The Chitarra Atiorbata and Guitare Theorbée

Monica Hall

[Corrected]

Giovanni Battista Granata's fourth book of music for 5-course guitar "Soave concenti di sonata musicali" (Bologna, 1659) includes five pieces for the *chitarra atiorbata* (p.97-114) and the manuscript "Pieces de Guitarre de differendes Autheures recueillis par Henry François de Gallot" (GB:Ob Ms.Mus.Sch.C94 – ca. 1660-70), twelve pieces for the *guitare theorbée* (f.100v-101v). In both sources the instrument in question apparently has **five stopped courses** on the fingerboard and **seven open bass strings** or diapasons.

The stopped courses of Granata's instrument are tuned to the standard intervals for the baroque guitar but those of Gallot's instrument are tuned to a **major or minor common chord** (nominally C major/minor. The examples here assume C major).

The open basses in Granata's music are represented in the standard way for Italian theorbo music –

6	7	8	9	X	11	12
G	F	E	D	C	B′	A′

In the Gallot manuscript the open basses are notated in what appears to be the standard French manner

a/	*a//*	*a///*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
F	E	D	C	B′	A′	G′

However in French tablature the first open bass is usually represented by the simple letter ***a*** **which would represent the pitch G**. Although all the seven bass courses listed above are used throughout the music, this eighth course is never used even in places where it is necessary to create an acceptable bass line. This can be seen in bars 2 and 14 of both bass lines of Mus. ex. 2 below where the bass falls a 7th to the dominant rather than rises one step. This suggests that the instrument did not have this eighth course.

If we assume that the instrument is simply a "standard" *chitarra atiorbata*, the overall tuning would be as follows

e′ b′ g d′d aA F E D C B′ A′ G′

Using *scordatura* for the courses on the fingerboard the tuning would be altered to

e′ c′ g e′e c′c F E D C B′ A′ G′

In the standard tuning there is an apparent gap of a **major 3rd** between the lowest course on the fingerboard and the first open bass.

The *scordatura* involves tuning the fifth course up a minor 3rd which is probably stretching to the limit what is practical without re-stringing. The second course is raised a semitone and the fourth course a tone.

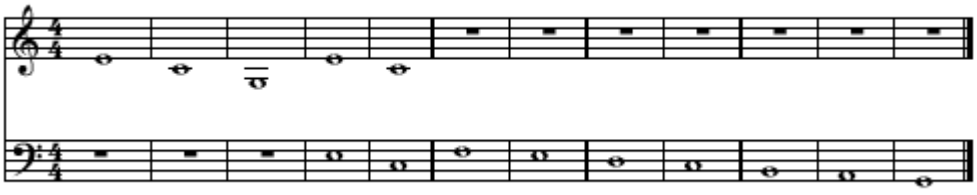
In the *scordatura* pieces the first open bass will be a **perfect fifth lower** than the low octave string on the stopped fifth course; even if the missing G is actually present on the instrument, there will still be a gap of a **perfect 4th**.

From a musical point of view this is unsatisfactory because it creates a gap in a crucial area of the instrument's compass. This defeats the whole purpose of having an extended bass range.[1] In the music it may also create wide separation between the melody on the upper courses and the bass line, as can be seen in bars 2, 7, 12 and 14 of the lower bass line in Mus. ex. 2 where the bass note is two octaves and a 5th below the treble. This results in a thin and unattractive sound.

It is more likely therefore that the open basses of Gallot's instrument descend stepwise from the **third course.** This would explain why the open bass **a = G** is missing. It is already present on the fingerboard and there is no need to duplicate it.

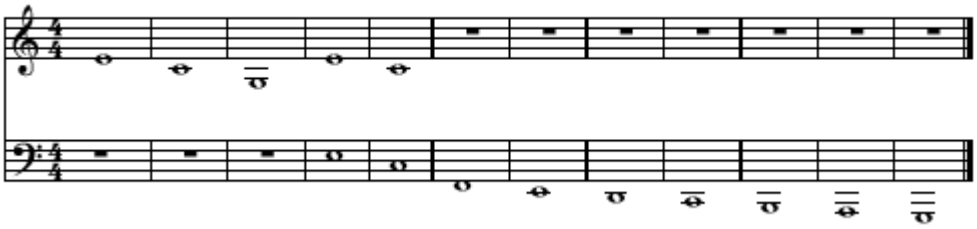
Mus. ex. 1 - Gallot's tuning – major form

A – with high basses



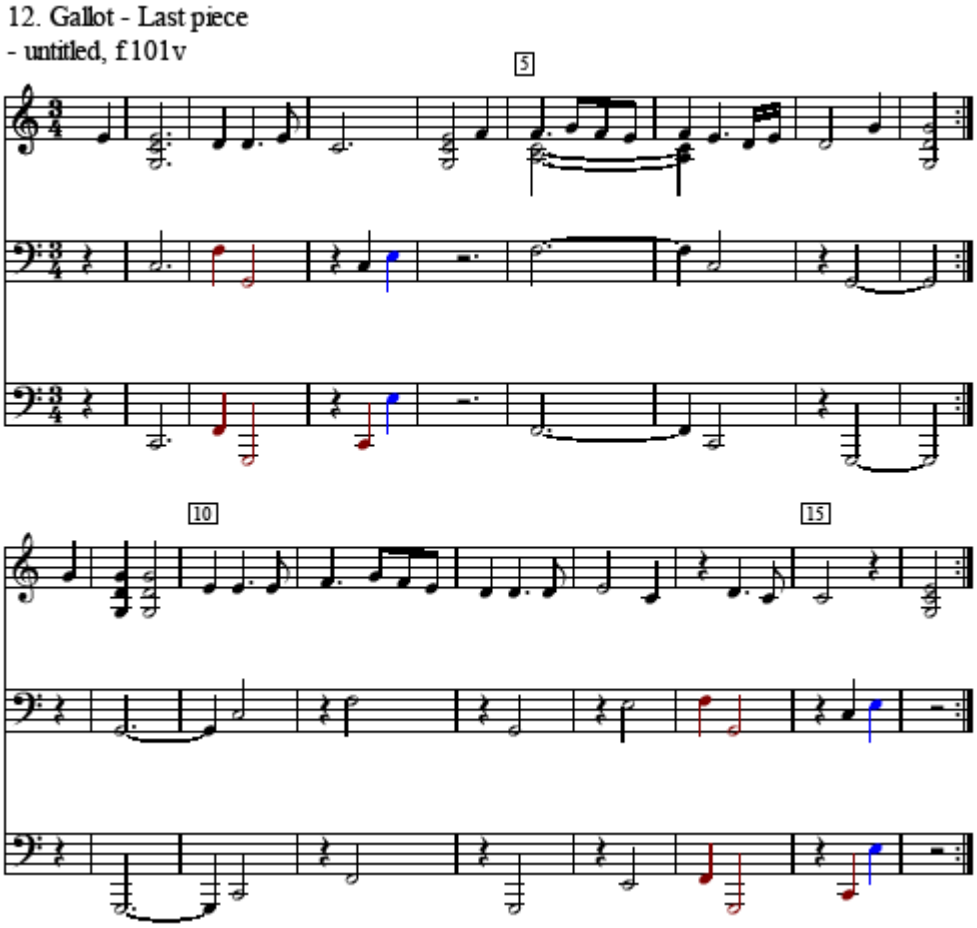
[1] Donald Gill in his article "The de Gallot guitar books" (Early Music, vol. 6, no.1, Jan. 1978) pointed out that this was the most likely tuning and stringing and commented on the overlapping courses. Richard Pinnell in his article "The theorboed guitar" (Early Music, vol. 7, no. 3, July 1979 overlooked or Gill's explanation and ignored the problems inherant in the tuning which he proposes.

B – with low basses



As can also be seen in Mus. ex. 1, in tuning A, the open basses will **overlap** with the fourth and fifth courses if these have a low octave or bourdon as well as high octave string which raises the possibility that they were strung in unison in the upper octave i.e. that they were **re-entrant**.

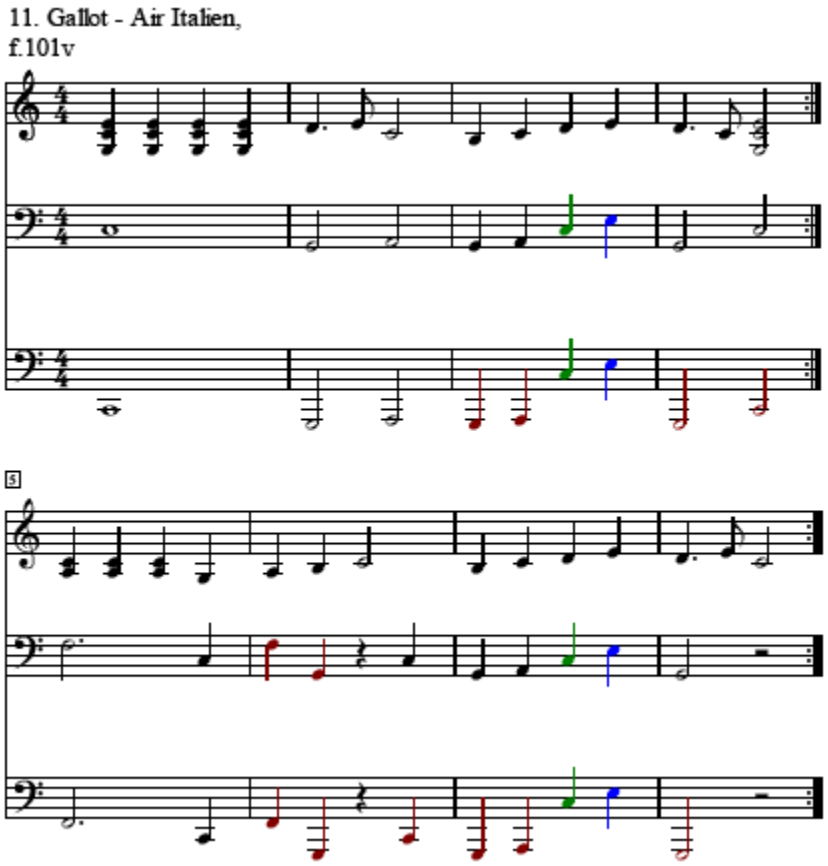
Mus.ex.2



In the music the fourth course is fretted in only one place - in the Sarabande on f.101v at bar 9. **The fifth course is only ever used as an unstopped course.** In

most places the notes on these courses clearly belong to the bass part so that octave stringing seems the most likely. This can be seen in bars 3 and 7 of Mus. ex. 3 where notes on the fourth course are blue and those on the fifth course green. It is however possible that the fourth and fifth courses were strung in unison in the lower octave. This example also highlights the disjointed bass line which will result in bars 3 and 7 if there is a gap between the lowest course on the fingerboard and the first open bass, confirming that the basses must be high.

