Basilisk

for solo bass clarinet in Bb

Nigel Morgan

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About the piece

Despite the best efforts of Suzanne Stephens and Harry Sparnay there are still relatively few solo works for this beautiful and expressive instrument. Basilisk was written for the clarinetist John Chapman who gave it its first performance in Cambridge in 1978. It was recorded in 1986 by his student Gareth Stuart and it is this recording that features in the opening section of the composer's Arts Council commissioned radiophonic documentary *Spring Manouevres*.

The work is the first part of a sequence of seven mythological beasts whose portraits, both mythological and in human manifestation, have been realised from Margaret Morgan's cycle of poems of *Man and Beast*. The sequence is designed for a single performer on single read instruments: clarinet in Bb, clarinet in A, clarinet in Eb, bass clarinet in Bb, soprano saxophone in Bb, alto saxophone in Eb, tenor saxophone in Bb.

Basilisk, that 'fatal orphan of a deadly serpent', is a particularly grotesque invention. Such a character calls out for an equally grotesque and alarming sonic presentation. For this reason the performer is encouraged to consider using amplification and signal processing to enliven the timbre and the sonic space. There are minimum markings present in the score; the tempo markings and phrasing are guides, no more. Dynamics are entirely free but suggested in the contours of the instrumental writing and in the texts of the two poems that make up The Basilisk. Above all, the performer should consider approaching the score as an actor might deliver the script of a soliloquy. The Basilisk is, in essence, a highly confrontational piece of music theatre.

The work is written as transposed for the bass clarinet in Bb sounding a major ninth lower than written.

Basilisk
by Margaret Morgan

There he moves.
Trickles his green foulness between wings
Tattered like dead rushes,
Or lies, stagnant, fronded with hindering feathers.
The Basilisk,
Fatal orphan of a deadly serpent,
Child of perverted wisdom, crammed forth,
Some male bird's impurity,
Abandoned for the mindless sun to quicken
Till the reeking egg cracks. The Basilisk.

Mountain, shore and city street
All his domain;
The world revolves beneath his bloodless belly.
Yet he is hidden
Deep as buried fear. The Basilisk,

at least men say so,
Dies if he should hear a cock crow.
Or a weasel, charmed well,
Will send a basilisk to hell,
Well, so they say.

But when it is June and birds
Burst like a handful of pebbles in blue air
And God is everywhere self-portrayed,
only a fool will burden himself
With a cock and a weasel in a bag.
And a man needs both hands free
Stumbling out for coal in iron Dcember.

The Basilisk
Skulks in the grass of June, the frozen clods of winter.
Rouse him. Open his eyes and cell by cell
You are petrified and die.

The Sentient Basilisk
Words by Margaret Morgan

……And though I wander
Through mountains and forests
I am still hidden in every man's soul,
An orphan,
A fear of non-being
Bedded in scar tissue.

My den trips with feet
Of muttering pilgrims
Seeking the mountain-leveller
Who will draw my sting
And make me safe for infants.
May he come soon!

Perhaps the something that I am
Will unify itself.
I must be one.
I long to see my own haecceity.

I thirst for confrontations.
A man's eyes could mirror me,
But when they do his words fall away
Like broken armour on the ground.
He sees himself a midget in my eye.

He is the seedless male he sees,
The orphan fear, the flightless bird.
My mirror breaks.
A sightless stone leaves me alone
With the din of a treacherous crowing.

Introduction to Man and Beast
By Margaret Morgan

The Basilisk is one of a series of poems entitled *Man and Beast*. The series is based on a set of mythical animals that we have invented partly as scapegoats and partly as explanations for human conduct.

These animals prance, bounce and skulk across the pages of medieval bestiaries, frisk in legends and hang on the walls of our art galleries. Familiarity has lent some of them a domesticity, even a charm echoed in children's songs, stories and toys though I have yet to see a velour basilisk or a sciopod pencil case!

