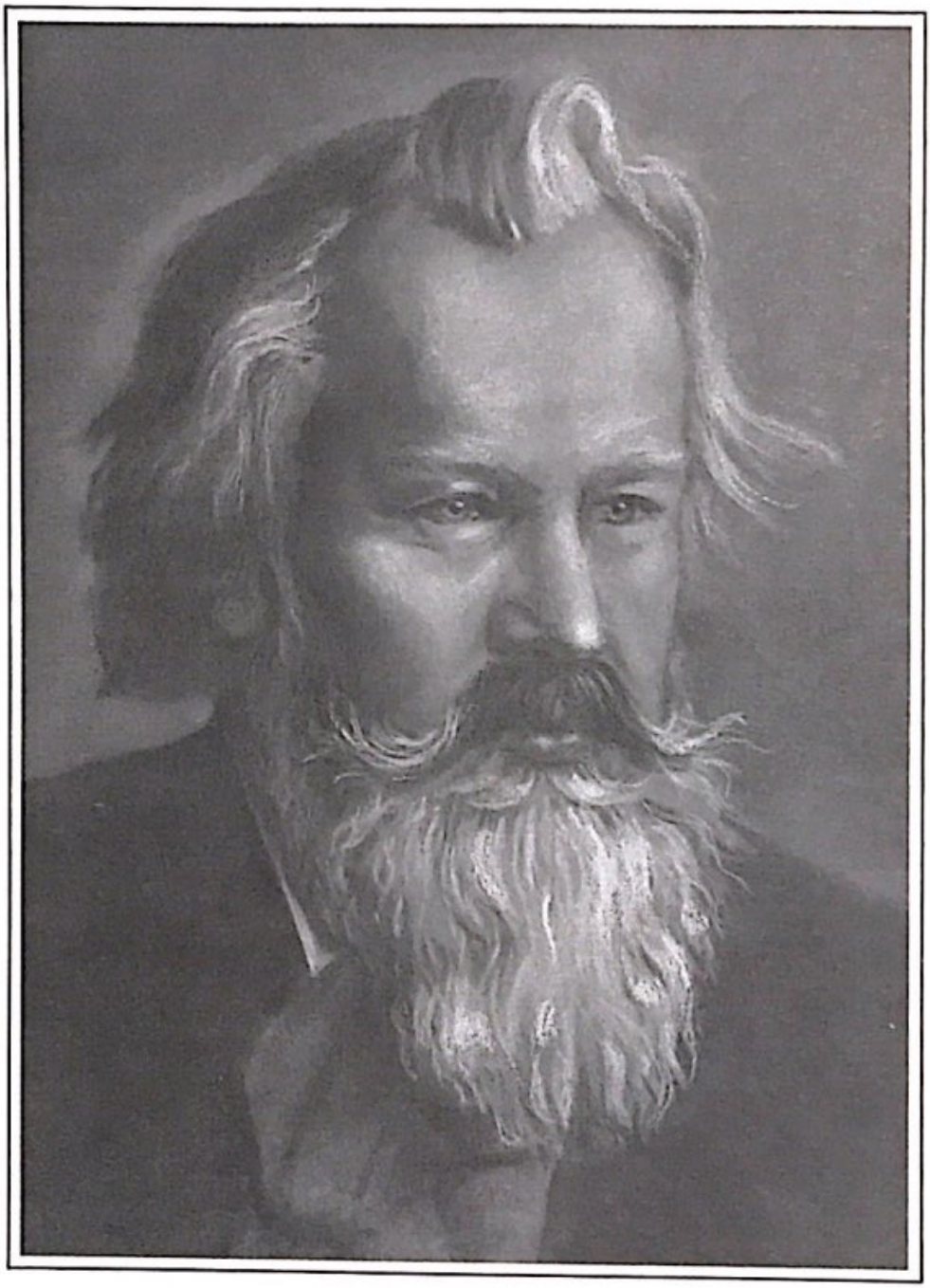
AT THE PIANO WITH
BRAHMS

EDITED BY
MAURICE HINSON



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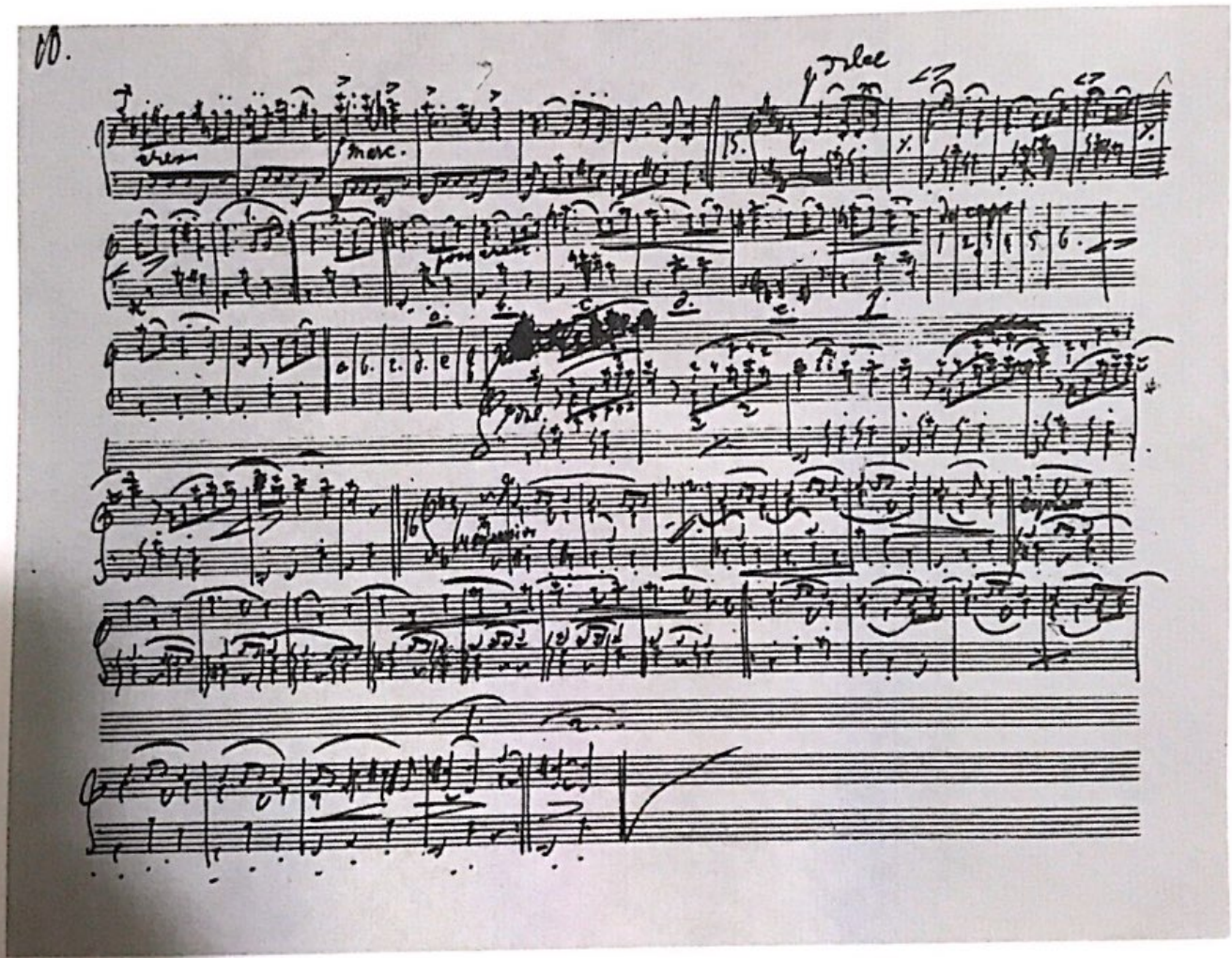
One ought never to forget that by actually perfecting one piece, one gains and learns more than by commencing or half-finishing a dozen."

Johannes Brahms



Autograph facsimile showing portion of *Waltzes* Op. 39, including the A-major version of No. 15.

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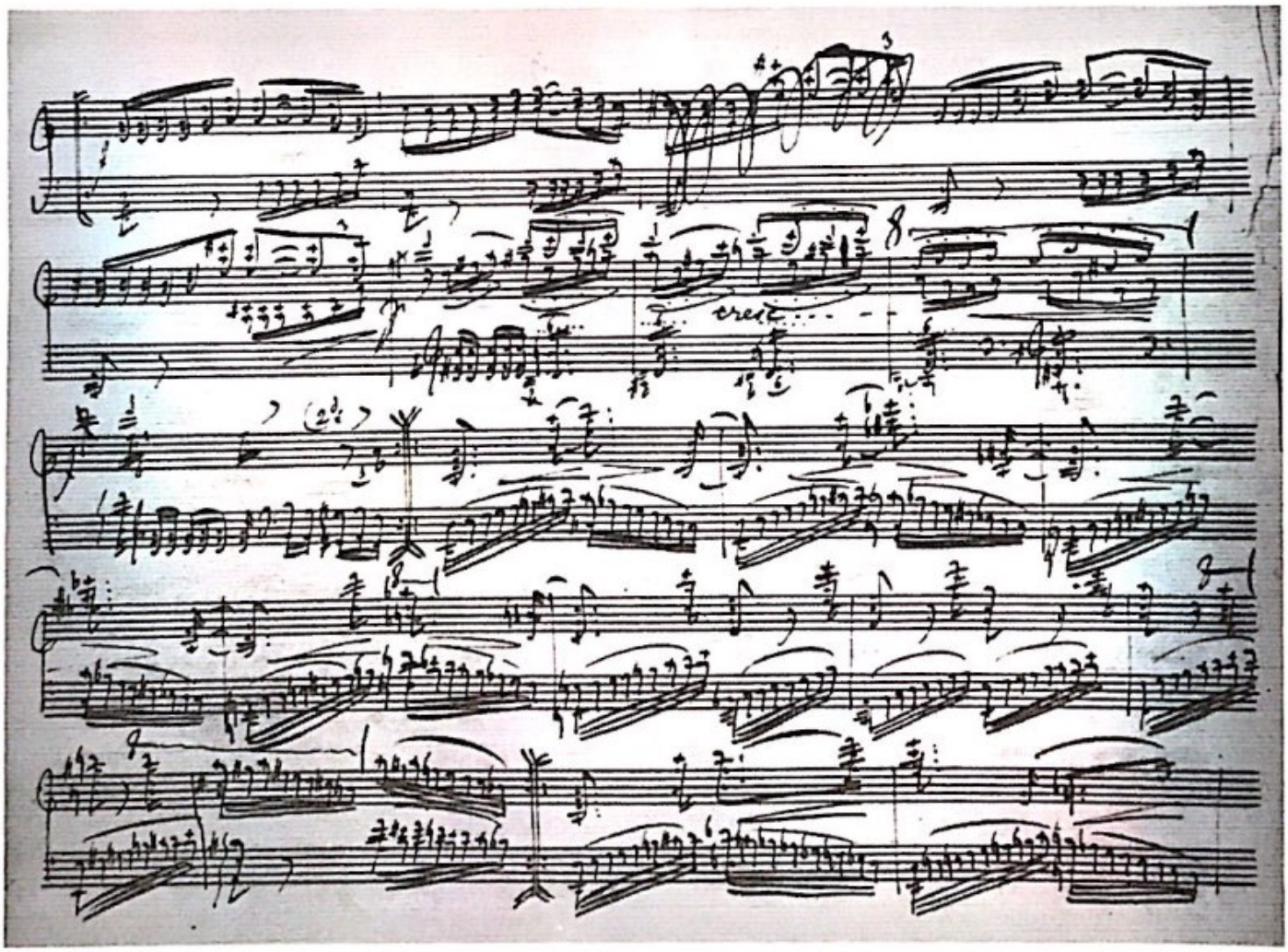
his final article, which had a profound effect upon the musical world, was entitled *Neue Bahnen* ("New Paths") and presented the 25-year-old Brahms. It appeared in Leipzig on October 23, 1853 in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* as follows:

> Years have passed – almost as many as I once devoted to the editing of these pages – 10 indeed, since I have made myself heard in this place so rich in memories. Despite intense productive work I often felt impelled to continue. Many new and significant talents have arisen; a new power in music seems to announce itself; the intimation has been proved true by many aspiring artists of the last years, even though their work may be known only in comparatively limited circles. To me, who followed the progress of these chosen ones with the greatest sympathy, it seemed that under these circumstances there inevitably must appear a musician called to give expression to his times in ideal fashion; a musician who would reveal his mastery not in a gradual evolution, but like Athene would spring fully armed from Zeus' head. And such a one *has* appeared; a young man over whose cradle Graces and Heroes have stood watch. His name is *Johannes Brahms*, and he comes from Hamburg, where he has been working in quiet obscurity, though instructed in the most difficult statutes of his art by an excellent and enthusiastically devoted teacher. A well-known and honored master recently recommended him to me. Even outwardly he bore the marks proclaiming: "This is a chosen one." Sitting at the piano he began to disclose wonderful regions to us. We were drawn into even more enchanting spheres. Besides, he is a player of genius who can make of the piano an orchestra of lamenting and loudly jubilant voices. There were sonatas, veiled symphonies rather; songs the poetry of which would be understood even without words, although a profound vocal melody runs through them all; single piano pieces, some of them turbulent in spirit while graceful in form; again, sonatas for violin and piano, string quartets, every work so different from the others that it seemed to stream from its own individual source. And then it was as though, rushing like a torrent, they were all united by him into a single waterfall the cascades of which were overarched by a peaceful rainbow, while butterflies played about its borders and the voices of nightingales obliged.



Autograph facsimile, Variation II and first two measures of Variation III from *Theme and Variations in D minor*, Op. 18.

Brahms as Composer

Compared to his contemporaries among the great composers of the 19th century, Brahms led a relatively uneventful life. Although born in Hamburg, Germany, he spent most of his adult life in Vienna (from 1862). As a young man he made something of a reputation as a pianist, and later as a conductor of choruses in Vienna. But Brahms devoted his main energies to composing.

As a composer, Brahms was a follower of Beethoven, at least with respect to his symphonies, concertos, and chamber music. In these forms he applied a newer harmonic vocabulary to classic models. In his later piano music, he was more influenced by the Romantic composers, especially Schumann.

Robert and Clara Schumann were doubtless the greatest single influence in Brahms' life. Brahms became practically a member of the Schumann family and his sentiments toward Clara Schumann amounted to something more than mere affection.

Before he was 30, Brahms had identified himself with the anti-Wagner group. With the violinist Joachim and others, he signed and published an open letter (1860) attacking the "New German School of the Future," the school of Wagner and Liszt. Brahms' opposition to the Wagner school was strongly supported by the Viennese critic and aesthetician Eduard Hanslick, who in his important book *Concerning Beauty in Music* (1854) considered music as a phenomenon complete in itself and obeying its own laws. Hanslick said, "Music is form moving in sounds," thus opposing the programmatic and the poetic-intuitive concepts of music.

Much of Brahms' early keyboard writing plays like orchestral transcriptions rather than true piano music. Such excesses reveal unbounded creative energy, yet Brahms, being mercilessly self-critical, took them as a warning of the risk into which his powerful temperament could lead him—a clear instance being the overstraining of resources in the original version of his Piano Trio, Op. 8. From these he instinctively withdrew, seeking the reassurance of great technical mastery through a period of renewed contrapuntal study and variation writing. Variation is probably the most important process of development in Brahms' compositions, both large and small. However, in a letter of June 1856 to his friend, the eminent violinist Joseph Joachim, he wrote that he was moving toward a purer, more austere form of variation, and the sets on themes by Handel, Op. 24 and Paganini, Op. 35 prove that his tenacity was rewarded with a means of expression far more refined and flexible than hitherto available.

As the opus numbers show, the solo piano was Brahms' starting point, and the instrument was still present in the very last works he published, the Clarinet Sonatas, Op. 120 and the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121. Though his production of instrumental music was not so large as his vocal music output, it nevertheless spanned his entire creative life. He followed the practice, however, later identified by Schoenberg, of thinking more than he wrote and writing more—much more—than he published. At the time of the first performances of his two String Quartets, Op. 51 in 1873, Brahms declared that he earlier had composed about 20 works for this medium and destroyed them all. Likewise, he was prepared to keep his pieces for many years, perhaps revising them several times during that period, before publishing or, again, destroying them.

It is not surprising that there were periods, then, during which he seems not to have composed for solo piano, even though it was central to his activities. Thus, after the Op. 39 Waltzes of 1865, there was a period of seven years during which he appears to have written only vocal music. Such contentions can be based only upon the works that he allowed to survive, yet Brahms' composing for the piano seems to have come to a prolonged halt soon after he settled in Vienna in 1863. For a decade and a half he wrote nothing for solo piano—unless he was producing the early drafts of the many short pieces that he subsequently collected together in groups. In 1878–79, he composed or finalized the Eight Piano Pieces, Op. 76 and the two Rhapsodies, Op. 79. Then between 1891 and 1893 came the Capriccios, Romance, Ballade, Rhapsody and Intermezzos of the late sets Opp. 116–119.

By these later dates Brahms' musical thought had grown more aphoristic, more oblique. Sonata form had long been for him more of a framework than, as with Beethoven, a developing structure that expressed as well as contained the music. Beethoven would present two themes from whose characters and contrasts would arise the musical argument that was the essence of the piece. Brahms, though, would sometimes already begin to vary his themes in the exposition, because the essential nature of the composition resided in them rather than in the musical activity they generated. Although present in many of his large works, this approach was especially well suited to the remarkable selections of short piano pieces preceding Opp. 76 and 79, that he published during the closing years of his life.

As with all great composers for the piano, the character of Brahms' keyboard writing derived from the specific qualities of his own playing, and from the strikingly different ways that the instrument's potentialities are exploited in the early sonatas, the central sets of variations and the final

groups of short pieces. With subtle nuance replacing broad gesture, we can get an unusually clear notion of how his pianism must have evolved over the years in conjunction with his musical thought. Knowing as we do of Brahms' fierce self-criticism, it is perhaps more difficult to associate him with the gentle intermezzos from Opp. 76 and 116–119, yet they are the most characteristic of all the pieces in these sets. And we can see from the Schumanns' comments that these qualities had been present in his work from the start, emerging with greater definition as the years passed.

Brahms at the piano. Drawing by Willy von Beckerath.

Brahms as Pianist

Schumann's description of Brahms' playing (see page 4) is clearly that of one original talking about another. Schumann's wife Clara, herself a great pianist, confirmed her husband's impressions, confiding to her diary that same month, "It really is moving to see him sitting at the piano, with his interesting young face, which becomes transfigured when he plays, his beautiful hands, which overcome the greatest difficulties with perfect ease (his pieces are very hard); and in addition these remarkable compositions."

The observations imply, as is the case with many geniuses, though by no means all, that something of Brahms' later achievement was implicit in his beginnings. Moving in exalted circles in Vienna during the years of his personal fame, Brahms was occasionally as arrogant as Beethoven had been, yet for quite another reason. The young Beethoven rejoiced in the power of his genius, whereas Brahms was apprehensive of the fire within himself. His reverence for the past accorded with a tendency toward introspection that derived from his North German Protestant upbringing in Hamburg, and we can observe the struggle between Teutonic stolidity and romantic individuality working itself out even in Brahms' Op. 1, a piano sonata on the largest scale and one of the works that he played to the Schumanns.

Brahms' piano playing as a young man was more idiosynchratic than pianistic. As can be seen from an impartial judgment of his early piano works, he thought orchestrally, and it is only to be expected that he should have played in the same manner. His style of piano playing was massive. People trembled when he sat down at the piano – such was his reputation for power. He would bend over the keys and hum the melody as loudly as he was playing it. His attitude toward his beloved instrument was that of a composer, not that of a pianist. A little later, when he was forced to earn his living as a concert pianist and therefore had to practice at a repertoire, he modified his style; but he never played like a highly trained and consummately equipped pianist. His playing tended too much to extremes – it was either full of convulsive power and energy, with a tremendous use of dynamic force, or it was extraordinarily tender, and often inaudible. The even quality of touch that is the *sine qua non* [indispensable mark] of the first-class pianist – his speaking voice – did not exist with Brahms. At that time he was the servant of his emotions, not his art.

His friend Widmann wrote of Brahms at age 32:

> The short, square figure, the almost sandy-colored hair, the protruding under-lip which lent a cynical expression to the beardless and youthful face, was striking and hardly prepossessing; but yet the total impression was one of consummate strength, both physical and moral. The broad chest, the herculean shoulders, the powerful head which he threw back energetically when playing, the fine thoughtful brow shining as with an inward light, and the two Teutonic eyes, with the wonderful fiery glance, softened only by the fair eyelashes – all betrayed an artistic personality replete with the spirit of true genius.

By this time Brahms, with the *Paganini Studies*, Op. 35, had finished his first "period" of composition and had earned a fine reputation in the musical world of Europe both as composer and pianist. Even with all his shortcomings as a virtuoso, he was in regular demand as a concert pianist, and was not always engaged to play only his own compositions. His repertoire was wide and his memory

astounding—though in those days it was not necessary to play everything from memory, this being a tradition begun by Liszt and Bülow and insisted upon by audiences today. Brahms' playing had improved, and at first the Viennese critics admired his performances more than his compositions. One critic wrote of his "enormous virtuoso technique, but he can fascinate his audience by other means." Again, "he was a robust and energetic player, with an exciting sense of rhythm, and a broad conception of everything he played." Florence May described his playing in 1871 as "stimulating to an extraordinary degree, and so *apart* as to be quite unforgettable. He never aimed at mere effect, but seemed to plunge into the innermost meanings of the music." Eugenie Schumann had lessons from Brahms in 1872, and wrote that "to hear him play his own works was in the highest degree interesting if not always satisfying. He brought out the themes very emphatically, with a tendency towards slightly irregular accentuation; everything in the nature of an accompaniment figure was merely outlined, so that one had the feeling of strong light and shade. When he came to passionate parts, it was as though a tempest were tossing clouds, scattering them in magnificent fury." There can be no doubt that Brahms, when playing the piano, was a musician first and a pianist second. He was far more concerned with expressing the music, particularly its emotional urge and its energy, than with technical accuracy. It was this emotional fervor that appealed to his audiences. Perhaps in the concert halls of today he would have had less success as a pianist, for his playing had none of the mechanical brilliance that can seduce an audience with whirlwinds of accuracy. But the true musician must consider it fortunate that Brahms was not a better pianist; had he been so, his creative work might have suffered.

When Joachim first heard him he was greatly impressed by "an intense fire, and what I might almost call a fateful energy and inevitable precision of rhythm which proclaimed the predestined artist."

Brahms as Teacher

Brahms' piano students were few, but their writings have left us with considerable insight into his playing and instructional methods. The Englishwoman Florence May came to know him through Clara Schumann, with whom she had studied in London in 1871 on one of Clara's visits there. Her study with him in the early 1870s, when Brahms was about 40, left her with rhapsodical praise:

> Brahms united in himself each and every quality that might be supposed to exist in an absolutely ideal teacher of the pianoforte, without having a single modifying drawback . . . He was strict and absolute; he was gentle and patient and encouraging; he was not only clear, he was light itself.

Gustav Jenner's personality and achievement under Brahms called forth a different side of Brahms' nature. Jenner seemed to see him primarily as a stern disciplinarian whose philosophy was to put a student through a strict contrapuntal and technical routine with no words of praise in order to prove the student's true worth. Perhaps Brahms was more gentle with his female students!

Whether he was or not, Brahms still gave them plenty of technique to work on. Florence May tells us:

> Remembering that Frau Schumann had said of his ability to assist me with my technique, I told him, before beginning my first lesson, of my mechanical difficulties, and asked him to help me. He answered, "Yes, that must come first," and, after hearing me play through a study from Clementi's "Gradus ad Parnassum," he immediately set to work to loosen and equalize my fingers. Beginning that very day, he gradually put me through an entire course of technical training, showing me how I should best work, for the attainment of my end, at scales, arpeggi, trills, double notes, and octaves.
>
> He not only showed me how to practice; he made me, at first, practice to him during a good part of my lesson, while he sat watching my fingers; telling me what was wrong in my way of moving them, indicating, by a movement of his own hand, a better position for mine, absorbing himself entirely, for the time being, in the object of helping me.
>
> He did not believe in the utility for me of the daily practice of the ordinary five-finger exercises, preferring to form exercises from any piece or study upon which I might be engaged. He had a great habit of turning a difficult passage round and making me practice it, not as written, but with other accents and in various figures, with the result that when I again tried it as it stood the difficulties had always considerably diminished, and often entirely disappeared.

She also mentions that a considerable portion of her lessons were devoted to the study of Bach—to the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the *English Suites*. As her technique developed, he devoted more and more time to "the spirit of the music:"

> . . . His phrasing, as he taught it to me, was, it need hardly be said, of the broadest, while he was rigorous in exacting attention to the smallest details. These he sometimes treated as a delicate embroidery that filled up and decorated the broad outline of the phrase, with the large sweep of which nothing was ever allowed to interfere. Light and shade, also, were so managed as to help to bring out its continuity. Be it, however, most emphatically declared that he never theorized on these points; he merely tried his utmost to make me understand and play my pieces as he himself understood and felt them.

He would make me repeat over and over again, 10 or 12 times if necessary, part of a movement of Bach, till he had satisfied himself that I was beginning to realize his wish for particular effects of tone or phrasing or feeling.

Frequently at the close of her lessons, Brahms would perform many of the Bach preludes and fugues for her. She was particularly impressed with the emotional, poetical qualities of his Bach playing. On his playing in general, Florence May commented:

At this time of his life Brahms' playing was stimulating to an extraordinary degree, and so *apart* as to be quite unforgettable. It was not the playing of a virtuoso, though he had a large amount of virtuosity (to put it moderately) at his command. He never aimed at mere effect, but seemed to plunge into the innermost meaning of whatever music he happened to be interpreting, exhibiting all its details, and expressing its very depths. Not being in regular practice, he would sometimes strike wrong notes—and there was already a hardness, arising from the same cause, in his playing chords; but he was fully aware of his failings, and warned me not to imitate them.

She also summed up Brahms' view on the relationship of technique to musical expression:

Brahms, in fact, recognized no such thing as what is sometimes called "neat playing" of the compositions either of Bach, Scarlatti, or Mozart. Neatness and equality of finger were imperatively demanded by him, and in their utmost nicety and perfection, but as a preparation, not as an end. Varying and sensitive expression was to him as the breath of life, necessary to the true interpretation of any work of genius, and he did not hesitate to avail himself of such resources of the modern pianoforte as he felt helped to impart it; no matter in what particular century his composer may have lived, or what may have been the peculiar excellencies and limitations of the instruments of his day.

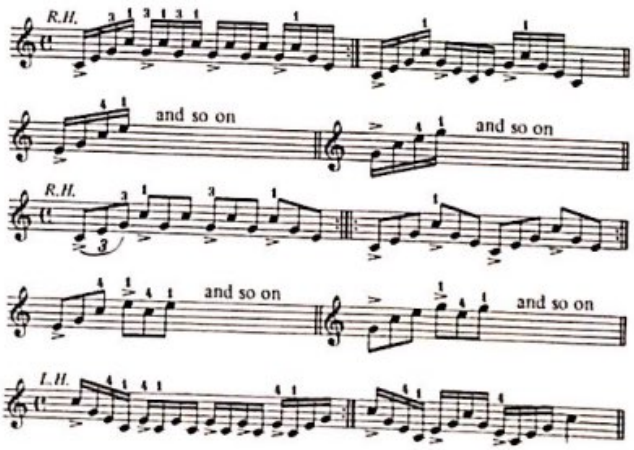
Whatever the music I might be studying, however, he would never allow any kind of "expression made easy." He particularly disliked chords to be spread unless marked so by the composer for the sake of a special effect. "No apége," he used invariably to say if I unconsciously gave way to the habit, or yielded to the temptation of softening a chord by its means. He made very much of the well-known effect of two notes slurred together, whether in a loud or soft tone, and I know from his insistence to me on this point that the mark has a special significance in his music.

One of Brahms' students was the Schumann's daughter Eugenie. Her recollection of Brahms' playing is graphic:

To hear Brahms play his own works was, if not always satisfying, at any rate in the highest degree interesting. He brought out the themes very emphatically, with a tendency, which was characteristic of his playing, towards slightly irregular accentuation; everything in the nature of an accompaniment he merely sketched in, in such a way as to give rise to remarkable effects of light and shade. If he was playing an impassioned piece, it was as though a stormwind were driving through clouds, spreading devastation with heedless recklessness. On such occasions one felt how inadequate the instrument was for him. From the point of piano technique his playing could never be satisfactory; in general he confined himself in later years to playing his own things, and in these he did not trouble about technical perfection.

When she was 77, Eugenie Schumann wrote an account of the technical approach Brahms used when she studied with him as a young woman of about 22. This account follows:

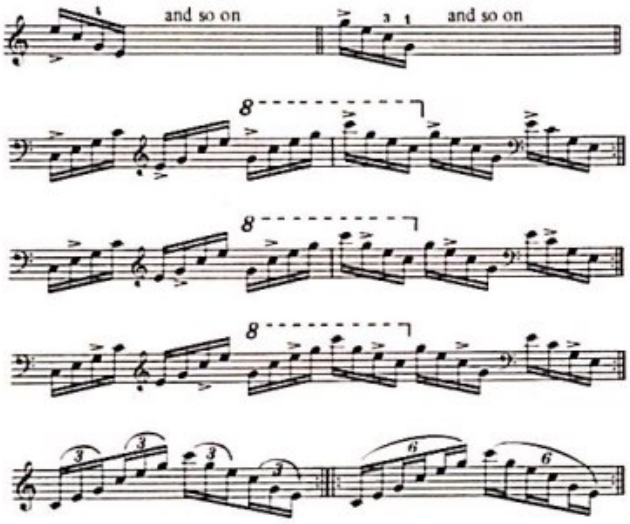
In the spring of 1872 my mother told me that she was going to ask Brahms to give me lessons during the summer. She thought that the stimulating influence of a fresh teacher might incite me to a more eager pursuit of my studies. I felt very unhappy; Mamma could not be satisfied with my progress, and I thought that I had done my best. There was no one for whom I would have worked rather than for her. Now Brahms really did come twice a week. He entered the room punctually to the minute, and he was always kind, always patient, and adapted his teaching to my capabilities and the stage of my progess in quite a wonderful way. Also he took a great deal of trouble in the training of my fingers. He had more than my mother, who had surmounted all technical difficulties at an age when one is not yet conscious of them. He made me play a great many exercises, scales and arpeggios as a matter of course, and he gave special attention to the training of the thumb, which as many will remember, was given a very prominent part in his own playing. When the thumb had to begin a passage, he flung it on the key with the other fingers clenched. As he kept his wrist loose at the same time, the tone remained full and round even in a fortissimo. Considerable time was daily given to the following exercises on the passing-under of the thumb—also to be played in triplets.



