All Is Found

For Piano Left Hand

Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez
(arr. Holden Mui)

cover art by Emily Wu

for Andrew

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Program Notes

In the first scene of *Frozen II*, a flashback, with young Elsa and young Anna curled up against her, their mother Iduna sings *All is Found*. It's a lullaby about Ahtohallan, a river her mother told her "hold[s] all the answers about the past."

Where the north wind meets the sea
There's a river full of memory
Sleep, my darling, safe and sound
For in this river, all is found

In this stanza, Iduna's voice is warm and restrained. So too is the instrumental backing, which comprises two lines—both played on the kantele, Finland's national instrument—one mirroring the vocals and one providing a basic accompaniment built (mostly) from perfect fourths and fifths.

The kantele, sharp and vibrant, supported by a generous amount of resonance, translates poorly to the piano, whose timbre by comparison is rather blunt, almost linear. So Holden brings the melody to the upper registers; adds a high-pitched broken-octave repeated-note motif; fills out the intervals with steps and scales. It's a logical transformation. The piano can replicate neither Iduna's nor the kantele's unique warmth—especially not given just the left hand—so he pivots to the other extreme. The repeated-note motif juts out from the melody, icicle-esque, droplets frozen in time and space: always on the third beat; always piercing the piano's highest octave. It's cold. It's magical, the way in which the lullaby morphs into something stark to fit the limitations of the form.

And for the form itself—left-hand piano music has a long history. It didn't start with Paul Wittgenstein, but he was its greatest champion. A pianist who lost his right hand in the first World War, Wittgenstein commissioned composers to write numerous works for the left hand

alone; most notably, Ravel wrote him a Piano Concerto. For Wittgenstein, the main point of commissioning left-hand music was surely so he could appreciate the piano as fully as possible given his physical limitations.

What draws *me* to left-hand music is my appreciation for the technical mastery it takes to both write and play interesting, convincing left-hand music. Much classical piano has the right hand shoulder the melodic load and the left hand shoulder the accompanimental load. With only one hand, the composer (or arranger) often must incorporate large jumps that span the keyboard, to create the effect of a separate melody and accompaniment; they often must set the pianist difficult voicing challenges, where the pianist must highlight certain notes far more than others; fundamentally, they must force into one hand what is often done in two.

The piano part corresponding to the next stanza is an excellent illustration of such.

> *In her waters, deep and true*
> *Lay the answers and a path for you*
> *Dive down deep into her sound*
> *But not too far or you'll be drowned*

In the song, listen to the bell-like sounds after *waters*, *true*, *answers*, and *you*. One needs only to watch the hand to understand the challenge of replicating them on the piano. Because the hand has little time for setup and little time to find the next position, the pianist must both attack and release these high notes with great speed and precision, which imposes upon these notes an elegant sparkle. That is to say, the technical difficulty *forces* the desired effect. Such is a beautiful marriage of form and content.

This part comprises many other difficulties one might expect from left-hand music. Consider the melody notes from *into her sound*. On *in-*, the accompaniment lies below the melody, such that the pianist

plays the melody note with their thumb; on *-to*, it passes from below to above, such that they (likely) must use their index finger for the melody to preserve the thumb for the higher accompaniment note; on *her*, it lies fully above the melody, and they are forced into taking the melody note with their pinky or ring finger, which is rather tricky—those are the weakest fingers of the hand. Their task is then to conceal any awkwardness from these moments entirely.

The atmosphere shifts in the next stanza.

> *Yes, she will sing to those who'll hear*
> *And in her song, all magic flows*
> *But can you brave what you most fear?*
> *Can you face what the river knows?*

Visually, we transition into the outdoors, where we see an aurora borealis. It's gorgeous animation. Having escaped Anna and Elsa's bedroom, the music is noticeably brighter—Iduna's voice reaches *All is Found*'s highest pitches on *sing* and on *brave*.

At the end of the stanza comes a key change. The music creeps up on you: the pianist bounces from register to register, with the melody on *what the river knows* once again splitting the accompaniment as in *into her sound*, as the arrangement (and song) builds to a climax.

