VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS

- For Educational Use Only -

Hyrule Castle

from The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past

Composed by Koji Kondo
Transcription/Analysis by Seventh Sam
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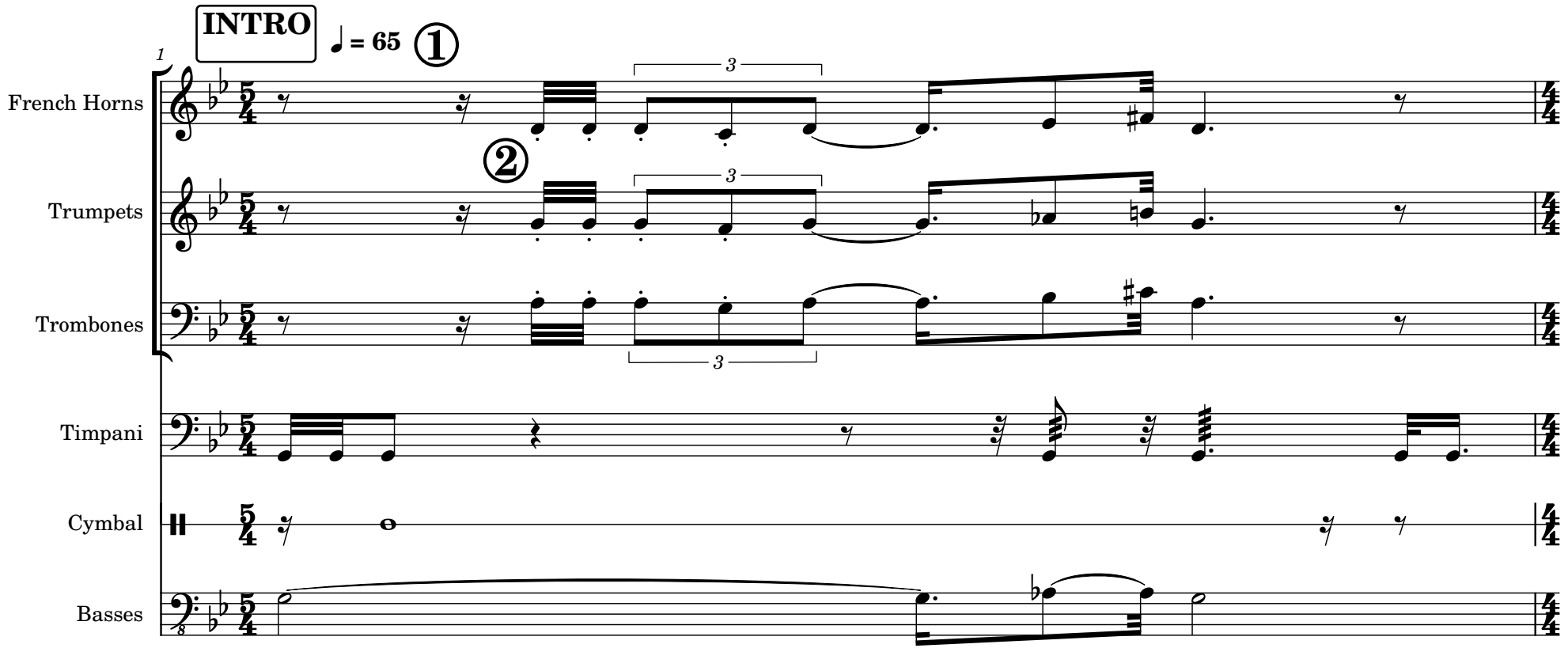
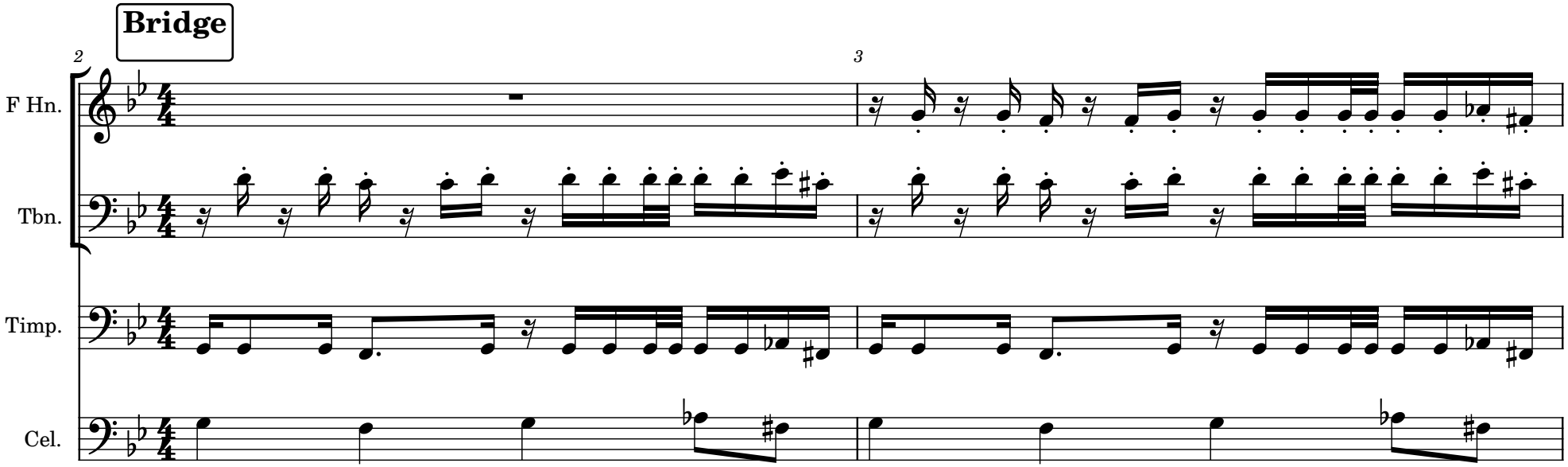


