Oteri

Setting the World at Five and Seven

Transformal Music

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An unidentified species counterpoint
for solo clavichord
(or piano played like a clavichord)

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Over the past couple of years I've become deeply enamored of the music of Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach (1714-1788) who in his day overshadowed his father Johann Sebastian who now overshadows him. I've been particularly drawn to C.P.E. Bach's keyboard music. The simple, yet meticulously detailed sound world he created is most vivid when played on his instrument of choice, the clavichord. In fact the current obscurity of the clavichord is most likely what has relegated C.P.E.'s music to its current status since it comes across as somewhat tinny on a harpsichord and a bit silly on the modern piano.

I grew up surrounded by pianos and it has remained a constant source of inspiration throughout my life. Years later, when I learned about the harpsichord, I became obsessed with its hypnotic timbre and over the past two decades it has been an instrument I frequently return to. But the clavichord is something else entirely, a lost secret from another era which like alchemy or hermeticism seems far removed from our time.

While the harpsichord has proven itself to be an invaluable contemporary music instrument, in everything from Ligeti's *Continuum* and Carter's Double Concerto to Albert Ayler's *Love Cry* and Diana Ross's "Love Child," the clavichord—despite some remarkable recordings by Oscar Peterson and Keith Jarrett—remains mostly uncharted territory. Too gentle for very dense contemporary vocabulary and too quiet for rock and roll, it requires much more introspection. In fact, it's probably best suited for music with only two parts, like much of C.P.E. Bach's music. So I endeavored to create a two-part composition for clavichord that would remain sensitive to the instrument's character while still exploring the kinds of musical ideas I gravitate toward, which are the result of listening to music spanning all the Bachs, Ligeti, Carter, Ayler, Diana Ross, Oscar Peterson, Keith Jarrett, and beyond. It is possible to play this music on other keyboard instruments as well provided the interpreter approaches the music with a clavichord-like sensitivity.

I've been fascinated by music using 5-beat rhythmic cycles for as long as I can remember. Partially because I've never been able to reconcile the seeming naturalness of a quintuple meter (after all, we have five fingers) with its always being somewhat awkward sounding, like there's one extra beat. As I grew older I became equally fascinated with 7-beat cycles which have a similar unstableness, only in reverse; they sound like they're missing a beat. So it was only a matter of time before I pondered the possibility of overlapping a 5-beat cycle with a 7-beat cycle which results in a sonic queaziness in which you're never quite sure if you're gaining something or losing something.

Since each hand is essentially in a different time signature, the only meaningful meter to indicate for *Setting the World at Five and Seven* is 1:1 since the two parts share the same downbeat. Therefore a metronome marking of whole note equals 30 means that the left hand's quintuplets go by at 150 and the right hand's septuplets go by at 210. This polyrhythm temporarily resolves to both hands playing parallel septuplets, but this is merely to prepare for a metrical modulation to a situation where the left hand's subsequent quintuplets are at 210, making the right hand's septuplets speed up to 274, hence the overall whole note equal 42. Eventually the parallel septuplets return to prepare for a reverse metrical modulation back to the original tempo. To keep listeners focused on this polyrhythm, the pitches are limited to a pentatonic scale (although that's a 5 as well) and the harmonic progression is a standard 12-bar blues although it probably won't sound like a blues to most people.

Back in the 18th century, when folks were busily determining rules for how to compose effective counterpoint, various kinds—or species—of two-part counterpoint were codified based on the rhythmic relationship between the two parts. Unfortunately they were so focused on standard two-beat rhythms, they never got around to figuring out what to do if the relationship between the two parts was a five to seven ratio. This then is such an attempt. Further back in time, in the 14th century, the Middle English poet Geoffrey Chaucer used the expression "setting the world at six and seven" to connote risking one's life, from which the still current phrase "at sixes and sevens," meaning in disarray, derives. Perhaps setting the world at merely five and seven will prove to be ultimately not quite as dangerous.