> *Where the north wind meets the sea*
> *There's a mother full of memory*
> *Come, my darling, homeward bound*
> *When all is lost, then all is found*

Now the aurora fades into autumn, maple leaves swirl, and we are brought back to present-day Arendelle. Iduna passed long ago, but later in the movie, when Elsa makes her way to Ahtohallan, we discover that the voice that's been calling her—the *dies irae*, present at the opening to *Into the Unknown*—is, in essence, the ghost of Iduna: *a mother full of memory*. The *come, my darling, homeward bound* lyric serves a double purpose. Visually, we find ourselves back

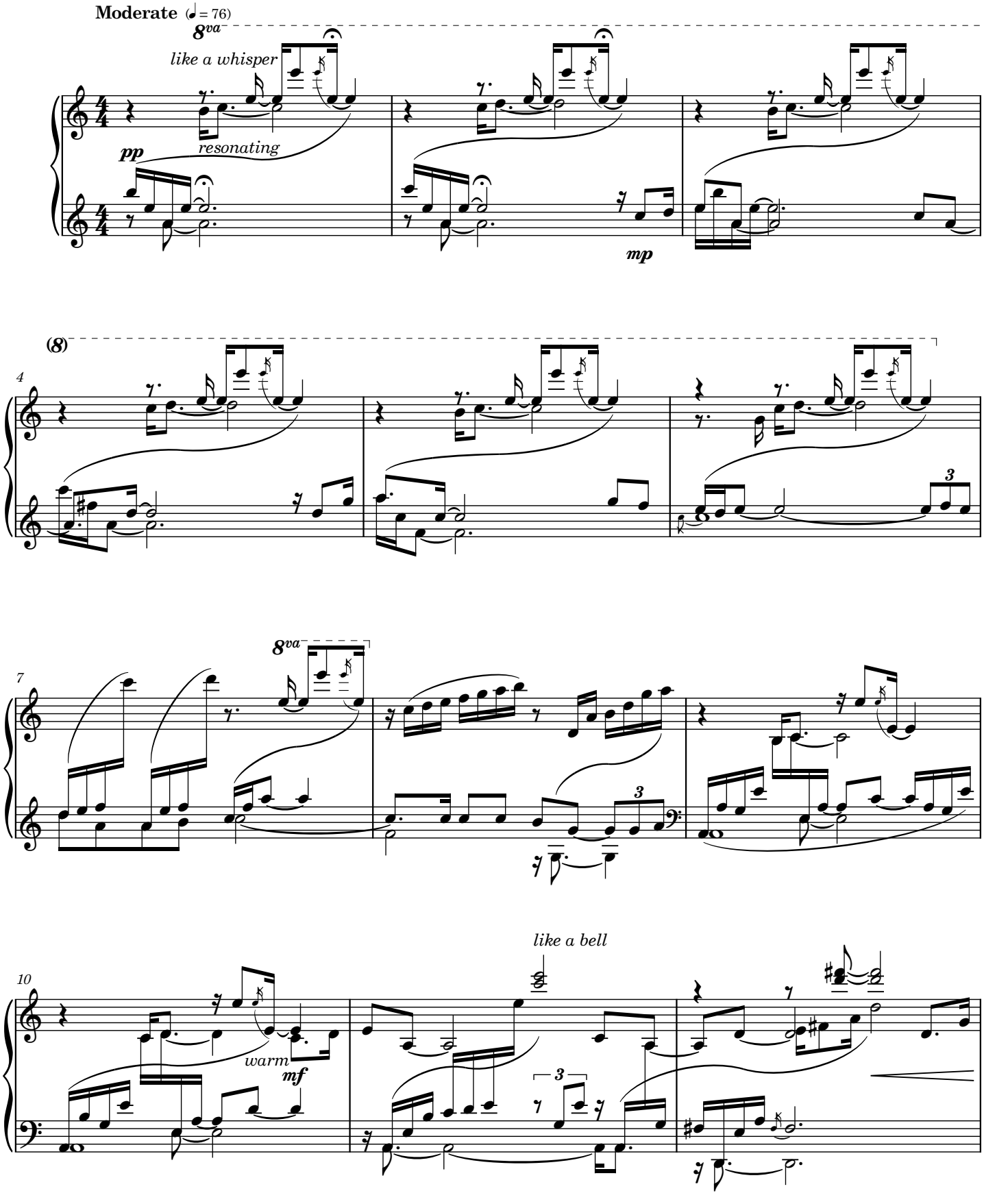
at the castle, Elsa staring out into the sea, but midway through the movie we come to understand that Iduna was a member of the neighboring Northuldra tribe, and at the end Elsa leaves Arendelle's throne to Anna and returns to the Northuldra to protect their forest.