I had to take the note on which the thumb was used, quite lightly—so to speak, on the wing—and accentuate the first of every four notes strongly.

Then I had to play the same exercise triplets, with strong accents on the first note of every triplet. When I could play the exercises faultlessly in keys without the black notes, I played them, always beginning with the thumb, in C-sharp, F-sharp, A-flat, E-flat, and D-flat.

Then followed the common chords with inversions through three or four octaves, also in groups of four notes and in triplets, beginning with the accent on the first note. When I had played this about ten times, I changed the accent to the second, then to the third note of each group, so that all the fingers were exercised equally. I practiced these arpeggios alternately in triplets and groups of six, and had to distinguish clearly between the groups of twice three and three times two notes.



Brahms made me practice trills also in triplets. In all exercises he made me play the nonaccentuated notes very lightly. I practiced the chromatic scale with the first and third, first and fourth, and first and fifth fingers, and he often made me repeat the two consecutive notes where the thumb was passed under. They were all, in fact, quite simple exercises; but carefully executed, first slowly, then more rapidly, and at last prestissimo. I found them extremely helpful for the strengthening, suppleness, and control of the fingers. I also played some of the difficult exercises published later as "51 Exercises for Pianoforte by Brahms," in which he did not include the easier and musically less valuable ones.

With regard to studies Brahms said: play easy ones, but play them as rapidly as possible. He thought very highly of Clementi's "Gradus ad Parnassum" and made me play a great number of these.

In the study of Bach's works Brahms laid the greatest stress on rhythm, and gave me directions which, like seeds, took root and continued their growth throughout my musical life. They greatly increased my perception of the subtleties of rhythmic movement. He made it one of the principal rules that in constantly recurring figures the accents should always be the same, and that they should be stressed not so much by strong attack as by greater pressure on the accentuated and more lightness of the nonaccentuated notes.

The melodic notes of figures he made me play legatissimo; the harmonic, however, e.g., the notes of broken chords, quite lightly. He never wrote purely rhythmic accents in above the notes, as he held them to be an integral part of the figure; but accents specially intended, or not self-evident, he marked, to make them quite clear, and pencilled phrasing in with slurs. But I was never allowed to interpret a passage thus phrased by lifting and fresh attack of the hands; only by rhythmic emphasis and nuance.

Brahms gave much attention to syncopations. They had to be given their full value, and where they produced dissonances with the other parts he made me listen to the syncopated in relation to each one of the dissonant notes. He made the suspensions equally interesting to me; I could never play them emphatically enough to please him. Of all the works which I studied with Brahms I enjoyed the French Suites most; it was pure joy to work at them in this way, and he made me see things which I had hitherto passed without noticing, and of which I never again lost sight.

In any work by Bach, Brahms would occasionally permit an emphatic lifting of the notes (portamento), but never staccato. "You must not play Bach staccato," he said to me. "But Mamma sometimes uses a staccato in Bach," I demurred. Then he replied, "Your mother's youth goes back to a time when it was the fashion to use staccatos in Bach, and she has retained them in a few cases."

Brahms did not give me many directions with regard to the interpretation of the Suites; he confined himself to explanations of their rhythm and the simplest rules for nuances. "Play away, play away," he would call out from time to time in a quick movement.

In the course of the summer I studied with him three French Suites, several preludes and fugues from the second book of the *Wohltemporierte Klavier*, some pieces by Scarlatti, an almost unknown sonata by Mozart in F major, Variations on a Theme in F major by Beethoven (each of which was in a different key), his 32 Variations in C minor, Variations in B-flat (Impromptu) by Schubert, some of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*, and Chopin's Nocturnes. If I remember rightly, nothing of my father's. I must confess to my disgrace that I enjoyed of all of these things only the Suites, the C-minor Variations, and the *Songs without Words;* all the others I hated. I had revelled in my father's G-minor Sonata the previous winter, and now I was expected to play all these queer, unexciting pieces. I have often wondered why Brahms made just this selection? Perhaps he wanted me to form my own judgment on things which I had never heard my mother play, in which I had no tradition to go upon, and thought it would be good for me to become more independent, more self-reliant.

I thought it natural that my mother should devote time and strength to me, and it made me happy. But I never got over the fact that I strummed to Brahms for a whole long summer, and, though in later years he often kindly urged me to play to him

again, I could never bring myself to do so. But the seed which he sowed fell upon good soil and bore fruit in the course of years, and when I began to teach I recognized how much I owed to him. I only wish I had told him this.

The parents of Max Graf (Graf eventually became one of Vienna's most distinguished critics) wanted their son to become a lawyer, but the notes he wished to write were musical rather than legal. Since Graf's mother was a friend of Celestine Truxa, Brahms' landlady at Karlsgasse 4, she arranged for the young composer to visit Brahms for his advice.

When I approached Brahms in his workroom, he received me with a few mumbled words which he growled into his beard, as a dozing dog would if disturbed, and took my compositions from my hand. At once, he plunged two fingers between the first and third staffs of the score (of one of my songs). I was somewhat surprised to see him cover up my middle voices of which I was inordinately proud. But the very nicest of all my notes Brahms hid – the many sixteenth notes with which I had been so lavish. Seeing my astonishment he growled, 'When I look over a new song I always cover the middle voices. I only want to see the melody and the bass. If these two are all right, everything is right.' Finally, he said, 'You must learn counterpoint. Go to a good counterpoint teacher for two years and then come back and we shall see what is left of your talent.' I asked him if he would recommend someone, and with the same gruff tone he said, 'In the country, there are some old organists who know counterpoint. Perhaps you can find one who will teach you.'

With this interview ringing in my ears, I left, bent on following his suggestion, and I did find an 'old organist' and went to him as a pupil. My teacher, however, was not a country organist, or more correctly was no longer a country organist. He was Anton Bruckner.

Brahms as Accompanist

Brahms frequently played chamber music with friends and did a large amount of accompanying throughout his career. We have an interesting account of Brahms the accompanist from Max Graf. Max Graf's first encounter with Brahms was during his student days at the University of Vienna. One cold wintry night he and a few of his friends were having dinner in an old eating place that their meager budgets permitted, when Brahms, in "an elegant company of fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen," walked in. Shortly thereafter some other guests came in and to everyone's surprise, succeeding in getting Brahms to play dance music – old waltzes, quadrilles – while the guests danced. The next day Brahms explained that he had done this because the place reminded him of the pubs in Hamburg in which he had to work in his youth to earn money for his family. The pieces were those he used to play every night.

Brahms accompanying Alice Barbi in recital.

Graf's path casually crossed Brahms' on several other occasions, and he was also present at a number of concerts at which Brahms performed his own works. Although his chronology is at times inaccurate, his recollections of the events themselves are always vivid, and his accounts are perceptive and throw a great deal of light on Brahms as an accompanist:

In the year 1892 . . . I encountered Brahms for the second time. He was in the company of Alice Barbi, the marvelous singer who had come to Vienna for the first time in the year 1888 as an unknown artist and rose overnight to fame, acclaimed as the greatest singer of classical songs. I had been present at her first concert, the audience limited to 50 who had been given complimentary tickets to this preview, so to speak, by the concert management. The second concert was sold out as were all that followed. The expression in her rich contralto voice filled the soul and she could make an audience joyful or sad with her song. Her program regularly consisted of songs of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms. She never sang music of other composers and I have never heard Brahms' pieces – the simpler compositions *Vergebliches Ständchen* nor the more difficult like *Wie bist du, meine Königin* – sung more lovingly than by Barbi. The combination of Italian sense of melody, Southern beauty, true musical form, and deep expression flowing from the soul was never more perfect than in this singer.

Brahms had come with Alice Barbi [to a restaurant in the Prater where the famous Viennese *Schrammeln* – quartets of two violins, one guitar, and one accordion – played in the garden] to show

her the popular Viennese musicians and typical Viennese popular playing. It was not difficult to see that Brahms was not merely being a polite host to Barbi; he was captivated by her. Usually a somber man, he was in good spirits, his face wreathed in smiles and completely engrossed in this great artist and beautiful woman. He doted upon her and one would have had to have been blind not to see his devotion and pleasure in her company.

The *Schrammeln*, after playing several Viennese selections, struck up an American song, popular at the time—'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay.' As the 'boom' was played, it was customary to strike the table with a walking stick or thump it with a beer glass, and to this day I can see Brahms exuberantly rapping his umbrella on the table—a little boy with a gray beard. There was love, kindled and sparkling, in Brahms that day beneath the old trees of the Prater which overhung dining tables as the musicians played an American song . . .

At the last of the concerts which Barbi gave, an all-Brahms concert was announced. Barbi, wanting to show Brahms her devotion, dedicated a whole evening of songs to him.

We young admirers of Alice Barbi would not have missed the Brahms concert for anything in the world and stood waiting for her dressed in one of her simply-cut white gowns which she always wore, her black hair knotted softly, and behind her, to our surprise, and the surprise of the whole audience, in the place of the usual accompanist, came Brahms. He was somewhat at a loss and came on the stage with the awkwardness of a great Newfoundland dog following its mistress. Later we were told that Brahms appeared unannounced at the singer's dressing room and astounded her by saying that he wished to accompany her at the piano. That night, the audience not only heard Brahms' most beautiful songs sung by Barbi, but played by the composer himself. (This concert took place on December 21, 1893.)

Brahms never accompanied in the manner to which we are accustomed today. Accompanists of great singers perform in the same manner as lackeys laying a carpet at the feet of their mistresses. They are in the background, obsequious and bending to the whims of the artist and never step forth to attract attention. But not Brahms. He was still a great musician as an accompanist. At this concert there were two musicians performing with an equally distributed effort and attention. The singer was not the main feature, the song was important, and both singer and pianist worked toward the same goal in the service of the composer.

Brahms' accompaniment had a strong foundation of basses, even in sweet songs like the *Wiegenlied*, the accompaniment of which is usually sublimated and pampering. Brahms himself always used firmness in the basses. His hand was somewhat heavy and his playing was devoid of the complicated shading and nuances of colors which characterizes players of the Liszt school. He was simple and strong. There was spiritual and musical potency in his playing—no nervous oversensitiveness running amuck in hundreds of little color patches. When Brahms played, the design was important, and not the colors themselves.

There was another trait in Brahms' accompaniment which is no longer found. He built up his accompaniment like a symphonic composition. There was unity, gradation, and development. The music reached its climax from within by virtue of the musical forces. When he played his songs, he was the creator of great symphonic forms used in the development of a vast musical composite of several ideas, which grew like petals to form a single beautiful flower. Barbi's concert was the first time I had heard Brahms interpret his own songs, but later I was to have other opportunities of attending concerts at which he played his own compositions. He enjoyed accompanying the Viennese tenor Gustav Walter. Walter . . . had a mellifluous tenor voice [smooth, rich and flowing] which he used with fine taste and was accomplished in developing discriminating half-tones and falsettos. He is identified with the history of Brahms' music since it was he who sang the solo at the first performance of Brahms' cantata *Rinaldo* (in 1869). He was especially well known for his charming renditions of Brahms' semiclassical songs like *Ständchen* and *Wiegenlied*. Brahms, whose hands were heavy, experienced some difficulty in adapting his accompaniment to Walter's hovering pianos.

Brahms and the Waltz

From time to time, Brahms drew inspiration from the Waltz King, Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825–1899). Brahms' *Am Donaustrande, da stecht ein Haus*, Op. 52, No. 9, for example, seems indebted to the beloved "Blue Danube" Waltz, not only for its essential imagery, but perhaps for certain musical details as well. Years later, Brahms expressed his love for Strauss' masterpiece by inscribing an autographed fan with the opening measures of the dance, followed by the words "Song not by Brahms," and, on another occasion, by autographing a photograph of Strauss and himself with the same theme set in counterpoint with that which begins his own Fourth Symphony. The flavor of Strauss is also plainly detectable in the little orchestral suite Brahms made in 1870 from several of his *Liebeslieder Waltzes*—eight from Op. 52, and one from the later Op. 65, *New Liebeslieder Waltzes*.

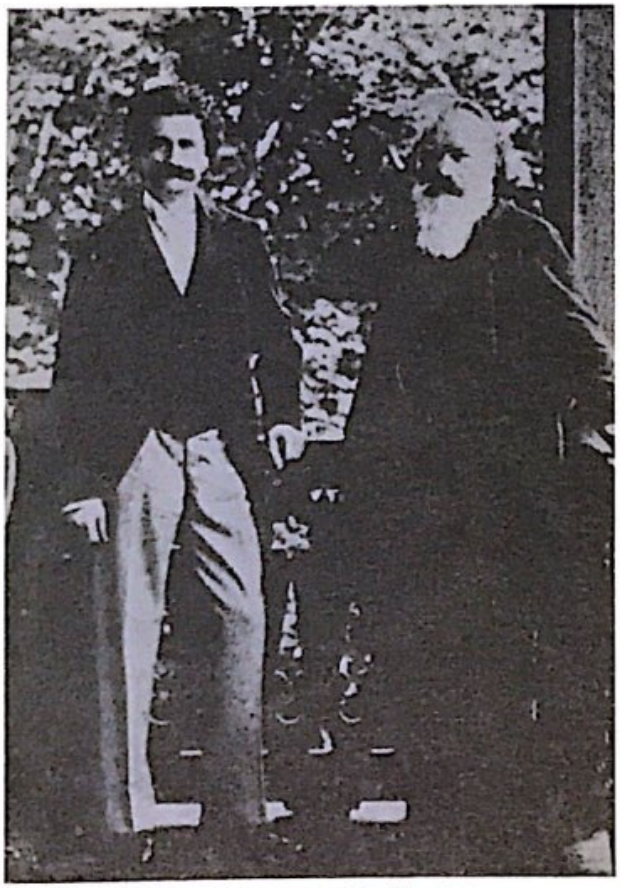
Yet, notwithstanding a sincere admiration for the art of his great contemporary, Brahms' own waltzes celebrate a predominantly Schubertian heritage. The matter of Schubertian influence was raised by Brahms himself when, in a letter to Eduard Hanslick, he described his set of *Waltzes* Op. 39, as "little innocent waltzes in Schubertian form." The lineage is clear enough, even without this acknowledgment, for like his predecessor's dances, Brahms' waltzes stand worlds apart from those composed in the tradition of Joseph Lanner (1801–1843) and the Strauss family—the former

more or less intimate sets of pieces for use as "house music," the latter orchestral, decidedly public affairs, meant for ballroom dancing.

In structure, too, Brahms' sets differ from the standard practice of the 1850s and 1860s. In the hands of Johann Strauss, the Viennese waltz cycle had come to consist of a fairly small number of dances, linked where necessary with transitional material and framed with an introduction and coda. By contrast, Brahms' waltzes follow the normal Schubertian plan, whereby the cycle is made up of a longer series of brief pieces lacking the separate introduction, transitions, and coda.

The "Schubertian form" of Brahms' remark to Hanslick thus seems to square with the facts. The description of his waltzes as "innocent," however, could only have been made with tongue in cheek, since the waltzes in Op. 39, as also those of the later sets, display many of the refinements taken for granted in Brahms' larger works. Normally, such pieces are straightforward affairs. Dance music, after all, is characterized by repeated rhythmic (and often times melodic) patterns. One need only recall again Strauss' "Blue Danube" Waltz, the beginning of which comprises six nearly identical statements of the principal motive.

The waltzes composed throughout his career are quintessentially Brahms. Though their charm may derive in part from their contrast to his work as a whole, their eternal freshness stems from techniques refined in larger forms. As Ernest Newman, the British music critic and Wagner biographer, put it: "Had Brahms never been stretched to the tension of such works as the C-minor Symphony and the Requiem, he could never have relaxed to the charm of the waltzes." This memorable image retells a familiar story—of an uncompromising and inscrutable composer who brought the highest artistic sensibilities to every expression of his muse.



Johann Strauss and Brahms at Bad Ischl, 1894.

Characteristics of Brahms' Style

Brahms' melodies are frequently built around triadic formations. The downward sweep of many melodies is a pronounced characteristic. Melodies resembling the German folk song or *lied* are commonly found, particularly in his songs and instrumental slow movements.

Typical melodic figuration is based on extension of arpeggios and on wide spacing of the broken harmony. Harmonic ambiguity and flexibility frequently result where the root of the chord is omitted. Figuration based on widely spaced chords makes for large stretches for the pianist and sometimes rather awkward leaps across the strings for the violinist. Figuration based on the broken octave or octaves is used greatly.

Typical of his phrase construction is melodic elision or overlapping of phrases, a method which often obscures the rather "square" periodic structure. The use of sequence may extend the phrase.

Rhythmically, Brahms' music is vigorous and intricate, similar to that of Robert Schumann. Brahms often combines one rhythm with another. A vigorous rhythmic drive animates his music; he is fond of rhythmic patterns using dotted notes. Syncopation has an extensive and prominent place in the rhythmic scheme. This includes the usual syncopation of single notes, especially in the accompanying parts. More complex and characteristic is the complete displacement of whole phrases or melodic lines with respect to the normal accent in the measure. Normal metrical accent may also be displaced to change the basic meter; for instance, 6/4 may be changed to 3/2 by means of accent. Brahms is likewise fond of ending a phrase on the weak beat. In some pieces he uses the same melodic material for two different movements or sections, but changes the meter or tempo. In Symphony No. 2 the *Allegretto* (third movement) and the following Trio No. 1 (Presto) use the same material, but the *Allegretto* uses it in 3/4 and the Trio adapts it to 2/4.

Brahms makes extensive and effective use of the techniques of Romantic harmony. He sometimes intentionally leaves the tonality ambiguous and

vacillating, as explained above, by utilizing incomplete chords. Arpeggios and openings of pieces are often left tonally inconclusive by such omissions. Sometimes final chords are similarly left incomplete, frequently in a high register for effect, although in such cases this is done mainly for coloristic reasons, since the tonality is well-established by the previous material.

Chord and key relationships are used for color, for relatively remote modulations, and for extension of the structure. Sombre keys are frequently used. Mediant and submediant relationships are used between chords, between sections (for instance, second groups in sonata-form) and between movements (the Second Symphony in D Major's slow movement is in B major). Fairly remote modulations are produced by use of enharmonic and chromatic chords, such as diminished sevenths, secondary dominants, and specific chromatic chords. Further possibilities are the change of mode from major to minor or vice versa, the use of modes (e.g., phrygian in the slow movement of the Fourth Symphony), and of modal chords (e.g., modal minor dominant). The harmony may be enriched by appoggiaturas. These numerous harmonic possibilities are used by Brahms for a colorful harmony and for subtlety of harmonic effect and changes.

A characteristic of Brahms is his use of heavy and thick doublings in the chord structure. Thus, he often amplifies a line with parallel thirds and sixths, sometimes in octaves or in several octaves, or by doubling lines in contrary motion in this way.

The active inner parts in his pieces reflect his concern with counterpoint. Sometimes the independence of the lines is stressed by such devices as the use of different rhythms or fugal techniques. In this connection, Brahms' love of the music of J. S. Bach must be mentioned. Brahms is said to have remarked that the two most important events in the 19th century were the establishment of the German Empire and the founding of the Bach Gesellschaft (company for publishing the complete works of Bach).

Brahms uses the traditional sonata form of instrumental music, particularly in the symphonies, chamber music, concertos, and sonatas, but with some refinements. For instance, a kind of melodic motto may be found in some works. This is the case in the Third Symphony, with its motto F–A or A-flat–F (supposed to represent the phrase "Frei Aber Froh," free but happy). The cyclic principle is also employed by Brahms. For example, the opening material of the Third String Quartet (Op. 67) is worked into the last variation of the finale. Like Beethoven, Brahms uses extensive codas. A particularly beautiful one occurs at the end of the Third Symphony. When they occur, Brahms' introductions are elaborate, notably in the First Symphony, and may be integrated with the following material. In the finale of the First Symphony, the horn-call figure of the introduction reappears. As noted in the discussion of harmony, Brahms makes a greater use of mediant relationships for contrasting sections and movements, rather than the traditional dominant relationships.

In his variations, Brahms is apt, like Beethoven, to follow the theme with variations of highly contrasted characters, often remotely related to the original, as in the Op. 18 set in this collection. This procedure is rather different from the approach of the 18th century in which composers generally proceeded systematically and slowly, with gradually increasing degrees of thematic complexity. Another type of variation used by Brahms is the *passacaglia*, as occurs in the finale of the Fourth Symphony. In his variations, Brahms reveals himself as an imaginative and worthy successor to Beethoven.

The concertos also follow the Beethoven model, and furnish a marked contrast with those of such contemporaries as Liszt. In his treatment of the solo instruments, the Double Concerto for Violin and Cello may be considered as a type of *concerto grosso*. Sometimes Brahms experiments with new arrangements of material. For example, in the A Major Violin and Piano Sonata the material of the slow movement and the *scherzo* alternate.

Two general points about the forms Brahms uses should be mentioned. One is that Brahms tends to use similar forms in pieces composed at about the same time. Examples are the two Piano Quartets Op. 25 and Op. 26 and the two String Quartets of Op. 51. The second point is that the sections of Brahms' forms are nicely calculated just to touch each other, so his formal structure is usually clearly defined. The least distortion or miscalculation in this respect on the part of the performer tends to pull the sections apart and destroys the flow and unity of the music.

Characteristics of Brahms' Piano Music

Whatever his prodigious accomplishments in other music, Brahms was a composer for the piano throughout his career. I have already mentioned Schumann's description of Brahms' piano playing "turning the piano into a full orchestra." Brahms' procedure of doubling is used to extract the utmost sonority from the instrument. In many of his works, especially in the earlier works for piano, the virtuoso passages have the disadvantage from the performer's point of view of being hard to play without sounding difficult. Widespread figuration, which necessitates agile and accurate leaps of the

hand, and the large number of notes to be played at rapid tempos add to the difficulty. An example of the latter is the use of octaves to which the inside third is added as in the *Rhapsody in E-flat*, Op. 119, No. 4. Brahms achieves his most idiomatically satisfactory piano style in the later piano works, in which he also uses the more characteristic shorter forms of the Romantic movement (e.g., the intermezzi).

Another trait of his piano works is the rich effects produced by the use of melodies in the inside voices. Sometimes these melodies are created by cross accents and serve as obligato accompaniment to the principal melody, in the style of Schumann. A feature of Brahms' work is a kind of nonlegato style indicated by the slur over staccato markings. This style calls for careful pedaling to preserve continuity in an expressive nonlegato style.

Brahms is important not only as a composer of the first magnitude, but historically as a representative of the end of the great German piano and symphonic tradition.

About this Edition

I have based *At the Piano with Brahms* on his personal copies of the first editions in the collection of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna, unless indicated otherwise in the notes concerning each piece. Brahms' personal copies show that he gave critical attention to these works even after their first publication. A few engraving errors are corrected, such as some dynamic, tempo and phrase marks, and specific indications for the performer are added, such as *sotto* and *sopra* and a few fingerings. The few deviations that occur in later *Urtext* editions from the first edition have been carefully examined. I also had access to all original editions as well as the autographs for Op. 116 at the Library of Congress, Washington.

The fingering in italics originates from Brahms; all other is by the editor. I have indicated some finger substitutions since this procedure is important in achieving a *legato*, especially at places where it is difficult for the damper pedal to be of assistance. I have used Brahms' pedaling and have identified it in footnotes. All other pedaling is by the editor. The subtleties in pedaling this music cannot, in many cases, be accurately notated. Therefore, the editor's pedal indications must be taken as only suggestions of the actual pedaling required for musical performance. Markings in parentheses are editorial. The editor has indicated a few redistributions between the hands to facilitate certain passages. A major consideration of this edition has been the accurate and reliable presentation of Brahms' text.

Performing the Works in this Collection

J. S. Bach's music had a strong influence on Brahms, who was an outstanding interpreter of Bach's keyboard works. Bach's polyphonic style inspired Brahms to develop a new kind of pianism that exploited independent voice-leading. This special kind of pianism followed very different paths from Chopin and Liszt and emphasized commuication of musical ideas that are not always expressed idiomatically on the keyboard. It is for this reason that Brahms' music has been criticized as being unpianistic. Although it makes the piano sound beautiful, his piano writing is different from other composers in that the pianist's 10 fingers must frequently act as 10 independent voices. Brahms searches out pianistic sonorities as effectively as any composer for the instrument, and as the pianist gains a greater familiarity with his works through playing, he/she will discover that Brahms' piano works do lie well under the hand and are, after all, pianistic.

Brahms answered complaints about his pianistic style by saying:

> I have no patience with the pianist who growls because of a few new technical difficulties. Shall progress stop because of a few hard nuts to crack? All my life I have been deeply interested in piano technique, and I have endeavored in my piano works to combine good musical ideas with new idioms. You will find the new technique more particularly in my Paganini Variations [these are full of jumps, figurations in open positions, polyrhythms, double-note passages, blind octaves, double trills, and intricate polyphonic passages, a concentrated compendium of his entire piano technique] and in my Capriccios. I admit that many of the passages lie awkwardly for the hands. This new kind of technique seems inconvenient (*unbequem*) because hands and fingers are used in a new way. The new idiom requires greater strength, freedom and independence of fingers than the traditional classical piano technique.

Brahms' approach to the piano was abstract; he composed pure music without thought of any conventional piano technique. But he obviously thought a great deal about the piano's sound. His chords are just the right thickness. He does not make the mistake of some composers by placing too many thirds in the bass so that the sound is too thick. He always uses the range of the piano where each melody will come through most effectively.

There is some difficulty in interpreting many of Brahms' piano pieces because of the obscurity of some of the ideas. The melody can easily get lost if the performer is not careful. There are many

problems for the performer, which makes these works difficult for the amateur even though many of them are not technically very difficult.

Brahms frequently uses the term *sostenuto* to indicate a slight holding back of the tempo. An *a tempo* is understood either where the - - - - marks stop, or at the beginning of a new measure or phrase.

Grace notes and arpeggios normally come before the beat and the arpeggio frequently requires a slight lengthening of the beat on which it occurs (see the *Capriccio in B minor*, Op. 76, No. 2, measures 19, 21 and 27, pages 20 and 21; for grace notes, see the same piece, measures 2, 4, 5, etc.).

Brahms indicates very few pedal marks, but he continually relies on its use to make sense of his widely spaced, left-hand parts. The performer will find that I have generally based my suggested pedaling on the harmonic changes, although there are times when other factors must be taken into consideration, such as pedaling through *staccato* indications (e.g., *Capriccio in B minor*, Op. 76, No. 2, measures 11, 19, 20, 26, 31, pages 20 and 21).

Frequently widely spaced, left-hand arpeggio passages should be fingered by dividing the arpeggio into complete, rather than partial handfuls, and relying on the pedal to cover the breaks in *legato* that occurs when jumping from the thumb to the fifth finger or vice versa (e.g., *Rhapsody in G minor*, Op. 79, No. 2, measure 14, page 33).

Brahms is fond of using rolled (arpeggiated) chords. Examples may be found in many of the works in this collection: the *Capriccio in B minor*, Op. 76, No. 2, measures 19, 21, 73 (pages 20, 21 and 23); *Intermezzo in E*, Op. 116, No. 6, measures 22, 64 (pages 29 and 31); and the *Theme and Variations in D minor*, Op. 18, measures 10–16 (page 46). If Brahms wanted a large chord, he would frequently indicate to roll the chord, usually for musical rather than technical reasons. Pianists with small hands should carefully break chords they cannot stretch, either as fast arpeggios or with the bottom key played as a grace note before the beat and sustained by the pedal. Brahms' use of the arpeggio sign ( ) often implies a slight broadening of the tempo.

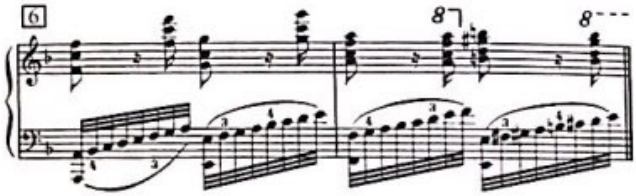
A problem in coordination is presented by Brahms' frequent use of *staccato* and *legato* markings simultaneously. The B section (measures 46–82) of the *Capriccio in B minor*, Op. 76, No. 2 (pages 22–24), presents these problem, since the *staccato* and *legato* must often be played by one hand and because the *legato* notes are of short duration.

Brahms did not use metronome indications. When asked for the correct markings for his *Rhapsody in B minor*, Op. 79, No. 1, he replied that he could not give one, as it would be different each week. The editor has included metronome marks, in parentheses, only as broad suggestions.

An important rule to remember is: the quieter the music, the stronger the fingers must be for control.

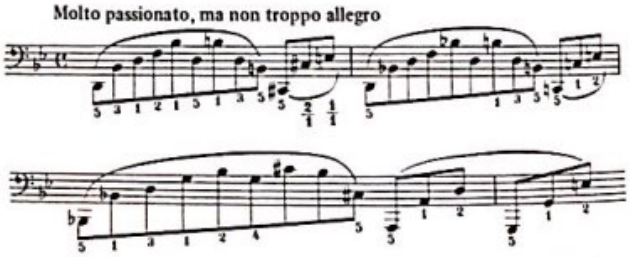
Much of Brahms' piano music uses doublings in thirds and sixths, and these double-note passages sometimes involve uncomfortable stretches between the fingers. These passages feel differently to the hand from any piano music written before Brahms. See his *51 Exercises*, which treat this problem and provide excellent material for good *legato* playing. These exercises also focus on another problem of Brahms' piano style: its rhythmic complexity.

