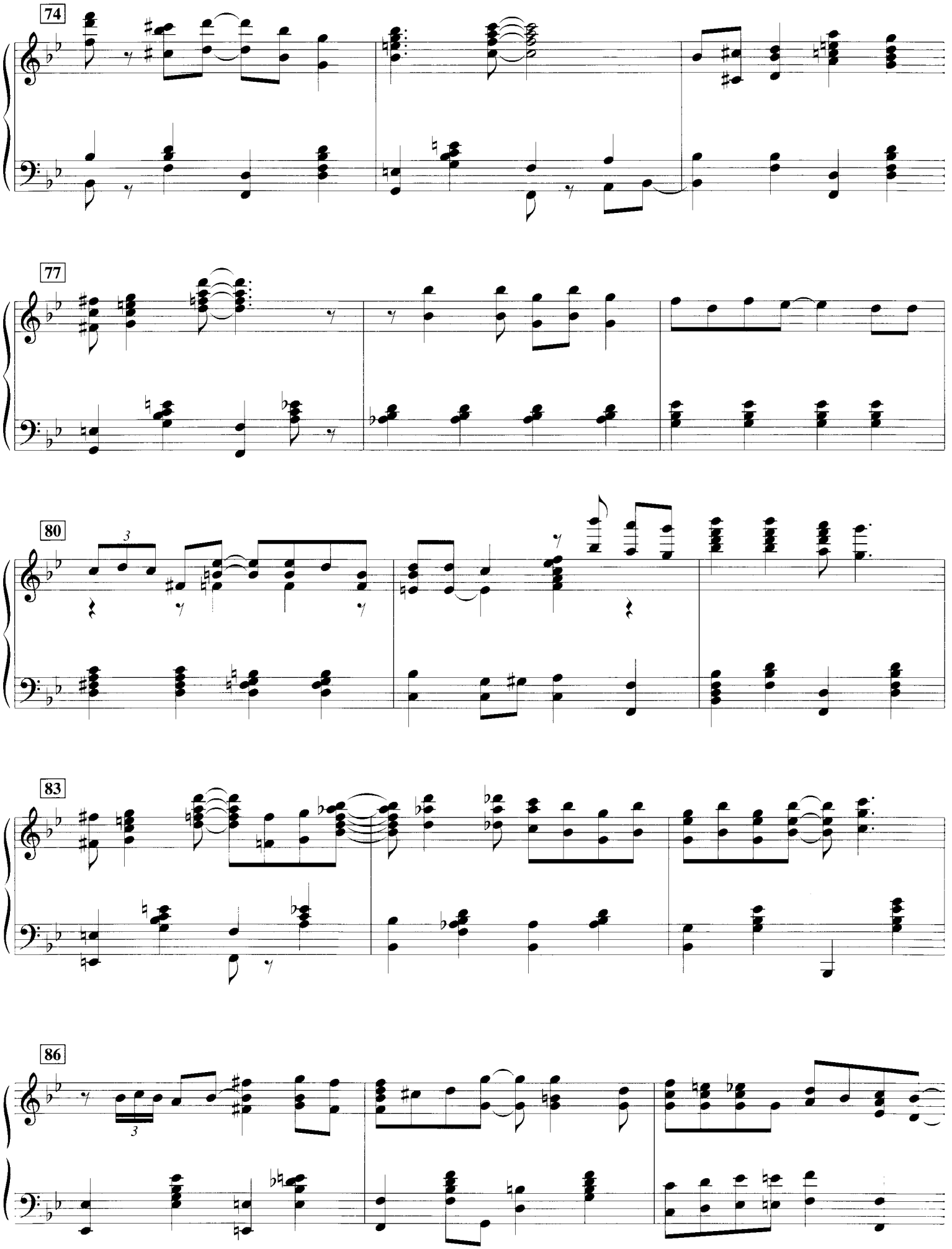
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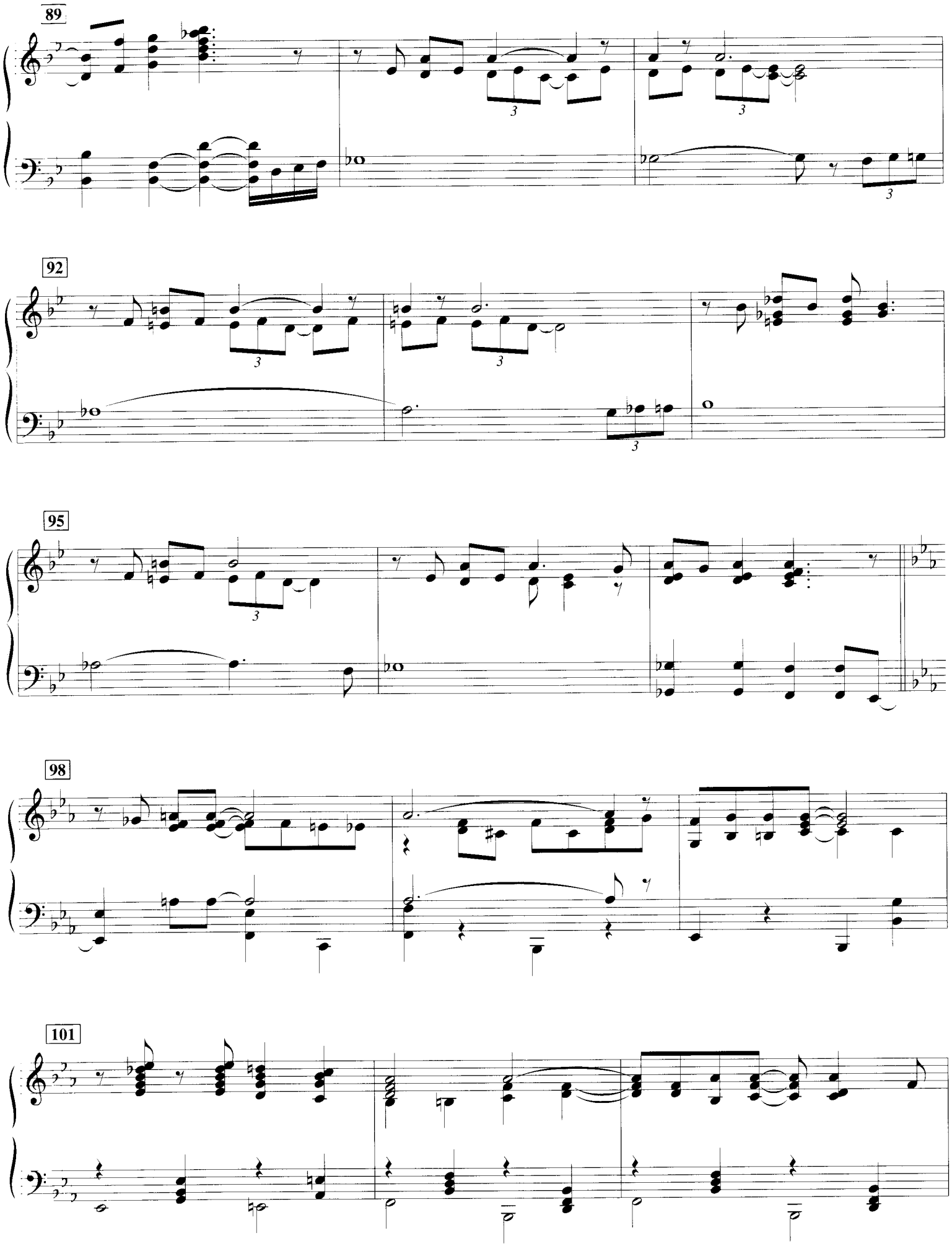
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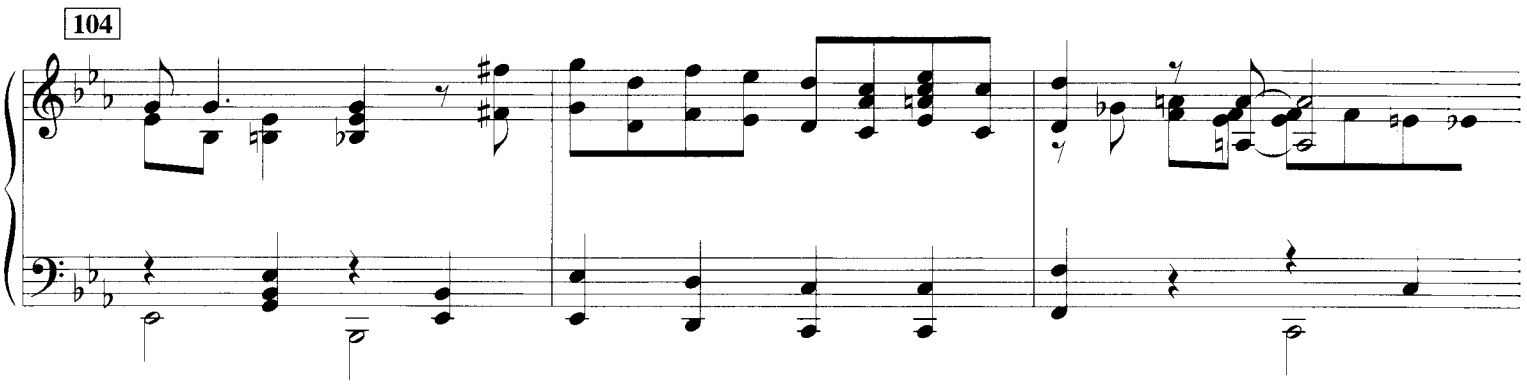

