Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor

The Composer's Original Arrangement for Piano Four Hands

JOHANNES BRAHMS

INTRODUCTION BY
Ralph Neiweem and Claire Aebersold

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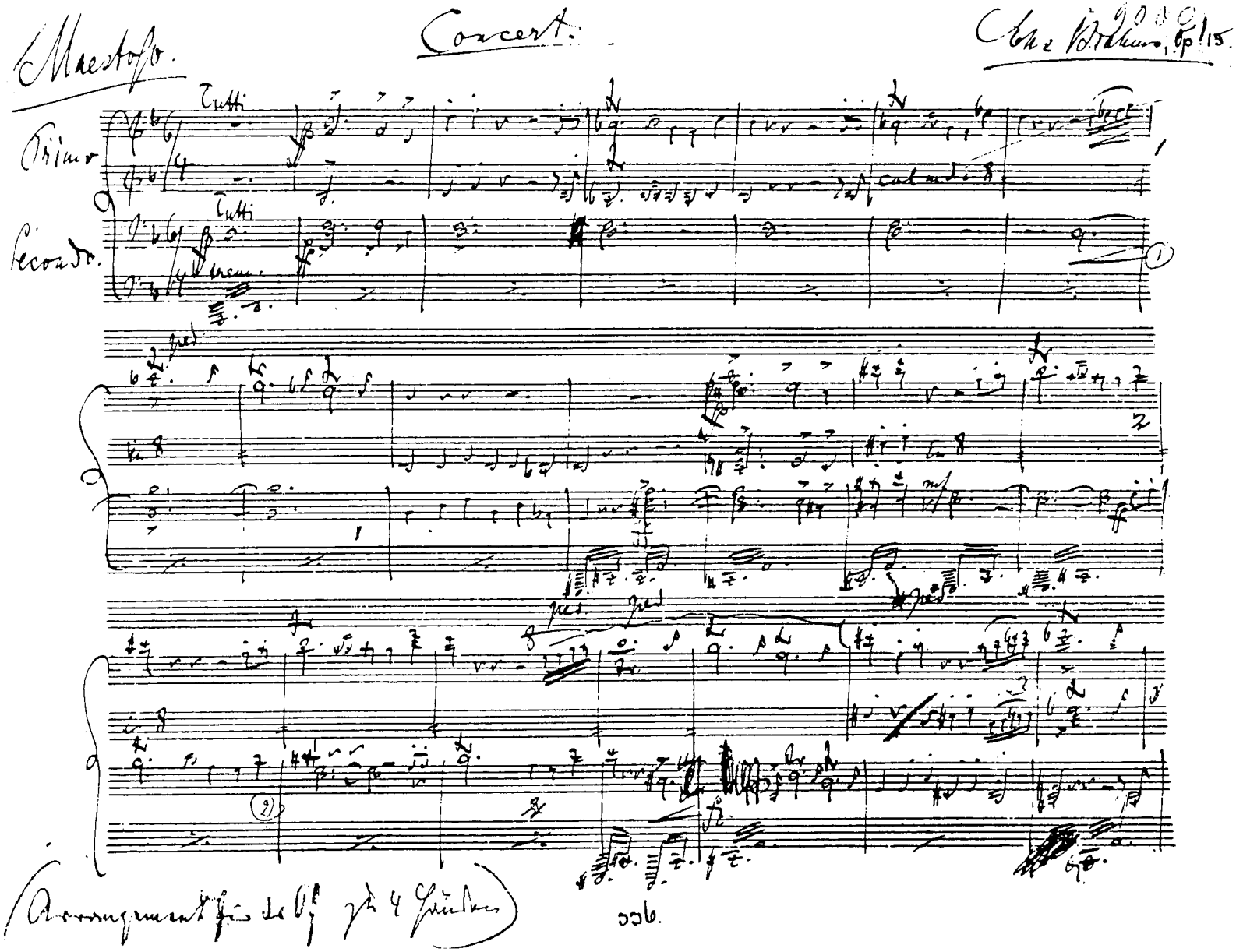

Brahms, Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15

The composer's original arrangement for piano four hands, 1864

Opening page of the holograph

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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GLOSSARY

The following Italian and German names, terms and abbreviations in this score refer to the original instrumentation of the concerto:

Bläser = woodwinds
col sord(ino) = muted
Fag(otto) = bassoon
Horn = French horn
Ob(oen) = oboes
Orch(ester) = orchestra
(to distinguish between solo and ensemble sonorities)
Pauke(n) = timpani
Pf = pianoforte
(to distinguish between solo and ensemble sonorities)
Tromp(eten) = trumpets
tutti = "all" (full orchestra)
Viol(inen) = violins

INTRODUCTION

THE JOHANNES BRAHMS four-hand arrangement of his Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15, represents the apex of the very specialized art of duet transcription. Along with Liszt, Brahms was the most prolific of all four-hand arrangers and perhaps understood the genre best of all. The existence of a one-piano four-hand version by Brahms himself of this great masterwork undoubtedly comes as a surprise to many, but it is, in fact, the final version of a work that had originated ten years earlier as a two-piano sonata. Its complex transition to finished form represents the single greatest struggle of the youthful, self-doubting Brahms of the "Hamburg" period. It is still astonishing for the modern listener to learn that this work, now such an icon of the concerto repertoire, caused its composer untold misery and received a disastrous debut, in 1859, nearly on a par with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* fiasco a half-century later!

By 1854, Brahms had composed three movements of the two-piano sonata, which he performed frequently with Clara Schumann. This work, now lost or discarded, first metamorphosed into an abandoned symphony, then later became the basis for two major compositions. The first movement evolved into the opening movement of the D-minor concerto; the second movement, a sarabande, served as material for the second section of *A German Requiem.*

Brahms composed the second movement of the concerto using material from an unfinished mass. (The manuscript as presented for inspection to Joseph Joachim contains the heading "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini," taken to be a reference to Schumann to whom Brahms occasionally referred as "mein Herr Domini.") By 1857 the concerto was finished, although not in its final revision. The composer expressed his anguish over the work in a letter to Clara Schumann during that year:

> I have been thinking about my first concerto lately. You cannot imagine what trouble it has given me; it is one botch from start to finish, and bears the hallmark of amateurishness. I am trying to get rid of this and to finish with the work for good.

Brahms gave the unofficial first performance, with Joachim conducting, in Hanover in January 1859; the official debut, under a different conductor, took place in Leipzig five days later. It was the worst failure of Brahms's career. Critics groped for negatives: ". . . hopeless desolation and aridity" . . . "shrillest dissonances and most unpleasant sounds . . ." Brahms himself wrote to Joachim: "There was only a little desultory applause which was immediately suppressed . . . yet the concerto will become popular when I have improved the construction of it."

Given the scarcity of materials left to examine, it is impossible to gauge the actual difference between the final published version and that of the premiere. The solo and orchestral parts were published in 1861 and 1862, respectively, the piano duet version in 1864, and the full orchestral score, strangely enough, not until 1873.

THE PIANO FOUR-HAND ARRANGEMENT

Although there is no precedent for a duet transcription of a piano concerto by the original composer, in the nineteenth century piano-duet arrangements of large-scale symphonic and chamber works, intended for home study and family enjoyment, were fairly routine. These arrangements generally clump into two types: transcriptions by journeyman arrangers for consumption by the amateur public, and arrangements executed by the original composers, often for similar purposes but also as a means to disseminate music to professional musicians and colleagues. This latter type of arrangement—particularly by a composer who was himself a pianist (such as Brahms, Mendelssohn and Liszt)—is particularly worthy of study and has found a niche in the performance repertoire of today's four-hand piano duos.

Brahms arranged an assortment of works for piano four hands and two pianos. Two of these were assigned opus numbers by the composer: the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* for two pianos, Op. 56b, and the Sonata for Two Pianos, Op. 34b (a transcription of the Piano Quintet, Op. 34). His other four-hand arrangements, whether for two pianos or piano four hands, were published without independent opus numbers. These include his string quartets, several symphonic works, and *A German Requiem* in a version for piano duet and chorus, as well as the D-minor concerto transcription. Performance of these arrangements is particularly tempting for today's players as we know that Brahms played them in private concerts with

Clara Schumann and others, and made no concession to the more limited abilities of amateurs.

Of all these arrangements the duet transcription of the Piano Concerto No. 1 is of the greatest interest in that it is not only a curiosity but has such firmly pianistic roots both as a solo concerto and as an abandoned two-piano sonata. In 1864 the transcription appeared, quite unbidden and as a complete surprise, at Brahms's Swiss publisher of the period, Rieter-Biedermann. Paul Badura-Skoda points out, in his introduction to Eulenberg's miniature orchestral score of the D-minor concerto, that Brahms's four-hand arrangement is the most carefully wrought of all published versions, and should be consulted regarding details of expression and dynamics. Furthermore, this version contains a number of small changes in actual notes, ties, rhythms, etc., that differ enough from the standard version that it may be regarded as a revision. A side-by-side comparison with the composer's autograph reveals Rieter-Biedermann's care. The only discrepancy of major significance occurs on page 65, system 5, measure 3, where the autograph gives the familiar *f#-g-a* in the *primo* melody, as opposed to Rieter-Biedermann's *f#-e-a*. (The second eighth-note chord should read *g-e-g*.)

Brahms's care over this version is borne out in a letter to his publisher dated February 11, 1864:

> I think I can pride myself on having made it practical and playable . . . the arrangement in question is meant to be performed and not, as is the current fashion, sight-read.

He further comments, rather contradictorily, that ". . . it does not look well for a composer to manufacture an unwieldy thing out of his own work which a concerto for 4 hands must necessarily be!" requesting that, following the norm of the period, it be published as an unsigned arrangement. The manuscript, nonetheless (see our frontispiece), bears the composer's prominent signature.

The manner in which Brahms turned this "unwieldy thing," this monument for piano and large orchestra, into a "practical and playable" work for the intimate genre of the piano duet is, of course, a matter of some curiosity.

- Generally speaking, all solo sections without orchestra, or with light orchestral accompaniment, are presented note-for-note, with the parts divided equally between *primo* and *secondo*, often creatively distributed.
- Accompanimental lines are shared at times in a give-and-take manner between the right hand of the *secondo* and the left hand of the *primo*. (For an example of this, see p. 8, system 2, m. 6; and p. 9, system 2, m. 6.)
- The brief cadenzas in the second and third movements are given substantially to the *primo* player, with bass support from the *secondo* (note that the trills in the second-movement cadenza are divided between the players—a real ensemble challenge!).
- The question of pedaling naturally arises when confronting a duet work. The sparse pedal indications are Brahms's own. The lengthy pedal mark at the beginning produces a thick sonority, and clearly indicates the composer's desire for a massive sound. In view of the subsequent absence of pedal marks, this may also be taken to indicate a general suggestion for pedaling—that is, more generous than otherwise, particularly in similarly dense textures.
- The *tutti* gain enormously from the availability of twenty fingers, as one can quickly ascertain from comparison with Emil von Sauer's standard orchestral reduction in traditional two-piano editions. Brahms seems to have had a field day here, imbuing many orchestral passages, particularly in the finale, with an idiomatic complexity and coloring that remains completely true to the original.
- The passages of real interest are those in which soloist and orchestra are playing together with full intensity. Here one might fear a letdown; yet Brahms manages to condense the thunderous ending to the first movement, for example—with its torrent of top-to-bottom arpeggios for the soloist and stentorian melody for the orchestra—in a manner that leaves nothing out except octave doublings, enabling the players to be completely involved in projecting the emotional excitement of the moment. Brahms achieves his results in these sections by emphasizing contrapuntal clarity and complexity over harmonic coloration.

Those who are familiar with Brahms's four-hand writing will also know that he is as idiomatic a writer for piano duet as ever lived. This extraordinary arrangement of the D-minor concerto proves to be no exception, and may well be the *magnum opus* of its type.

Ralph Neiweem and Claire Aebersold
Chicago, 1996

The husband-and-wife piano duo of Claire Aebersold and Ralph Neiweem enjoy an international career as exponents of music for two keyboard players. Their extensive repertoire of both original and transcribed works for piano four hands has been documented in a series of twenty live radio broadcasts for WFMT Radio in Chicago. Their many publications include major articles for *Clavier* magazine, and they regularly give master classes at music schools and universities. Ms. Aebersold is a graduate of the New England Conservatory, and Mr. Neiweem of The Juilliard School.

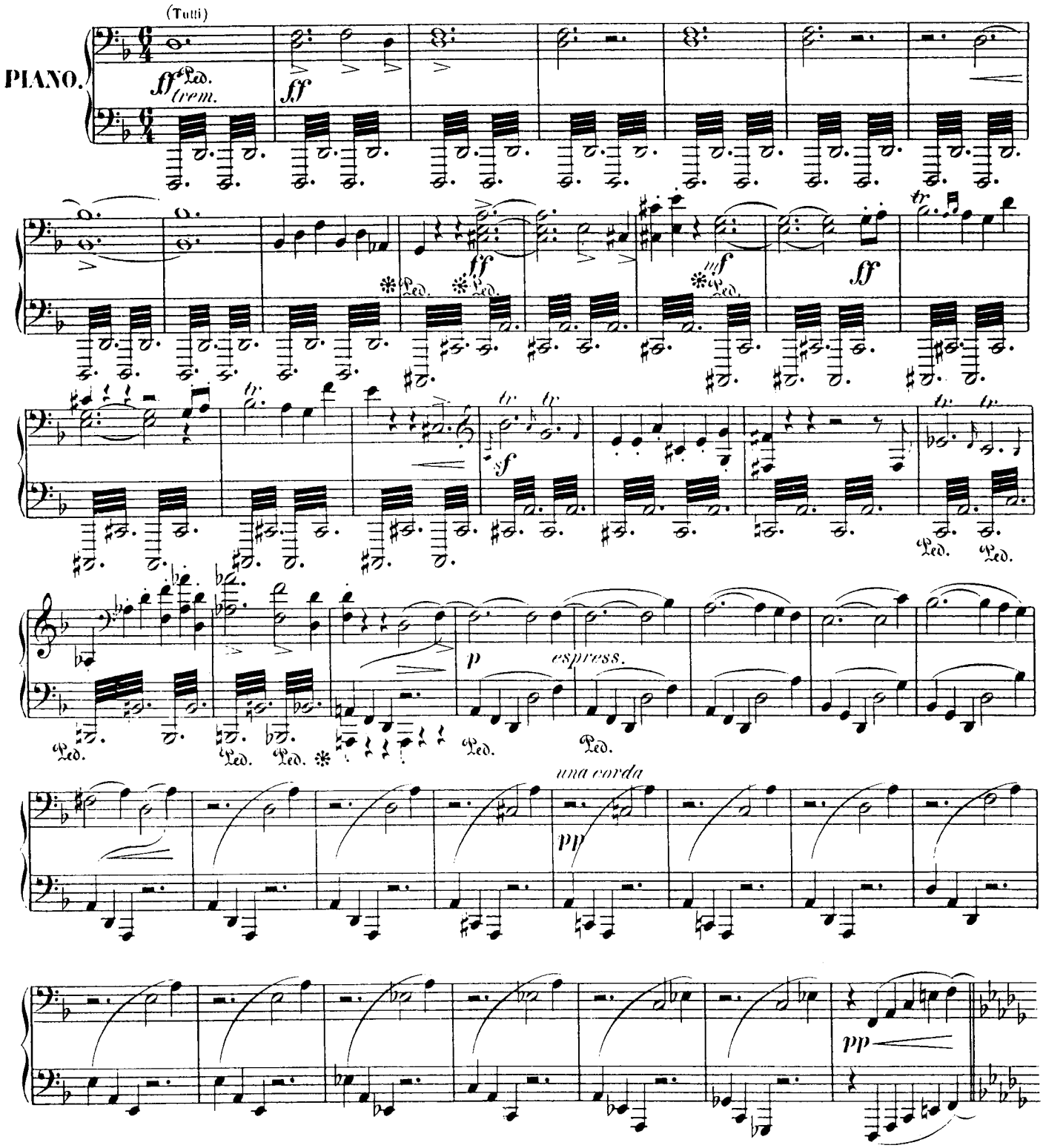
Aebersold and Neiweem released the first compact disc recording of the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1 transcription in 1995 on the Summit label.

Piano Concerto No. 1
in D Minor

I.

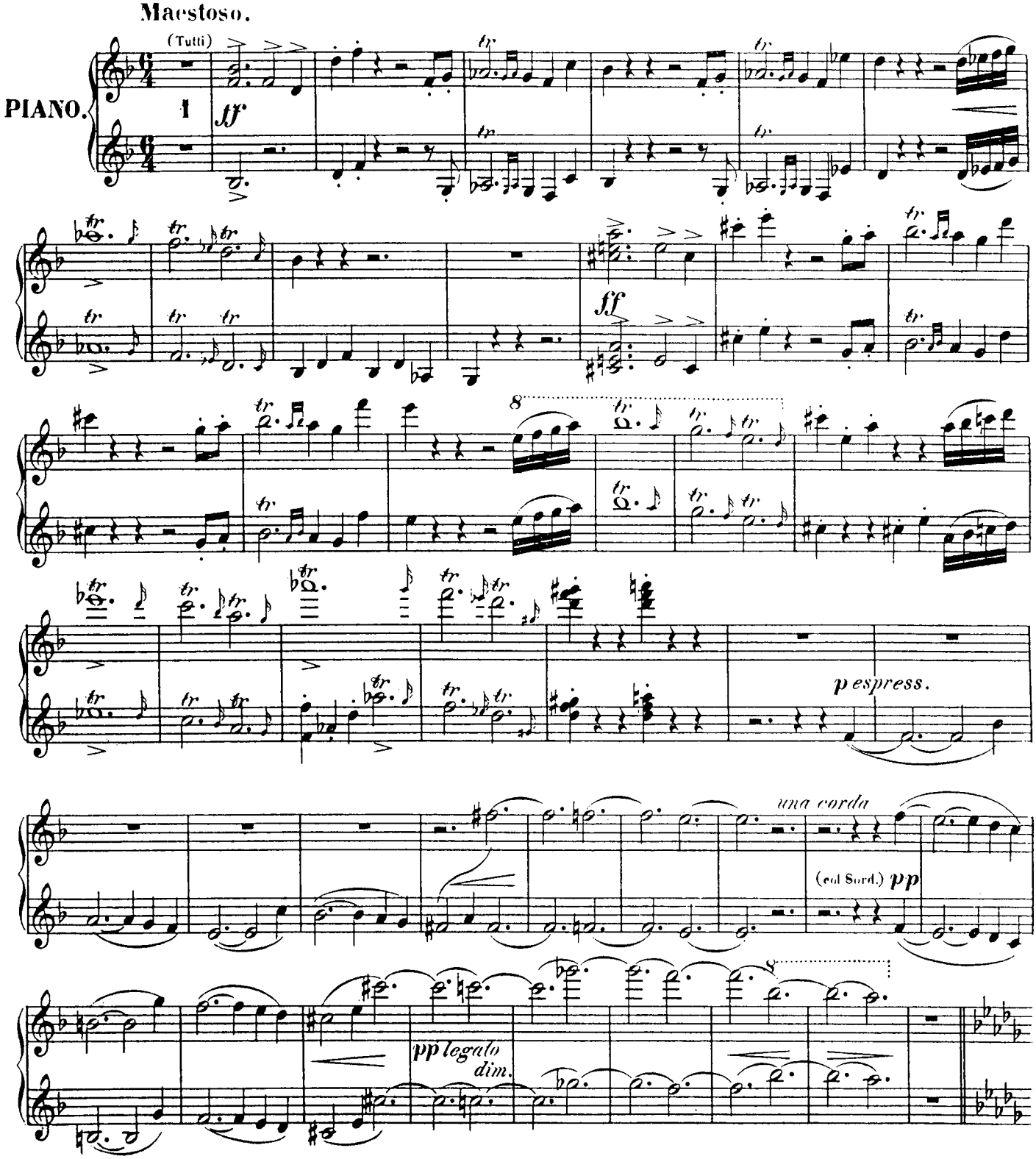
Secondo.

Maestoso.

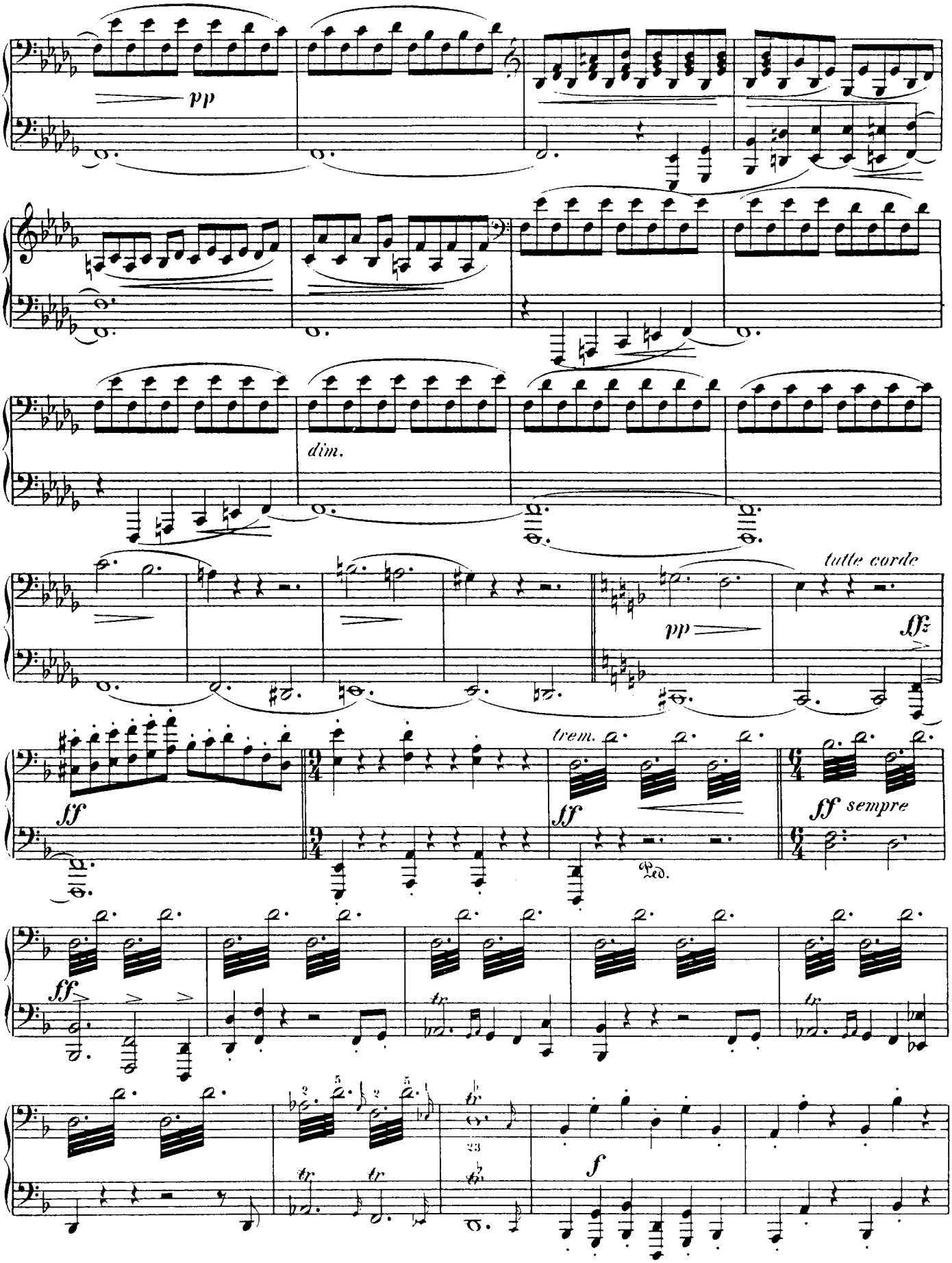


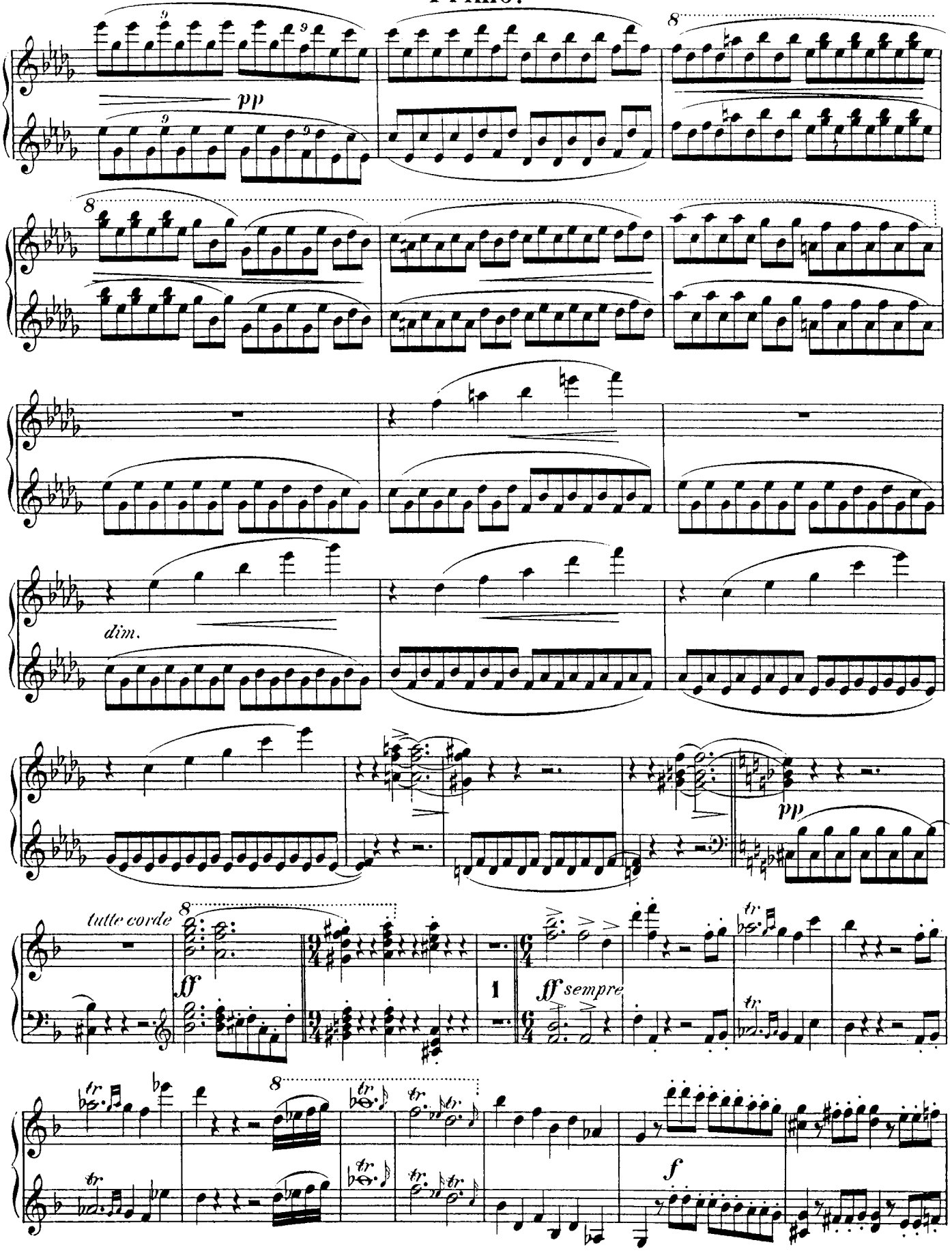
I.

Primo.

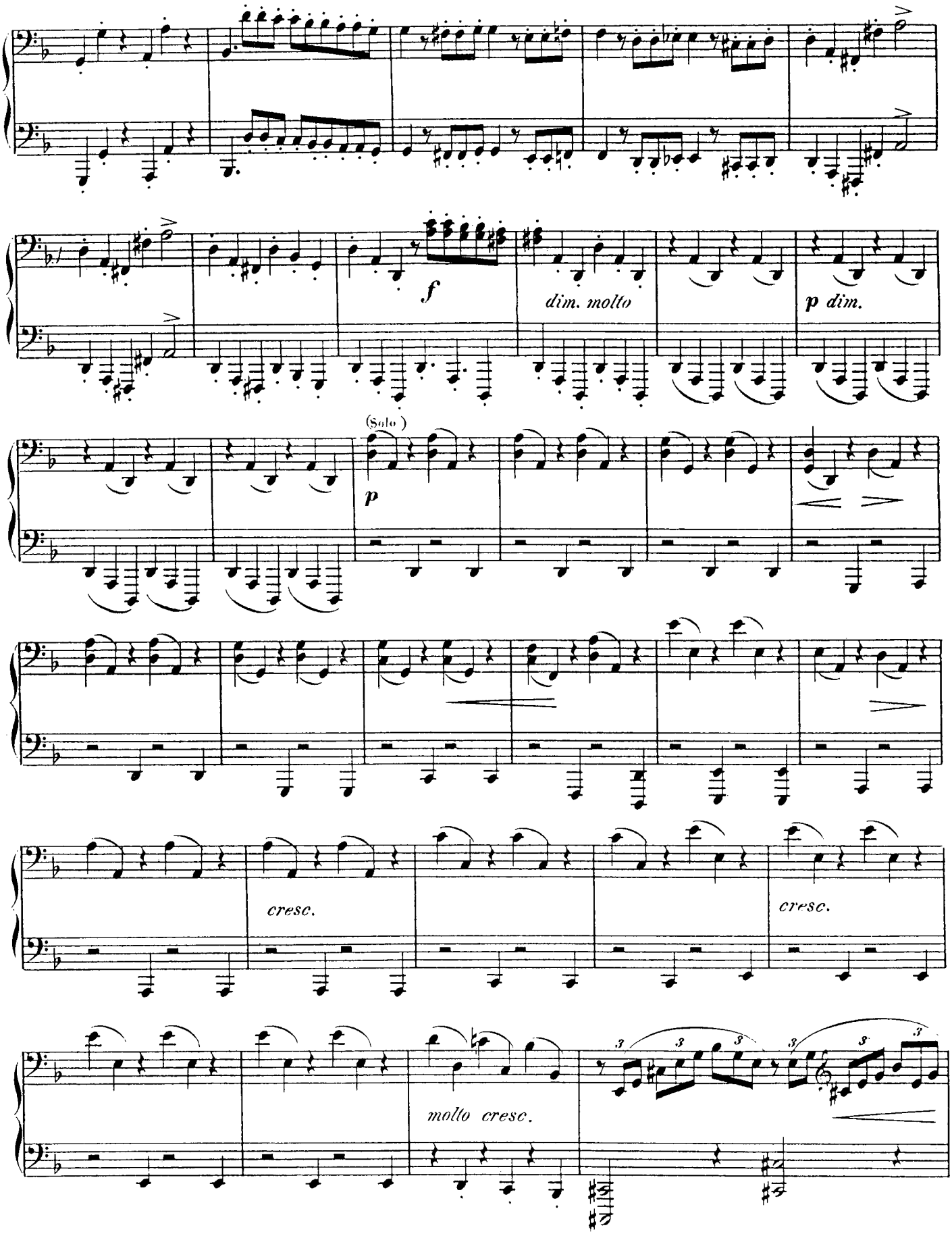

Maestoso.
(Tutti)
PIANO.
ff
ff
p espress.
una corda
(col Sord.) pp
pp legato
dim.

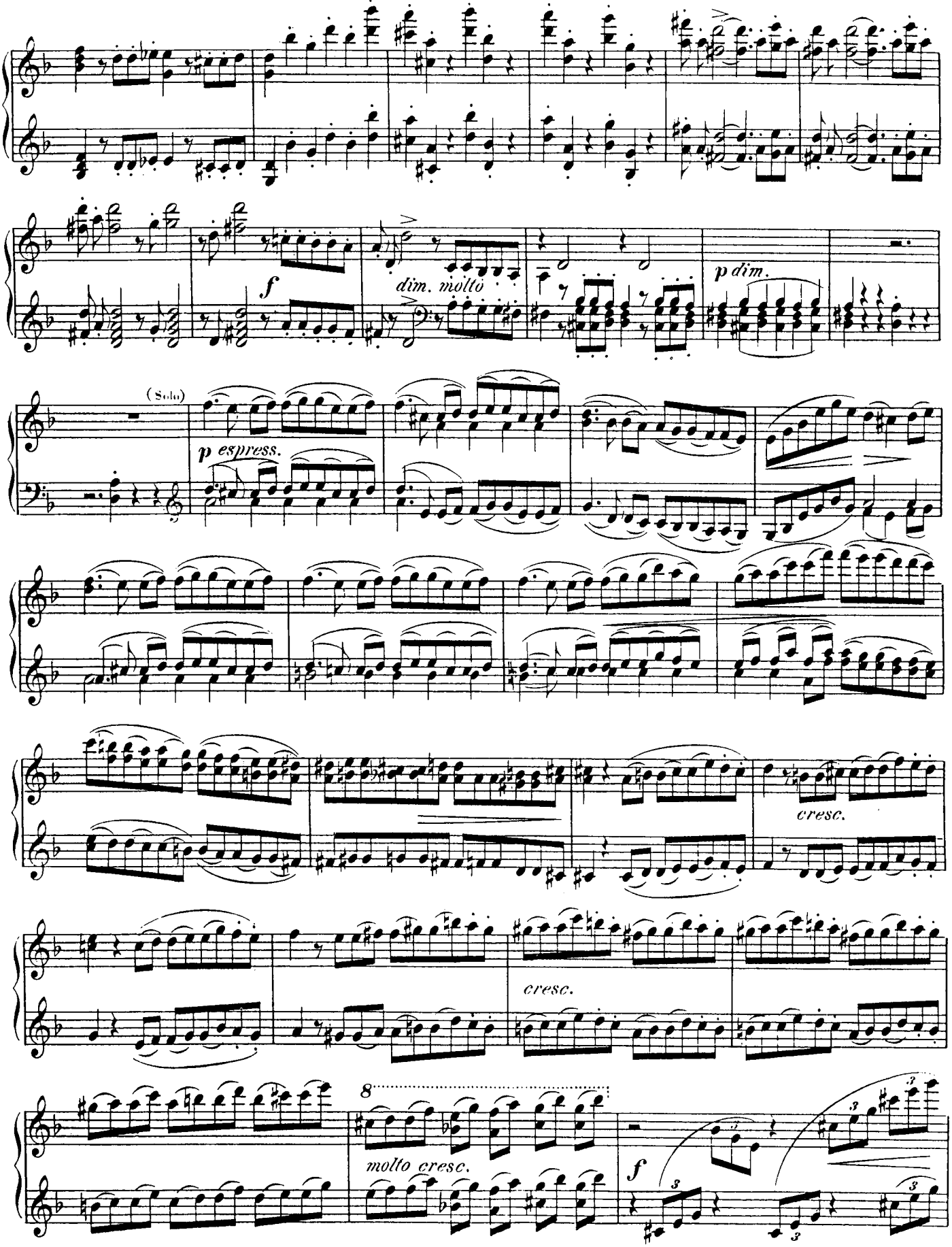
Secondo.


pp
dim.
tutte corde
pp
fff
ff
trem.
ff
ff sempre
Ped.
ff
tr
tr
tr
tr
tr
23
f

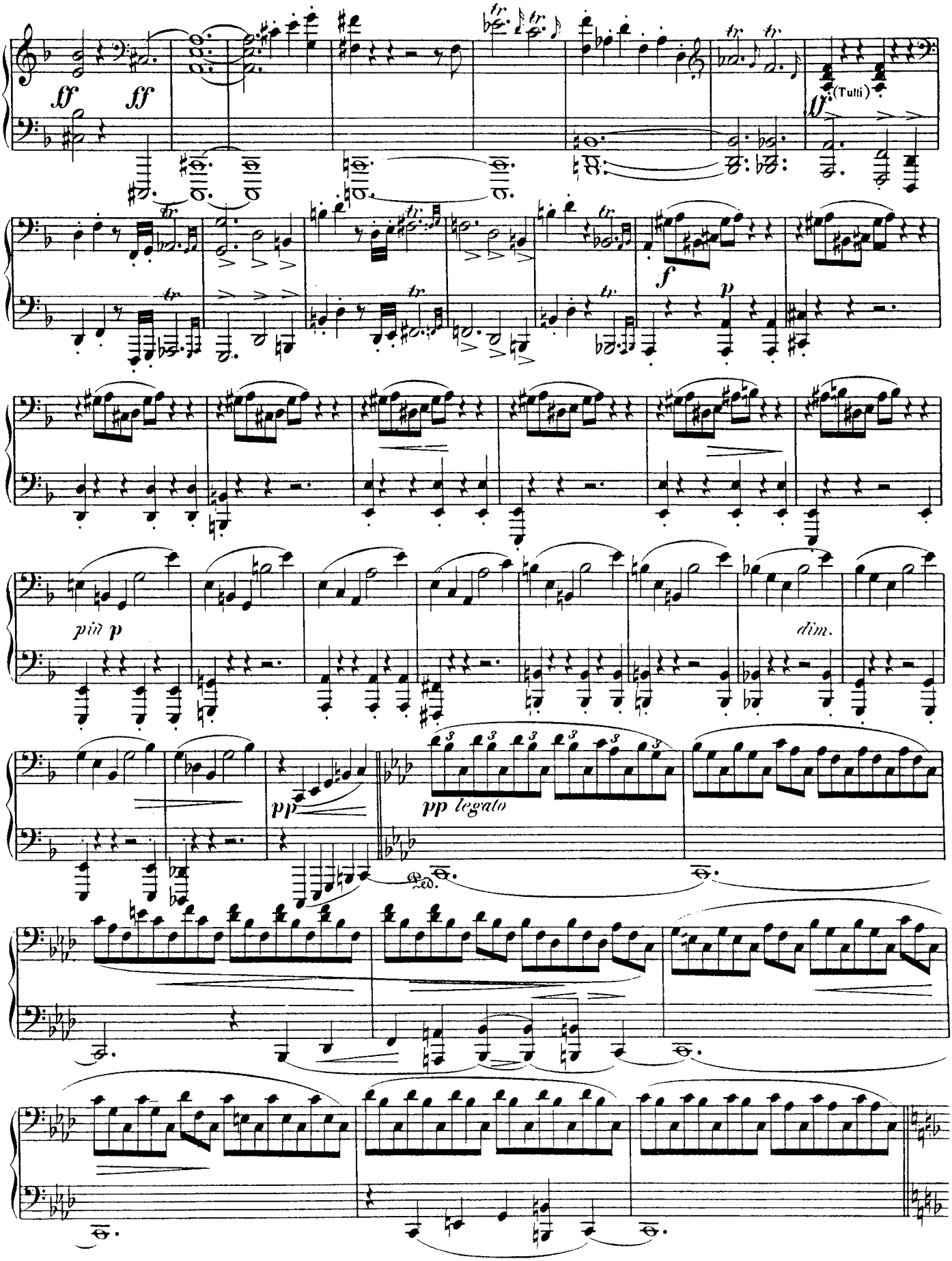

pp
dim.
pp
tutte corde
ff
1
ff sempre
f

Secondo.