The free rhythm of the poems echoes facets of the possible movement and character of each beast. And each beast is given a chance of speaking back and explaining itself, holding up a mirror to reflect back to us some of our most hidden thoughts and desires.

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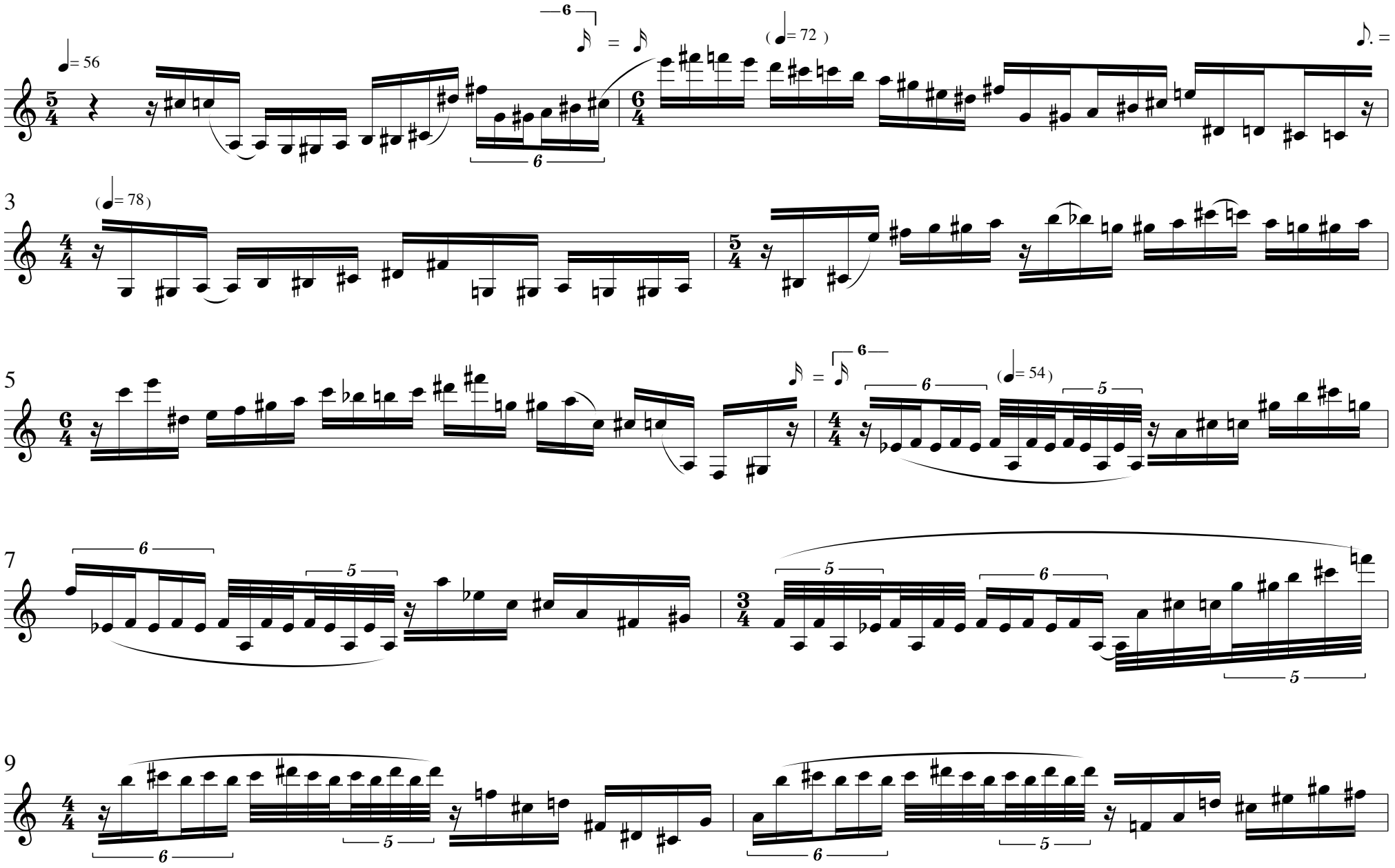
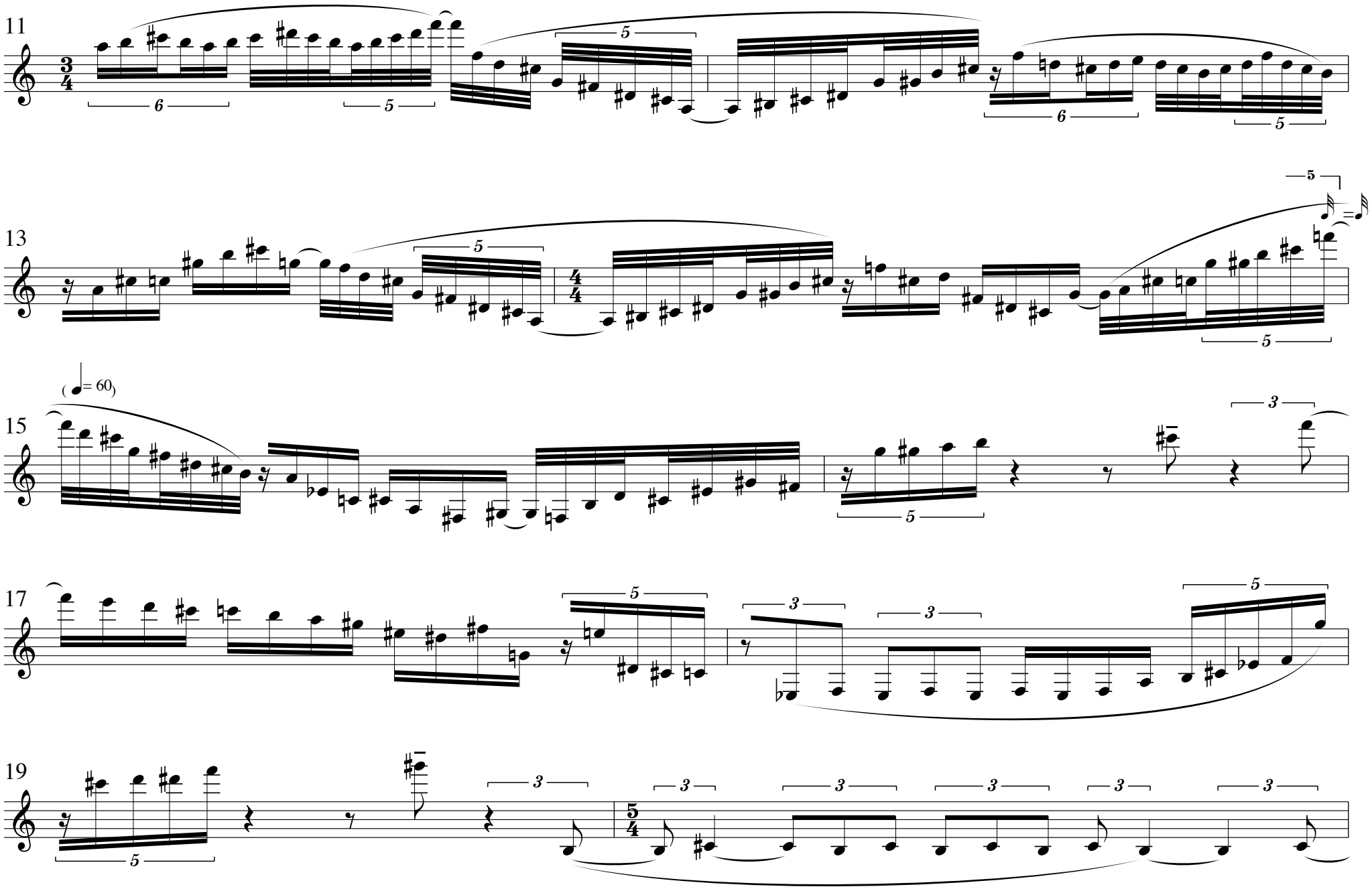
Basilisk

