Four Characteristic Pieces for piano, four hands; op. 30

The opening number "Jenny and Anna" was a *jeu d'esprit* I had on February 4th of last year, in which the two sister piano students would share the instrument and portray one another musically. Taking the primo part is Anna, who presents first a depiction of her younger, more capricious sister with a wry waltz tune in a dotted rhythm. Jenny on secondo furnishes her theme with a rudimentary accompaniment which manages nevertheless to take us far afield harmonically. Now it's her turn to exaggerate, as Jenny represents her own sister with a stern, syncopated theme in the parallel minor. Those frivolous oom-pah-pahs are duly suppressed, although Anna does keep the dotted rhythm of Jenny's little waltz active in the treble accompaniment. Finally her theme for Jenny returns outright in the primo, but this time through the subject down there on secondo harmonizes it much more conventionally, a clear token of her elder sister's good influence. Since the piece was dedicated to the girls' mother, my friend the literary agent Ginger Barber, I presented it first to her. She glanced at the score and said to my delight, "That must be Jenny where the flat comes in." Quite so.

I had kept both parts of "Jenny and Anna" easy enough for students to play, but in July of last year I seized particularly upon the fact that this piece had an easy secondo part. In my four-hands Suite, op. 9, the primo part is for the student and the secondo for the teacher. I decided that here the roles would reverse: as I continued work on the present suite, the secondo part would stay easy, but I had the freedom to write more challenging music for the primo to play.

The Serenade is written in the characteristic guitar key of E major. While the primo sings, the secondo strums off-beat chords in the first strain. For the second one, it replicates the finger picking of idiomatic repeated notes through the use of broken octaves (the more grateful way to achieve this effect on keyboard instruments). After undergoing a certain amount of development, this second strain recurs as a canon, which supports a street echo effect: the secondo player holds down the pedal, and the primo executes the canon at the space of only an eighth note between the hands. Above the street, up in her balcony, the subject of the serenade hears a piquant blurring effected by both acoustical (the sustaining pedal) and compositional (the abnormally close canon) means. The first strain returns and builds now to its own climax. We sense the propriety in just continuing our stroll (which had suffered this sweet interruption) down the Italian street, and letting the lovers be. As we move further along our appointed path, the strumming guitar appears to die away. I dedicated Serenade to my sister Rose.

In writing these notes I find myself at an impasse here: if I am pointing up the music's highlights for the listener, then I should talk now about the third number, "The Chase." But I just composed that a few weeks ago, whereas the final number, "Impatience," was written in September of *last* year. The latter number begins quietly, but ends raucously when the student on secondo takes over and

puts the number into high gear, as I describe below. I was happy with "Impatience" as a characteristic piece, just not one to immediately follow the Serenade with its *morendo* ending. During the intervening year, I played the wedding for Rose and Bill Cupo, and thought it would be appropriate to interlard a characteristic piece dedicated to him. "The Chase," fortunately, starts out fast (a perfect foil then to Rose's Serenade), and its coiled-up energy in fact never lets up until the very end (a foil then to the beginning of "Impatience" as well).

The kind of headlong 6/8 characteristic of "The Chase" has long been associated with the hunt, but here the quarry is Charlie Chaplin! I noticed in his films that outdoor scenes where the police are in pursuit were often looped for comic effect (and also possibly as an economy: a way to get your money's worth out of your footage). You would see Charlie go around the same corner, and the same gang of hapless police continue down the same street without turning; that kind of thing. I wrote my music in large formal sections which get repeated verbatim along with the film footage. Toward the end the eighth-note motion allays: Charlie seems to have eluded them. But it picks up again when he is spotted, and he is of course nabbed in the end.

The "Impatience" of the final number is characteristic of many beginning students of piano, including my niece Lara, to whom the work is dedicated. In writing this number I decided to take their point of view, being bored with playing naïve accompaniments while the teacher playing primo fairly goes to town. The latter starts things out with a slow four-note ostinato, repeated relentlessly twenty-four times. Below this, the student on secondo plays groups of fourths, which use only four different pitches in both hands. Then, against this background, our teacher gets to play certain rambling, but at least varied, improvisatory motifs with his right hand. Finally the student can no longer take the relentless repetition in her part, for so much as a single measure more! She takes the fourths she has been relegated and generates a new motive, presto, in which she of course becomes the soloist. This goes fine until she invites the teacher on primo to take over with the number's original melody. The problem is, she expects him to recapitulate this material at the break-neck speed that she has since established. For her part, she no longer seems to mind those repeated fourths which proved so very irksome before, as long as the music stays really fast like this! The teacher tries valiantly to comply with her wishes, to speed up his own part from the number's stately, not to say static, introduction. This music, however, soon proves itself unsuited to the faster tempo which now obtains. The poor pedagogue gets lost, dropping out for measures at a time, while those student fourths continue whirring blithely below! The embarrassed teacher (me, of course) and his reckless student (me again at Lara's age) only come together again in the piece's final, *sforzando* chord.

Victor Frost
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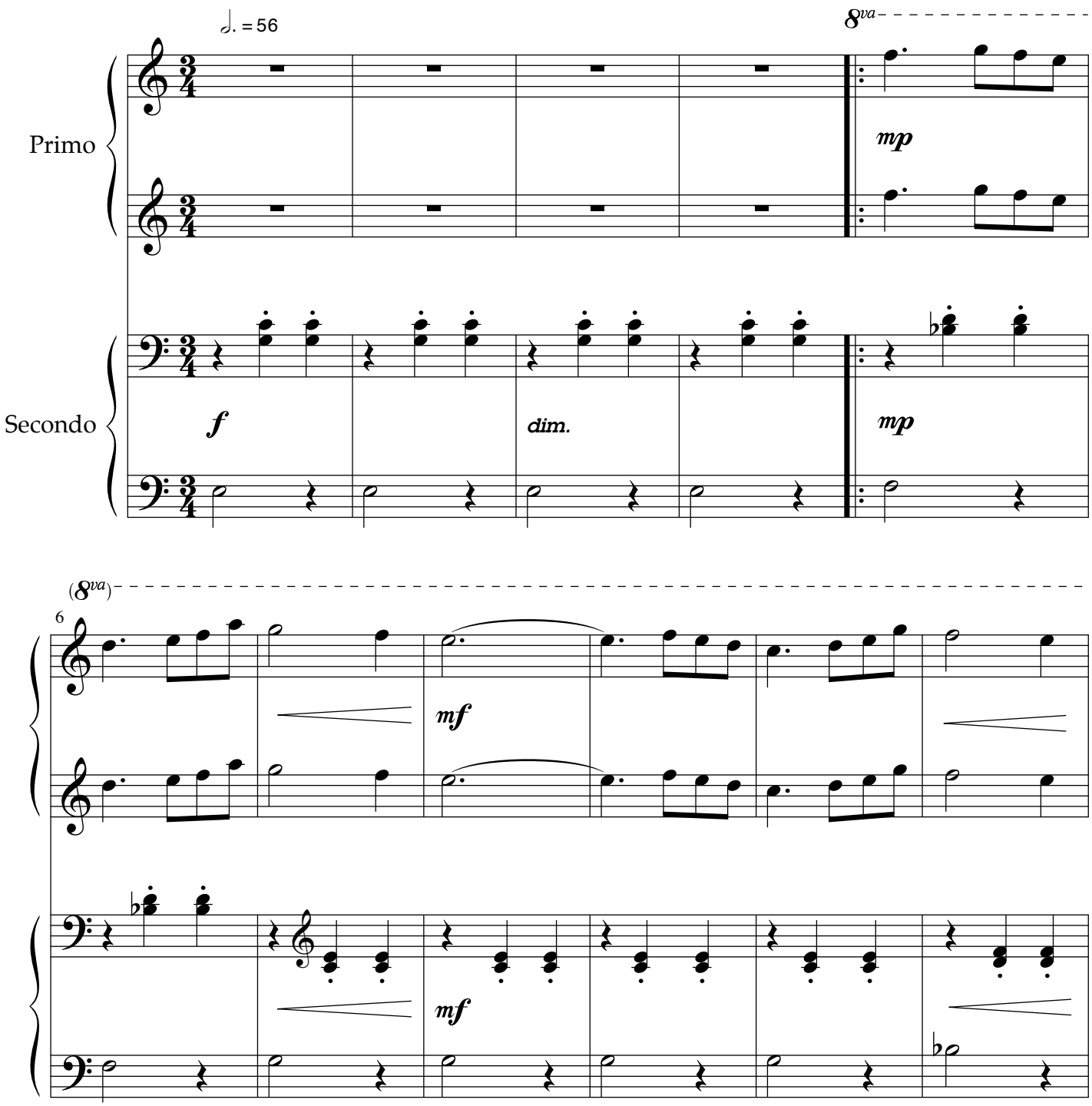
Four Characteristic Pieces