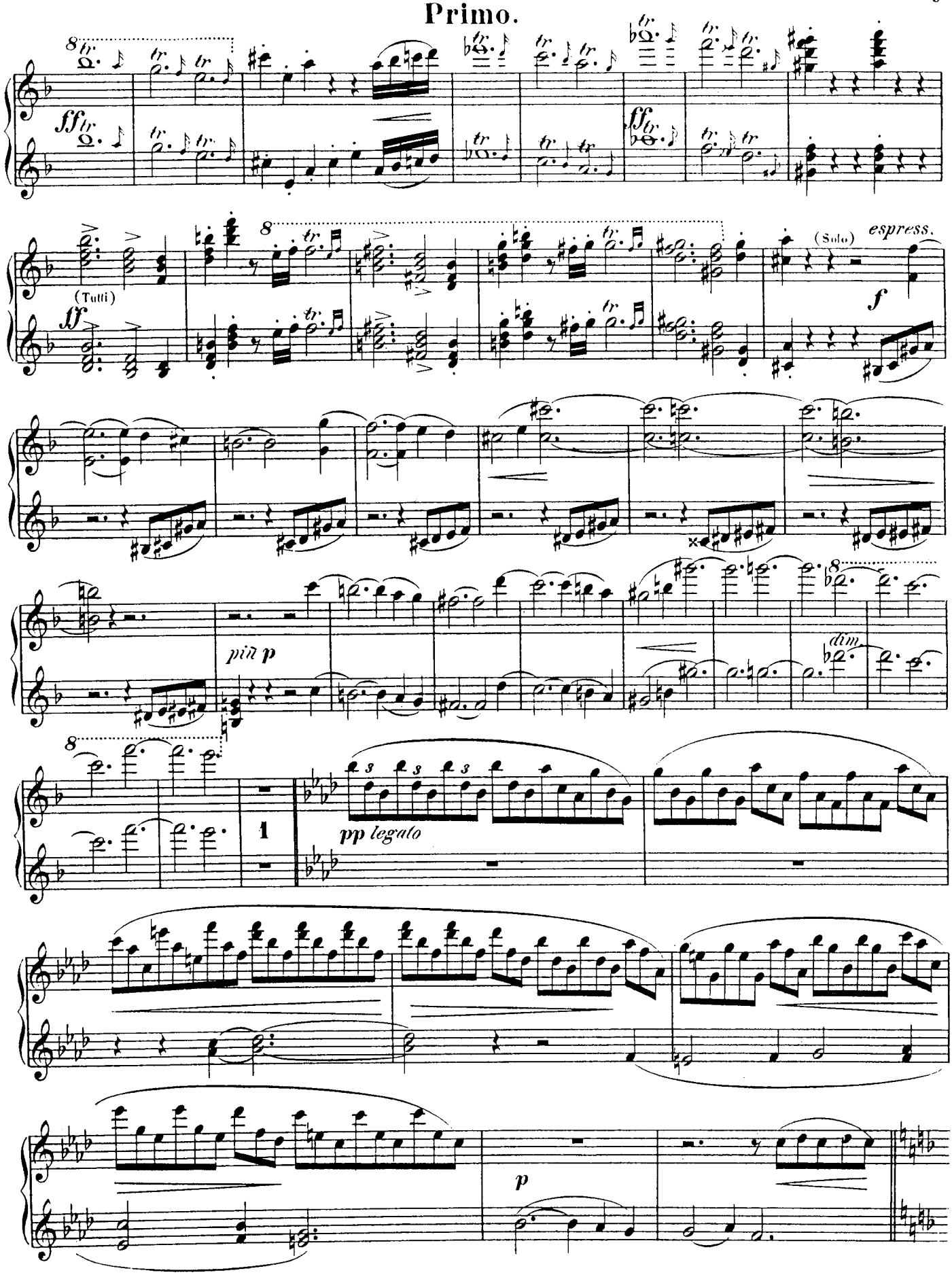



f
dim. molto
p dim.
(Solo)
p espress.
cresc.
cresc.
8
molto cresc.
f

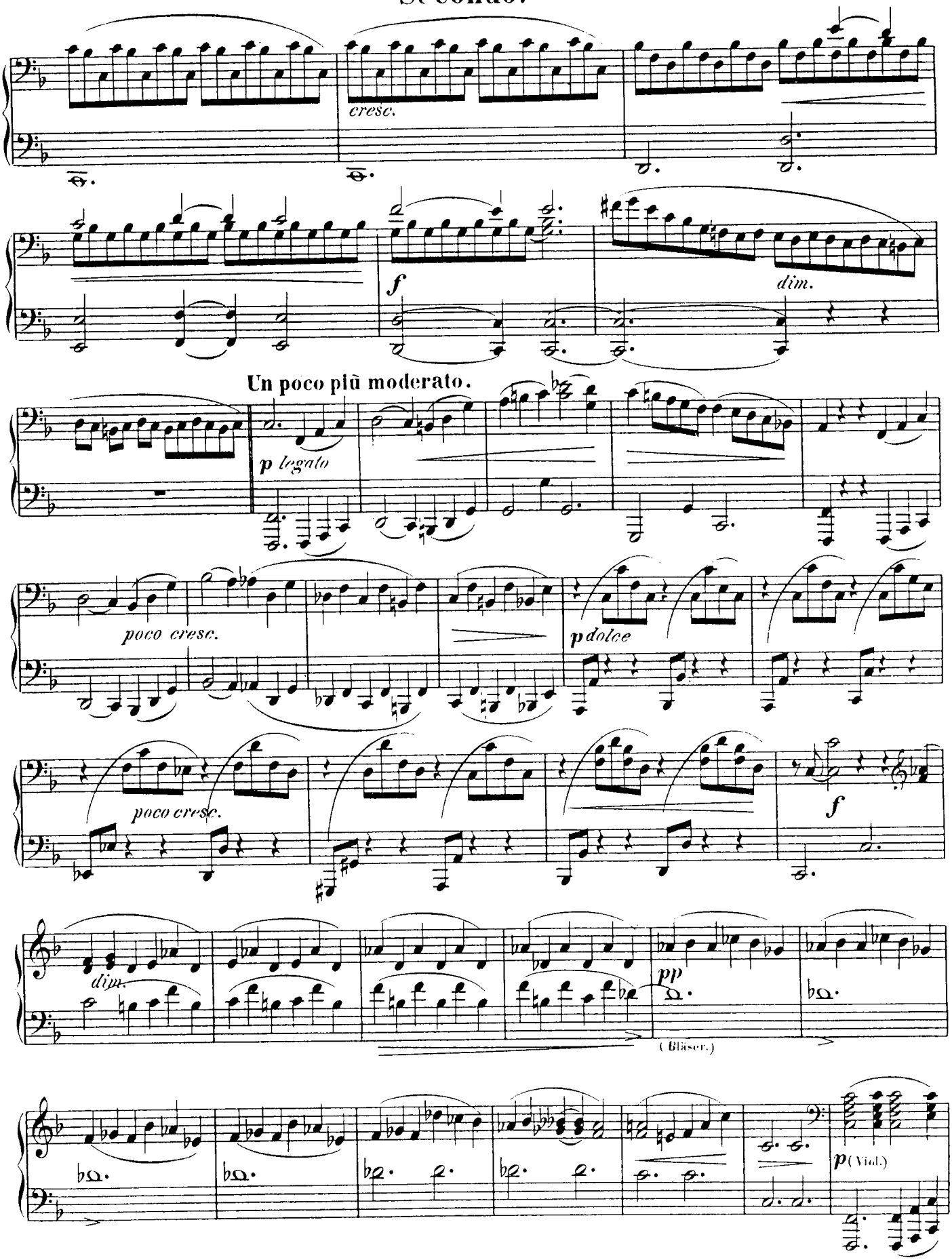
Secondo.



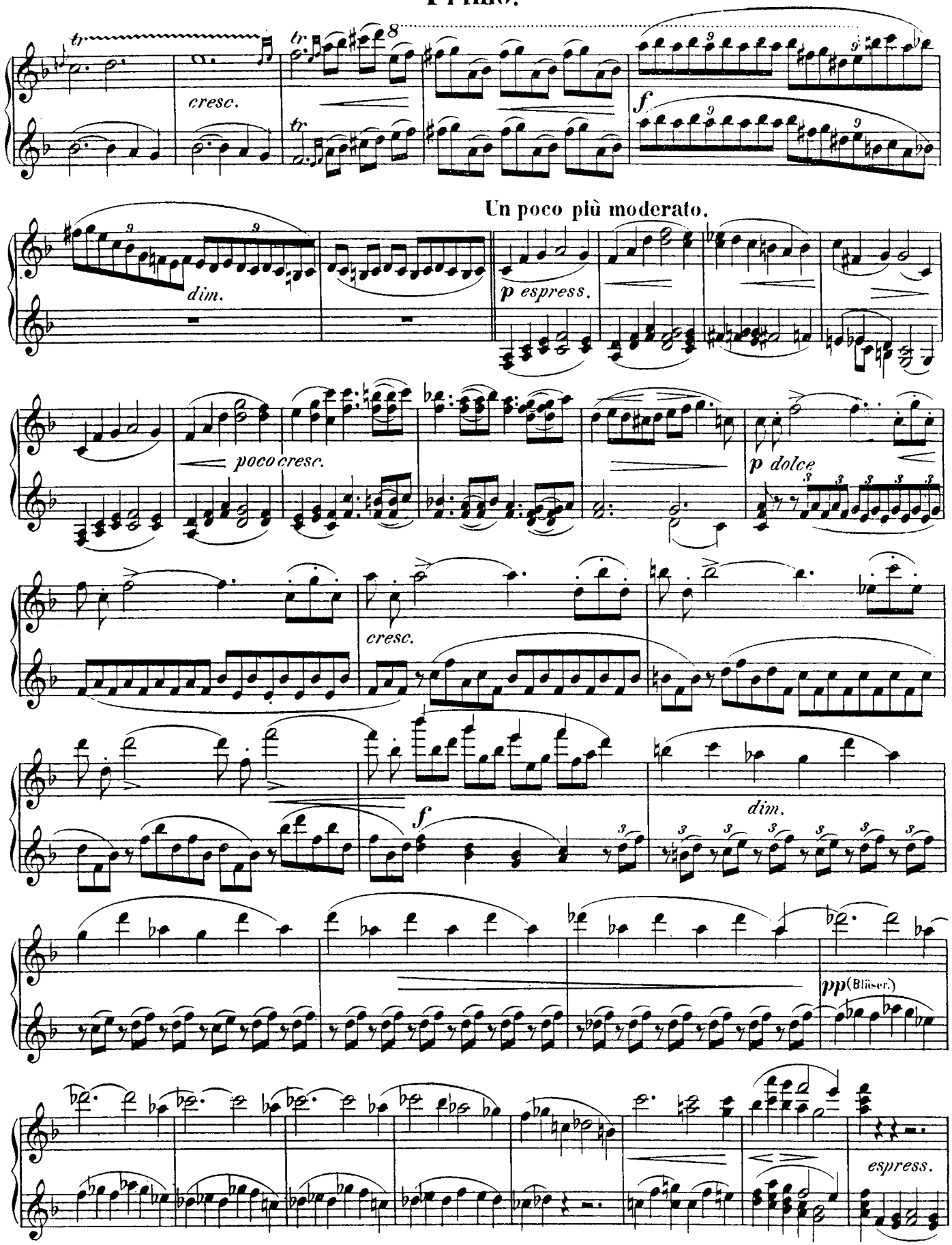
Primo.



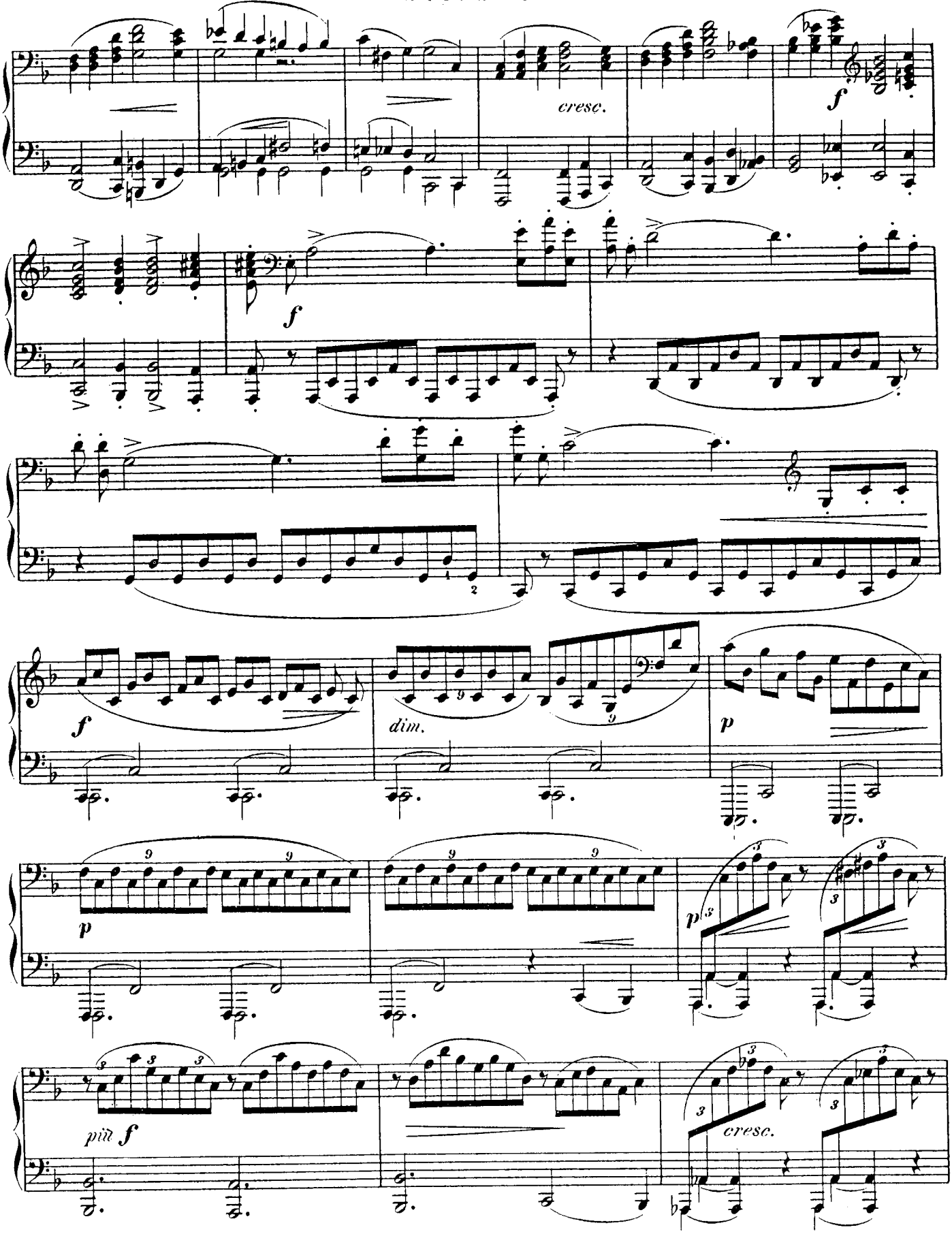
Secondo.


cresc.
f
dim.
Un poco più moderato.
p legato
poco cresc.
p dolce
poco cresc.
f
dim.
pp
(Bläser.)
p (Viol.)

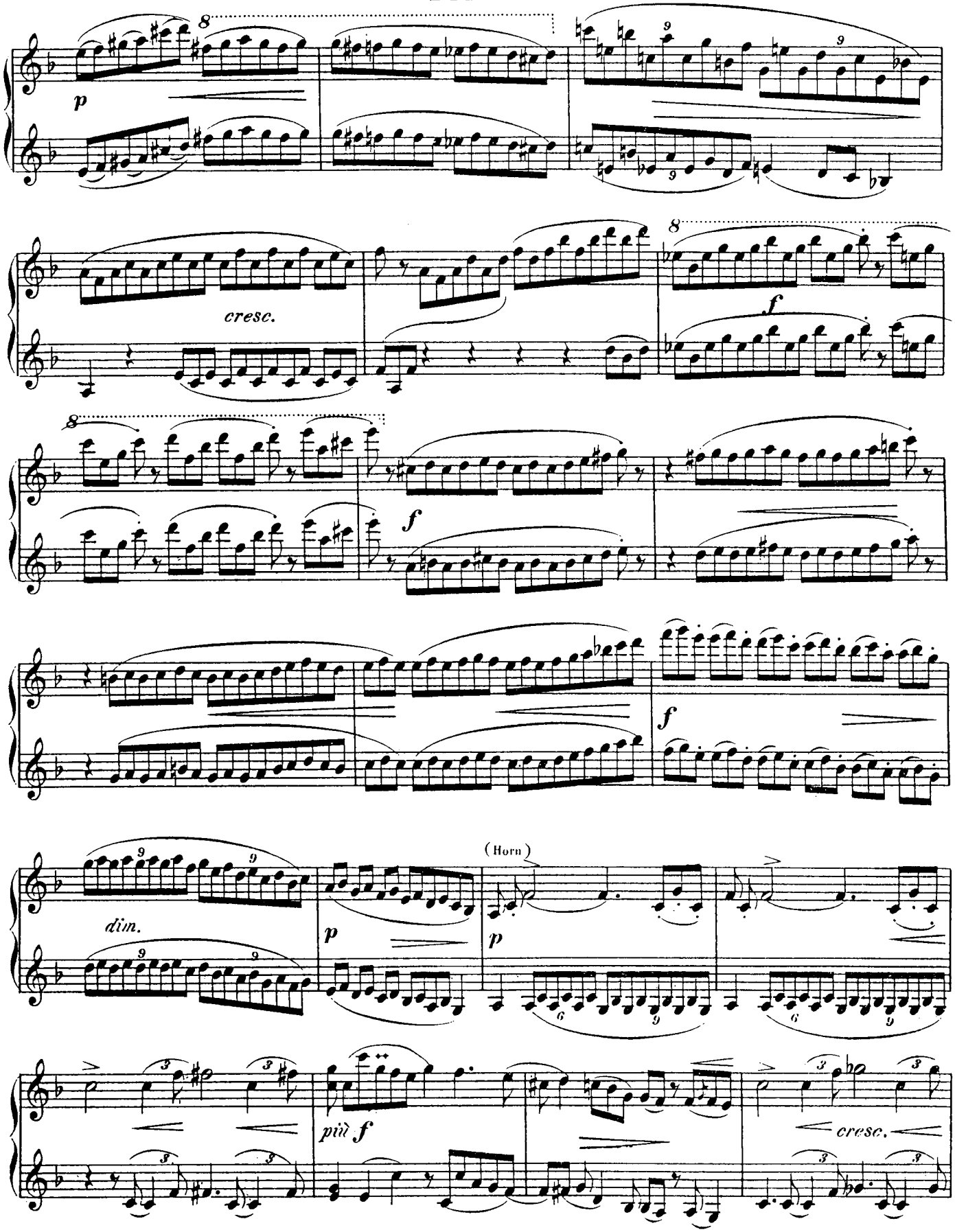
Primo.


cresc.
f
Un poco più moderato.
dim.
p espress.
poco cresc.
p dolce
cresc.
f
dim.
pp (Blüser.)
espress.

Secondo.



Primo.



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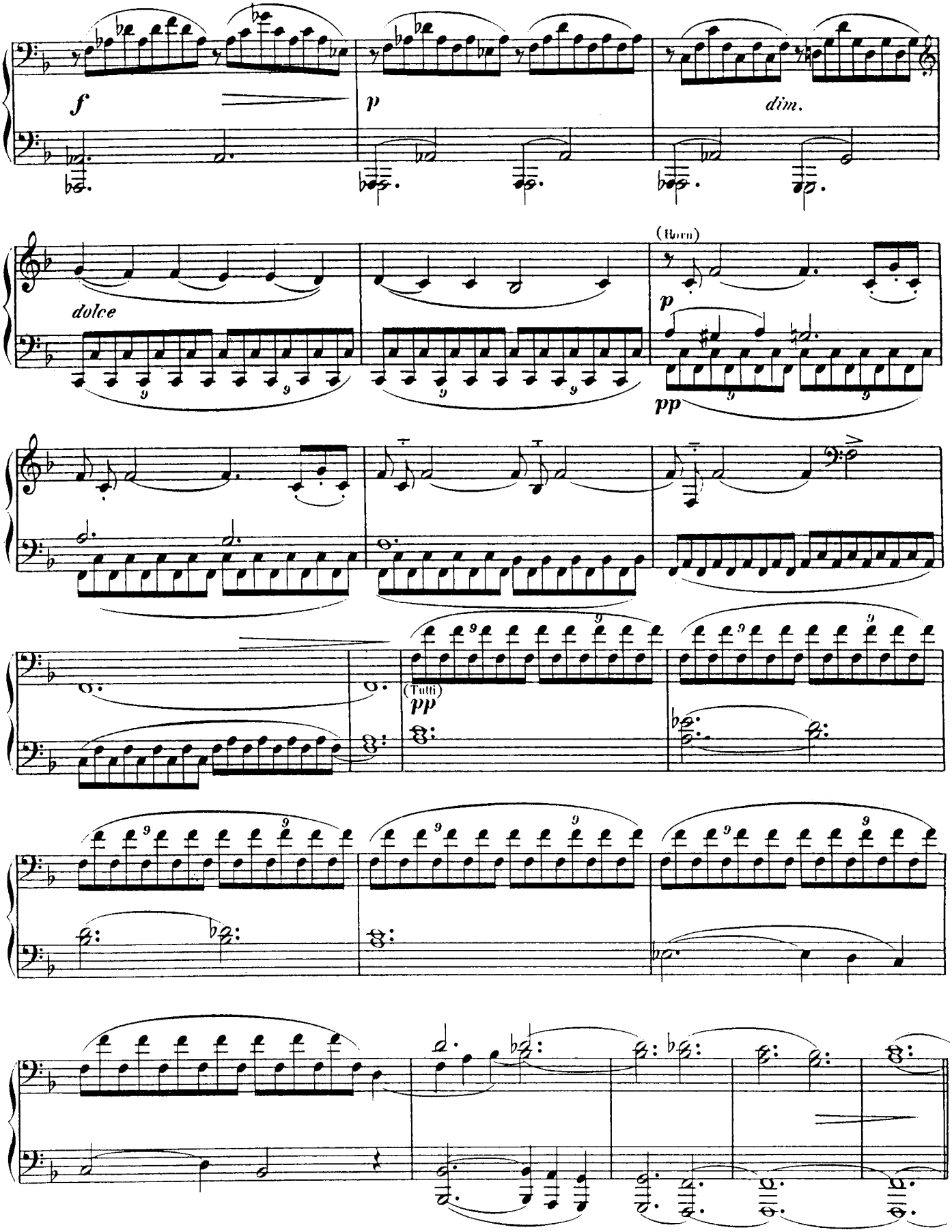
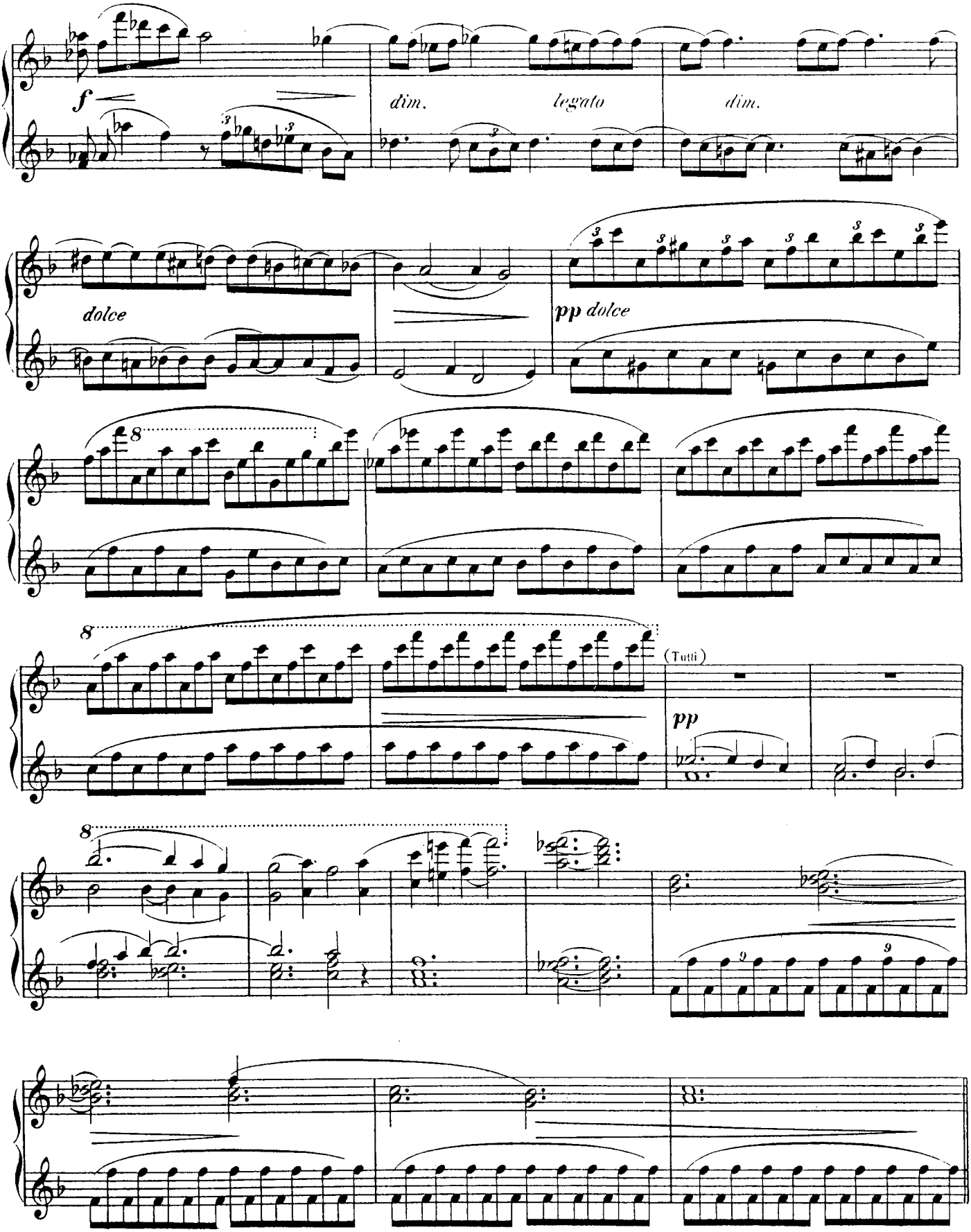
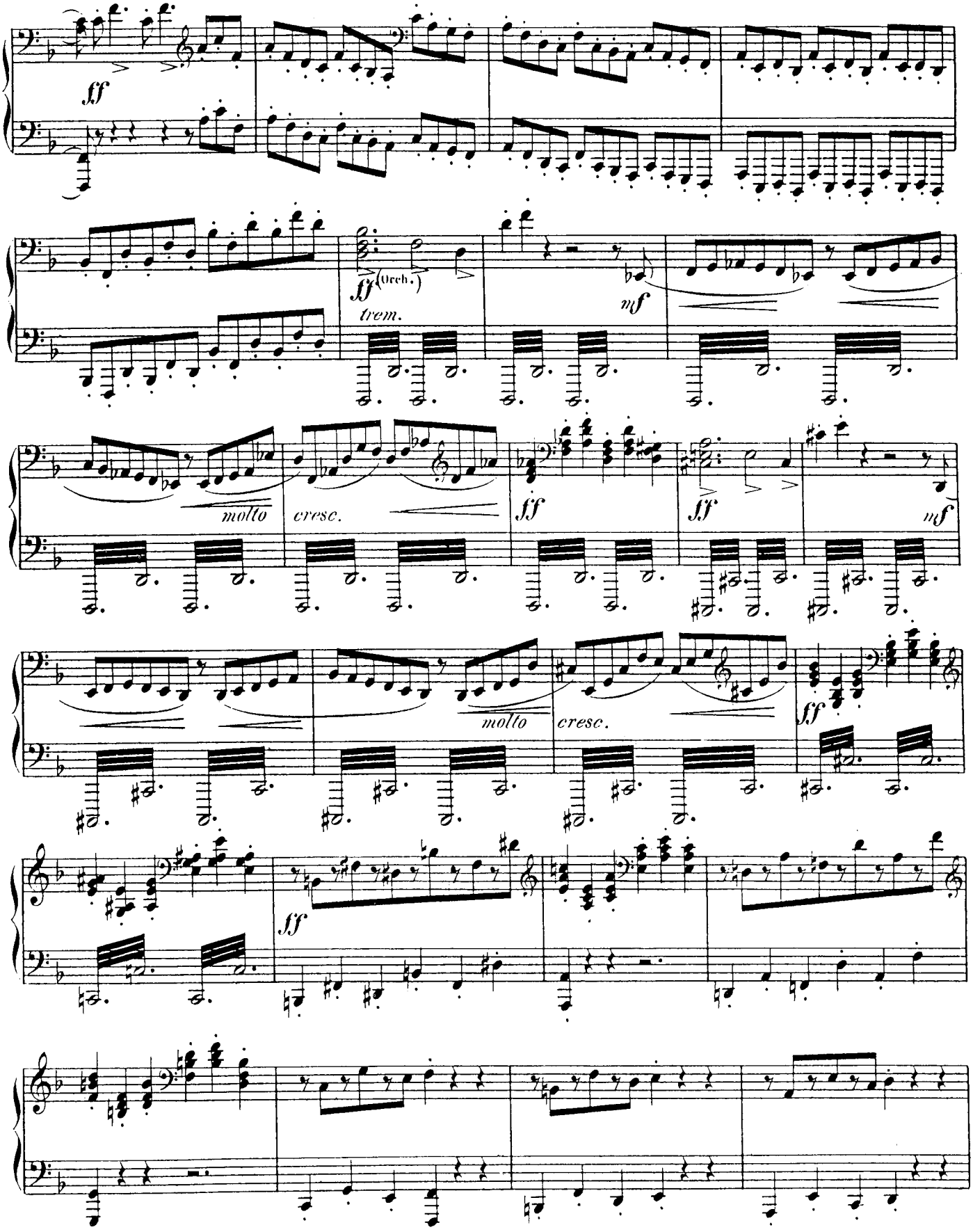


Primo.



