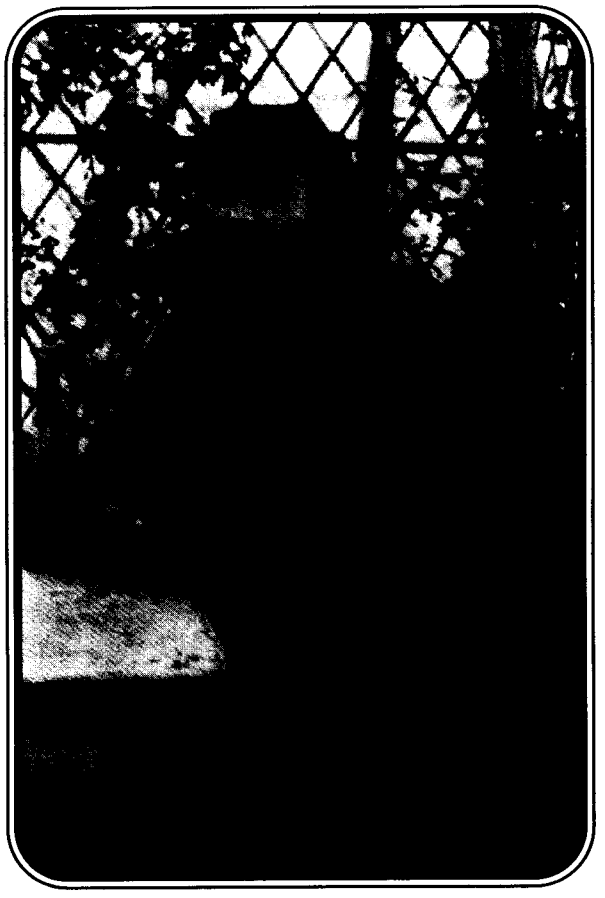
Erik Satie's First Sarabande

In 1911, three pieces by Erik Satie—the second *Sarabande,* the (first?) Prelude to *Le Fils des Etoiles* and the third *Gymnopédie*—were played by no less than Maurice Ravel at a concert of the progressive *Société Nationale de Musique.* This proved a turning point in Satie's career—up till then, he had indeed been known to Parisian musical circles, but more as a prickly eccentric than as a serious composer, and had in fact only produced a trickle of scattered short pieces. (Ravel, although his junior by nine years, was already established on the basis of a number of major compositions, including the *ne plus ultra* of impressionist pianism, *Gaspard de la Nuit.*) The program note to the concert proclaimed Satie "an inspired forerunner . . . By playing today the second *Sarabande,* M. Maurice Ravel shows the respect which is felt by the most 'advanced' composers for a creator who, a quarter of a century ago, was already speaking the musical 'jargon' of today."



Portrait photograph of Erik Satie, taken in 1895

It is significant that the program note places such emphasis on the *Sarabande,* rather than the *Gymnopédie*—today, the three *Gymnopédies* are certainly the most universally known and beloved of Satie's works. The *Sarabandes* may be restrained and stately in character, but their unresolved ninth chords pose a devastating threat to the tonalities asserted by their key signatures, and, by extension, to tonality altogether. Rather than points in a harmonic "progression," perceived like words in a sentence, these chords are heard as objects unto themselves, like brightly colored trinkets strung into a necklace. It has been correctly observed that Chabrier's unresolved ninth chords in his opera *Le Roi malgré lui* predate even those of Satie, but they are incidental rather than essential: in Chabrier, the A-1 sauce; in Satie, the steak.