—FJO

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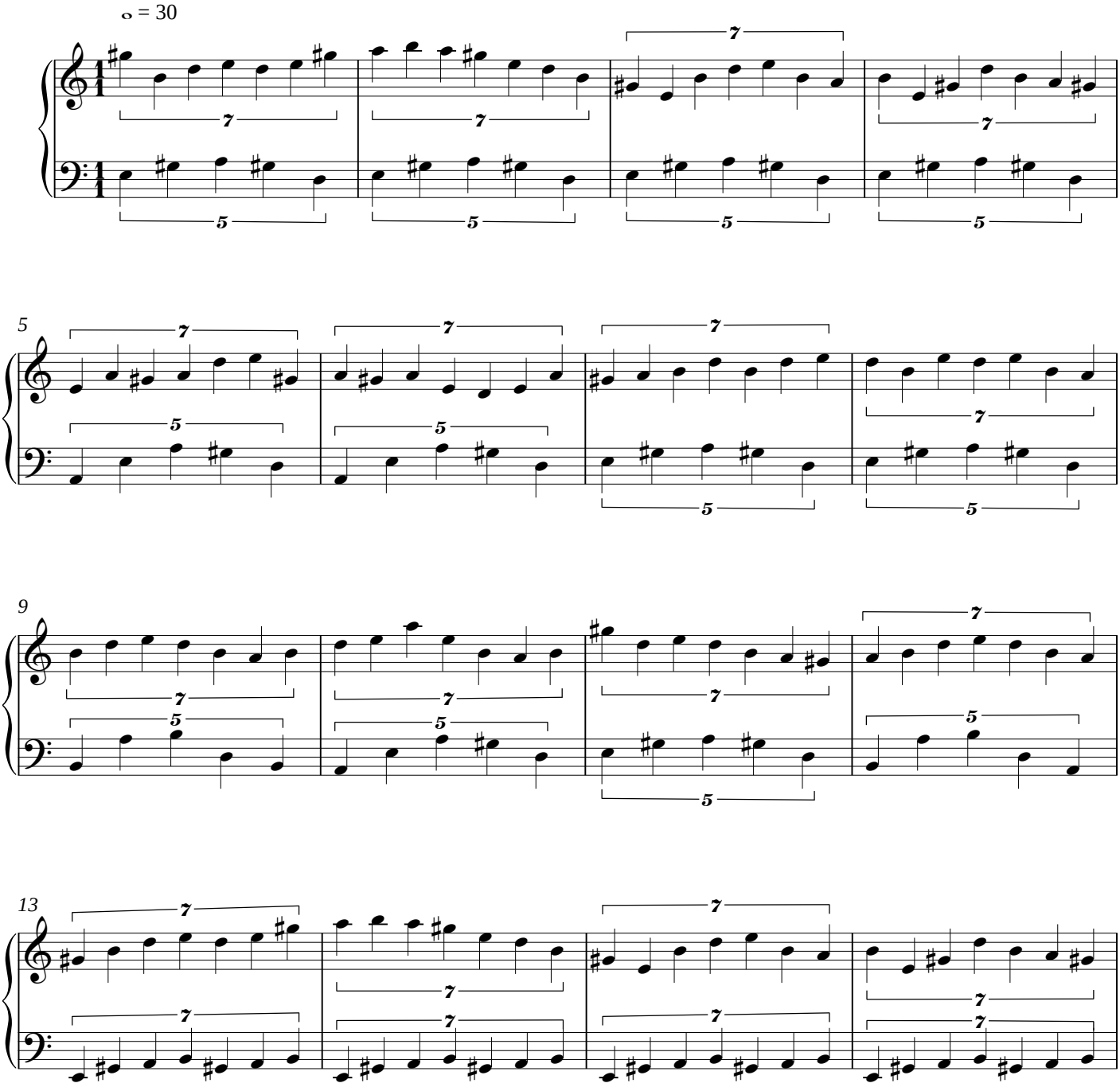

