Ricercare a 3

J. S. Bach

From the Musicial Offering

For Keyboard

Typeset by Peter Billam

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The Musical Offering

In May of 1747, after finishing the B minor Mass and the second book of the Well-Tempered Clavier, Johann Sebastian Bach travelled to Potsdam, accompanied by his son Wilhelm Friedeman, to visit his successful son Carl Philipp Emmanuel, who was personal harpsichordist to Frederick the Great of Prussia. Johann Sebastian was still a humble schoolteacher; he taught Latin and Music at St Thomas School in Leipzig.

Potsdam was a very musical court. Personal flute teacher to Frederick the Great was Johann Joachim Quantz, the finest flute player in the country, the author of the book "On Playing the Flute", and the only person allowed to find fault with the king's flute playing. Carl Philipp Emmanuel would have spent much time playing music with Quantz, and they must have sounded wonderful. Frederick himself was a fine flute player, and a composer whose works are still played by flute players today.

When Johann Sebastian arrived, the King immediately cancelled the evening's planned concert. He had an extensive collection of harpsichords, and Johann Sebastian, without being given time to change out of his travelling clothes, was ushered from room to room and asked to improvise on each one.

The King also had fifteen of the new fortepianos, which he correctly foresaw as the great new wave in music. They were loud modern inventions, where the strings were so thick that they could not even be plucked, but had to be hit with hammers. Silbermann, of Freyburg, had devised an elaborate mechanism to allow the hammer to rebound even as the key remained pressed. The fortepiano had some of the touch sensitivity of the clavichord, but was loud enough to be played in concert, even in public; however, it could not play vibrato, as the clavichord could. This was the only time that Johann Sebastian played on the new fortepiano, and every piano player since would love to know what he thought of the instrument, and how he played it. Certainly Silbermann was the organ-maker that Johann Sebastian most admired, so the new creation would have been accorded respect.

As is usual with visiting organists, Johann Sebastian was asked to improvise on a given theme. The King sat at the keyboard and played a fine Bach-like theme, rich and dramatic, and asked his guest to improvise a fugue upon it. The King admired the learned treatment of his subject, and asked Johann Sebastian to play it in four, then five, and finally six voices. Nobody knows what Johann Sebastian played in response, and I am sure that it sounded superb, but he probably failed to sustain a six-voice texture, and presumably the King pointed this out.

A six-voice fugue is an almost unheard-of technical challenge − there is none in the Well-Tempered Clavier, for example − and the King's theme, which does not fit in stretto with itself, is particularly unfavourable to treatment in many voices. On the other hand, because of its great eloquence, it is a wonderful subject for a three-voice fugue, and presumably Johann Sebastian pointed this out.

Arnold Schoenberg even suggested that the royal theme had been devised by Carl Philipp Emmanuel as a practical joke, because he knew a six-voice treatment would be impossible. I do think it was written by Carl Philipp Emmanuel, because it shows a superb understanding of Johann Sebastian's style, and is simply too good for the King to have invented. However, I do not think Carl Philipp Emmanuel, at the peak of a brilliant career, and well aware of his father's extraordinary powers, would have felt any need to ridicule him.

The King also desired to hear Johann Sebastian perform on the organ, so the next day he was taken round all the organs in Potsdam. The following day he returned to Leipzig.

The voyage to Potsdam is a defining event in the western musical tradition, because it is the only time Johann Sebastian was accorded public honour, the only time he played the fortepiano, and because it brings him, and all his contrapuntal powers, into contact with the best of the next generation, who were to develop the style which became that of Haydn and Mozart.

Six months later, Johann Sebastian sent to Potsdam a *Musical Offering* which he had had engraved at his own expense. The opening piece is a three voice fugue (*Ricercare a 3*) on the King's theme; this I see as Johann saying to Frederick "When I mentioned that the best setting for this theme was in three voices, this is what I had in mind ..." . The centrepiece is a six voice fugue (*Ricercare a 6*) on the King's theme; this I see as Johann saying to Carl Philipp "You see ? My art is adequate to your test ..." . The finale is a trio sonata, for flute, violin and continuo, largely based on the King's theme, a delight to play, perhaps the greatest and certainly the grandest trio sonata ever written. Between these three pieces are eight smaller ones, all on the King's theme. They include a number of puzzle canons, and the *Fuga Canonica in Epidiapente* for flute and keyboard.

Then Johann Sebastian Bach turned his attention to the *Art of Fugue*.

