Felices Dias
A Latin Dance

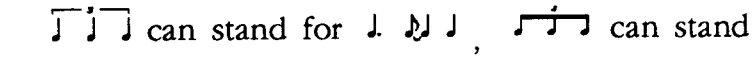
Although Juan Morel Campos (1857-96) produced religious music, a zarzuela, and even a symphony, he is best remembered as Puerto Rico's most inspired and prolific composer of the *danza,* its distinctive and evocative dance music.

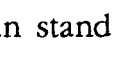
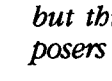
The *danza* probably evolved from dances brought to Puerto Rico by its mixture of immigrants. The Spanish *caballeresca* (chivalrous) dance is believed to have compromised its cold elegance by consorting with the Venezuelan *danzon,* the Cuban *habanera,** the *merengue* (of disputed origin), or a combination of these. The result is a syncopated music in 2/4, sometimes capricious and insouciant, sometimes smoldering and passionate.

Morel lived his entire life teaching, conducting and composing in Ponce. Manuel Gregorio Tavárez, composer of "How the old man looks at me" (1863)—one of the first *danzas* ever to be published—moved to Ponce in 1870, to run the music department of a large store there. He turned this department into an informal conservatory. Soon, the fourteen-year-old Morel was inspired to begin composing *danzas* of his own. He never stopped.

Not simply composing, but also entitling 339 *danzas* would seem an imposing challenge, but Morel's names are as piquant as his melodies. The animal kingdom is represented in all its diversity, from "The Alligator" to "The Microbe." Romance is celebrated in "To Love Is to Live" and "Love in Crescendo," and deplored in "Damned Love!" Perhaps the most unusual are the admonitions: "I Told You So," "Careful with That," and "No, Don't Eat Matches."

The *danzas* confront us with the interesting problem of *tresillos elasticos* (elastic triplets). These "triplets" are used as an inexact but visually simplified notation for certain uneven rhythms:



can stand for , can stand for , and  can stand for  .

José Quinton, the leading post-Morel *danza* composer, was (justifiably) uneasy about this notation, foreseeing how it would mislead posterity, especially outside of Puerto Rico. On the other hand, the distinguished composer and scholar Héctor Campos-Parsi and the great pianist Jesus Maria Sanromá concluded that, because Morel often wrote both triplets and syncopated rhythms in the same *danza,* his rhythms should be executed exactly as written.** However, as his enchanting recordings prove, Sanromá certainly didn't play them that way!

While he does, in fact, play *some* triplets evenly, he renders others unequivocally as "elastic." (Often, he indulges in such rhythmic caprice that one cannot determine the meter, let alone the rhythms—this abandon is all the more impressive by contrast with Sanromá's rhythmic scrupulosity in modern and chamber music.)

Let us bravely admit that there is no certain way of divining which of Morel's triplets are meant to be even and which "elastic," and decide on the basis of familiarity with his music and intuition. One further bit of performance practice: in the introductory *paseo* (here, the first sixteen measures), the pairs of dancers merely stroll around the room—therefore, this section need not be played in tempo. Its close signals the dancers to take their "intimately linked" position and begin the dance proper.

