Analysis of Bach’s Prelude BWV 1007

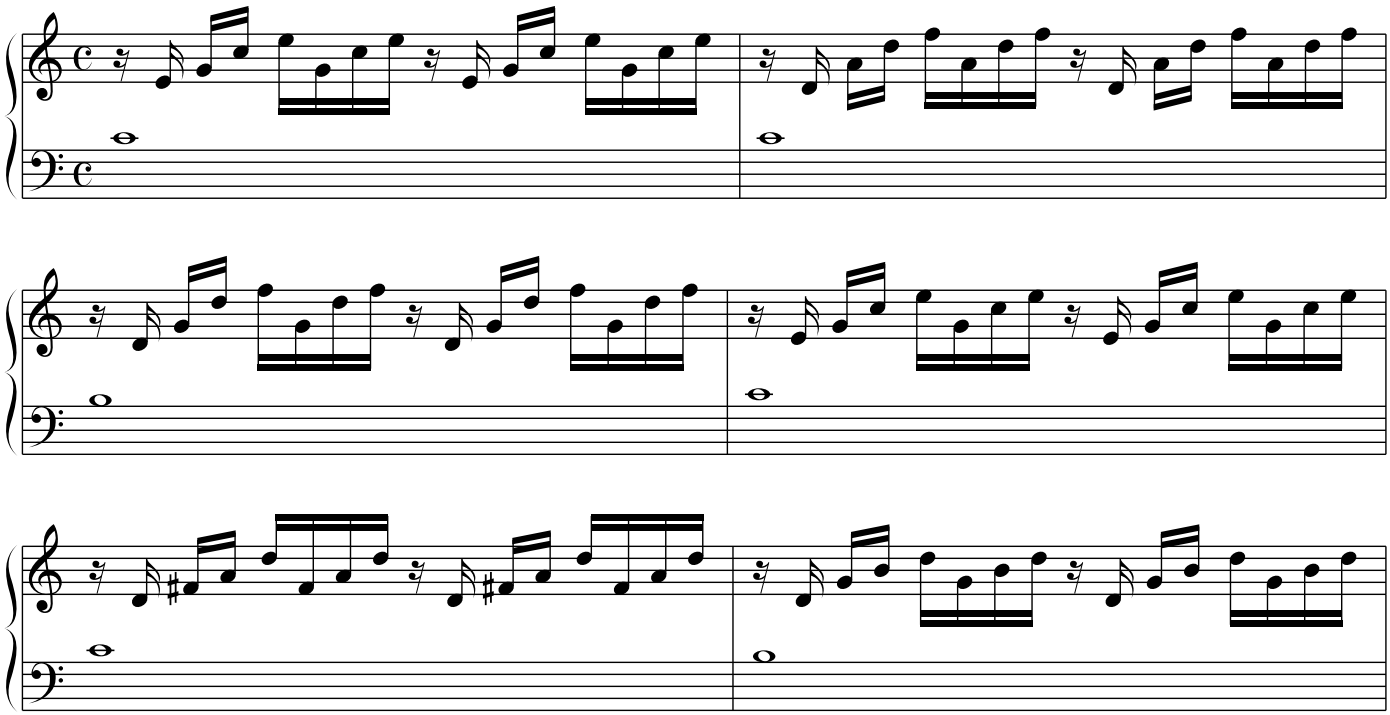
1. Introduction
The question if I understand a composition is for me the same question as ´Can I recompose the composition´. This text is more or less a result of a method of simulated composition. Simulated composition is a very useful analytical tool, for it uncovers principles of the creative process that really matter; principles which get lost in a purely disintegrated analysis (as the ineffective, however popular roman numeral analysis).

What I want is insight in Bach’s structural principles, in the ´forma formans´, in the self−forming form. One option is to focus on melody instead of harmony. So my question is: can I determine a structural melody that determines form? A melody of main tones that one can use to compose a new piece, in this case Bach’s Prelude of BWV 1007? Yes, it´s possible although a discussion on how to select main tones can not be avoided.