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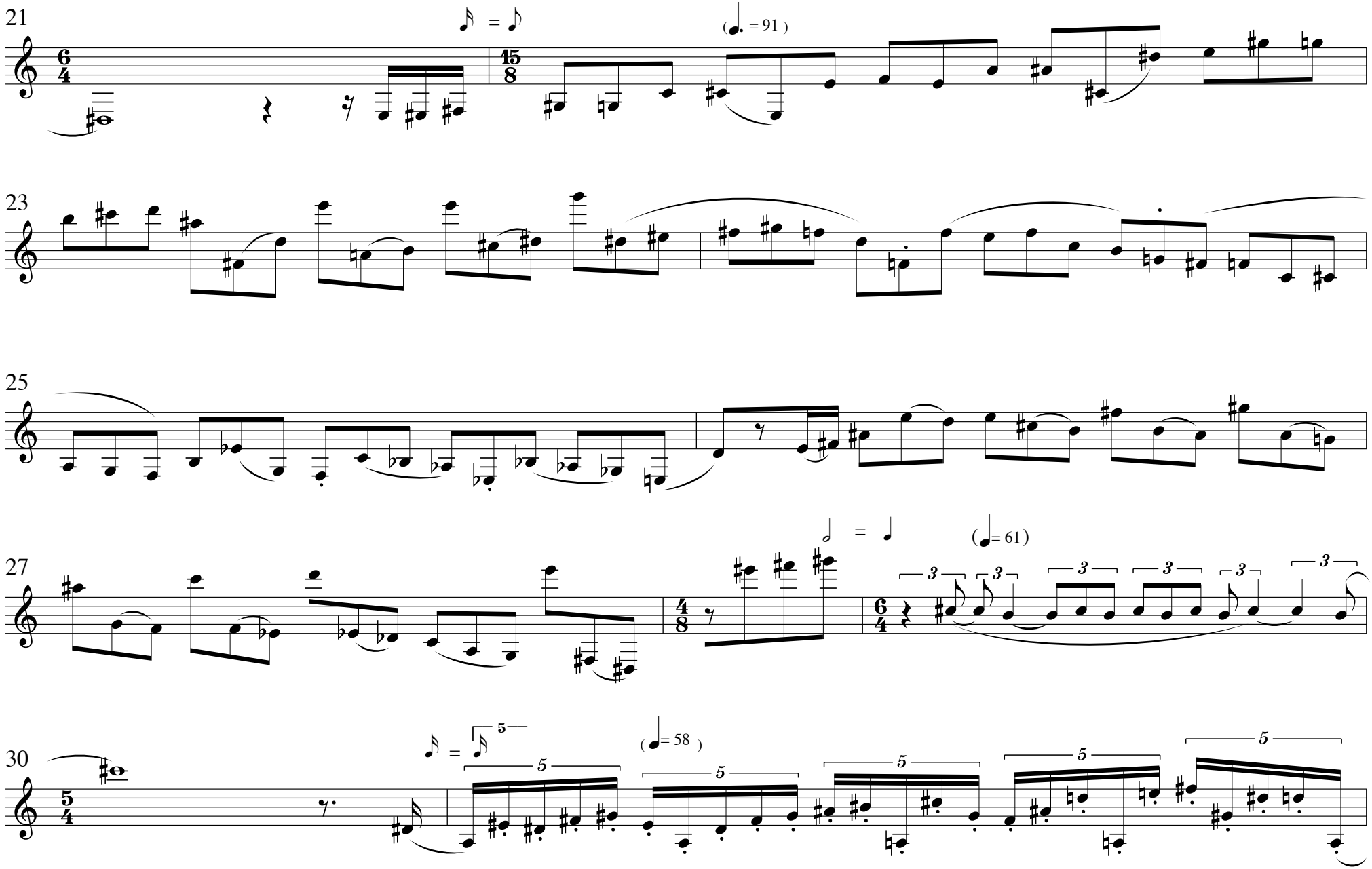