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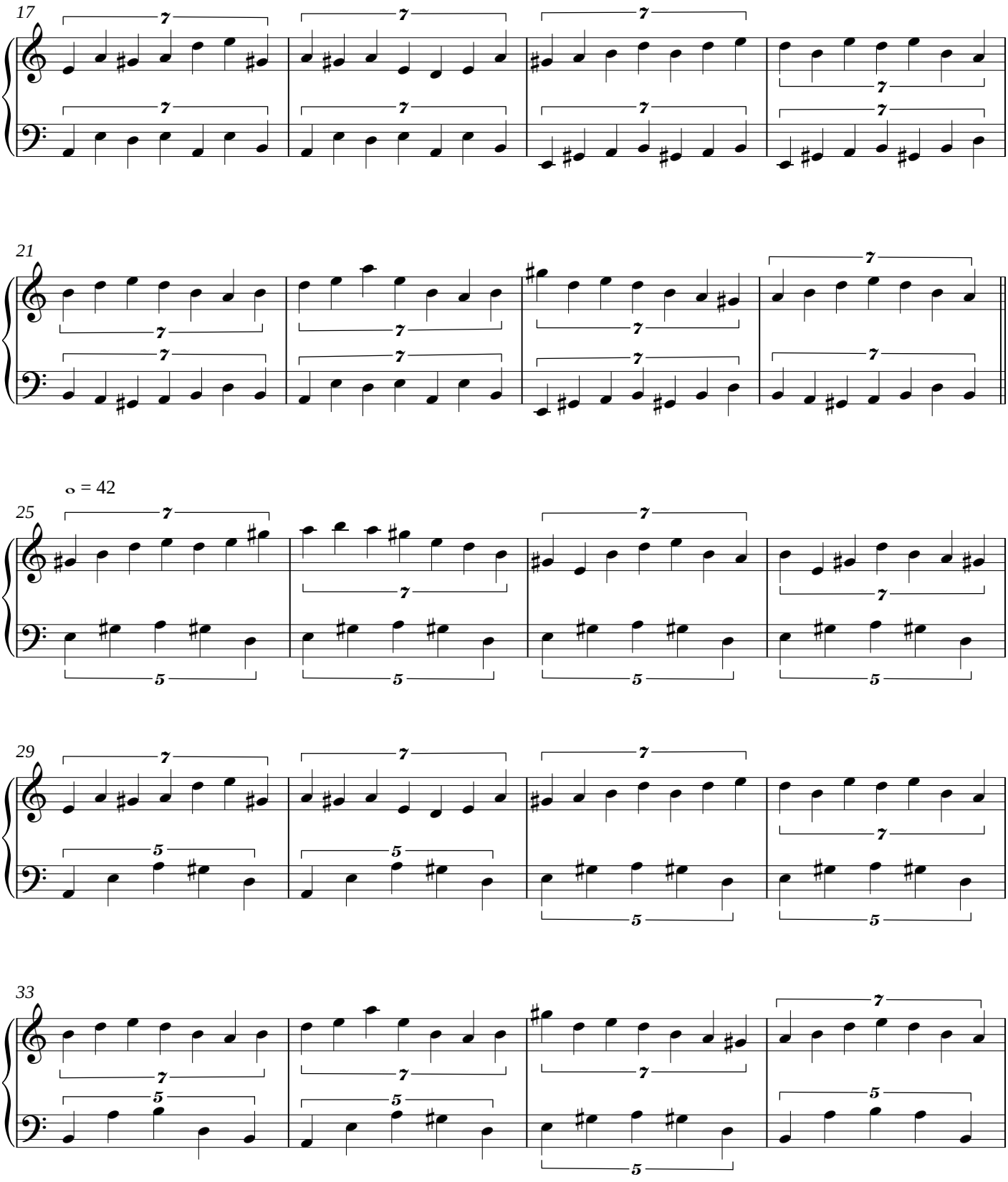

