Dances with the Devil: Telling a Story with Music in Polystylism

by

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Senior Honors Thesis

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The Honors College

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Advisor: Dr. John Mayrose, Music

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Abstract

"*Dances with the Devil*: Telling a Story with Music in Polystylism"

Dances with the Devil is an original musical composition that narrates a story by utilizing various genres of music. Embodying polystylism, the composition is separated into four sections. The piece begins with a classical overture that flows into a rock song. The next section is a hip hop song, and the piece ends with an electronic dance music section that synthesizes elements from each part. Thematic leitmotifs, a popular technique in film scores, are used to represent different characters throughout *Dances with the Devil*.

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I. Introduction

I started planning my honors thesis my freshman year- basically as soon as I knew I had the opportunity to write one. I knew I wanted my thesis to reflect my degree, but didn't know how to approach a creative thesis. When I found out that my close friend Lily Lavon was working on a musical, my first thought was, “that could become a thesis project...” So, I decided to ask Lily if I could use their characters and story and write my own version for my thesis. They happily agreed. The next step in the process became deciding what genre to write in. During my time here at UWO, I have had the privilege of working with many different styles of music, with the goal of being as versatile of a musician as possible. I decided to make my thesis a full circle of my college experience by working in every genre I worked with as a student.

To start, my very first audio project that I helped lead was in my Audio III class group, and we recorded a string quartet. I decided, therefore, to write and record a string quartet as the overture to my thesis to begin the piece of music. Next, I thought about extracurricular things I did while studying music. A big part of my time in school was joining a rock band and assisting in writing original music for our group. I decided, therefore, to use my limited knowledge of rock to write a song for my thesis project. I received a lot of help figuring out the rock genre with my own twist from my advisor, Dr. John Mayrose.

The last two genres were obvious to me because of my time as a music producer. I have worked with both hip hop and edm since high school and have written and produced both genres for multiple different classes. In fact, one of my first audio projects was remixing a song into my edm style that I had developed in high school. I also wrote and recorded solo hip hop and edm songs (and remixes) that I showcased at my senior recital in May 2024. In my free time, I work with both genres in collaboration with producers and artists around the world. So, the issue

became how to weave multiple genres into one project to tell a story. This paper shows how I worked with polystylism to tell a musical story.

II. Definitions

In order to explain my creative process, it is important to understand the basic definitions of the genres I'm working with, and the meaning of polystylism. I used these definitions to accurately write in these styles. First, Classical Music is music written in a Western musical tradition, and is usually written for certain ensembles or instruments (I wrote a string quartet). Classical music is generally considered to be serious and to have a lasting value (Oxford Dictionary). Classical music has been a big focus during my education because traditionally classical music is the main focus in music school. Next, Rock is a genre of music made popular in the 1950's and 60's and can be described as having a strong beat and using real instruments, but because of the vast amount of rock music written, it is difficult to give a more exact definition (Brittanica.com). I've listened to a fair amount of rock music, but didn't have experience writing or performing it until I joined a band and we started having writing sessions and performing together. For the band, I assisted with writing two songs: in one I wrote the chord progression and the other I produced and added instrumentation. Next, a genre I know quite well, Hip Hop comes from the cultural movement of the same name started in the 1980's and 90's in the Bronx, New York. The music is known for rapping/ rhyming lyrics, heavy bass beats, and sampling previous recordings of older popular music (Britannica.com). I have worked with hip hop artists from Milwaukee, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Madison, and even LA. It is also one of the main genres I draw from for my own solo sound. Finally, Electronic Dance Music (EDM), another genre I know quite well, is the umbrella term for music that utilizes electronic instruments such as drum machines, synths, and samples of previous recordings to make danceable club-like music (Britannica.com). I first started producing and writing EDM music in freshman year of high school. I have since released remixes and solo EDM music on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube.

So, I have background in all four genres I want to utilize in the thesis piece, but how do I put these sounds together? The question brings us to polystylism and thematic leitmotifs. Polystylism is the combining of radically different styles of music to create one piece of music. This practice was made popular by Russian Composer Alfred Schnittke (Britannica.com). For my thesis, in the spirit of polystylism, I decided to integrate the four genres. I paired genres with characters. Rock represented the characters from or associated with Heaven, and hip hop represented the characters from Hell. EDM would be a remix featuring all of the characters to be used as the finale of the story. The Overture, or introduction, would be classical.

I wrote thematic leitmotifs for each character. A leitmotif is a short, musical phrase associated with a person, place or concept. Leitmotifs return each time the associated person, place, or concept is mentioned. They are used commonly in movies, tv, musical theater, and opera. The word comes from the German word Leitmotiv, meaning “leading motive” (Britannica.com).

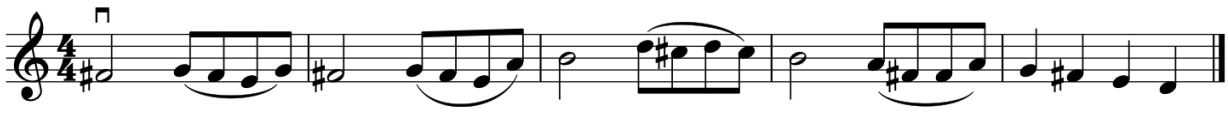
III. The Story: Character Background and Plot

The musical story is set in a fantasy world. The main character, Frankie, is a demon from hell who ran away to be with her human lover. Her mother is the Devil and the queen of Hell. Because of Frankie's departure, the Devil sends her army to Earth to search for Frankie and fight to get her back. The war that breaks out on earth draws out angels from heaven including Frankie's best friend, Maddi. Maddi has spent most of his life avoiding conflict. He prefers to mind his own business, but this war prompts him to fight. His decision to fight leads him face to face with Szazarac- the demon Frankie's mother betrothed to Frankie. Szazarac takes his knife and kills Maddi, further sending Frankie into a spiral of despair.

Within this plot I wrote a thematic leitmotif for each character to represent them throughout the piece. Each theme returns three separate times, each in a different genre. For each character, after making a basic beat to which I would write lyrics, I put myself in each character's shoes to see how I could write from their perspective. This work is what made me fall in love with writing for characters. Below are the themes I used with descriptions regarding how I shaped these melodies into different genres.

IV. Thematic Leitmotifs of Each Character

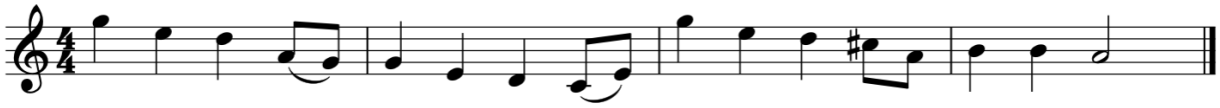
Frankie’s Theme



(Figure 1)

Frankie’s theme was the first one I composed. In music, there is normally a "home" note that most melodies lead to. For Frankie's theme, I decided to avoid the home note to show that she doesn’t want to go home. That note (G) is still present in the melody but it's never the last note heard. This allows for the melody to be looped- which is important for hip hop and edm production. Furthermore, it shows Frankie’s avoidance.

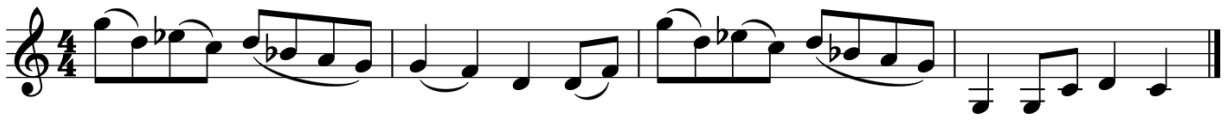
Maddi’s Main Theme



(Figure 2)

Maddi’s main theme needed to sound grounded. Frankie needed someone to stay grounded because she was in despair and was very much not grounded. I therefore made Maddi’s main melody assertive by taking up multiple octaves (something not commonly done when writing music).

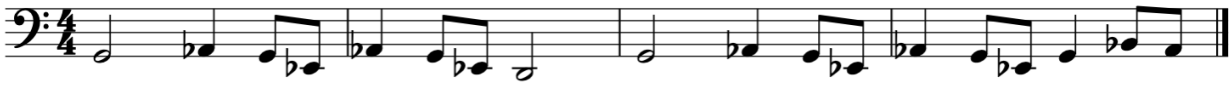
Maddi's Death Theme Variation



(Figure 3)

Maddi's death theme is a variation of Maddi's main theme. I simply added a few notes and switched the key of the melody to minor. I also added a third octave, even lower than the two the main melody is in. The descending line and lower notes represent the death.

