A New Type of Musical Coherence

Module 17 of *Music: Under the Hood*

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Osher Course
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Outline

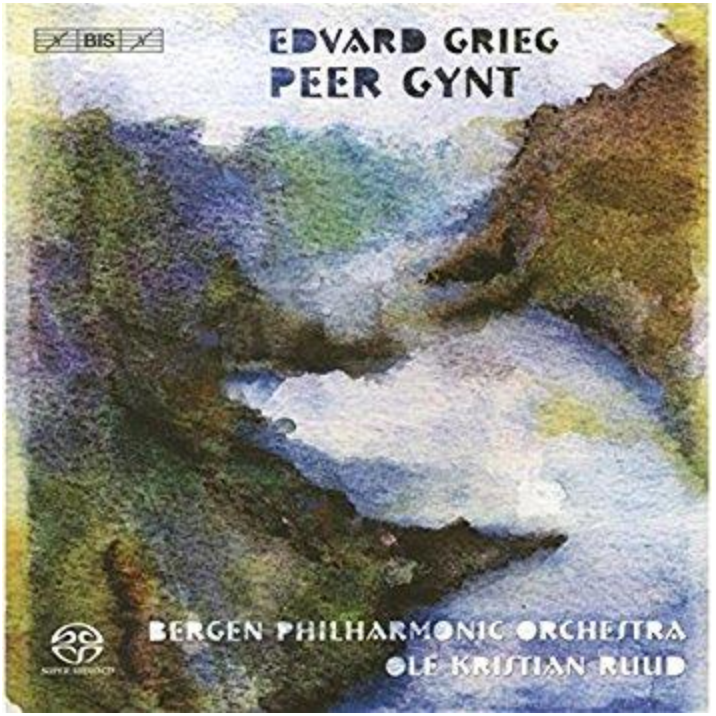
- Nationalism in music
- Biography of Claude Debussy
- Analysis of *Clair de lune*

Nationalism in Music

- Rise of ethic consciousness and nationalism
  - Late 19th century
  - Rooted in colonialism and development of the concept of “a culture.”
    - As described by new field of cultural anthropology.
    - Whence self-conscious “national culture.”
    - Remains with us today, for better or worse.

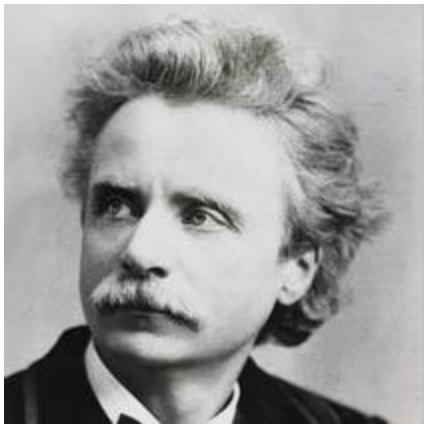
Nationalism in Music

- Rise of ethic consciousness and nationalism
  - Led to nationalistic styles in music
    - During late Romantic era
    - Often inspired by rejection of “development”
    - …and rejection of German domination of music scene.



Nationalism in Music

- Some nationalistic schools
  - Scandinavian
    - Edvard Grieg, Norway (1843-1907)
    - Carl Nielsen, Denmark (1865-1931)
    - Jan Sibelius, Finland (1865-1957)



Grieg

Sibelius

Nielsen

Nationalism in Music

- Some nationalistic schools
  - French
    - Georges Bizet (1838-1875)
    - Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
    - Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
    - Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

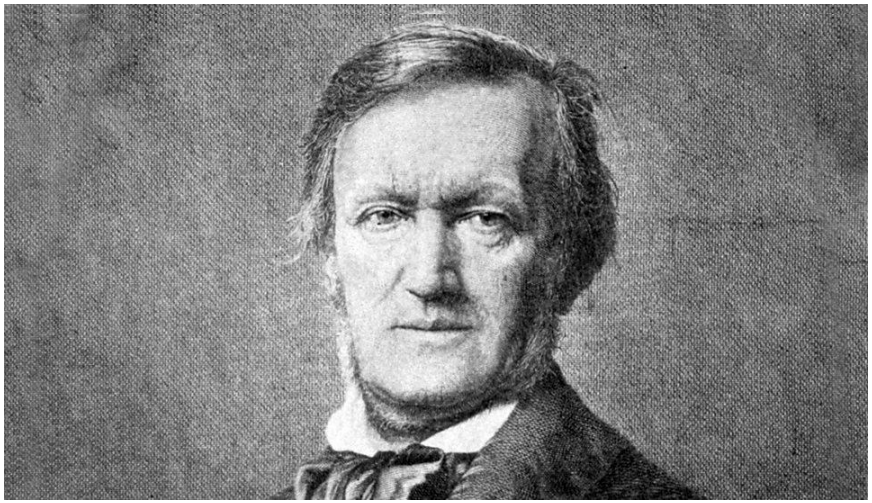
Ravel

Bizet

Saint-Saëns

Nationalism in Music

- Some nationalistic schools
  - German
    - Richard Wagner (1838-1875)



Nationalism in Music

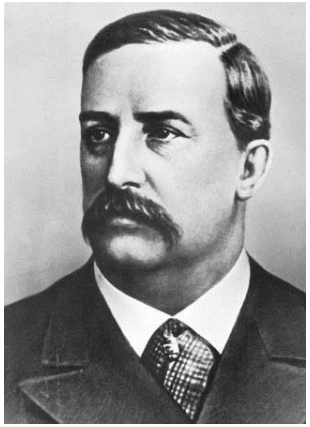
- Some nationalistic schools
  - Russian
    - Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
    - The “Russian Five”
      - Mily Balakirev (1837-1910)
      - Cesár Cui (1835-1918)
      - **Modest Mussorgsky** (1839-1881)
      - **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844-1908)
      - **Alexander Borodin** (1833-1887)

