The Transcriber's Art - #40
Richard Yates
Pavane, Op. 50 by Gabriel Fauré

"*The guitar is a small orchestra. It is polyphonic. Every string is a different color, a different voice."* –Andrès Segovia

Perhaps Segovia was the first to make this observation, or maybe it was Hector Berlioz—also a guitarist. Regardless of the attribution, it is true that the variations in tonal color of which the guitar is capable are a substantial source of its charm and versatility. But does that mean that the guitar is suited for playing music written for orchestra? Well, there is that qualifying word "small" in the Segovia quotation and, of course, there lies the difficulty: Orchestras, even small ones, are much larger than guitars—and the sound they can produce—in nearly any dimension you care to measure. However, this has not deterred all guitarists. The performances of orchestral music by such players as Kazuhito Yamashita and, more recently, Jorge Caballero are astonishing. But these Olympian accomplishments do more to impress us with their superhuman technique than to assure us that playing orchestral music on the guitar is feasible for the average player. Indeed, to hear Yamashita's Beethoven or Caballero's Dvorak can be simply discouraging for transcribers looking to expand the guitar's repertoire.

And yet close examination of some orchestral scores can reveal a simpler compositional structure than is apparent from the sound that is produced. After all, in the period of harmonic common practice orchestra composers put together their progressions one triad at a time just as the guitar composers did. And so, barring dense polyphony for which we have too few fingers and strings, we can find reasonable pieces for transcription. In searching this far afield, some will be less comfortable with the term "transcription" than with "arrangement" but, in any event, the boundaries of these terms are fuzzy and a practical and musical result is what is most important.

I recently heard Gabriel Fauré's *Pavane in F sharp minor, Op. 50* performed by a brass orchestra at a concert to raise money for the victims of last spring's earthquake in China. Jay Chen, of Willamette University, recruited and organized members of the Columbia Symphony, Portland Opera, Oregon Symphony, Portland Ballet and regional universities. The success of that arrangement and performance prompted me to look at the score to see if a guitar version were possible.

The *Pavane* was written for a series of light summer concerts in 1887. Happily for the transcriber, it employs a smallish orchestra consisting of strings plus pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns, although Fauré added a chorus shortly before the first performance. The versions with and without chorus have both been performed regularly ever since. Fauré had a strong ambivalence about the orchestra. He wrote only a handful of works for large ensembles and abandoned or destroyed several orchestral scores, yet he also composed music for immense ensembles—*Prométhée* is scored for three wind bands, 100 strings, 12 harps, and choirs. His biographer, Jean-Michel Nectoux wrote, "He had a horror of vivid colours and effects, and showed little interest in combinations of tone-colours, which he thought were too commonly a form of self-indulgence and a disguise for the absence of ideas" and "Fauré's lack of interest in the orchestra is sometimes criticized as a weakness…"

In this context, the *Pavane* is interesting because it seems to be a deliberate exercise in orchestral color, much as Ravel's *Bolero* was. The main melody repeats in turn on different instruments or their combinations. This structure presents both the opportunity and the challenge for a guitar transcription. The guitar, uniquely among instruments, can color these repetitions with a range of timbres, articulations and dynamics and, in so doing, sustain interest over the extended form. I do not recommend trying to imitate the actual original instruments but, rather, to experiment with different sounds to find the ones that best fit the music, the instrument, and the player.

The size of the original ensemble is daunting as you can see in Figure 1. Yet, after sorting through the maze of clefs and transposing instruments, a basic structure is revealed that is within the reach of the guitar. Figure 2 shows all of the notes of the original score combined onto only four staves. The octave duplications are then eliminated and a more felicitous key chosen. The line that combines the first violins and the horns is just a bit more than can be managed on the guitar and, because it has no essential harmonic tones not present in other voices, it was omitted. The result is shown in Figure 3—not quite ready for the guitar but certainly very close. The measures in these examples are the densest of the whole piece and were chosen to show how much reduction is both possible and necessary. A similar procedure was used throughout the transcription.

