"This is the scheme which magnifies, beyond any other, the polarization of harmony, thematic material, and texture." (Rosen 1927)

Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn's *Piano Sonata in G Minor* (1843) represents something of a theoretical and nominal paradox both in terms of sonata as form, and as genre. The sonata as *genre* has undergone extensive development throughout Western music history, so much so that the term broadly defines radically different works relative to their era of composition. Take for example the Baroque sonata *da chiesa* or *da camera*, multi-instrumental multi-movement works constructed from dance forms, opposed to the solo (or duo) sonatas of the late 18th century and beyond, subject to strict rules concerning form and tonal features. James Webster describes the sonata *form* (also referred to as the first-movement or sonata-allegro form) as "The most important principle of musical form, or formal type, from the Classical period well into the 20th century" (Webster 2001). The sonata form has variably been characterized as a musical essay, including the introduction of a musical idea (exposition), a comprehensive exploration of this idea (development), and concluding thoughts (recapitulation), all of which being subject to a prescriptive tonal blueprint.[1] Mendelssohn's sonata exemplifies a number of the novel features that extended sonata composition in the 19th century. As regards the work broadly, her blurring between movements with unconventional concluding harmonies and *attaca* figures is not unlike similar compositional choices incorporated later by Brahms (Mangsen, et al. 2001). Similarly, in her opening *Allegro molto agitato*, Mendelssohn subjugates traditional tonal structure to the exploration of two contrasting themes. In this paper I will demonstrate how Mendelssohn subordinates form and tonal

[1] Whether the sonata form constitutes a binary or ternary form is a matter of some debate, but which ultimately depends on the proportions of any individual piece. Prima facie, as a tripartite composition, the ternary descriptor would appear apt and certainly, in certain circumstances, this is the case. However, some difficulty arises in circumstances where any one or all of the exposition, development, or recapitulation are repeated. For example, where only the exposition is repeated, this may create more of a binary construction where the two instances of the exposition balance the development and recapitulation.

structure to thematic development in the service of a more unified, one-movement sonata, including a discussion of her incorporation of chromatic elements.

Before illustrating Mendelssohn's unconventional, although potentially forward-thinking, approach, I will first provide some historical context by way of theoretical thought on the 18th and 19th century sonata form. In this regard, there are two music theorists who went a great ways toward codification in their respective publications: Carl Czerny and Adolf Bernhard Marx. Czerny, a prolific composer in his own right, was a student of Beethoven and, according to Charles Rosen, his prescriptive explanation of the sonata in his *School of Practical Composition* Op. 600 (Czerny 1979) basically describes the "compositional procedures of Beethoven… which could be imitated most comfortably and with the smallest risk of disaster." (Rosen 1927) As regards Marx, in his *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition* (Marx 1842) he was primarily interested in tracing the development of the sonata through five different rondo forms of increasing complexity, with reference to excerpts from works by Beethoven and Mozart (Lang 1993). Rosen himself describes the 18th century sonata as being less like a "clearly definable form" and more like "a series of procedures for enlarging, articulating, and dramatizing short patterns of two, three, or four phrases." (Rosen 1927) According to Demuth, compositional practice of the sonata in the late 19th century by composers such as Liszt and Franck was "cyclique", which he says consists of "binding the movements together thematically by means of rhythmic alterations or actual quotations, in full, of the material of the first movement, thus giving the Sonata unification." Indeed, he goes on to discuss the prevalence of the "one-movement Sonata, written either as one continuous whole, but often resulting simply in a single first movement; or a succession of linked movements, each section leading into the next…", an approach that bares striking resemblance to Mendelssohn's work. (Demuth 1953)

The table at Example 1, taken from Kohs' *Musical Form*, synthesizes the very basic structural, thematic, tonal, and dramatic composition of the sonata form. (Kohs 1976)

Example 1: Musico-dramatic structure of sonata form including optional Introduction and Coda sections.

Section:	*Introduction*[6]	*Exposition*		*Development*	*Recapitulation*		*Coda*[6]
Thematic element:	Free	P.T.[7]	S.T.[7, 8]	Thematic fragmentation, etc.	P.T.	S.T.[8]	Free
Key:	Tonic or parallel minor, V emphasis at close	Tonic	Dominant or other related key	Modulations, tonal instability	Tonic	Tonic	Tonic
Dramatic element:	Exploration, uncertainty	From stability to "challenge"		Conflict, instability	Resolution, "reconciliation," stability		Stability confirmed

We can see from Example 1 that tonally, the sonata form has a strong tonic emphasis, deviating occasionally by way of either modest, related key excursions or, as in the case of the development section, modulations which cause more significant tonal instability. The degree of deviation, again according to Example 1, has implications for dramatic interpretation, ranging from a sense of exploration and uncertainty, to challenge and conflict. Each return to tonic conversely creates both harmonic and dramatic stability. This diagram includes the introduction and coda sections which are not necessary elements of the sonata form, but are optional additions. In terms of thematic content, these two sections are free-composed, as opposed to all other sections which include thematic statements or restatements, and fragmentary explorations through diverse key areas (as in the development). This basic diagram "sets the stage" upon which I will compare Mendelssohn's tonic trajectory with discussion on the practical and dramatic effect of her chromatic deviations.