Peter Billam

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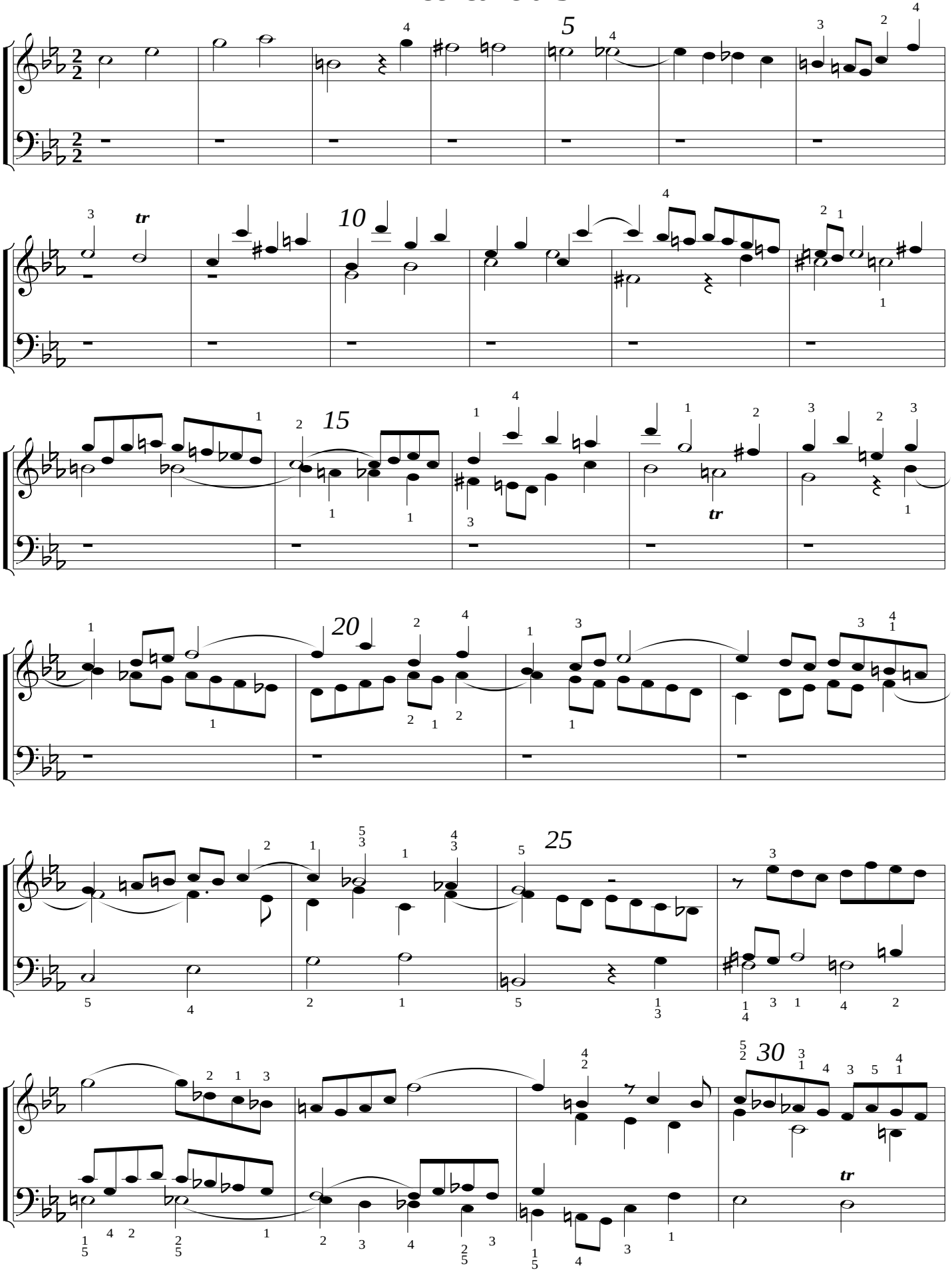
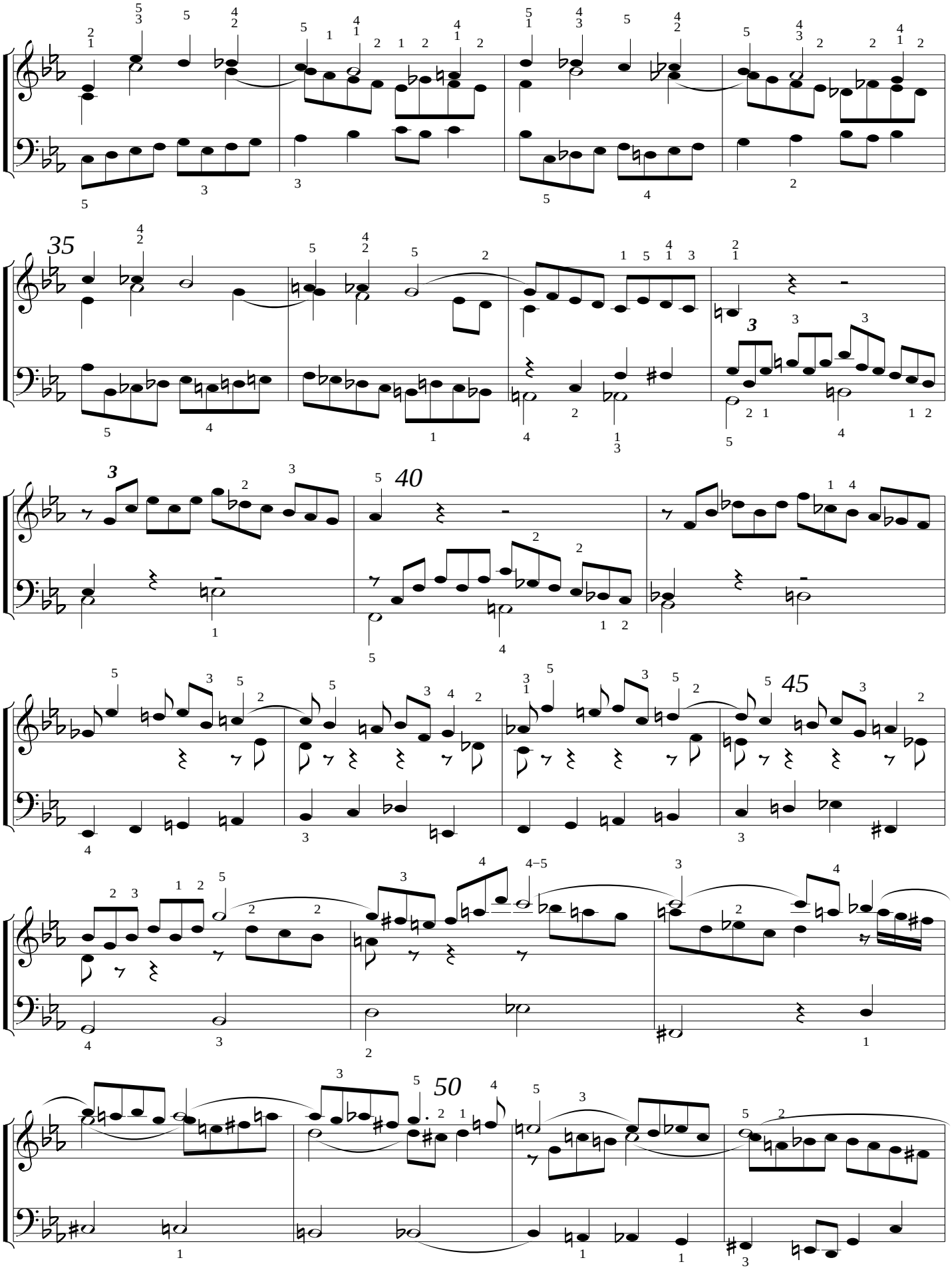
Ricercare a 3


