JOHN SYKES

THEME and VARIATIONS

in G minor

for Pianoforte

The JOHN SYKES PROJECT

MMXII

John Austin Sykes (1909 – 1962)

John Sykes was born in India in 1909 - in India because his father was in the Indian civil service. Back in England he won a music scholarship to Clifton College, Bristol, and whilst still a schoolboy gained his A.R.C.O. and F.R.C.O. In 1928 he went up to Oxford as organ scholar at Balliol. In those days, undergraduates were not able to read Music as a first degree, so Sykes read Modern History, and followed it up with a B.Mus. One contemporary source considered him to have been the most distinguished musical undergraduate of his time. He was president of the famous Oxford University Opera Club and active in the Music Club and Union. He was sufficiently important to be given a full-page spread in the undergraduate newspaper 'Isis' – which referred to his ability to 'make a piano do anything but swim'. He was a friend of the left-wing poet Randall Swingler, and also a contemporary of W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis, whom he knew, so it is perhaps not surprising that he was a fluent, though not distinguished, poet. After Oxford, he went to London, to the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition under Ralph Vaughan Williams, R. O. Morris and Gordon Jacob. In 1936 he was appointed to the staff of Kingswood School, and there he stayed, except for war service, until he died of cancer in the school Sanatorium in the summer term of 1962.

The John Sykes Project is an informal group of former pupils who are transcribing and publishing his music on the internet, and encouraging its performance.

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sykesproj@talktalk.net

Theme and Variations in G minor

The manuscript of this piece (in the John Sykes Archive at Kingswood School, Bath, kindly donated by the Randall Swingler archive) shows that it was composed in January 1941 – the dark days of the second World War. He started it whilst staying with his sister Christal in Worcester and finished it after term had started and he was back at Kingswood School (which was then in wartime exile in Uppingham, cheek by jowl with Uppingham School and sharing its facilities). Later that year he was start his war service as a conscientious objector, involved with such work as building sewers. Its provenance from the Swingler archive shows that Sykes must have shown it (at the least) to the Peppin twins[1], and probably to the other pianists and musicians (such as James Gibb and Alan Bush) who congregated at the Swinglers' London home and later at Pebmarsh.

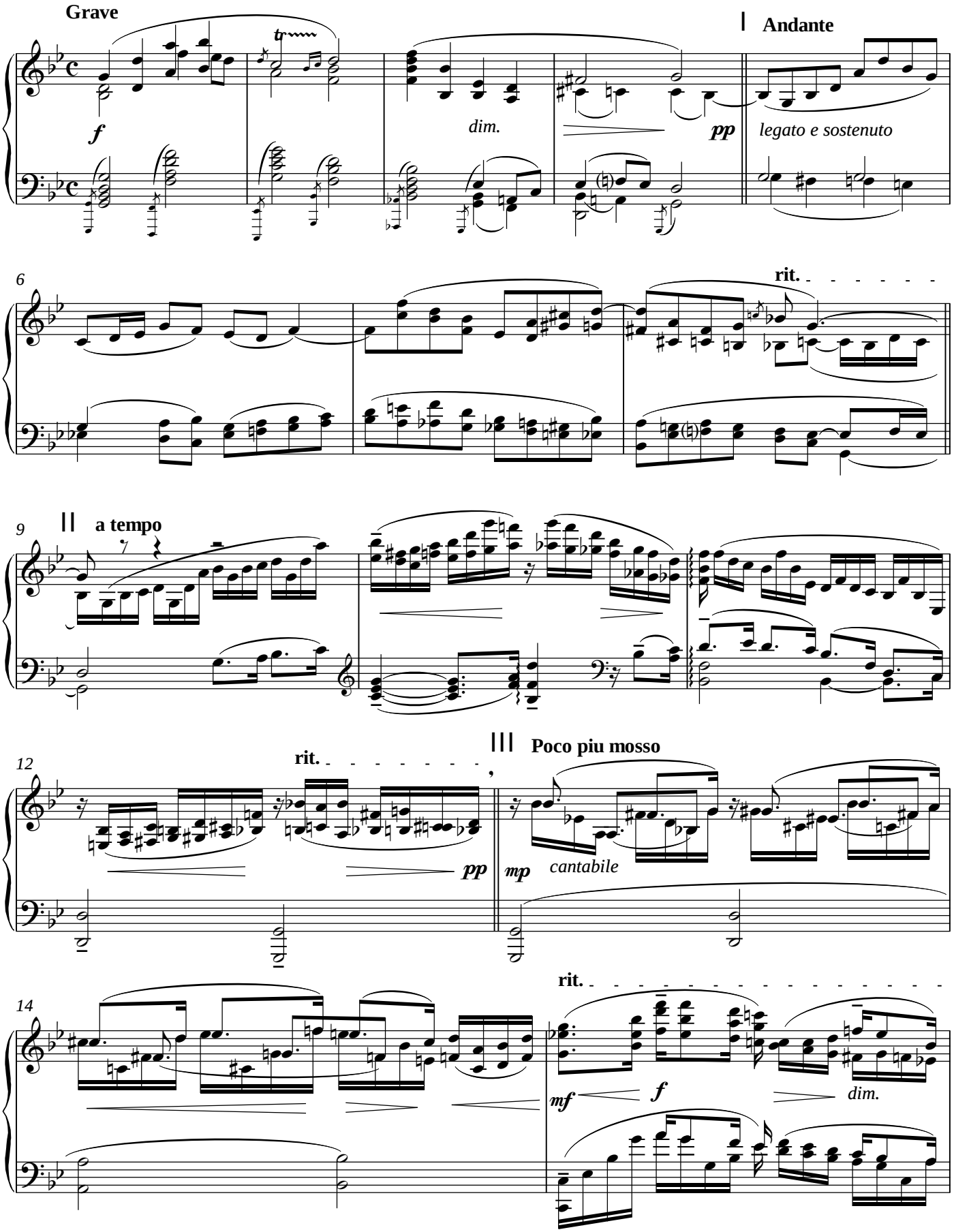
The music is obviously written by a virtuoso pianist, and requires a formidable technique in performance – someone who can "make a piano do anything but swim" [2]. The innocuous theme (a mere four bars long) allows great freedom of approach in its variations, of which there are fifteen. The last (labelled *Finale*) forms an exuberant peroration, being much longer than its predecessors, taking up about a quarter of the work.

[1] Geraldine and Mary Peppin were a concert pianist duo well known in the middle years of the twentieth century. Geraldine married the poet Randall Swingler, and later became a professor at the Guildhall School of Music. The Swinglers' home in 'Fitzrovia', and later in their remote Essex cottage near Pebmarsh, was a centre for left wing intellectuals such as Louis MacNeice, E. P. Thompson, Alan Bush and Alan Rawsthorne. Coincidentally, Randall Swingler was called up for military service at the end of 1941, more or less when Sykes' civilian service started.

[2] 'The Isis', Nov. 25, 1931, where he is that issue's "Isis Idol", and "Even his consumption of beer, which is as dexterous as his playing, is performed with something of the same dexterity."

