# The Development of Modern Sonata Form through the Classical Era: A Survey of the Masterworks of Haydn and Beethoven

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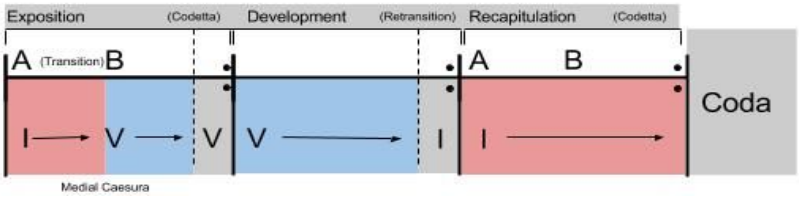
In the early Classical era (1750-1820), many composers embraced new, diverse changes in the musical realm. The development of the early phrase model and a new focus on simplicity, philosophy, knowledge, and nature allowed composers to expand on several aspects of music. Sonata form is an instrumental form that developed from the continuous rounded binary form of the Baroque era.

The traditional sonata form presents the original melodic content in the section known as the exposition. In the second section, the melodic content is presented in a new key and breaks down those themes in that new key. The final section of the sonata is the recapitulation. It represents all the material in the tonic key and usually highlights the themes presented throughout the piece (Figure 1).

(Figure 1) Sonata Form




The objective of this paper is to analyze the sonata from its early beginnings in the Baroque era, through its further development throughout the Classical era, and finally its progression into the Romantic era. I will be considering the style of the Classical era and the compositional style of the composers featured in this analysis. At the end of this paper, I will survey the growth and development of the sonata form and compare its predecessor to a common modern contemporary of the Romantic era.

To begin, where did the sonata form come from? Why was it created, and what purpose did it serve? For that, let us consult the writings of Mark Evan Bonds in his textbook, *A History of Music in Western Culture*. The text places the early beginnings of the sonata in the late 1600's. "The term [s]onata was used quite broadly during the early Baroque era and did not acquire its modern, more specialized meaning until well into the 18th Century," writes Bonds. It "was something of a catchall for instrumental works of all kinds, including those for a large ensemble with more than one player to a part. In general, the Baroque sonata had no fixed number or order of movements."[1]

Specifically, this section indicates that most early instrumental music in the Baroque era was classified as a sonata. It was not until later in the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century that composers began narrowing a form down for this new genre of instrumental music. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Trio Sonata and its two progenies, the Sonata De Camera and the Sonata De Chiesa, emerged as a new genre with a distinctly fixed form.[2]

[1] Mark Evan Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture*, 1st ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education, 2013), 264.
[2] Ibid.

The Sonata De Camera (Chamber Sonata), a late Baroque form, was a multi-movement work that usually consisted of a suite of dances. These dances were usually grouped in Fast-Slow-Fast form. This was one of the things that carried over from the Baroque Sonata to the Classical Sonata, as many sonatas are arranged as fast-slow-fast movements. The Sonata De Chiesa (or Church Sonata) takes this name because of its suitability for performance within the liturgy of the Catholic Church.[3]

In the Classical era of music, the Sonata form became increasingly popular for composers. The sonata had originally emerged as a misnomer for all instrumental music of the early Baroque and Classical eras, and later became a specific genre of music that would retain its significance well into the 20th century.

As described in the opening of this paper, the sonata has three main sections. First, there is the exposition, which presented the main themes in the tonic key and ending with a transition to the key of the developmental section, often in the dominant key. This progressed into the developmental section, where the themes are stated, broken down, and the whole section becomes harmonically unpredictable and unstable. The last section leads back to the tonic key where all of the melodic themes are restated. This section is known as the recapitulation.[4] (See Figure 1)

With this new genre of music developing, composers found new ways to expand their themes and harmonic phrases. Let us begin the survey, then, of this new form in the early classical era. While there were many active composers during the early Classical era, Haydn remains among the best known and respected.

Franz Joseph Haydn began as a freelance musician, teacher, and composer in Vienna around 1750. He was especially bright as a young musician. Despite his aptitude for music, however, his first break did not come until he was appointed as the court composer for the Esterhazy Court where he remained until the death of Prince Esterhazy in 1790. During this time, Haydn had nearly unlimited resources at his disposal. The court possessed enough wealth that he was able to compose with an experienced group of court musicians at his side at all times. During this period, he refined his skills and produced a large mass of music.

After his time in the Esterhazy Court, he left to compose in London where his works had already made him a huge sensation. While his fame in London could have led him to live a life of luxury, he decided to focus on his career.[5]

To establish a good base model for the early sonata, take a look at a few of Haydn's sonatas and observe the development of the sonata from the early Classical era and onward. For simplicity's sake, we will look at a keyboard sonata from his time in Vienna and from when he left for London after his time with the Esterhazy Court. Although the entire piece is considered a sonata, the only section that was in "sonata form" was the first section. Once again, to simplify the objective, we will only be looking at the first movements of these two sonata. Our first sonata is his Keyboard Sonata No. 10 in C Major (Figure 2).

The piece opens up with the "A Theme" being presented in measures 1-7, ending with a half cadence in C Major. The second theme in the same manner from measures 8-15 ending with a half cadence in C Major. The exposition closes with an authentic cadence in the dominant key in the codetta (m. 15-17).

The developmental section takes this simple theme and moves to the key of G minor and proceeds to restate the main themes while making them more unstable. In measure 18, we see the "A Theme" restated in the new key. Later in measure 30, we see Haydn further deconstructing the

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid, 306.

[5] James Webster and George Feder, "Haydn, Joseph," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, [accessed November 12, 2016] http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/44593pg5.

"A Theme" with descending sequence motion. This happens until measure 37, where the retransition to the tonic key begins and introduces us to the recapitulation in measure 39. The recapitulation reintroduces us to the melodic material of the piece in the tonic key. The movement concludes with an authentic cadence in the home key of C Major.[6] This piece displays the simplicity and elegance of Haydn's sonata writing. A simple, catchy theme that clearly develops throughout the piece. The piece follows the model for sonata form almost perfectly. An exposition showing two prominent themes, a development that, with careful precision, plays with those themes and creates a great deal of tension, and a recapitulation that reintroduced us to the melodic content of the exposition. This piece is an excellent observation of how composers used this new form.

Next, let us survey a later keyboard sonata of Haydn, his Keyboard Sonata No. 60, a piece written in London after his time with the Esterhazy court in 1794-95. We will begin with a more basic analysis of the piece (Figure 3). The exposition of this piece is noticeably longer than the previous. It spans from measures 1 to 53 and presents the thematic material of the piece. The development from measures 54 to 101 takes all of those materials and moves them into the minor mode. The pieces primary themes returned at measure 102.[7]

This piece has many unique differences compared to the Haydn Piano Sonata No. 10 we examined. First of all, the phrases in Sonata No. 60 compared to Sonata No. 10 were substantially longer. This expansion of the primary theme gave him plenty of material to work with in the developmental section of the piece. The developmental phrase was more diverse because of this large mass of material and that helped support the music overall.

Secondly, the piece was substantially thicker in terms of the overall texture. I hypothesize this has something to do with the invention of the Pianoforte in the Classical era. This new technology allowed Haydn and other composers the ability to compose with dynamics and made the keyboard a more diverse and virtuosic instrument. This also allowed composers to use pitches to their own desires, rather than being limited to the middle of the keyboard and only using the upper and lower sections for dynamic doubling and basso continuo.

