§ii – Option a) Two-Part Counterpoint

In the examination you will be given an extract of approximately 8-12 bars, of which all but approximately 4 bars will be in two-part counterpoint. In the remaining bars you may be given the upper or lower part, or even a few notes of each, or nothing, and you will be asked to complete the extract.

Do study with care the completed bars, as they will give clues to the rate of harmonic change, patterns and imitations used.

The following pages give help and guidelines on various procedures and devices which may occur.

Link to practice exercises

Study and preparation

Study, listen to and, preferably, play the Two-Part Inventions of J.S. Bach. Further examples can be found in the English and French Suites and the Short Preludes and Fugues written by Bach for beginners. The 48 Preludes and Fugues also contain some very good examples of two-part counterpoint.

The question set for this examination will be for keyboard or other instruments (e.g. two violins). The general principles of two-part counterpoint are fully explained (with examples) in the LCM *Theory Handbook Grade 6* (also Grade 7), and you should study them with care. Here, we give some hints on working questions, along with the addition of some 'tricks of the trade' and a suggested method of working.

Harmony

1. This must be clear. Do not employ an excessive rate of harmonic change. Quick tempi suggest fewer chords, whilst slower tempi may allow for more changes of chord per bar.

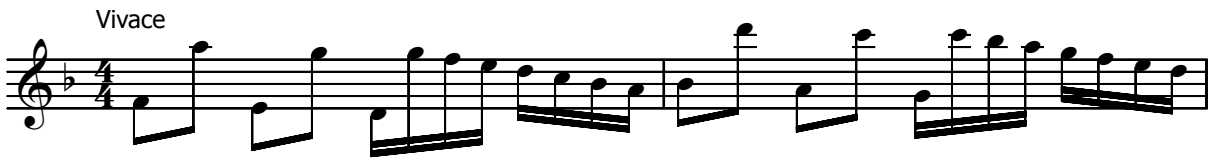
2. All discords should resolve correctly, but remember that the use of chromatic chords can make it difficult to produce 'running' parts.

3. Modulation to related keys can be used freely, especially in 'transient' form, but avoid remote keys, which are easy to move into but often awkward to leave in contrapuntal textures.

Part movement

It is important to remember that keyboard players cannot move over inordinately large leaps, whilst violinists are well able to deal with such leaps, as shown in Example 1 by J.S. Bach:

Example 1

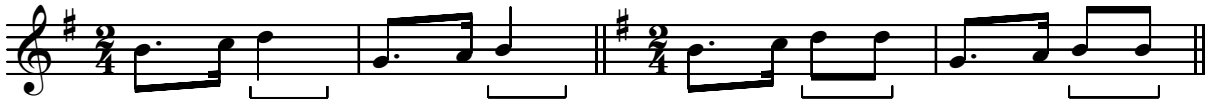


Obviously not all string music moves in this way, but the example shows how keyboard and string writing can differ. Crossing parts is best avoided in keyboard writing, but two violinists are free to do this with ease, for obvious reasons.

Some other considerations between keyboard and string writing are given below:

a) Keyboard b) Strings

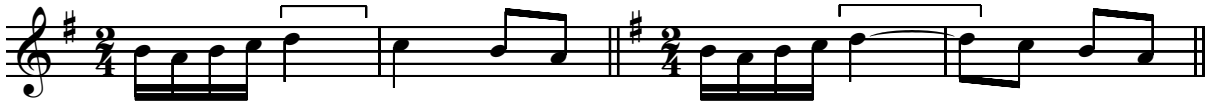
Example 2



The bracketed crotchets in 2a are better written for strings as shown in 2b.

a) Keyboard b) Strings

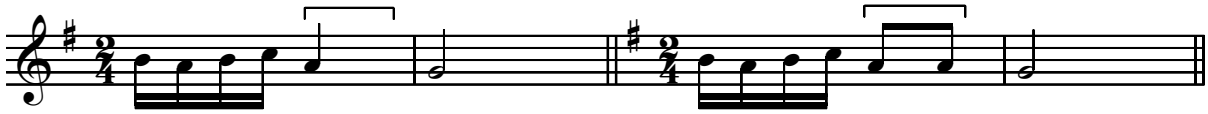
Example 3



The crotchet D is better written for strings as a tied note, as shown in 3b.

a) Keyboard b) Strings

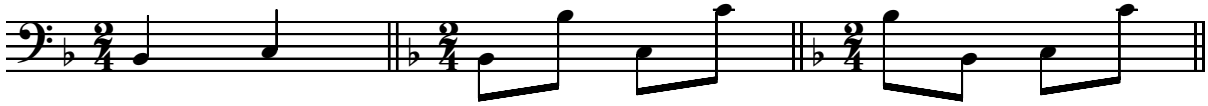
Example 4



In this cadence the crotchet in 4a is better written for strings as two quavers – see 4b.

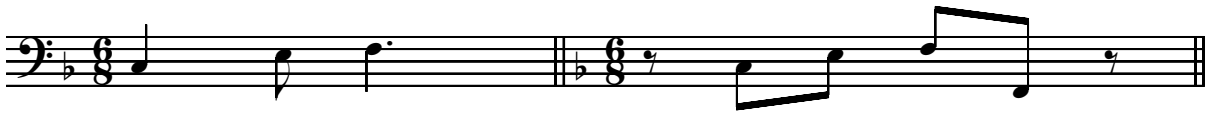
a) Keyboard or Voice b) Cello OR

Example 5



a) Keyboard or Voice b) Cello

Example 6

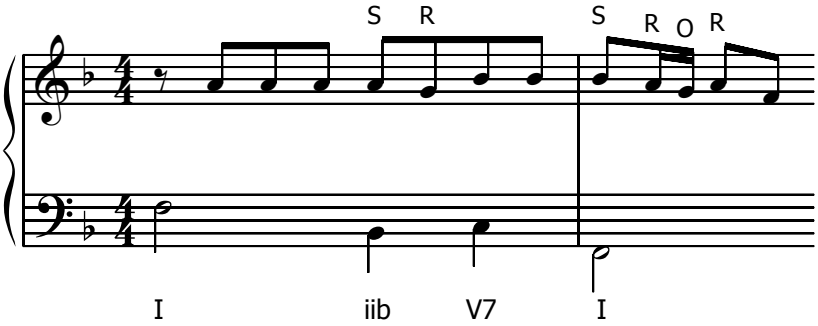


Examples 5a and 6b show a bass part for voice or keyboard. 5b and 6b show how they are rhythmically amplified when played by a cello.

Realising the harmony

Look out for suspensions, whether tied or, as in Example 7, struck.

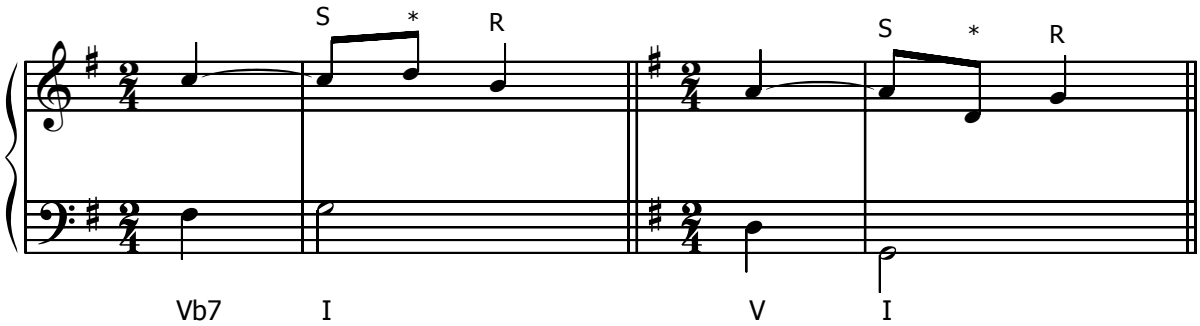
Example 7



In bar 1 the quaver A is a suspension resolving to G.
In bar 2 the quaver B♭ is a suspension which is ornamentally resolved.
S = suspension. R = resolution. O = ornamental note.

As shown in Example 8, suspensions may move to another note of the resolution chord before the actual note of resolution.

Example 8

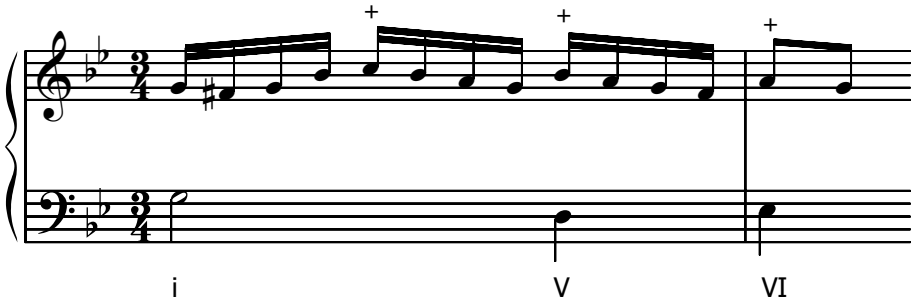


* = decorative note (another note of resolution chord). S = suspension. R = resolution.

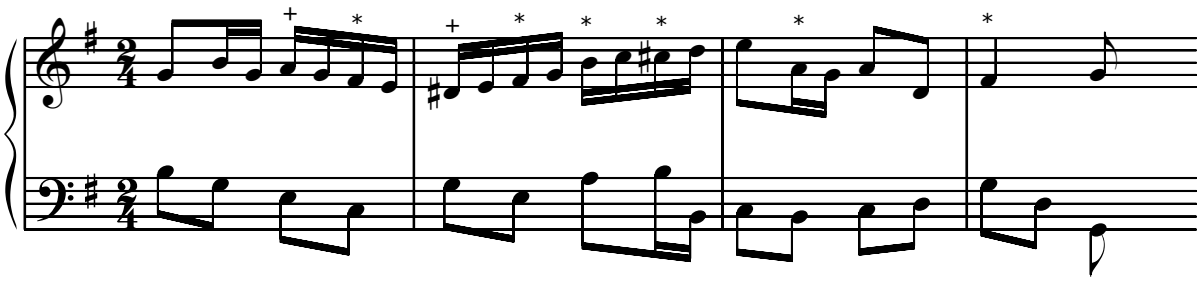
Accented passing notes and appoggiaturas can produce problems if not spotted. If ignored they can produce poor harmony, but when treated properly they can produce a pleasant discord with a strong accent.

In Example 9 the accented passing notes are marked *, and the appoggiaturas +.

