Modsefa Scur

Quartet
for B-flat Clarinet,
Alto Saxophone,
Bassoon,
and Harpsichord

Kevin H. Gray

FOREWORD

The composition of *Modsefa Scur* was begun during the summer of 2009 and completed during the summer of 2010. The title is Old English, and roughly translates as "spirit-storm". I feel as though my preoccupation with early English music colored and informed the writing of this music, though I readily admit that the influence that seems clear to me may be undetectable to others. The first movement, for me, possesses much of the bawdy infectiousness of an Irish jig, or one of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book's numerous *corrantos*, while the second movement's hurried moodiness evokes in me similar feelings to those I experience when I perform one of the ruminative Tallis keyboard transcriptions from the Mulliner Book, or perhaps the curiously dissonant variations of Ferdinando Richardson.

I feel that a musical performance of this work is only possible if all four players know one another's parts as well as they know their own. To that end, traditional single-instrument parts are not provided; rather, all players play from score. Two scores are provided. The first score is for the harpsichordist, and also functions as a study score. It features a full-sized harpsichord part, while the wind parts are cue-sized, and all at concert pitch. In the second score, which is meant to be a performing score for the wind players, the harpsichord part is omitted entirely to better facilitate page turns. Periodically, descriptions of harpsichord activity that are deemed crucial to the quality of the overall ensemble are included.

All three wind players are requested to employ little or no *vibrato,* the excessive use of which is, I feel, seldom efficacious in highly chromatic music such as this. The harpsichordist is free to creatively utilize whatever capabilities (buff stop, couplers, etc.) are inherent to the instrument at hand, as long as such timbral variety does not adversely affect the overall instrumental balance. The harpsichord part has many momentary pauses during which couplers, or the buff stop, could be added or removed as desired. Couplers, if available, should be used with caution if the harpsichord to be used is especially loud. *Rubato* would almost certainly be out of place in this work, and should be stringently avoided by all four players.

Articulations for all four instruments are notated uniformly, with the three symbols in question carrying the same meaning for all three wind players, and very nearly the same meaning for the harpsichordist as well.

First, and most simply, accents for the wind players should not be subtle; and must be easily perceived to stand out from their surroundings by even a casual listener, though their intensity should still, to some extent, be context-dependent.

Next, the unmitigated staccato dot is intended to represent the shortest possible duration, irrespective of all

and sundry considerations which, in the minds of many players of all instruments, often justify the lengthening of notes that bear a staccato dot. I find that when I coach players in performances of my music, the first comment I am likely to make is to request shorter staccatos. Within the locus of my composition, the use of staccato is usually meant to evoke an abruptness bordering on violence, regardless of the volume level.

This brings us to the third and final articulation mark, which is the dash sometimes referred to as the *tenuto* mark. This symbol's interpretation depends on context. If used in tandem with the staccato dot, it should function to mitigate the severity of the staccato effect, thereby subtly lengthening the duration of the affected note, producing what might be referred to as a slightly "fat" staccato. Whenever the dot and dash are present beneath the same note, the dash's only purpose is the mitigation of the staccato dot, and no additional meaning should be inferred.

In those instances where the dash appears without the dot (in a wind part), its use denotes, for the note in question, an additional heft, weight, or darkening of the tone, perhaps similar to the manner in which most players might respond to the Italian term "*pesante*." For the harpsichordist, the unaccompanied dash is simply a standard *tenuto* mark.

Please exaggerate contrasting articulations.

Several aspects of my approach to rhythm warrant brief discussion.

First of all, my beaming choices do not always adhere to conventional expectations for a given time signature. In these cases, the decision to disregard convention is always purposeful, in that the unexpected beaming reflects the music's structure more clearly than conventional beaming would have done. Of course, *Modsefa Scur* utilizes only two time signatures, neither of which are burdened with hundreds of years' worth of traditions and expectations.

Secondly, I find the still commonly accepted perspective that tuplets may only begin on main beats to be unendurably restrictive. While I recognize that this practice of allowing tuplets to begin more or less anywhere creates counting dilemmas for some performers, I feel that persistence, a strong sense of pulse, the ability and willingness to subdivide obsessively, and knowing one's partner's part just as well as one's own, can not only overcome any difficulties encountered, but also be quite rewarding.

Thirdly, while I do, in fact, view measures (and phrases, as well) as discrete musical events, I reject the notion that time signatures in post-modern music, and especially in my music, necessarily imply the presence of an unwritten yet obligatory accent structure. Measures seldom carry, in my music, any requirement of behavioral response from the performer. Therefore, please only emphasize a downbeat if an accent on that downbeat is present in the score. For me, the measure is an organizational tool, and the vehicle through which I, and the performers, jointly chart the endless universe of rhythmic potential. The use of measures also provides the

interested performer with a glimpse into the compositional process. In the wake of the myriad rhythmic innovations of the twentieth century, the notion that measures and time signatures must continue to be interpreted just as they were in 1900 seems, at best, unrealistic, and at worst, anachronistic. The beauty, and genius, of the system of notation that we have commonly inherited, is, I feel, its unerring ability to adapt to the inevitability of shifting aesthetic priorities.

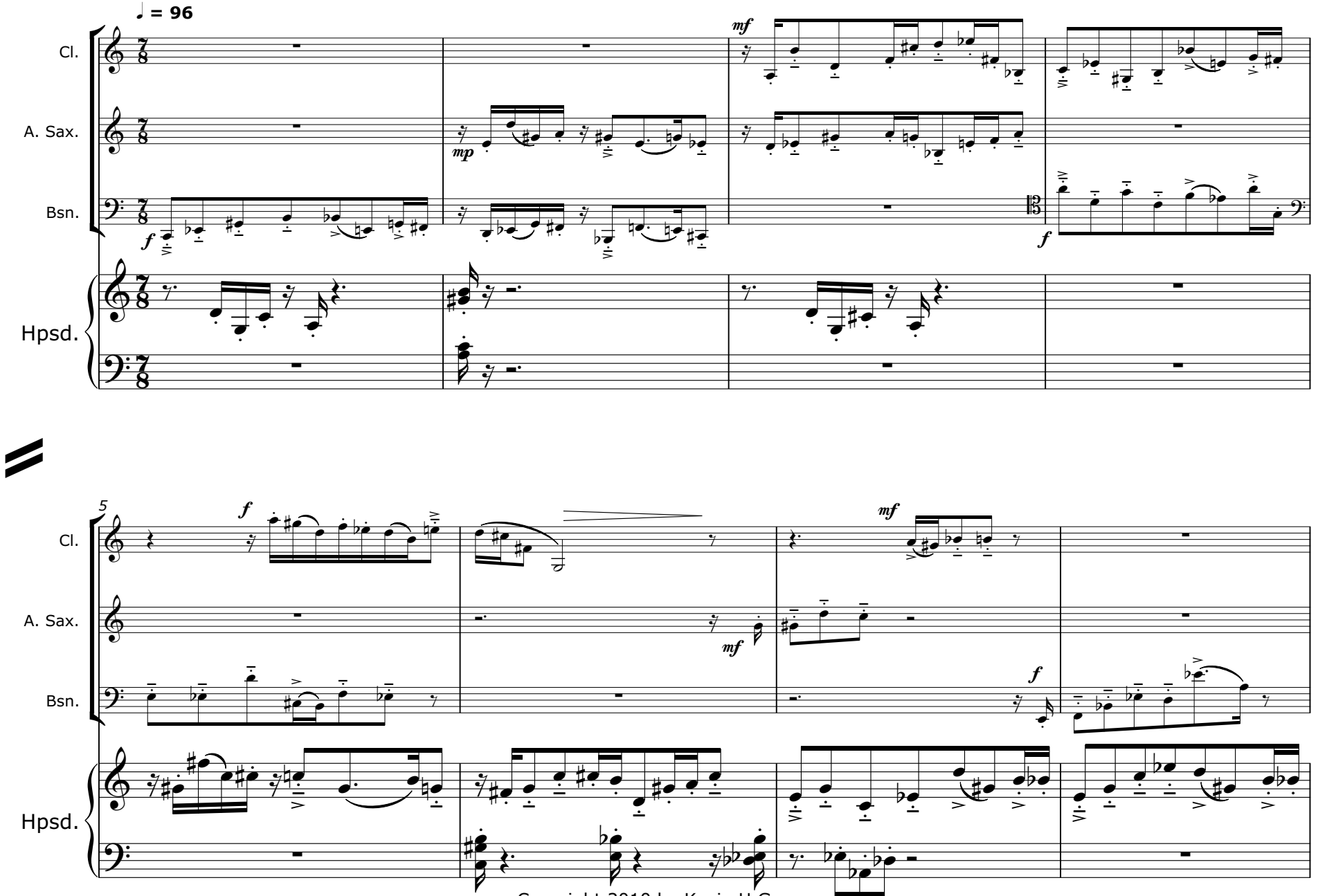
Likewise, I also reject the notion that phrases must always be characterized by arched dynamics. One often hears instrumental affectations that are relics of the romantic period utilized in the performance of music from other periods. I find this problematic, from an aesthetic point of view, and especially so if the music in question is predominantly avant-garde in nature.

Kevin H Gray
May, 2010

Modsefa Scur

I

Kevin H Gray



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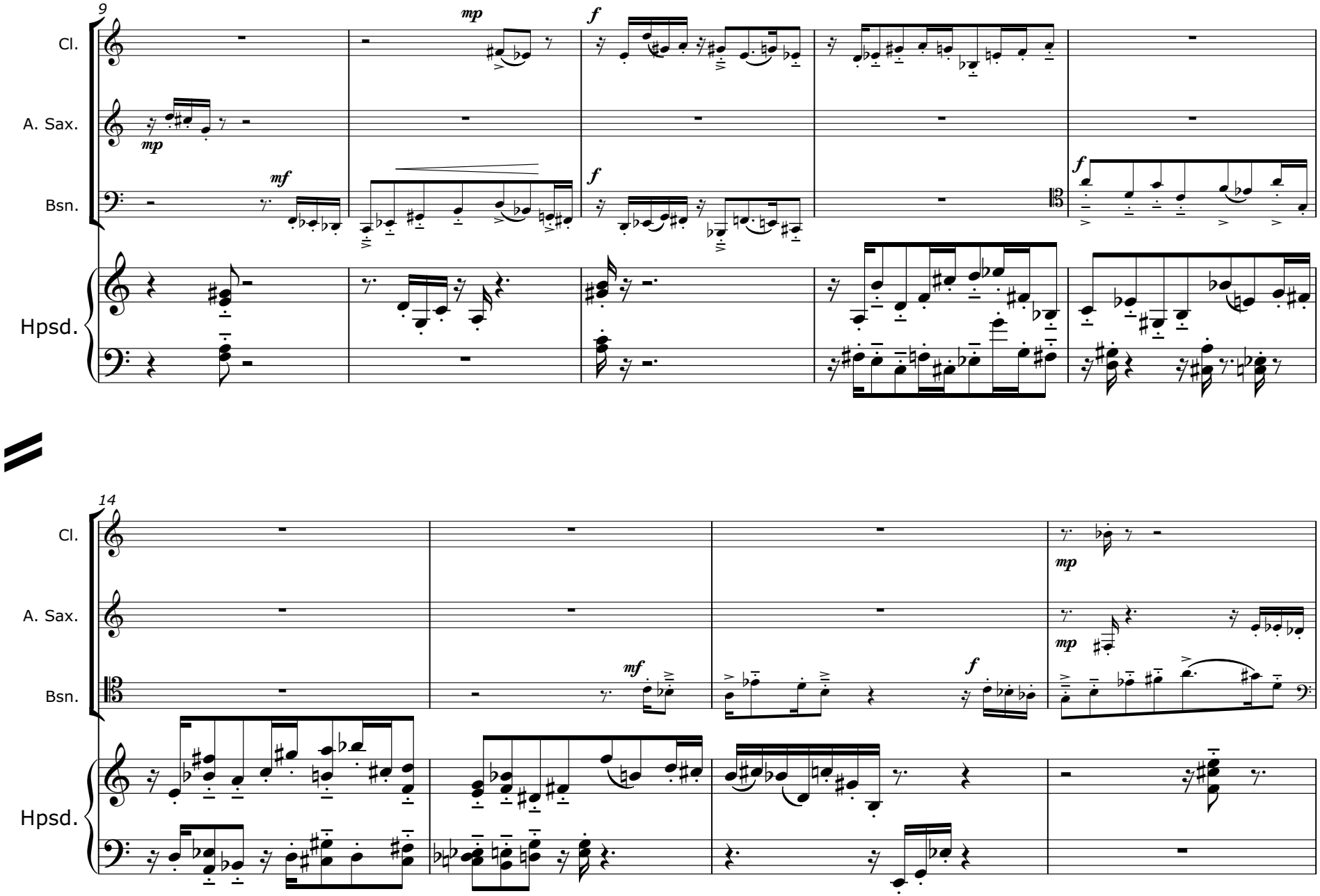

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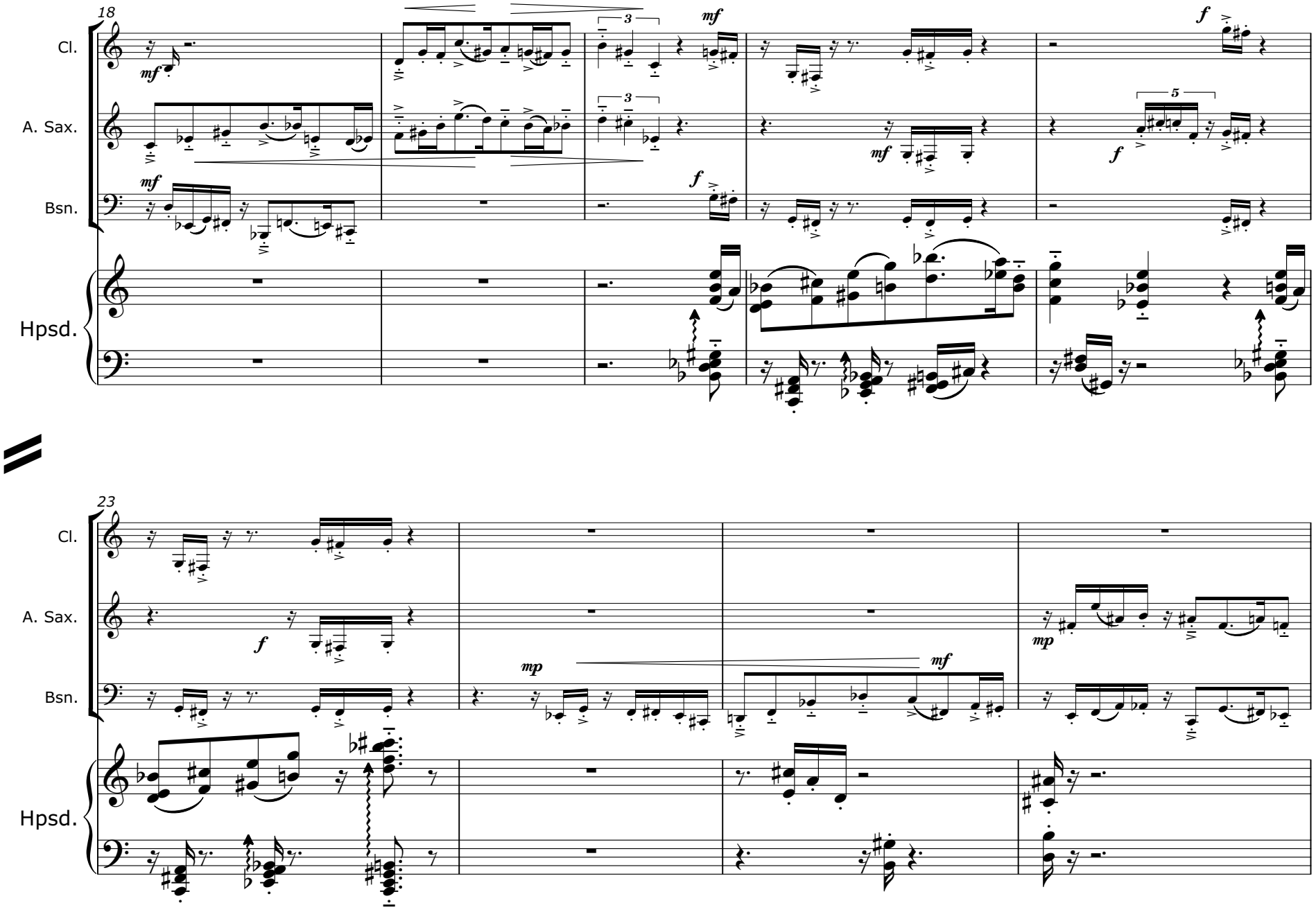

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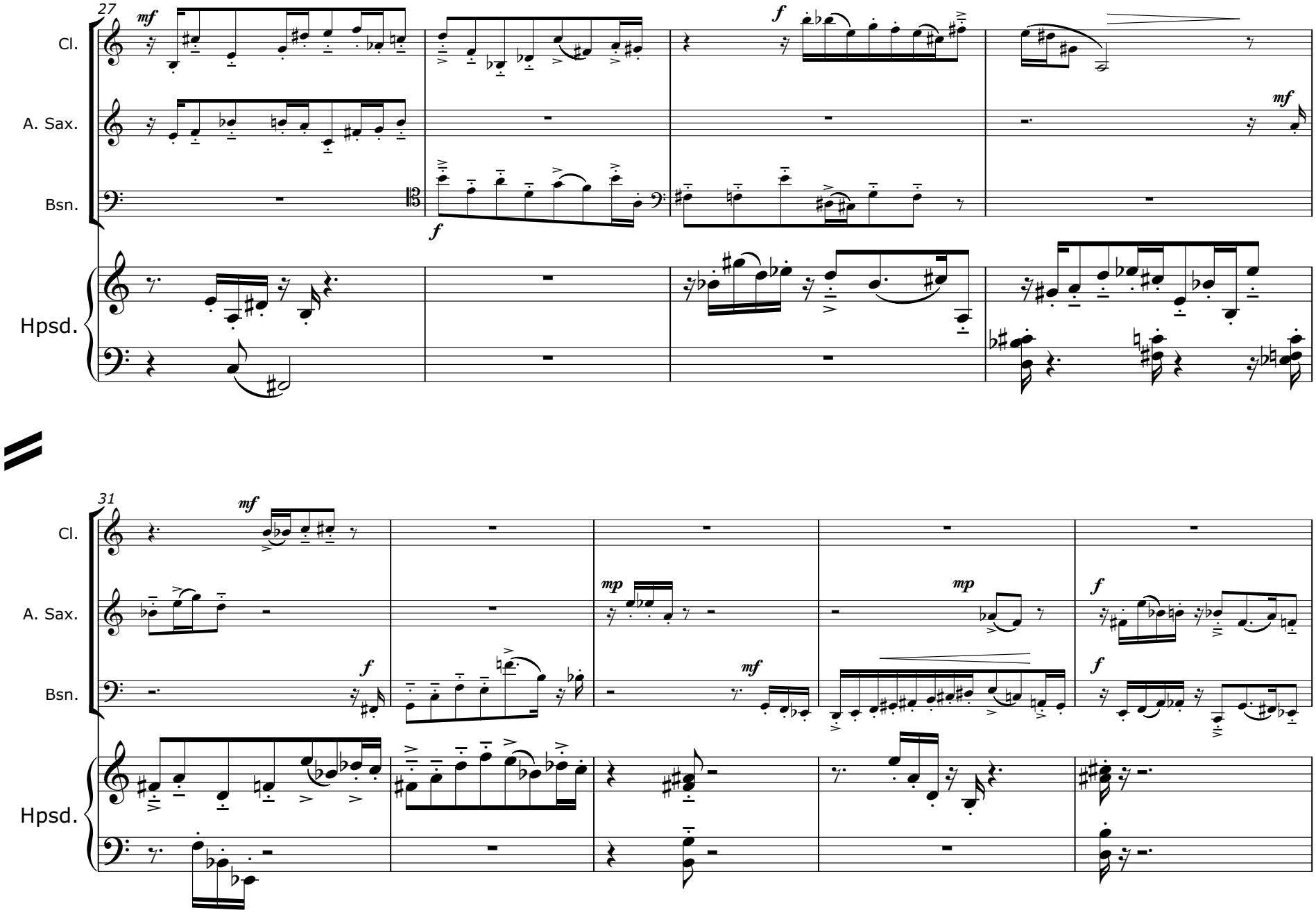

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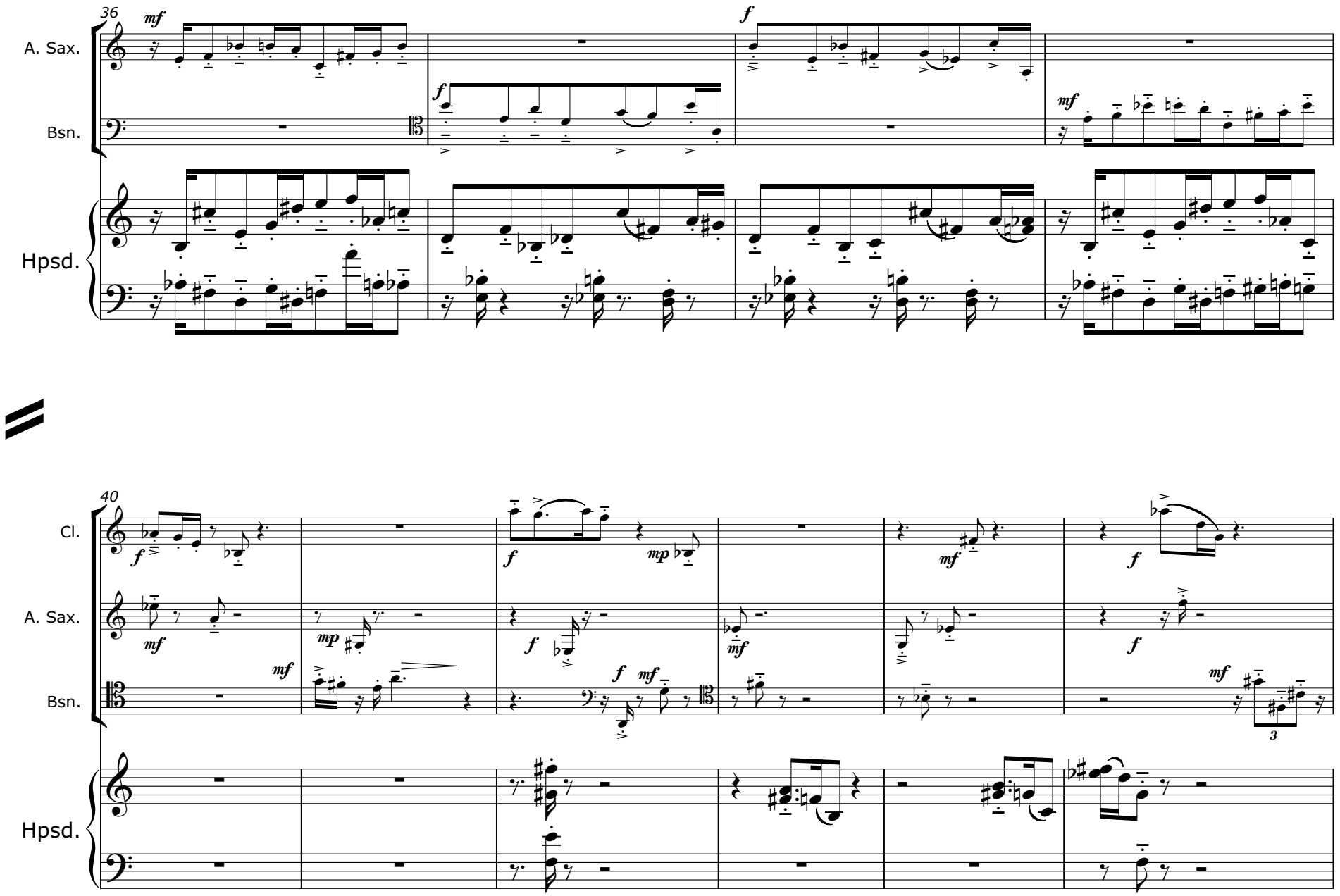

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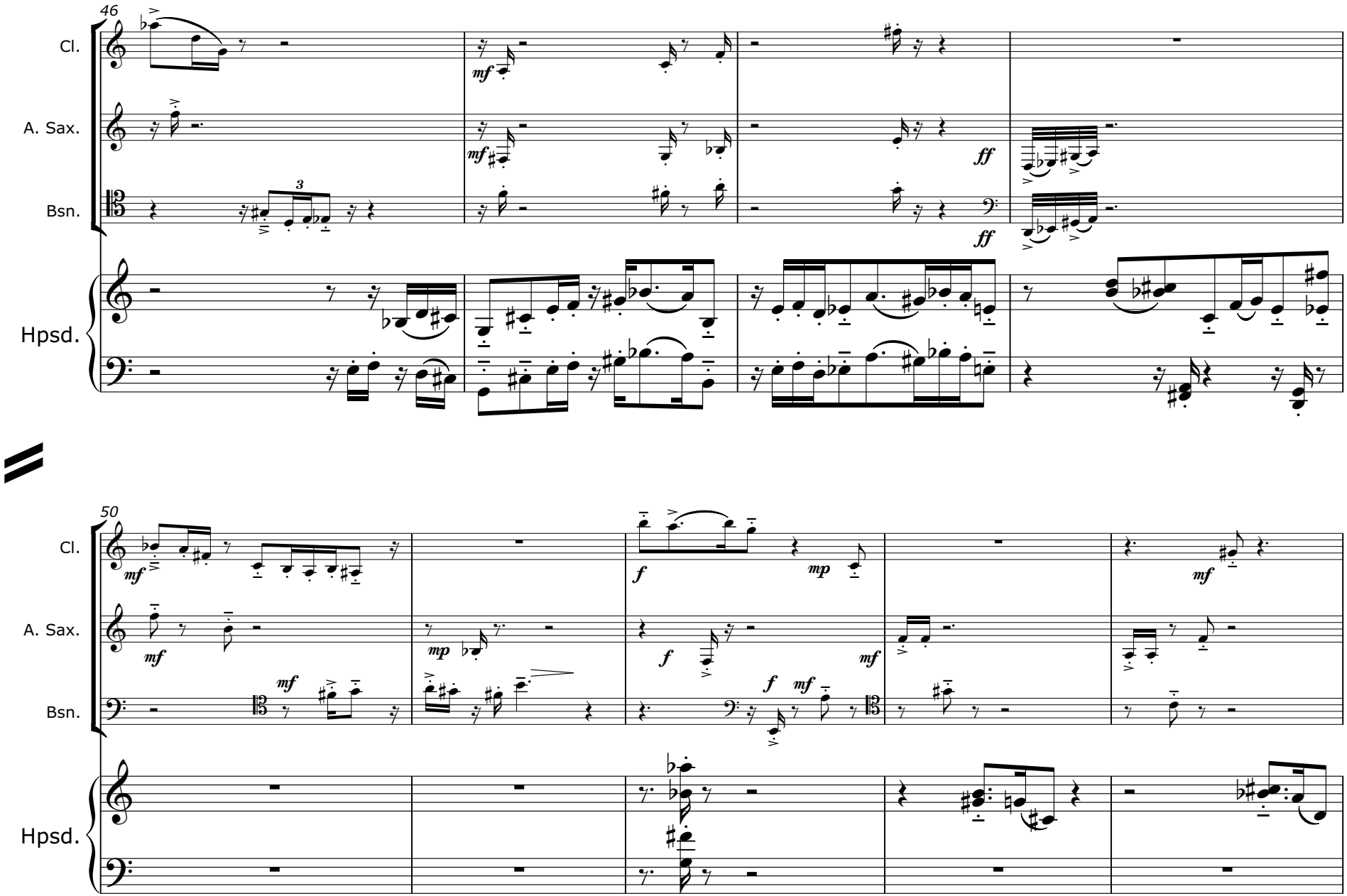