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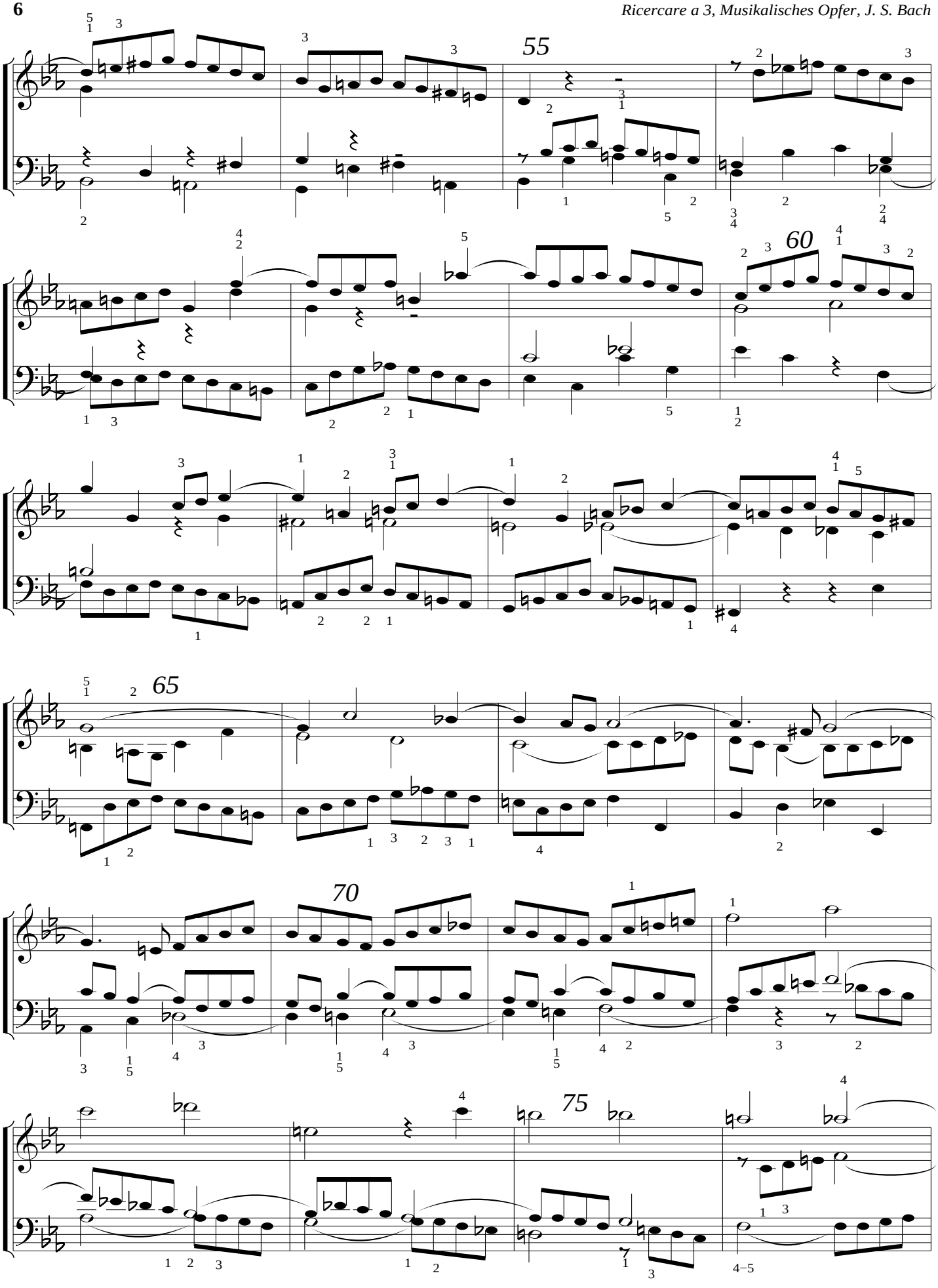
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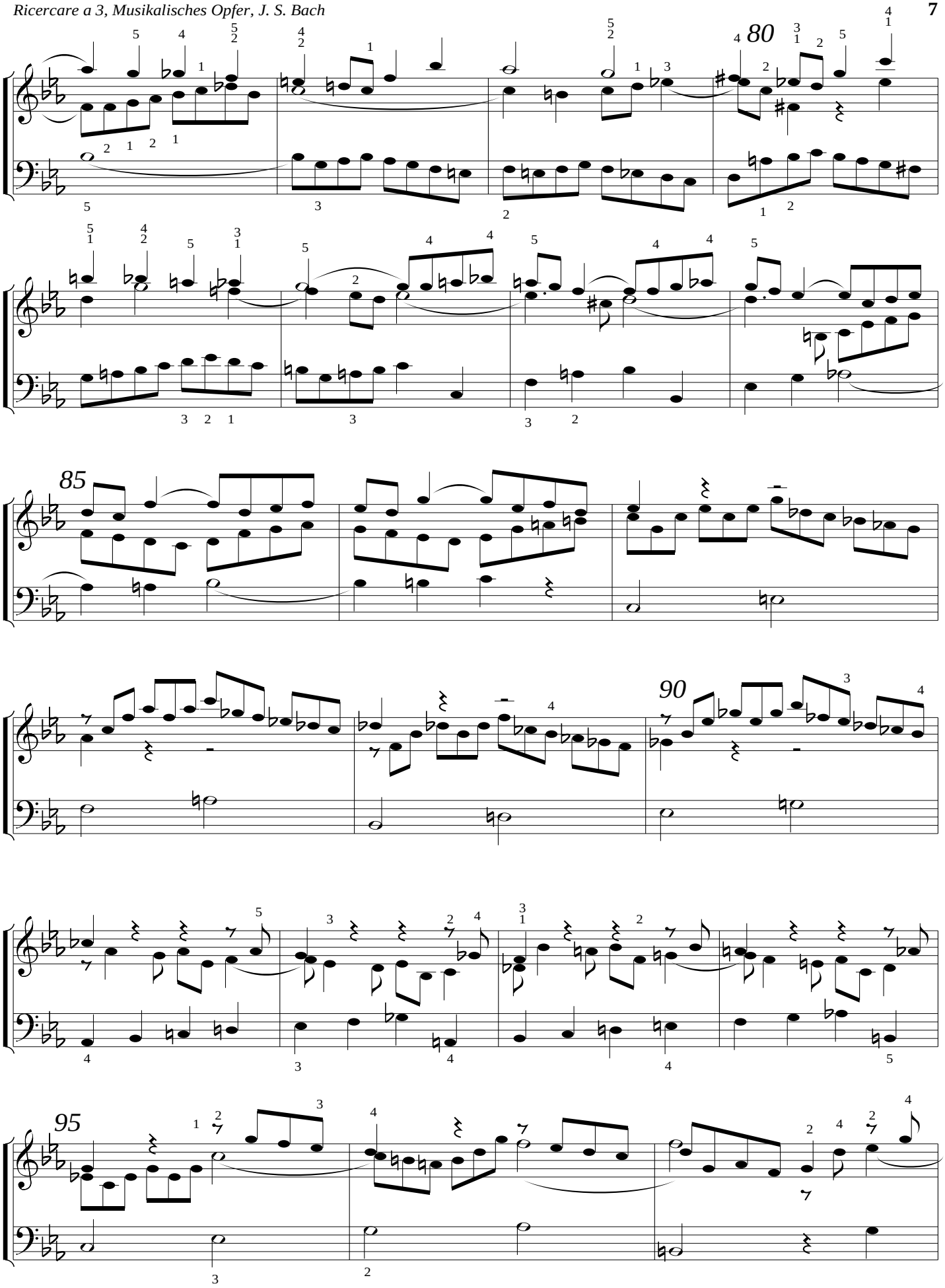
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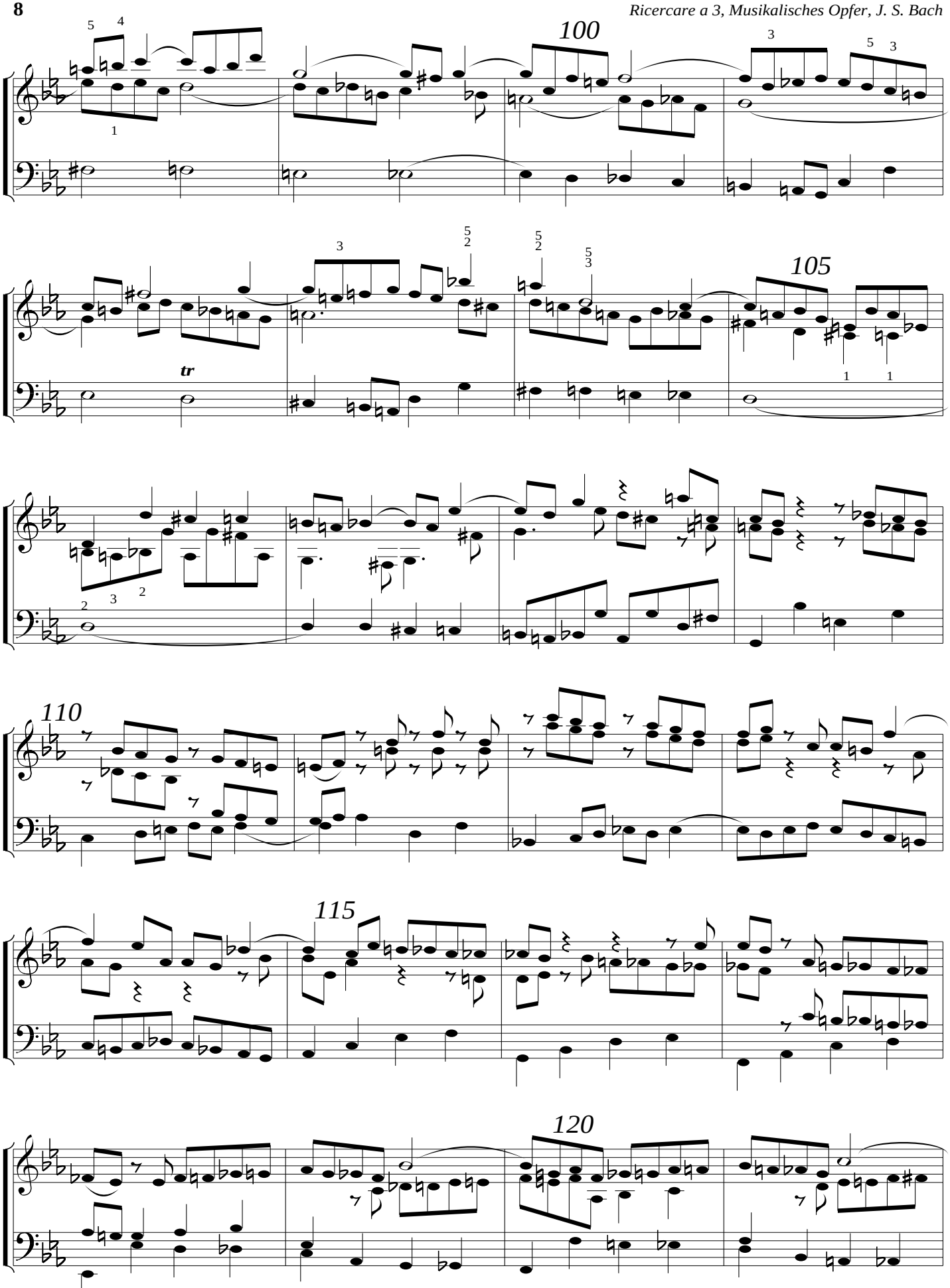
