Johannes BRAHMS

Acht Klavierstücke

opus 76

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Johannes BRAHMS

1833 — 1897

Acht Klavierstücke

opus 76 1878 - 1879

1	Capriccio F♯ minor	1
2	Capriccio B minor	7
3	Intermezzo A♭ major	14
4	Intermezzo B♭ major	17
5	Capriccio C♯ minor	20
6	Intermezzo A major	27
7	Intermezzo A minor	32
8	Capriccio C major	35

Johannes Brahms's *Eight Pieces for Piano*, Op 76, date from a pivotal moment in his output. Written in 1878–79 at the age of 45, they belong to a period of artistic consolidation rather than experimentation: no longer needing to prove himself, nor yet evaluating his worth. Instead, these pieces show a composer deeply at ease with compression, allusion, and restraint. They are often described as character pieces, but that term barely captures their peculiar gravity. Here, Brahms pares musical thought down to essentials, achieving density without heaviness and intimacy without confessional display. The scale is modest; the ambition is not.

From an academic perspective, Op 76 exemplifies Brahms's mature handling of form and motivic economy. Each piece unfolds with an almost classical logic, yet the surfaces are unmistakably late-Romantic: syncopated inner voices, rhythmic displacement, and a harmonic language that stretches tonality without rupturing it. The influence of earlier models — Baroque counterpoint, Classical balance, even hints of Schumann — is palpable, but never imitative. What fascinates me most is how Brahms allows structural rigour to coexist with expressive ambiguity. Cadences feel earned yet withheld; phrases breathe naturally, but rarely resolve in the way one expects. The music seems to deliberate as it goes, carefully, inwardly.

On a more personal level, the set has always struck me as music that resists display and rewards patience. These are pieces that do not ask to be admired so much as experienced. Their emotional world is autumnal but unsentimental, introspective without self-pity. Playing or listening to them feels like overhearing a monologue — measured, reflective, occasionally stubborn, but quietly humane. In an era increasingly drawn to grand statements, Op 76 reminds us that depth can be found in understatement, and that some of the most lasting music speaks with a subdued voice.

Duality is reflected in the titles, which alternate between *Capriccio* and *Intermezzo* and the distinction is not merely nominal. The *Capriccios* tend toward outward motion and rhythmic vitality — restless, driven, occasionally defiant — while the *Intermezzos* retreat into a more inward, suspended world. Yet Brahms consistently blurs the boundaries: the *Capriccios* are too tightly asserted to be merely impulsive, and the *Intermezzos* often conceal structural toughness beneath their lyric surfaces. The alternation feels less like a contrast of character types than a dialogue between two modes of thought: action and reflection, gesture and afterthought.

B r a h m s *— a photograph c.1876*

If one detects an autumnal quality, it should not be mistaken for melancholy. There is wit in the Capriccios and even defiance. There is intellectual play beneath the surface severity. It is worth mentioning that perhaps the most well-known of the set, N° 2 — contains a dedication written in ink to "Frau Wilhelmine Clauss-Szarvady — *mit herzlich verehrungsvollem Gruß* — Johs. Brahms — Wien Febr. 79."* The intimate and passionate first *Capriccio* first appeared in a slightly altered form in Clara Schumann's library; on page 41 the opening page is reproduced together with a brief history of its genesis.

Some of these pieces work well in the concert hall, but I would say they are at their best when in personal communion with the depths of Brahms's life and inner self at this time. 1879 finds him in a strikingly balanced, even confident position — although never uncomplicated. He is approaching middle age, internationally respected, financially secure, and artistically established. Yet his temperament remains inward, skeptical, and self-critical. He is no longer a struggling artist — reviews are strong, performances frequent and publishers attentive. If anything, Brahms is in a state of controlled strength — no longer defensive about Beethoven's shadow, no longer anxious to prove himself, yet still intensely disciplined. He has become, whether he likes it or not, an institution.

* "Mrs. Wilhelmine Clauss-Szárvády with heartfelt, respectful greetings." The dedicatee (1832-1907) was a highly respected Bohemiam-born French pianist.

1 ***Capriccio***

47 the natural is missing in all editions — a very probable oversight

51 the treble minim's augmentation dots are missing in most editions — a probable oversight

2 ***Capriccio***

46 editorial 'arrangement'

120 for smaller hands — the diamond-headed note can be played silently thus obviating pedal use

3 ***Intermezzo***

27-29 Brahms's 51 exercises — those concentrating on held notes (10 - 19) and double held notes (39) are a particularly useful preparation

4 ***Intermezzo***

32 editorial accent

5 ***Capriccio***

68 the ♯ is missing from treble A in all editions — a very probable omission

71 Brahms gives no instruction at this change of time signature — a more probable solution than ♪ = ♪

6 ***Intermezzo***

82-83 editorial bass octaves

8 ***Capriccio***

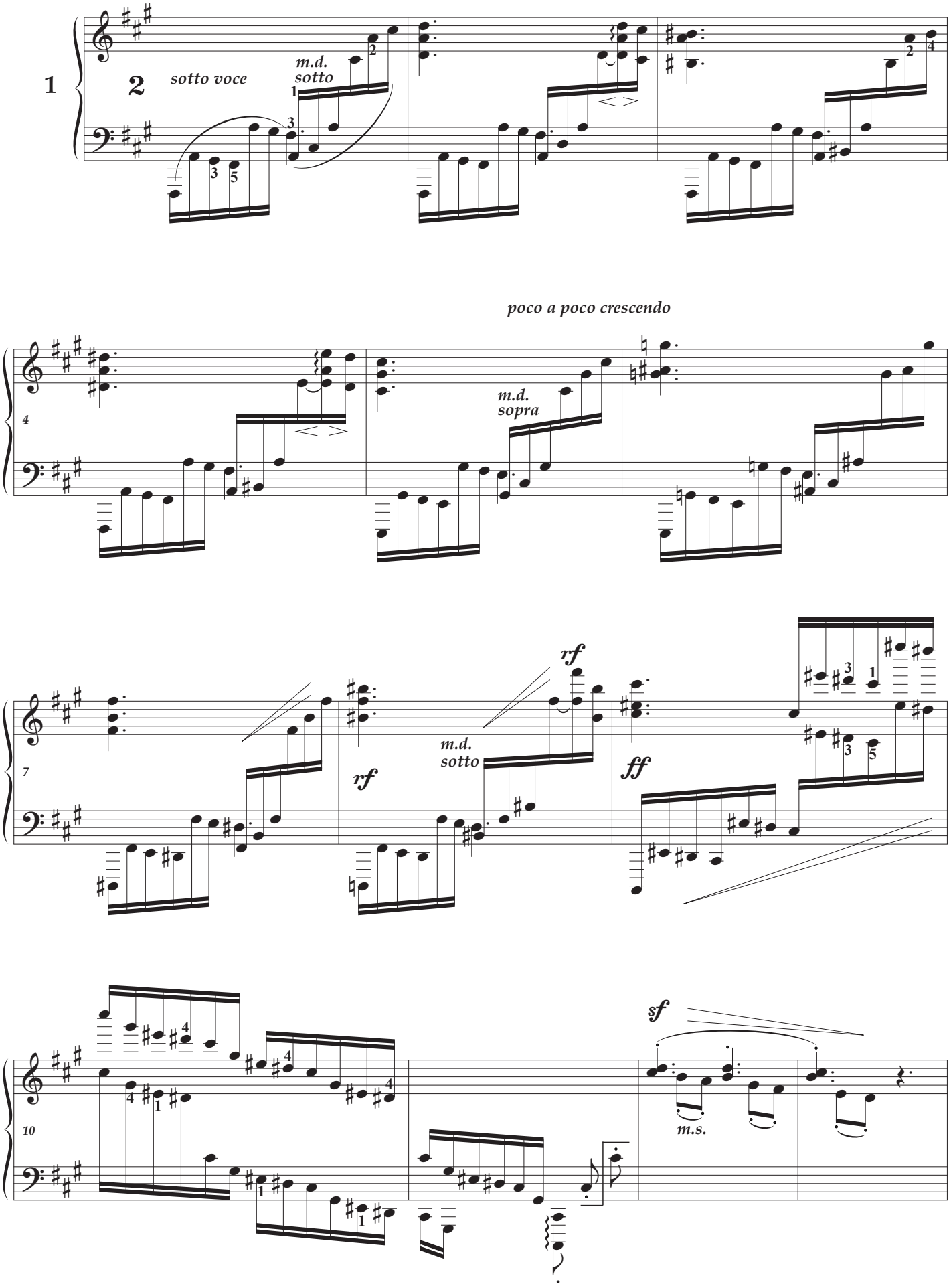
40 editorial bass voice in anticipation of **42** — a possible omission

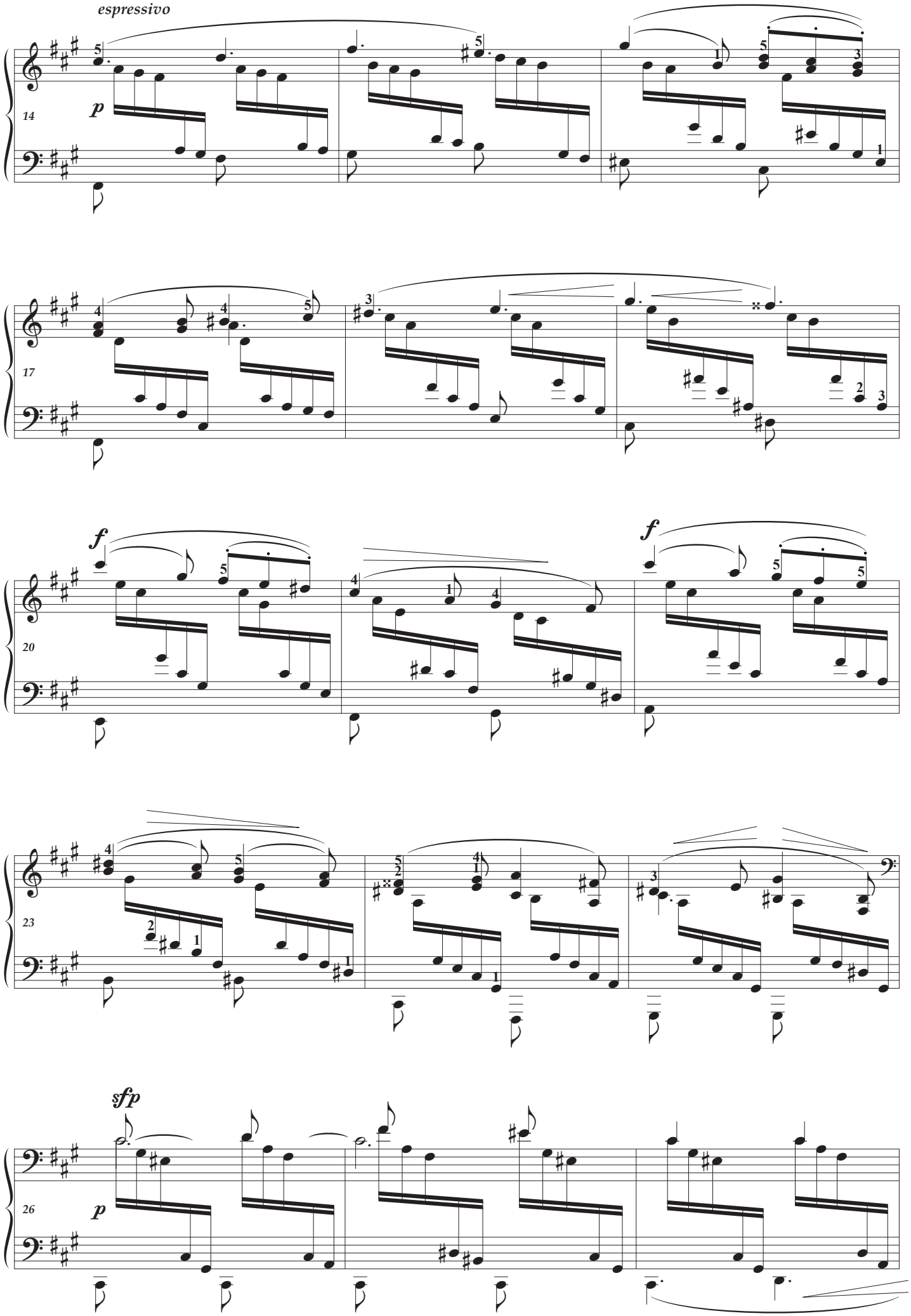
44 I have a hunch that this might be a B flat

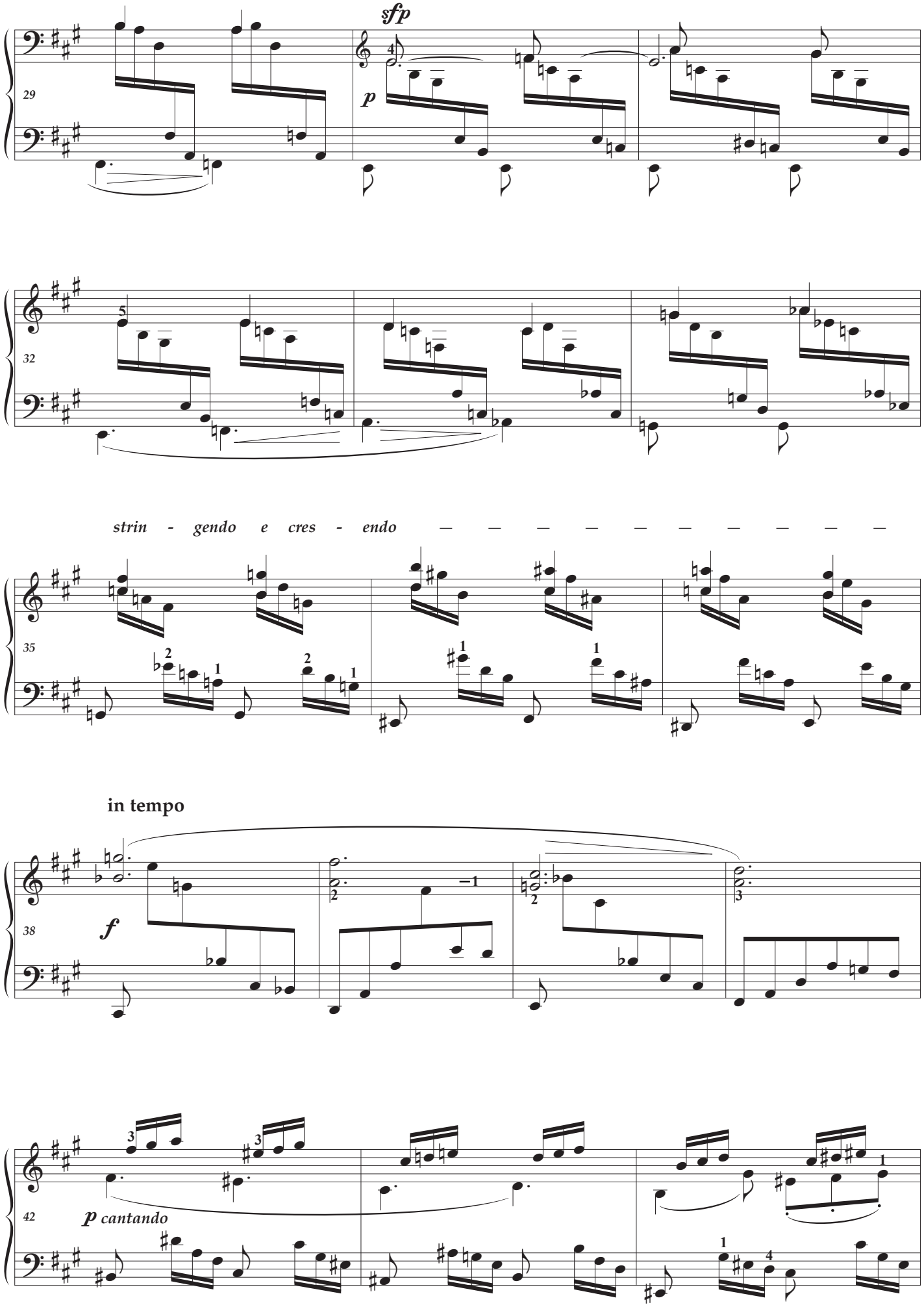
54 editorial alto voice in anticipation of **42** — a possible omission

