Claude DEBUSSY
CENTENARY EDITION 2018

Children's Corner
Petite Suite pour Piano seul

I. **Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum**
II. **Jimbo's Lullaby**
III. **Serenade for the doll**
IV. **The snow is dancing**
V. **The little shepherd**
VI. A **Cake-Walk for Tristan**

The Little Minstrel

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Claude DEBUSSY 1862 - 1918

CHILDREN'S CORNER

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"À ma chère petite Chouchou, avec les tendres excuses de son Père pour ce qui va suivre." C. D.

"To my beloved little Chouchou, with tender apologies from her father for what follows,"

It is rare to encounter a dedicatee aged just three years and this *Petite Suite* was created for his daughter Emma-Claude or rather '*Chouchou*'*, Debussy's only child suitably doted upon by her 43 year-old father. Although it was probably too soon to appreciate its cherished dedication for some time, "*in* Children's Corner we find *elegant and supervised games, discreet archness, the charming gestures of a very young girl, a Parisian child already a coquette and a woman-to-be, and whose high spirits and imagination are discouraged by a strict nanny"* — Cortot.

Debussy was an ardent anglophile, although apparently with a limited command of English. Unlike a mere tourist he extended his passion to reading English novels (he loved Dickens) taking strong tea for breakfast and enjoying a glass of whisky. He also hired an English governess — Miss Gibbs — as nanny for his daughter, which might explain why most of these pieces were given titles in English.

The Franco-American pianist, E. Robert Schmitz enthusiastically wrote : *When Chouchou was still very young, her father would bring some delightful little toys. But then he would ponder over their real significance to the child; it was not merely toys he wanted to give Chouchou, but an incentive to Joy! And so he conceived that she could really derive joy from the toys when induced to make the little elephant walk and go to sleep, when she would have a serenade to play to her doll, when she would hear the little shepherd play some tunes on his reed and dance, and when she would make the little black puppet dance a cake-walk, during which he would take those sublime*

1915 — picnic in a pine forest near Arcachon with his daughter *Chouchou* aged 10

and grotesque postures that only the greatest dancers, or articulated toys can perform. So came the inspiration to write the finest music to complete the make-believe universe of his beloved Chouchou; a music that would inspire her to play, to imbue her playthings with joy and life; it was a real labour of love, binding his consummate skill to the miniature music for his adored child… a gift of love and humility.

Composed between 1906 and 1908, the suite started life with *Serenade for the Doll,* originally promised to a former colleague, Octavie Carrier-Belleuse who was preparing a teaching method. The entire suite was first published by Durand in July 1908. As Cortot stated : "*There is no need to point out how well the pianistic artistry of "Children's Corner" corresponds to its subject. With minimum virtuosity and an exquisite attention to nuance and colour, we discover fragile perfection equal to the finesse of its conception.*"

Somewhat similar in conception to Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and Tchaikovsky's *Album for the Young*, it is easier to appreciate these pieces in retrospect from adulthood, reflecting the wonder of childhood and Chouchou's early years. As Hsing-Yin Ko perceptively observes : "Debussy's colourful writing is of a sparse texture and an innocent, spontaneous quality which stylistically embraces the genre to perfection."

The work was very successful and about 20,000 copies were printed in Debussy's lifetime. The first performance was given on 18th December 1908 at *le Cercle Musical* de *Paris* by Harold Bauer, a pianist appropriately from England.

The Little Minstrel, similar to and much easier to play than the *Cake-Walk* appeared in 1909, is included in this edition; it was commissioned for a teaching method, this time by Théodore Lack.

* *Chou — une expression de tendresse* — a familiar name for a favourite child. Her mother Emma Bardac was an accomplished soprano and it is reported that her daughter sang with depth and maturity. She died tragically aged just 14 while recovering from diphtheria, only a year after her father succumbed to a debilitating cancer.

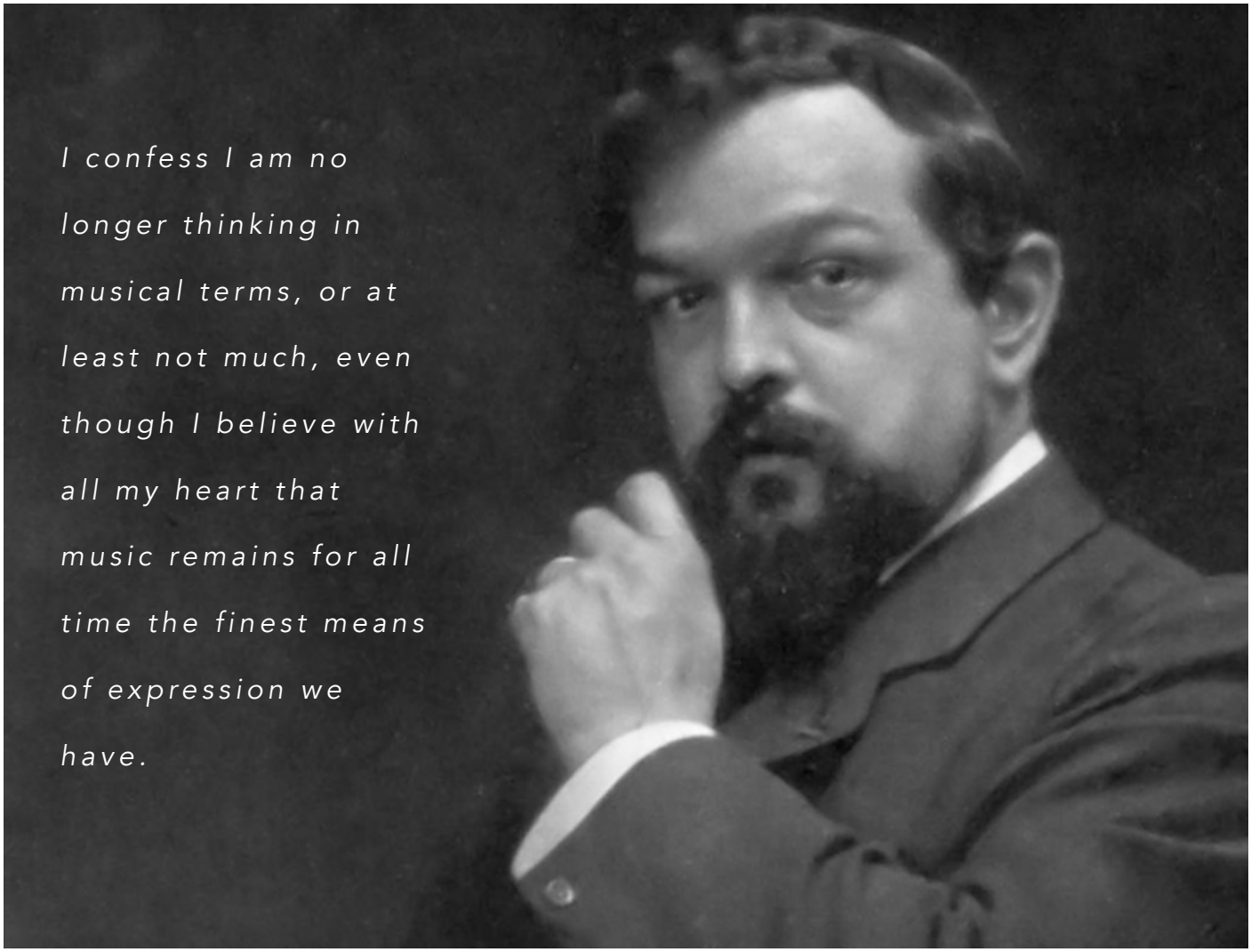
Piano Practical Editions

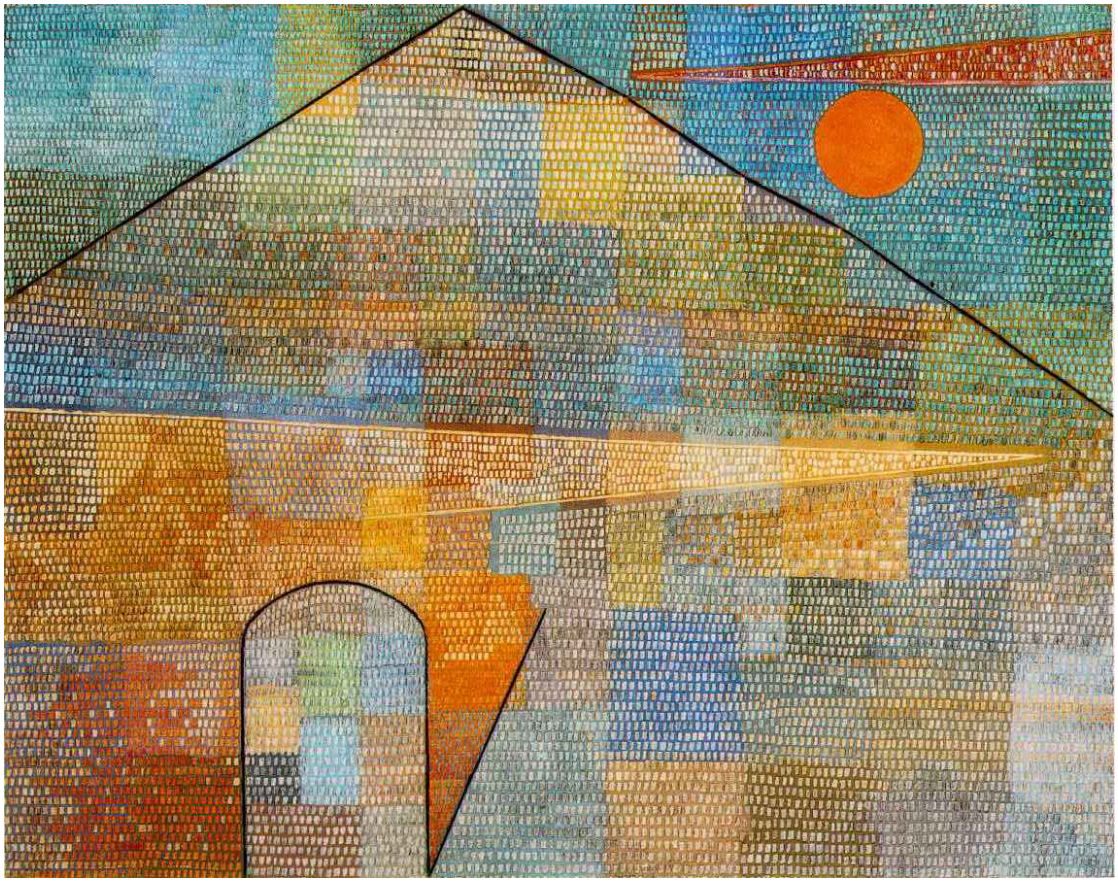
"I believe more and more that music in its essence is not a thing that can be poured into a rigorous and traditional mould. It is made of colours and rhythmical beats. Music is a mysterious mathematical process whose elements partake of infinity, capturing mysterious relations between nature and the imagination".
— **Claude Debussy**

The strong influence of French piano music is surely identified with Chopin and Debussy who share a unique position as masters of an exceptional instrument; through an extensive affinity with the sustaining pedal they each created a personal language conceived to communicate their work with the greatest authenticity.

In addition to some suggested fingering, the introductions contain comments and a vocabulary. The composer has made a few rather charming mistakes in English which have been retained for sentimental reasons. Redistribution between the hands comes under close scrutiny to make certain passages easier or more persuasive. Debussy rarely uses the pedal sign preferring extended ties or long bass notes, impossible to hold otherwise.

Ray Alston March 2023





Paul Klee Ad Parnassum 1932

I. Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum

Oh how we have all suffered the youthful torment of practising Pischna, Hanon, Czerny or Clementi exercises! This particular version of the dreaded Doctor refers neither to Clementi nor Czerny, but proves to be a a very charming and inventive opening piece for this exquisite suite, paving the way for a delightful world of fantasy, centred around Chouchou's toy collection.

The tempo indication was missing from the first proof, and Debussy wrote with tongue in cheek to his publisher: "*Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* is a sort of hygienic and progressive gymnastic exercise; it should therefore be played every morning, before breakfast, beginning at *modéré* and working up to *animé*." The dedicatee was once heard to say, "Daddy wants me to play the piano, but he forbids me to make any noise".

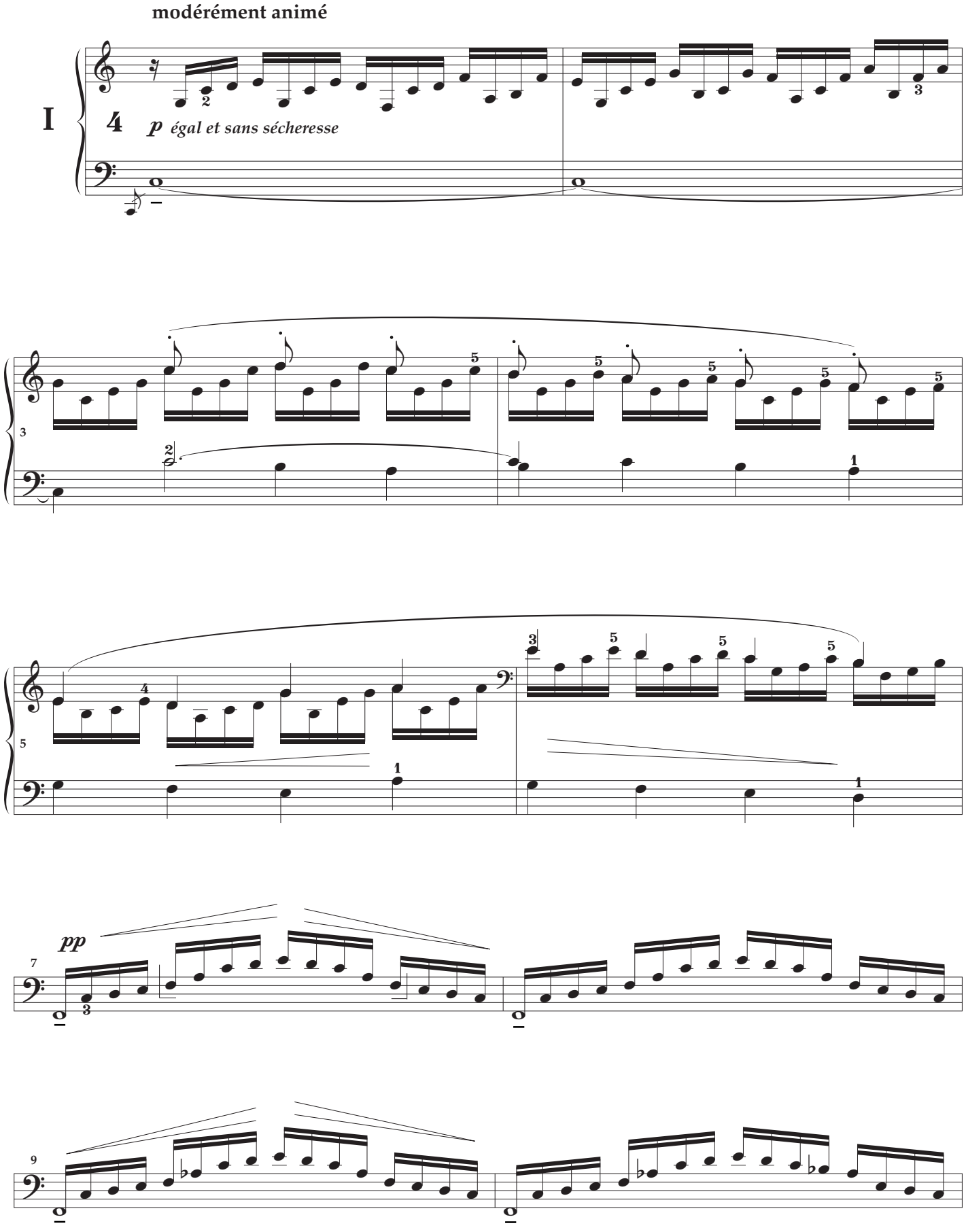
Cortot writes : "From the very first bars, there is the charming vision of the child at the piano, and the slightly humorous tale of her frank, unequal and resigned struggle against the monotonous complications of the perfidious Muzio Clementi. What boredom, what unfathomable discouragement or what invincible need of distraction by a ray of sunlight, by a passing fly, by a rose shedding its petals, is revealed by those brusque stops, those sulky slowings down. And towards the end, what an irresistible bound to movement, to games, to liberty at last recovered !"

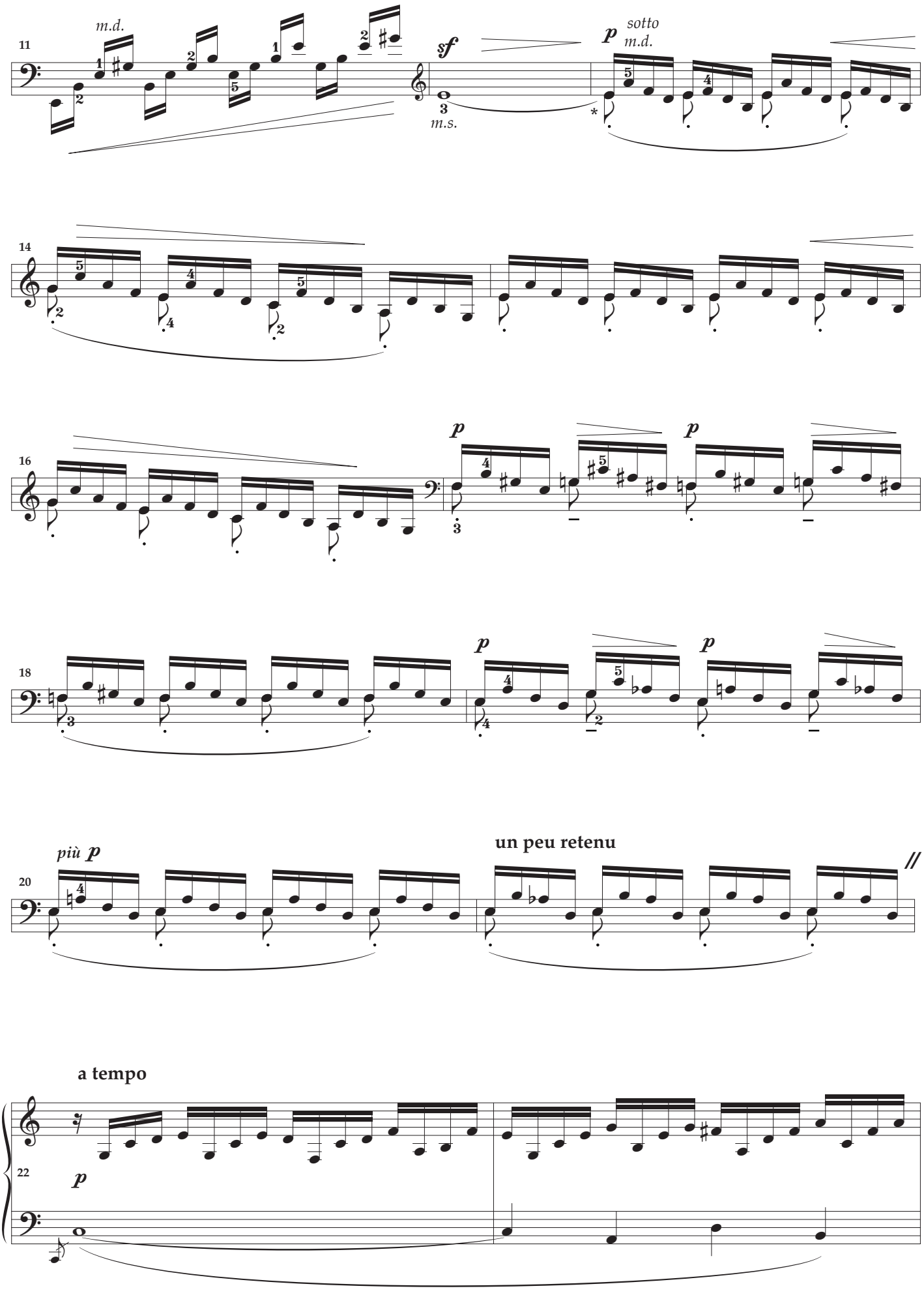
Notes

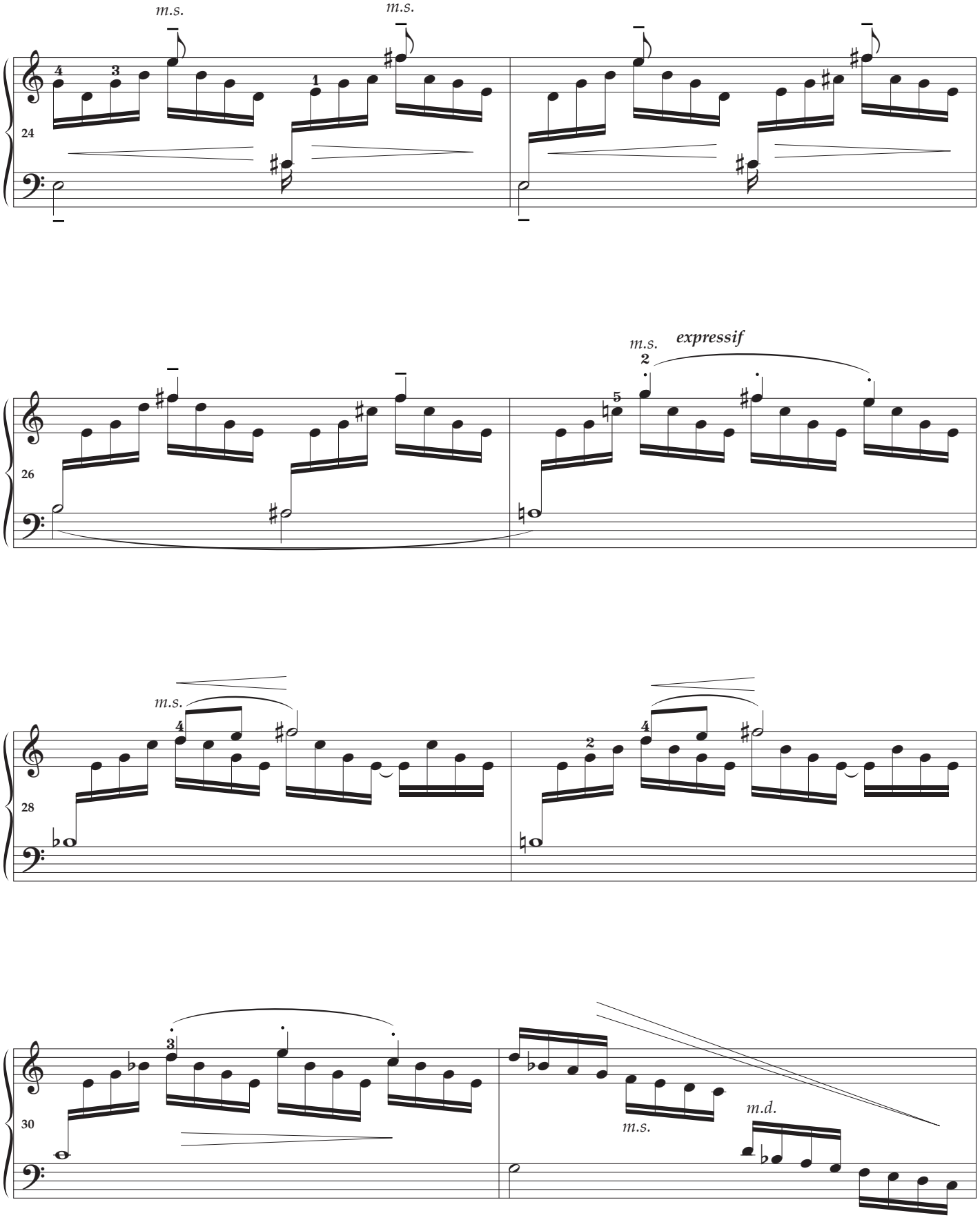
- phrasing, dynamics and accentuation are not a strict copy of any edition
- **13** most pianists, including the composer, tie the E. However there is a curious *portamento* dot and I believe it is more convincing untied (as **15**)
- **33** & **37** the *sostenuto* pedal suggestion is entirely editorial
- **57** editorial time-signature modification