Example 9



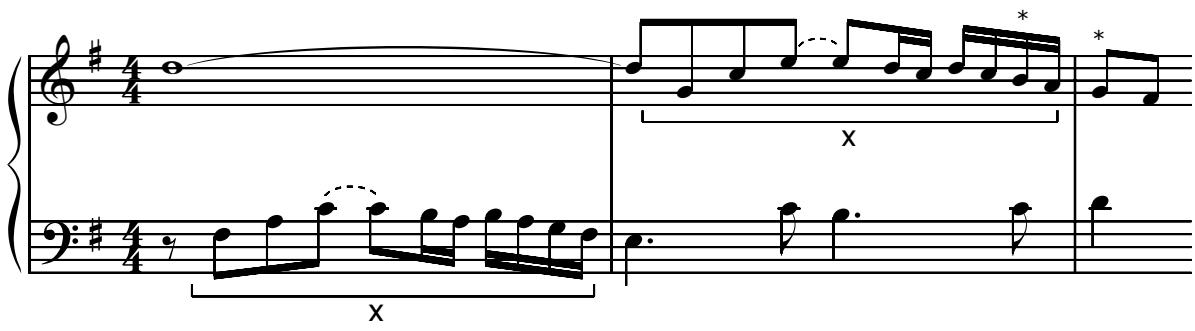
Example 10



The long note

Long notes can prove a problem: 'spinning out' a chord over three or four beats is not the best way, and neither is a change of harmony on each beat useful. Look at Example 11:

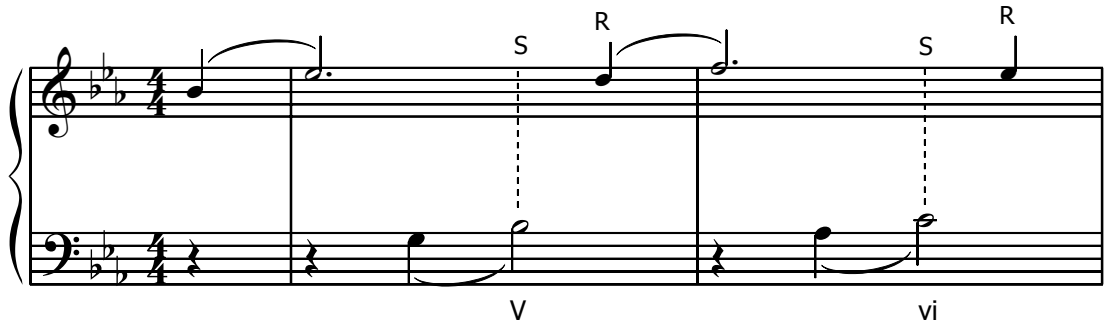
Example 11



The given semibreve D is harmonised here by using the figure in the melody at bar 2 (marked x). The use of struck suspensions (shown with dotted lines) produces discord and movement, through their ornamental resolution. Note the accented passing notes at *.

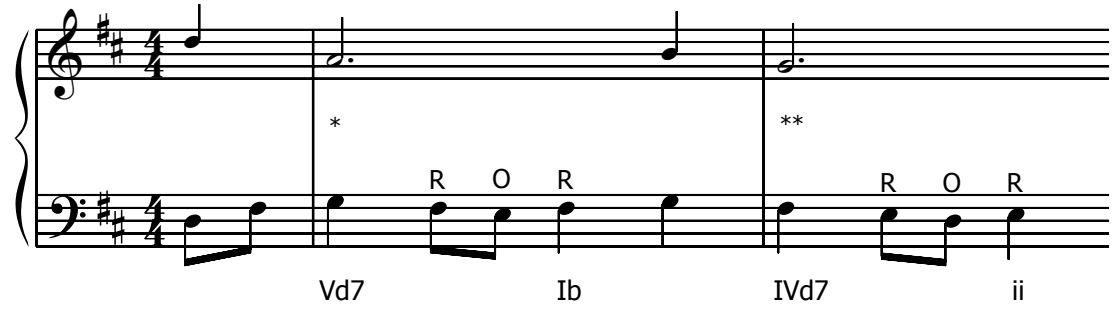
The use of unessential harmony in conjunction with 'long' notes is shown in Examples 12 and 13, below.

Example 12



In bar 2 the E♭ becomes a suspension on the third beat, and similarly with the F in bar 3, indicated by dotted lines.

Example 13

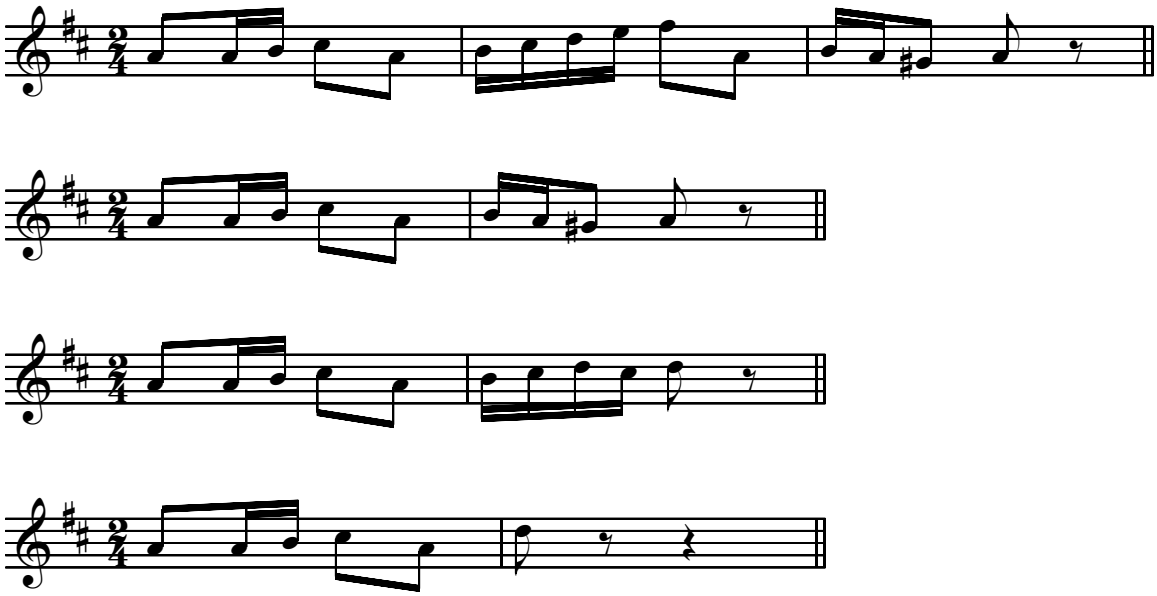


Here the long notes in the melody are decorated by the use of 7th chords, which are ornamentally resolved. At * the dominant 7th in third inversion is ornamentally resolved to Ib. At ** the secondary 7th on IV in third inversion is similarly treated, resolving to ii.

Shortening figures

When using imitation you may need to 'curtail', or shorten, the figure. This method may be used at any moment in a piece of music to facilitate cadences or modulation. Remember that imitation should be plentiful but may at times need to be short-lived. The opening of the figure needs to be present, but thereafter you can adapt the figure, omitting part of it or adapting it to move into a cadence. Example 14 demonstrates this process.

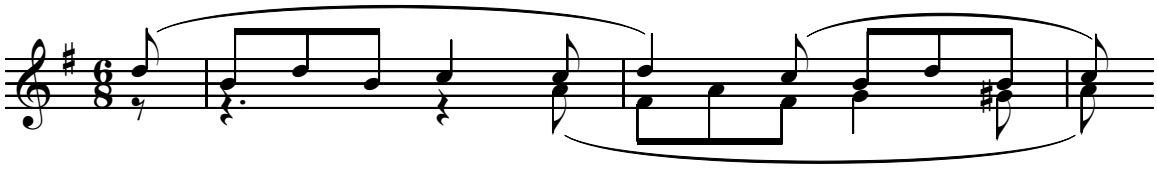
Example 14



Imitation

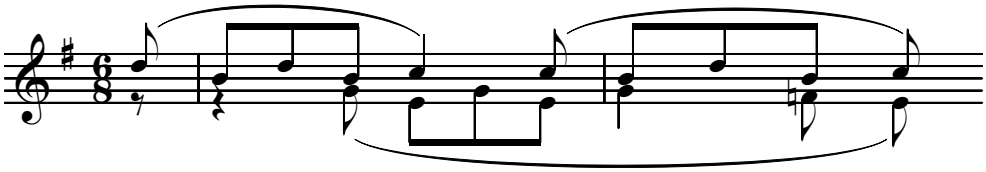
The opening imitation may be as given in Example 15, i.e. at one bar's distance. The interval of imitation here is a perfect 4th below the initial melody.

Example 15



Example 16 shows the same imitation but now at a half-bar distance. This is an effective way of enhancing the tension in the writing. Here, the interval of imitation is a perfect 5th below the initial melody and the intervals in the answering phrase are adapted in bar 2.

Example 16



A useful method

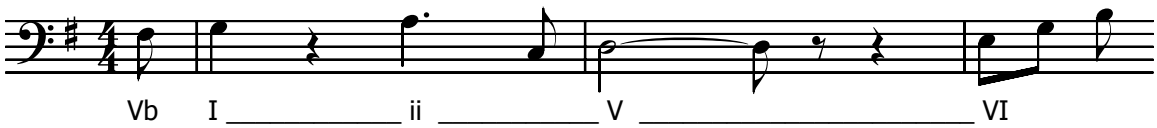
1. Study the given opening.
   - What is the rate of harmonic change? (This is related to tempo.)
   - What are the modulations?
   - What are the cadences?

2. Determine which notes are 'unessential'.

3. Fit in any points of imitation.

4. Consider the use and position of any rests.
   Remember that, in terms of harmony, a chord used with a rest lasts until the next strong beat.
   (See Example 17.)

Example 17



5. Look for features which may re-occur:
   - If there are suspensions in the given opening, use them again.
   - If there are rests in the given opening, use them again.
   - If there are accented passing notes in the given opening, use them again.

Remember that good contrapuntal writing is always based on a strong and clear harmonic progression.

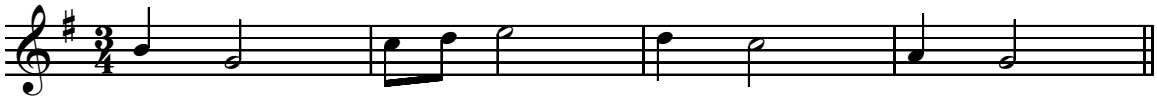
Rhythmic devices

a. Syncopation

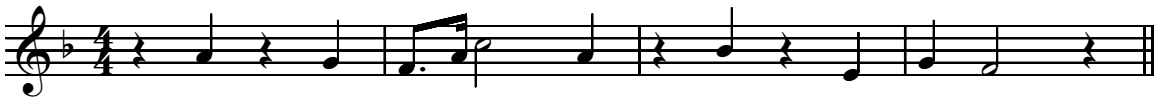
This occurs when the accent is placed on a weaker beat of the bar, or on the weaker part of a beat.

