VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS

- For Educational Use Only -

Theme of Crono (Main Theme)

from Chrono Trigger

Composed by Yasunori Mitsuda
Transcription/Anaysis by Seventh Sam
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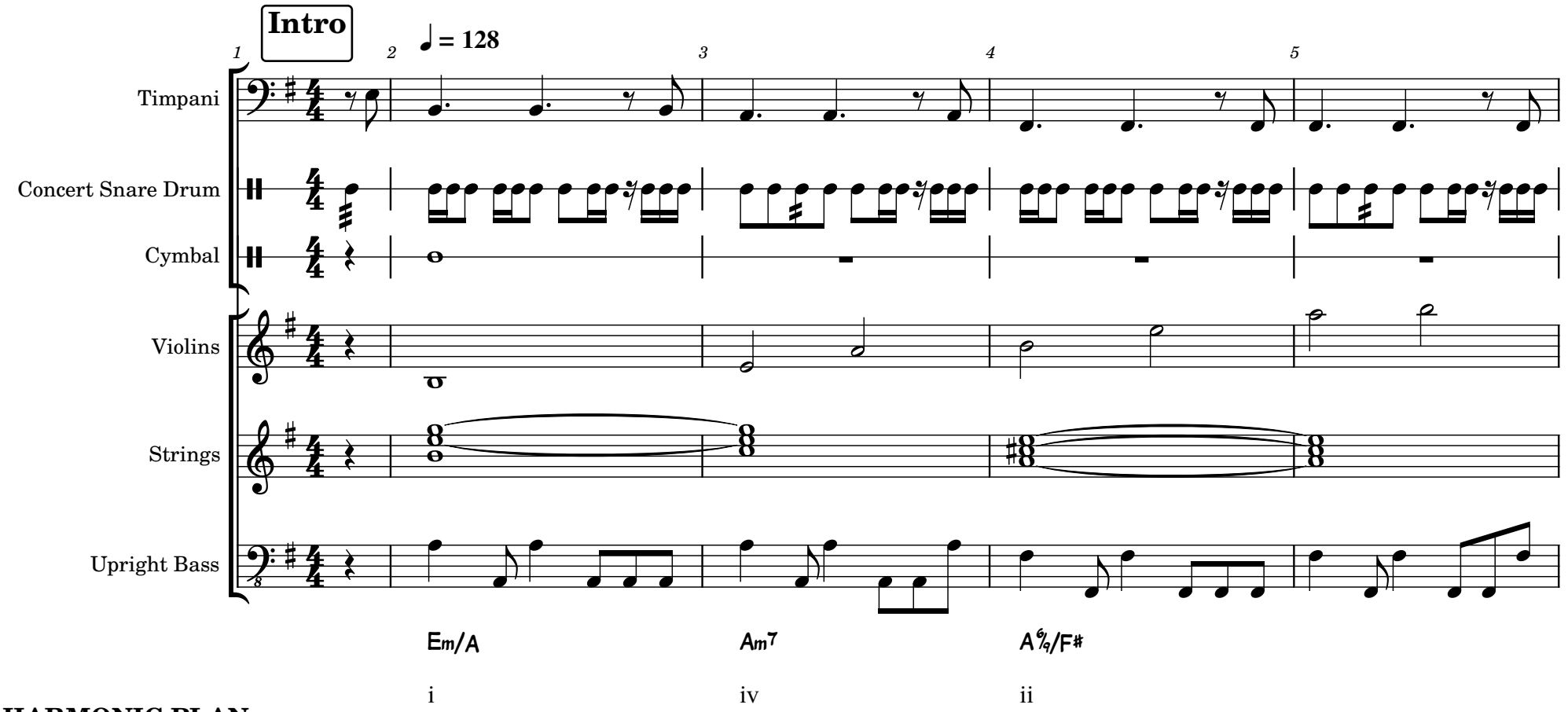


HARMONIC PLAN:

The key to understanding the harmony is in looking at the bass line and melody and seeing how those interact and color and extend the triads voiced by the inner string section. Given that almost every chord in this track is highly extended, the roman numeral analysis is here only to indicate the implied diatonic functionality of the chords.

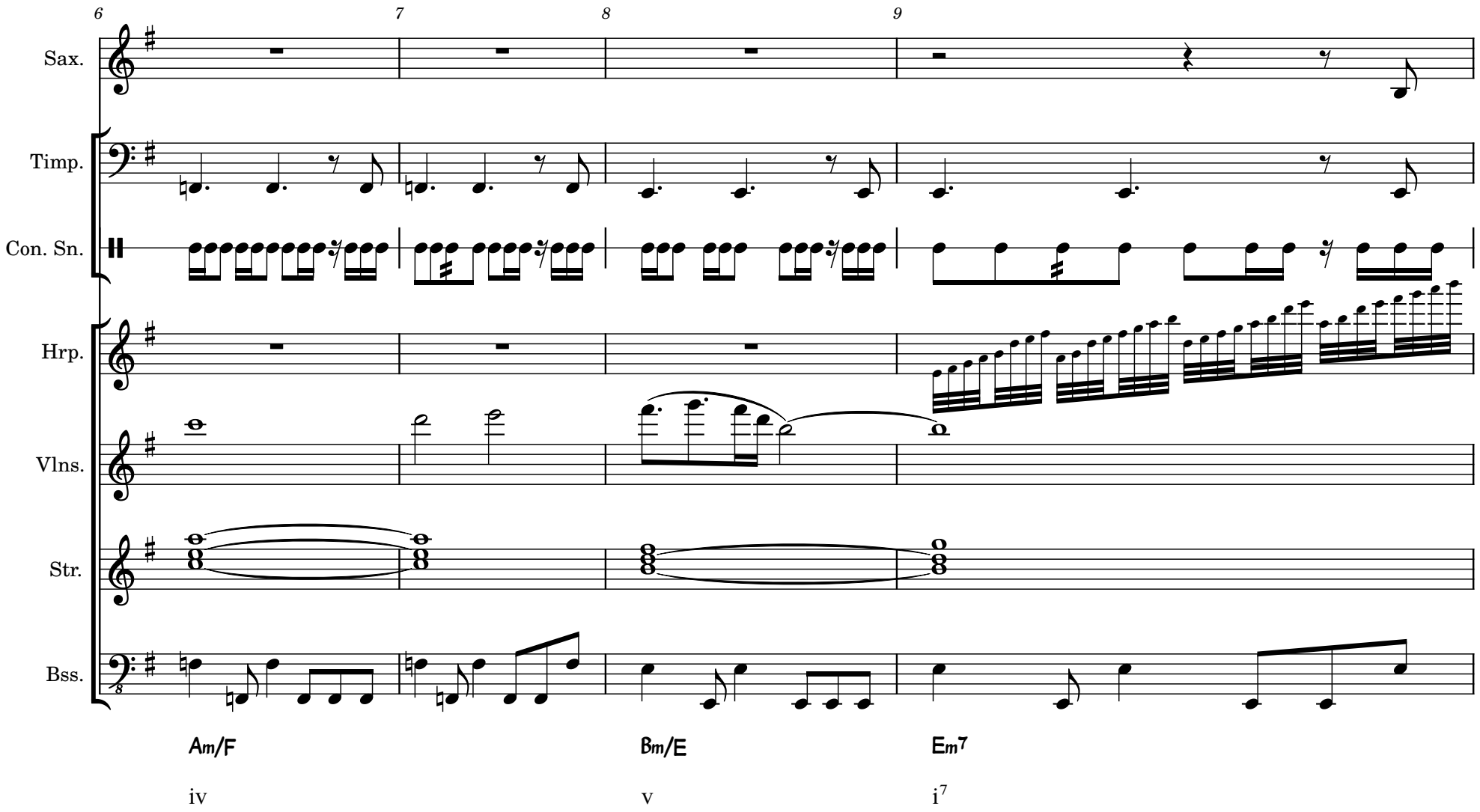
1) mm. 2-3: The triads progress from Em (E-G-B) to C (C-E-G), yet the bass line plays the note A consistently. This extends both chords and allows for the smooth voicing of the bass to follow.

2) mm. 4 voices an A chord in the strings (A-C#-E), but the melody and bass add tones that essentially form an A6/9 chord, a rather unexpected turn from what we were just hearing.

3) mm. 6 slides the bass down to F natural and the strings play an Am chord (A-C-E). Along with the F natural, the chord heard is an Fmaj7, but the implied functionality is that of a predominant iv chord since Fmaj7 contains the Am (iv chord) triad, which is coincidentally voiced *as a triad*.

