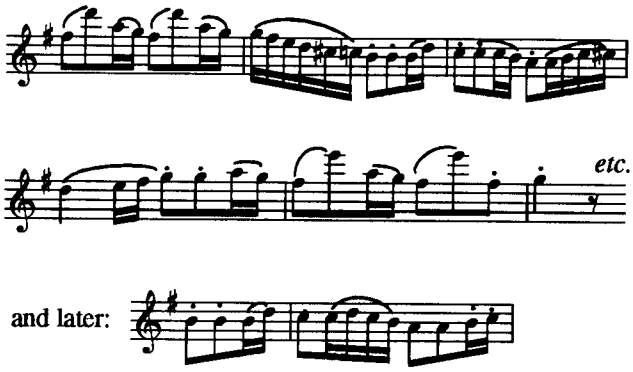
Fritz Kreisler's Rondino
On A Theme By Beethoven
(Transcribed By Leopold Godowsky)

The Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962) was one of the most phonogenic of musicians — his caressing tone, rhythmic spontaneity, and lyric intensity leap out from the grooves of a vast wealth of recordings, ranging from concertos and sonatas (including a feverishly impassioned Grieg C minor with Rachmaninoff) to "Blue Skies." Naturally, the bulk are of his own adorable miniatures and transcriptions — ideally suited to the limited time of the seventy-eight side. (His compositions also include a string quartet so good that one wonders whether he might not have neglected the potential to become a major composer.)

Ordinarily, one would suppose that a work "on a Theme by Beethoven" was on a theme by Beethoven. However, Kreisler's long history of hoaxes inspires vigilant skepticism toward any claim he makes. He had already acknowledged his authorship of such waltzes as "Schoen Rosmarin," which he had originally claimed were posthumous compositions of Lanner. In 1935, however, he finally admitted that the series of fourteen pieces that he had for three decades maintained were based on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts "discovered in an old convent in the South of France" were, in fact, wholly original Kreisler compositions as well. (For the attributions, he had plucked such forgotten but tasty names as Pugnani and Porpora from Groves Dictionary.) His "justification" was that it would have been "tactless and impudent" to have used his own name repeatedly on his concert programs.*

So...is the theme by Beethoven?

The answer is — sort of. The "very early and unimportant composition" alluded to by Kreisler is Beethoven's G-Major Rondo for violin and piano, WOO 41, dating from around 1794. However, considering how little Kreisler changes the melody, it is astonishing how completely he subverts its character. In Beethoven's original, the first notes of the melody fall on the second half of a 6/8 bar.



Kreisler's added upbeats give these first Beethoven notes the stress of a strong beat, reversing the accentation of the melody throughout. In Beethoven, certain melodic turns are introduced as ornaments to the theme. Kreisler, while boiling the theme down to eight bars, retains all these piquant modifications, making them serve as essential rather than as incidental elements. The addition of a lilting laendler accompaniment completes the Kreislerization — the result could as easily be taken for "Lanner" as for Beethoven.

Shortly after Kreisler's Rondino appeared in 1915, his friend, the legendary pianist Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938), hastened to apply the next layer of adaptation. Considering that Godowsky usually transforms everything from Chopin to Johann Strauss, Jr. into dense, chromatic poly-saturated romantic counterpoint, his treatment of this Rondino is uncharacteristically restrained. (Is this perhaps because he feared that a living composer like Kreisler might object to the kind of radical re-working that dead composers accept with such amiable docility?)

However, even in this modest, transparent rendering, Godowsky demands great control of dynamics and touch, particularly in balancing the voices in the theme's subtly varied recurrences.

