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Variations on a Russian Folk Song

Brian R. Denu
Gettysburg College

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Variations on a Russian Folk Song

Abstract
This piece for solo piano demonstrates a wide range of techniques utilized in twentieth century composition. The theme is taken from the Finale of Igor Stravinsky's ballet "The Firebird", which itself is based on a Russian folk song. Each subsequent variation focuses on one or more compositional technique.

I. Theme

II. March (chords by thirds, extended triads)

III. Molto grave e expressivo (chromaticism)

IV. L'istesso tempo (ten-tone row)

V. Fast and light (twelve-tone row, secundal harmony)

VI. Much less (minimalism, extended techniques)

VII. Hazy (quartal harmony, modal melody)

VIII. Finale (spectralism)

The order of the variations partly reflects a chronological motion of harmony through the twentieth century, but also demonstrates a building of large-scale tension, releasing that tension, then focusing on the aftermath of that release. The final variation creates a symmetry within the form of the piece, with chords rising into the uppermost register of the piano, just as the piece began.

Keywords
theme and variations, piano, russian folk song, Stravinsky, Firebird, music theory

Disciplines
Composition | Fine Arts | Music Theory

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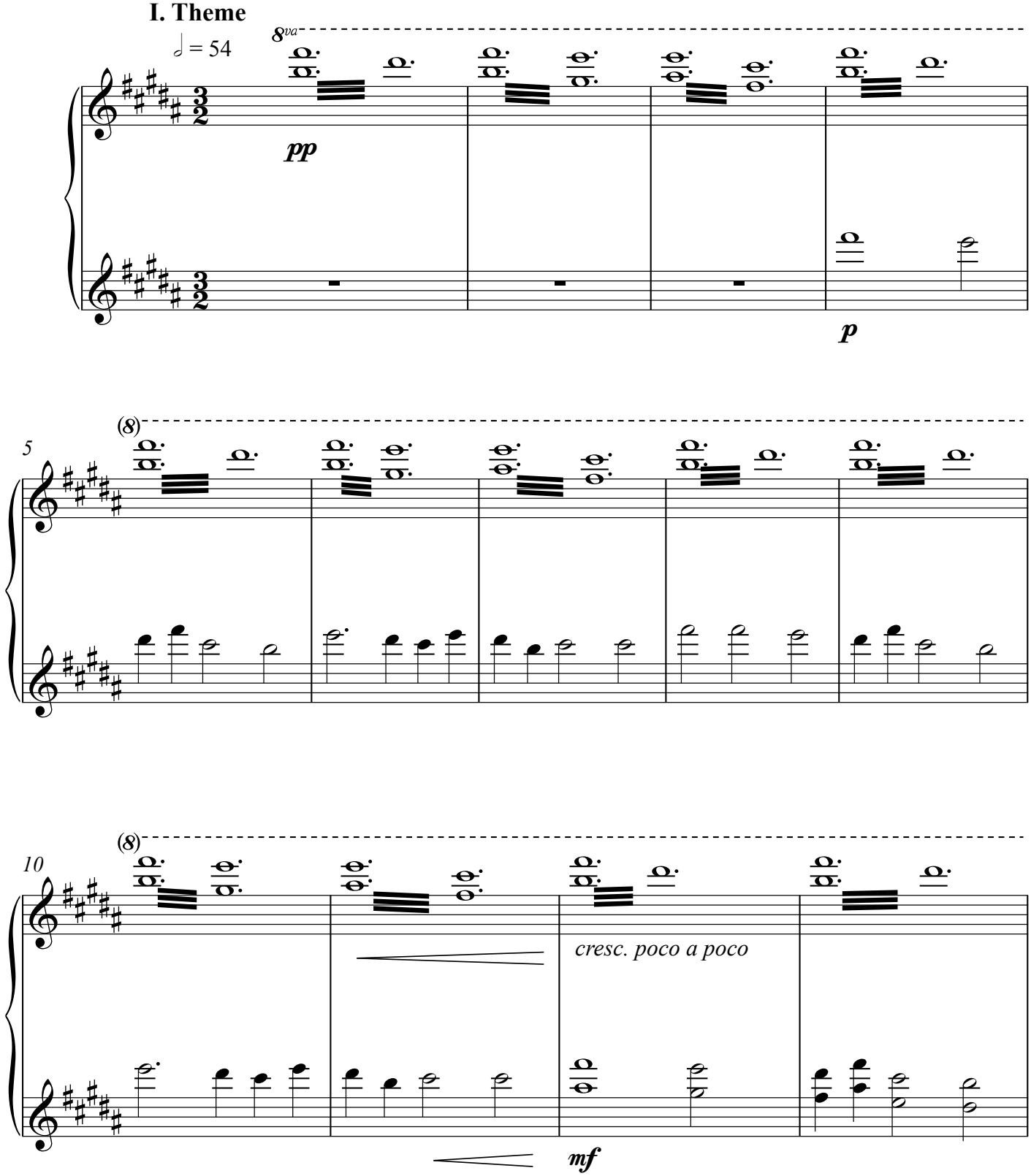
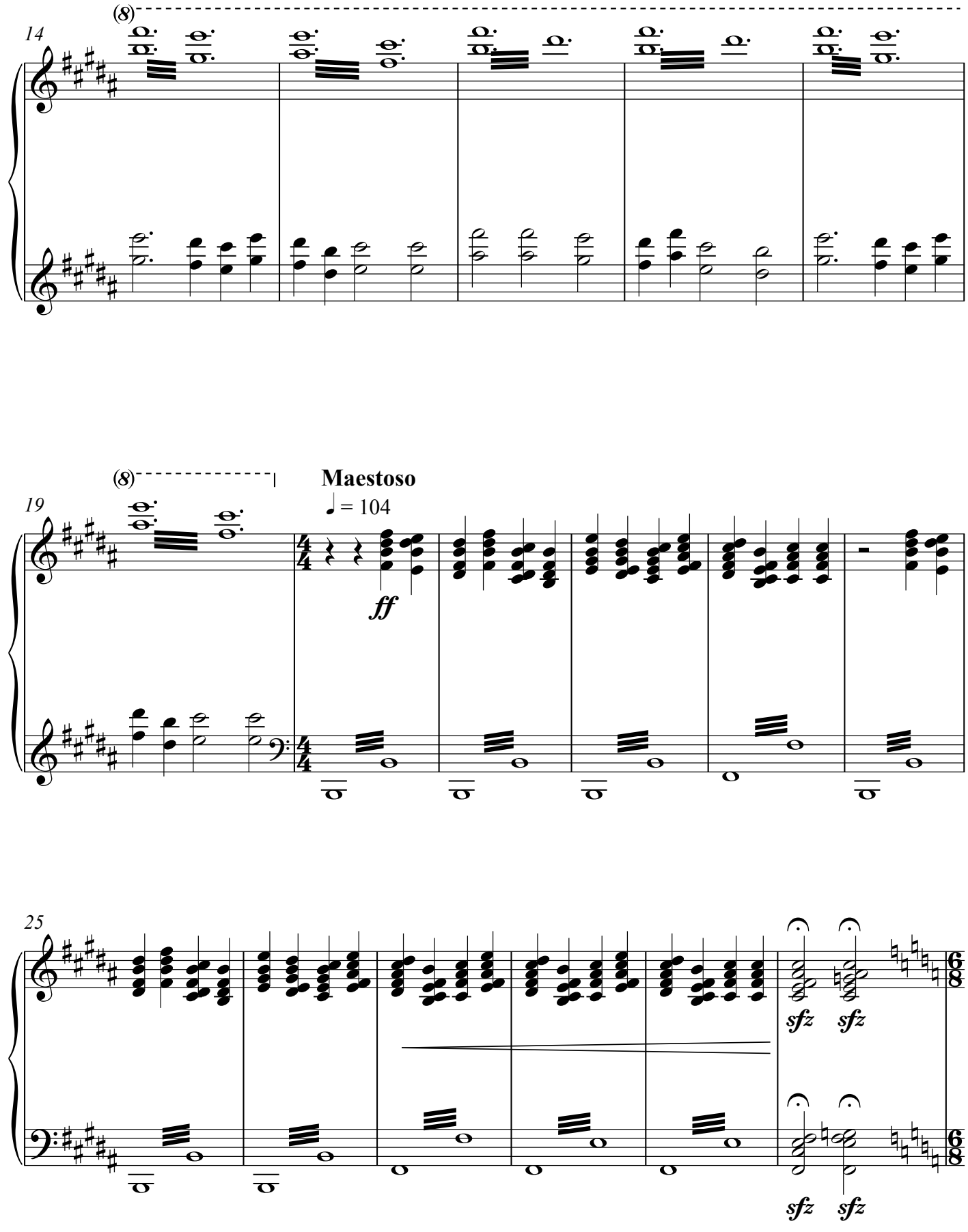
Variations on a Russian Folk Song