In Example 18 the accent is placed on the weak beats of the bar:

Example 18a

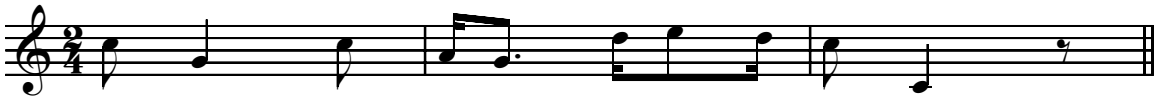


Example 18b



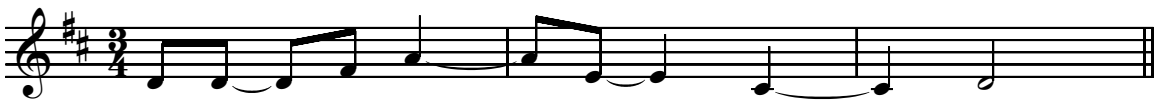
In Example 19 the accent is placed on the weaker part of the beat:

Example 19



Sometimes a syncopated effect is achieved by the use of tied notes, as in Example 20:

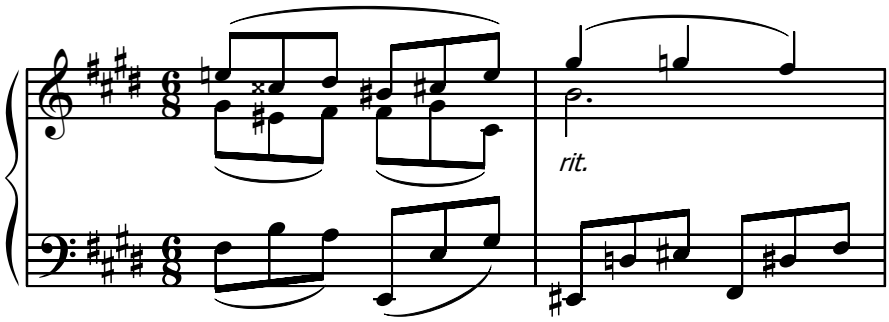
Example 20



b. Hemiola

This occurs when two different measures of time (or two different time signatures) are used simultaneously. Look at this example, taken from the Capriccio Op.76 No.5 for piano by Brahms:

Example 21

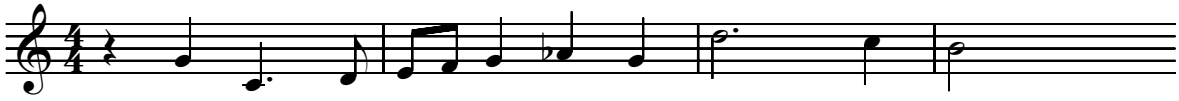


The time signature is 6/8, but in the second bar the right hand part is clearly written in 3/4 time. The effect of two dotted crotchet beats in the LH against three crotchet beats in the RH adds a new dimension to the forward movement. Most would count quavers in this bar to achieve the correct alignment of parts, but you would also need to be concerned as to where the accents lie in each hand.

c. Augmentation and diminution

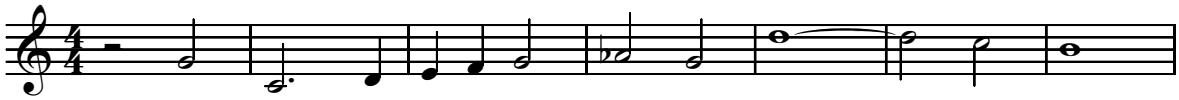
This is when a theme occurs in notes of longer or shorter value.

Example 22



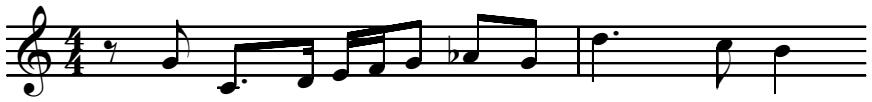
Example 23 shows Example 22 in notes of double value; this is known as 'augmentation':

Example 23



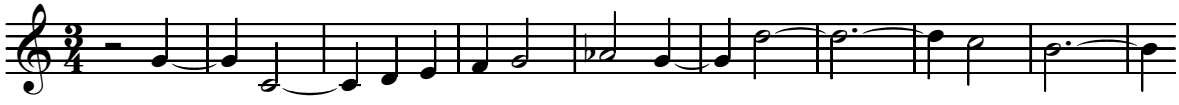
Example 24 shows Example 22 in notes of half value; this is known as 'diminution'. It is of course possible to use notes of quarter value.

Example 24



Example 25 shows the augmented version (Example 23), with the time signature changed to 3/4. Although the note values are the same, the change in accent and shape of the theme are interesting and quite dramatic.

Example 25



Further guidelines

The examination question will consist of approximately 8-12 bars of 2-part counterpoint, and you will be asked to complete 4 bars.

Always look at the whole example in order that you may capture the style. Also look at the rate of harmonic change, the modulations and the use of unessential harmony (suspensions, auxiliary notes, changing notes, and accented and unaccented passing notes). If writing for string or wind instruments, make sure that you are familiar with their playing ranges.

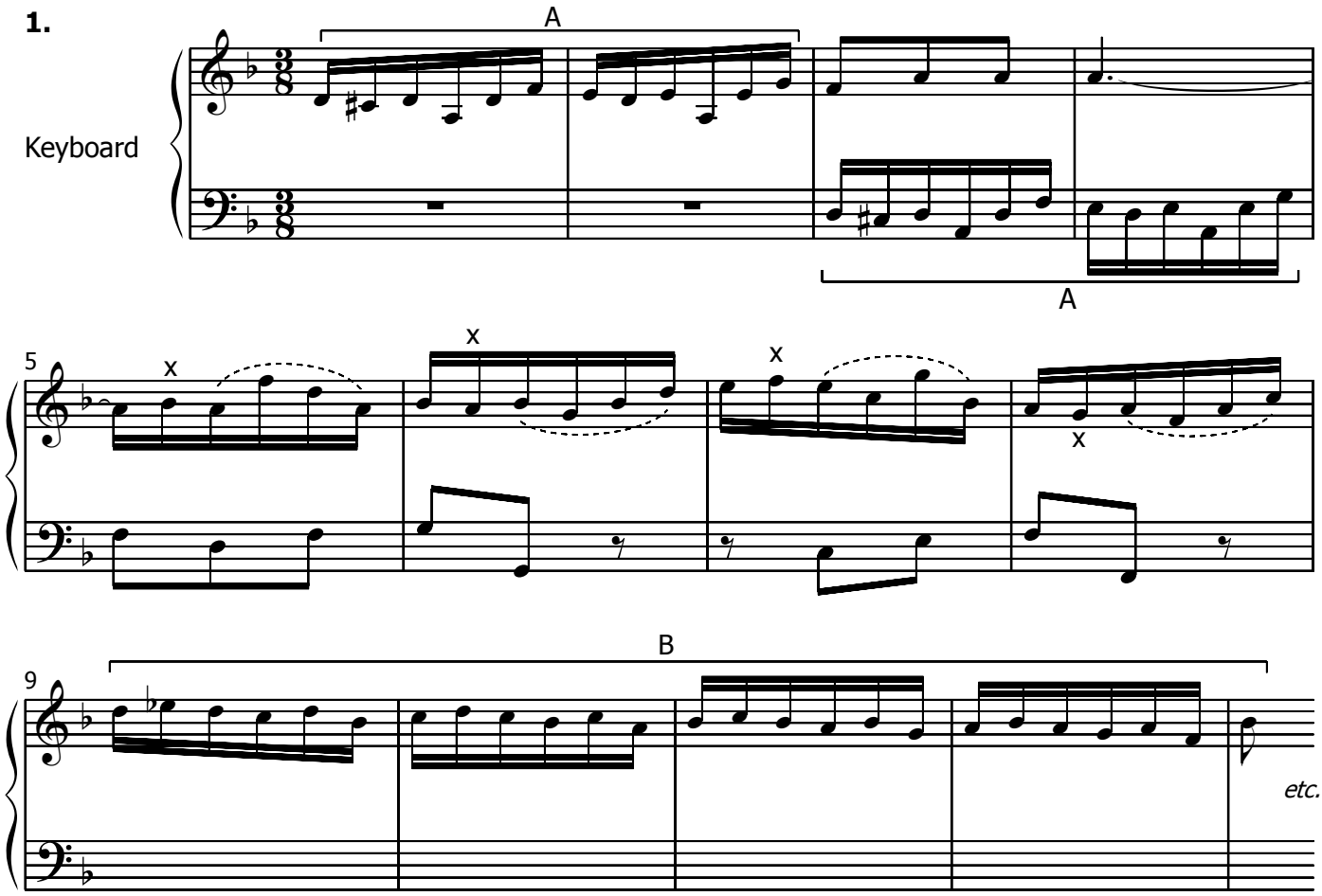
Remember the general rule that if the given part moves, the other voice should 'stand still', and *vice versa*. Also remember that too many changes of chord can make voice leading and melodic contour rather awkward – the given parts will give clues to this.

Good counterpoint is borne out of clear harmonic progressions. Accidentals (often unessential notes) can mislead you into using chromatic harmony. Although this may occasionally happen, it can lead to unmusical patterns and movement.

Practice exercises

Complete the following 2-part examples, paying particular attention to any points of imitation.

1.

