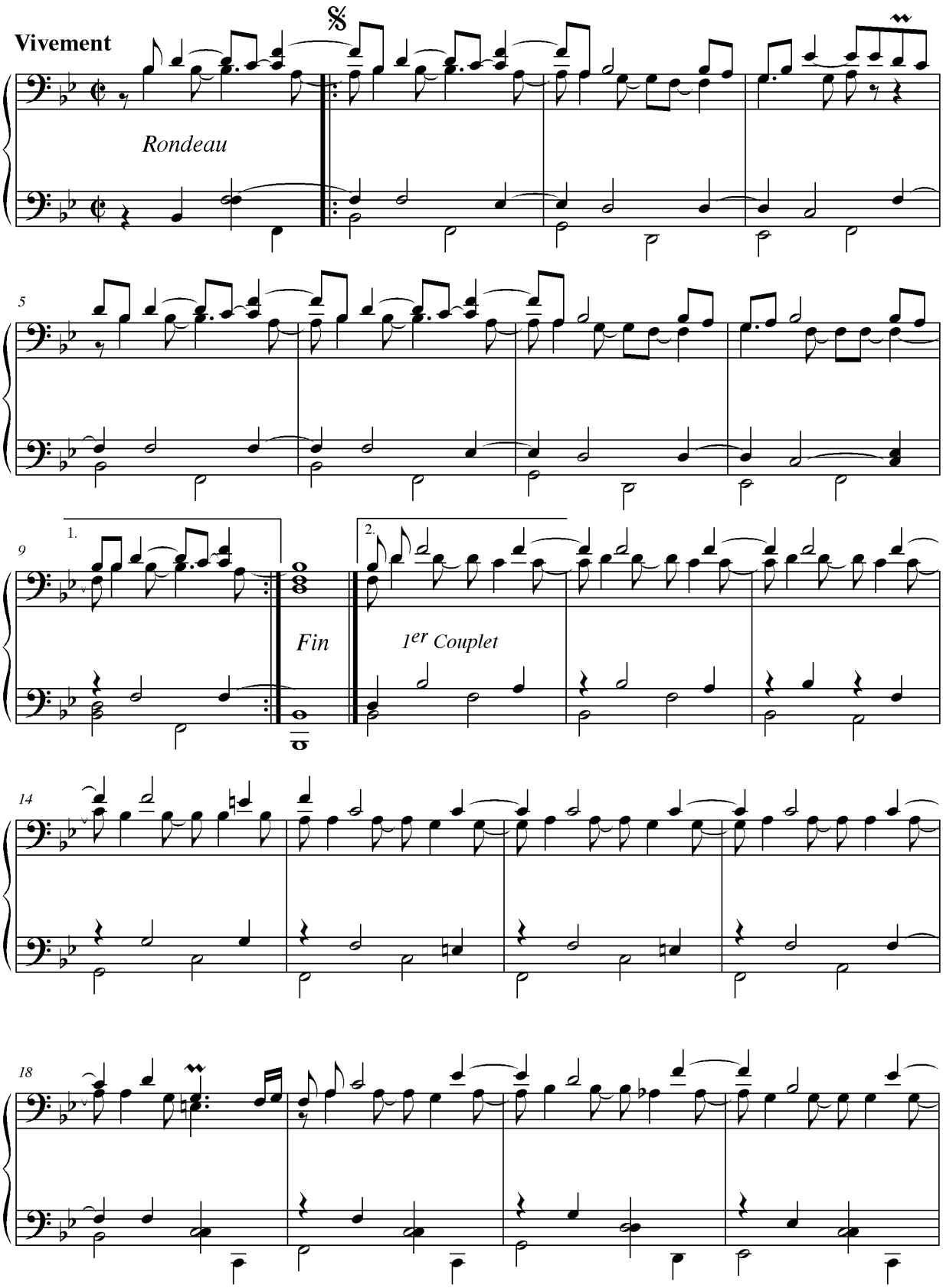
Web Feature 22.1

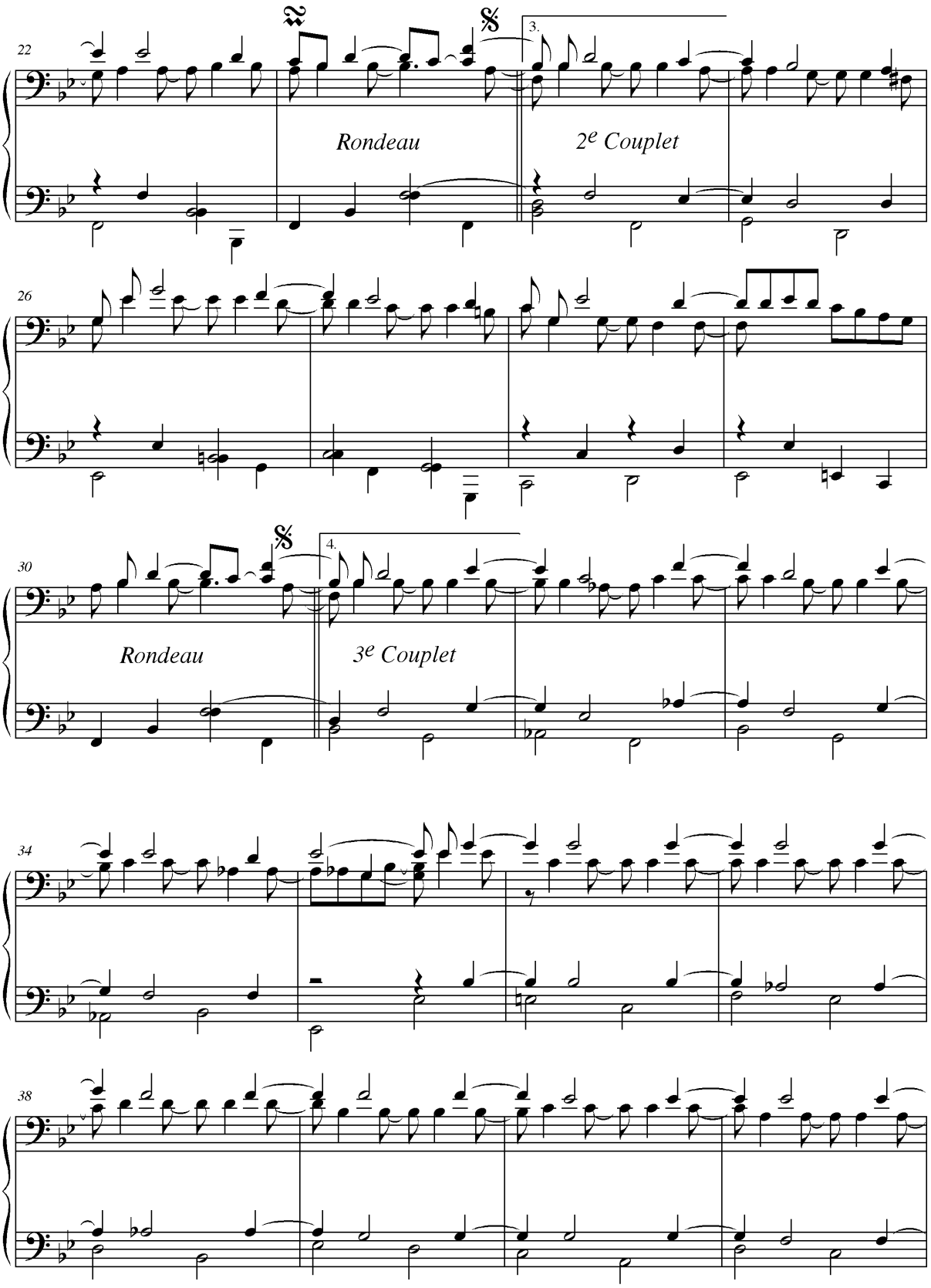
The Baroque rondeau

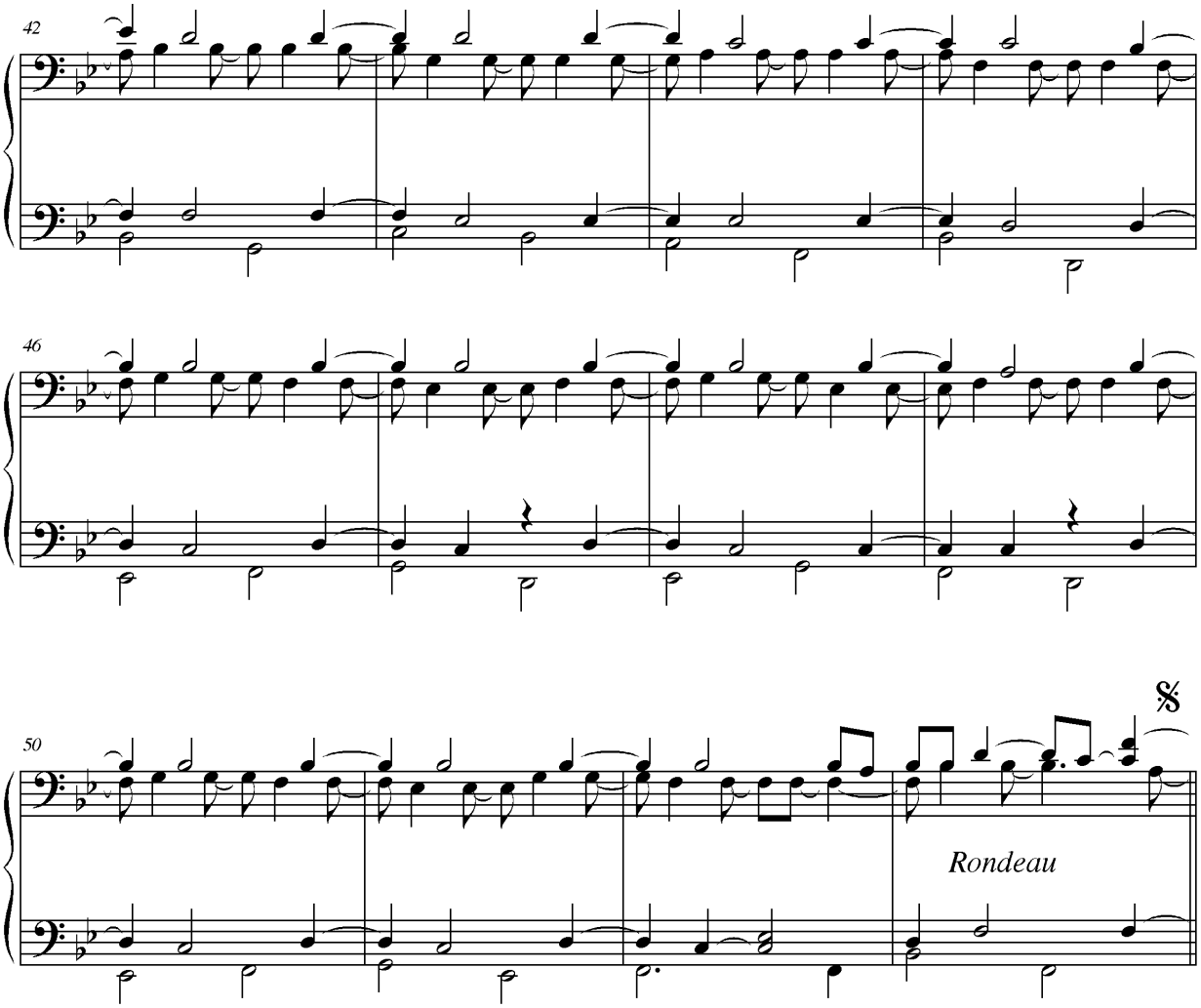
The term *rondeau* originated as a form of poetry and music in France in the Middle Ages. One form, dating from the thirteenth century, was an eight-line poem; lines 1 and 2 were repeated for the last two lines, and line 1 was also repeated in the fourth line. The first two lines then formed a kind of **refrain** (a repeating passage) that was reprised at the end and partially reprised in the middle. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the refrain came to be expanded, with the result of lengthening the poem: a three-line refrain was called a *tercet,* a four-line refrain a *quatrain,* and there were even refrains with five lines (called a *cinquain*). In the recitation of these poems, music would be composed for the refrains only.

The French Baroque *rondeau*, which flourished in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, bears little resemblance to its medieval forerunner, though perhaps the