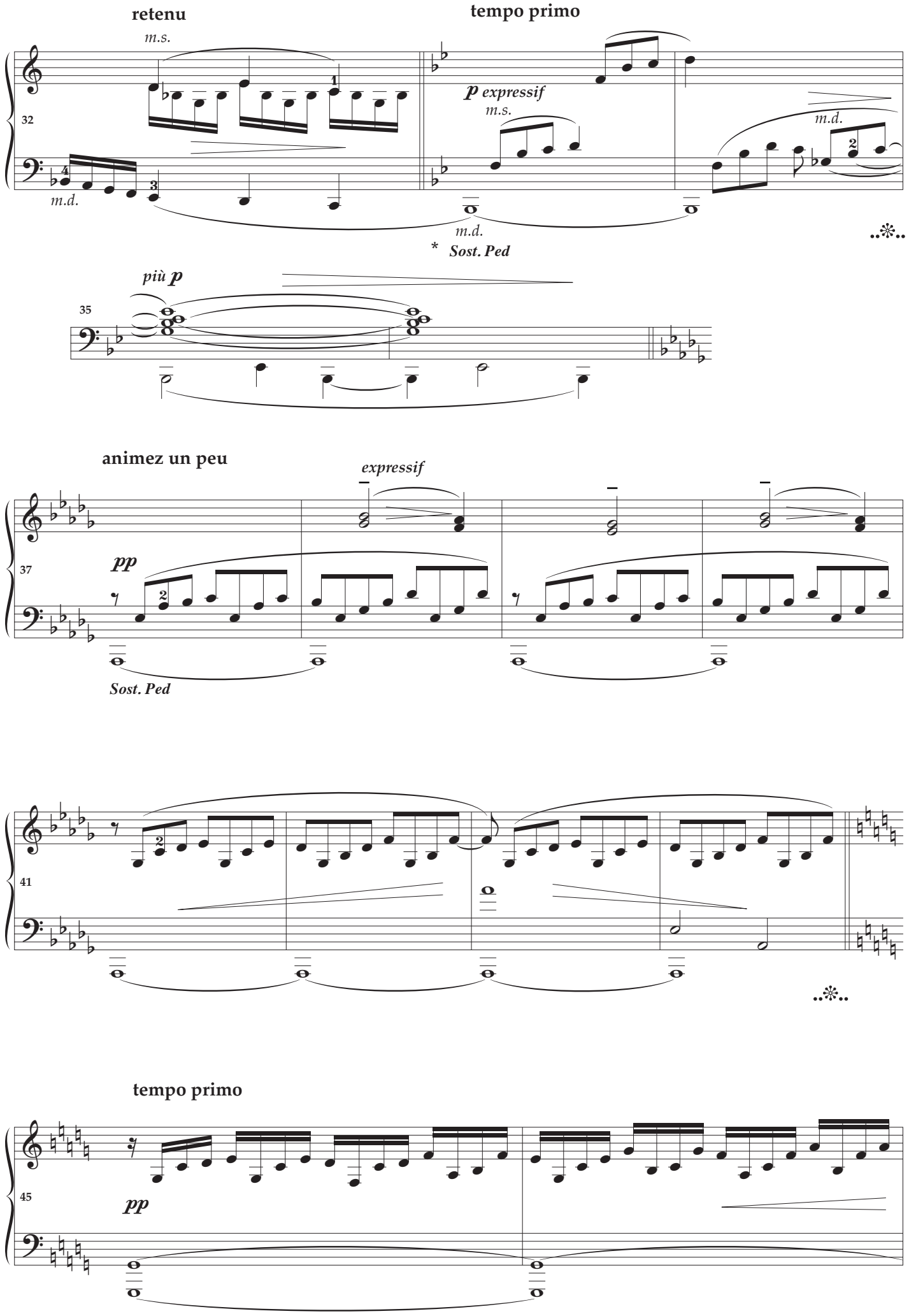
modérément animé	*fairly animated*
égal	*uniform*
sans sécheresse	*without monotony*
un peu retenu	*a little slower*
animez un peu	*a little more animated*
en animant peu à peu	*gradually more animated*
très animé	*very lively*

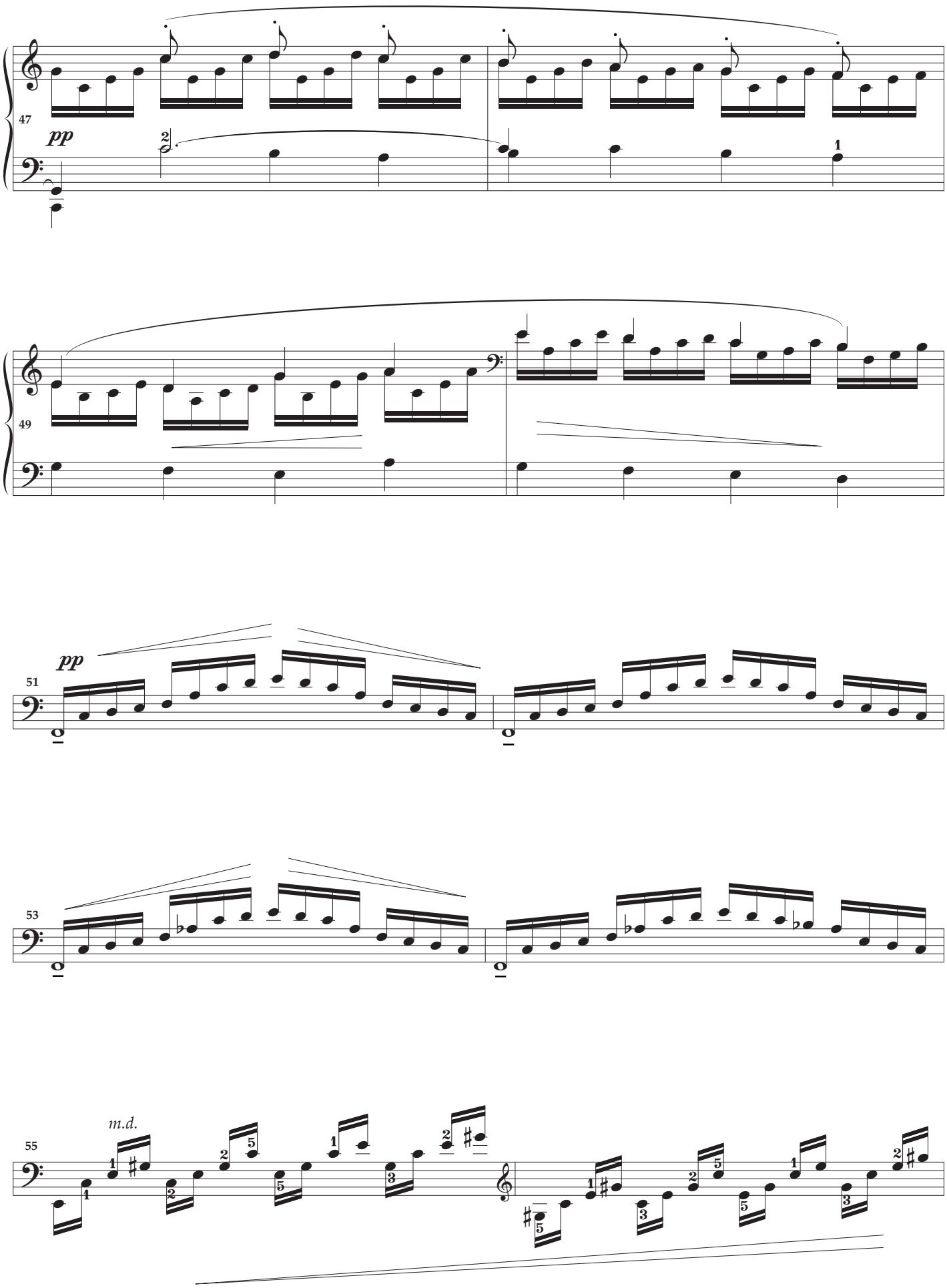
Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum



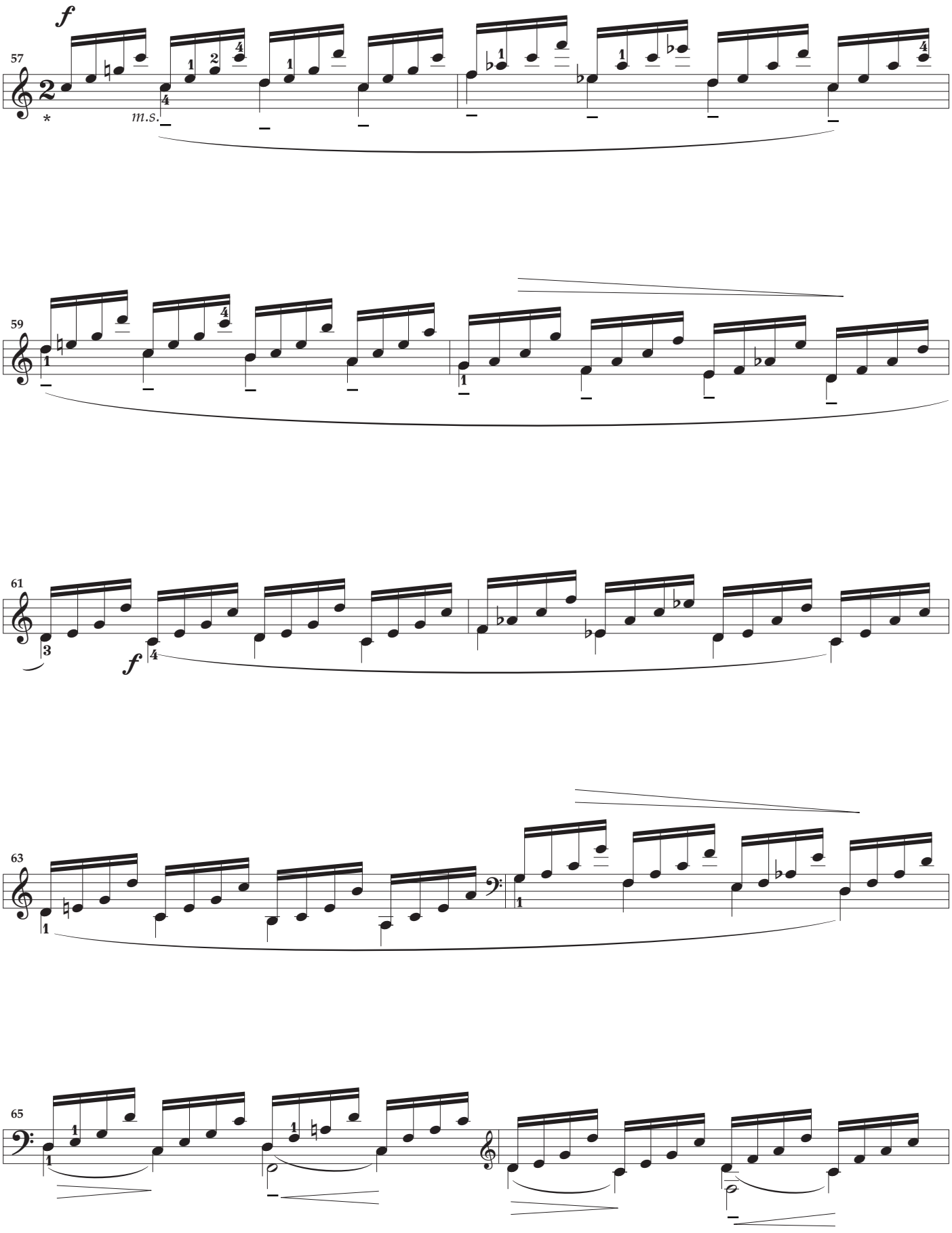

11
m.d.
sf
m.s.
p
sotto
m.d.
14
16
p
p
18
p
p
20
più p
un peu retenu
//
a tempo
22
p

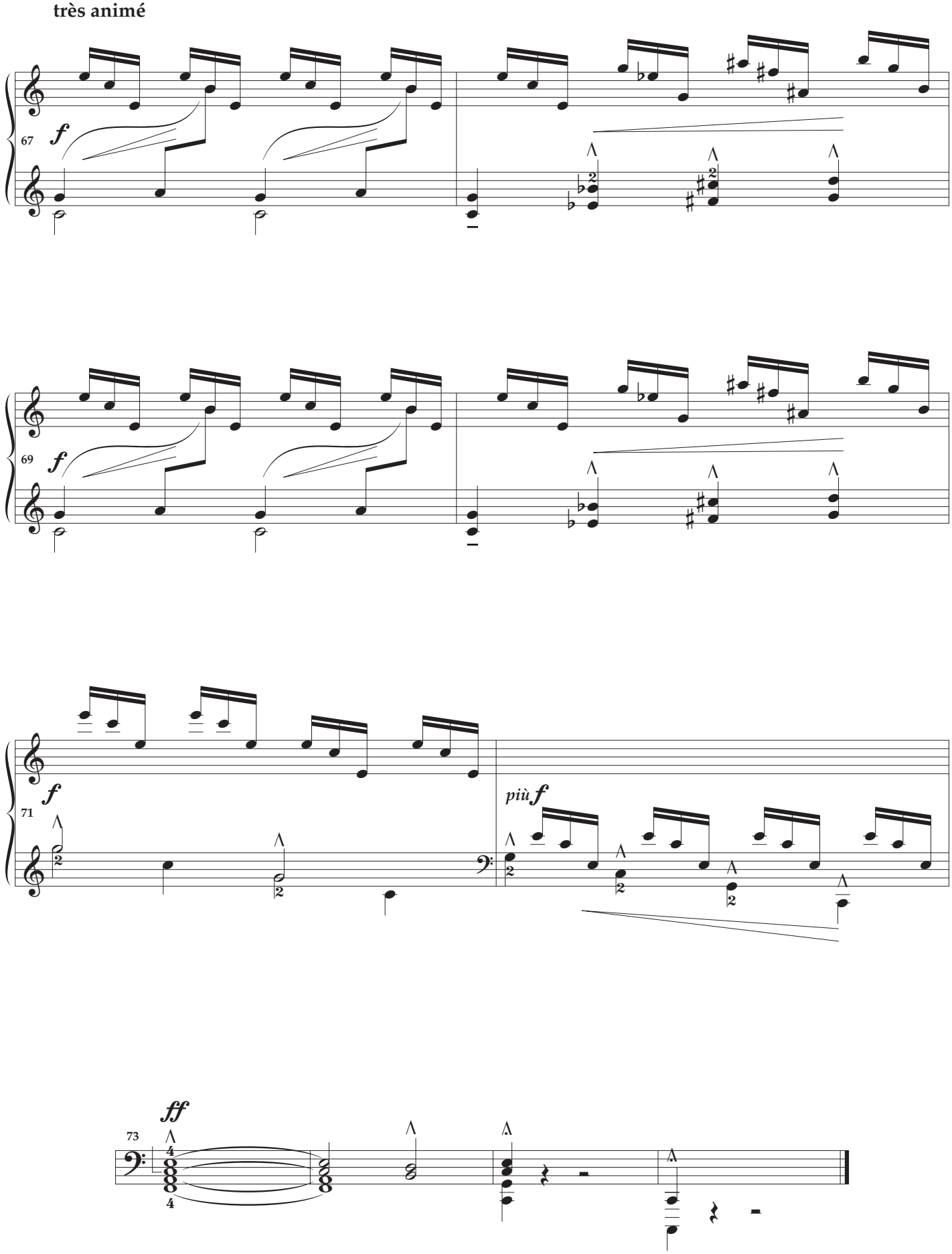

m.s.
m.s.
24
m.s.
expressif
26
m.s.
28
30
m.s.
m.d.


retenu
m.s.
32
m.d.
tempo primo
p expressif
m.s.
m.d.
m.d.
* Sost. Ped
più p
35
animez un peu
expressif
37
pp
Sost. Ped
41
tempo primo
45
pp


47
pp
49
51
pp
53
55
m.d.

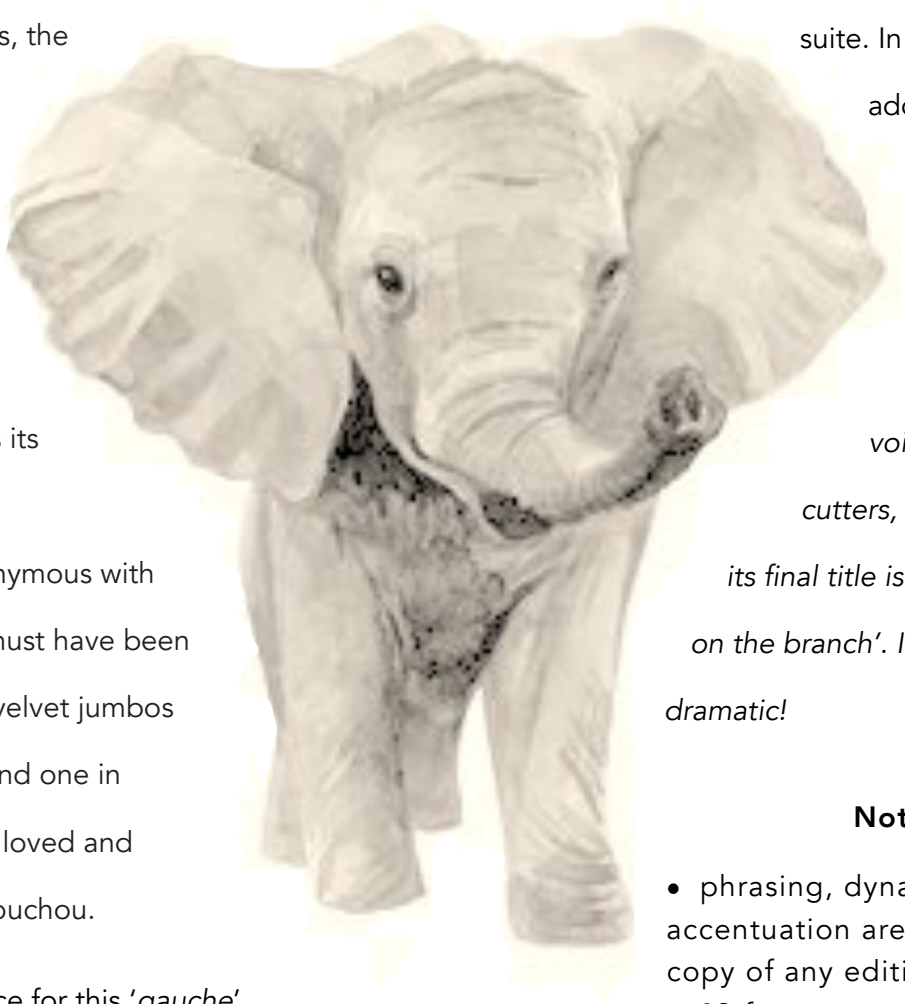
en animant peu à peu




très animé
67
f
69
f
71
f
più f
73
ff

2. Jimbo's Lullaby

A baby African elephant, born just about a year before the composer, indirectly became the inspiration for this "clumsy" lullaby. *'Jambo' in* Swahili means 'hello', and so he was named, this jumbo-sized beast imported from the Abyssinian savannah to the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris, the first to set foot in Europe. Thus for more than a hundred years its nickname has become synonymous with huge. There must have been thousands of velvet jumbos at that time, and one in particular was loved and nursed by Chouchou.



Debussy's piece for this '*gauche*' animal with gorgeous large ears, features some surprisingly delicate counterpoint, a French lullaby "*dodo l'enfant do*" and jungle dreams, stories around which the composer must have often weaved for his beloved daughter. As Cortot observed : "A very young *Scheherazade* who pursues in waking moments that inner prodigious dream of childhood, more intense than reality, more captivating than fairy stories. Then is it the child or the puppet that falls asleep? Perhaps both."