for Solo Piano

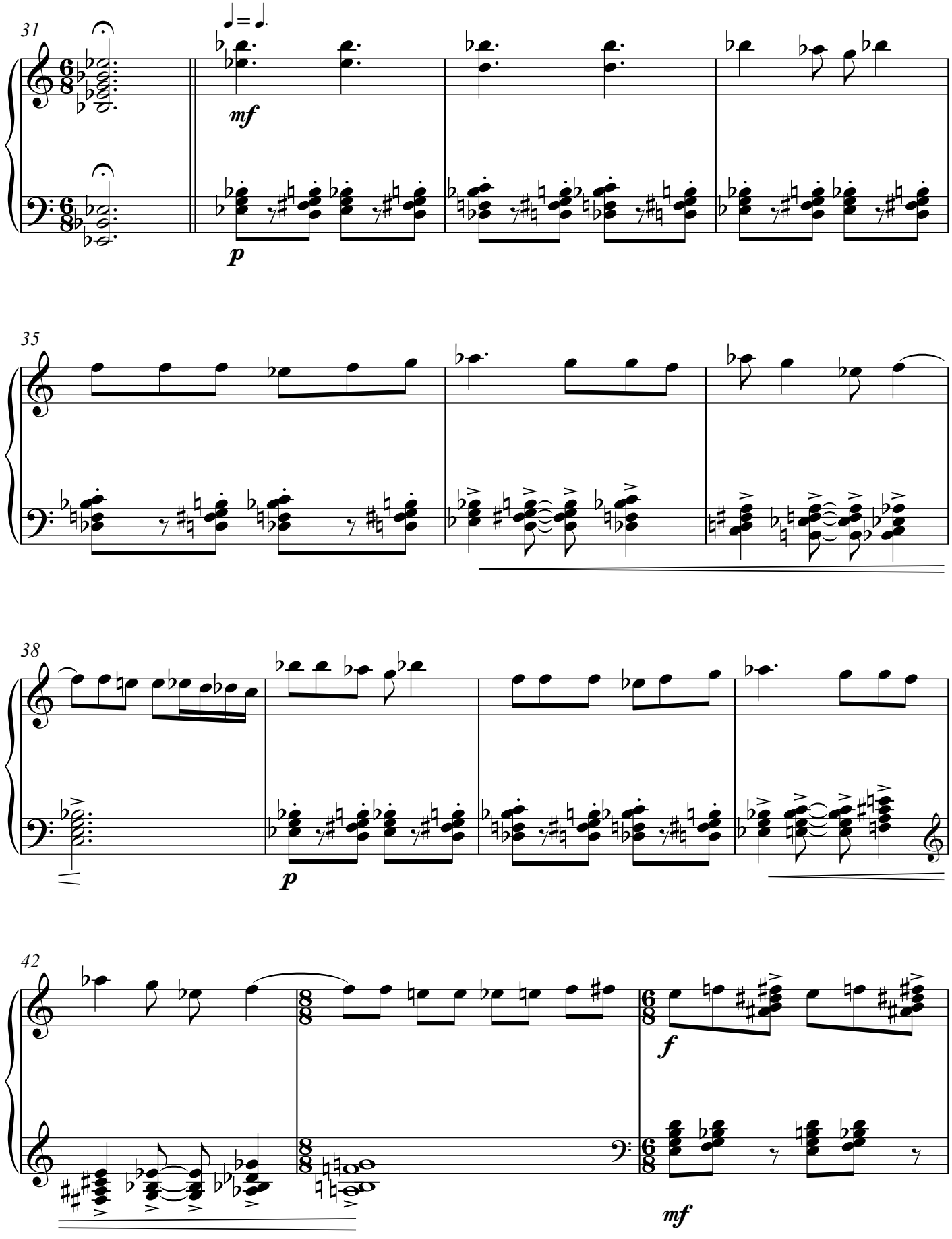
Brian R. Denu

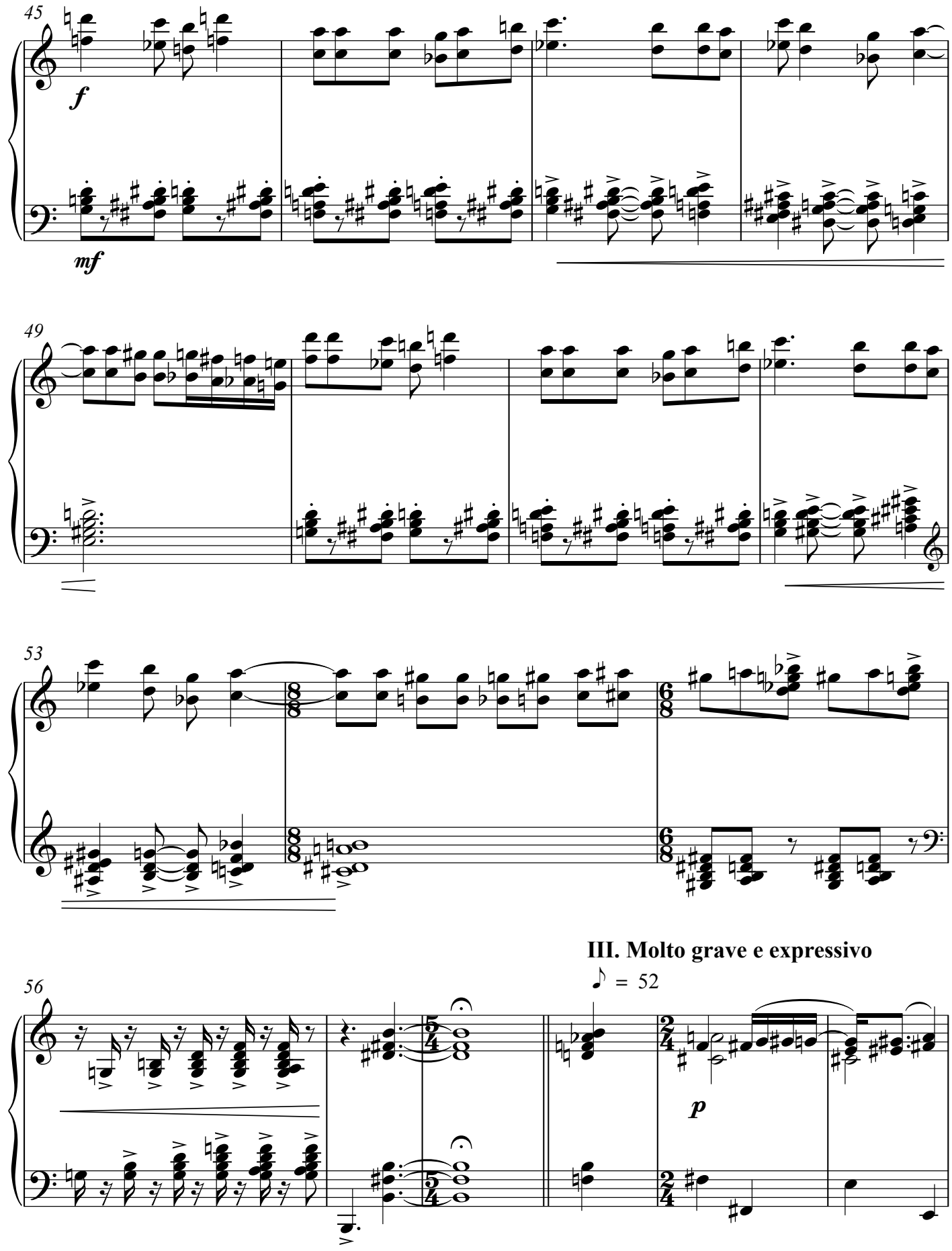
I. Theme

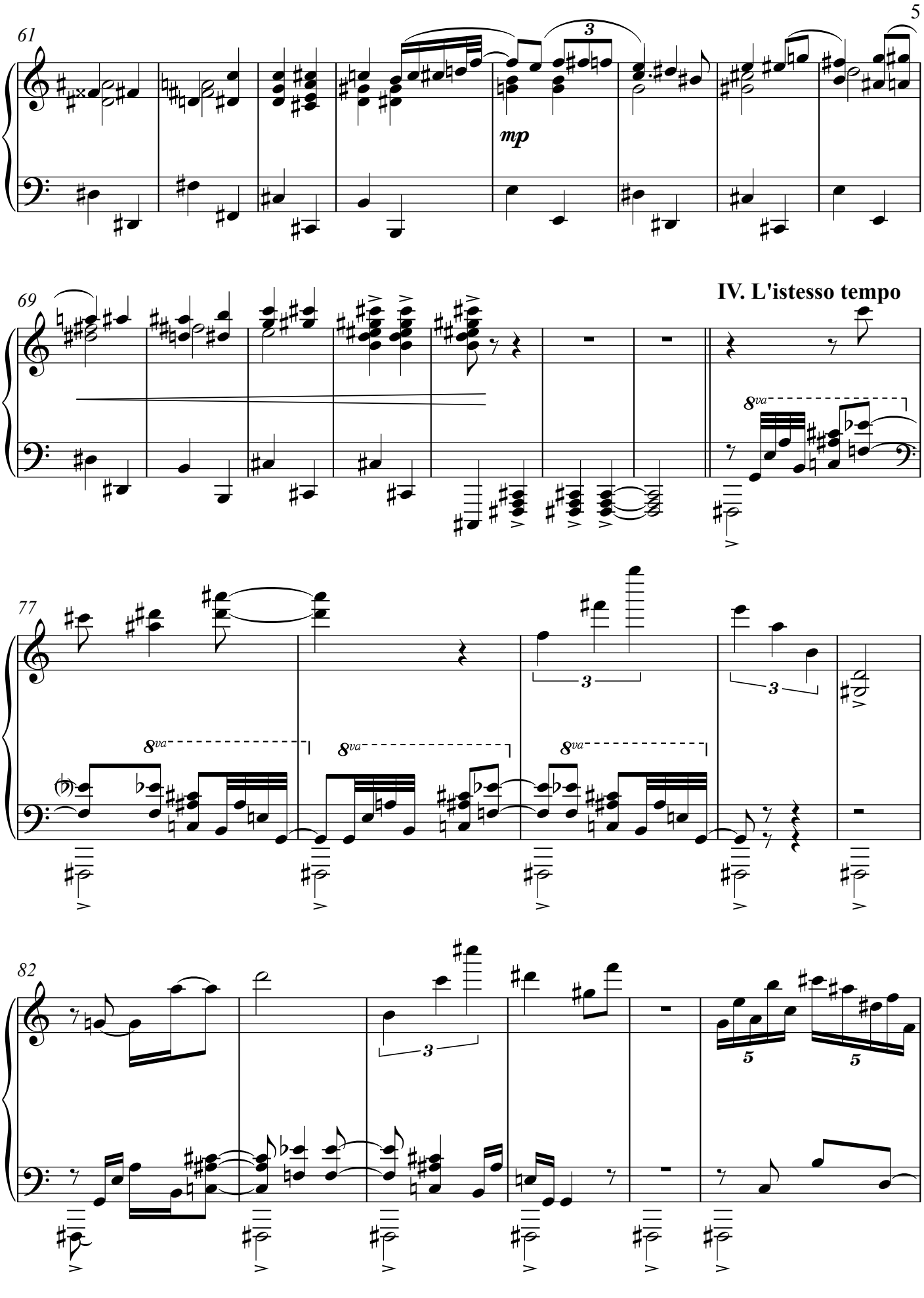


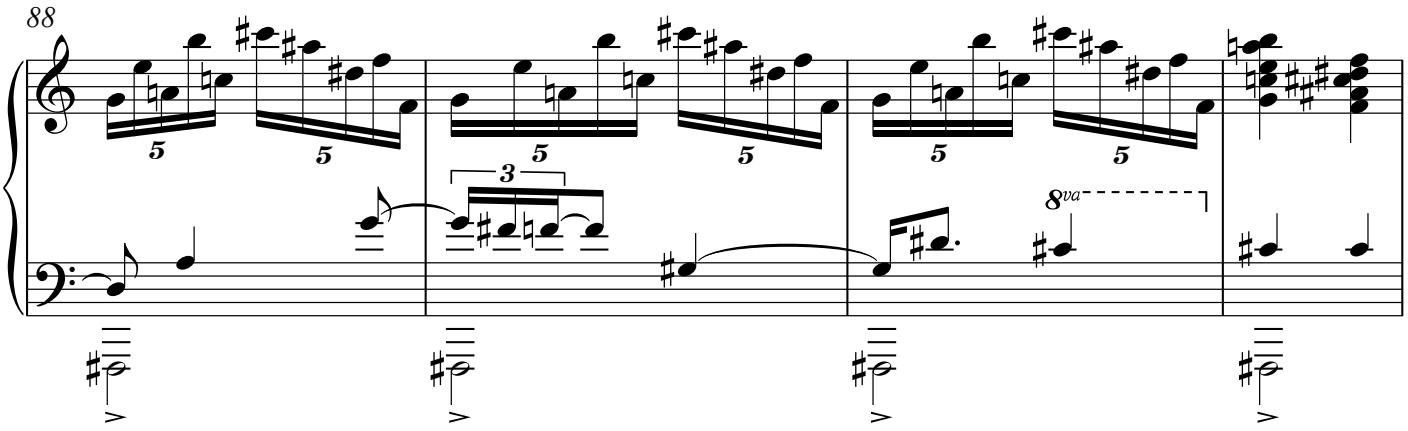

(8)
14
(8)
Maestoso
19
♩ = 104
ff
25
sfz
sfz
sfz
sfz

II. March

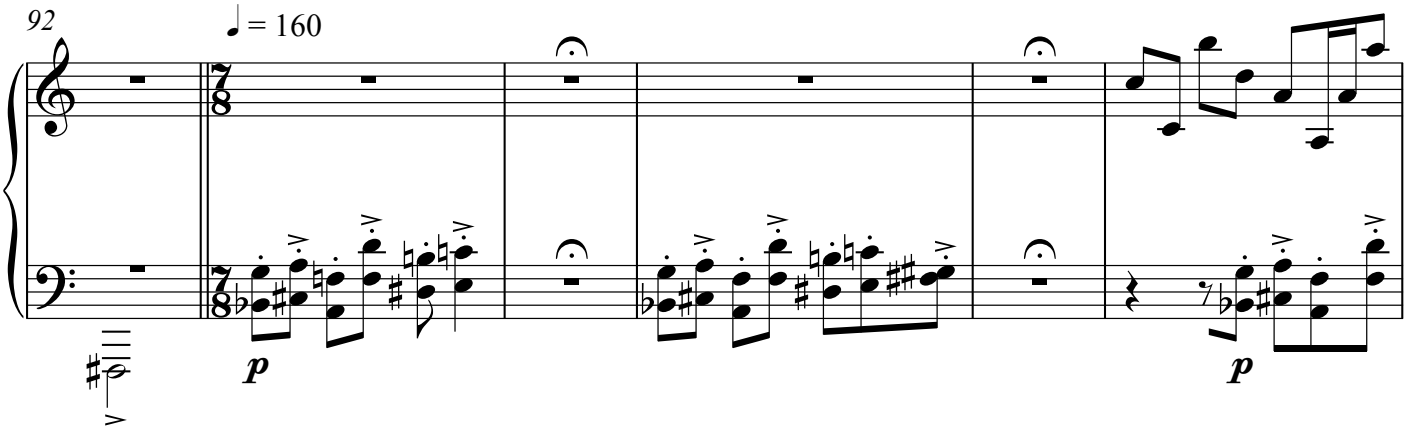


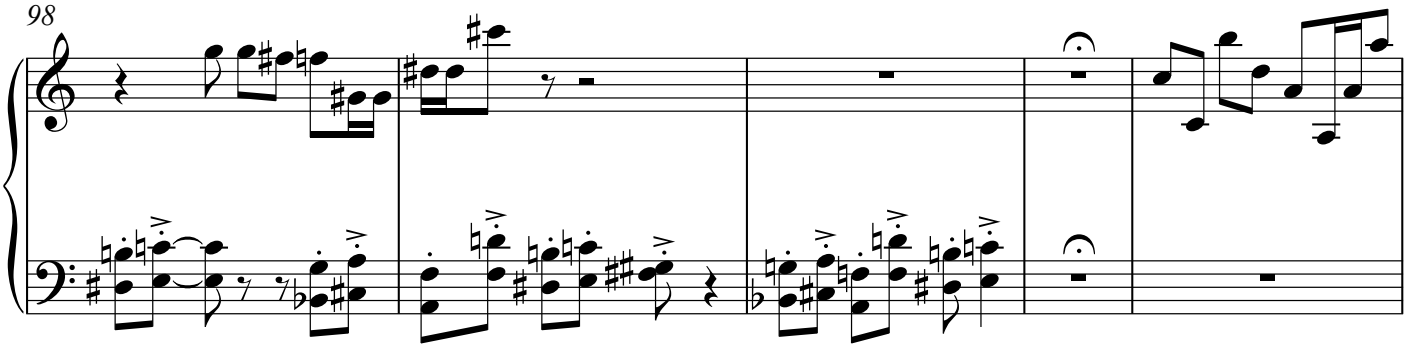

45
f
mf
49
53
III. Molto grave e expressivo
56
p

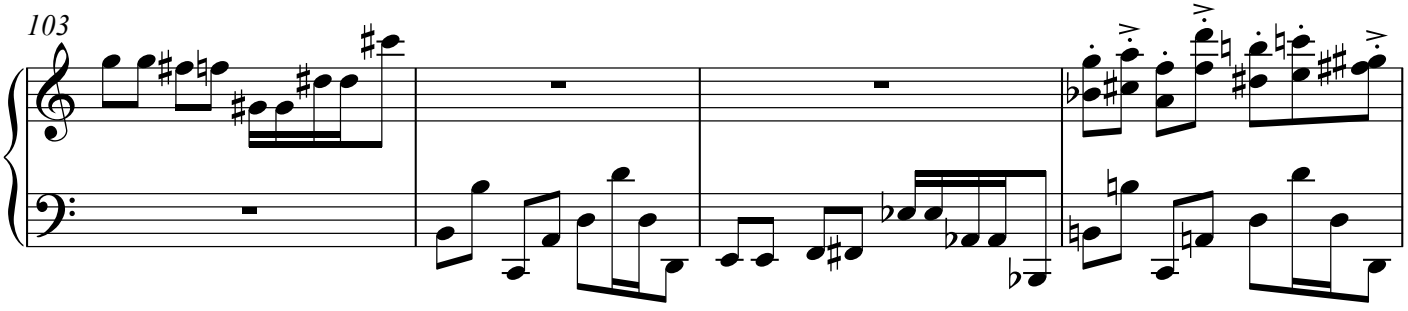

