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1794–1795: Decisive Years in Beethoven's Early Development

Douglas Johnson

It is too late to tamper with the three periods. The broad stages of Beethoven's creative life – imitative, heroic, and introspective – have been assimilated into the basic popular vocabulary from which all discussion of his music now proceeds. And not without reason, for the division does associate important changes in his style with what have been perceived as crises in his life. On another level, however, the three periods are an abstraction inevitably qualified by all concrete discussion: works that are typical at one level become atypical at another, and each period, when examined closely, reveals its own distinctive subdivisions. Beethoven developed within his creative periods as well as between them.[1]

Although it is normally risky to equate development with qualitative progress, there are obvious reasons for doing so in the twenty or so years of the first period (roughly 1782–1802). These were the years of Beethoven's adolescence and early manhood, and the achievement of technical mastery was a gradual process. It is my intention here to isolate one step in that process, a critical step involving the principal compositions of the years 1794 and 1795: the Piano Trios in G major and C minor Op. 1 Nos. 2 and 3, the Sonatas in A major and C major Op. 2 Nos. 2 and 3, the C-major Piano Concerto Op. 15, and to a lesser extent the String Quintet Op. 4, and the songs 'Adelaide' Op. 46 and 'Seufzer eines Ungeliebten' WoO 118.

Two general circumstances encourage and facilitate discussion of these works. First, they are the earliest important compositions conceived and completed after Beethoven moved from Bonn to Vienna. For reasons not yet fully explained, no substantial new works were written in 1793; during that initial year of study with Haydn,

[1] For a concise survey of the ways in which Beethoven's career has been subdivided see Maynard Solomon, 'The Creative Periods of Beethoven', *Music Review*, xxxiv (1973), 30–8.

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Beethoven was content to revise several of his Bonn works.[2] Second, there are some provocative bases for stylistic comparison between the works of 1794–5 and those of a few years earlier. Op. 4 is a heavily revised arrangement of the Wind Octet Op. 103, and the first movement of Op. 2 No. 3 derives in part from a piano quartet of 1785. There is also evidence of various kinds that the first of the Op. 1 Trios and the first of the Op. 2 Sonatas belong – at least in their conception – to a somewhat earlier period than the last two works in each opus.

What are the specific musical reasons for being interested in the new works of 1794–5? To put the matter bluntly, in these works Beethoven was coming to grips for the first time systematically with the most sophisticated elements of Classical style. He had had no real difficulty with the superficial elements: the basic forms, the melodic and harmonic clichés, and conventional instrumentation. But these belonged to the common language of the time and were mastered by composers of all ranks. The new procedures that are found in the works of 1794 and 1795 were the ones that set Haydn and Mozart apart from their contemporaries and which, after he had mastered them, were to do the same for Beethoven. Here, oversimplified, are the points I consider most important:

1 The distribution of thematic material throughout the texture and the natural and easy use of polyphony anywhere in a movement;
2 control in the handling of remote key relationships, especially those of the mediant and submediant in both modes;
3 concern with the organic relationships among the parts of a movement and among the movements of a work;
4 the creation of instability within thematic statements as a way of sustaining momentum.

Some of these points are easier to illustrate than others. I shall begin with the first two. A convenient place to observe the change in Beethoven's practice with respect to texture and tonal goals is in the relationship of the String Quintet Op. 4 to the Wind Octet Op. 103, since the Octet as we know it was completed in 1793 and the quintet arrangement was probably made in 1795.[3] This comparison has done service before[4] and it is not an altogether happy one, but some of the small differences between the two works are very instructive.

[2] For example, the B♭ Concerto Op. 19, the Octet Op. 103, the song 'Feuerfarb'' Op. 52 No. 2, and the Oboe Concerto, Hess 12.
[3] The relevant sources are Berlin, SPK, Artaria 132; and SPK, Autograph 28, fols. 54–55 (both Op. 103); and Bonn, SBH 606 (Op. 4).
[4] See, for example, Alfred Orel, 'Beethovens Oktett Op. 103 und seine Bearbeitung als Quintett Op. 4', *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft*, iii (1920–1), 159–79.

