Rubinstein's Barcarolle
in F-minor

A barcarolle is a boat song, associated with the singing of Venetian gondoliers. According to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music,* "A basic feature... is the time signature, 6/8" and it cites Chopin's magnificent example (in 12/8) as an exception to the "customary 6/8." Grove fails to observe, however, that Rossini's Barcarolle from his song collection *Soirées Musicales* is likewise notated in 12/8, and is probably Chopin's model in this respect. (Chopin, in a letter, wrote that he wanted to notate his Tarantella in whatever meter Rossini had used for his *La Danza*, also from the *Soirées*). Nor does the New Grove note that three of Fauré's richly inventive and varied Barcarolles are cast in 9/8, preserving the rocking triplets of 6/8, but in a triple meter.

ANTON RUBINSTEIN

I had long supposed that Fauré's Barcarolle No. 5 (1894) was the first ever to be conceived in a triple meter, and I had intended to say so in a lecture-recital when it occurred to me that I had seen only one or two of Anton Rubinstein's six piano Barcarolles. When I went to the library, the very first Rubinstein Barcarolle I saw was the present F-minor, composed in 1852 and published a few years later, which begins in 3/4, continues in 6/8, and ends in 9/8. (His others are all in 6/8.) Further metrical "exceptions" I have subsequently remembered or encountered include little-known piano Barcarolles by Glinka and Alkan ("Barcarolette"), and well-known ones by Tchaikovsky ("June Barcarolle" from *The Seasons*) and Rachmaninoff (the opening number of the first duo-piano Suite).

