Johannes BRAHMS

Fantasien

opus 116

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Johannes BRAHMS

1833 — 1897

Fantasiestücke Op 116 1892

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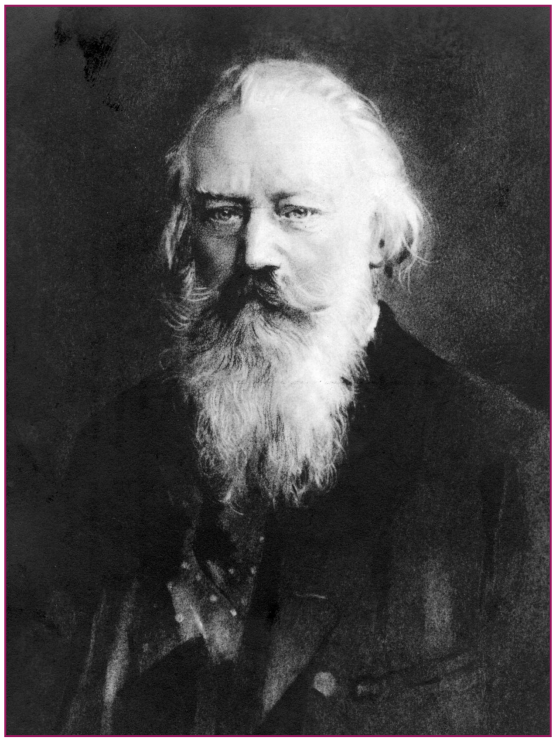
In the summer of 1892, Johannes Brahms, now sixty-years-old, returned unexpectedly to the piano after several years in which he had considered his compositional life essentially over. Living in Vienna and spending summers in the quiet Austrian spa town of Bad Ischl, he had already achieved the status of a revered elder of German music. Yet the piano pieces opus 116–119 reveal not the public monument but the private voice of a composer writing with remarkable intimacy and concentration.

These *Fantasiestücke* form the first of these late collections. Despite the title, recalling the Romantic tradition of free, imaginative character pieces, the set is carefully balanced and unified. Seven short movements alternate between turbulent **Capriccios*** and reflective **Intermezzi***, creating a cycle that moves repeatedly between agitation and inward reflection. The kindred outer movements are dramatic and urgent, while the central Intermezzi form interludes of lyrical introspection. If a 'fantasy' implies improvisation and free association of thoughts, then the title *Fantasien* is somewhat misleading, as they are among the most densely expressive and tightly crafted miniatures to come from his pen. It is clear that the descending interval of a third and ascending chromatic motifs form a unifying thread throughout the entire 'suite'.

Rather than a technical display, Brahms offers music of compressed intensity. Textures are rich but economical, voices often interwoven in subtle counterpoint, and the harmonic language moves fluidly between warmth and shadow. In these pieces Brahms seems less concerned with outward brilliance than with capturing fleeting emotional states — moments of unrest, tenderness, melancholy, or quiet resolve.

The cycle is sometimes orchestral, sometimes choral, in various formats ranging from densely scored harmony to the austere. One feels that an inner hidden definition might exist between the lines. The connections are evident: the opening and closing Capriccios are both in D minor and the 3 central Intermezzi are in E. But it is the interrelationship of material that is so striking. In a letter to Brahms, Clara Schumann wrote: “I like the deeply passionate ones as much as the dreamy ones, in which such exquisite sounds are conjured from the piano.”

No. 1 – Capriccio in D minor
The set opens with restless energy and I detect Hungarian influence. Sharp rhythmic figures, driving triplets, and sudden dynamic contrast create a sense of urgency and turbulence. The music presses forward with dramatic force, immediately establishing the passionate aspect of the cycle. It presents grandiose sonority stretching from the deepest bass to the upper mid-range, and is particularly ambiguous in its metrical pulse.



B r a h m s *— a photograph c.1890*

No. 2 – Intermezzo in A minor
A striking contrast — softly veiled and rhythmically subtle, this Intermezzo unfolds in delicate, sighing gestures. The left hand rocks gently while the right spins a fragile melodic line, producing an atmosphere of quiet introspection. Its harmonic colouring is a poignant merging of wistful minor and major modes. In the central section, while the left hand keeps to a 4-bar repetitive accompaniment, the right meanders through 5-bar phrases and poses a particularly elasticated technical challenge. Clara Schumann was particularly enchanted with the this piece.

No. 3 – Capriccio in G minor
Agitated and rhythmically incisive, this movement returns to the darker dramatic world of the opening, in restless pursuit of descending thirds. Syncopations and accents give the music a nervous vitality, while the lush harmonies of the central lyrical section provide a peaceful interlude, recalling the composer's love of the chorale. Clara Schumann mentions the central section march as being "very sonorous and mellifluous". Sections similar to bar 9-11 could have been lifted from his 51 exercises (WoO 6).

No. 4 – Intermezzo in E major
This quasi-nocturne is quietly passionate with warm, luminous harmonies and flowing inner voices creating a sense of calm lyricism. The music unfolds almost like a song without words, serene yet tinged with reflective melancholy.

No. 5 – Intermezzo in E minor
An exploration of subtle harmonic shifts and expressive suspensions. Its restrained character suggests quiet contemplation, the melody emerging gently from the surrounding texture. An enigmatic improvisation with a surreptitious melody. Normal methods of study cannot apply to this intermezzo; we must just follow our instinct and enjoy fulfilled intimacy. Clara Schumann mentioned that it is precisely the position of the hands, entangled and indivisible, that has a peculiar charm and sounds quite transformed. One literally rocks oneself to sleep by it.

No. 6 – Intermezzo in E major
One of the most tender pieces of the set. Graceful and intimate, it features a gentle chordal accompaniment supporting a lovely melodic line. The mood is affectionate and reflective, as though evoking distant memories. A chromatic motif in the middle voice puts me in mind of a stately court dance. The central section in G sharp minor is a lesson in how to convey yearning with basic essentials: a simple expressive melody from a descending scale — with alternating triads in accompaniment — and where we again discover those descending thirds.

No. 7 – Capriccio in D minor
The cycle concludes with a powerful return to the dramatic world of the opening, tempestuously once more exploring descending thirds. Its middle section skilfully presents a wondrous song in the centre of its texture, complemented by alternating arpeggiated figuration. Emphatic rhythms drive the music forward, yet the intensity feels more controlled than explosive — the coda, *ben marcato,* delivers a final surge of energy, closing the cycle with compressed rhythm and concentrated force.

* A ***capriccio*** or **caprice** betimes intense, is fairly free in form and of a lively bravura character. Bach had experimented with the title In bygone decades. The **intermezzi** for piano, some of Brahms' last compositions, are sets of independent character pieces. Stylistically, they are usually lyrical and melodic and these in particular have an extremely wide emotional range.

1 *Capriccio*

37 RH the opening bar of these passages is sometimes in octaves, sometimes not, (see the autograph reproduced at the penultimate page)

53 editorial dotted barlines show unusual phrase lengths

2 *Intermezzo*

19 editorial dotted barlines show unusual phrase lengths

46 the alto crotchet is missing in all editions — a probable omission

55/56 acciaccaturas should almost certainly be performed as **51**

3 *Capriccio*

9-11 and similar sections could have been lifted from his 51 exercises

5 *Intermezzo*

35 Brahms sets this out in simplified layout, but I prefer to maintain entangled hands

38 inexplicably, all editions omit alto E — an almost certain error

43 if you struggle, as I do, to manage this stretch, the RH fifth may depress two notes — A (silent) and B

6 *Intermezzo*

14 mysteriously all editions present a bracketed pause here

7 *Capriccio*

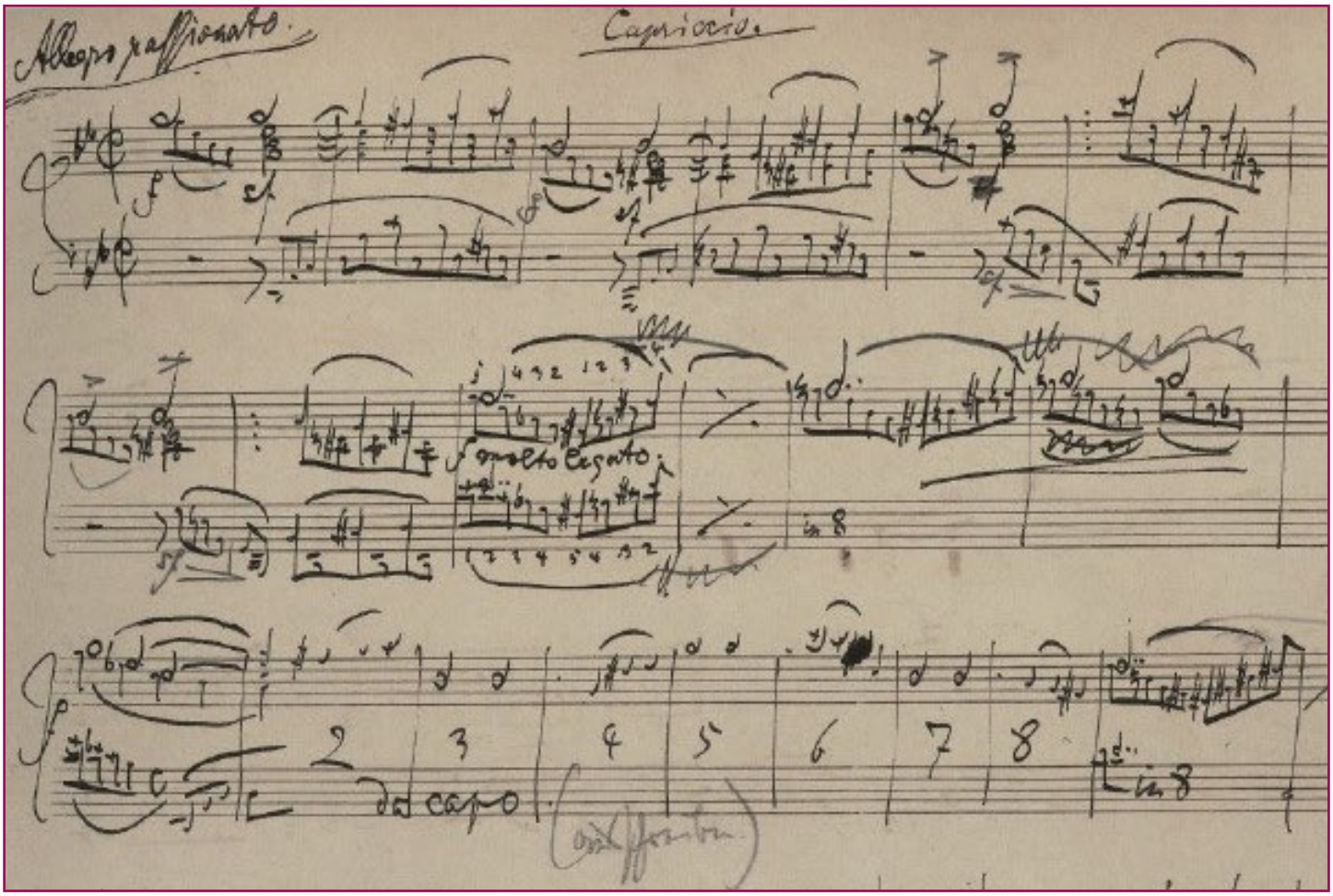
21 editorial ***mp*** — Brahms indicates ***p*** for the accompanying arpeggios.

44 reproduced from Peters edition (with which I agree) — the bass tie is absent elsewhere

