Johannes BRAHMS



Vier Klavierstücke

opus 119

Piano Practical Editions
pianopracticaleditions.com

iano Practical Editions

Musical Health Warning : please be aware that these editions are definitely not urtext and should be consulted together with a traditional version. They have been devised purely to help

solve musical and technical problems at the piano.

Please send comments and error reports to

Johannes BRAHMS

1833 — 1897

Vier Klavierstücke Op 119 1893

1 Intermezzo B minor 1
2 Intermezzo A minor 5
3 Intermezzo C major 12
4 Rhapsodie E flat 16

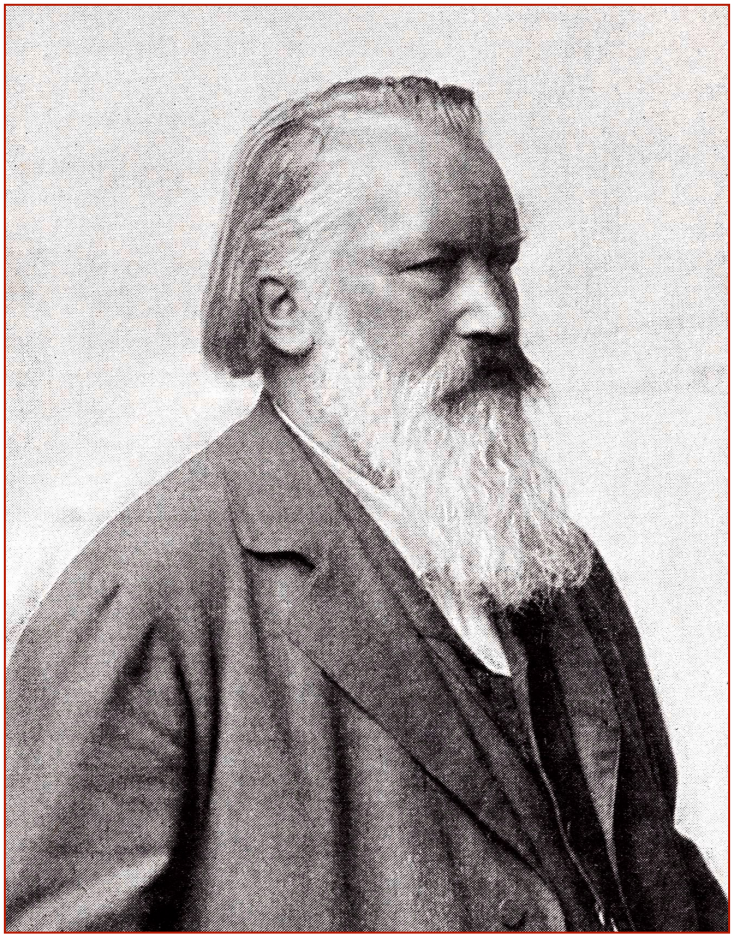
Composed during the summer of 1893 at Bad Ischl, these Four Piano Pieces were among the last works Johannes Brahms wrote for solo piano, the culmination of a remarkable sequence of late collections — opus 116–119, in which we find the distillation of a lifetime's experience into music of extraordinary concentration and expressive intensity. It is unclear whether Op 119 overlapped 118 and some pieces may have preceded the earlier set. Although modest in scale, they encompass an emotional range between profound introspection and almost symphonic grandeur, providing a fitting farewell to the instrument that had remained central to his musical life from childhood.

By the early 1890s Brahms was one of Europe's most respected composers. Living quietly in Vienna, financially secure and internationally admired, he had long ceased to write with public expectation in mind. The heroic ambition of his younger years had given way to a more personal mode of expression, one in which the piano miniature became an ideal medium. Within these concise forms he achieved a remarkable balance of structural mastery, harmonic complexity and emotional restraint. Every phrase seems carefully weighed; every modulation and inner voice contributes to a musical language that is at once economical and deeply expressive.

Unlike the more varied Op 116, the first three pieces of this opus are all entitled Intermezzo, suggesting three complementary reflections rather than sharply contrasted character pieces. Their moods differ, yet they share a common atmosphere of intimacy and poetic reserve. Melodies emerge naturally from richly woven textures, while subtle rhythmic flexibility and constantly shifting harmonic colours create music that seems to unfold in a continuous, unhurried breath. The expressive world recalls that of the earlier Horn Trio, Op 40, where lyricism is tempered by nostalgia and where simplicity often conceals extraordinary sophistication.

The concluding *Rhapsodie* provides a dramatic foil to this inward world. Bold, expansive and

rhythmically driven, it recalls the vigorous Brahms of earlier decades, yet its energy is never merely youthful exuberance. Rather, it is the confident assertion of a composer whose command of form and expression had reached complete maturity. Characteristically, Brahms avoids a conventionally triumphant ending: after beginning in E-flat major, the work ultimately settles in the parallel minor, leaving a final impression not of victory but of quiet resolve and thoughtful resignation.



Contemporary accounts suggest that Brahms frequently played these newly completed pieces to friends during his summer stay at Bad Ischl. After returning to Vienna on 27 September 1893, he performed some of these late works at the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein*, giving his colleagues an opportunity to hear what would prove to be his final contribution to the solo piano repertoire. These intimate performances, far removed from the public concert hall, seem entirely appropriate for music that speaks in a voice of such refinement and personal candour.

Taken together, the Four Piano Pieces stand as one of the crowning achievements of Brahms' late style. They ask little of outward display, yet demand the highest degree of tonal imagination, subtle voicing and architectural understanding. In these final pages for piano, he speaks with complete assurance and remarkable economy, leaving music whose emotional depth continues to reveal itself with every hearing.

*Brahms was closely connected to the Vienna Musicians' Society, serving as its honorary president from 1886.

1 Intermezzo in B minor

Traurigsüß ist das Stück!

The piece is sweetly sorrowful!

— **Clara Schumann**
May 1893, a diary entry which captures so perfectly a unique blend of tenderness, harmonic richness and quiet resignation; the opening Intermezzo is among the most intimate and deeply personal of all Brahms' piano works. Marked *Adagio*, it unfolds with remarkable freedom, its gently descending motifs and richly coloured harmonies creating an atmosphere of quiet melancholy. In May 1893 Brahms sent the manuscript to Clara Schumann, writing with characteristic modesty that it "teems with dissonances". Although he believed them to be perfectly justifiable, with tongue in cheek he stated that they might not suit her palate, adding that he almost wished they were "less correct but more appetising". He concluded with a simple instruction: *"The little piece must be played very slowly."*

2 Intermezzo in E minor

Restlessness replaces serenity. The syncopated accompaniment lends the music an unsettled pulse, while the central waltz offers a brief vision of radiant calm before the opening mood quietly reasserts itself. Although more dramatic than its predecessor, the emotional world remains essentially private, avoiding any outward display.

33 it is very satisfying to complete the LH accompanying slur and for the hands to meet in shared notation

3 Intermezzo in C major

Perhaps the most elusive piece of the set, this graceful Intermezzo conceals remarkable rhythmic sophistication beneath its apparently effortless surface. The melody sings with almost childlike innocence, supported by transparent textures and subtle phrase structures that gently undermine any sense of stability. Its warm lyricism has often reminded listeners of the pastoral character found elsewhere in Brahms' late music, particularly the Horn Trio, with its spacious melodic intervals and quietly nostalgic tone. It is also deceptively difficult to play, requiring a large hand extension to achieve a meaningful balance between lyrical melody, graceful bass and descant accompaniment. A useful starting point is to project the RH inner melody legato and ***mf***, gradually easing up as the coordination becomes automatic.

7 & **19** another of these slight differences of notation which the composer introduces from time to time; they are not always easy to explain.

4 Rhapsodie in E-flat major

Although cast in a firmly controlled sonata-like design, the *Rhapsodie* frequently evokes the spirit of the Hungarian *verbunkos* style that had fascinated Brahms since his youth. Its shifting accents*, vigorous syncopations and alternation of duple and triple rhythmic groupings lend the opening theme an improvisatory freedom, while the broad melodic intervals and fiery momentum recall the Hungarian idiom that inspired so many of his earlier works. Here, however, these elements are no longer picturesque borrowings but have become an integral part of the composer's mature musical language. This conclusion was thus pertinently praised by Clara Schumann : 'a wonderful piece, full of passion and energy, and grace, too'.

Marked Allegro risoluto, it combines muscular rhythms with broad, sweeping melodies, demanding orchestral sonority from the instrument. Although the graceful second theme is grouped in eight-bar phrases, they do not subdivide into four, but into three plus two plus three. The melody and its arpeggiated accompaniment provide total contrast before energy returns with renewed determination. We are however denied a victorious conclusion, which subsides into the tonic minor — a deeply characteristic ending: resolute yet reflective, bringing not only the collection but Brahms' entire output for solo piano to a close with evocative dignity.

Whether Brahms himself regarded Op 119 as a farewell to the piano we cannot know, but it is difficult not to hear these four pieces as a final summation of a lifetime's writing for the instrument. If they should also prove to be the last additions to Piano Practical Editions, they could scarcely provide a more fitting conclusion.
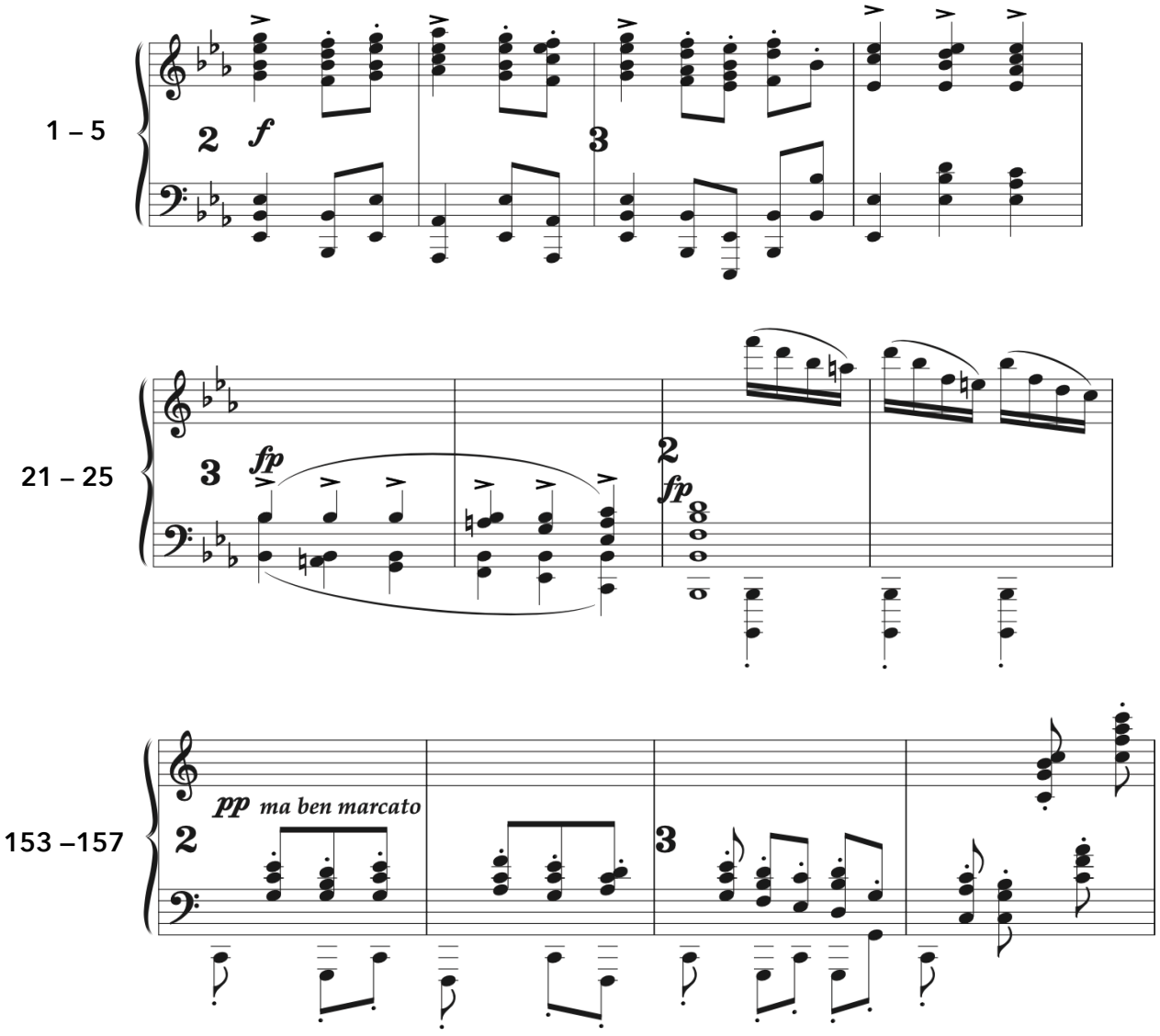
* An extract from Clara Schumann's letter to Brahms dated 10 August 1893 :

„Nun wieder auf das Allegro zu kommen, wie kräftig ist schon das erste Motiv, durch die 5 taktigen Phrasen so originell, wohl ungarisch! – Merkwürdig, sonst geniert mich die 5 taktige Einteilung, hier aber gar nicht – es muß so sein… Dann wieder wie merkwürdig die 3 und 2 Takte!"

