J.S. Bach

Selected transcriptions
for tenor viola da gamba
(includes bass and treble versions)

Dick Yates

This collection features pieces selected from Bach's solo cello and violin compositions. While the transcriptions were made specifically for tenor viol, versions for both treble and bass viols are also included. These versions are the same as the tenor scores with changes only to the clef and key. Fingering has not been adjusted to account for the different sizes of those viols. In many instances the fingerings will work satisfactorily, but in others the player will undoubtedly have to make adjustments.

Transcription of solo music from violin and cello to viola da gamba entails unique and interesting challenges. Because they are all bowed string instruments, a superficial view might be that most music can be thus transferred with only a few adjustments, but the reality is quite different. The simple difference of the relative tuning of the strings has widespread repercussions on what is possible.

Violins and cellos are tuned with the strings at an interval of a perfect fifth; gambas' strings are a perfect fourth apart (and with a major third in the middle). This affects all scale patterns and chord fingerings. And when the composer has a comprehensive practical knowledge of the instrument and how it is played, as is certainly the case with Bach, the music often ingeniously exploits its capabilities in ways that do not translate to another tuning.

The simplest example of this is Bach's use of *bariolage* in which there is a quick alternation of an open string against an adjacent string that carries its own melody. The availability of that open string is what makes the technique possible, but in transcription to a viola da gamba that open string is not always available. There can sometimes be clever accommodations to this difficulty, and I highly recommend Jacqui Robertson-Wade's transcription of the first Cello Suite, BWV 1007 (Rondo Publishing, 2013) as an example.

Chord formations are also all altered. Consider a simple octave on the violin with an open string against its higher neighbor. The higher string is stopped at the fifth "fret" while the hand easily remains in its first position. On a gamba, that higher string is stopped at the seventh fret with all the attendant adjustments to hand position and preceding and subsequent notes. A frequent accommodation is to revoice a chord by adding notes to fill in on strings that must be included in order to play the full range of the chord. This can add richness but also often difficulty.

A word about fingering: All gambists owe great gratitude to the modern string players who sparked the resurrection of the viola da gamba. A very common progression has been from modern cello, to increased specialization via the Baroque cello, and then further exploration with the viola da gamba. One result of this is that

there is a residual, albeit understandable, conception of the viola da gamba in terms of the modern strings. But a viola da gamba is not a cello with a couple extra strings. It is more accurately conceived of as a "bowed lute" and the left-hand's chores are far closer to the lutenist's than to the cellist's. The difference shows up incongruously even in notation. How do the symbols and nomenclature "down bow" and "up bow" make any sense on a viola da gamba where the bow is horizontal, and especially when the underhand bow hold reverses the effect of these motions? The tutors that we have from the heyday of the viola da gamba do not use this terminology, instead referring sensibly to "forward" and "backward" or to "push" and "pull." And consider the oddity of describing fingering two adjacent strings on the same fret as "lute fingering." Of course, only those coming from modern strings would see this as a specialized technique requiring a distinguishing term. Lute players just call it "fingering."

Bowing directions and slurs come from several considerations. Always coming first were Bach's manuscript scores, or those of his family when those are the primary sources available to us. Modern editions and even videos provided useful insights. But transcriptions are not a blind copying of music from one instrument to another. The goal is not to play the music as closely as possible to how it would have been played on a cello or violin, but, rather, to play the music as if had been written for the viola da gamba. Slurs in particular present many puzzles. While they often can be entirely in the service of shaping, phrasing and articulating the music, they also inevitably must adjust to practical realities of fingers, strings and frets. How this accommodation is made on one instrument by the composer is not always the best accommodation on the destination instrument of a transcription. This brief introduction cannot begin to explore all those factors, but the score here is the result of careful consideration. If some decisions seem puzzling, please look a little further into the matter. If you ultimately disagree with them please let me know. I may be persuaded!

As someone with a background in music for plucked strings – guitar, lute, vihuela – and who has never even held a violin or cello, I have made transcriptions that inevitably rely on that experience and may surprise or puzzle at times. If they also betray a blindness to practical realities of viola da gamba technique, I would love to hear from you about that, but be assured that all the pieces in this edition have been developed, practiced, played and enjoyed on the tenor viola da gamba.

Dick Yates
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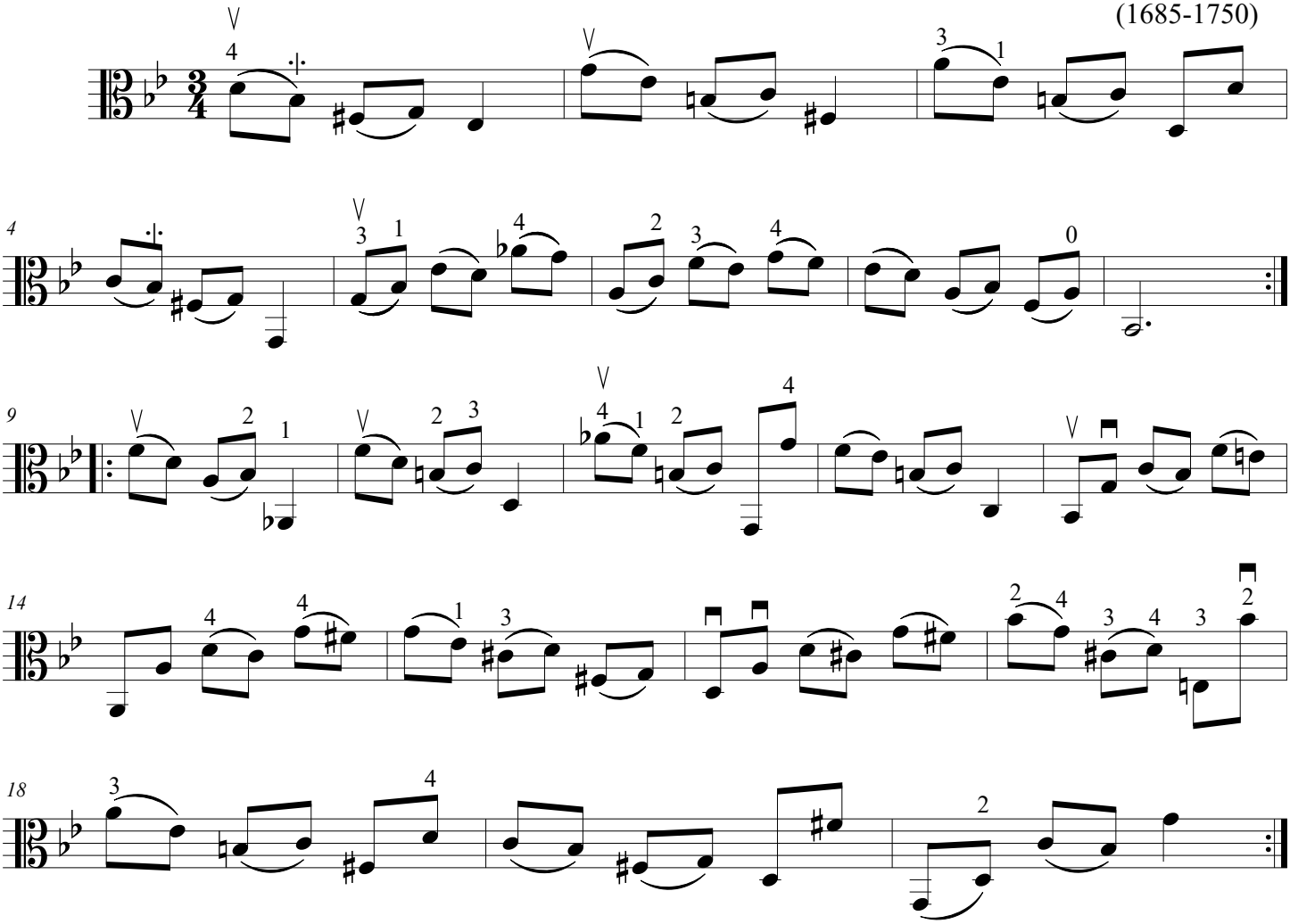
July, 2020