Finally, the form of this piece had slight differences compared to the model of sonata previously observed (Figure 1). This was largely the result of his extended amount of material in the exposition, and I also believe that this is a result of Haydn maturing his compositional style throughout his life. This is an excellent example of a composer refining his/her sound and in addition to doing so, helping guide the direction of the sonata in the Classical era.

Moving into the late Classical era and into the earliest times of the Romantic era, composers like Beethoven sought new musical ideas and influences. One of the most substantial changes in between the Classical era and the Romantic era was the way composers treated the main melodic content and how they harmonized the content.[8]

Beethoven was a substantial figure in the development of the early Romantic style. He began composing in 1787 and was active until his death on March 26th of 1827. Among his most popular repertoire is his "Moonlight" Sonata No. 14 (1802), which is an excellent piece, allowing us to survey the late Classical era moving into the early Romantic style (See Figure 4).

This work opens with a four bar introduction that lead us right into the primary theme of the piece. The exposition develops its theme over an underlying triplet ostinato that drives the whole piece. The development from measure 24 to measure 42 makes great use of the triplet ostinato to drive the piece towards the end and helps support the breaking down of the melodic content. The

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[6] Franz Joseph Haydn, "XVI: 1 (No. 10) in C Major" on IMSLP, IMSLP [accessed November 11th, 2016] http://imslp.org/wiki/Template:Piano_Sonatas_(Haydn,_Joseph).

[7] Ibid.

[8] James Webster, "Sonata form," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, [accessed November 17, 2016] http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/26197.

recapitulation revisits these melodic devices in the tonic key, and the piece concludes with the triplet ostinato winding its way down to the final authentic cadence point at the end of the piece.[9]

This piece has many romantic influences, and many innovations in it. The piece's development for instance, rather than entirely improvising off the melodic themes from the exposition, makes full use of its content. The development is significantly less tense in its presentation of the primary themes. Tension is defused by the repeating triplet ostinato, while the themes just cascade and melt away throughout the duration of the development. It provides the listener something to expect and to rely on, and that, perhaps, offsets the unstable melodic content.

It is unusual looking back on the developments of the Haydn sonata, which stated the theme and then proceeded to create new material that strongly pointed towards the end of the piece. The development in the Beethoven sonata appears much less concerned with using the melodic and harmonic content to drive the piece to the recapitulation. It uses the triplet ostinato as a sort of slow moving conveyer driving us to the end of the piece. The end of the development lines up with the recapitulation a little too well. The cadence between the two sections is seamless and carries listeners back into the first tonal area of the piece.

Another substantial difference between the Haydn and the Beethoven sonatas was the way they treated the bass line. The bass line in the Beethoven sonata seemed much freer and more Fantasia-like. The bassline in the Haydn sonata acted more with the melodic line than as a harmonizing function with the piece. This was a popular way for late Classical composers and early Romantic composers to focus more on the themes they were writing, rather than letting the phrasing dictate how the piece was laid out.[10]

Altogether, both composers do well to represent the emerging genre of sonata from the rounded continuous binary form. Both present clean melodic content, develop it, and represent it in the tonic key—which is, at the heart of it, the entire point of the sonata form.

From the early sonata, the form grew significantly between the Baroque and early Romantic eras. The focus on short, concise phrases with clean and memorable melodies had passed. Composers now focused more on using their melodic material to create these massive sections of music from the variation and development of the main melodic ideas presented at the beginning of the piece. This spotlight on expanding the primary theme led many later Sonatas to have significant length and developmental differences from their early classical predecessors.

With the instrumental innovations of the Classical era, no longer were composers bound to the limitations of the instruments for which they were writing. The writing of later classical works included the use of dynamics and the freedom to compose across the keyboard without the fear of ringing overtones of the harpsichord. This addition gave composers a new way to write, and, in turn, let composers freely write creative bass lines without having to outline chords below the melody.

Together, composers and new musical technologies drove the development of the sonata that allowed music to be written differently. While Haydn and other Classical composers, such as Mozart and J.C. Bach, were able functionally to use these new components as the Classical era developed, it was not until composers like Beethoven and Schubert came along that these genres had substantial differences in their writing techniques.

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[9] Ludwig Von Beethoven, "Piano Sonata No. 14 "Moonlight" Op. 27 No. 2" on IMSLP, IMSLP, accessed November 11th, 2016, http://imslp.org/wiki/Piano_Sonata_No.14,_Op.27_No.2_(Beethoven,_Ludwig_van)

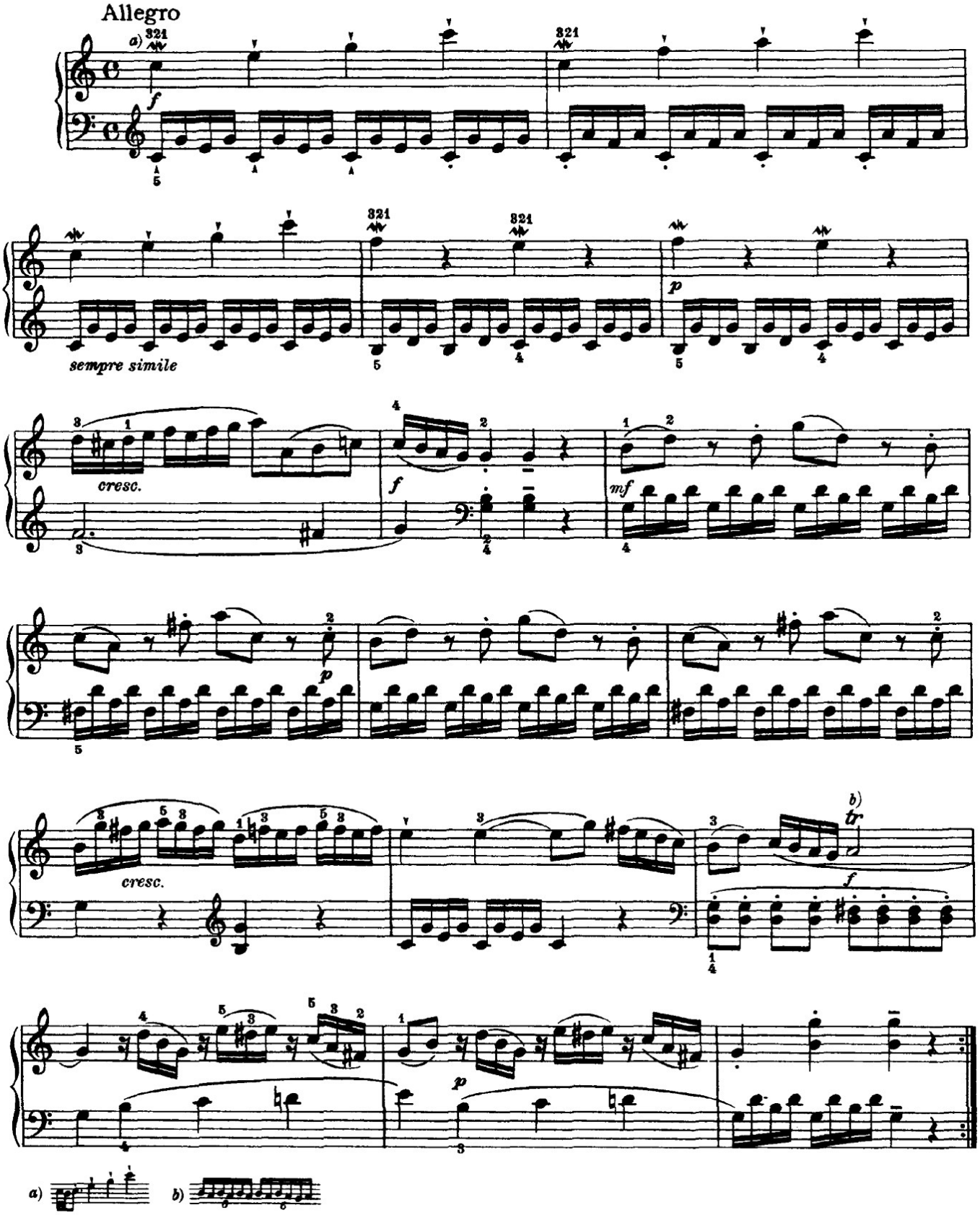
[10] James Webster, "Sonata form," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.*