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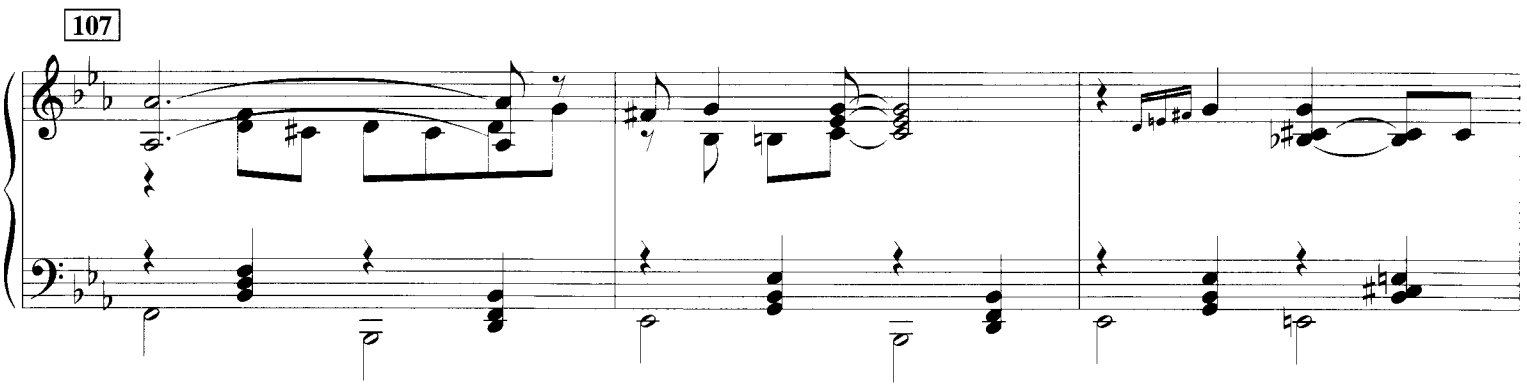