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Example 1 shows the first half of the Andante in both versions. When Beethoven revised this movement he concentrated on two things. First he tried to enrich the texture during the thematic statements. The repetition of the opening theme by the cello (Quintet bar 9) has a new anacrusis which is taken up as a contrapuntal figure by the violins. The extension (bars 17ff) has a bass line animated by a rhythmic–melodic cell from the melody. Finally, in the new theme in F major (Quintet bar 28, Octet bar 34) the first violin has a motif mimicking the rhythm of the more important original motif in the second violin, and during the repeat there is a further bit of new dialogue between the cello and the first viola.

These textural changes were all motivated by the same basic principle. A different kind of revision occurs in the modulatory passages. There are two such passages in the example, and Beethoven made substantial changes in both of them. The first is the transition from B♭ to F. In the Octet the extension of the principal theme comes to a full cadence in bar 24; at that point a new idea in G minor begins a formal transition, reaching F through the circle of fifths. In the Quintet Beethoven interrupts the same extension with a shift to the minor mode (bar 20) and replaces the tonic cadence with an augmented-sixth progression to the dominant of F, which is then prolonged for six bars – the formal transition is omitted altogether.

The second modulatory passage is the retransition from F to B♭ after the second group. In the Octet (bars 50–5) Beethoven recalls the extension (see bar 17), now in D minor, and moves with a minimum of drama to the dominant of B♭; the harmonic reinterpretation of A in the bass localises the effect without disturbing the continuity. In the Quintet he begins with the same material (bar 43), but in D♭ major, and he expands the passage to include well-articulated arrivals in A♭ (bar 49) and A minor (bar 60), before finally reinterpreting A as the leading-note in the home tonic. The retransition takes six bars in the Octet, twenty in the Quintet.

Together with the motivic additions to the texture, this motion to remote keys increases the complexity of the movement and raises its temperature appreciably. Whether or not the movement can bear the heat is a question that need not concern us here; the important thing is that Beethoven thought it could. At the same time the pre-existent material did limit the scope and effectiveness of the changes in Op. 4. In works that were newly composed in 1794 and 1795 the same compositional goals are achieved more convincingly.

The new emphasis on polyphony within thematic statements is perhaps most easily appreciated where it is least necessary: in works