In Holden's arrangement, the pianist now must wrestle with the most overtly virtuosic material written so far. It'd be difficult to guess that this music was written for one hand if one could only hear it. The great weakness of the hand is that, unless one is Rachmaninoff, it can span only (perhaps) an octave and change, so arpeggiating chords—playing their component notes in quick succession, rather than playing them all at once—lends the music an otherwise impossible fullness. The melody and bass now come in octaves, and their resonance creates a certain warmth. On *homeward bound*, the notes spiral back up into the upper registers—

—and we finish a half step up from where we began, with the icy motifs of the opening. *All is found*, indeed.

(Andrew Wu)

All Is Found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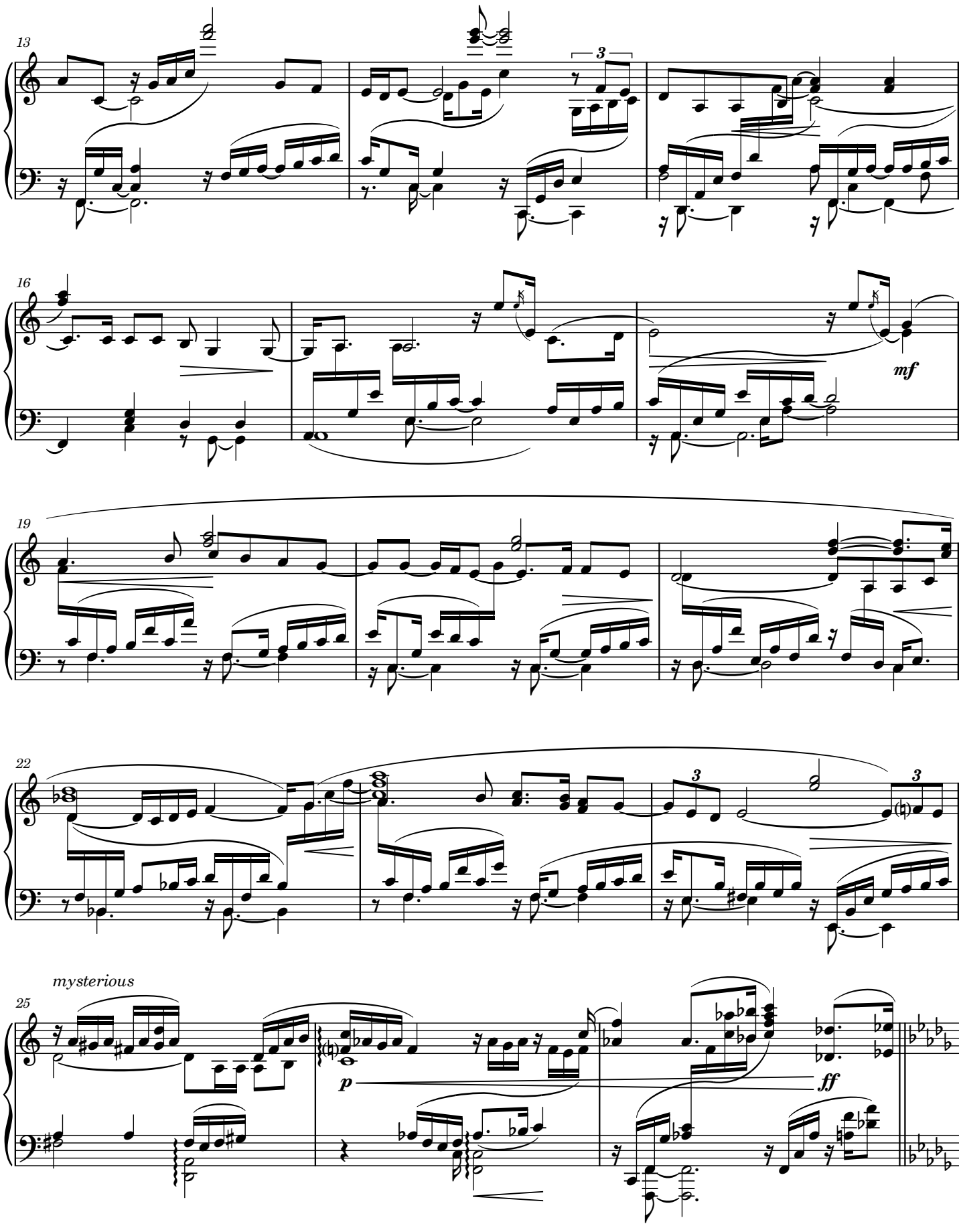
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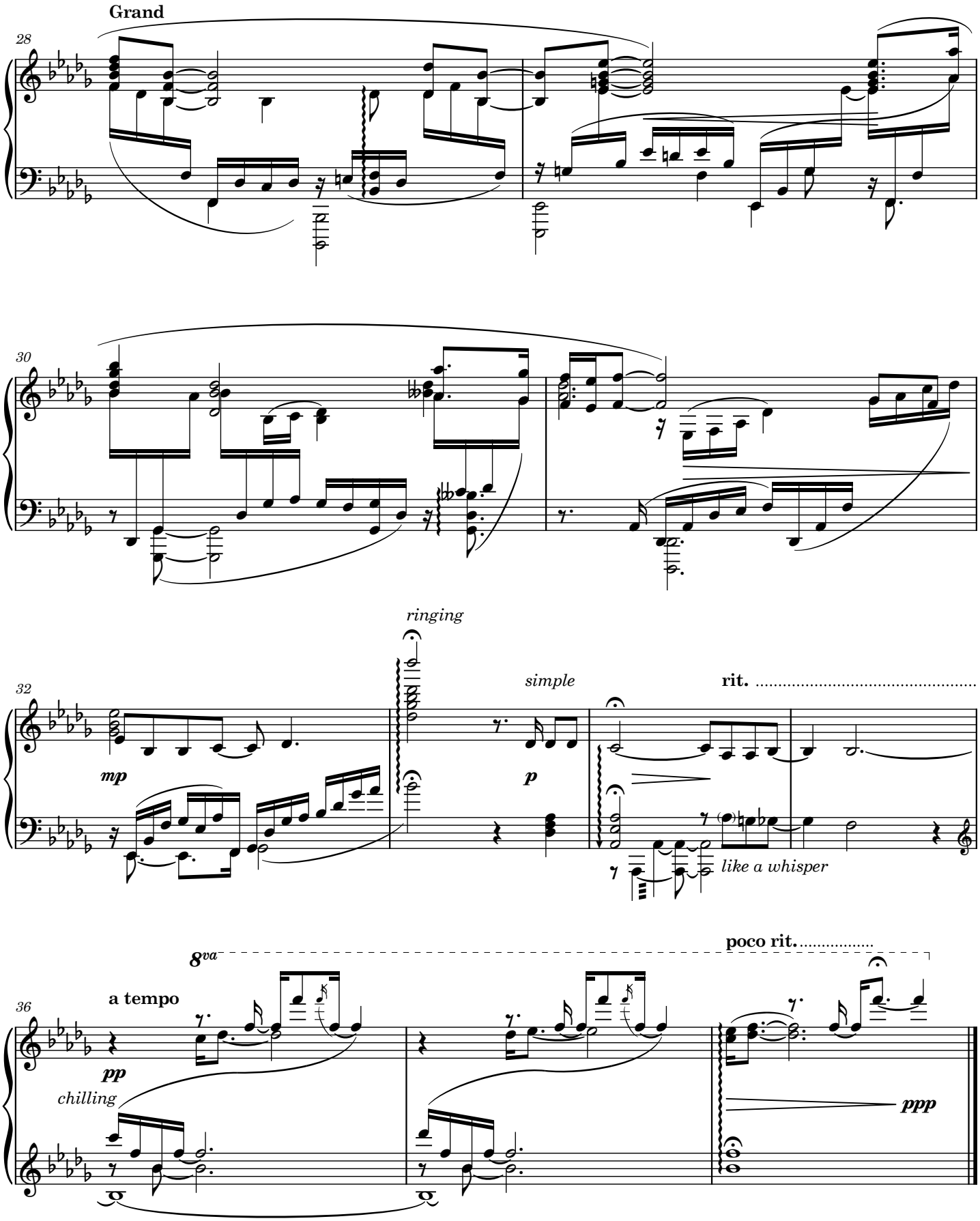
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