"And now we come to the Allegro — how powerful is the first motif, and the five-bar phrases are truly original — and perhaps Hungarian! Curiously, I am usually troubled by irregular divisions, but here not at all — it must be so**… And in addition, how remarkable is the combination of duple and triple time!" She also praised the charm of the A-flat major section, adding that there was scarcely a bar that did not completely carry her away.
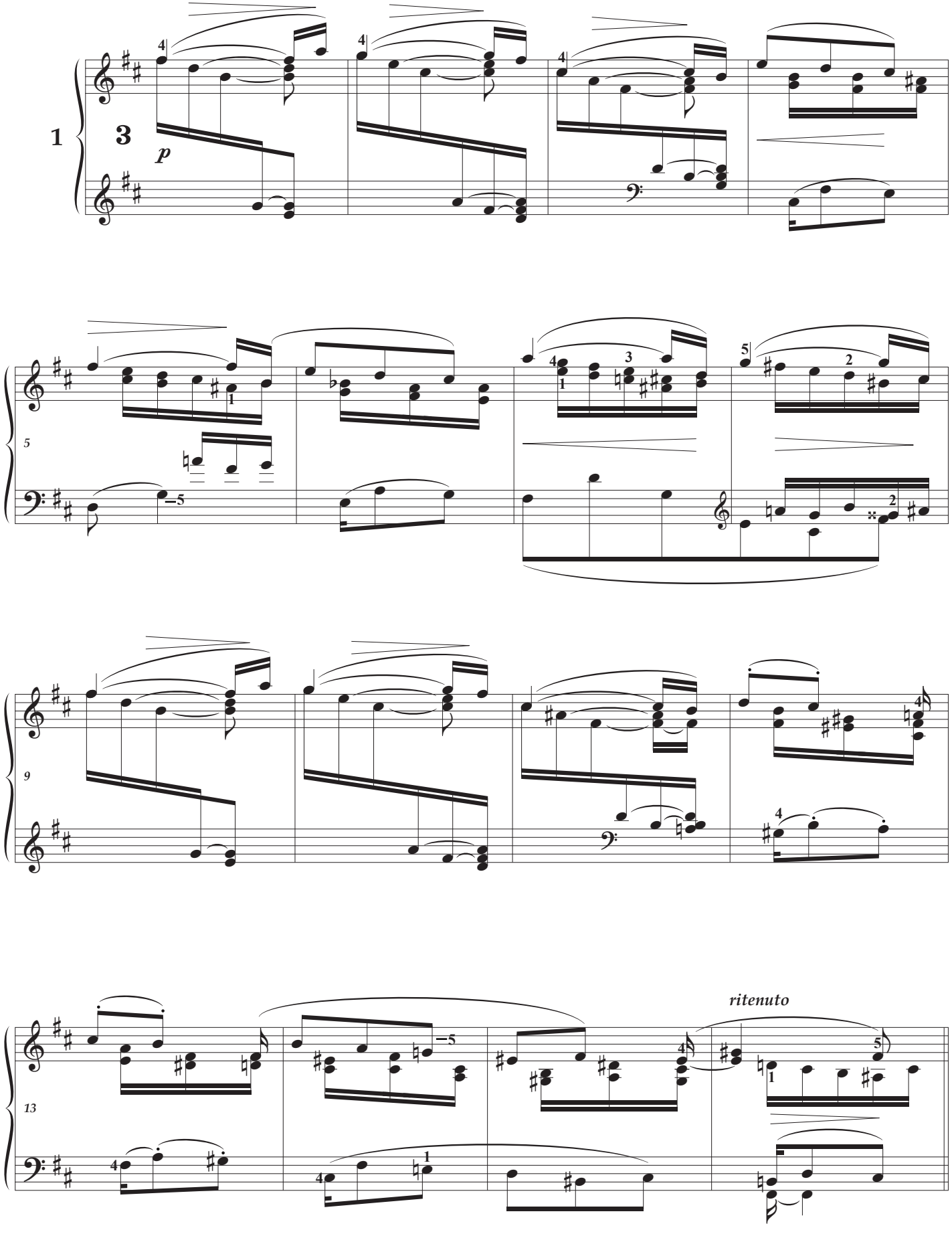
** a direct quotation from Beethoven's String Quartet Op 135 *"Der schwer gefasste Entschluss"* ("The Difficult Decision") and the determined response —*"Es muss sein!"* ("It must be!") to the solemn question *"Muss es sein?"* ("Must it be?")
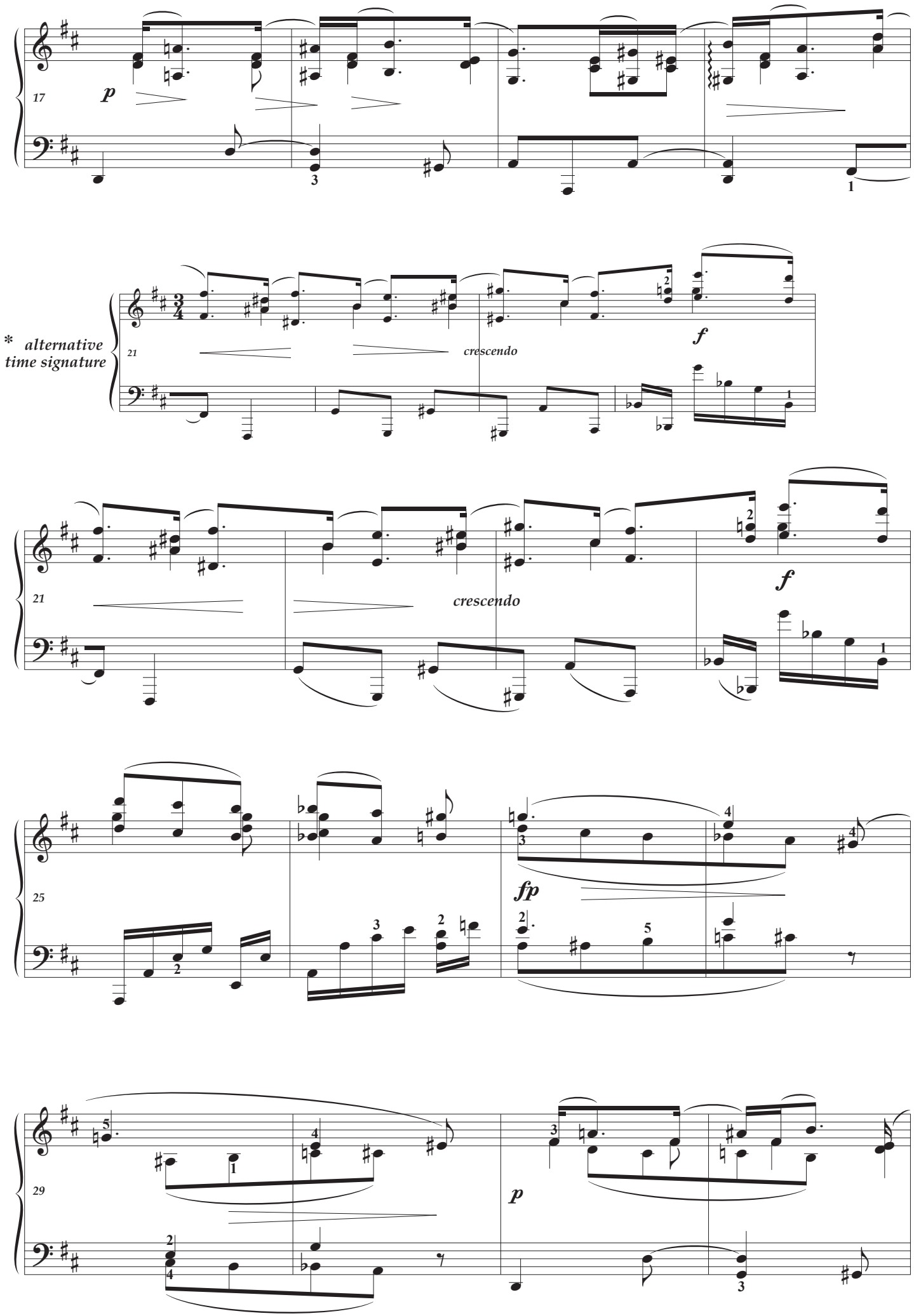
it requires very little imagination to perceive how Brahms converts five into four-bar phrases *à la Verbunkos :*
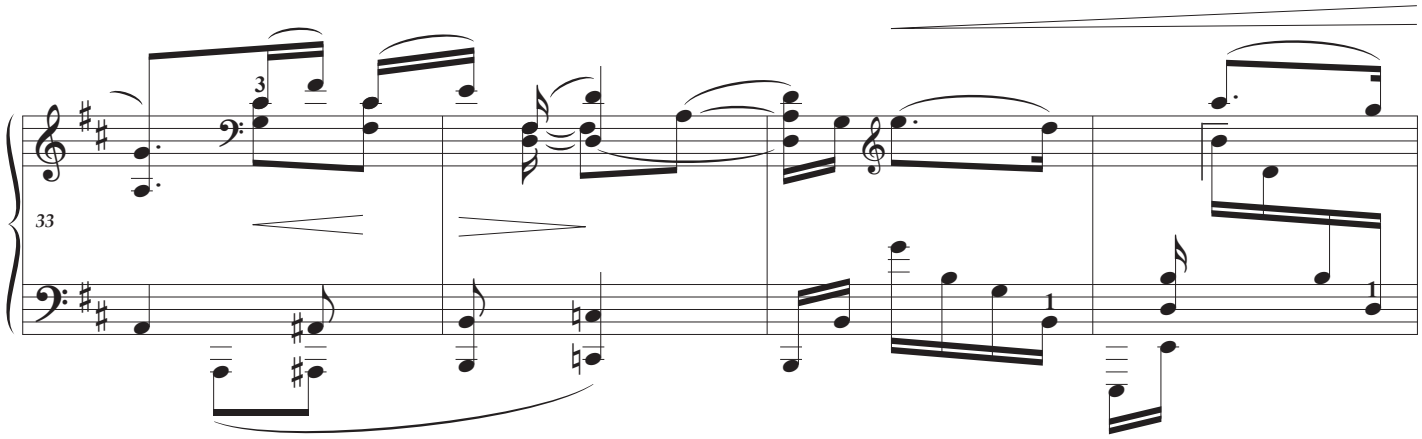


