About the melodic organization of Debussy's Prelude Les Tierces Alternées

Although the piano preludes of Claude Debussy (1862-1918) sound like an improvisation, analysis can often reveal an intriguing decision making strategy. The Prelude 'Les Tierces Alternées' (alternating thirds) is in this respect a nice example. In contrast to other Preludes of Debussy, 'Les Tierces Alternées' does not refer to an extra-musical content but indicates instead its modus operandi: alternating third intervals played by alternating hands. The object of this article is to find out how Debussy organized melody in this mainly fast moving music.

In short, this prelude has three ideas:

1. A slow, concentration like music (bar 1-10, 91-116) that becomes from bar 108 a dance like character
2. A fast, etude like music with a clear melody (bar 11-33, 65-90, 125-148), sounding like a refrain
3. A fast, etude like music with a hidden melody: an episode (with function of a transition or coda) (bar 34-64, 117-124, 149-162)

In other words:

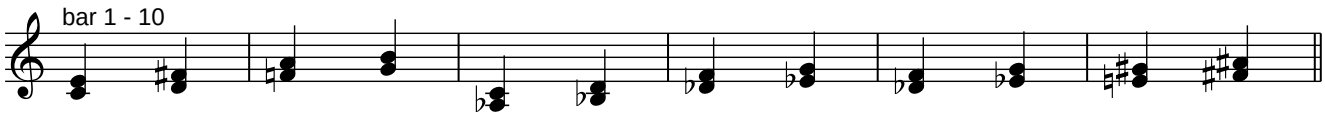
Intro - Refrain - Episode - Refrain - Intro music varied - Episode - Refrain - Episode (=Coda)

Conceptually, a very simple rondo like design, where intro, refrain and episode are interrelated to each other. In fact, we can define some basic rules that define the musical relations.

Notice that this text skips the register variety Debussy uses in order to make the analytical observations comprehensible.

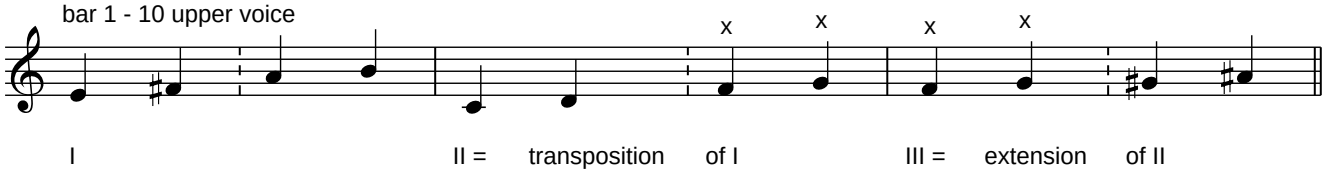
1. A rule for melodic construction

The intro music (bar 1-10) can be reduced to a simple melody, that is harmonized by the interval major third.



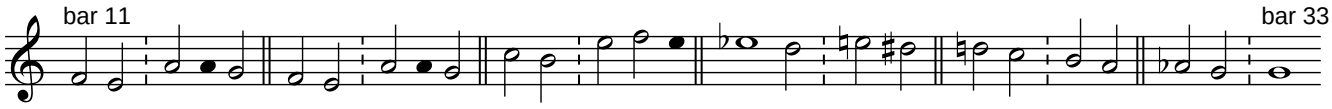
The upper voice contains all melodic information: a succession of small intervals, i.e. second and third. The melody has three elements, each consisting of four tones:

I. The first four tones E-F#-A-B with interval progression second - third - second
II. These tones are followed by its tranposition (a major third lower): C-D-F-G
III. These tones are followed by its extension, starting with the last F-G: F-G-G#-A# (second - second - second)



These melodic progressions of the intro can be described as the succession of two ascending stepwise motions (including four tones) separated by the interval second or third.

The melody of the first refrain (bar 11-33, lowest voice) seems to have a similar construction techniques:



This melody can be seen as a subtle variation on the melody of the intro with its succession of two separated stepwise motions, summing up to four tone cells. So, a general rule for melodic construction could be defined, based on the observations till now:

Rule for melodic construction:

Each basic melodic progression consists of two ascending and/or descending stepwise motions, separated by an ascending or descending interval

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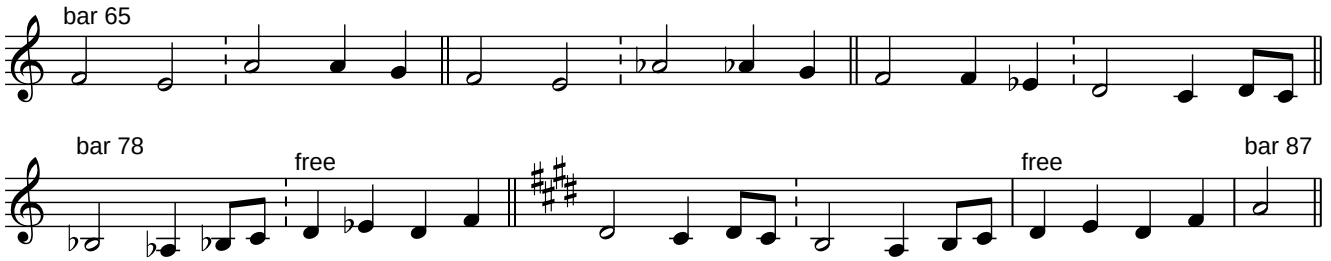
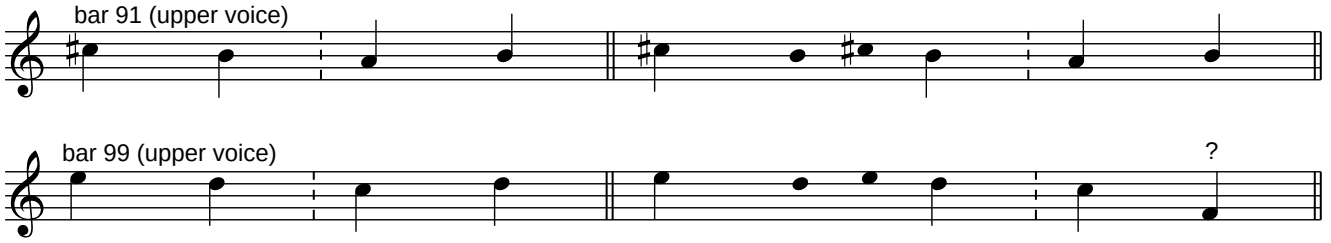
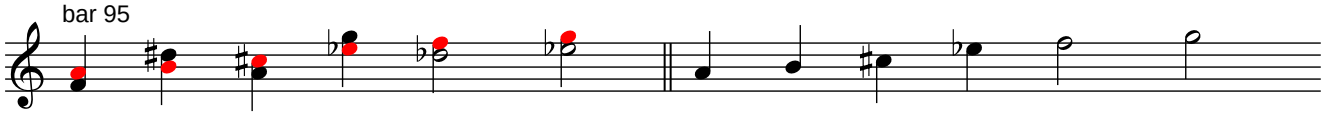
This rule is -apart from small exceptions- relevant for the melody of the second refrain (bars 65 - 87, lowest voice). In addition, some diminutions are added.



