THE IMPROMPTUS

THE first Chopin Impromptu was published December, 1837; the second, May, 1840; the third, February, 1843; the Fantaisie-Impromptu, 66, was published by Fontana in 1855; it was opus composed about 1834. At least two of these Impromptus are almost denied us because of their eternal iteration; the Fantaisie-Impromptu and the one in A flat, seldom played beautifully, have become commonplaces. A greater Chopin is in the F sharp major Impromptu. It possesses the true impromptu spirit, the wandering, vagrant moods, the restless outpouring of fancy. The G flat is practically neglected; nevertheless, it is charming.

To write of the four Impromptus in their own key of unrestrained feeling, yet pondered intention, would be as difficult as recapturing the first careless rapture of the lark. With all the freedom of an improvisation the Chopin Impromptu has a well-defined form. There is a structural sense, though the pattern is free and original. The mood-color is not much varied in the first, third and fourth, but in the second there is a Ballade-like quality that hints at the tragic. The A flat Impromptu, opus 29, is, if one is pinned down to the title, the happiest named of the set. Its prankish, nimble, bubbling style is indicated from the start. The D natural in the treble against the C in the bass was once an original effect, while the flowing triplets of the first part lend a ductile, gracious, high-bred character. The chromatic involutions are many and interesting. When the F minor section is reached, the ear experiences the relief of a strongly contrasted rhythm. The simple duple measure, so naturally ornamented, is broadly melodious. After the return of the first theme there is a *coda*, and with a few chords in which *chiaroscuro* is suggested the composition rests. *Rubato* should be employed, for, as Kleczynski says: "Here everything totters from foundation to summit, and nevertheless, everything is so clear, so beautiful."

There is more pure grace of line and *limpidezza* in this first Impromptu than in the second, opus 36, in F sharp major. Here symmetry is abandoned, but compensation is offered because of intenser emotional issues. There is something sphinx-like in this work. Its nocturnal beginning with the carillon bass—the sunken bell!—the sweet-grave close of the episode, the faint hoof-beats of an approaching cavalcade, with the swelling thunder of its passage, surely suggest a narrative, a programme. After the D major picture there are two bars of anonymous modulation as "modern" as Schoenberg—these bars creak on their hinges—and the first subject reappears in F, climbs to F sharp, thence merges into a melodic, glittering organ-point, with brilliant scale-passages, the whole subsiding into an echo of earlier harmonies. The final octaves are usually marked *fortissimo*, which always seems brutal. Yet its logic may lie imbedded in the scheme of the composer. Perhaps he wished to harshly arouse us from dreamland—as was his habit when improvising for friends; a *glissando* or a crashing chord would send them home shivering after an evening of delicious reverie. Niecks finds this Impromptu lacking the pith of the first, but for me it is of more moment than the other three. In outline it is as irregular and wavering, the moods errant and capricious, yet it would be bold to deny its power, its beauty. In its use of accessory figures it does not reveal much ingenuity, but just because the "figure in the carpet" is not so varied in pattern its passion is all the deeper. It is a species of Ballade, sadder, more meditative of the tender grace of a vanished day.

The third Impromptu in G flat, opus 51, is not often played. It may be too difficult for the student with an average technique, yet one hardly ventures to maintain that it is as fresh in feeling, as spontaneous in utterance, as its companions. There are touches of the *blasé*, of the jaded, the *rococo*, and in sentiment it is hardly profound. There are snake-like curves in triplets, as in the first Impromptu; but with interludes of double-notes, in coloring tropical and rich to morbidity. The E flat minor trio is a fine bit of melodic writing. The absence of simplicity is counterbalanced by greater freedom in modulation and complexity of pattern. But the Impromptu flavor is not missing, and there is allied to delicacy of design a strangeness, which Edgar Poe has declared should be a constituent of all great art. Opus 66 is a true Impromptu, although the prefix of Fantaisie given it by Fontana is superfluous. The piece presents some difficulties, chiefly of the rhythmic order. Its involuted first phrases suggest the Bellinian *coloratura* so dear to Chopin, but the D flat part is without nobility. Here is the same sort of saccharine melody that makes mawkish the trio of the Funeral March. There seems no fear that the Fantaisie-Impromptu will suffer from neglect, as it is the joy of the amateur, who usually transforms its *presto* into a slow, blurred mass of badly related rhythms and its slower episode into a long-drawn, sentimental agony. But in the hands of an adept pianist the C sharp minor Impromptu is of a charm, though not of great depth.

George Mathias once sketched Chopin for me in a few sincere strokes. His alluring, hesitating, gracious, feminine manner, coupled with his air of supreme distinction, were very attractive. M. Mathias—dear, old, charming gentleman, how well I remember him during the year 1878 at Paris—spoke to me of Chopin's way of holding his shoulders high, after the Polish style. Chopin often met Kalkbrenner, his antipodes in everything but breeding. Chopin's coat was buttoned close and high, the buttons black; those of Kalkbrenner were of gold. How Chopin disliked the pompous old pianist with his affected airs and his stinginess! Mathias was gleeful when he spoke of Kalkbrenner's offer to teach the Pole. "I believe it was Kalkbrenner who needed lessons from Chopin," he said. At Louis Viardot's Chopin met Thalberg; and that master of the arpeggio, and also of one of the finest singing touches ever heard on a keyboard, received with feigned humility the compliments of the Polish pianist, not altogether believing in their sincerity. Perhaps he was right, as Chopin mocked his mechanical style when his back was turned, his imitation of the old-fashioned "Moses in Egypt" fantaisie being very funny, according to Mathias. It must be remembered that Chopin, with all his Slavic poetry, his melancholy, and rather haughty bearing, was an astounding mimic and on his happy days full of fun and tricks. Bocage said he had in him the making of a great actor. His parodies of other pianists were not always without a sparkle of malice, and his power of sudden alteration of his personality was said by Sand and Liszt to have been remarkable.

"What a jury of pianists," cried Mathias, "in the old palmy days of the Salle Érard! Doehler, Dreyschock, Leopold de Meyer, Zimmerman, Thalberg, Kalkbrenner—how they all curiously examined the Polish black swan, with his original style and extraordinary technique." Chopin admired Weber. Their natures were alike aristocratic. Once, after Mathias had played the chivalric sonata in A flat, Chopin exclaimed: "An angel passes in the sky." Mathias first knew Chopin in 1840 at the Chaussée d'Antin, No. 38. The house no longer stands, having been demolished by the cutting through of the Rue Lafayette. Later he moved to the Rue Tronchet, No. 5. The house is still there—or was when I last saw it ten years ago. Chopin occupied the *rez-de-chaussée*. The first piece of music brought by Mathias at his lesson was by Kalkbrenner and called—oh, horrible!—"Une Pensée de Bellini!" Chopin looked at it, made no comment, for he was diplomatic, and gave the boy the Moscheles Studies and the A minor Concerto of Hummel. When Chopin was sick Fontana gave his master's lessons. One day that Chopin was ill, he received his visitors lying on a couch. Mathias noticed a copy of Schumann's "Carneval." He asked his master what he thought of the strange music, but Chopin answered in icy accents, as if the mere idea of the composition were painful to him. He never spoke well of music in which the form shocked his taste—himself the form-breaker—and so said as little as possible. And poor, devoted Robert Schumann in Germany, pouring out inky rhapsodies over Chopin! Chopin, added Mathias, did not boast the intellectual fibre of Berlioz or Liszt. He was a simple man—"je ne veux pas dire simple esprit." Of the Impromptus, Mathias told me the second and third were his favorites, particularly the second. And he never played twice alike, always making some subtle nuance or slight change in the tempo, or a topsy-turvying of dynamics. Chopin was the chameleon among pianists.

James Huneker

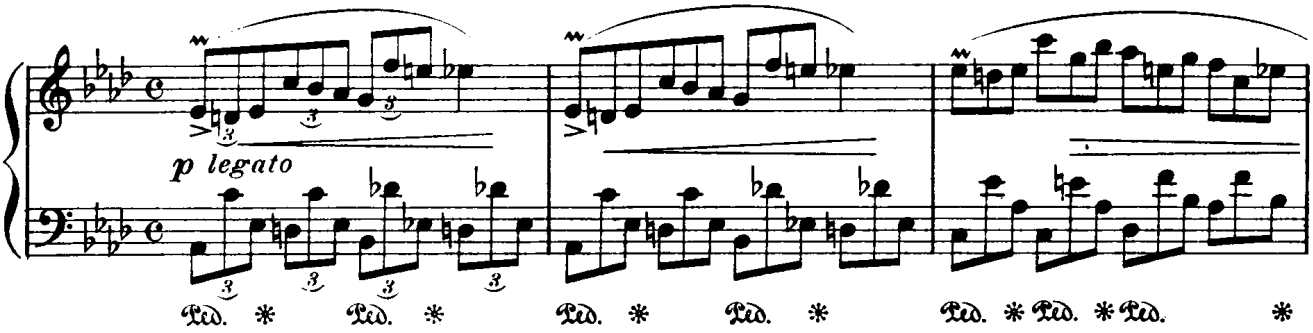
Thematic Index

IMPROMPTUS

Impromptu

Op. 29

Allegro assai, quasi presto



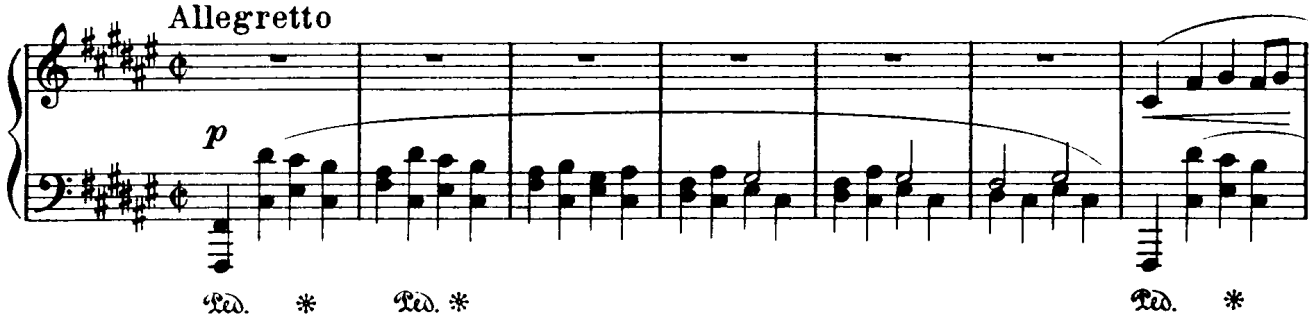
1
A♭ Major

Page 3

Impromptu

Op. 36

Allegretto



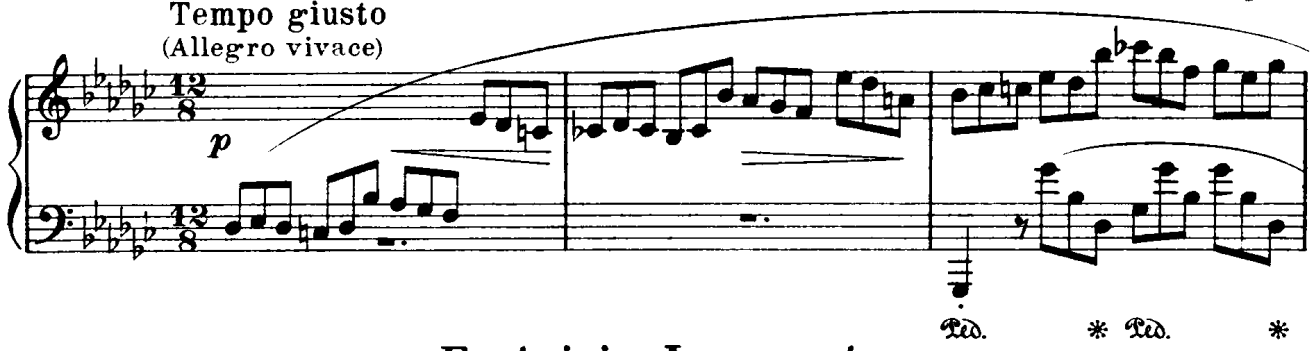
2
F♯ Major

Page 10

Impromptu

Op. 51

Tempo giusto
(Allegro vivace)



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G♭ Major

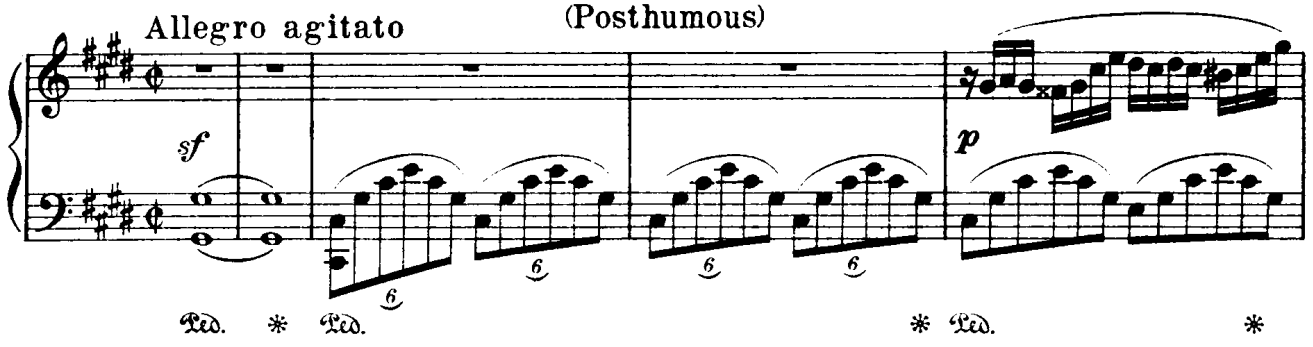
Page 18

Fantaisie-Impromptu

Op. 66

(Posthumous)

Allegro agitato



4
C♯ Minor

Page 24

Impromptus

I

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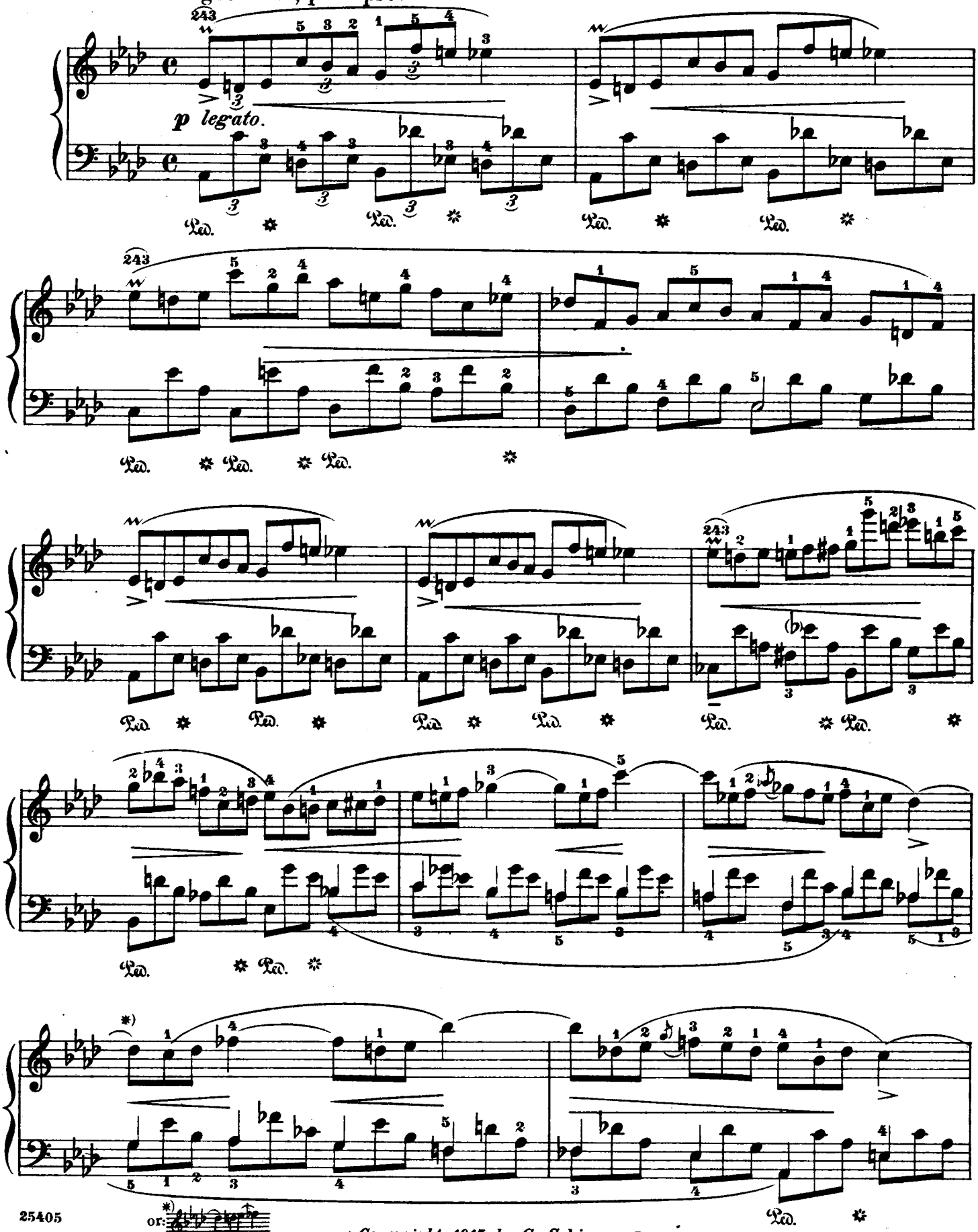
à Mlle la Comtesse de Lobau