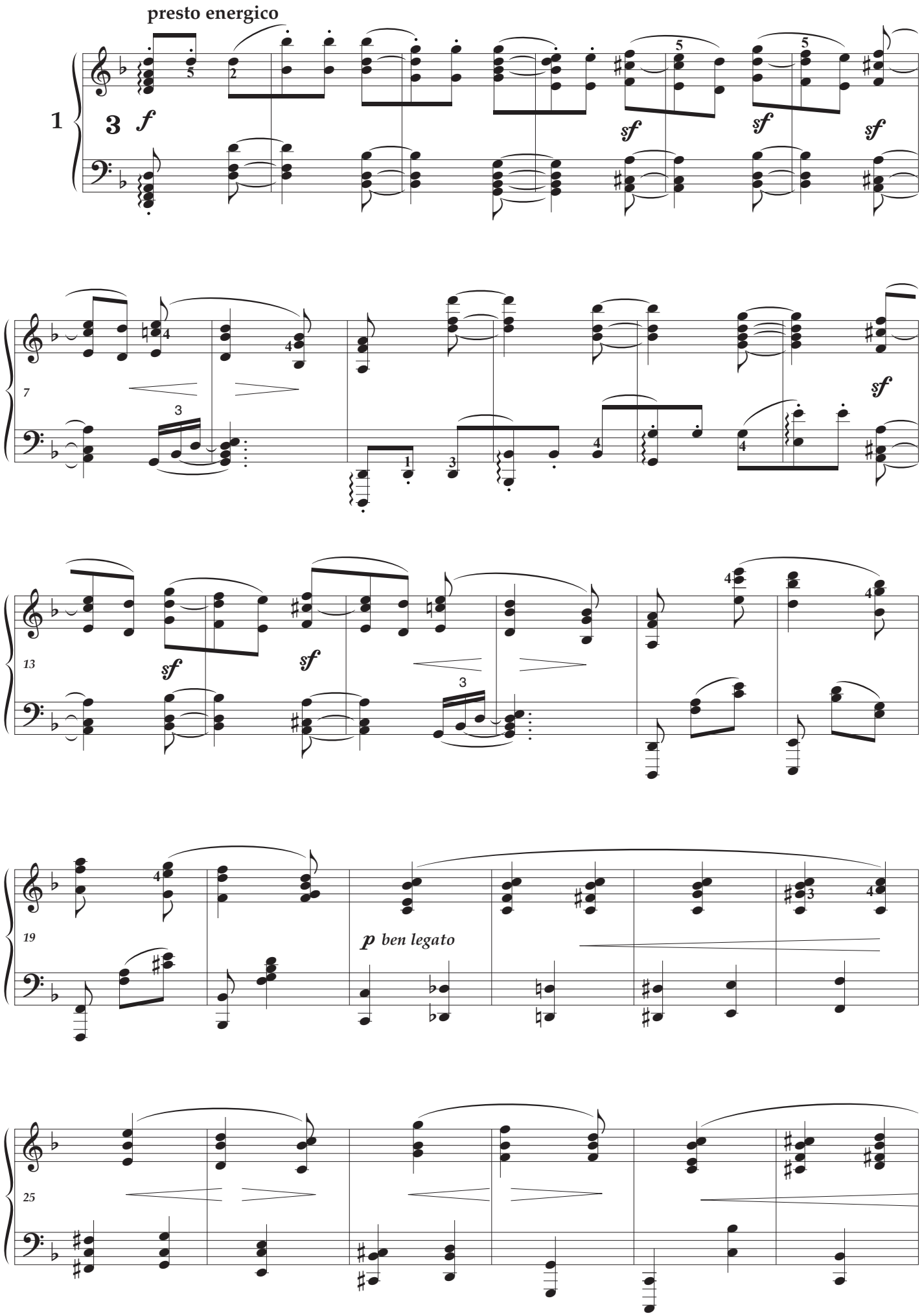
64 editorial added bass octave

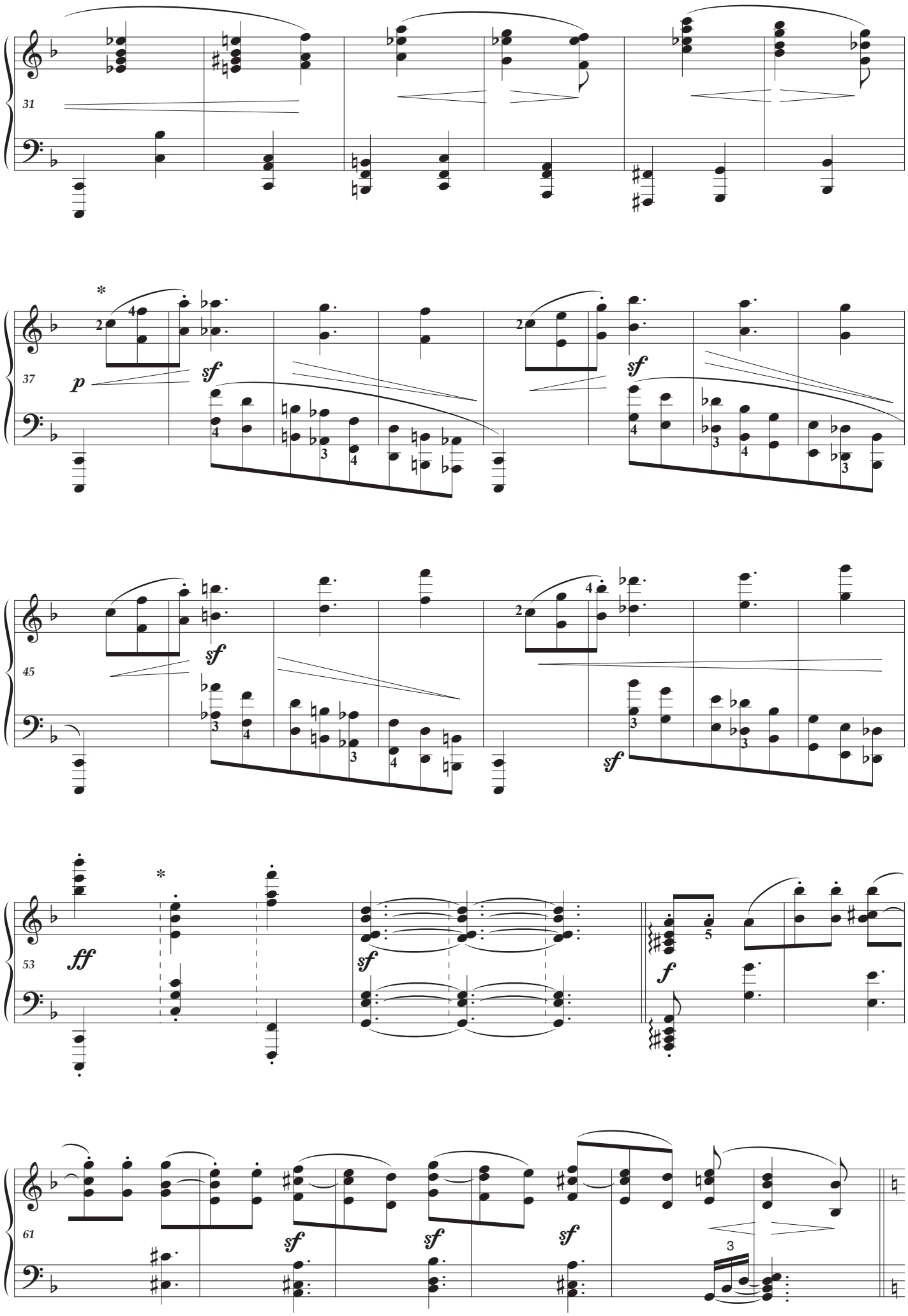
75 editorial crotchet

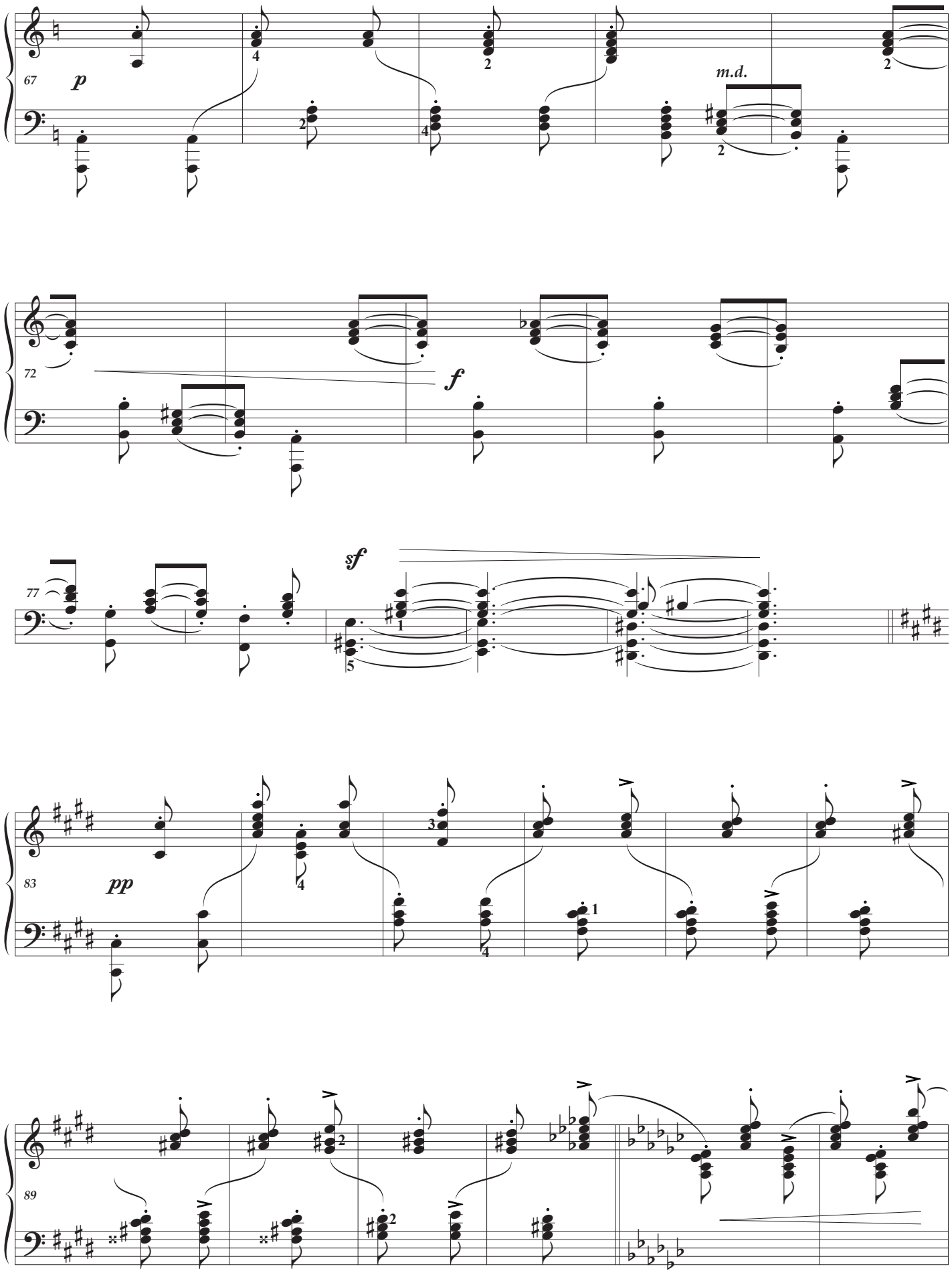
76/92 editorial — unlike Intermezzo N° 2 there are no metronome indications — assuming a *ritenuto* in **75** and **91** these suggestions seem logical