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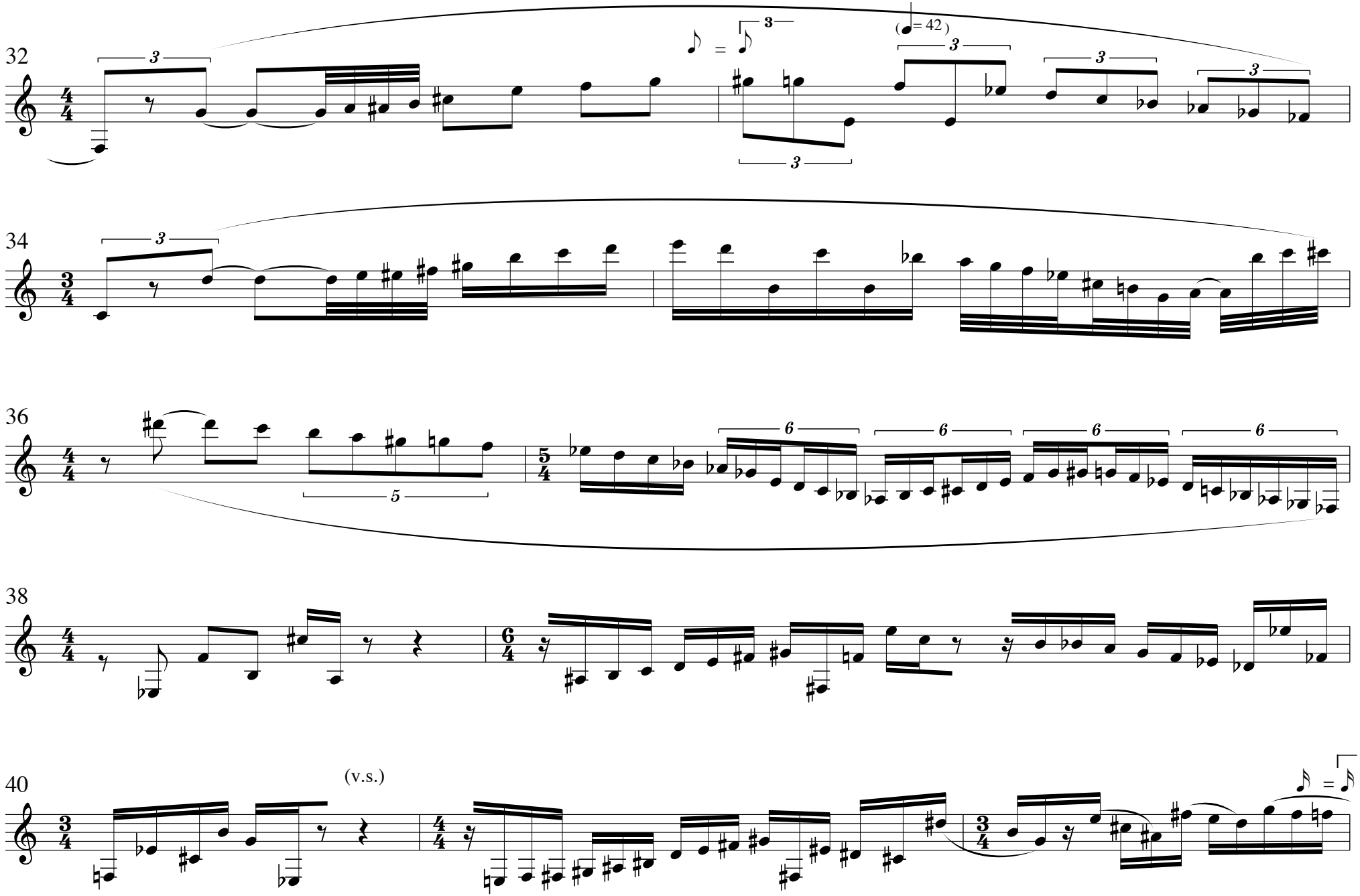
