A Game of Chants

for trombone solo

(1981)

Christopher Coleman

Duration ca. 2'20"

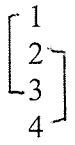
A Few Words on *A Game of Chants*

Christopher Coleman

This short composition resulted from an assignment in Richard Wernick's Composition Seminar while I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania. Every week each student created a tiny fragment of music, a short idea, or some other minute bit from which Wernick selected one. The following week, we were all to create a short but complete composition based on that idea. During one class another student, Michael Rose, had just come from a composition lesson with George Rochberg. Rose was working on a string quartet and Rochberg was encouraging him to use the quartet more effectively in terms of texture. On the piece of paper which Rose had brought his tidbit for Wernick, Rochberg had written the following:

1	3	2	1	2
3	1	1	2	2

and beside that



with braces connecting 1 to 3 and 2 to 4. When Wernick saw this, without knowing its origin or intent, he said "Now that's an idea!" and gave us the assignment to create a piece based on these numbers, for any combination of instruments or voices that we chose.

As a trombonist, I was attracted to the possibility of considering that the numbers might be interpreted as indicating overtones or slide positions. I created a tone series based on this idea, in which the top row of numbers initially indicated the slide position and the bottom row of numbers indicated the overtone in that position. A second complementary series reversing the two roles was also created. These original series gave me a limited pitch collection, which I expanded through the addition of individual elements of the series:

1	+	3	=	4		3	+	2	=	5
3		1		4		1		1		2

Further expansion came through a consideration of the second part of Rochberg's original notation. The connection of 1 with 3 via a brace suggested equivalence, so I substituted those numbers for one another and also 2 with 4, generating new series.

I sought to bring the initial idea into as many elements of the piece as it could sustain in an interesting fashion, so I also created two rhythmic series. The first was based on a

quarter note beat, where the numbers in the top row indicated the number of pitches, and the bottom number indicated the number of quarter note beats. The first column, then gave 1 note in the space of three quarter notes, or a dotted half note. The second column gives three notes in the space of one quarter note, or three eighth note triplets. The second rhythmic series I created was based on a sixteenth note unit, in which the rows of Rochberg's original numbers are simply read directly across as combinations that value: 1 3 2 giving a single sixteenth, a dotted eighth, and an eighth, for example. This secondary rhythmic series serves as an occasional interruption to the first. One final use of Rochberg's number series was involved in the setting of the tempo; as the individual digits of each row sum to nine, the tempo is set at quarter note equals 99 MM. Rests, phrasing, and dynamics were freely chosen.

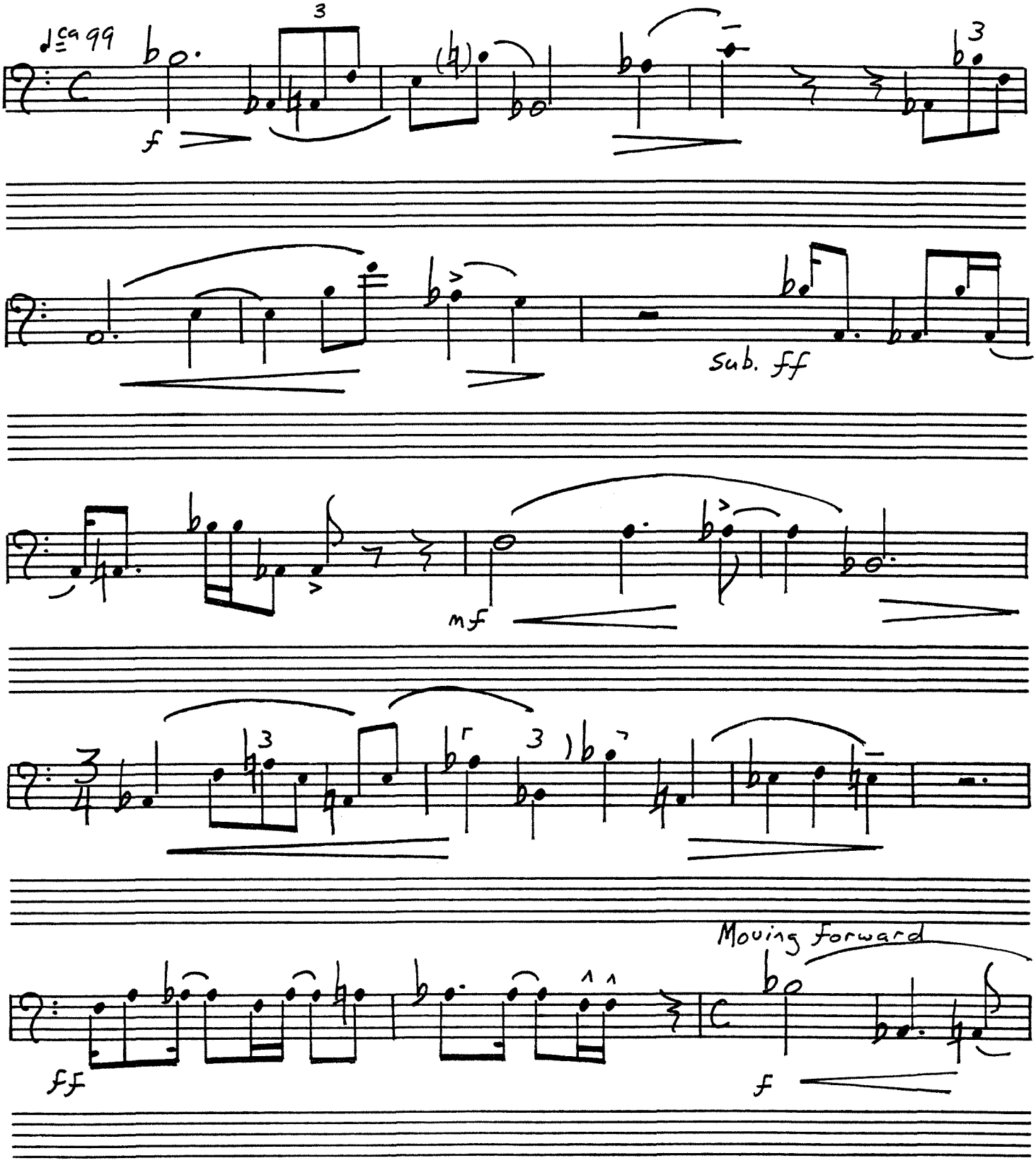
These independently operating series originally raised in my mind the image of a ball bouncing around freely in a roulette wheel. But further consideration of the use of separate series for pitch and rhythms reminded me of the practice of talea and color in the medieval isorhythymic motet, and led me to think of prayer wheels spinning independently. The limited number of pitches, which gave the piece a somewhat chant-like quality, reinforced this impression. Combining these two images gave me the title I finally adopted: *A Game of Chants*.