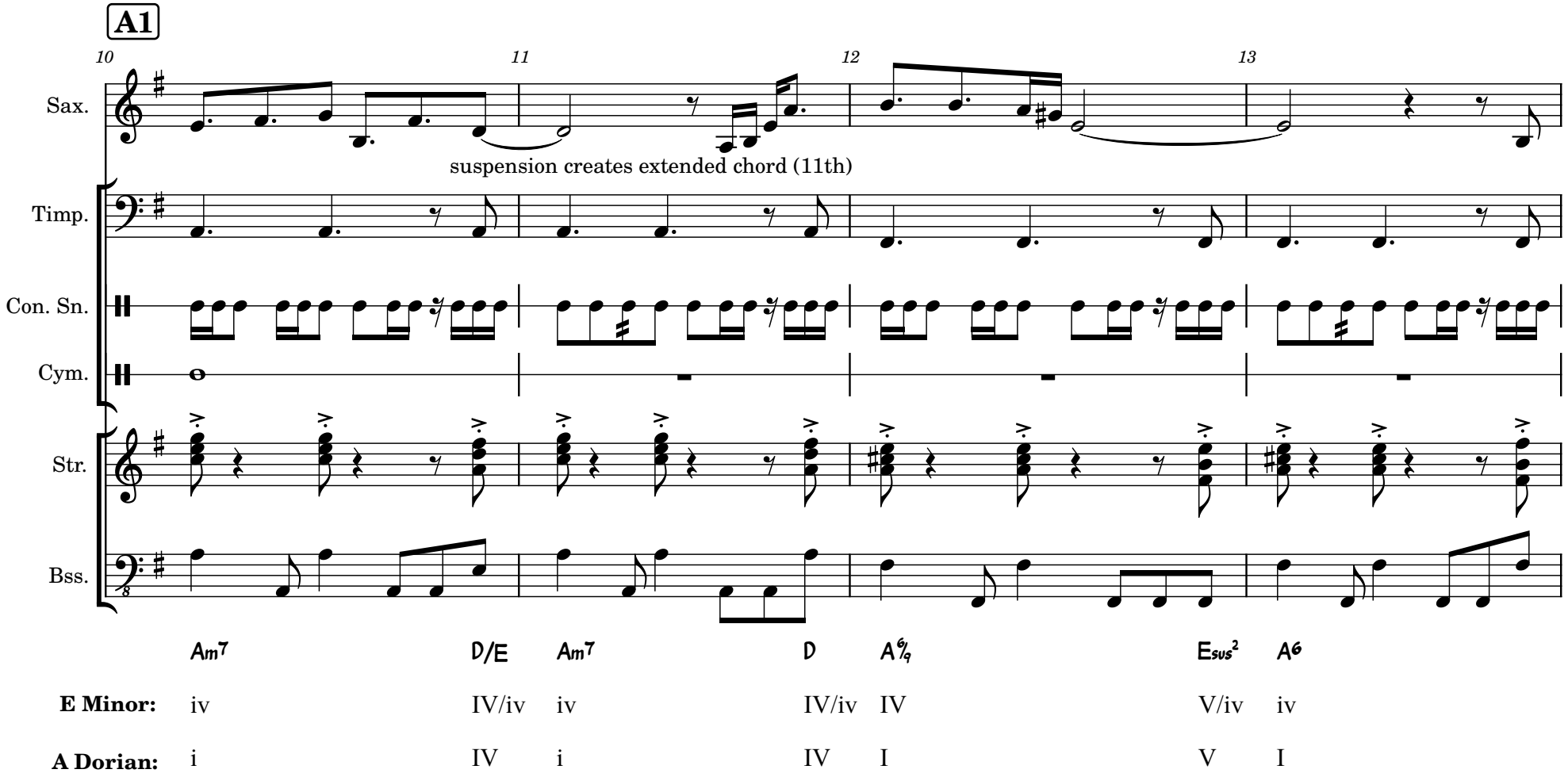
4) mm. 8 completes the bass movement by chromatic step to E, the tonic note. The triad played by the strings is Bm - the natural dominant of the key - but the E natural in the bass as well as various notes in the melody color the chord.

By now, you might be noticing a pattern: Mitsuda implies standard, functional progressions by voicing basic triads in the inner voices, and then extends, colors, and tastefully obfuscates that function with the use of extended notes in the bass and melody. This is one of the key elements that contributes to his unique, signature sound and style.



CROSS RHYTHMS:
The entire A section is permeated by a cross rhythm, a juxtaposition of two groupings:
- The bass and timpani (and later, the strings) play in a 3+3+2 grouping.
- The snare drums, the strings in the intro, and - to a certain extent - the saxophone play in 2+2+2+2 groupings.

Mm. 8 in the Violins: This motif - of a descending major 7th chord in first inversion - is one that Mitsuda will re-use throughout the entire soundtrack. Ex: Magus Battle, Schala's Theme, Corridors of Time...



E MINOR or A DORIAN?

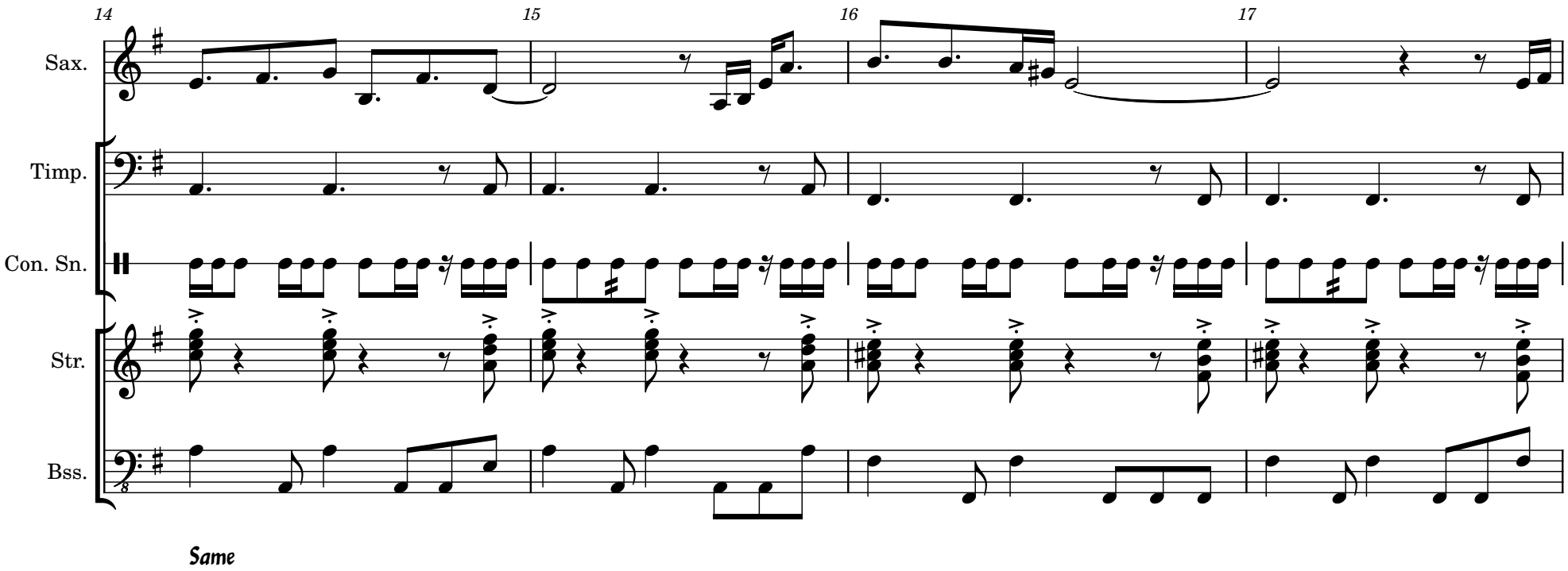
You might notice that the key is in E minor, but the harmony suggests the parallel Dorian mode (A Dorian). Take a look at the roman numeral analysis and you'll see what I mean. So which one is it?