They took an oath to avoid development in their music! →

Rimsky-Korsakov

Mussorgsky

Tchaikovsky



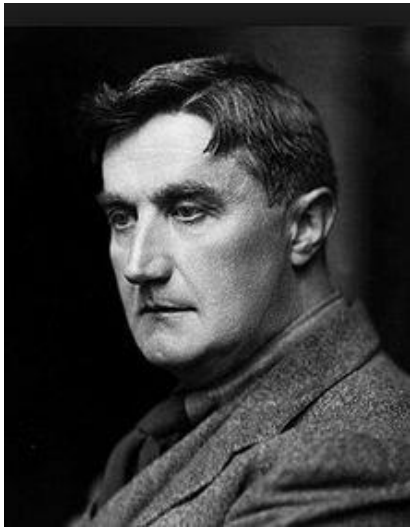
Borodin

Nationalism in Music

- Some nationalistic schools
  - British
    - Edward Elgar (1857-1934)
    - Gustav Holst (1874-1934)
    - Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Elgar

Holst



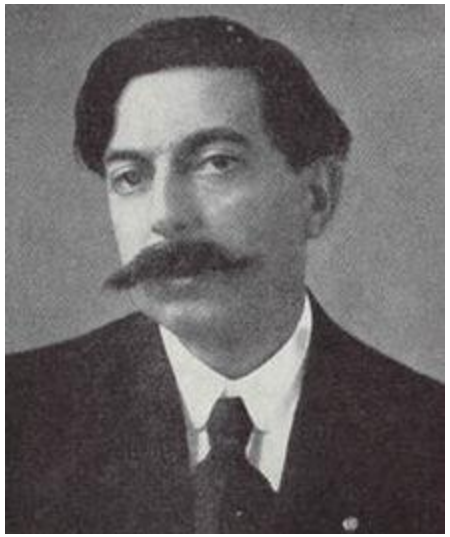
Vaughan Williams

Nationalism in Music

- Some nationalistic schools
  - Spanish
    - Issac Albeniz (1860-1909)
    - Manuel Da Falla (1876-1946)
    - Enrique Granados (1867-1916)

Albeniz

Da Falla



Granados

Nationalism in Music

- Some nationalistic schools
  - Czech/Slovak
    - Antonin Dvořák (1860-1909)
  - Hungarian
    - Franz (Ferenc) Liszt (1811-1886)

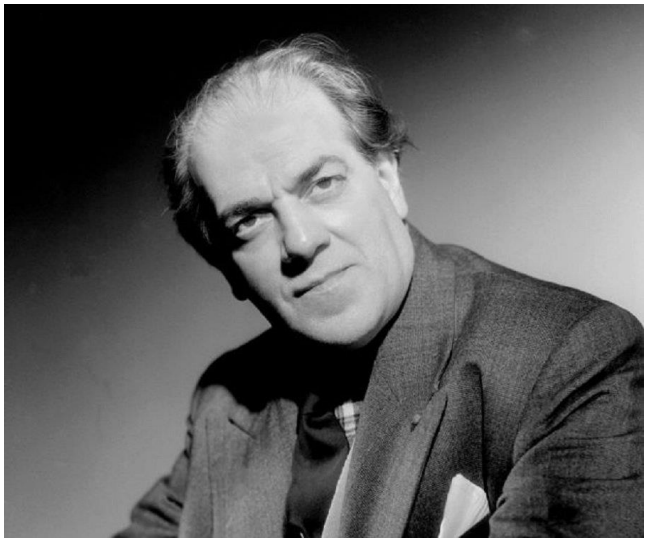
Liszt

Dvořák

Nationalism in Music

- Some nationalistic schools
  - Romanian
    - Georges Enescu (1881-1955)
  - Brazilian
    - Heitor Villa-Lobos, Brazil (1887-1959)

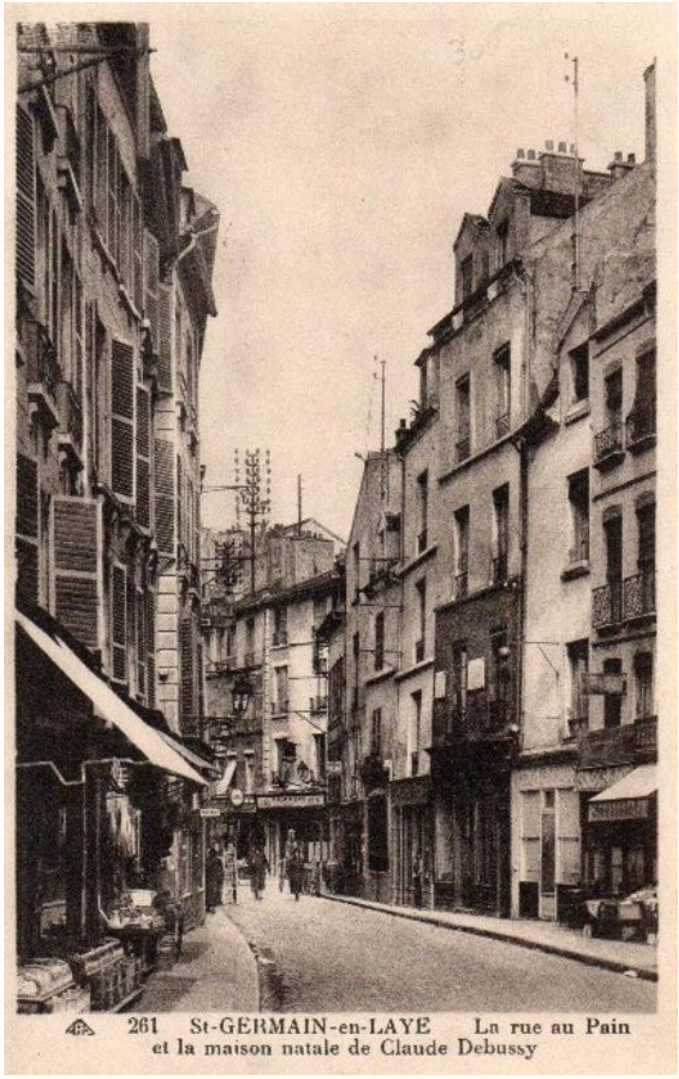
Enescu



Villa-Lobos

Biography

- Claude Debussy, 1862-1918
  - Born into poor French family
    - Aunt paid for piano lessons, age 7.
  - Entered Paris Conservatoire, age 10.
    - Studied composition, etc., 11 years
  - Sponsored by Nadezha von Meck, ages 18-20
    - She was wealthy patron of Tchaikovsky



