# Johannes BRAHMS



## Sechs Klavierstücke

opus 118

Piano Practical Editions
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# Johannes BRAHMS

## 1833 — 1897

## Sechs Klavierstücke Op 118 1893


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Intermezzo A minor | 1 |
| 2 | Intermezzo A major | 4 |
| 3 | Ballade G minor | 11 |
| 4 | Intermezzo F minor | 17 |
| 5 | Romanze F major | 24 |
| 6 | Intermezzo E flat minor | 29 |


Dedicated to Clara Schumann and created during the summer of 1893 at Bad Ischl, opus 118 belongs to the remarkable final flowering of Brahms' piano music. While the Three Intermezzi Op 117 inhabit an almost exclusively inward and contemplative world, this set encompasses a wider spiritual range; passion, lyricism, nostalgia and melancholy coexist within a collection whose six movements are strikingly individual in character yet deeply unified in style.

The pieces are linked less by a thematic thread than by a shared emotional and stylistic world. Their forms are concise and highly integrated, often built from small motivic cells that generate entire sections. His characteristic use of rhythmic ambiguity, cross-rhythm and inner-voice interplay is present throughout, while the harmonic language frequently stretches traditional tonal boundaries. The result is music of exceptional density, where even the smallest detail contributes to the overall design.

Alternating between passionate and contemplative moods, the opening Intermezzo and the central Ballade provide moments of dramatic intensity, while the remaining pieces explore a more intimate sound world. Particularly striking is Brahms' ability to combine lyrical warmth with contrapuntal sophistication, allowing melodic lines to emerge naturally from richly woven textures.

For the performer, this opus presents challenges that are less overtly dazzling than those of many nineteenth-century piano works. The demands lie in voicing, tonal control and the ability to project long musical paragraphs within relatively small forms. Balance between melody and accompaniment is of paramount importance, as is an awareness of the often complex interaction between various layers of texture.

Contemporary accounts suggest that the composer frequently played these newly completed pieces to friends at Bad Ischl. After returning to Vienna on 27 September 1893, he presented some of them at an informal gathering of the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein. Such performances offer a rare glimpse of Brahms as pianist in his later years, sharing music conceived

not for the concert hall but for the cultivated salon, where its intimacy and refined craftsmanship could be most fully appreciated.

These six pieces stand among Brahms' finest achievements for the piano. Their technical mastery is inseparable from their emotional depth, and they continue to reward performers and listeners alike with new insights at every encounter.



*Brahms — c.1890*

## 1 Intermezzo in A minor

The opening Intermezzo acts as an introduction — not with introspection but with urgency. Restless rhythms and surging phrases recall the passionate young man of earlier decades, even though emotions are compressed into a miniature form. Moments of turbulence alternate with passages of lyrical warmth, creating a sense of struggle between agitation and consolation. The work ends unexpectedly in A major, as though a storm has finally broken and sunlight briefly emerges through the clouds.

## 2 Intermezzo in A major

Justifiably one of Brahms' most beloved piano pieces, this Intermezzo creates an atmosphere of extraordinary tenderness. The principal melody unfolds with the simplicity of a romance remembered from long ago, while the central section introduces darker shades of yearning and regret. Many listeners have sensed in this music an intimate message to Clara Schumann; whether or not that was his intention, the piece speaks with rare directness. Its closing pages seem suspended outside time, fading into silence rather than offering a conclusion.

## 3 Ballade in G minor

The Ballade provides a dramatic centre to the set. Strong rhythms and powerful chordal writing evoke an epic narrative, though no specific story is told. Brahms contrasts this stern outer music with a luminous central episode in B major, where the tension briefly dissolves into song. The return of the opening material feels less like repetition than recollection, as if an old legend were being retold through memory rather than direct experience.

## 4 Intermezzo in F minor

After the Ballade's broad gestures, this Intermezzo turns inward again. The prevailing mood is restless and questioning, generated not through overt virtuosity but through the persistent interaction of imitative voices, sometimes argumentative, sometimes reflective. Much of the piece is constructed from extended canonic writing, a technique that fascinated Brahms throughout his life. Here, however, the contrapuntal craftsmanship never sounds academic; instead, the overlapping lines create a sense of emotional urgency and growing tension, culminating in one of the most powerful climaxes of the set.

## 5 Romanze in F major

The Romanze is the most openly lyrical piece in the collection. Its gentle melody unfolds above a flowing accompaniment, creating an atmosphere of pastoral calm. Yet this serenity is never entirely uncomplicated: shadows pass across the landscape, and moments of wistfulness interrupt the song. Brahms' gift for combining simplicity with depth is nowhere more apparent. The music seems to smile through tears, offering a brief oasis before the darker world of the final Intermezzo. Clara Schumann received the manuscript in September 1893 and it soon became a particular favourite; "*besonders lieb*" — exclaiming that she was especially fond of the piece.

## 6 Intermezzo in E flat minor

The final Intermezzo, probably my personal favourite, is among the most profound of the composer's late works. Marked *largo e mesto*, the work unfolds as a grave meditation whose dark sonorities and descending melodic gestures bestow an almost funereal character. The sombre opening may allude to the ancient *Dies irae* chant associated with death, and throughout the piece Brahms creates sonorities of remarkable orchestral richness. Yet this is not music of despair. Rather, it seems to contemplate mortality with dignity and acceptance. As the closing pages fade away, the entire cycle appears to withdraw into silence, leaving an impression of wisdom hard won and deeply human.

---o0o---

This set forms a compelling companion to Op 117 (1892), three Intermezzi which resemble lullabies or inward confessions, and Op 118 broadens the emotional range with a more varied and dramatic palette, while remaining unmistakably the voice of Brahms in his final years.

**1 Intermezzo**

nicht schnell aber sehrleidenschaftlich

**3 Ballade**

**41** the fourth voice single quavers are quite a mystery

**4 Intermezzo**

**18** deaduck — an excellent example of Bernstein's elision or 'phrase merging'

**110** editorial re-write for clarity

**112 & 119** as indicated in this edition — these accents are probably intended for the crotchets

**60** & **77** editorial suggestion for the following diminuendo
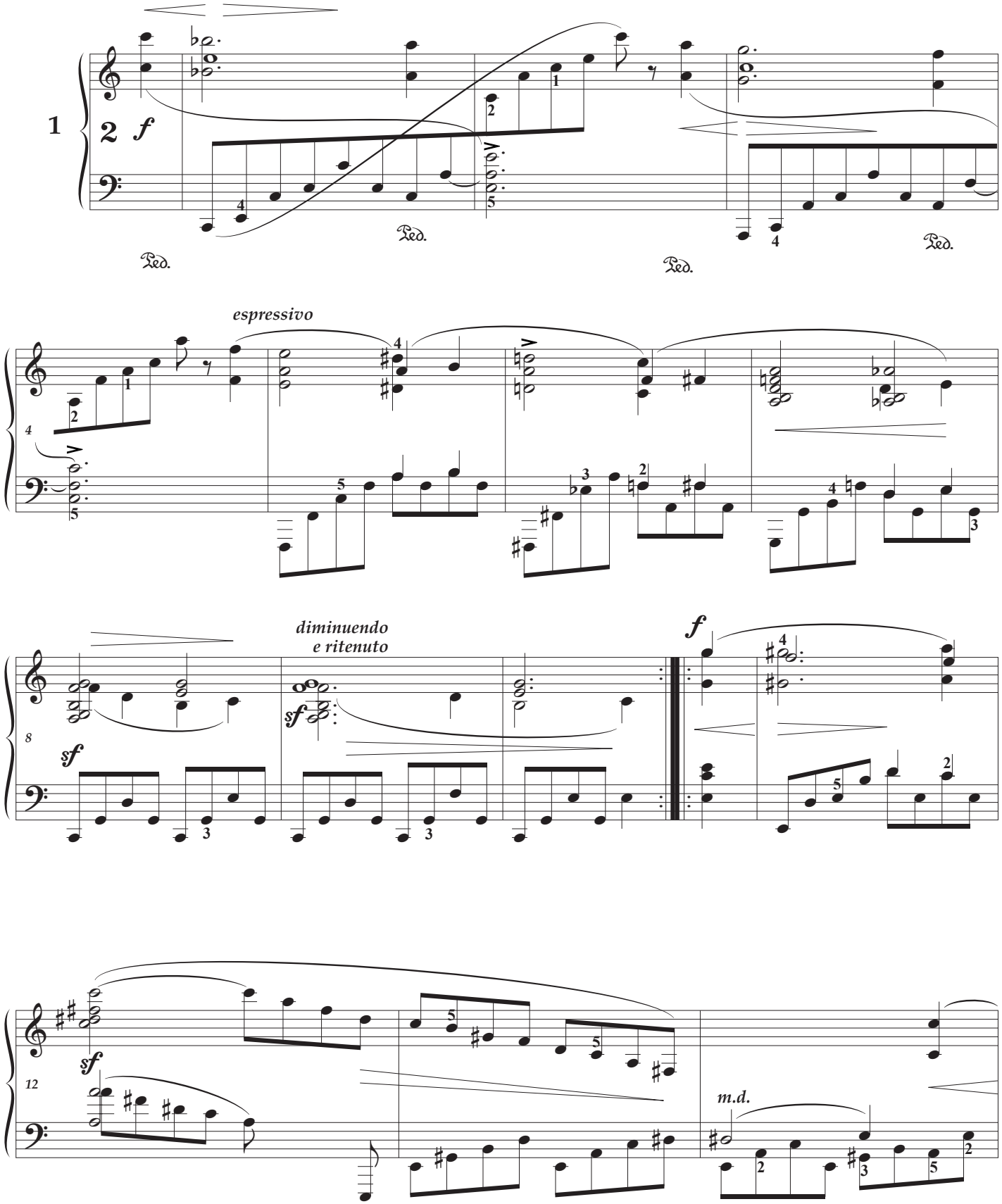
**6 Intermezzo**
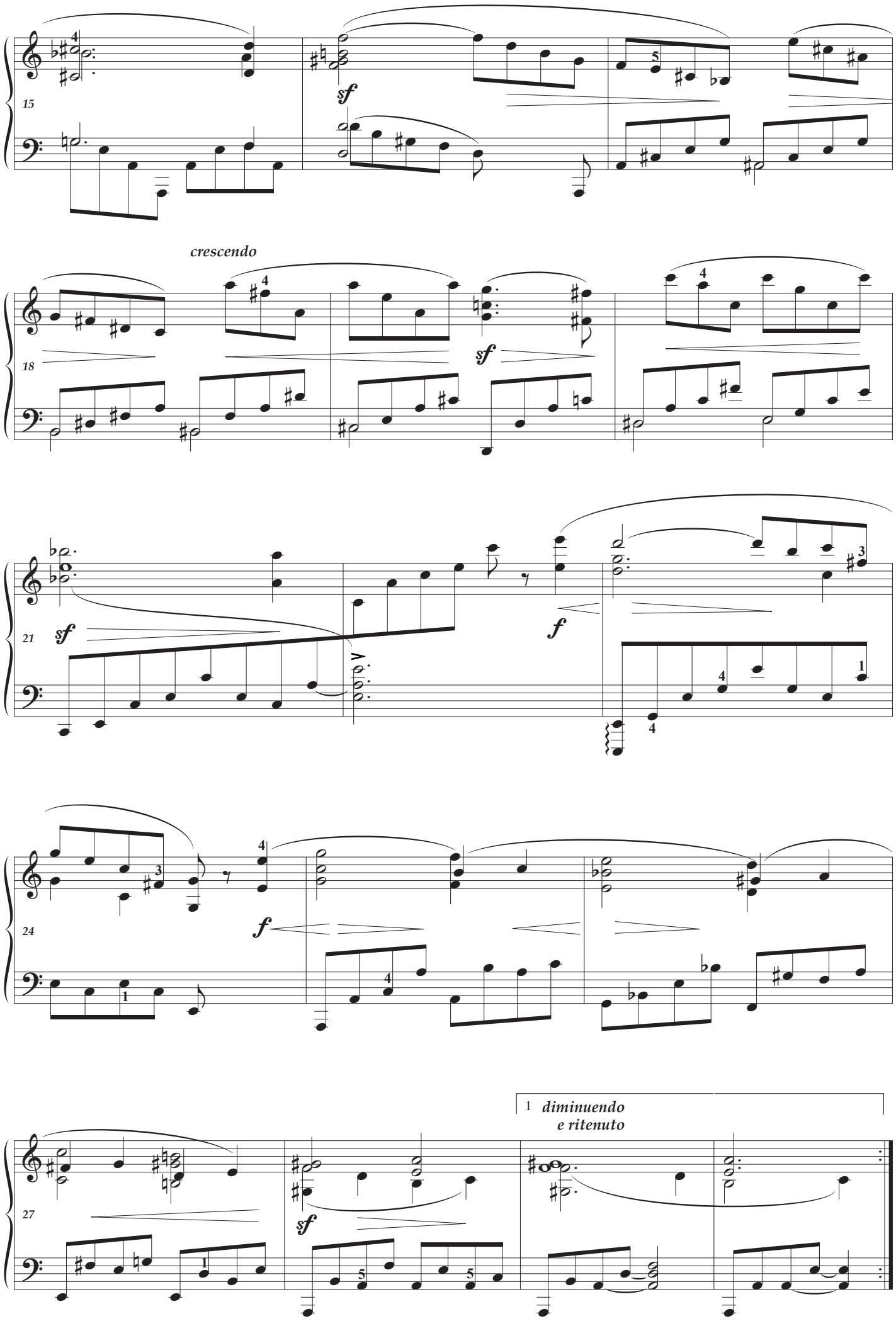
**3 (**and throughout) editorial reduced note heads for the accompaniment
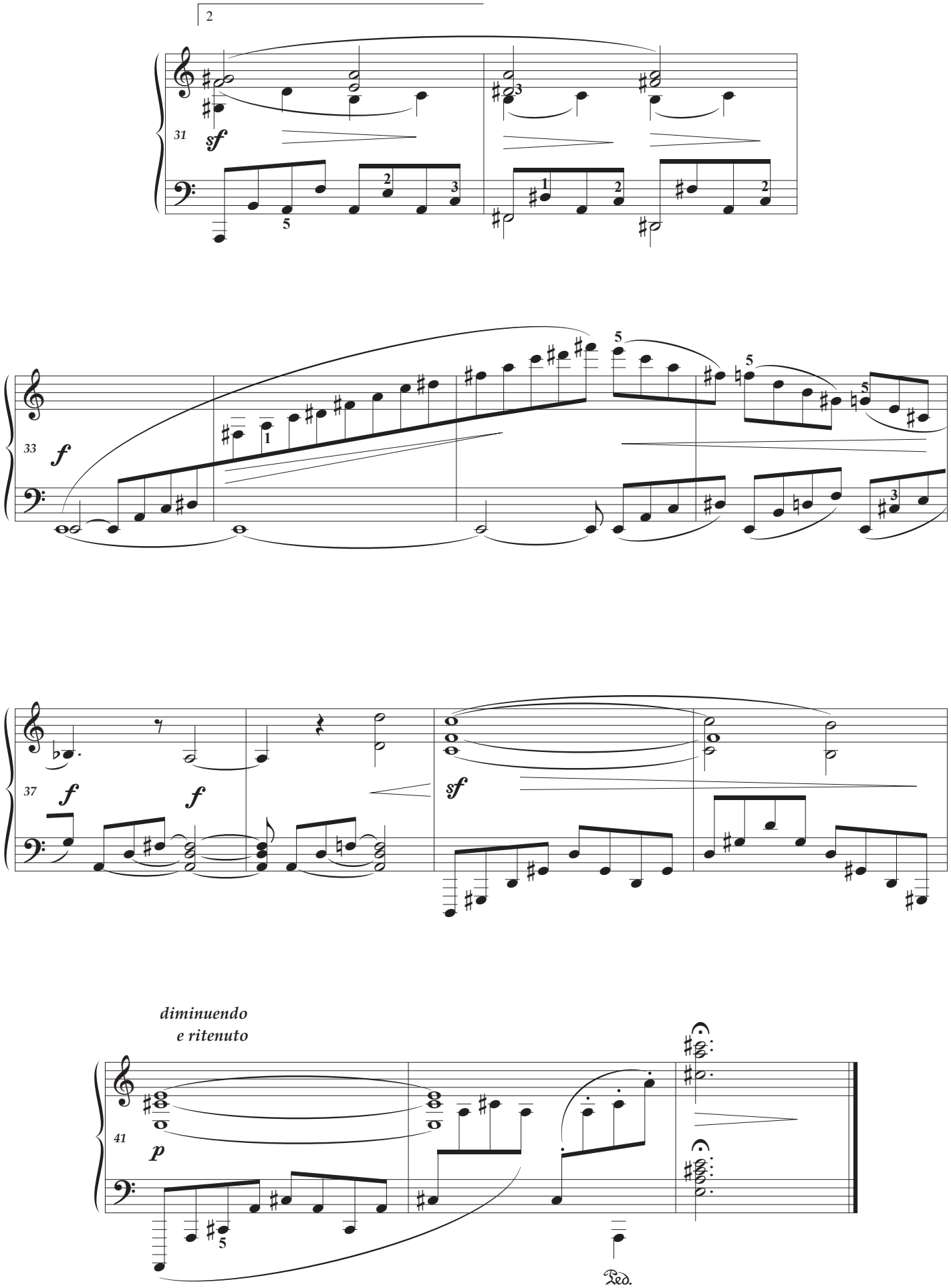