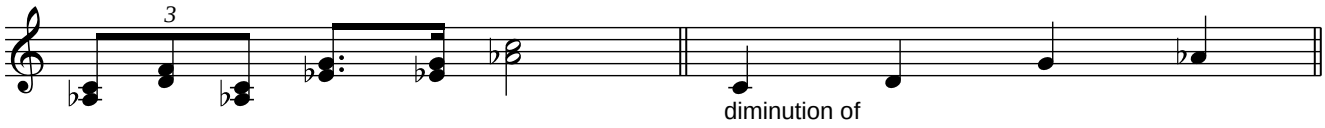
The melodic lines of the third refrain (bars 125 - 148, lower voice) are almost an exact repetition of bar 11-33. The idea of the opening bars 1- 10 is repeated and extended in bar 91 - 116. Bar 91-94 and 99-102:



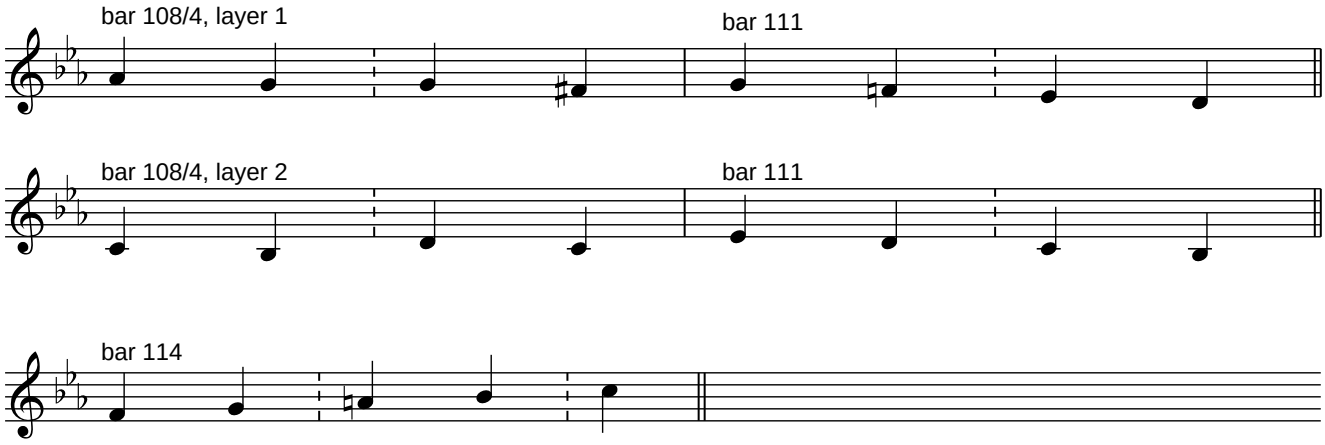
Bar 95-98 is more complex, but could be explained in terms of rule 1 when applying the old voice exchange technique:



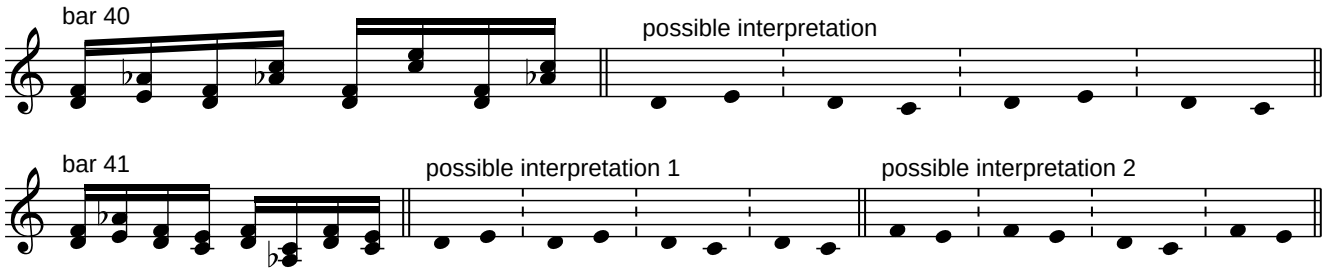
Bar 103-107



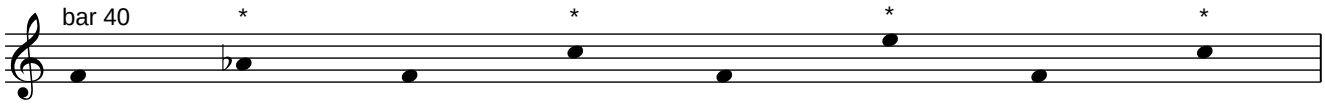
The foregoing voice exchange technique reveals that in bar 108-116 several layers are combined. Hence, these bars are the most complex of all.



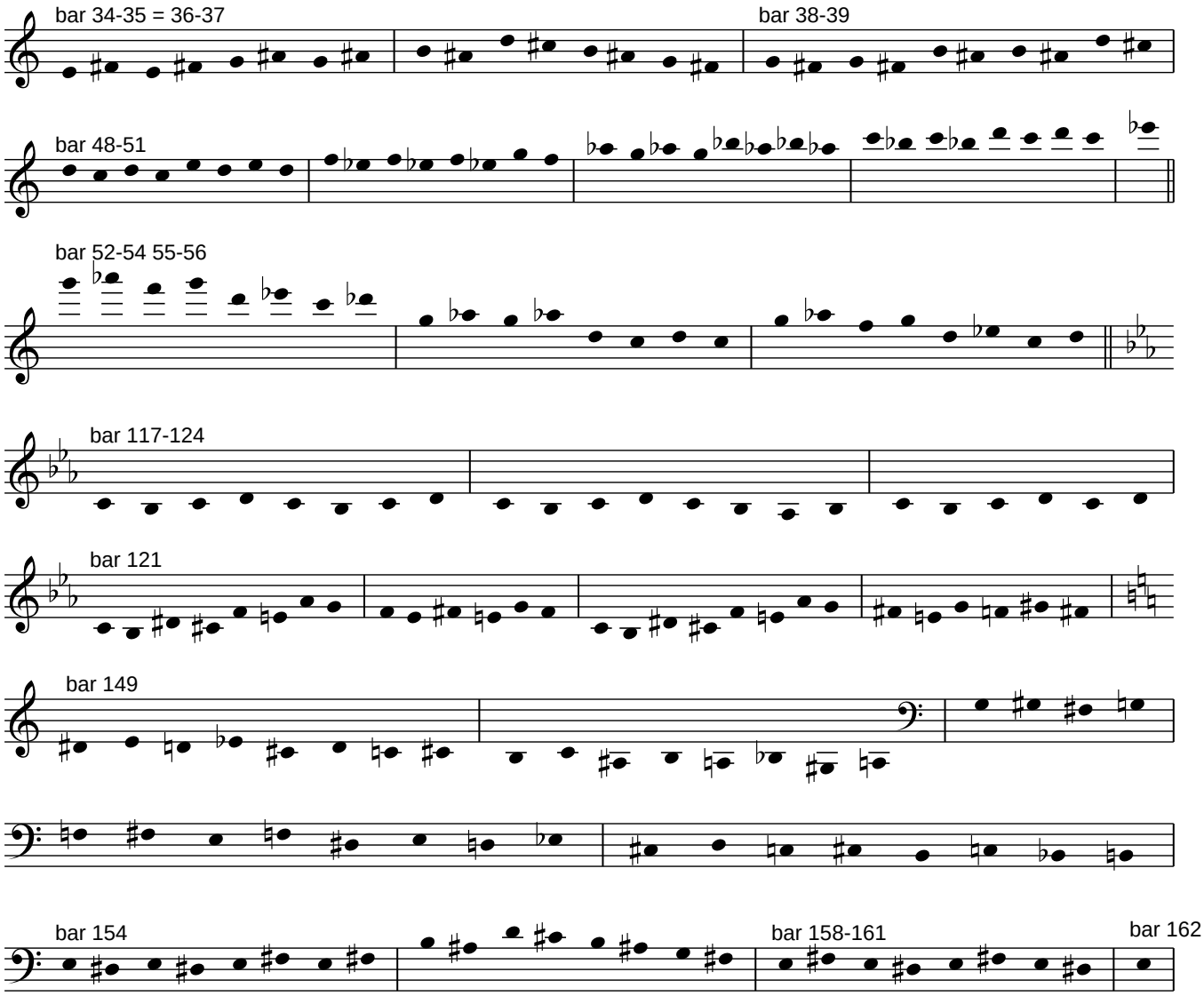
The implicit melody of the first episode is now presented without any comment. When you play the music slowly, then a melody can be heard. This melody has a lot in common with the refrain melody, but there are striking differences: the higher speed of change of melody tones and the influence of chromaticism.
Again voice exchange seems to organize the melodic progressions. Let us first take a look at that.