Large leaps are sometimes required. An example for the right hand would be:



Theme and Variations in D minor, Op. 18 (page 50), measures 6, 7 of Variation III

Left-hand leaps:



Rhapsody in G minor, Op. 79, No. 2 (page 33), measures 14–17

For Further Reading

Walter Frisch. *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Reginald Gerig. *Famous Pianists and Their Technique*. Bridgeport, Conn.: Robert B. Luce, 1974.

Michael Musgrave. *The Music of Brahms*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Schoenberg, Arnold. *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*. Edited by Leonard Stein. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975.

This edition is dedicated to Dr. and Mrs. William Race, with admiration and appreciation.

Maurice Hinson

About the Pieces

Capriccio in B Minor
Op. 76, No. 2 *Page 20*

This light-hearted, gypsy-style composition is one of Brahms' most popular pieces. Be careful to use very little pedal, as the editor has indicated. The quaint melody—a curious mixture of gaucherie (lacking tact) and grace—will lose much of its character if you ignore the *staccato* marks or disobey the *non troppo* after the tempo mark *Allegretto*. The off-beat accents in the left hand pose a considerable problem. (Note that they are absent against the *legato* groups in measures 2 and 4.) Against the *staccato*, the alto quarter notes in measures 7–10, must be *legato*. Make the *staccato* very short on the eighths, and do not extend the slur over the two sixteenths to include the following eighth (i.e., make the second sixteenth *staccato*). Like the alto in measures 7–10, the tenor in measures 17–18 must be *legato*. Brahms was fond of playing the B section melody with a singing touch. The interchanging of the hands in this section requires a mastery of touch-control to avoid a jerky accompaniment. The *senza ritard* at measure 81 is Brahms' marking, and even though it might be difficult to obey, it should be followed. The coda (measure 111 to the end) fades away with a blend of humor, delicacy and harmonic finesse. Form: **A B A**; **A** = measures 1–45, **B** = 46–82, **A** = 83 to end.

Hungarian Dance No. 3 *Page 26*

As a young man in Hamburg, Brahms was passionately fond of hearing gypsy music, and it was only natural that when he met and traveled in 1853 with Eduard Remenyi, the Hungarian violinist, this interest should have been deepened. Some of Brahms' Hungarian Dance arrangements even date from this period. Brahms arranged 21 Hungarian Dances for piano duet in 1869. They received such acclaim that he arranged them for solo piano in 1872. Hungarian Dance No. 3 is said to be based upon the melody of "Tolnai Lakadalamas," or "Wedding Dance," by J. Riemer. The opening subject is extremely melodious and well contrasted with the following section in D major, *vivace*. There then follows a D-minor section where Brahms was kind enough to give the player a simplified version of the bass. This music requires rhythmic sparkle, a fiery abandon with subtle *rubatos*, and plenty of full-blooded pathos, especially in the D-minor section.

Intermezzo in E, Op. 116, No. 6 *Page 29*

This **A B A** designed piece is dominated by the falling line of the first two measures. It has the character of a sad, slow minuet. The middle B section (measures 25–42) in G-sharp minor, with its pulsating hemiolas, contains one of the loveliest duets between the tenor and soprano parts every conceived by Brahms. This section can move a little faster than the A sections. Be careful to bring out the melodic line in the alto voice in the opening two measures. Any unsteadiness in the equal eighths of the melody will upset the mood and character of this simple tune. Take a little more time with the sections marked *expressivo* (measures 8–9, 48–49, 57 forward) and *sostenuto* (measures 13–14, 21–22, 38–40, 54–55). Sensitive voice-leading and *cantabile* touch are extremely important throughout this piece. Begin the lowest note of the final arpeggiated chord (measure 64) on the beat, not before. The end should be calm and serene. There is a strong tinge of the ballade style about this intermezzo.

Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79, No. 2 *Page 32*

Rhapsodies are ordinarily thought of as being irregular, ecstatic, and highly fantastic compositions based upon folk melodies. Such, for instance, are the well-known Hungarian Rhapsodies of Liszt. Since there is, in this work by Brahms, very little of the "rhapsodic" in this sense, we should look elsewhere for a justification of its title. According to ancient Greek usage, a rhapsody signified a poem or ballade sung by a "rhapsode" to the accompaniment of lyre, an ancient harplike instrument. The narrative or epic element, then, was the important feature; and this conception of the word possibly appealed to Brahms, with his methodical and classical approach to writing.

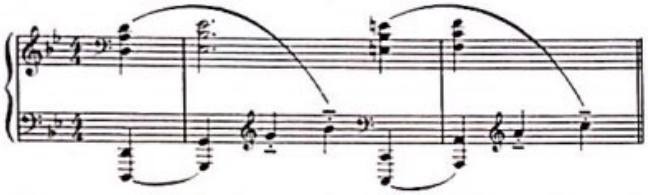
Neither specific program nor traditional melodies are here utilized. Lyric passages are sharply contrasted with those of a martial character. The *fermatas* which are encountered in various places, as in measure 13, produce the effect of suspense and surprise, and lend to the composition a strongly declamatory style. They are invariably followed by short periods of complete silence, although the notation may not indicate this by any rest. Pauses without rests in the notation are occasionally indicated by Brahms, as in measure 8. Musical instinct and taste are the only safe guides as to the duration of such punctuations of the tempo.

Because of its very definite architectural outline and development, the effect of this work is that of poise coupled with cumulative growth. It is spontaneous music—vivid, vital, and virile at every stage, yet at times tender.

Careful attention to all of the indications of the text is necessary in order to assimilate the numerous and varied impressions conveyed to the eye. These must then be translated into living, coherent, logical—and exciting—sonorities. After the pianist has studied the work in detail and has obtained a thorough

understanding of it, the performer is confronted with the problem of making the listener understand it; and to accomplish this the performer must draw upon all of his or her pianistic and musical resources. The work provides opportunity for display of great technical and interpretative mastery, and at the same time exemplifies the highest in musical worth.

It is practical to play the melody through with simple chord structure in order to gain a general idea of the music, as for example:



This provides the harmonic and melodic outline. All other elements, such as the arpeggiation of chords, etc., should form a discrete middle-ground and background. Like a good picture, a piece of music must have perspective, and perspective is acquired by arranging the elements of the work into proper relation, as background, middle-ground, and foreground. In piano music, this is done by using varieties of touch, gradations of pressure and weight, dynamics and other elements of interpretation. No matter how excellent the playing may be, if it persists at any length of time at the same level, it cannot be very musical. Real music is always kinetic, never static. The indications in the music form the clue to its potential dynamic and rhythmic vitality, and must be followed carefully.

The editor has added careful pedal indications which will make for musical effectiveness. When the tonal texture occurs in the lower register of the piano, (a typical characteristic of Brahms' music), the pianist must be very careful about the release of the damper pedal. In fact, the release, in such cases, is more important than the depression of the pedal; and quick changes nearly always blur the sound, since the vibrations of the long strings are too strong to be easily stopped. The best guide is, after all, close attention – i.e., careful listening. The musical pianist pedals with his or her ears!

Be sure to play measures 116 to the end strictly in time. Brahms indicates a well-defined diminuendo, and any slackening in the tempo would be weak and ineffectual. The two very abrupt, loud chords at the close are more impressive when played in strict tempo.

The form of this Rhapsody is sonata-allegro: exposition = measures 1–32; development = 33–85; recapitulation = 85–116; coda = 116 to the end.

ROMANZE IN F, Op. 118, No. 5 *Page 41*

This somewhat pastoral-like piece uses variation technique from beginning to end. The opening A section consists of four varied statements of the same basic theme. Where is the intriguingly elusive tune – in the top line or in the richly doubled inner voices? In both, since the lines interchange, with the lower one coming to the surface from time to time, but they are never heard separately. The melody has a distinct folklike quality. Notice that the top line in the first three measures reappears in the alto at measures 9–11. The form is **A B A**, with the B section interlude (measures 17–47) developed in continuous variations over a rocking bass *ostinato*. A new mood, with flutelike runs and short cadenza passages, permeates the B section. Be aware of the rather quiet dynamic level – a *forte* is never indicated. The editor has performed and taught this piece by repeating measures 1–8, after the B section at measure 47 and continuing with the final section at measure 48 to the end. This alleviates the shortness of the last section.

SARABANDE AND GAVOTTE IN A MINOR *Page 44*

These two pieces were composed by June of 1854 during the preparation of a never-completed suite. Brahms used the *Gavotte* as the inspiration for the Scherzo of the Second String Sextet, Op. 36. Both dances have a Baroque spirit about them and the *Sarabande* shows a strong Bach influence. The editor suggests the *Sarabande* be played again after the *Gavotte*, in *da capo* form. Of course, either dance may be played separately. The *Sarabande* must not be rushed, especially the second half. The *Gavotte* begins on an upbeat that must not sound like a downbeat. Sources: The *Sarabande* is contained in a facsimile in the 1917 *Berlin Deutsche Brahms–Gesellschaft*, edited by Max Friedlander. The *Gavotte* is located in the Photogrammarchiv of the Austrian National Library in Vienna.

THEME AND VARIATIONS IN D MINOR, Op. 18 *Page 46*

This work was originally the second movement of the String Sextet, Op. 18, composed in 1860. Brahms transcribed this solo piano version for Clara Schumann's birthday, September 13, 1860, and it is dedicated to her, since she had asked Brahms for a concert arrangement of this movement. He sent it to her almost two years before the publication of the original work. The processional and folk-song-like theme is grandly and lavishly ornamented. The binary shape of the theme allows each half to be repeated as though to impress it indelibly on the listener's memory before the variations begin. Each two-measure phrase takes us to a different key before we are returned to the tonic at measure 17, and the entire theme is repeated. As in his other piano variations, Brahms takes the phrase forms and their main harmonic progressions as the constant factors controlling the forms of the variations. Variations one through three simply vary and ornament the theme by successive fast subdivisions of the beat; the third variation features rushing scales. Variation four comes to a lull in the major mode and supports a new and beautiful melody with

subtly flowing counterpoint. Variation five seems to make merry at the thought of nearing home by indulging in a *musette*-like dance. The theme reappears in variation six with a new and gentle kind of treatment. Brahms was very successful in making each variation present the theme in a different mood.

This set of variations shows Brahms' fascinating and personal solution to the art of transcription, i.e., the way in which he summarizes his original, and neatly and smoothly transfers his own music from one medium to another.

There are many arpeggiated chords in this work; they should be rolled slightly before the beat so that the melody note falls on the beat. Take plenty of time for the melodic turns—they should never sound rushed.

In a letter of February 16, 1869 to the music critic Adolf Schubring, Brahms drew a distinction between Beethoven's more strictly worked-out variations and Schumann's "fantasy variations," and described his own viewpoint as follows:

> With a theme for variations really, almost, virtually only the bass means anything to me. That, however, is sacred, it is the solid ground on which I build my inventions . . . If I vary the melody, there's not much more I can do than be witty or graceful, or, as long as it is in keeping with the mood, I can make a beautiful thought more profound. On the given bass I invent really new things, I invent new melodies for it, I create . . .

This is a good description of the Op. 18 variations, as the bass is almost constant throughout and Brahms makes the soaring theme more beautiful and profound in each variation. This set requires approximately 11 1/2 minutes for performance.

The source for this edition is Eusebius Mandyczewski's edition of *Brahms' Complete Works*, 1926-28.

Waltzes, Op. 39

These waltzes, of which there are 16, were originally composed as piano duets and were first performed by Clara Schumann and Albert Dietrich in 1866. They are a pure delight and are dedicated to Eduard Hanslick, the Viennese music critic. In the letter announcing the dedication, Brahms confessed that the impetus for the work came in part out of his affection for Vienna. The fabled character and charm of the town is reflected—not directly, as in Johann Strauss' waltzes, but prismatically, through Brahms' own more wide-ranging imagination. Brahms arranged these waltzes for solo piano in 1867 and also made a simplified piano version. The simplified version appears in this collection along with the original two-handed version of No. 15.

No. 2 *Page 55*

This waltz, which is extremely melodious, contains rich harmonies throughout, and unusual modulations in the second half. It has an entrancing lilt that will not be felt unless the pianist pays careful attention to the subtle phrasing.

No. 4 *Page 56*

A powerful rhythm and rich harmonic color are this waltz's main characteristics. It is warm-blooded, leads off dashingly, and is Hungarian in character. The harmonic progressions in measures 22-26 are especially appealing. Do not misread the turn figures in measures 2 and 4 as if they were identical with the opening upbeat. It is difficult but important to make the distinction between this figure and that of the four thirty-second notes in measure 18.

No. 6 *Page 57*

This is a highly brilliant waltz. Brahms' favored technique of cross-rhythm (here, a two-beat pattern in a three-beat measure) is here piquantly exemplified. The capriciousness of the second section is due to the fantastic character of an incessantly moving upper part. A supple wrist is of vital importance.

No. 8 *Page 59*

This is one of the gems of the set and contains a most attractive rhythm. The *dolce* mood is elegant, and the frequent left-hand skips illustrate one of the characteristics of Brahms' writing for piano. Here are the principal elements of Brahms' style in miniature: the seven-measure pedal points on B-flat and later, D-flat; the chromatic passagework within the confines of the simpler top voice and bass; the implications of peculiarly original rhythmic patterns. All elements are here with charm, grace and finesse.

No. 11 *Page 60*

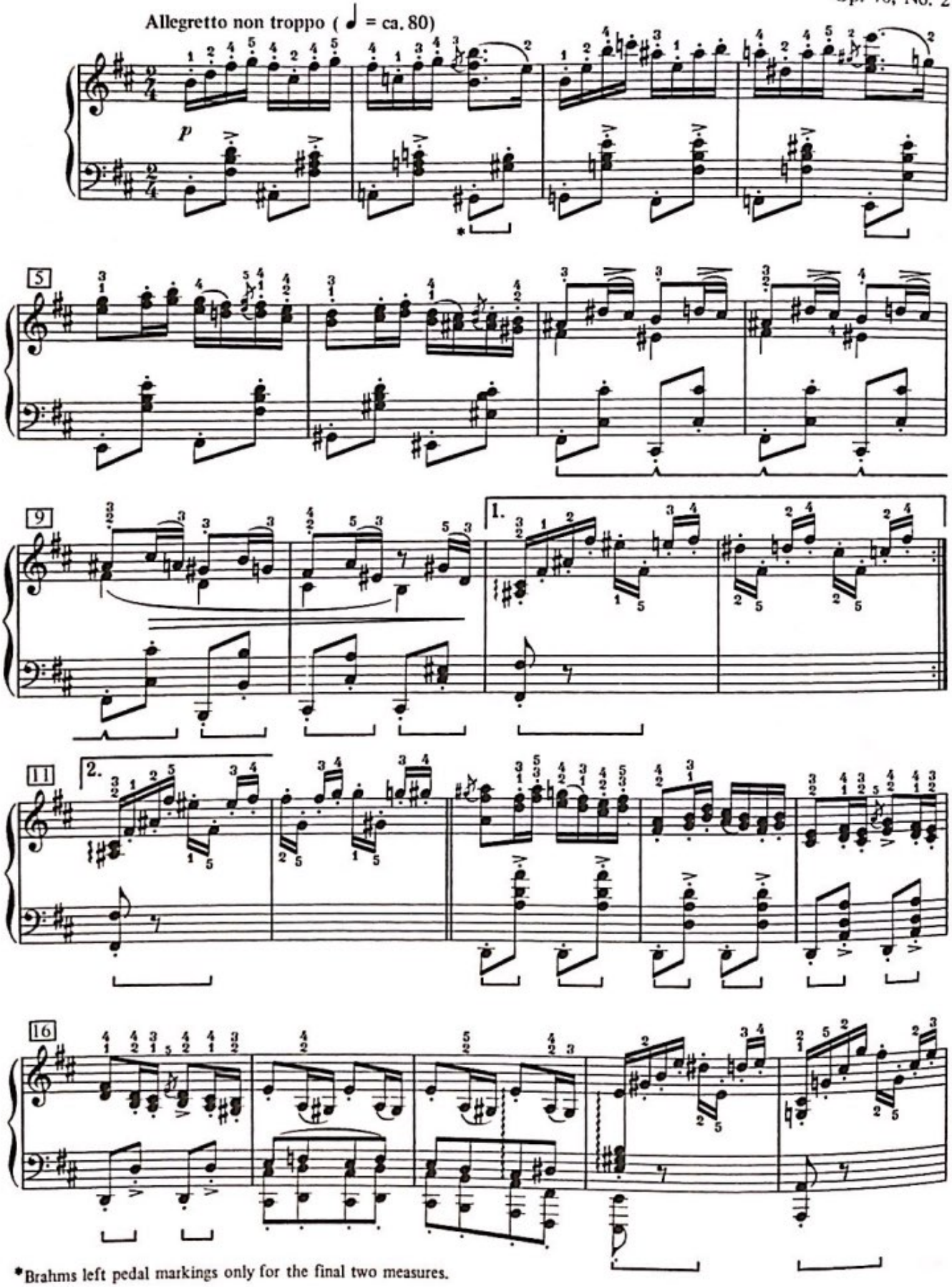
More than a suggestion of Viennese influence is felt in this waltz. One wants to get on one's feet and dance to its impulse. Some refreshing harmonic touches add to its attractiveness. Judging from its style, it might easily have been composed by Schubert.

No. 15 (Original version) *Page 62*
(Simplified version) *Page 64*

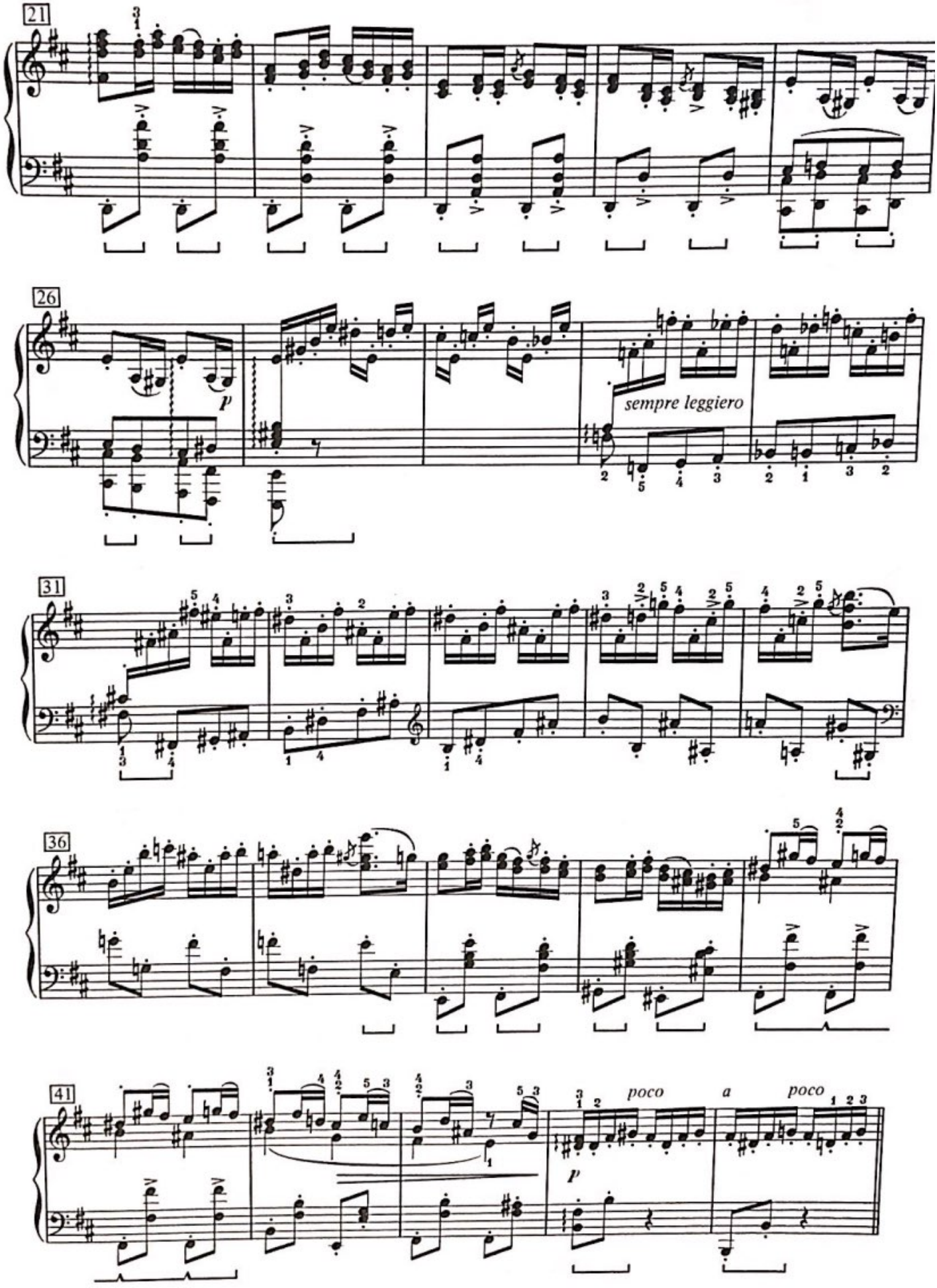
This is the most popular waltz of the set. Here is Brahms at his most amiable. Excellent phrasing is necessary, along with a very even and sensitive touch, while the final eight measures require a perfect *legato*. Both versions are presented with the suggestion that both could be played as a group: the original version in A-flat, followed by the simplified version in A. The greatness of Brahms is clearly heard in these works.