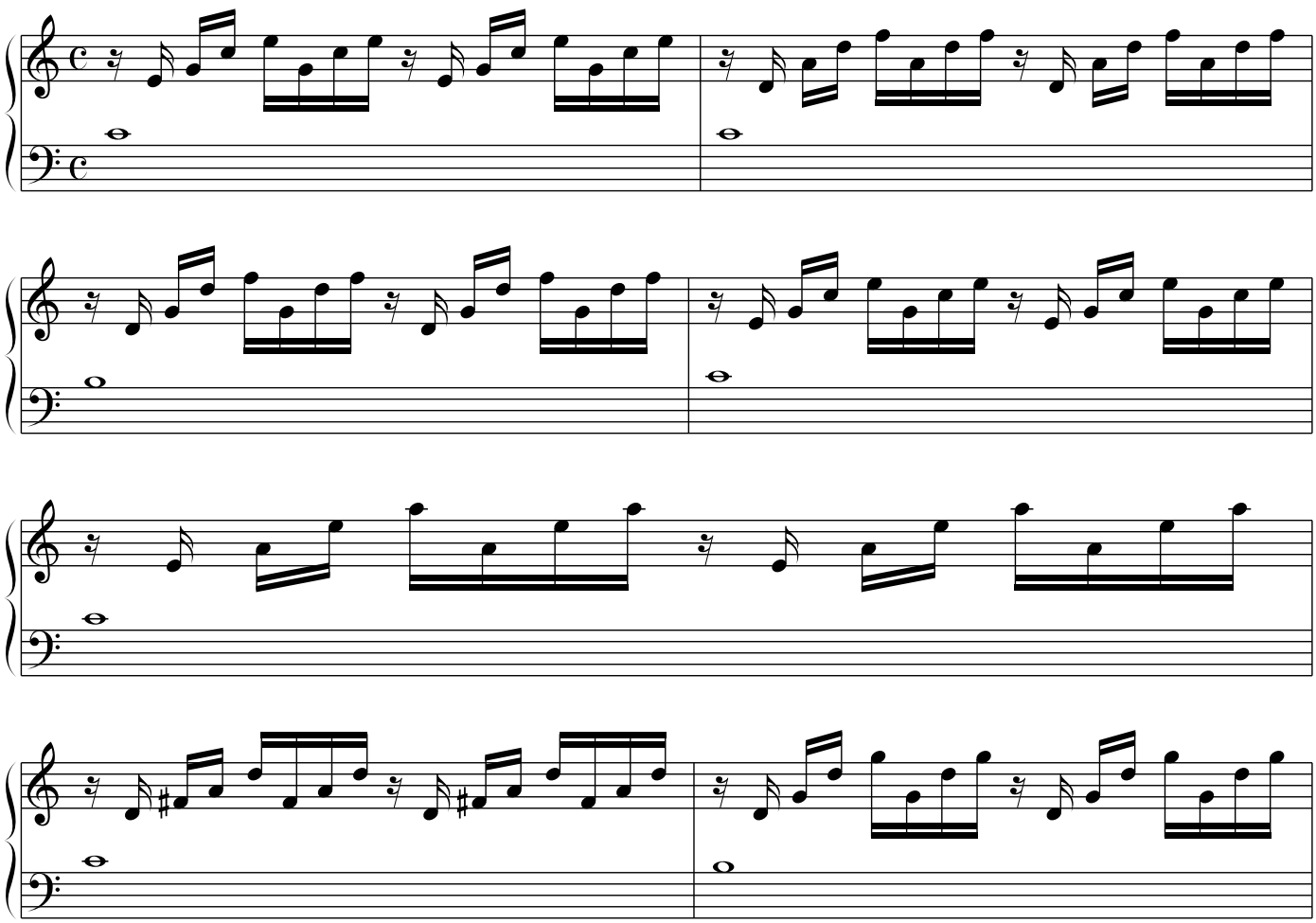
However, before we start to discuss, consider the following:

− remember that Bach´s contemporary, the music theoretician Mattheson considered melody as more important than harmony
− many of Bach´s melodies can be seen as diminutions of chorale melodies; the prelude below has connections with e.g. ´Das walt mein Gott´ from Musicalisches Gesangbuch (1736) with Bach as supervisor
− that basso continuo players know how to harmonize and elaborate melodic formulas (e.g. the discant and tenor clausula)

2. First question: determining main tones
Study the following early version of Bach’s BWV 846 and determine the main tones of the upper voice.
Probably, you say: E−F−F−E−D−D, i.e. an embellished form of E−D



Study the following, latest version of Bach’s BWV 846 and determine the main tones of the upper voice.
Probably, you say: E−F−F−E−A−D−G