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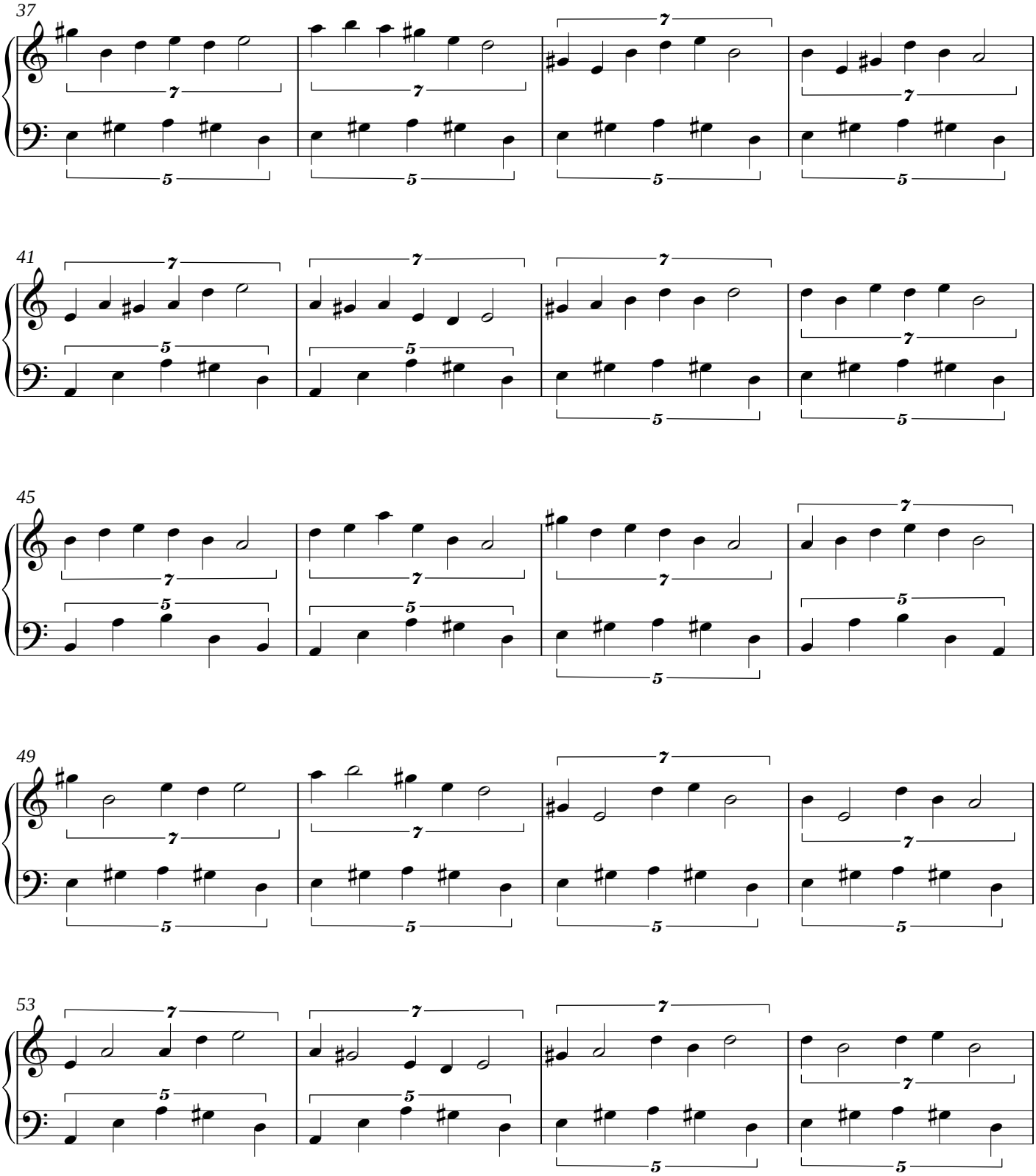