F. Chopin. Op. 29

Allegro assai, quasi presto



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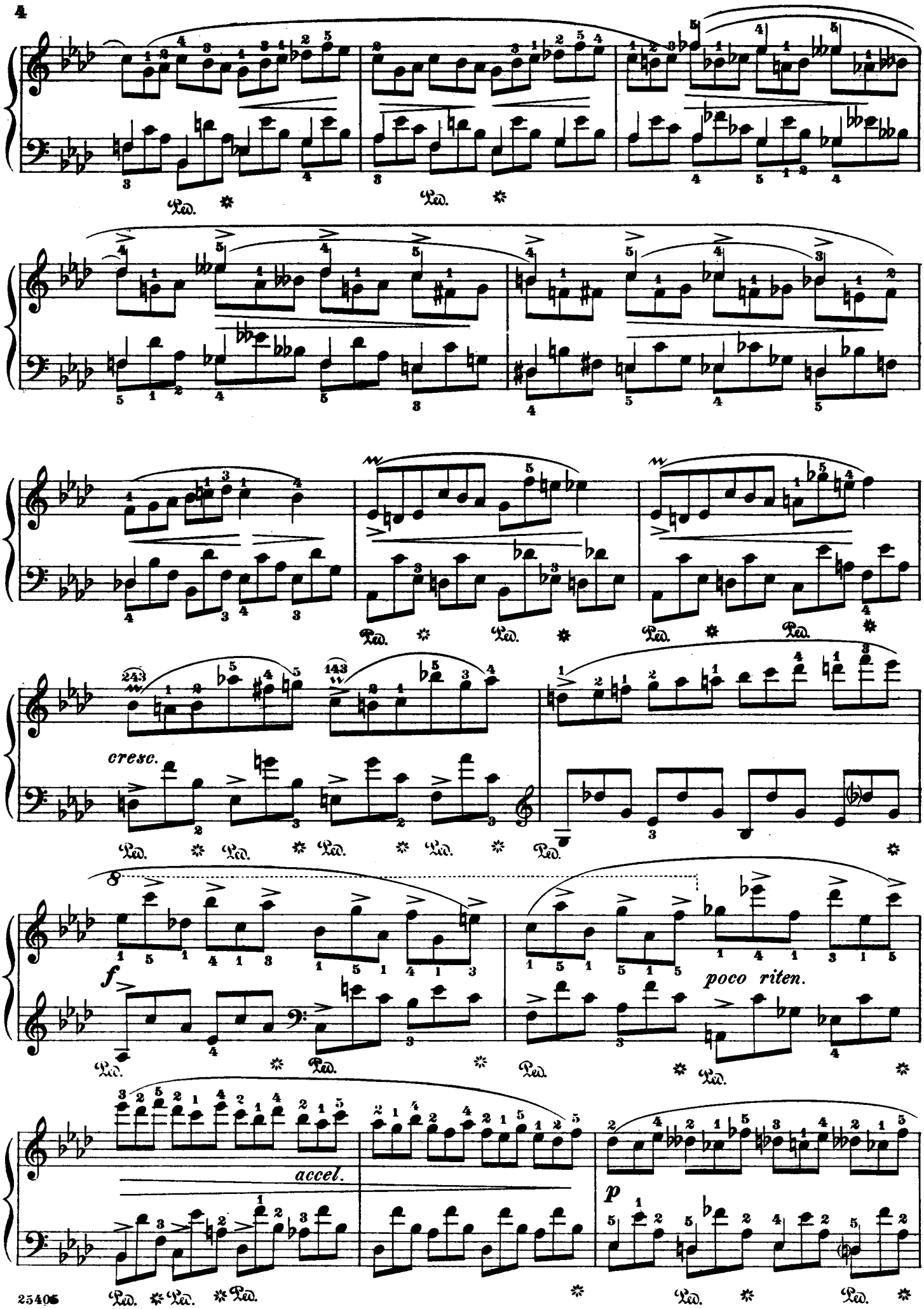
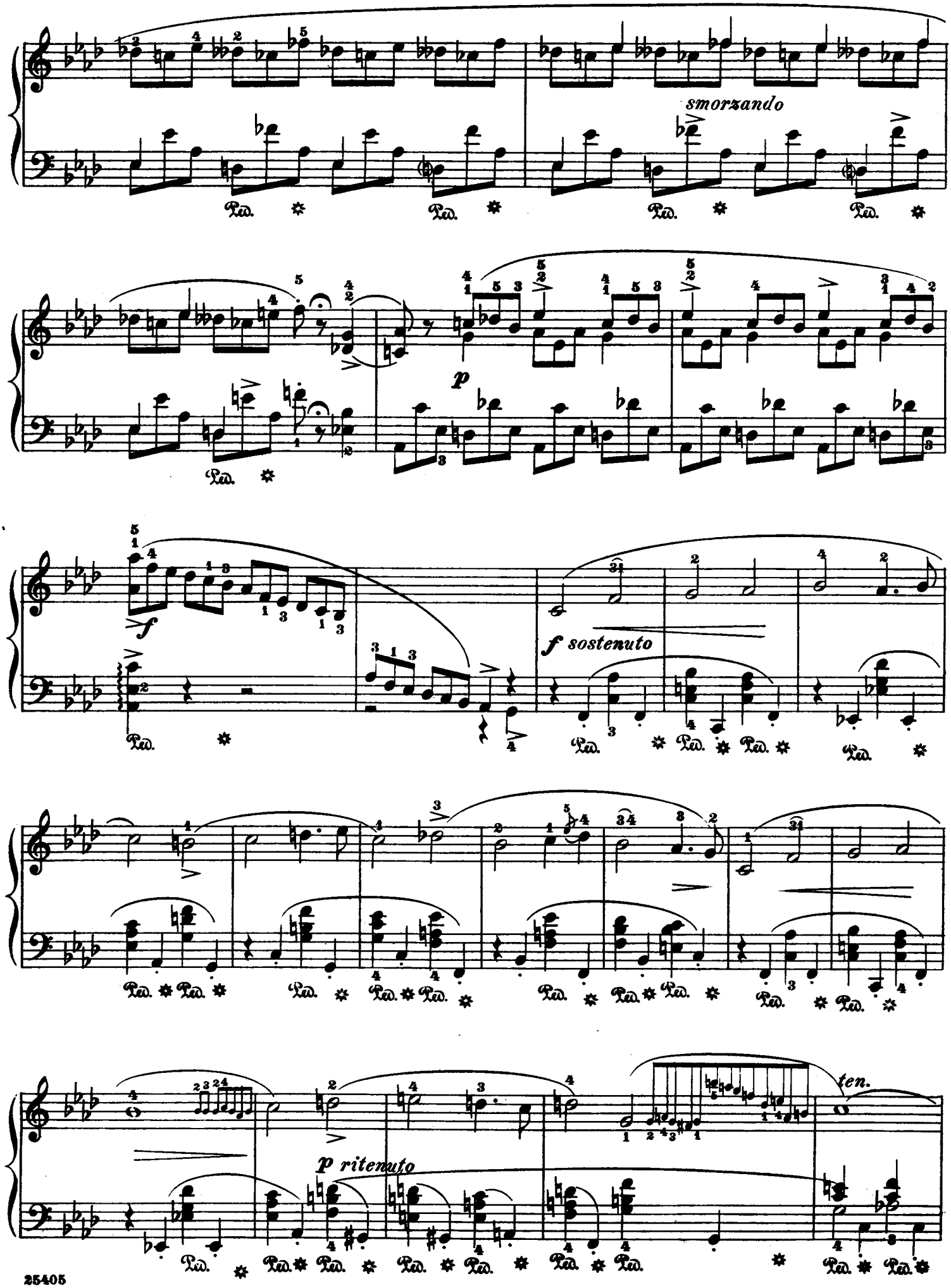
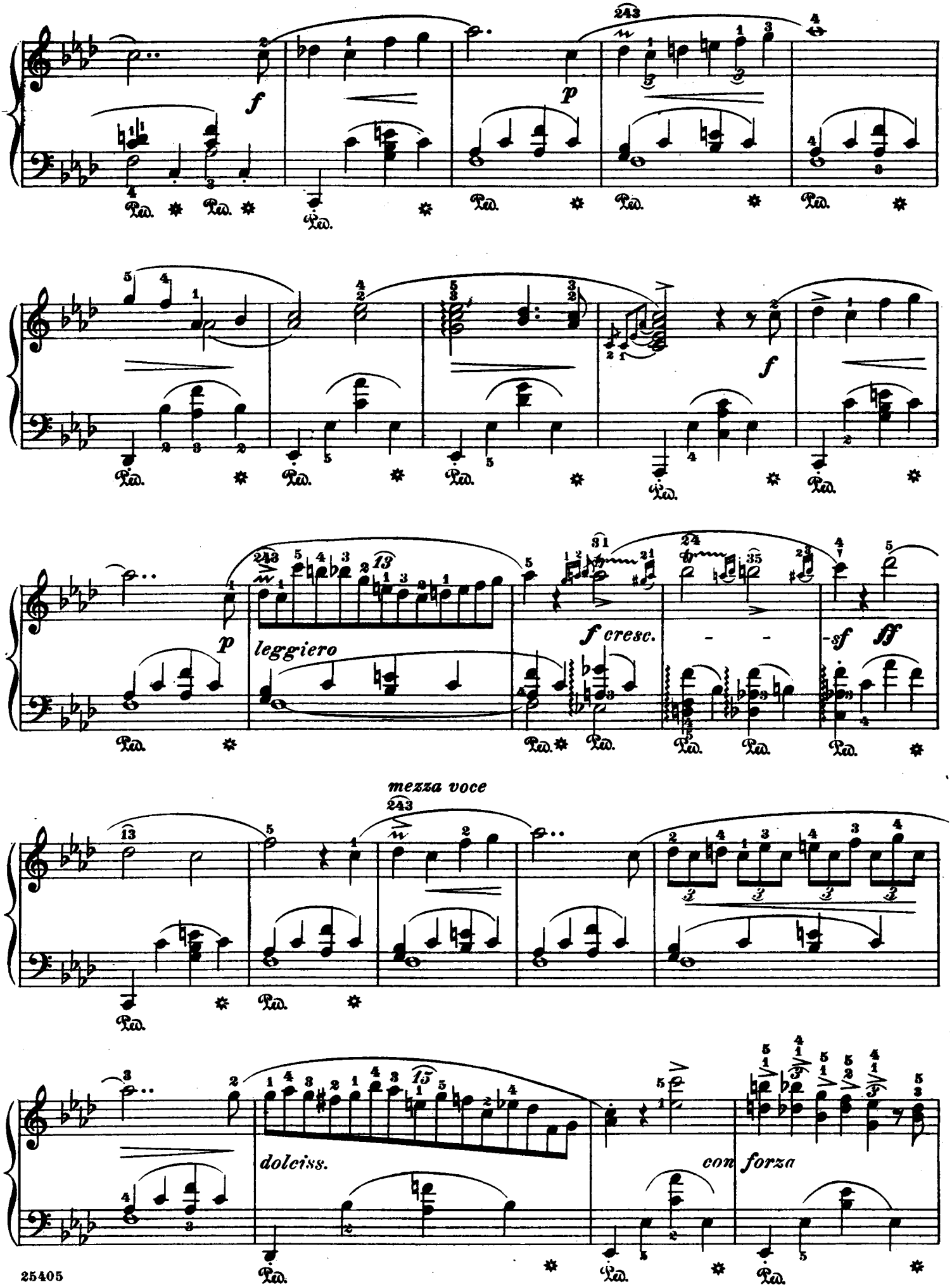
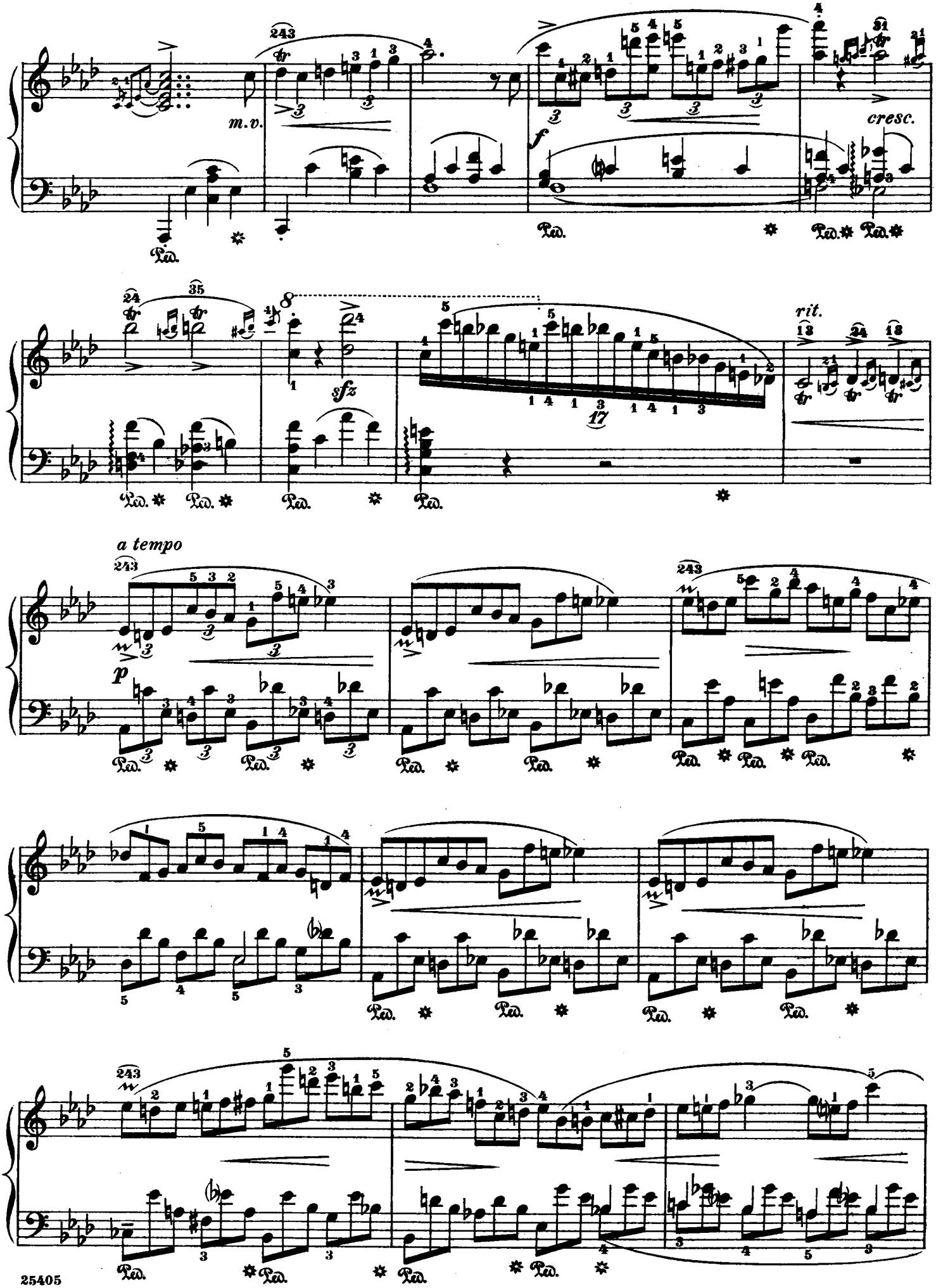
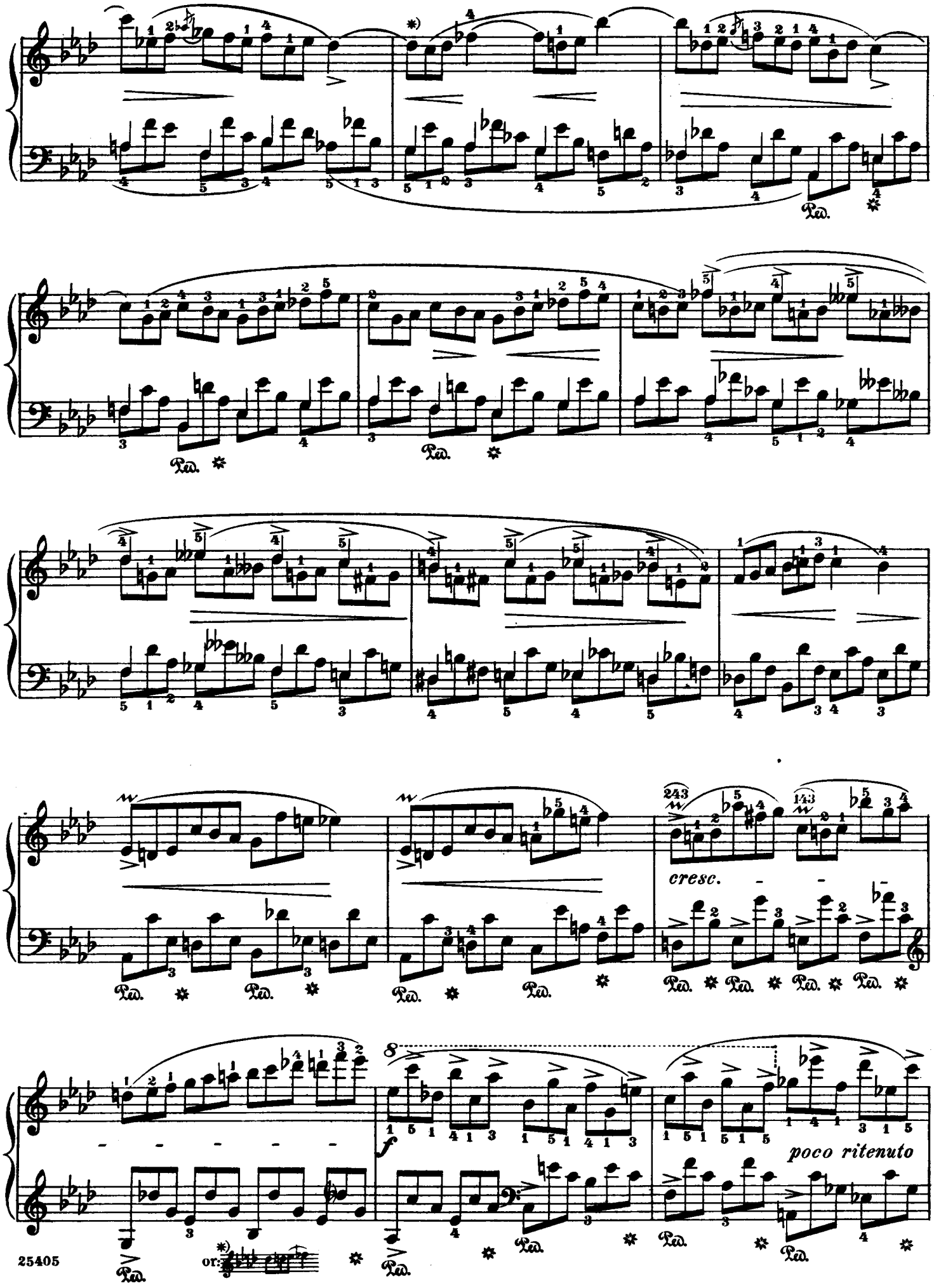
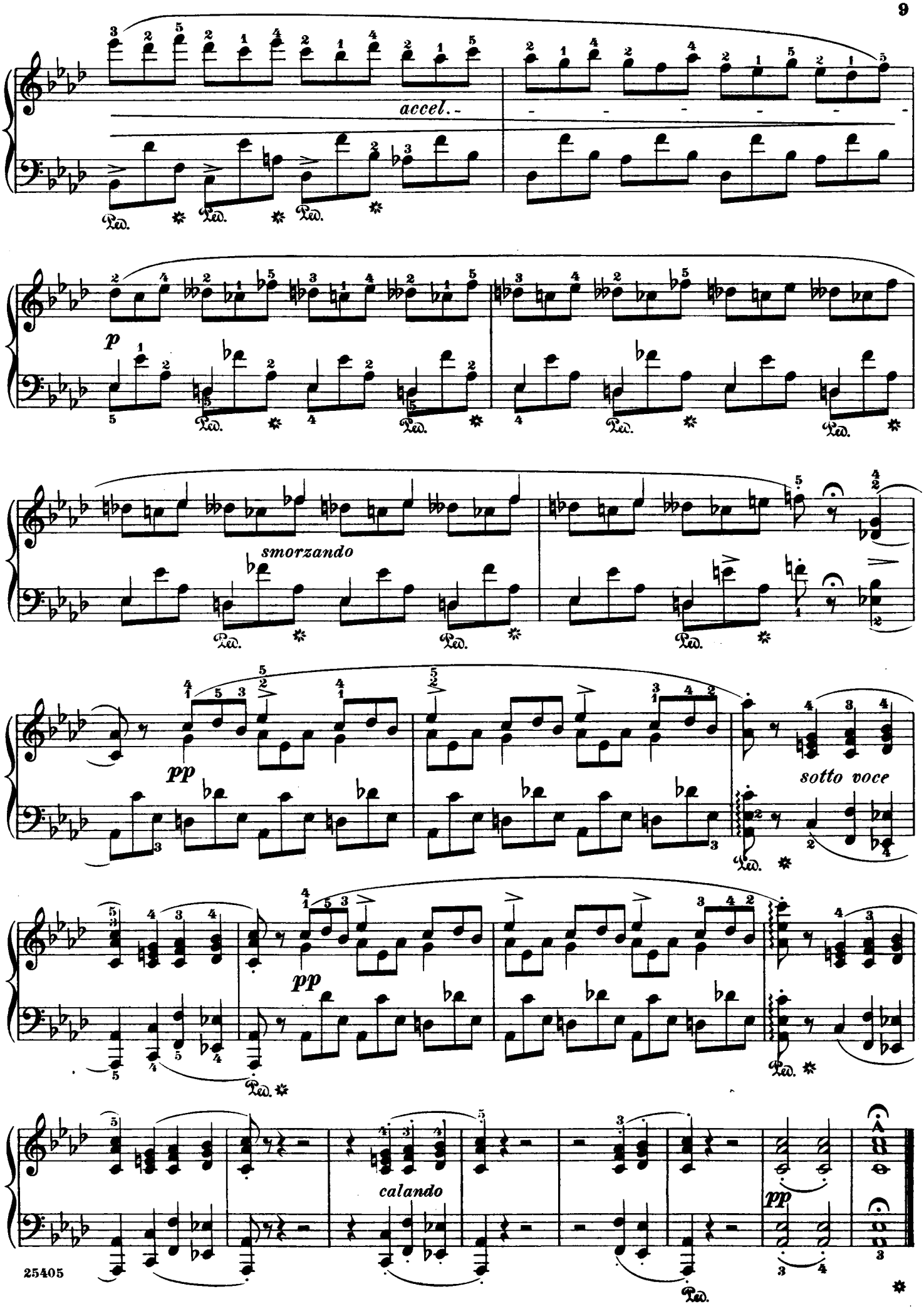