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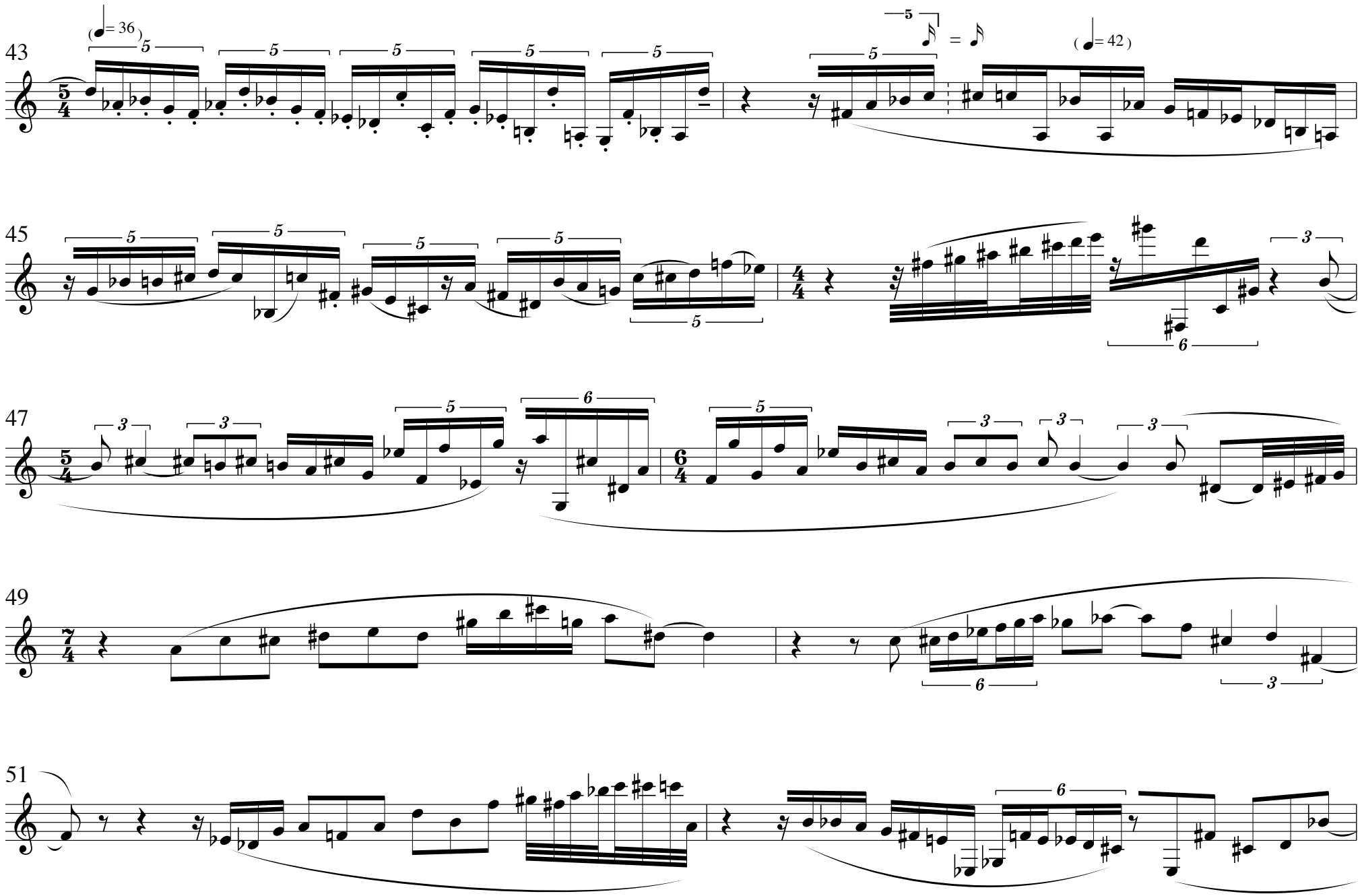
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