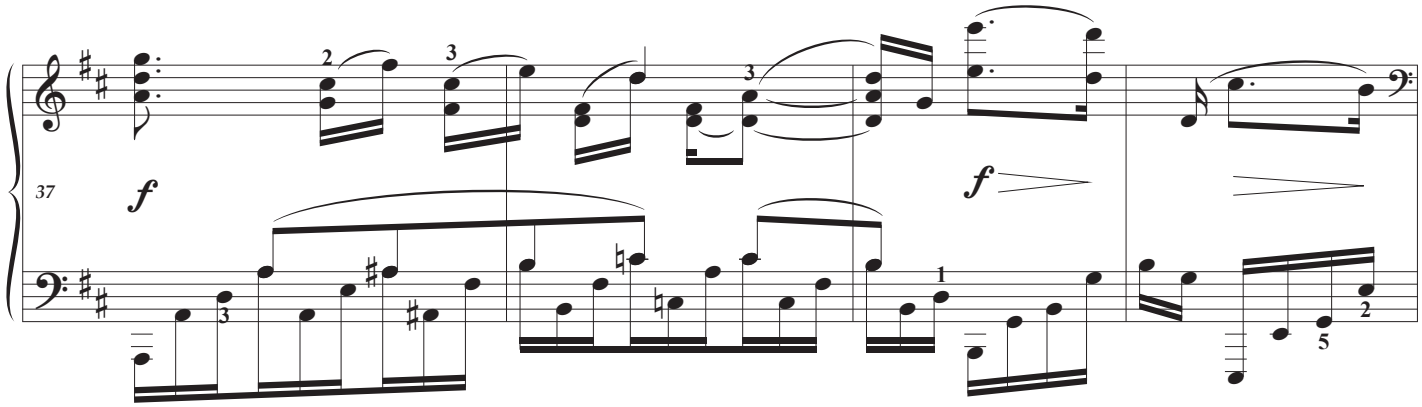
INTERMEZZO

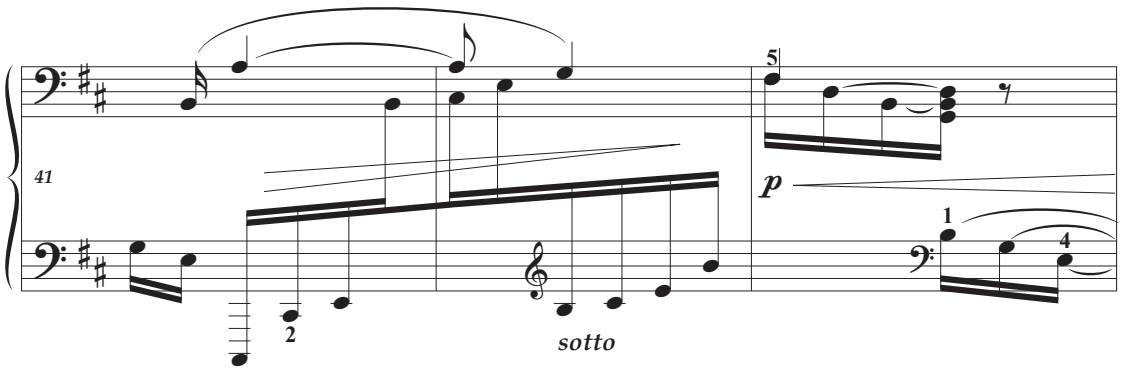
adagio

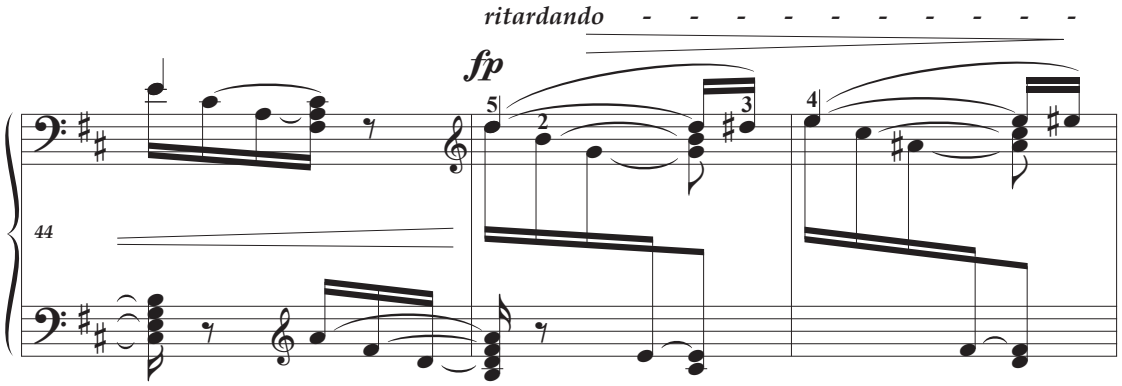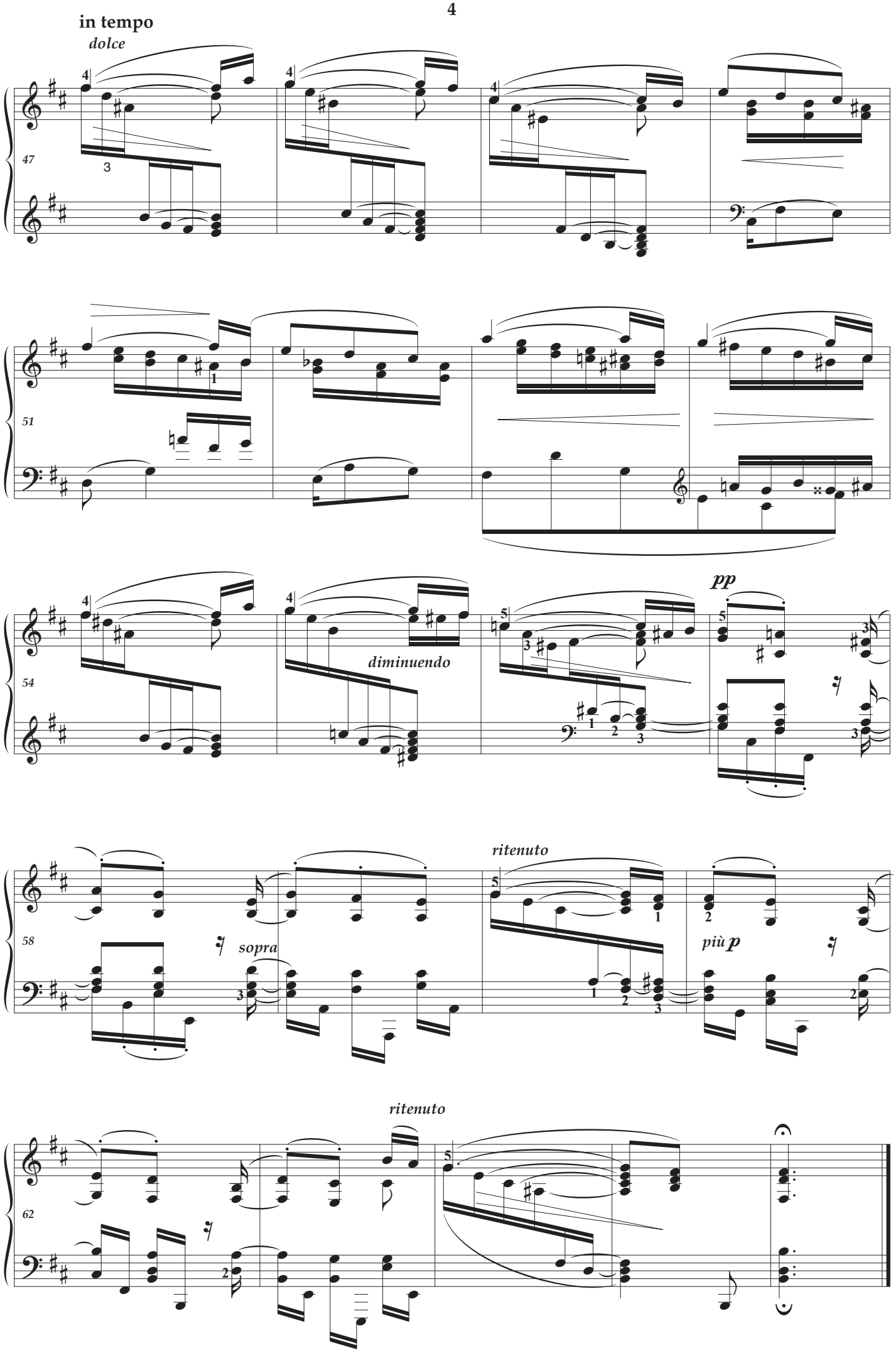



17
p
21
crescendo
f
* alternative time signature
21
crescendo
f
25
fp
29
p


33


37
f
f
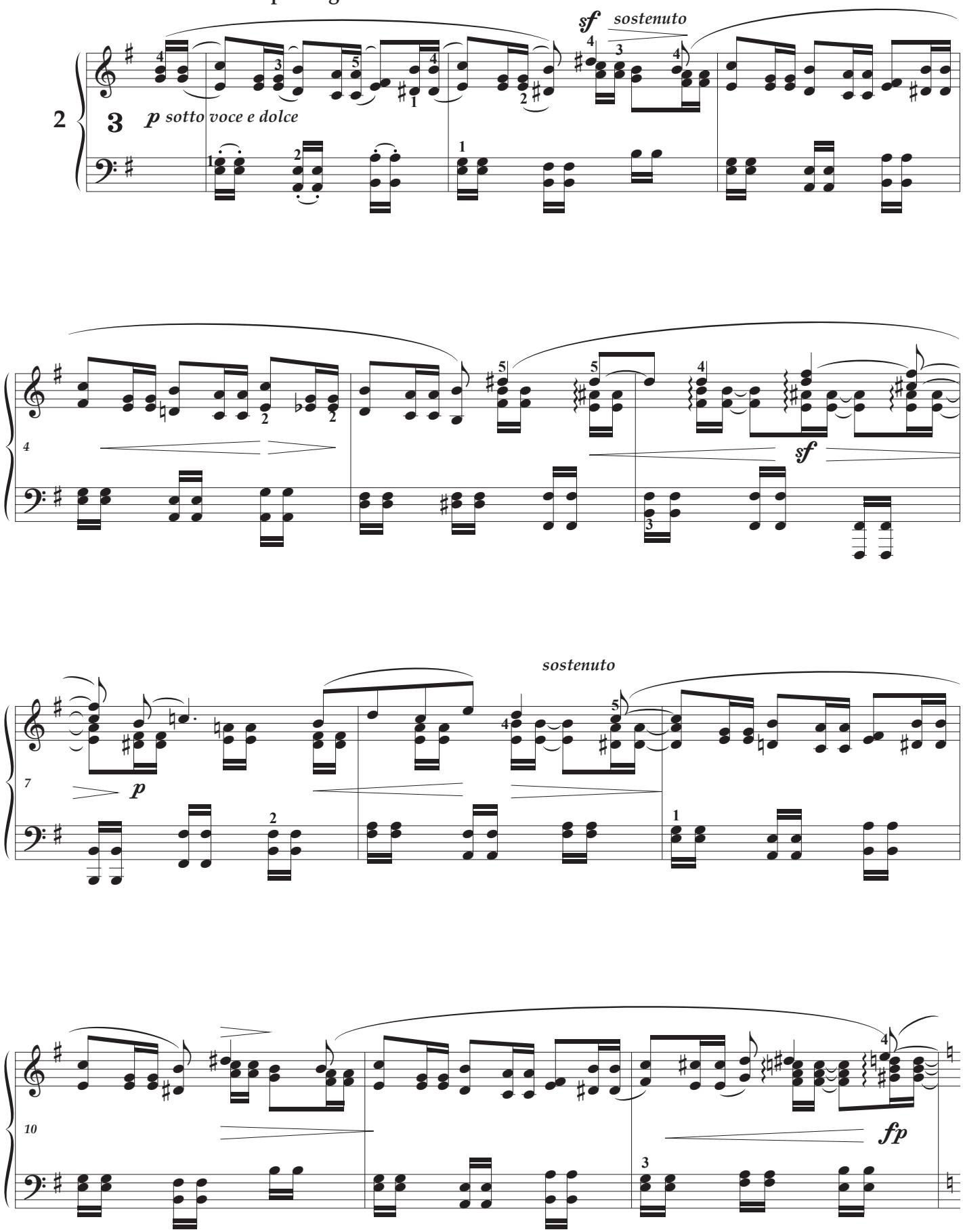

41
p
sotto
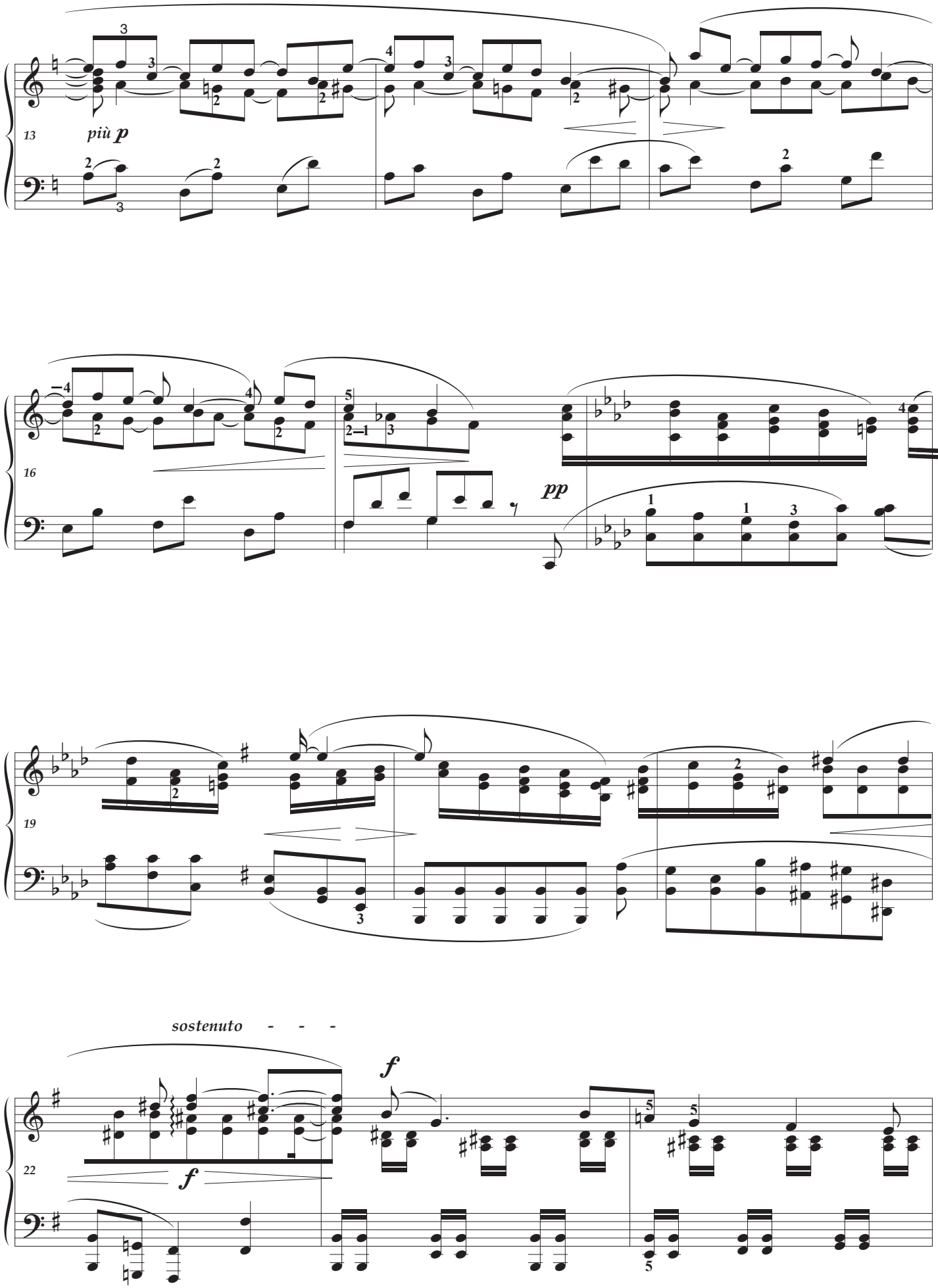

ritardando
fp
44
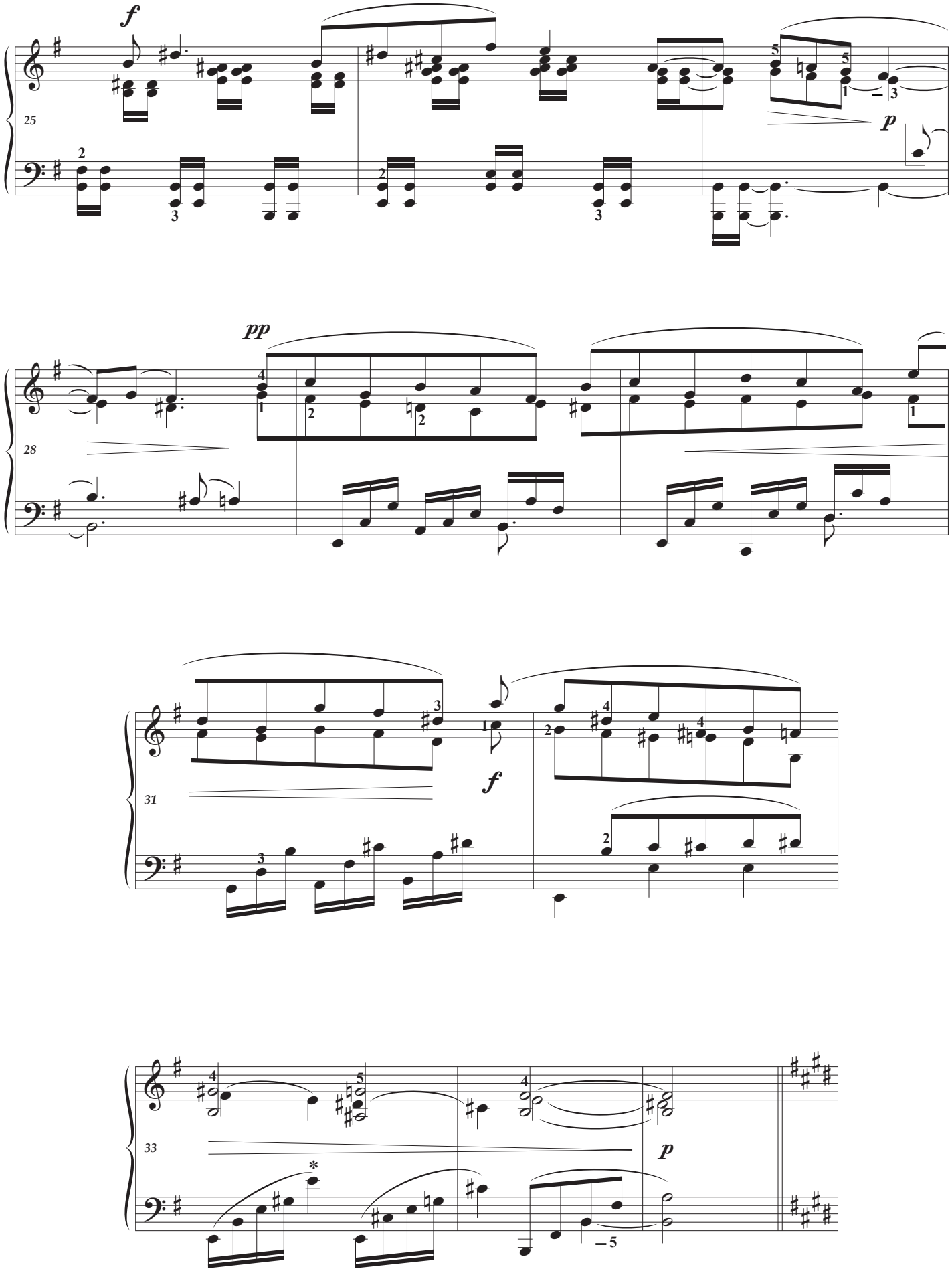

in tempo
dolce
47
51
54
diminuendo
pp
58
sopra
ritenuto
più p
62
ritenuto

INTERMEZZO
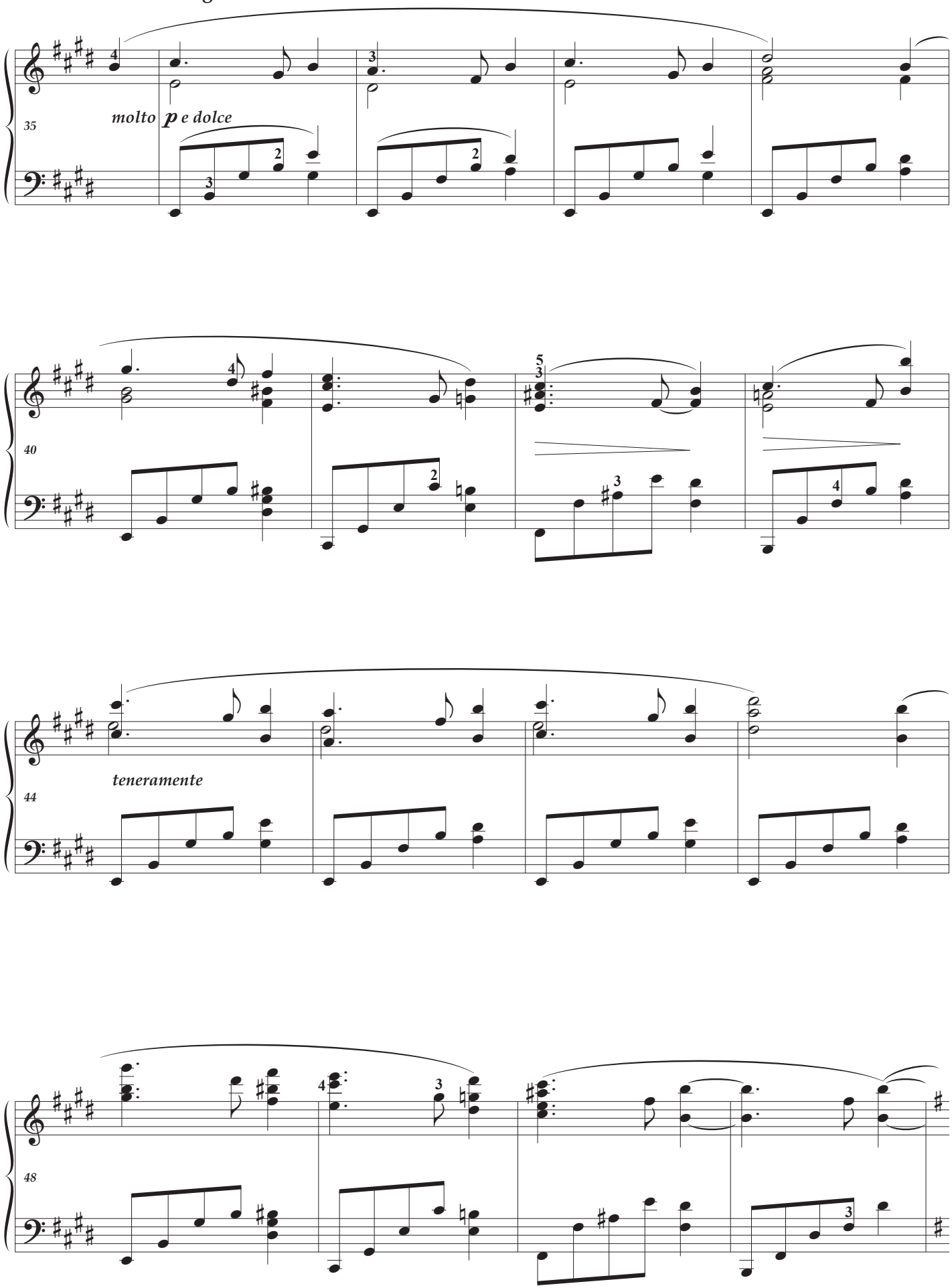
andantino un poco agitato
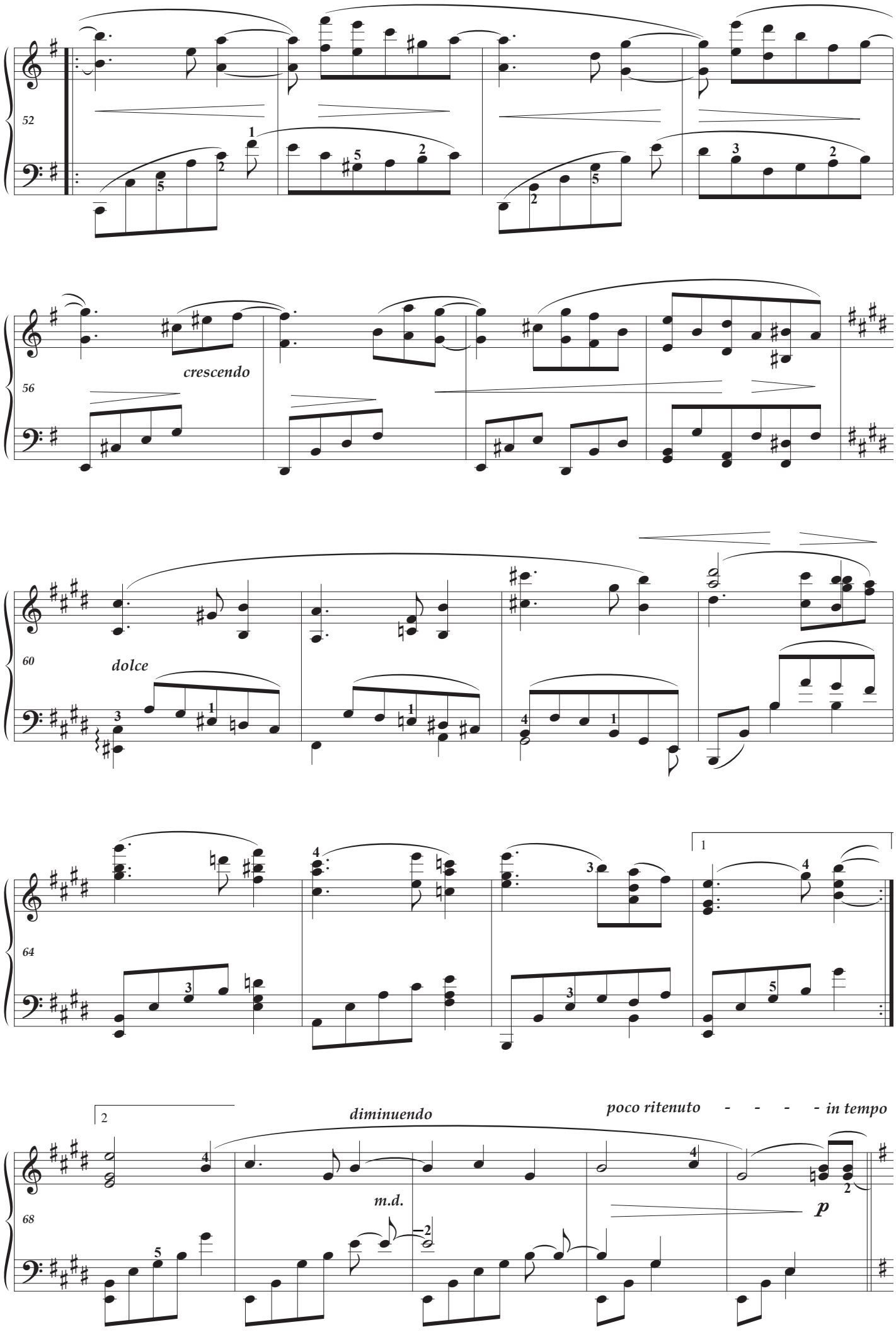