A Game of Chants

Chris Coleman

Based on the numerology: 1 3 2 1 2 / 3 1 1 2 2 [1 2 3 4]

Solo Trombone



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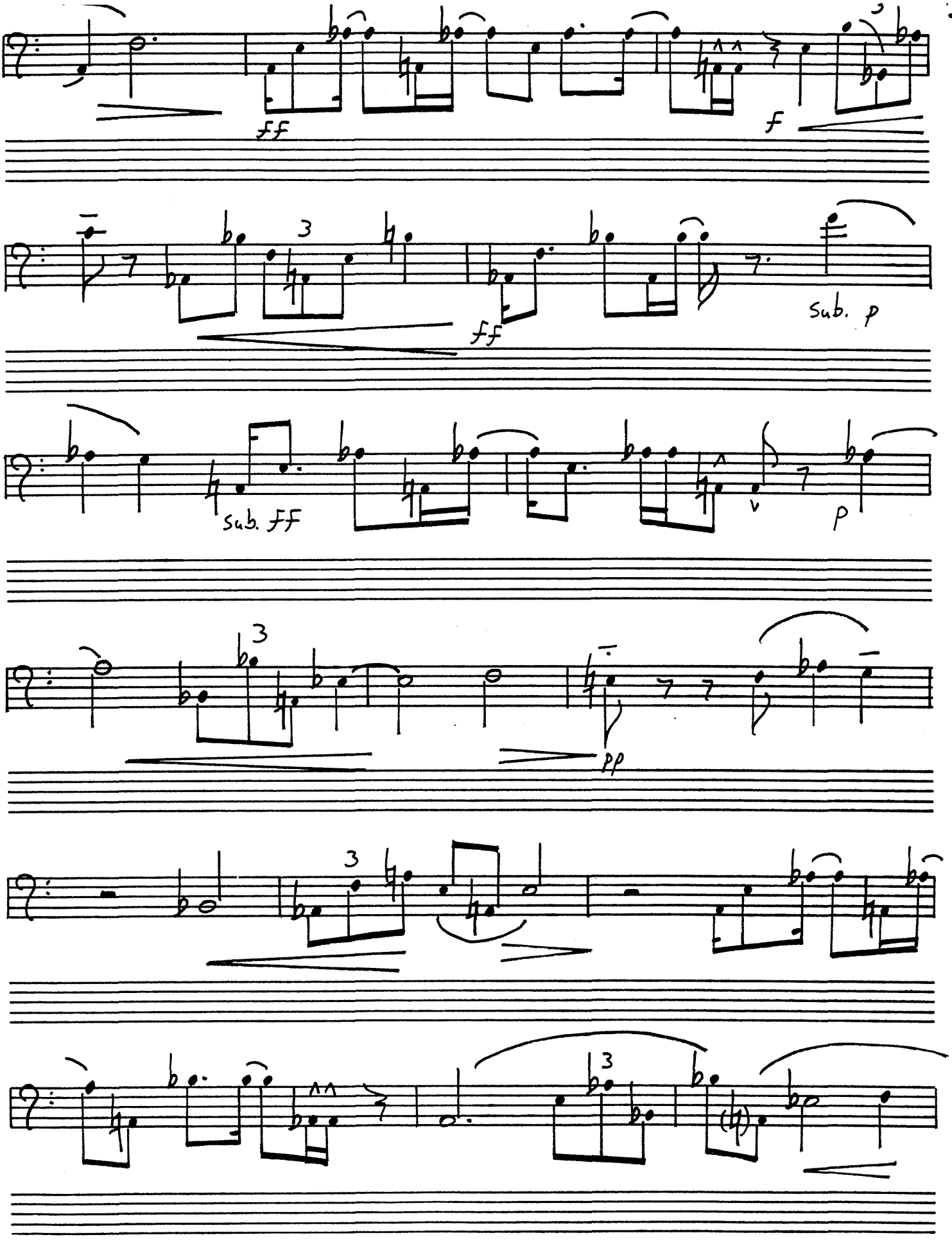
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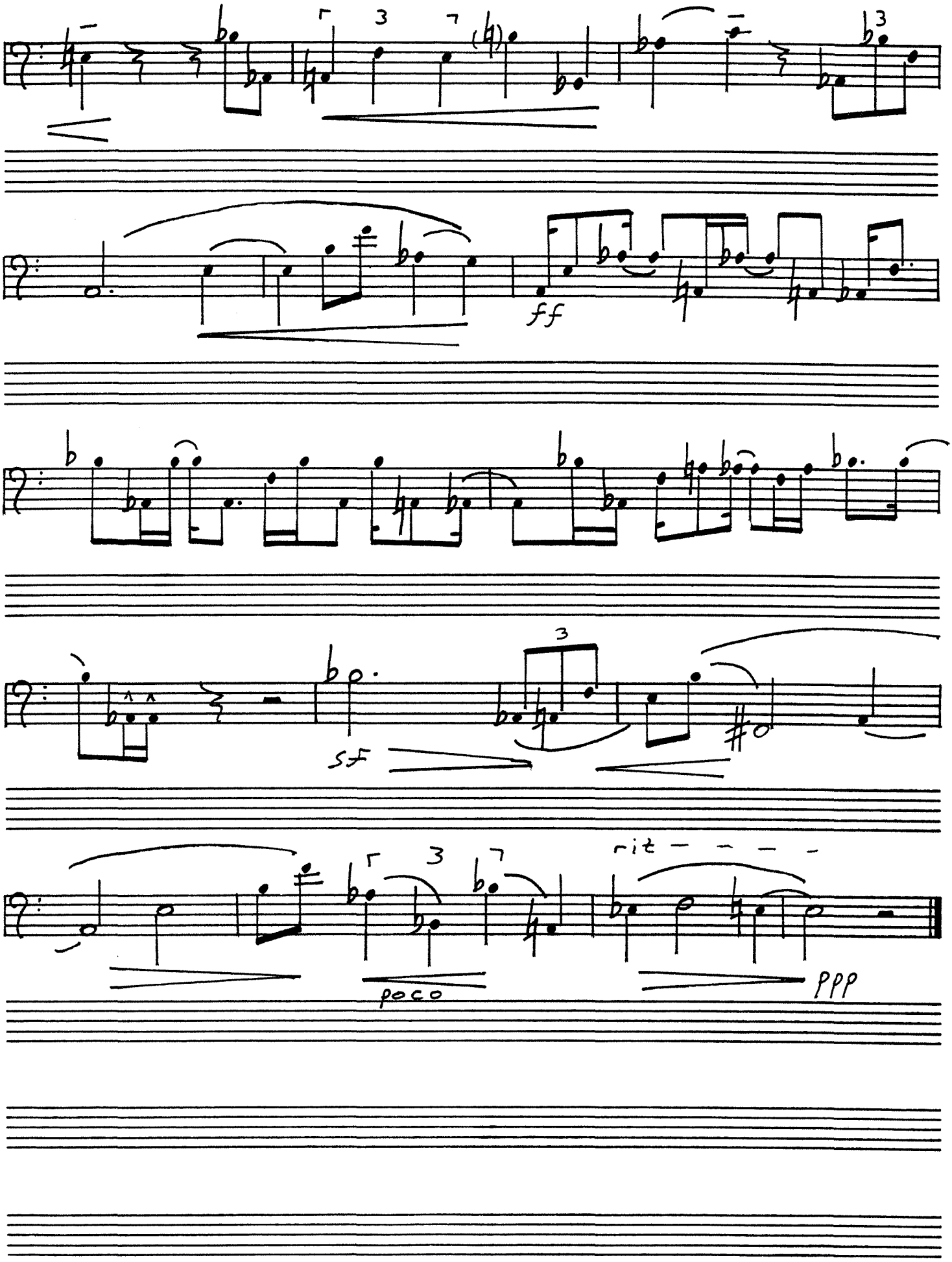
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