Olivia Bona
Miller Art Scholars Grant Outcome Report
8 May 2015

Oboe and Piano Sonata: A Journey of Musical Exploration

For this grant, I intended to write an oboe and piano sonata in the neo-classical style that I would perform on my Distinguished Major Program oboe recital in February of 2015. I believed that this style of music would allow me the most flexibility regarding harmonic progressions and rhythmic expression. I planned to write the piece in an A, B, A' style and I had several elements that I planned to incorporate: an accelerando to the fast B section, a circle of fifths modulation sequence, modal melodies, and an overall ambiguous key.

During the first semester I won this grant, Spring 2014, I began to follow my plan. However, I quickly realized that my theoretical knowledge of composition was not sufficient to produce a piece that sounded like what I hoped I could produce. Instead, my theoretically accurate piece sounded like an exercise from an instrumental methods book. So I turned to library research on the neo-classical style and returned to the music theory materials I had from years prior that discussed neo-classicism. I understood the tenants of neo-classicism—the angular melody, the quickly shifting character of the pieces, the lack of strict chordal progression requirements—but in practice, I struggled to emulate the sound. Moreover, I realized my goal to produce a modal melody that was also angular, per the neo-classical style, produced a strange timbre and character clash that I could not resolve.

During the fall of 2014, I reapplied to continue my research for the sonata and began the composition anew, with completely new intentions and only a set of musical

elements I would include in the piece. After experimentation and research, I felt sure that I would not be able to produce a neo-classical oboe and piano sonata of which I felt proud. The material I produced once I discarded the musical style was much more satisfactory to me. I was able to research the style of pieces that I found aesthetically pleasing, regardless of their classification. This research led me to minimalism, music with repetitive structure, and modern music. I finally found that the elements I hoped to include in the piece were easily accessible to these styles of music.