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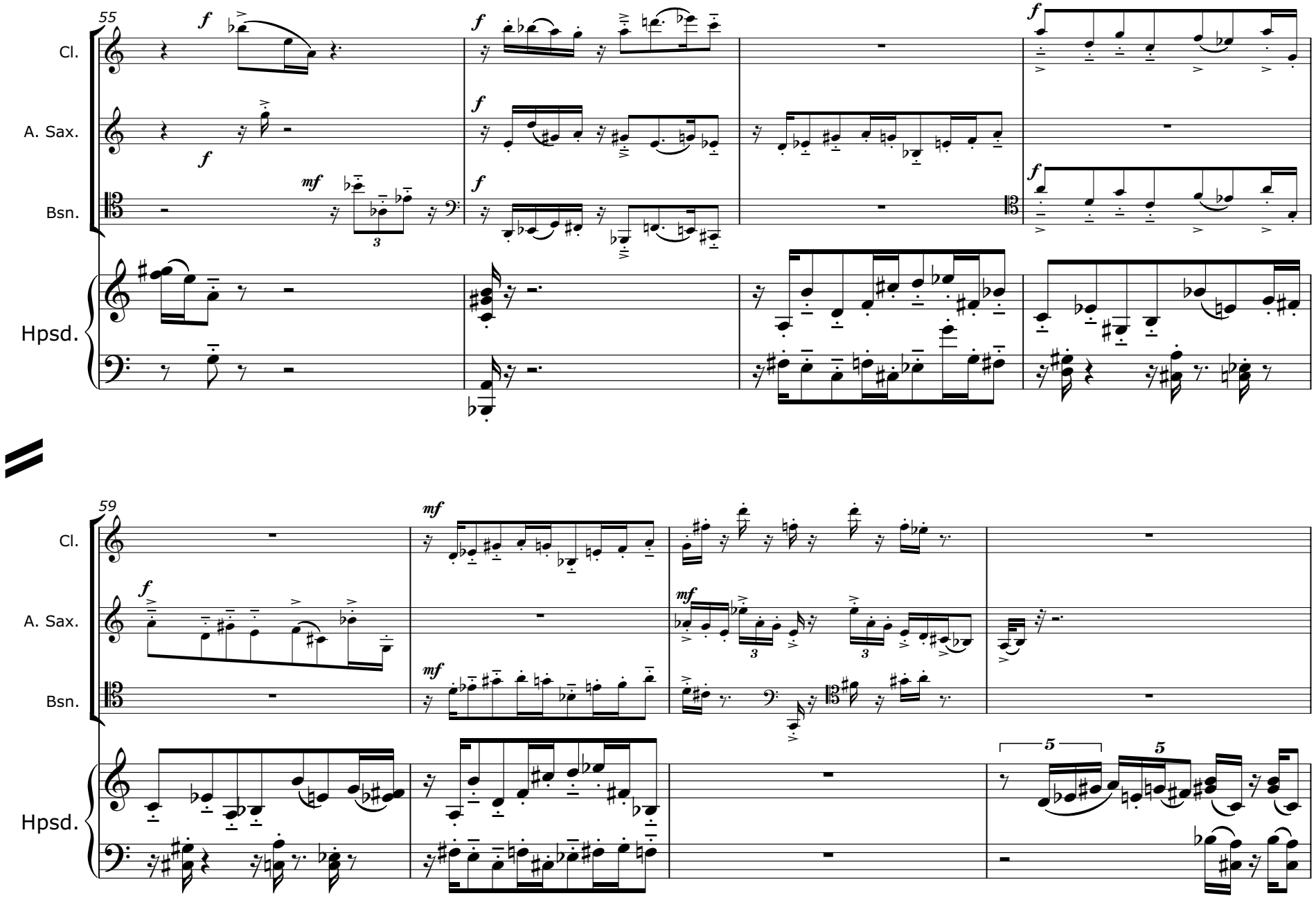

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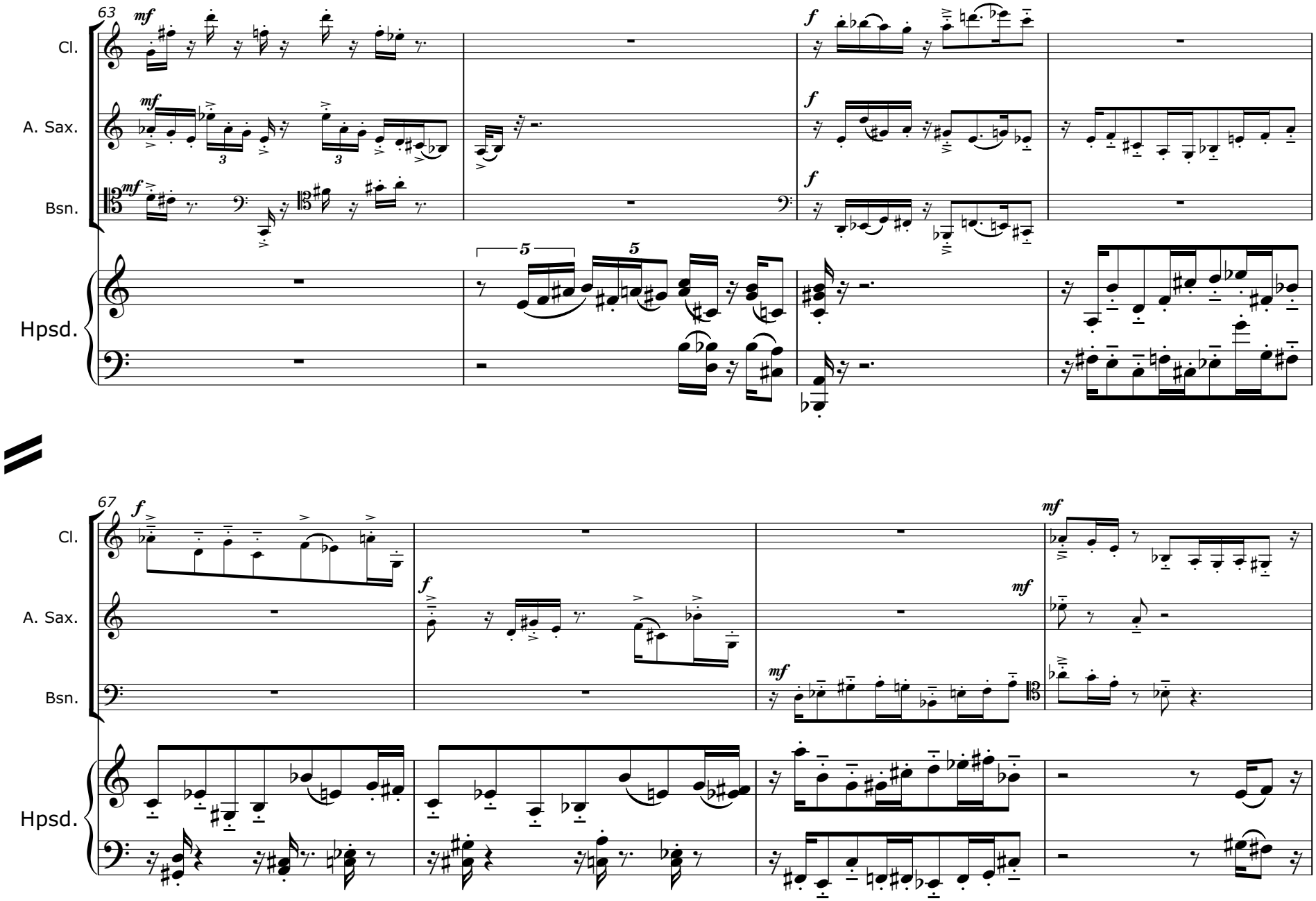

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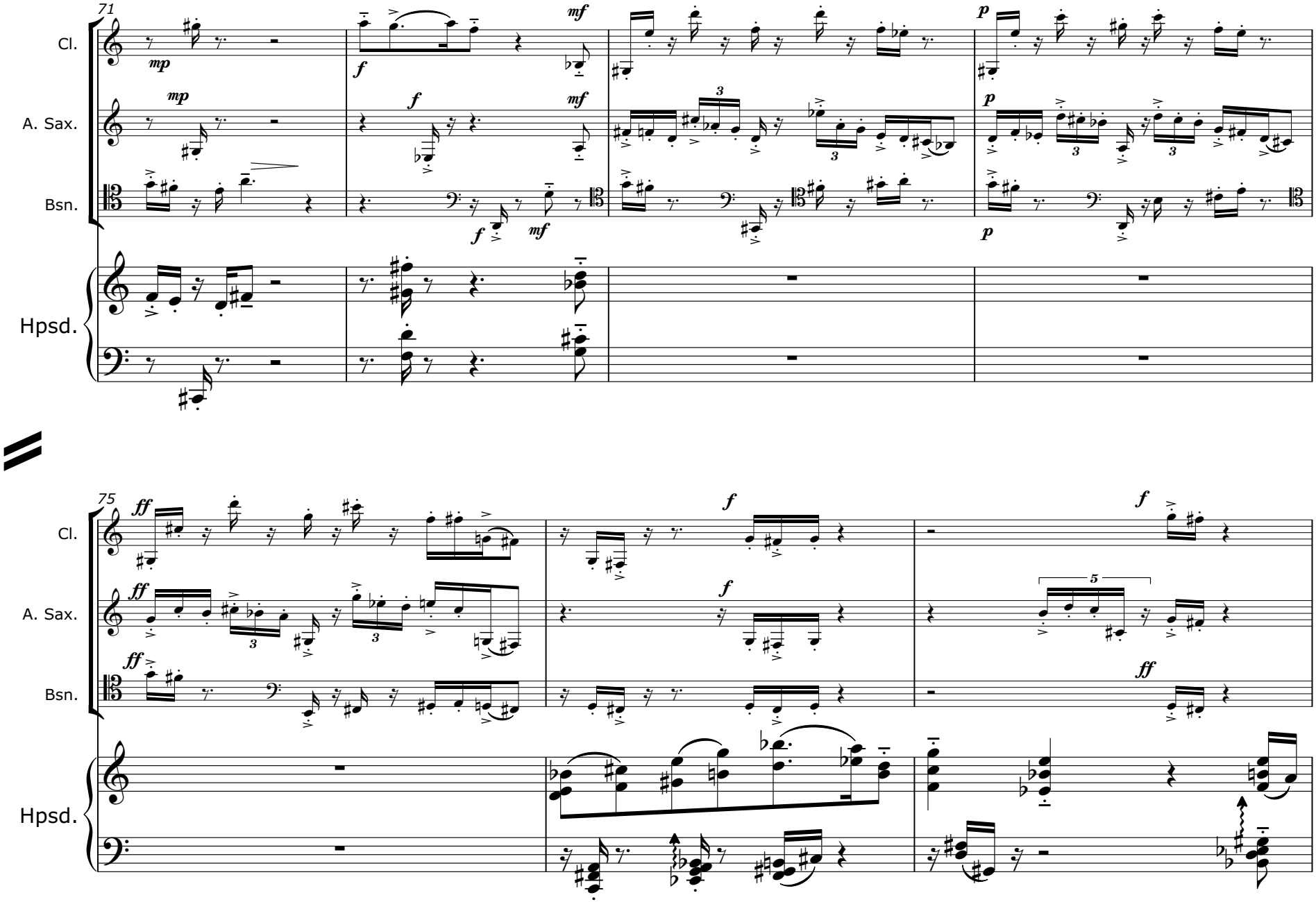

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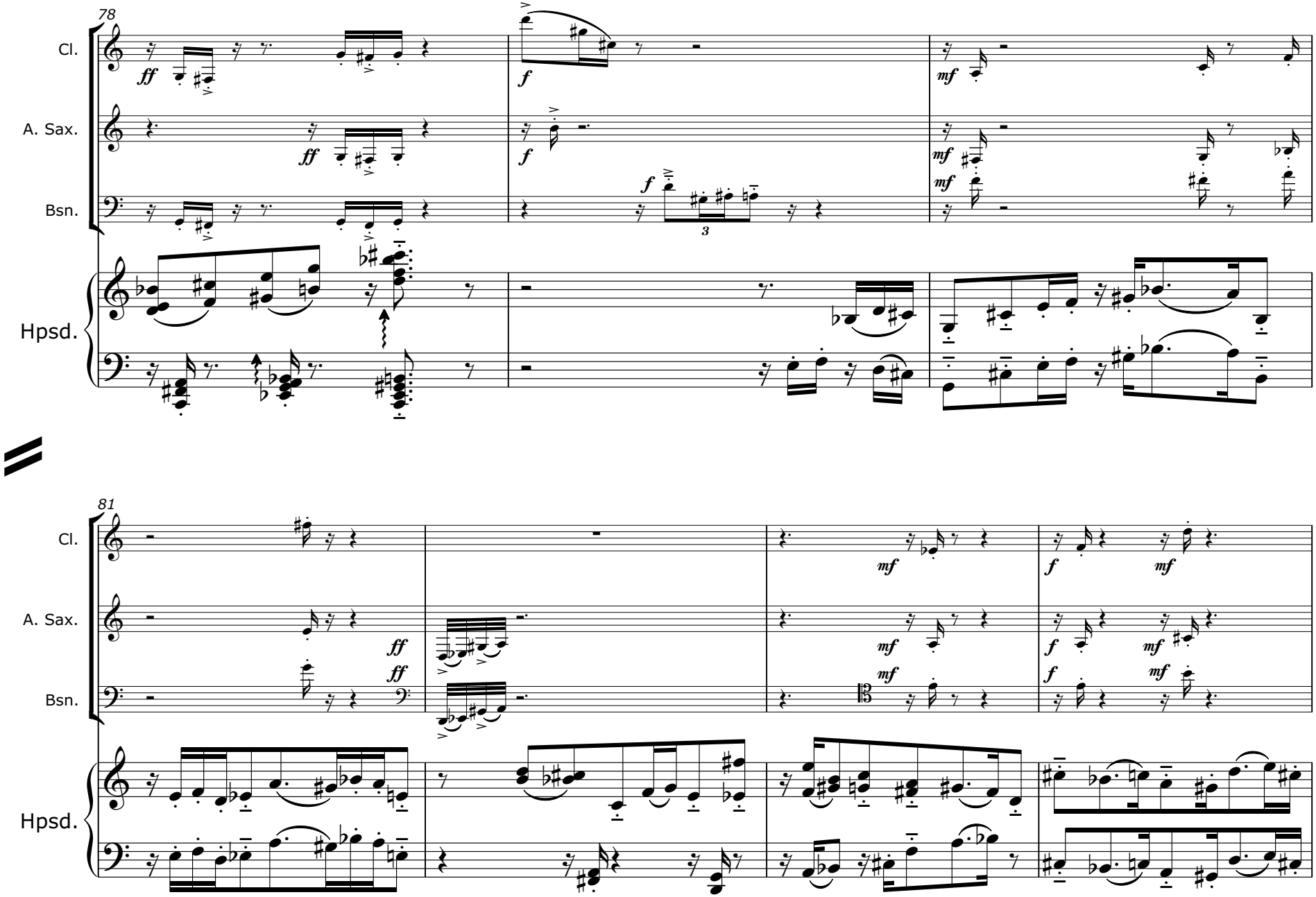

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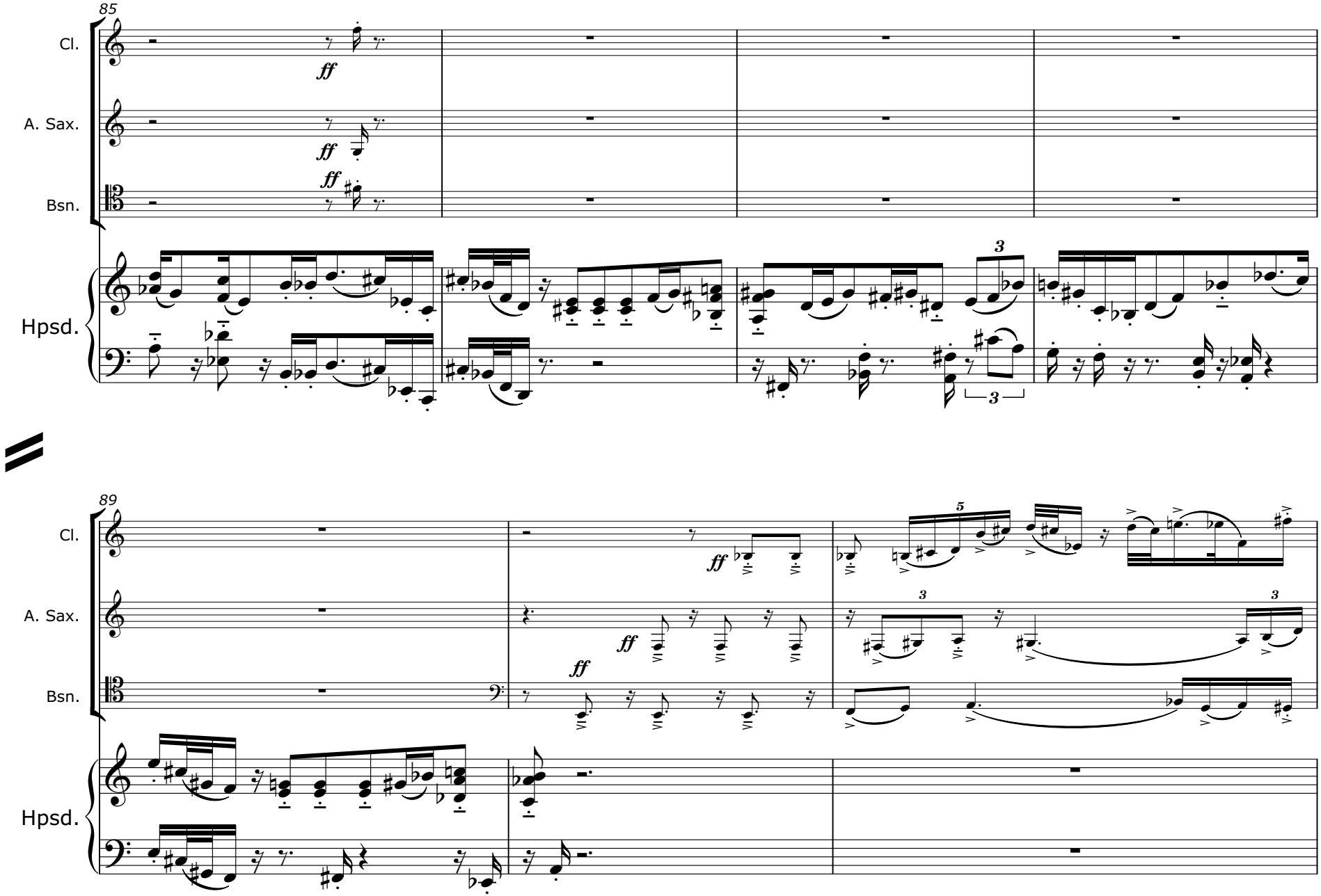

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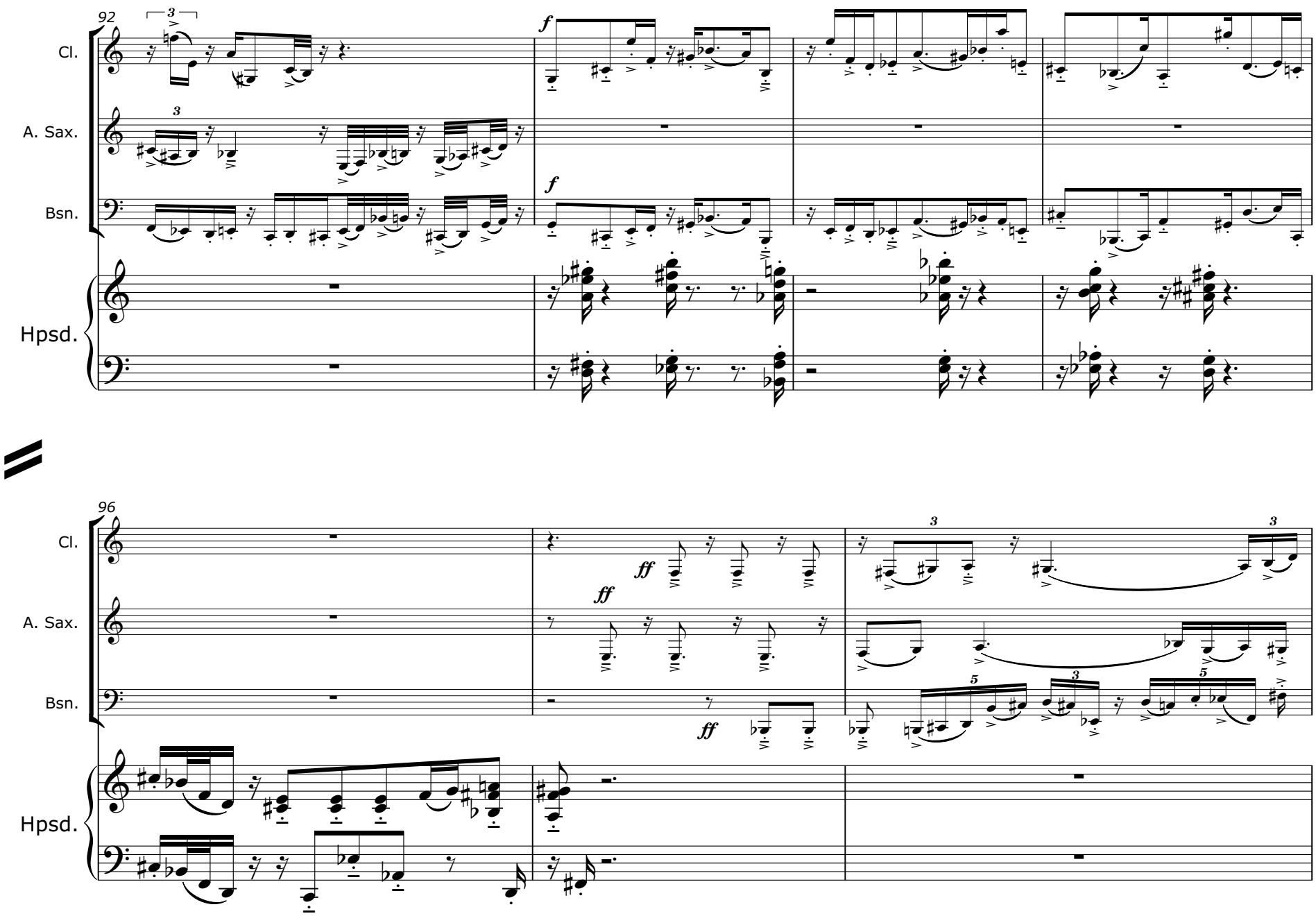

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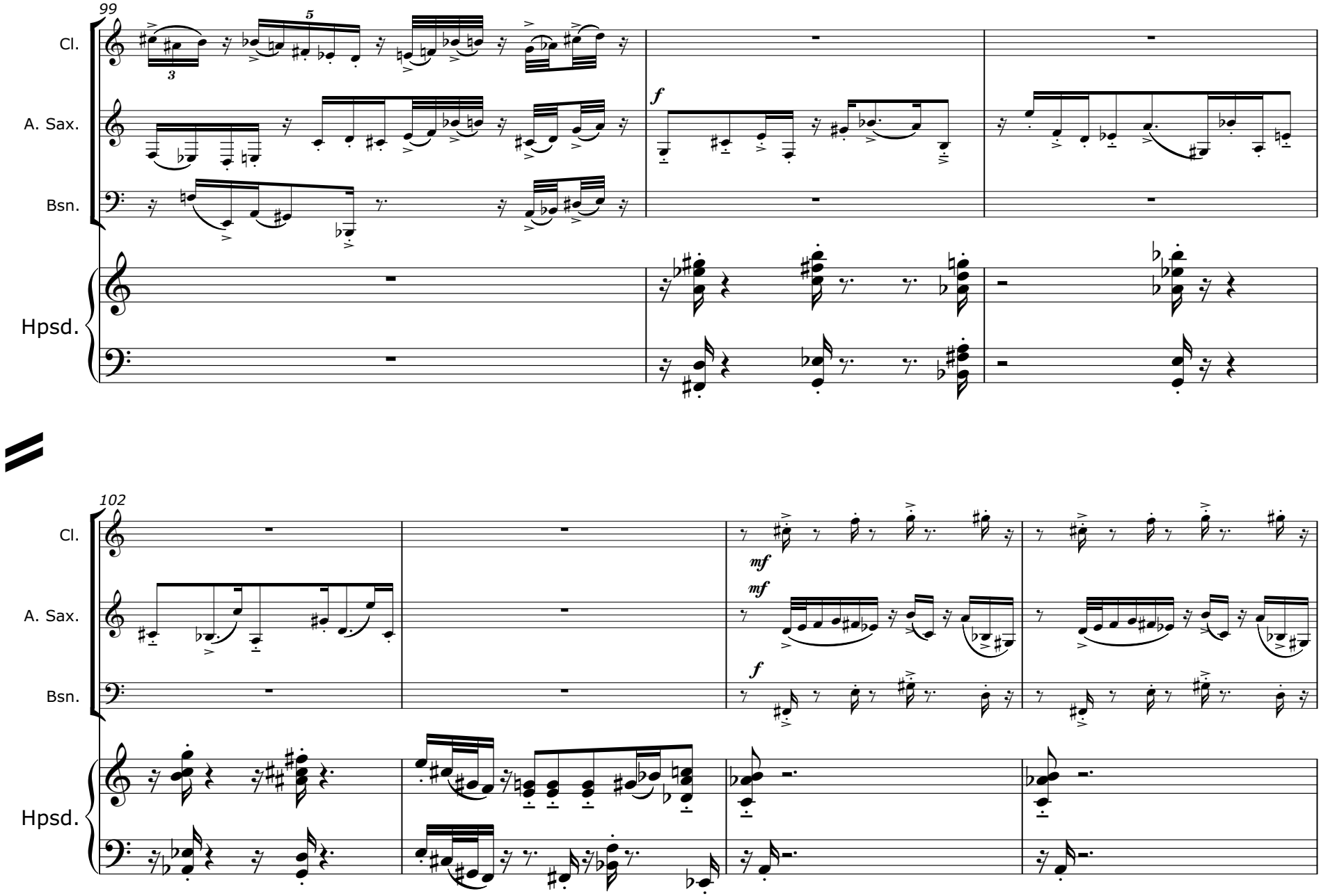