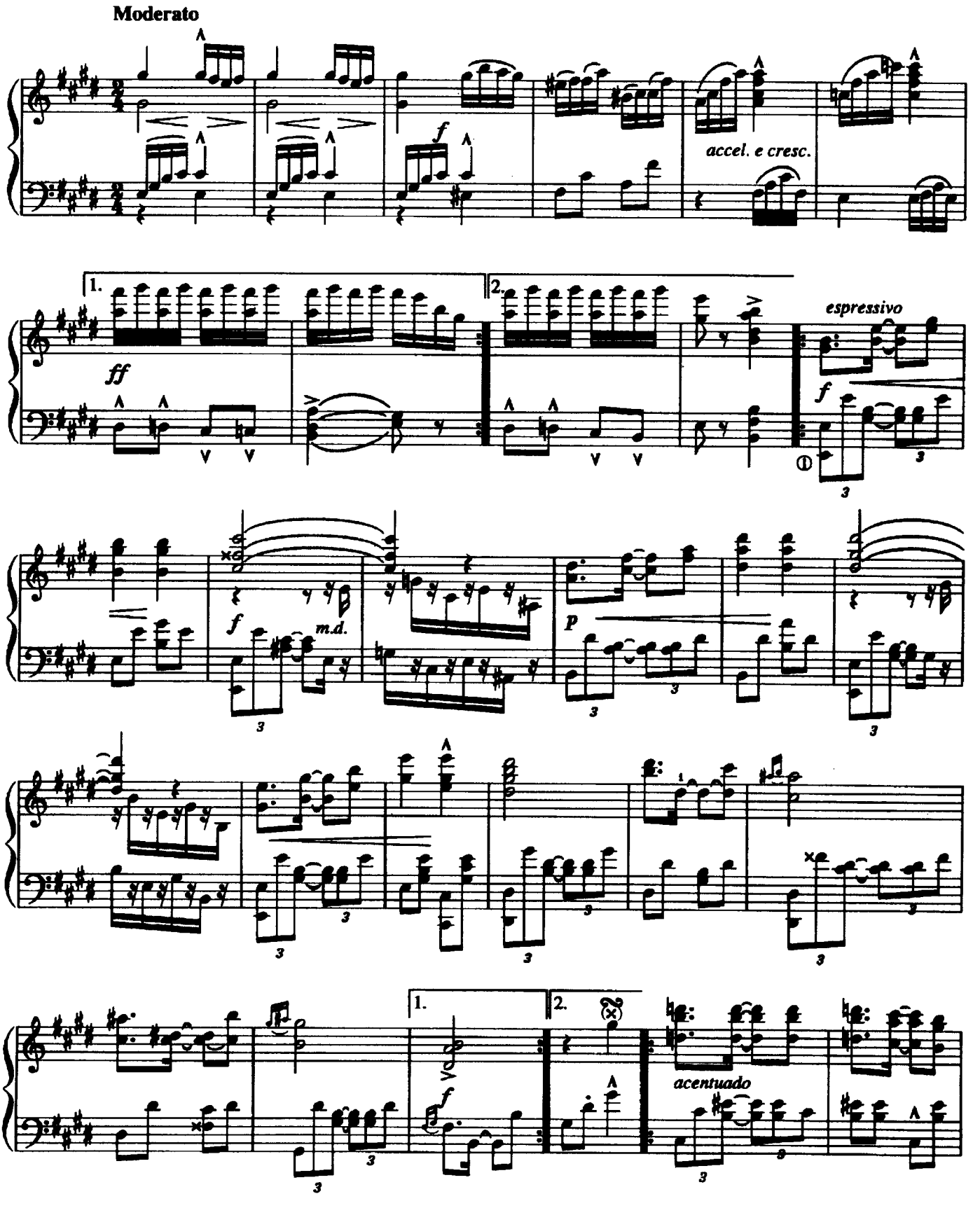
**The common spelling (and commoner pronunciation)* habañera *is incorrect.*

***The flaw in this argument is its presumption that Morel's notation is consistent. He often forgets accidentals, but this does not make his music bitonal. Talented composers are not always infallible notationists.*