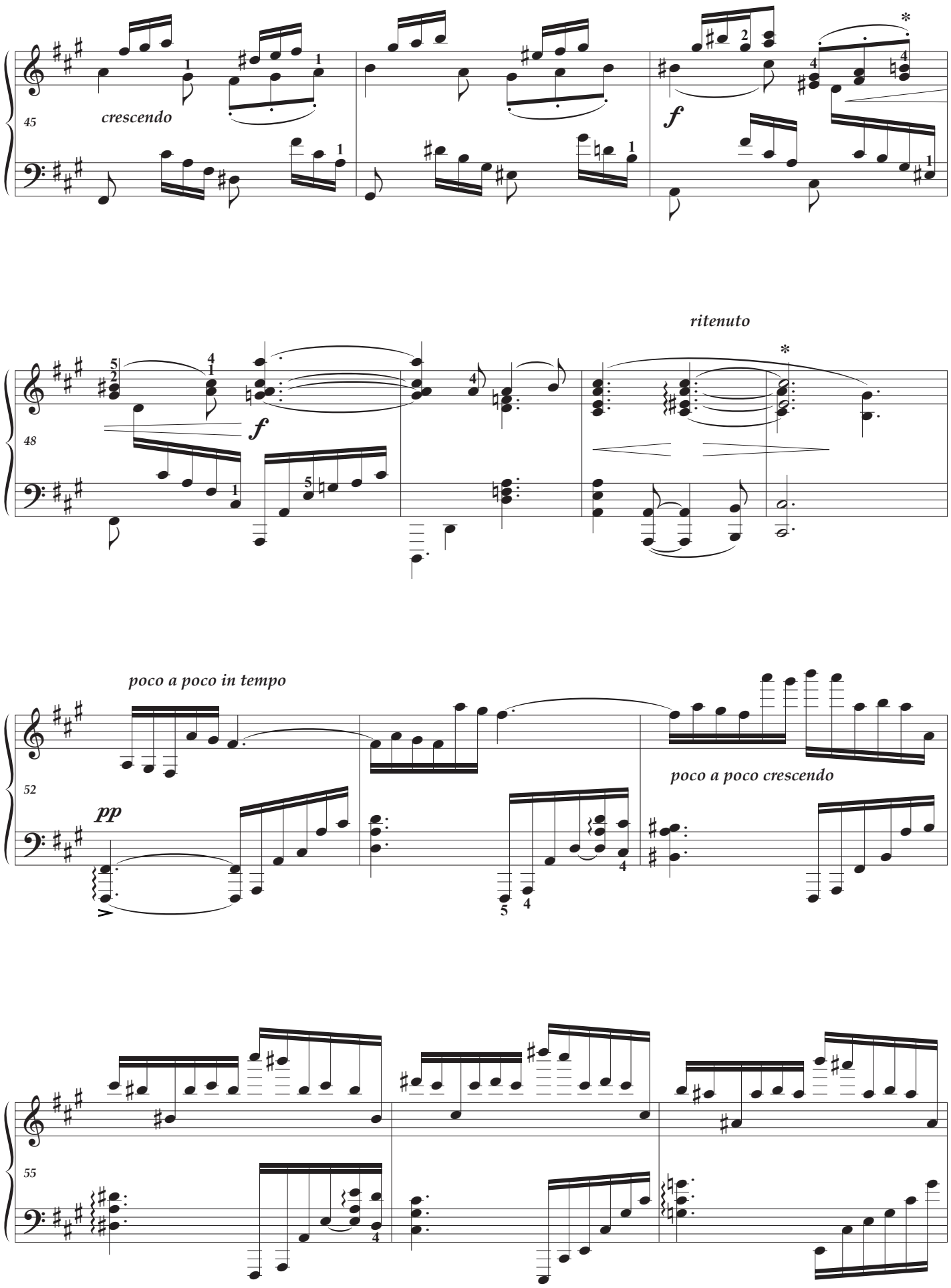
CAPRICCIO

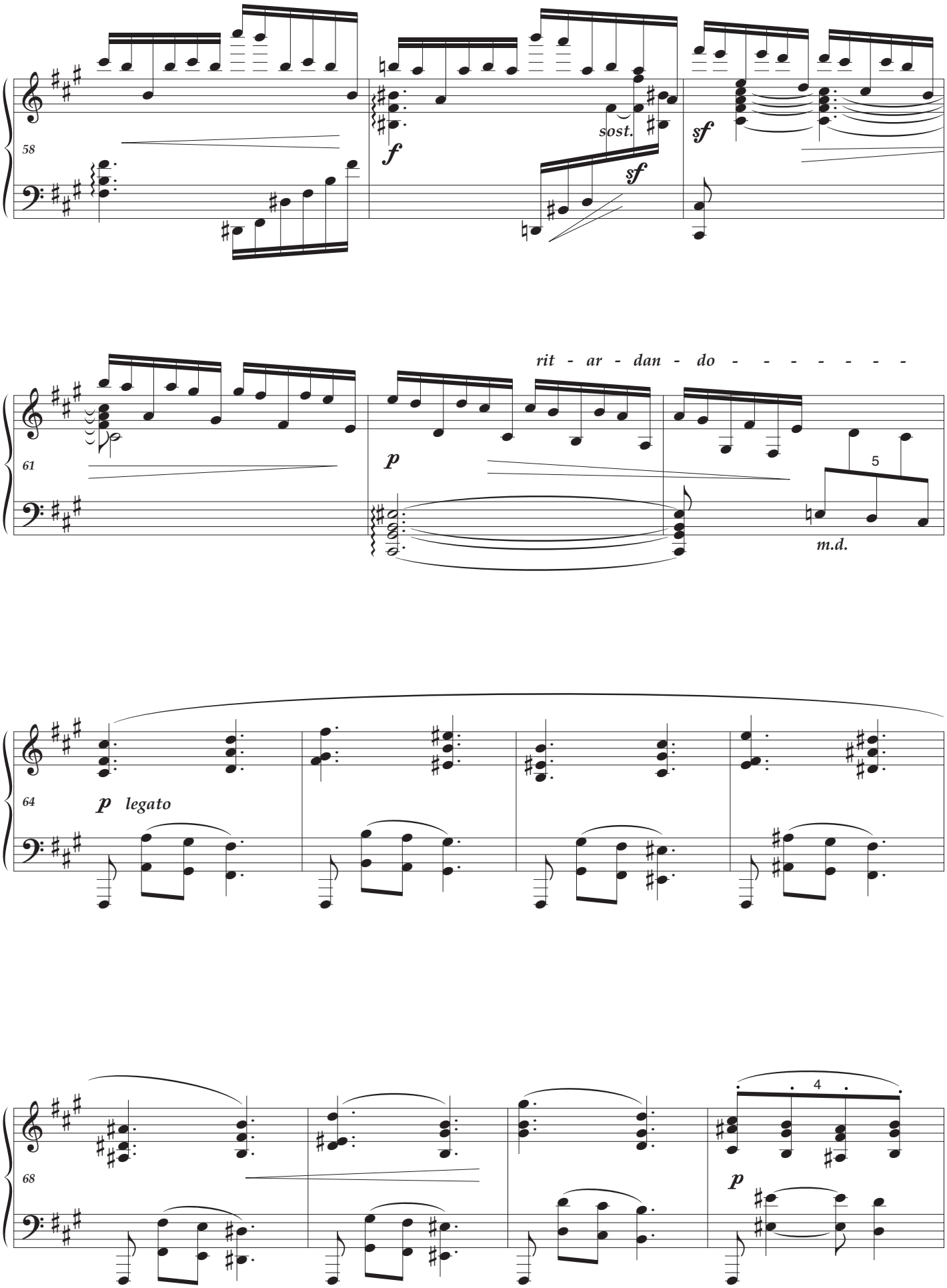
un poco agitato

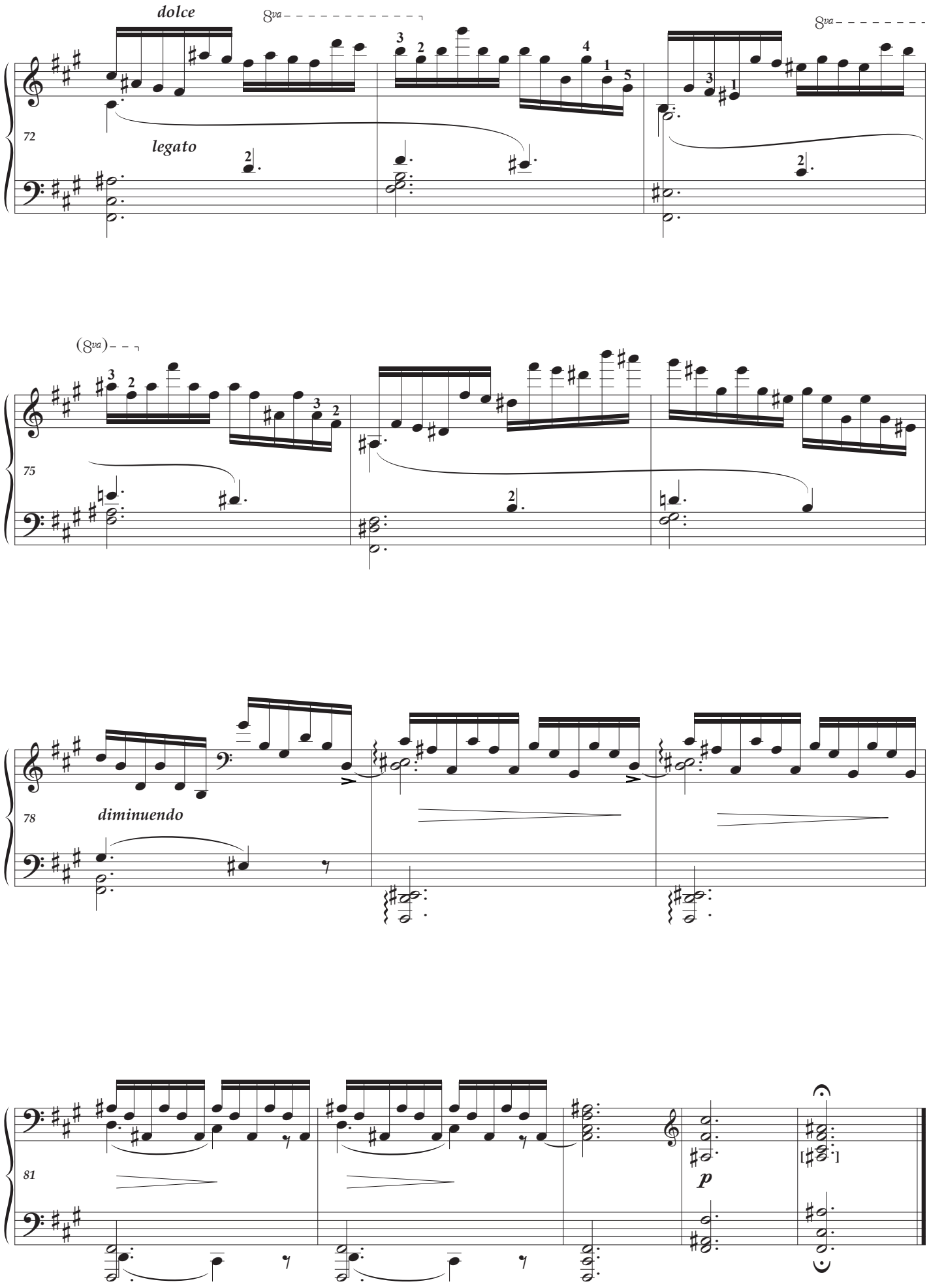



espressivo
p
14
17
f
20
f
23
sfp
p
26

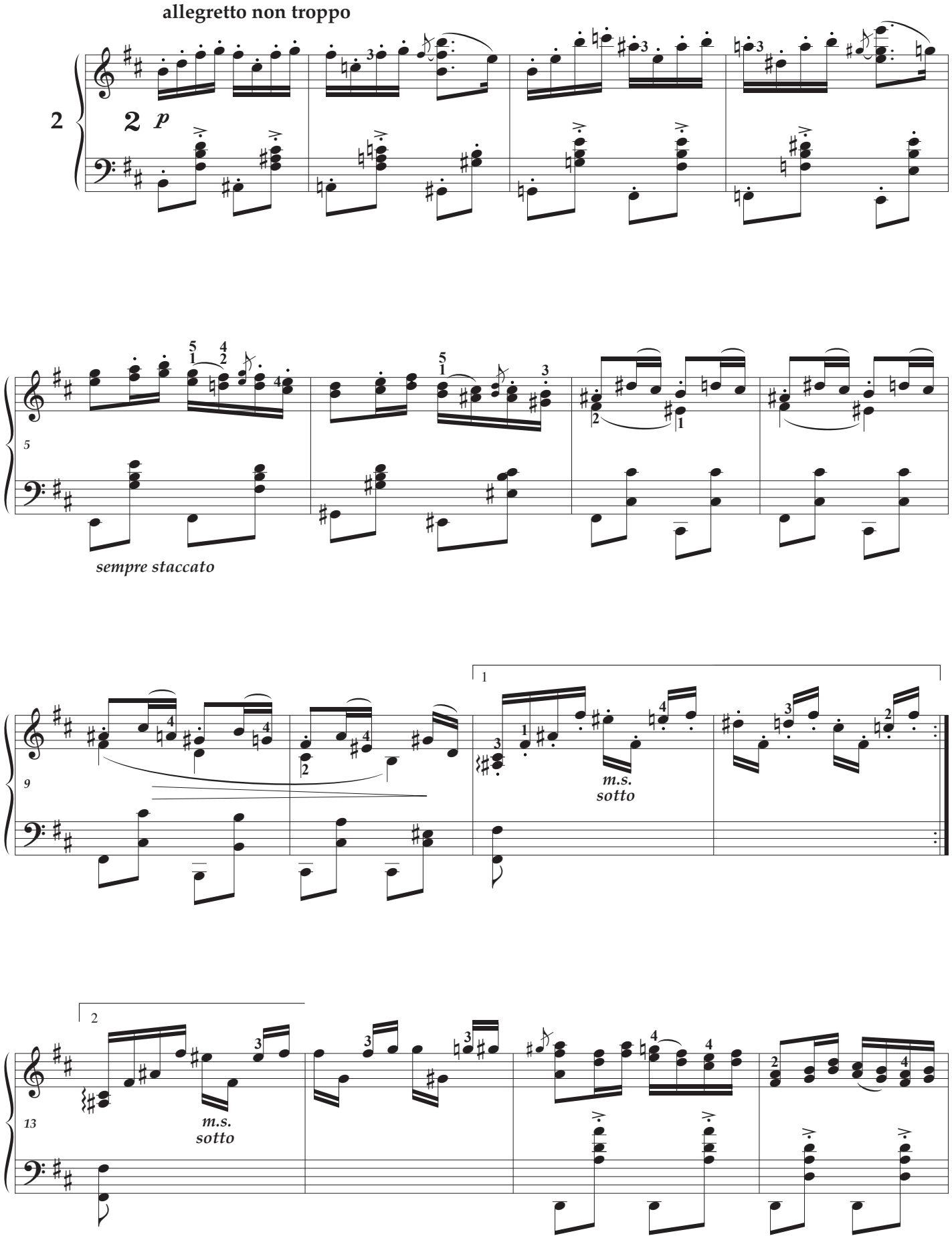

sfp
p
strin - gendo e cres - endo
in tempo
f
p cantando

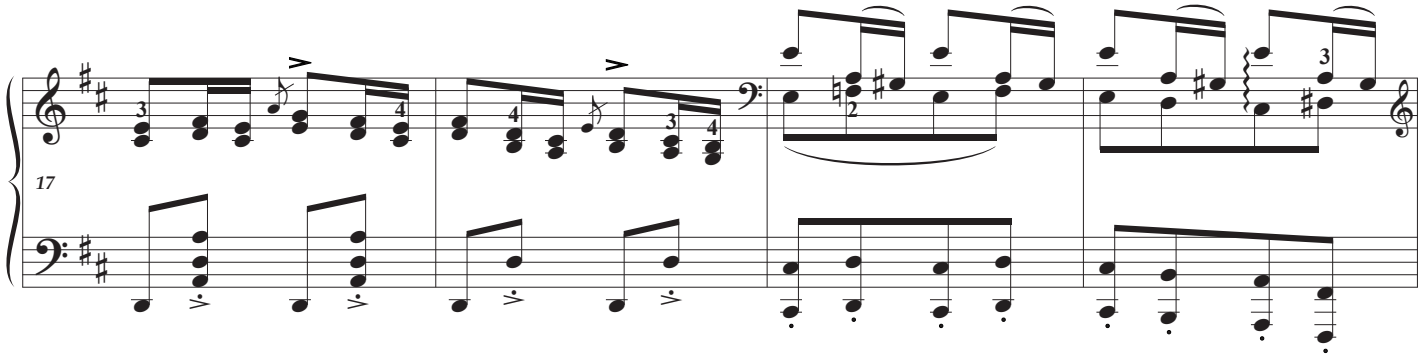

45
crescendo
f
48
f
ritenuto
52
poco a poco in tempo
pp
poco a poco crescendo
55

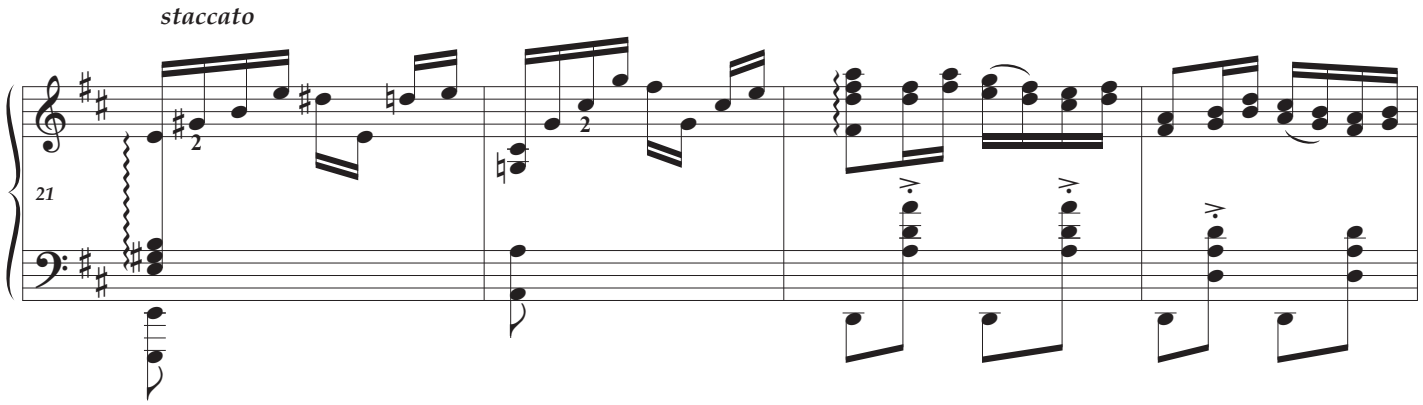

58
f
sost.
sf
sf
61
p
rit - ar - dan - do - - - - - - - -
5
m.d.
64
p legato
68
p
4

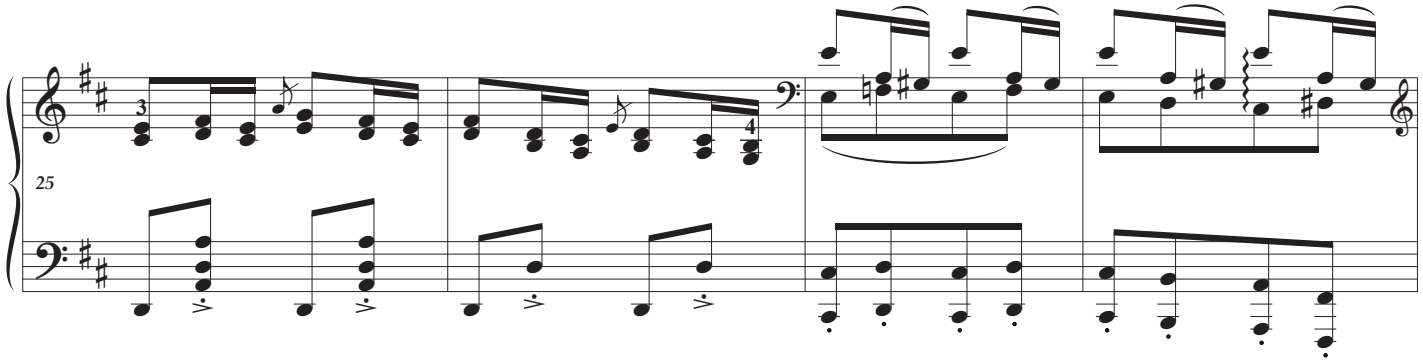

dolce
8va
legato
72
(8va)
75
diminuendo
78
81
p

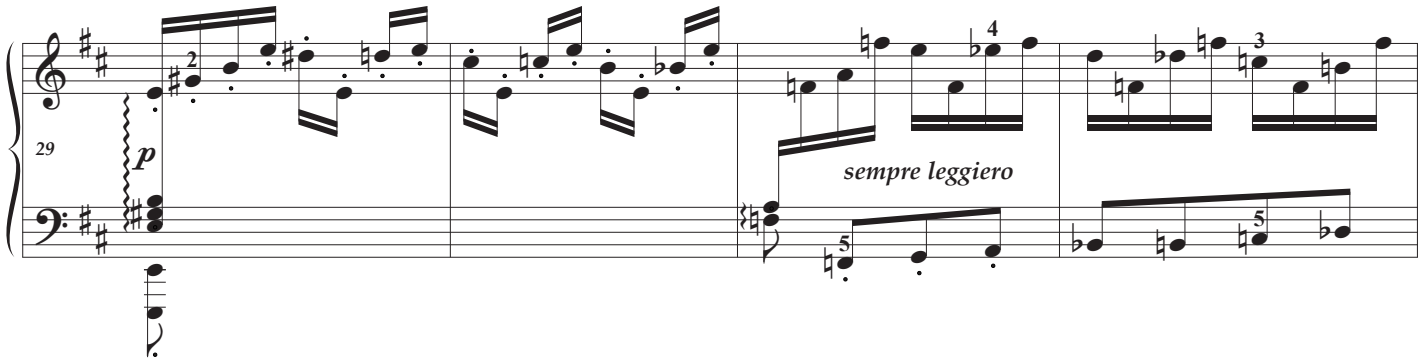
CAPRICCIO

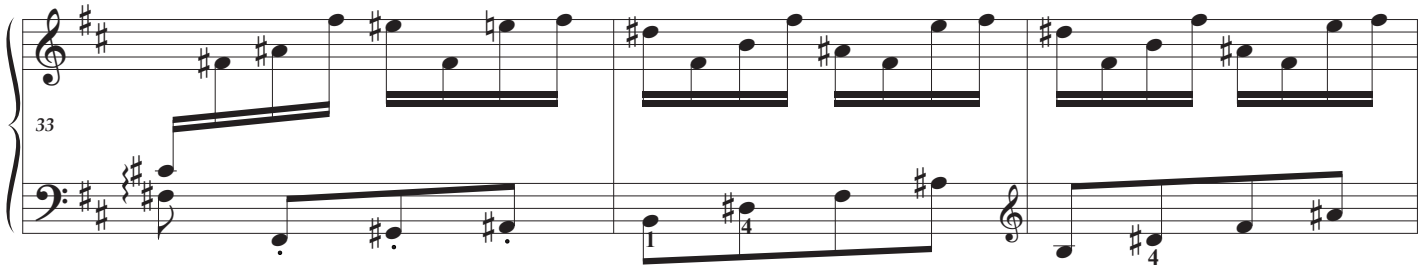


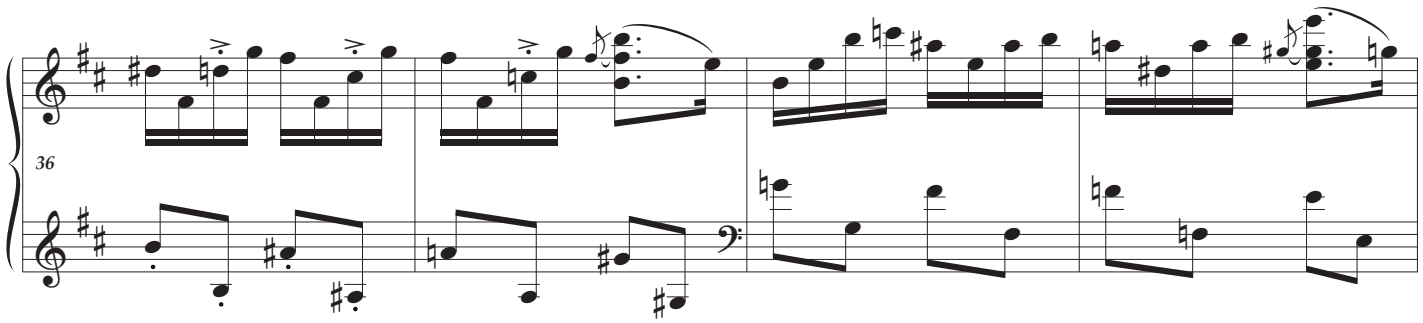



staccato




p
sempre leggiero

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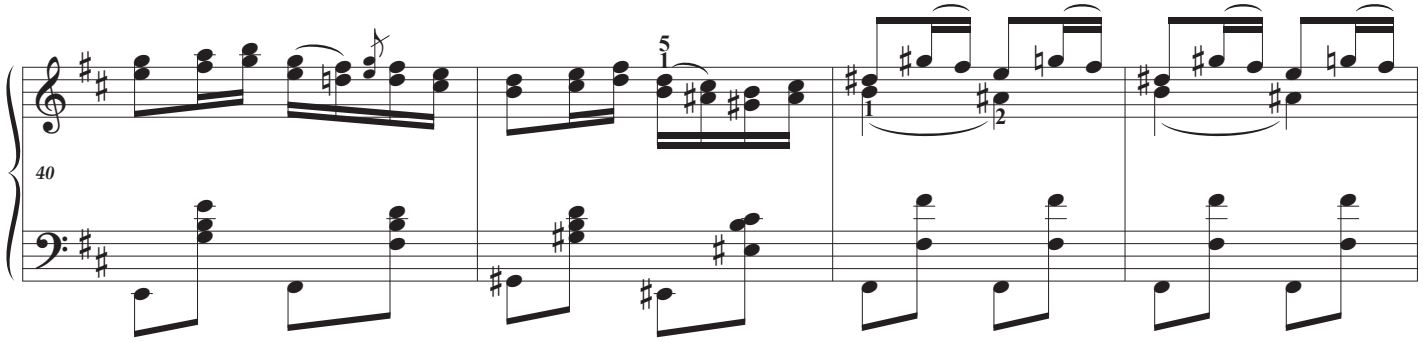
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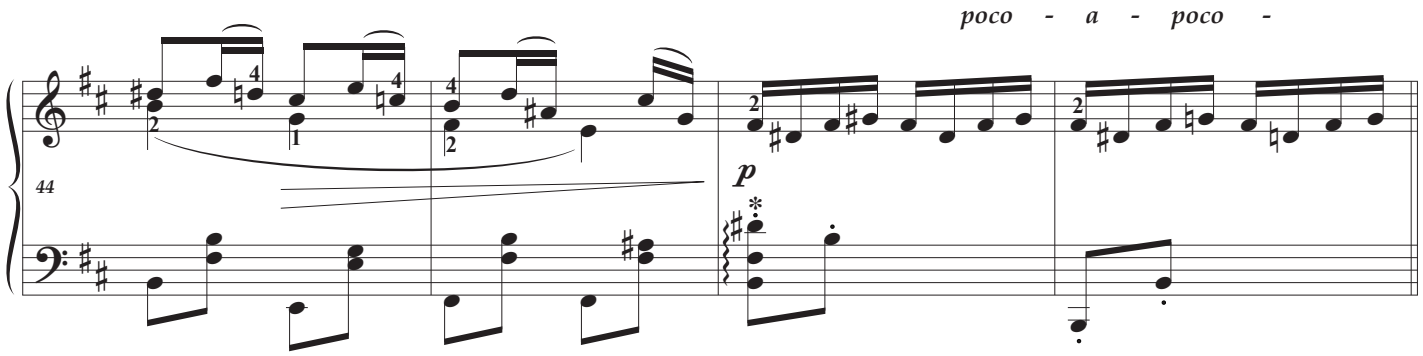
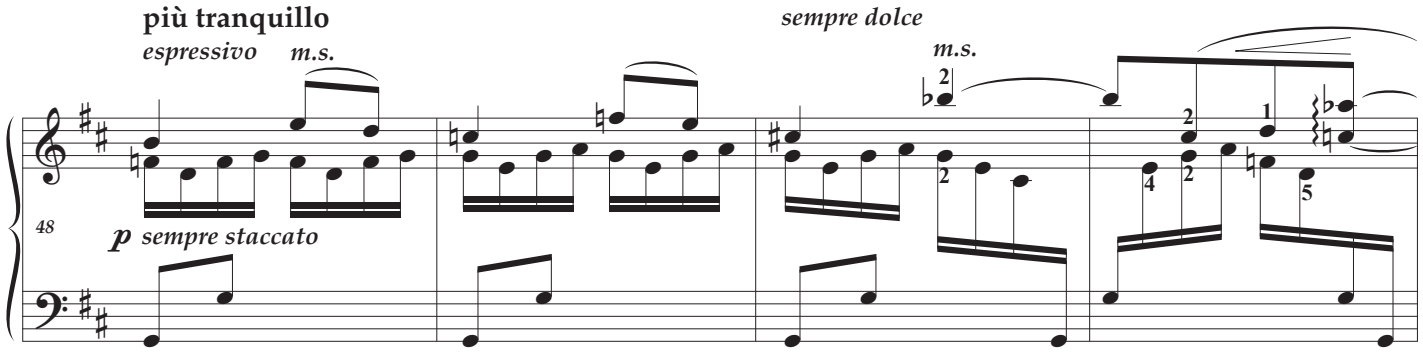
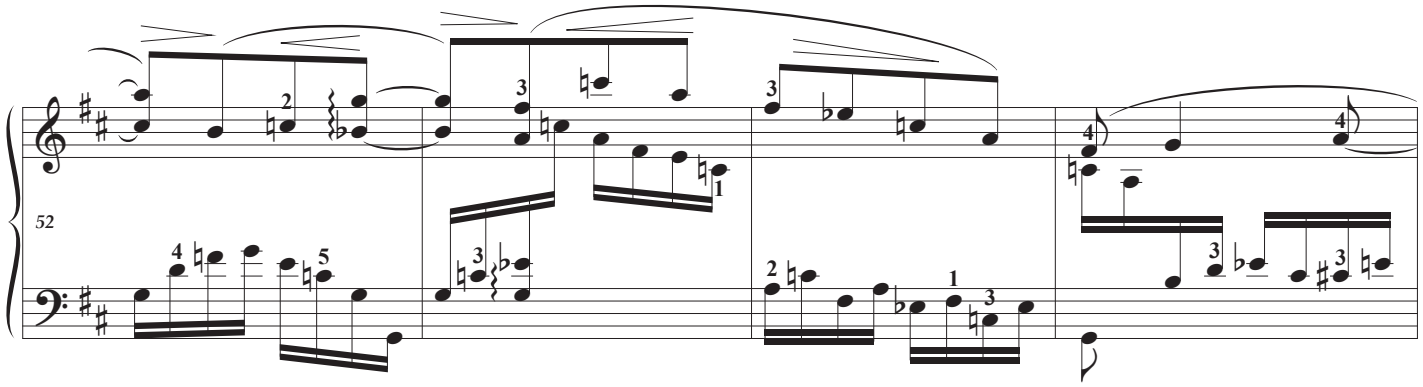