As previously mentioned, Mendelssohn's work places an unusual emphasis on its two themes and could certainly be described, per Rosen, as an enlargement, articulation, and dramatization of a short pattern. For reference, a copy of the score is provided at Appendix 1. The primary theme begins with a dramatic Beethovian tremolo in the left hand, against which block chords are played in the right. The left hand then moves into arpeggiated gestures from m.10 and both hands commence homorhythmic dotted rhythms

at m.15 as something of a dissolution into the second theme which begins resolutely at m.22. The second theme sounds lush and romantic, with a sweeping arpeggiated left hand accompaniment to a "sung" right hand melody. William Caplin provides interesting commentary on the 19th century gendering of "main" and "subordinate" themes by theorists including Marx which, to a degree, rings true in this piece:

> Today, we generally reject the typical 19th-century position – such as that proposed by A.B. Marx – which held that a dynamic, "masculine" main theme stands in opposition to a lyrical, "feminine" subordinate theme… It is interesting to note, however, that Marx's position is subtler than what we often think today. He makes it explicit that by being masculine the main theme is no more important, or dominating, within the form than the feminine subordinate theme. In fact… he sees the union of masculine and feminine (akin to the marriage of a man and woman) as essential to the fundamental nature of a sonata-form exposition (and recapitulation). (Caplin 2013)

Whilst I would reject the gendered characterization of the themes as antiquated, there is an obvious dichotomy at work that served not only Mendelssohn, but many sonata composers of this era such that Marx sought to define the nature of the relationship between the themes. That both he and Caplin (albeit to a highly qualified extent) describe the dynamic as masculine and the lyrical as feminine, to a modern reader, is likely to cause discomfort, similarly the notion of marriage being strictly between man and wife. However, I see nothing offensive in identifying musical polarities, the combination of which creates something of a yin and yang "whole". Indeed, one could argue that Mendelssohn dedicates the entire first movement of her work experimenting with the finer points of this idea.

In her thesis, *The Piano Sonatas of Fanny Hensel and Clara Schumann*, Thiang provides a very clear illustration of Mendelssohn's thematic repetition relative to tonal centers traversed, provided below at Example 2. (Thiang 2011) I am firstly interested in discussing the sub-section column of Example 2. Thiang

differentiates between the first and second "subjects", and "themes" from those subjects.[2] This distinction is somewhat useful when considering how thematic content is being used, especially in the context of Example 1 concerning "thematic fragmentation". We see that Thiang describes the entirety of mm.1-22 and mm.22-44 as the first and second subjects respectively. In the development section, Thiang demonstrates how melodic content (which she describes as thematic) from both the first and second subjects remains the singular focus, but for a short 12 measure transition into the recapitulation and mm.61-73. At the recapitulation, in lieu of a repeated development and recapitulation, we see two uniquely reharmonized restatements of the first and second statements, moving into a coda, and what she describes as a transitional passage into the second movement. This transitional passage is an example of the techniques that I alluded to in my introduction which function to create the sense of a one-movement sonata much like what Demuth described as a late 19th century convention, placing Mendelssohn's composition "before its time".

Perhaps the most notable deviation from traditional sonata form composition can be seen in the column titled "Key". Per previous, the sonata is a particularly tonic-centric form. Mendelssohn's work begins in G minor, consistent with its key signature. Comparing Examples 1 and 2, the first difference we see is that the secondary theme/subject remains in tonic as opposed to creating some sort of "challenge" by diverting through either the dominant, or a related key. While we accept and indeed, expect, variation in the modulation of the development section, we would normally expect a degree of predictability and stability in the recapitulation. Not so with this work. Where the first iteration of the first subject returns to tonic, the second subject is composed in the parallel major. The second iteration of both subjects creates unusual harmonic tension by vacillating between both minor and parallel major keys before

[2] Caplin discusses this distinction in his *Analyzing Classical Form: An Approach for the Classroom*. Where, as Thiang has done, popular usage might define themes according to melodic content, he prefers to use the term more broadly to define "a complete unit, which includes its particular melodic-motivic content, its accompanimental texture, and its supporting harmonic progressions." (CAPLIN). In this respect, I agree with Caplin, and for the majority of this paper have used the term "themes" in this way, however I will adjust terminology here in discussion of Example 2.

resolving to the parallel major for the coda and the final transitional passage. The practical effect of this modulation might be to create a natural and stable transition into the next movement in D major, reinforcing the unifying gesture of the *attaca*.

