C.P.E. Bach's Minuet

By Joseph Smith

Recently, I was asked to check a few facts for the new edition of a teaching anthology, among them, the correct Wotquenne catalogue number of a C.P.E. Bach minuet. I was delighted, since the little piece had enchanted me when I encountered it in the previous edition, and I knew where to track down the information: a beautiful edition of C.P.E. Bach's *complete* keyboard works, in facsimile of the original editions. (Garland Publishing, Inc., edited by Darrell Berg, in case you had been wondering what to get me for my birthday...) However, when I found the minuet, more turned out to be missing from the anthology's source than just the first digit of the Wotquenne number.

J.S. Bach And Family

In C.P.E. Bach's time, the practice of embellishing repeats lavishly was applied even to both halves of what we call "sonata allegro" form. Bach considered this practice to be, in principle, "excellent, but much abused. My feelings are these: not everything should be varied, for it if is, the reprise will become a new piece. . . . All variations must relate to the piece's affect [mood], and they must be at least as good as, if not better than, the original. For example, many variants of melodies introduced by executants in the belief that they honor a piece, actually occurred to the composer, who, however, selected and wrote down the original because he considered it the best of its kind" (trans. William Mitchell). To show how repeats could be varied imaginatively without violating the mood of the original, he composed two sets of 6 sonatas with fully notated varied repeats—the "Amalian" Sonatas W. 50 (1760). A few years later, in 1766, he expounded these principles to less advanced players by composing *Short Easy Piano Pieces with Varied Repeats* (with extensive fingering as well).

When I found it in the complete works, the F-minor minuet in question turned out to be not an independent piece, but a minuet II, to be sandwiched in between two occurrences of an F-major minuet I. Moreover, the anthology's corrupt source had jettisoned Bach's varied repeats, replacing them with repeat signs! Even in its truncated version, the F-minor minuet exudes a characteristically C-P-Evian melancholy. However, there is a special interest in the simple variants, since they provide so fine an example of Bach's principle of preserving mood: one can appreciate how these ornaments are a specific response to the contours of the original melody, rather than formulas—reinterpretations, rather than encrustations.