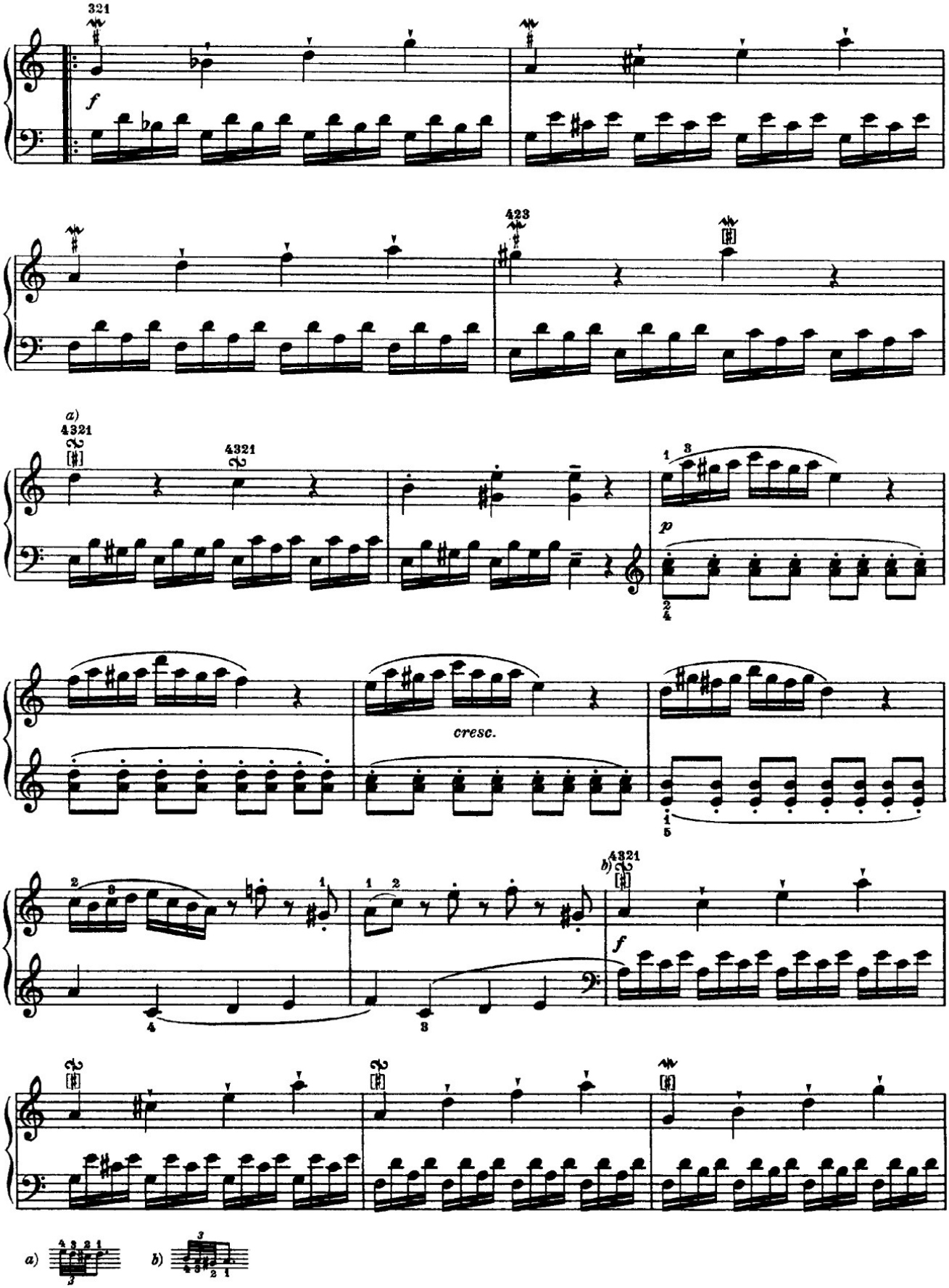
**Figure 2: Hayden Keyboard Sonata, No. 10**

Franz Joseph Haydn

# Sonata in C Major

(Partita/Divertimento, 1750-55?)