Where Debussy was born

Biography

- Career
  - Received *Prix de Rome* composition prize, age 22
    - Included 4-year fellowship in Italy
    - Left after 2 years.
  - Went to Bayreuth, age 28
    - Strongly influenced by Wagner's *Tristan & Isolde,* which pushed boundaries of tonality.
    - But later ridiculed the music in *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*

Biography

- Career
  - Musical milestones
    - *Suite Bergamasque*, ages 28-33.
    - *Prélude à l'après-midi d'une faune*, age 32.
    - *Pelléas et Mélisande*, opera, age 40, after 10 years of work
    - *La mer*, age 43
    - *Children's Corner Suite,* age 46*,* dedicated to his daughter*.*
    - *Préludes* for piano, first book, his best composition for piano, age 48

Biography

- Personal life
  - Tumultuous
    - Various wives, mistresses
    - One of whom shot herself (but survived)
    - “He was a very, very strange man.”
    - But was devoted to his daughter.

Debussy and daughter Claude-Emma

Biography

- Personal life
  - Tumultuous
    - Various wives, mistresses
    - One of whom shot herself (but survived)
    - “He was a very, very strange man.”
    - But was devoted to his daughter.
  - Died of cancer, age 55.
    - Daughter died a year later from diptheria at age 14, due to doctor prescribing wrong medicine

Debussy and daughter Claude-Emma

Biography

- Approach to composition
  - Perhaps not self-consciously nationalistic
    - But keenly interested in **symbolist** movement of French literature
      - Discussions with Stéphane Mallarmé about Wagner, Edgar Allen Poe
      - The purpose of art is “to depict not the thing but the effect it produces,” according to Mallarmé.

Manet’s portrait of Mallarmé

Biography

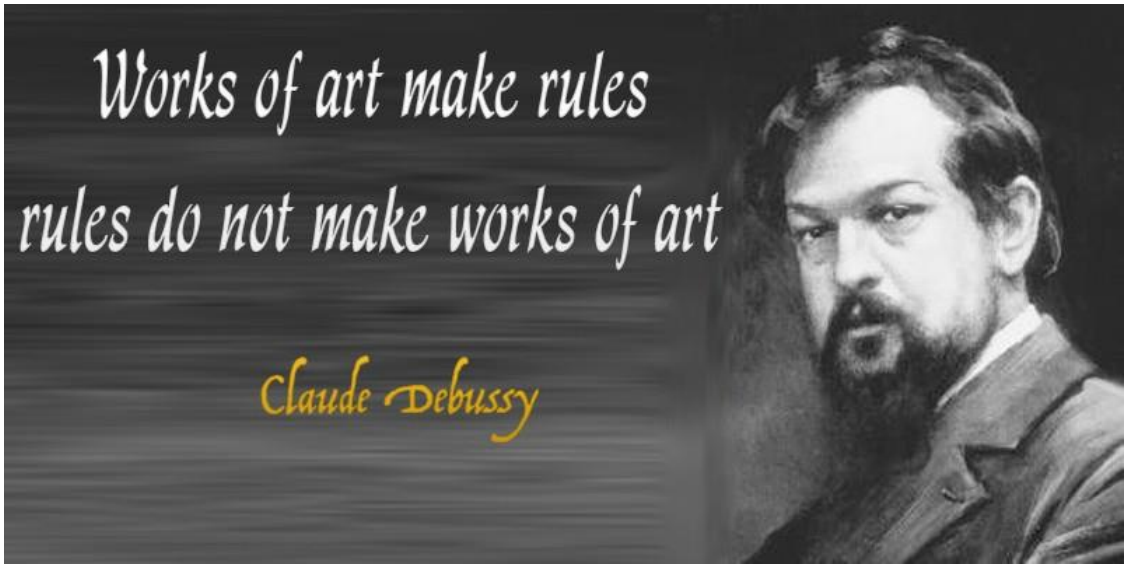
- Approach to composition
  - Perhaps not self-consciously nationalistic
    - Often identified with French **impressionism** in art
      - Debussy himself **rejected** this identification
      - He liked J. M. W. Turner.
    - Unclear what symbolism or impressionism can mean in a **non-representational** medium.

Biography

- Approach to composition
  - Always experimental, on the cutting edge
    - Departed somewhat from tonality.
    - Nonstandard scales
      - Modes, whole-tone
    - Parallel and “nonfunctional” harmonies.
      - *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (1:04)
      - We will see something similar from Jule Styne!
    - Late pieces are scarcely tonal.
      - Préludes, book 2

Biography

- Approach to composition
  - Debussy's fundamental challenge
    - Find a new type of musical coherence
    - A new type of organization for an abstract medium

