Prelude and Chaconne

by

John Webb

Preview File Only

Instrumentation

2 solo violins
String orchestra
Harpsichord

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Commissioned by the European Union Baroque Orchestra and Monica Huggett for their 1998 season. Premiere performances:

22 August	Gripsholm, Sweden
23 August	Stockholm, Sweden
25 August	Copenhagen, Denmark
27 August	Hannover, Germany
28 & 28 August	Bruhl, Germany

Prelude and Chaconne **John Webb**

Creating a work for period instruments presents a unique series of challenges to a modern composer. The physically lighter structures, particularly of bowed instruments, using less bracing, thinner sound-boards and gut strings, open up a range of performance and tonal possibilities not accessible through modern instrument ensembles.

In Prelude and Chaconne, I tried to respond to the challenges presented by this unique idiom. From the outset, I did not rely on the crutch of baroque pastiche and quotation, using the ensemble's sound in a distinctly 20th century way. This does not mean, however, that there is no debt to the baroque: after all, preludes and chaconnes are themselves explicitly baroque musical forms.

JS Bach's C major Prelude from the Well-Tempered Clavier is clearly a point of reference for the Prelude. The earlier work consists of a simple arpeggio pattern, repeated through a variety of harmonic progressions. There is no melody as such - although Gounod found enough to sustain his setting of the *Ave Maria* - just a series of harmonies of varying intensity. In the new work, scored for solo strings and continuo, I use a similar starting point: a repeated pattern that slowly develops through changes of harmony. However, as the piece progresses these patterns become rhythmically more complicated, creating a kaleidoscopically changing effect.

The Chaconne, more conventionally scored for two violin soloists and orchestra, follows the Prelude without a break, and strives initially to conceal its identity as a dance. The theme is, at first, played very slowly but, with each repeat, the note lengths are shortened. Rather than announcing itself in the opening bars, the theme if thus gradually revealed over the course of the piece. To enhance this effect further, the theme does not always appear in the bass. The movement falls into several informal sections, with the final section being a lively dance that serves to affirm the fully revealed chaconne theme. This movement contains various strongly contrasted ideas, many of which can be traced back to a melodic idea heard at the end of the Prelude.

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The work was commissioned by the European Union Baroque Orchestra, and performed on a North European tour in August 1998. The solo violinists were Monica Huggett and Daphna Ravid, and the performances were conducted by the composer.

Performance Directions

Where the soloists are marked tacet, they may join the orchestral violins.

It may be preferable to use two harpsichords in unison, especially in louder passages.

The Prelude is scored for solo strings (3 violins, 2 violas, cello, double bass, and harpsichord(s)). The Chaconne is tutti unless otherwise marked. However, the 2 solo violas continue from the Prelude until bar 101.

In performances on early instruments, players should not try to play in a 'modern' manner, but should use the stylistic playing style they would use in baroque music. Points to note include:

> Phrases are always shaped (even where no markings are indicated in the score). The shaping should be a slight crescendo when a line rises, and a diminuendo when it falls.
>
> Held notes receive some kind of dynamic shaping. This would certainly be appropriate in the Prelude, but not necessarily so for long held pedal notes or sustained chords.
>
> Vibrato should be used sparingly throughout the piece, but *should not* be used at all in the prelude until bar 54. Even after this point it is optional.

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In the Prelude, all rests should be carefully observed.

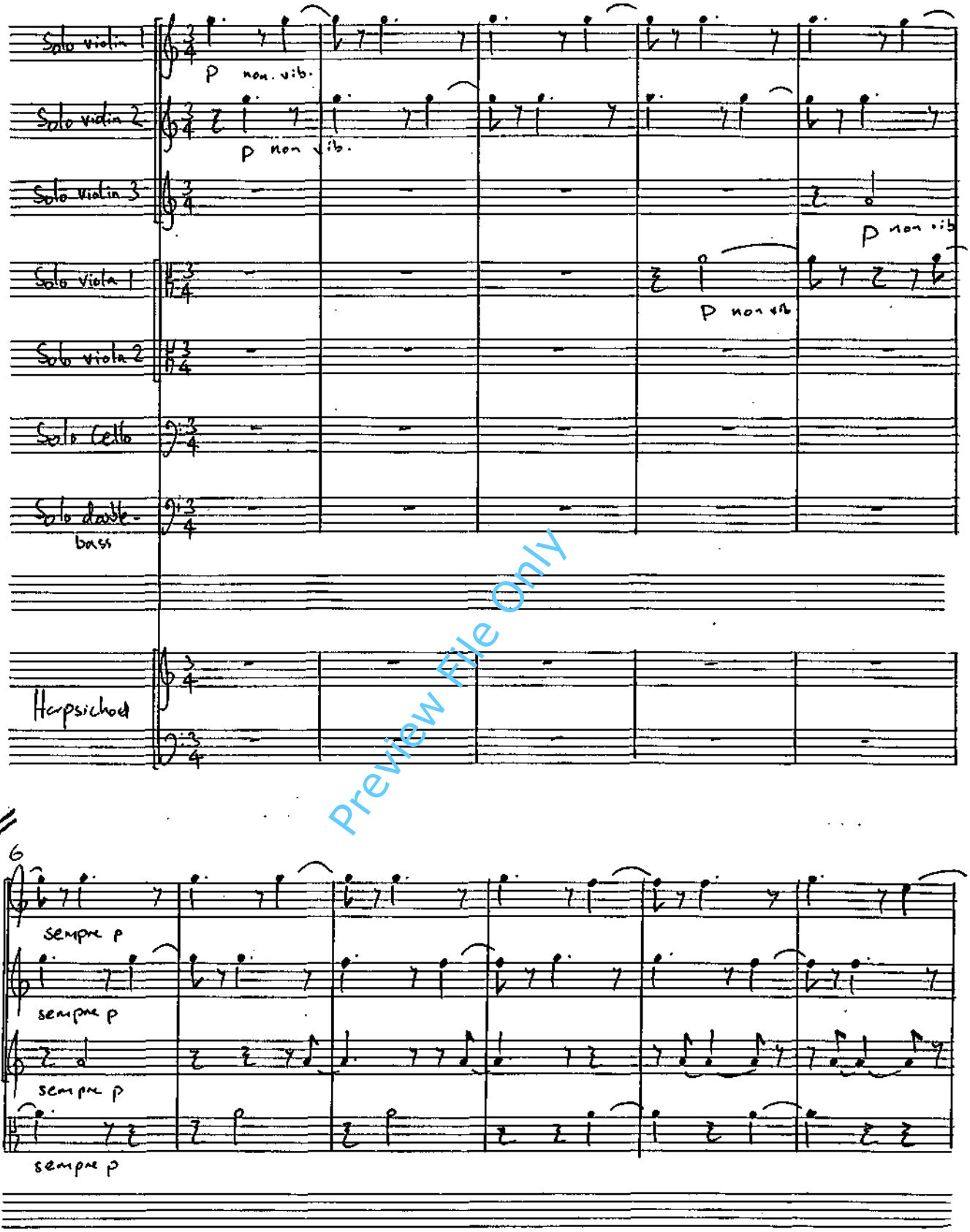
The chaconne theme is first heard from bars 76-93 in the bass. The theme is at this point hidden from the listener; it functions as a slow moving bass line. Over succeeding repeats of the theme, its note values are gradually reduced, until at bar 281, it becomes a highly obvious feature of the music.

JW 7/7/98

I : Prelude

John Webb

♩ = 60 Semplice



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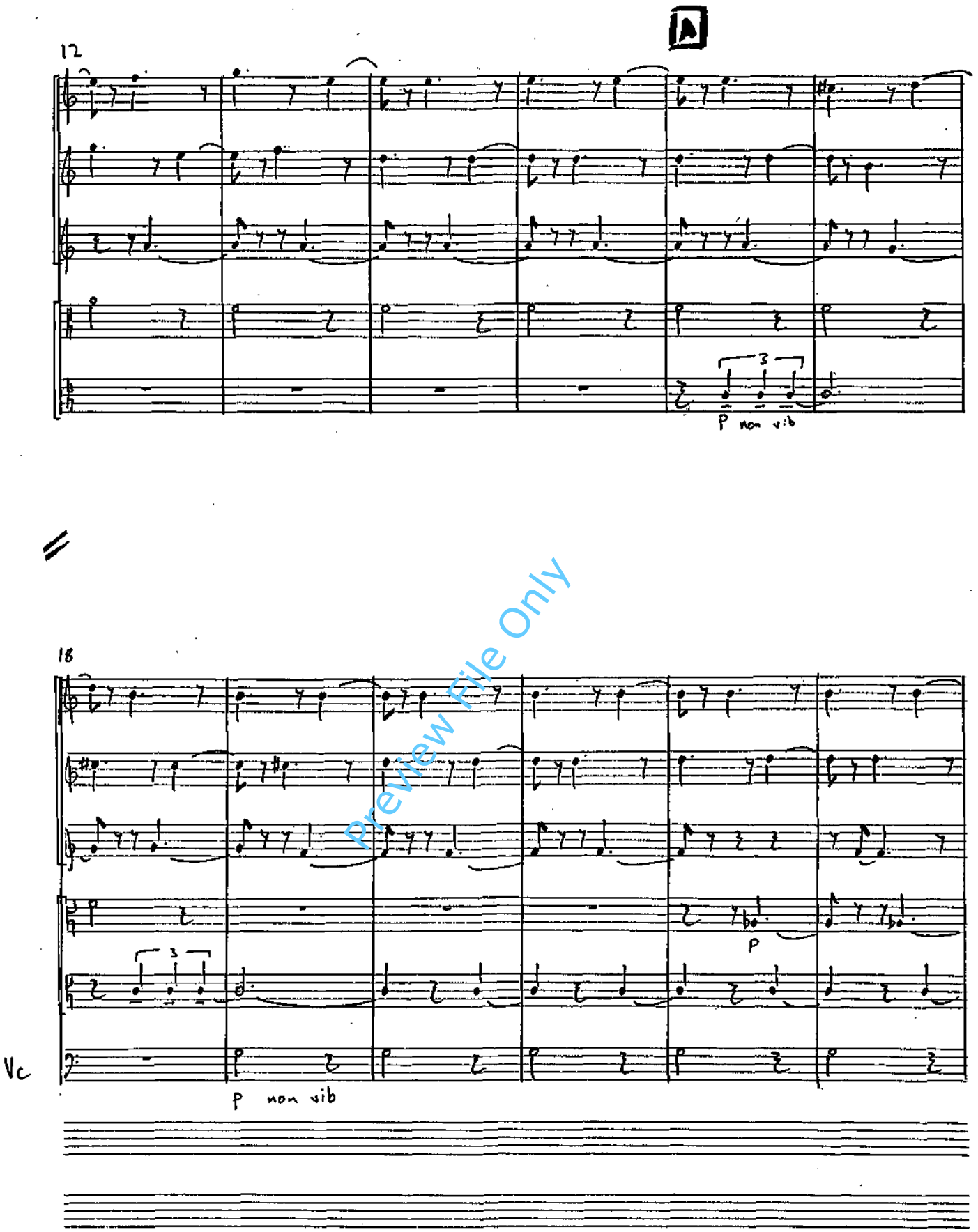

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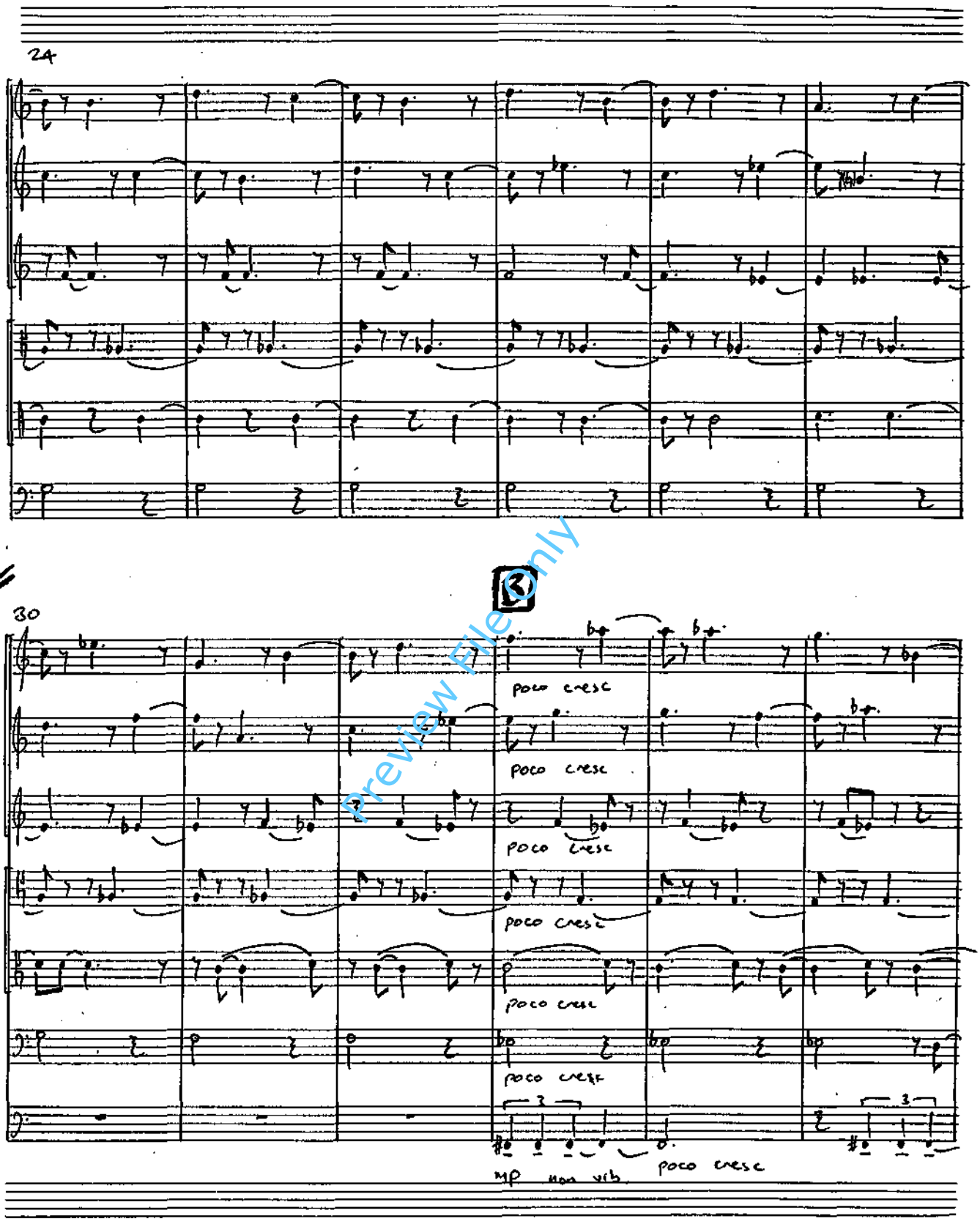

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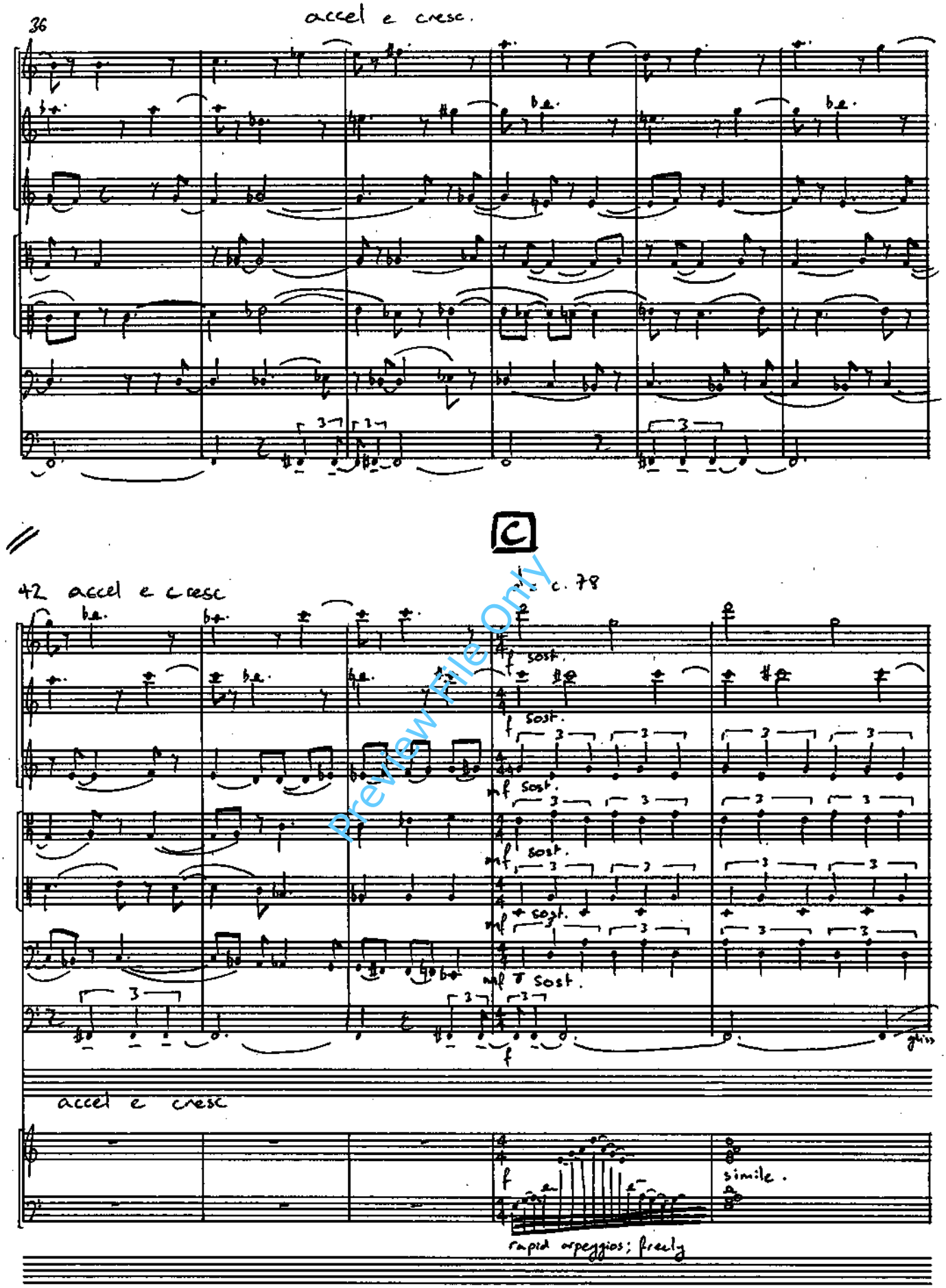

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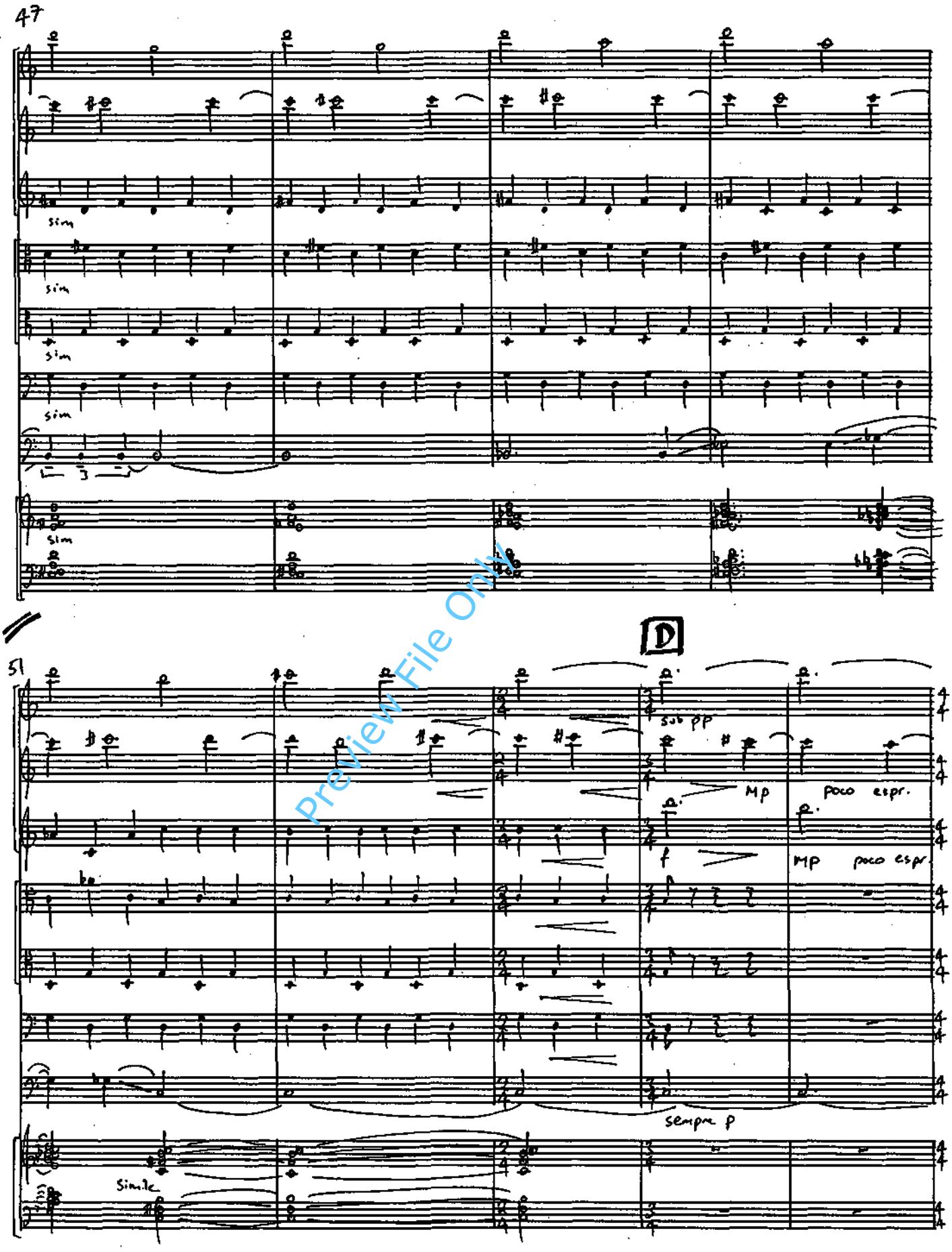

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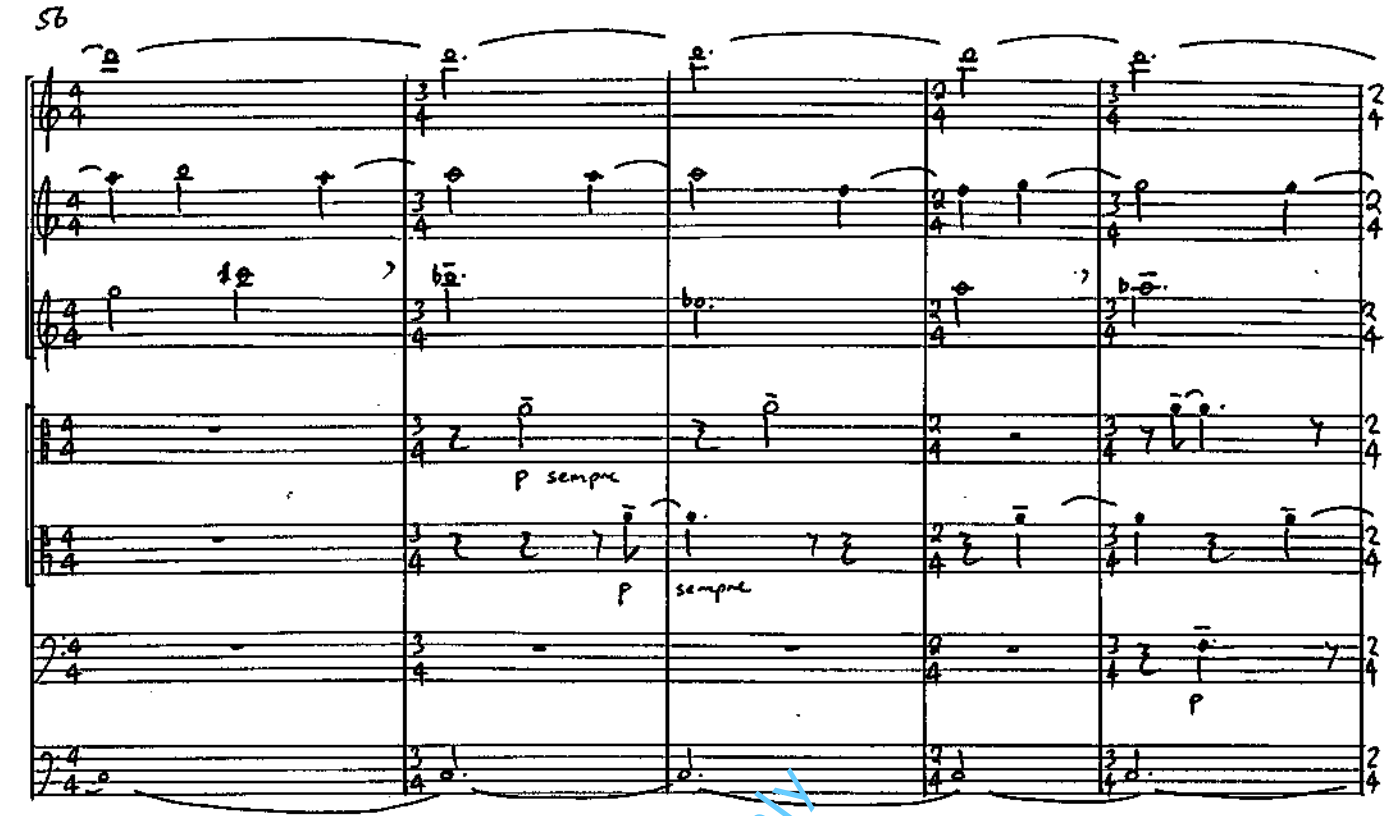