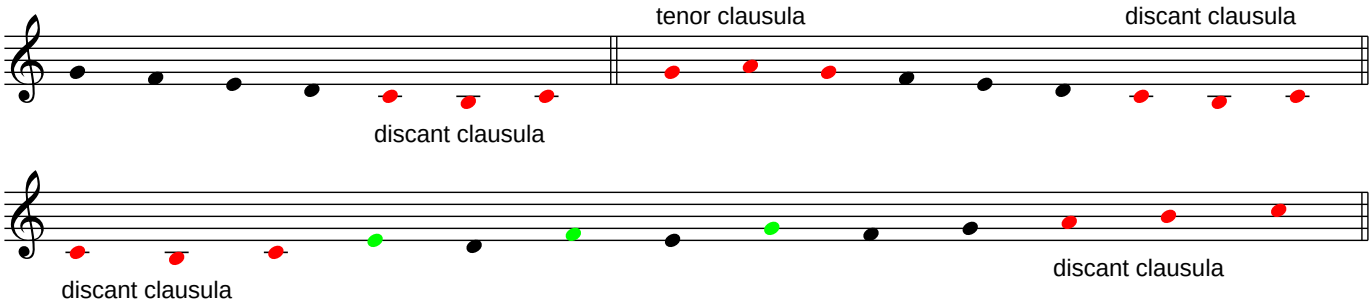


However, in fact your E−F−F−E−A−D−G can also be seen as an embellished E−D: the high tones A and G are simply ornaments of the tones E and D. I'll analyze Bach's Prelude is this way: looking at tones that reduce the reality into an easy to grasp melodic structure.

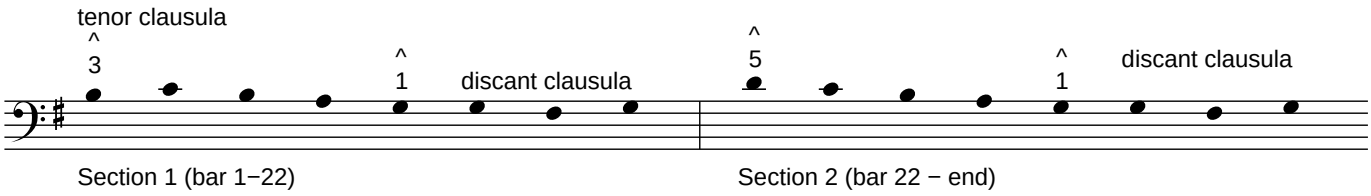
3. Second question: what is an easy to grasp melodic structure?
Analyzing the 18th century basso continuo methods, we can at least discern two basic structures:

− melodic cadence (as the clausula for discant and tenor)
− line (tirata), often descending

With these structures, anyone can compose a melody as a combination of line and clausula. Some examples, that show some expansiontechniques.

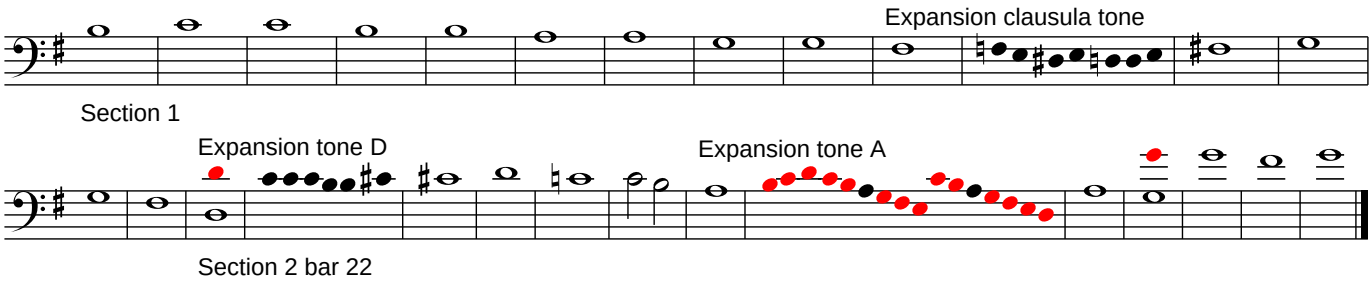


4. Third question: what is Bach's hidden melody?
Bach's Prelude for cello (BWV 1007) consists of two sections 1 (bar 1−22) and 2 (bar 22−end), that use nearly identical melodic structures, that provides us two variants of some sort of a hidden melody in a descending, stepwise movement.



Only the way they are embellished and expanded, differ! Essential in Bach´s diminutions is the use of register change to create pitch variety, that in turn leads to melodic freedom!

Study the expansion techniques of both sections as shown below.