# INTERMEZZO

**allegro non assai, ma molto appassionato**
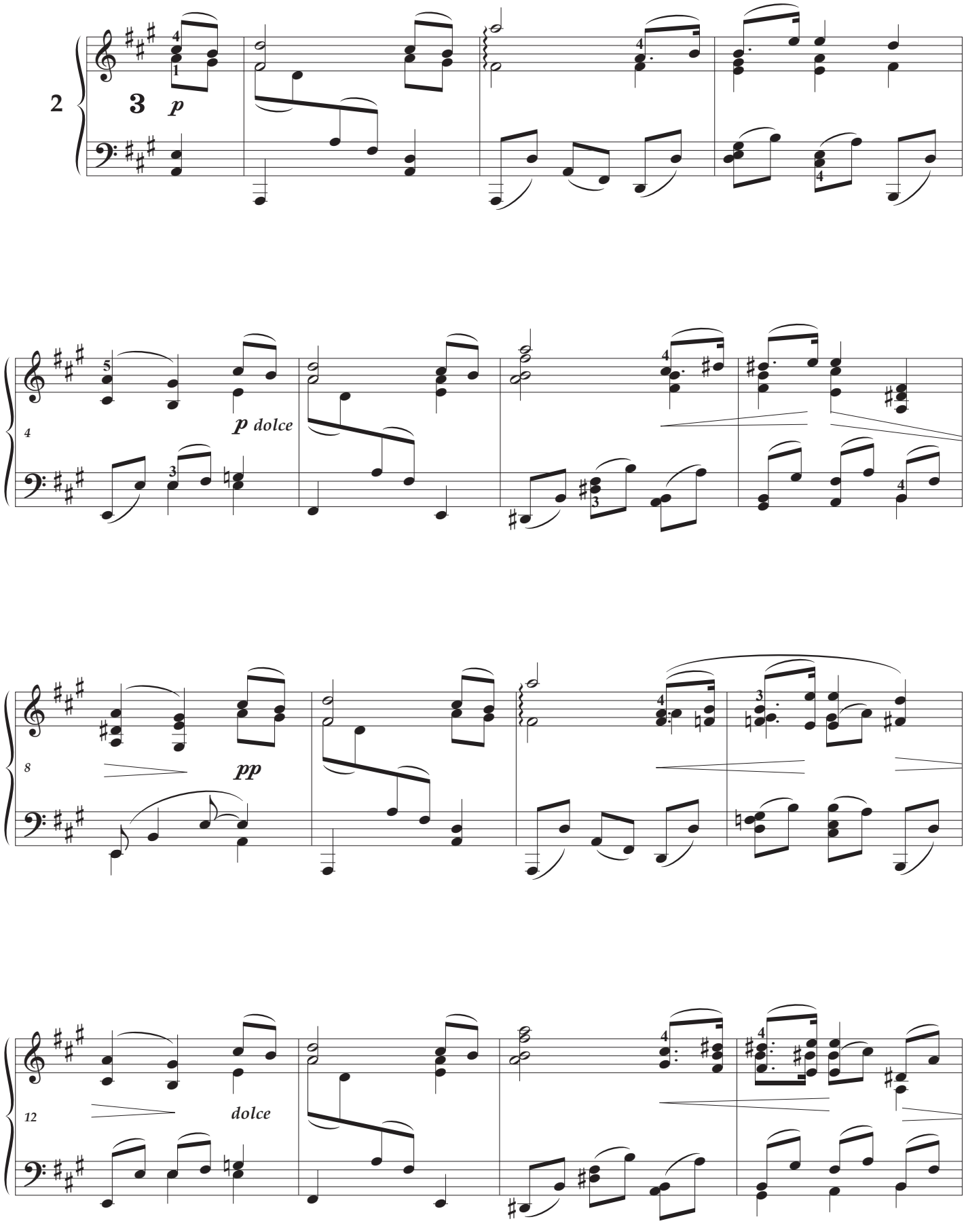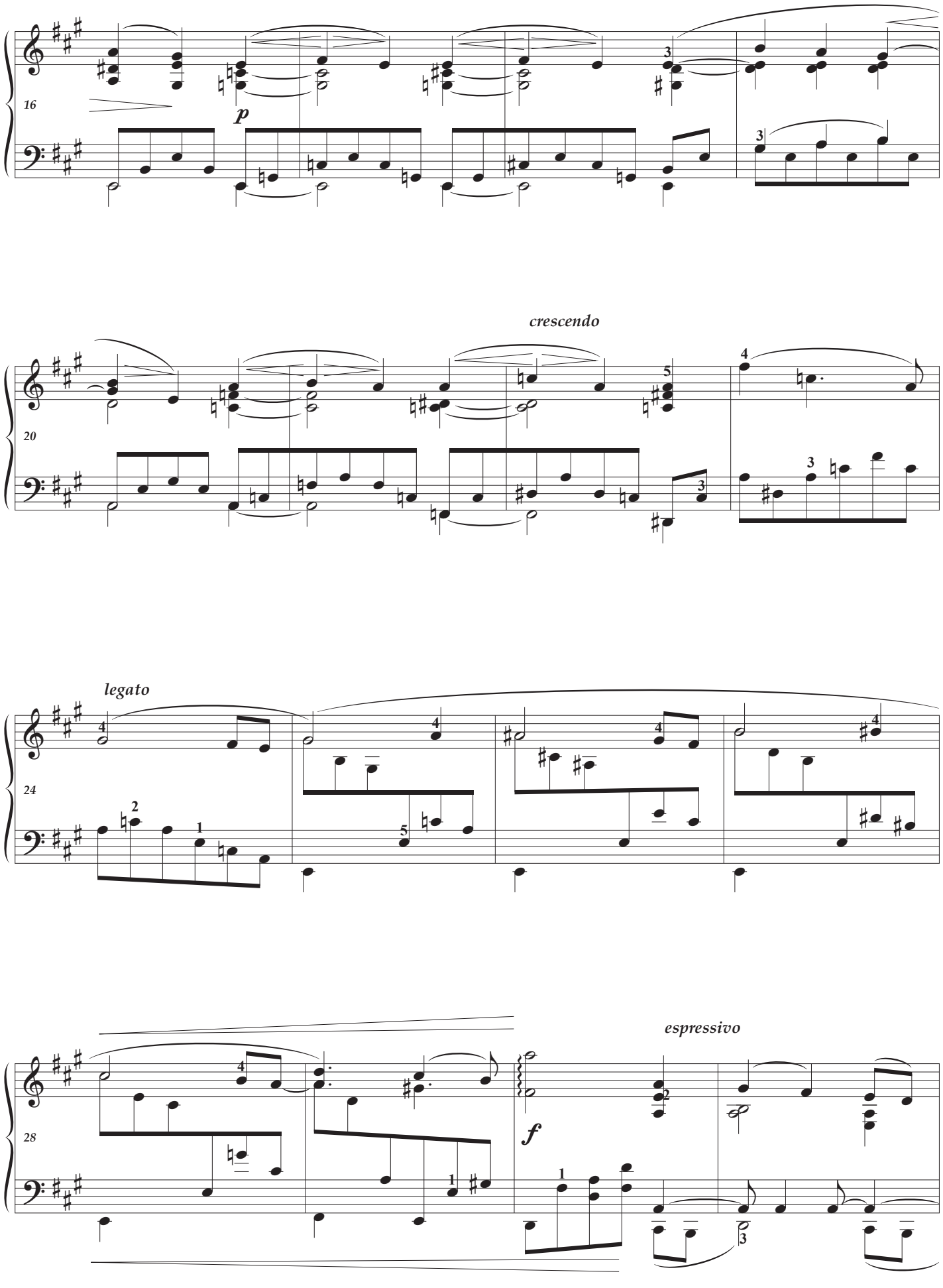



15
sf
18
crescendo
sf
21
sf
f
24
f
27
1 diminuendo
e ritenuto
sf
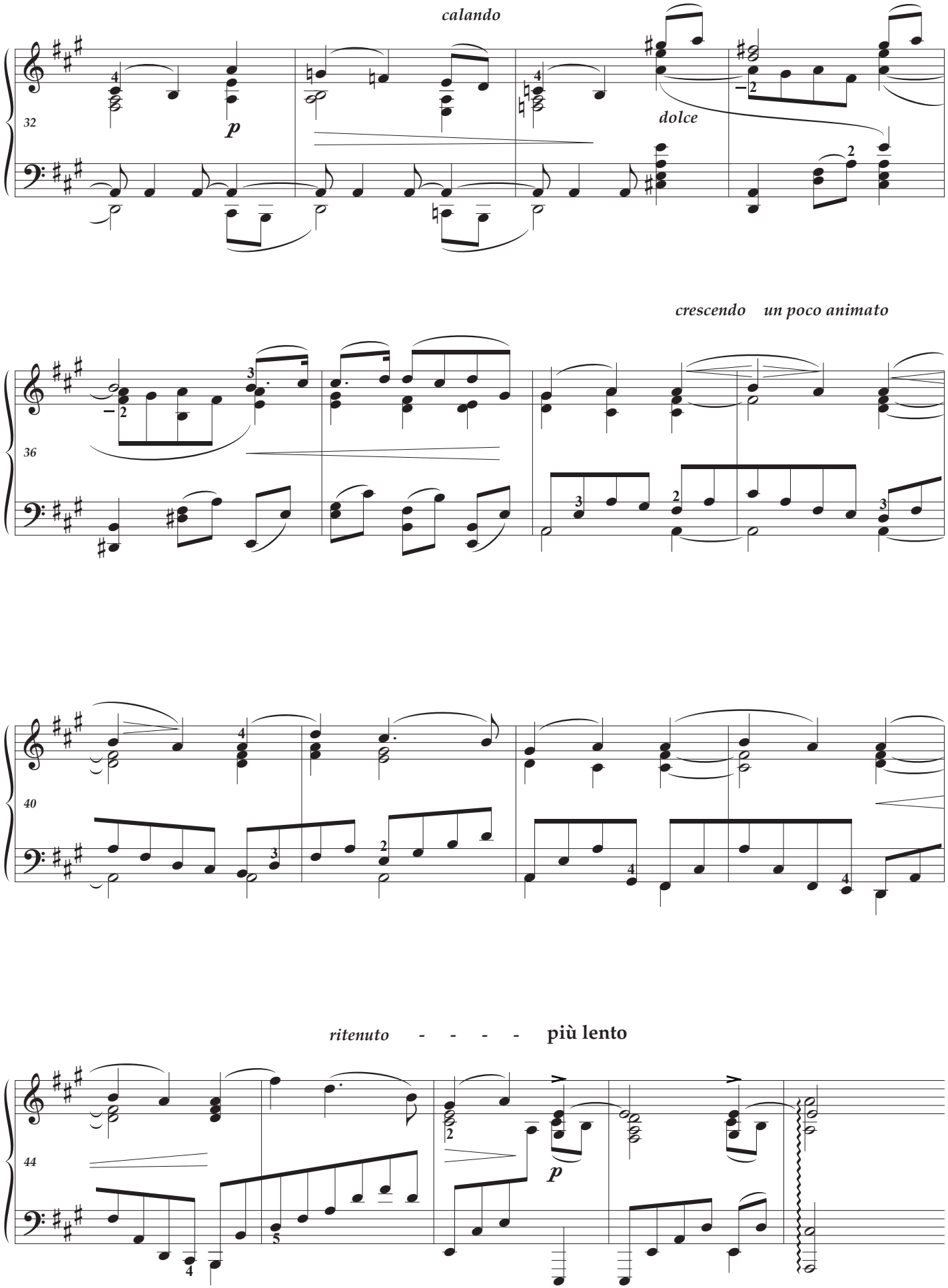

2
31
sf
33
f
37
f
f
sf
diminuendo
e ritenuto
41
p
Ped.
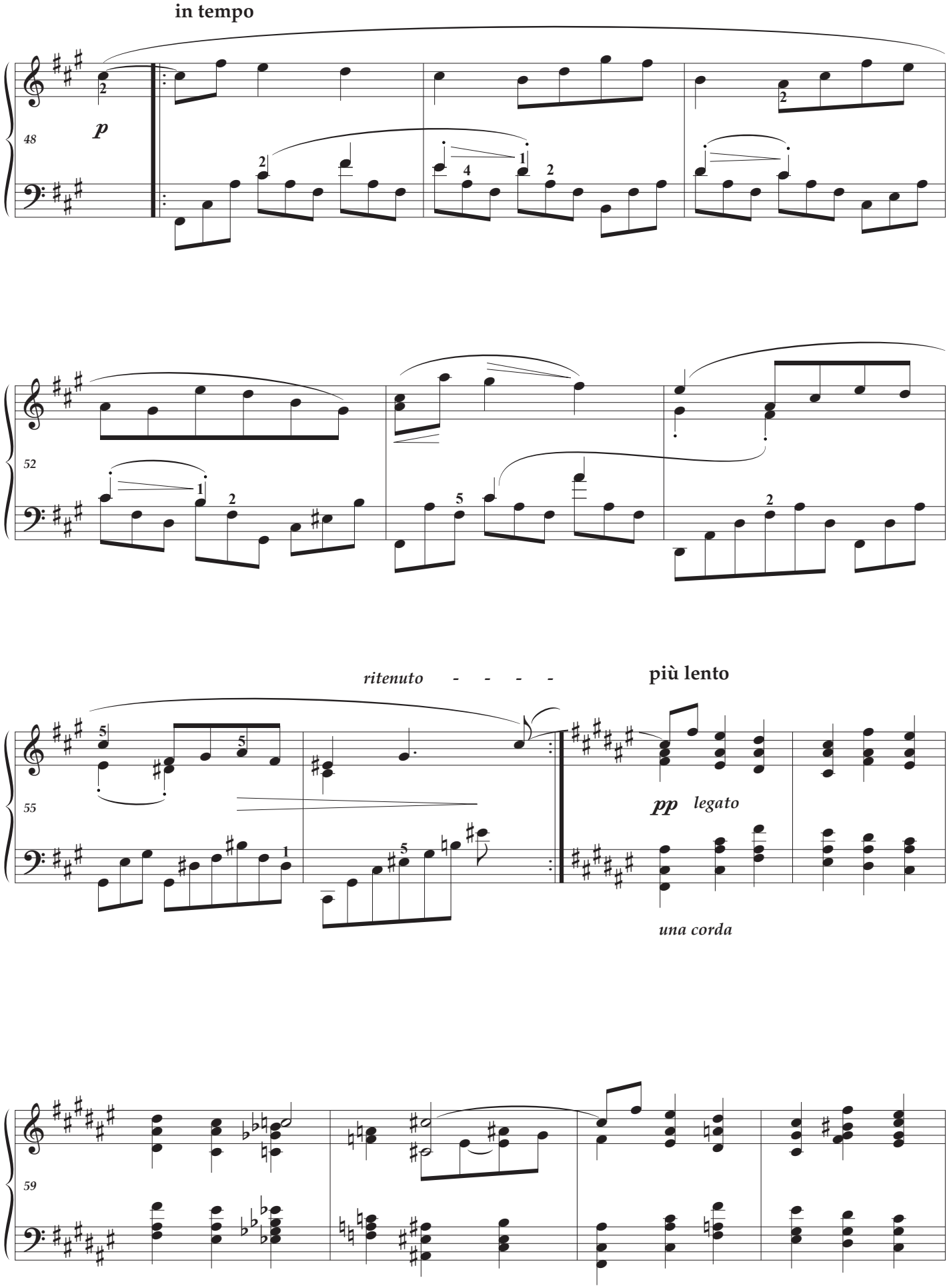
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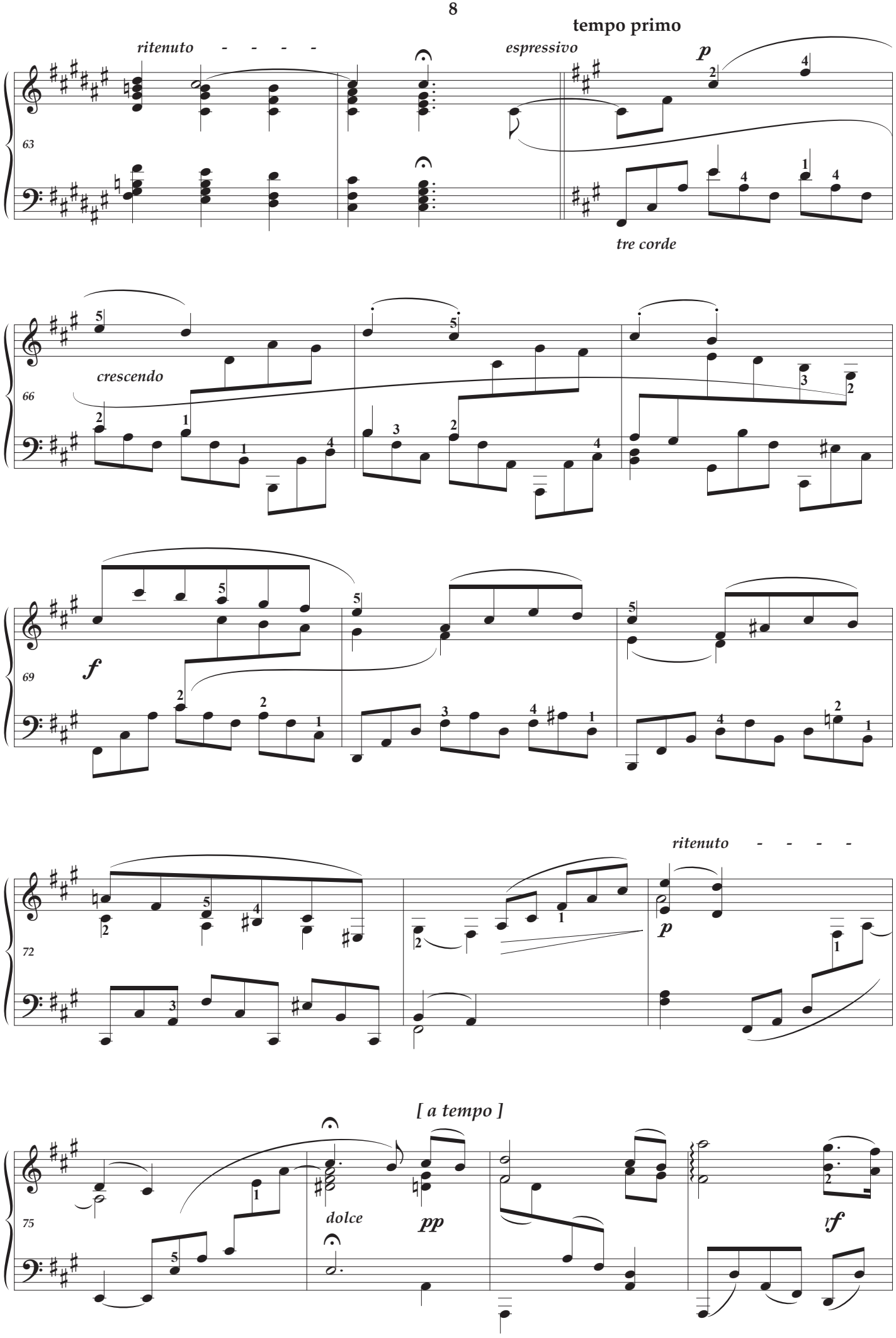
**andante teneramente**
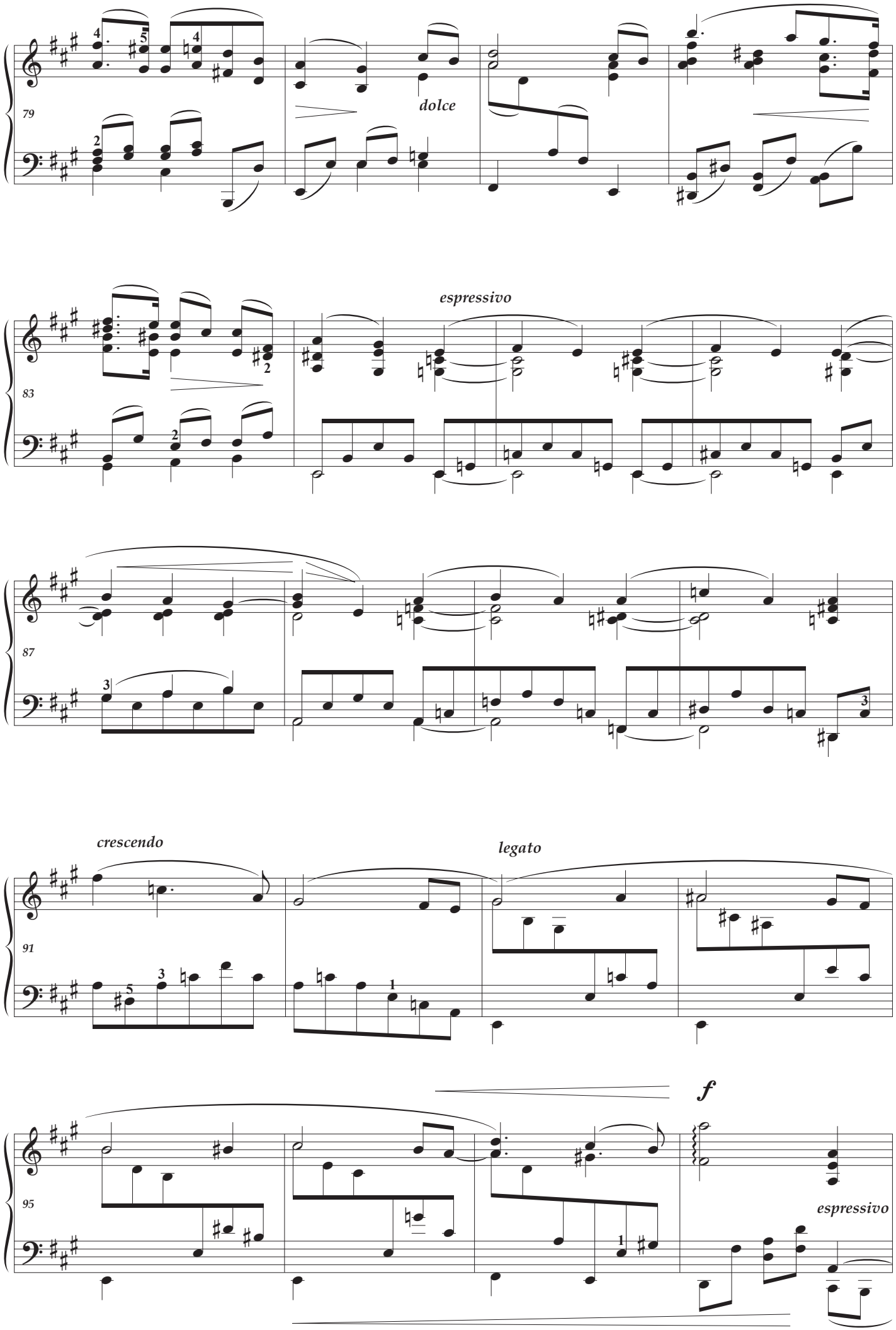