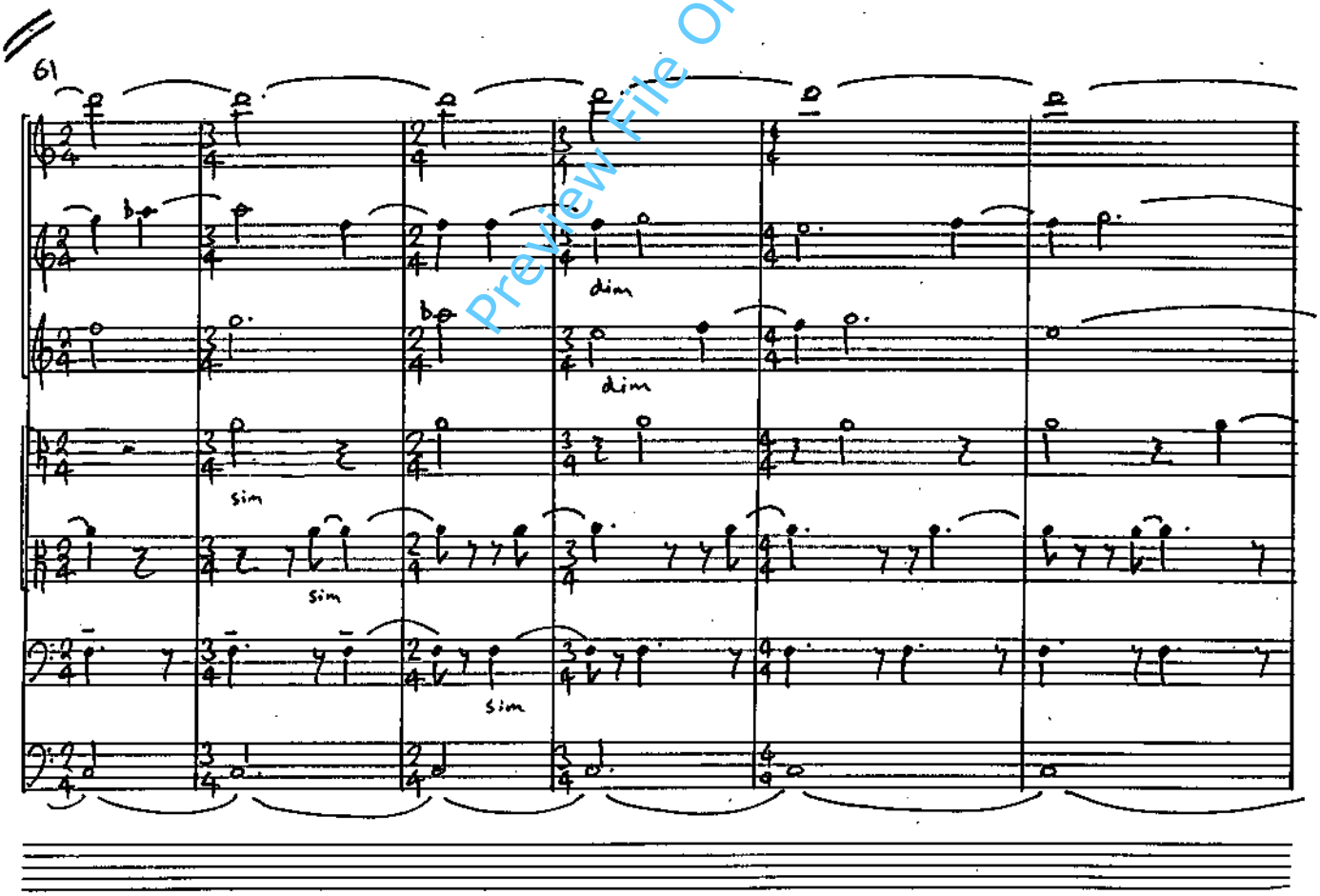

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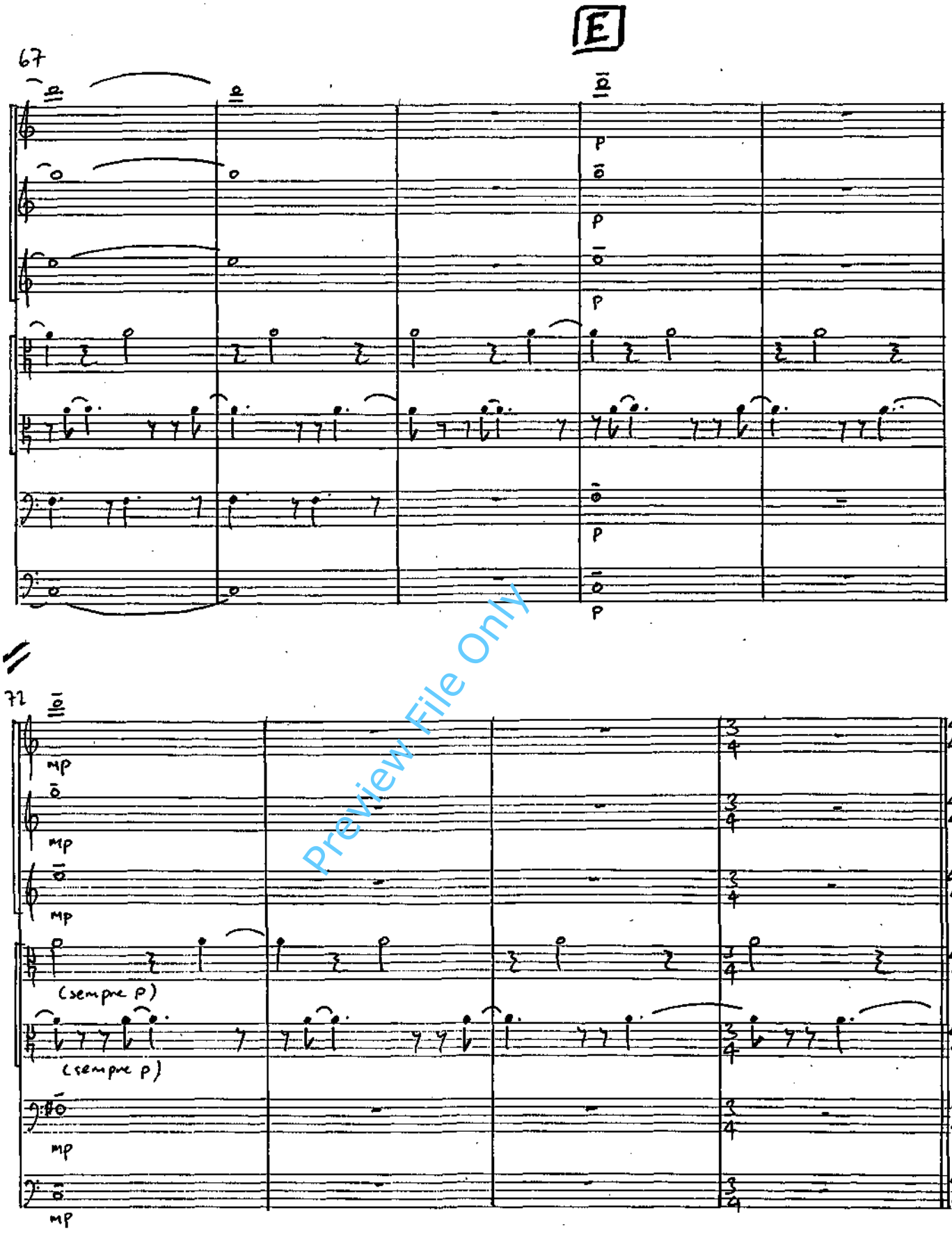

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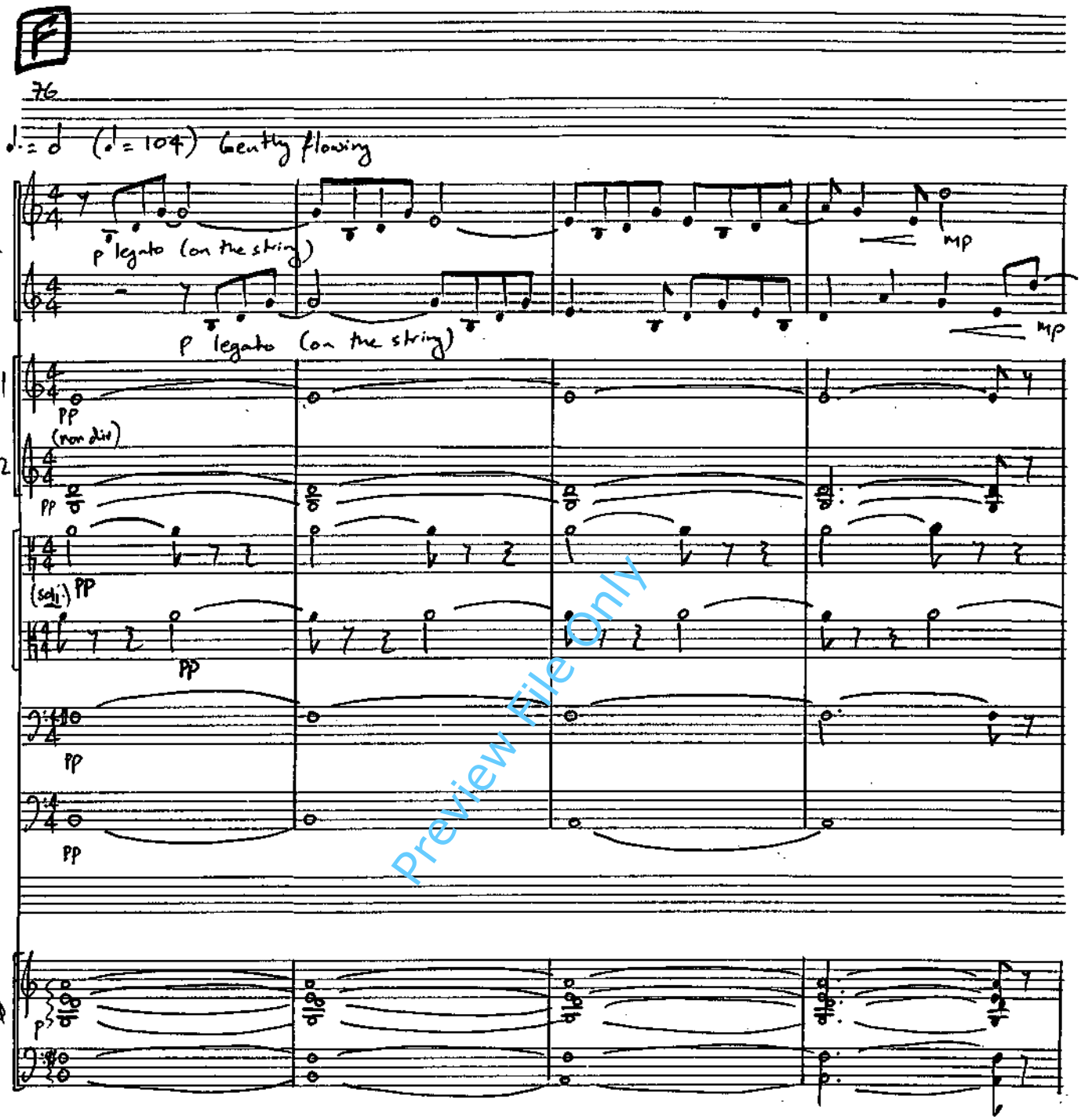

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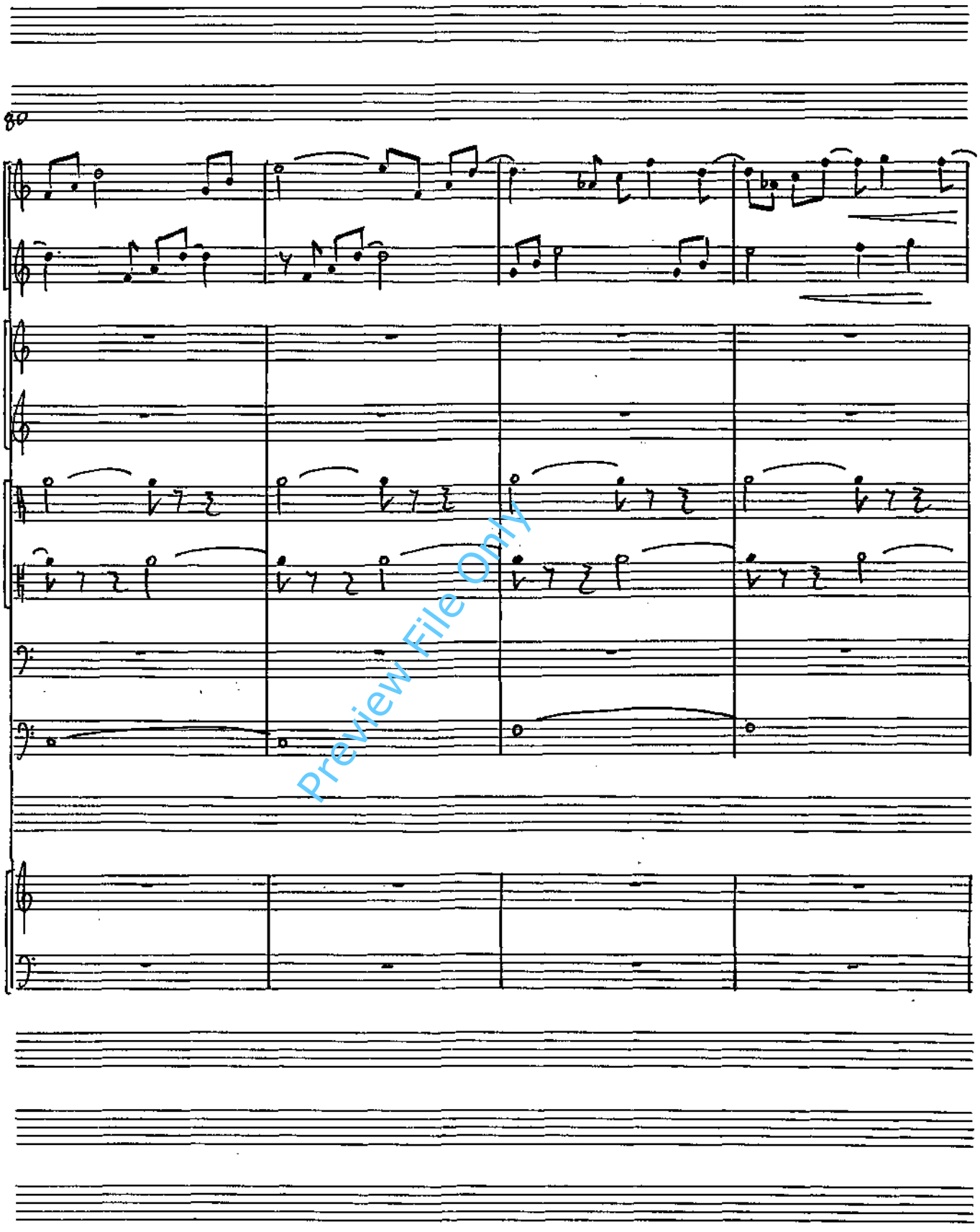

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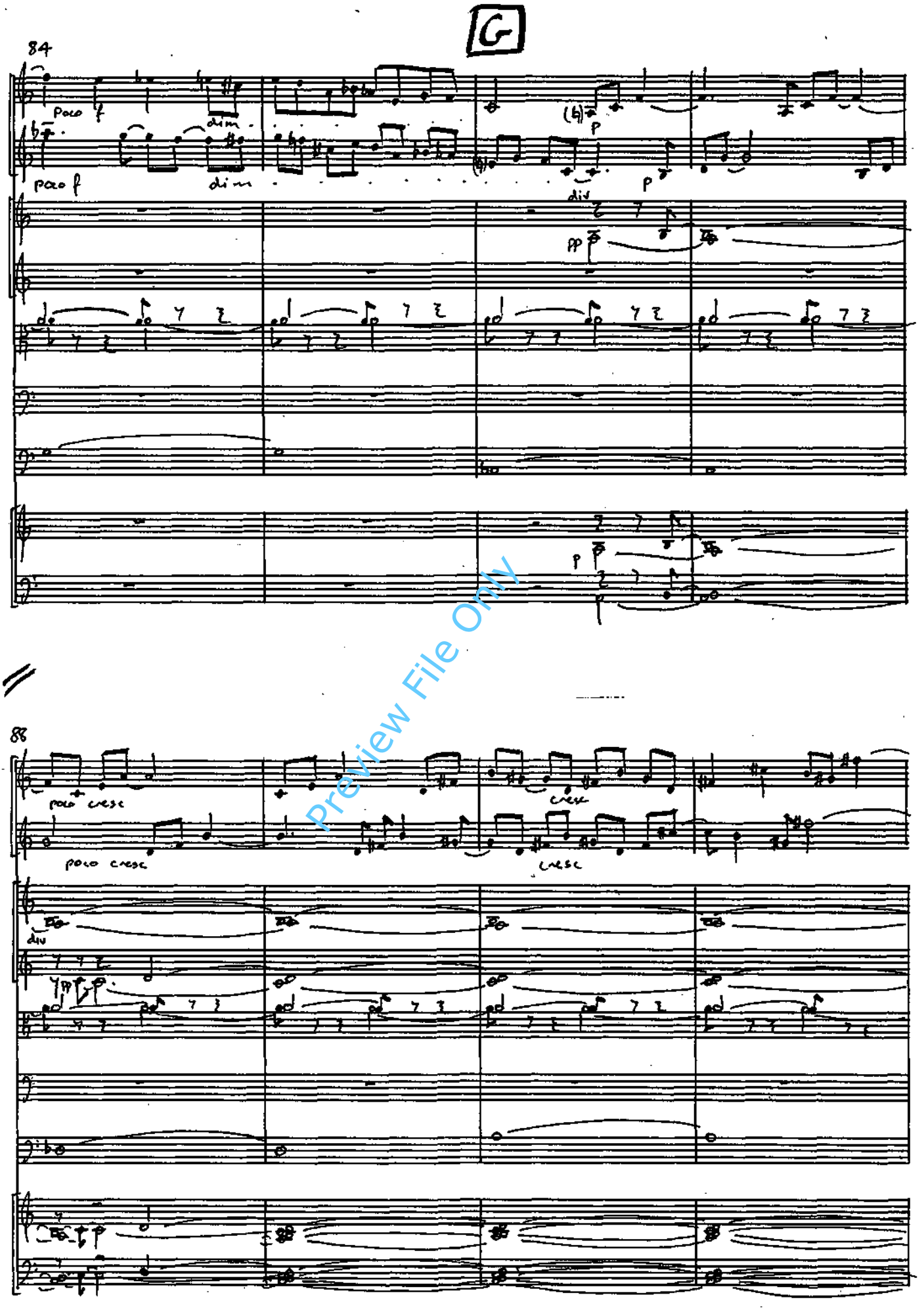

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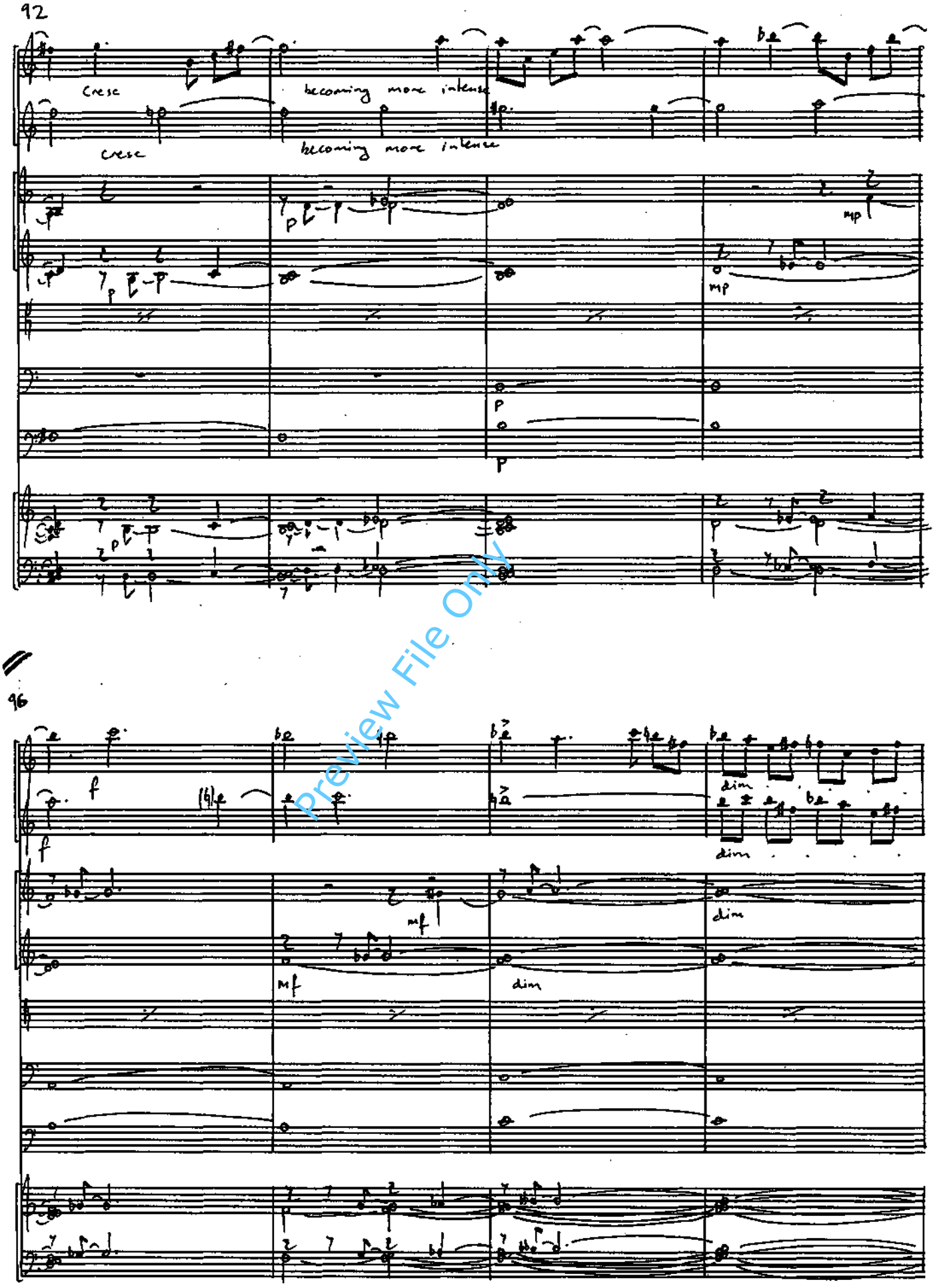

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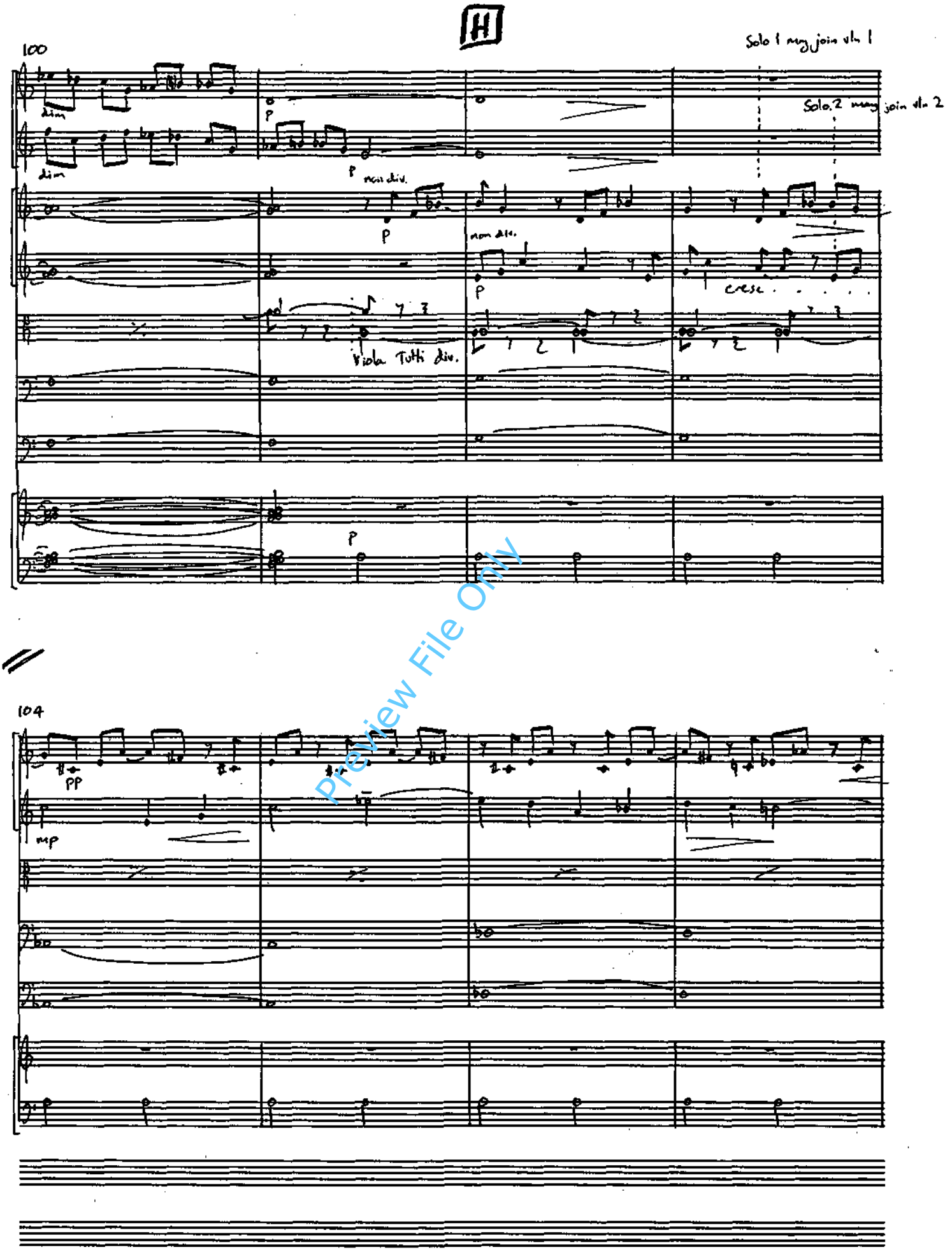

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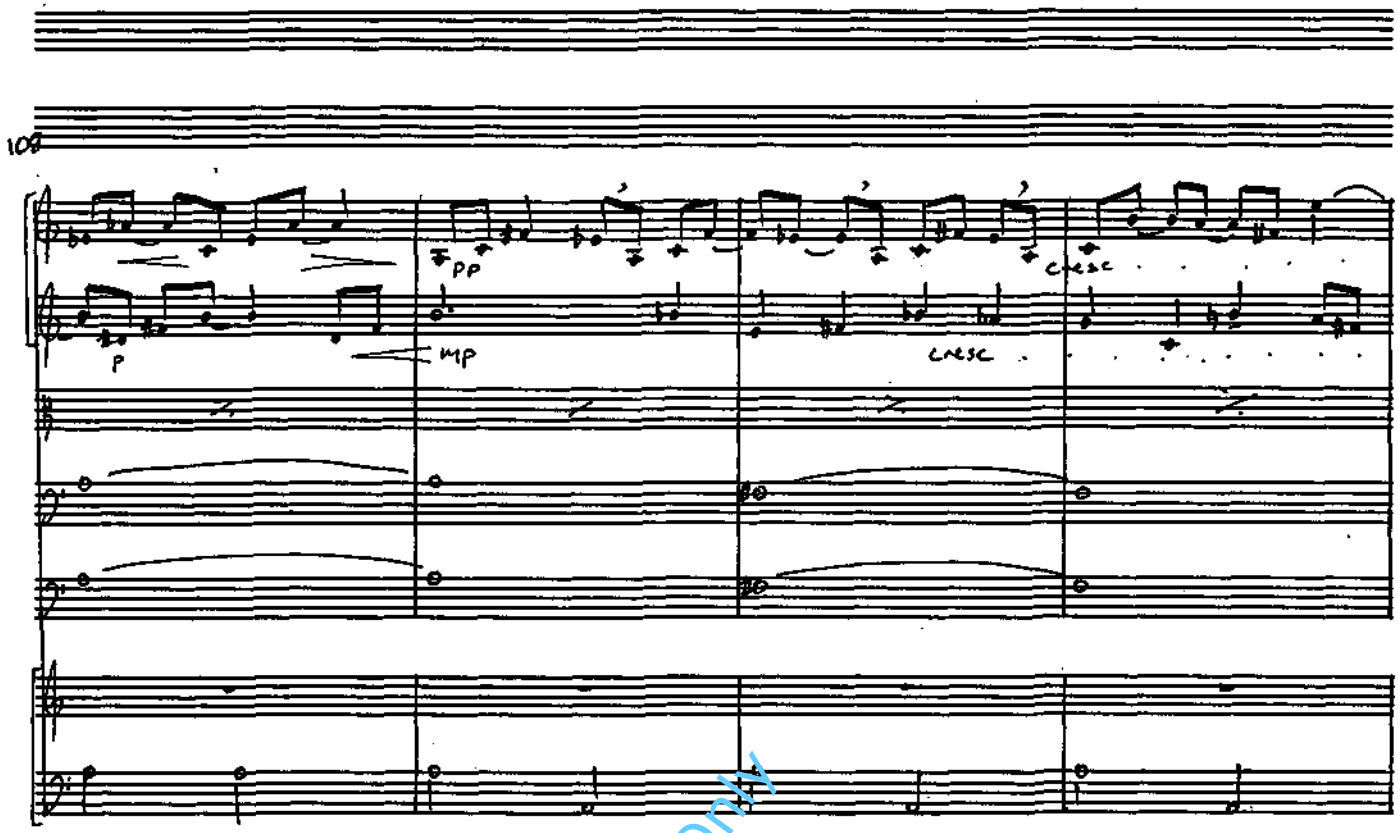