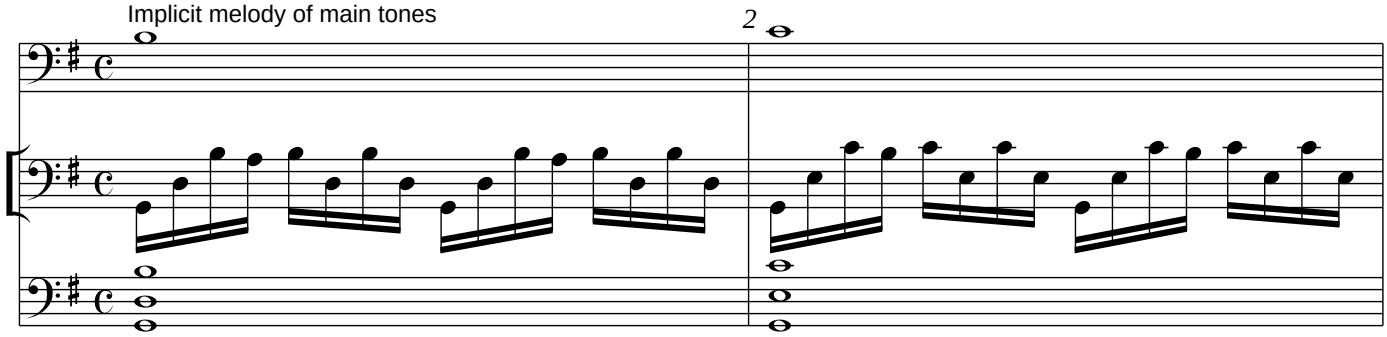
5. Fourth question: what harmonies does Bach use?
Because harmony is not the subject of this text, I give now only a few remarks:

− the succession of harmonies has to be understood from lines
− voice leading is the most important factor in understanding the succession of harmonies
− the triad (= a tone and a fifth and a third) is point of departure for 'harmonizing' the 'hidden' melody and
− to make harmony more colourful, other interval combinations can be used. Examples: a tone and a sixth and a third; or a tone with a fifth, a sixth and a third; or adding a seventh to the triad results in a seventh chord (popular are the dominant and the diminished seventh).

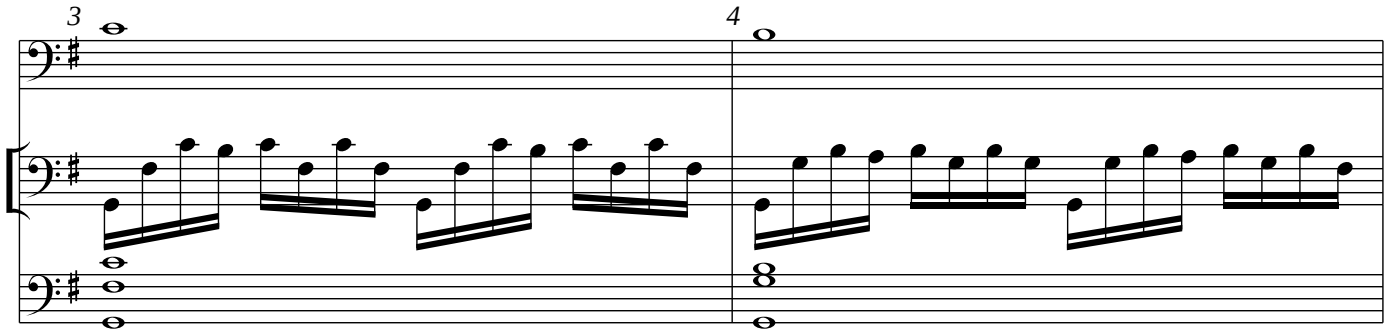
Sometimes, one of the niceties of baroque harmony, harmonies are resolved improperly by applying the so called ellipsis: the omission of an expected resolution. This incorrect use is called catachresis, comparable with a saying like 'Can't you hear that? Are you blind?'

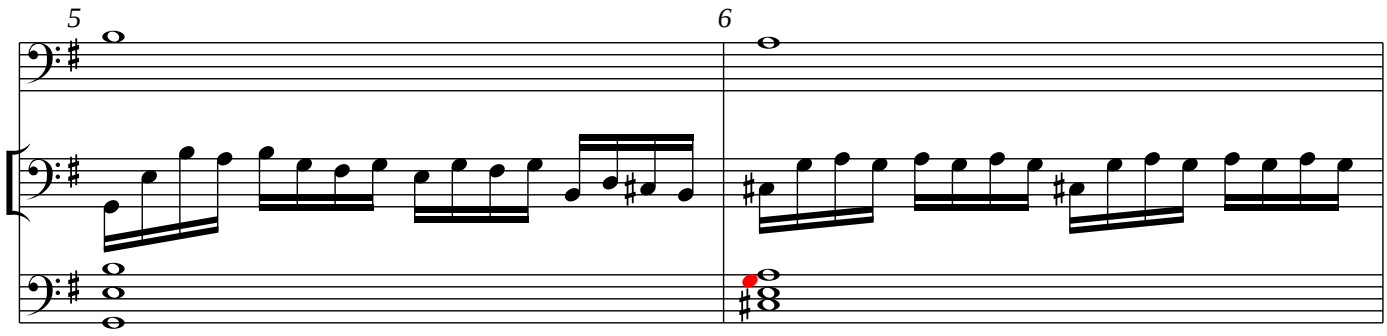
Study the following score carefully.

