Paraphrases On "Chopsticks"

Alexander Borodin (1833-87) did not leave a large body of work. But, considering that what he regarded as his "principal business" — his chemistry professorship — allowed him to compose only in the summer and when illness prevented him from going to work ("my friends never say to me, 'I hope you are well,' but rather, 'I hope you are ill'"), that his home life was so disordered that his manuscripts were sometimes used to line the cat box, and that he died at 54, we must be grateful that he managed to bring to completion such highly personal masterpieces as the fierce B-minor Symphony and the intimate, confiding D-Major String Quartet.

Borodin

The unlikely genesis of *Paraphrases* is confirmed by a letter from Borodin himself. When his young adopted daughter, Gania, asked to play a piano duet with him, he raised an objection — she didn't know how to play. She replied that she could, in fact, play the "Cutlet Polka" — a two-finger, white-note piece resembling our "Chopsticks." (Victor Seroff writes that in Russia, Gania's selection is called the "Dog's Waltz." While I suppose Russian dogs need not necessarily conform to the human convention of waltzing in 3/4 meter, I prefer Borodin's name for the tune.) The ever-indulgent Borodin obliged her by improvising a duet polka, the primo part of which consisted of her playing the "Cutlet" theme over and over.

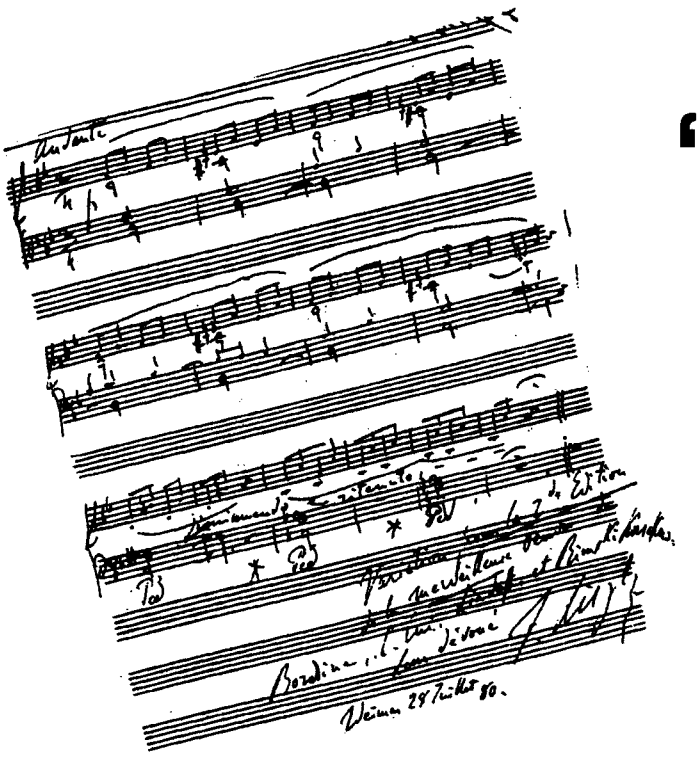
Cui, Rimsky and Liadov all loved the idea.

Borodin's friends, Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Rimsky's student, Liadov, found the idea contagious, and all began feverishly vying with one another to discover the panoply of possibilities dormant in the inane, maddening motif. An embarrassment of riches resulted — among the pieces eventually discarded was a setting of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." (Schumann had found Meyerbeer's use of the Lutheran hymn in *Les Huguenots* a desecration. What if he had lived to hear it serve as an obligato to the "Cutlet Polka"?) However, the finished collection of *Paraphrases* (published in 1879) does include a requiem, two fugues, and a set of 24 variations, going as far afield of the theme's C-major tonality as D-Flat Major.

Two members of the "Mighty Five" Russian nationalists are conspicuous by their absence. The dictatorial Balakirev deplored the whole project (probably because it did not originate with him). Mussorgsky did compose a contribution, but when the others accused him of "cheating" by altering the ostinato in the course of his piece, he refused to be bothered with revising it. His reputation must therefore rest on such trifles as *Boris Godunov* and *Pictures At An Exhibition.*