for piano, four hands; op. 30

1. Jenny and Anna

Victor Frost



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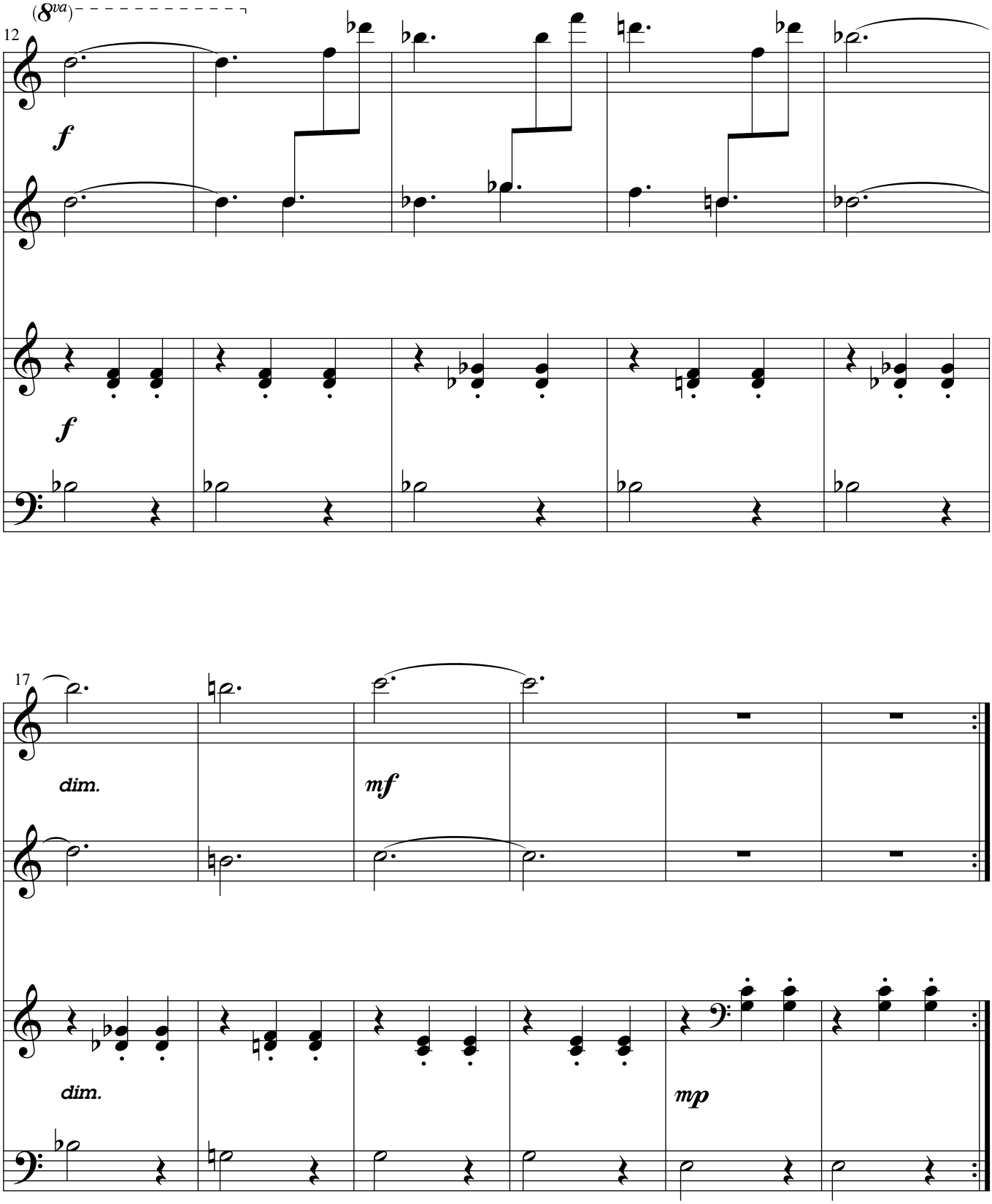
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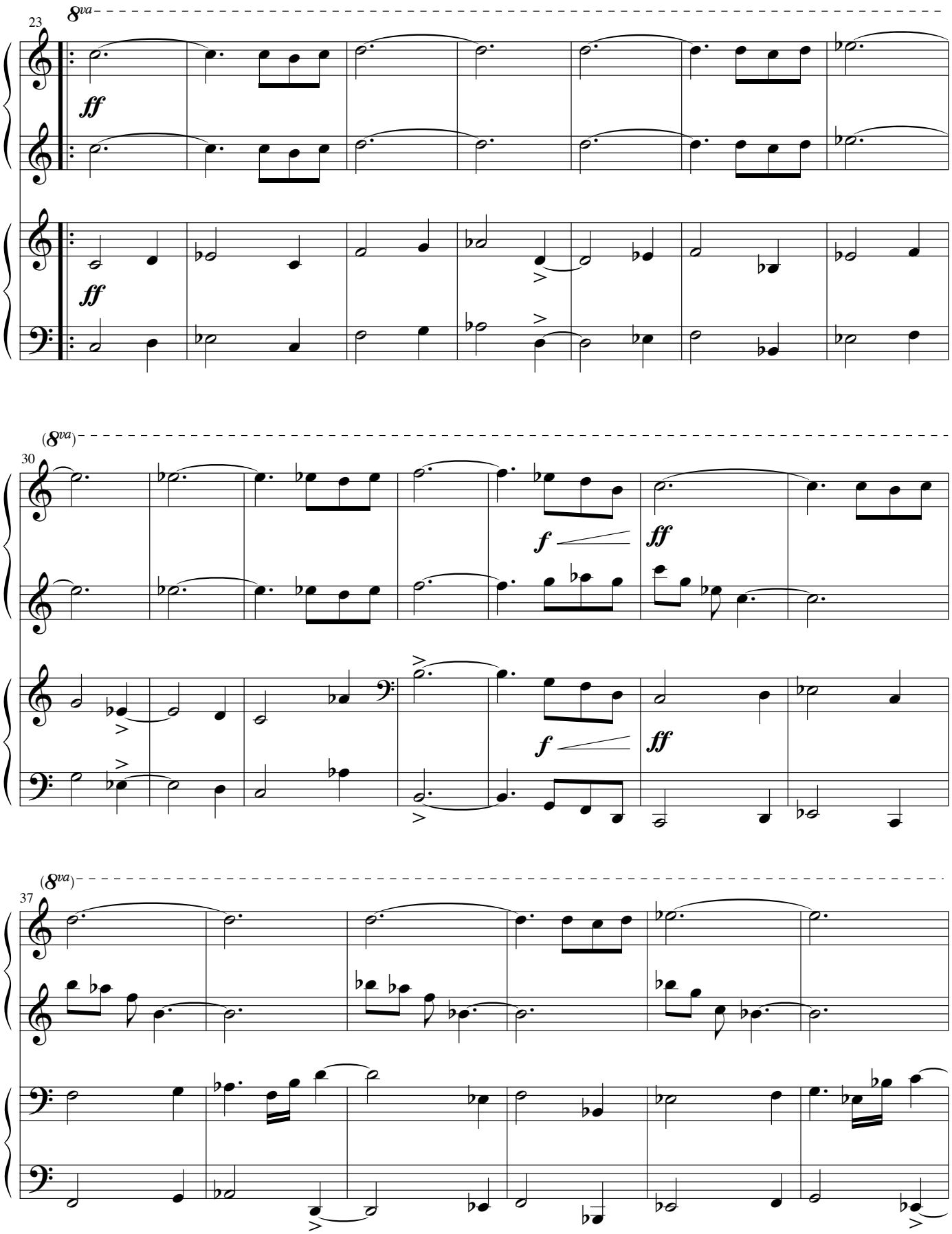