poco - a - poco -
44
p


più tranquillo
espressivo
m.s.
sempre dolce
m.s.
48
p sempre staccato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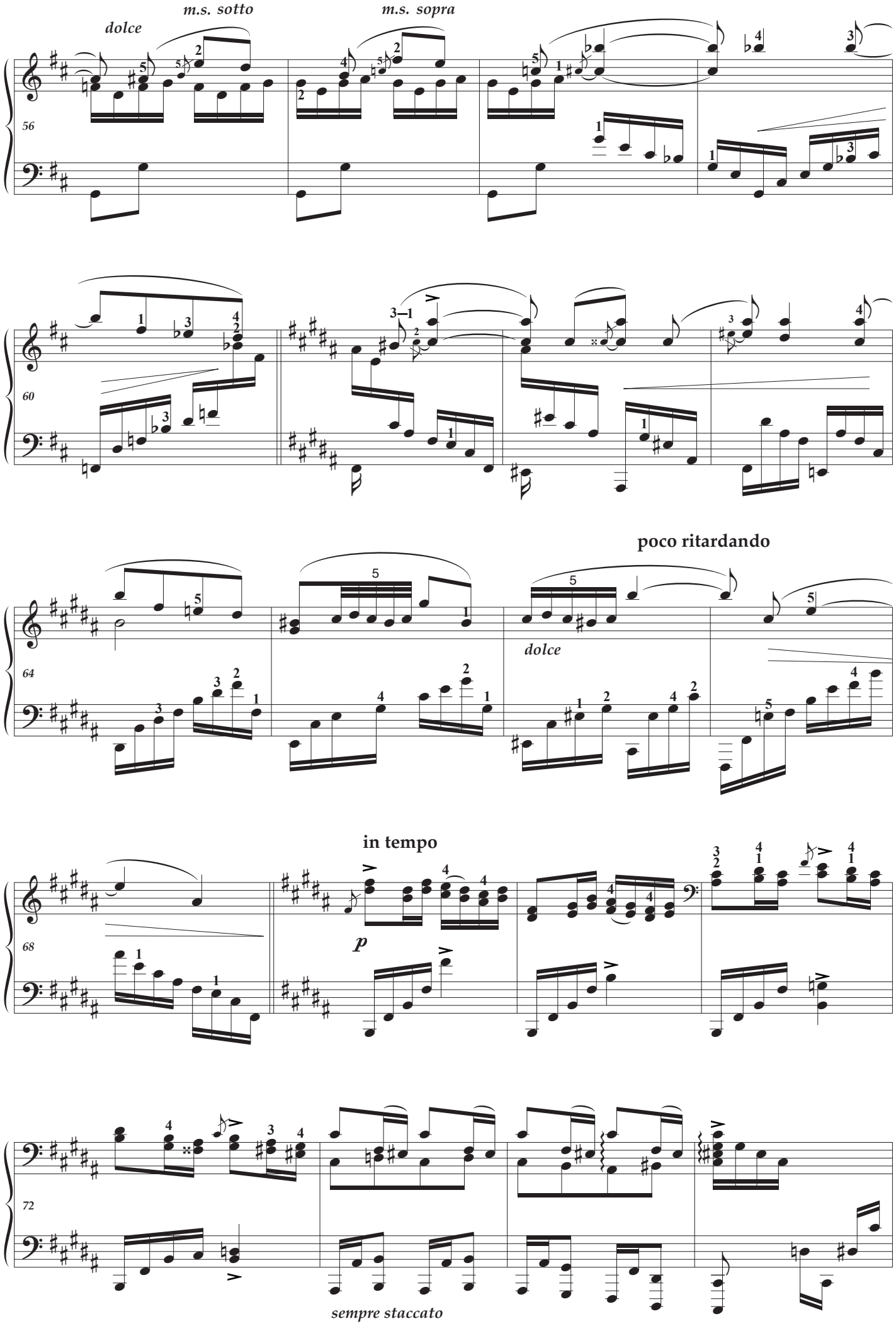
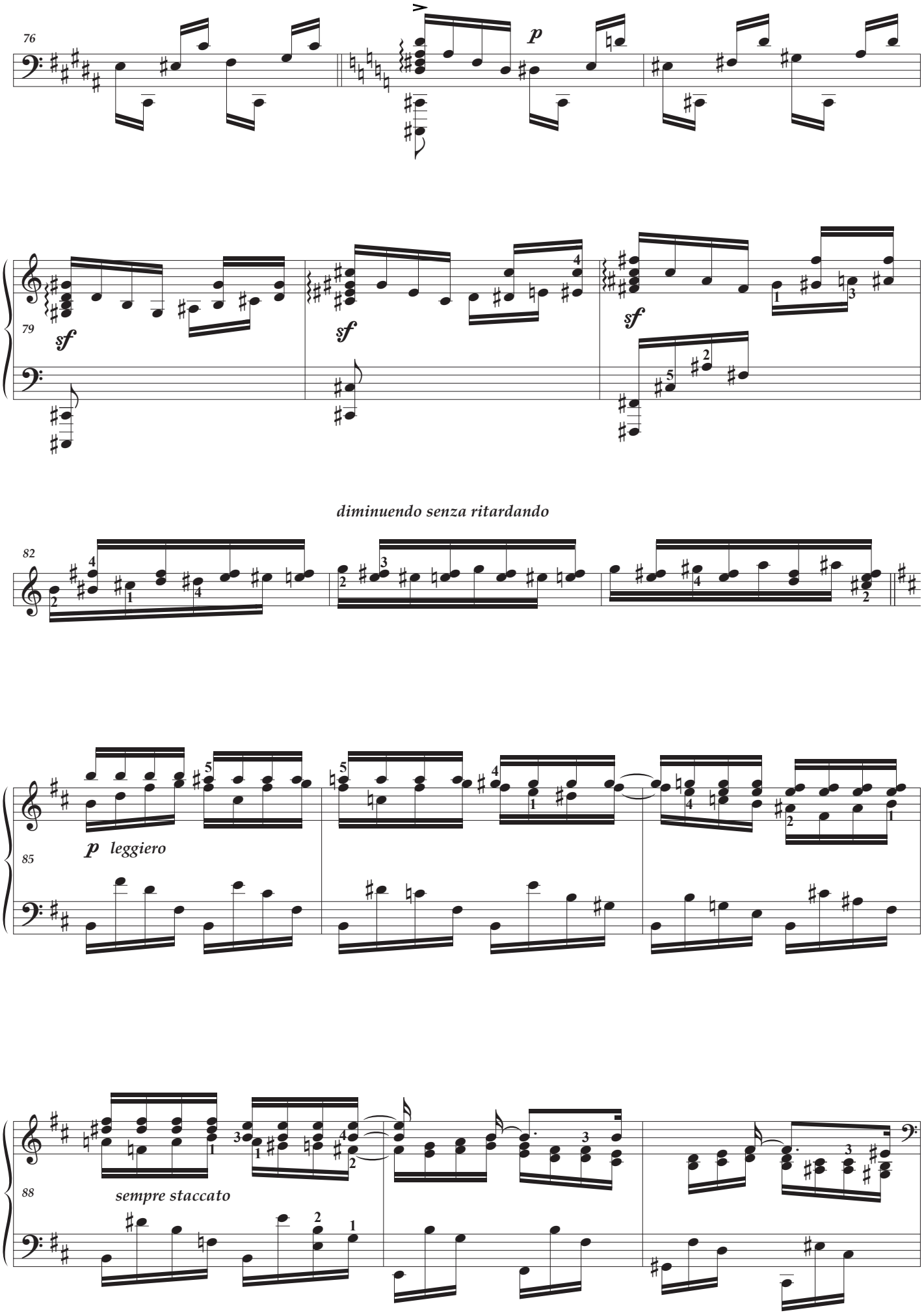
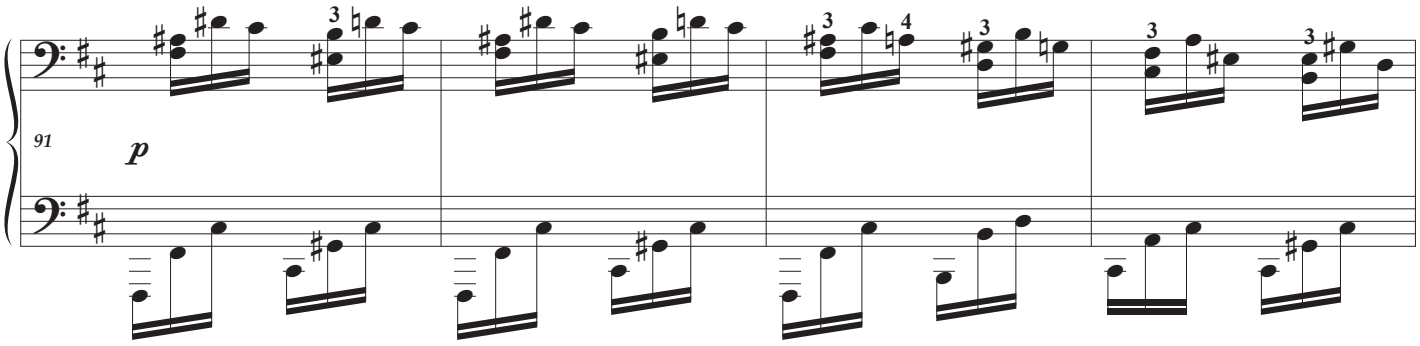
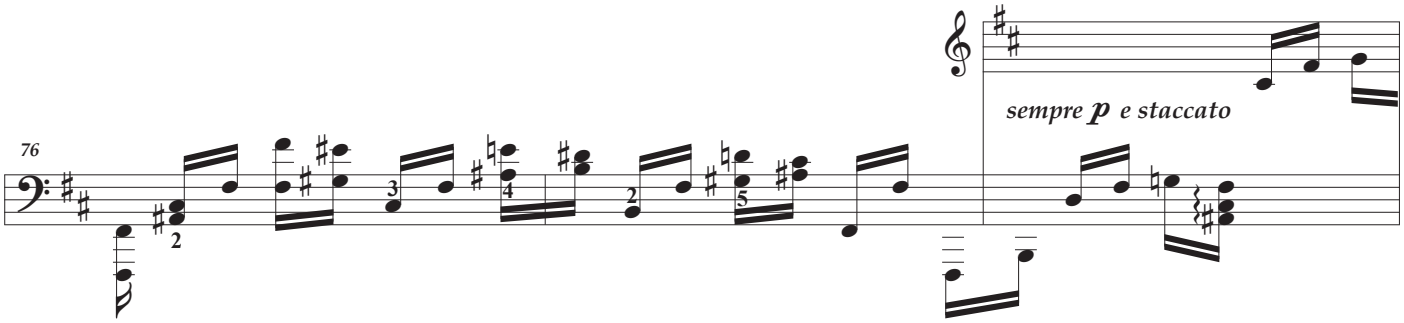

dolce
m.s. sotto
m.s. sopra
56
60
poco ritardando
64
dolce
in tempo
68
p
72
sempre staccato


76
p
79
sf
sf
sf
diminuendo senza ritardando
82
85
p leggiero
88
sempre staccato


91
p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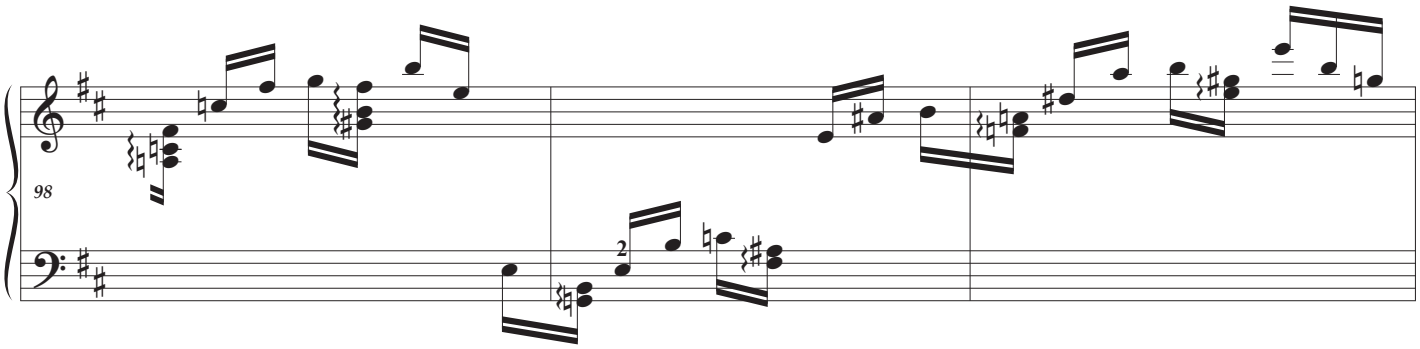
sempre p e staccato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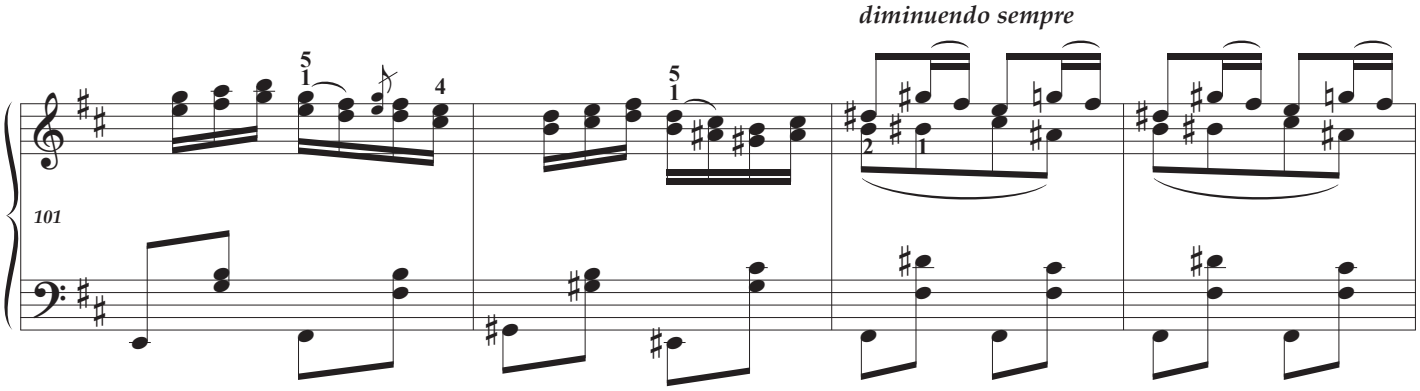
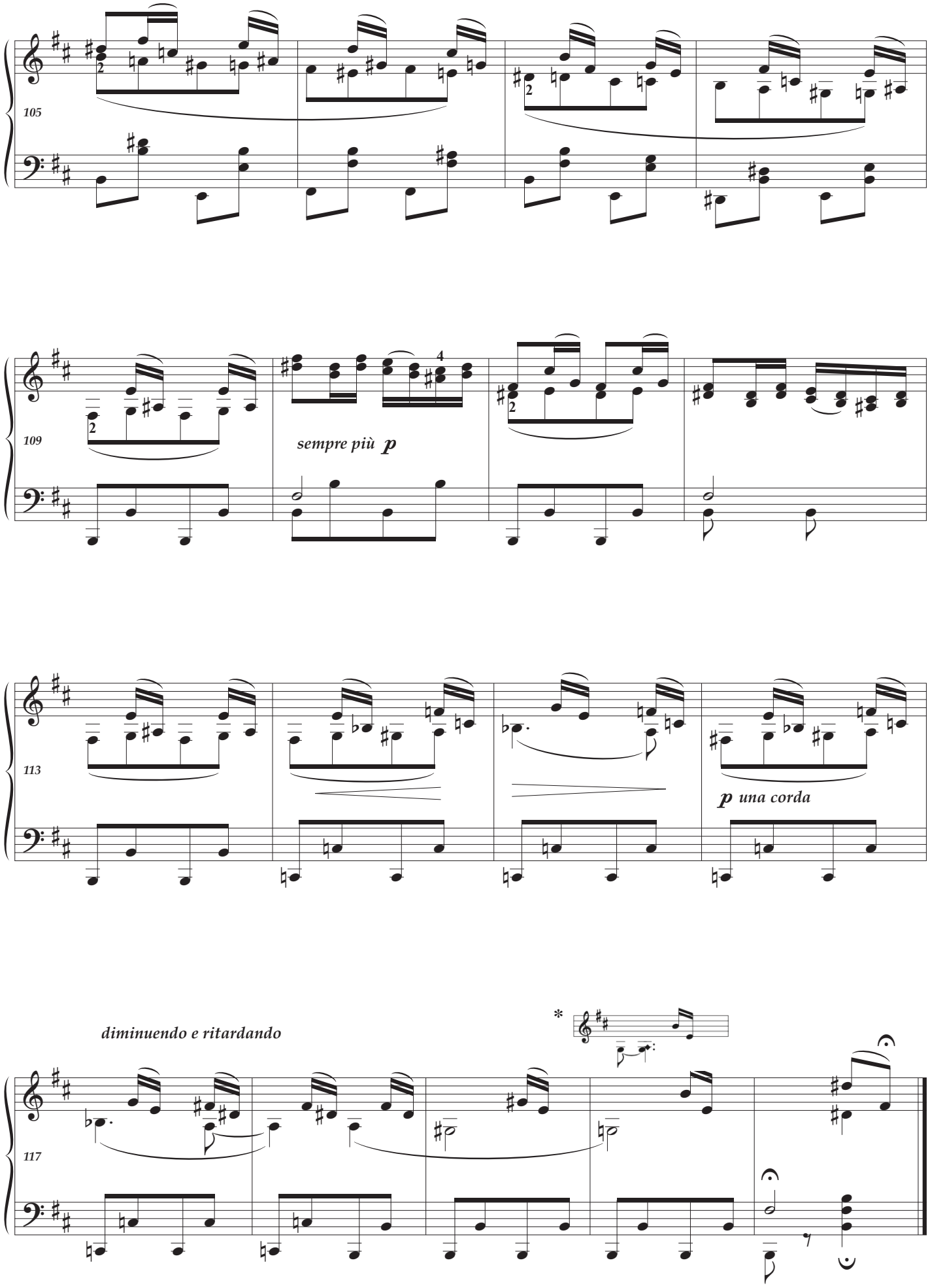
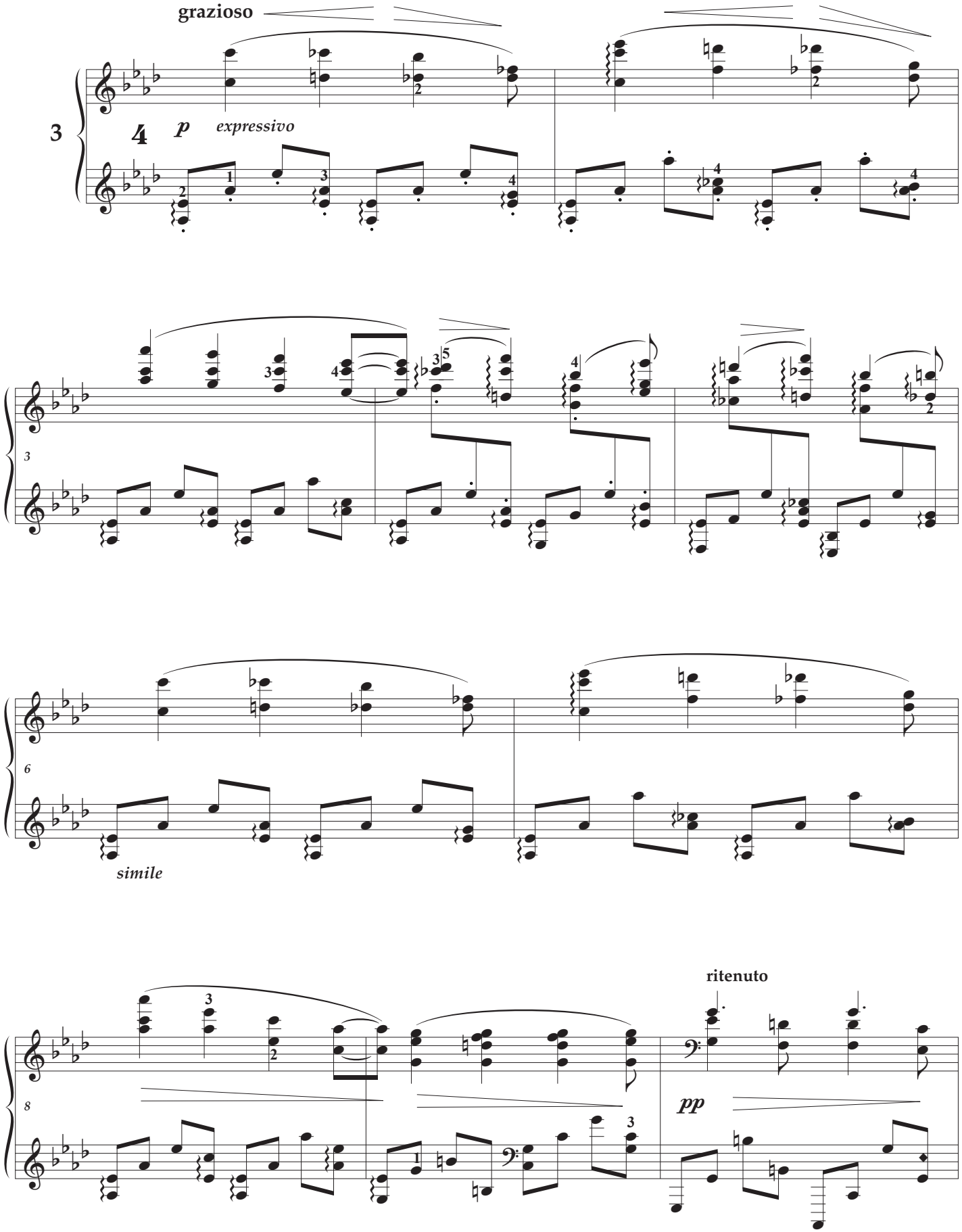
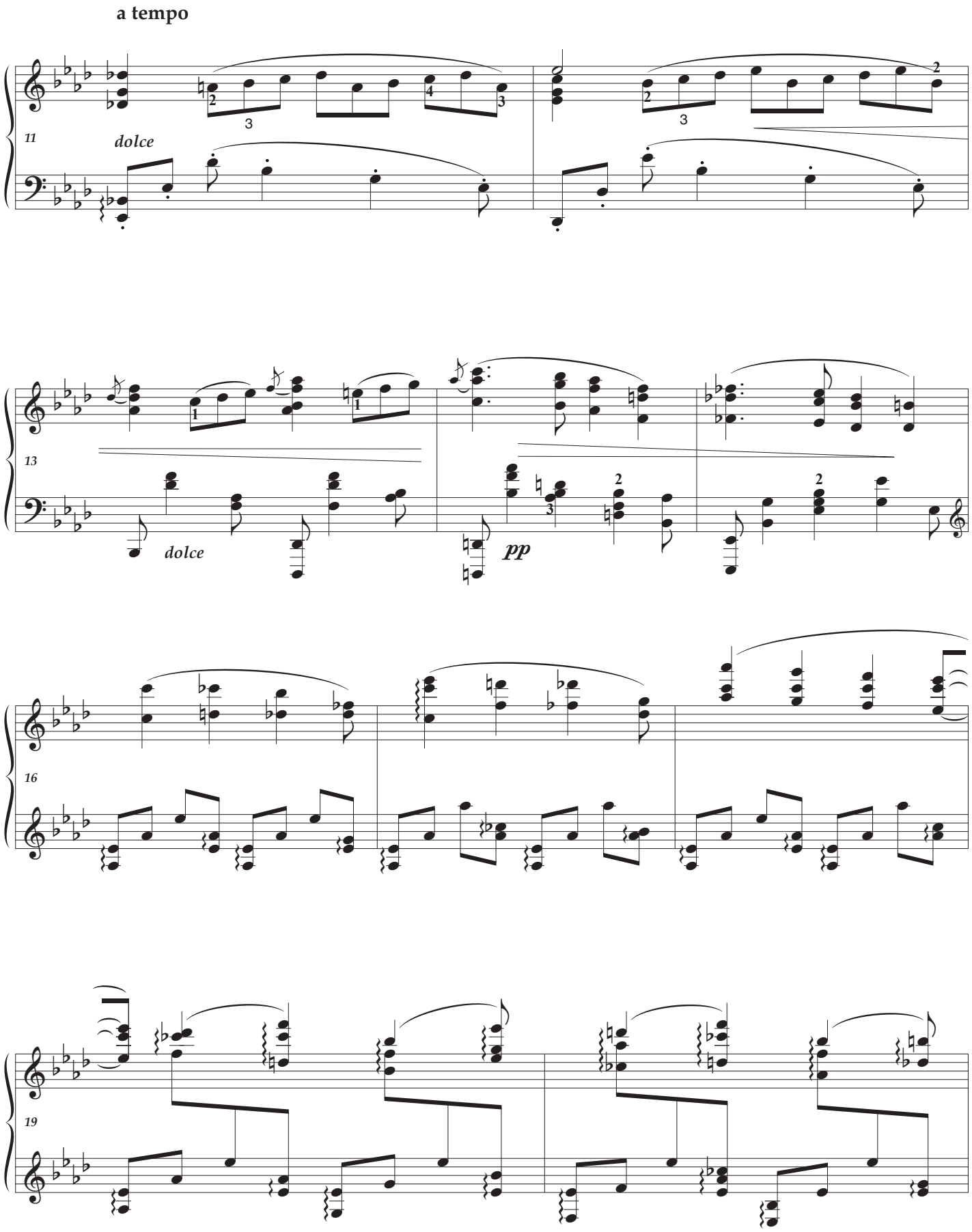
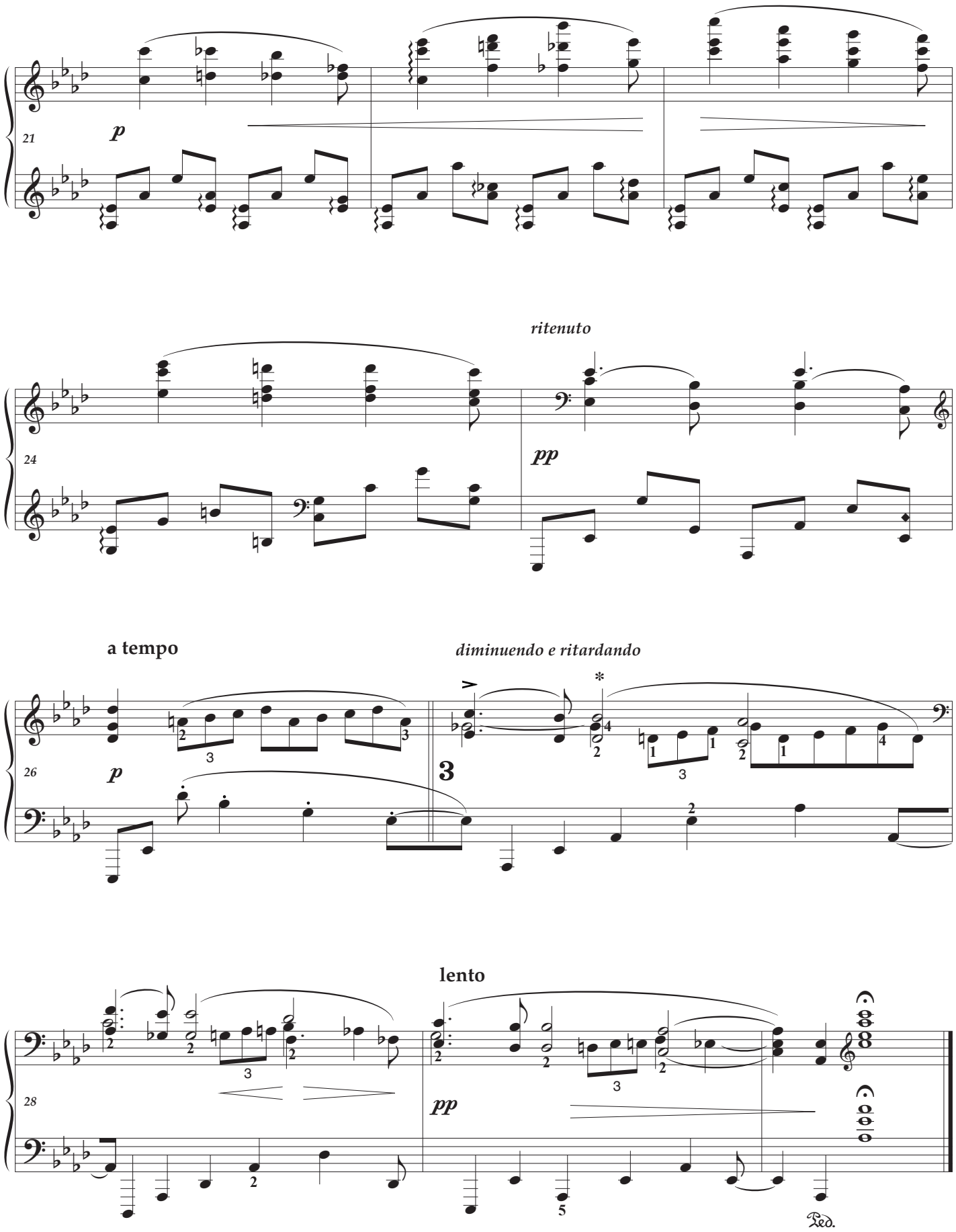