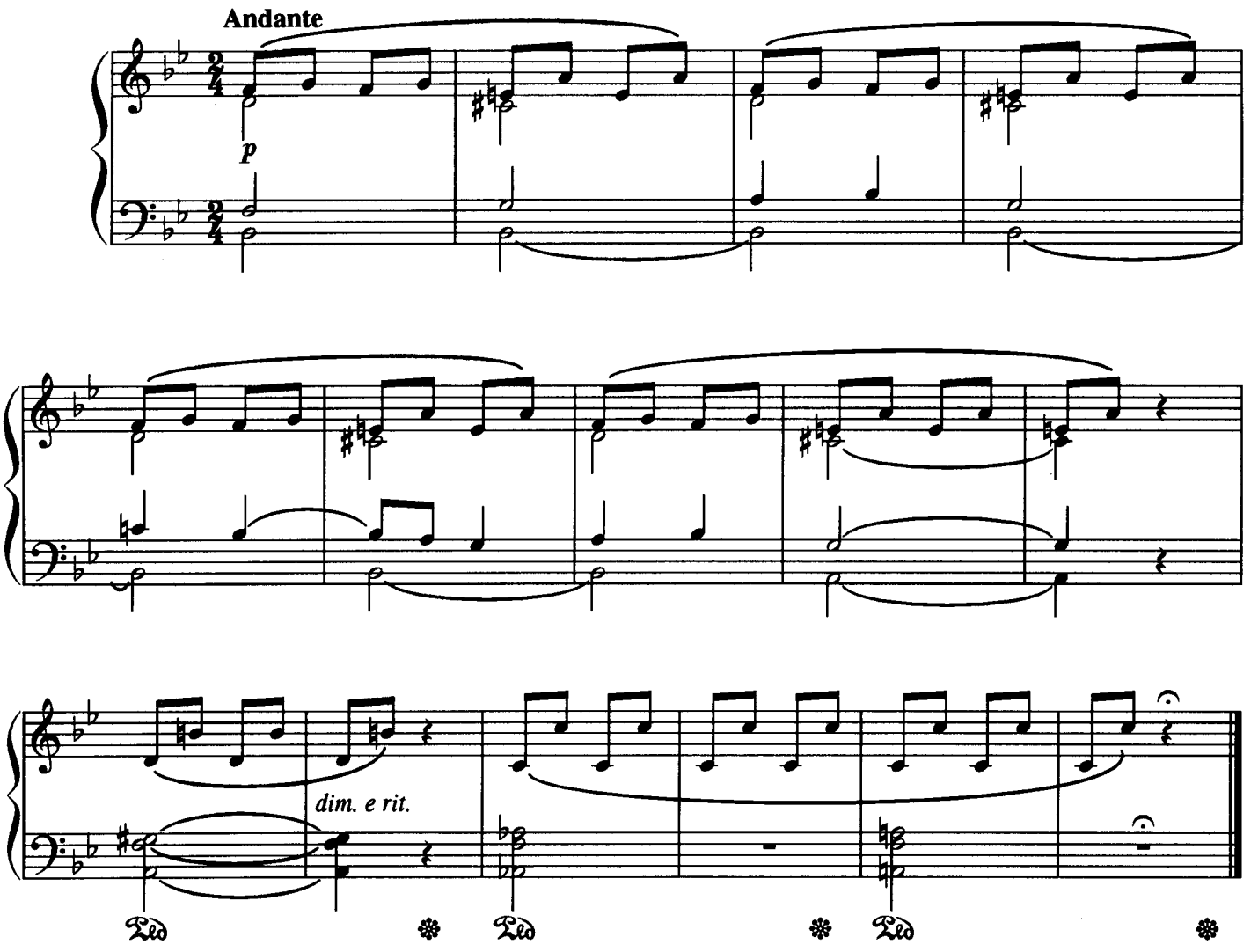
Liszt, an early admirer of the new Russian school, wrote of his enthusiasm for *Paraphrases* to a St. Petersburg friend, who mentioned it in an article. The enemies of "The Five" became apoplectic, denying that the great Liszt could possibly have approved of such frivolity. Hearing of this, Liszt tossed off a Prelude (in B-Flat, a tonality not previously used in the collection) leading into Borodin's original Polka. This Prelude was published in the second edition of *Paraphrases* — in facsimile, lest anyone impugn its authenticity. Note that Liszt tampers with the theme — the error that voided Mussorgsky's piece. However, no one scolded the pampered celebrity!

Borodin's posthumous Mazurka was clearly conceived for *Paraphrases.* However, he later found a more sober setting for both strains of this Mazurka in his Petite Suite (1885). The C-Major strain begins the first of the Suite's two Mazurkas, and the F-Major strain (transposed to A-Major) forms the ardent trio section of the dreamily amorous second Mazurka.