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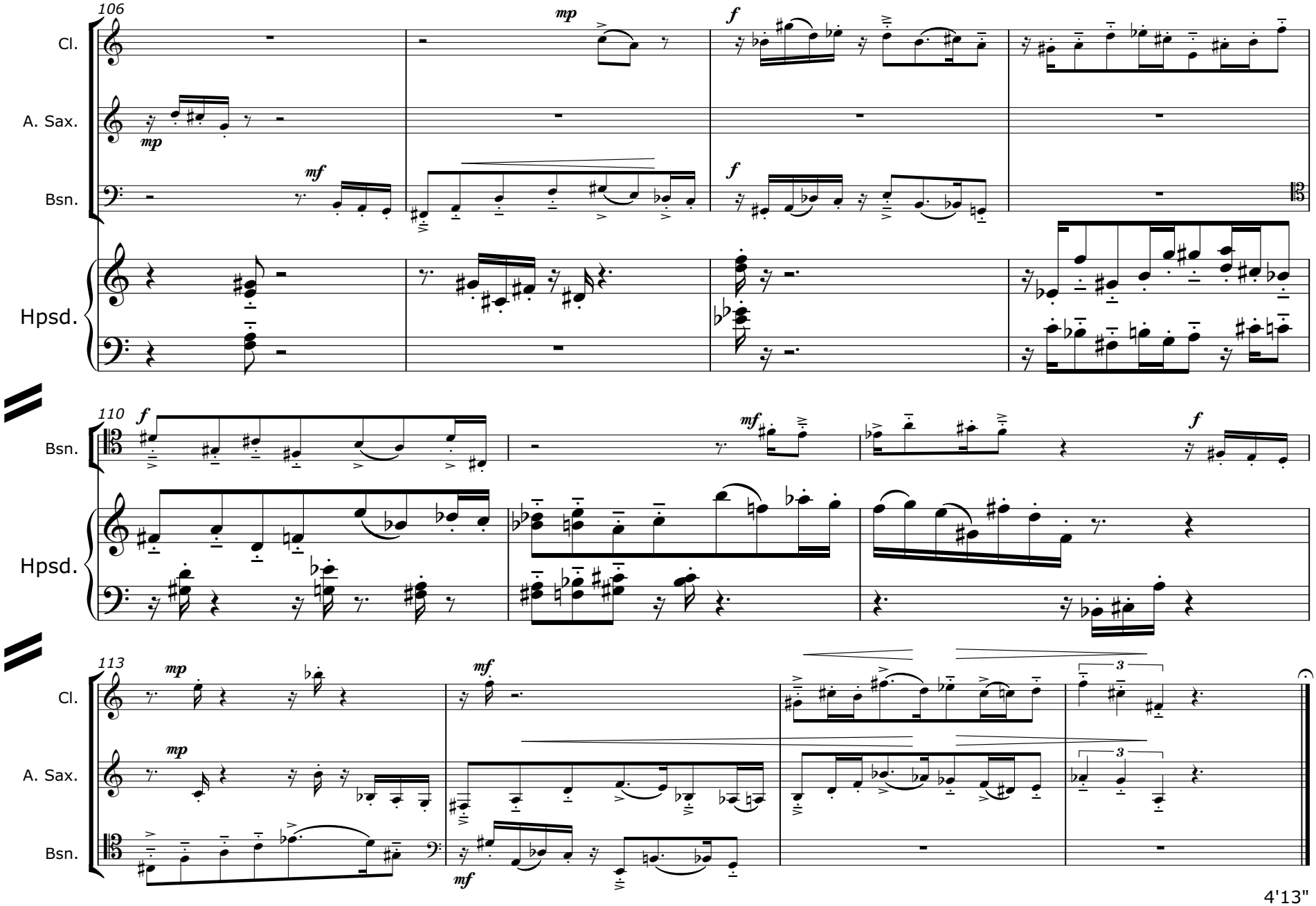

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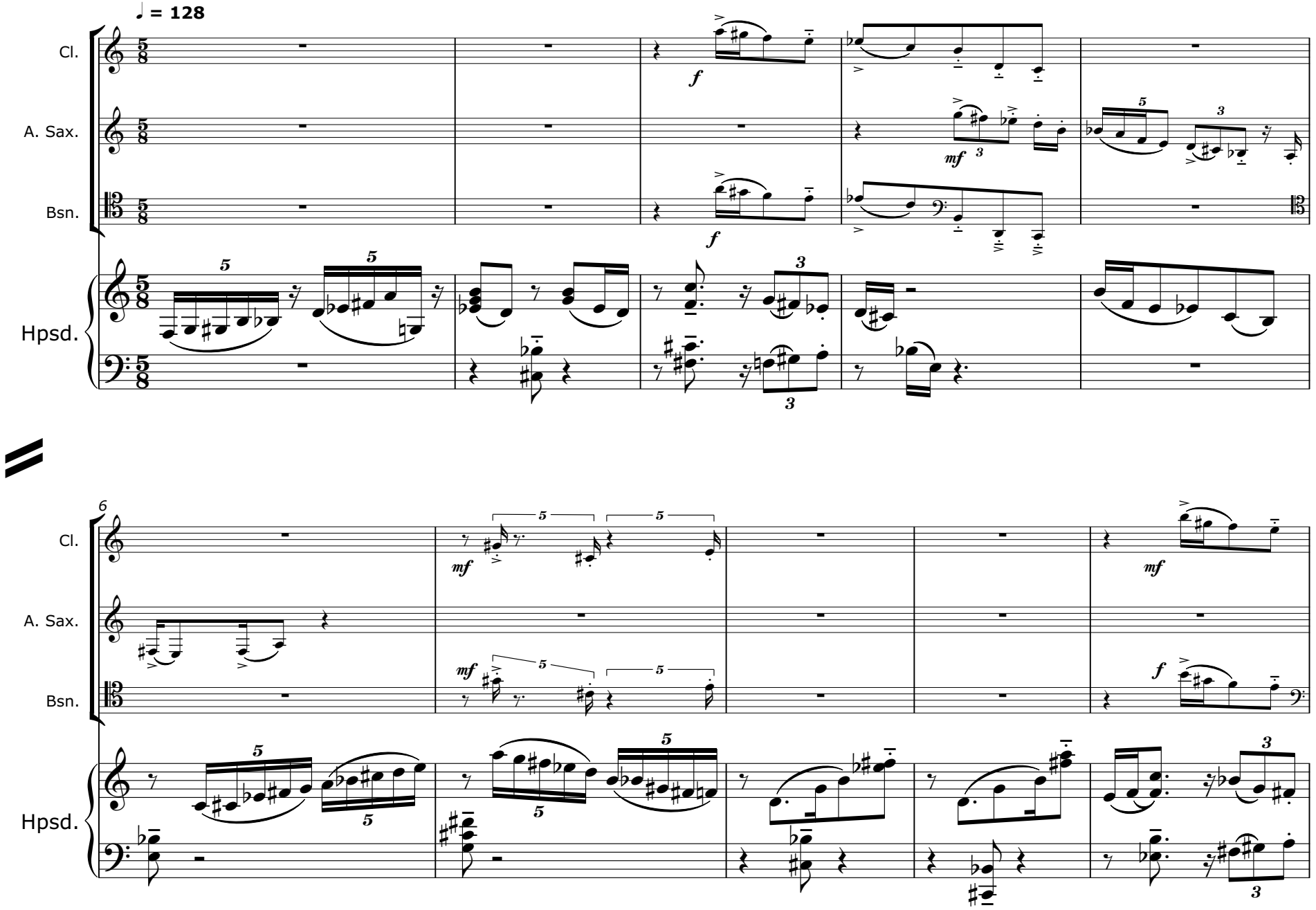

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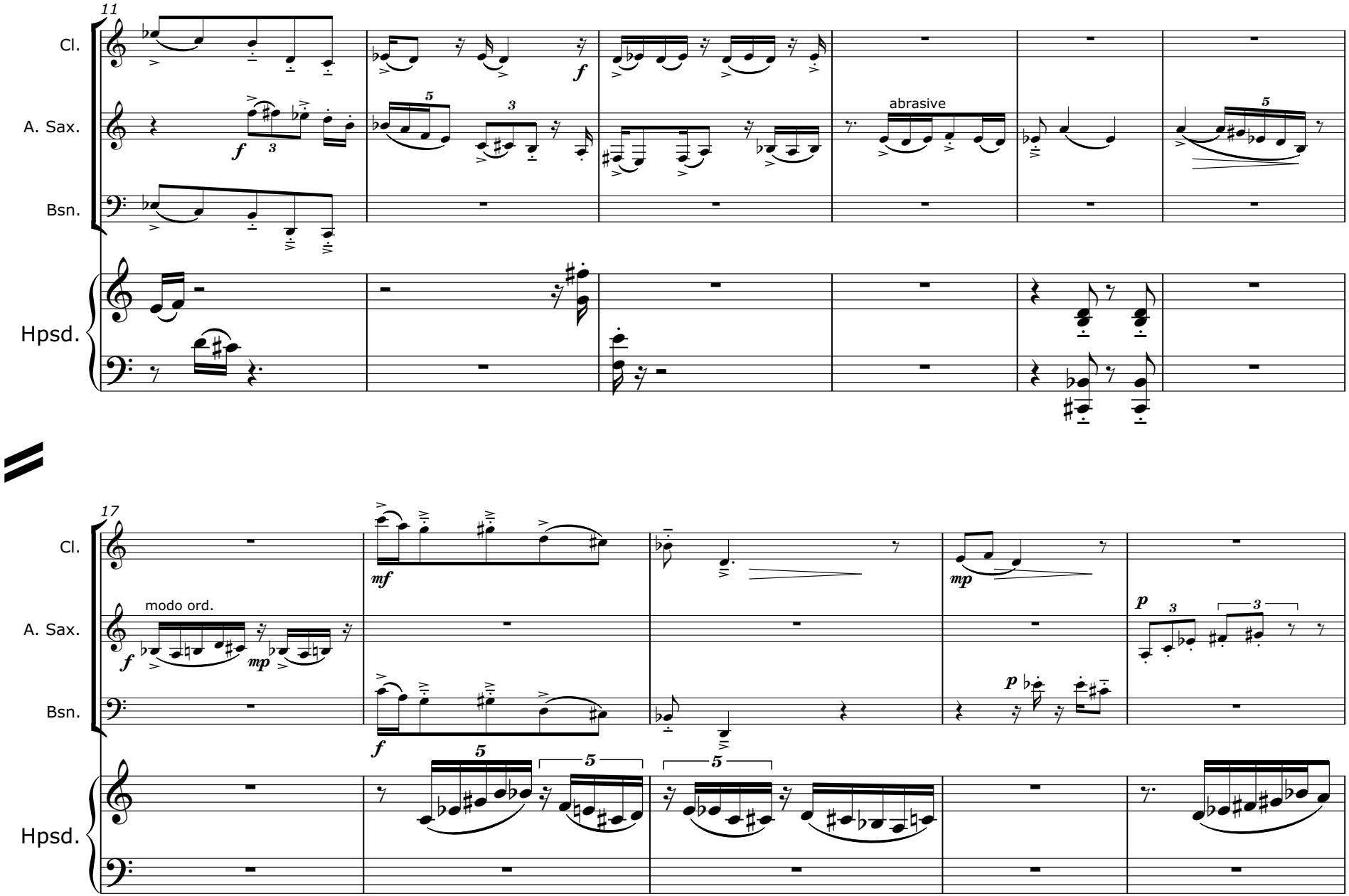

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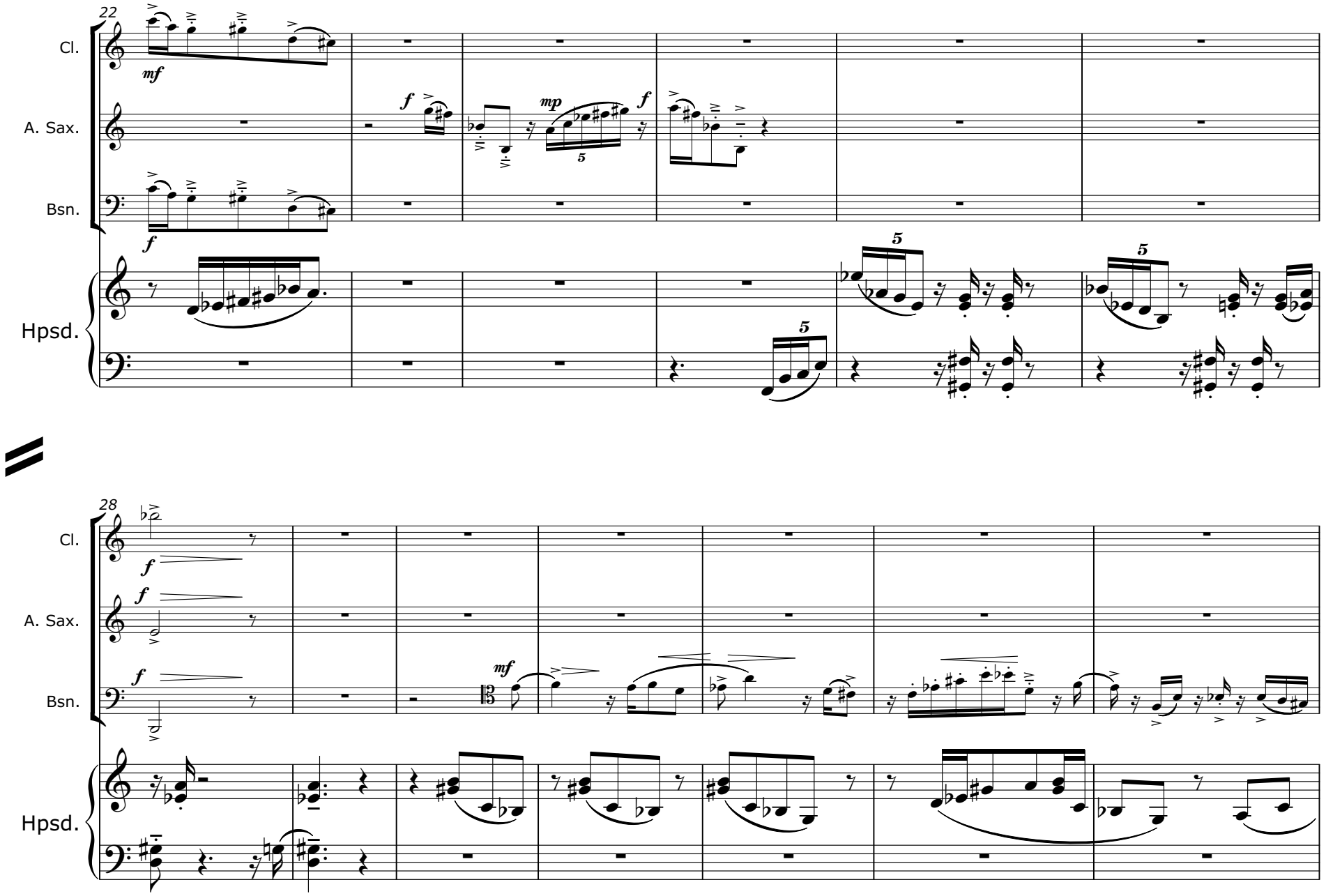

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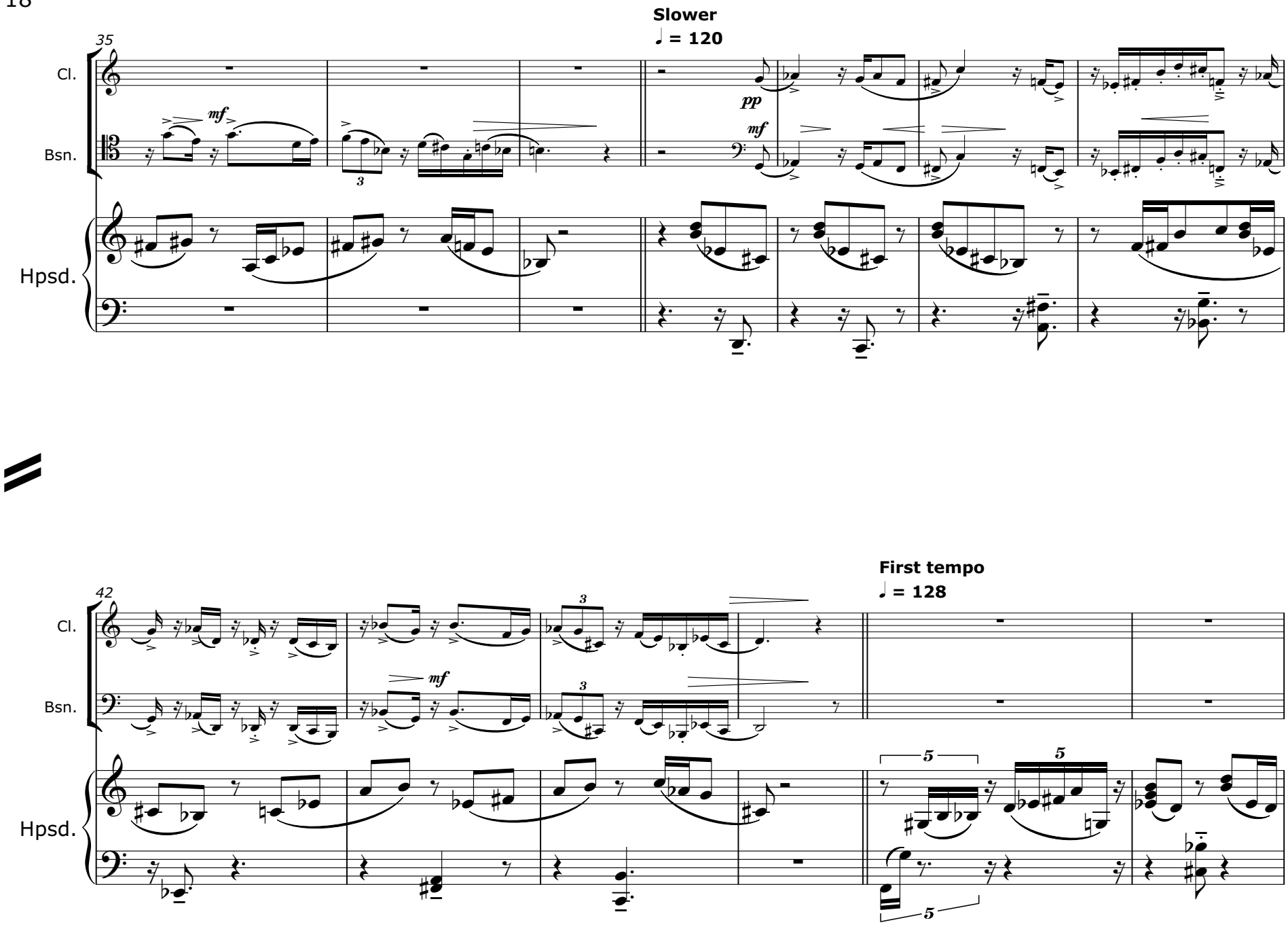

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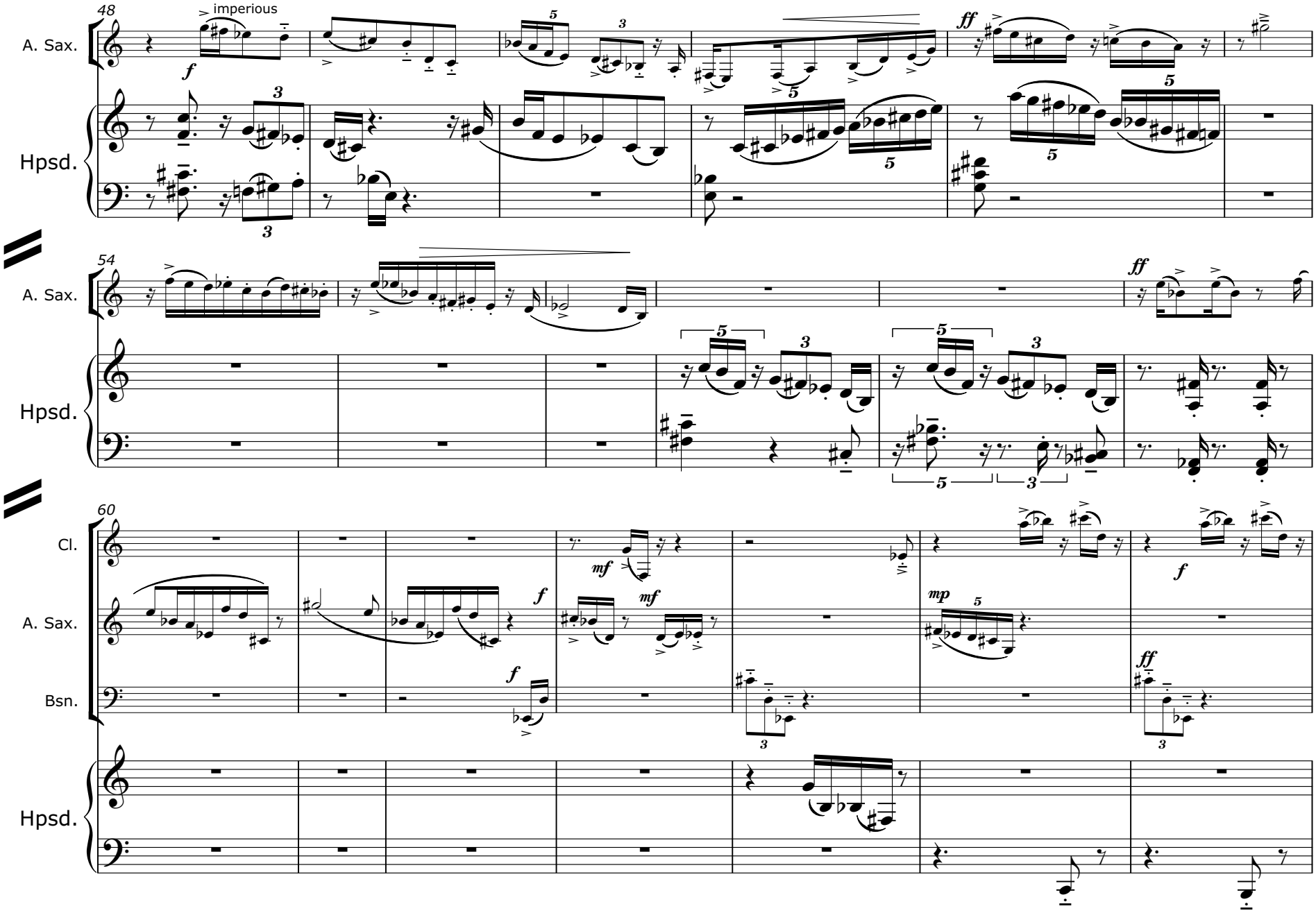

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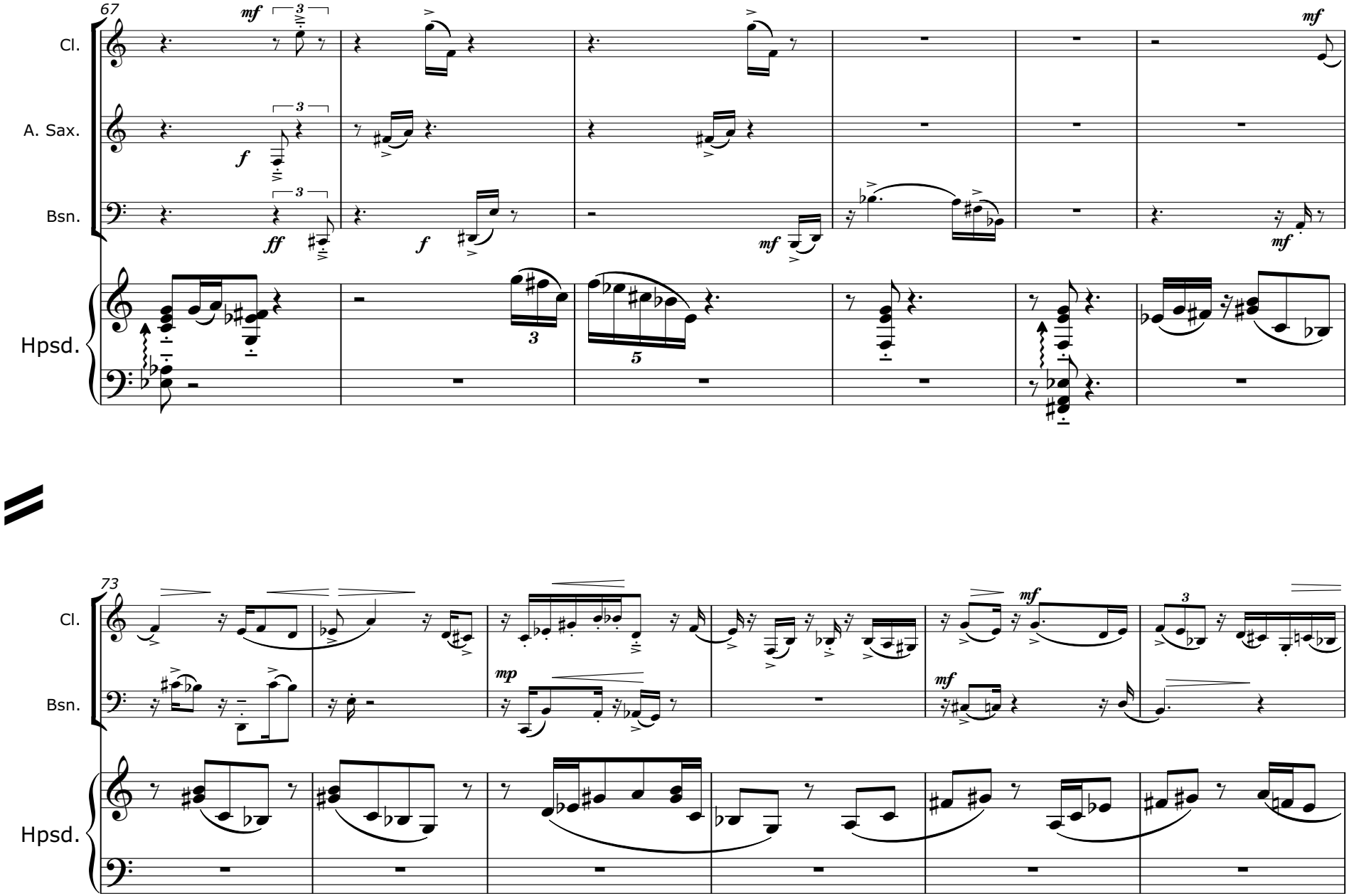

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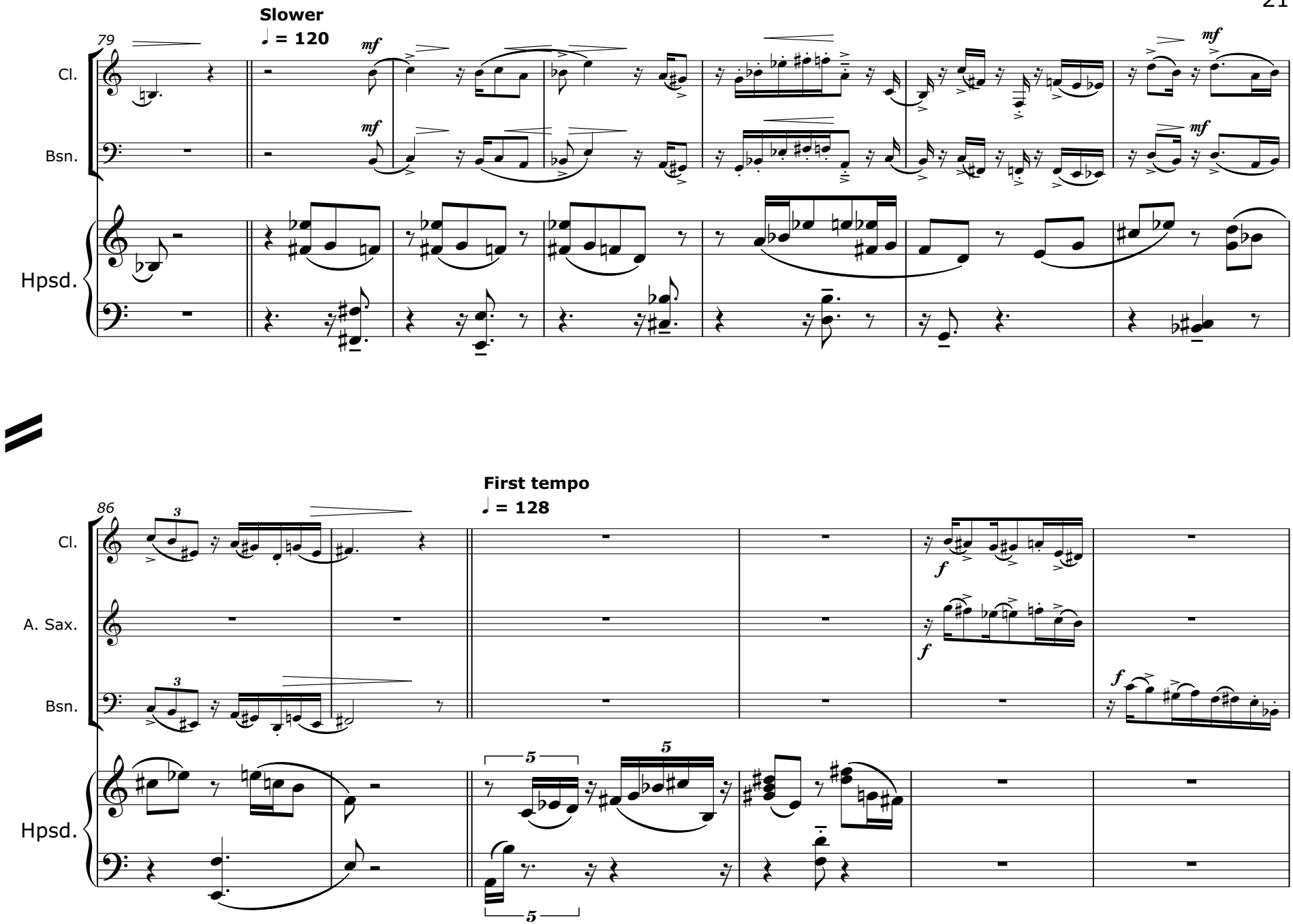