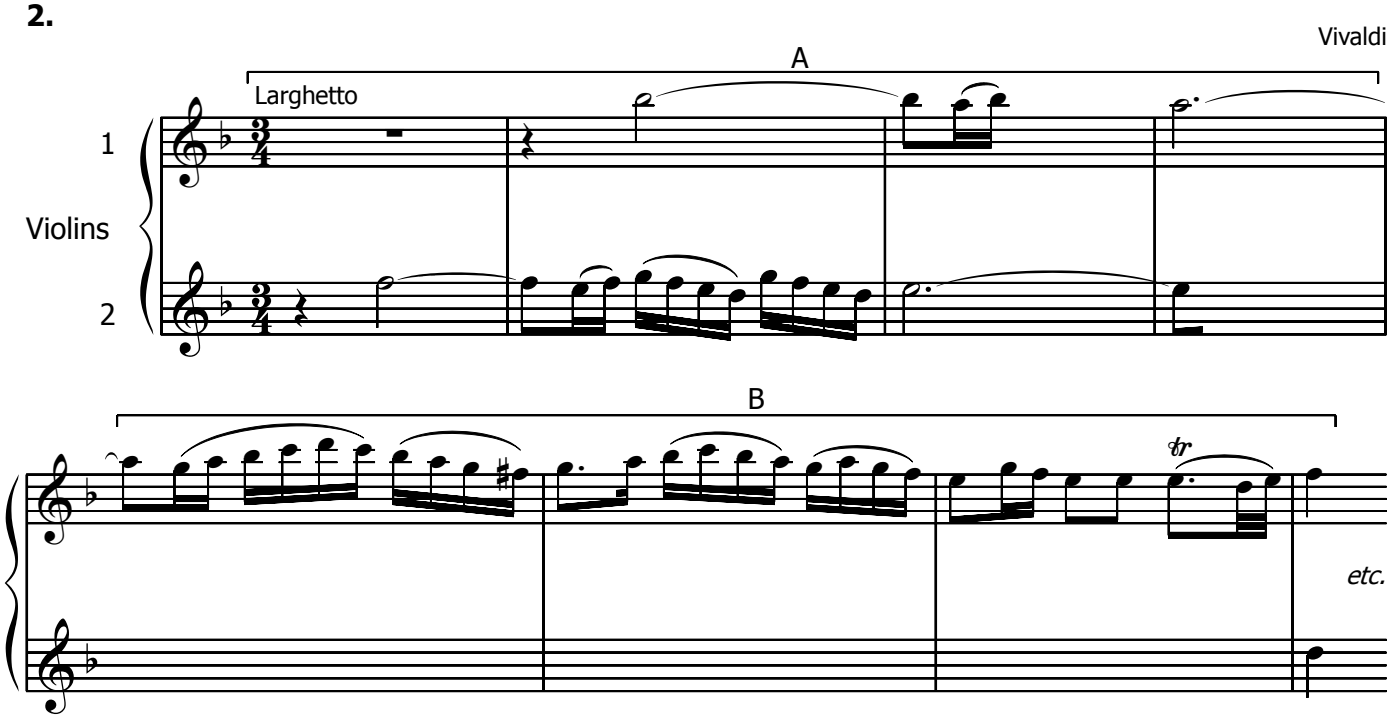


Note the imitation at the opening, marked A. Beginning in D minor, the opening 8 bars end with a perfect cadence in F major (the relative major). Bars 4-8 are interesting in that the given part contains a flow of semiquavers, some of which are lower and upper auxiliary notes (marked x), and arpeggiated harmony notes (marked with dotted lines).

You are asked to complete the bass line in the section marked B. Note the rests in bars 6 and 7: these could feature in Section B – perhaps on the first quaver beat of bars 9, 10 and 11.

Although there are no accidentals, the melodic shape at the end indicates V7 – I in B♭, allowing us to end here in the relative major (B♭) of the subdominant minor (G).

2.



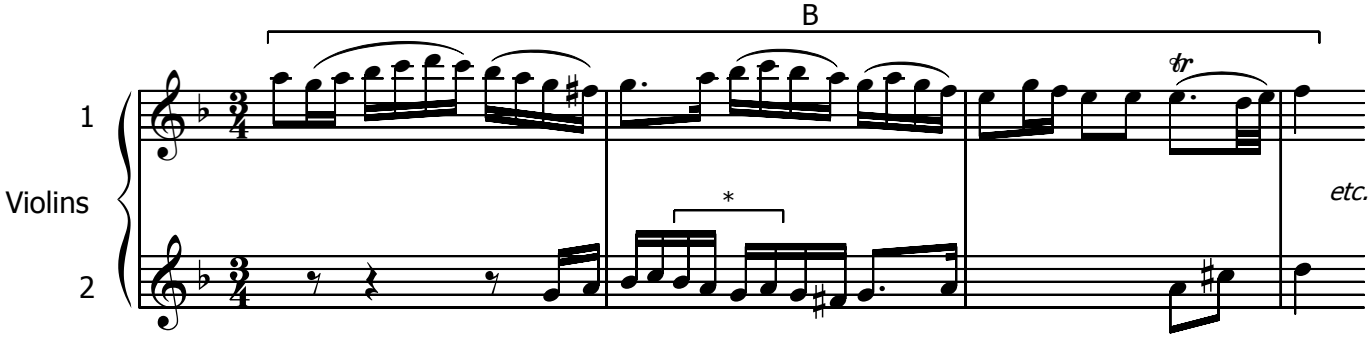
The above extract is for two violins; remember that the lowest note on the violin is G below Middle C. In string writing it is quite common for parts to cross, but here the 1st violin part is quite high and there would therefore be no point in crossing the parts.

Notice in the opening bars that when one part has a long note, the other part moves.

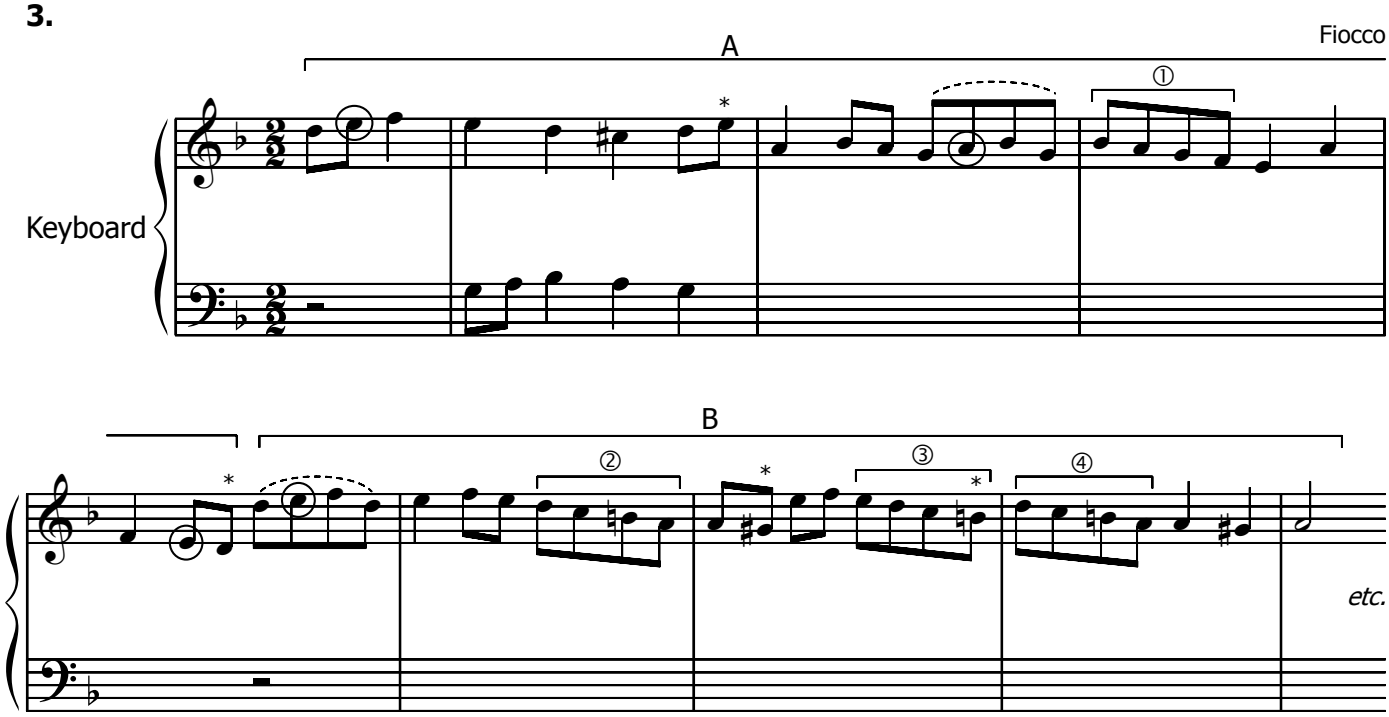
You are asked to complete the 2nd violin part in Section B, and just before it. Also, to complete the imitation in the 1st violin in bar 3.

In Section A, the imitation is obvious; however, in Section B the given part moves mostly in semiquavers, so the added part would be more sedate, although a small amount of imitation could occur, as shown below. The effect of this would be enhanced by the use of rests immediately beforehand. (NB the figure is slightly altered at *.)

The given final bar indicates that the phrase ends in the relative minor (D minor), so the introduction of a C♯ in the penultimate bar would confirm this.



3.



In this example in duple time, there seems to be less movement – the rate of harmonic change could be two chords to the bar for the most part.

Remember, if a note leaps, it must be a harmony note – see *. The repeated notes (e.g. bars 5-6) are unessential notes, in this case struck suspensions of short value.

Arpeggio harmony patterns are indicated by dotted lines. Not all quavers need to be harmonised, as some are passing notes (circled). The groups numbered 1-4 could contain accented passing notes, depending on the chosen harmony.

Note the modulation at the end, preparing the way for a perfect cadence in A minor – the dominant minor.

Complete the lower part.