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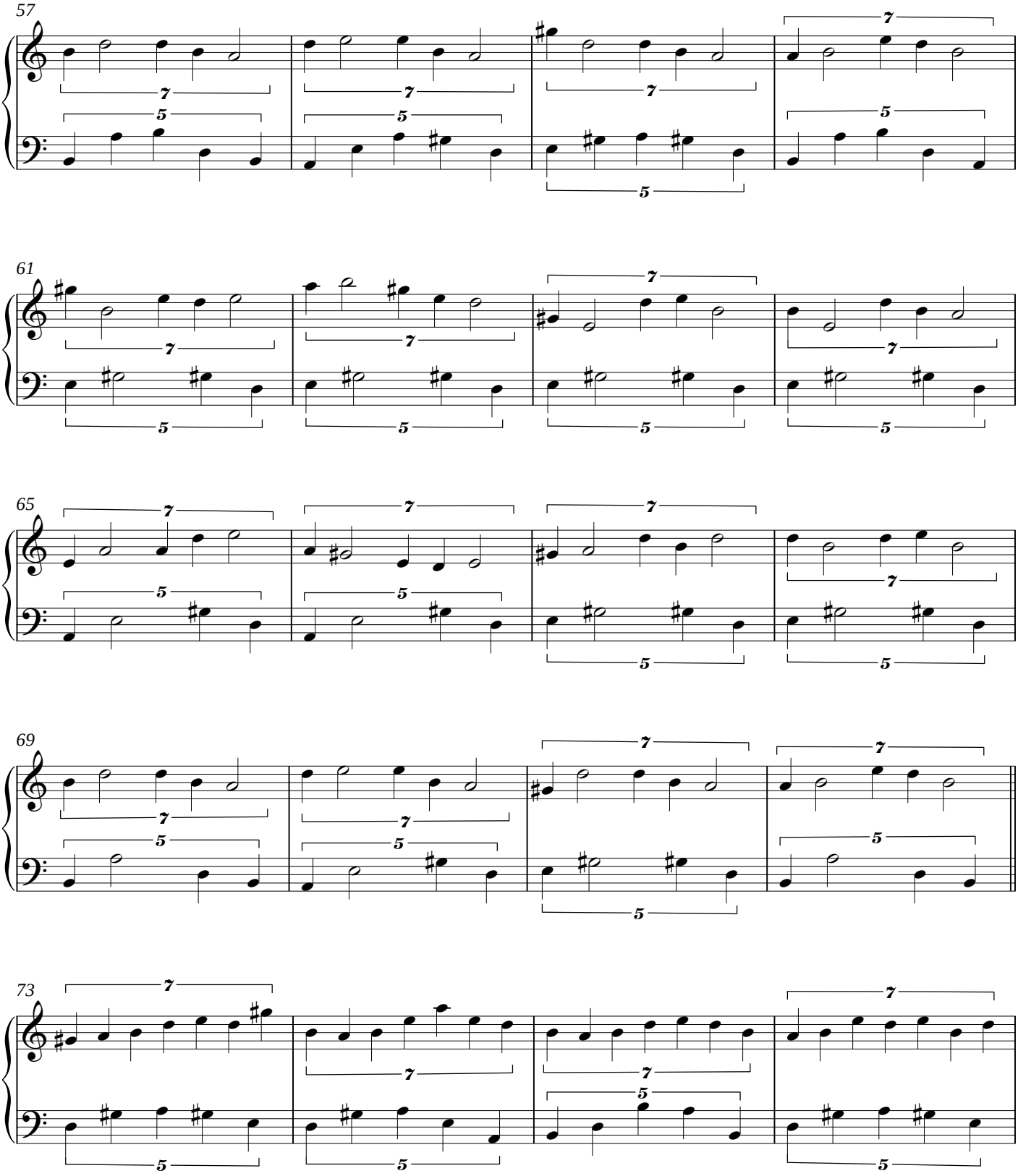