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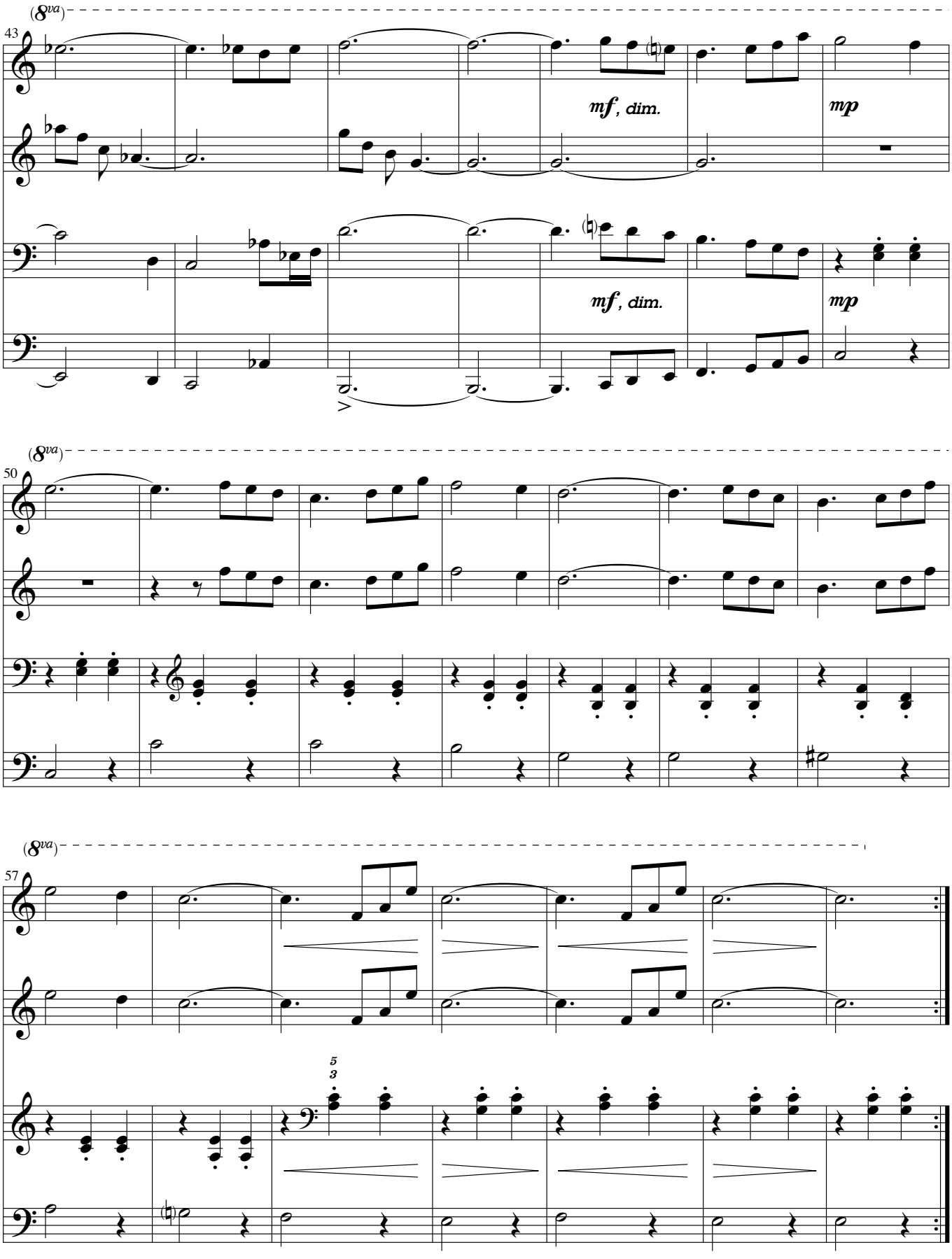
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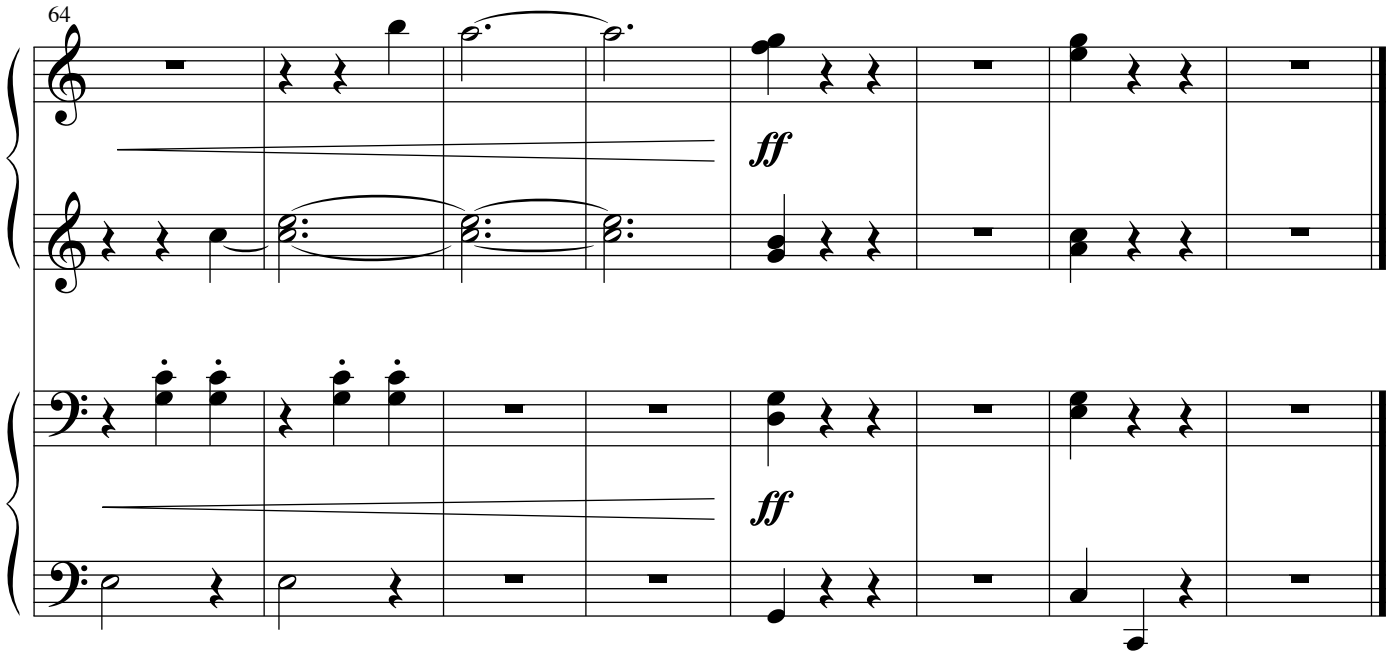
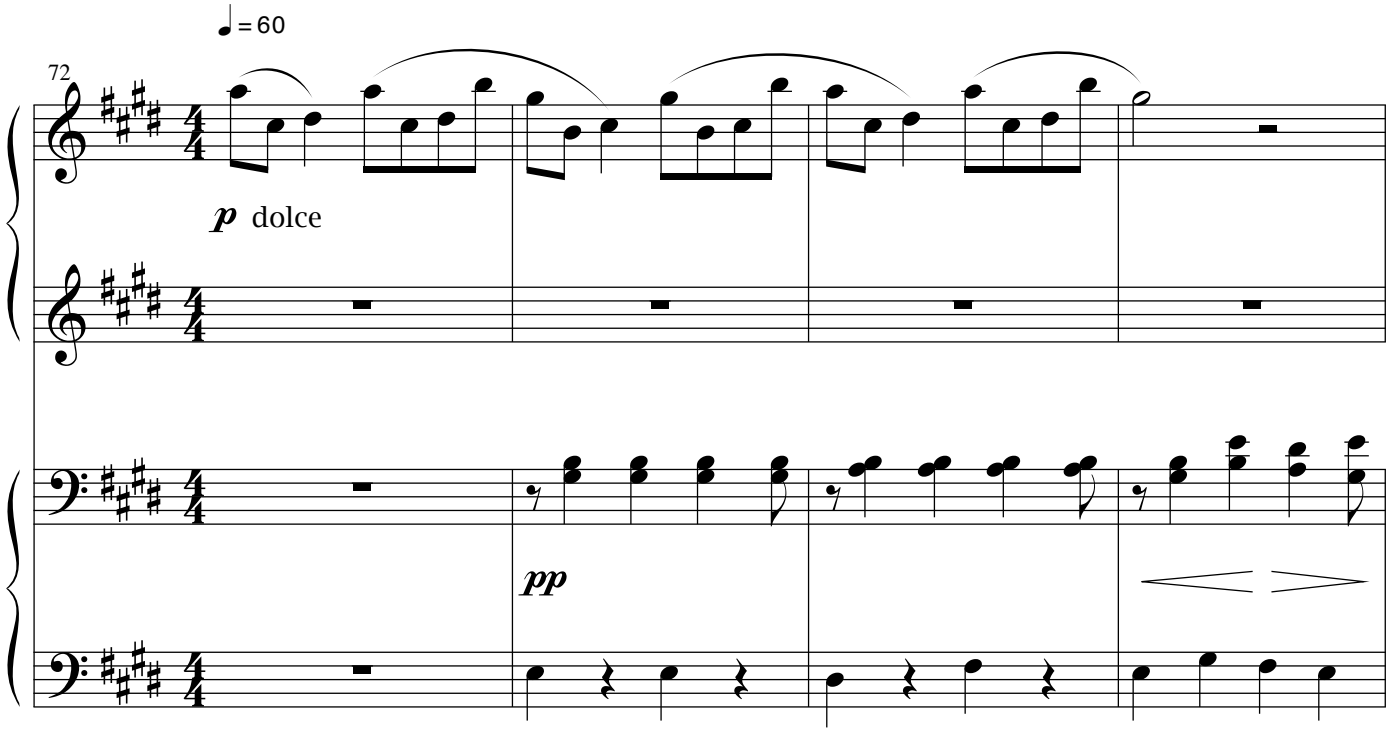
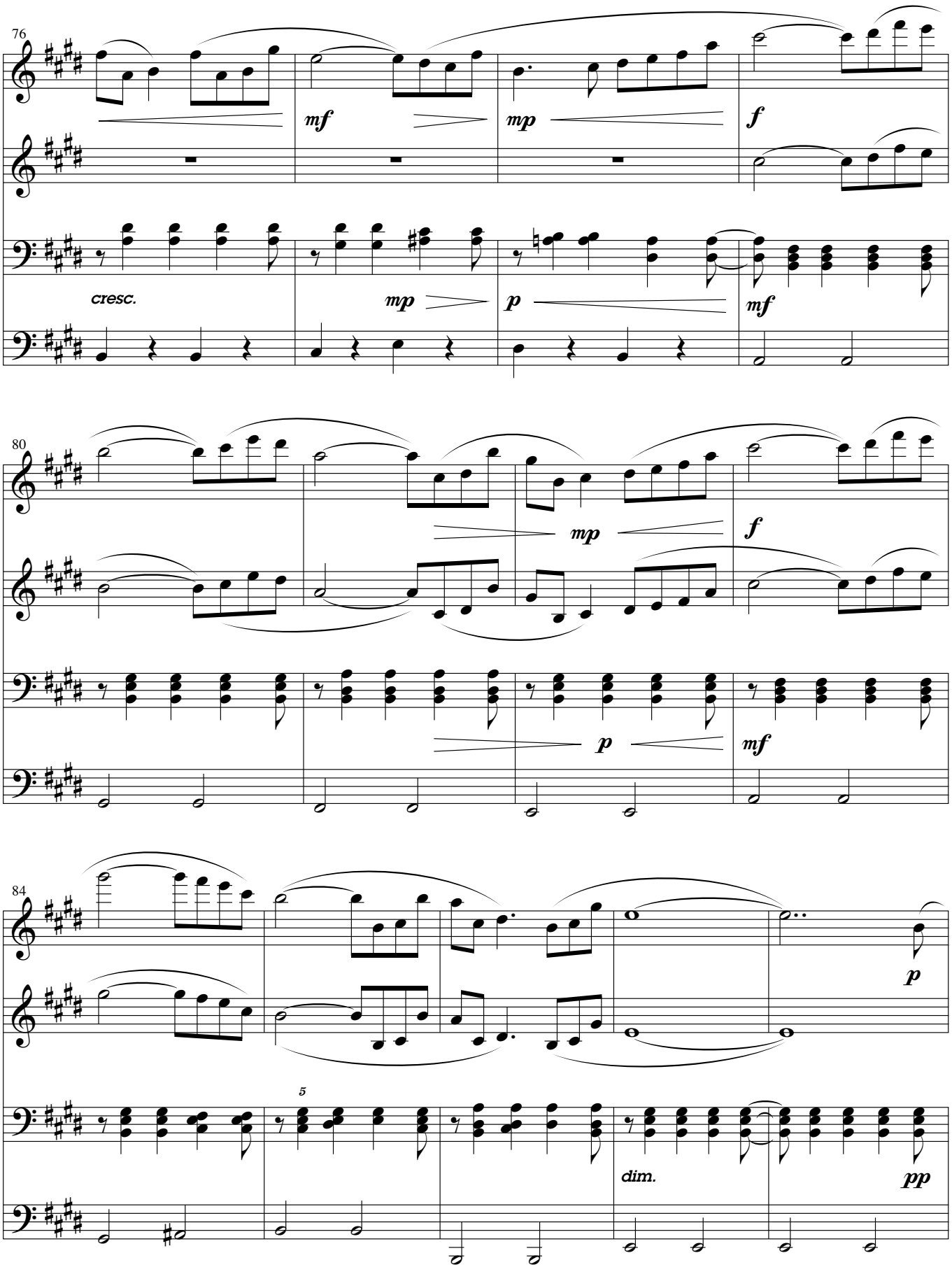