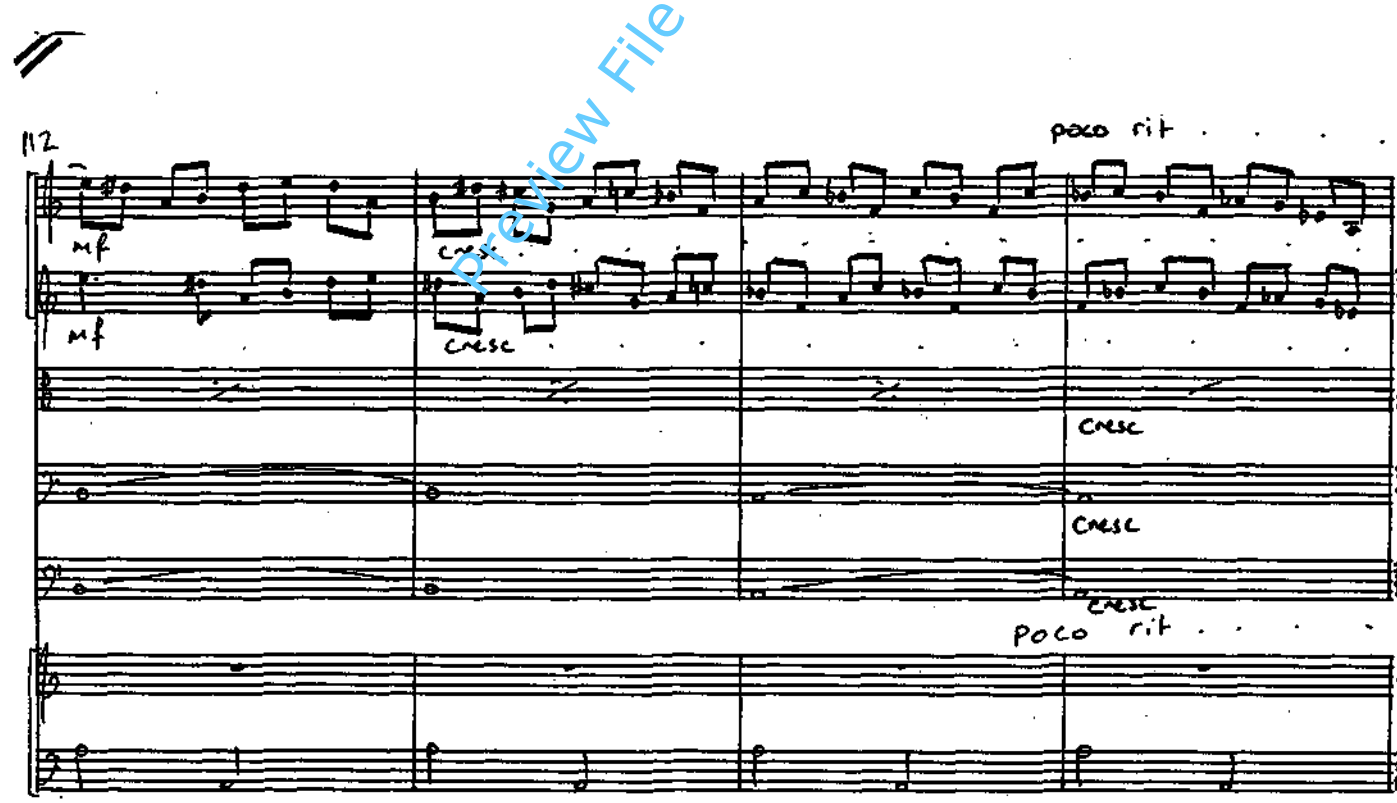

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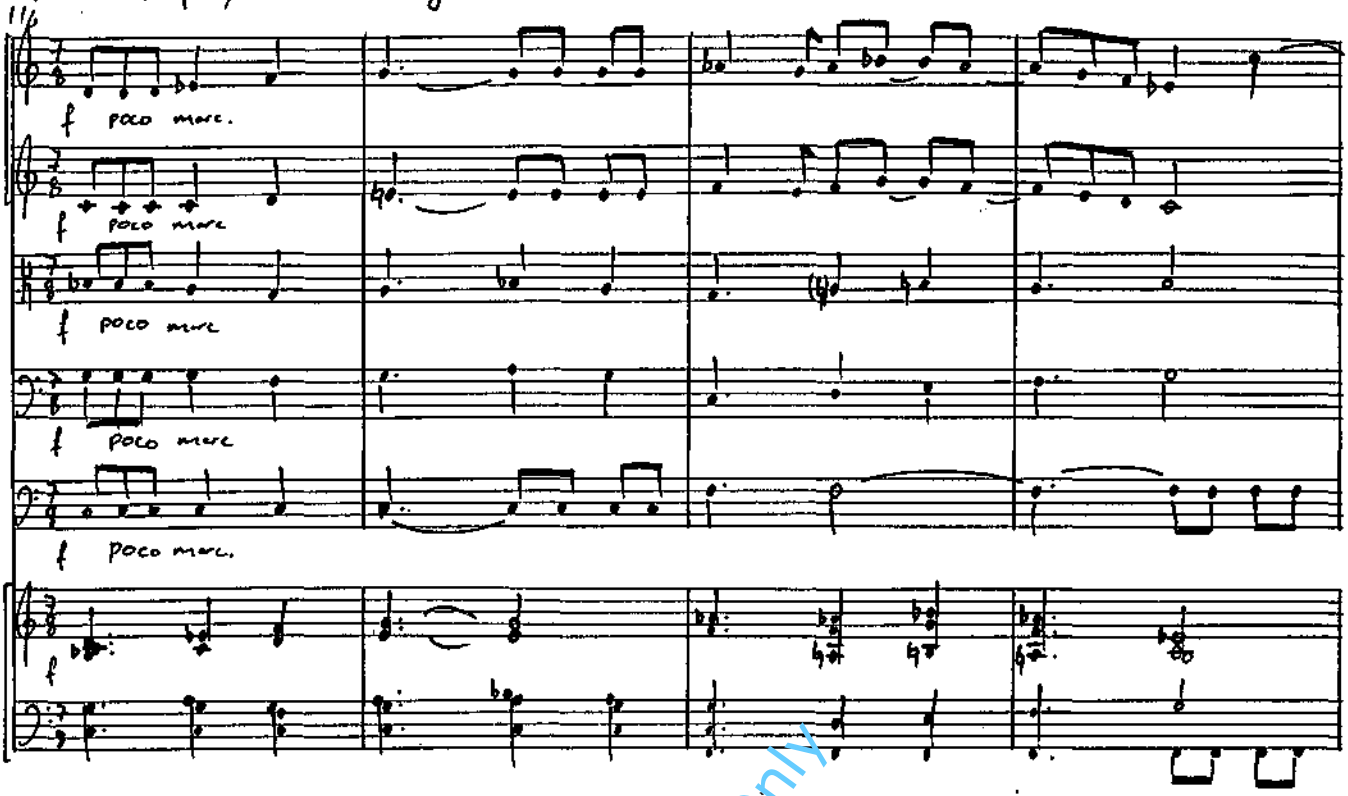
I

♩. ♪ A tempo, more incisively



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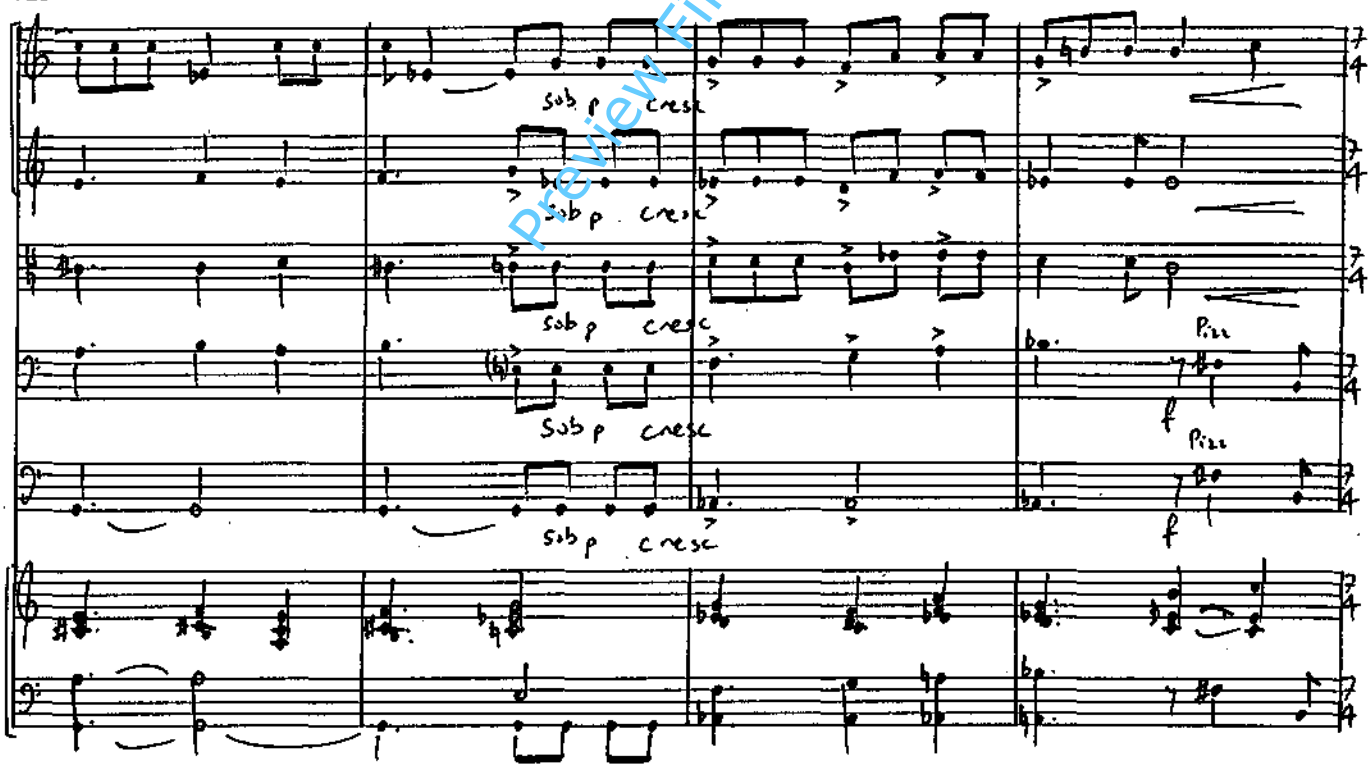

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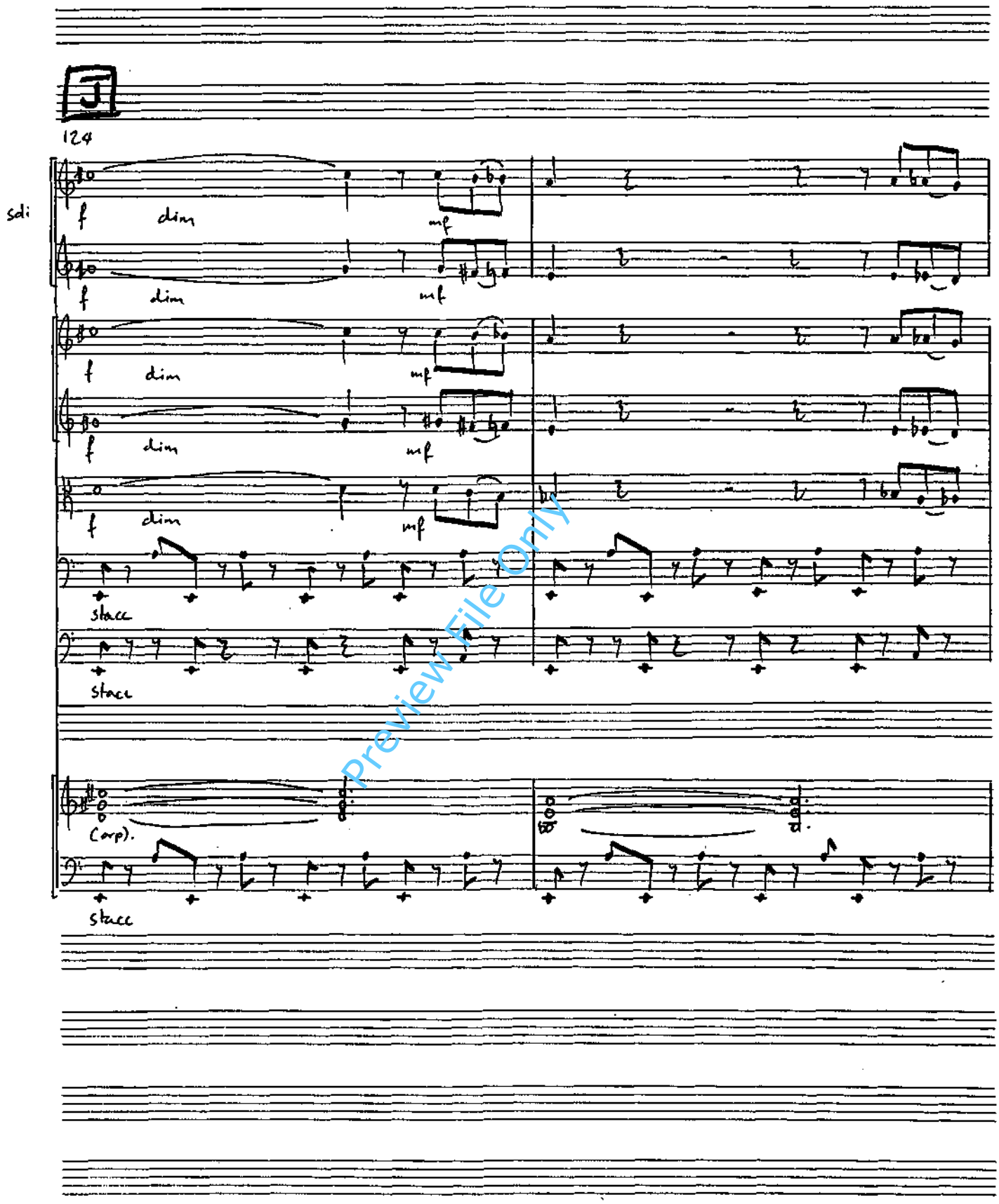

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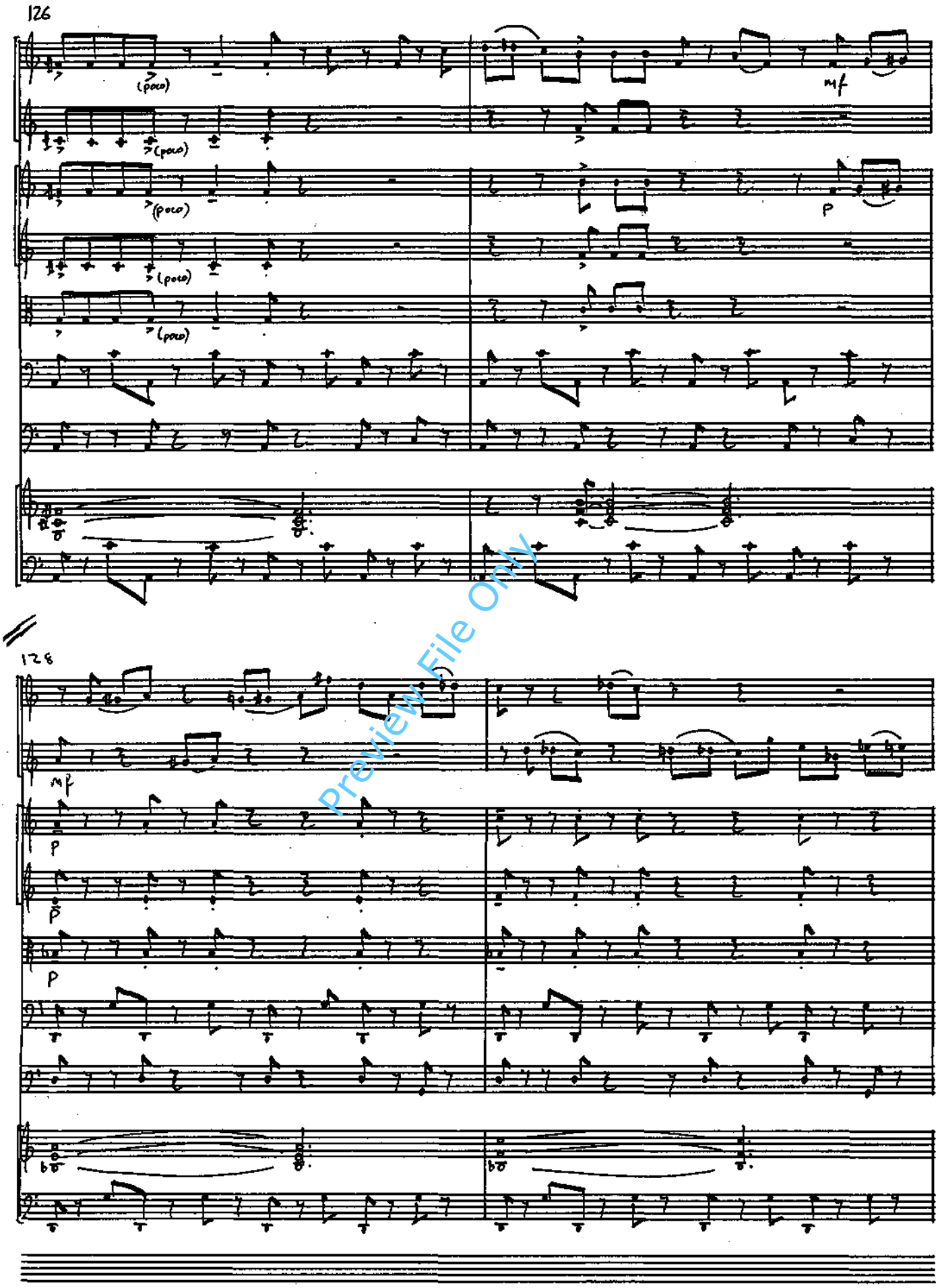

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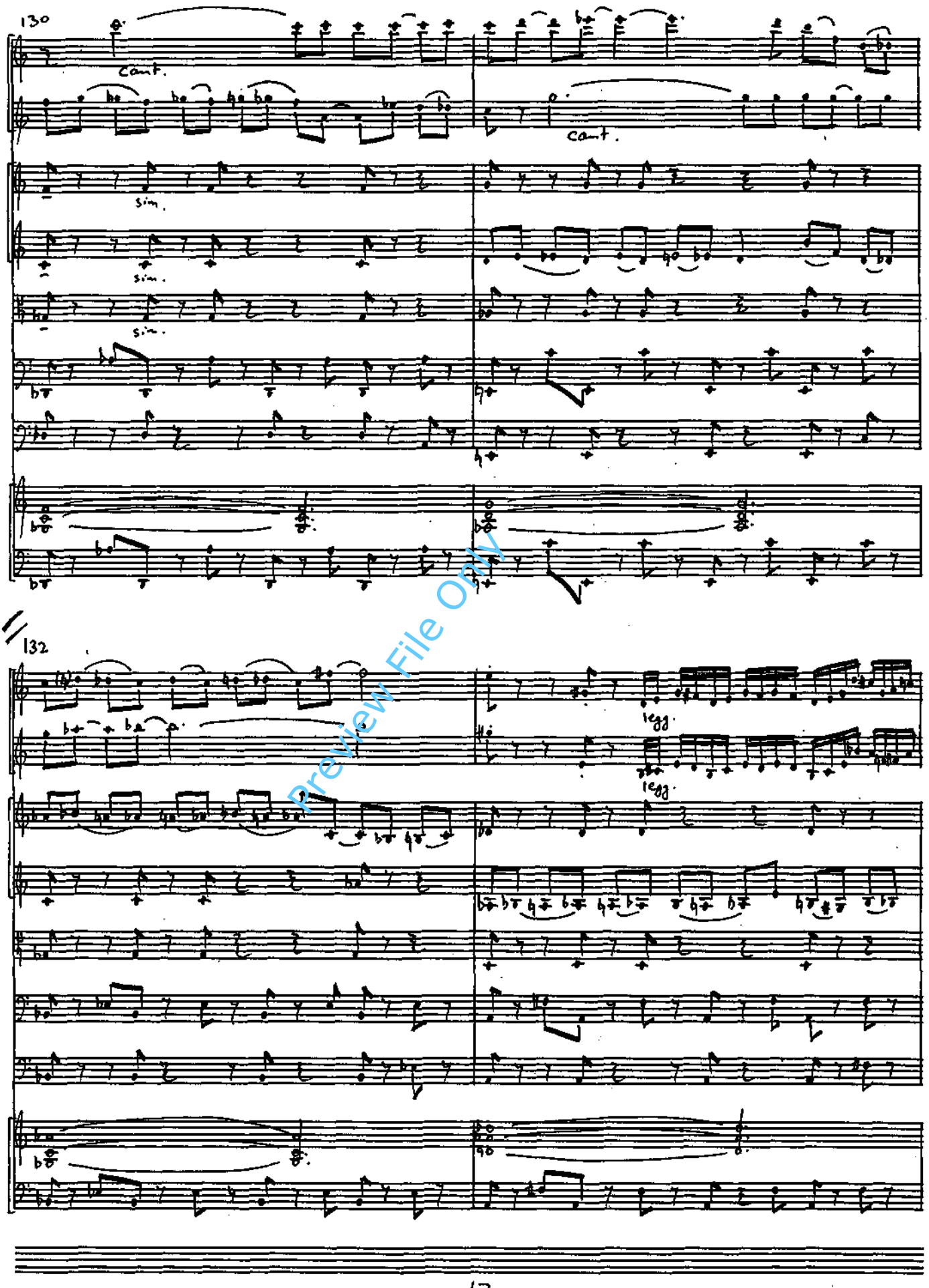

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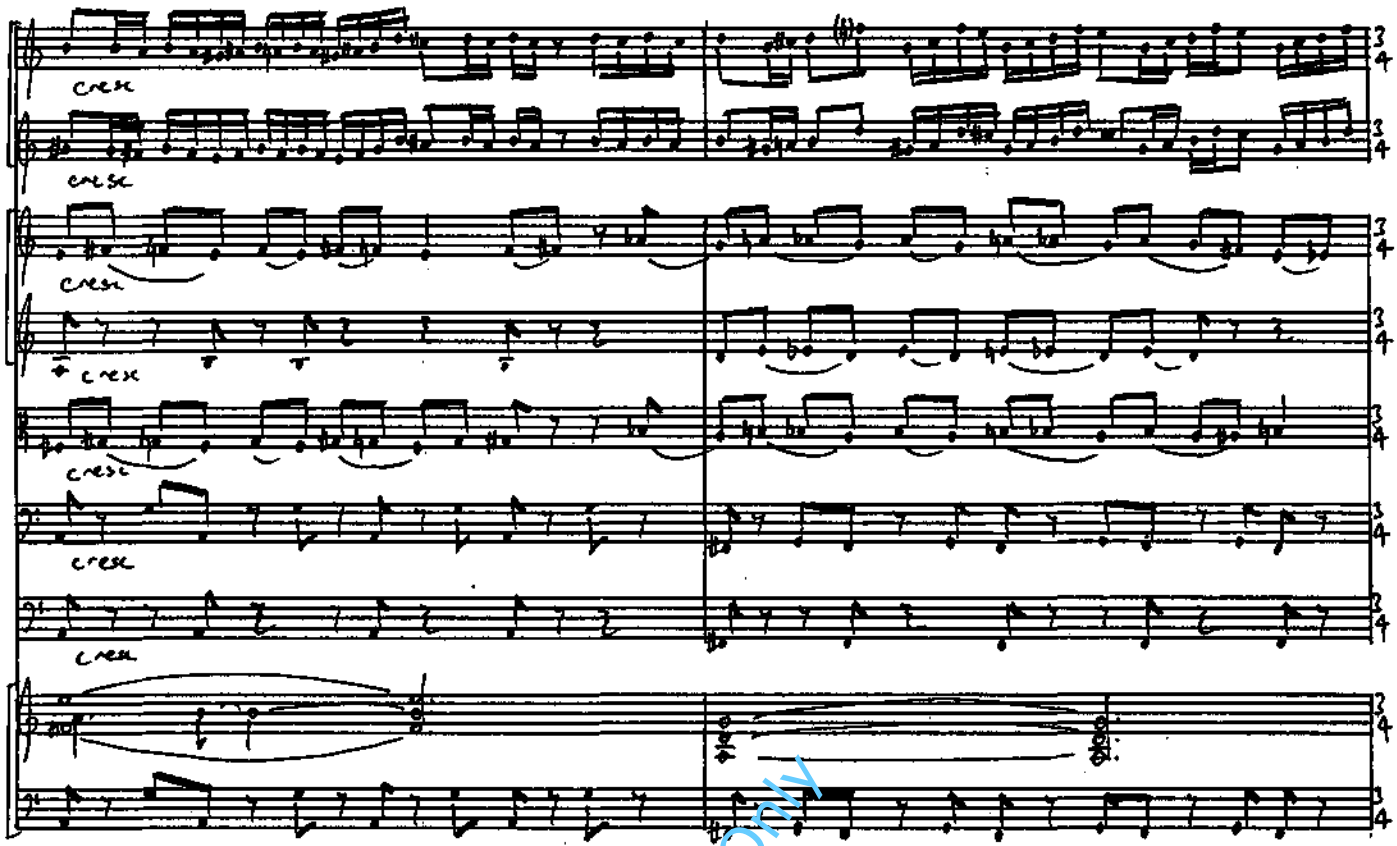

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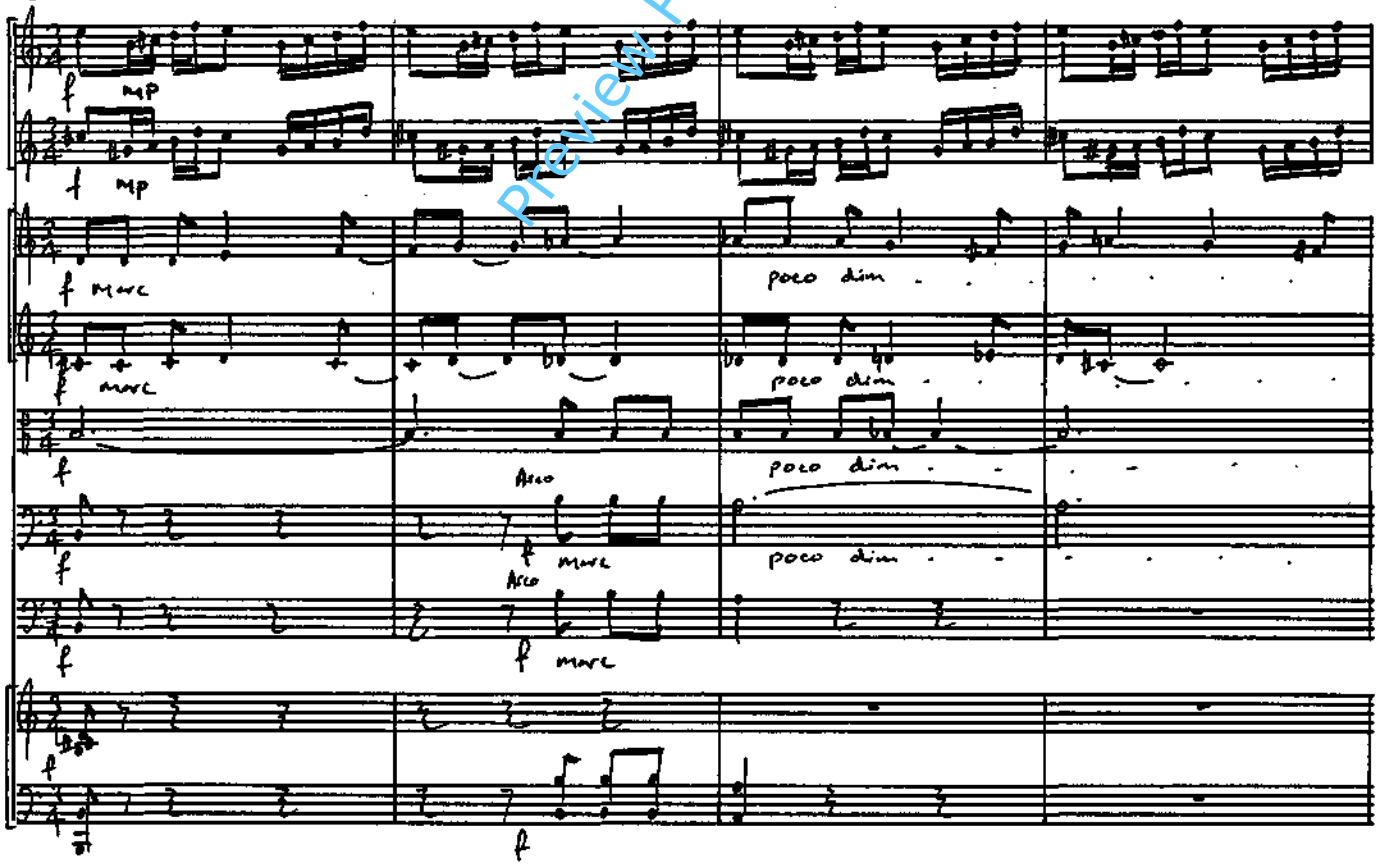