Theme and Variations in G minor

John Sykes



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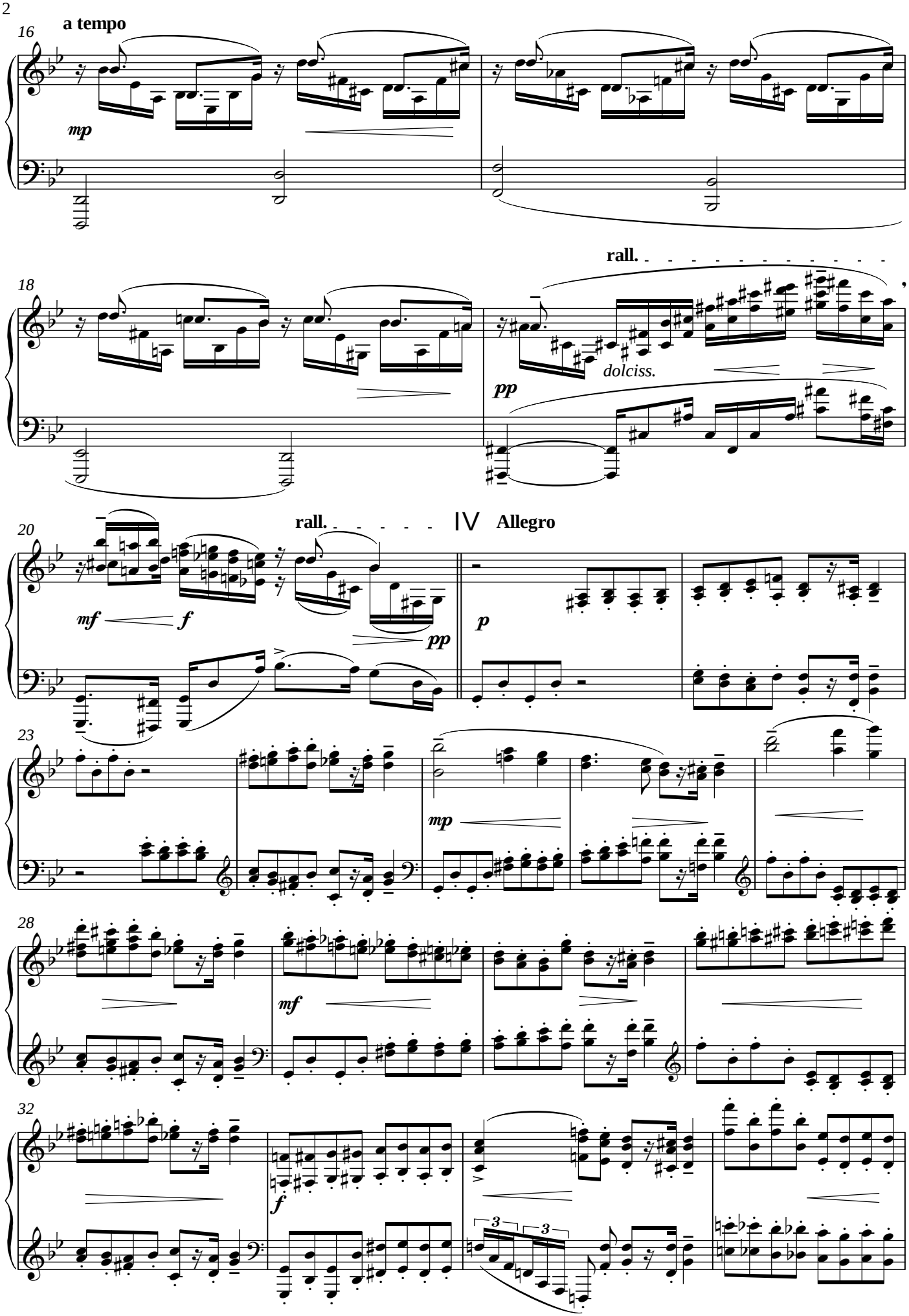

16
a tempo
mp
18
rall.
dolciss.
pp
20
rall.
IV Allegro
mf
f
pp
p
23
mp
28
mf
32
f
3
3