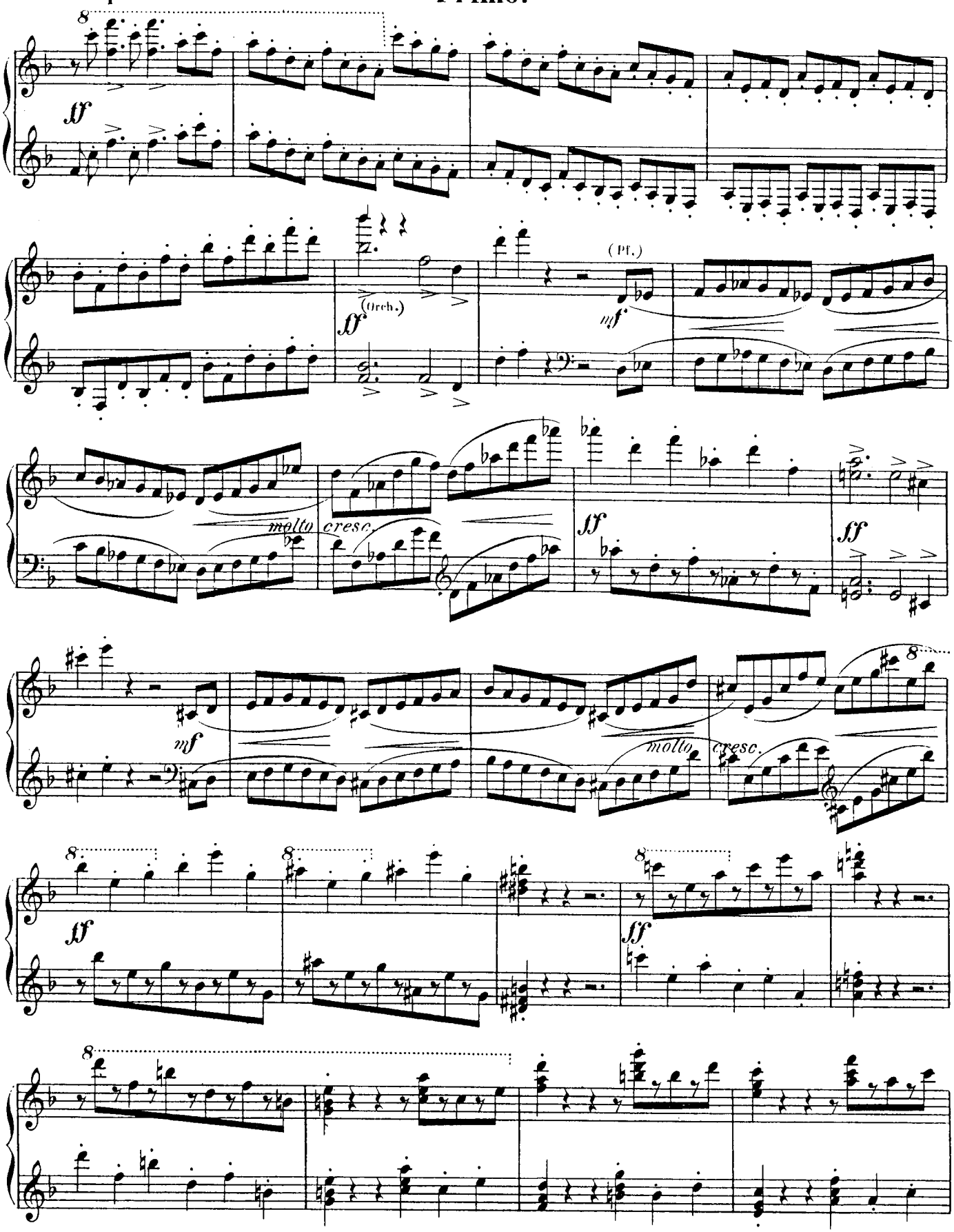
Secondo.

Tempo I.



Tempo I.

Primo.



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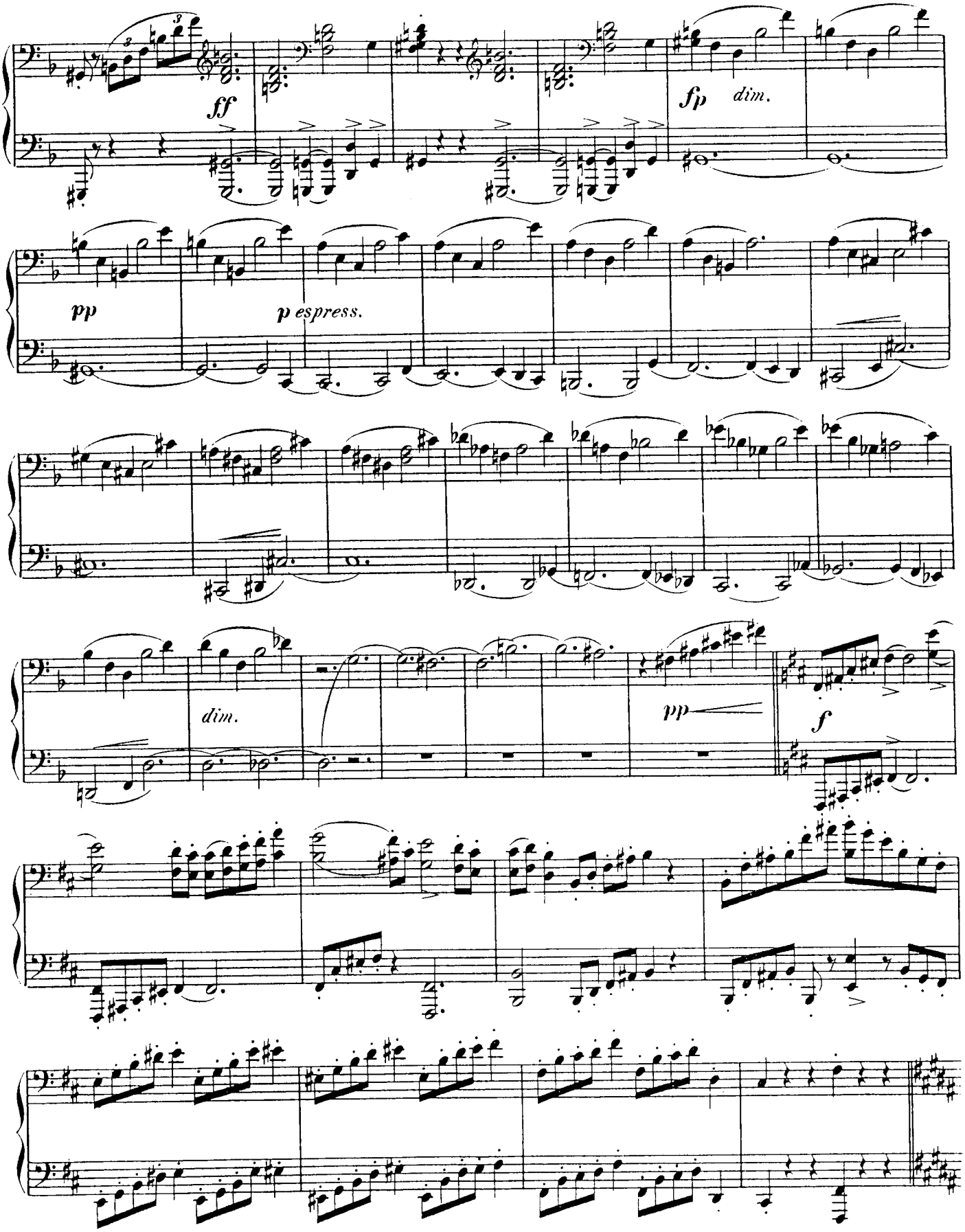
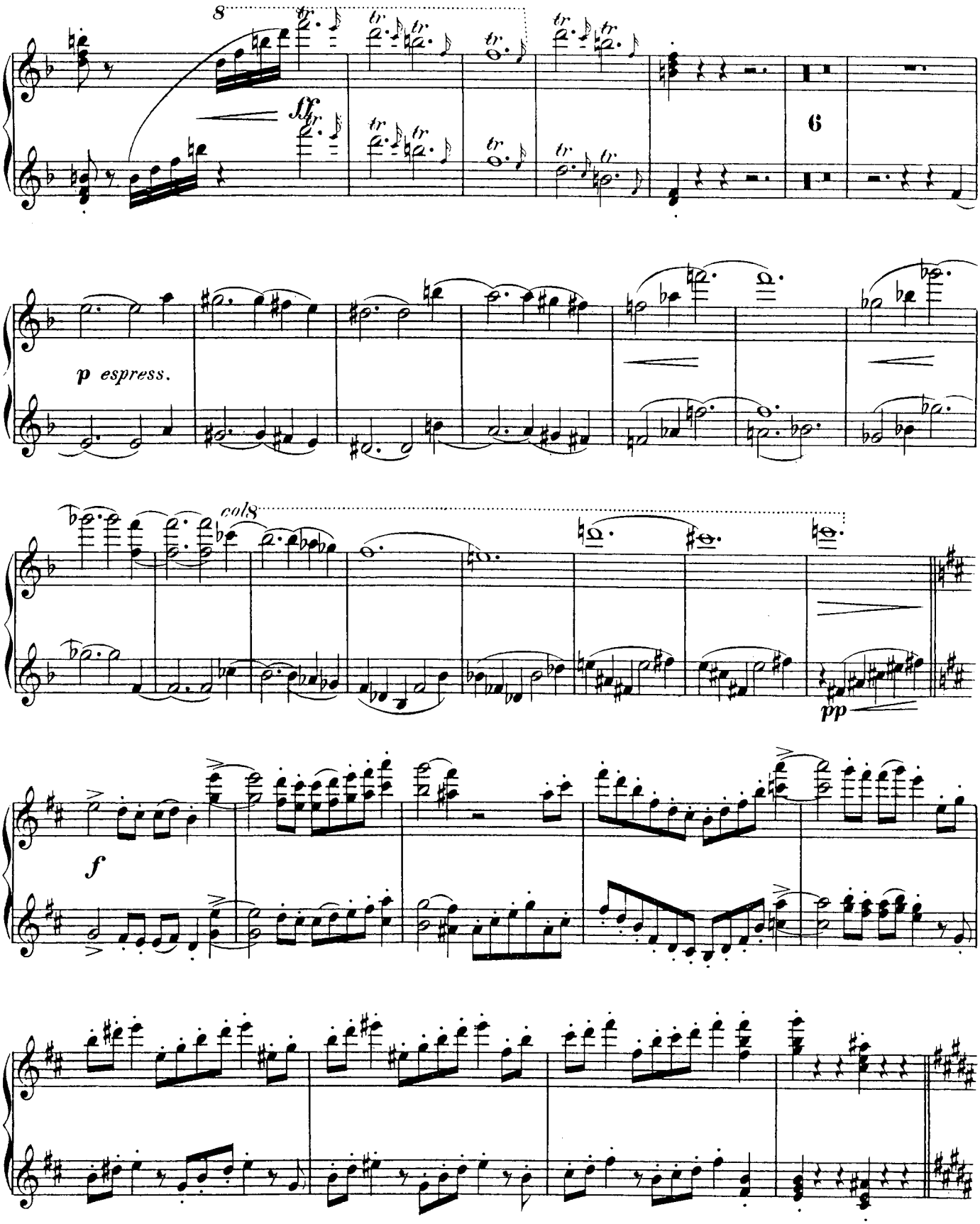


Primo.



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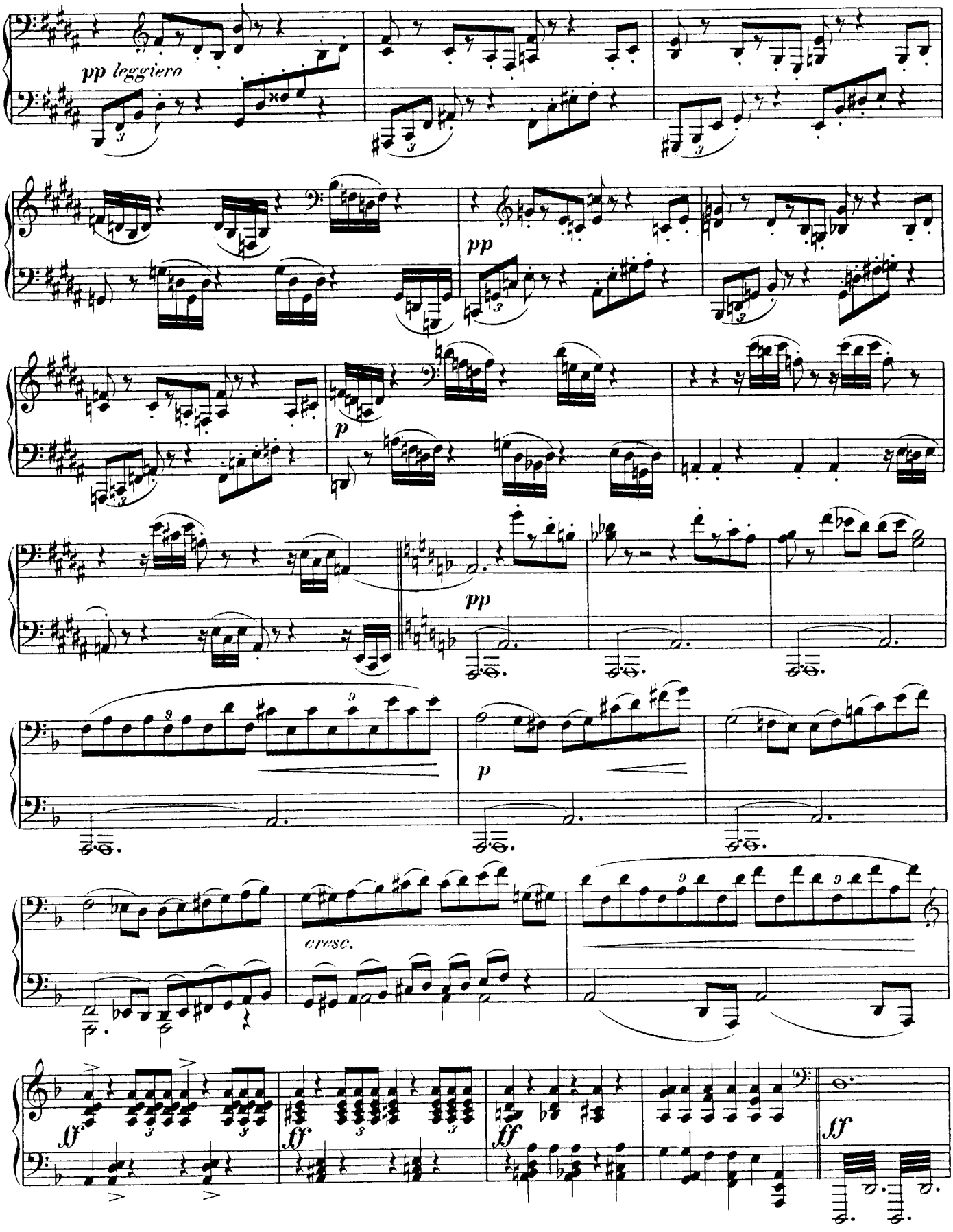
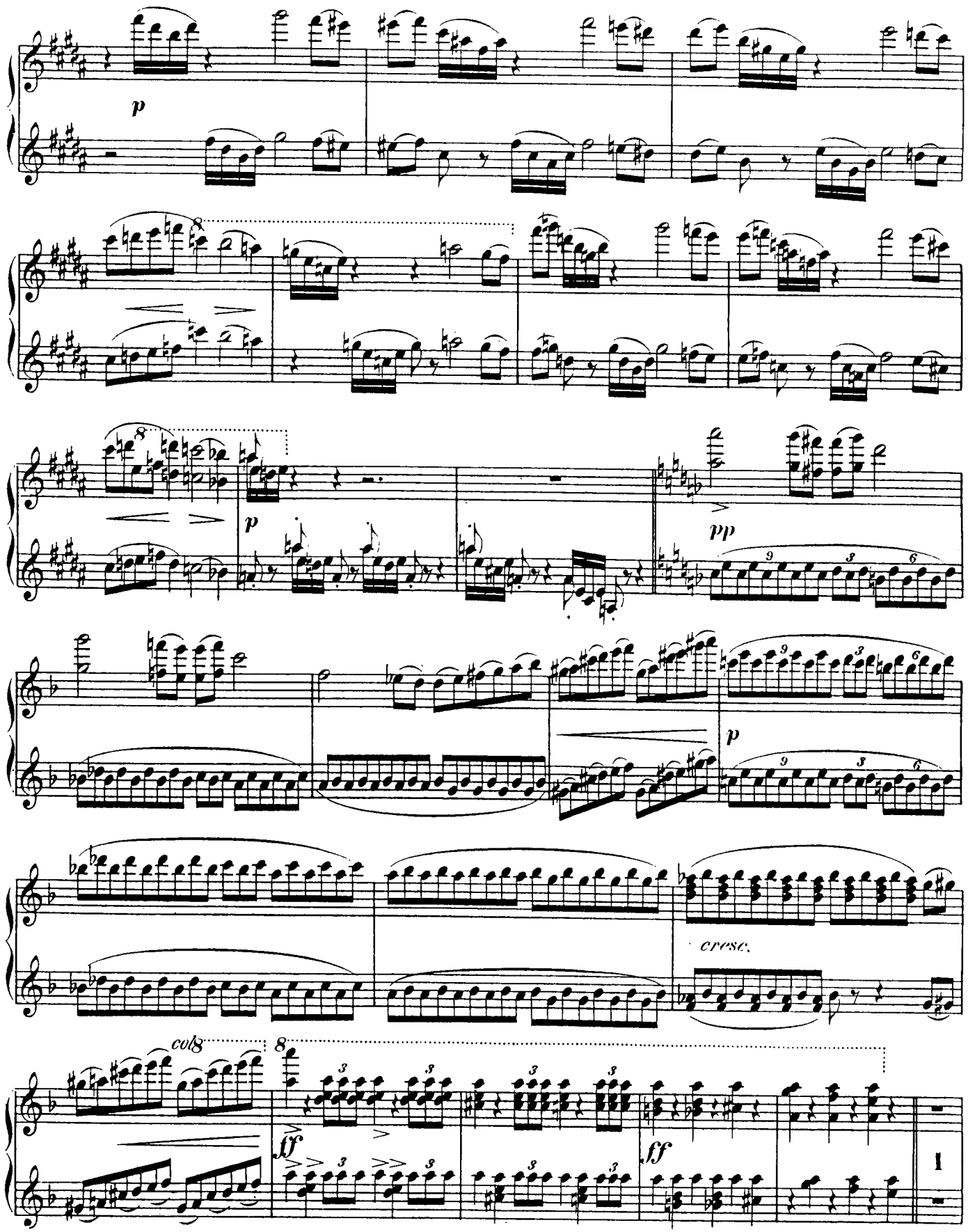
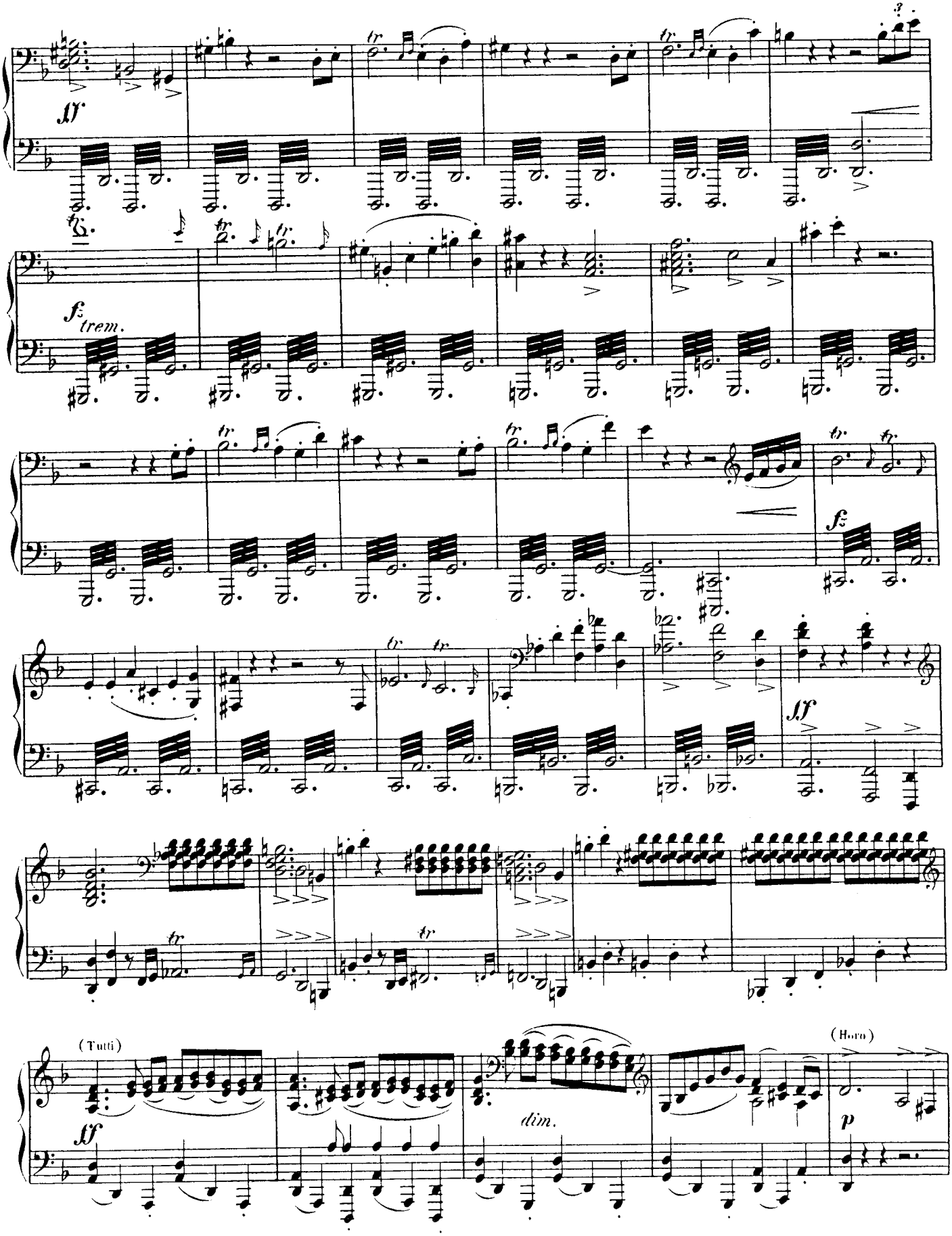
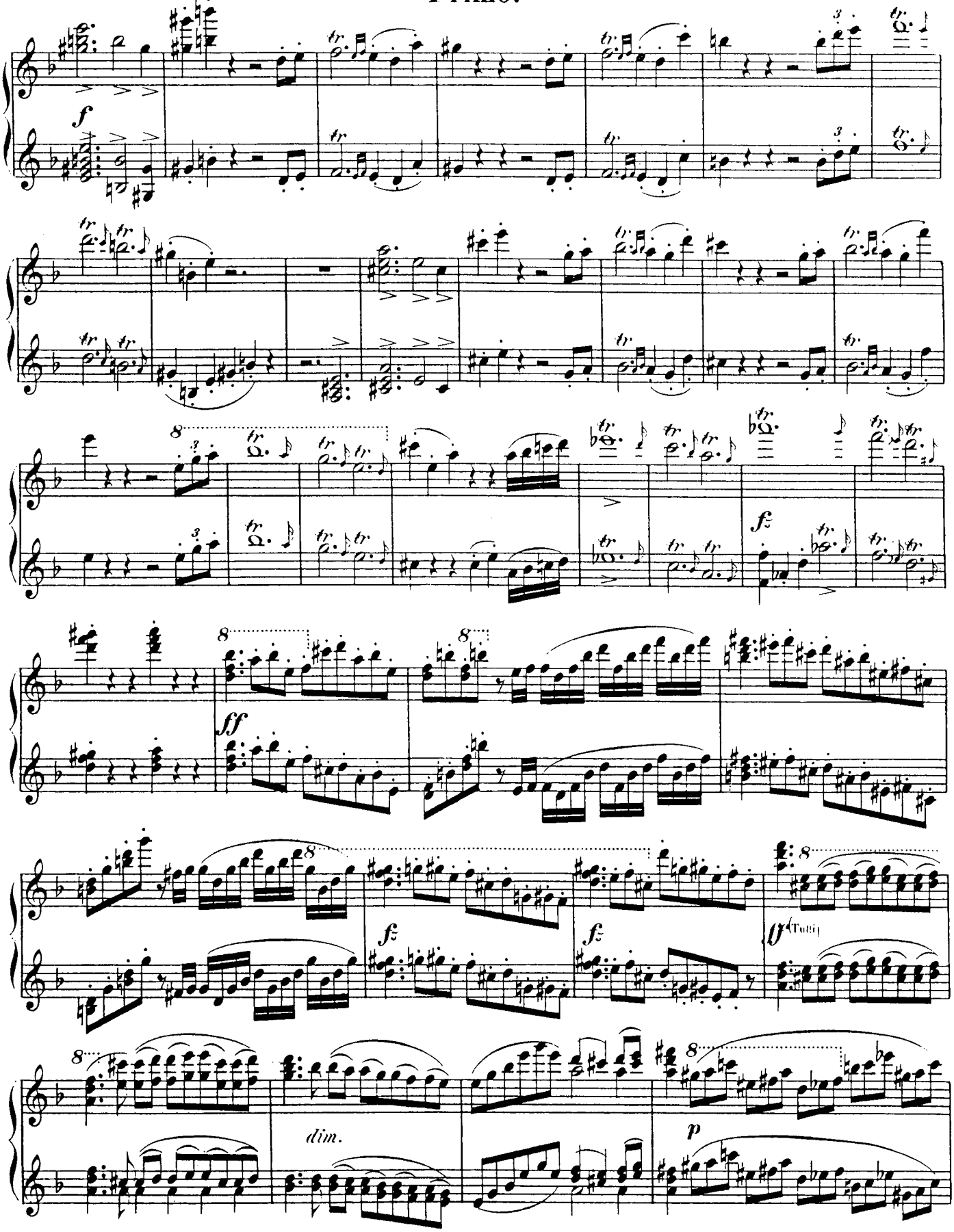



p
8
p
pp
p
cresc.
col 8
8
ff
ff
1

Secondo.



Primo.



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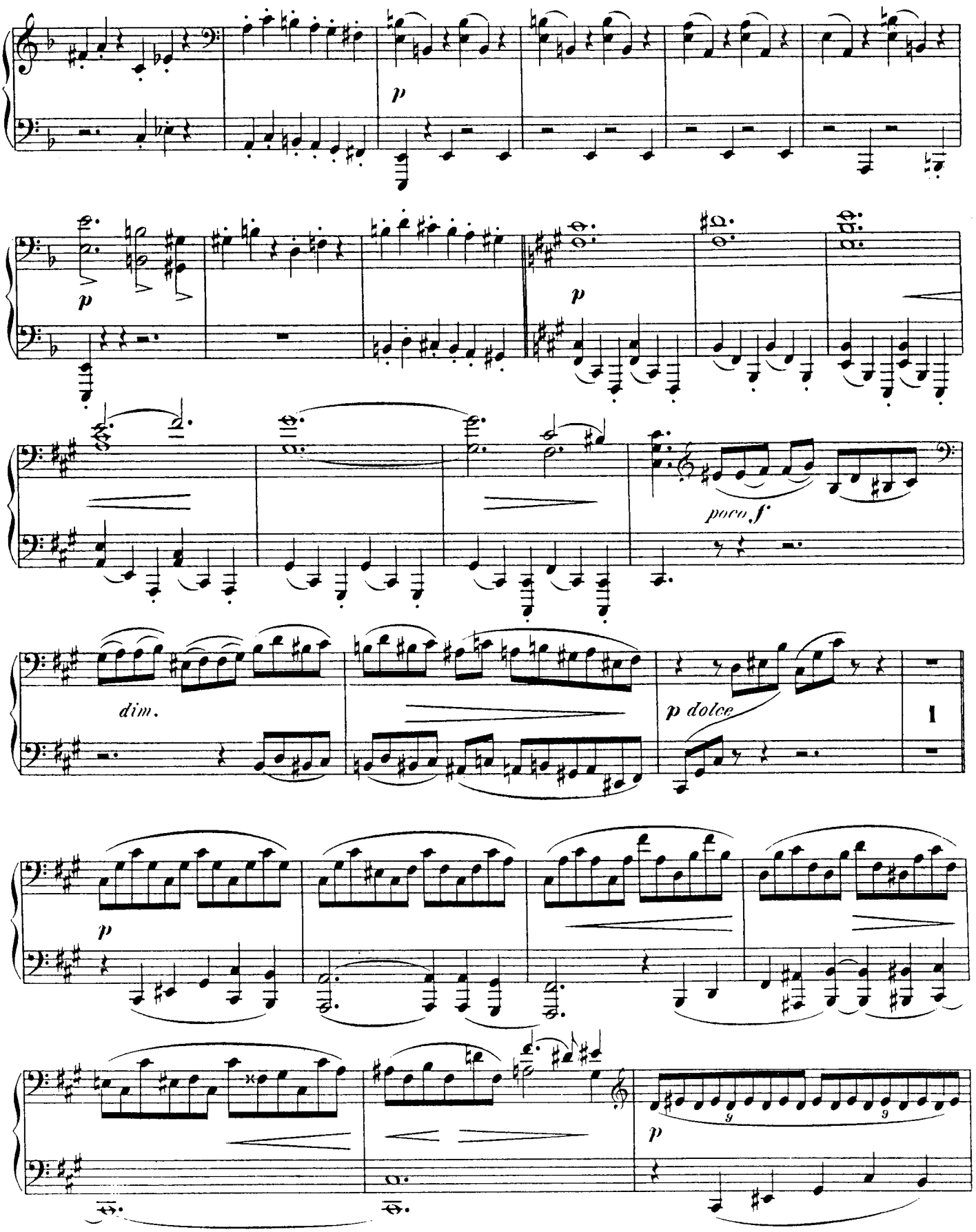
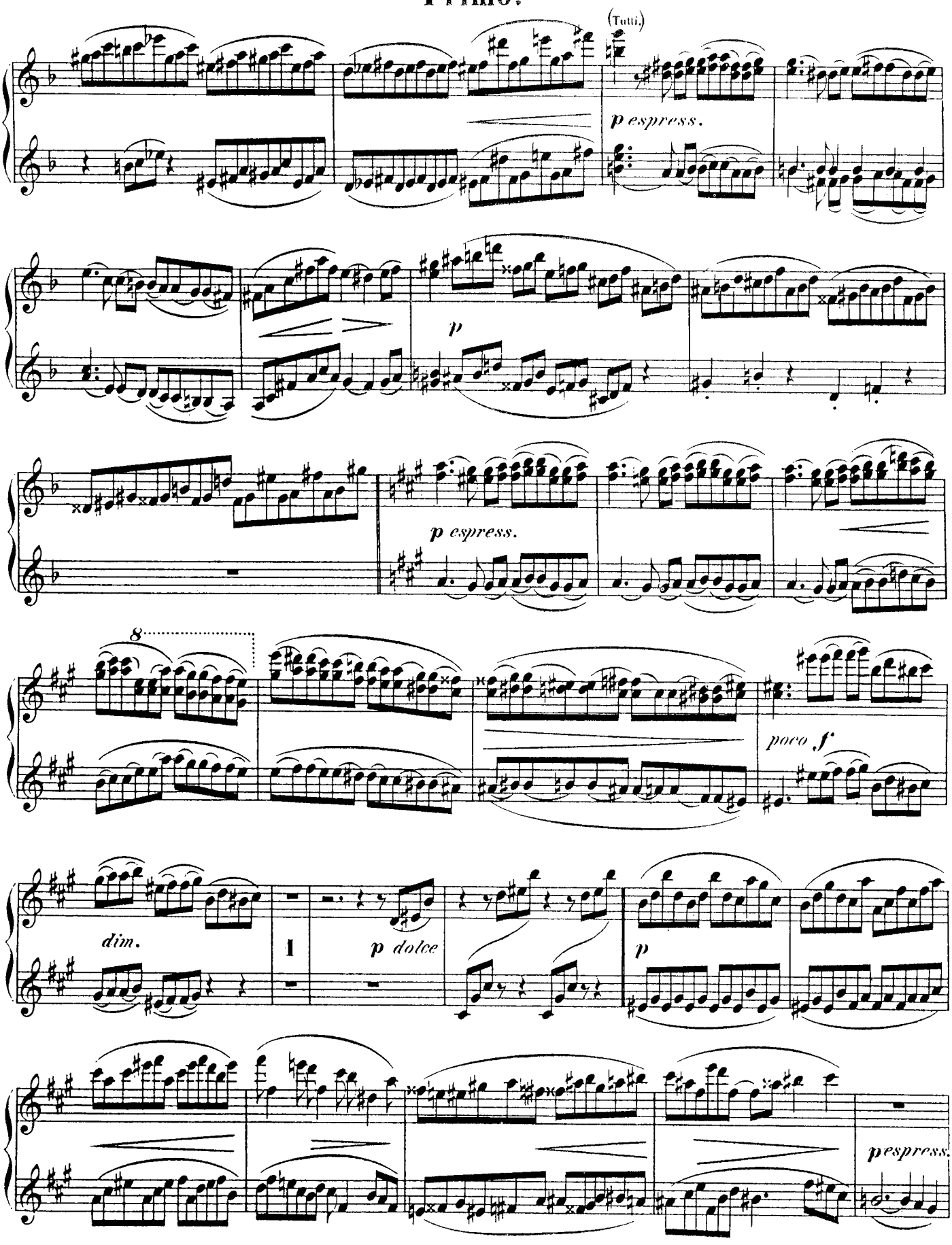
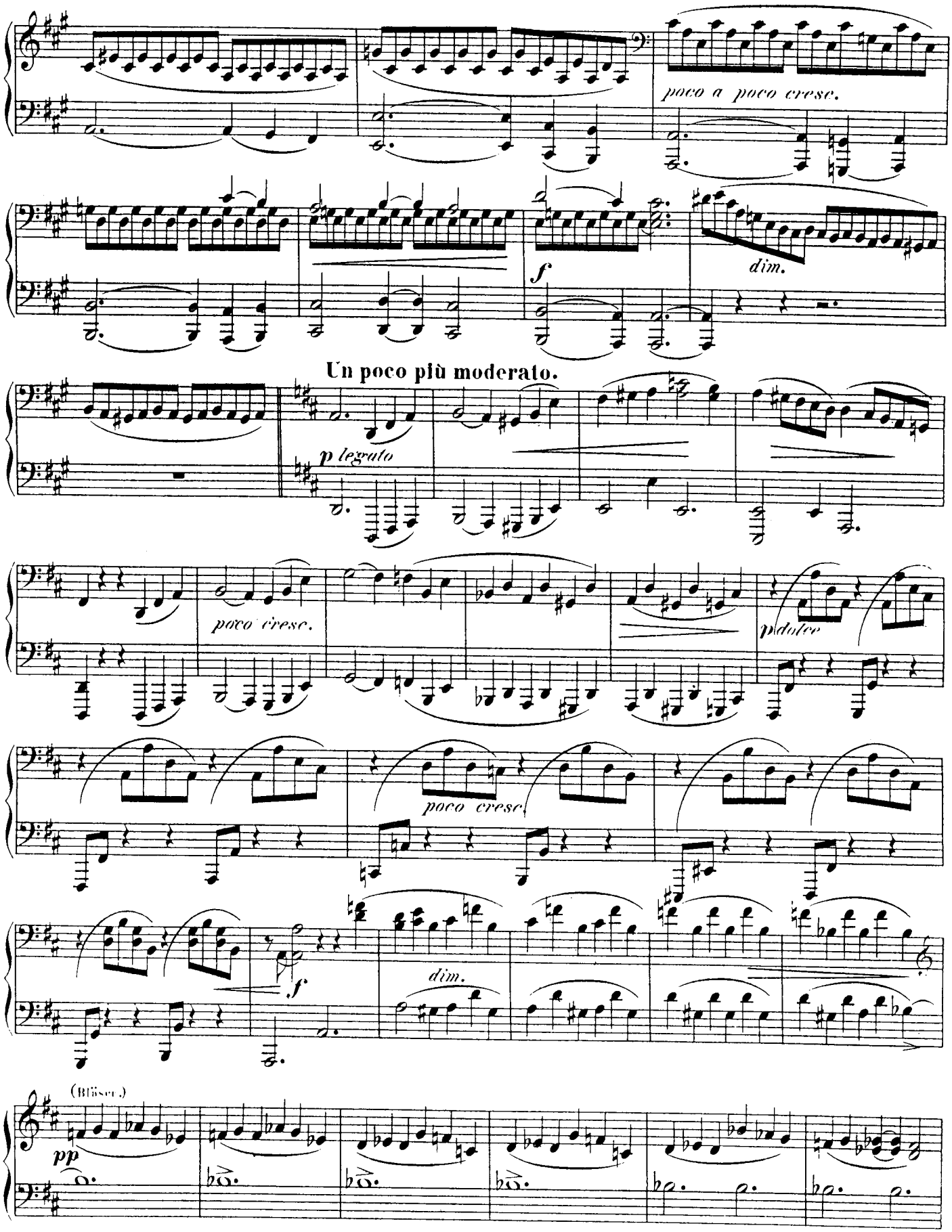
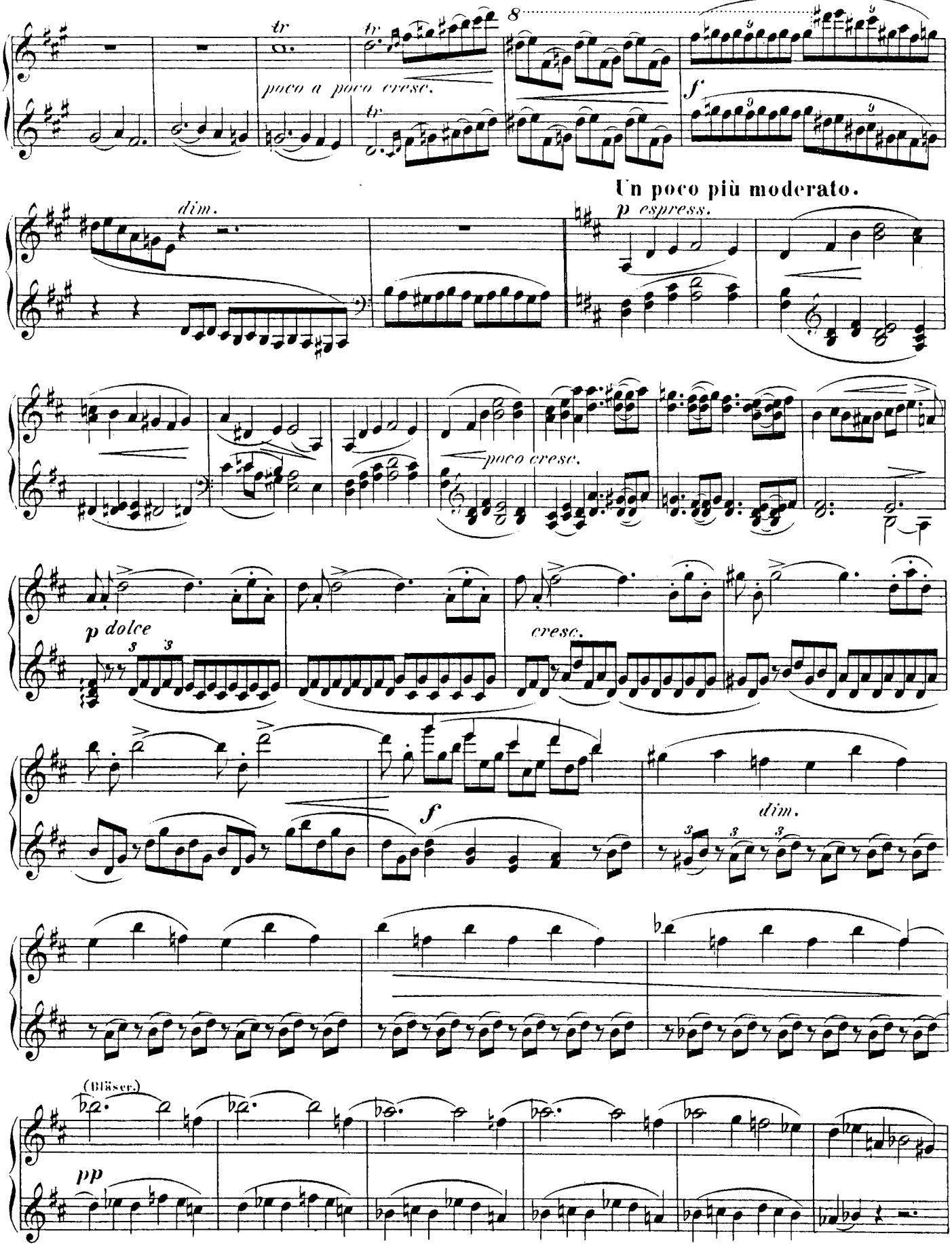