Tenor viola da gamba

Sarabande

Cello Sonata #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

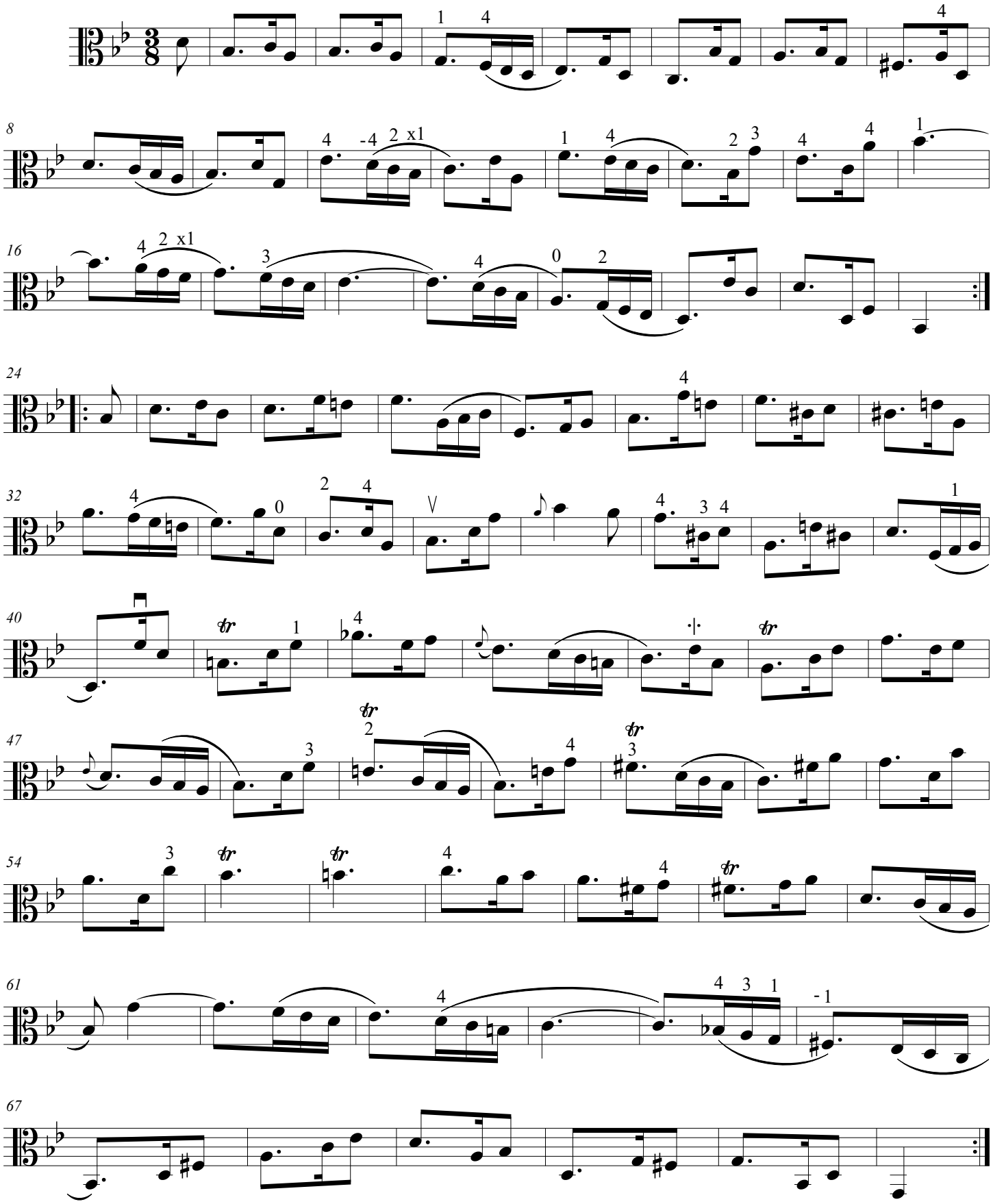


Tenor viola da gamba

Gigue

Cello Suite #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

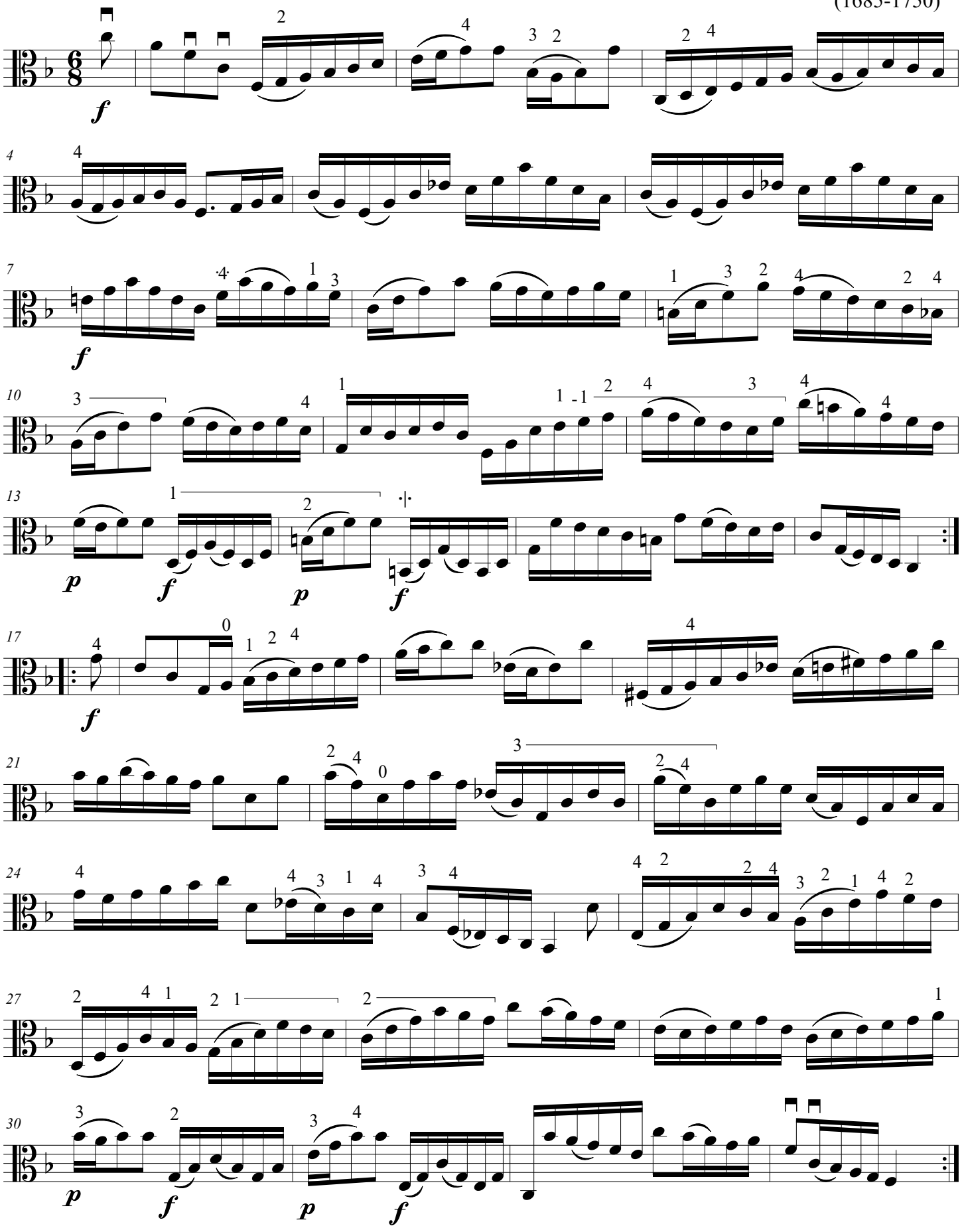


Tenor viola da gamba

Gigue

Violin Partita #3, BWV 1006

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

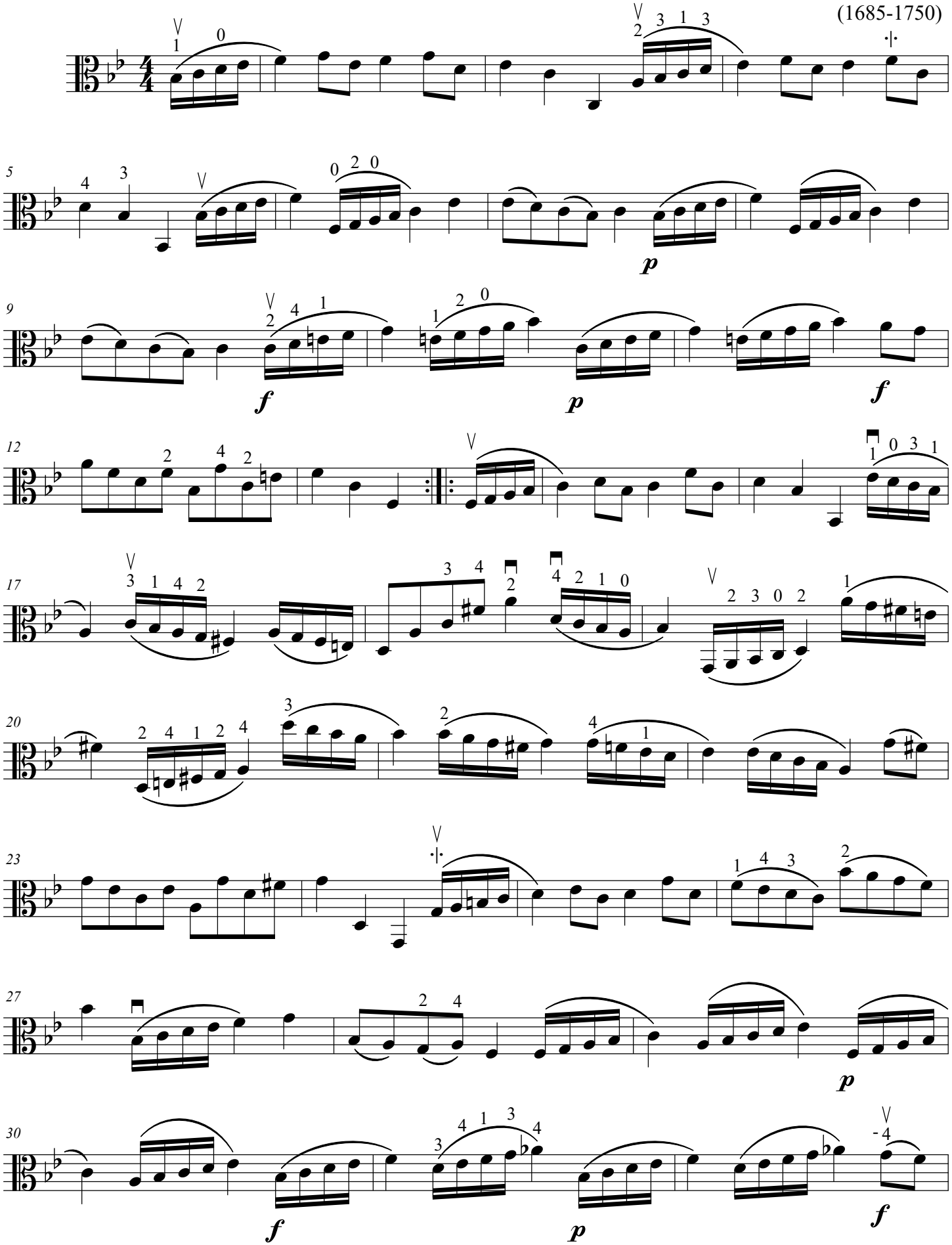


Tenor viola da gamba

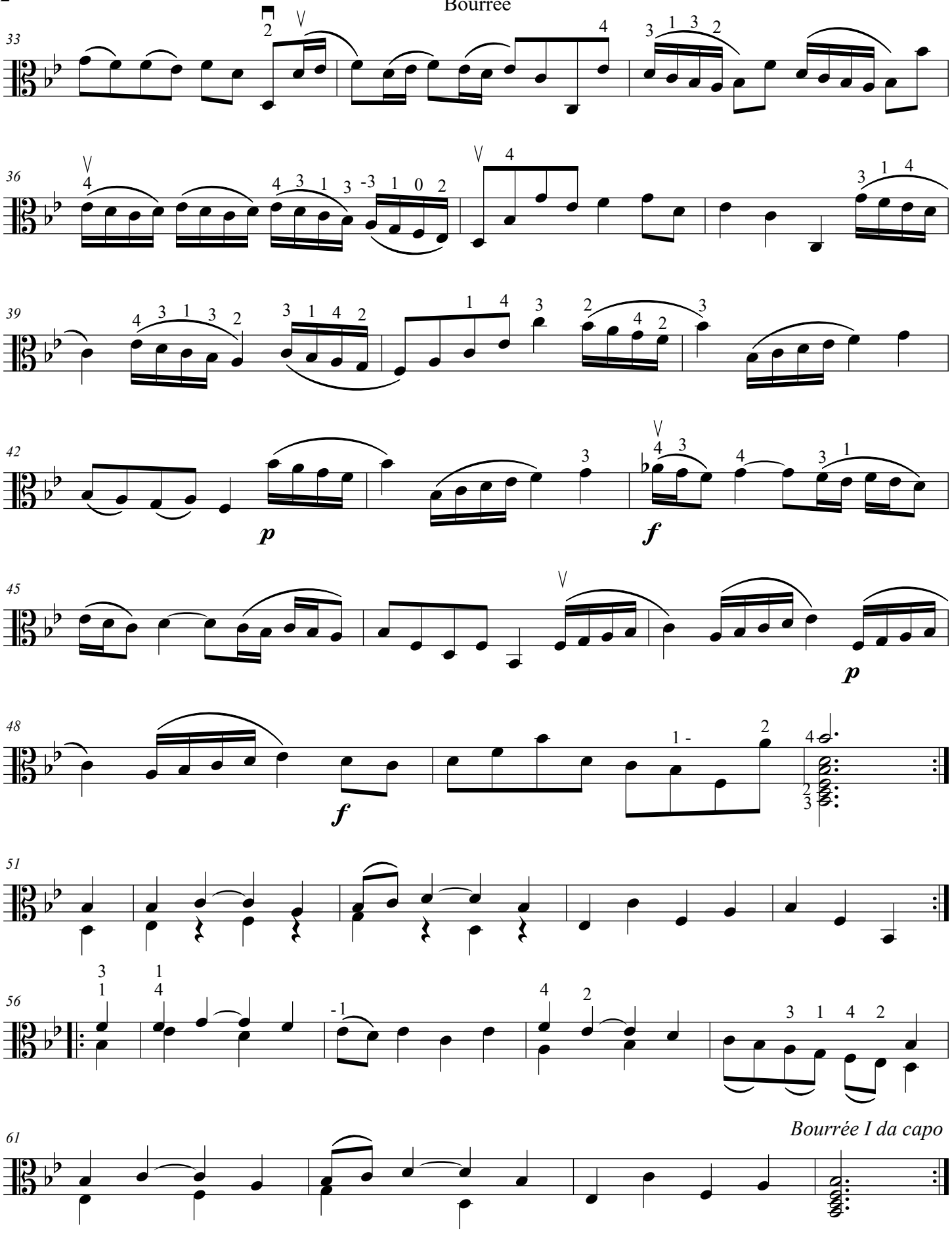
Bourrée I and II

Cello Suite #4, BWV 1010

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)



Bourrée

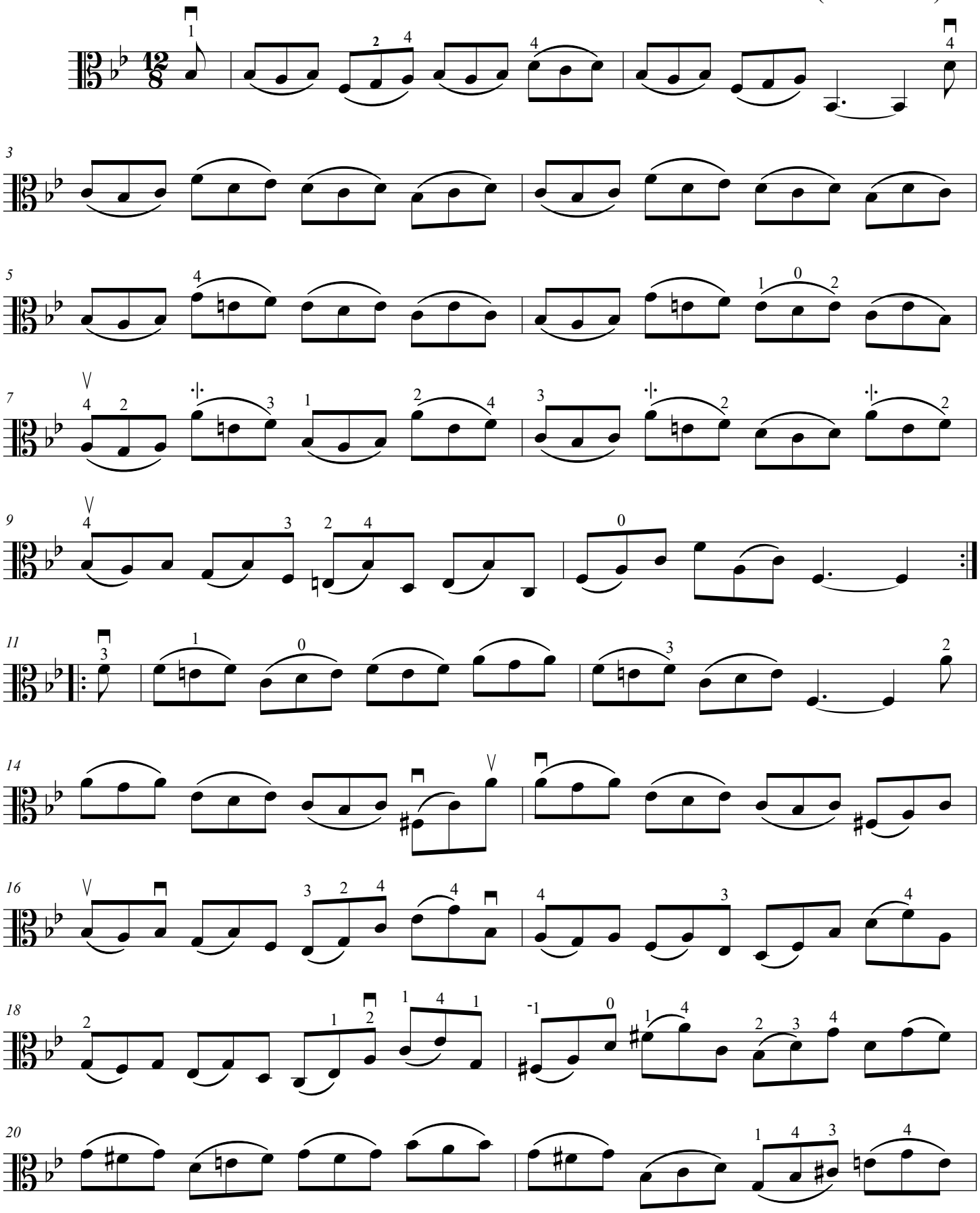


Tenor viola da gamba

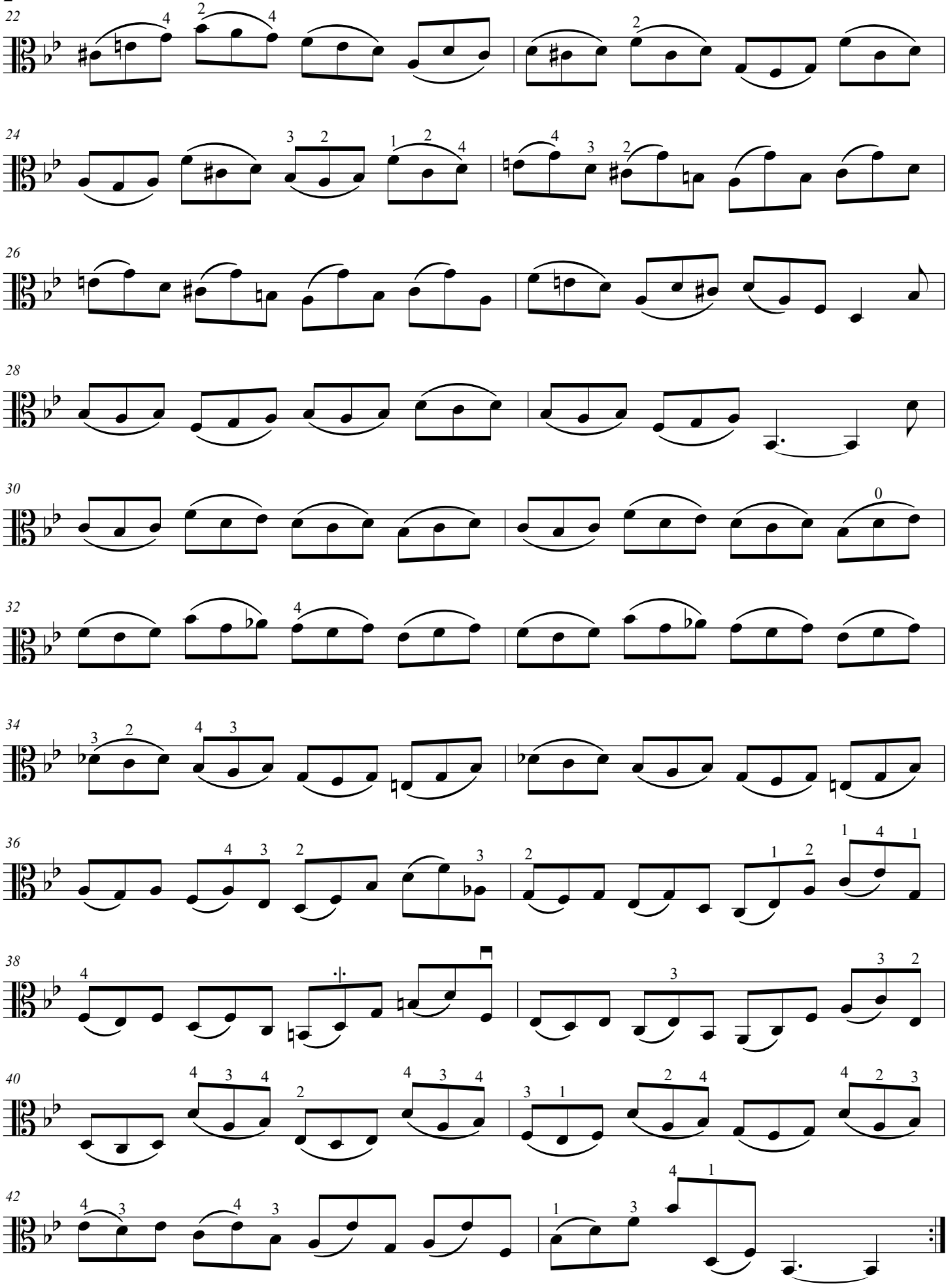
Gigue

Cello Suite #4, BWV 1010

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)