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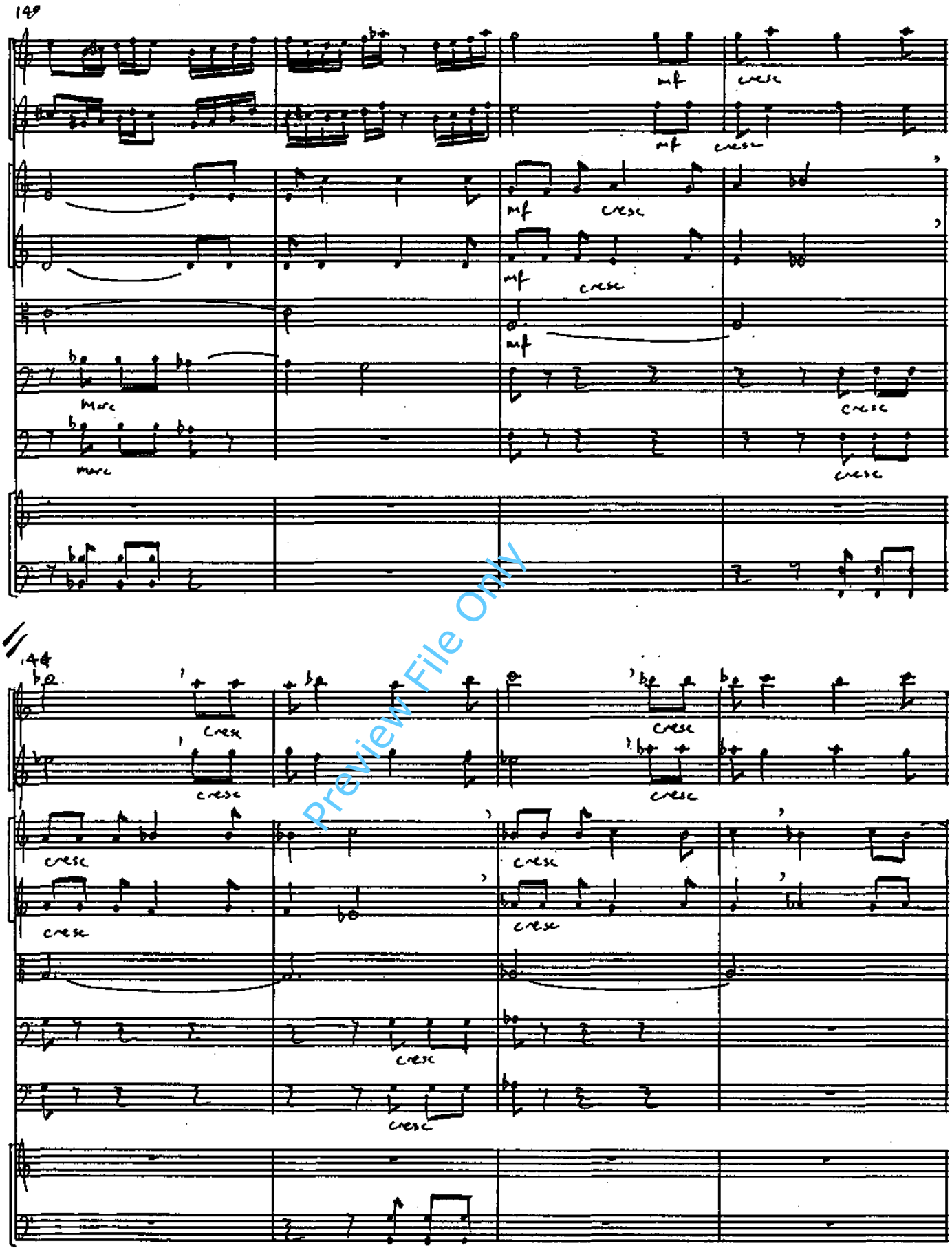

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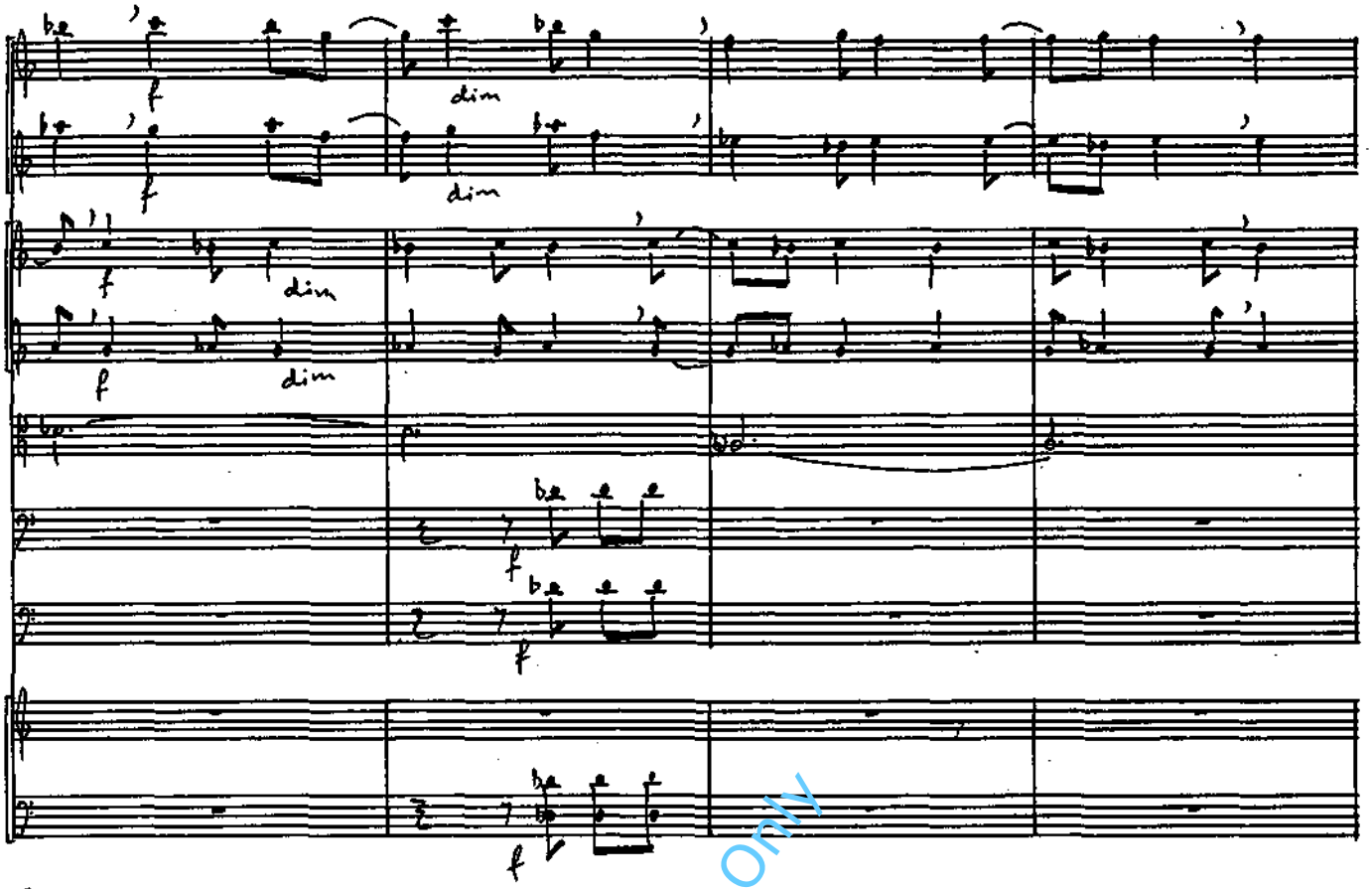

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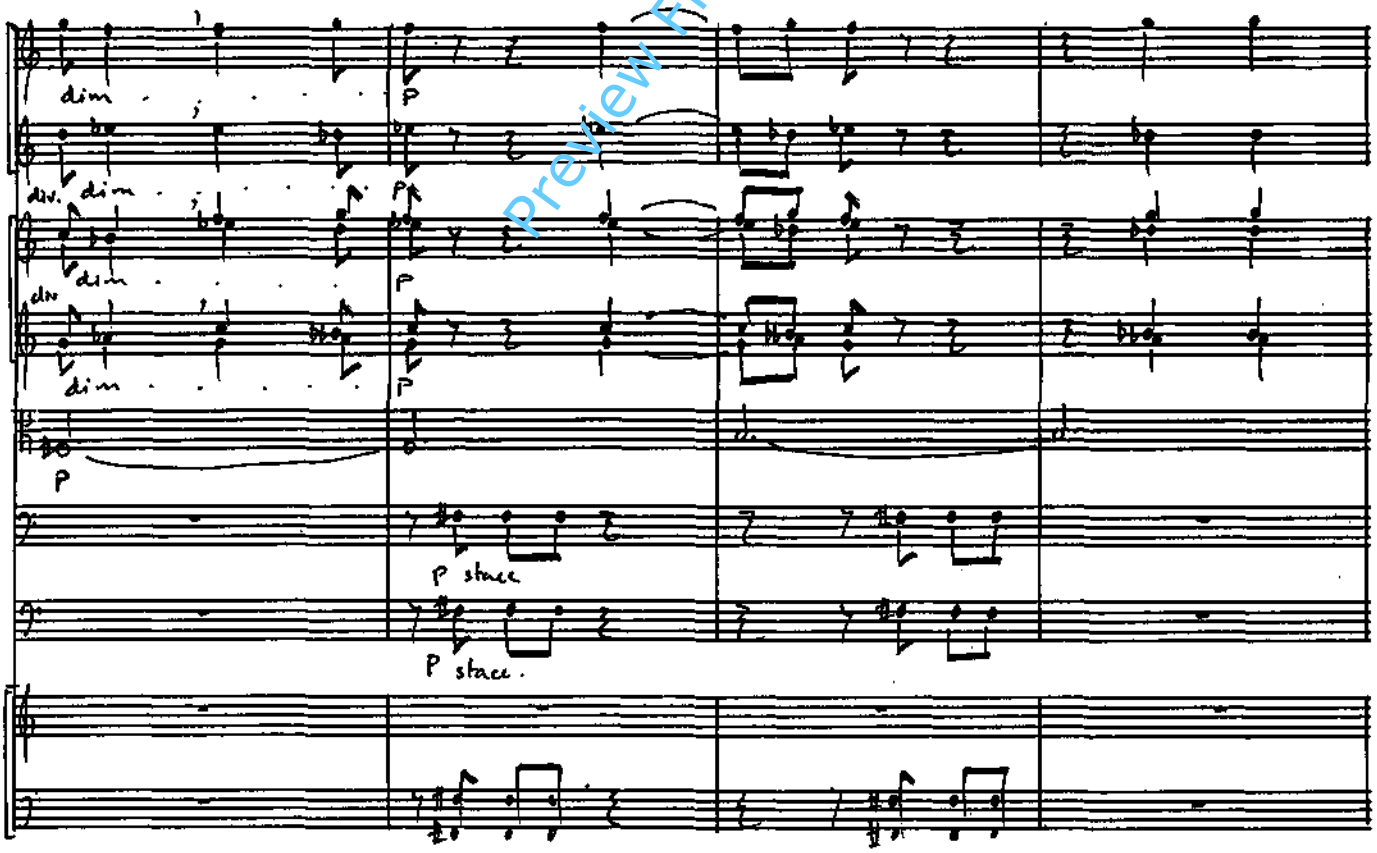

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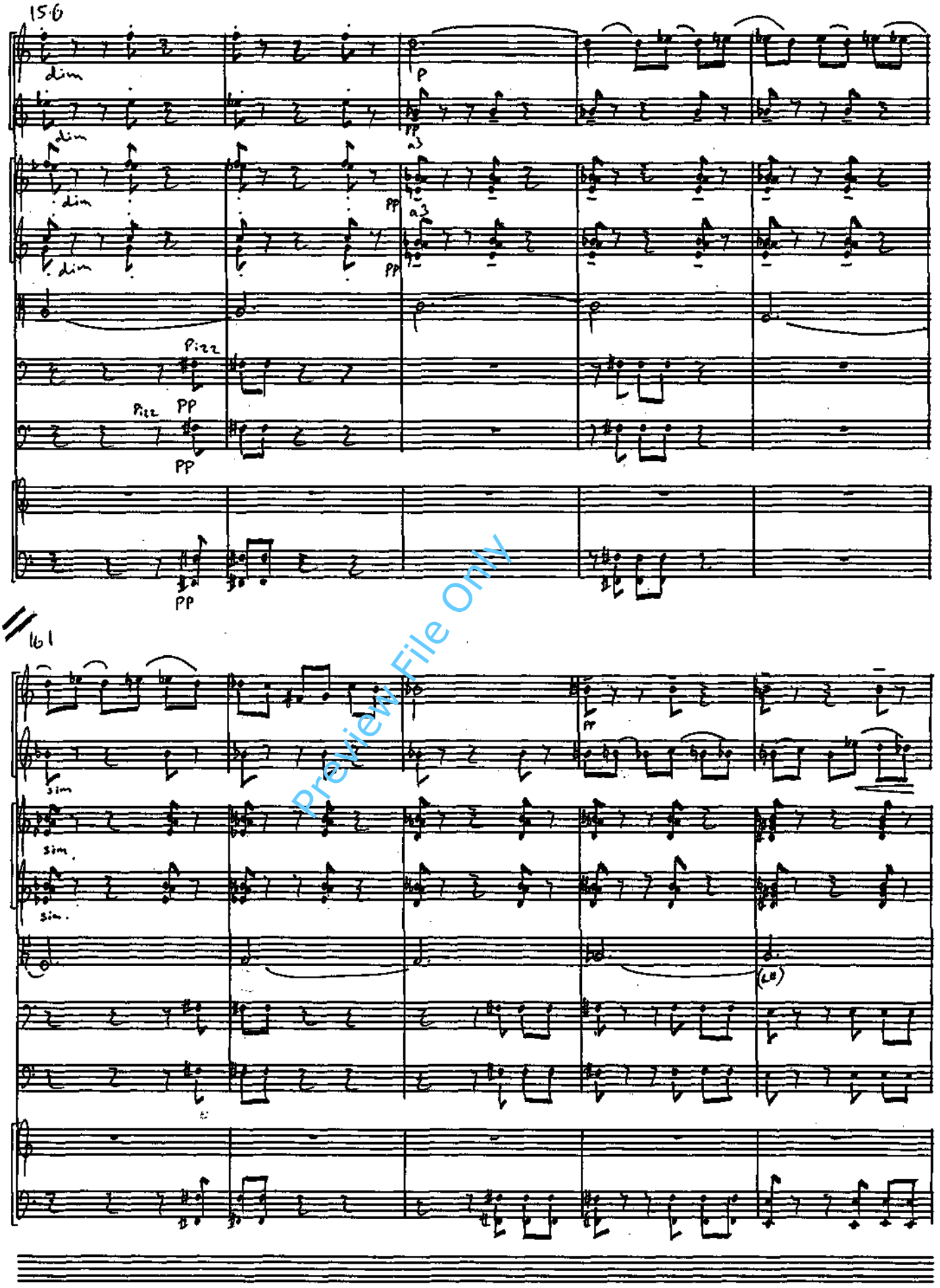

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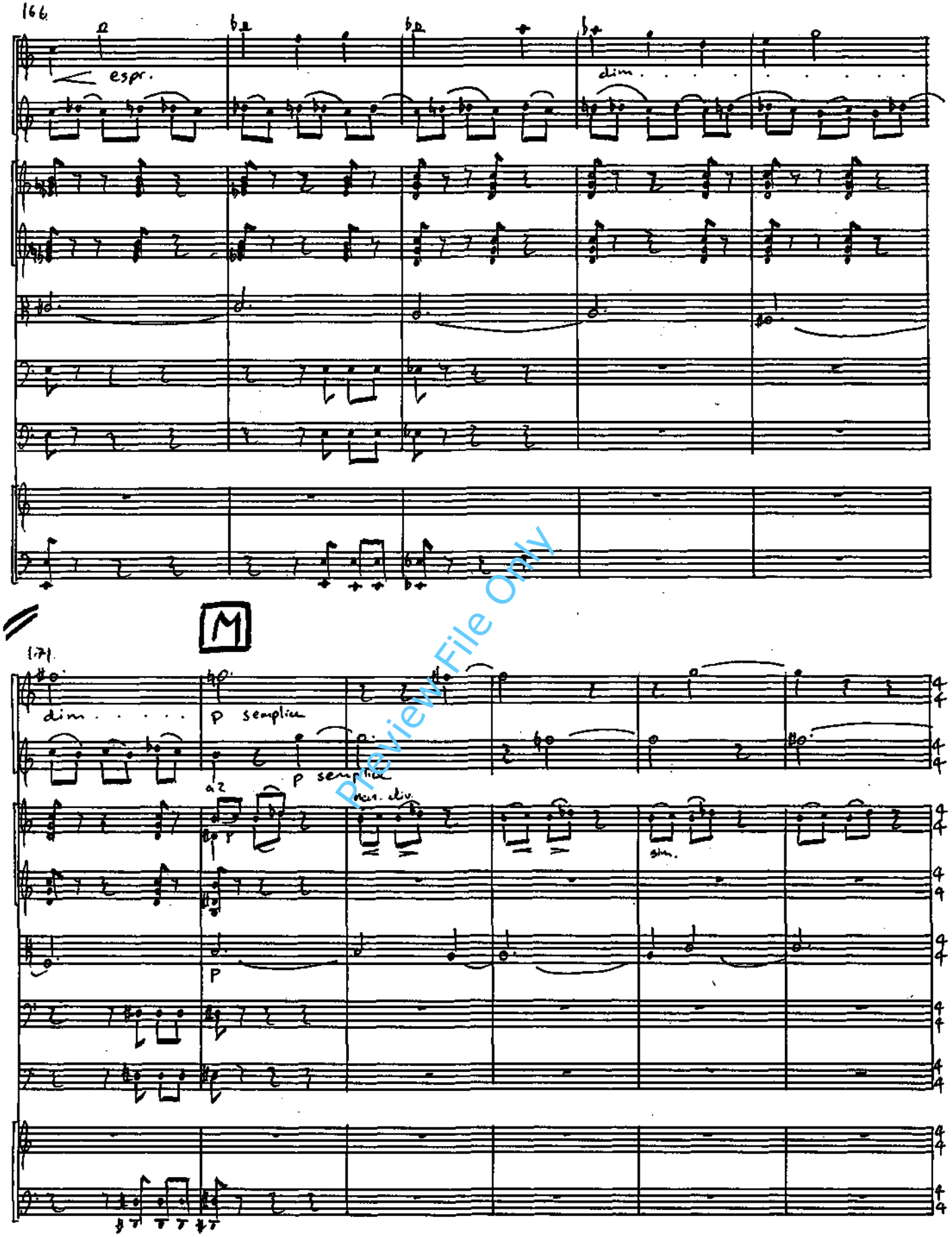

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177

Arco

Vc

p

182

rit

dim

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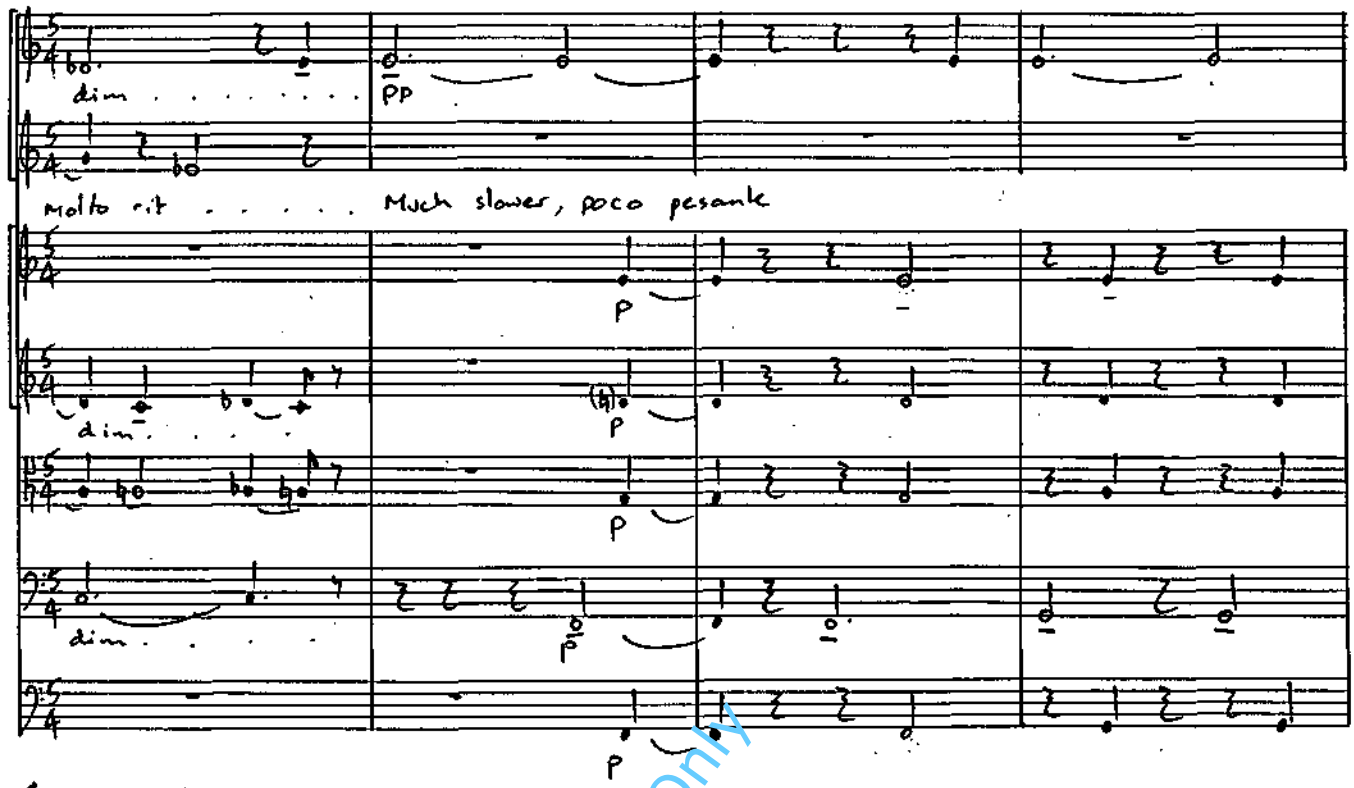
N

187 molto rit . . . . . Much slower, poco pesante



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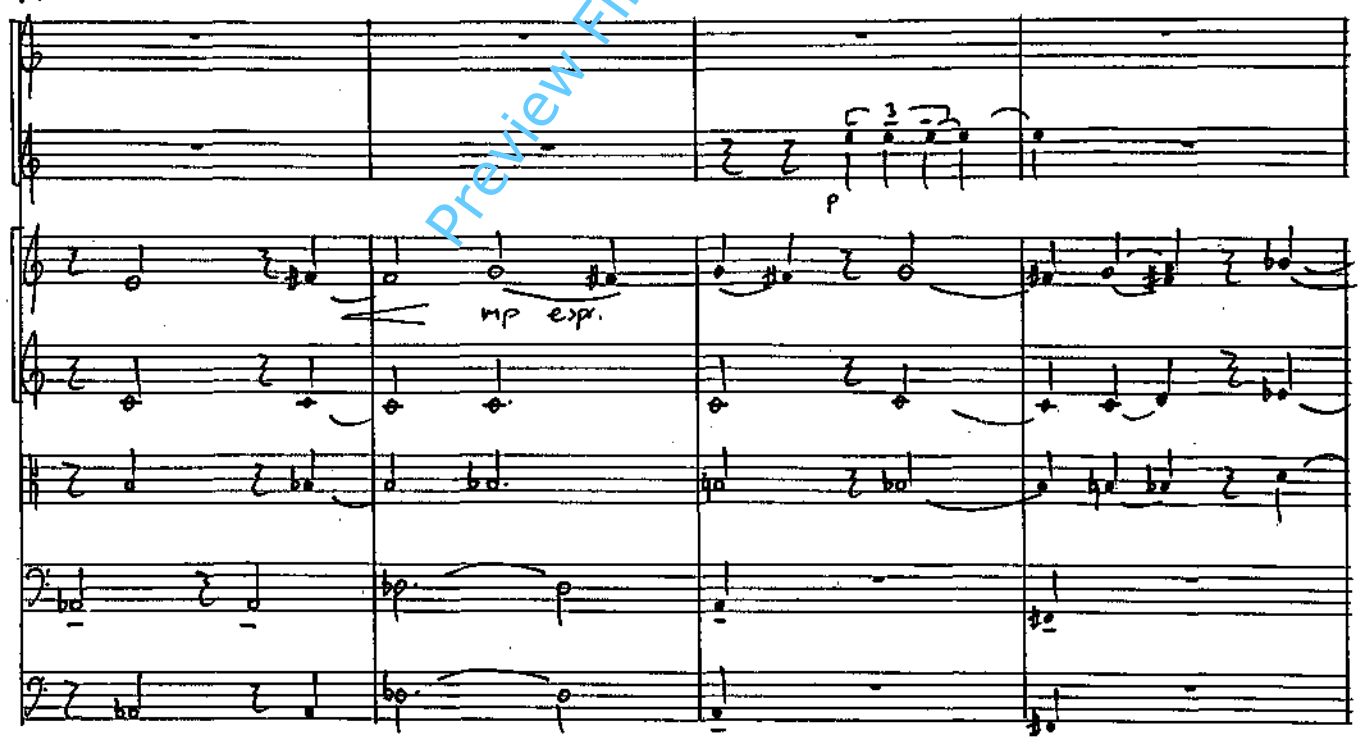