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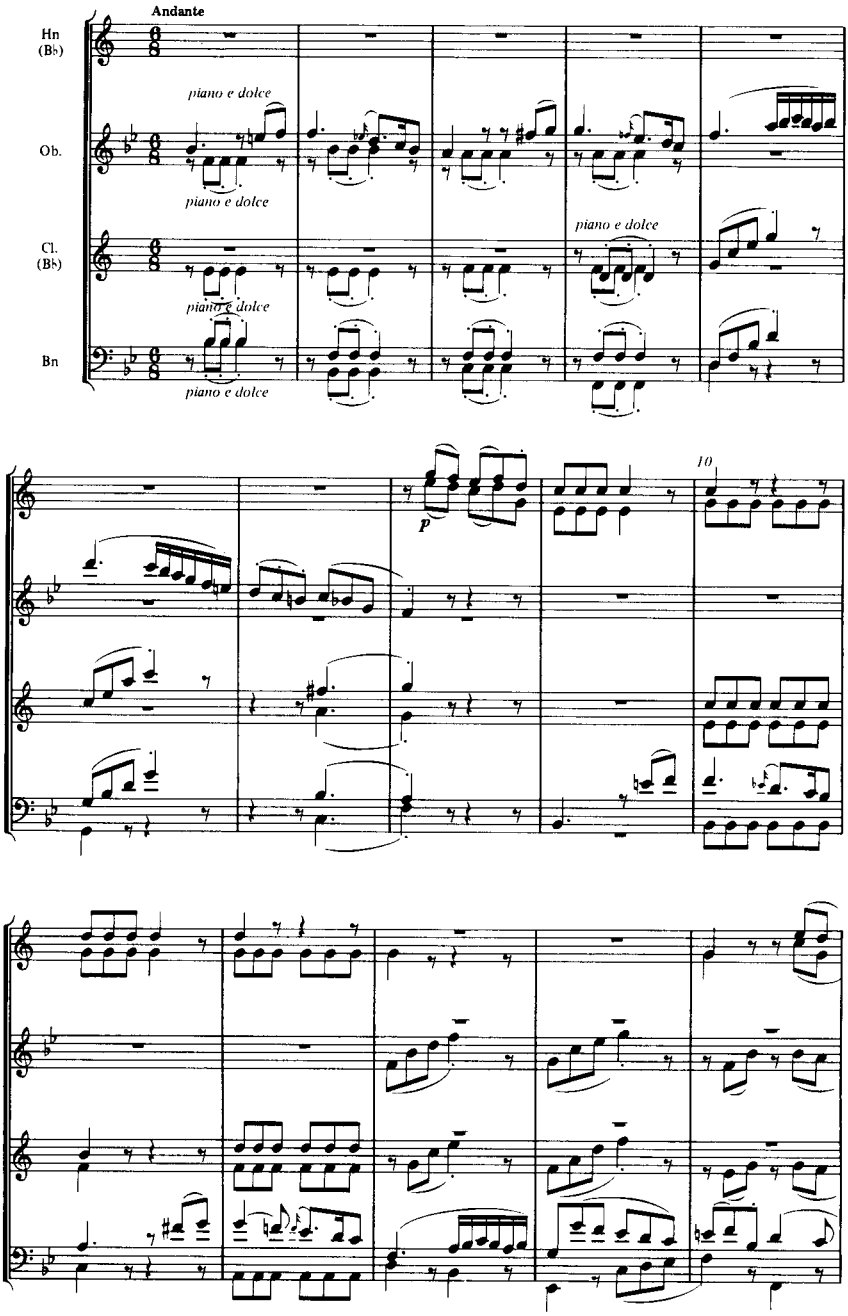
Example 1
Wind Octet Op. 103, second movement



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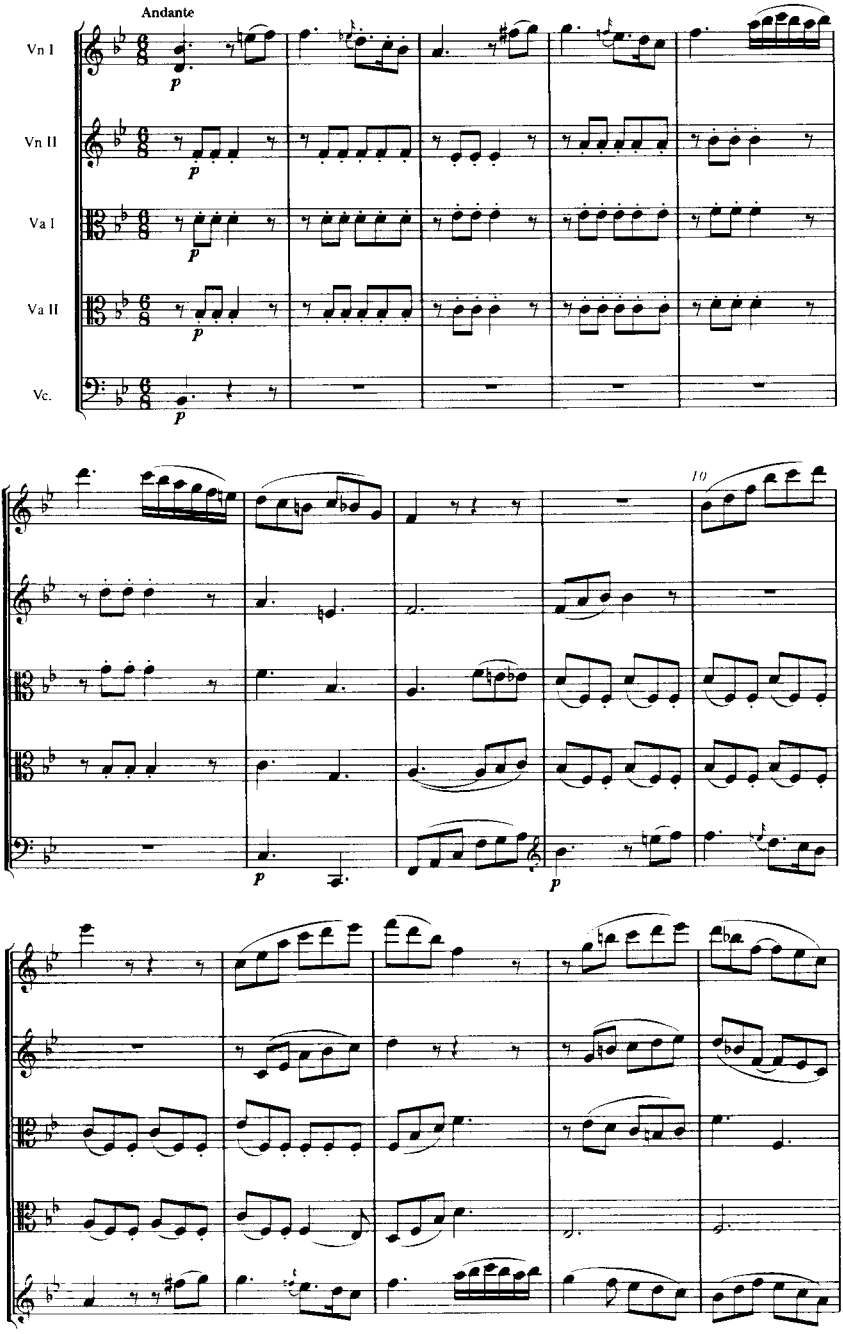
String Quintet Op. 4, second movement