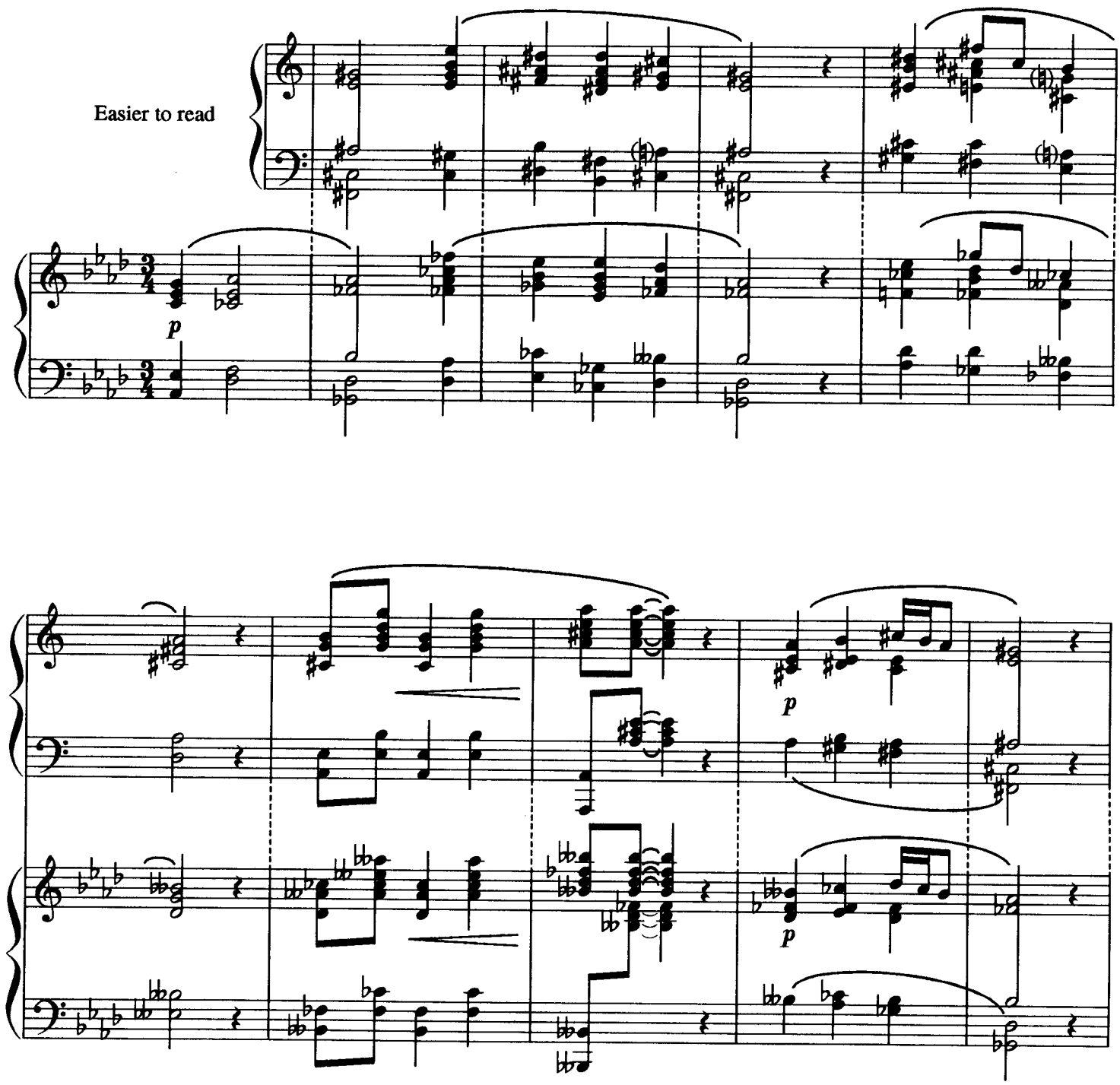
If Satie's *Sarabandes* are really so important, why are they so little known? I believe that much of the answer lies in their notation. Pianistically, anyone who can play the *Gymnopédies* can play the *Sarabandes;* however, the modal *Gymnopédies* are easy to read, whereas the *Sarabandes,* with their unsightly globs of flats and double-flats can cause the eyes of the most facile reader to cross and glaze over. Some believe that this discouraging note-spelling is Satie's way of teasing the player, and certainly it would be consistent with Satiean humor, which can be interpreted as self-deprecatory, disarming—or hostile. Attesting to this illegibility are the numerous nasty little errors which have nested undisturbed in the printed music for all of eighty-five years. Even attempted in good faith, though, the notation of a piece like the first Sarabande, whose identifiable tonality seems to call for a key signature, but whose harmonic fluidity continually contradicts it, is interestingly problematic. The spelling of a chord like E-double-flat major seventh (bar 6) seems the gratuitous result of a perverse decision to spell the piece in a flat key. However, were we to choose a sharp key for the same (enharmonic) tonality, we would be stuck with the—unconventional—key of G-Sharp Major (requiring F-double-sharp in its key signature). I have decided to sacrifice consistency and musical logic to readability, and to offer passages re-spelled in sharps (with no key signature) as *ossias* for the reader to consult where needed.