After discarding the idea of writing a neo-classical piece and identifying the style that I believed would be the most successful for the piece, my work came together rather quickly. I purchased the newest update and most advanced Finale composition suite and reed-making supplies for rehearsals down the line. I listened to composers like Philip Glass, Ludovico Einaudi, Hans Zimmer, and more. After analyzing the style of these composers, I incorporated my favorite elements into my piece: arpeggiated cluster chords, repetitive Alberti bass in the left hand of the piano, long suspensions across bars, and complimentary florid parts between piano and other instruments (in this case, the oboe). Once the basic structure was written, I was easily able to include the elements I wanted from the start: A, B, A' structure, circle of fifths modulation, a vaguely modal melody, and an ambiguous key.

My mentor, Aaron Hill, kindly proofed my drafts, made suggestions, helped me think of ways to lengthen the composition, and ways to make the process of composing easier. Without his help and encouragement, I would not have had the determination to apply for a second year of grant money or the ability to have finished a draft of the piece that was ready to be performed. Dr. Hill also taught me very much about reed-making

skills that were useful in the practice, rehearsal and performance of the grant composition piece. I also learned other reed-making techniques, such as gouging, with Kelly Peral while she was visiting Charlottesville in March. I also was very lucky to workshop and perform the piece with fellow Art Scholar George Swartz who graciously critiqued my piece from a pianist's perspective, offered helpful suggestions, and performed the piece at the Art Scholars Showcase.