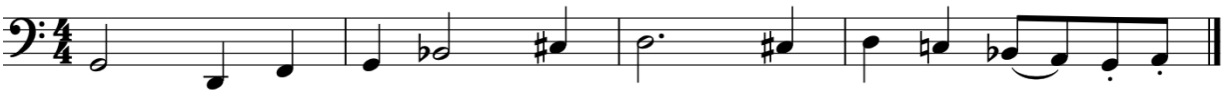
Szazarac's Theme



(Figure 4)

For both Szazarac and The Devil's theme, I took inspiration from different movies and TV shows that used bass for the main villain theme. I immediately thought of Star Wars and Marvel movies. For Szazarac's theme, I wanted it to be repetitious so that it could be easily used in the hip hop genre. I also wanted it to be clear who the theme represents.

The Devil's Theme:



(Figure 5)

For the Devil's theme, I took direct inspiration from the Dark Side Theme in Star Wars. I started playing around with that theme and came up with my own version. That version still sounded a little too close to the Star Wars original version, so I took out notes and changed a few notes. This new version became the Devil's Theme.

Next, to take a look at my process, I will break down each project individually. For the Overture, I will be using the music score and will highlight or otherwise point out how I used each theme. Next, I will screenshot each project and show how I worked with the themes in different genres.

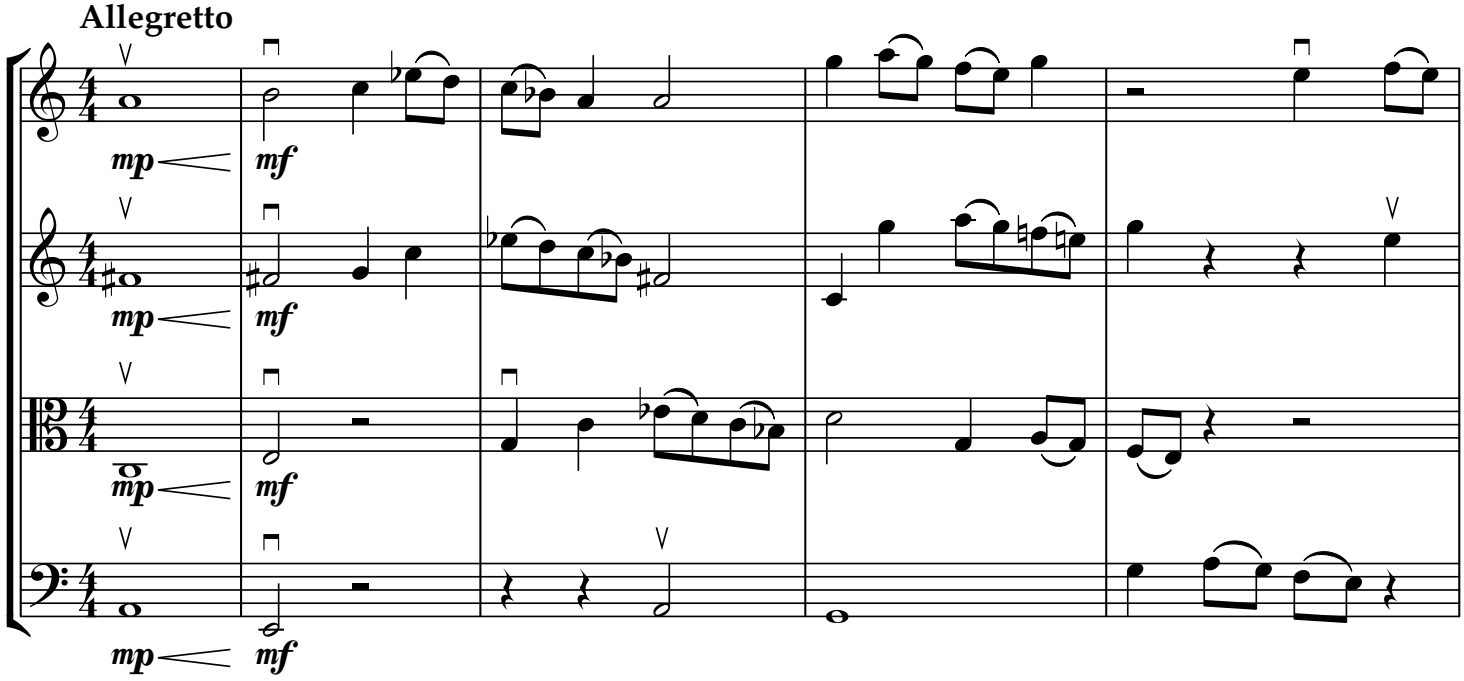
V. Dances with the Devil

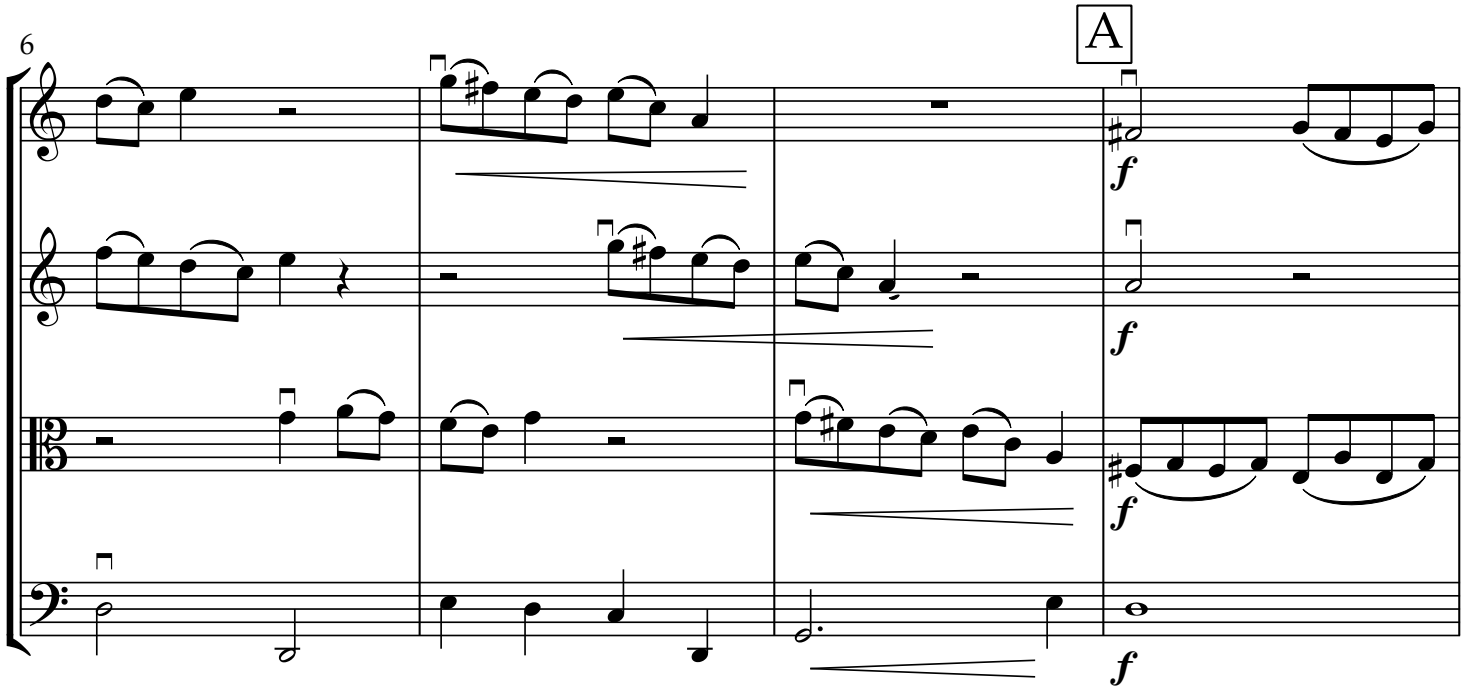
To begin, I took the original themes as noted above and put them into a classical piece of music. I decided on a string quartet for the classical piece. According to Dr. Mayrose, I worked on this project in reverse order from how musical theater shows are written. Most of the time, the Overture is the last thing written, utilizing themes and main melodies that appear throughout the show. Instead, I started with Overture to begin working with the themes and figuring out how to use them in the rest of the songs. Below is the score for the string quartet. After the score, I will explain how I wrote the classical section.

Following the classical score, I will show screenshots of the original files of the software I use to write music. In those pictures, I will label how I used the themes, and how I wrote and produced each song.