61
mp
69
IV. L'istesso tempo
8va
77
8va
8va
8va
82

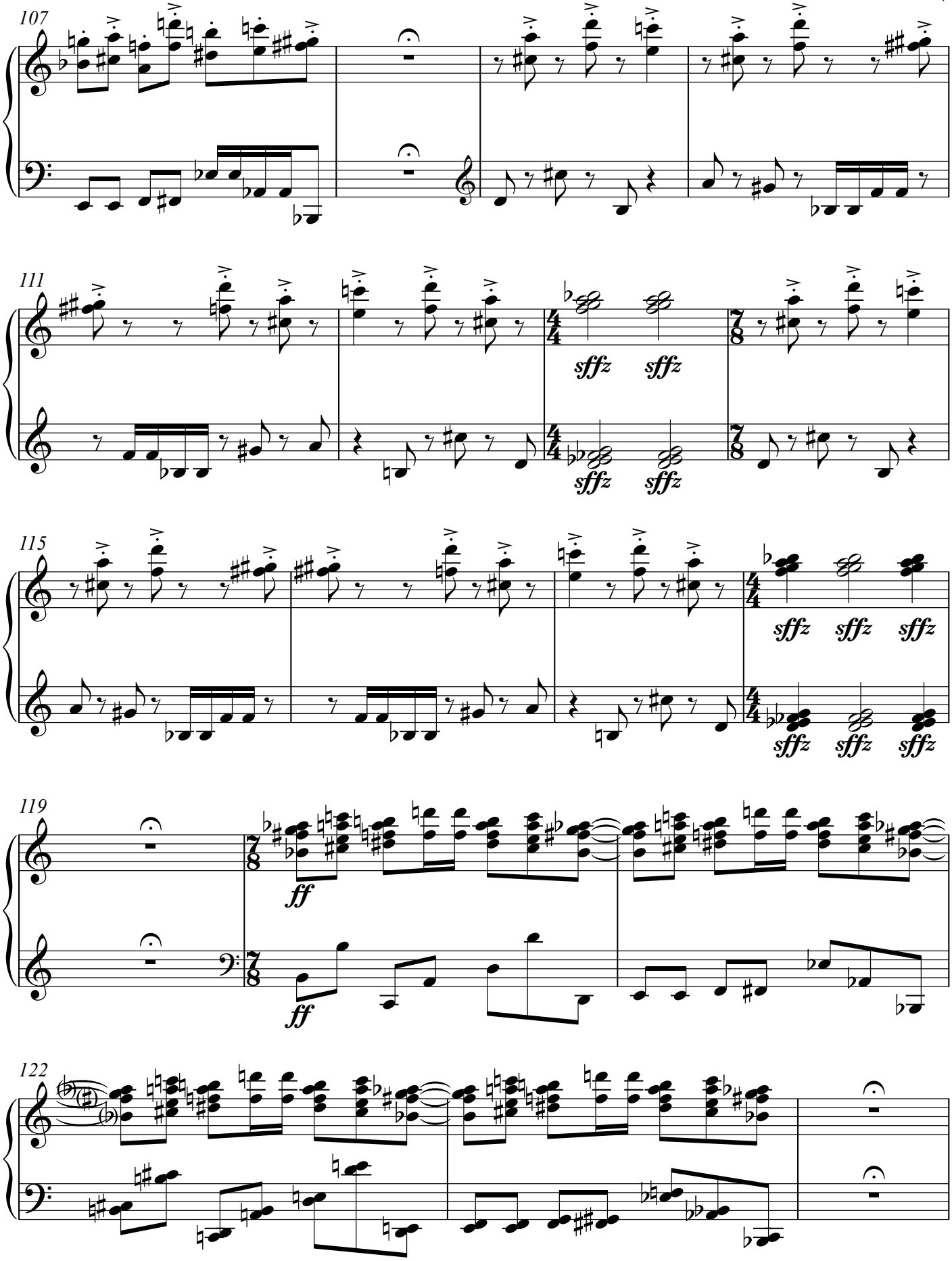


V. Fast and light

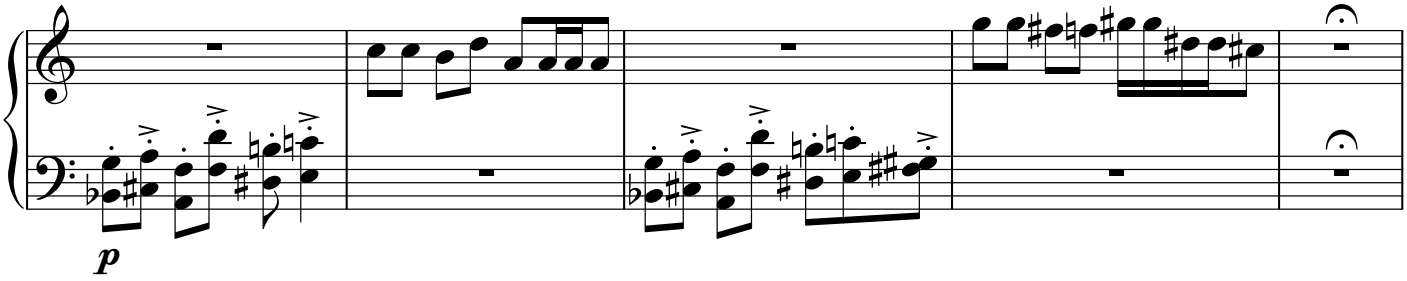




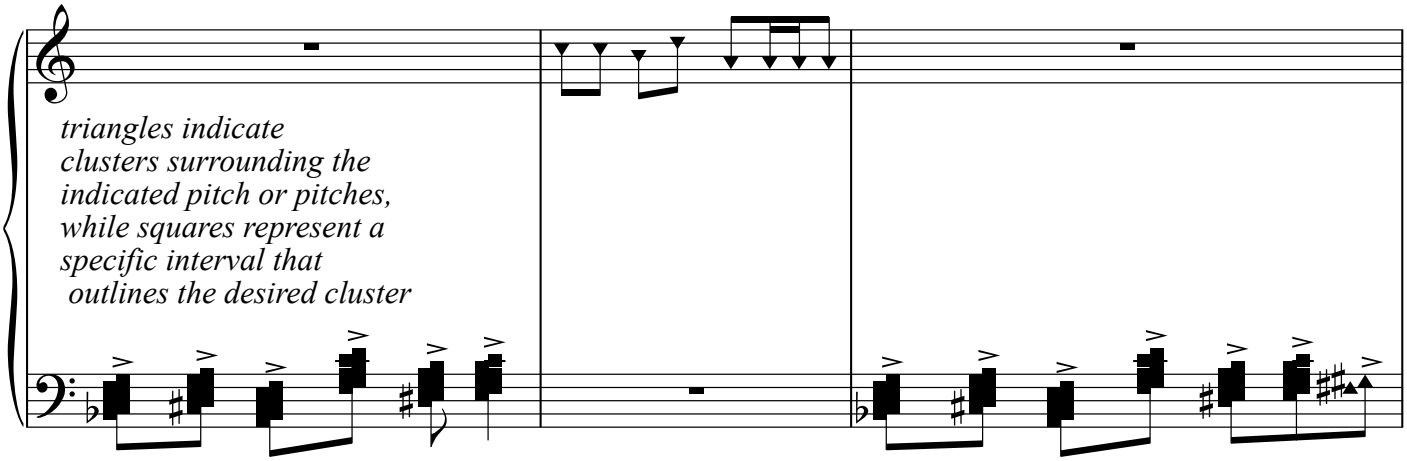



107
111
sffz
sffz
sffz
sffz
115
sffz
sffz
sffz
sffz
sffz
sffz
119
ff
ff
122

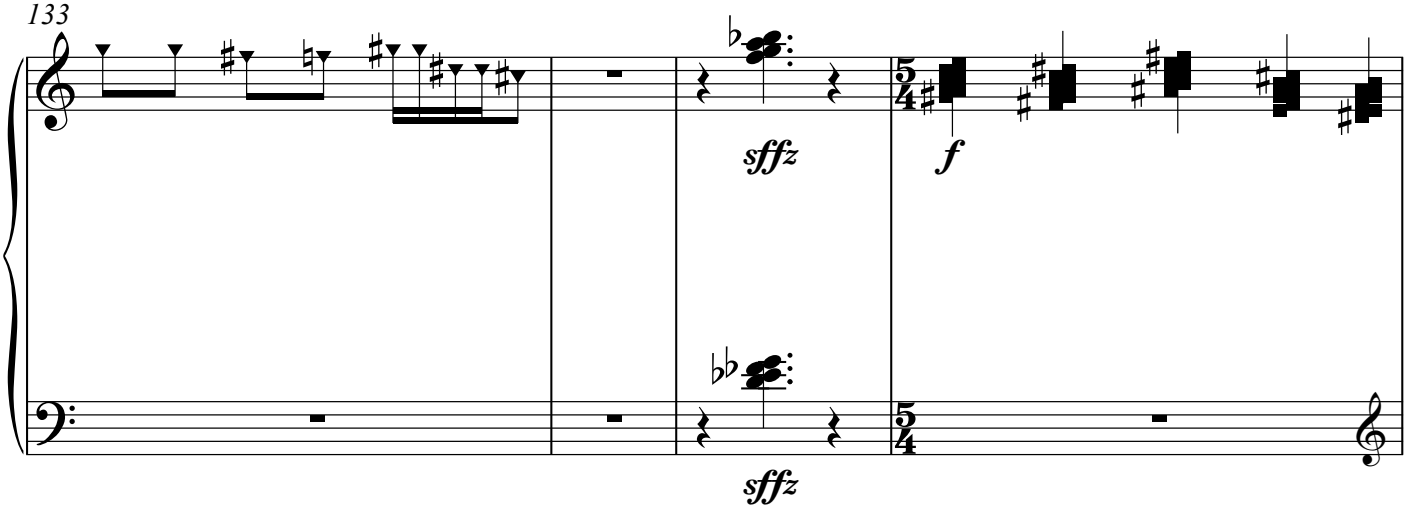
125

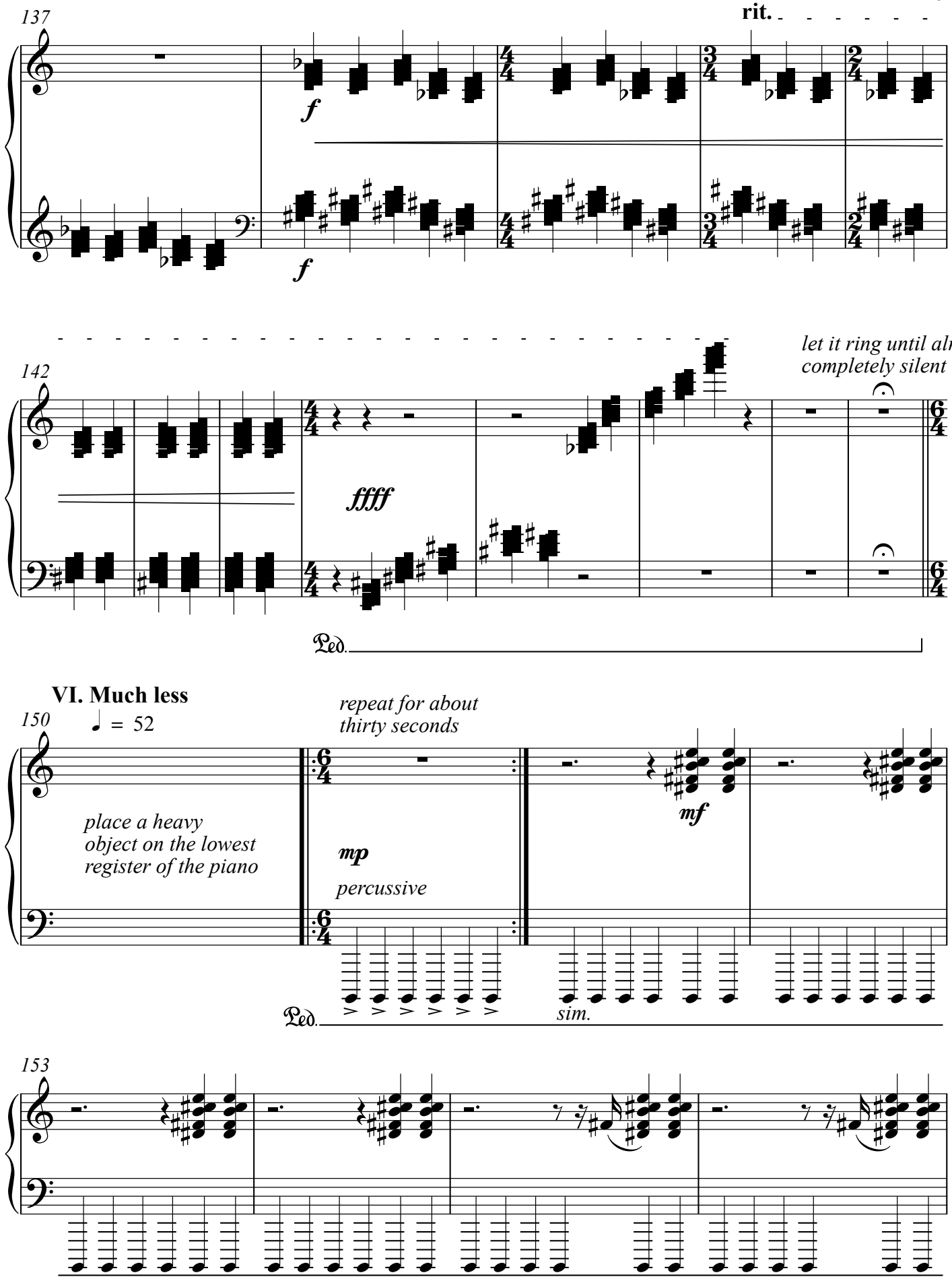

p

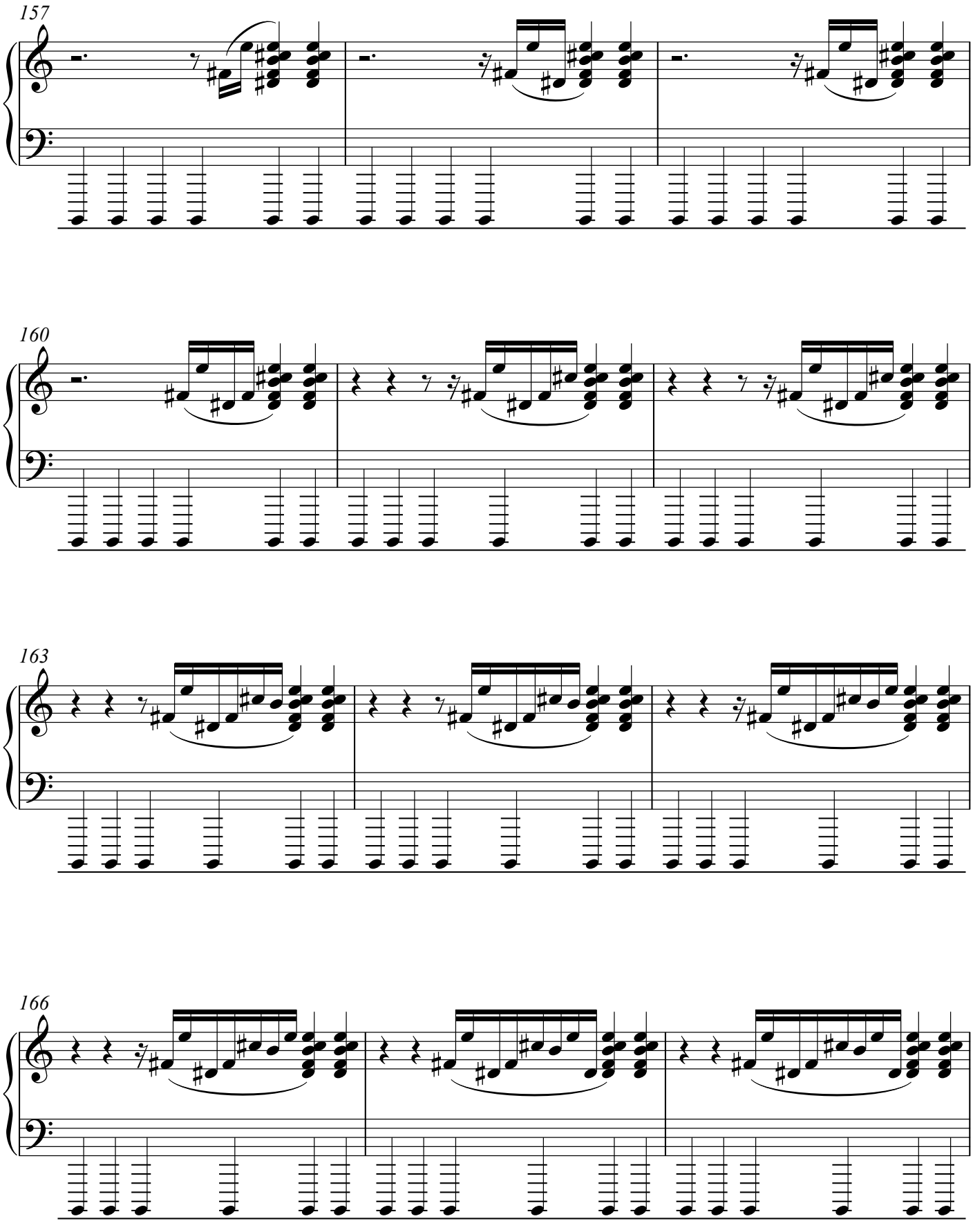
130