to Virginia Barber

2. Serenade

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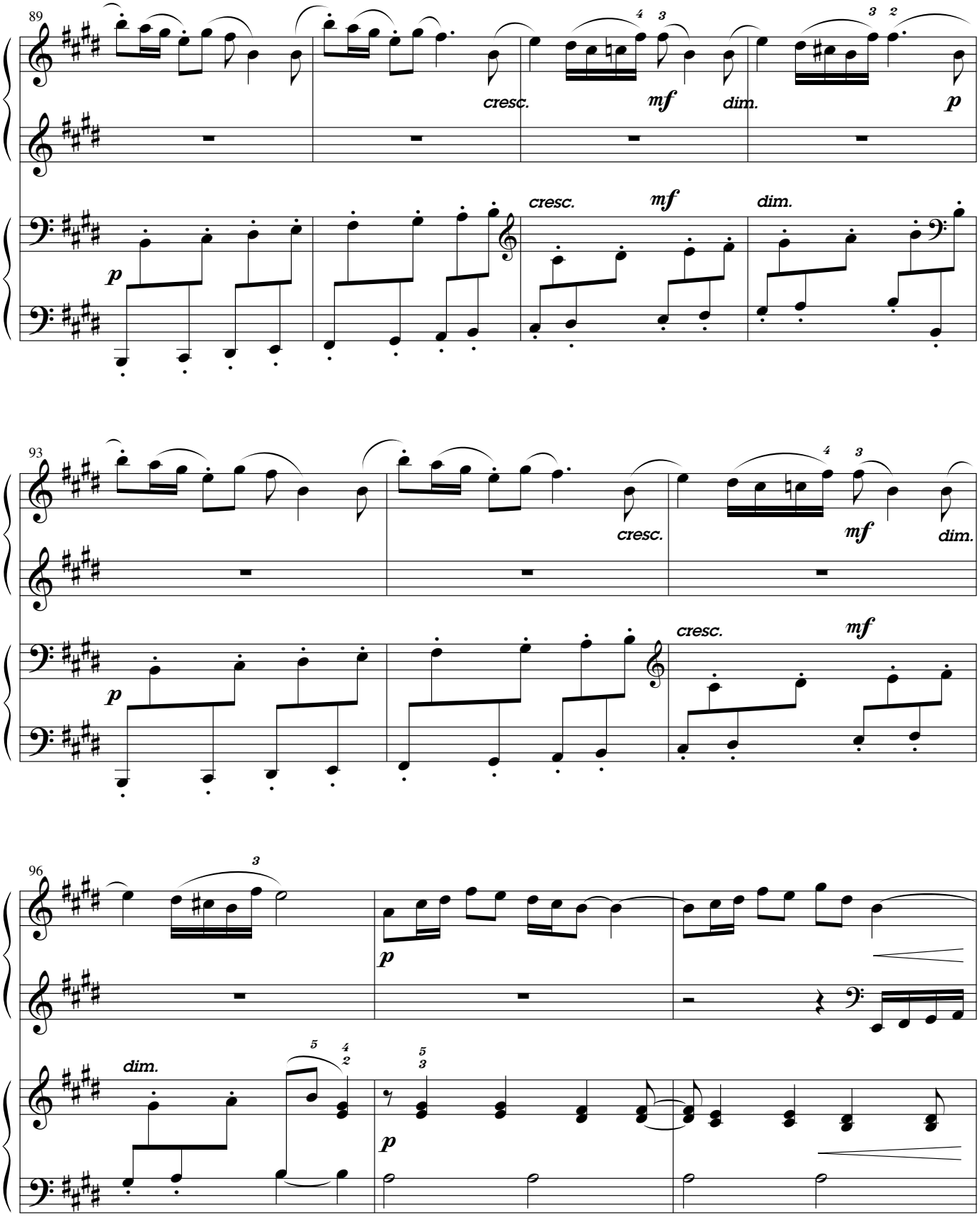
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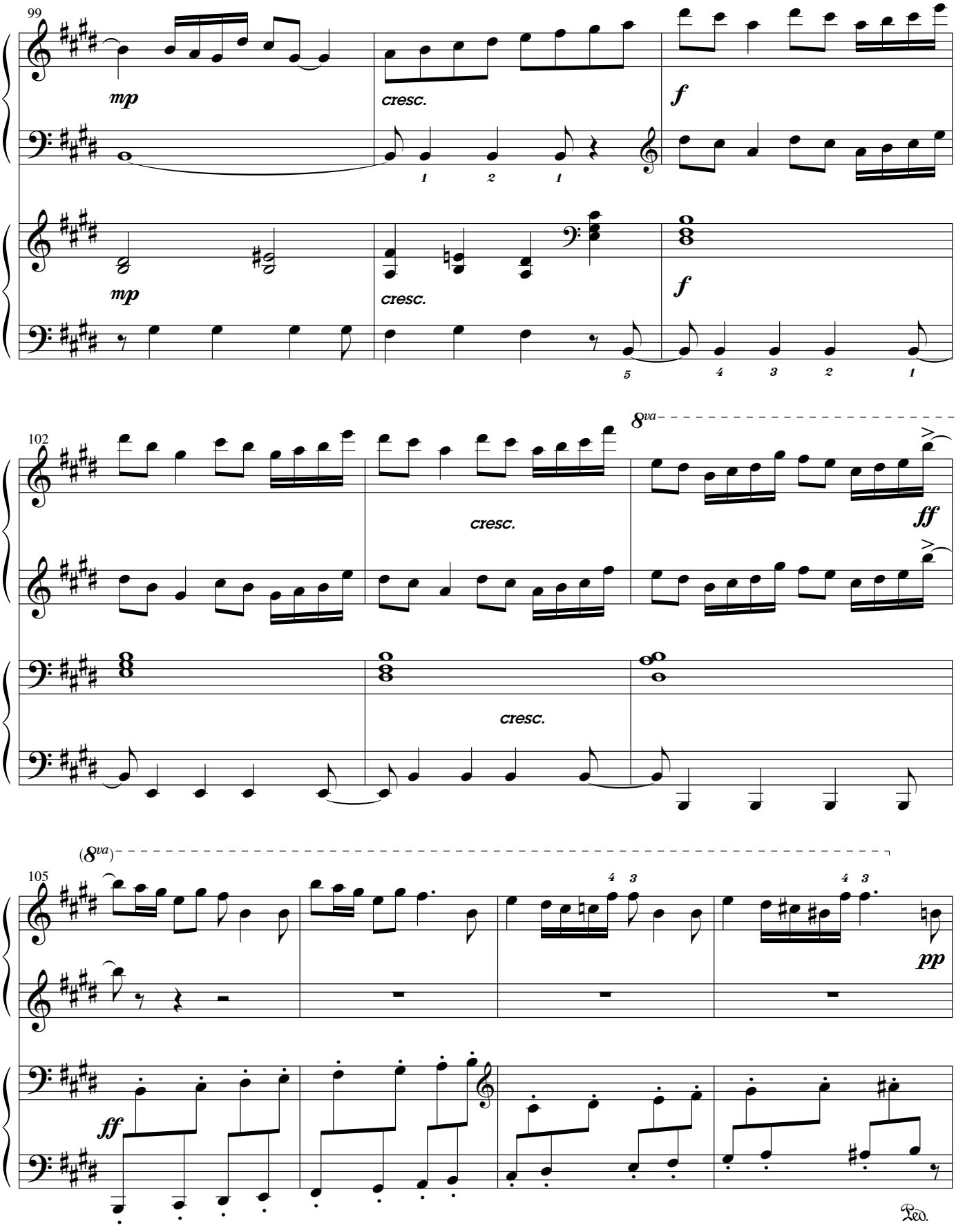
p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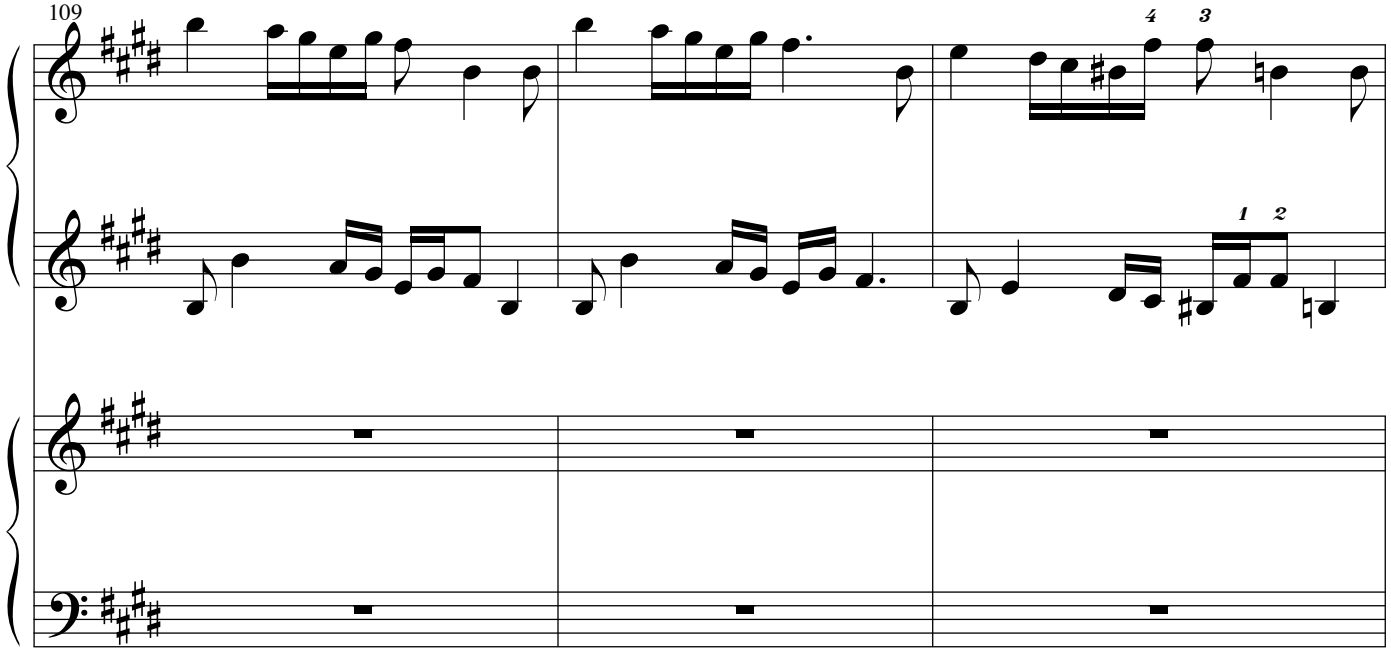
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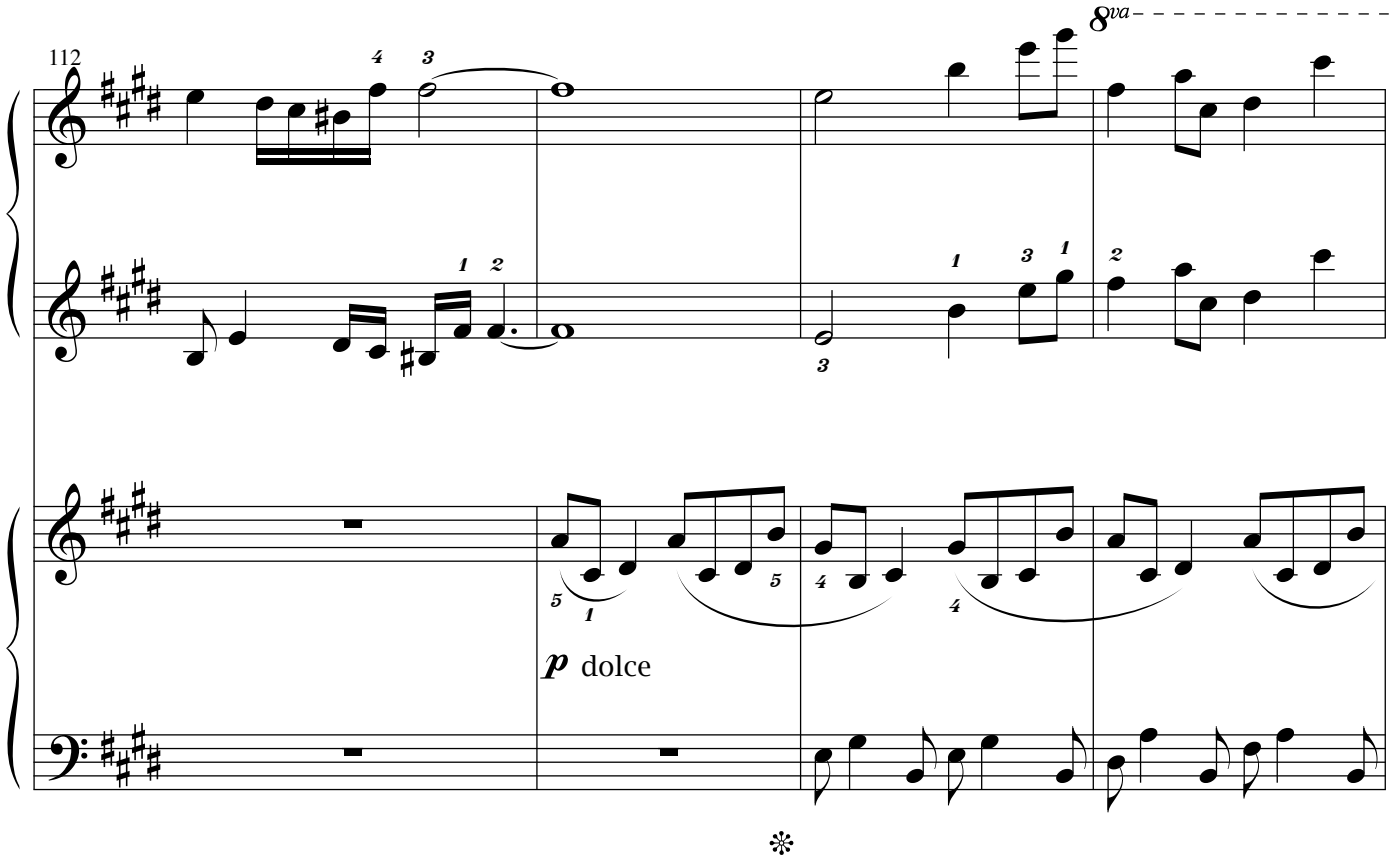