Mus. ex. 3

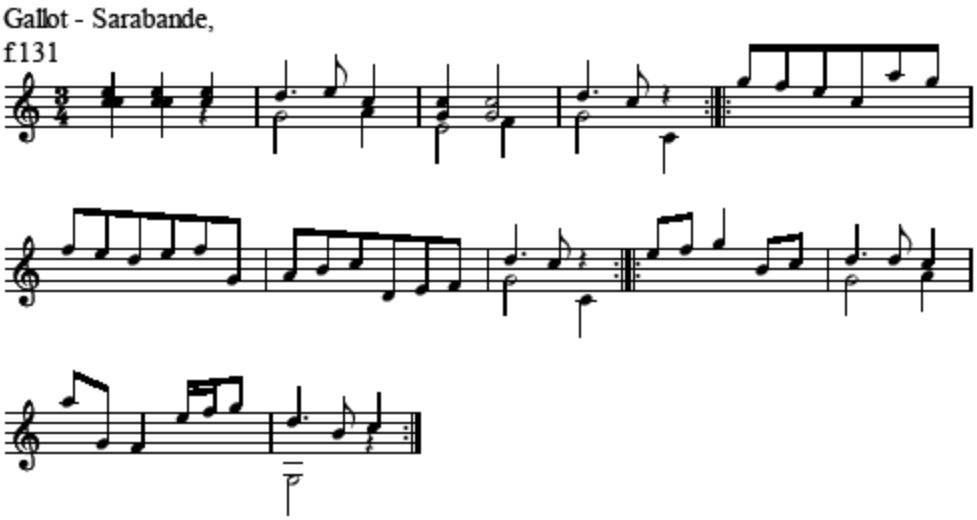


In at least one piece, the Ballet on f.100v, it seems likely that the fifth course is to be tuned down to B flat. All the pieces in the manuscript are very simple, for the most part in two parts with some three part chords making the maximum use of open courses.

It has generally been assumed that because the instrument is referred to as a **guitarre** it must have had a figure of eight shaped body and been related to the 5-course guitar. But this is by no means certain. The manuscript also includes seven pieces for a **5-course mandore**, a small member of the lute family likewise

tuned to a major or minor common chord with a perfect fifth between between the third and fourth courses. The pieces are similar in style to those for *guitarre théorbée,* albeit a bit more adventurous. The following Sarabande is fairly typical.

Mus. Ex. 4

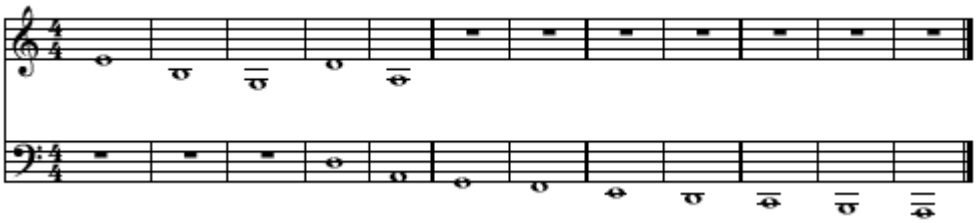


The *guitarre théorbée* is just as likely to have had a lute shaped body and perhaps was more in the nature of a mandore with additional bass strings than a guitar. The tuning to a major or minor common chord is a specific character of the instrument (as it is on the later English guitar) not the result of using *scordatura* on an instrument which generally had the standard tuning.

With Granata the position is very different. It has generally been assumed that the open basses descend stepwise from the low octave string or bourdon on the **fifth course** and are therefore at the lower octave as in the following musical example

Mus. ex. 5 – Granata's tuning

A – with low basses

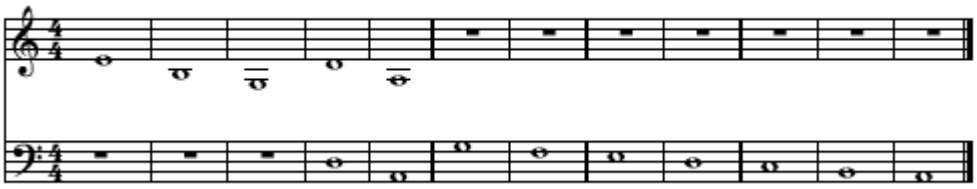


It is possible that like Gallot, they descend stepwise from the third course which would result in a similar overlap if the fourth and fifth courses were strung in octaves.

There is however an obvious flaw in this arrangement - the notes G, D and A are duplicated which seems rather pointless.

B – with high basses

Tuning B - open basses descend stepwise from the third course



In the music this also results in some overlap between the bass part and the upper parts which is unsatisfactory from a musical point of view. In Mus. ex. 6 below, the bass part is written out both in the upper and the lower octaves. Overlap, highlighted in red, occurs in four places when the bass part is in the upper octave. (This example is transcribed with all the parts an octave higher than sounding pitch to avoid using too many ledger lines).

It therefore seems a reasonable assumption that the basses on Granata's instrument were low. The question is - how low?

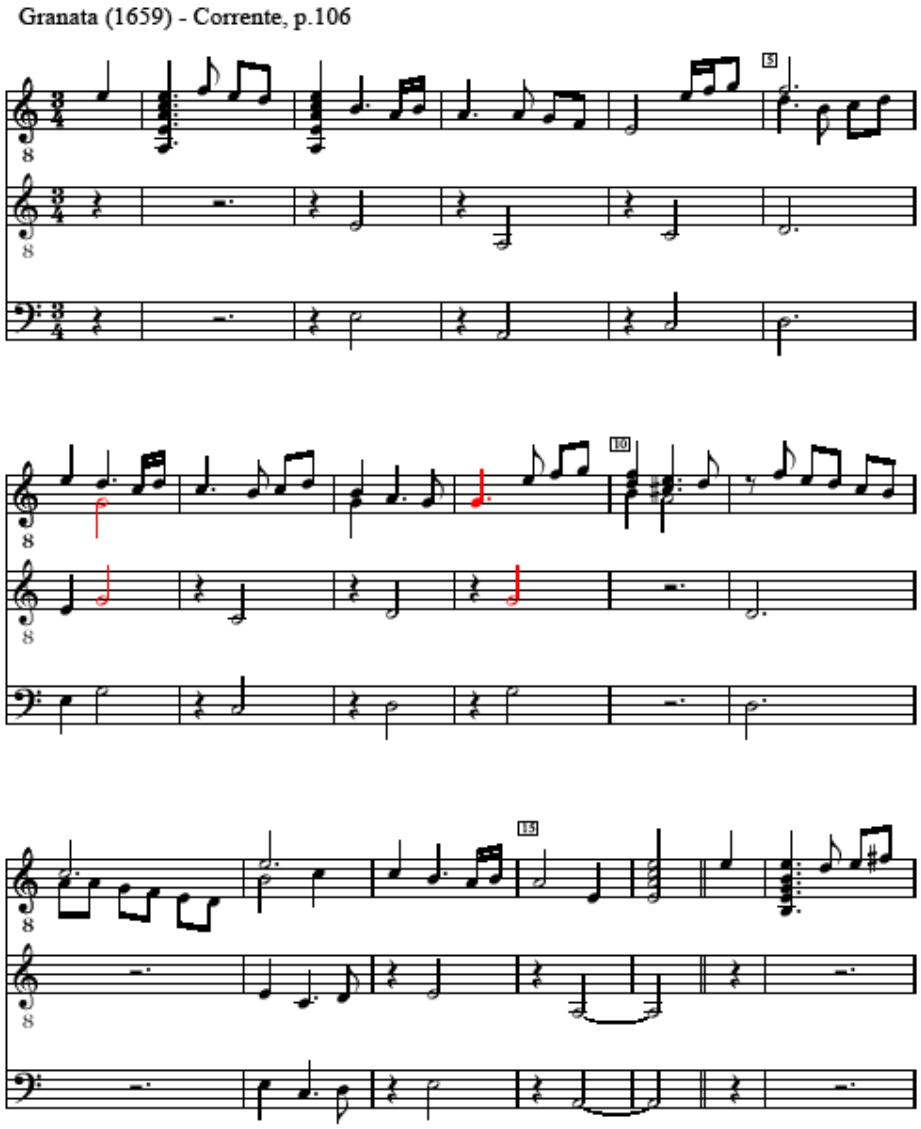
Available pictorial evidence suggests that the length of the basses on this instrument was slightly less than that required on theorboes which have a low octave tuning. In the engraved illustration of a *chitarra atiorbata* in Granata's "Nuova scielta di capricci armonici e suonate musicali" (Bologna, September 1651) the neck extension is quite short.[2] What appears to be a guitar with a short neck extension can also be seen in the illustration "Chantres Grenadins" by Daniel Rabel.[3] However illustrations like these can really only give us an idea of what the instruments looked like – they are not intended to give detailed specifications as to how they were constructed. In the Granata engraving the instrument is clearly guitar shaped probably with a flat back and the body of the instrument also appears to be smaller than the guitar which Granata is actually playing. In the Rabel drawings the figure of eight shape is less pronounced and the instrument may have a vaulted back.

