B Major

By Joseph Smith

In last issue's Letters section, Richard Lynde of Aromas, CA, wrote: "Years ago, I recall having read somewhere a musician's contemptuous dismissal of B major as a key worthy of composition. Seems as if this critic's contempt was based on the premise that no great or significant works have been composed in this scale...."

Of course, discussing such a statement presents several problems of definition. We may not agree on what is "great" or "significant." Even the word "work" is a problem. For purposes of this discussion, I will consider only well-known composers and will count as a "work" a piece that shares an opus number with others, provided that the pieces within the opus are customarily performed separately. If, however, I occasionally allude to a movement within a classical form, it is not to refute the "no great works" premise—I simply offer it as a point of interest. Even if the reader disagrees with some of my examples, I hope to disprove this rash overstatement. The literature of music is vast and rich, and there are unquestionably great works even in the rare key of B major.

Ignace Jan Paderewski

Domenico Scarlatti wrote two pairs of sonatas in B. The first pair, however, seem to be ashamed of their key. (There are, alas, three different catalogs of Scarlatti in use. The two sonatas are L. 348 and 450, or K.244–5, or P. 298–9.) Scarlatti, evidently resisting a key signature of five sharps, omitted the fifth sharp and instead sprinkled the page with A-sharp "accidentals." His later two sonatas in this key (sigh... L. 148 and 446, K. 261–2, or P. 300–1) have the conventional key signature.

Beethoven did not compose an independent work in B major, but he did compose a famous movement—the slow movement of the E-flat Concerto ("Emperor"). Here, in the context of a flat-key work, the spelling C-flat major would be much more logical—but a key signature of seven flats is even less welcoming than one of five sharps, and Beethoven chose the easier spelling. Did Beethoven get the idea from Haydn's trio in E-flat, where the slow movement begins in B and ends in E-flat major, via E-flat minor?

While a comparatively modest example within the corpus of Schubert's sonatas, the early sonata D 525 (1817) is still a work of considerable charm, and it is thoroughly Schubertian. (The textures, by the way, have always suggested a string quartet to me—is it possible that Schubert may have at some stage conceived it as such?) Much later, in his song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin*, Schubert made the audacious choice of casting the song "The Beloved Color" in B minor, and the following song, "The Hateful Color" in B major, reversing the conventional associations of major and minor. [Editor's note: Before the universal acceptance of equal temperament, the key of B was often a "rough" one, being relegated in earlier tunings to the group of keys least in tune. Perhaps Schubert was alluding to the unpleasantness that resulted. However, as Joseph Smith demonstrates, there are many other reasons some composers avoided the key, such as difficulties in reading or in performance.]

B major was more attractive to the romantic era than to the classic, perhaps *because* it had been so little used. John Field was an important influence on later romantic composers. Although all four of his sonatas belong to his earlier, more classical period, the last of them, in B major (1813), suggests the romantic, especially in its relaxed and rambling first movement. As he composed this sonata, Field had just begun to originate the form that served him so well—the nocturne.

Robert Schumann produced no major works in B

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major. The last of his set of *Three Romances*, Op. 28, however, is a distinctive, quirky piece that no other composer could have written (and certainly no other composer would have titled "romance"): a rondo with a marching theme in canon. Attractive as its various themes are, this composition is blemished by excessive repetition.

Chopin gave us three nocturnes in B—all of them important and distinctive. The first of these, Op. 9, No. 3, contrasts its light and fanciful theme with passages of lyric warmth and drama. The Op. 32, No. 1, is suddenly interrupted in its final bars by a violent recitative, ending the Nocturne in tragedy—and the parallel minor. The final B major Nocturne, Op. 63, No.1, is luxuriantly rich in every respect: melody, counterpoint, harmony, and figuration. And if, in addition to the nocturnes, we consider such examples as the B major Prelude, the Mazurka Op. 56, No. 2, the *Largo* of the Third Sonata, and the middle episodes of the first Scherzo and the Octave Etude, we can see that, in Chopin's work, B major tends to have a special character: rapt and blissful. (Interestingly, the first scale that Chopin would assign his students was, in fact, B major—he felt that its disposition of white and black notes helped place the hand in its proper position.) Fauré's lovely Nocturne, Op. 33, No. 2, seems inspired by Chopin's examples in this key.