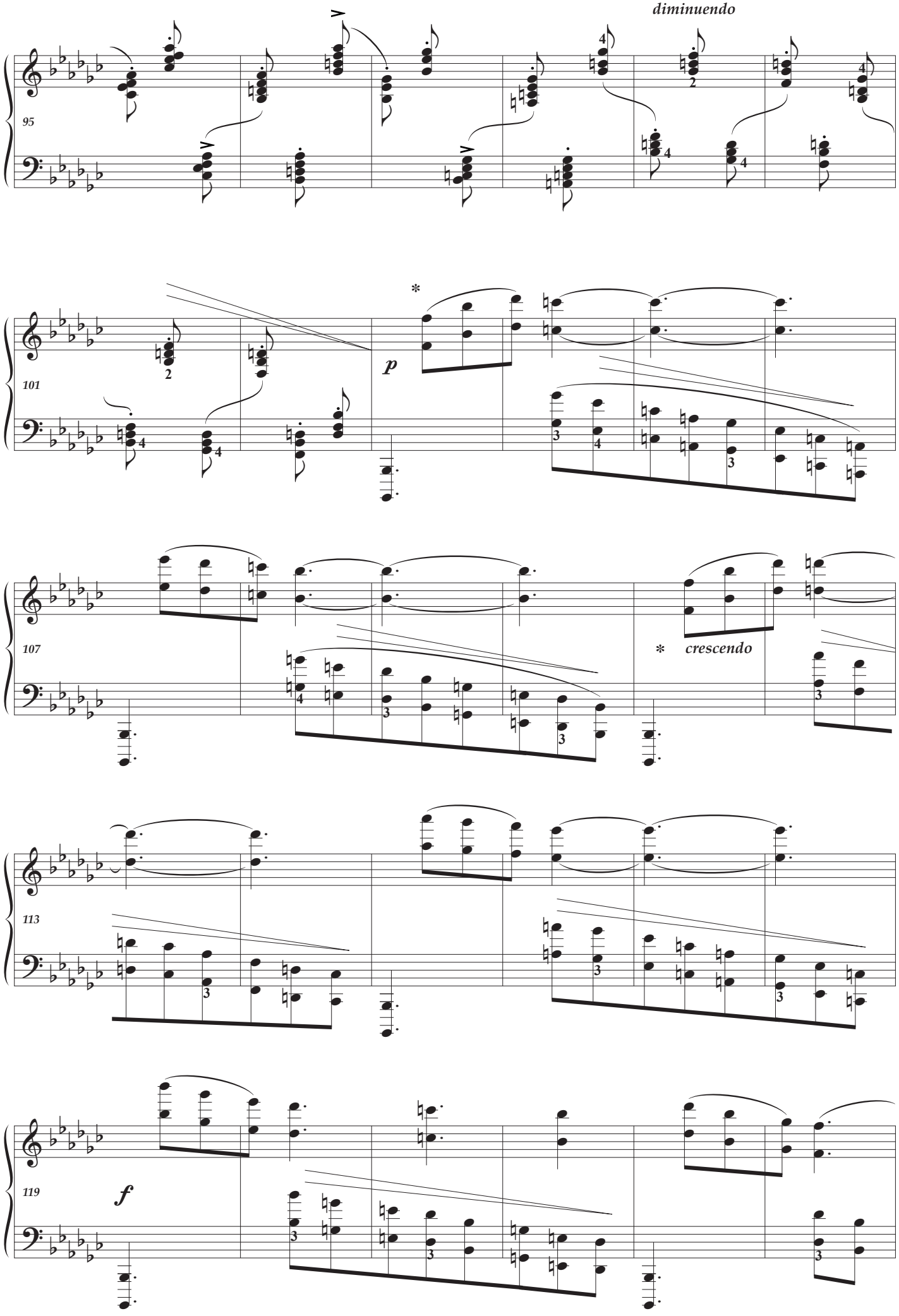


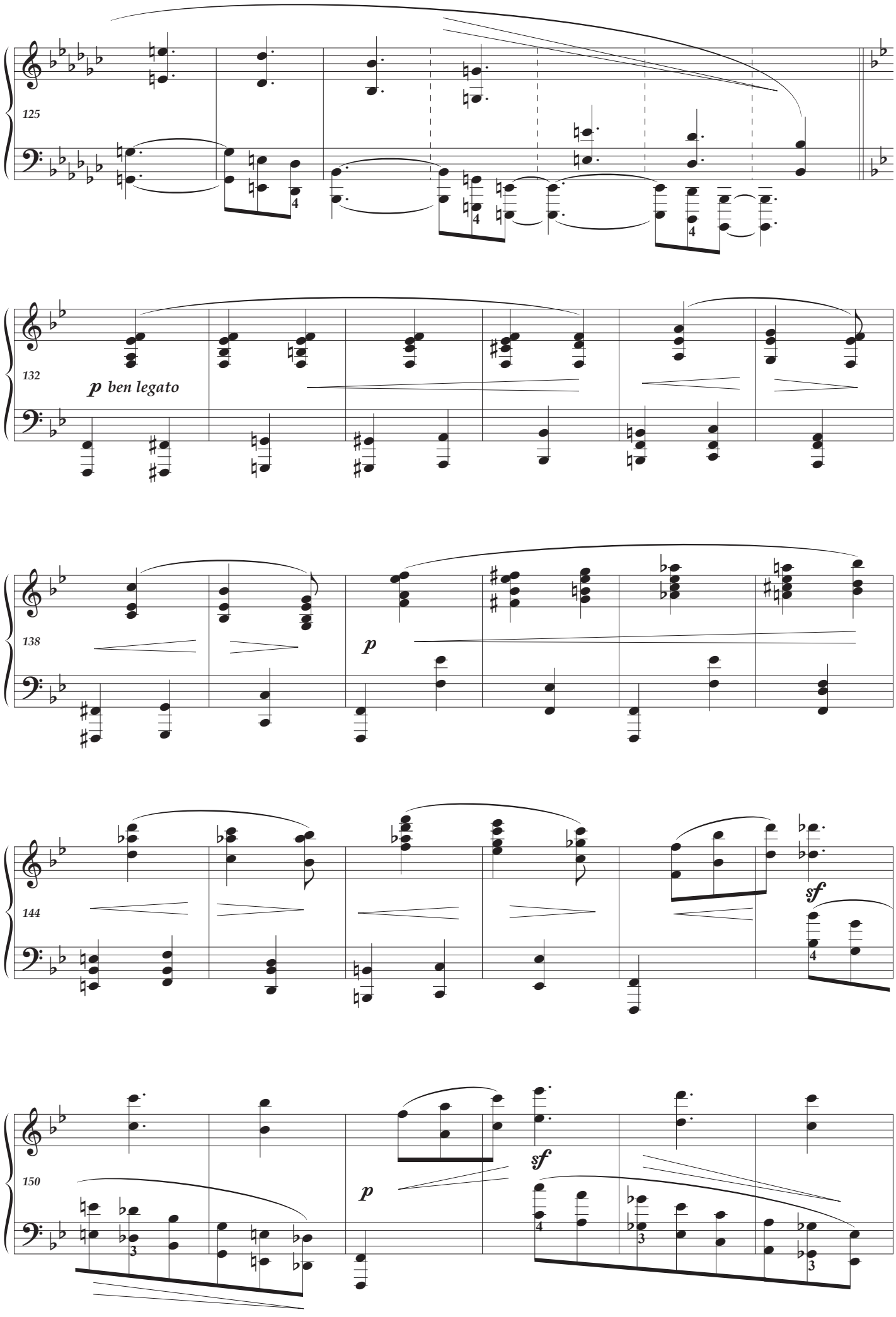
CAPRICCIO

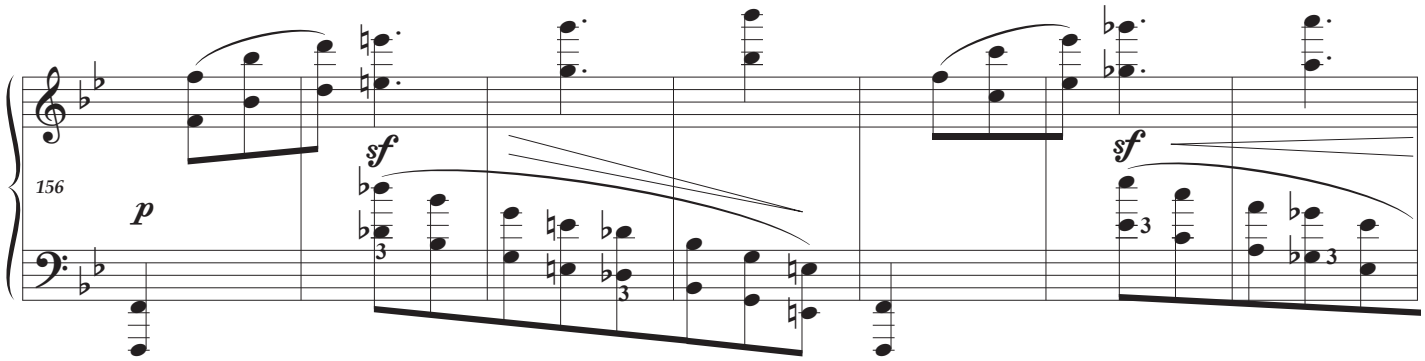


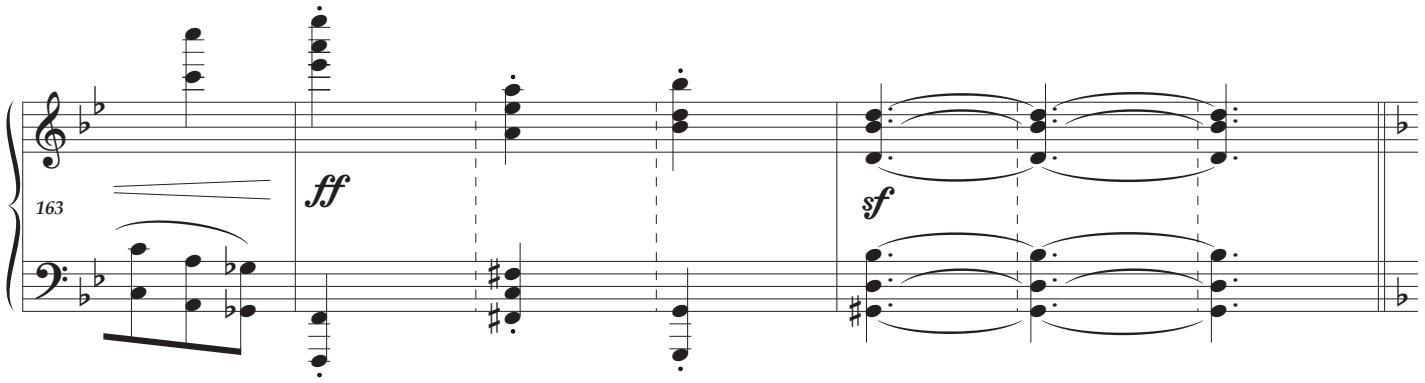

31
37
p
sf
45
53
ff
61

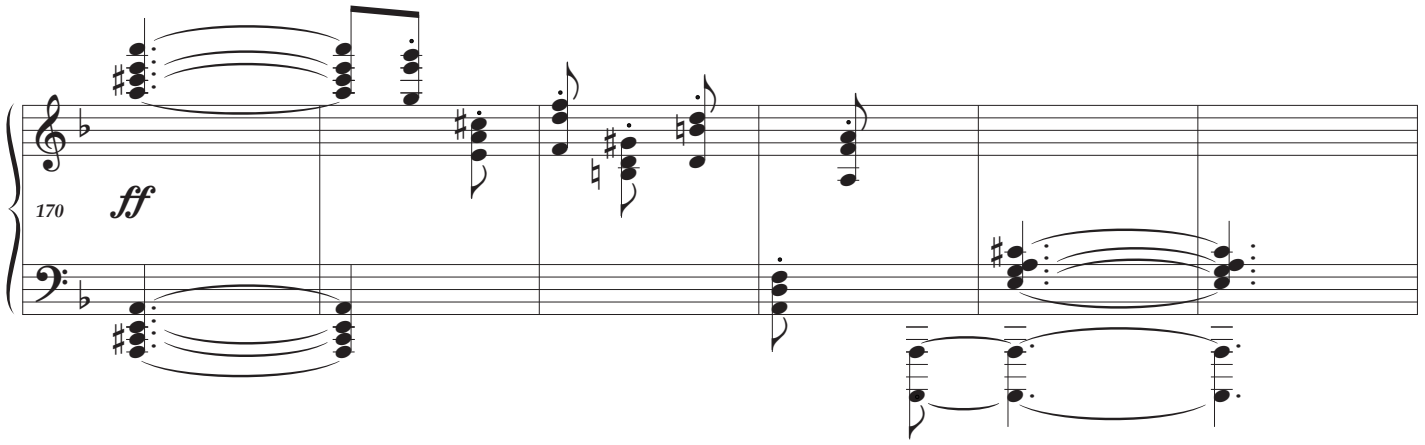

67
p
m.d.
72
f
77
sf
83
pp
89

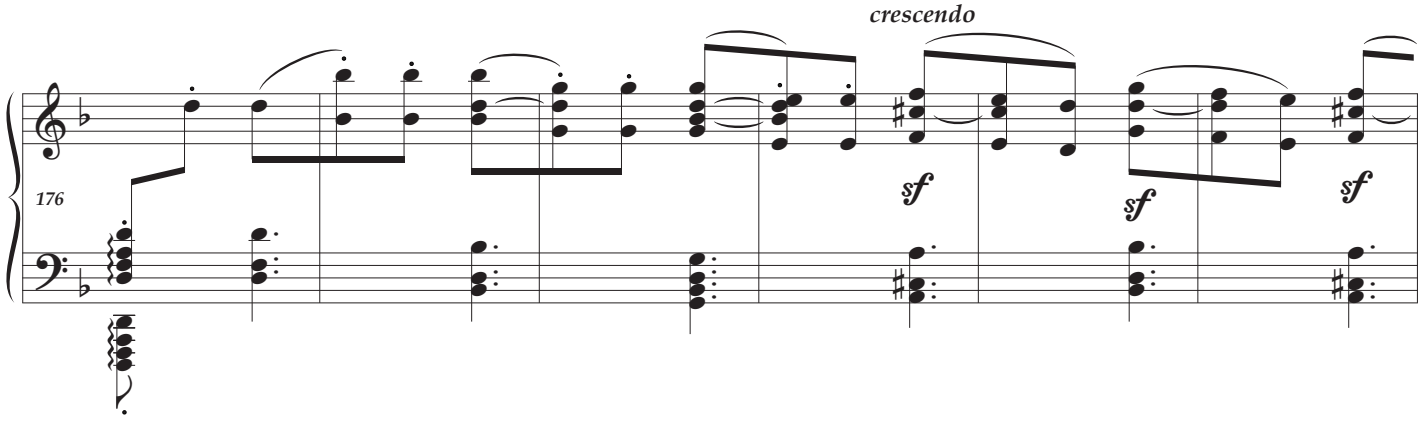

diminuendo
95
101
p
107
crescendo
113
119
f

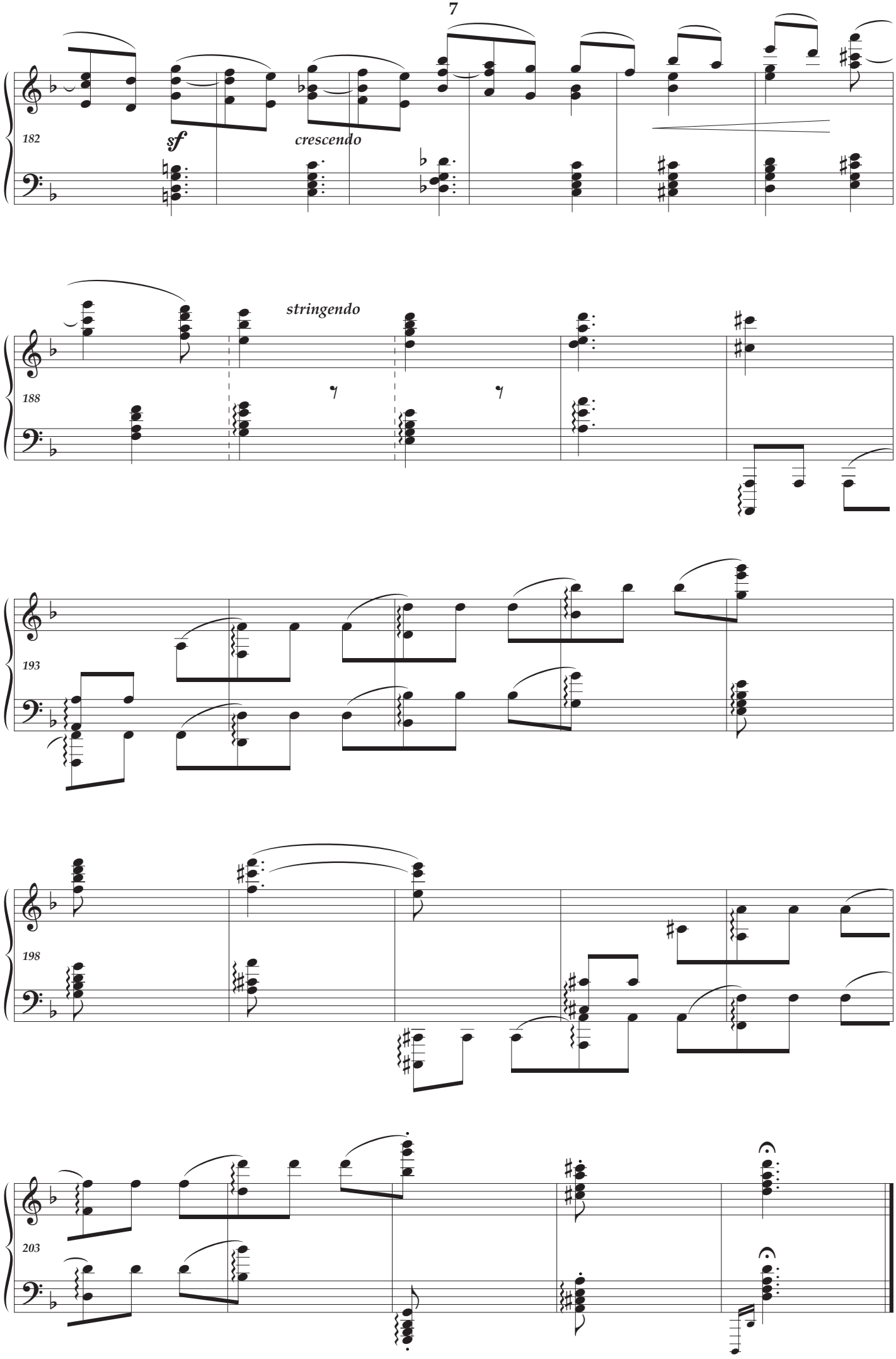

125
132
p ben legato
138
p
144
sf
150
p
sf


156
p
sf
sf

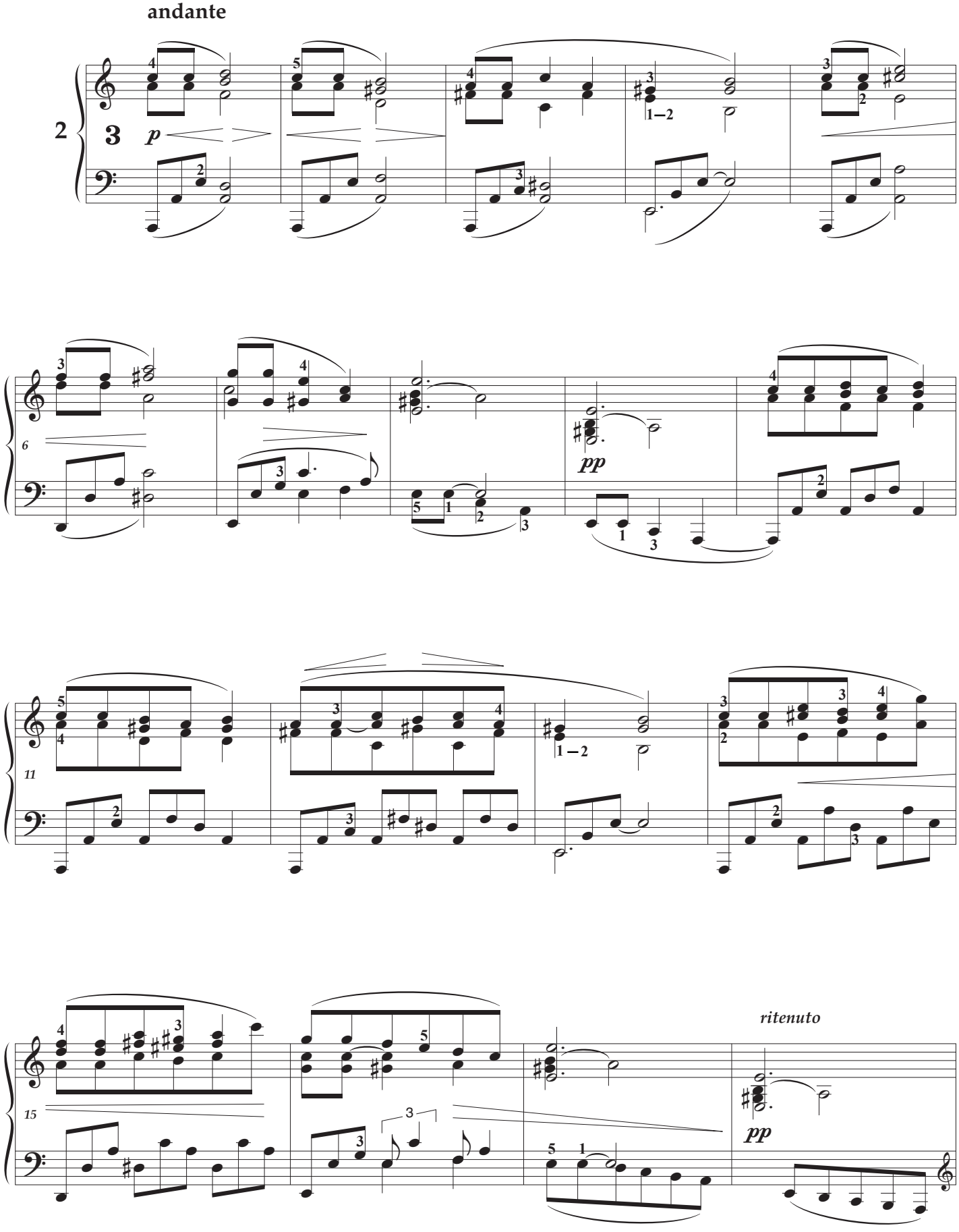

163
ff
sf


170
ff


crescendo
176
sf
sf
sf


182
sf
crescendo
stringendo
188
193
198
203

INTERMEZZO



non troppo presto (♩. = ♩)