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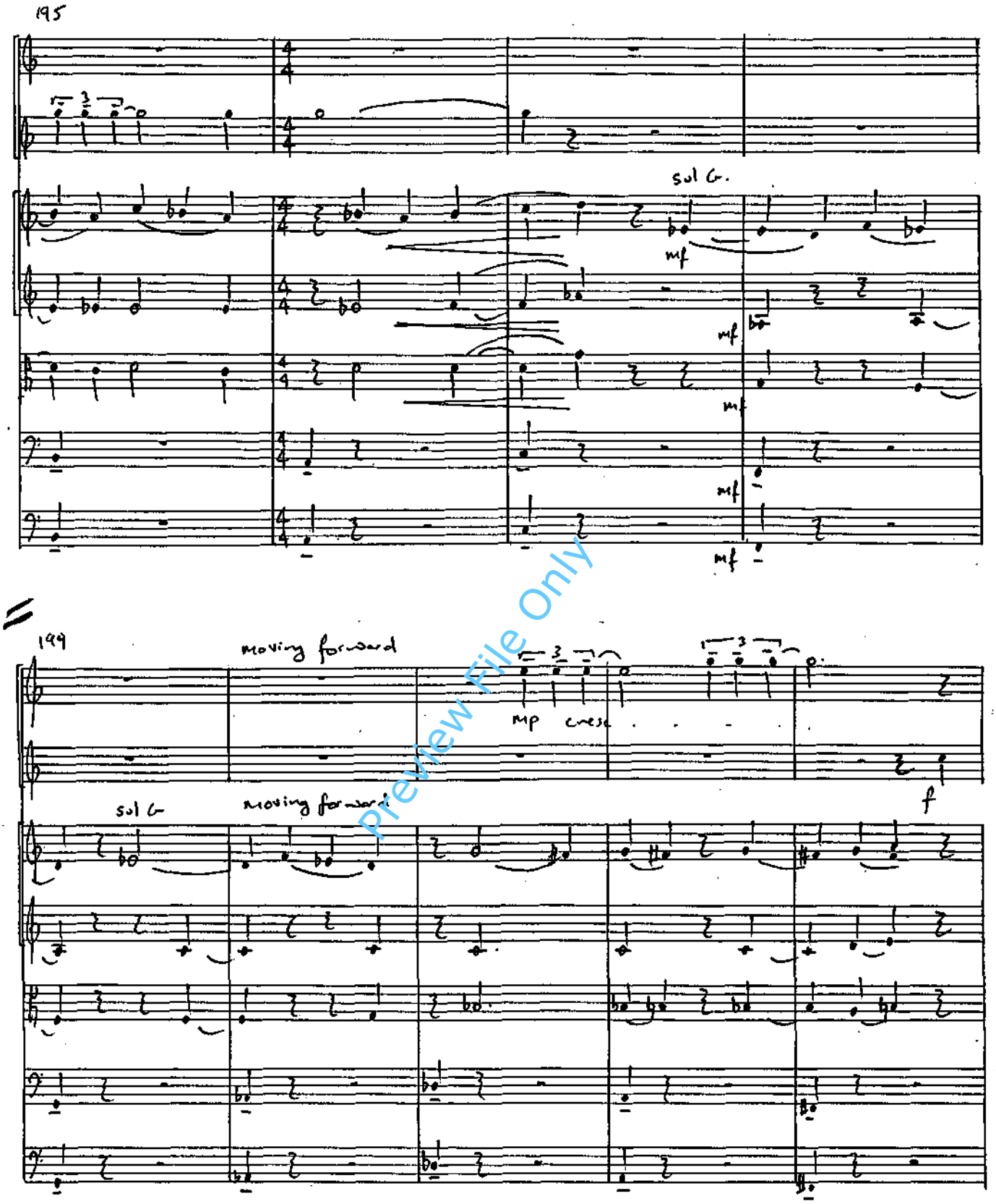

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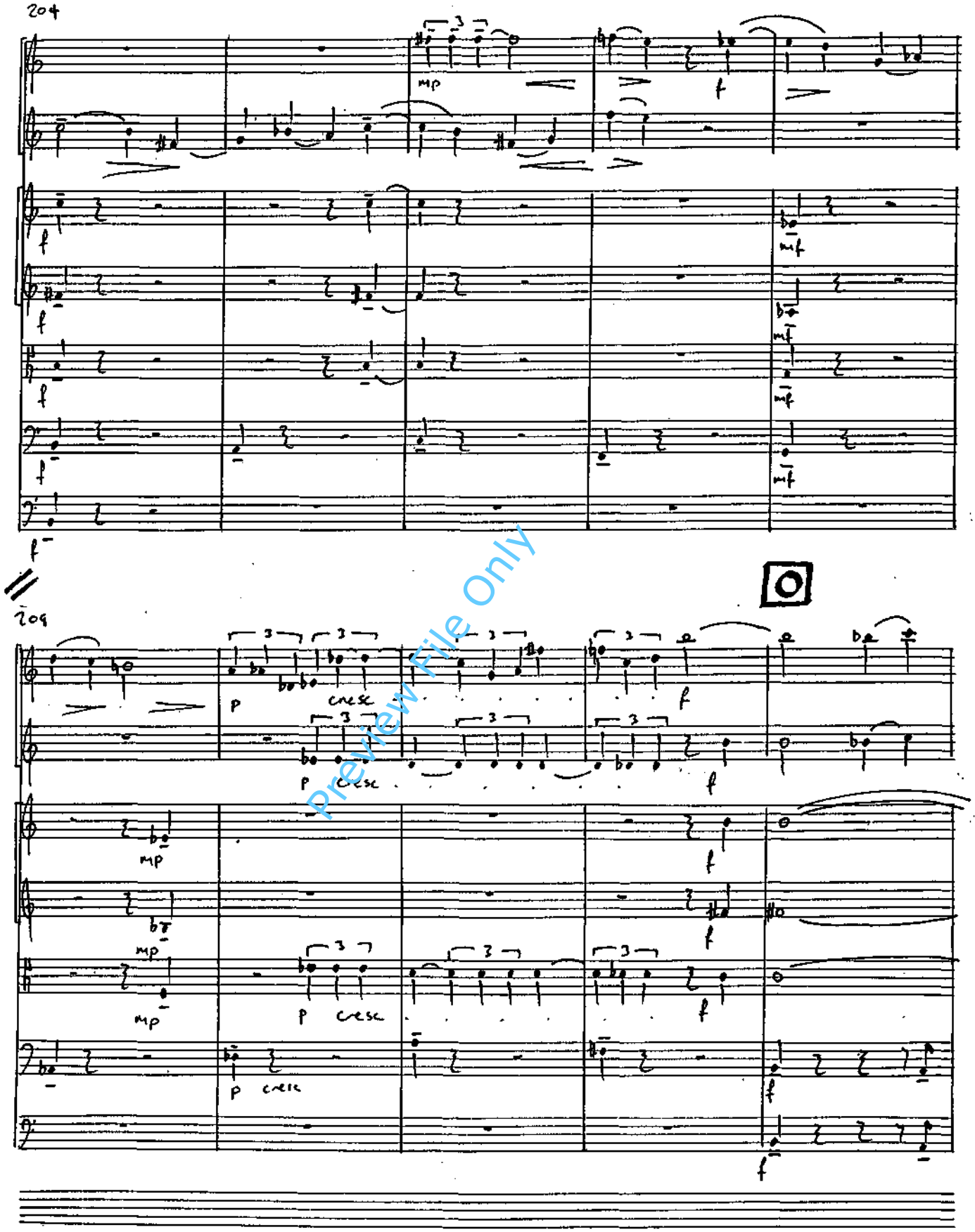

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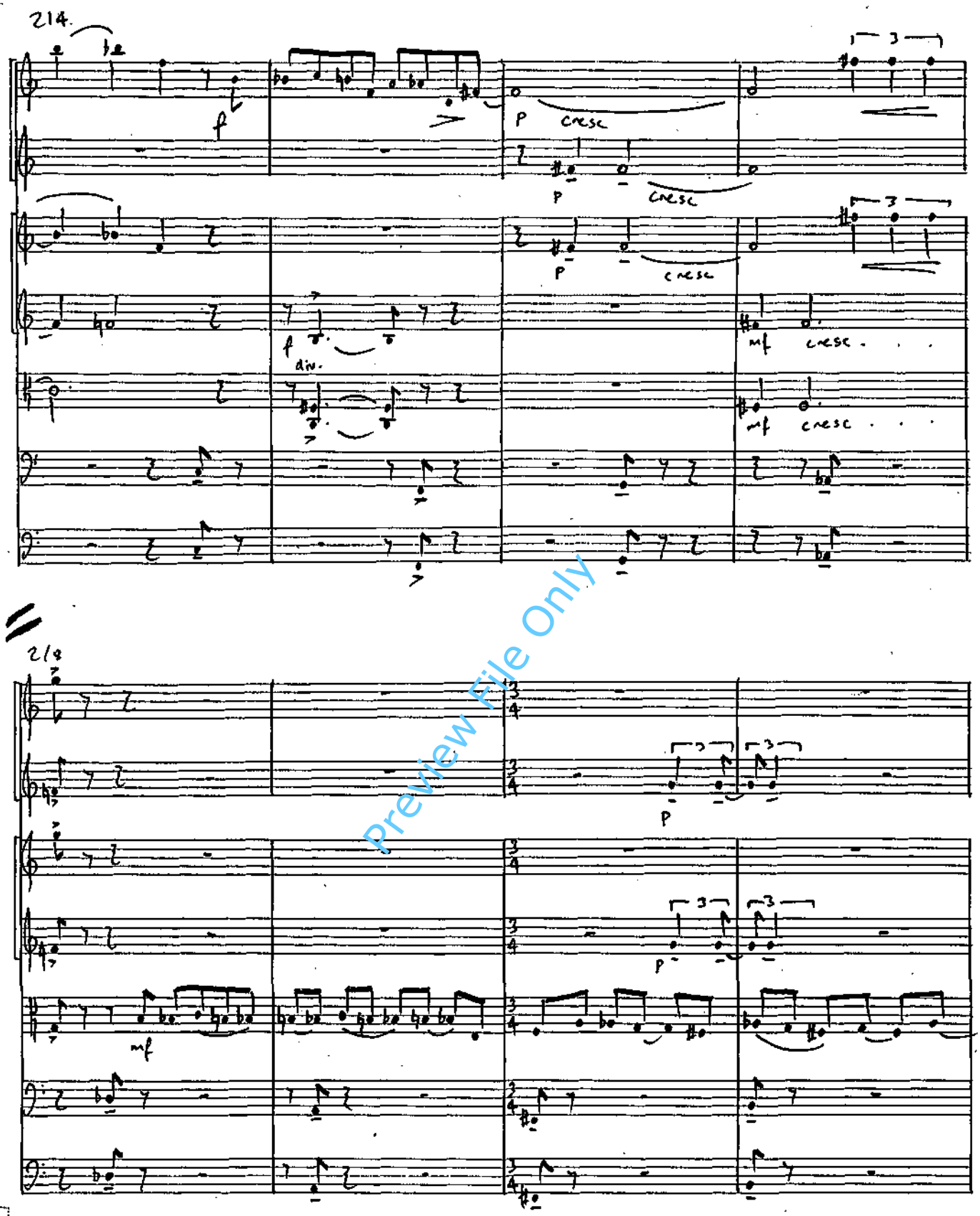

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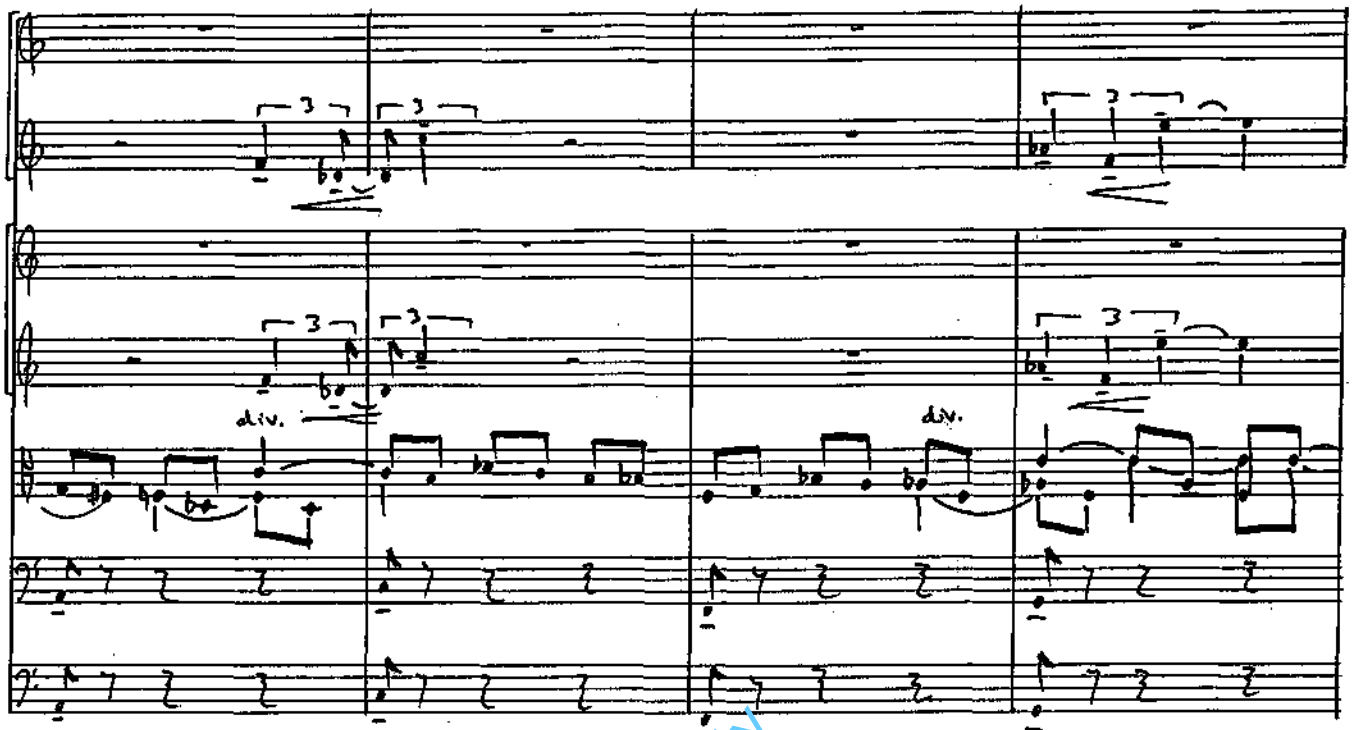

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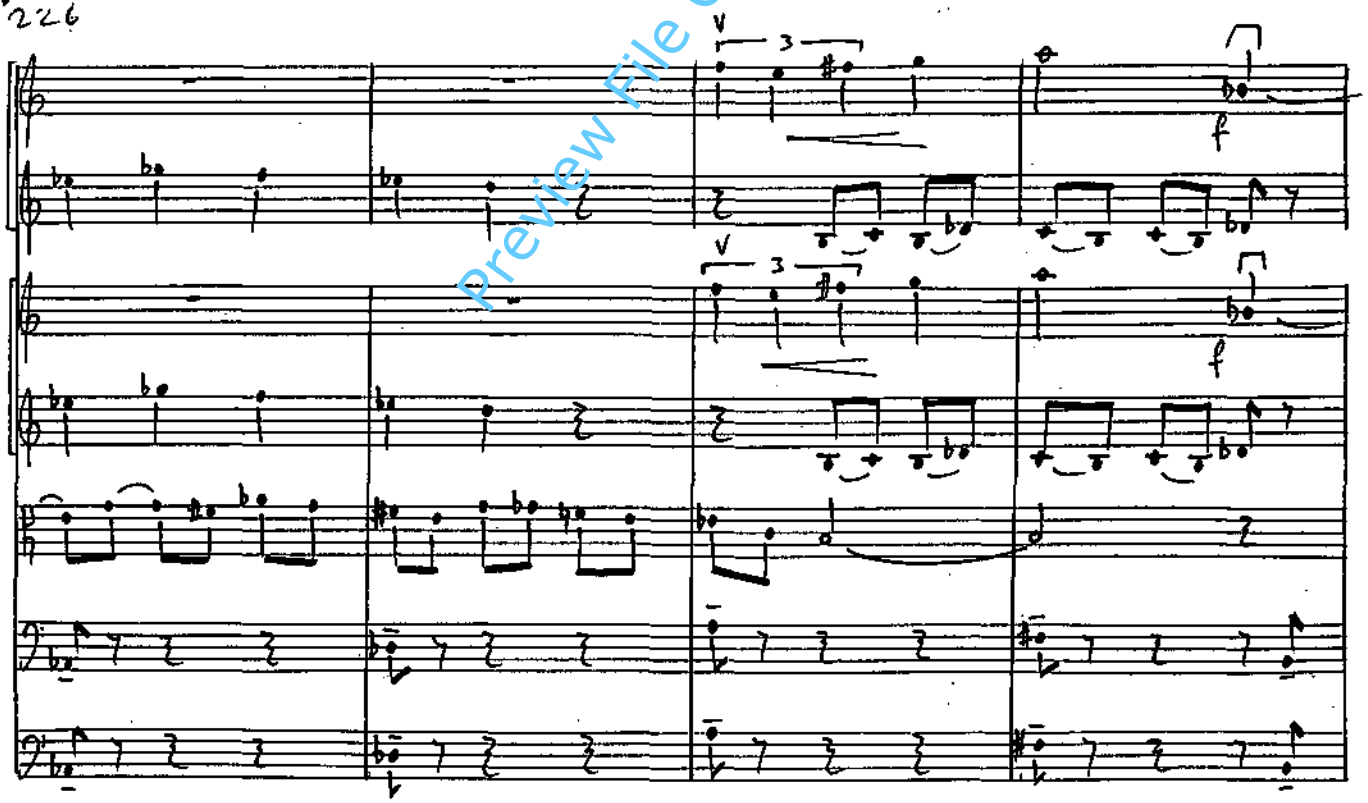

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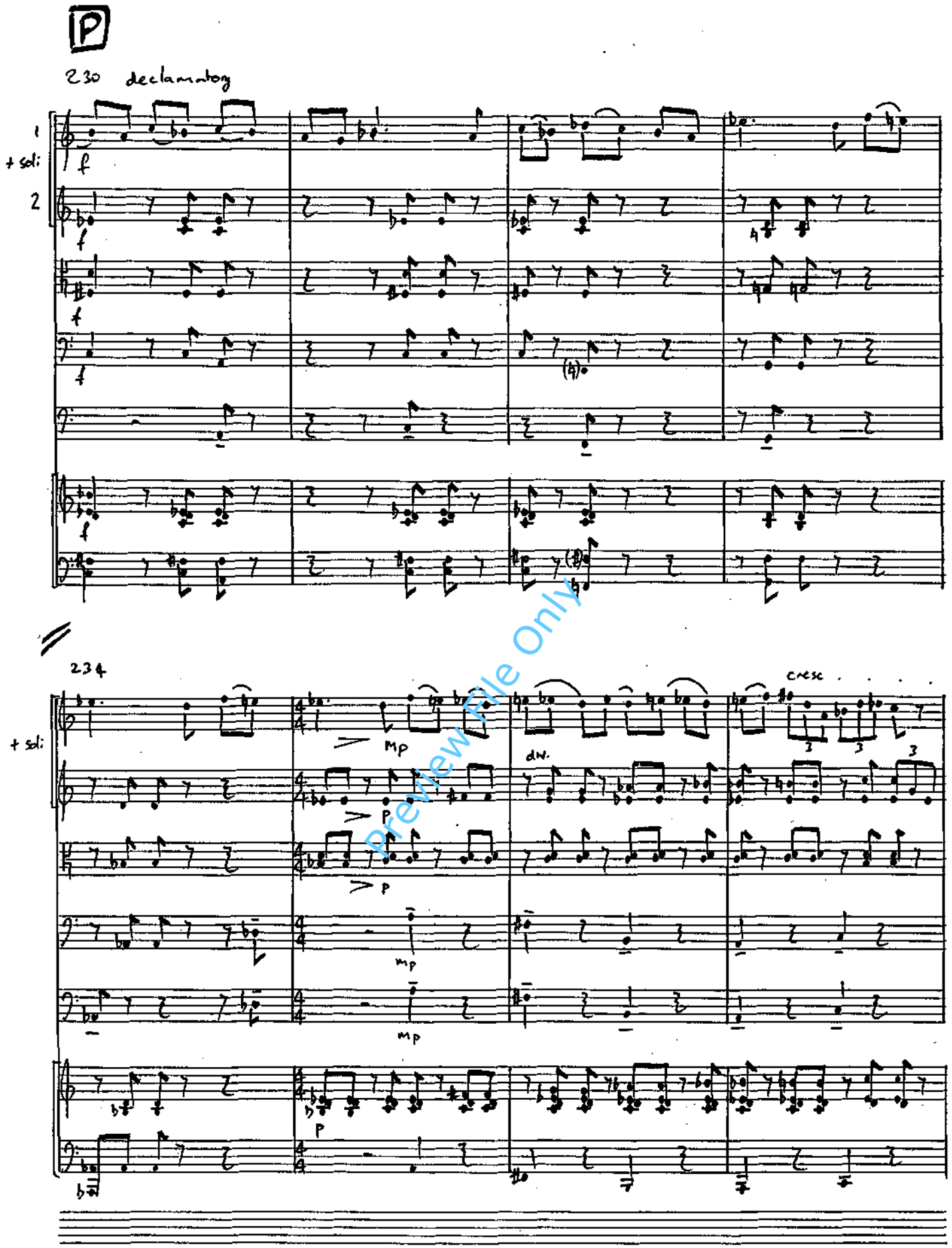

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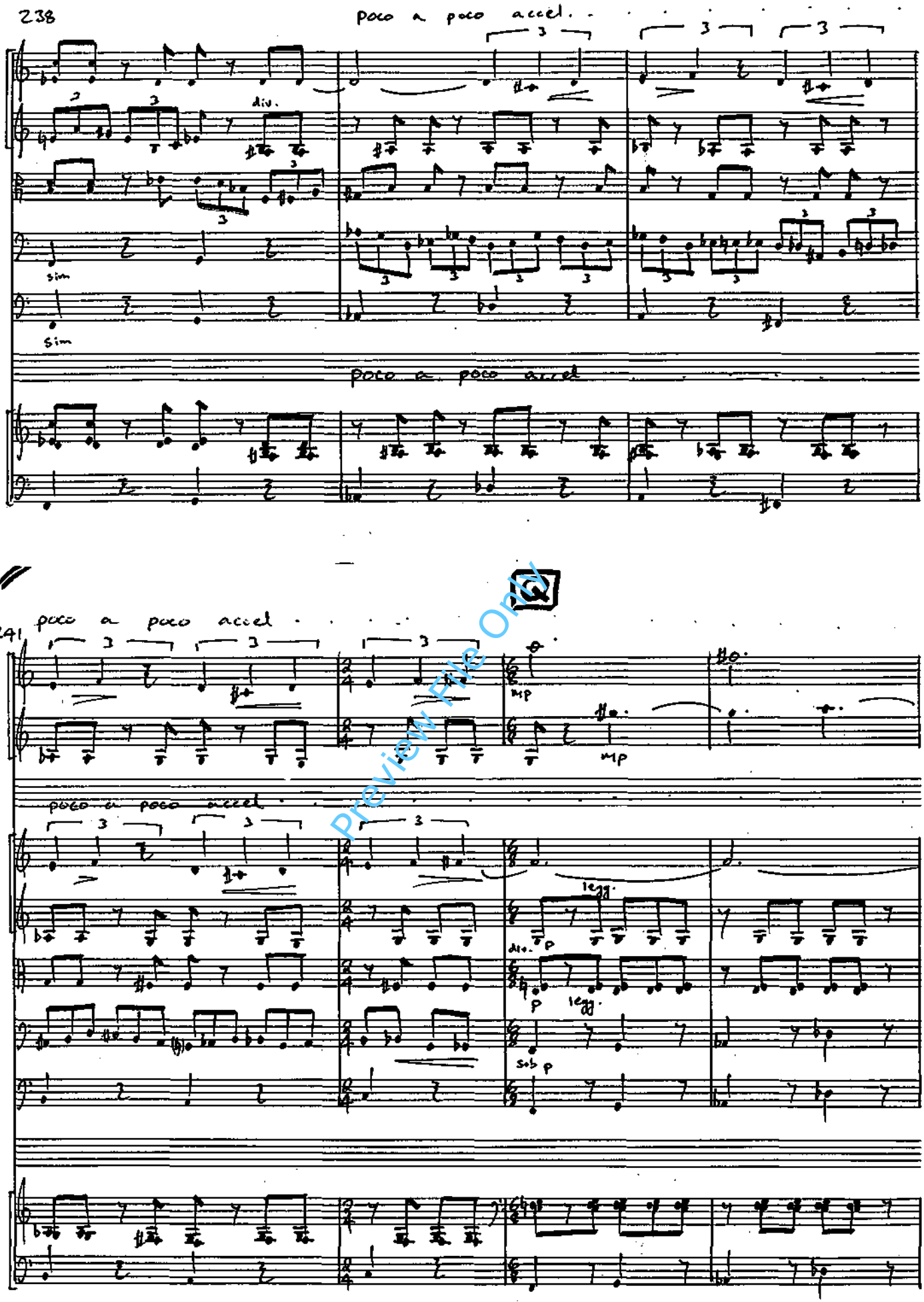

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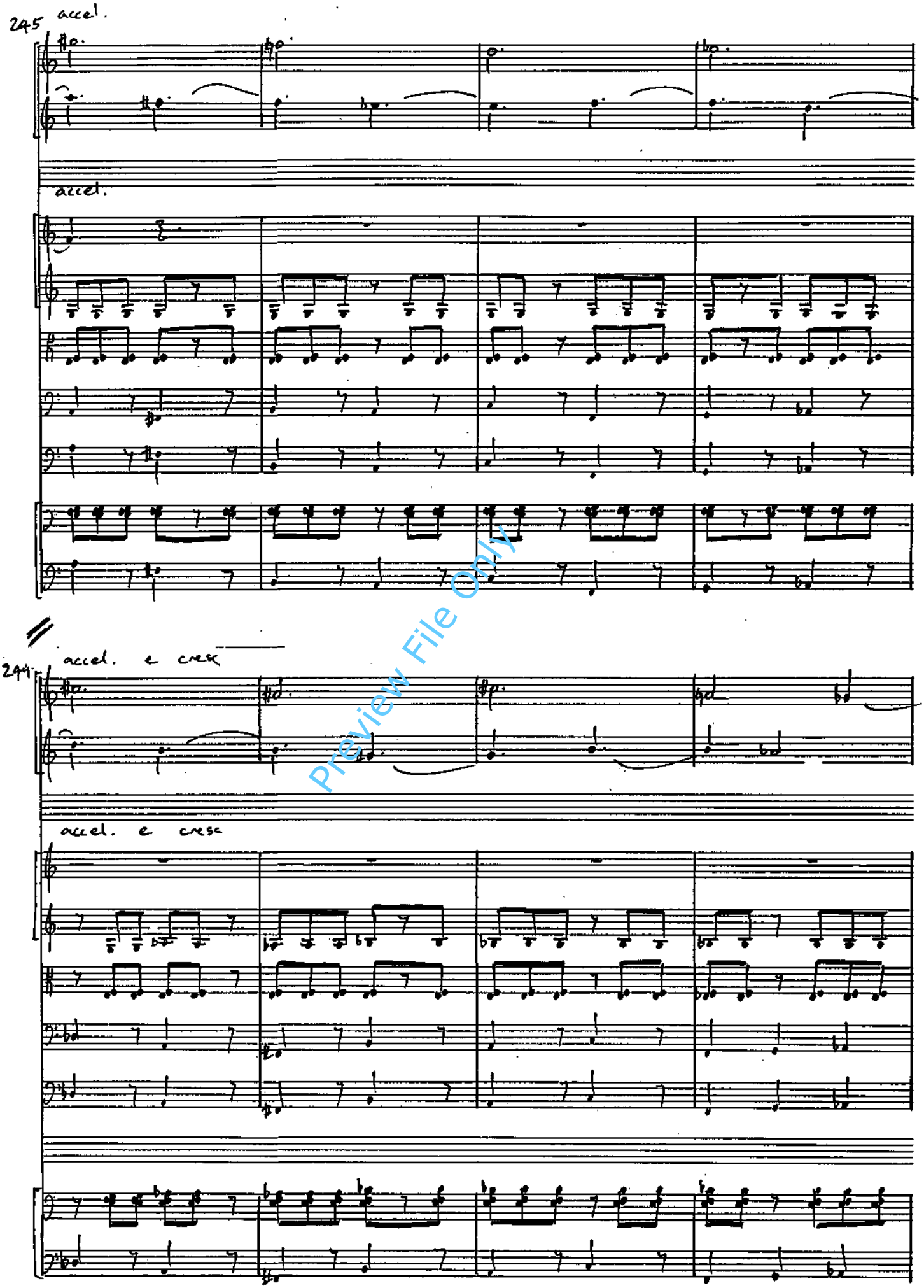