Overture

Thomas O'Shea





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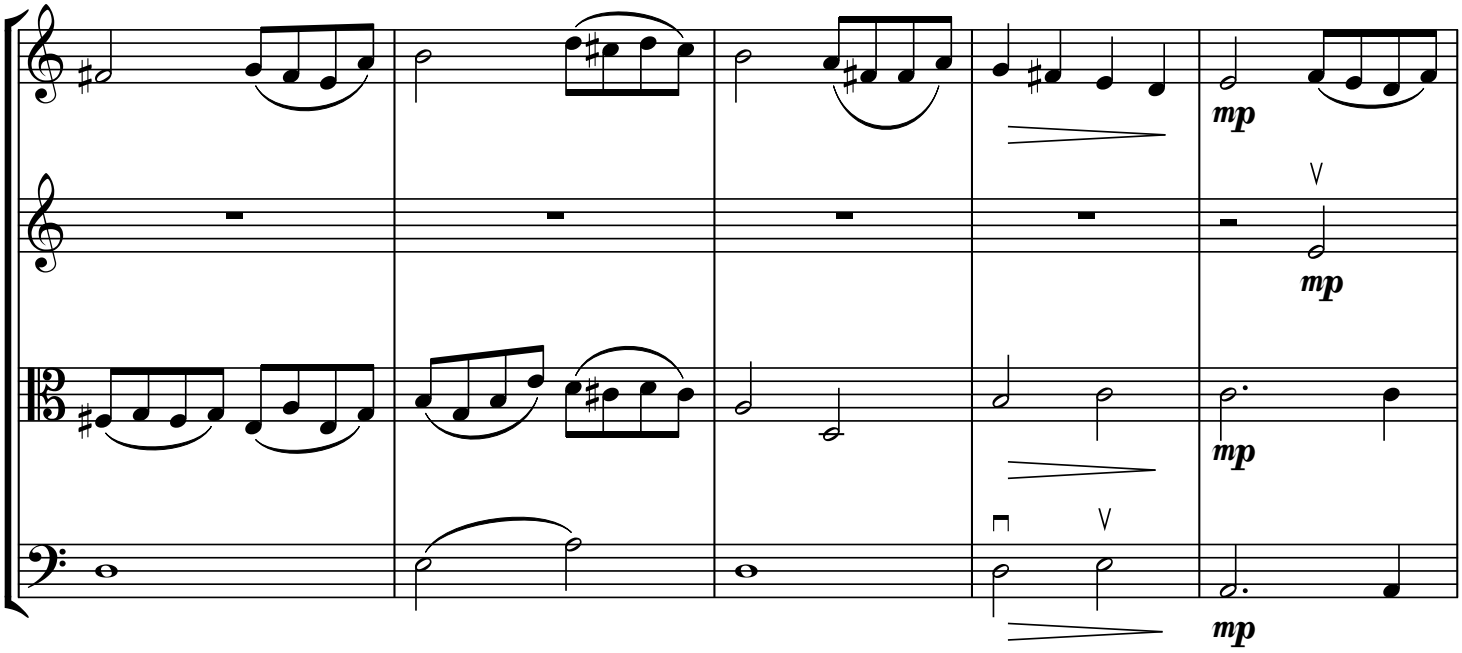

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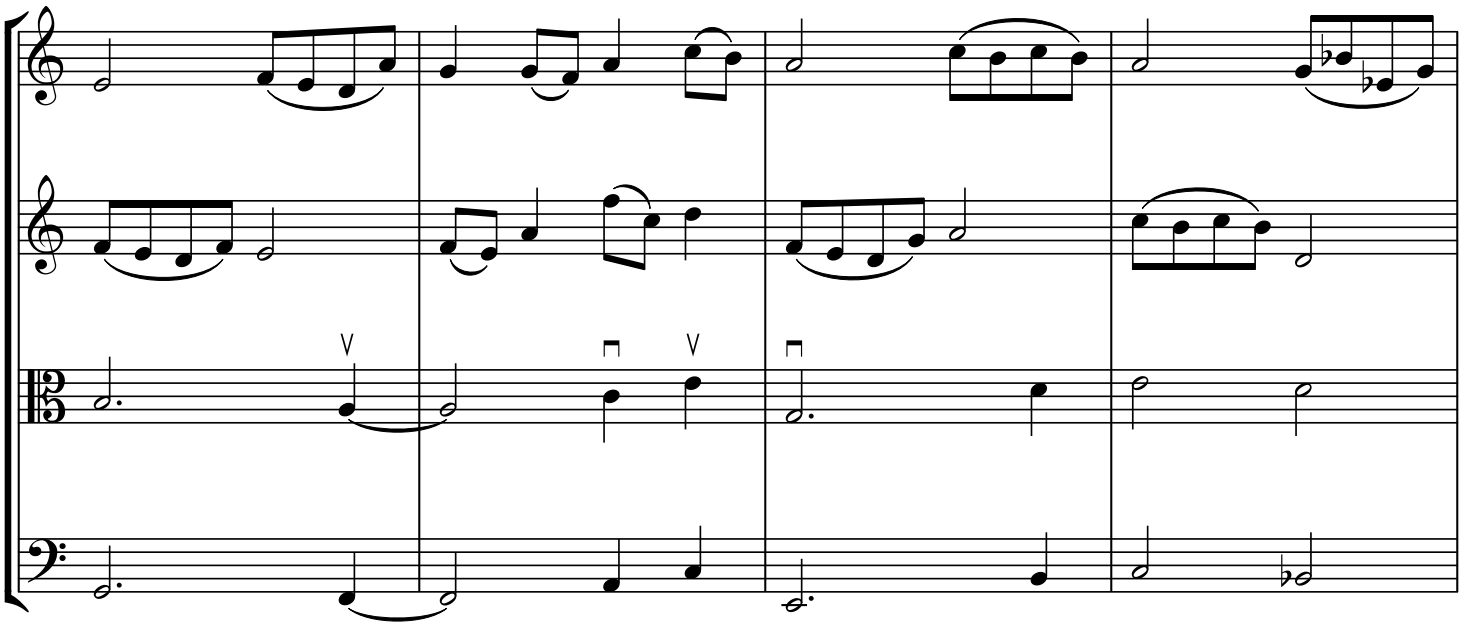