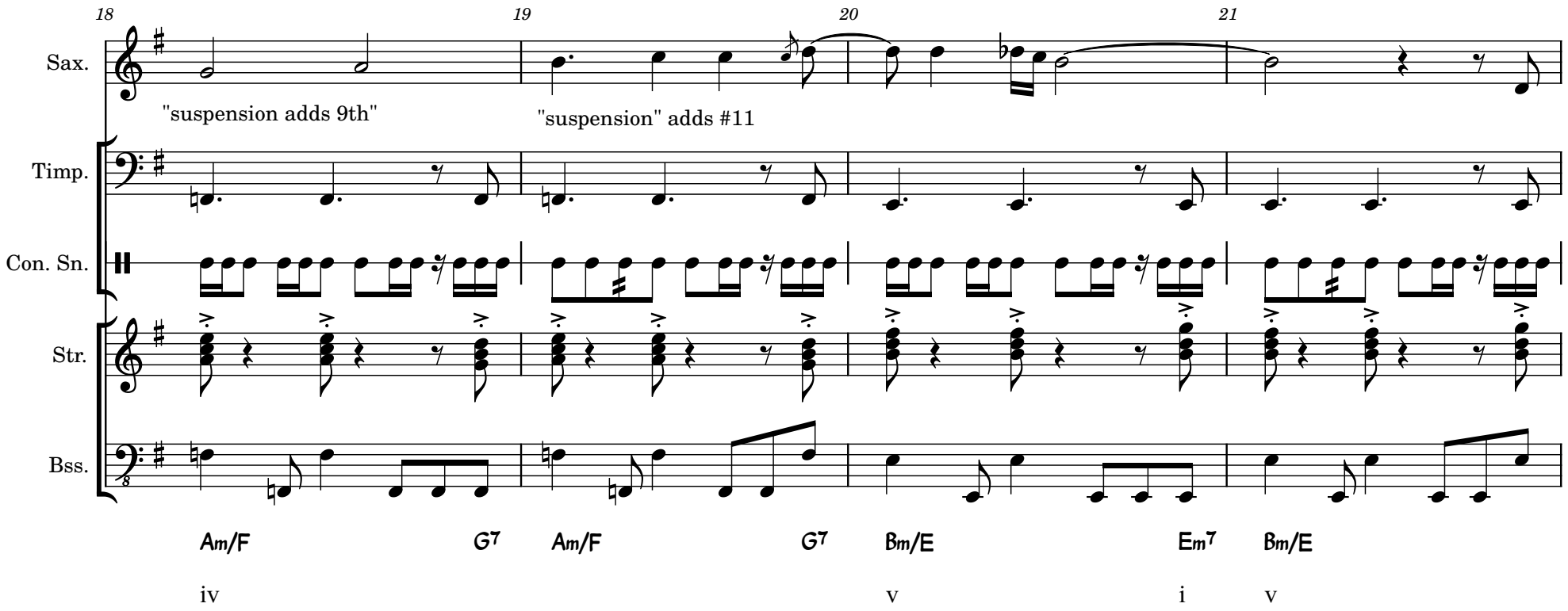
I would say that it's both:

- The harmony, which is again a combination of simple triads and extended tones in the bass/melody, is pretty clearly focusing around some form of A and D chords.
- The melody, on the other hand, keeps landing on E as if it's the tonic note, starting and ending the phrase on it.

In mm. 12-13, the introduction of C# in the strings and G# in the melody implies E major/A major, and gives a nice, bright contrast to the preceding to measures.

NOTE: Diminished 3+3+2 groupings make up the rhythmic motivic foundation of the melody.


14
15
16
17
Sax.
Timp.
Con. Sn.
Str.
Bss.
Same

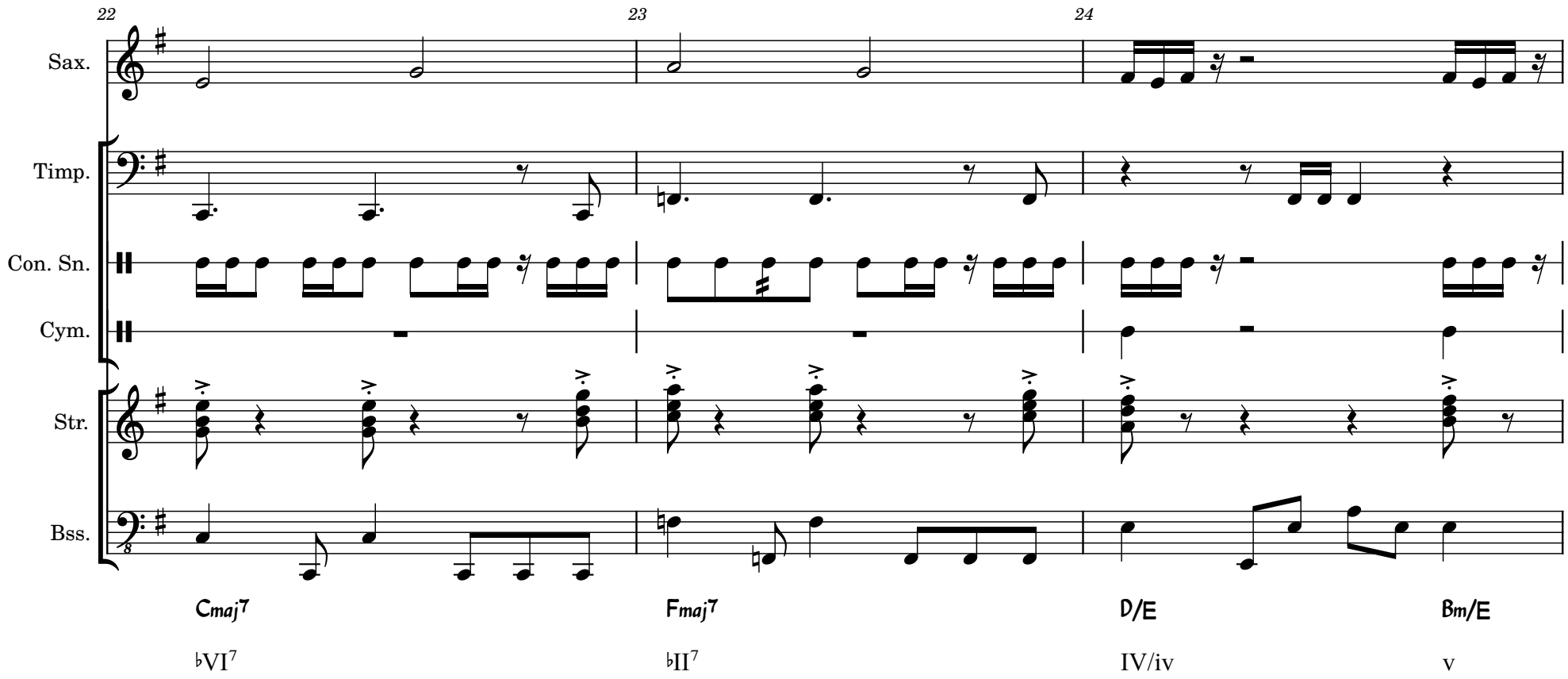


Again, Am/F = Fmaj7. In this case, Fmaj7 is extended to a the #11 via suspensions in the melody, but the underlying emphasis of the harmony on the A minor triad suggests a (highly colorful and non-traditional) pre-dominant function to the upcoming natural dominant chord (Bm).

NOTE: The G7 chords are really G major triads resolving quickly to the Am triad (a bVII->i cadence in A minor) The only thing that makes it a 7 chord is the F natural that stays constant in the bass - the chord doesn't actually serve a dominant function as it usually does.

The chromatic, descending passing tone figure in mm. 20 of the Sax is another motif that Mitsuda uses throughout the soundtrack.

The bass line mimics the descending chromaticism from the intro section. Note that in mm. 24 both chords are voiced over E, the tonic note.