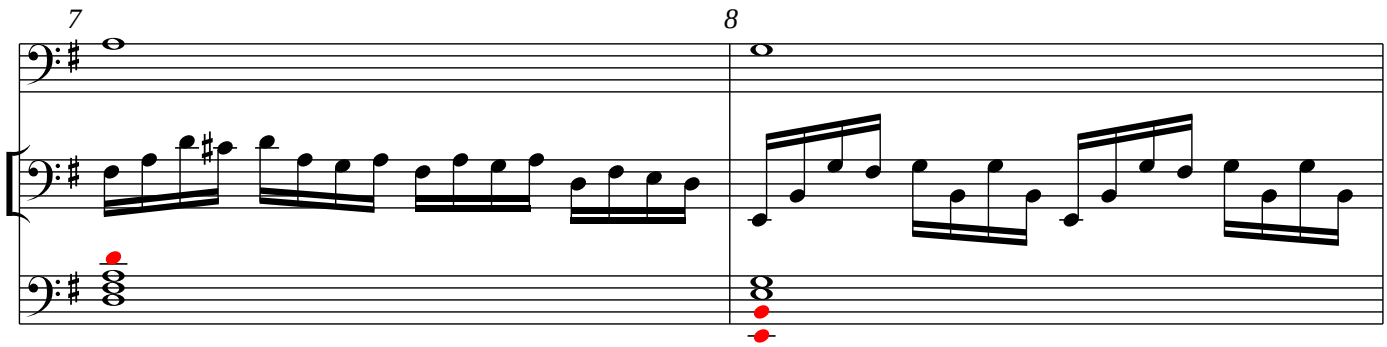
Implicit melody of main tones

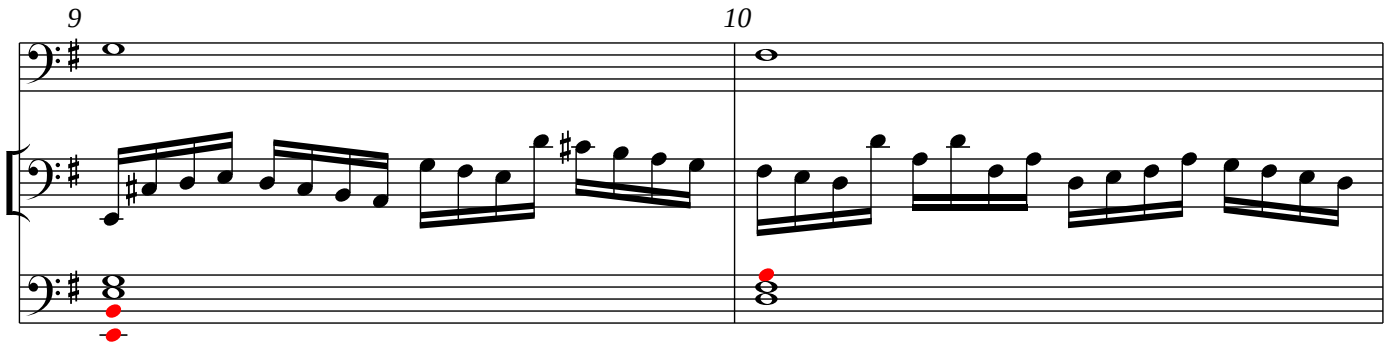


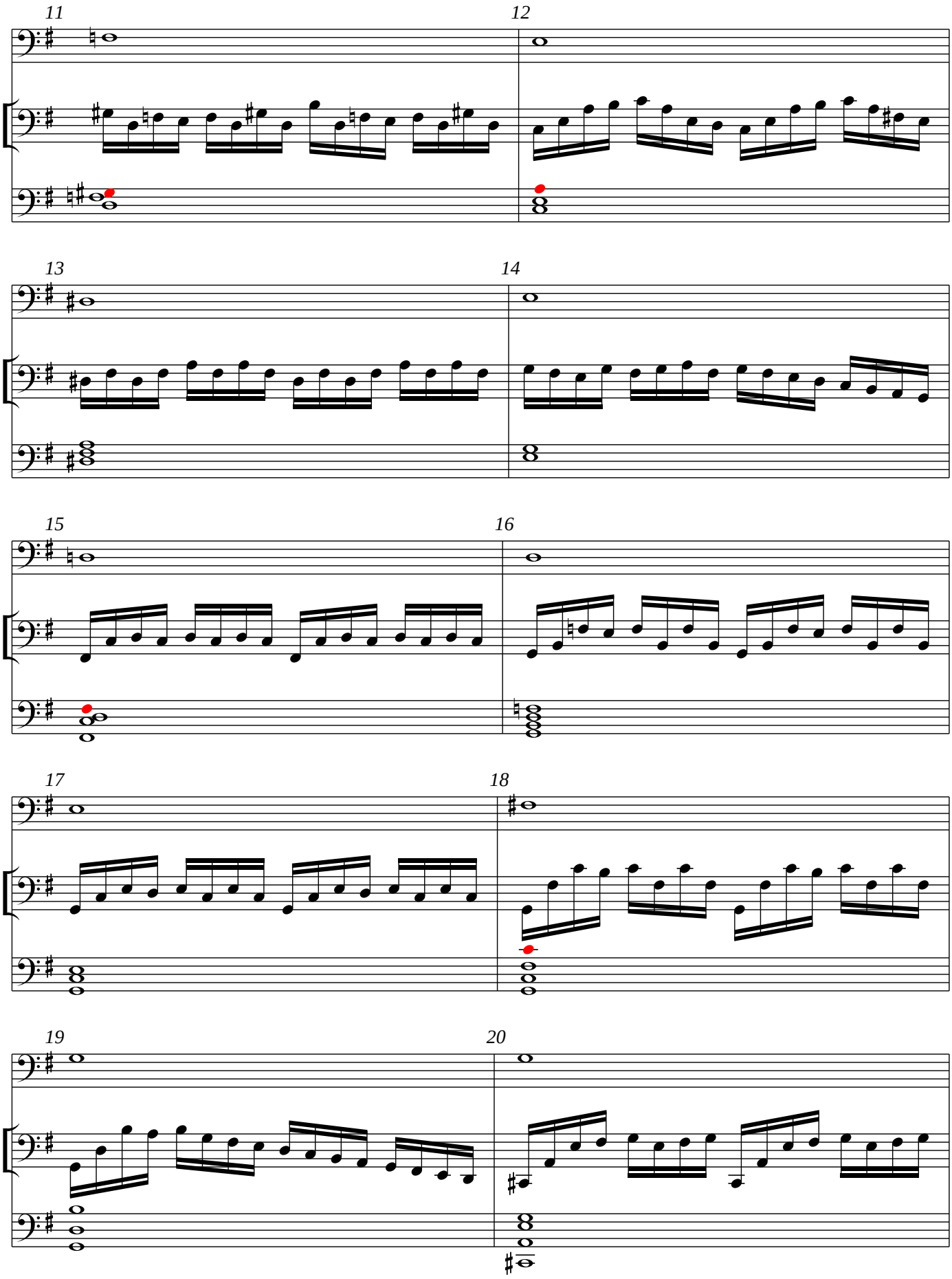
Implicit 'chords' − note voice exchange