As shown, these passages can be interpreted in more than one way. Of course, one can object that the defined construction rule is determining the observations. And that in case of e.g. bar 40 one only hear the tones with an asterisk, alternating with the sustained/pedal tone F).



The only thing I can say is, that in my opinion musical reality is more than only an upper voice.
The old medieval organum compositions of Perotinus are in this respect an important source.
So, if you are willing to accept voice exchange as an serious explanation for the melodic and interval progressions, study the following examples from the first, second and third refrain carefully.



Conclusion:

Four tone cells with stepwise motion, separated by some interval, seems to be the general rule in the melodic construction of Debussy's prelude 'Les Tierces Alternées'. Adding skips for variety is mainly done by voice exchange, while maintaining an underlying stepwise motion. There is no considerable deviation from this procedures.

About the author:

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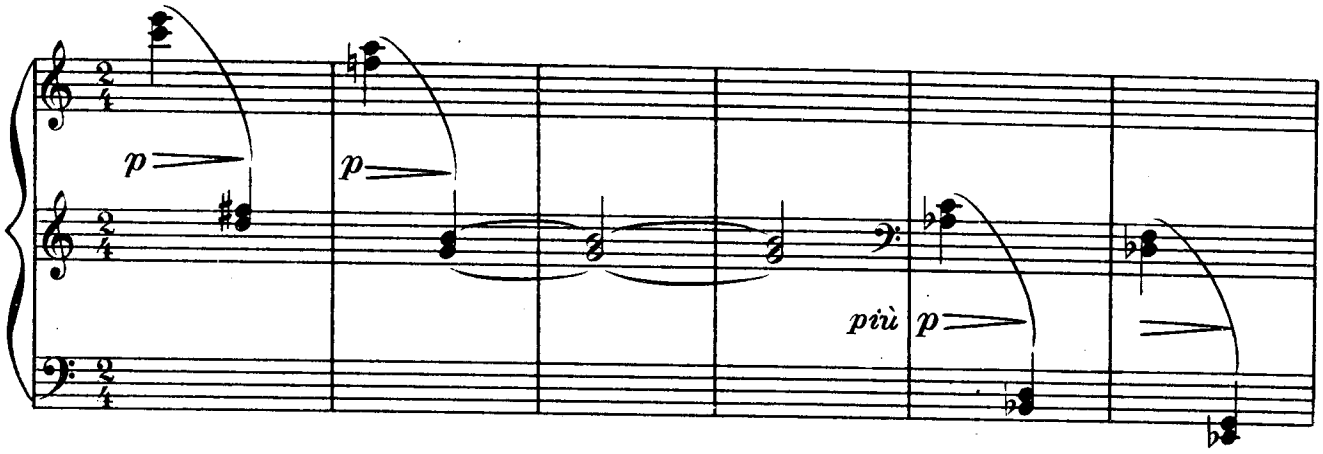
His freeware music notation programm MC Musiceditor (Windows) can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com This article has been typeset with MC Musiceditor 8.4.2 (www.mcmusiceditor.com).

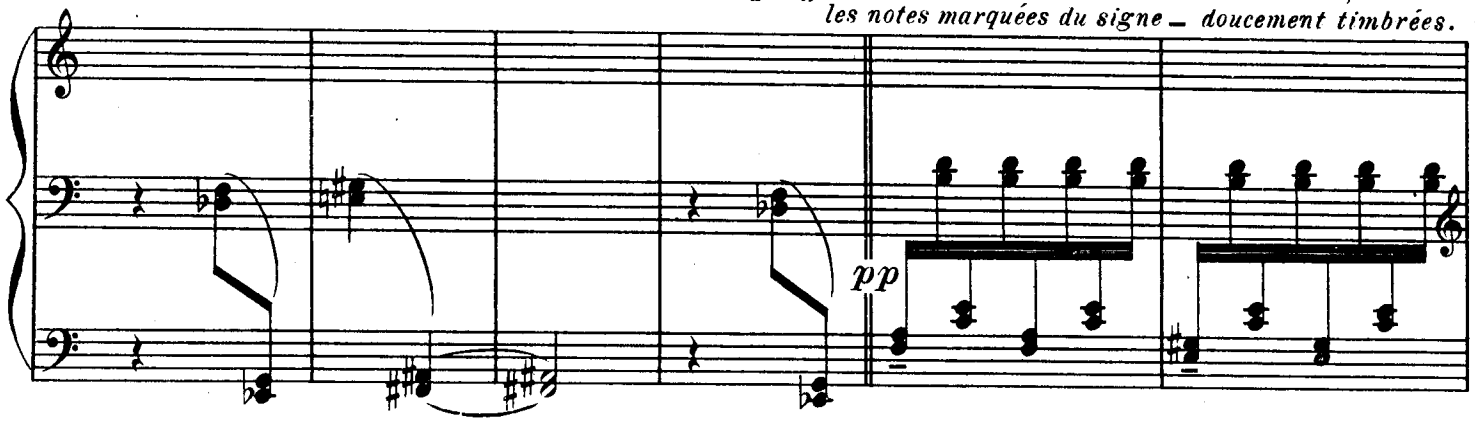
XI.