Like Chopin, Brahms seems to have had a special affinity for the key of B Major.

Like Chopin, Brahms had a special affinity for B. The fourth of his Ballades, Op. 10, is in B major, although it begins with a few notes in B minor. (If anyone who hates theory is still reading, please skip the following sentence.) The succession of tonalities in this opus is intriguing, and seems designed to show how B major is related to D, as the parallel major of the relative minor, B minor. For instance, the opening of the second, in D major, in its return, opens in B major, having arrived by way of B minor. Brahms will do something similar in the second, D major symphony—the secondary tonality of the first movement is B minor, the key of the slow movement is B major.

Brahms, in fact, provides us with a huge work that most unequivocally refutes the "no great works" premise: the glorious Trio, Op. 8. Here is an ambitious, large-scale work that continues from where his three high-powered romantic piano sonatas left off, summing up Brahms's early period. The key of B is a large factor in the work's distinctive sound. Indeed, I remember, when I was in my teens, some friend proposing a snobbish but intriguing game—trying to identify a work from its first chord. Even to one without absolute pitch, the trio proclaimed its identity unmistakably and immediately. (I can't remember whether the upbeat was played...) Perhaps the most extraordinary example of Brahms's special feeling for B is the central episode of his famous Ballade in G minor from Opus 118. Since the key of B major is about as distant from G minor as possible, one can be certain that Brahms chose B for its intrinsic color. The episode suggests a siren song, threatening the heroic resolve of the opening section—enchanting both literally and figuratively.

I would like to mention two familiar examples from musical dramas, alike only in being in B major, and in demanding loud voices. In Jule Styne's score for *Gypsy* (lyrics by Sondheim), Mama Rose's "Everything's Coming Up Roses" encapsulates the character's aggressive, relentless, opportunistic optimism. In Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (lyrics by Wagner!), Isolde's *Liebestod* provides an overwhelming catharsis, and enjoys an independent life as an orchestral excerpt. Because it is based on the climax of the love duet, and because it closes the opera, its final bars can be heard as "resolving" the famous tonally ambiguous opening motif of the prelude. Thus, the *Liebestod* (and the key of B) have a special feeling of finality. Interestingly, Verdi chooses this unusual key for a tune intended to be a blatant, popular song rendered by the Duke in *Rigoletto*, "La donna è mobile."

While Debussy's "The Hills of Anacapri" from the first book of Preludes and "Pagodas" from *Estampes* evoke utterly different kinds of folk music, they are alike in one respect: both present the tonality of B major in remarkably pure form, scarcely touched by chromatic alteration.

César Franck had no fear of multiple sharps, and his organ works contain one piece in B major, the *Cantabile* from his *Three Pieces* of 1878. The eighth of Charles-Marie Widor's ambitious, massive organ symphonies is in B. It is quite usual to find a multi-movement work in the minor that ends with a finale in the major, but very unusual to find a major key work with a finale in the minor, as in this organ symphony.

Because Paderewski was, in his day, quite simply the most famous of pianists, we tend to think of him mainly as a pianist who also composed. In fact, though, his early works were beginning to make a name for him even before he began a serious performing career. I wonder whether if it were in an "easier" key, his B major Melody would have enjoyed greater success. (We feature this piece in this issue, beginning on page 8.) Like Fauré, Paderewski seems to have evoked the character of B as used by Chopin.