Gigue

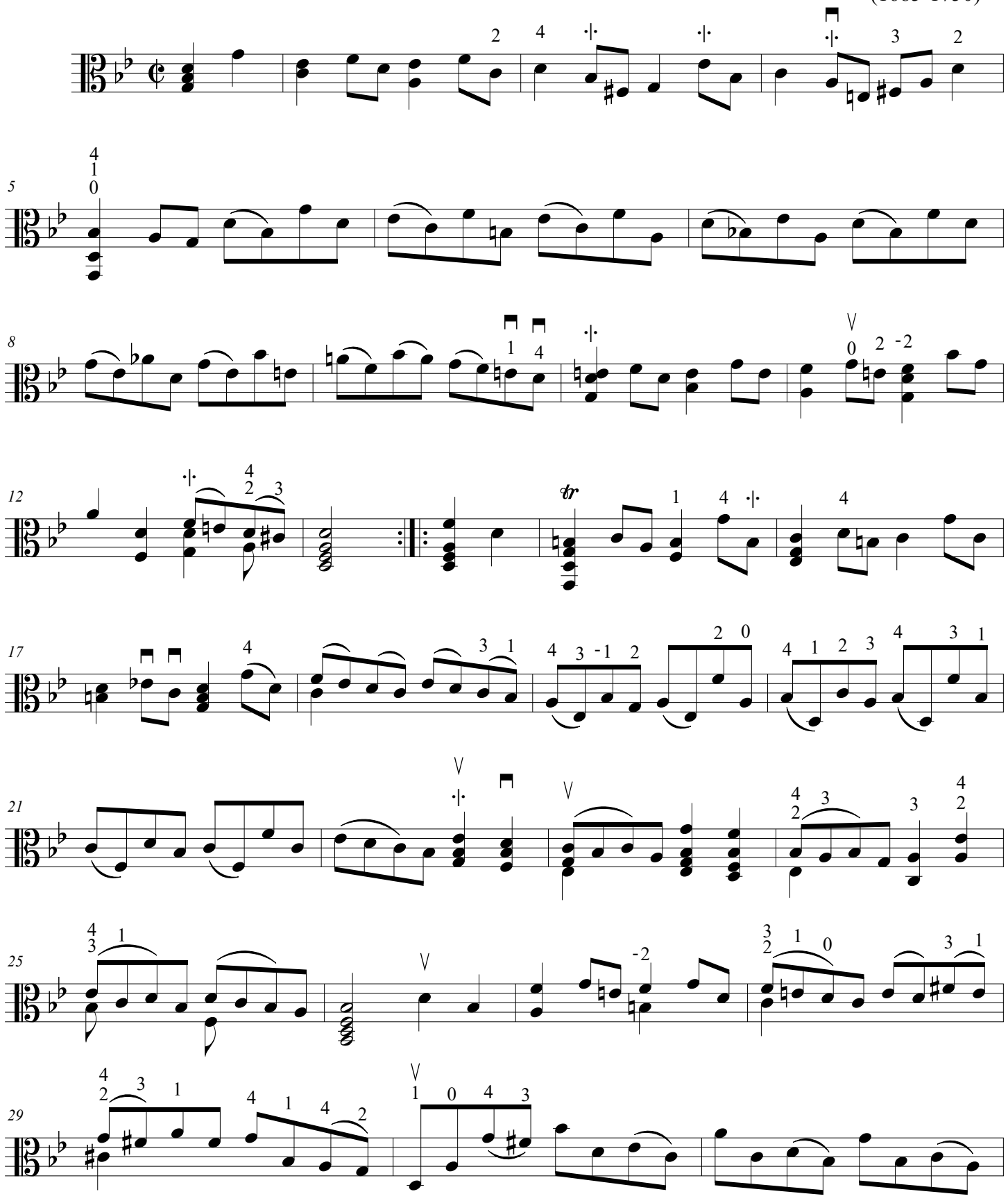


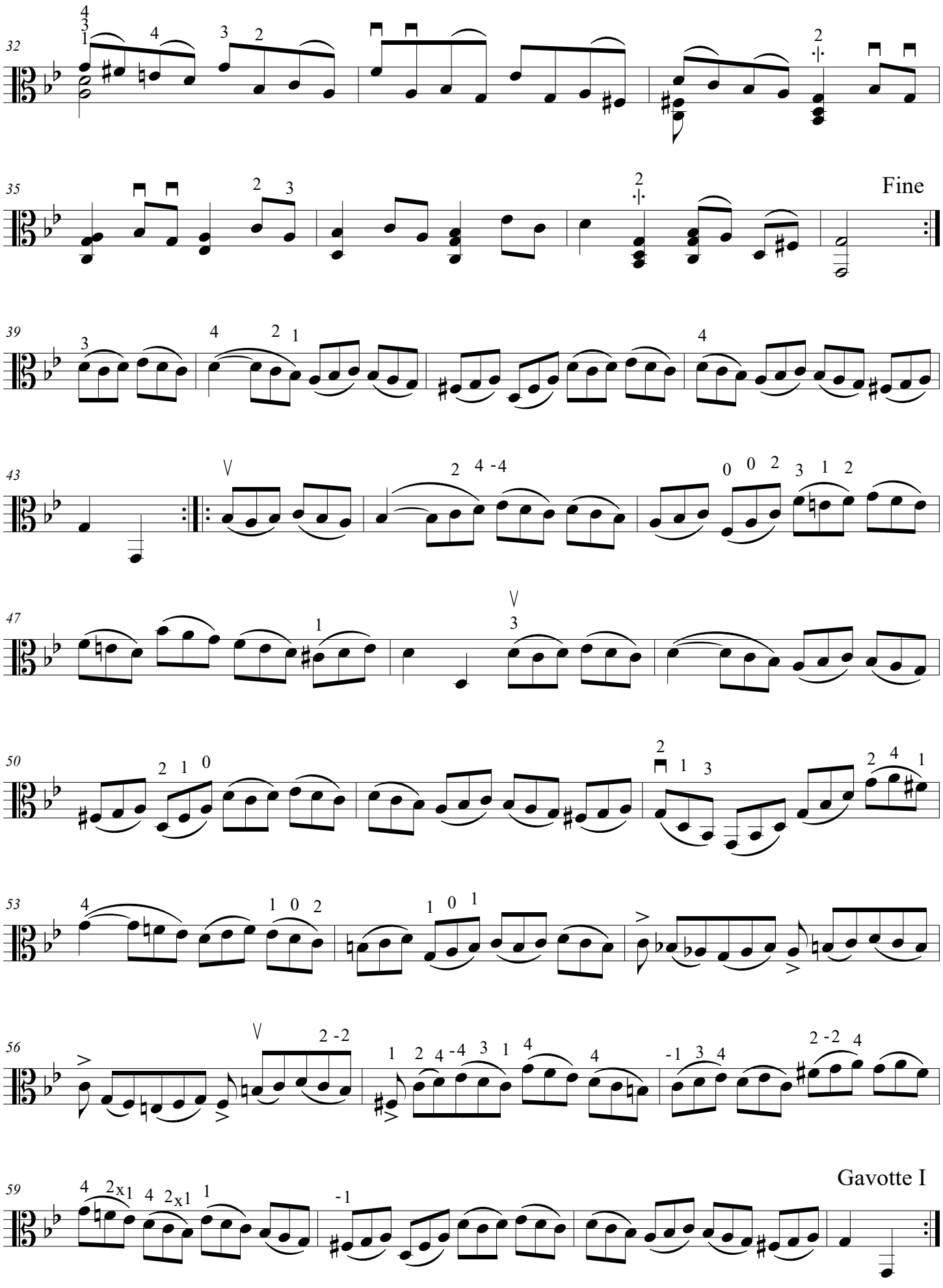
Tenor viola da gamba

Gavotte I and II

Cello Sonata #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)




32
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Fine
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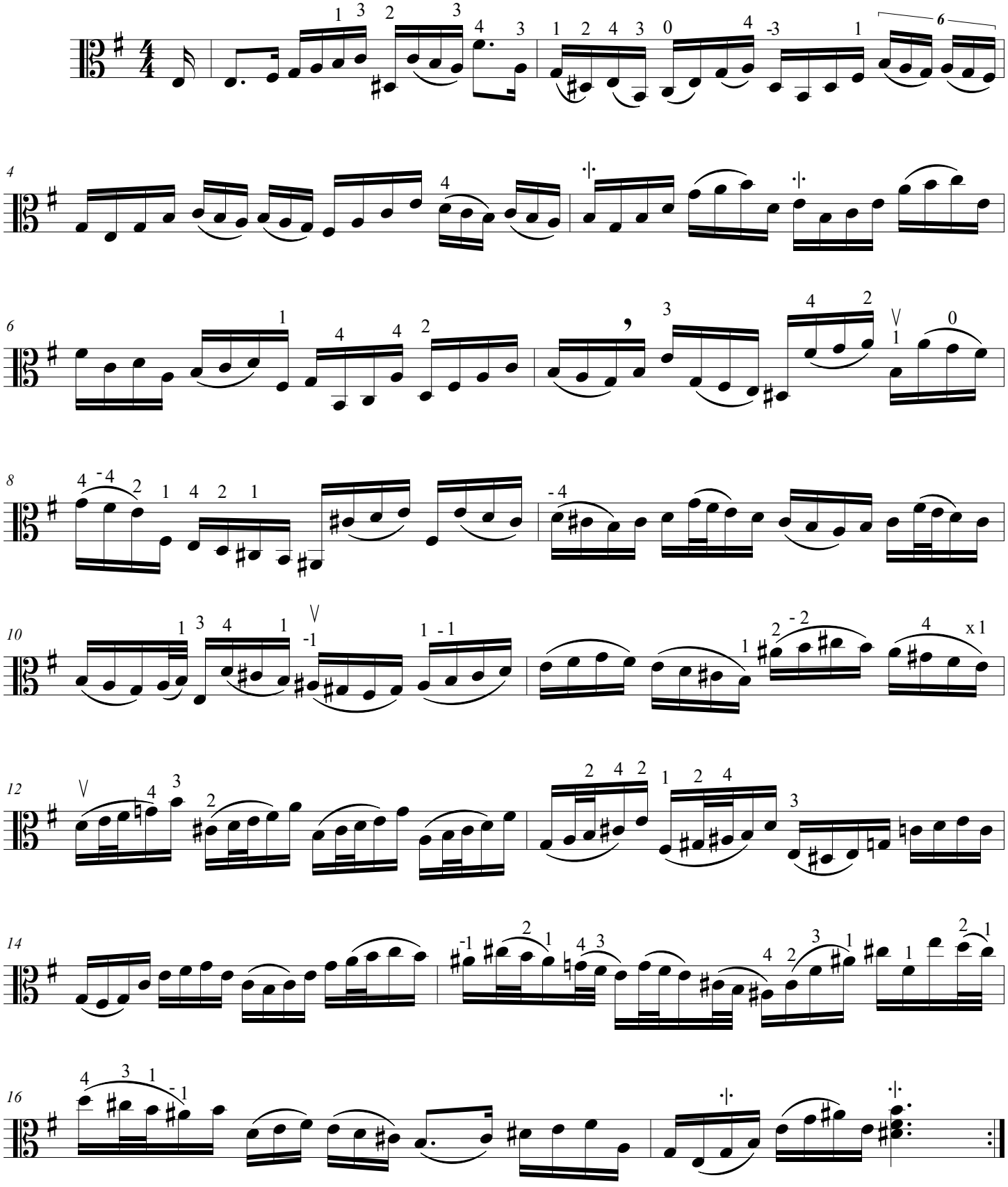
59
Gavotte I

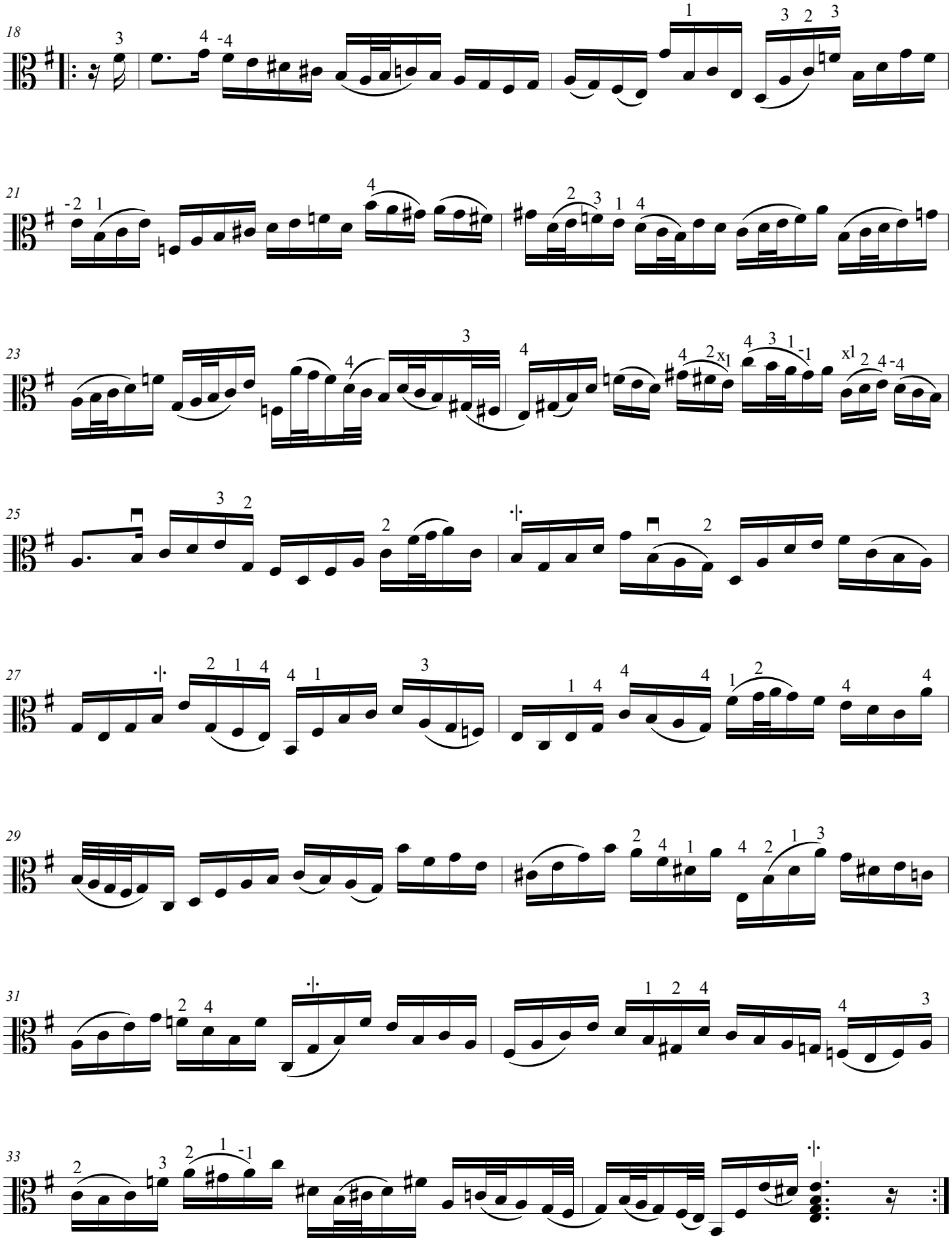
Tenor viola da gamba

Allemande

Violin Partita #2, BWV 1005

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)