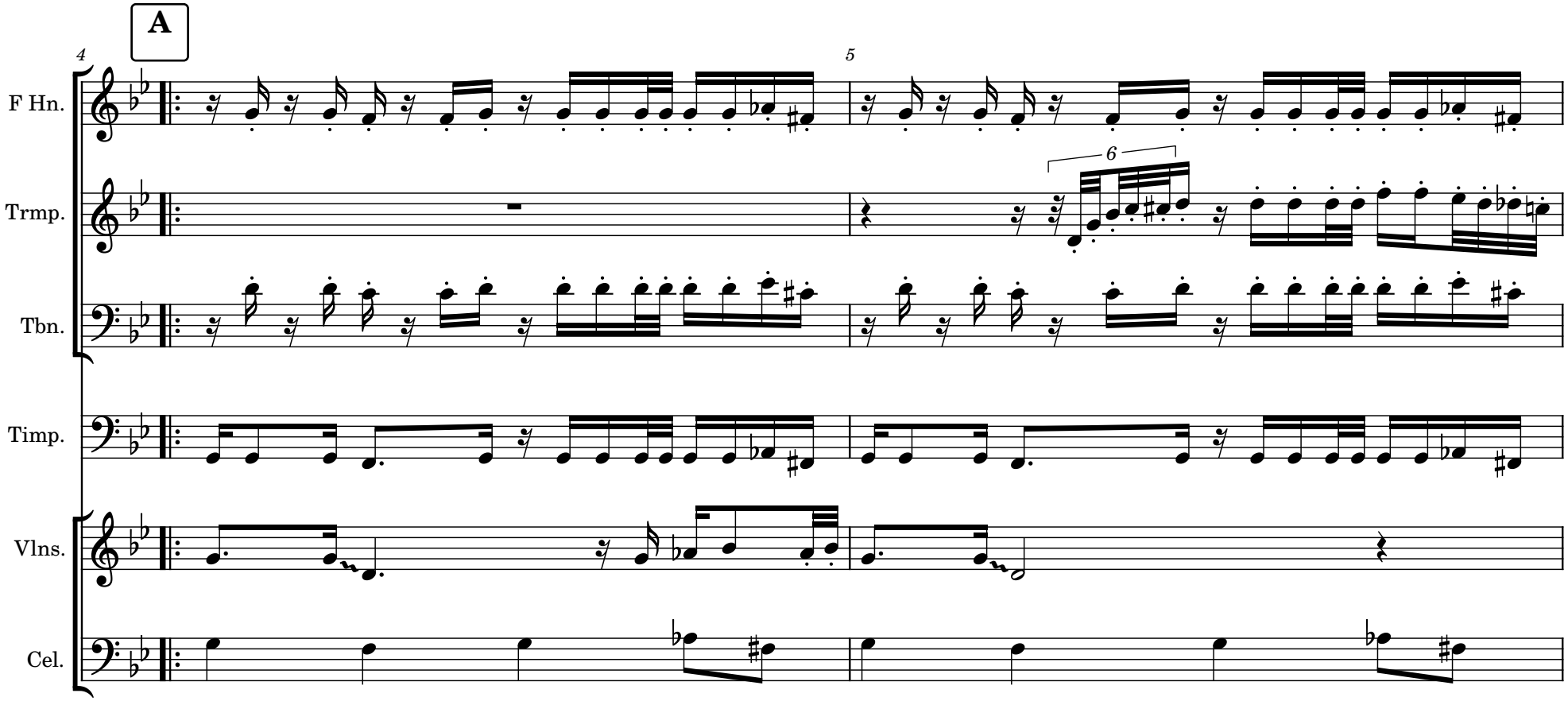
(1) - The first measure of the track immediately sets the mood with a grand yet ominous fanfare.
This measure is the only one not included in the looping material. So how does it serve to tell the game's story?
- *Punctuating Scenic Transitions*- This measure only plays when the player *enters* Hyrule Castle. Thus, it effectively serves as a one-measure musical transition between scenes (from field to dungeon).
- *Subverting Expectations*- Fanfares are normally meant to inspire and uplift, to introduce the listener to benevolent andtrustworthy royalty or authority. *This* fanfare introduces royalty, but it is corrupt and evil: the music does not inspire, but instead creates tension and fear. The subversion of a sound or trope that is normally associated with something good and thereby turning it evil is a powerful storytelling technique, one that can serve the greatly enhance and strengthen the gravitas of a villain or antagonistic force.
(2) - The chords created by the horns, trumpets, and trombones are *quartal*. Why? Not only do quartal harmonies sound excellent when voiced by brass instruments, but they also create tonal ambiguity that can fit a variety of musical circumstances. In this case, voicing the powerful, open harmony over the rumbling chromatic movement in the bass line creates an unmistakably dark, weighty, and somewhat intimidating sound.



(1) - mm. 2-3 serves as a "bridge" that acts as *both* the beginning and ending of the track.

These two measures establish the rhythmic and harmonic framework of the track and lead smoothly into the A section. This is important because the music needs to lead into the A section not just *once*, but as many times as the track is required to loop during gameplay. Thus, you will find that Kondo "ends" the track with these very same measures(mm. 23-24) before looping right back into the A section.

To see/hear why this use of bridge measures for looping is so crucial, skip ahead to the measures past the repeat/end of the track (mm. 25)

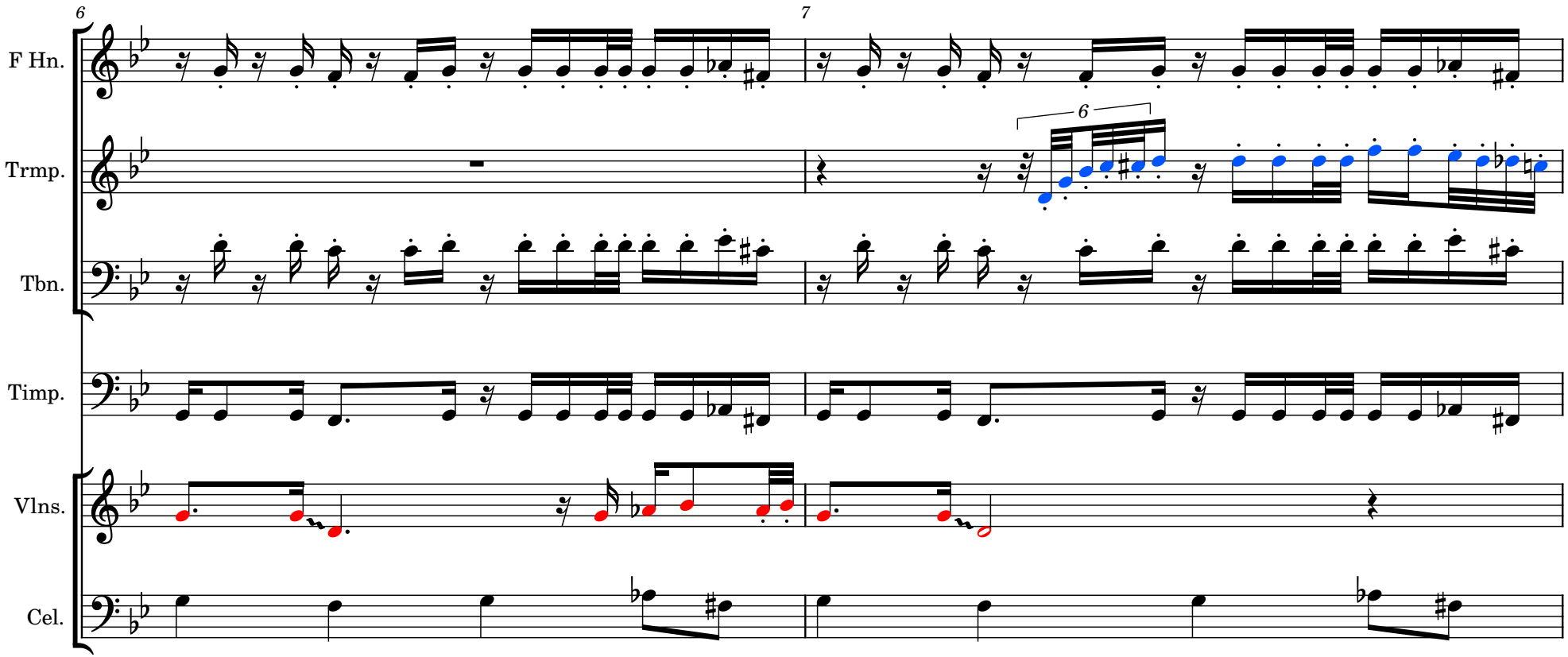


In the A section, Kondo employs *static* harmony (sometimes known as *modal* harmony) as opposed to *functional* harmony.

If you analyze this section beat by beat, you'll find little to no *chordal* motion. With the exception of part of the melody, the music dwells on and reinforces the tonic note (G). Any harmonic coloration is created by the juxtaposition of all other notes against that incessant tonic note.

Why does Kondo do this? Because static (or modal) harmony firmly roots the music in a "mood" (AKA: mode) and keeps it there unwaveringly. In this case, the mood is dark, powerful, and ominous - all hallmarks of the Phrygian mode, in which this section is composed.