It may be hard to imagine that Rubinstein could have influenced Fauré. Esthetically, Rubinstein's blunt, extrovert music could scarcely be farther from Fauré's refined, subtle style. Personally, though, the two had a close friend in common—Camille Saint-Saëns. In 1857, the twenty-year-old Saint-Saëns heard one of Rubinstein's first Parisian concerts as an adult. (He had appeared there as a child prodigy.) Saint-Saëns later remembered, "I was knocked flat... those who saw his fierce velvet paws attack the instrument with powerful caresses will never forget it." A year later, Saint-Saëns finally summoned up the courage to meet Rubinstein (older and already establishing himself as an international celebrity),* and they became fast friends, often playing four-hands together. In 1861, Saint-Saëns took a job teaching piano at the Ecole Niedermeyer, where one of his students was the teen-aged Fauré. Throughout their lives, Saint-Saëns continued to be friend and mentor to the younger man. Therefore, it seems conceivable that Saint-Saëns could have brought Rubinstein's F-minor Barcarolle to Fauré's attention, and that Fauré, struck by the unusual choice of meter, could have eventually been inspired to cast his fifth, eighth and ninth Barcarolles in 9/8.

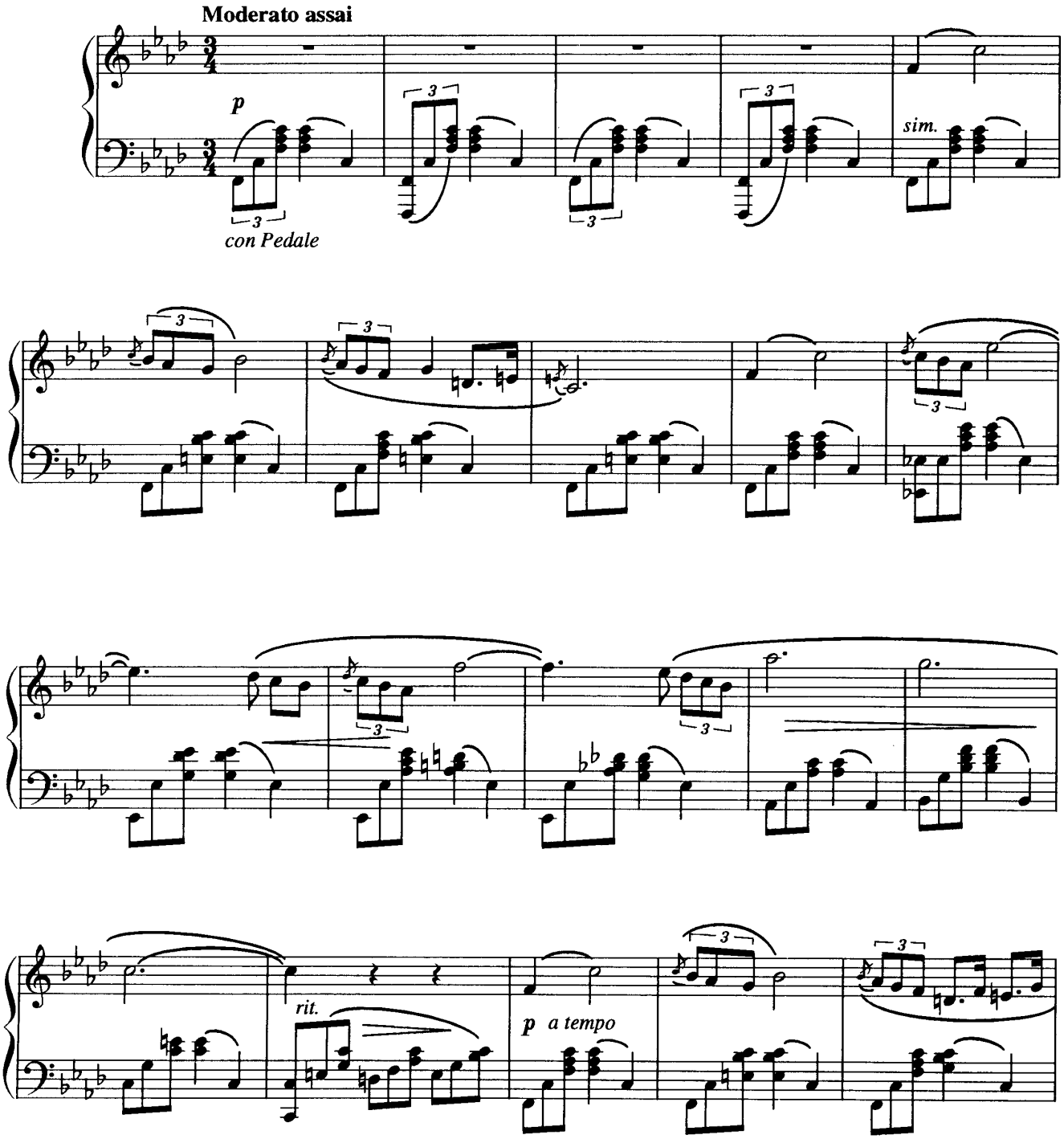
There exists an unlikely connection among the three men. In 1868, when Saint-Saëns composed his famous Second Piano Concerto, to be premiered with himself as soloist and Rubinstein as conductor, he took as the principal theme of the first movement a gravely expressive phrase from an unpublished *Tantum ergo* by Fauré, who generously had agreed to give it to his former teacher. Rubinstein, therefore, actually conducted a theme by Fauré, probably without the slightest knowledge of having done so.