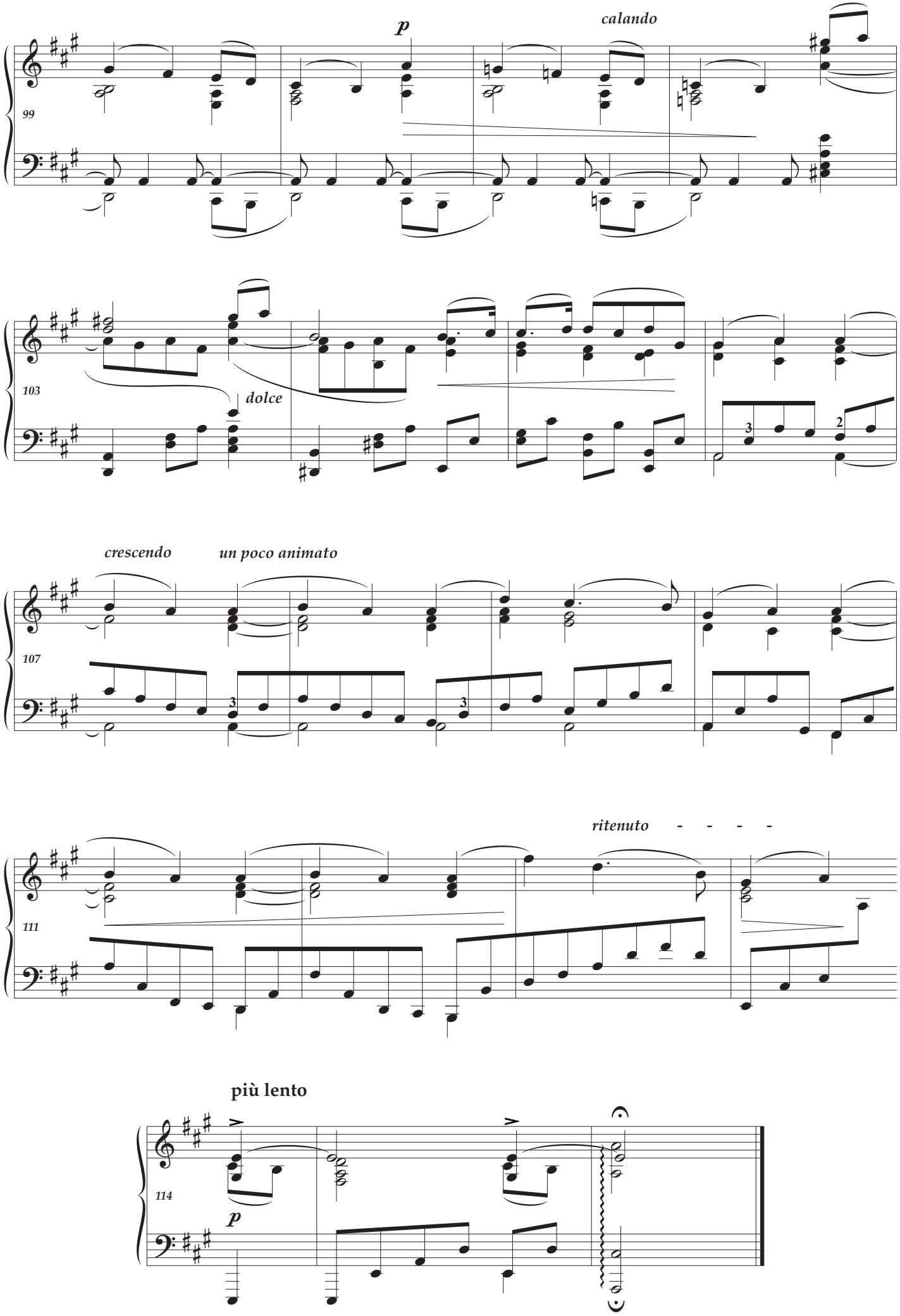

16
p
crescendo
20
legato
24
espressivo
28
f


calando
32
p
dolce
crescendo un poco animato
36
40
ritenuto - - - - più lento
44
p
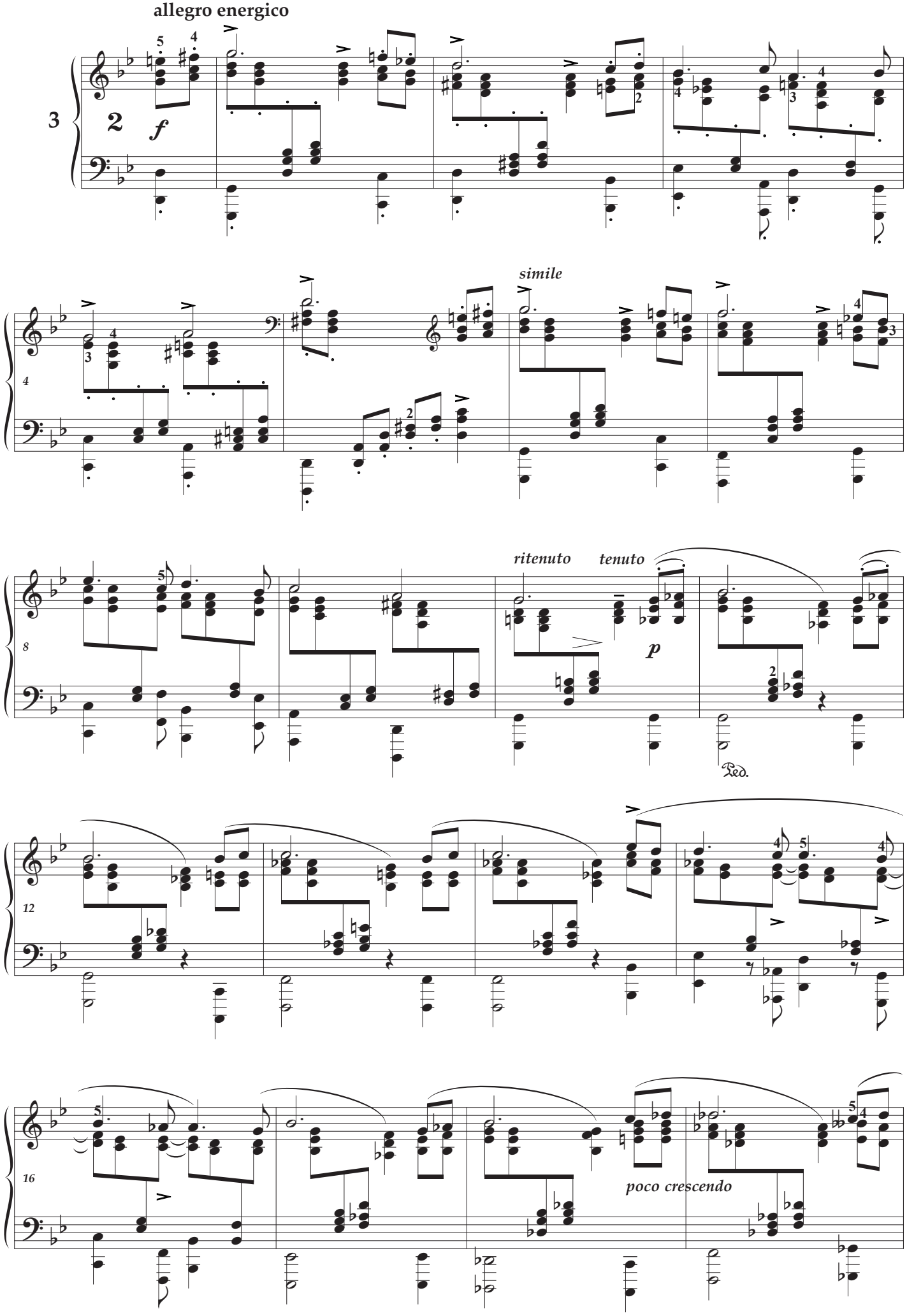

in tempo
p
48
52
ritenuto - - - -
più lento
55
pp legato
una corda
59
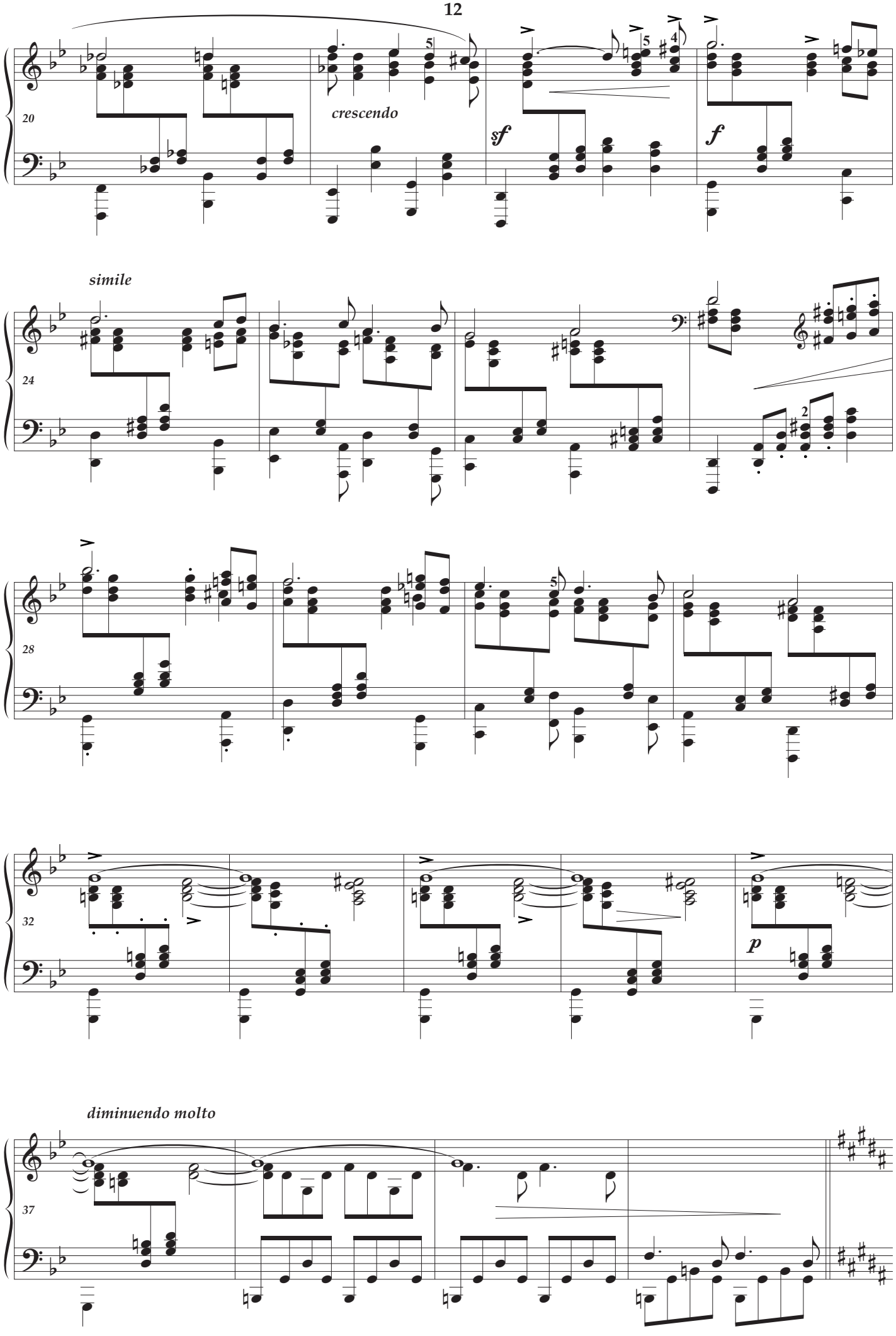

tempo primo
ritenuto
espressivo
p
tre corde
crescendo
f
ritenuto
p
[ a tempo ]
dolce
pp
rf
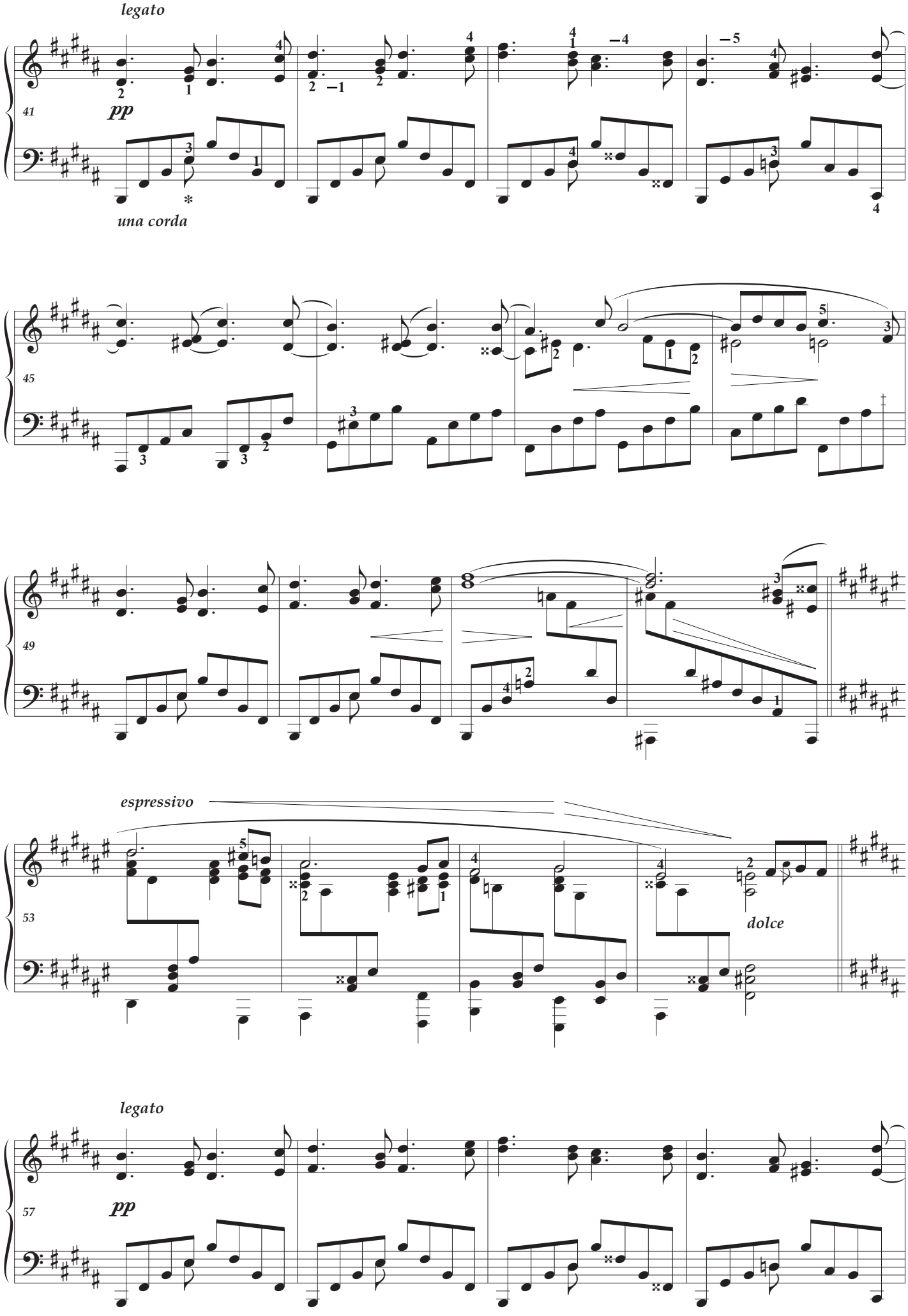