Example 2: Mendelssohn's Tonal Roadmap: Sonata in G minor, first movement (Thiang 2011)**.**

Hensel: Sonata in G minor, first movement				
Section	**Sub-section**	**Bar numbers**	**Key**	**Comments**
Exposition	**First subject**	1-22	G minor	Bar 1 consists of a bass tremolo in the LH reminiscent of the orchestral timpani roll of a concerto introduction. LH tremolo continues as tonic pedal while RH melody joins in block chords. The same melody repeats from bar 10, but with broken chords in the LH. A transitional passage starting from bar 15 leads to the second subject.
	Second subject	22-44	G minor	A second subject, also in G minor, characterised by a more lyrical melody in the RH maintaining the same *agitato* feeling from the first subject.
Development	**Themes from first subject**	45-51	B minor	Frequent modulations with themes from the first and second subjects.
	Themes from second subject	51-54	E major	
		55-58	D minor	
		59-60	E*b* minor	
	Transition	61-66	B*b* major	
		67-73	A minor	
Recapitulation	**First subject**	74-84	G minor	The first subject is restated here with a dominant pedal in D, which serves as a dominant preparation for the return to the second subject in G major instead of G minor compared to parallel section in the exposition.
	Second subject	85-100	G major	
	First subject	101-104	G minor	Both themes from the first and second subjects are repeated here with more modulations before the concluding coda.
		105-113	E*b* minor	
		114-115	Bb major	
		116-118	G minor	
	Second subject	119-120	G major	
		121-122	C minor	
		123-124	G major	
		125-126	A*b* major	
	Coda	127-134	G major	A short cadential passage with mostly block chords.
	Transitional passage to the second movement	135-140	G major	Moving towards B minor in the second movement.

So, in addition to a discussion between dynamic and lyrical themes, we also have a tension between the key signature and the parallel major. In addressing the chromatic element, I will refer again to Caplin this

time for his tight-knit and loose analytical approach, after Arnold Schoenberg. Where Caplin says that it is difficult to provide simple definitions of these terms except to say that "tight-knit organization promotes structural stability, while loose organization promotes structural instability" he goes on to provide a useful table by way of explanation which is excerpted below at Example 3.

Example 3: Caplin's tight-knit versus loose organizational structure. (Caplin 2013)

	TIGHT-KNIT	⟶	⟶	LOOSE
tonality	home key (I)	subordinate key (V)	distant keys (III, ♭VI)	modulating
harmony	prolongation of I	prolongation of I^6	prolongation of V	sequential
	diatonic		modal mixture	chromatic
cadence	PAC	HC	cadential evasion	no cadence
grouping structure	symmetrical (4 + 4)	symmetrical (6 + 6)		asymmetrical (4 + 3 + 5)
functional efficiency	efficient	redundant (via extensions, etc.)		ambiguous
motivic material	uniform			diverse
thematic conventionality	period	sentence		nonconventional types