V **Moderato**

36

ff

p *legato e dolce*

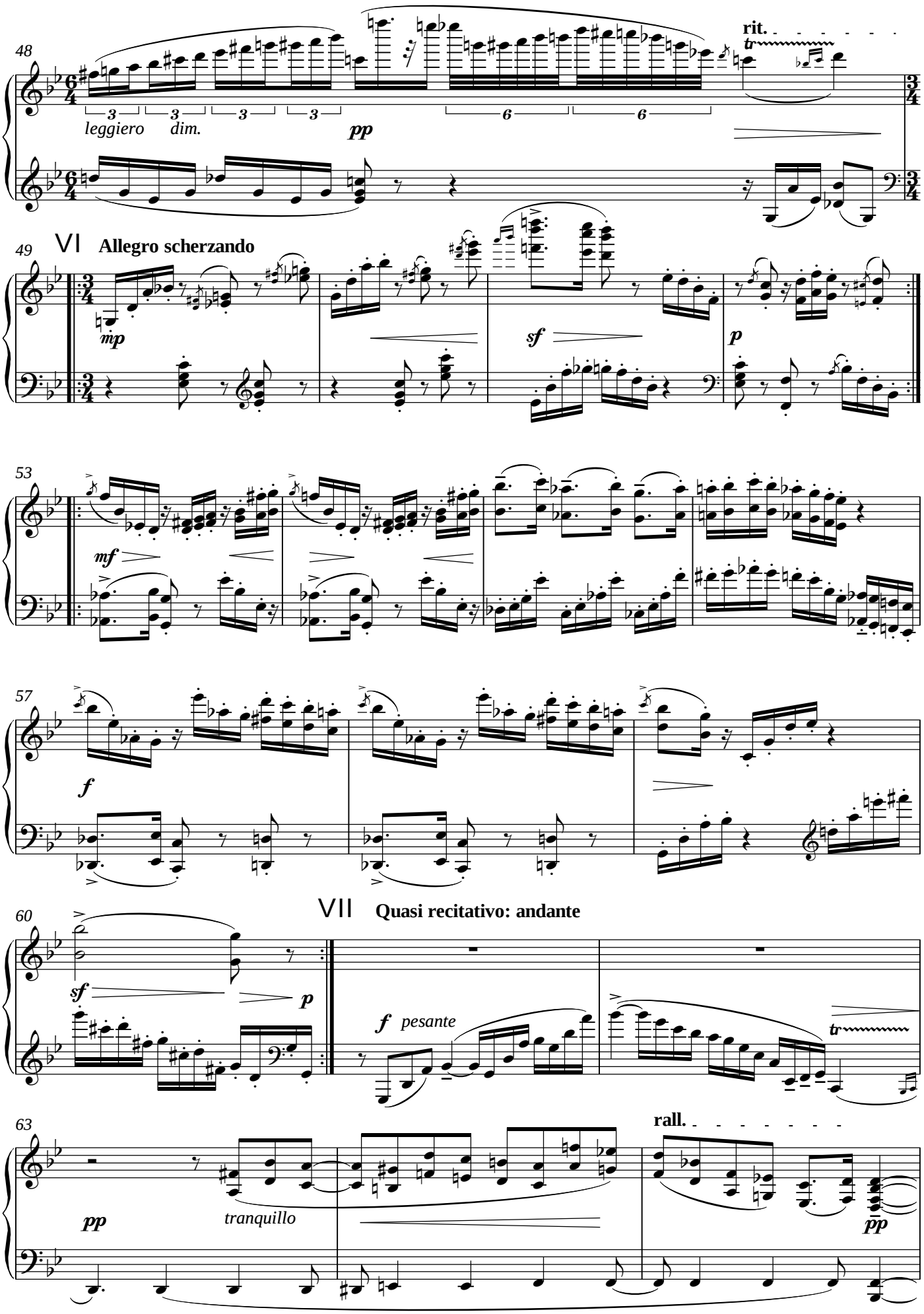
38

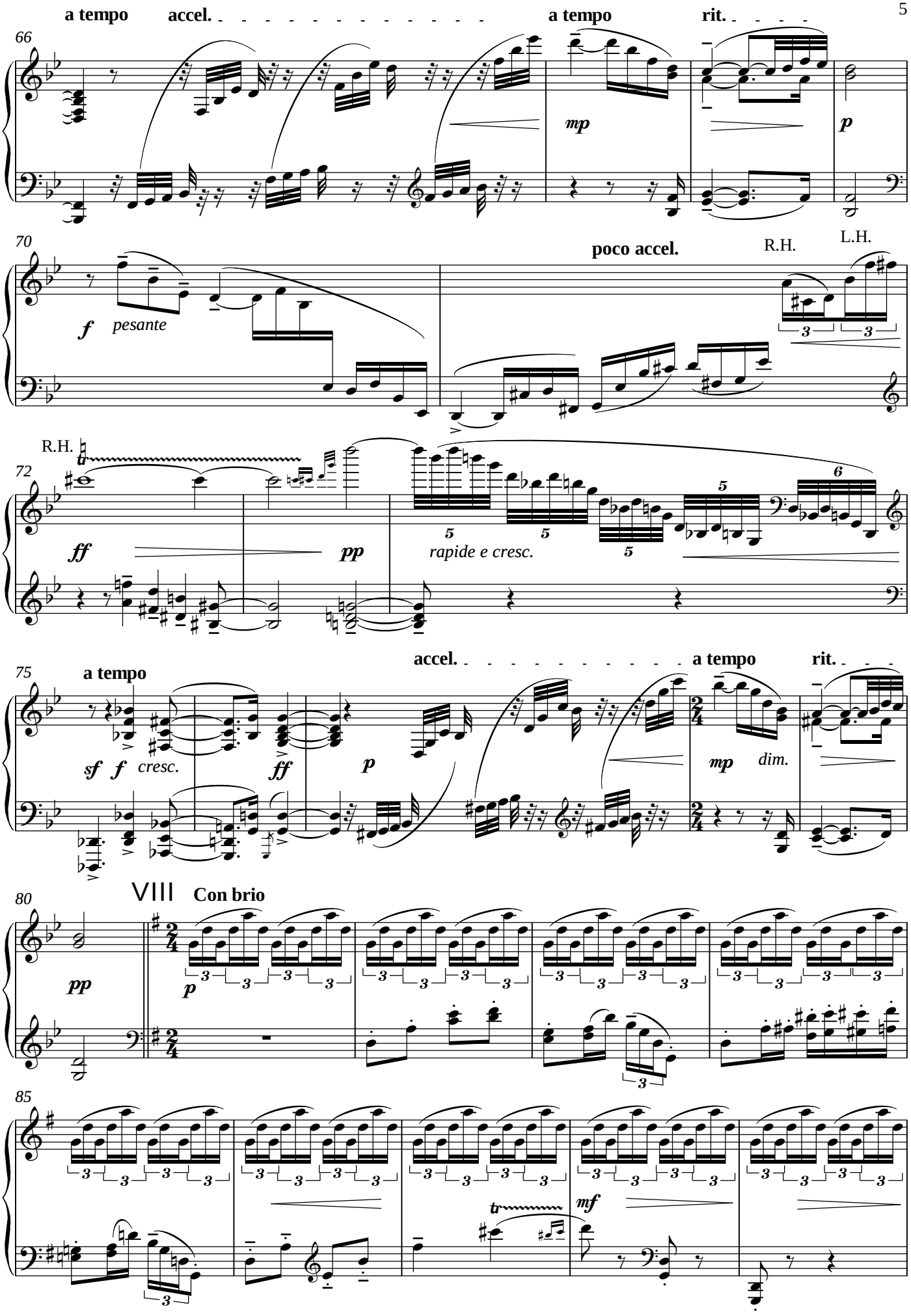
40

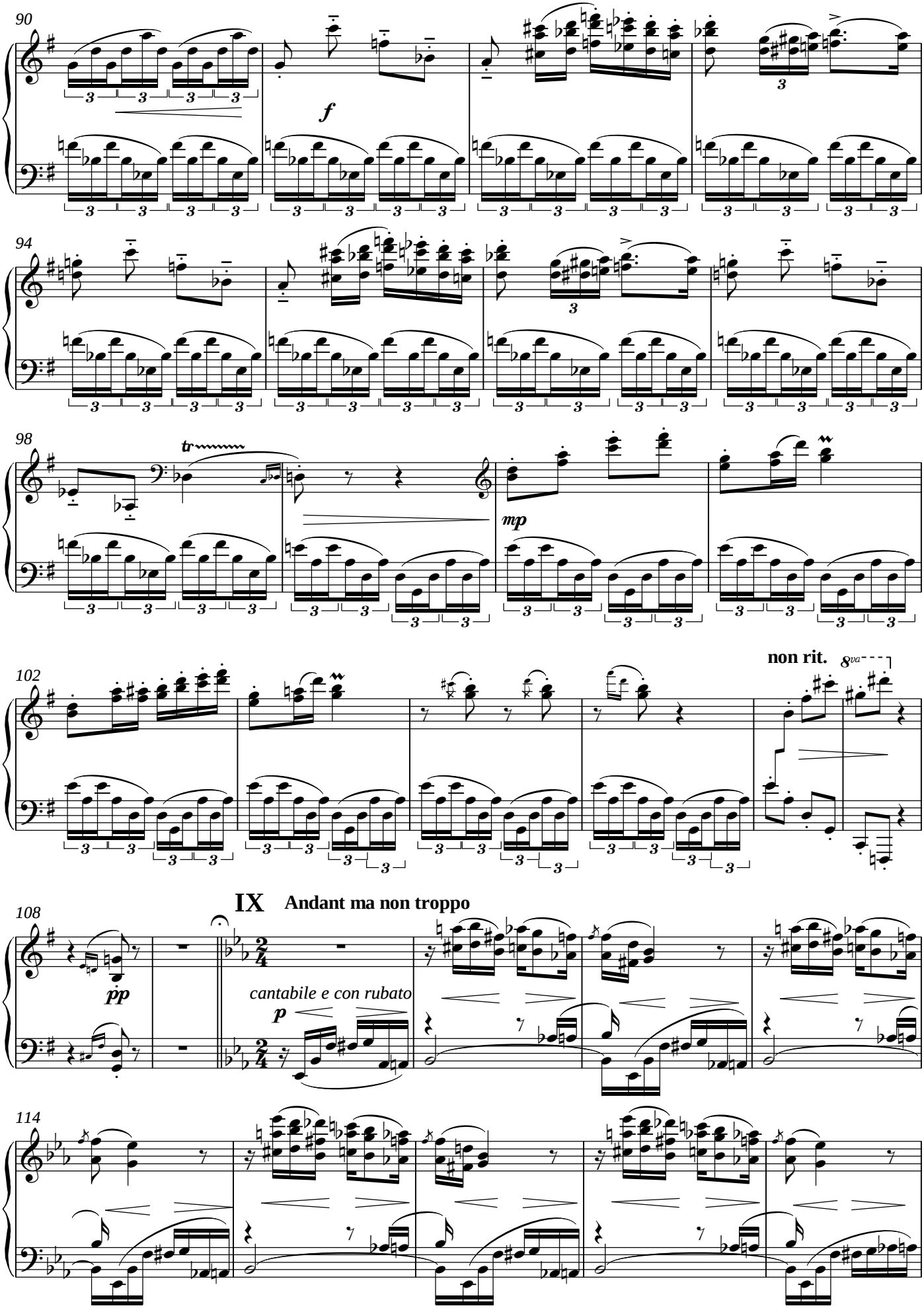
42

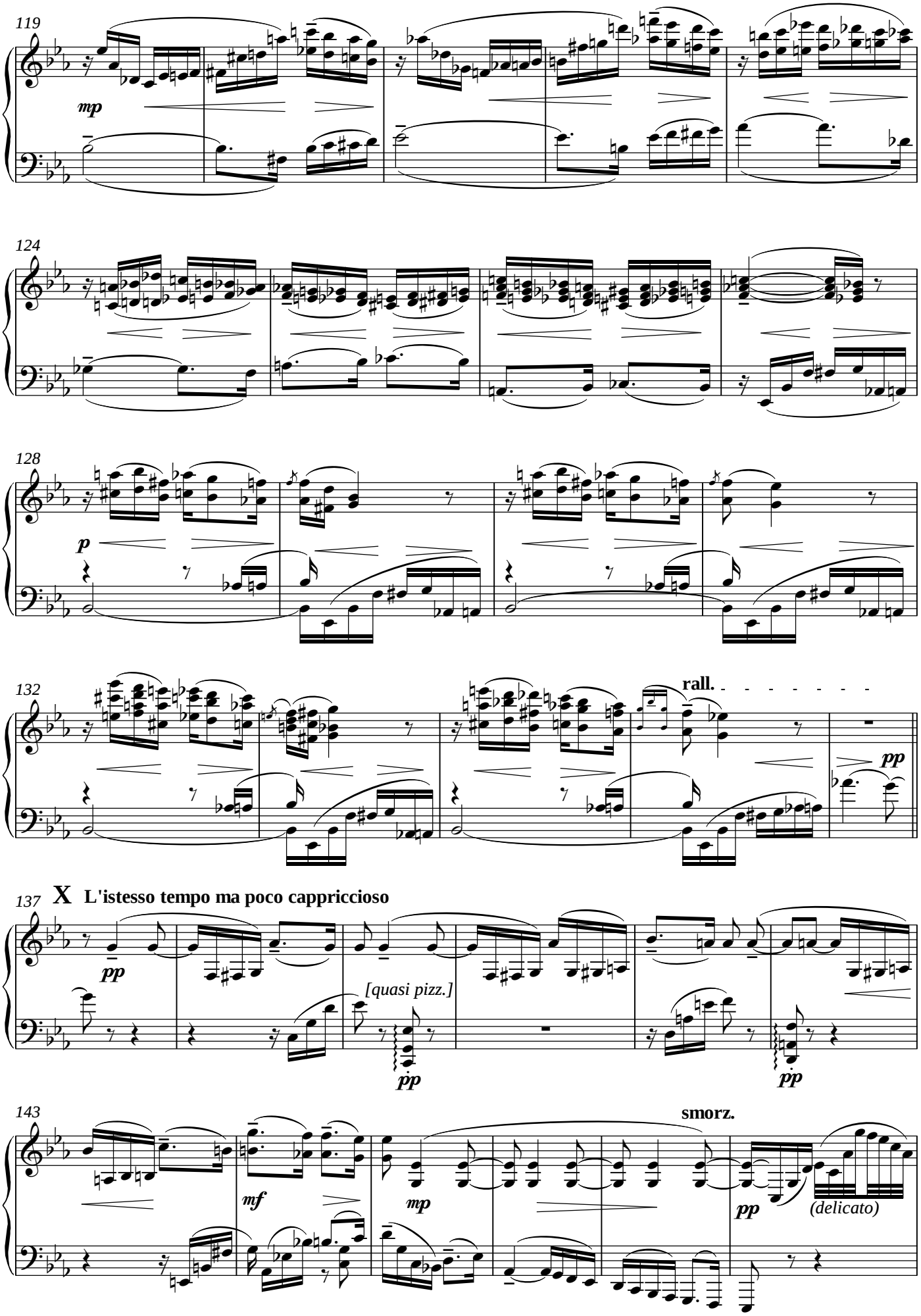
44