79
dolce
83
espressivo
87
91
crescendo
legato
95
f
espressivo
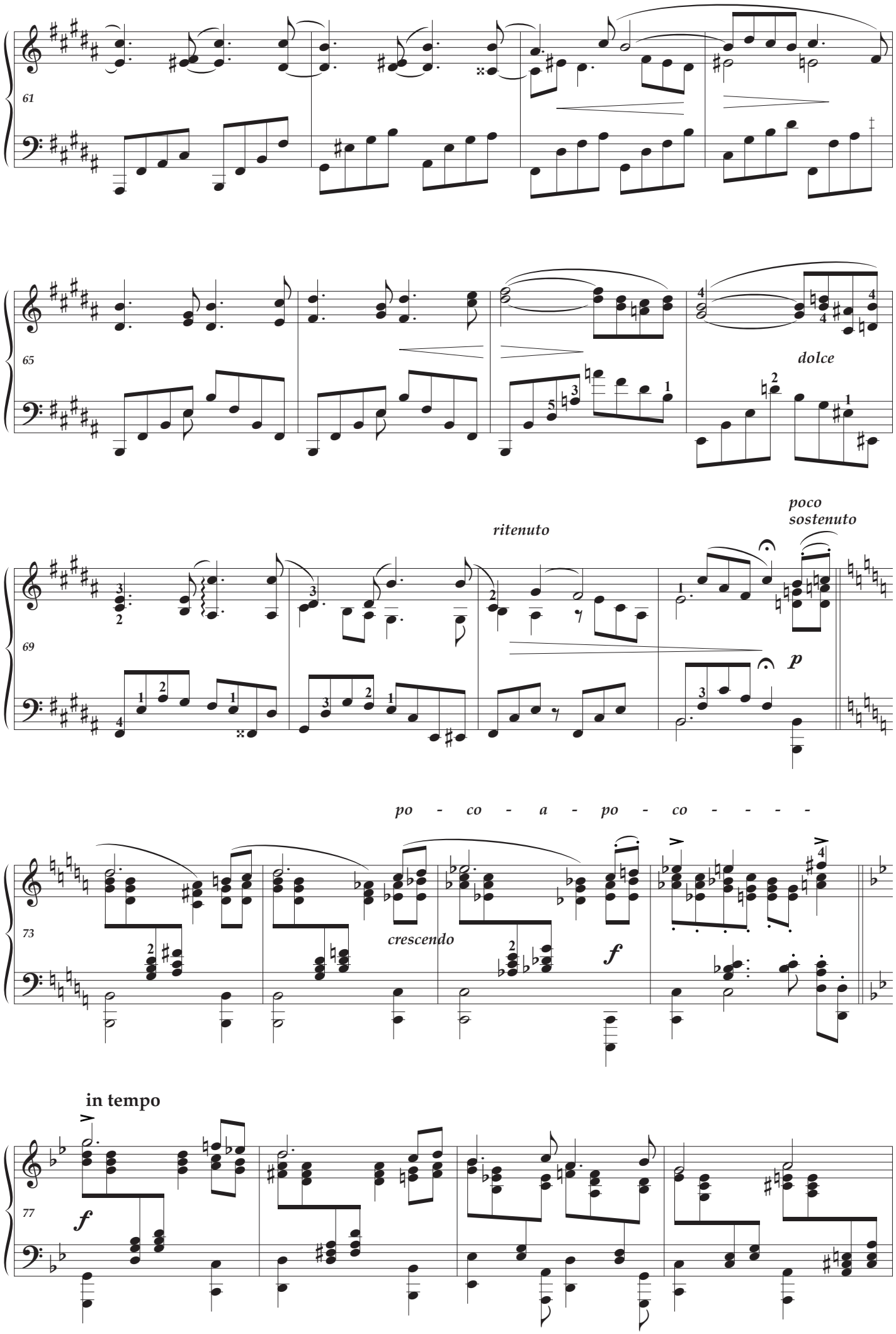

p
calando
99
103
dolce
crescendo
un poco animato
107
ritenuto
111
più lento
114
p
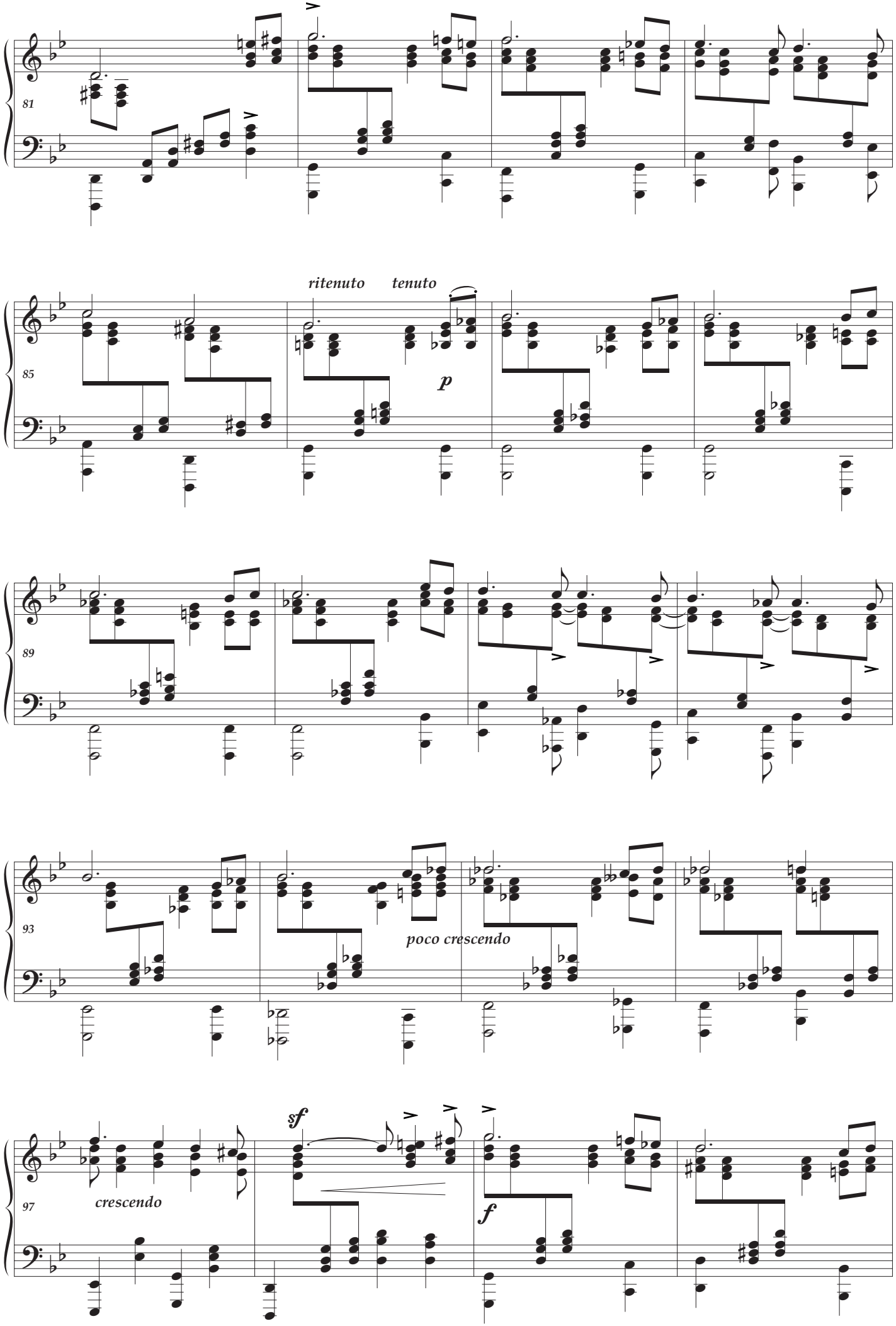
# BALLADE
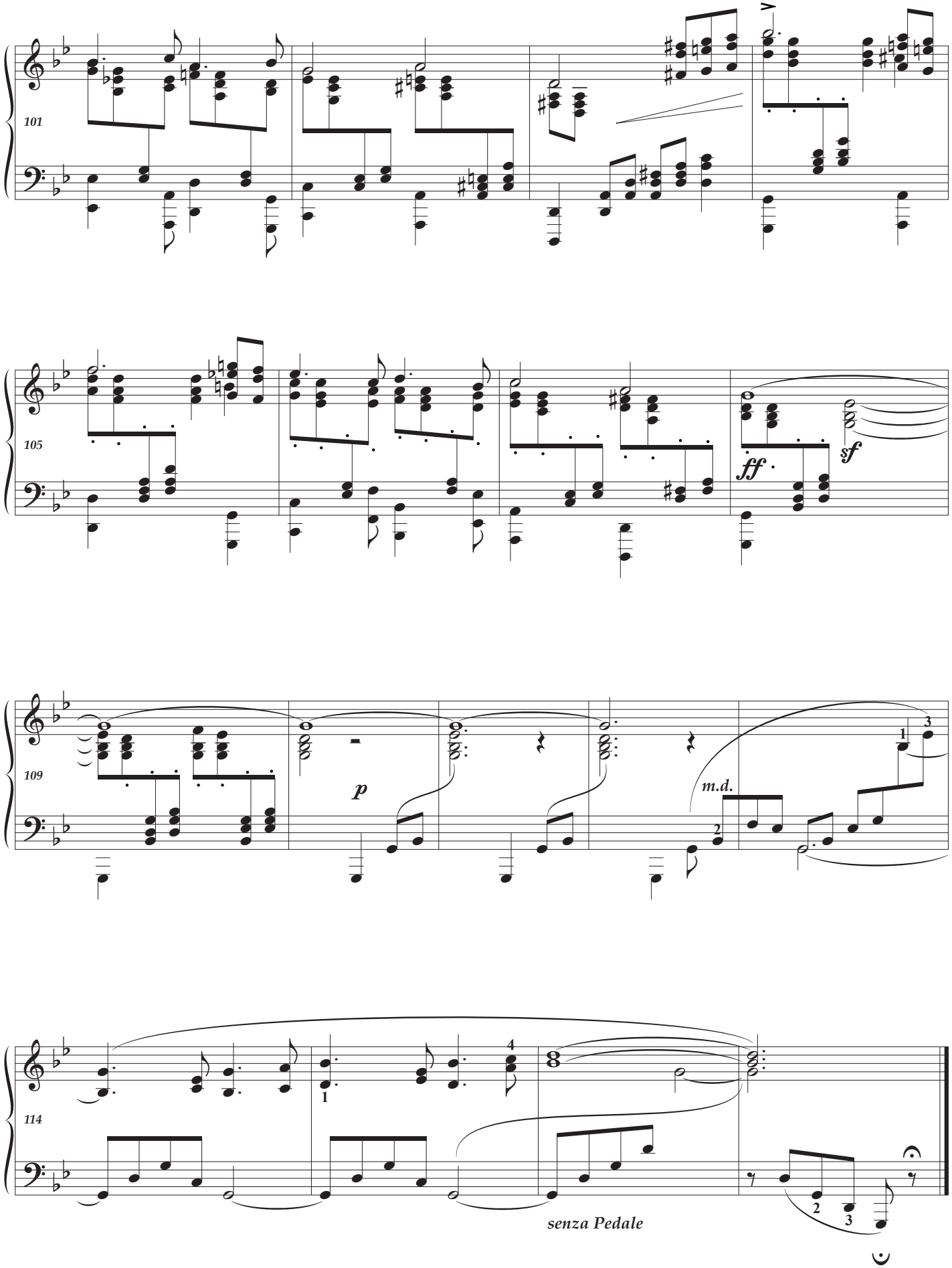

allegro energico
f
simile
ritenuto
tenuto
p
Ped.
poco crescendo


20
crescendo
sf
f
simile
24
2
28
5
32
p
diminuendo molto
37


legato
41
pp
una corda
45
49
espressivo
53
dolce
legato
57
pp
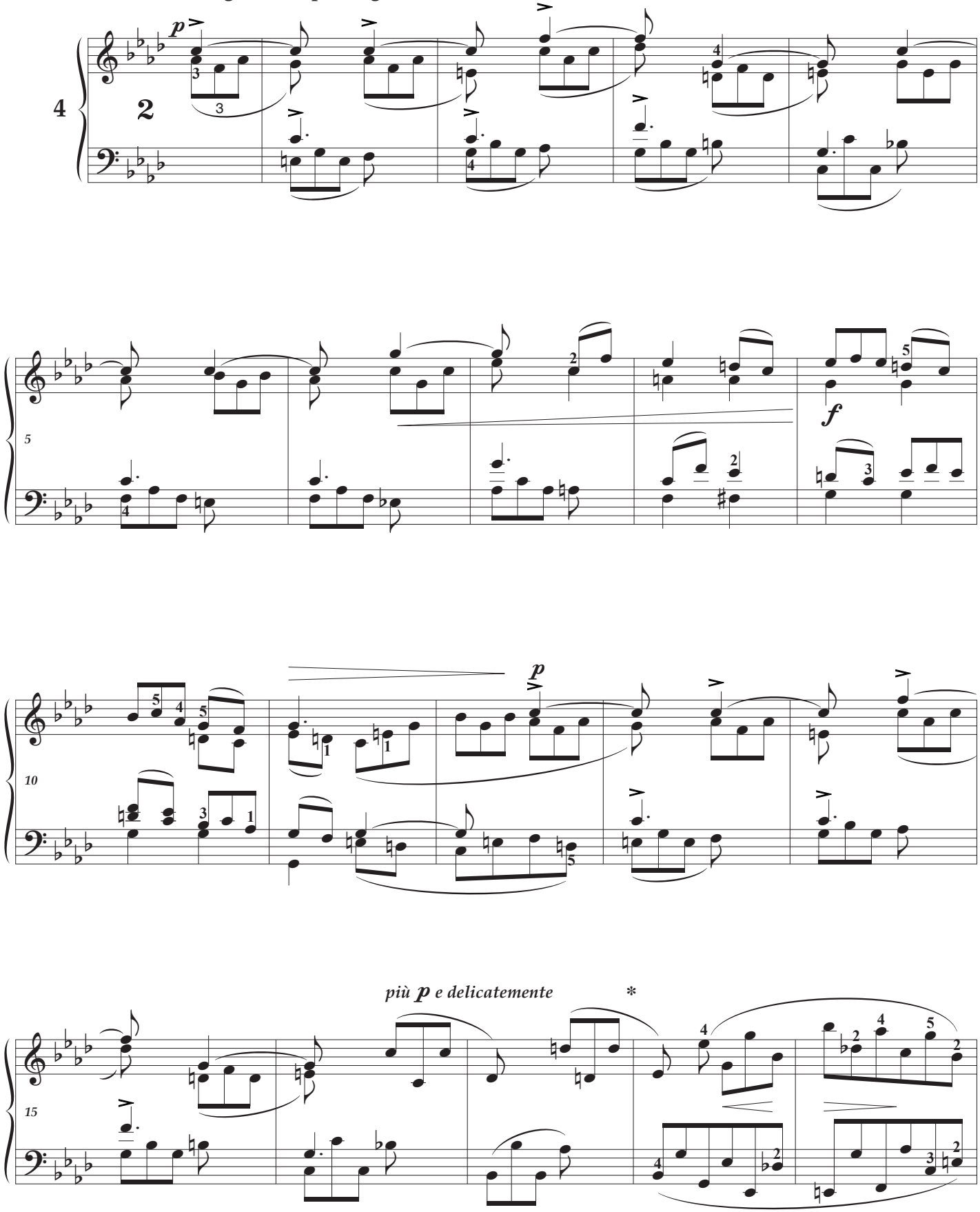

61
65
dolce
69
ritenuto
poco
sostenuto
p
po - co - a - po - co - - - -
73
crescendo
f
in tempo
77
f
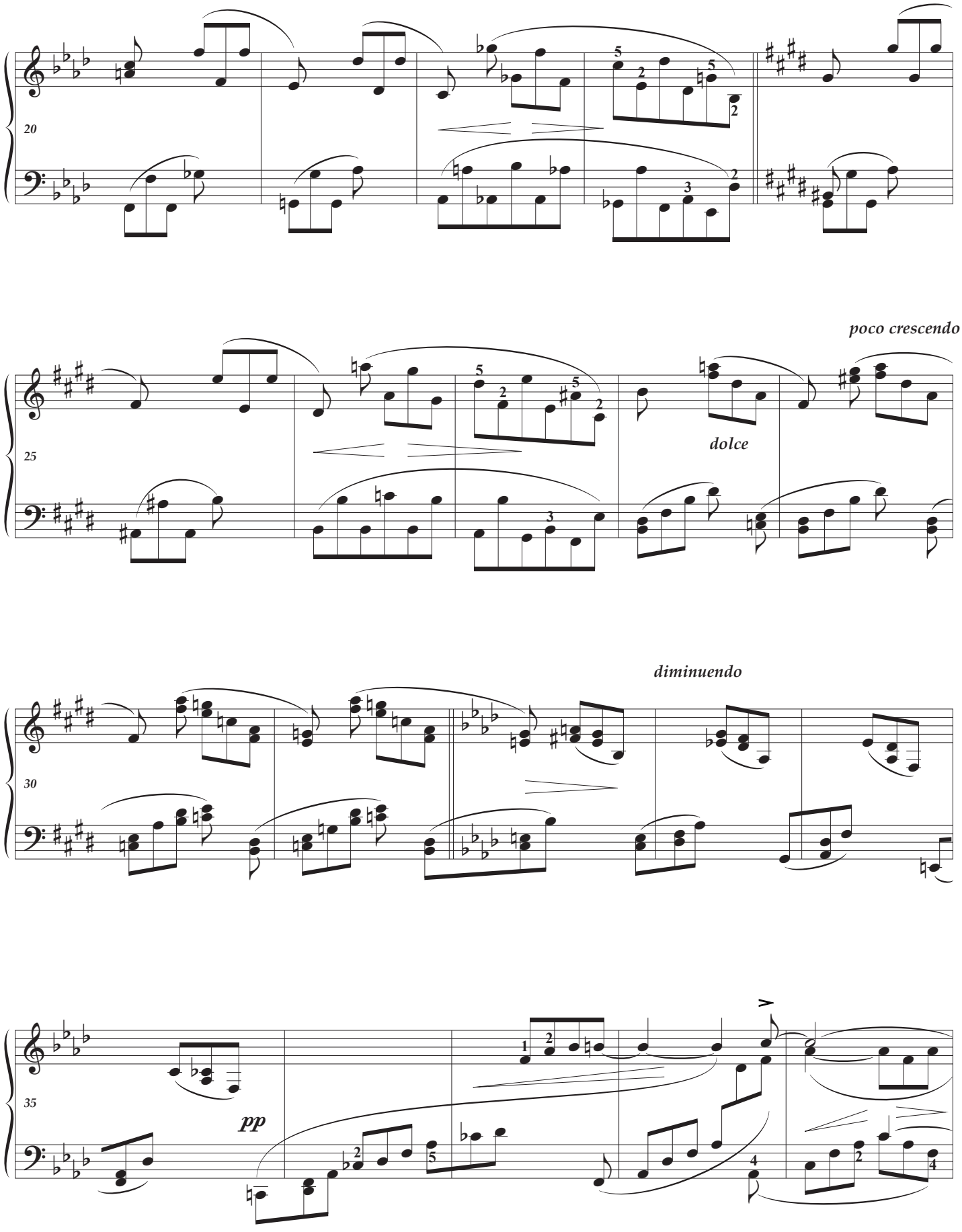

81
85
ritenuto
tenuto
p
89
93
poco crescendo
97
crescendo
sf
f
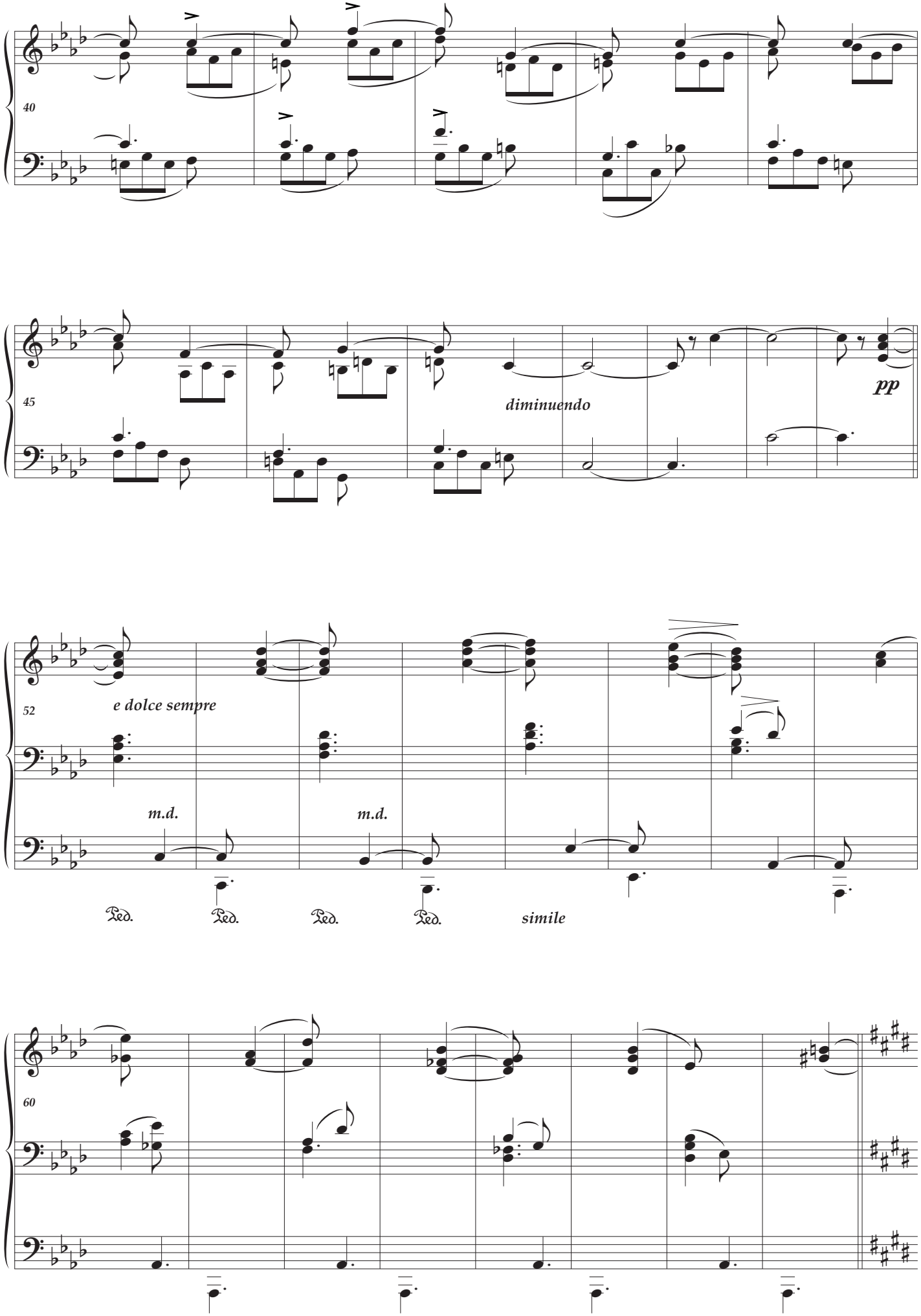