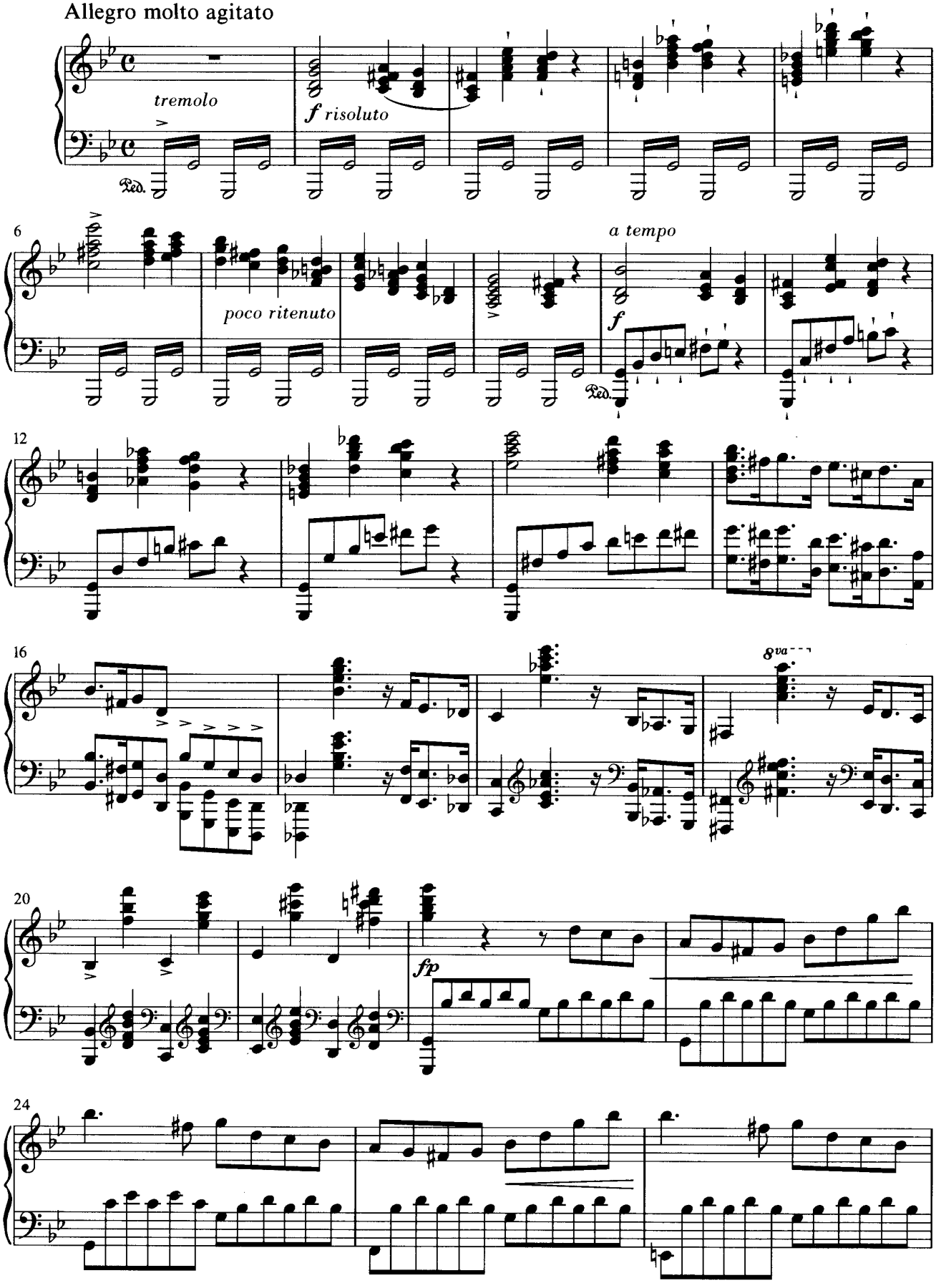
A key point that Caplin makes is that these classifications work somewhat more like a spectrum than a dichotomy and that it is effectively relative. That is to say that one phrase might be considered *more* or *less* tight-knit, relative to a contrasting phrase. In this respect, harmonically speaking, I would argue that there is a binary ABA, tight-knit, loose, tight-knit structure to the piece that supplements the traditional sonata form. The tonic focus of the exposition, and the relative stability of the parallel major in the coda and final transition form a stark contrast to the balance of the piece with distant keys and increased chromaticism. This, to me, fits hand in hand with Mendelssohn's overall approach to the sonata form in that, to a large degree, the form remains recognizable, whilst the language is manipulated to create a more unified expression. Rather than distinct exposition, development, and recapitulation, she reinforces