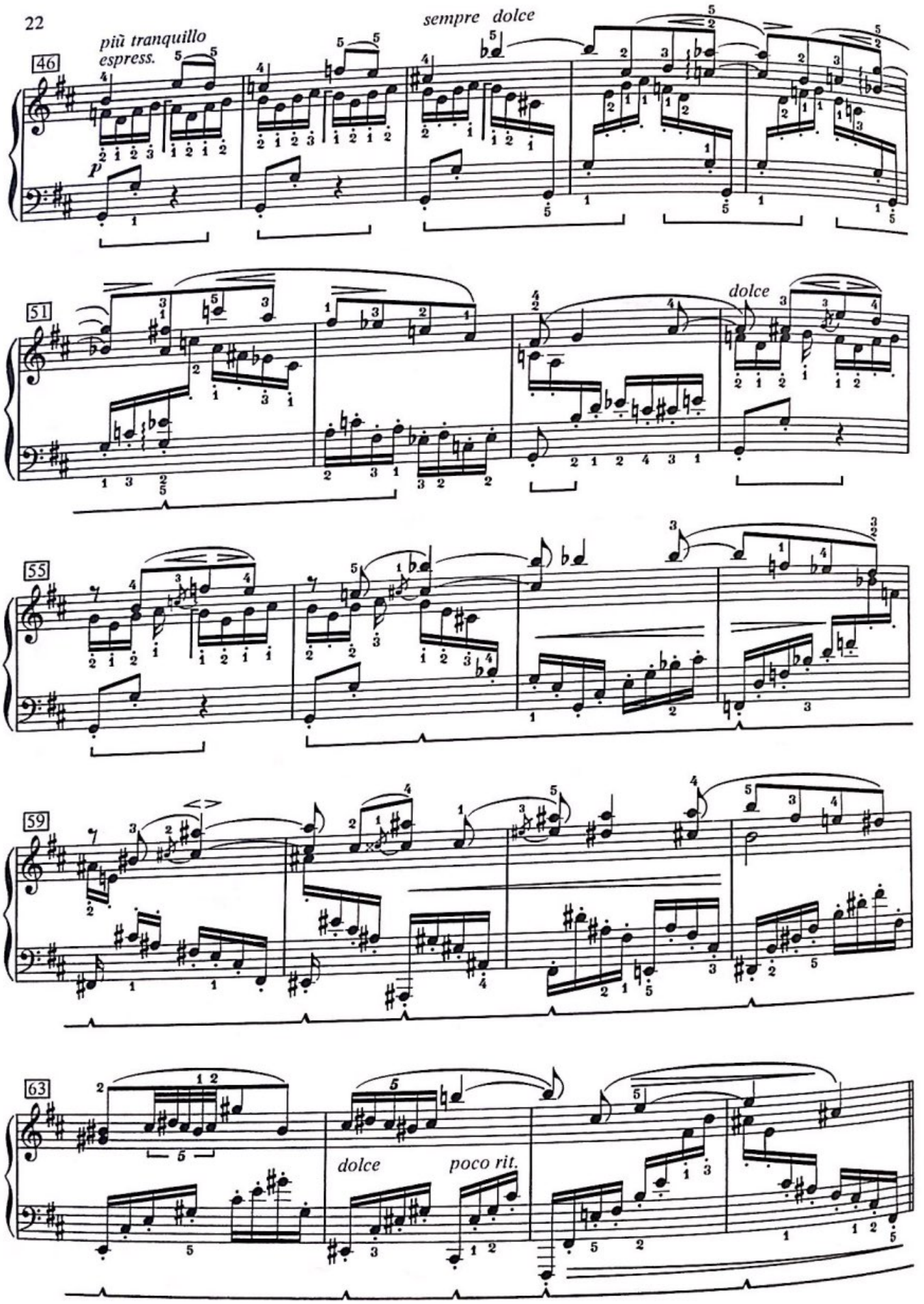
CAPRICCIO IN B MINOR

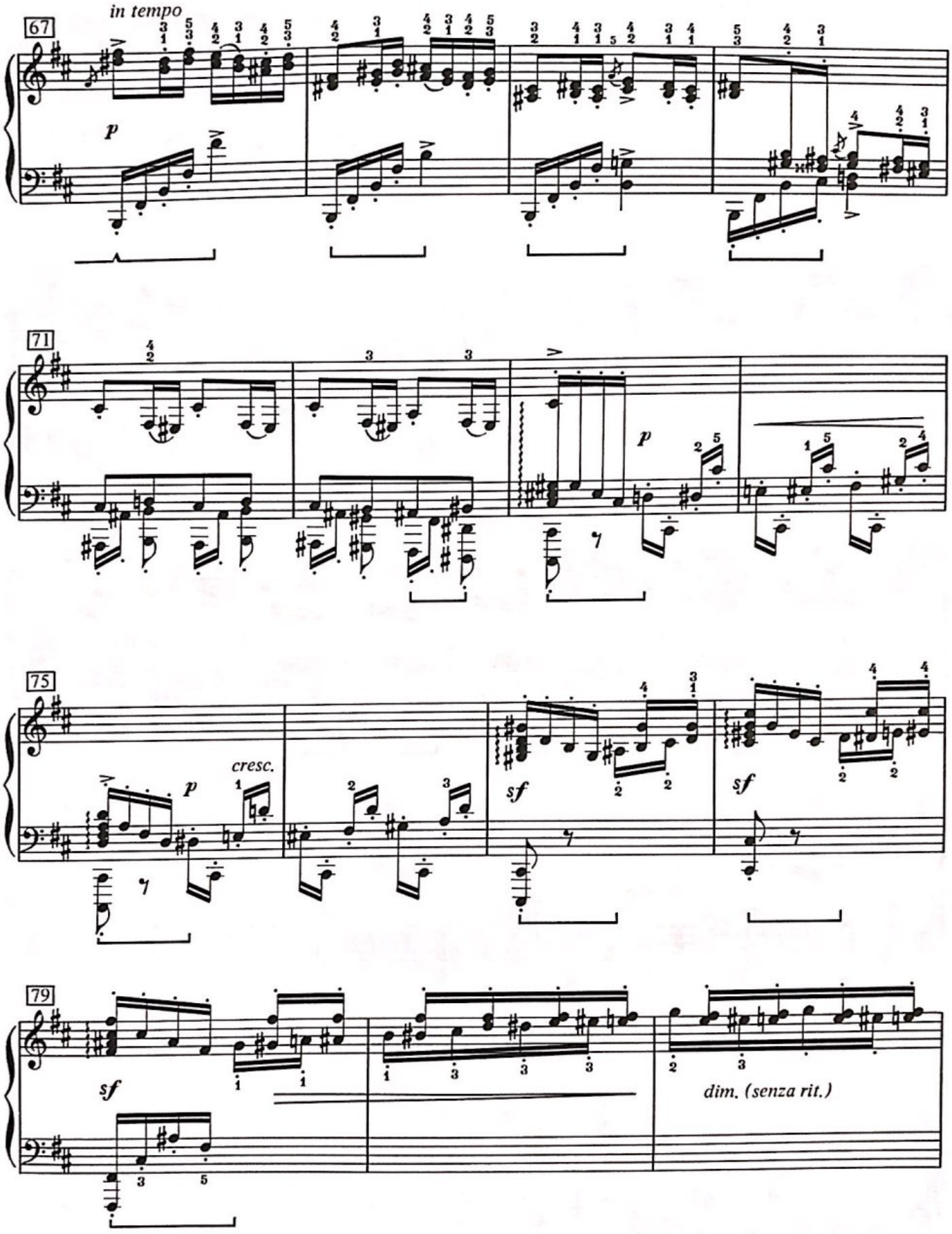
Op. 76, No. 2

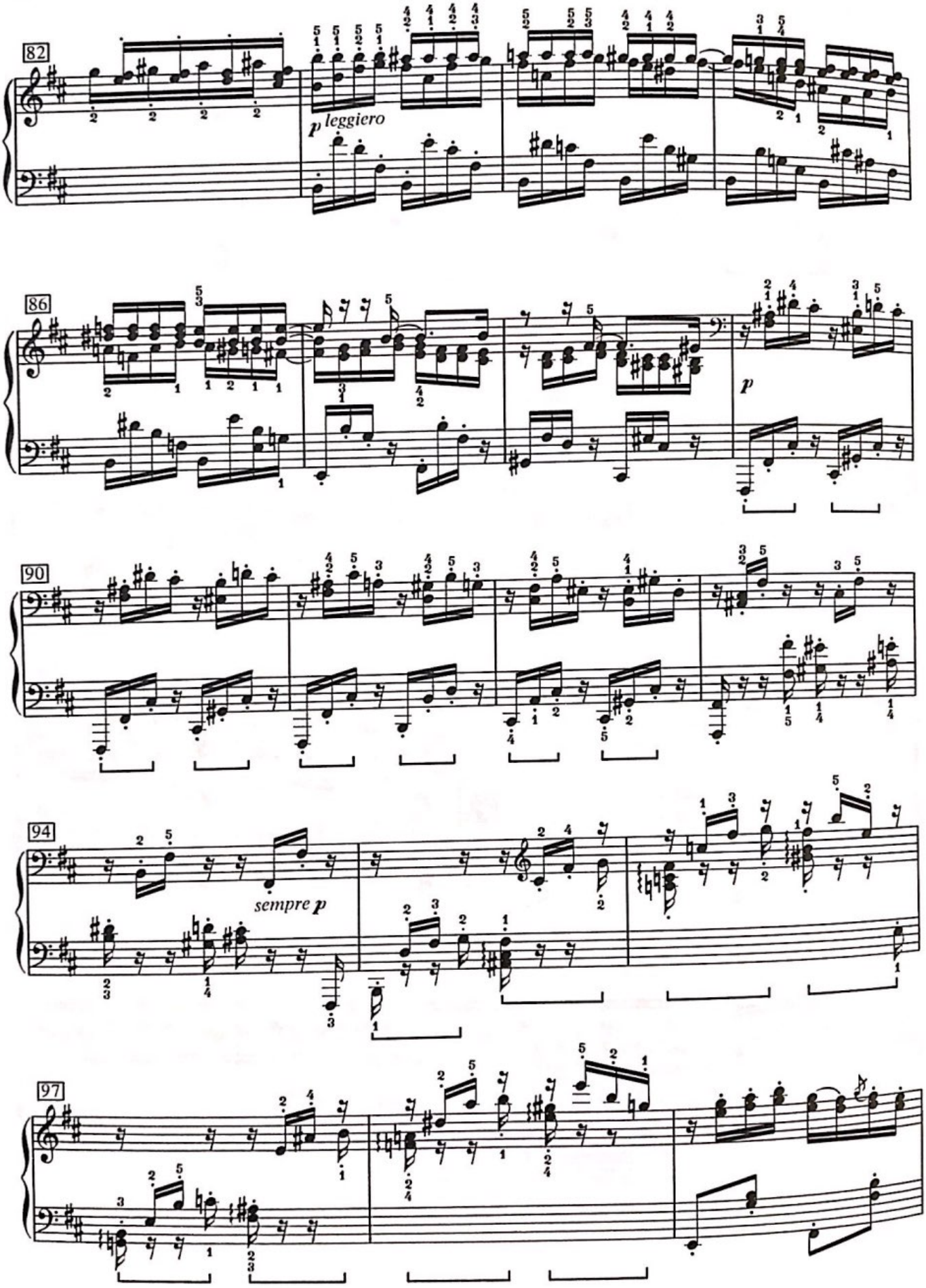


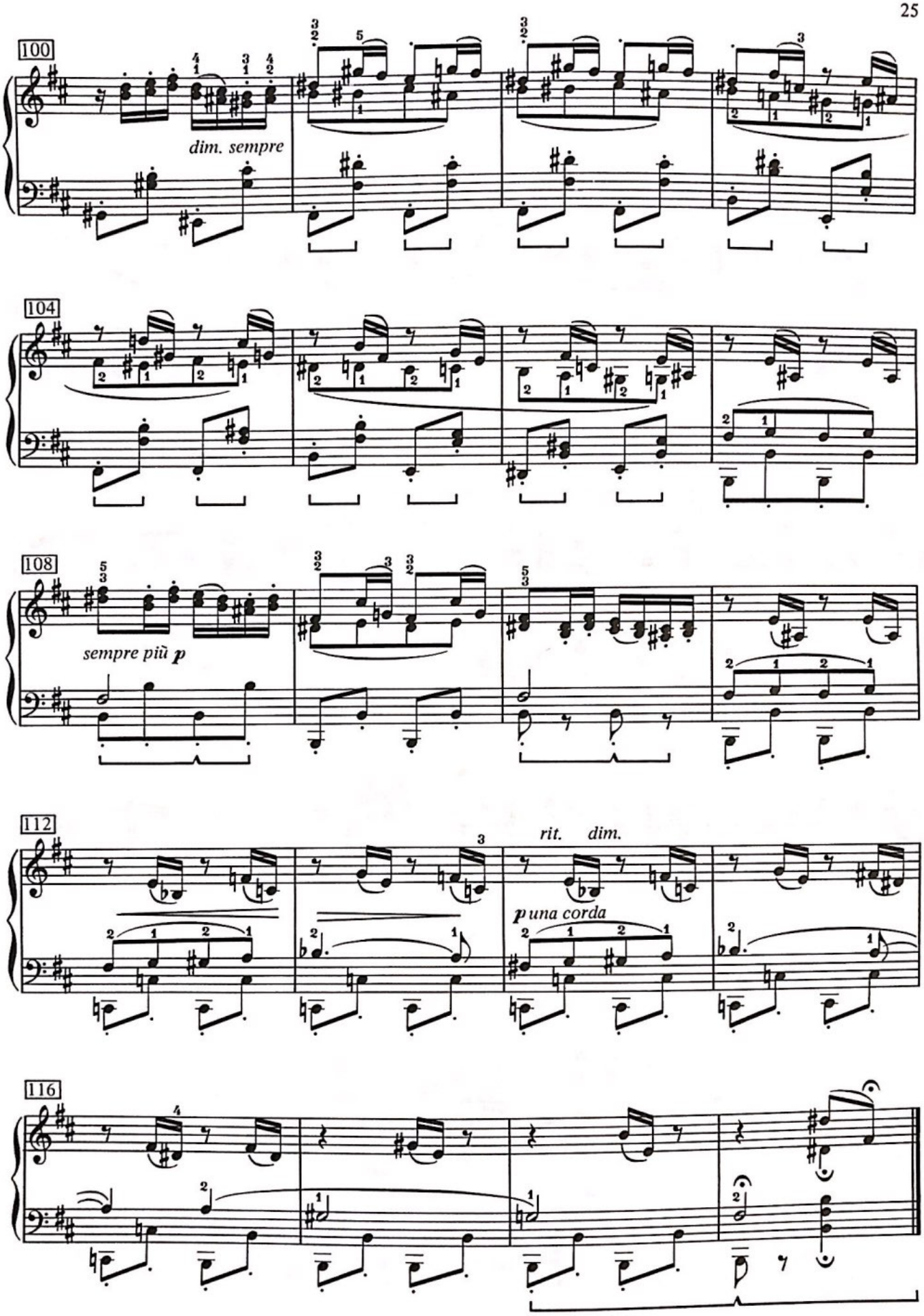
*Brahms left pedal markings only for the final two measures.



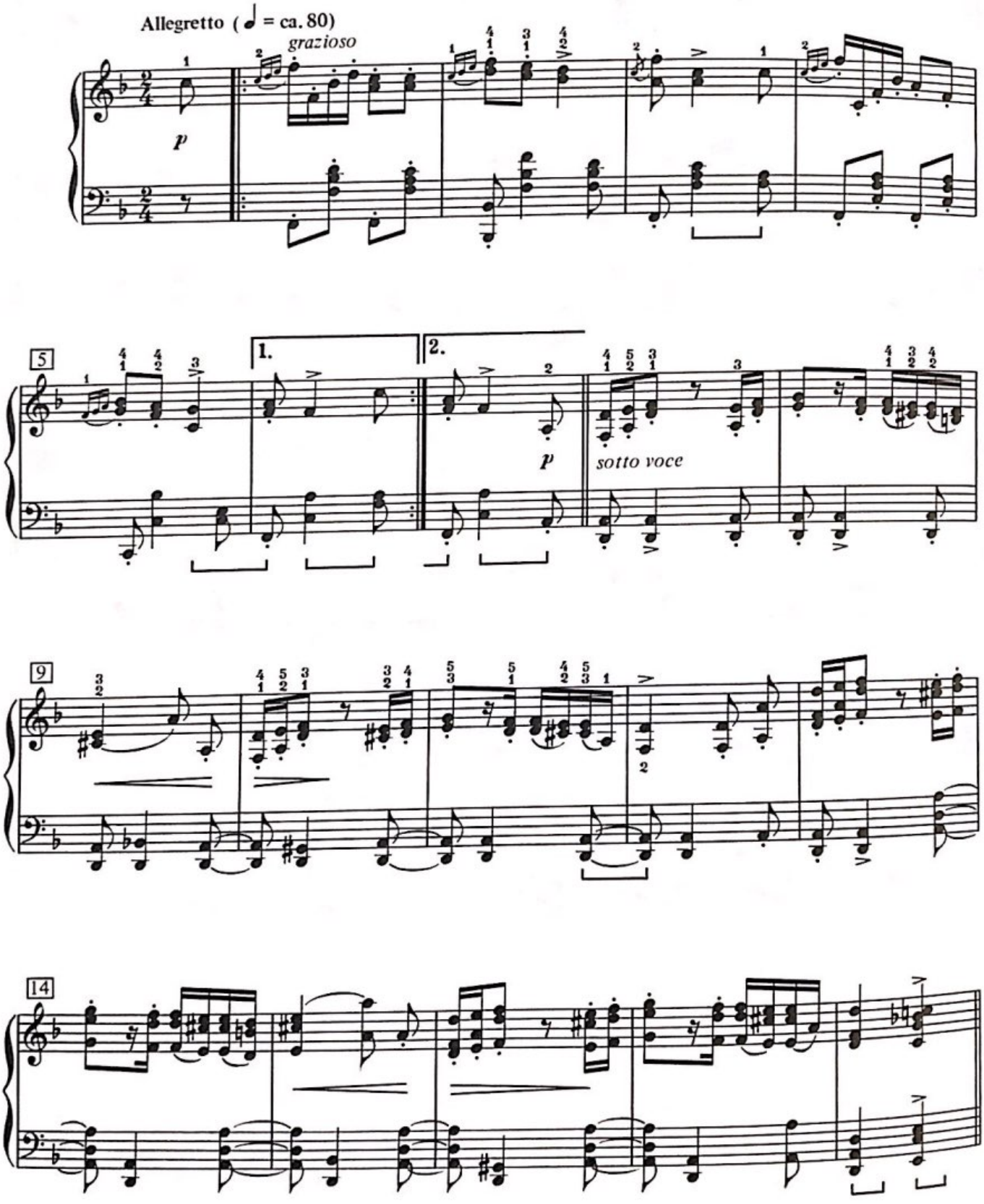


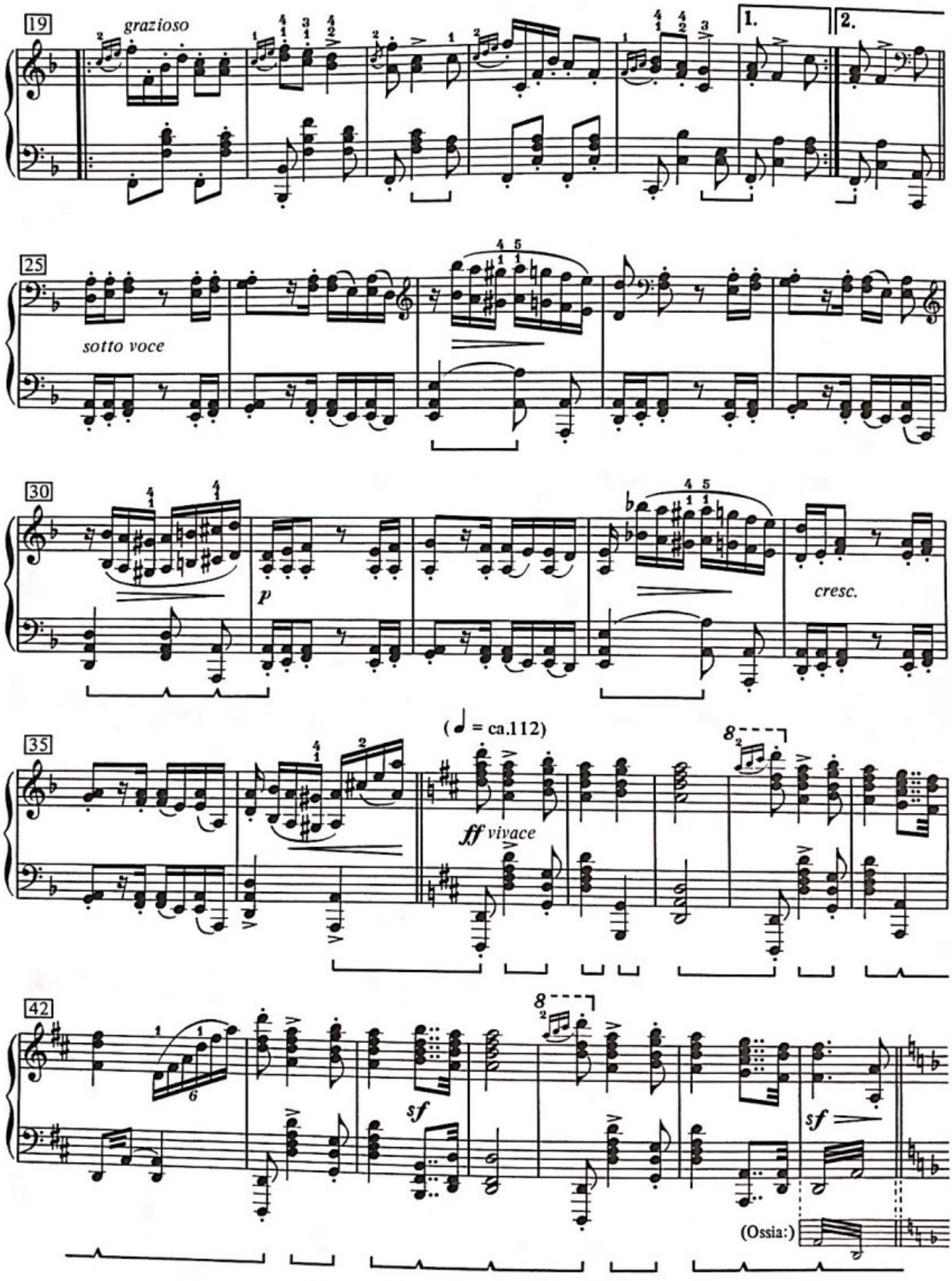


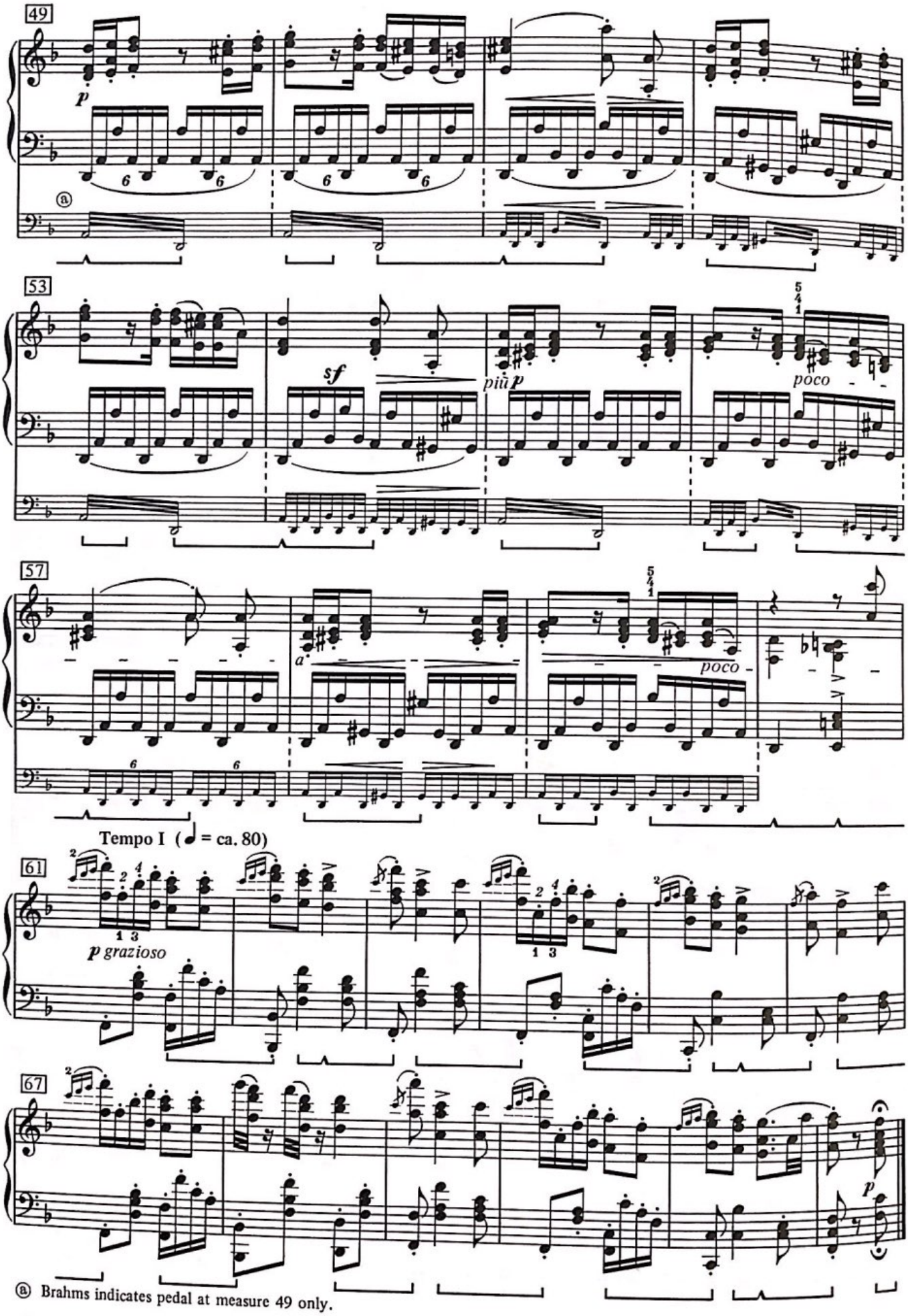




HUNGARIAN DANCE NO. 3



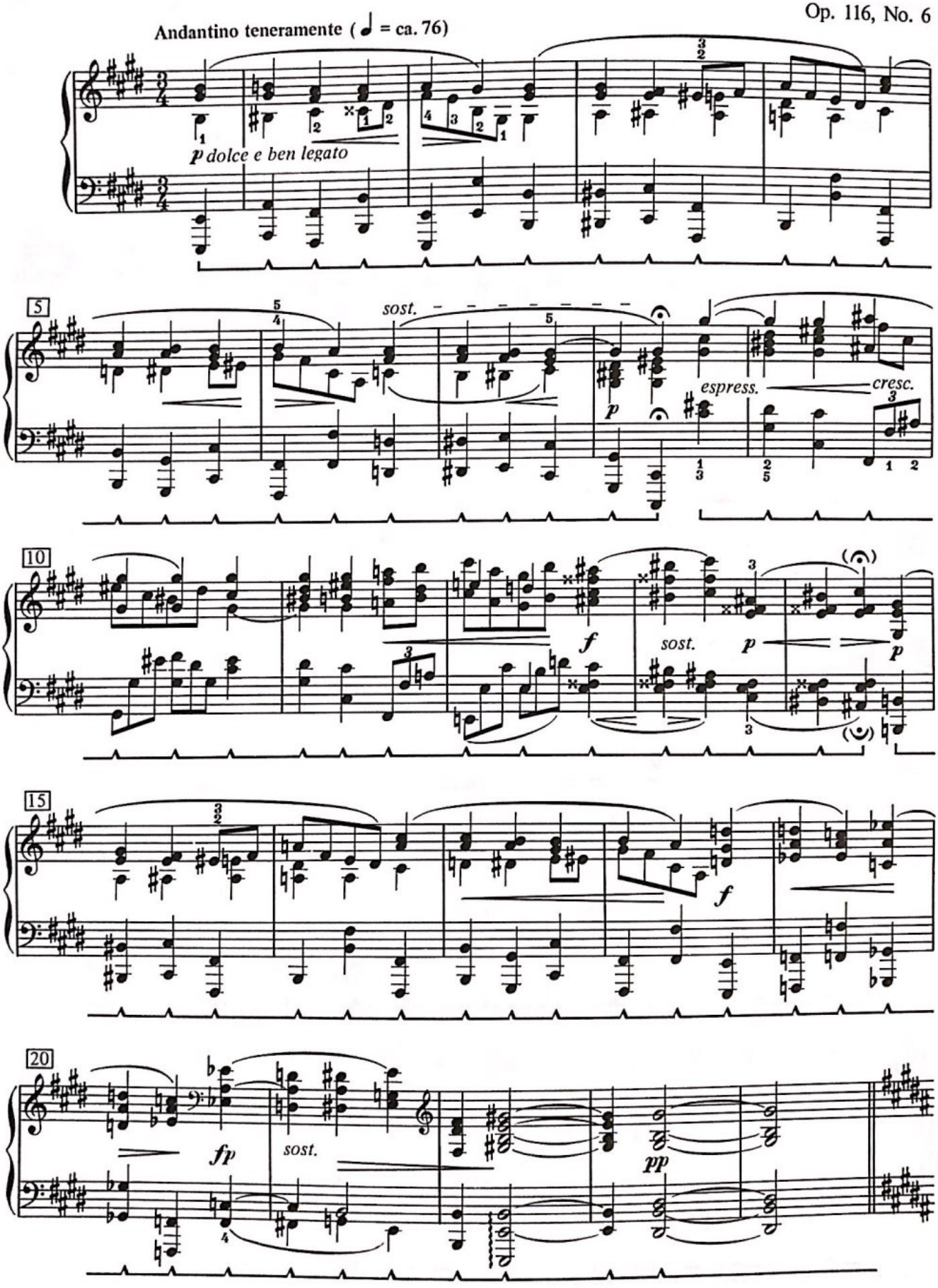


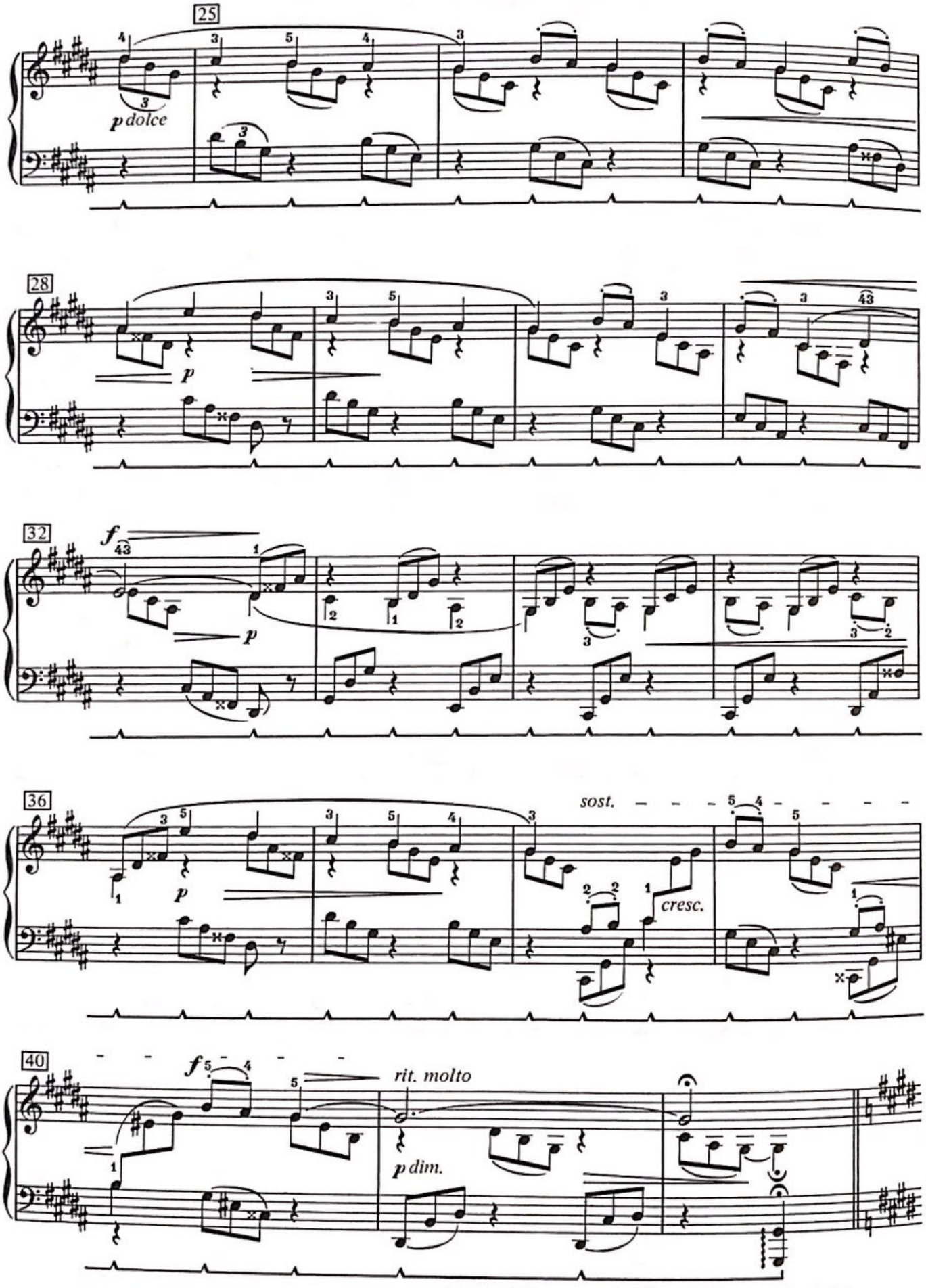


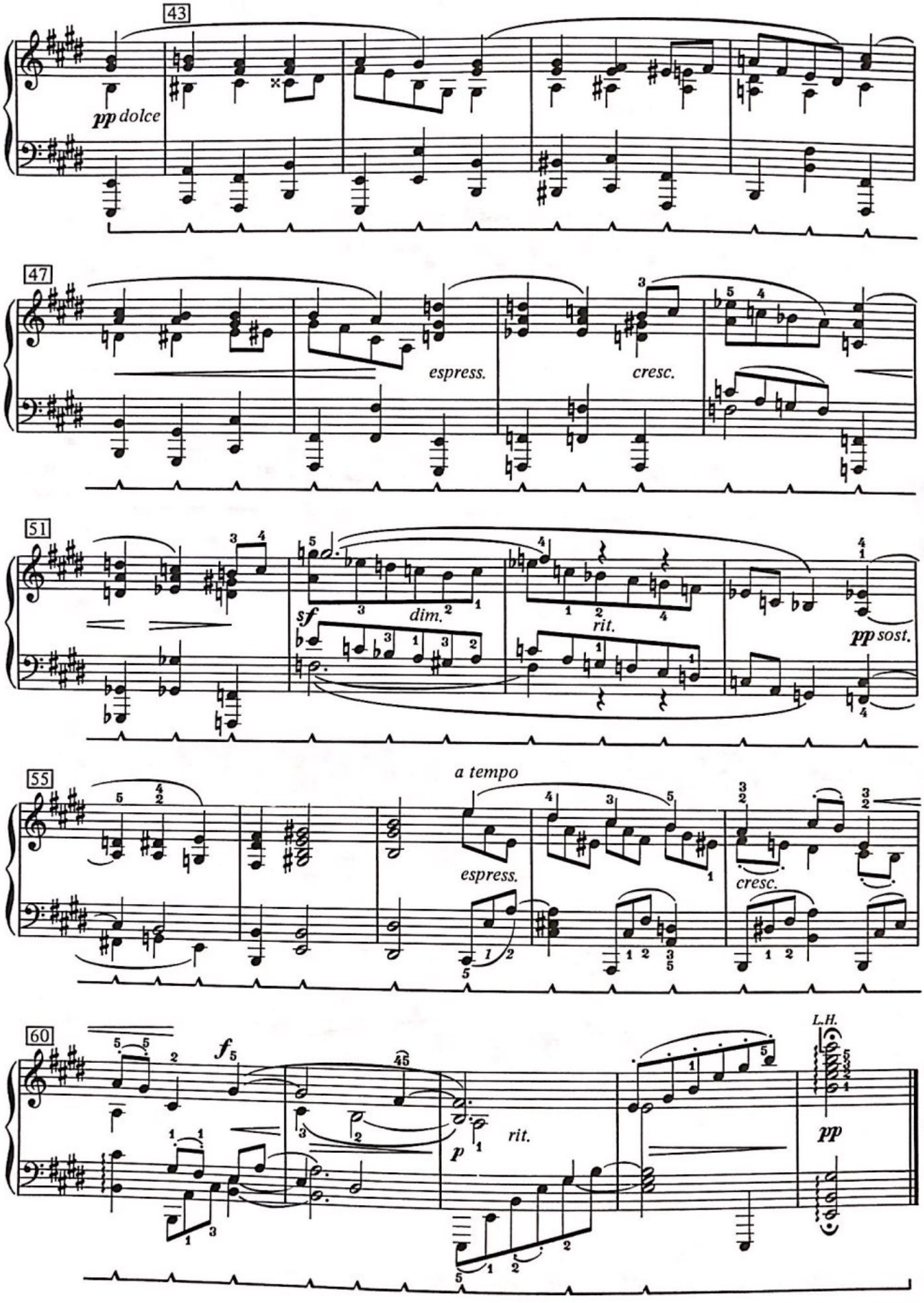
ⓐ Brahms indicates pedal at measure 49 only.