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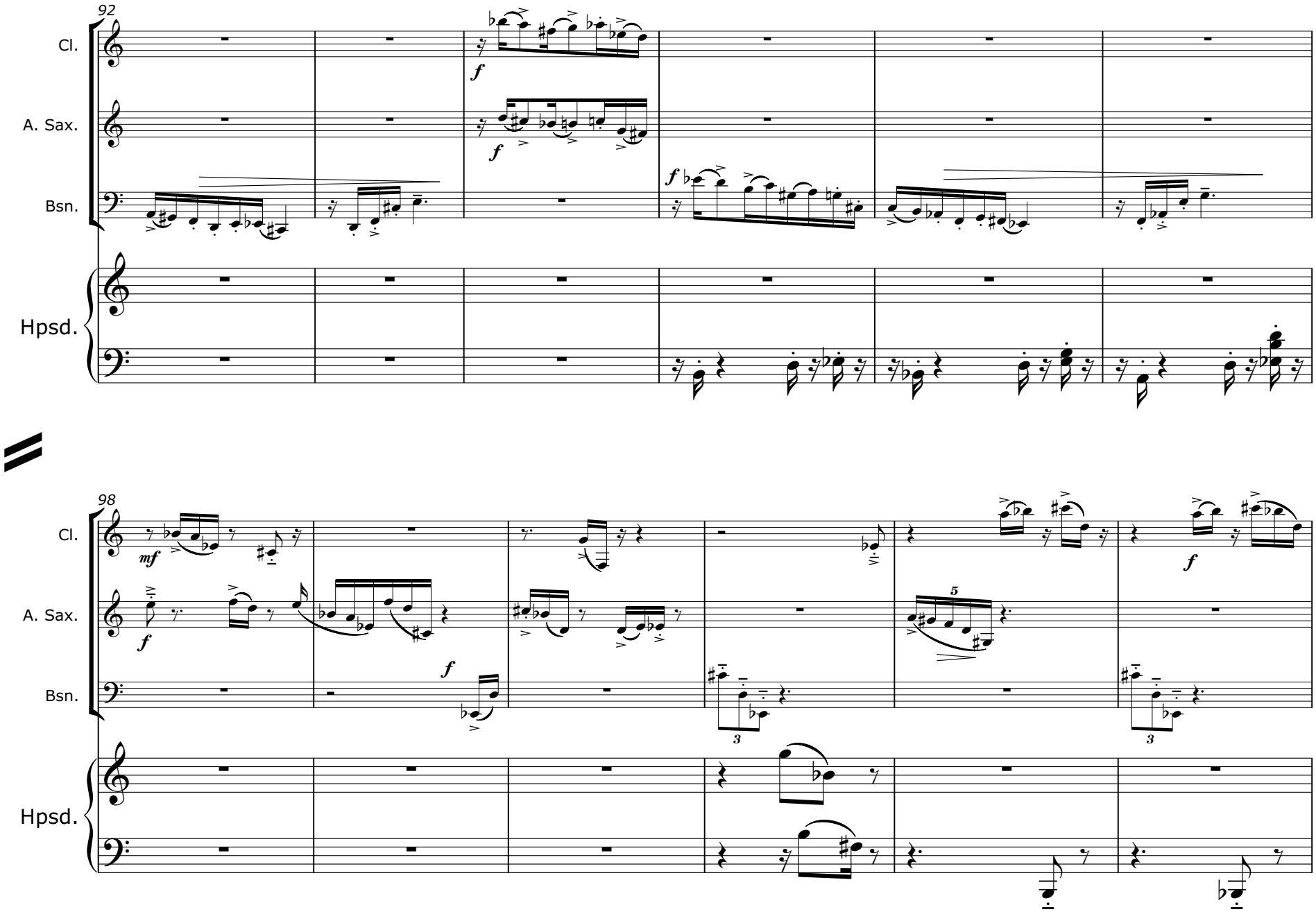

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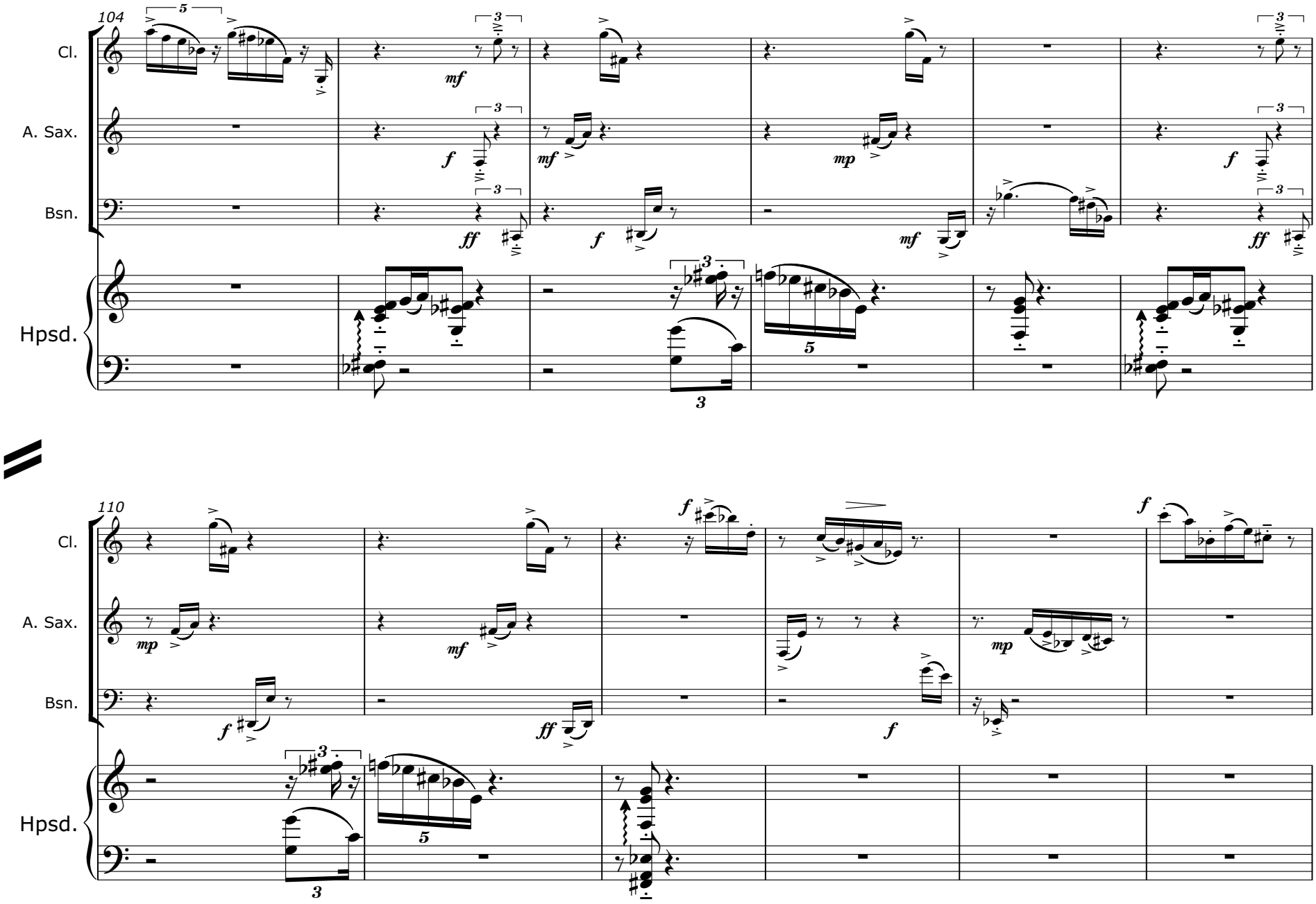

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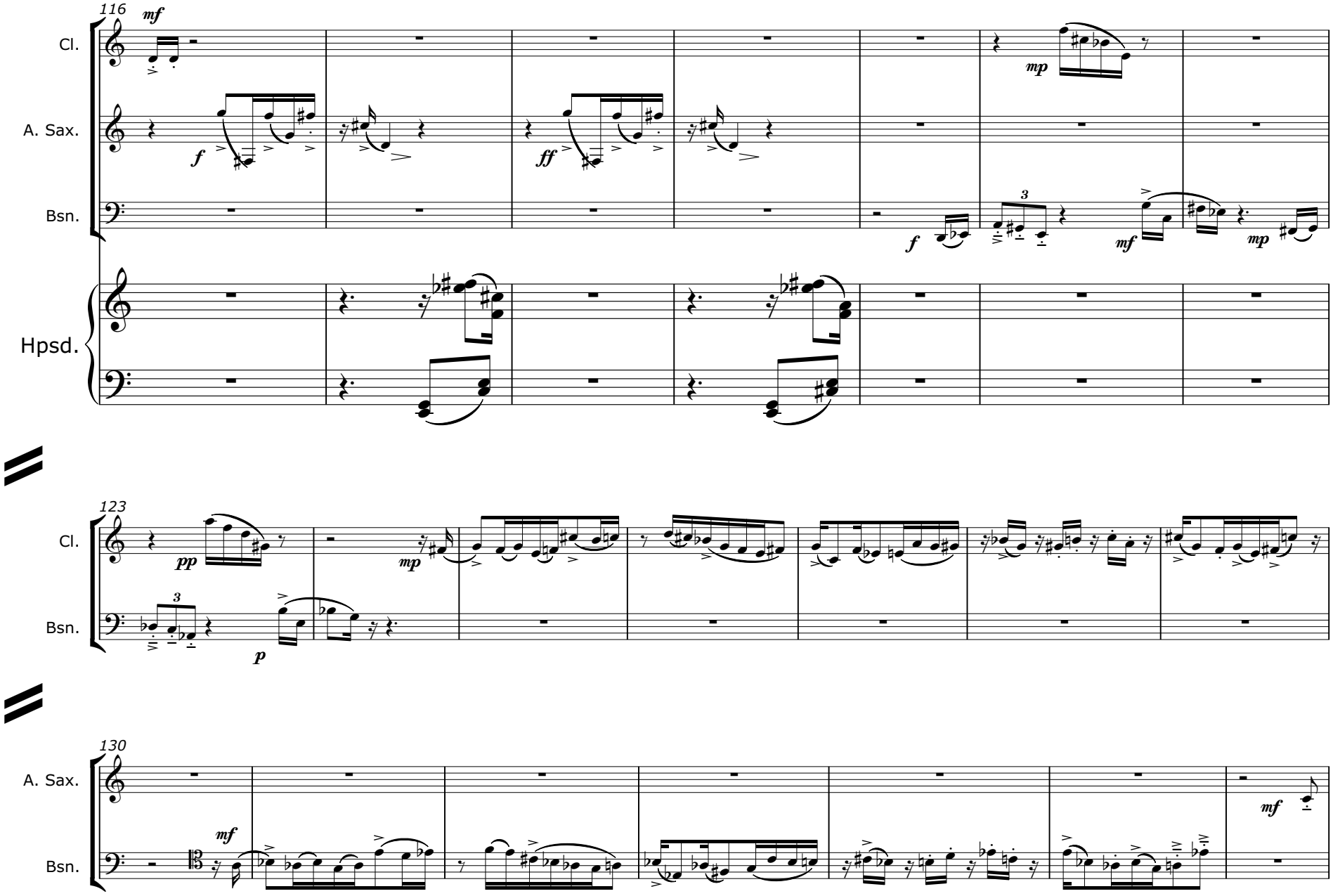

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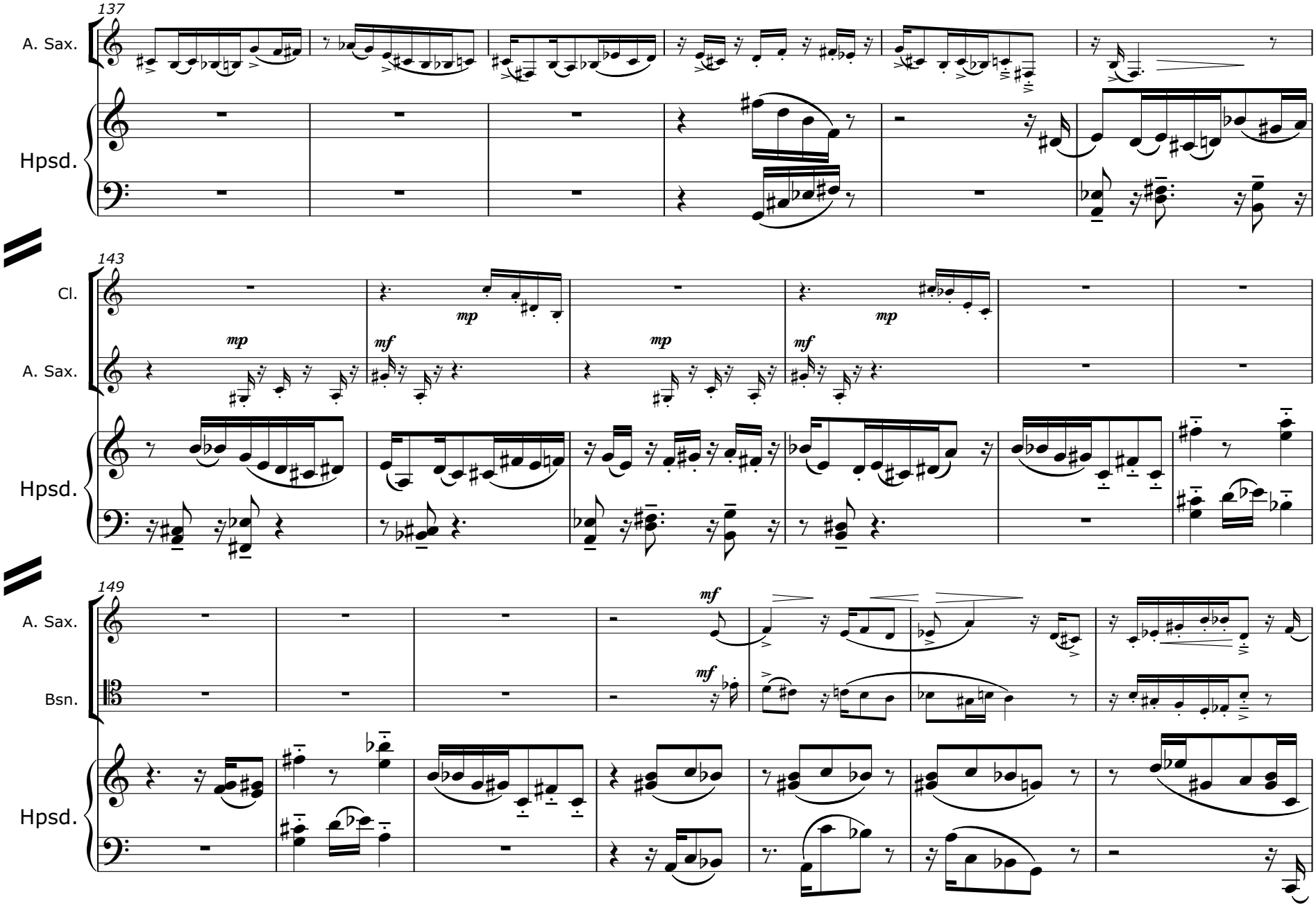

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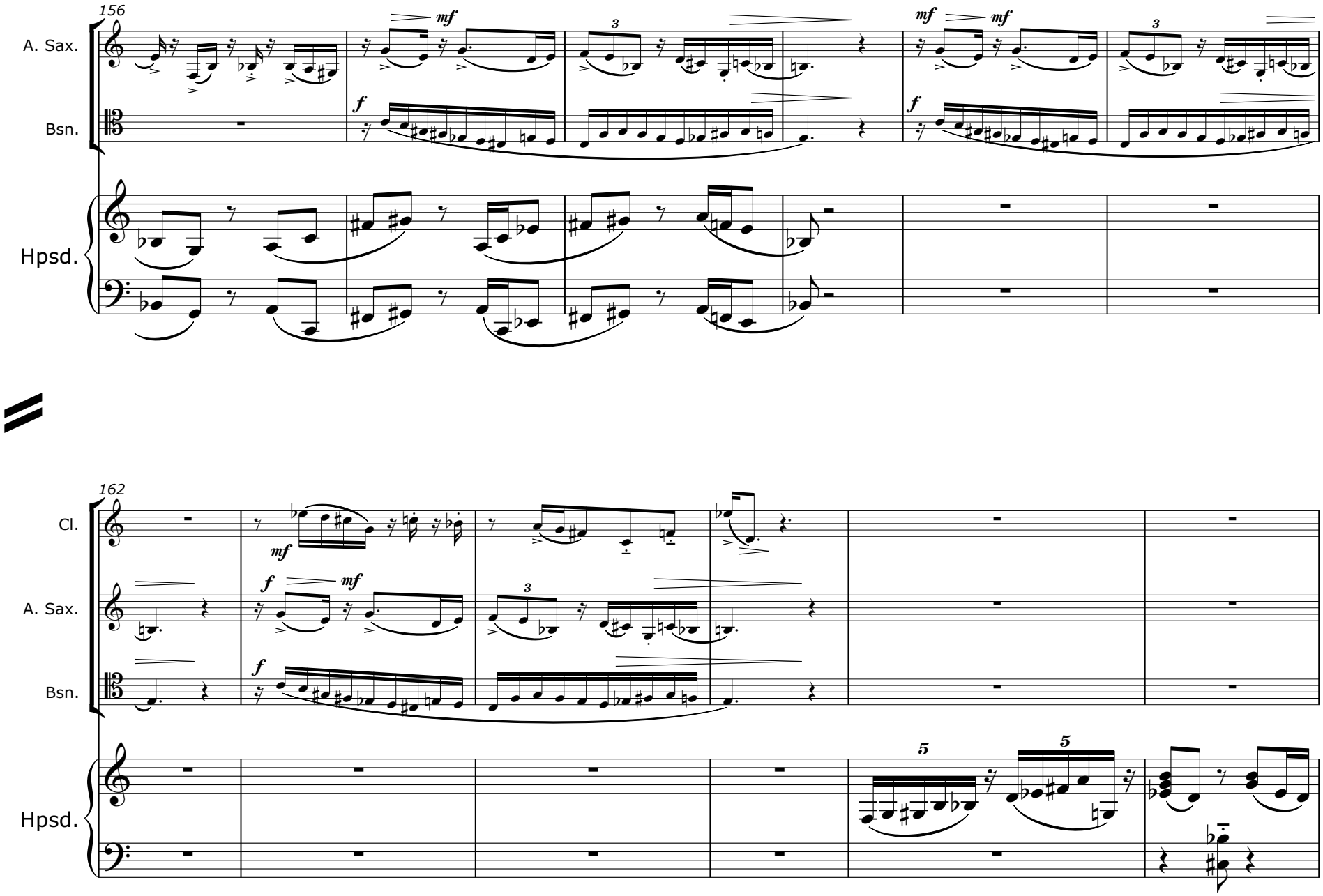

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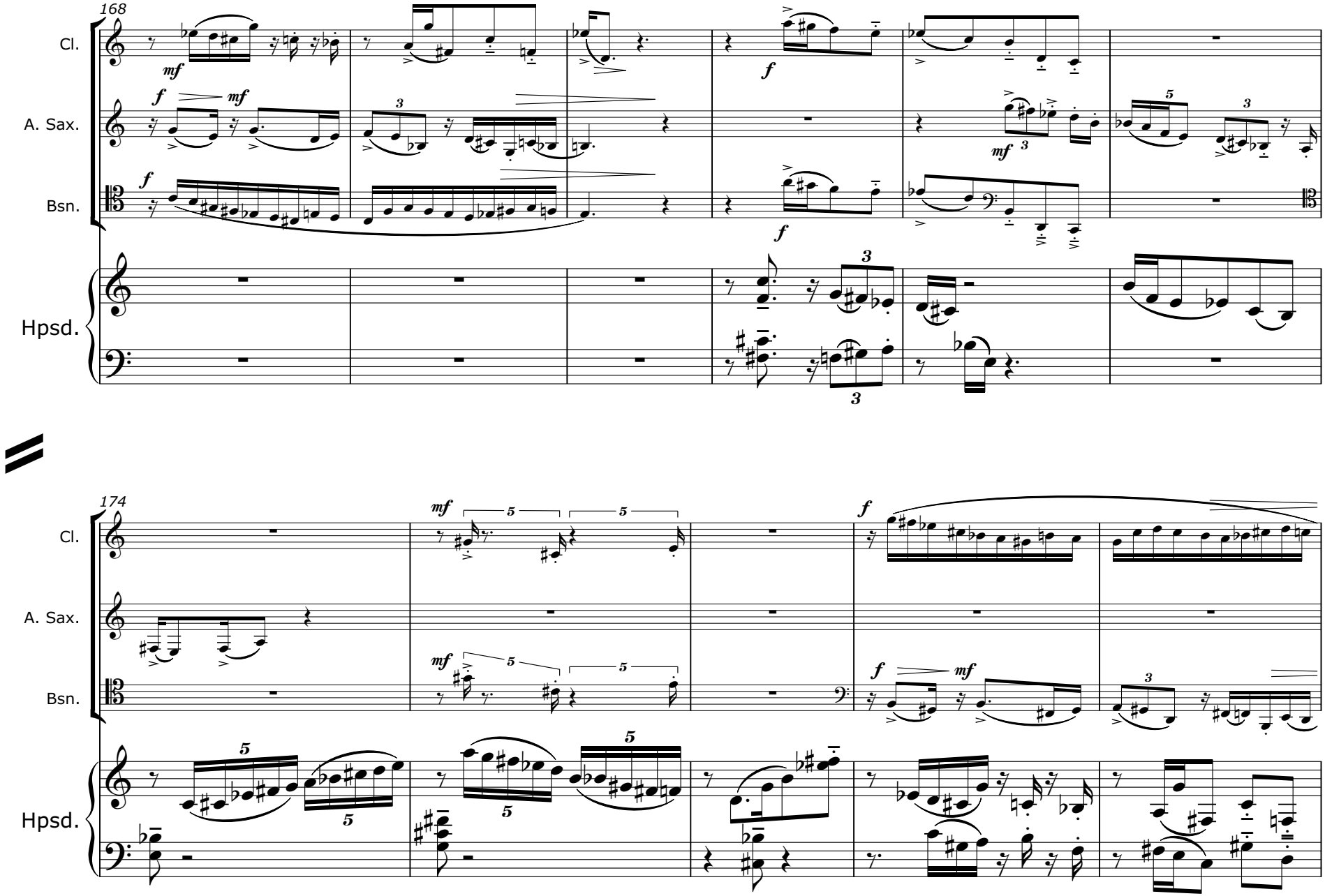

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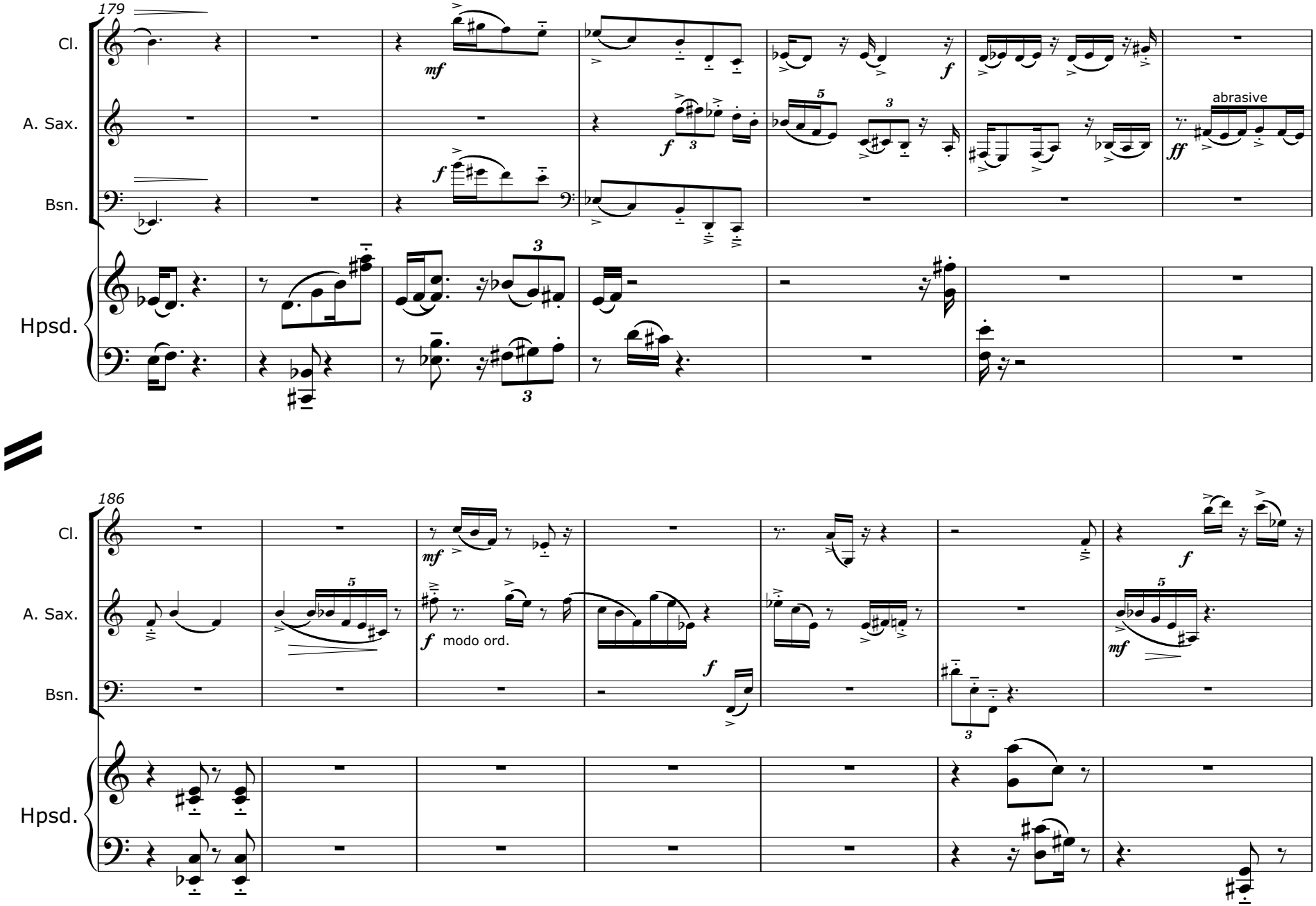