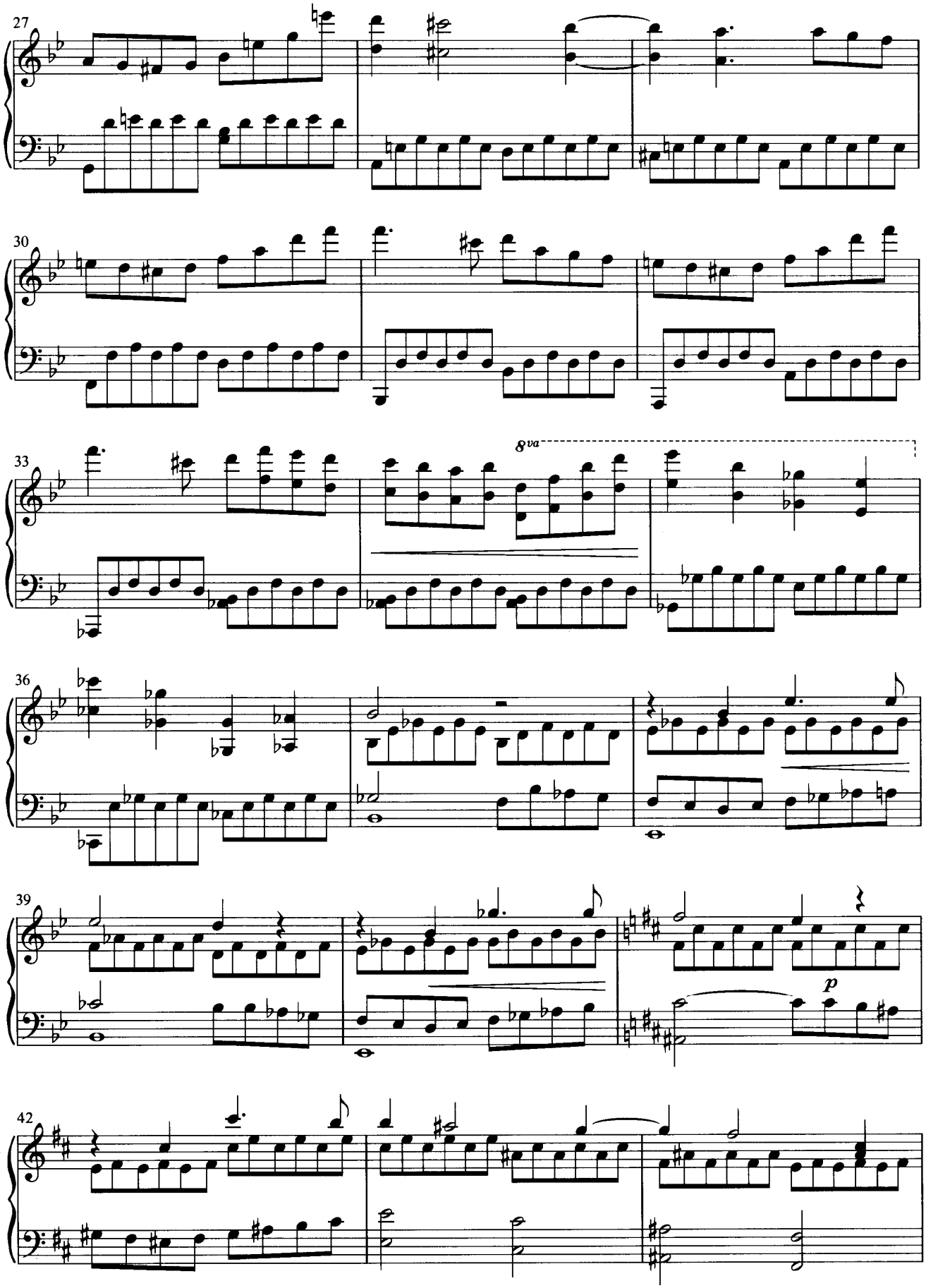
her thematic content frequently leaving no question of her through-composed thinking, and allows her variation in tight-knit and loose organizational structure. This increased chromaticism creates the dramatic impact that the sonata form would naturally include. I think Demuth puts it succinctly when he says “The metamorphosis of themes which ensued often passes unrecognized until the music is read analytically, and when this is the case, the process may be said to be completely successful.” (Demuth 1953)

Mendelssohn’s work surely represents a precursor for sonata form composition of the late 19th century. Ultimately, I put Mendelssohn’s different approach down to a readjustment of sonata form priorities. If the sonata as form and as genre are intended to allow for the exploration of an idea, hers appears to be unification. Mendelssohn repeats her themes frequently, but her alteration from tight-knit, to a loose organizational structure with increased chromaticism and back, maintains a tripartite feeling whilst preserving overwhelming thematic focus. Further, Mendelssohn’s first movement is forward-thinking. In addition to subverting the sonata form, the complexity of the development section must also be attributed to preparation for the shift to the parallel major in order to create a half cadence into the second movement by way of through composition. Not to be misunderstood, this sonata is unlikely to be described as avant-garde, however it certainly was unconventional and laid the foundations for late 19th century sonata composition.