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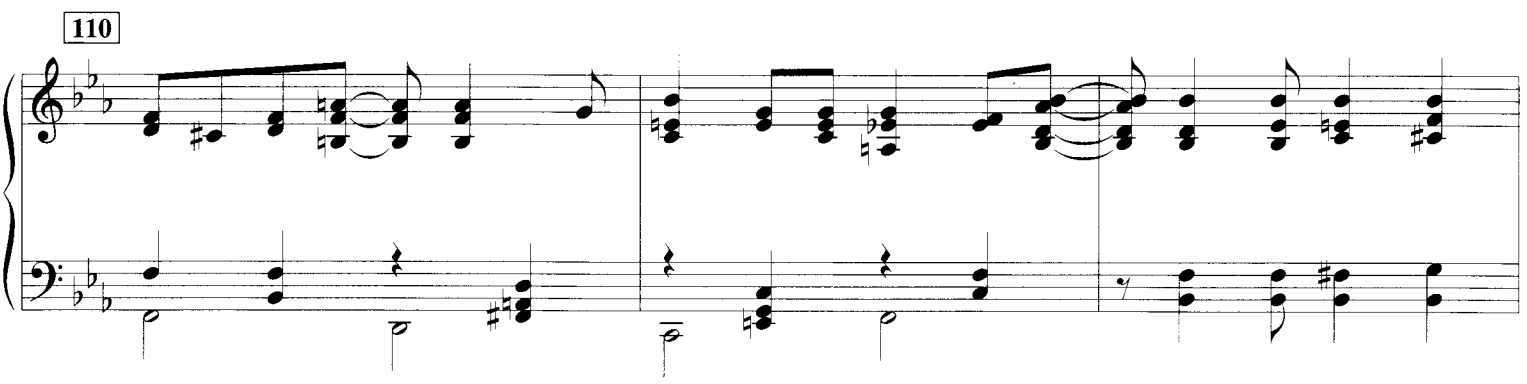

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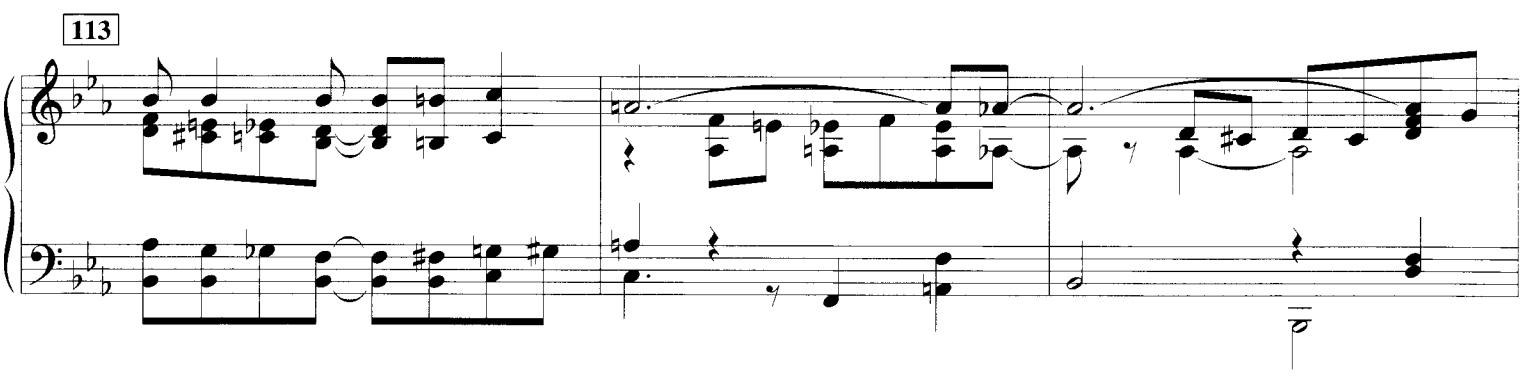