101
diminuendo sempre


105
109
sempre più p
113
p una corda
diminuendo e ritardando
117

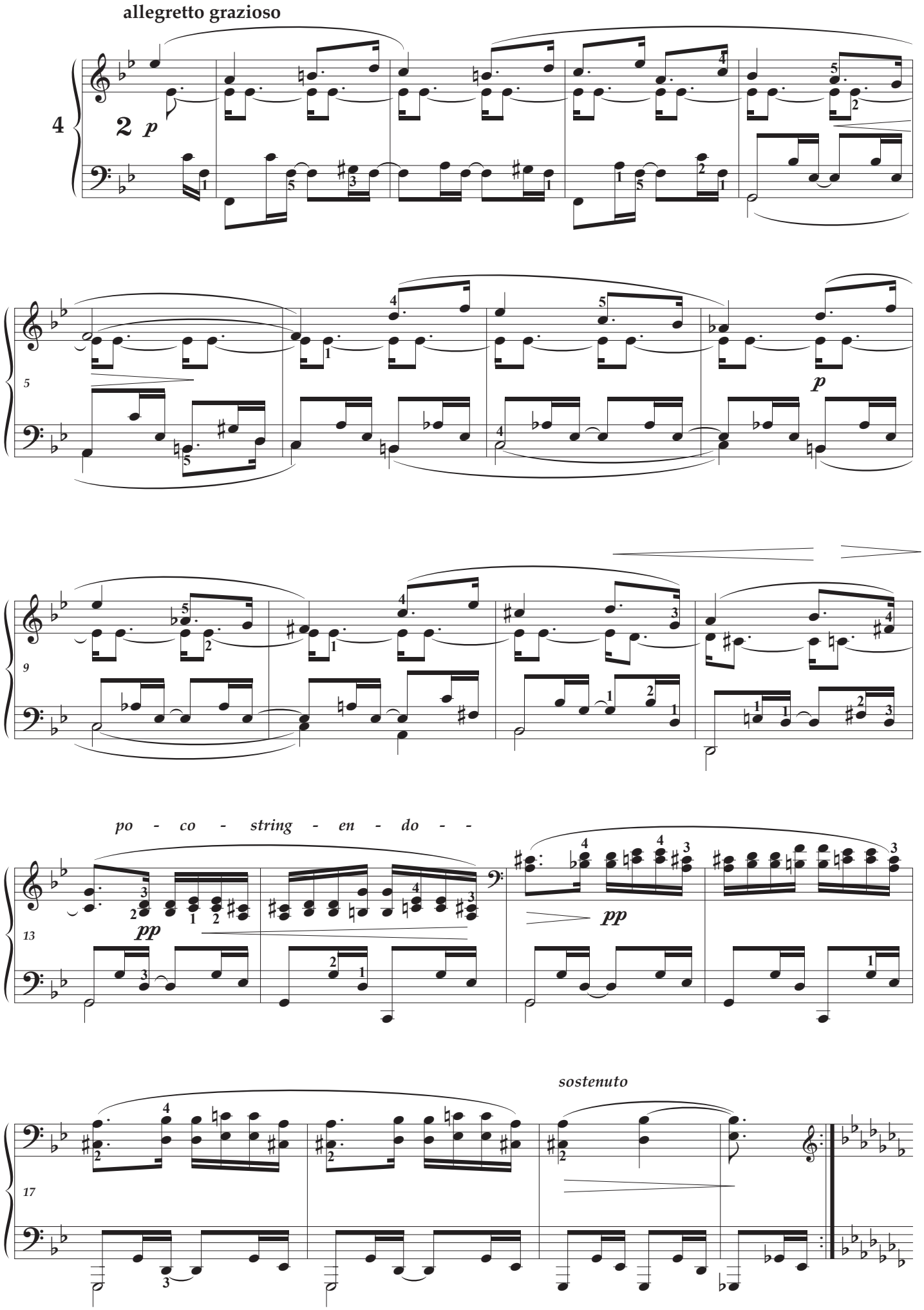
INTERMEZZO

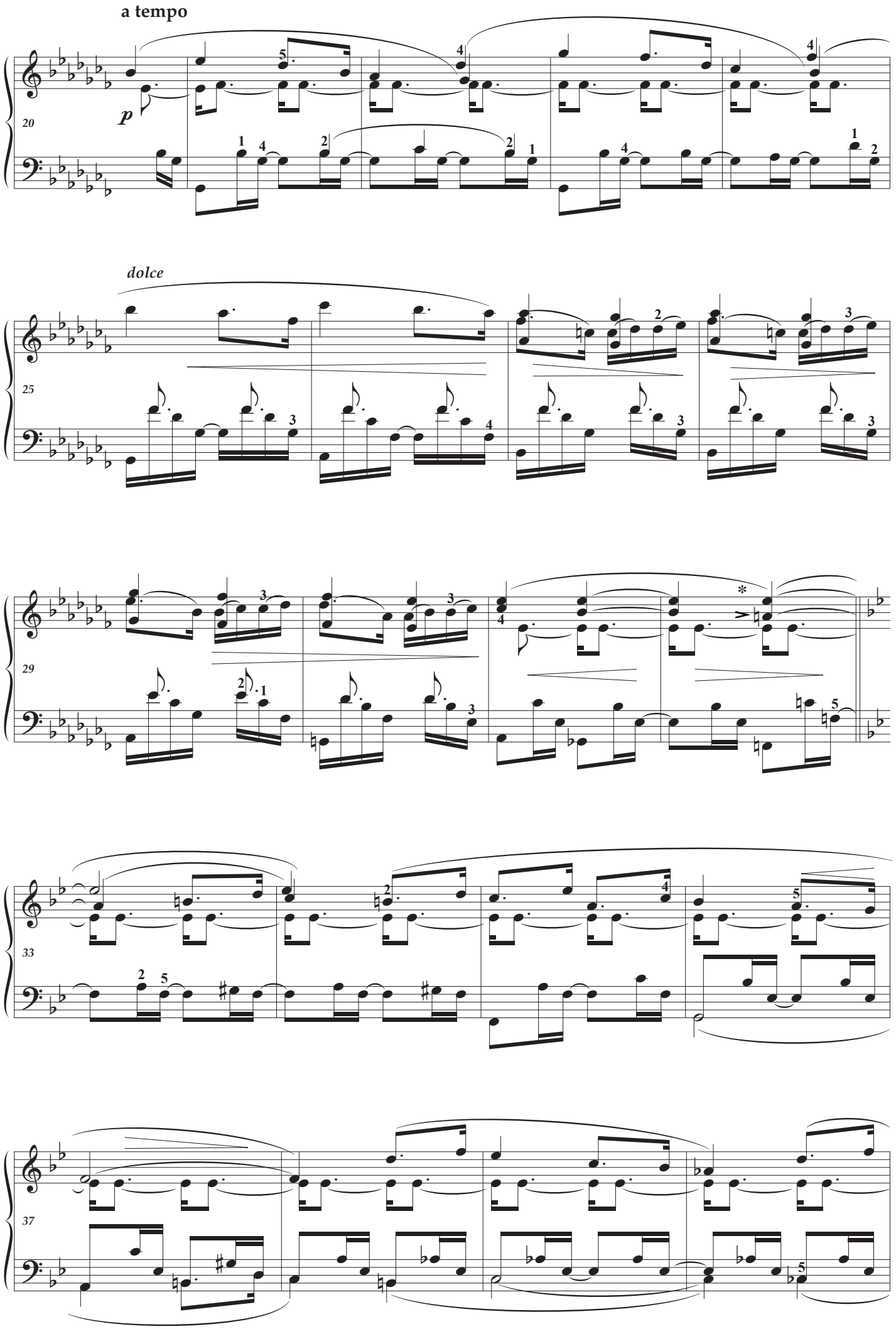


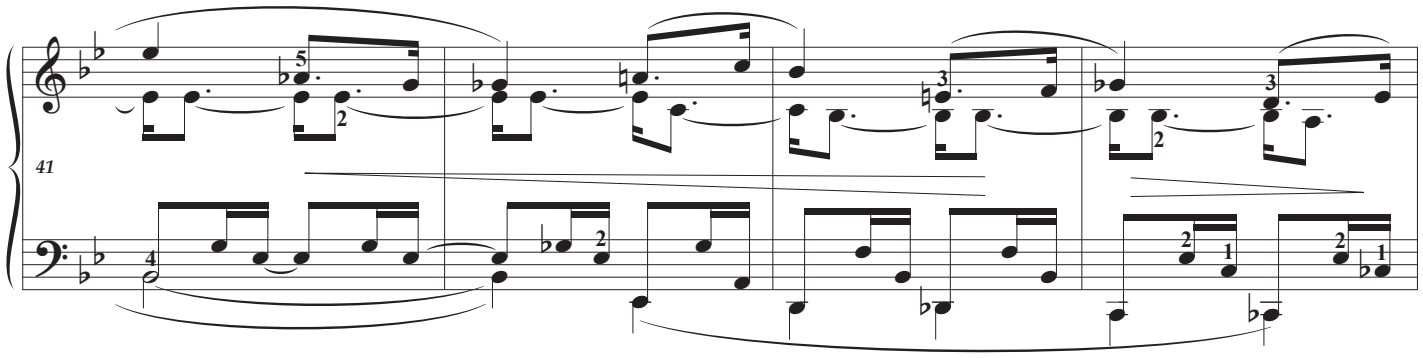

a tempo
11
dolce
13
dolce
pp
16
19


21
p
24
ritenuto
pp
26
a tempo
p
diminuendo e ritardando
3
28
lento
pp
Ped.

INTERMEZZO


allegretto grazioso
p
5
p
9
po - co - string - en - do - -
pp
13
pp
sostenuto
17


a tempo
p
20
dolce
25
29
33
37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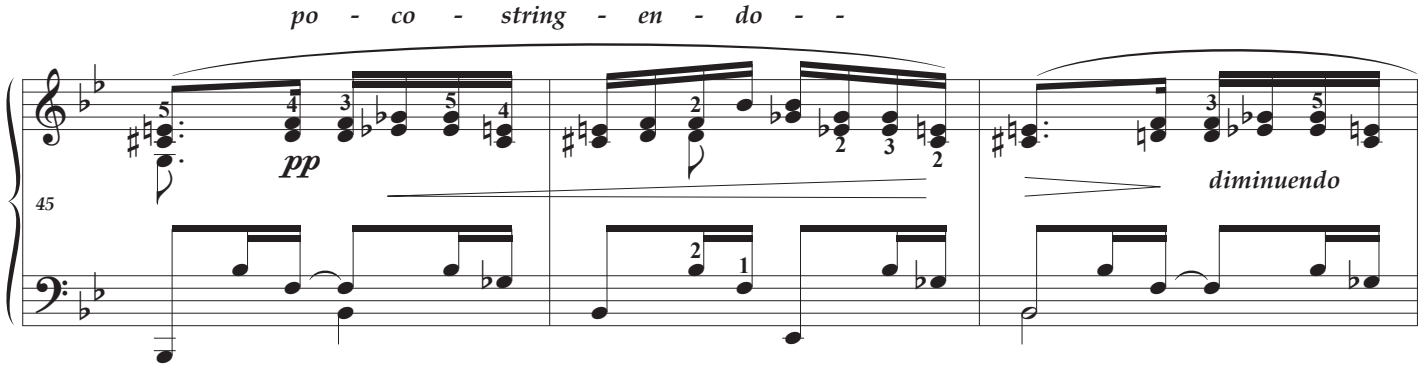
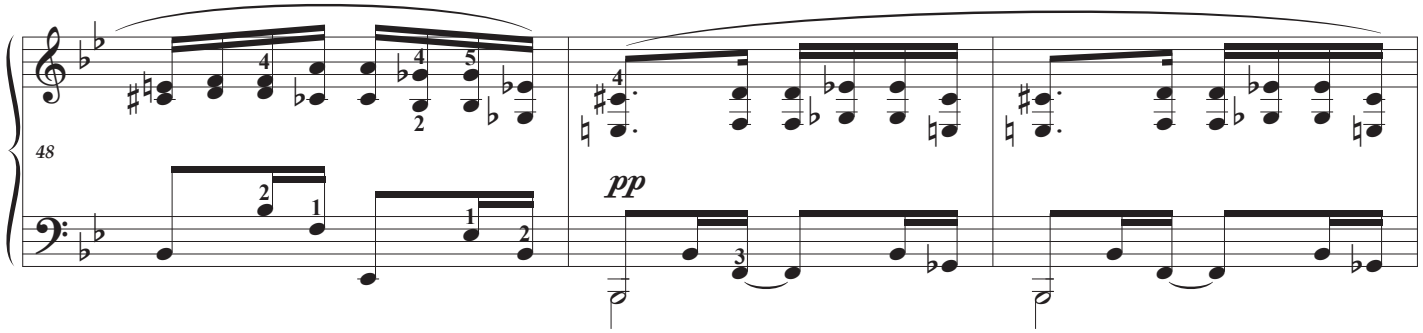
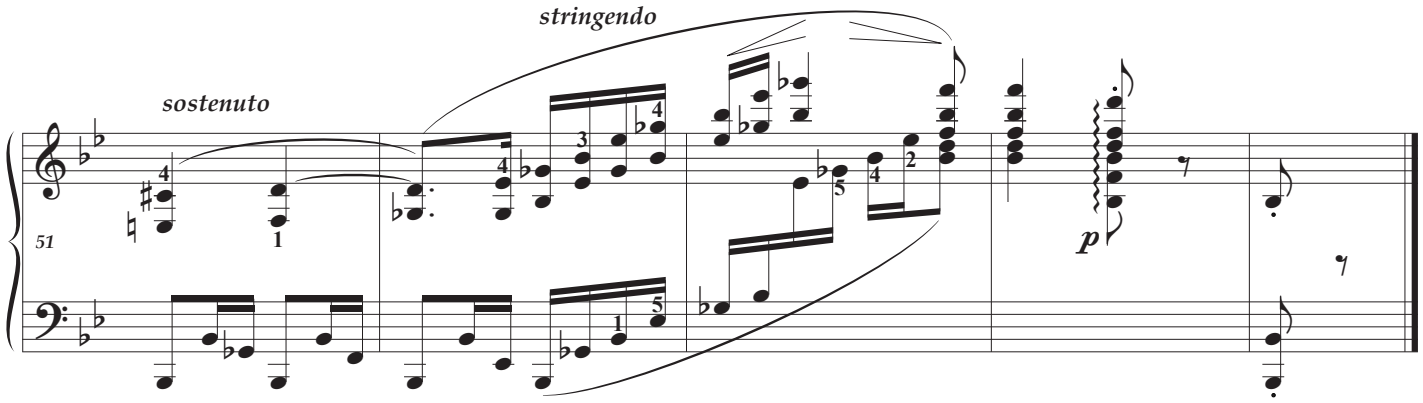
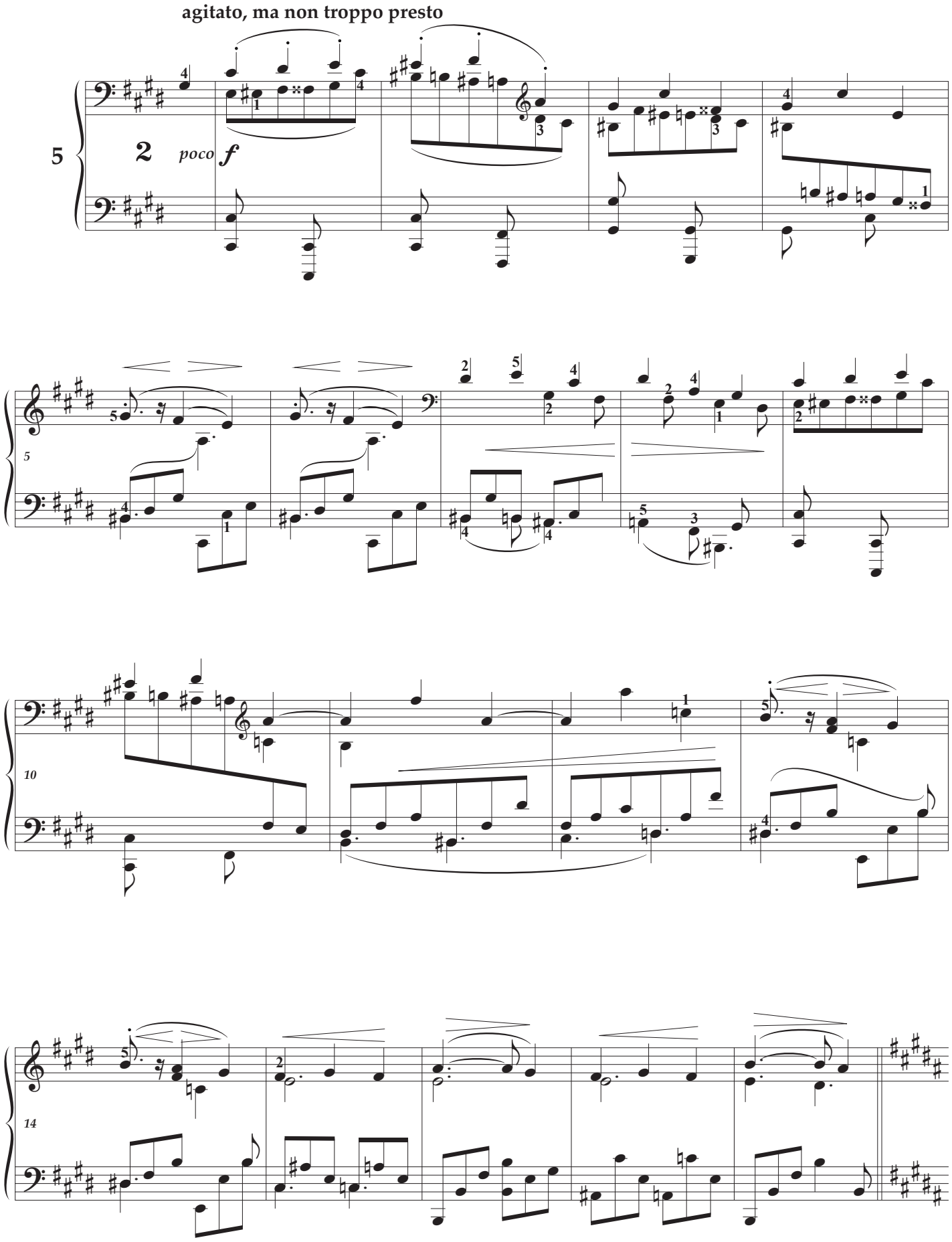
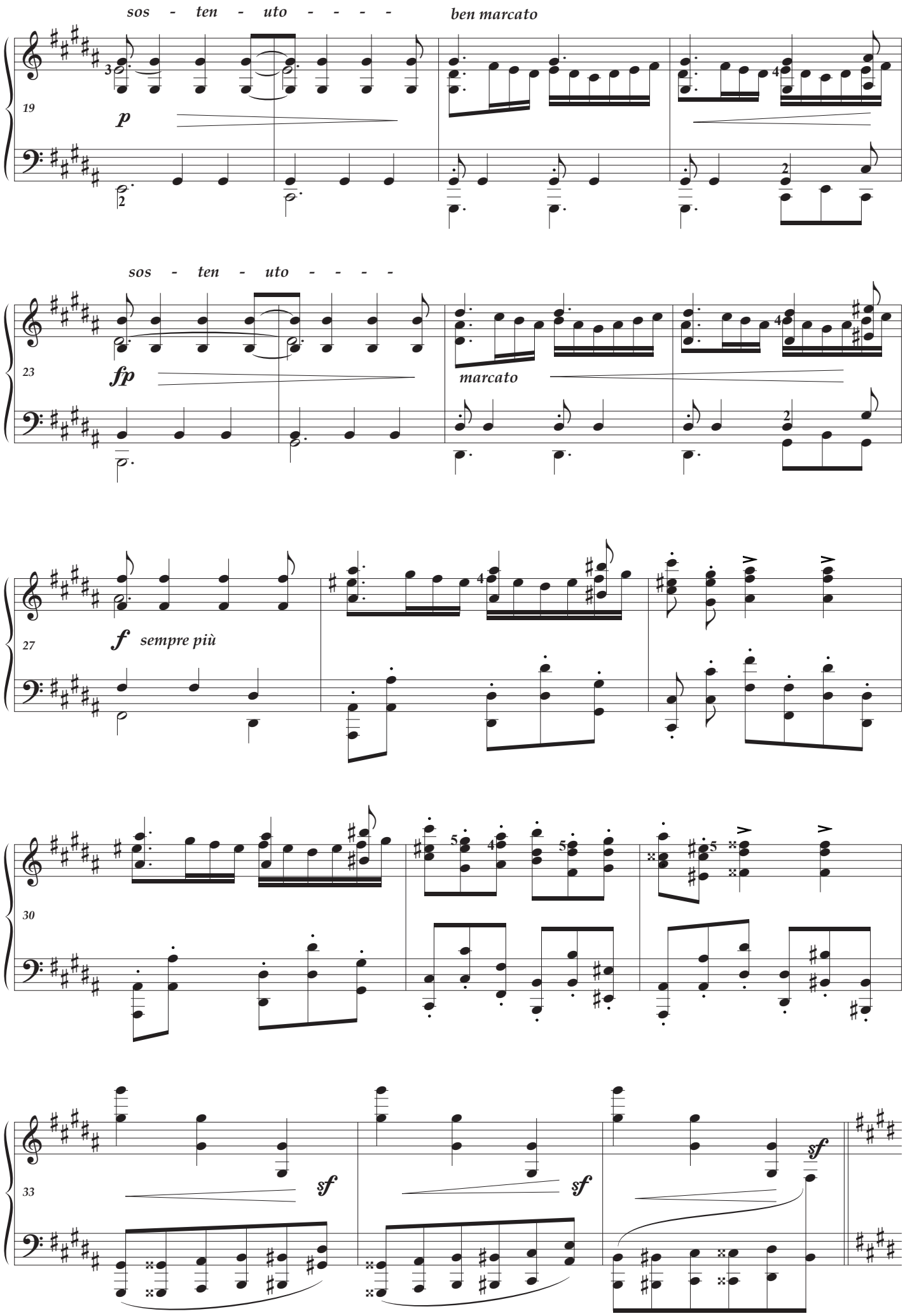