[2] The illustration can be seen on Gary Boye's web page at http://www.library.appstate.edu/music/guitar/1651granata.html

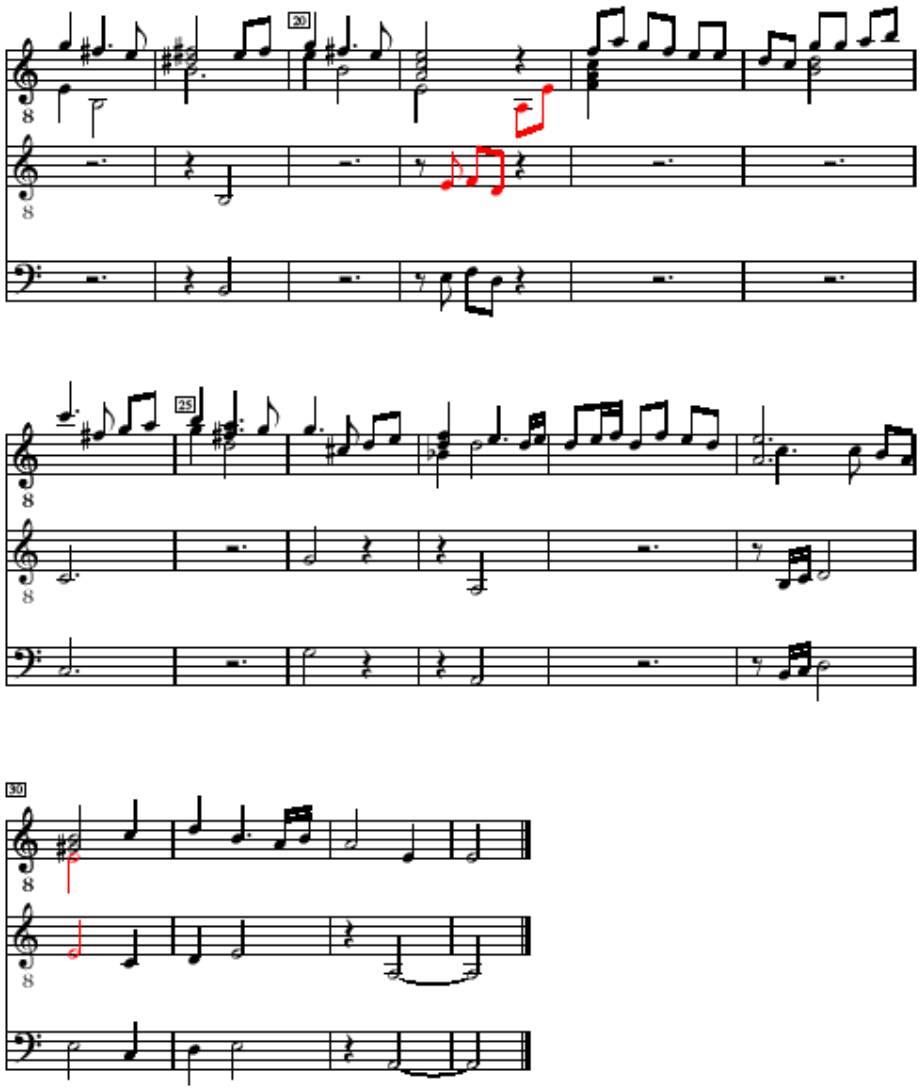
[3] This can be seen at http://tinyurl.com/qcdpvd

It has always been assumed that, like the five-course guitar, Granata's *chitarra atiorbata* had the first course tuned to e'.[4] However, guitars did vary in size and were tuned to different pitches. If the instrument was tuned a minor third or even a perfect fourth higher than the standard five course instrument, this would raise the tessitura, with the lowest sounding bass tuned to C or D, rather than A' and result in an instrument well suited to the solo music in Granata's book and quite capable of accompanying the voice or a small ensemble.

Mus. ex. 6



[4] The staff notation in the exercises for accompanying a bass line and the sonata for violin with guitar clearly indicate the e' tuning for the guitar.



Conclusion

The only logical conclusion which can been drawn from the above analysis of the music is that the *chitarra atiorbata* and the *guitarre théorbée* were two quite different instruments.

There are other sources of music for an instrument with five stopped courses tuned to the same intervals as the guitar and open basses – notably two small manuscripts of music by Ludovico Fontanelli for a *chitarrone francese* with five open basses dated 1733 which formerly belonged to the lutenist Robert Spencer.[5]

[5] Decribed in his article "The chitarrone francese" in Early music, vol. 4. no. 2, April 1976.

Much earlier, the well known painting by Antiveduto Grammatica (1571-1626) shows a "theorbo" player whose instrument has a lute shaped body, five courses on the fingerboard and nine open basses, which appears to be somewhat smaller than the average *chitarrone*. There is also the illustration of the neck and fingerboard of a *chitarra atiorbata* in the Stadivarius museum which includes notes describing gauges and arrangement of the strings the fingerboard.[6] From the available evidence it is not clear whether this had a guitar or lute shaped body.

We should not assume that because these instruments share similar names they are always the exactly the same instrument. The terms *chitarra*, *chitarrone*, *guitarra*, *guitarre, guitar* are all originally derived from the Greek/Latin word *Kithara* which can refer to any plucked stringed instrument.

We should also be cautious about trying to argue that the way in which they are strung, where this is known, sheds any light on the stringing of the five-course guitar.

All twelve pieces from GB:Ob Ms.Mus.Sch.C94 are transcribed below into staff notation at sounding pitch. The bass line is shown in the upper and lower octaves for comparison; notes on the fourth course are blue and those on the fifth course green.

[6] I:CRMuseo Stradivariano. Paper pattern no. 375 of the head and neck of a *chitarra atiorbata*. Details of stringing in Sacconi, Simone, The secrets of Stradivari. Cremona : Libreria del Convengo, 1979.

12 Pieces for the Guitarre Théorbée

from

Pieces de Guitarre de differendes Autheures

recueillis par Henry François de Gallot

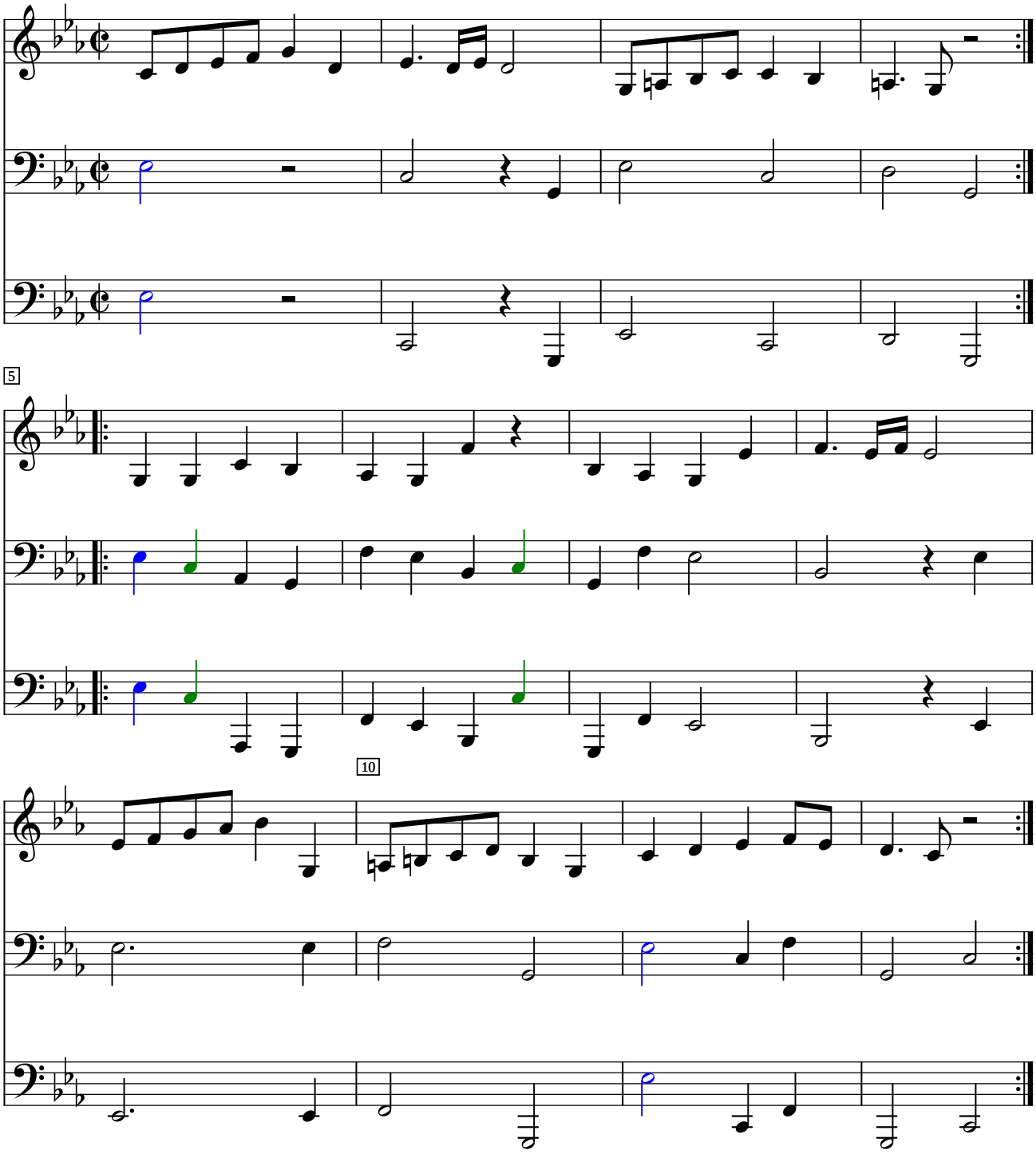
(GB:Ob Ms.Mus.Sch.C94 – ca. 1660-70)