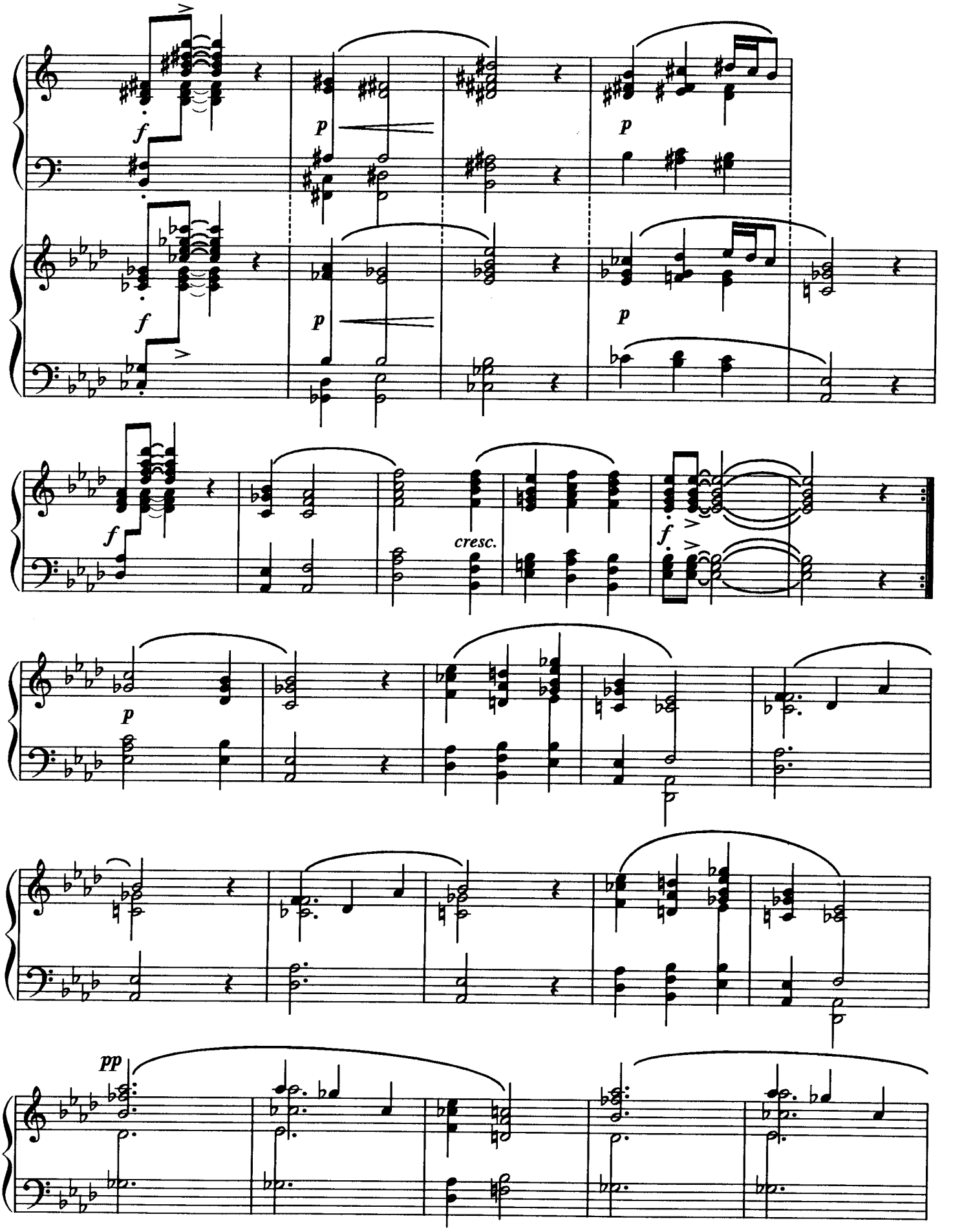
On paper, the Sarabandes, with their bizarrely dissociated harmonies, may appear to belong to a different tonal world from the stark modality of the *Gymnopédies,* the organum-like parallel chords of the *Ogives,* or the pitiless repetitions of the *Gnossiennes,* all of which date from this early period. However, in their various ways, all shun harmonic direction, resulting in a strangely suspended, timeless quality. Few dances induce such a feeling of stasis.