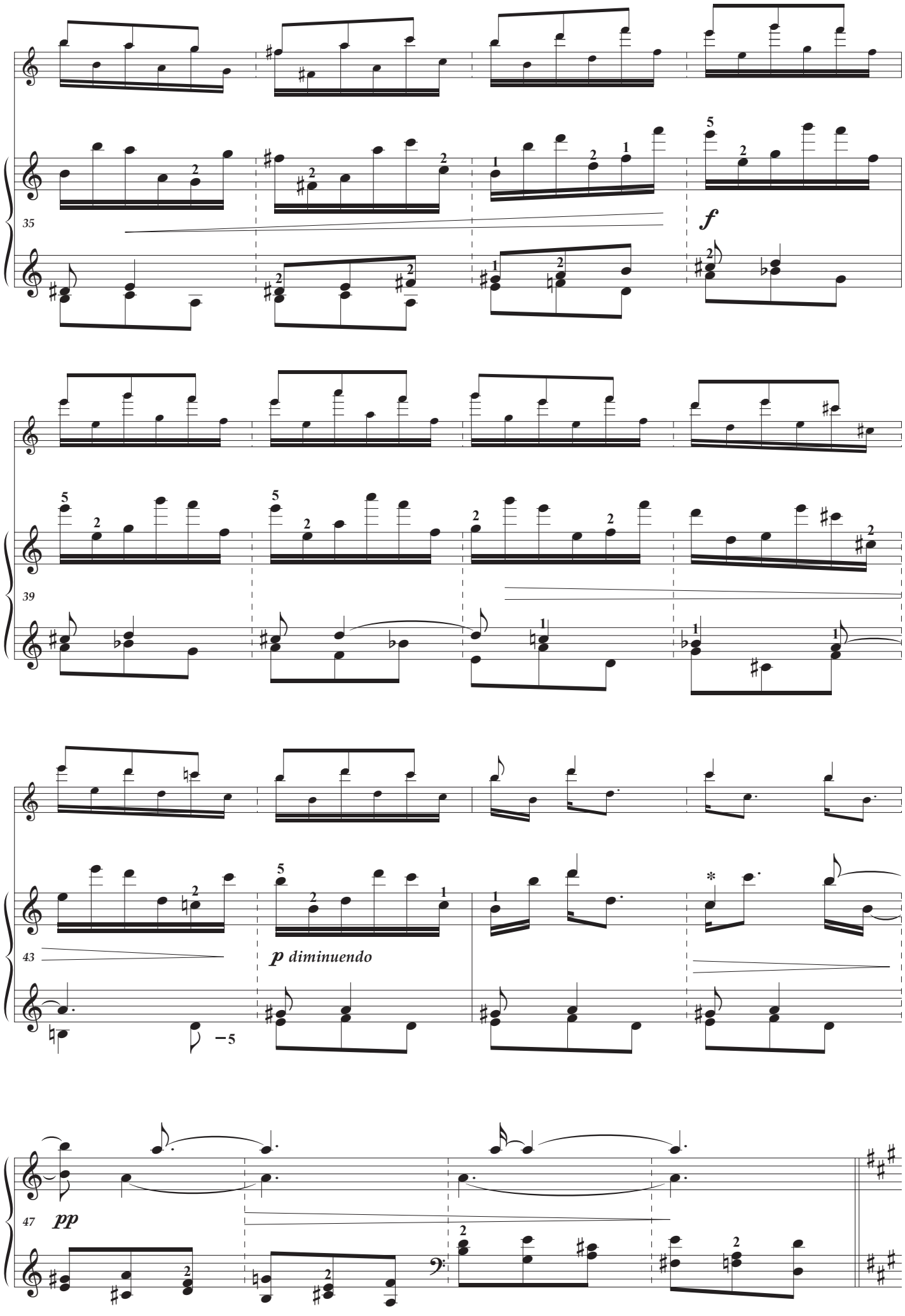
ossia

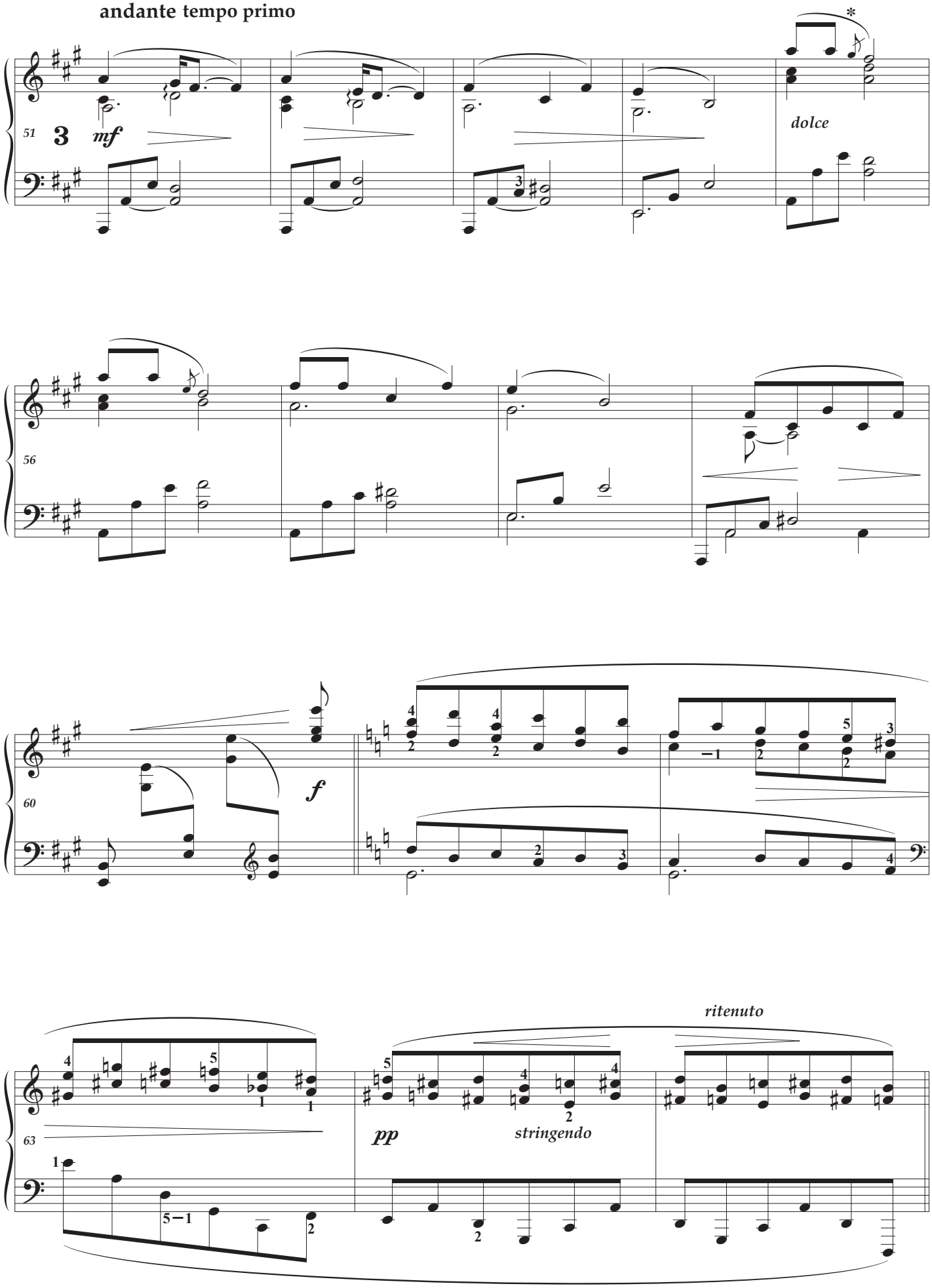
19 **3** *molto piano e legato*

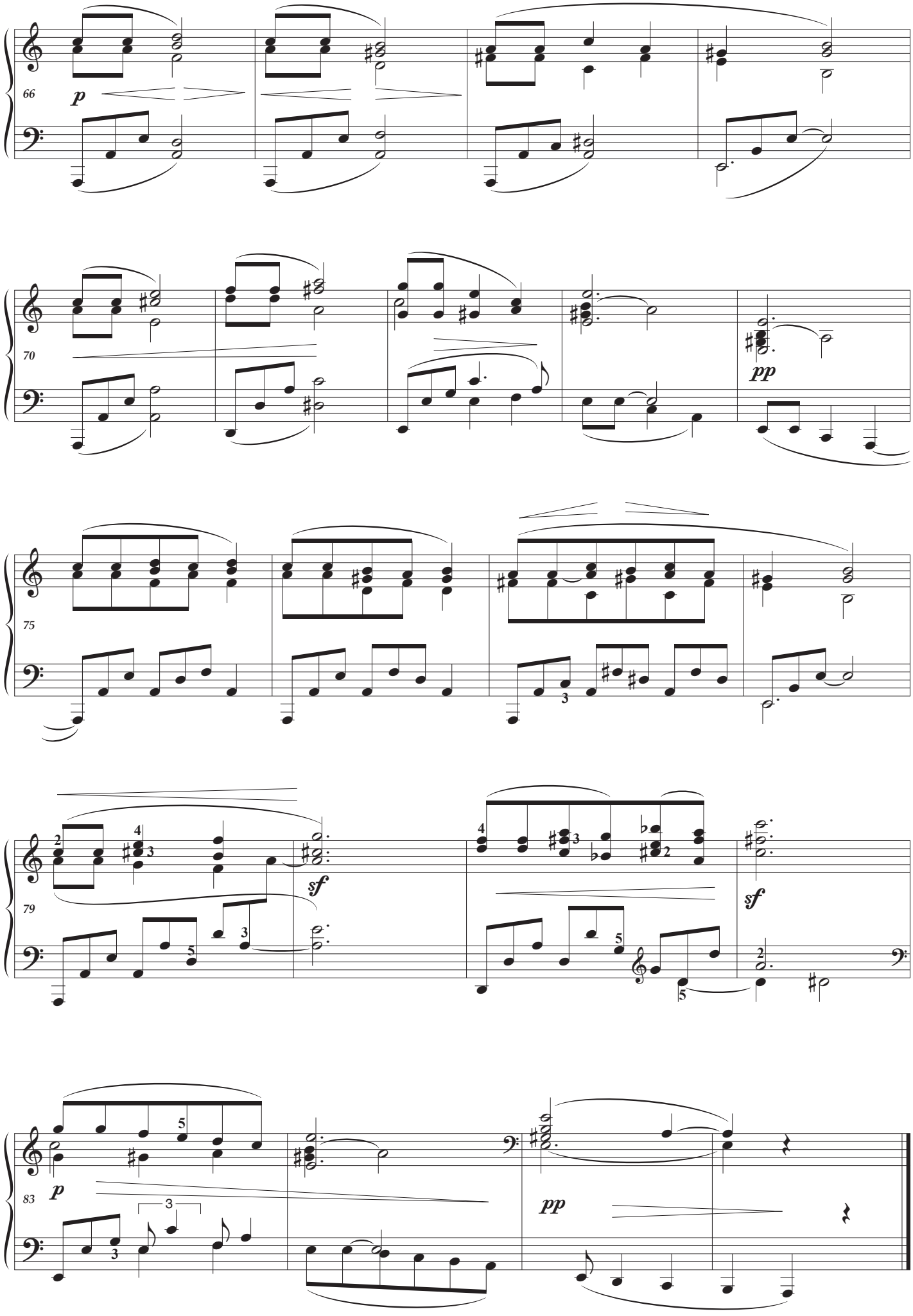
23

27 *fp*

31

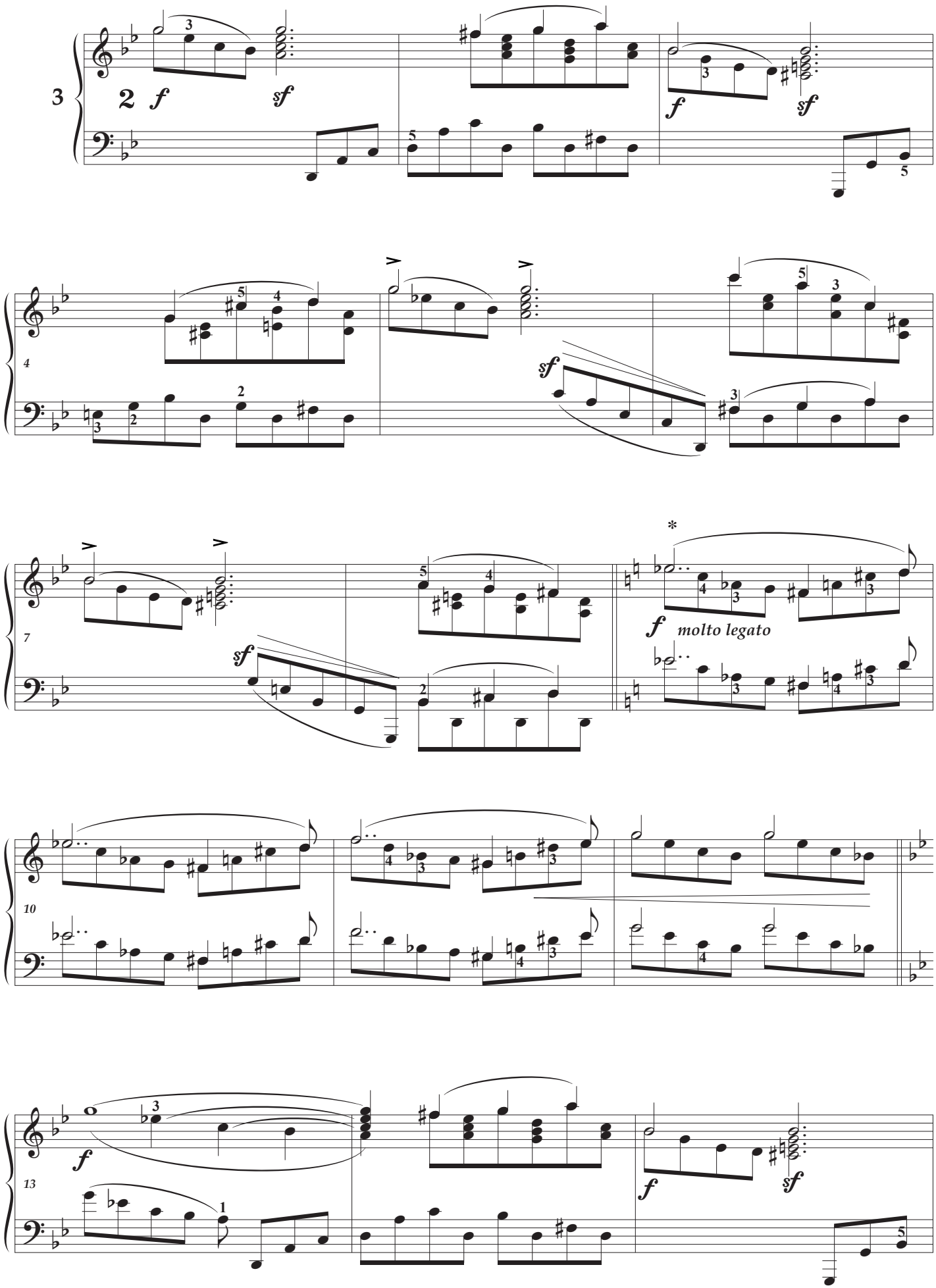

35
f
39
43
p diminuendo
47
pp

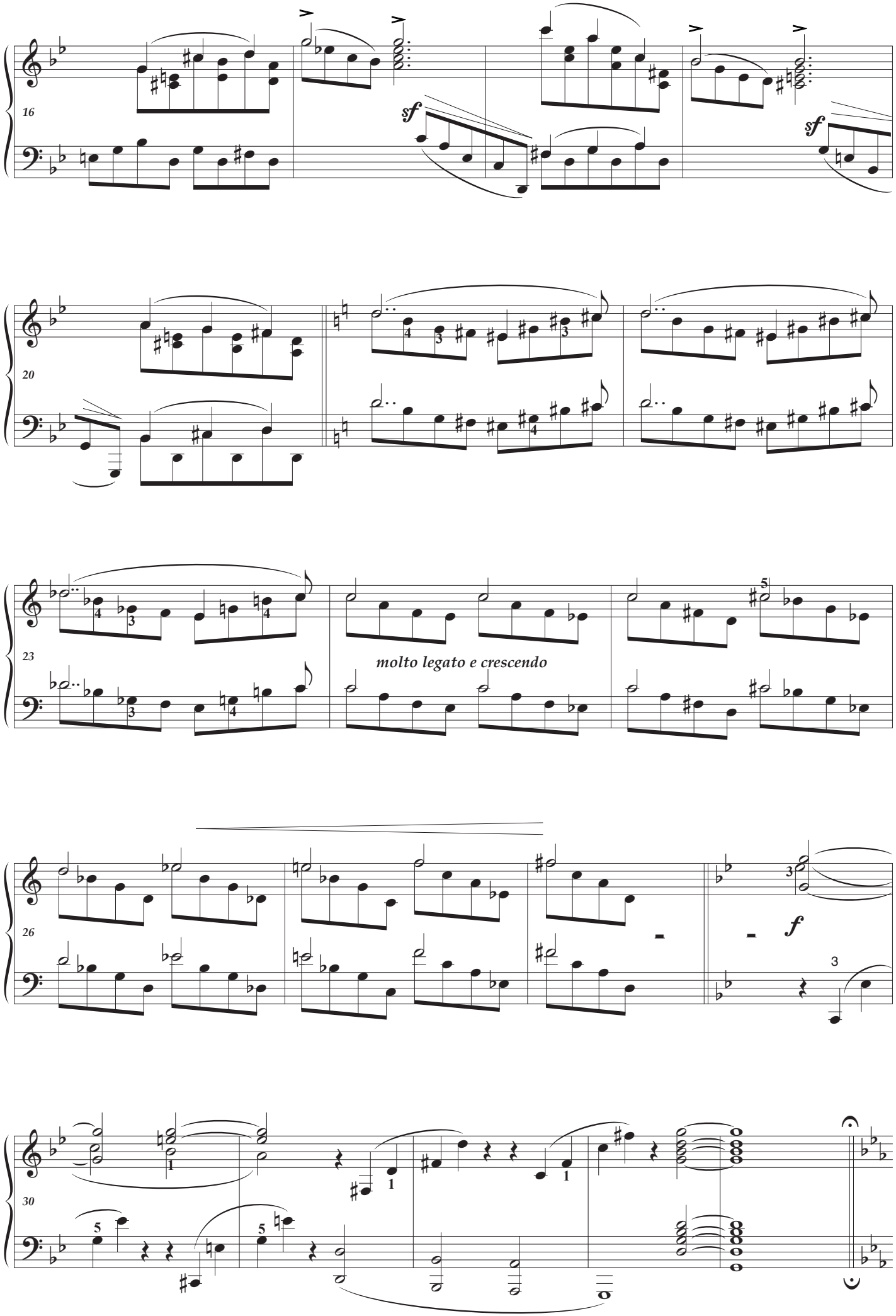

andante tempo primo
51
3
mf
dolce
56
60
f
63
pp
stringendo
ritenuto

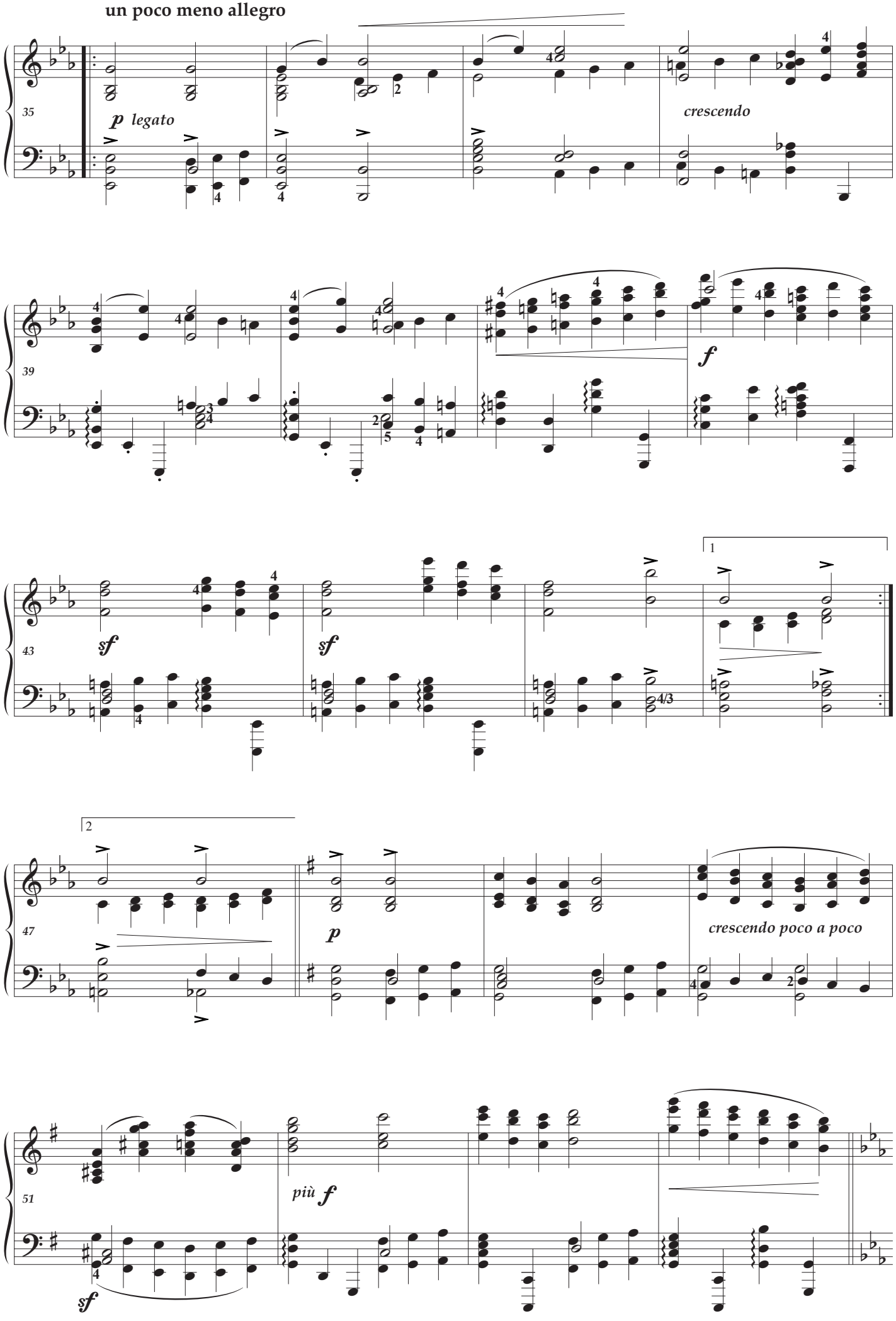

66
p
70
pp
75
3
79
sf
sf
83
p
3
pp

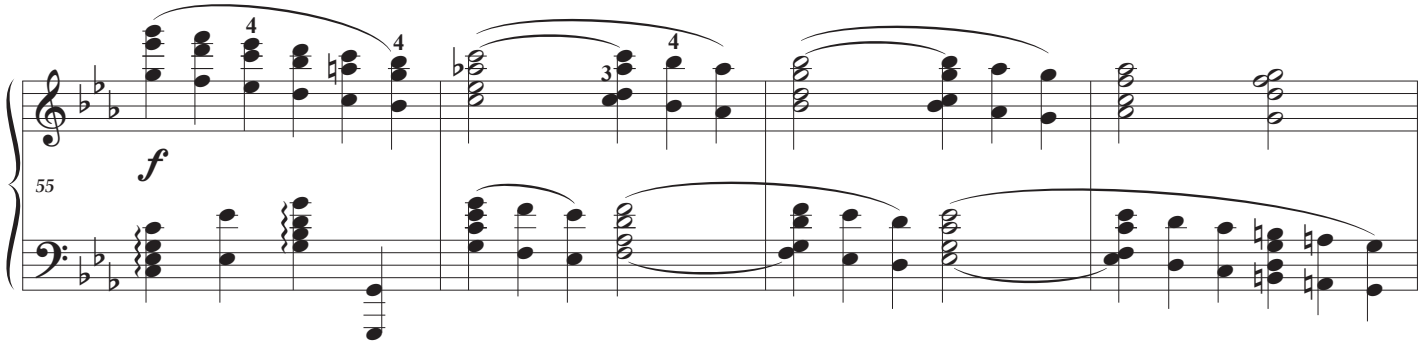
CAPRICCIO

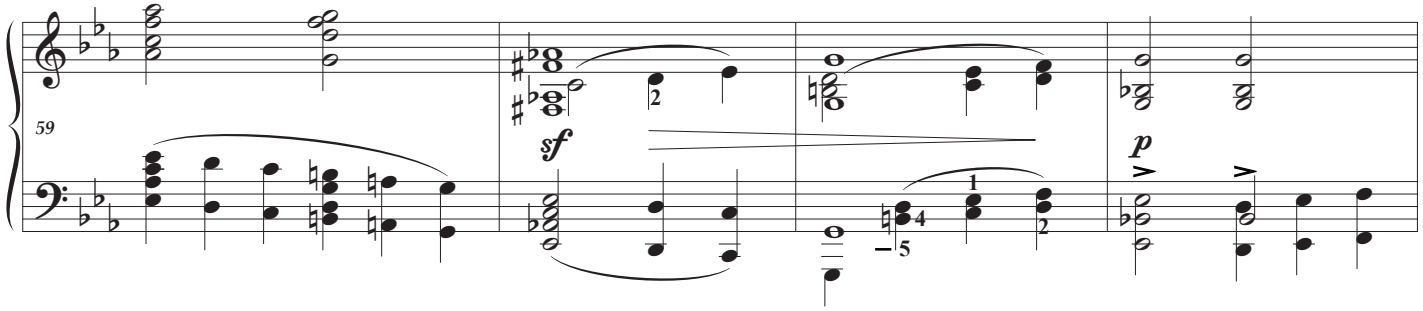
allegro passionato

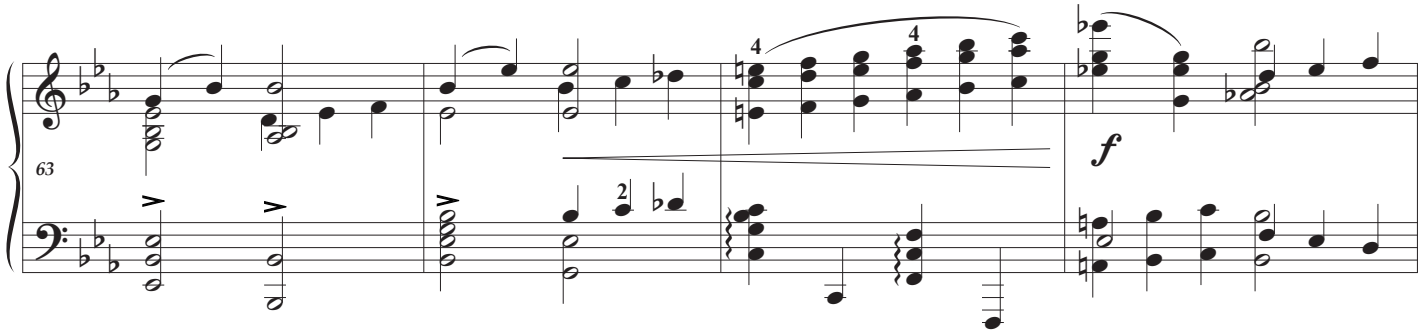


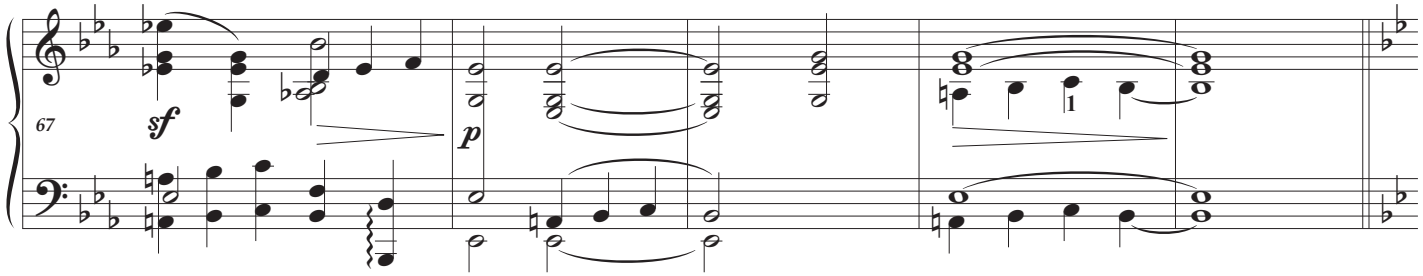

16
sf
sf
20
23
molto legato e crescendo
26
f
30


un poco meno allegro
35
p legato
crescendo
39
f
43
sf
sf
1
47
2
p
crescendo poco a poco
51
più f
sf