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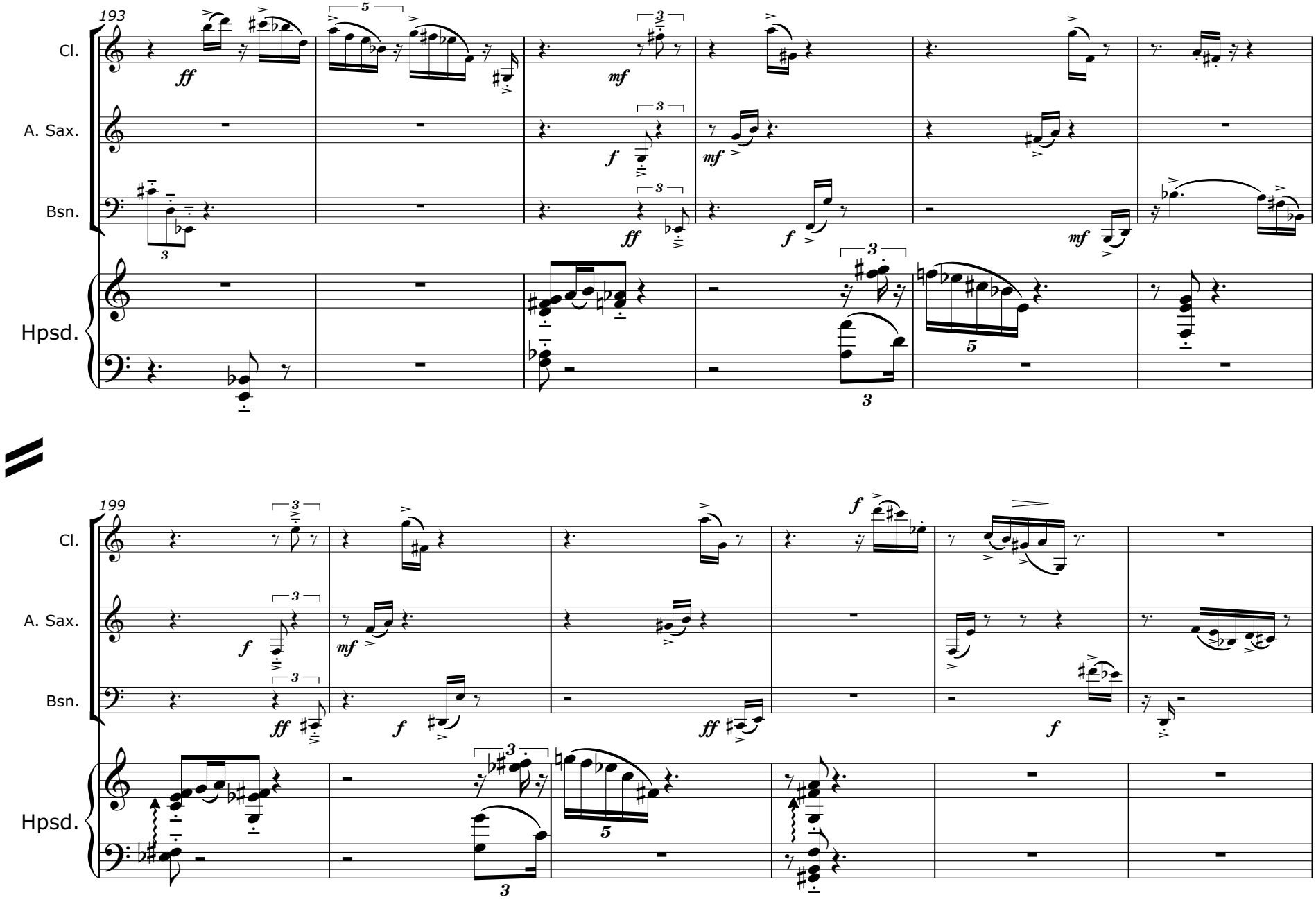

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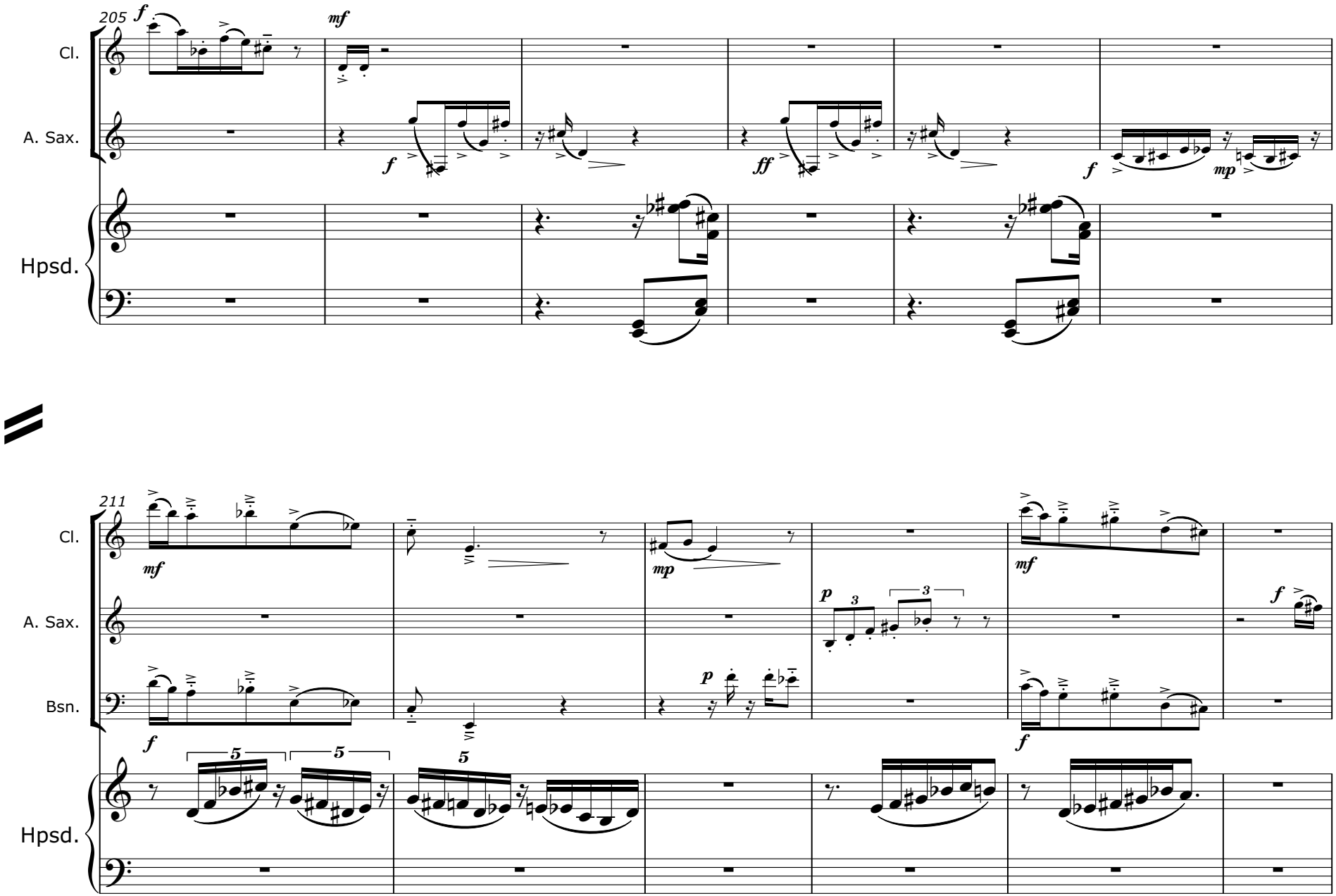

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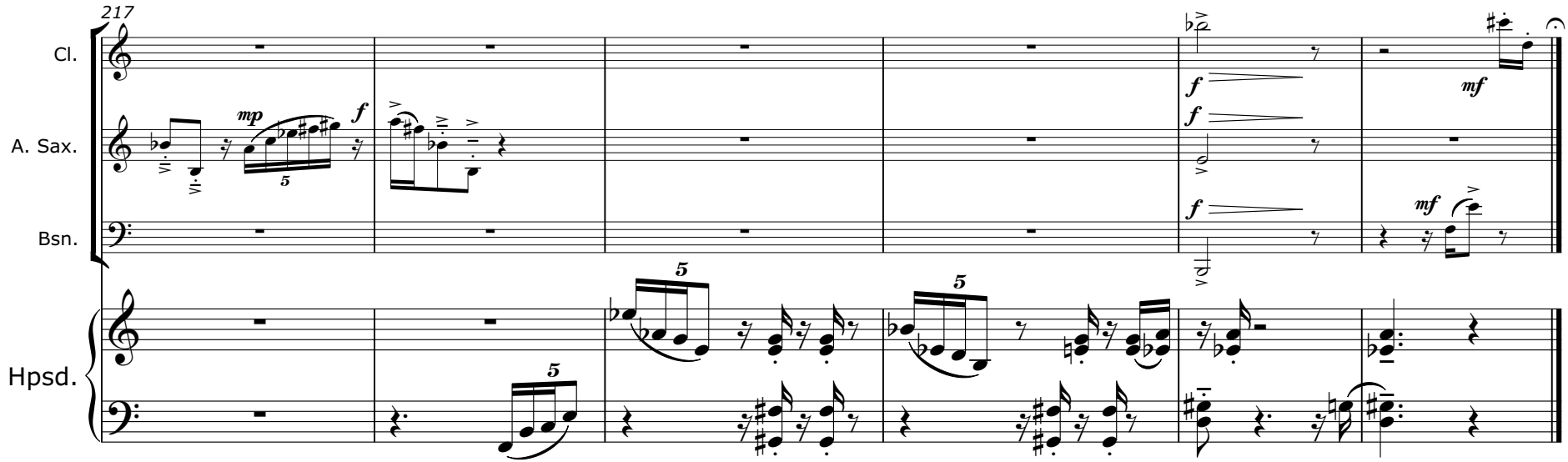

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Modsefa Scur

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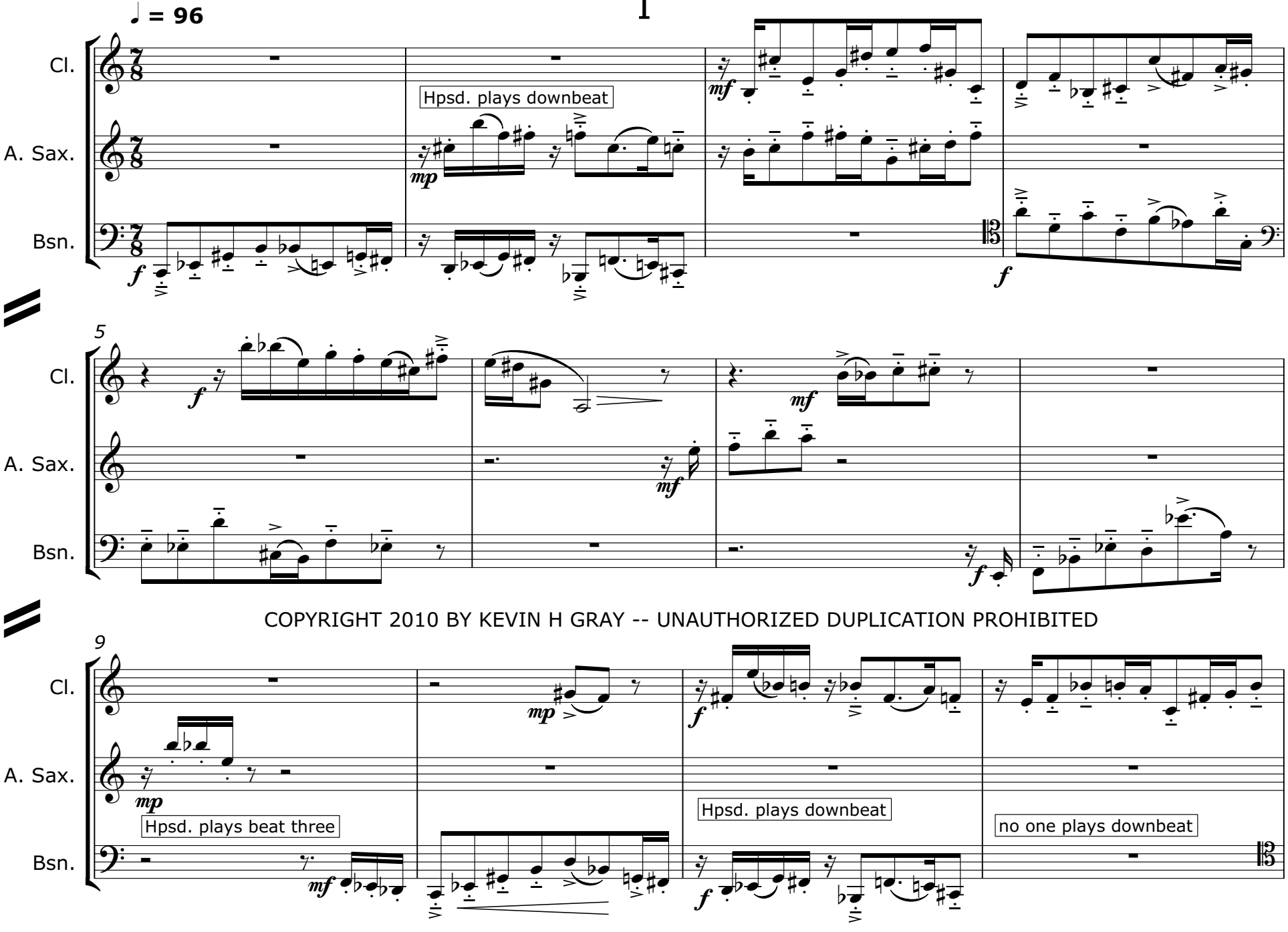

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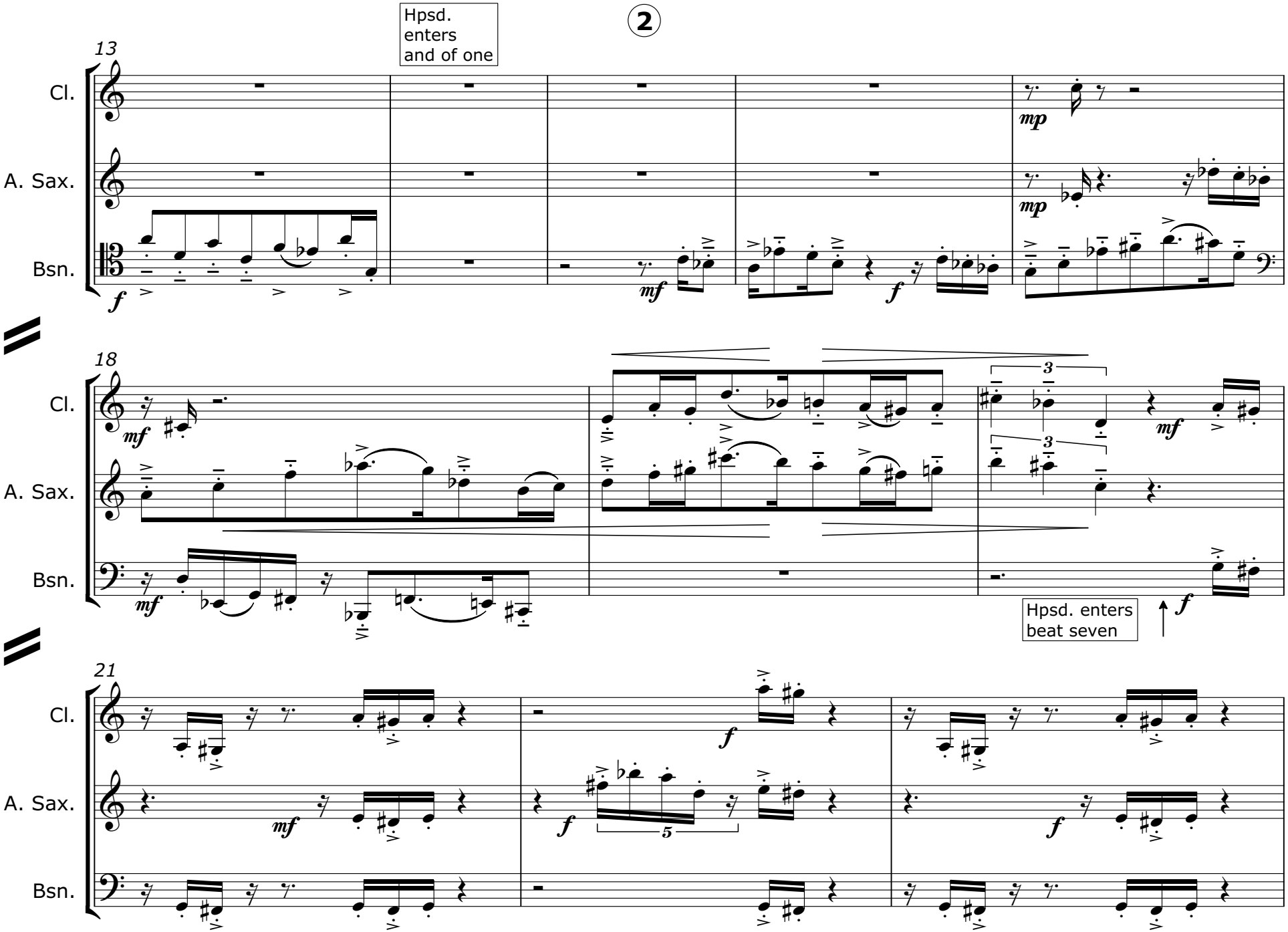

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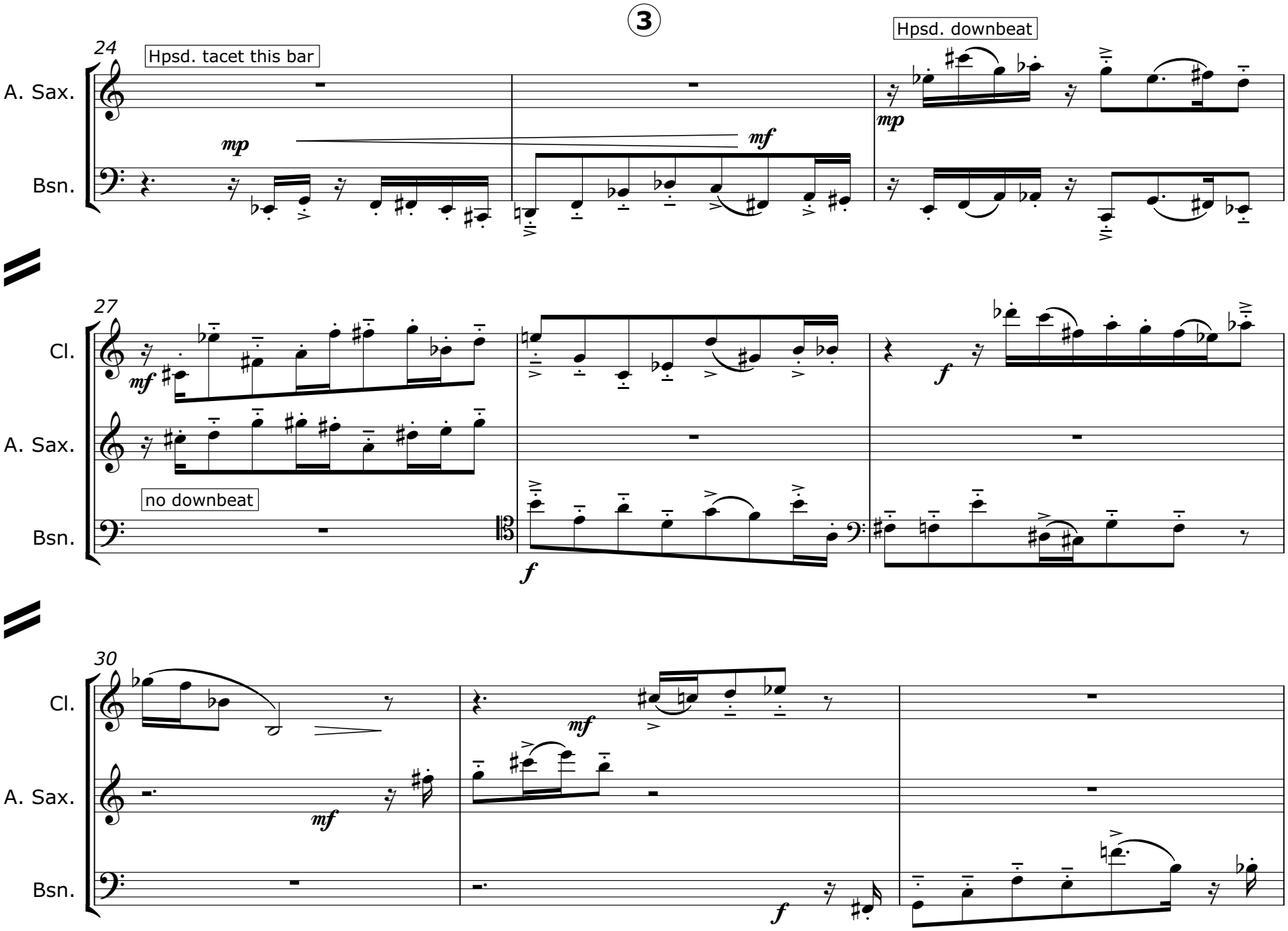

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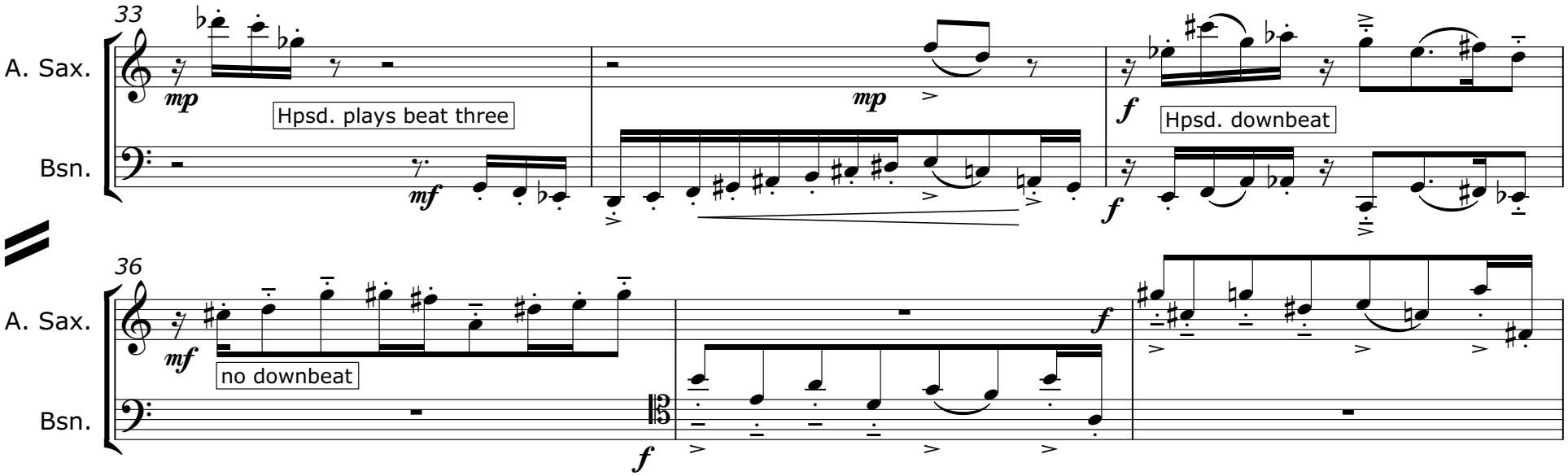

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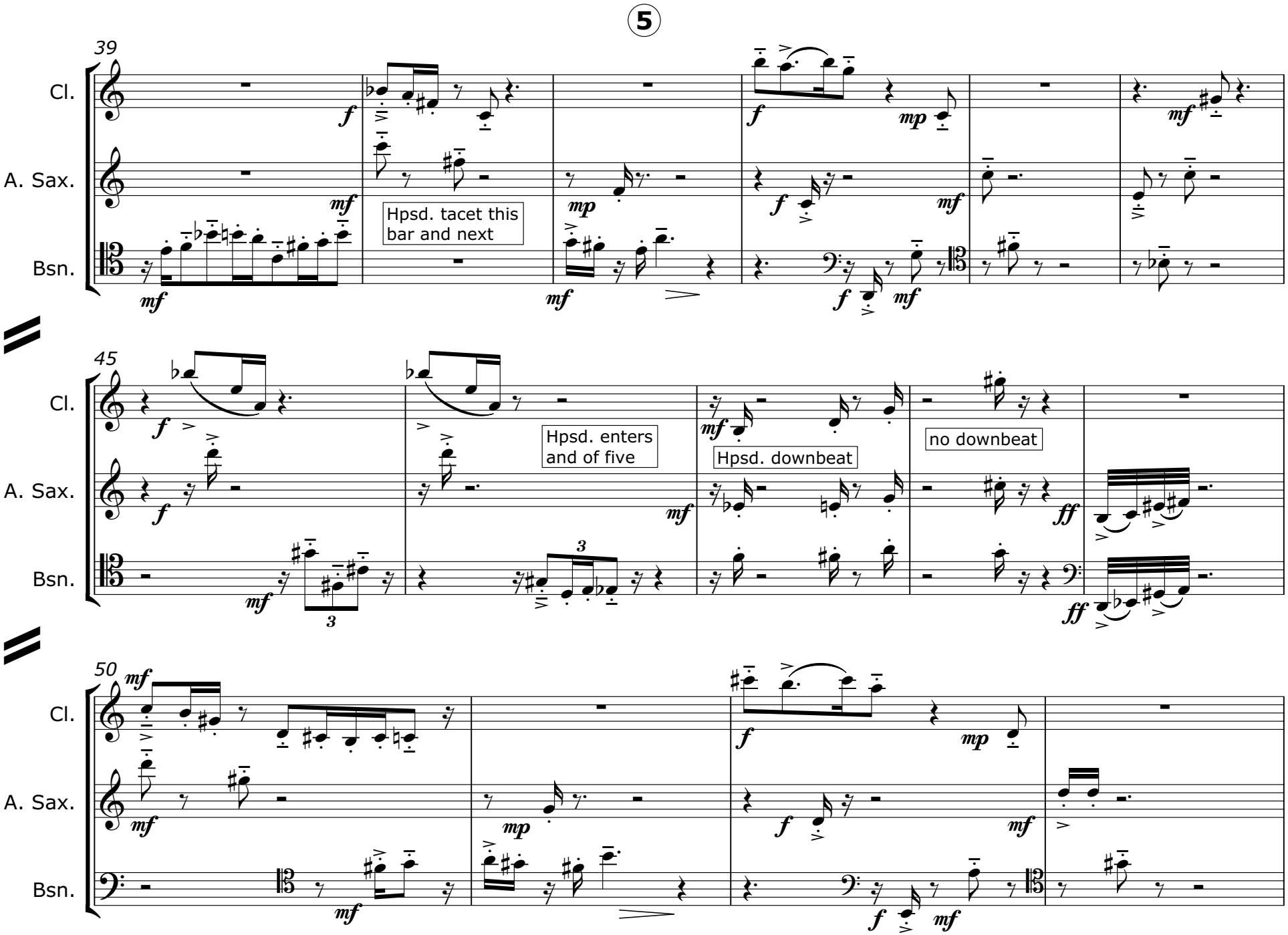