The lullaby shows much affection and humour — attributes that can be found throughout the suite. In 1911 Debussy added: *"Chouchou has just terminated her first symphonic poem for voice, two paper cutters, piano ad libitum; its final title is: 'The Elephant on the branch'. It's extremely dramatic!*

Notes

- phrasing, dynamics and accentuation are not a strict copy of any edition
- **60** for greater clarity silently replay the thumb and 2nd finger

doux	*dolce*
un peu gauche	*a little awkward*
un peu en dehors	*a little in relief*
un peu plus mouvementé	*slightly faster tempo*
marqué	*marked*
retenu	*slower*
sans retarder	*without slowing down*

Jumbo's Lullaby

assez modéré

II *p* *doux et un peu gauche* *pp*

m.d.

5

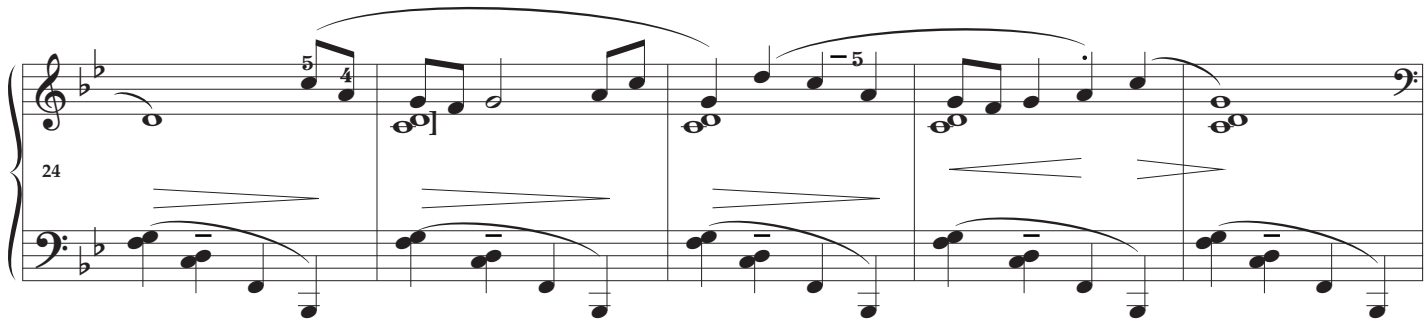
9 *pp* *m.d.* *un peu en dehors*

m.d.

15 *p* *pp* *pp*

un peu en dehors

19 *pp* *pp*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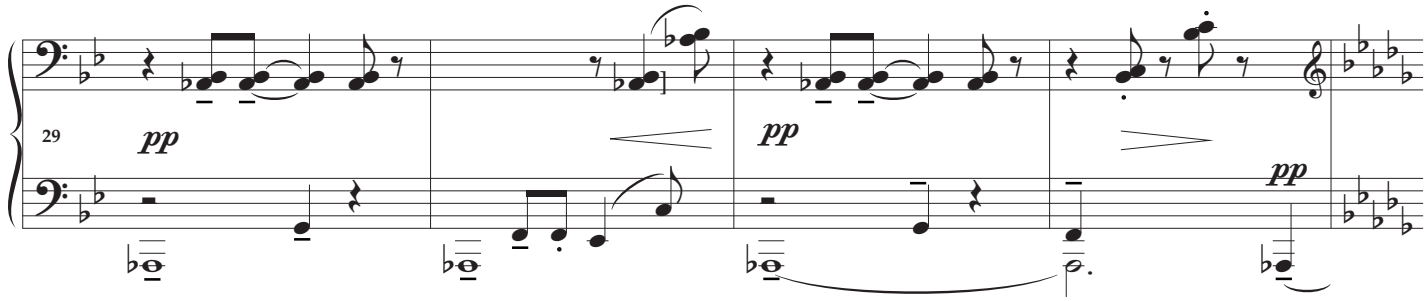
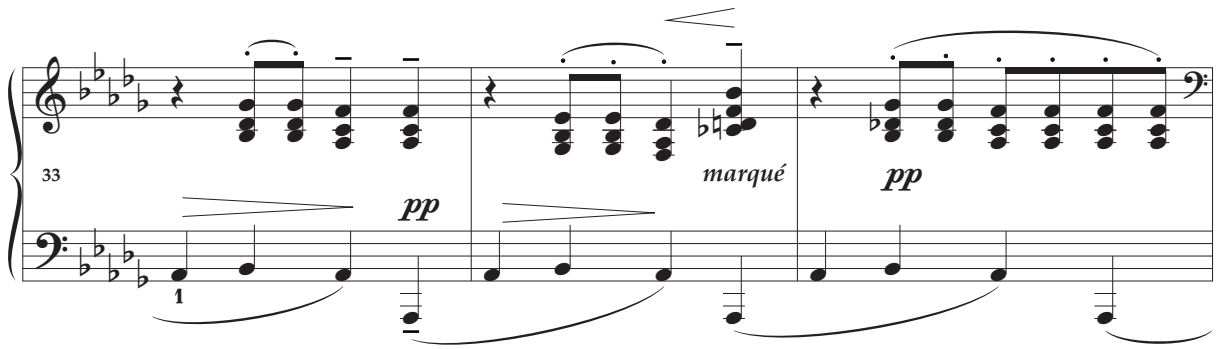
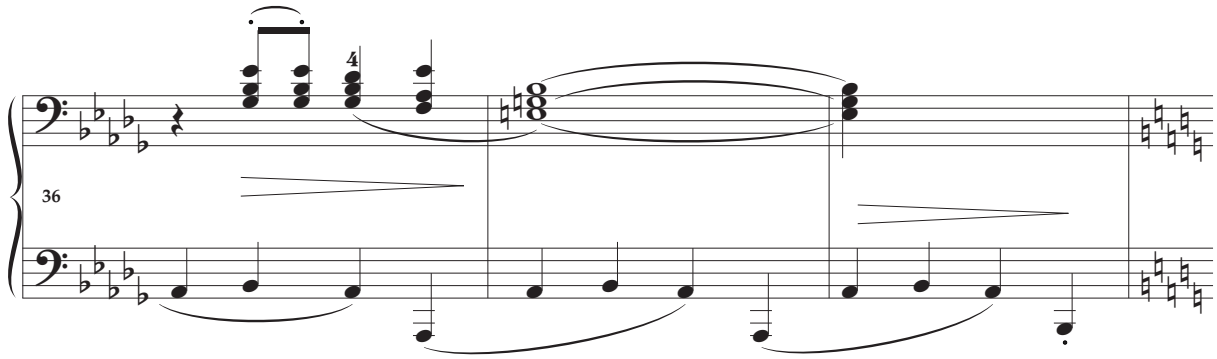
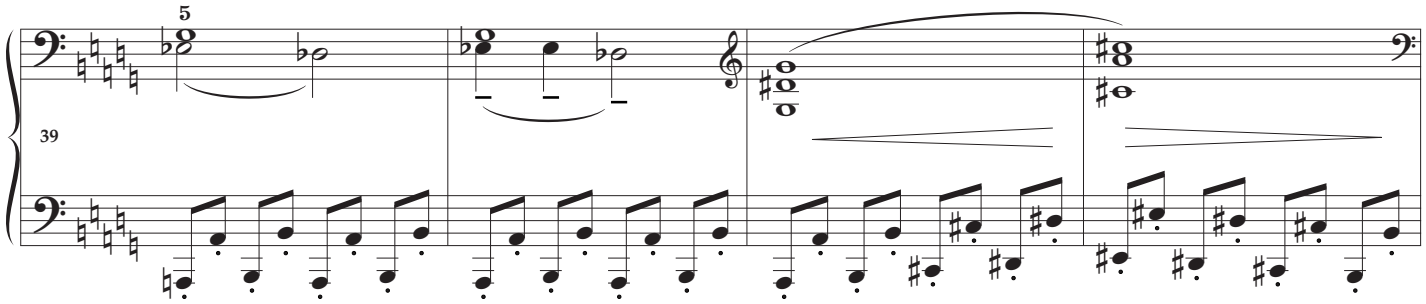
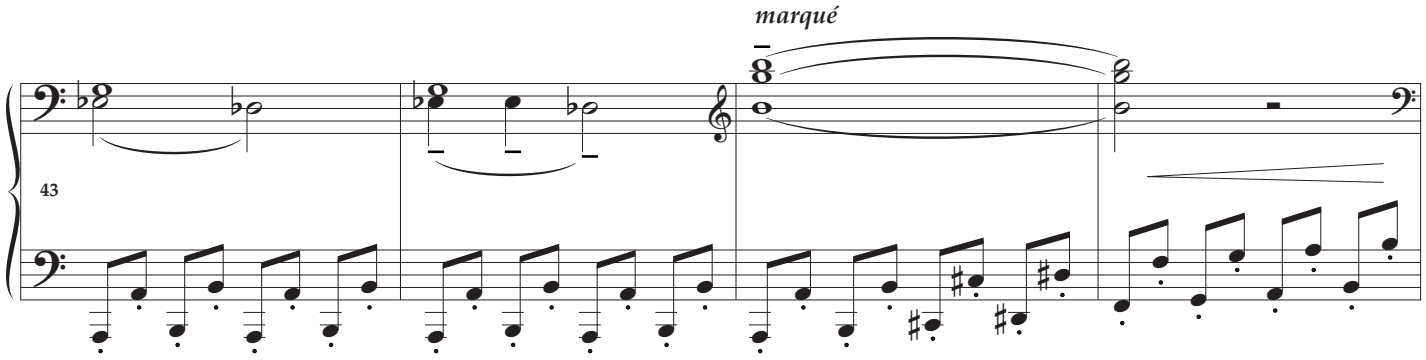

29
pp
pp
pp

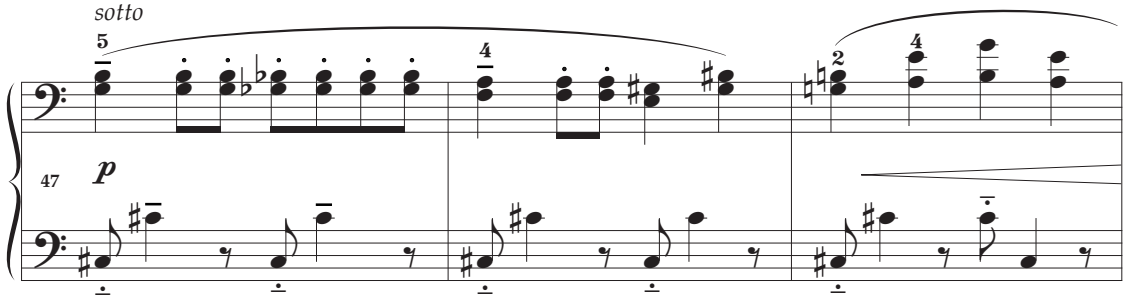

33
pp
marqué
pp

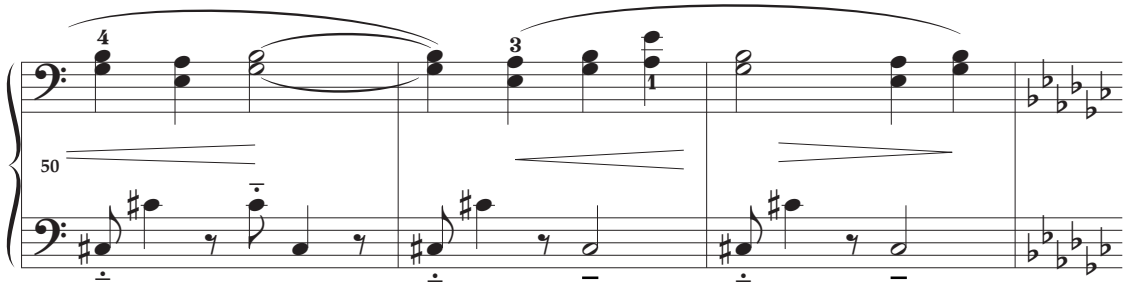

36

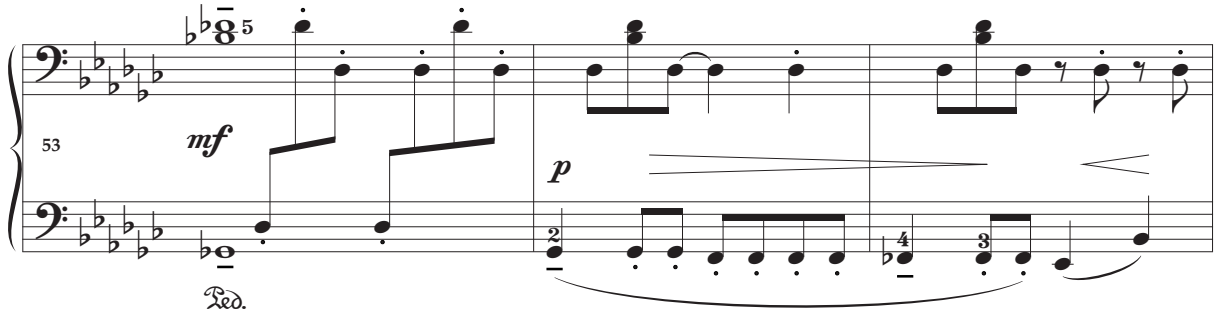
un peu plus mouvementé

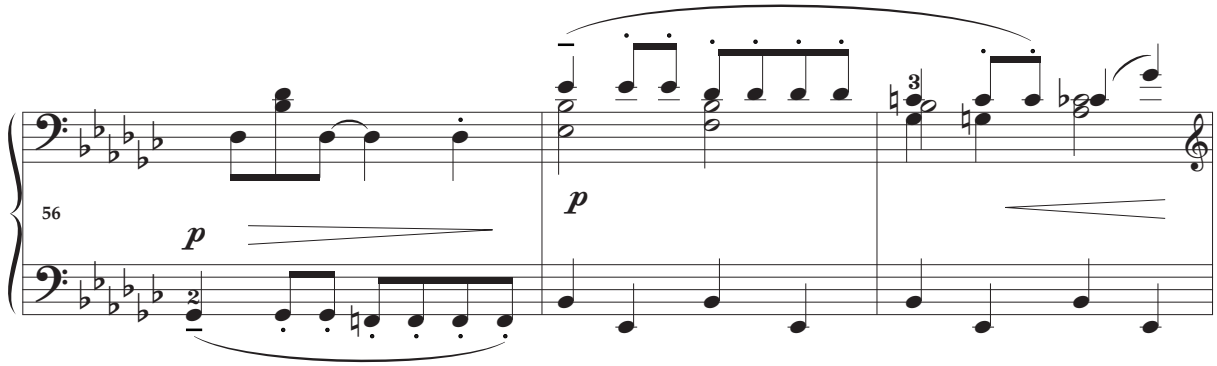




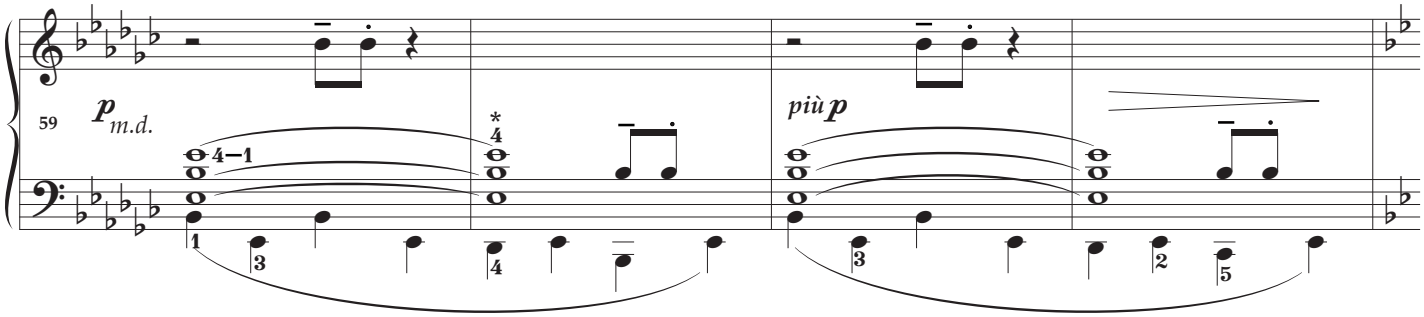




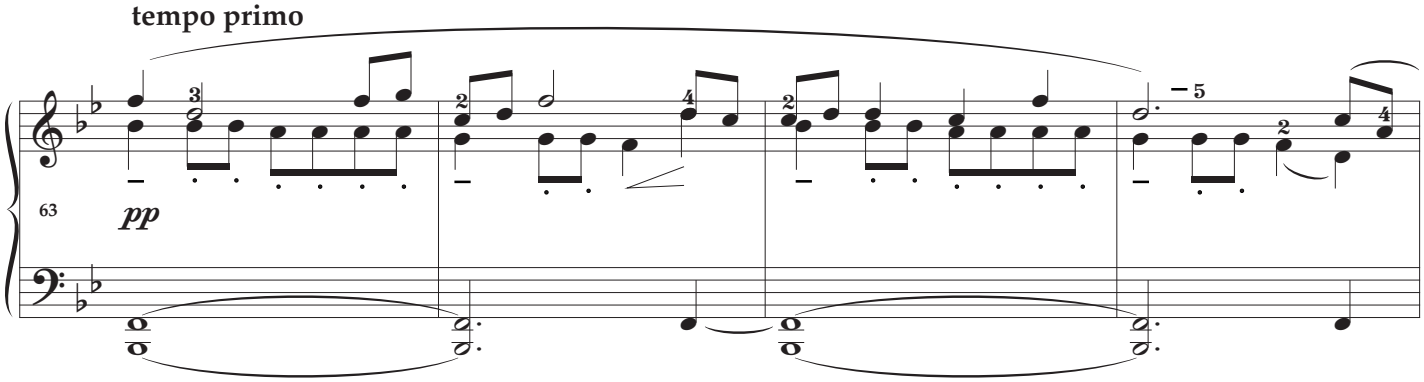


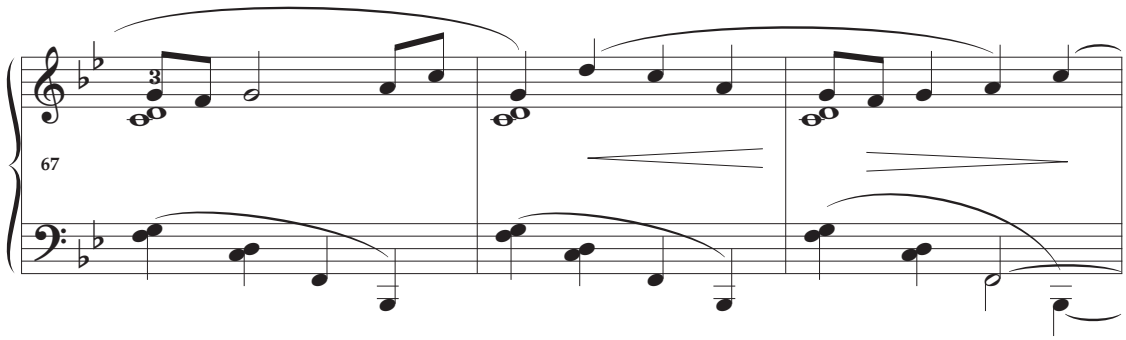


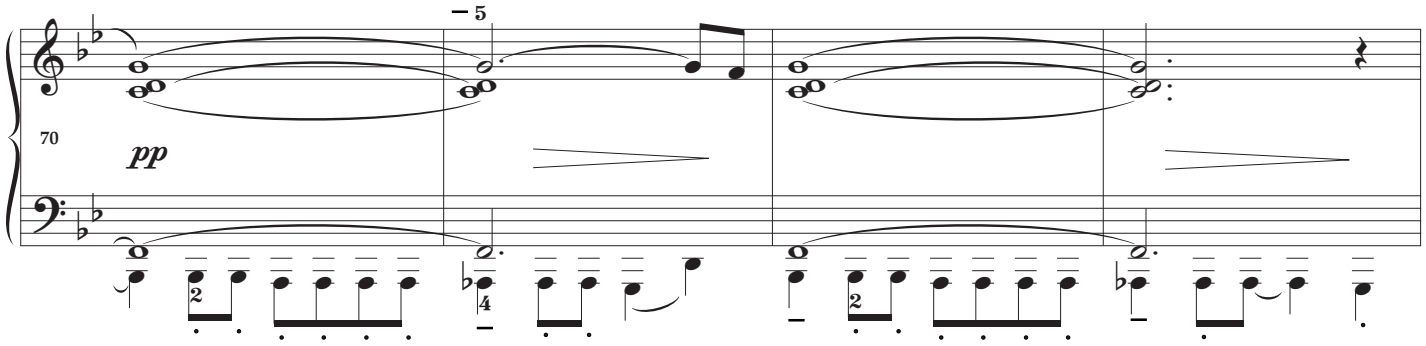
retenu

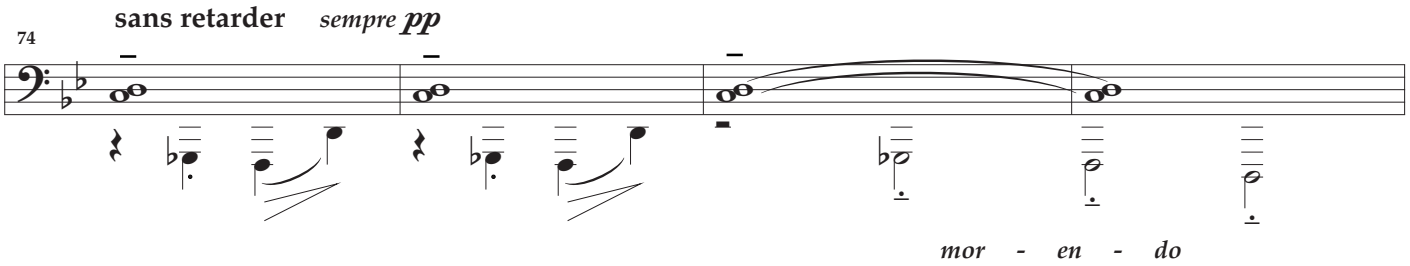


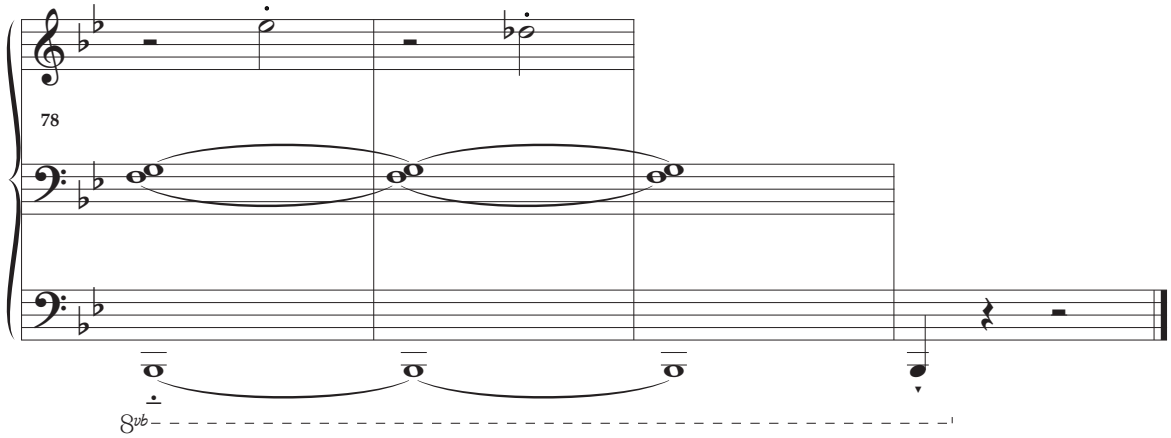
tempo primo




67
3


70
pp
5
2
4
2


74
sans retarder
sempre pp
mor - en - do


78
8vb

3. Serenade of the Doll *

My second favourite from the suite and another of Chouchou's toys, a porcelain doll, possibly oriental, inspired this quaint composition. But who is her suitor? Serenades should be accompanied with plucked instruments and in this eastern scenario perhaps a *liuquin*** will excite the imagination of our young dedicatee.