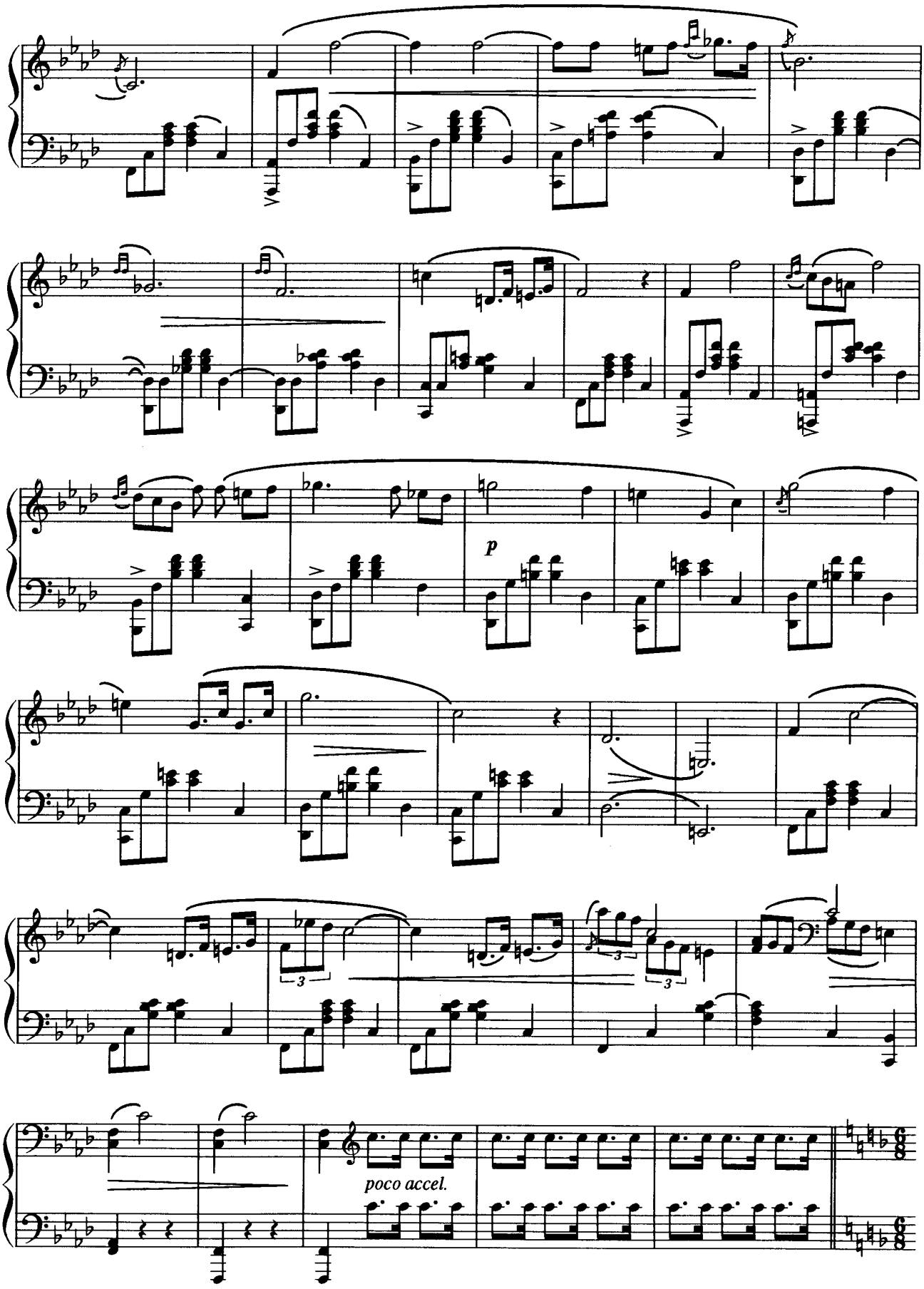
Rubinstein's compositions, like the once universally-known *Melody In F,* the adorable *E-Flat Romance* and the present Barcarolle, may offer little delicacy or variety of texture, but they do possess in abundance one attribute that can outweigh all others—melodic charm. Josef Hofmann's recording of the Fourth Concerto—providentially preserved from his golden jubilee performance of 1937—proves what a sensational vehicle it can be for the display of impulsiveness and force. Hofmann's boiling accelerandos, mercurial changes of sonority and violent accents evoke the "fierce velvet paws" of his revered teacher.

*Through his extensive 1872 American tour, Rubinstein had a profound effect on this country's musical culture. He used his prestige not simply to walk away with easy dollars, but to introduce the U.S. to serious, challenging programs.