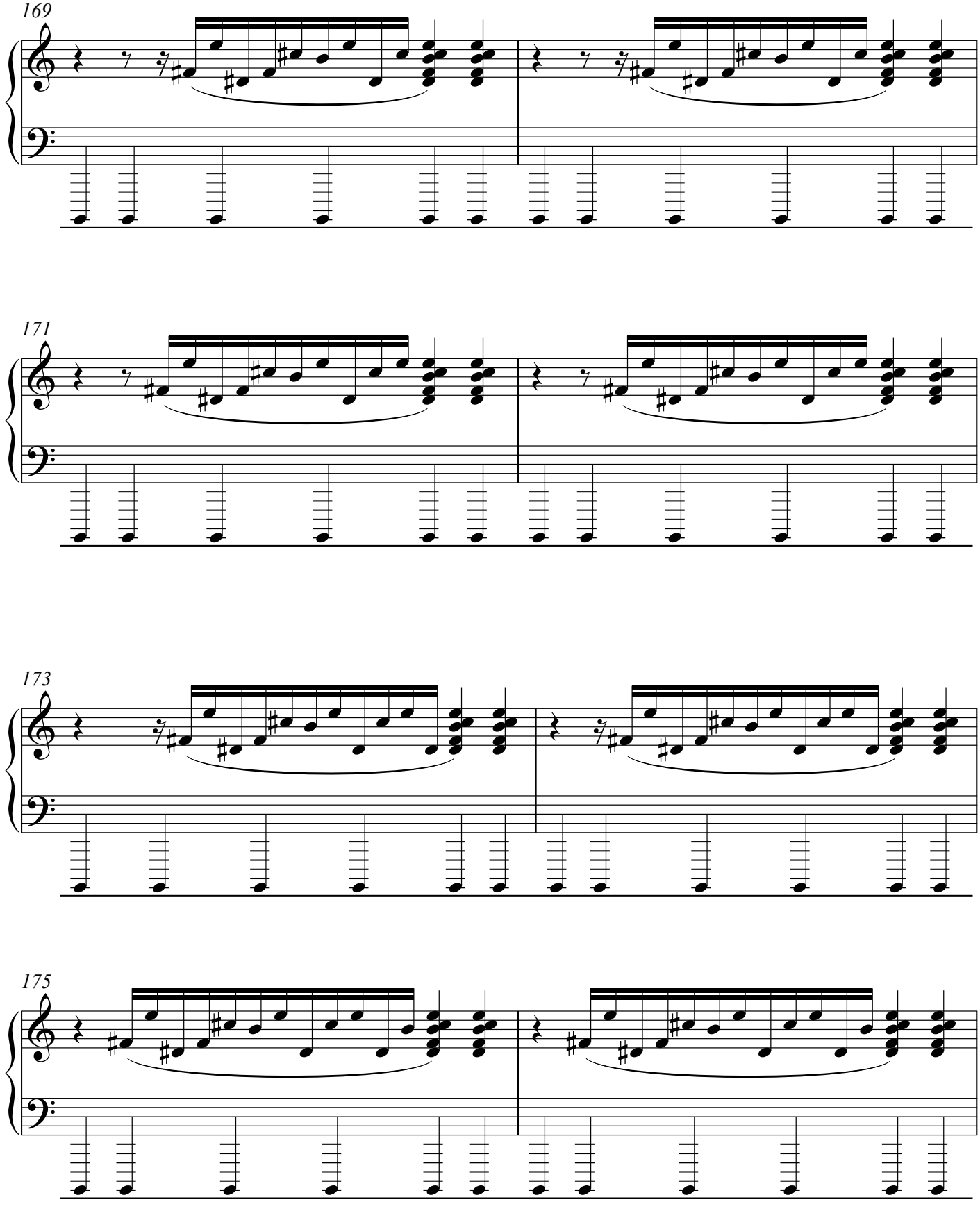

triangles indicate
clusters surrounding the
indicated pitch or pitches,
while squares represent a
specific interval that
outlines the desired cluster

133


sffz
f
sffz


137
rit.
f
f
142
let it ring until almost
completely silent
ffff
Ped.
VI. Much less
150
♩ = 52
repeat for about
thirty seconds
place a heavy
object on the lowest
register of the piano
mp
percussive
mf
Ped.
sim.
153