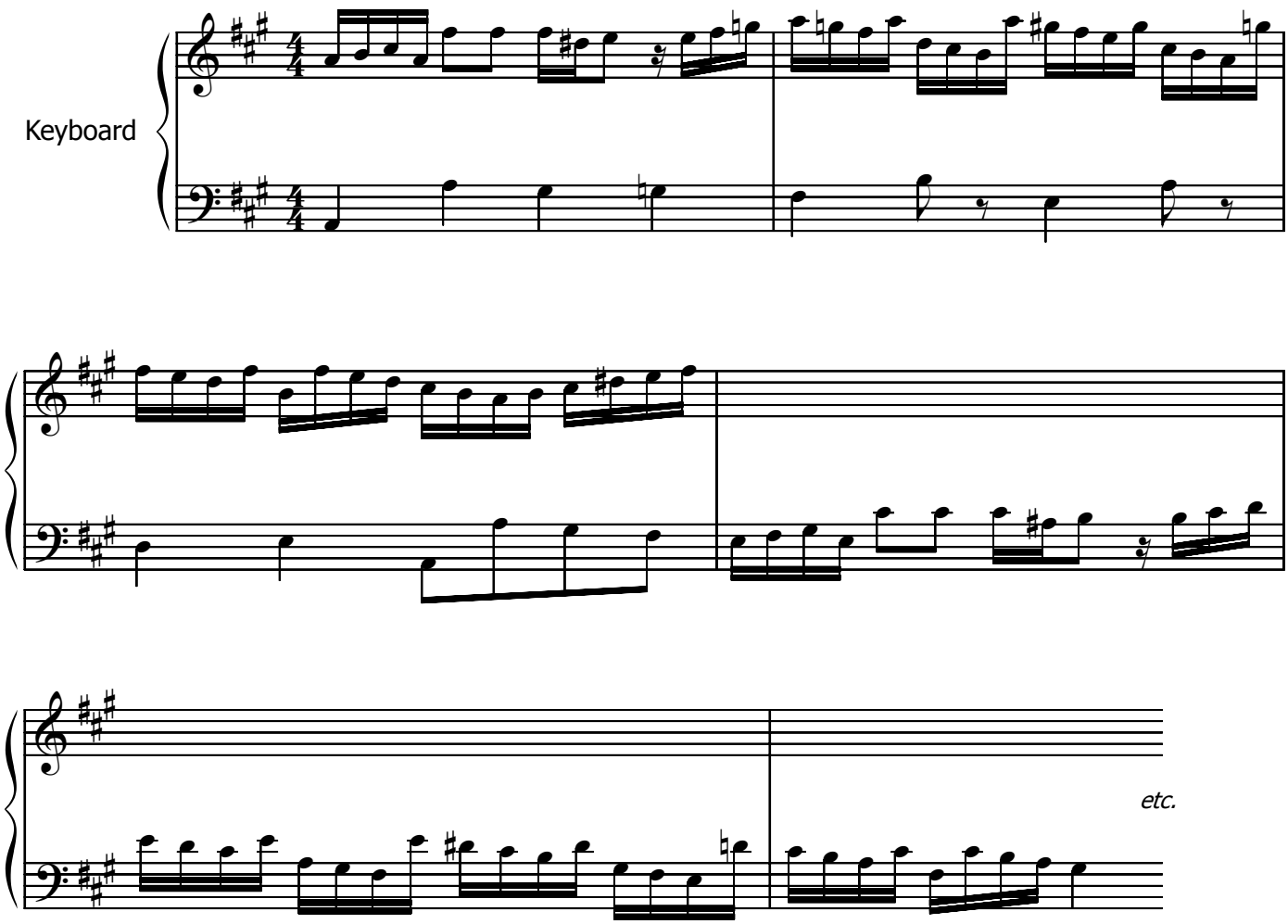
Further exercises

The following extracts will give you further practice. In longer extracts, bracketed sections marked A and B indicate the kinds and lengths of portions which candidates will be asked to complete in the DipMusLCM examination.

Complete these two-part examples, paying particular attention to any points of imitation.

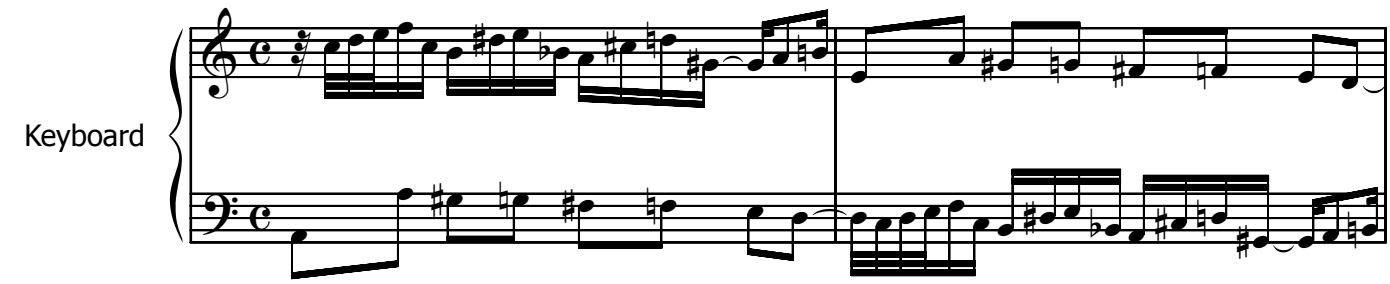
4.

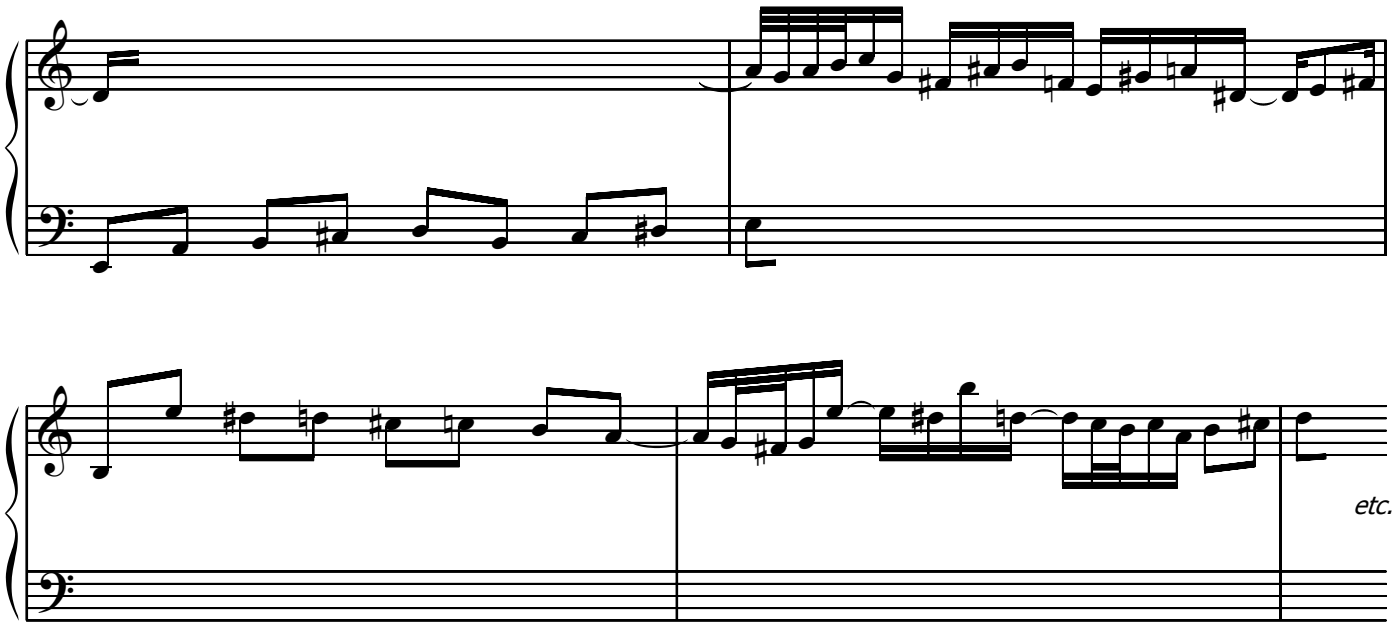
J. S. Bach



5.