Rather than a true vocal flirtation we have a descriptive scene in which chouchou's doll takes centre stage, listening to a quirky pentatonic theme in fourths combining simplicity and sophistication. The doll dances and at **65** the suitor, a soldier, joins in with a military snare drum episode in D flat. In truth much of this delightful music is neither oriental nor pentatonic.

The syncopated accompaniment and whimsical metre (noted with dotted barlines in this edition) reflect sublime and grotesque postures typical of articulated toys.

It has been suggested that this light and graceful miniature was possibly a trial run for *la Sérénade Interrompue*, from the first book of preludes composed in the following year.

"Il faudra mettre la pédale sourde pendant toute la durée de ce morceau, même aux endroits marqués d'un ***f*** *"* — Debussy instructs that the entire piece should be played with the soft pedal, although I suggest ignoring this when practising as it will likely ruin a grand piano.

* Intended to form part of a colleague's piano method, *Serenade of the Doll*, was the first piece of the suite to be composed, when Chouchou was a mere baby of 4 months in 1906.

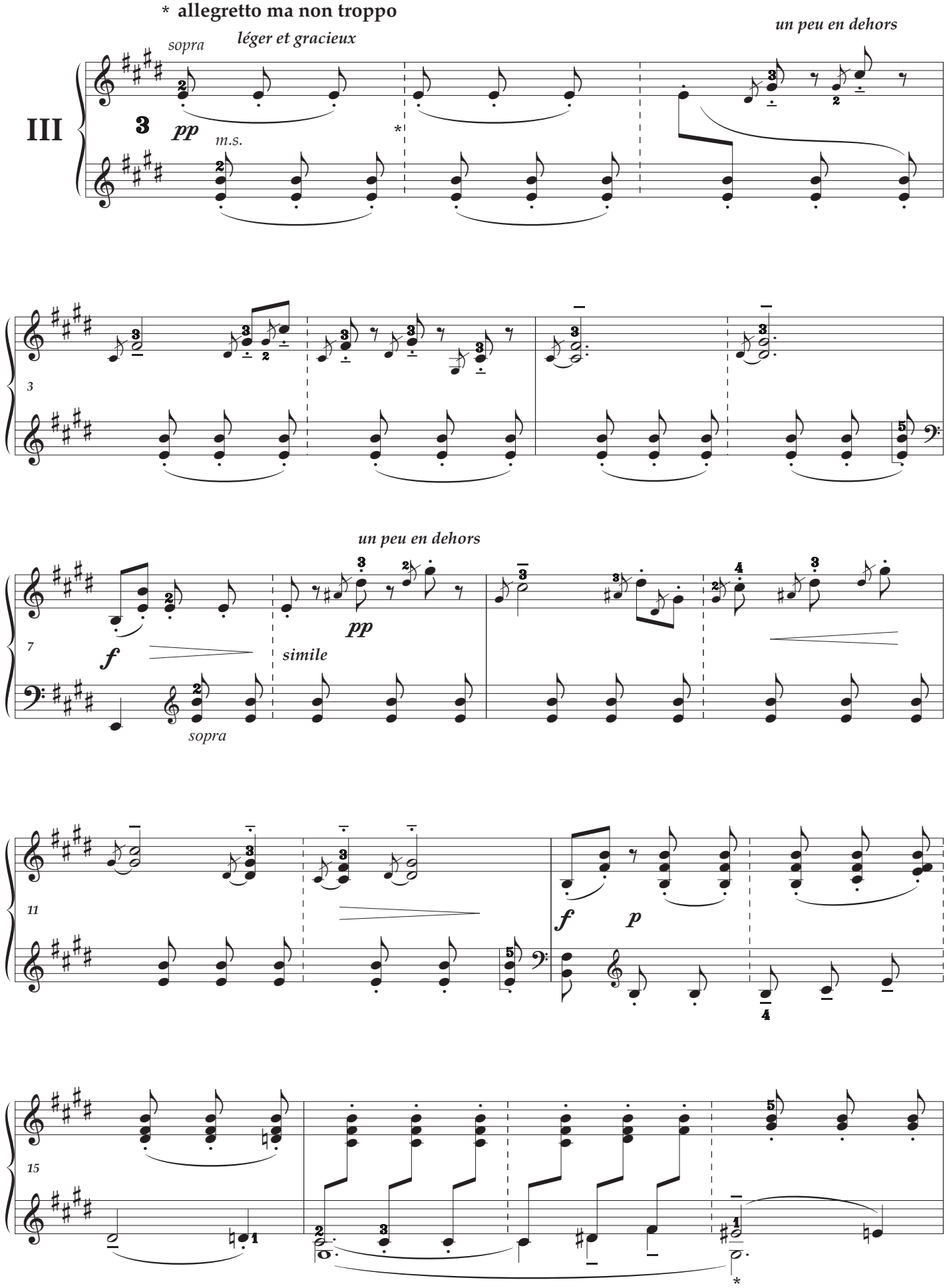
** Chinese mandolin

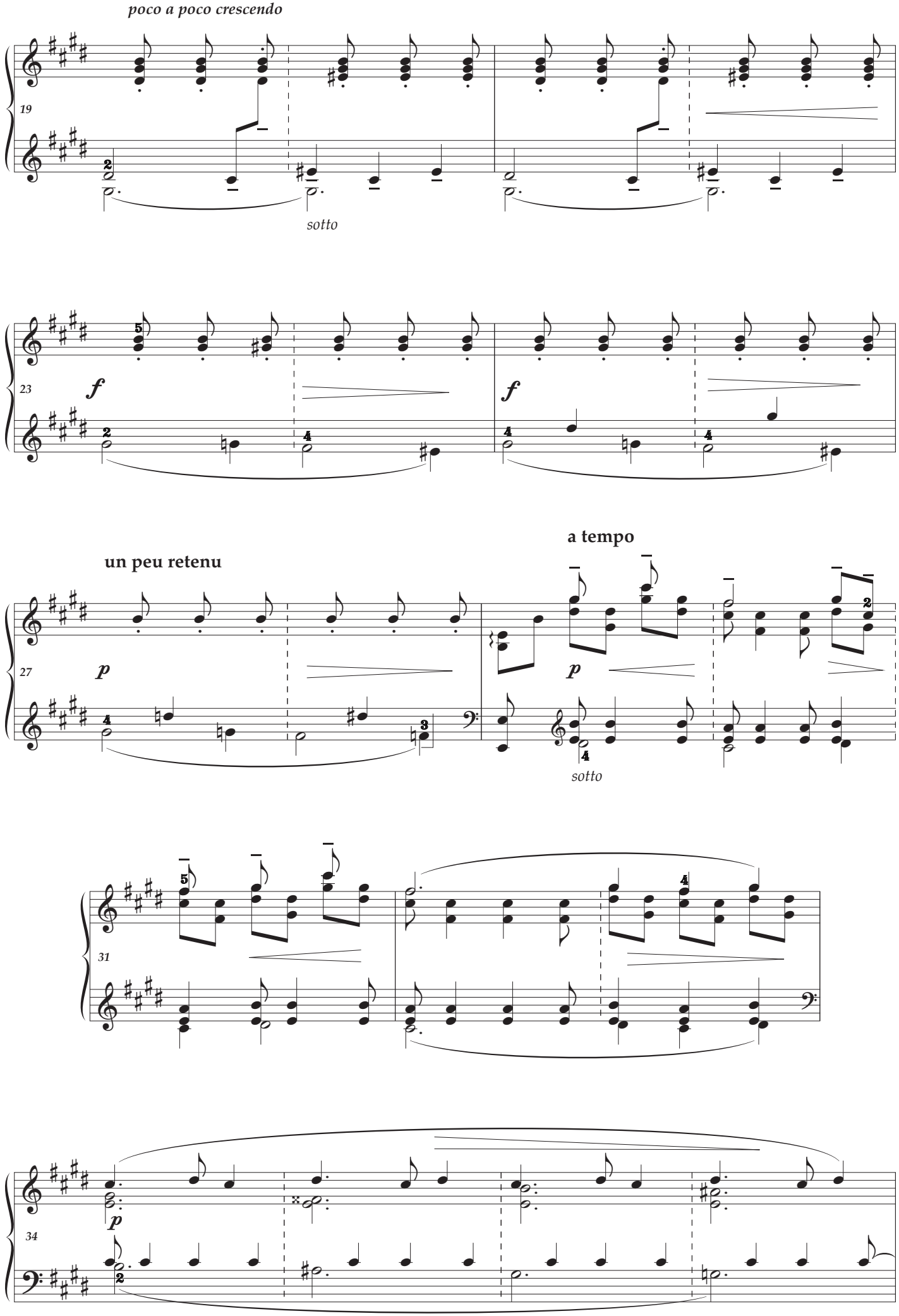
Notes

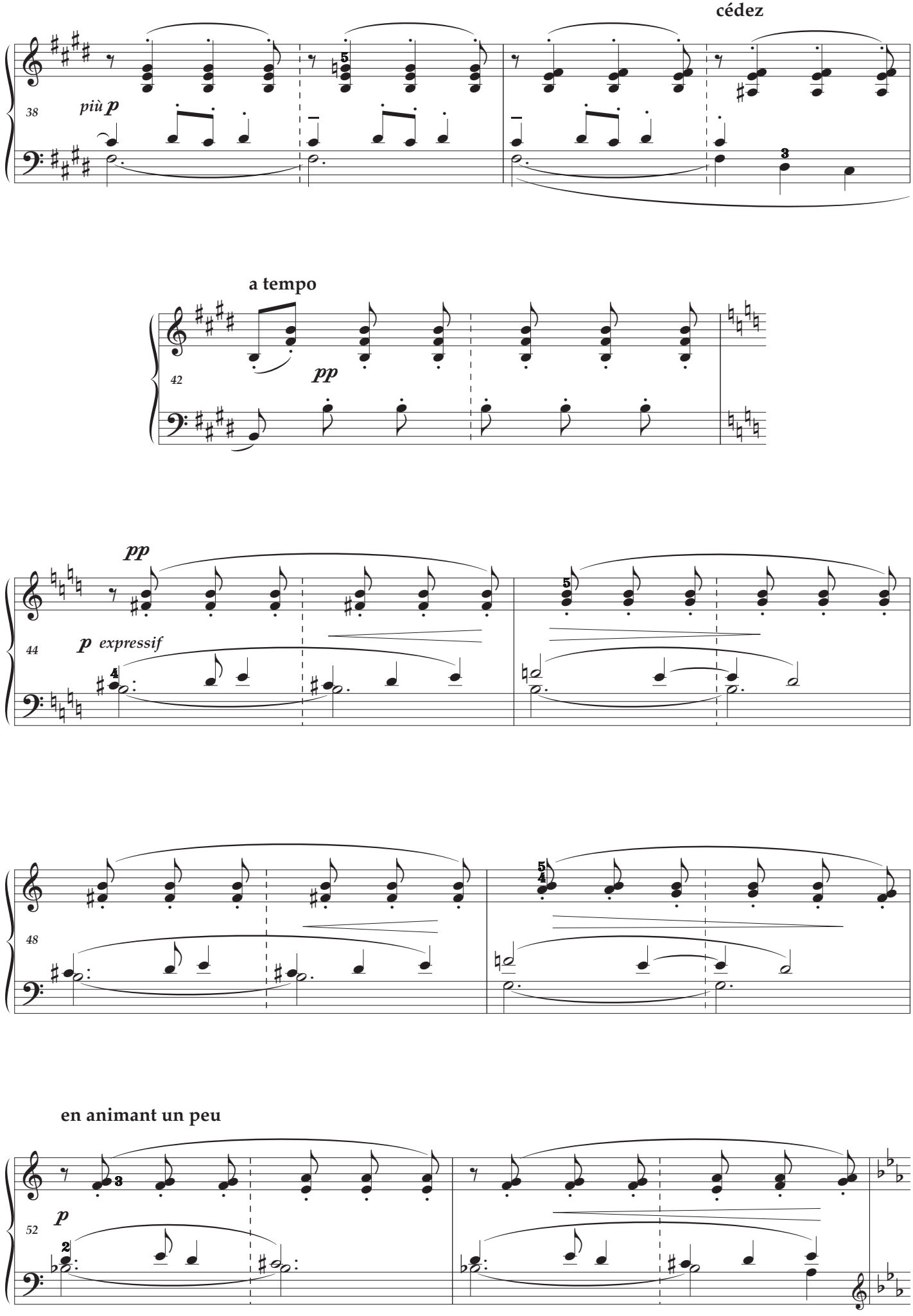
- allegretto *ma non troppo* is somewhat difficult to define, and as there are so many different tempo interpretations of this work I would suggest ♩ = 120-128
- editorial dashed barlines to show phrase length
- this edition features much hand swapping, keeping the theme always in the right hand
- **18** editorial tied G#

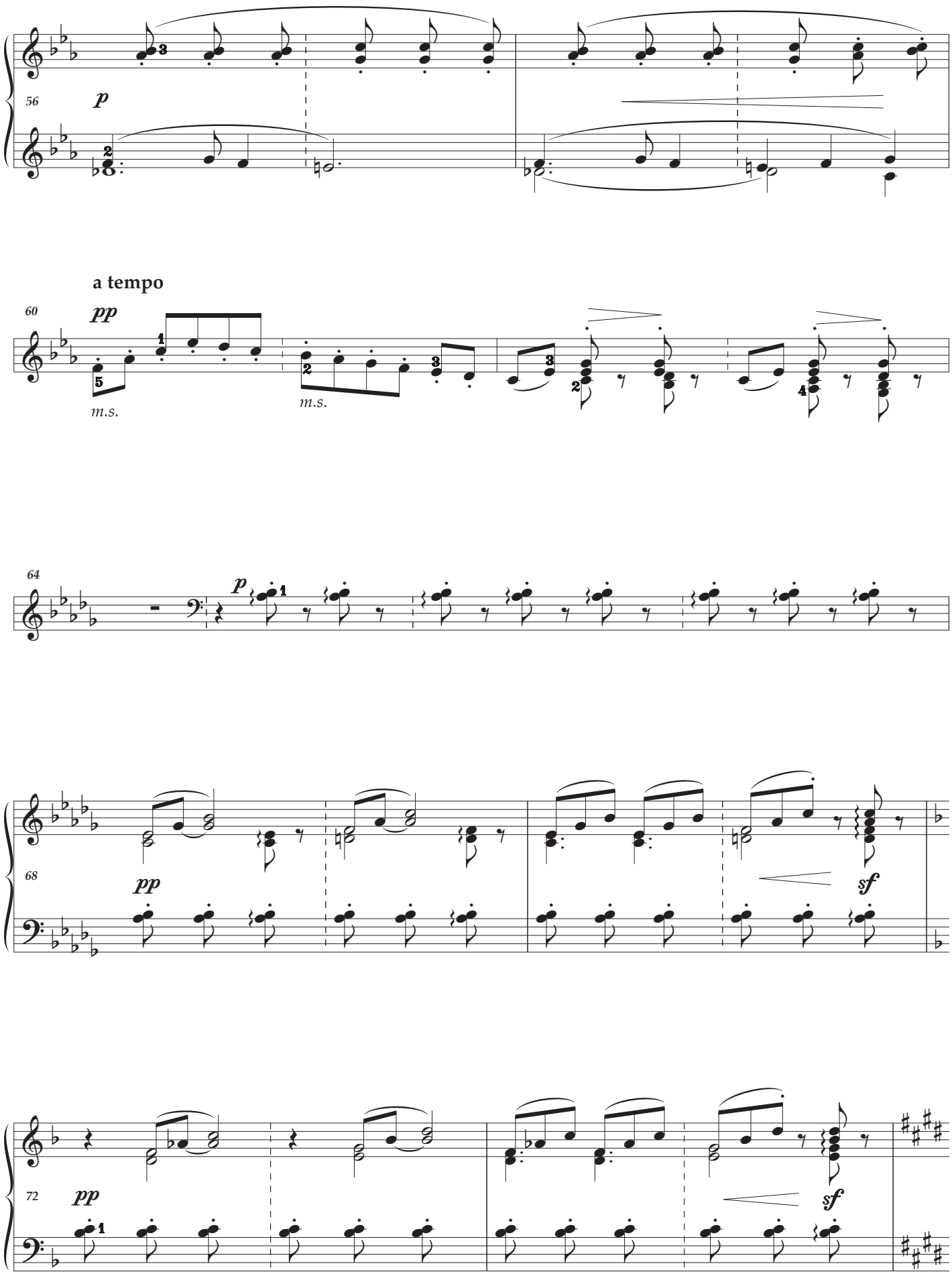
léger et gracieux	*light and graceful*
un peu en dehors	*a little in relief*
un peu retenu	*a little slower*
cédez	*slow down a little*
en animant un peu	*a little more animated*