"Chopsticks" Prelude

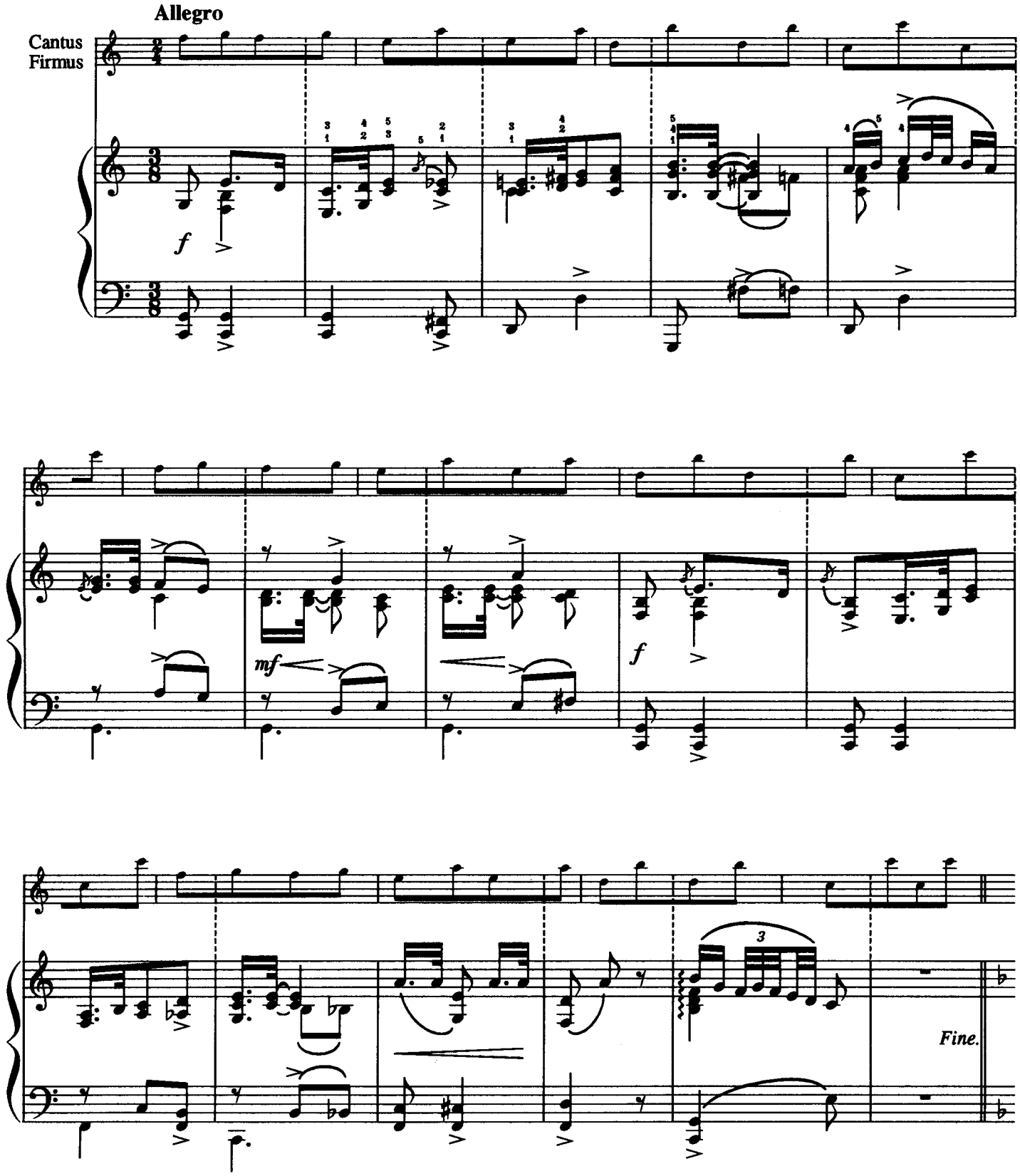
Franz Liszt
(1811-1886)



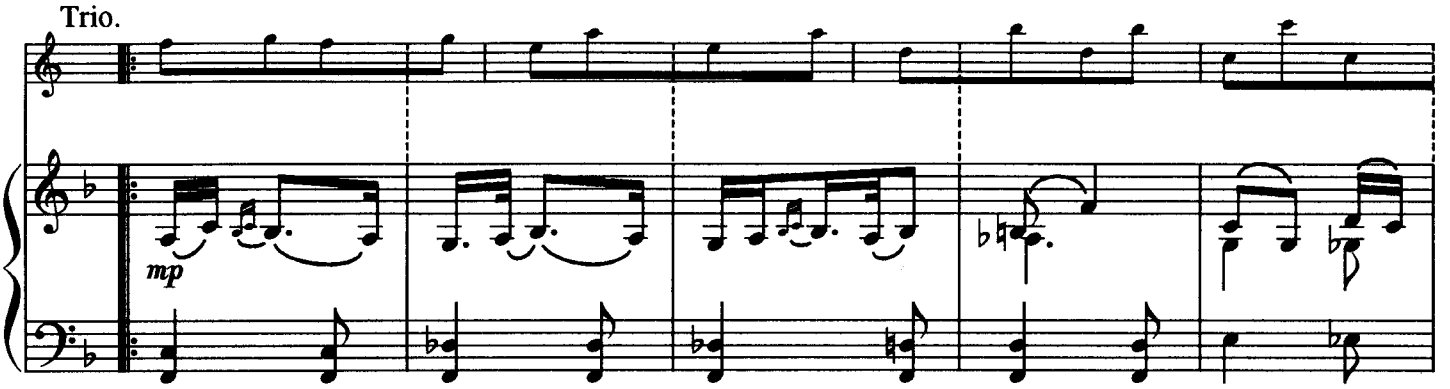
Mazurka

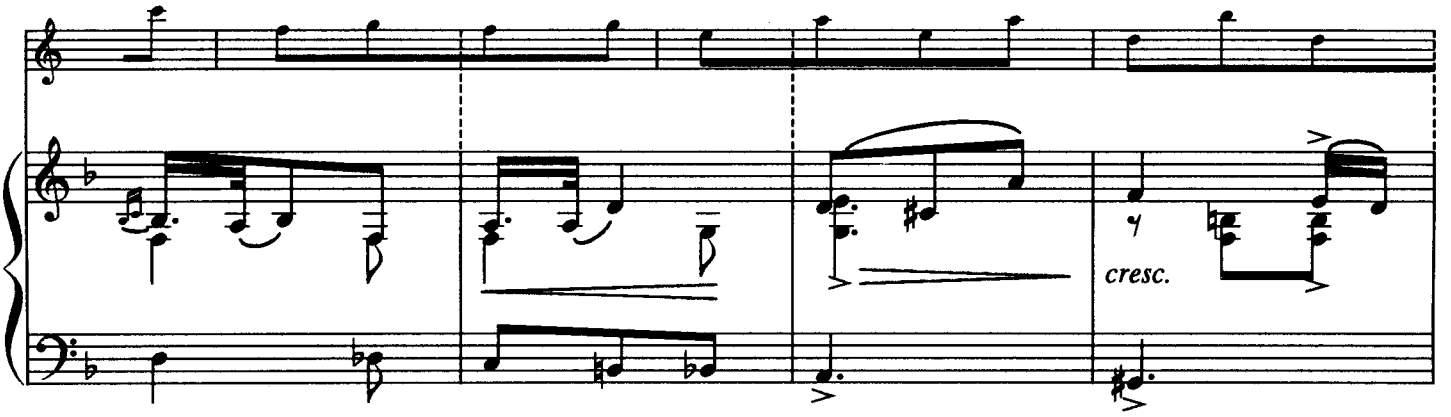
Op. Posth.

