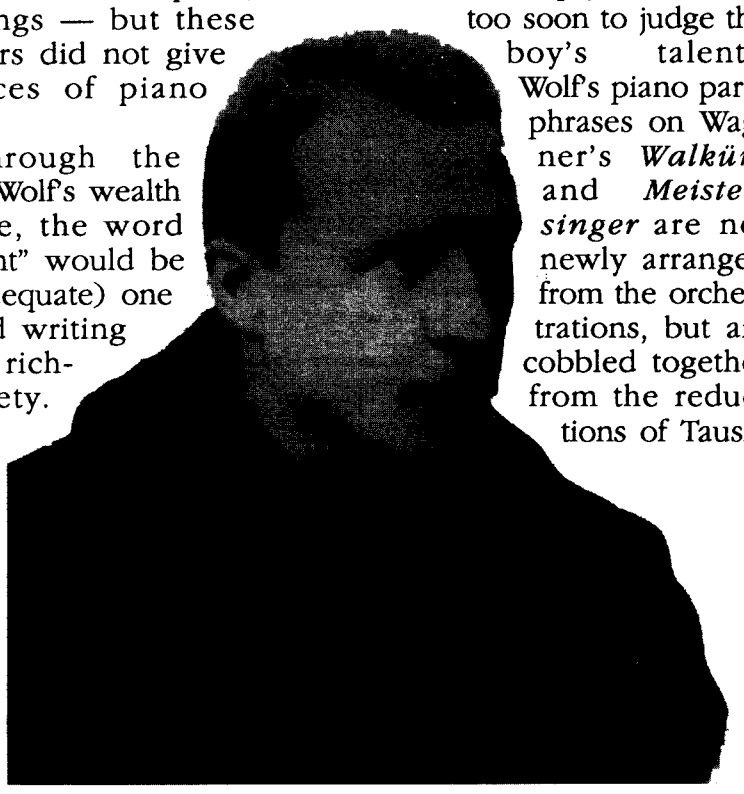
Childhood Musings of Hugo Wolf

Late Romanticism in Germany and Austria produced a great body of overwhelming music — symphonies by Mahler and Bruckner, Strauss's tone-poems and operas, and Wolf's songs — but these same composers did not give us masterpieces of piano music.

Looking through the piano parts of Wolf's wealth of songs (here, the word "accompaniment" would be hopelessly inadequate) one finds keyboard writing of astounding richness and variety. Often, the part will have such melodic interest as to seem almost like an independent piano piece (for example, "Auf einer Wanderung"), and postludes are sometimes extravagantly elaborate — the one to his ecstatic tribute to Spring, "Er ist's," constitutes fully forty percent of the entire song! Even the simpler parts are remarkably free from stereotypical accompaniment patterns. According to his contemporaries, his playing at evenings of his songs made up in vivid expression what it lacked in sheer polish. Therefore, one turns to his solo piano works and finds ...



Charming innocence replaces complexity.

First, a heap of juvenile sonata movements and variations. (When the fifteen-year-old Wolf had the boldness to bring some of these to Wagner for his opinion, the venerated composer, with uncharacteristic tact, simply declared it too soon to judge the boy's talent.) Wolf's piano paraphrases on Wagner's *Walküre* and *Meistersinger* are not newly arranged from the orchestrations, but are cobbled together from the reductions of Tausig and Klindworth. There remain a reasonably pianistic *Humoreske,* a *Rondo Capriccioso* — an awkward version of a projected symphonic movement — and two miniatures, *Joking And Playing,* and *Slumber Song* — charming, but totally eschewing Wolfian complexity of harmony and texture. These two pieces were written for a projected cycle, *From Childhood,* and date from 1878.