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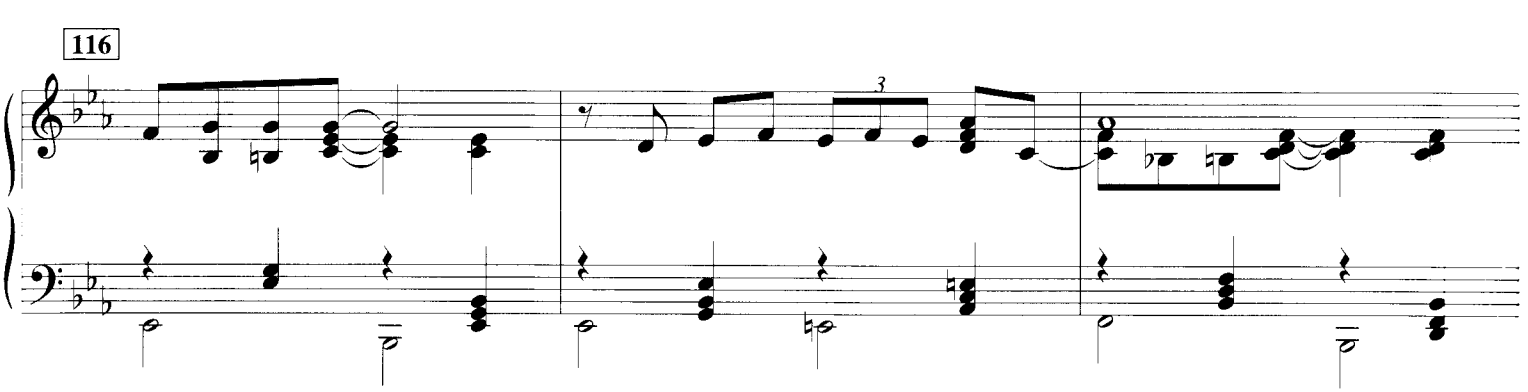

