Lesson One

How to Learn and Memorize Major Scales

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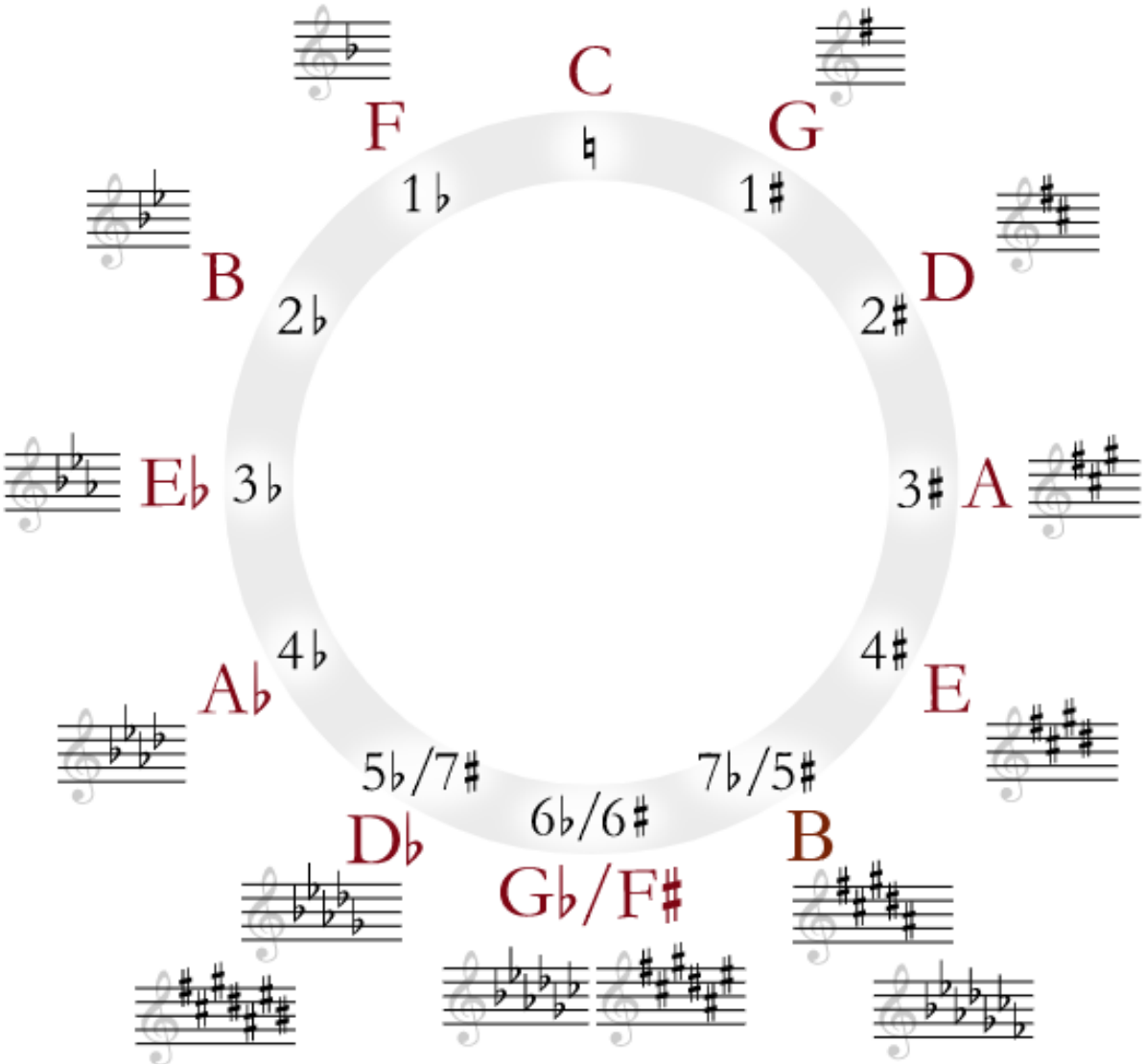
Part 1: The method

The importance of Major scales

Major scales are the most important piano scales to learn. Not only because they are the most common, but also because a large part of the remaining scales is compared to them. The seven modes, for example, are essentially Major scales, but starts on other steps in the scale.