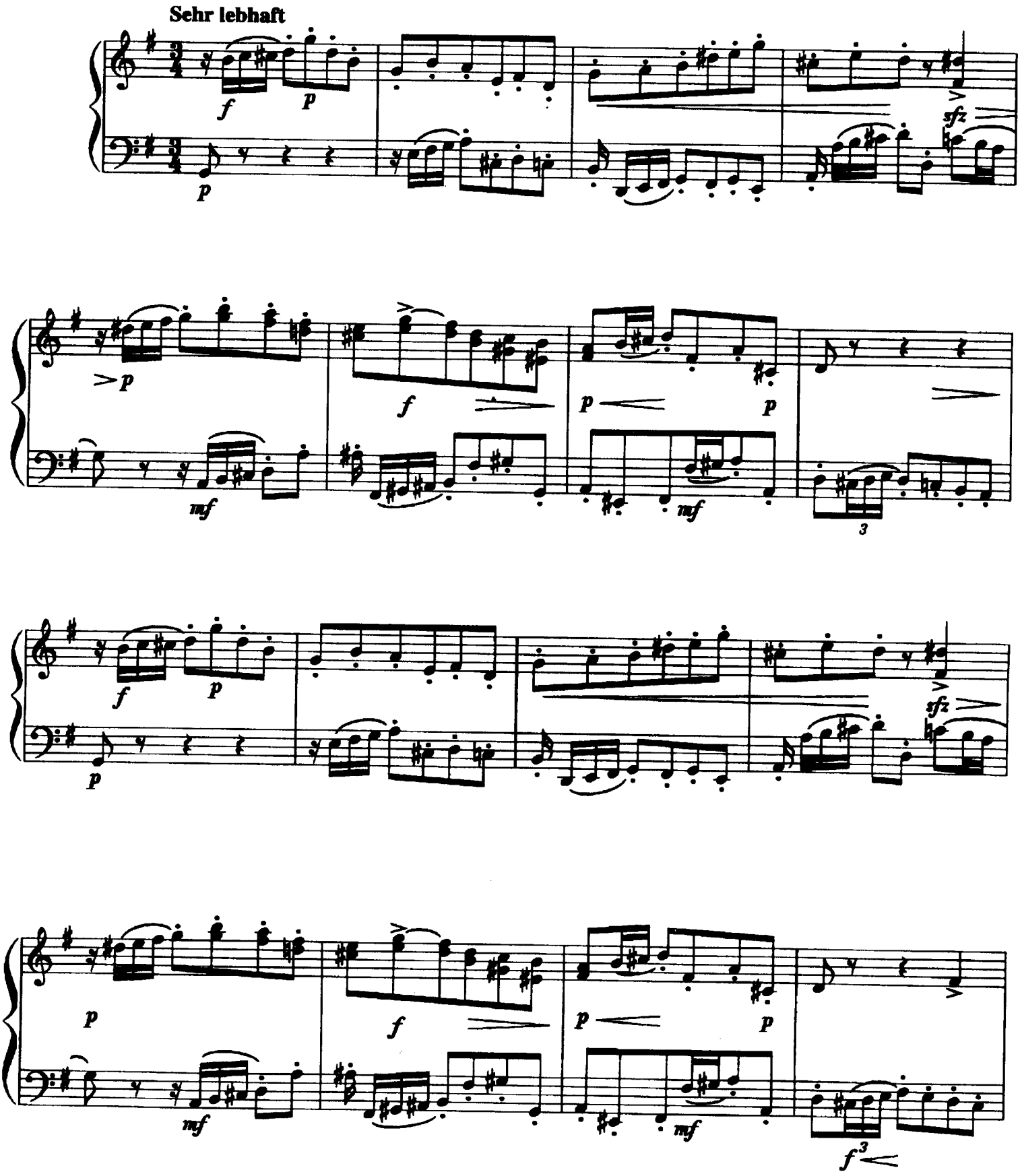
As to the other composers mentioned, Richard Strauss was an accomplished pianist — the notoriously ungenerous Von Bülow praised the young man's performance of Mozart's C minor Concerto, and 1943 radio recordings show the seventy-nine-year-old Strauss still playing his songs with clarity and energy.