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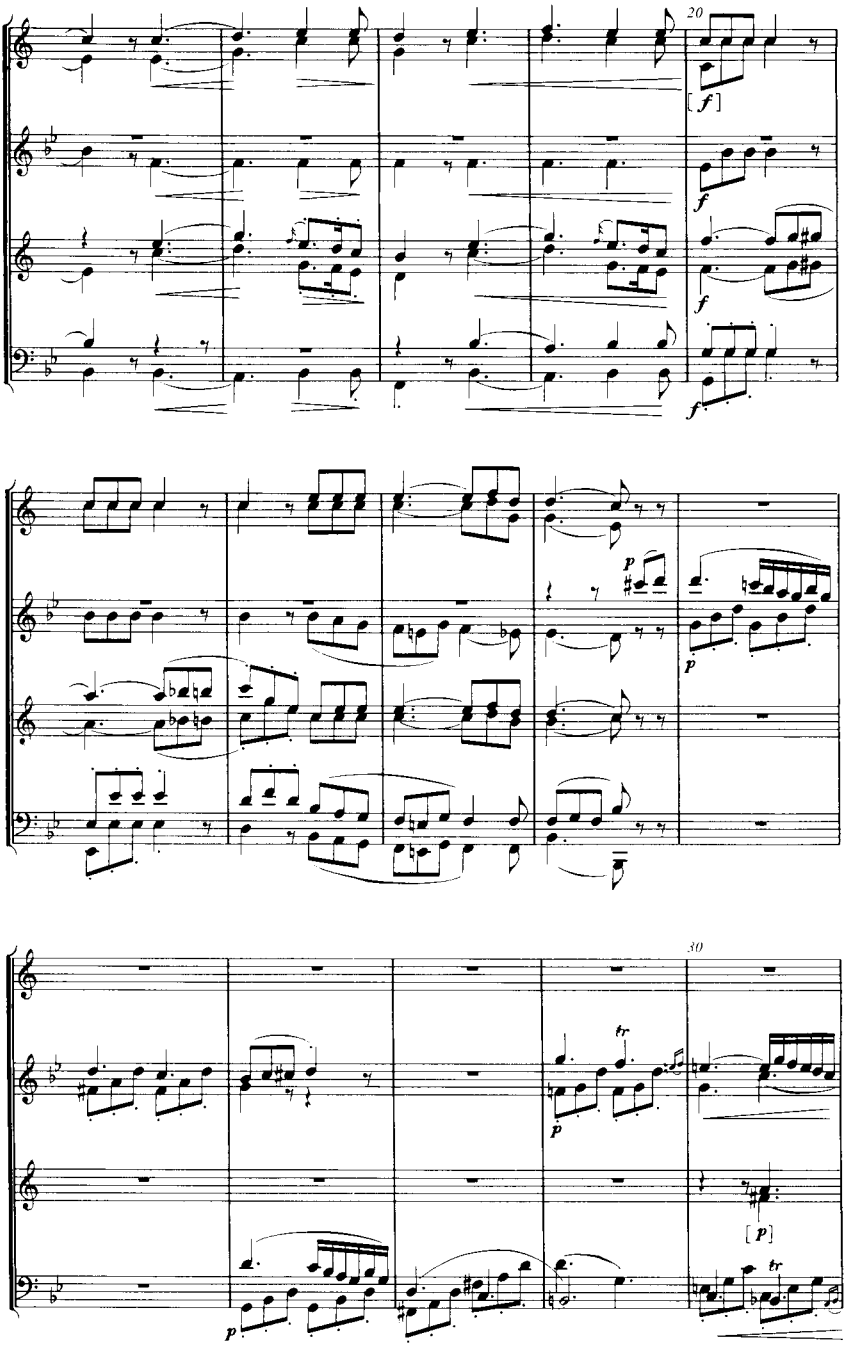