101
105
ff
sf
109
p
m.d.
114
senza Pedale

# INTERMEZZO
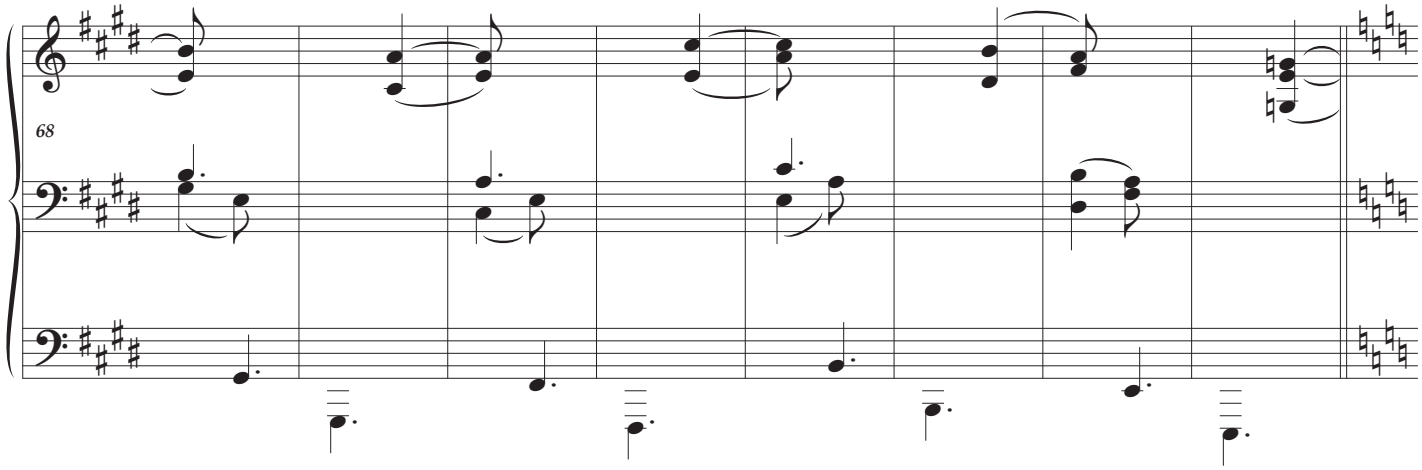
**allegretto un poco agitato**

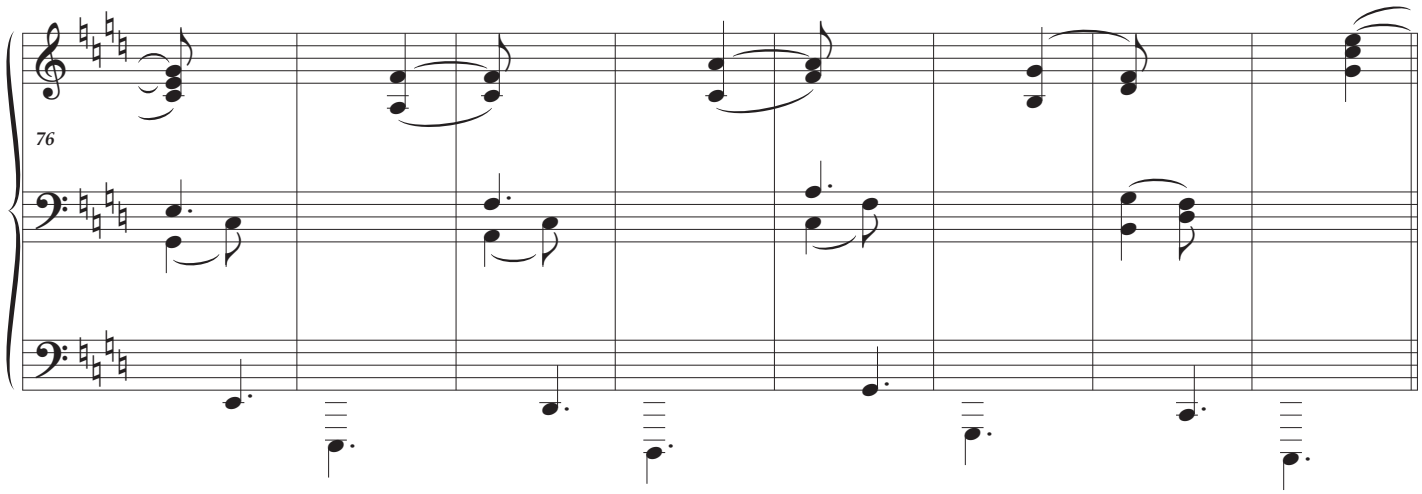



20
poco crescendo
25
dolce
diminuendo
30
35
pp


40
45
diminuendo
pp
52
e dolce sempre
m.d.
m.d.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
simile
60

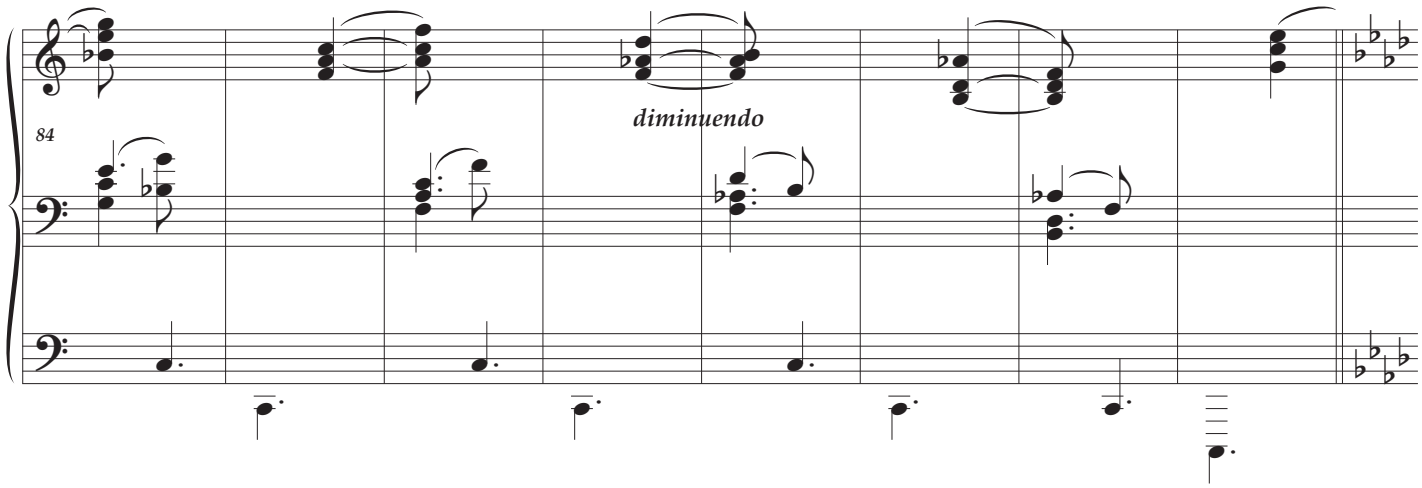
*diminuendo*

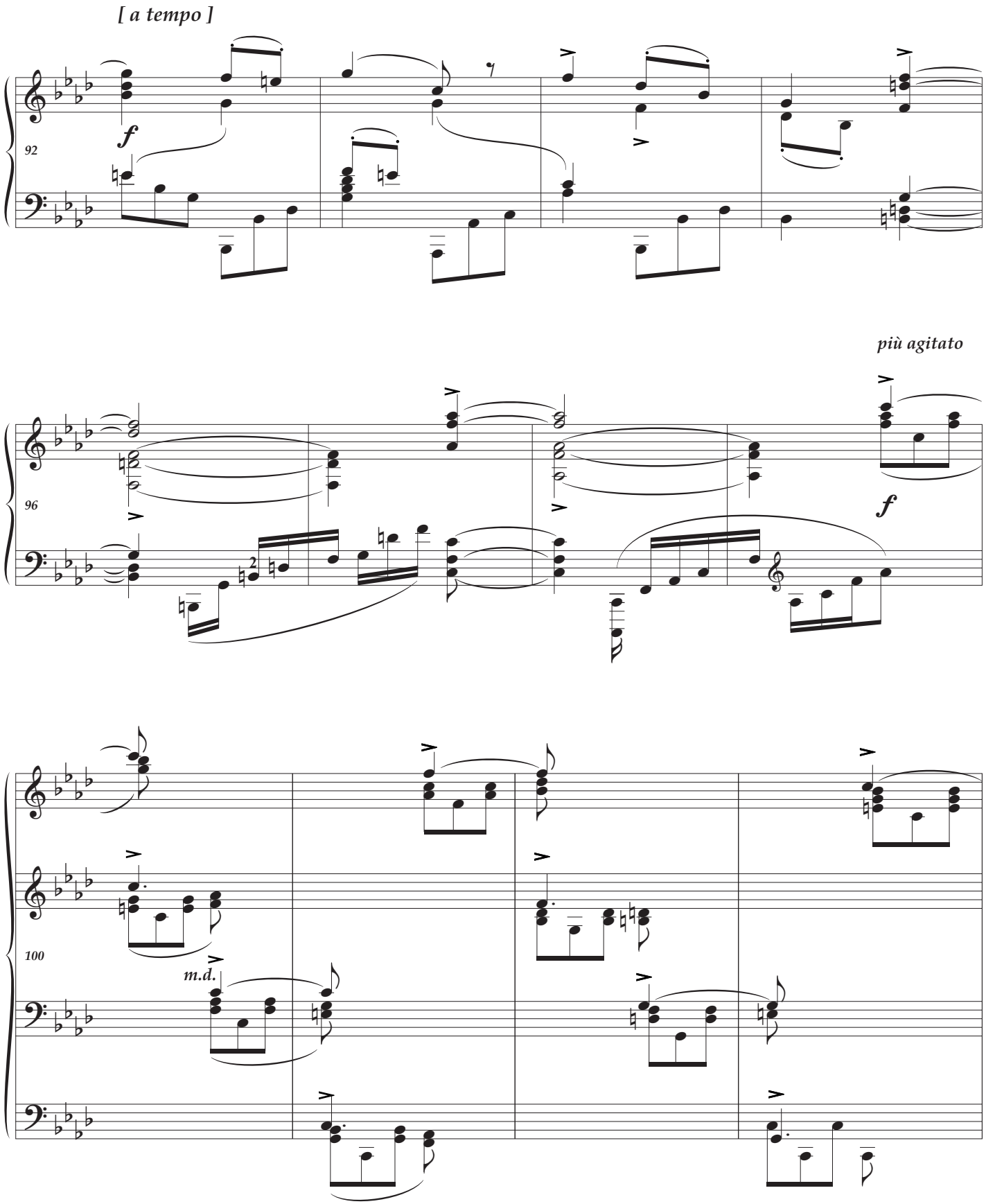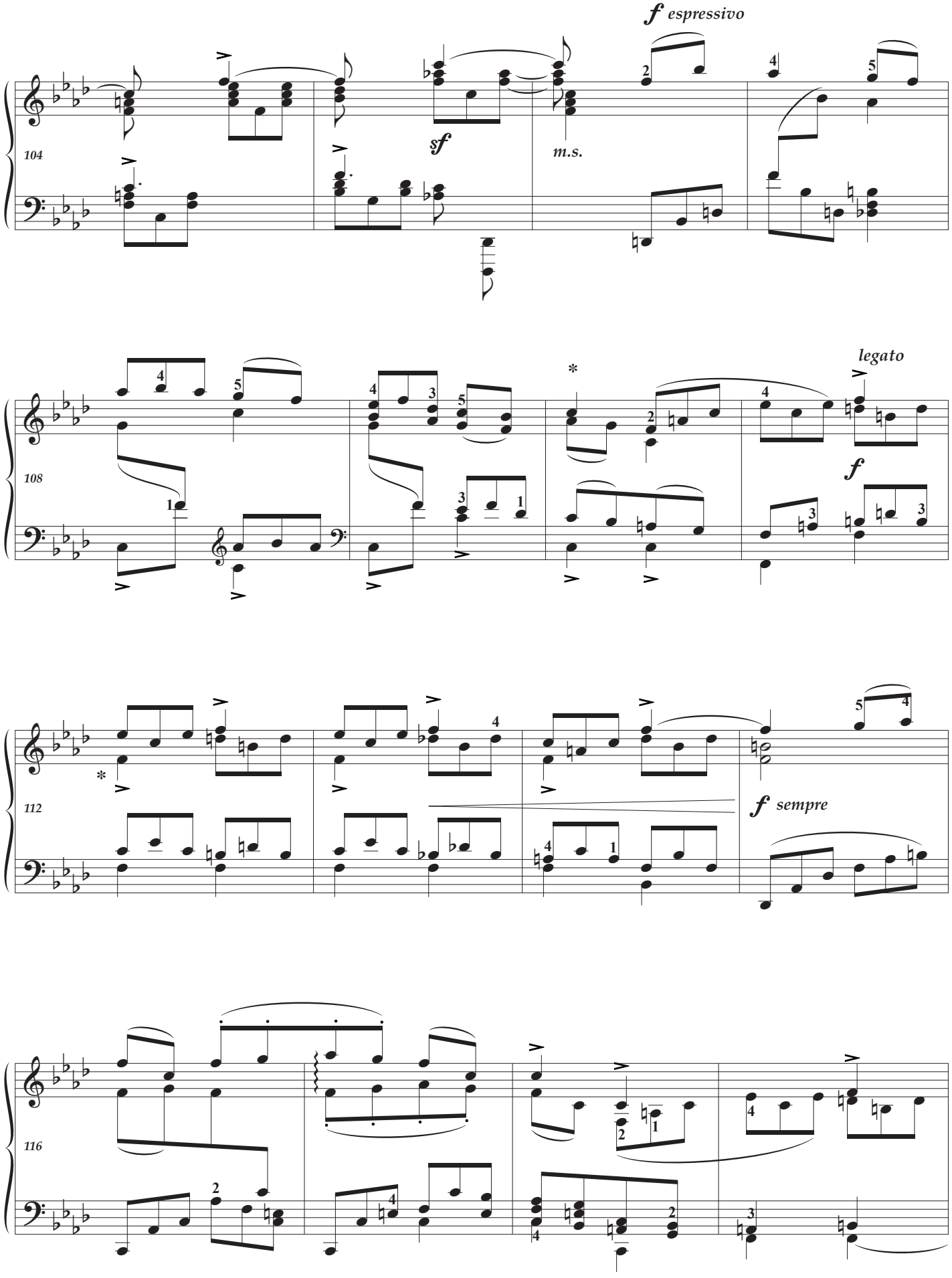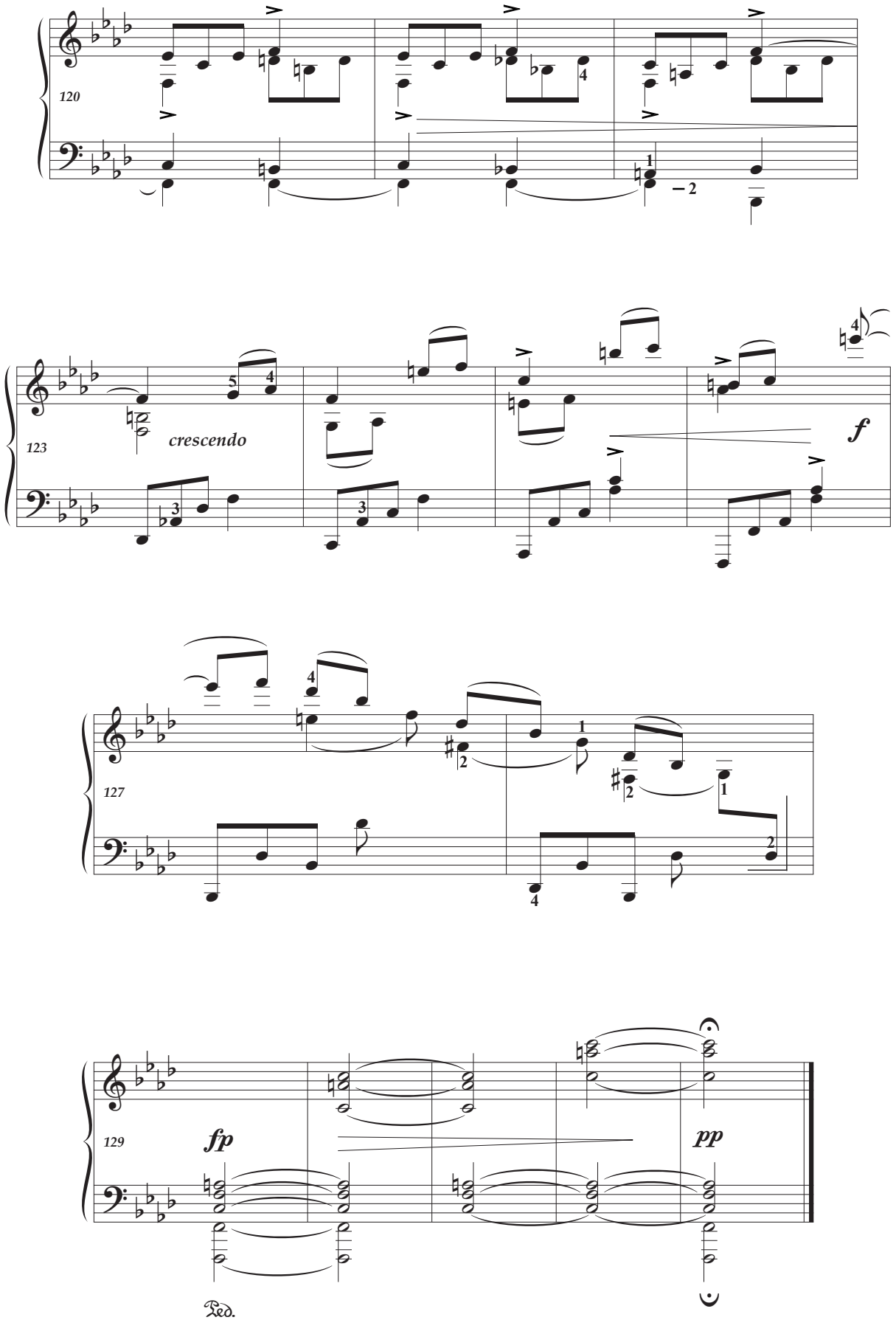



*calando - - - - - - - - - - - - -*

*diminuendo*
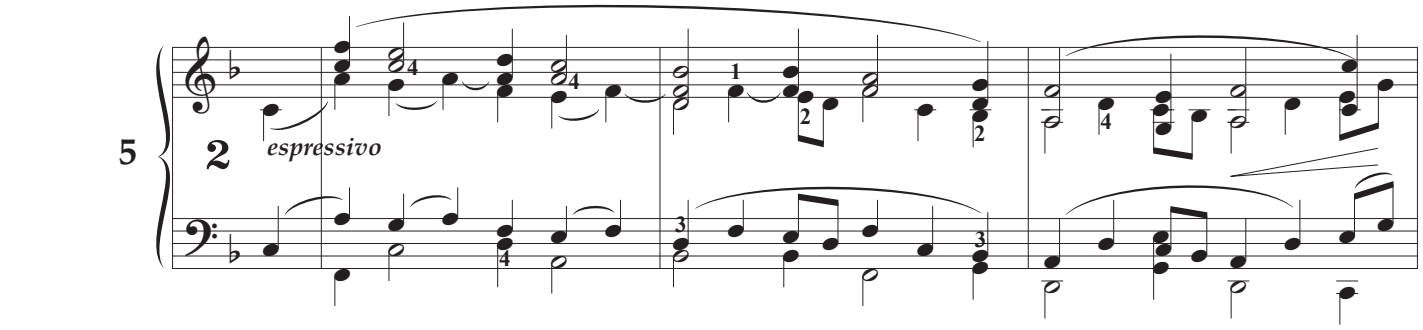



[ a tempo ]
f
92
più agitato
96
f
100
m.d.