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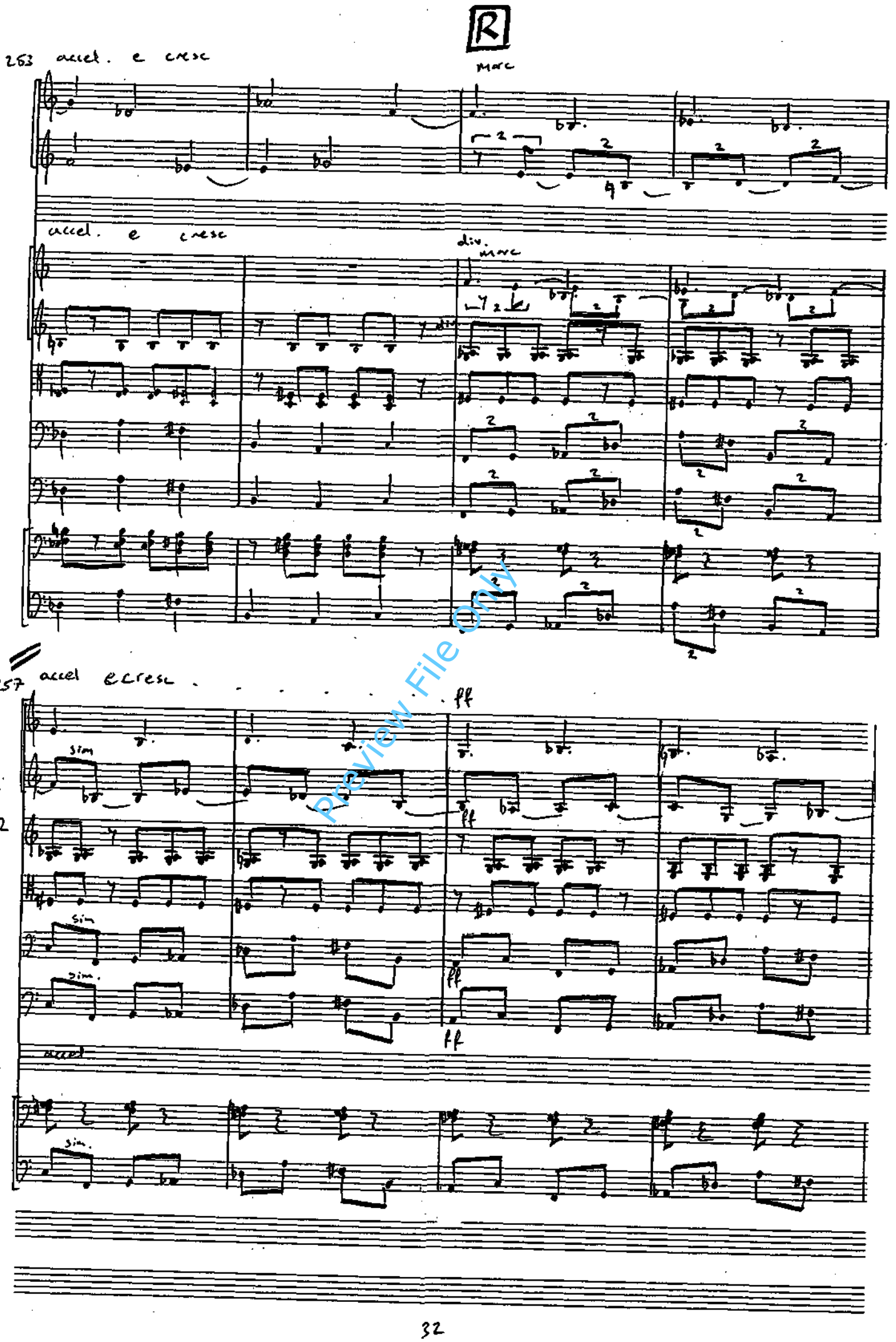

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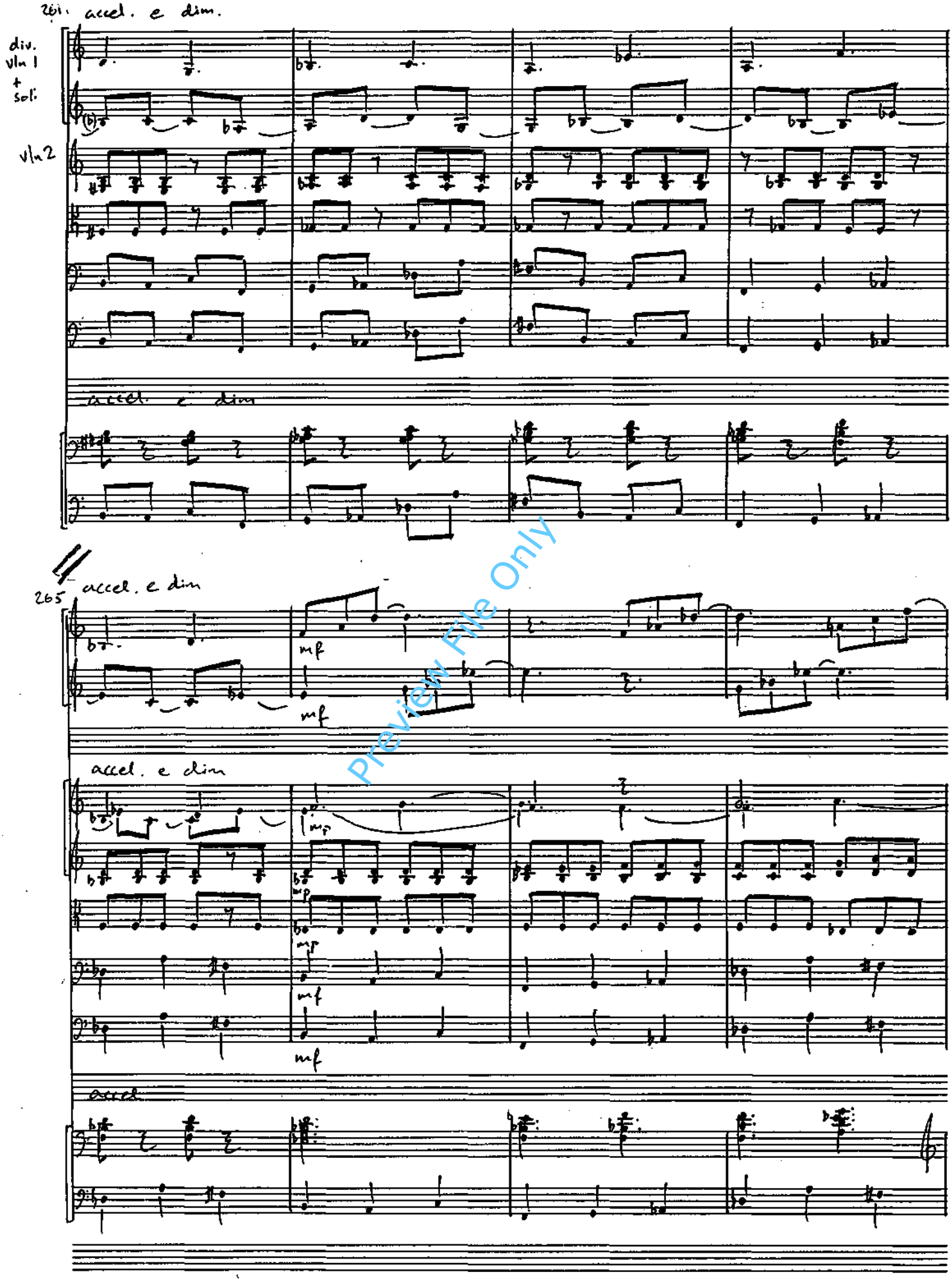

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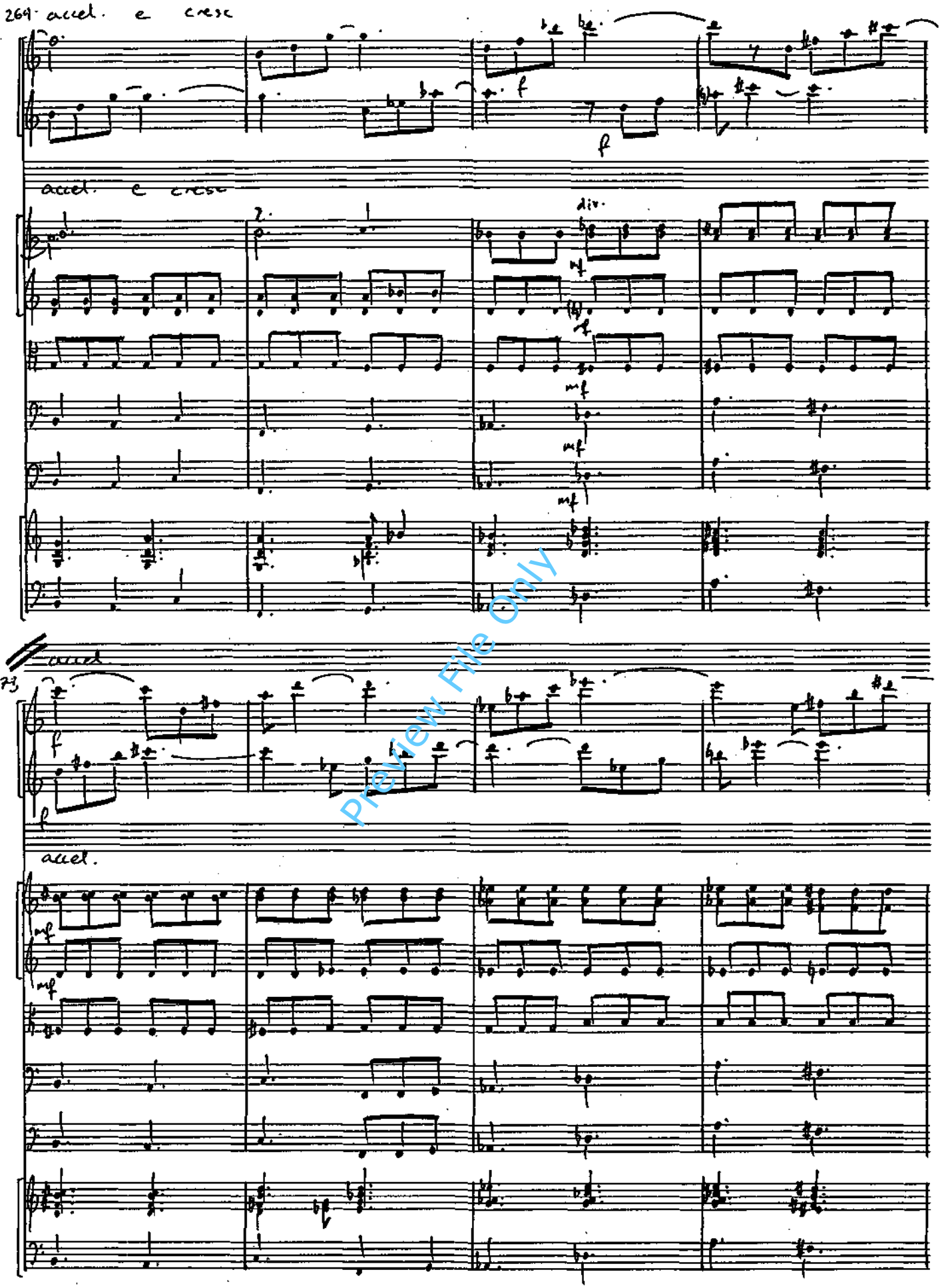

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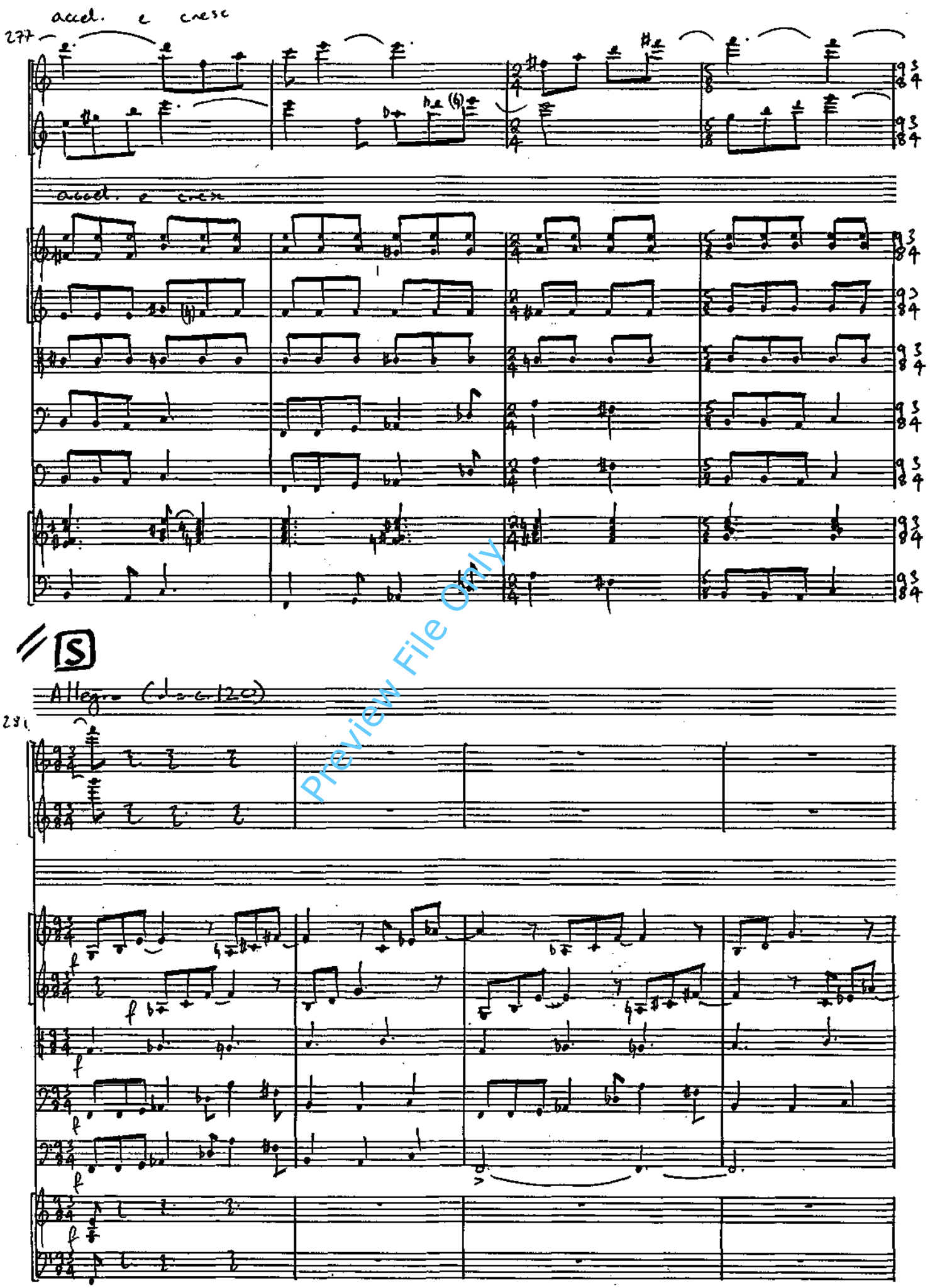

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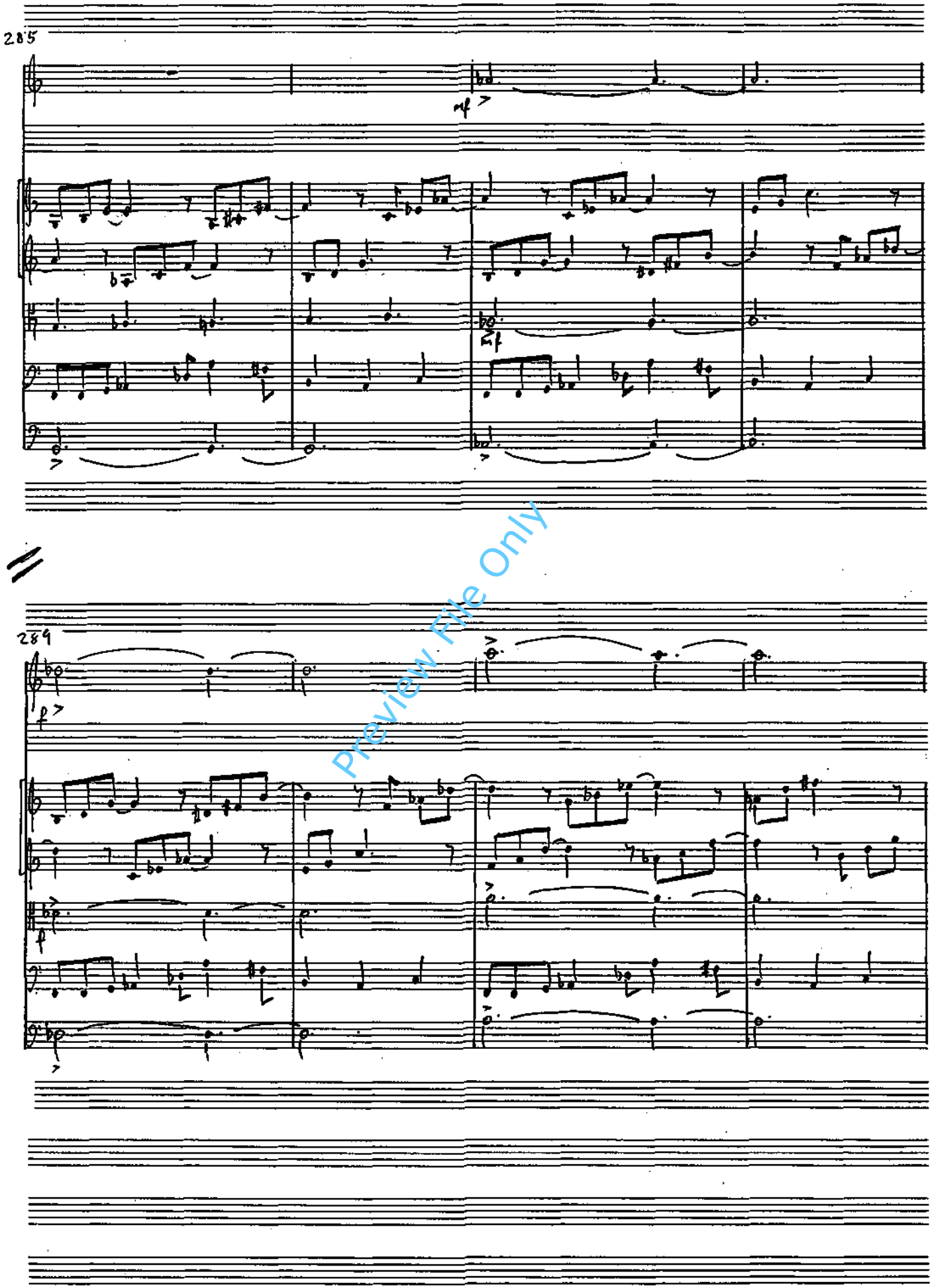

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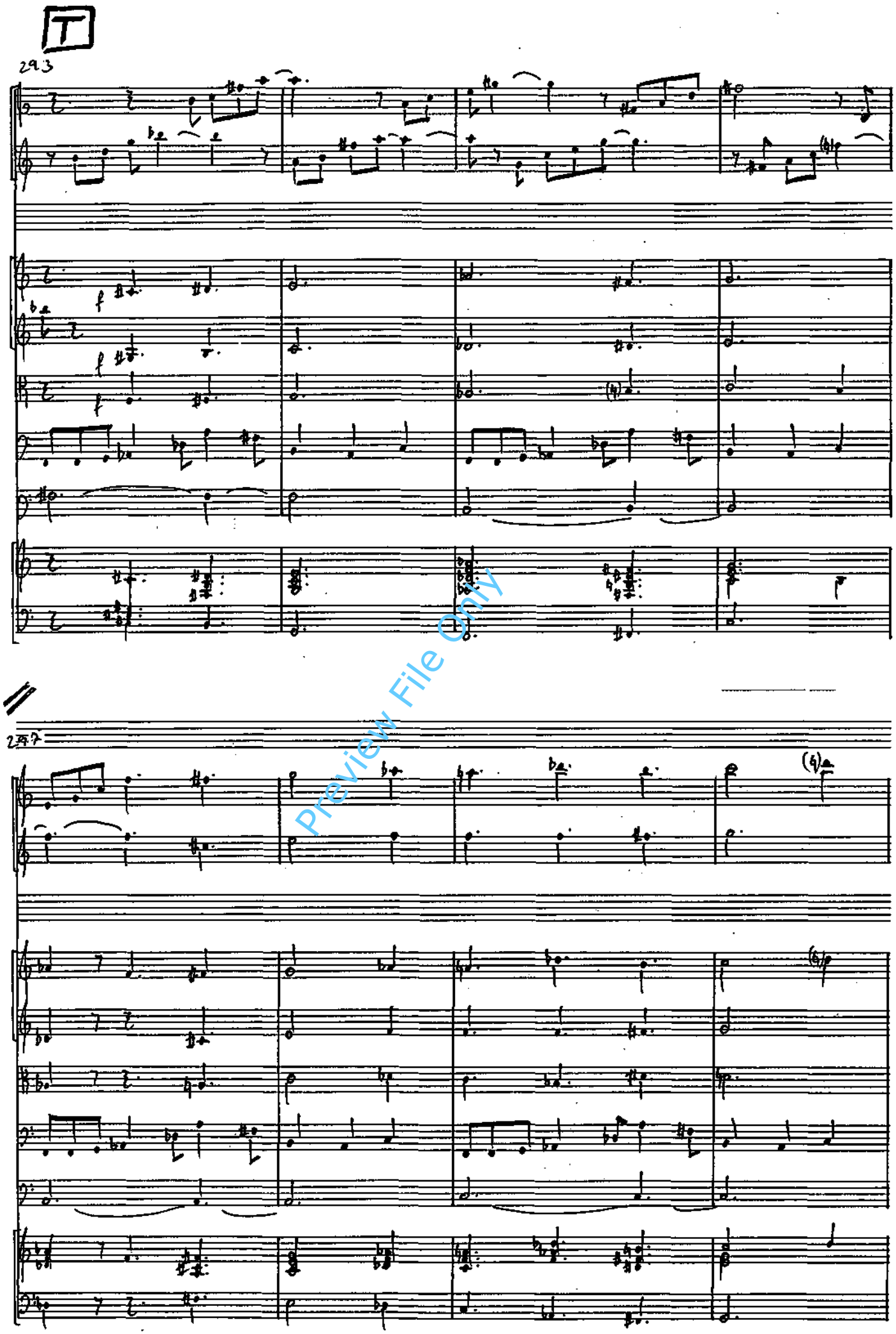

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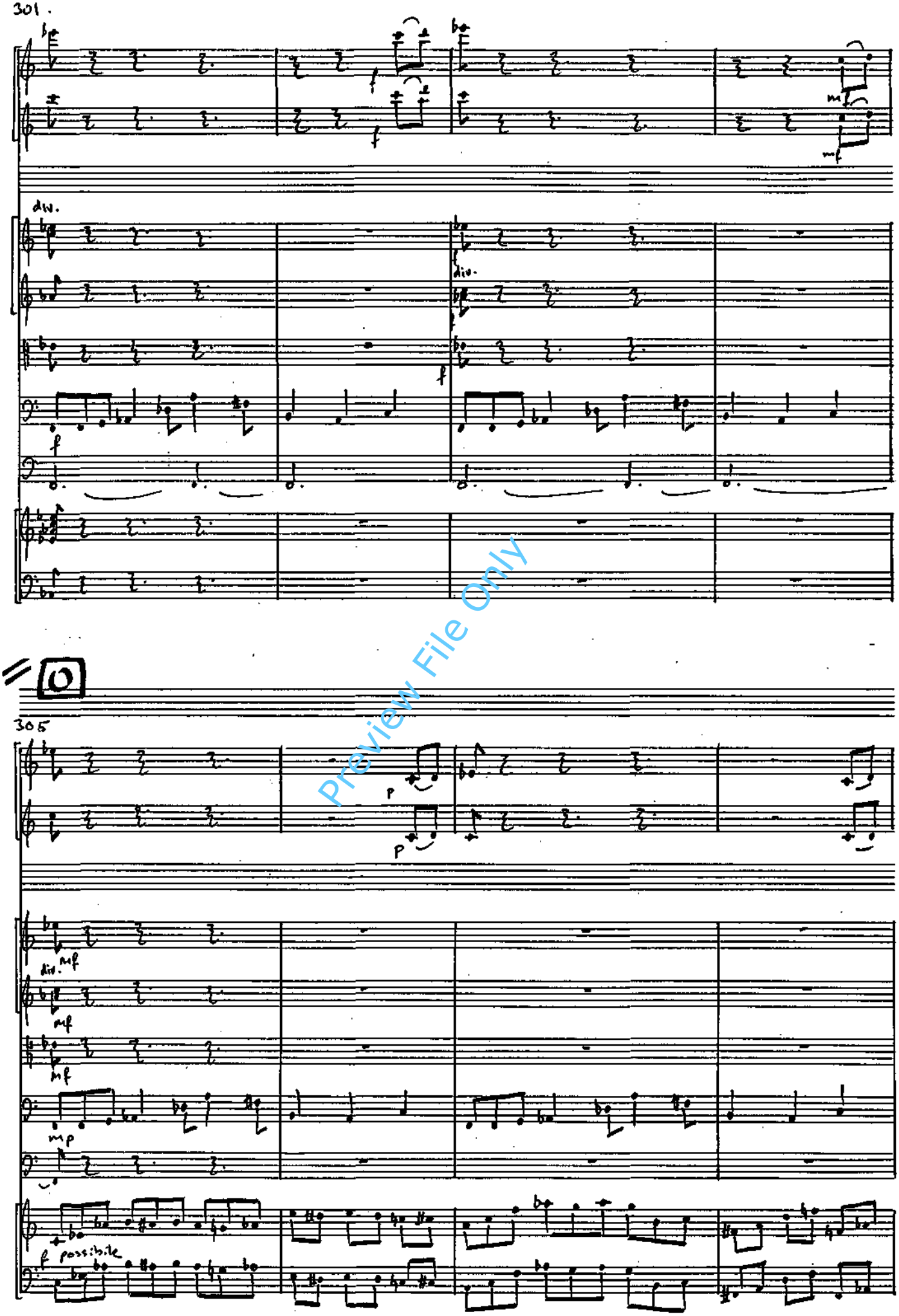