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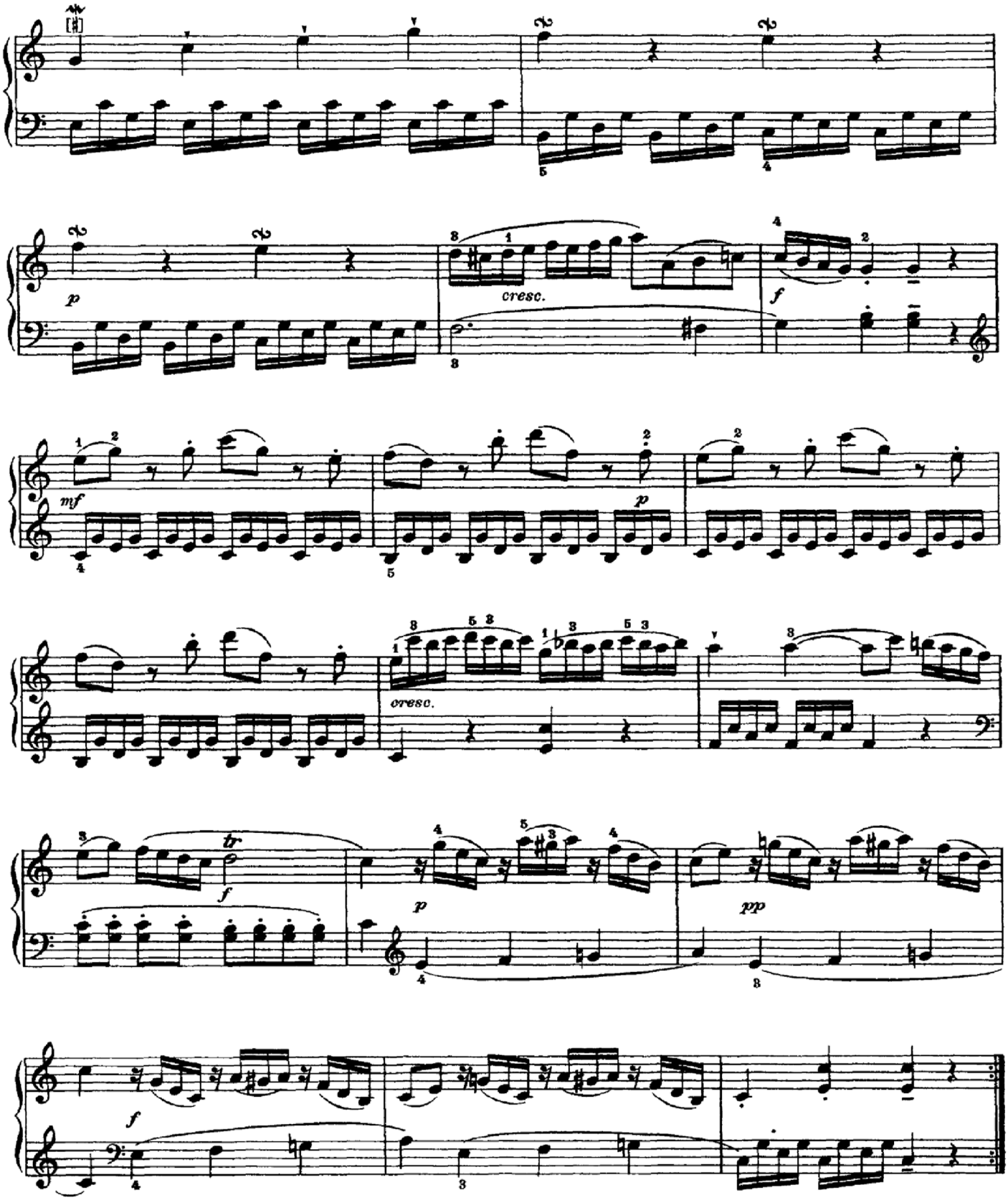
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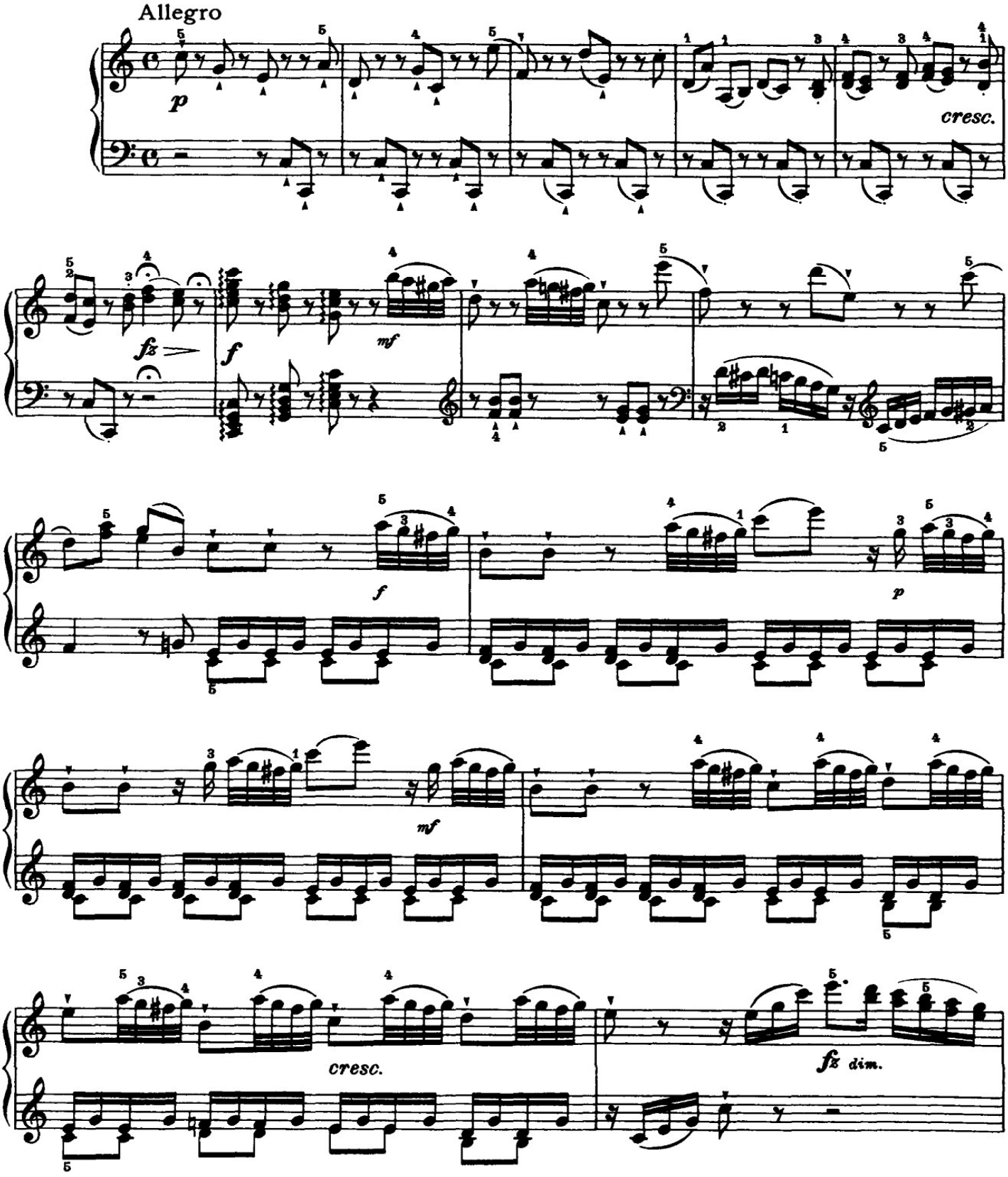
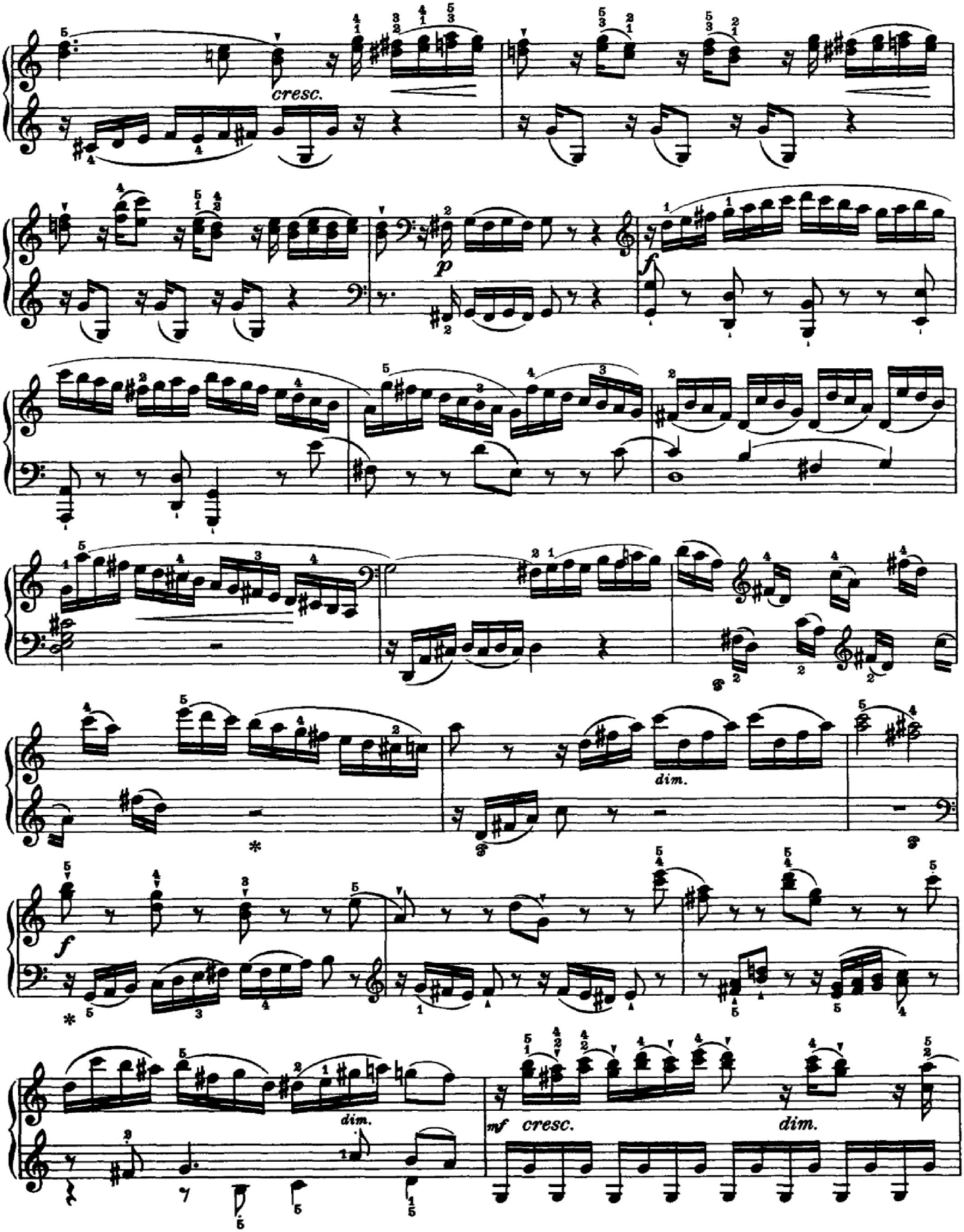
**Figure 3: Haydn, Keyboard Sonata, No. 60**