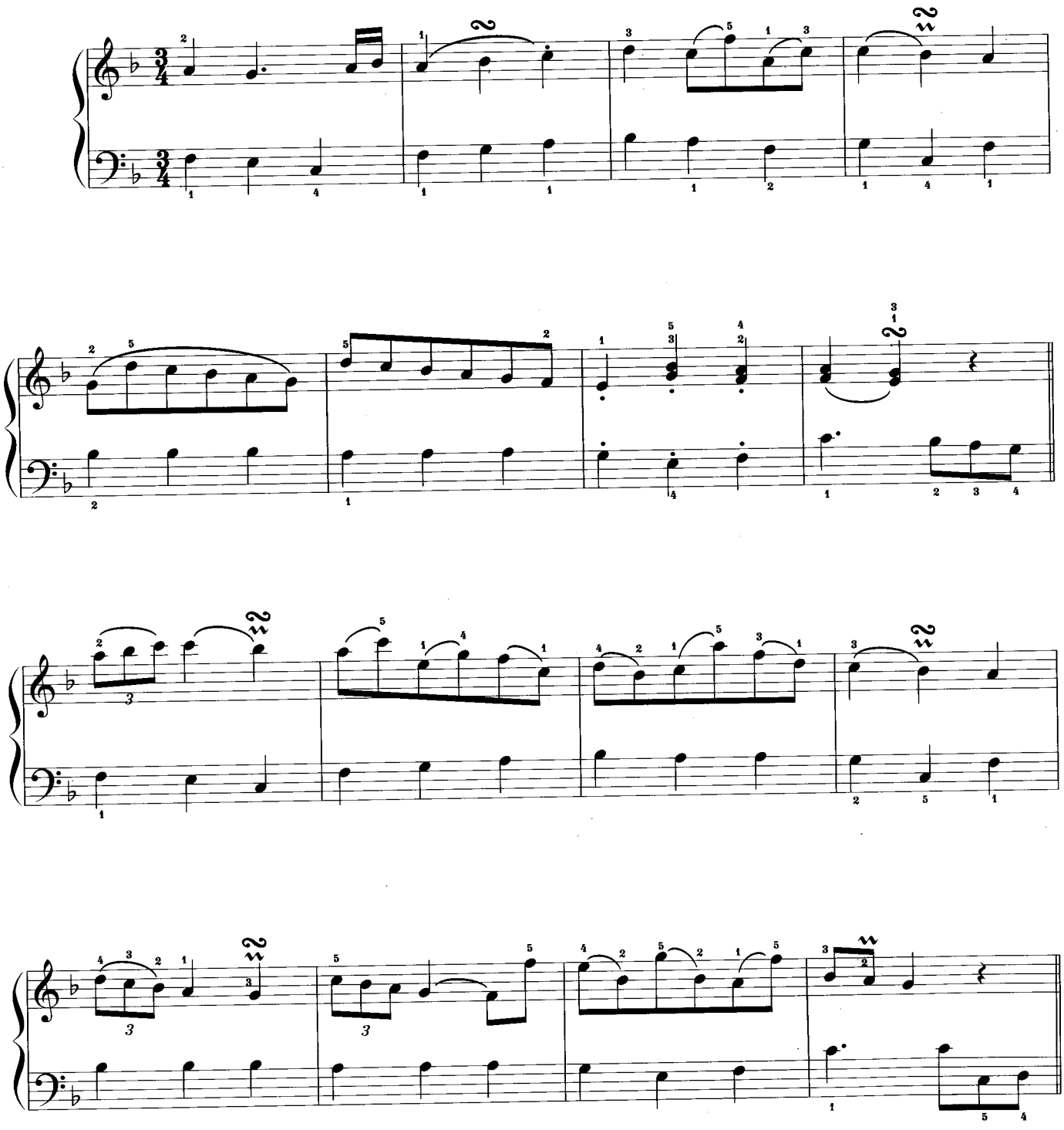
It goes without saying that C.P.E. Bach was an immeasurably great influence on the Classical style. Haydn openly acknowledged his indebtedness, and was flattered that Bach recognized it. But regarded purely in its own right, Bach's music occupies a strange position in the literature. Taken as a whole, his body of work is overwhelming, yet individually, few of his works seem satisfying today. In his sonatas and fantasies, his tendency to yield utterly to the expressive impulse of the moment makes them bold, novel, and personal—but also jumpy, arbitrary, and incoherent. It is easy to become impatient with the pace with which many of his once-beloved individual rondos unfold, while acknowledging that this very looseness allows Bach to introduce richly inventive variations of the theme and delightfully unpredictable harmonic digressions. One may not particularly care to perform or listen to his works, and yet when browsing through them, find oneself continually fascinated, awed, and delighted. ■