cresc.
f
poco riten.
accel.
p


smorzando
p
f
f sostenuto
p ritenuto
ten.


f
p
f
p
leggiero
f cresc.
sf
ff
mezza voce
dolciss.
con forza


m.v.
cresc.
f
sfz
rit.
a tempo
p


cresc.
poco ritenuto
or:


accel.
p
smorzando
pp
sotto voce
pp
calando
pp

Impromptu
II

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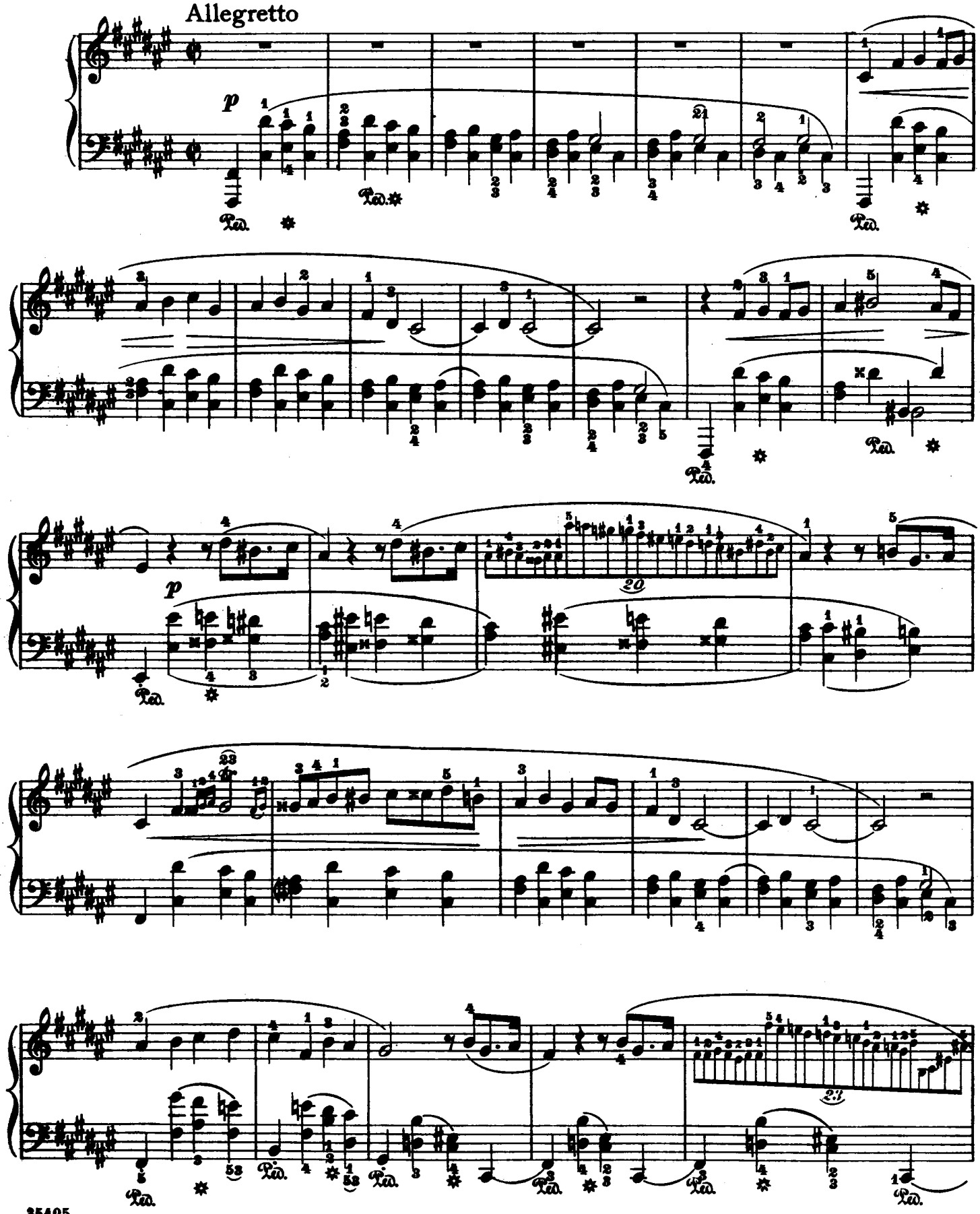
Rafael Joseffy

F. Chopin. Op. 36

Allegretto



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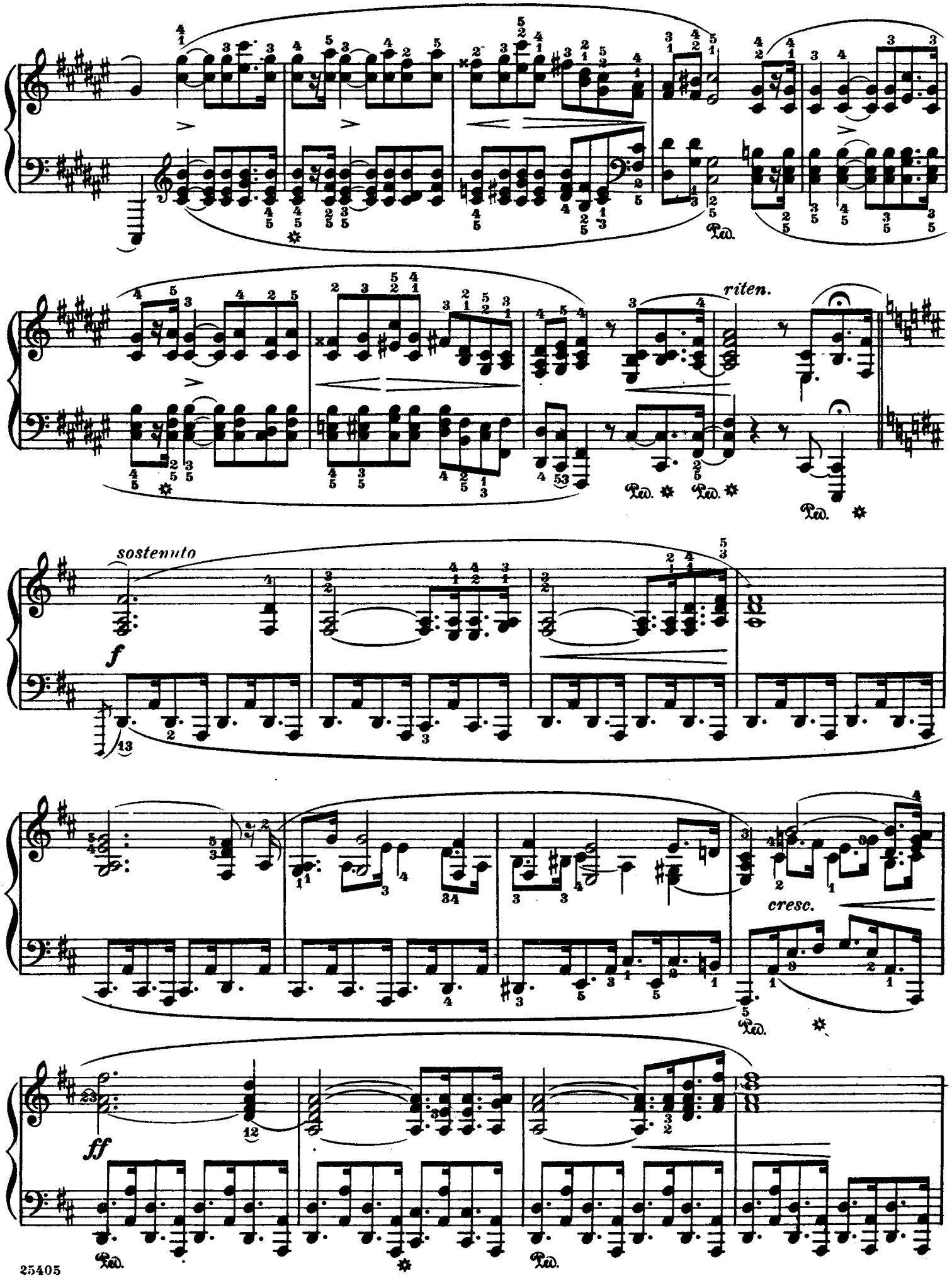
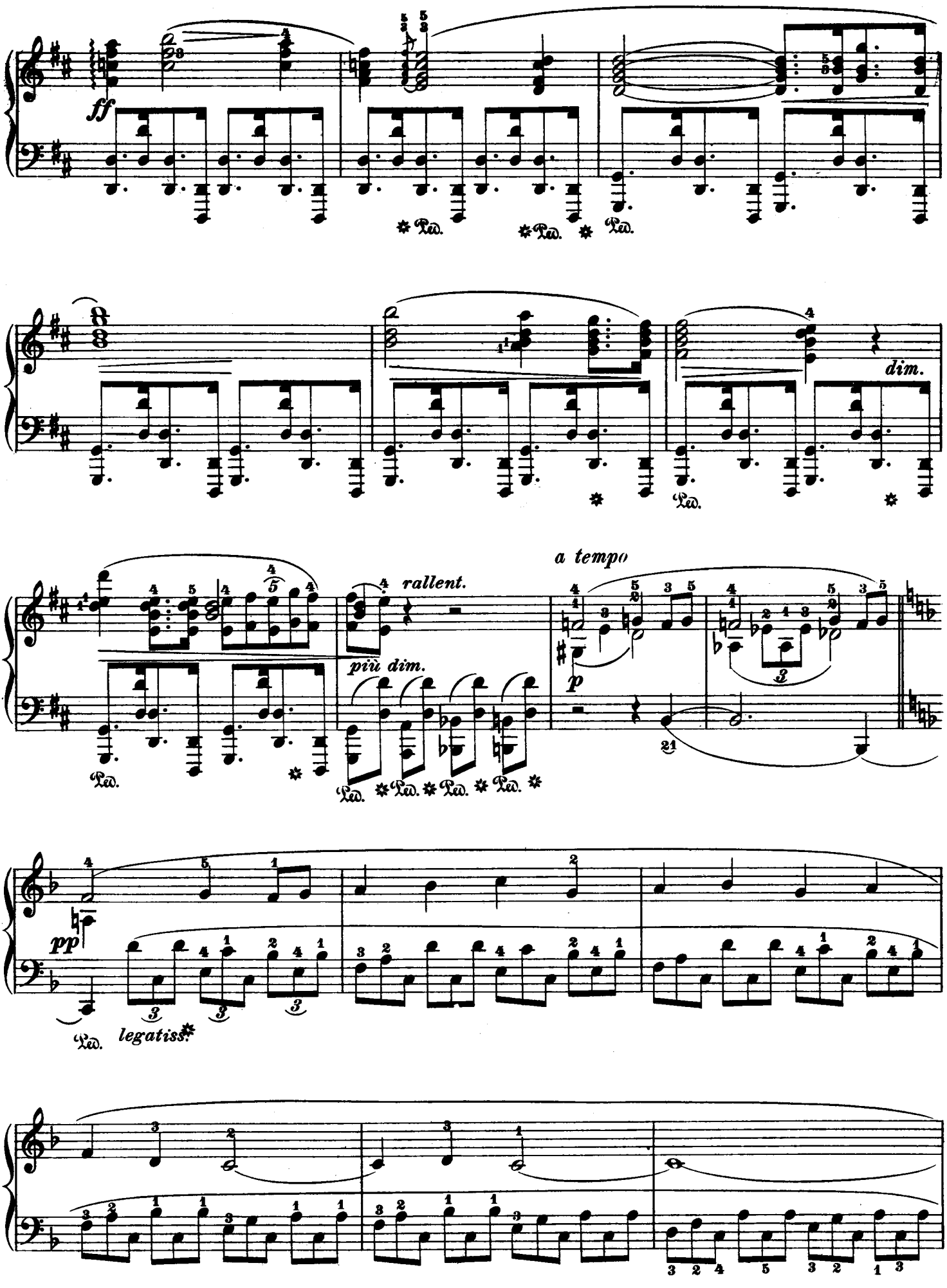
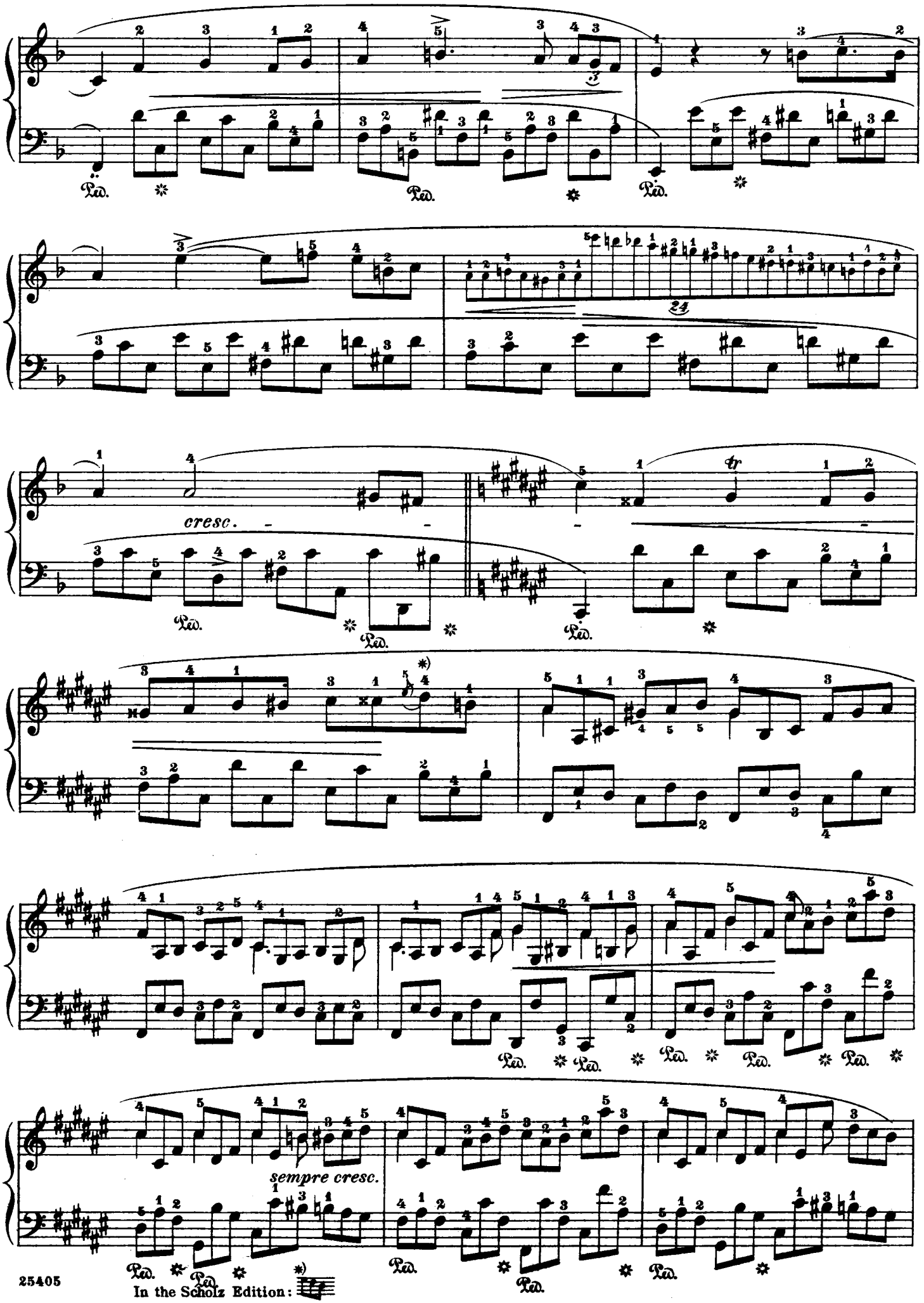