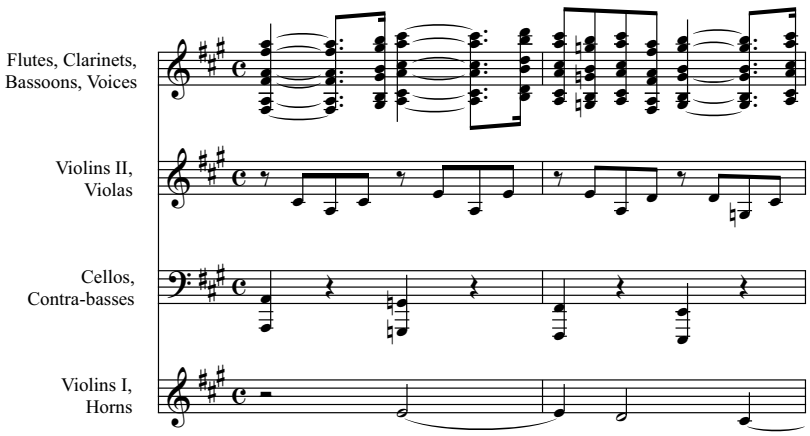

Figure 2

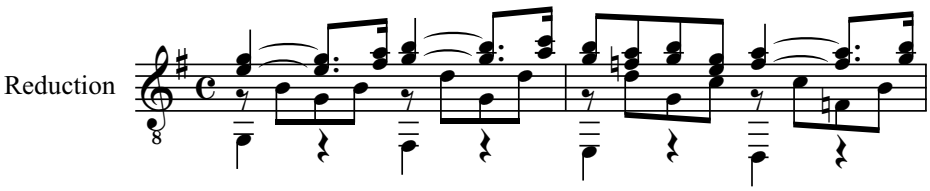

Figure 3

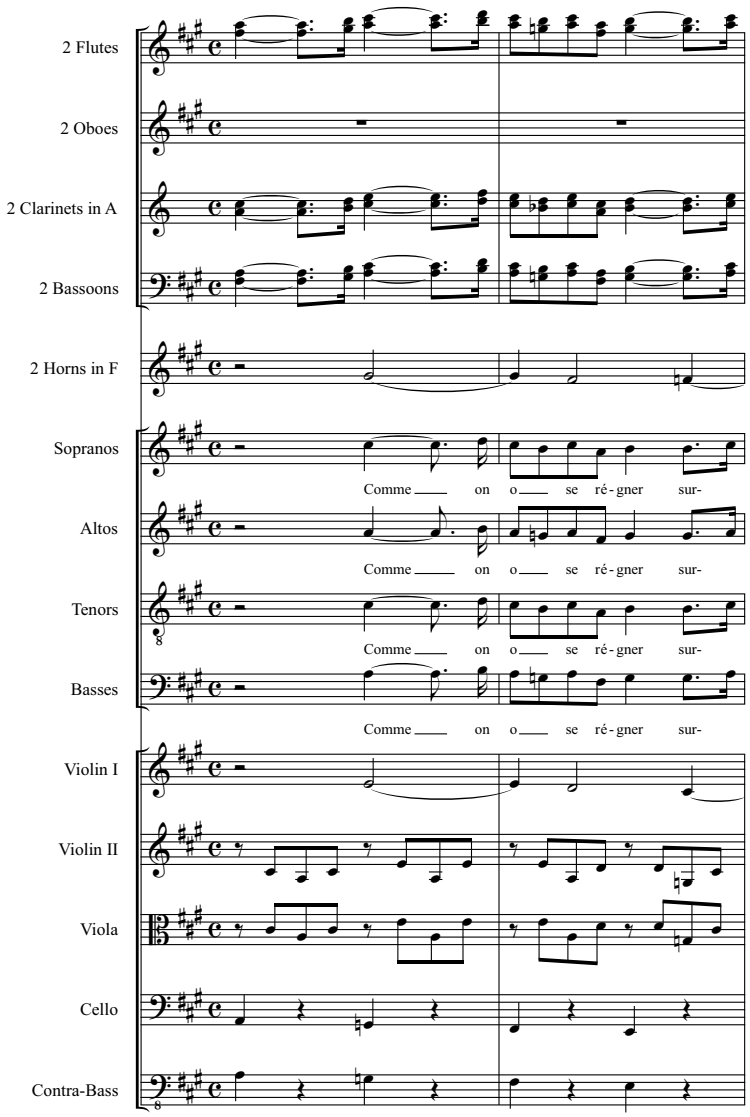

Figure 1

A few details and suggestions follow:

Measure 1: I kept the explicit pattern of a quarter note plus a quarter rest in the bass and suggest that these rests be observed literally rather than allowing the bass notes to ring through. Later in the piece I changed the line to half notes for textural variety and to simplify fingering.