Barcarolle

Anton Rubinstein
(1829-1894)

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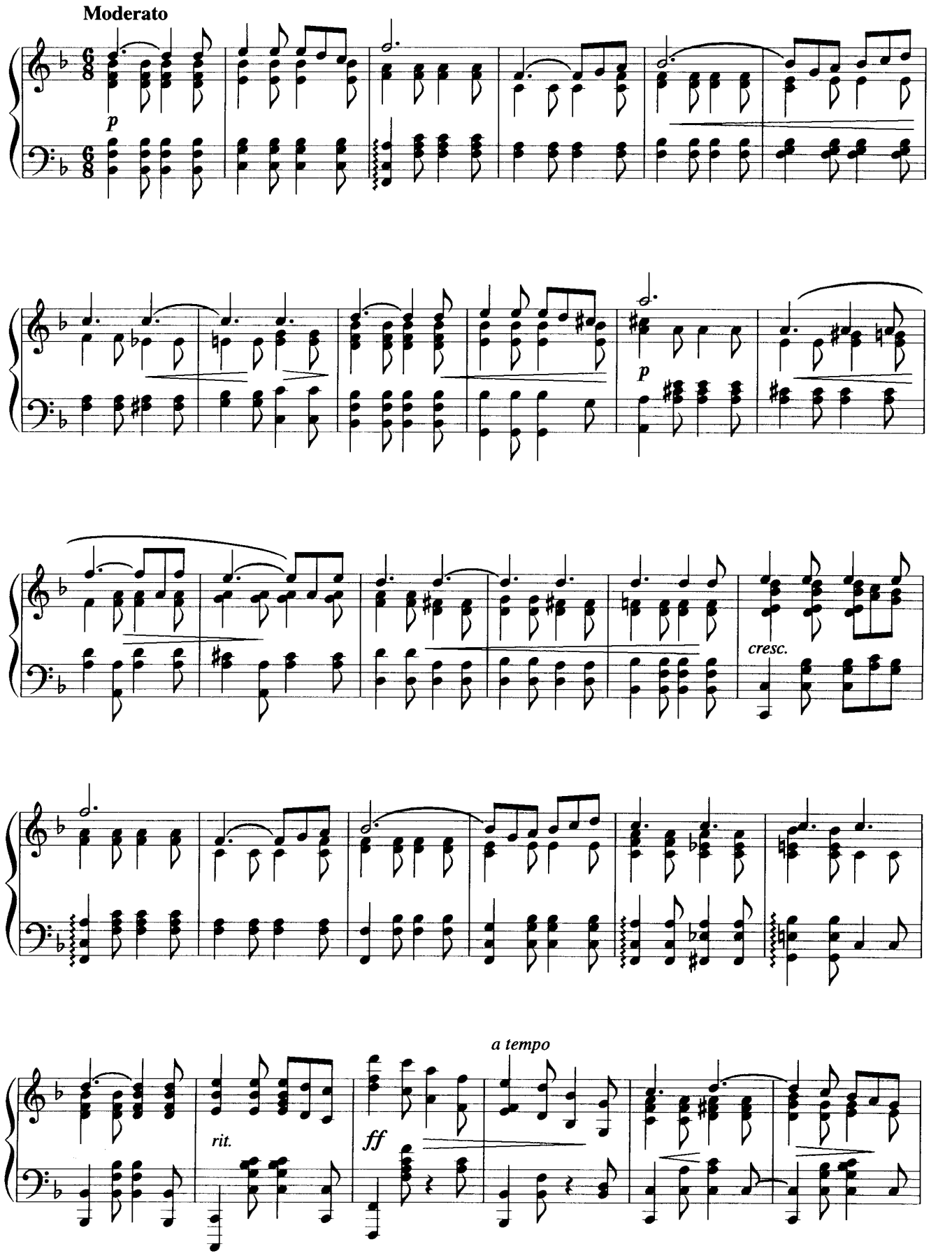