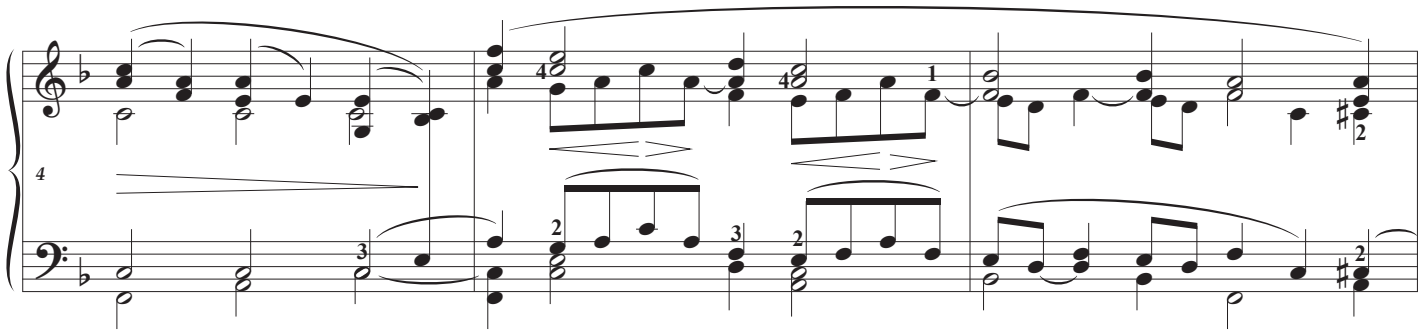

f espressivo
104
sf
m.s.
legato
108
f
112
f sempre
116


120
123
crescendo
f
127
129
fp
pp
Ped.

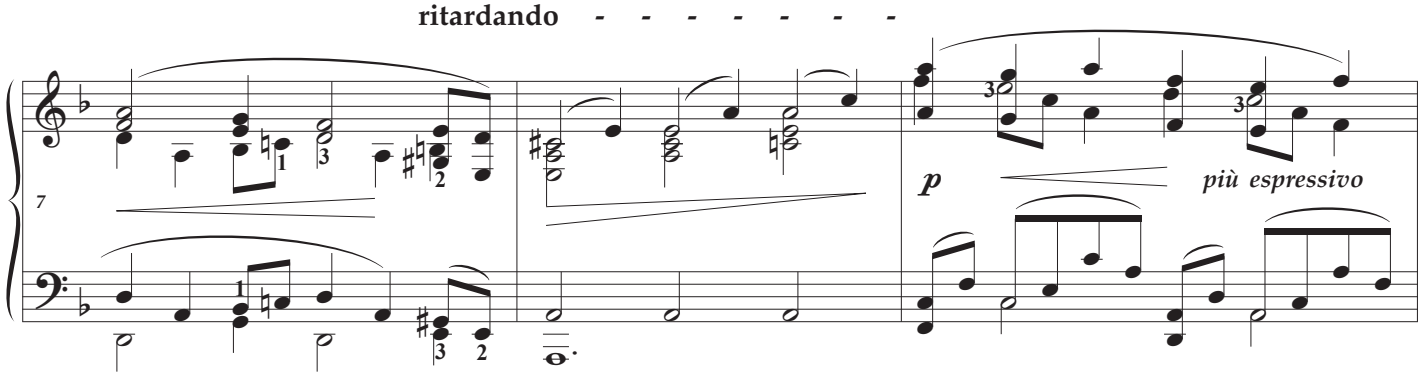
# ROMANZE

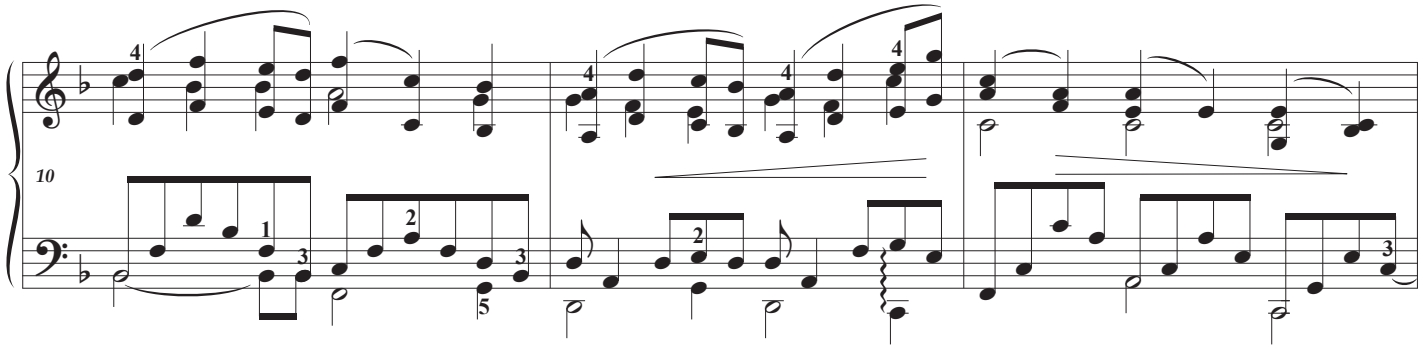
**andante**
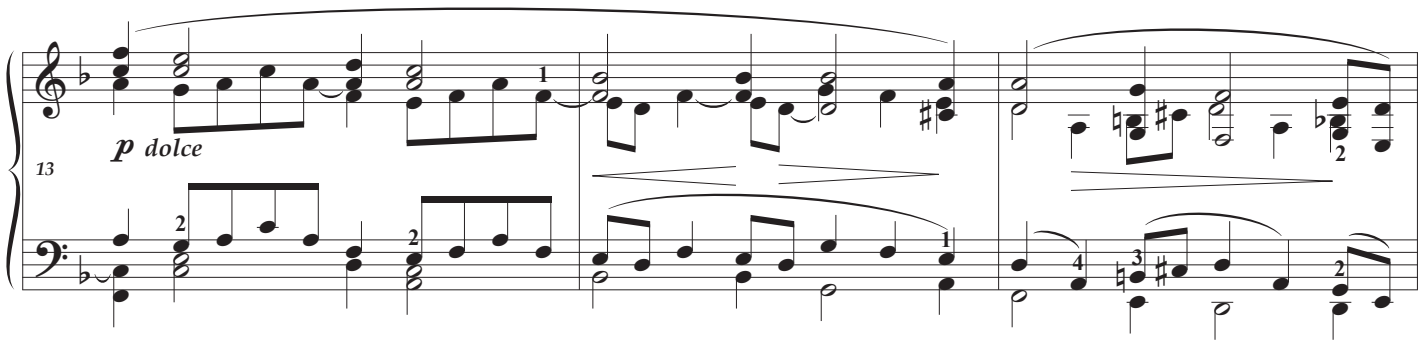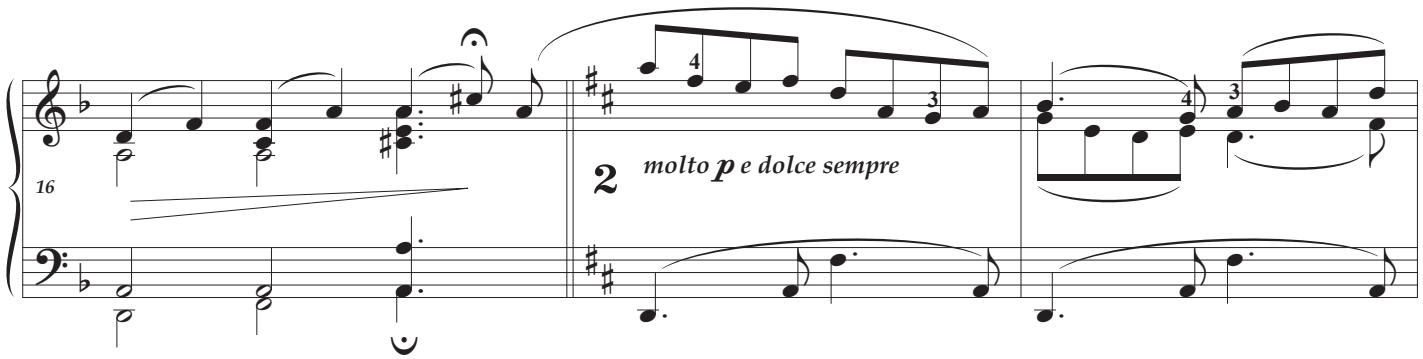



**ritardando - - - - - - - -**

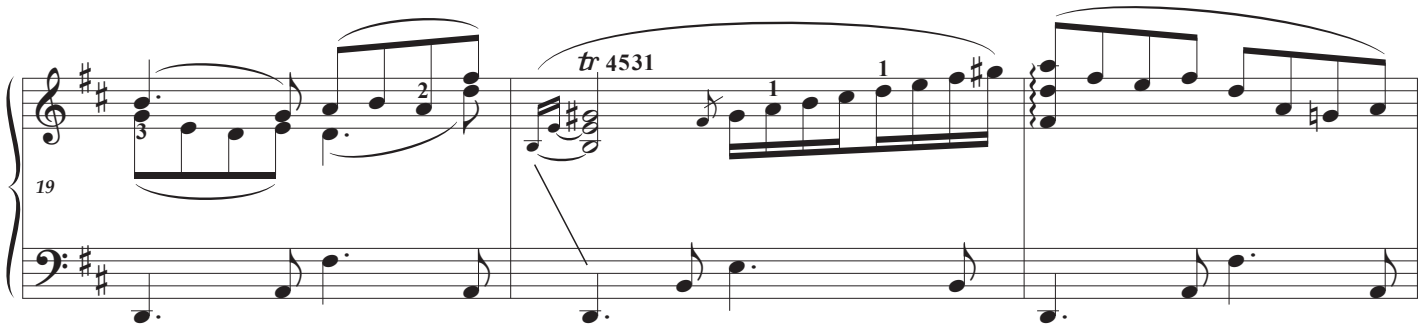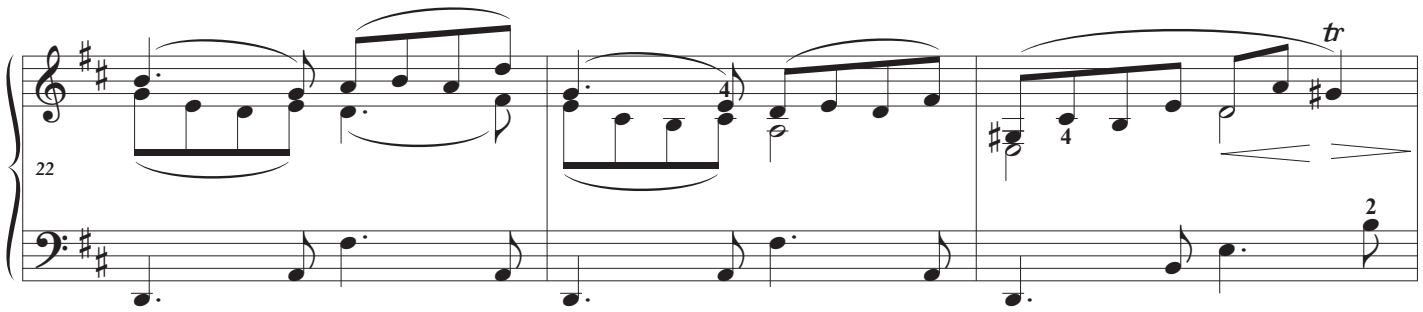


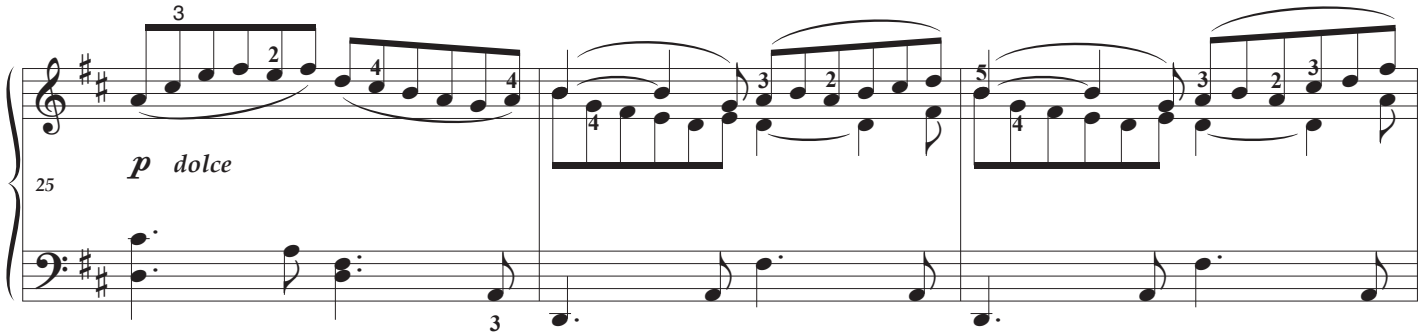


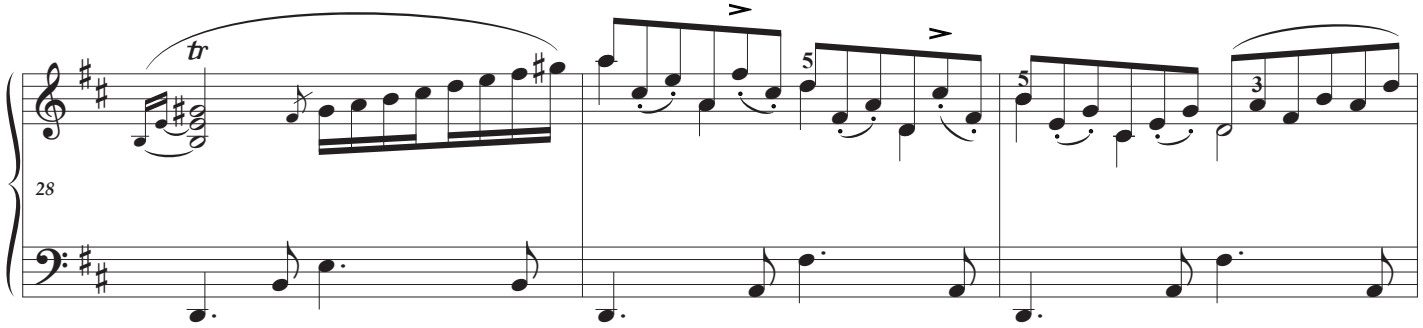

ritardando - - - - - - - - allegretto grazioso
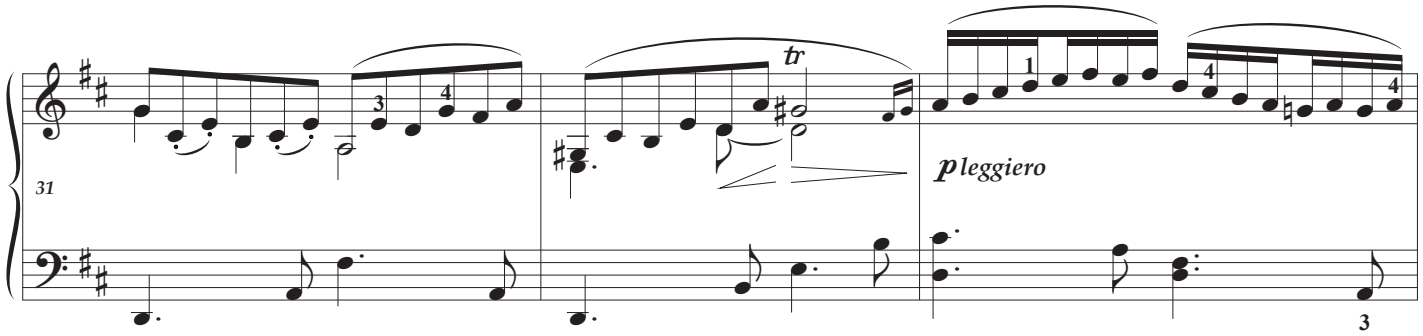