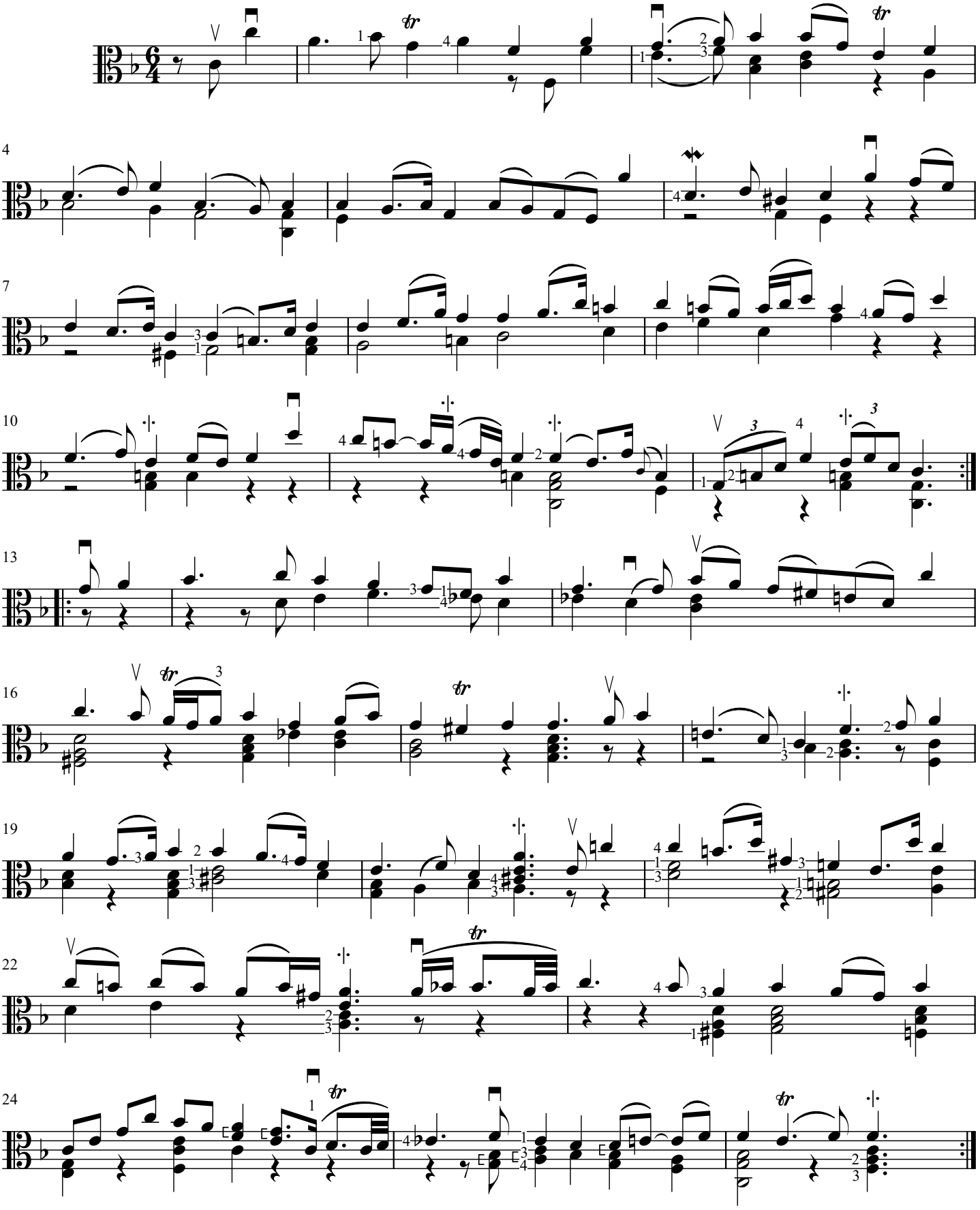


Tenor viola da gamba

Loure

Violin Partita #1, BWV 1006

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

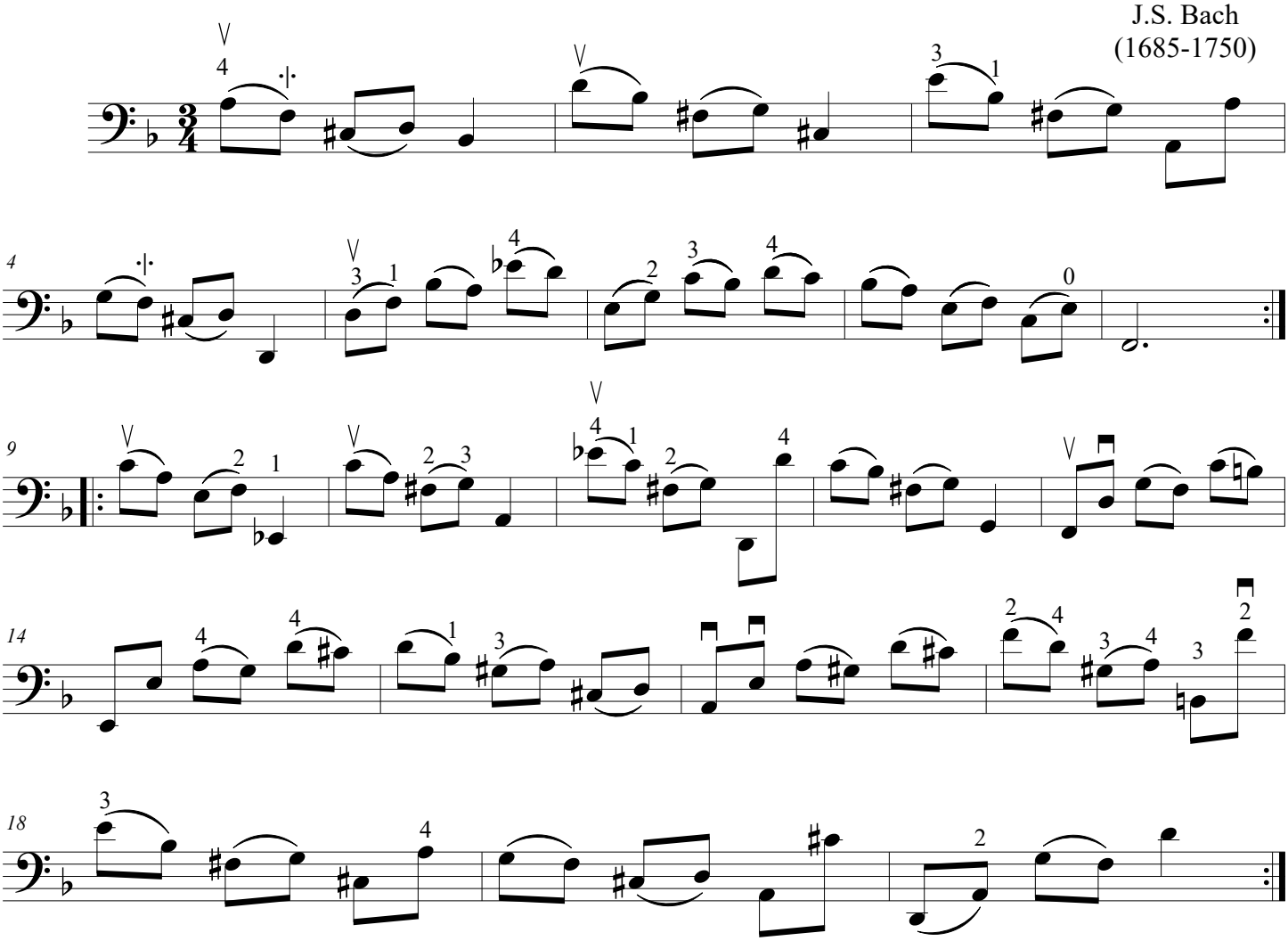


Bass viola da gamba

Sarabande

Cello Sonata #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

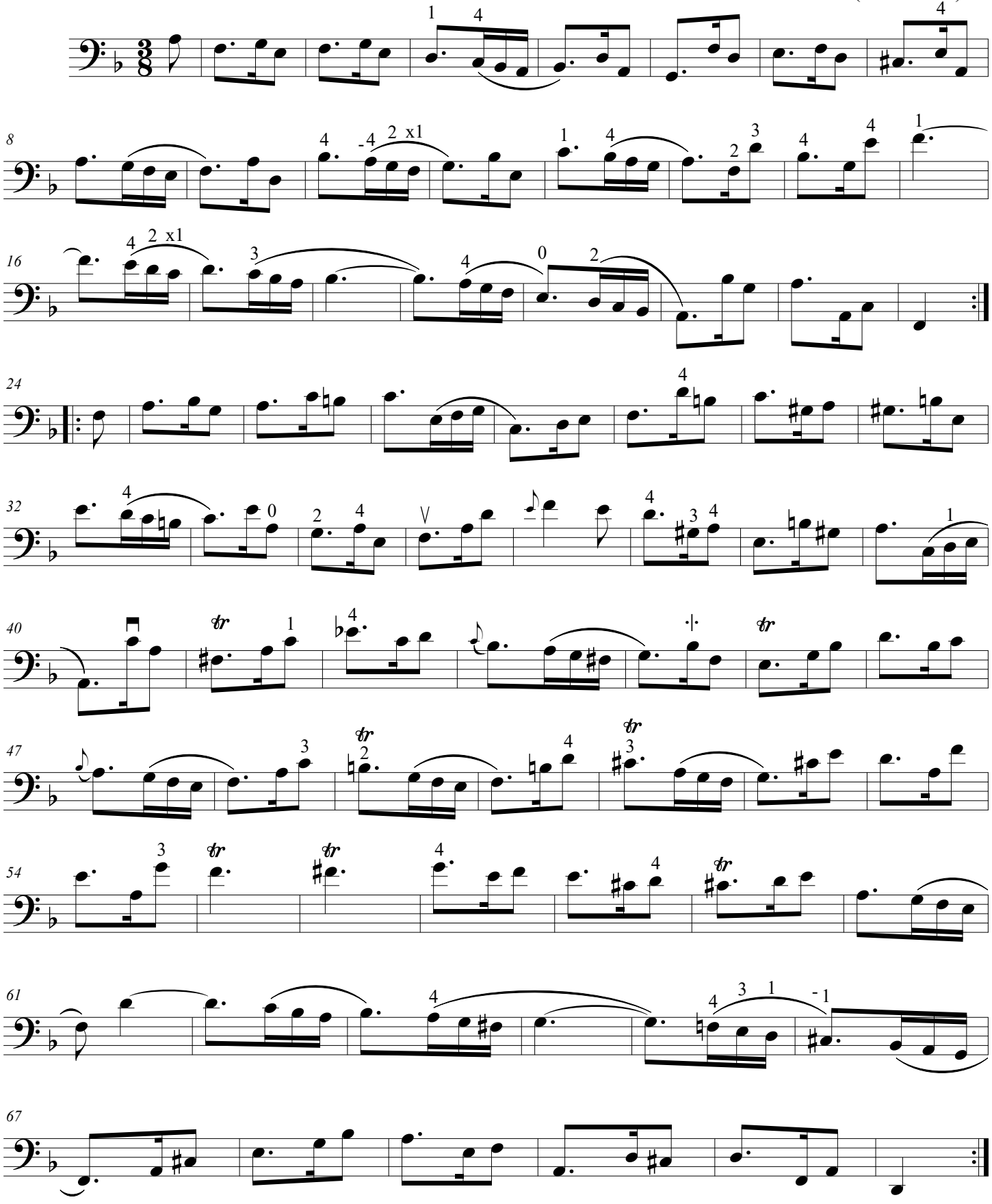


Bass viola da gamba

Gigue

Cello Suite #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

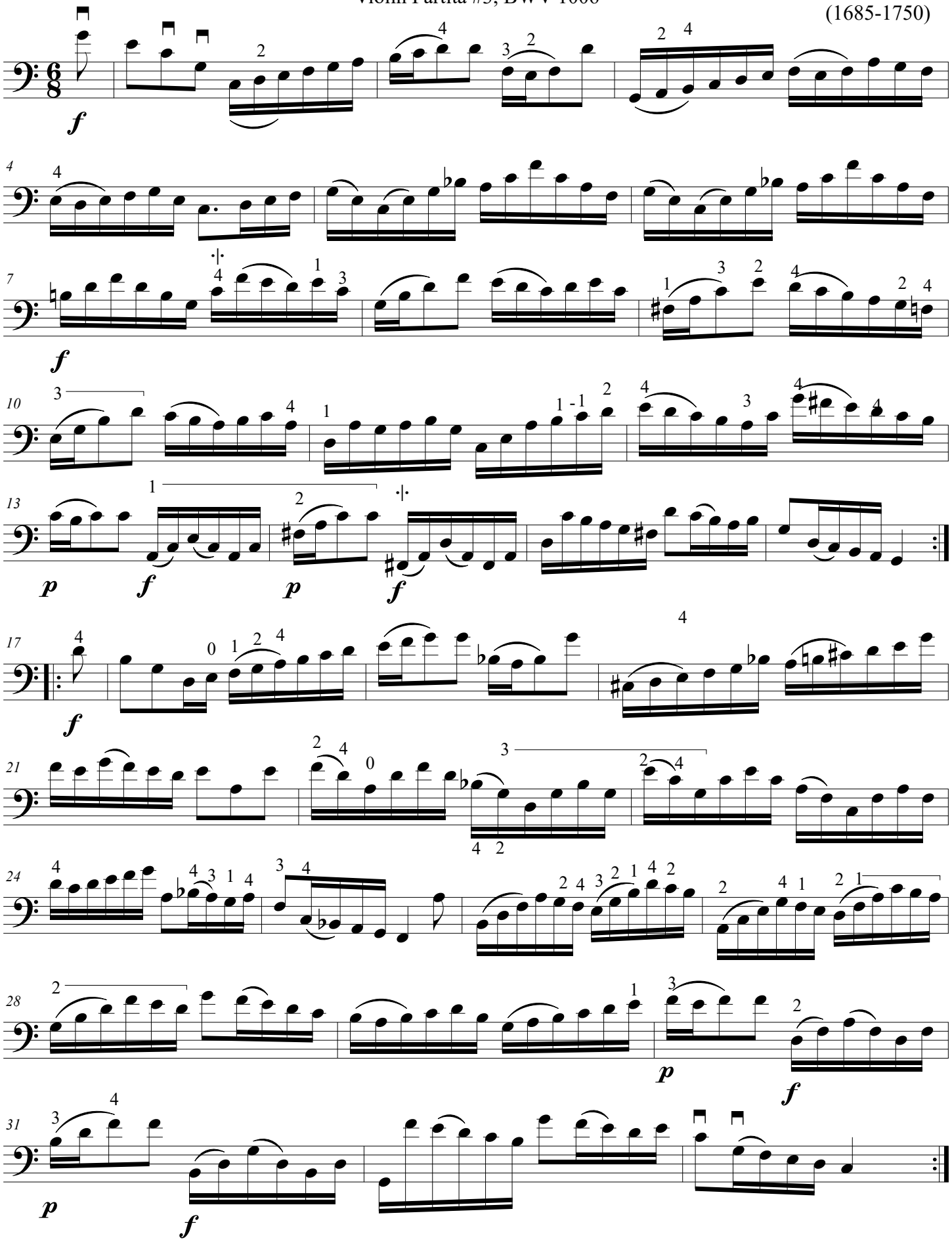


Bass viola da gamba

Gigue

Violin Partita #3, BWV 1006

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

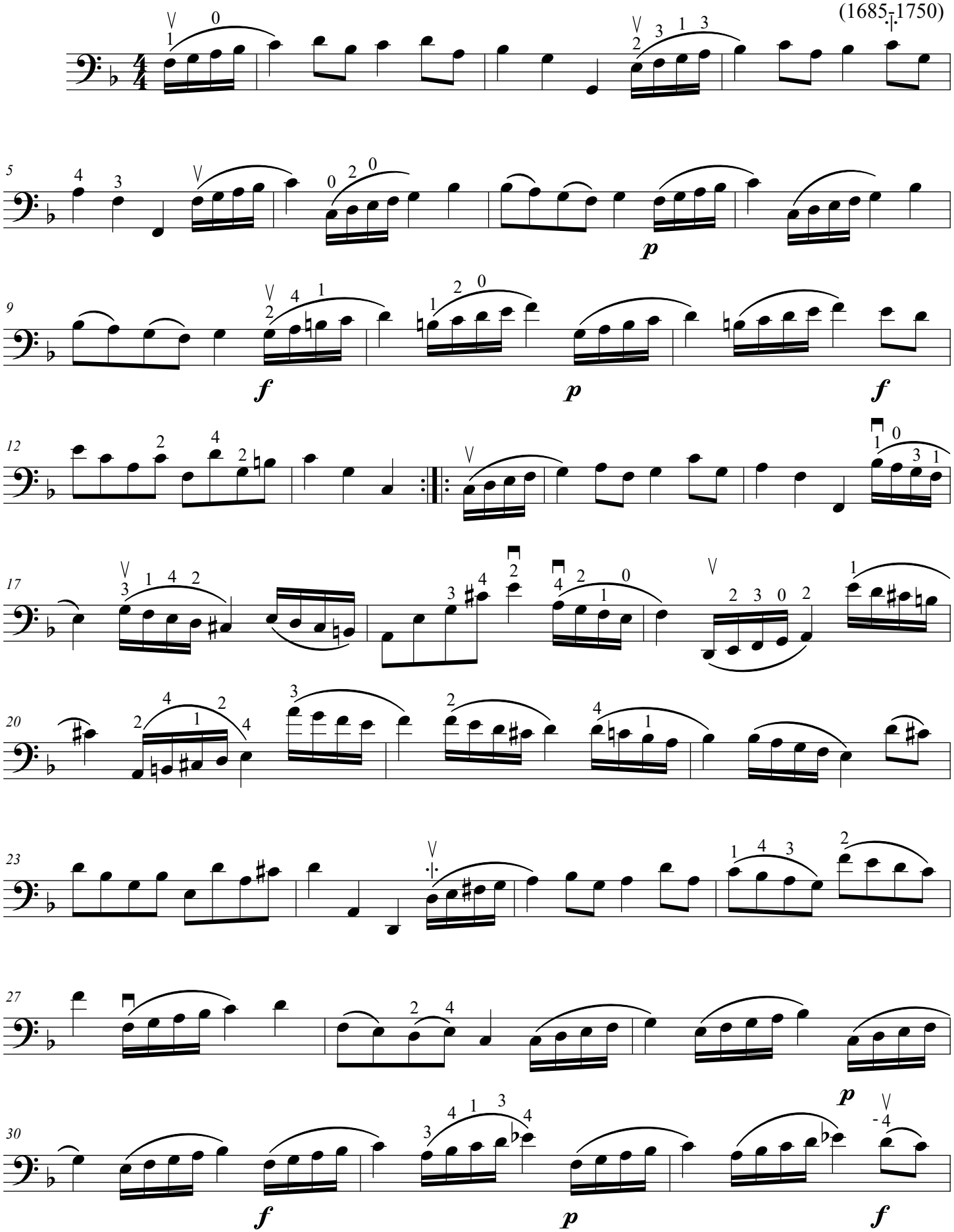


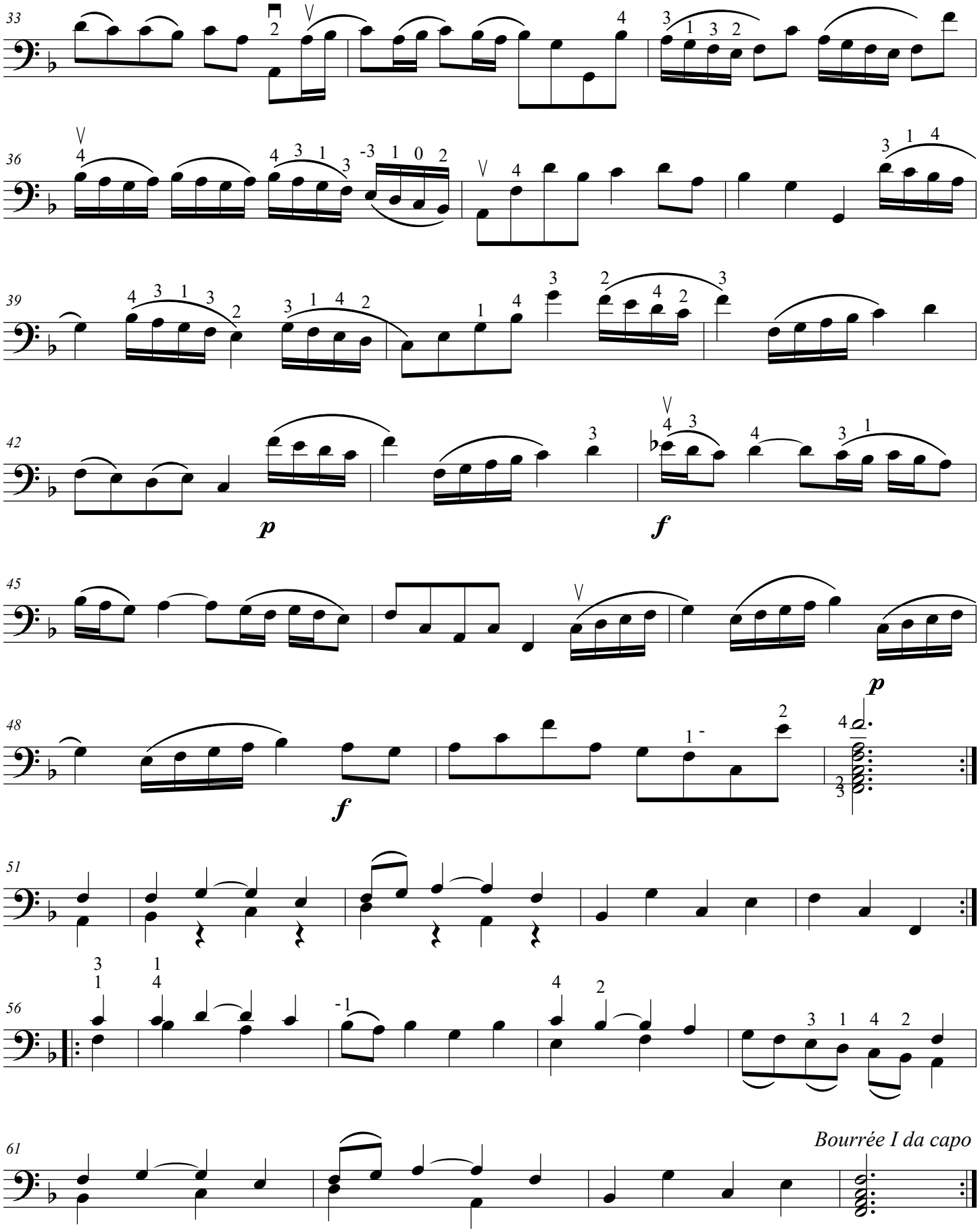
Bass viola da gamba

Bourrée I and II

Cello Suite #4, BWV 1010

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)