INTERMEZZO IN E

Op. 116, No. 6



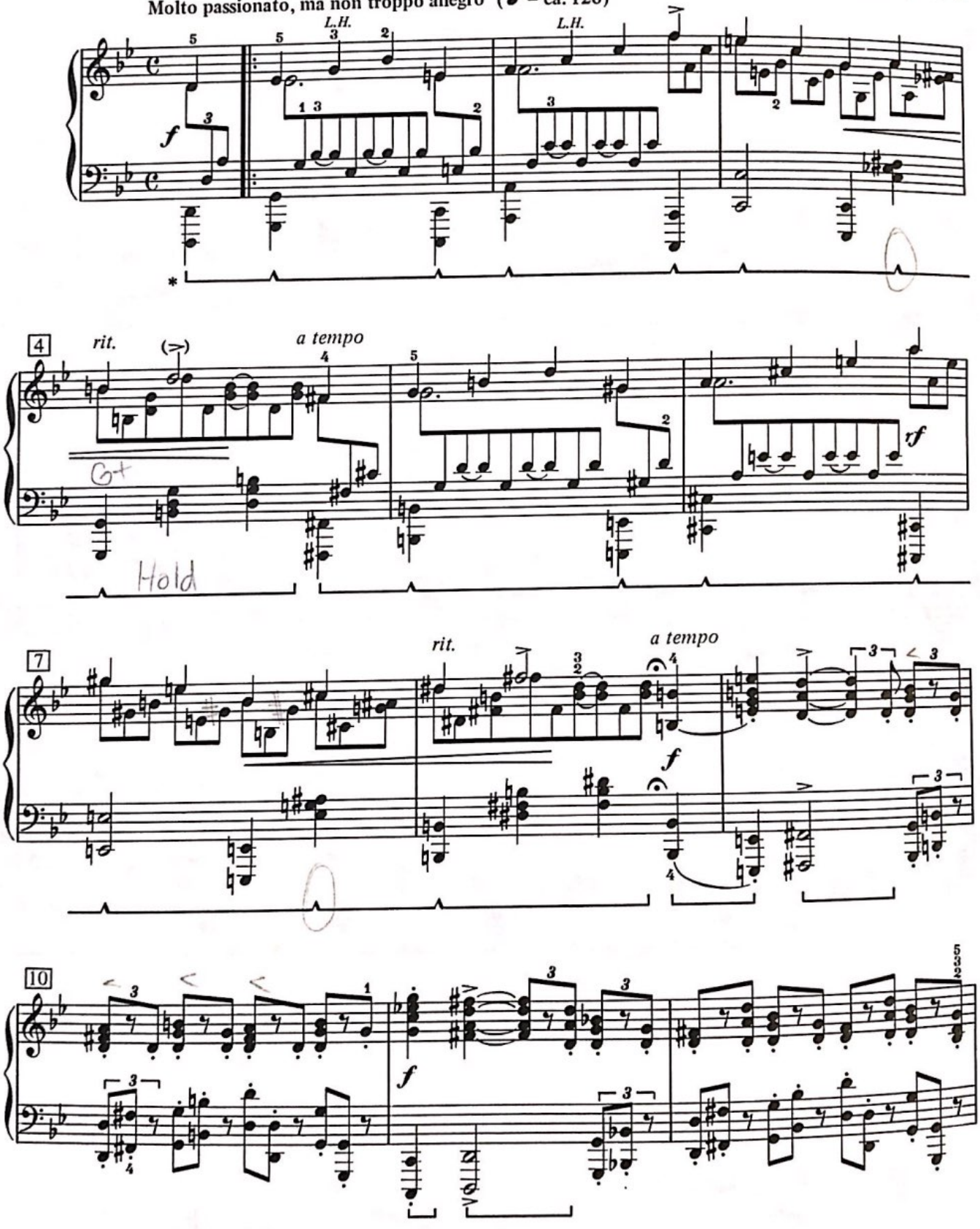




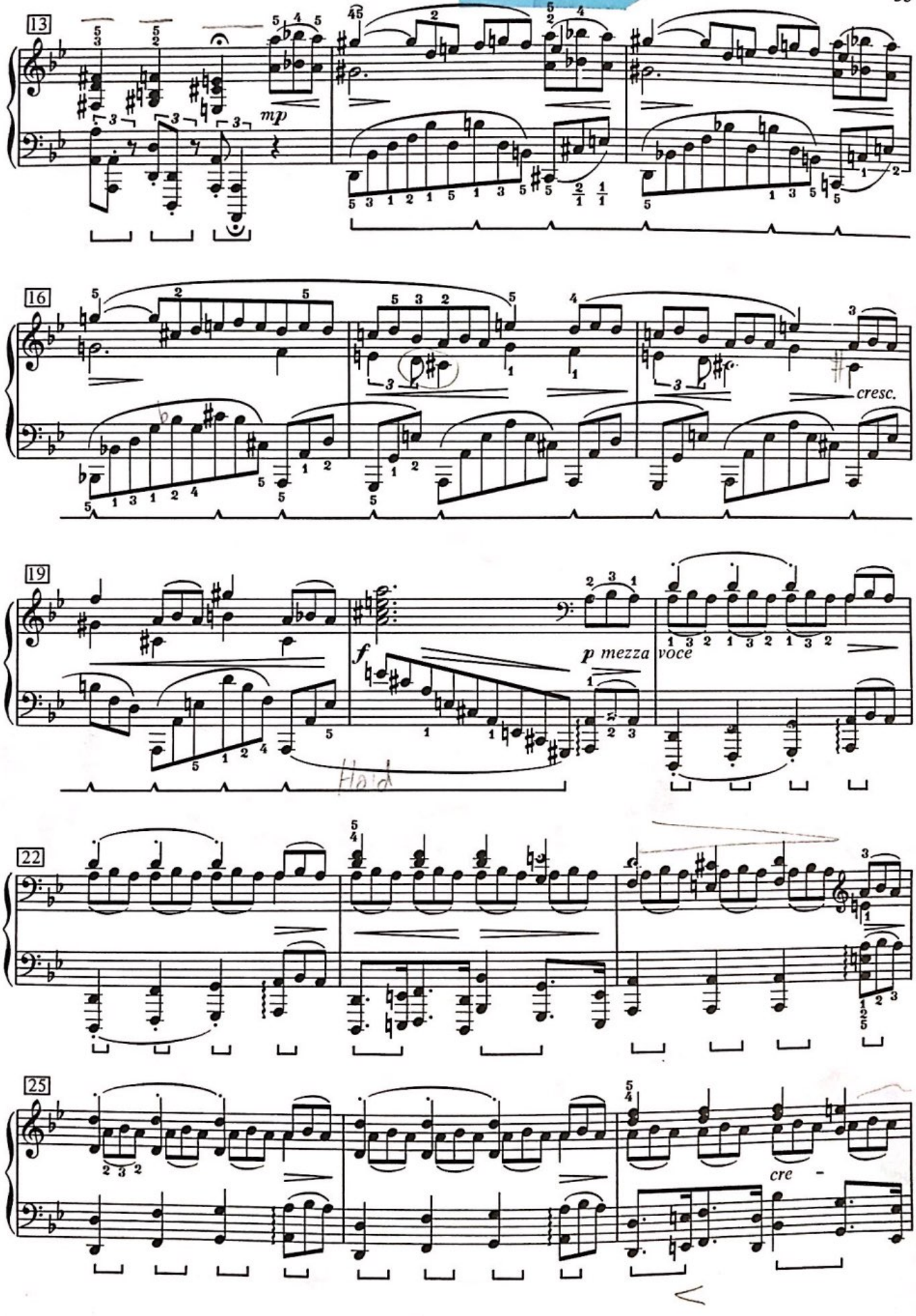
RHAPSODY IN G MINOR

Op. 79, No. 2

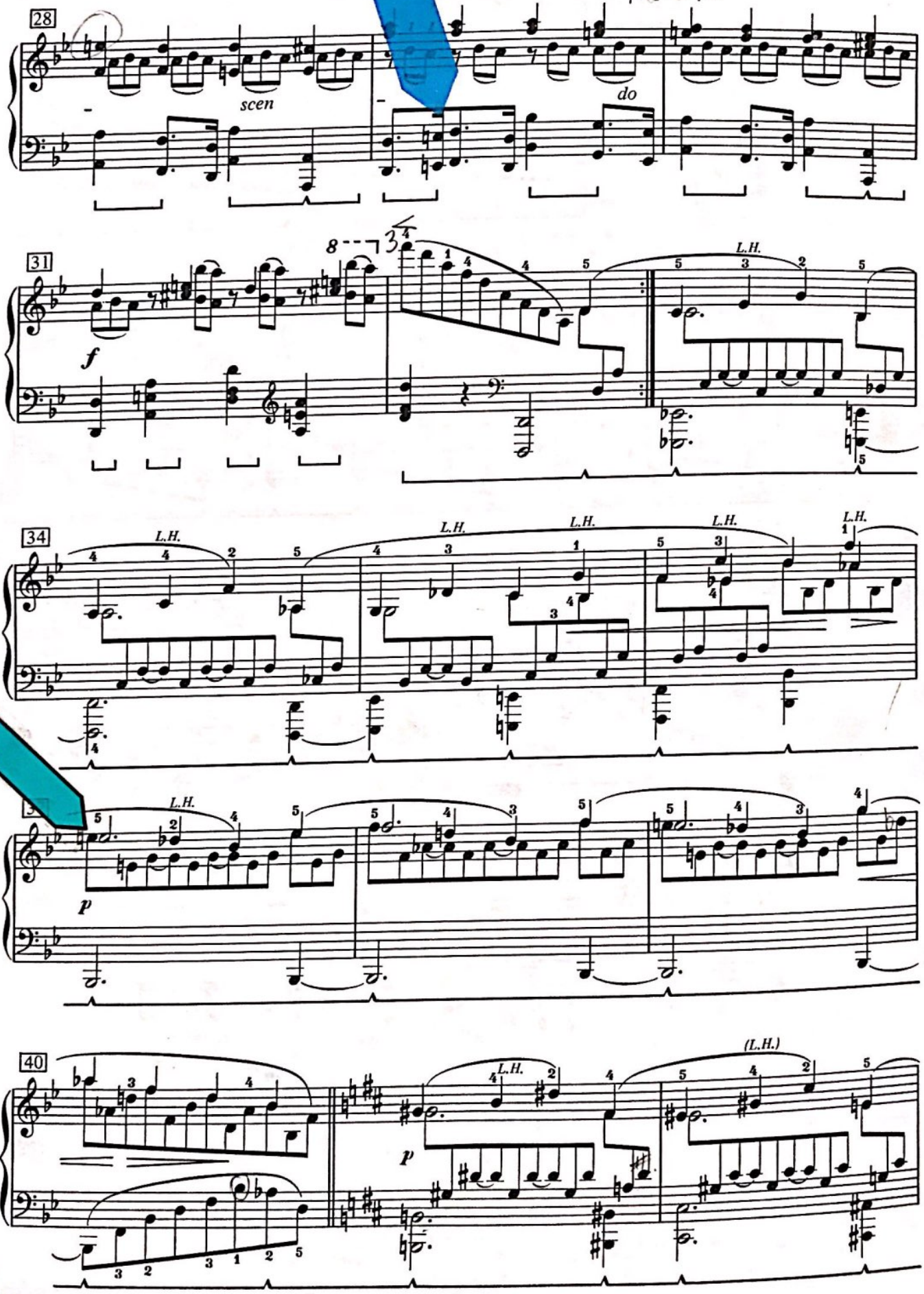
Molto passionato, ma non troppo allegro (♩ = ca. 126)

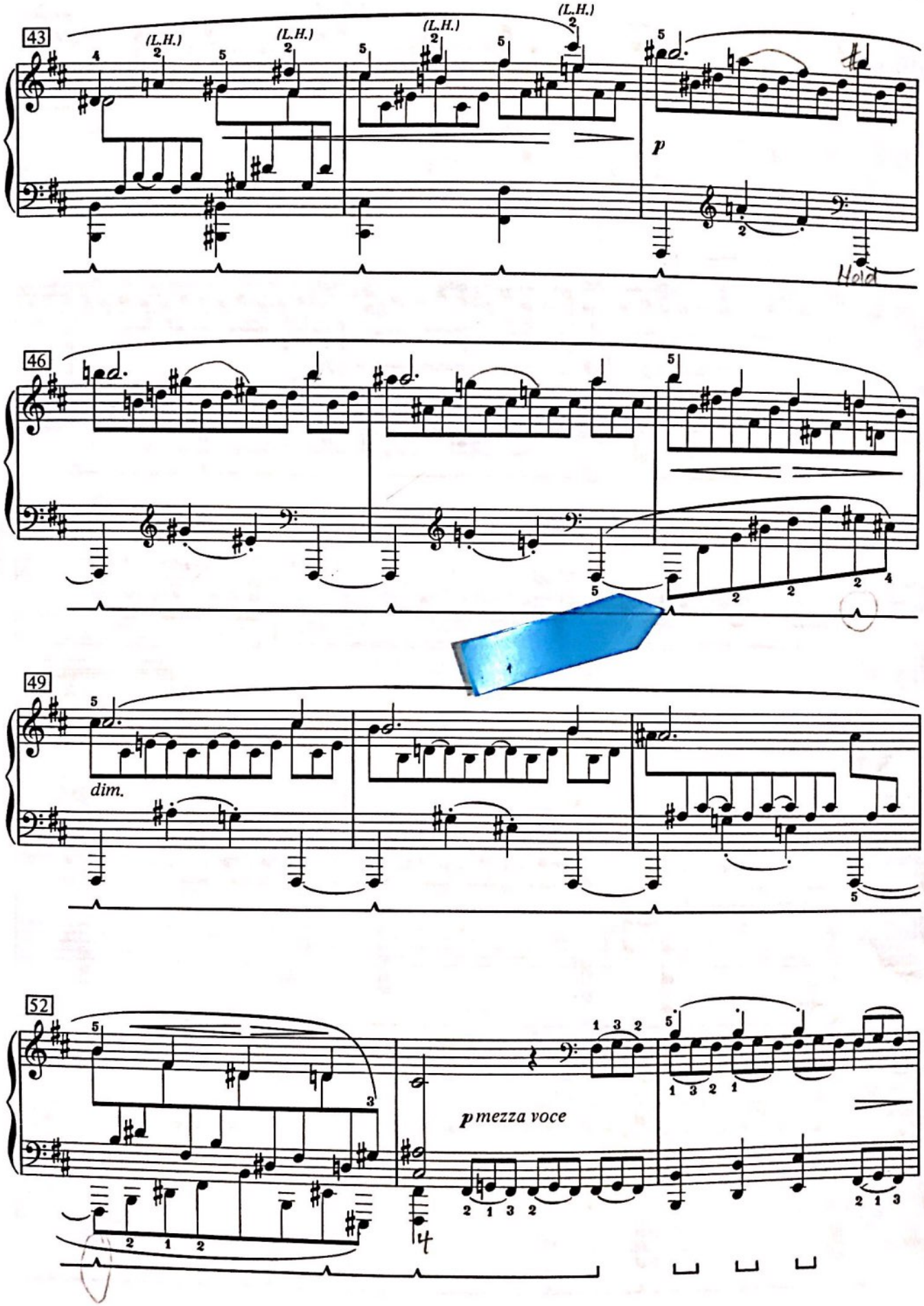


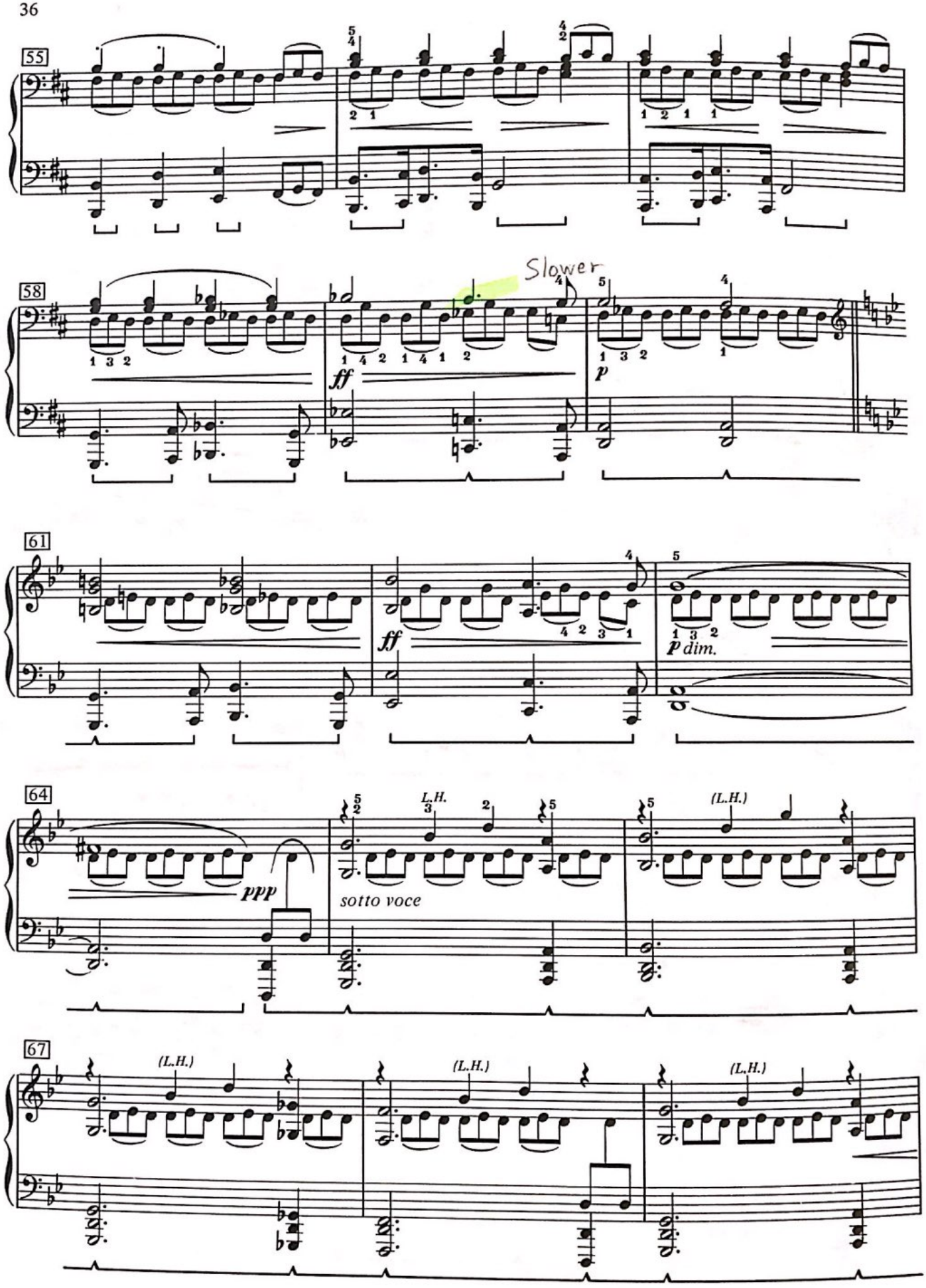
*Brahms left pedal indications in measures 1, 44, 65 (*Col pedal*). and 86.