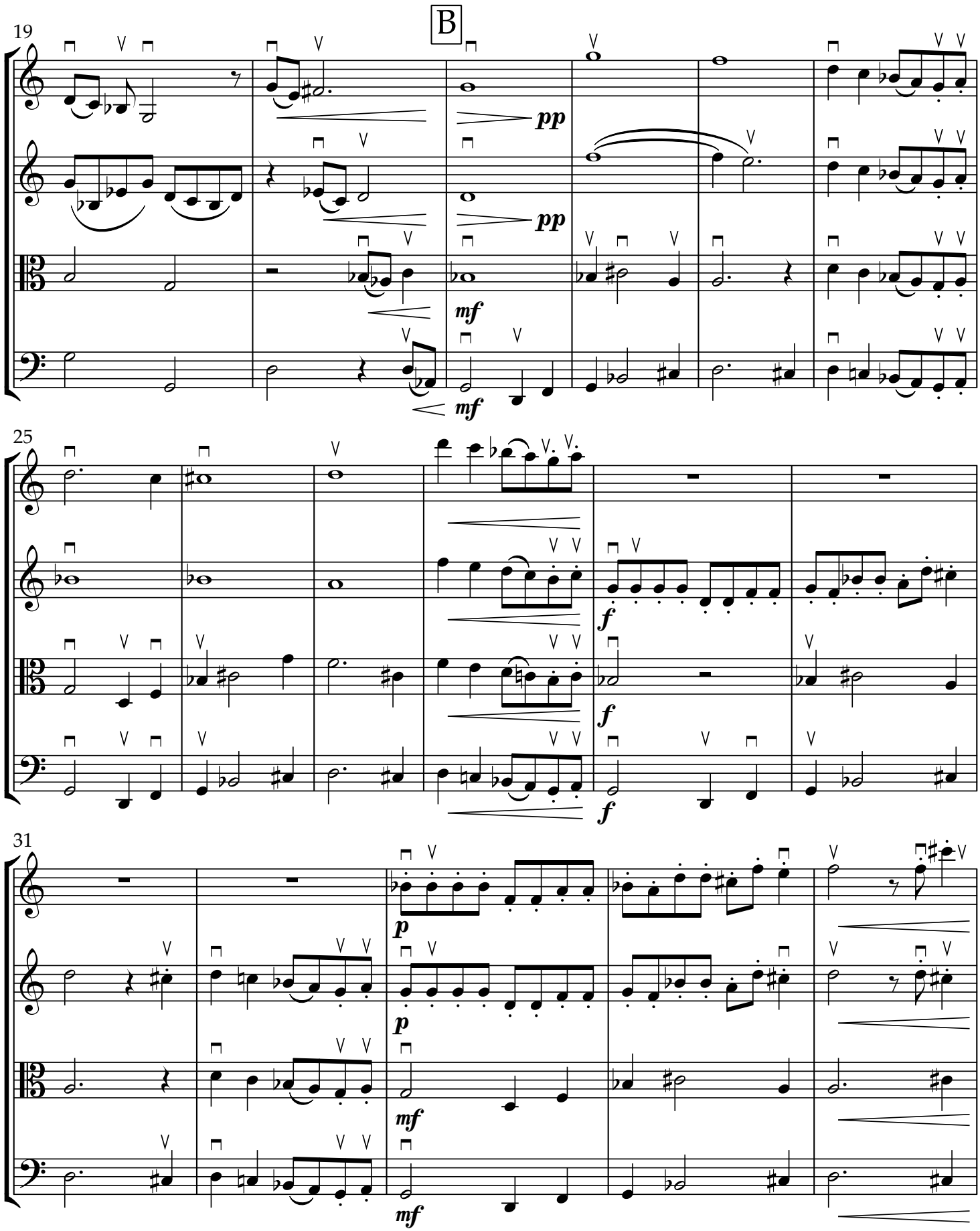
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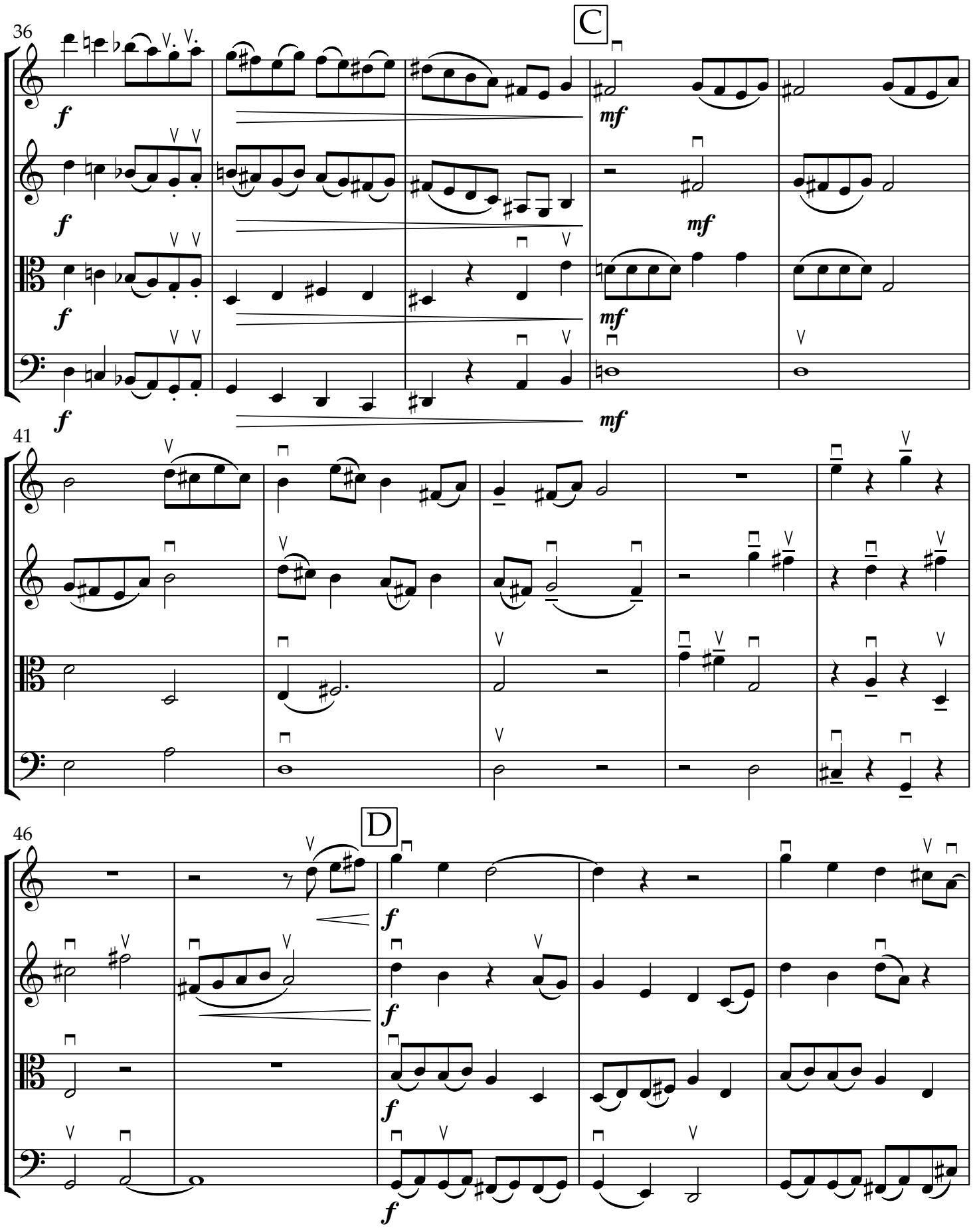
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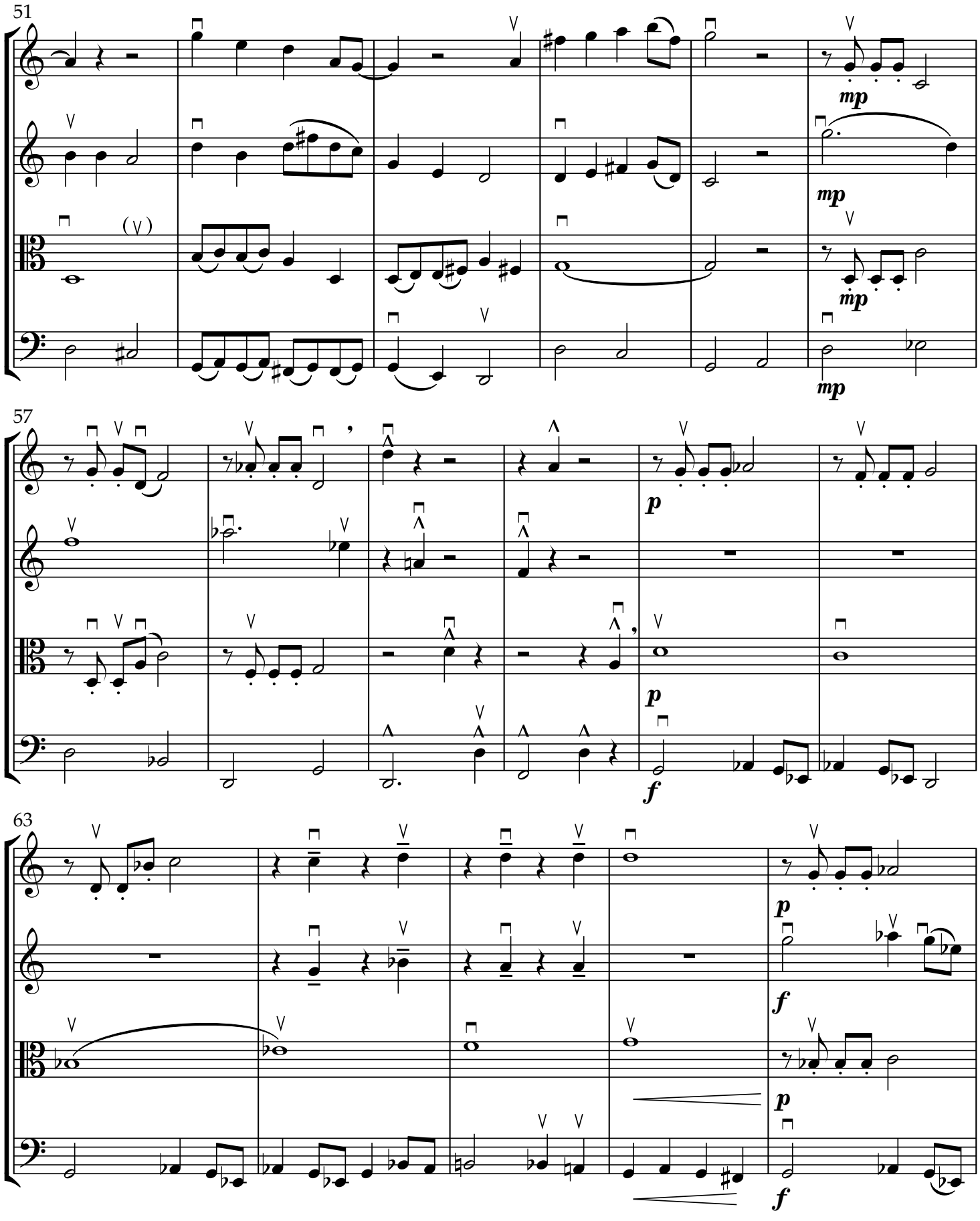
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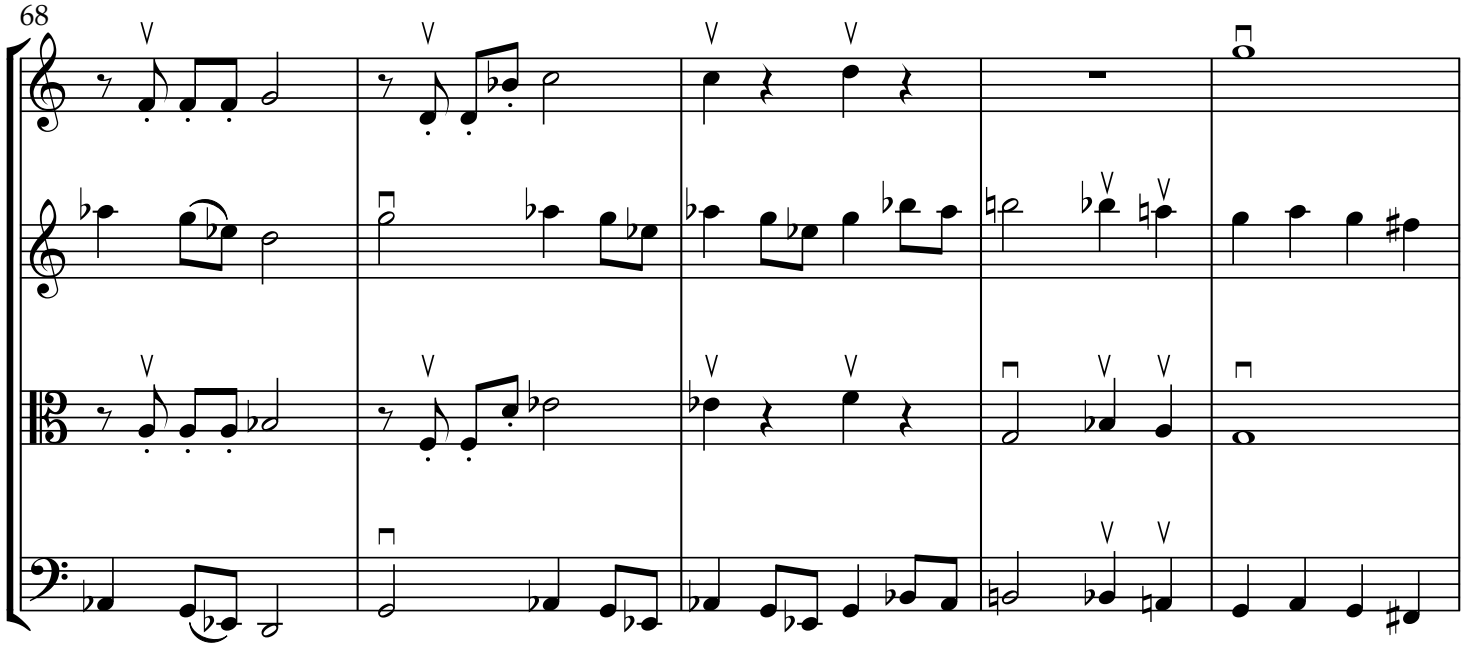
68