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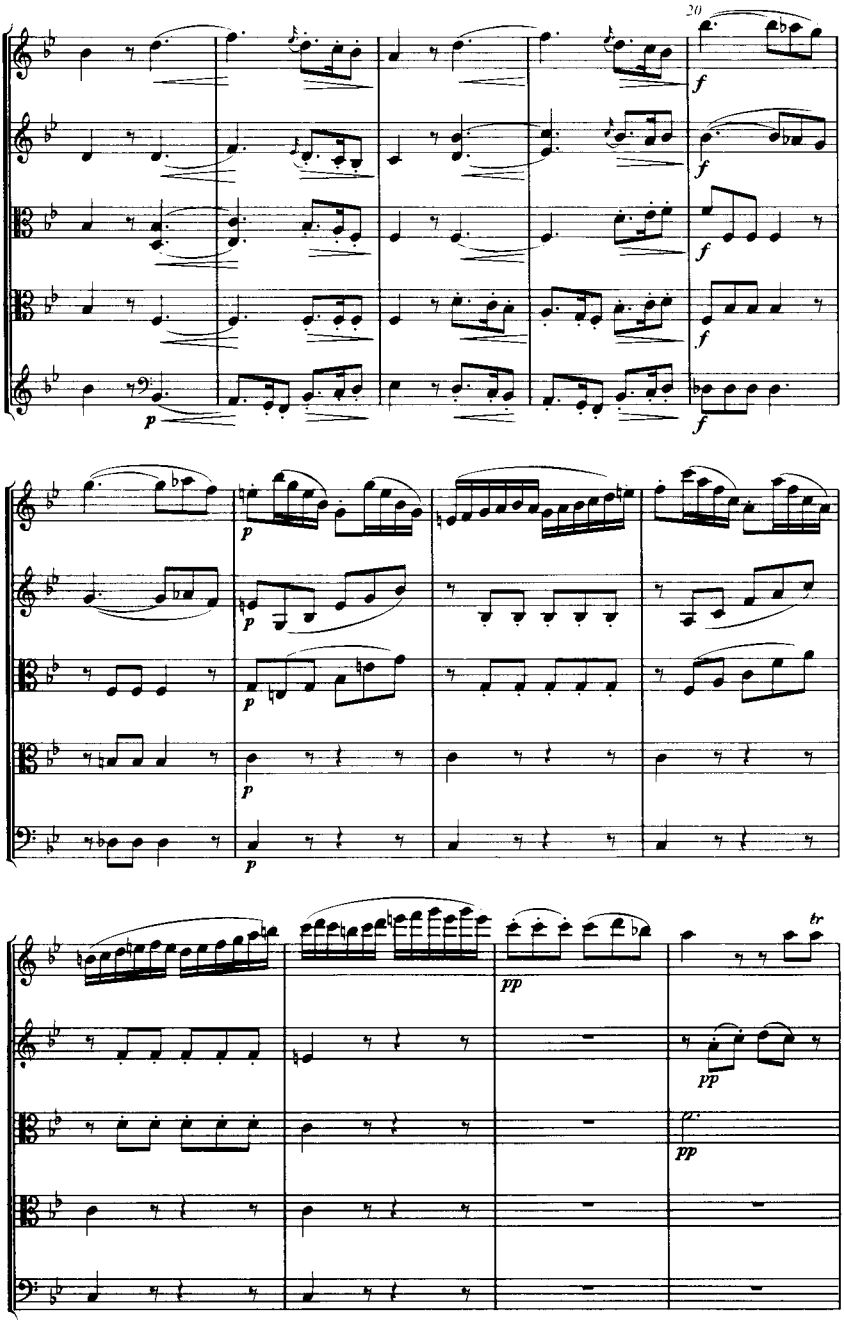