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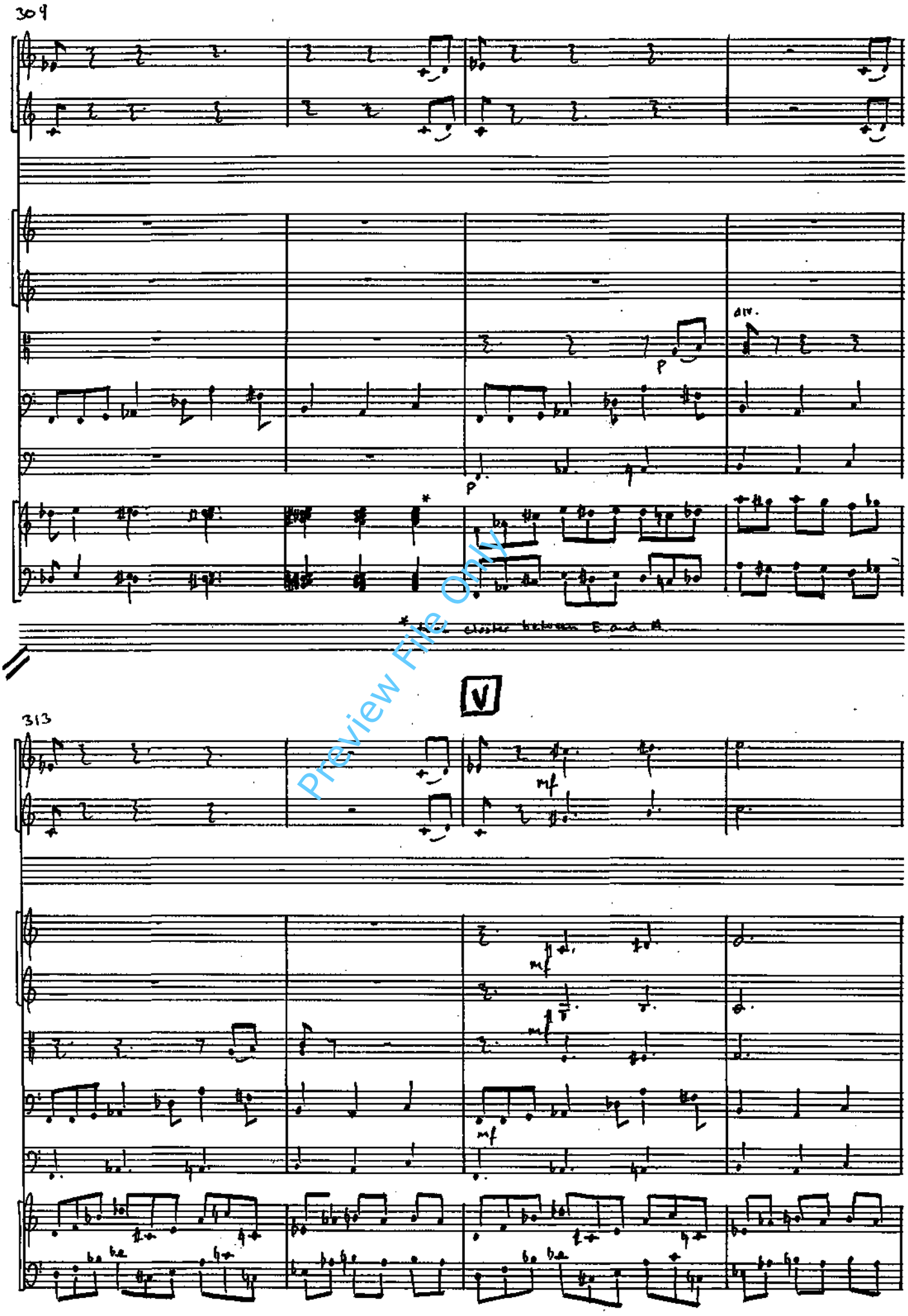

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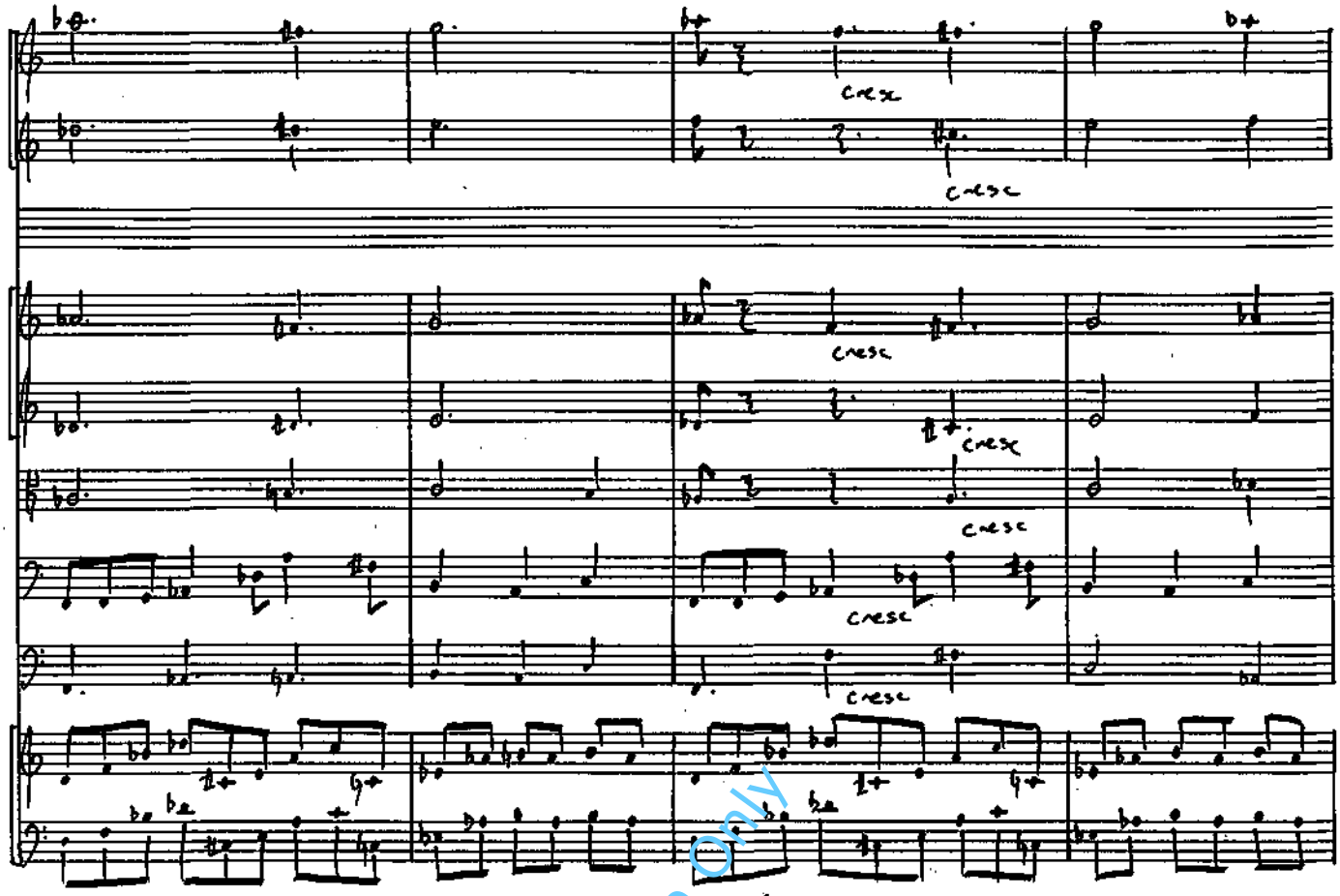

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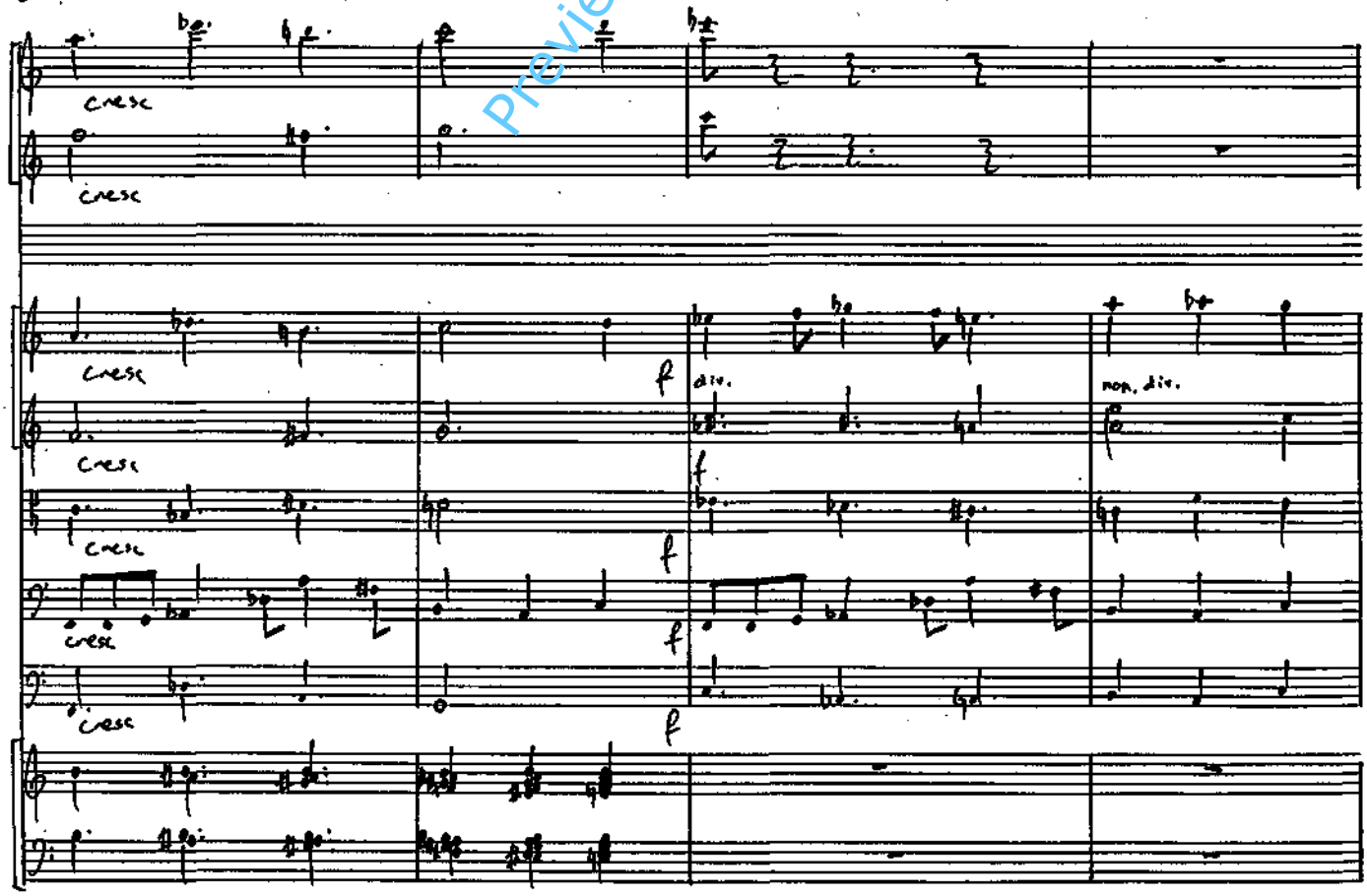

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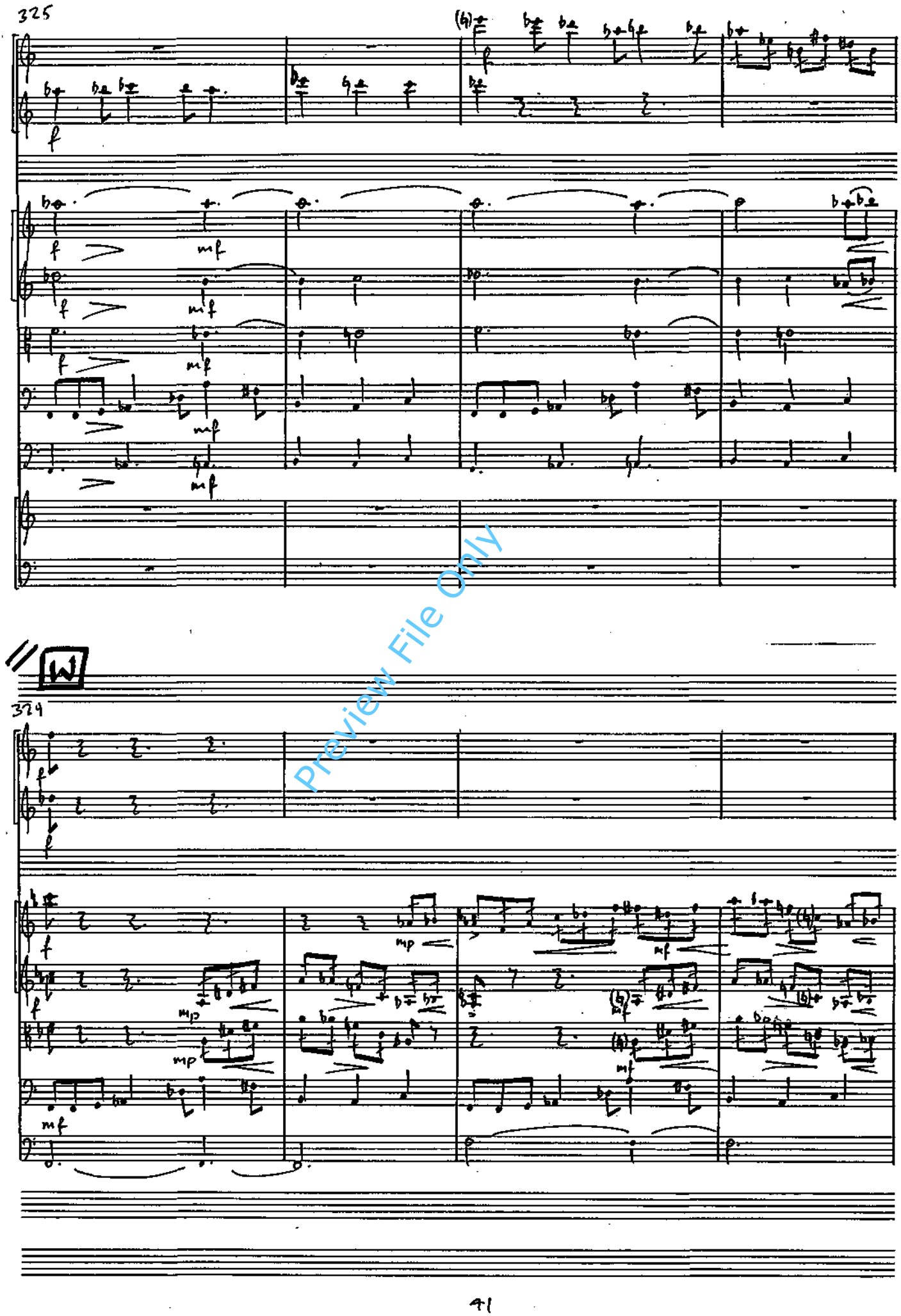

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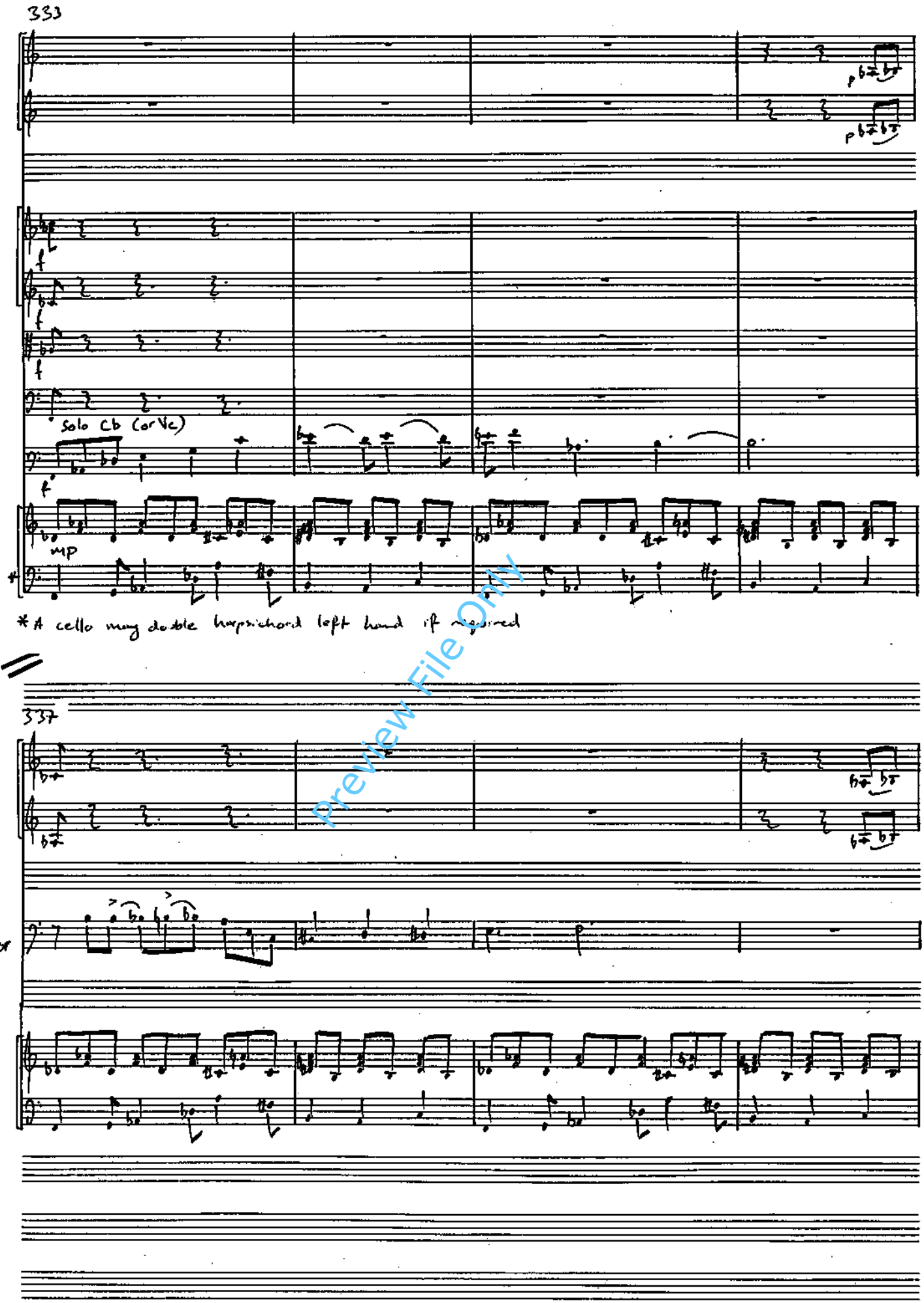

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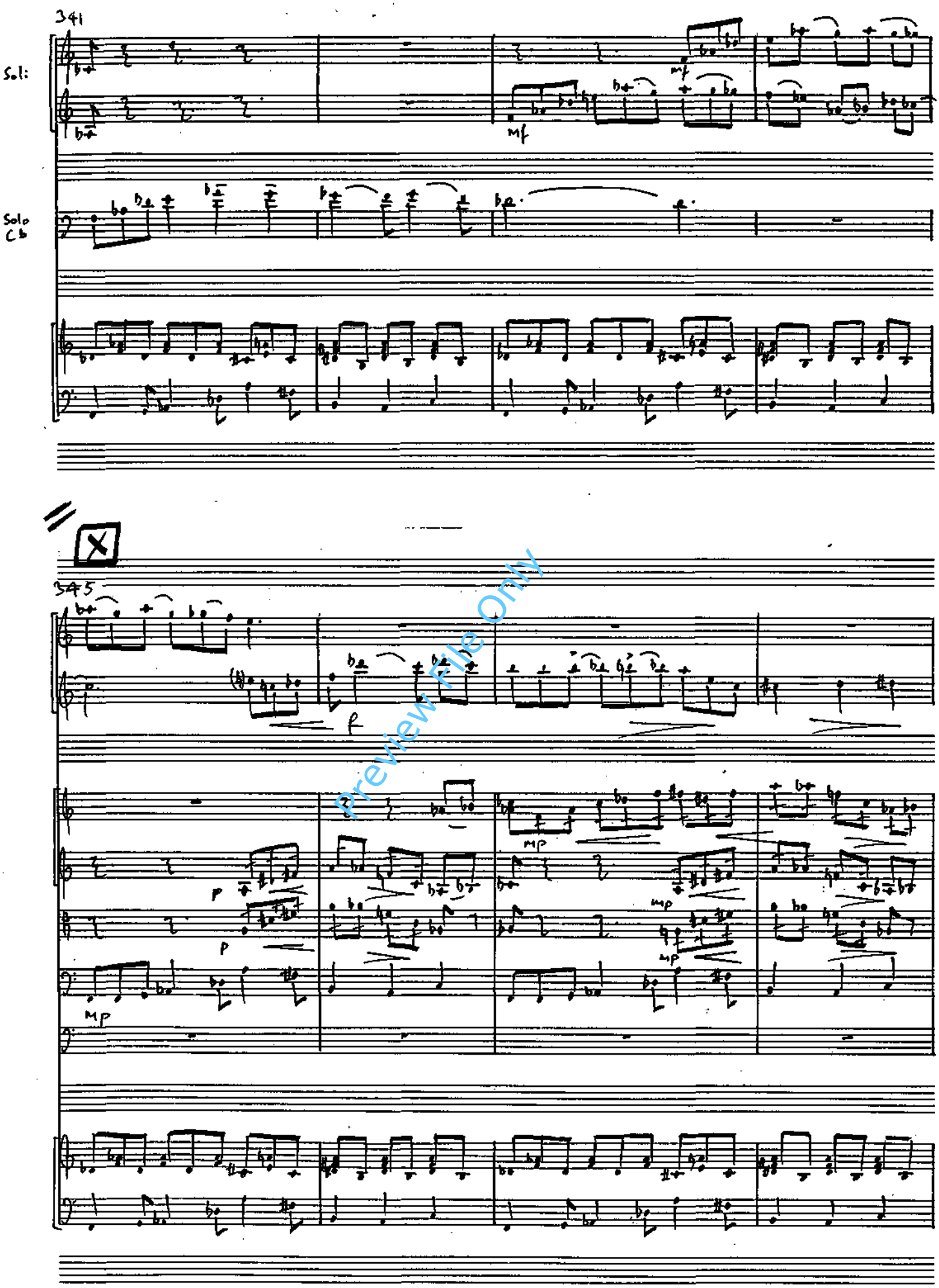
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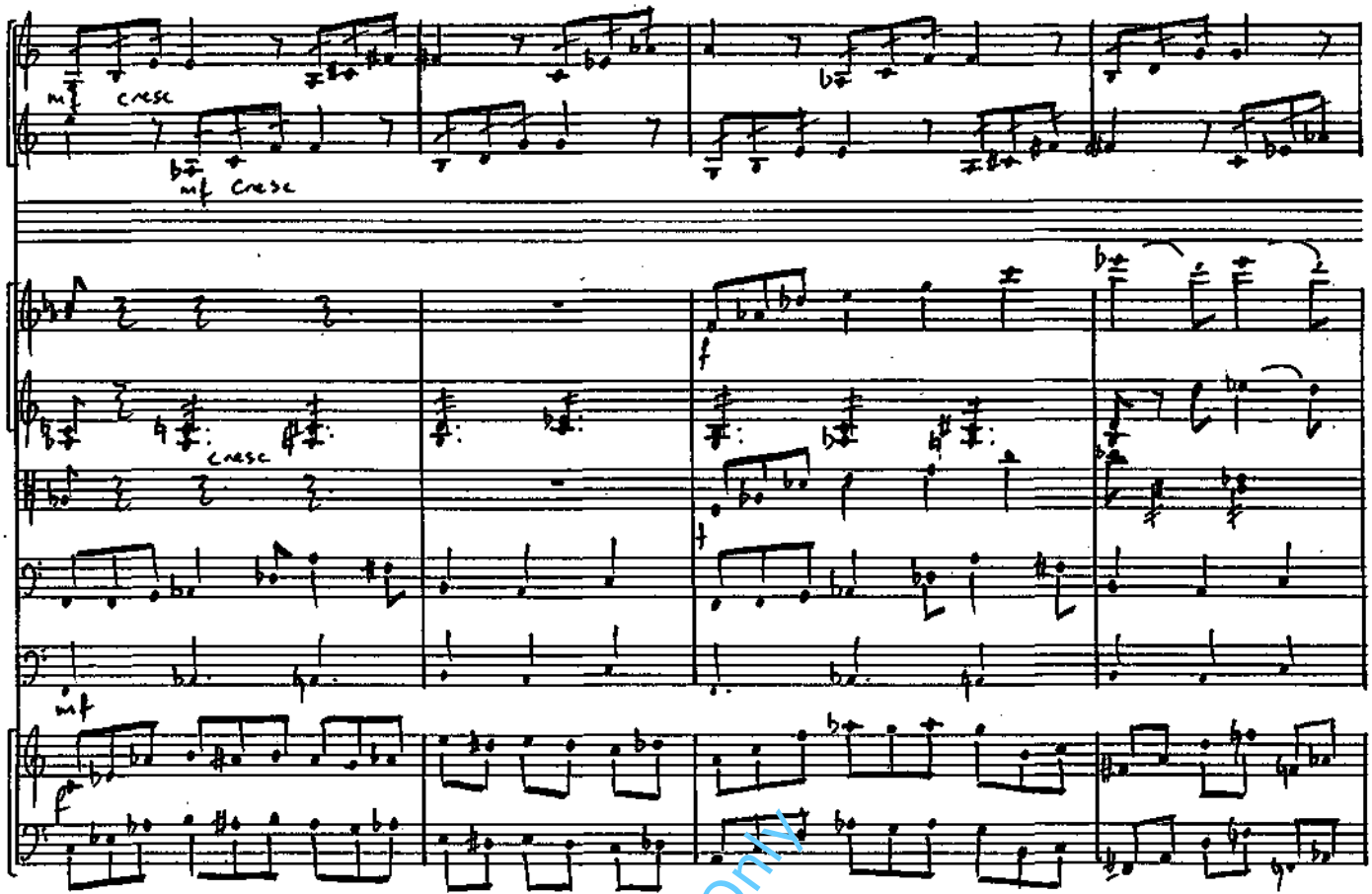

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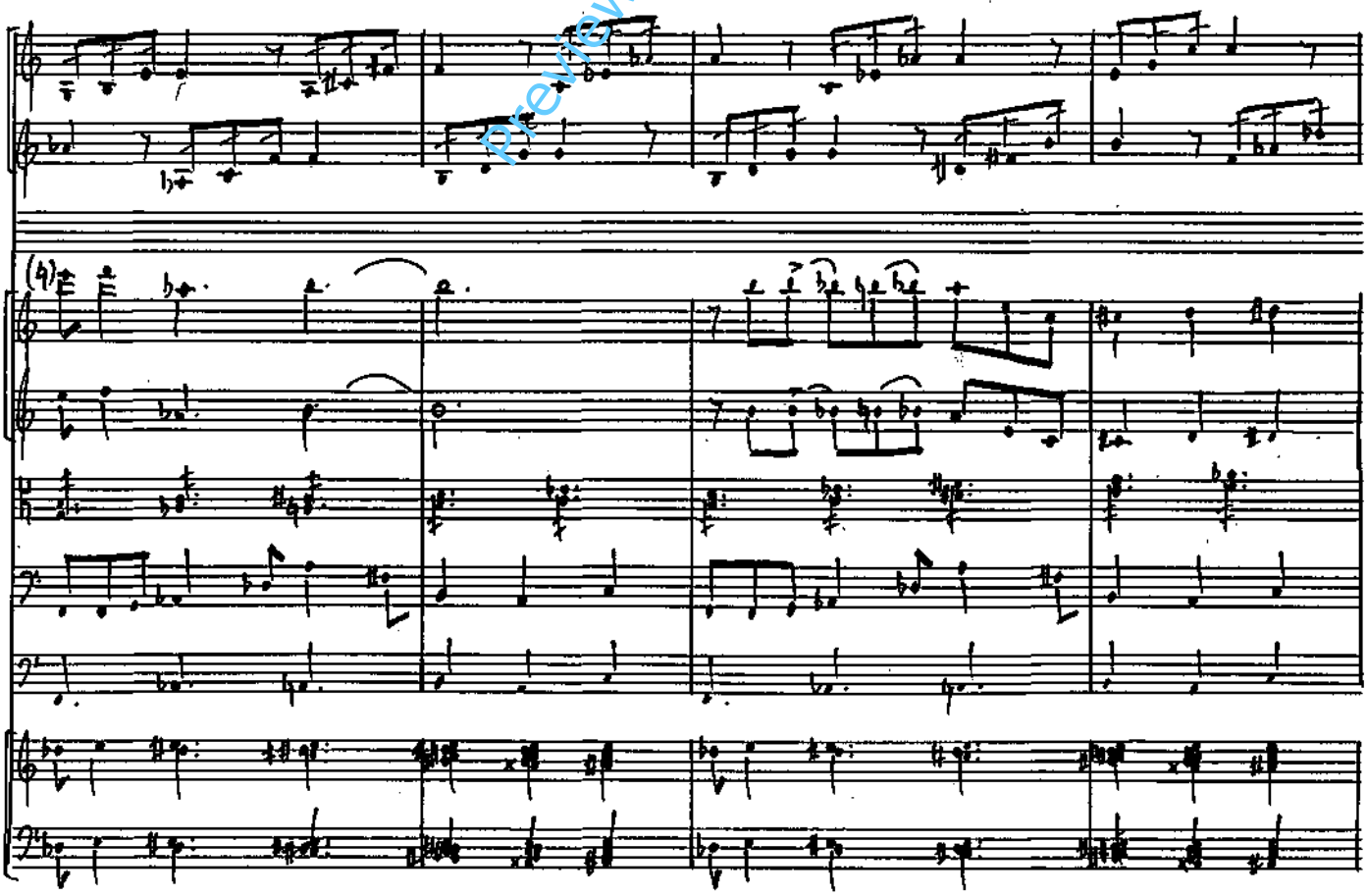