Major scales are also synonymously with major keys. If you hear someone mention that a piano sonata by the composer and pianist Franz Schubert is played in A Major, it means that it depends on the A major scale.

The Circle of fifths



A common way to present a visualization of the relationship between notes and keys is the *circle of fifths*. It is called so because each note, turning clockwise, is a perfect fifth interval away from the next. Turning counterclockwise will instead result in fourth intervals (which is the reason for it being called the *circle of fourths* as well).

As seen in the image above, the sharps (♯) increase for each clockwise step. And vice versa, the flats (♭) increase for every counterclockwise step. This can be fundamental for memorizing the major scales and often when scales are listed they are ordered this way.

We can comprise this into a list of all keys with accidentals:

C — no flats or sharps

G — one sharp

D — two sharps

A — three sharps

E — four sharps

B — five sharps

F# — six sharps

F — one flat

Bb — two flats

Eb — three flats

Ab — four flats

Db — five flats

Gb — six flats.

The list includes only 13 keys out of the total 17 keys. The C# key includes seven sharps and is often represented by the enharmonic equivalent Db. The others – G#, D# and A# — are also represented by their enharmonic equivalents because of the double sharps (𝄪) these contains make them problematic in sheet music situations.

You don’t have to memorize the circle of fifth directly. You can instead start by playing the C major scale and locate the fifth scale step, which will tell you what the next step in the circle of fifth is.

C, D, E, F, **G**, A, B (the C major scale with the 5th step in bold).

You can do the same thing by playing the G major scale to find the third step in the circle of fifth.

G, A, B, C, **D**, E, F# (the G major scale with the 5th step in bold).

This time, it was the D major scale. You can continue by this method to find the other steps in the circle of fifth in clockwise order.

If going counterclockwise from C, now it is the fourth step that shows the next step in the circle.

C, D, E, **F**, G, A, B (the C major scale with the 4th step in bold).

The rest of the steps counterclockwise in the circle can be found by the same method.

Patterns to recognize

When we are shifting from C major to G major, we can notice that the seventh note in the scale get raised one semi-step.

G, A, B, C, D, E, **F#** (the G major scale with the 7th step in bold).

When we once again move on to the next scale by turning clockwise in the circle of fifth, to D major, it is once again the seventh note in the scale that are raised one step in relation to the previous one (G major).

D, E, F#, G, A, B, **C#** (the D major scale with the 7th step in bold).

The same pattern applies for the rest of the scales every time another extra sharp is added.

If we instead turn counterclockwise, from C major to F major, we can notice that the fourth note in the scale get lowered one semi-step (compared to the notes in the previous C major scale).

F, G, A, **Bb**, C, D, E (the F major scale with the 4th step in bold).

By moving again in the same direction to Bb major, the pattern is repeating: once again the fourth note in the scale get lowered one step compared to the previous scale (F major).

Bb, C, D, **Eb**, F, G, A (Bb major scale with the 4th step in bold).

We have learned that the circle of fifths can be used to see how sharps (turning clockwise) or flats (turning counterclockwise) increase for every step.

Summary

To summarize, to learn and memorize all major scales by this method you

1) begin with C major (exclusively white keys) and count five steps from the start note, which turns out to be the G note and means that the next scale in the cycle order is G major.
2) The G scale starts from G (of course) and include the same notes as the previous scale (C major) except that the seventh note is raised one step.
3) Going counterclockwise, start again with C major and locate the fourth note, which is the start note for the next scale.
4) That scale includes the same note as C major except the fourth note, which is lowered one step.

By playing through all major scales by this method you will also learn the circle of fifth, which will be beneficial in other aspects, such as chord theory. This method gives you a device to better learn and memorize the major scales.

