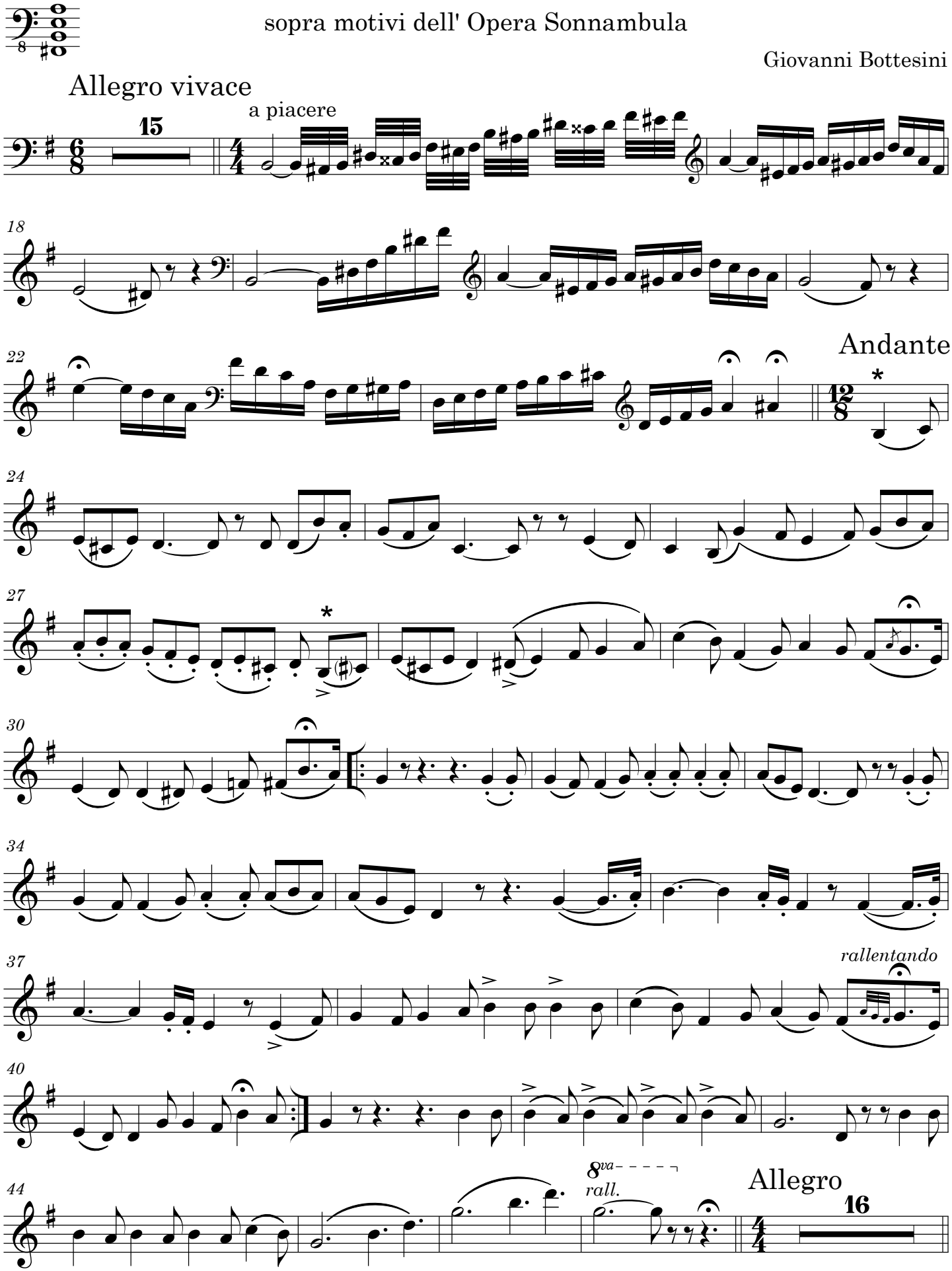
C'basso solista (in D)

Fantasia per Contrabasso

sopra motivi dell' Opera Sonnambula

Giovanni Bottesini



Meno mosso

64

69 (rubato)