While he employs functional harmony later in the track to create drama and contrast, Kondo is using a familiar tool from the game composer's tool belt. Most video game tracks are designed to loop; the consistent and ambient nature of static harmony is therefore an effective way to maintain and reinforce a specific emotion or mood indefinitely.



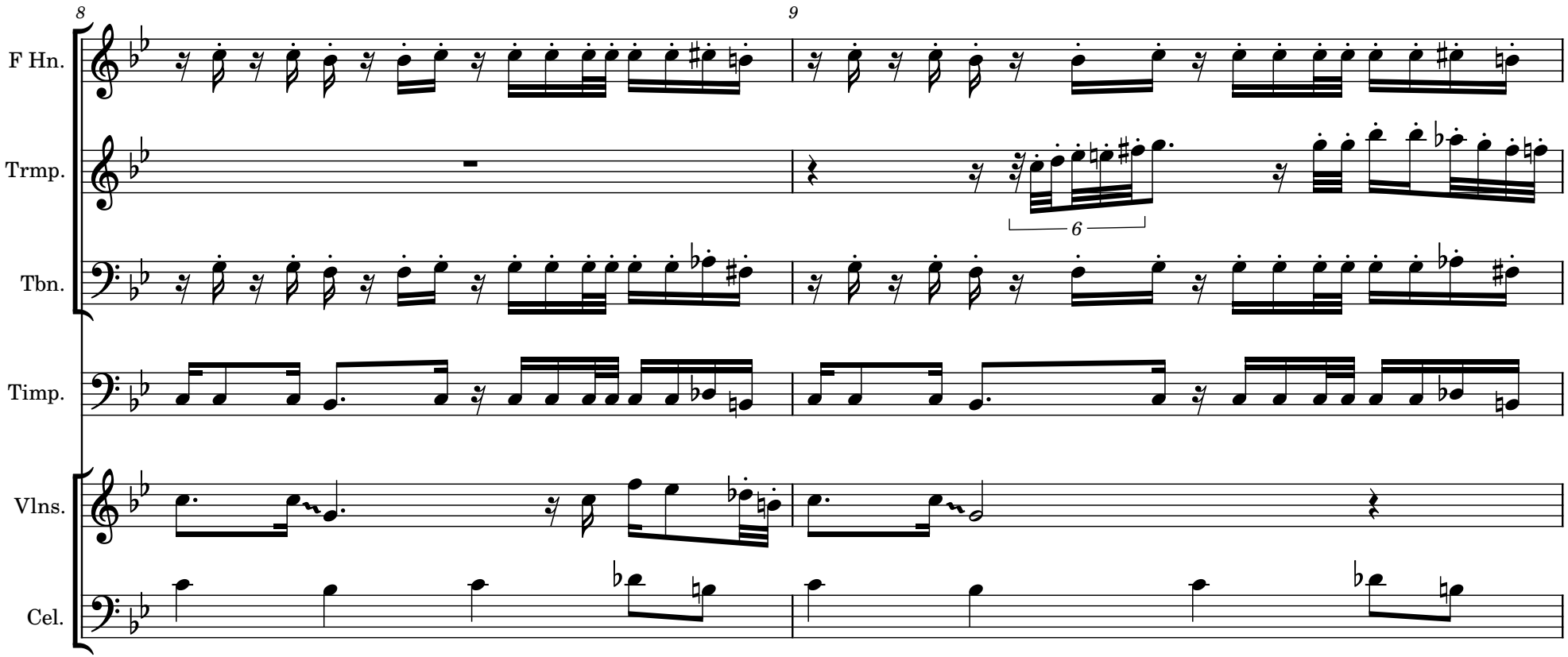
The track's iconic melody is split into two phrases:

The antecedent phrase (RED) is carried by the violins. The consequent phrase (BLUE) is carried by the trumpets.

Both melodic carriers are the highest in pitch of their respective instrument families. This allows the melody to be clearly heard.

The call-and-response between the two phrases creates an engaging timbral contrast that keeps the music interesting. The track would get old much quicker of only *one* of the sections carried the entire melody.

Worth noting is that the antecedent phrase centers around the note G (tonic), while the consequent centers around the note D (dominant). This subtle tonic-to-dominant motion further reinforces the call-and-response effect by creating subtle
"push-pull" tension.