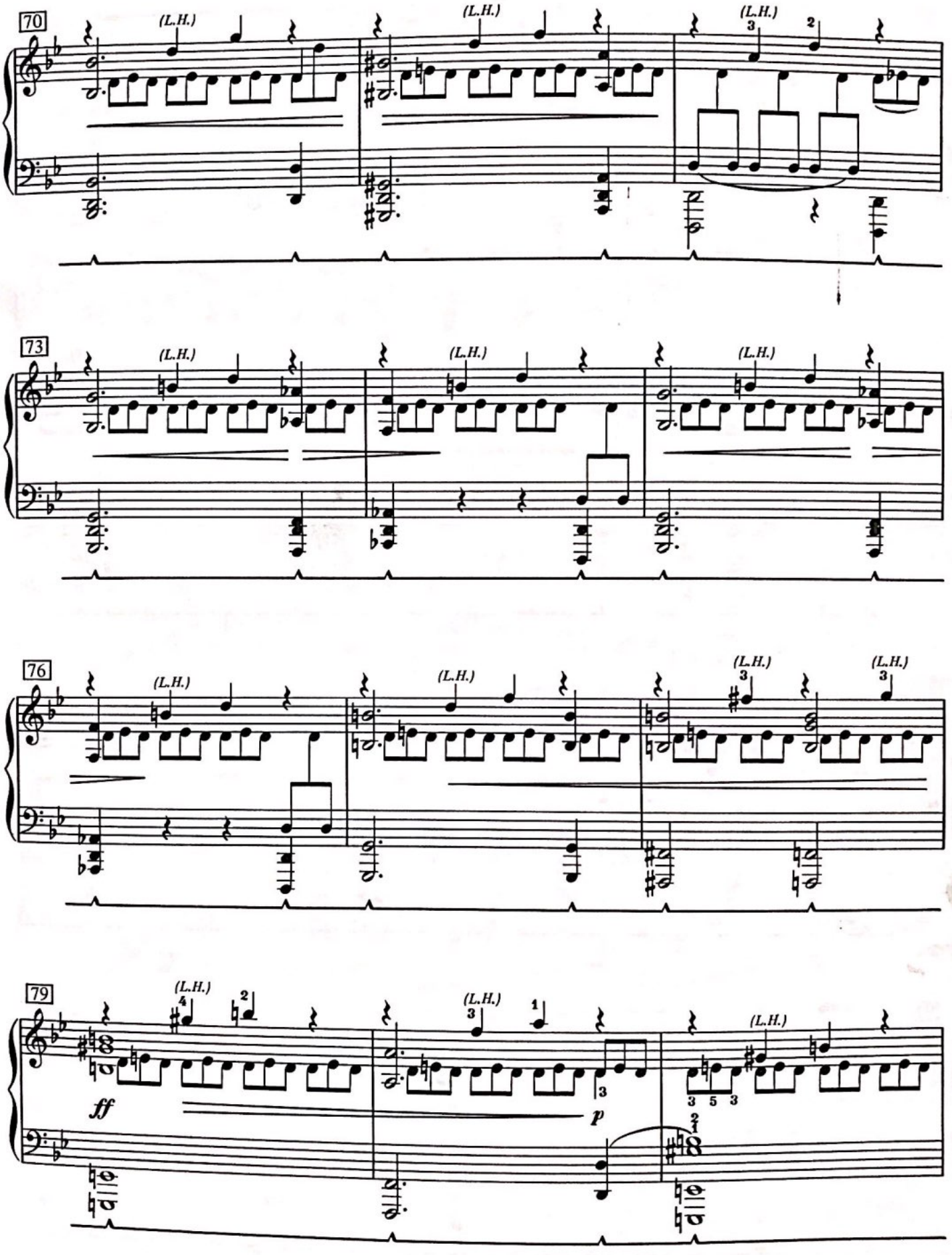


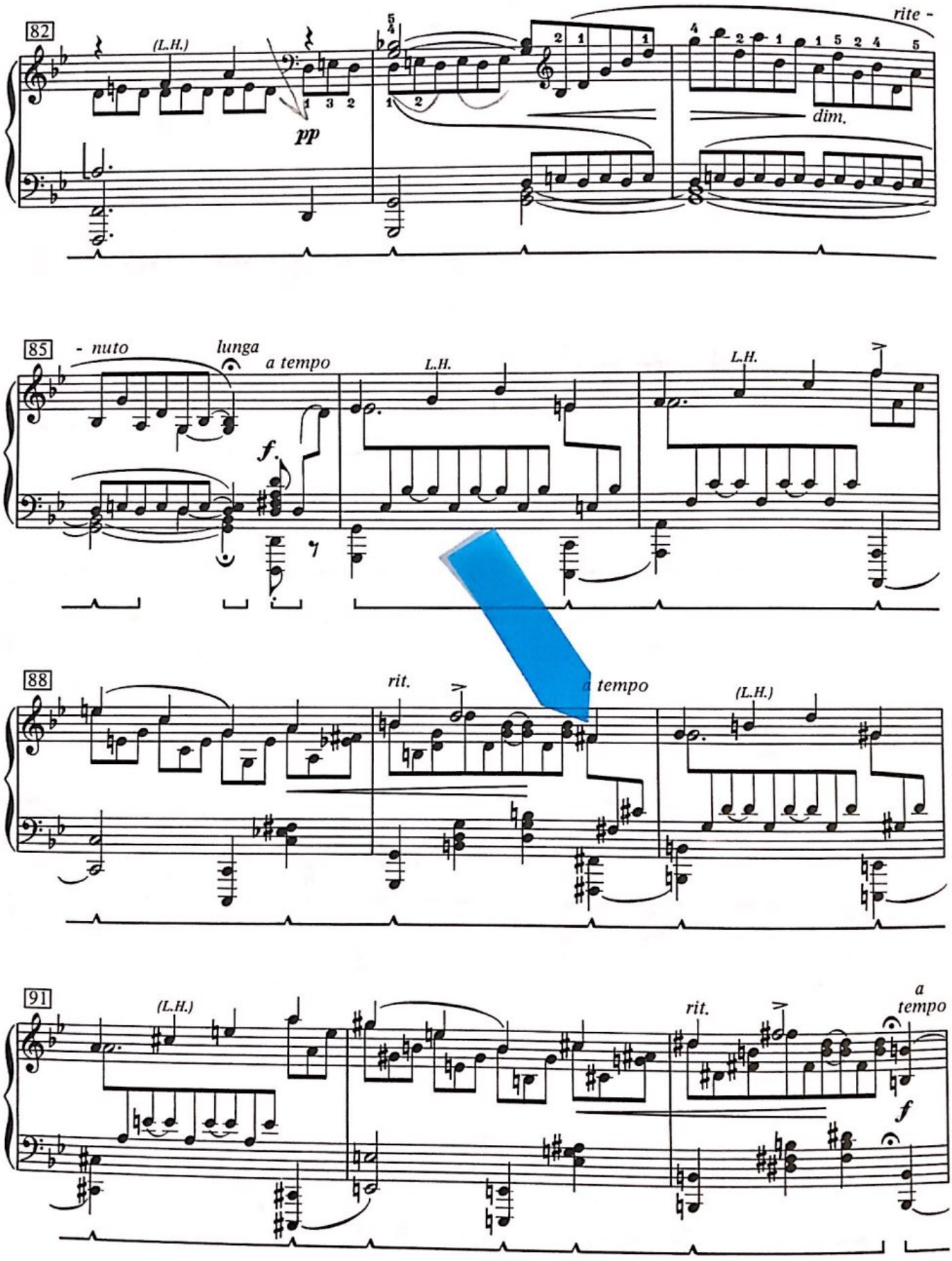
More RH

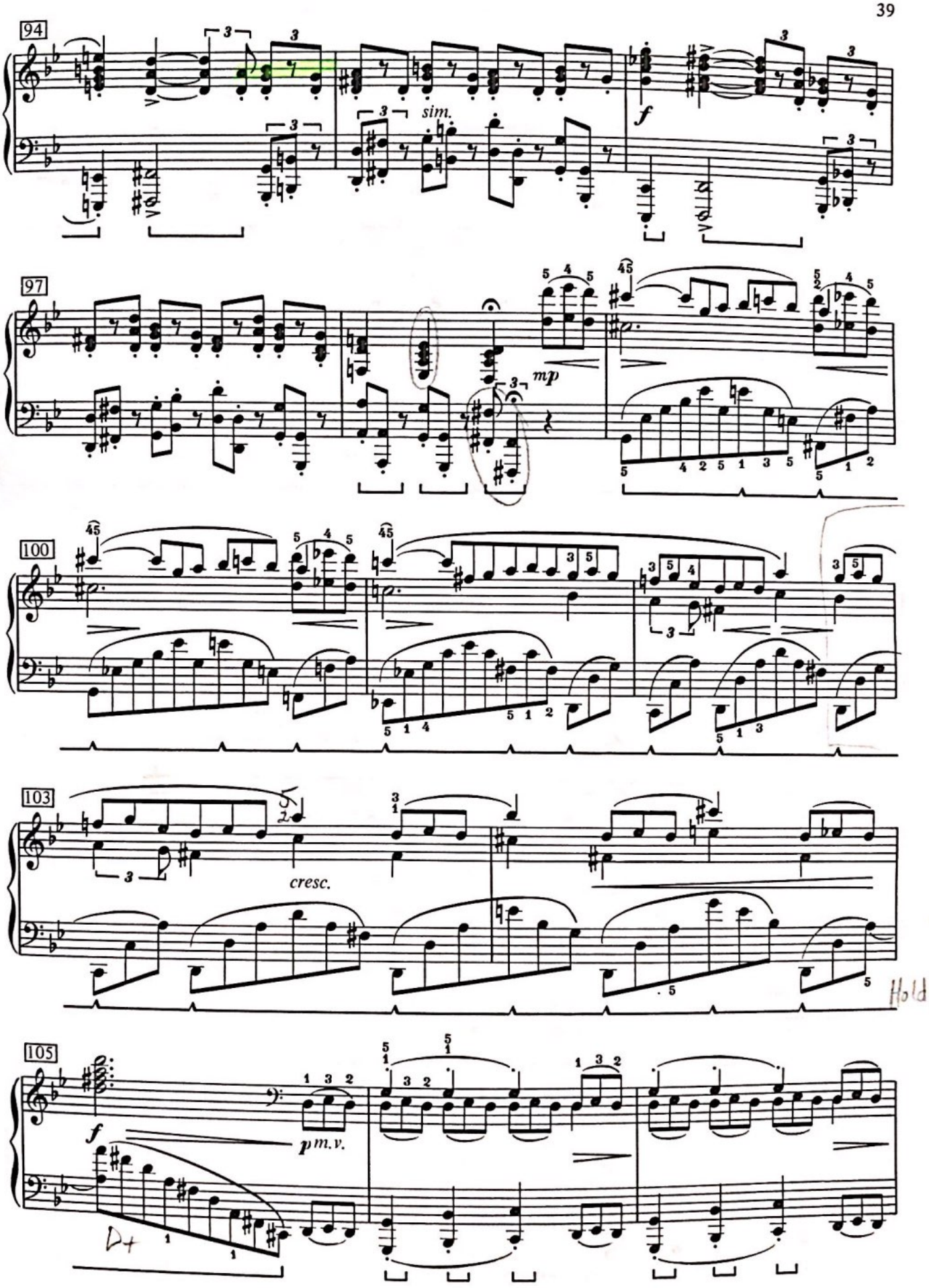


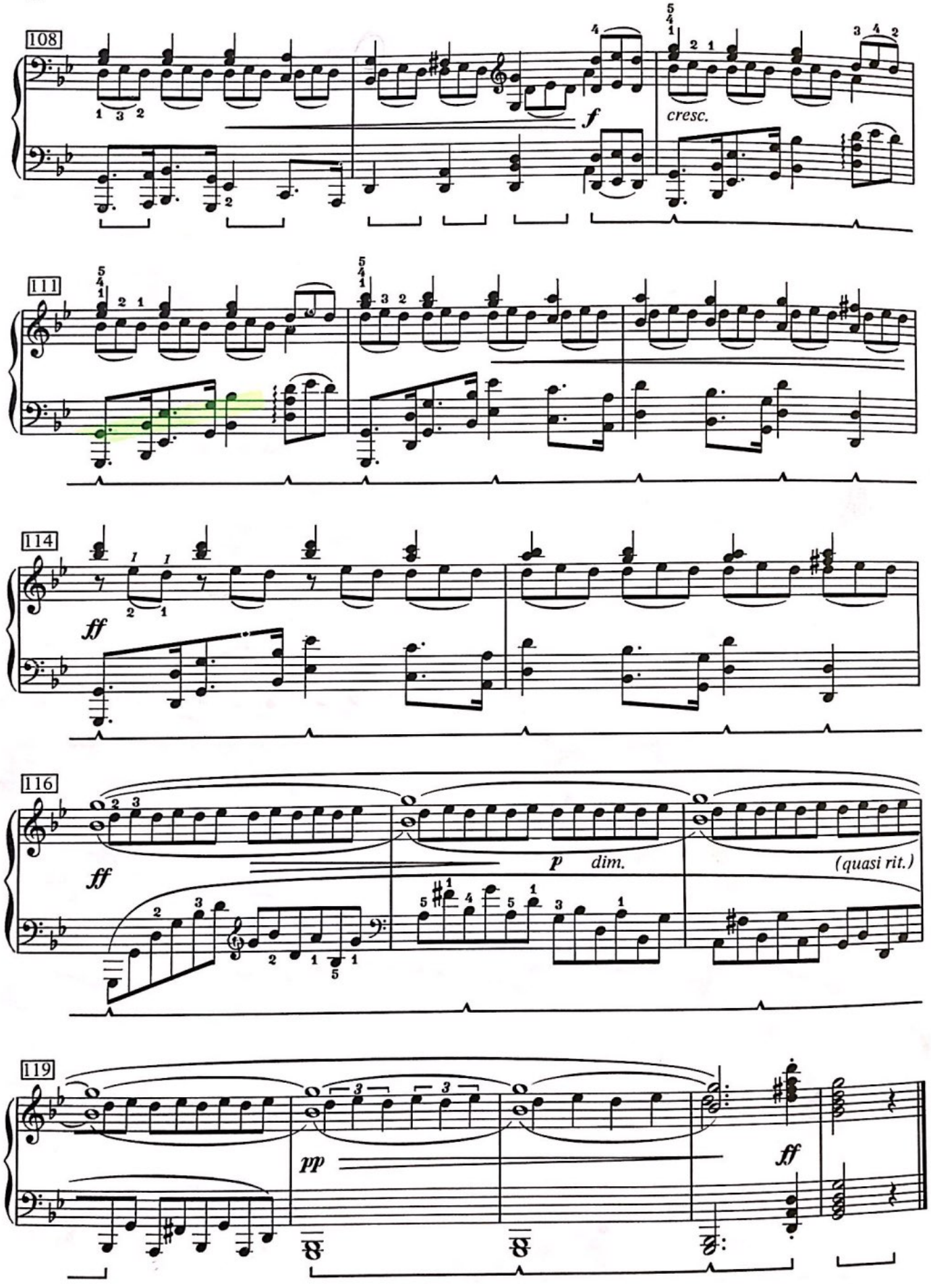






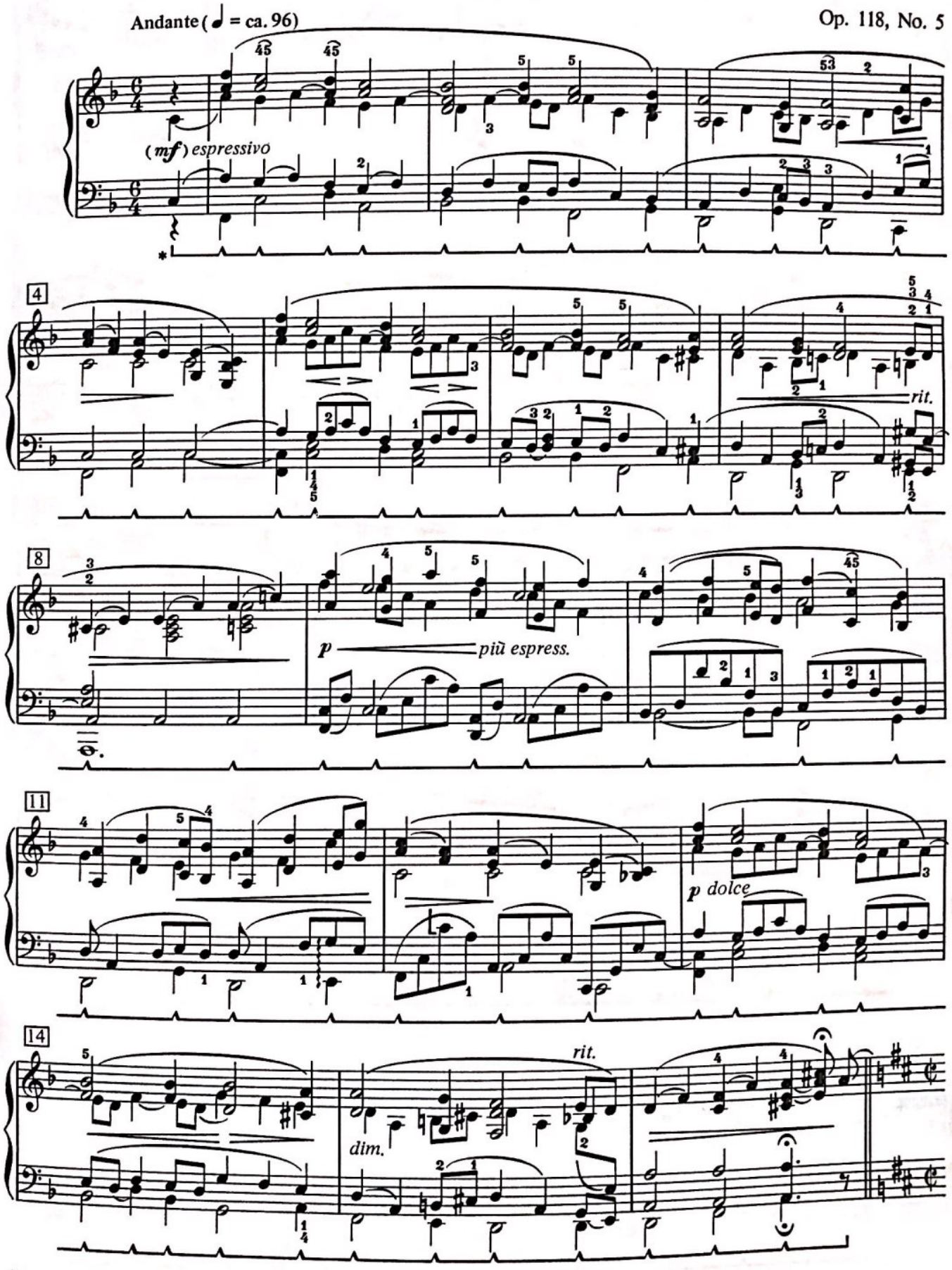




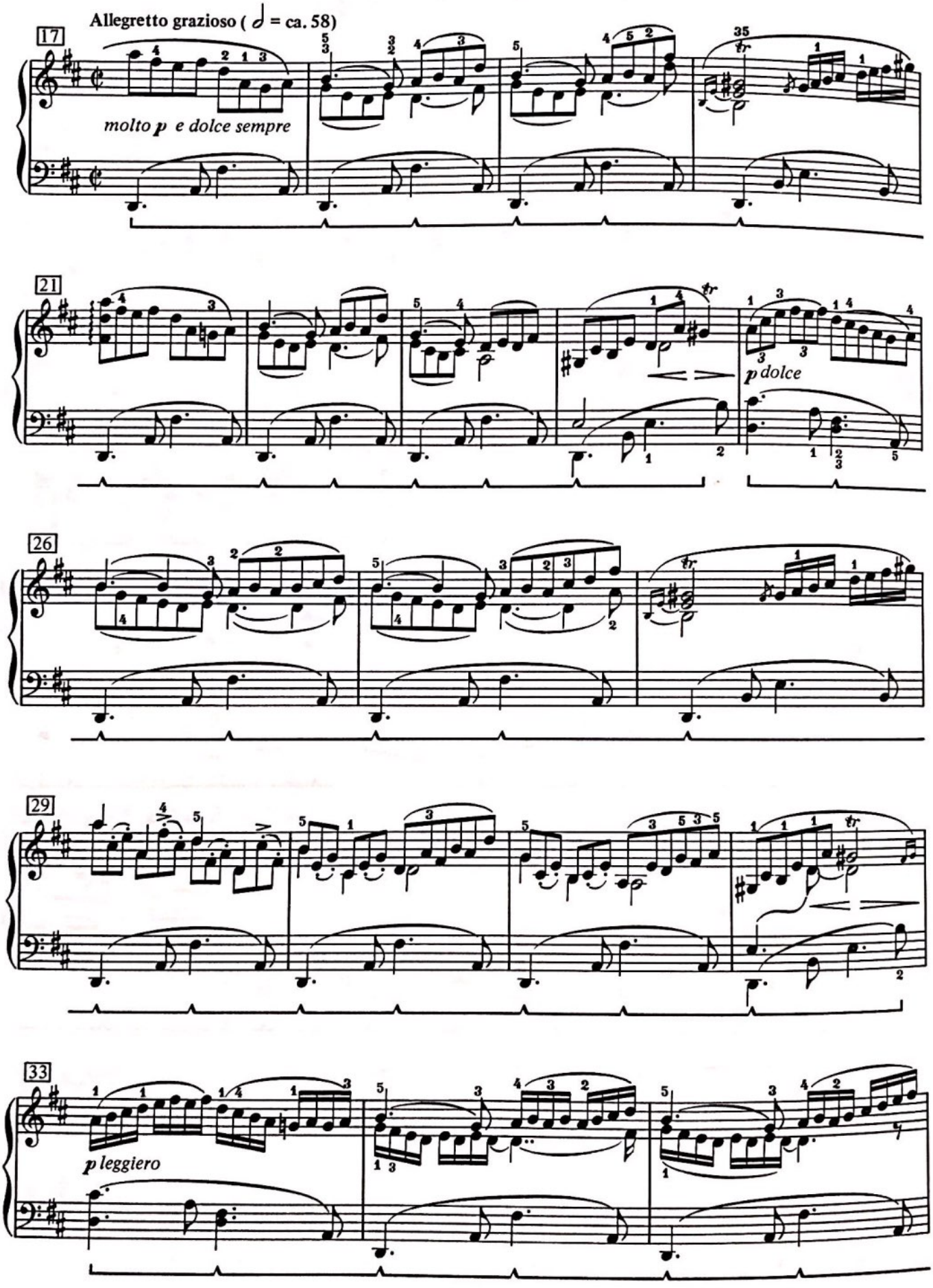


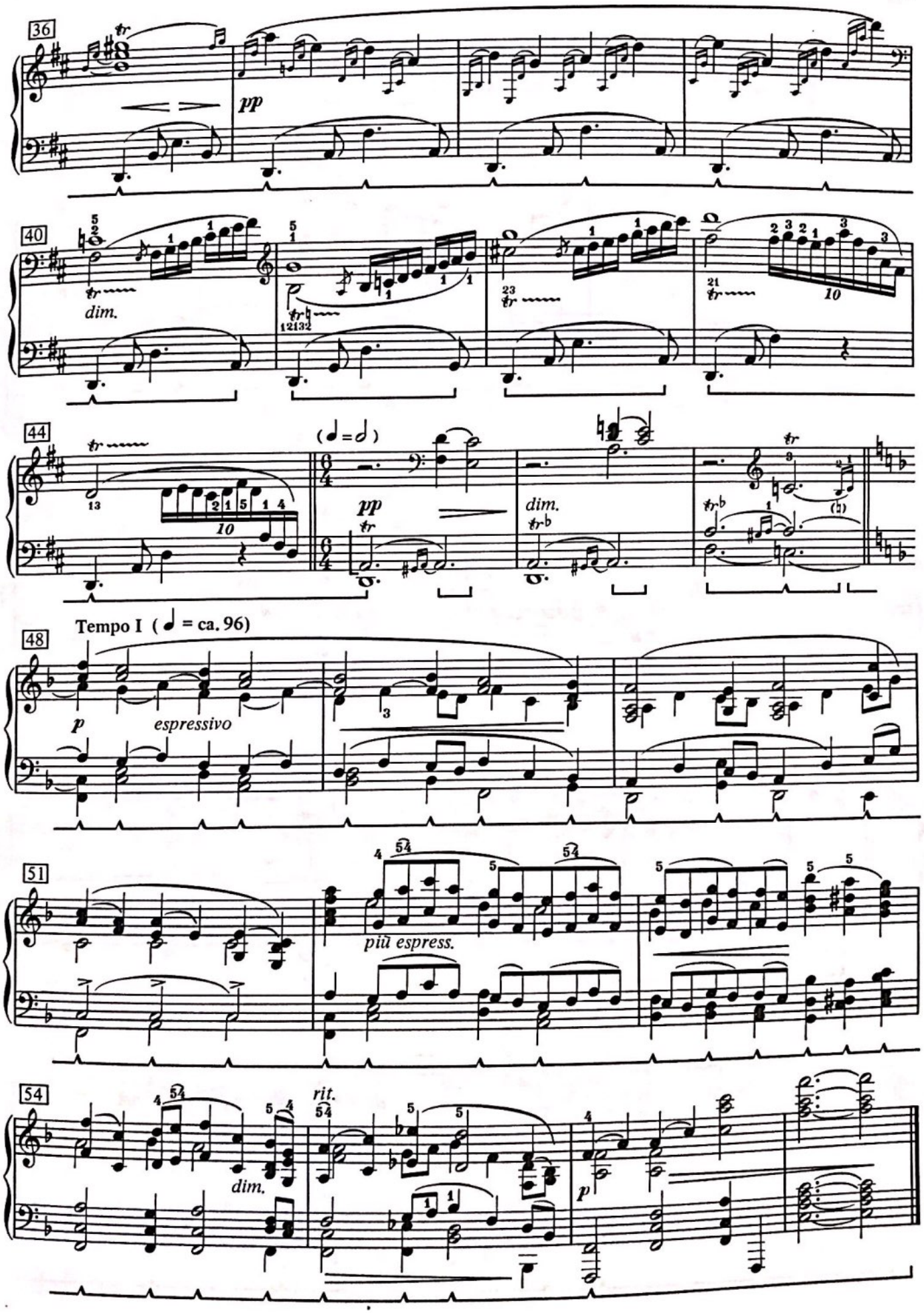
ROMANCE IN F

Andante (♩ = ca. 96) Op. 118, No. 5

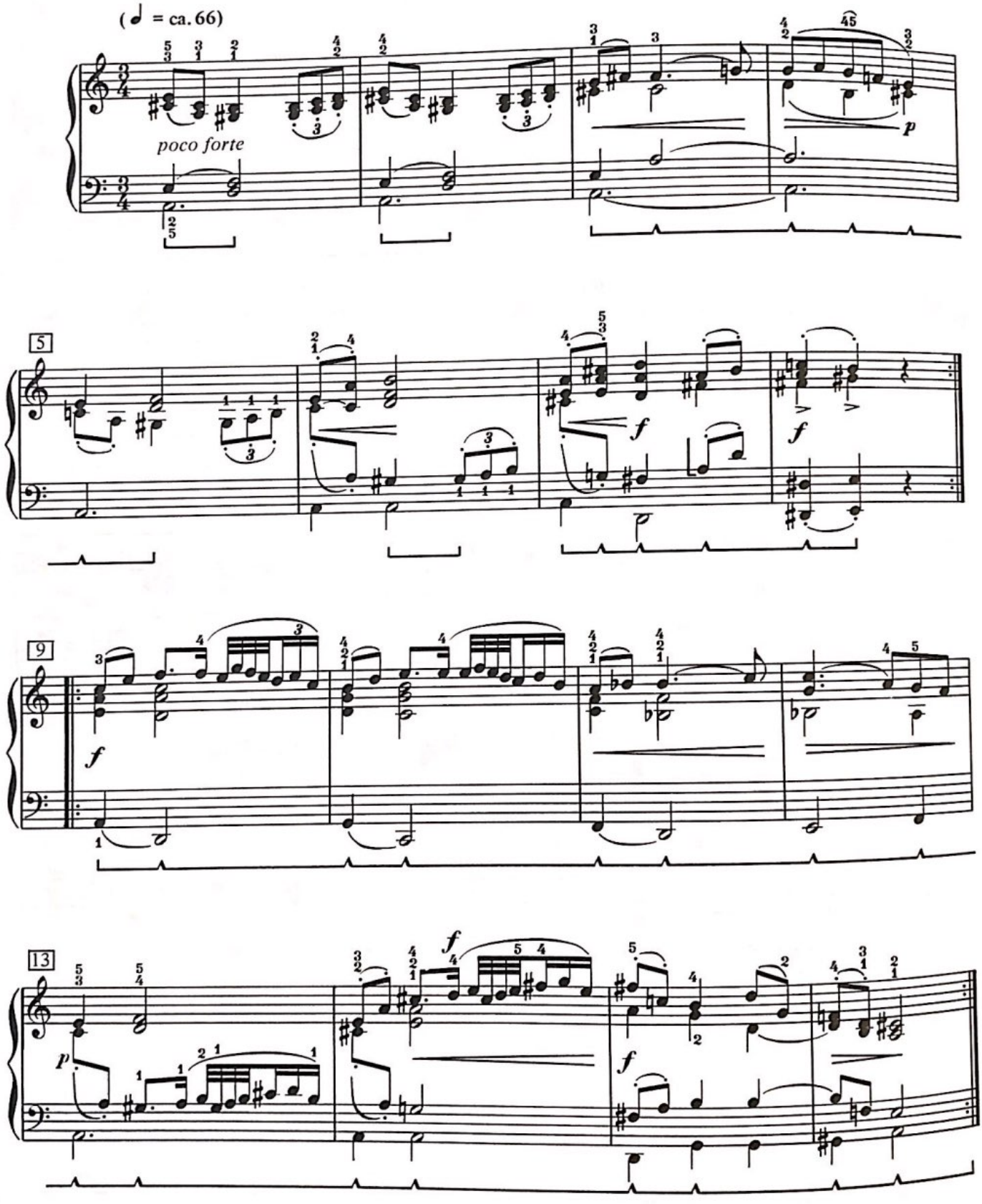


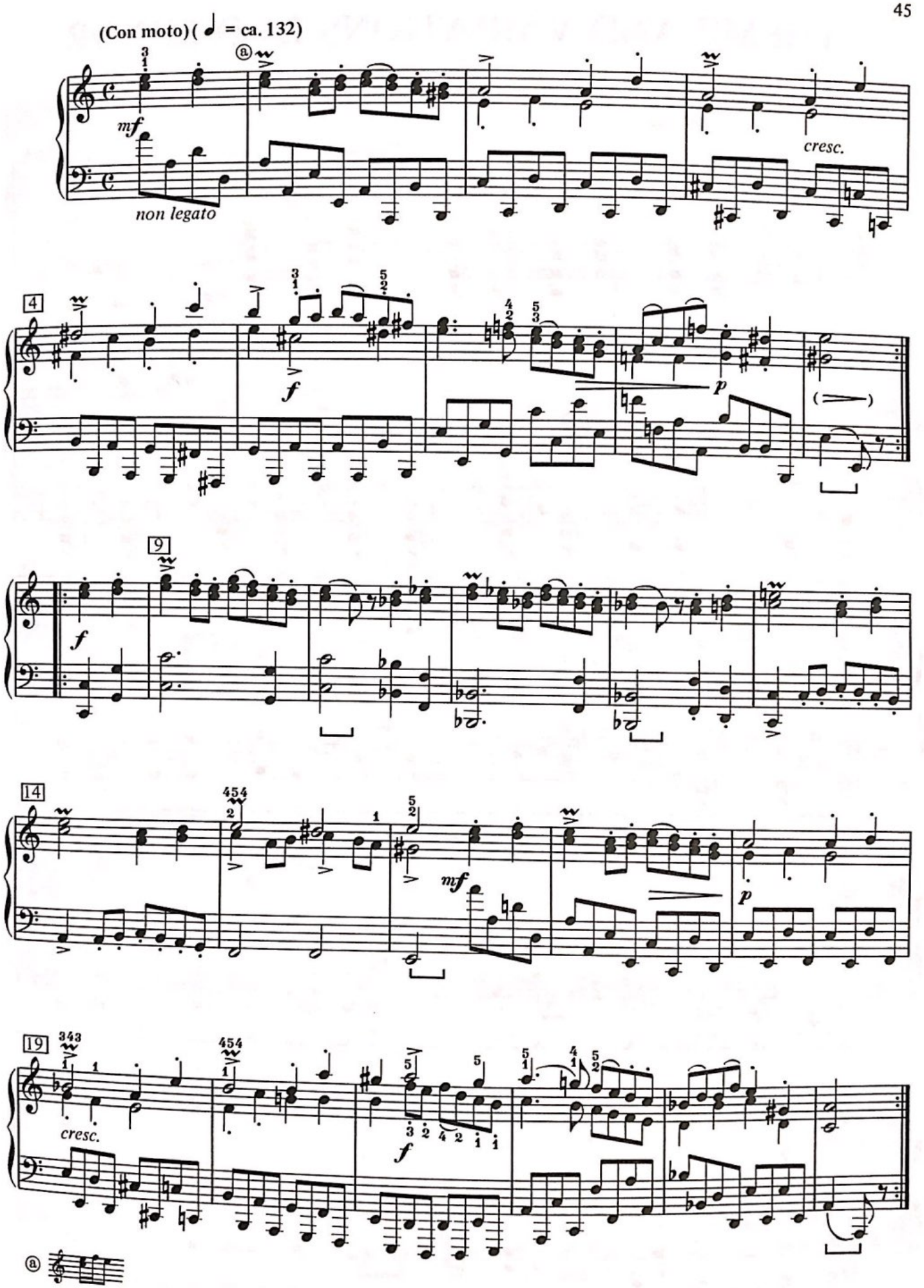
*Brahms indicated pedal in measure 56 only.





SARABANDE AND GAVOTTE IN A MINOR



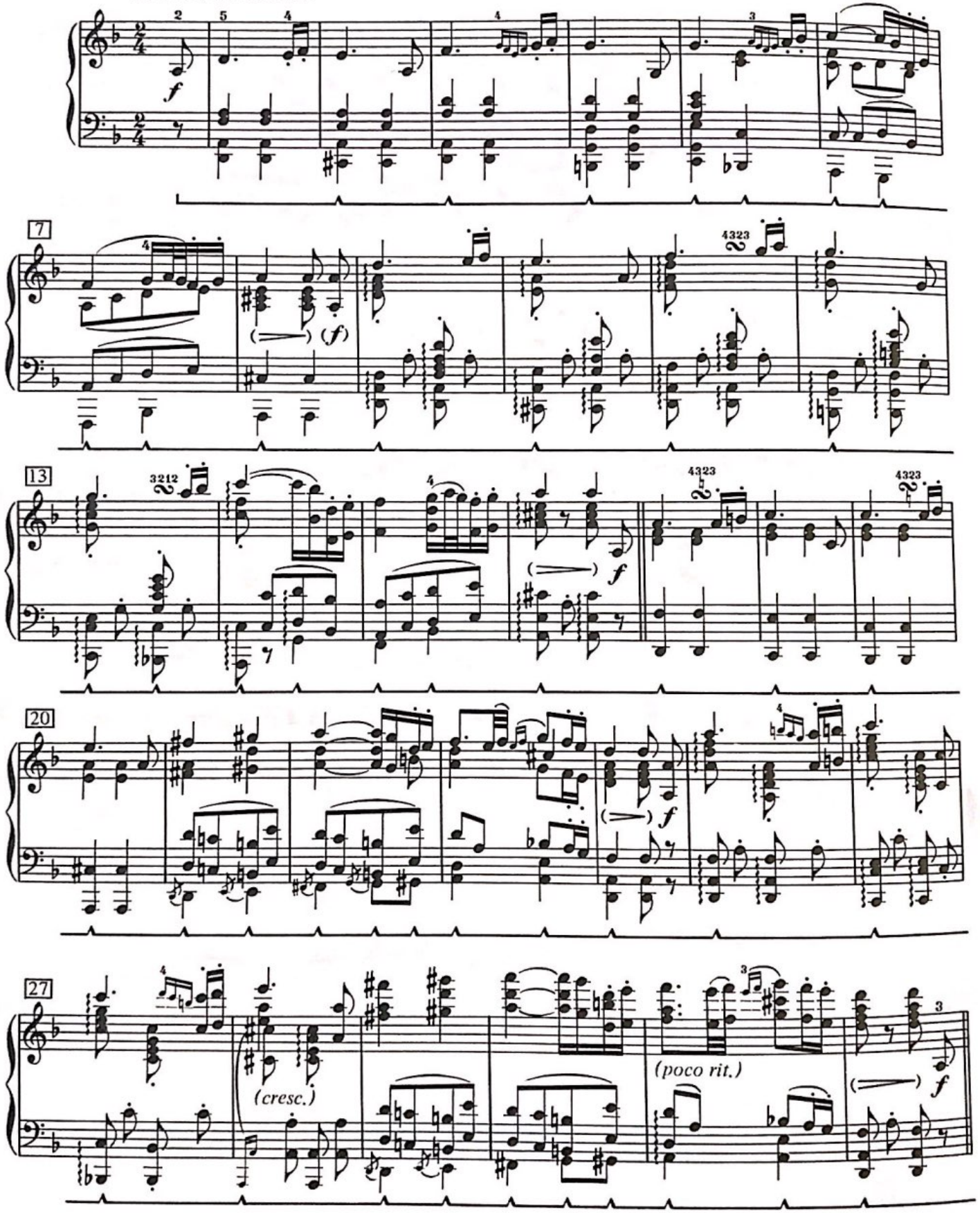


THEME AND VARIATIONS IN D MINOR

[Thema] (♩ = ca. 44)