Transcribed by

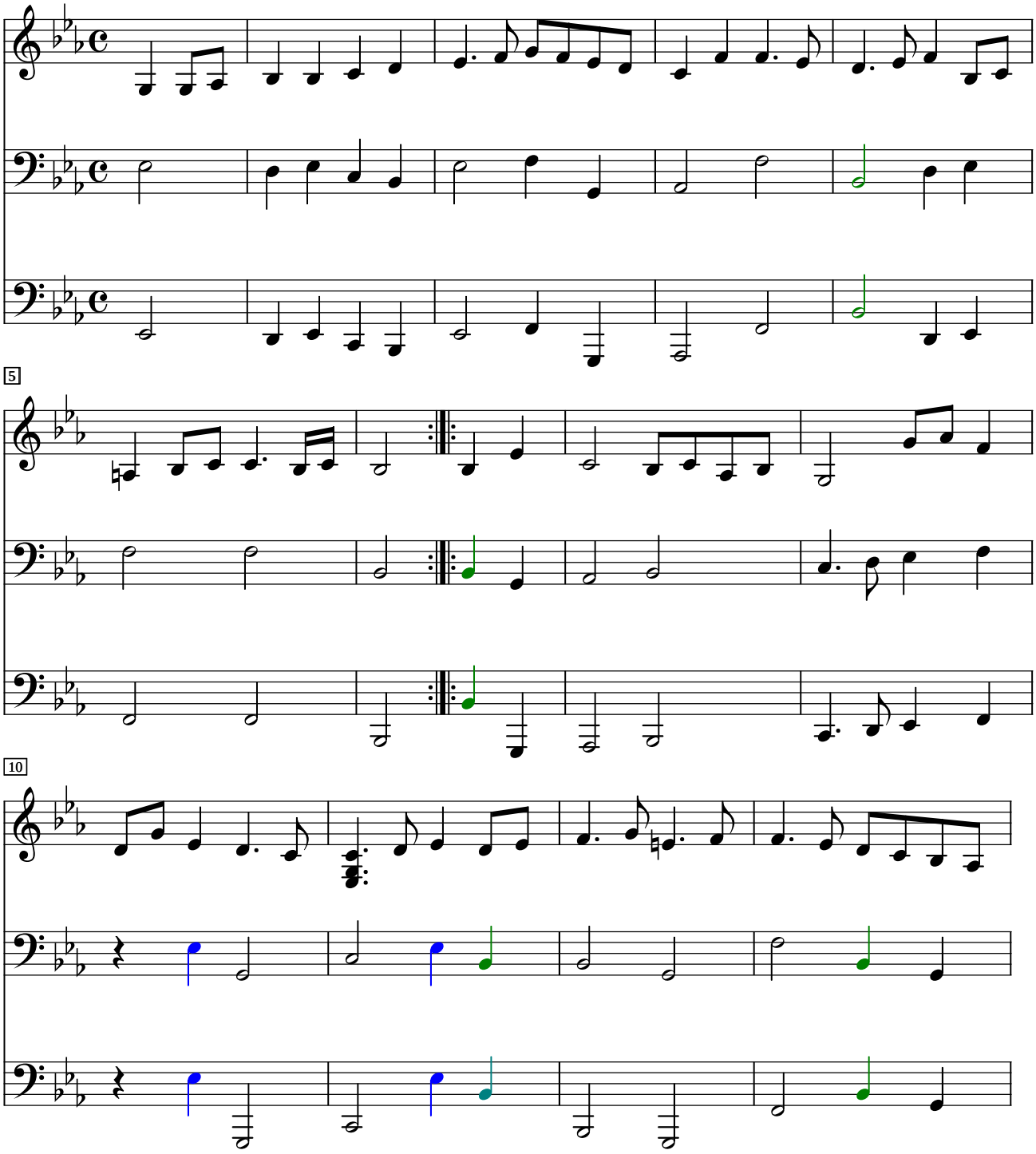
Monica Hall

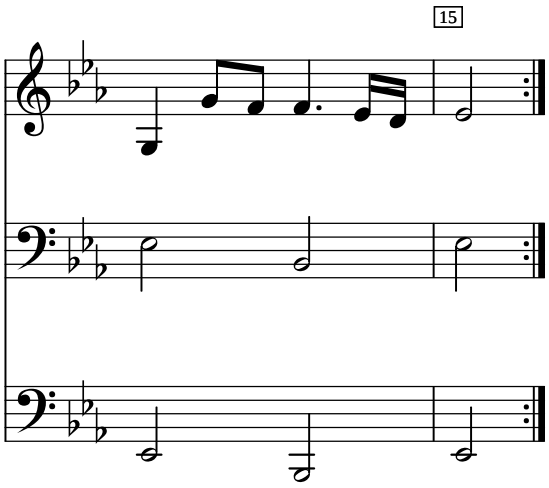
2009

1. Gallot - Gavotte, f.100v



2. Gallot - Ballet,
f.100v [5th course B

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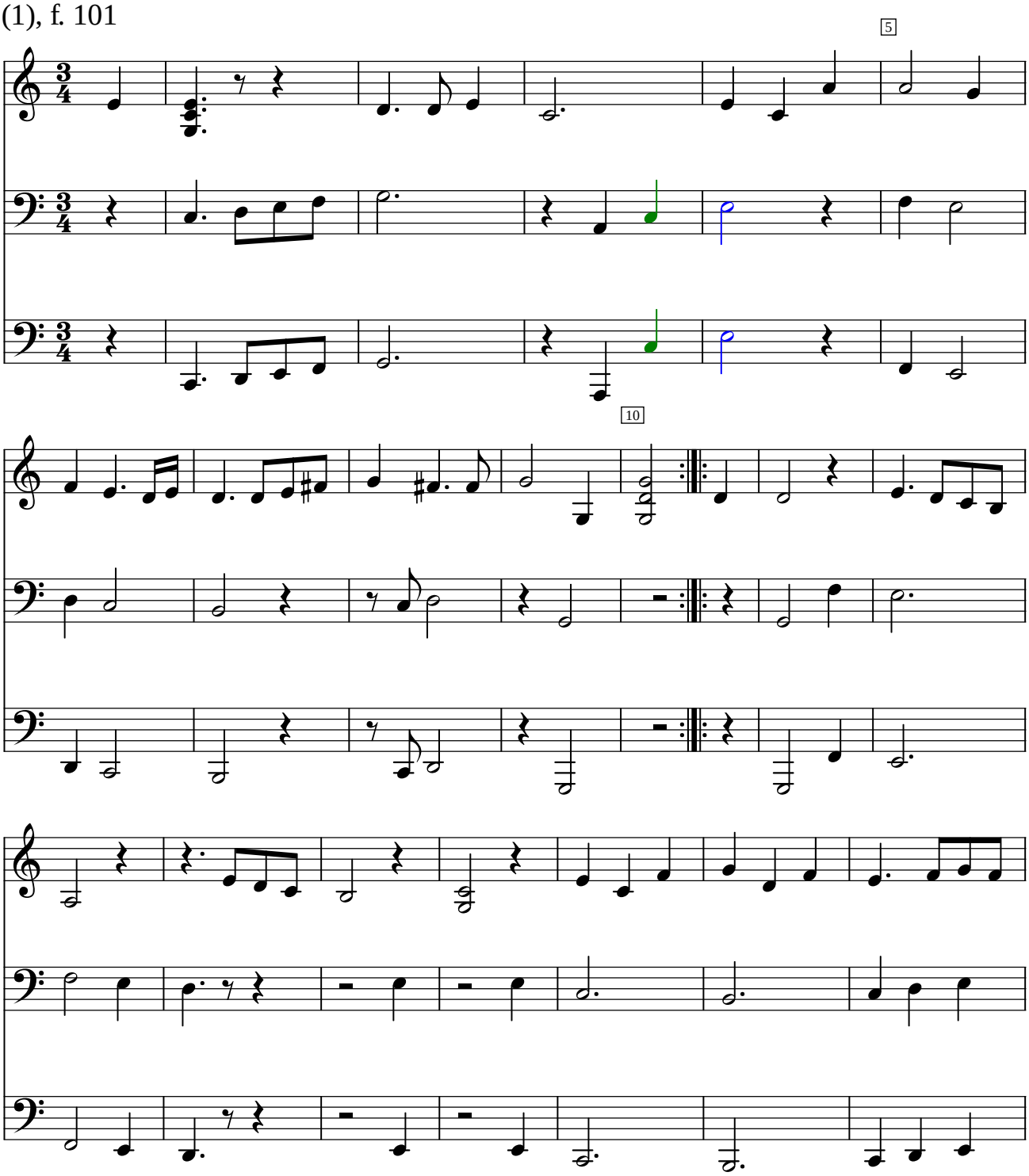
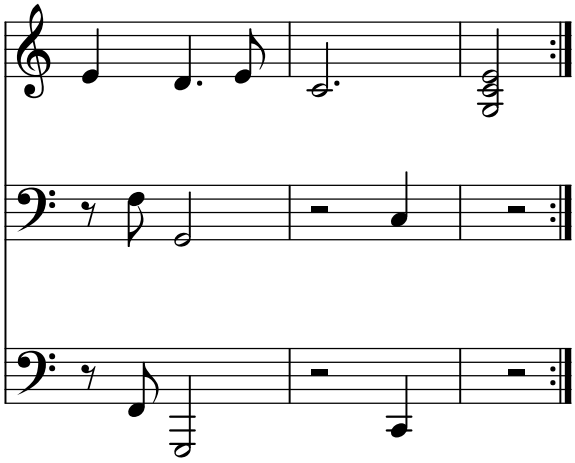
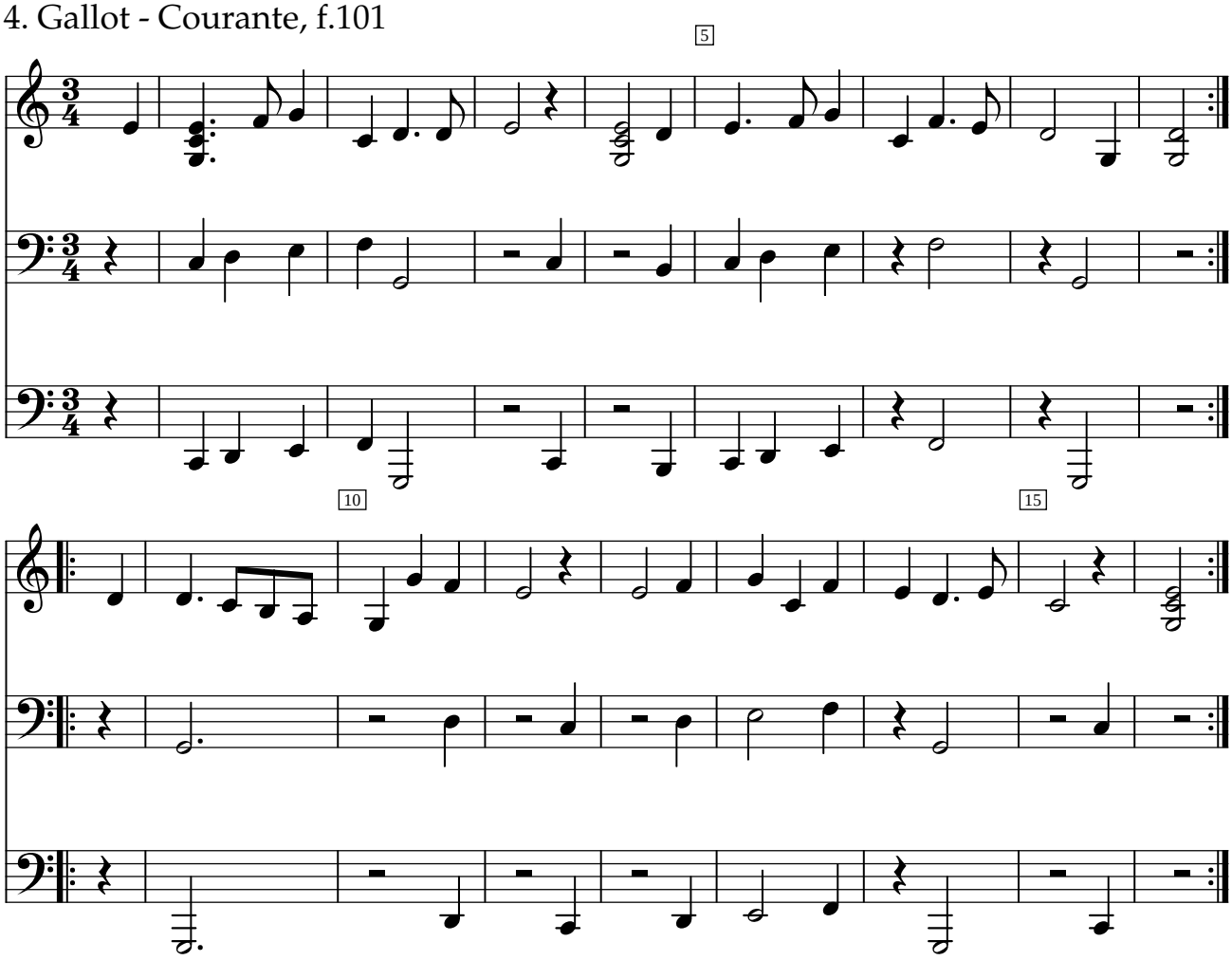
3. Gallot - Courante
(1), f. 101