157
160
163
166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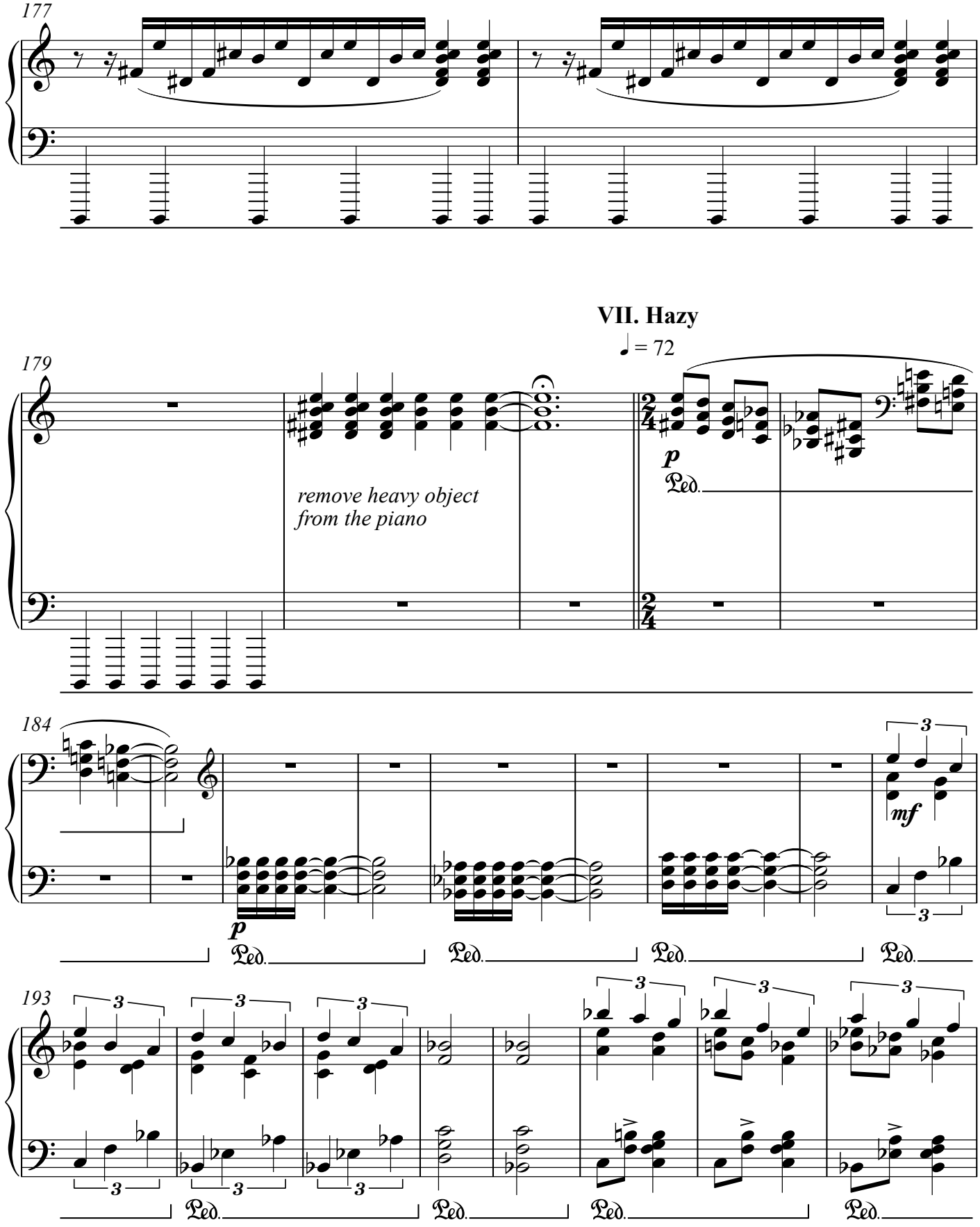
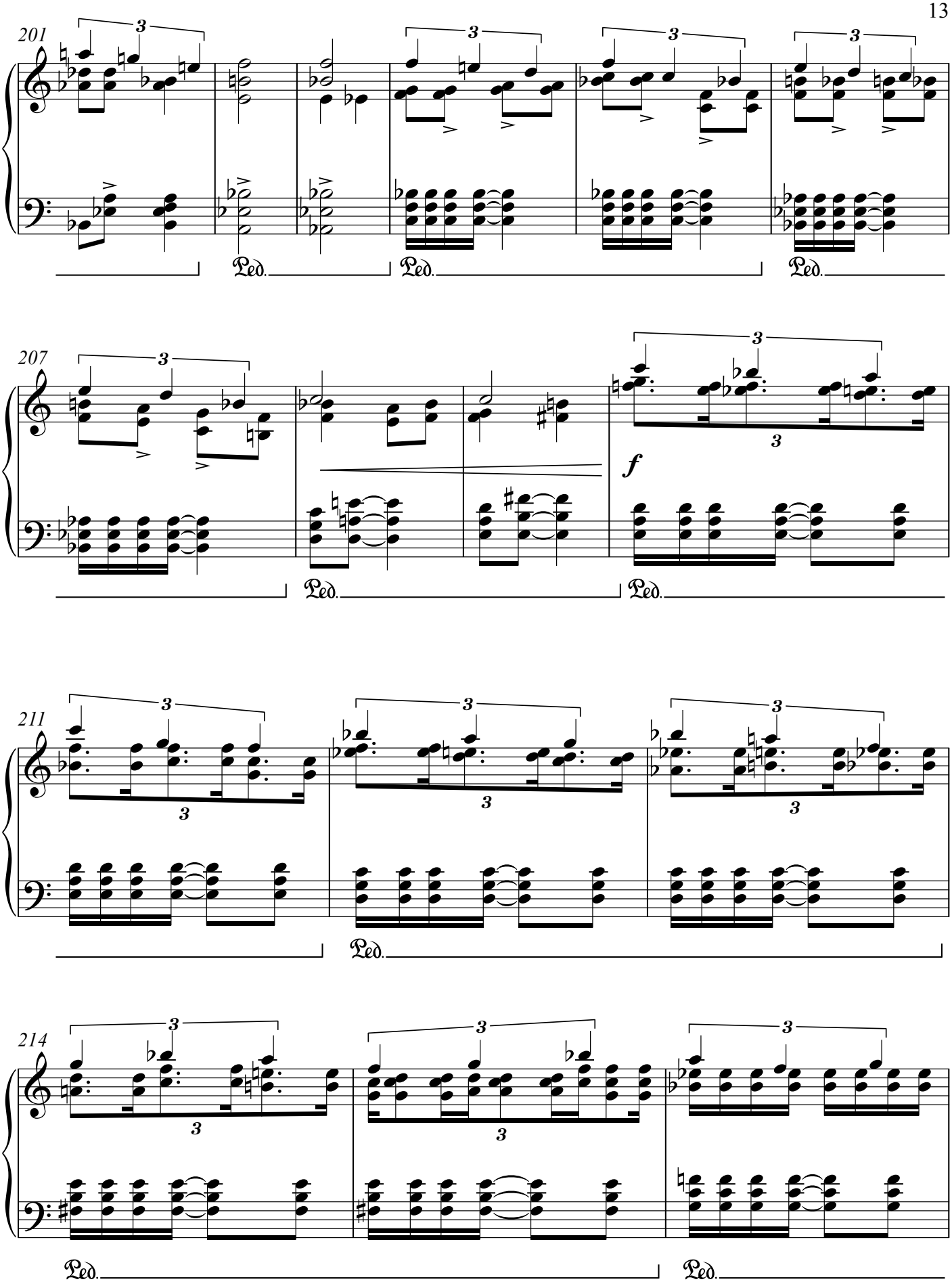
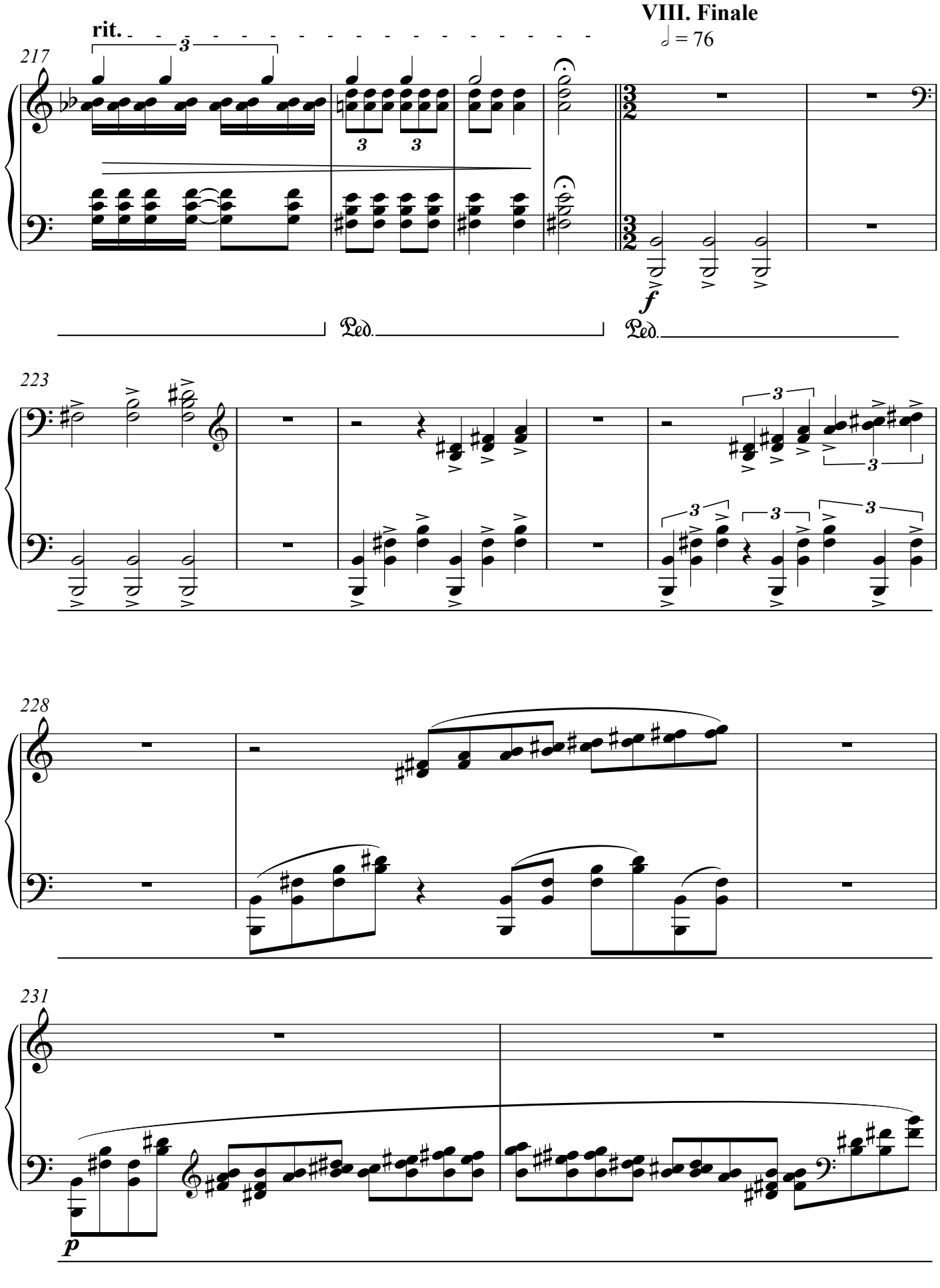
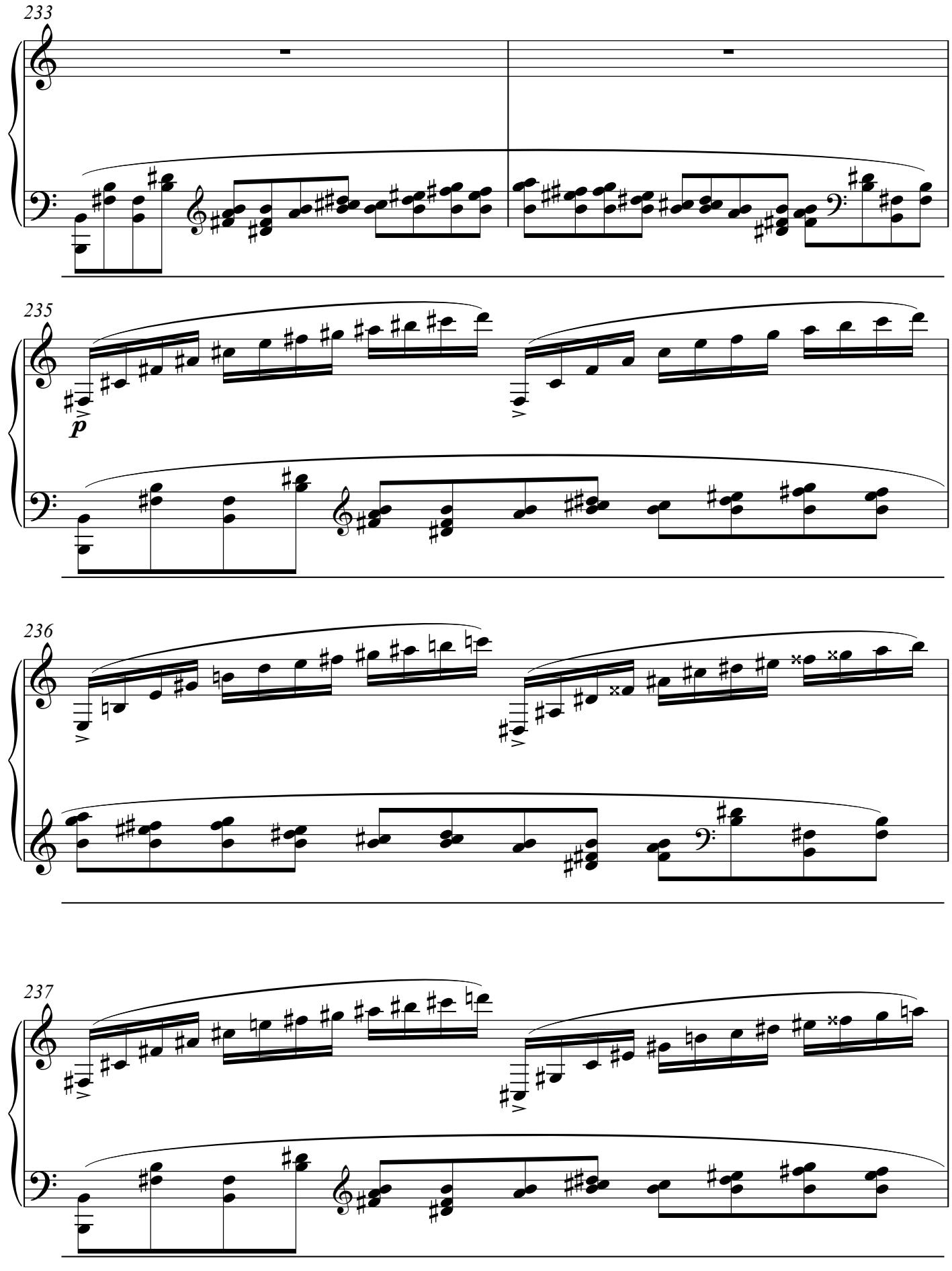
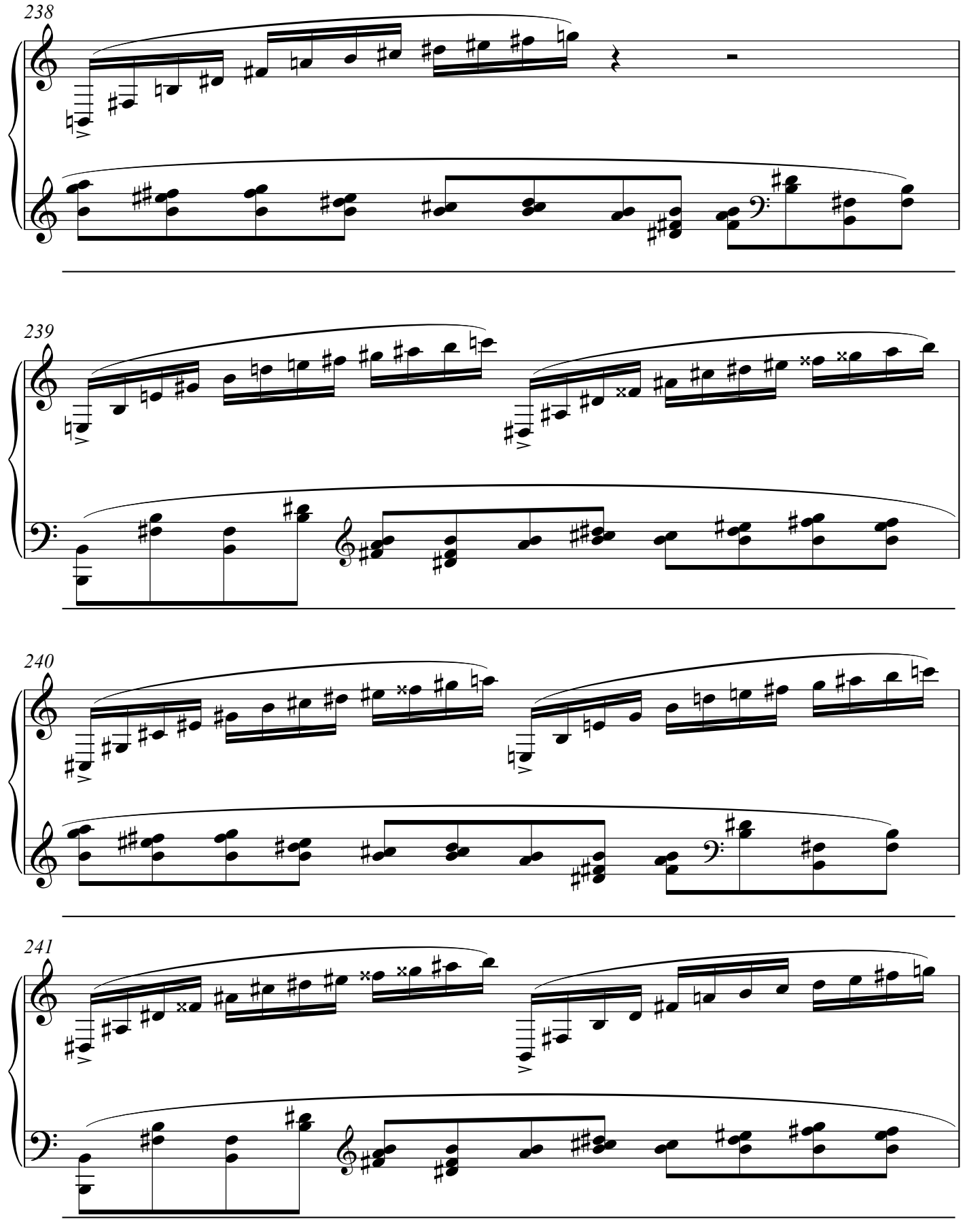
171
173
175