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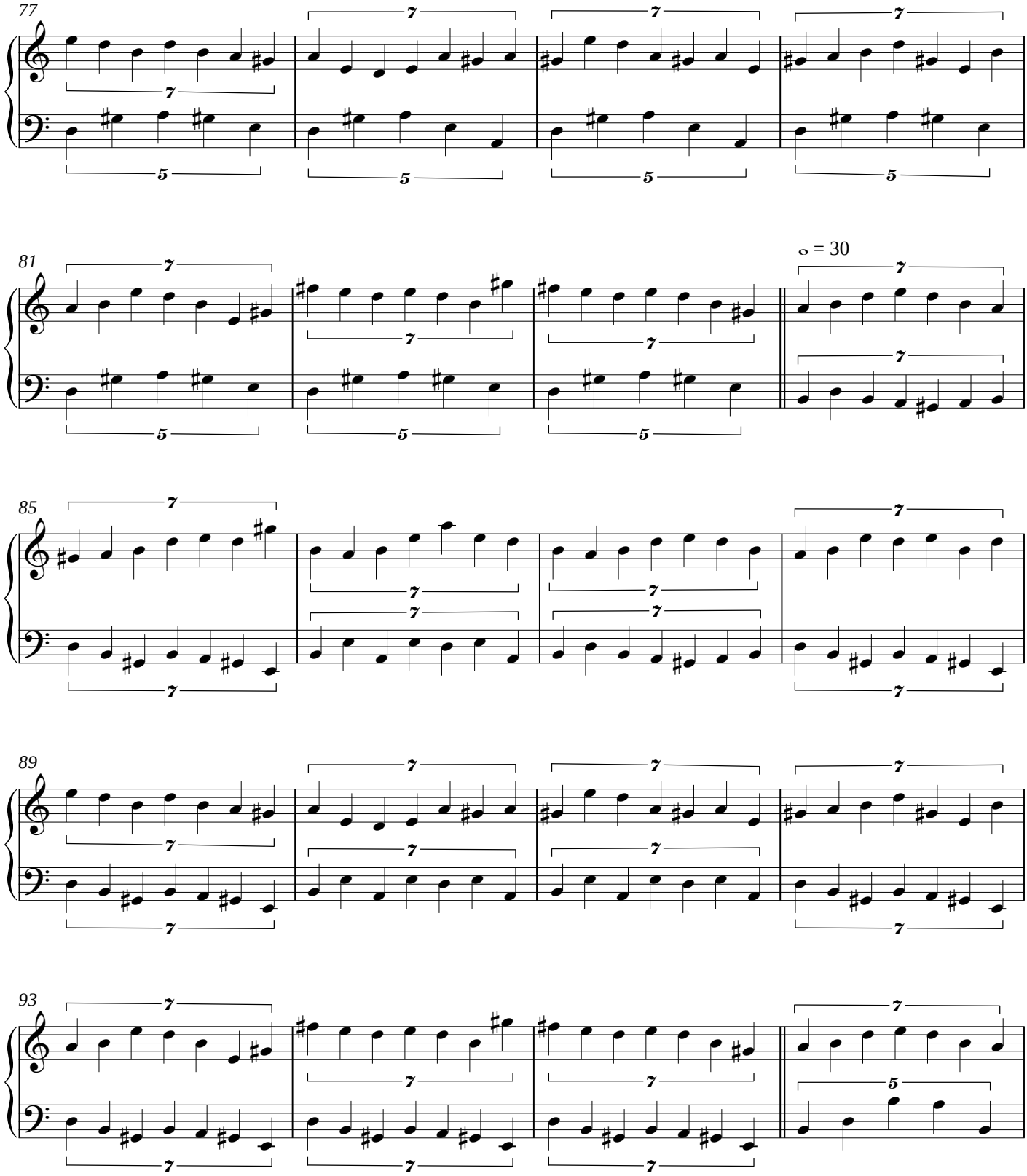