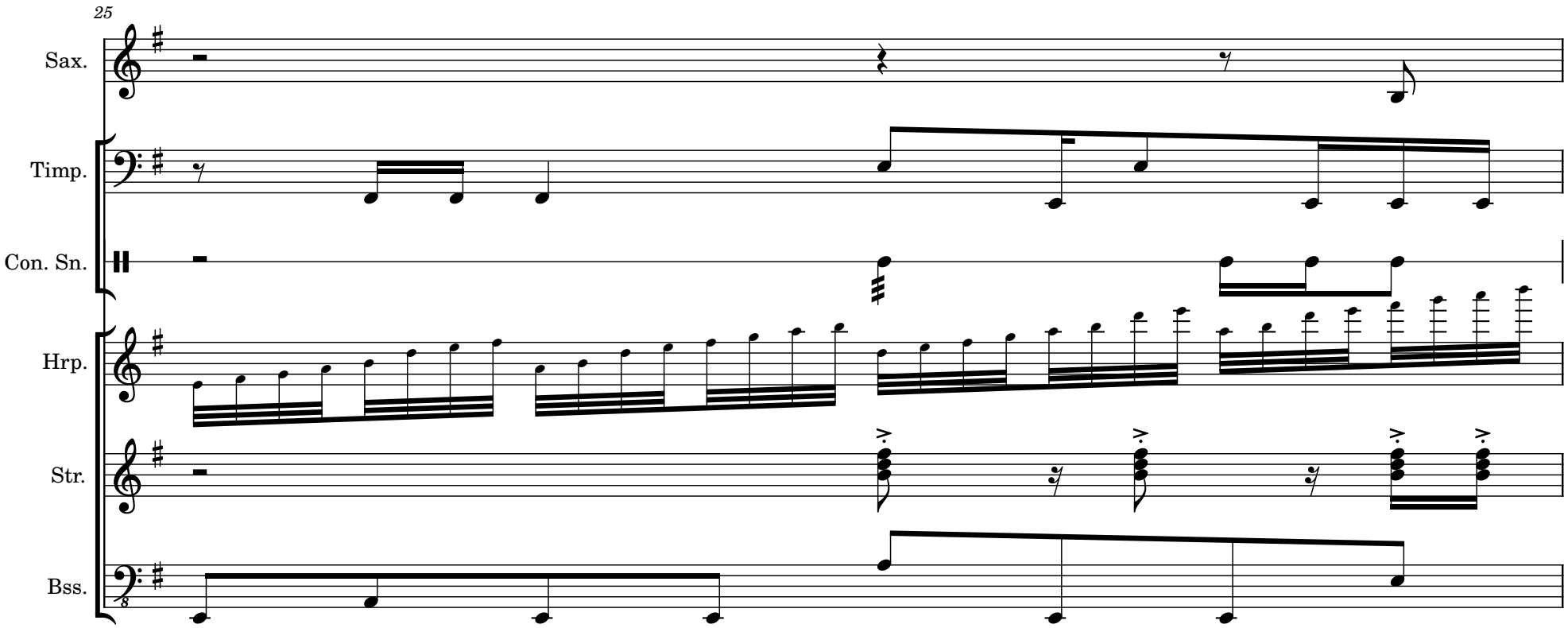


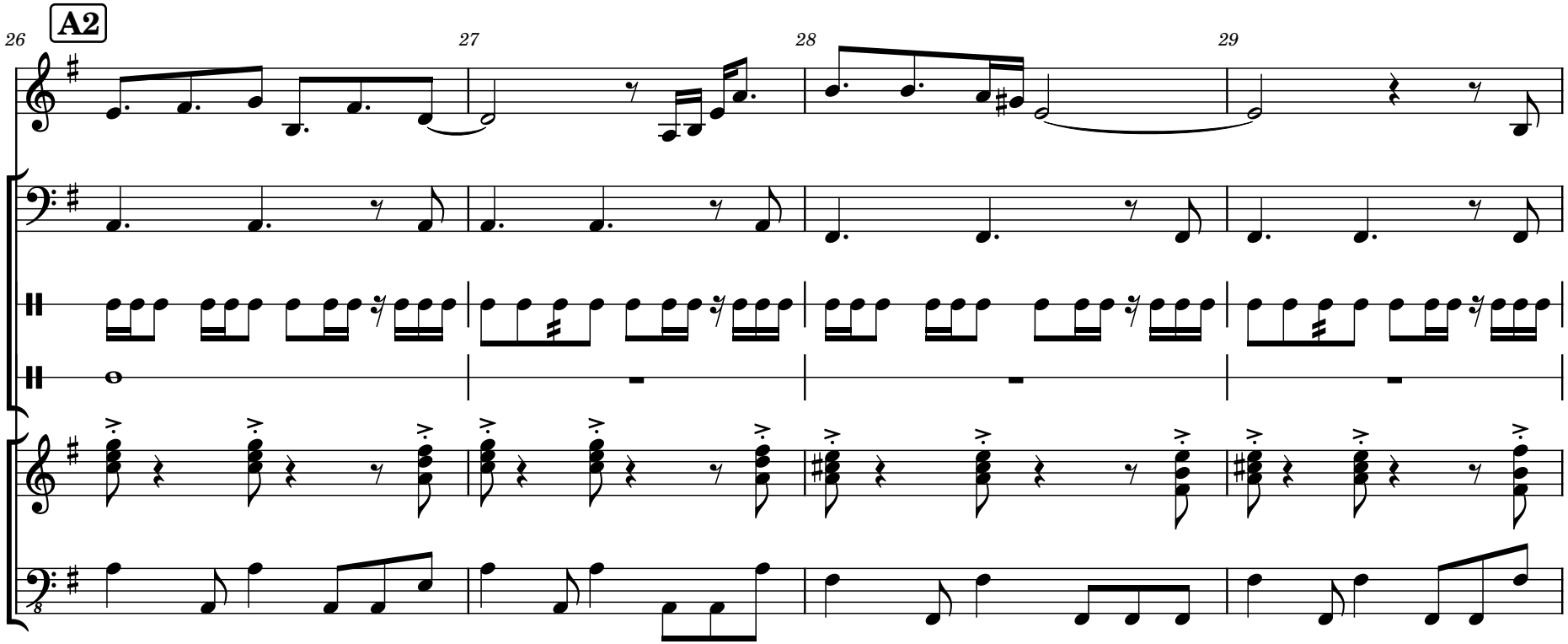
DECEPTIVE CADENCE TO A DECEPTIVE CADENCE:

Yet, instead of going to E minor, Mitsuda deceptively resolves to Cmaj7, although the "deception" is quite soft (Cmaj7 contains the E minor triad, E-G-B)

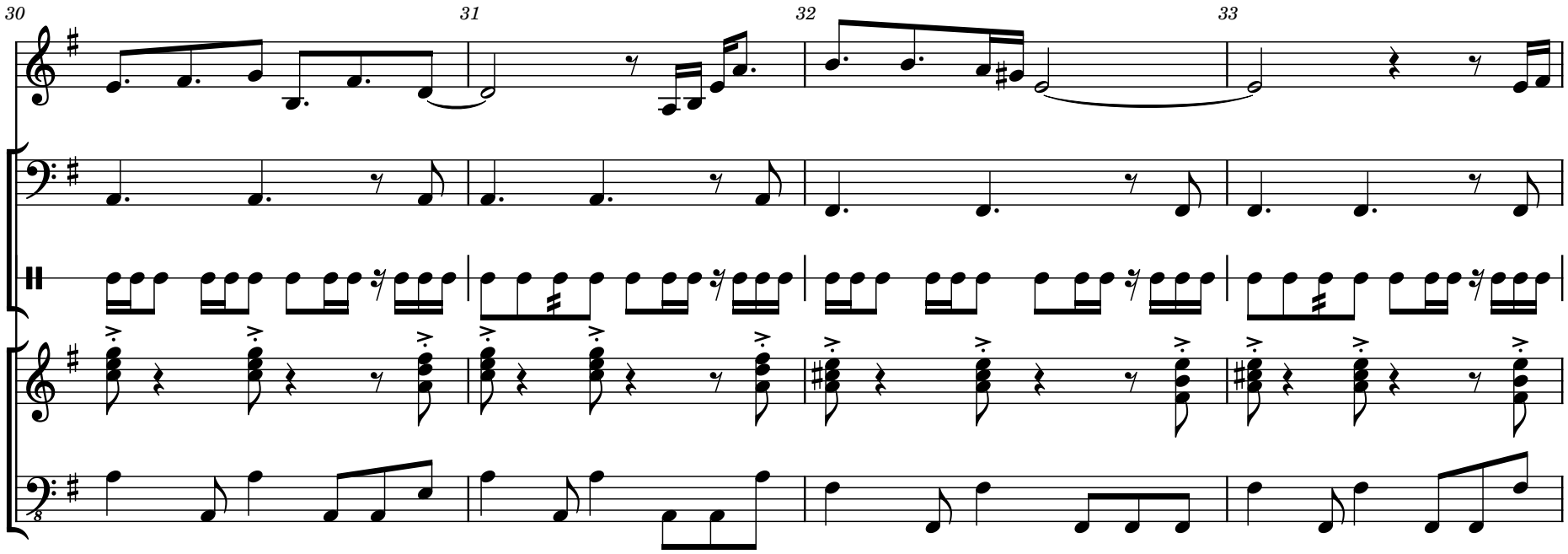
Then, to defy expectations even more, Mitsuda proceeds to a D/E chord - the IV of A Dorian - and then to a Bm chord - the natural v of E minor - only to resolve *back* to Am7 instead of any kind of E minor chord.