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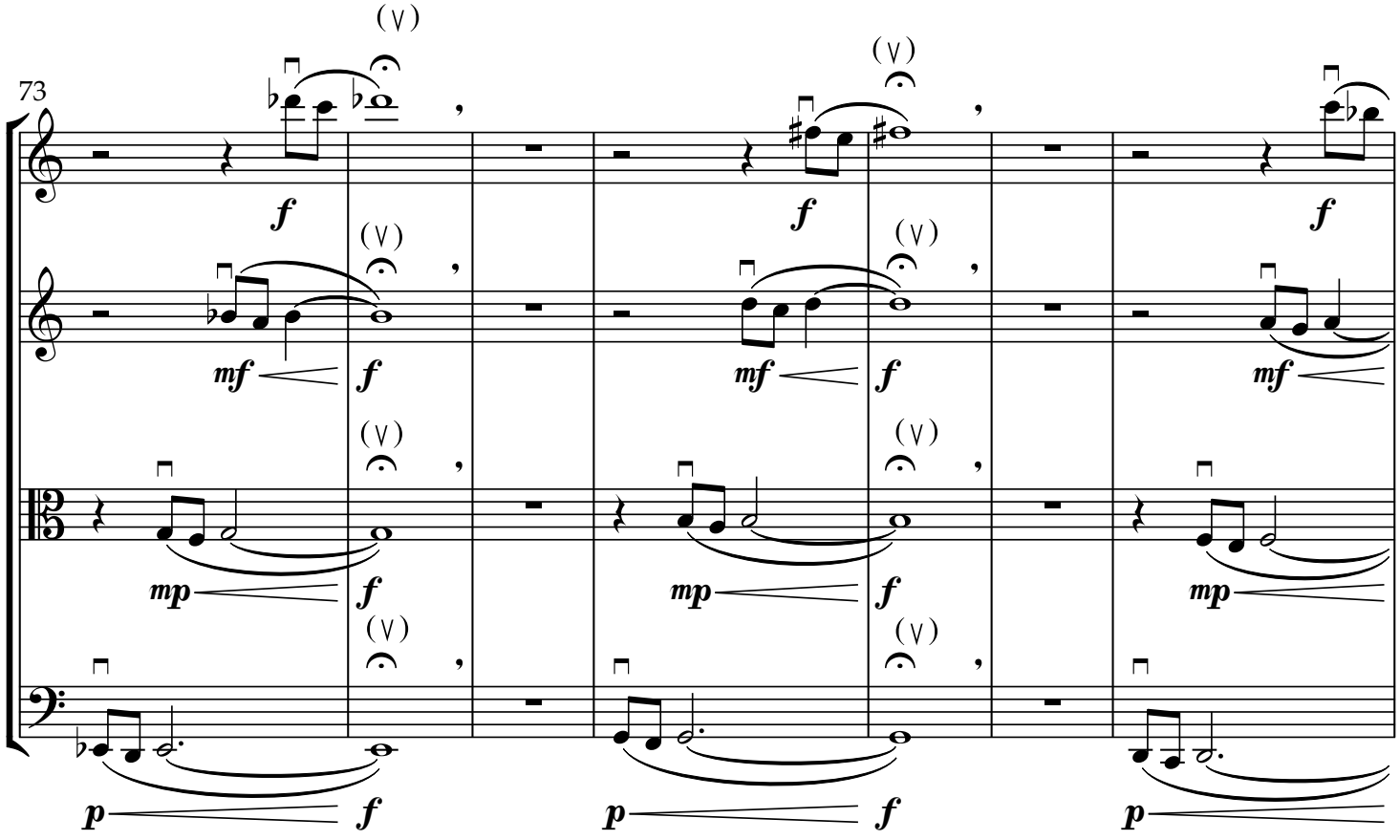