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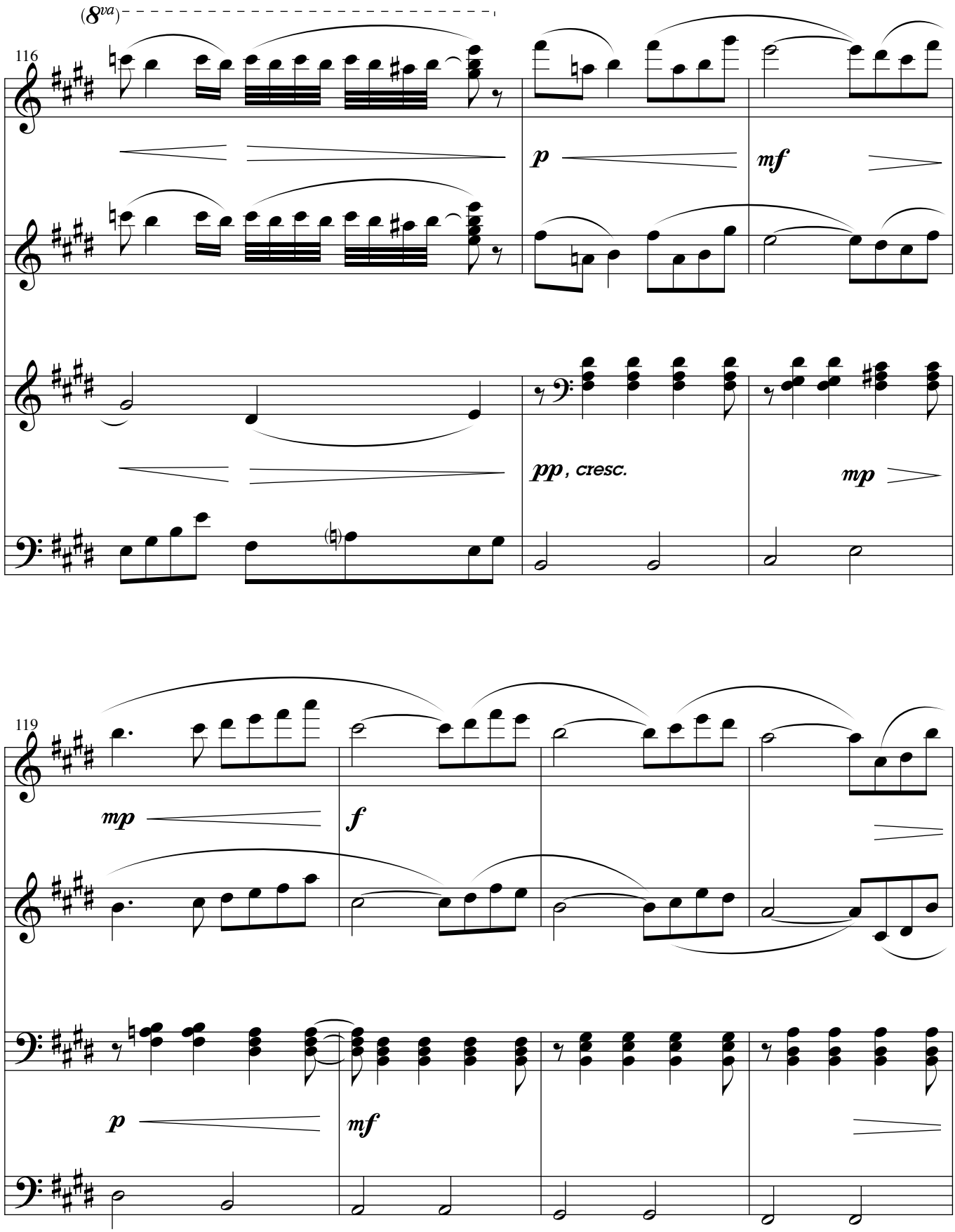
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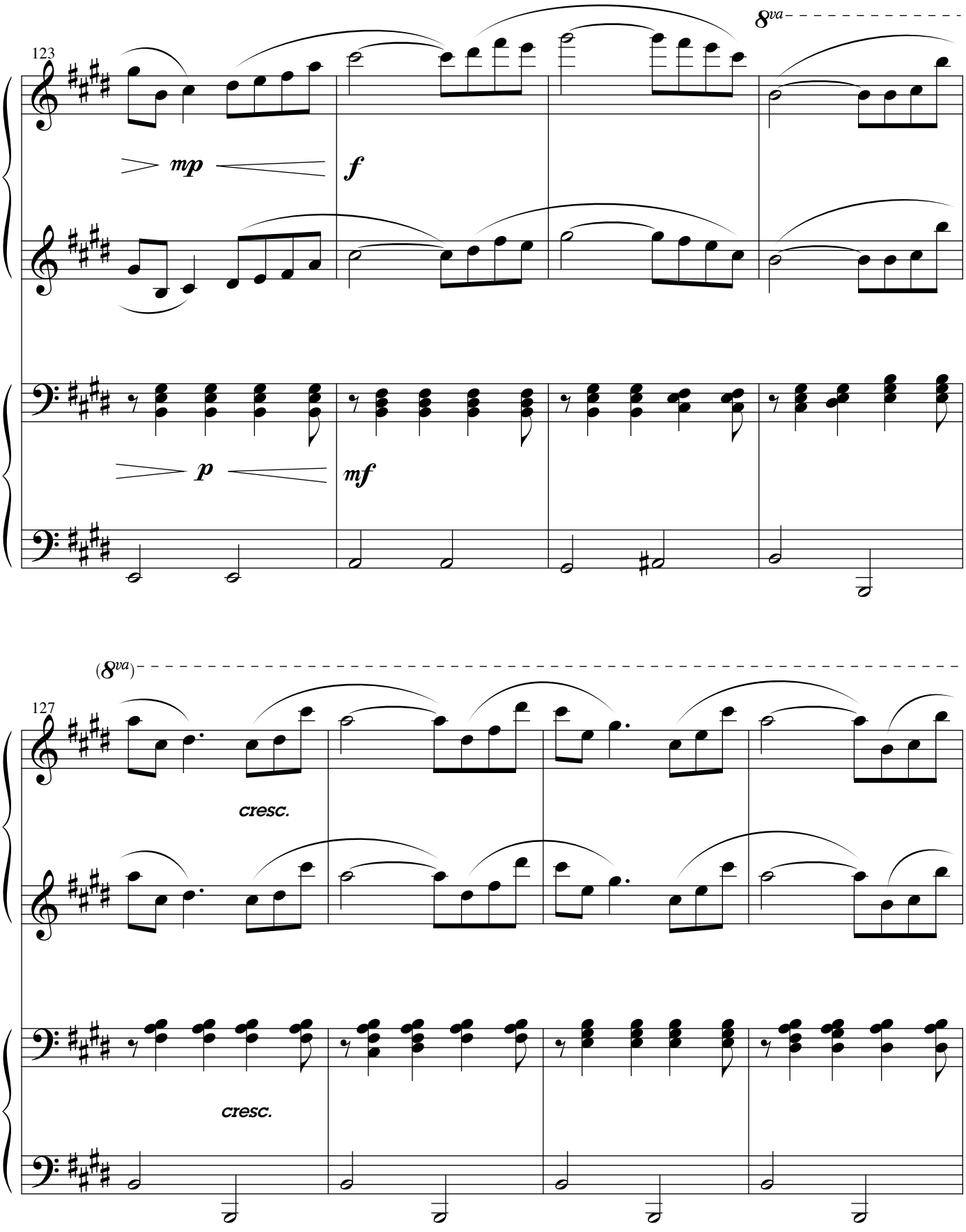
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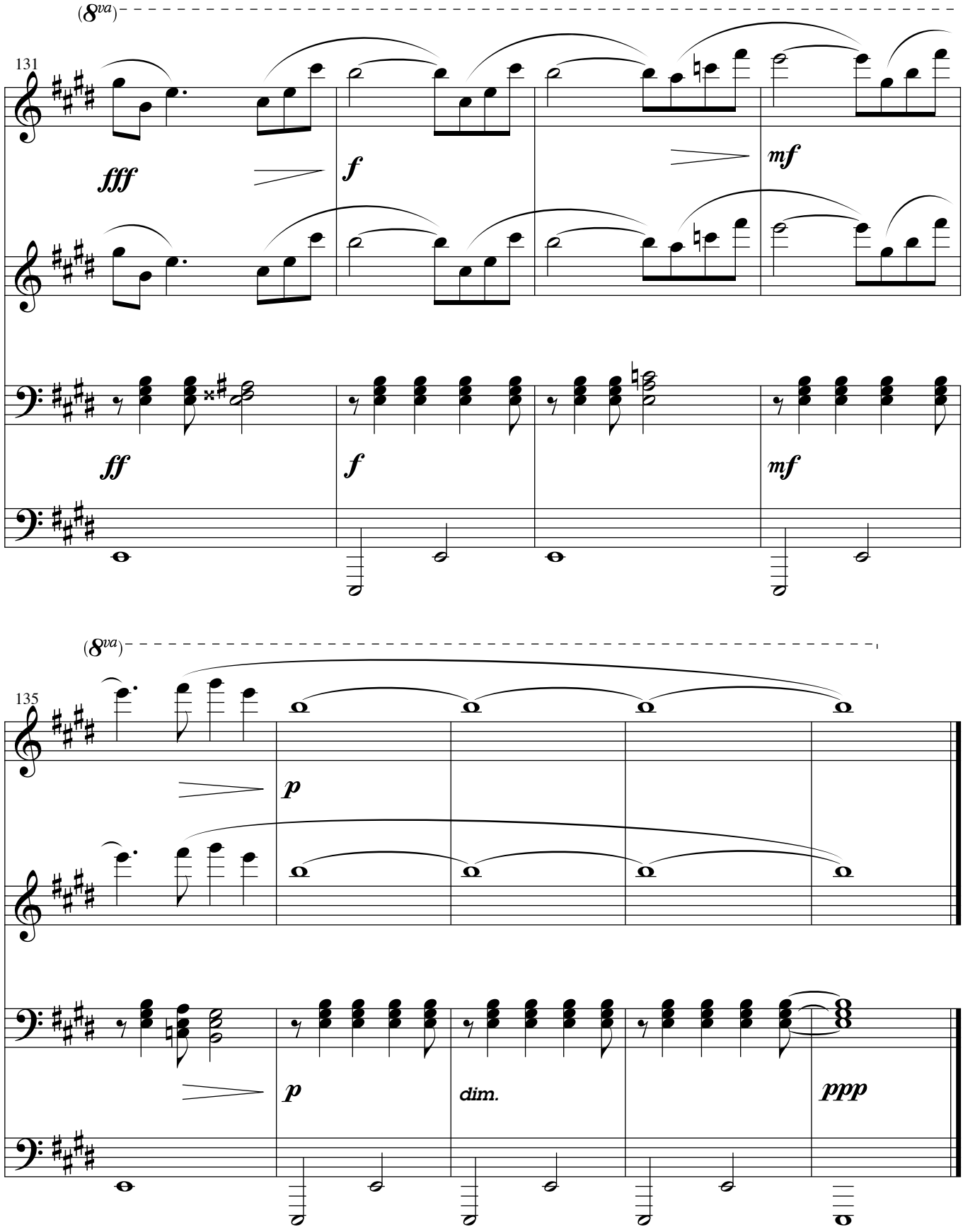
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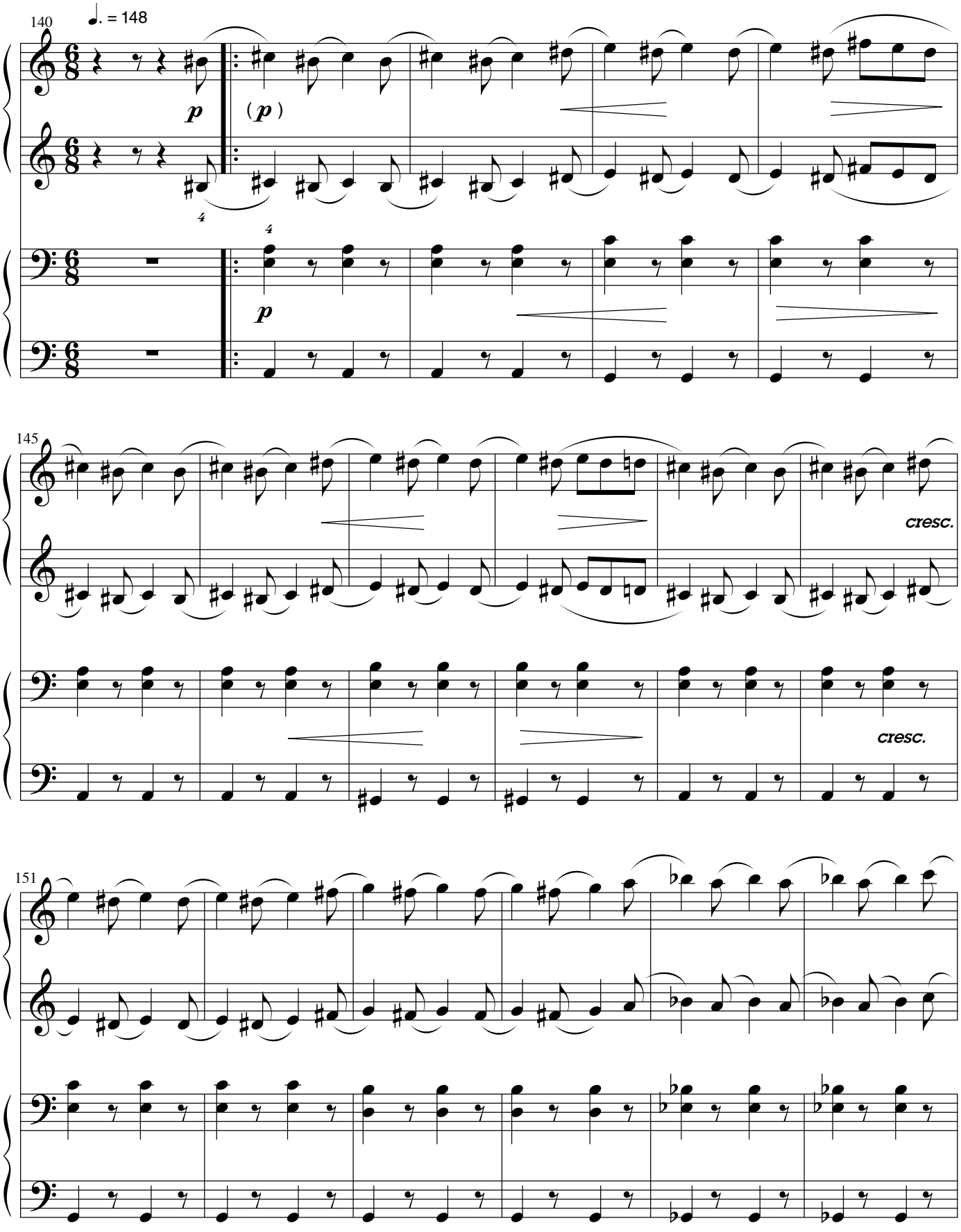
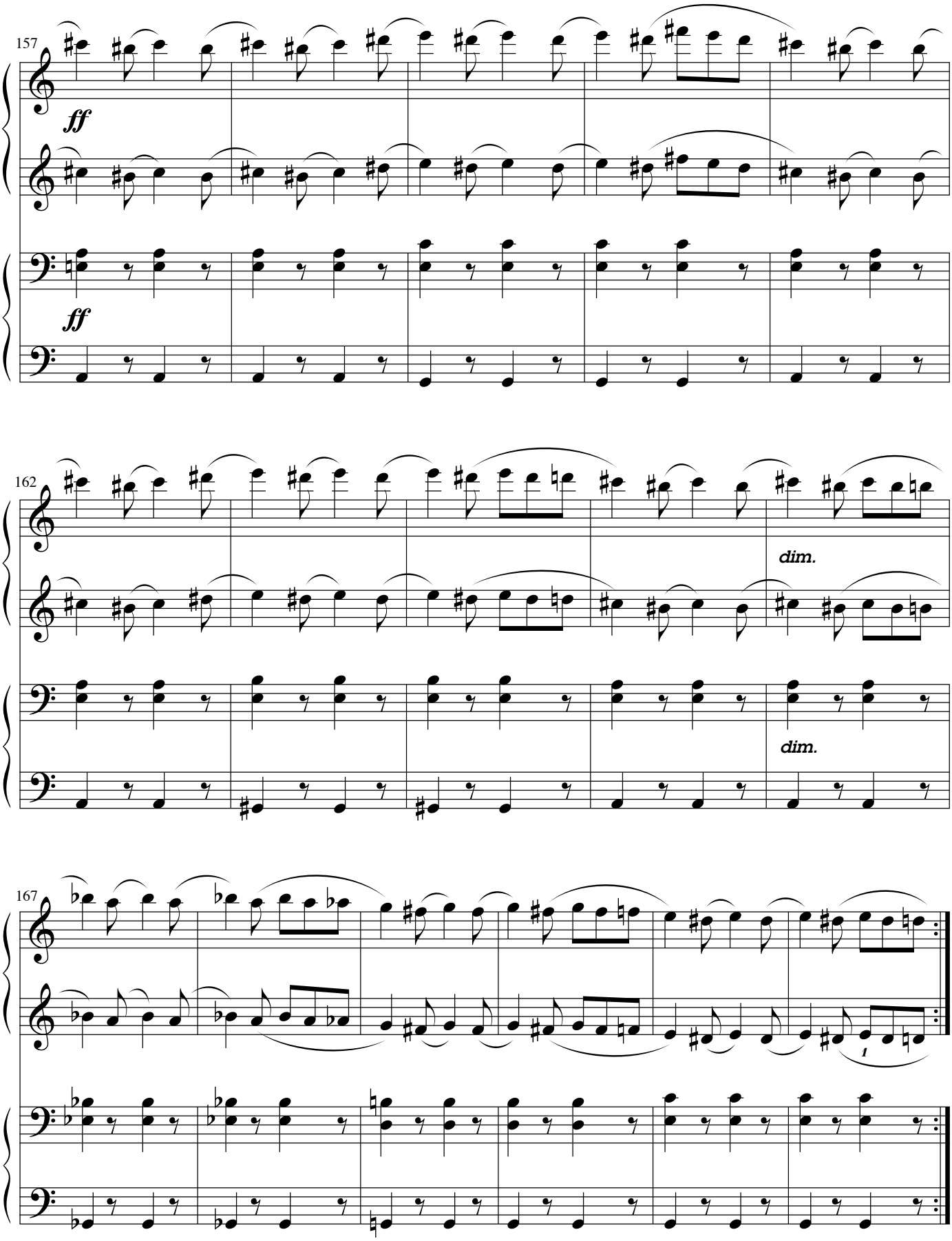
3. The Chase