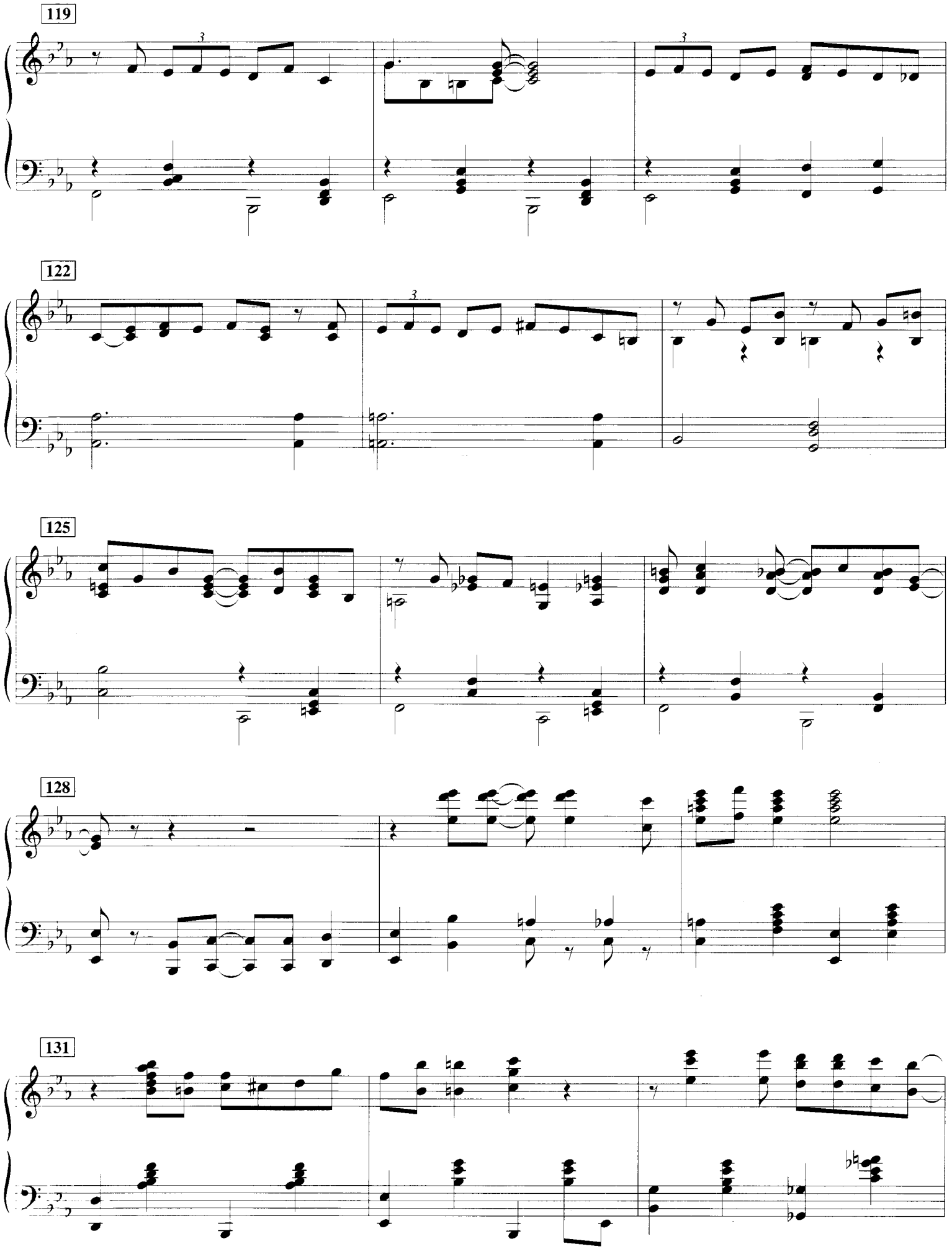
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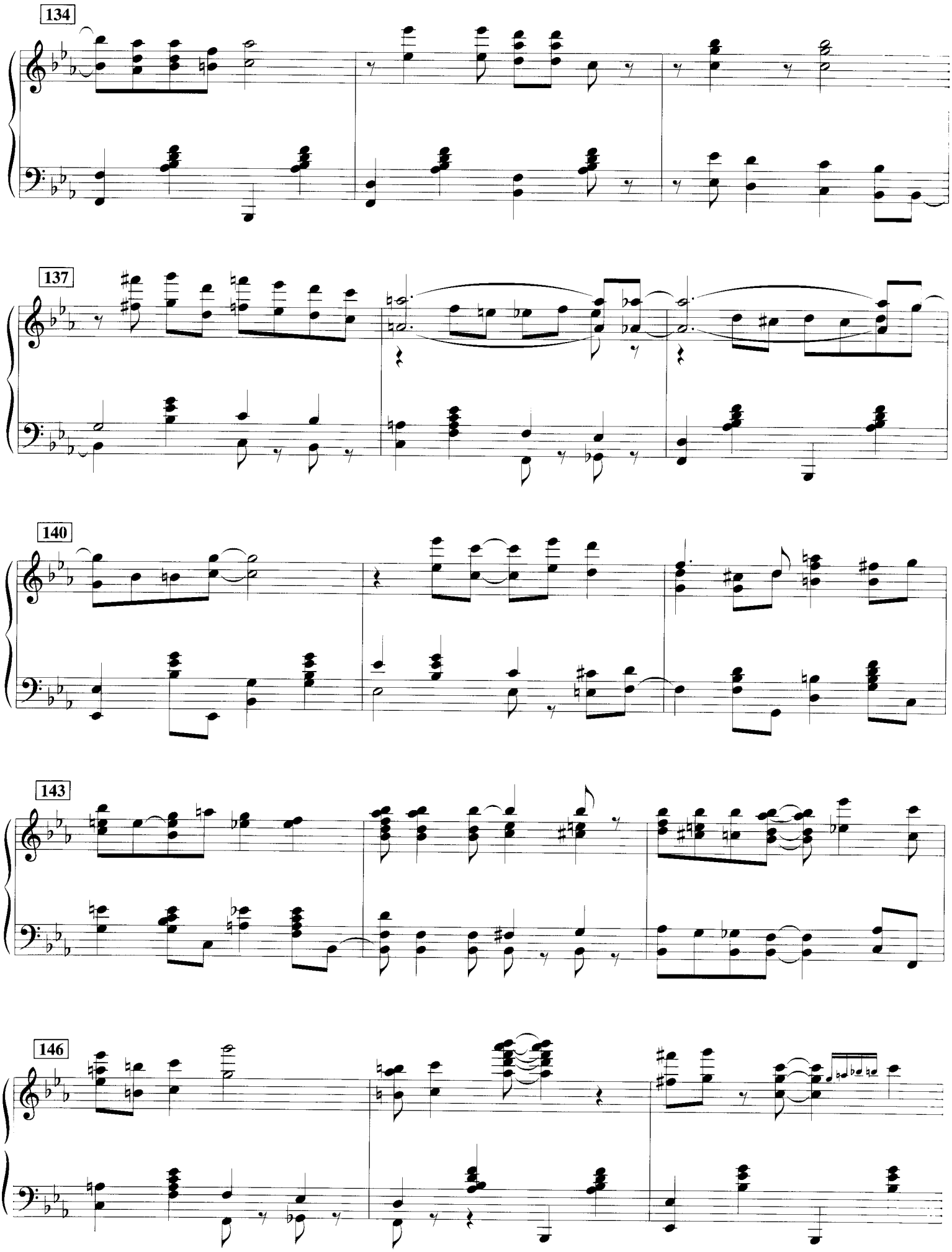
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