13
più p
16
pp
19
sostenuto - - -
f
22
f
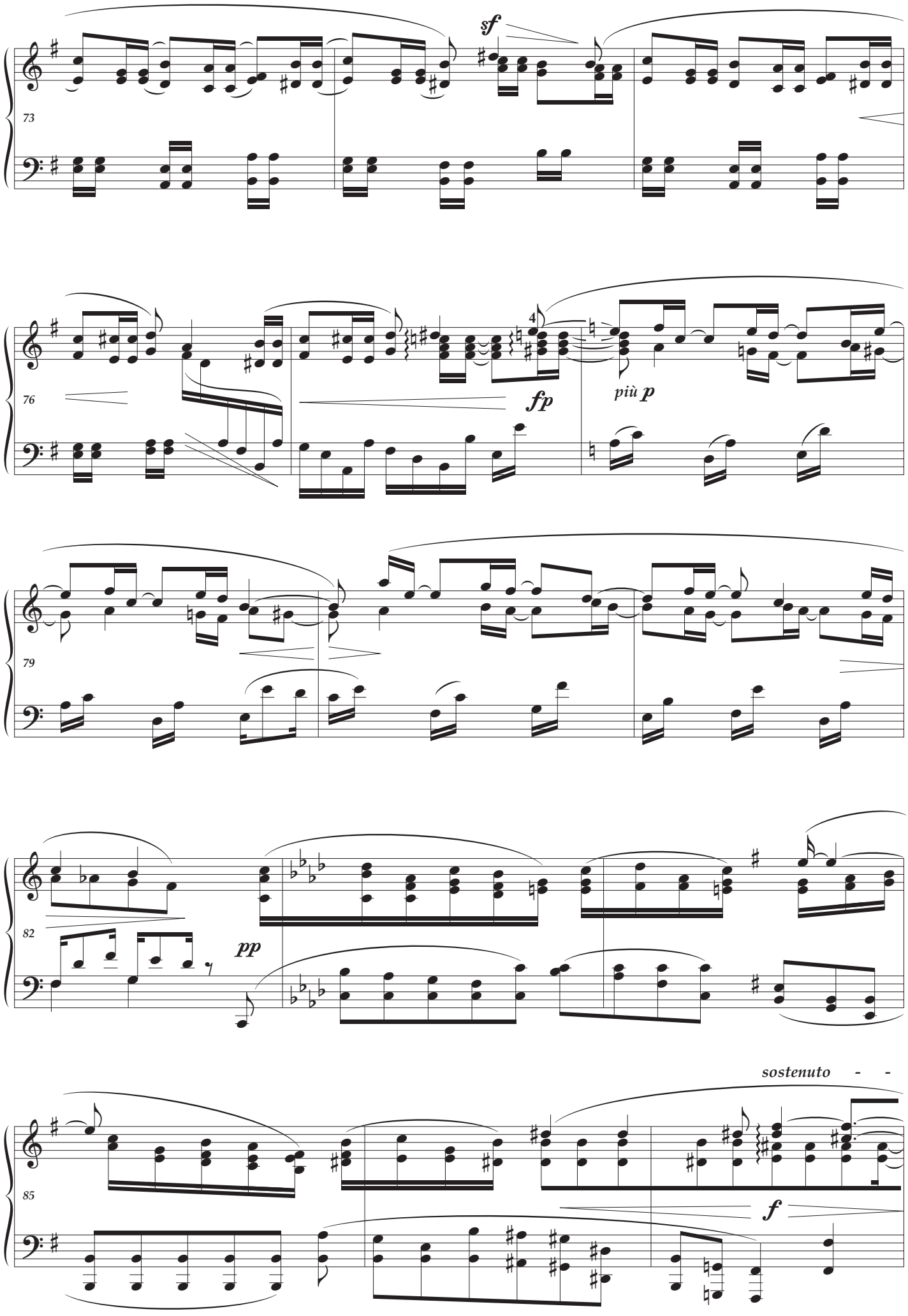

f
25
p
pp
28
f
31
p
33
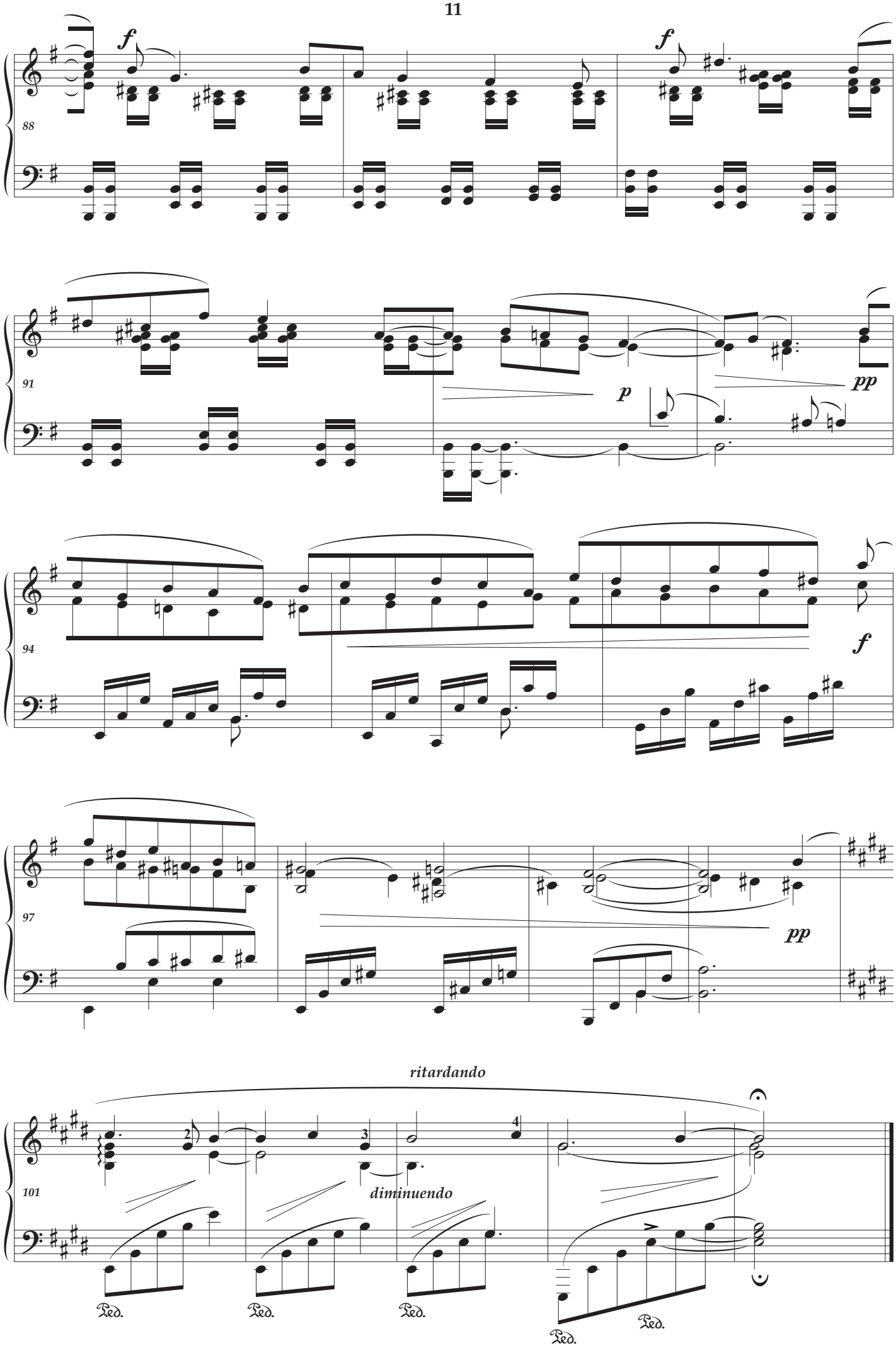
andantino grazioso




52
56
crescendo
60
dolce
64
1
68
2
diminuendo
poco ritenuto - - - - in tempo
m.d.
p

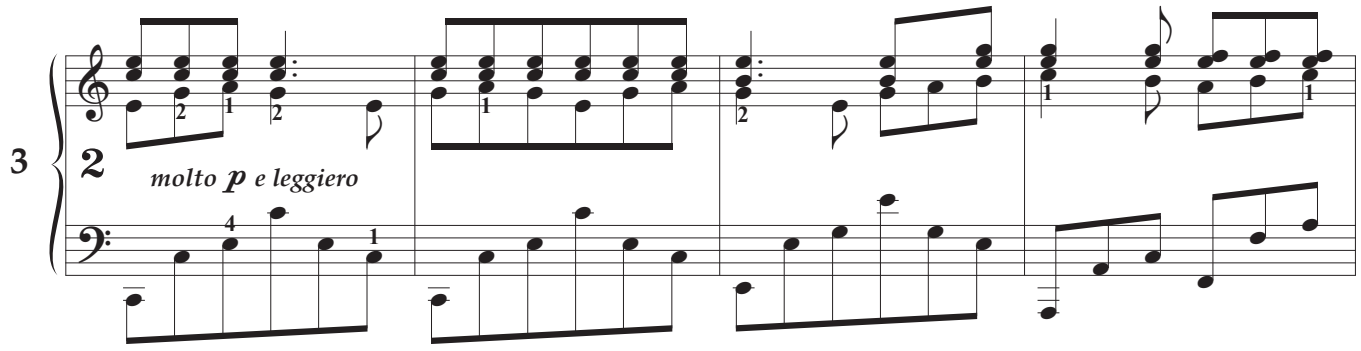
tempo primo

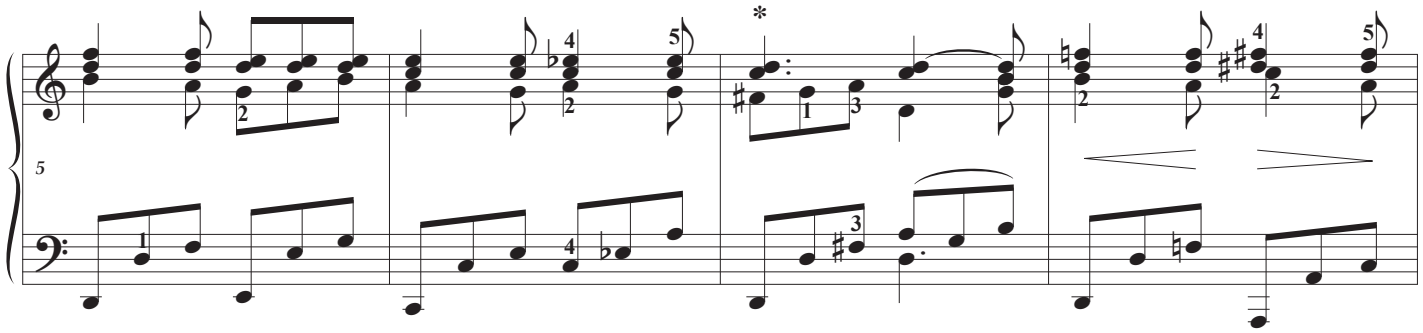



88
f
f
91
p
pp
94
f
97
pp
ritardando
101
2
3
4
diminuendo
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.

INTERMEZZO
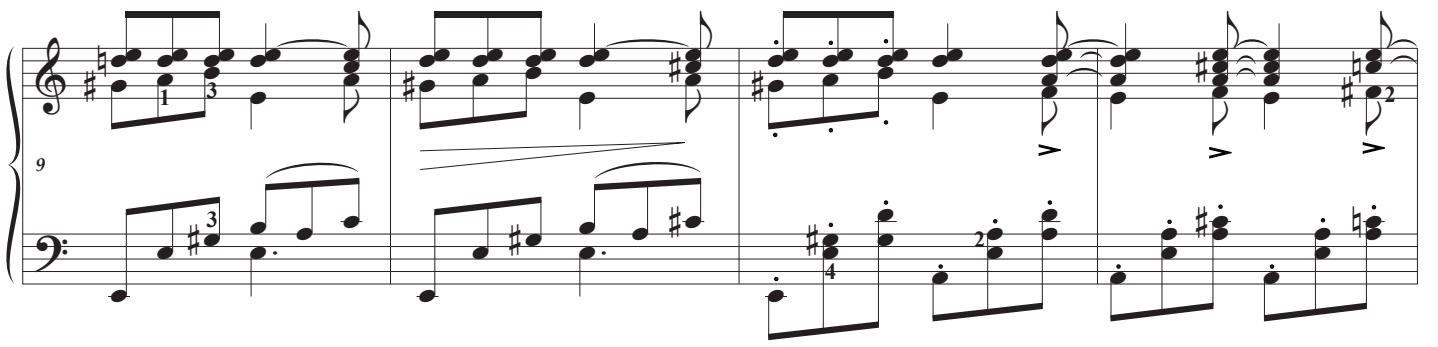
grazioso e giocoso

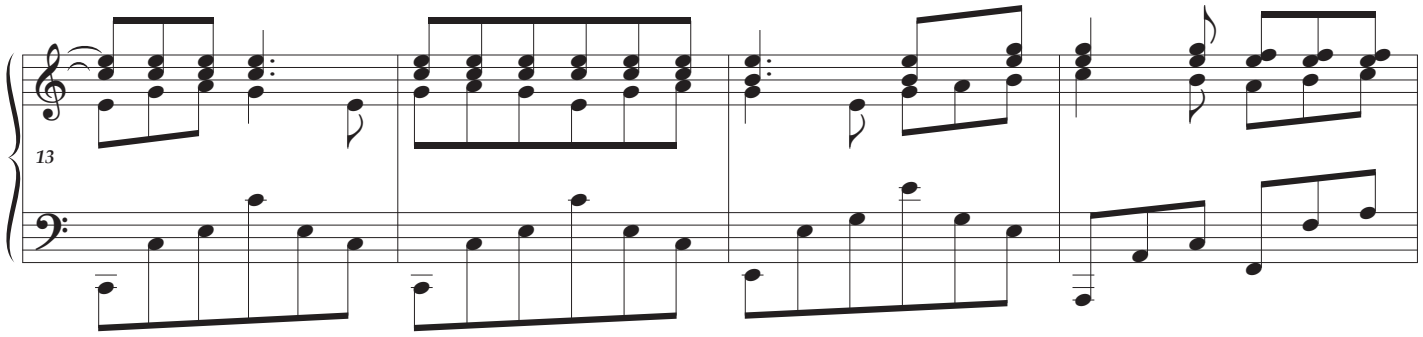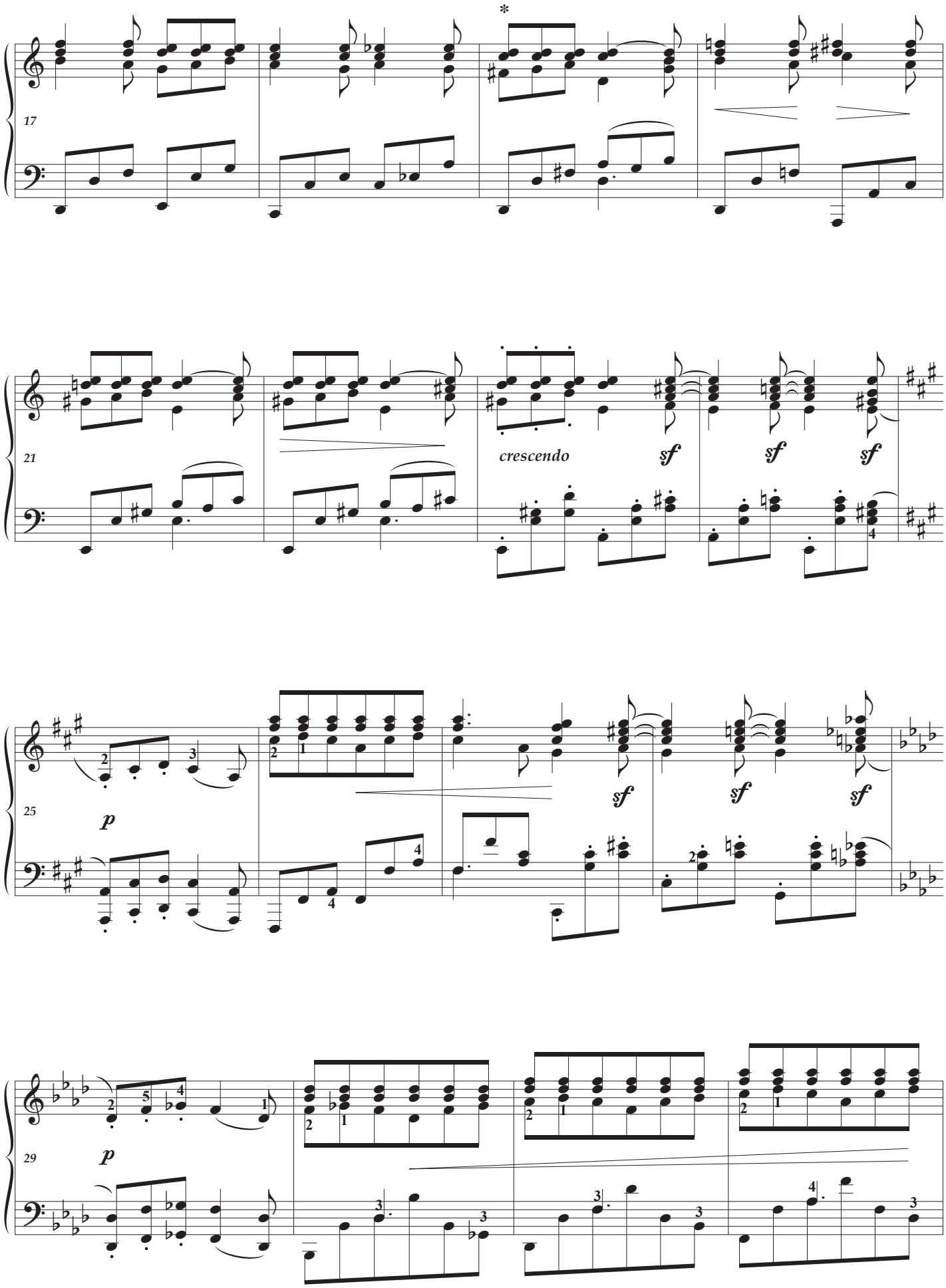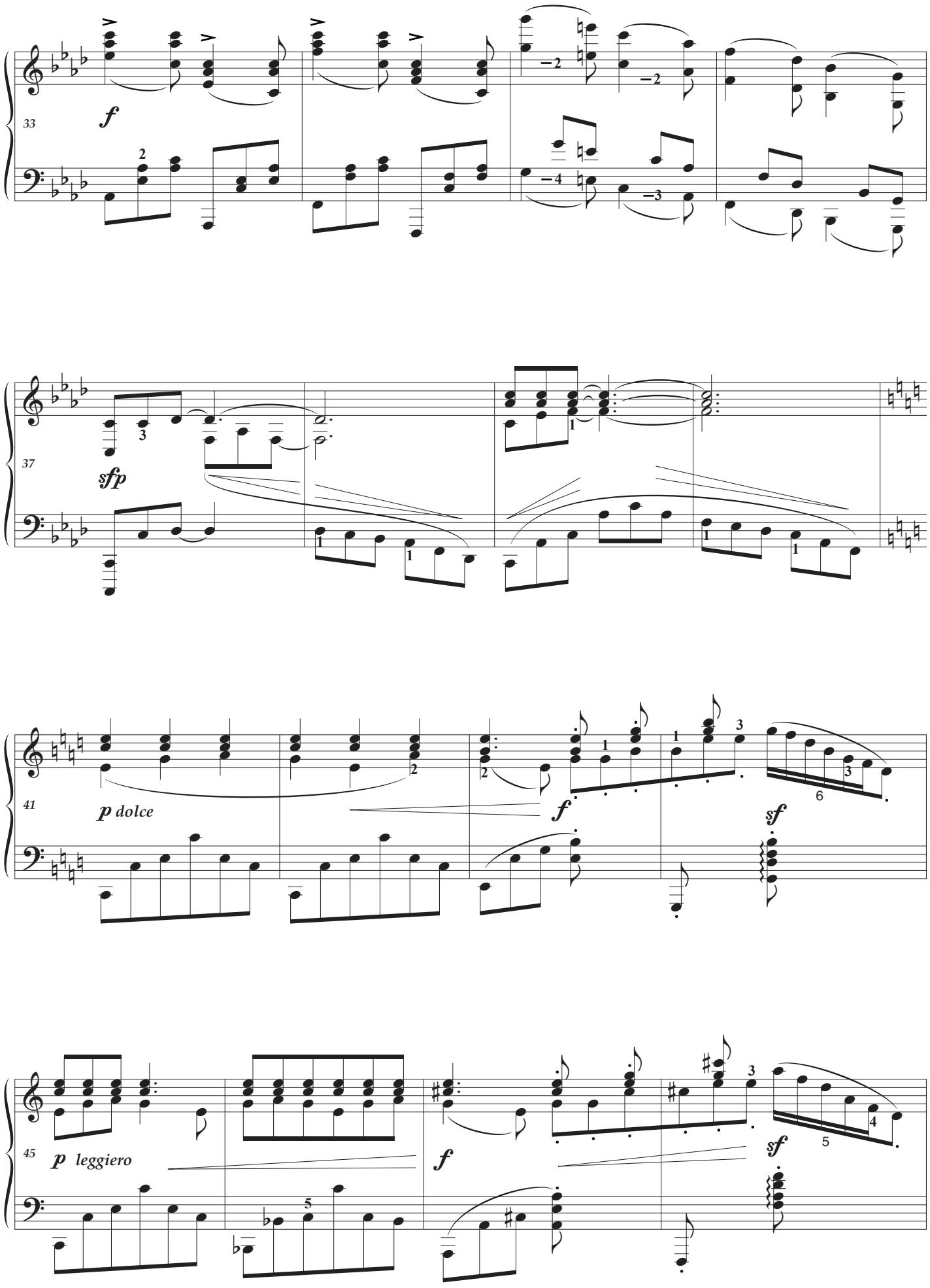