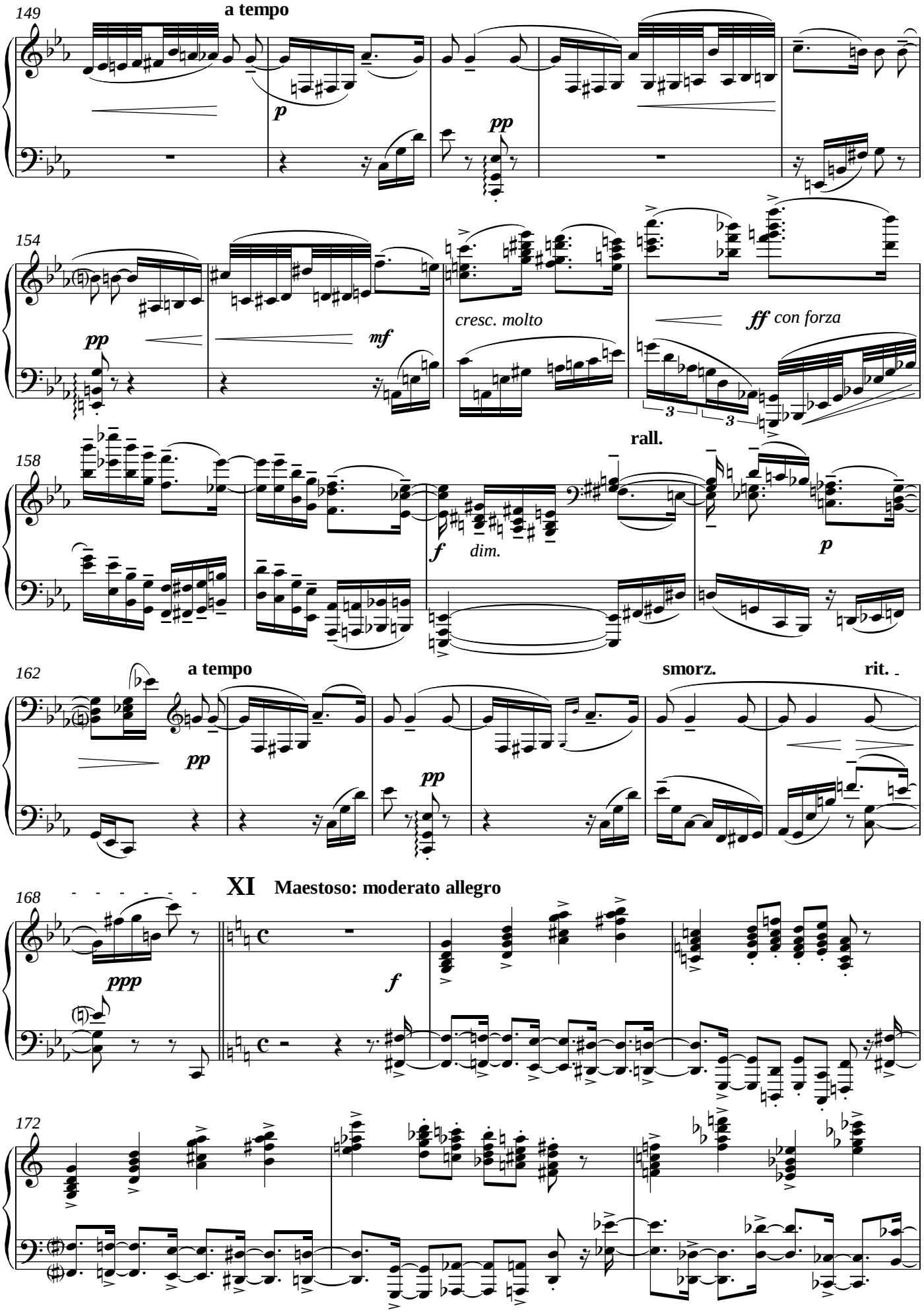
46

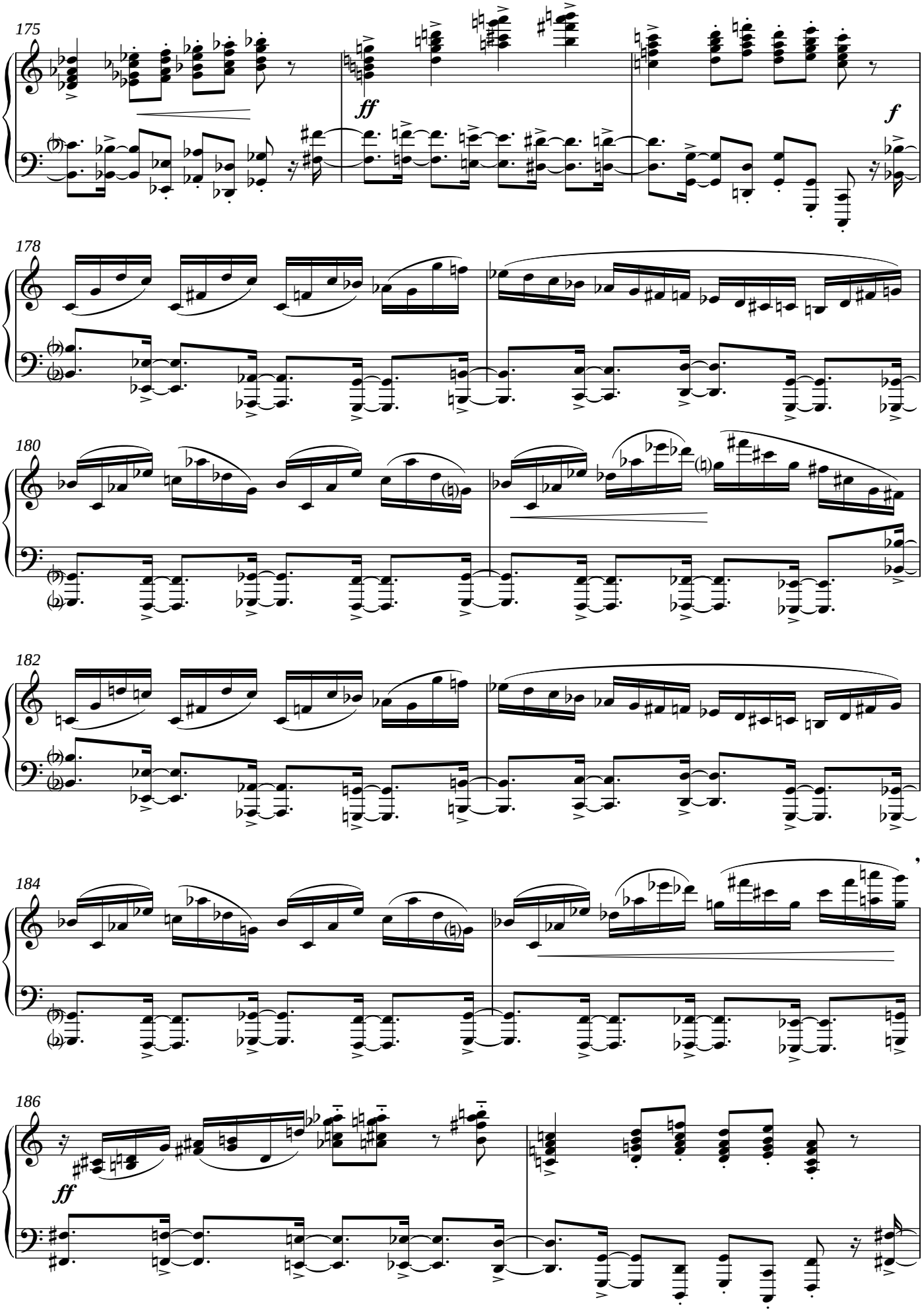

48
rit.
leggiero
dim.
pp
49
VI
Allegro scherzando
mp
sf
p
53
mf
57
f
60
VII
Quasi recitativo: andante
sf
p
f
pesante
63
rall.
pp
tranquillo
pp