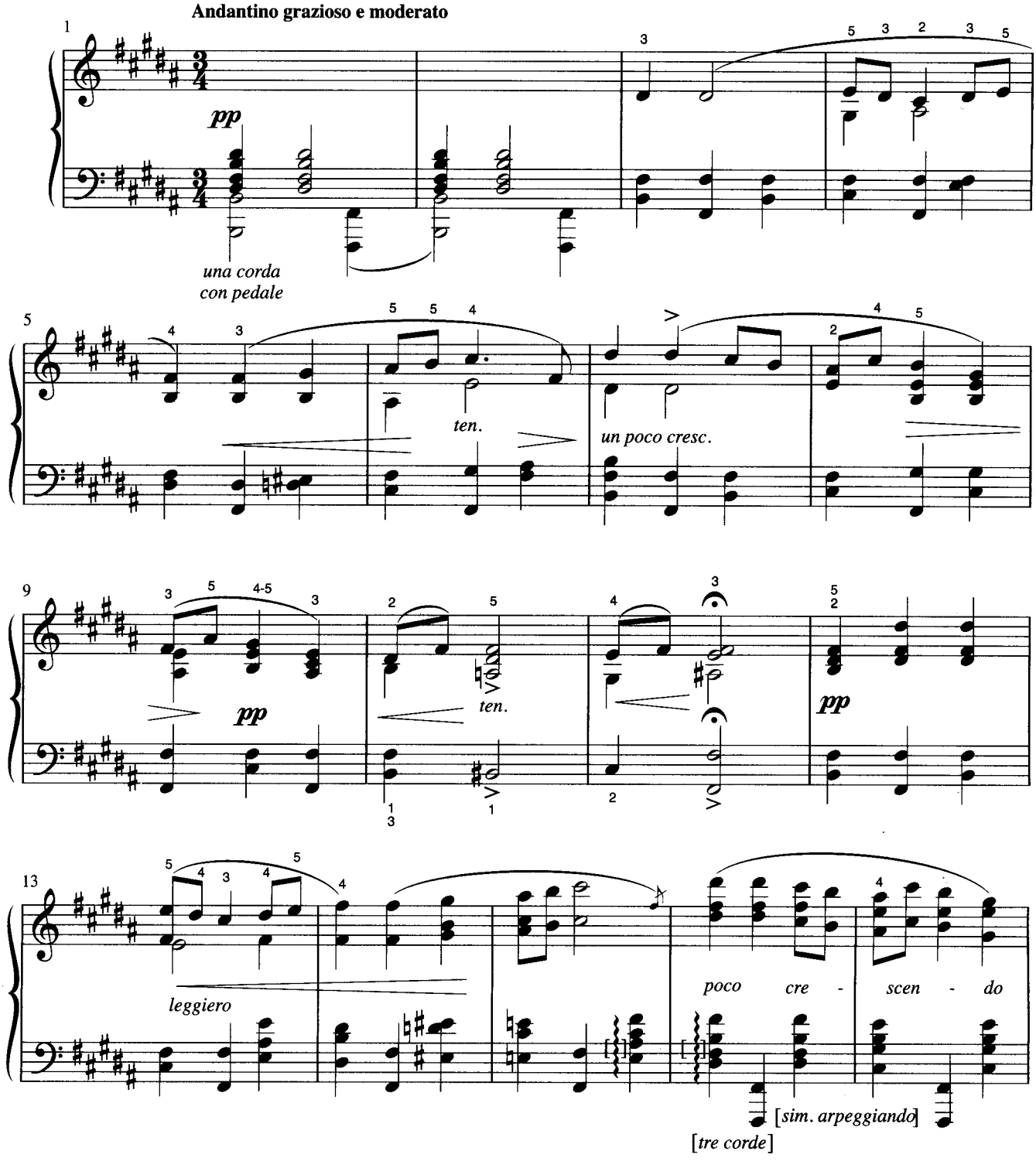
Every tonality, whether through intrinsic sound or tradition, has its own characteristic flavor. In major keys, sharps tend to suggest brightness. Somehow, though, as we add more sharps to the key signature, we seem to get a more rich and burnished sound. Let us celebrate the key of B major for its wonderful combination of brightness and gravitas! ■