sostenuto - - - -
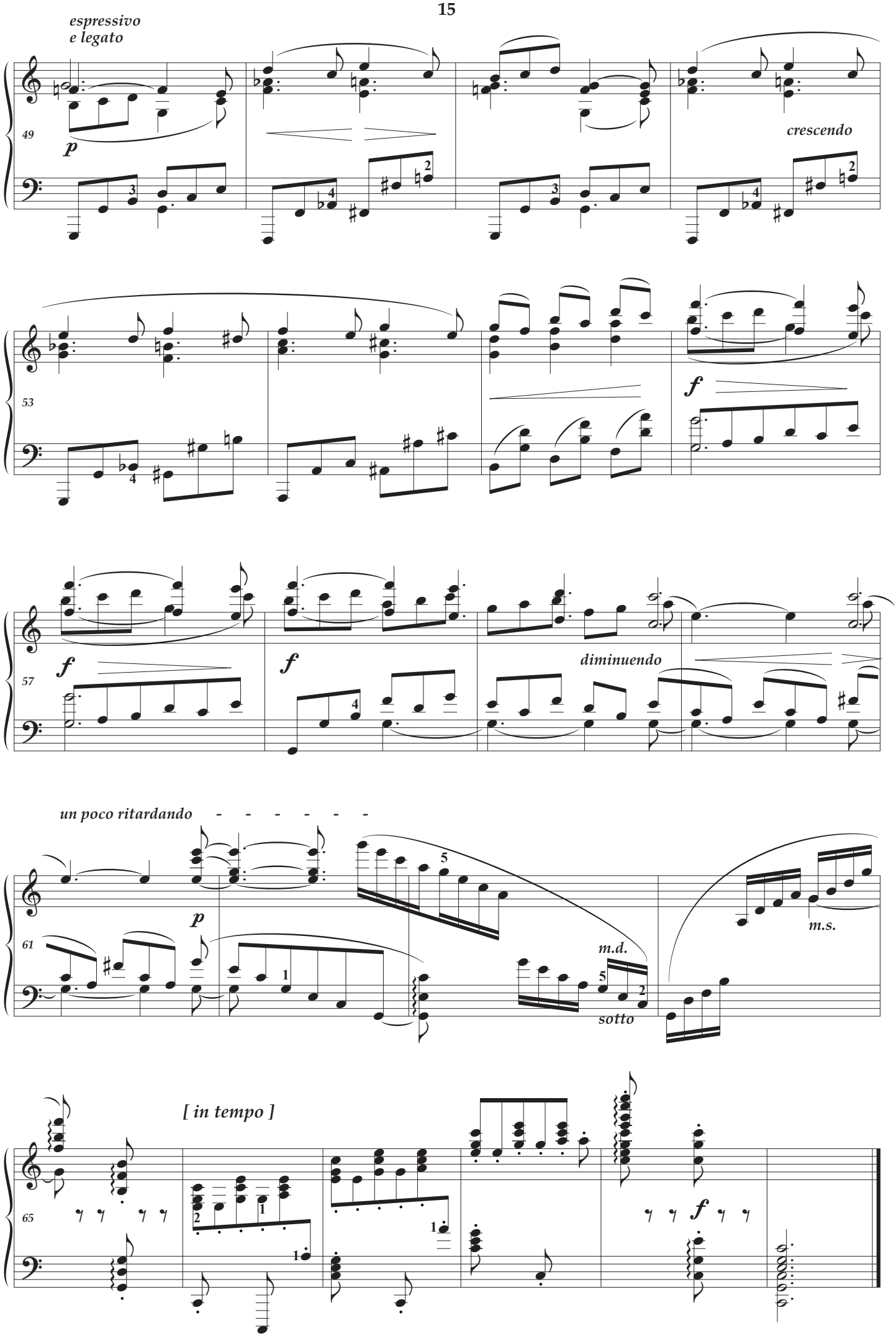
sostenuto
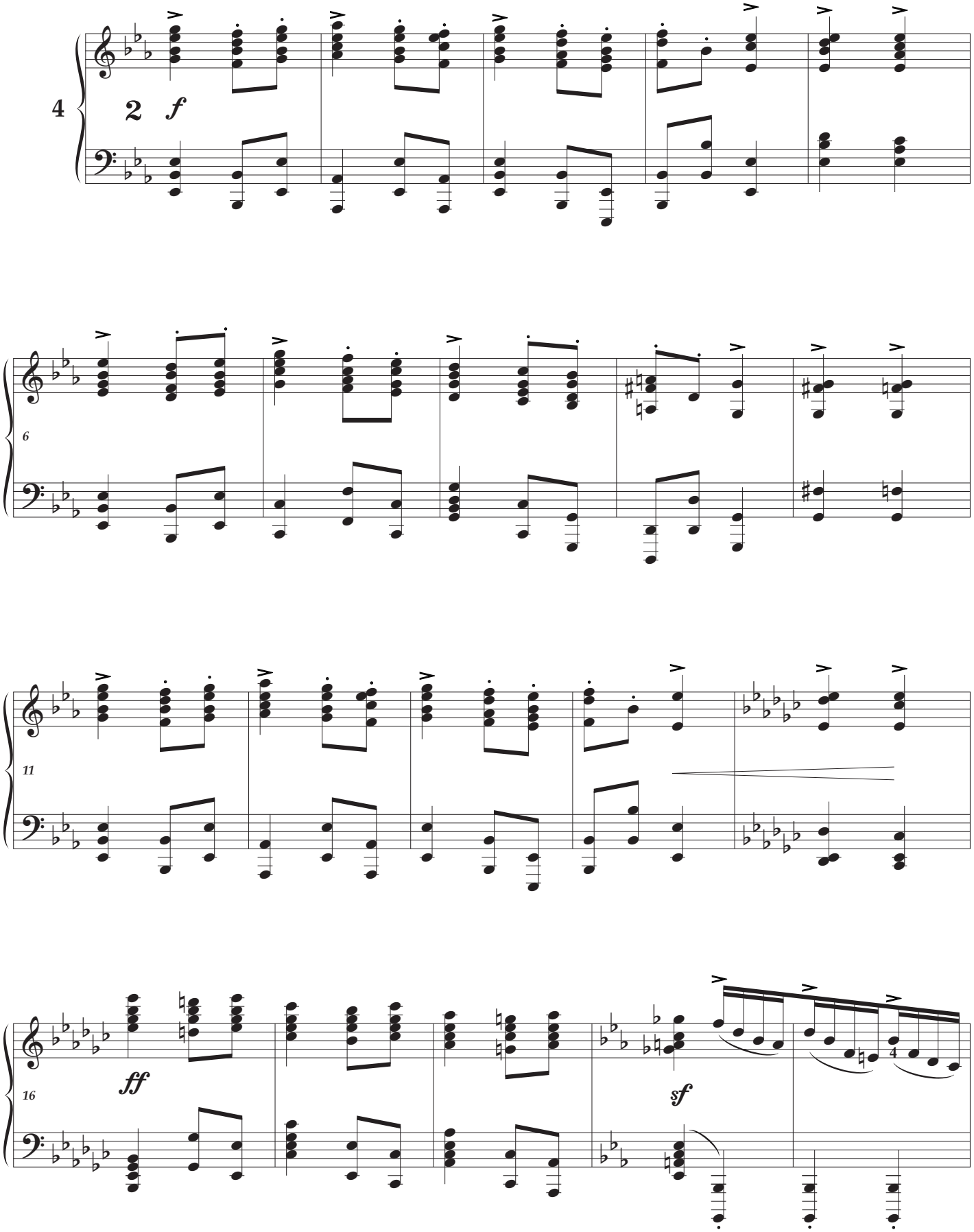





17
21
crescendo
sf
sf
sf
25
p
sf
sf
sf
29
p
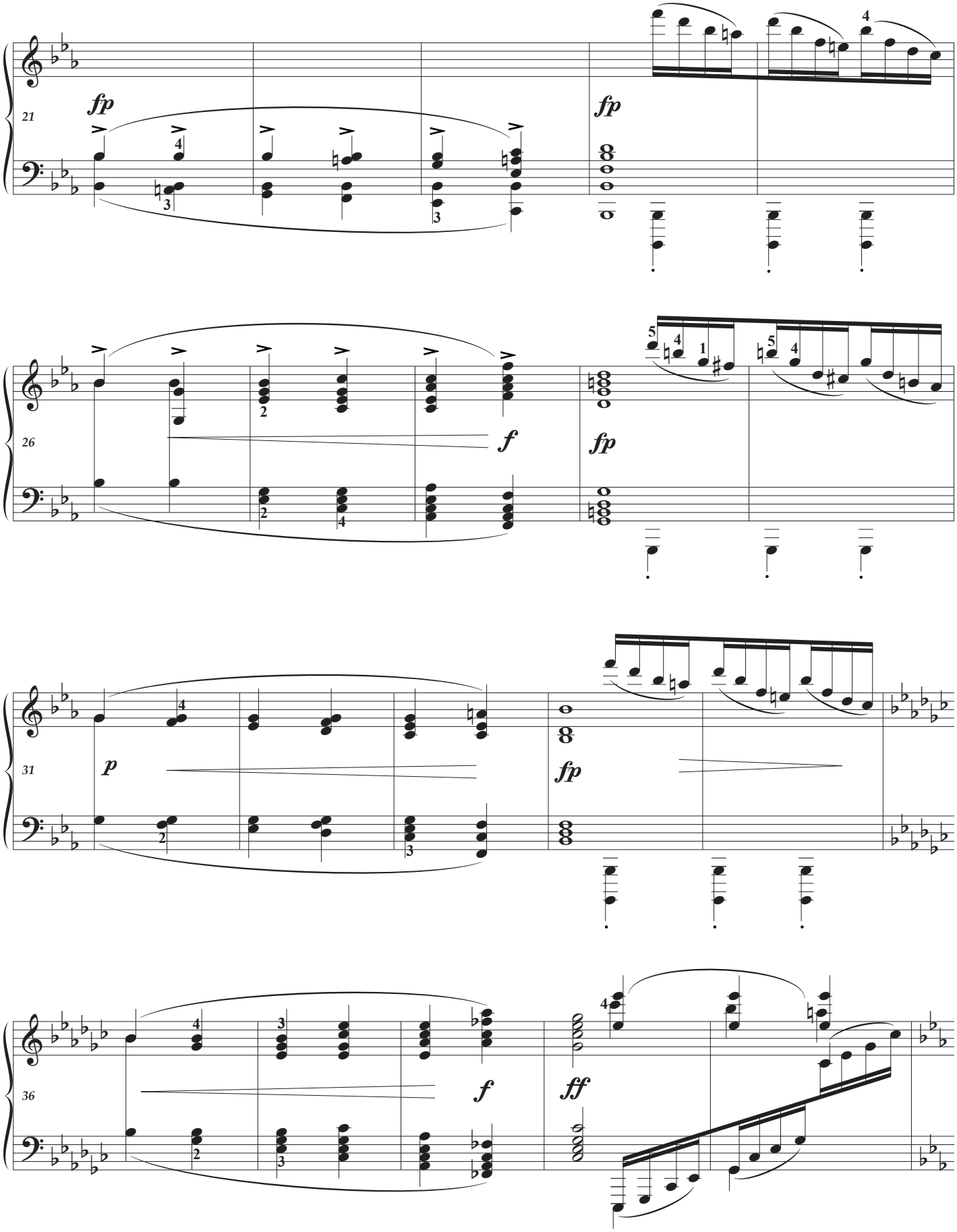