po - co - string - en - do - -
45
pp
diminuendo

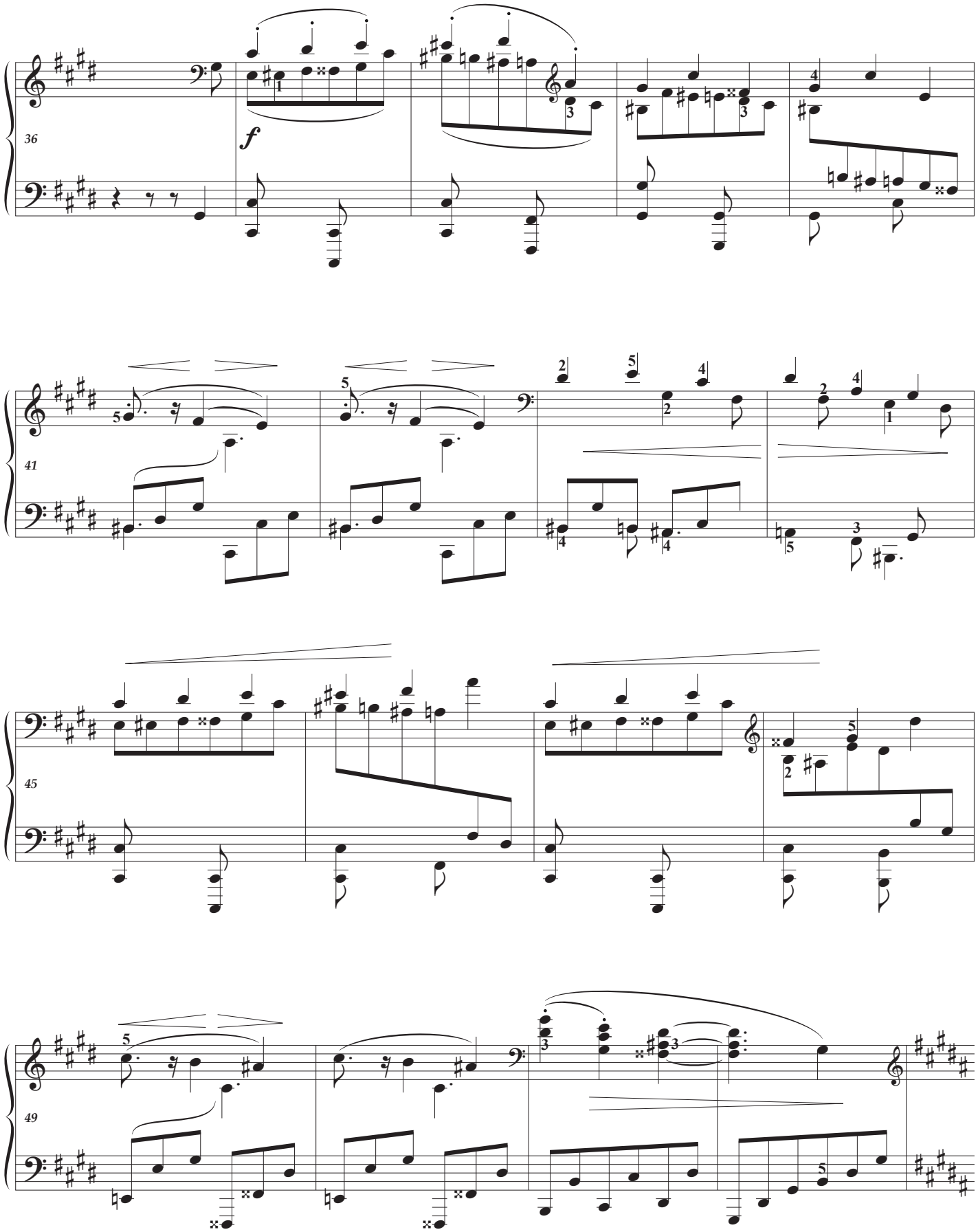

48
pp

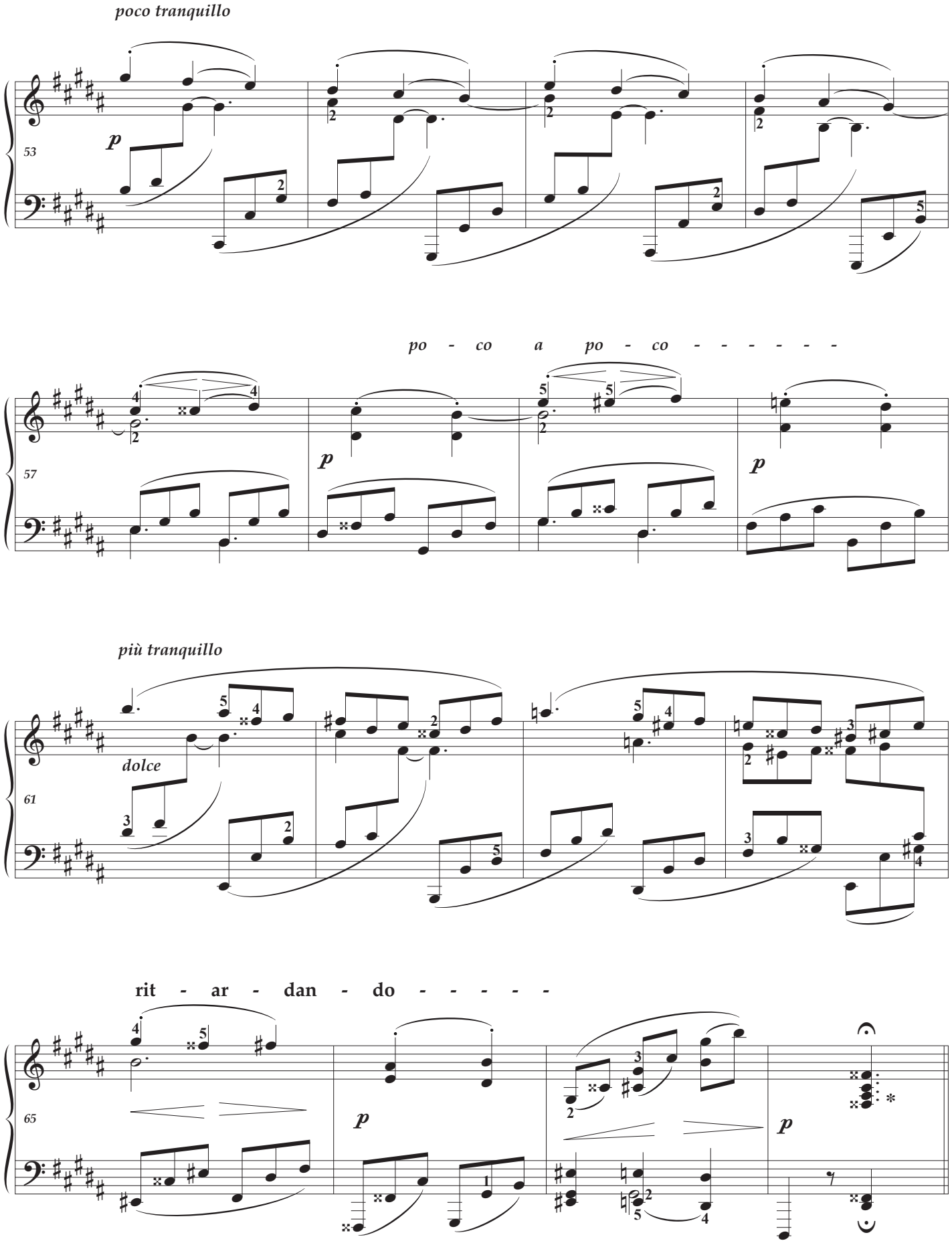

stringendo
sostenuto
51
p

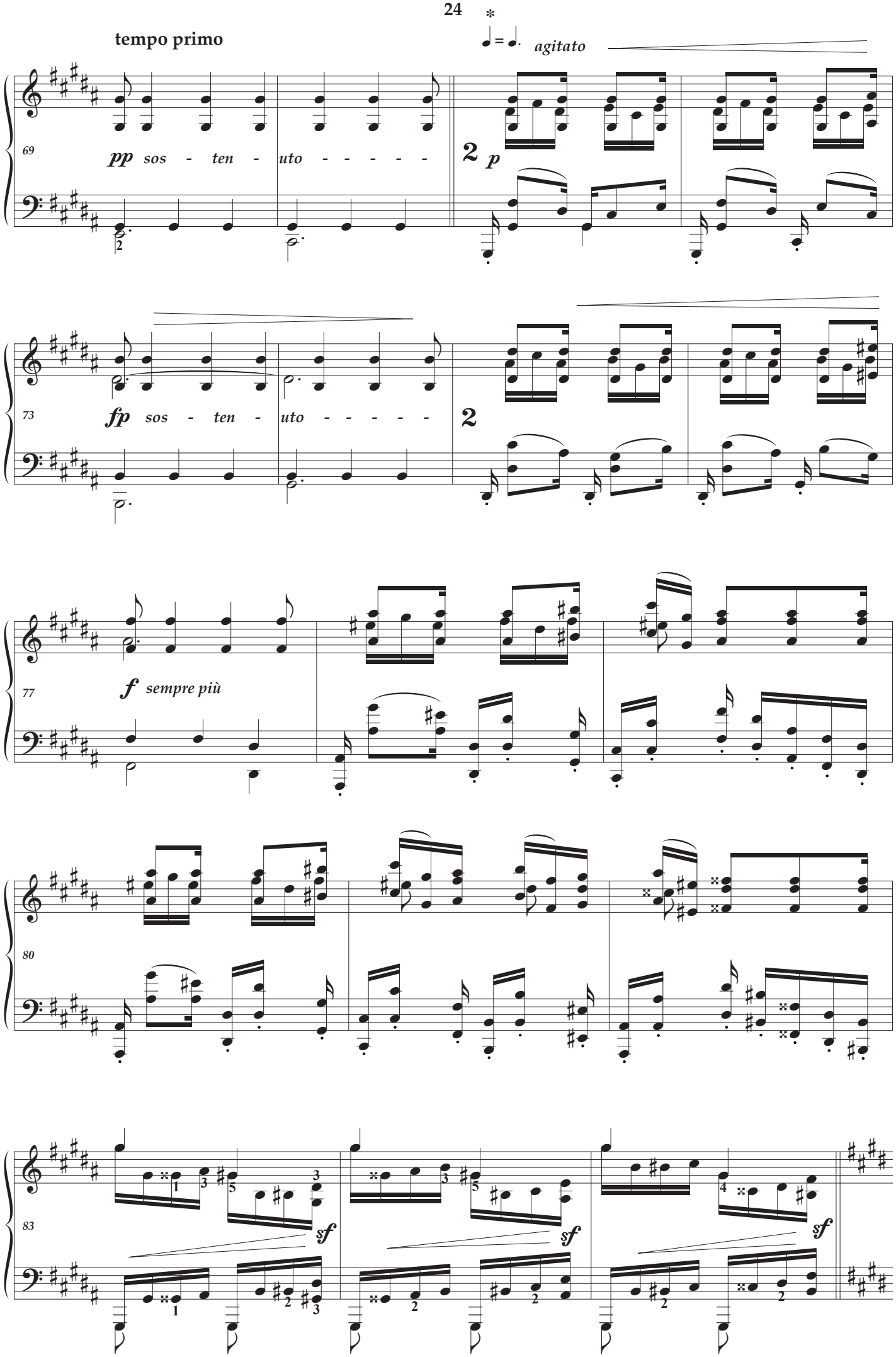
CAPRICCIO

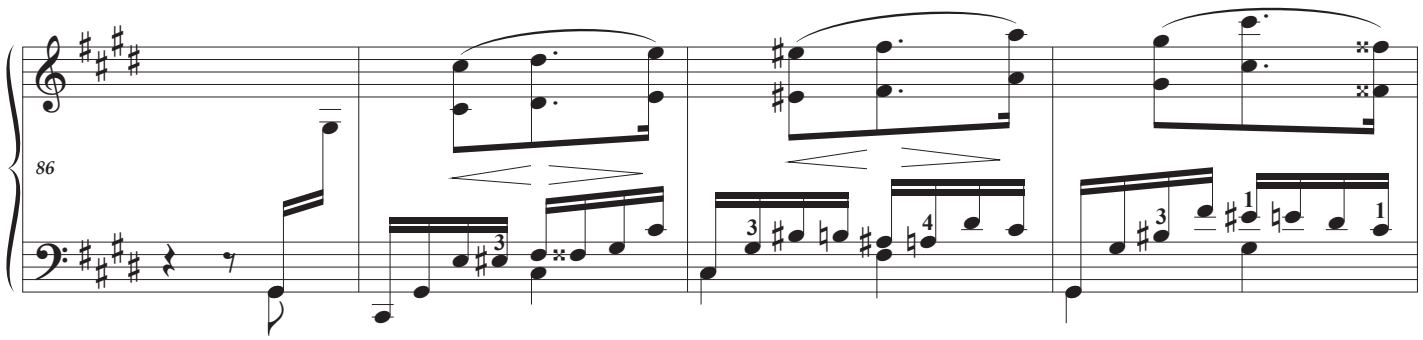



sos - ten - uto - - - -
ben marcato
19
p
sos - ten - uto - - - -
23
fp
marcato
27
f
sempre più
30
33
sf
sf
sf


36
f
41
45
49


poco tranquillo
53
p
po - co a po - co - - - - - -
57
p
più tranquillo
dolce
61
rit - ar - dan - do - - - - -
65
p
p


tempo primo
*
agitato
69
pp sos - ten - uto - - - - -
p
73
fp sos - ten - uto - - - - -
77
f sempre più
80
83
sf
sf
sf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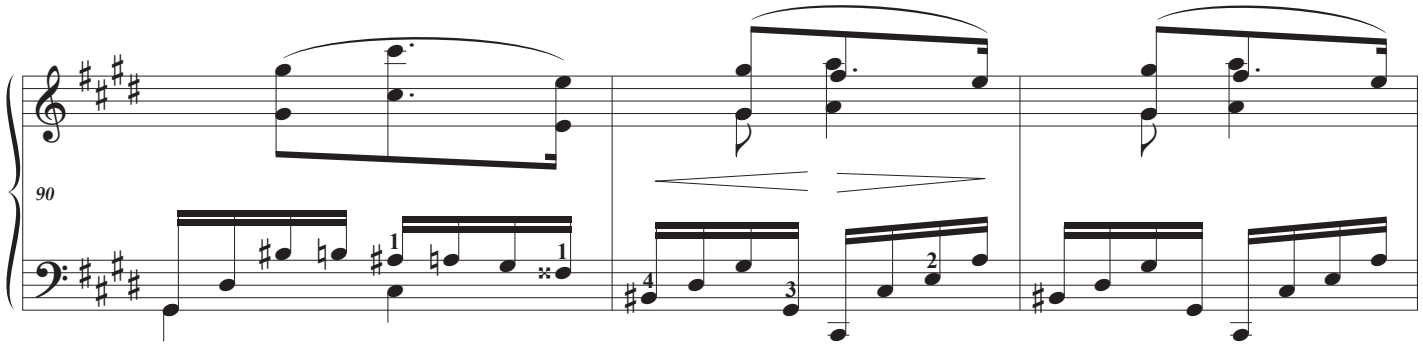
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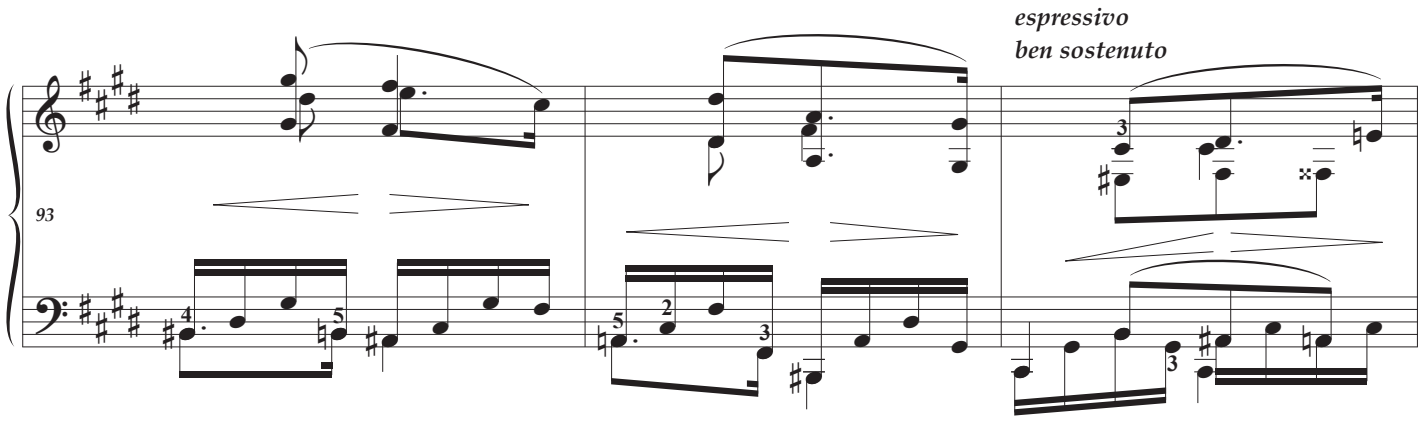
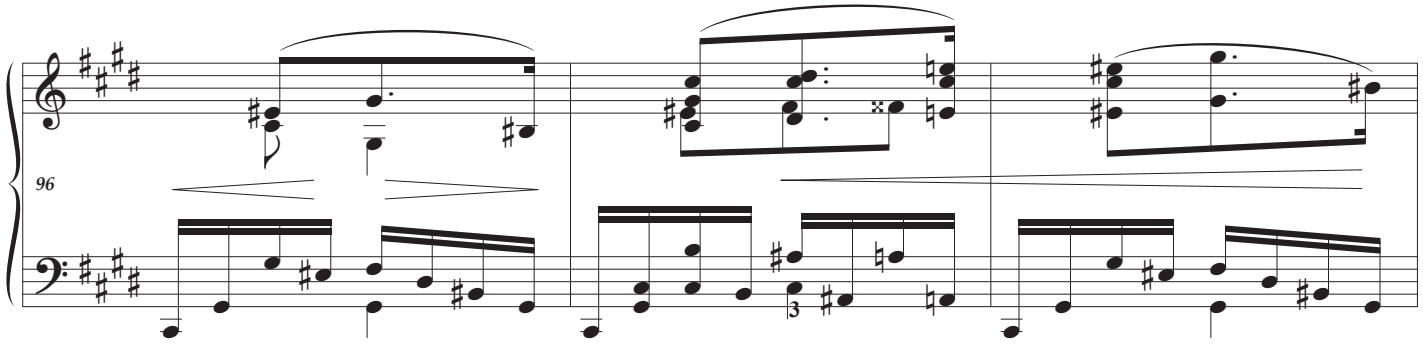