74

79 Var. 1

83

86

89

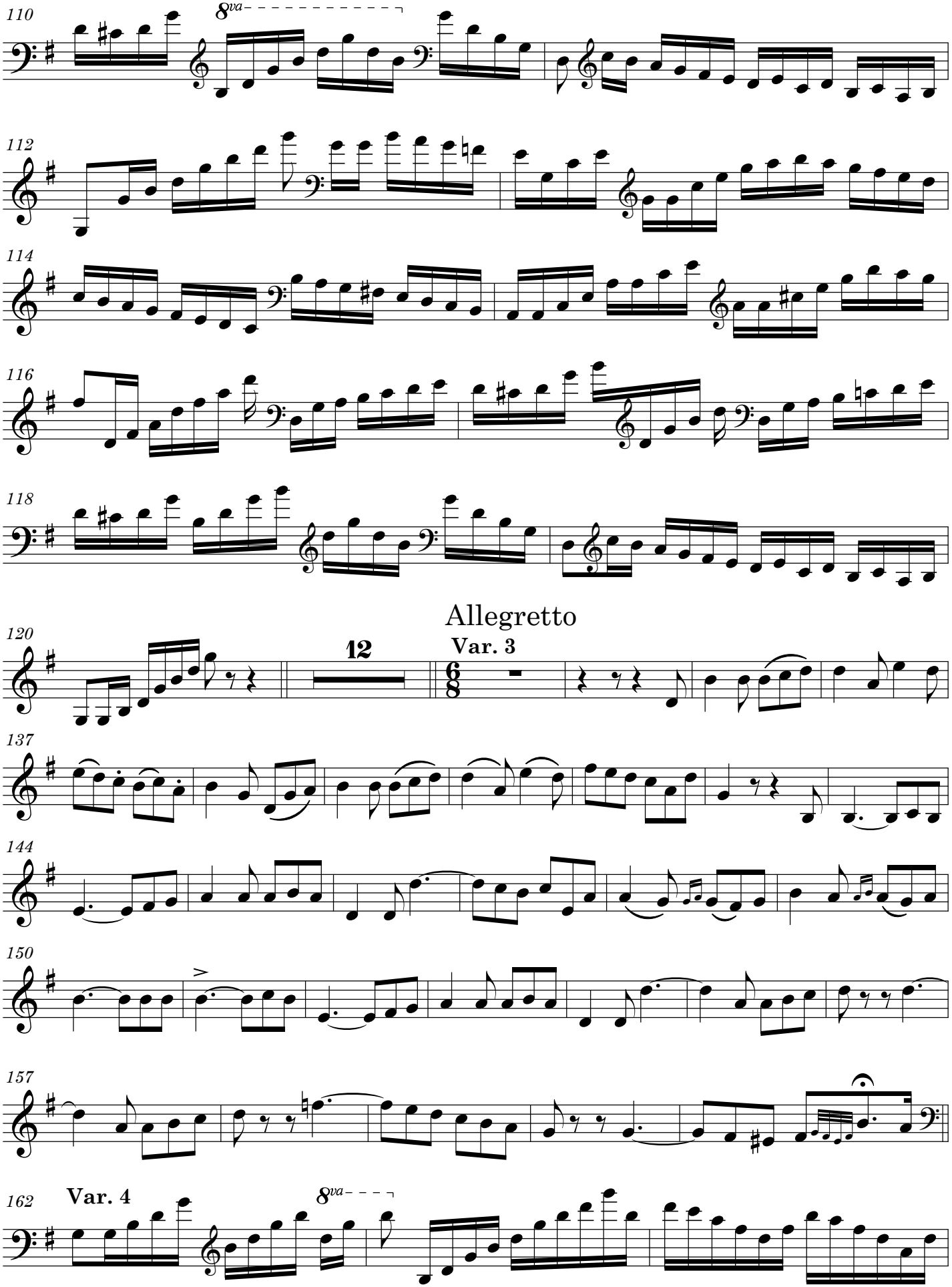
91

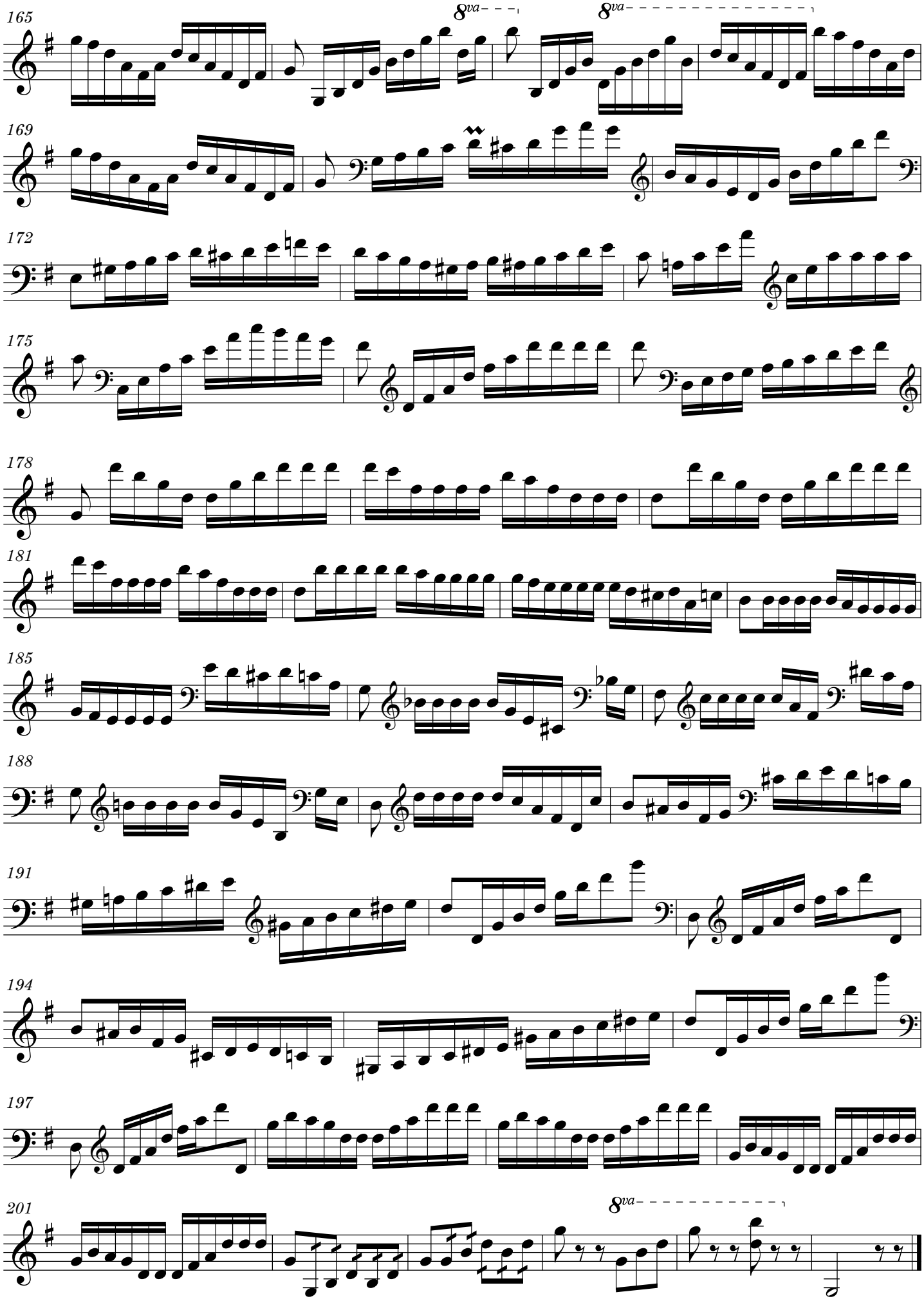
94

97 Var. 2

106

108


110
8va
112
114
116
118
Allegretto
120
12
Var. 3
137
144
150
157
162
Var. 4
8va


165
8va
8va
169
172
175
178
181
185
188
191
194
197
201
8va

Performance practice notes

From the early 20th century onward, training musicians in historically informed interpretation was largely neglected. The consequences of this neglect are still strongly felt today, as much of the notational practice used in earlier centuries has been forgotten. Thanks to the tireless work of leading musicologists of our time, who have carefully examined and compiled historical sources, many details of 18th- and 19th-century performance practice have been rediscovered and brought together into an increasingly complete picture.

Urtext editions such as this one, which faithfully reproduce 19th-century autograph scores, should not be approached solely through a modern interpretive lens. Performers are encouraged to consider the performance practices of Bottesini's time, which were deeply shaped by the Italian *bel canto* tradition. This aesthetic favored a beautiful, singing tone, seamless legato, and vocal-like articulation on all instruments.

Dynamics in this repertoire should be understood as expressive shaping rather than fixed volume levels. Markings such as ***p***, ***f***, and crescendo often imply a flexible range of nuances, frequently connected to harmonic tension, melodic direction, or rhetorical emphasis. Sudden contrasts may be intended more as changes of color and intensity than as purely loud or soft effects.