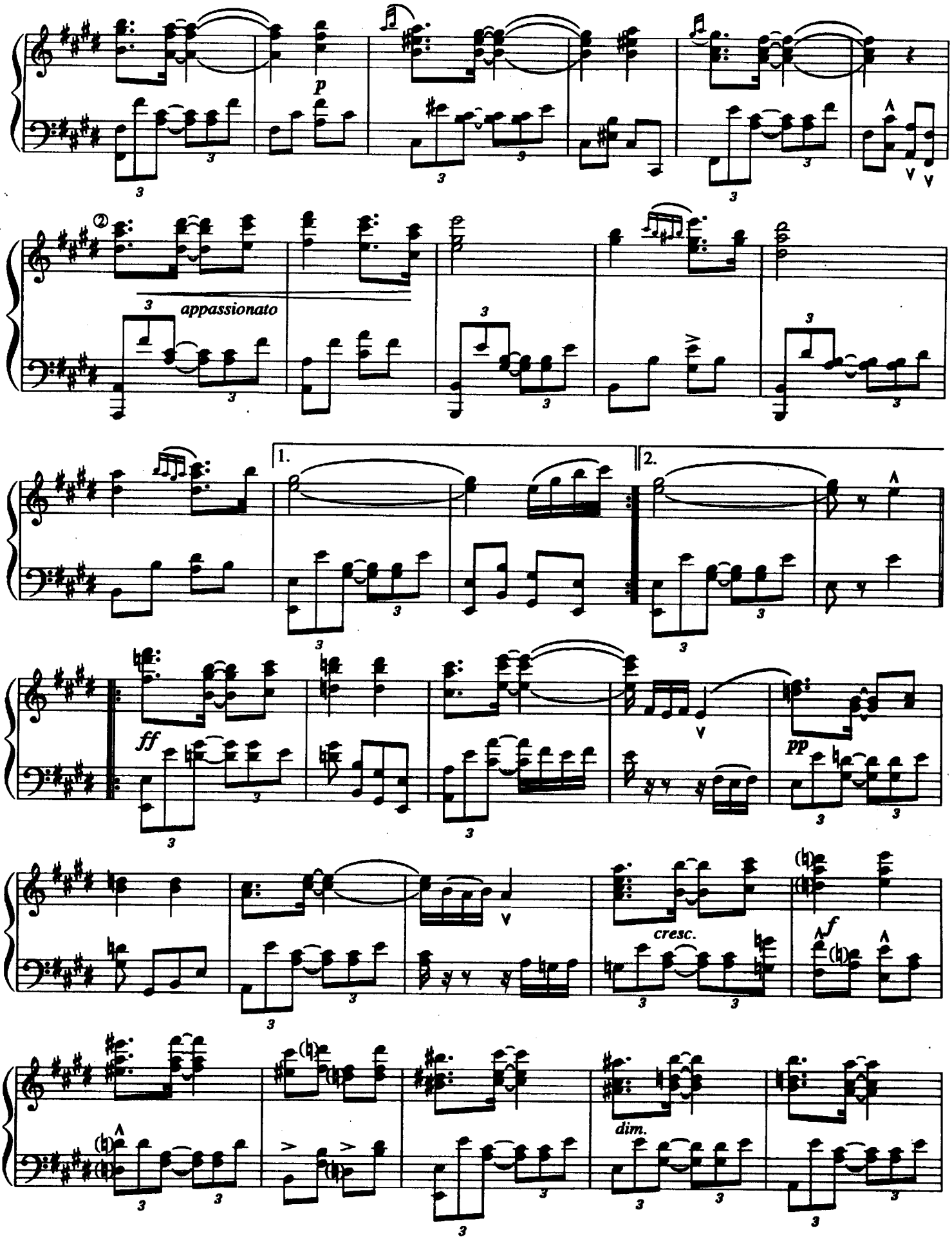
Felices Dias

(Happy Days)

Juan Morel Campos
(1857-1896)



①These "triplets" are almost certainly intended to be played throughout the piece. — JS



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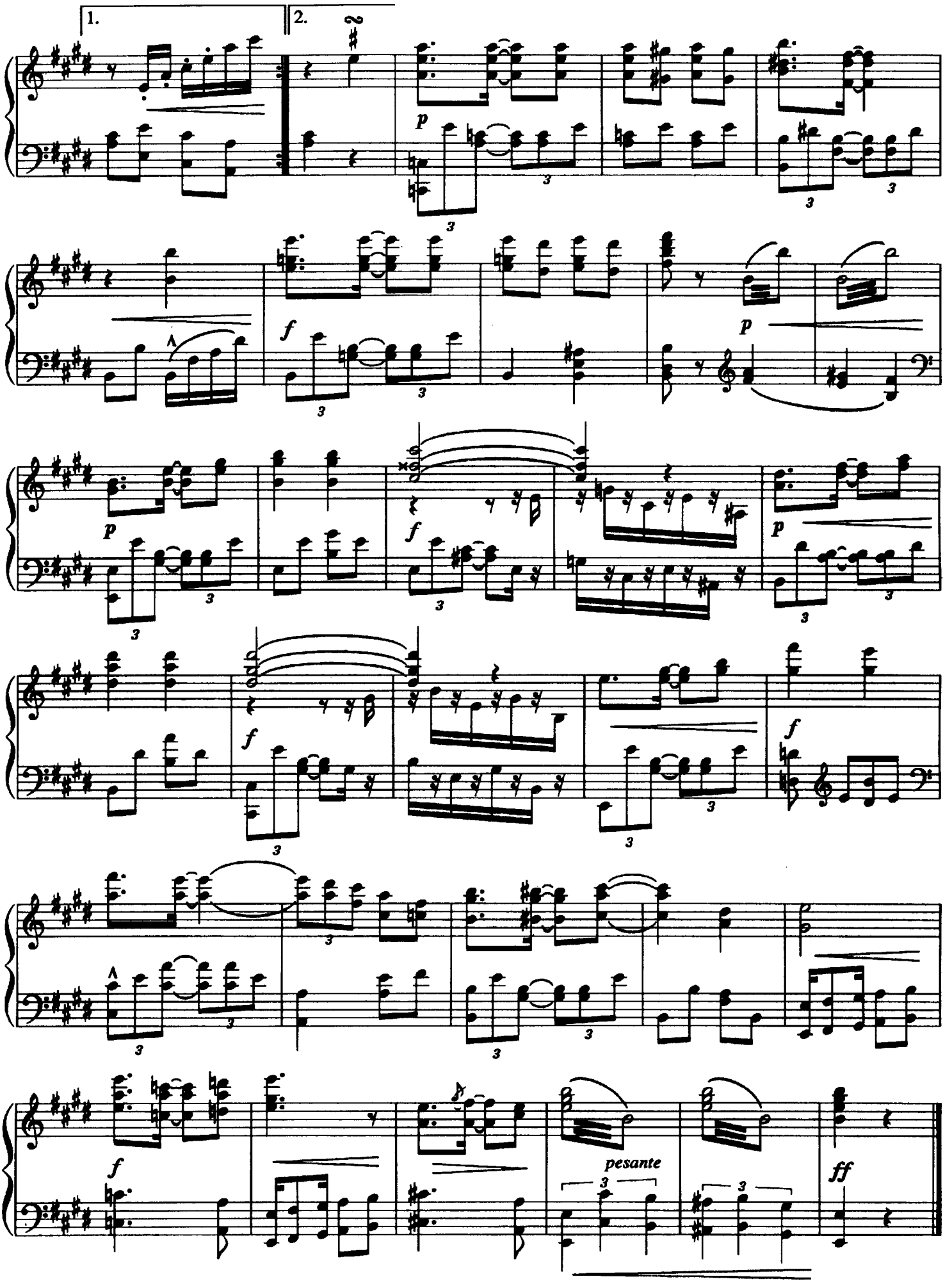
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