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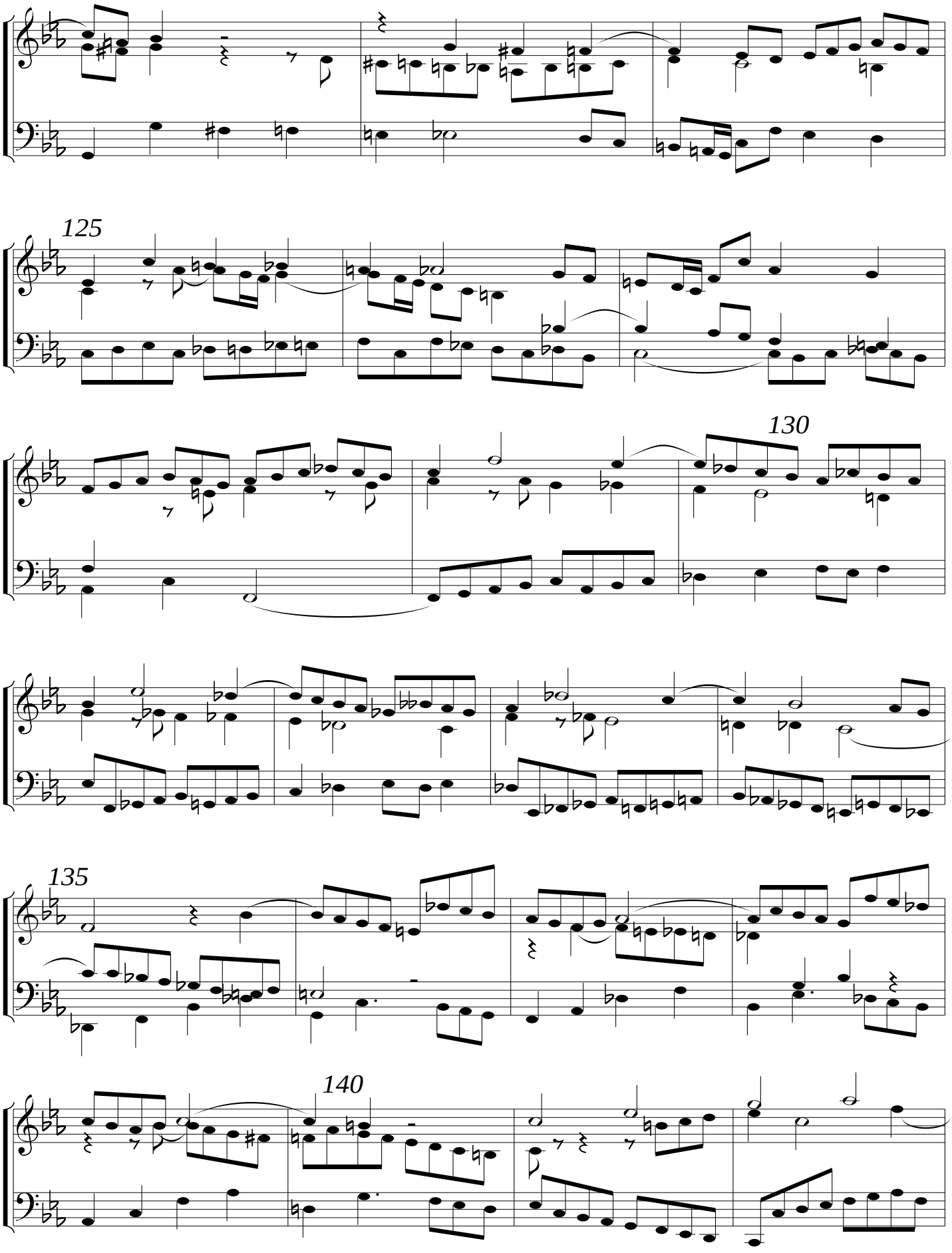
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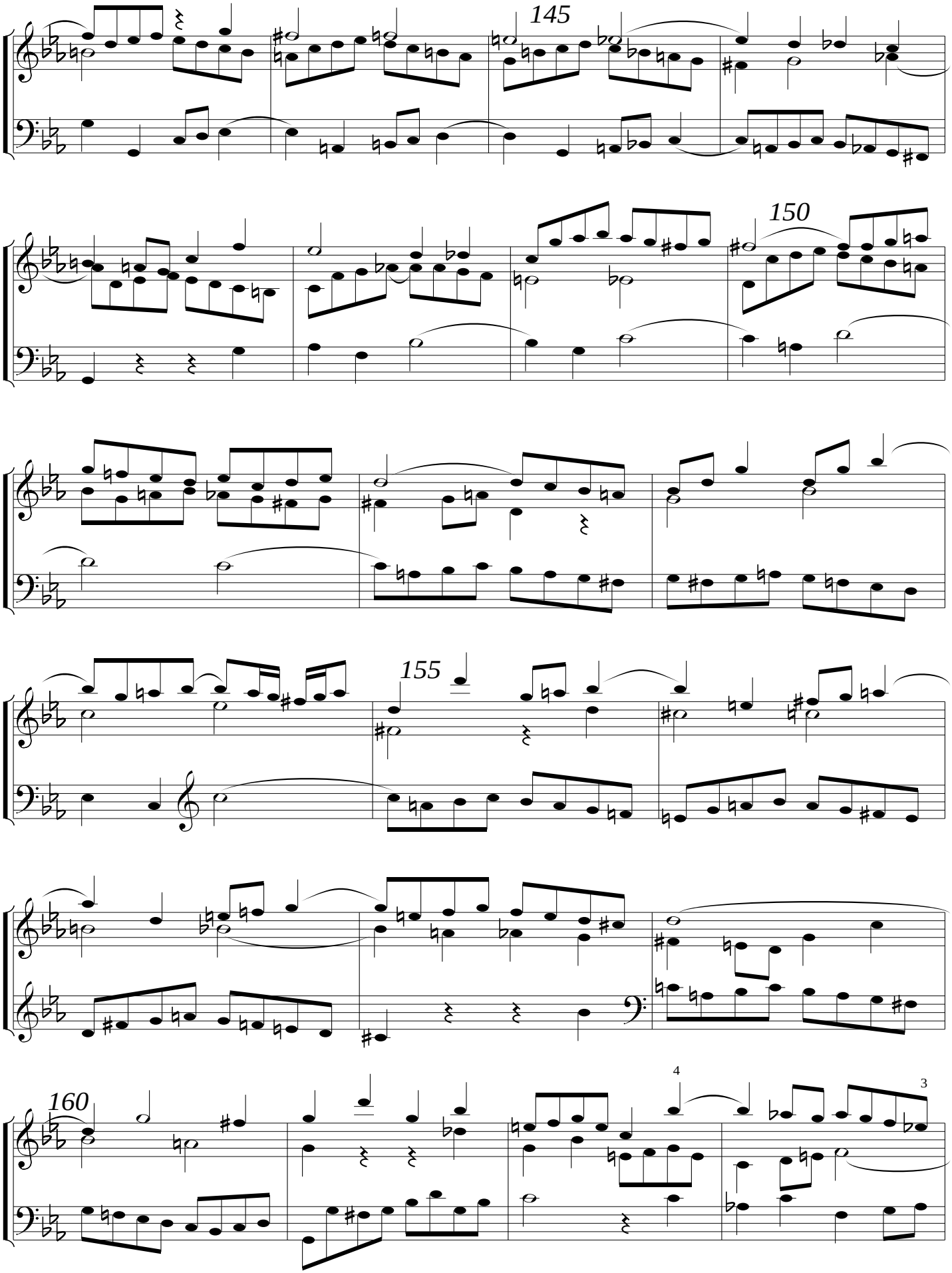