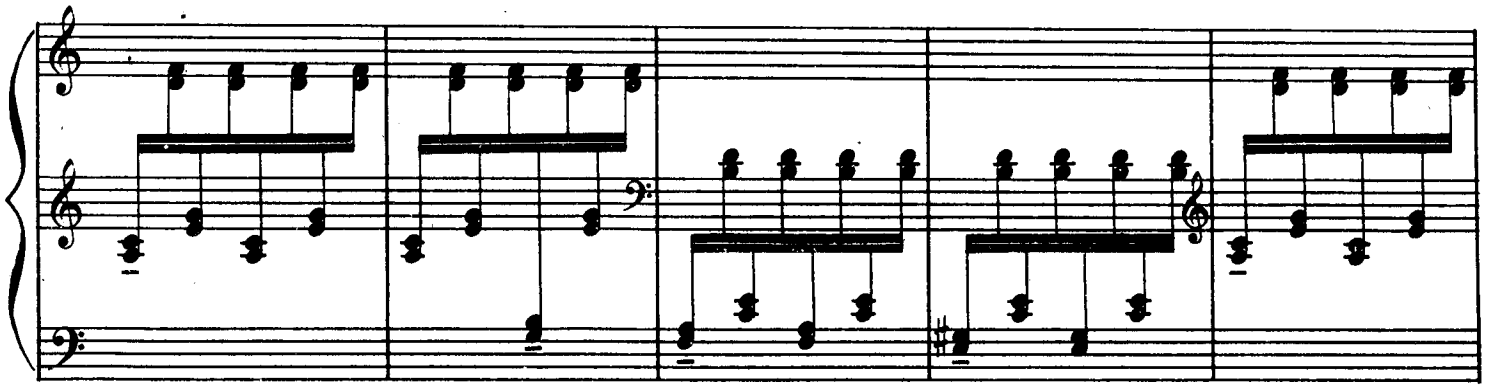
Modérément animé

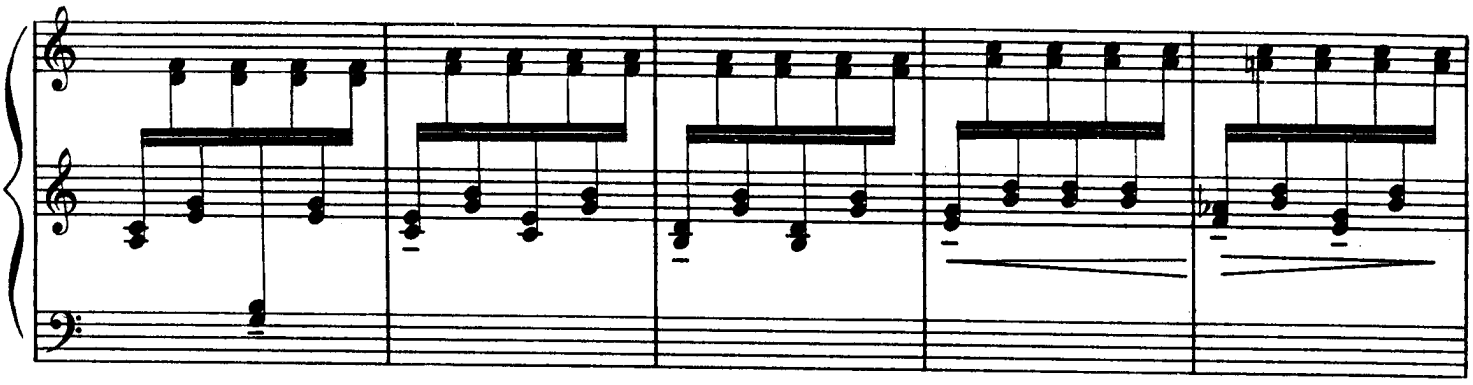


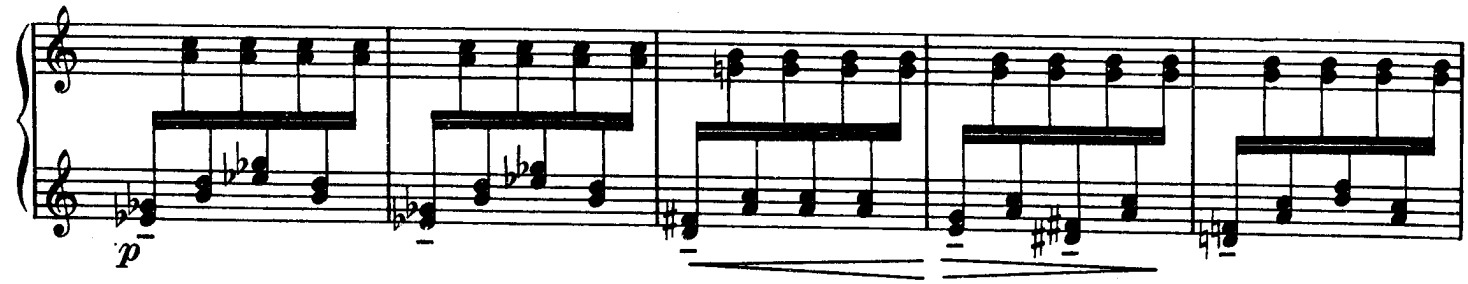
Cédez - - - - - - - //

Un peu plus animé
légèrement détaché sans sécheresse;
les notes marquées du signe – doucement timbrées.





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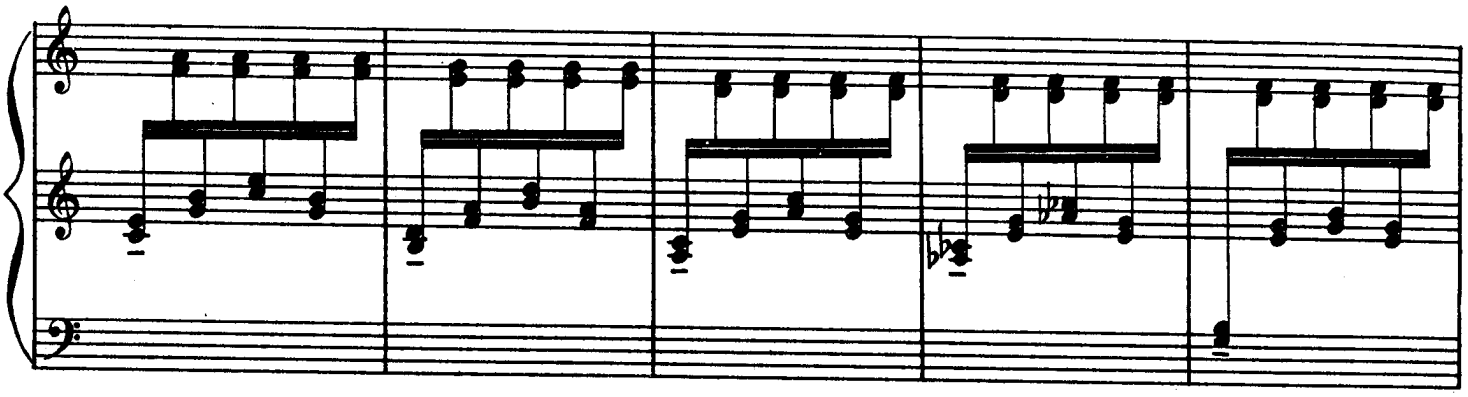