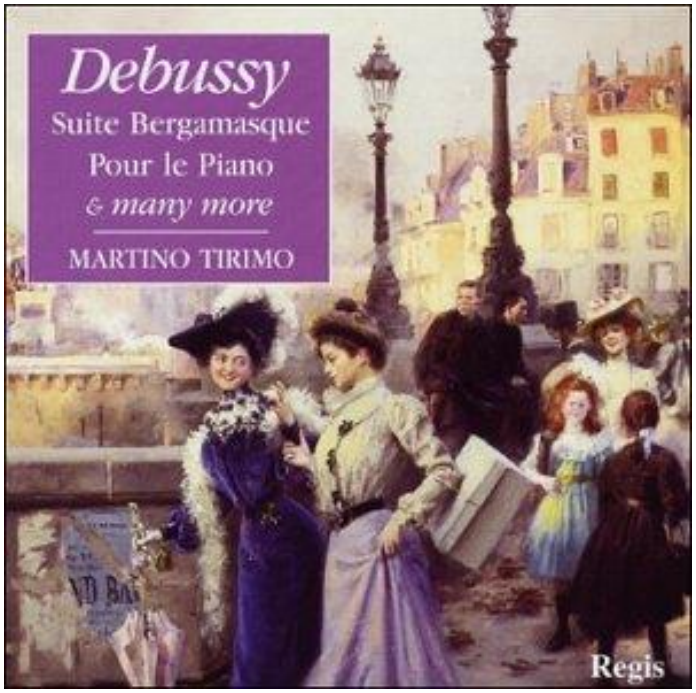


Biography

- Legacy
  - Closed out the romantic era
    - Pushed tonal framework to the limit.
    - Even though Mahler, Bruckner were yet to come.
  - Innovative harmony influenced many
    - Stravinsky, Bartók, Boulez, Villa-Lobos
    - Gershwin, Ellington, Strayhorn
  - Particular influence on jazz
    - 9^{th}, 11^{th}, 13^{th} chords and other tensions.

Clair de Lune

- Movement 3 of *Suite Bergamasque*
  - 1890, substantially revised 1905.
  - *Bergamasque* = a type of country dance
    - *Clair de Lune* (Moonlight) is not a dance!
    - Debussy originally called it *Promenade sentimentale.*



Clair de Lune

- Perhaps Debussy's best-known composition
  - Successfully blends traditional and novel techniques to achieve coherence.
    - Easy to follow because this early work relies primarily on traditional methods.

Clair de Lune

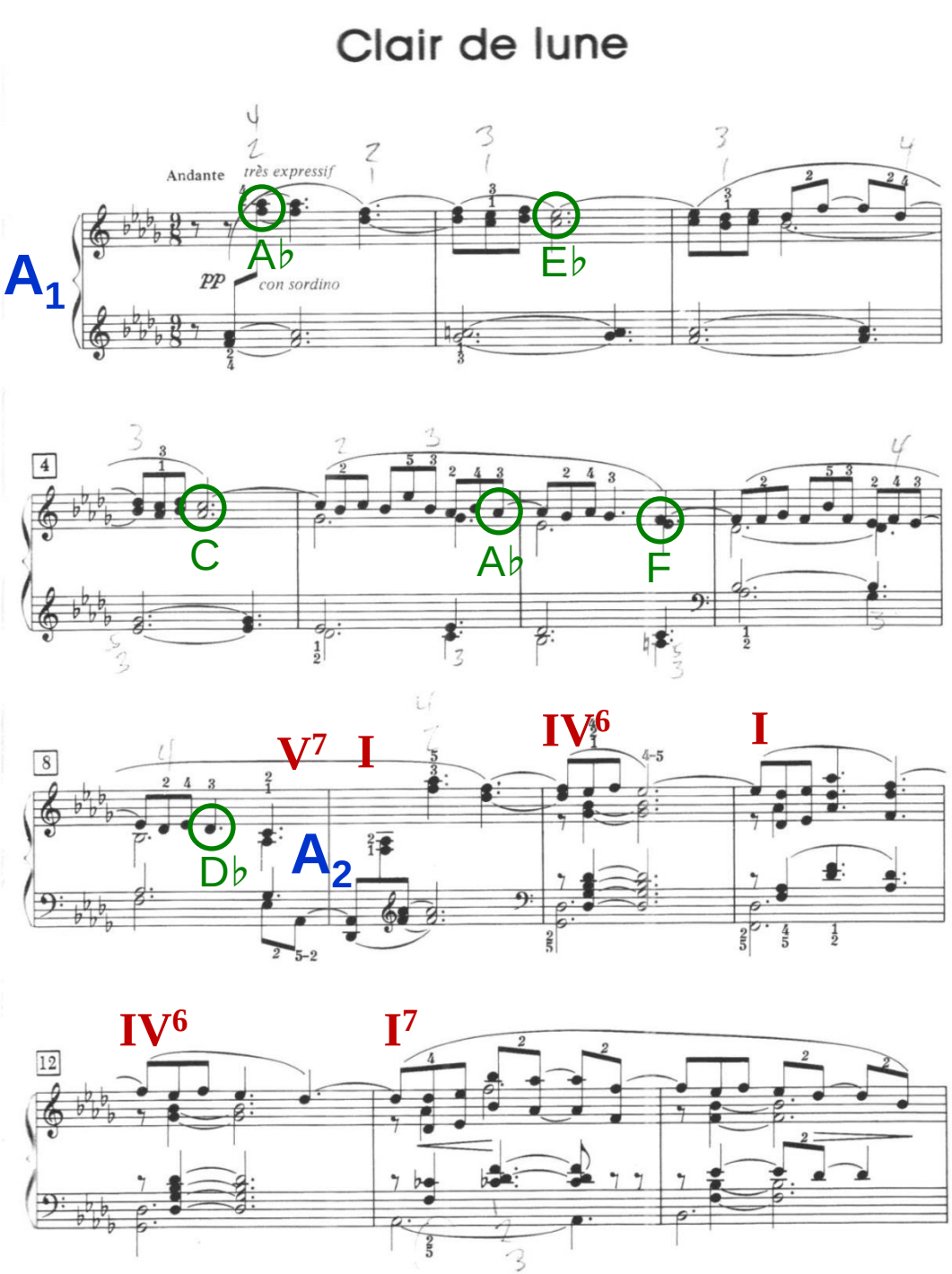
- Traditional organizational techniques
  - Approximate sonata allegro form
  - Tonal center (D♭ major)
  - Unifying motif
  - Melody based on major triads
  - Some traditional **V-I** cadences
- Debussy's own techniques
  - Couplets
  - Replace **I-V-I** with **I-III♭-I**

Audio file

Approximate sonata allegro form:
$A_1A_2BA_3$+Coda

Melody consists of major triads.
V: A♭ E♭ C A♭
I: A♭ F D♭
A classic technique.
Compare with Mozart

Classic **V^7-I** cadence, then **I-IV-I** progression.
"Cheats" by borrowing traditional expectations.