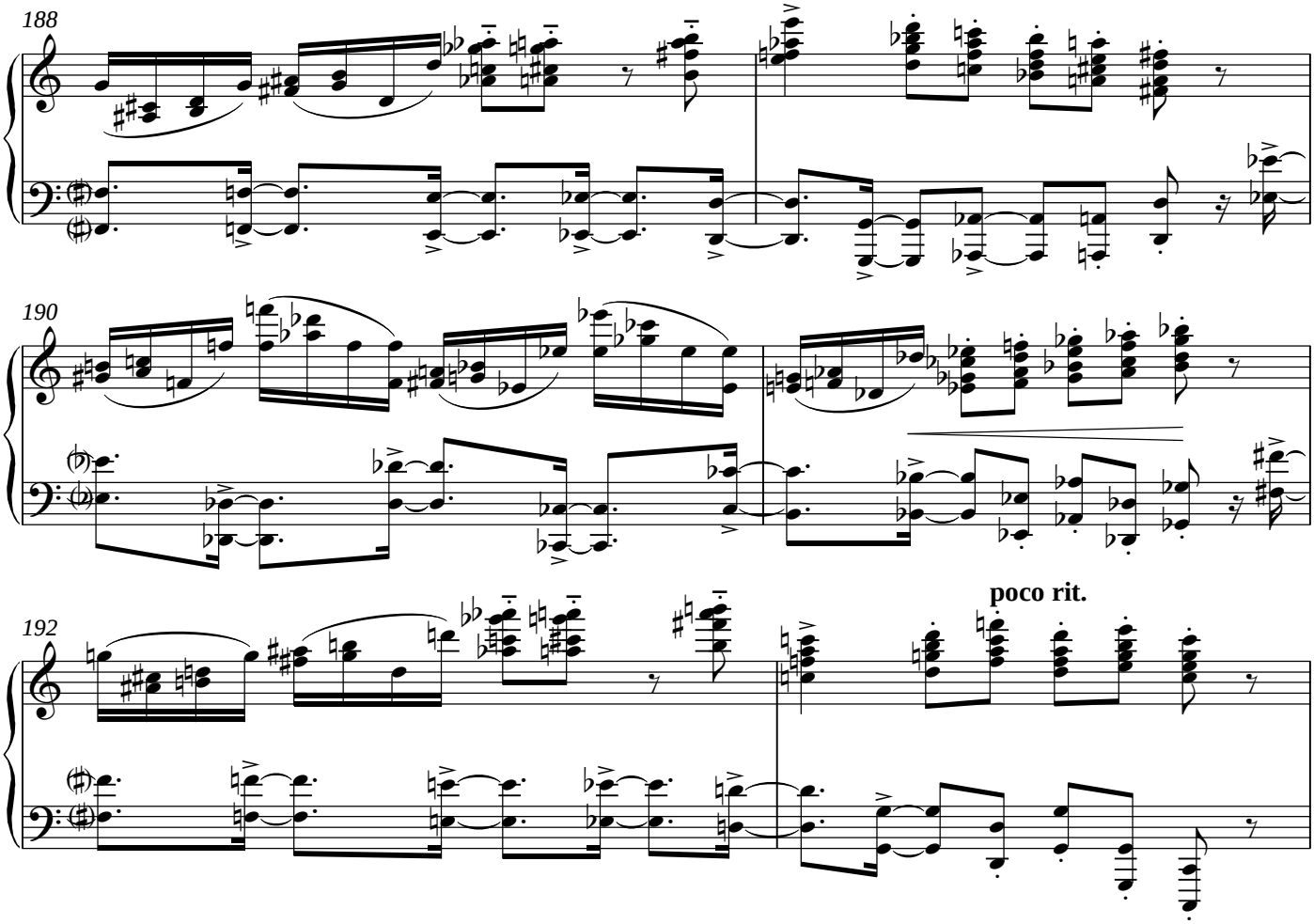

a tempo
accel.
a tempo
rit.
66
mp
p
70
poco accel.
R.H.
L.H.
f
pesante
3
3
R.H.
72
ff
pp
rapide e cresc.
5
5
5
6
accel.
a tempo
rit.
75
a tempo
sf
f
cresc.
ff
p
mp
dim.
80
VIII
Con brio
pp
p
3
85
mf
tr

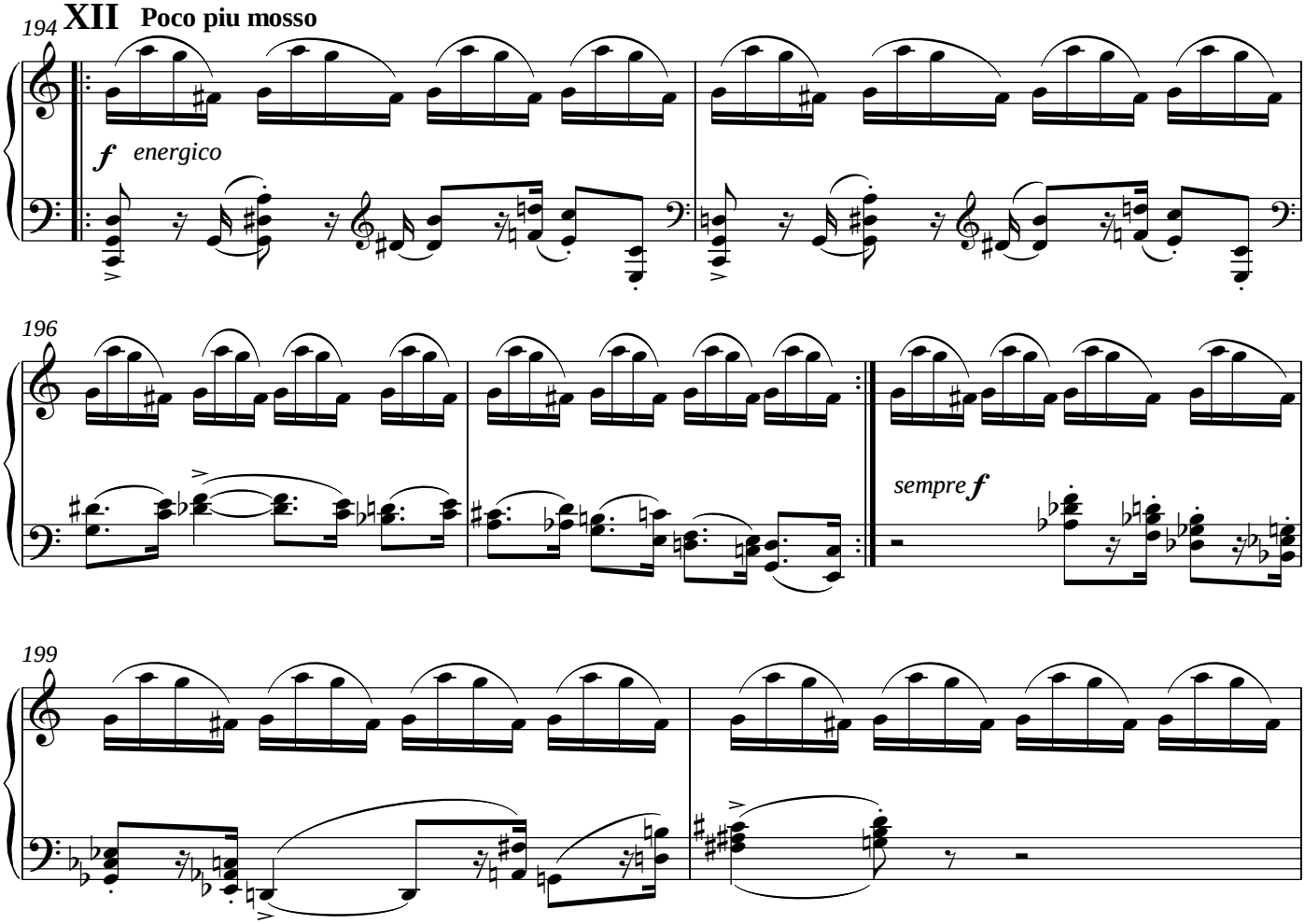

90
f
94
98
tr
mp
non rit.
8va
102
IX
Andant ma non troppo
108
pp
cantabile e con rubato
p
114