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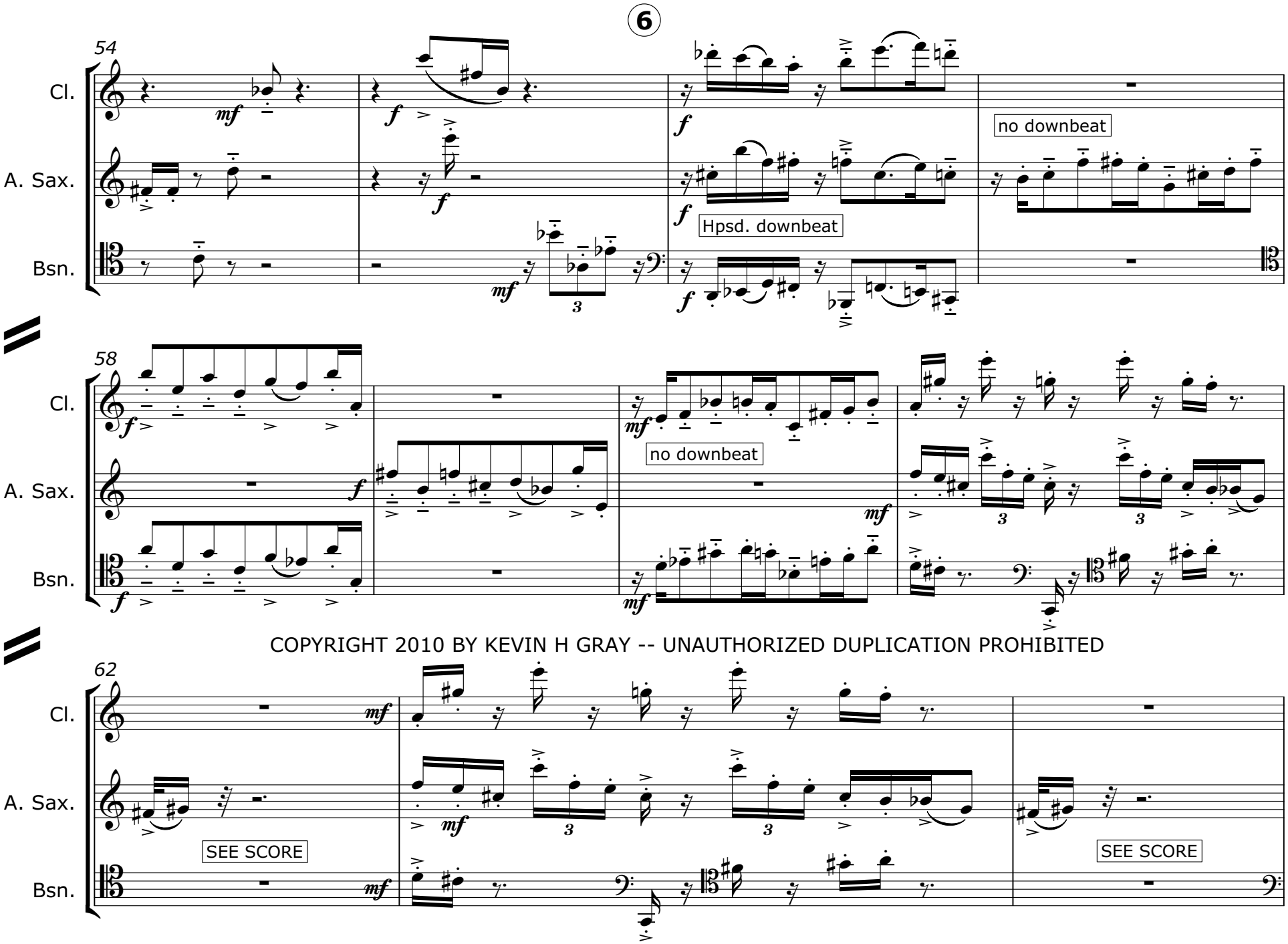

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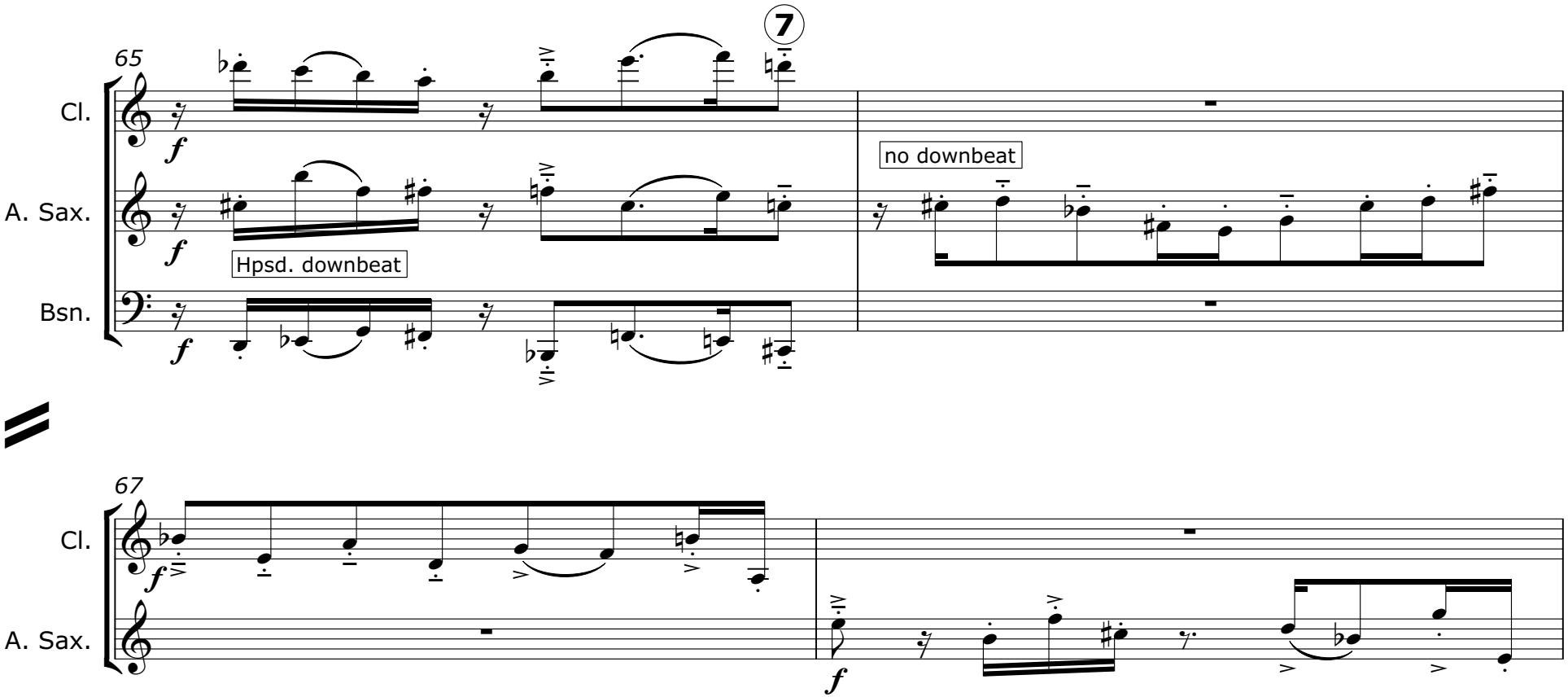

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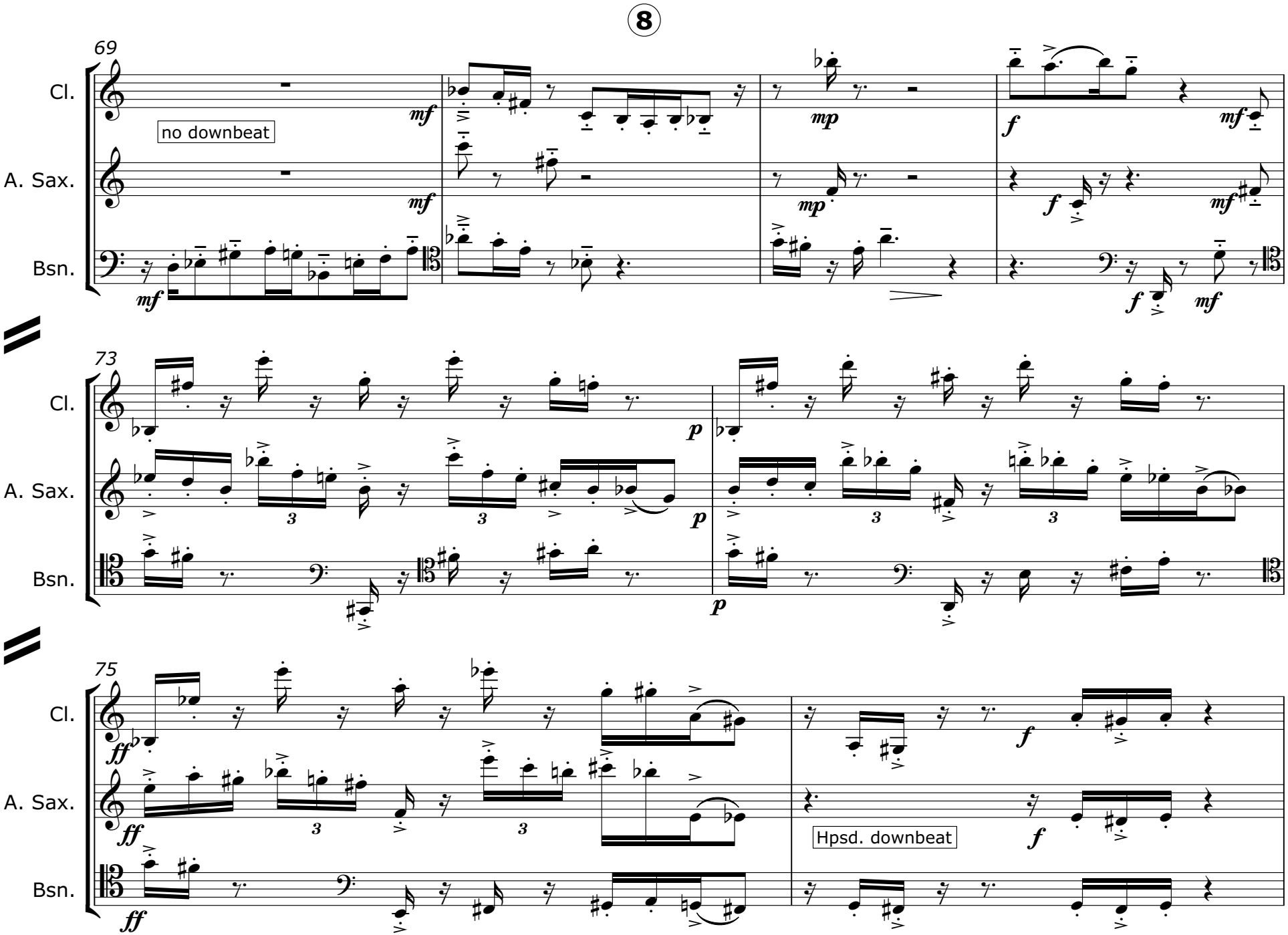

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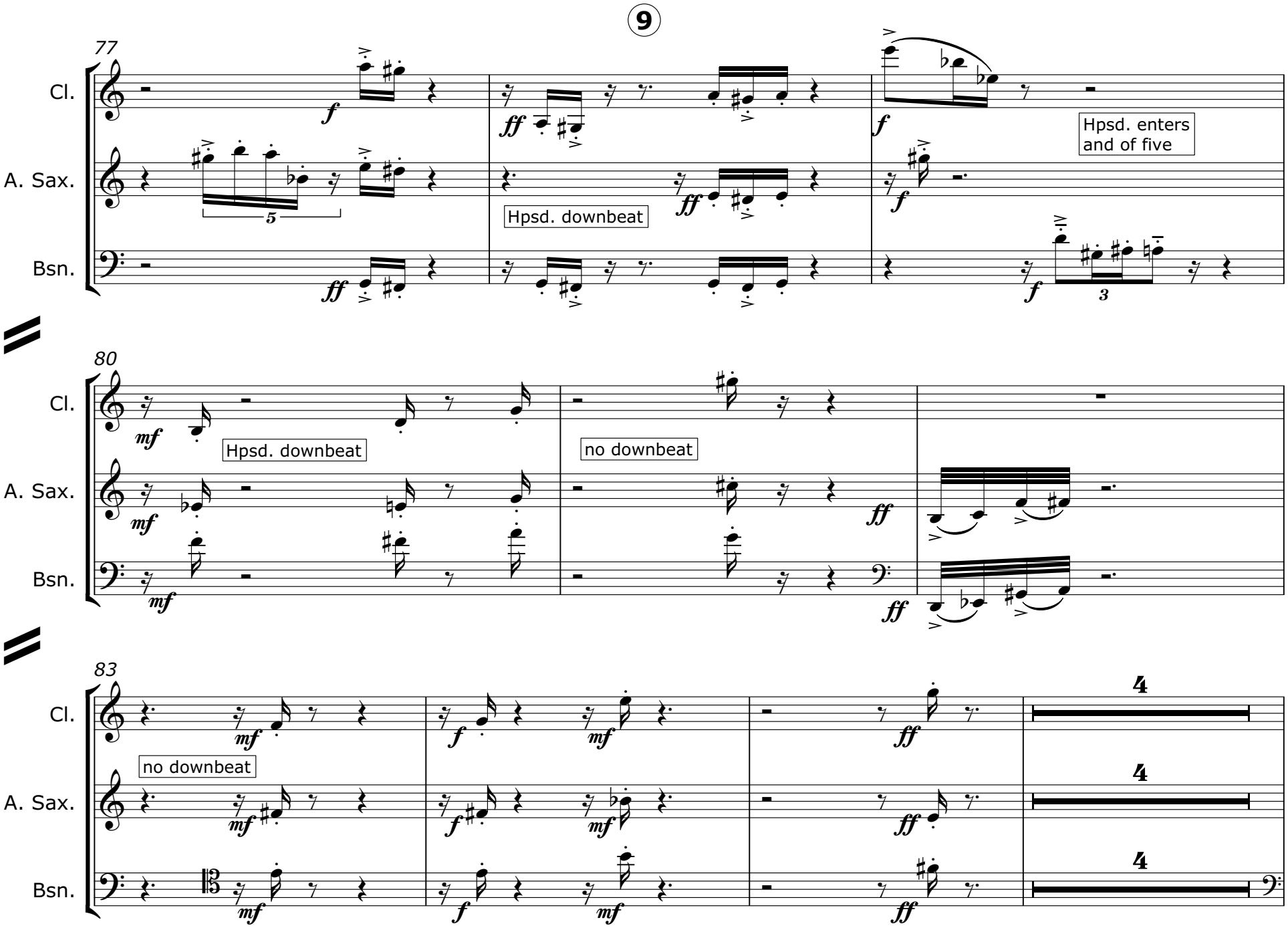

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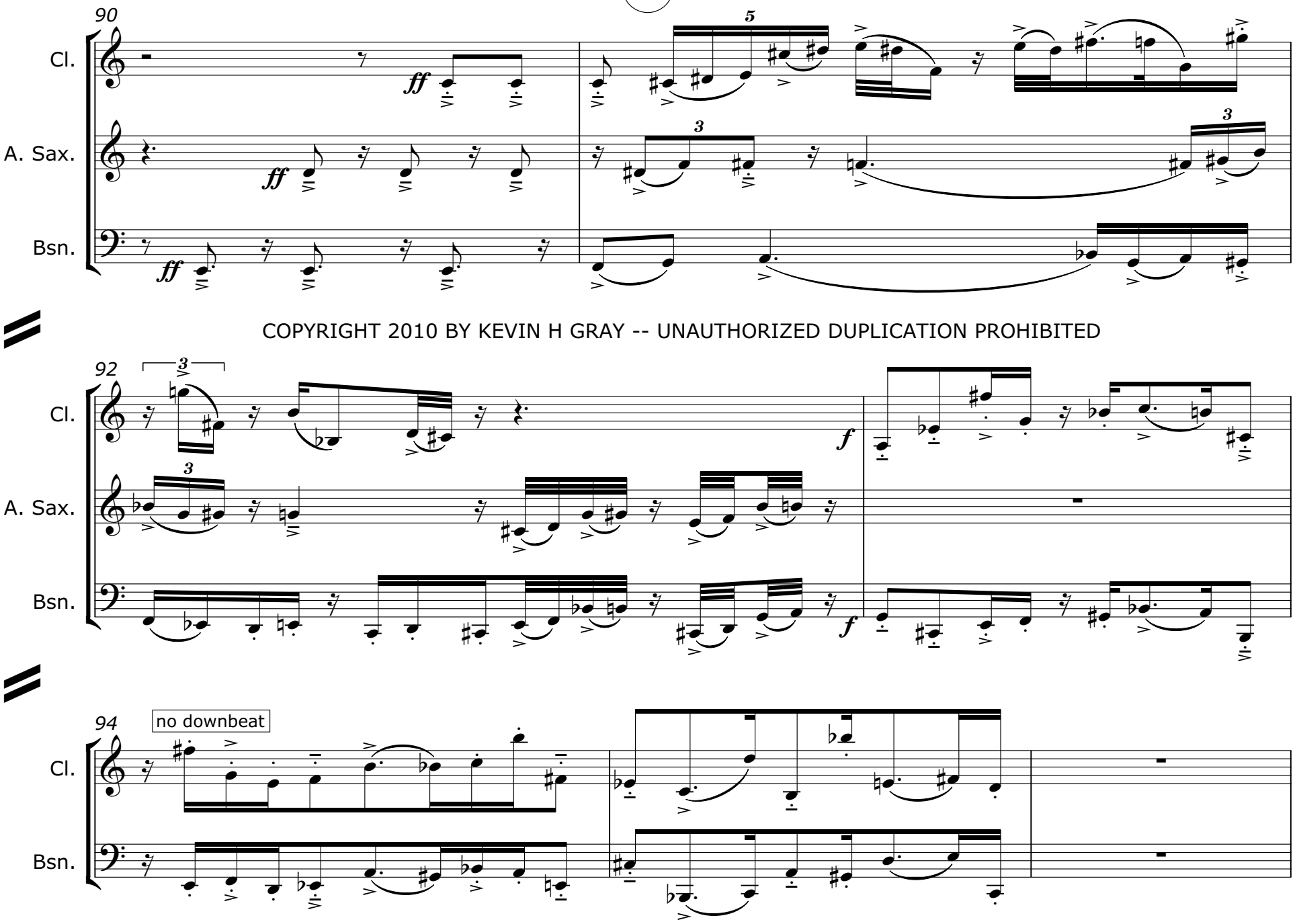

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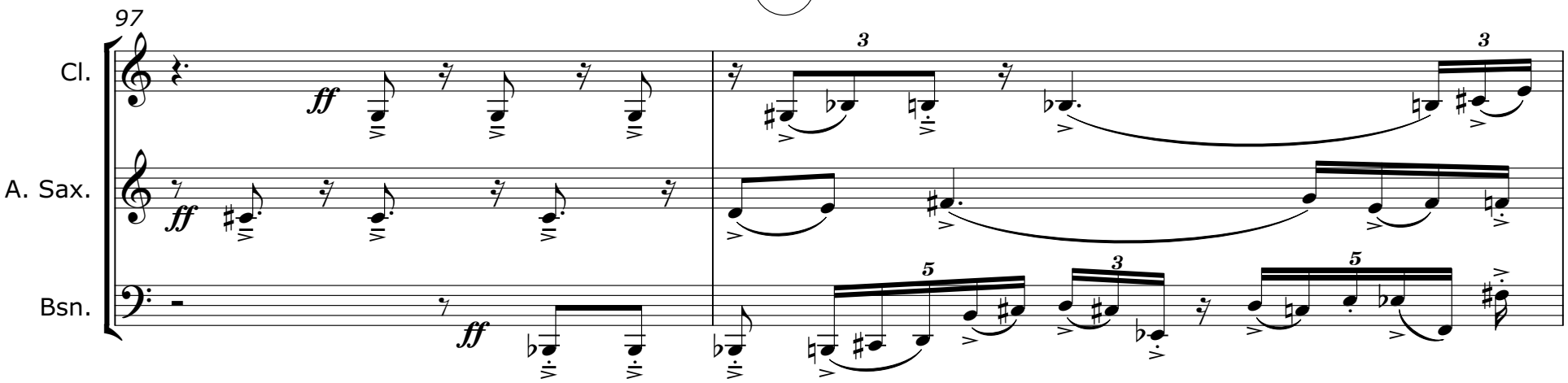

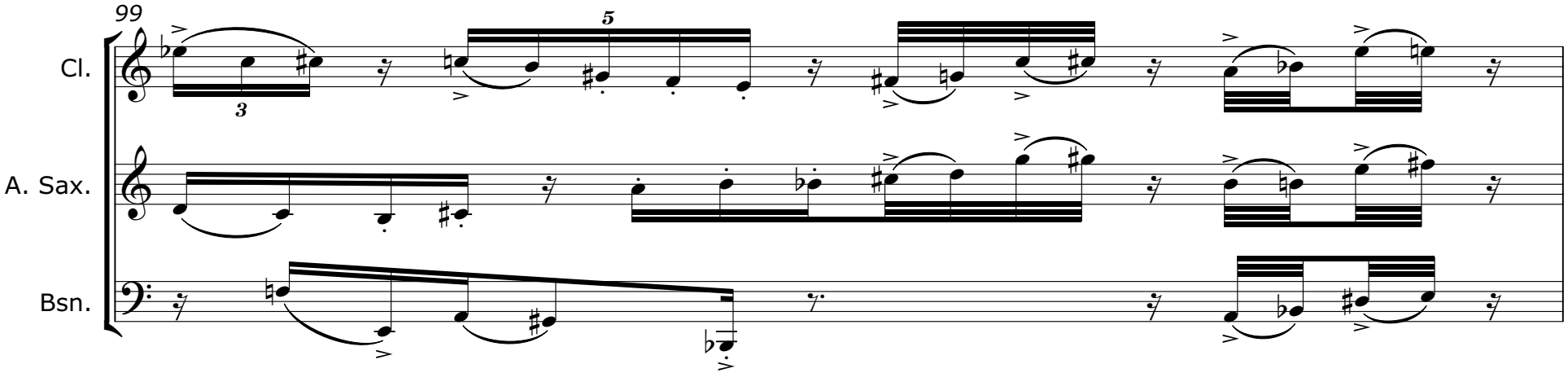

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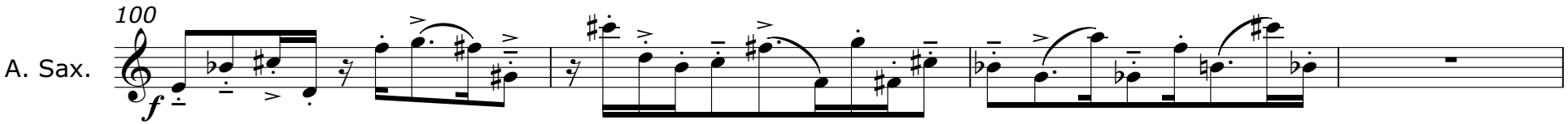

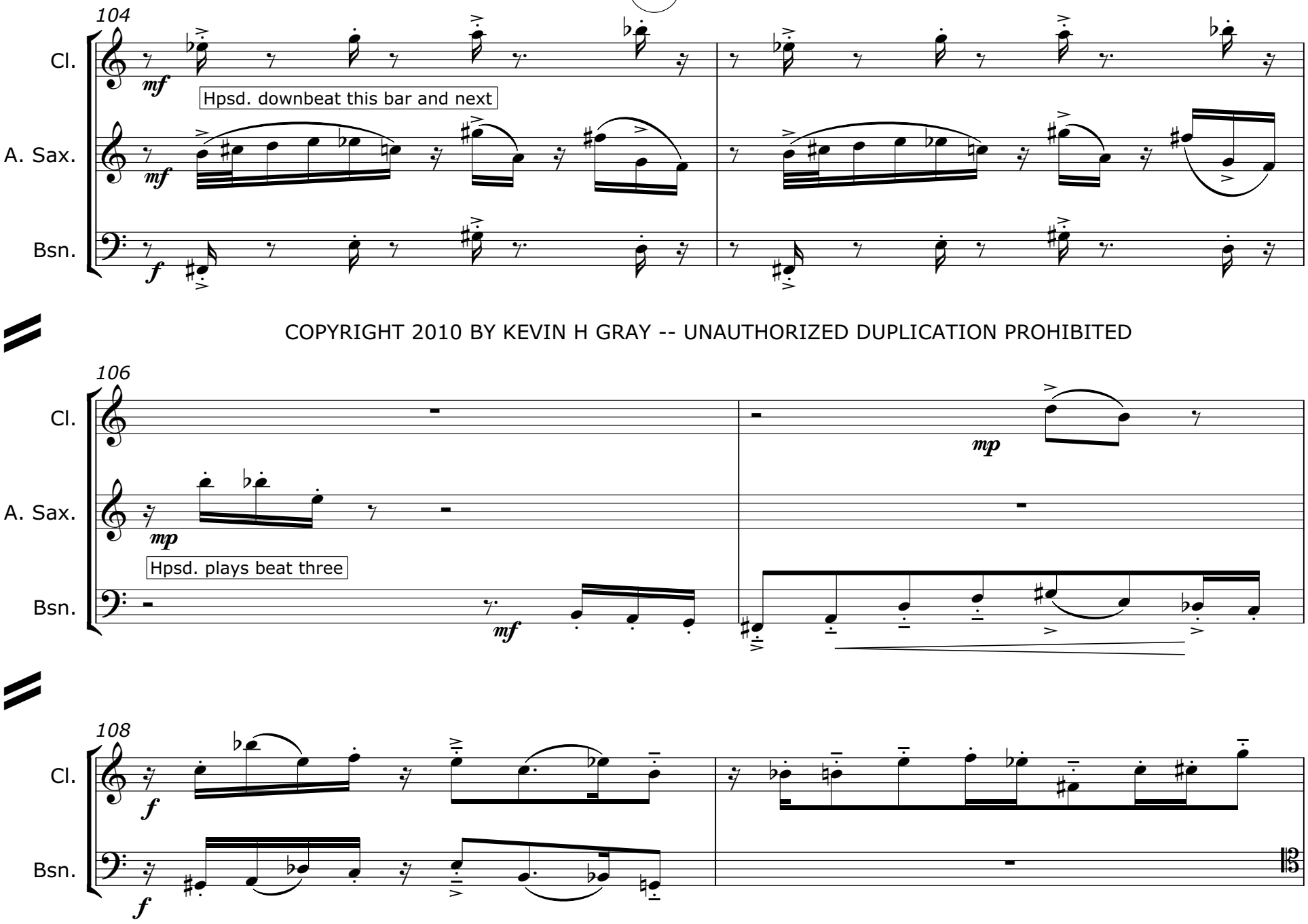

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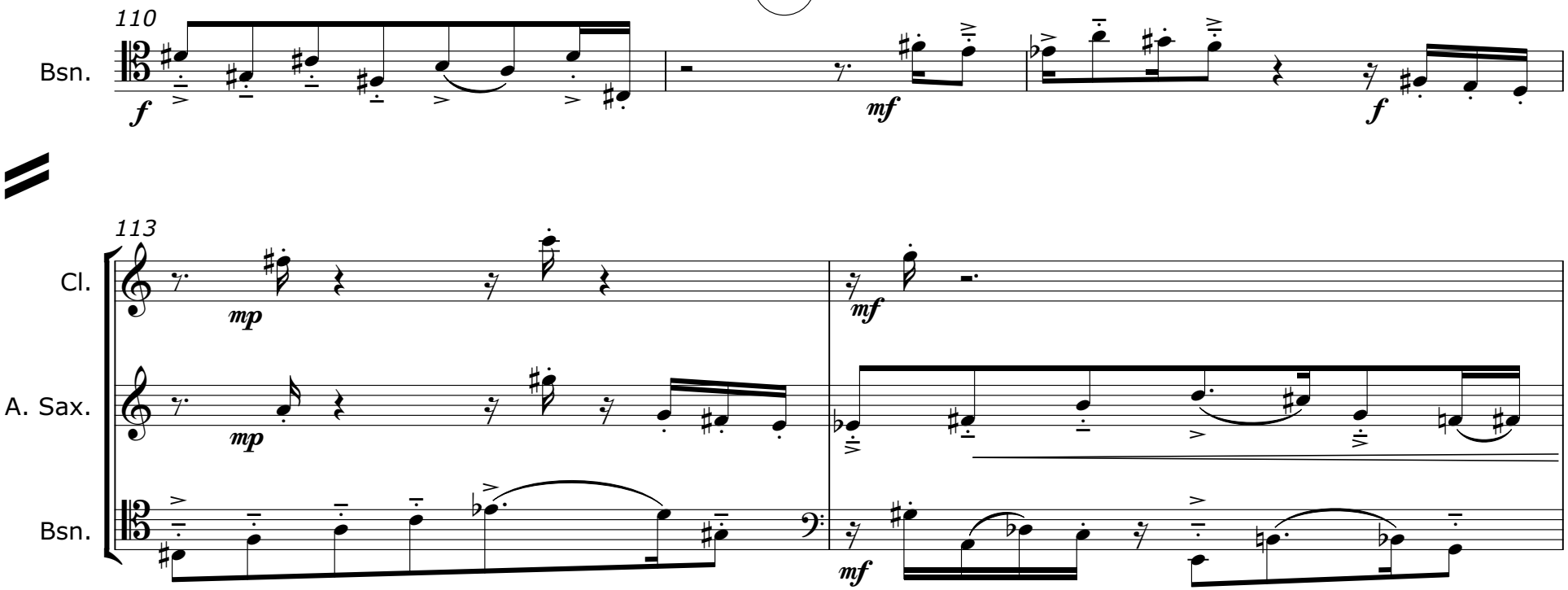