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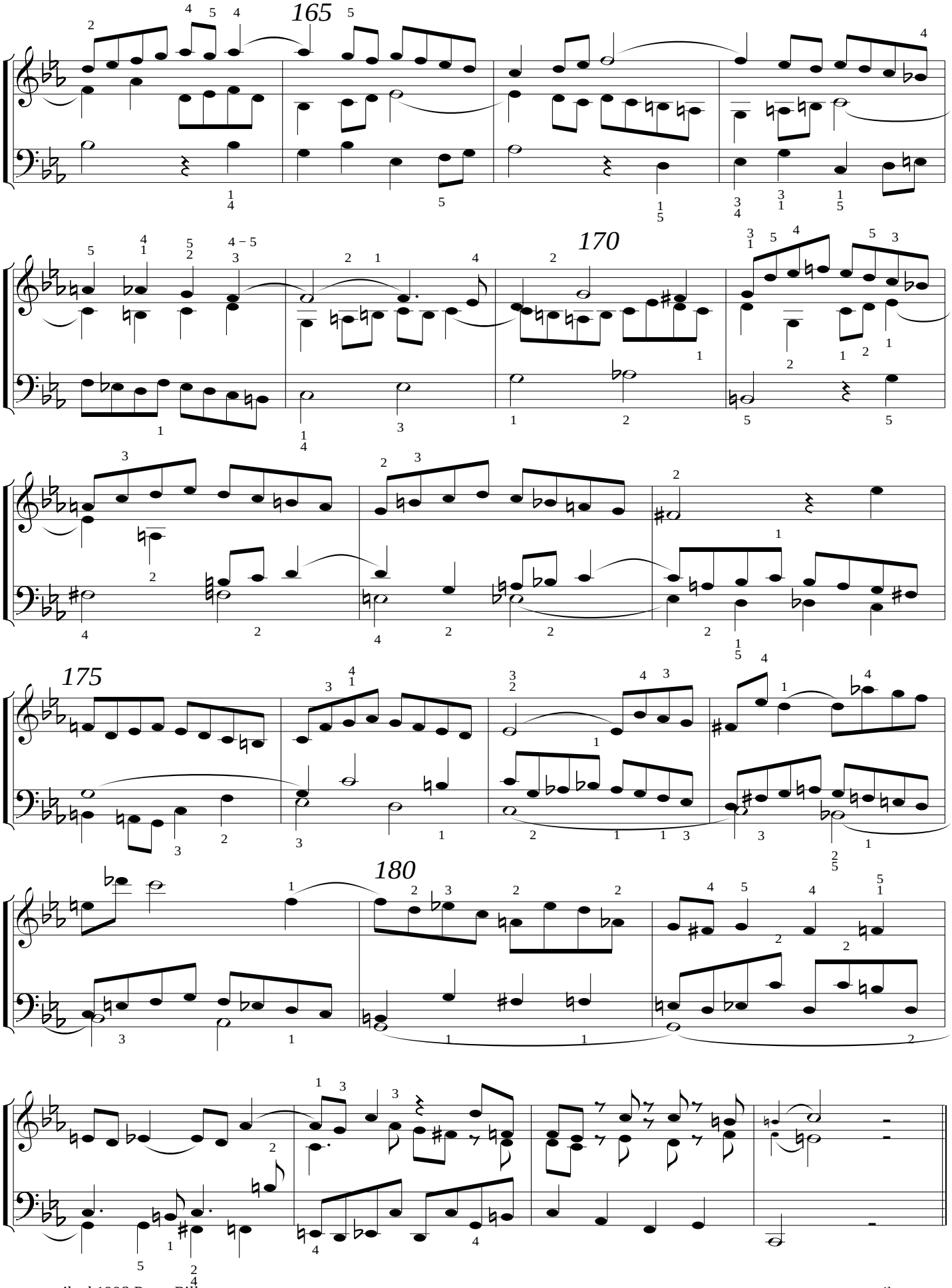
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Peter Billam was born in London in 1948, studied piano, and lived in Switzerland from 1973 to 1983, where he studied composition, classical guitar, flute and voice, worked as Musical Director of the *Théâtre Populaire Romand*, and as recording engineer, record producer and computer programmer. He moved to Tasmania in 1983, and lectured in composition at the Conservatorium. He founded **www.pjb.com.au**, becoming the first composer to sell scores on-line, taking scores from Composer to Performer in one immediate step. *Www.pjb.com.au* offers a new approach to music publishing. These pieces are **written to be read, made to be played !**