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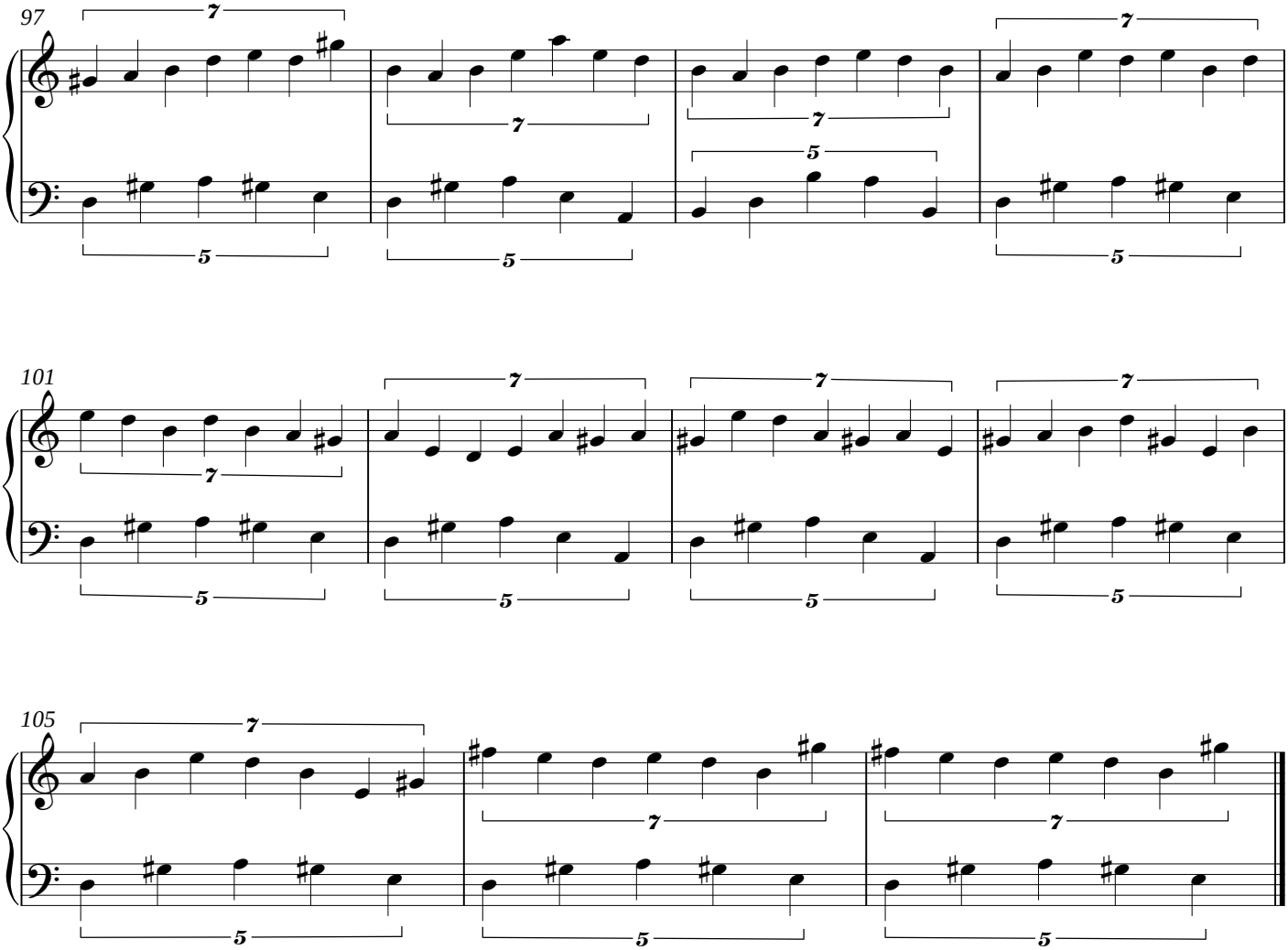

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