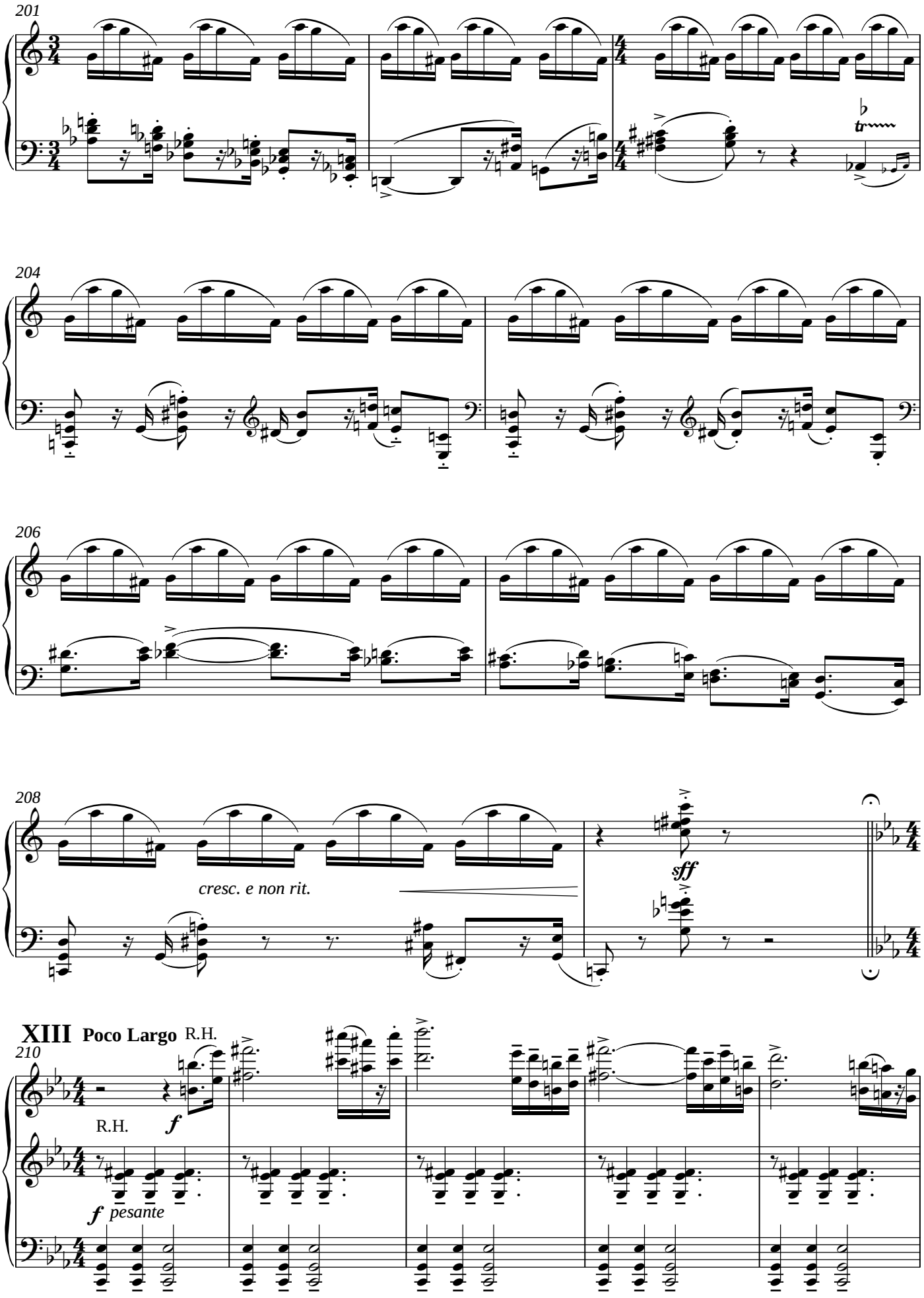

119
mp
124
128
p
132
rall.
pp
137
X L'istesso tempo ma poco cappriccioso
pp
[quasi pizz.]
pp
pp
143
smorz.
mf
mp
pp
(delicato)

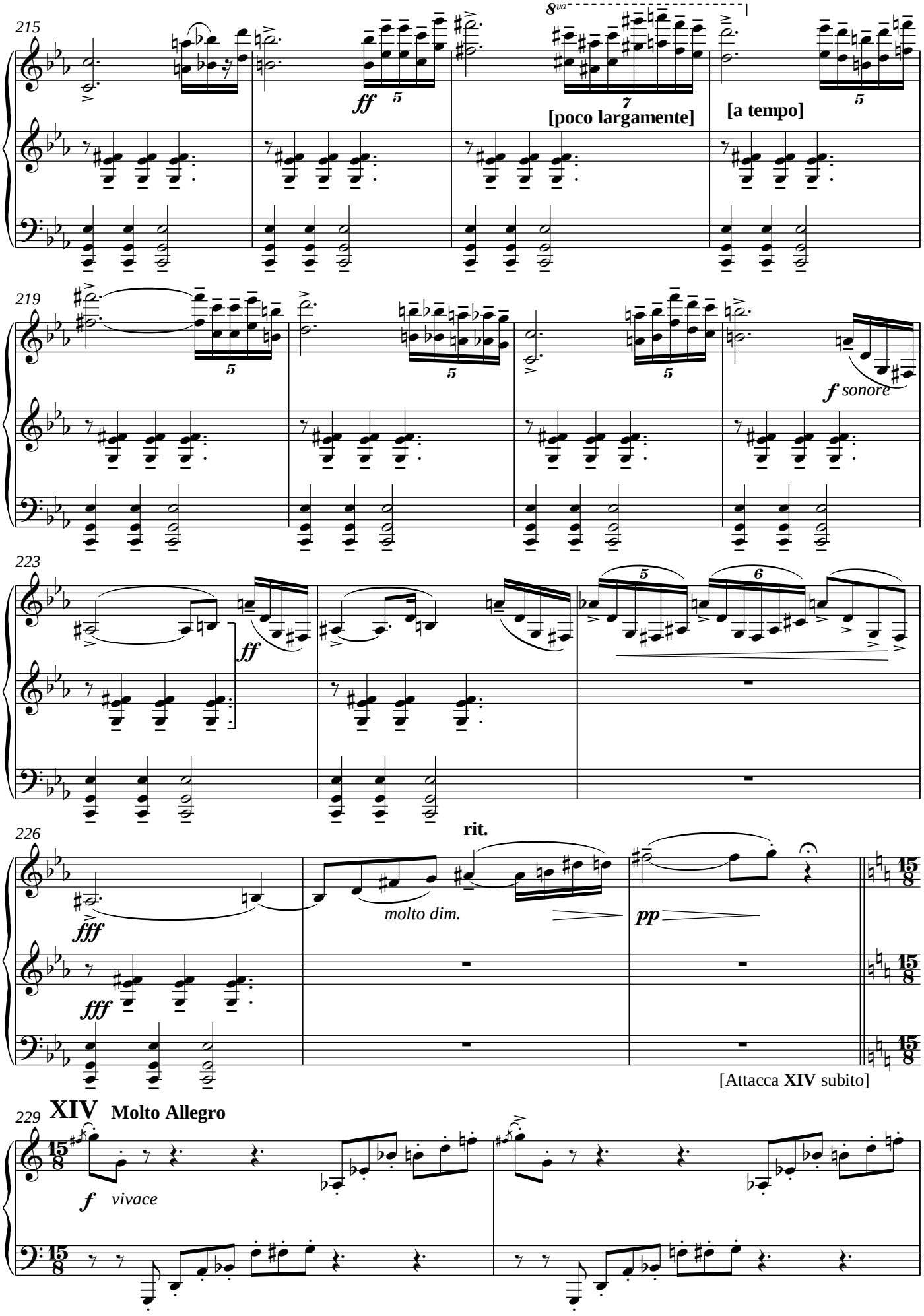

149
a tempo
p
pp
154
pp
mf
cresc. molto
ff con forza
3
3
158
rall.
f
dim.
p
162
a tempo
pp
pp
smorz.
rit.
168
XI Maestoso: moderato allegro
ppp
f
172

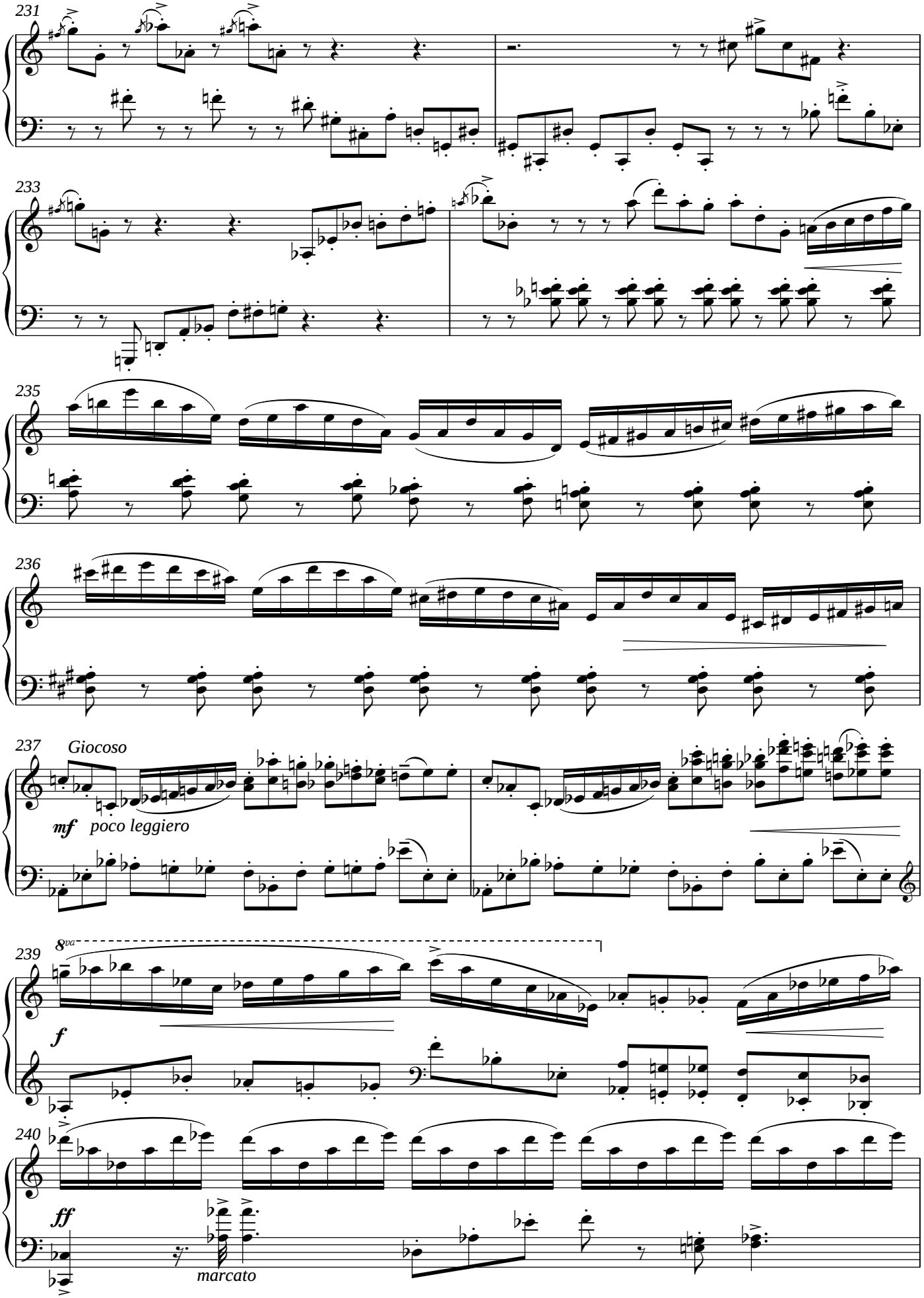

175
ff
f
178
180
182
184
186
ff


188
190
192
poco rit.