**This revelation provoked an unforgettably unbecoming interchange between the influential English critic Ernest Newman and Kreisler. Newman raised genuine musical and ethical issues, but posed them in a ridiculously inflated tone of moral outrage. Kreisler, for his part, cavalierly affected to believe that Newman was motivated solely by an unsporting rancor at having been fooled.*

Rondino

(On A Theme By Beethoven)

Fritz Kreisler
(1875-1962)
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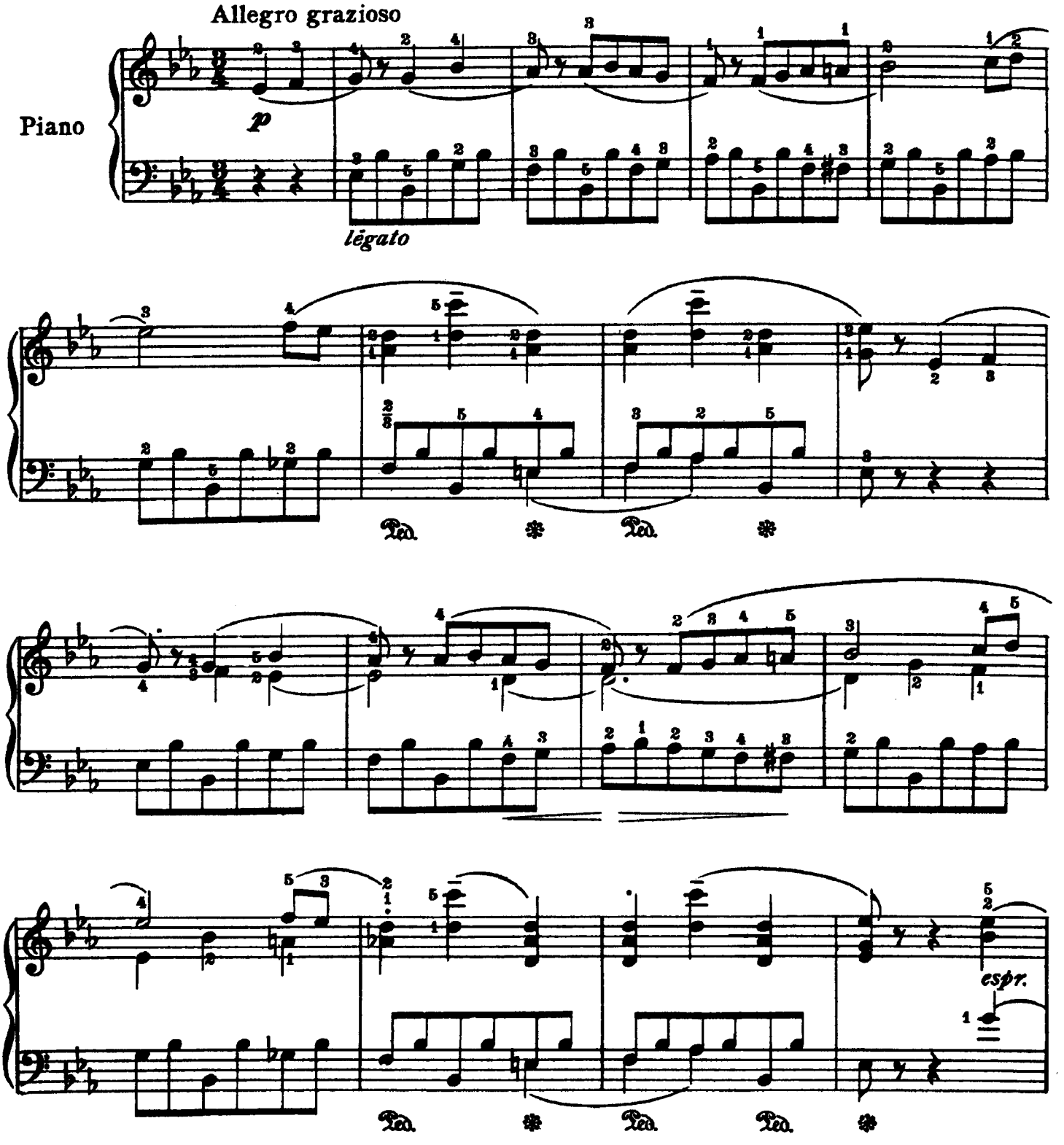
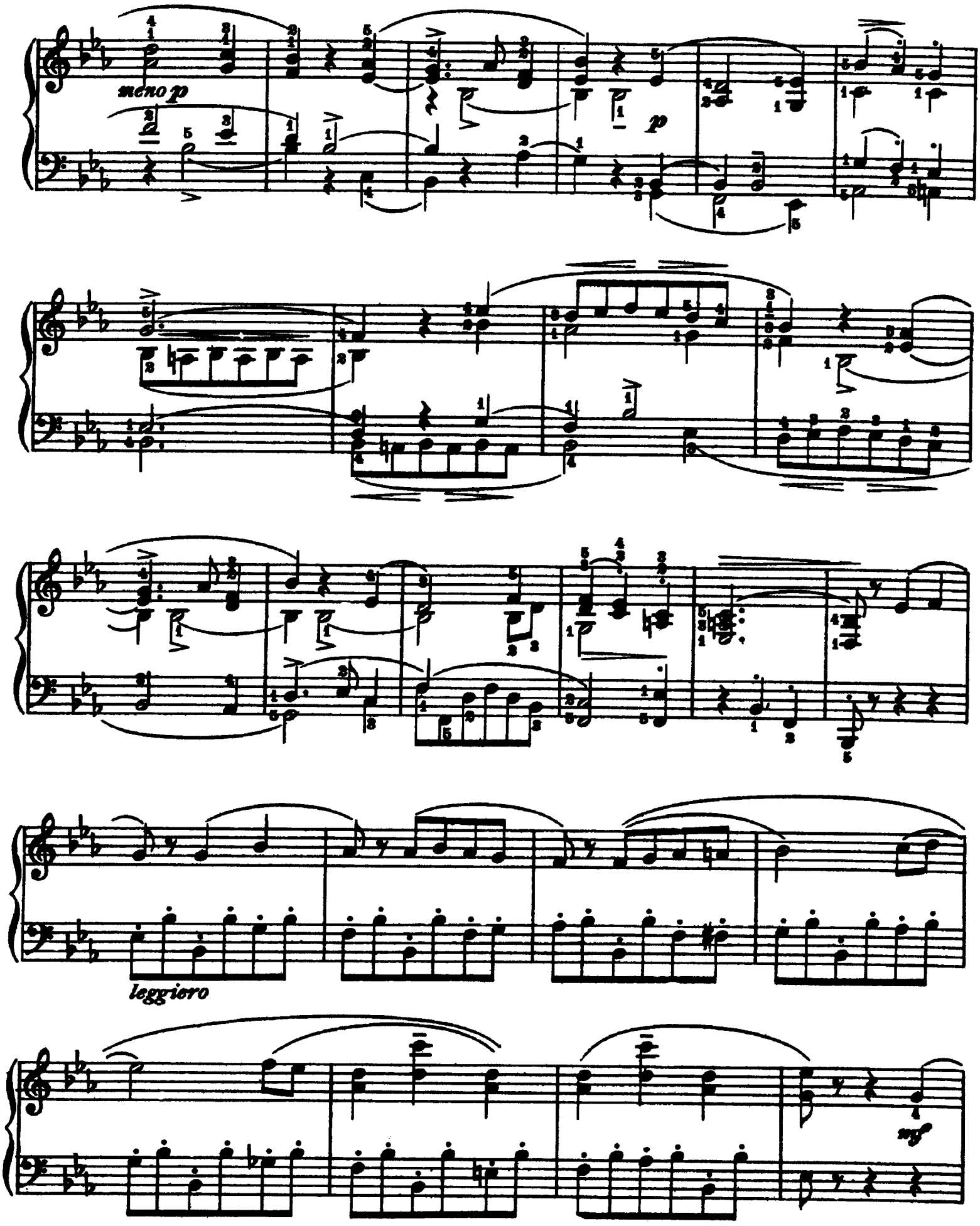
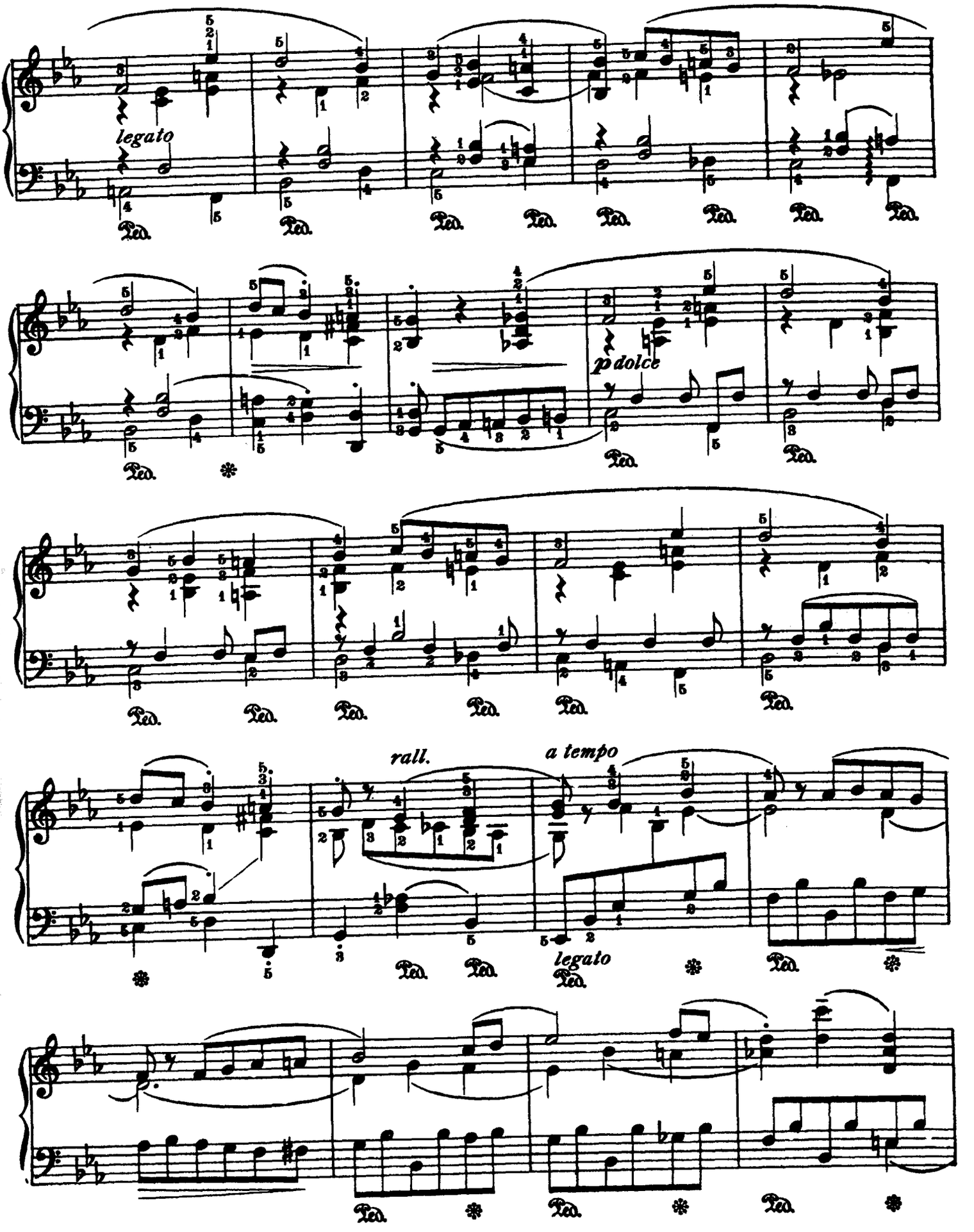