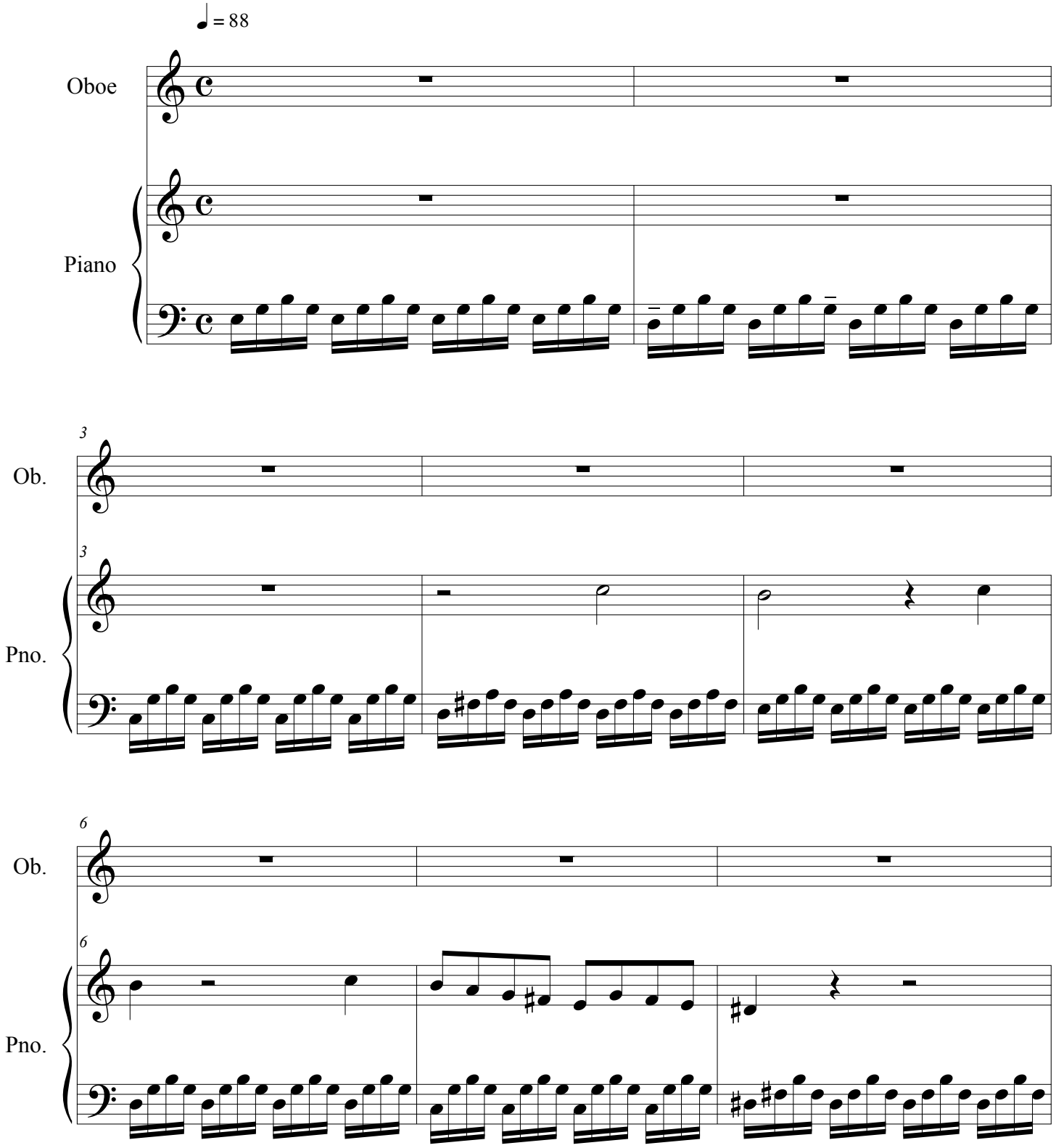
Through this process, I have learned that while setting goals and structure for a project can be helpful, in creative projects, too much structure is detrimental to the creative goal. I had a deep respect for composers—what they do is not easy! I believe that my compositional skills were challenged and grew as a result. When I applied for this grant, I knew that writing this piece would not be easy; I was looking for a way to grow as a musician, and composition was one way to do it. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to win money to fund this endeavor, to learn about styles of composition I may otherwise not have