93
espressivo
ben sostenuto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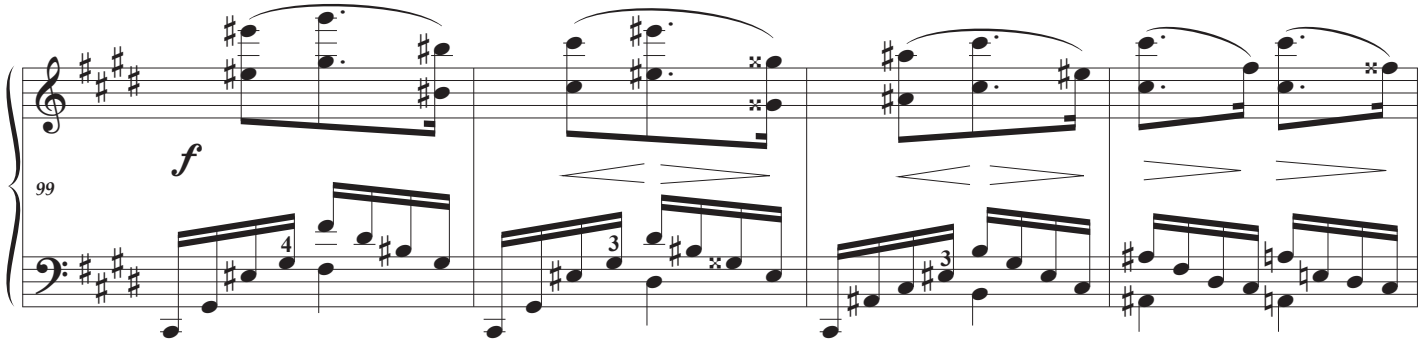
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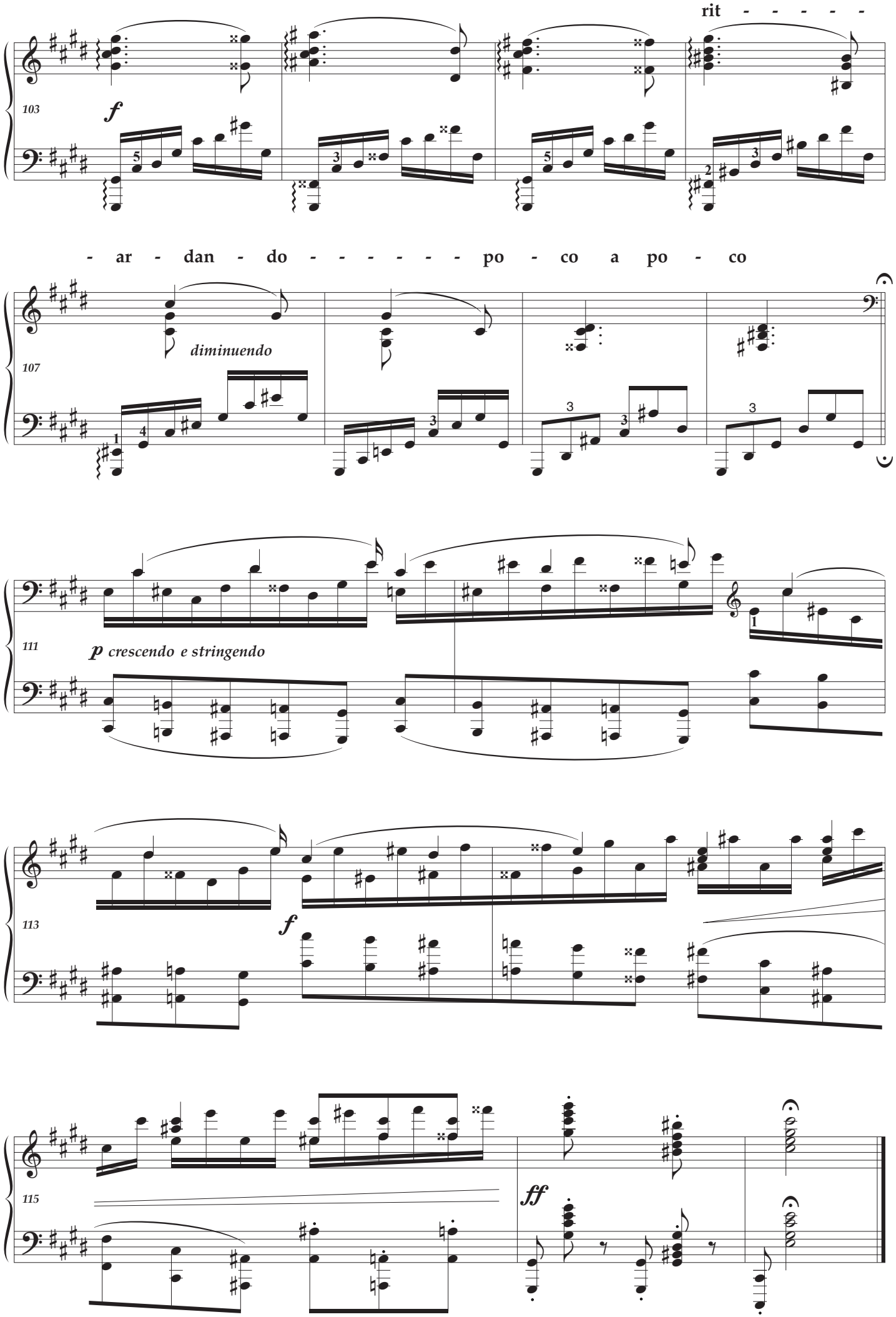
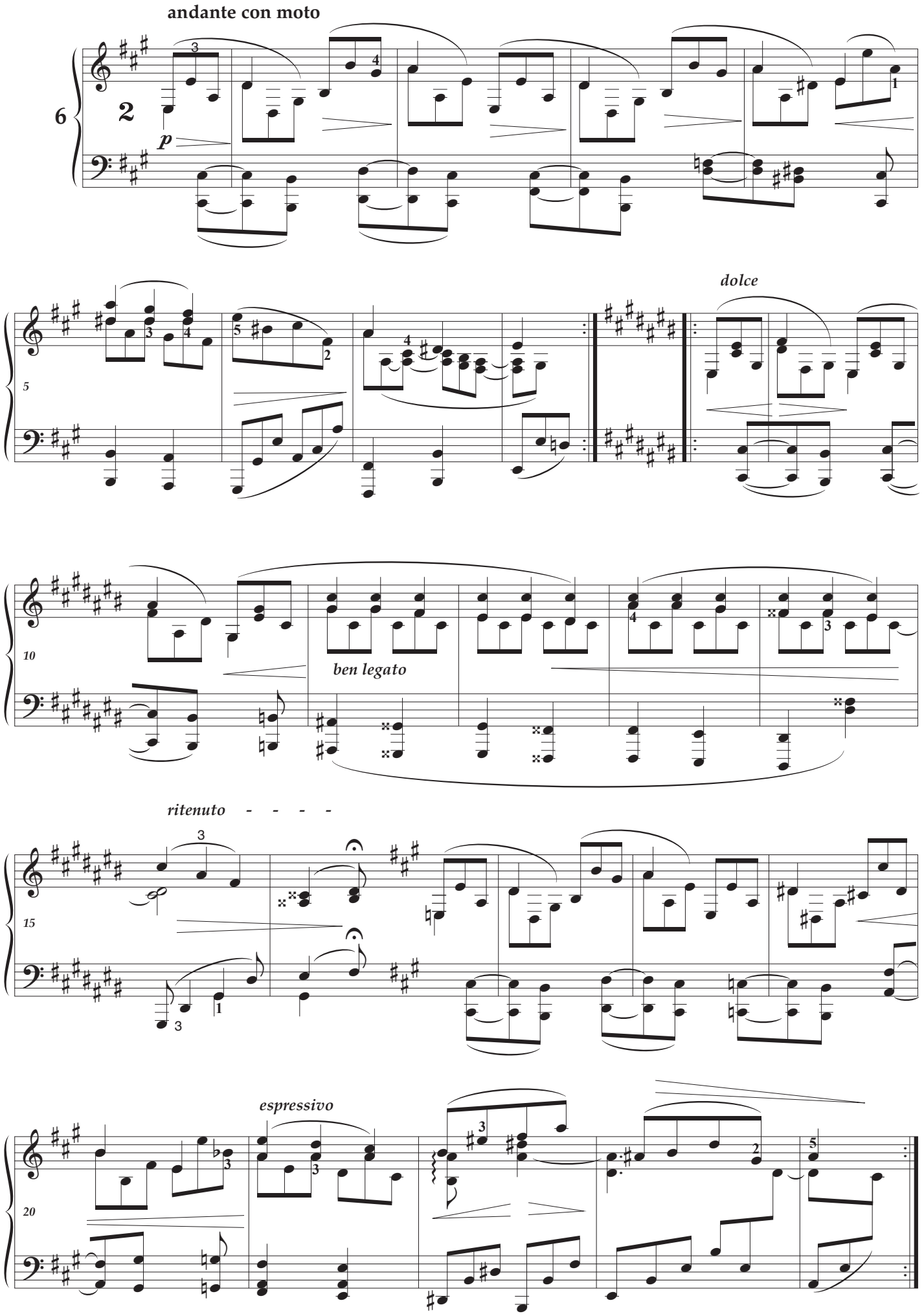
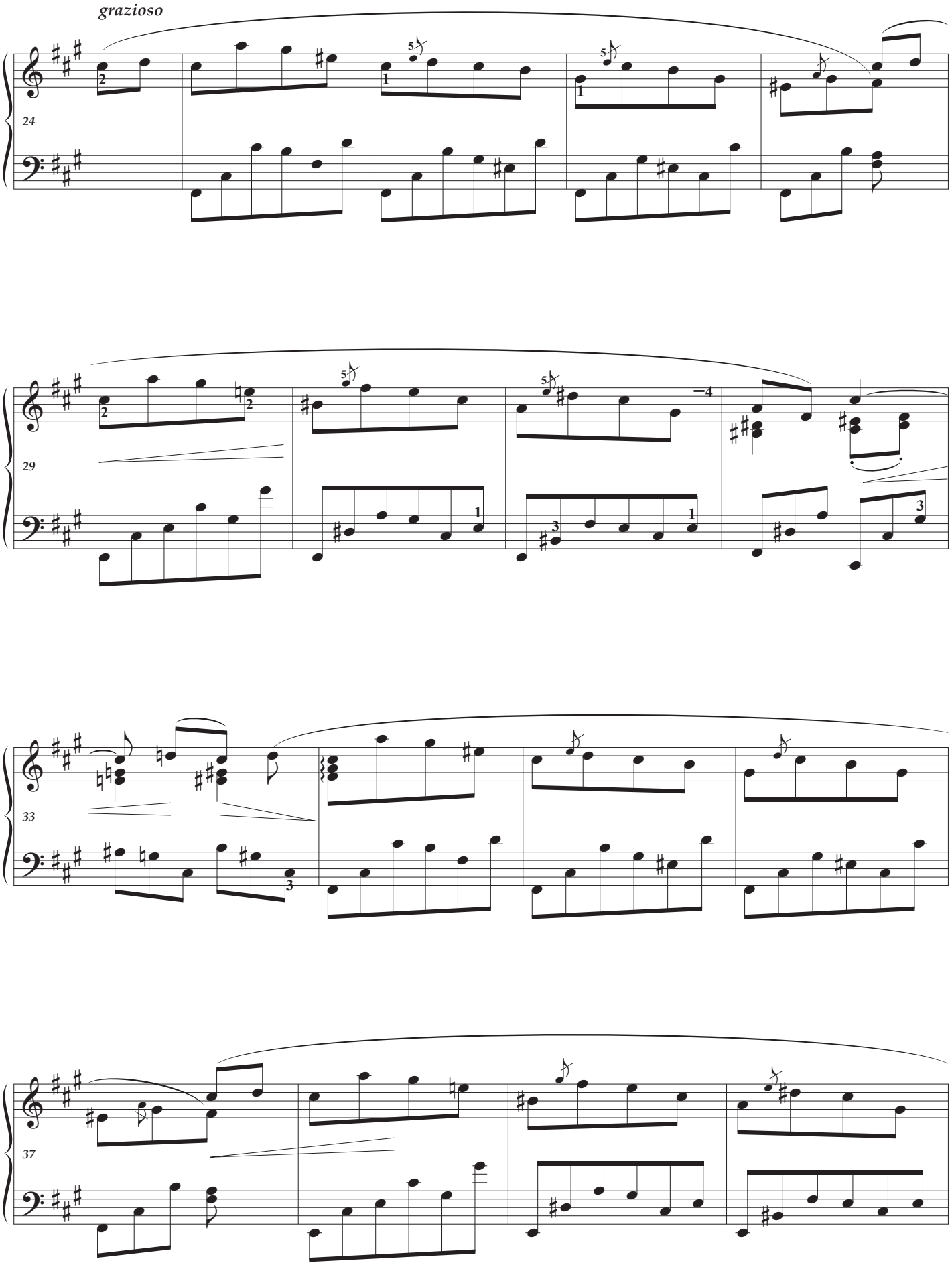
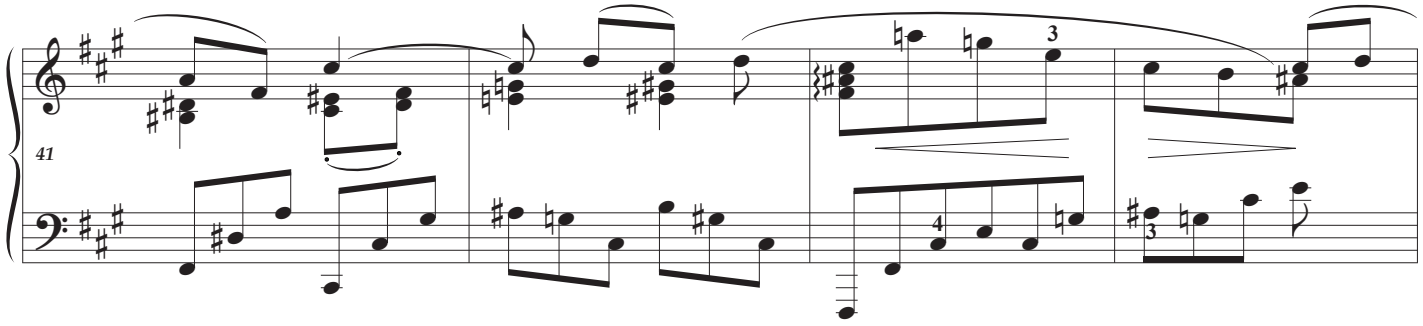

rit - - - - -
103
f
- ar - dan - do - - - - - - po - co a po - co
107
diminuendo
111
p crescendo e stringendo
113
f
115
ff

INTERMEZZO




grazioso
24
29
33
37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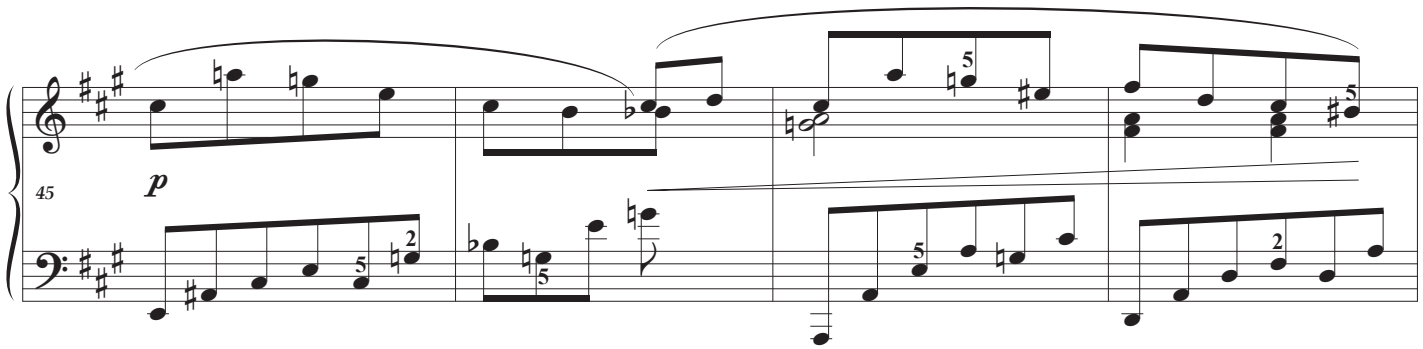
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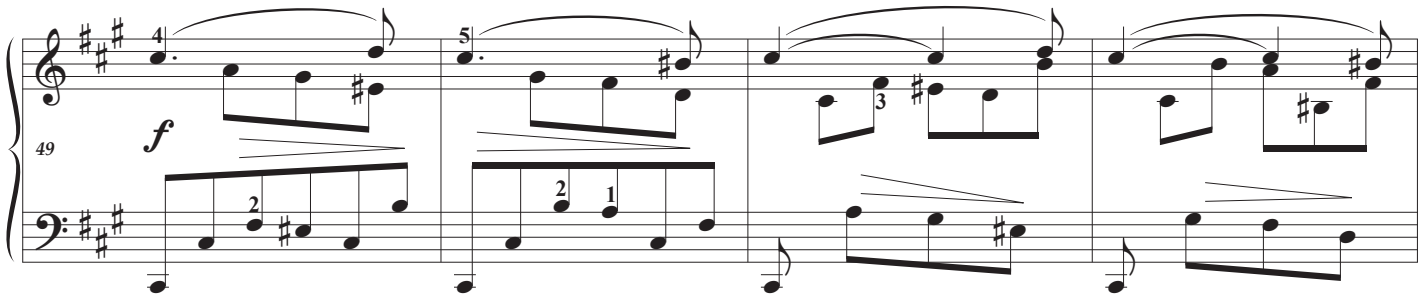
p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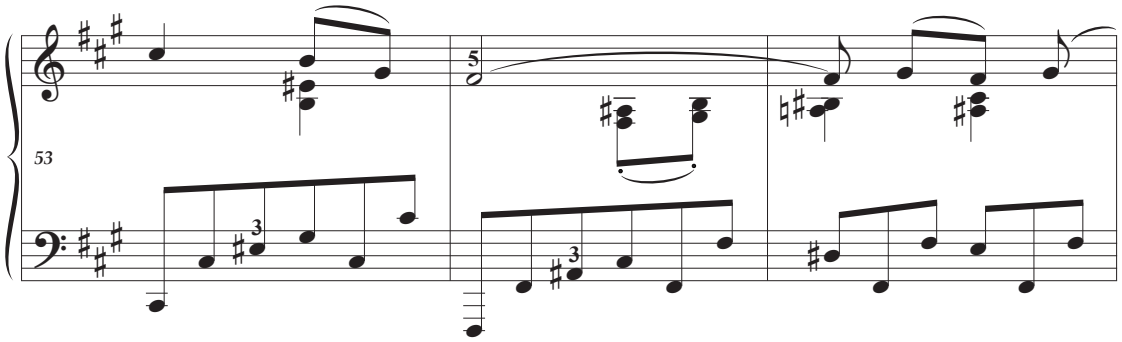
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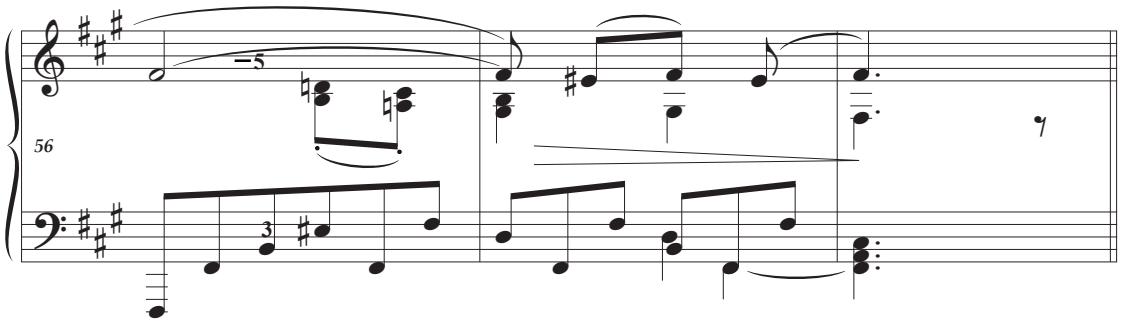
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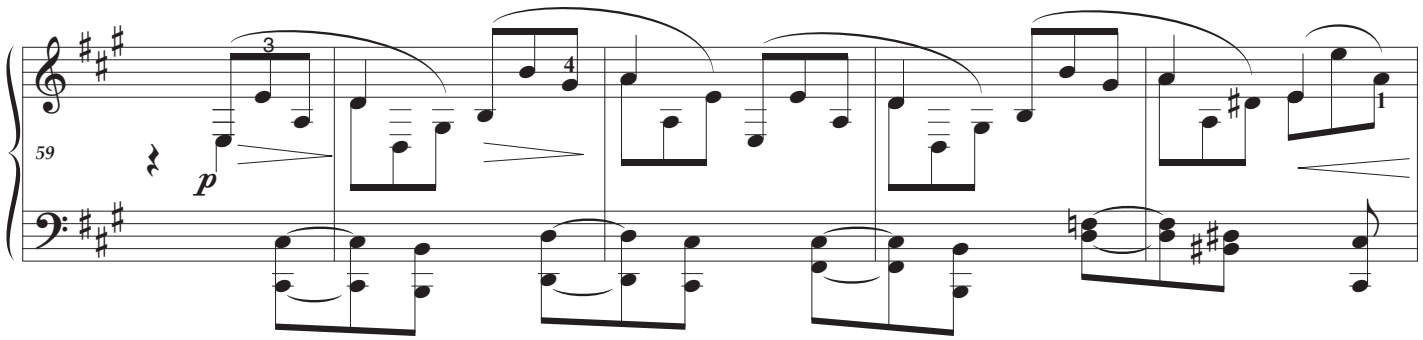
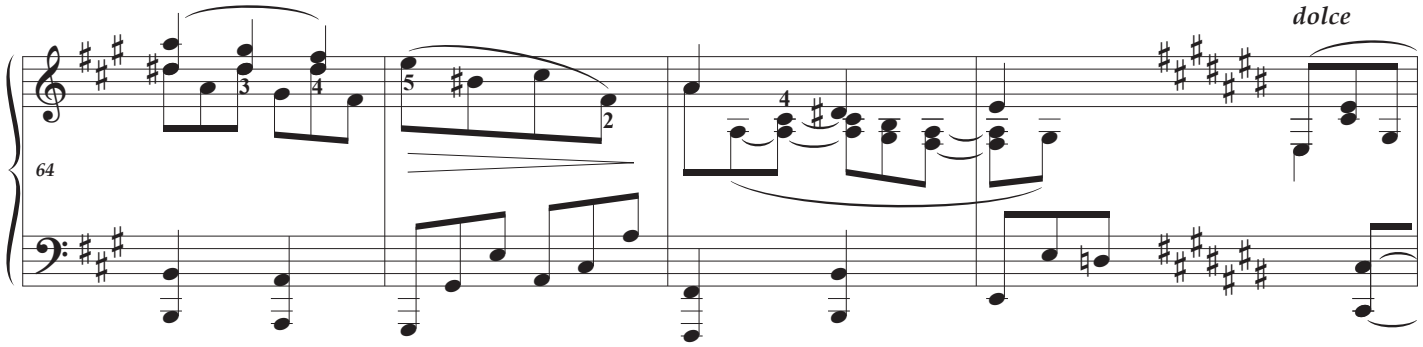
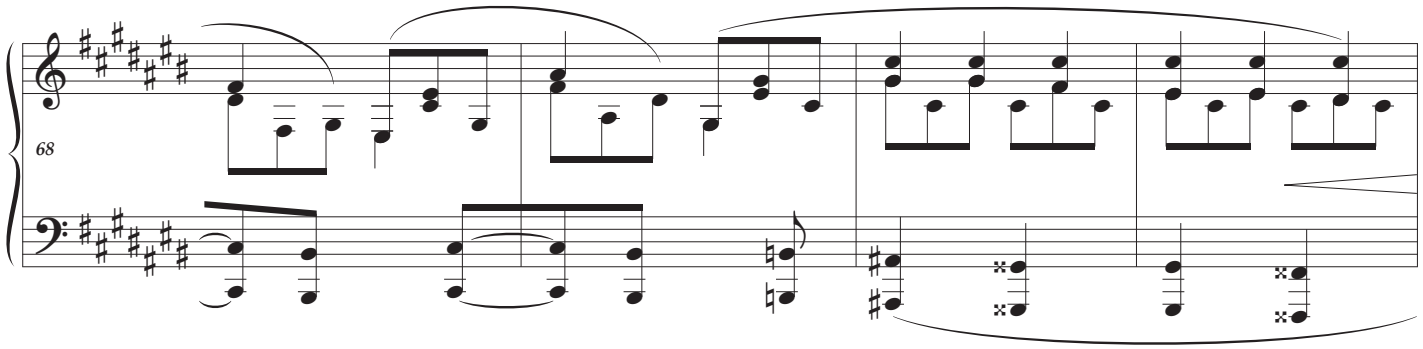