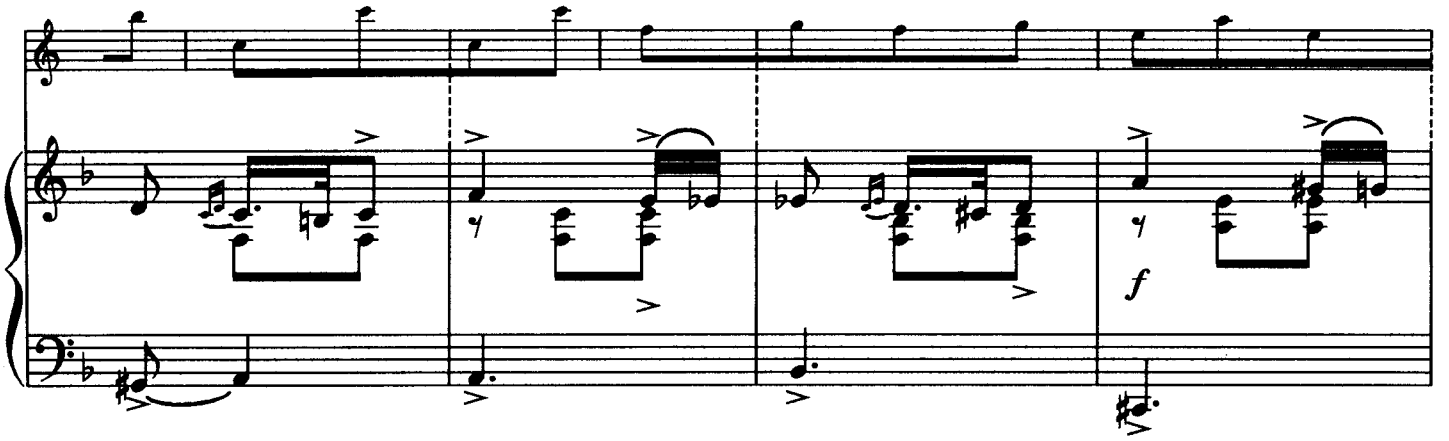
Alexander Borodin
(1833-1877)



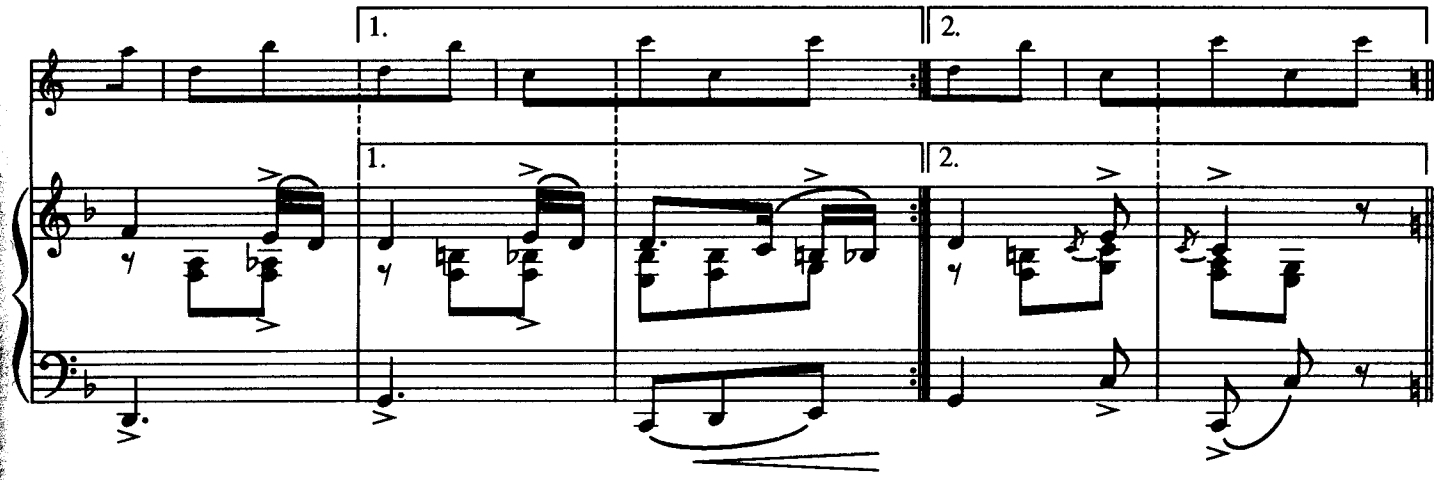
Trio.