194
XII Poco piu mosso
f energico
196
sempre f
199


201
204
206
208
cresc. e non rit.
sff
XIII Poco Largo R.H.
210
R.H.
f
f pesante


215
8va
ff
[poco largamente]
[a tempo]
219
f sonore
223
ff
226
rit.
fff
molto dim.
pp
[Attacca XIV subito]
229
XIV Molto Allegro
f vivace


231
233
235
236
237
Giocoso
mf
poco leggiero
239
8va
f
240
ff
marcato

241

242

sff

243

8va

f

ff

245

non rit.

feroce

sff

Finale

248 **XV** **Alla marcia: non troppo allegro**

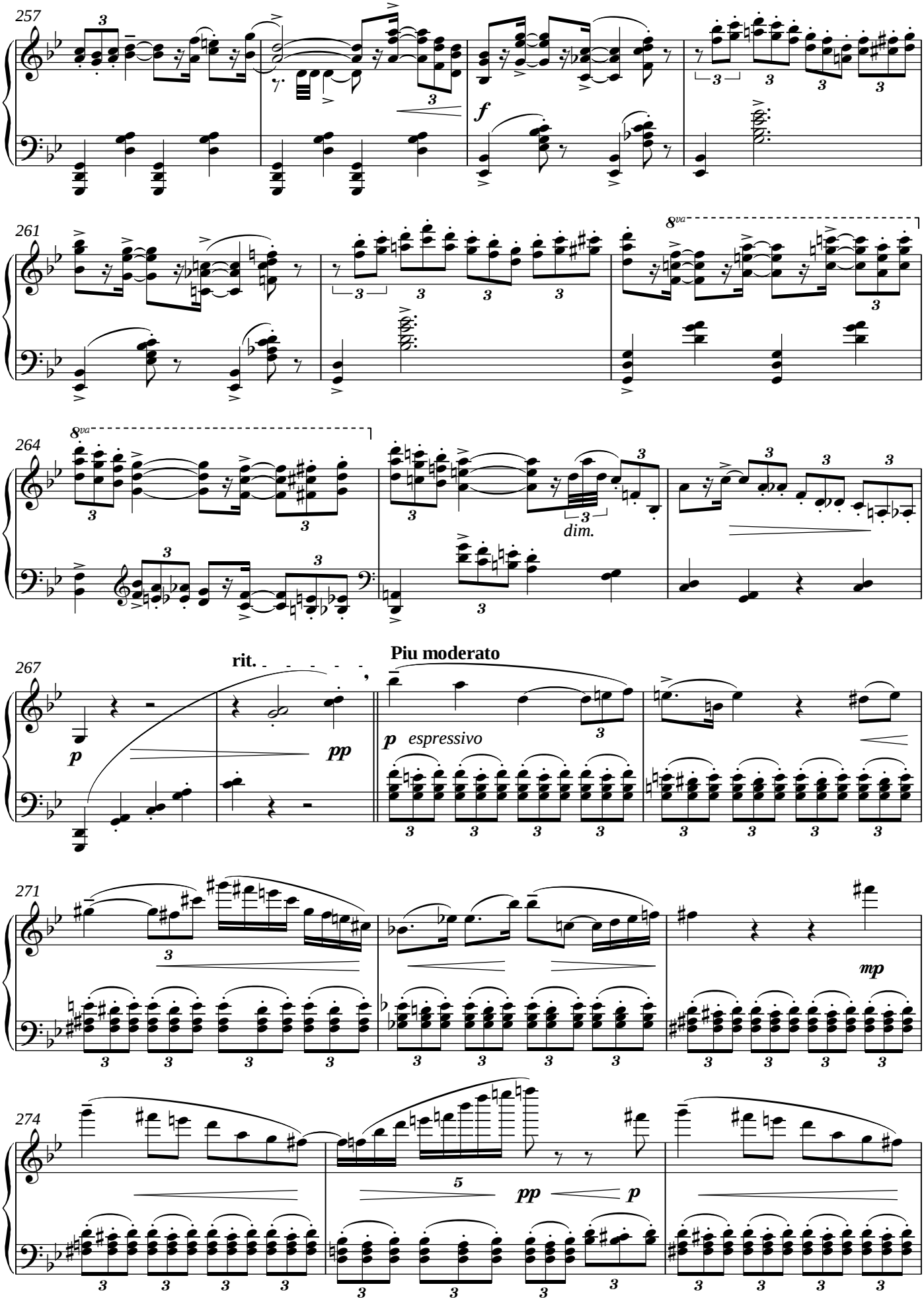
mp

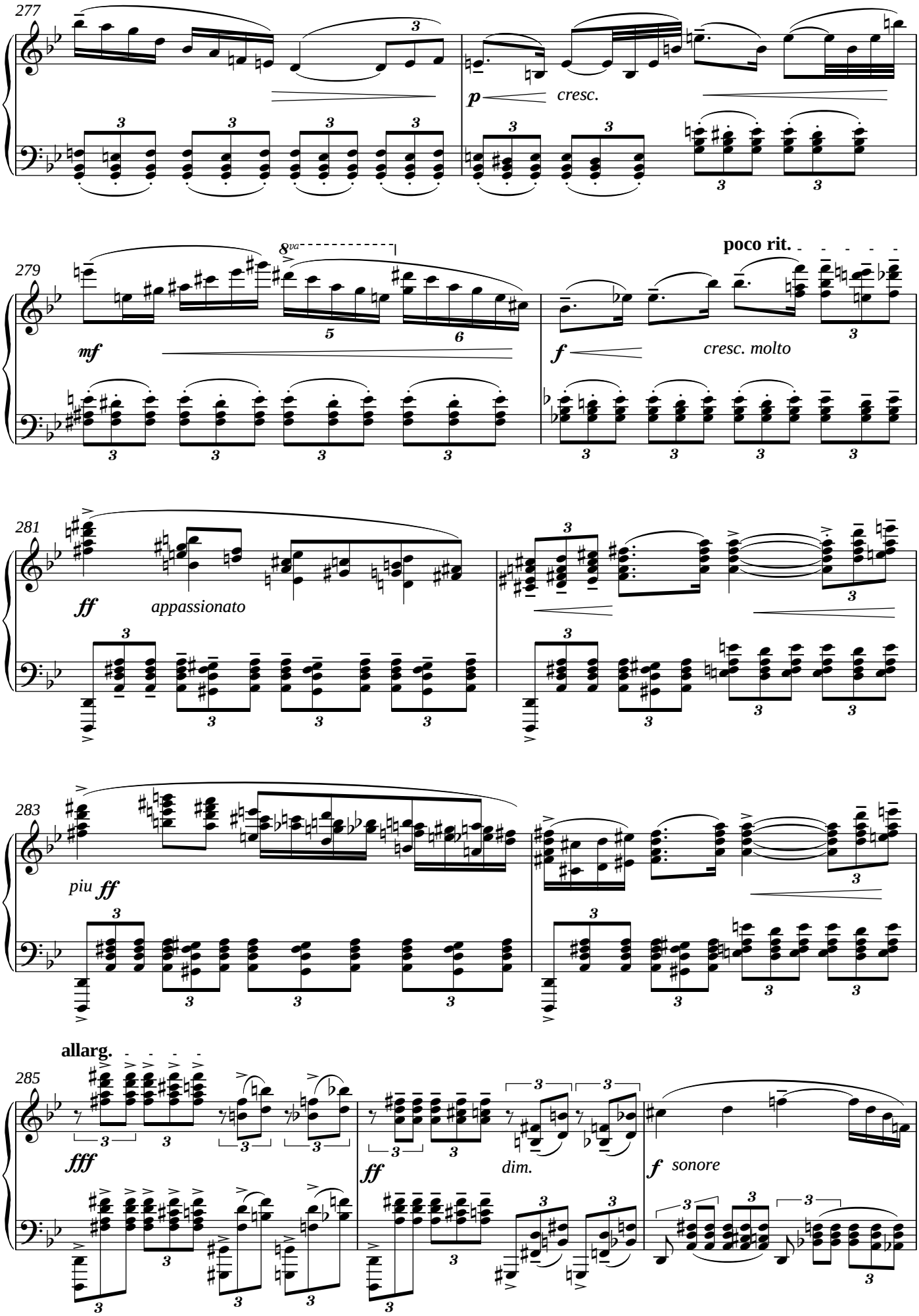
poco staccato

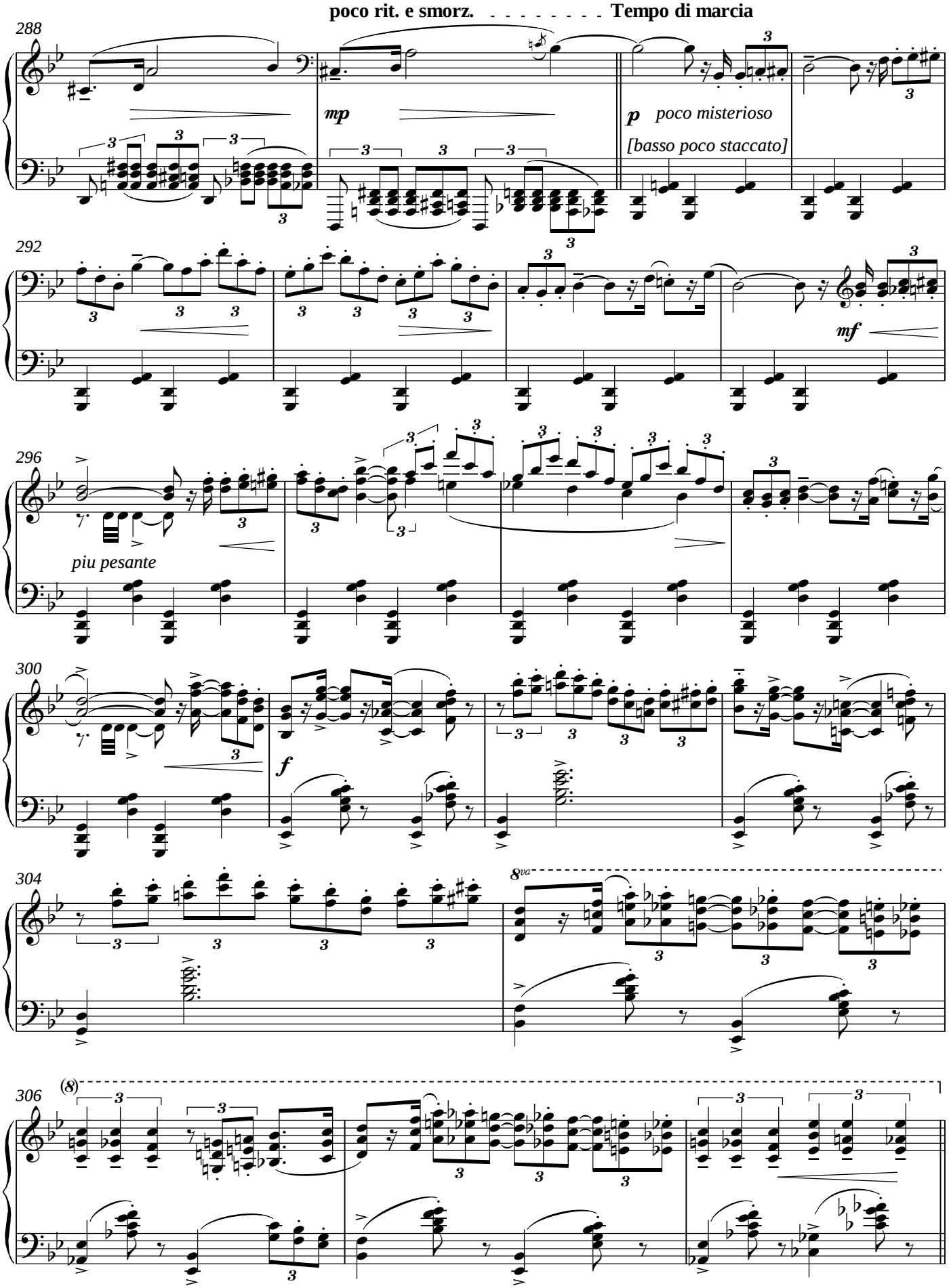
253

mf