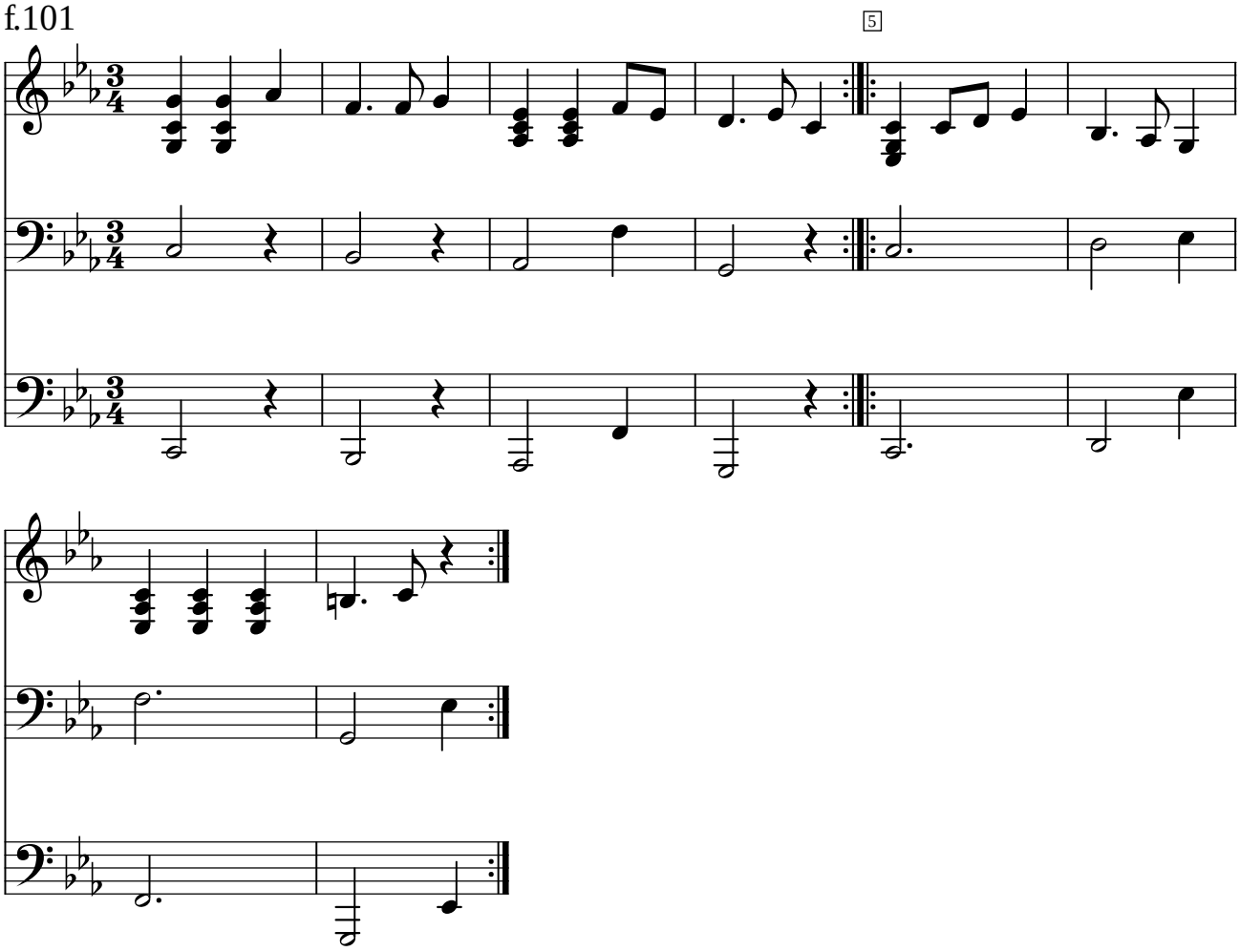




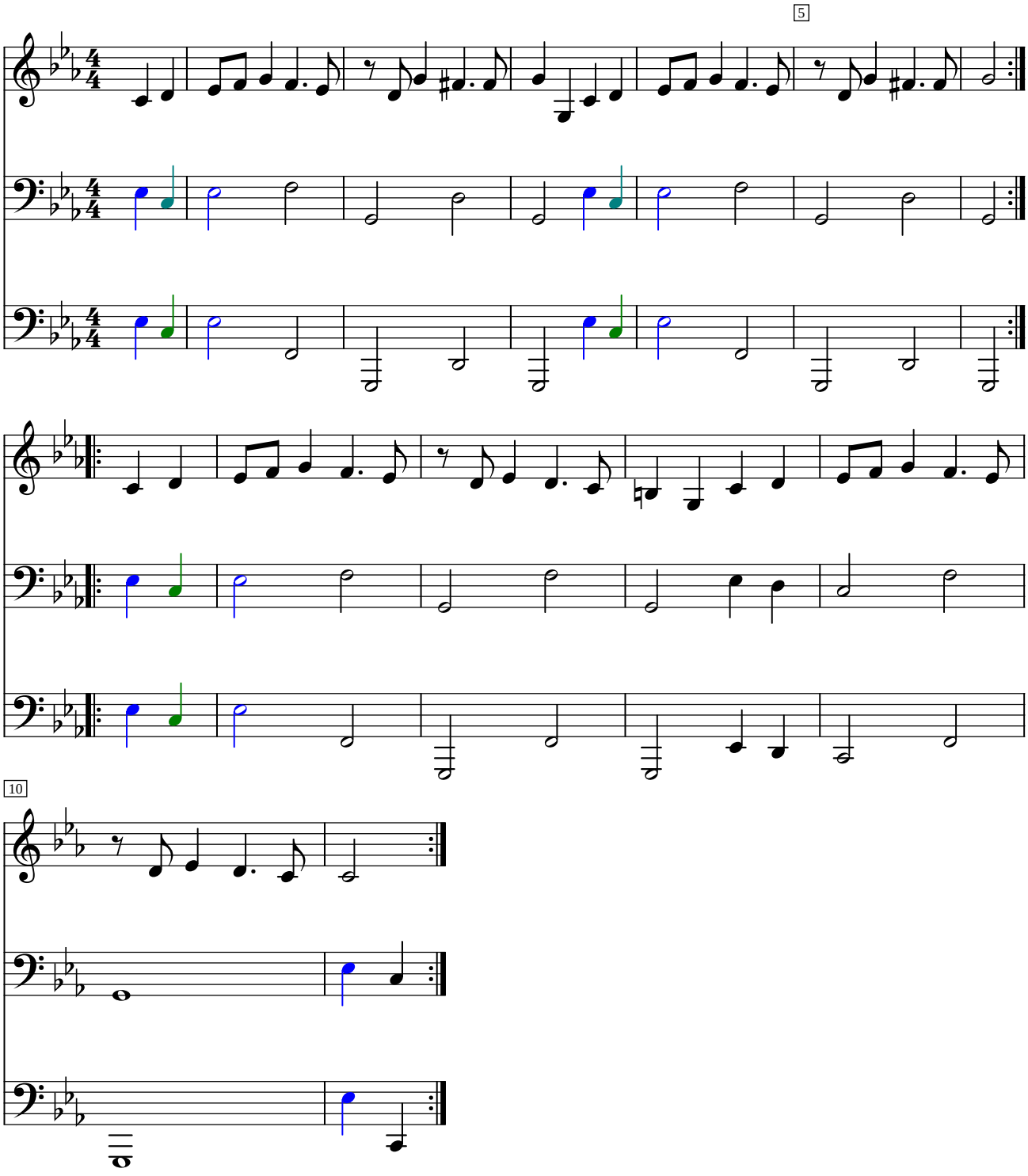
4. Gallot - Courante, f.101



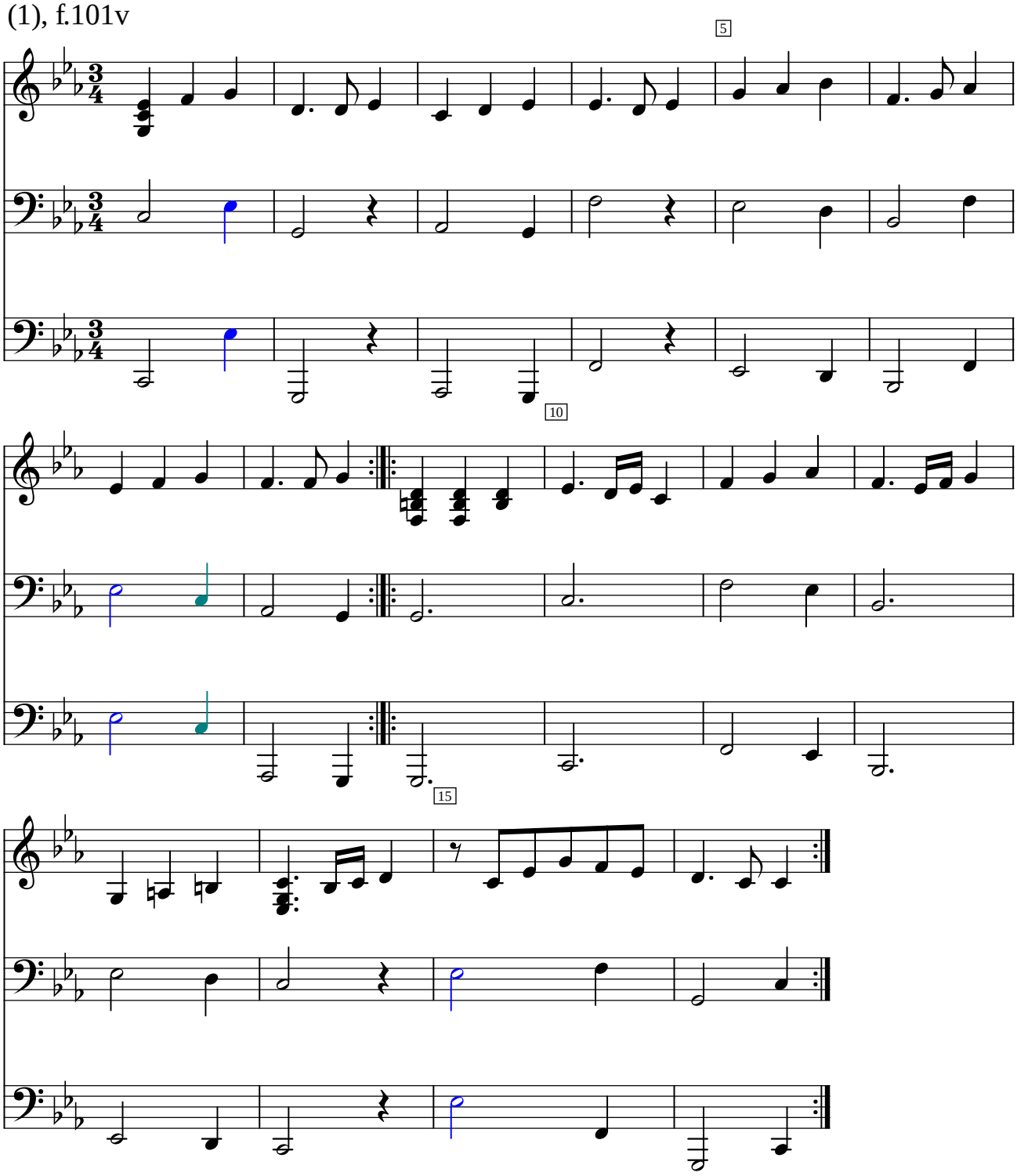
5. Gallot - Sarabande,