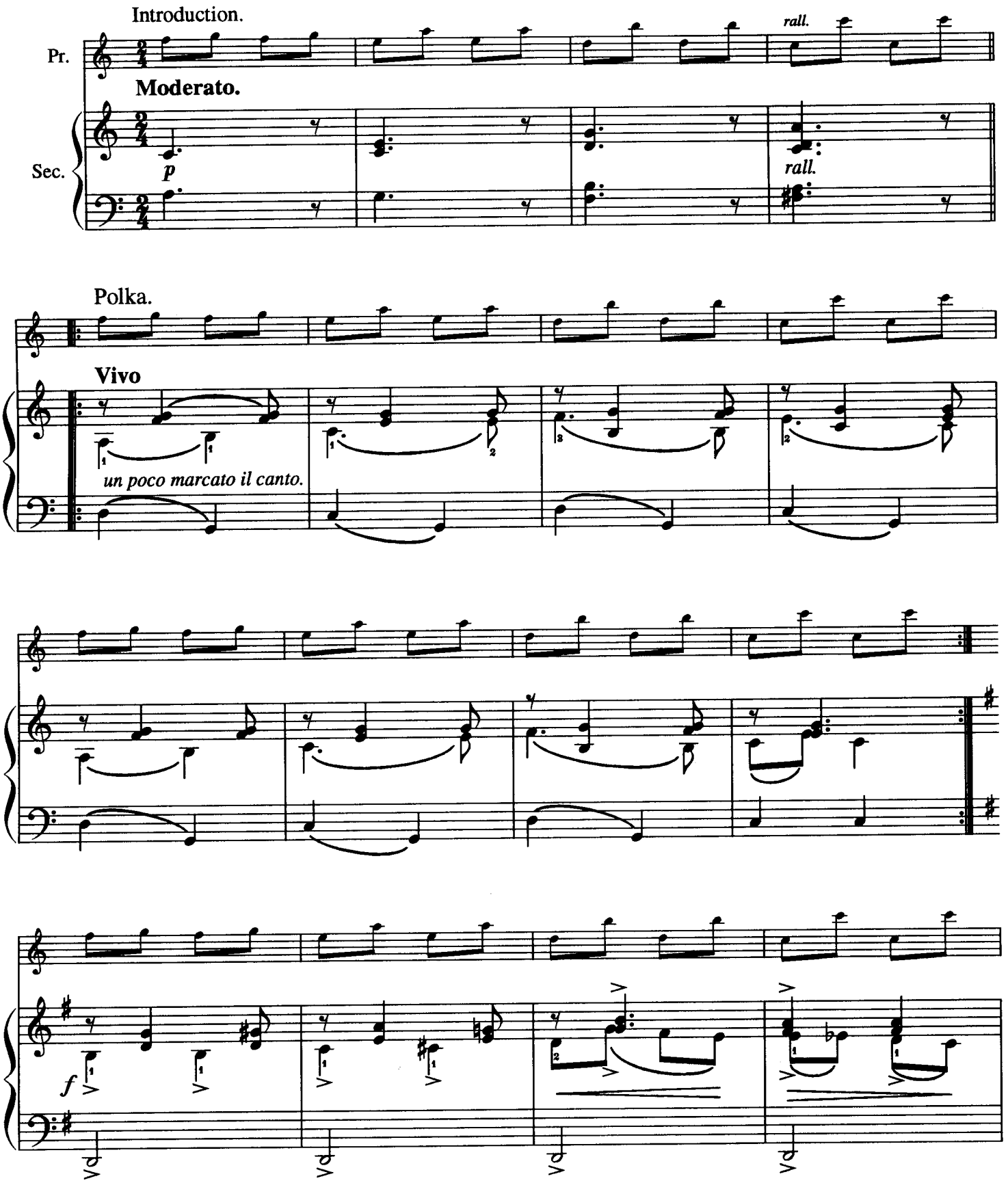


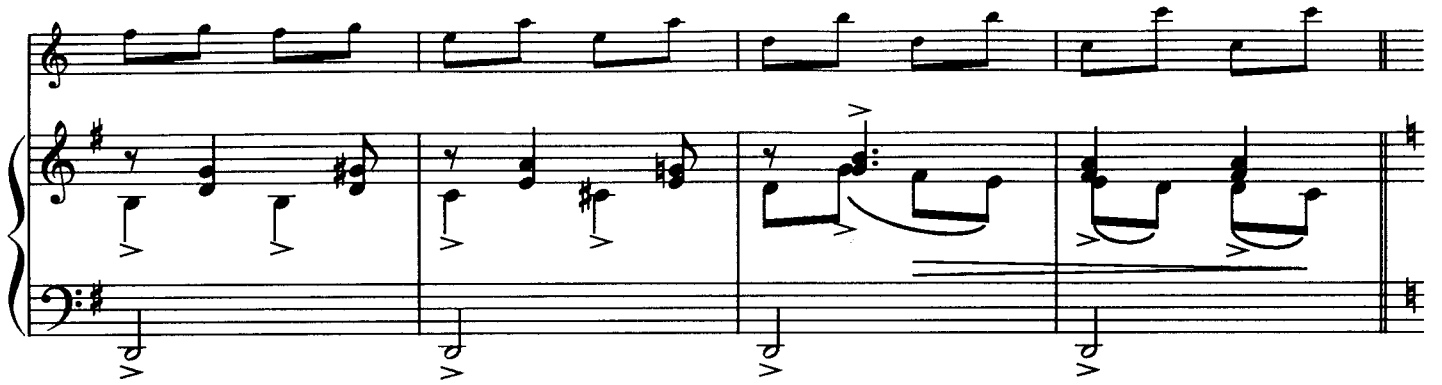
D.C. al Fine