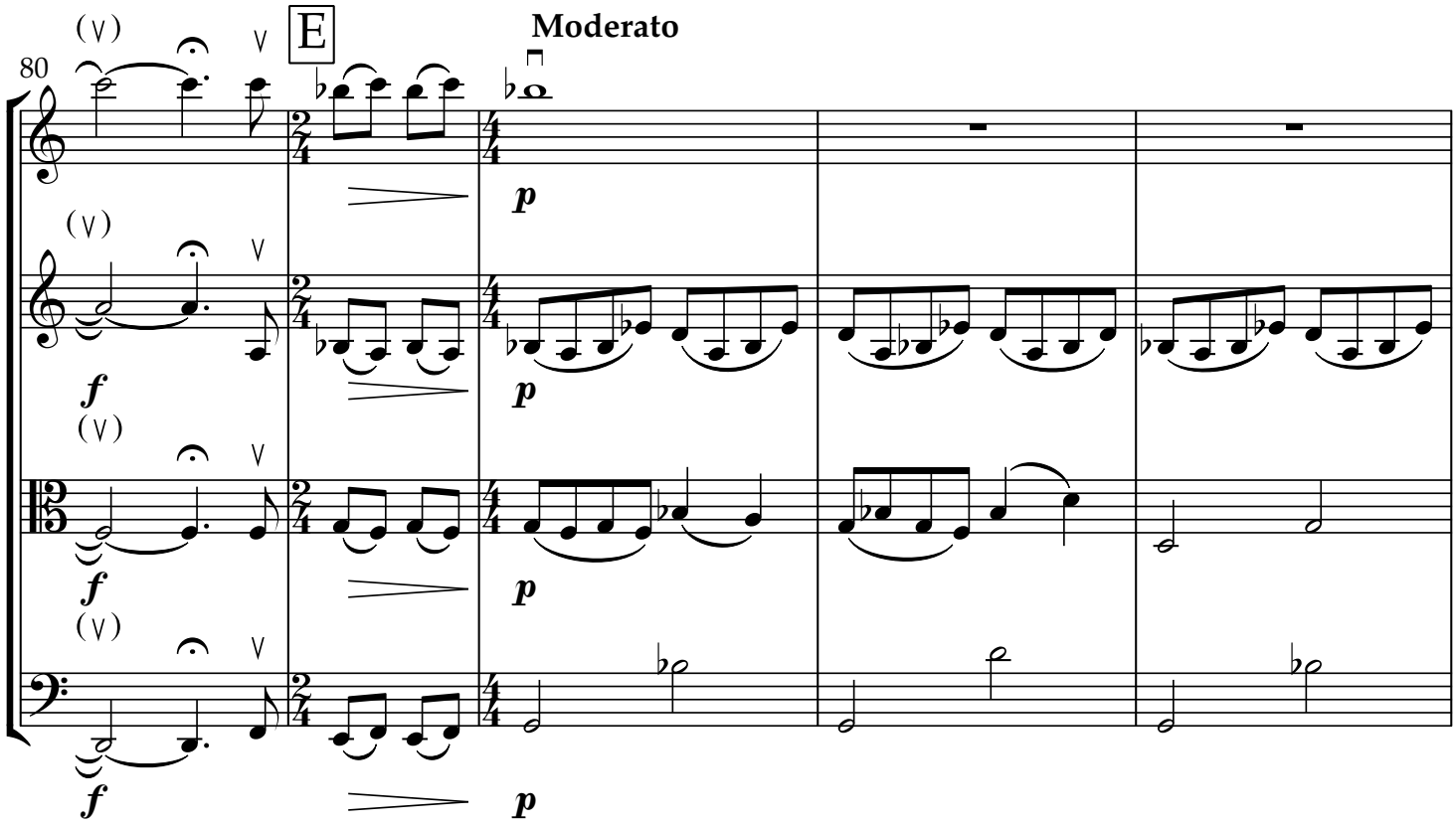
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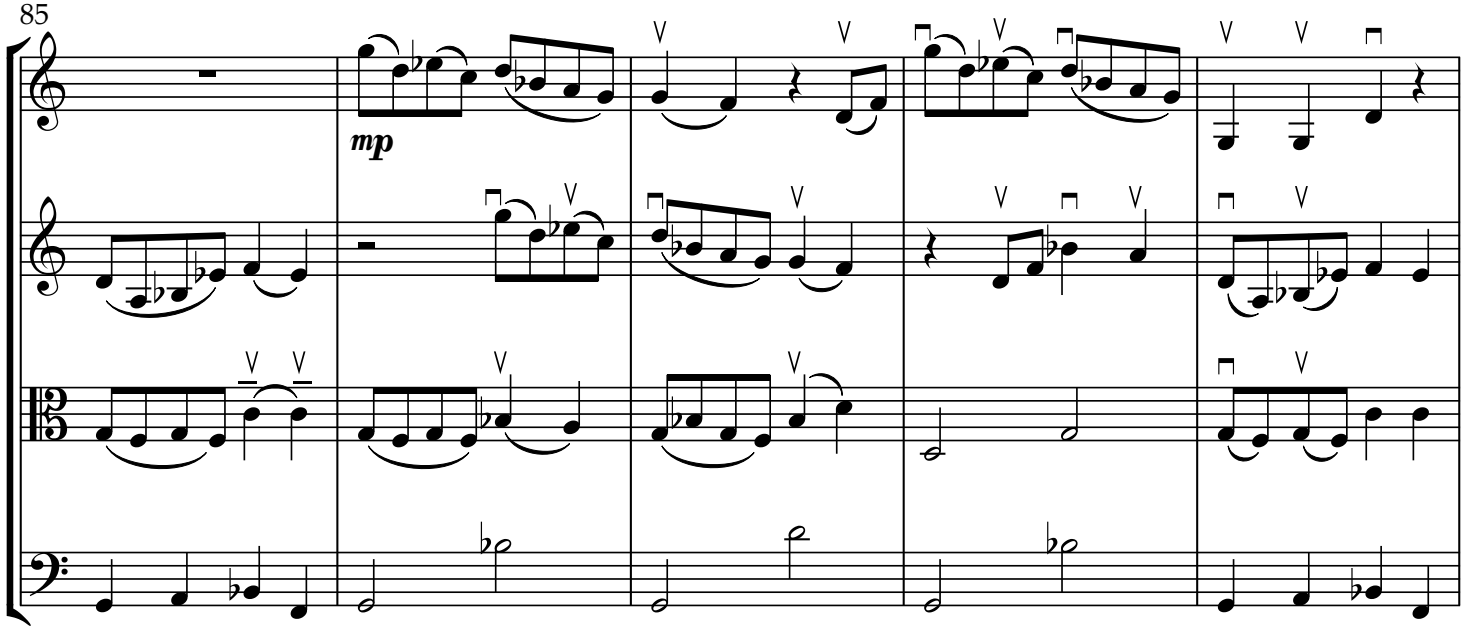
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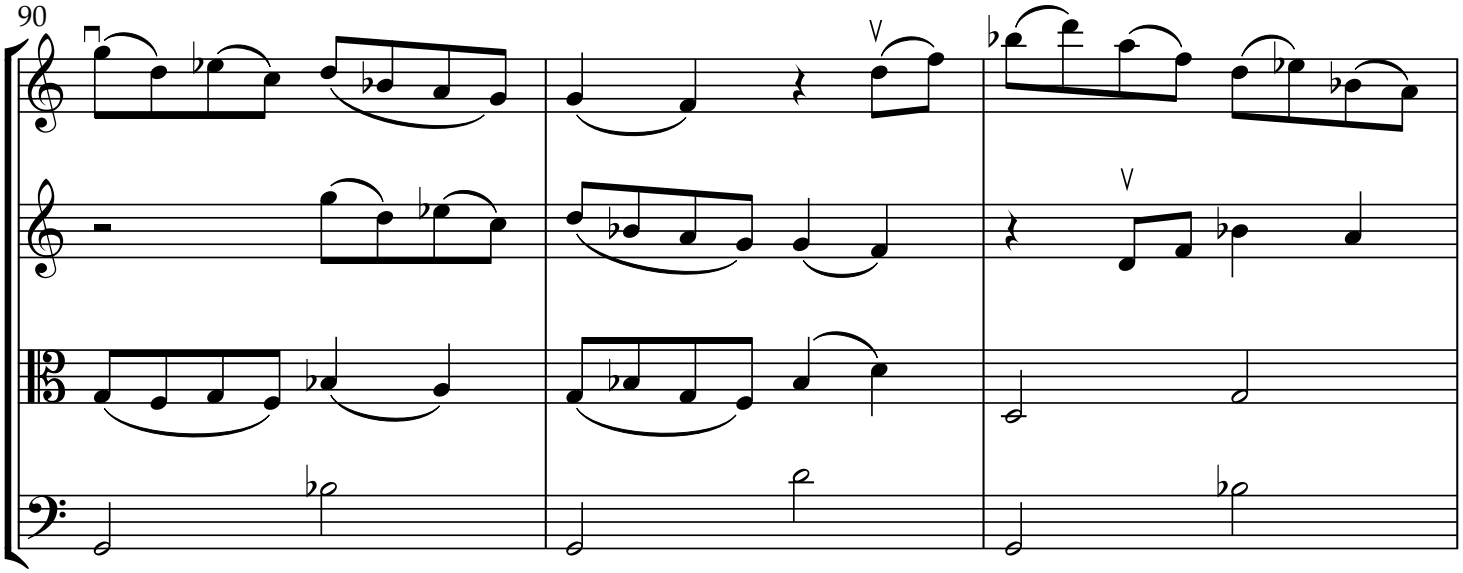

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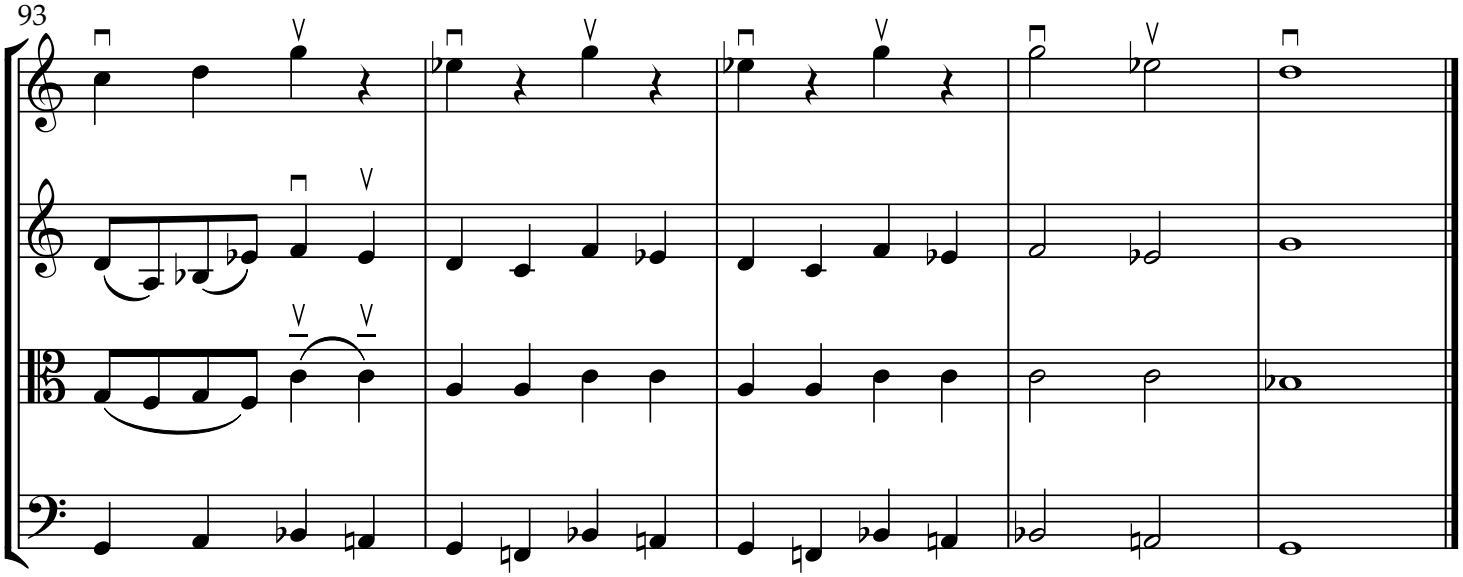