177
VII. Hazy
♩ = 72
179
remove heavy object
from the piano
p
Ped.
184
p
mf
193
3
Ped.


201
207
211
214
Ped.
f


VIII. Finale
♩ = 76
rit.
217
Ped.
Ped.
223
228
231
p


233
235
p
236
237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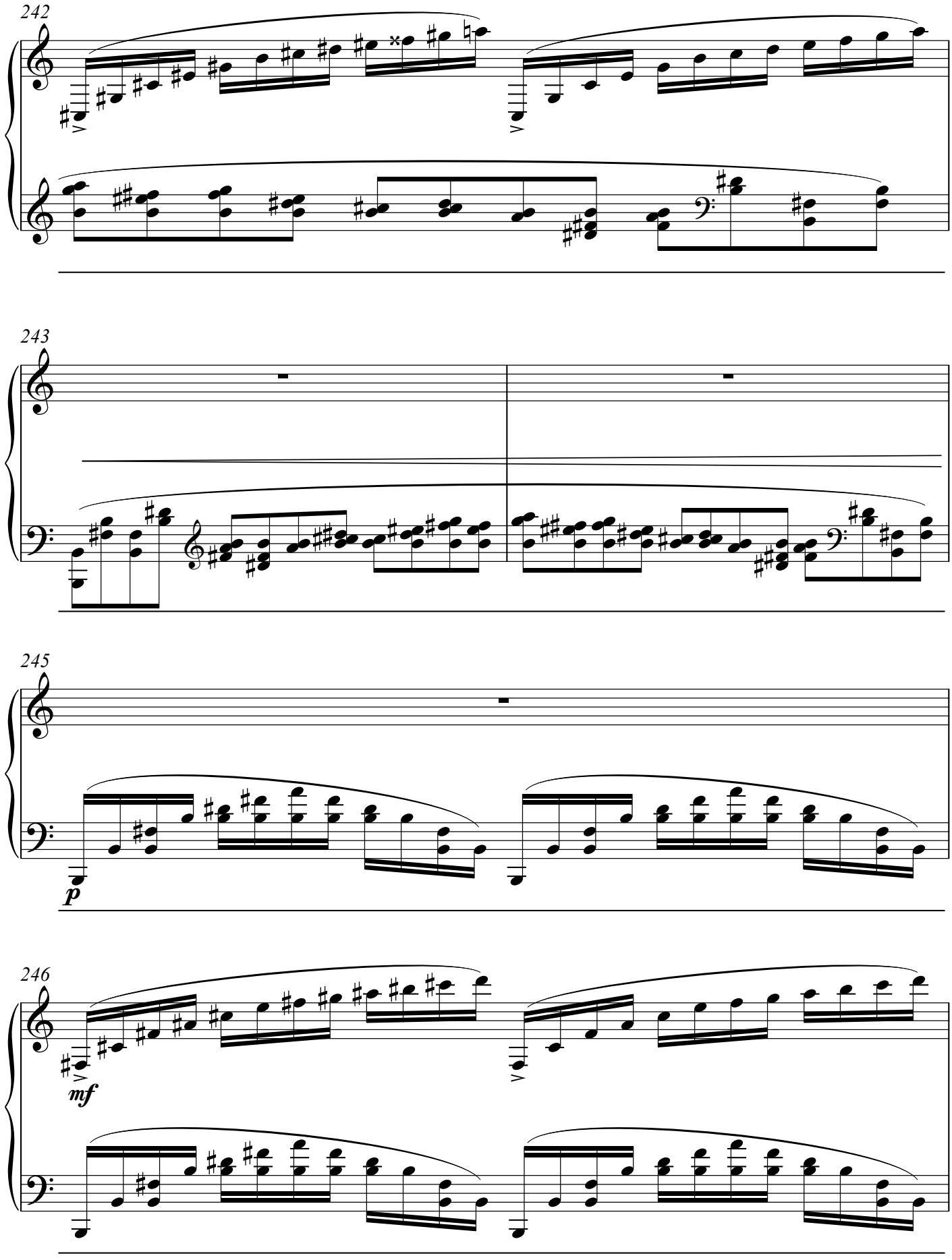
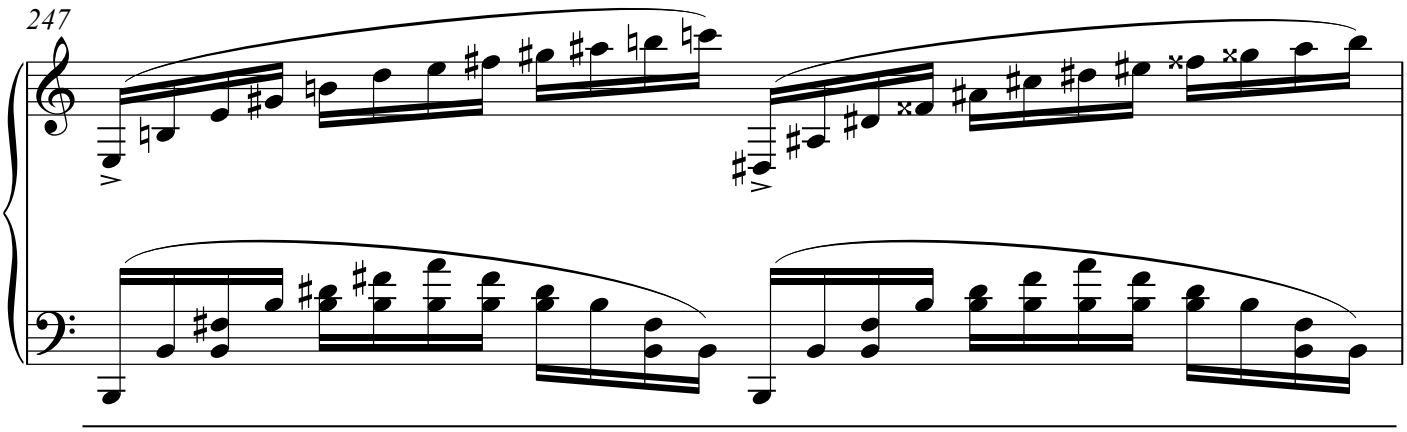

242
243
245
p
246
mf

247



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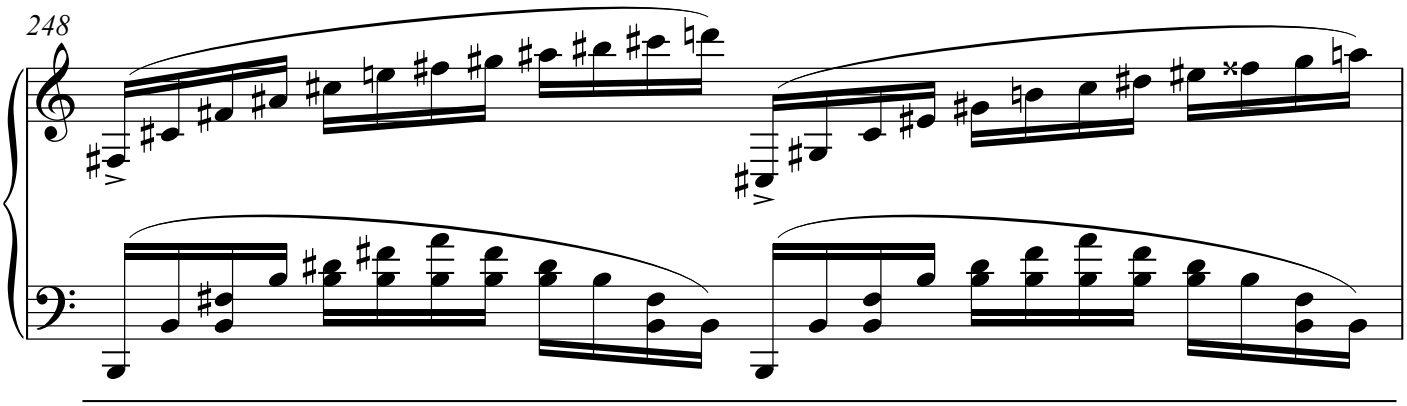

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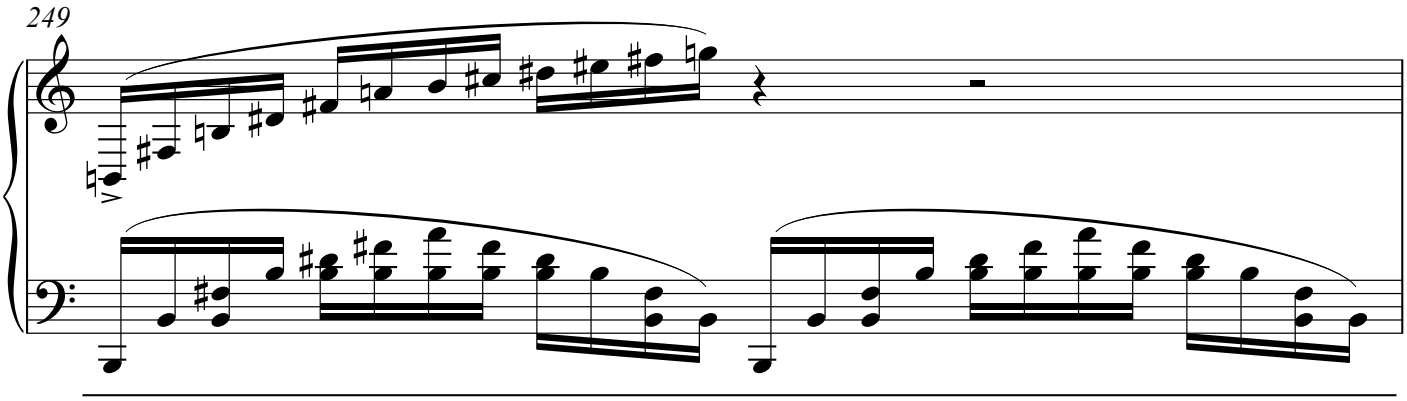