59
p


64
dolce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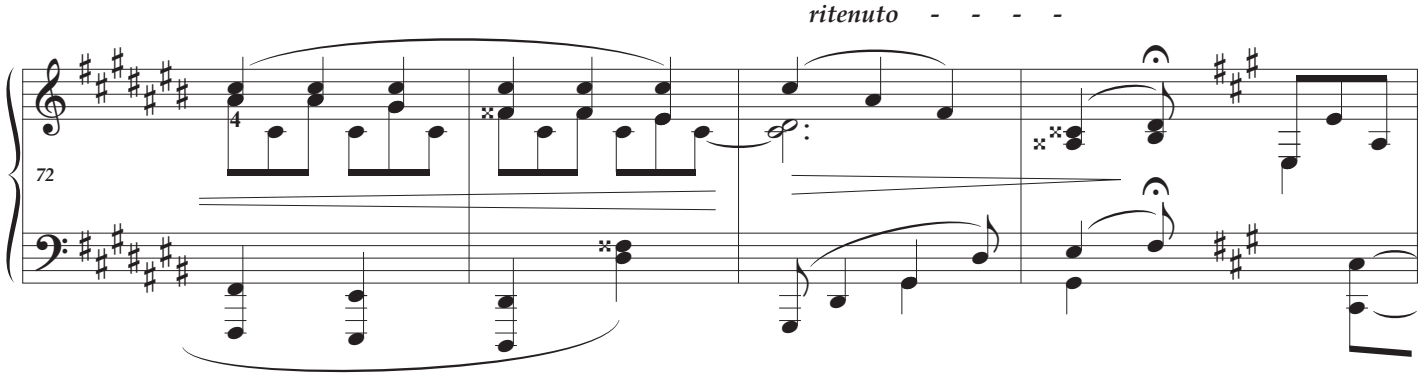
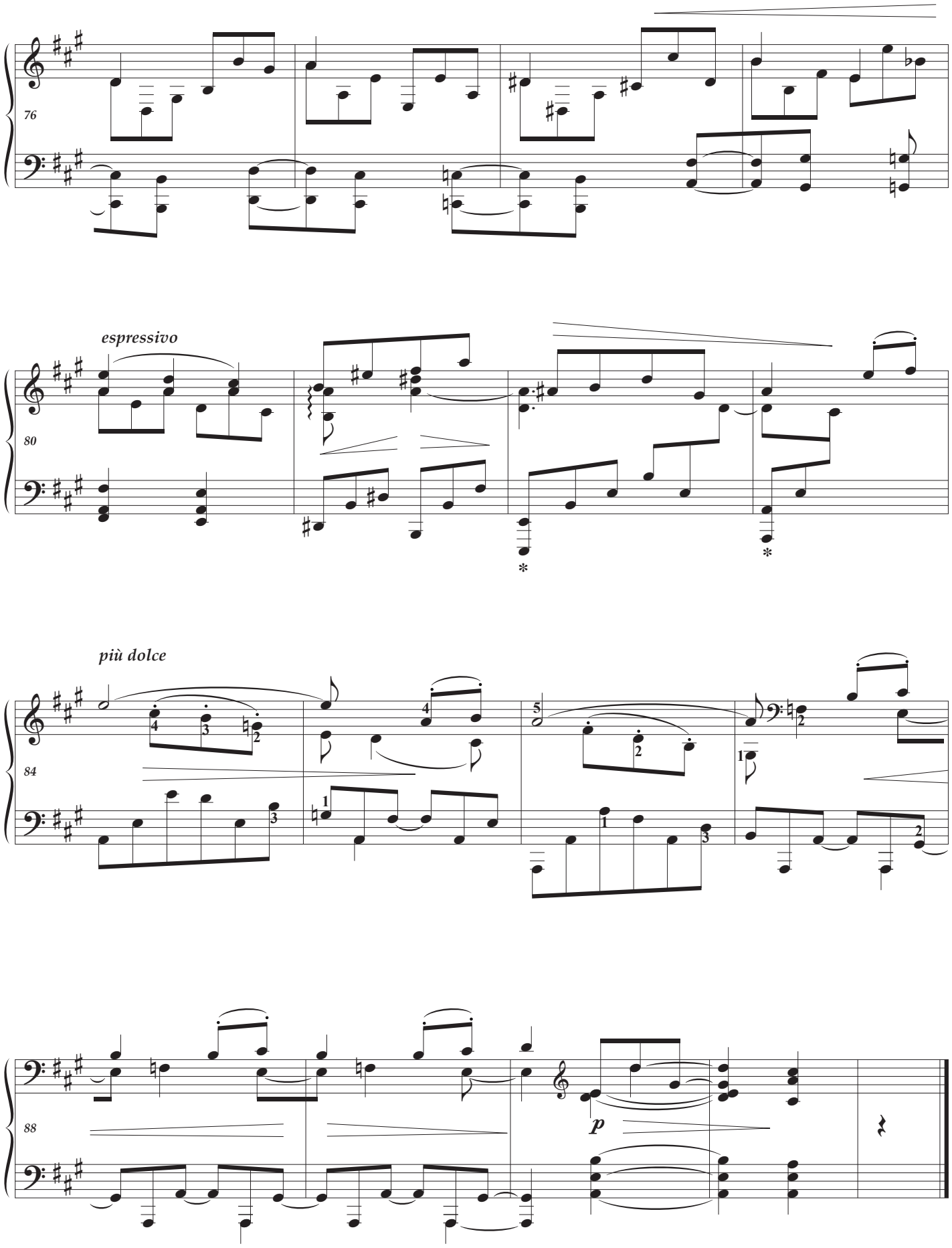
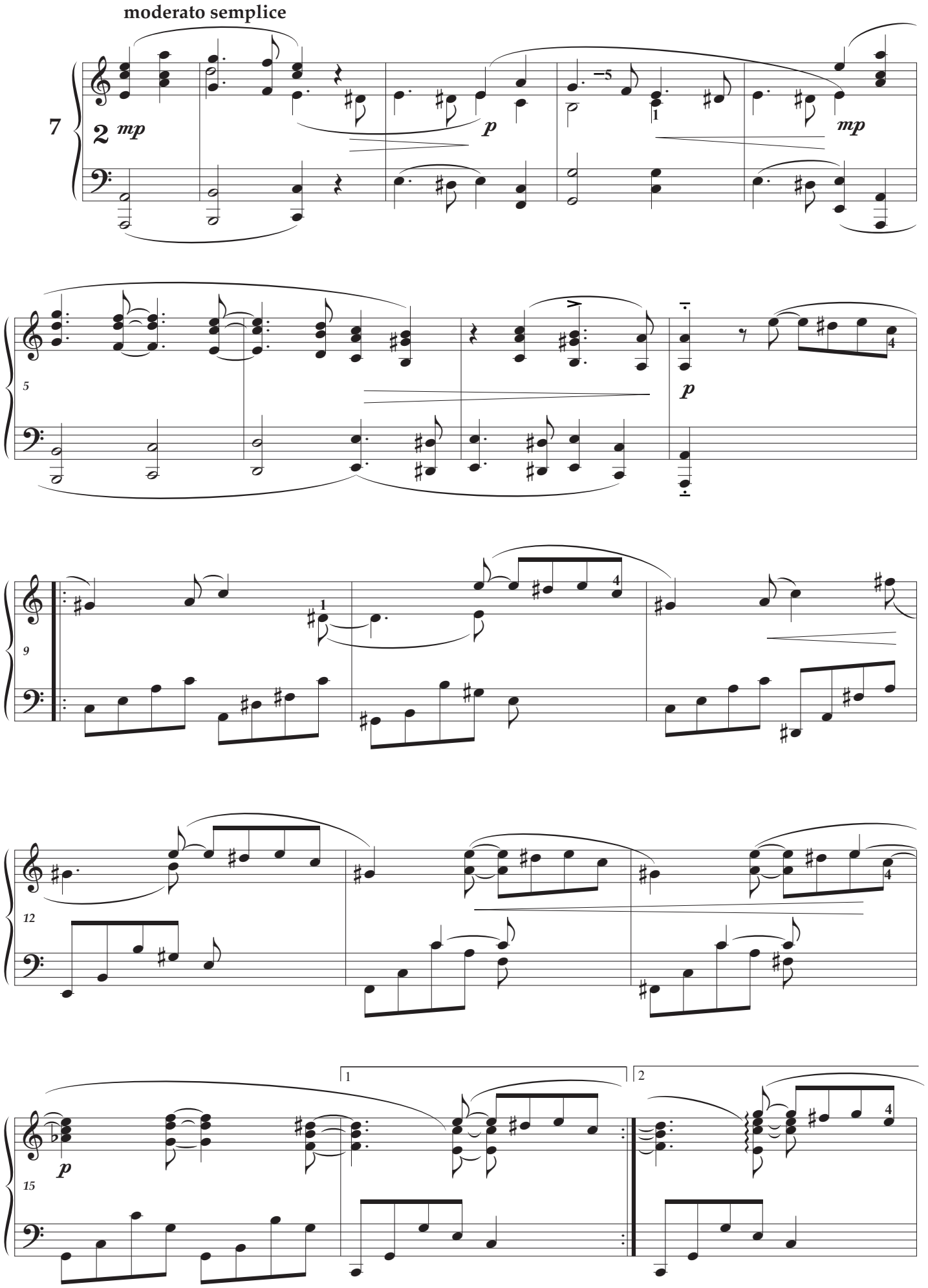
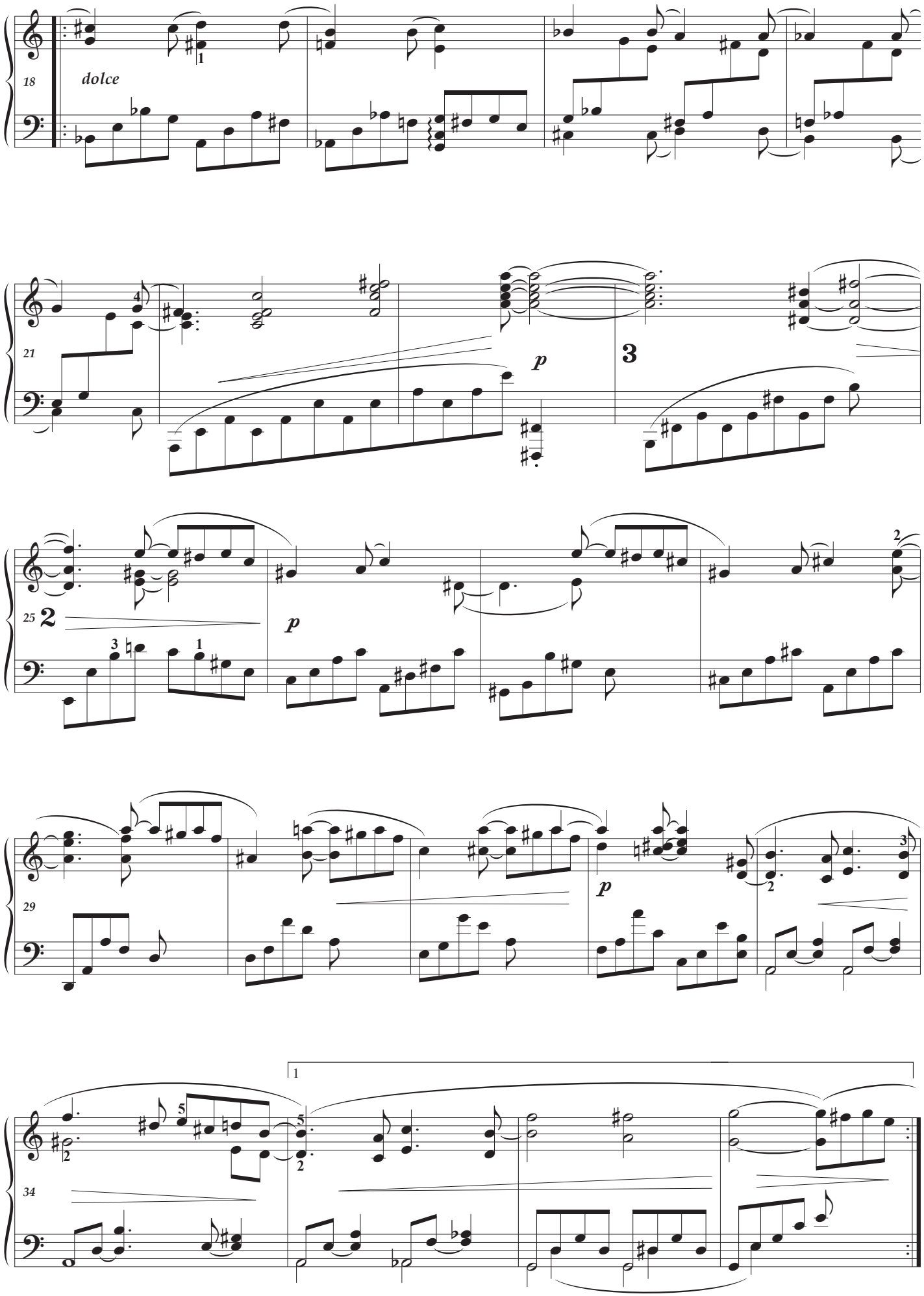
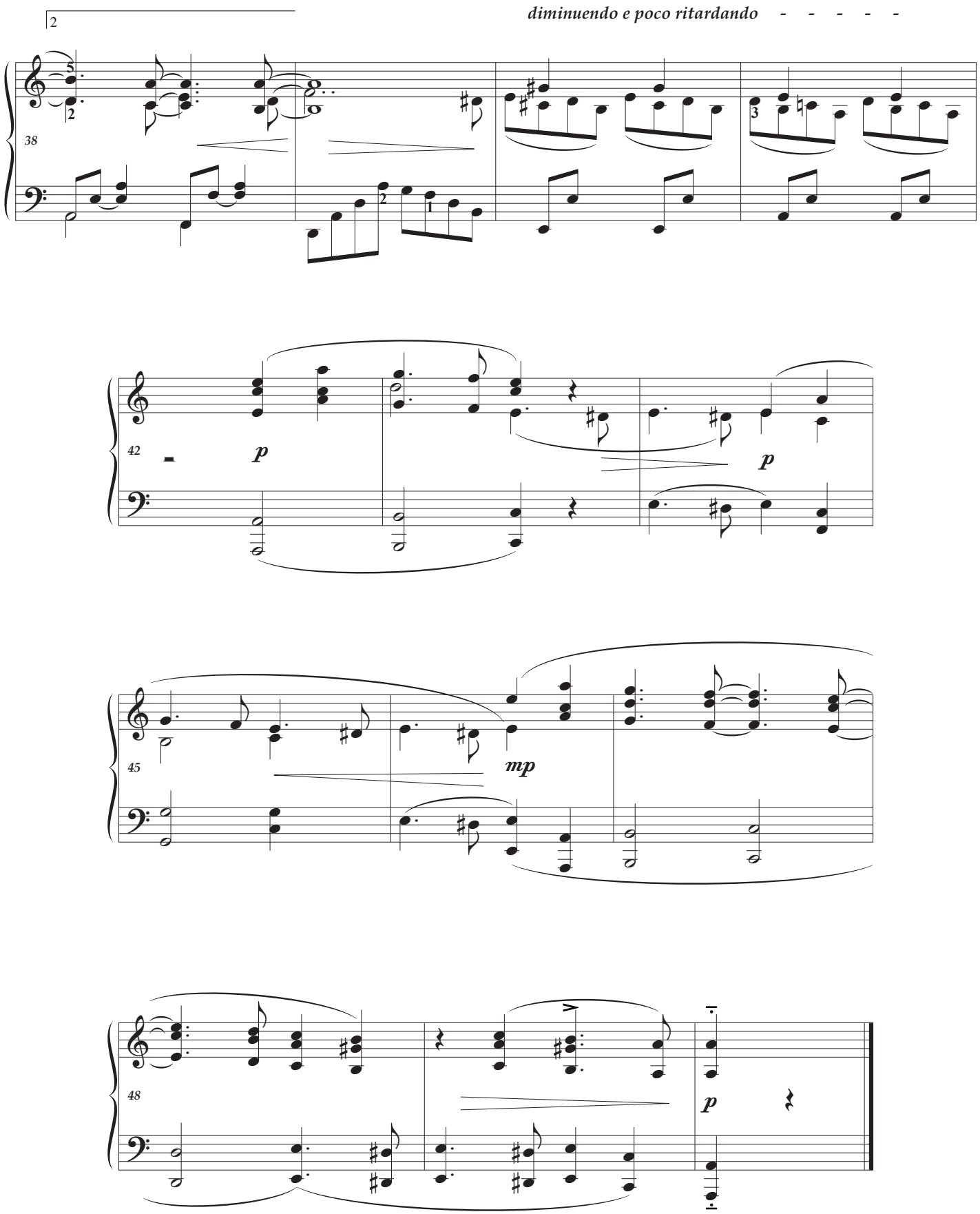