33
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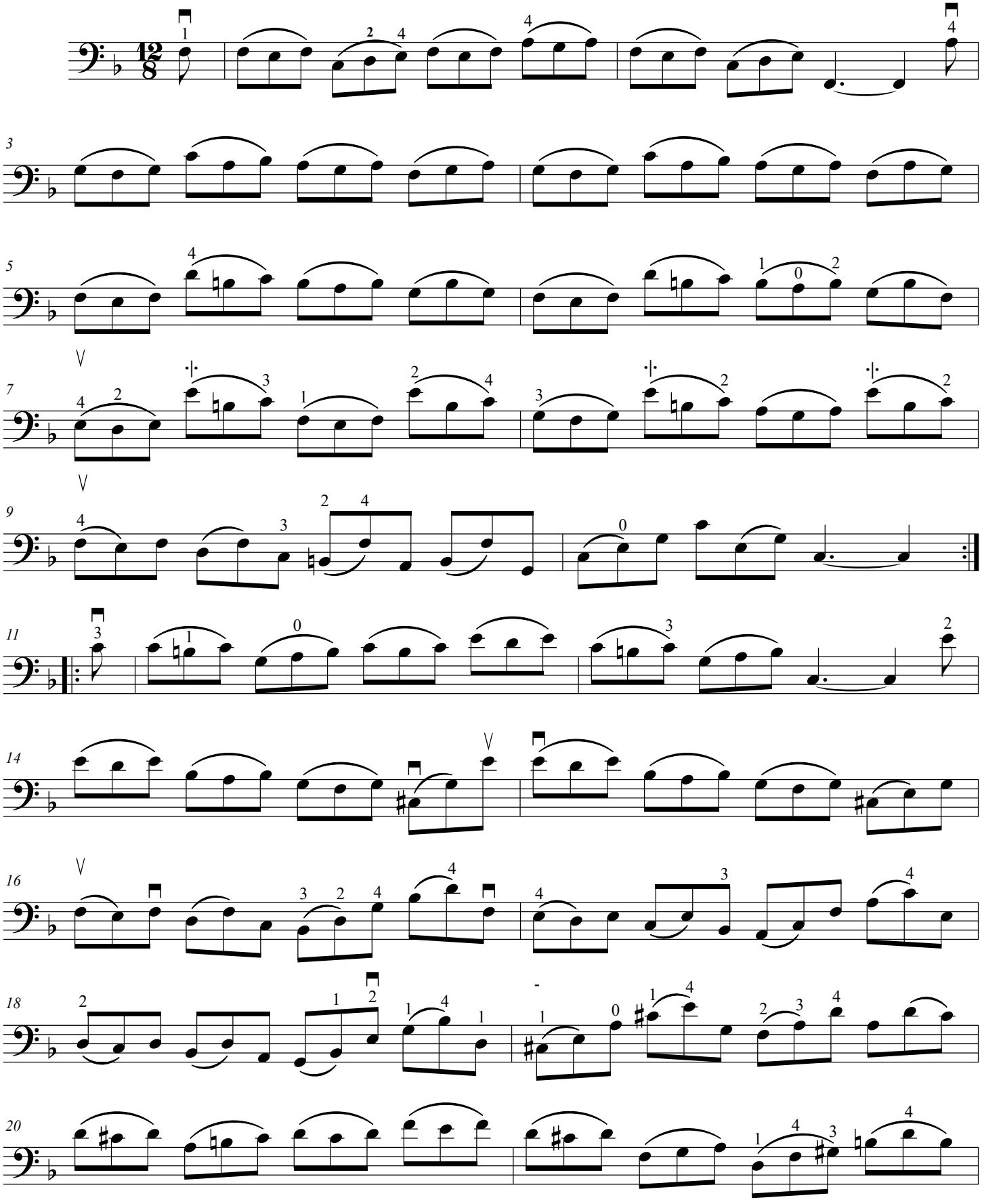
Bourrée I da capo

Bass viola da gamba

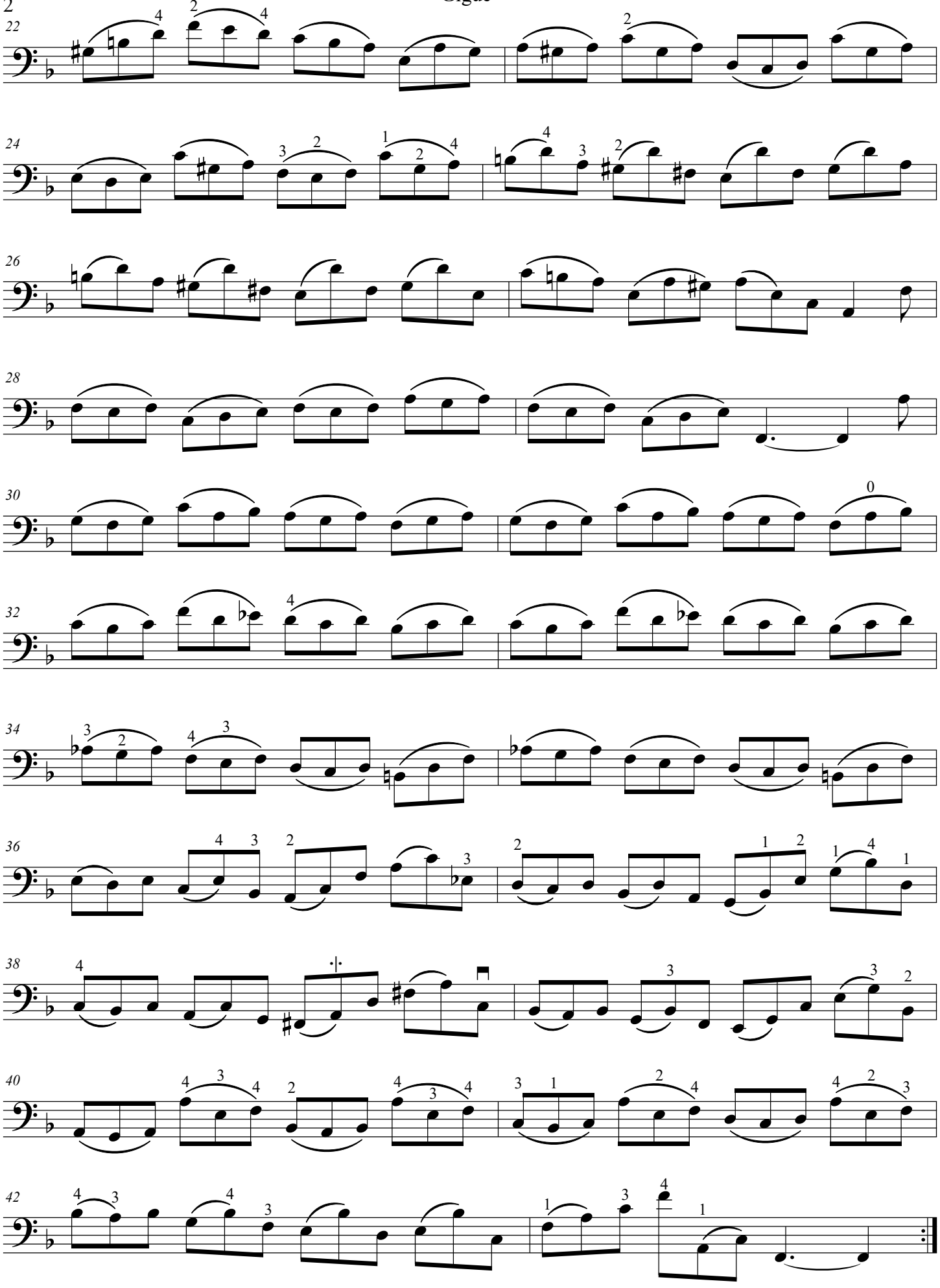
Gigue

Cello Suite #4, BWV 1010

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)



Gigue

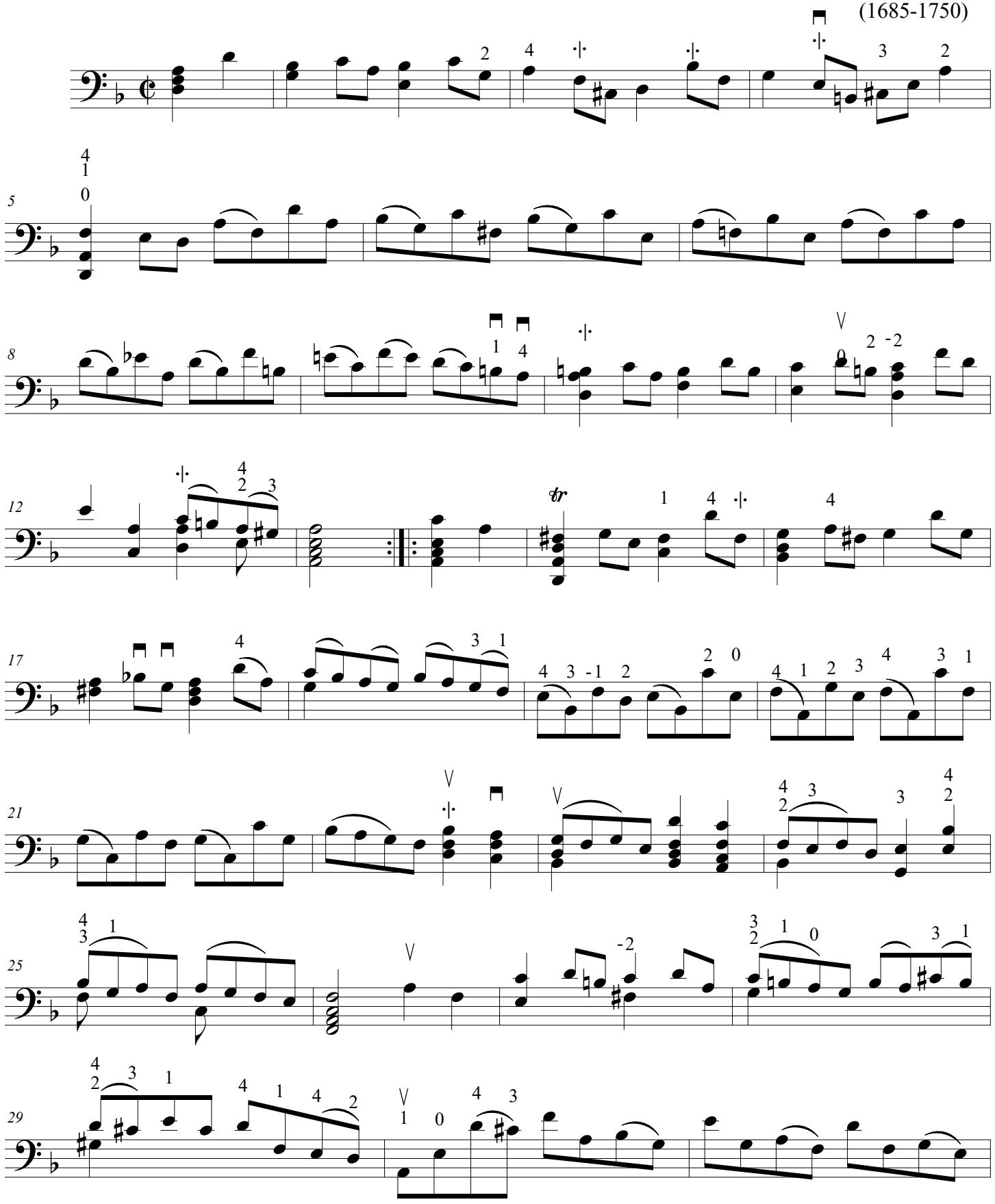


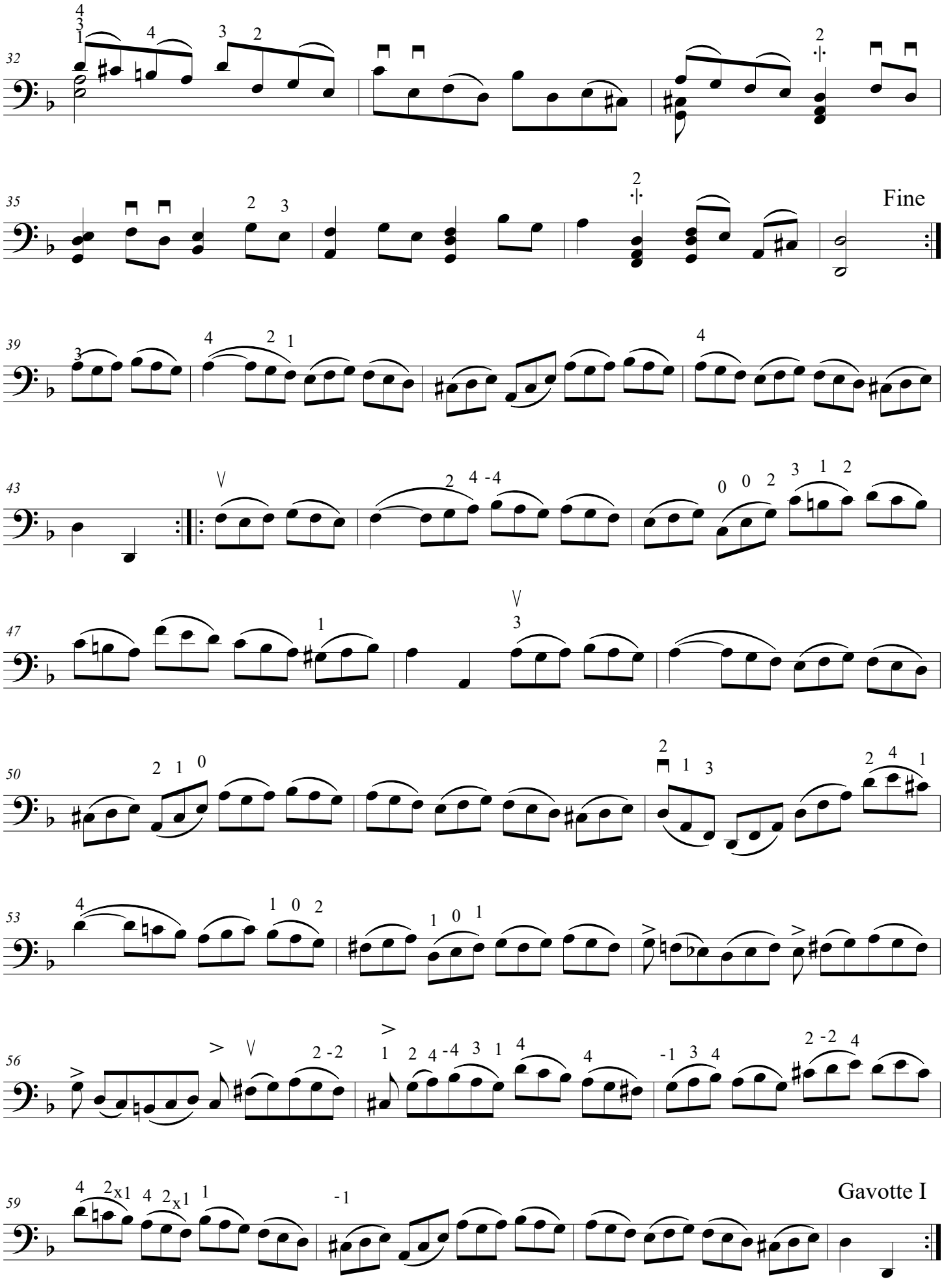
Bass viola da gamba

Gavotte I and II

Cello Sonata #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)




32
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Fine
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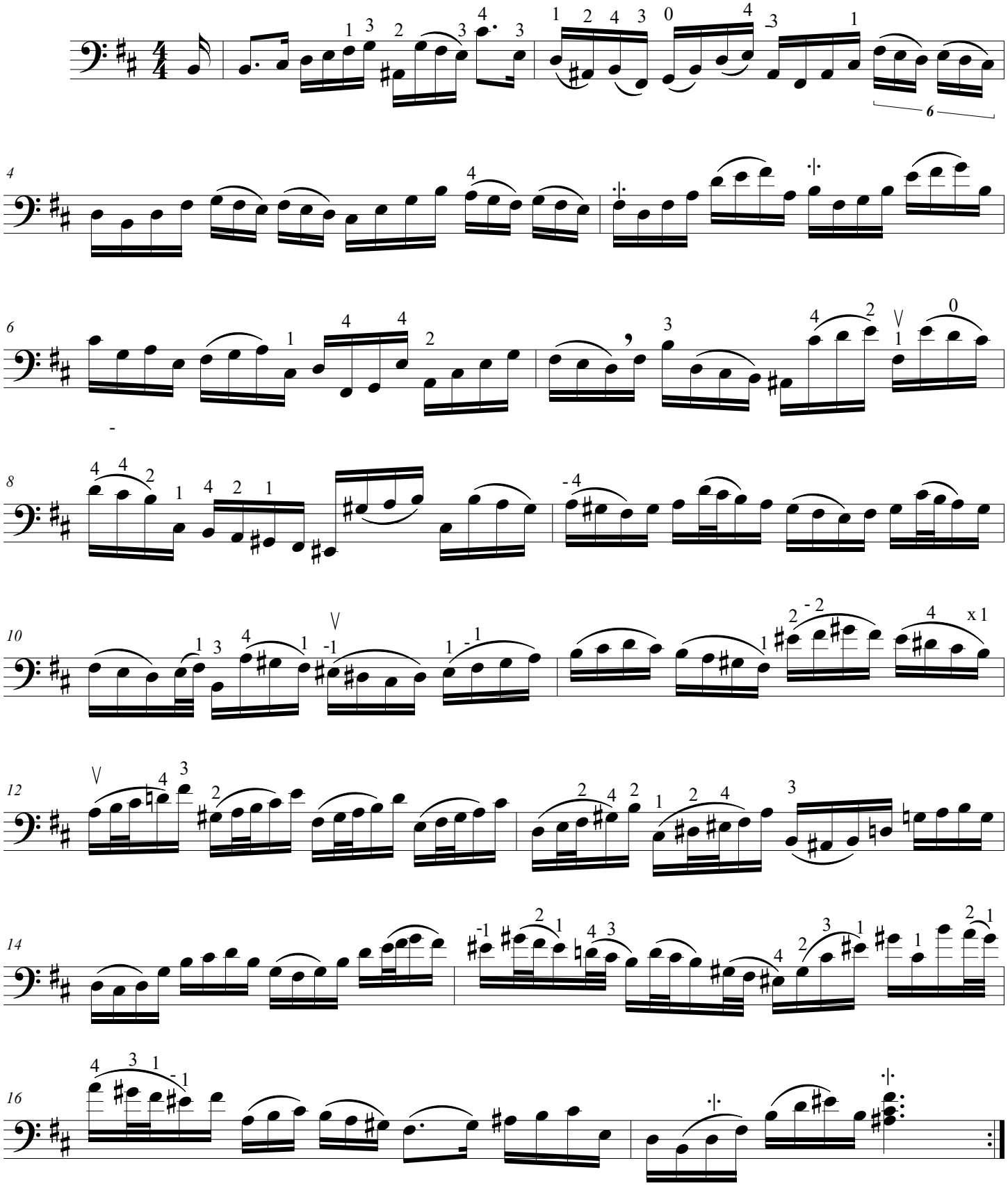
Gavotte I