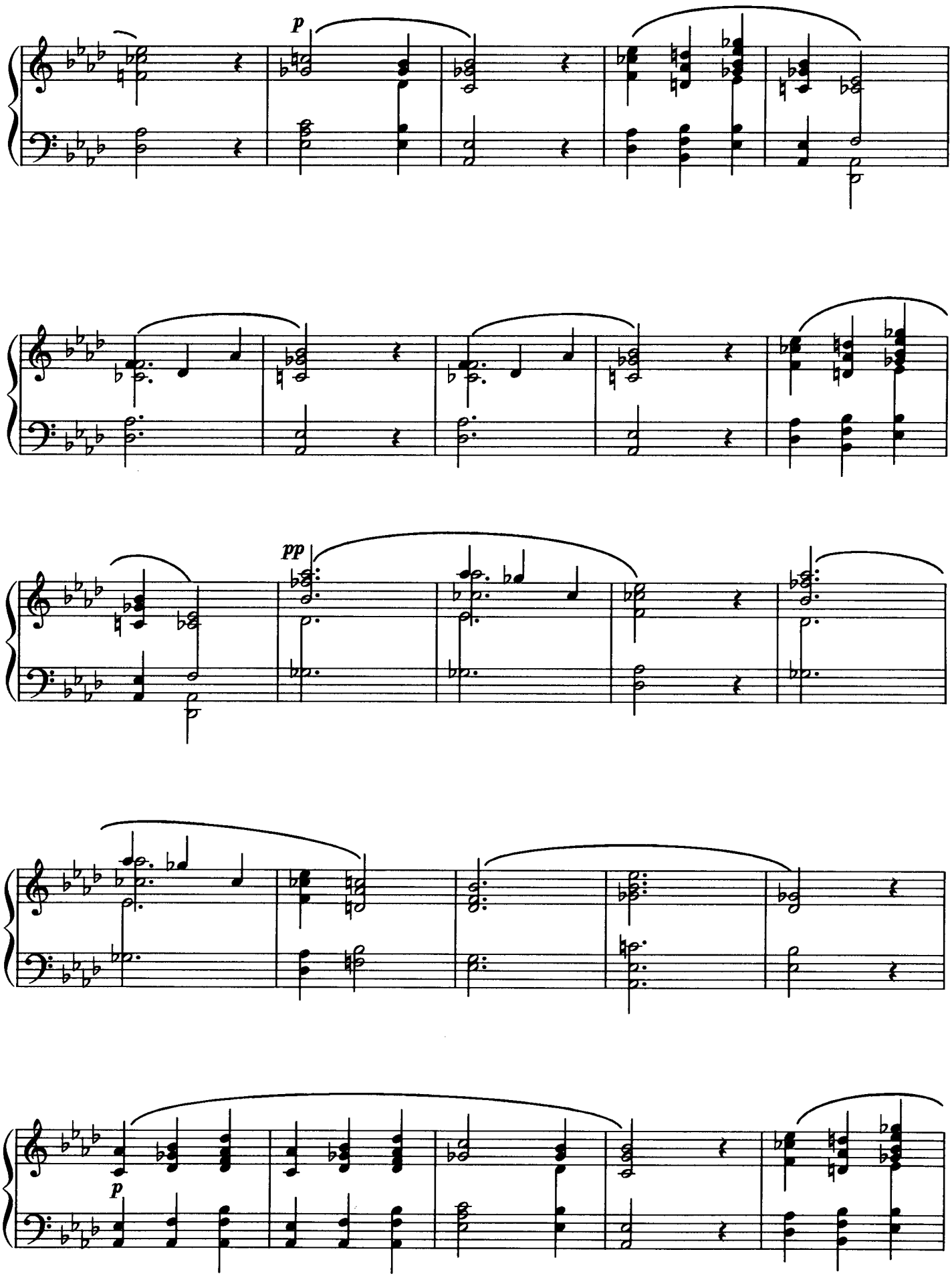
First Sarabande

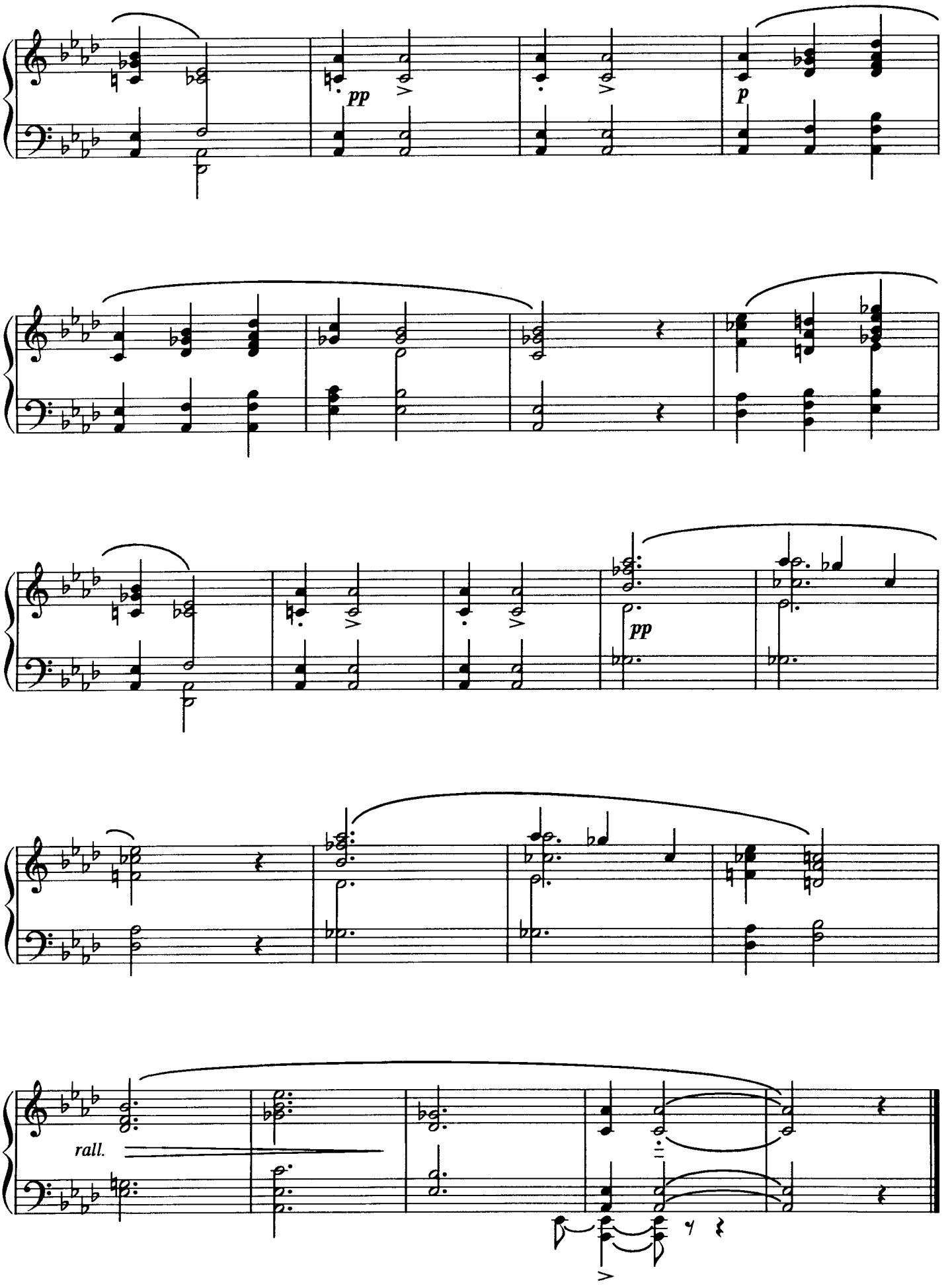
(1887)

Erik Satie
(1866-1925)
Edited by Joseph Smith




f
p
p
f
p
p
f
cresc.
f
p
pp


p
pp
p


pp
p
pp
rall.