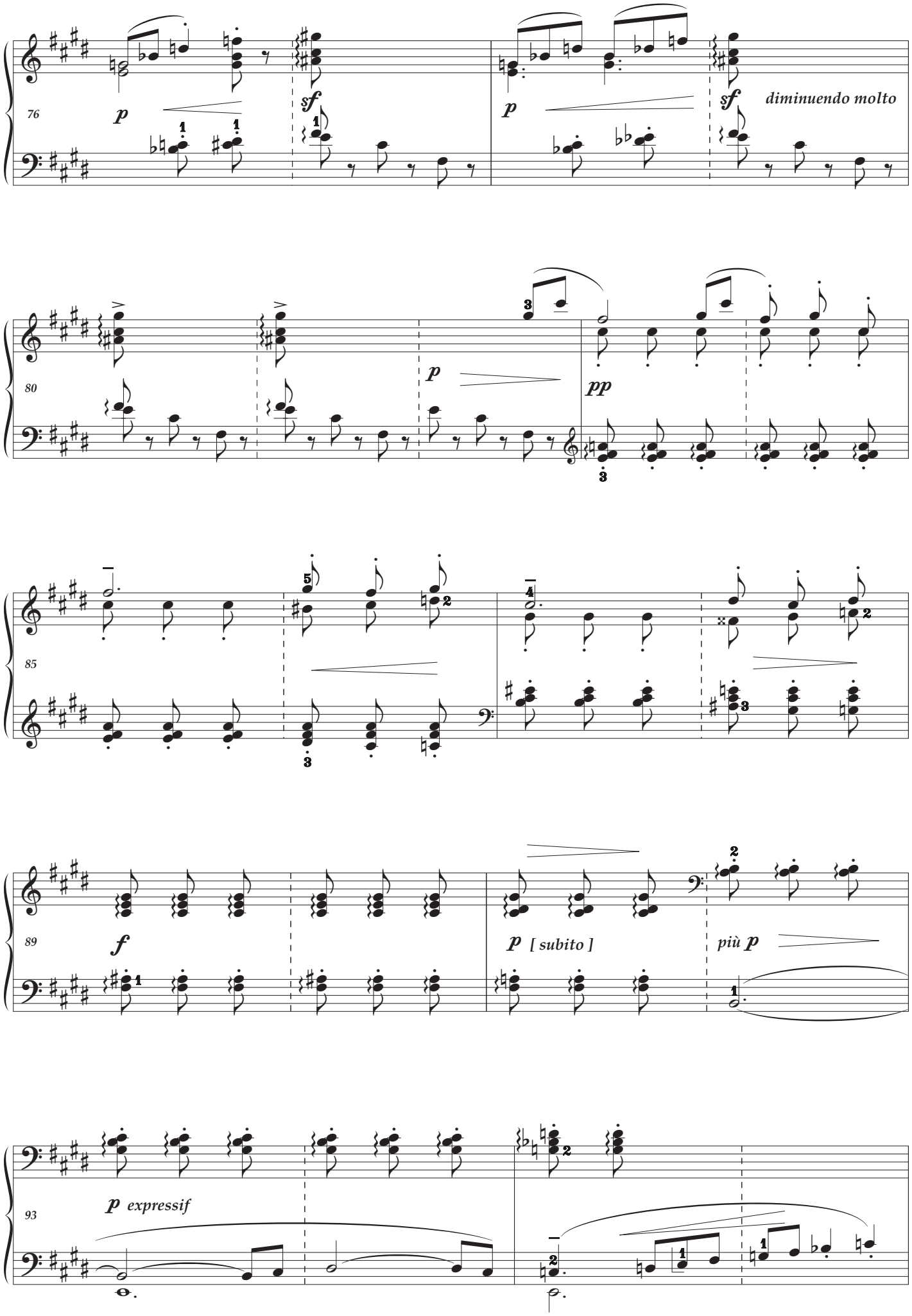
Serenade of the Doll

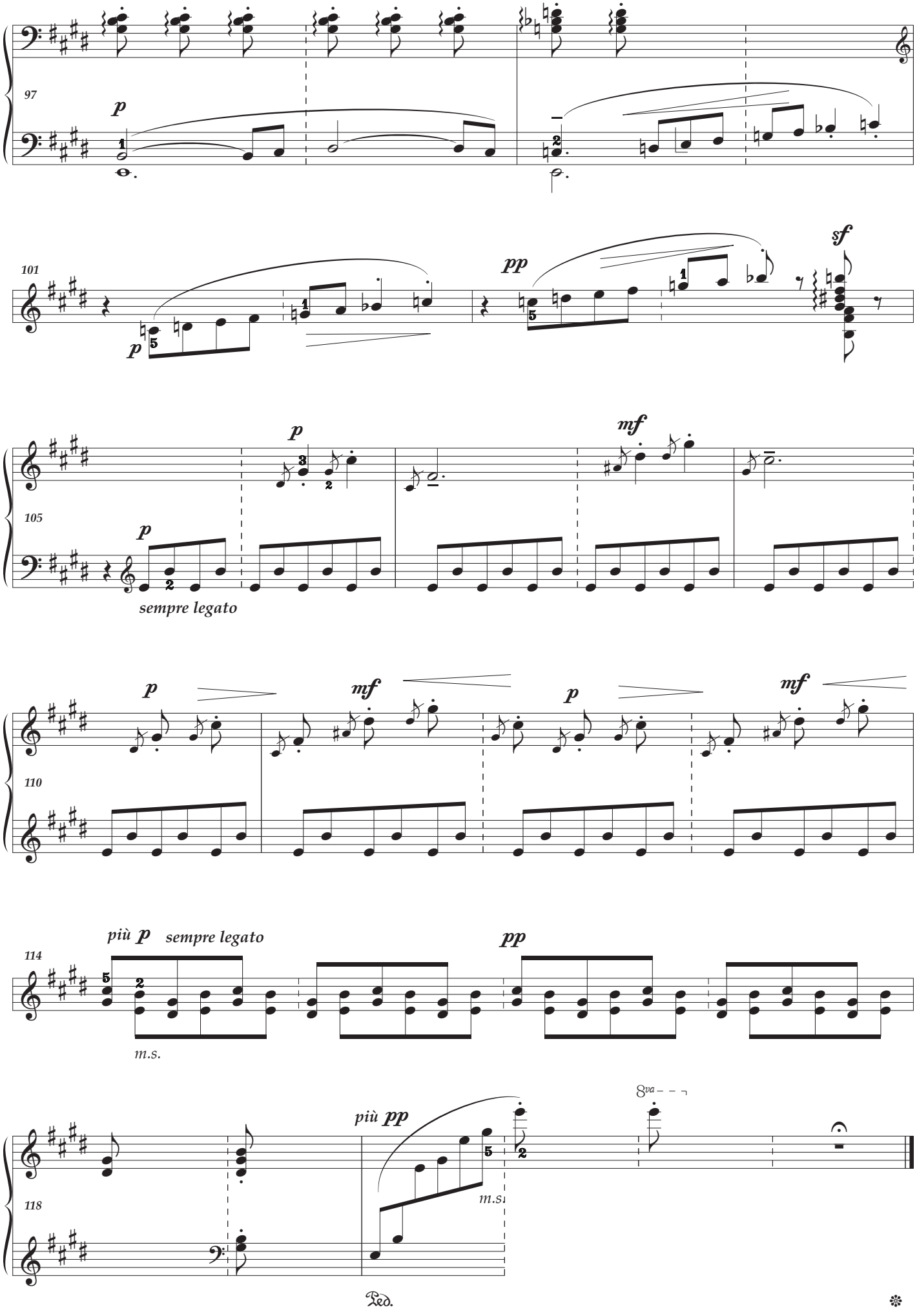



poco a poco crescendo
19
sotto
23
f
f
un peu retenu
a tempo
27
p
p
sotto
31
34
p


cédez
38
più p
a tempo
42
pp
pp
44
p expressif
48
en animant un peu
52
p


56
p
a tempo
60
pp
m.s.
m.s.
64
p
68
pp
sf
72
pp
sf


76
p
sf
p
sf
diminuendo molto
80
p
pp
85
89
f
p [subito]
più p
93
p expressif


97
p
101
p
pp
sf
105
p
sempre legato
p
mf
110
p
mf
p
mf
114
più p sempre legato
m.s.
pp
118
più pp
m.s.
8va
Ped.

Claude Monet
neige à Argenteuil 1874

undoubtedly creates the most challenging piece of the suite. Debussy suggested that we should imagine the piano as an instrument without hammers, striking the key in such a way so that the vibrations of the other notes would be heard 'quivering distantly in the air'. At **34** the seamless join from two to one-hand accompaniment is particularly difficult. To train the ear, try playing the LH part with two hands.

Roger Nichols : semiquavers passing between the hands is an idea borrowed from the '*danse silencieuse des gouttes de rosée*' (silent dance of the dewdrops) from Massenet's opera *Cendrillon* of 1899.

4. The snow Is dancing

The garden beckons as we gaze upon a silent *tableau* harking back to the two books of *images* from 1903 and ***le tombeau des naïades*** (*Chansons de Bilitis*) 1899. This wistful but sombre scene of gently falling snow is my personal favourite from the suite.

Cortot : "a melancholy pleasure to follow with one's eyes, one's face pressed against the window of a warm room, the indolent fall of the flakes. But what has happened to the birds and the flowers? And when will the sun shine again?

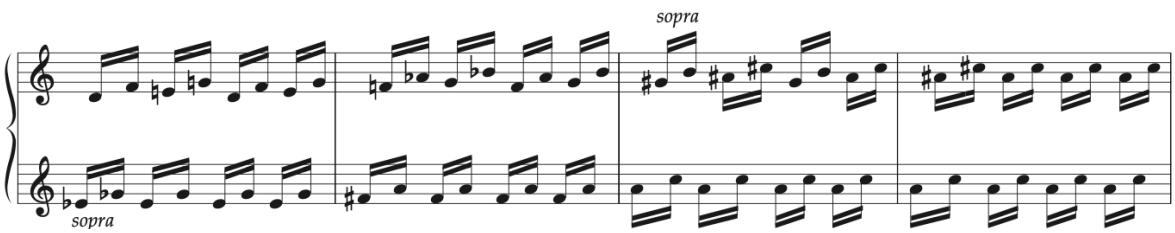
This chilly companion to the earlier ***jardins sous la pluie*** (*Estampes* 1903) is not easy to control as we must achieve the desired blend of *non-legato* and pedals for a 'blanketed' or 'muffled' sound (*estompé*). As the snowflakes swirl around in the wind, constant variation in the configuration

Notes

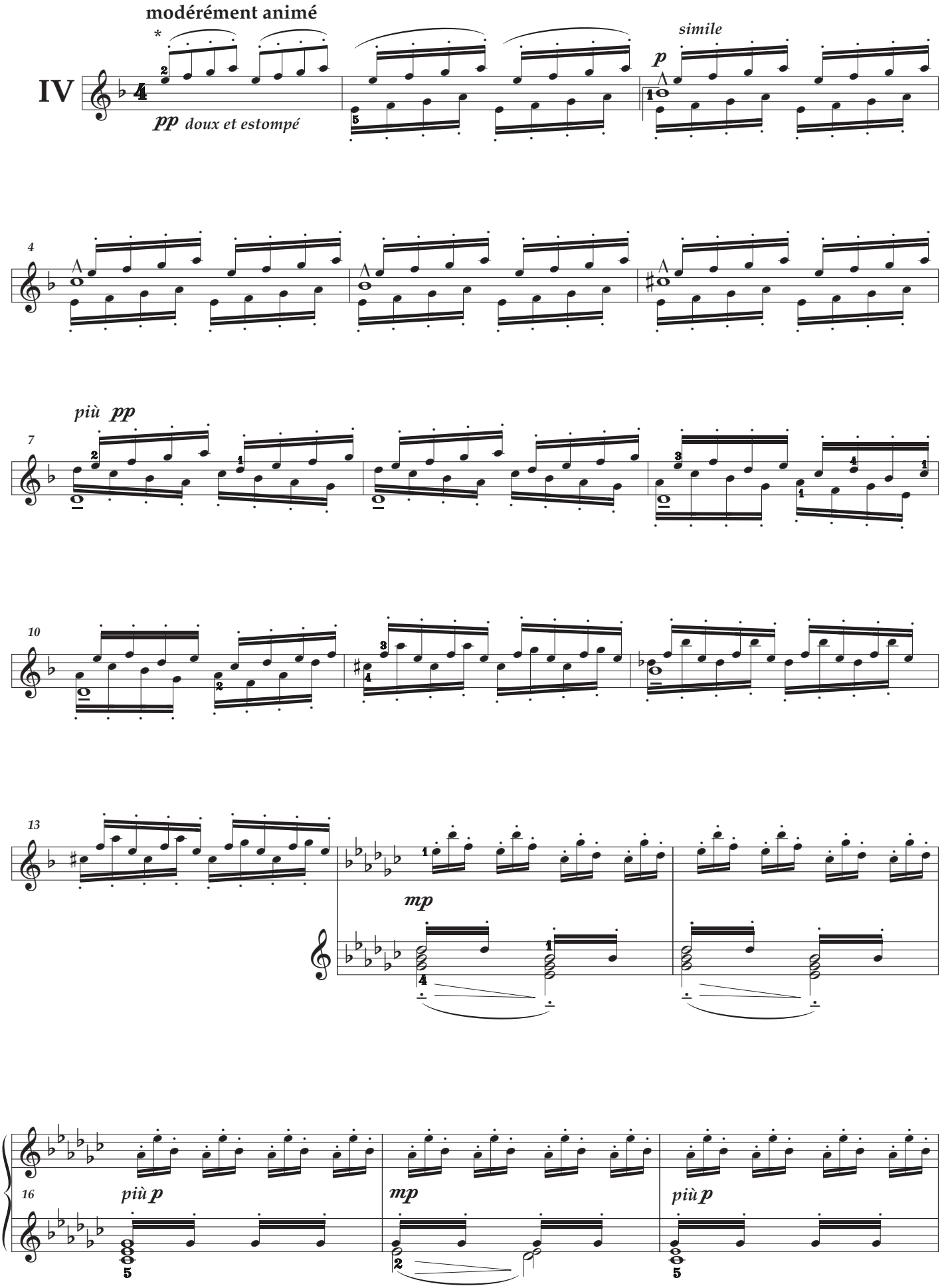
- although I dislike fixing tempos with the metronome I would suggest ♩ = 96
- smaller size notation is entirely editorial
- **22** a Gallic version of the English nursery song 'Ding Dong Bell' materialises unexpectedly out of the mist
- **35/36/46/49** modification of time-signature
- **25** E bass semibreve suggested from 29
- **37** editorial reverse arpeggiation

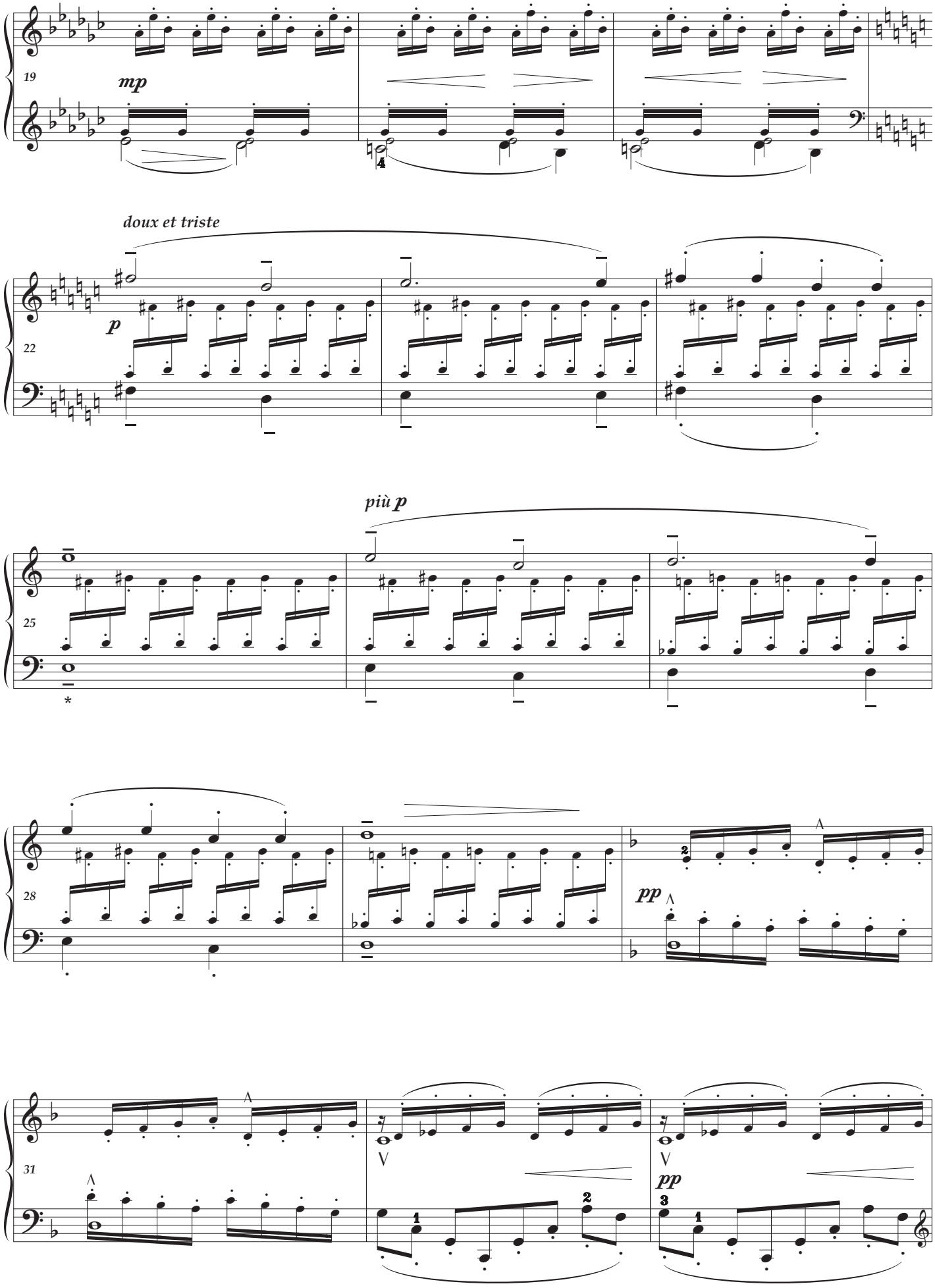
modérément animé	*fairly animated*
doux et estompé	*gentle and muted*
triste	*sad*
cédez un peu	*a little slower*
un peu en dehors	*a little in relief*
au mouvement	*a tempo*
léger mais marqué	*light but marked*
sans retenir	*without slowing down*

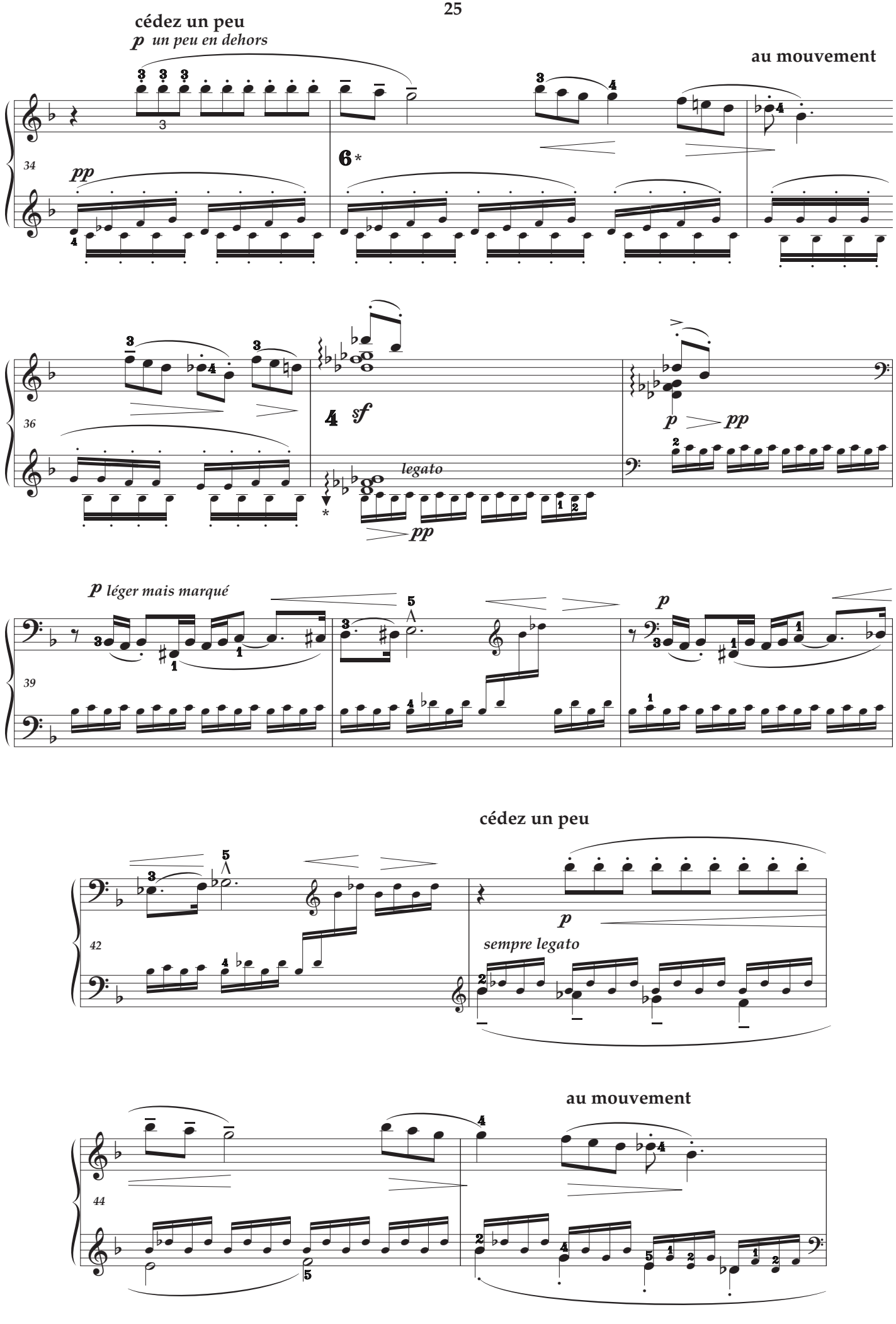
At **51** — an imaginative transitional section similar to ***poissons d'or*** and ***la danse de Puck.*** I always found the anticipated tonic a little unfortunate and musingly searched for an alternative progression :