33
f
37
sfp
41
p dolce
f
sf
45
p leggiero
f
sf
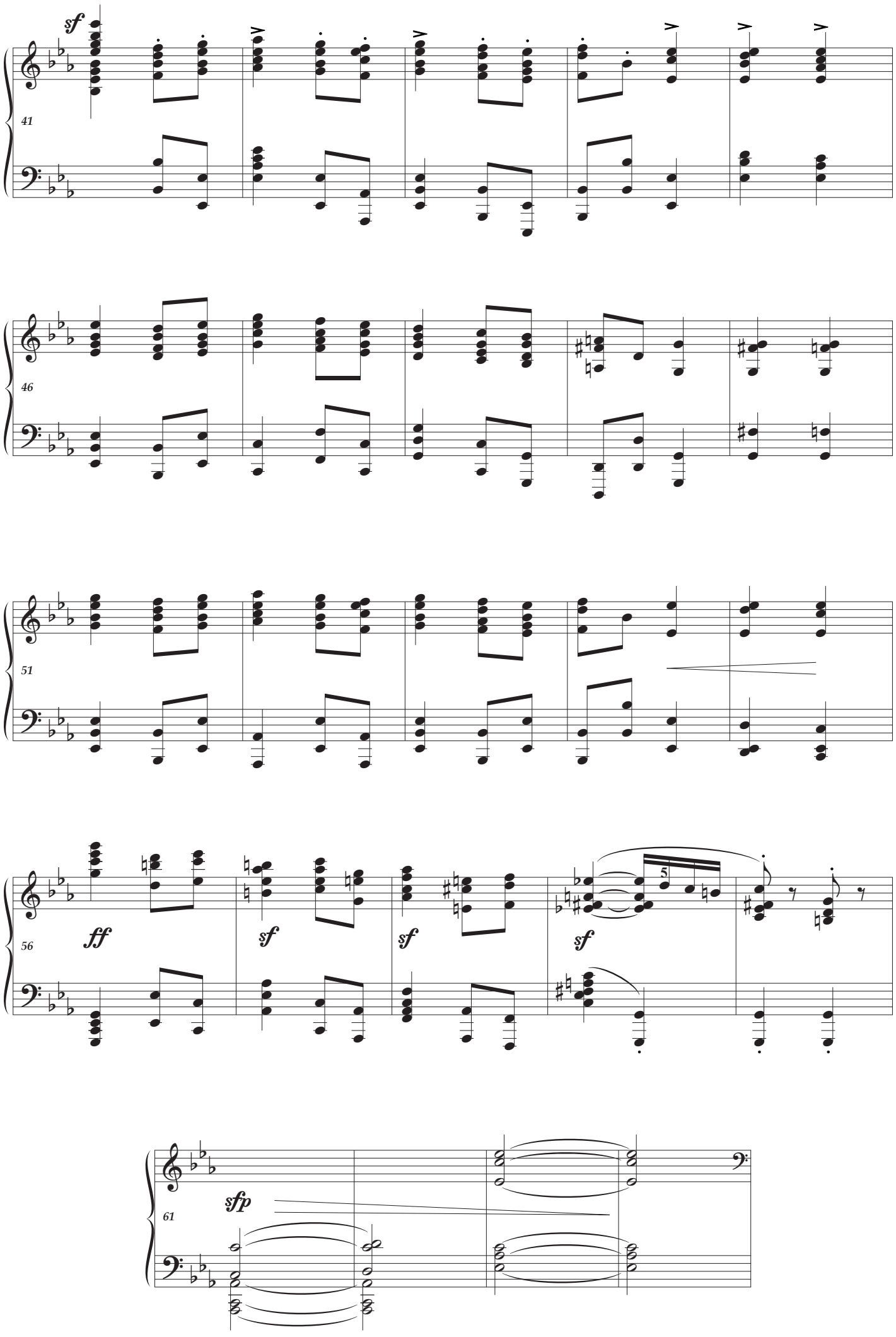

espressivo
e legato
49
p
crescendo
53
f
57
f
f
diminuendo
un poco ritardando
61
p
m.d.
sotto
m.s.
[in tempo]
65
f
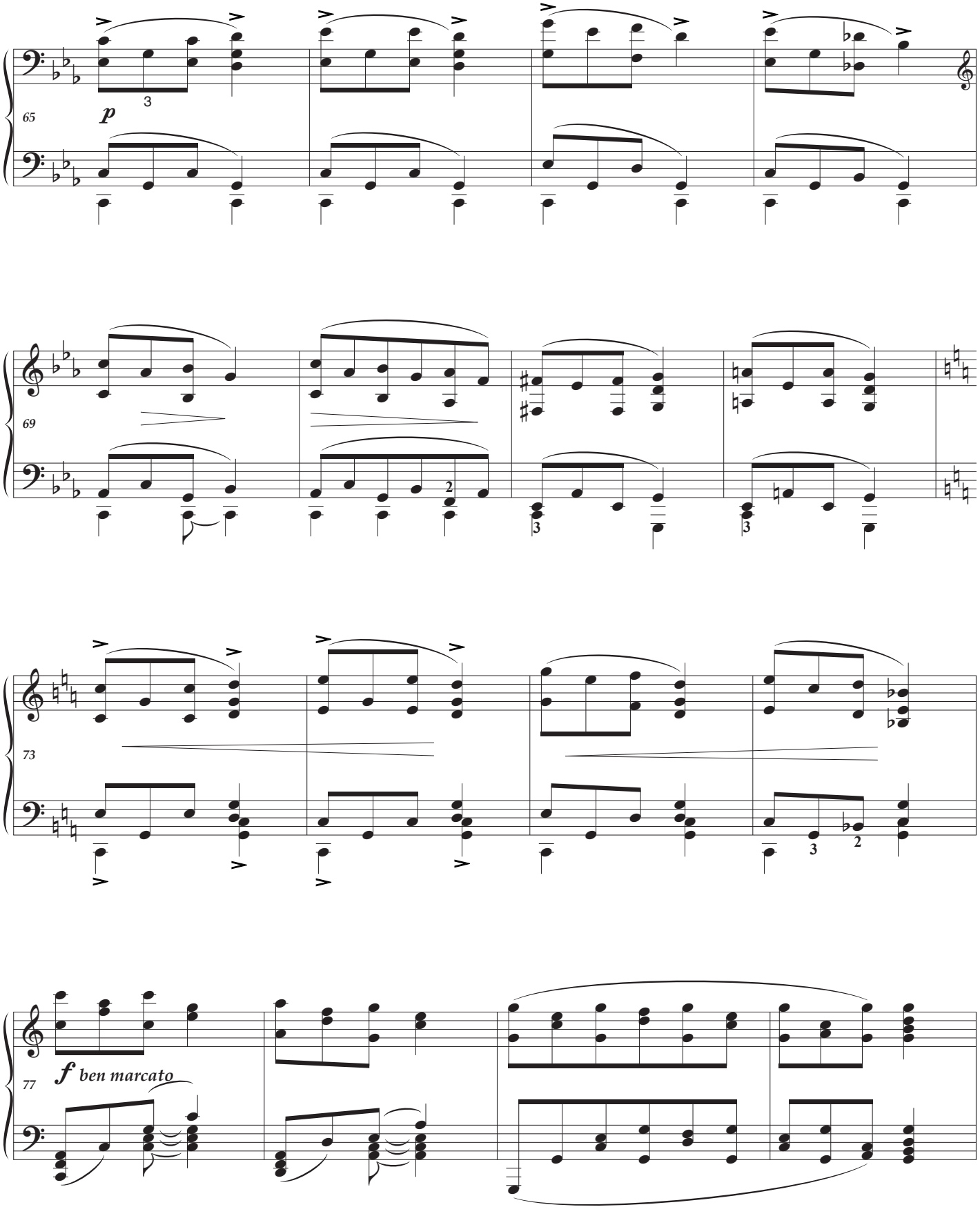
RHAPSODIE
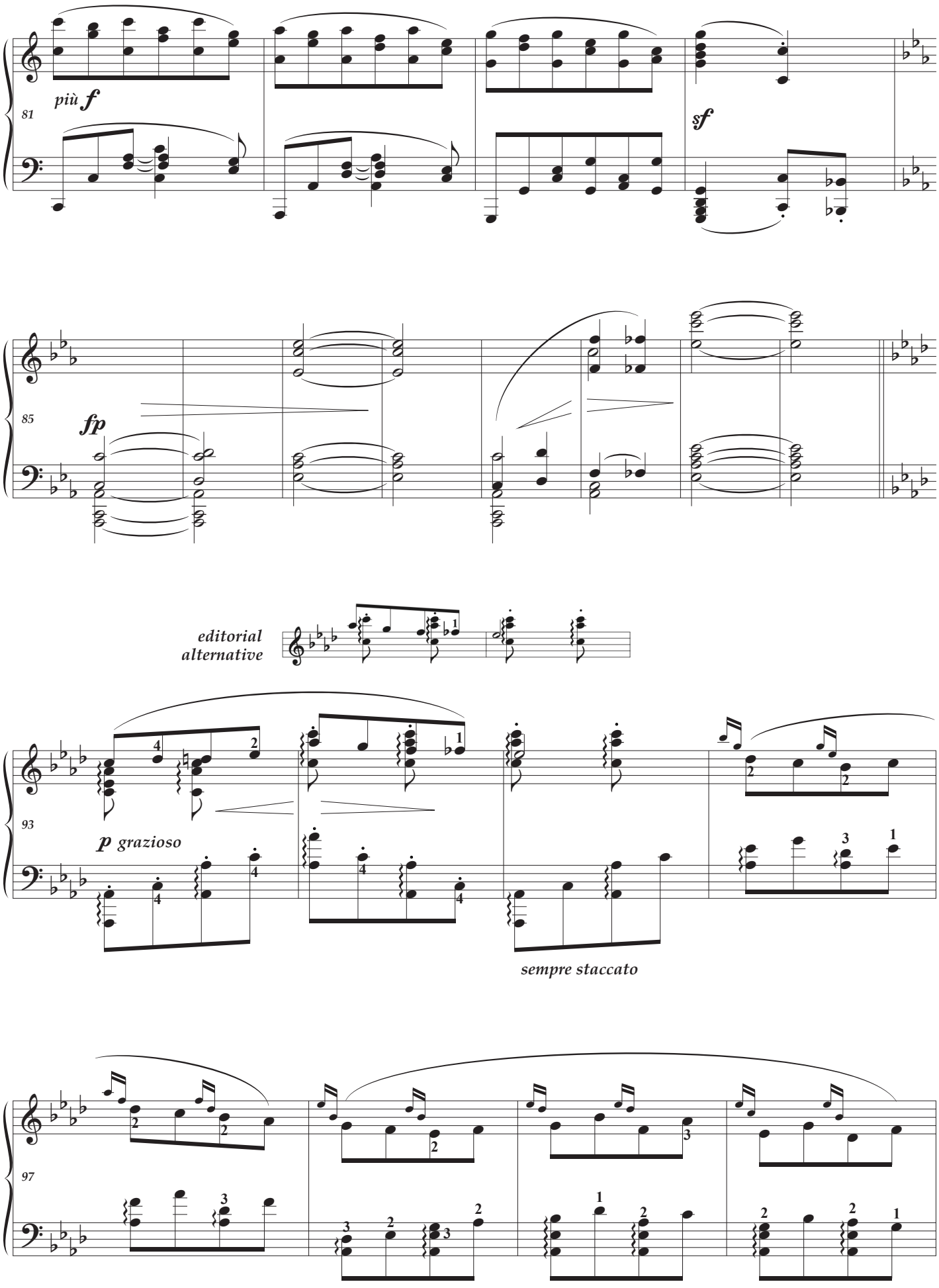
allegro risoluto
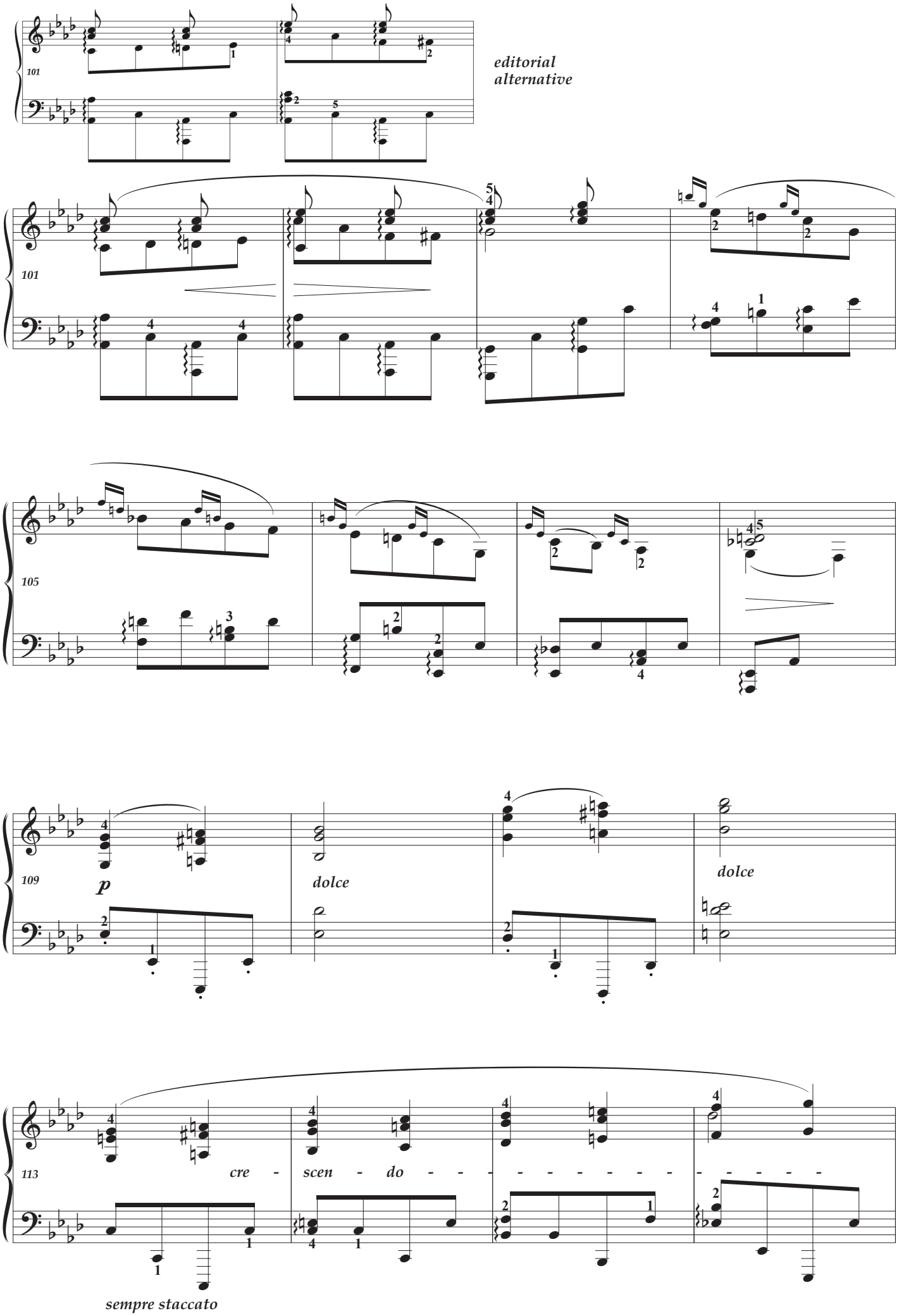