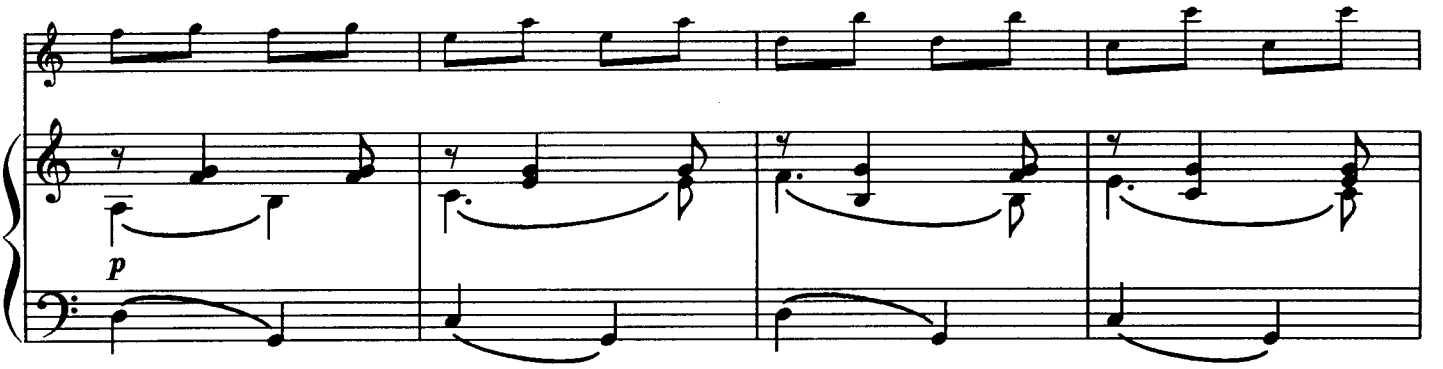


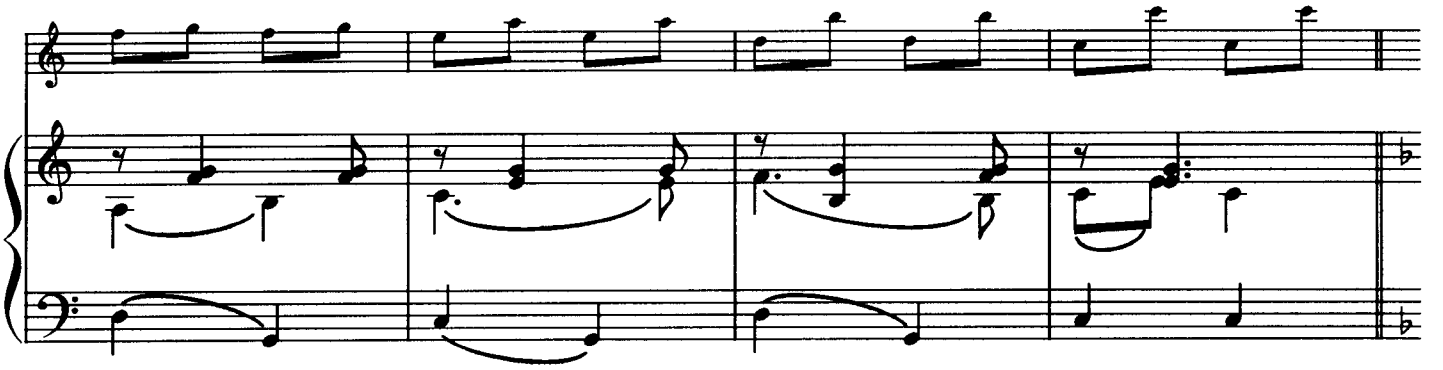
Polka

Alexander Borodin
(1833-1877)