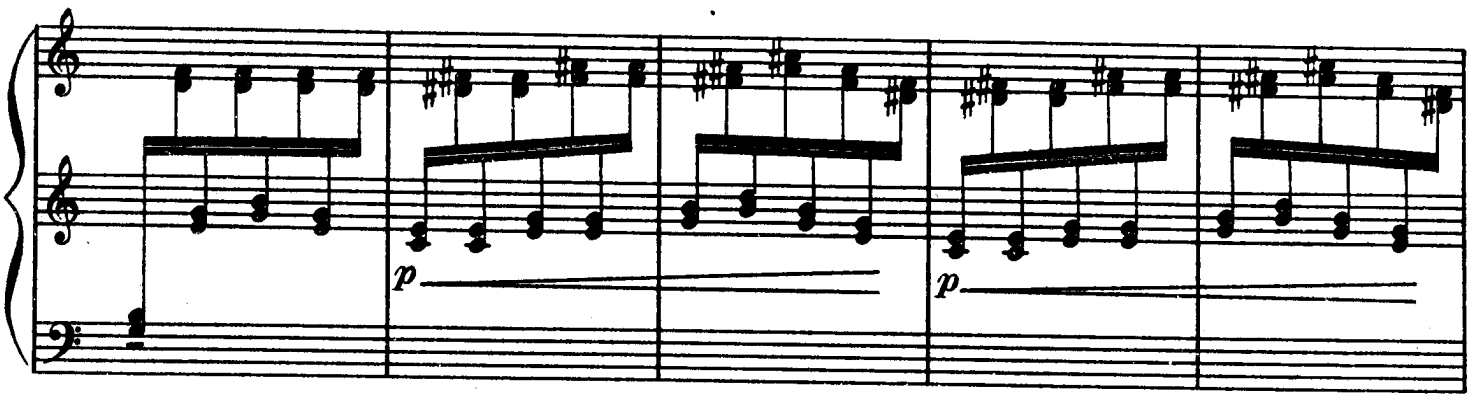
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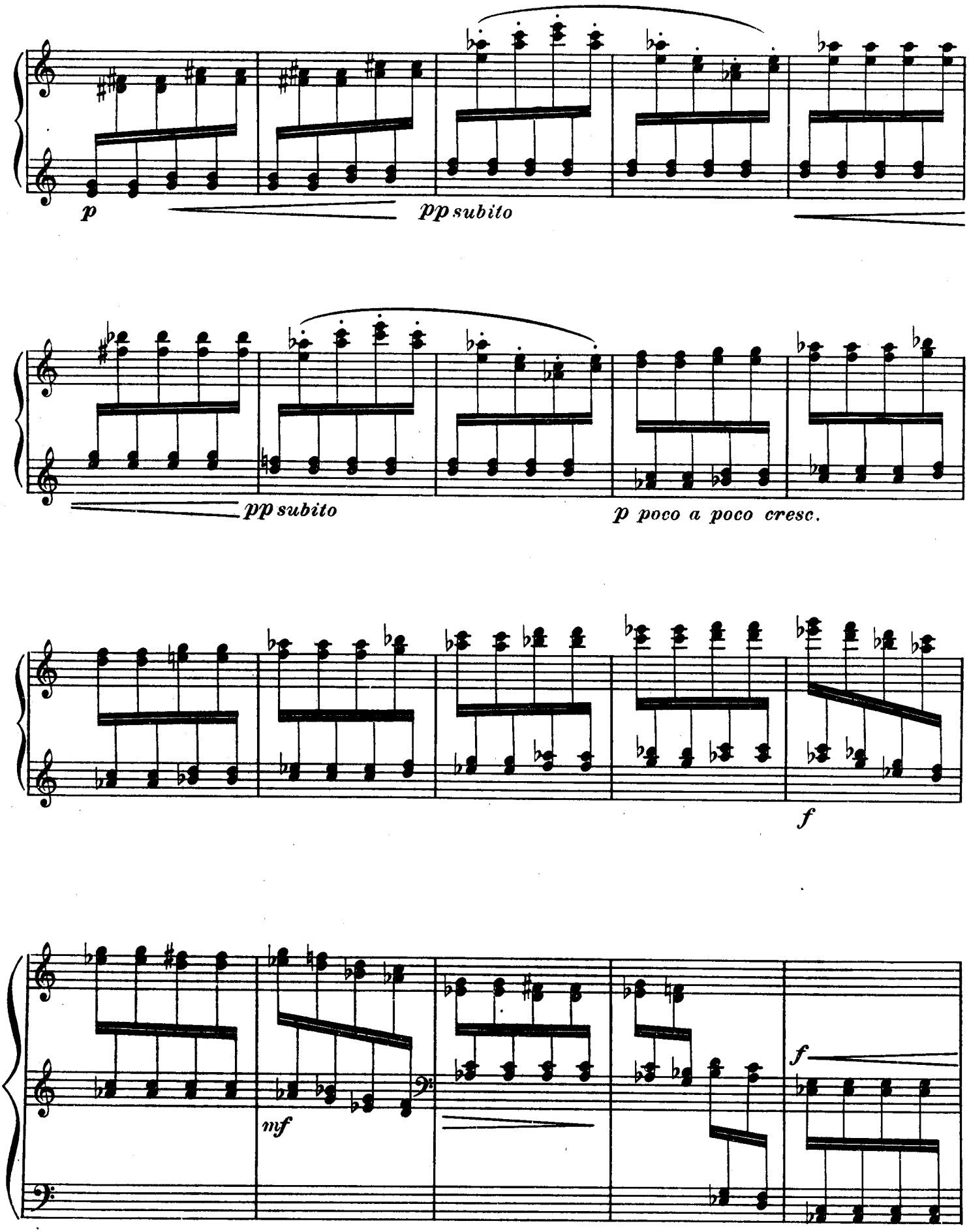
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