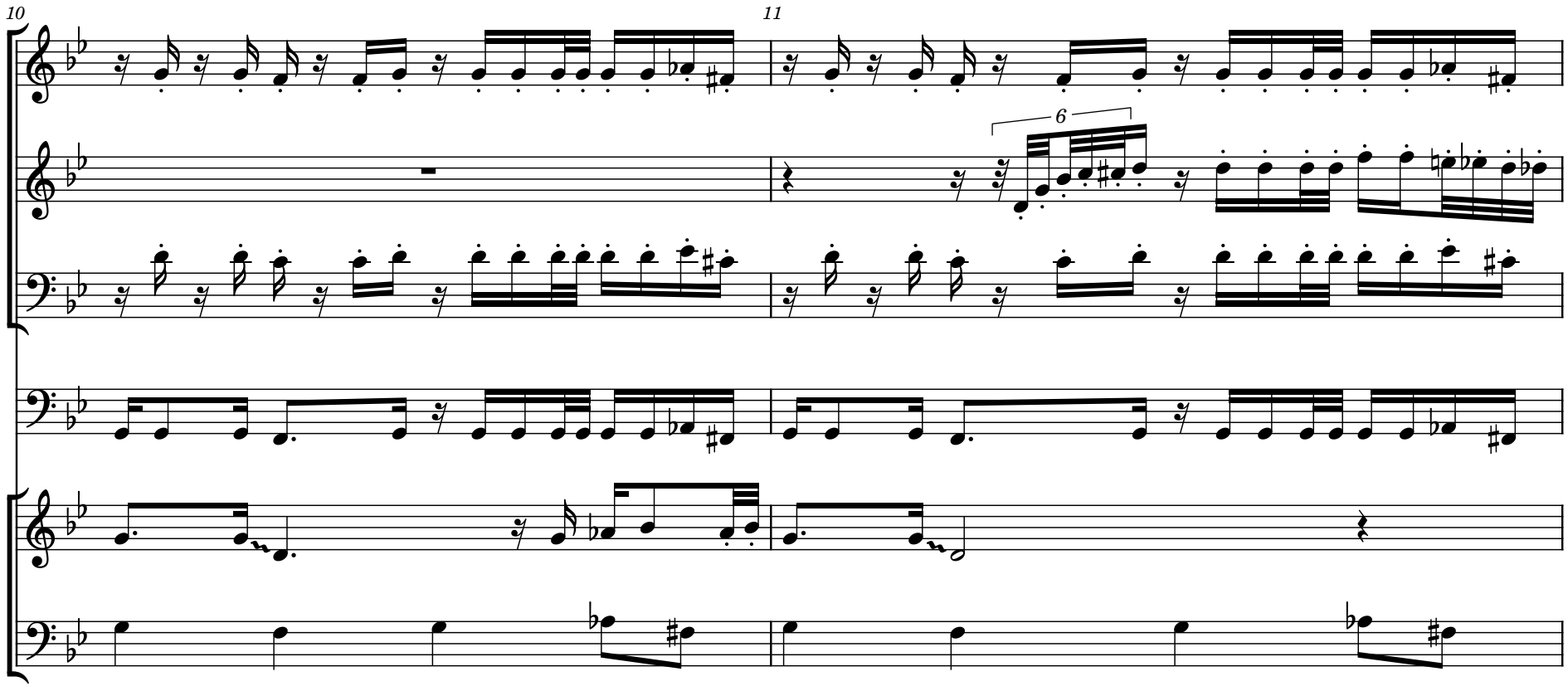


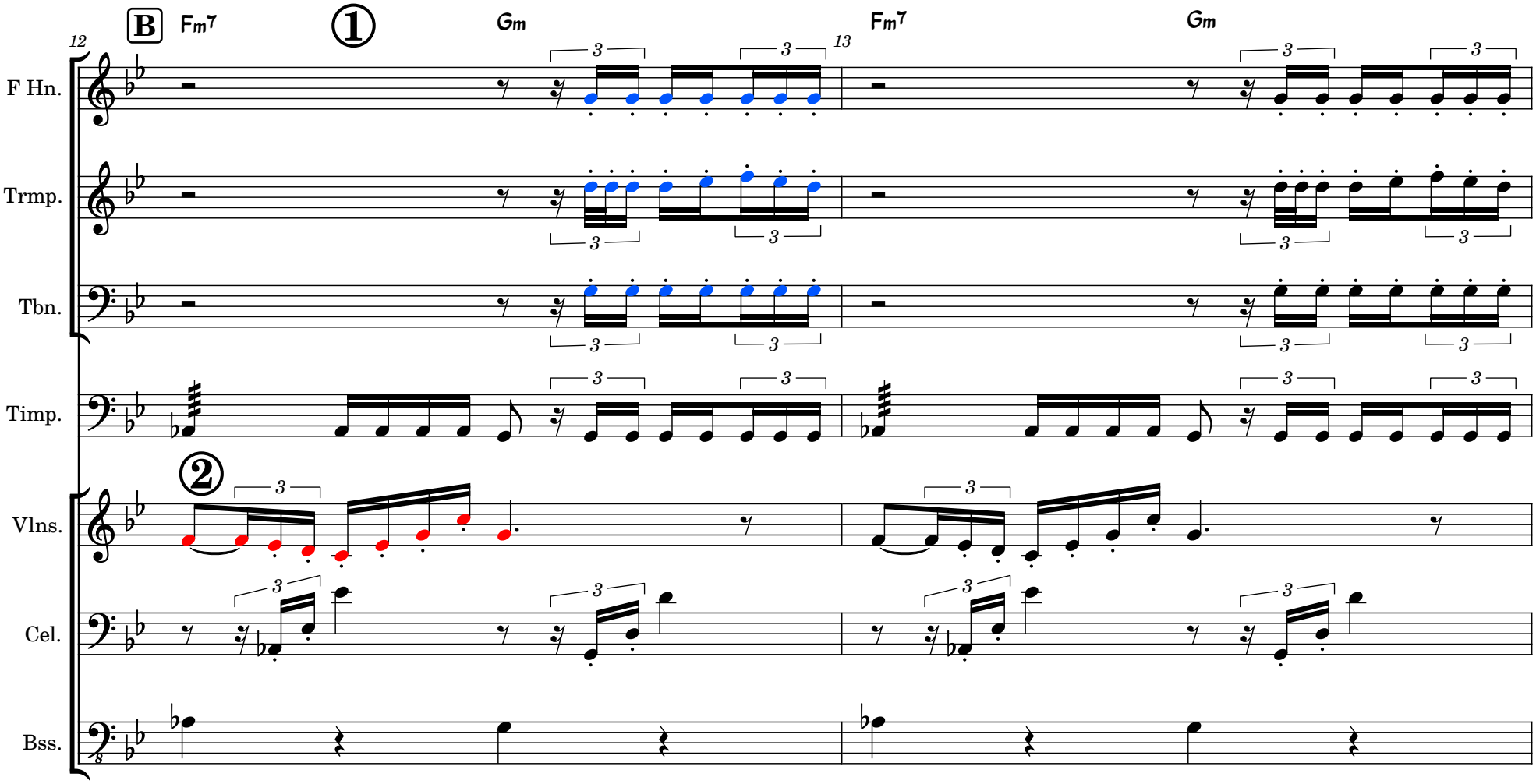
In mm. 8-9, Kondo suddenly shifts the tonal center to C Phrygian. This is an interesting choice on his part. Consider the following:

If you take mm. 4-12 and consider every two measures a "bar", you'll find that you get what looks like the first four "bars" of a 12-bar blues progression. If the measures in G Phrygian can be considered a "I chord", then these two measures of C Phrygian can be considered a "IV chord". Indeed, the melody moves *up* a perfect fourth, from G to C. So we now have stentorian quartal brass voicings, a rumbling and dark Phrygian tonality, and...a blues progression???

Why did Kondo do this, considering that this is essentially a dungeon theme? Aren't dungeons supposed to be scary? Why not lean completely into the one "appropriate" mood?

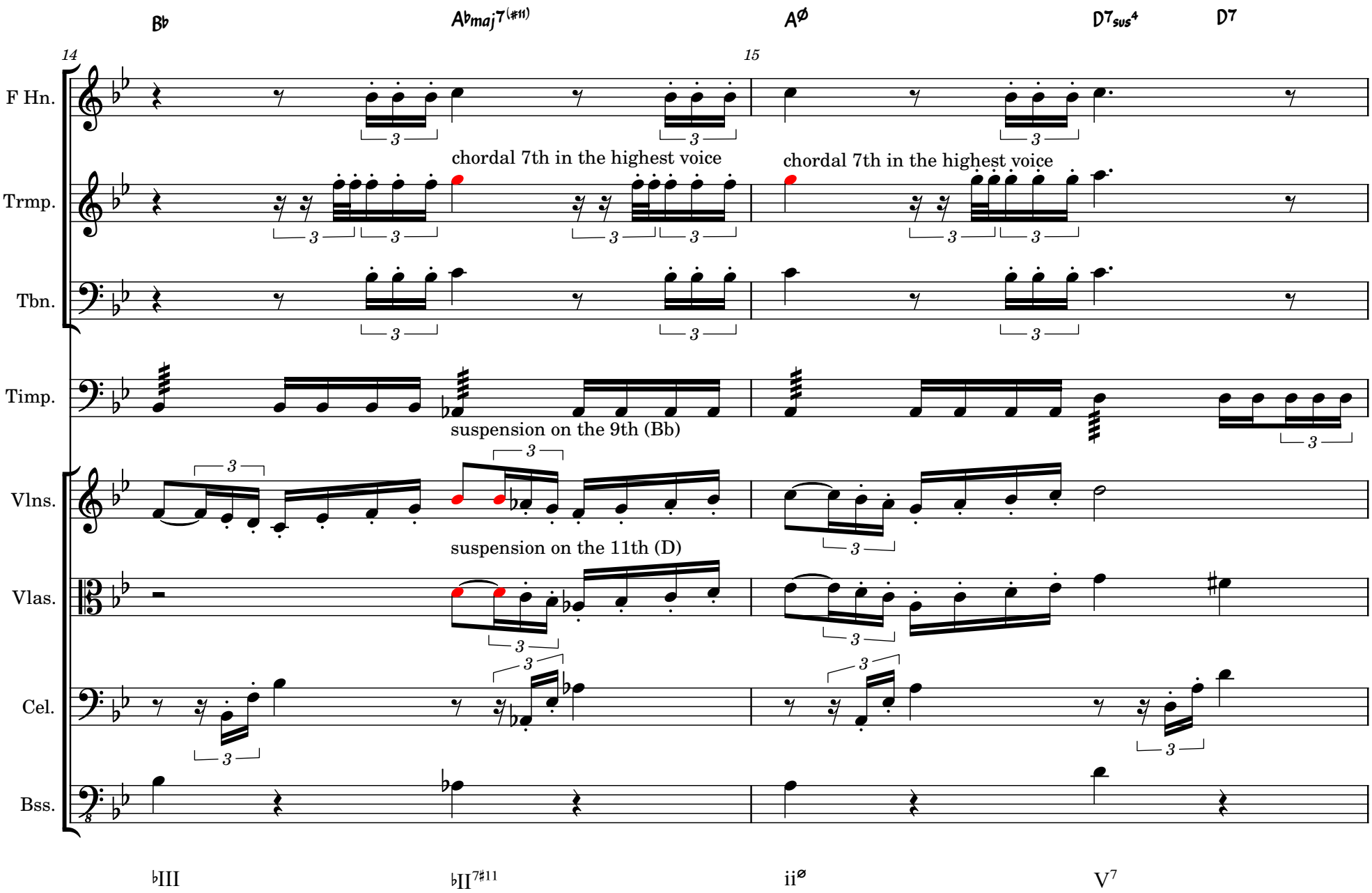
The most likely answer is that he thought it sounded cool :-) Sometimes, that's enough. Chalk it up to the lovely eclecticism and freedom from genre that so delightfully inspired the game soundtracks of the 8-bit and 16-bit eras.