Sonate

Erstveröffentlichung

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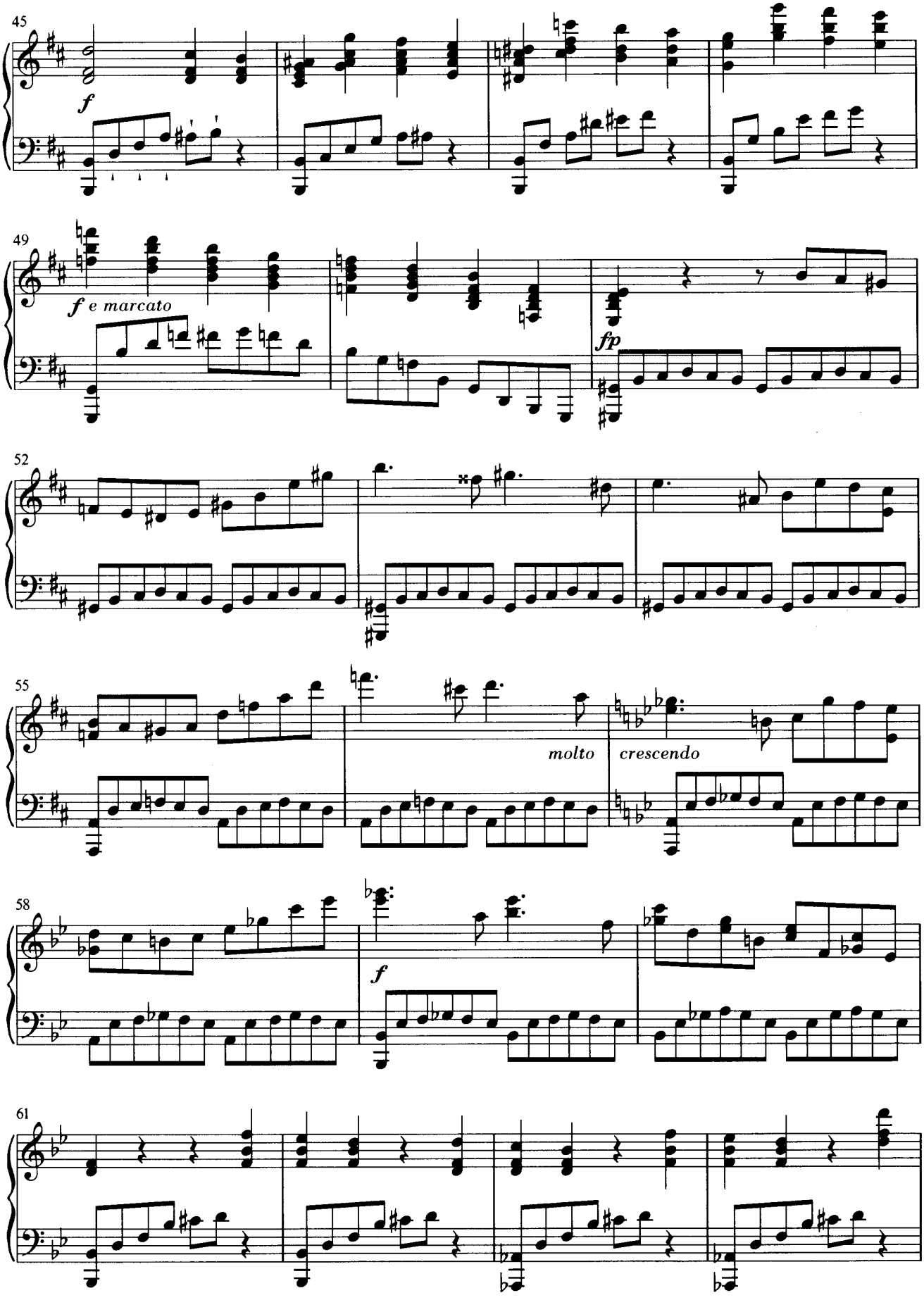
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