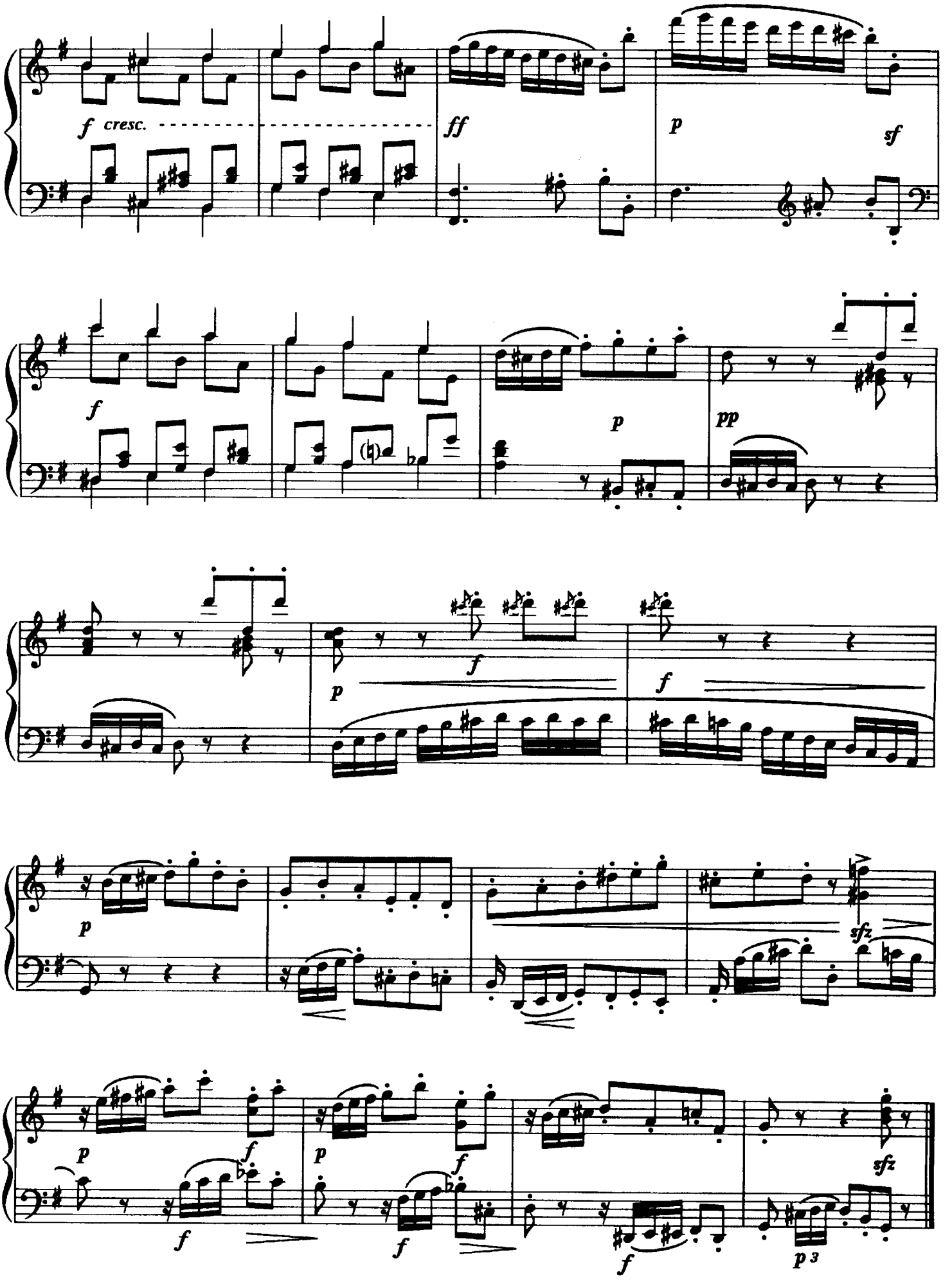
Among his early works, the *Burleske* for piano and orchestra exemplifies Straussian wit, and the piano parts of the cello and especially the violin sonatas radiate an ebullient, concerto-like brilliance. Yet his *only* piano solos, written around this period, are the utterly conventional *Piano Pieces,* Op. 3, the somewhat less tame *Mood Pictures,* and the depressingly dutiful B-minor Sonata. Seemingly, he could only fully express himself pianistically through the timbral contrast and textural complexity offered by some form of ensemble.