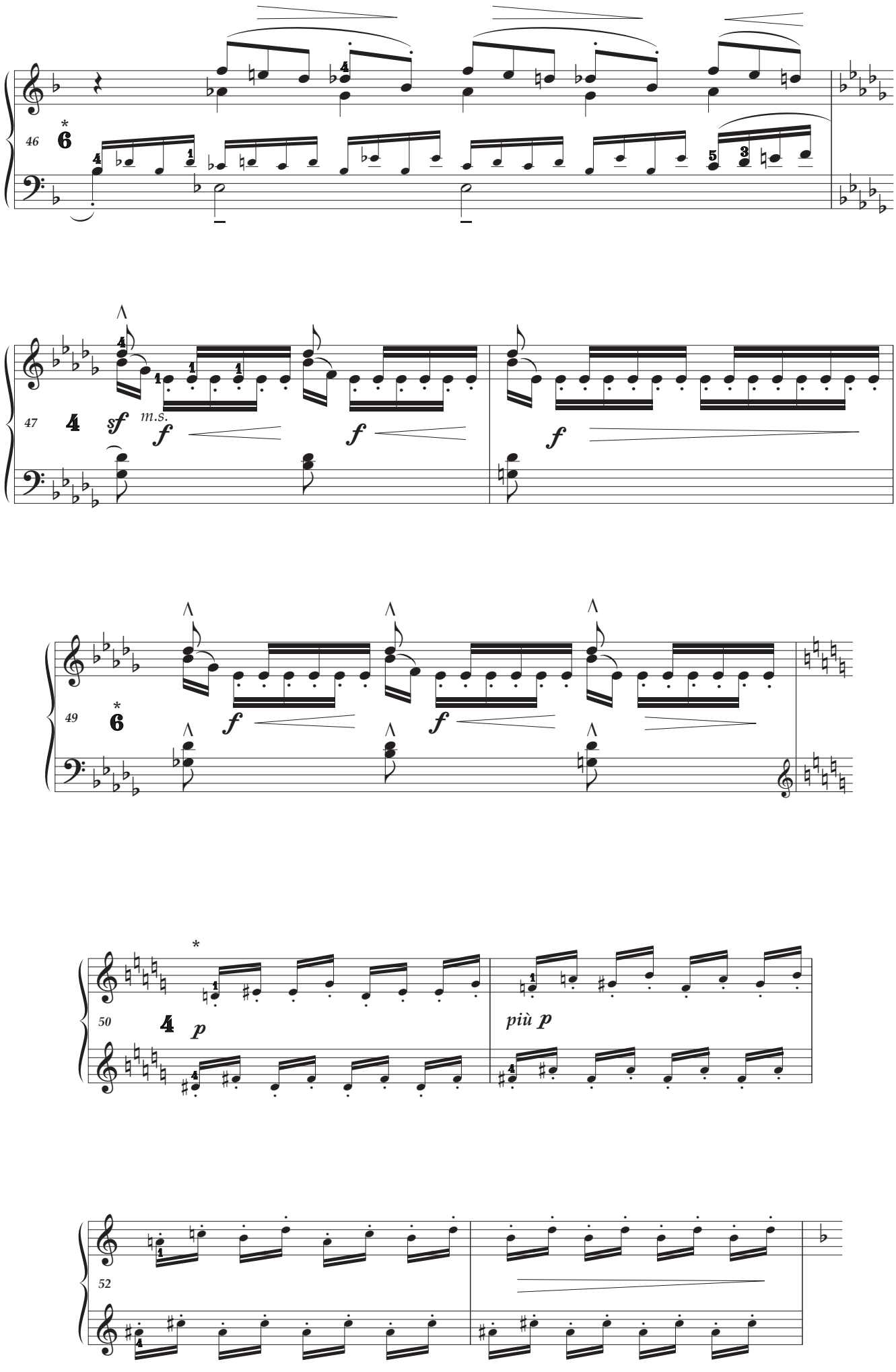


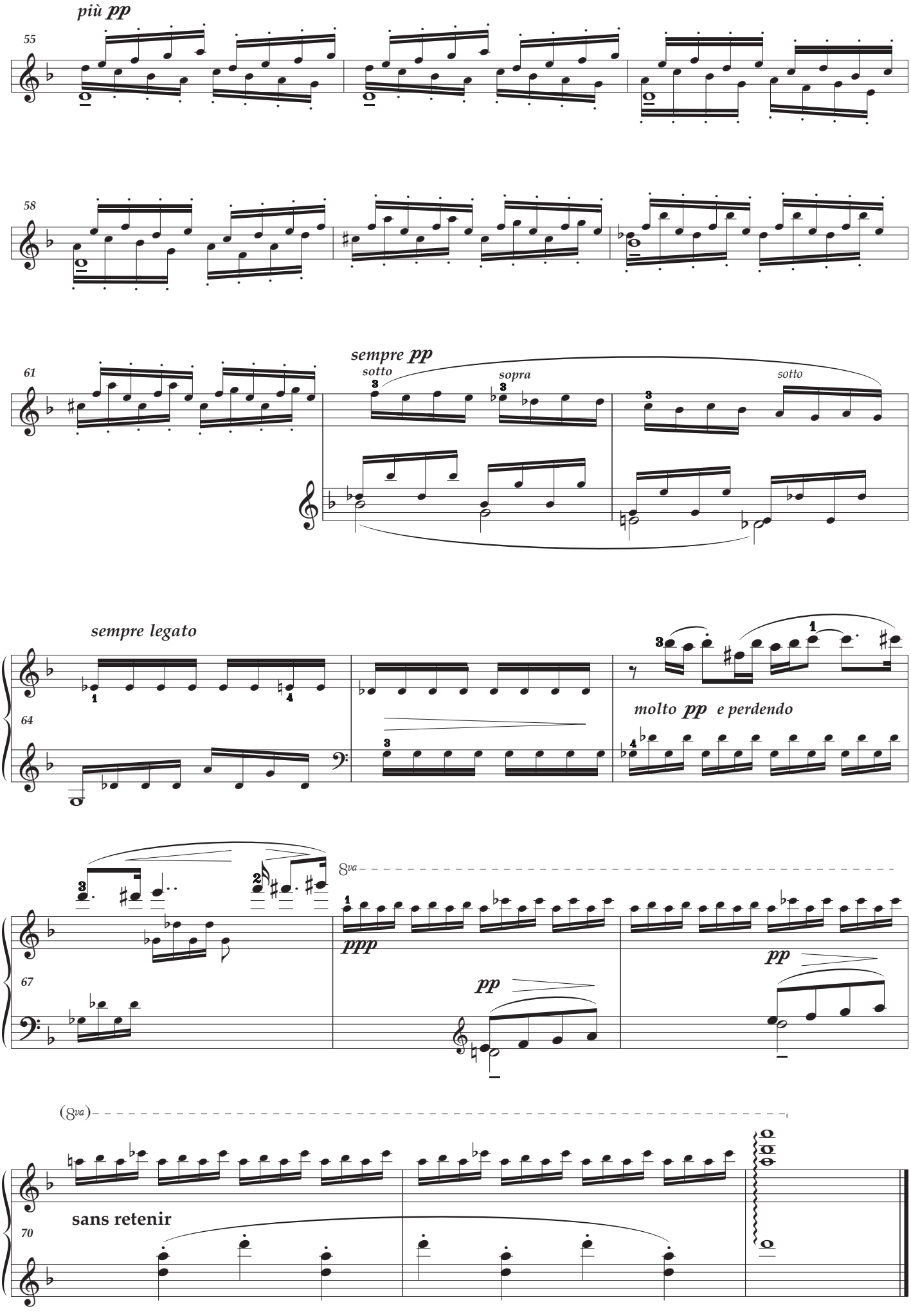
The snow is dancing

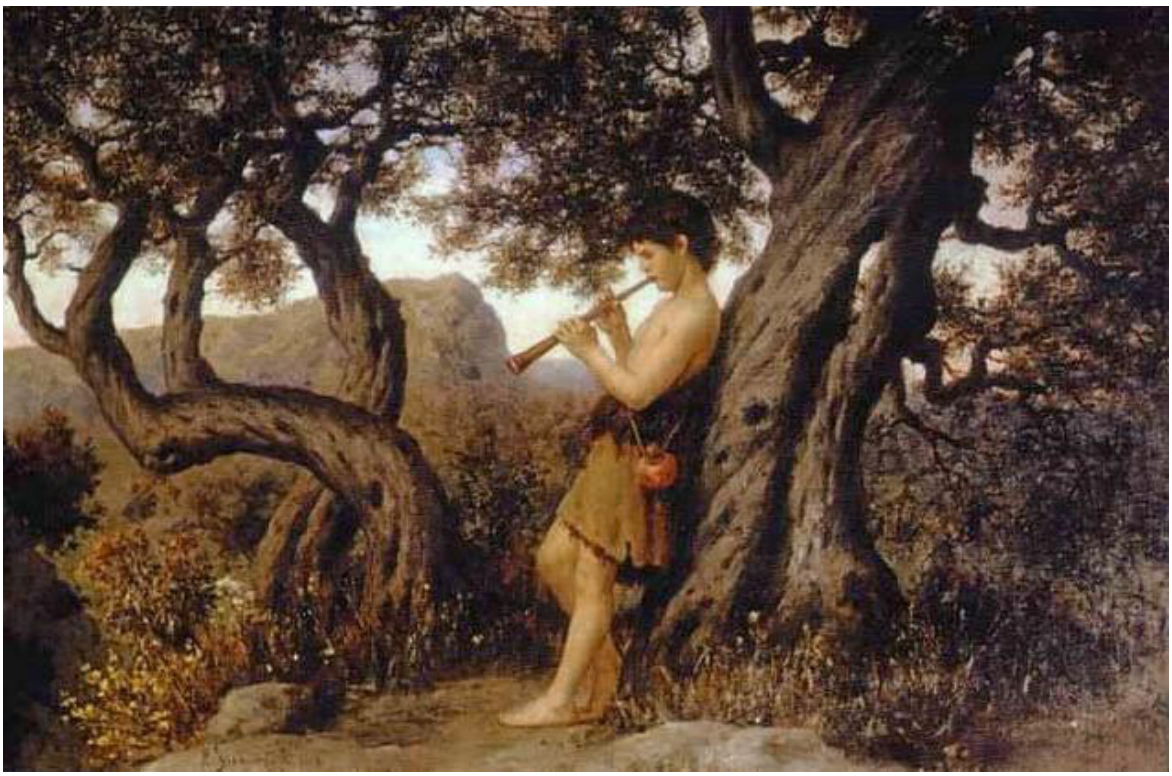



19
mp
doux et triste
22
p
più p
25
28
pp
31
pp


cédez un peu
p un peu en dehors
au mouvement
34
pp
6*
36
4 sf
legato
pp
p pp
p léger mais marqué
39
p
cédez un peu
42
p
sempre legato
au mouvement
44


46
47
49
50
52
sf
m.s.
f
più p
p


più pp
55
58
61
sempre pp
sotto
sopra
sotto
sempre legato
64
molto pp e perdendo
8va
67
ppp
pp
pp
(8va)
70
sans retenir



Henryk Hektor Siemiradzki

5. The little shepherd

The art of achieving much with so little !

Marguerite Long, a close friend of the family who first performed many of Debussy's piano works, heard *Chouchou* play this piece and stated that it was "a very moving experience, for she was so much like her father". This evocative fluted music is surely an appropriately simplified version of his highly successful ***Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune***, composed some 12 years earlier.

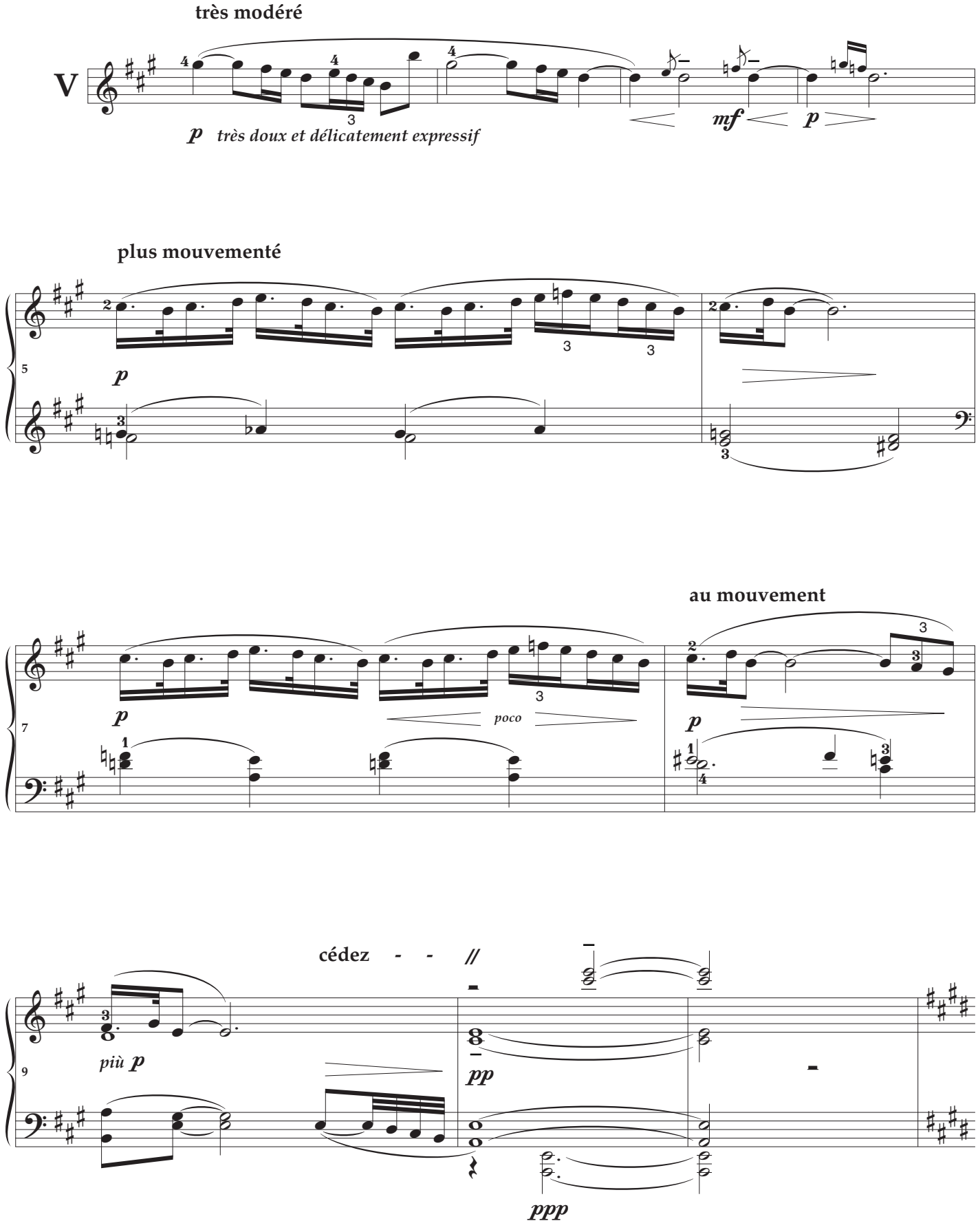
The snow has vanished for an idyllic country scene, the backdrop for a shepherd's delicately improvised flute solo and charming dance motif.

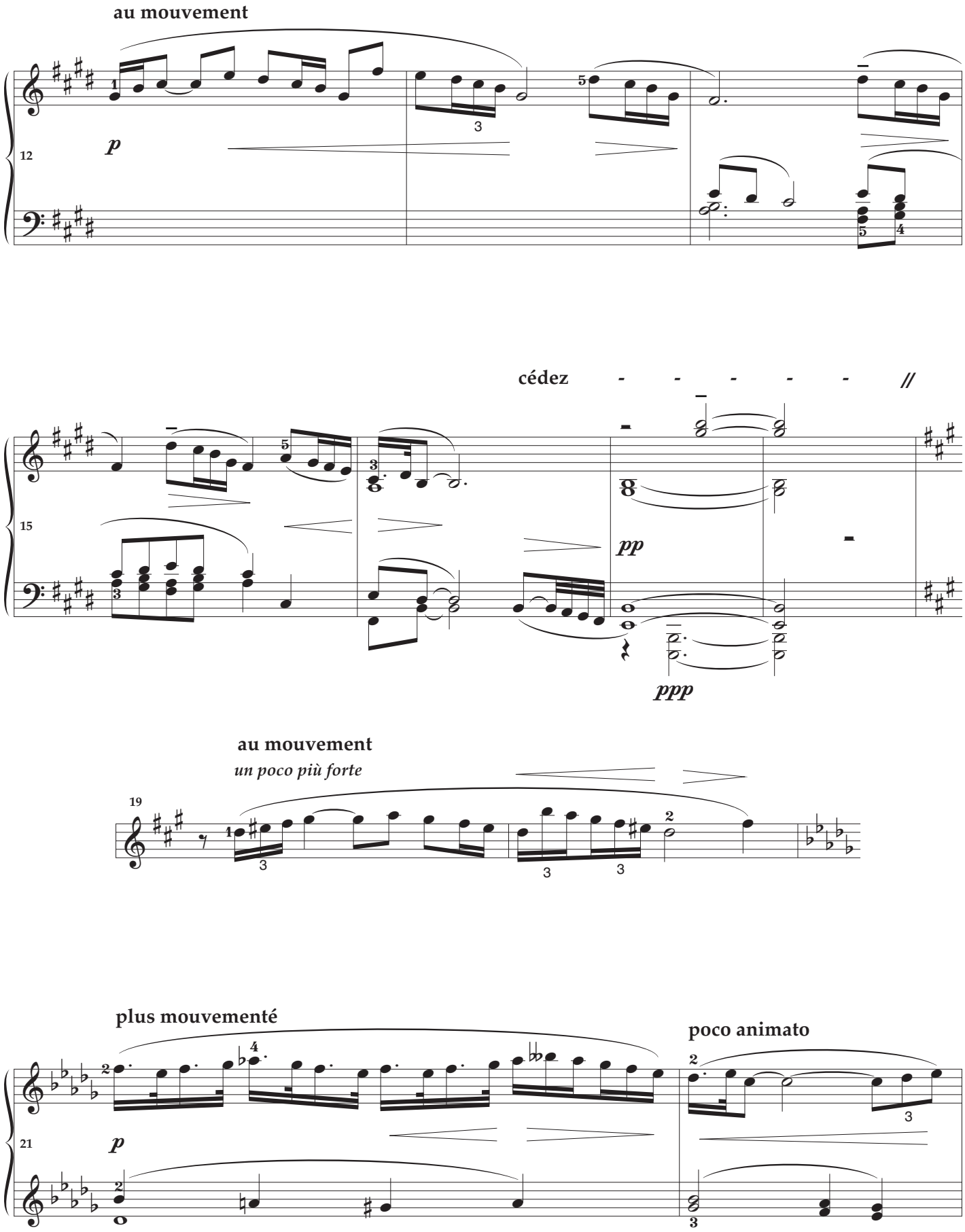
Stephen Walsh : This simplest and sweetest of the six pieces, seems to derive some of its ideas, especially the *plus mouvementé* dotted rhythm, from Rimsky Korsakov's ***Scheherazade***, which Debussy had liked in the 1890s, then turned against after hearing it in 1906 ("more bazaar than oriental" he told his stepson, Raoul Bardac). The dotted rhythm had been recycled a few years earlier for ***l'isle joyeuse.***

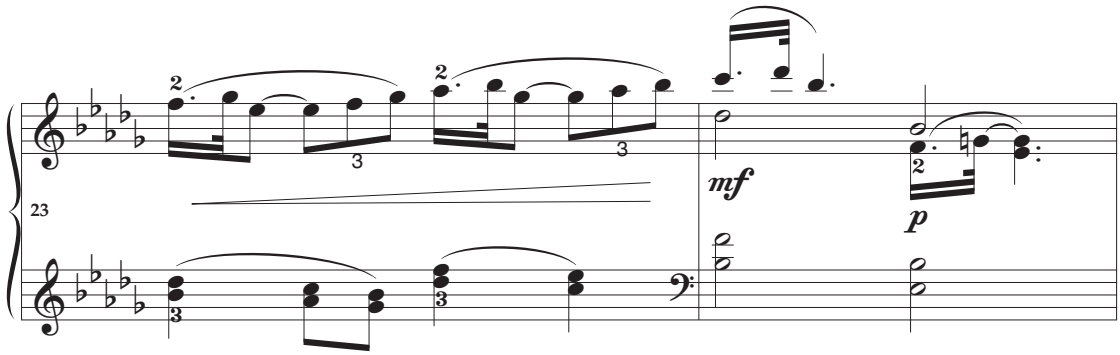
A gentle and bucolic contrast to the vibrant and urban Cake-Walk to follow.

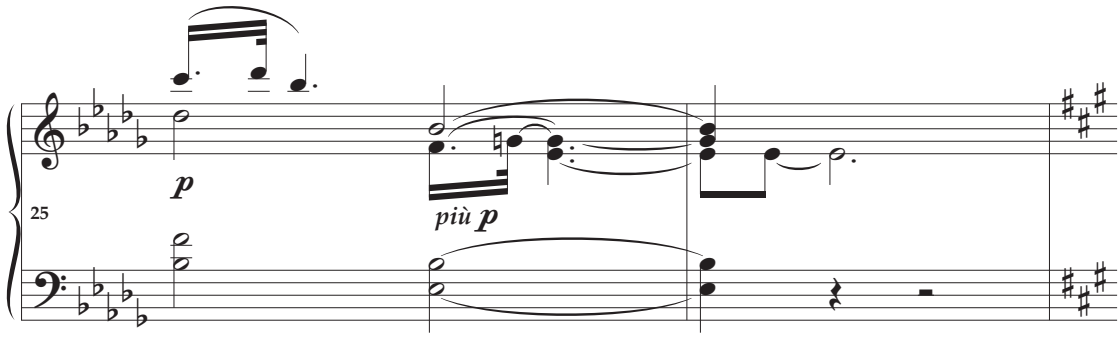
très doux	*molto dolce*
délicatement expressif	*delicately expressive*
plus mouvementé	*quicker tempo*
au mouvement	*a tempo*
cédez	*slower*
un peu retenu	*poco ritenuto*
en conservant le rythme	*preserving the rhythm*

The little shepherd

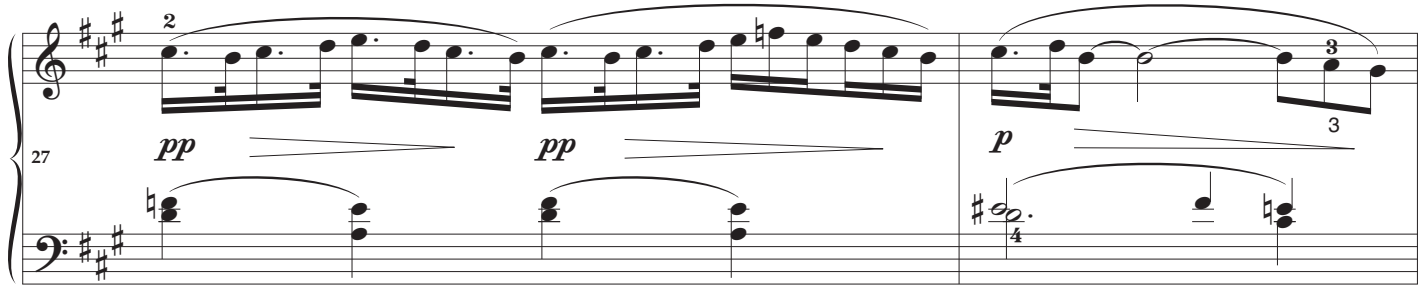



au mouvement
p
12
cédez - - - - - //
15
pp
ppp
au mouvement
un poco più forte
19
plus mouvementé
poco animato
21
p

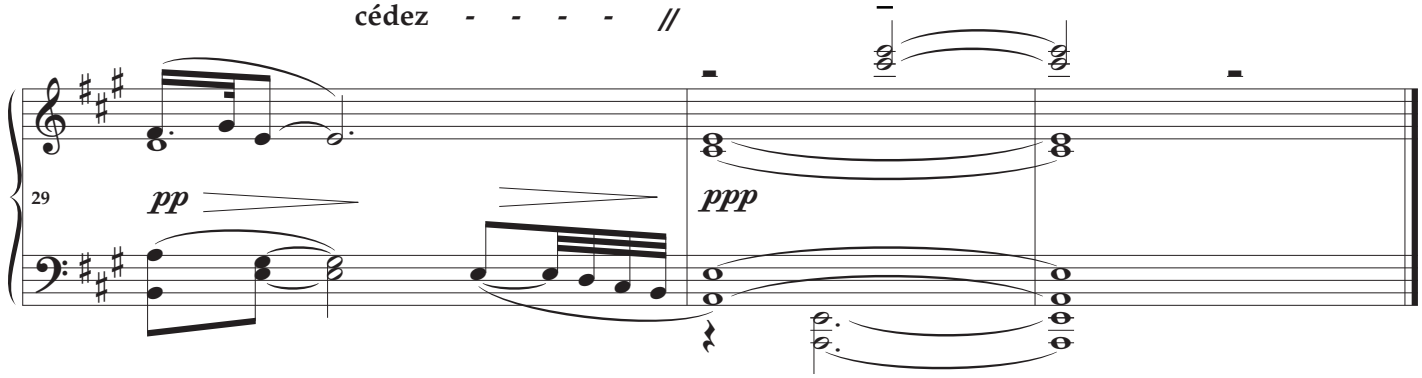




un peu retenu
(en conservant le rythme)



cédez - - - - //



6. A Cake-Walk for Tristan*

During the Paris Exposition of 1900 the Sousa Band caused a cake-walk** craze — celebrating the 4th of July, they played at the dedication of the American Pavilion and paraded triumphant through *les boulevards de Paris*. Debussy was smitten, calling Sousa 'the king of American music' and praising the cake-walk as their best invention. By 1912 he had composed four works inspired by music of the New World***.