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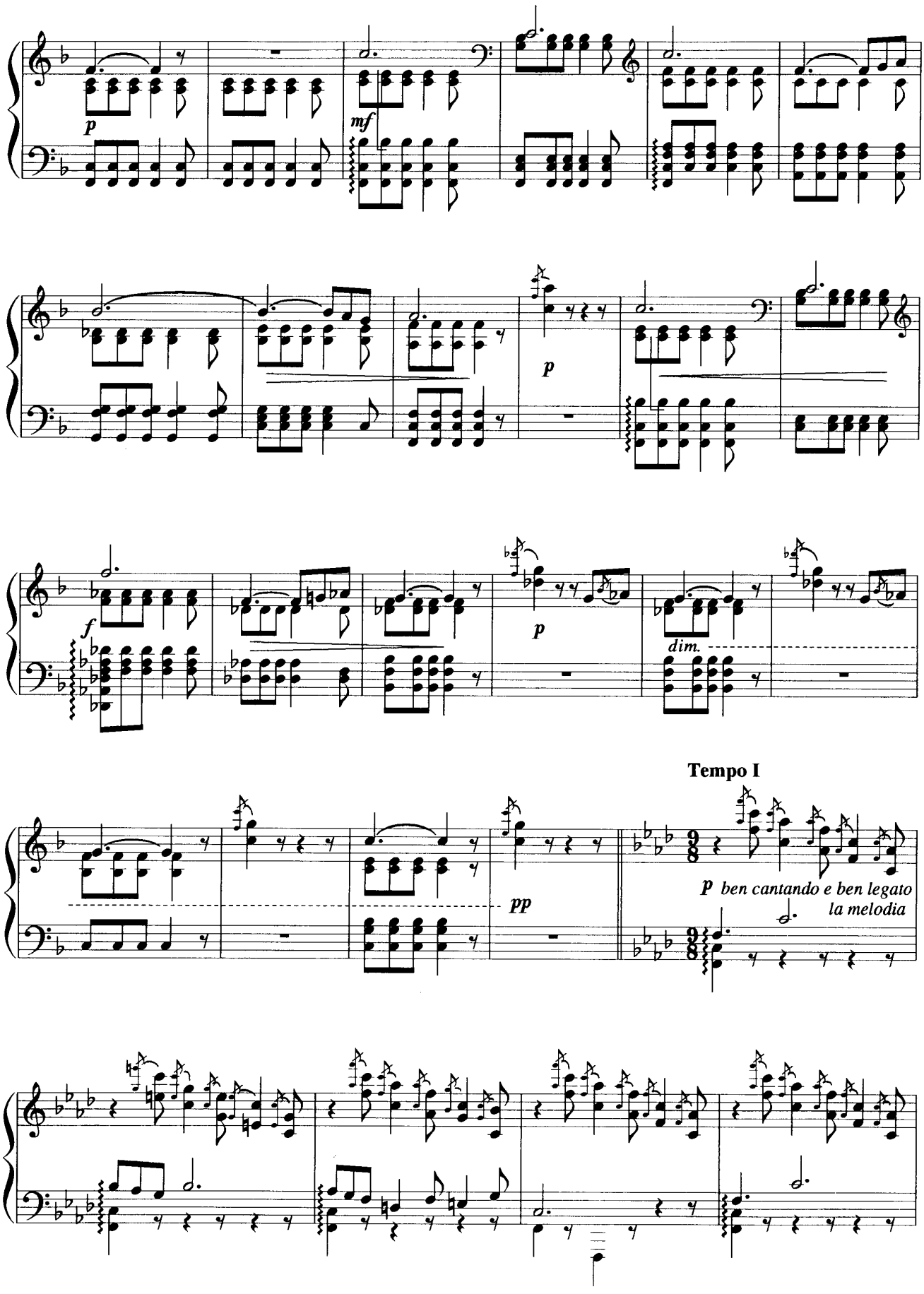