Franz Joseph Haydn

# Sonata in C Major

(1794-5)

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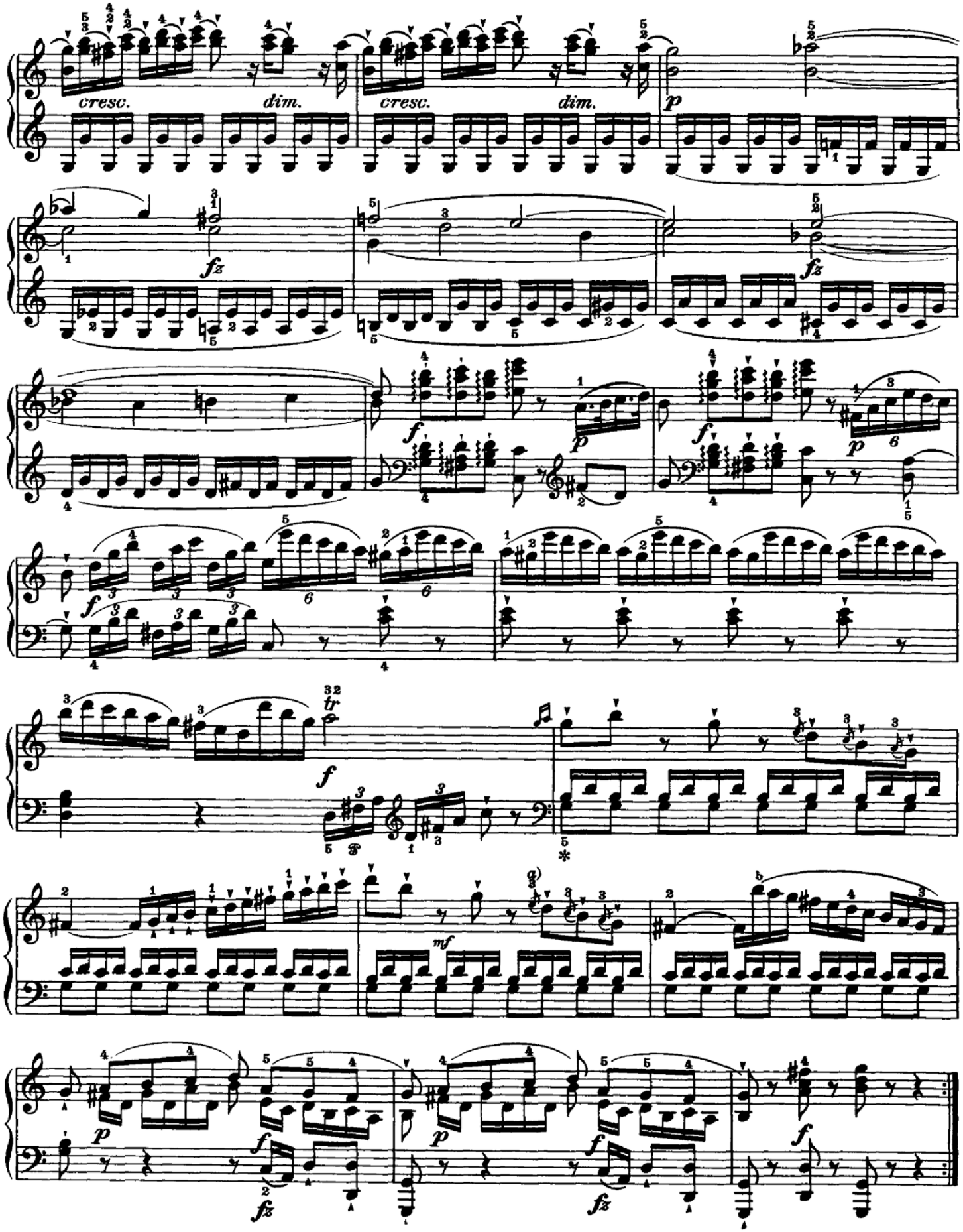
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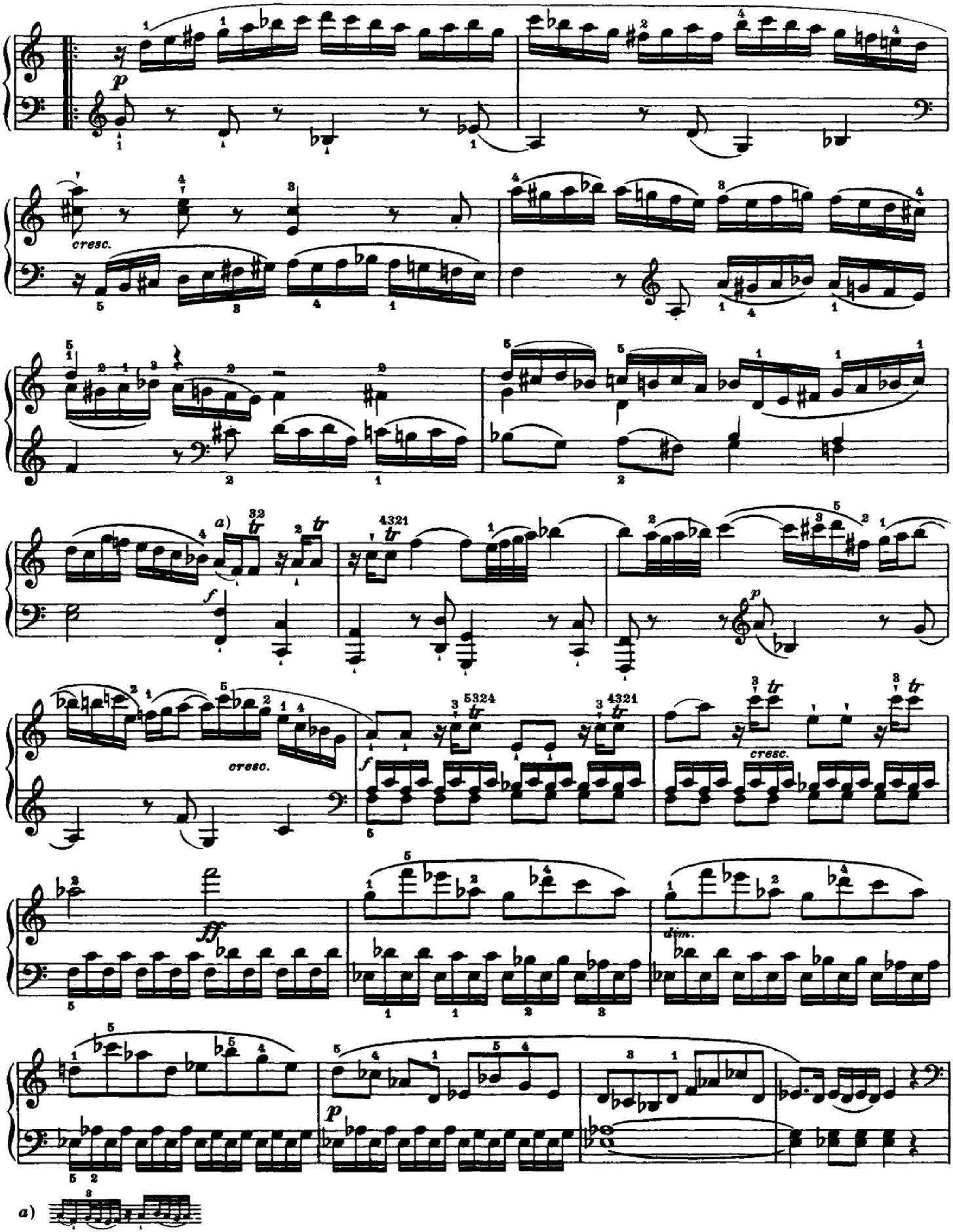