ritenuto - - - -
72


76
espressivo
80
più dolce
84
88
p

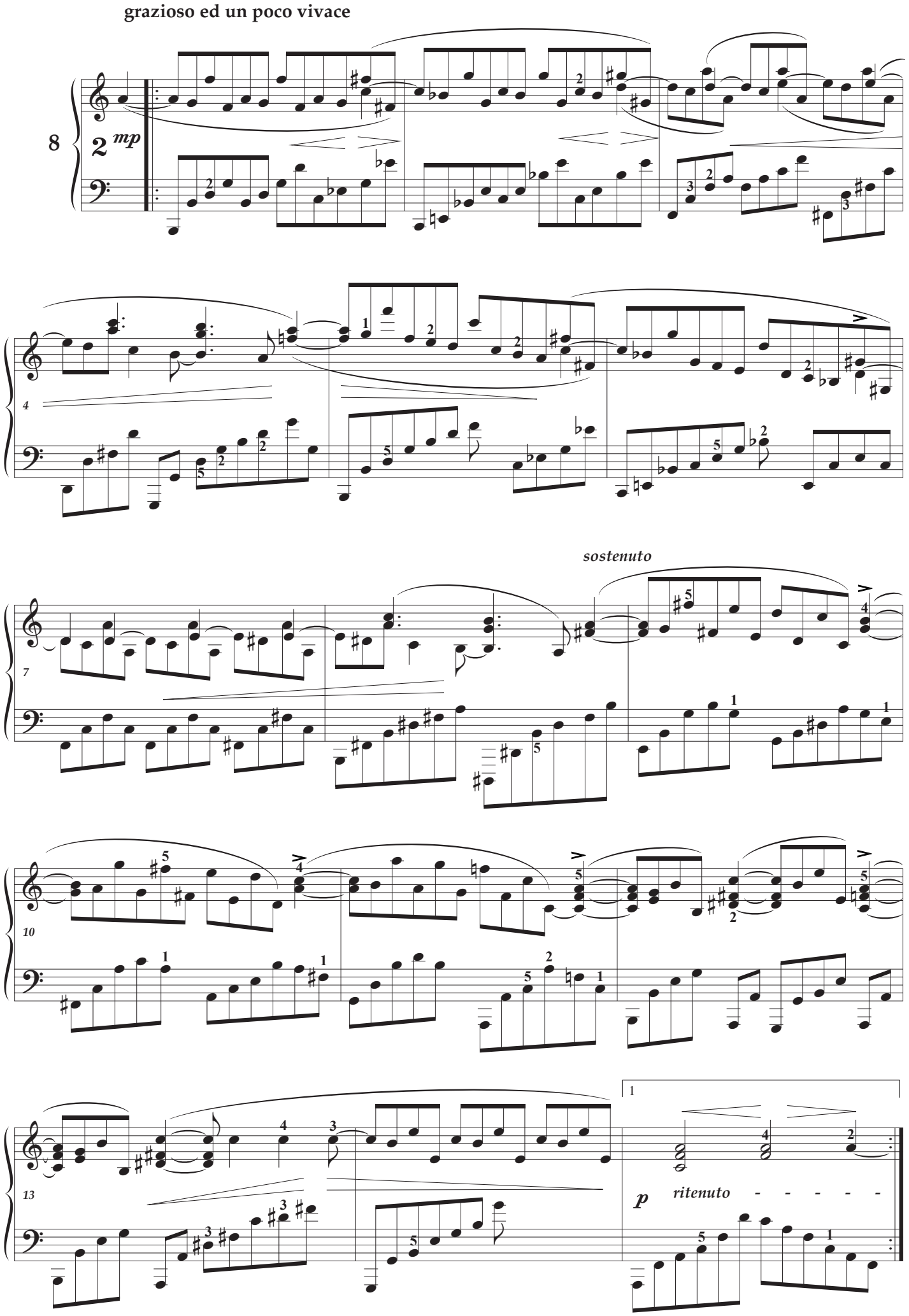
INTERMEZZO

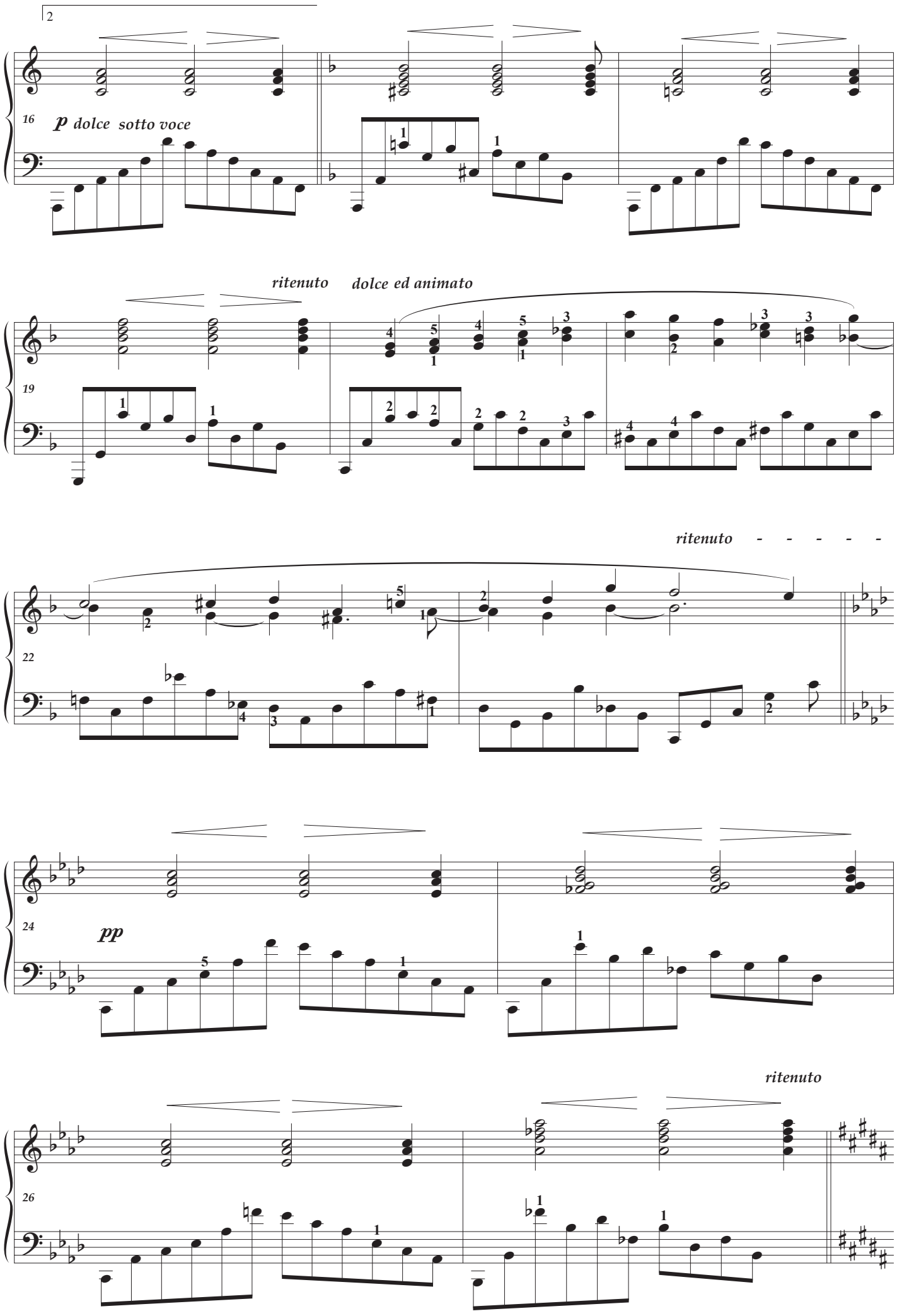


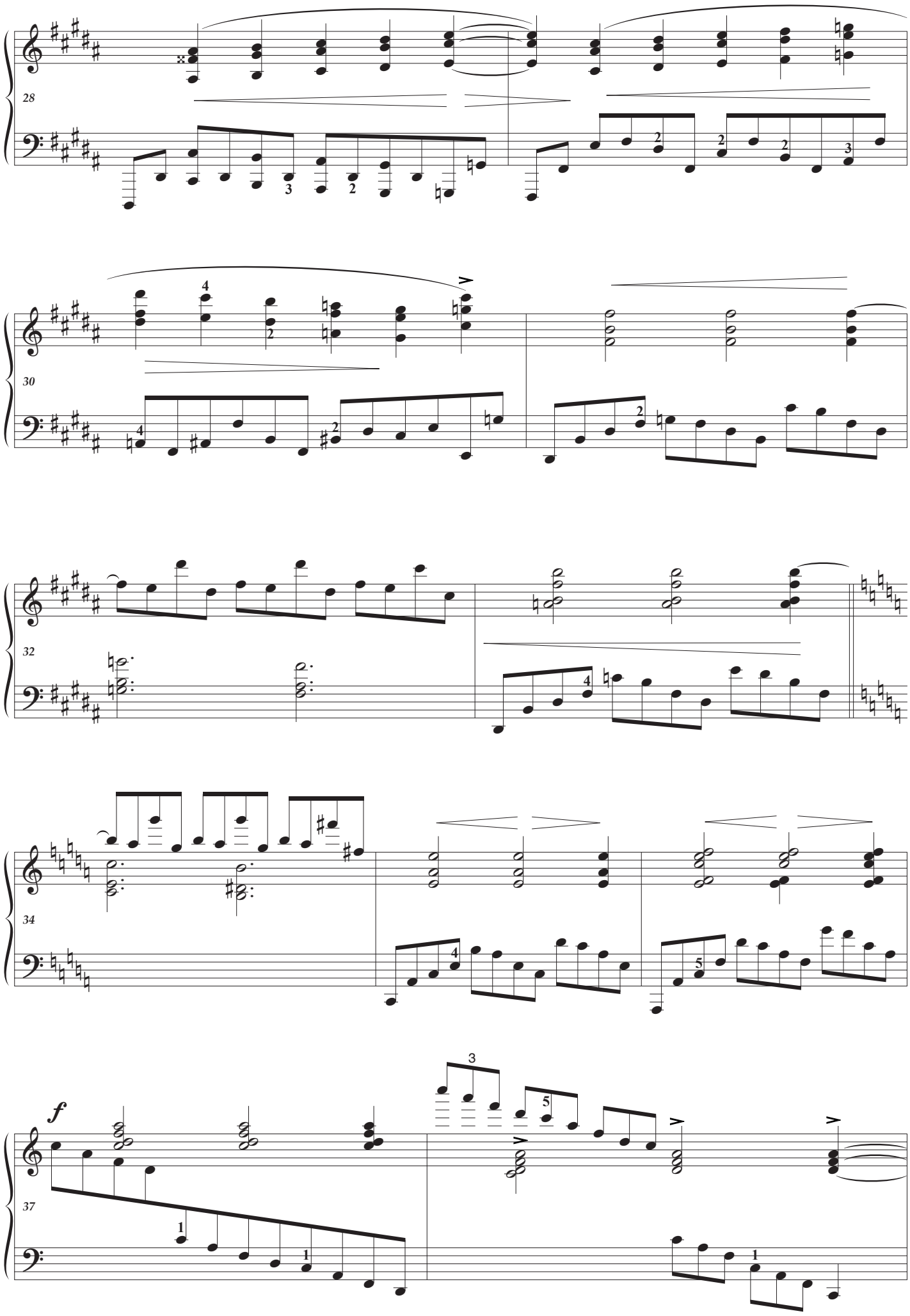

18
dolce
21
p
3
25
2
p
29
p
34
1

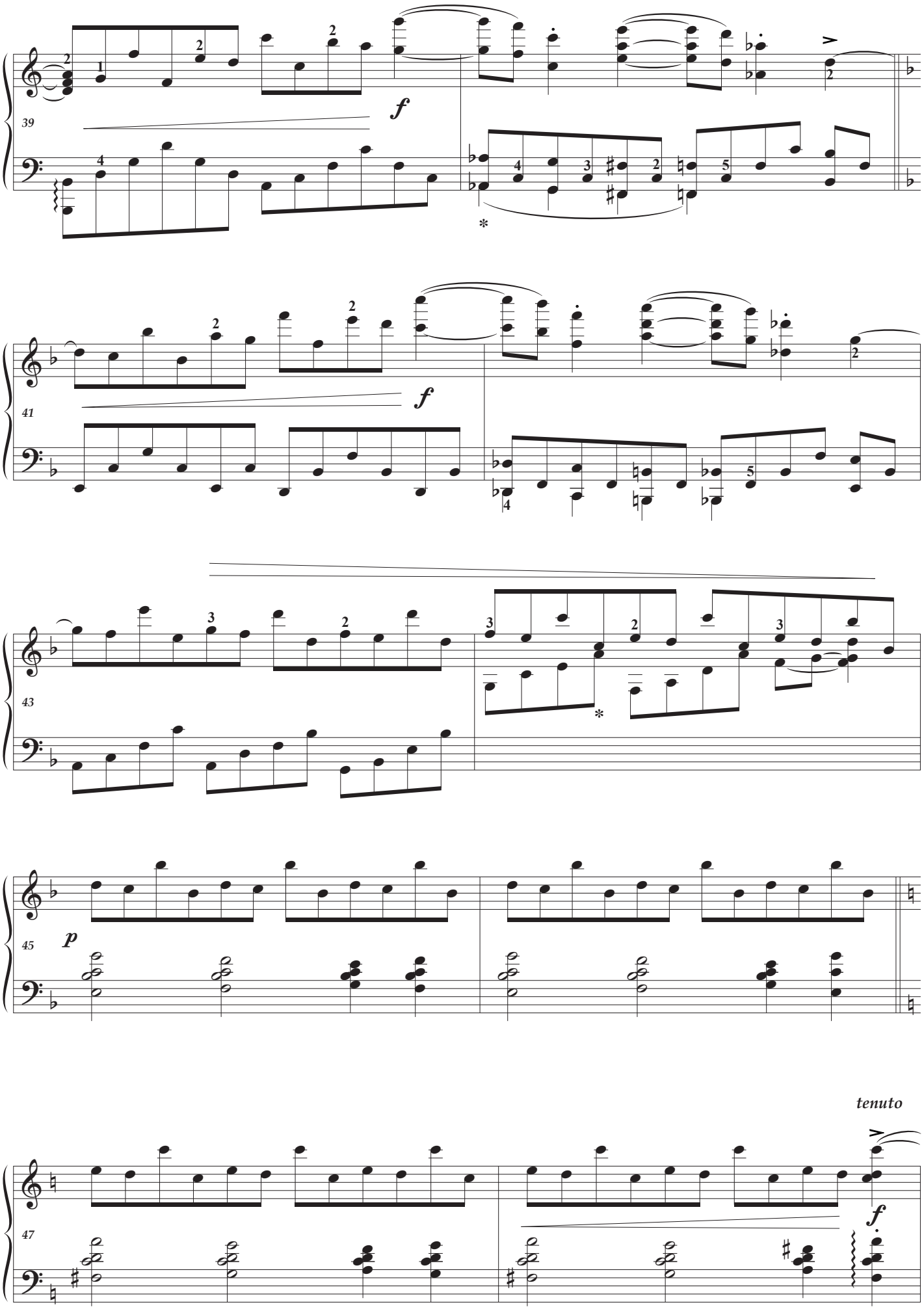

2
diminuendo e poco ritardando - - - - -
38
42
p
p
45
mp
48
p

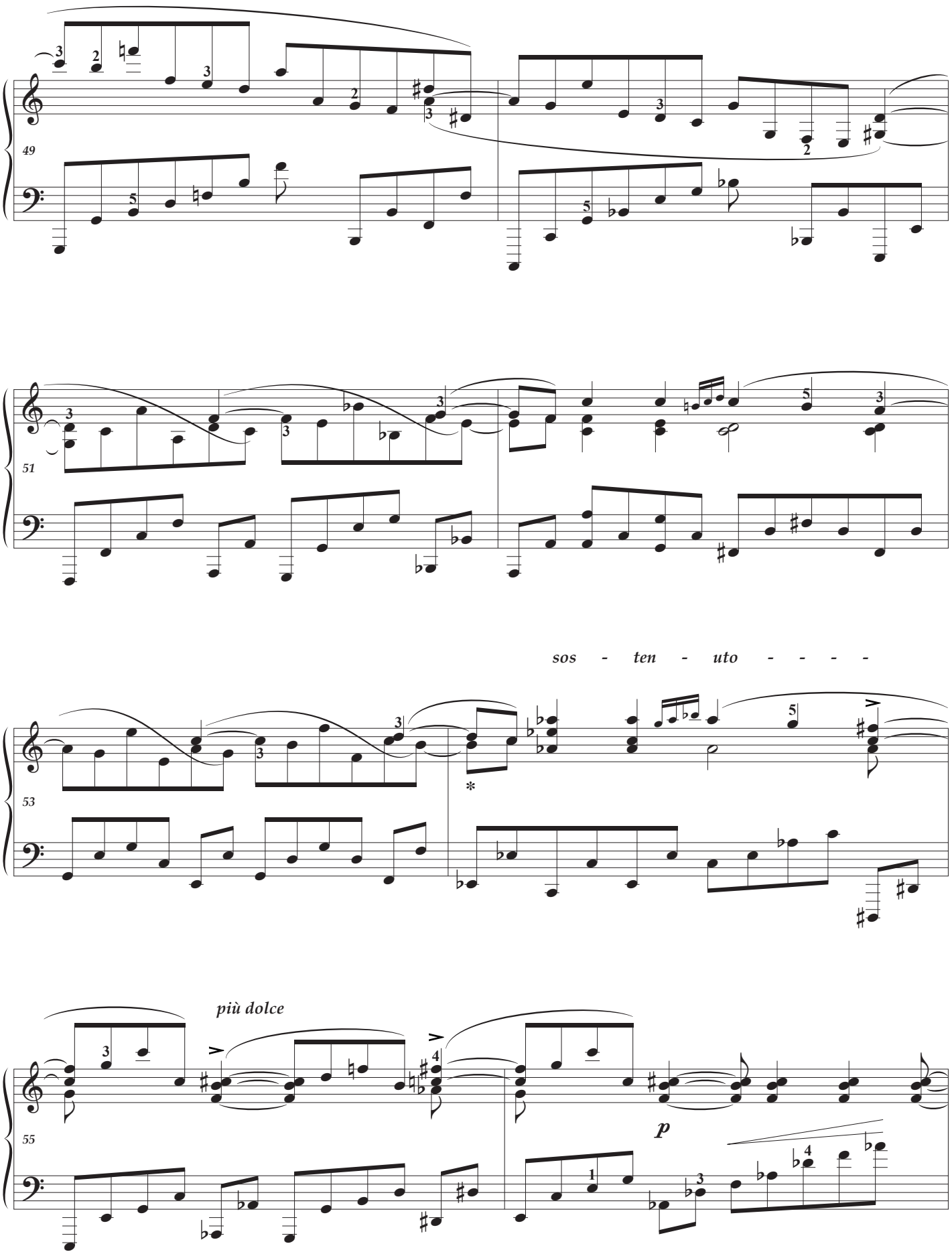
CAPRICCIO

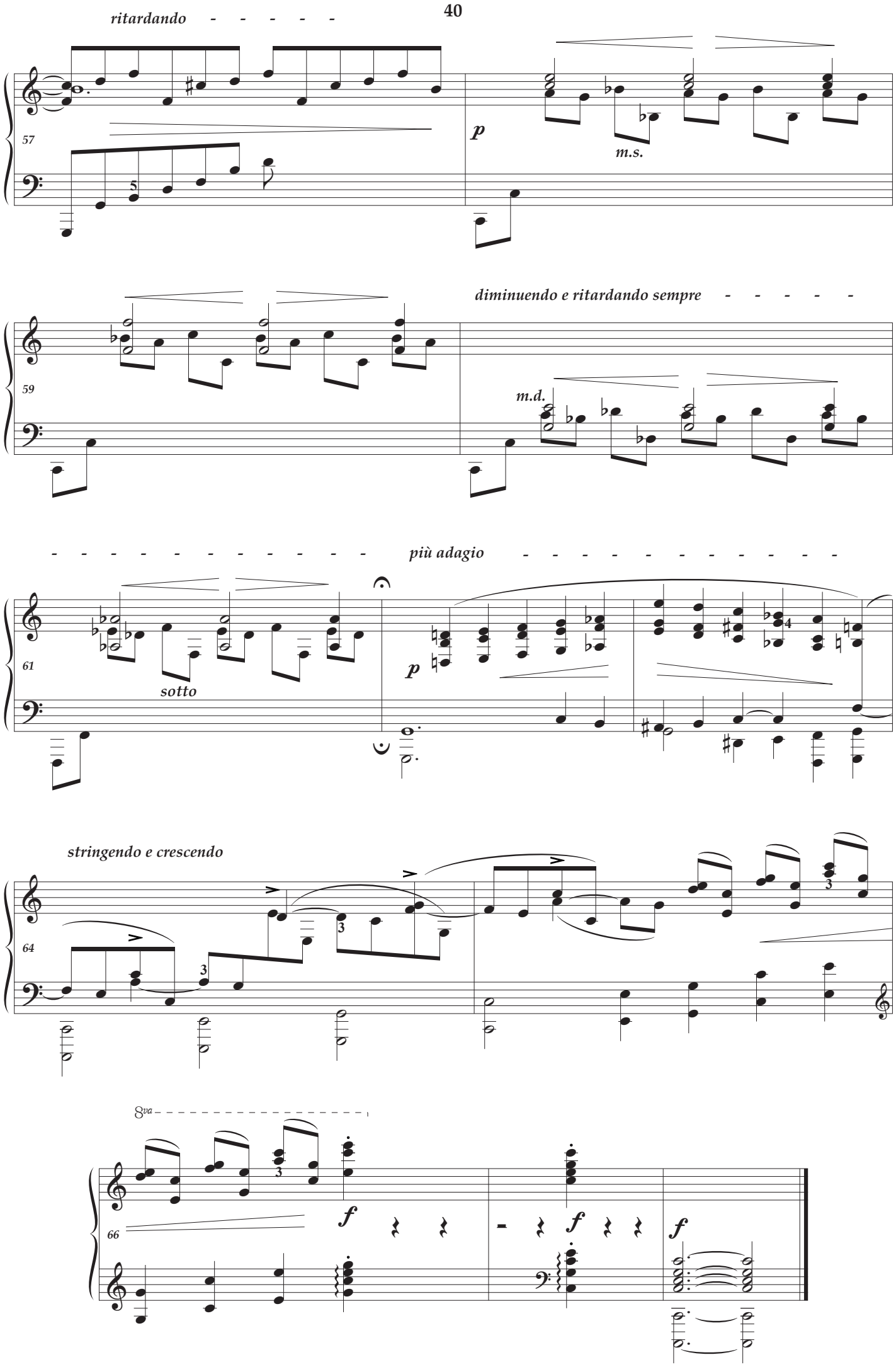


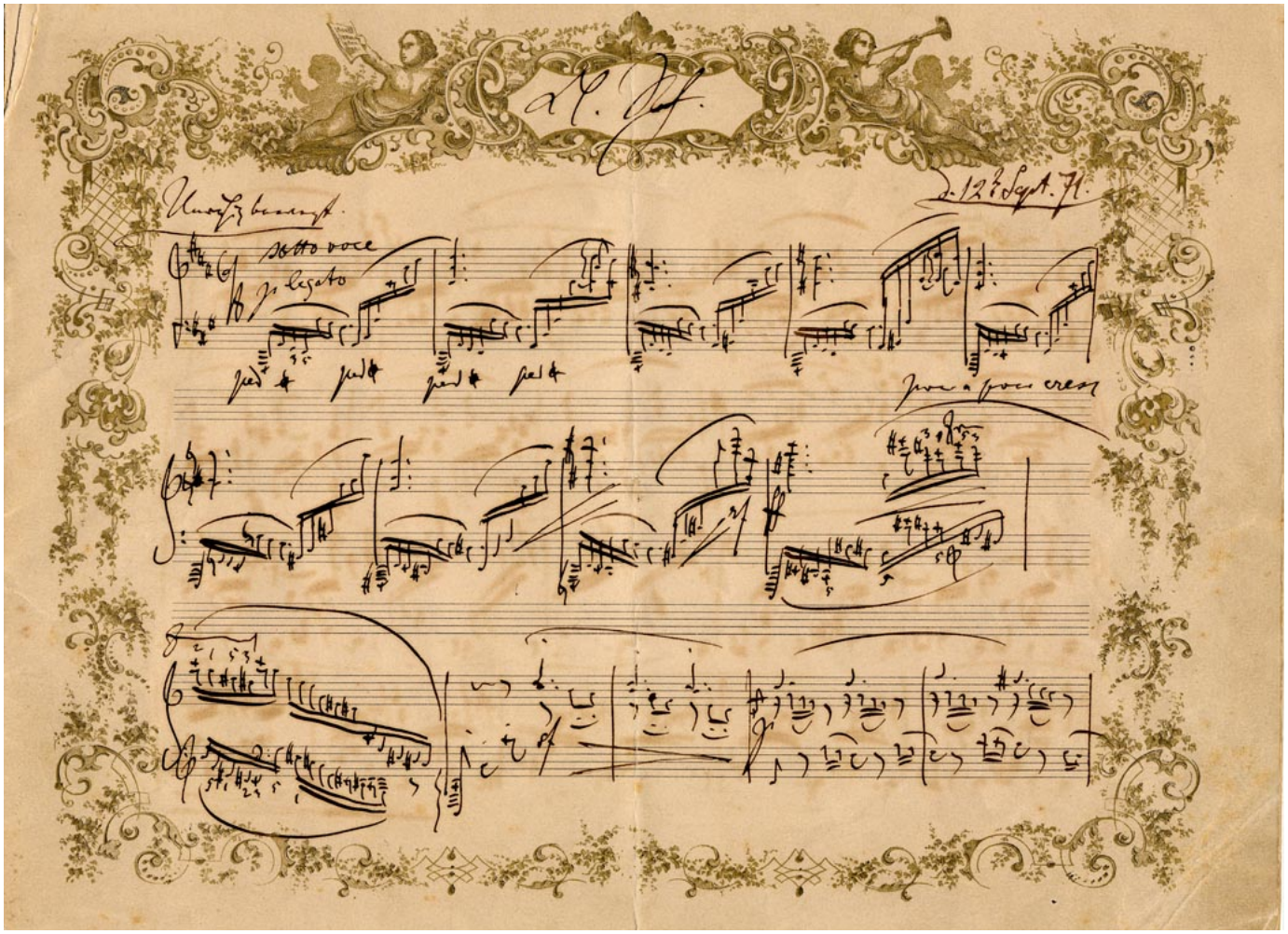

16
p dolce sotto voce
19
ritenuto
dolce ed animato
22
ritenuto - - - - -
24
pp
26
ritenuto


28
30
32
34
37
f


39
f
41
f
43
45
p
tenuto
47
f


49
51
sos - ten - uto - - - -
53
*
più dolce
55
p


ritardando
57
p
m.s.
diminuendo e ritardando sempre
59
m.d.
più adagio
61
sotto
p
stringendo e crescendo
64
8va
66
f
f
f



Capriccio in F♯ minor — an elegant manuscript, in Brahms's hand (this is just the first of five pages), recalls an episode between Clara Schumann and the composer. It is presented with a printed decorative border and features the inscription *Cl. Sch.* and the date — significantly the 31st anniversary of Clara's marriage (her 52nd birthday was celebrated on the following day). For most of the decade, the piece seems to have been known only to Schumann's wife, but in 1879 a revised version was published as opus 76 N° 1, without dedication and with a new title; apparently Clara preferred the original.

B R A H M S

A C H T K L A V I E R S T Ü C K E

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