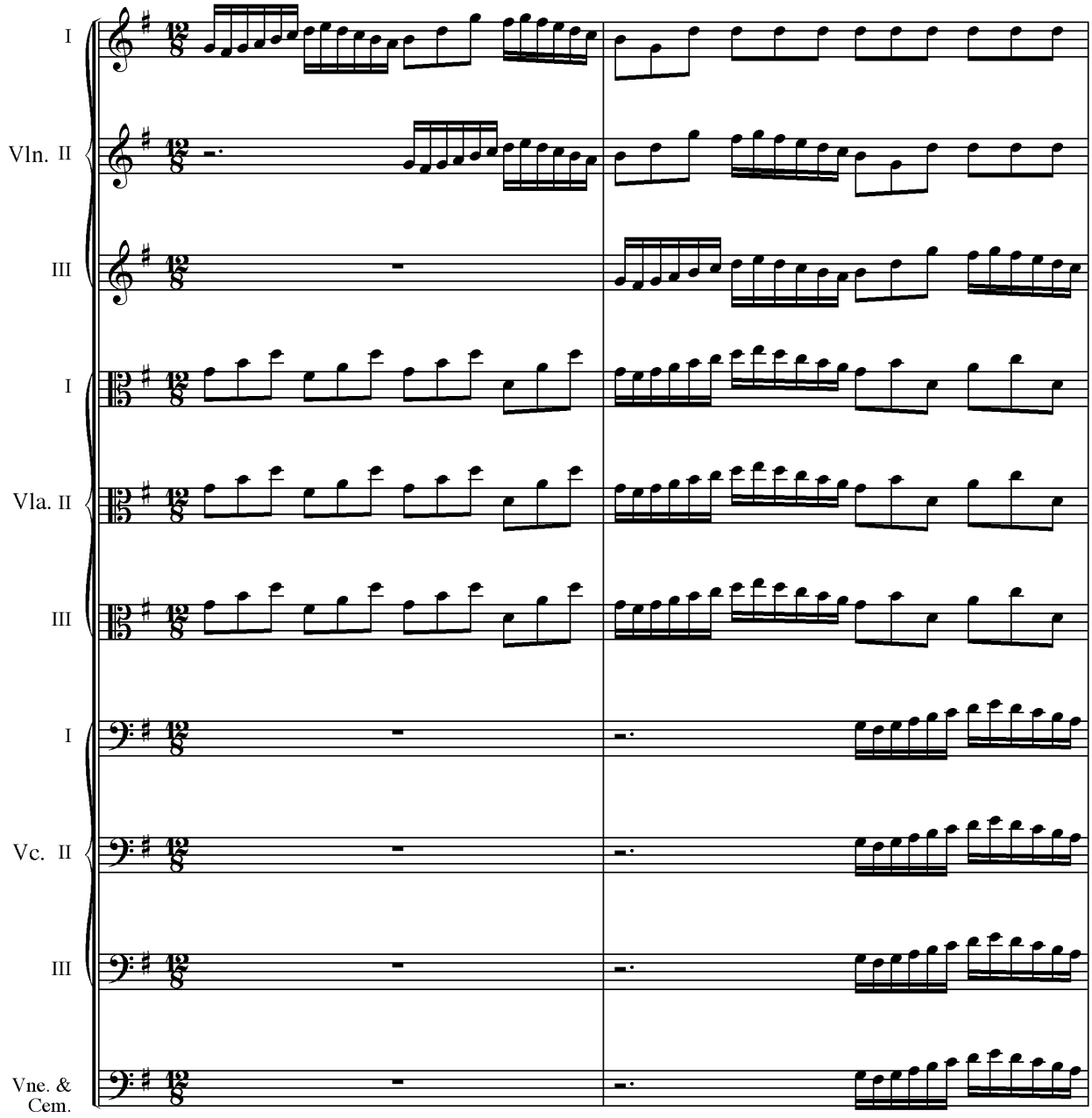
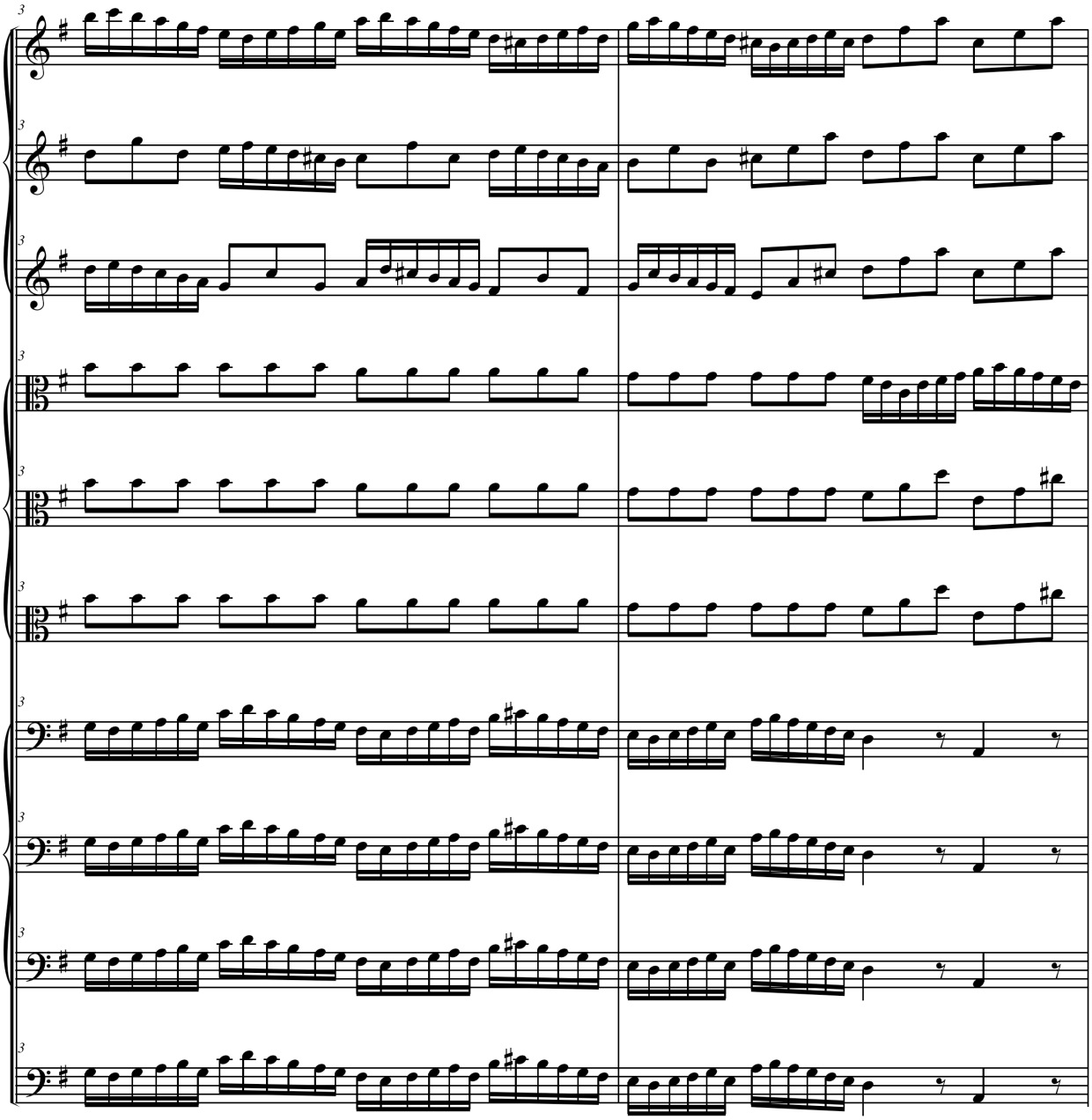
Web Feature 12.1

Motives in Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, 3rd movement

The third movement of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 (the opening of which is shown in Web Example 12.1) illustrates how several types of motivic development may be used together to create a rich musical surface. From the pattern of imitation, it might appear that the motive consists of twelve sixteenth notes. Closer inspection, however, shows that the second set of six sixteenth notes is an inversion of the first, so one could alternatively label the *first* six sixteenth notes as the motive, followed immediately by its inversion (is it real or tonal?).

At the third measure, a sequence begins, and the nature of the material in the first violins at this point presents another interesting question; is the pattern of twelve sixteenth notes that begins in measure 3 the inversion of the six-sixteenth-note motive, followed by the original motive transposed—or is the *entire* twelve-sixteenth-note passage the inversion of the original twelve-sixteenth-note motive? Both interpretations are plausible, and in fact which one is chosen may depend on the tempo at which the movement is performed; at a faster tempo we are less likely to subdivide the twelve-note into two six-note motives.


I
Vln. II
III
I
Vla. II
III
I
Vc. II
III
Vne. &
Cem.



Web Example 12.1. Bach, Brandenburg Concerto #3 (iii), measures 1–4.