f.101



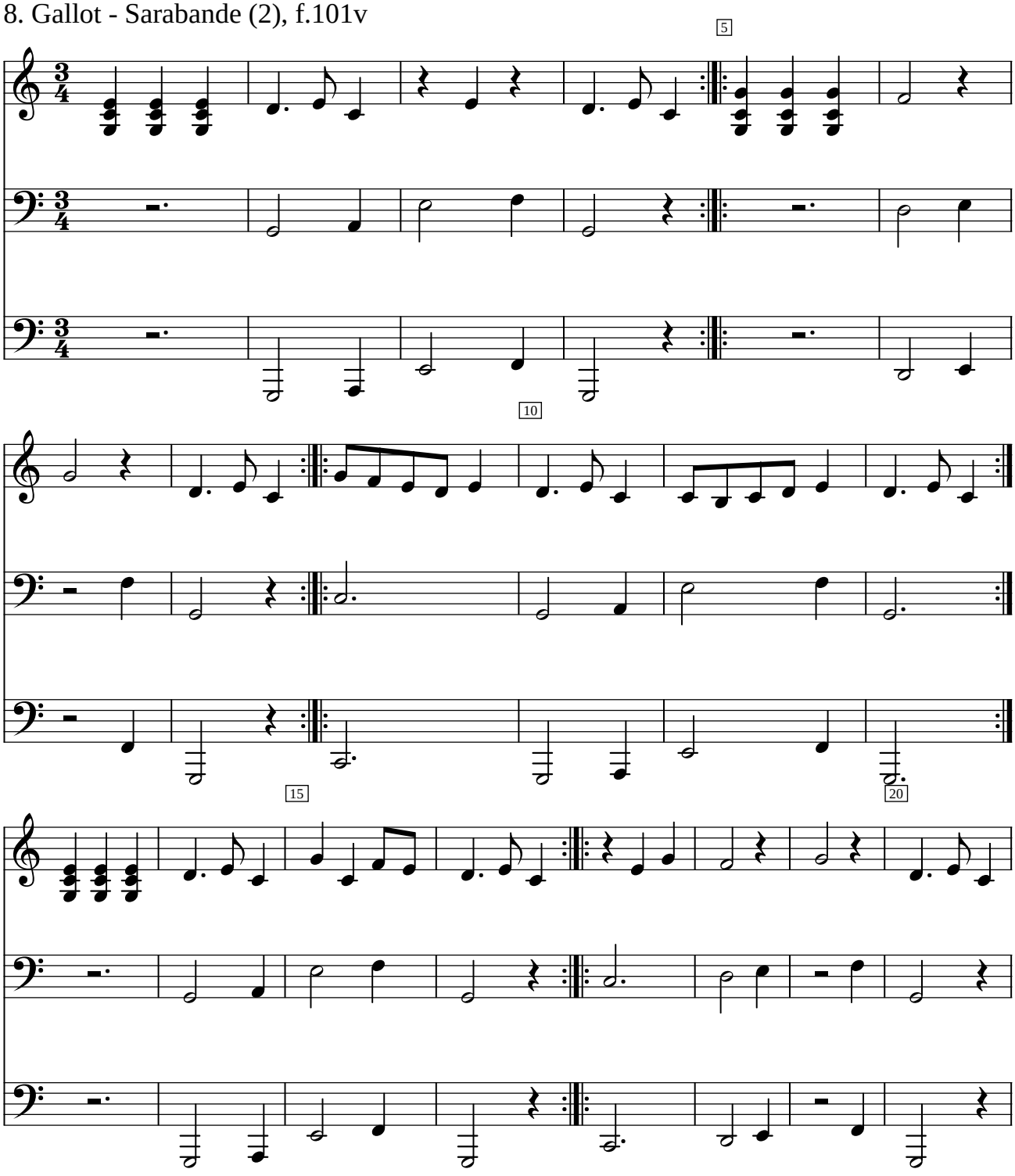
6. Tricotin - Gallot, f.101

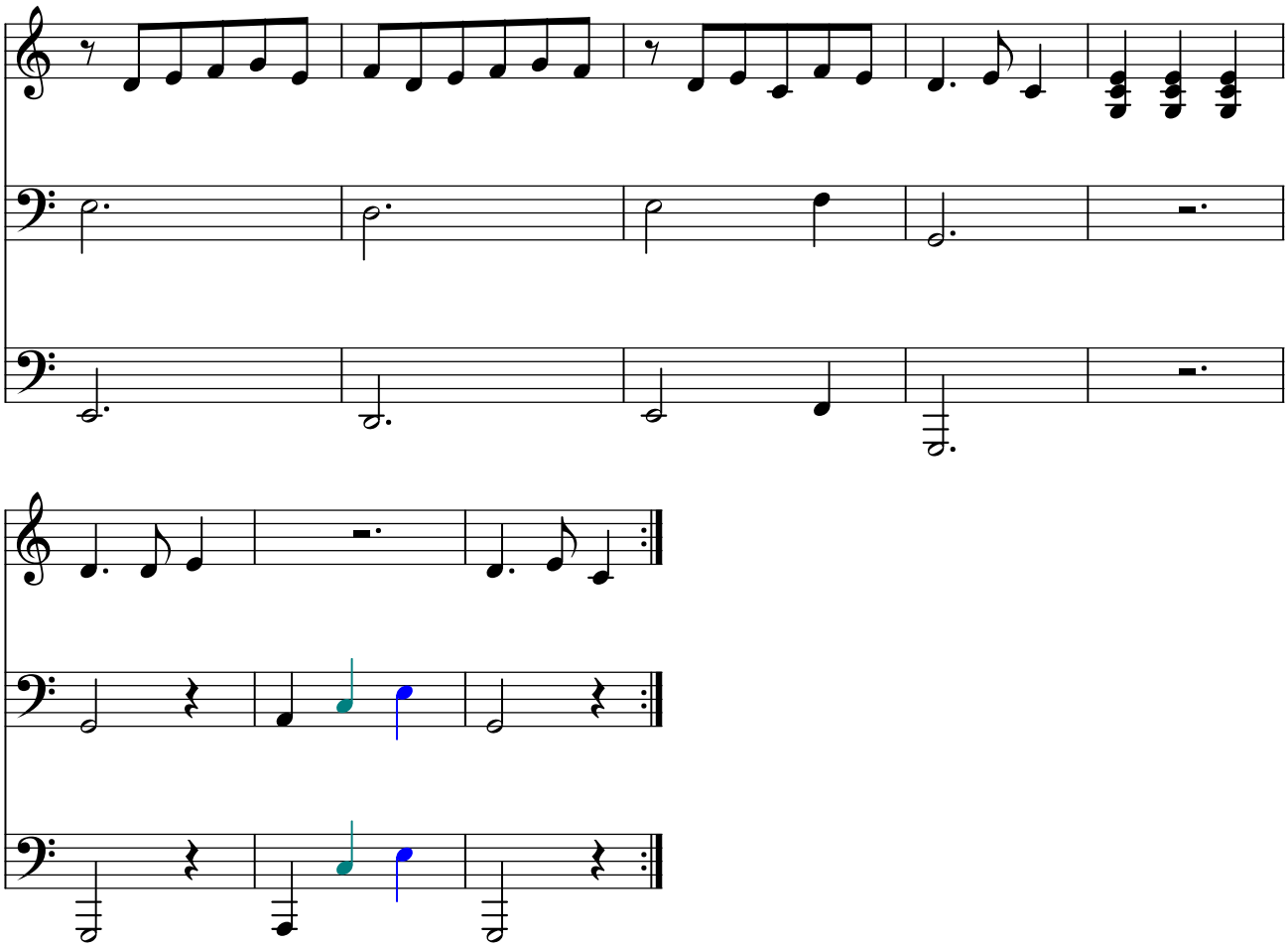


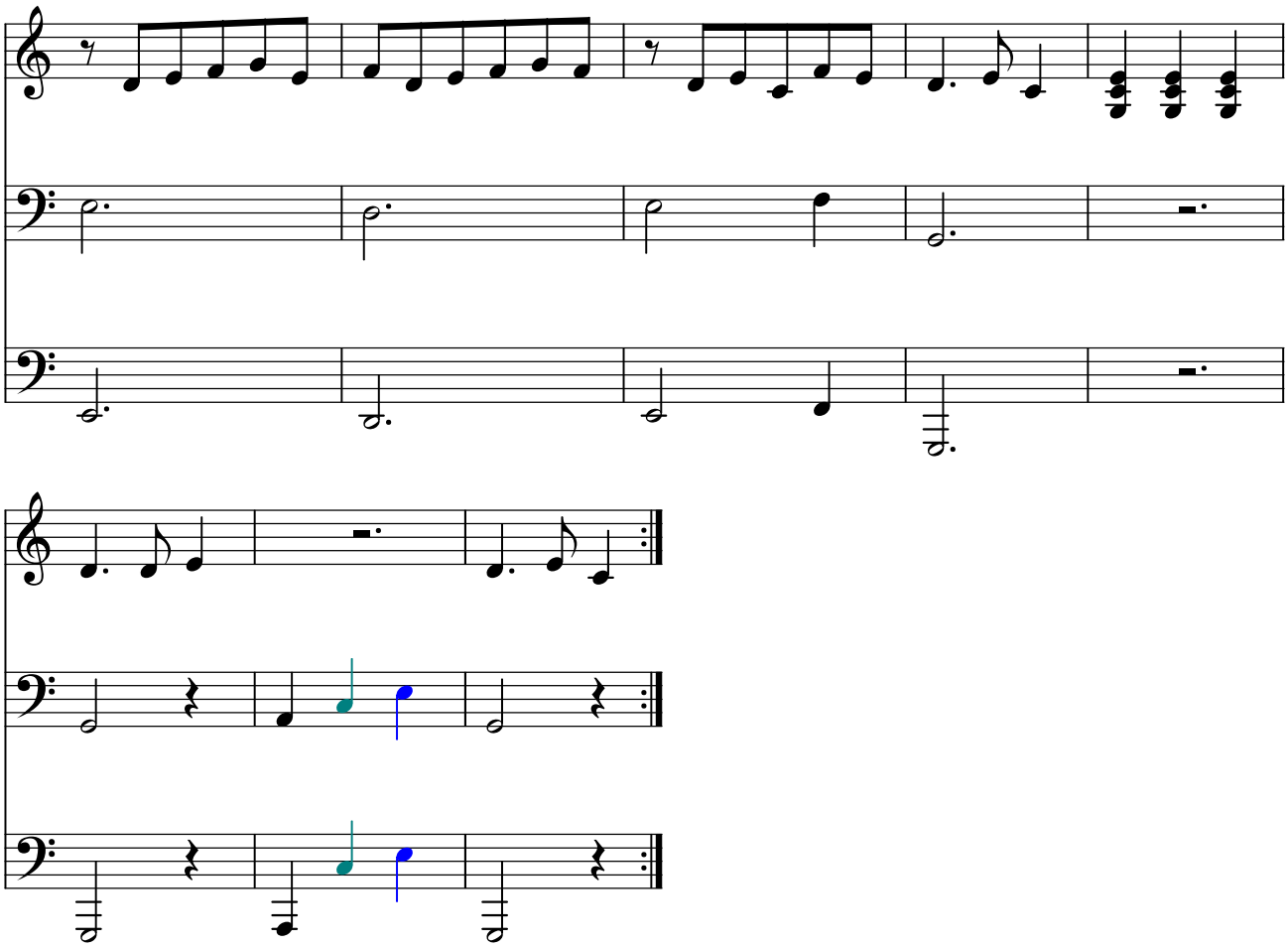
7. Gallot - Sarabande