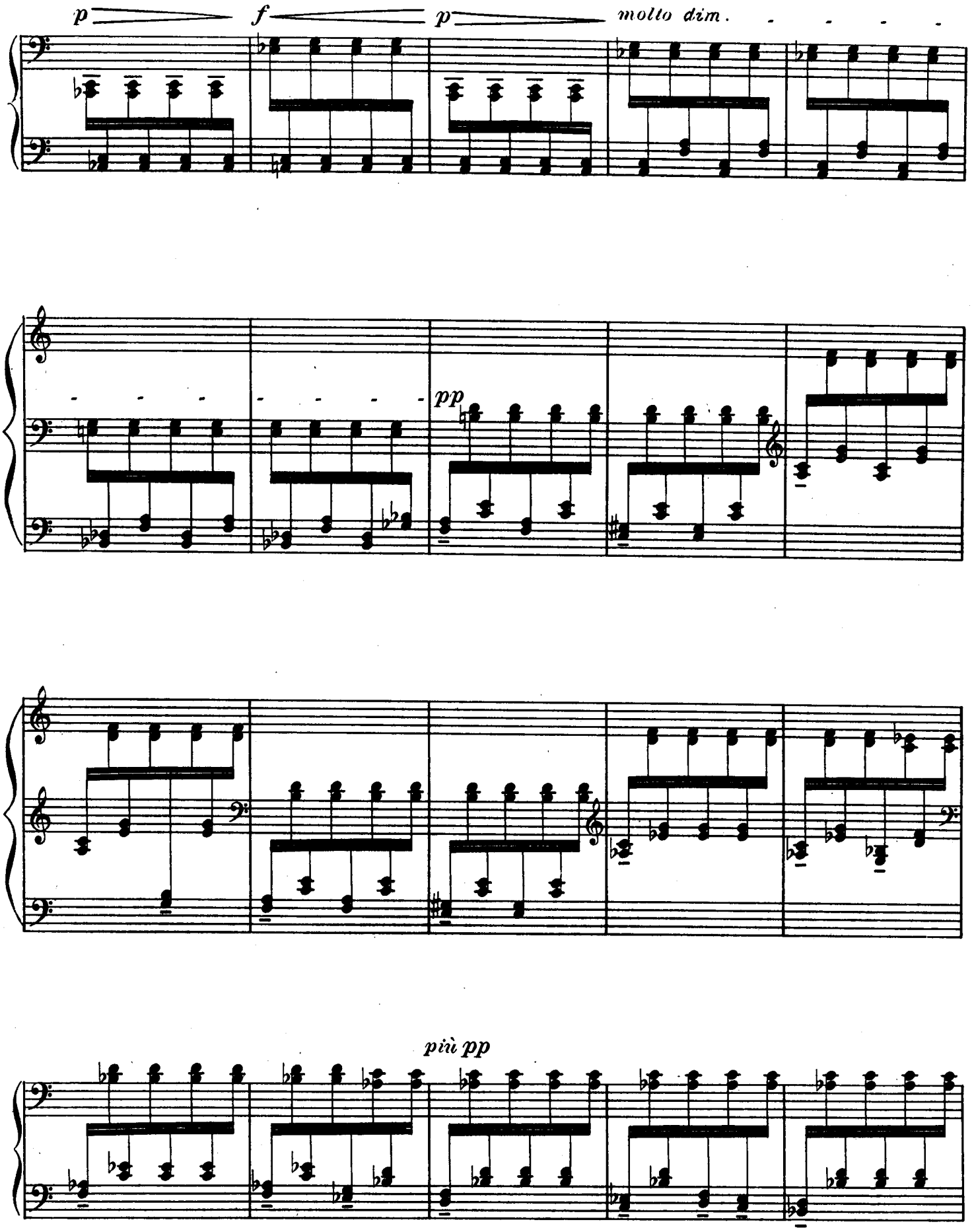
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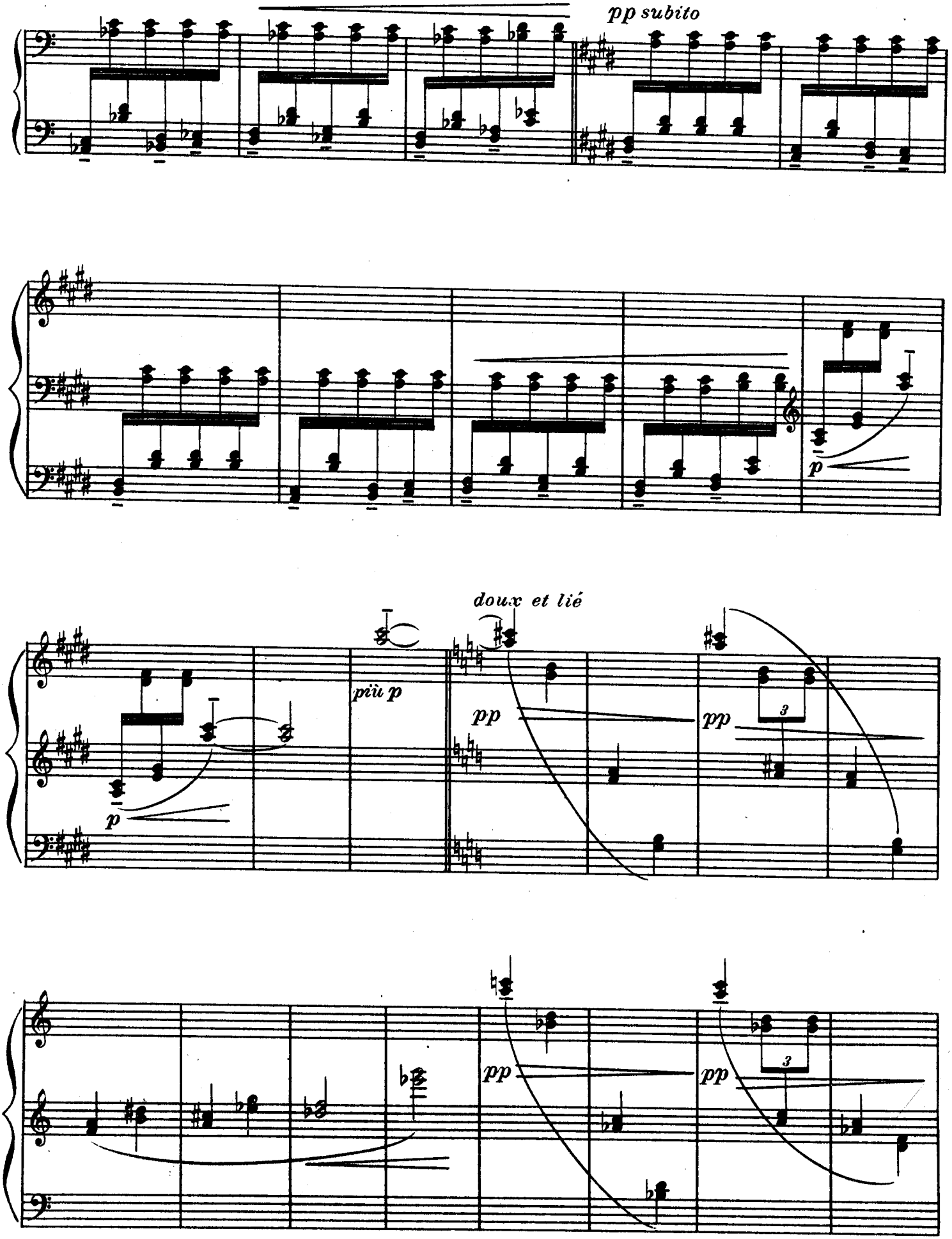
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