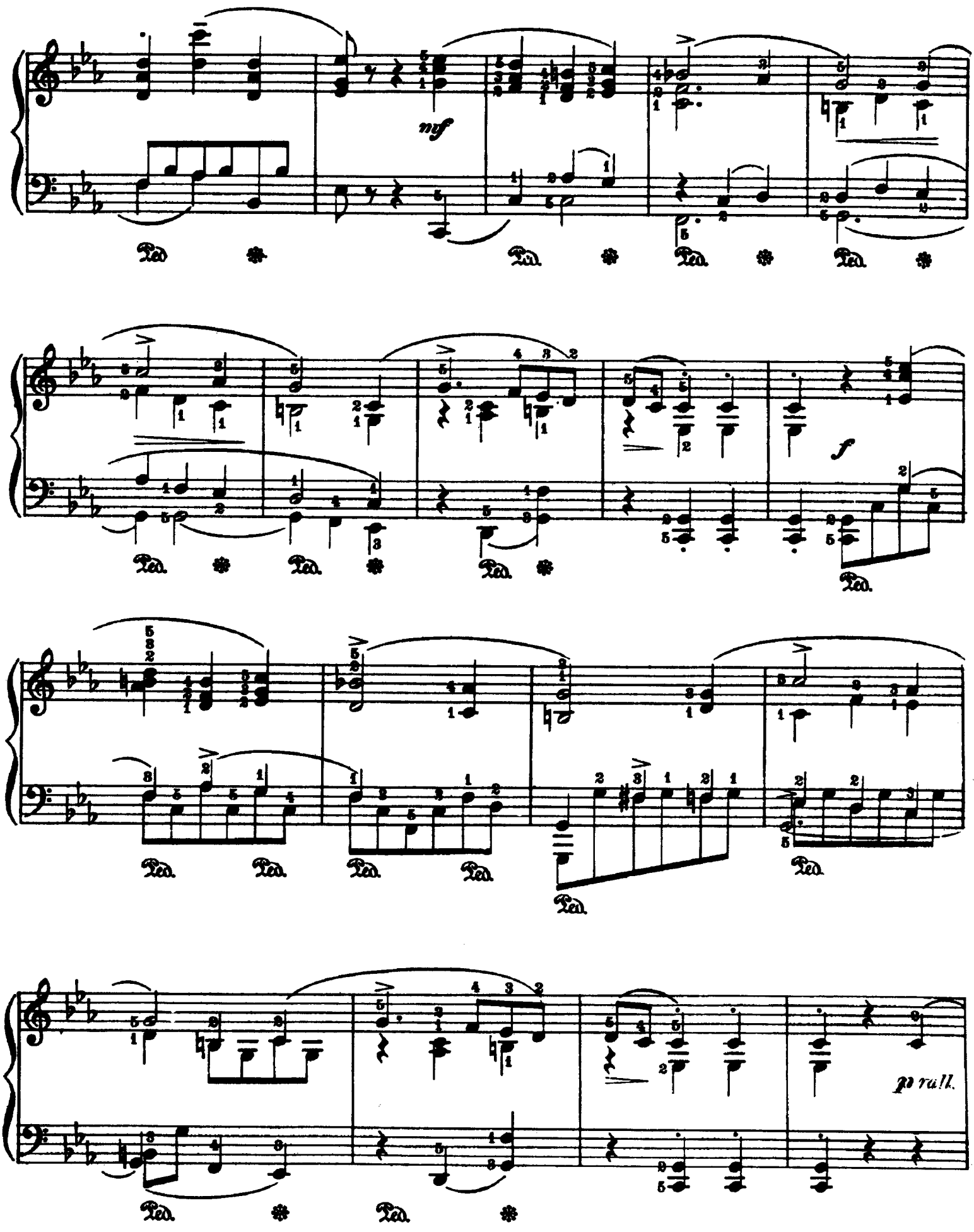
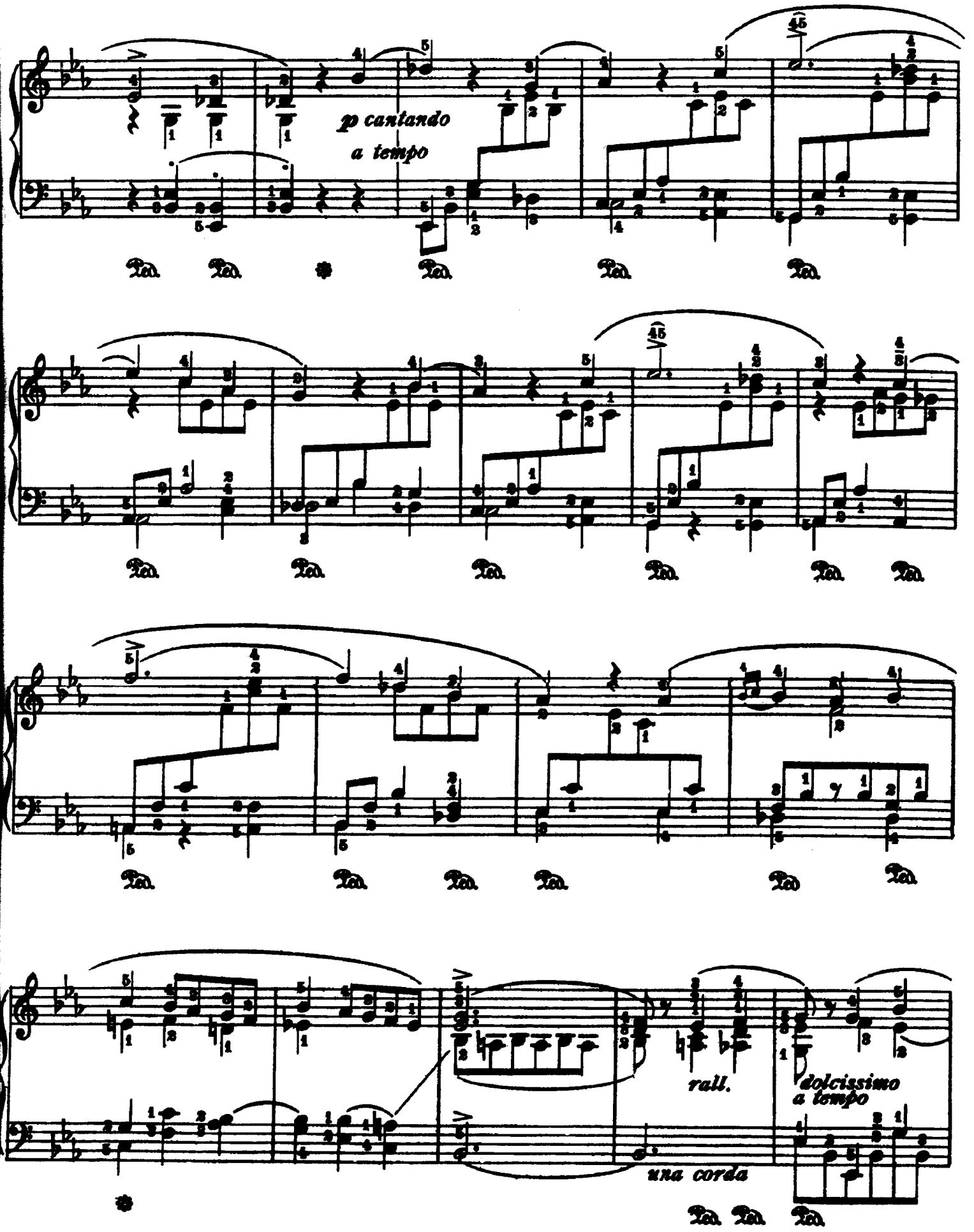
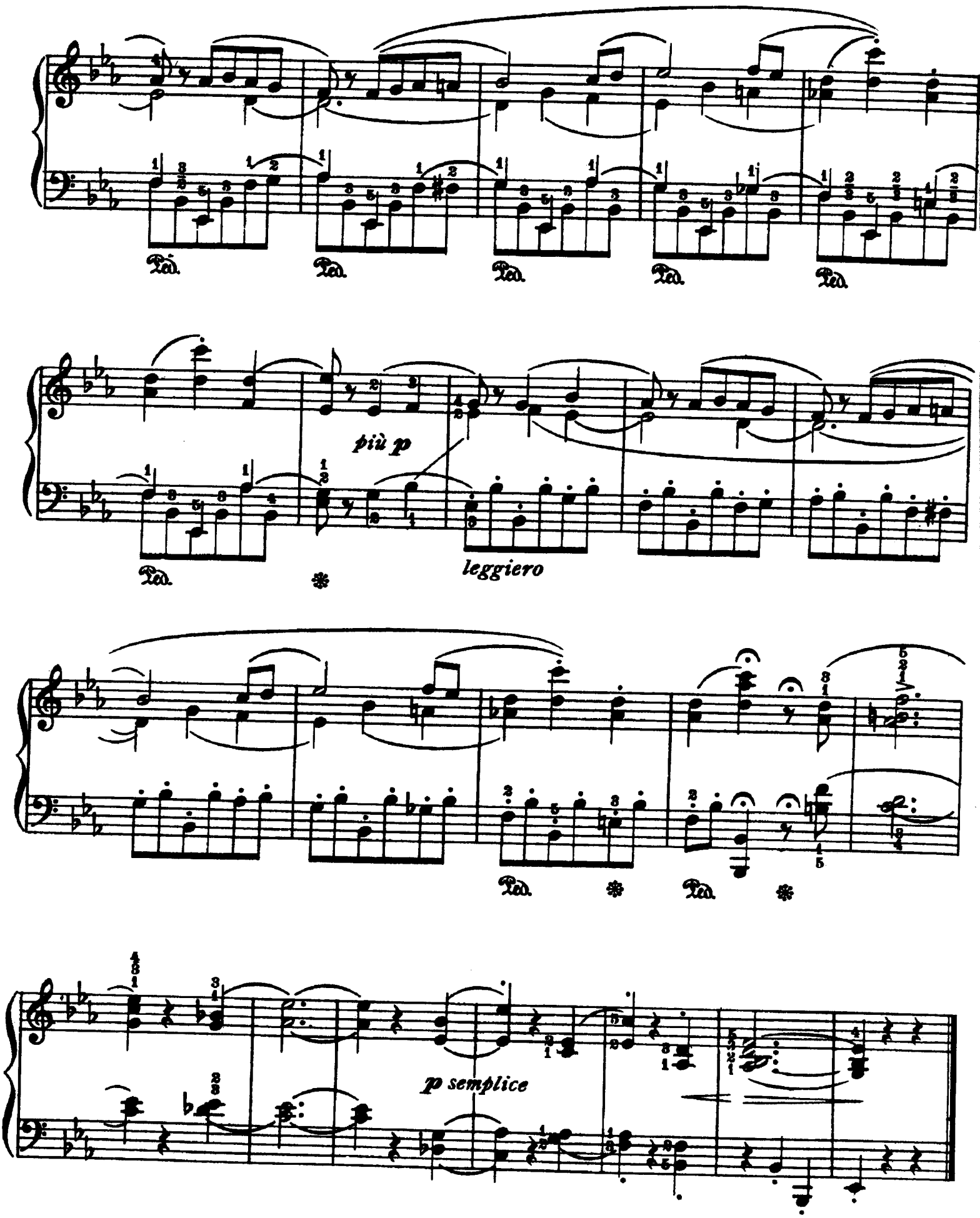



meno p
p
leggiero
mf


legato
p dolce
rall.
a tempo
legato


mf
f
p rall.


p cantando
a tempo
rall.
dolcissimo
a tempo
una corda


più p
leggiero
p semplice