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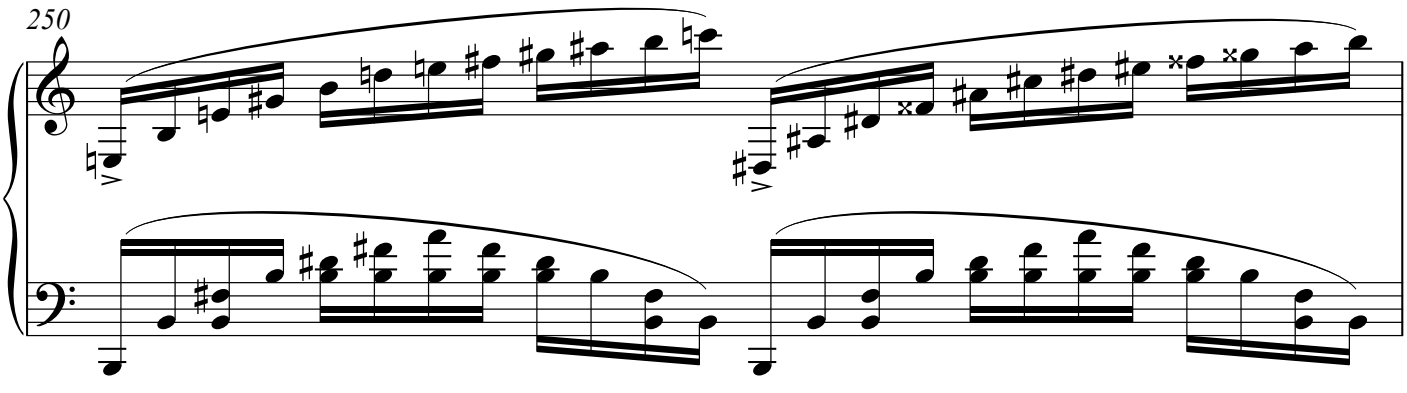
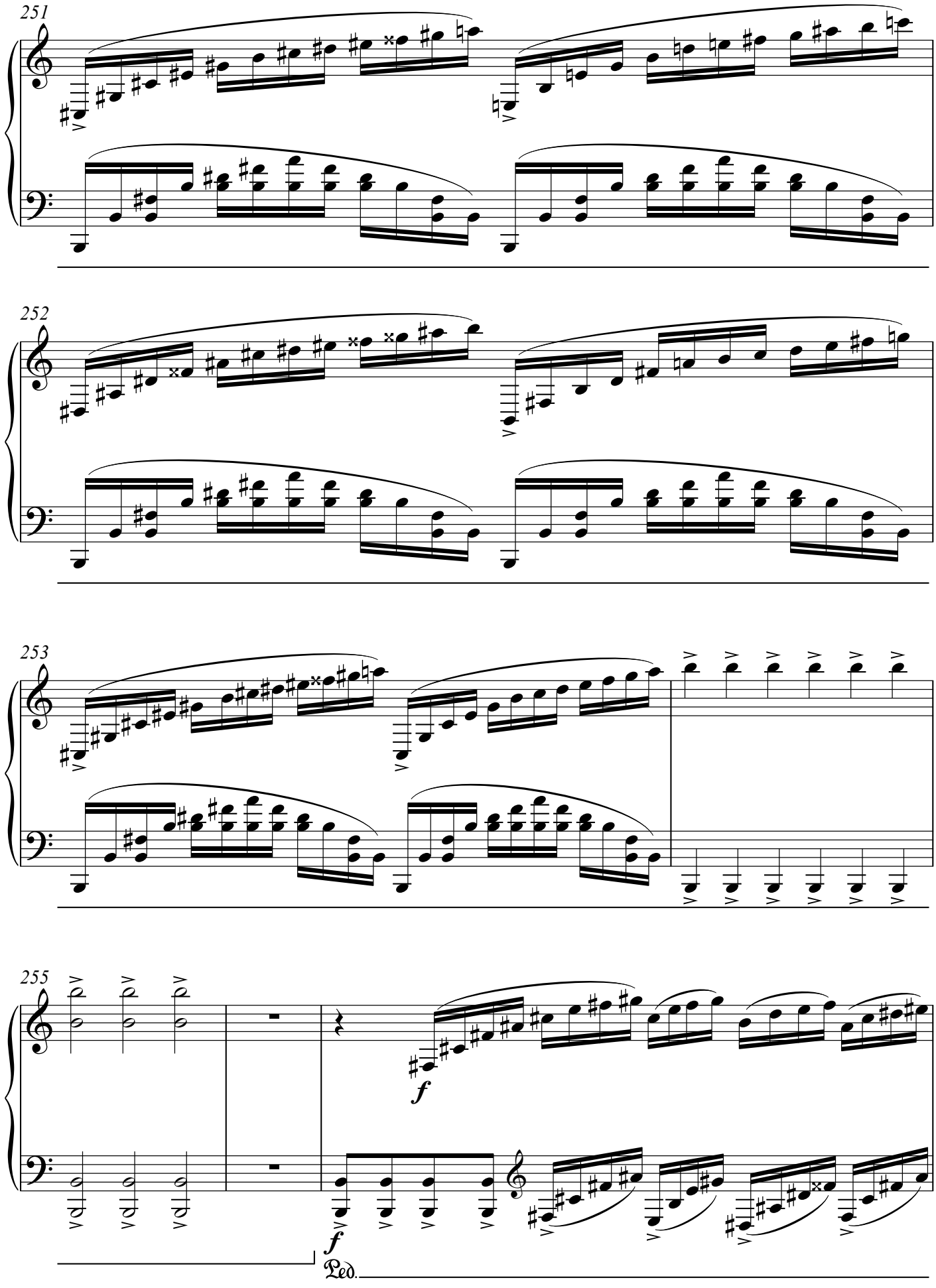
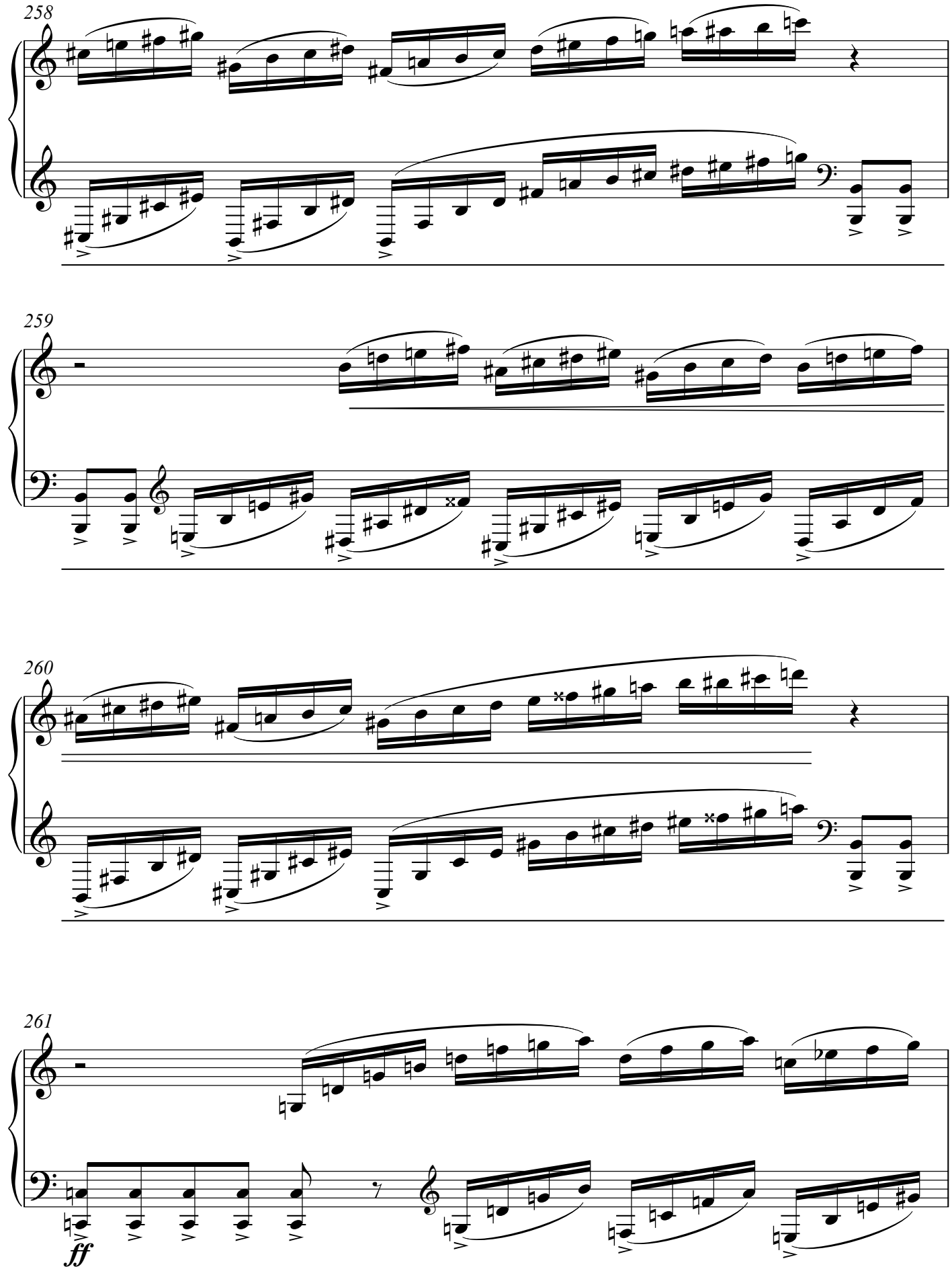
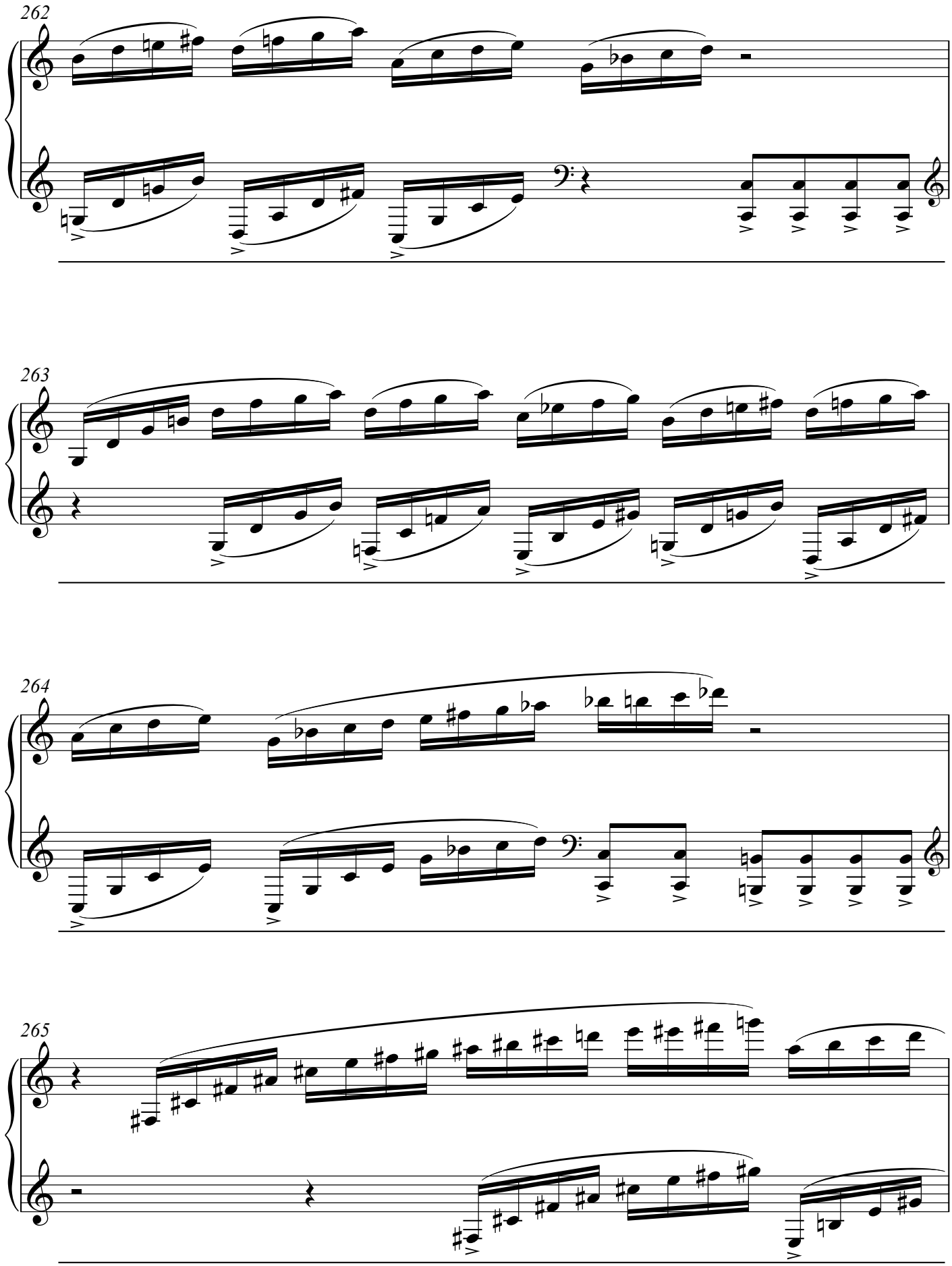



251
252
253
255
f
f
Ped.