Over the years Debussy had a love-hate relationship with Wagner and the cake-walk offered him an outrageous opportunity to simultaneously ridicule *Tristan und Isolde* and round off this wonderful suite with its most dazzling number.

Among her motley collection of dolls, *Chouchou* was the proud owner of a black minstrel****, capable of much humour and a variety of creative dance steps, grotesque postures and acrobatics, wittily mimicked by her adoring father with novel harmony and syncopation, abrupt stops, accents and dynamic contrast. In the central section Tristan's love-death *leitmotif* is satirically marked *avec une grande émotion* (with great feeling) and often interrupted by the derisive strumming of a banjo. You might also spot quotations from a Grenadier Guard's march with bass drum and cymbals, which the composer had heard in London.

Quoting Stephen Walsh "… pure fun and, in the middle section, at Tristan and Isolde's expense. Darius Milhaud in his younger, more strait-laced days was, he later admitted, shocked at such an introduction of 'vulgar' music into the 'serious' repertoire; indeed during the first performance by Harold Bauer in December 1908, Debussy was found pacing nervously outside the hall, anxiously chain smoking, in case Wagnerophiles in the audience might take offence. After it was over, Bauer reassured him that the audience had indeed laughed in the right places, and saw a look of relief flood through a composer often described by his friends as '*un grand enfant*'.

Here is Debussy writing as *Monsieur Croche* after a particularly scathing attack on *Parsifal* : "All of the above concerns only Wagner the poet and not the musical beauty of the opera, which is supreme. It is incomparable and bewildering, noble and strong. Parsifal is one of the loveliest monuments to sound ever raised to the serene glory of music."

Jean COCTEAU
les concours de cake-walk 1935

* renamed reflecting current anti-racist opinion and prejudice

** a pre-ragtime dance or strut, and for the performer with the most elaborate steps, a small prize "taking the cake". This new music had much influence on Western artistic expression, particularly in the *Fauvist* and *Cubist* movements, signalling the transition from traditional to modern art.

*** *Golliwogg's Cake-Walk, le petit nigar, Minstrels* and *"General Lavine" — Eccentric*

**** a golliwog, a stuffed black doll with red pants, red bow ties and wild hair, reminiscent of the blackface minstrel shows. Now a justifiably reviled racist caricature, they were all the rage partly due to the popular novels of Florence Kate Upton.

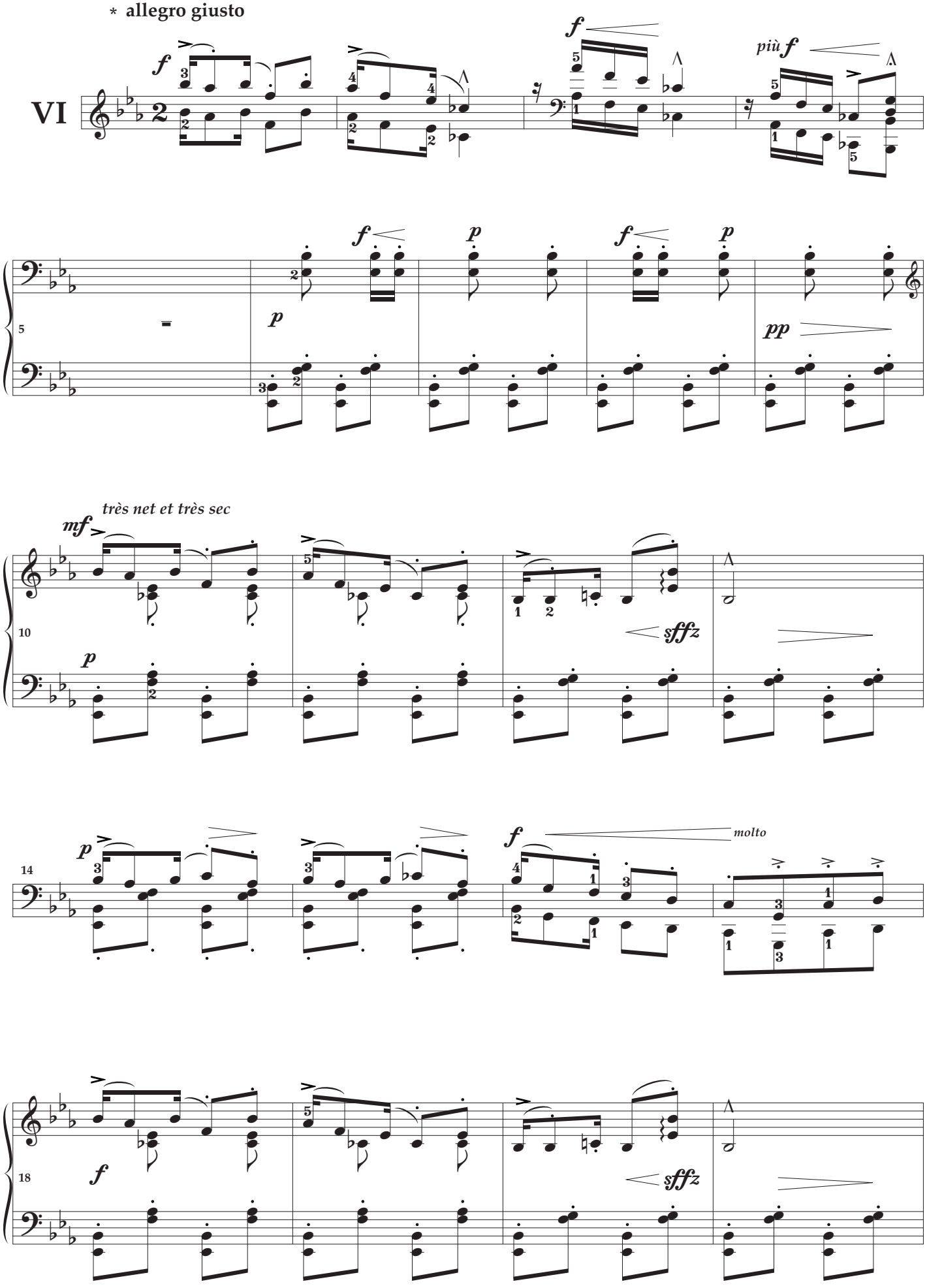
Notes

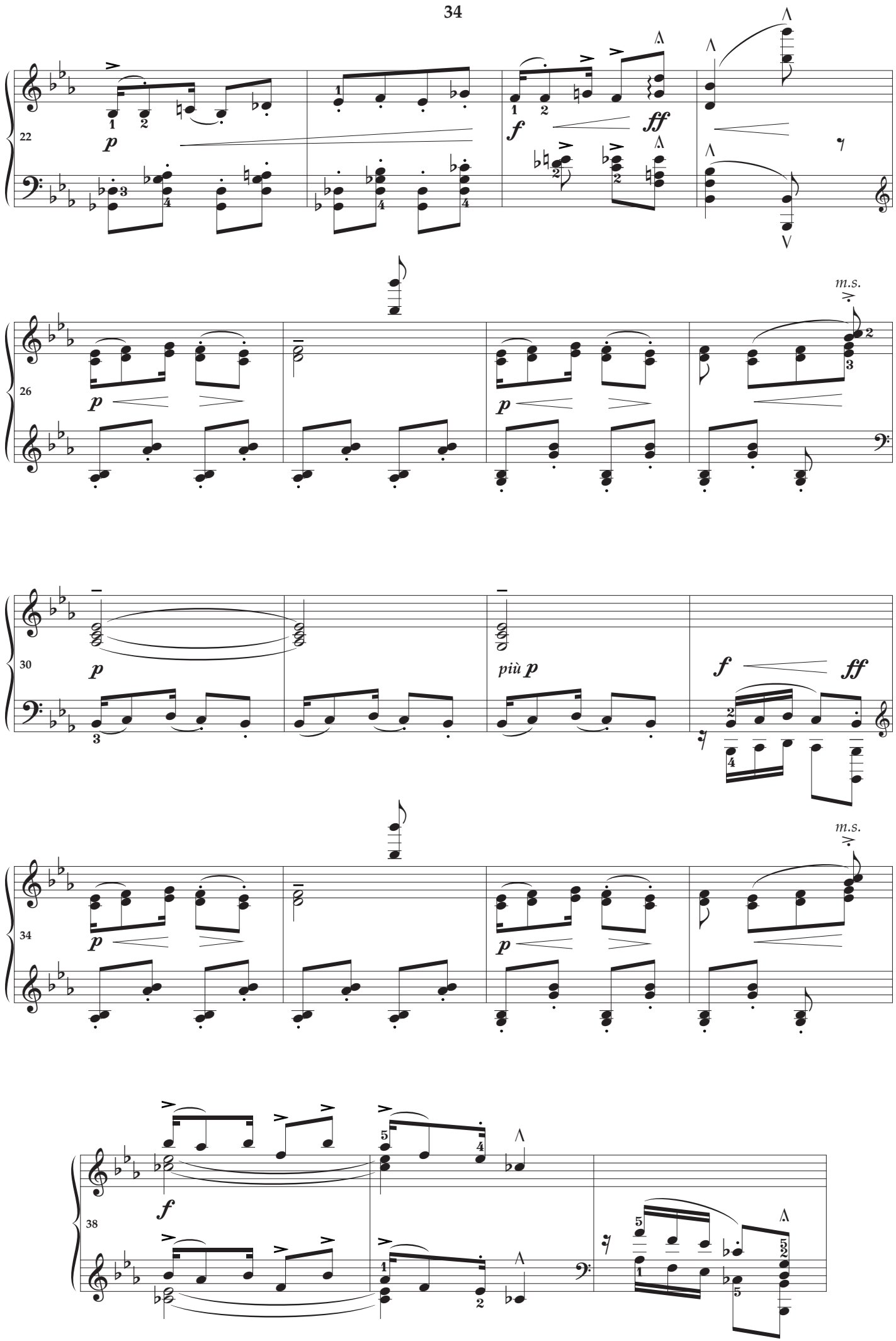
- as with ragtime it should not be played too fast — I suggest ♩ = 94 and for the middle section ♩ = 88
- **63** (and similar) originally minims
- **113** RH crotchet originally a minim — RH final quaver added octave as **33**

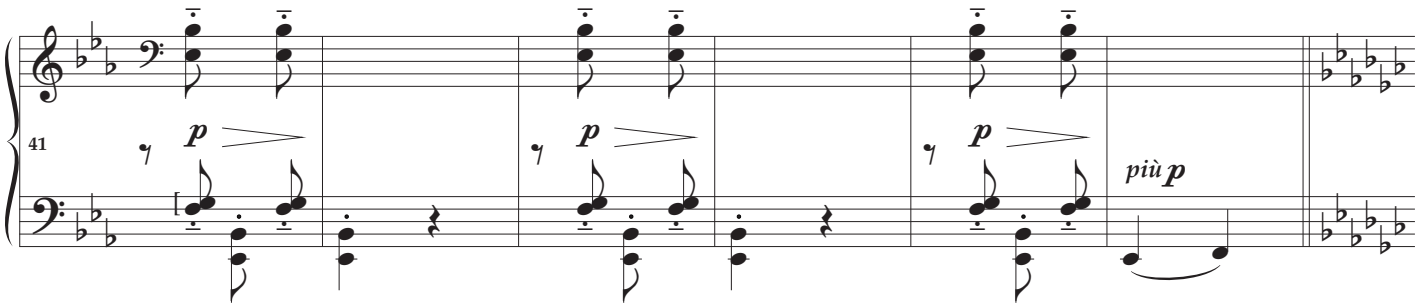
très net et très sec	*very clean and very dry*
un peu moins vite	*a little slower*
cédez	*slow down*
avec une grande émotion	*with great emotion*
retenez	*slow down*
toujours retenu	*continue slowing down*