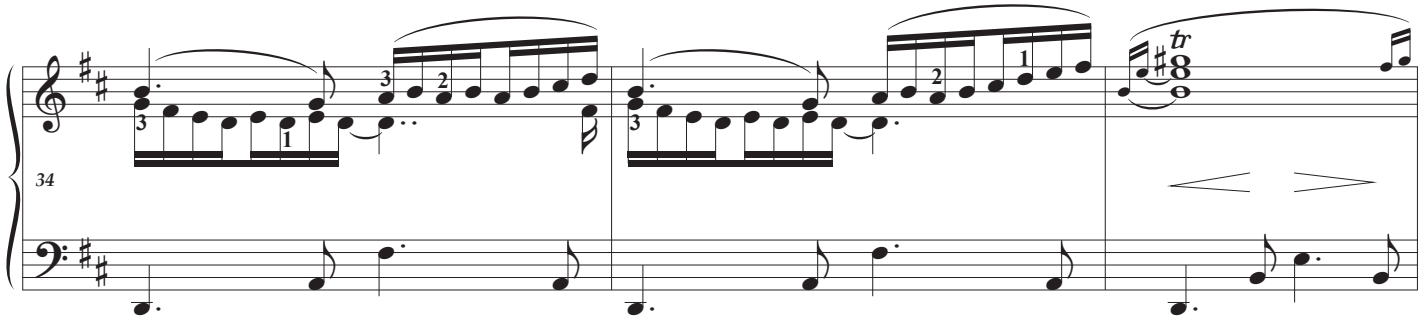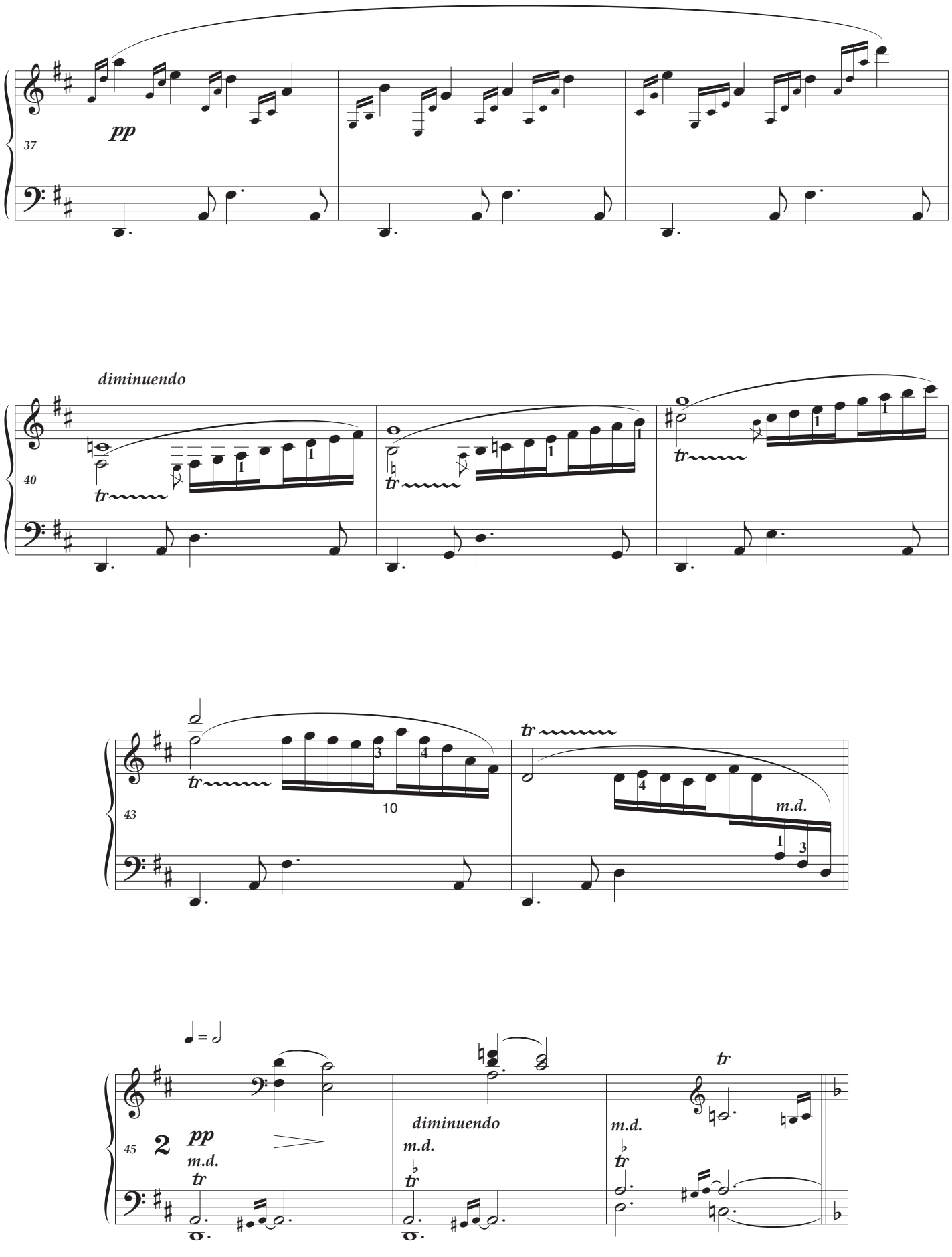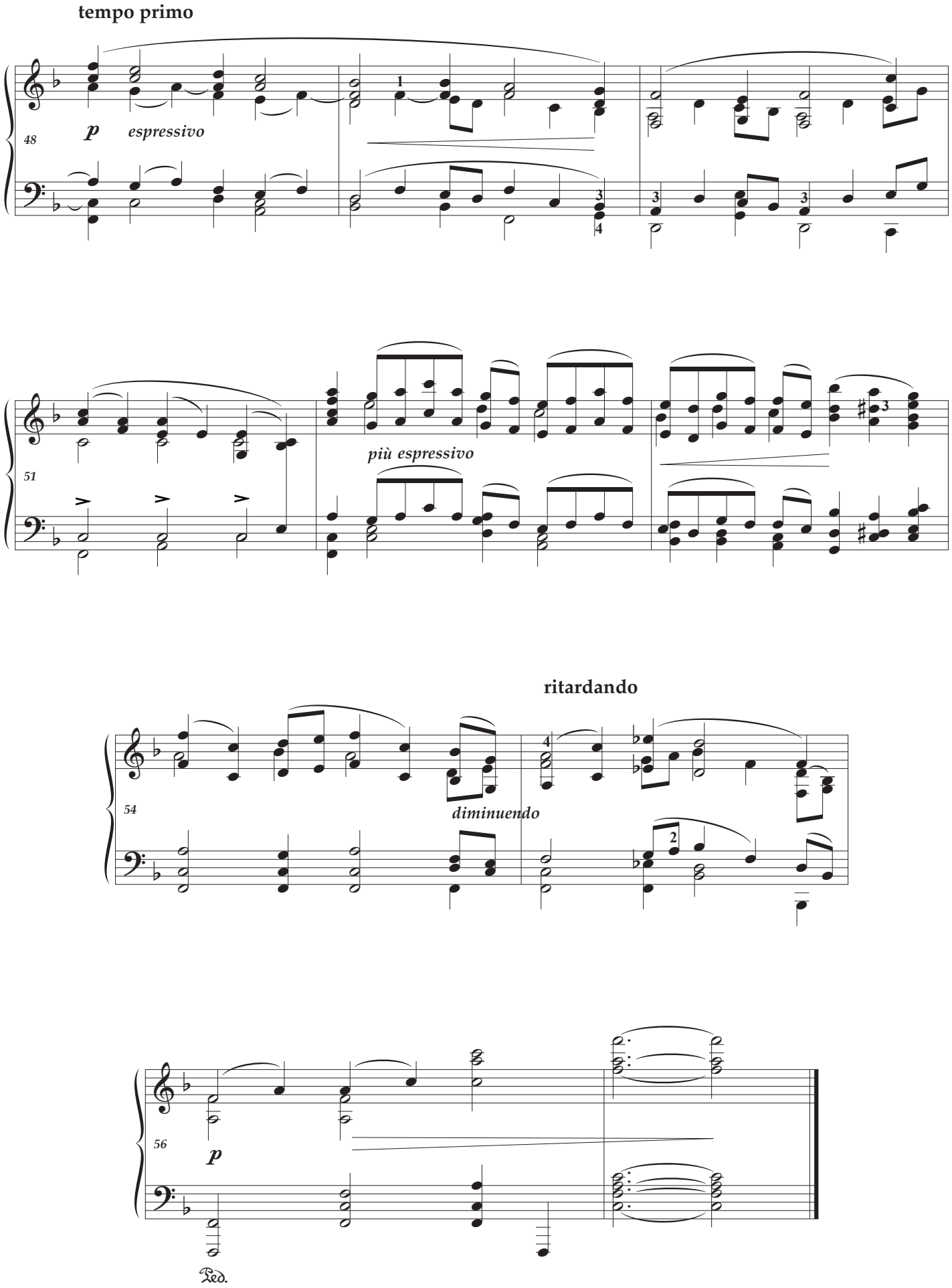







25
p dolce


28
tr


31
tr
p leggiero
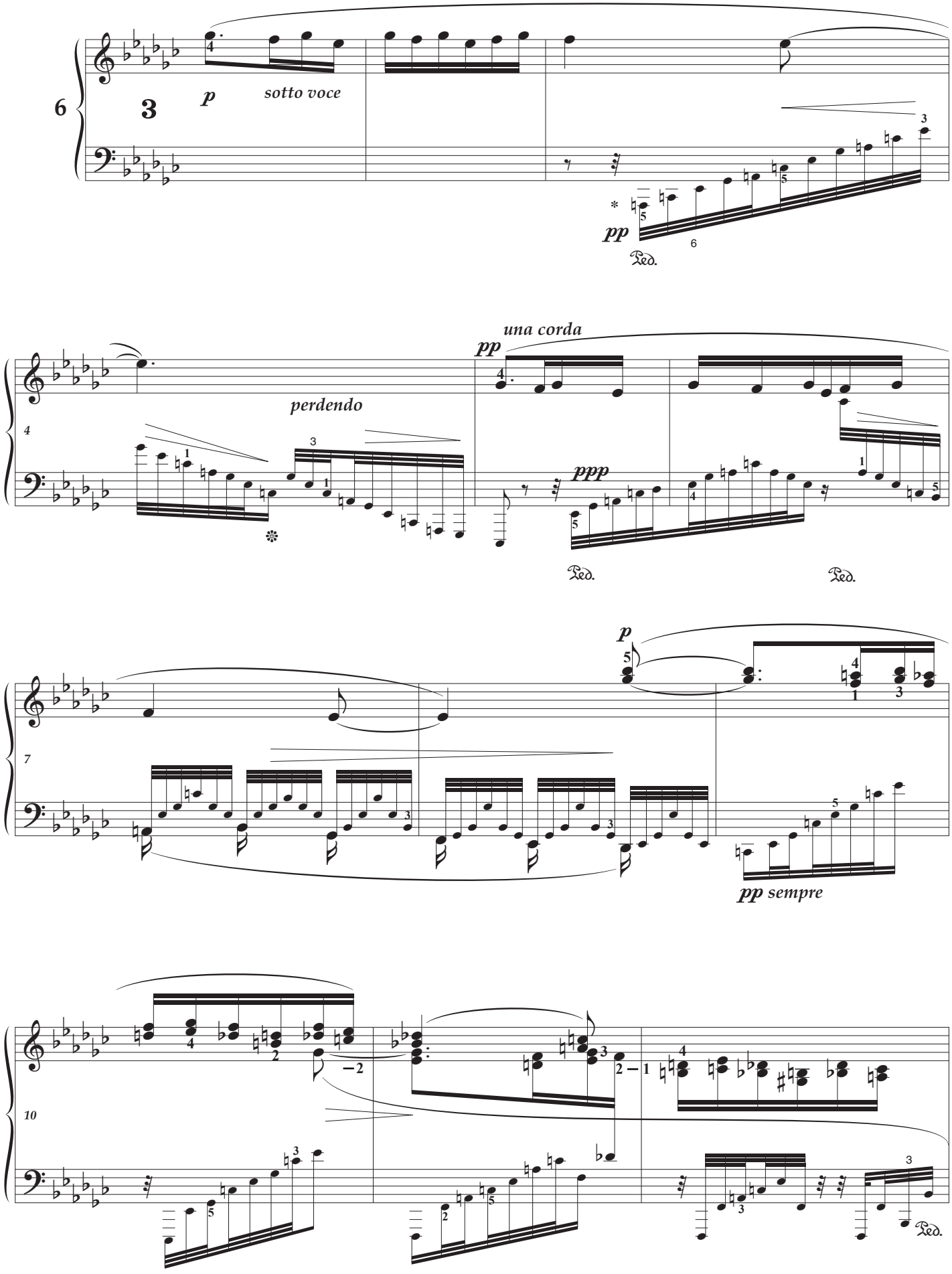

34
tr
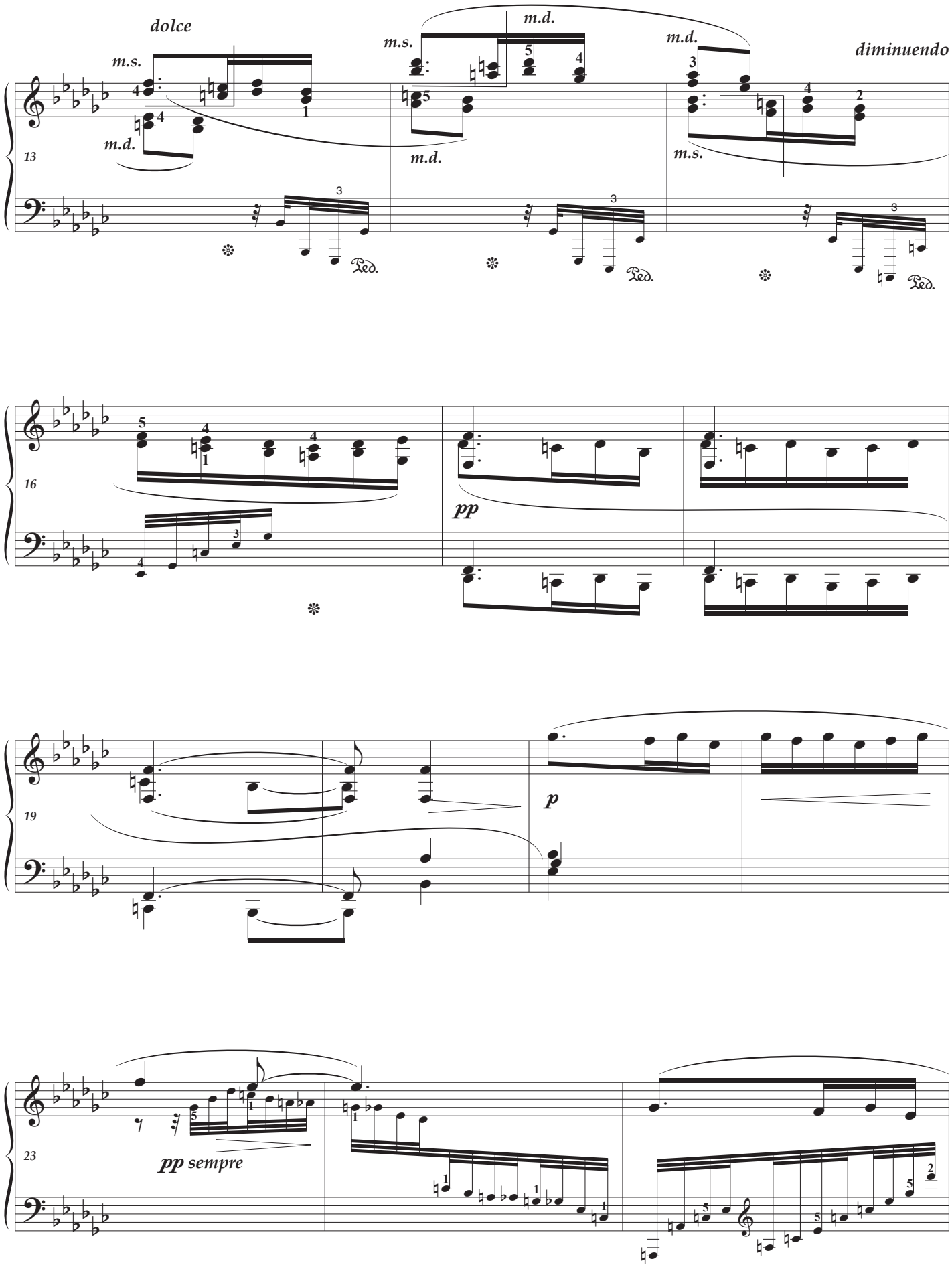

37
pp
40
diminuendo
tr
43
10
m.d.
45
2
pp
m.d.
diminuendo
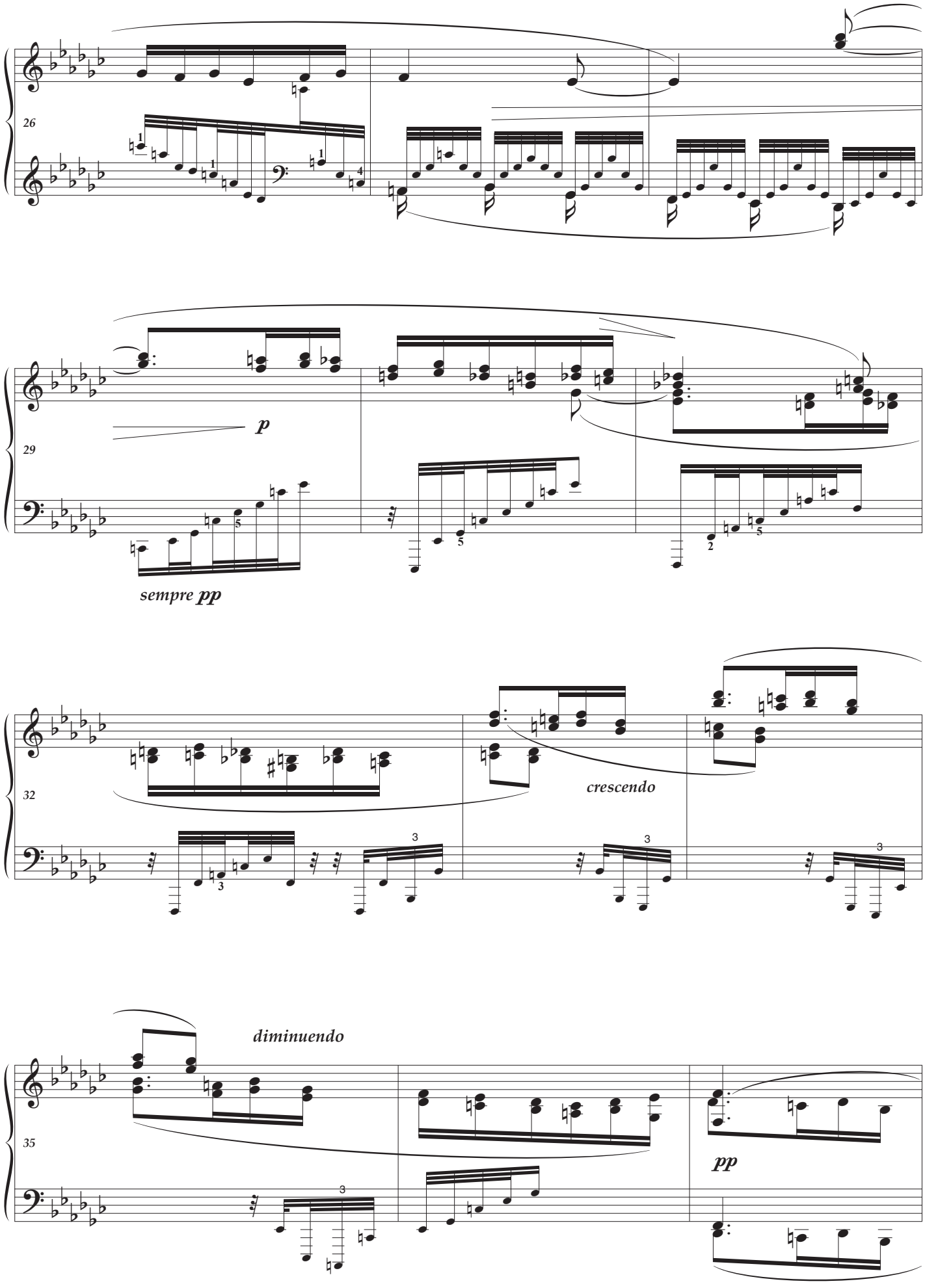