A. Classical Overture

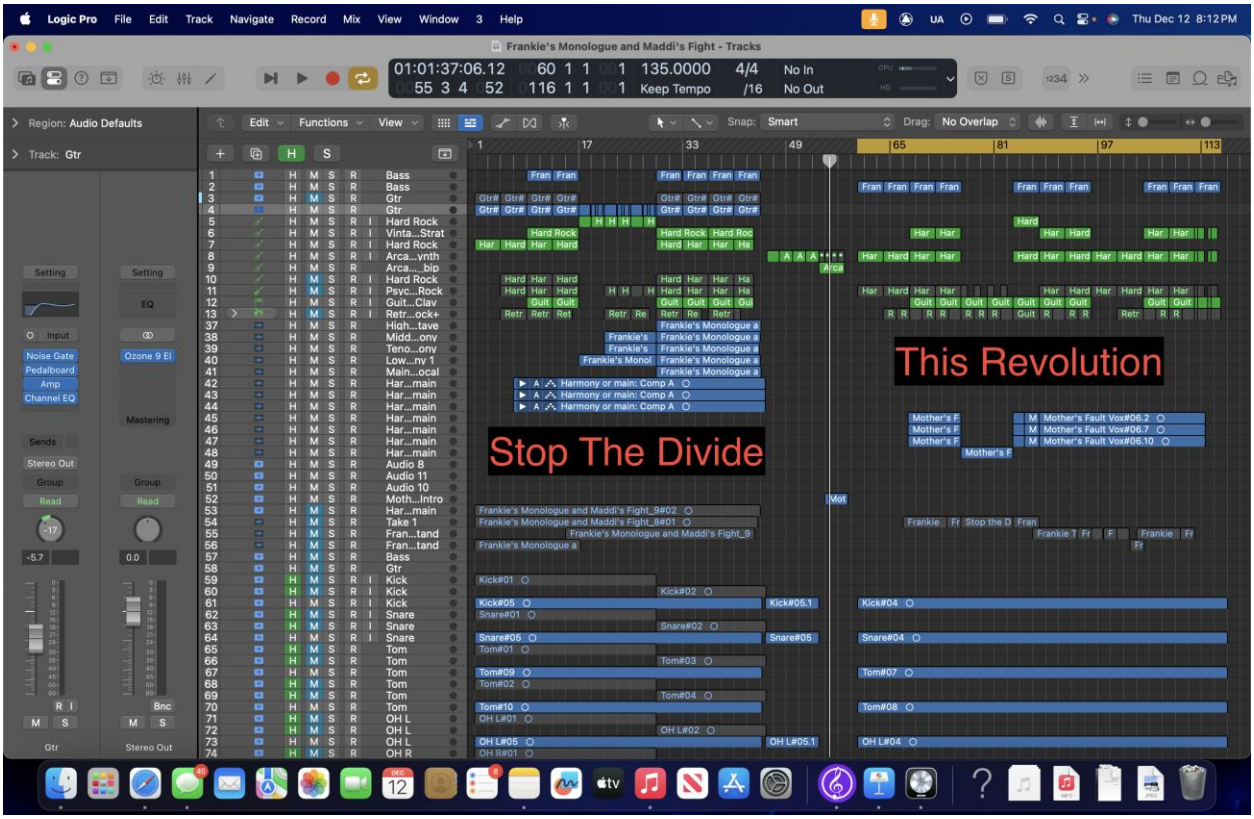
I approached the Overture with the same process I started learning in music composition lessons, which I started Fall 2023. First, I came up with the main melodies by experimenting at the piano and thinking about the story. Once I had each thematic leitmotif, I wrote harmony and counter melodies that other parts would play with the theme. I experimented with chords under the melodies and tried different rhythms to see how new ideas would sound. This entire process was done using the piano in my practice room and Sibelius- a Music Notation Software. In lessons, I would show Dr. Mayrose my progress and he would give his own ideas to help move the piece along. The way we work in music composition lessons is as follows: Dr. Mayrose would give me ideas or building blocks that I would then find ways to work into the music. These ideas could be as simple as using a canon (which I utilize a lot in this piece) or as complex as rewriting a passage because the notes were too close to another parts.

A canon is a technique commonly used in orchestral, choral, and other classical music. The idea of a canon is one melody being played over itself. This creates interesting harmony and can add more dense textures to your music. I utilize it throughout the Overture but especially in Frankie's theme and Maddi's Death Theme. This technique is one of the few times where the composer does not need to worry about notes in different parts overlapping in the same octave.

When writing any music, one of the most important things to think about (besides if what you're writing sounds good) is if parts are overlapping and WHY they are if you decide it's necessary. Each instrument has a range of notes that can be comfortably played. Some instruments overlap where they can be comfortably played with other instruments. Even when this happens, the goal is still to keep each part in its own independent octave. This was a big point of discussion in lessons as I worked on this piece. Once the Overture was finished and each

part was independent, it was time to start working on the other genres, and using what I wrote in the Overture as inspiration.

B. Stop The Divide/ This Revolution



(Figure 6)

"Stop the Divide" and "This Revolution" were written, recorded, and produced in the same project file. Above, a screenshot of the original file can be found. This project consists of 74 tracks, which is average for my work. One thing that you can notice right away is the lack of coherent labeling on the tracks. This is due to my quick workflow that keeps me focused on creating and adding new tracks. Tracks 1-7 and track 12 are used for the theme. Those are the guitar and bass tracks, and both songs utilize those tracks. Next are the vocal tracks for "Stop the Divide." The three tracks labeled "Harmony or Main: Comp A" are the main vocals for "Stop the Divide." Then, the 5 tracks above the main vocals are the background and harmony vocals I recorded with Lou Jaeger. After that are some unused tracks for Stop the Divide and Lily's vocals for "This Revolution." After the vocal tracks, I have the drum tracks. I recorded a total of

three takes each with Zach Schmitt for the drums and chose the best takes to use for each song. The greyed out takes seen in “Stop the Divide” represent one of the takes I ended up not using. In this program, called Logic Pro, I am able to record live and electronic sounds on my computer and manipulate those sounds using effects. In these songs, the main effect I use is distortion which is used on the guitar and rock organ sounds. This is a common technique used in rock music to get the signature loud and "crunchy" guitar sounds.

To the left, an example of how I mixed this project can be seen. On every single track, I used some kind of effect such as Equalization, Compression, or Amp Emulators. Each of these software programs, commonly called plugins in music production, are used to shape the sounds recorded into the program and make the song sound the best it can. In the case of the guitars, I used a noise gate to stop sound at a certain frequency to block out unwanted noise from the strings. Next in the processing chain, I have both a pedalboard and amp emulator. Both of these plugins combined gave me the tools I need to create the guitar sound I was looking for. The amp emulator emulates real amps made by well-known companies so that musicians like me can use those sounds. The pedalboard is another emulator that has examples of pedal effects commonly used on electric guitars. The pedal I’m using is an emulation of a very common distortion pedal that gives the guitar a rock guitar sound. Next, I will breakdown the project file for “Guess Who’s Back” and “Mother’s Advice.”