presence of the recurring refrain earned it the name. It was an instrumental form characterized by the alternation of the refrain (which by now had become, musically, a short recurring passage in the tonic, made self-sufficient by its conclusion on a perfect authentic cadence) with contrasting sections called **couplets.** Each couplet usually emphasized a different key, closely related to the tonic, in turn. The number of couplets varied according to the piece; most often there were three or four. A three-couplet rondeau, then, would have the form ABACADA (where *A* represents the refrain). Usually in the printed music the refrain would be printed only at the beginning, with *da capo* or *rondeau* signs used at the ends of the couplets to save space.

François Couperin (1668–1733) was a contemporary of Bach's who composed twenty-seven *ordres* (suites) for harpsichord as well as vocal and chamber music. Some of his harpsichord compositions bear fanciful or quizzical titles; such is the case with "Les Baricades Mistérieuses" (The Mysterious Barricades), which was composed in 1717. The complete score is shown in Web Example 22.1.


Vivement
Rondeau
5
1.
2.
9
Fin
1er Couplet
14
18


22
Rondeau
2e Couplet
3.
26
30
Rondeau
3e Couplet
4.
34
38



Web Example 22.1. Couperin, "Les Baricades Mistérieuses."

This arpeggiated texture also carries over to the couplets, so that at least as far as texture is concerned there might appear to be minimal distinction between the sections. Contrast is achieved largely by slight changes of register (the couplets tend to be somewhat higher in pitch) and, especially, in key areas. The first couplet (measures 9–23), for example, emphasizes the dominant, F major; the second couplet (measures 24–30), c minor; and the third couplet (measures 31–52) modulates by sequences before settling into E♭ major (measures 46–51). Note that whereas the refrain is a section of fixed length and content, the couplets are of varying lengths and degrees of tonal instability; the last couplet is the longest and tends to modulate the most. This tendency

of saving the most "adventurous" music for the final couplet will recur in some Classic-era rondos.