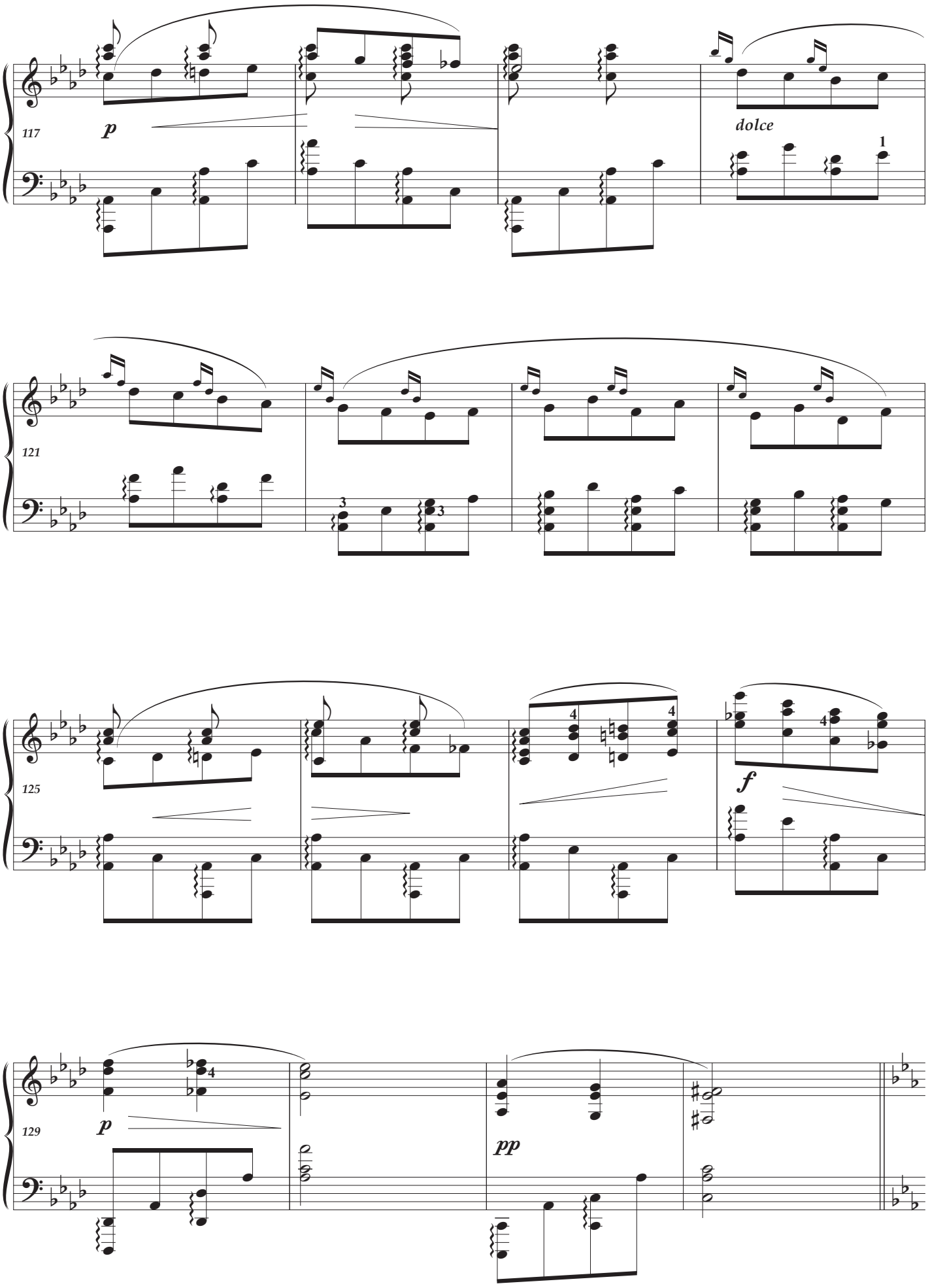

21
fp
fp
26
f
fp
31
p
fp
36
f
ff
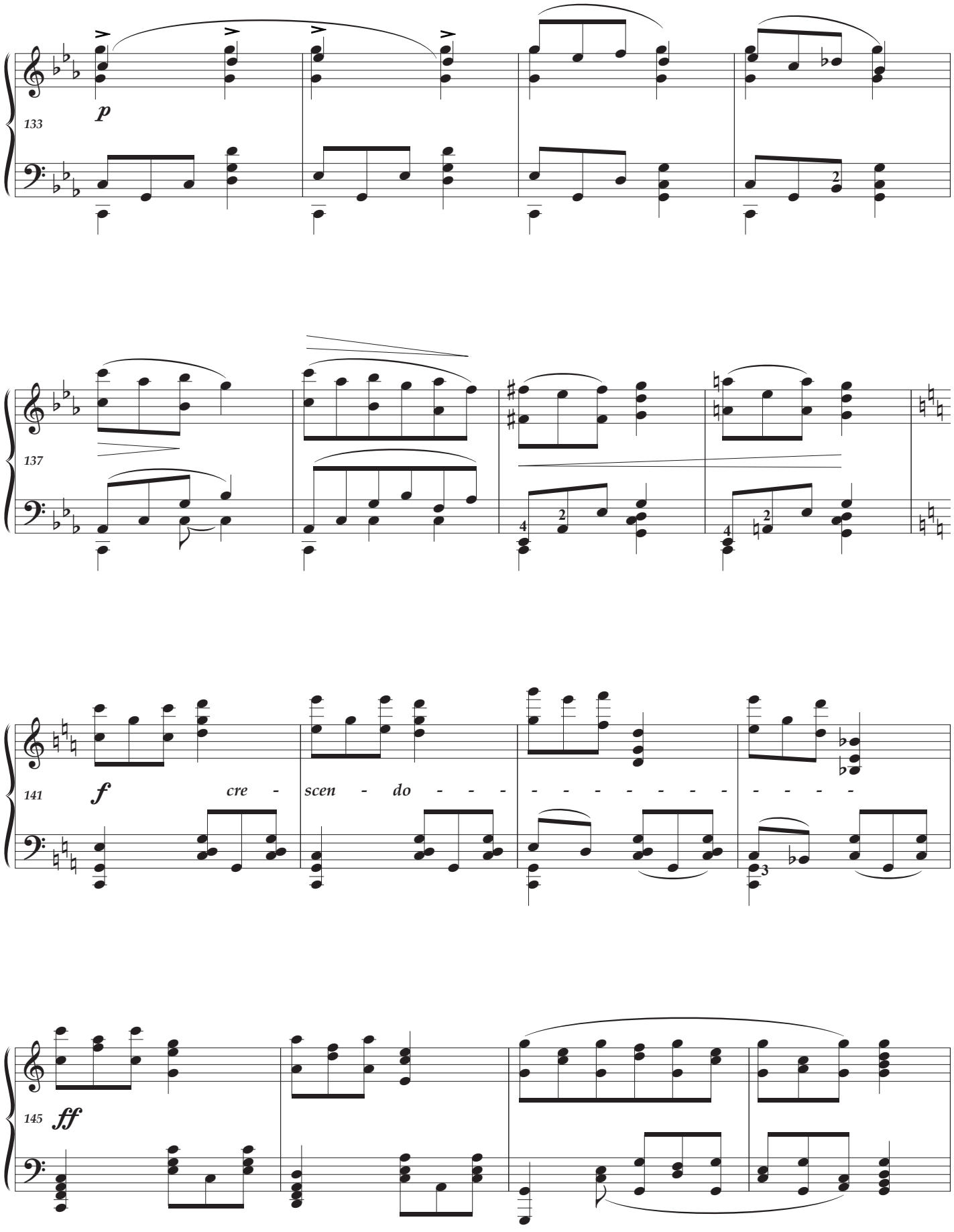

sf
41
46
51
ff
sf
sf
sf
56
5
sfp
61

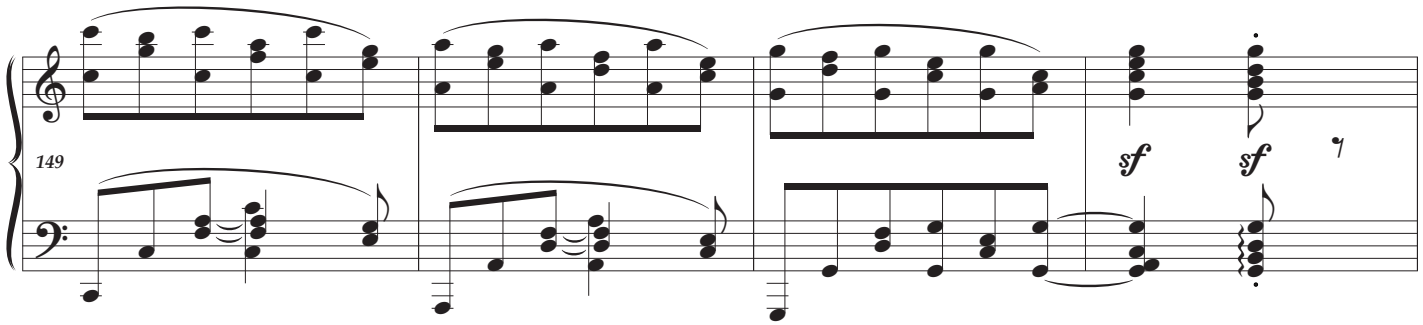

65
p
69
73
77
f ben marcato

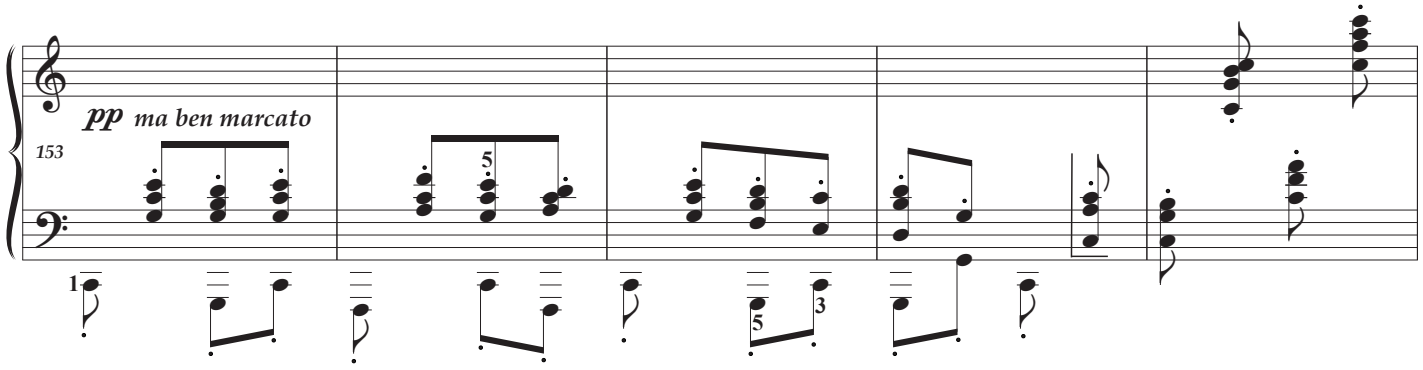

più f
81
sf
85
fp
editorial
alternative
93
p grazioso
sempre staccato
97

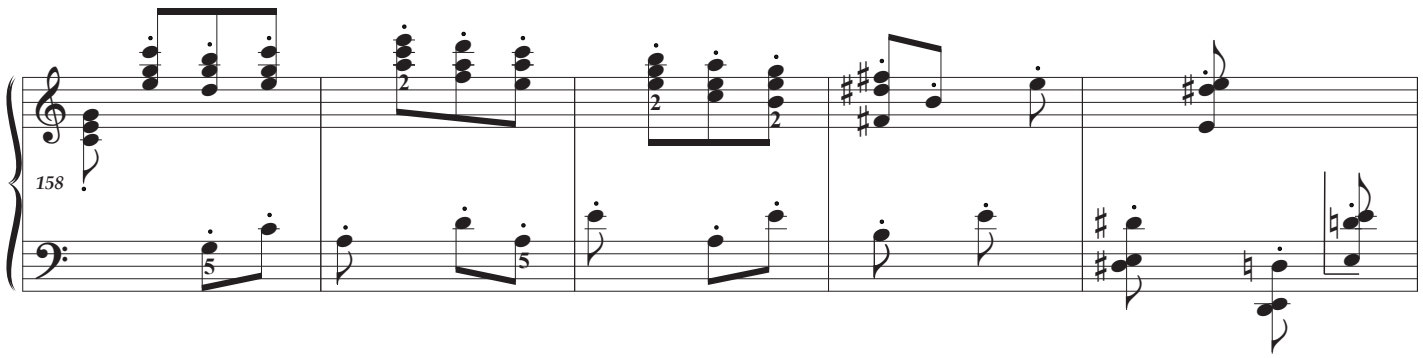

editorial
alternative
101
101
105
109
p
dolce
dolce
113
cre - scen - do - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
sempre staccato

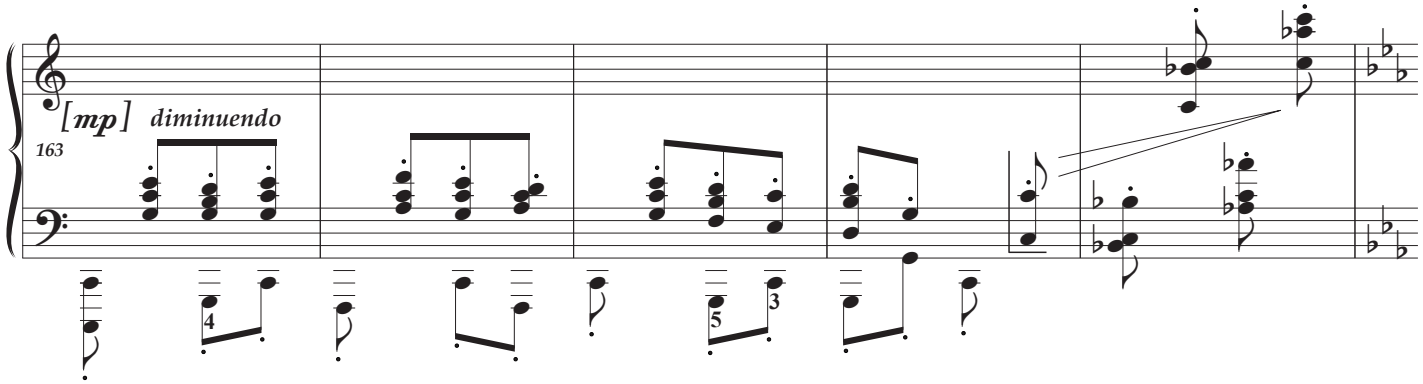

117
p
dolce
1
121
3
3
125
4
4
4
f
129
p
4
pp
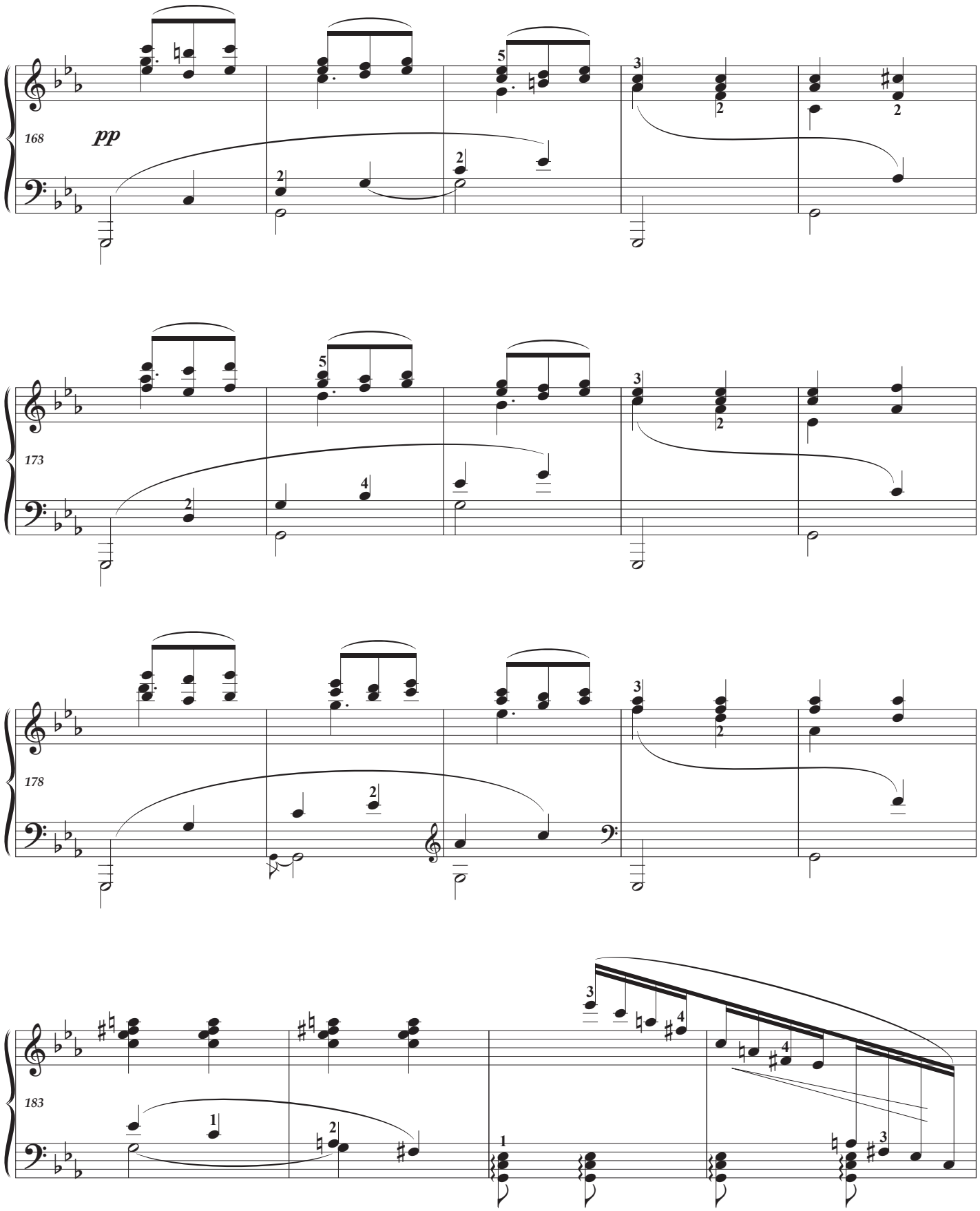

133
p
137
141
f
cre - scen - do - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
145
ff