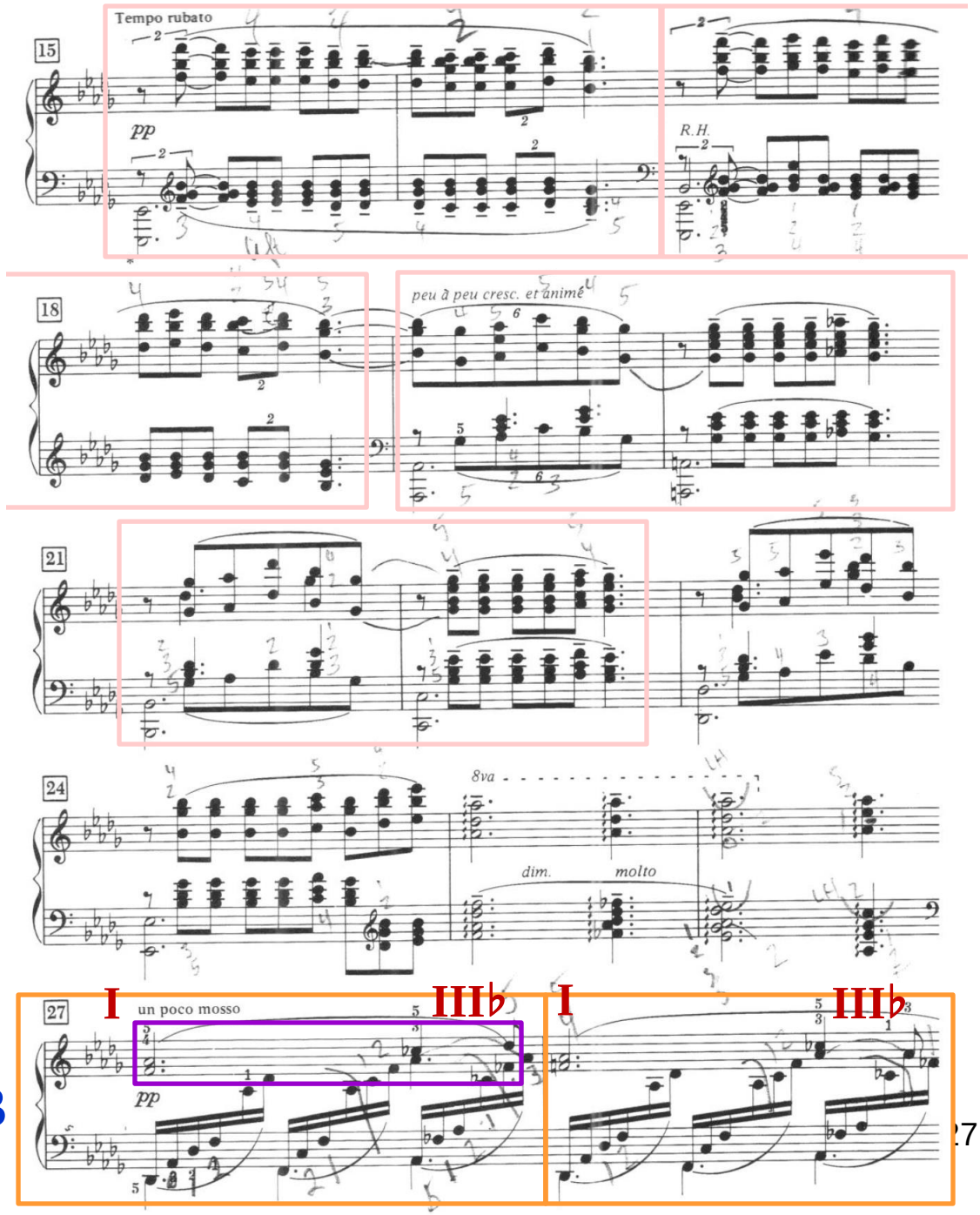


Couplets with approximate repetition

I-III♭-I replaces **I-V-I** (pivot on A♭)