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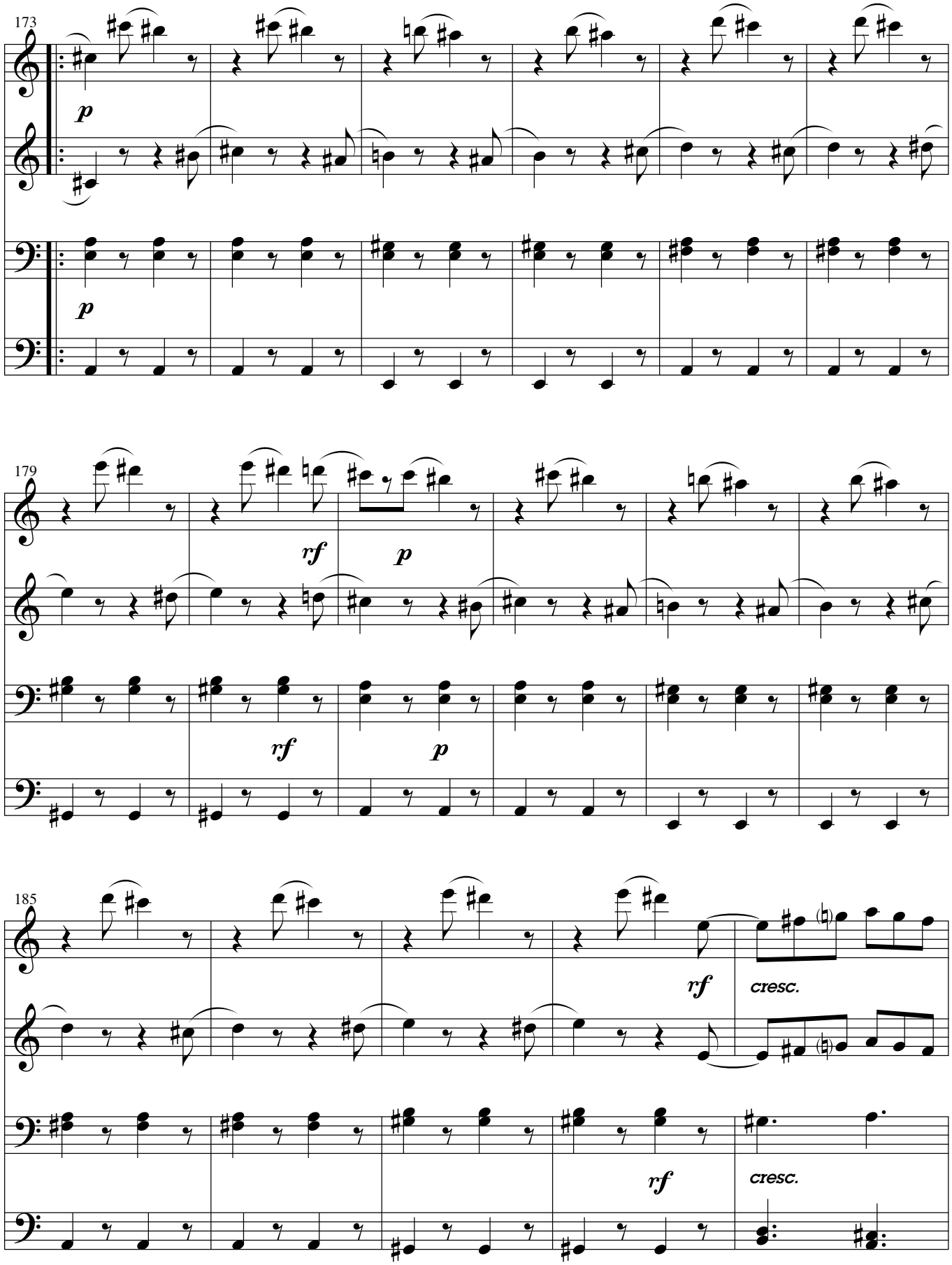
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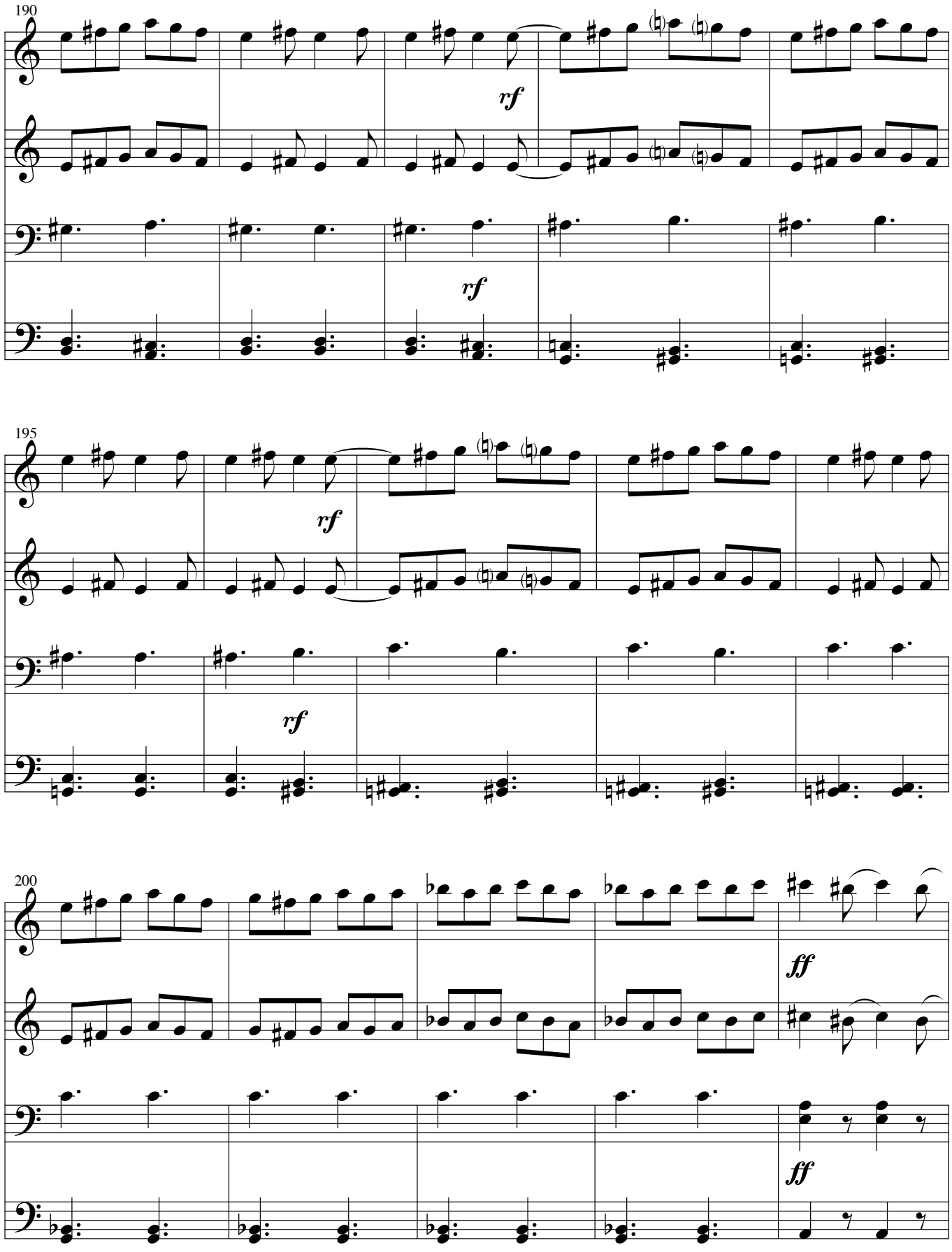
rf
cresc.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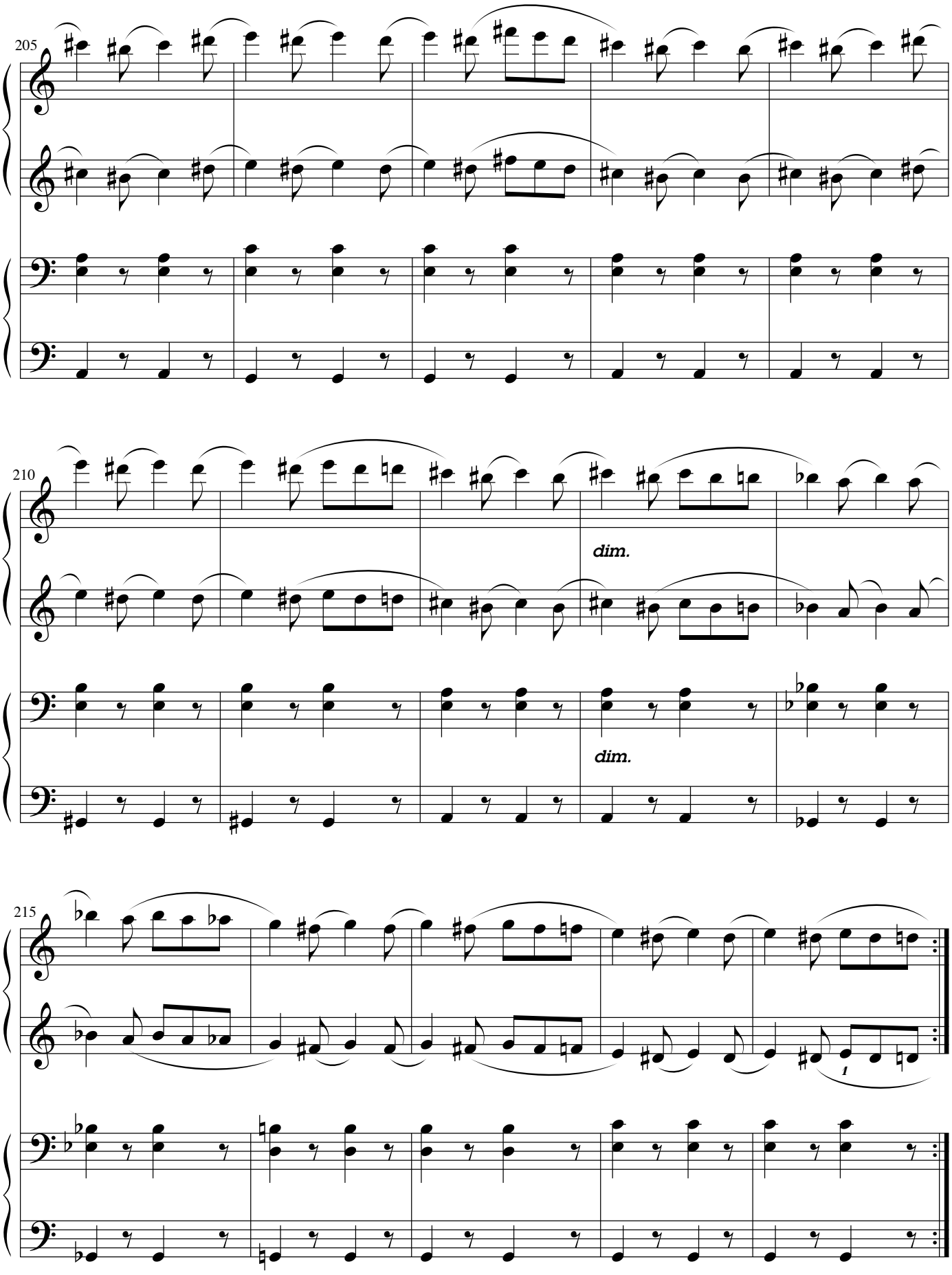