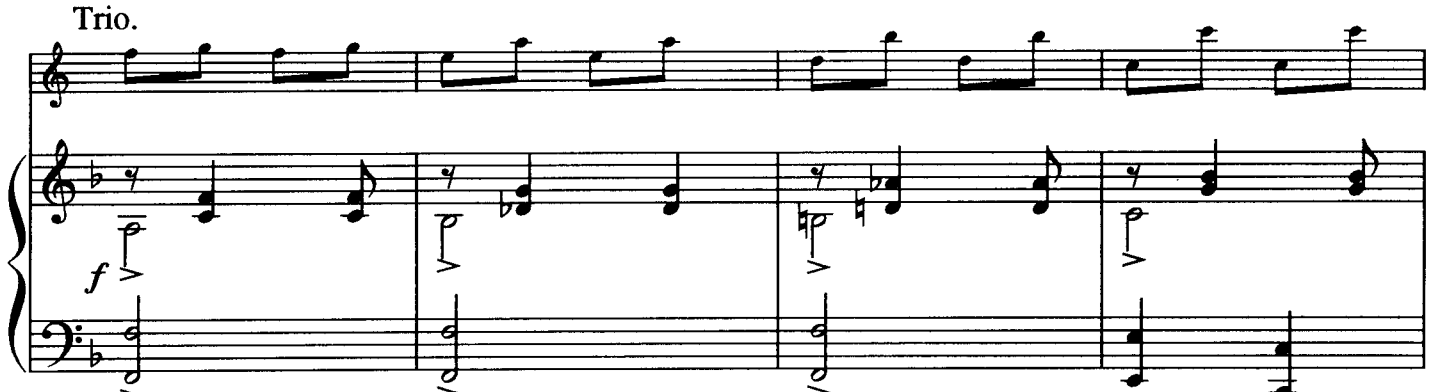


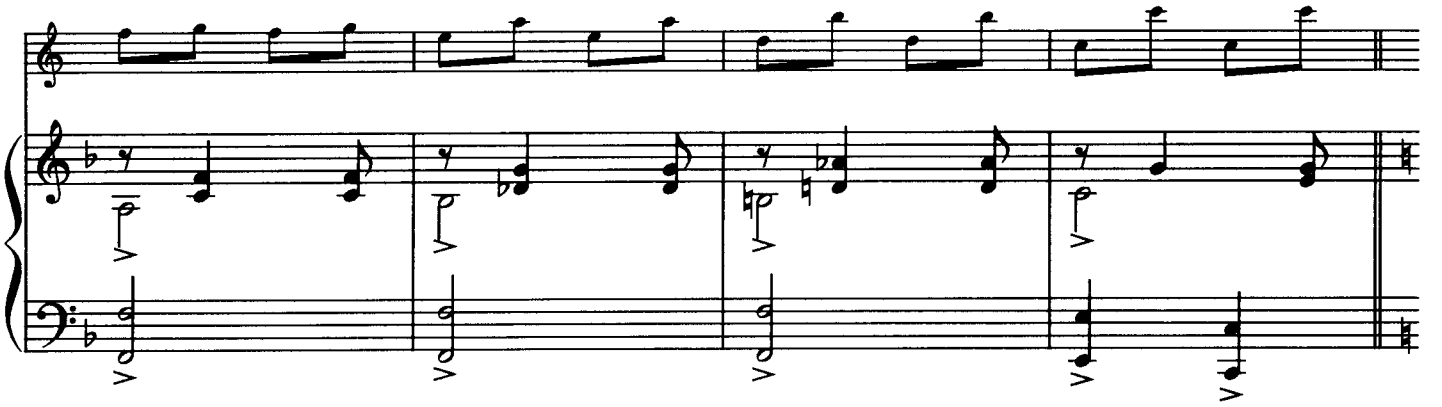


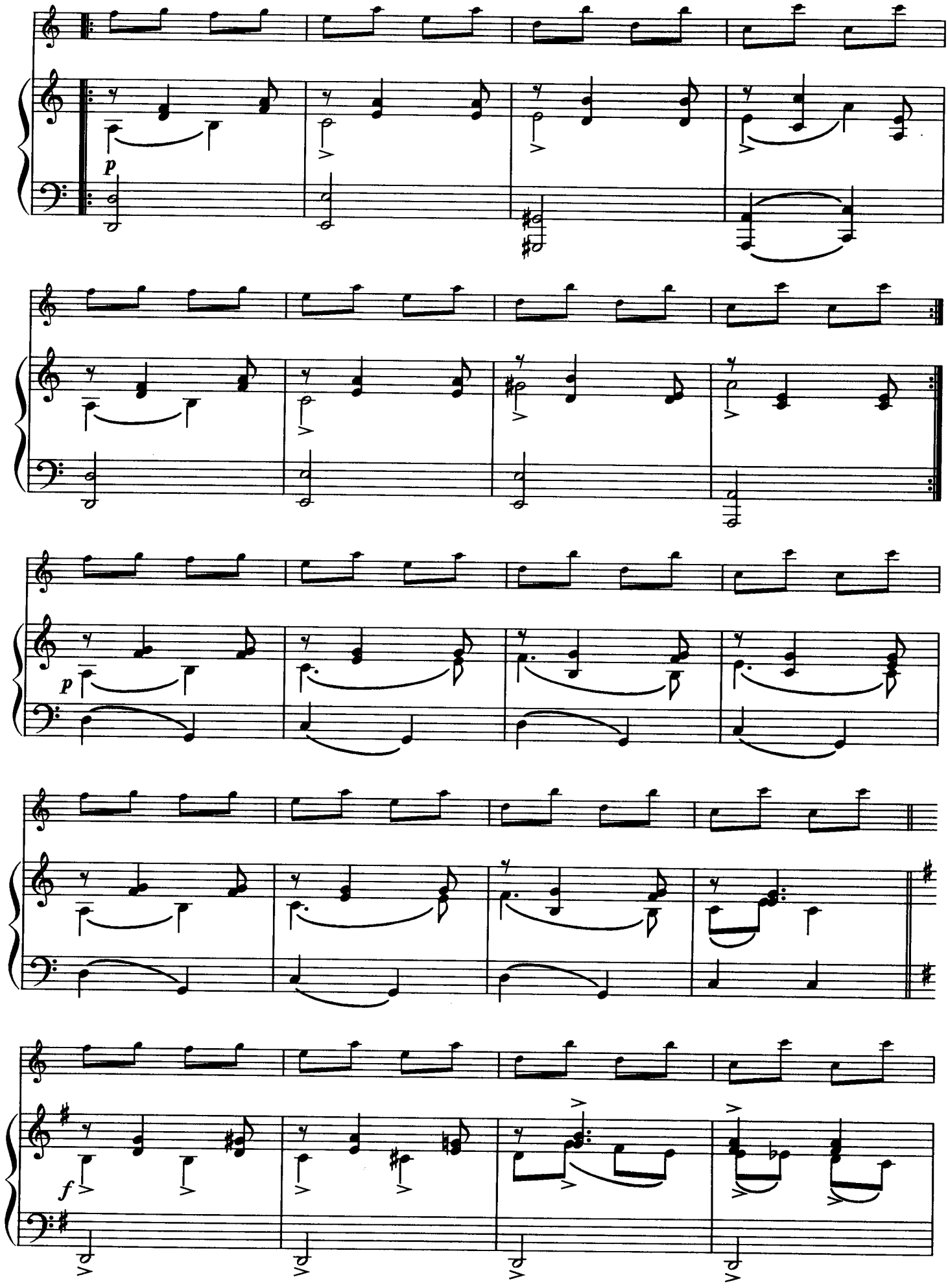




Trio.



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