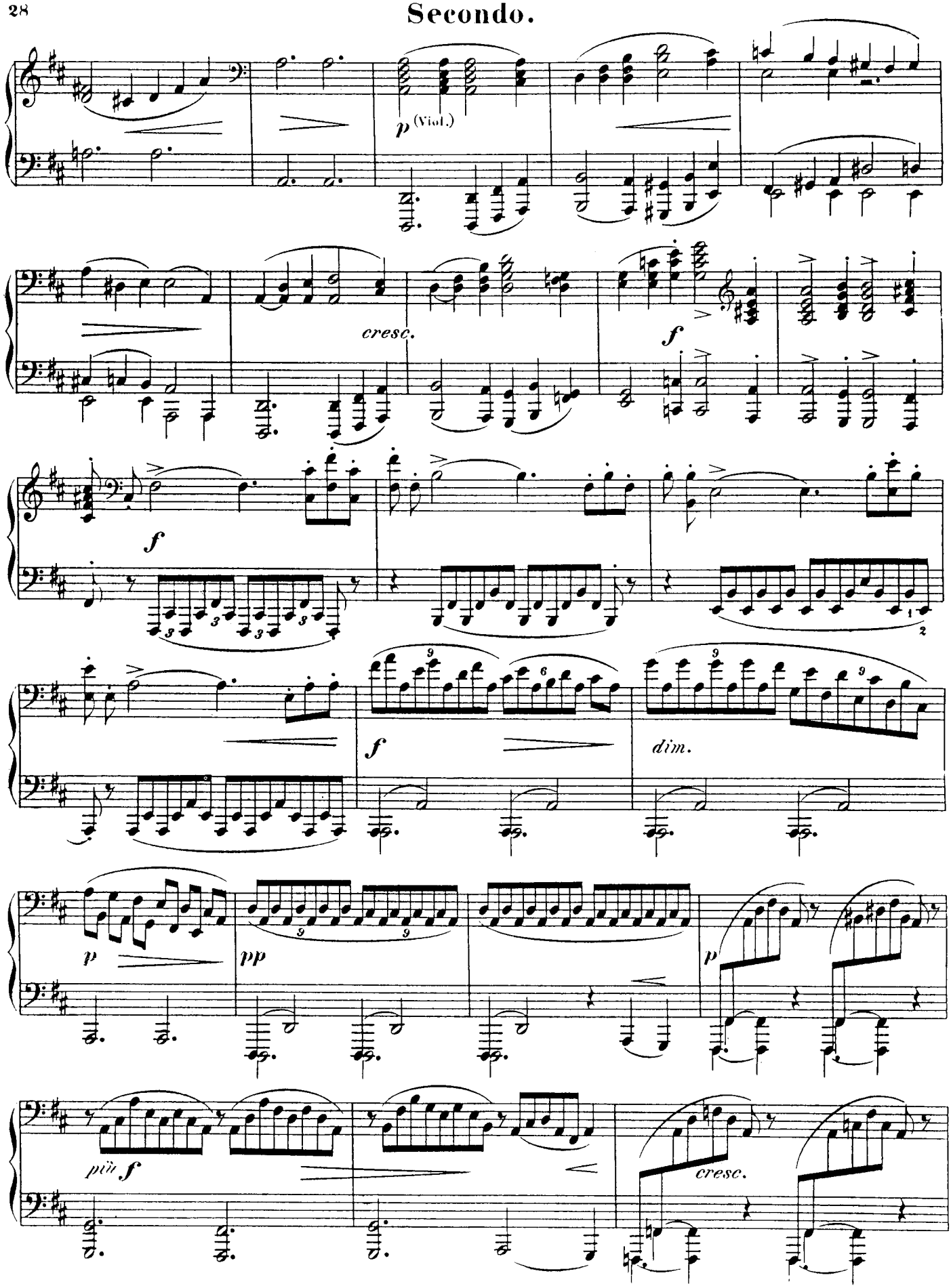

(Tutti.)
p espress.
p
p espress.
8
poco f
dim.
1
p dolce
p
pespress.

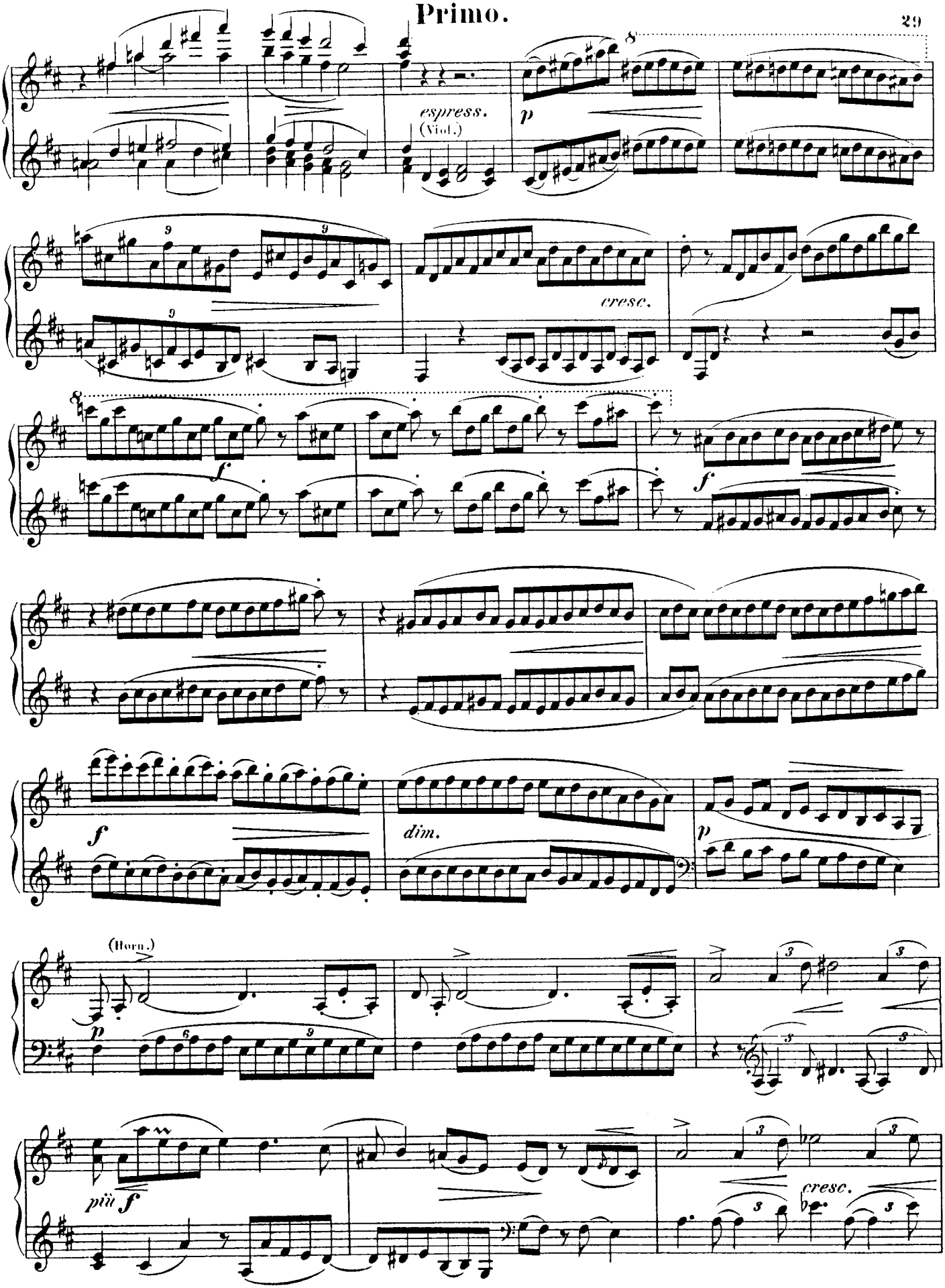
Secondo.


poco a poco cresc.
dim.
f
Un poco più moderato.
p legato
poco cresc.
dolce
poco cresc
dim.
f
(Bläser.)
pp

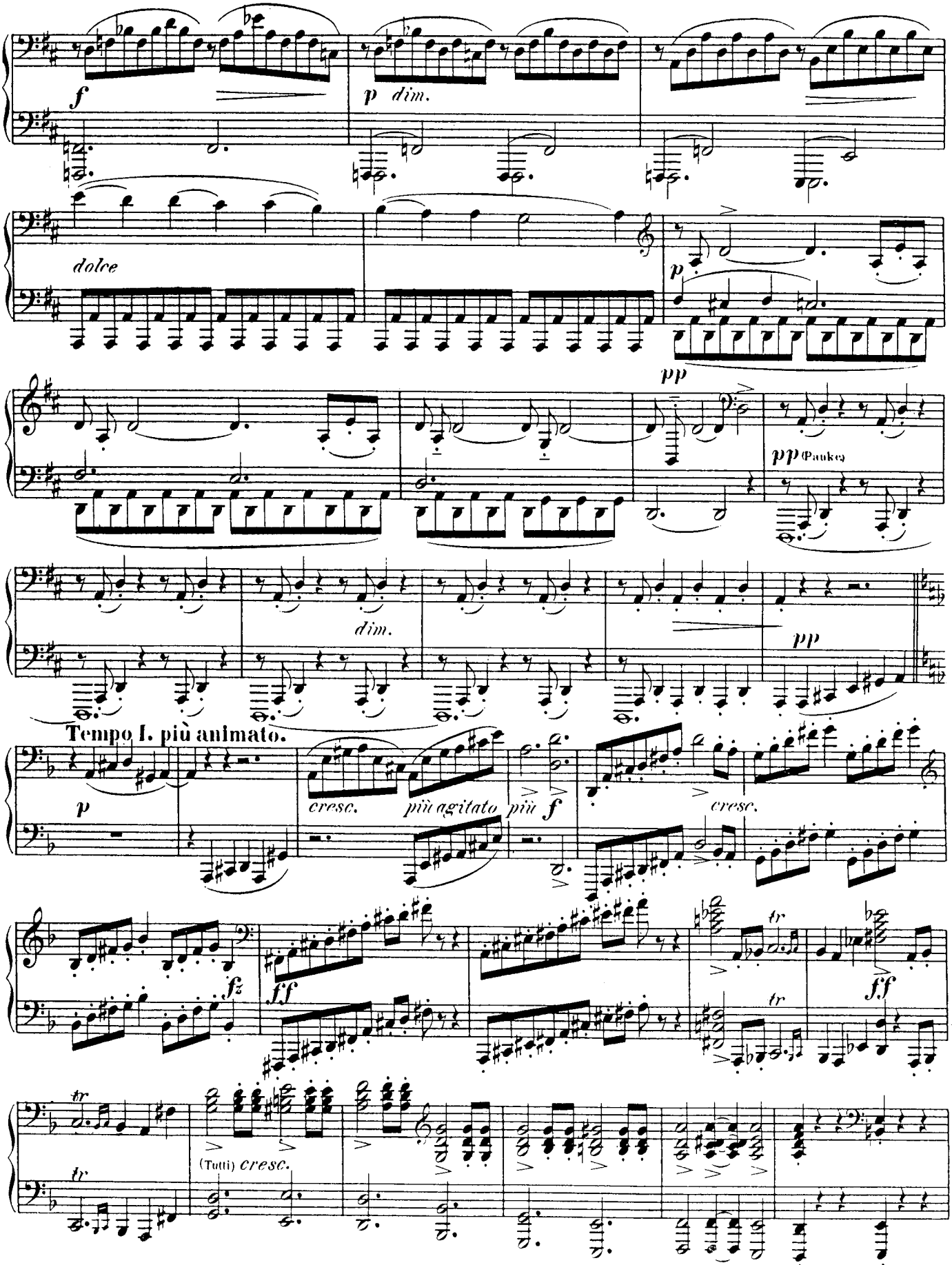

tr
poco a poco cresc.
f
dim.
Un poco più moderato.
p espress.
poco cresc.
p dolce
cresc.
f
dim.
(Bläser.)
pp

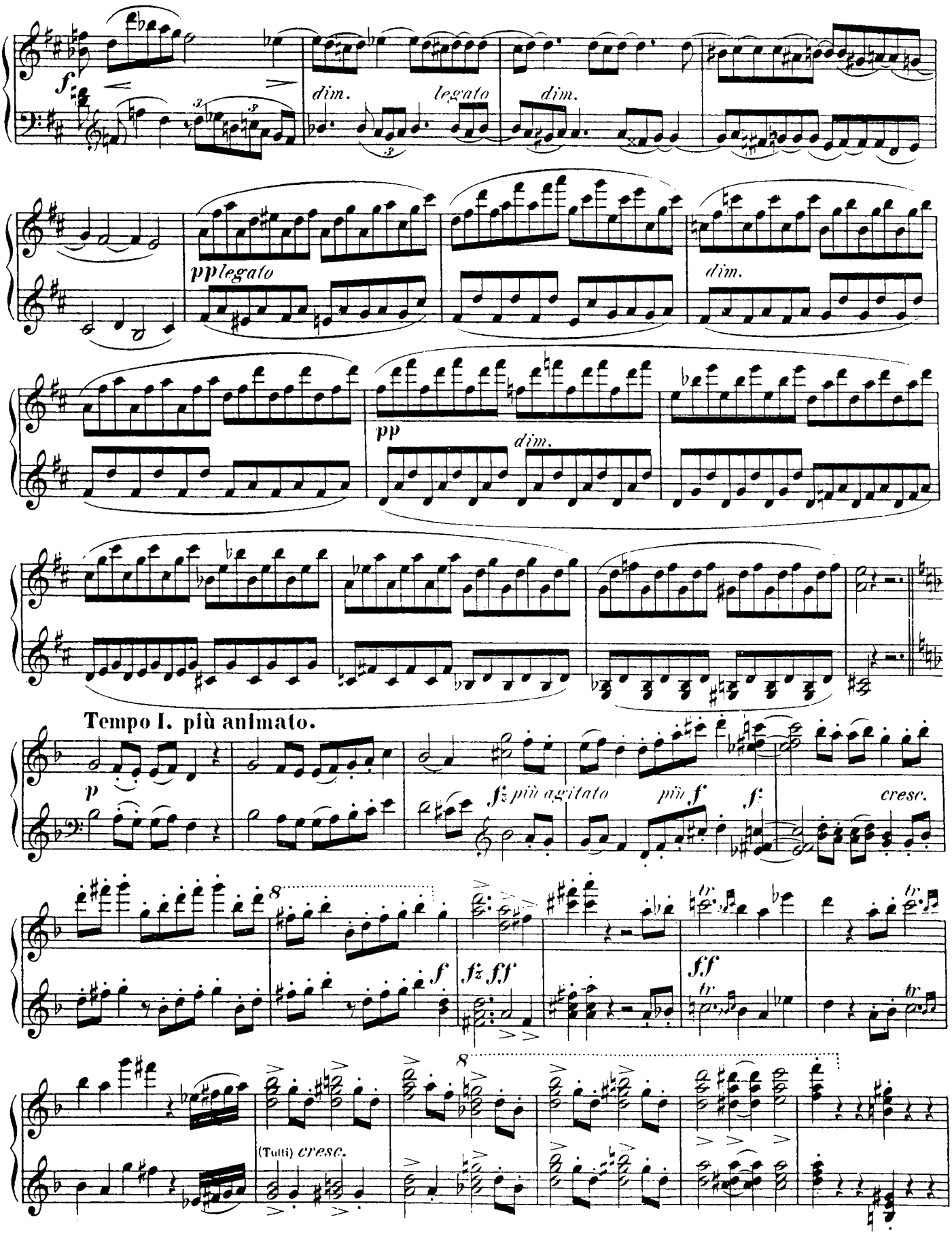
Secondo.



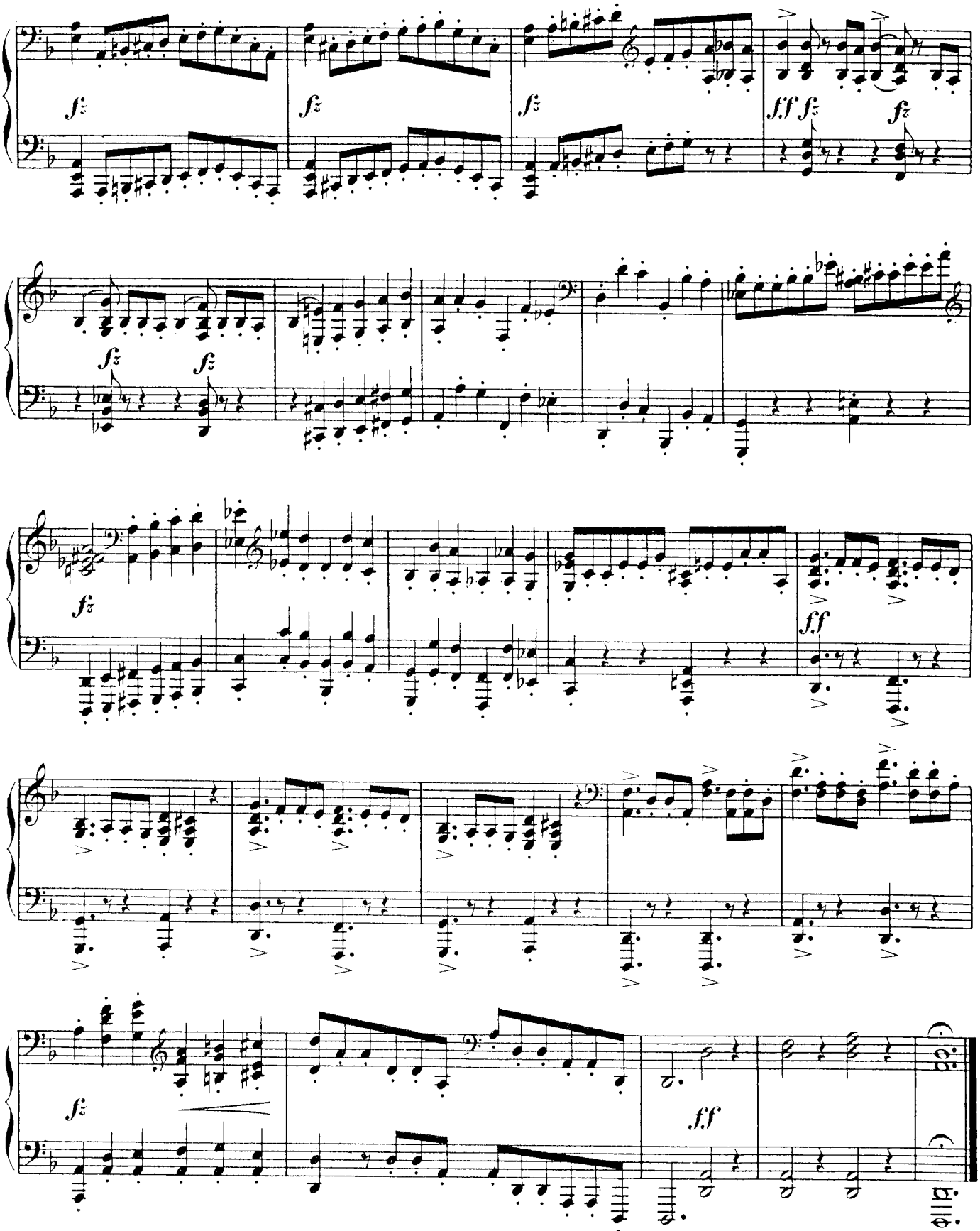

espress.
(Viol.)
p
cresc.
f
f
f
dim.
p
(Horn.)
p
più f
cresc.

Secondo.

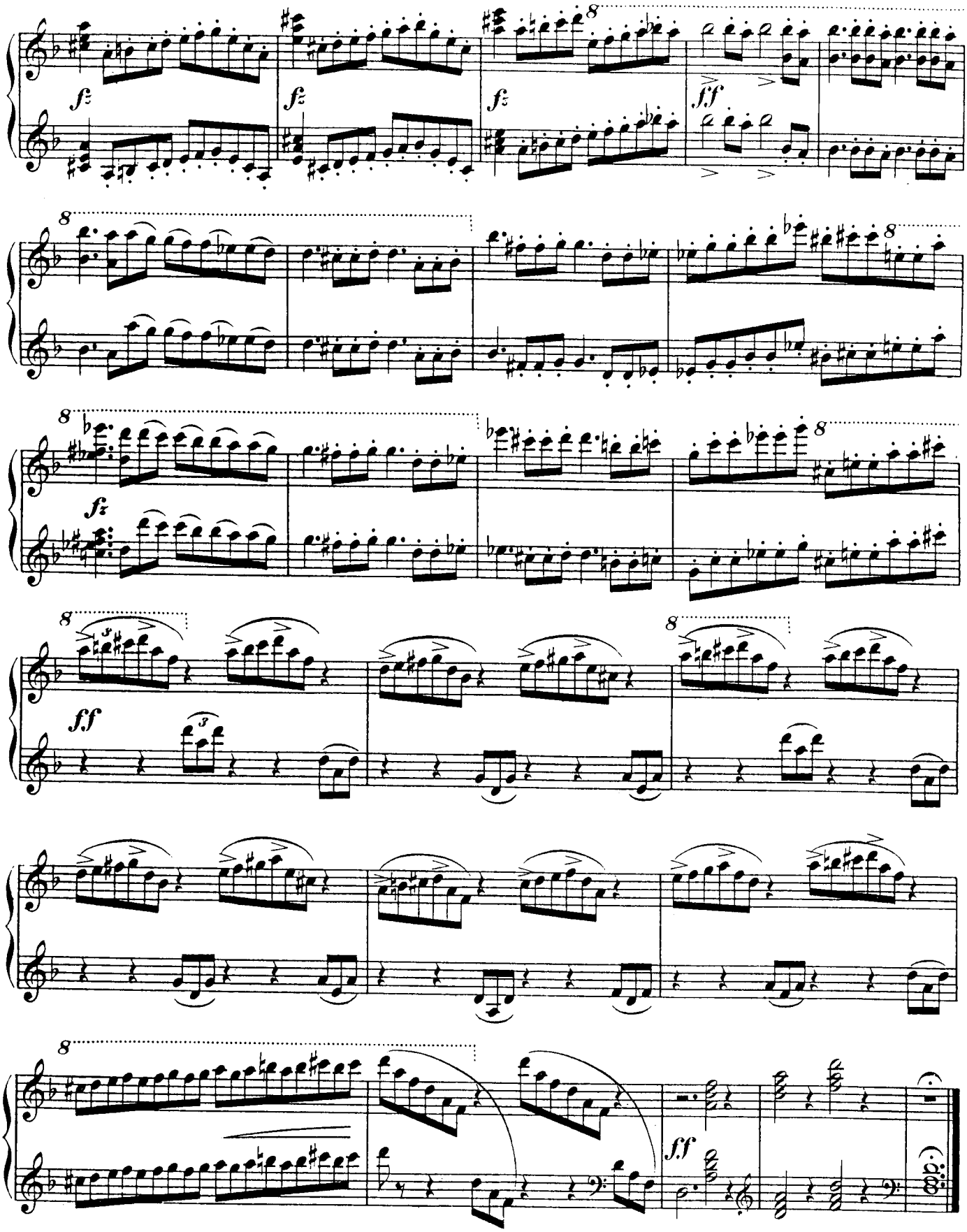

f
p dim.
dolce
p
pp
pp (Pauke)
dim.
pp
Tempo I. più animato.
p
cresc.
più agitato
più f
cresc.
fz
ff
tr
f.f
tr
tr
(Tutti) cresc.


dim.
legato
dim.
pp legato
dim.
pp
dim.
Tempo I. più animato.
p
fz più agitato
più f
f
cresc.
f
fz ff
ff
(Tutti) cresc.

Secondo.



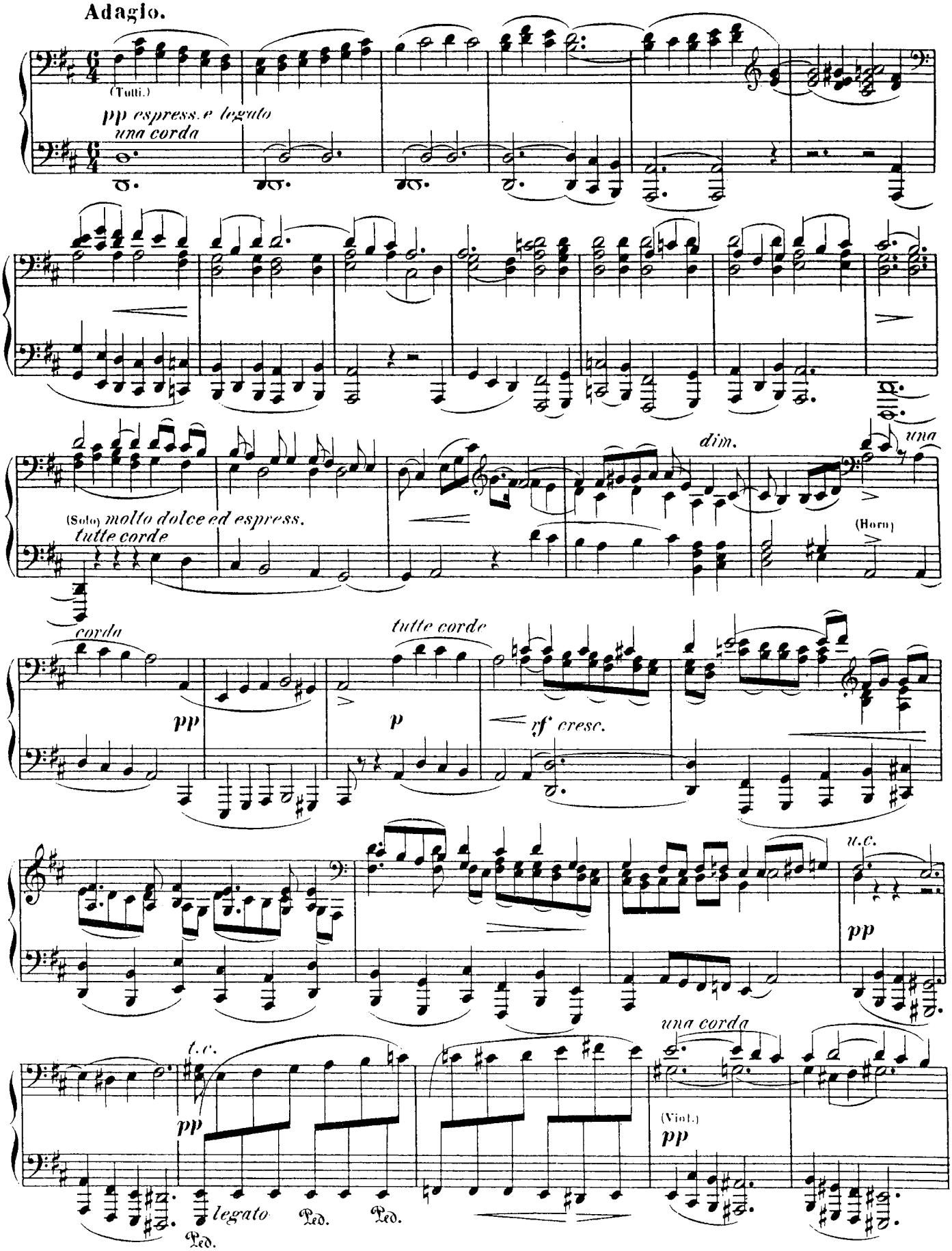
Primo.



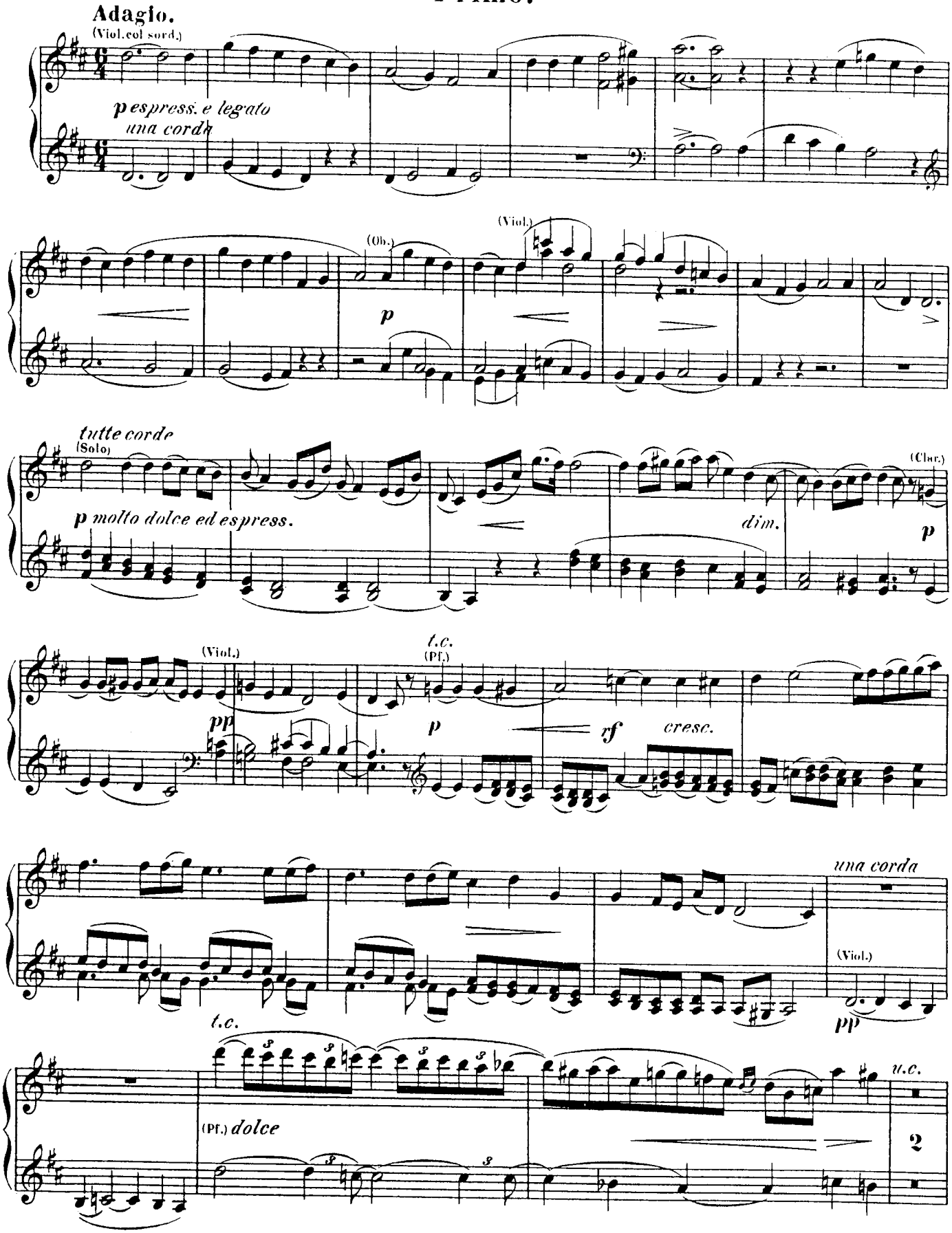
II.