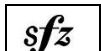
Articulation likewise reflects vocal models. Slurs generally indicate phrasing and breath-like continuity rather than mere technical grouping, while detached markings often suggest lightness and clarity rather than sharp separation. Bow strokes and finger articulation should aim to preserve a sense of line and cantabile flow, even in passages that appear technically demanding.

Tempo should also be treated with expressive flexibility. Indications such as Andante, Allegro, or Adagio describe character as much as speed, and performers are encouraged to allow subtle rubato, particularly at cadential points, in melodic climaxes, or in transitions between contrasting ideas. Such flexibility should remain organic and stylistically grounded, never disrupting the underlying pulse.

This interpretive approach shaped instrumentalists as much as singers, who consciously sought to emulate the expressive qualities of the human voice. Historical sources suggest that the prevailing sound ideal of Bottesini's contemporaries favored a lyrical, soft, and sweet tone. Composers' notational conventions reflect this aesthetic; many markings and indications found in the score assume this sound world and may therefore be misunderstood or applied too literally when interpreted from a purely modern perspective.

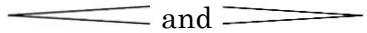
In the early 20th century, performance practice changed rapidly. The flexible, vocal-inspired phrasing of the 19th century gave way to greater precision, clarity, and structural awareness. Romantic expressiveness and free *rubato* were replaced by stricter tempos, clearer articulation, and closer attention to the composer's intentions. Innovations in instrument design and recording technology further influenced playing styles, ushering in a new era of technical brilliance and stylistic diversity.

This contemporary approach differs markedly from what a musician of Bottesini's time would have considered logical. To avoid misunderstandings when performing mid-19th-century notation, this short guide provides general hints for reading and interpreting the music of that period, based on insights from leading modern musicologists, and aims to support historically informed performance. In Bottesini's notation style, the most potentially misleading elements from a modern perspective are the articulation symbols. Therefore, the following table presents intensity grades from strongest to weakest, and indicates how they are presumed to be performed:

	This articulation / dynamic marking appears very rarely in Bottesini's works. It seems to denote very high level of intensity (it does not occur in La Sonnambula)

fz	Applied to notes of elevated intensity and serves, within Bottesini's notational practice, a role comparable to the modern *sforzando*. However, its execution was presumably smoother in character and imbued with a considerable degree of *espressivo*.
sf	This symbol is applied to exposed notes, yet its initial articulation should be executed considerably more softly than is customary in contemporary performance practice. Bottesini employed it frequently and across all dynamic levels. Notes marked in this way may appropriately be performed at approximately one dynamic degree above the written indication for the respective passage.
>	This articulation marking denotes notes of particular musical importance (harmony or melody). They should be given subtle prominence, more akin to an espressivo emphasis than to a marked accent, and usually without exceeding the prevailing dynamic level.

The following observations are intended not as commentary only on Bottesini's individual compositional style, but as guidance regarding the broader performance practices of the 19th century. Given the substantial evolution of musical interpretation since that time, these conventions may easily be misread from a contemporary perspective and thus warrant careful consideration:

-  and
  Throughout the 19th century, hairpins were primarily used to indicate subtle changes in tempo rather than dynamics, as is commonly assumed today. Nevertheless, they could also imply a corresponding increase or decrease in loudness.
- Tempo markings at the beginning of a movement, according to the musical conventions of the 18th and 19th centuries, generally applied only to the first theme. Subsequent sections or themes could adopt their own tempo, which did not necessarily correspond to strict metronomic accuracy.
- Dots placed above or below notes generally indicate shorter, detached articulation; however, their precise meaning - ranging from slightly detached to very short - varied considerably between composers and was often combined with other markings such as accents or marcato. This resulted in complex and inconsistent usage prior to standardization. Because the interpretation of such symbols remained composer-specific, they present a particular challenge for modern performers. In Bottesini's works, a light detachment of the notes is generally recommended, in accordance with the broader principles of *bel canto*, rather than performing them as very short staccato. There is no historical evidence indicating how Bottesini himself approached such situations, nor does his method provide instructions regarding the execution of dotted notes.