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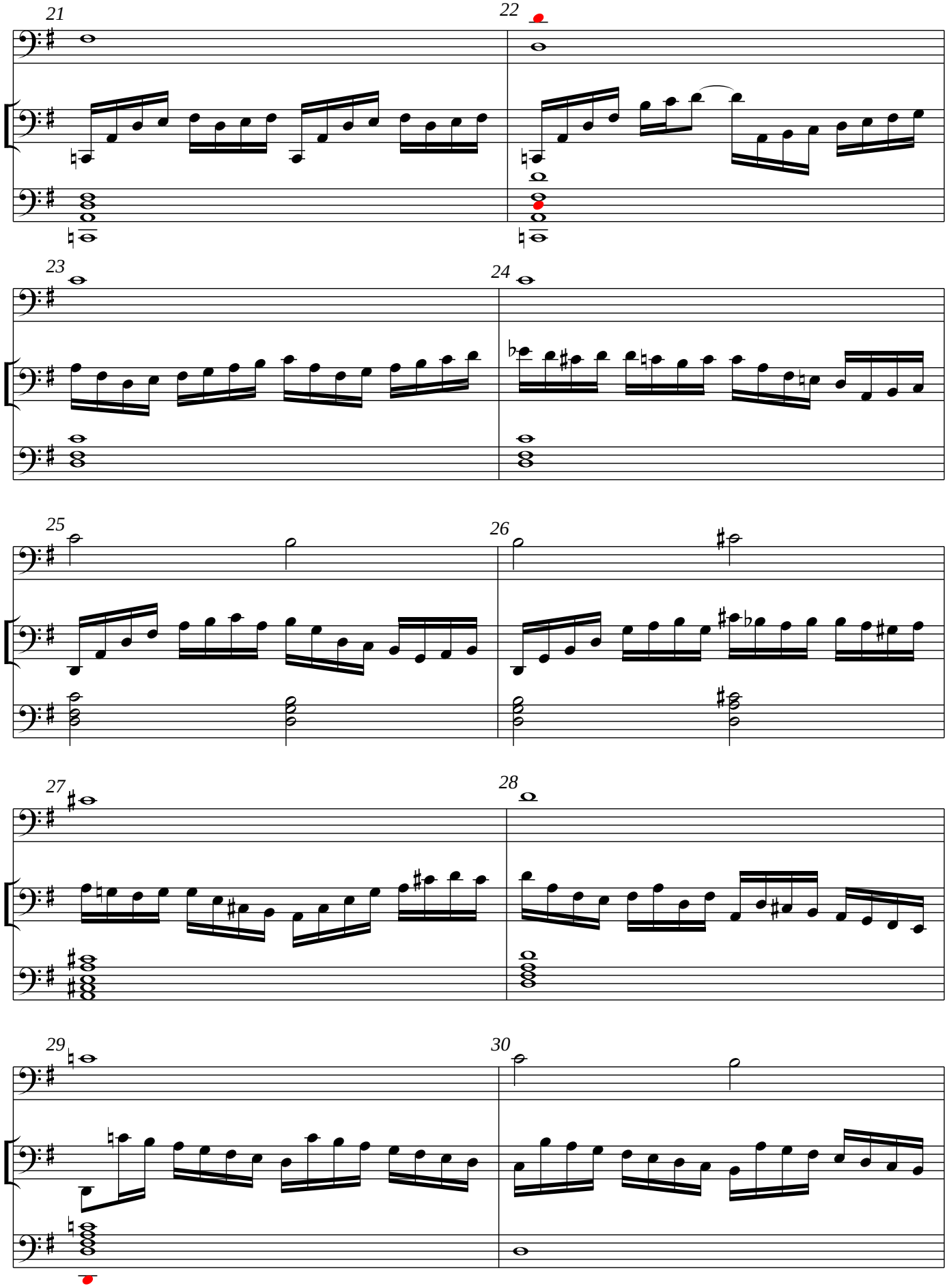
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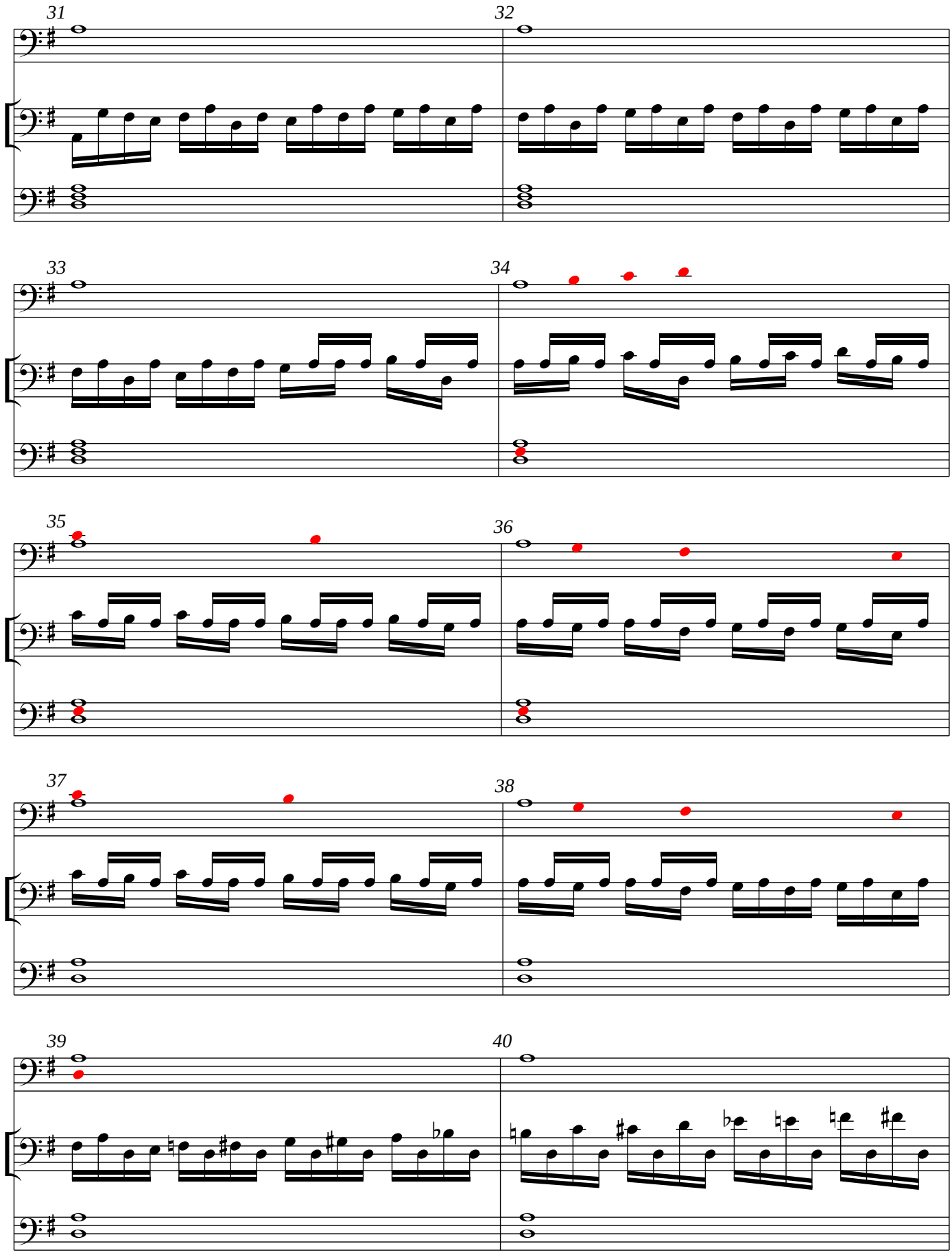