Secondo.

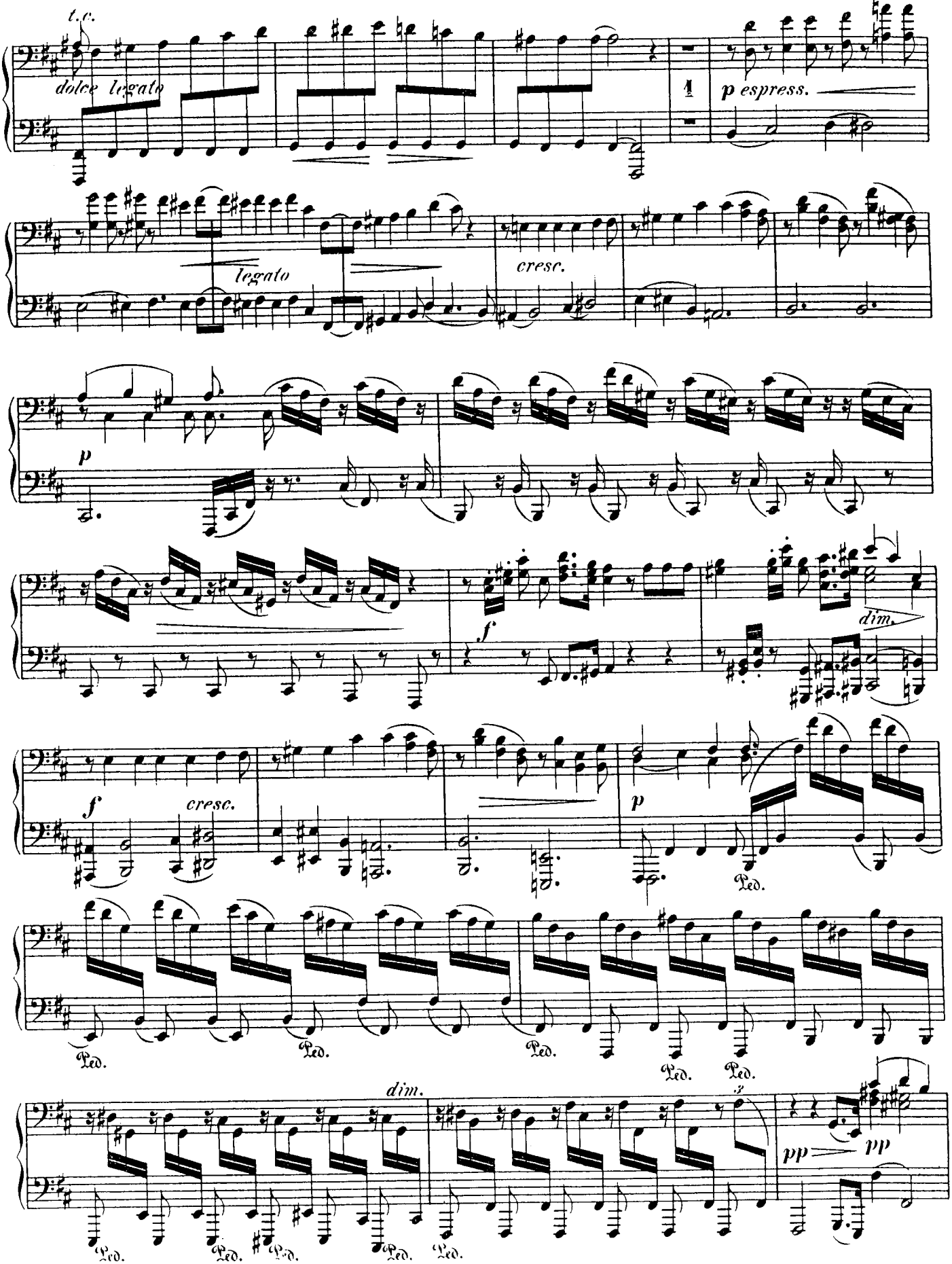
Adagio.

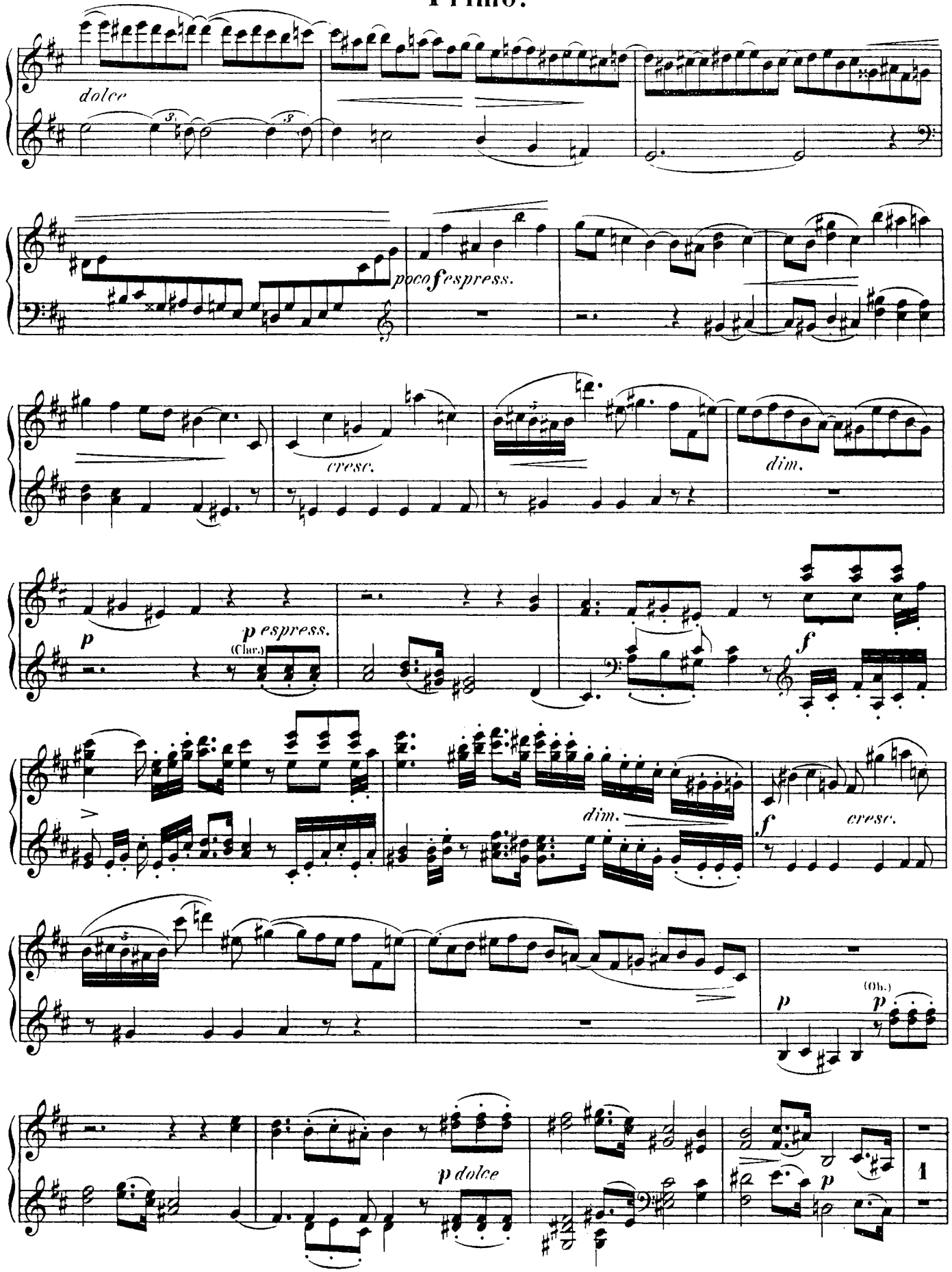


Primo.

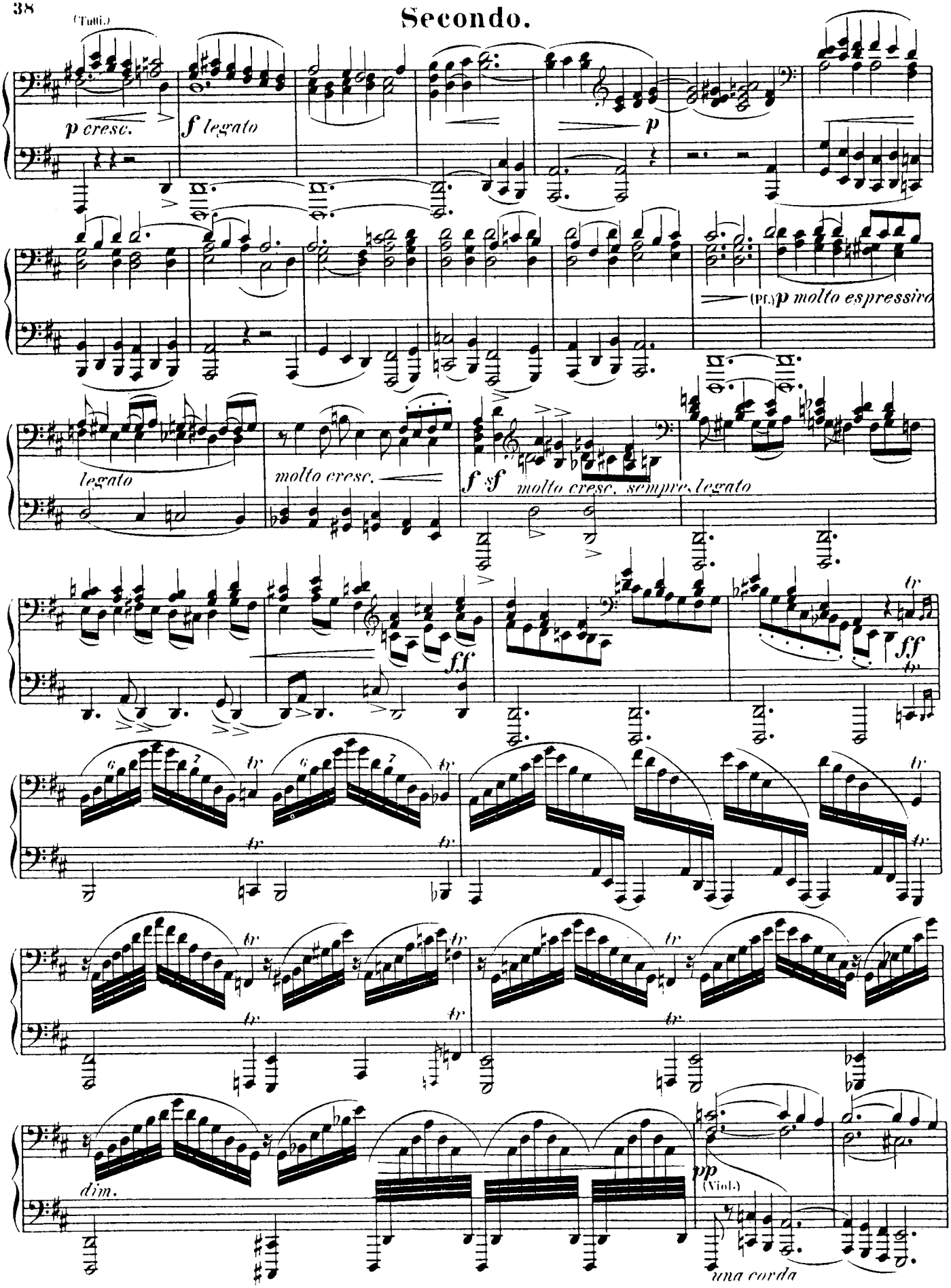

Adagio.
(Viol. col sord.)
p espress. e legato
una corda
(Ob.)
(Viol.)
p
tutte corde
(Solo)
p molto dolce ed espress.
(Clar.)
dim.
p
(Viol.)
pp
t.c.
(Pf.)
p
rf
cresc.
una corda
(Viol.)
pp
t.c.
(Pf.) dolce
u.c.
2

Secondo.

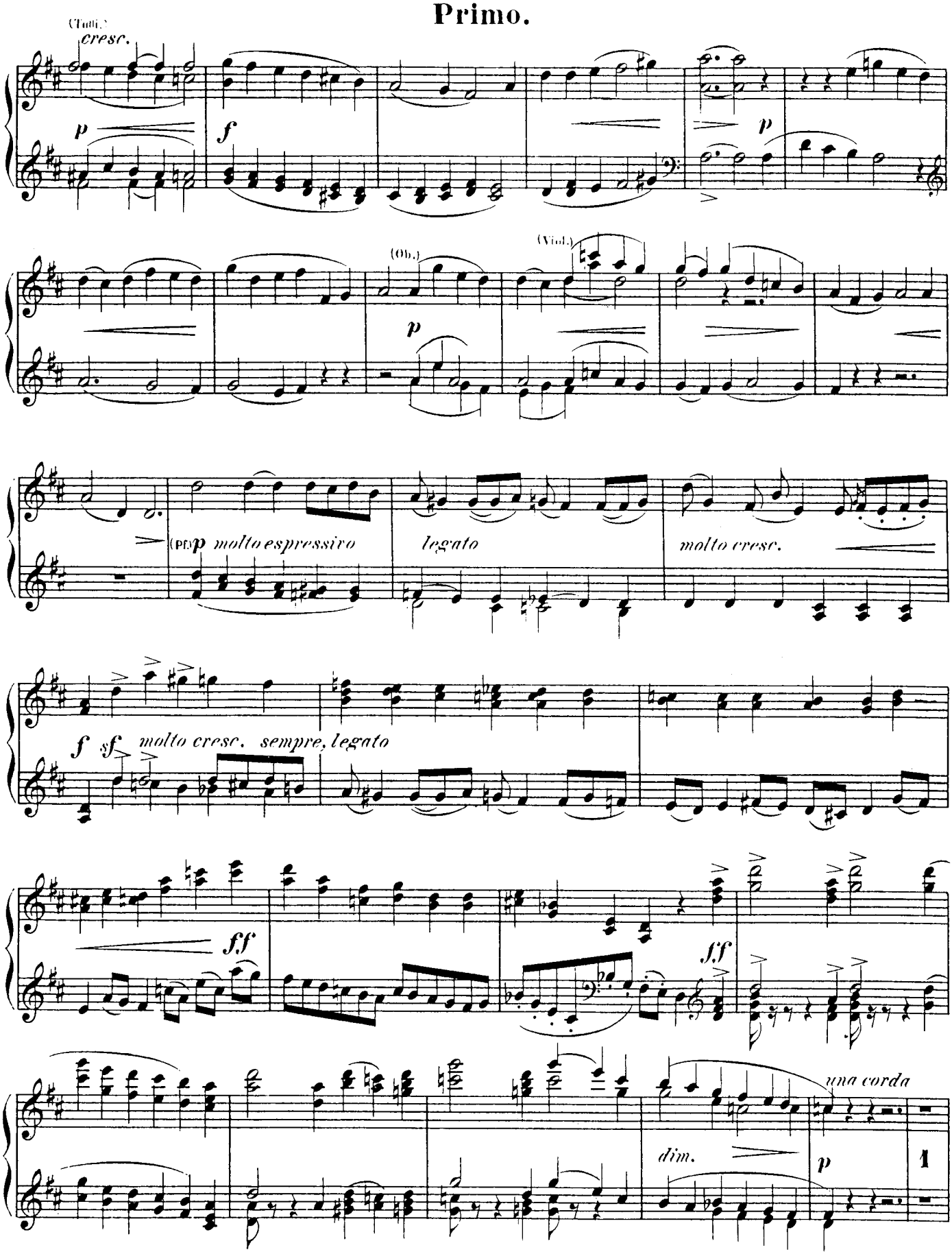

t.c.
dolce legato
p espress.
legato
cresc.
p
f
dim.
f
cresc.
p
Ped.
dim.
pp
pp


dolce
poco f espress.
cresc.
dim.
p
p espress.
(Clar.)
f
dim.
f
cresc.
p
(Ob.)
p
p dolce
p
1

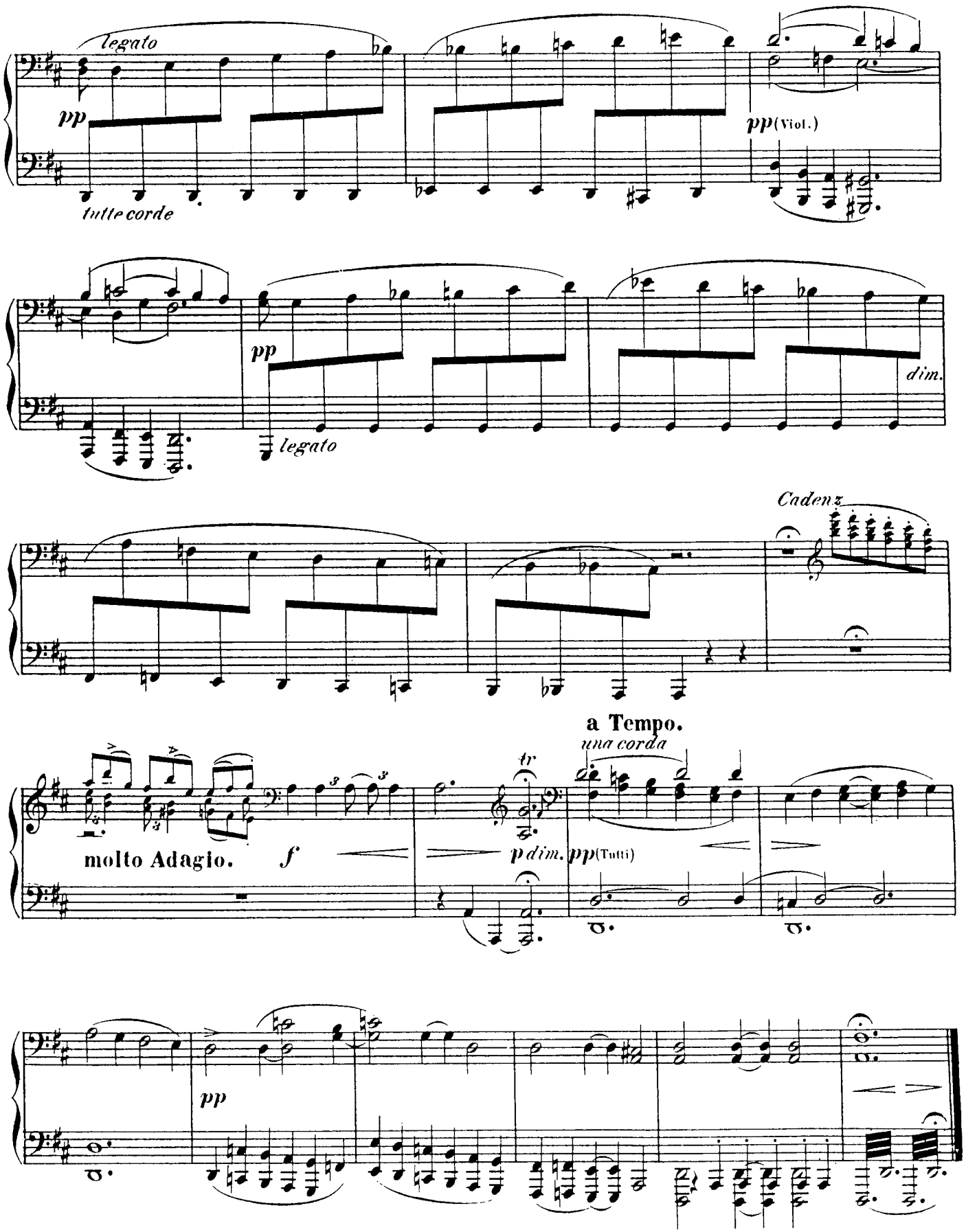
Secondo.


(Tutti.)
p cresc.
f legato
p
(pf.) p molto espressivo
legato
molto cresc.
f sf
molto cresc. sempre legato
ff
ff
tr
dim.
pp
(Viol.)
una corda

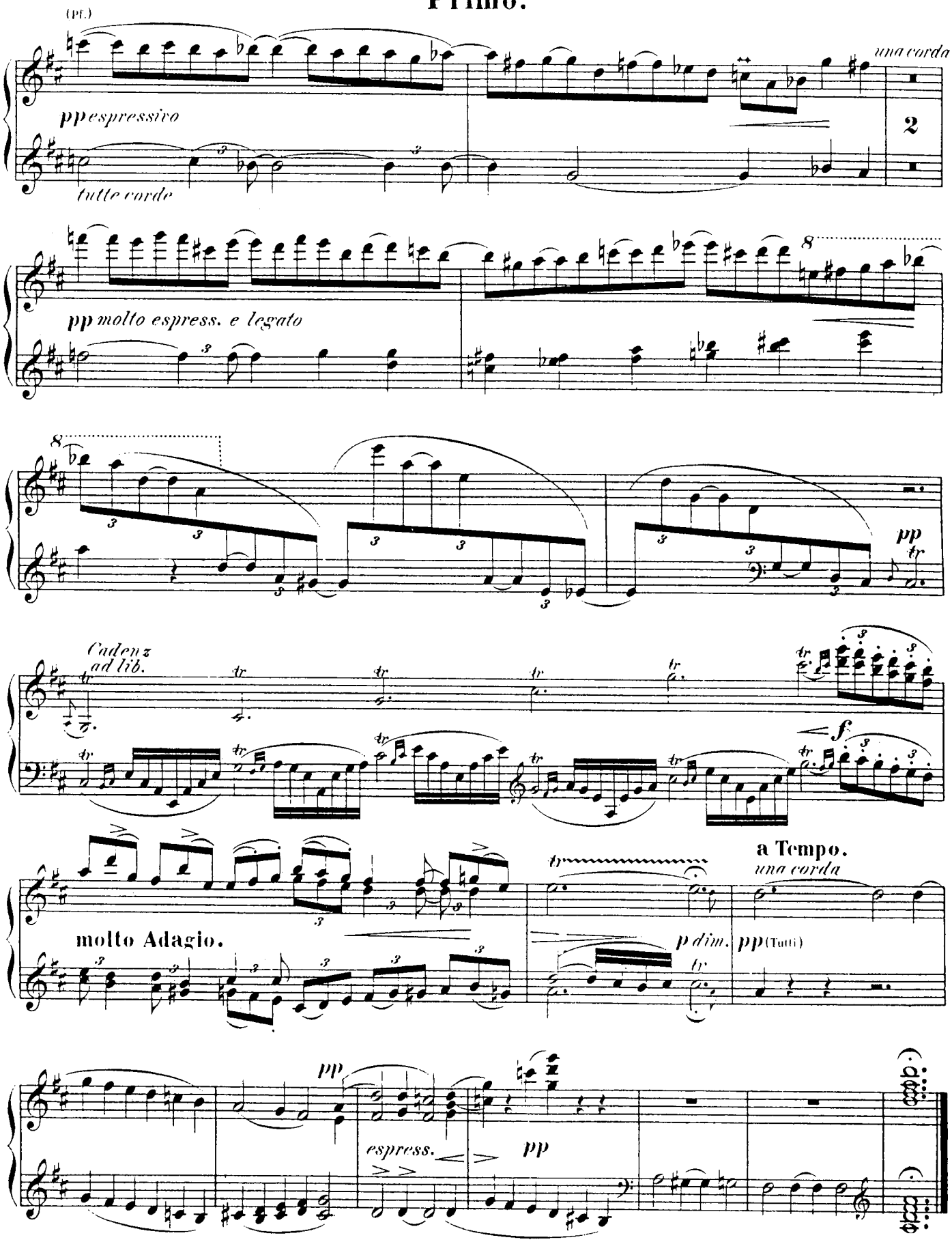
Primo.


(Tutti.)
cresc.
p
f
p
(Ob.)
p
(Viol.)
(Pf.) p molto espressivo
legato
molto cresc.
f sf molto cresc. sempre, legato
ff
sf
una corda
dim.
p
1

Secondo.


legato
pp
tutte corde
pp (Viol.)
pp
legato
dim.
Cadenz
a Tempo.
una corda
molto Adagio.
f
tr
p dim.
pp (Tutti)
pp

Primo.

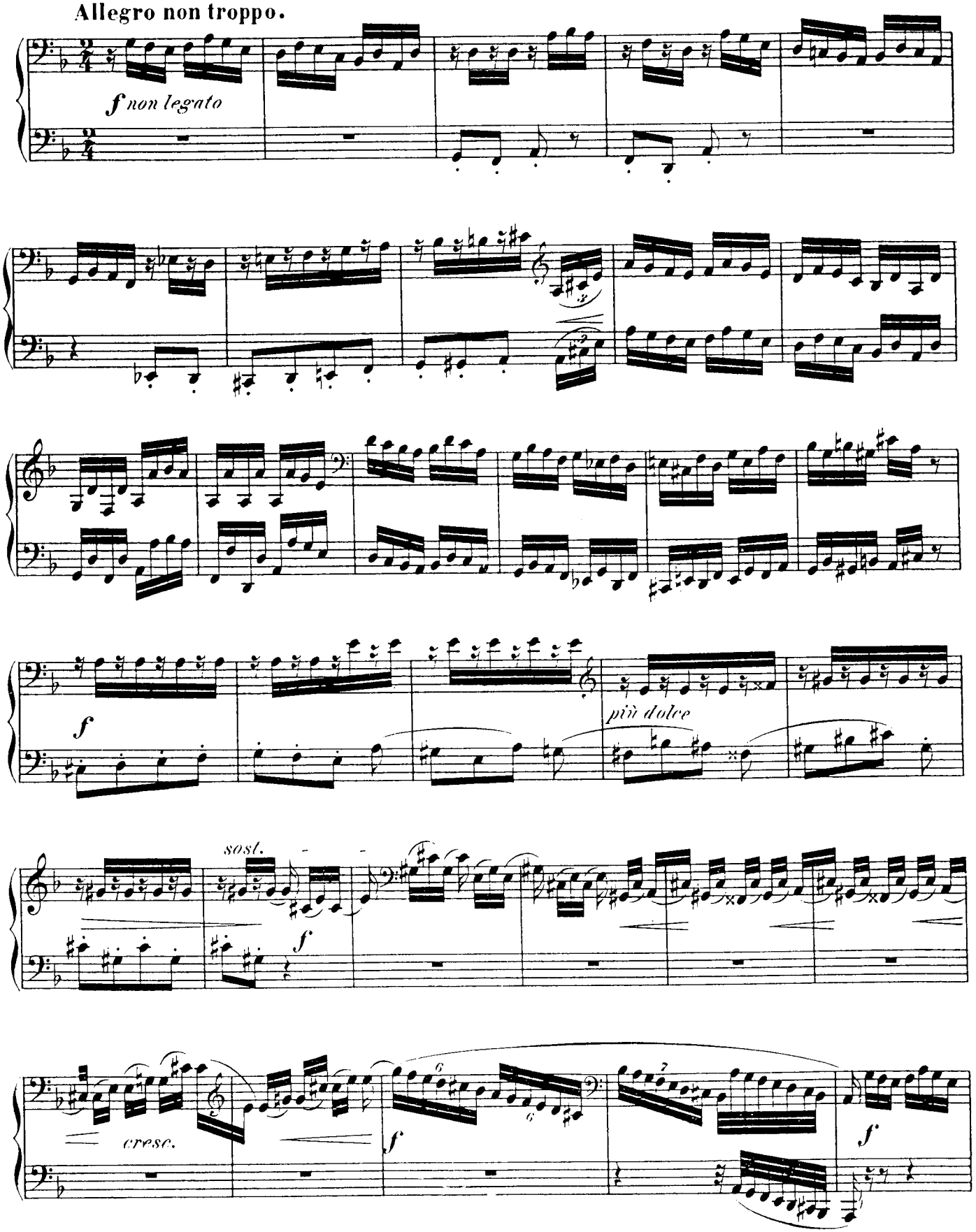

(pf.)
una corda
pp espressivo
tutte corde
2
pp molto espress. e legato
8
pp
Cadenz ad lib.
f
molto Adagio.
a Tempo.
una corda
p dim.
pp (Tutti)
pp
espress.
pp

III.

Secondo.

Rondo.

Allegro non troppo.

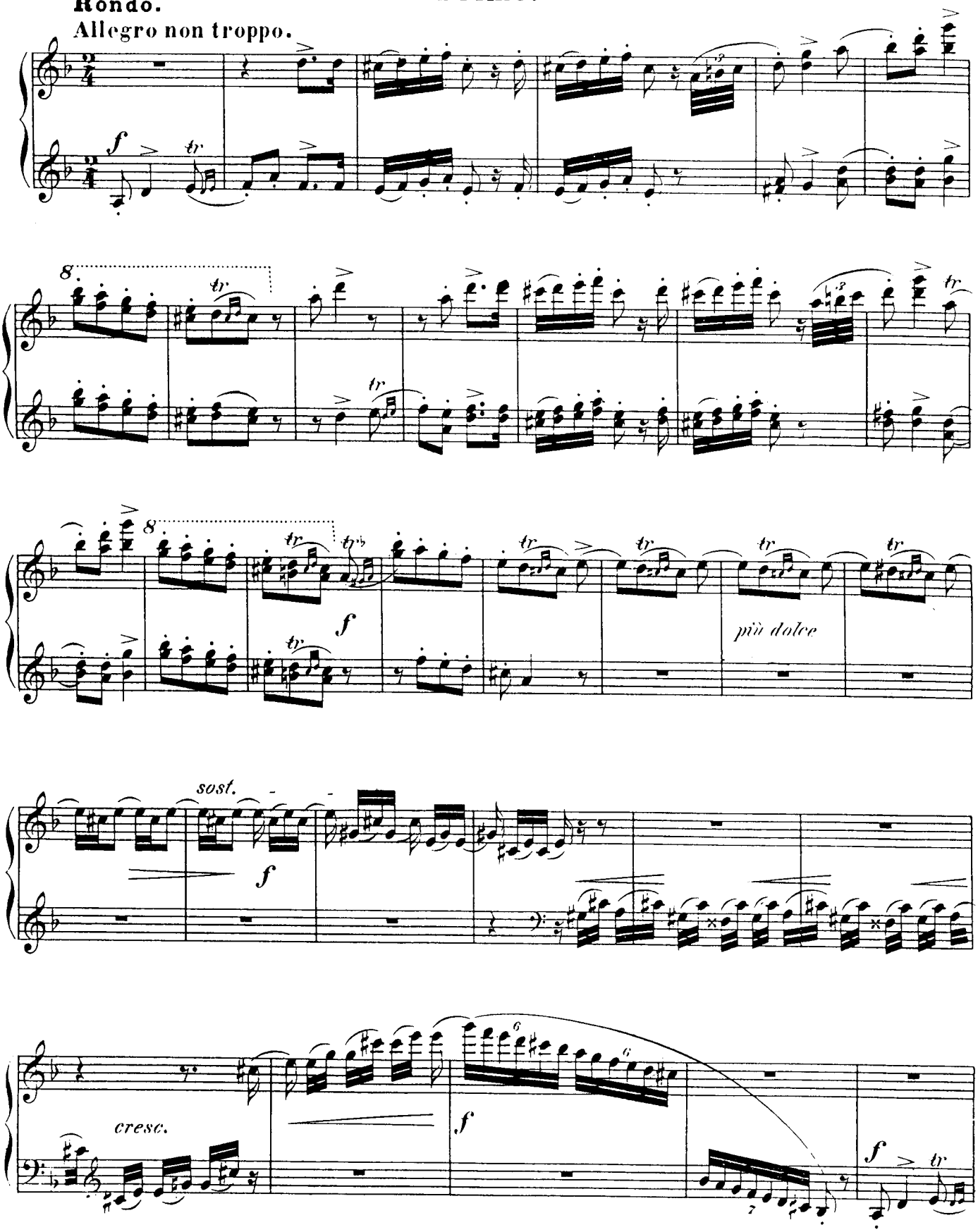


III.

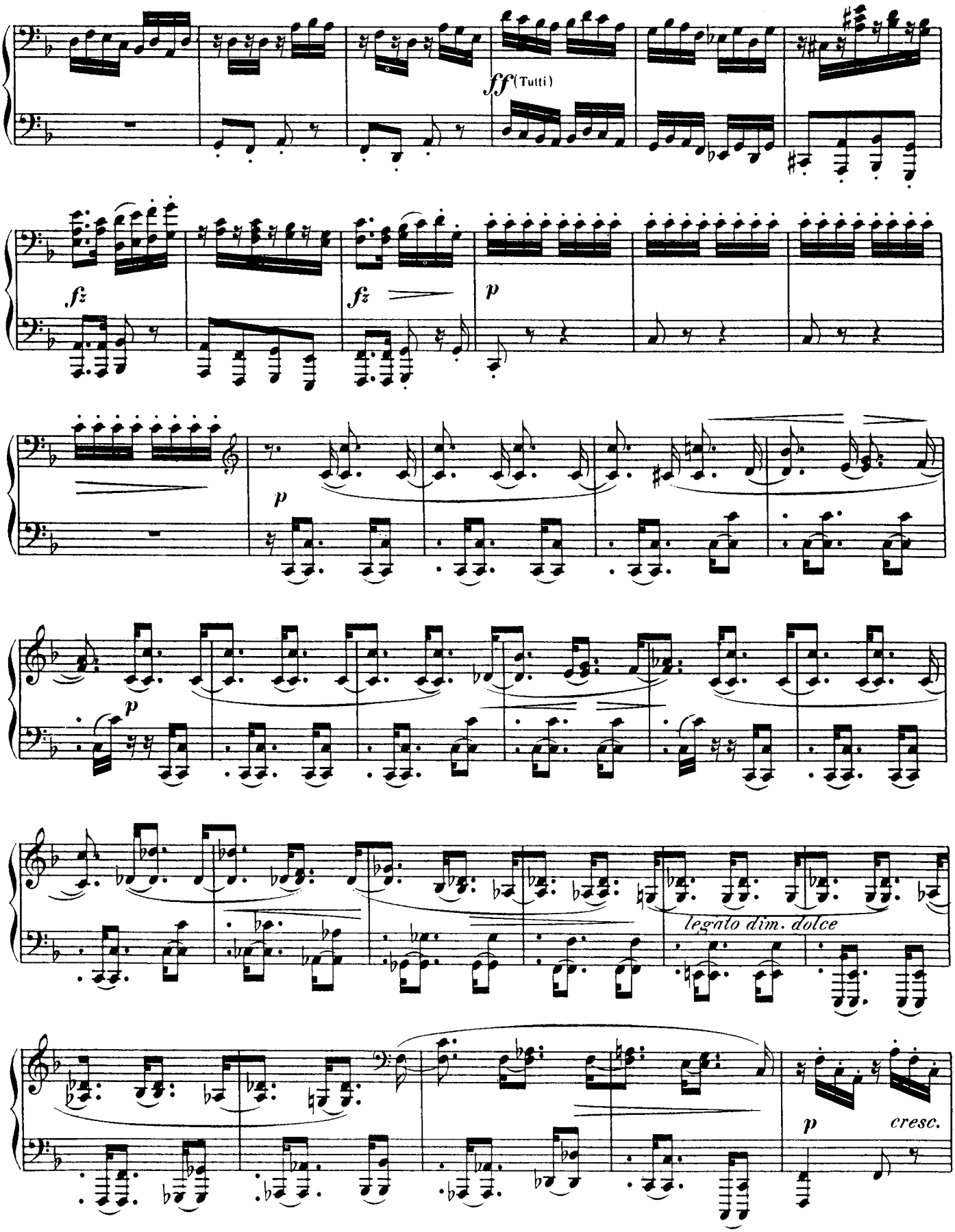
Primo.