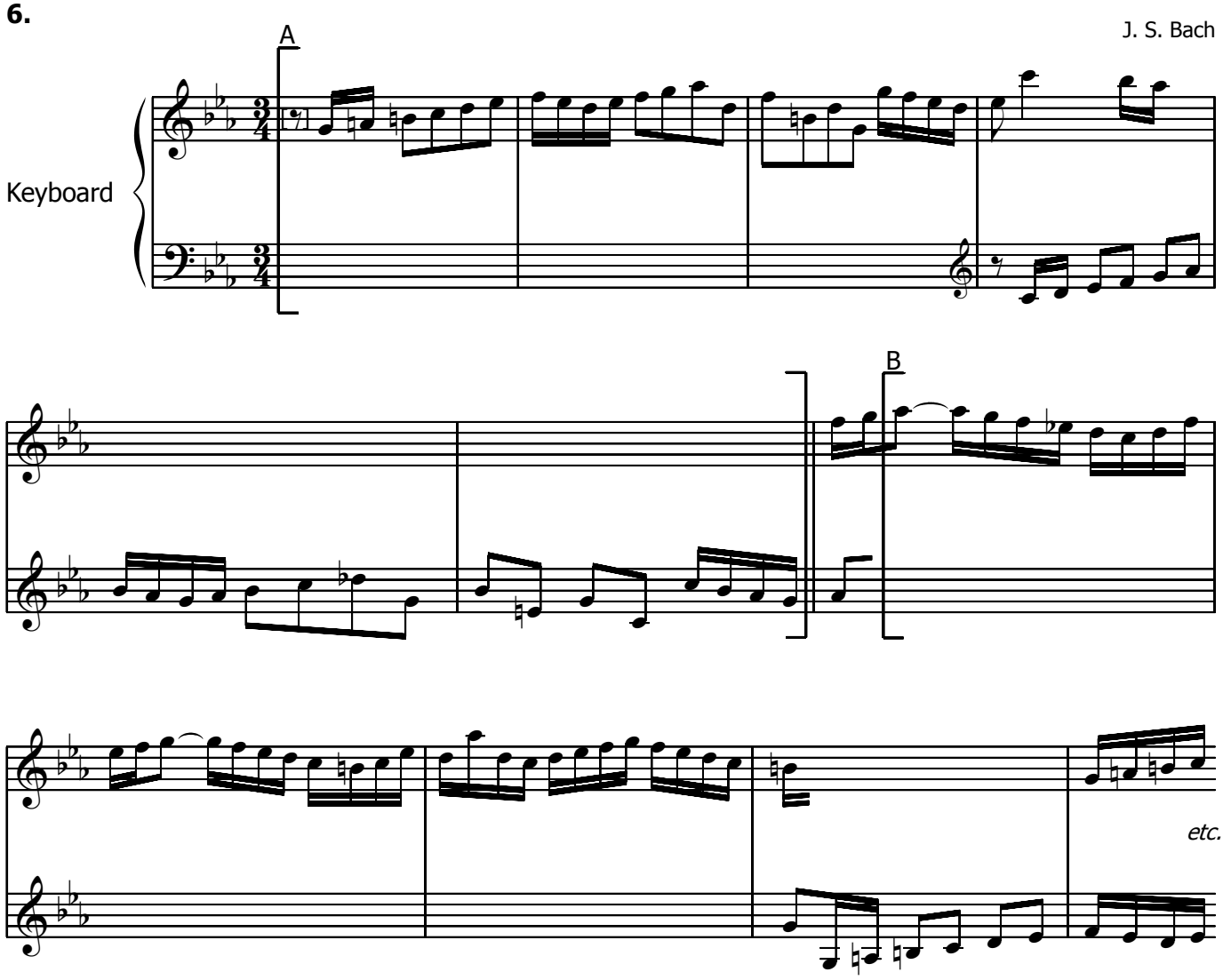
J. S. Bach



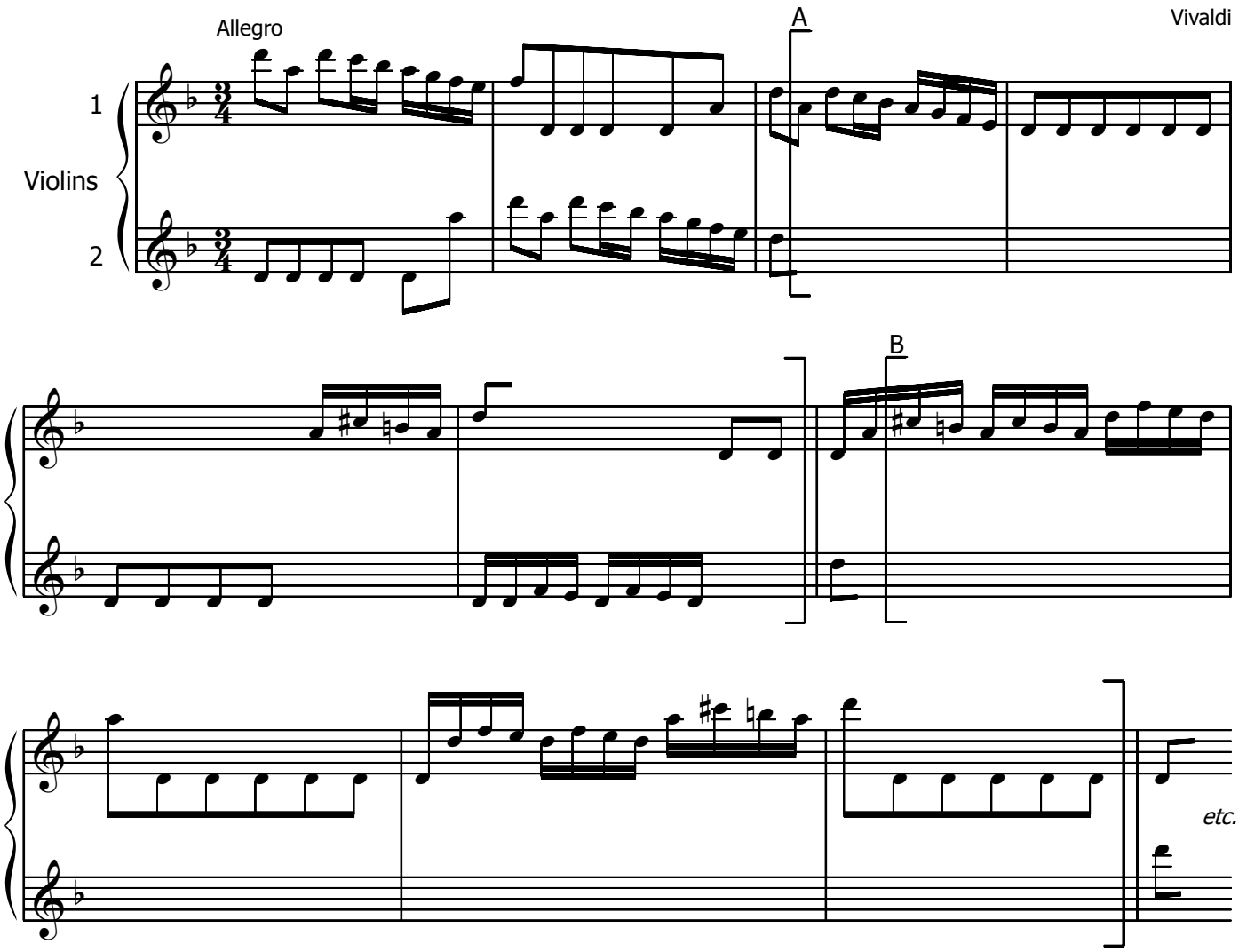


6.

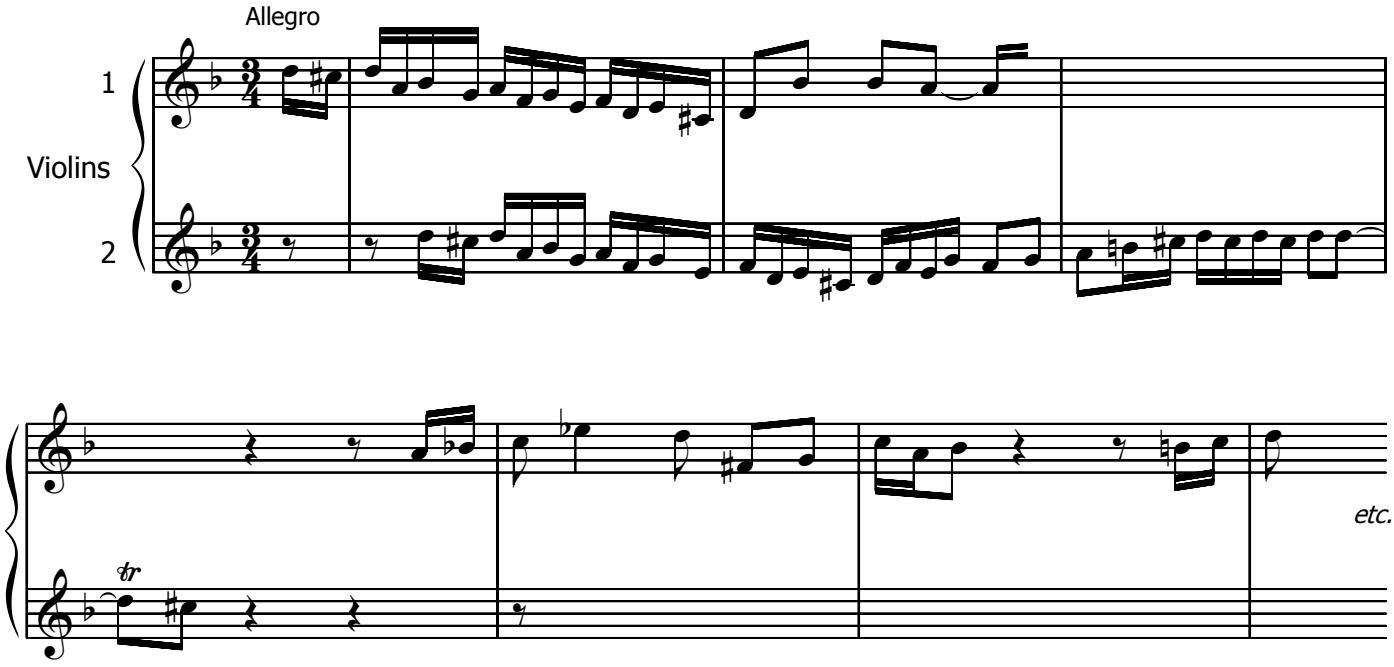
J. S. Bach



7.


Allegro
A
Vivaldi
1
Violins
2
B
etc.

8.


J. S. Bach
Allegro
1
Violins
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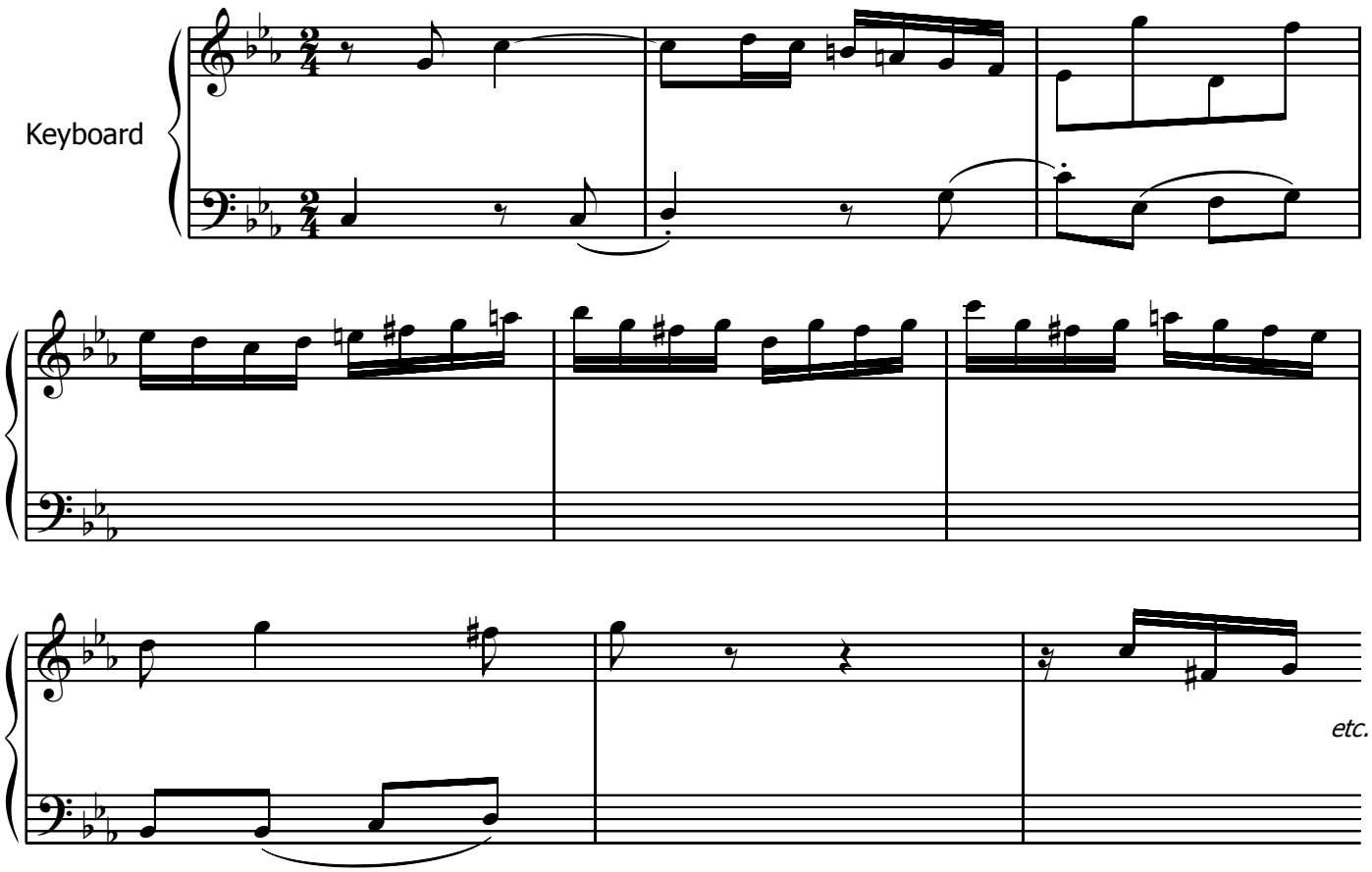
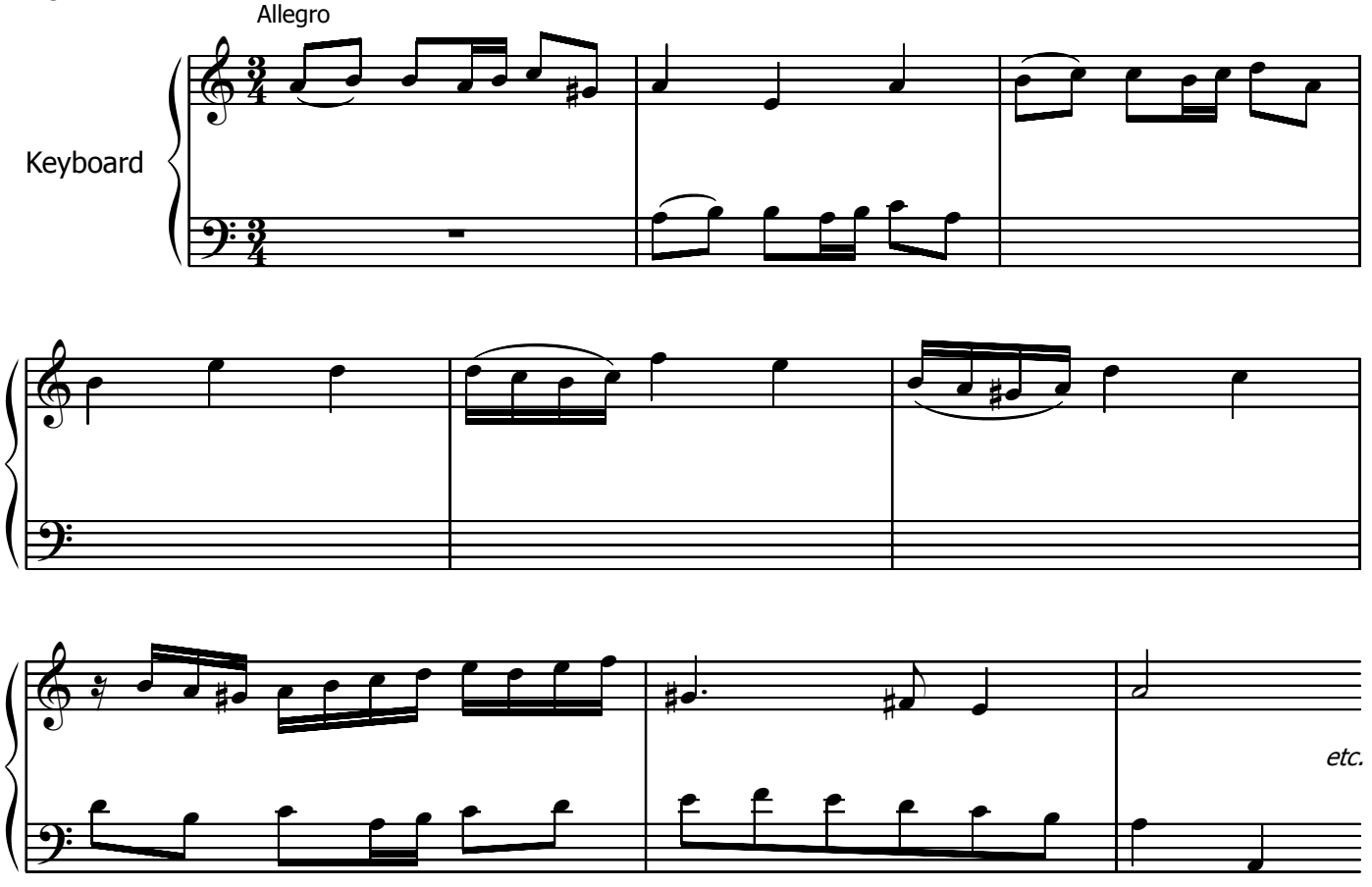
etc.