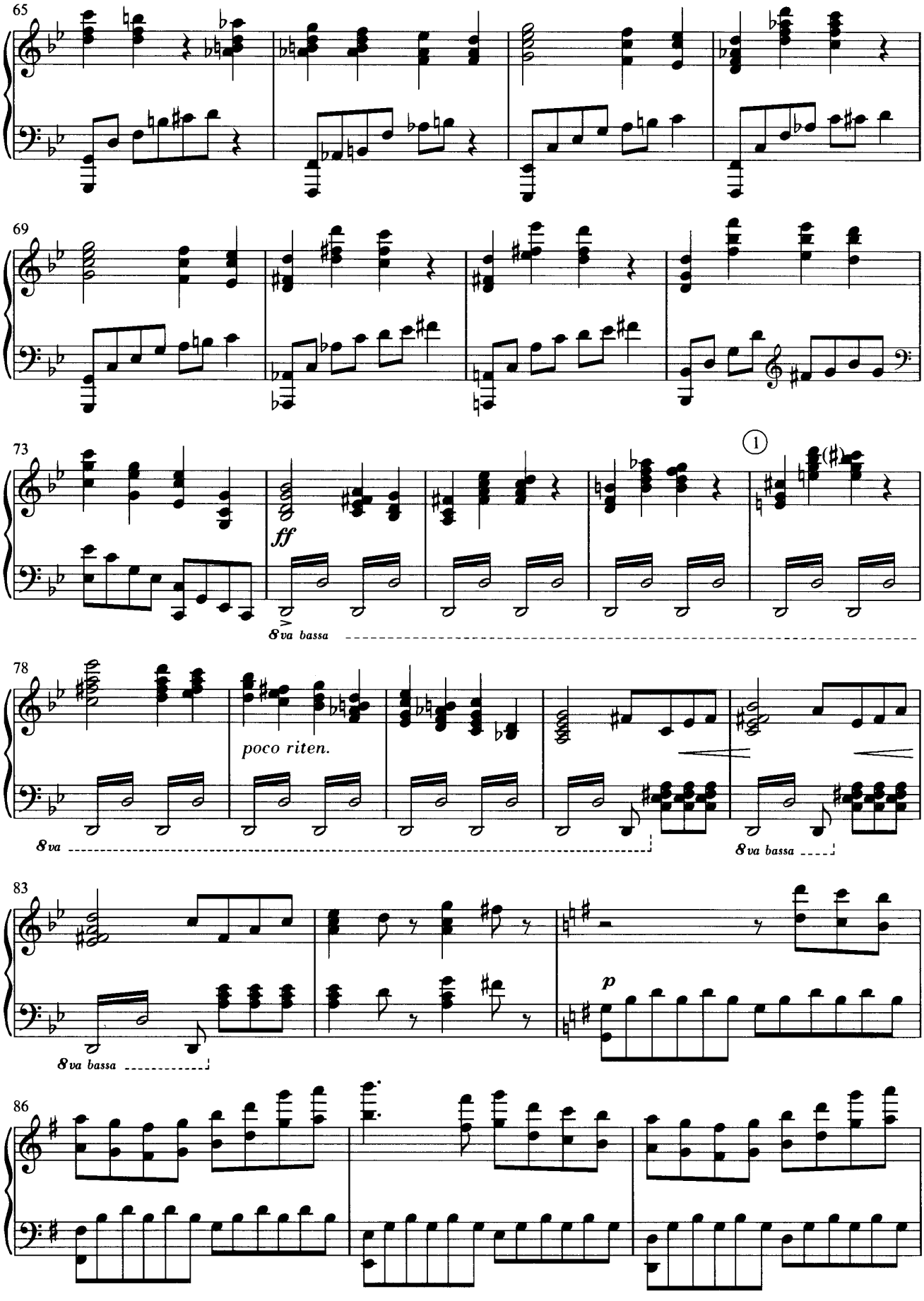
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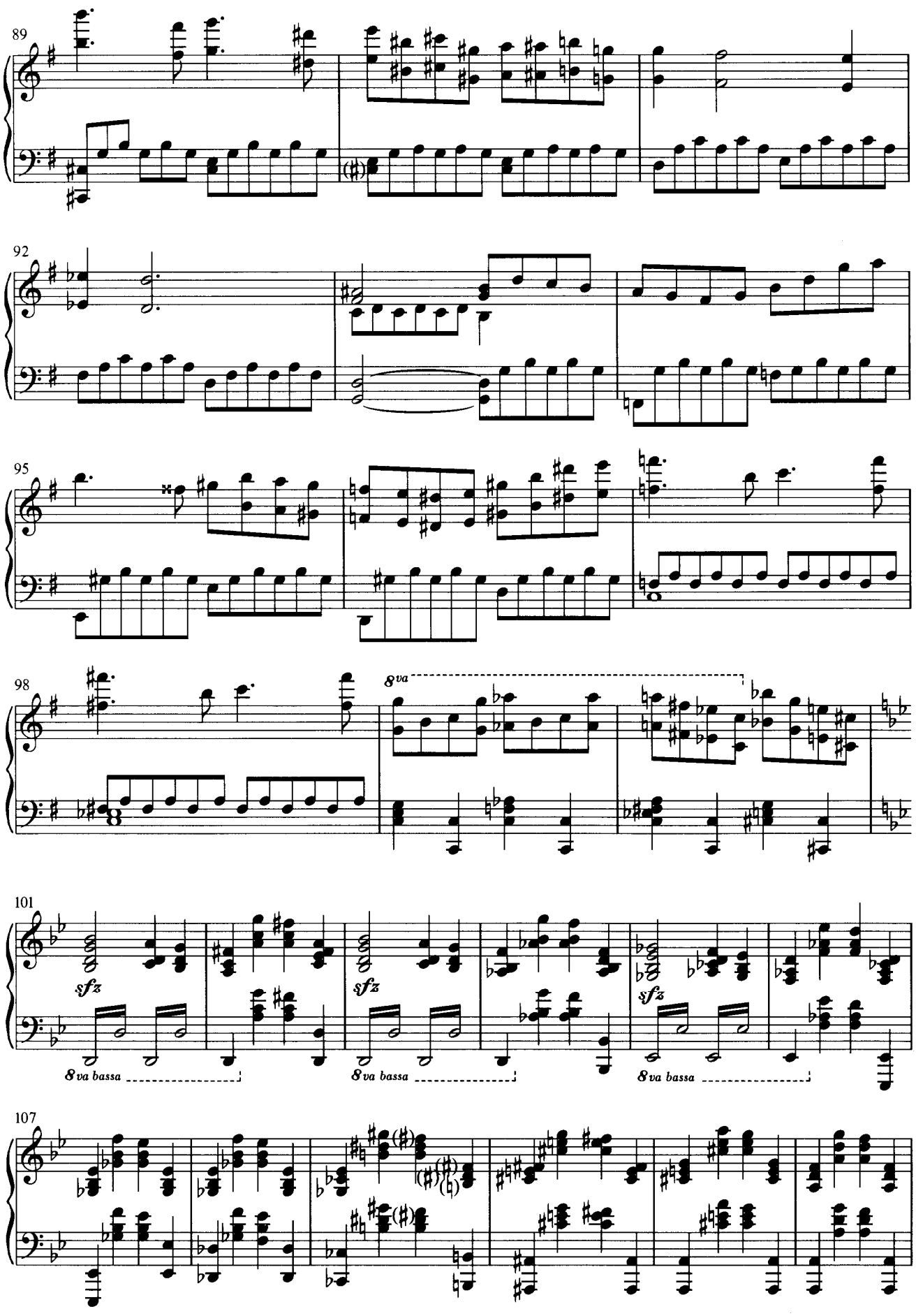