A Cake-Walk for Tristan

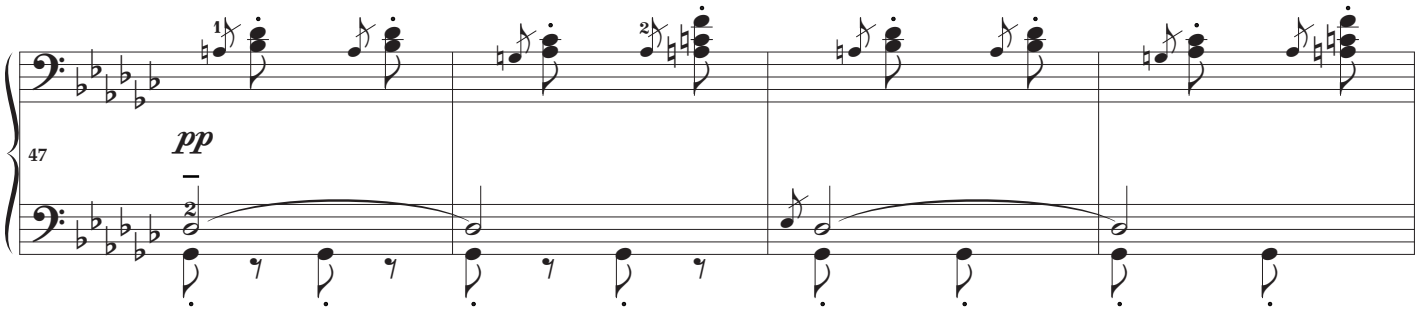
* allegro giusto

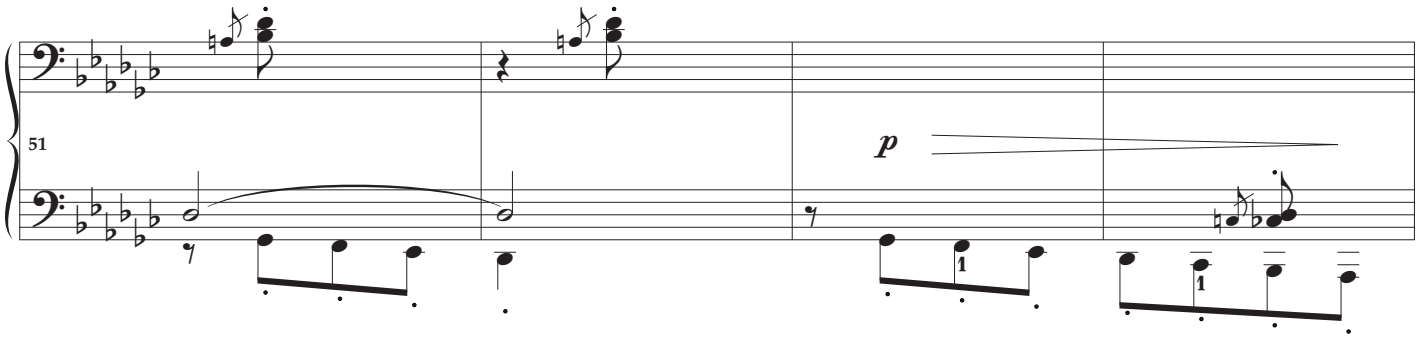


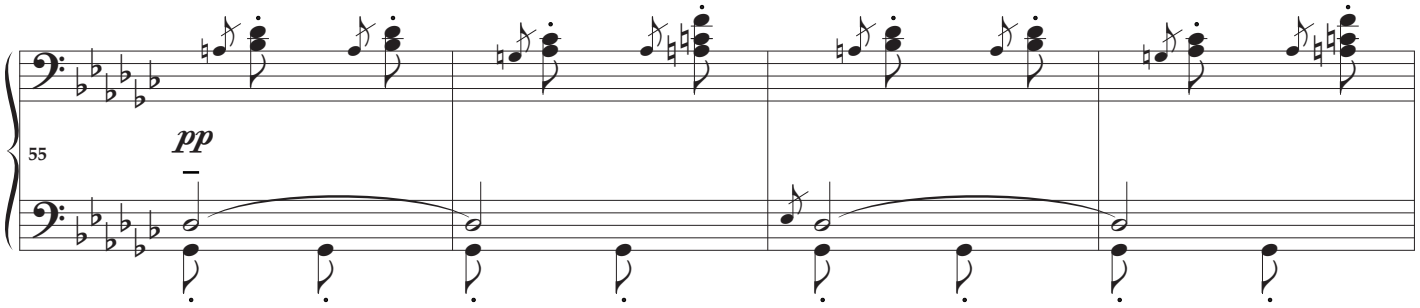

22
p
f
ff
26
p
m.s.
30
più p
38



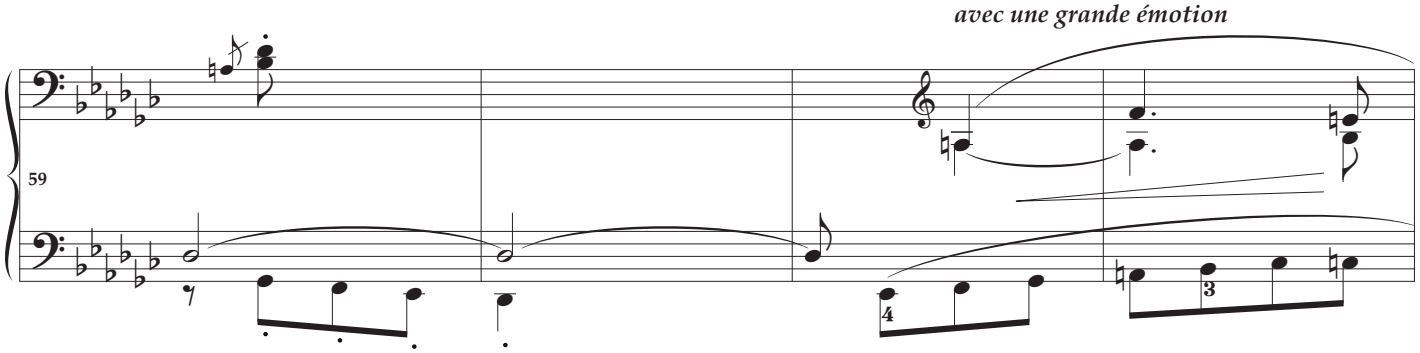
un peu moins vite

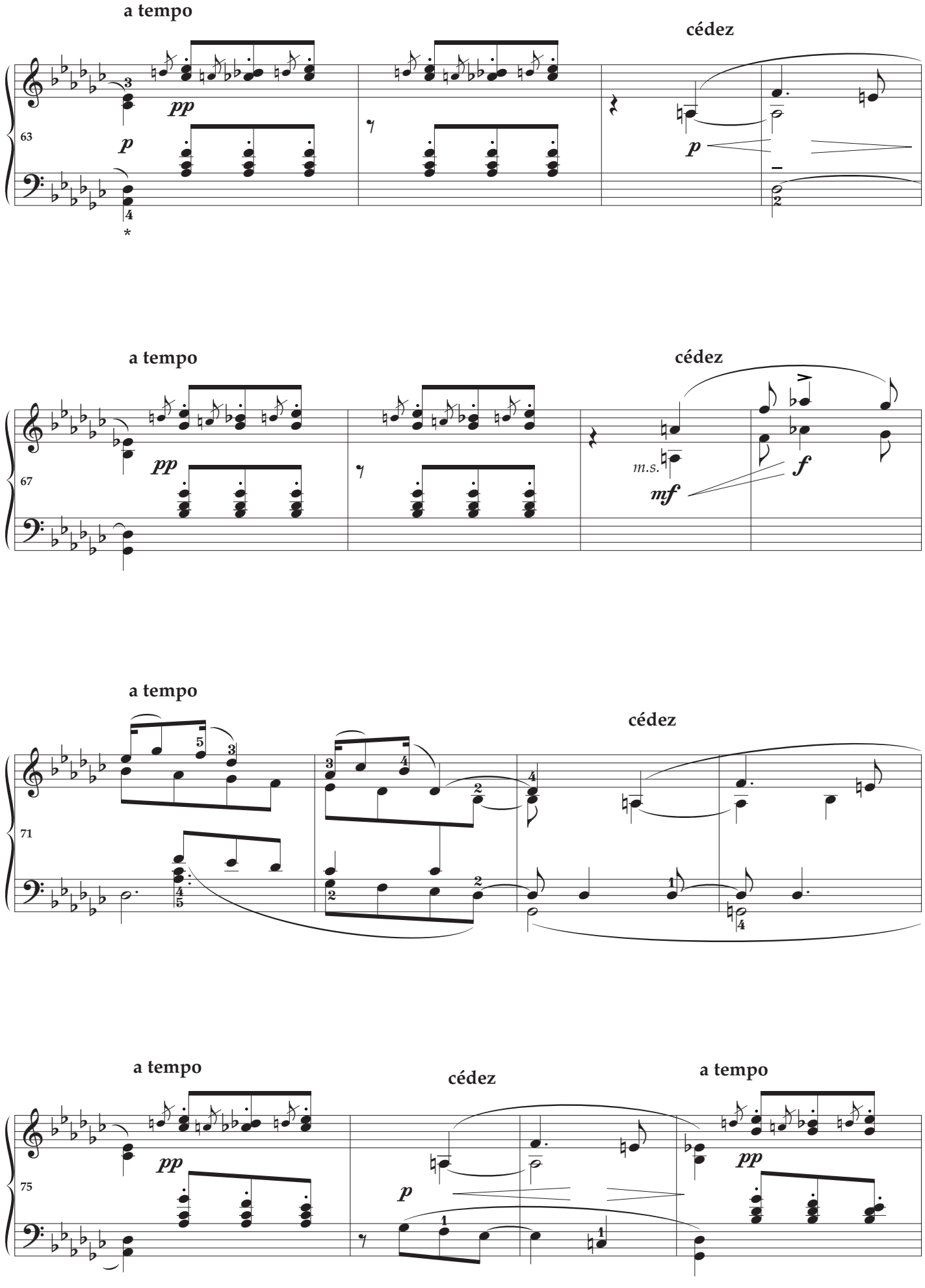


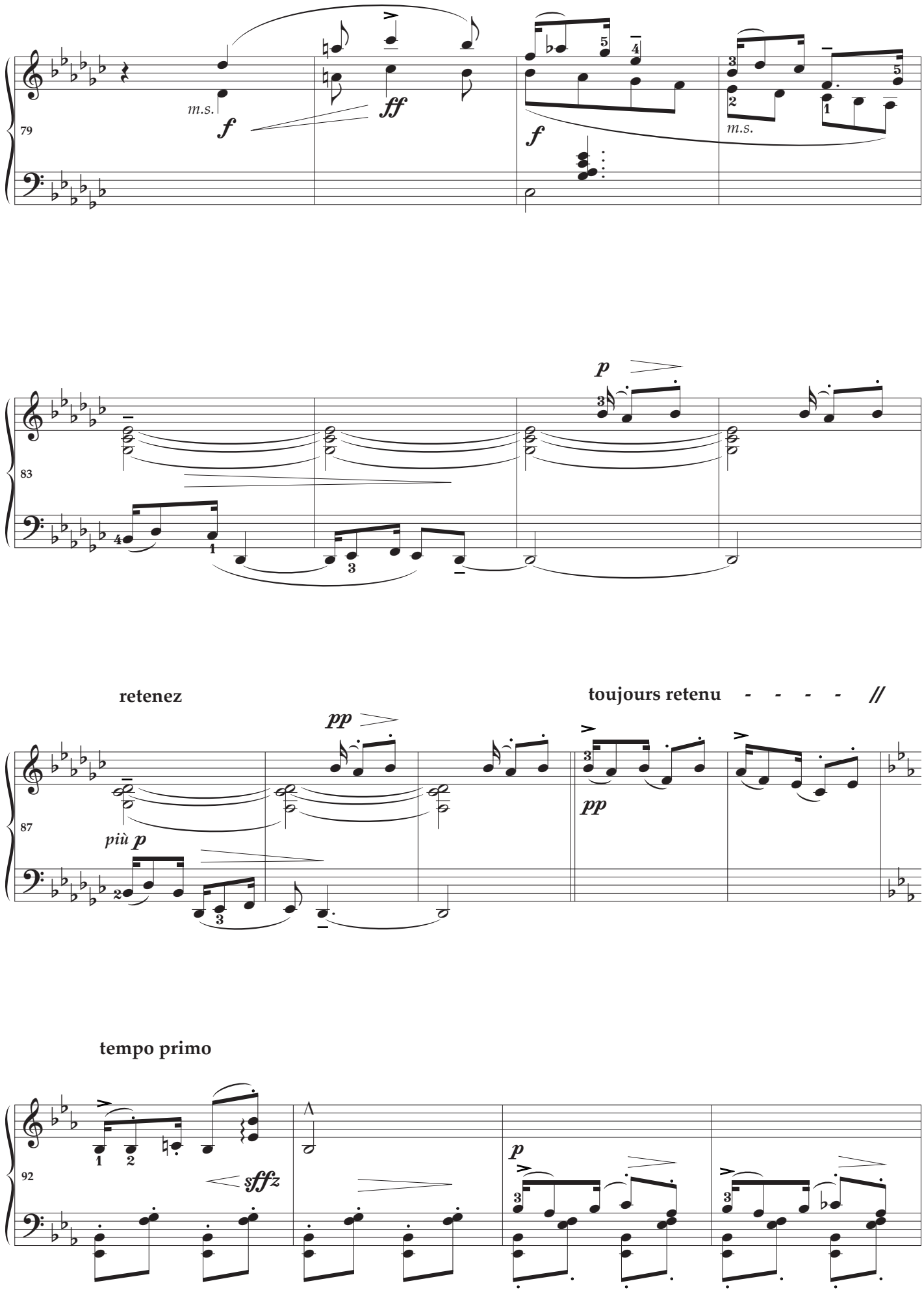


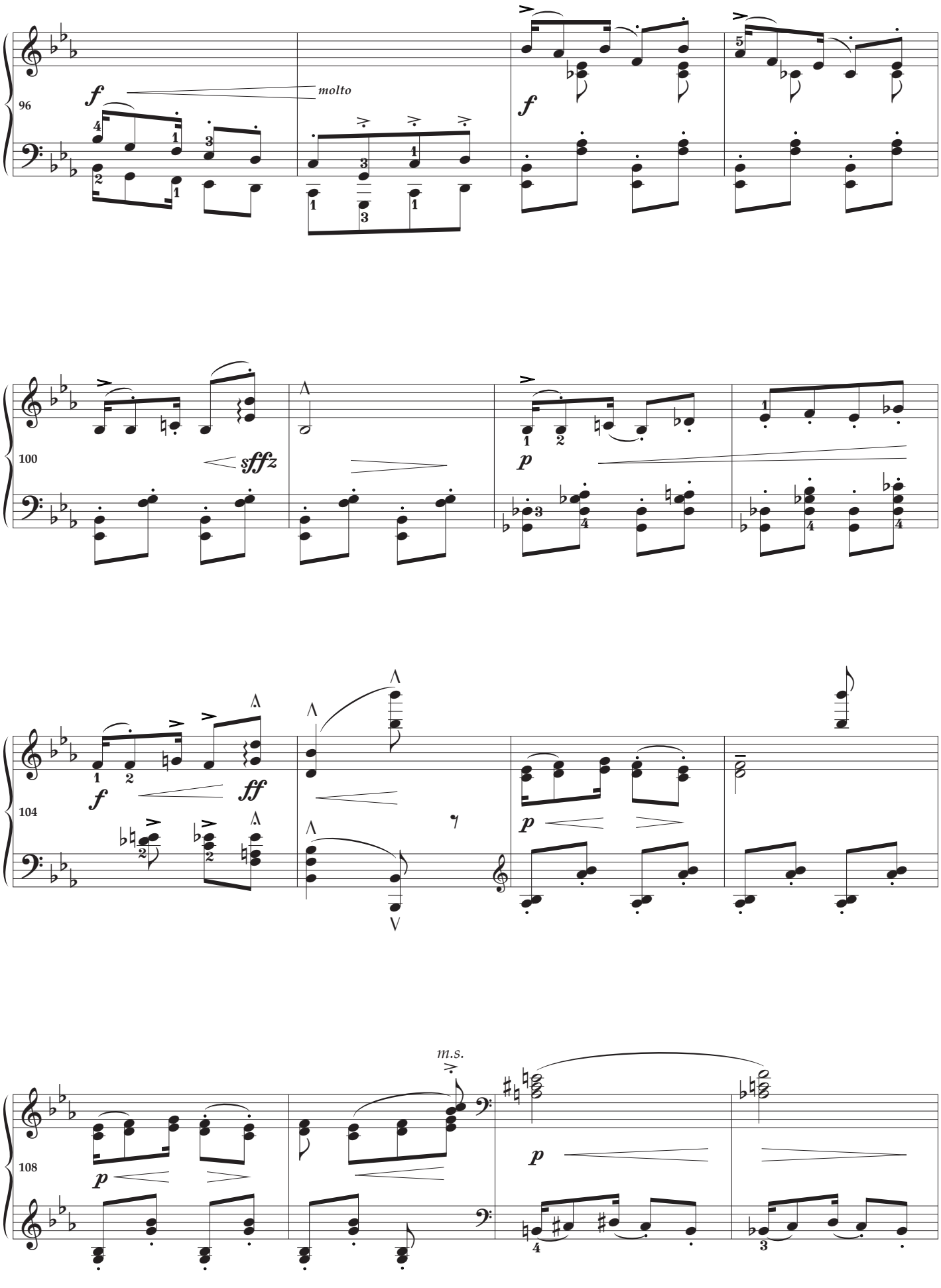


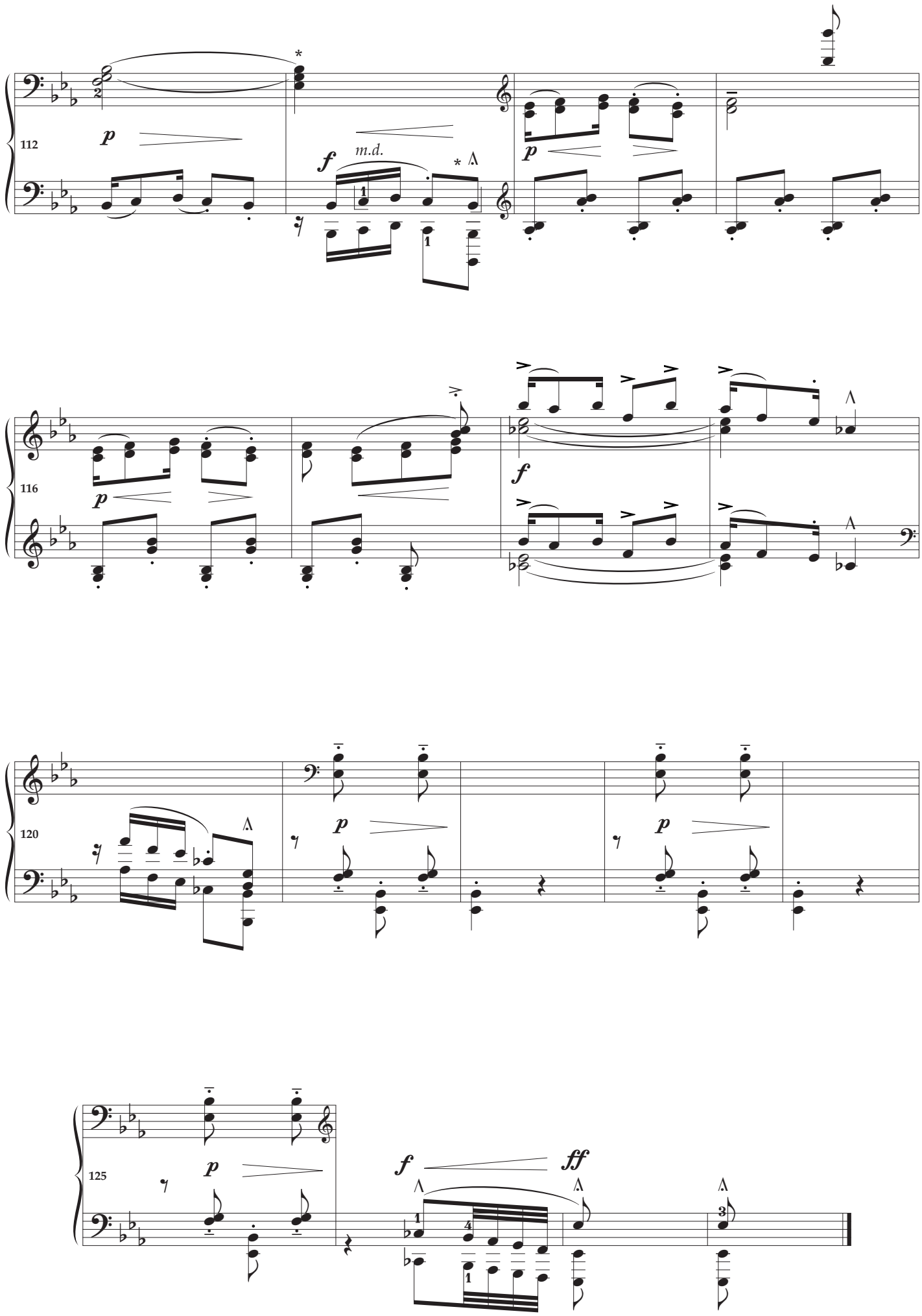
cédez
avec une grande émotion




a tempo
pp
p
63
cédez
p
a tempo
pp
67
m.s.
mf
cédez
f
a tempo
71
cédez
a tempo
pp
75
p
cédez
a tempo
pp


79
m.s.
f
ff
f
m.s.
83
p
4
1
3
retenez
toujours retenu - - - - //
87
pp
più p
pp
2
3
tempo primo
92
sfffz
p


96
f
molto
f
100
sfffz
p
104
f
ff
p
108
m.s.
p


112
p
f
m.d.
p
116
p
f
120
p
p
125
p
f
ff

The Little Minstrel

Now a justifiably reviled racist slur, the original title has been renamed in this edition. In the early years of the 20th century Debussy composed this minstrel show piece, another cake-walk with the inevitable strumming of a banjo, for Theodore Lack's *Méthode de Piano* 1909.

Le Petit Nigar was first published in 1909 by Leduc in Paris and later as a single piece in 1934, with an added repetition, reproduced here.

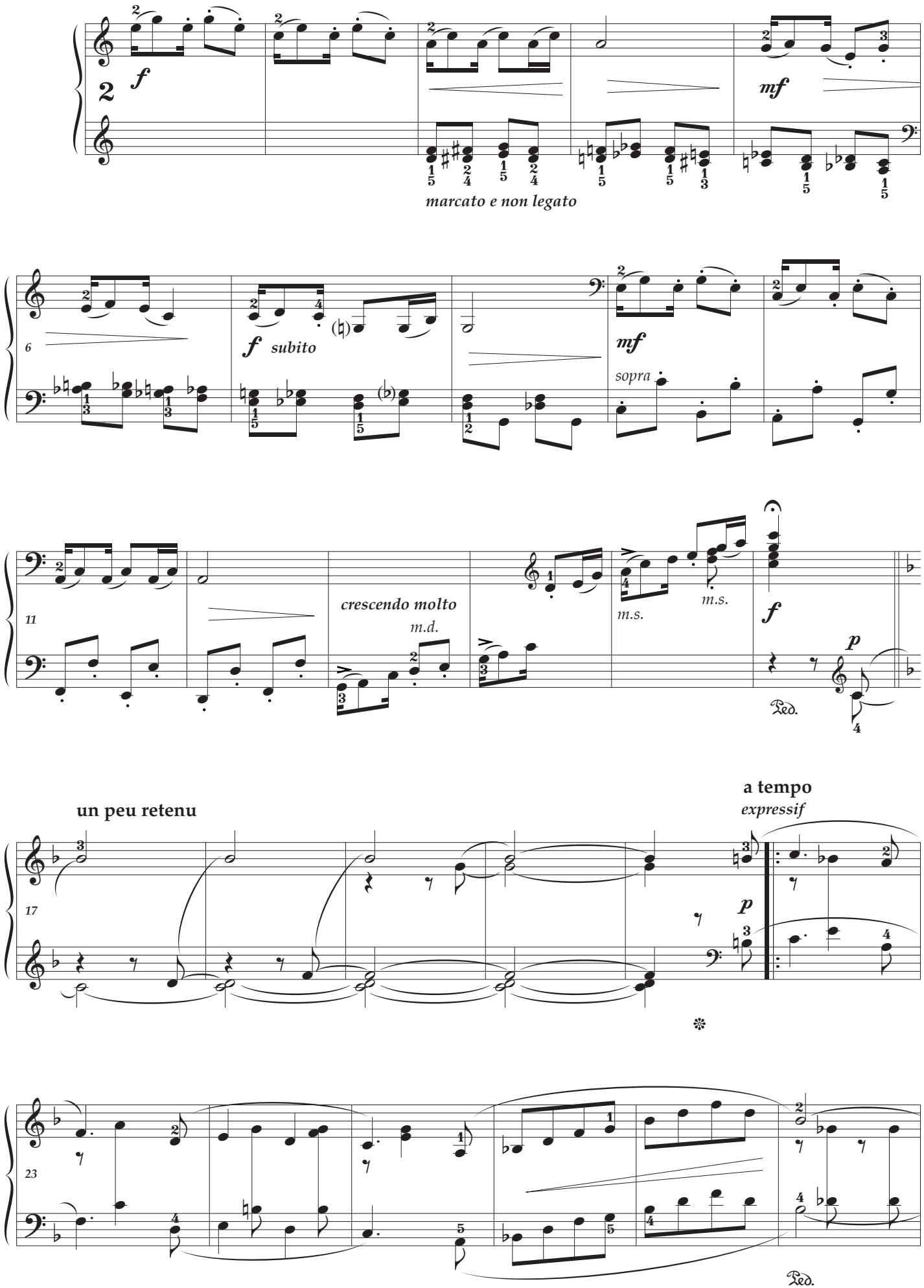
One might say that it resembles a simplified version of *A Cake-Walk for Tristan*, with a lyrical central section but without the distinctive and satirical Wagnerian parody.

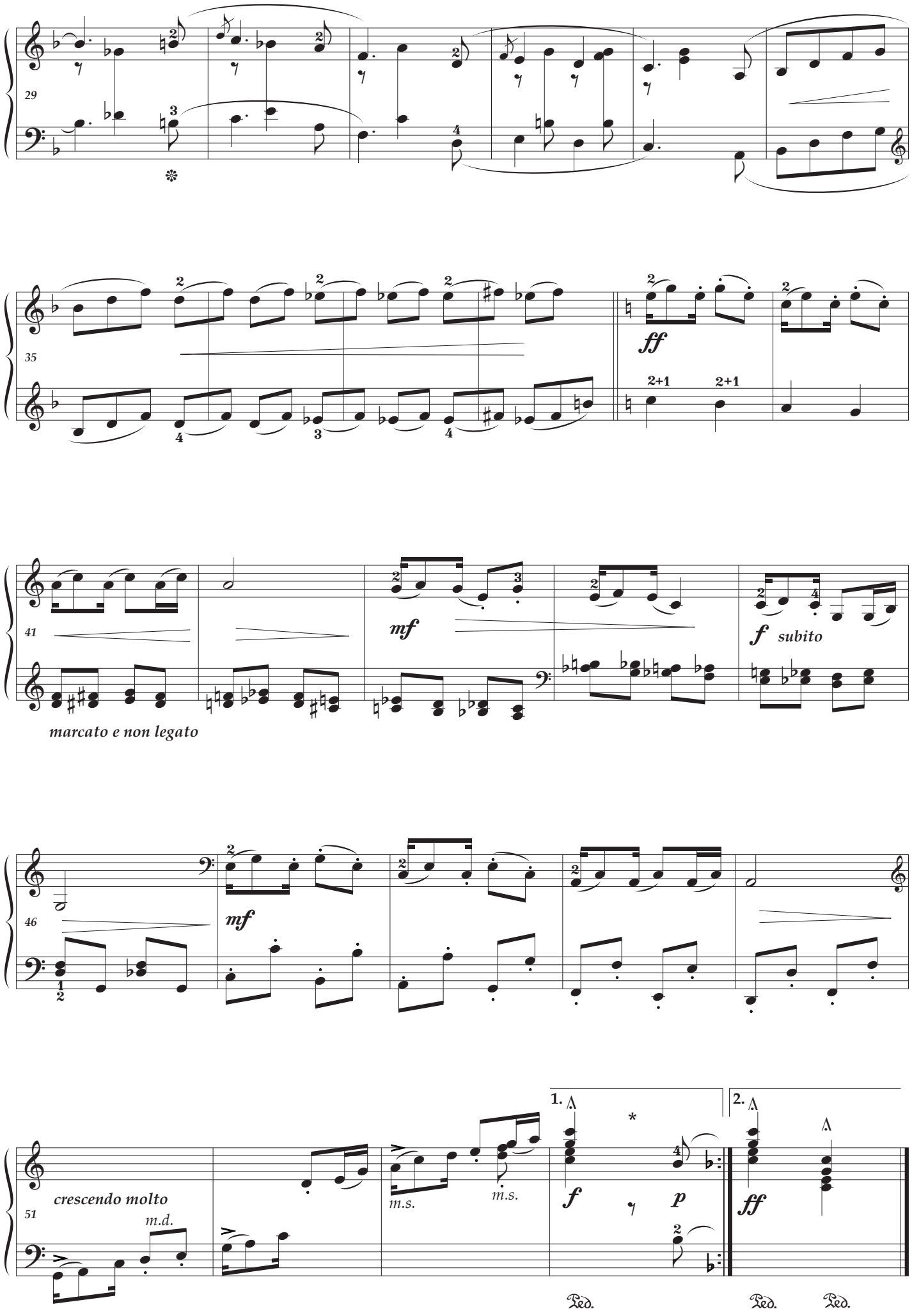
The main theme is featured in *la boîte à joujoux* (the box of toys), Debussy's 1913 ballet for children.

- **54** this repeat should probably be omitted

The Little Minstrel

allegro giusto e ritmico




29
35
ff
2+1
2+1
41
mf
f subito
marcato e non legato
46
mf
51
crescendo molto
m.d.
m.s.
m.s.
1.
2.
f
p
ff
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.

DEBUSSY

CHILDREN'S CORNER

published March 2023

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