10
11
F Hn.
Trmp.
6
Tbn.
Timp.
Vlns.
Cel.

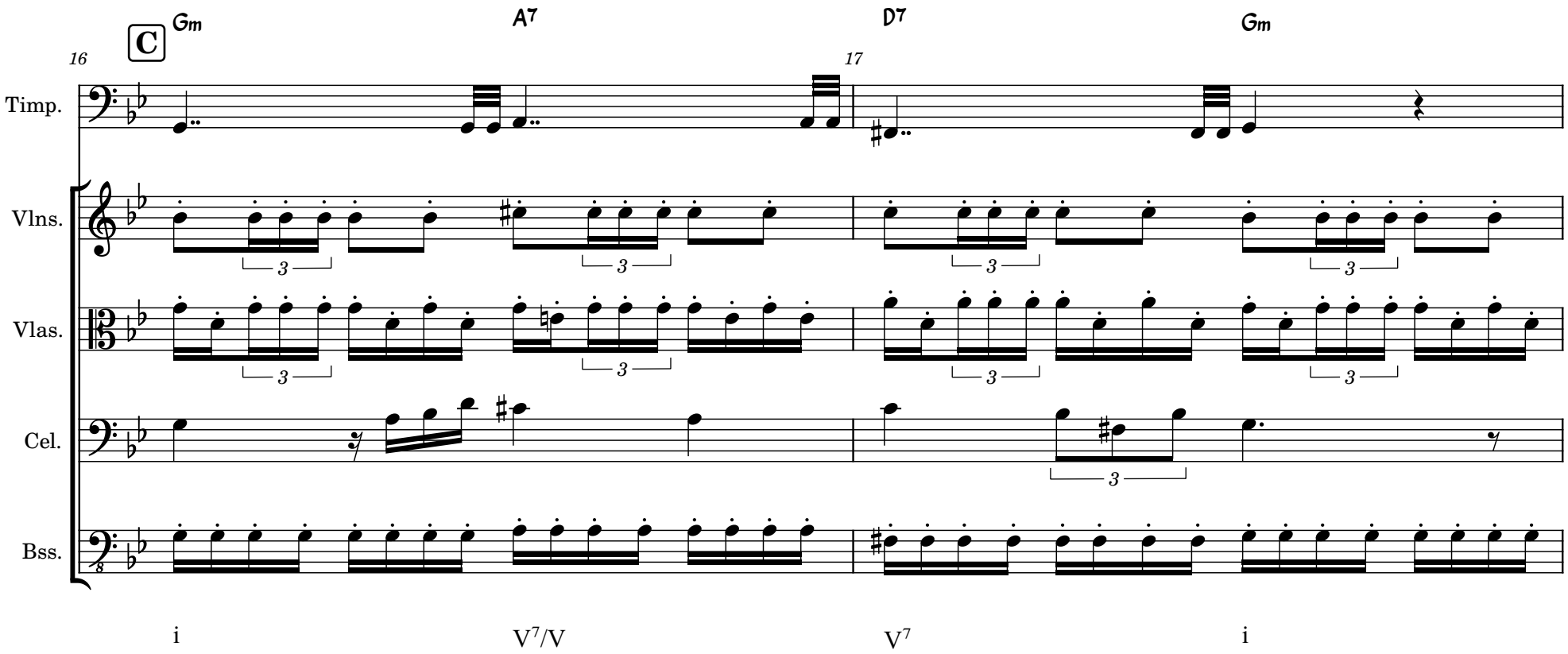


(1) - Starting with the B section, Kondo begins employing chords in a *functional* manner. The subtonic (bVII) chord of Fm7 oscillates/vamps with the tonic (i) chord of Gm. This vamp facilitates the voice-leading by semitone in the bass (Ab -> G) since Ab is the 3rd of Fm7, while G is the tonic of the track's scale. This voice leading is truly characteristic of the Phrygian mode and is a quintessential part of the yearning, desperate sound this chordal motion creates

(2) - The call-and-response split of the antecedent and consequent between the violins and trumpets continues, although the consequent is now given to the entire brass section. This gives the track a heightened sense of continuity and congruence.



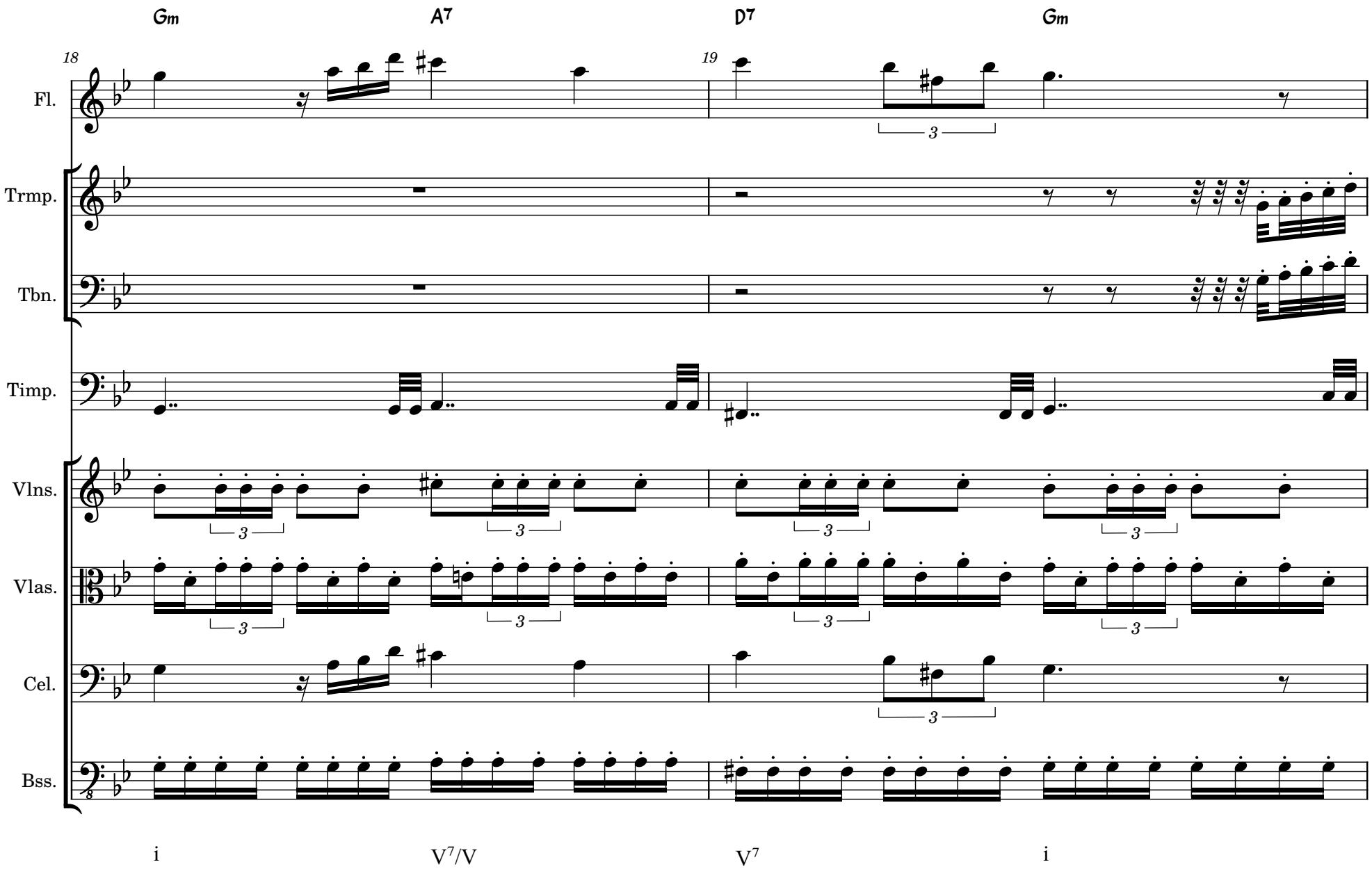
These two measures modulate beautifully to the parallel minor (G minor). The bIII chord (Bb Major) rises via the strings to the lush and evocative bII eleventh chord (created by the suspensions on Bb in the violins and D natural in the violas). This chord then chromatically pivots to the half-diminished ii chord and sets up the familiar ii - V7 - i progression that completes the modulation to G minor.