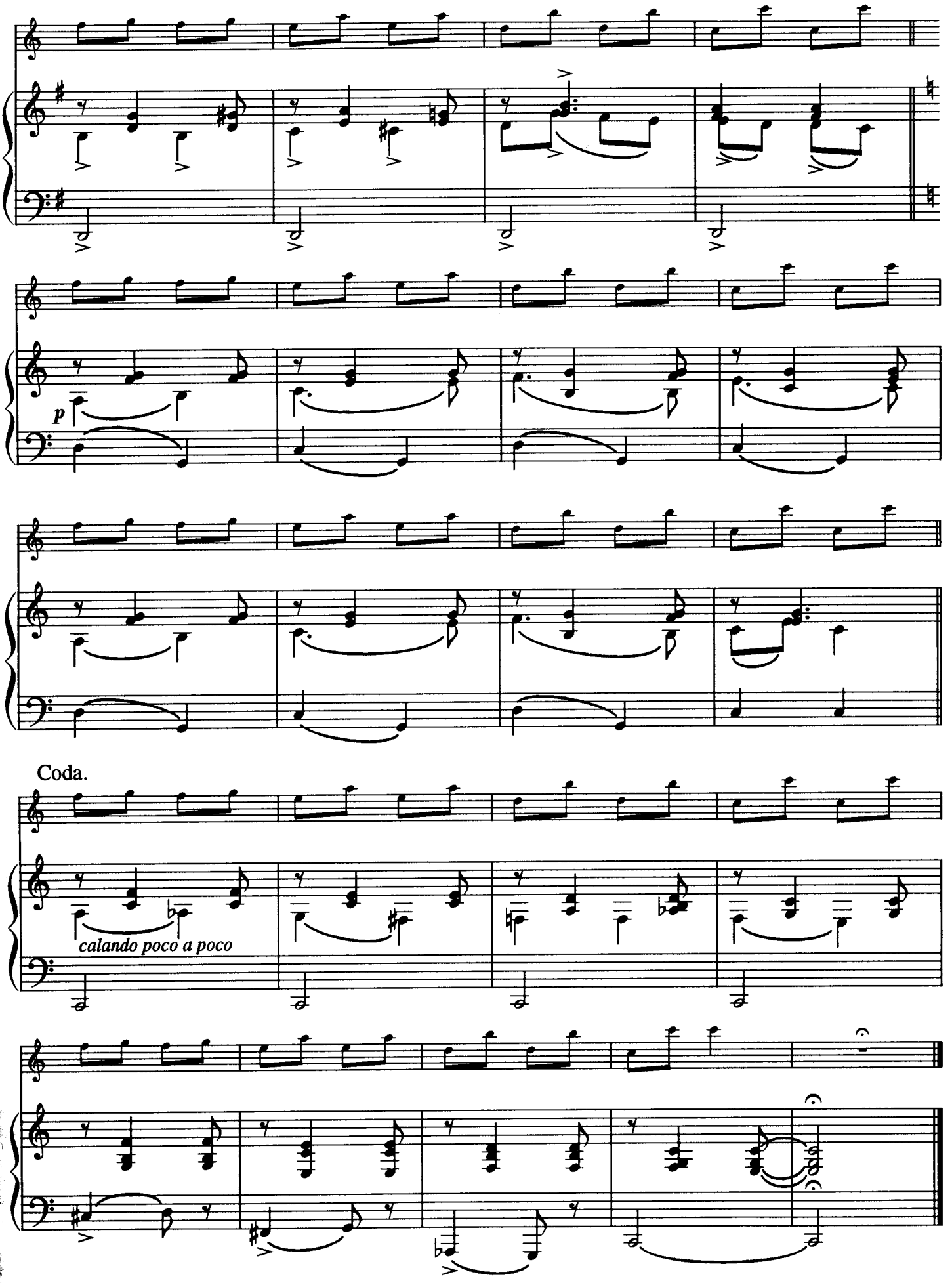
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Coda.
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