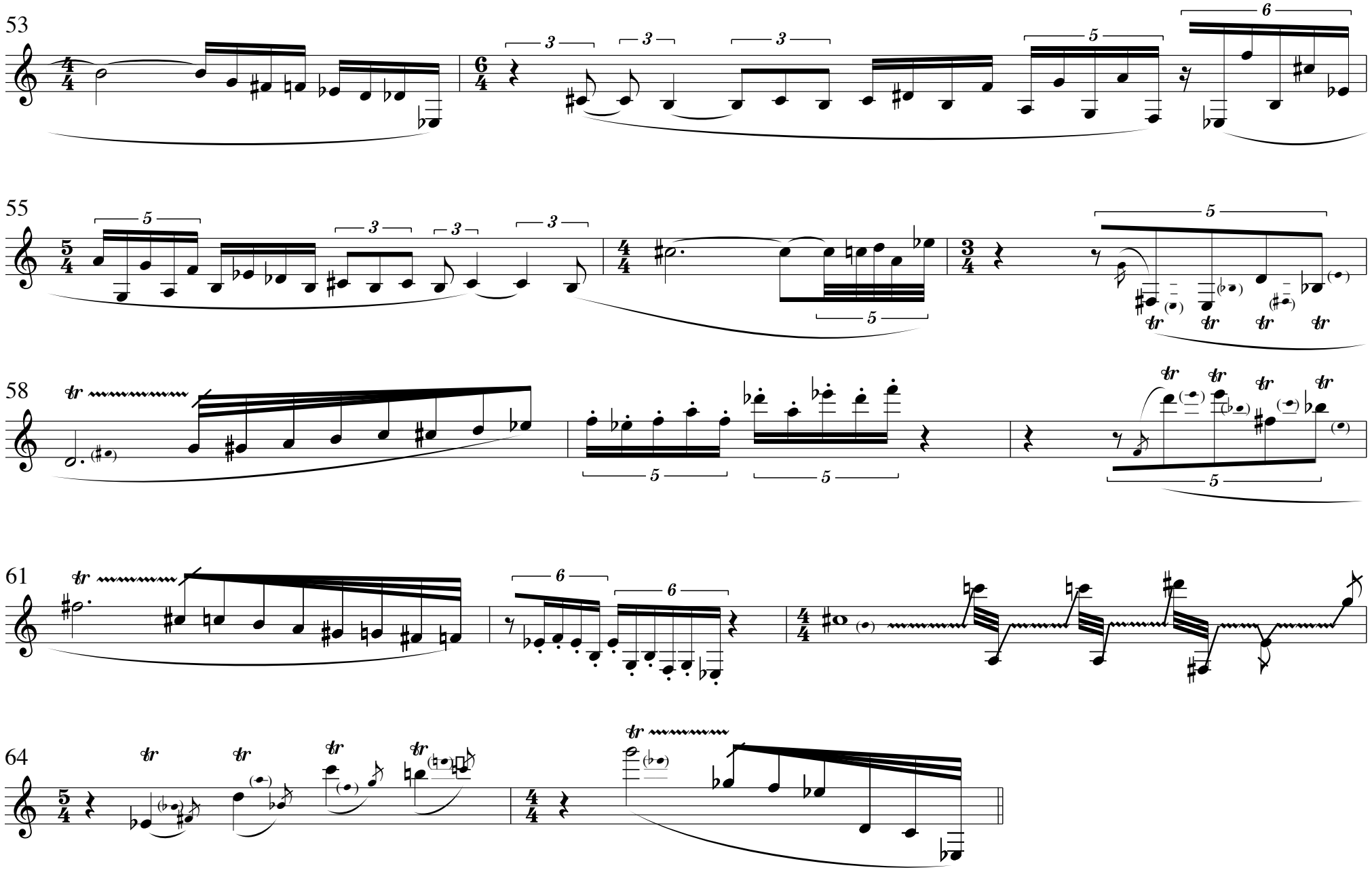
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