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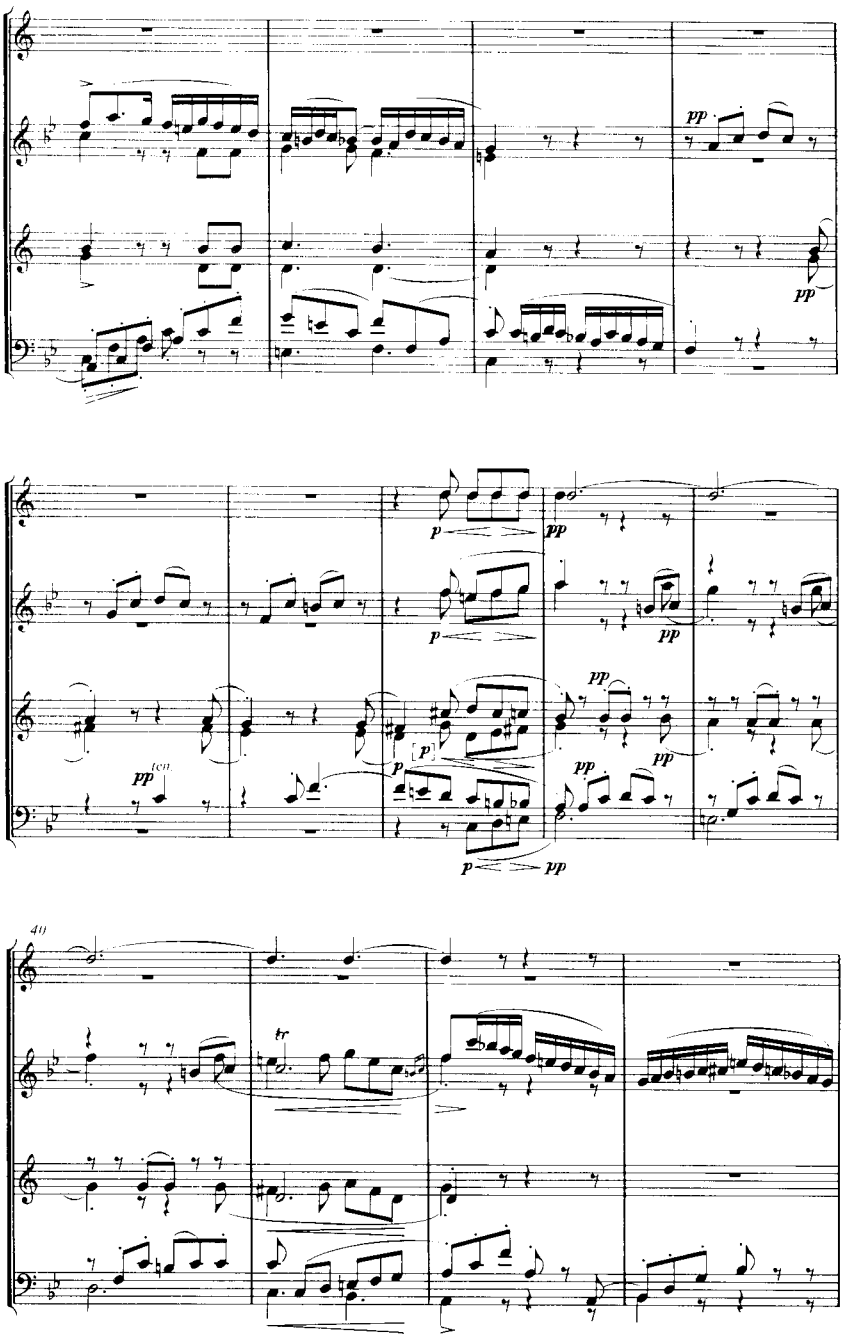