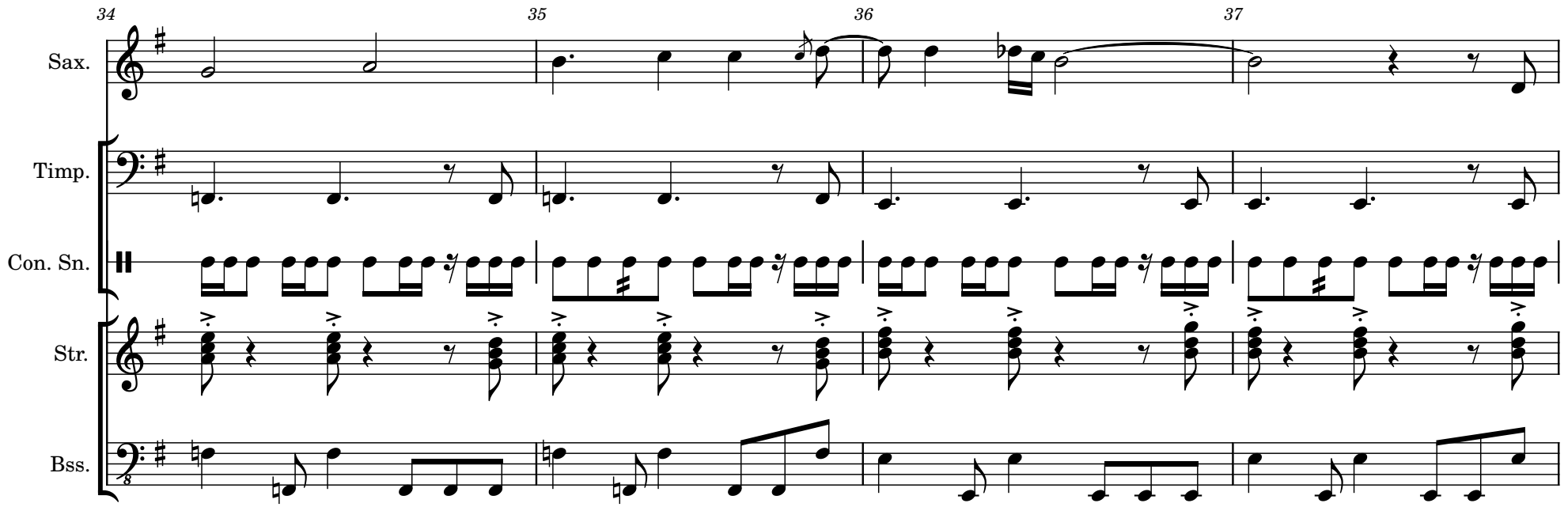
Thus, while the track is technically in the key of E minor, Mitsuda uses extended harmony and clever, non-traditional voice leading to create his own kind of harmonic function out of "non-functional" harmony.