Image source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Circle_of_fifths_deluxe_4_uz.svg, author: Nataev

Part 2: Piano pieces

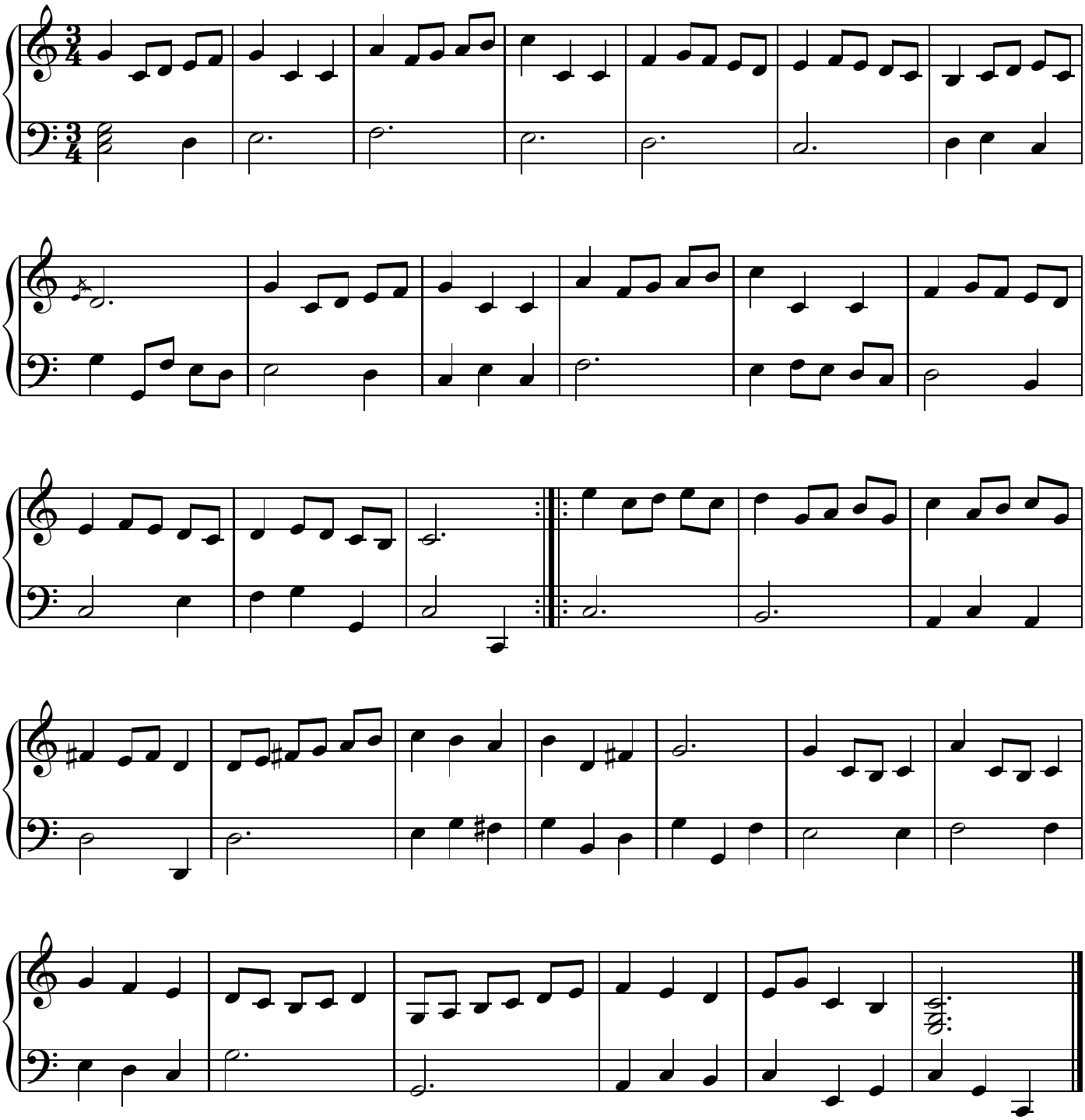
Piano pieces by transposition

A fun way to learn the major scales is to play piano pieces in different keys and take notice about which notes are involved. Any music piece can be transposed (moving the notes up or down by a constant interval to make it match a different key).