tempo primo
48
p
espressivo
1
3
4
3
3
51
più espressivo
3
54
diminuendo
ritardando
4
2
56
p
Ped.
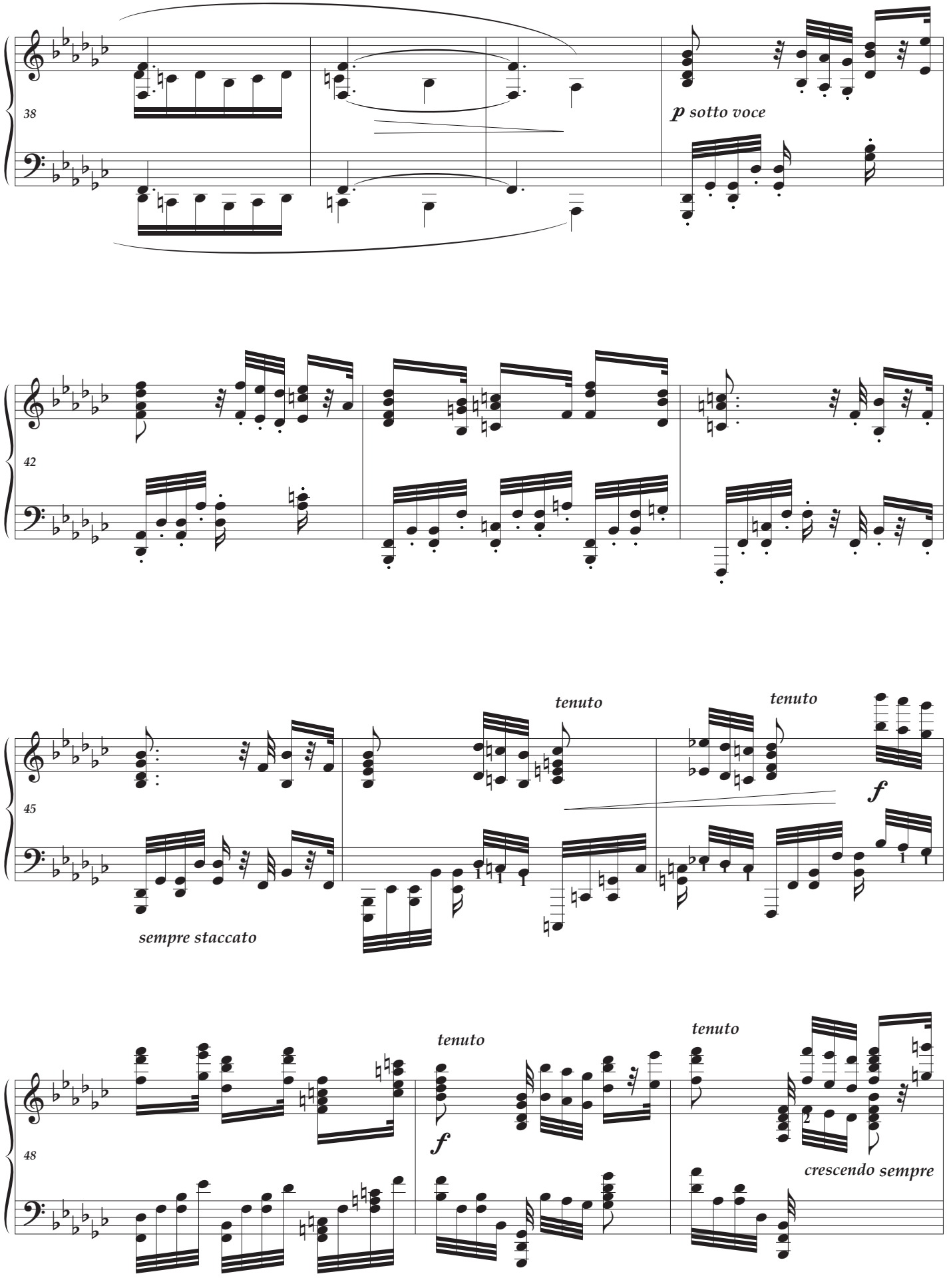
# INTERMEZZO
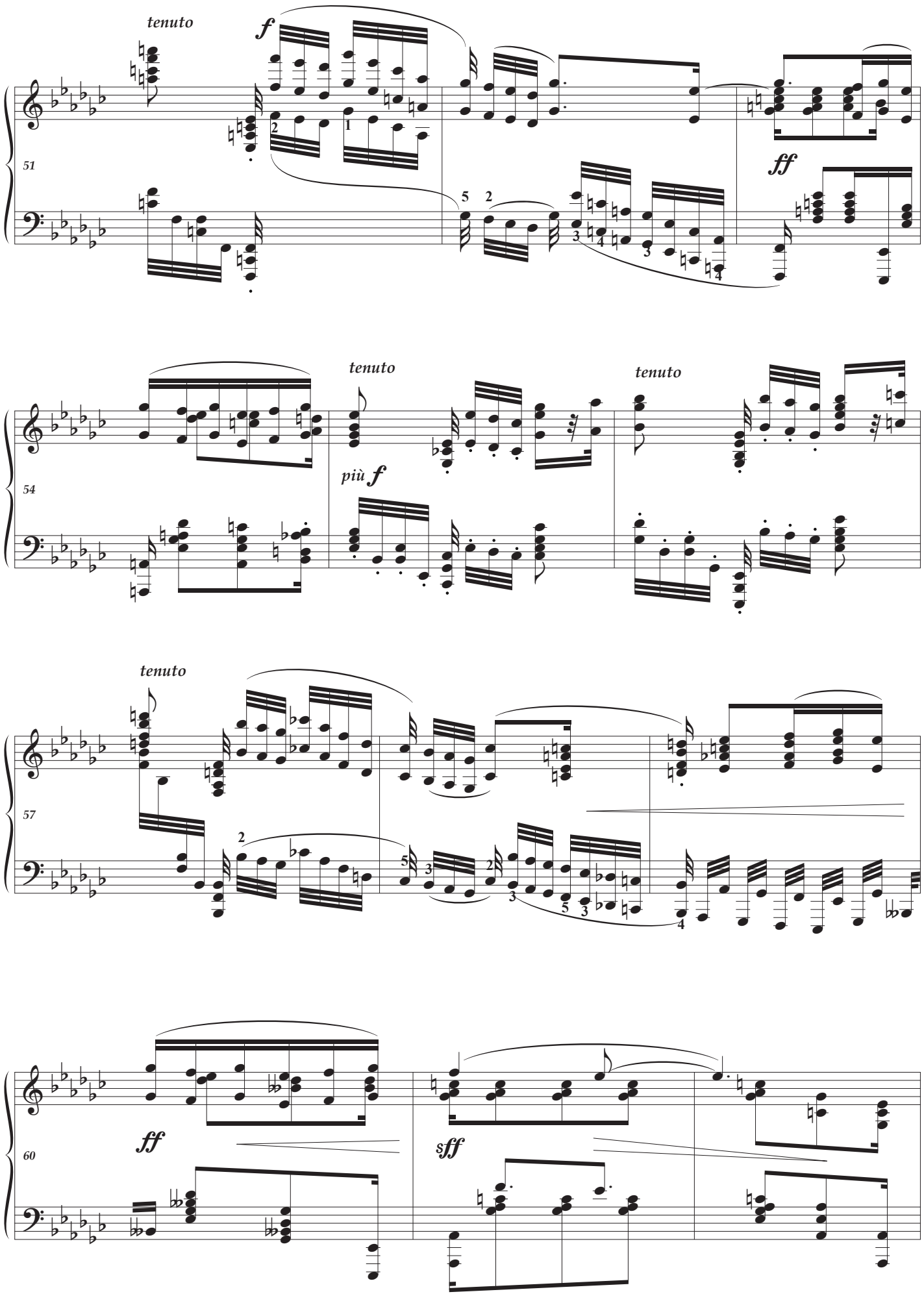
**andante, largo e mesto**
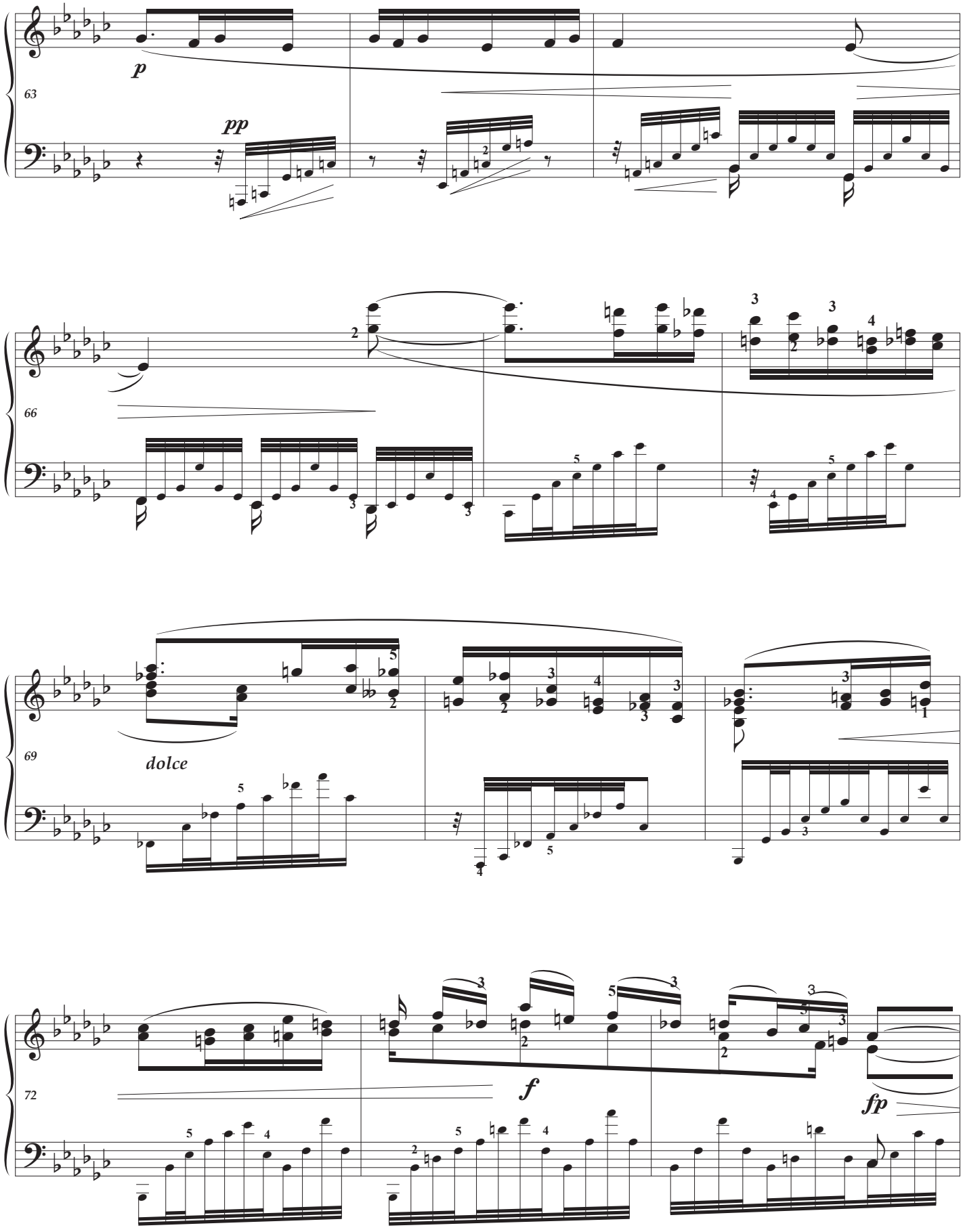


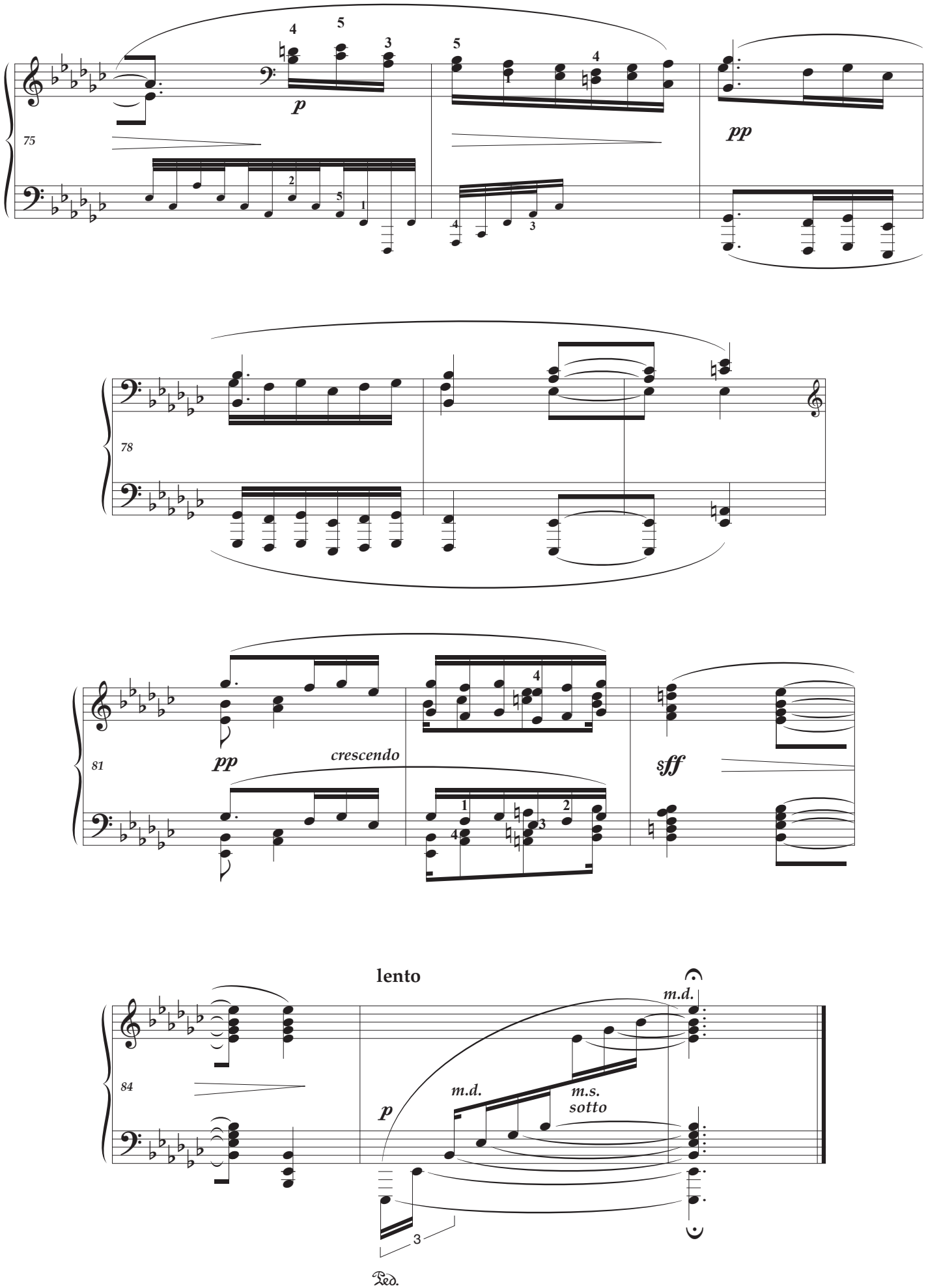

dolce
m.s.
m.d.
m.d.
m.s.
m.d.
m.d.
diminuendo
13
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
16
pp
19
p
23
pp sempre
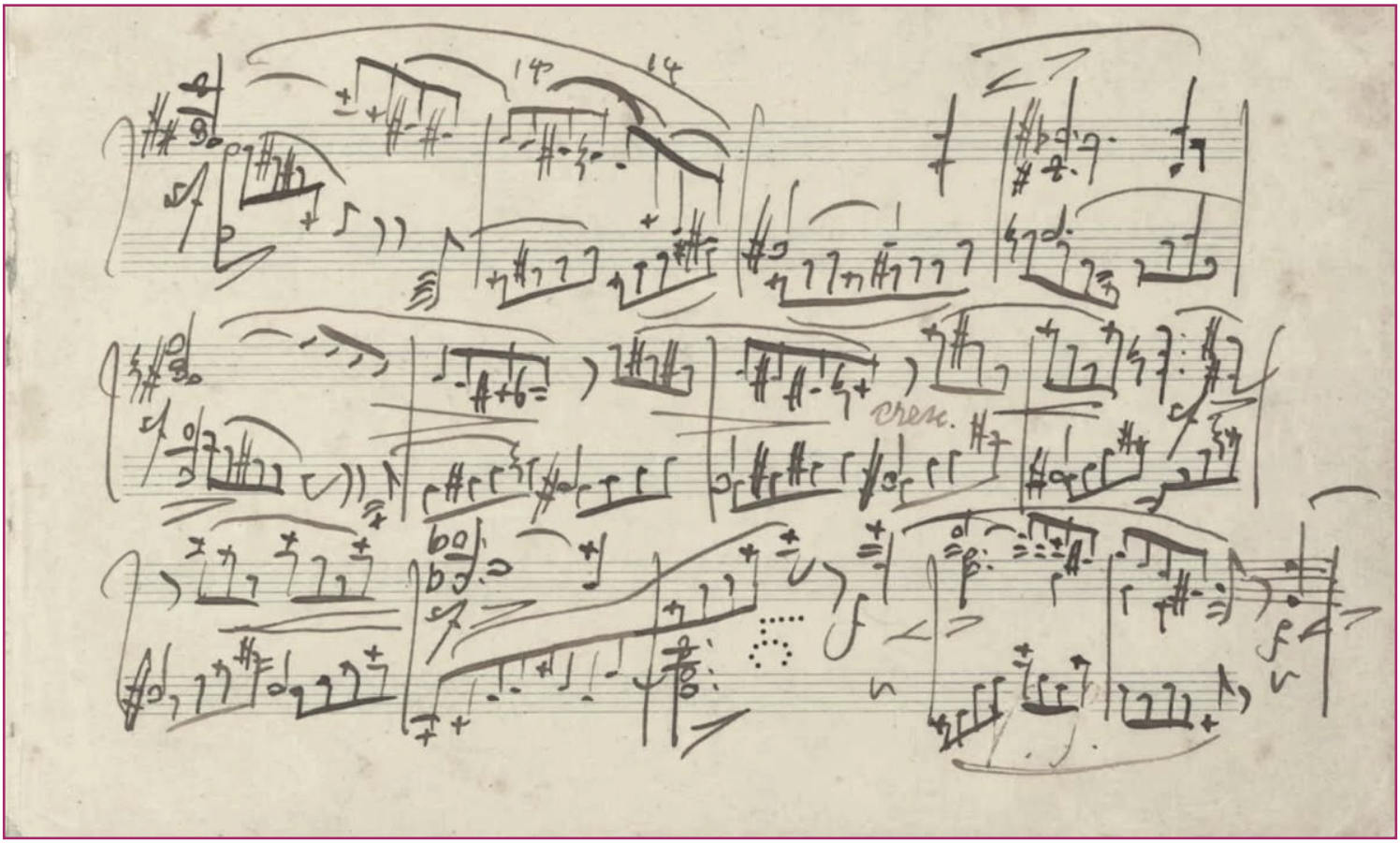

26
29
p
sempre pp
32
crescendo
35
diminuendo
pp


38
p sotto voce
42
45
tenuto
tenuto
f
sempre staccato
48
tenuto
f
tenuto
crescendo sempre


tenuto
f
51
ff
tenuto
tenuto
54
più f
tenuto
57
ff
sff
60


63
p
pp
66
69
dolce
72
f
fp


75
p
pp
78
81
pp
crescendo
sff
84
lento
p
m.d.
m.s.
sotto
m.d.
Ped.



**Intermezzo N° 1 in A minor (bars 12 - 24)**

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.

Beyond the polished clarity of printed editions, Brahms emerges as a meticulous craftsman: pages crowded with revisions, deletions, and layered annotations that reflect a constant quest 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.

For my part, when confronted with suspected errors, omissions, or ambiguities, I consult 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*** *August 2026*

# B R A H M S

## 6 Klavierstücke opus 118

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