Measure 20: This is the first appearance of triplet eighth notes in the melody against regular eighth notes in the middle voice. While these can be awkward for players unfamiliar with them, there are a couple of ways to proceed. One is to break the quarter note beat down into six sixteenths and practice it slowly until the feel for it is established. A second method is to focus on the melody, play the triplet in correct time, and then simply insert the second eighth note of the bass line in between the second and third triplet eighth notes in the melody. In practice it will fall in about the right spot, and familiarity will help smooth it out.

Measure 25: I included a suggested performance of the trill that gradually increases the speed of its alternations. Many other methods are possible including an unmeasured cross-string trill for those players with sufficient technique. In the original score this trill extended over two measures with the same harmonic underpinning but was too difficult to sustain on the guitar. Notice that the trill in measure 62 is the same although the bass line is slightly different.

Measure 34: In order to create more variety in the return of the main melody, I thickened the middle voice to include notes on each eighth beat. This substitutes a textural variation for the orchestration. It sounds best if the middle voice—which at this point is new to the listener—is played out more loudly than the upper melody—which is by now familiar.

Measure 42: This section is a series of three repetitions of a four measure contrapuntal phrase each a whole step lower than the previous one. The way in which Fauré links these together is typical of his use of rapid modulation. In the original score the first phrase is repeated. Without the resources of the orchestra this seemed too static and so I shortened it by deleting the repetition.

Measure 63: Fauré added variety here with a new accompanying line assigned to the cellos. In the guitar transcription it weaves between the melody and the quarter note basses. As in the section at measure 34, playing this voice prominently over the melody adds to the interest.

If you have examples or suggestions for our small orchestra please send them to:

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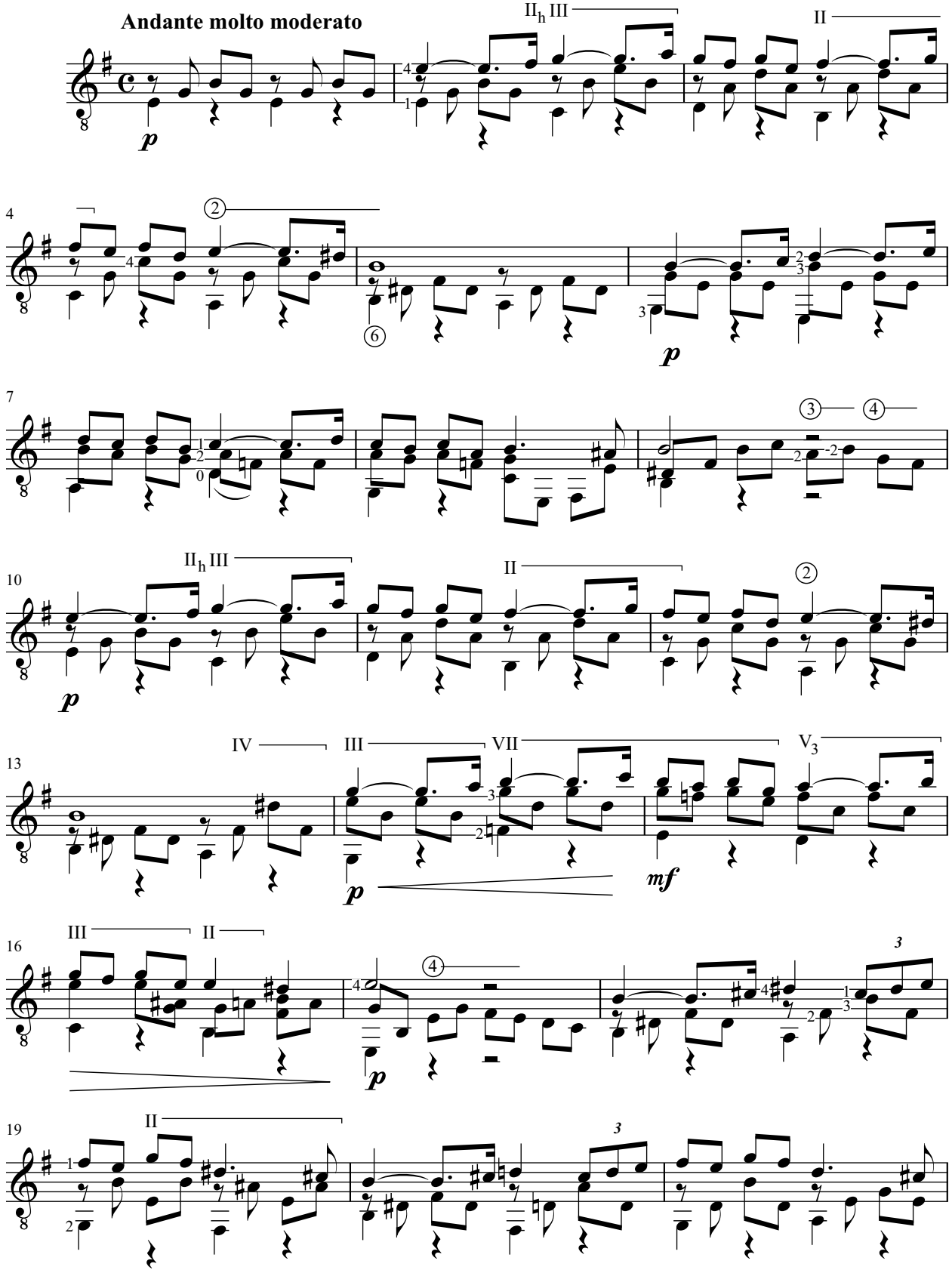
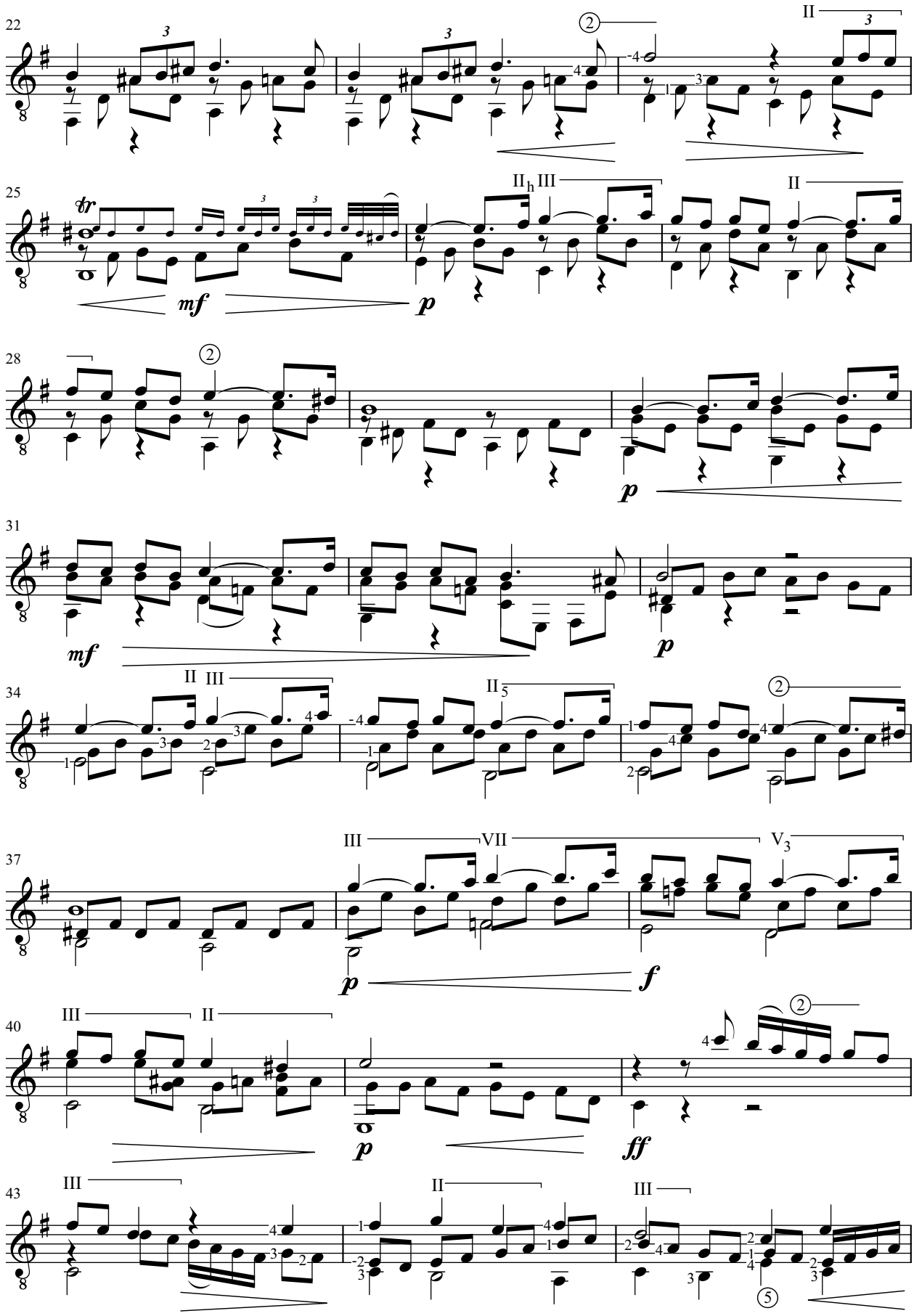
Pavane