9. J. S. Bach

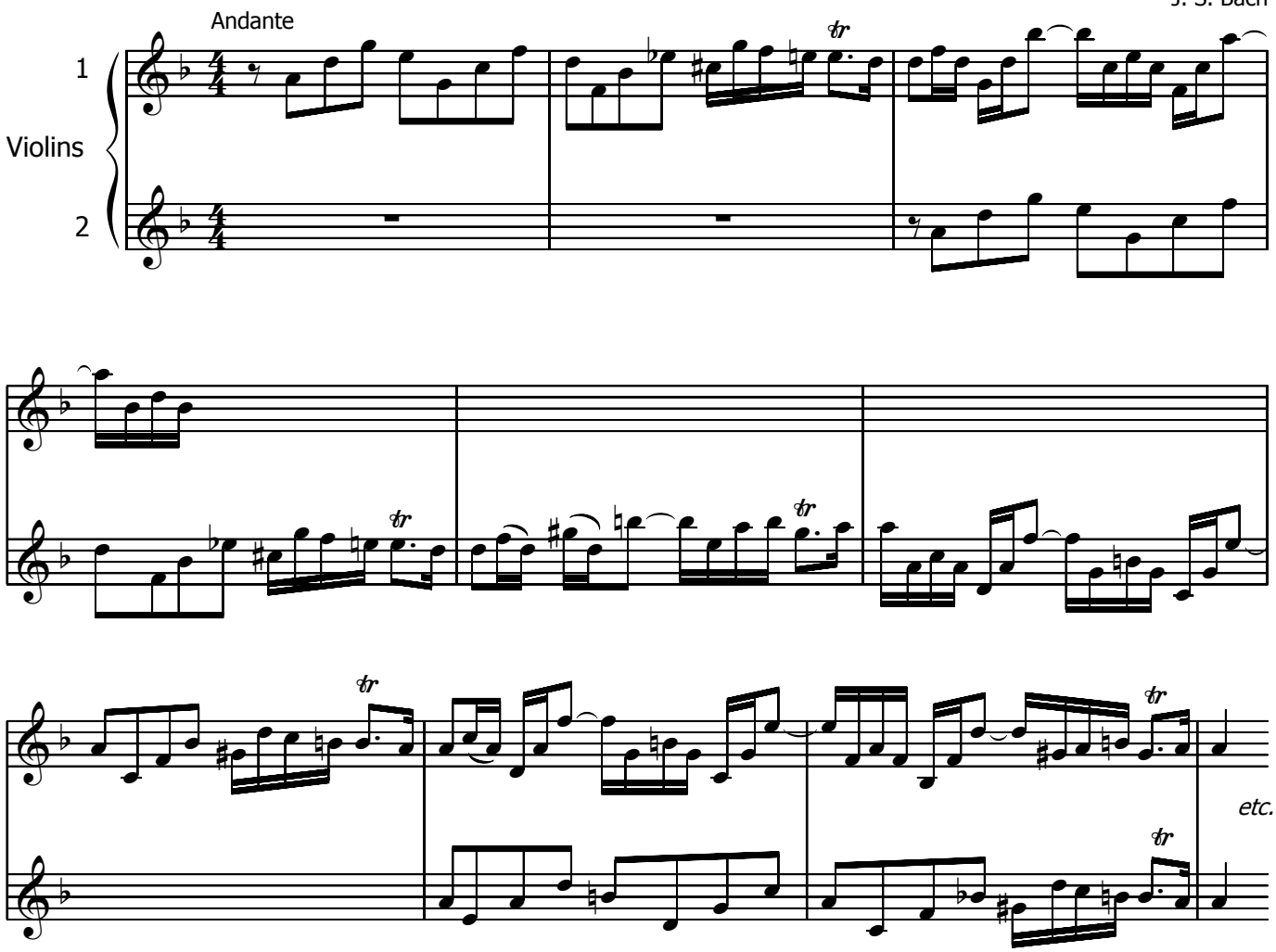


10. J. S. Bach



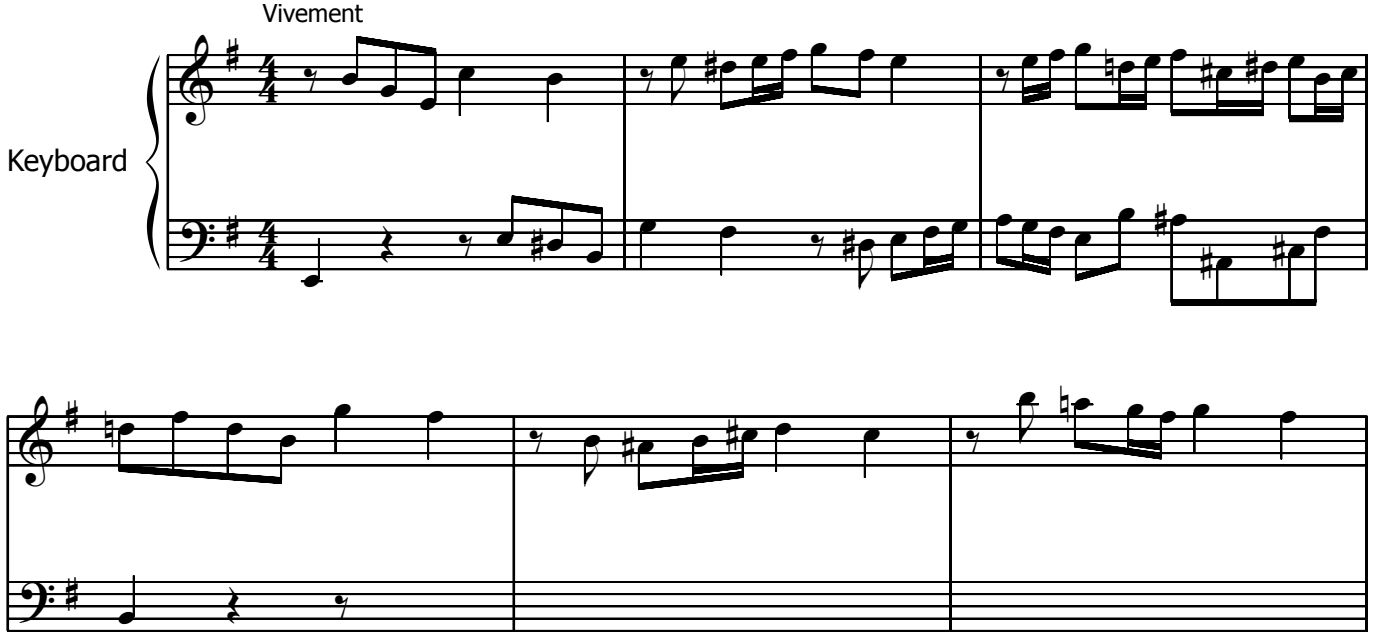
11.