piu pesante


257
f
261
8va
264
8va
dim.
267
rit.
Piu moderato
p
pp
p espressivo
271
mp
274
5
pp
p


277
p
cresc.
279
8va
poco rit.
mf
f
cresc. molto
281
ff
appassionato
283
piu ff
allarg.
285
fff
ff
dim.
f
sonore


poco rit. e smorz.
Tempo di marcia
288
mp
p
poco misterioso
[basso poco staccato]
292
mf
296
piu pesante
300
f
304
8va
306
(8)

piu allegro

309

ff vivo

f

[legato]

312

animato

[marcato]

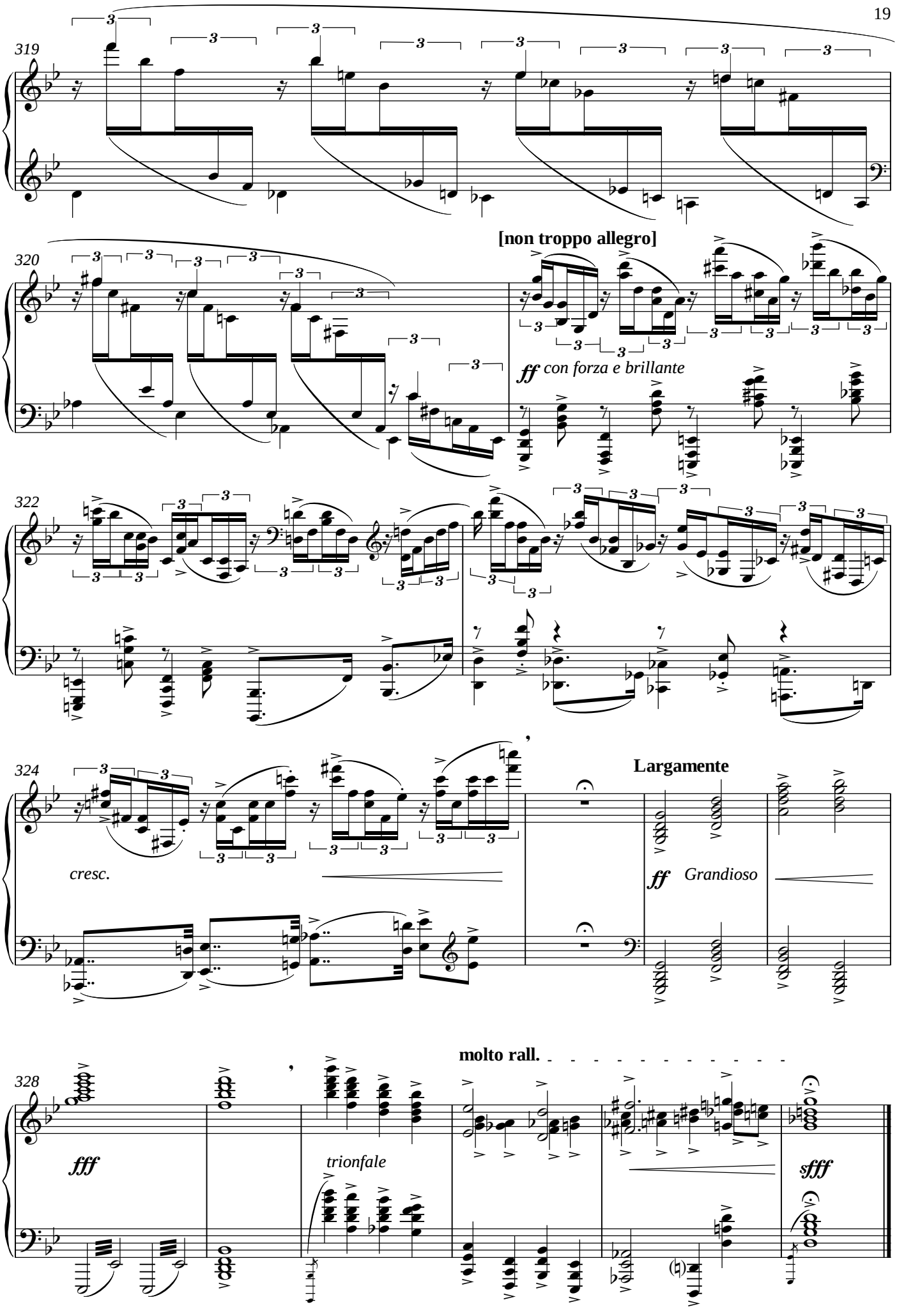
315

sempre animato

317

f

318


319
320
[non troppo allegro]
ff con forza e brillante
322
324
cresc.
Largamente
ff Grandioso
molto rall.
328
fff
trionfale
sfff