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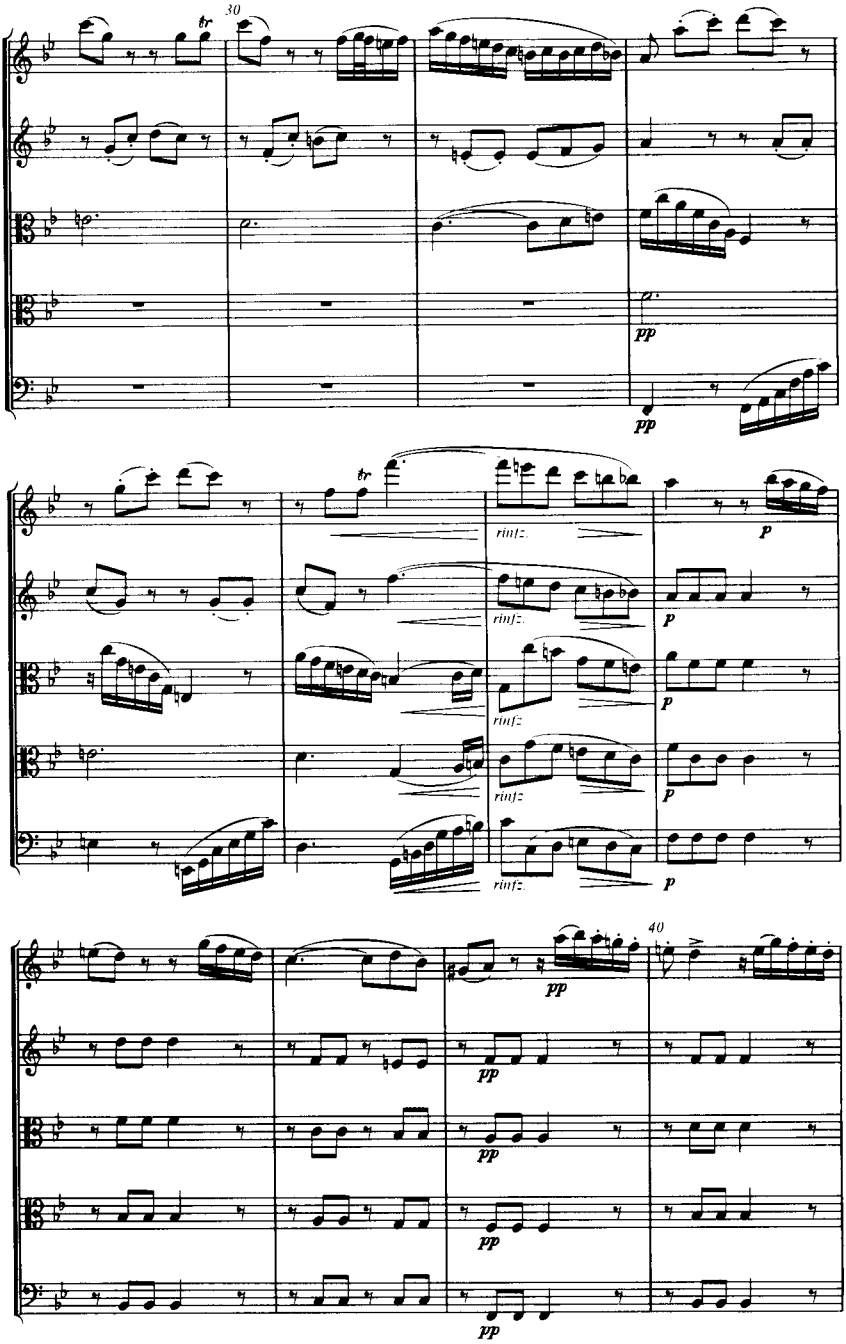