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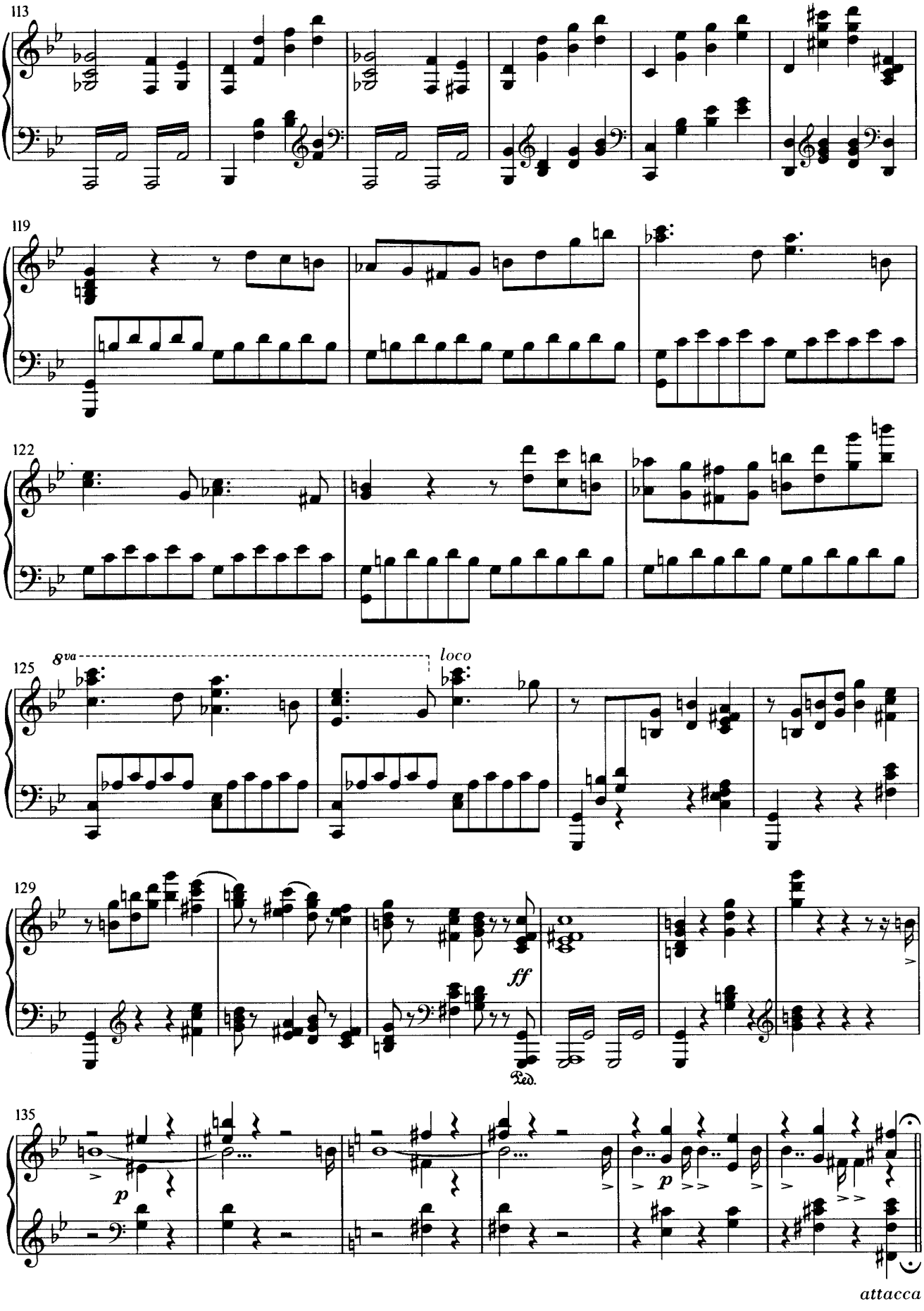
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