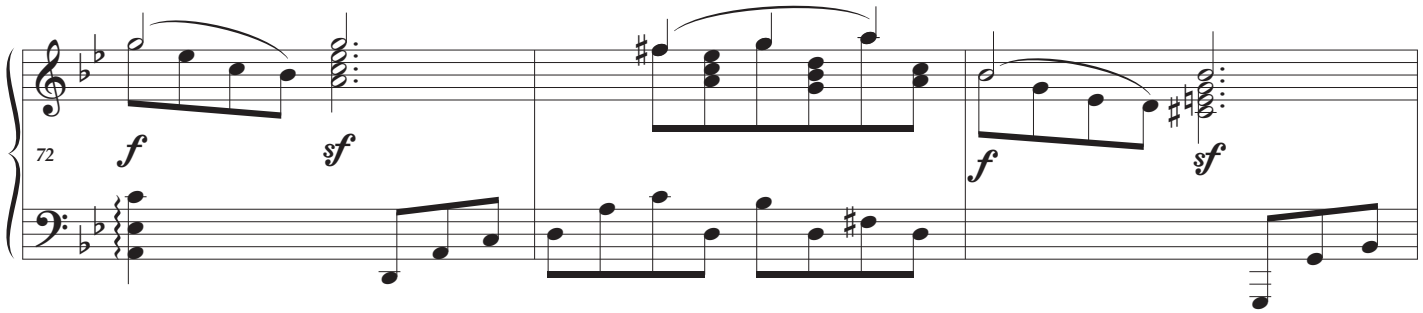


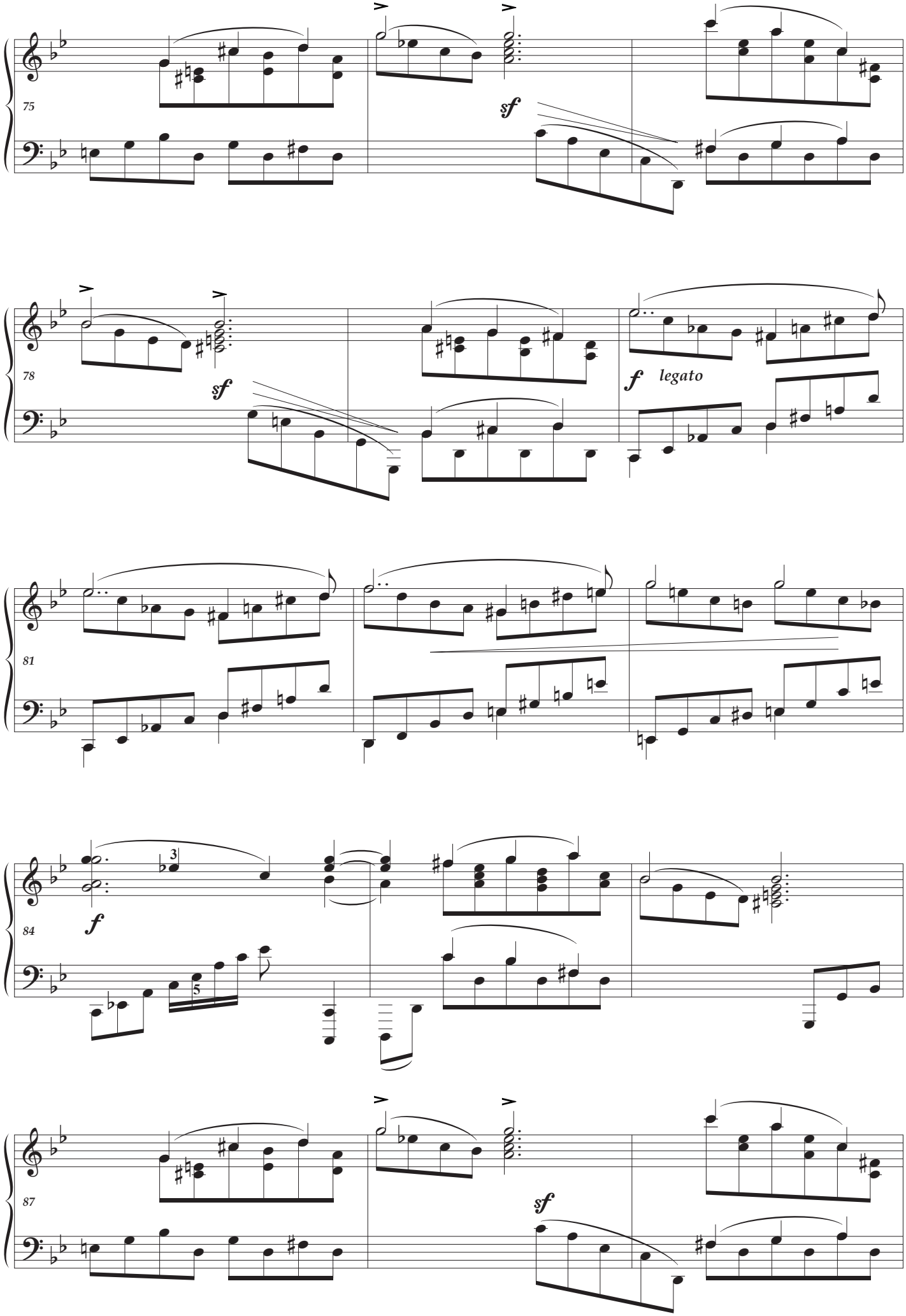


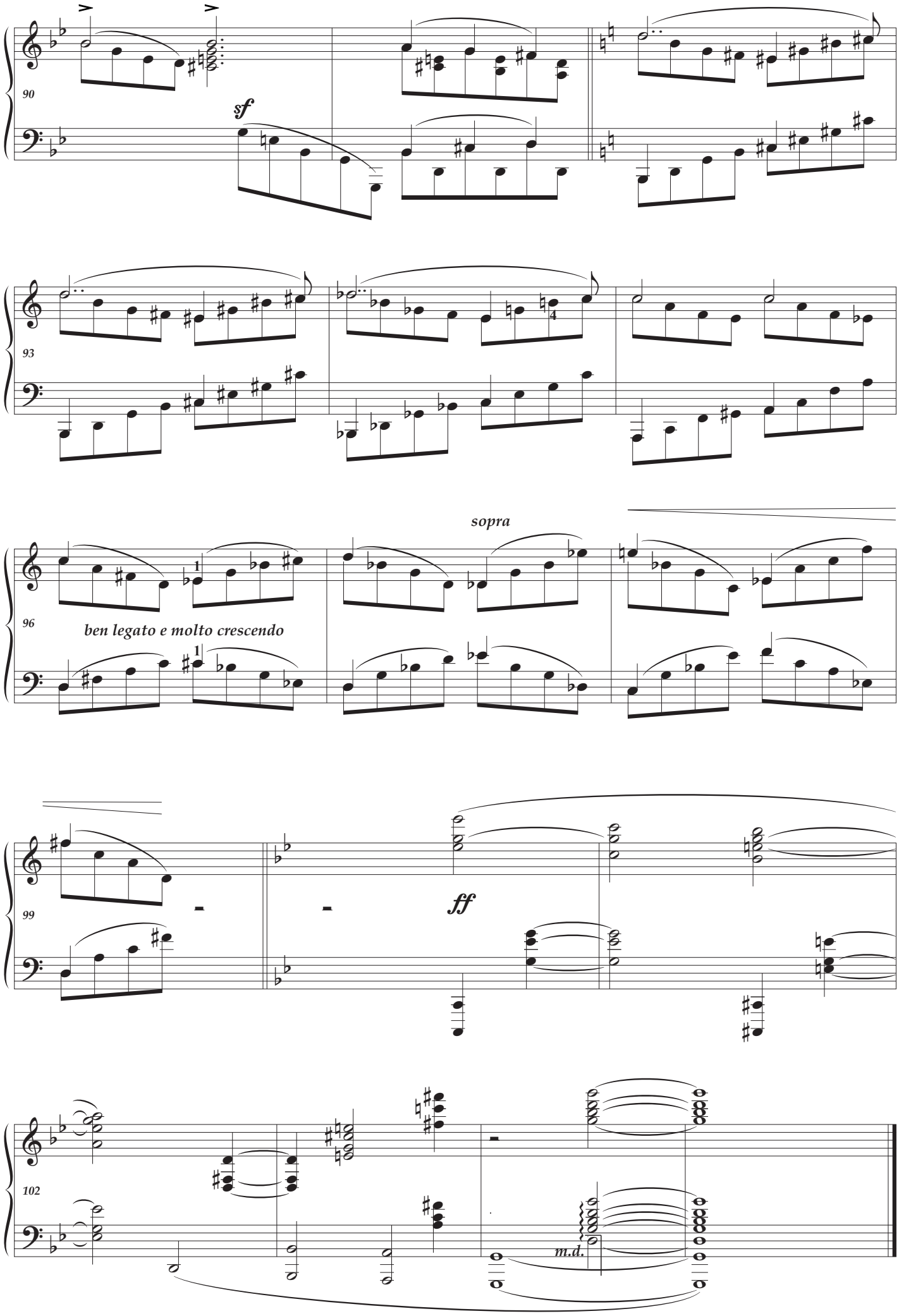




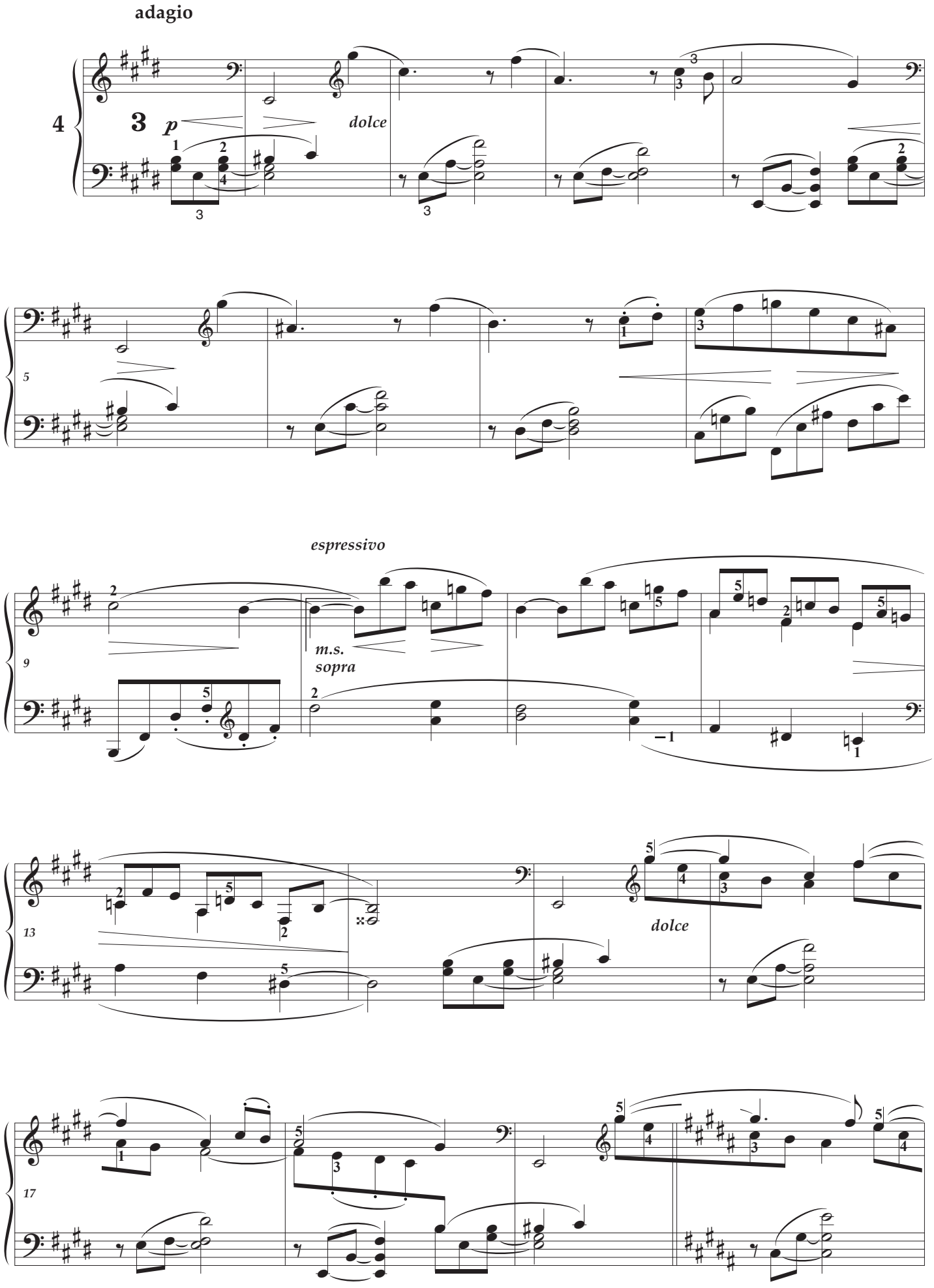
tempo primo

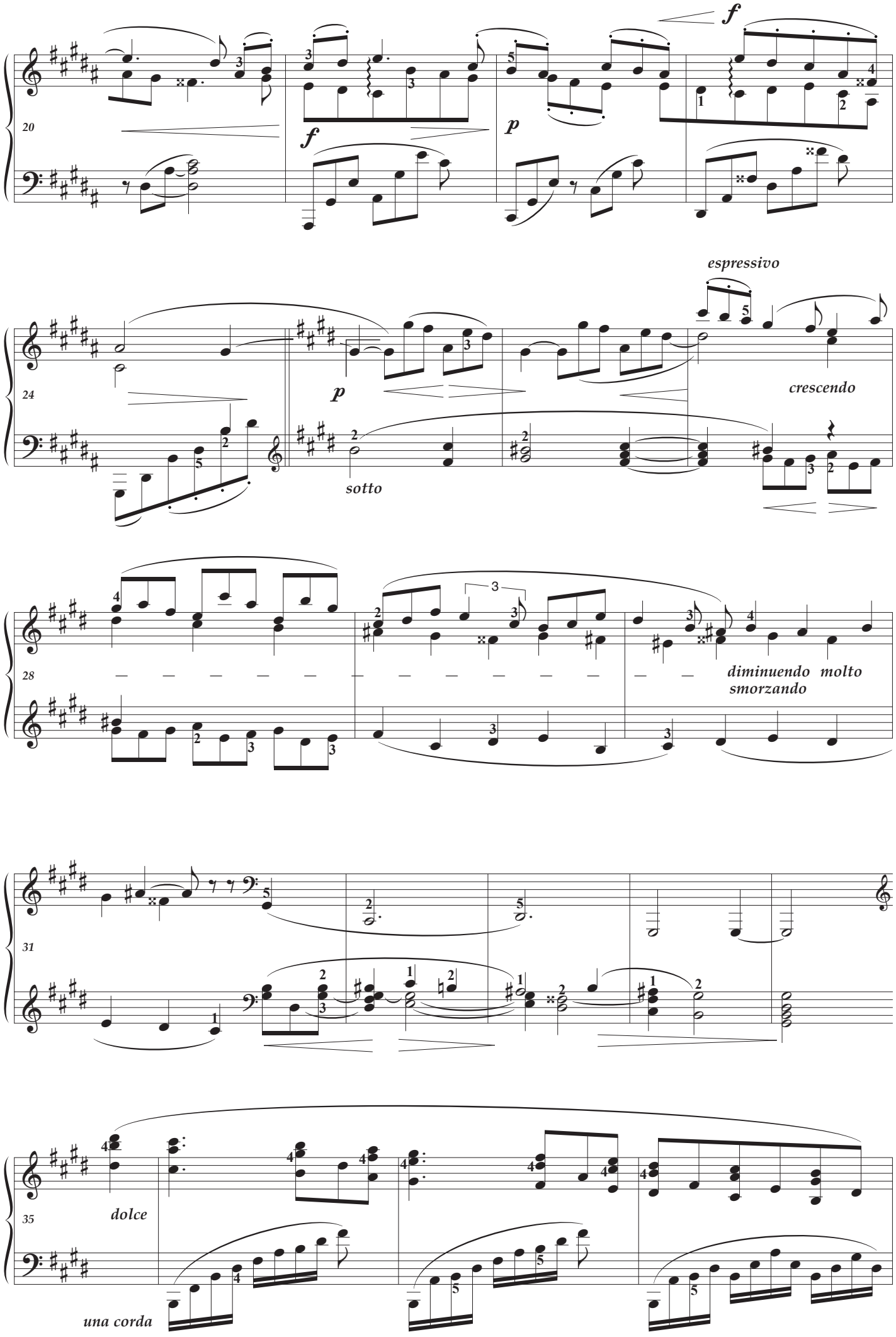


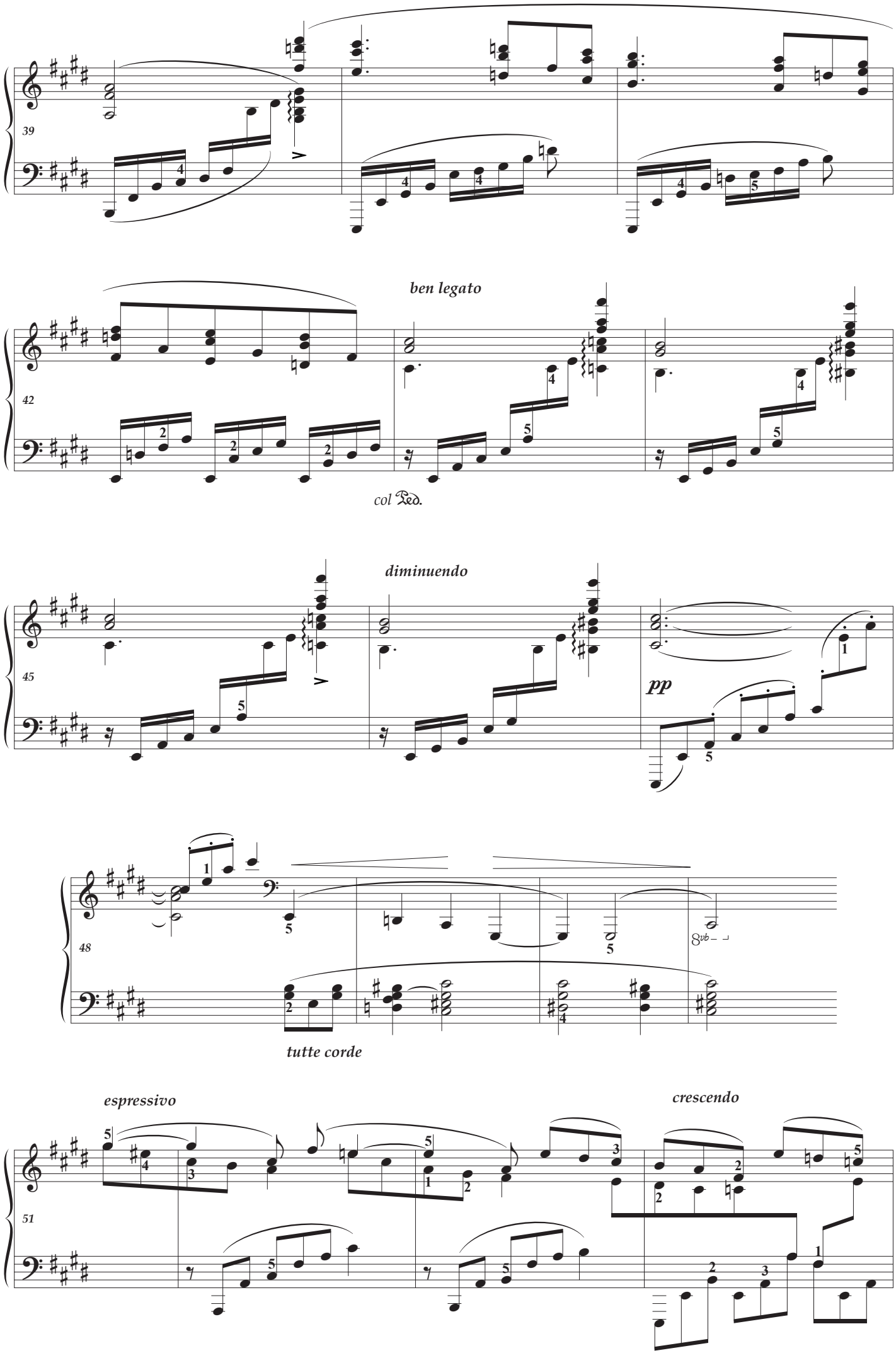

75
sf
78
sf
f legato
81
84
f
3
5
87
sf

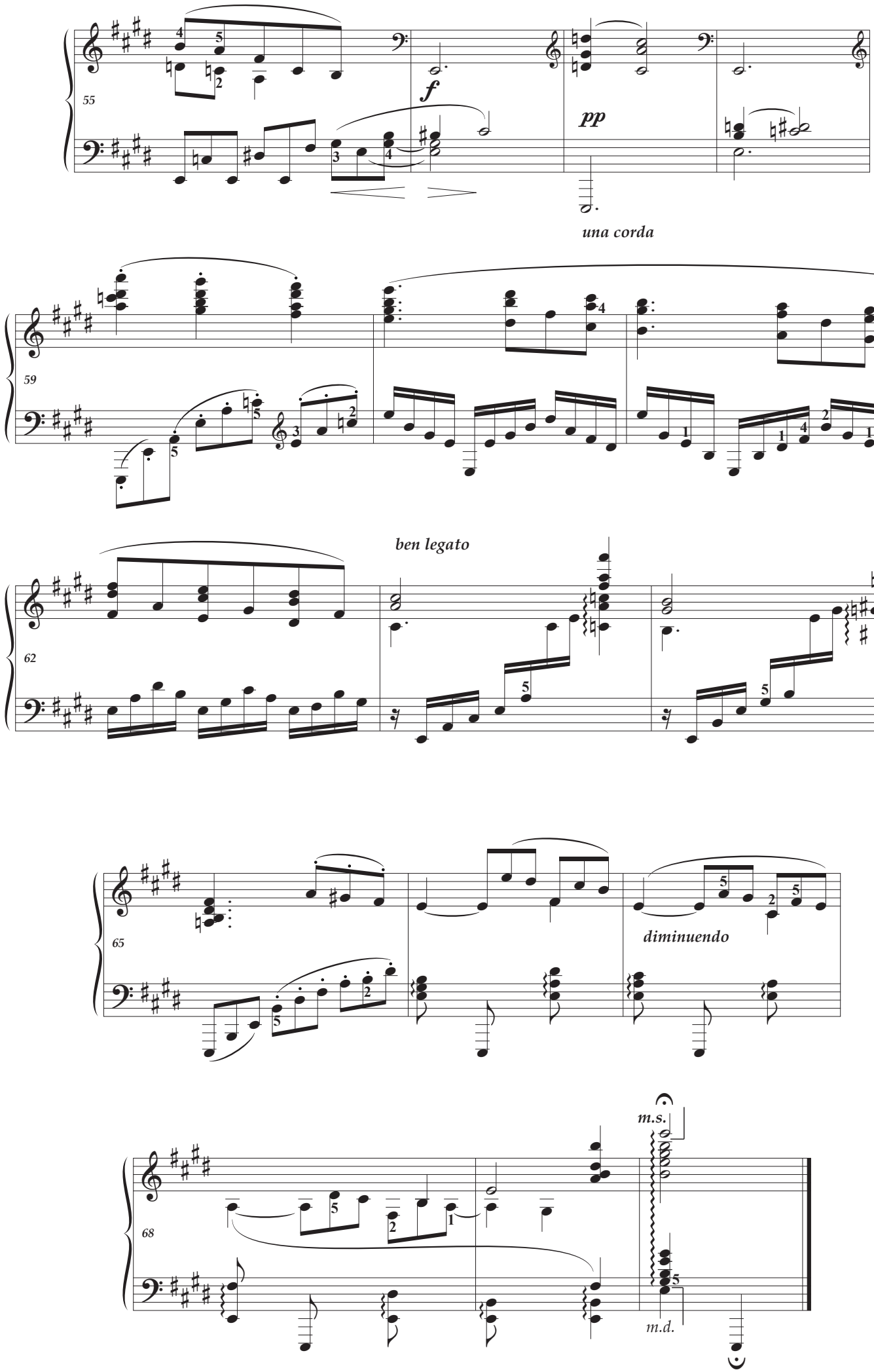

90
sf
93
96
sopra
ben legato e molto crescendo
99
ff
102
m.d.