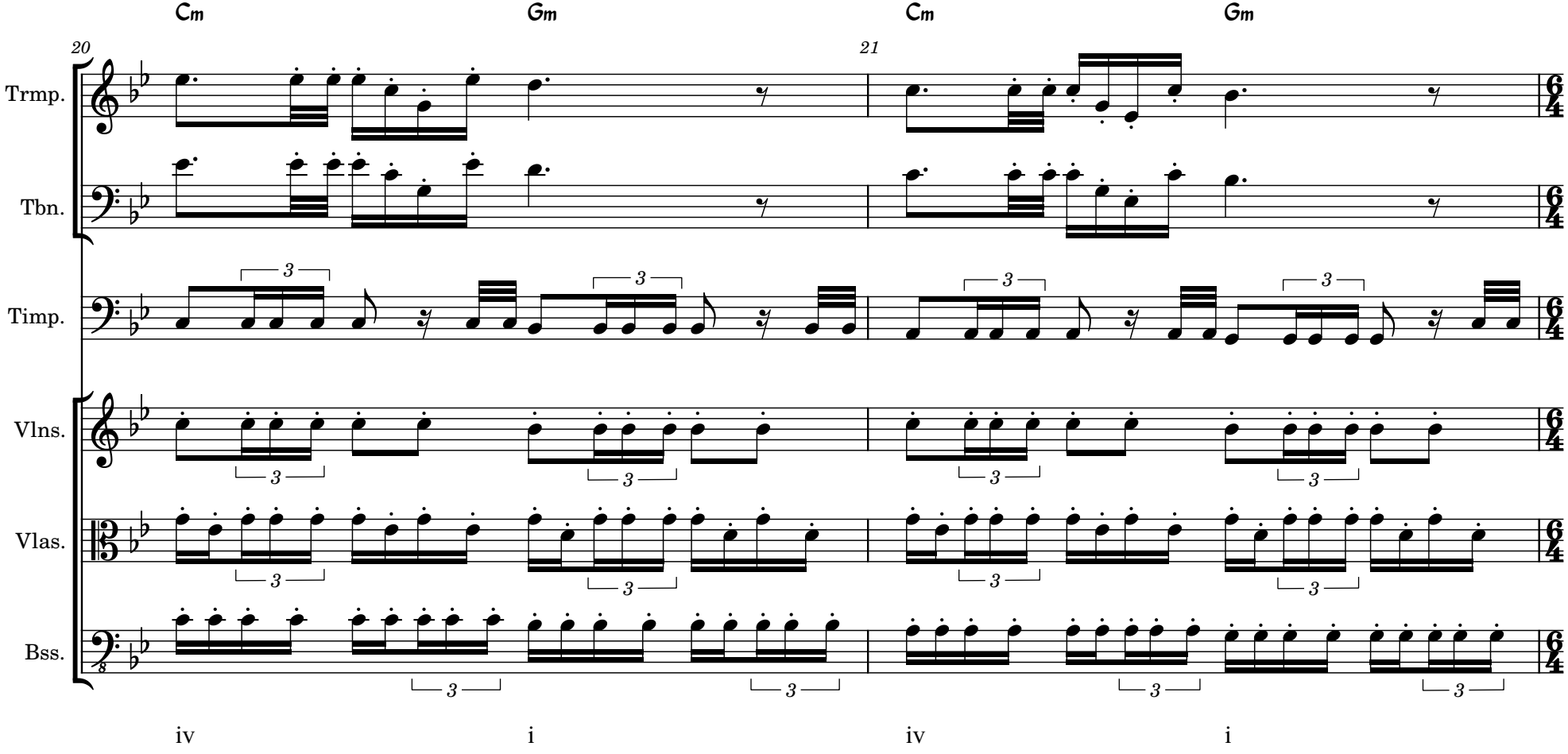


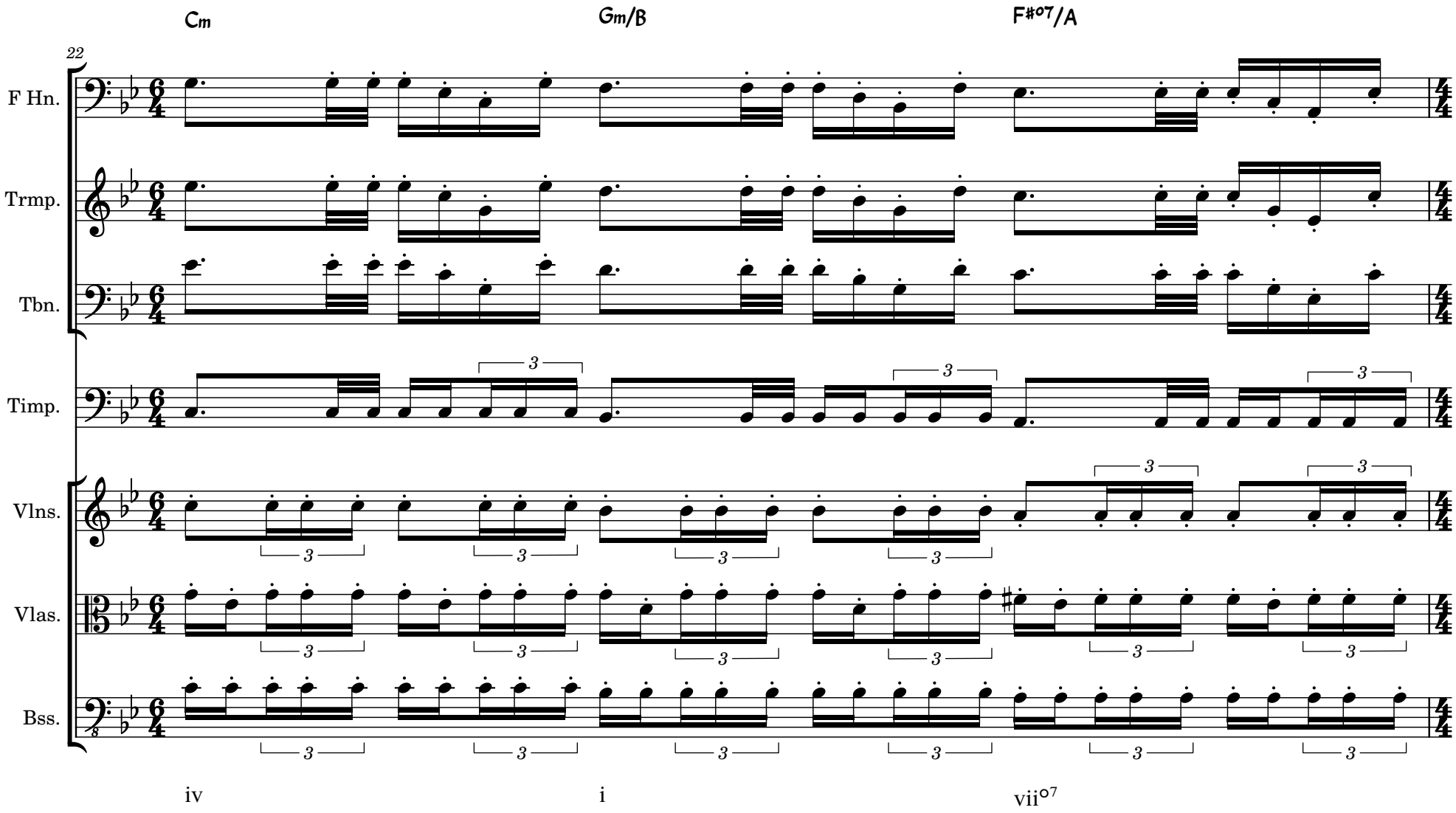
The C section introduces the second iconic theme of the track. It contrasts with the A section in several important ways:

- The instrumentation (at first) relies completely on the strings, as opposed to the brass-heavy A section.
- The rhythm changes to a driving, straightforward rhythm, as opposed to the syncopation present in the A section.
- The harmony is "functional", utilizing standard secondary dominant and plagal cadences (in the minor key).
- The brass (when it enters at mm. 20 and onward) is no longer voiced quartally.