In the last part of this lesson, you will have the chance to play a selected piano piece by J.S. Bach in three different keys which correspond to C major, G major and D major, respectively.

Minuet (in C major)

J.S. Bach



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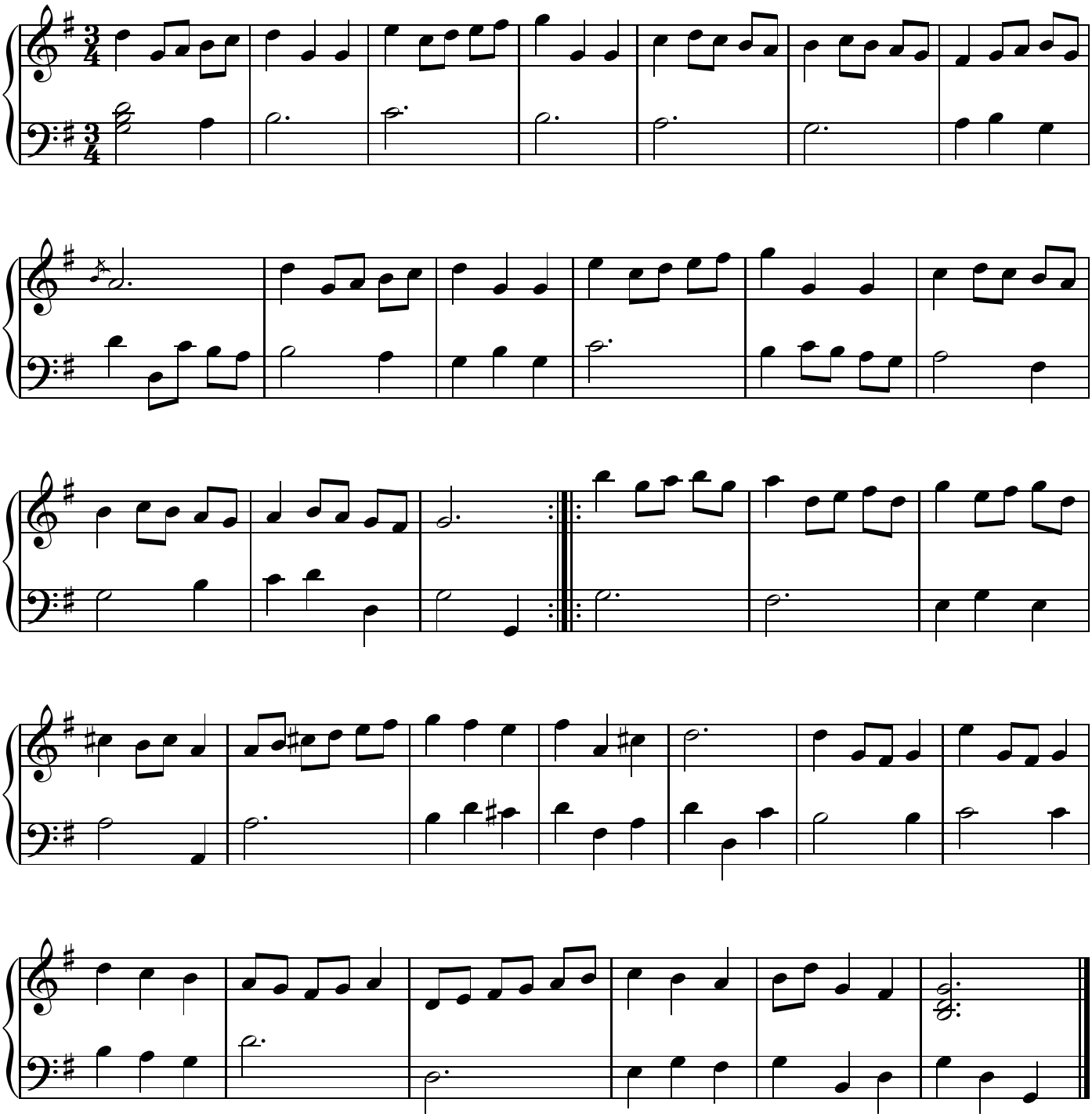
Minuet (in G major)