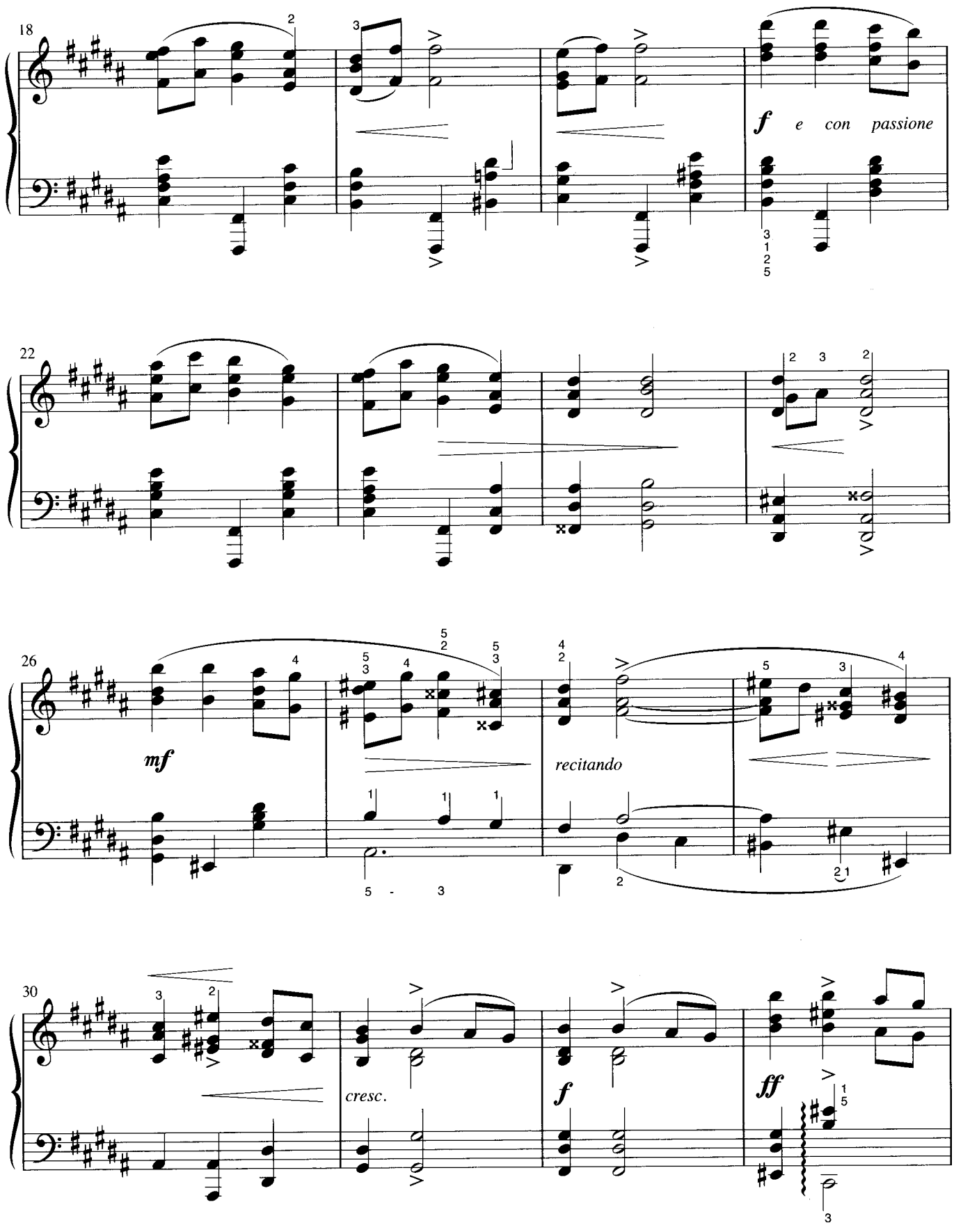
See Paderewski's *Melody* in B on the page 8.