riten.
sostenuto
f
cresc.
ff
Ped.


ff
Ped.
dim.
rallent.
più dim.
a tempo
p
pp
legatiss.



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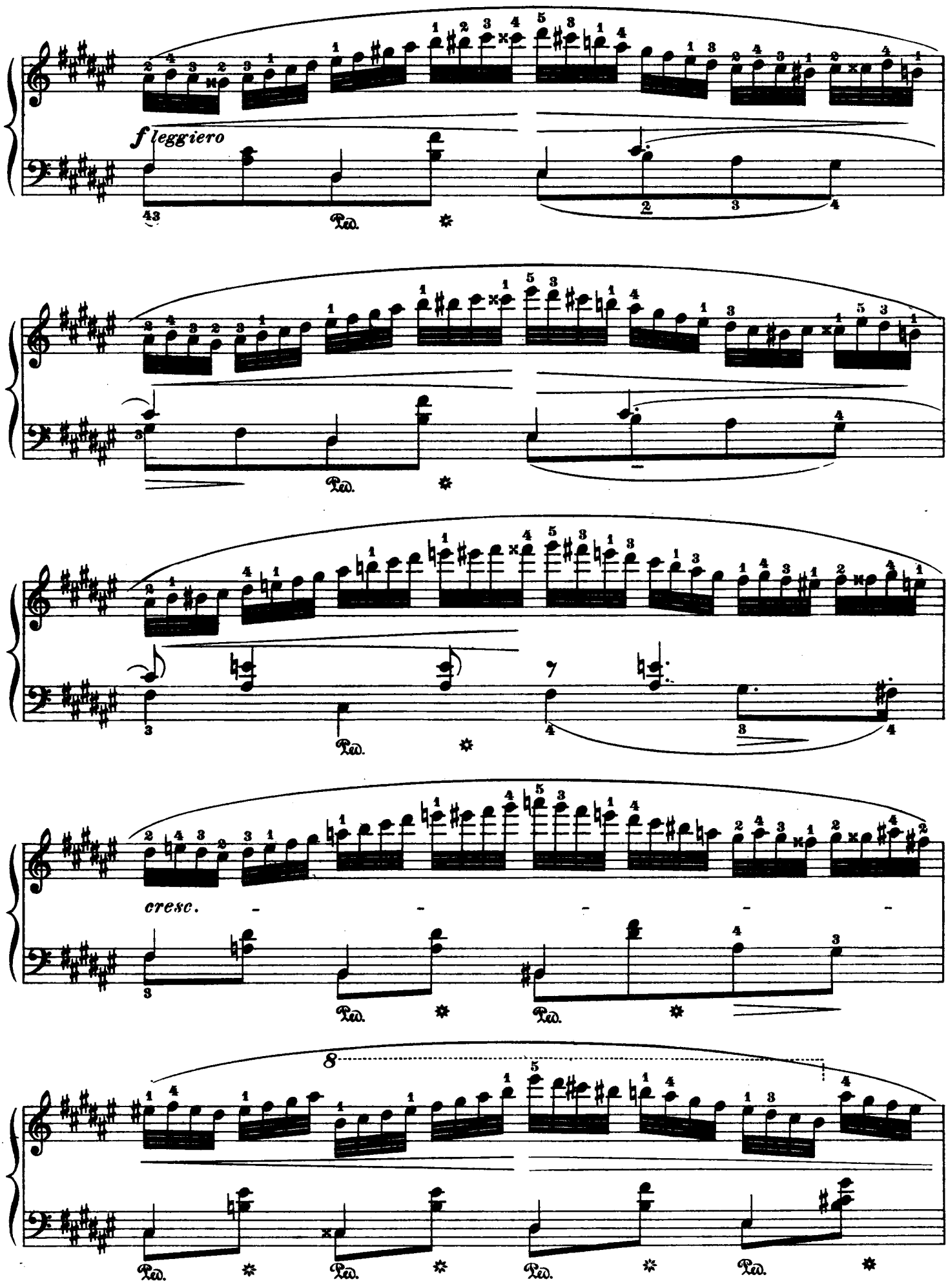
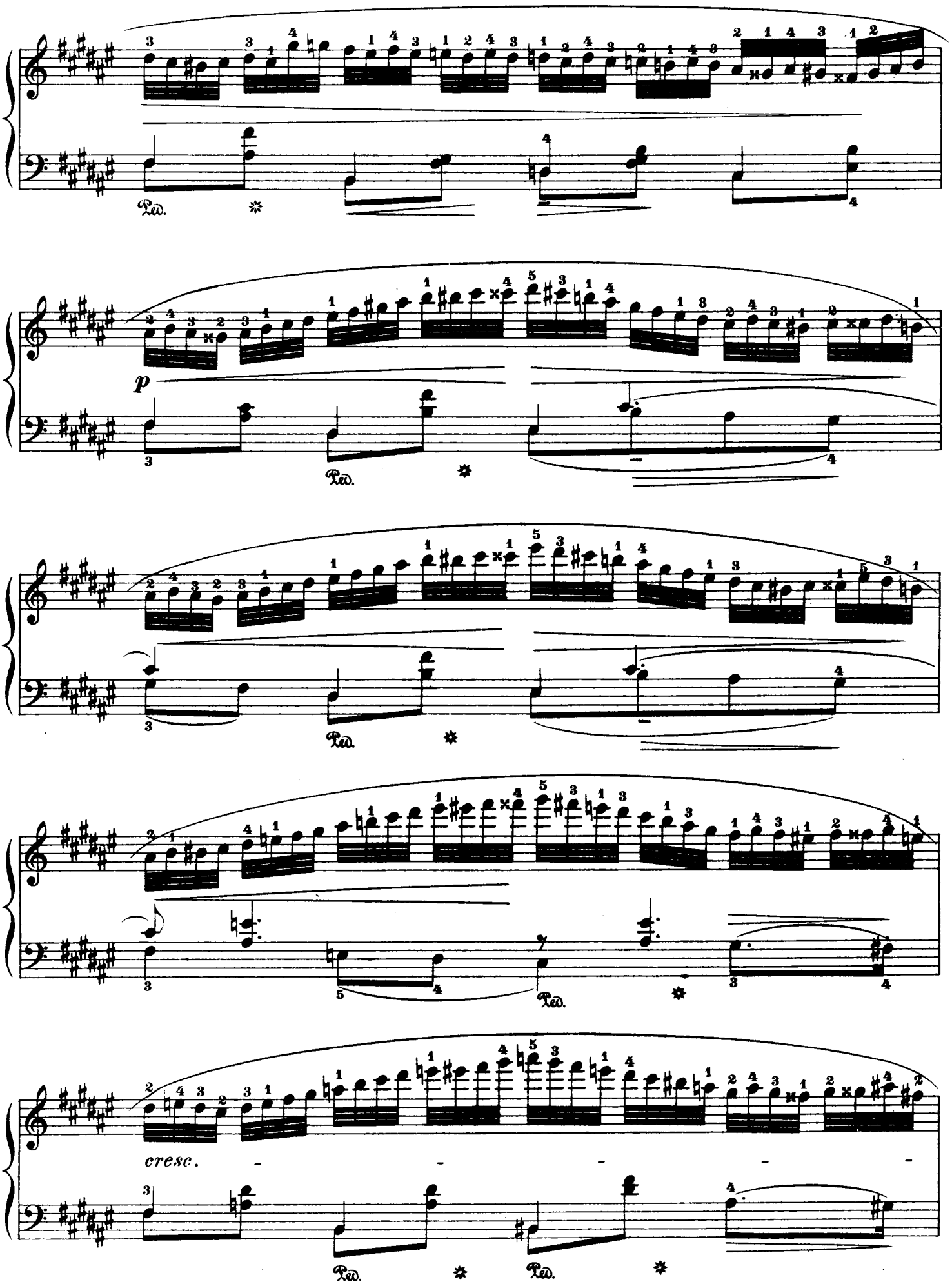
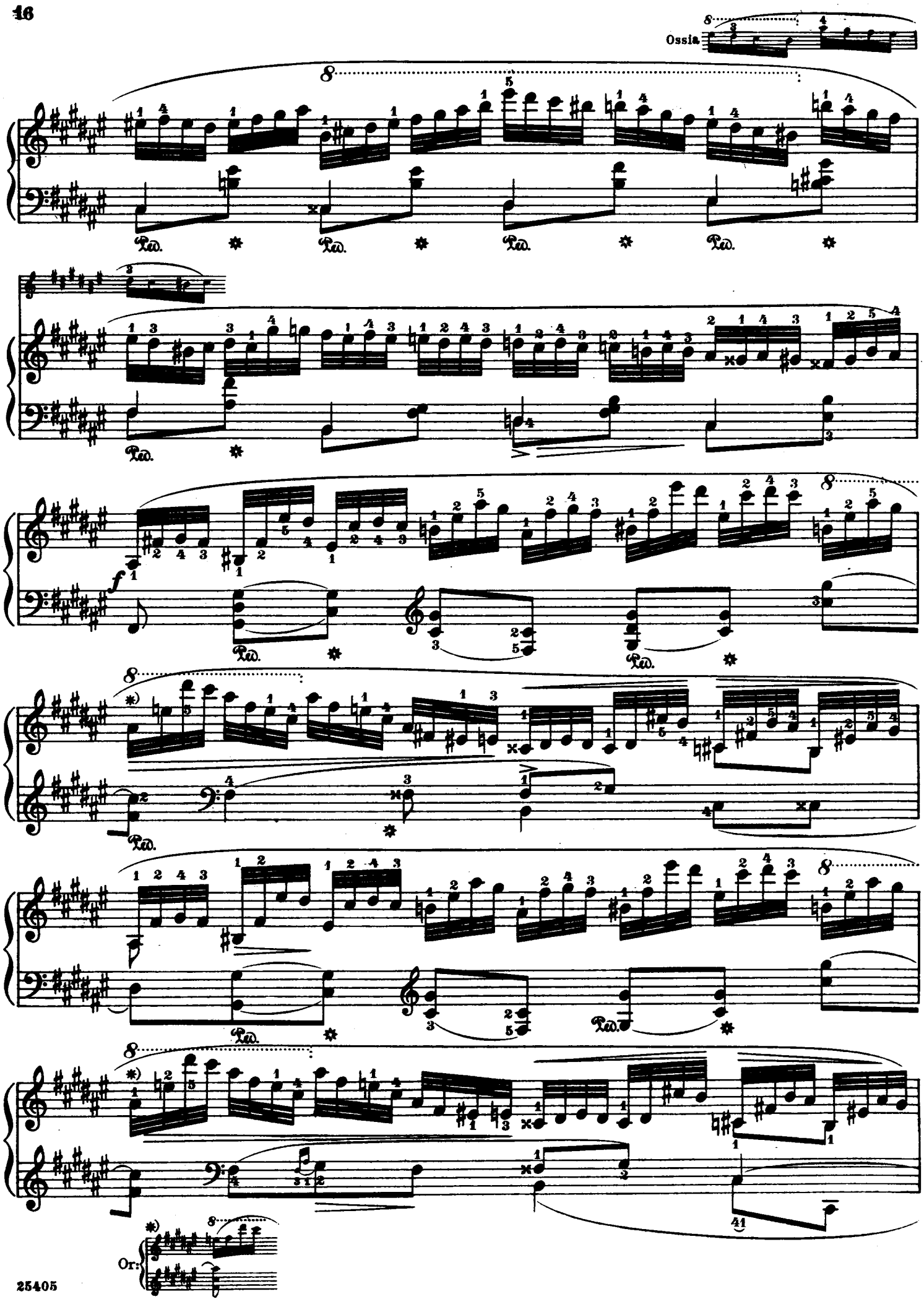
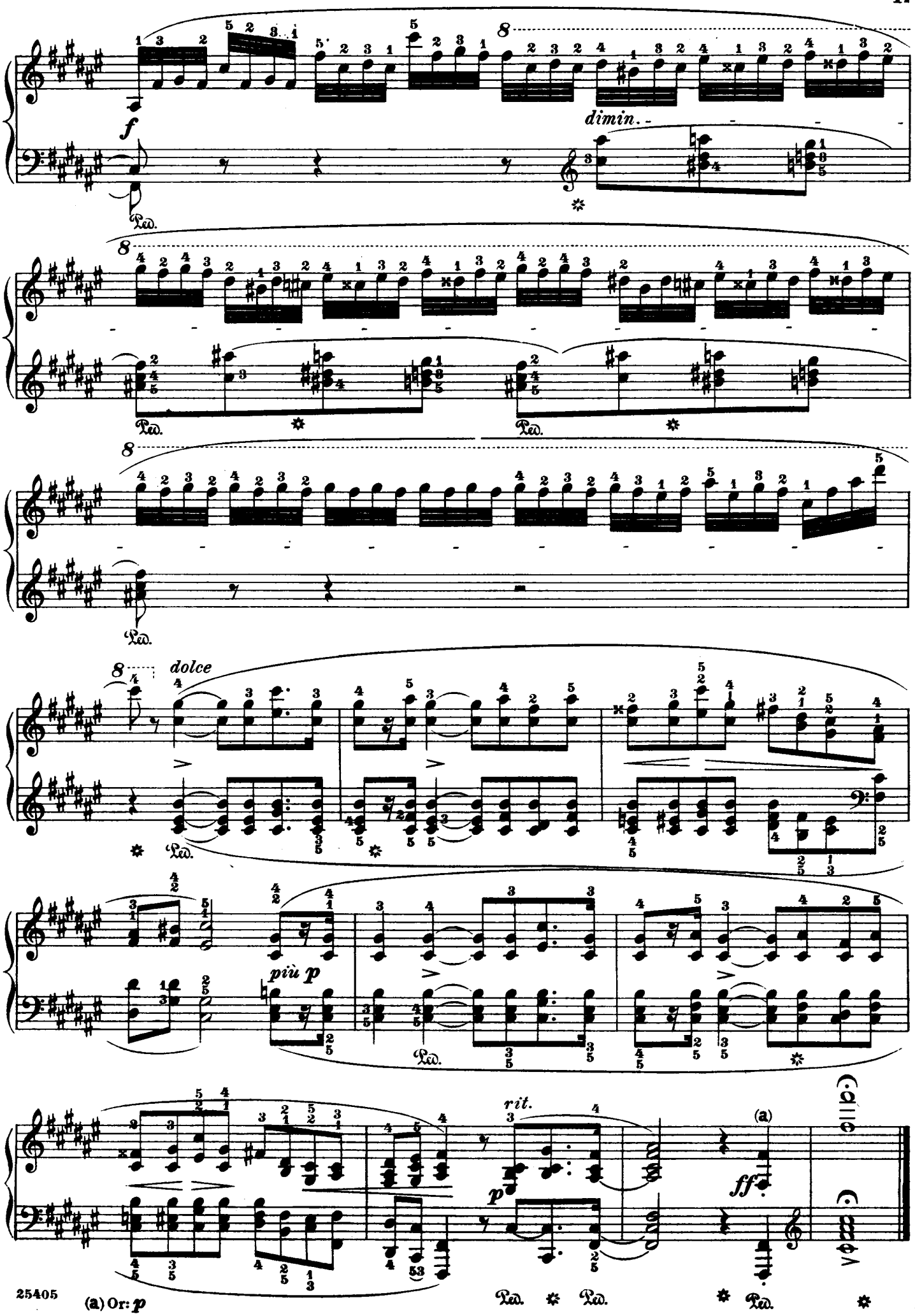