The track retains its dark, ominous feeling, but the above elements introduce enough contrast in the music to keep it flowing and interesting. Thus, a balance is struck between maintaining the mood of the scene and creating movement and drama within the music.

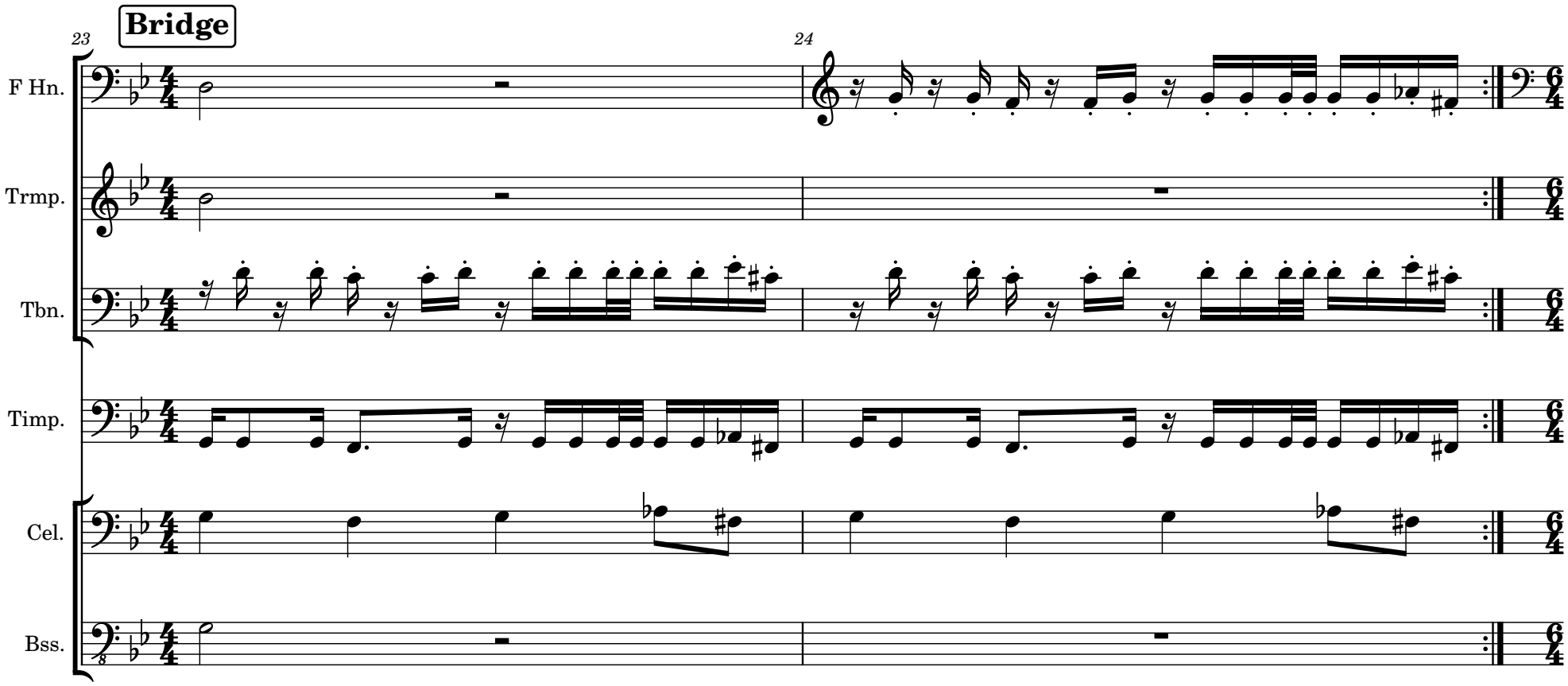

Gm
A7
D7
Gm
18
19
Fl.
Trmp.
Tbn.
Timp.
Vlns.
Vlas.
Cel.
Bss.
3
i
V7/V
V7
i


Cm
Gm
Cm
Gm
20
21
Trmp.
Tbn.
Timp.
Vlns.
Vlas.
Bss.
iv
i
iv
i



Compare this modulation with the one in the B section (mm. 14-15):
- In mm. 14-15, the melodic motion is *upwards*, creating rising tension. Furthermore, the harmony relies on major and dominant chords, brightening the sound.
- In the above measure, the melodic motion is *downwards*, which diffuses tension. The harmony relies on minor and diminished chords, darkening the sound.