Melodic & rhythmic motif

Couplets with almost literal repetition



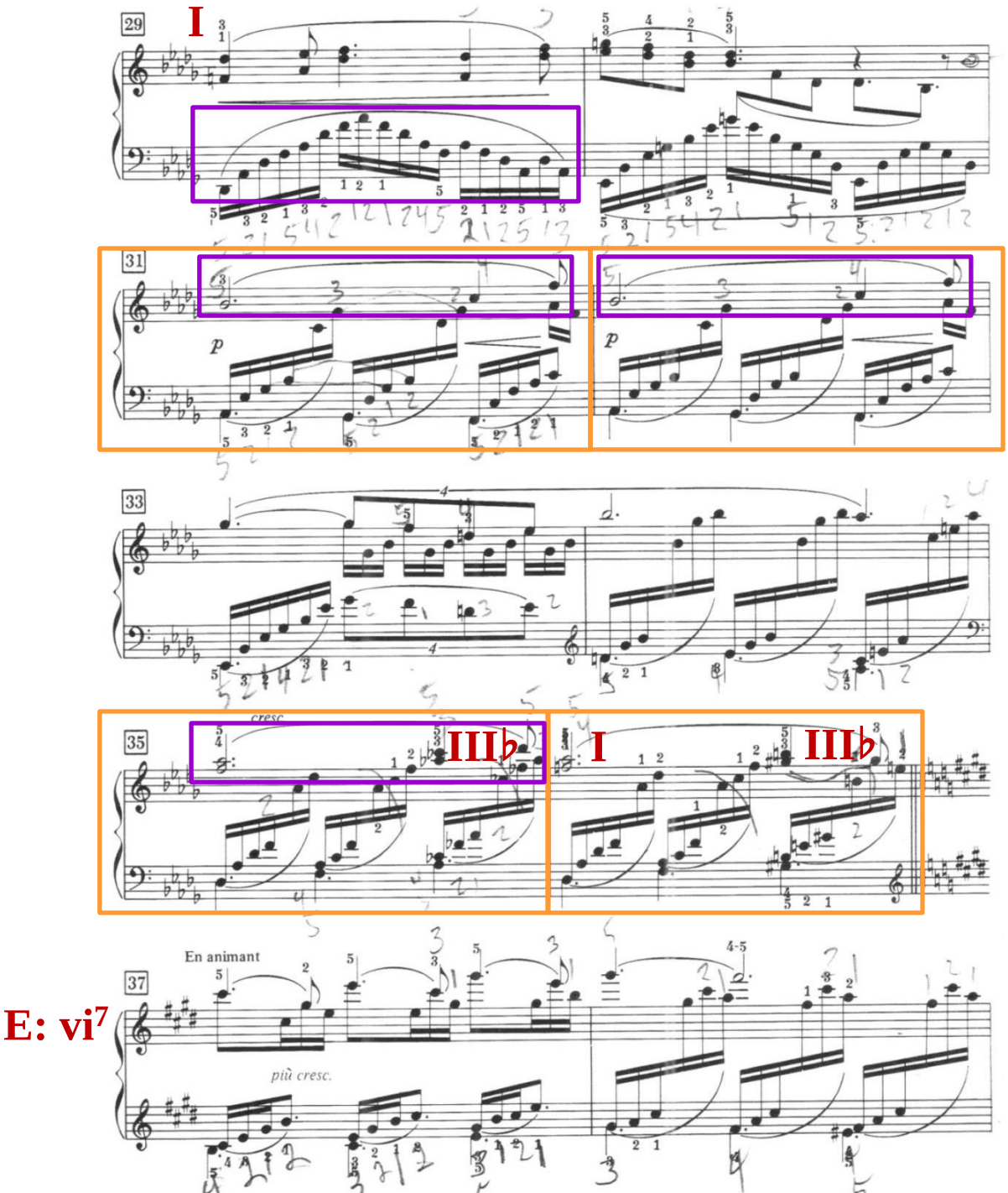
B

Rhythmic motif

Melodic & rhythmic motif

Couplets with almost literal repetition

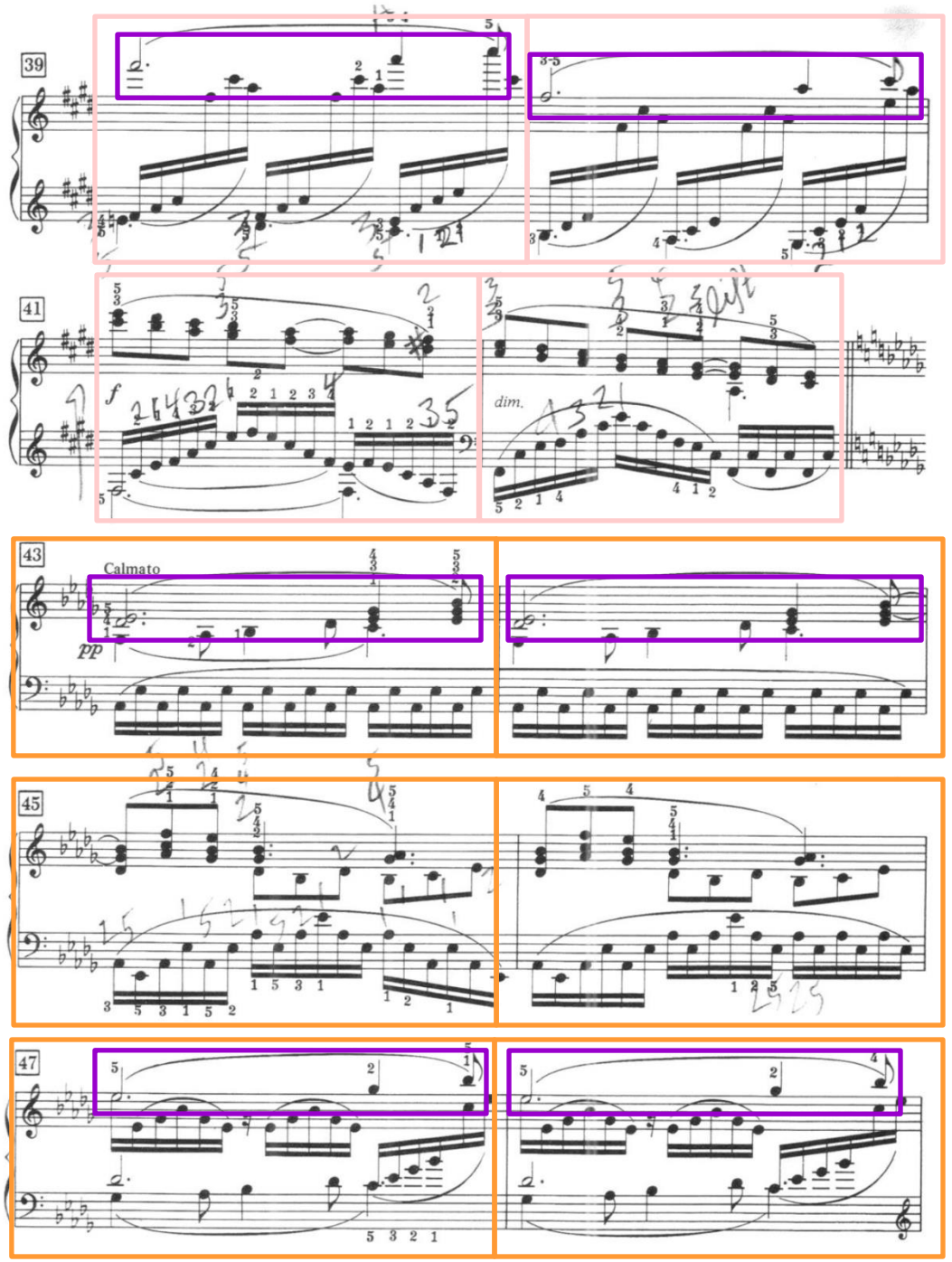
III♭-I cadence, then remain in **III♭** (spelled as E major).