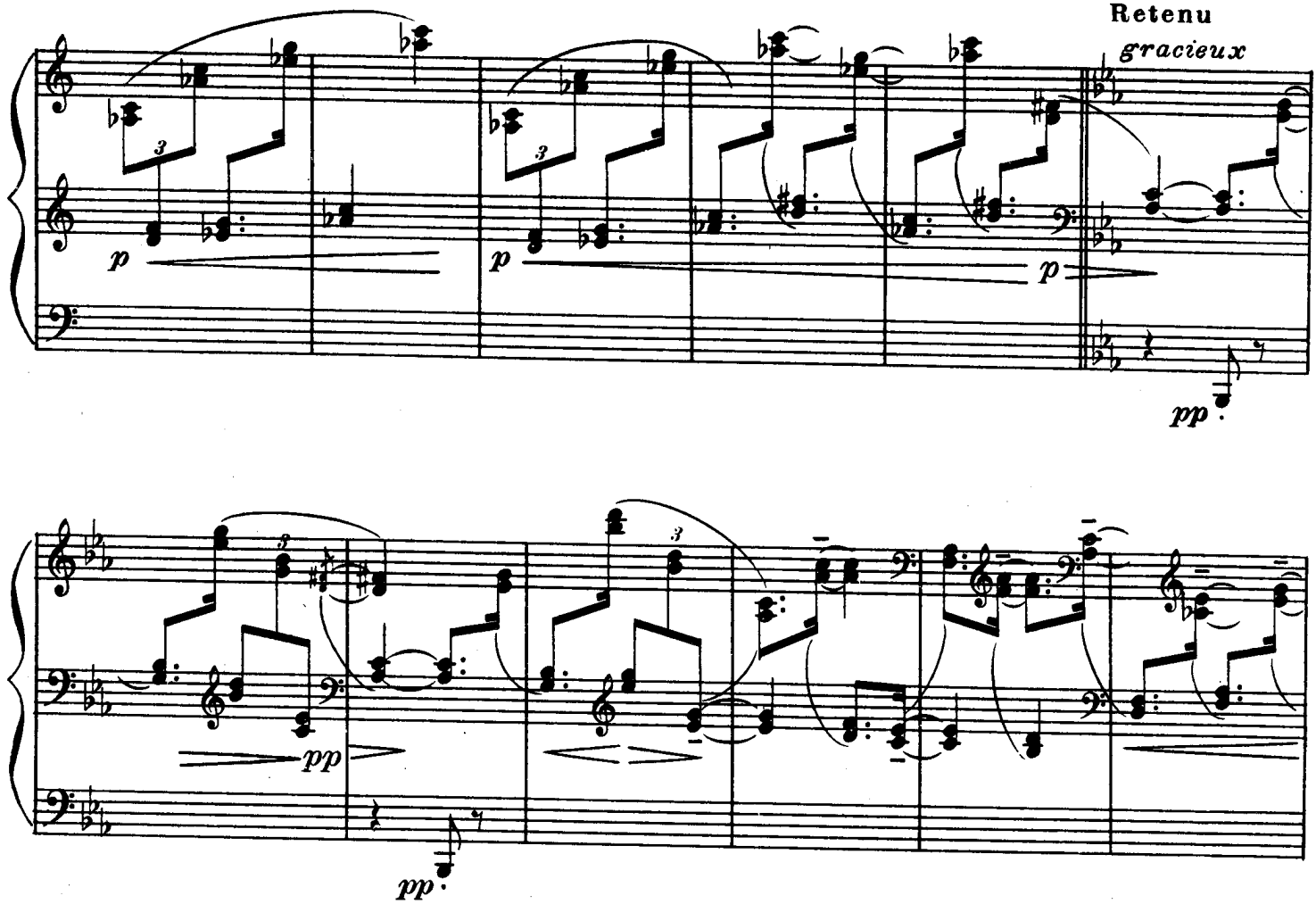
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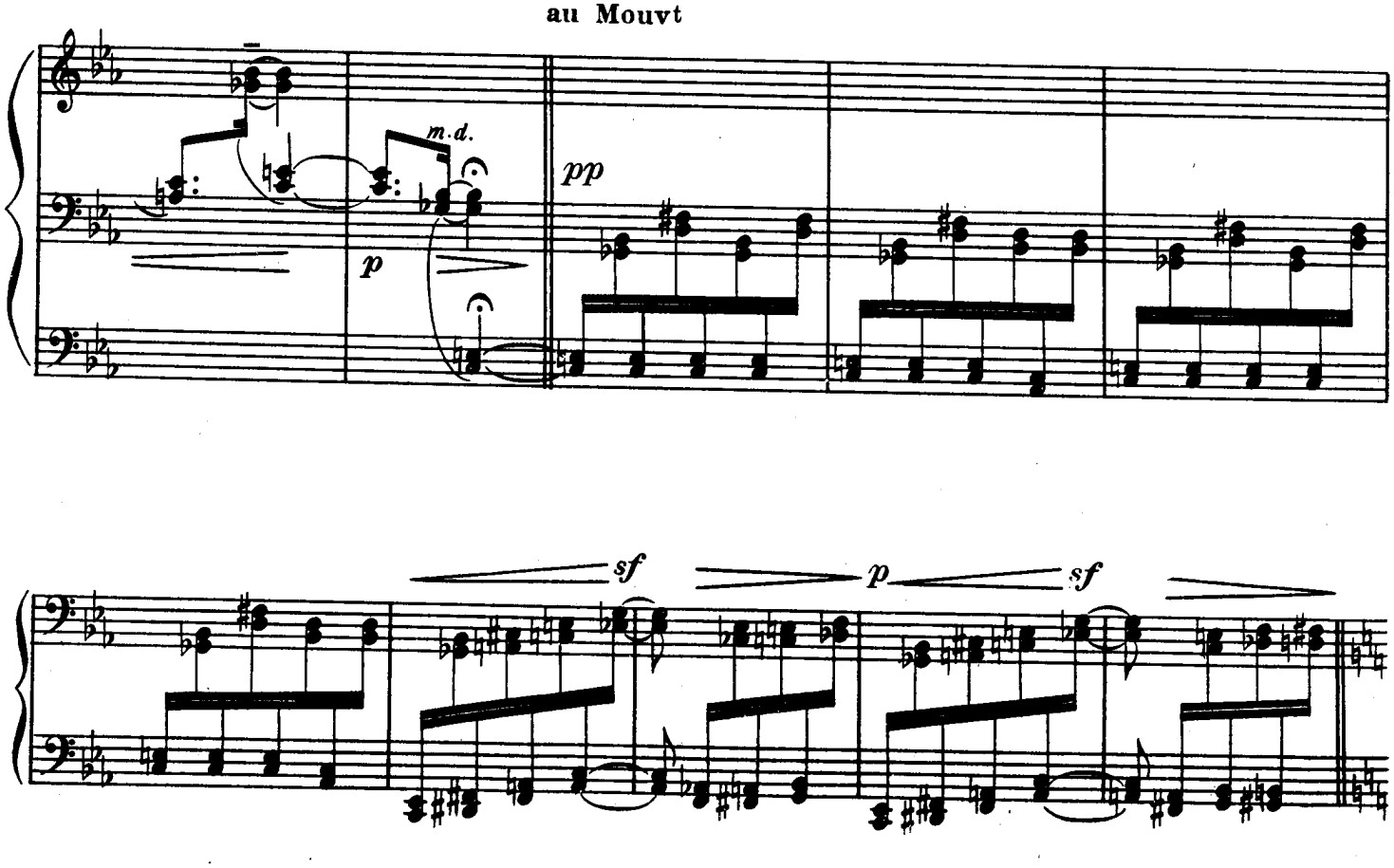
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