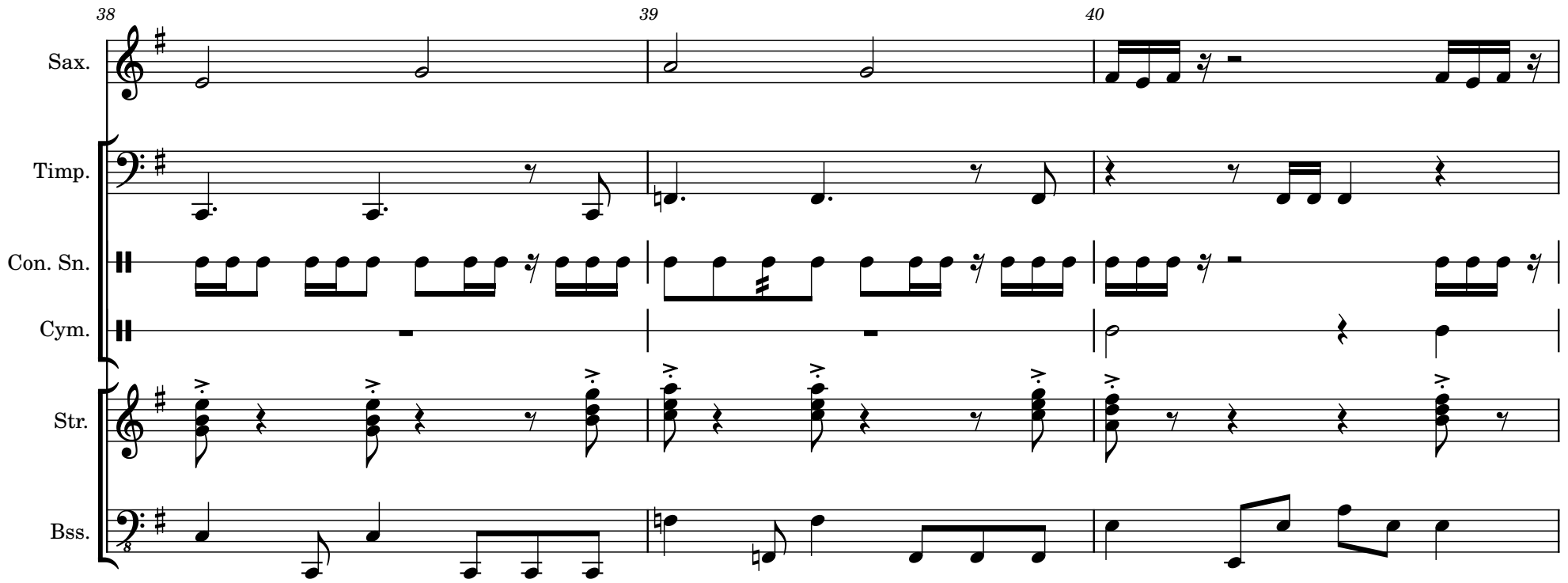

25
Sax.
Timp.
Con. Sn.
Hrp.
Str.
Bss.

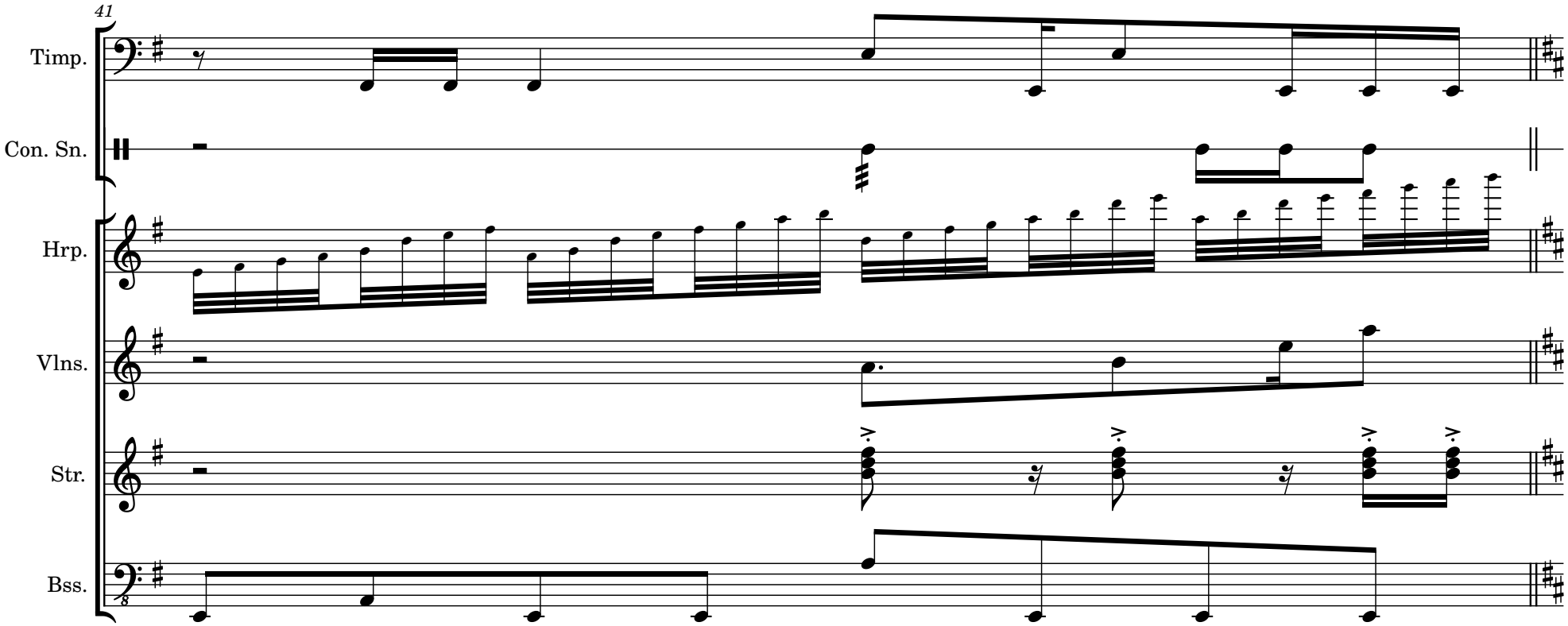


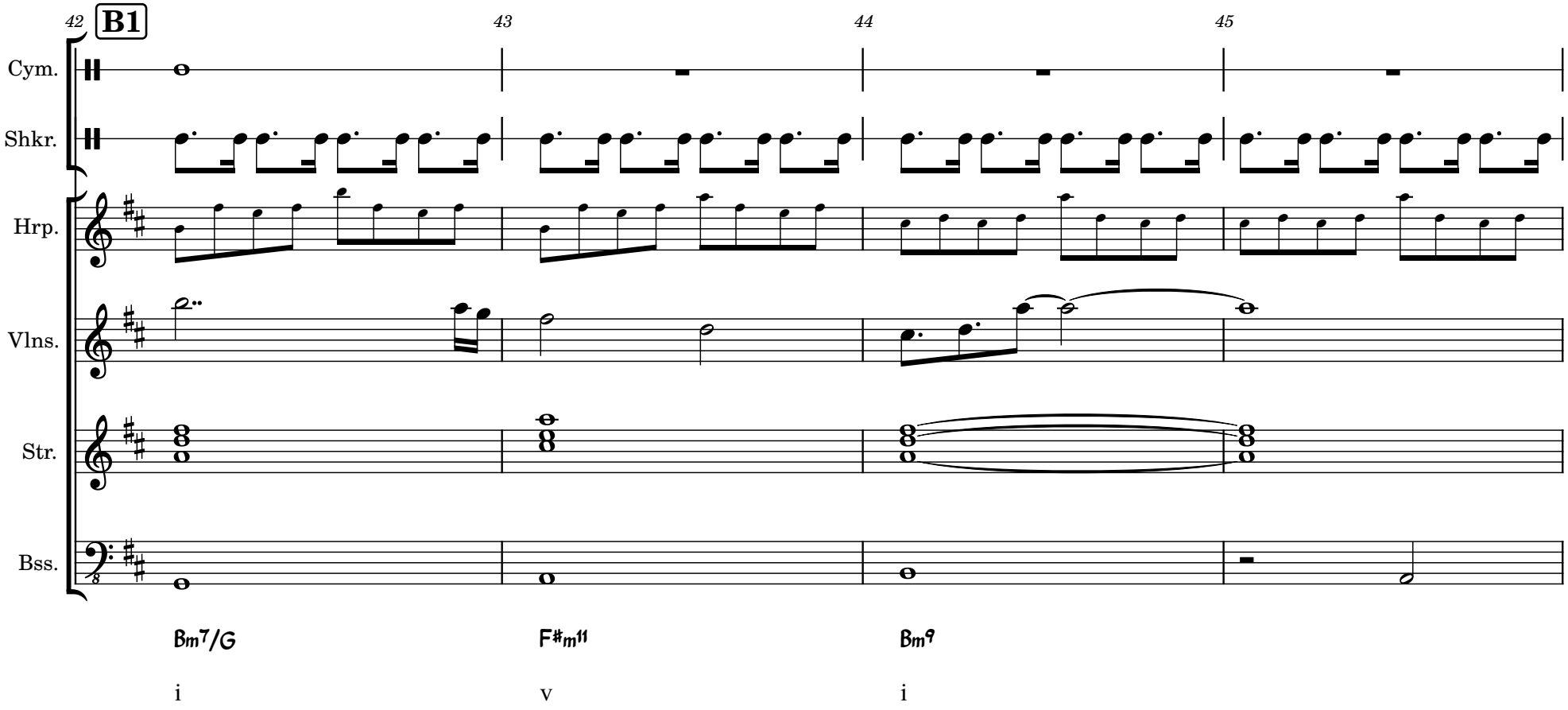
The entire section repeats...


30
31
32
33
Sax.
Timp.
Con. Sn.
Str.
Bss.


34
35
36
37
Sax.
Timp.
Con. Sn.
Str.
Bss.


38
39
40
Sax.
Timp.
Con. Sn.
Cym.
Str.
Bss.


41
Timp.
Con. Sn.
Hrp.
Vlns.
Str.
Bss.



RHYTHMIC CONTRAST:

The pulse changes to straight 4/4, no cross-rhythms. This creates contrast in mood between the modern sounding A section and epic, soaring B section.

ICONIC MELODY:

This unforgettable melody instills a heroic mood, like you're flying through the sky on a grand adventure. But how? Like a bird coasting and then suddenly changing direction with the wind, the contour of the melody is mostly step-wise, its rhythm held with gentle double-dotted half notes, only to suddenly leap in angular, unpredictable movements and syncopated rhythms.

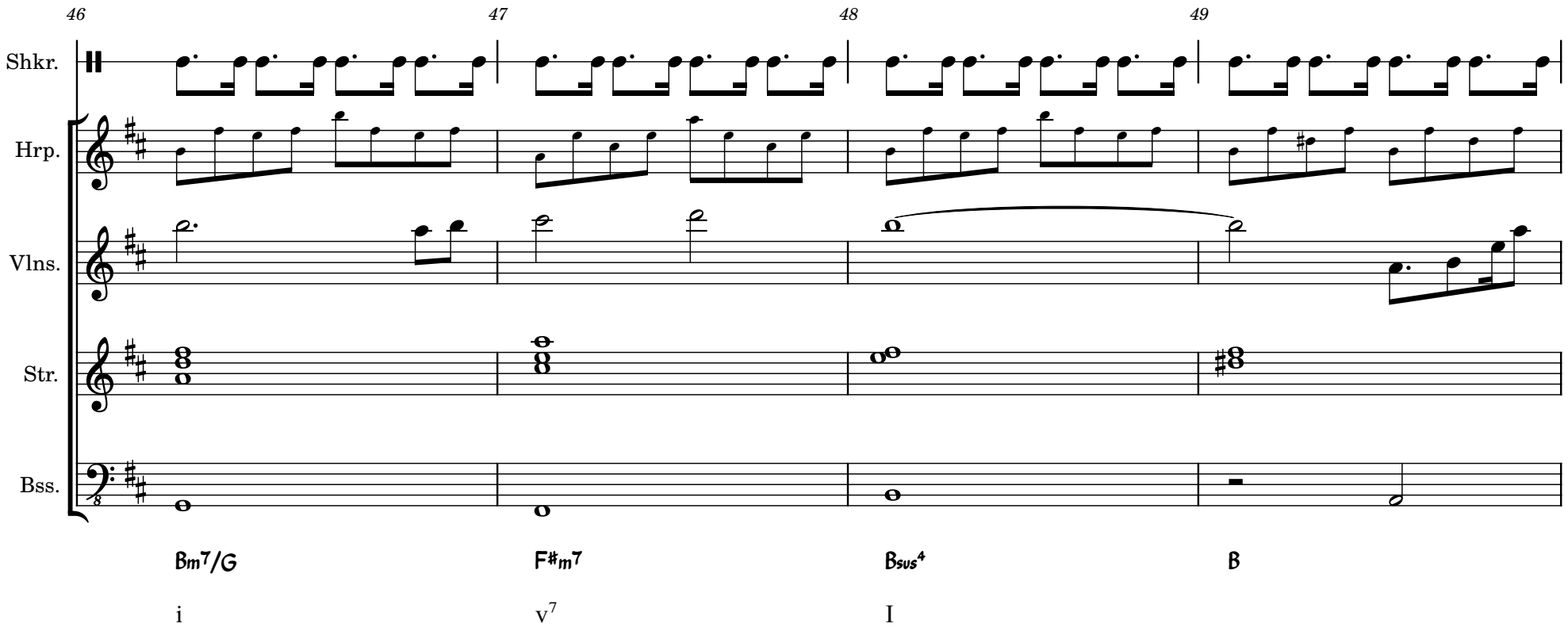
MORE CHORD EXTENSIONS:

A standard i -> v -> i progression in the dominant key (B minor) is turned into a gorgeous harmony by skillful application of chord extensions:

1) In mm.42, the G in the bass creates the b13 of the m7 tonic chord, introducing a dissonance that creates a determined, adventurous sound. (This chord could be notated as Bm7(b13)

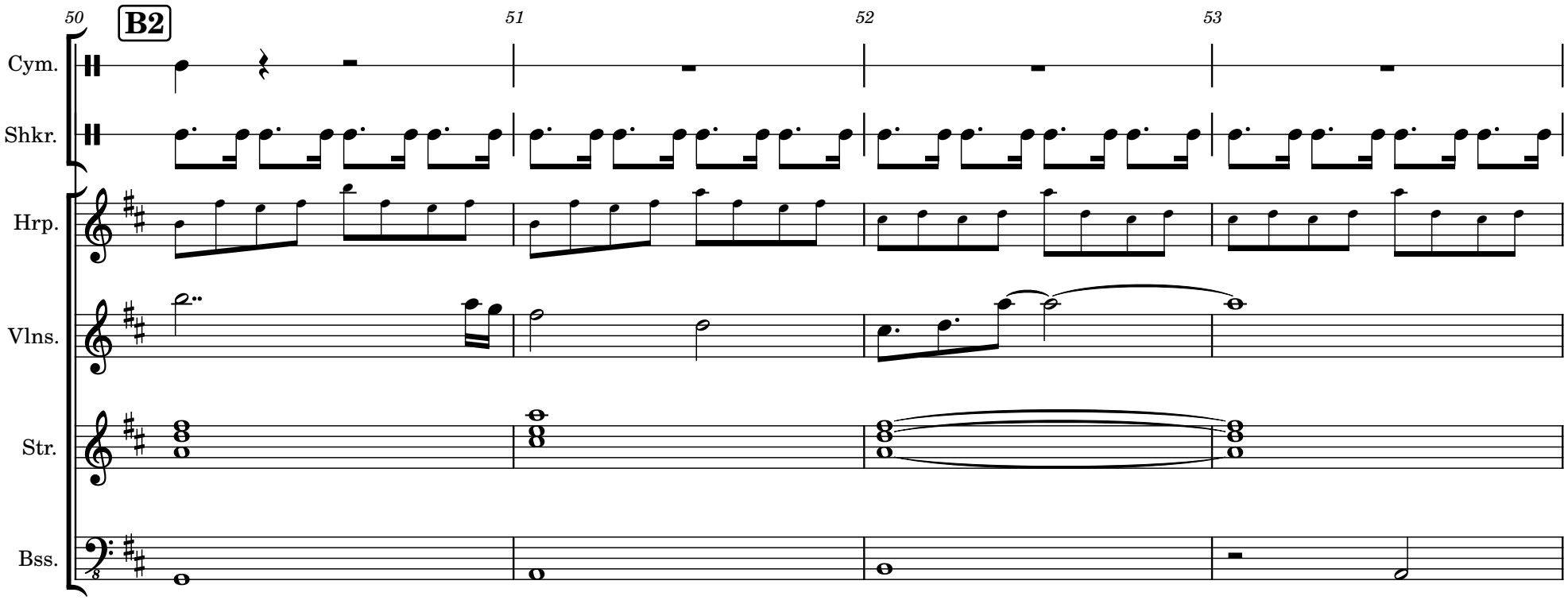
2) In mm 43, the B in the bass of the harp arpeggio creates the extension of the 11th, brightening the normally melancholy sounding natural minor dominant triad.