Alban Berg, with his Sonata (circa 1908), did succeed in creating a piano masterpiece in post-Wagnerian style. This work, one of the most astoundingly mature and original ever to be offered as an Op. 1, somehow manages to reconcile pianistic sonority with Mahleresque denseness and nervous intensity. (This work is more gratifying to the ear and hand than to the eye — to study the development section's tangle of crossing chromatic voices is to risk migraine.) But Berg found that this exhausting *tour de force* could not be sustained through further movements as he originally intended. This "first" movement remains a lonely, exceptional work.

Joking And Playing

Hugo Wolf
(1860-1903)

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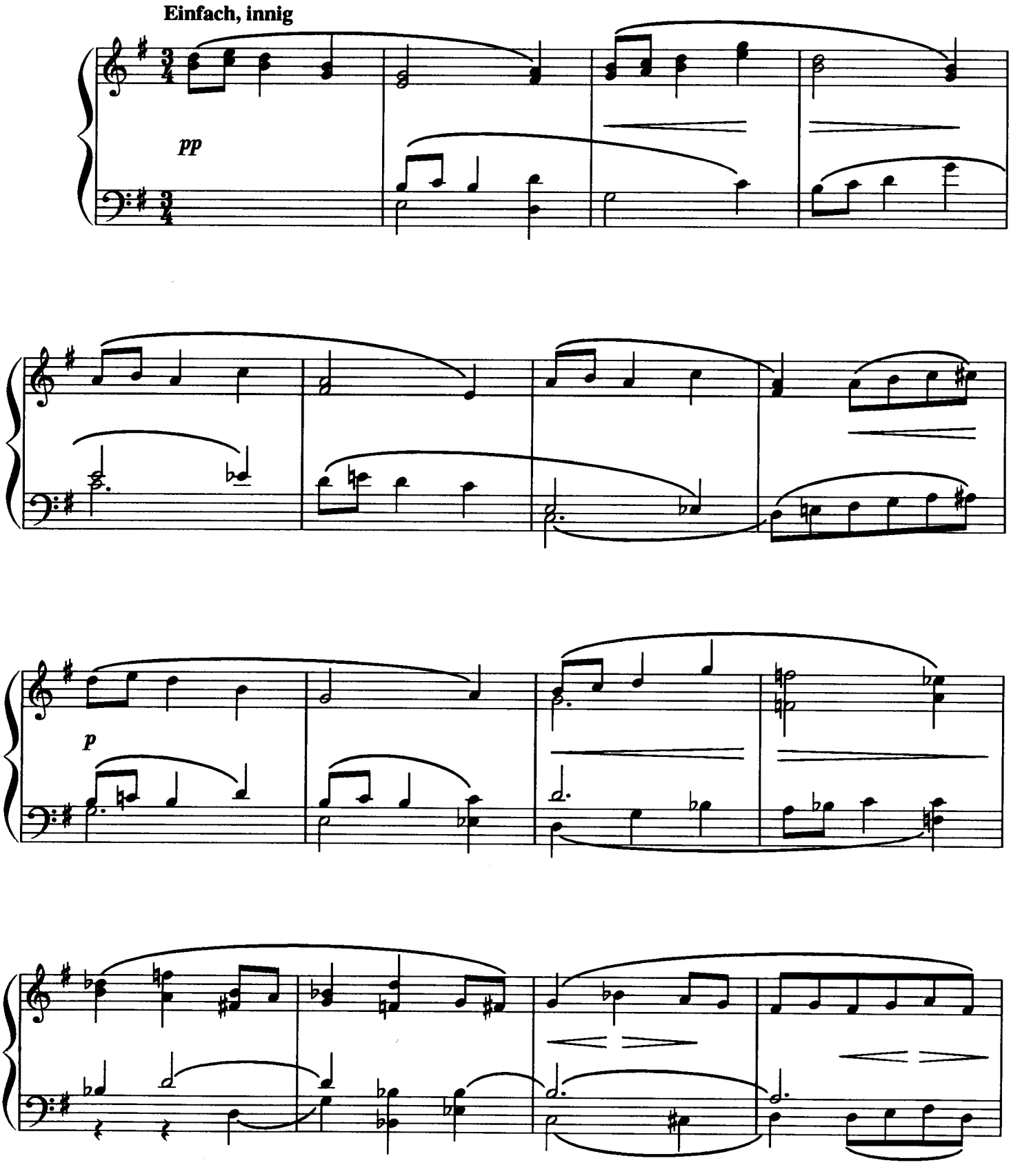
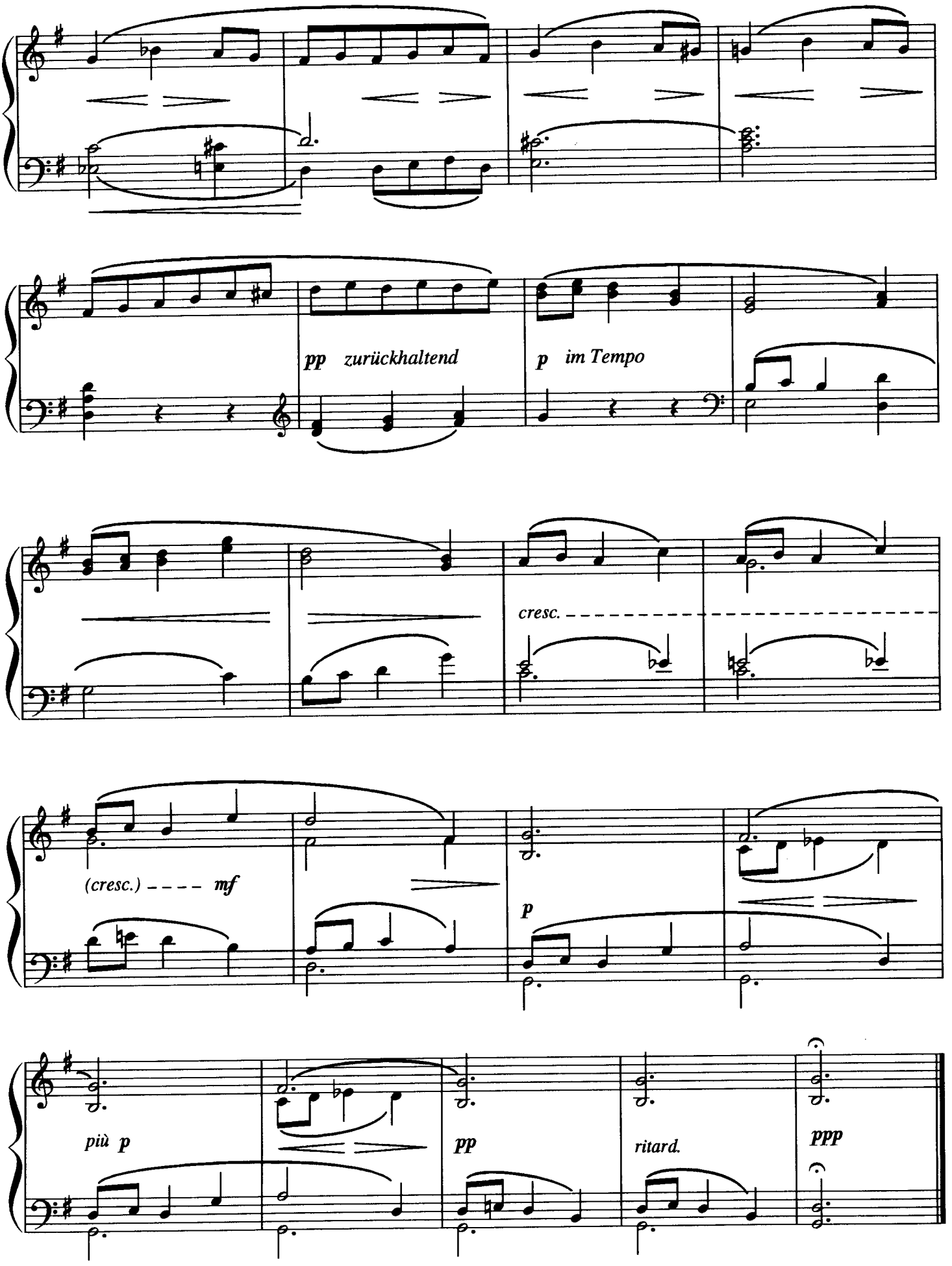
Slumber Song

Hugo Wolf
(1860-1903)

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