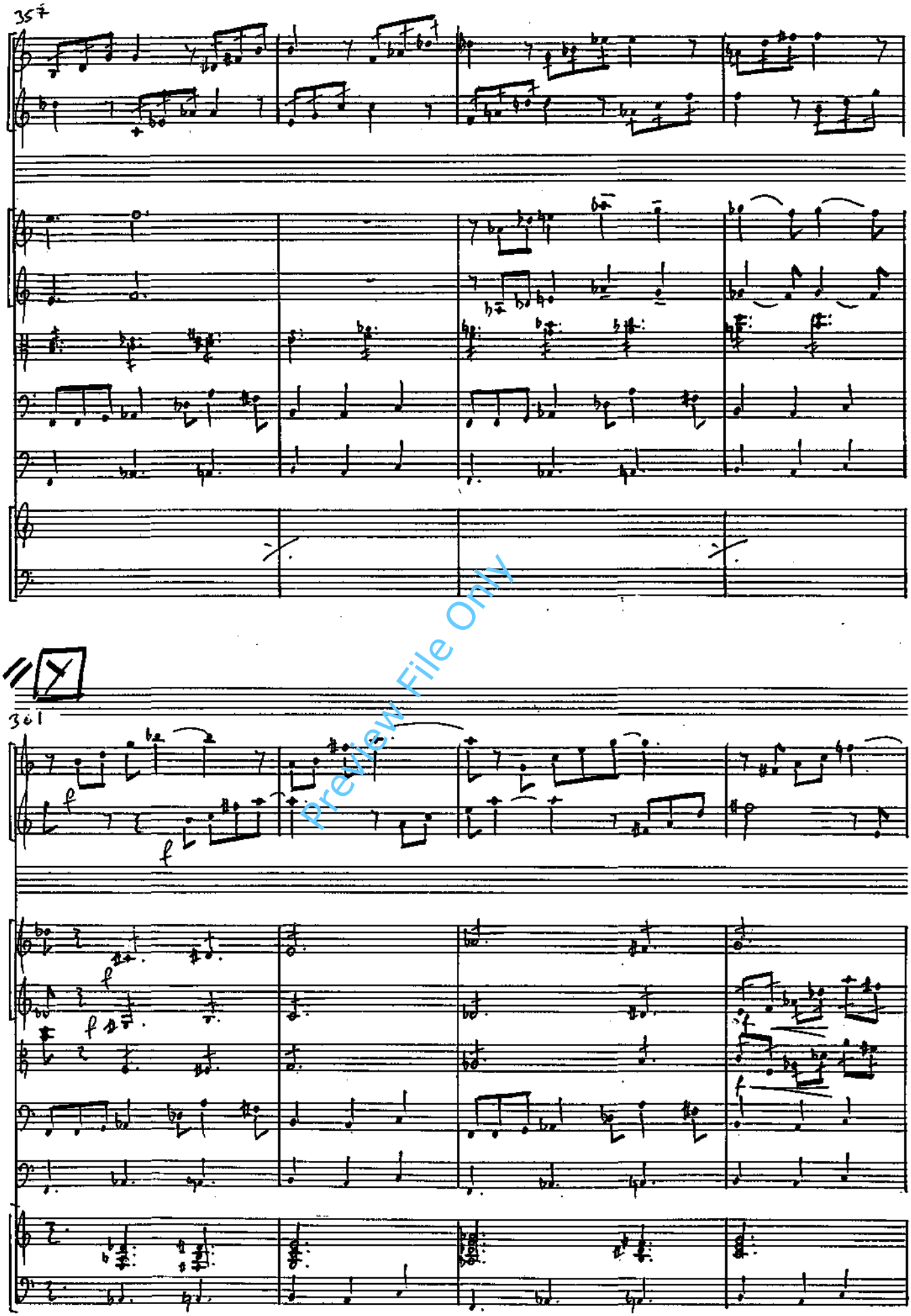

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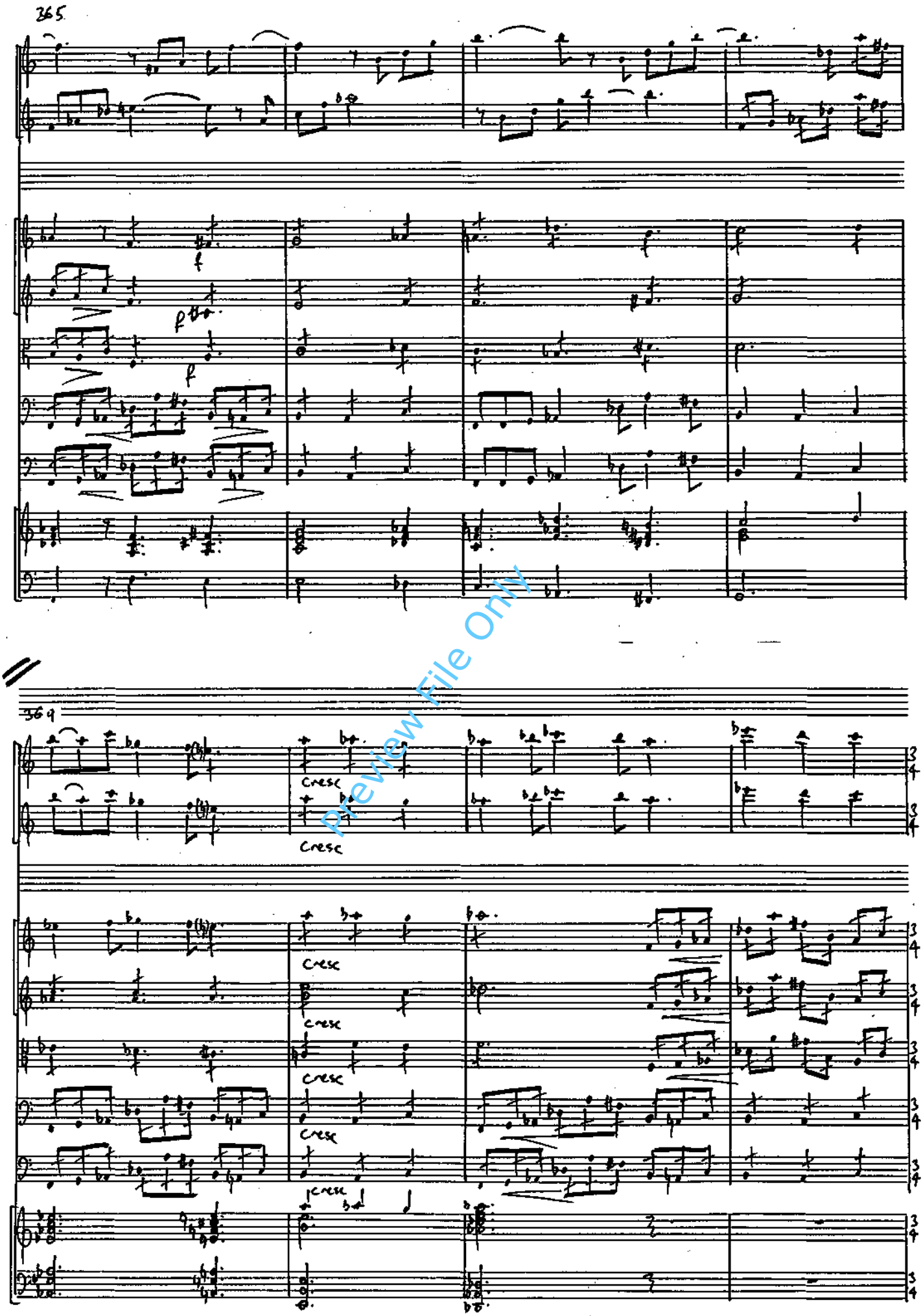

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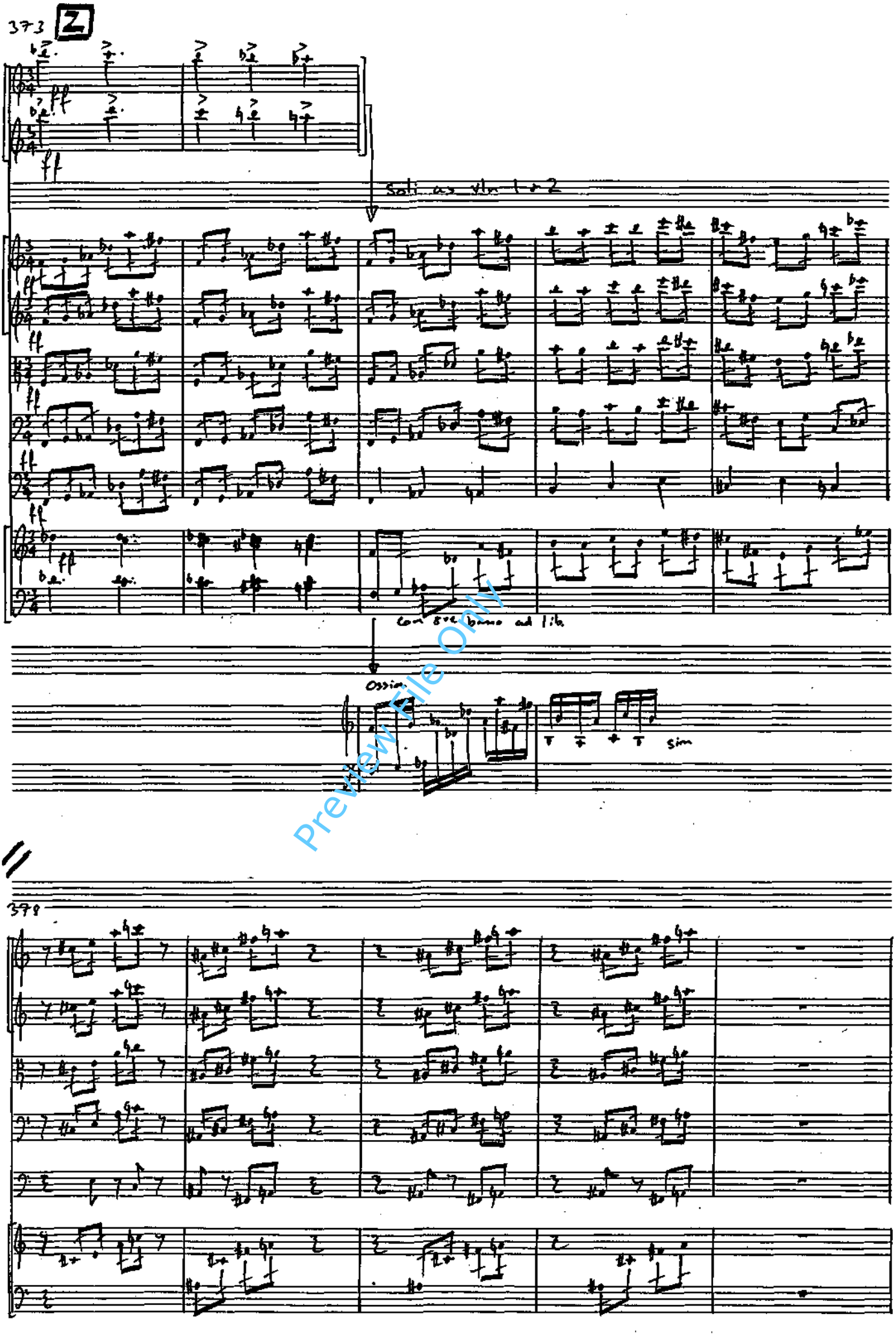

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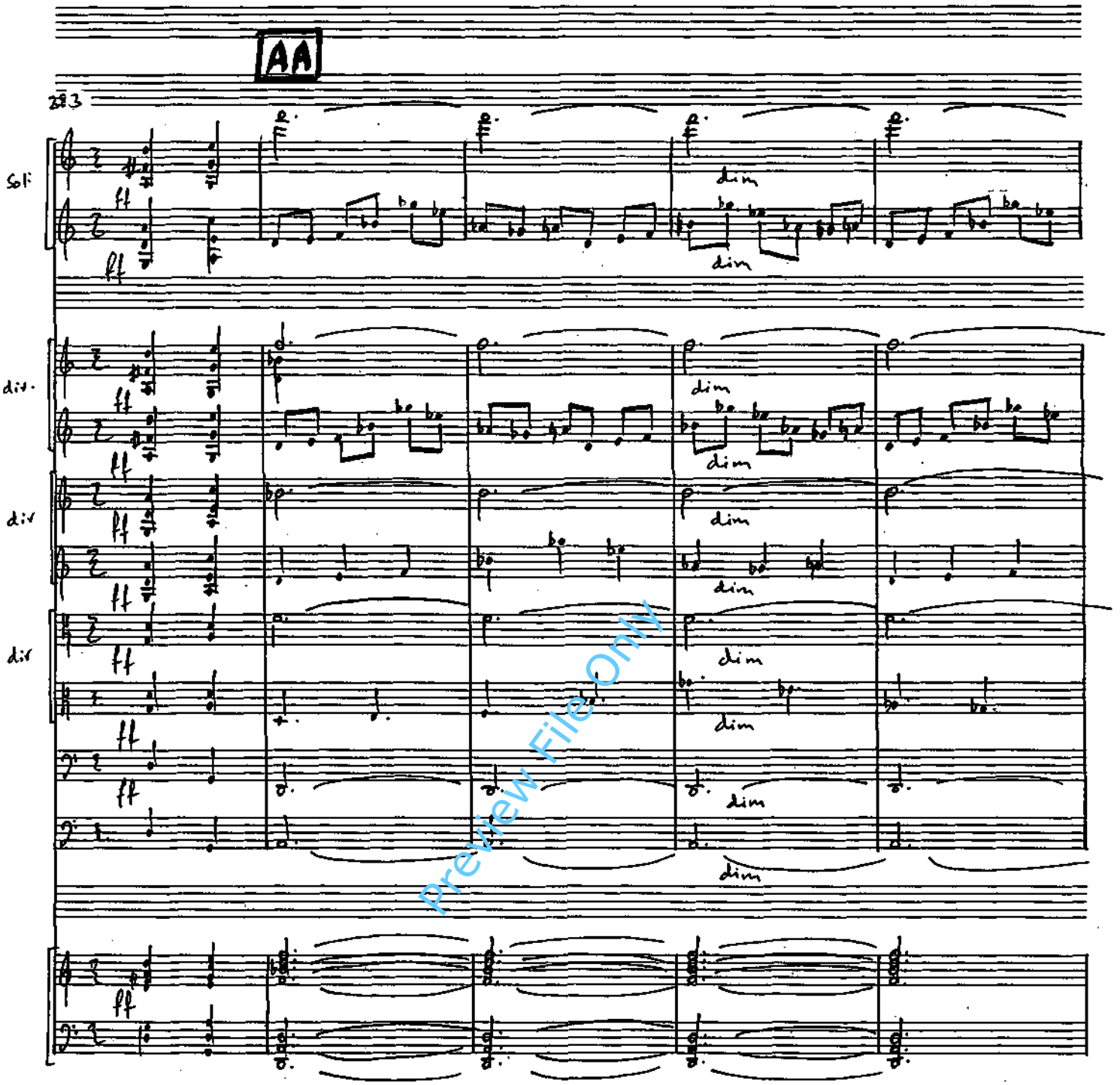

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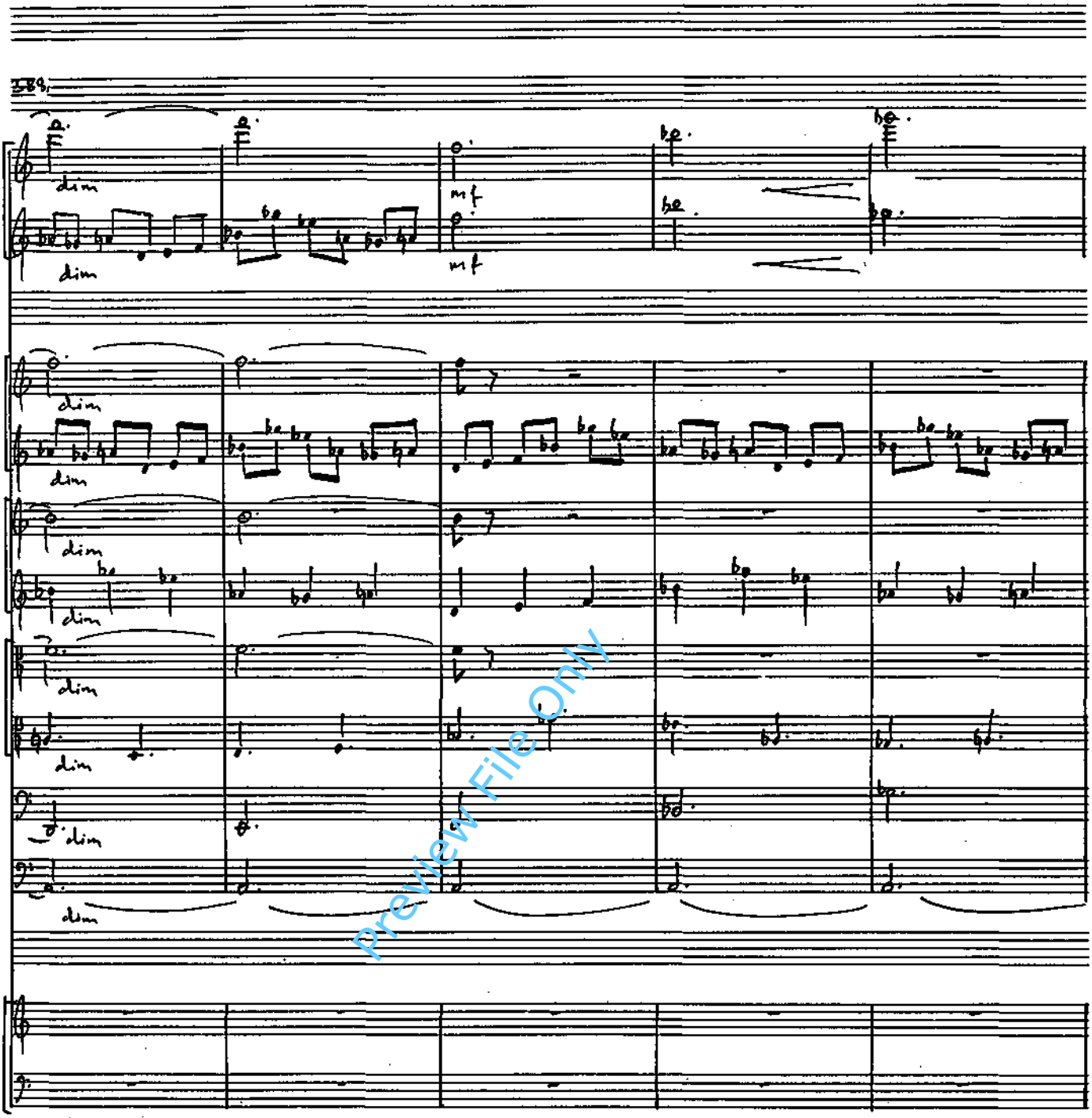

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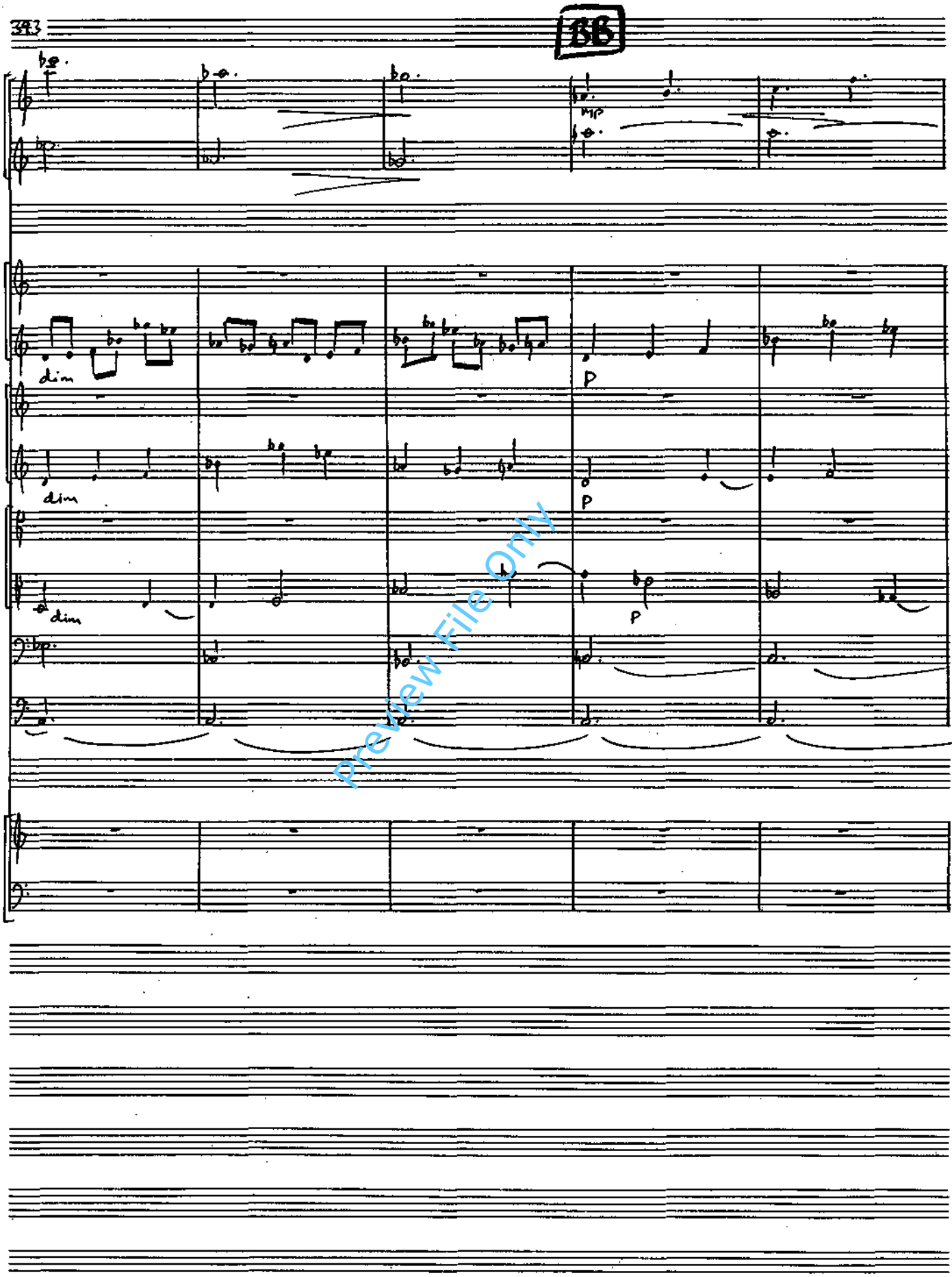

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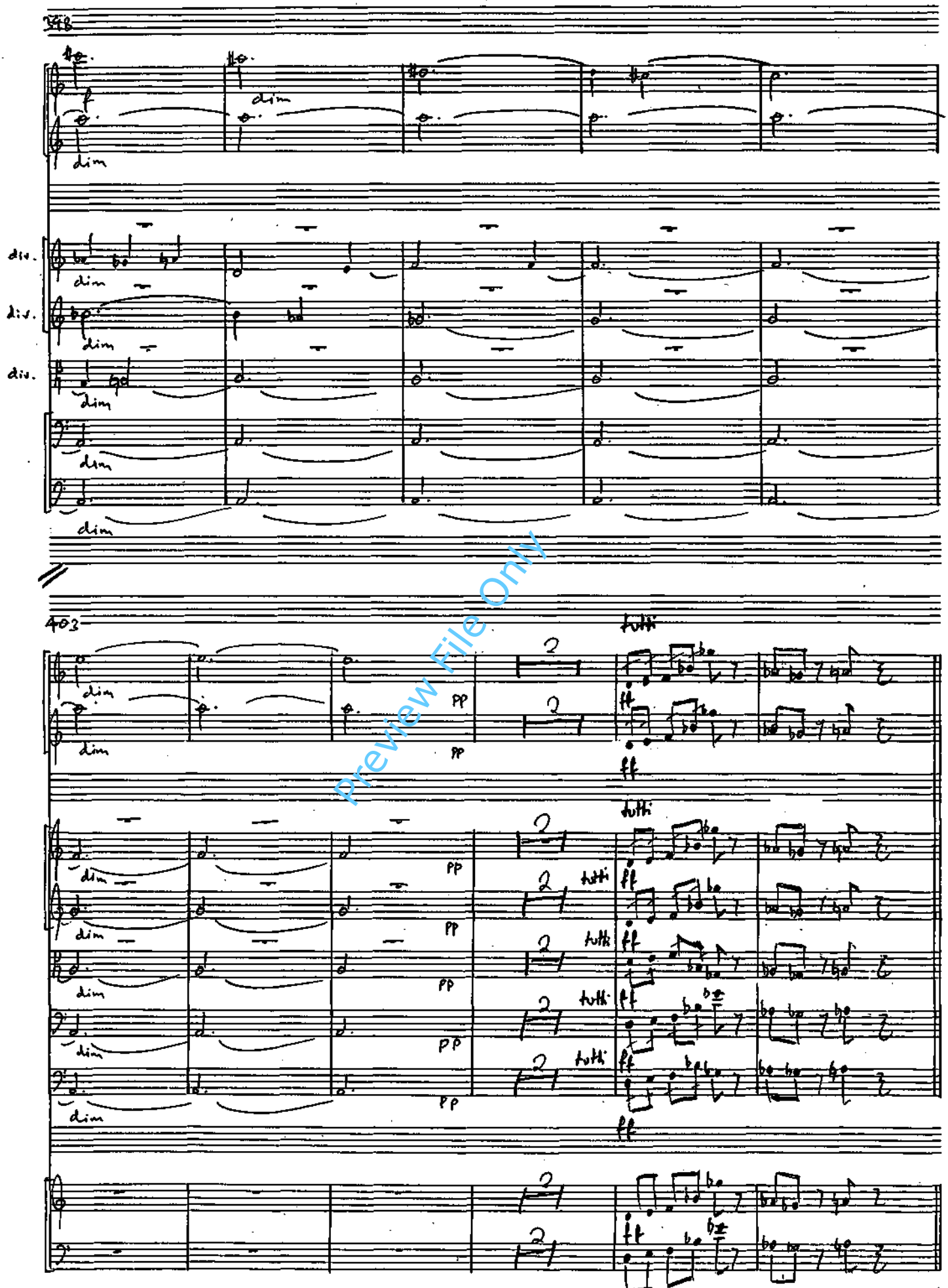

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J. Wel