f leggiero
Ped.
cresc.
8


Ped.
p
Ped.
Ped.
Ped.
cresc.
Ped.
Ped.


Ossia
Ped.
f
Or:


f
dimin.
dolce
più p
rit.
(a)
ff
p
Ped.
(a) Or: p

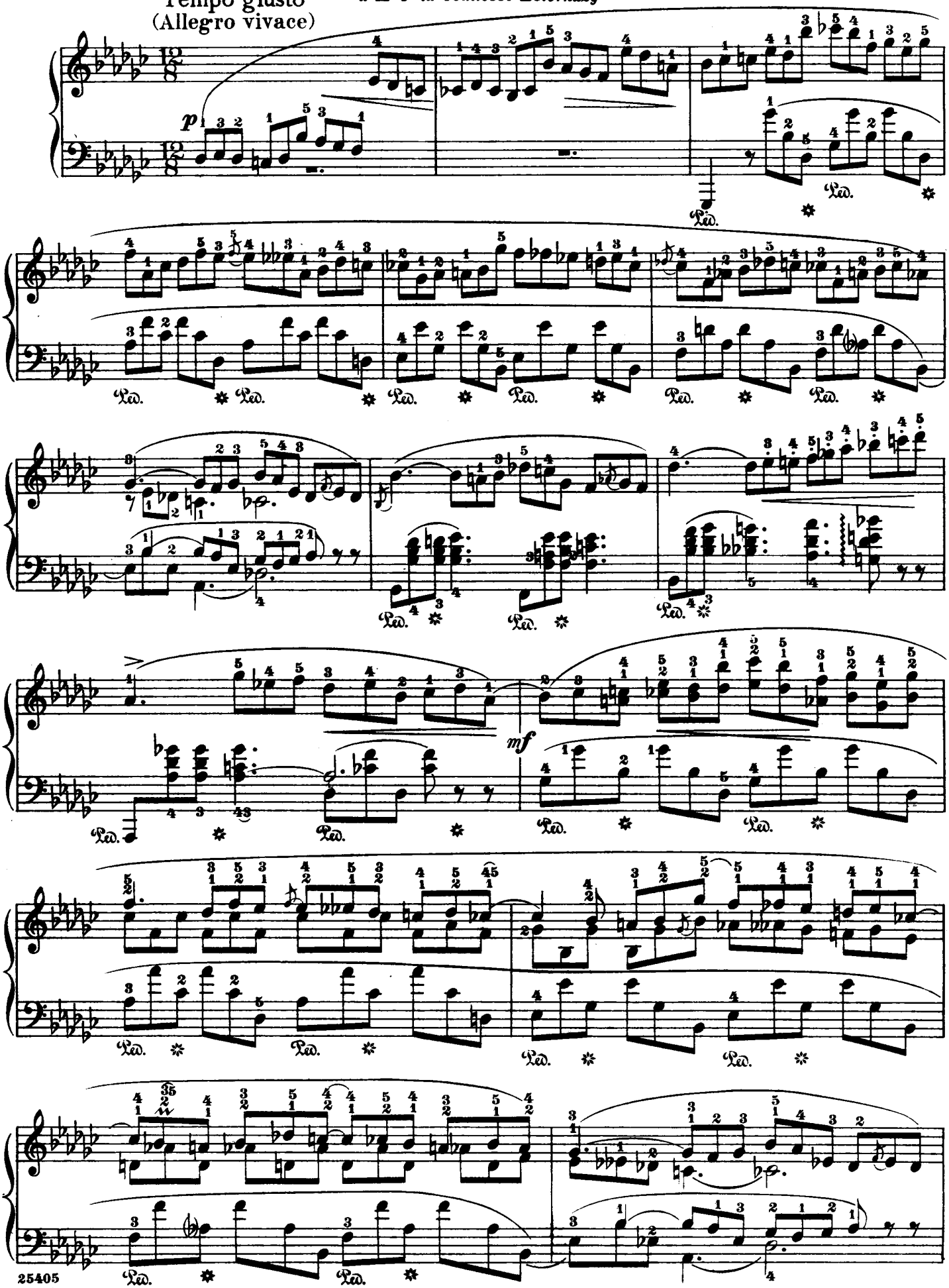
Revised, edited and fingered by
Rafael Joseffy

Impromptu
III

a Mme la Comtesse Esterházy

F. Chopin. Op. 51

Tempo giusto
(Allegro vivace)



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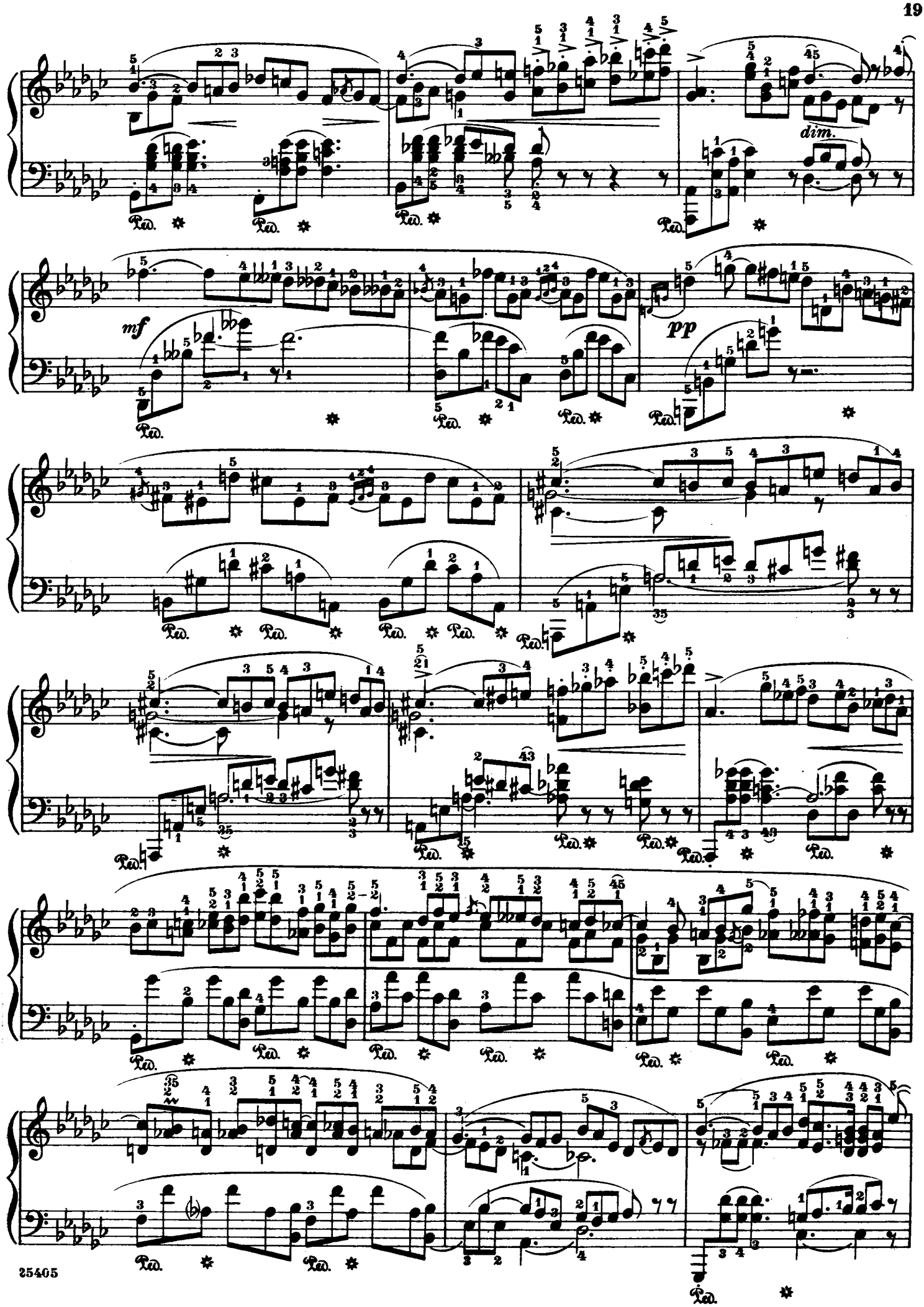
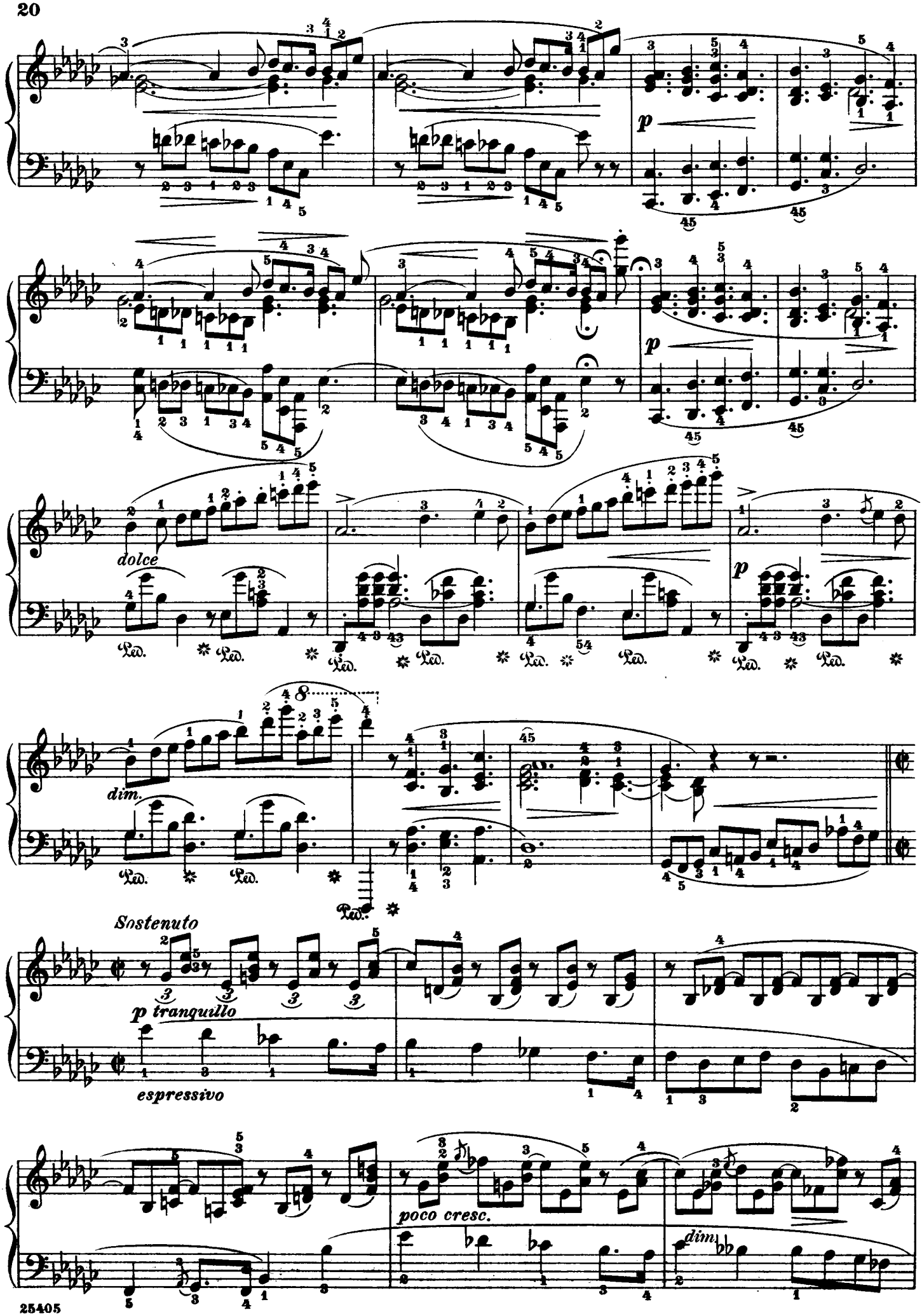
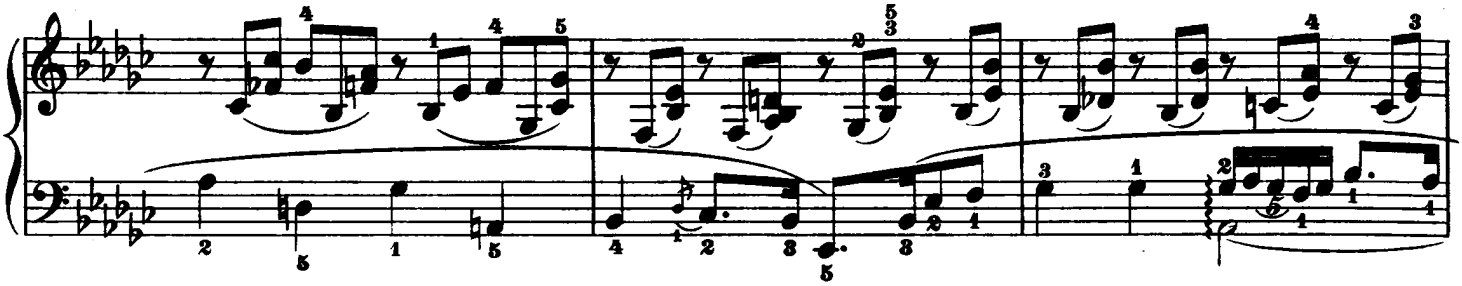
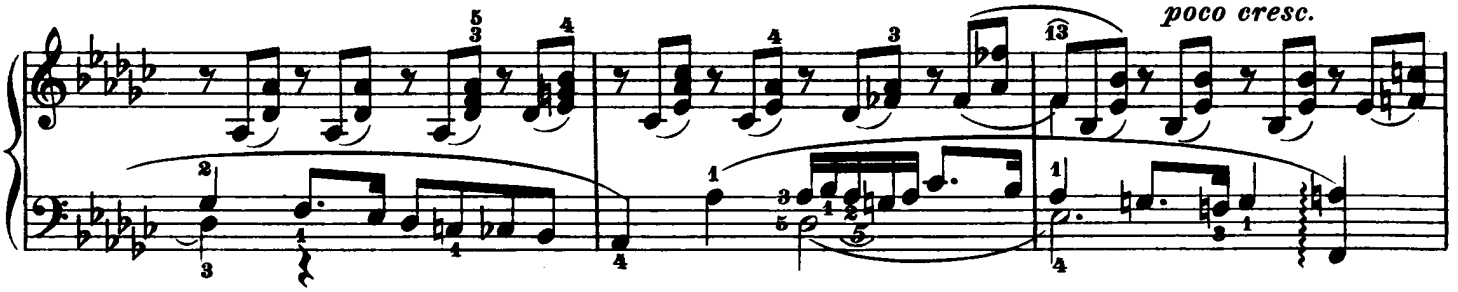
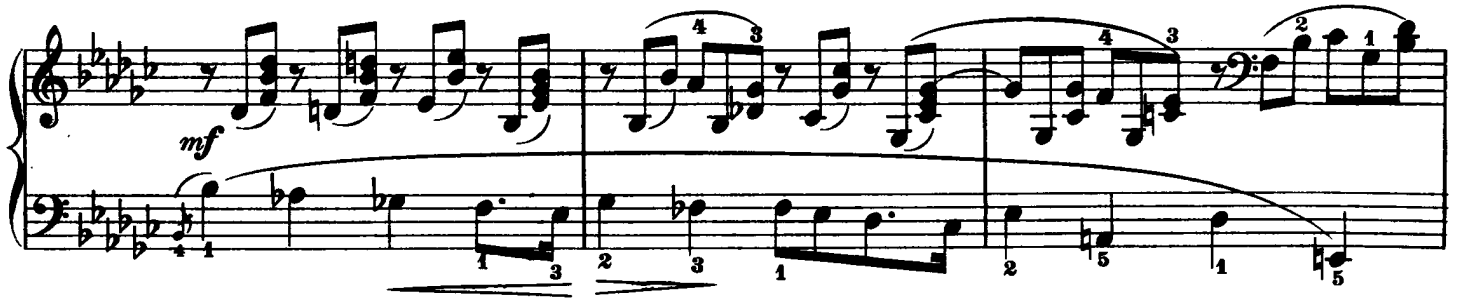
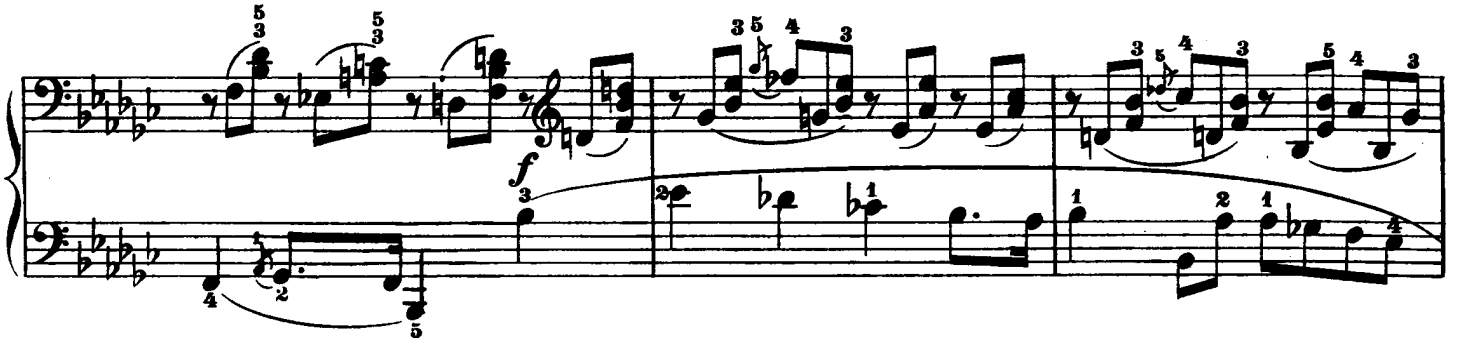