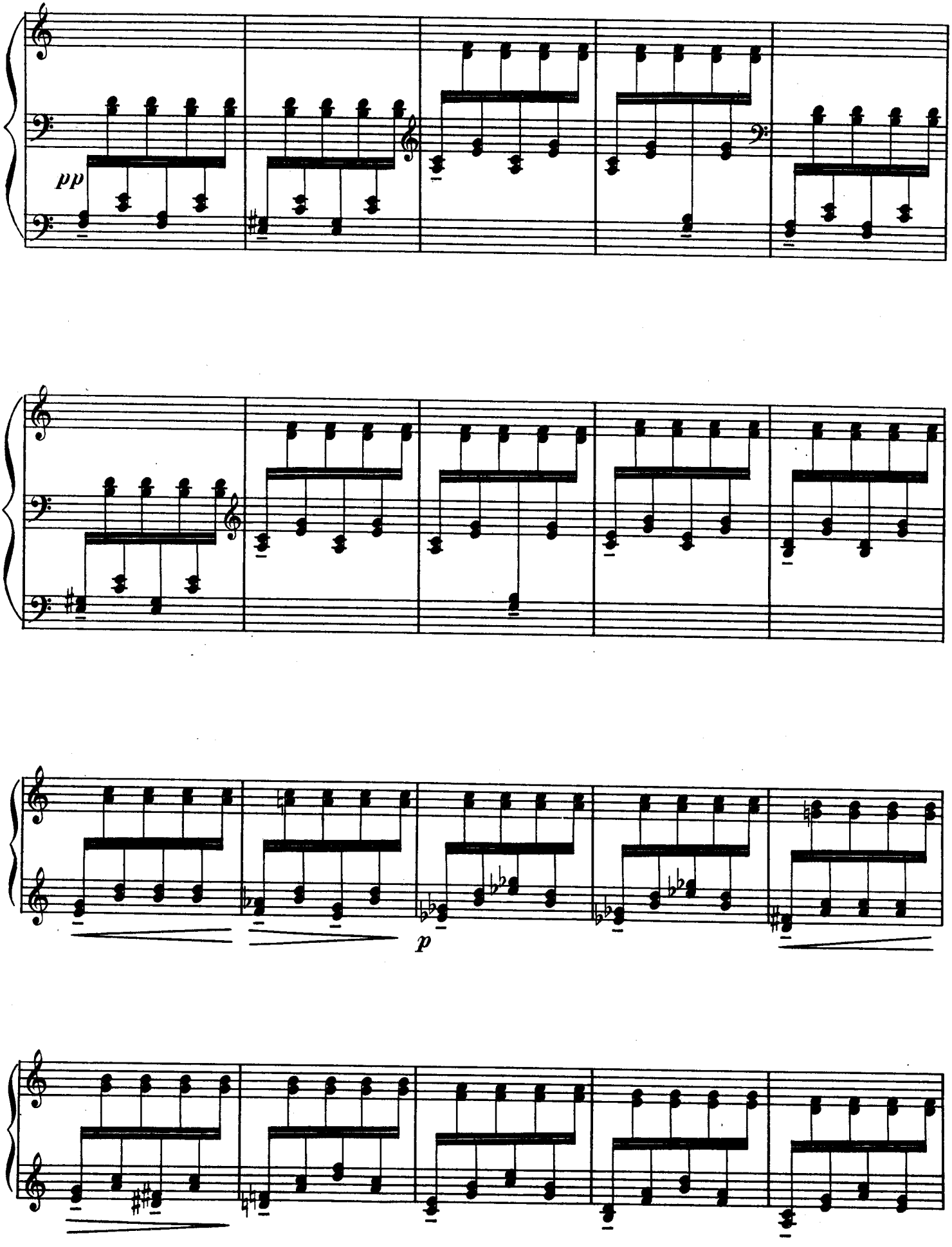
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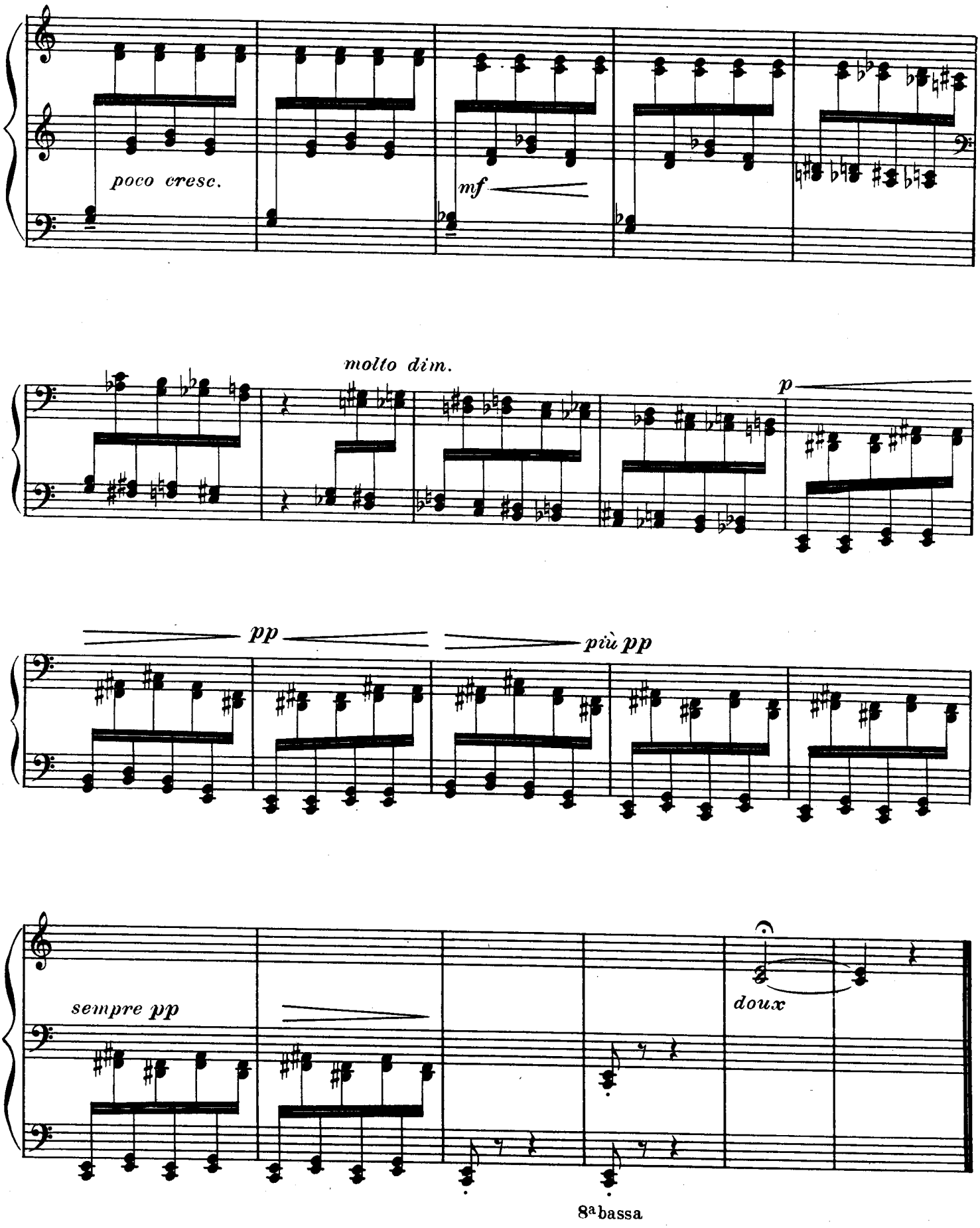

(...Les tierces alternées.)