INTERMEZZO



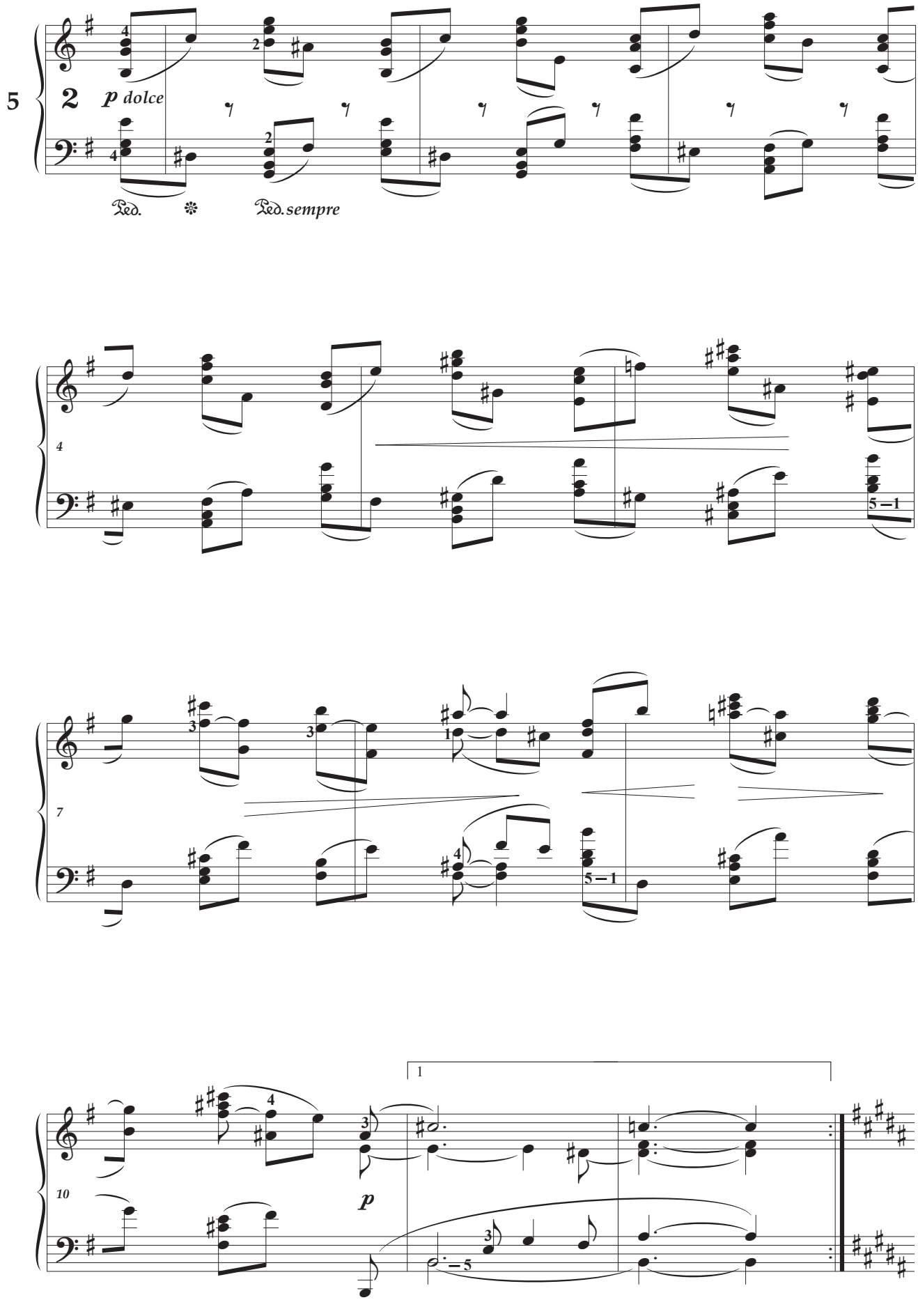

20
f
f
p
24
espressivo
p
crescendo
sotto
28
diminuendo molto
smorzando
31
35
dolce
una corda

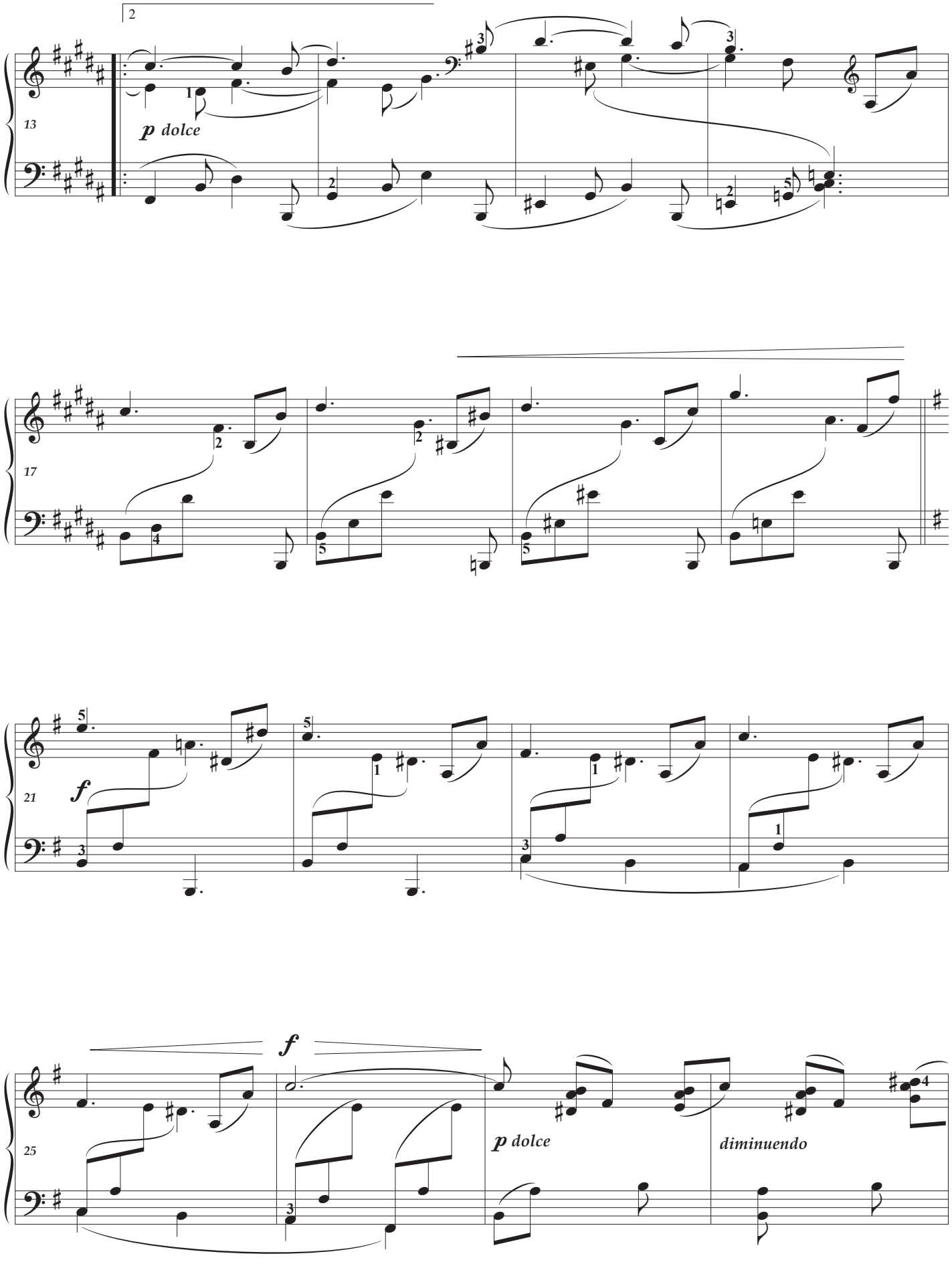

39
ben legato
42
col Ped.
diminuendo
45
pp
48
8vb
tutte corde
espressivo
crescendo
51


55
f
pp
una corda
59
ben legato
62
65
diminuendo
68
m.s.
m.d.