See Joseph Smith's article about this piece in this issue's Rare Finds feature.

MELODY IN B MAJOR

IGANCE JAN PADEREWSKI
(1860-1941)

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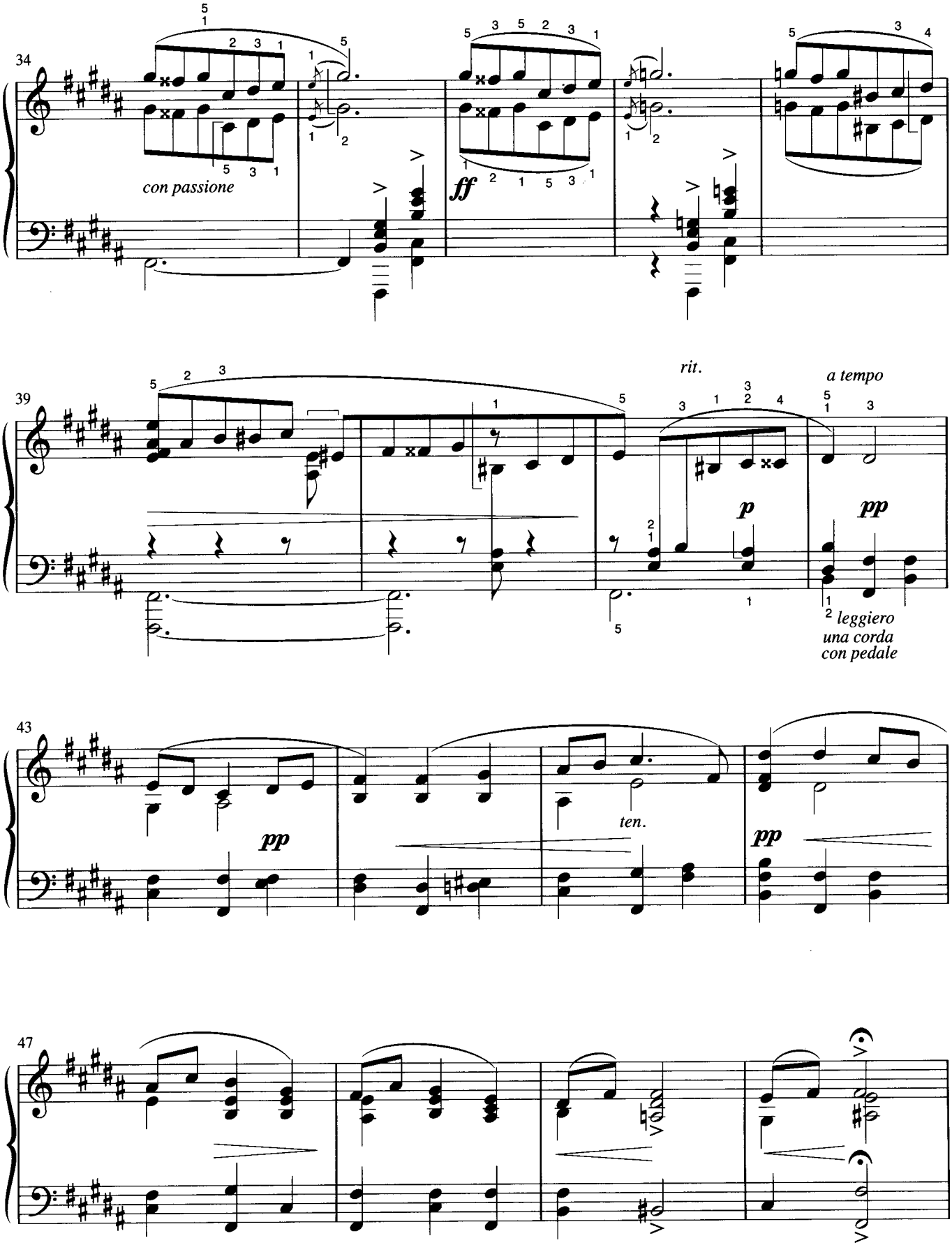
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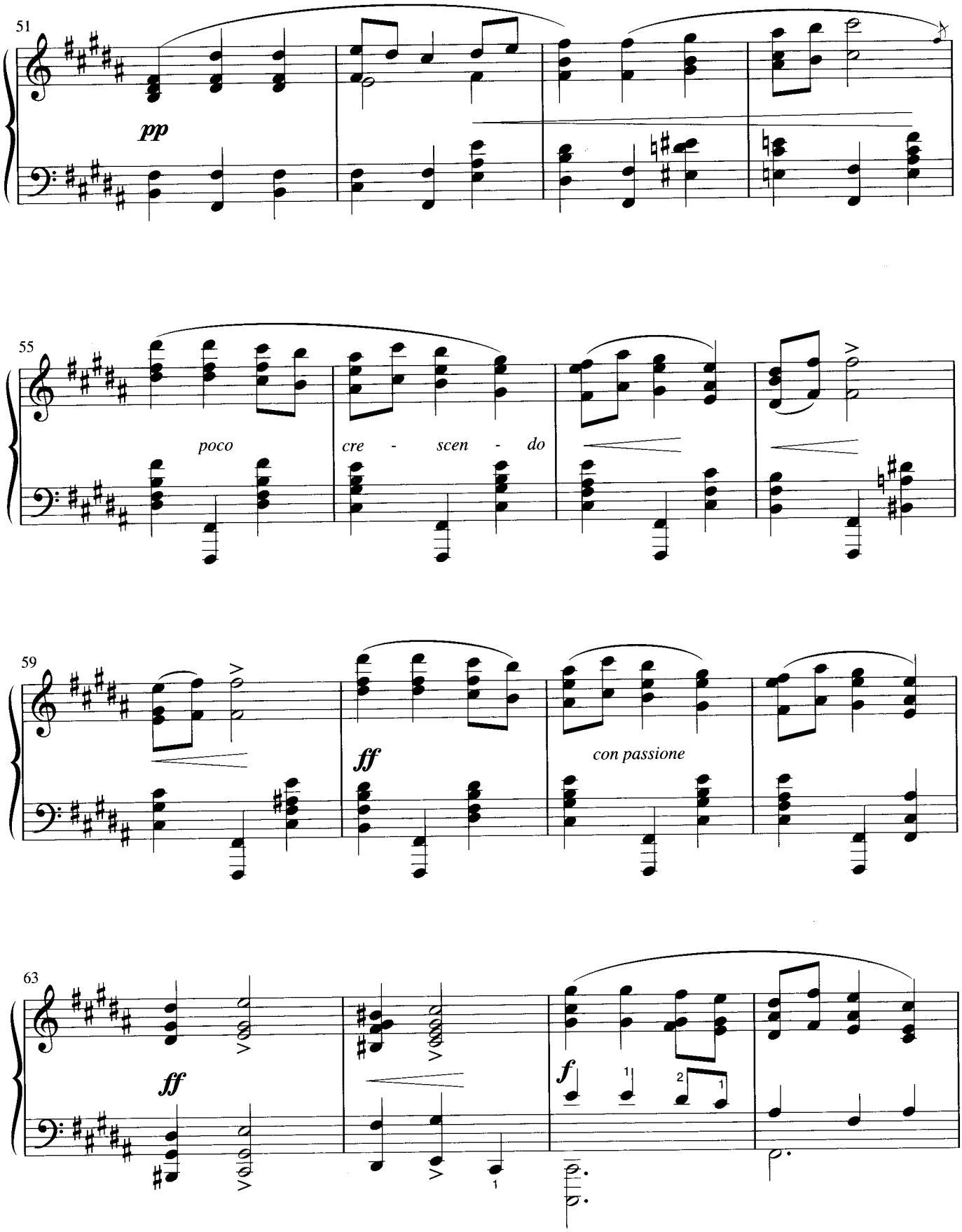