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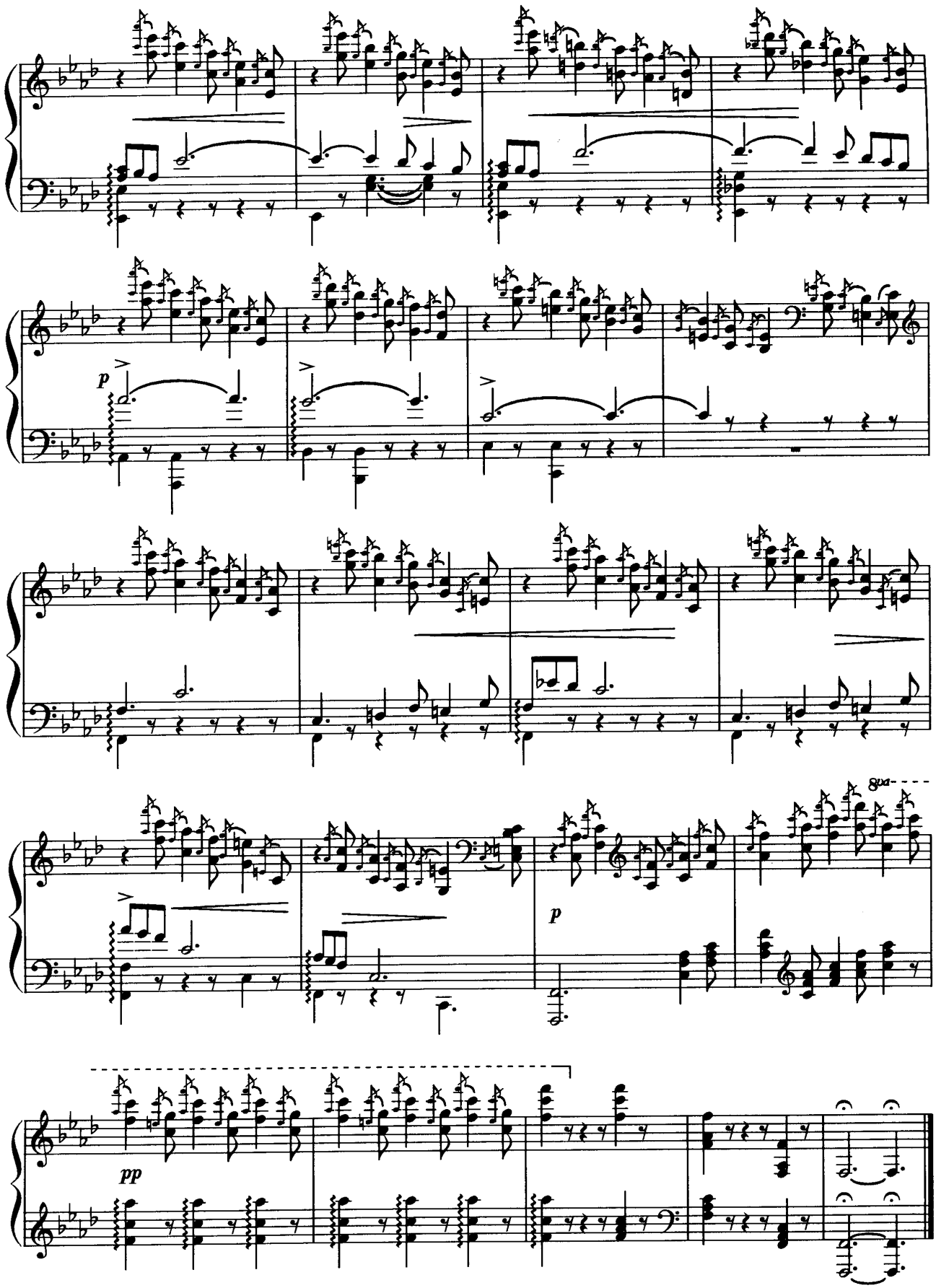
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