INTERMEZZO

andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento




13
p dolce
17
21
f
25
f
p dolce
diminuendo

in tempo

29 *smorzando* *pp* *dolcissimo*

33 *crescendo*

1

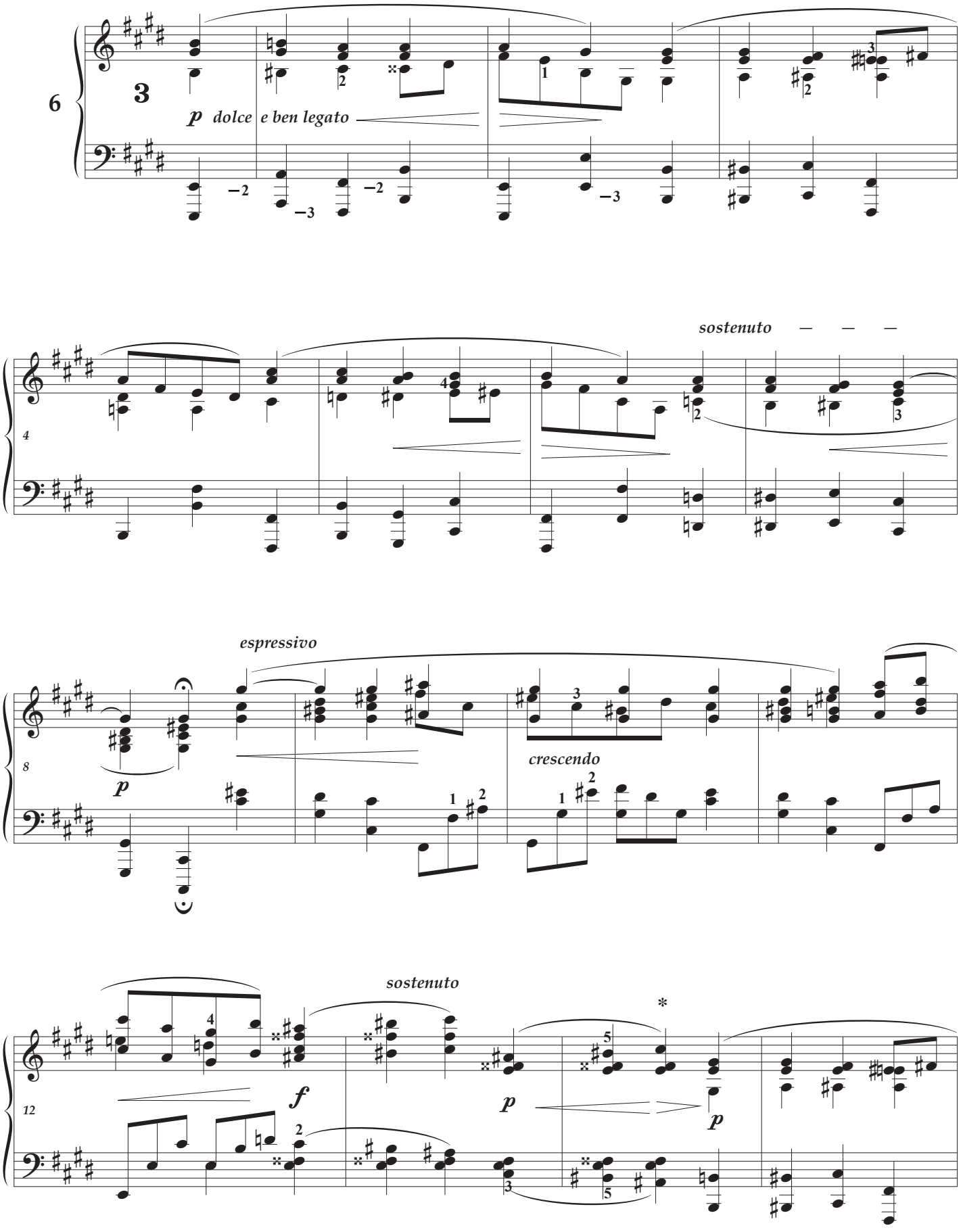
37 *p*

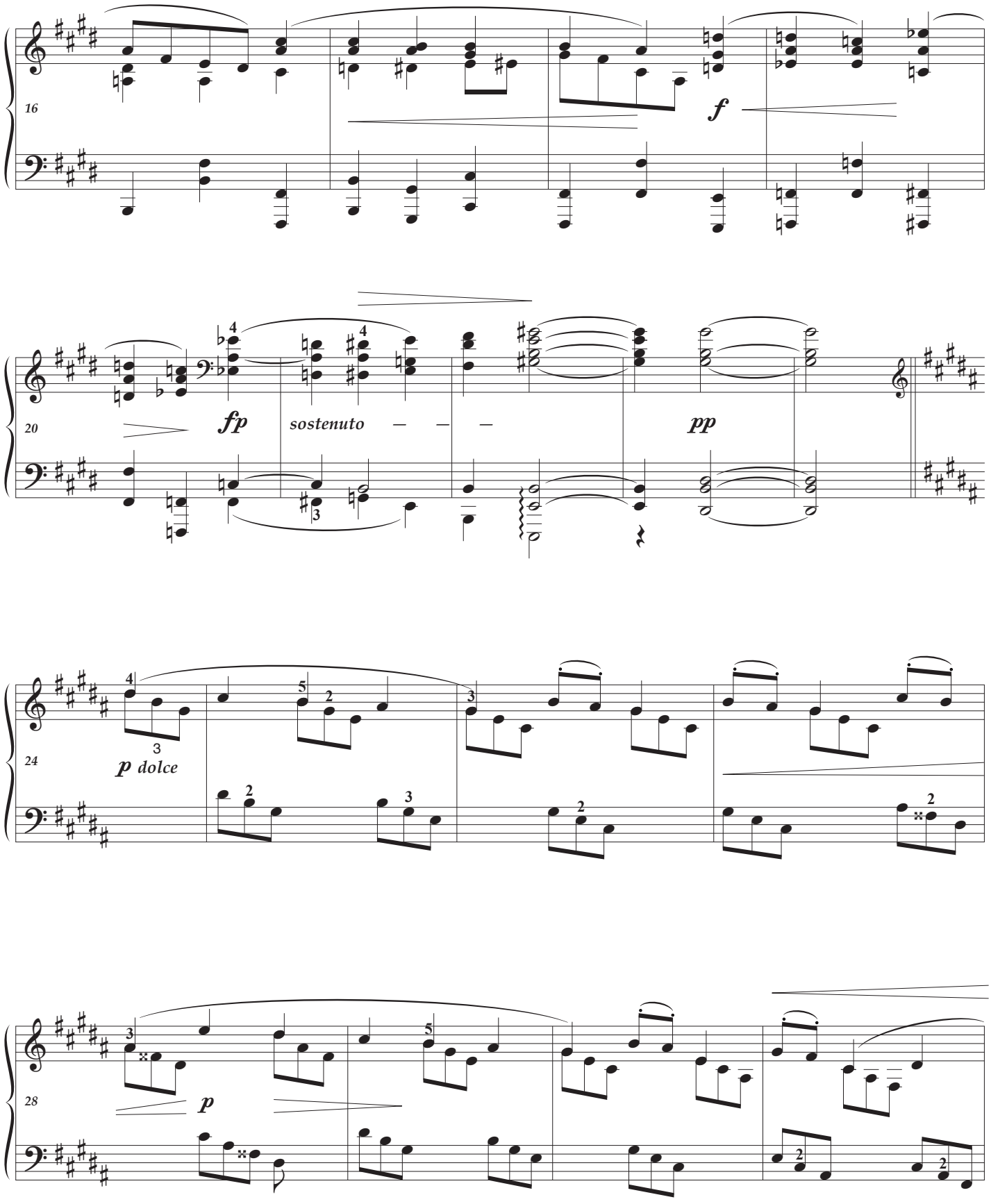
2

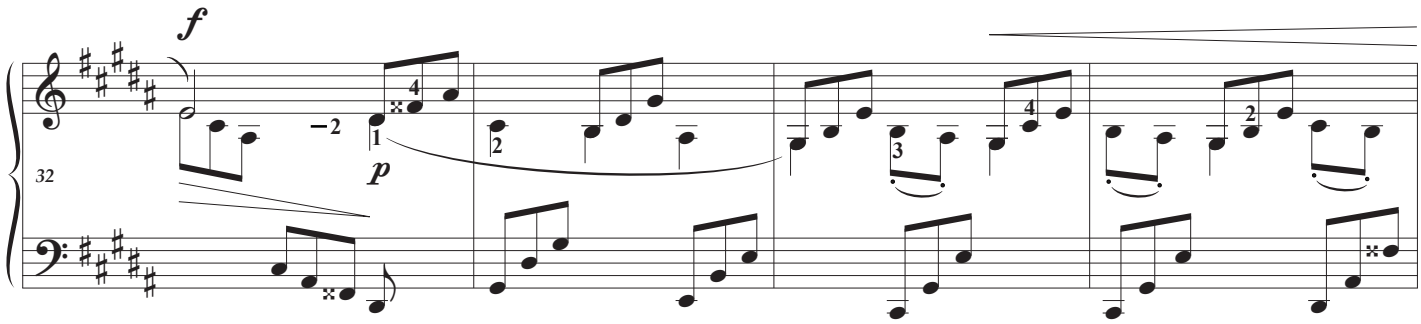
39 *sf* *p dolce*

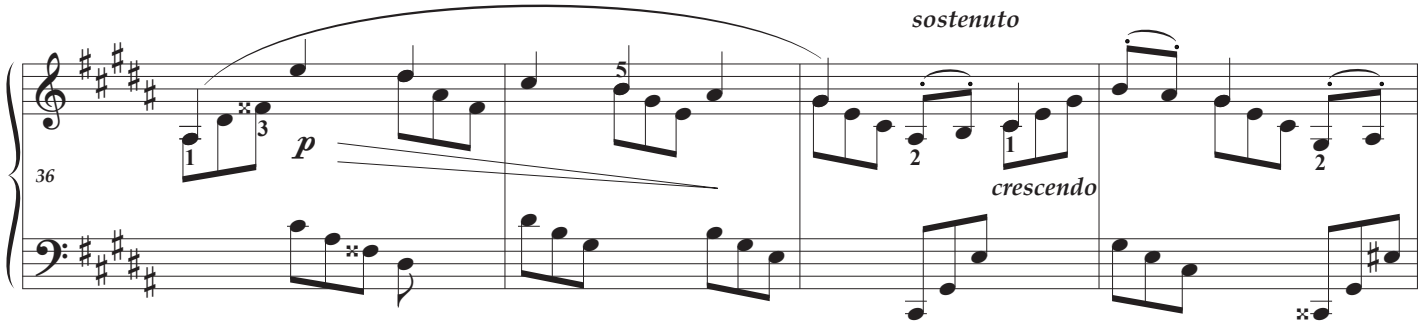
INTERMEZZO

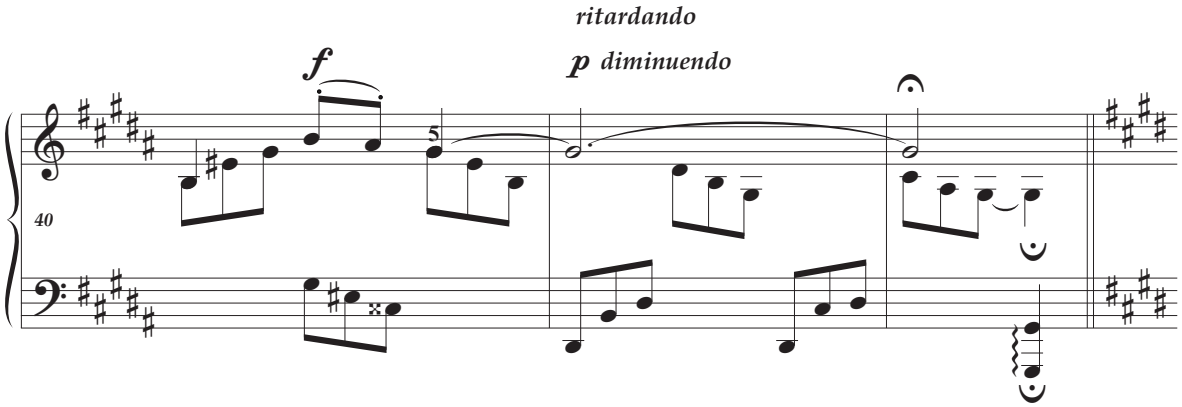
andantino teneramente

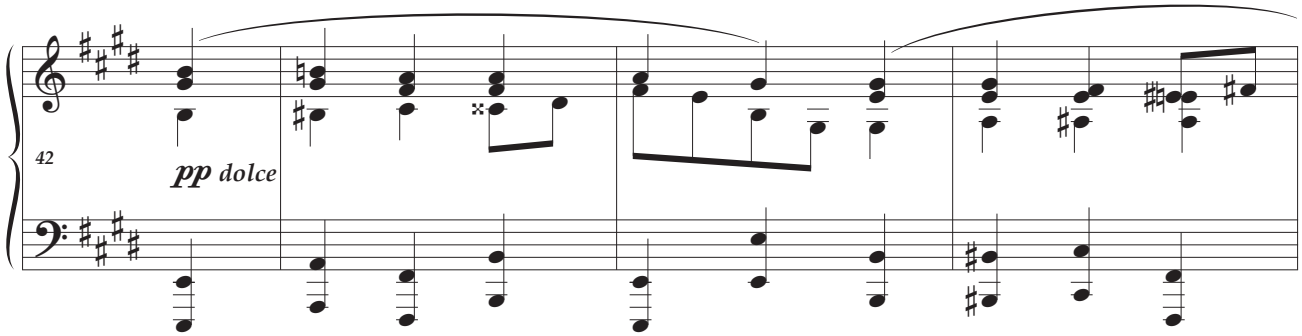


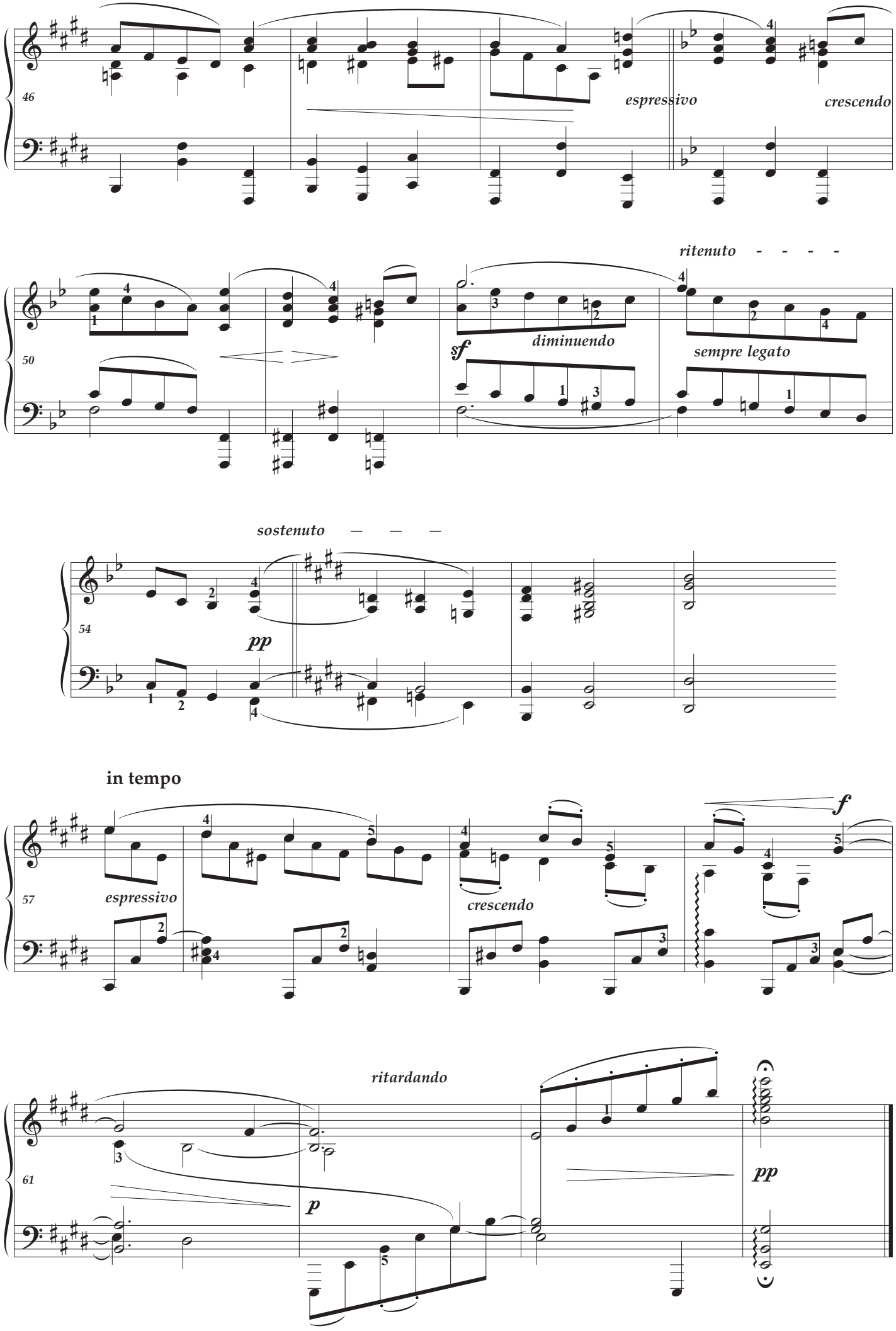

16
f
20
fp
sostenuto
pp
24
p dolce
28
p


f
p
32

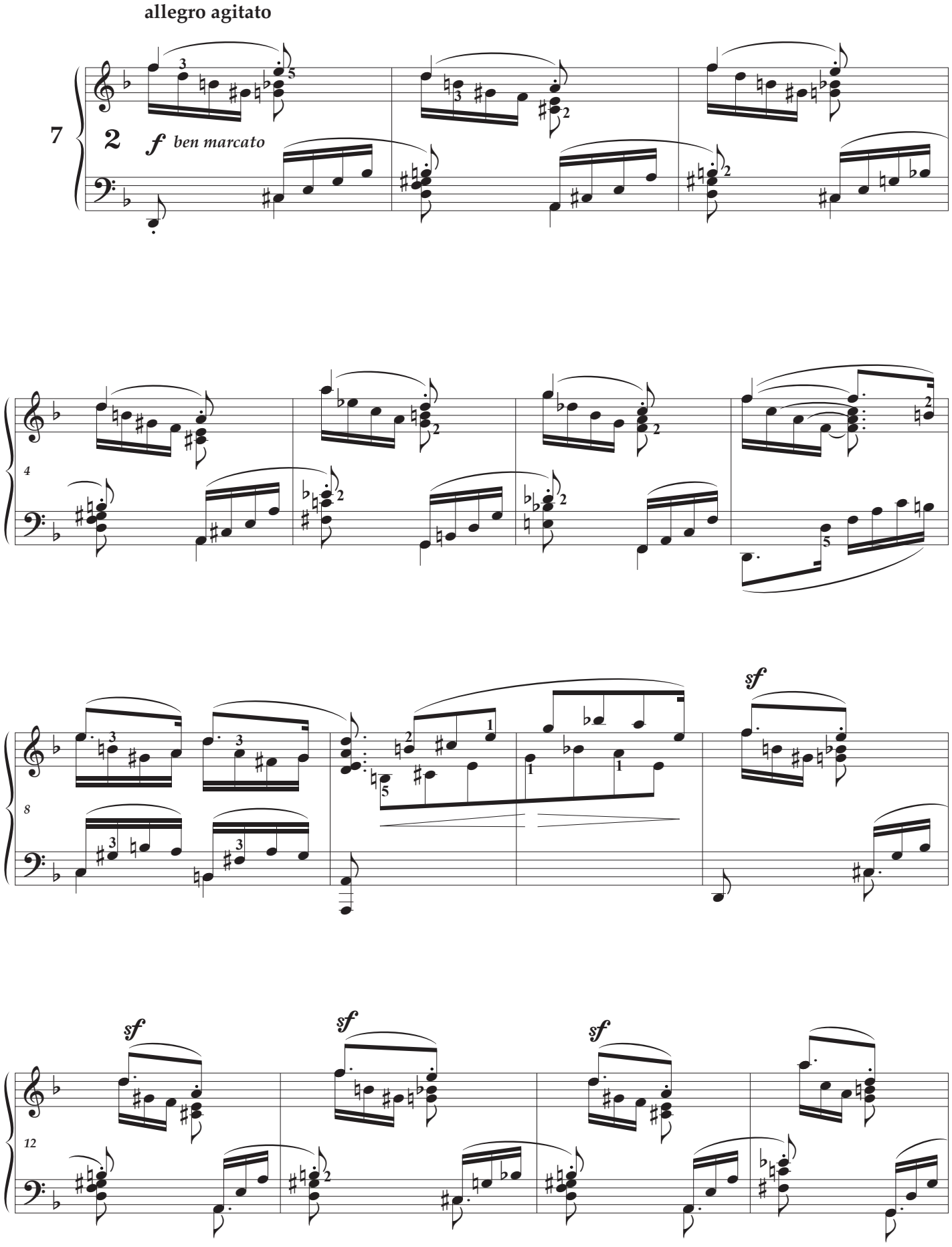

sostenuto
p
crescendo
36

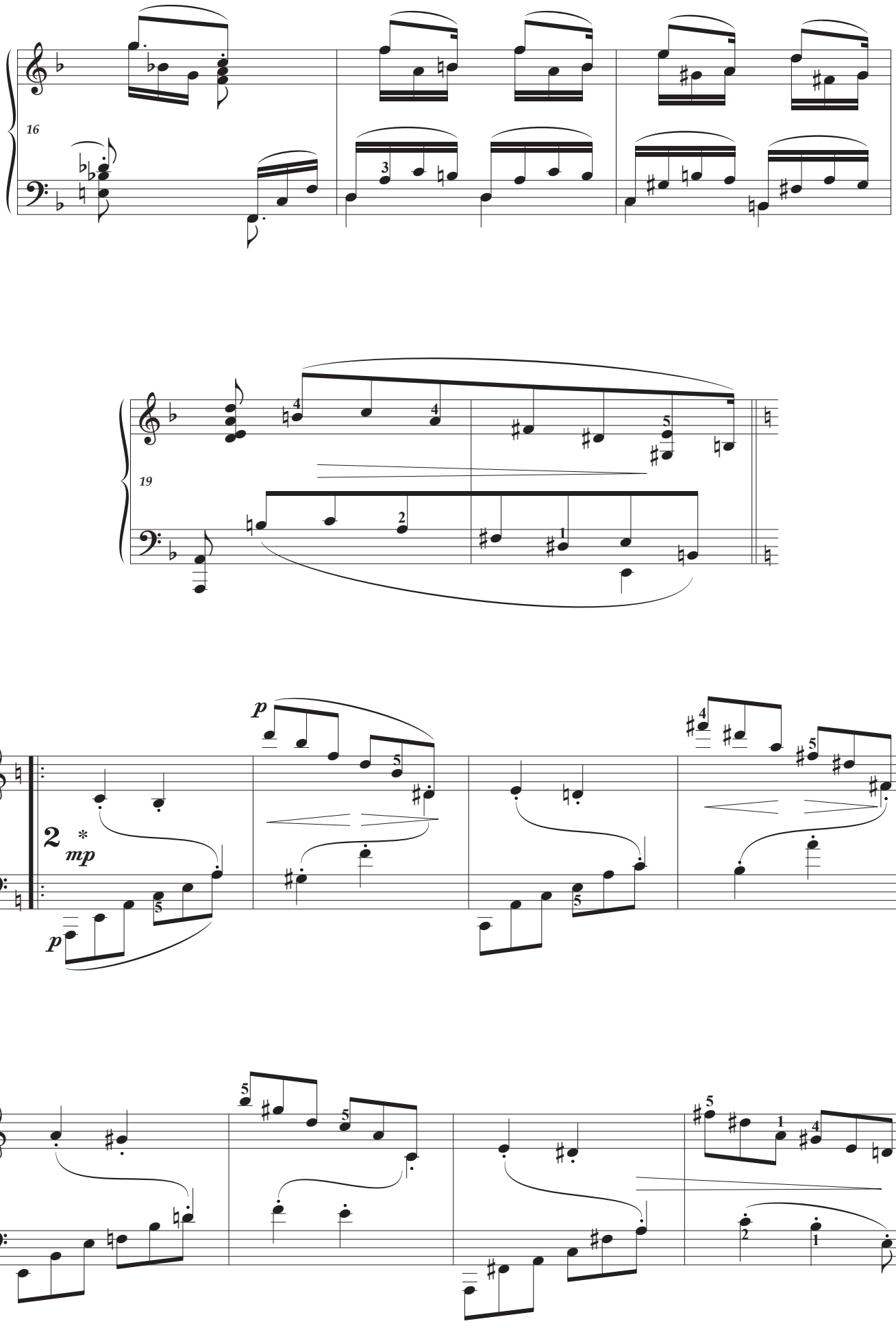

ritardando
f
p diminuendo
40

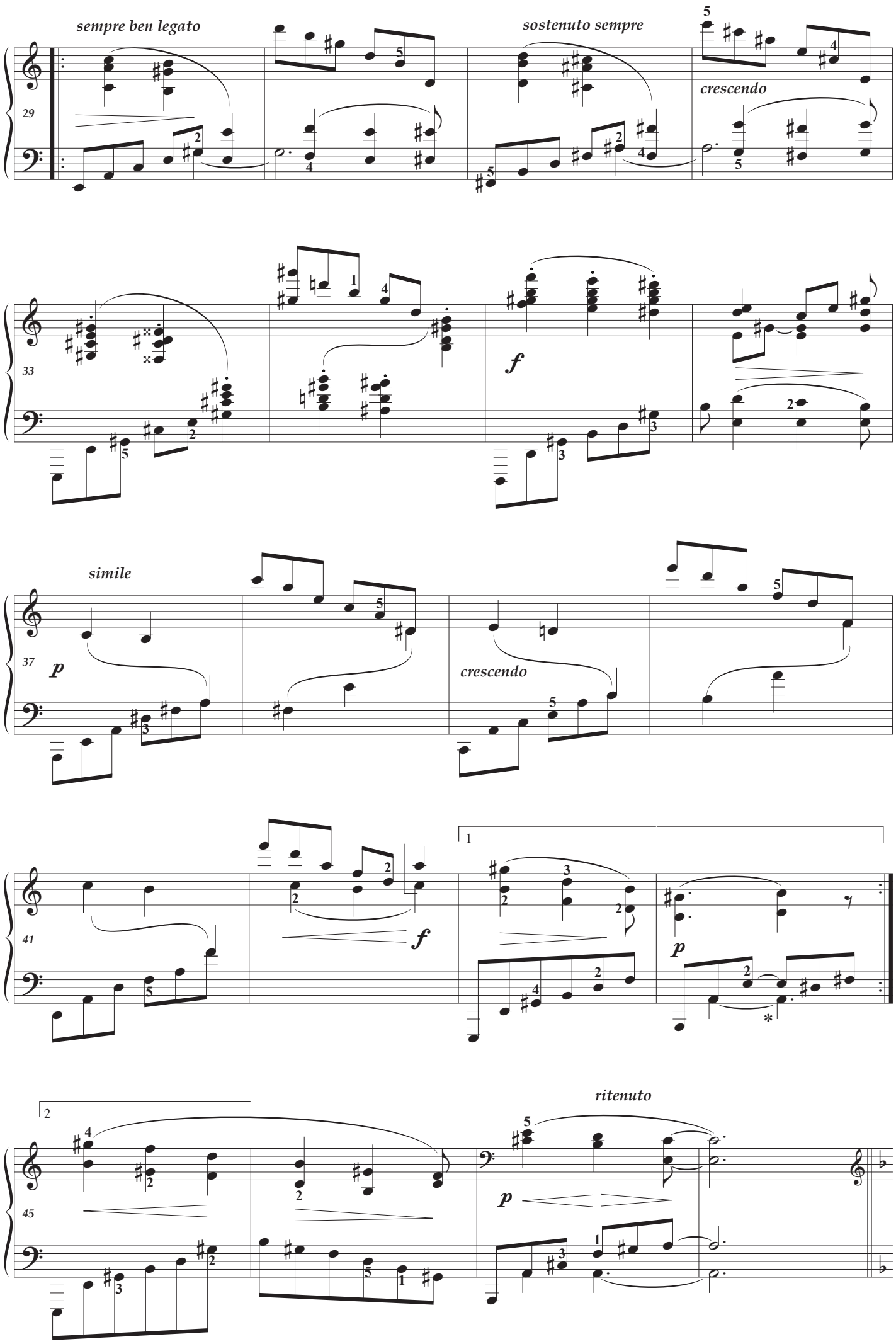

pp dolce
42

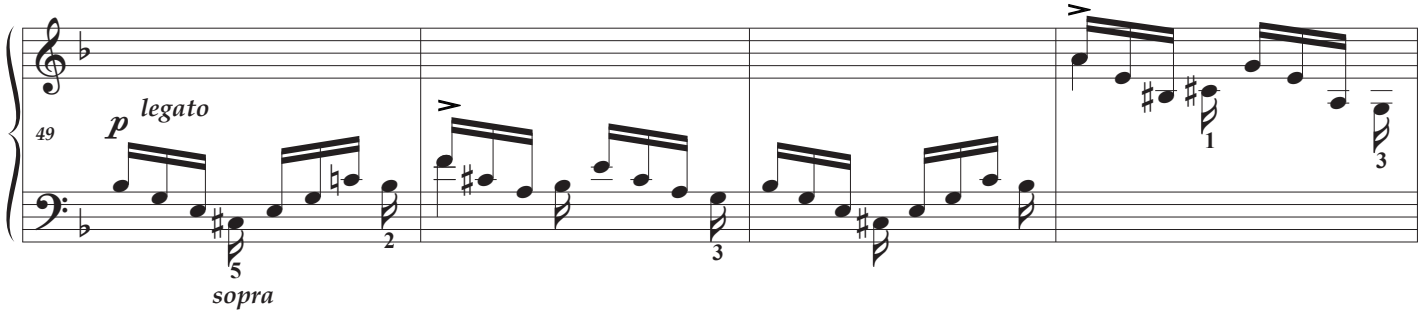

46
espressivo
crescendo
ritenuto - - - -
50
sf
diminuendo
sempre legato
sostenuto — — —
54
pp
in tempo
57
espressivo
crescendo
f
ritardando
61
p
pp