Rondo.

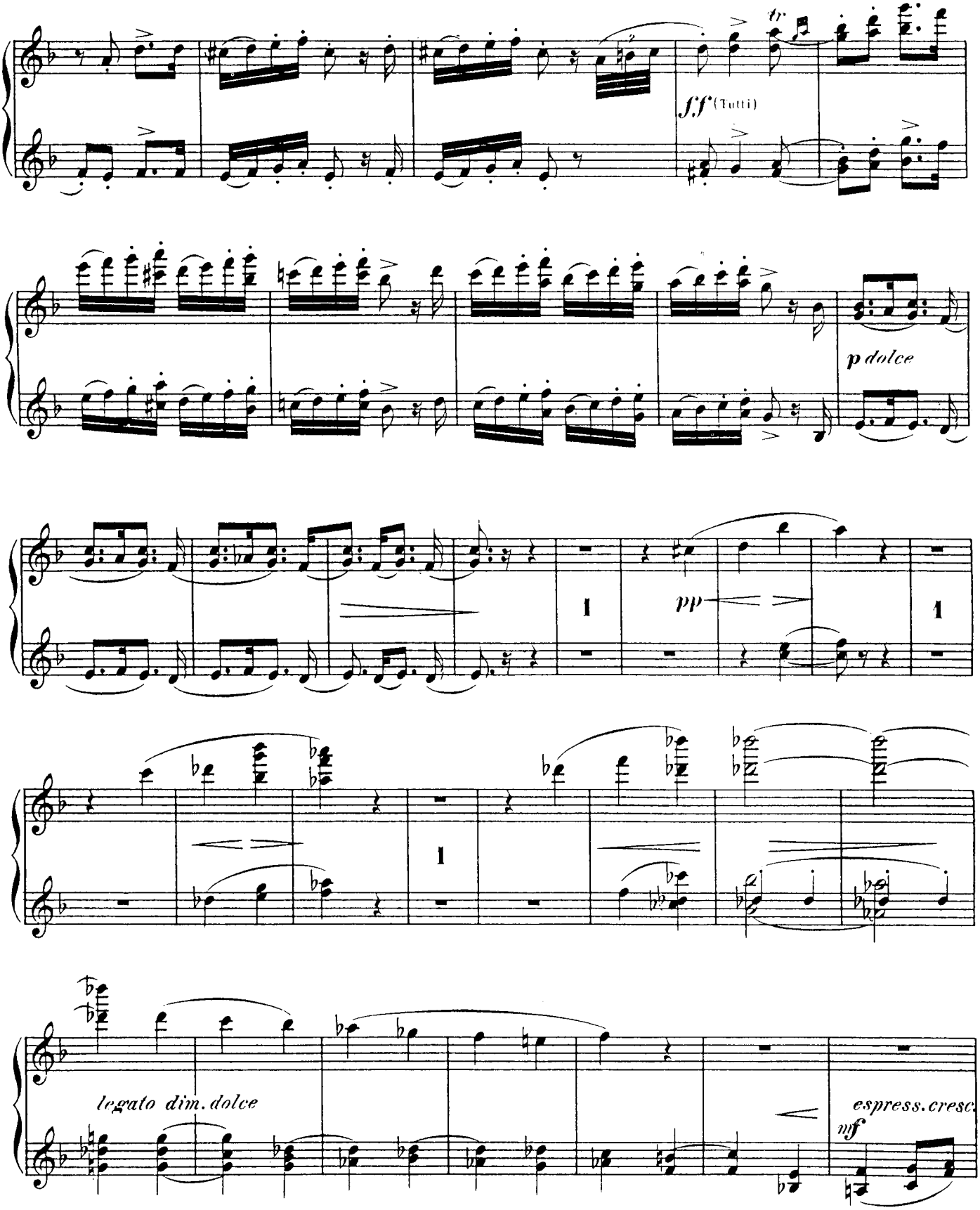
Allegro non troppo.



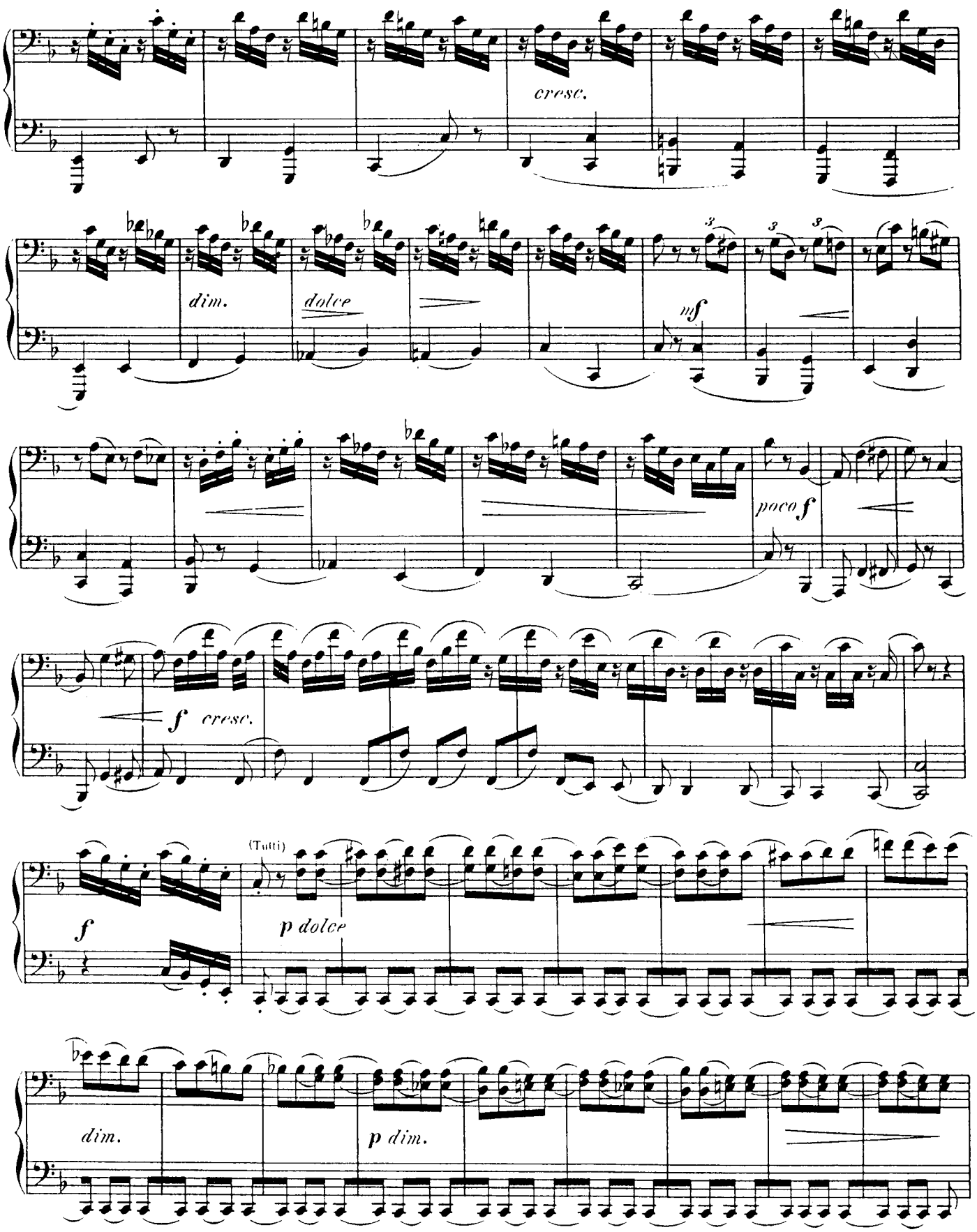
Secondo.



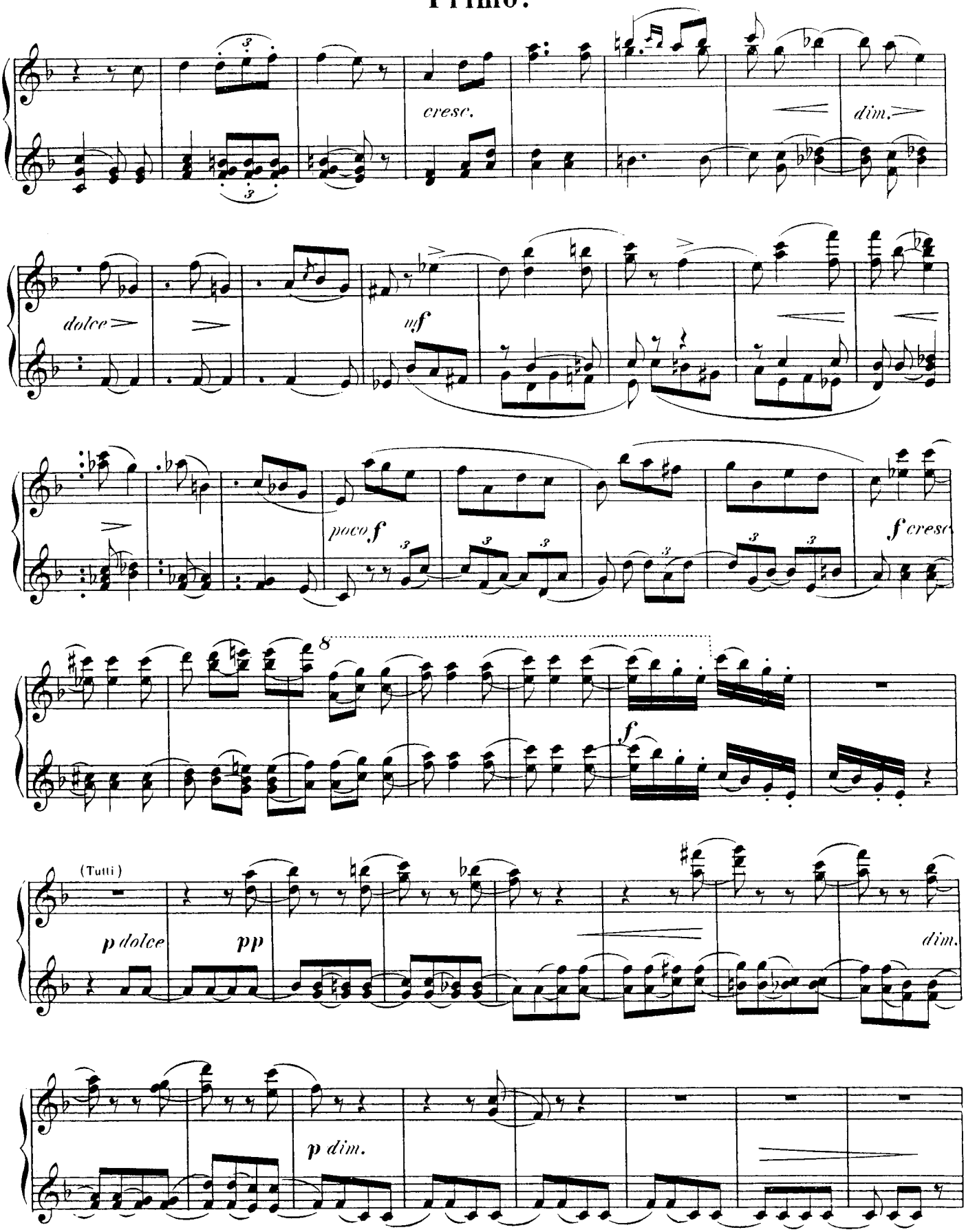
Primo.



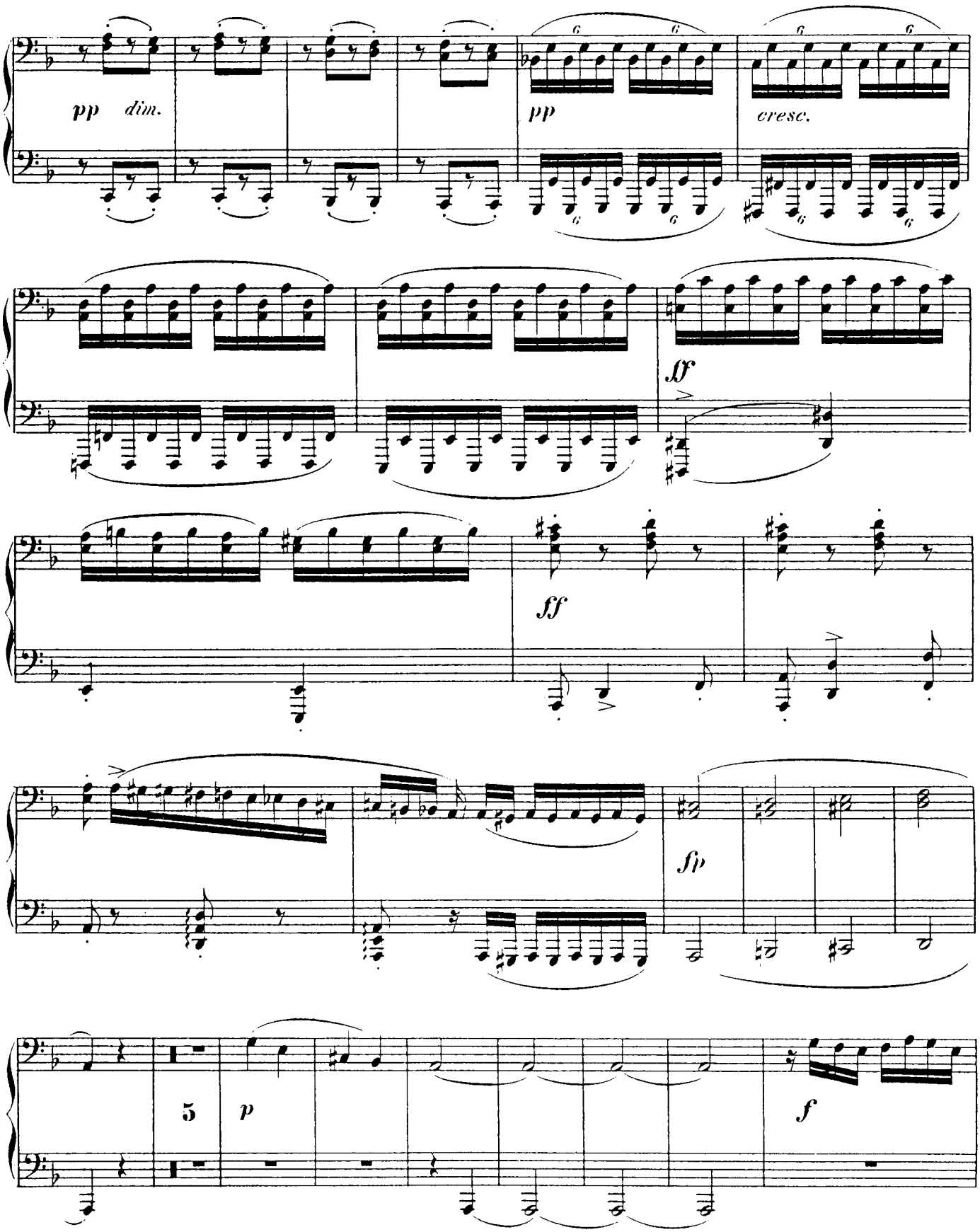
Secondo.



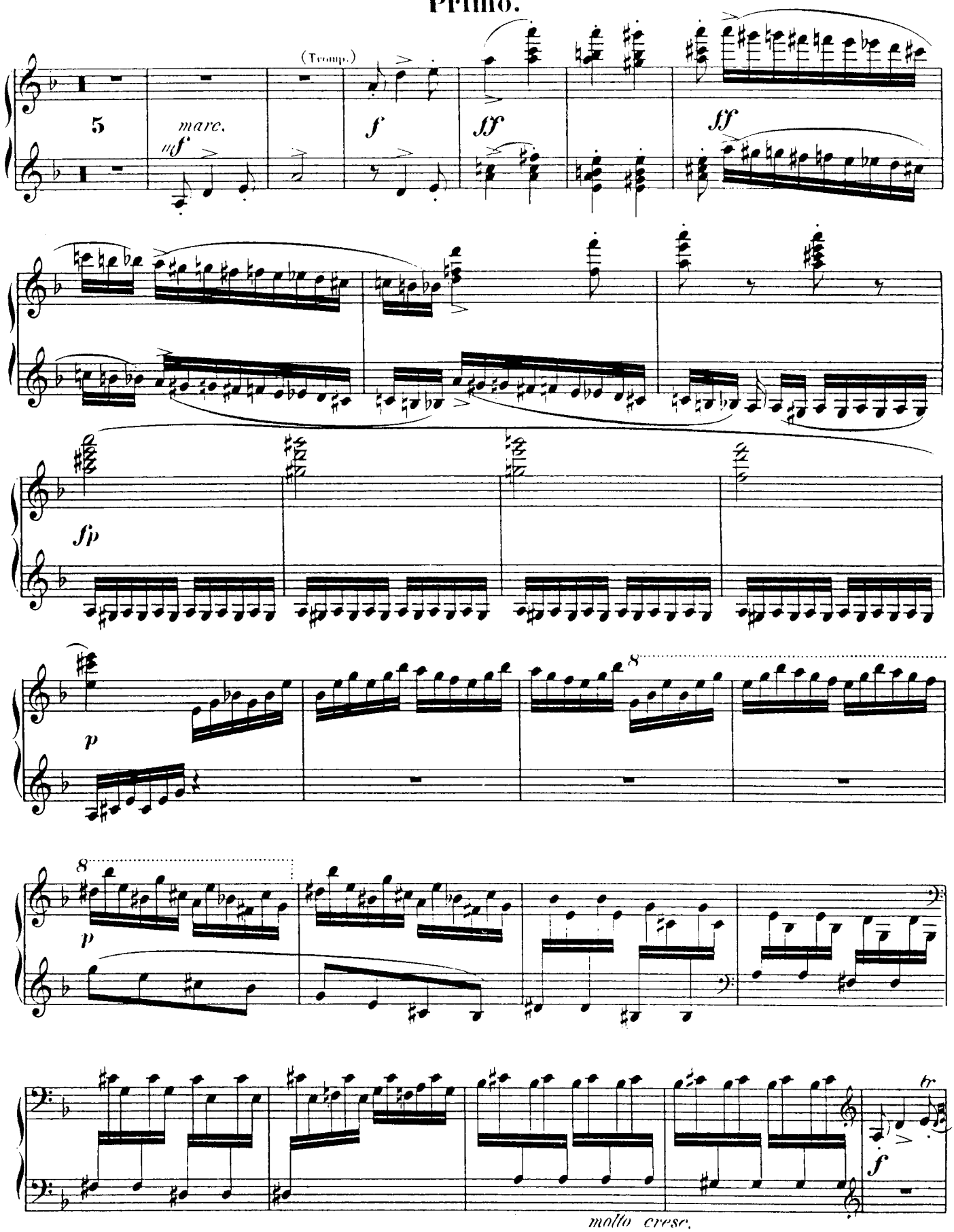
Primo.



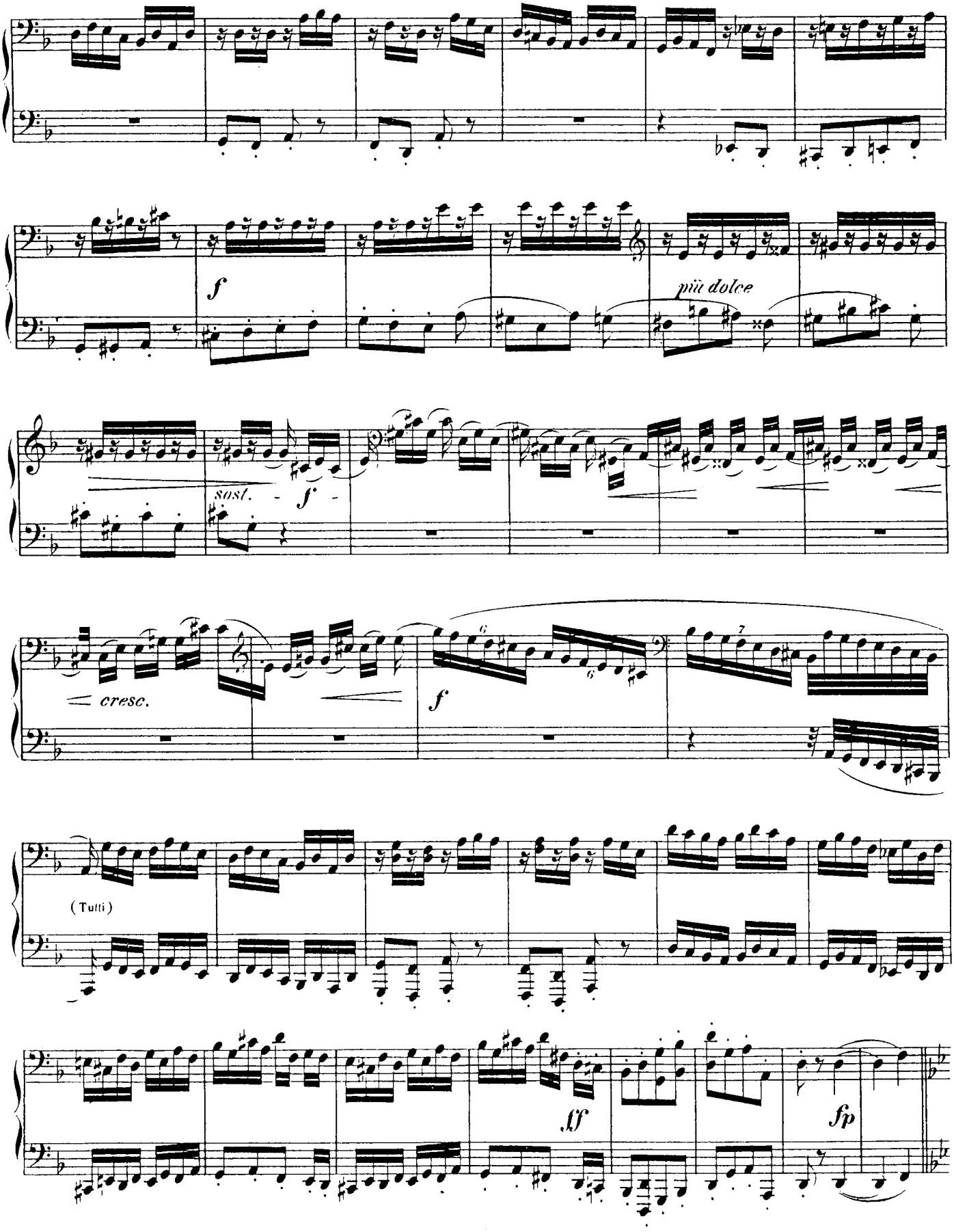
Secondo.



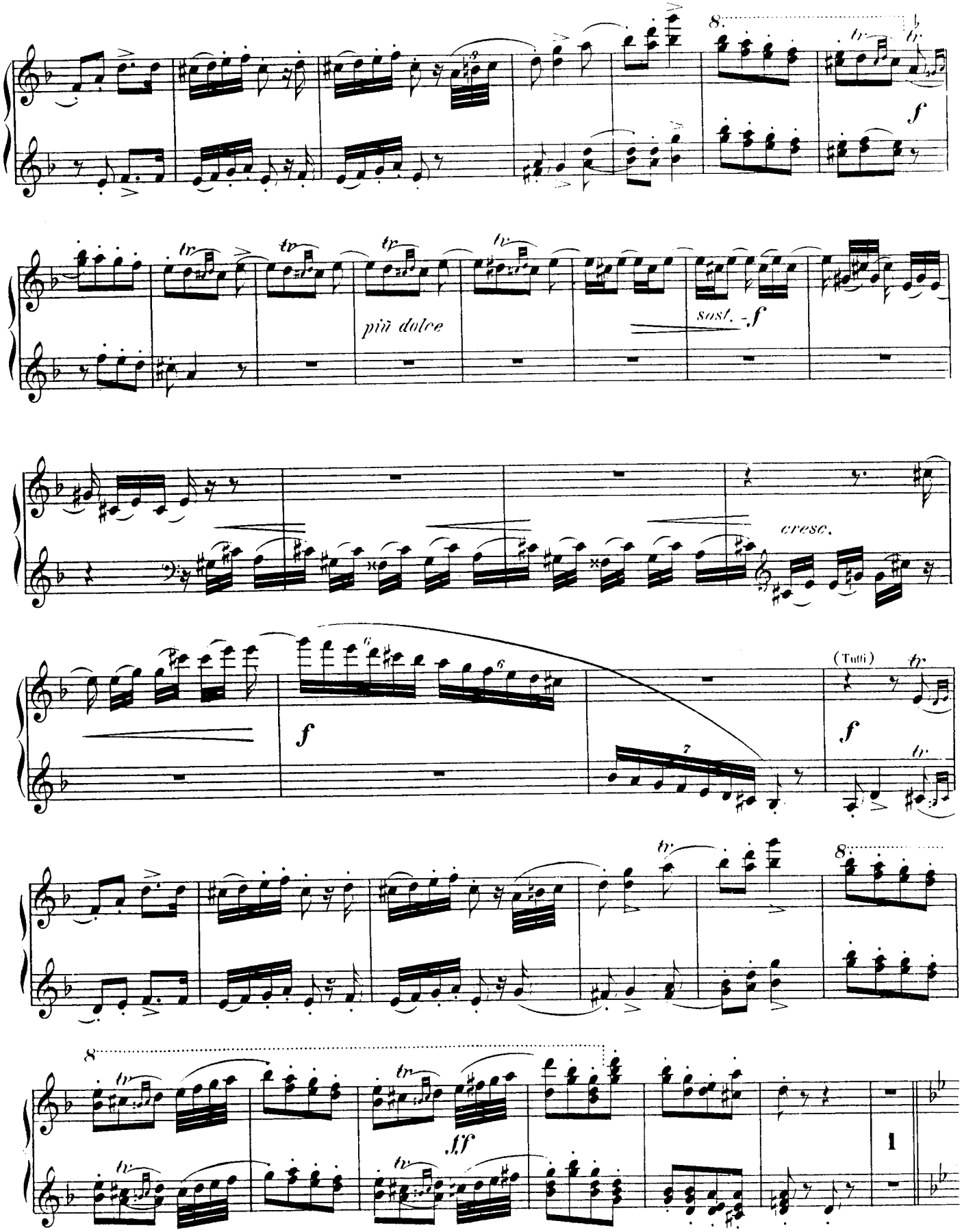
Primo.



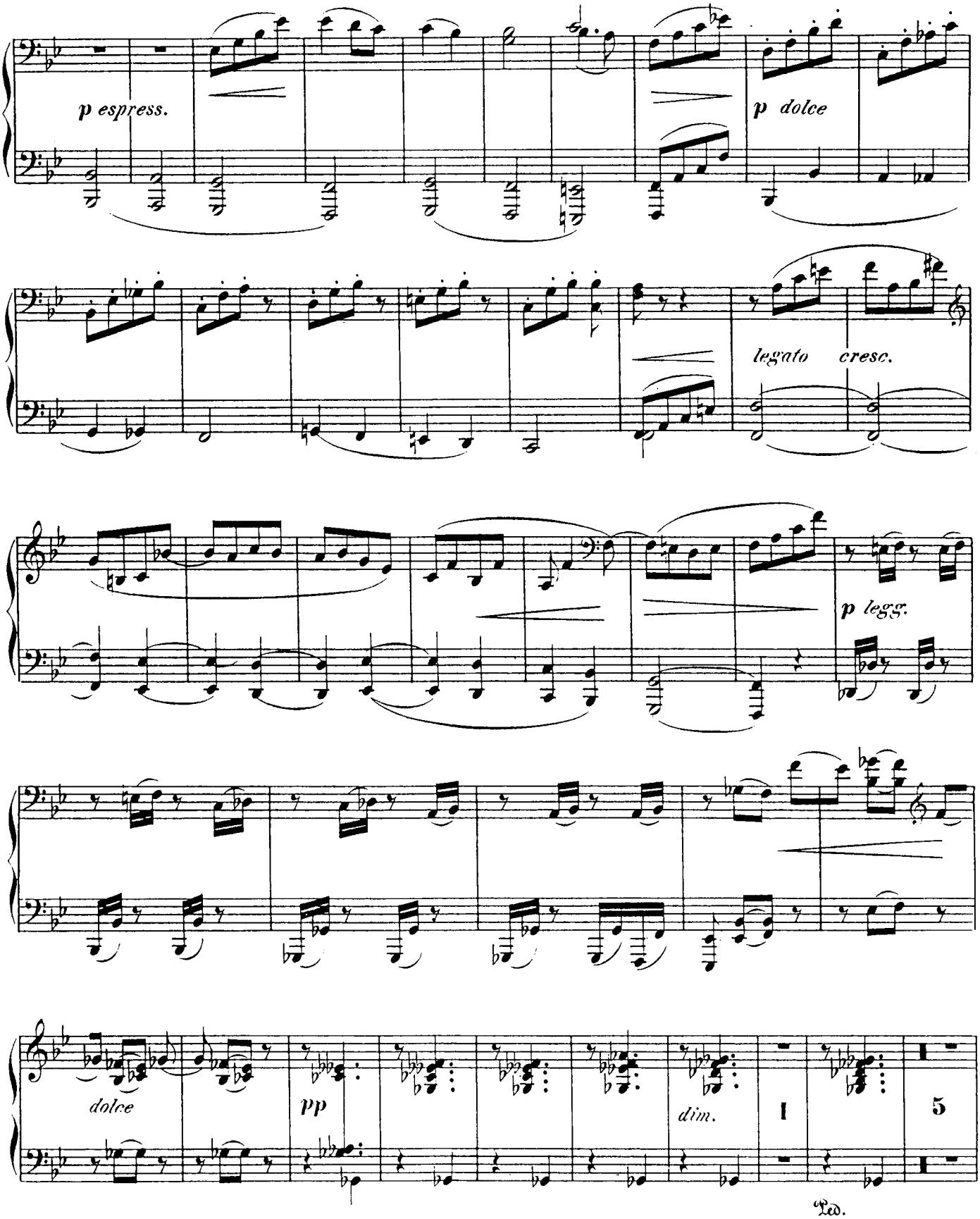
Secondo.



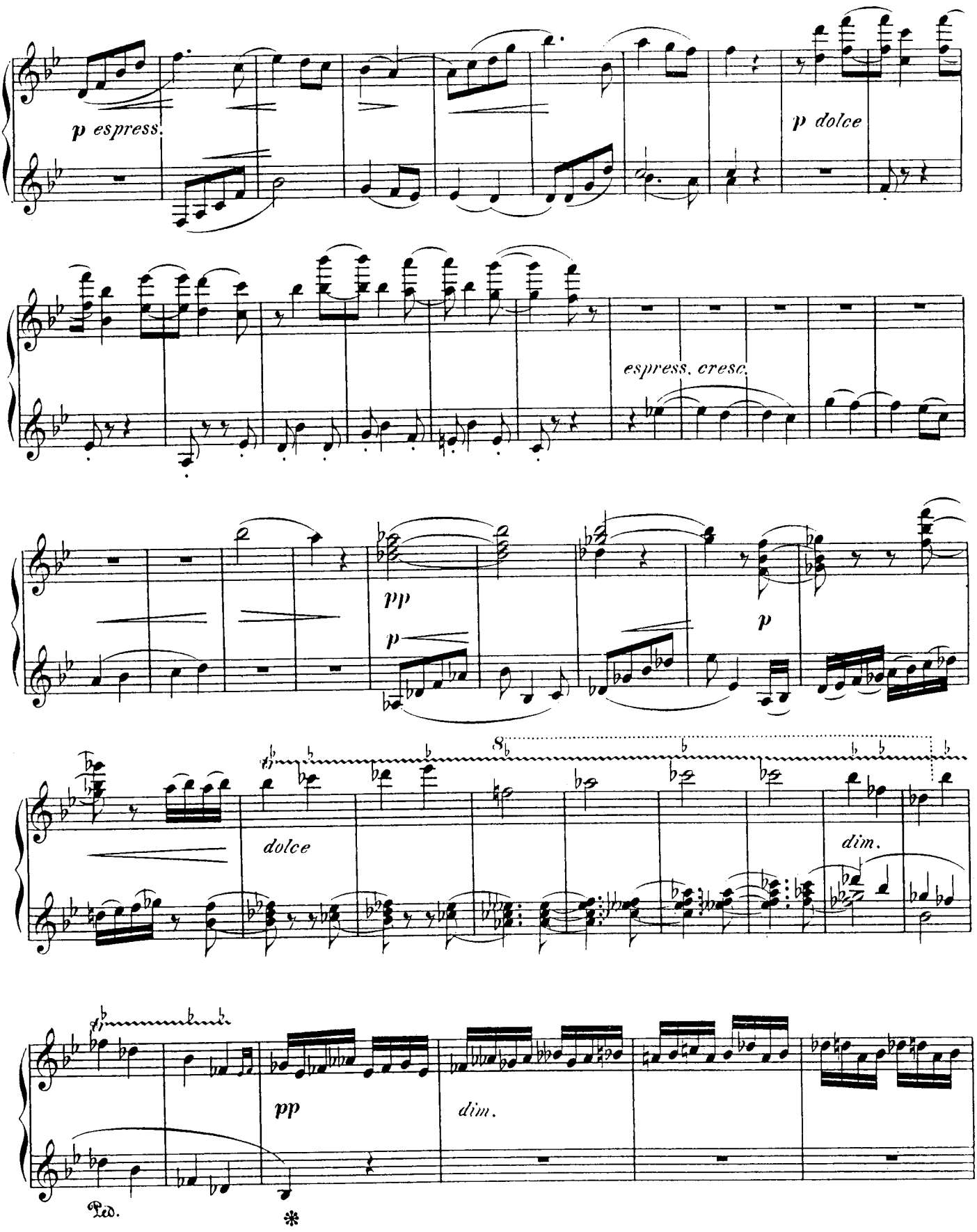
Primo.