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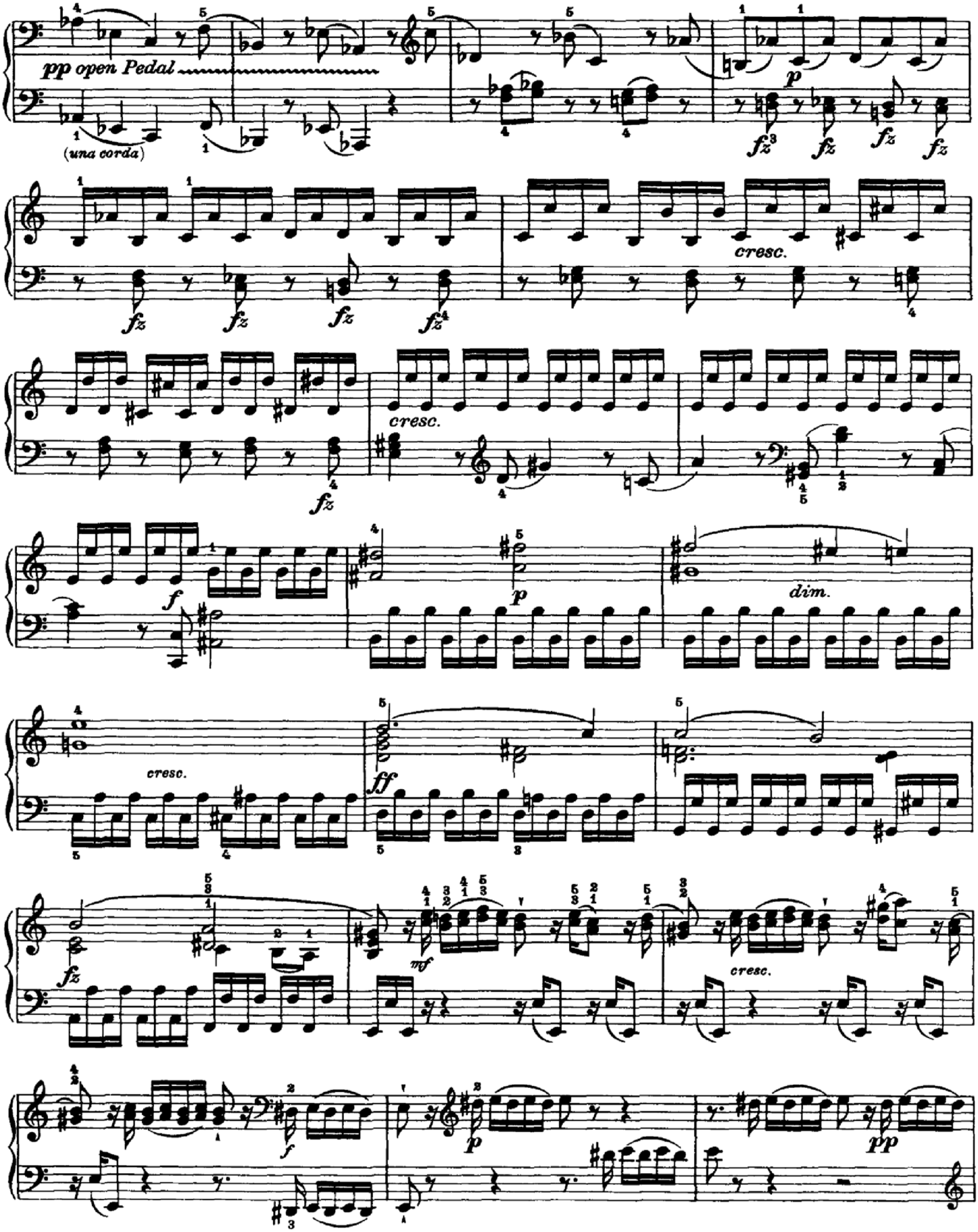
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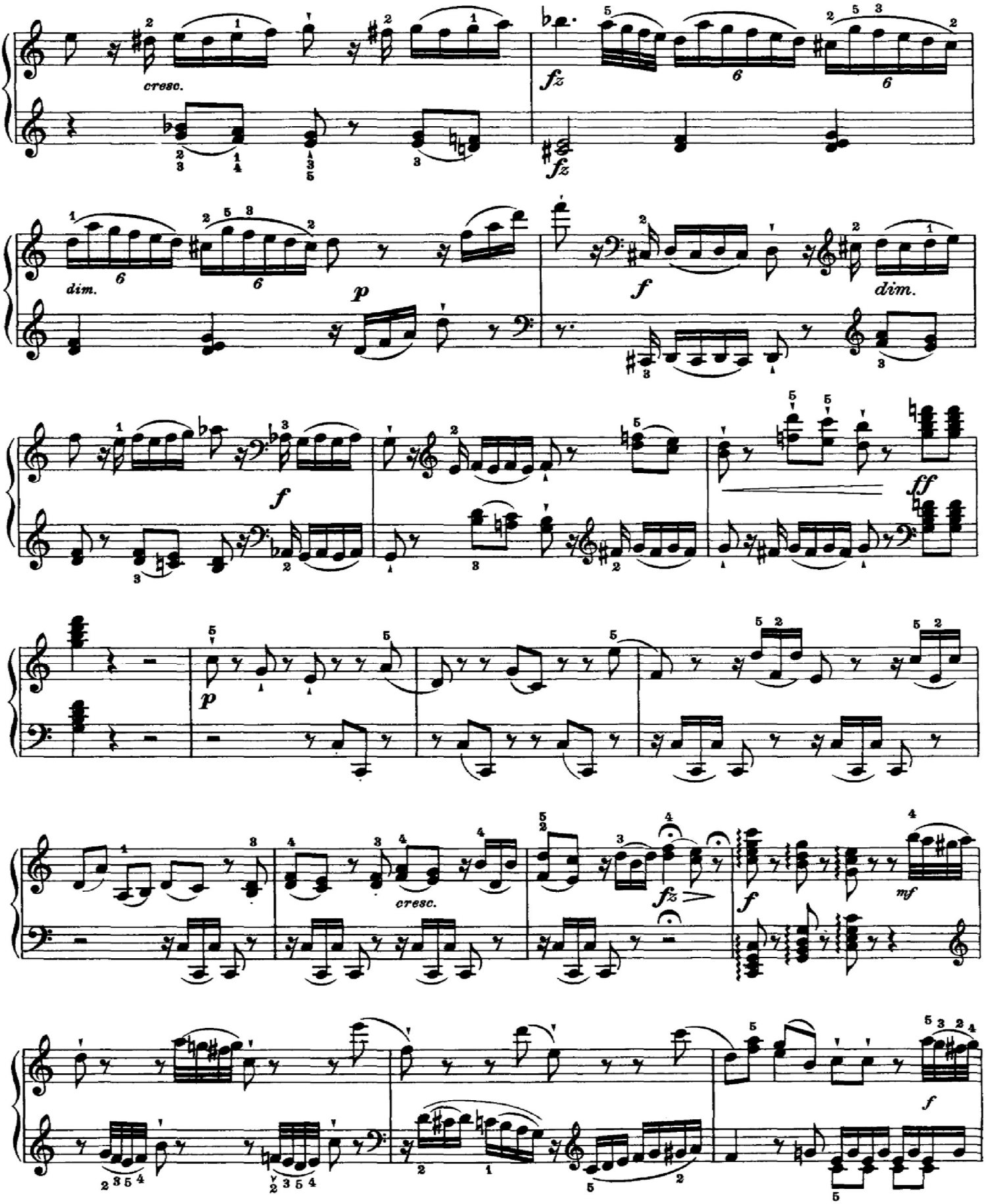
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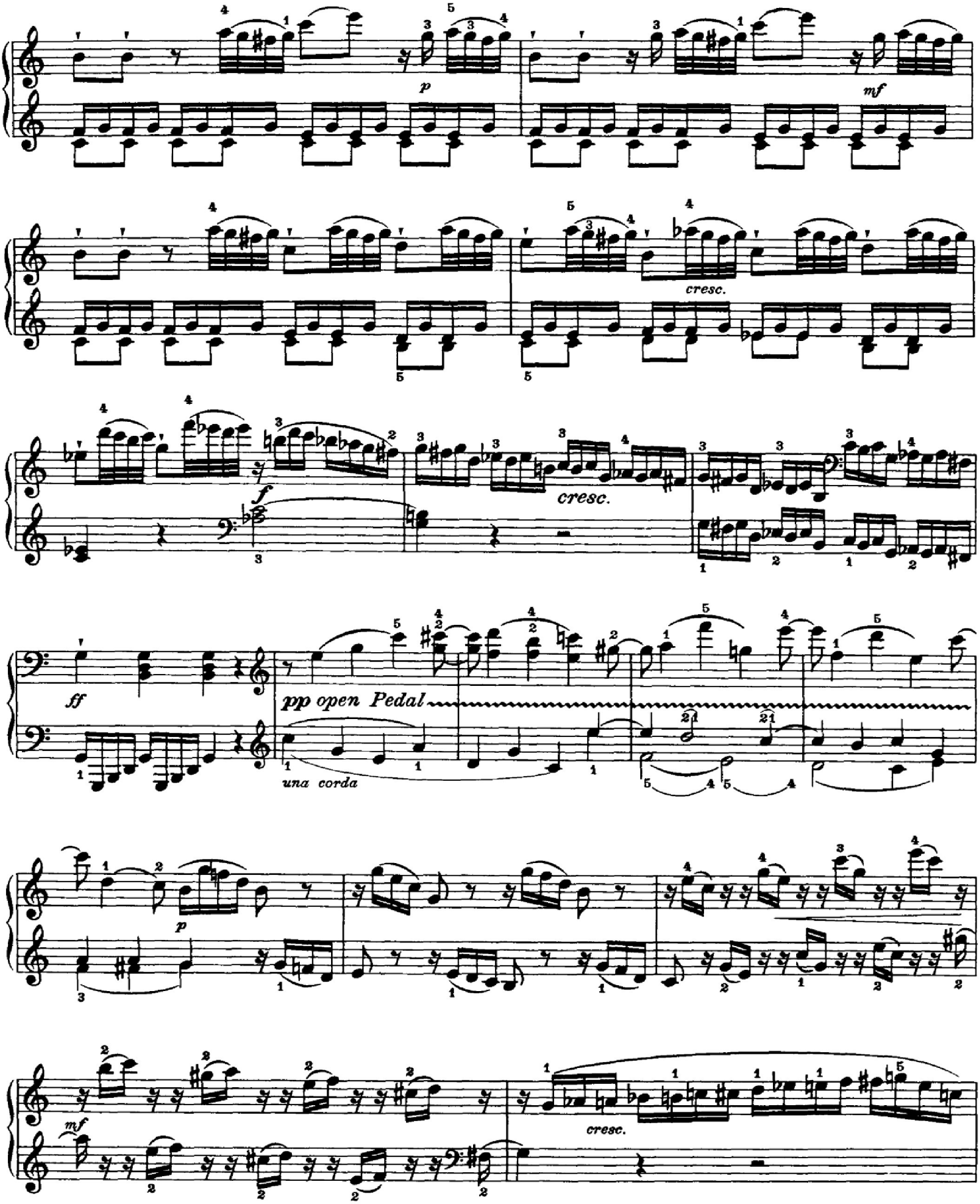