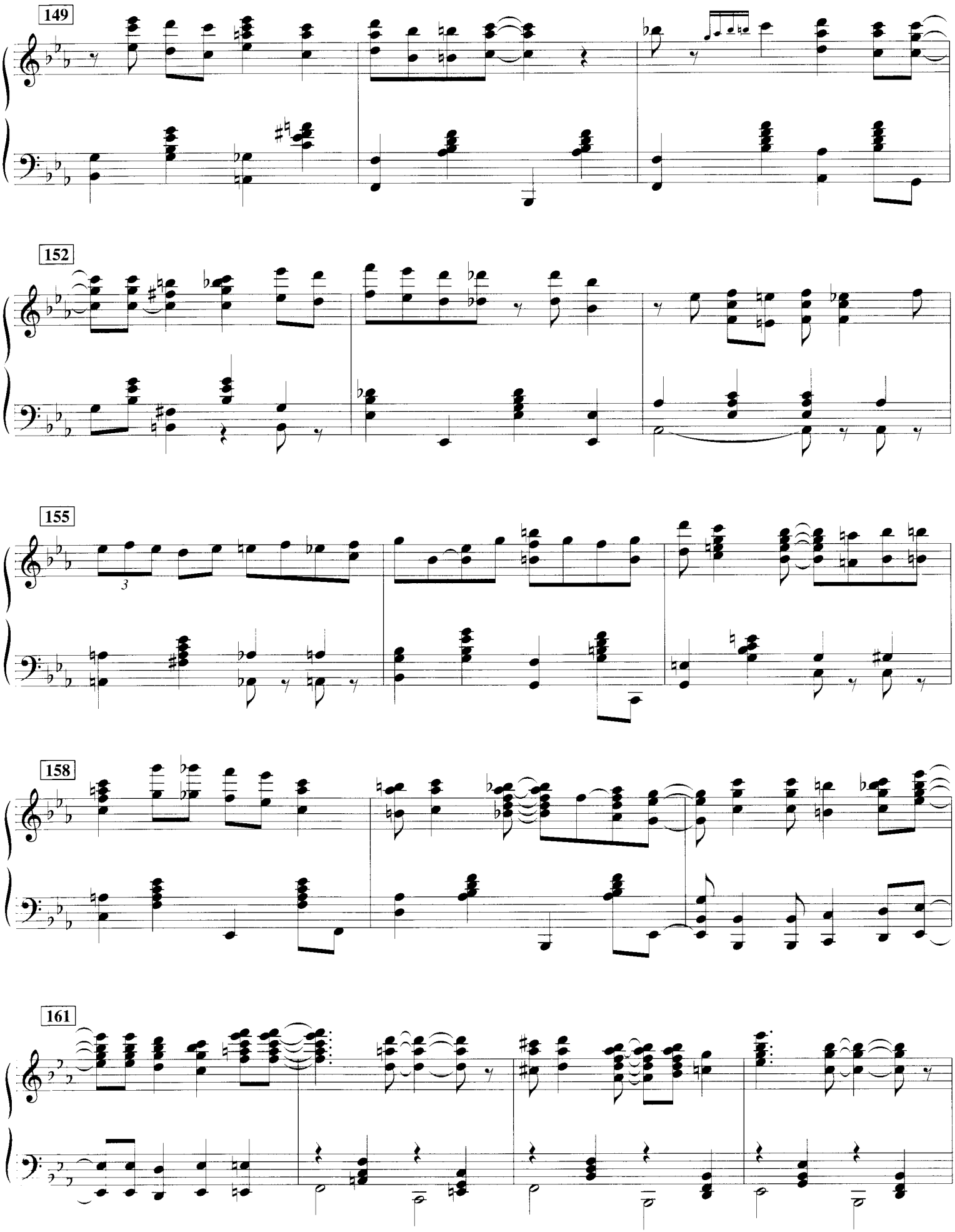
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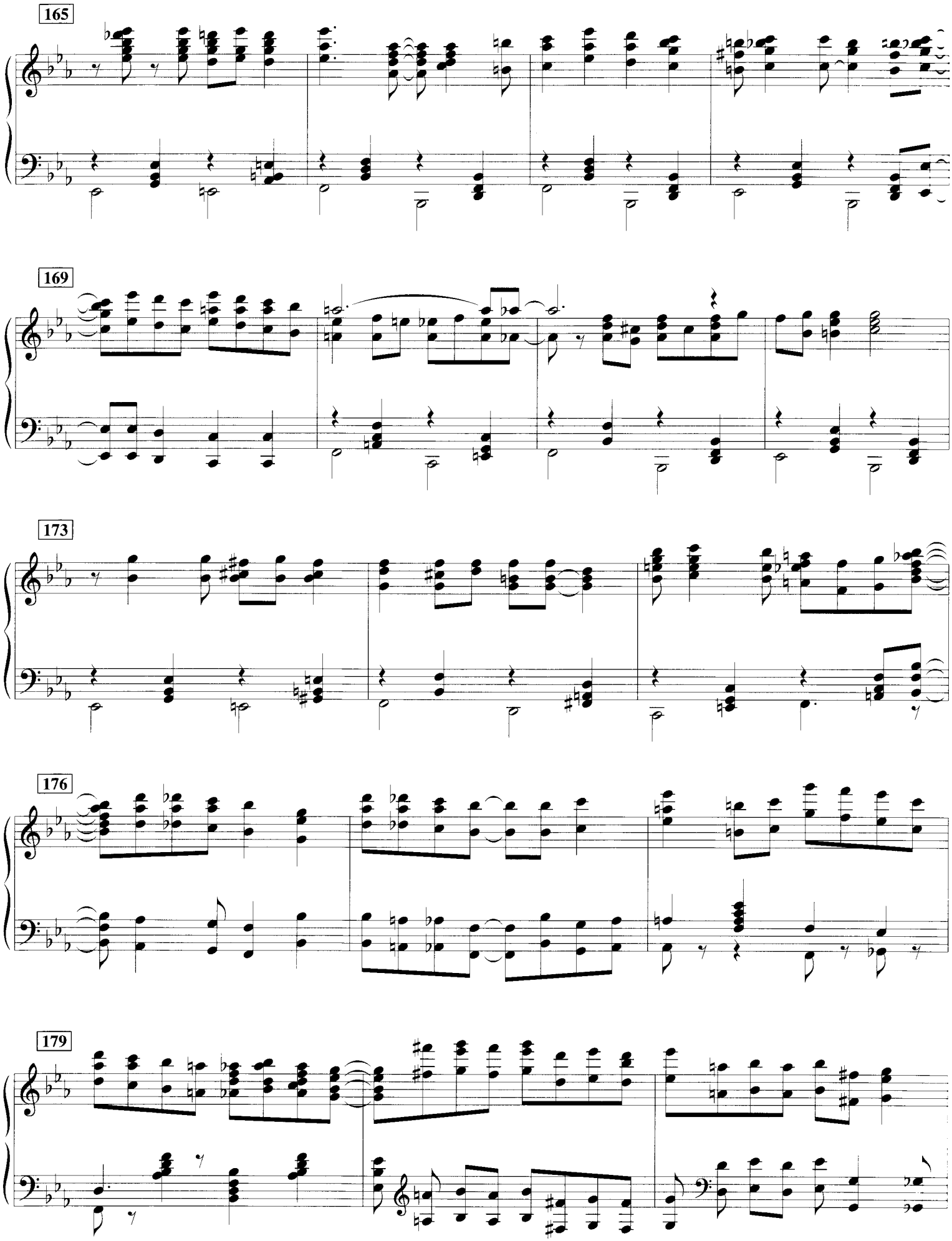