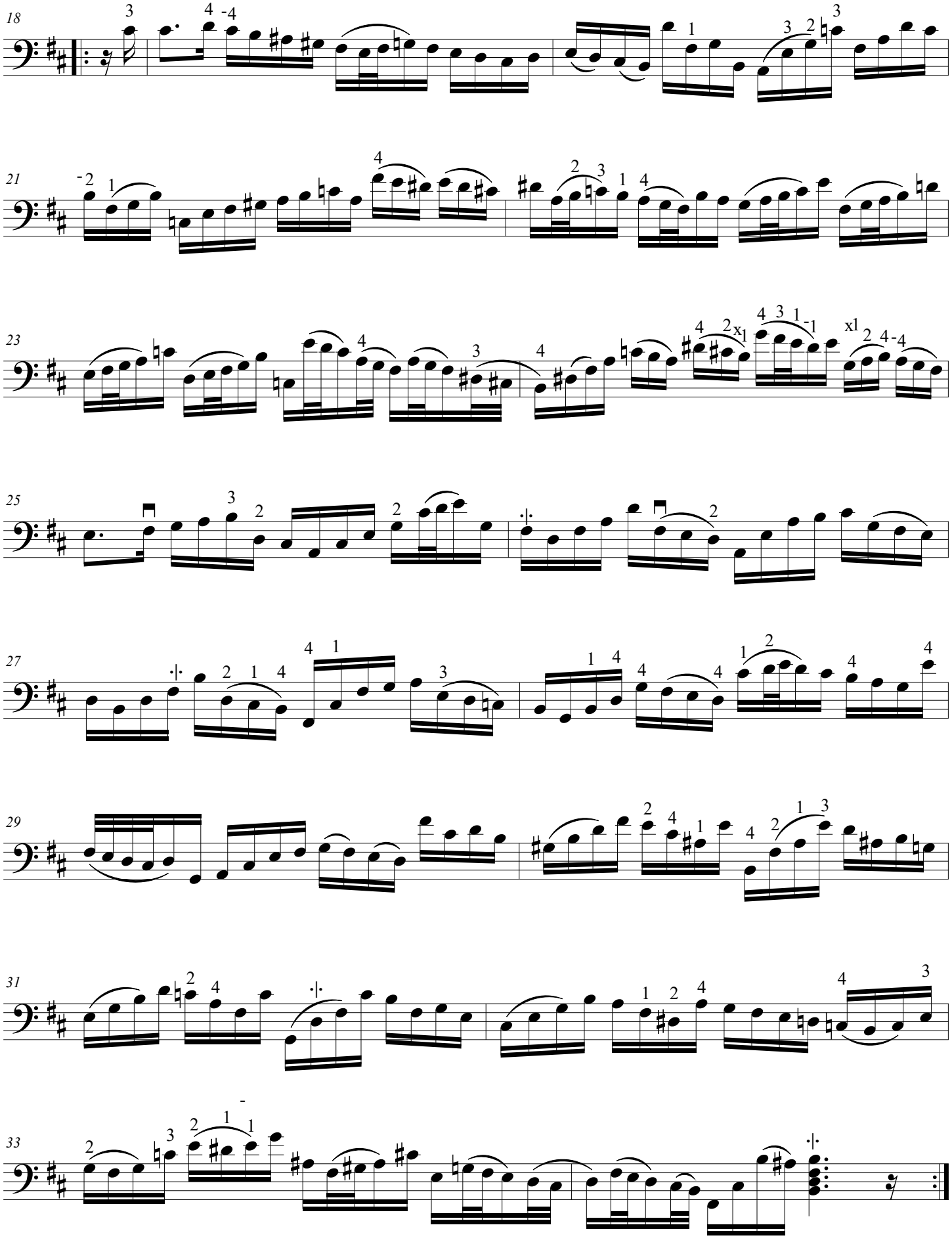
Bass viola da gamba

Allemande

Violin Partita #2, BWV 1005

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)