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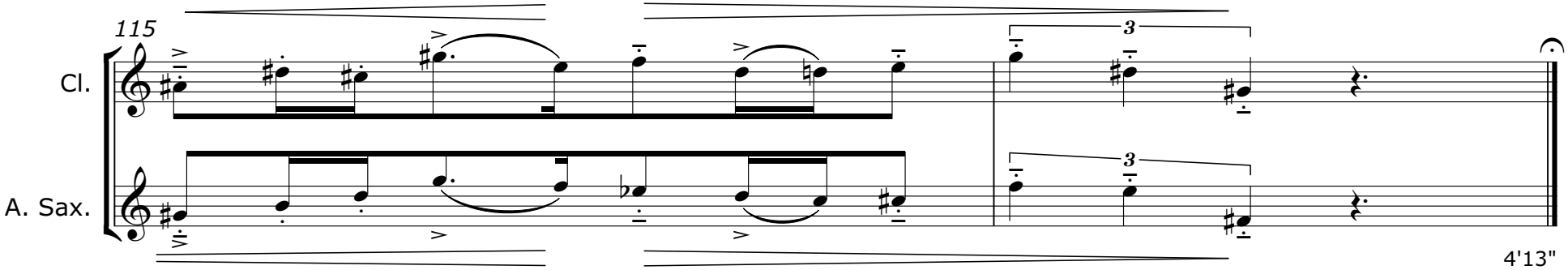

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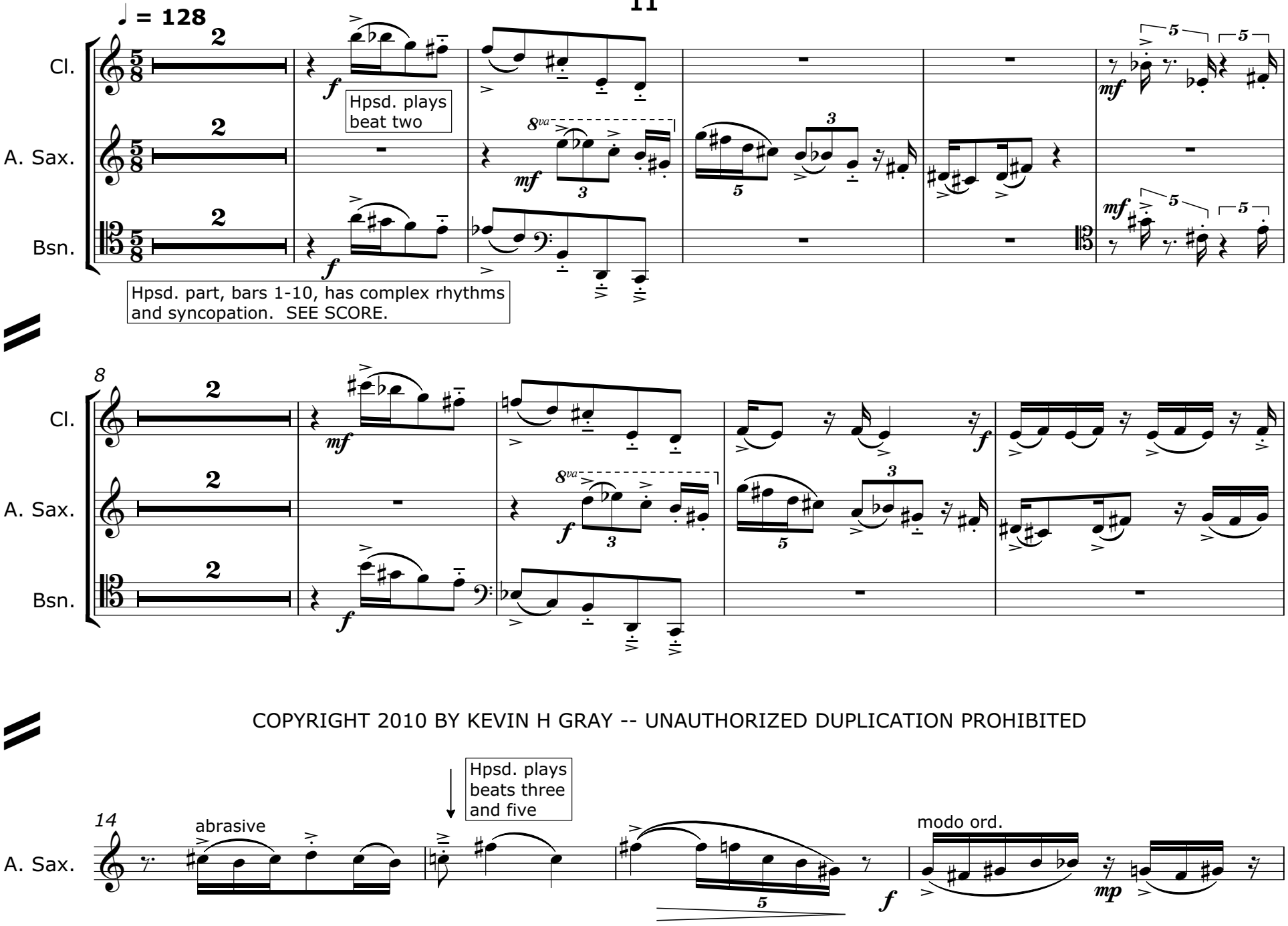
II



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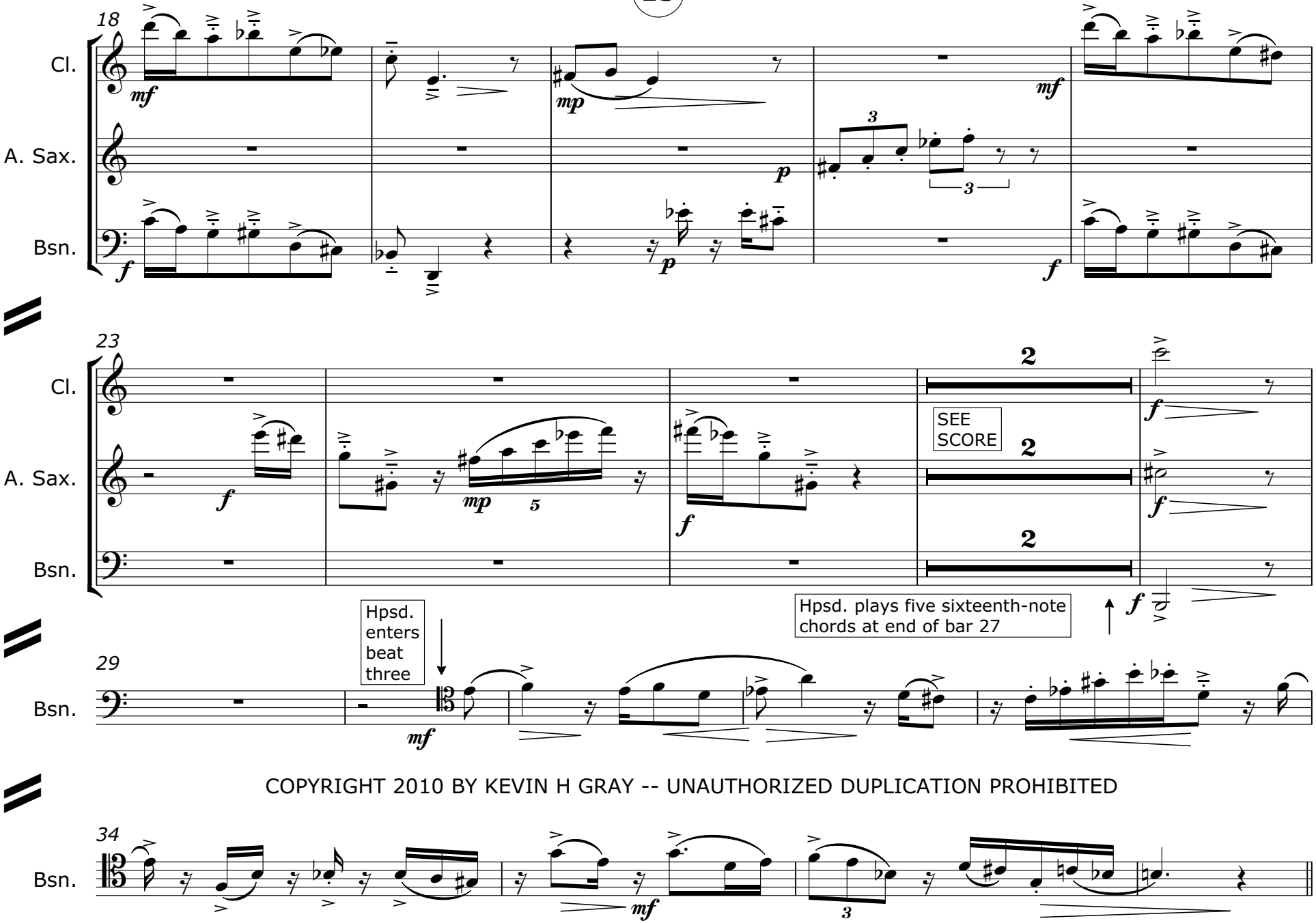

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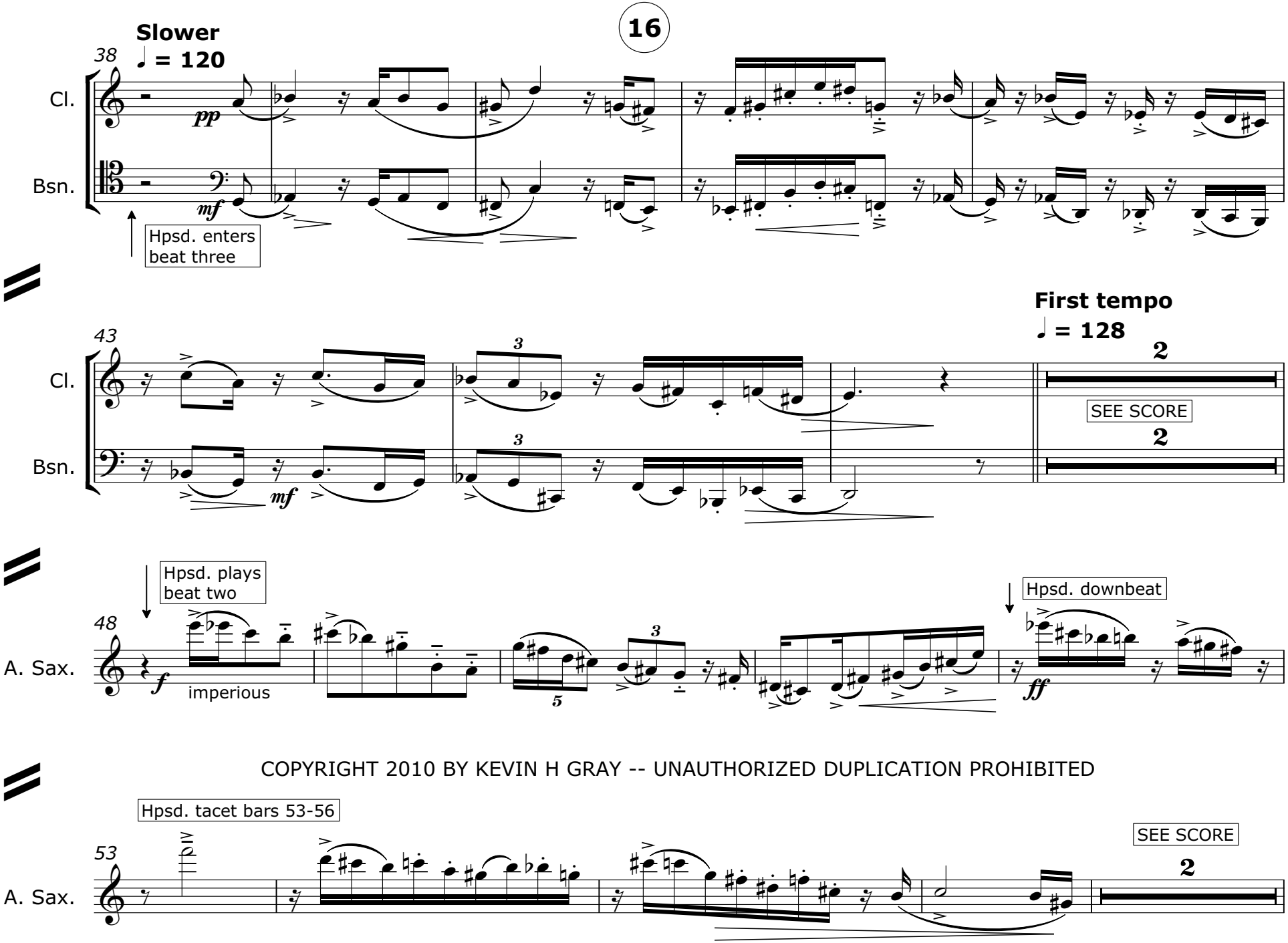

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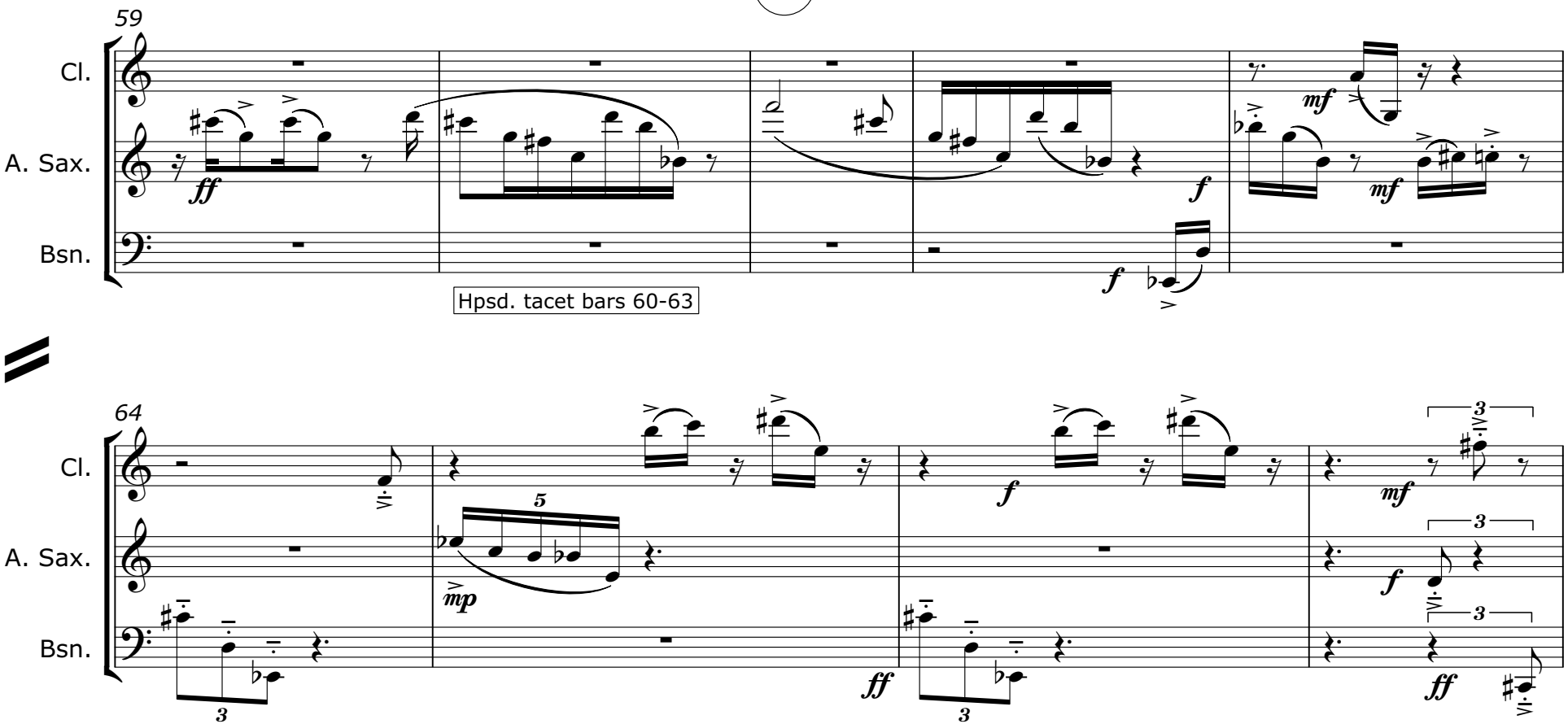

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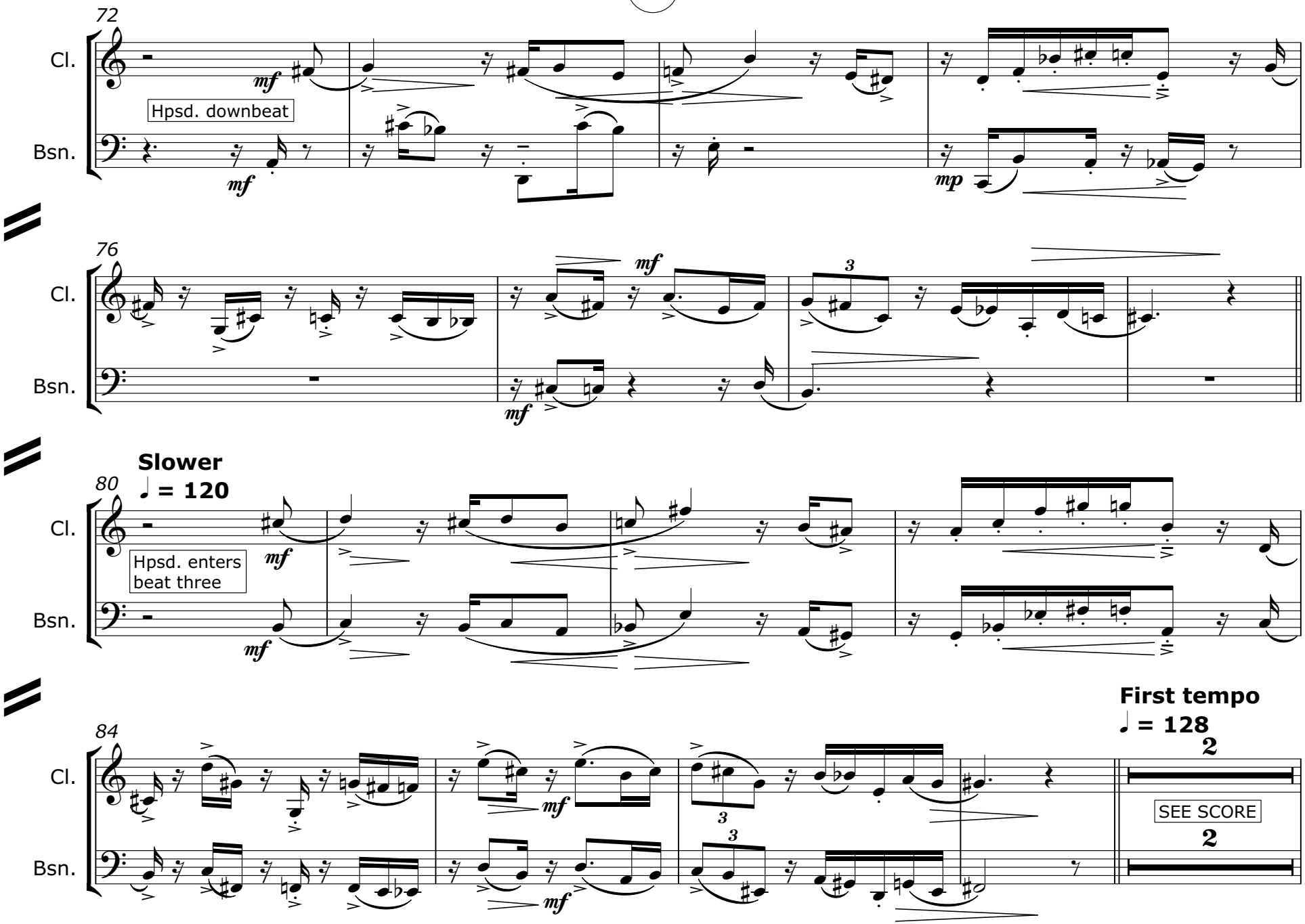

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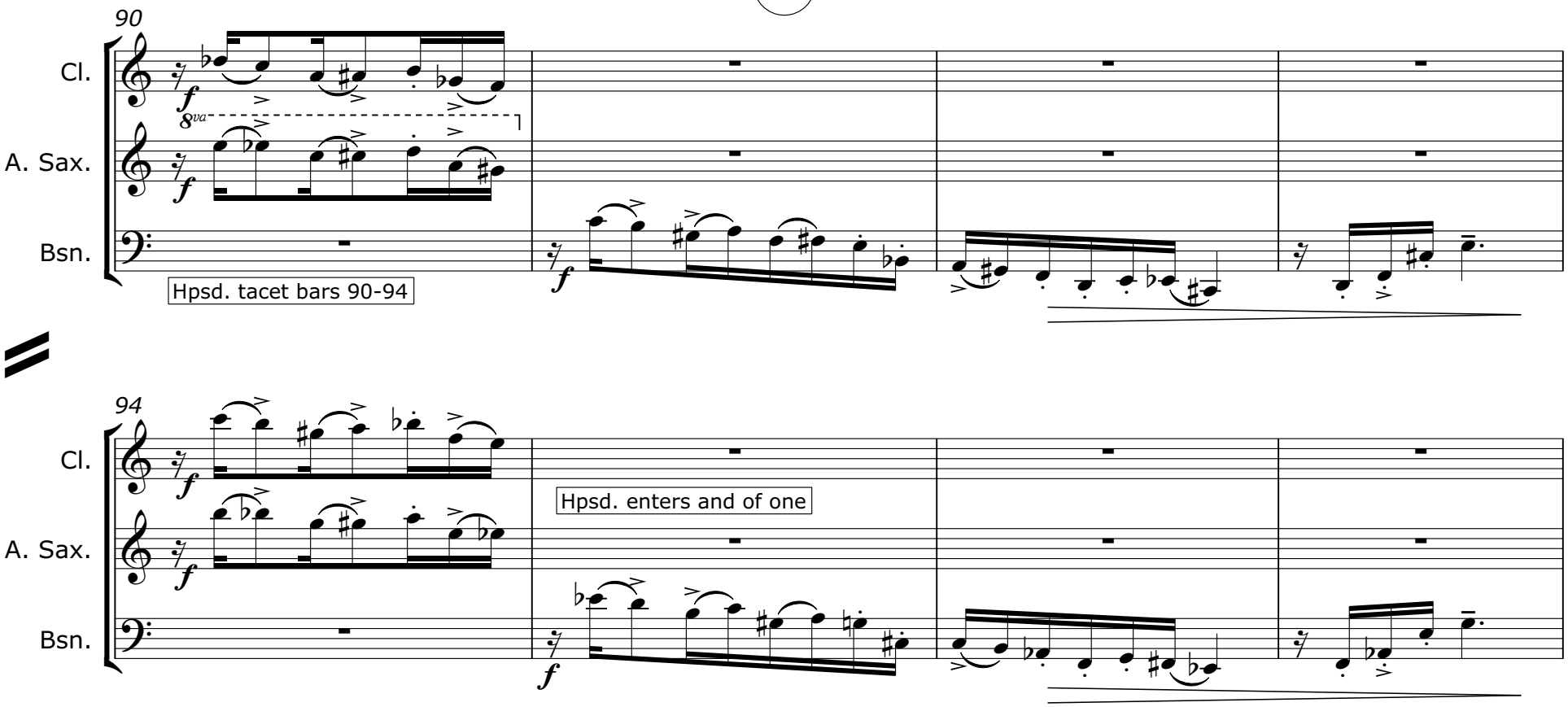

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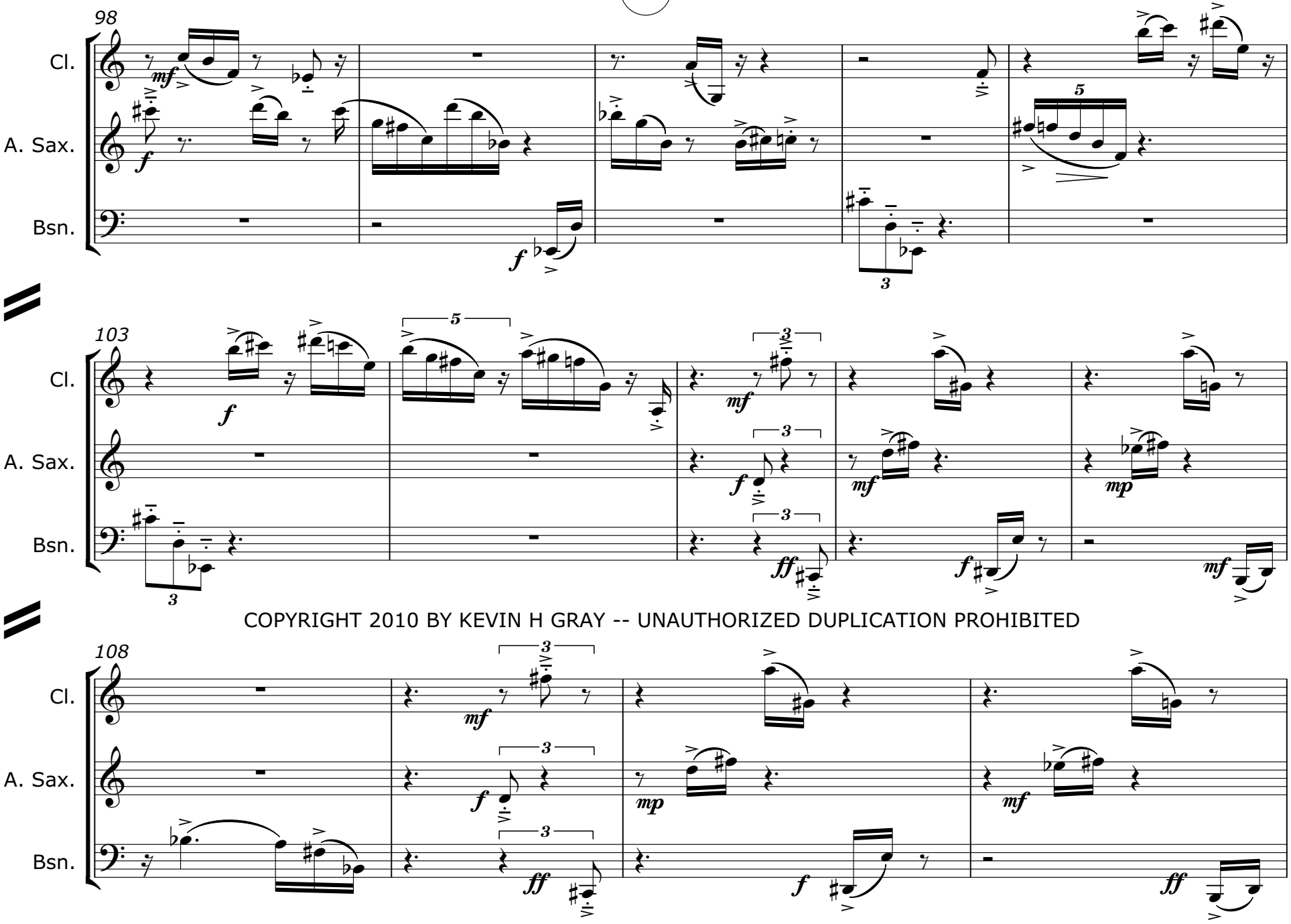