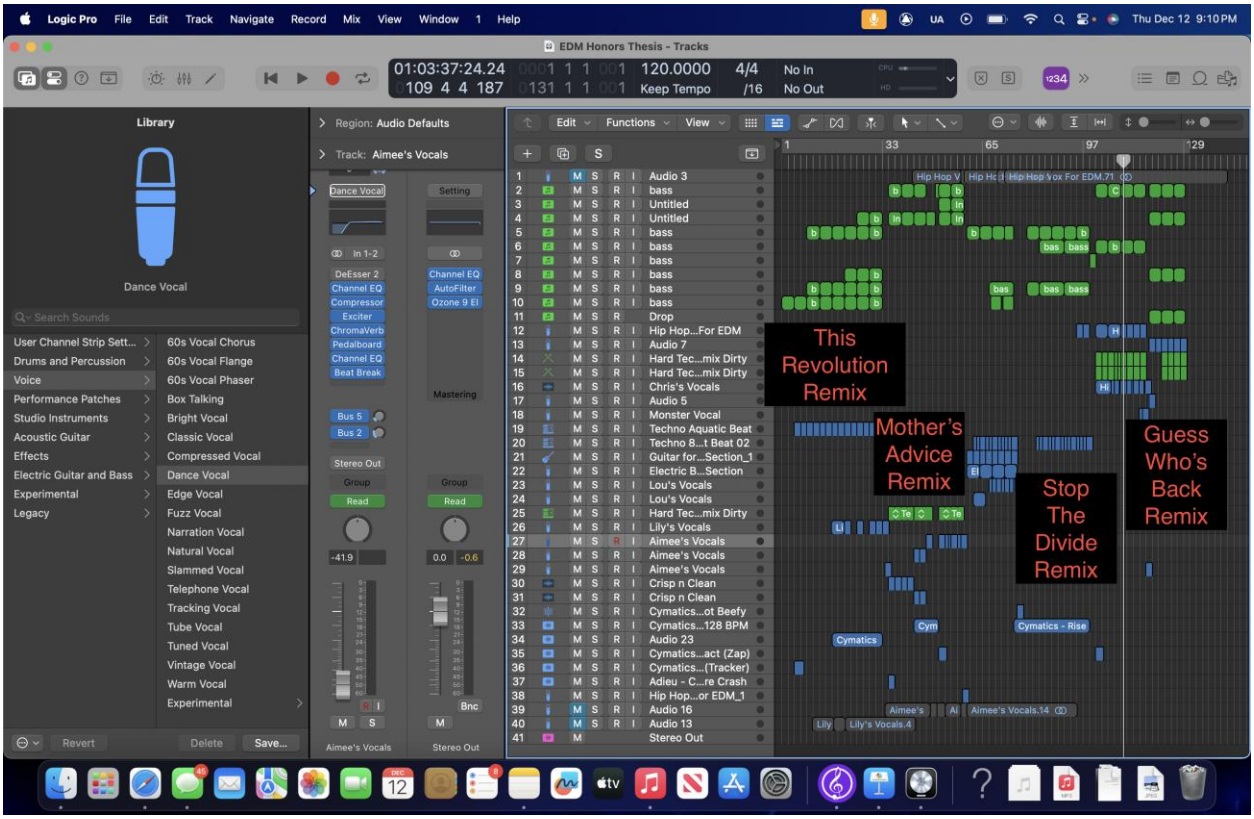
C. “Guess Who’s Back”/ “Mother’s Advice”

(Figure 7)

For “Guess Who’s Back” and “Mother’s Advice,” I used a very similar process as discussed above to write, produce, and record these pieces. The biggest difference between this genre and the previous one is the lack of real instruments. It is very common in hip hop and pop music production to use prerecorded sounds, commonly called samples, to make your music. Each small individual block that looks “chopped” is a strategically placed percussion sound to create a hip hop beat. The themes for both songs included in this project appear in the basslines (Labeled either Liverpool or 808 Bass), and also in some more melodic instruments like the vibraphone in Guess Who’s Back and the organ in Mother’s Advice.

The mixing chain seen to the left of the image is one of the vocal mixing chains. Mixing voice is a longer process of adding in plugins to create the perfect sound. The specific track seen is used as a backing vocal to give a “low voice” effect. This effect is achieved through the specific plugins distortion and vocal transformer. Distortion, which I used in a pedal form for Stop the Divide and This Revolution, does the same thing it would to a guitar but to the voice. This effect is something I experimented with after listening to some of my favorite producers and DJs do similar things. The plugin vocal transformer moves the voice up or down by octaves and changes the formant which changes the timbre of the voice without changing the pitch. I use both in tandem to create a deep sounding voice to layer with the main vocal. This creates a lower octave harmony. Finally, I will show my process for making the EDM remix combining the four different songs Stop the Divide, This Revolution, Guess Who’s Back and Mother’s Advice. This is an entirely different process.

D. Dances with the Devil Mashup



This track used a very different process from what I did for the rock and hip hop sections. This section uses the least amount of channels, 41, and the reason for that is the same reason why I used a different process in creating this track. The biggest difference between this track and the others I made is that this is based almost entirely on sampling. Sampling is a common music producer technique made popular in the hip hop genre but is now used in almost every popular genre today. For this track, I took the original vocals and themes from each song and used them in different ways to create an entirely different song. This is sampling- using something that's already made to create something new. This is a big part of what I do from day to day as a music producer. I work with people around the world who send me loops of audio they created and I use that audio in my own work.

For this section, I chose one of the vocals to break down what I did, and for this genre I can discuss the mixing process and the sampling process because both go hand in hand. The main thing from each song I sampled were the vocals. I then used the vocals by chopping them and using my favorite plugin, Beat Breaker, to create new rhythms out of the original vocals. This is how I made the interesting stutter effect vocals. Along with the Beat Breaker plugin, I utilize less processing plugins because the vocals have already been mixed- I just need to shape the vocals to fit it into context of the song and "remix" them to sound cooler with the electronic dance music beat underneath. The process of writing these four songs was intensely focused on the music, so after finishing everything and listening through the entire project, I realized there were plot holes and room for confusion. So, I decided to write more songs to fill in the gaps and better tell the story.

VI. Unexpected Changes to Original Idea

After working with this project for a total of 6 months, I ended up making some changes to the final product that were needed for the storytelling aspect. I realized that the way I wrote my version of the story left plot holes and questions for listeners. I decided that the best remedy would be to write a fifth character to act as the host. I voice and play this new character, whose name is Samael. He will move the story forward. Because I am adding a new character who will have multiple songs, I decided something needed to be cut. The most logical thing to cut would be the Overture, for the main point of that section was to work with the themes and introduce each character. I could do both using Samael's songs. This change means that one of Samael's songs will have to be an introduction of all the characters. I do regret cutting the Overture, especially after all the work that went into it, but this was a necessary step to make sure the story was coherent.

I also intended to use my project to explore one of my interests of sampling other people's work. I did sample some of my own personal work within the project, like utilizing the guitar and bass from the rock section in Maddi's part in the EDM section and using the all the vocals throughout EDM section. I was also going to sample commonly used drum beats in many different genres, or use samples as references to help tell the story. The reason I ended up not sampling this way is due to the legality of sampling and releasing the work I make from it. Sharing the music I wrote is more important to me than being able to sample other artists' work.

The final track list for the concept album and which character sings each song is as follows:

1. Dancing with the Devil (Samael)
2. Stop The Divide (Maddi)
3. This Revolution (Frankie)
4. Dancing with the Devil (Reprise) [Samael]
5. Guess Who's Back (Szazarac)
6. Mother's Advice (The Devil)
7. What Comes Next? (Samael)
8. Dances With The Devil (Reprise 2) (Samael)
9. Finale (Frankie, Maddi, Szazarac, The Devil)

VII. Acknowledgements and Credits

This was the most ambitious project I've done thus far in my music journey. There are many people to thank for their contributions, and there are many people to credit who put in hard work for my project. Below are the vocalists and their parts. In order of appearance:

Lou Jaeger- Maddi
Lily Lavon- Frankie
Chris Jewson- Szazarac
Aimee Footit- The Devil

Each of these vocalists made their parts their own, and each came into the recording session with their own ideas that pushed my creativity to make something even better than I had planned. Because of their work, I wanted to give praise where it is due and give a little insight into what these studio sessions were like. Lou came in with the idea to turn himself into a full gospel choir, because his character was an angel. The result was a beautiful background vocal stack that I used for the last two repeats of his chorus. Lily wrote the original character of Frankie to be based on themselves, and they made sure their intent for the original character was clear in my version of the character. It was their idea to yell different lines in their part, which show's Frankie's raw emotion after Maddi's death. Chris, as a rapper, came in with readiness and ideas of his own for layering and creating Szazarac's army. Guess Who's Back would have been a very different song if it wasn't for Chris's input and voice. He had ideas to change the flow, the rhythm of the rap, and experimented with what I had written. This gave me options for takes to use for the final version- which made it easier to put together. And finally, Aimee came up with the melody and the harmony below the melody for the ad-libbed "bridge" in Mother's Advice on the spot. It was also her idea to scream and that, in my mind, perfectly captured the Devil.

The vocalists were, of course, not the only people I worked with on this project. I also need to give a huge thank you and acknowledgement to the UWO String Quartet and Dr. Katie Decker who helped bring the Overture to life. The members of the string quartet are listed below. Their dedication, preparation, and aim to give me the best takes was greatly appreciated.

Simon Weinandt- Violin 1
Echo Czyznik- Violin 2
Ruby Disterhaft- Viola
Colby Schaller- Cello

While the Overture did not make the cut in the final project, the quartet's work should not go unnoticed. I also want to specifically thank Dr. Decker for her help with making the score for the string quartet as easy to read as possible. She took the time to write in score markings that would help the quartet learn the piece faster and play it closer to what I was going for.

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VIII. References

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