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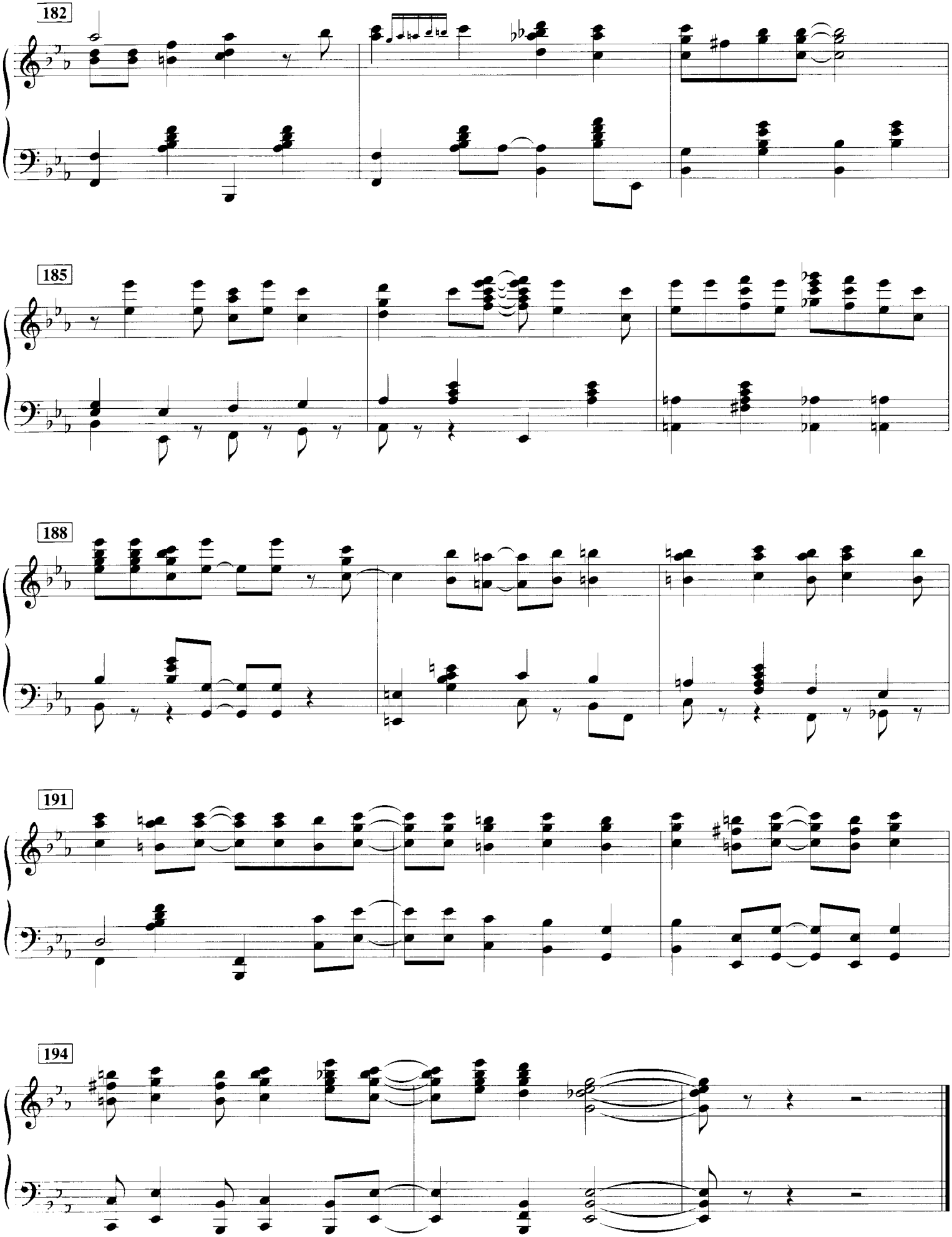
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A Note on Jelly Roll Morton