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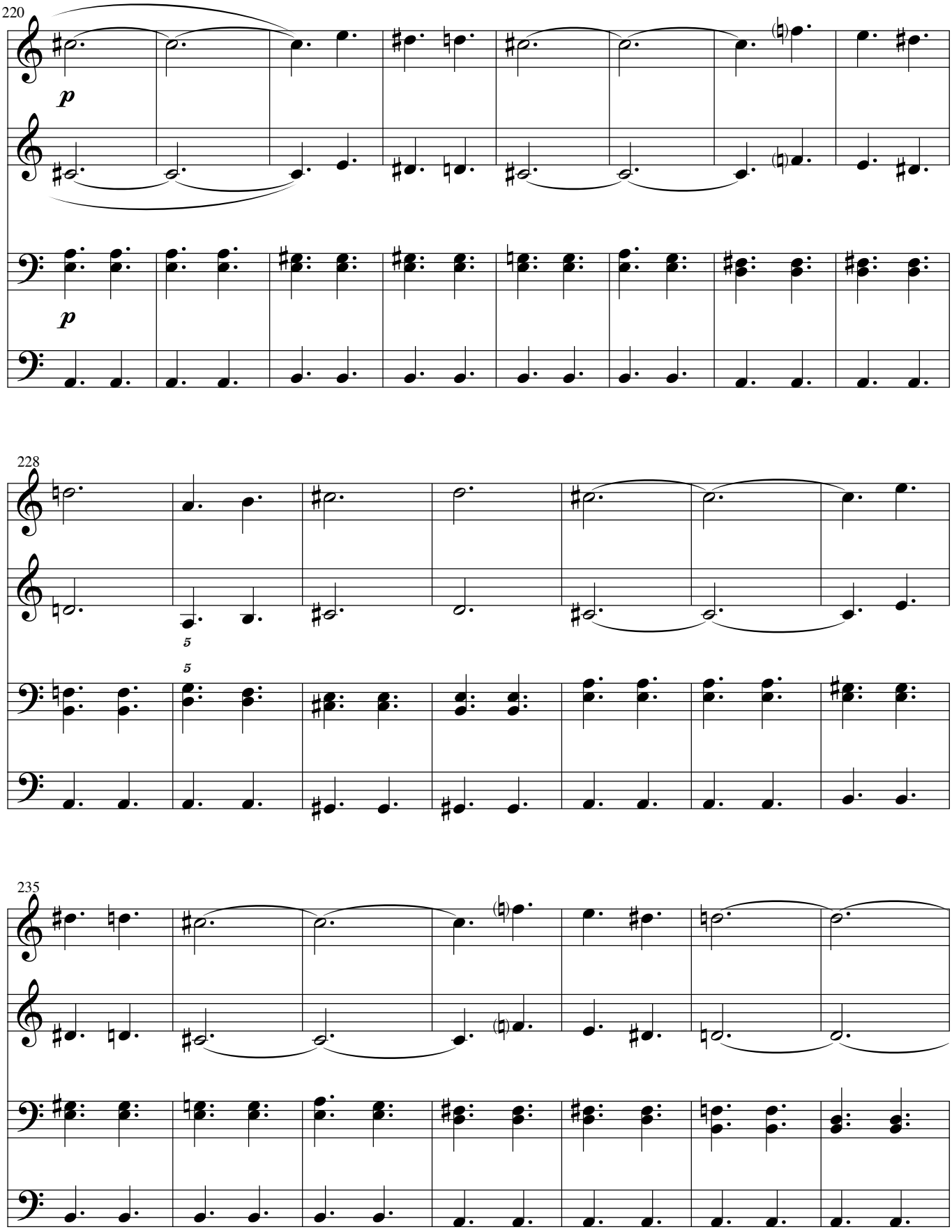
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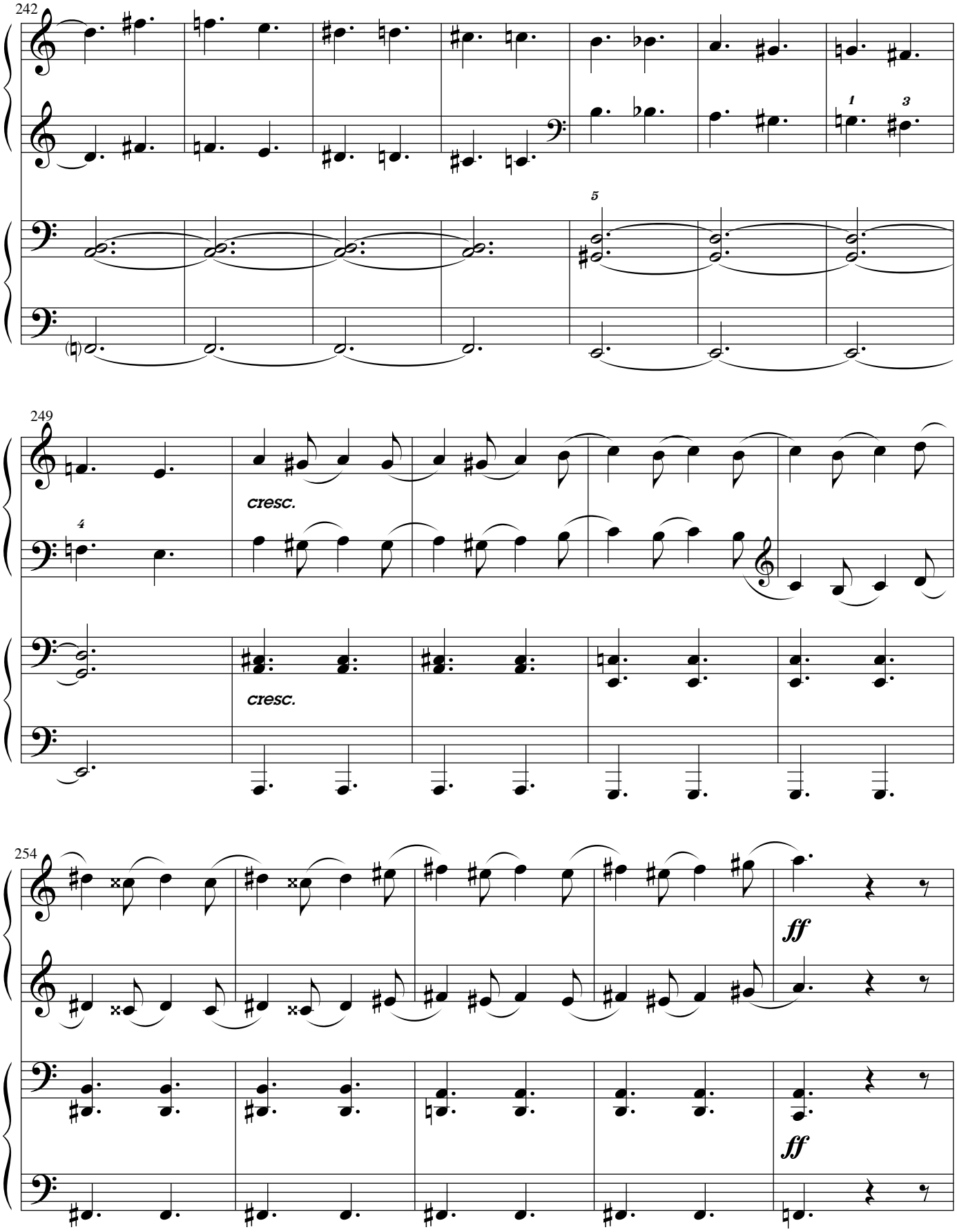
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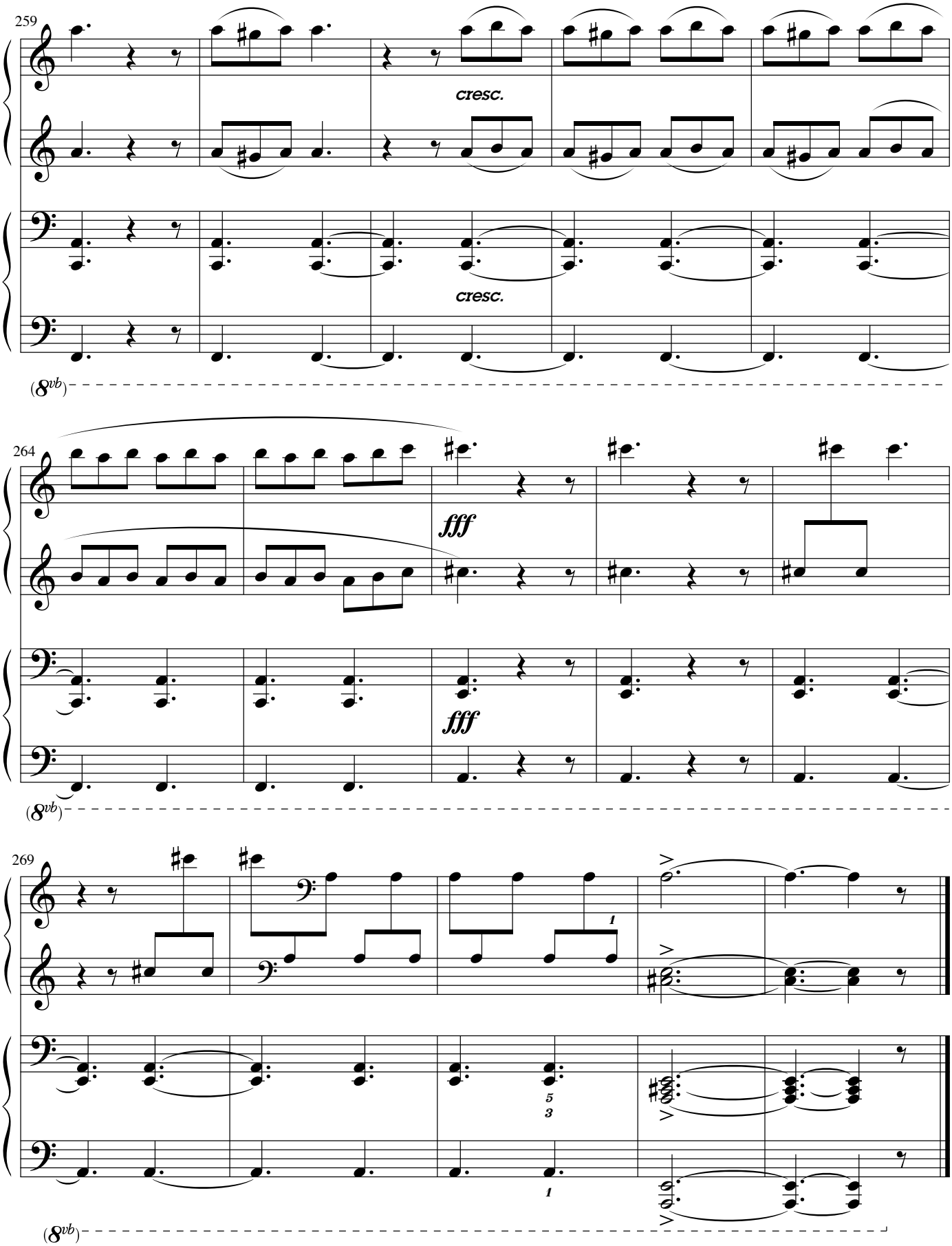
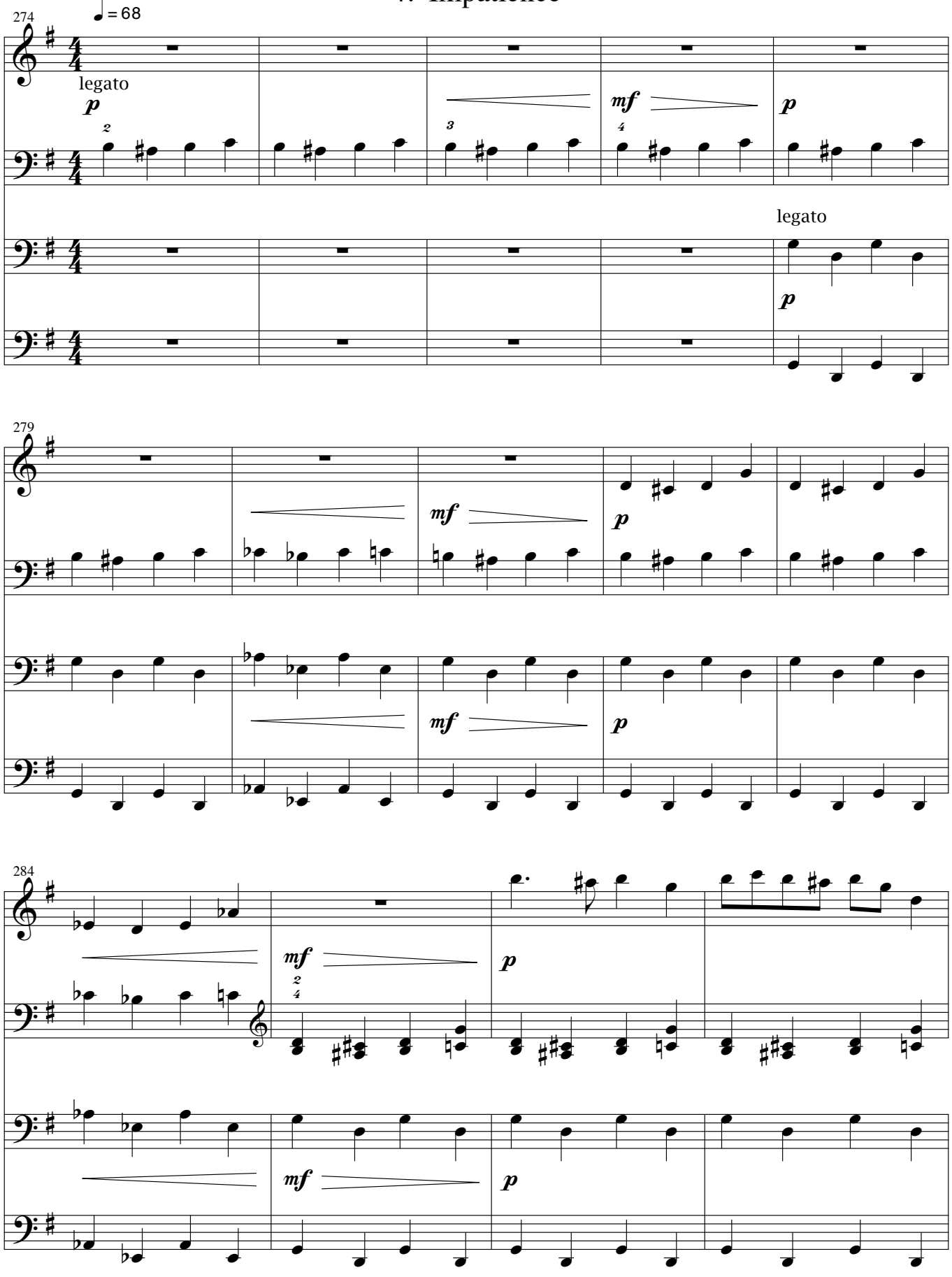
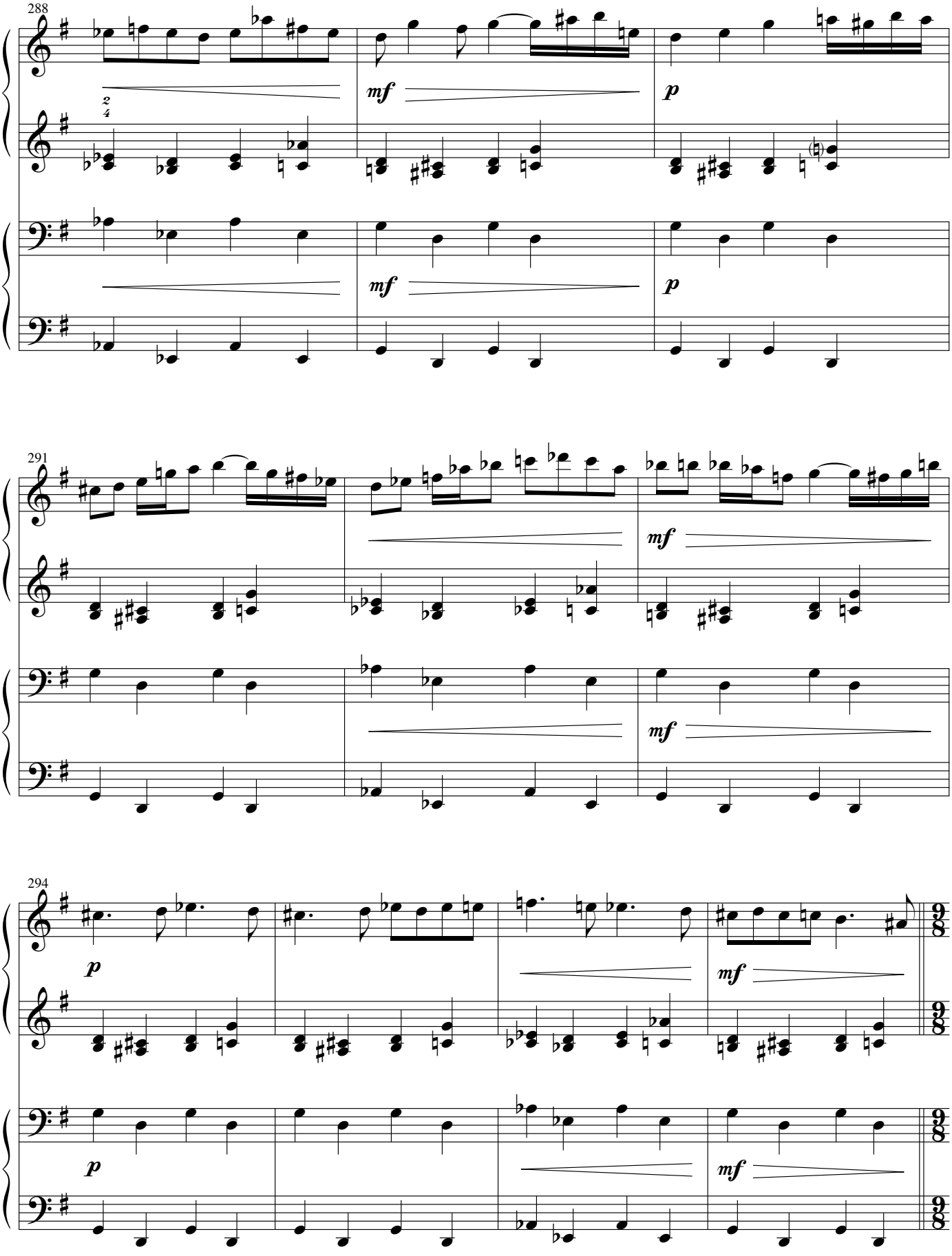