dim.
mf
pp

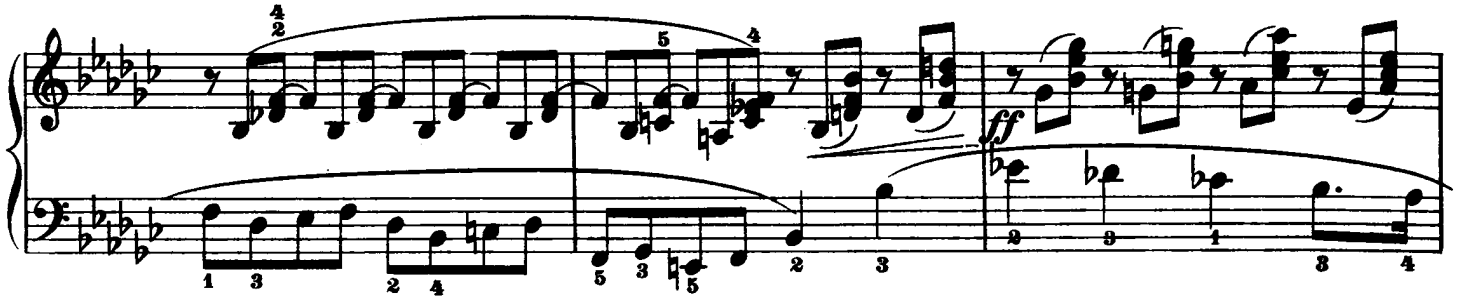

p
dolce
Ped.
dim.
Sostenuto
p tranquillo
espressivo
poco cresc.
dim.

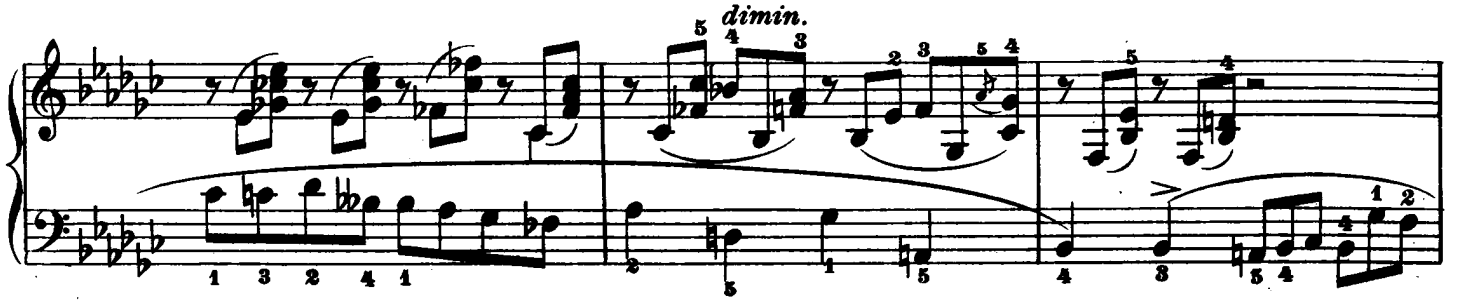


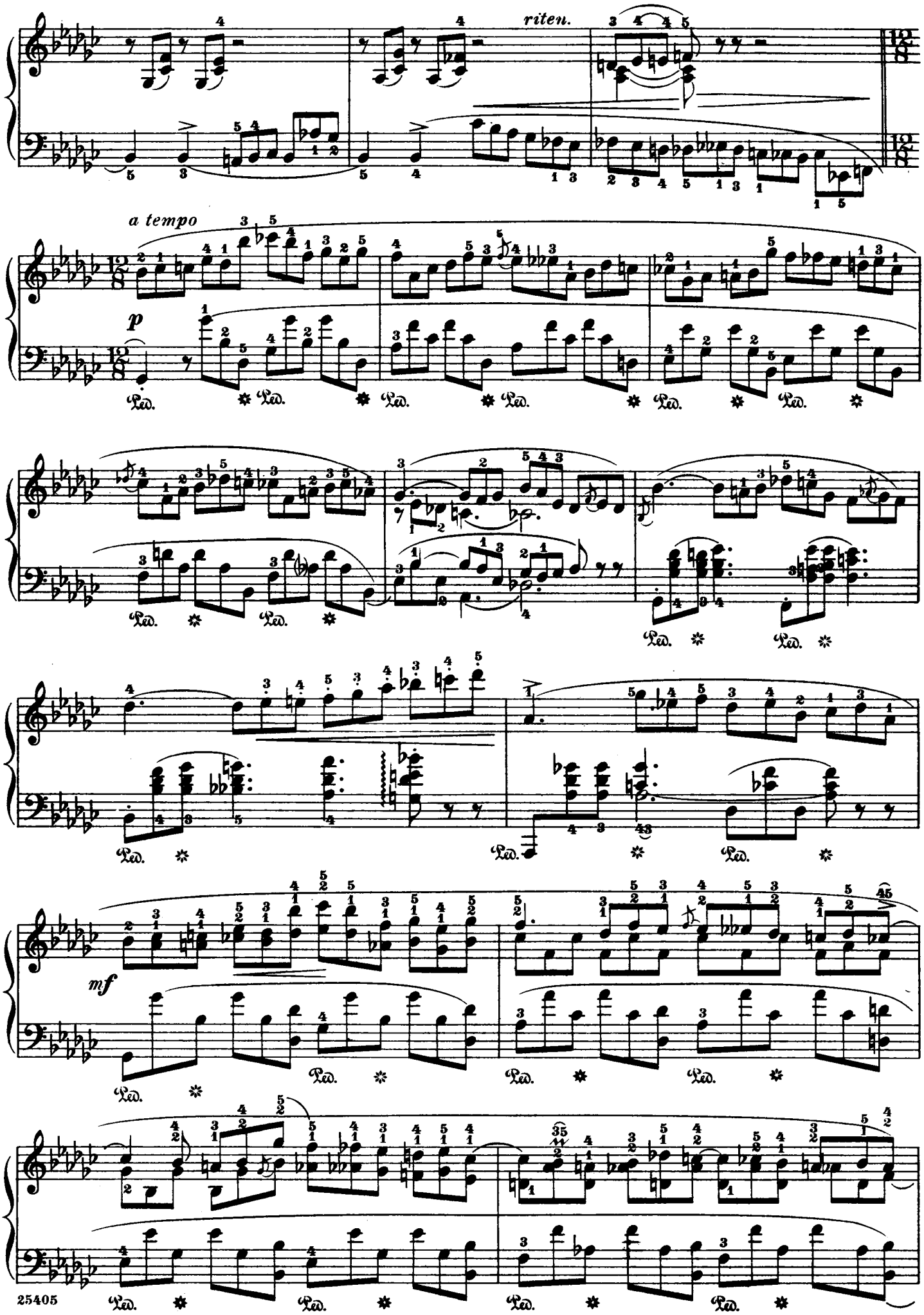

poco cresc.

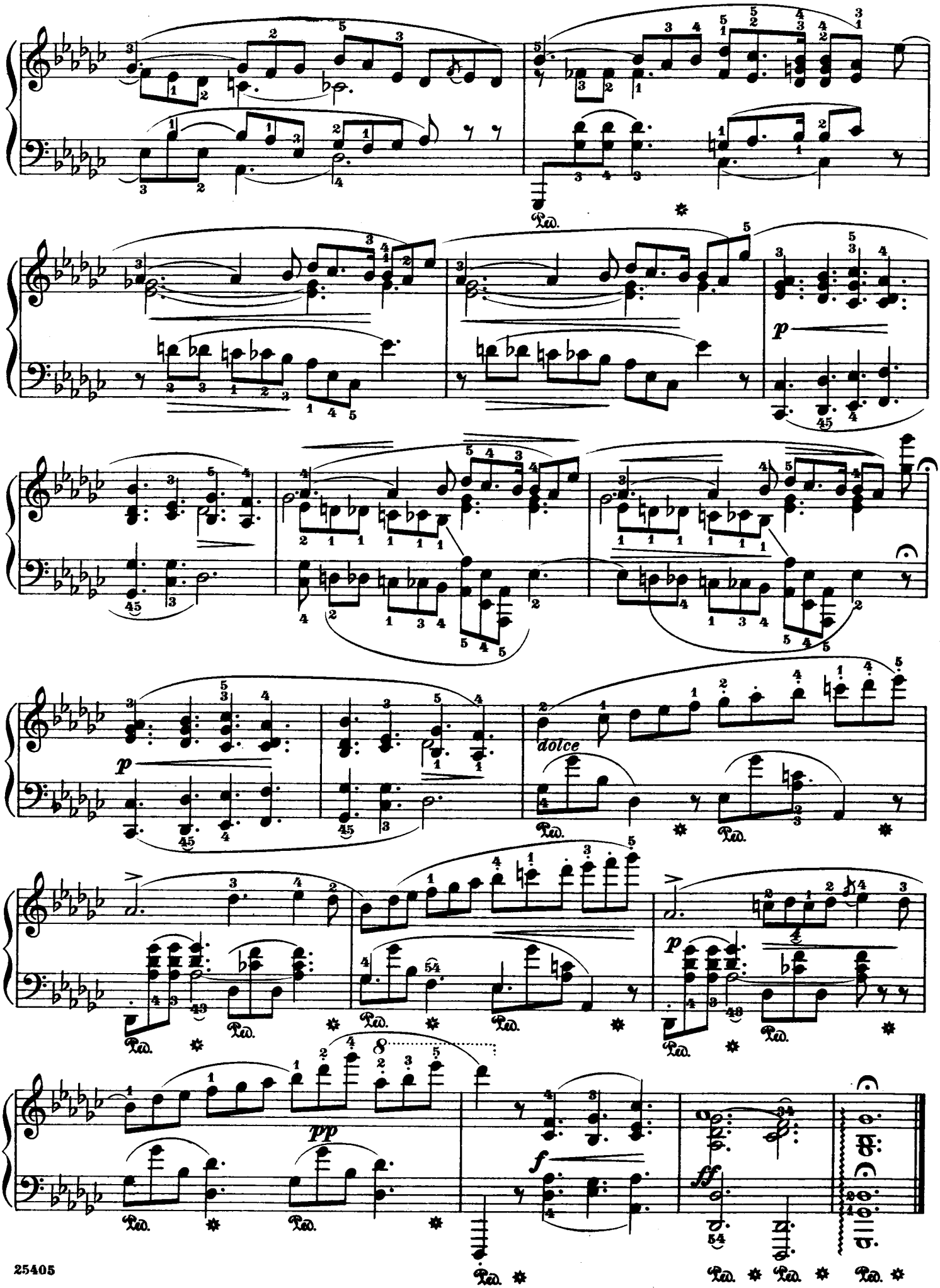

mf


f


ff


dimin.


riten.
a tempo
p
mf
Ped.


p
dolce
pp
f
ff

Fantaisie - Impromptu
IV

(Posthumous)

F. Chopin. Op. 66

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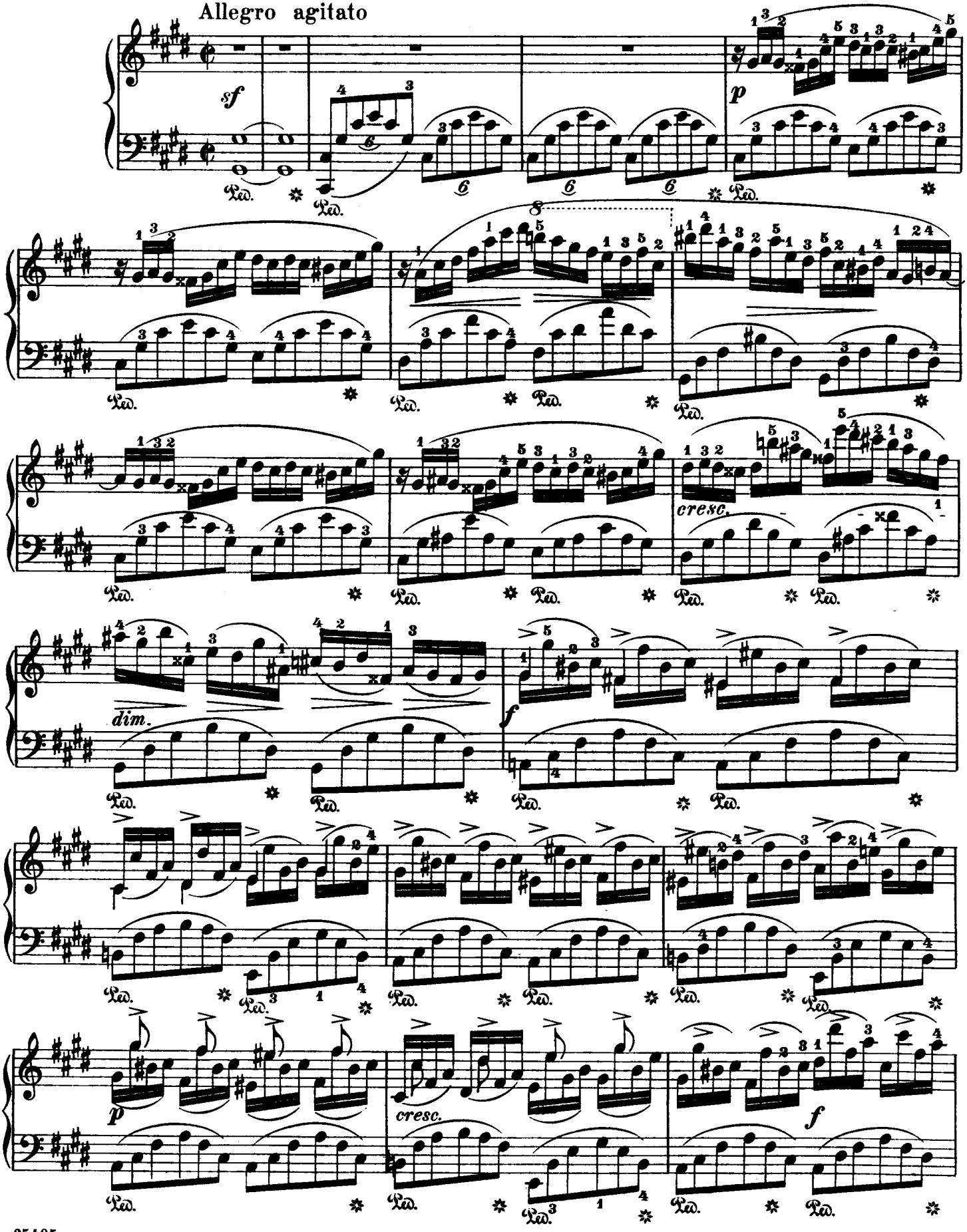
Allegro agitato