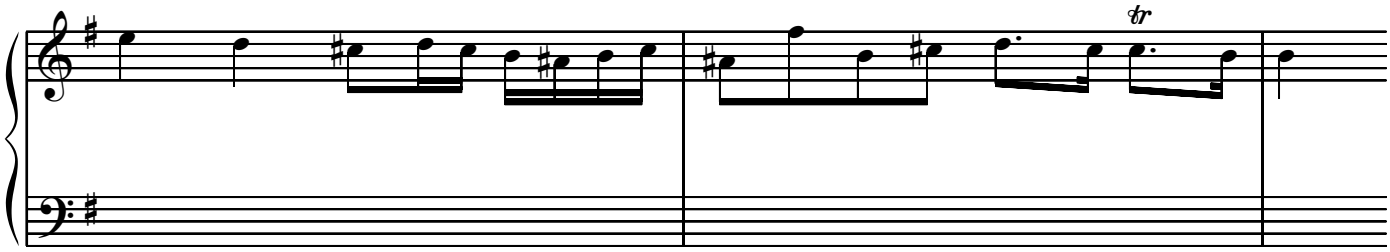
J. S. Bach



12.

Telemann



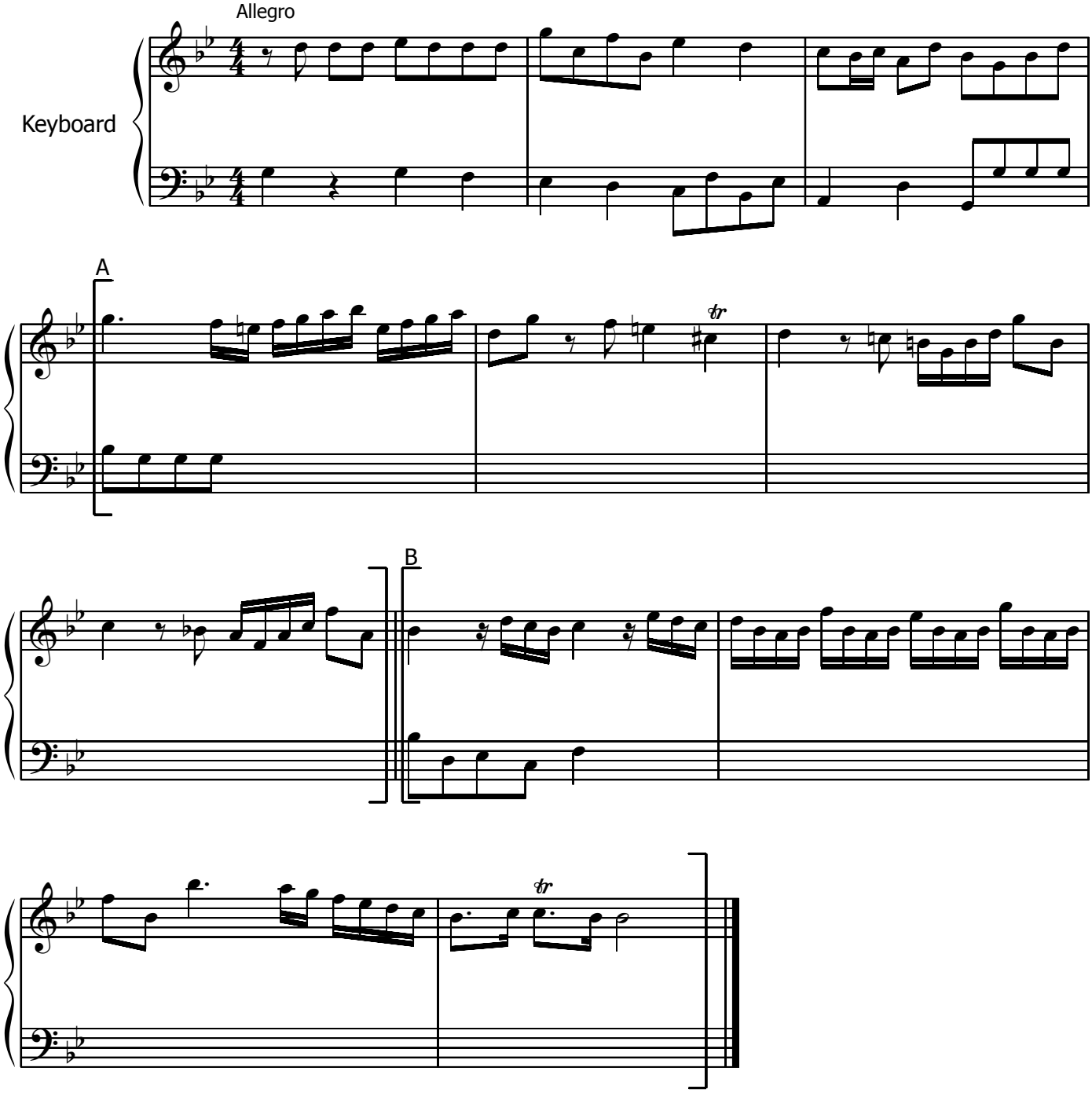


13.

Telemann

Allegro

Keyboard



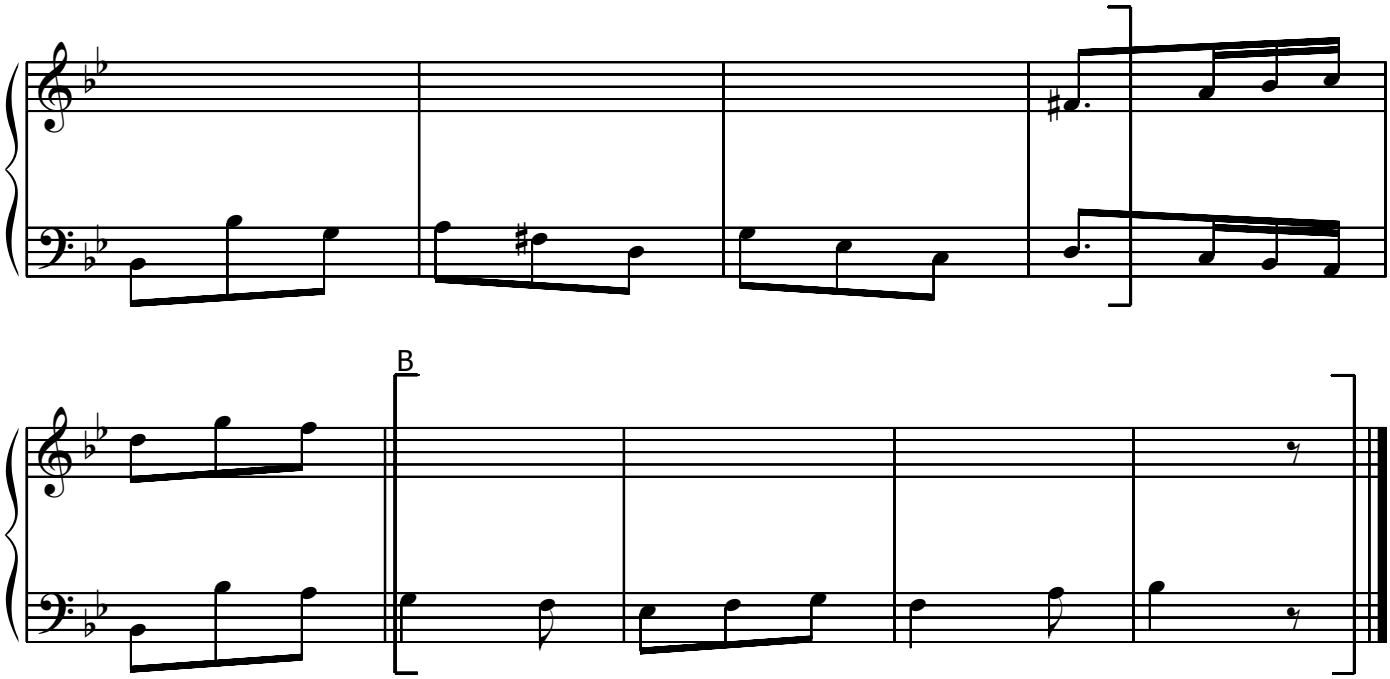
14.

Allegro

A

Handel

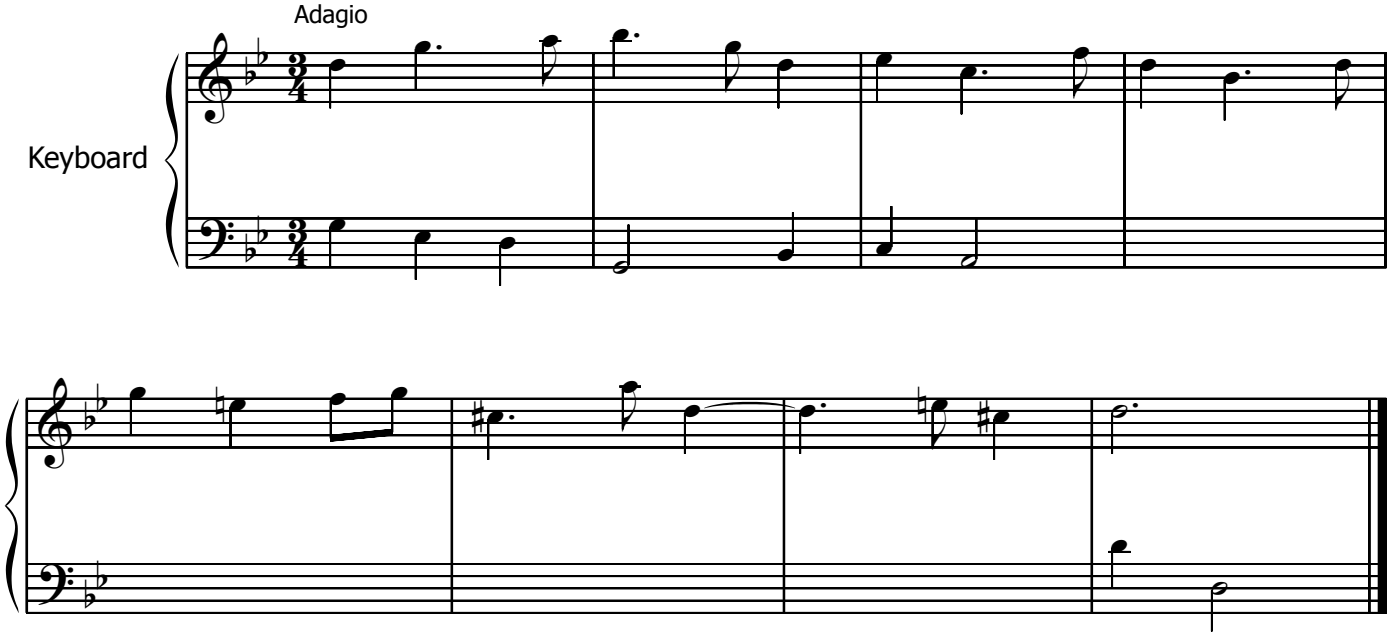
Keyboard



B

15.

Handel

Adagio

Keyboard