to William Cupo

4. Impatience

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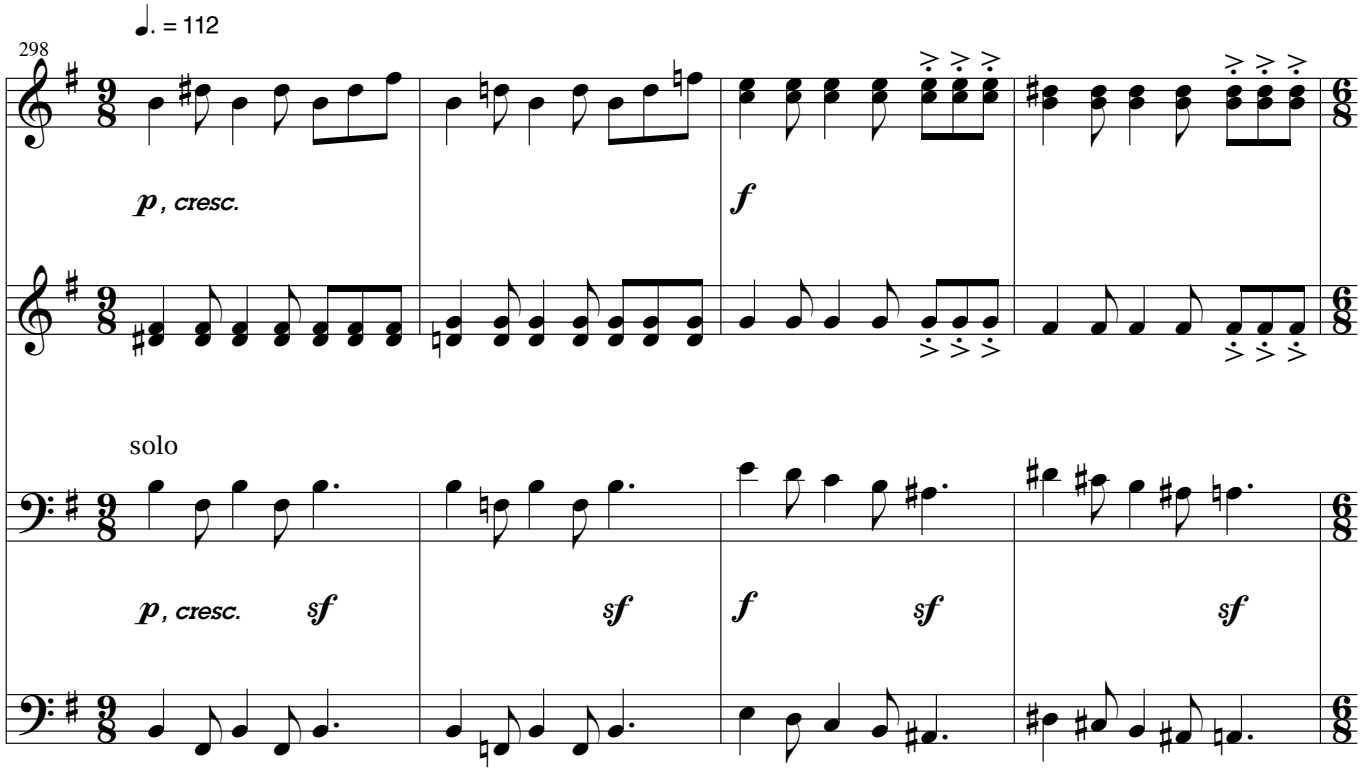
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sf
f
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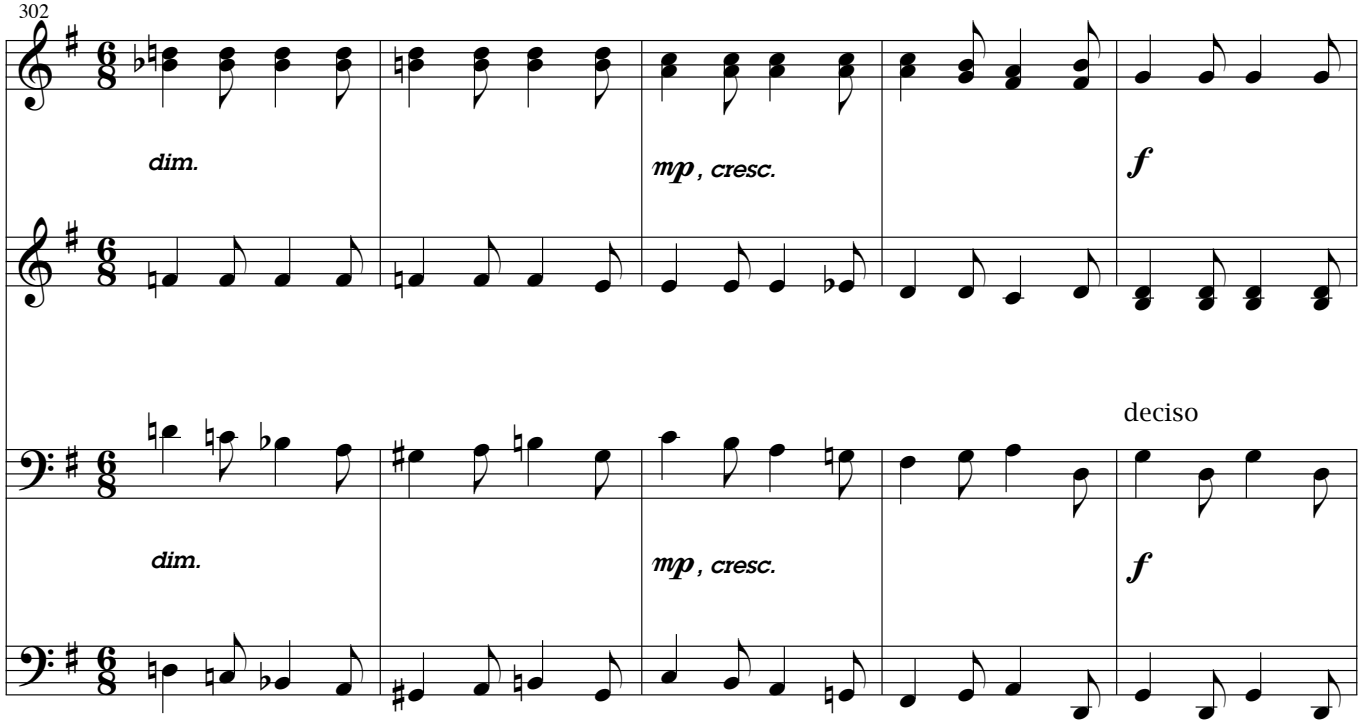
sf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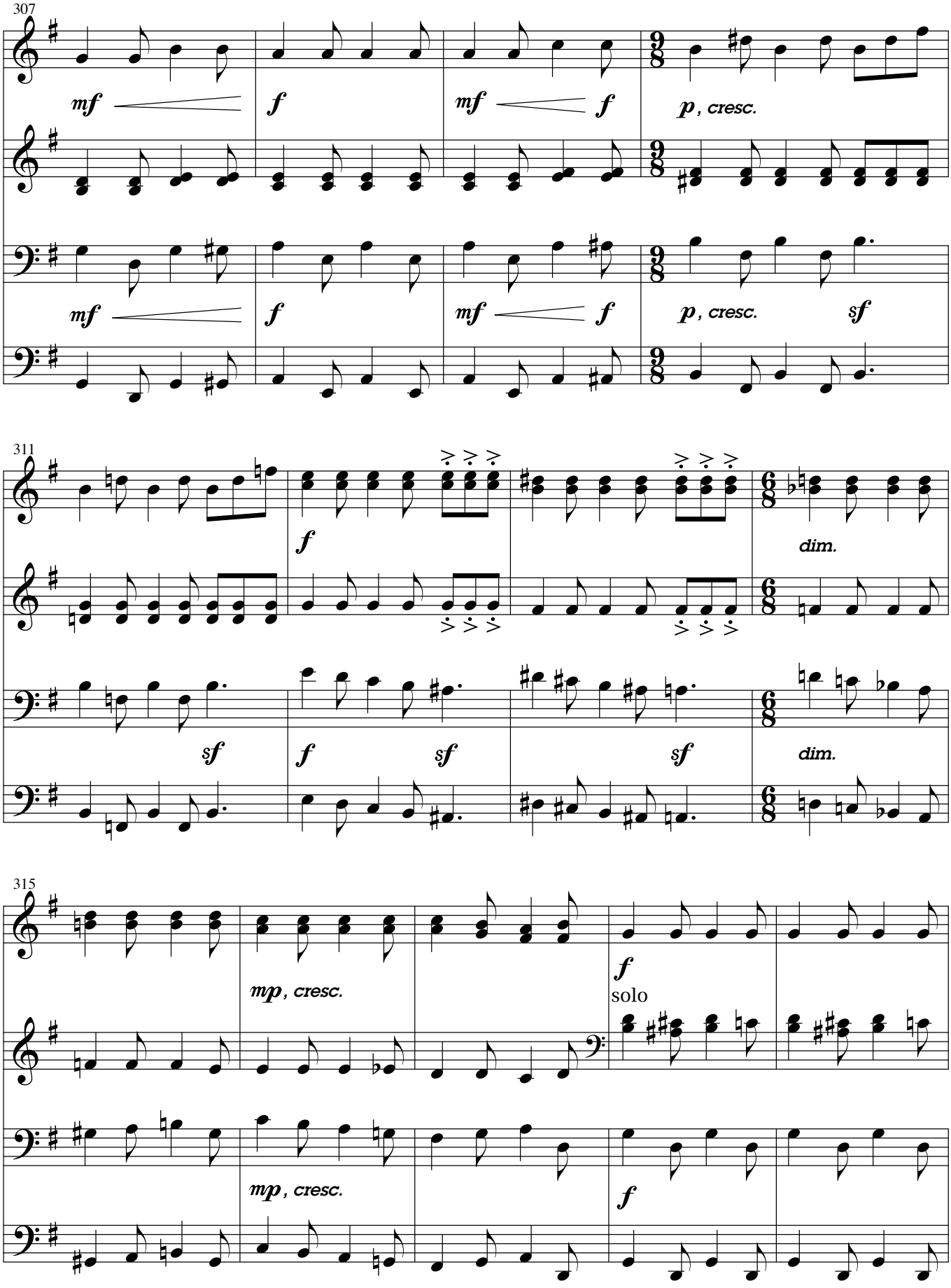
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mp, cresc.
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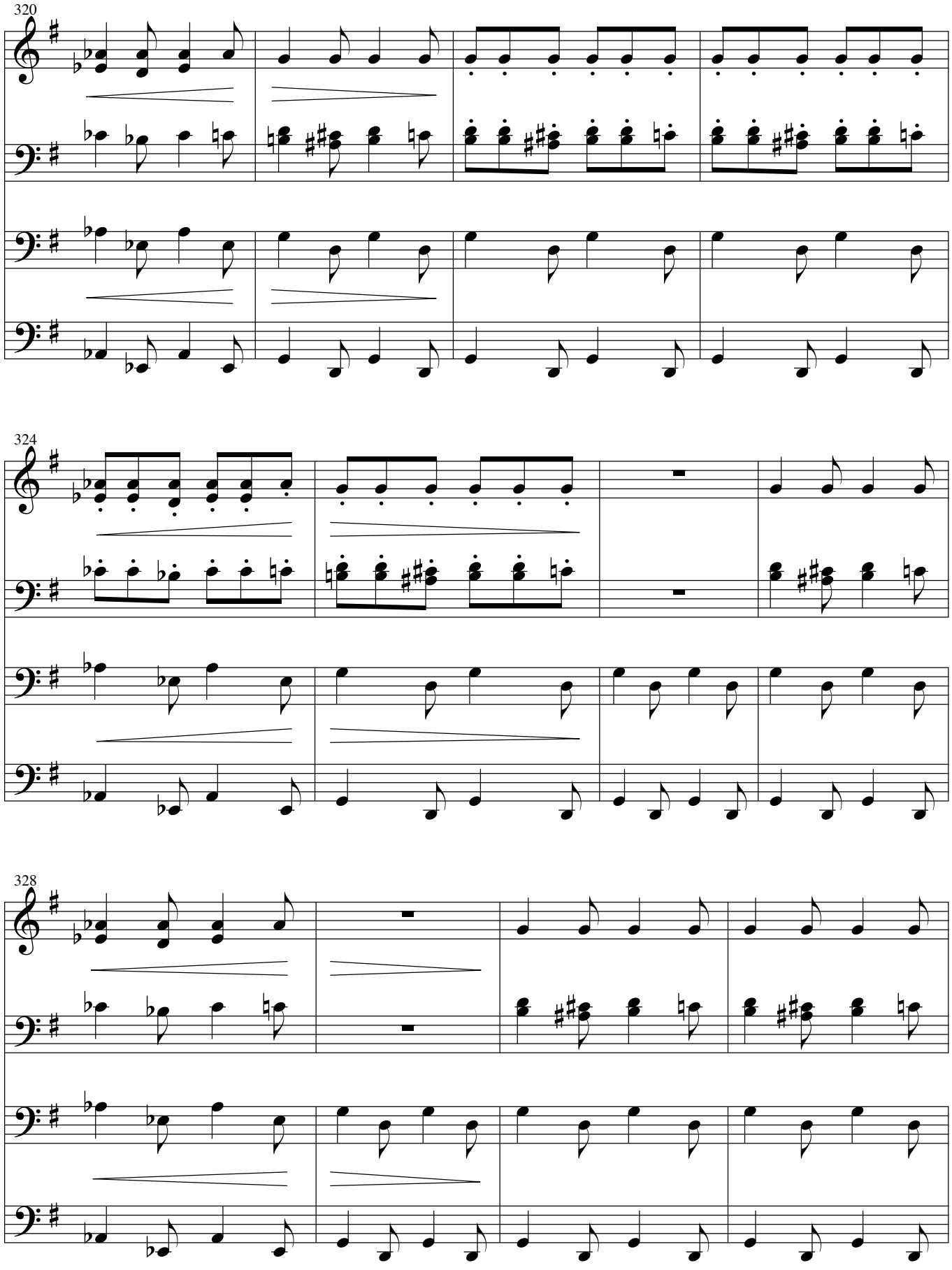
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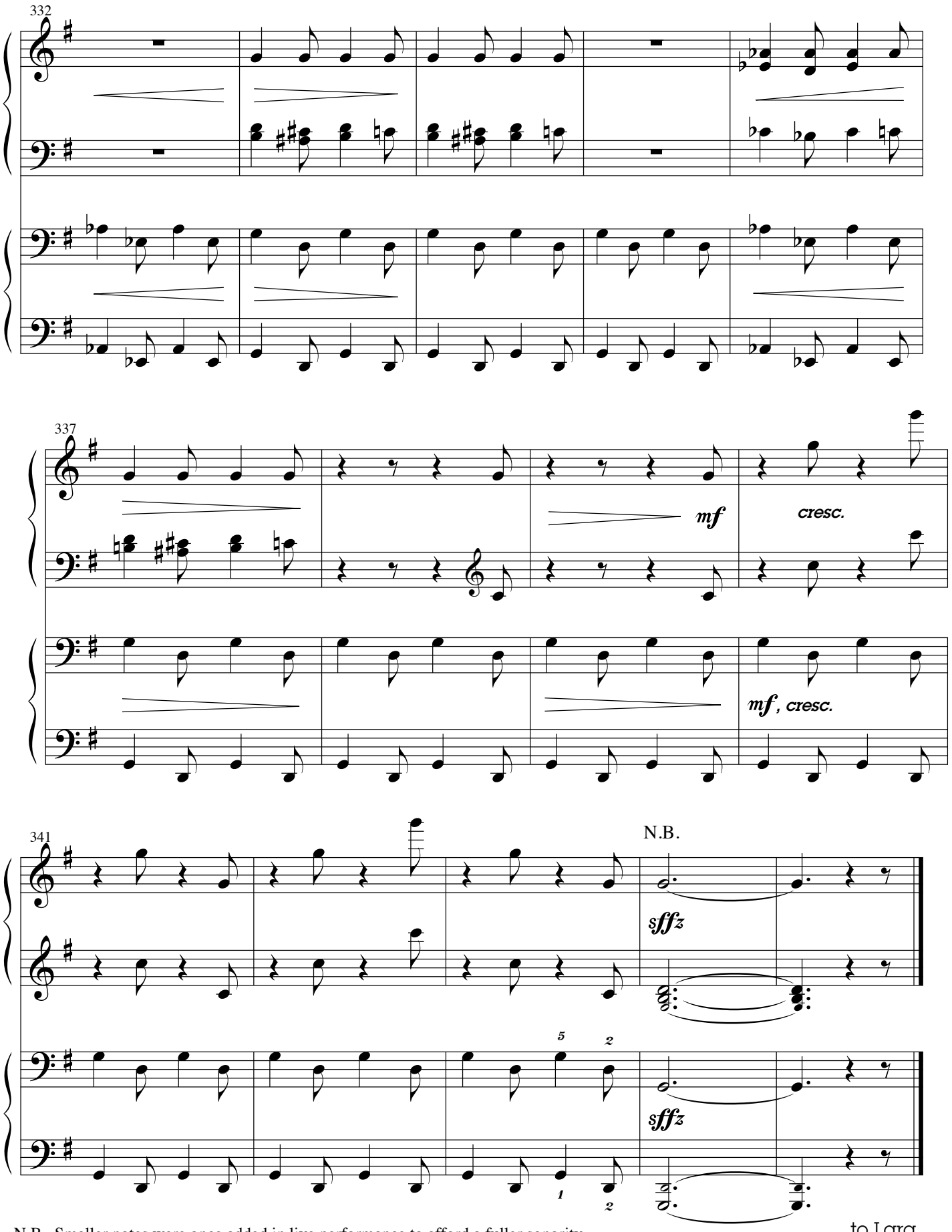

N.B. Smaller notes were once added in live performance to afford a fuller sonority.

to Lara