(1), f.101v



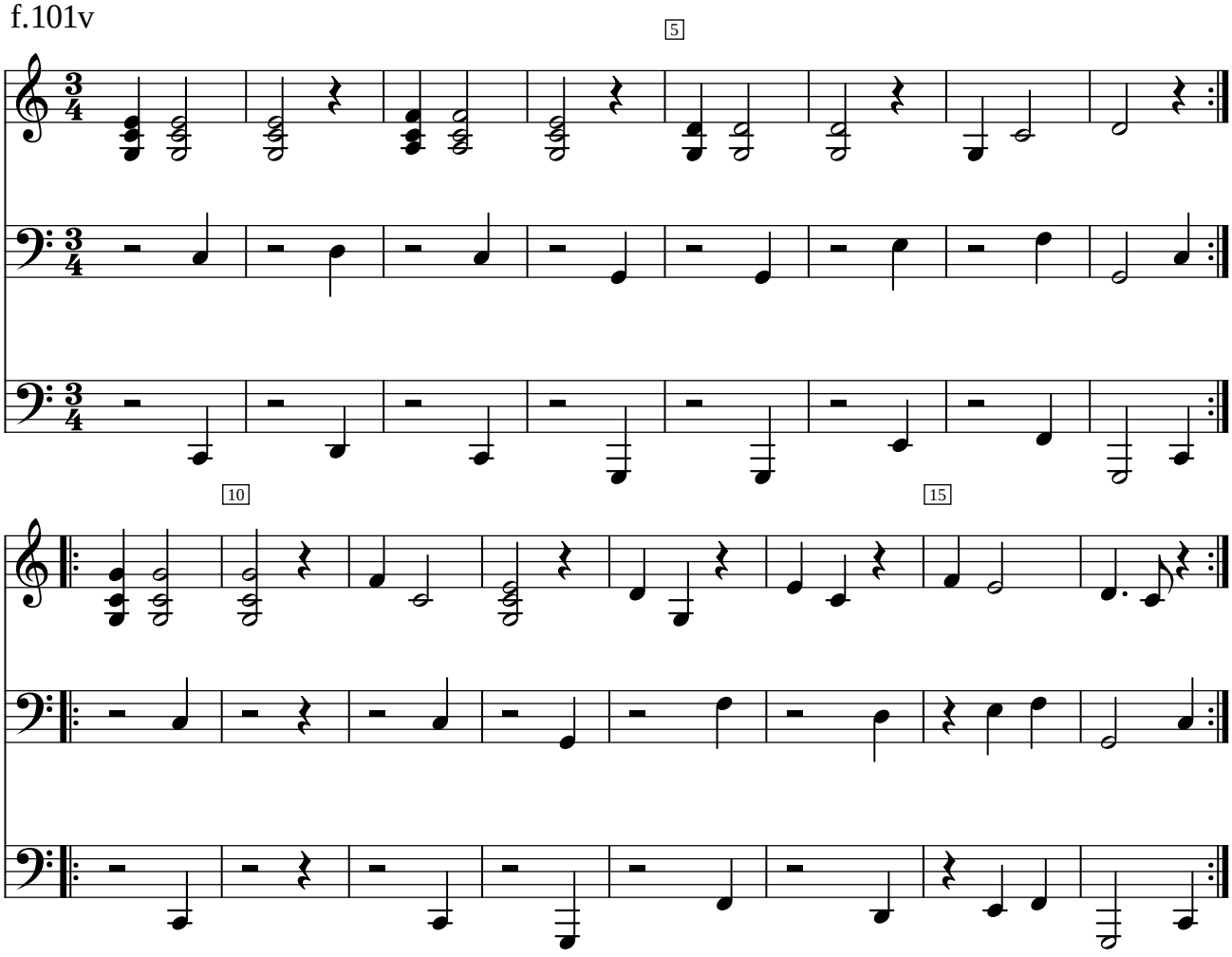
8. Gallot - Sarabande (2), f.101v





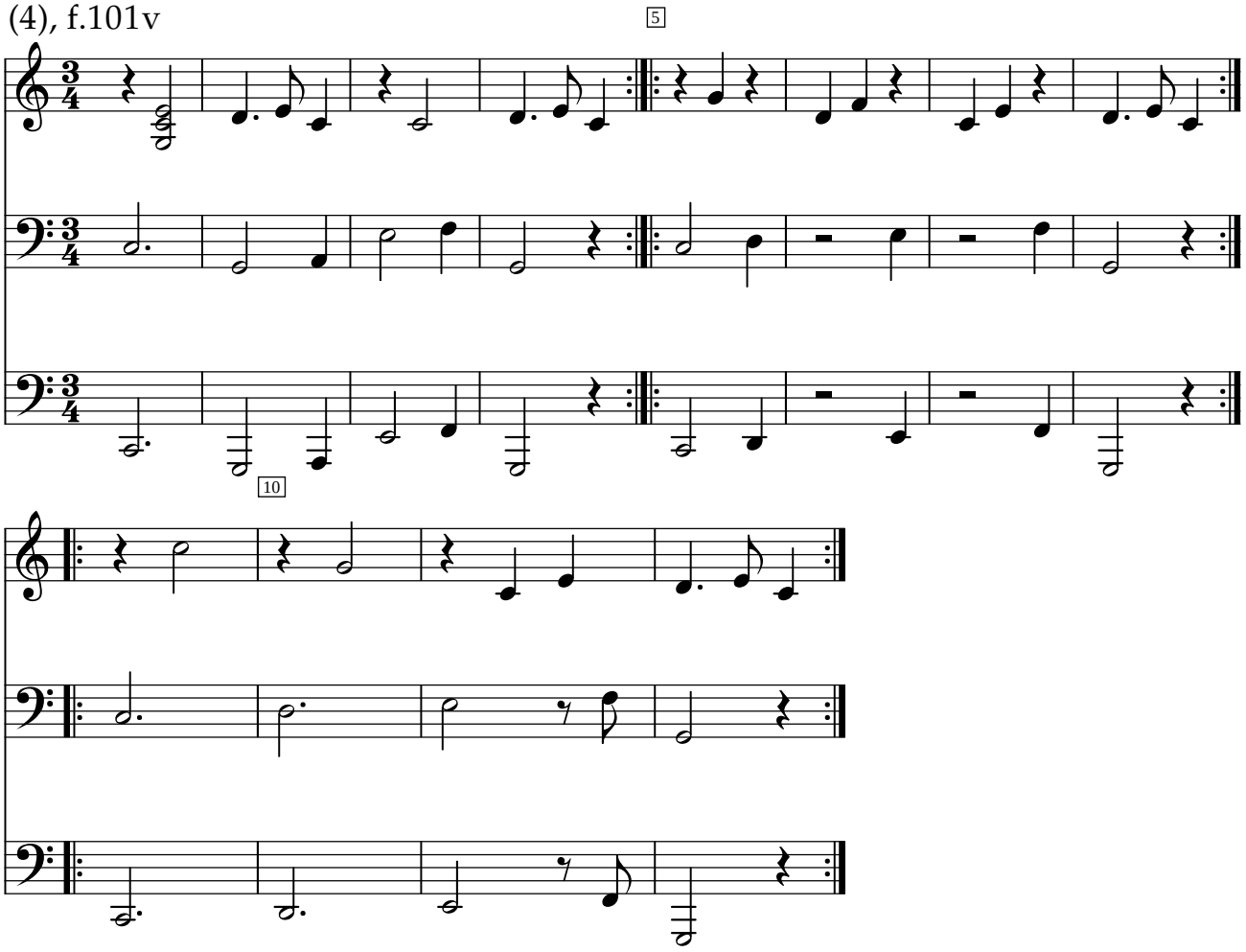


9. Gallot - Sarabande (3),
f.101v