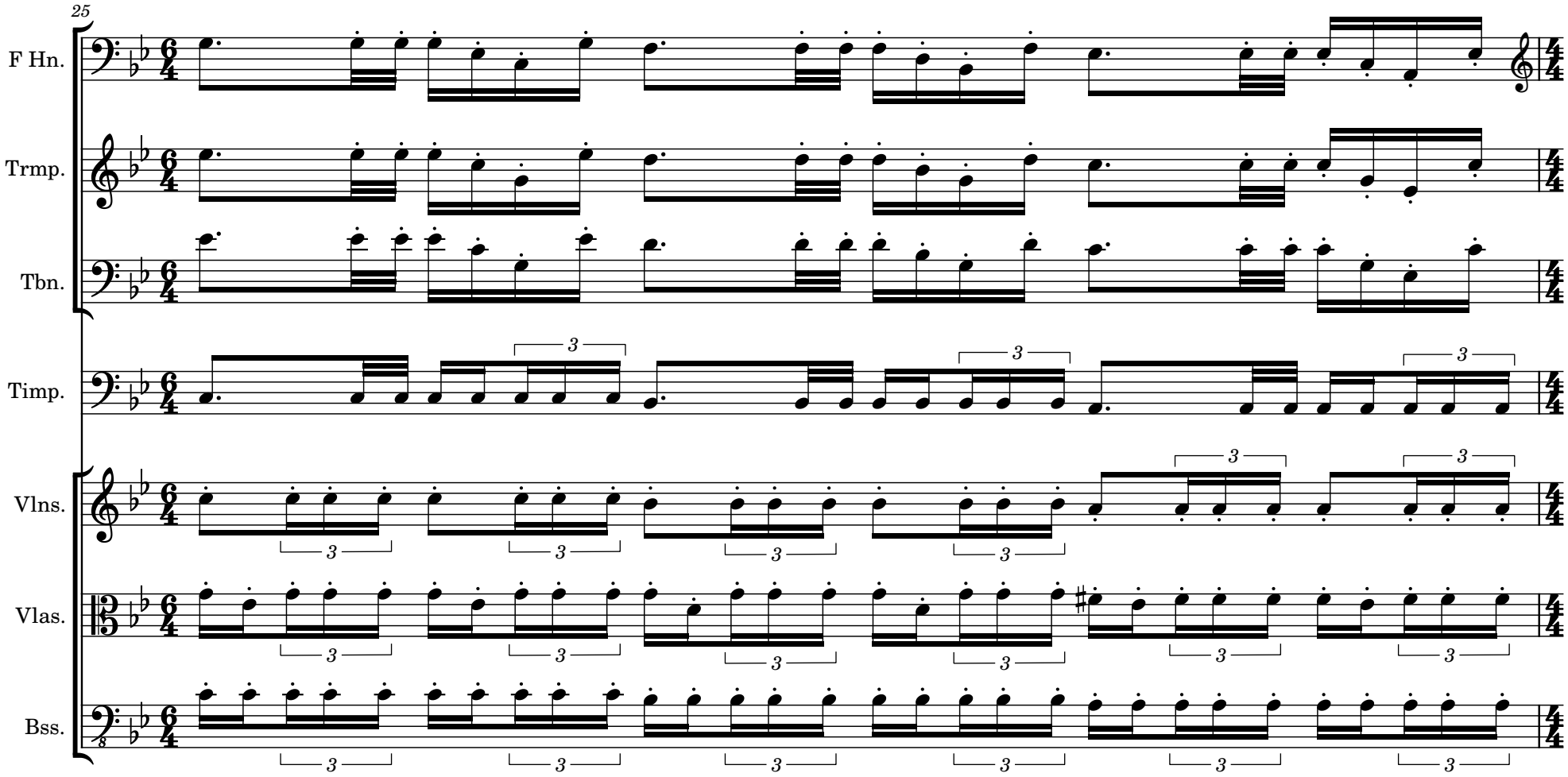
Taken as a whole, the track has a tidy "arc" to it - it rises and peaks at the B section modulation, and slowly settles down to *this* modulation before the track resets itself.



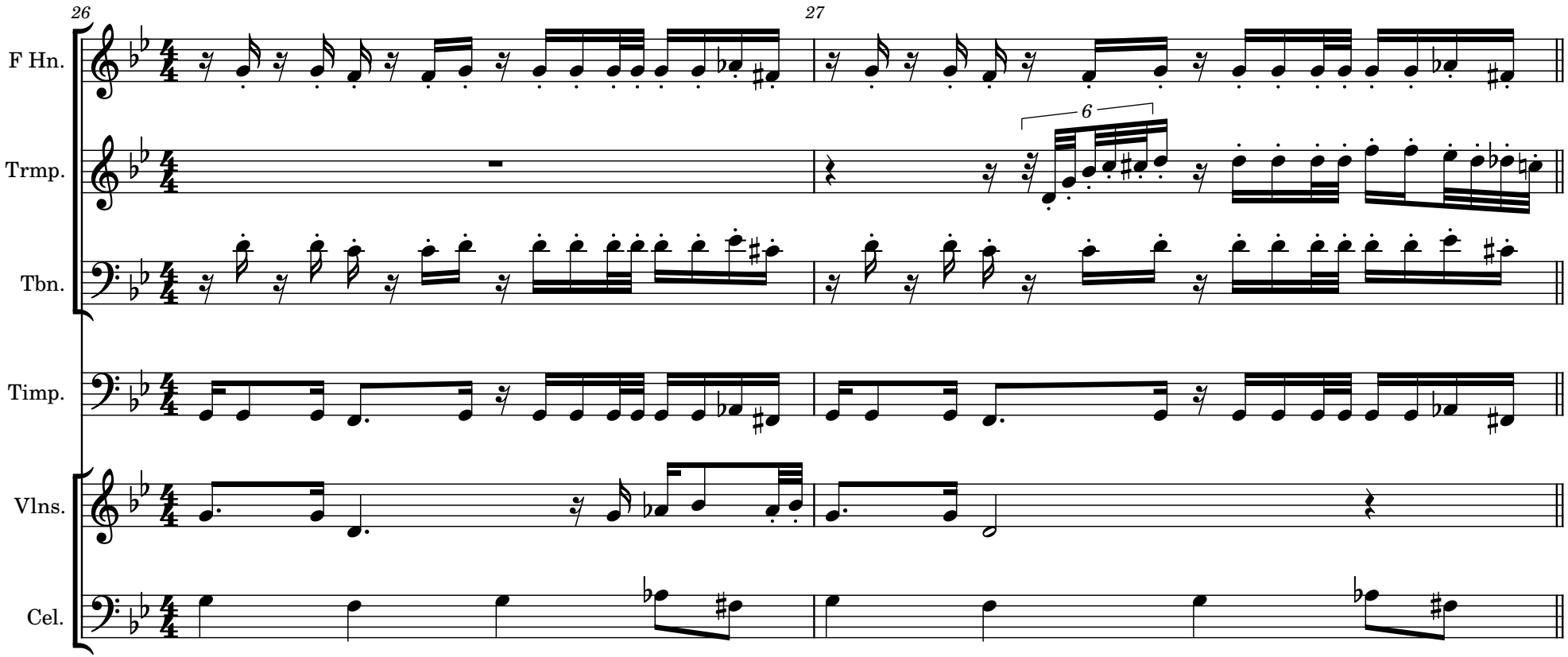
And here we have the bridge measures, same as the ones at the beginning of the track. This loops seamlessly to the beginning, allowing the music to flow indefinitely.

To see and hear an example of what the music would sound like *without* these measures, skip the repeat above and listen to mm. 25 and on.

EXAMPLE OF TRACK WITHOUT THE LOOP/BRIDGE



Here, I have copied the final measure of the final section of the track. However, instead of moving into the bridge measures (as Kondo composed it), I arranged it so this loops right back into the A section. Take a listen and you'll hear that...



...it doesn't sound very good, does it? While it would certainly be possible to tweak these measures so the transition was a bit more smooth, the jump right into the A section's melody would *still* sound jarring and out-of-step with the rest of the track.

This may seem like a minor detail, but keep in mind that video game music, for the most part, is meant to *loop indefinitely*. Since the game composer has no control over how long a player listens to the track, it's imperative that these "minor" details are addressed with attention and care. Otherwise, the music - and thus the player's experience of the game and story - will suffer.