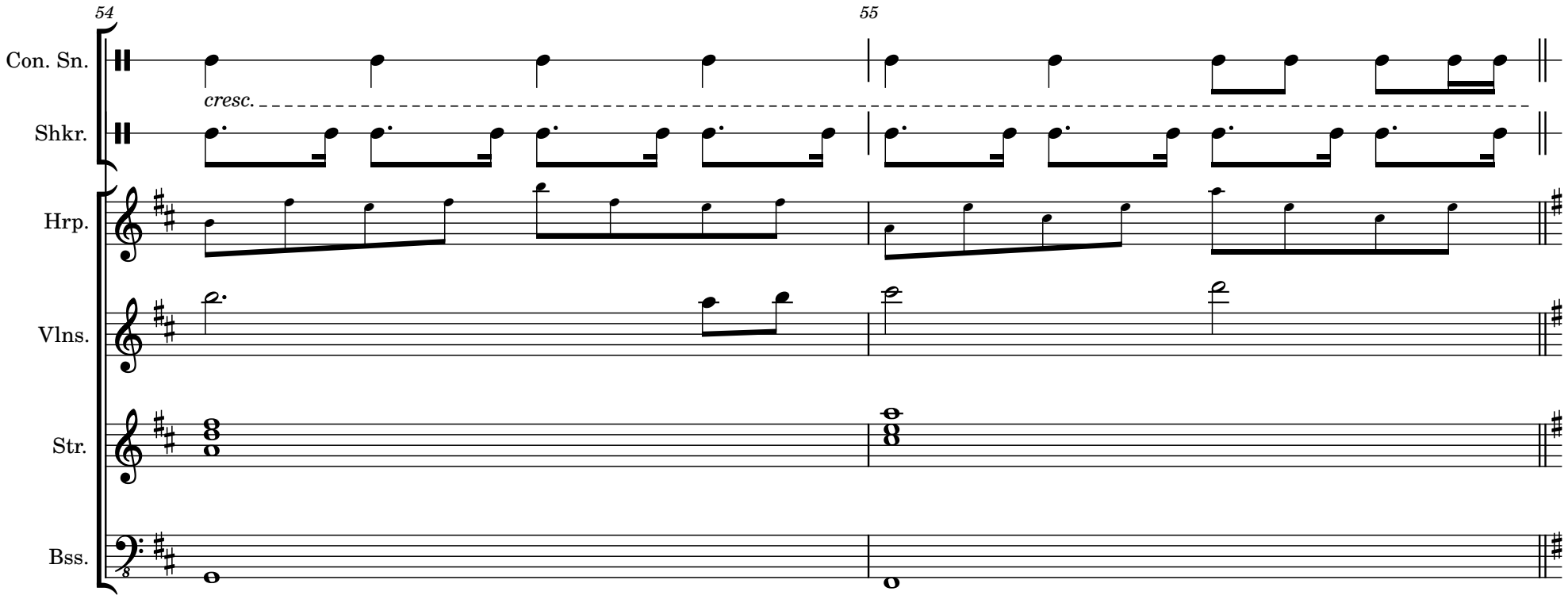
3) In mm. 44, the C# in the downbeats of the harp and melody create a wonderful, twinkling juxtaposition with the 3rd of otherwise mellow tonic m7 chord.



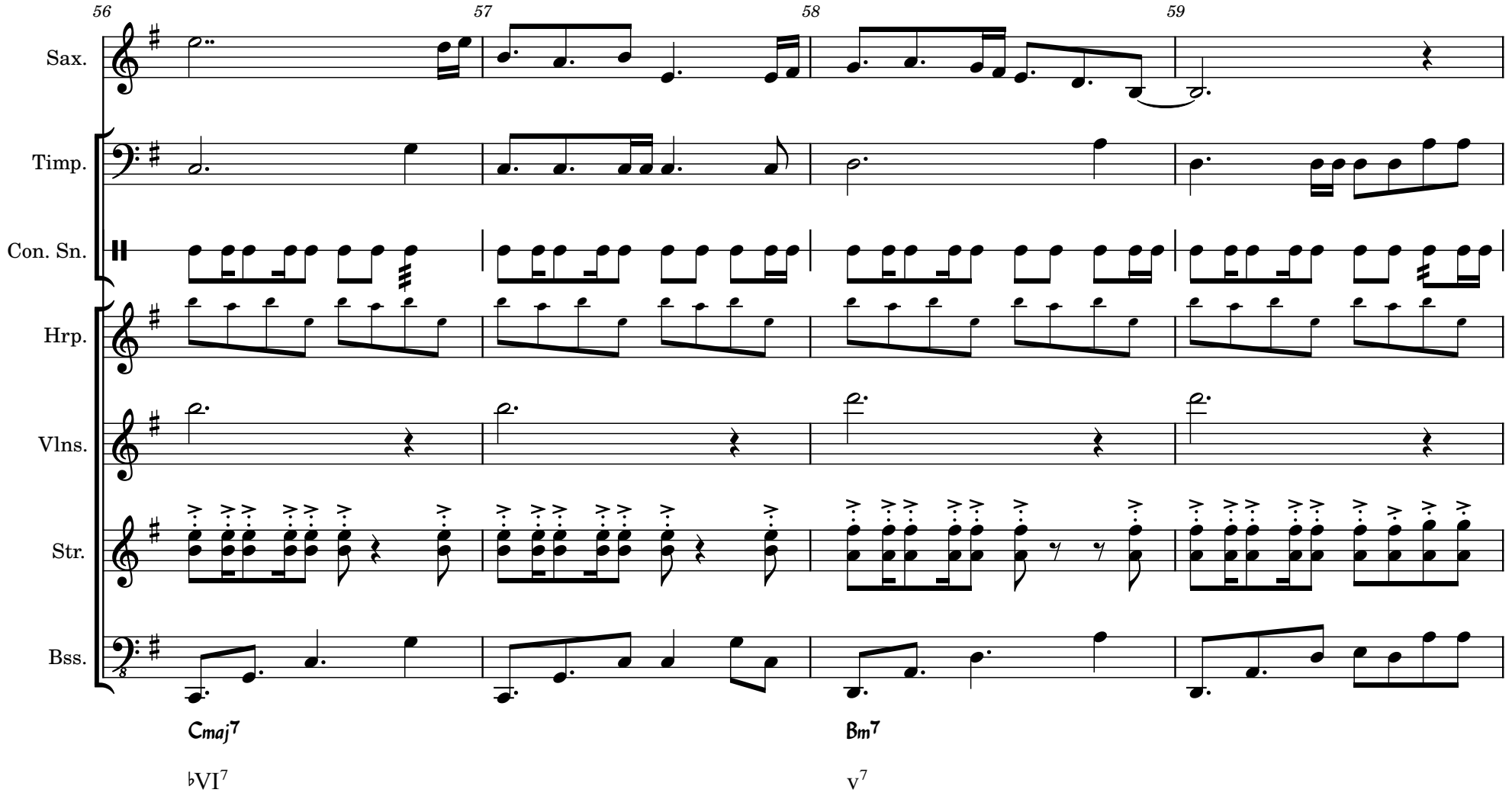
The harmony turns more traditional in mm. 47-49 as the music lands on a heroic sounding suspended major tonic chord.

Then, via an ascending 4th motif in the melody (used throughout the soundtrack), it returns to a repeat of the B section.


50
B2
51
52
53
Cym.
Shkr.
Hrp.
Vlns.
Str.
Bss.
Same


54
55
Con. Sn.
cresc.
Shkr.
Hrp.
Vlns.
Str.
Bss.