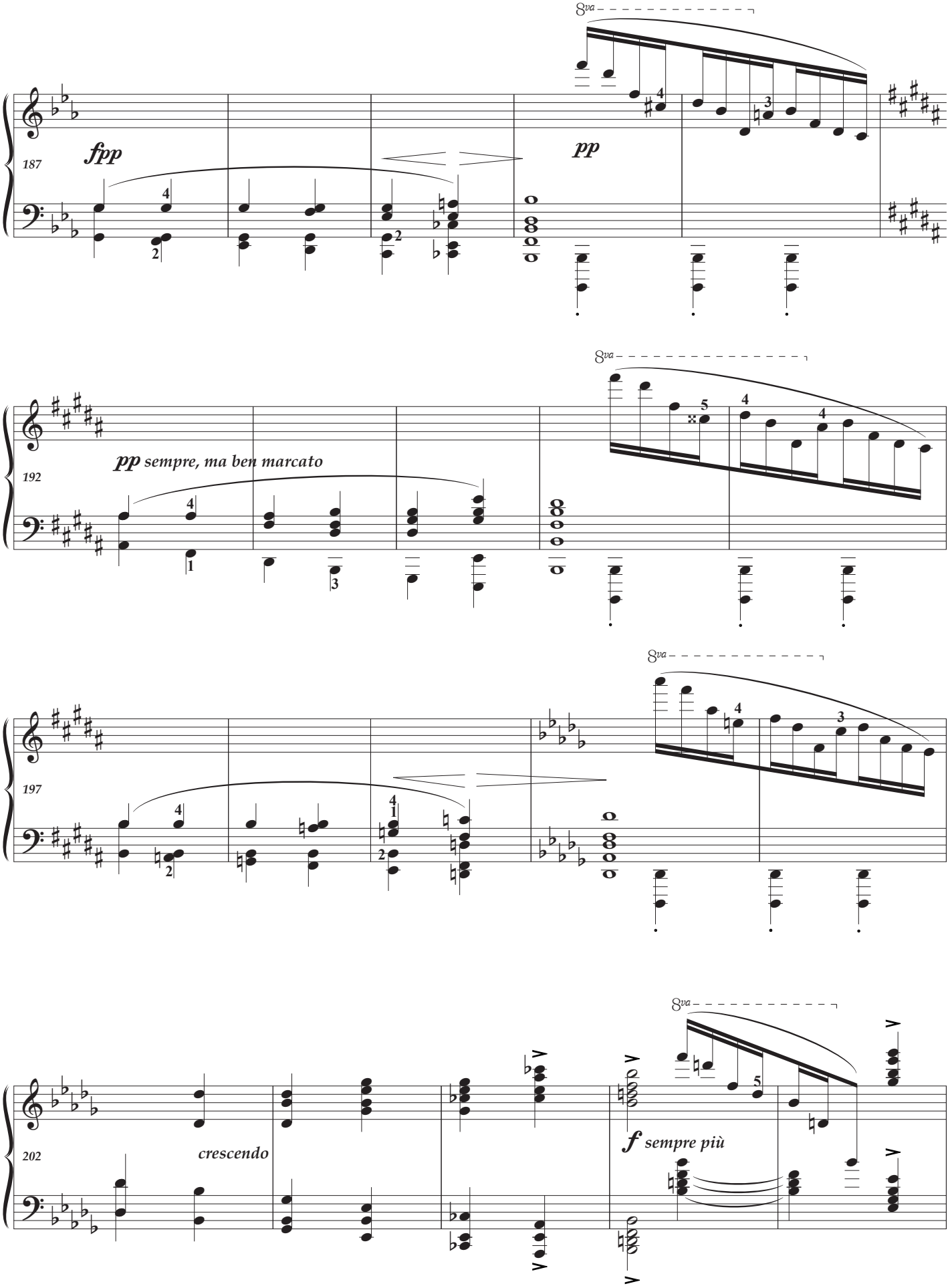

149
sf
sf

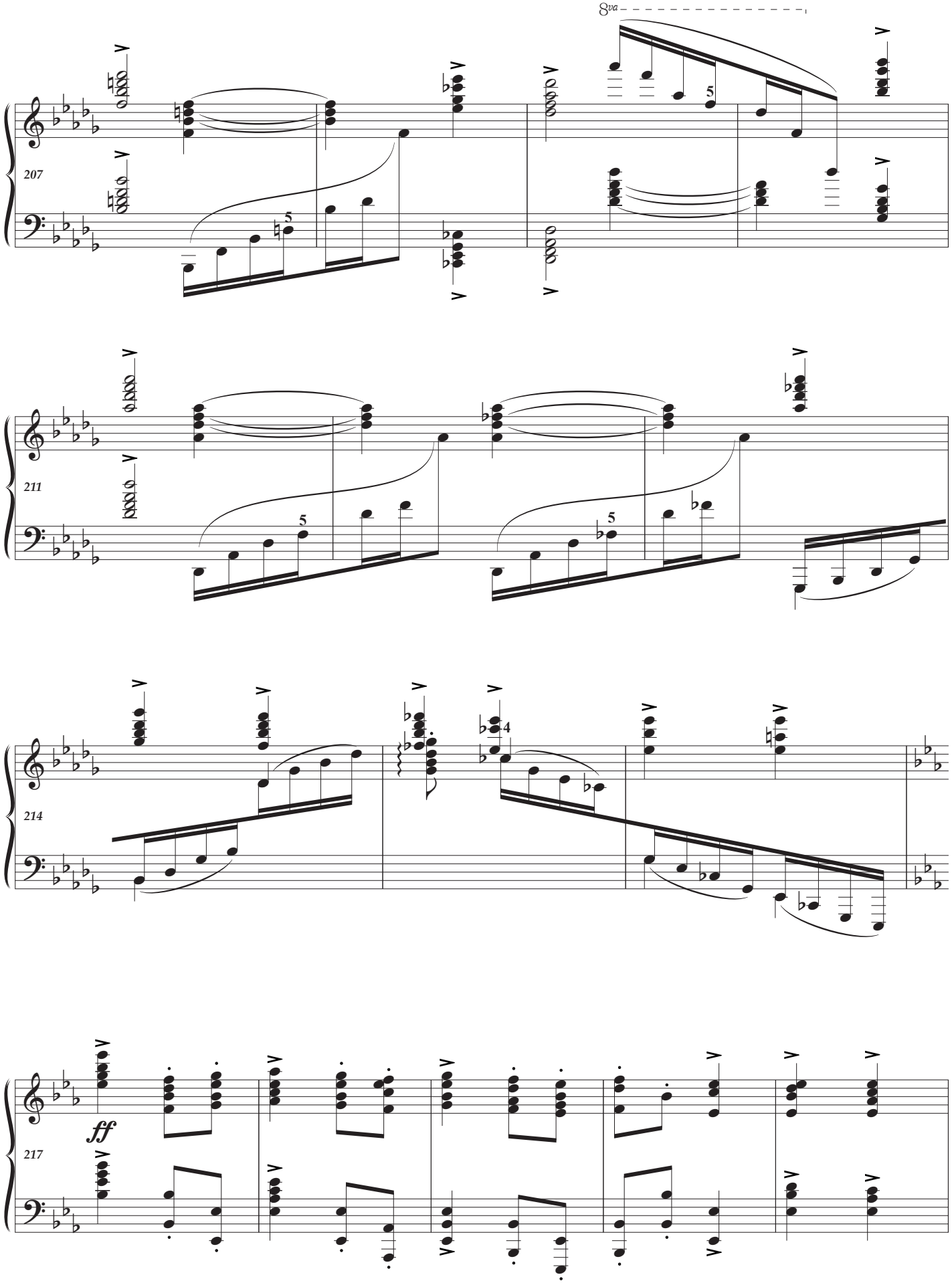

pp ma ben marcato
153
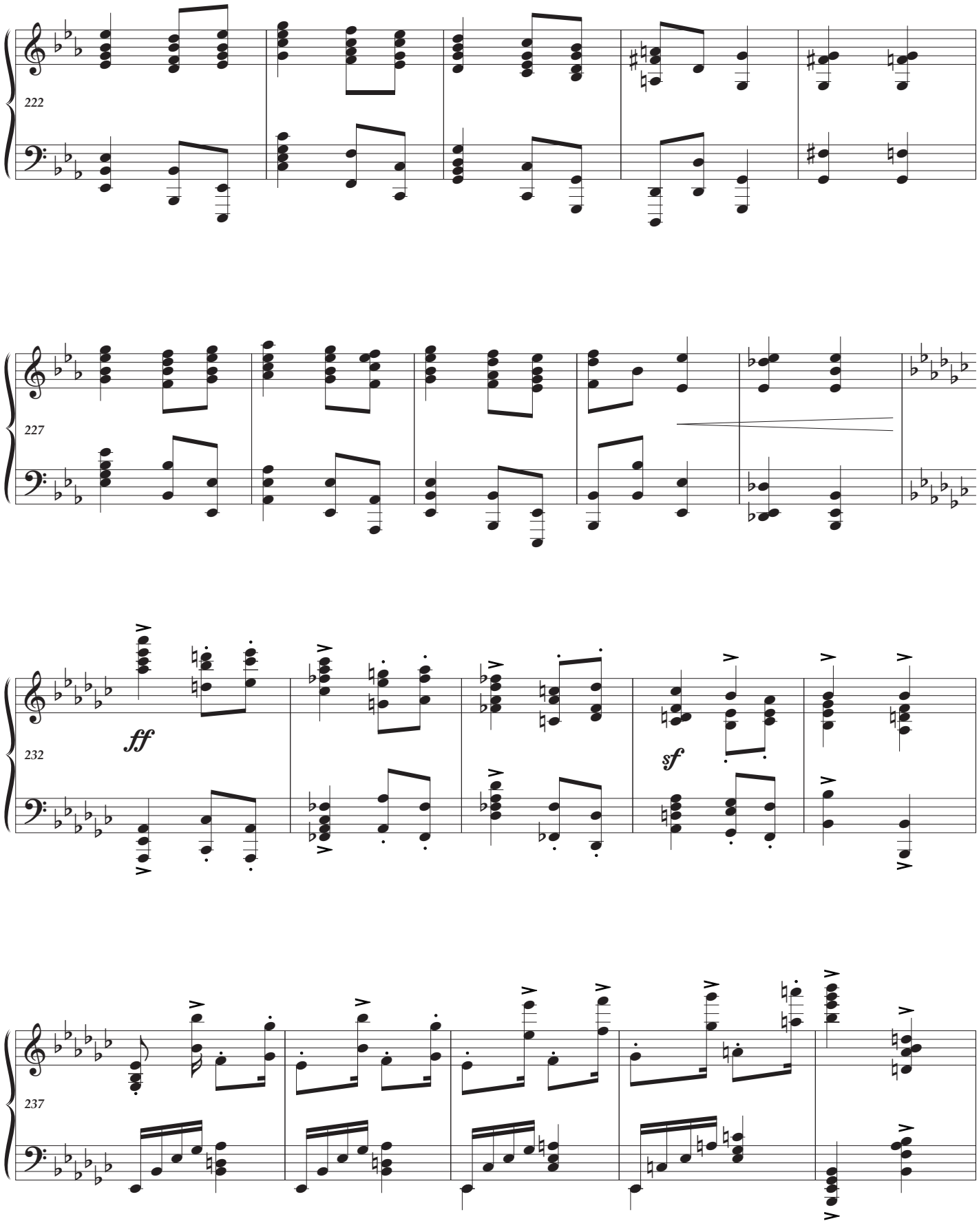

158
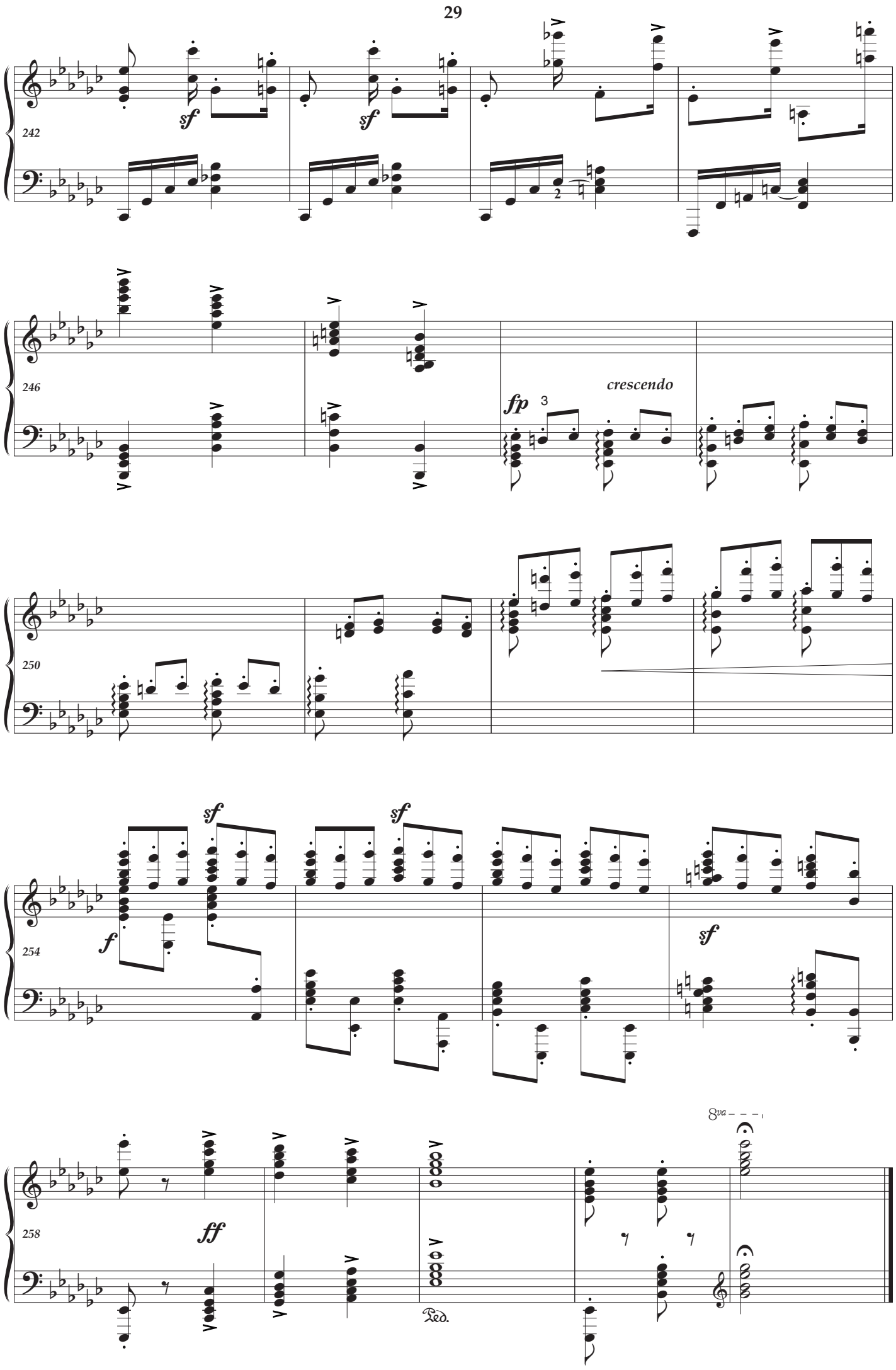

[mp] diminuendo
163

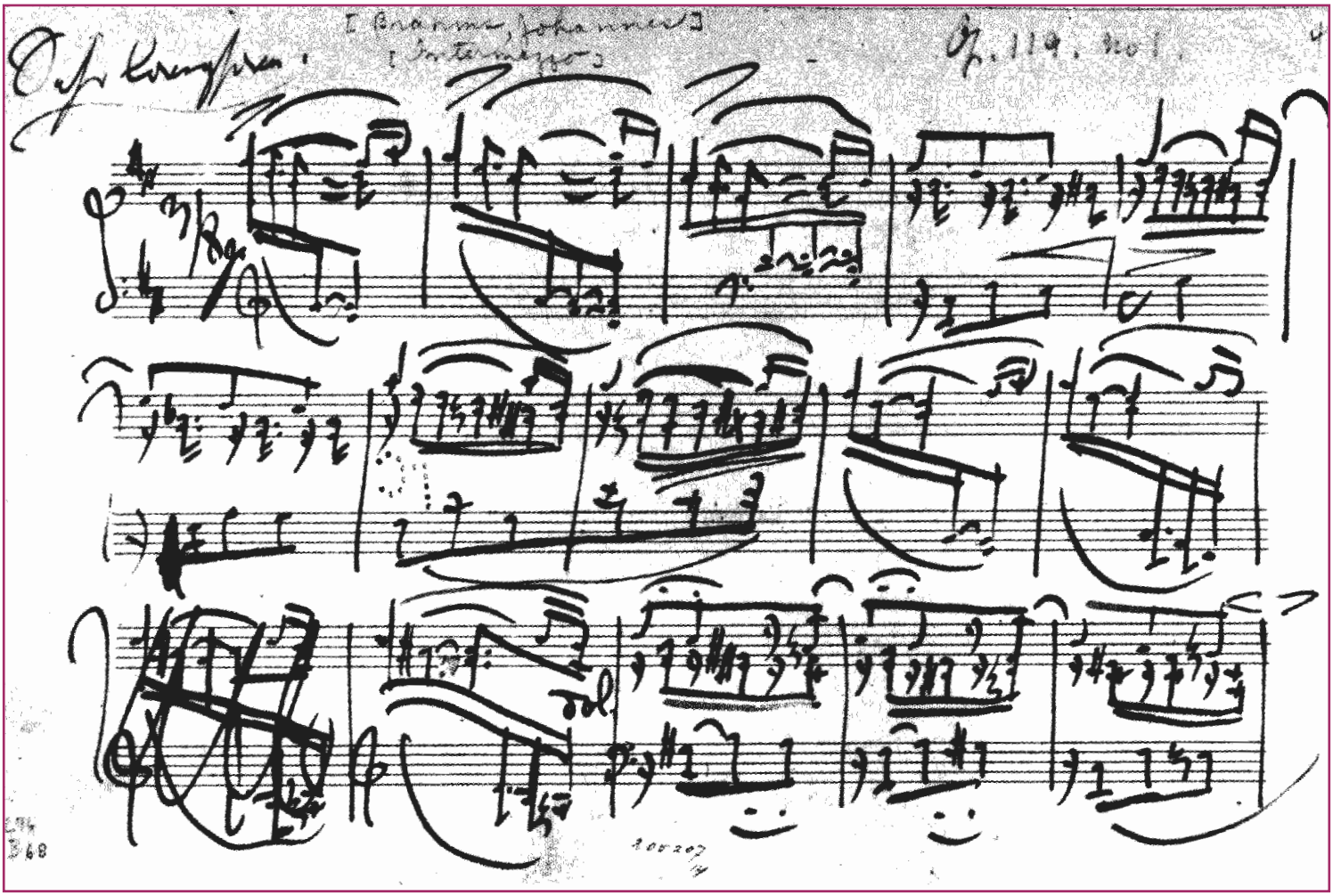

168
pp
173
178
183


187
fpp
pp
192
pp sempre, ma ben marcato
197
202
crescendo
f sempre più


8va
207
211
214
217
ff


222
227
232
ff
sf
237


242
sf
sf
246
fp
3
crescendo
250
sf
sf
254
f
sf
258
ff
8va
Ped.



Intermezzo N° 1 in B minor

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 *November 2026*

B R A H M S

4 K l a v i e r s t ü c k e opus 119

published November 2026



Please send comments and error reports to
Ray Alston : contact@pianopracticaleditions.com

iano Practical Editions
pianopracticaleditions.com