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Gabriel Fauré
(1845-1924)

Andante molto moderato

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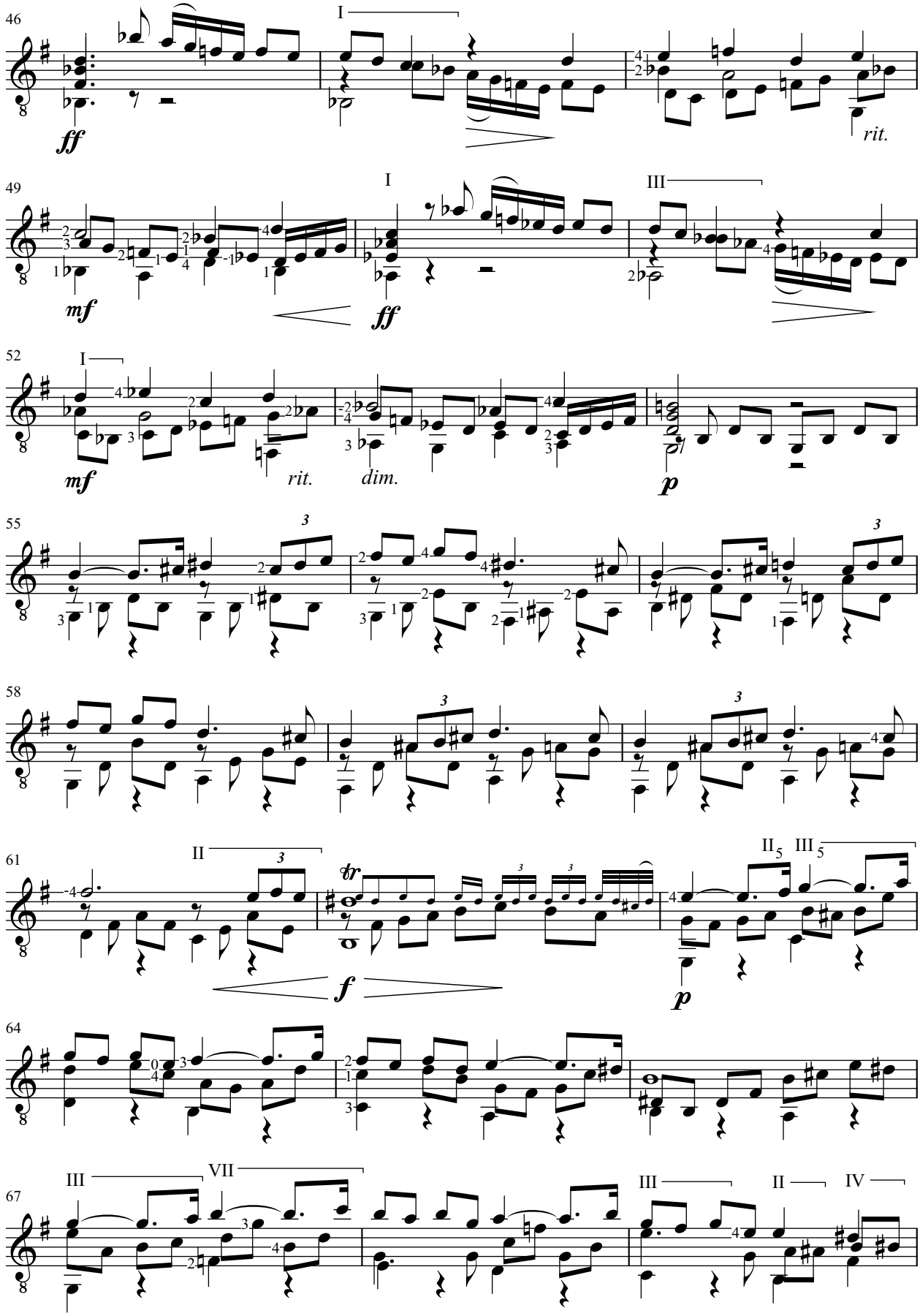