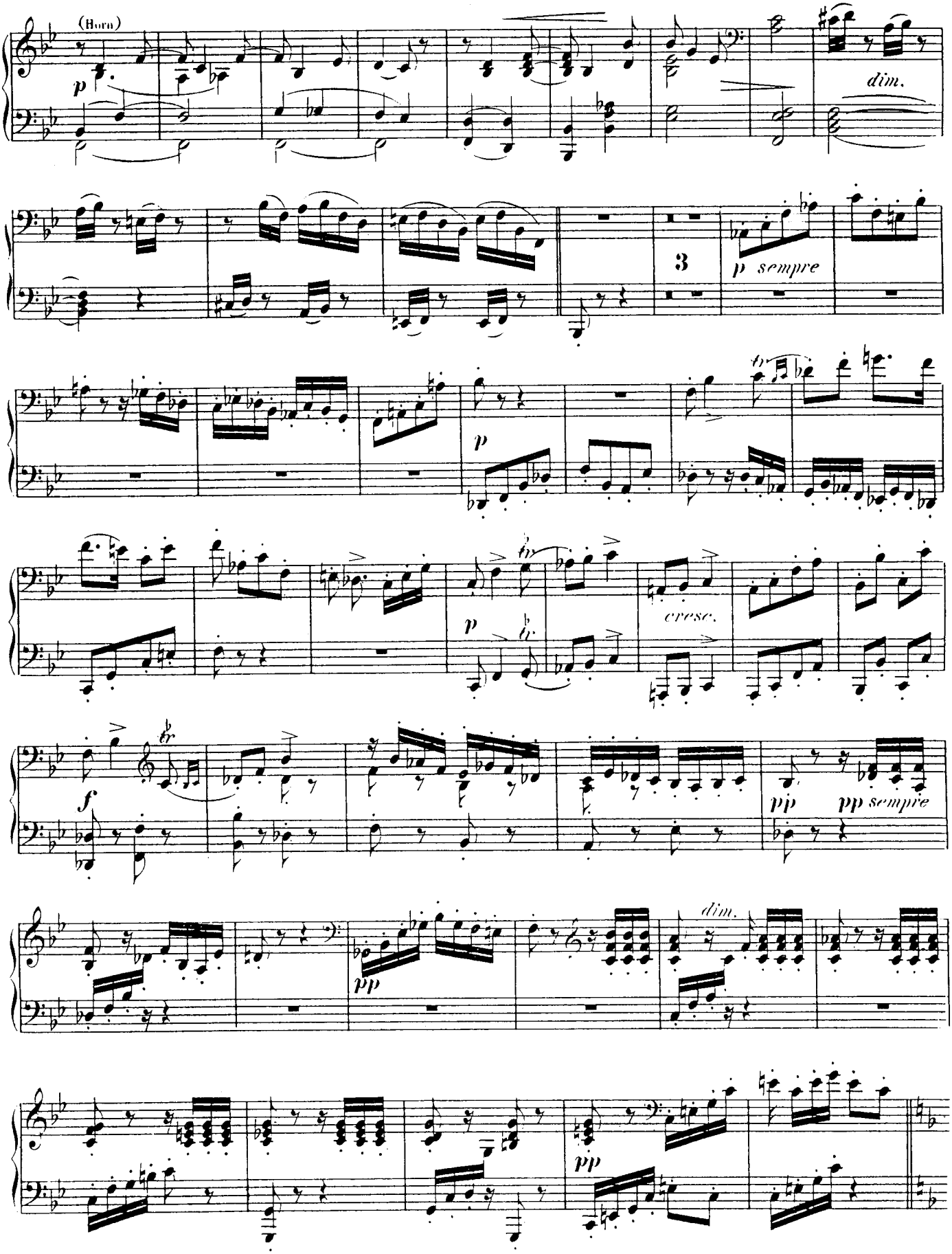
Secondo.

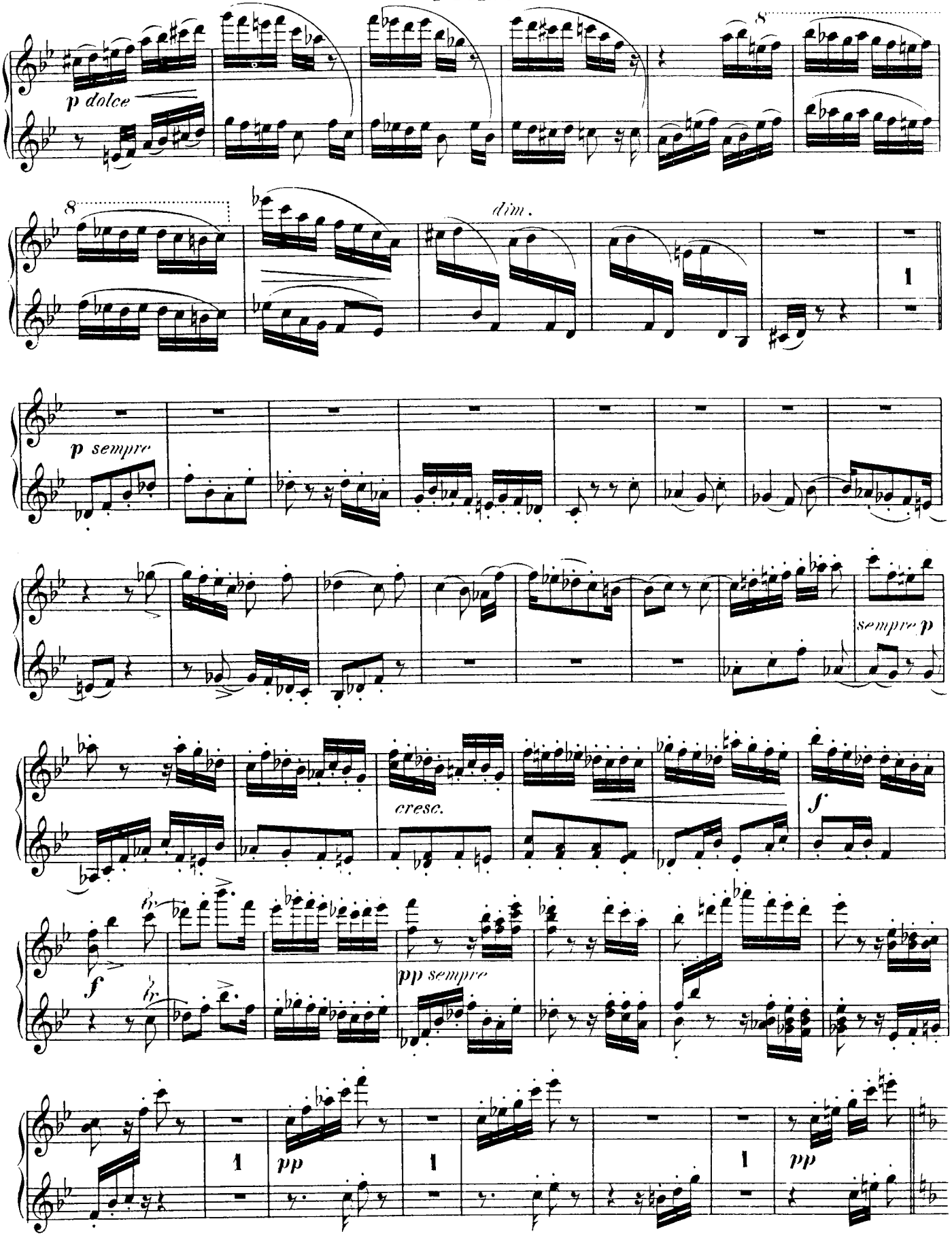


Primo.

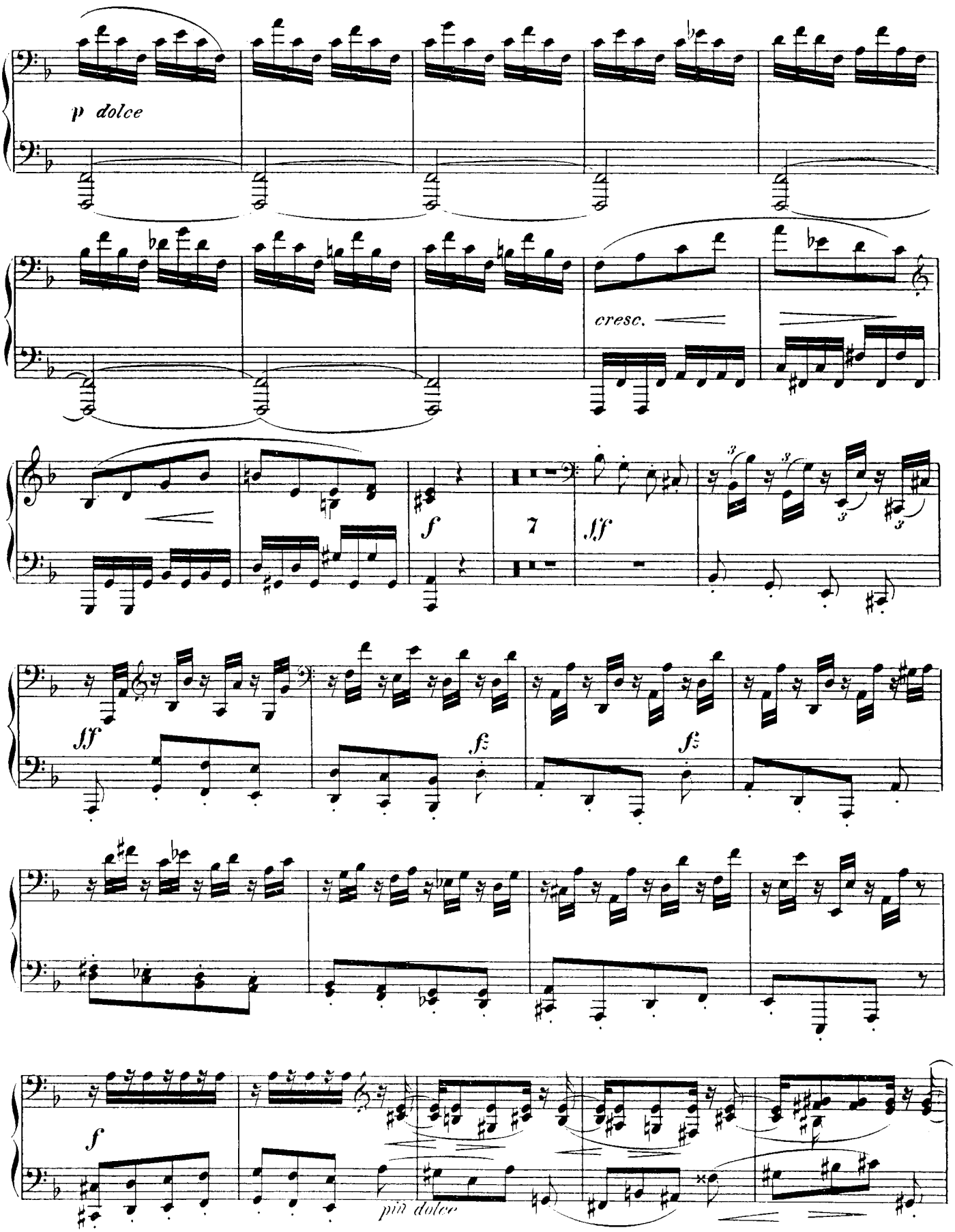


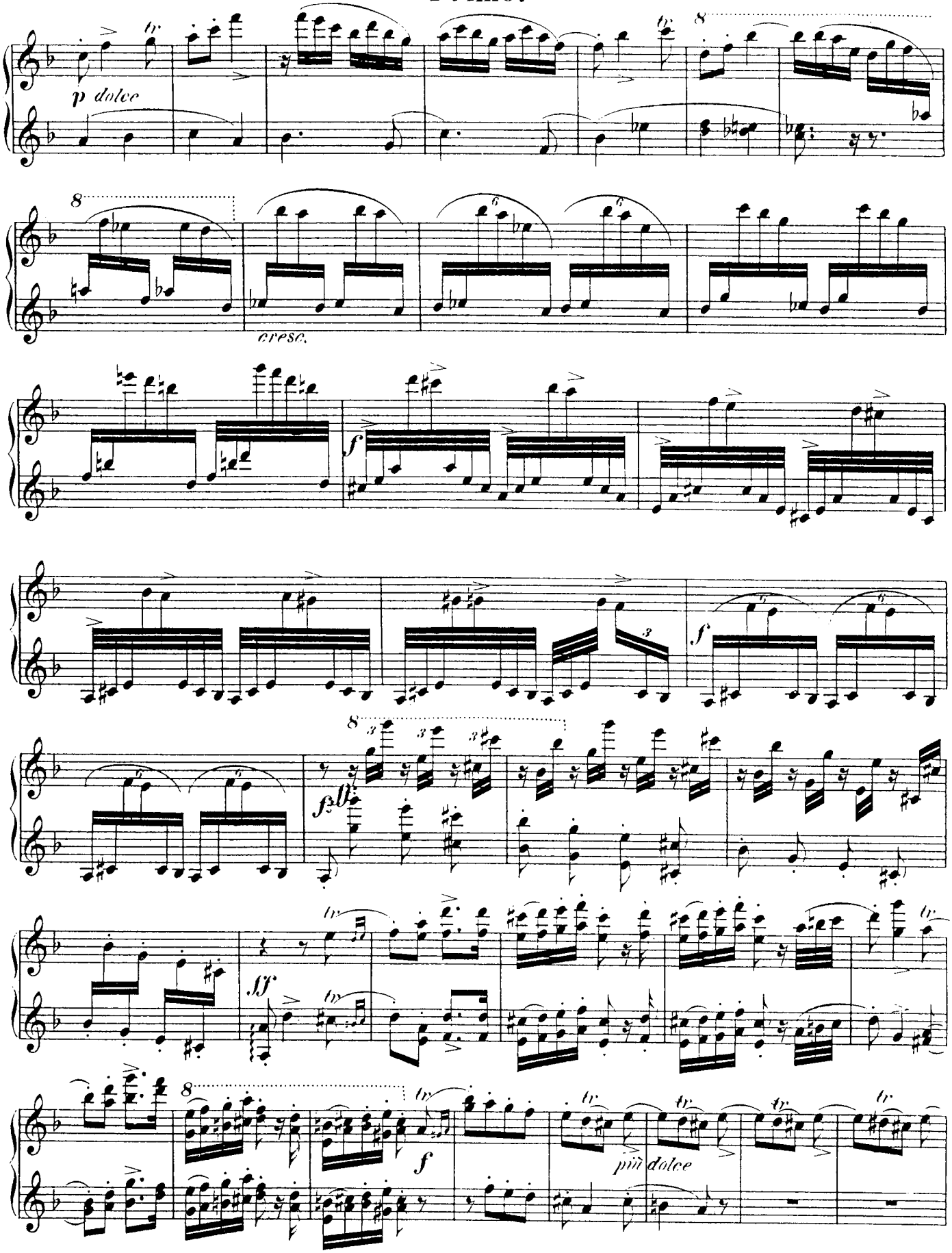
Secondo.




p dolce
8
8
dim.
1
p sempre
sempre p
cresc.
f
f
pp sempre
1
pp
1
1
pp

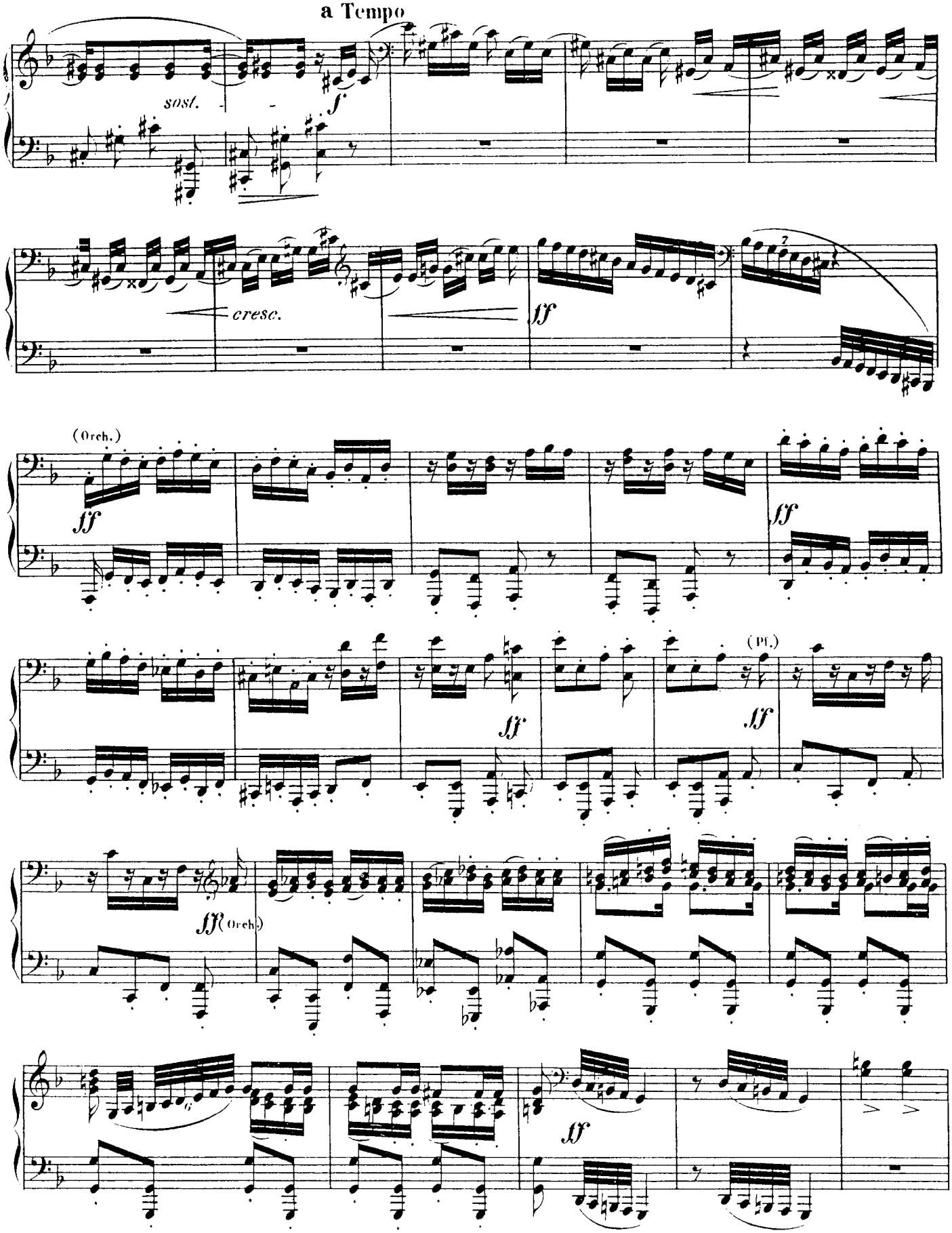
Secondo.




p dolce
cresc.
f
f
ff
f
più dolce

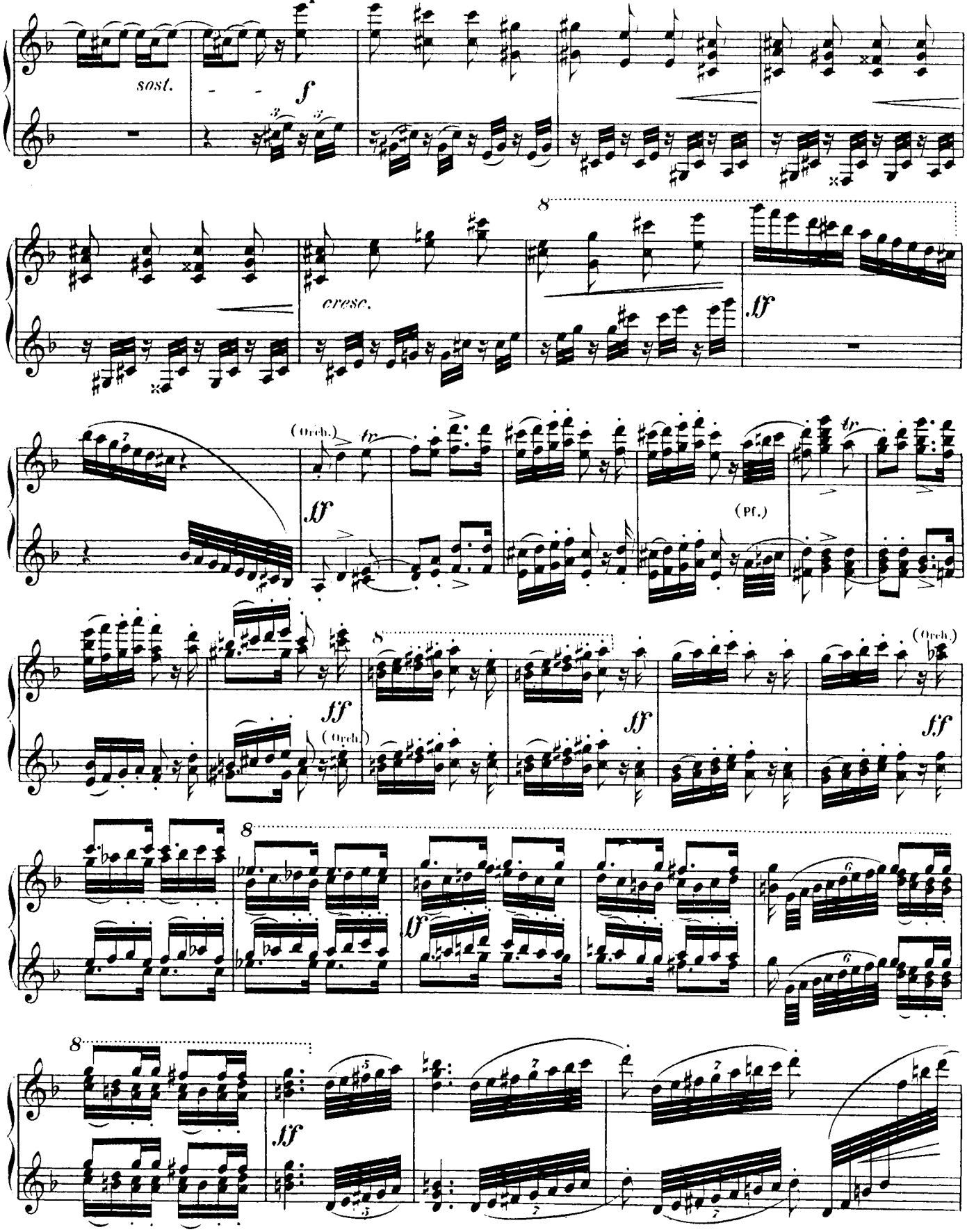
Secondo.

a Tempo

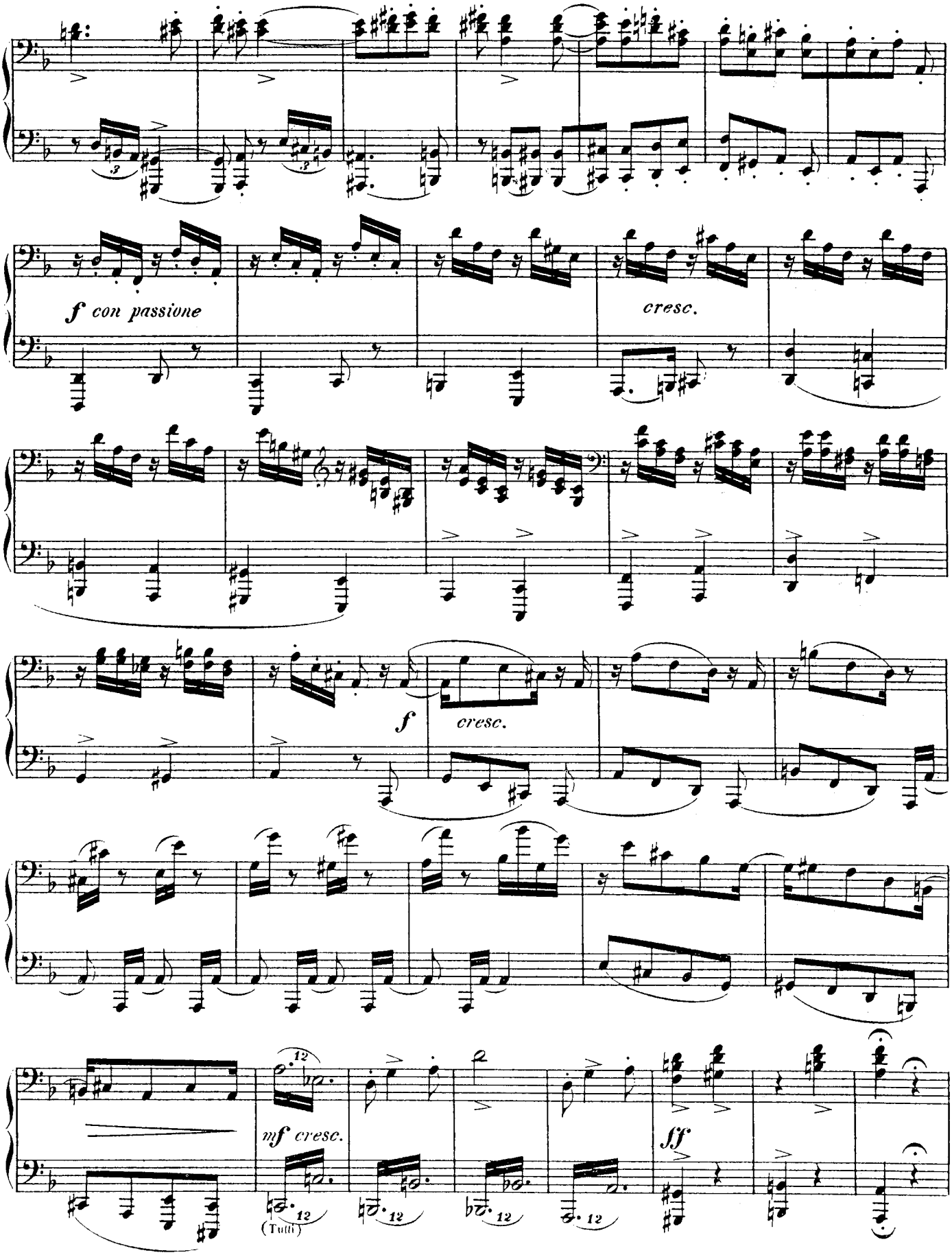


Primo.

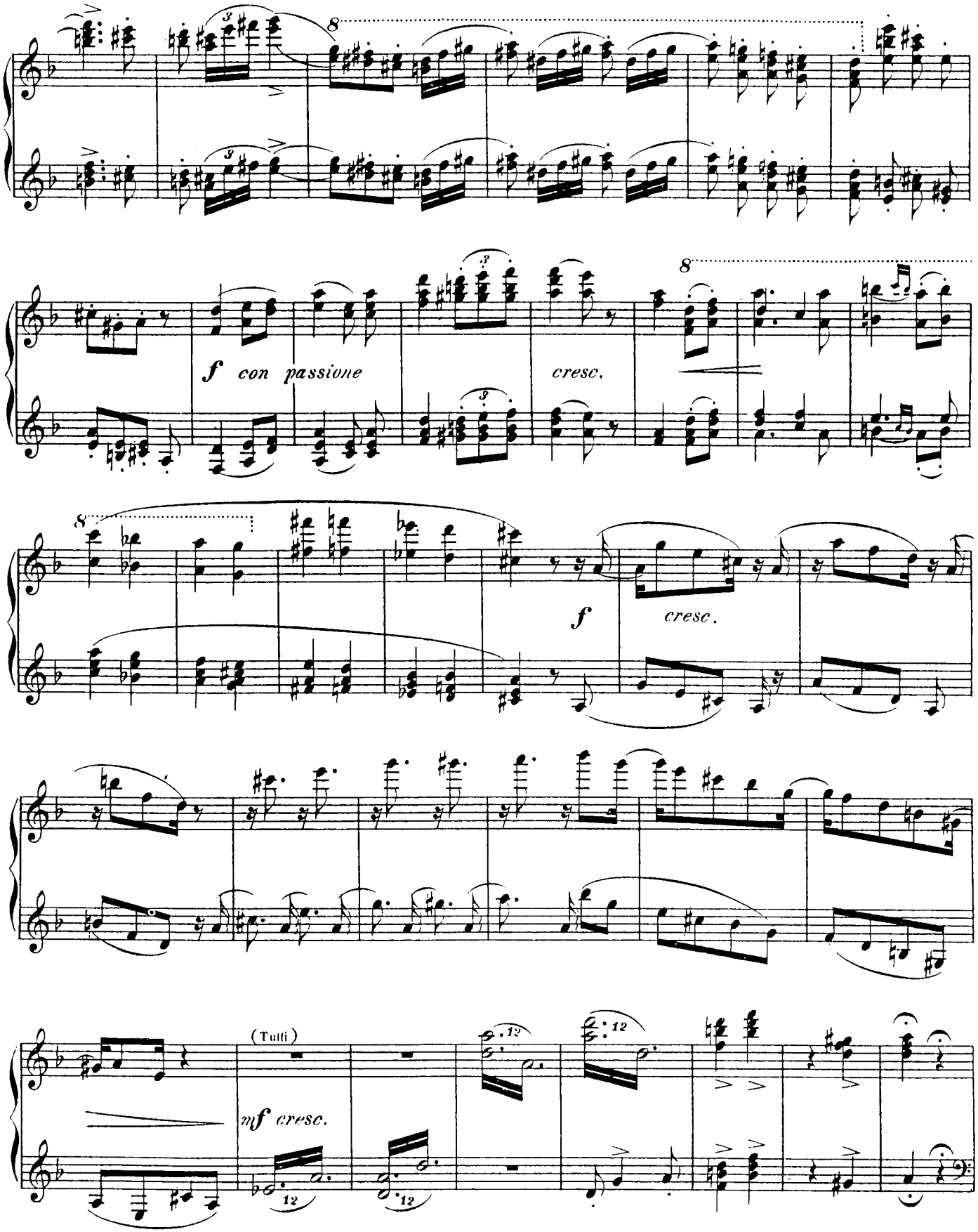
a Tempo



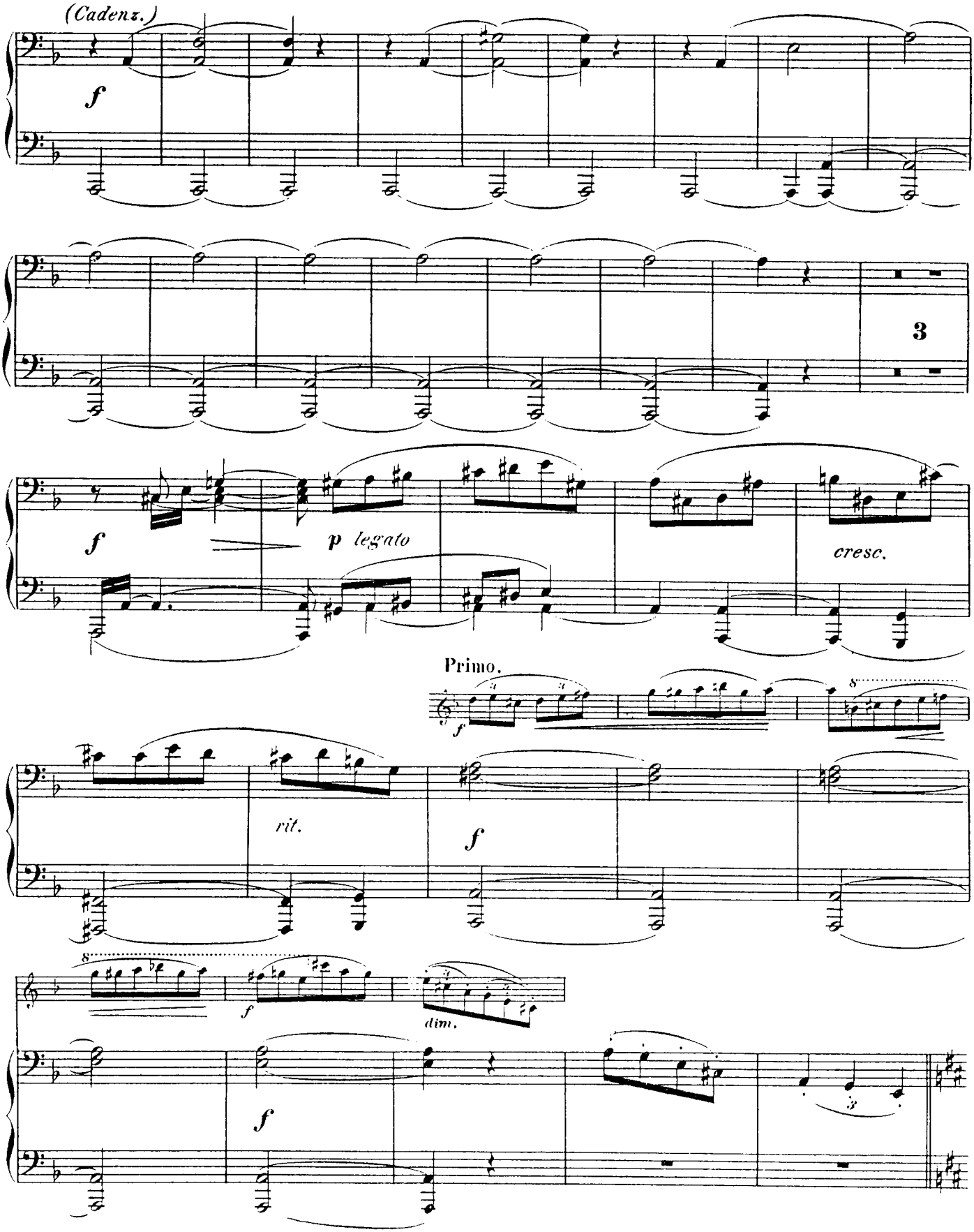
Secondo.



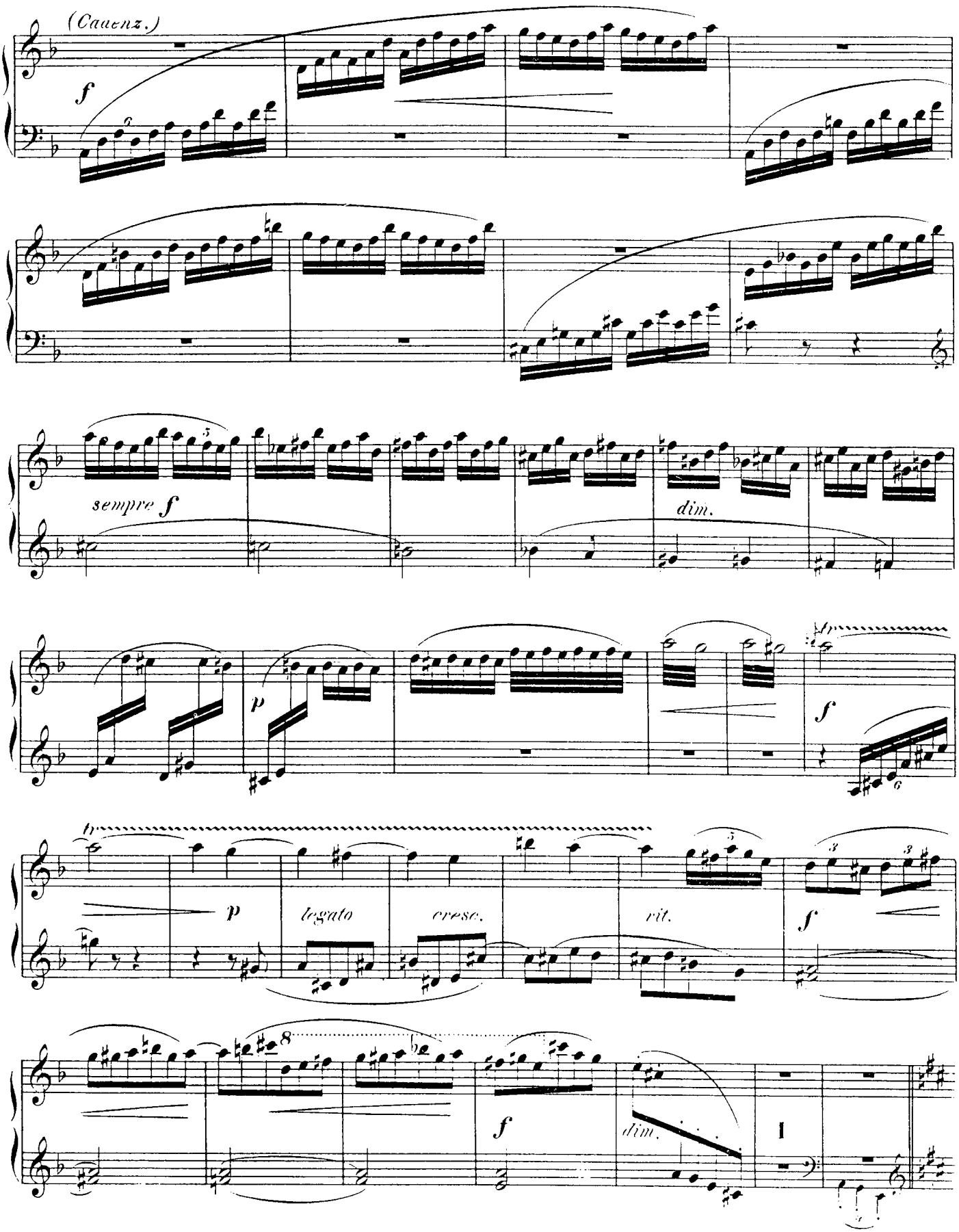
Primo.