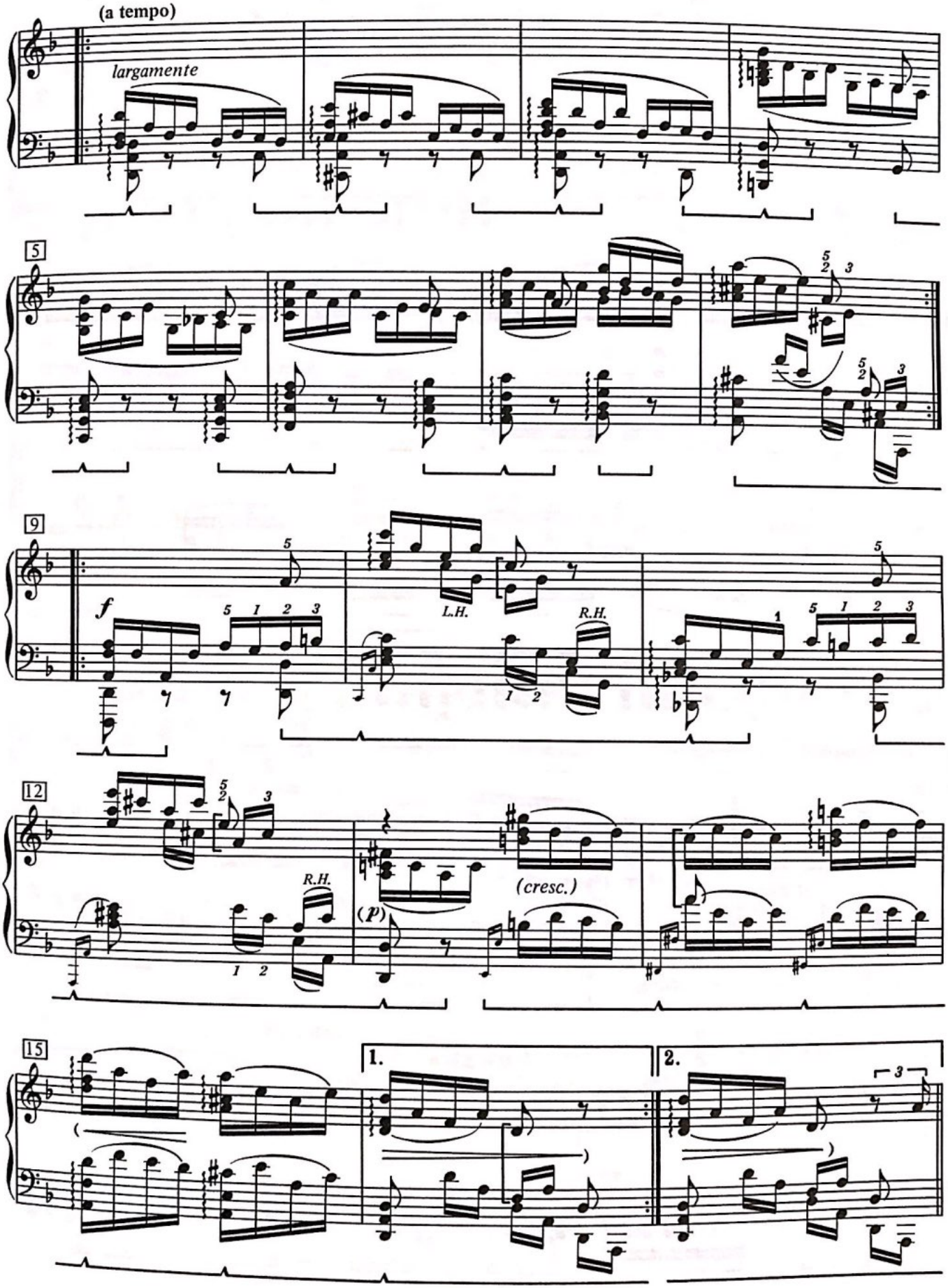
Andante, ma moderato

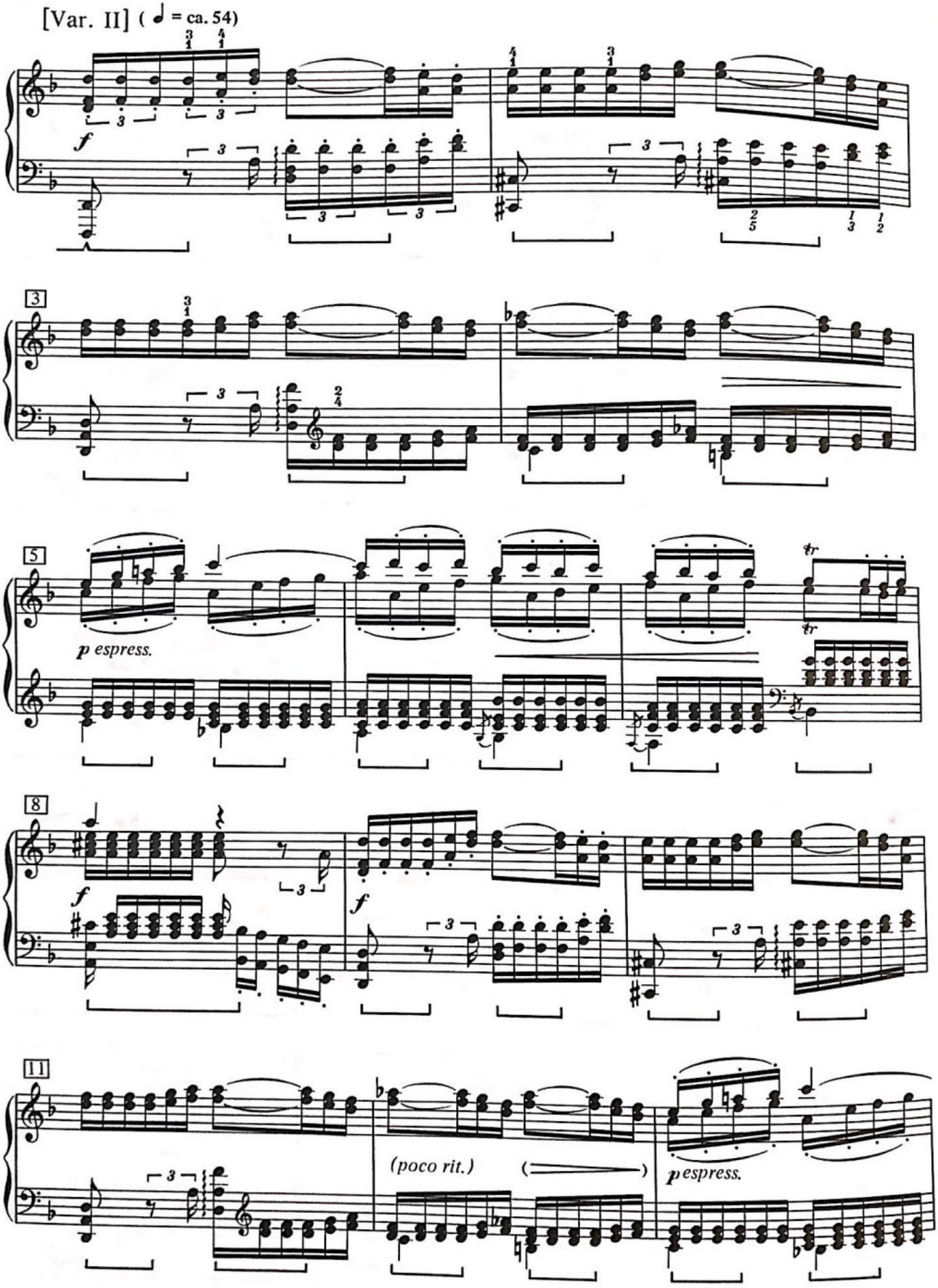
Op. 18

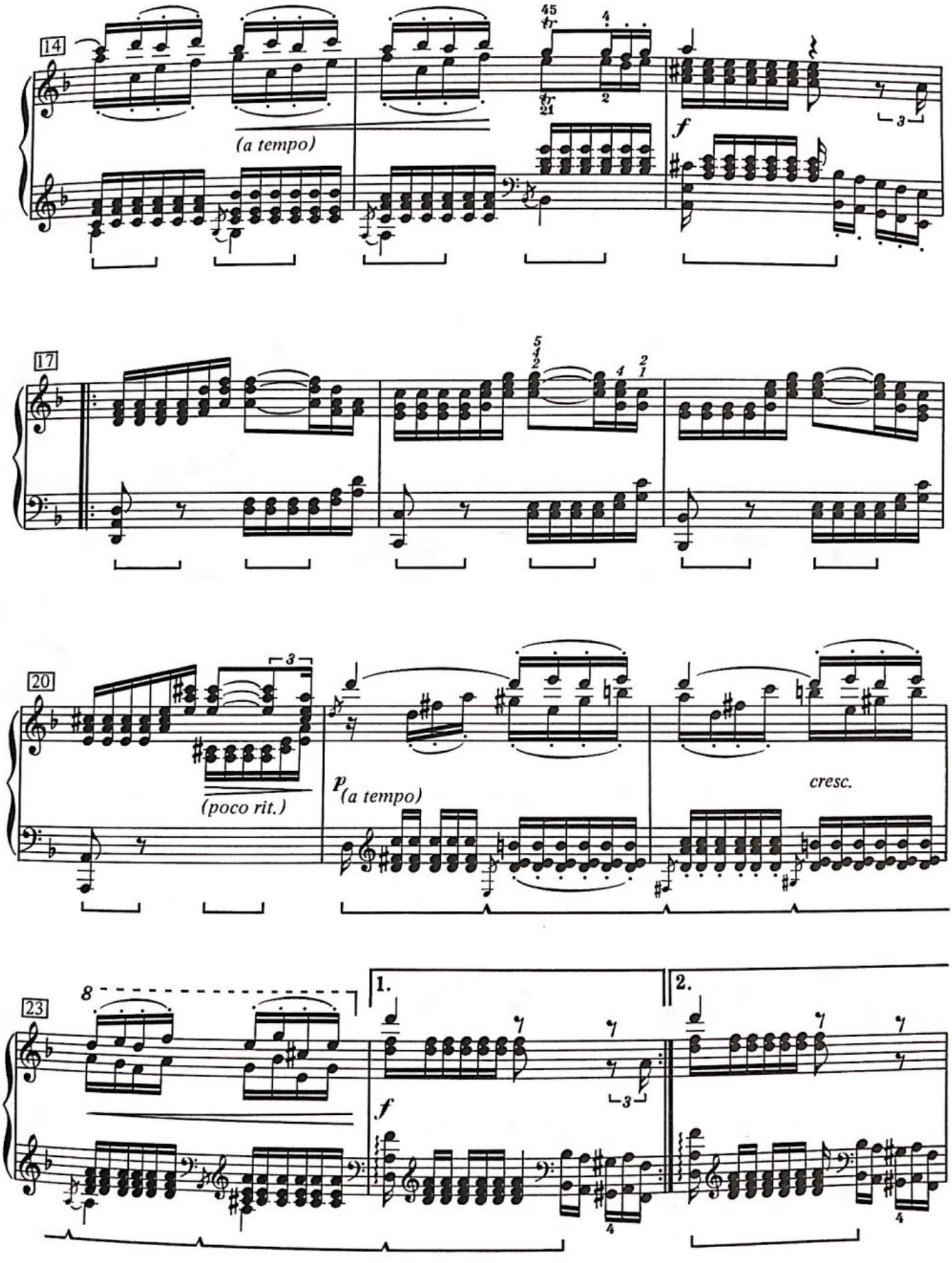


[Var. I] (♩ = ca. 48)

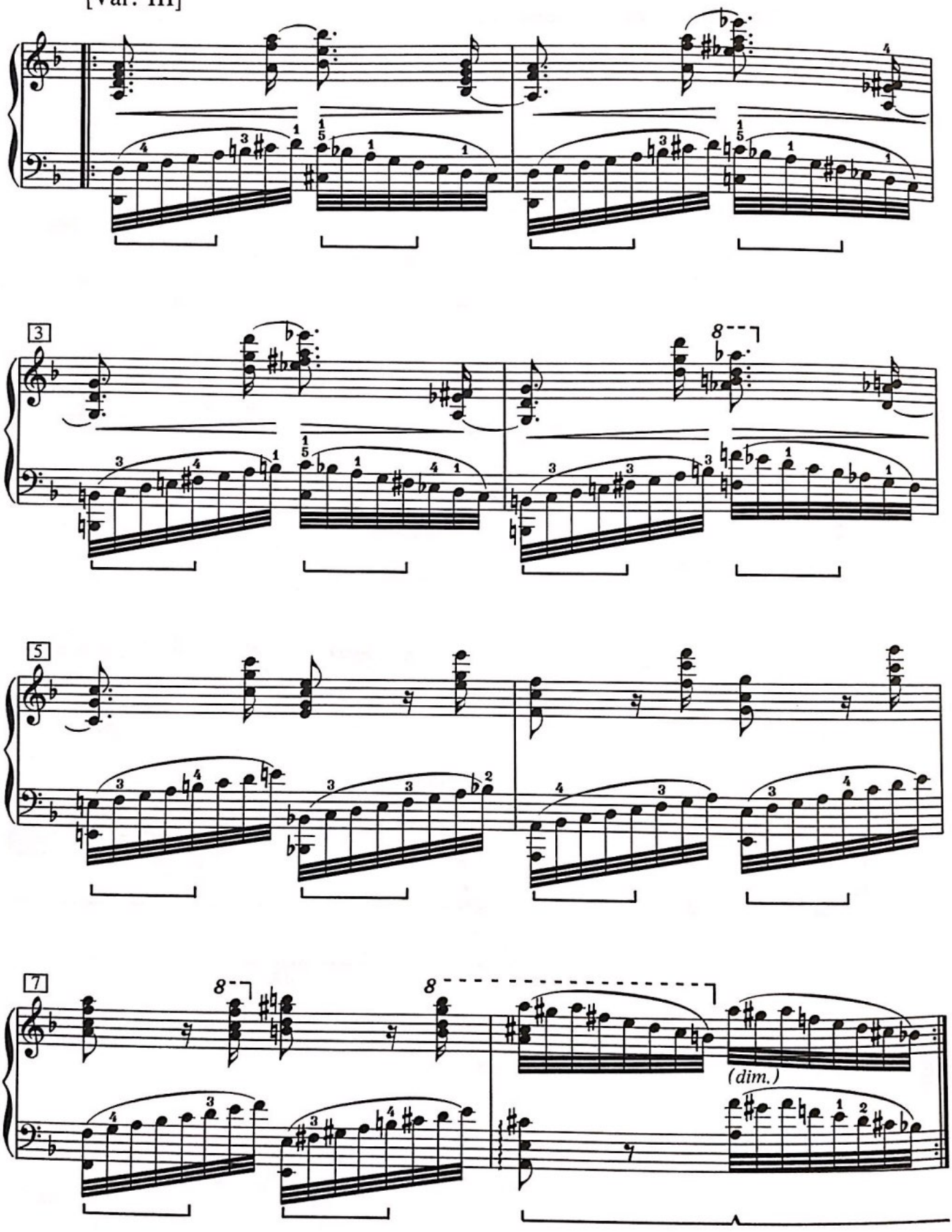
(a tempo)

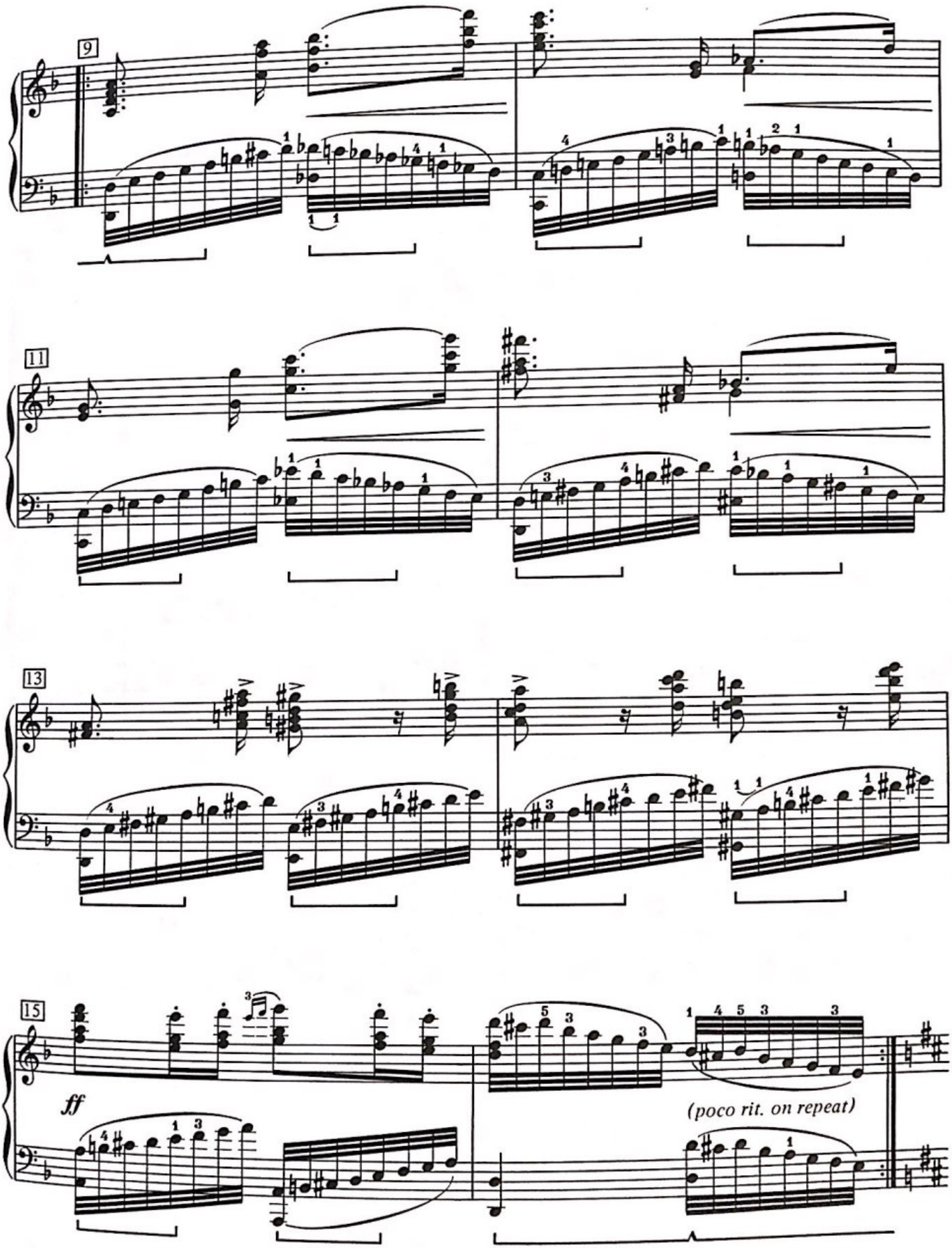


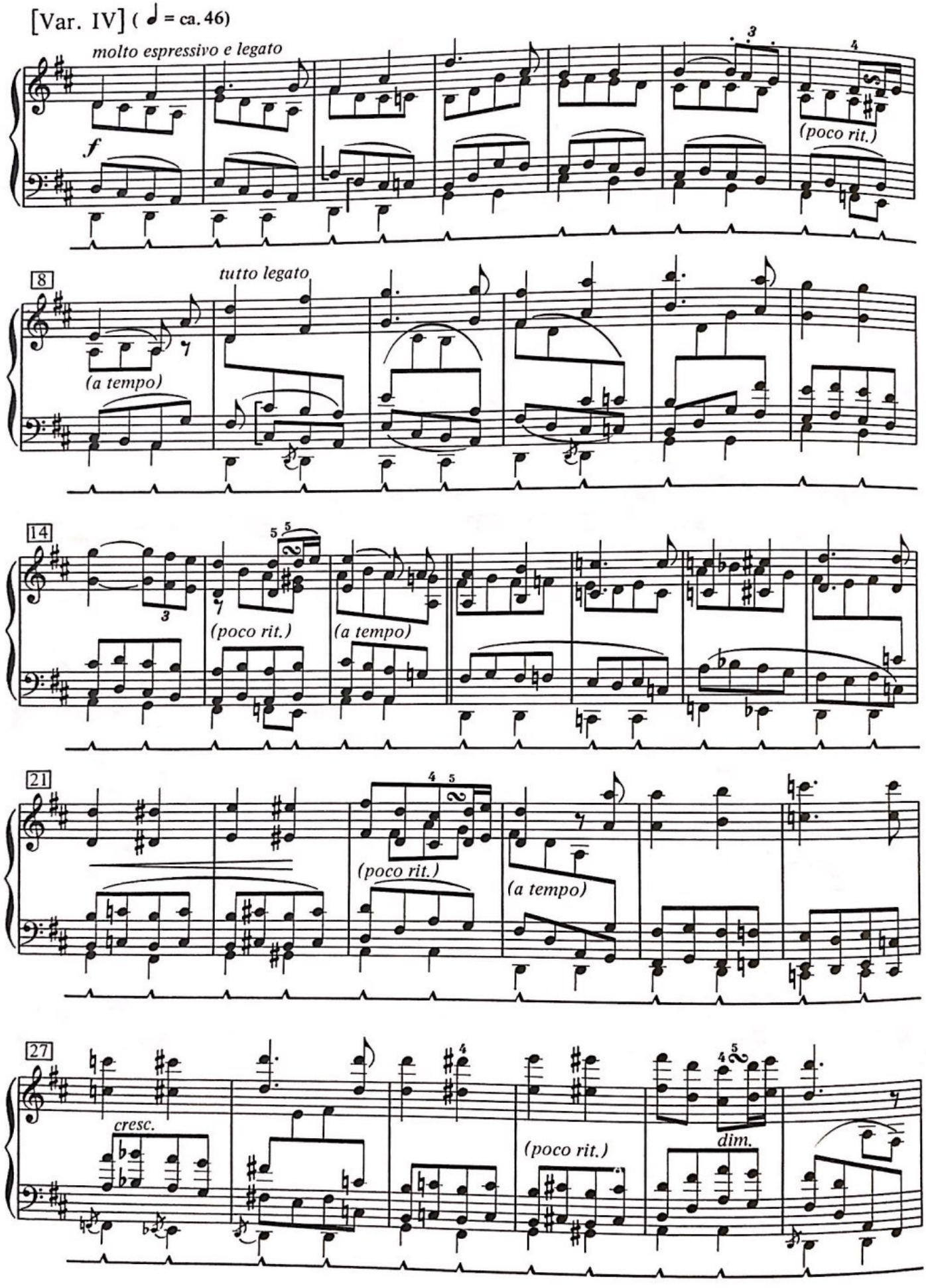


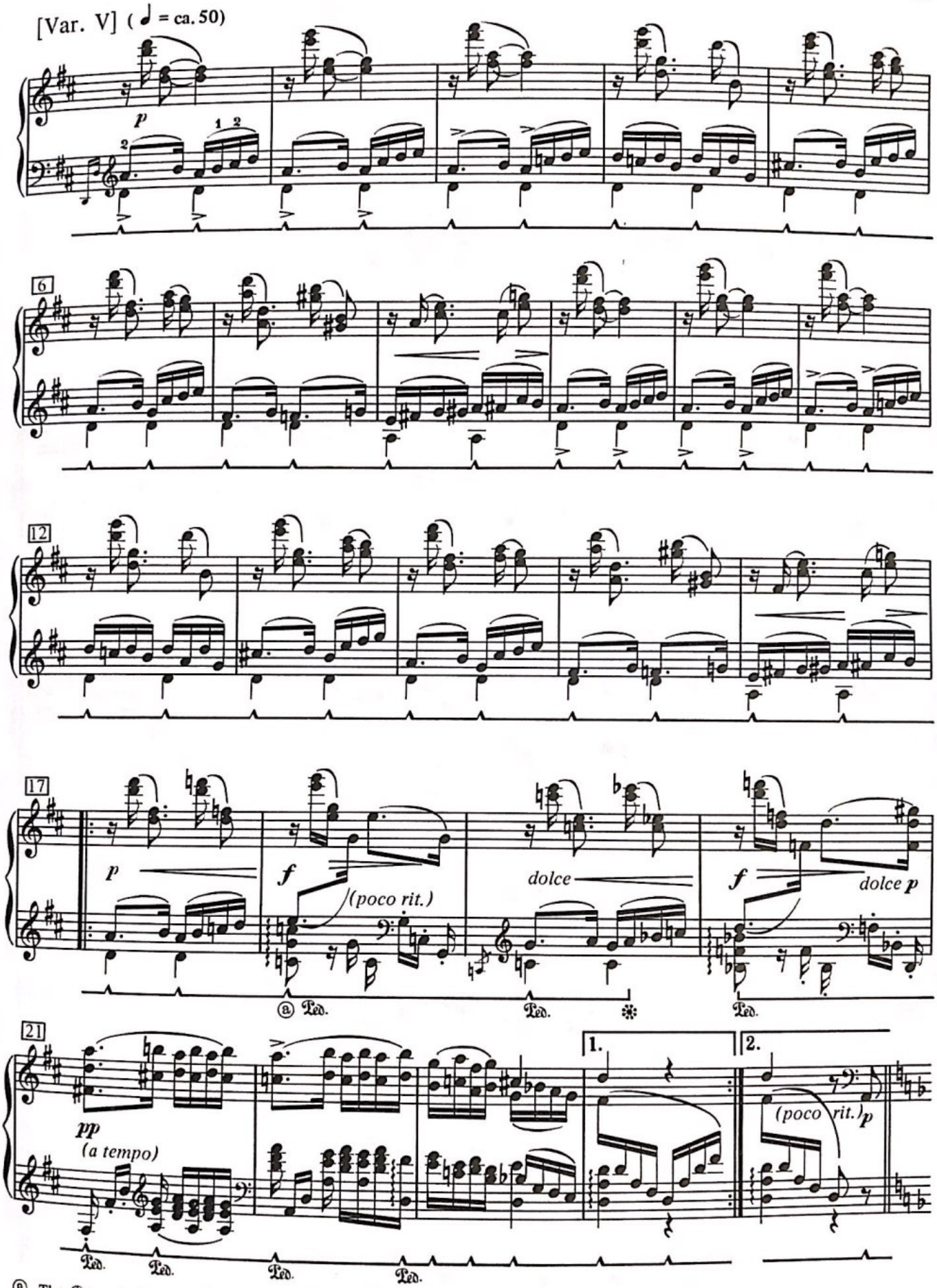


[Var. III]

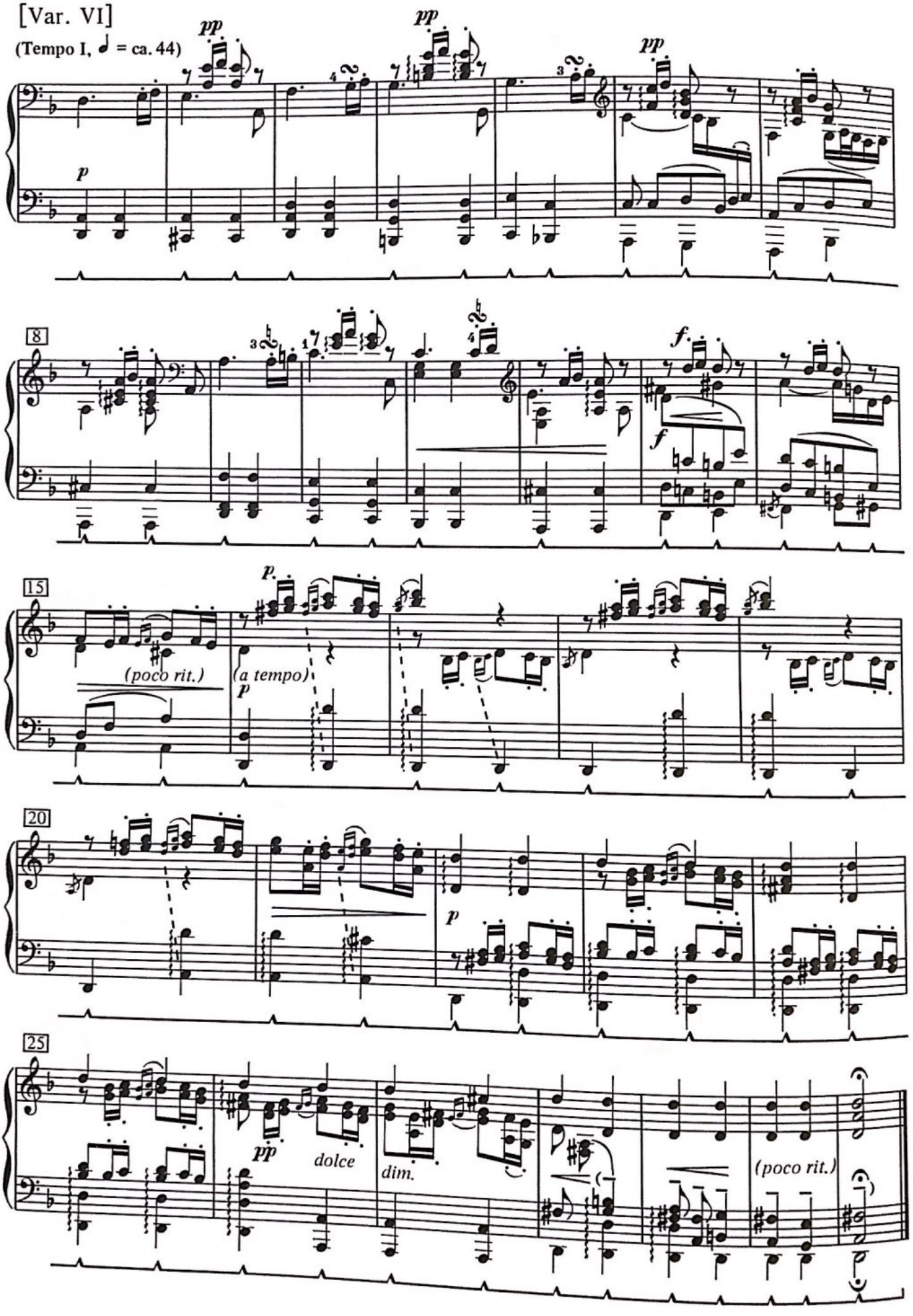






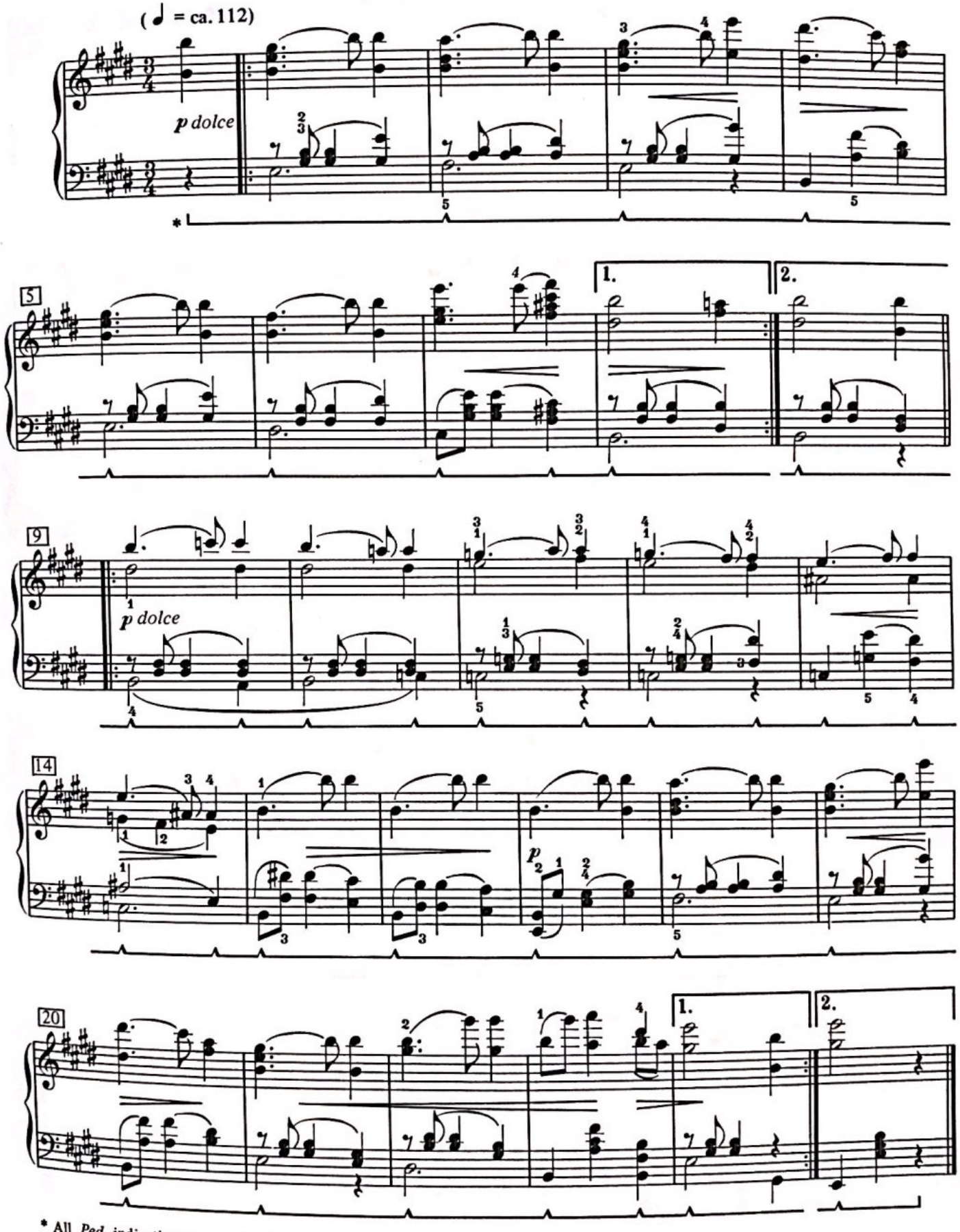


ⓐ The Ped. and * marks at measures 18–22 are Brahms'.