As a soloist, Bottesini often employed a scordatura on the double bass that was tuned higher than the tuning commonly used in orchestras. Because concert pitch had not yet been standardized in the 19th century, a variety of pitch levels coexisted. In addition to the frequently used pitch of A ≈ 435–440 Hz, the older Baroque pitch of A ≈ 415 Hz remained also widespread. This resulted in a difference of almost exactly a semitone. British practice, particularly in large concert settings, remained at notably higher pitch longer into the century, contributing to a brighter and more brilliant sound. For this reason, the accompaniments to many of Bottesini's compositions exist in two versions: one at the notated pitch, and another transposed a semitone higher, the latter intended for use with lower-pitched keyboard instruments or orchestras. For the same reason many old Bach editions include organ parts in two different pitches because organs were tuned to a fixed pitch, lower than orchestral instruments, requiring transposed notation so they could play together. There is also a theory suggesting that Bottesini tuned his instrument to different pitch levels; however, there is no historical evidence for that. Bottesini often wrote stronger dynamics and clearer articulations for lower-pitched instruments - whose sound is naturally softer - to balance the difference.

PREFACE

Fantasia (also designated by the composer as *Concerto*) on themes from Vincenzo Bellini's opera "La Sonnambula" is among Giovanni Bottesini's earliest works. The earliest documented performances date from the early 1840s.

The present Urtext edition is based on a single primary source: a set of handwritten orchestral parts deriving from Bottesini's original material and used under his direction in the 1880s. Some orchestral parts contain annotations by performers indicating dates and places of performance, including Rio de Janeiro (1879), Lisbon (27 and 28 January 1881), and Valencia (17 April 1884). These parts, prepared by several copyists, most likely represent the complete orchestral material. However, no full score has survived and - characteristically for Bottesini's sources - no separate solo part is preserved. This absence is particularly significant, as the extant traces of the solo line in the orchestral parts reveal notable divergences from the first printed edition for double bass and piano (Paris: S. Richault, early 1870s).

Several orchestral parts contain cue-sized notation or additional staves providing a simplified outline of the solo double bass part. Such indications are found in principal string parts, including those of the second violin leader and the principal viola. The most extensive transmission of the solo line appears in the concertmaster's (first violin) part. Octave placement of the solo double bass appears not to be indicated consistently, presumably in order to maintain clarity and readability of the notation of the violin part.

Editor's notes

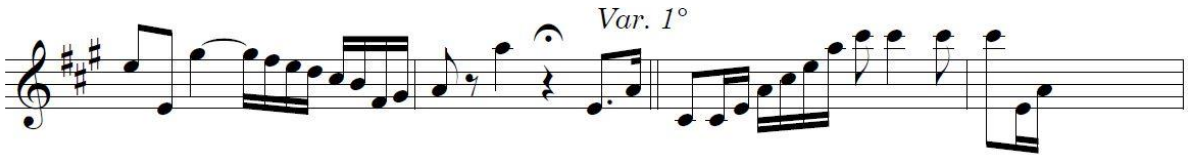
The present edition contains no editorial additions, with the exception of cautionary accidentals introduced for the sake of clarity. All pitch designations in the following commentary refer to sounding (i.e., real) pitch.

24
From a musical standpoint, the solo double bass part would be expected to continue in the same octave as the final two notes of bar 23. Such a continuation would necessitate the use of natural harmonics. A plausible point for returning to the lower octave occurs at the final two notes of bar 27. In this interpretation, the accidental given in brackets in bar 24 may be disregarded, and D natural may be performed, corresponding to the anacrusis to bar 24

64
The passage in bars 64–80 quotes the coloratura soprano theme *"Ah! non giunge…"* from the finale of Act II of Bellini's *"La Sonnambula"*. The solo double bass part is notated in a register that implies the use of natural harmonics in the upper range of the A string. In the context of mid-19th-century performance practice, the transfer of a soprano

melody to the double bass at notated pitch may be understood in relation to contemporary aesthetic preferences and the reception of Bellini's opera. From an acoustic perspective, natural harmonics on string instruments produce a distinct timbre and reduced sonority compared to stopped tones. In larger performance spaces, this may affect projection. An alternative octave placement of the passage is not transmitted in the source; however, performance in a lower octave may be considered in practice.

81
This is the only surviving bar of Variation 1 transmitted in cue notation in the concertmaster's part. Octave placement is not clearly indicated; the staff is reproduced here as it appears in the source:



104
The following passage provides a further example of inconsistent octave placement. Bars 104–107 are reproduced here exactly as they appear in the source:

163
The last bar in which the solo part is transmitted is bar 162. Bar 163 has therefore been editorially reconstructed in a musically consistent manner. From bar 164 to the end of the work, the solo part follows the text of the first printed edition (double bass and piano). The harmonic structure of the orchestral version also corresponds with that source through to the conclusion of the piece.