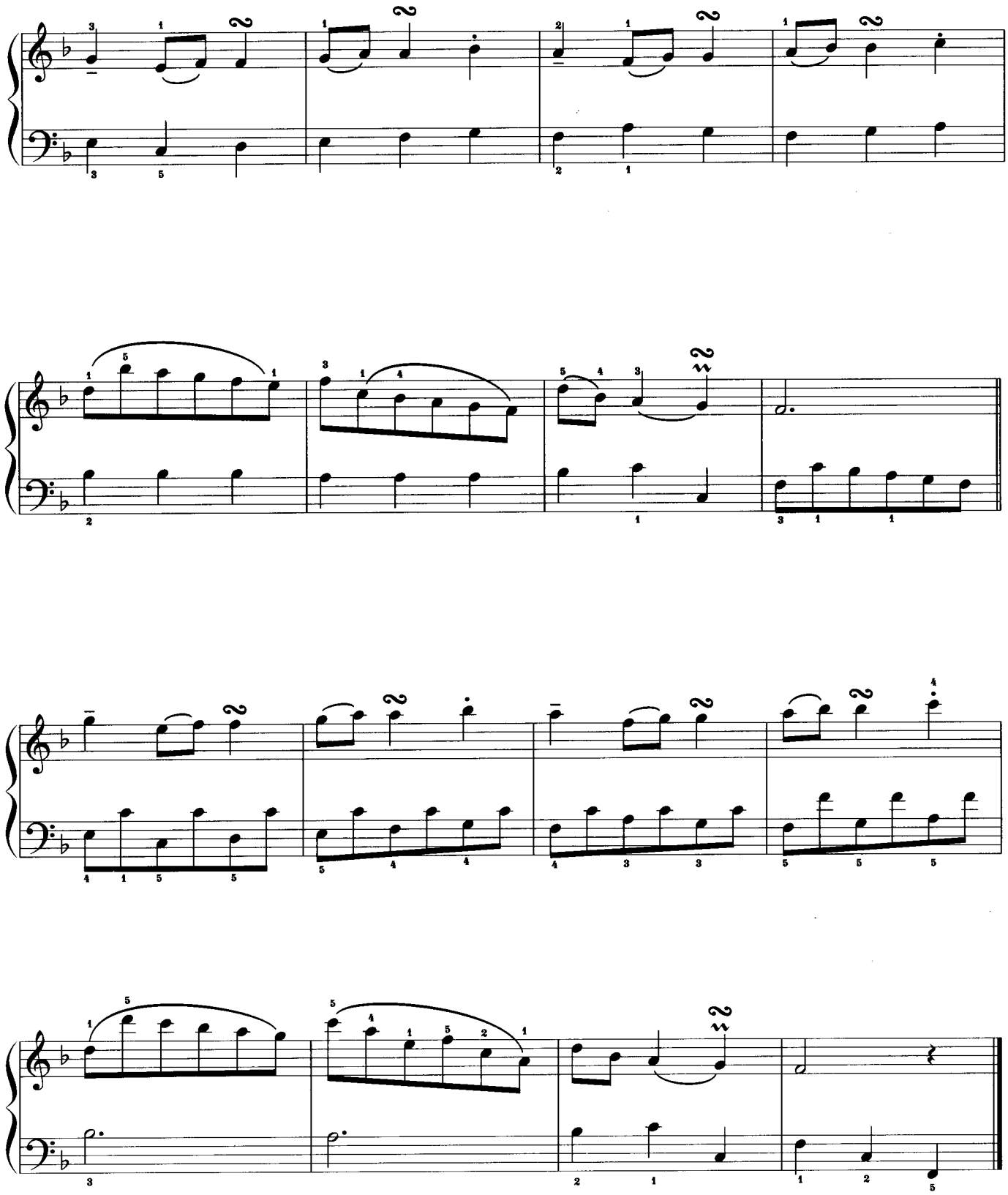
See the Minuet by C.P.E. Bach on page 12.

Joseph Smith can be heard in recital in New York's Alice Tully Hall on April 8 at 8 PM.