Outro



ABRUPT MODULATION:

The track abruptly and jarringly switches to E minor again without preparing the modulation. Furthermore, the "tonic" chord we modulate to is Cmaj7. With a root movement a *tritone* apart, this transition should sound more dissonant than it does. So why doesn't it?

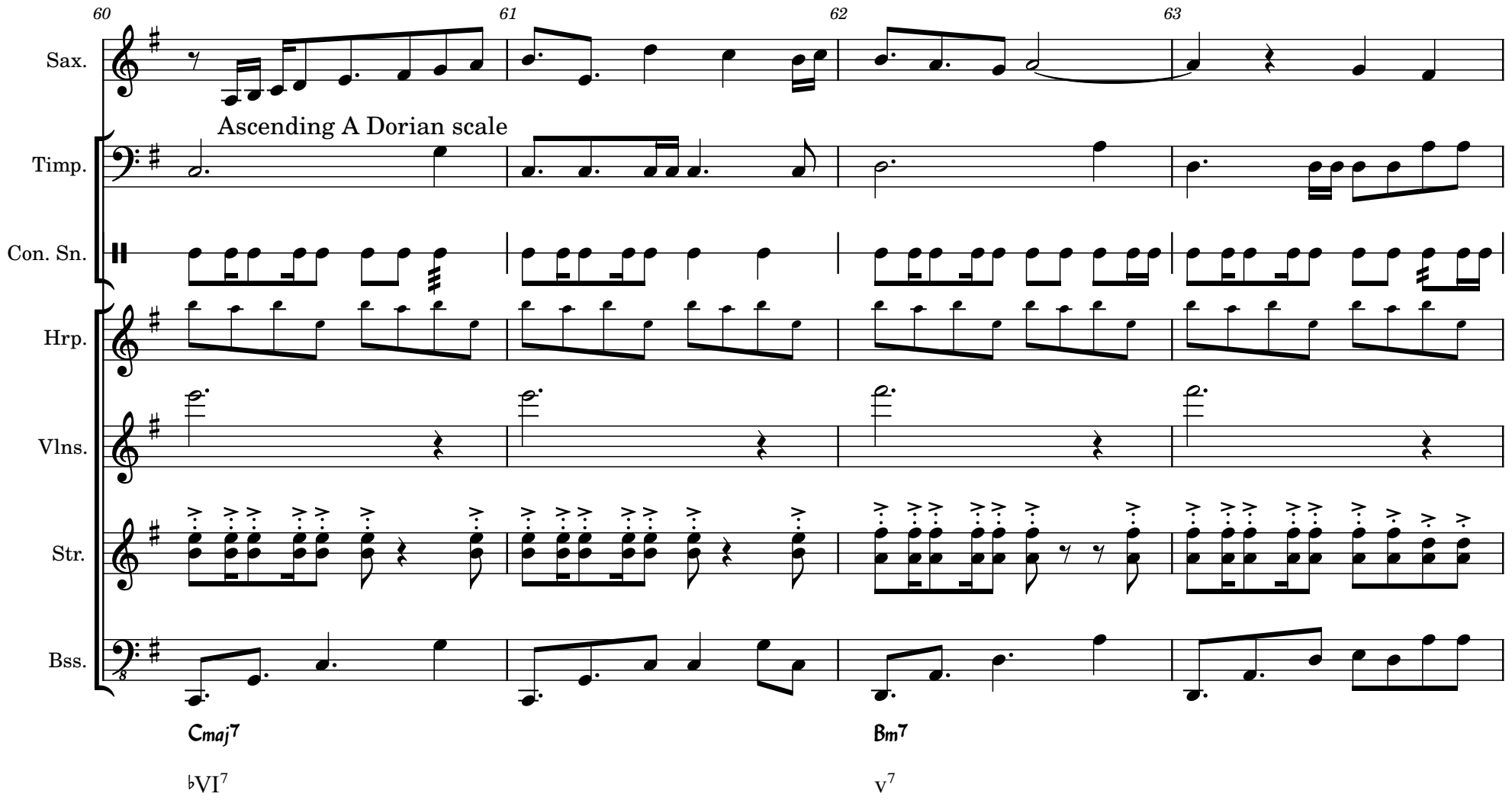
The answer is in the melody:

- The lead strings in the previous section hand the melody off to the saxophone, which starts the Outro right on E. Altogether, the melodic motion is

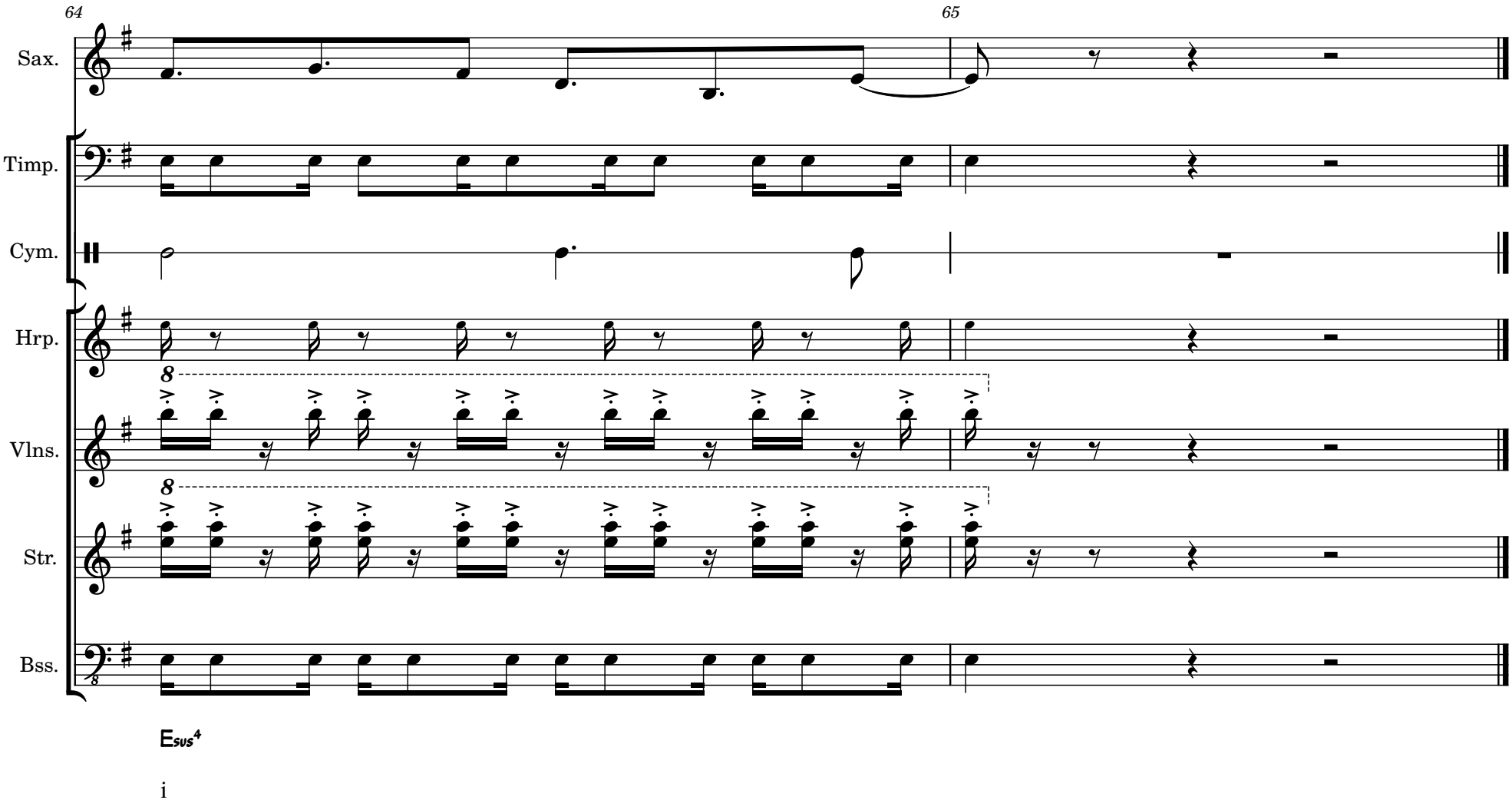
C#->D->E.

- Meanwhile, the strings move down to B, which is the dominant of E minor
- Finally, the lower strings play harmonic fourths (B-E) in a rhythmic ostinato.

All these elements come together to reinforce the notes E and B enough to make the transition sound solid enough.



In mm. 62-63:
Strong chordal weight is given to the notes D-F#-A, which is the bVII chord of E minor. Thus, the harmony simultaneously suggests a v-i progression *and* a bVI-bVII-i progression. Listen closely and you can hear both at the same time.



The track ends triumphantly on a *suspended fourth chord*, which is another way to say an inverted quartal chord.

Quartal and quintal harmony are a staple of a lot of Mitsuda's work in Chrono Trigger, and this use is no exception.