Melodic & rhythmic motif

Couplets with approximate repetition

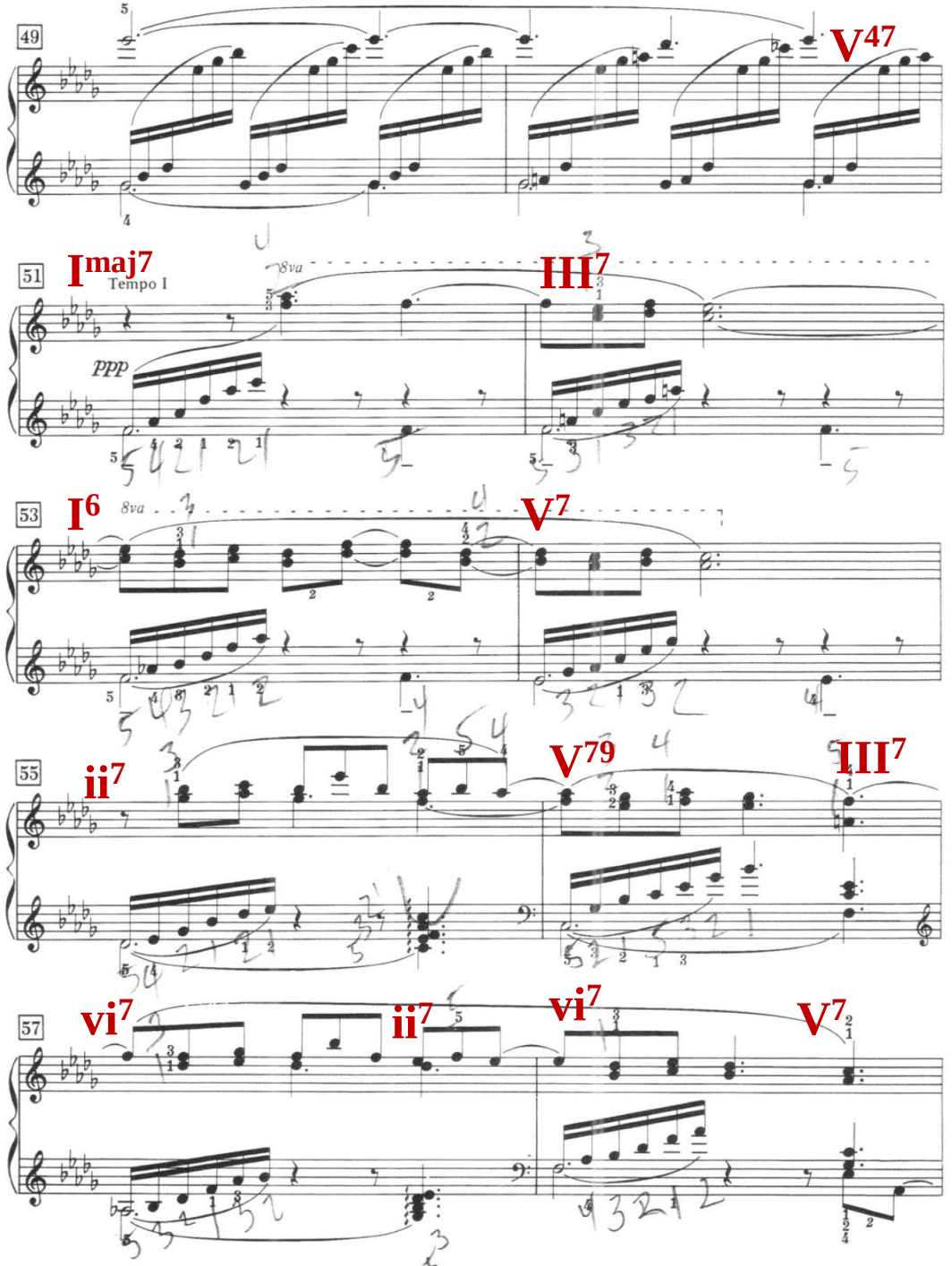
Couplets with almost literal repetition



Return to recapitulation with V^7-I^{maj7} cadence.
(but suspended 4th in V^7,
Tonic omitted from I^{maj7})

Fairly standard progression.