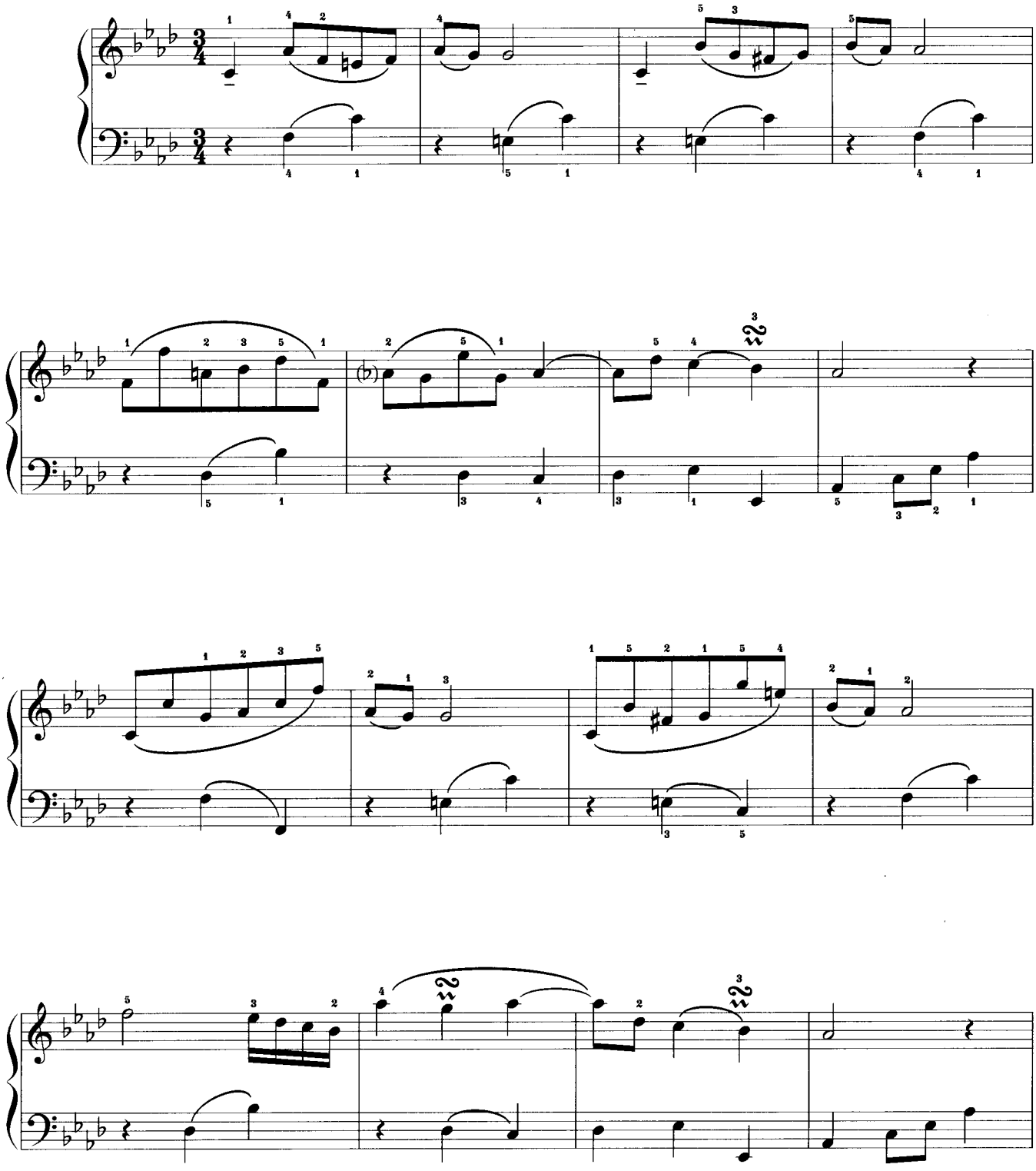
MINUETTO I

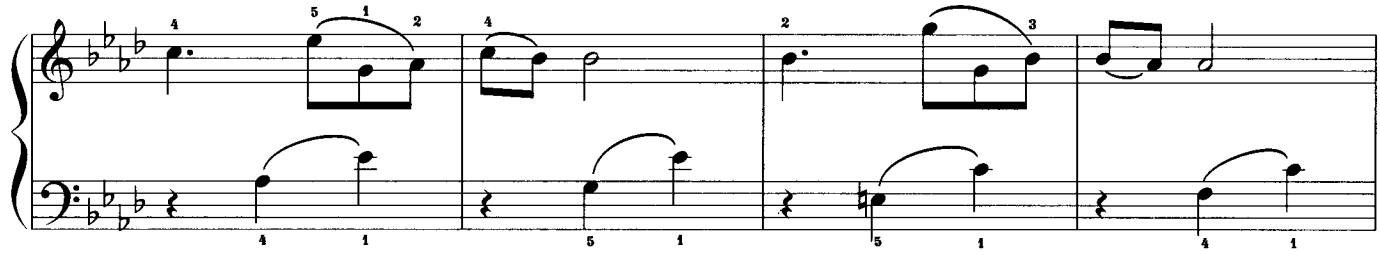
C.P.E. BACH
(1714-1788)