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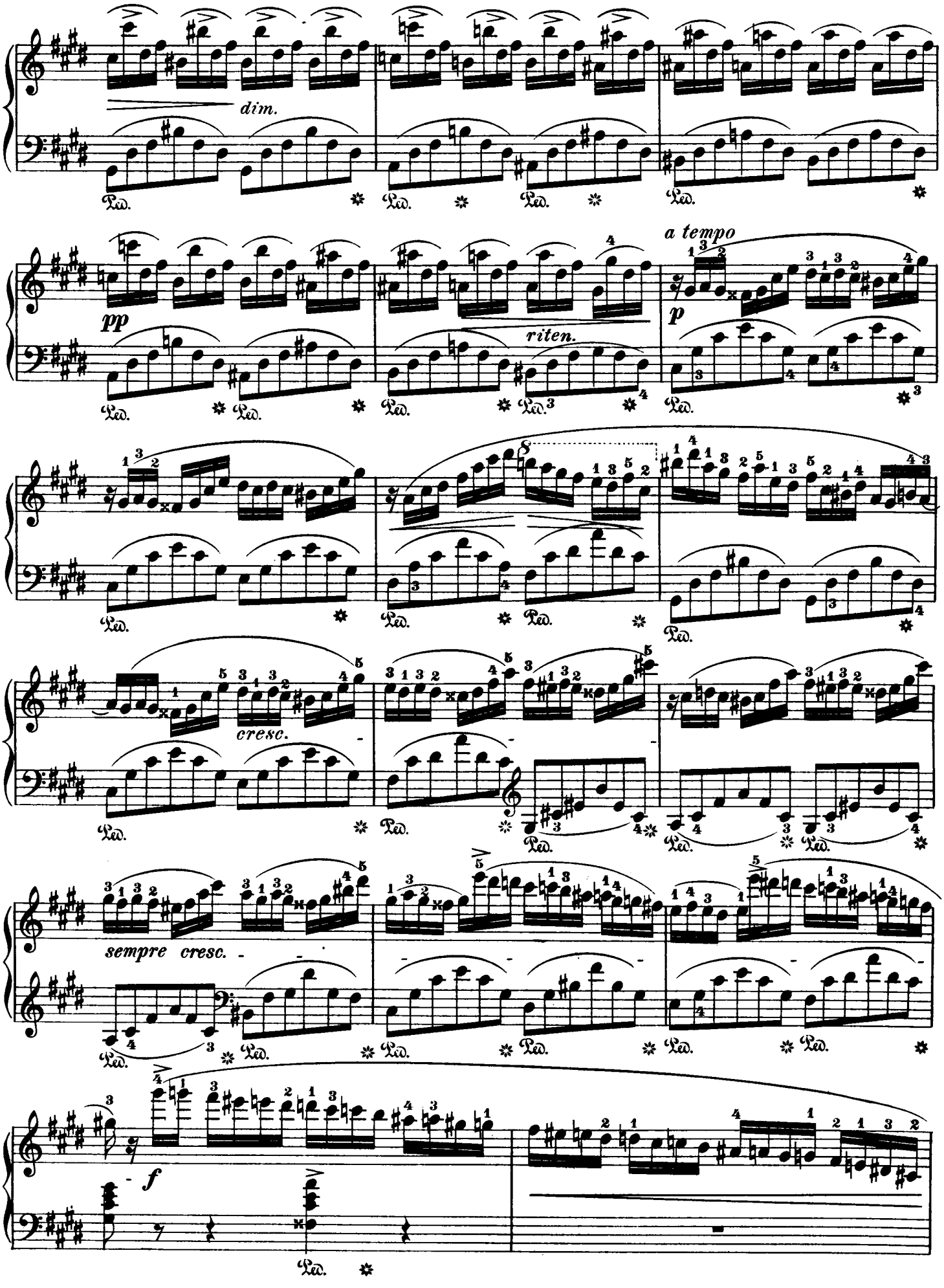
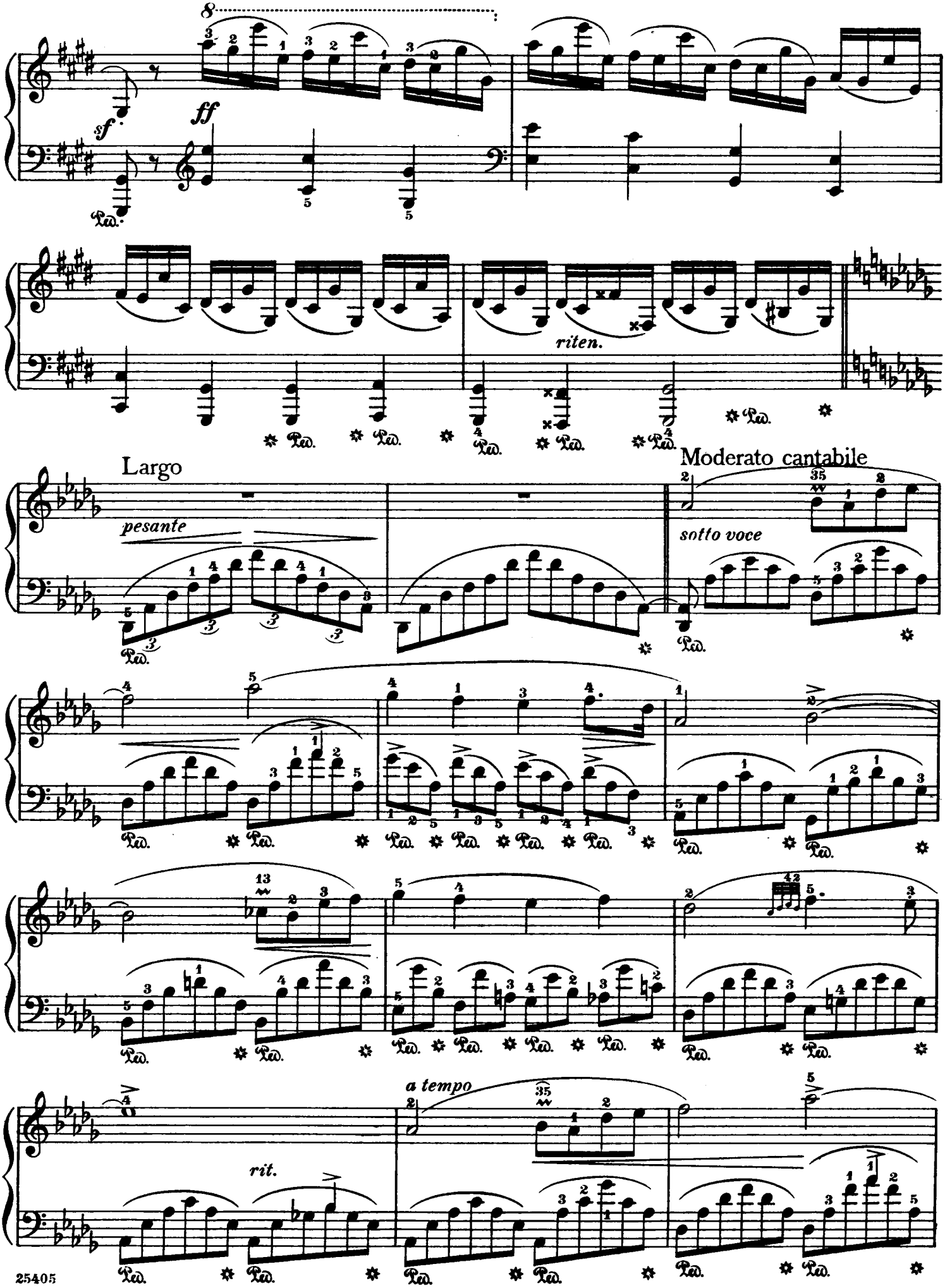
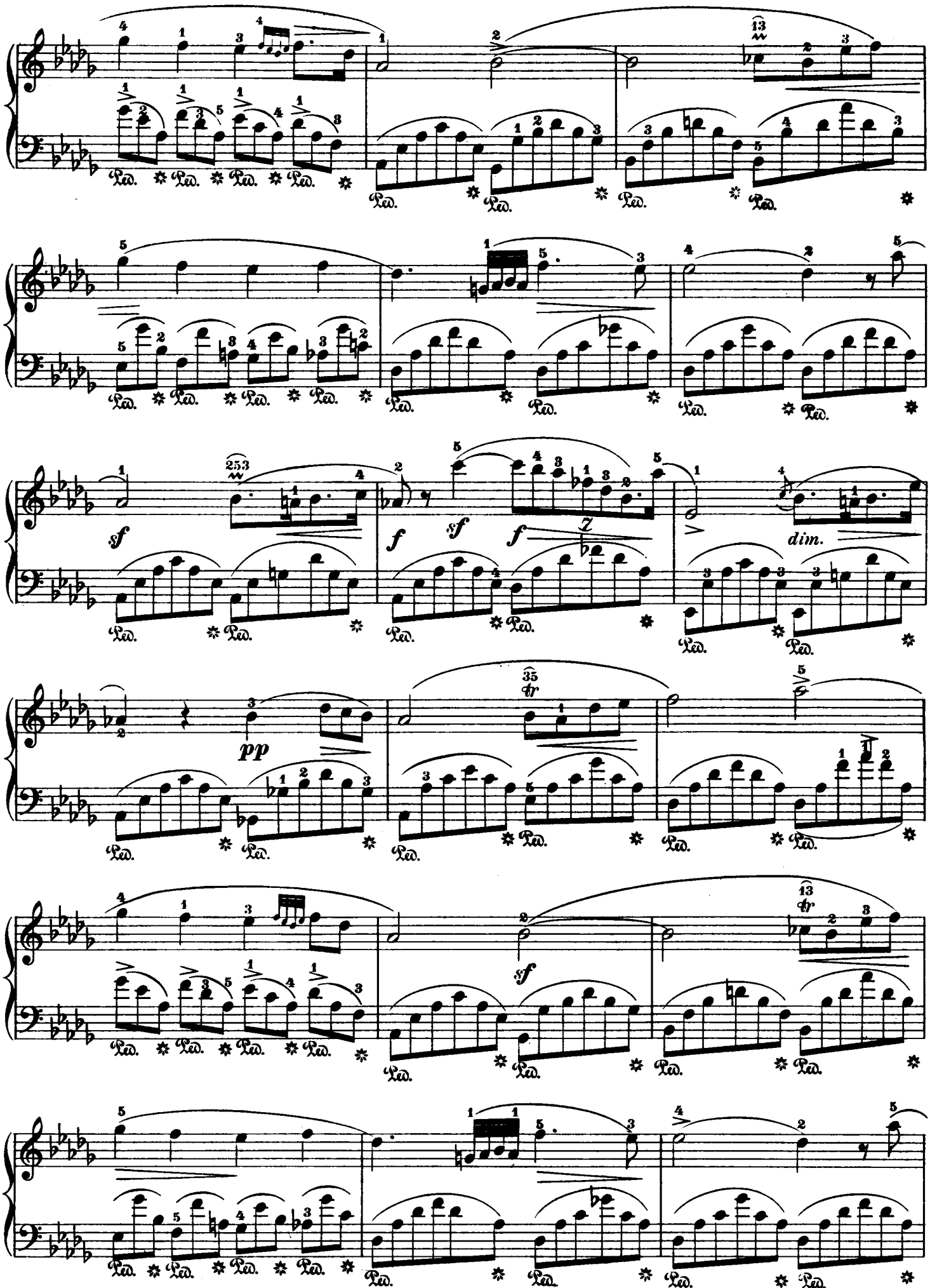
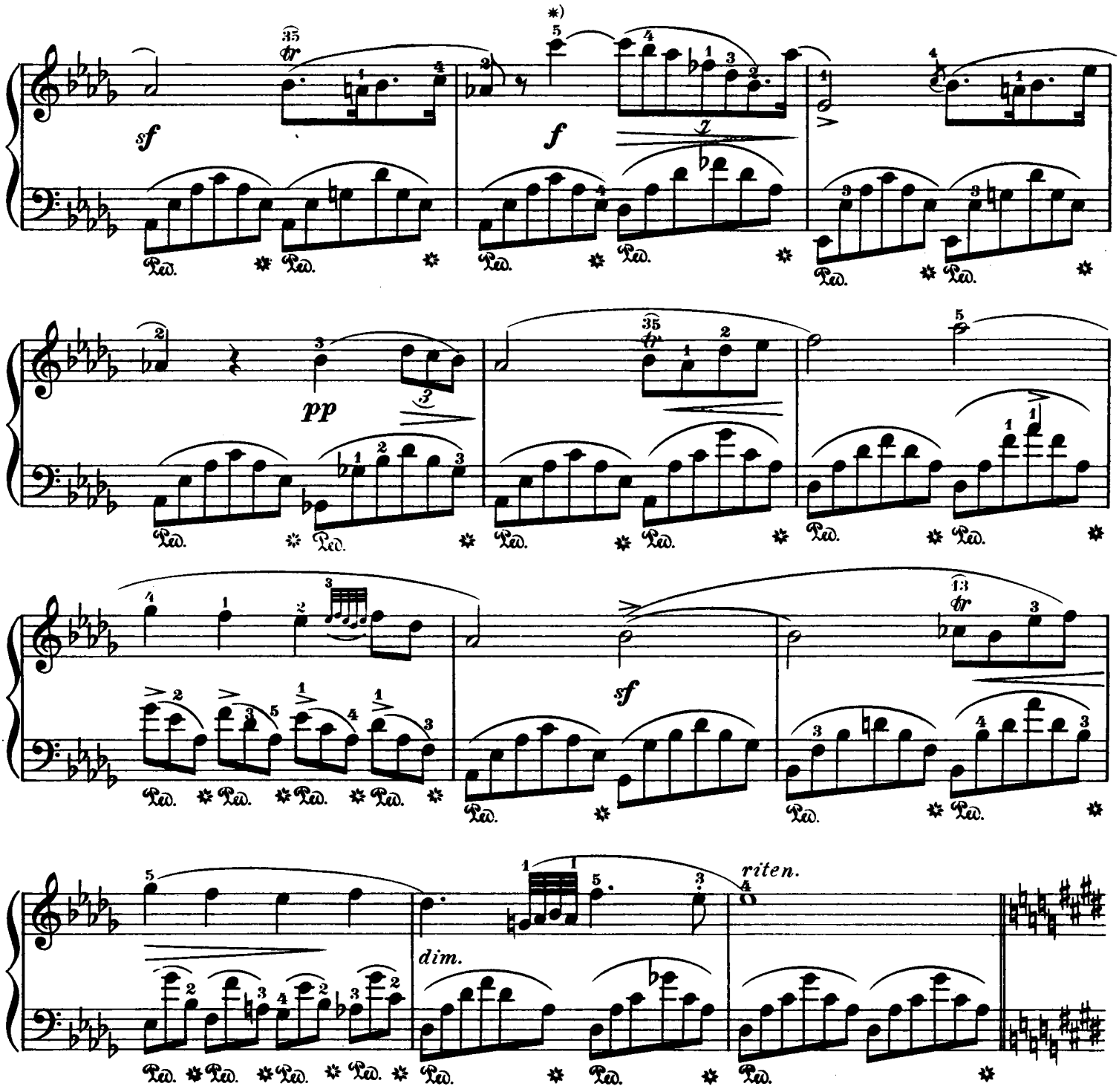
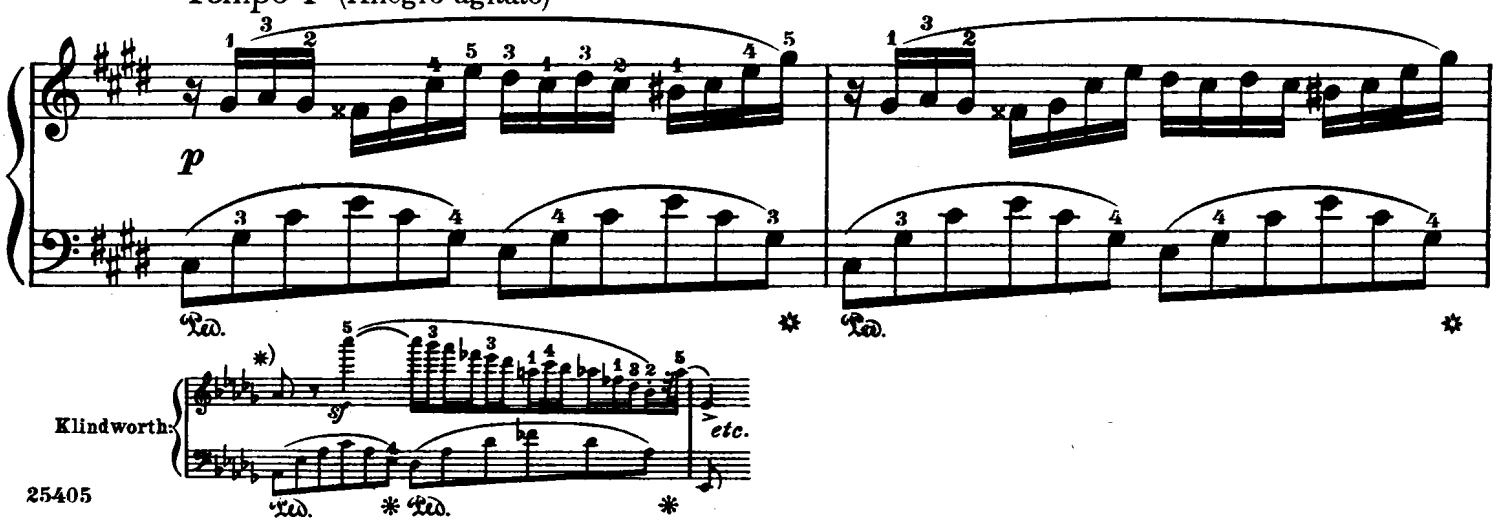