Secondo.

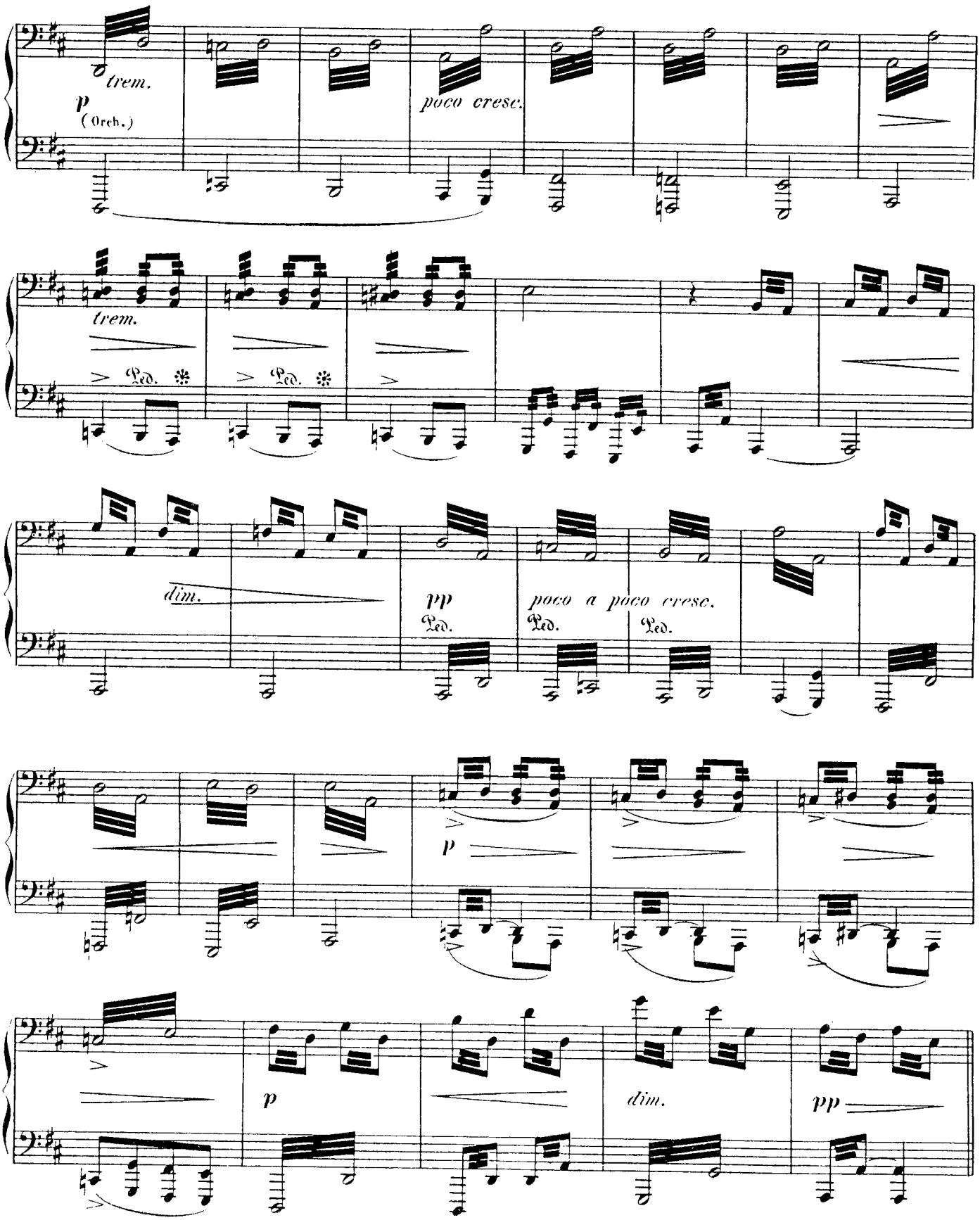


Primo.

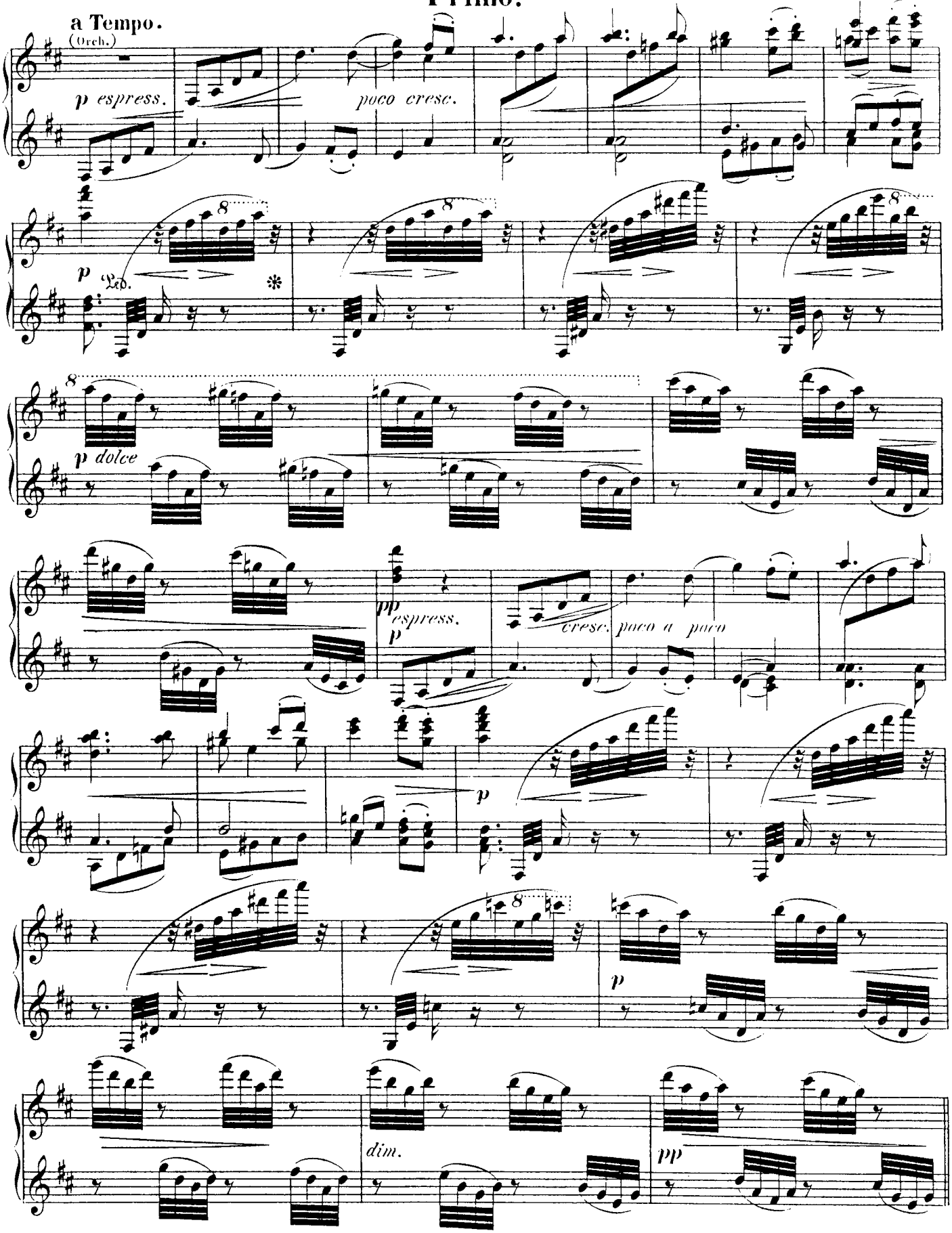


Secondo.

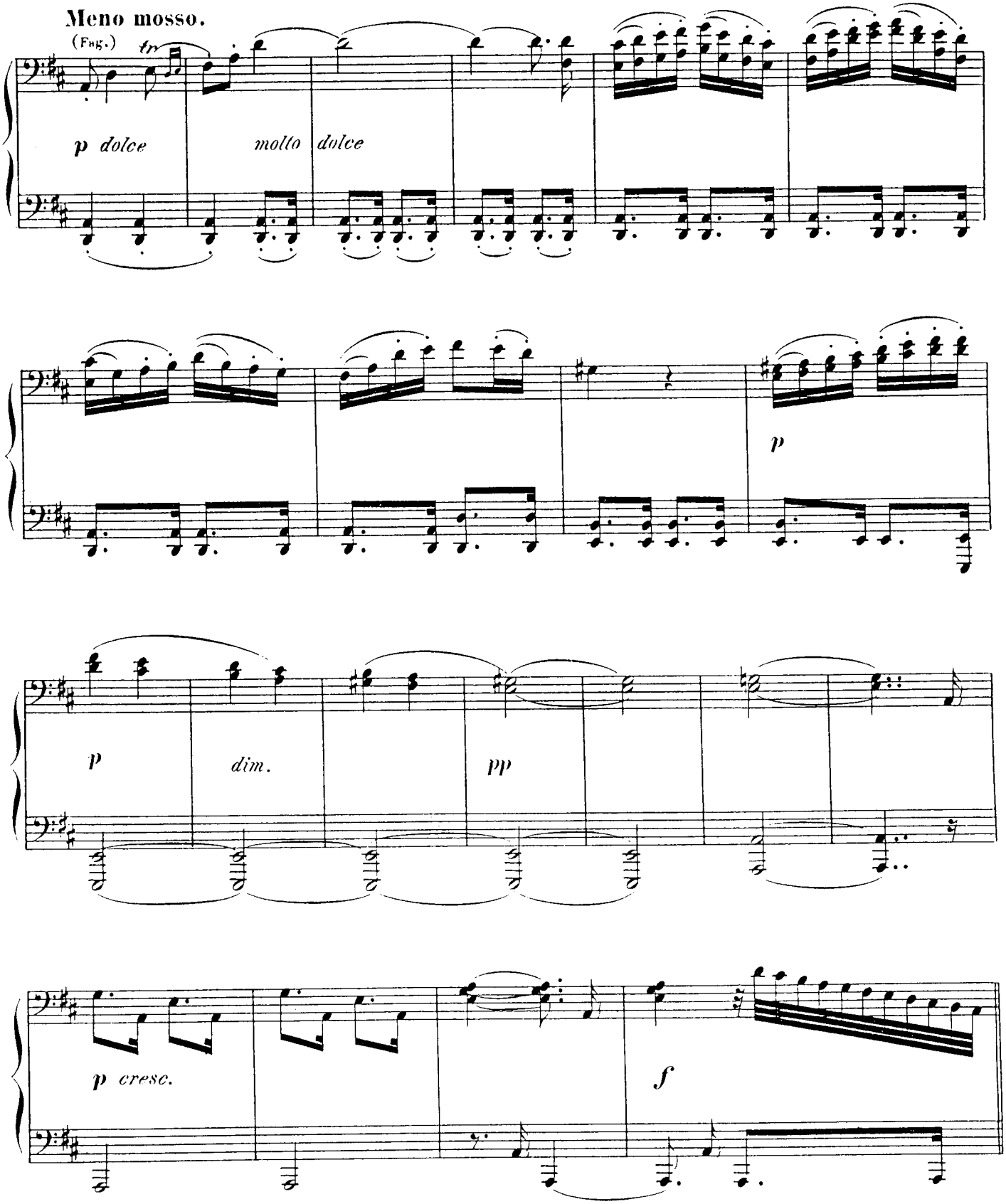
a Tempo.



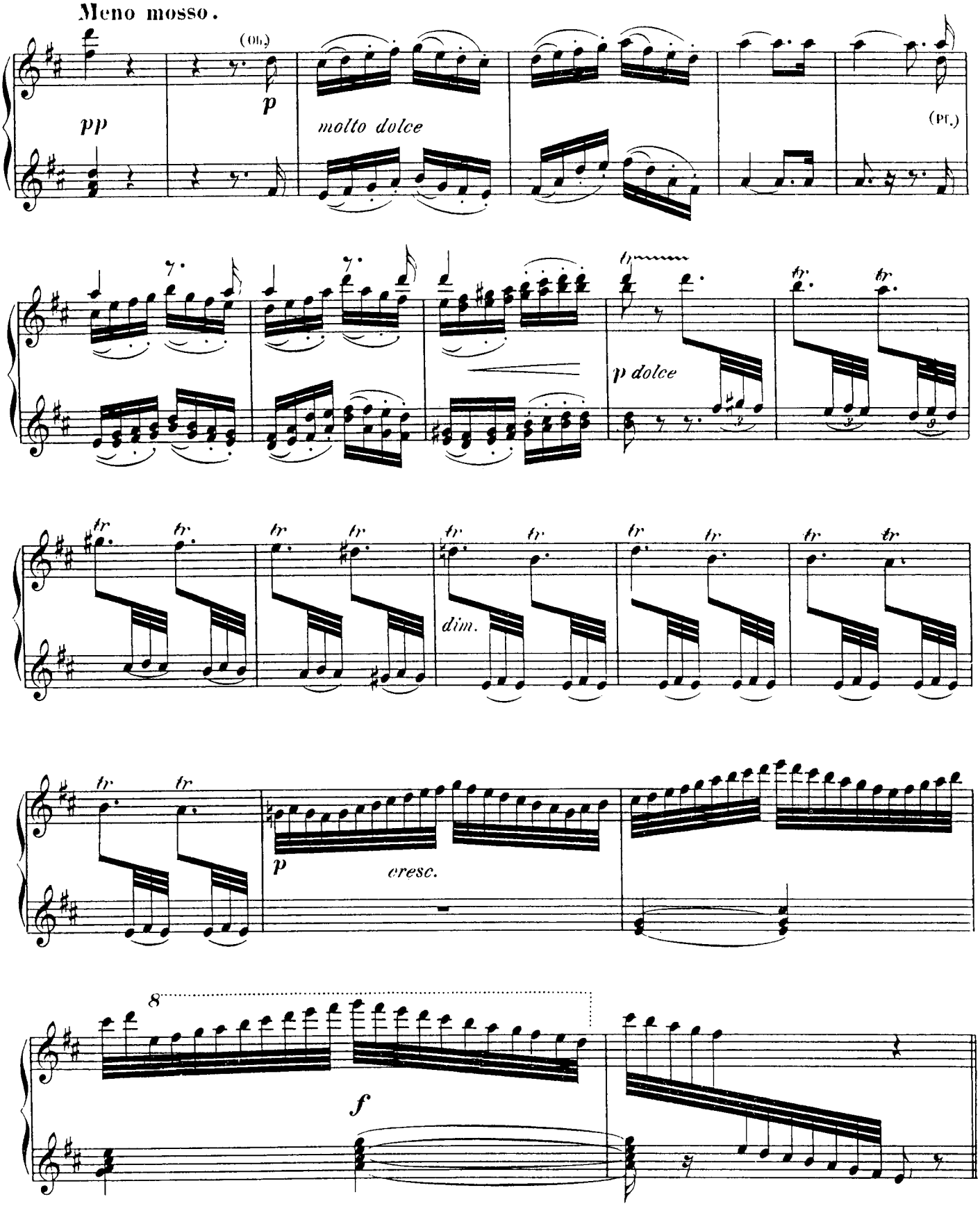
Primo.


a Tempo.
(Orch.)
p espress.
poco cresc.
p
Ped.
*
p dolce
pp
espress.
p
cresc. poco a poco
p
p
dim.
pp

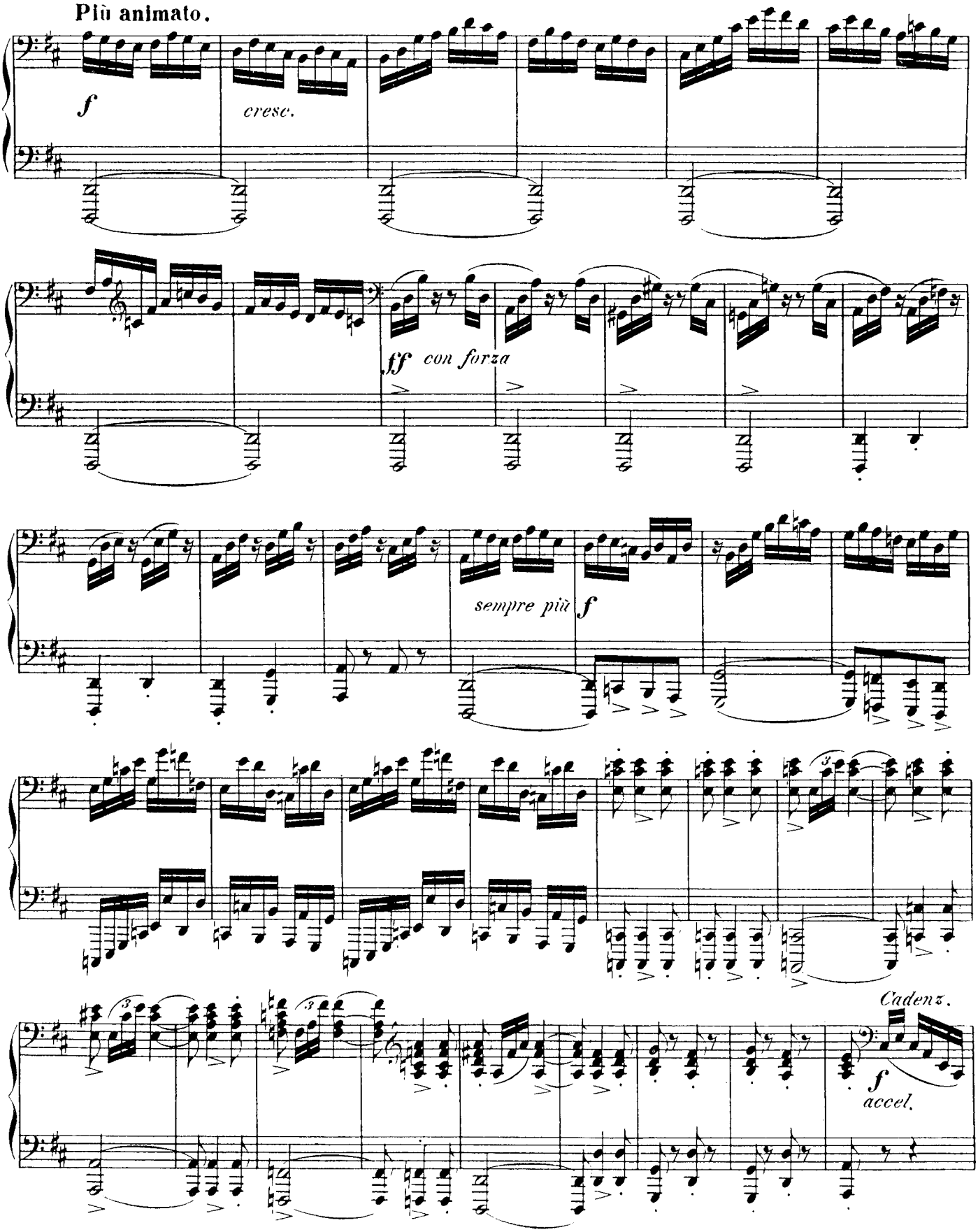
Secondo.



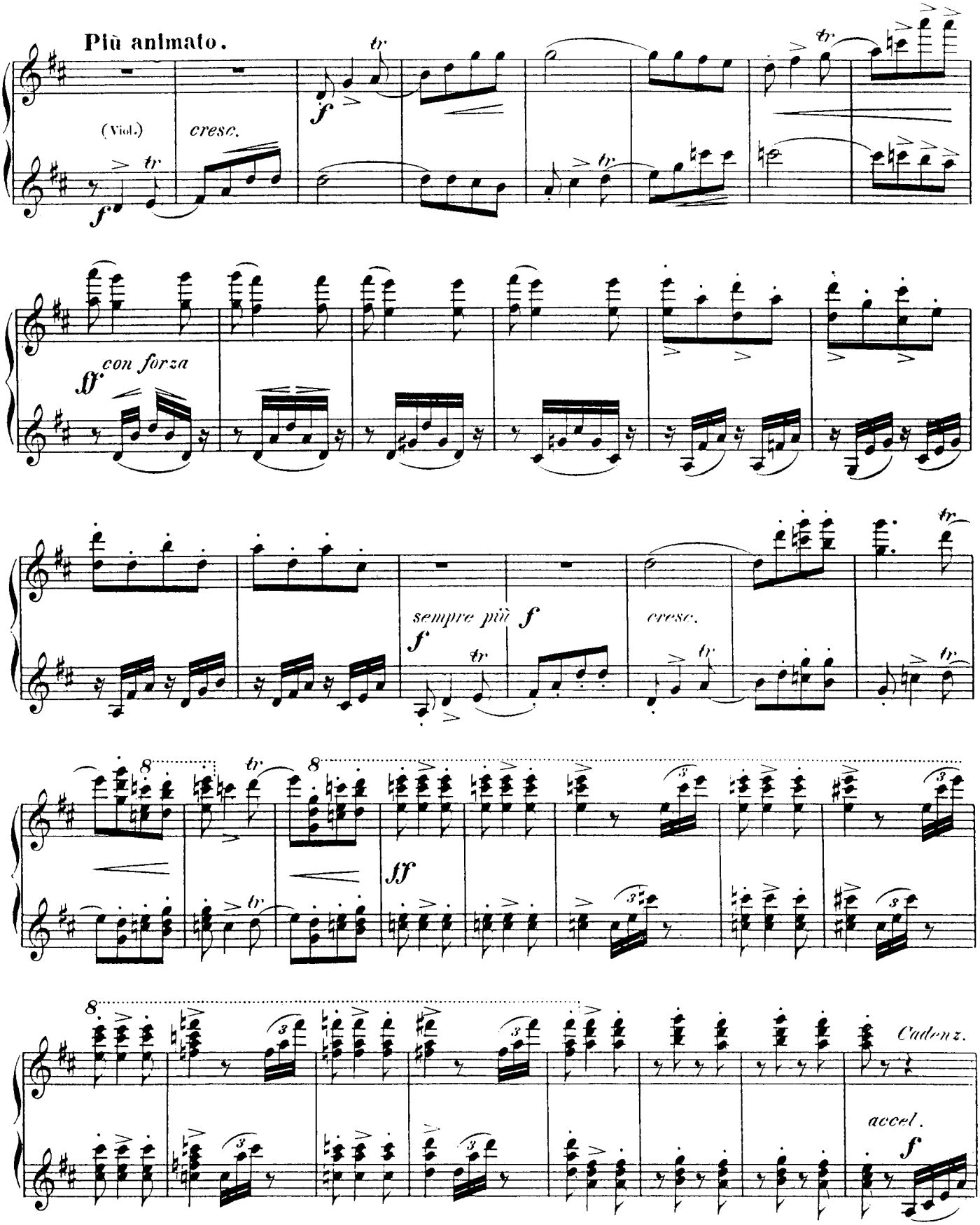
Primo.



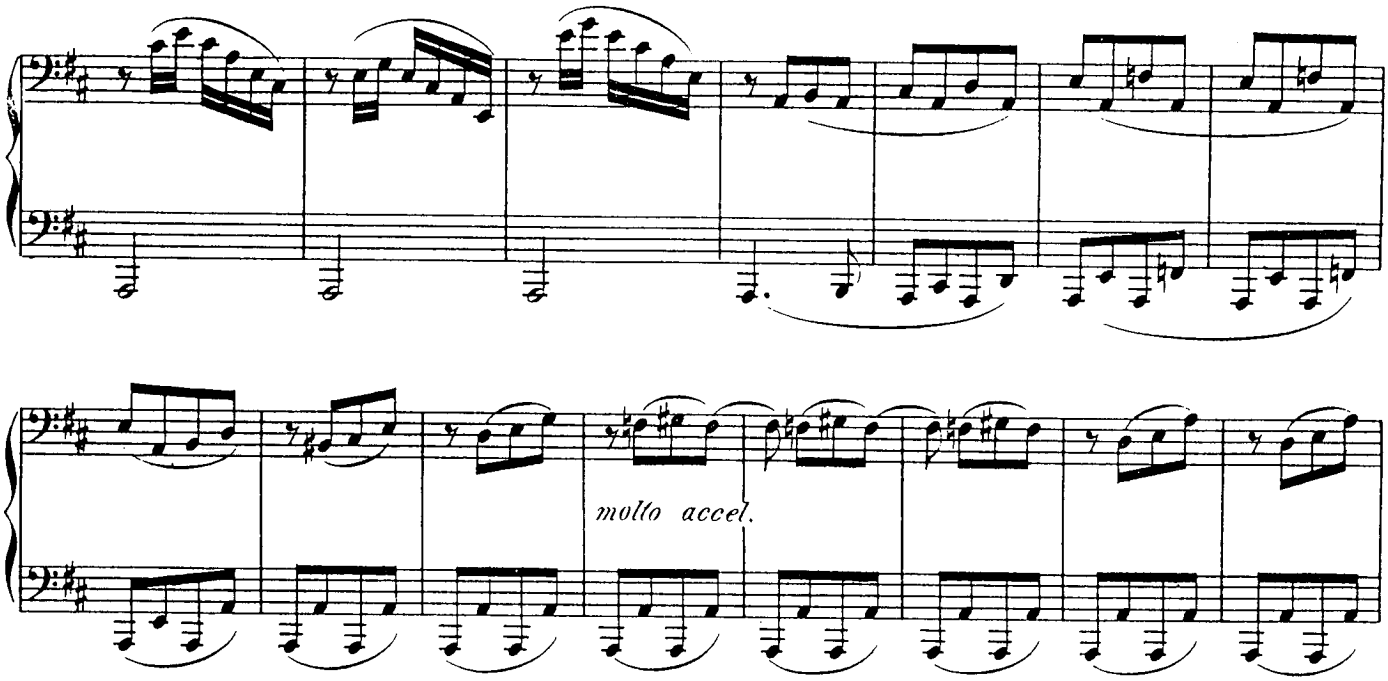
Secondo.



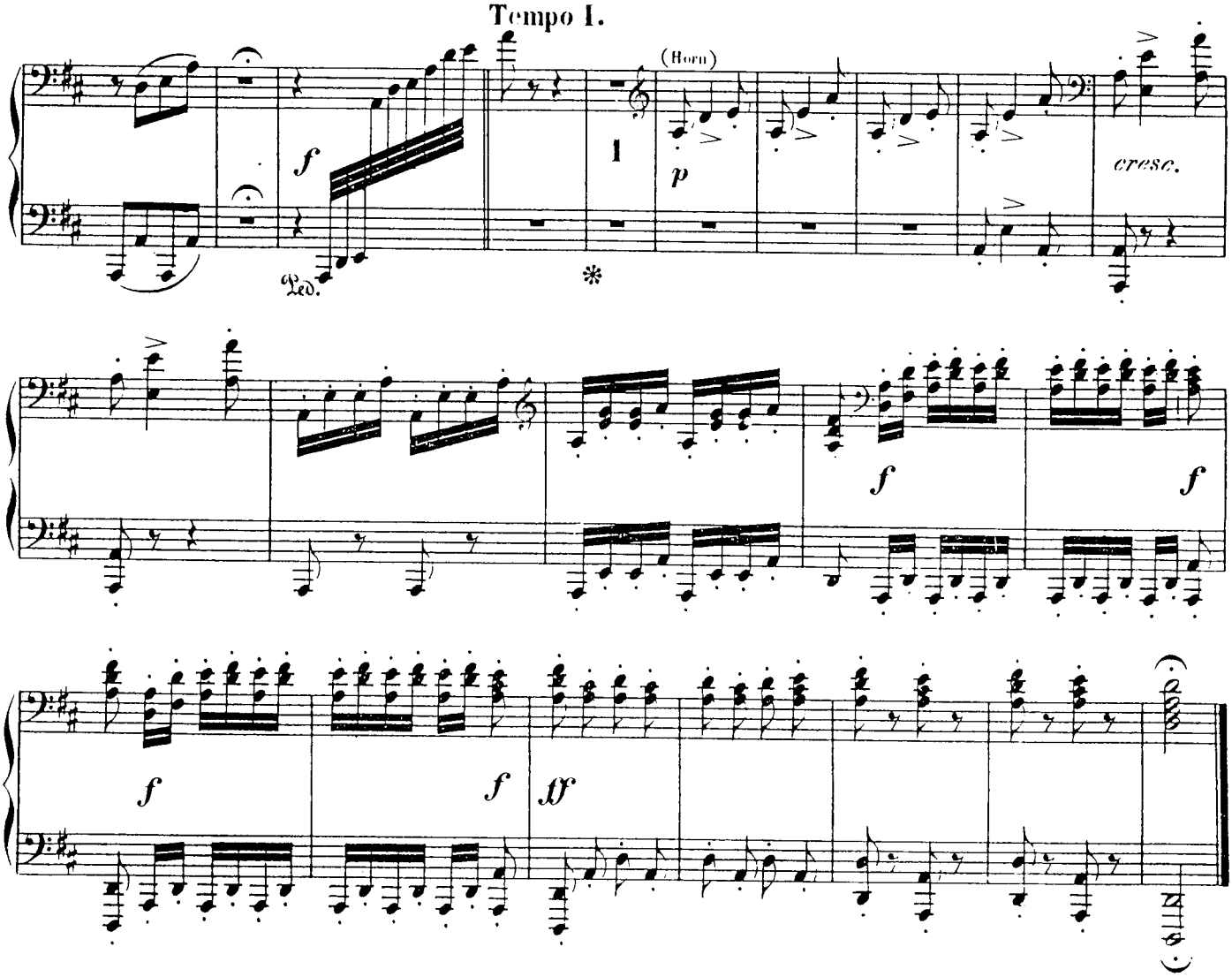
Primo.


Più animato.
(Viol.)
cresc.
con forza
sempre più
cresc.
Cadenz.
accel.

Secondo.

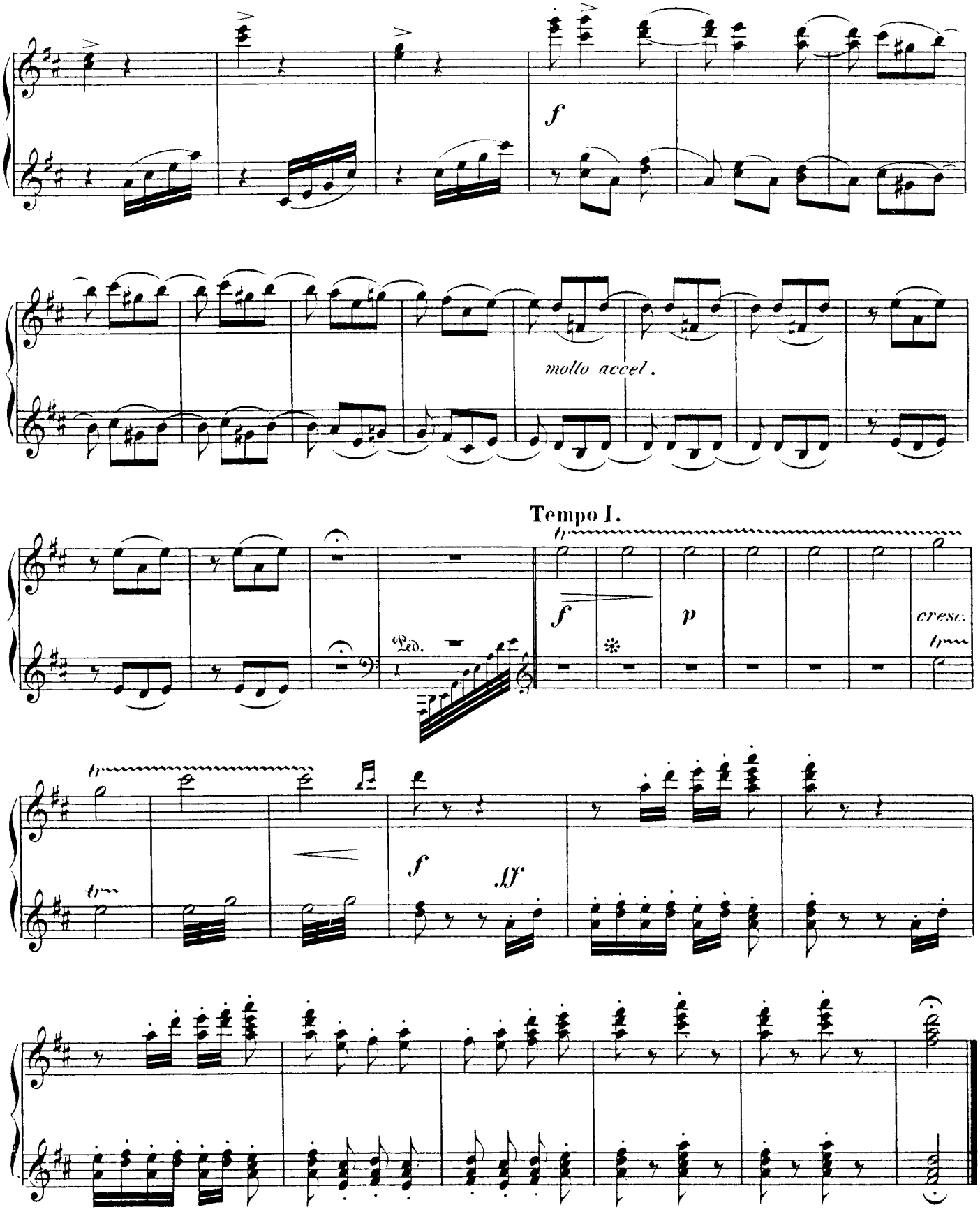


Tempo I.



END OF EDITION

Primo.



END OF EDITION