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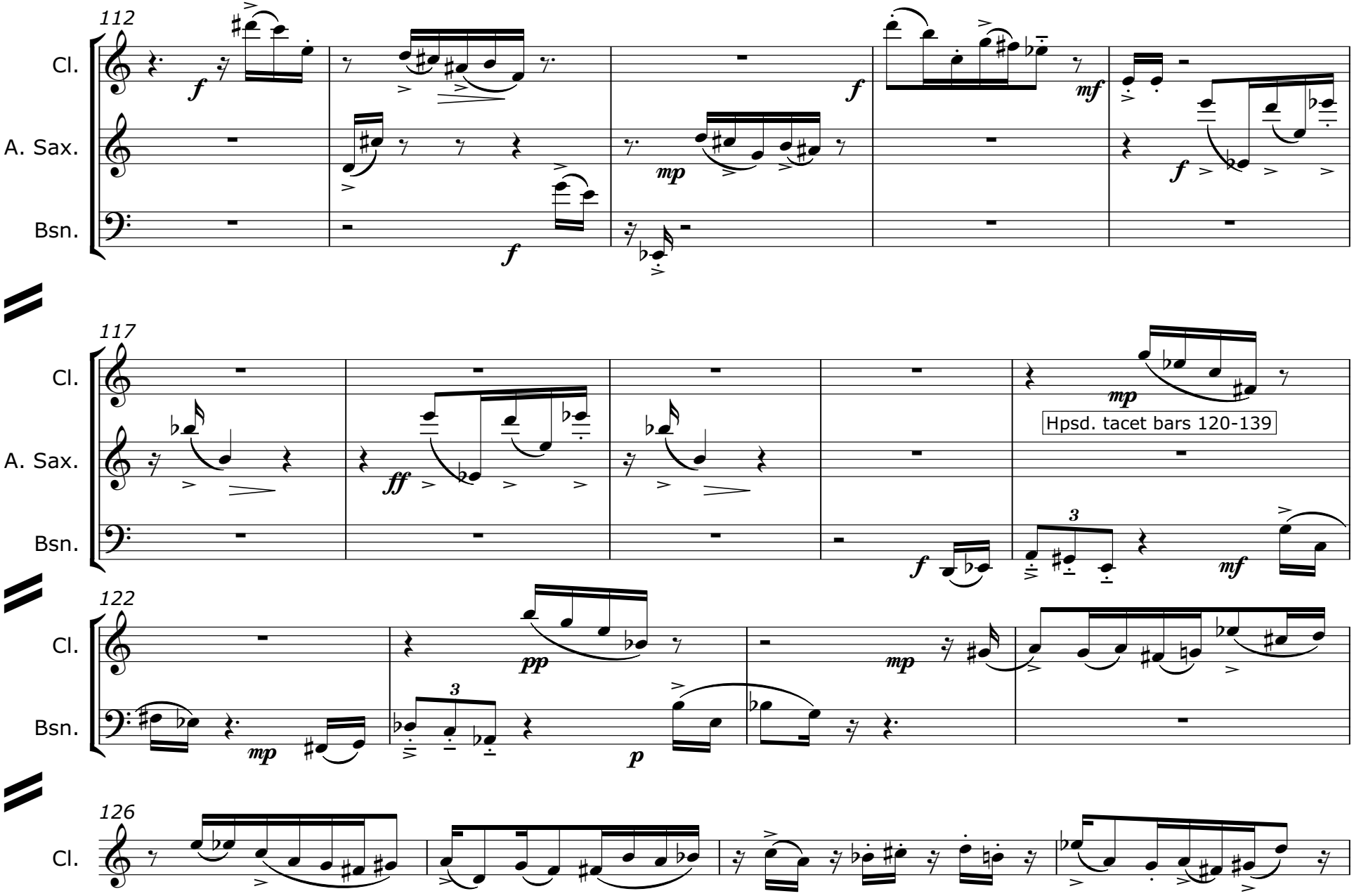

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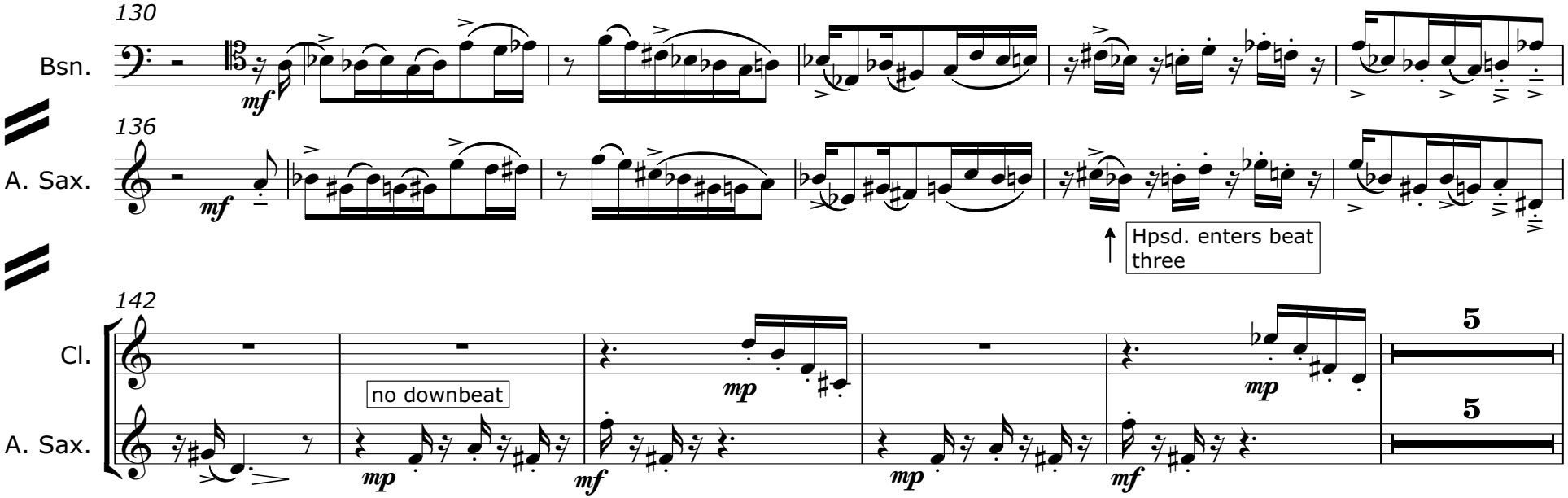

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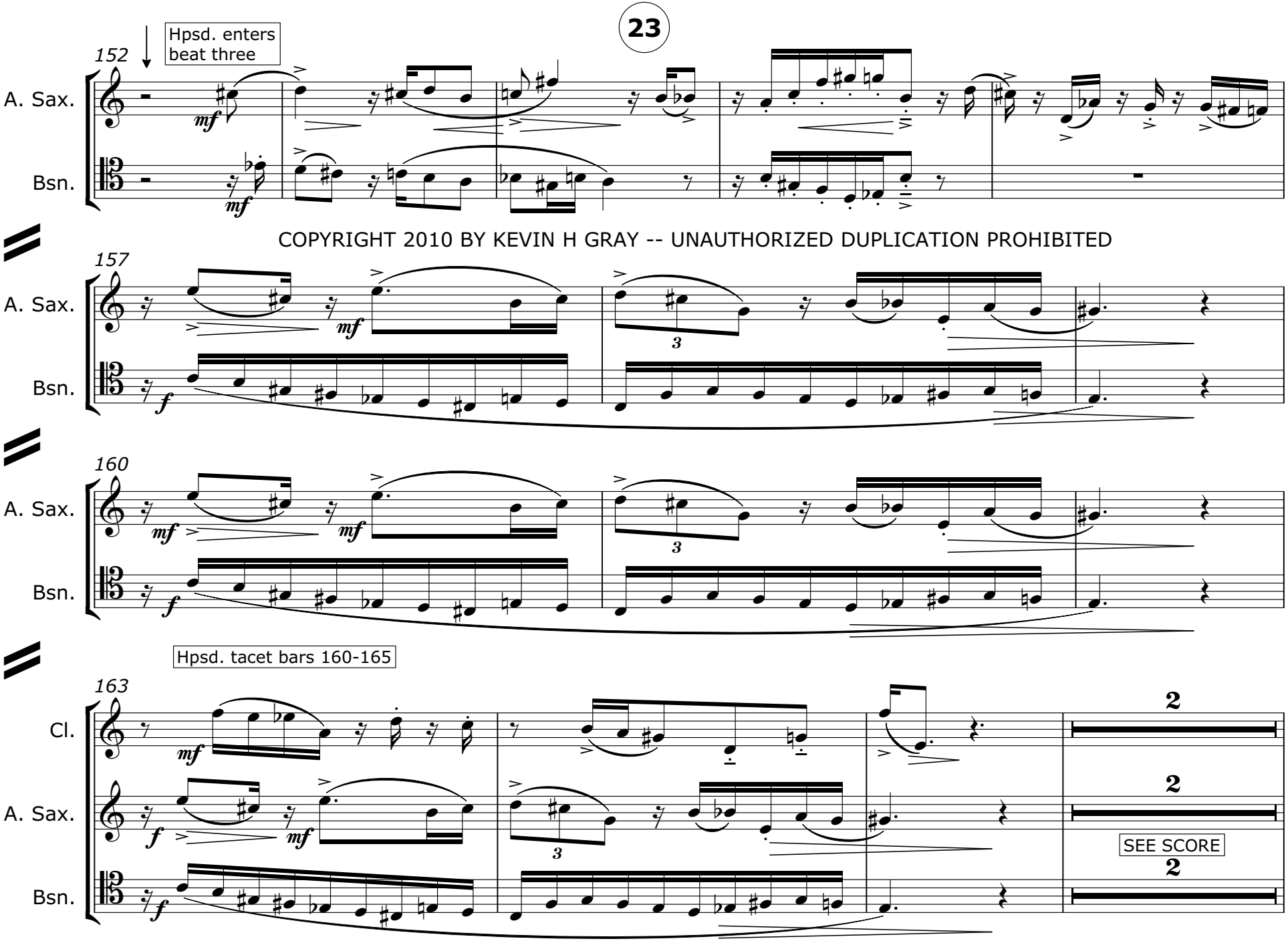

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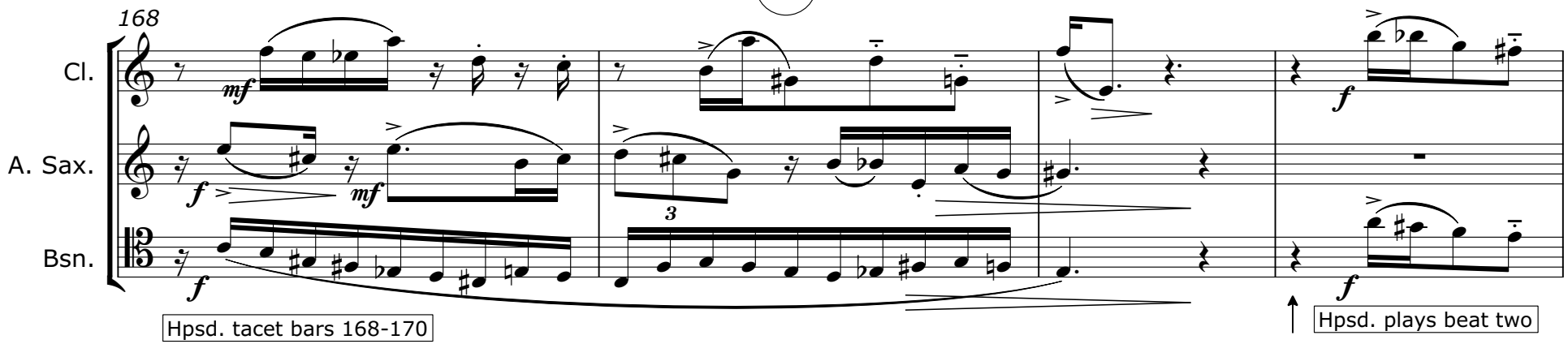

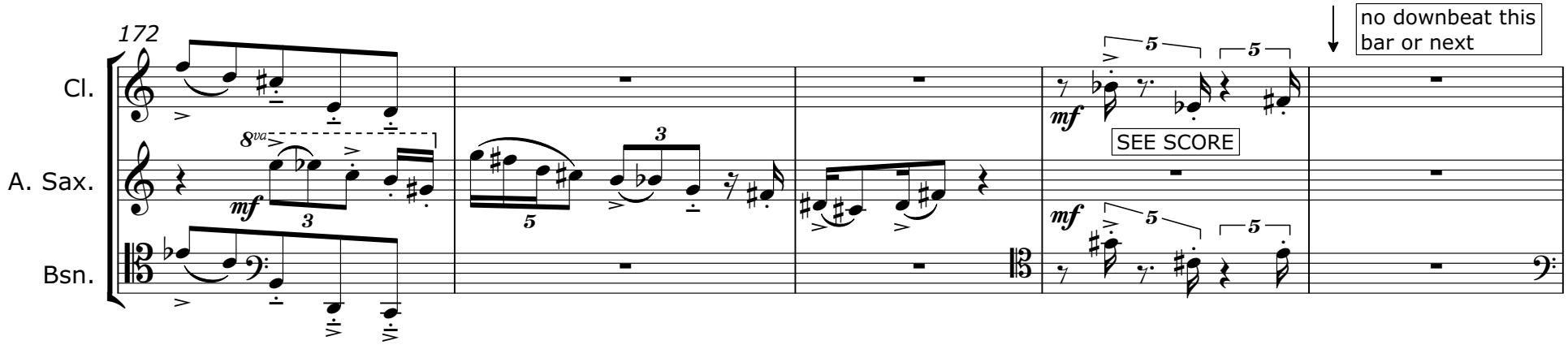

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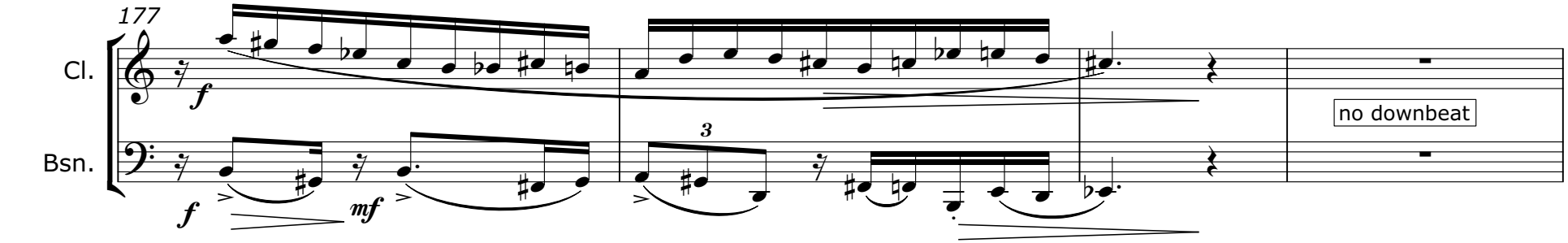

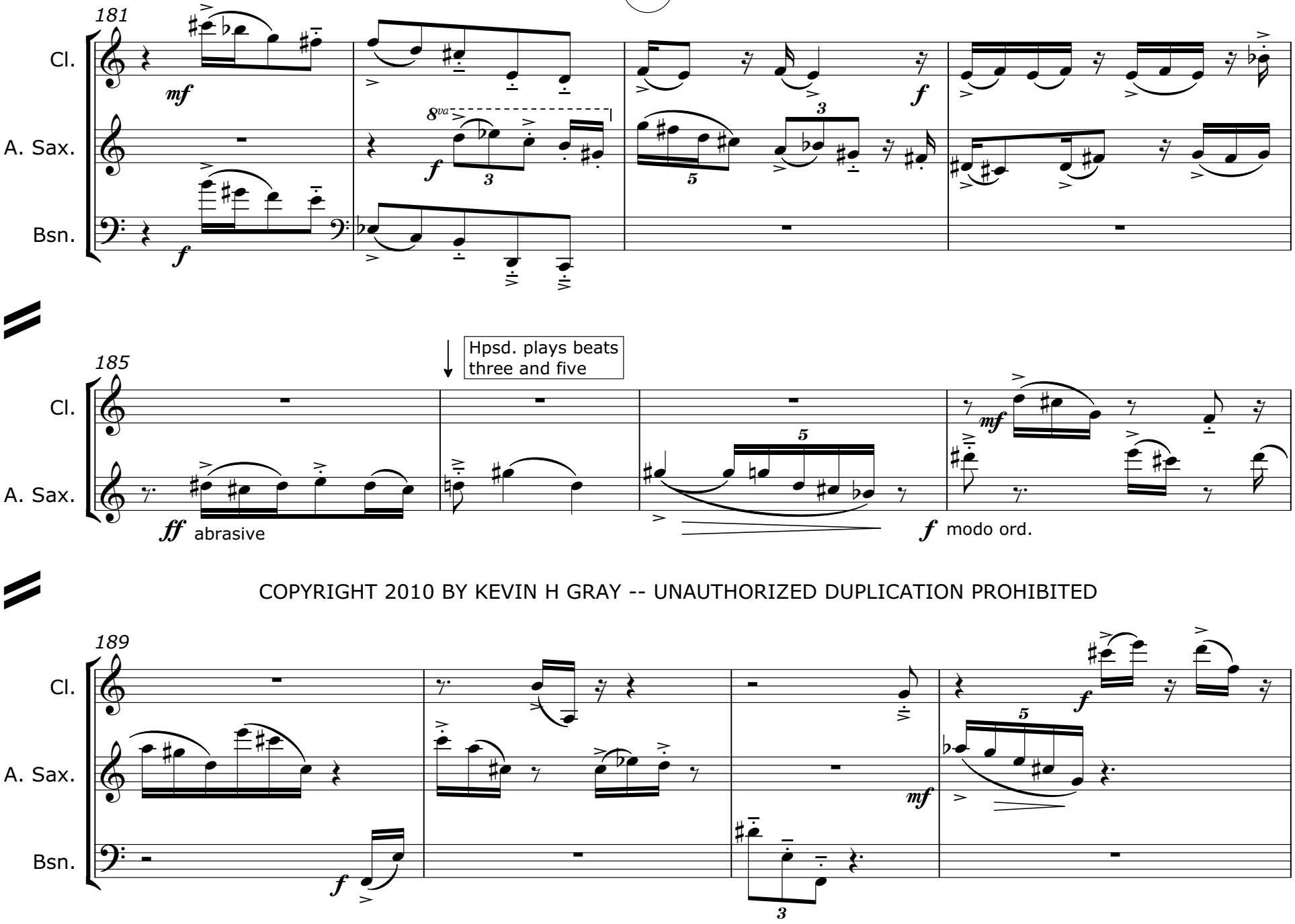

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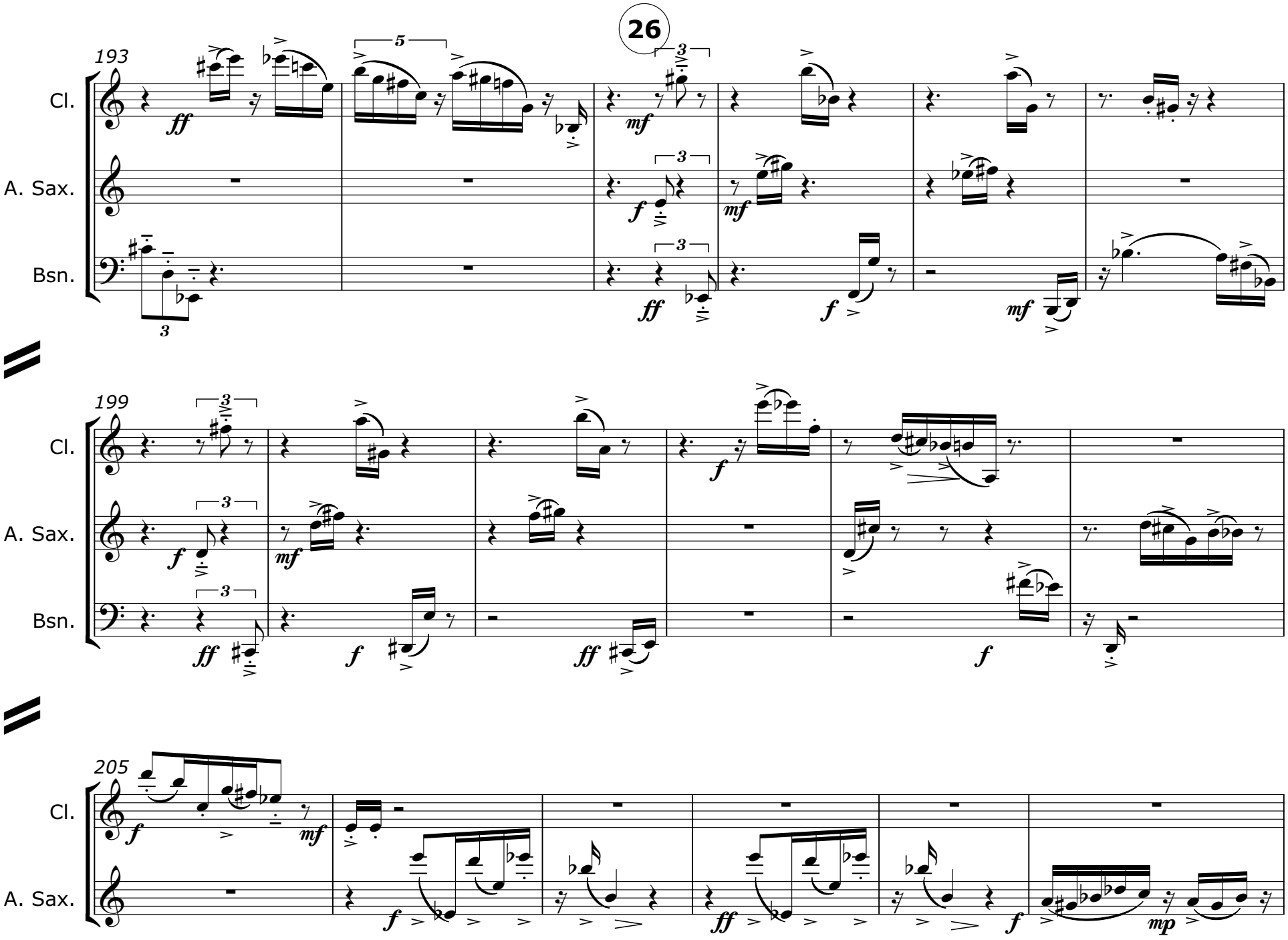

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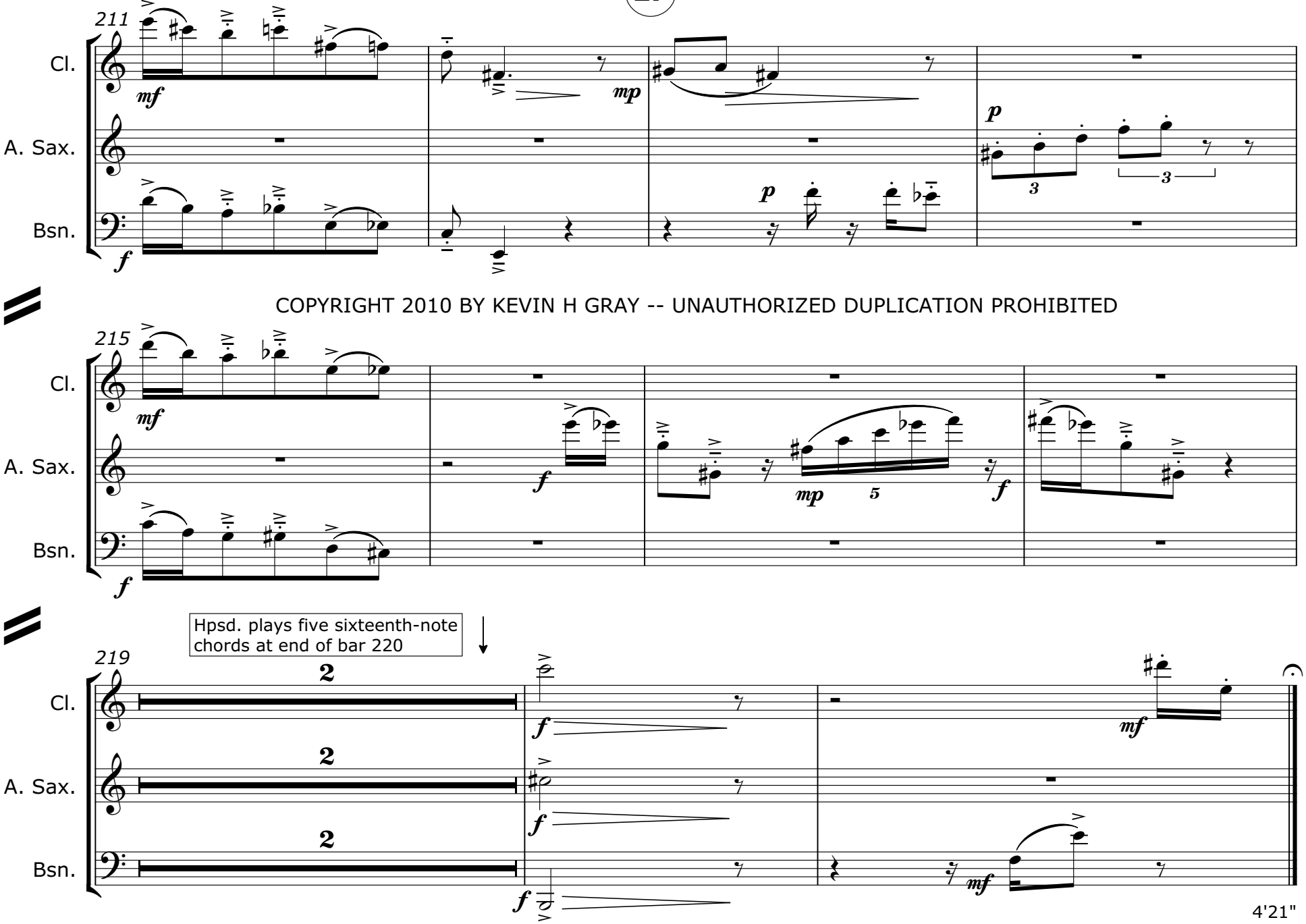

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4'21"