dim.
pp
riten.
a tempo
p
cresc.
sempre cresc.
f

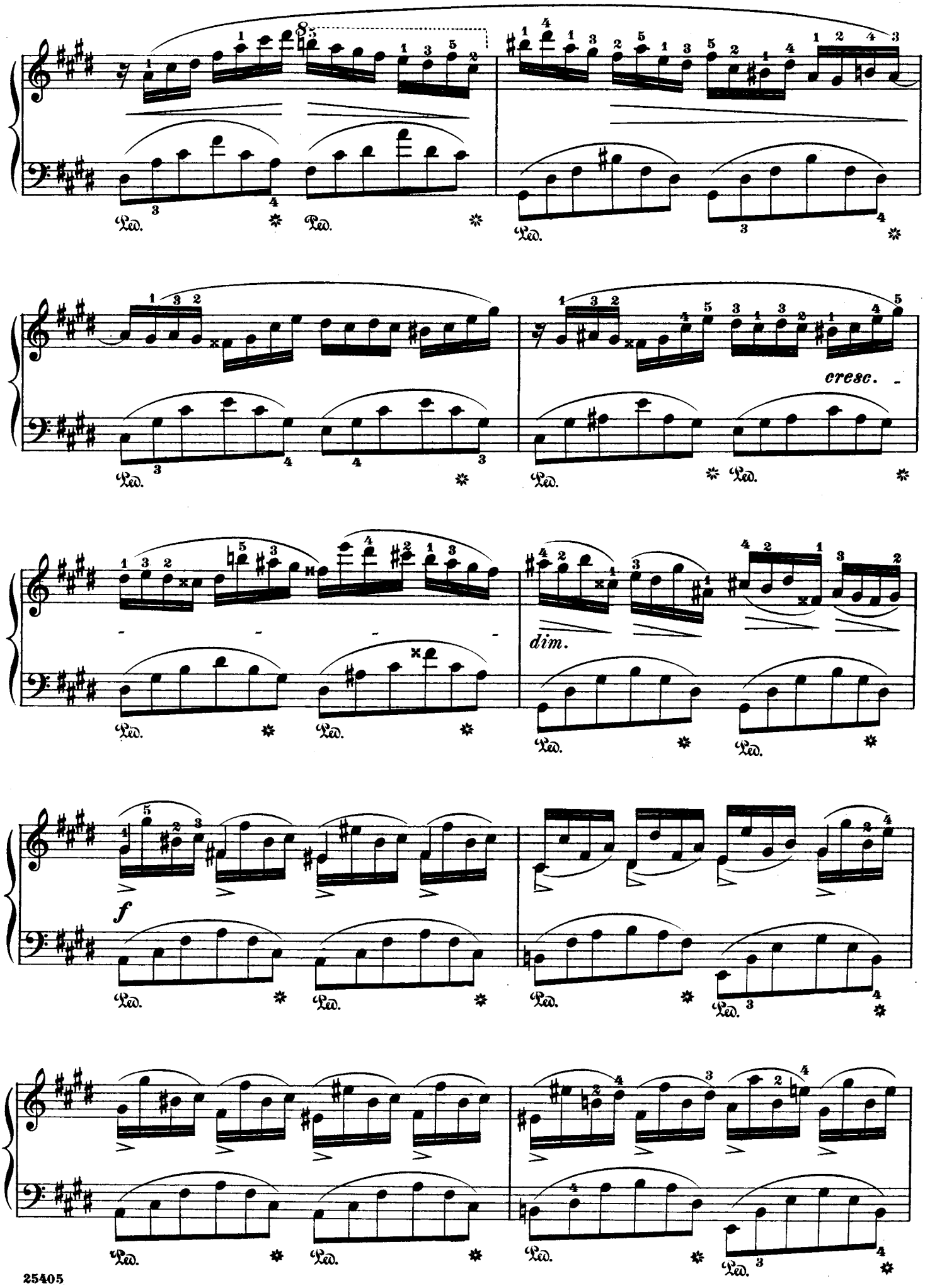

8
sf
ff
riten.
Largo
pesante
Moderato cantabile
sotto voce
a tempo
rit.

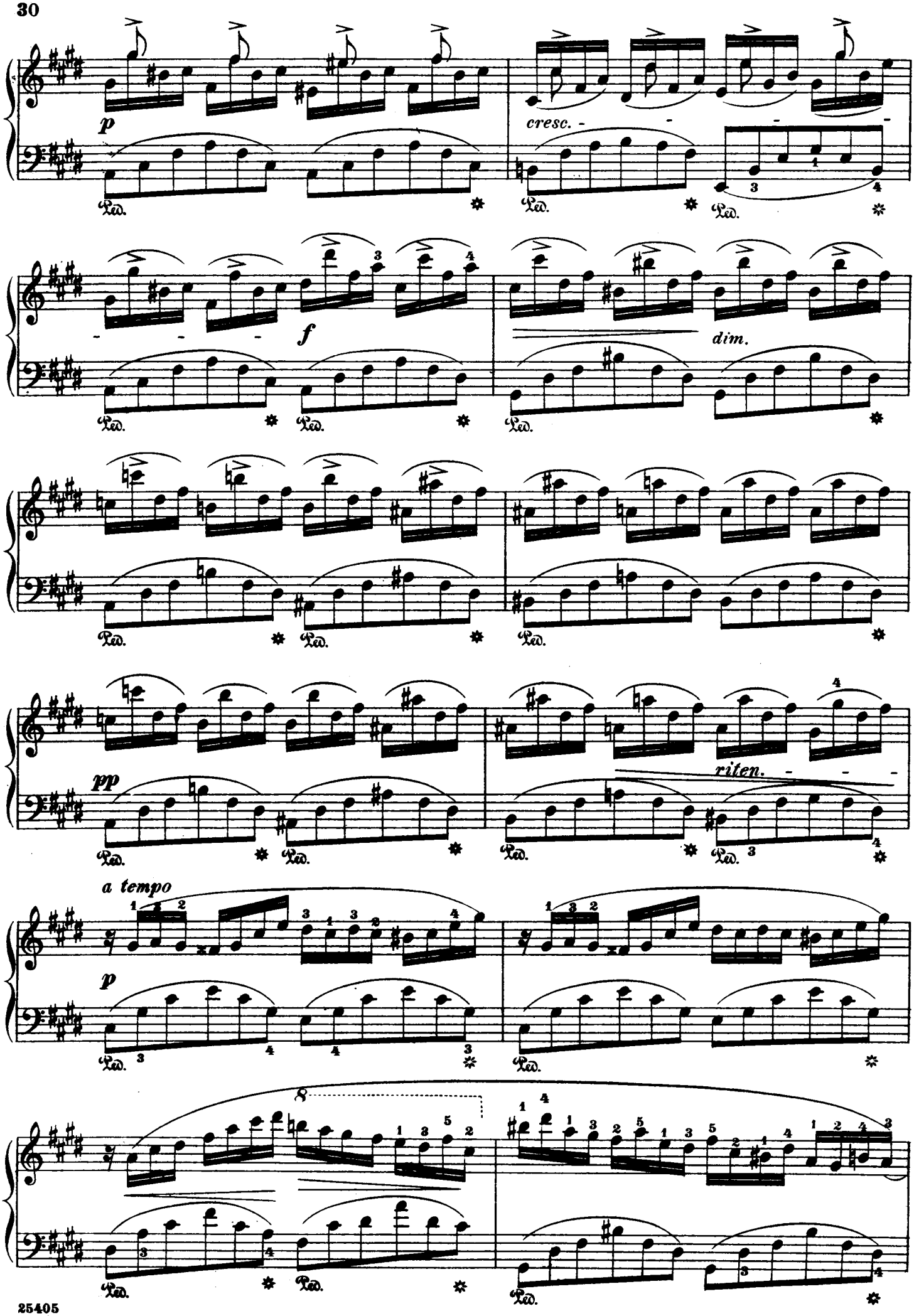

sf
f
sf
f
dim.
pp
sf

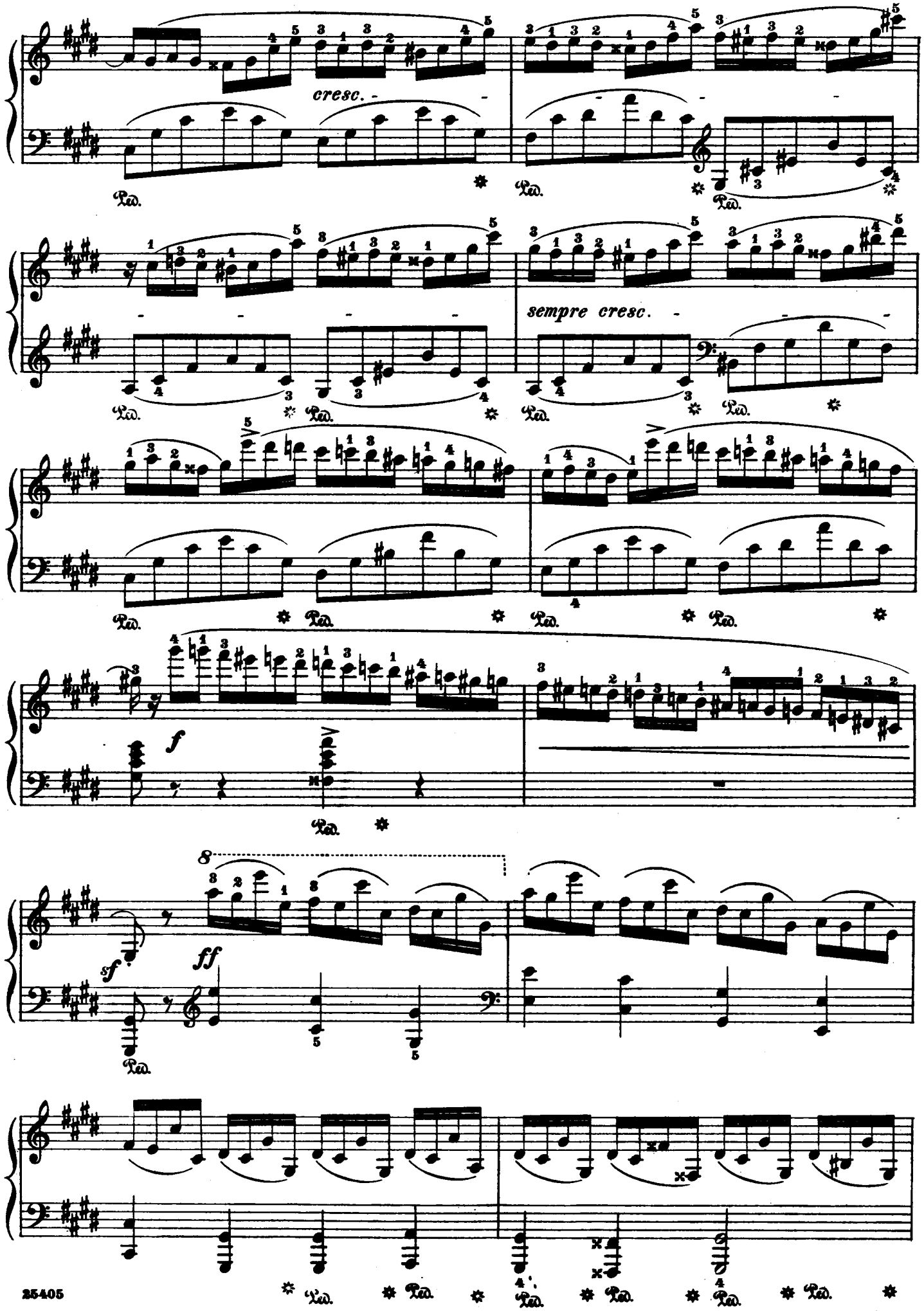


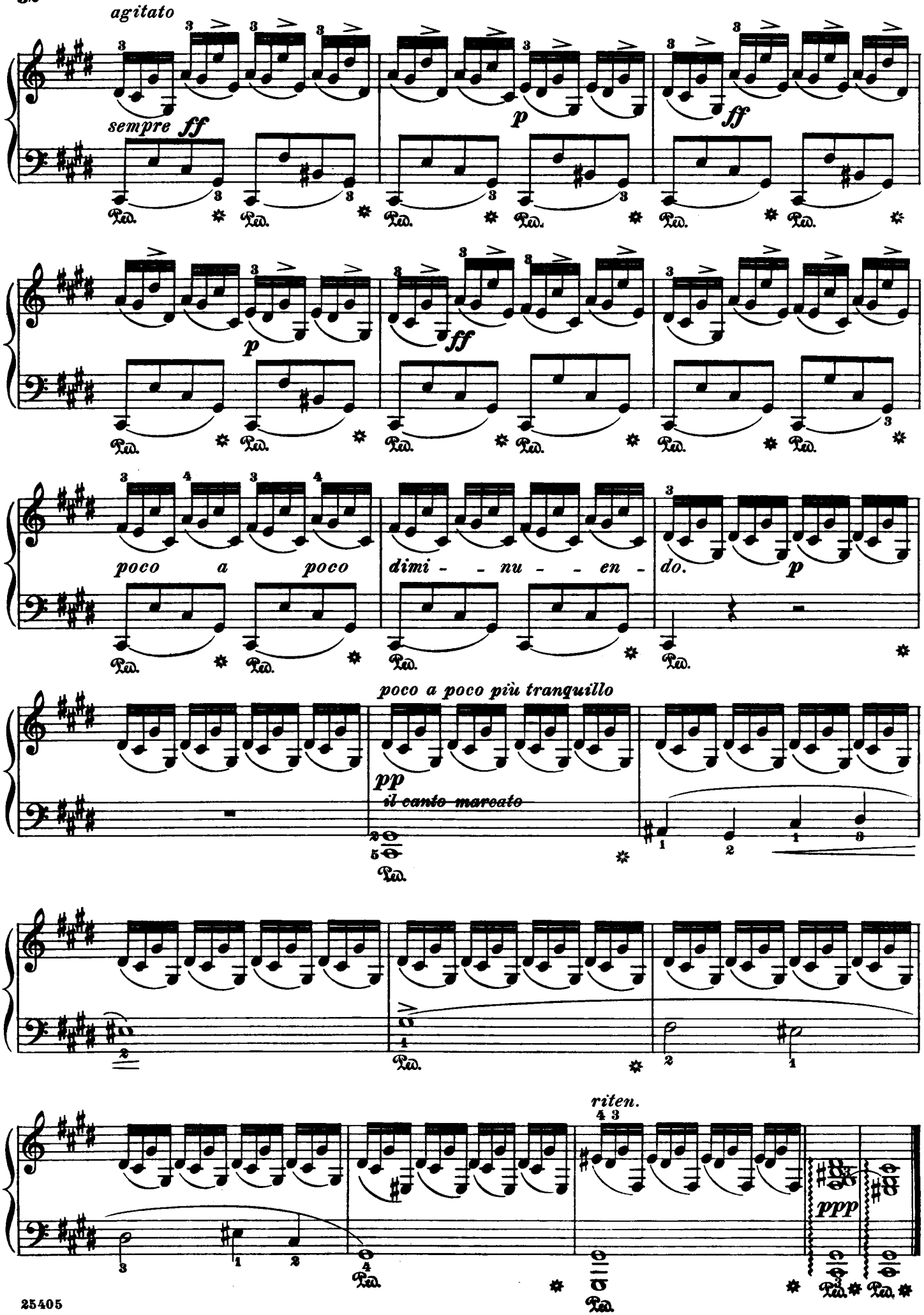
Tempo Io (Allegro agitato)




8va
Ped.
cresc.
dim.
f


p
cresc.
f
dim.
pp
riten.
a tempo
p


cresc.
sempre cresc.
f
sf
ff
8
Ped.


agitato
sempre ff
p
ff
p
ff
poco a poco
dimi - - nu - - en -
do.
p
poco a poco più tranquillo
pp
il canto marcato
riten.
ppp
Ped.