BY BUTCH THOMPSON

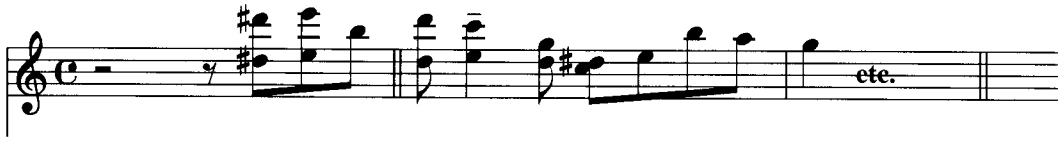
Jelly Roll Morton's piano playing has fascinated me since I first discovered his beautiful 1923-'24 Gennett solos. In 1962, those acoustically recorded sides were available on a Riverside LP (RLP12-111). Over and over I listened, trying to fathom that beautiful playing. It was the most mesmerizing, exotic piano music I had ever heard, and I knew I had to learn how to do it.

Among the first pieces I tried were "Grandpa's Spells," "King Porter Stomp," and "Stratford Hunch," the last already known to me as "Chicago Breakdown," recorded by Louis Armstrong in 1927. I didn't have the patience or know-how to transcribe what Morton played, so I worked by trial and error (mostly the latter), revising constantly. Later, after working this way for some time, I met Bill Russell, probably the leading Morton expert, and he gave me a number of transcriptions by J. Lawrence Cook. These things, some of which had been published in the late '30s by Morton's friend and business partner Roy J. Carew, were very helpful, but I still count those years of intense listening as most valuable.

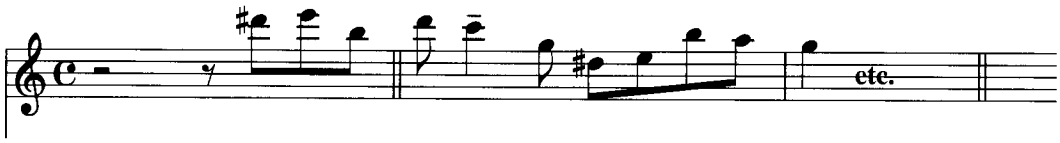
The more I learned about Morton's approach, the more I tried to play everything exactly as I thought Morton would have done. For years, I focused on his style. Everything from Joplin rags to Broadway ballads got the same treatment, for better or worse. What I was after was Morton's way, that wonderful combination of lyricism and down-home rhythm. The miracle of that playing is its originality; as with any great artist, his work is instantly recognizable. Over the years, his music has been examined from all angles by critics, musicologists, and other explicators. In the final analysis, though, there remains that central mystery about how an artist manages to create something so completely new with the materials at hand. We know Morton's raw material—that unique New Orleans musical roux of "everything from blues to opera"—but we can't explain how he made so much original beauty from it.

As Morton explained to his biographer Alan Lomax, he thought of jazz piano in orchestral terms; the jazz pianist should strive to imitate a jazz band. To suggest the sound of a collectively improvising ensemble with several horns, a certain sleight of hand is needed, and Morton, unique

among pianists of any era, was able to do this beautifully. Not only did he fill his playing with trombone-like fills in the left hand, he also often seemed to be playing two or more different lines in the right. This was accomplished by subtle indirection; a few notes in exactly the right places could suggest the excitement of collective improvisation. In this excerpt based on something he plays in his 1938 Library of Congress performance of "Creepy Feeling," we can see this effect clearly:



At least two distinct melody lines are suggested:



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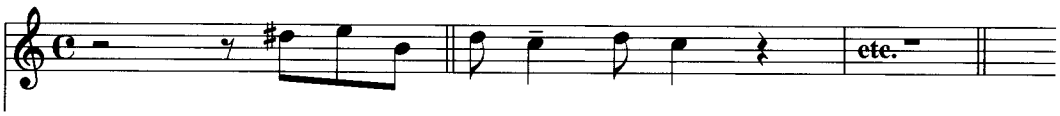

Much of the richness of Morton's sound derives from this kind of spontaneous polyphony. In the heat of improvisation, it can seem like wizardry, and who are we to say it isn't?

These piano rolls are an important part of the Morton legacy. "Grandpa's Spells," "Shreveport Stomp," and "King Porter" are especially inspired performances, completely different from their acoustically recorded counterparts made at the same period. These are among the best examples to be found of Morton in full cry. Jazz musicians of the '50s and '60s came to call this kind of extended soloing "stretching out." It's just another example of Morton doing something first.

Eventually I came to realize that I could never completely assimilate the Morton persona. Since then I have been working on traditional jazz piano in general, but I still regard Morton as my favorite and my top influence. I have no regrets whatever about trying so hard to imitate him; I'm just glad I discovered the best at such an early stage.

BUTCH THOMPSON

BUTCH THOMPSON is a jazz pianist widely known as an expert performer of Jelly Roll Morton's music. A life-long student of New Orleans jazz, he is well-known for his association with Garrison Keillor's A Prairie Home Companion on public radio. In addition to his career as a performer, Butch writes articles and reviews on jazz and produces his own weekly show, Jazz Originals.