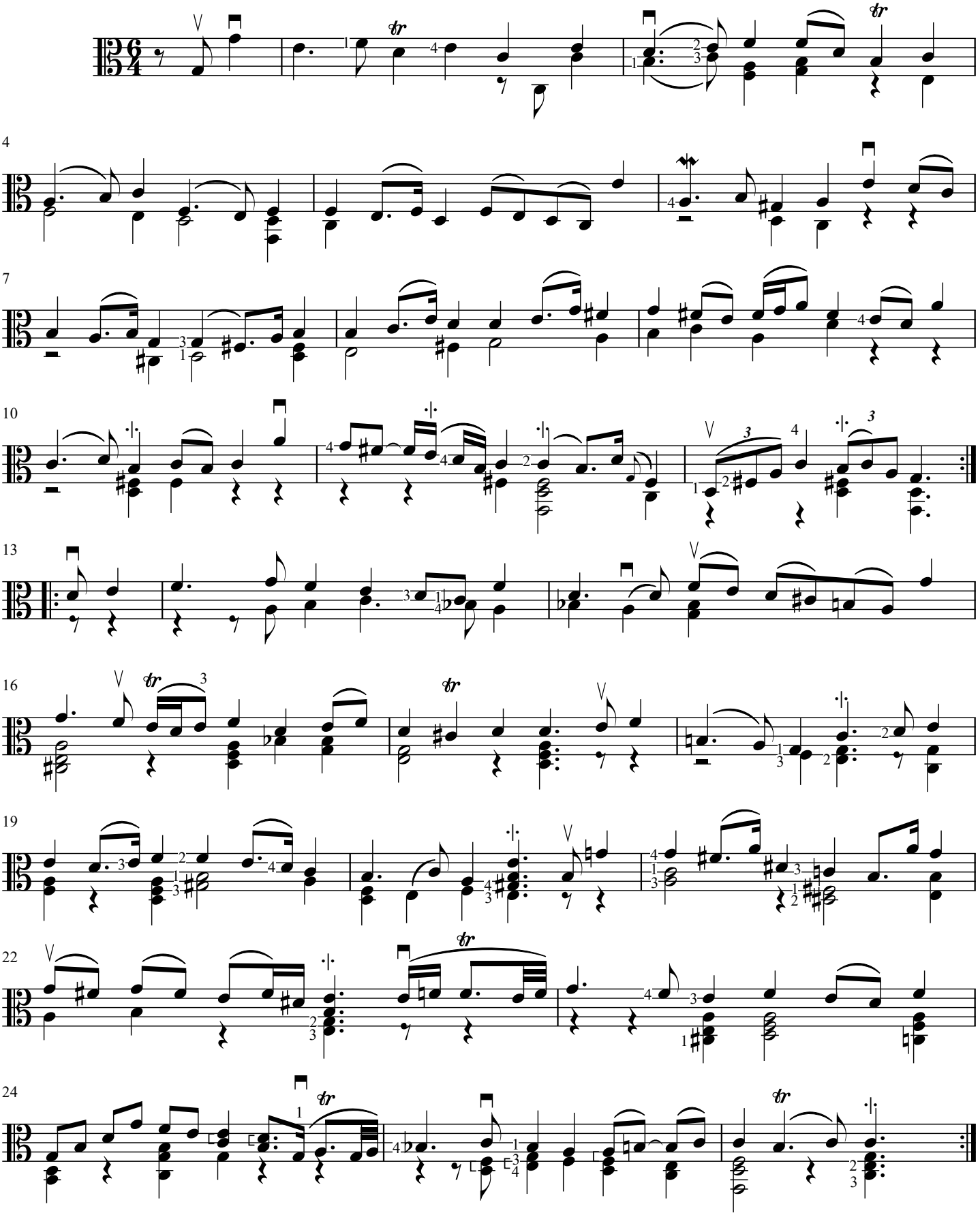


Bass viola da gamba

Loure

Violin Partita #1, BWV 1006

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

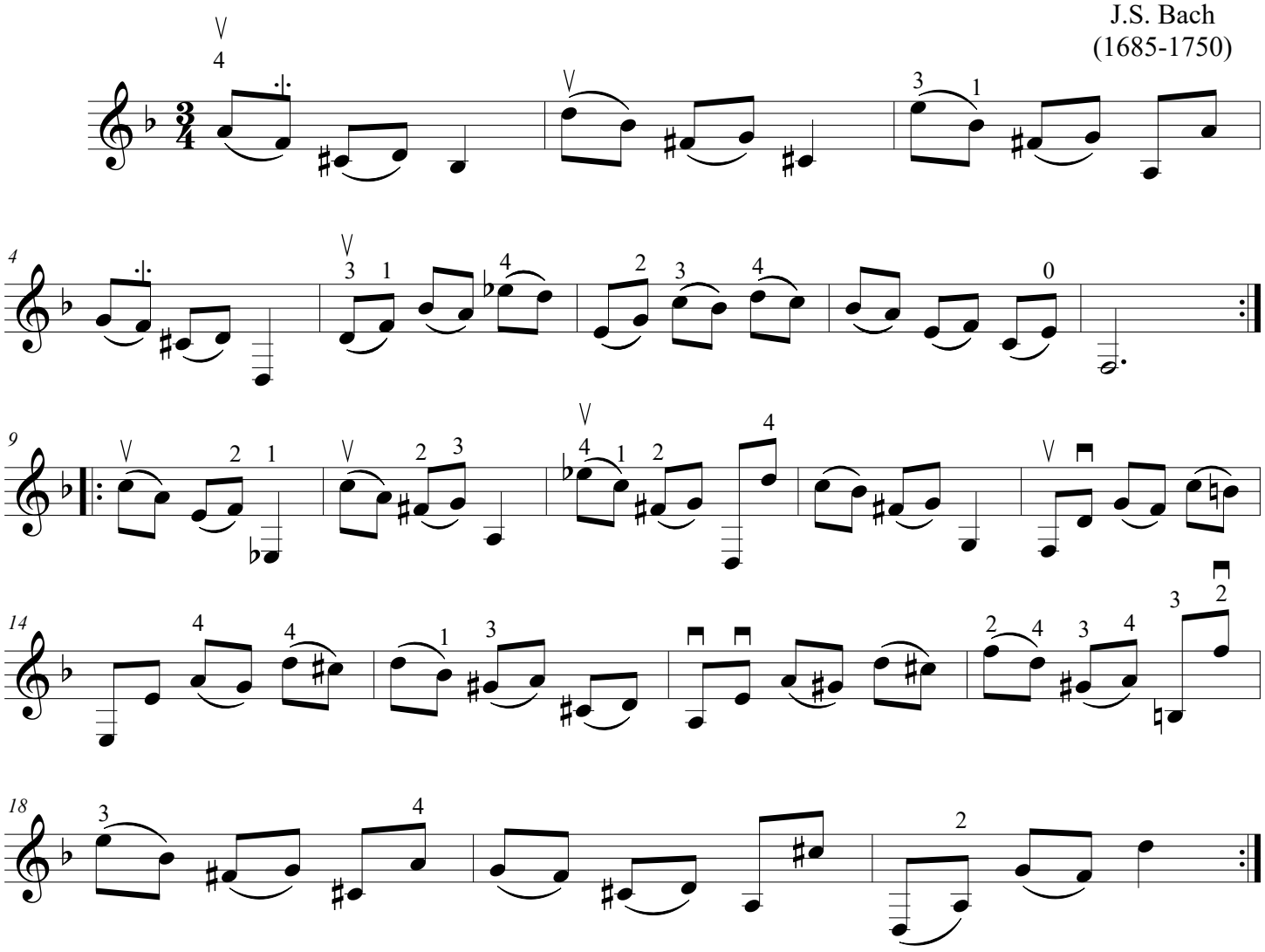


Treble viola da gamba

Sarabande

Cello Sonata #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

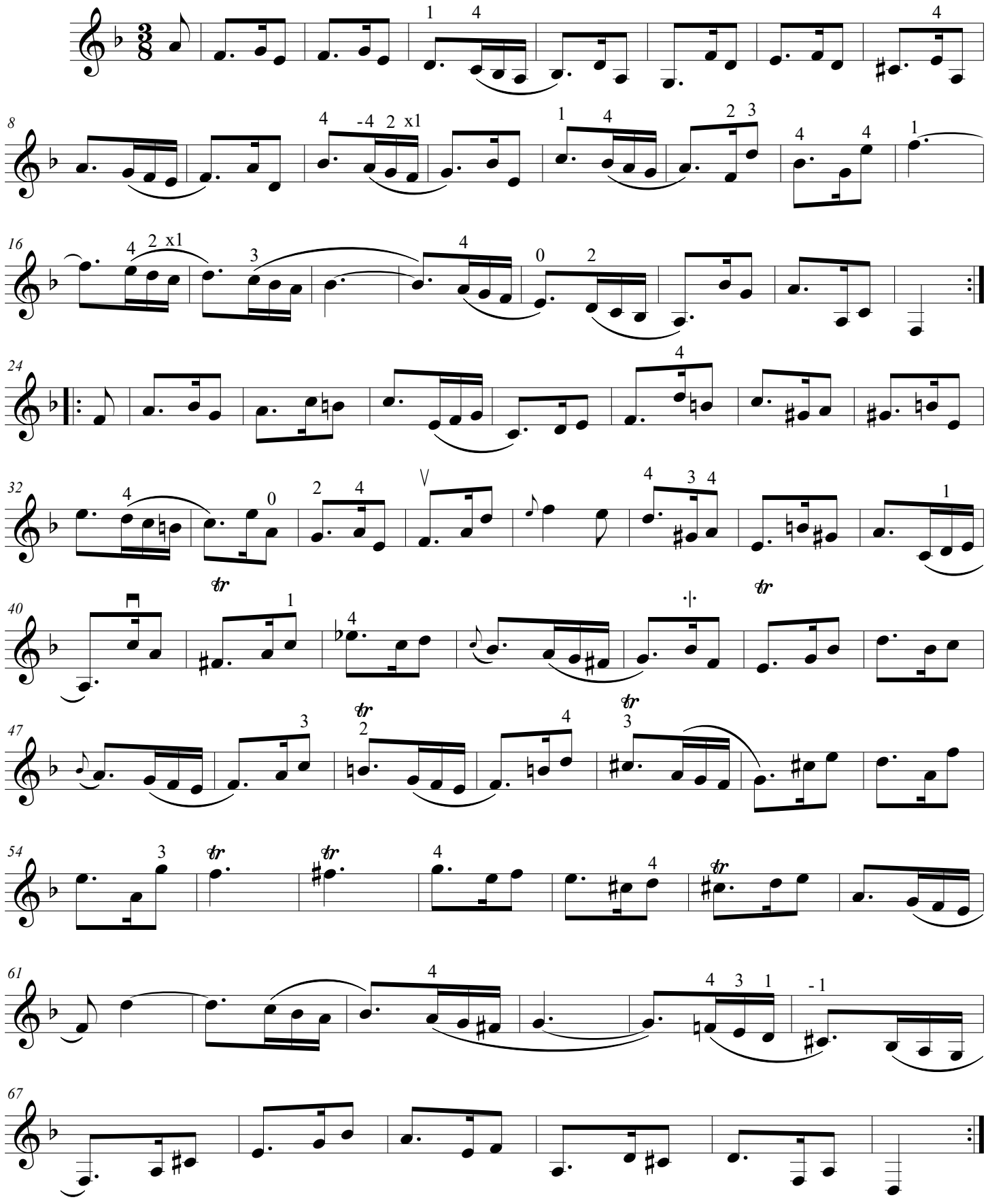


Treble viola da gamba

Gigue

Cello Suite #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

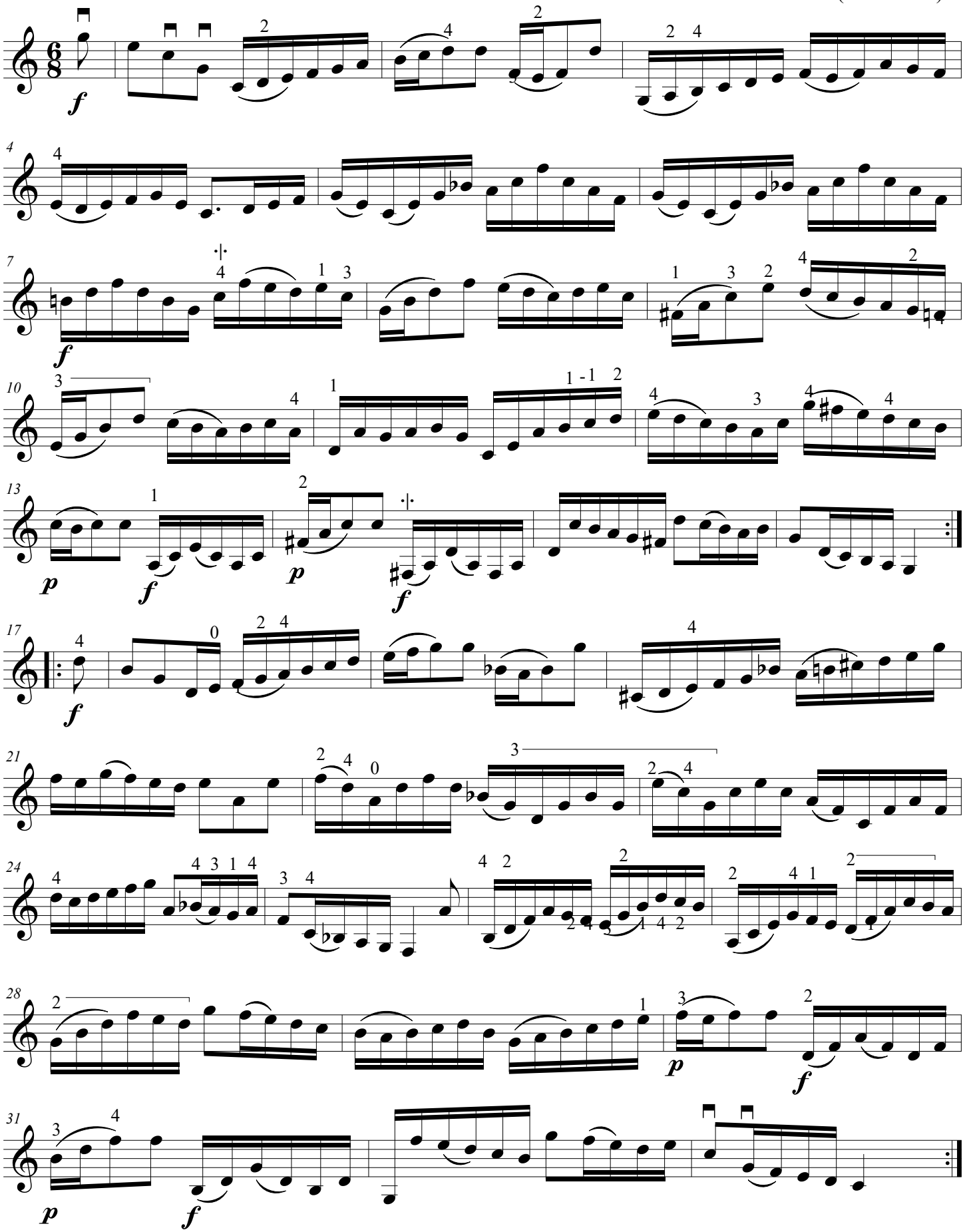


Treble viola da gamba

Gigue

Violin Partita #3, BWV 1006

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

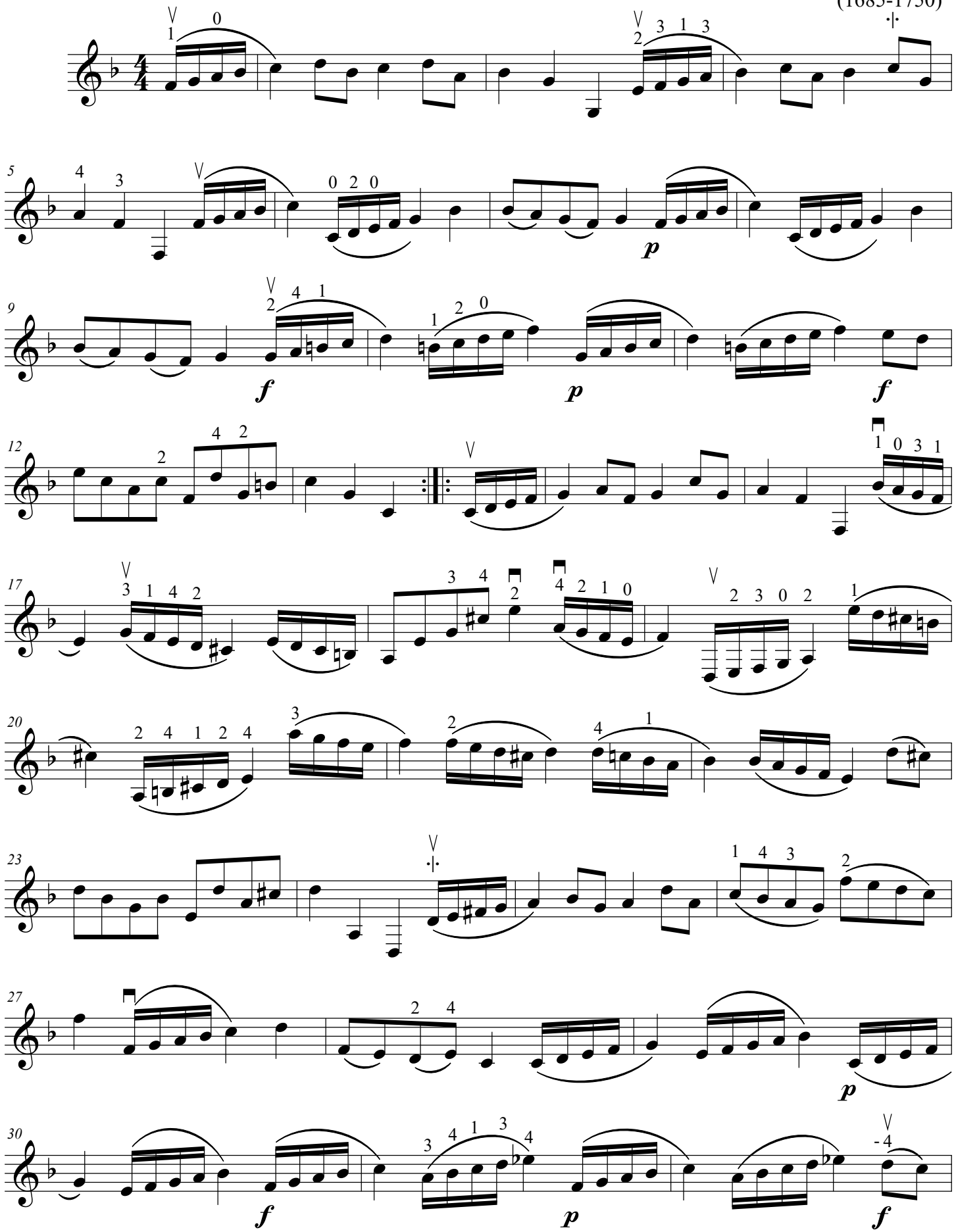


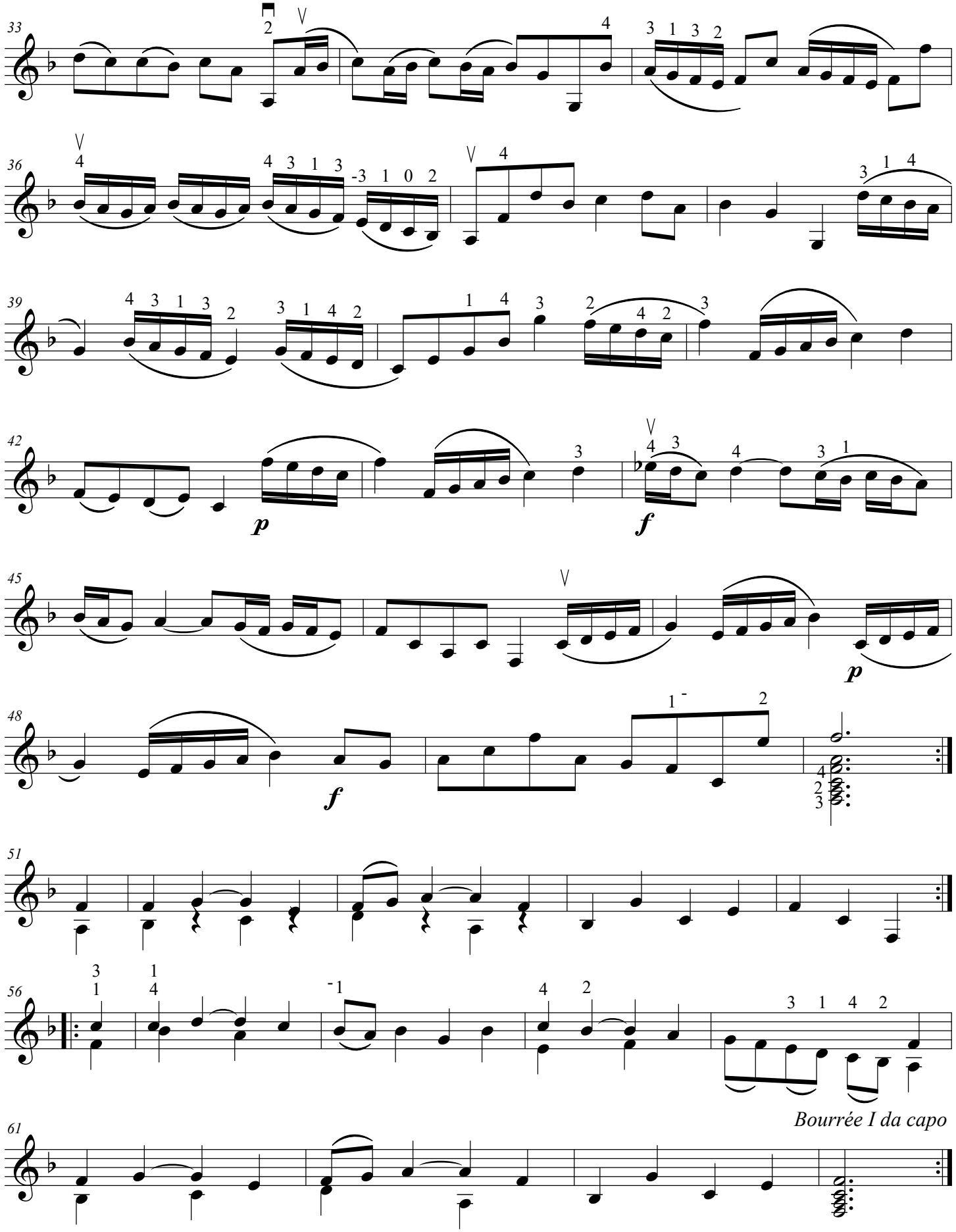
Treble viola da gamba

Bourrée I and II

Cello Suite #4, BWV 1010

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)




33
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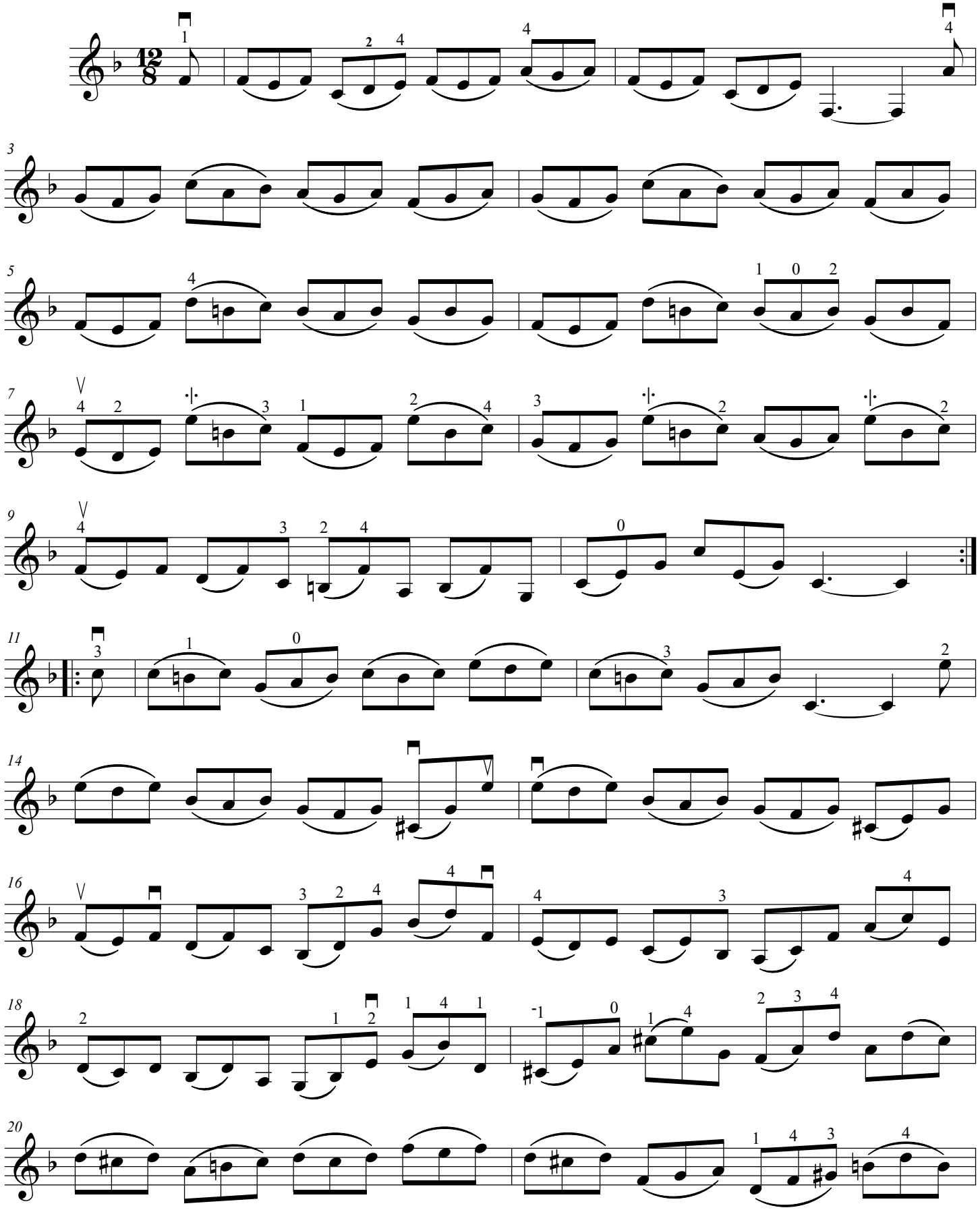
Bourrée I da capo

Treble viola da gamba

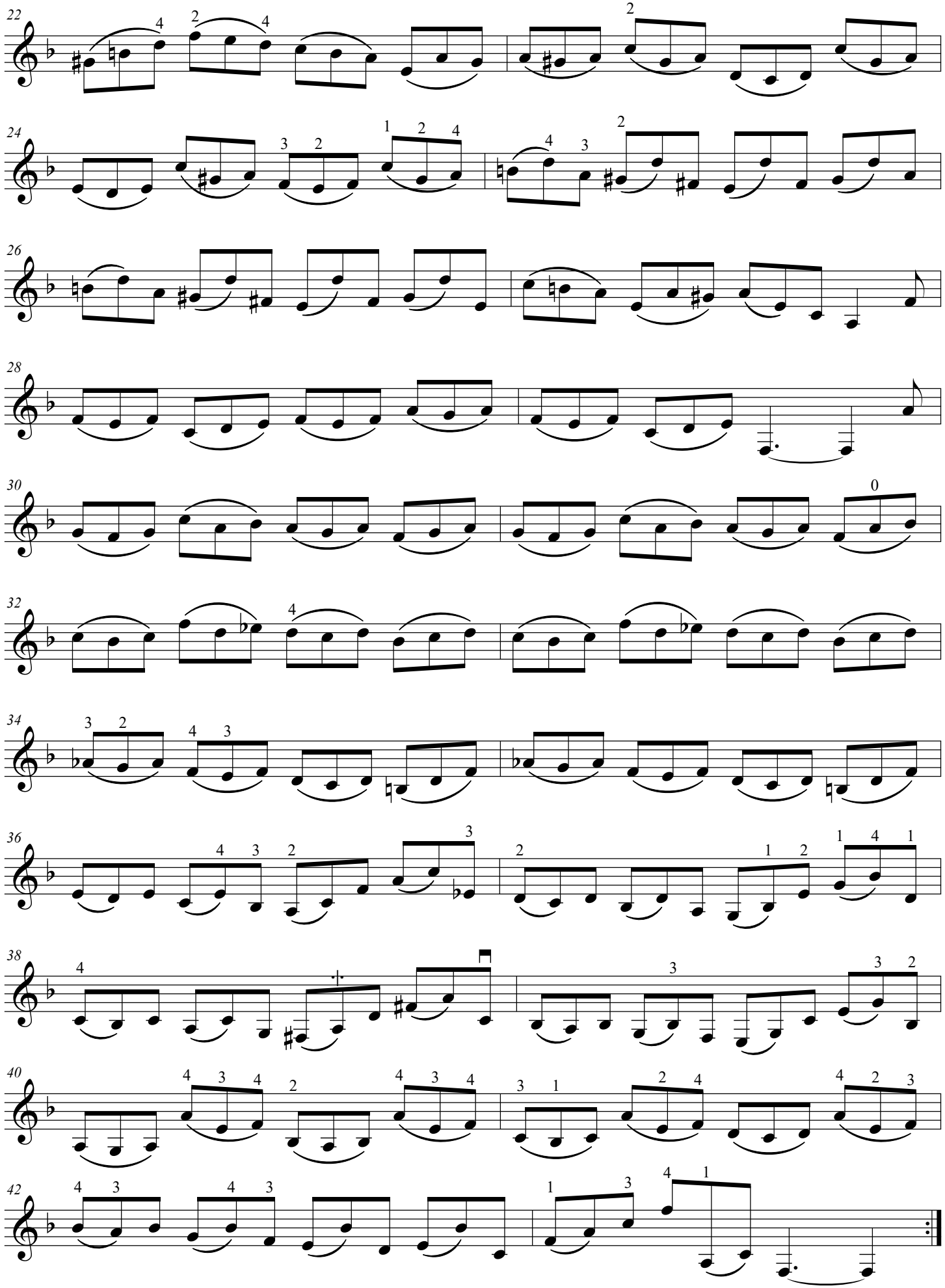
Gigue

Cello Suite #4, BWV 1010

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)