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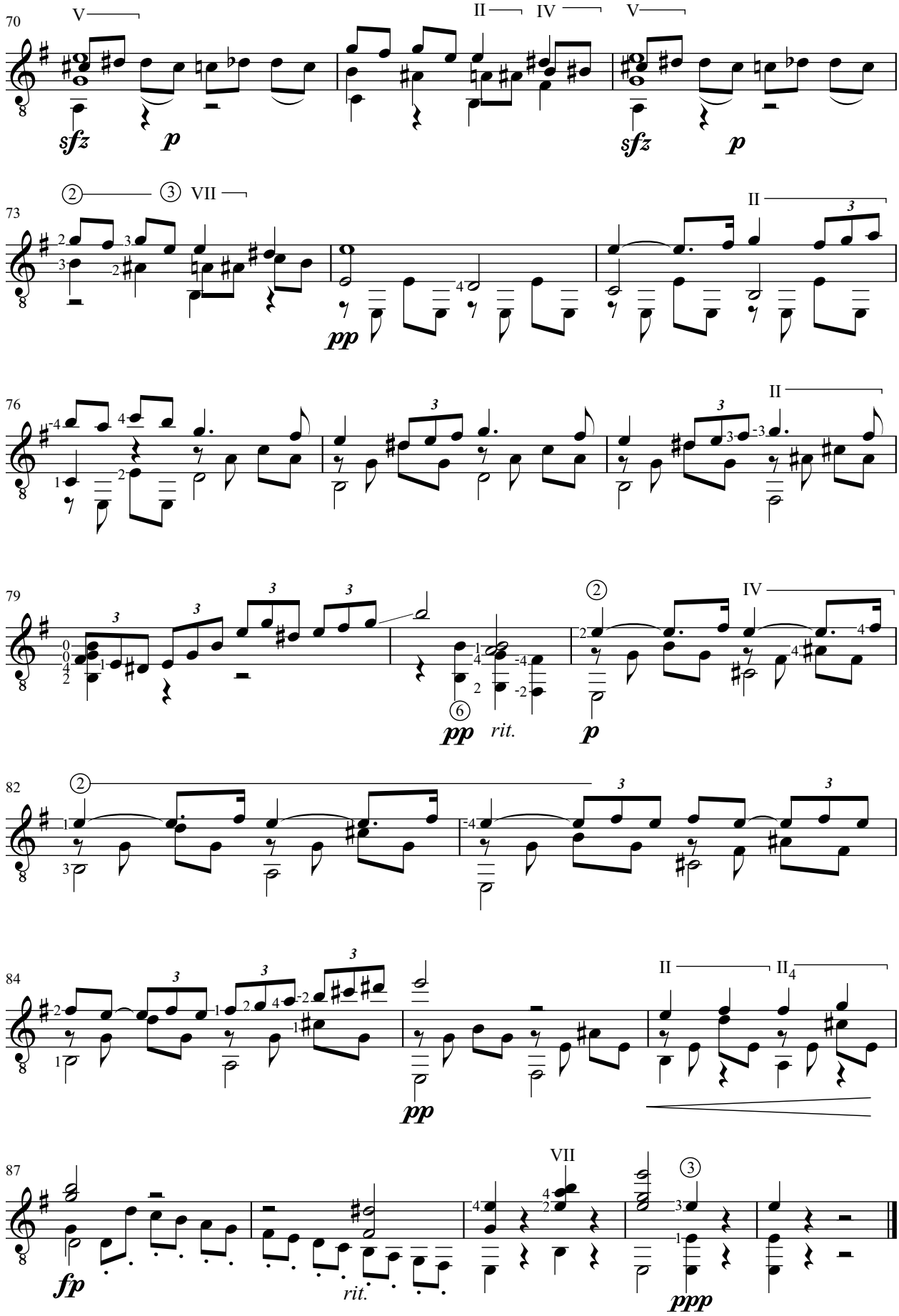
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