J.S. Bach



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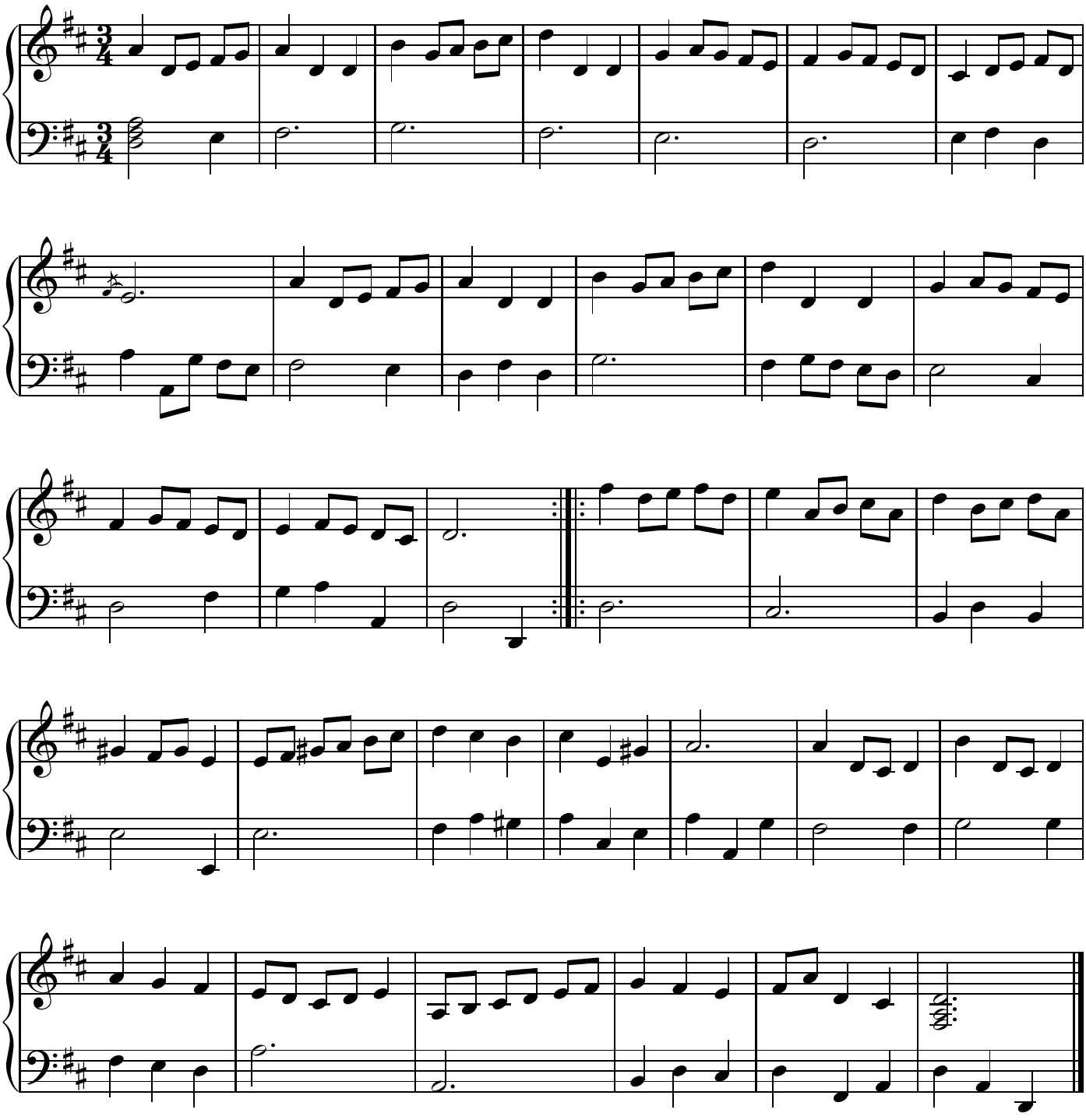
Minuet (in D major)

J.S. Bach



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