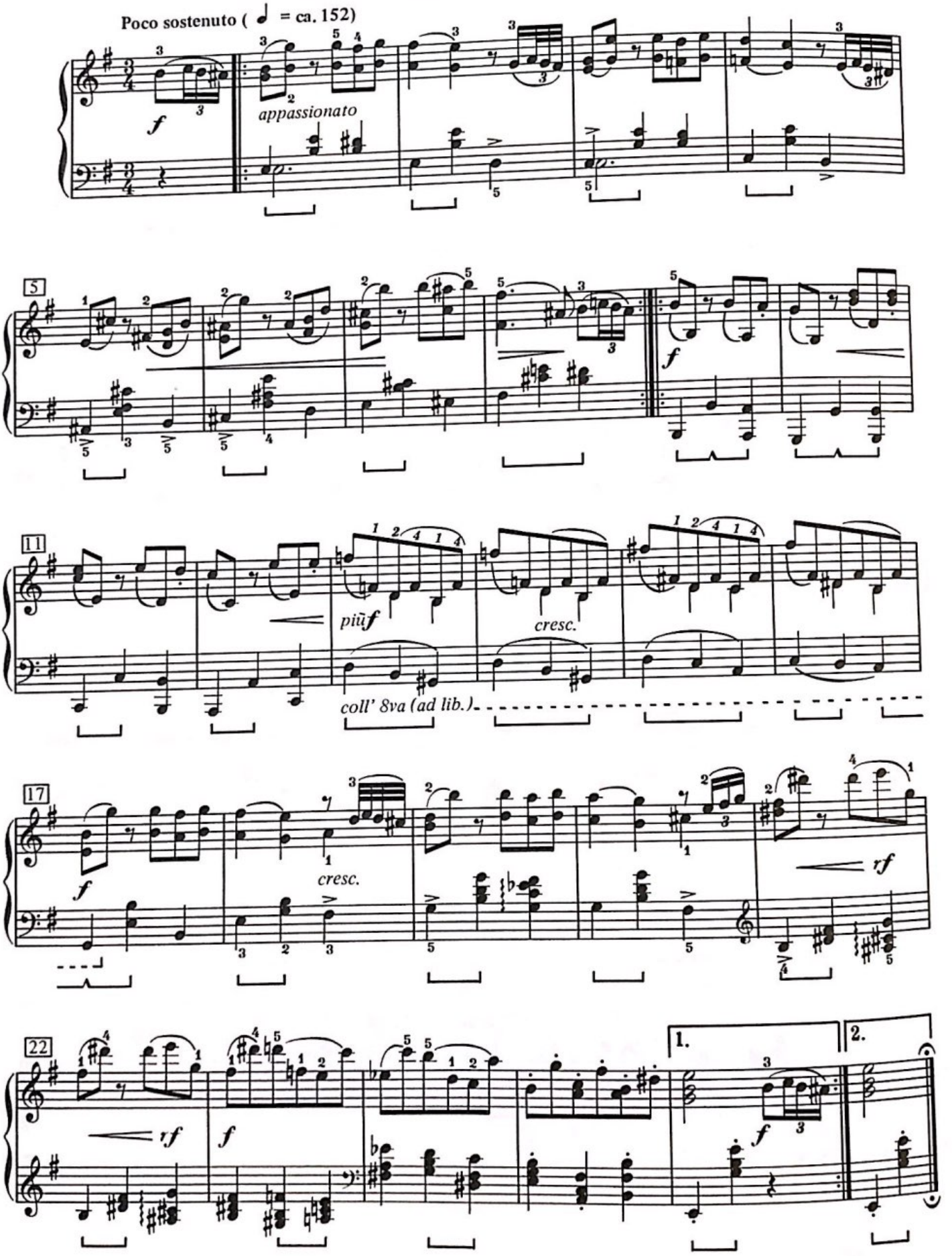
WALTZES, OP. 39

No. 2



* All *Ped.* indications are Brahms'.

No. 4



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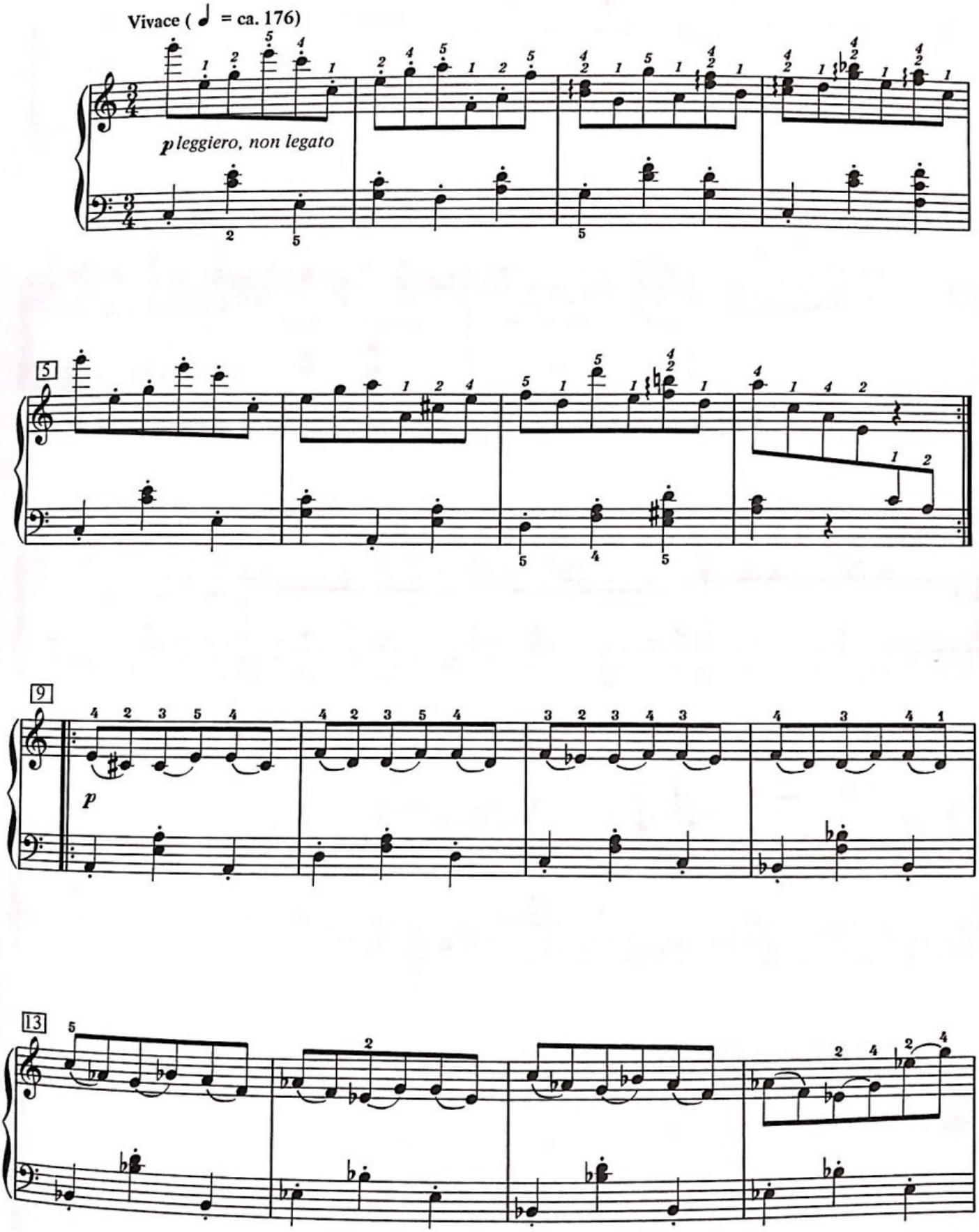

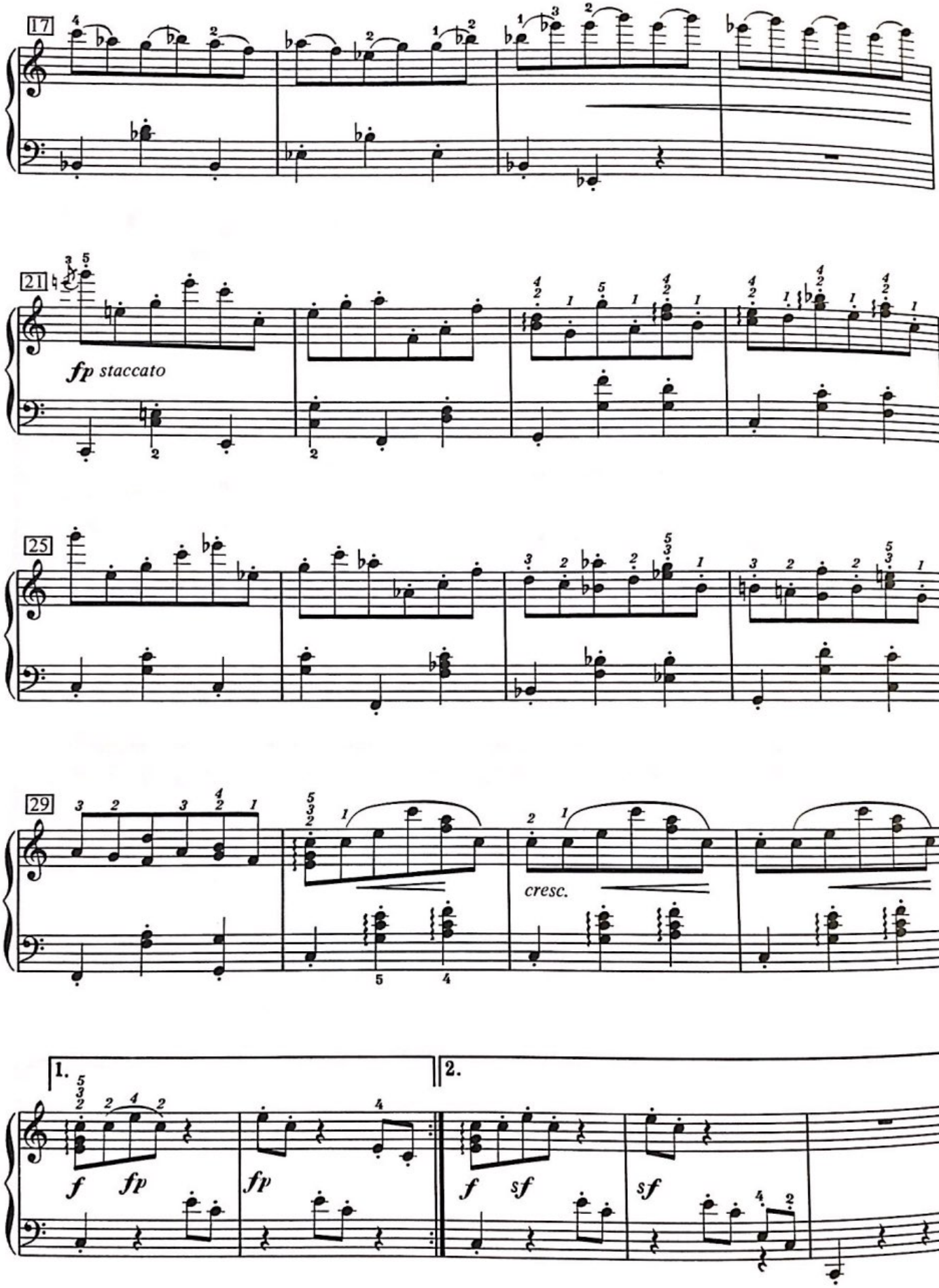

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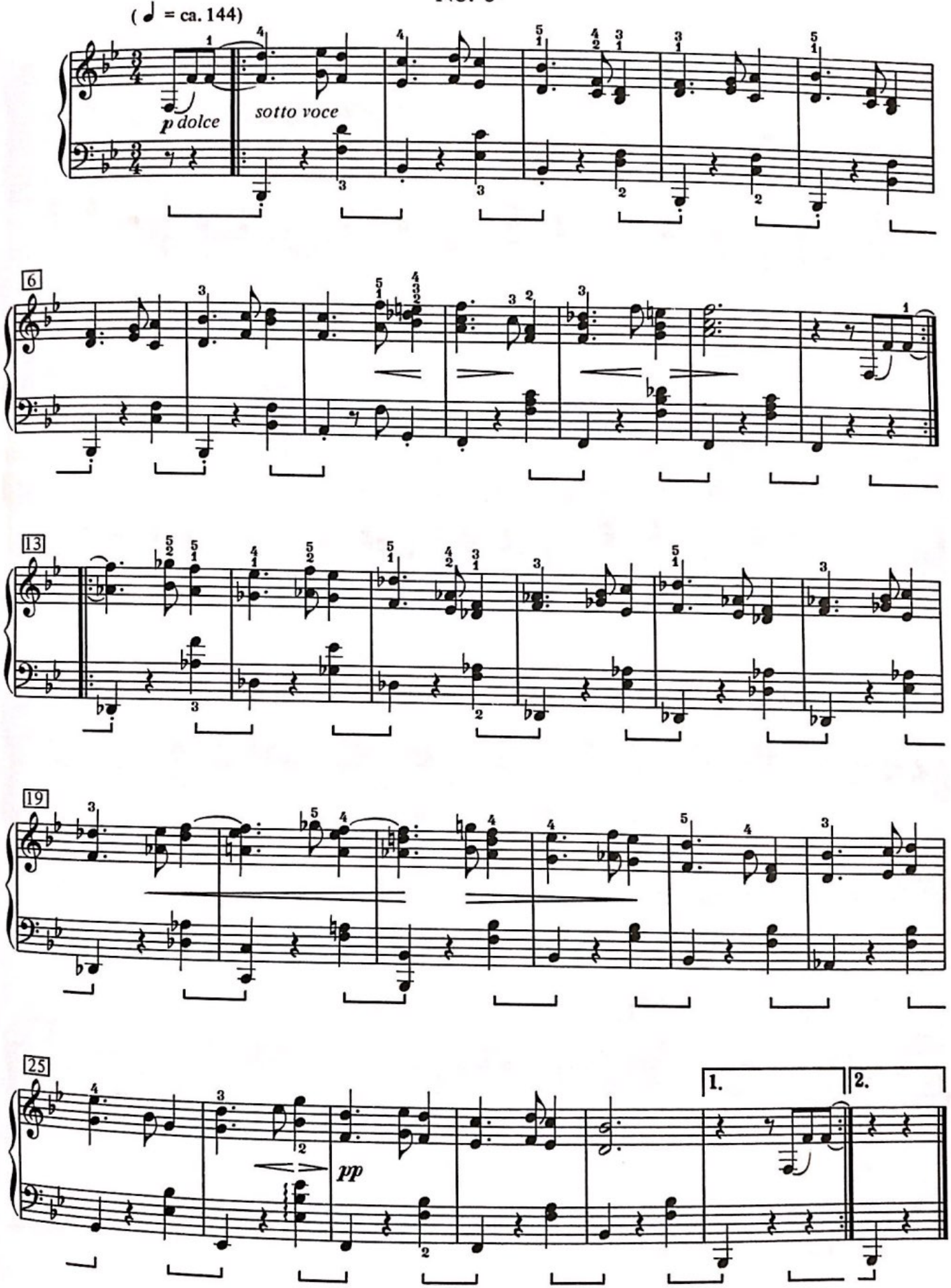

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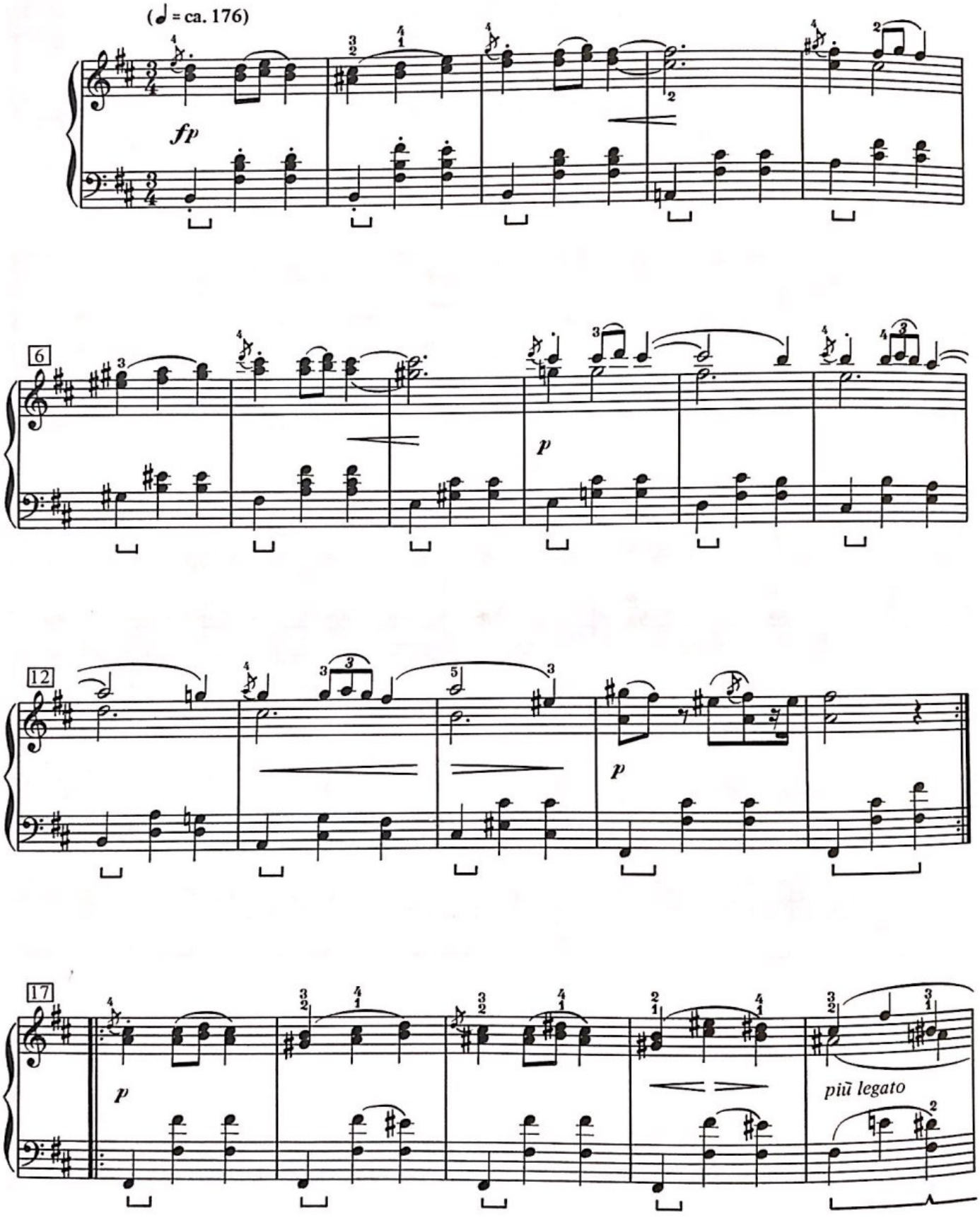
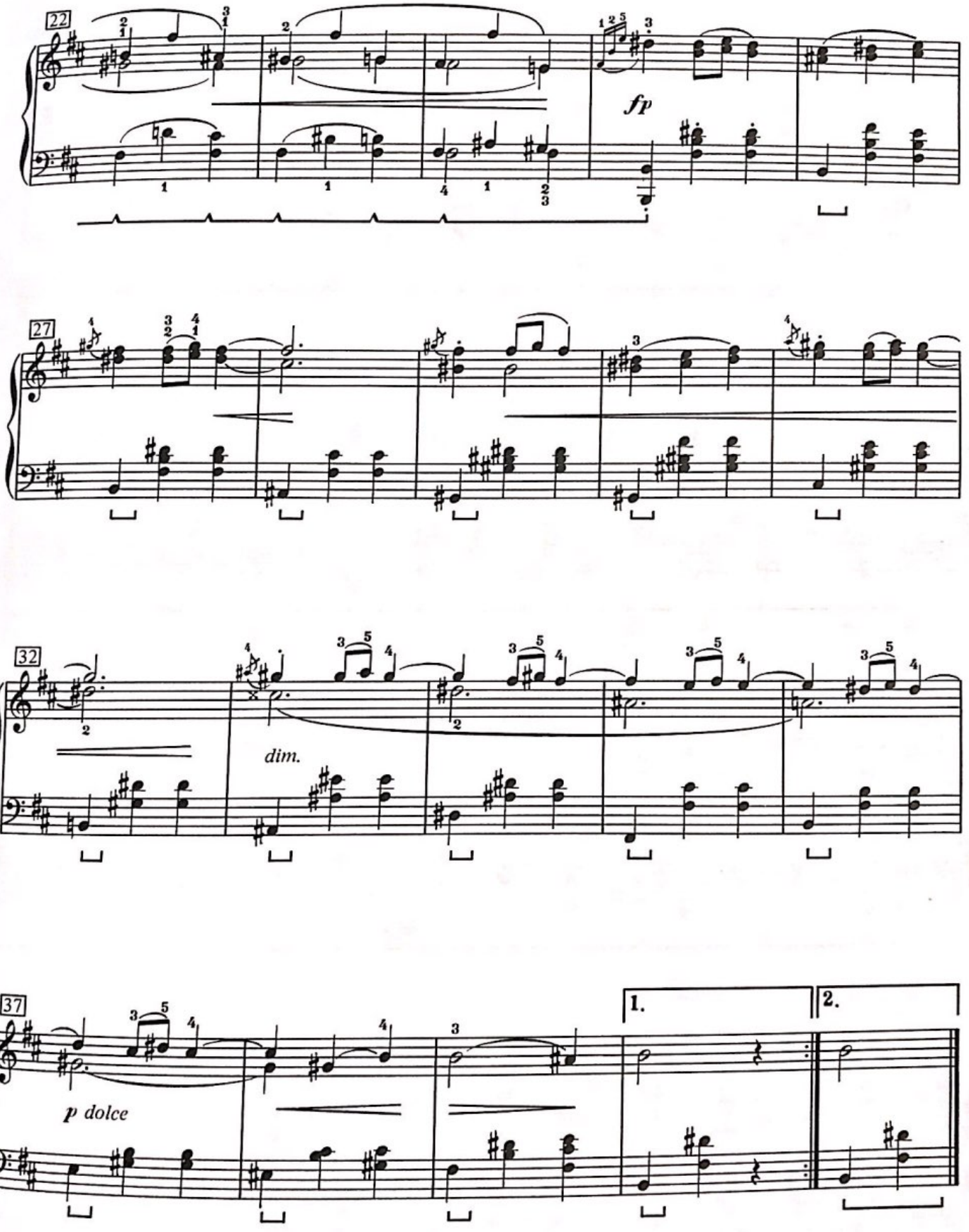
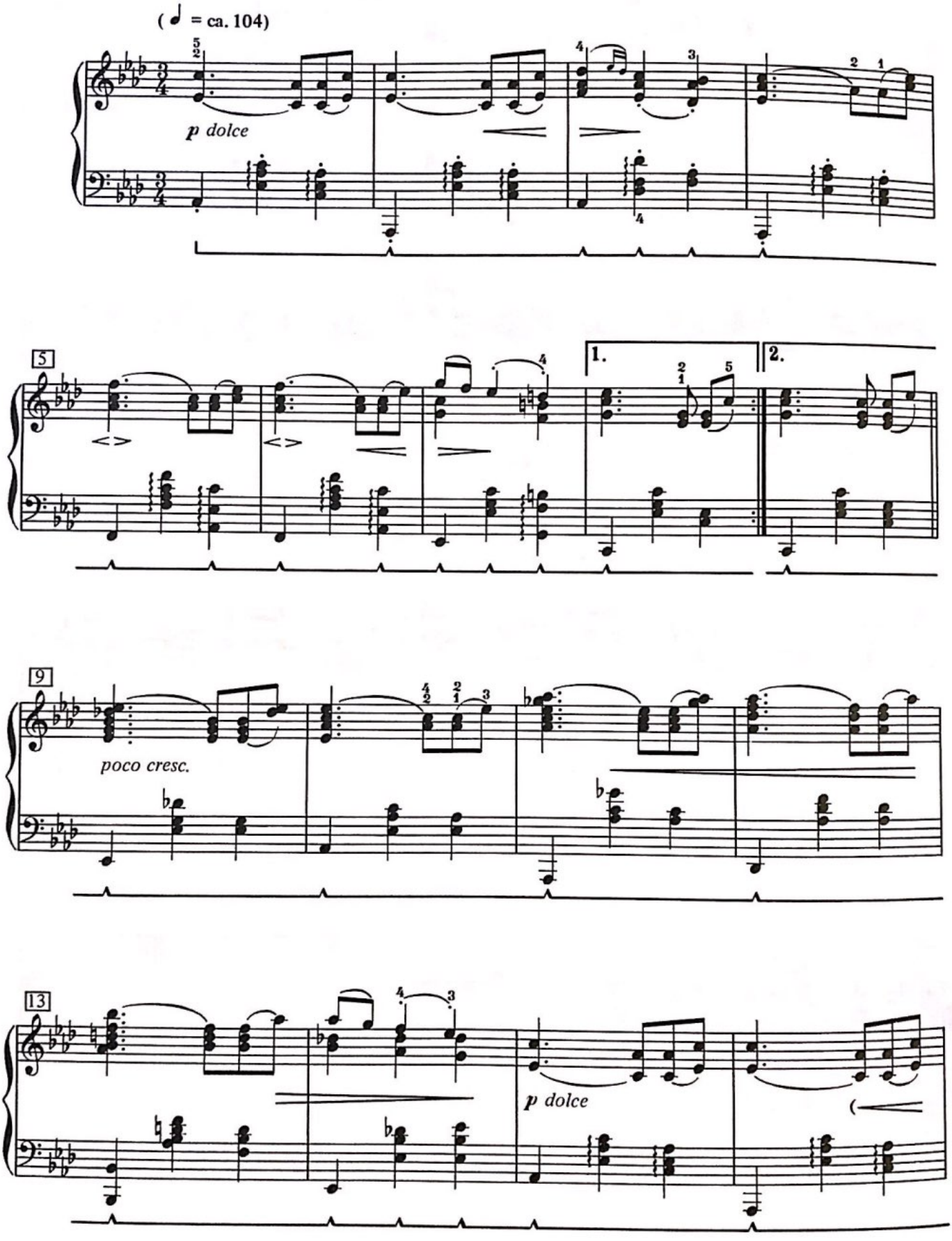
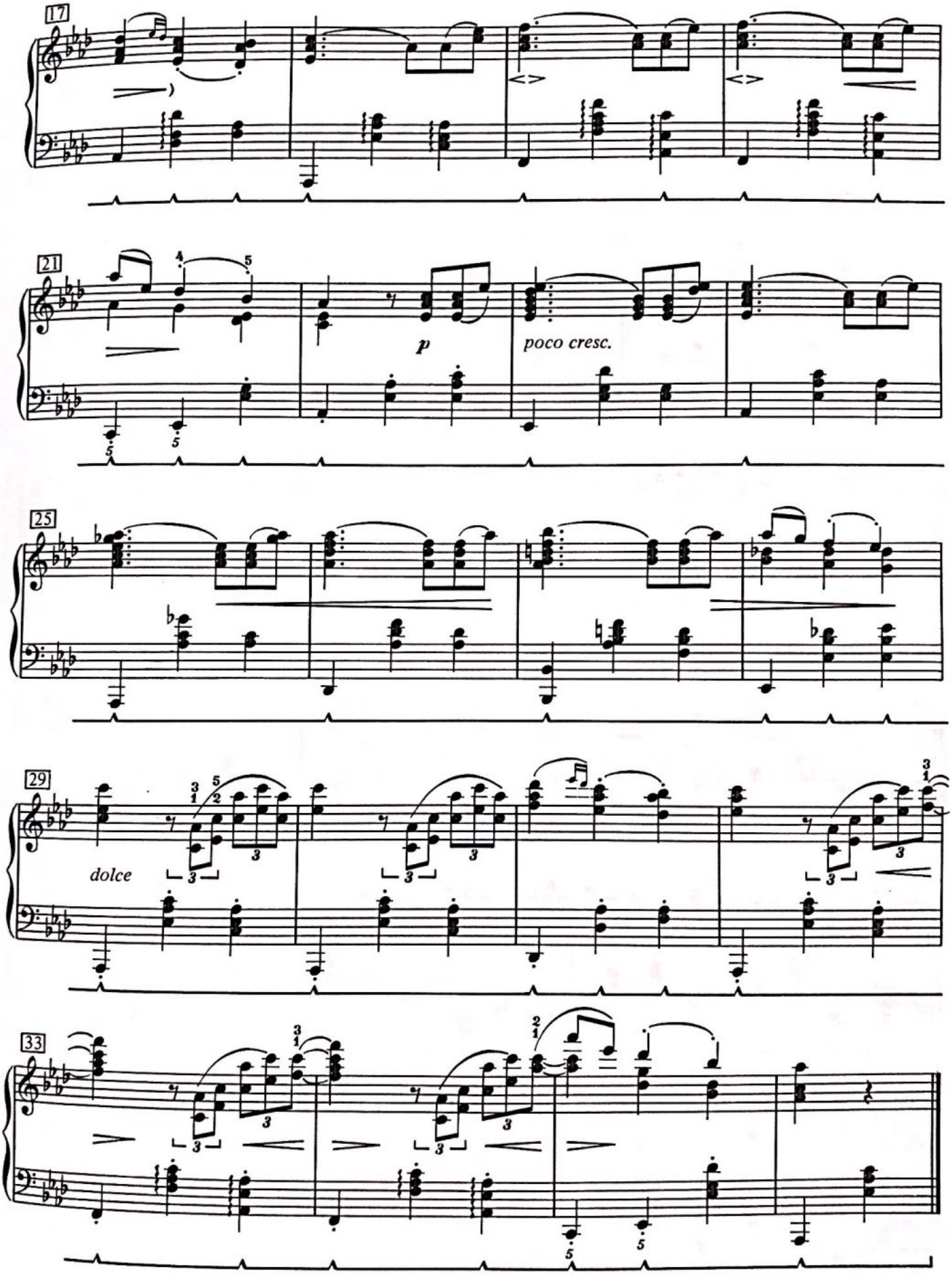




No. 15
(Original version)





No. 15
(Simplified version)