Move to coda with traditional V^7-I^7 cadence



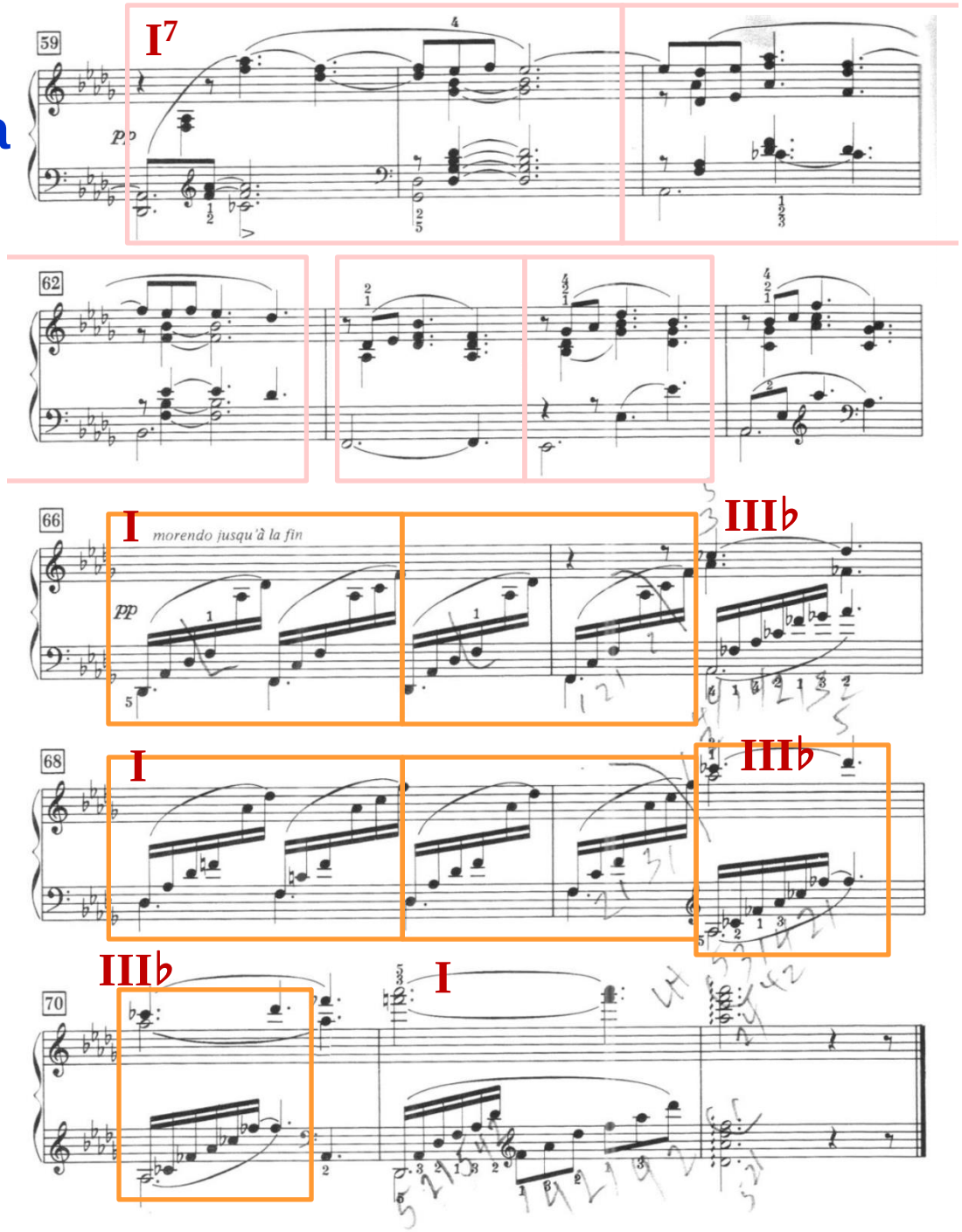
Coda

Couplets with approximate repetition

Couplets with almost literal repetition

I-III♭-I replaces **I-V-I**

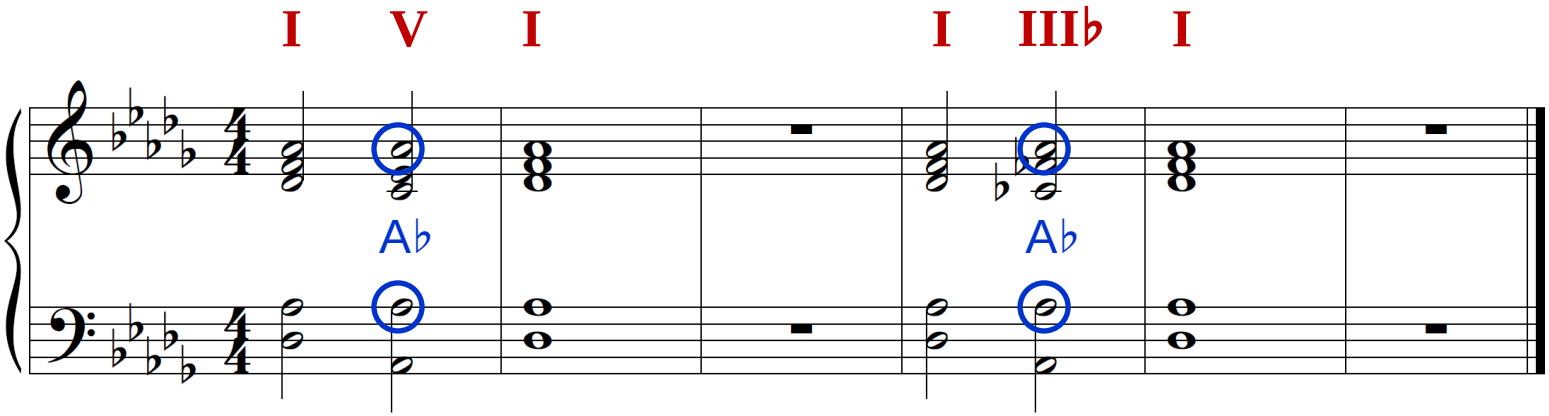
Conclude with **III♭-I** cadence rather than **V-I**



Couplets, an ancient technique used in Hebrew poetry (e.g. the *Psalms* of David) help the ear digest the music.

Psalm 8 (KJV)

[**1**] O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.
[**2**] Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.
[**3**] When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
[**4**] What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
[**5**] For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.
[**6**] Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:
[**7**] All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;
[**8**] The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.
[**9**] O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

Audio file

Replace **I-V-I** with **I-III♭-I** by pivoting on A♭