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Arrangements include: By J. S. Bach: *Trio BWV 655*, piano and flute; *Vor deinen Thron BWV 668*, piano; *Fugue in F minor BWV 689*, SATB recorders; *Four Duets BWV 802-5*, keyboard; *Six Preludes and Fugues* from Book I, keyboard; *Flute Sonata BWV 1031* transposed into G major for alto recorder and keyboard; *Flute Sonata BWV 1032* completed by Peter Billam for flute and keyboard, also in C major for alto recorder, and in G major for descant; *Ricercare a 3, from the Musikalisches Opfer* for keyboard; *Ricercare a 6*, for sSATBG recorders, or strings, or two keyboards; and *Fuga Canonica in Epidiapente*; from the *Art of Fugue*: *Contrapuncti 1*, *4* and *9* for keyboard, and *Contrapunctus 14* as completed by D. F. Tovey, for keyboard, or for SATB recorders, or for strings; *Passacaglia and Fugue in c* for piano four hands; *Chorales with Descant* for melody instrument and piano; *Cello Suites I*, *II* and *III* for flute or alto recorder, *Forty Chorales* for piano, *Der Geist hilft* for SATB-SATB recorders. By Brahms: *Fugue in Ab minor for organ*, for SATB recorders and gamba, in A minor; *Choralvorspiele for organ* plus settings by Isaac, Bach, Praetorius, recorders. *John Carr, Divisions on an Italian Ground*, flute or recorder and guitar. Franz Liszt, *Late piano pieces*, G.F. Händel: *Concerto Grosso in A minor* op 6 no 4, harpsichord and recorders; *Recorder Sonata in Bb* no 5, in G for tenor recorder and keyboard. Claudio Monteverdi, *Ecco Mormorar l'Onde*, SSATB recorders. Arnold Schoenberg: *Verklärte Nacht* for piano. Franz Schubert: *Four Songs*, voice and guitar; *Dances*, recorders and guitar, *Dances*, piano 4 hands. Scriabin, *Two Preludes op.67; Five Preludes op.74*, piano. Telemann, *Twelve Flute Fantasias*, recorder. Wilbye, *Draw on sweet Night*, SSATTB recorders, and for flute choir. *Twelve Italian Songs*, voice and guitar; *Seven English Songs*, voice and guitar; *Fourteen Folk Dance Tunes*, recorder and guitar; *Bushband Dances*, violin, accordeon and banjo; *Easy Classical Pieces*, Bb trumpet and piano; *Famous Beginnings*, for piano.

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