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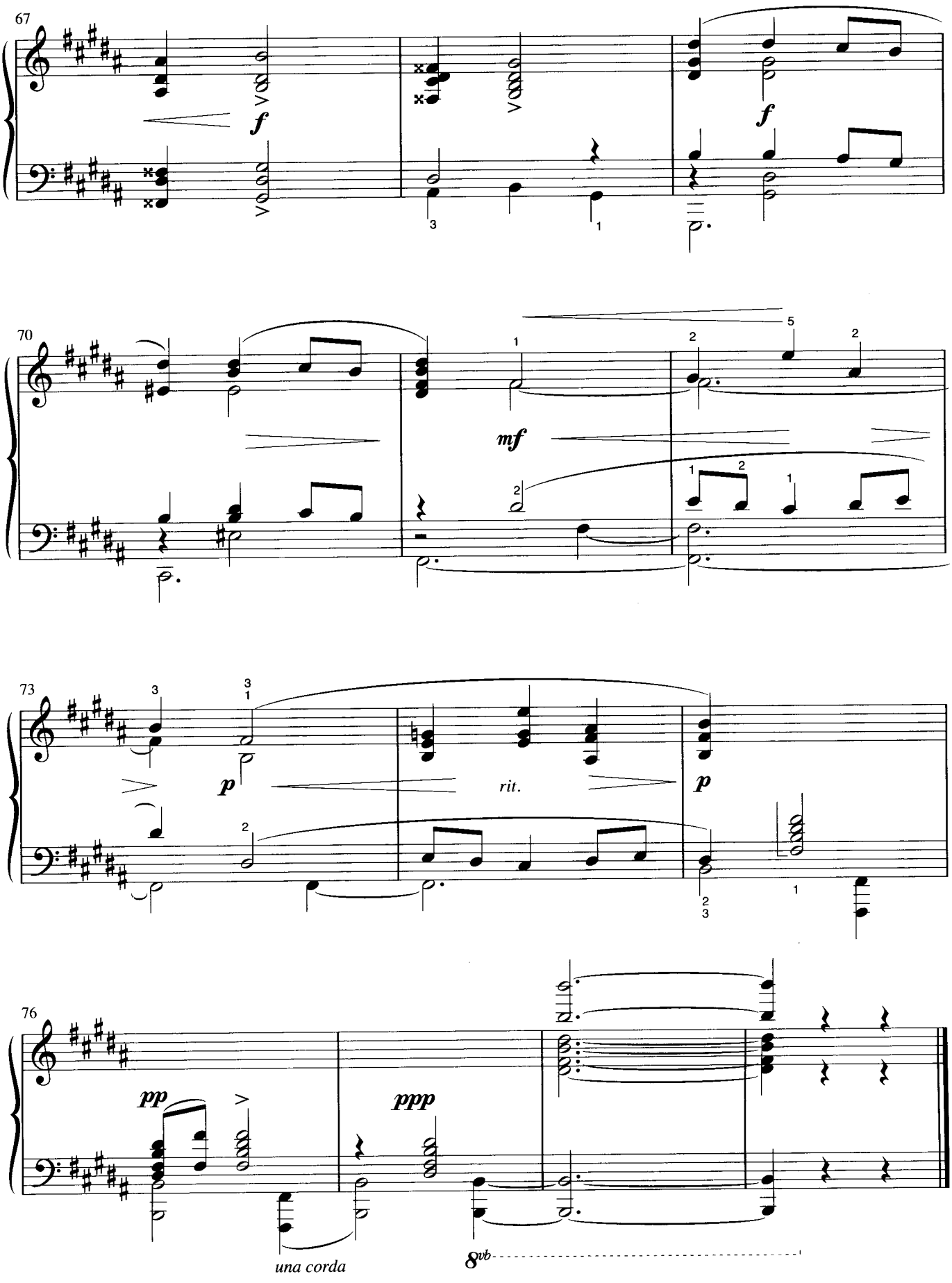
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