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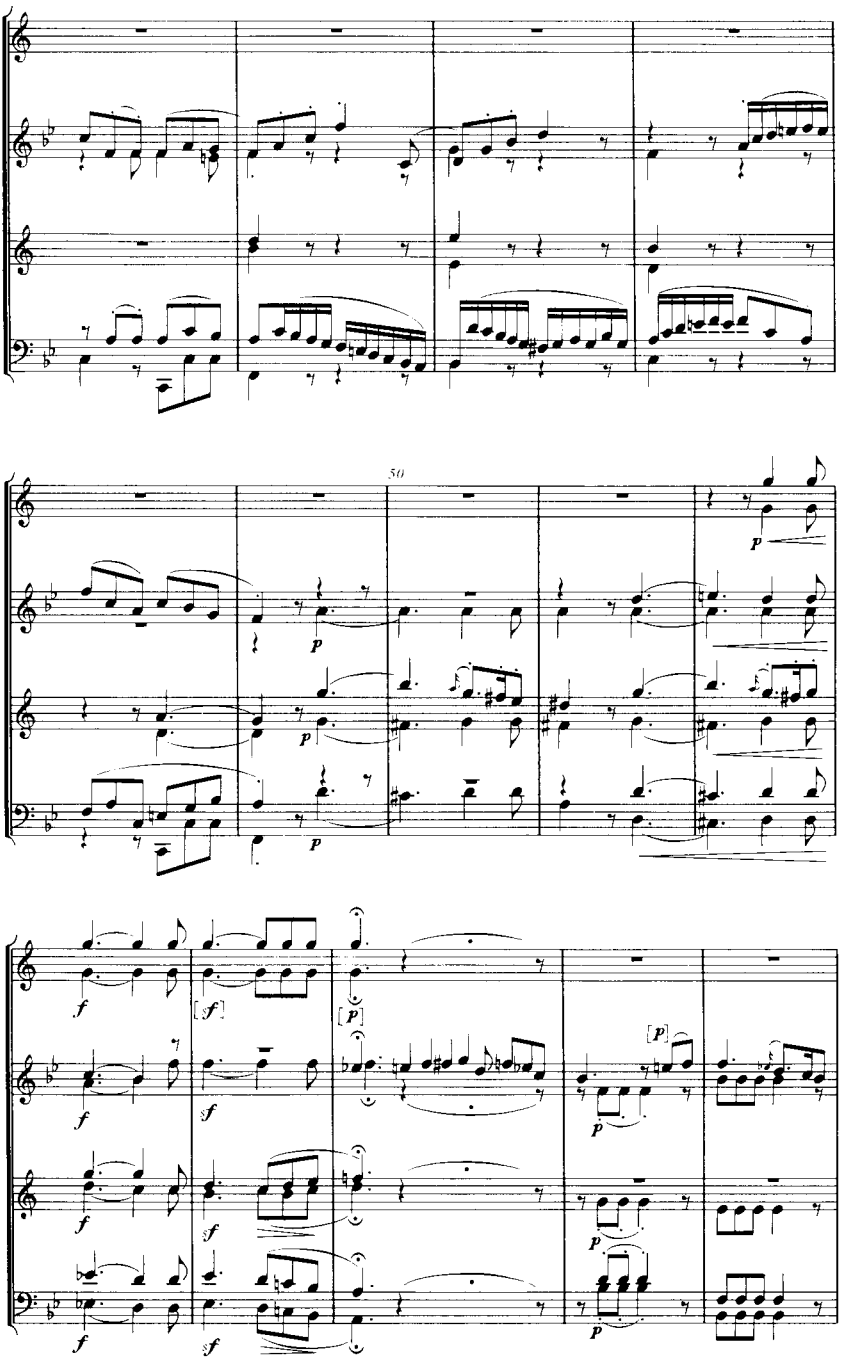

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