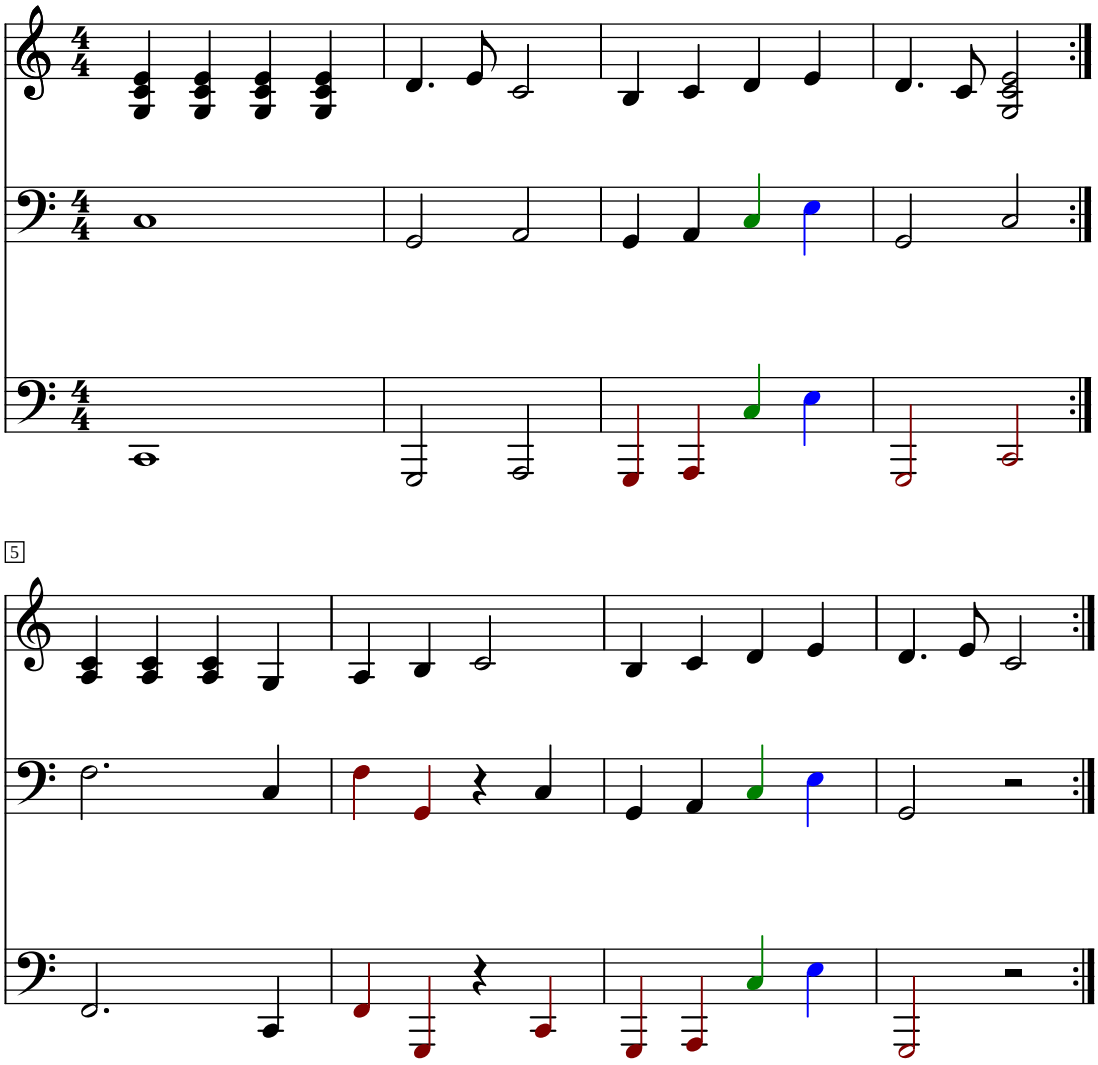
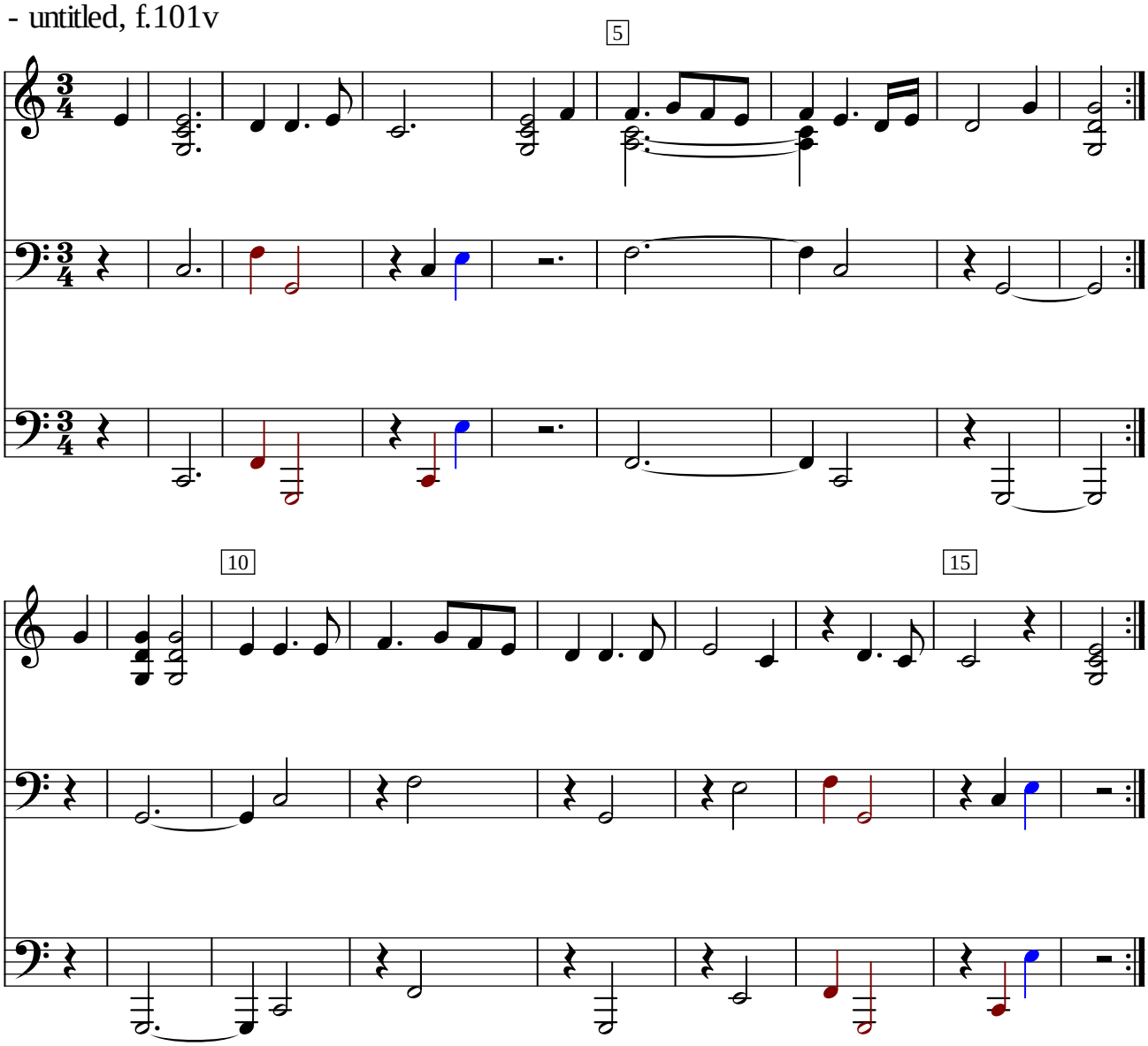


10. Gallot - Sarabande

(4), f.101v



11. Gallot - Air Italien,
f.101v



12. Gallot - Last piece
- untitled, f.101v