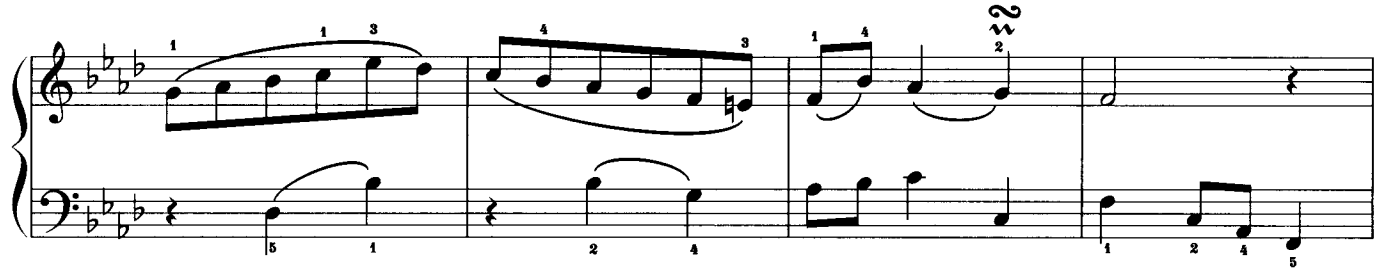


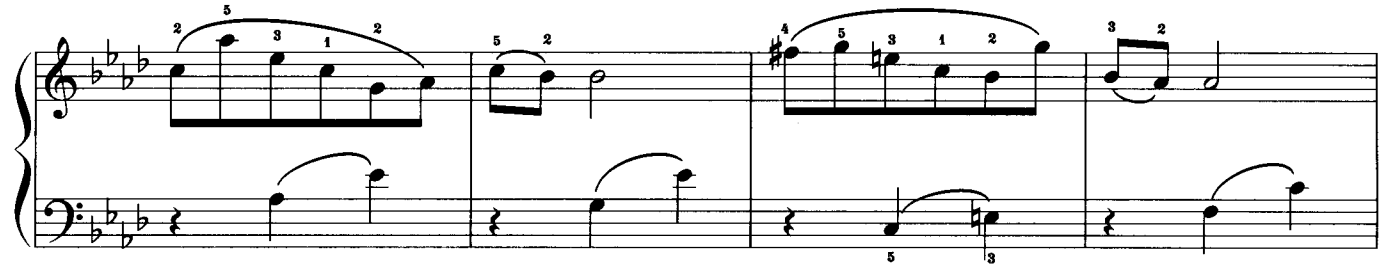


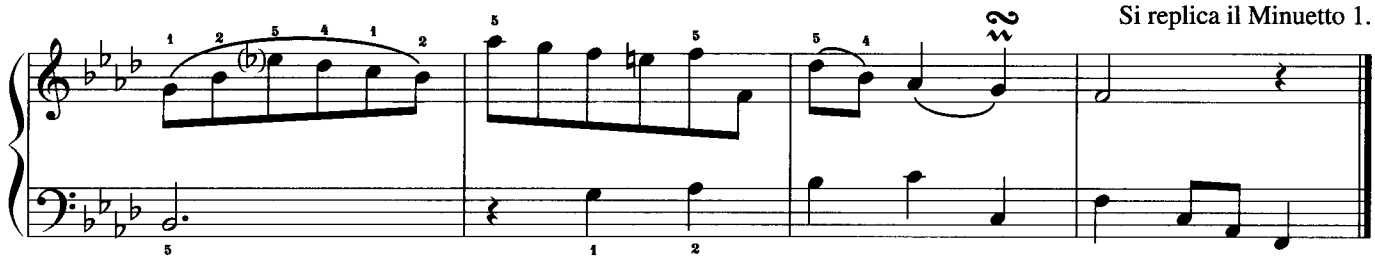
MINUETTO II











Si replica il Minuetto 1.