tried, and to perform the piece I wrote. Ultimately, I learned very much about my creative process, the creative processes of other composers, and braved the fear of having my research and hard work received by a discerning audience.

I would like to thank the Art Scholars program for giving me the opportunity to explore the compositional side of my musical development and for giving me a supportive environment in which to do it. Thank you to the generous donors to the Art Scholars program who made the funding possible. Without the proper equipment, I would not have been able to either write the piece or perform it. I am so grateful for the opportunity I was given to compose this piece of music, I look forward to continuing my work on it in the future!

Score

Saudade

Olivia Bona



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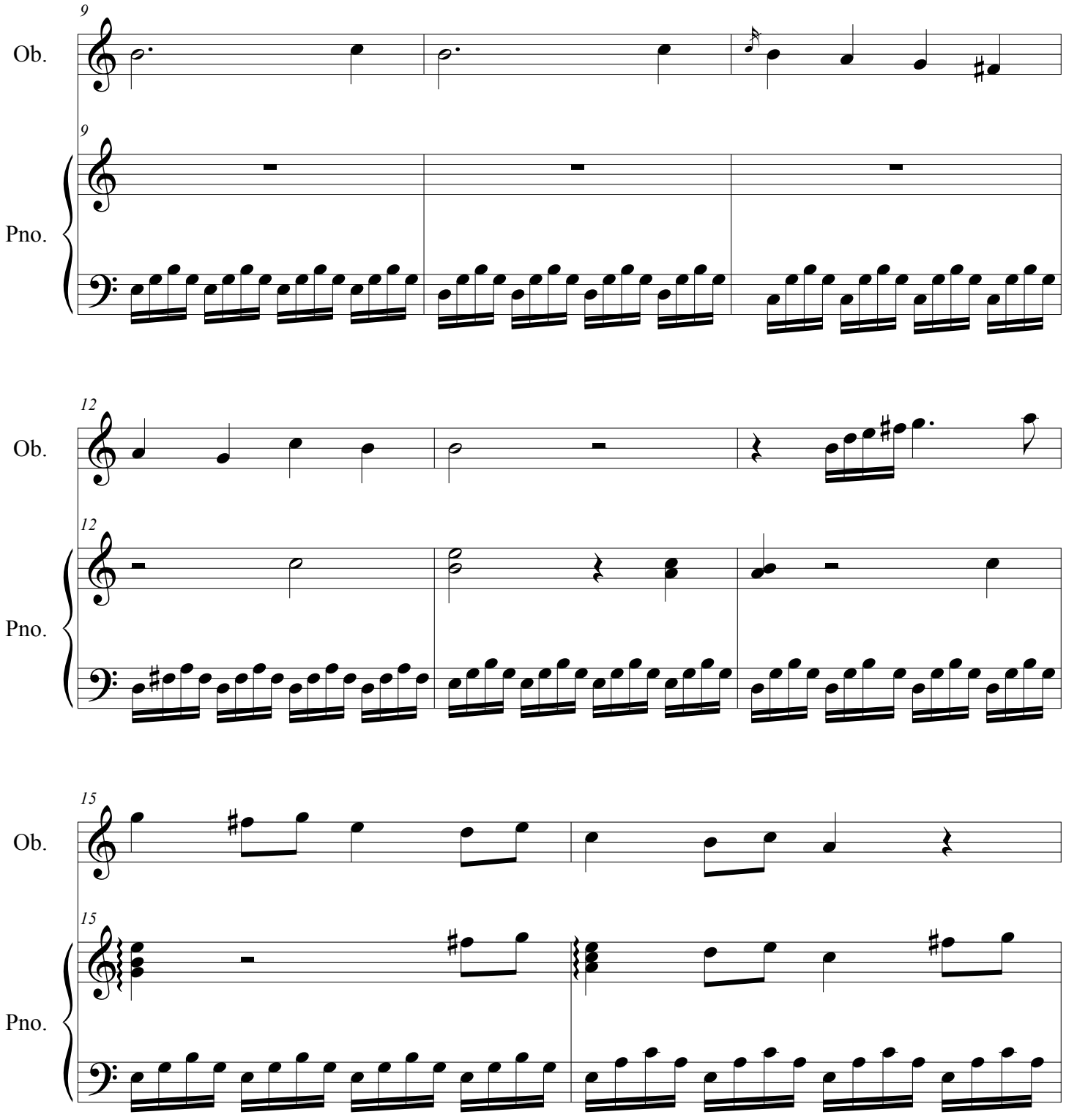
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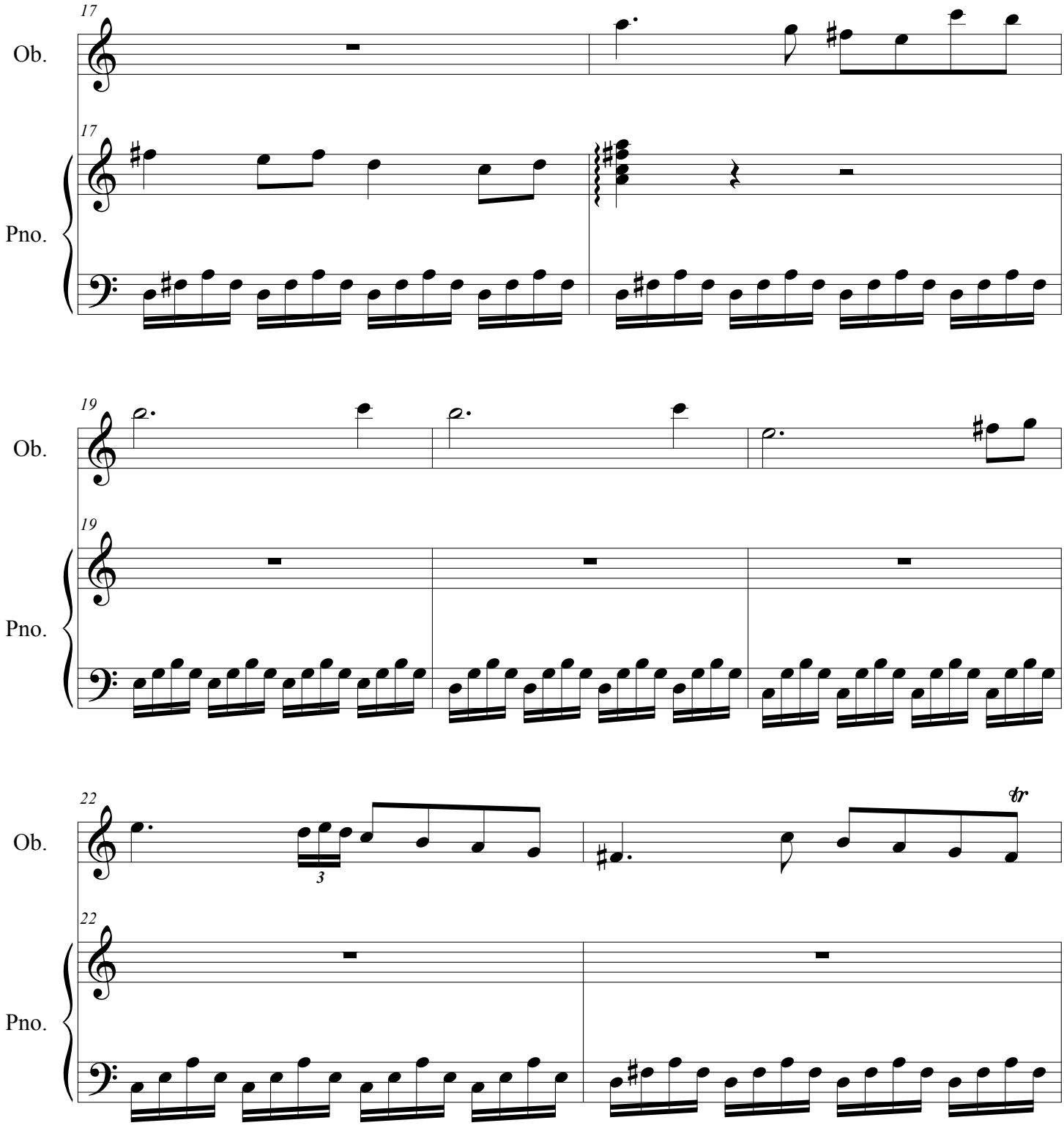
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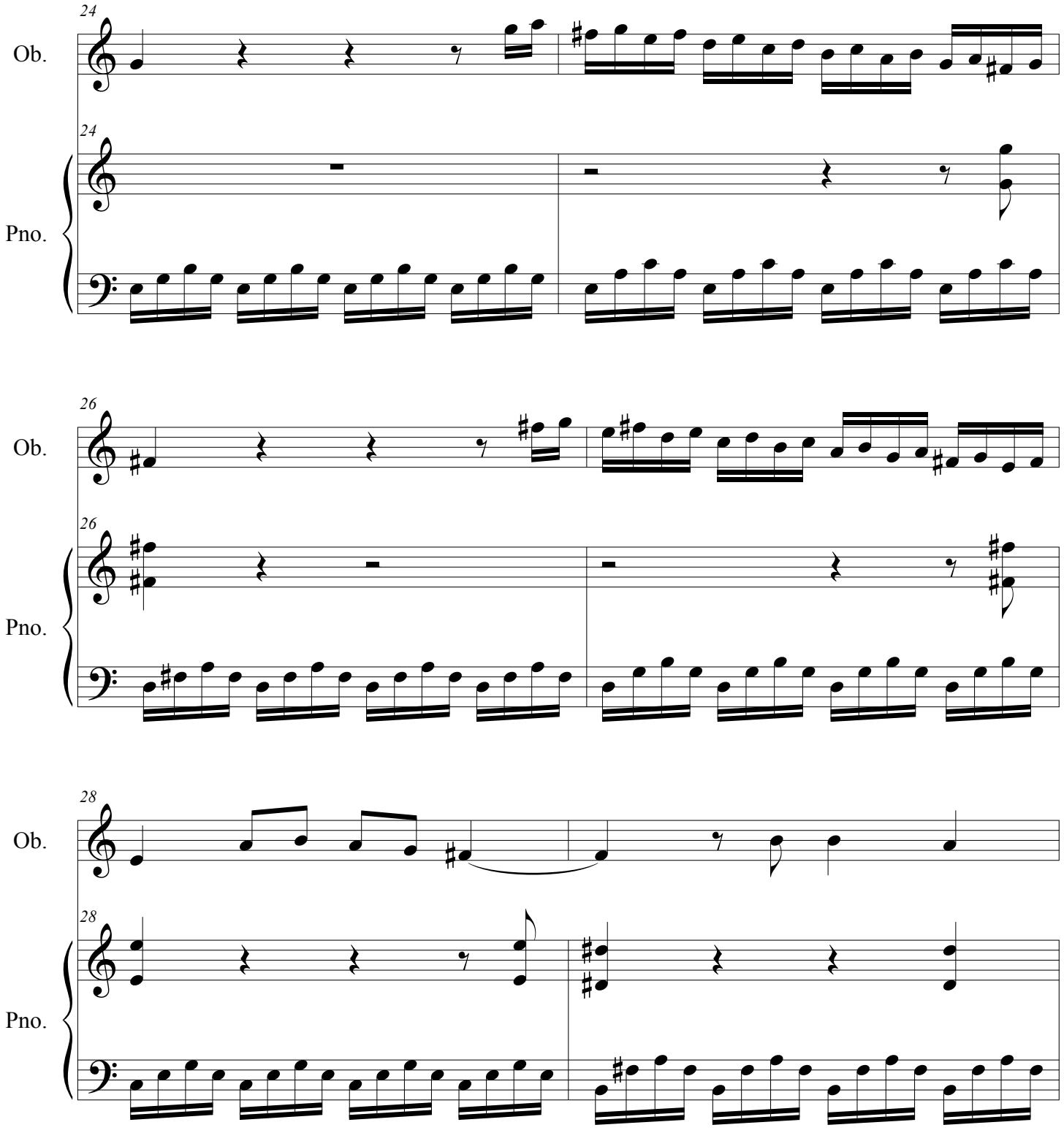
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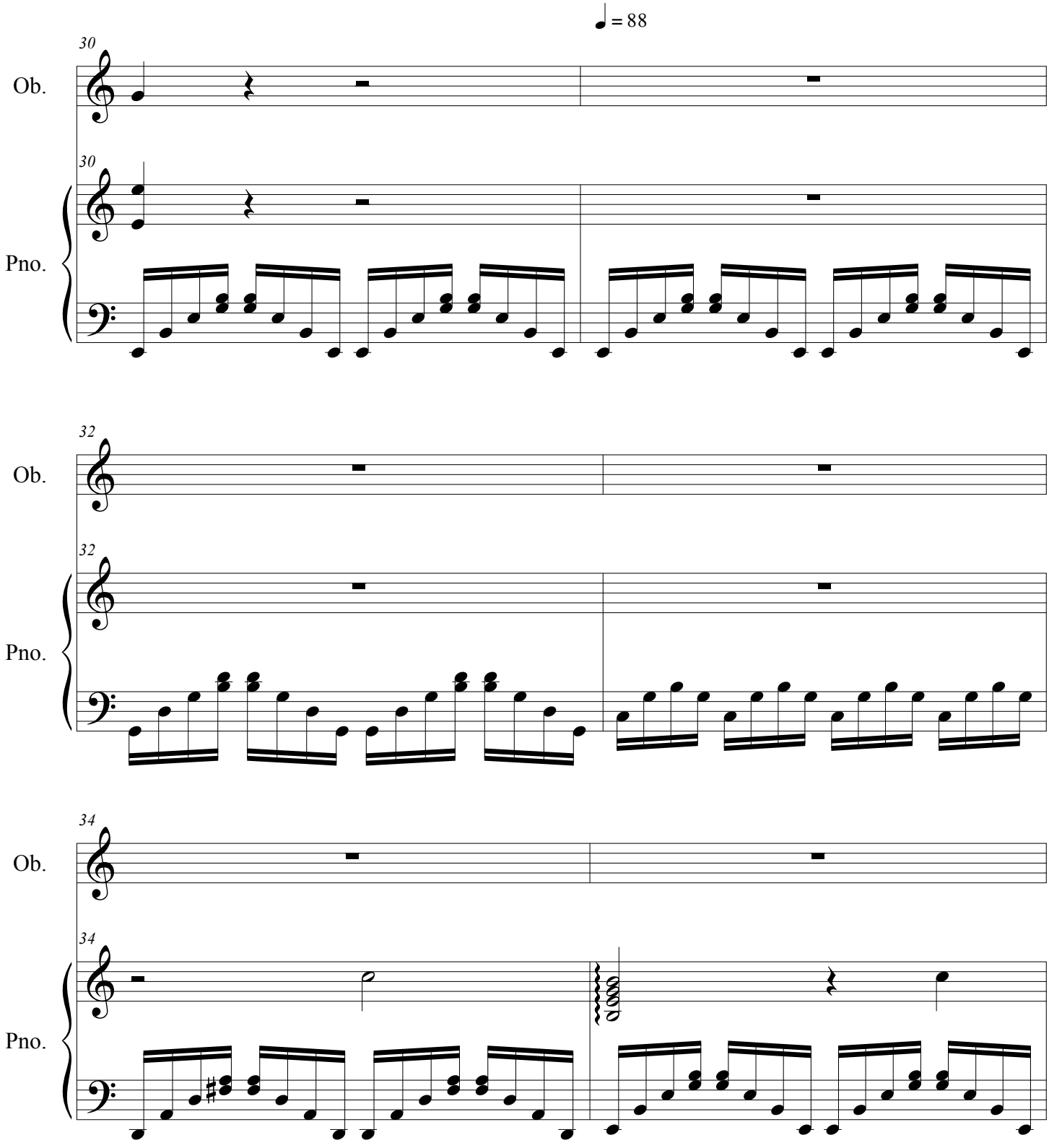
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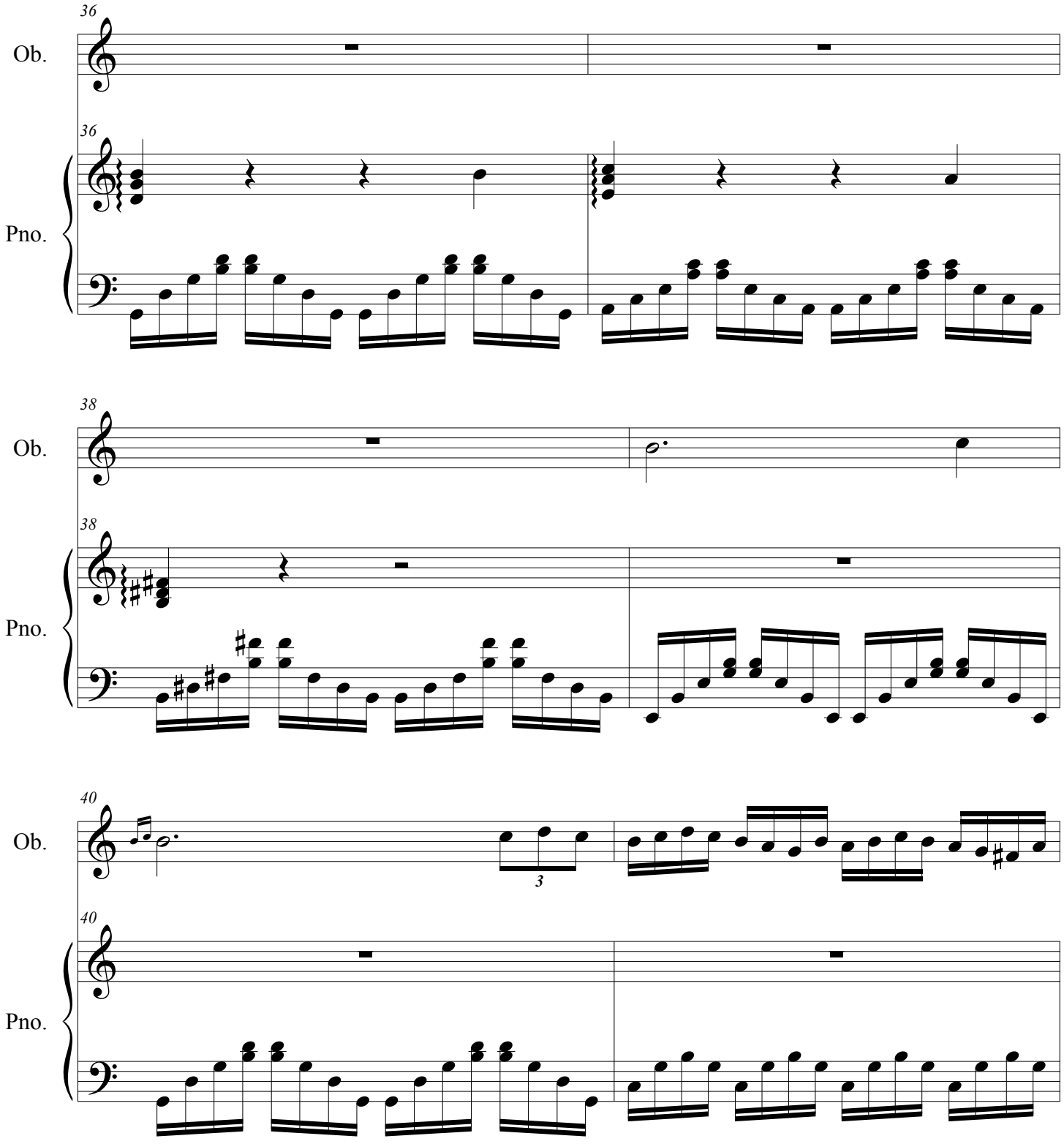
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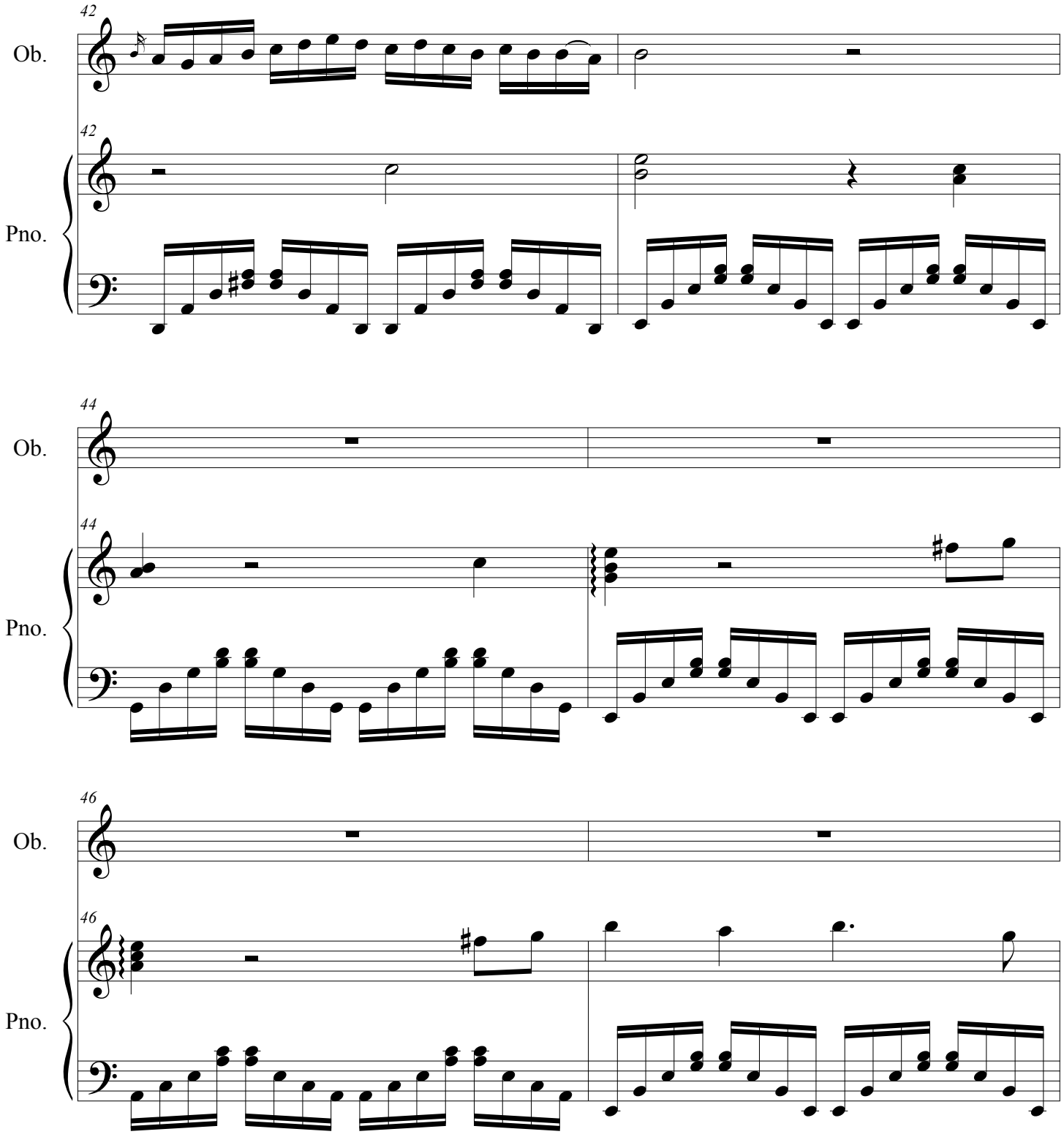
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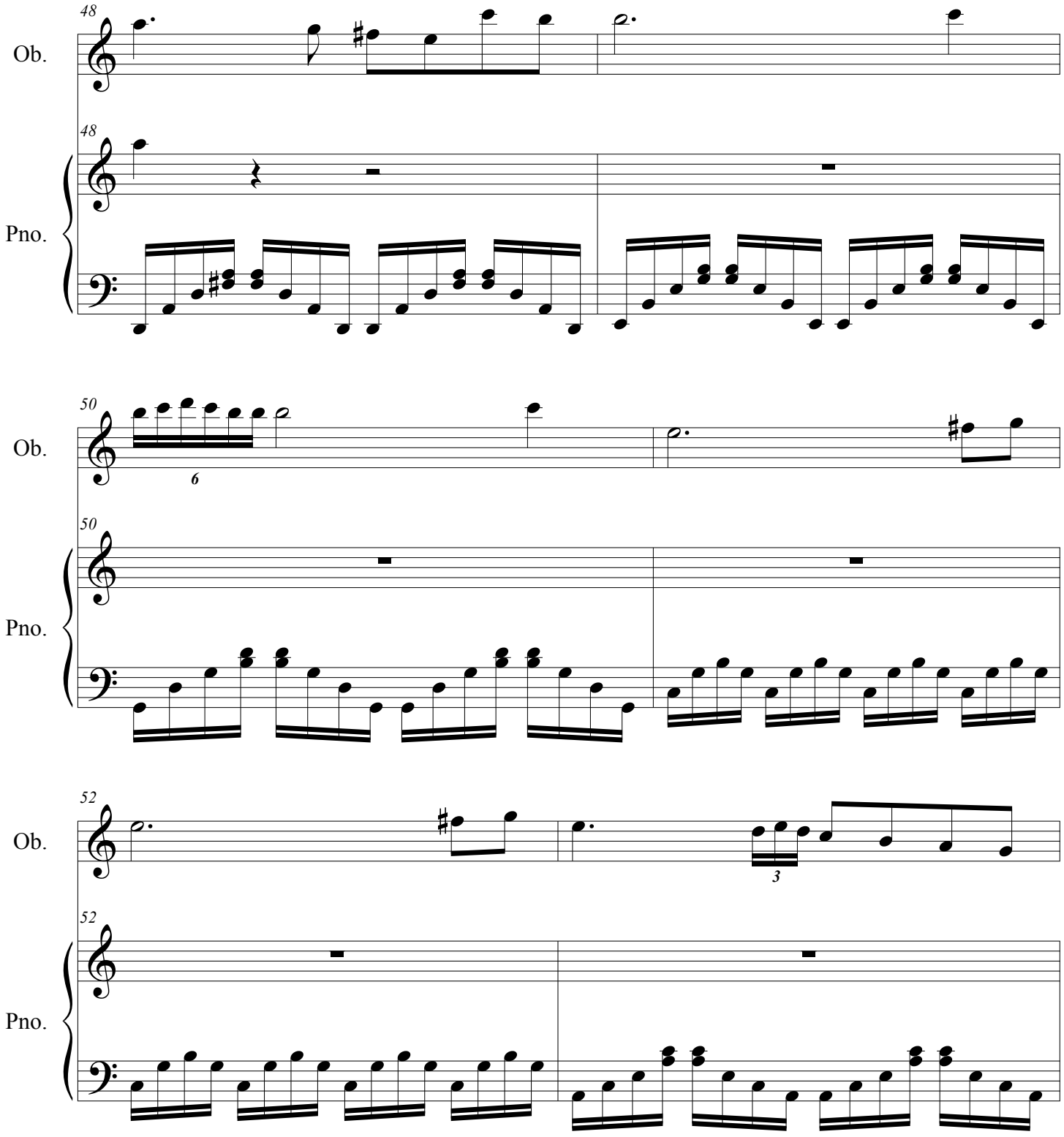
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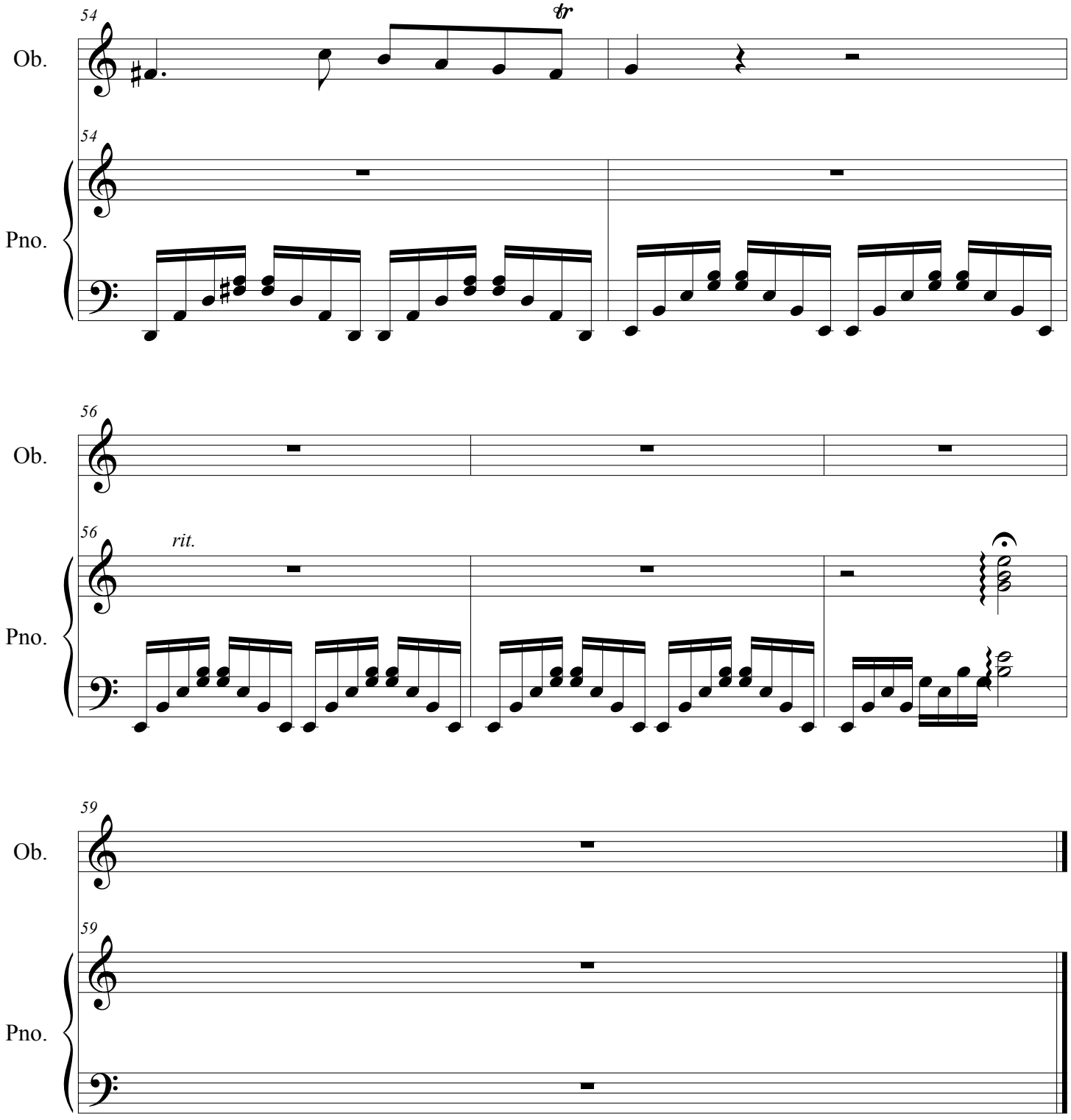
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