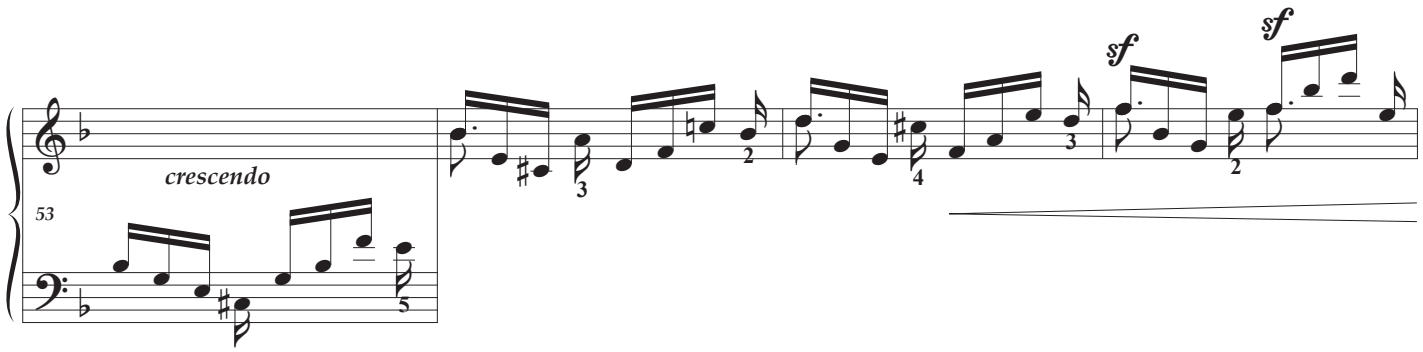
CAPRICCIO

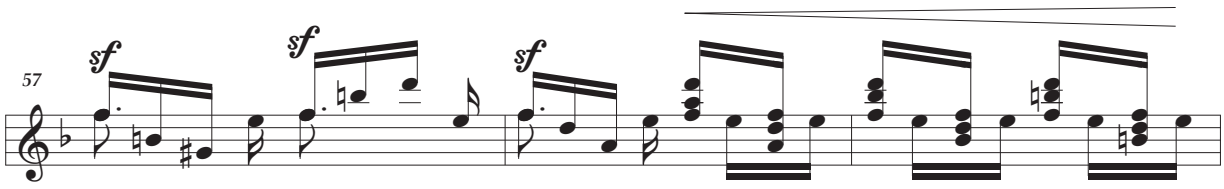


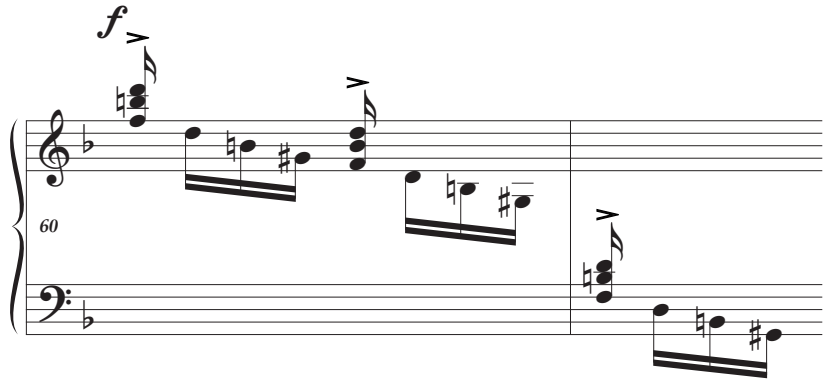

16
19
21
2
*
mp
p
p
25

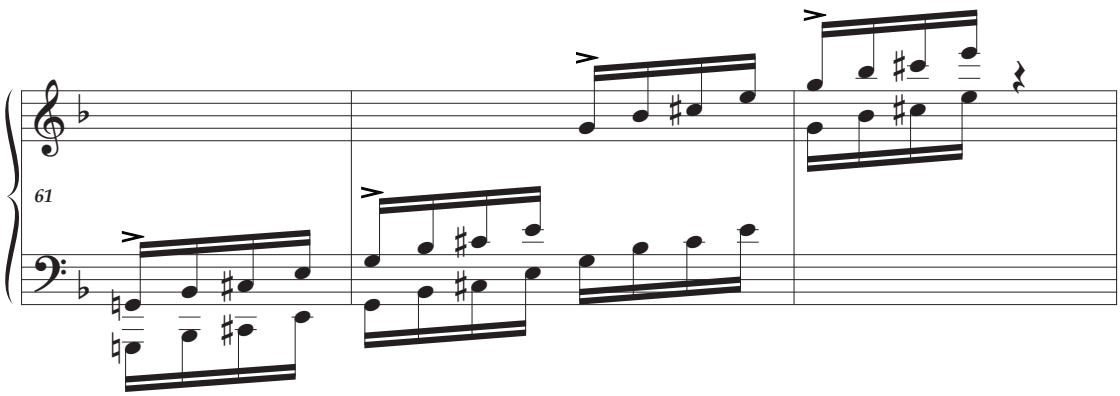

sempre ben legato
sostenuto sempre
crescendo
29
33
f
simile
37
p
crescendo
41
f
1
p
ritenuto
2
45
p

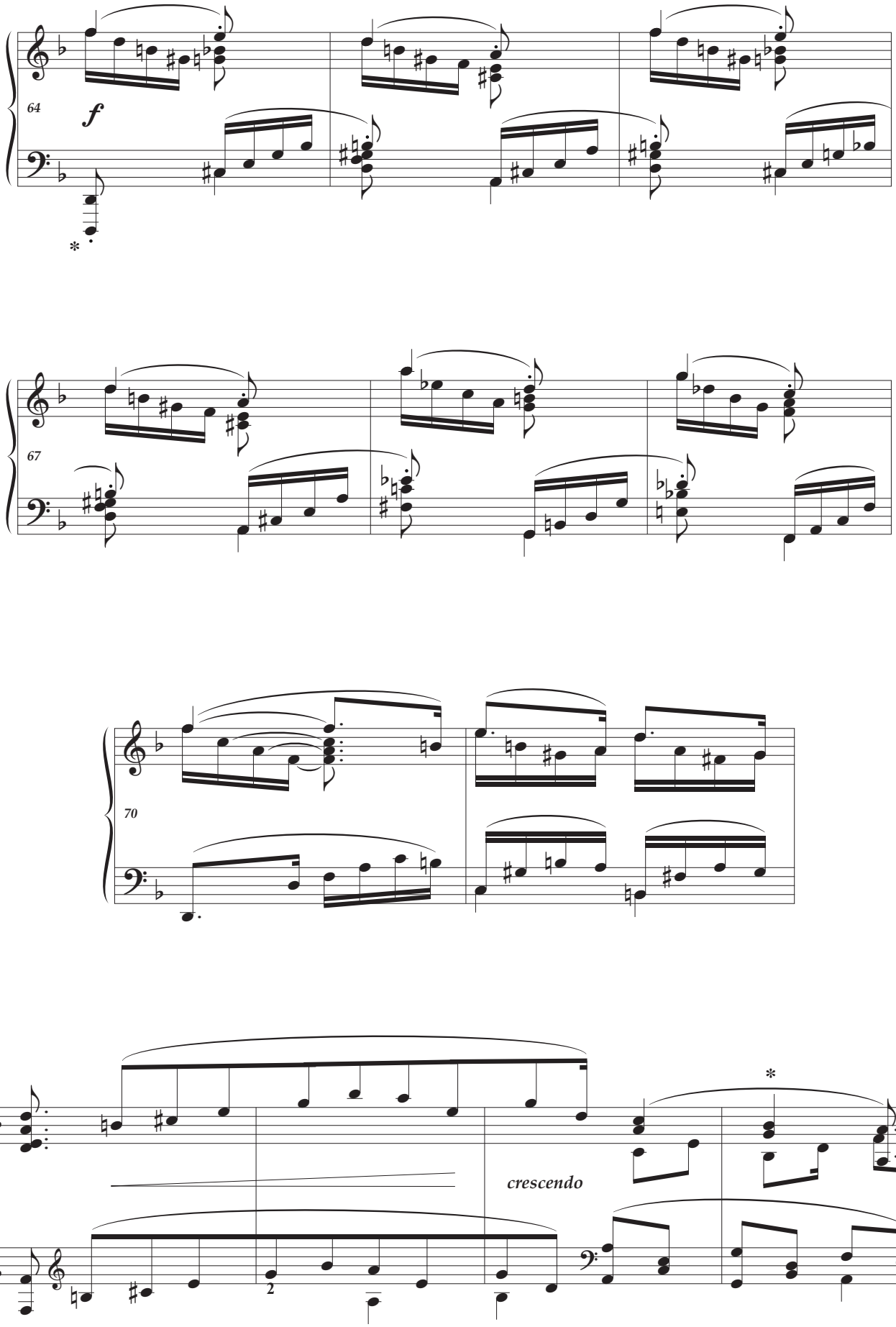

49
p legato
sopra

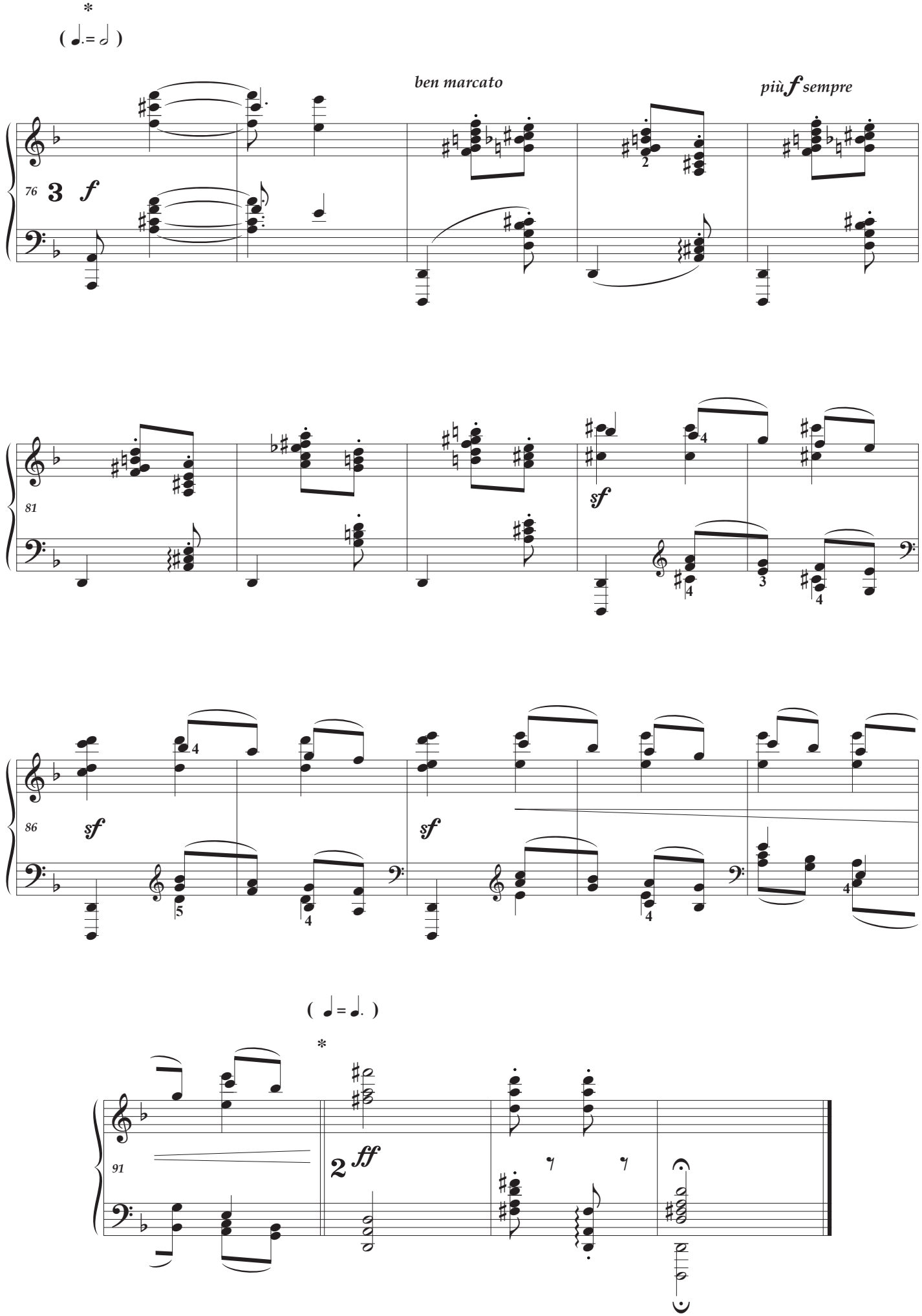

53
crescendo
sf
sf

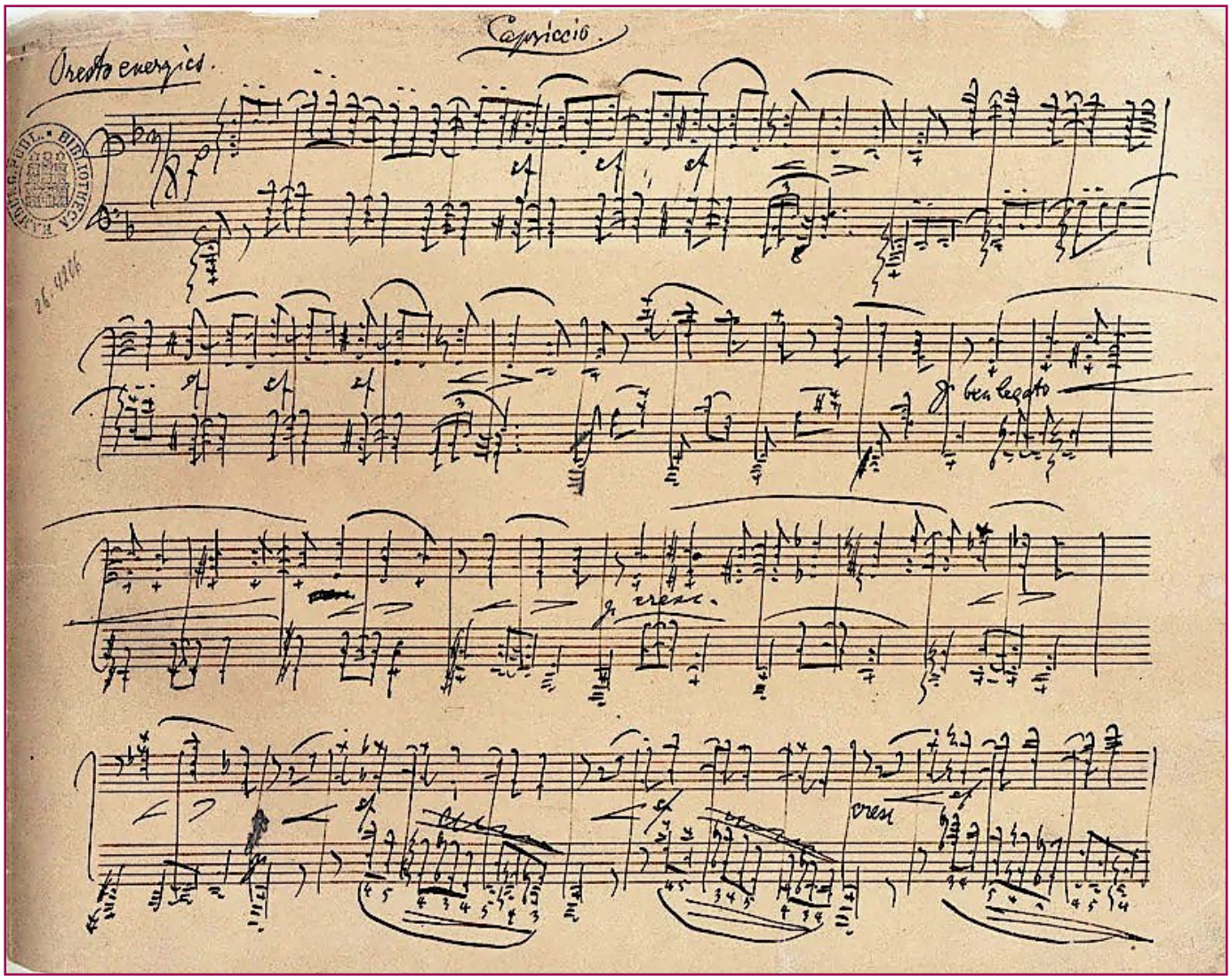

57
sf
sf
sf


60
f


61


64
f
67
70
72
crescendo
2


*
(♩.= 𝅗𝅥)
ben marcato
più f sempre
76
3
f
81
sf
86
sf
sf
(♩= ♩.)
*
91
2
ff



Capriccio N° 1 in D minor

A facsimile recently published by G. Henle Verlag, bearing the approximate date "Ischl / summer 1892," offers a particularly vivid glimpse into the working world of Johannes Brahms. Such reproductions open a rare and intimate window onto his creative process. Beyond the polished clarity of printed editions, he emerges as a meticulous craftsman: pages crowded with revisions, crossings-out, and layered annotations that reflect a constant search for structural balance and expressive depth. His handwriting, sometimes bold and decisive, sometimes hesitant and reworked, seems to register both inspiration and doubt in equal measure.

Through these facsimiles, performers and scholars can follow the evolution of musical ideas from first conception to final form. Subtle details such as phrasing marks, dynamic inflections, and even the physical spacing of notation suggest interpretative possibilities often flattened or standardised in later editions. These manuscripts feel less like relics and more like living documents, bridging the distance between composer and performer, and bringing us closer to the human act of composition itself.

For my part, when confronted with suspected errors, omissions, or ambiguities, I do consult all available sources. Yet in the end, I find that one must still rely on experience and instinct, indispensable guides in bringing this music to life.

Ray Alston *April 2026*

B R A H M S

F A N T A S I E N opus 116

published April 2026

Please send comments and error reports to
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