Gigue

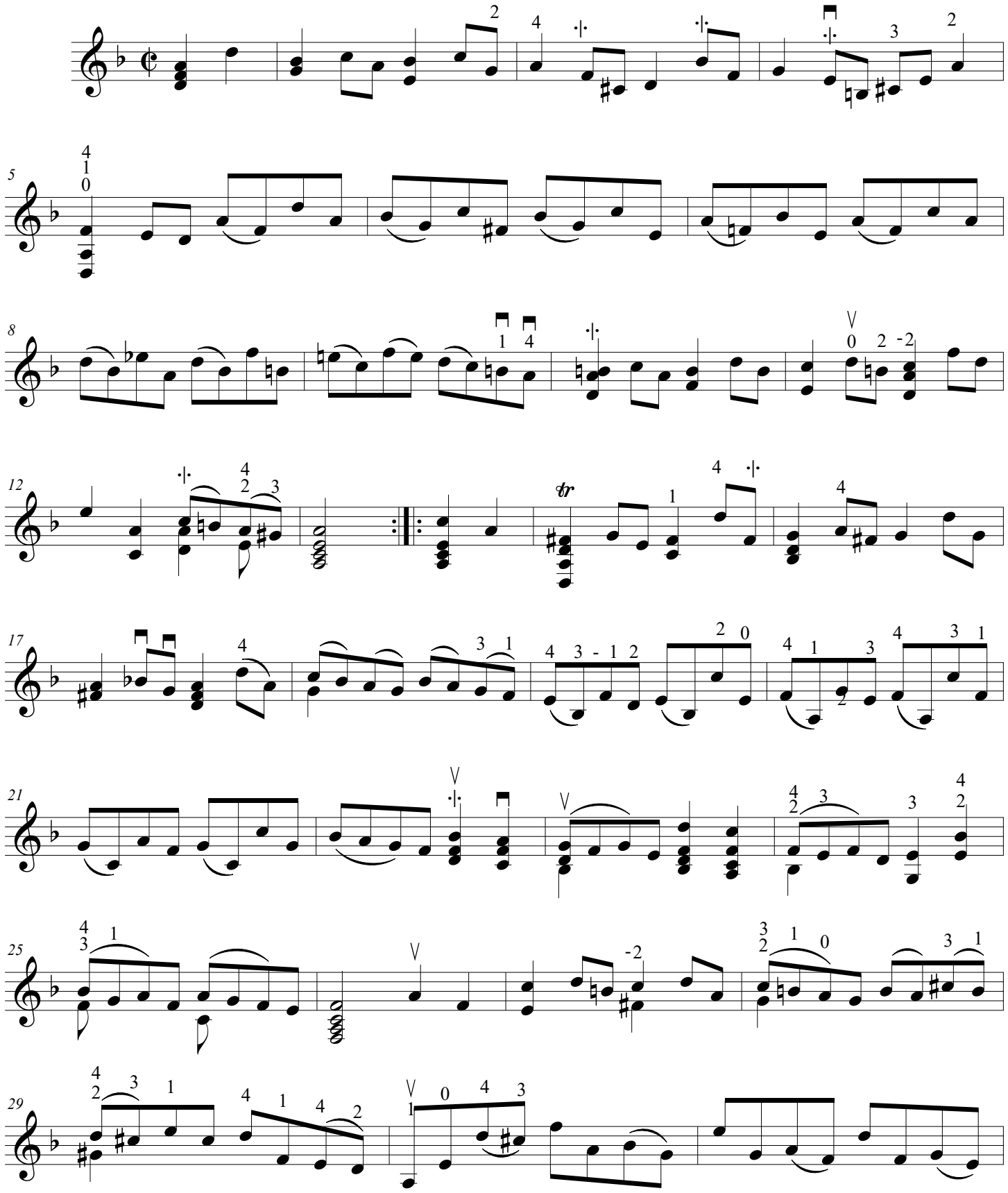


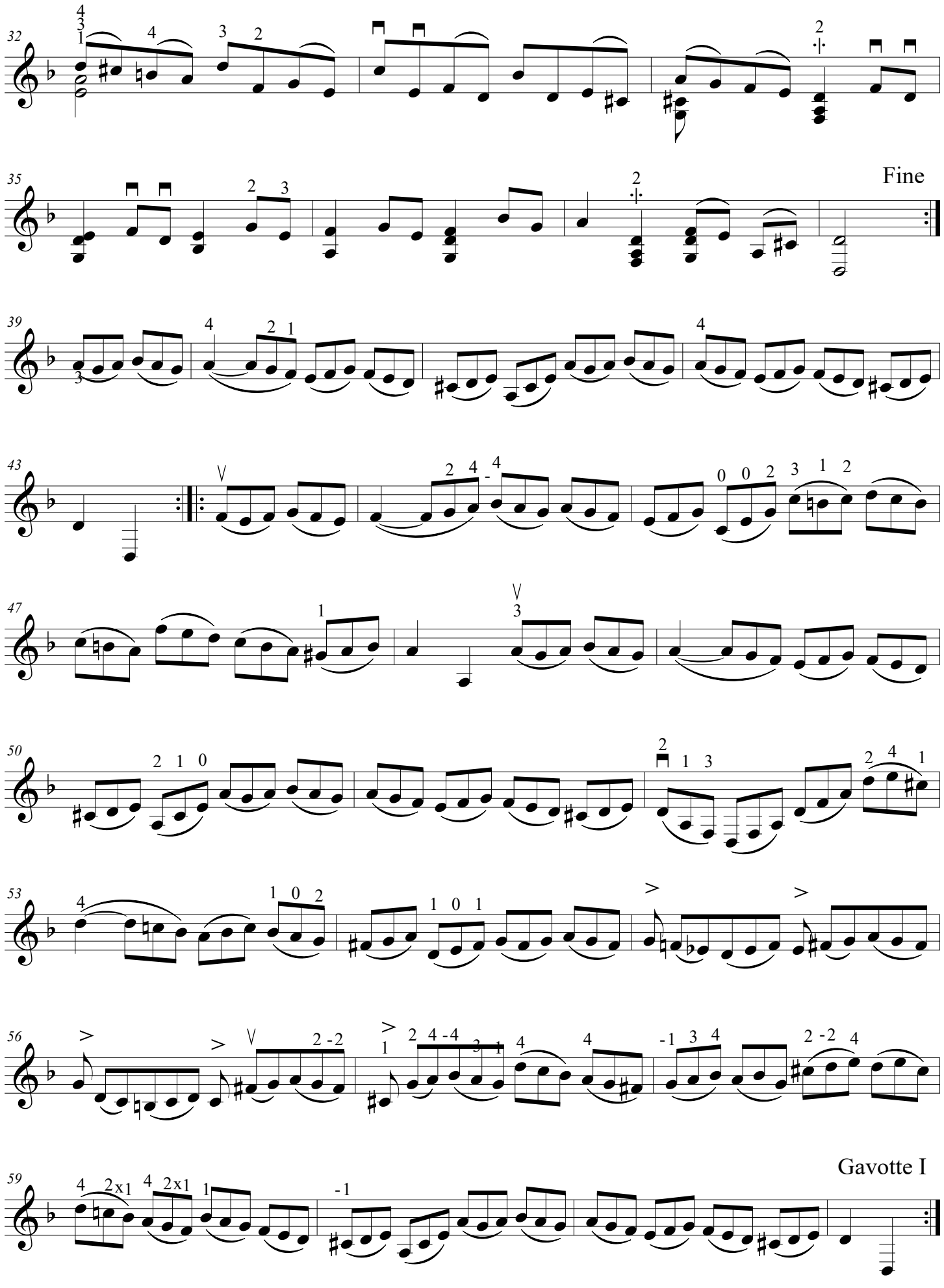
Treble viola da gamba

Gavotte I and II

Cello Sonata #5, BWV 1011

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)




32
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Fine
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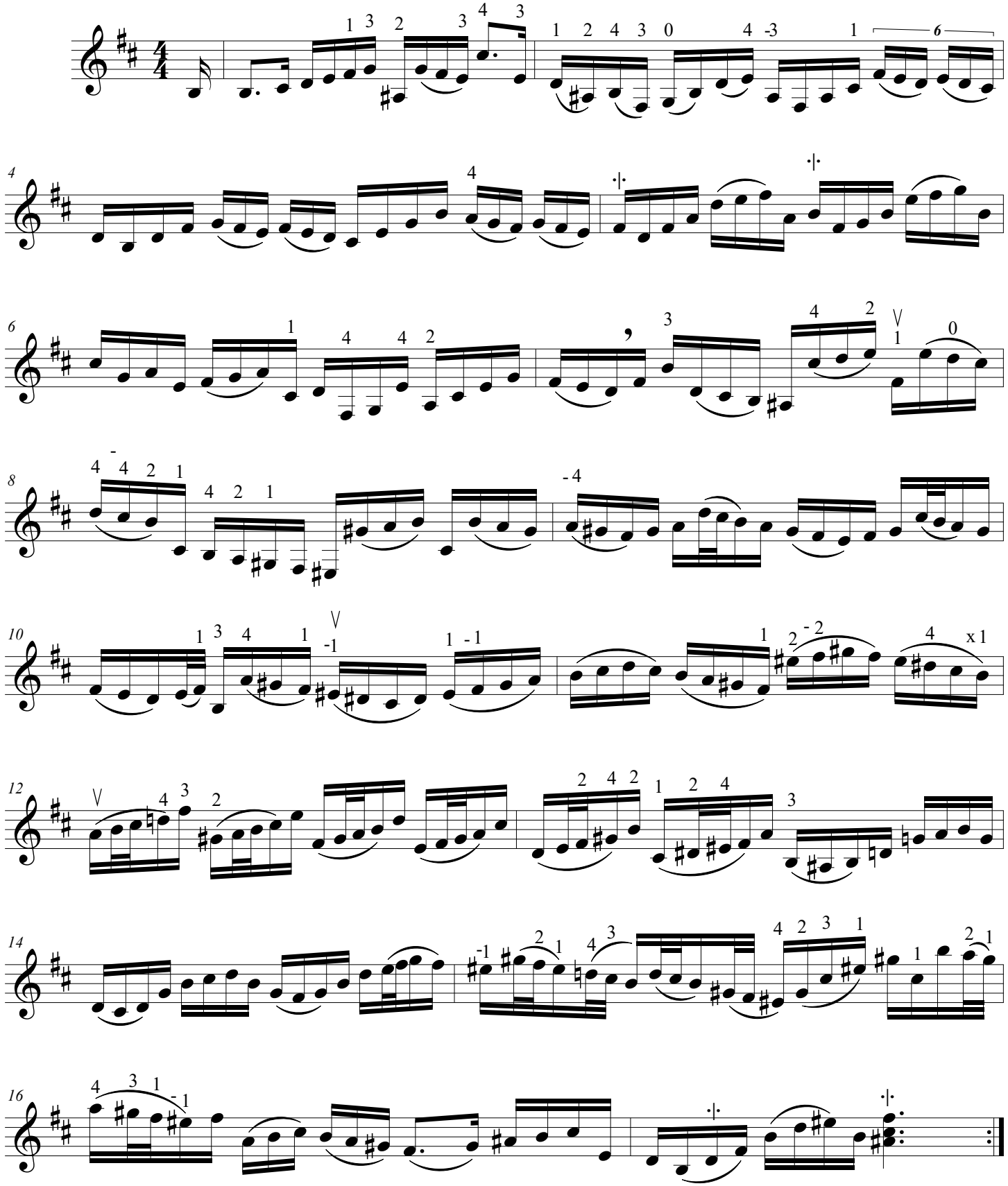
59
Gavotte I

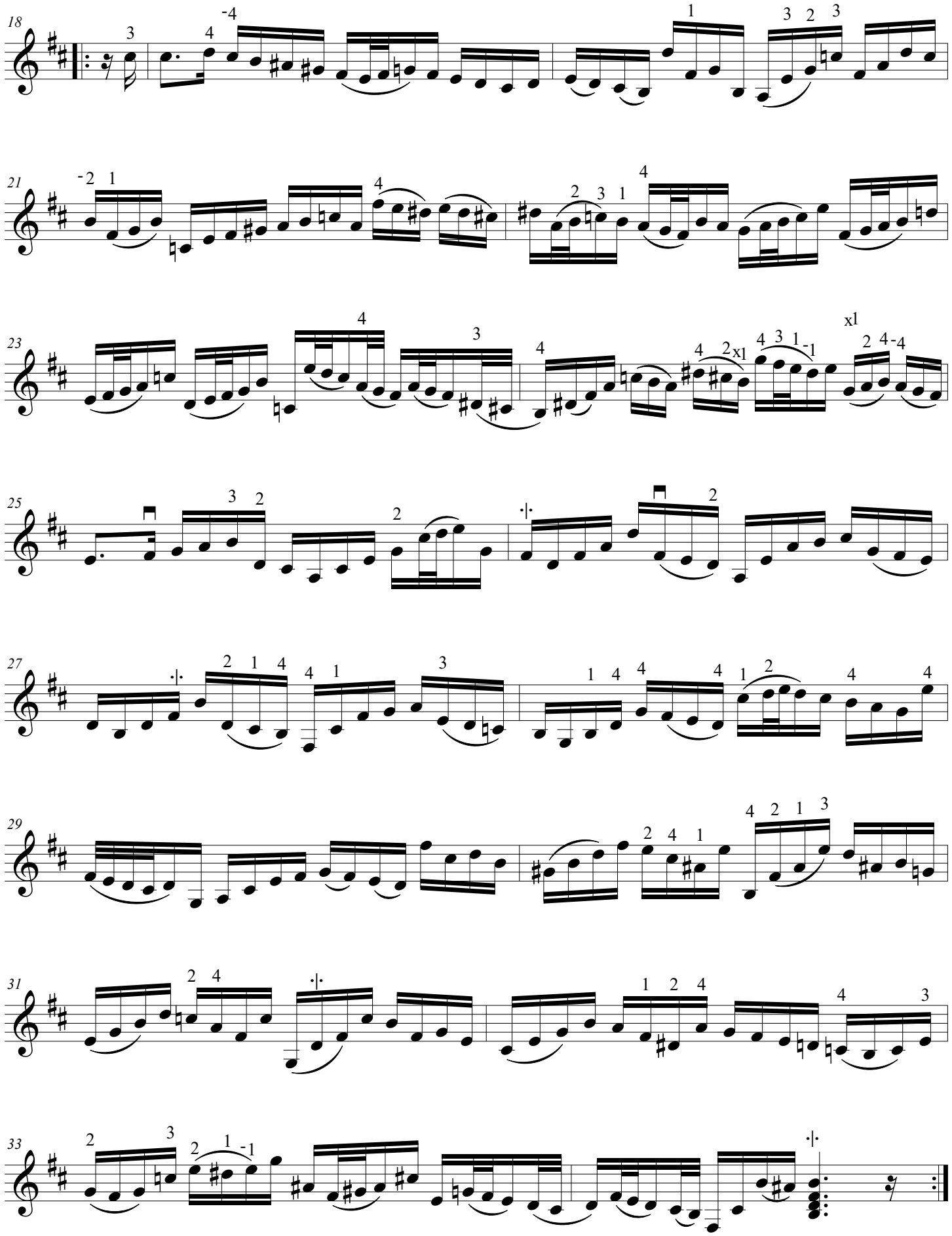
Treble viola da gamba

Allemande

Violin Partita #2, BWV 1005

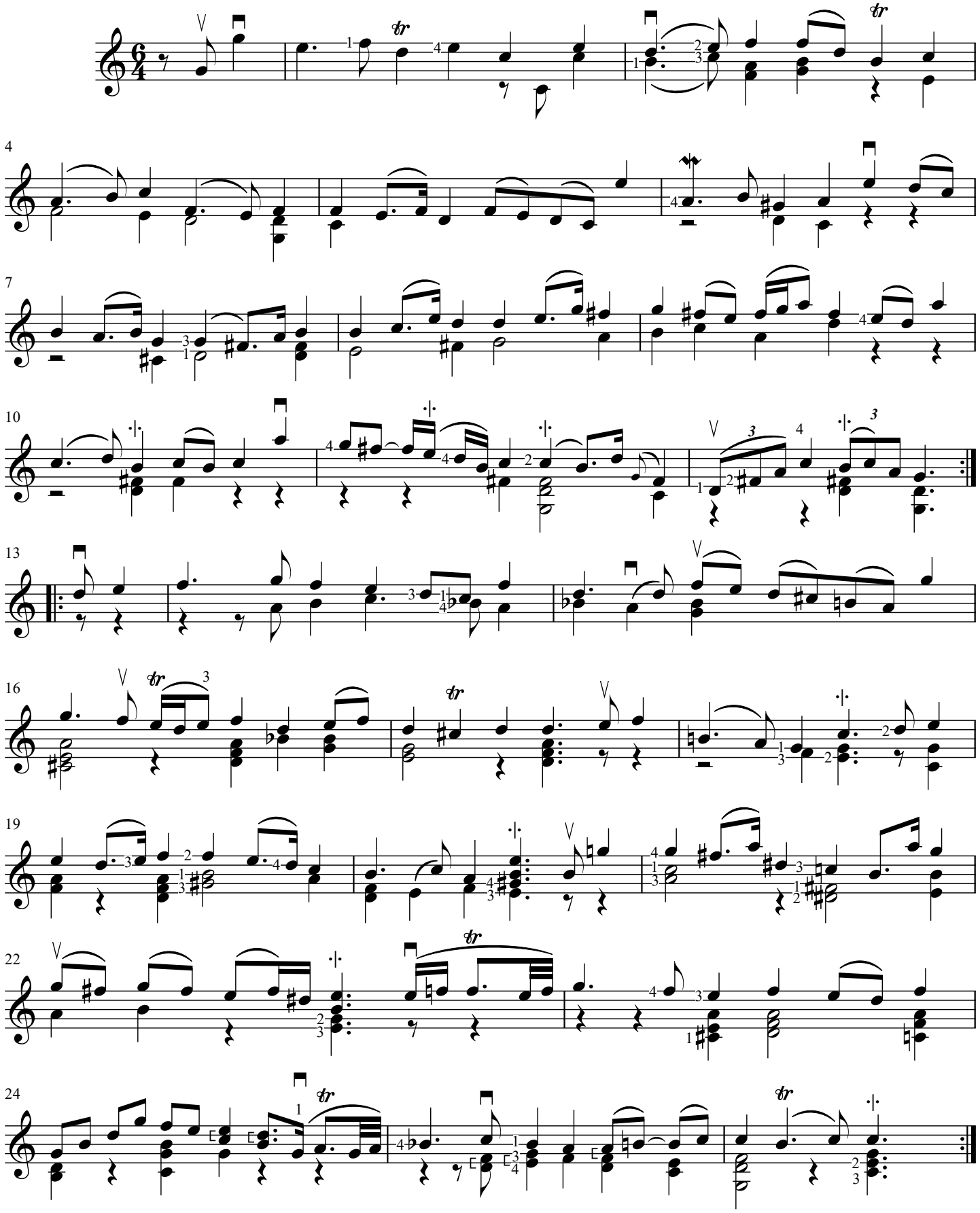
J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)





Treble viola da gamba

Loure

Violin Partita #1, BWV 1006

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)