258
259
260
261
ff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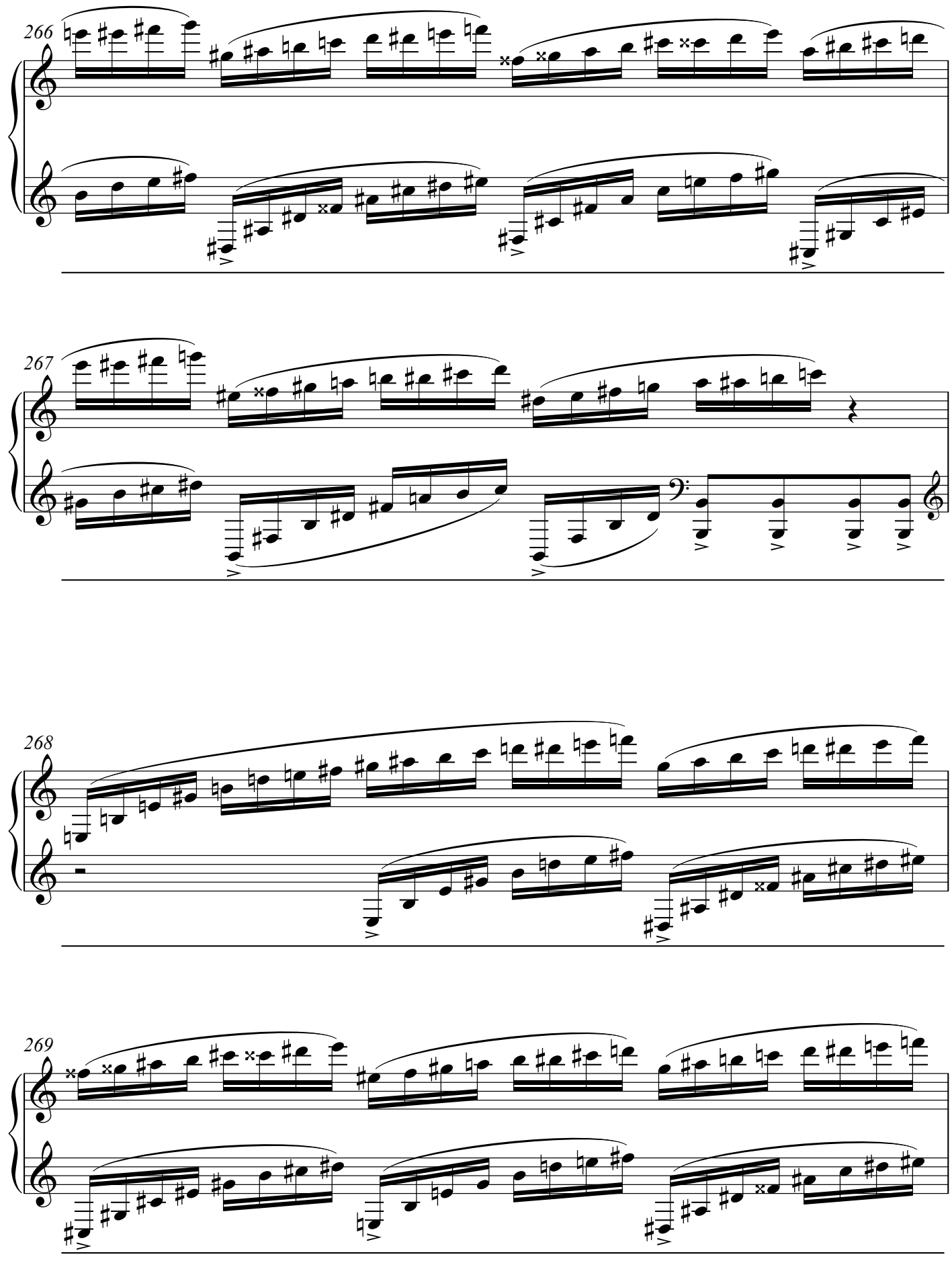
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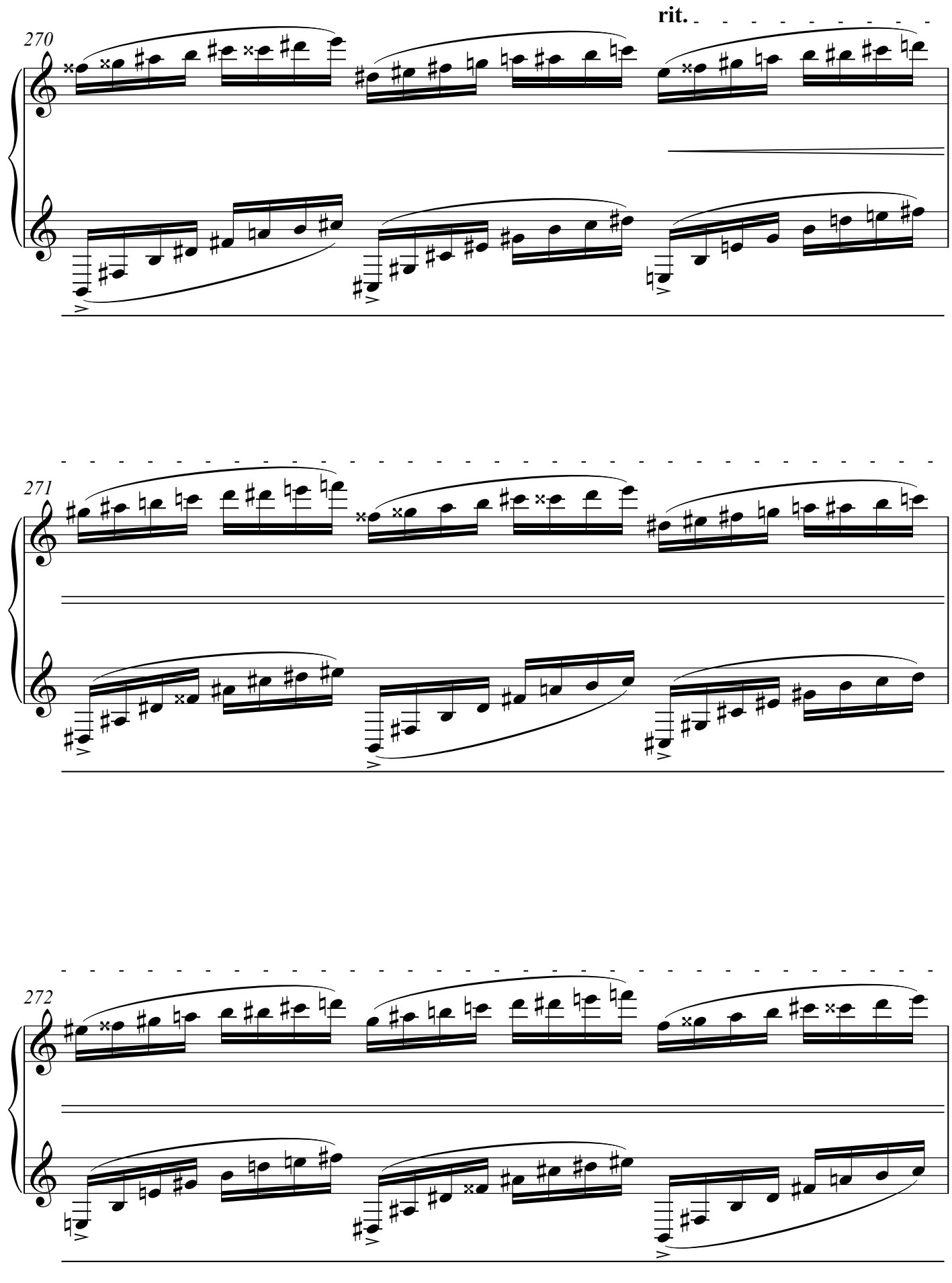
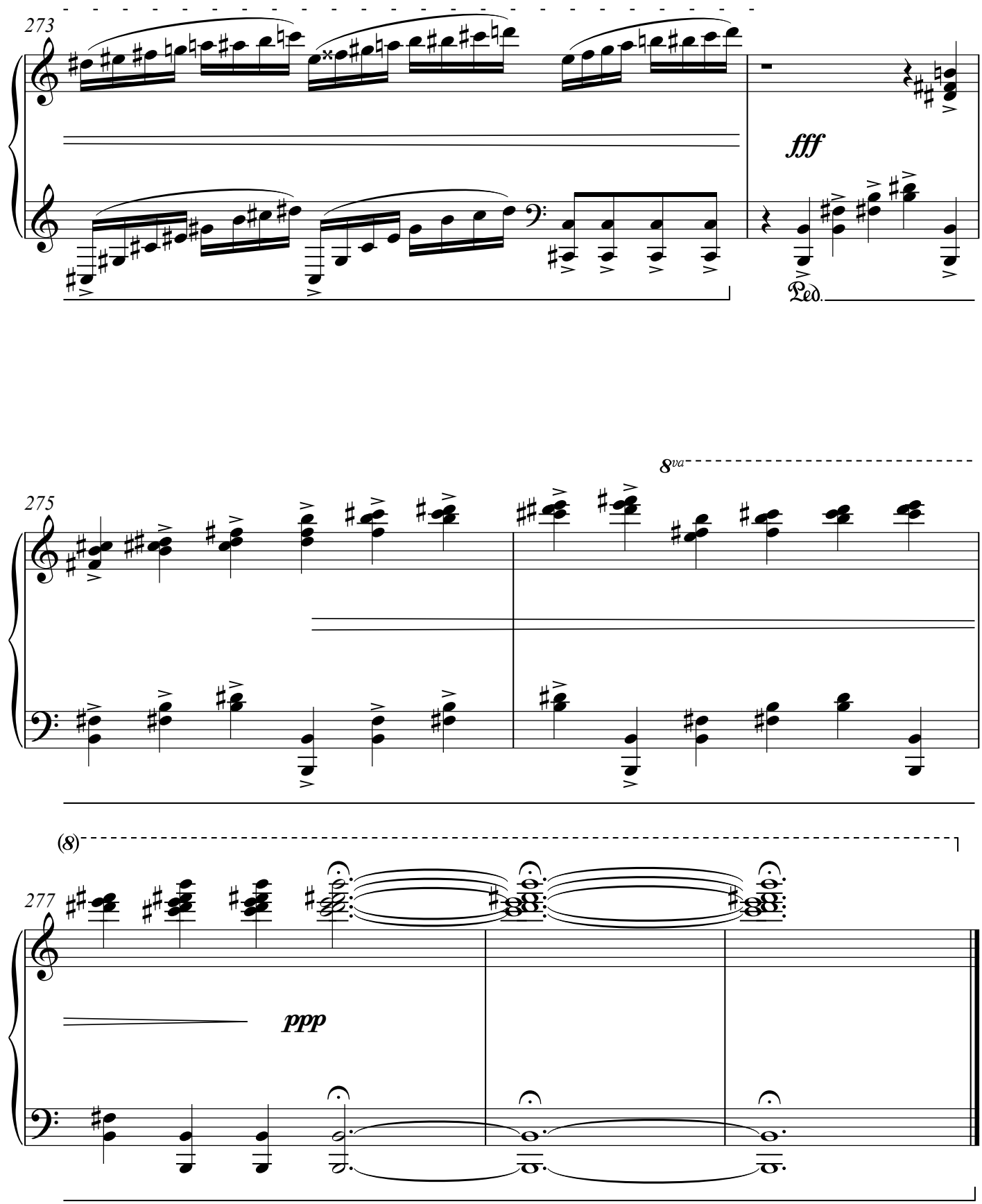

rit.
270
271
272


273
fff
Ped.
8va
275
(8)
277
ppp