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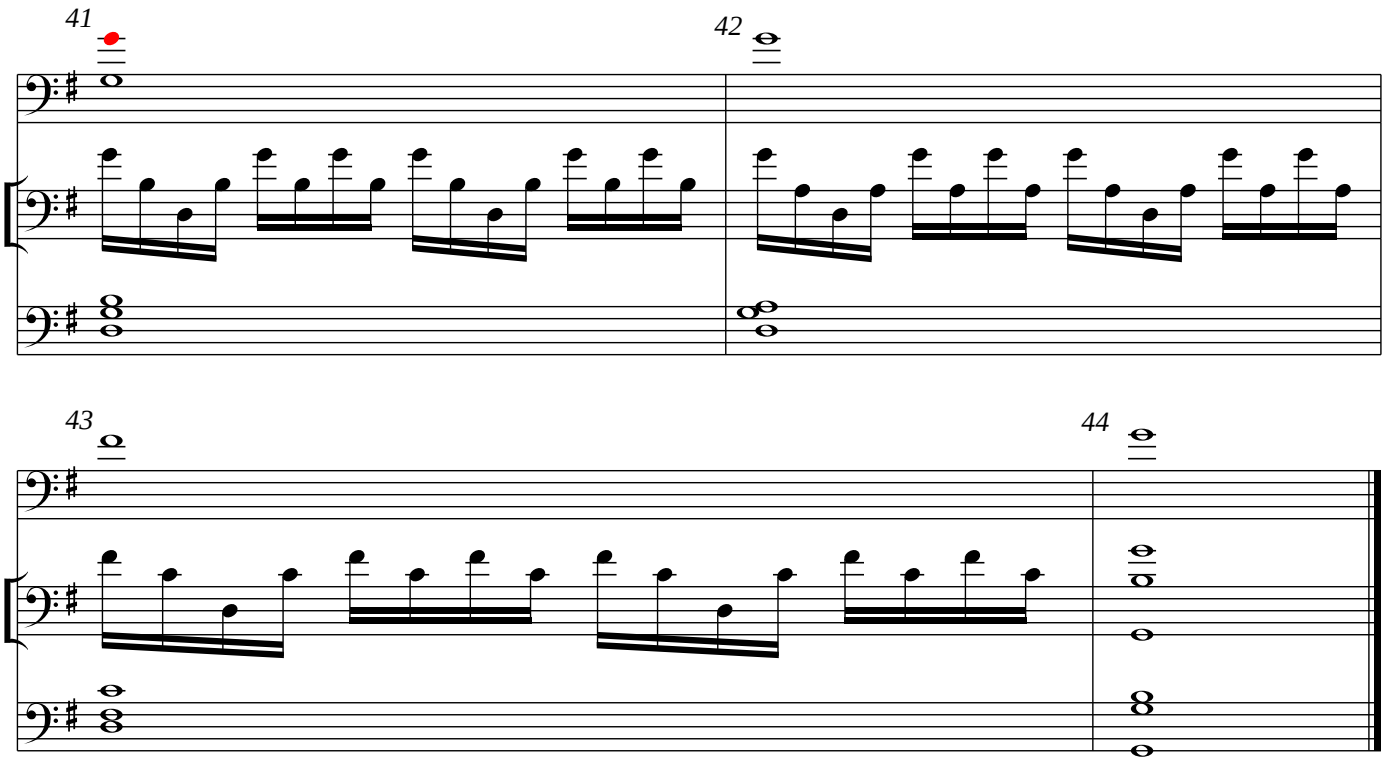

About the author:

Reinier Maliepaard is psychologist, software engineer, organist and teacher at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands (music theory and music history). He maintains www.bestmusicteacher.com, a website for music students, musicians and all other musiclovers with

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