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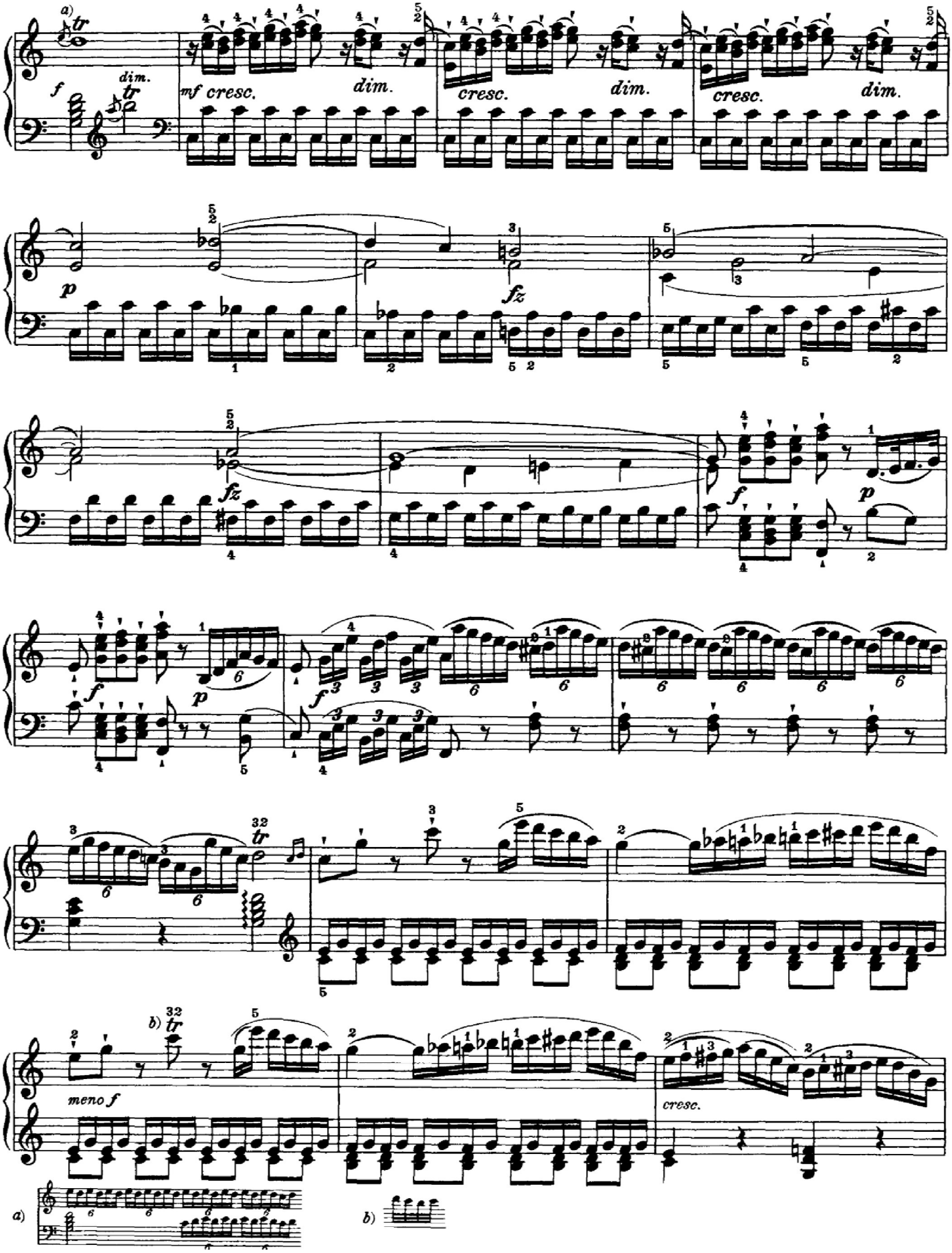
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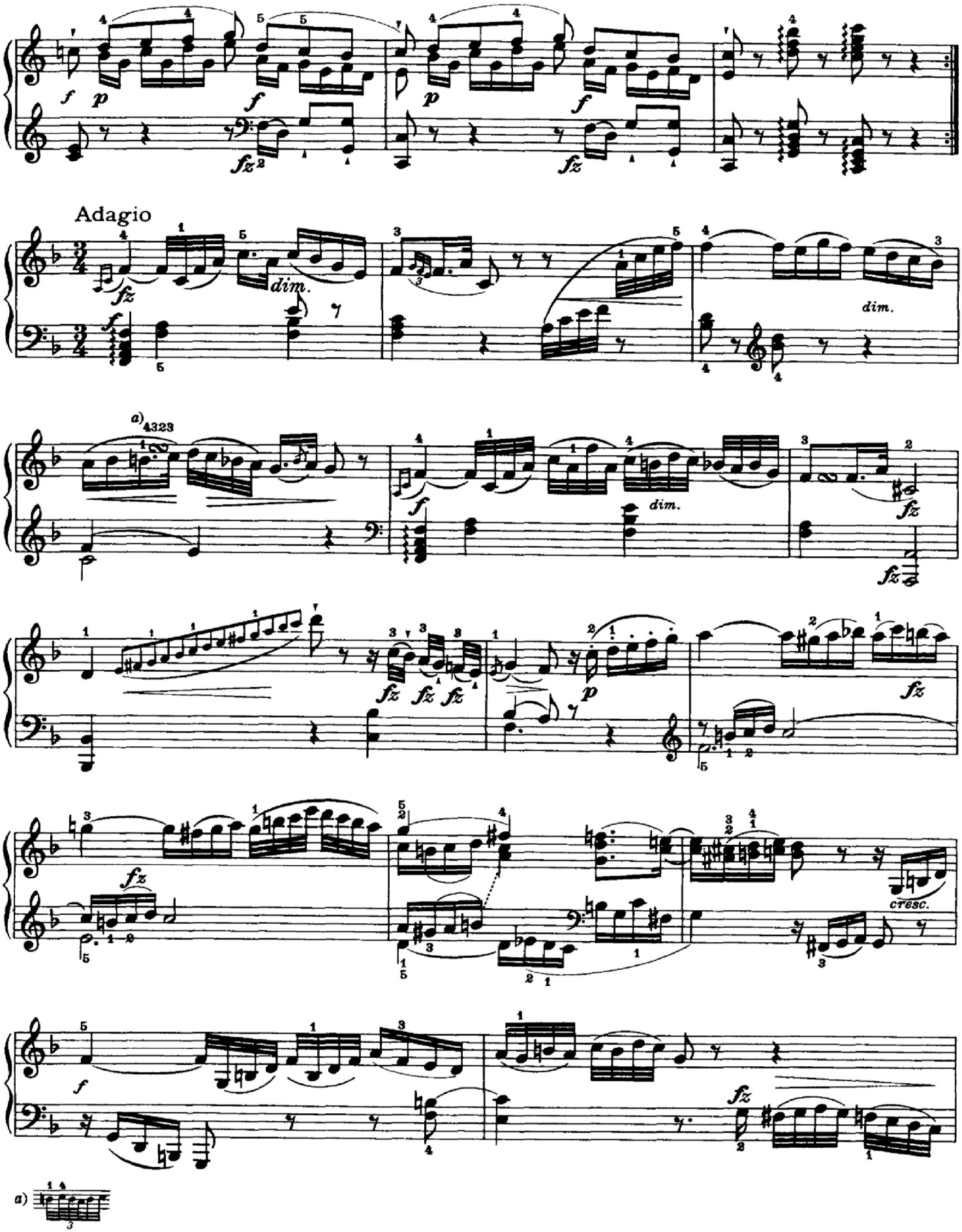

Adagio
dim.
cresc.

**Figure 4: Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14 "Moonlight"**



# SONATE

(SONATA QUASI UNA FANTASIA)
für das Pianoforte
von
# L. VAN BEETHOVEN.

Beethovens Werke.

Serie 16. Nº 137.

Der Gräfin Julie Guicciardi gewidmet.

Op. 27. Nº 2.

## Adagio sostenuto.

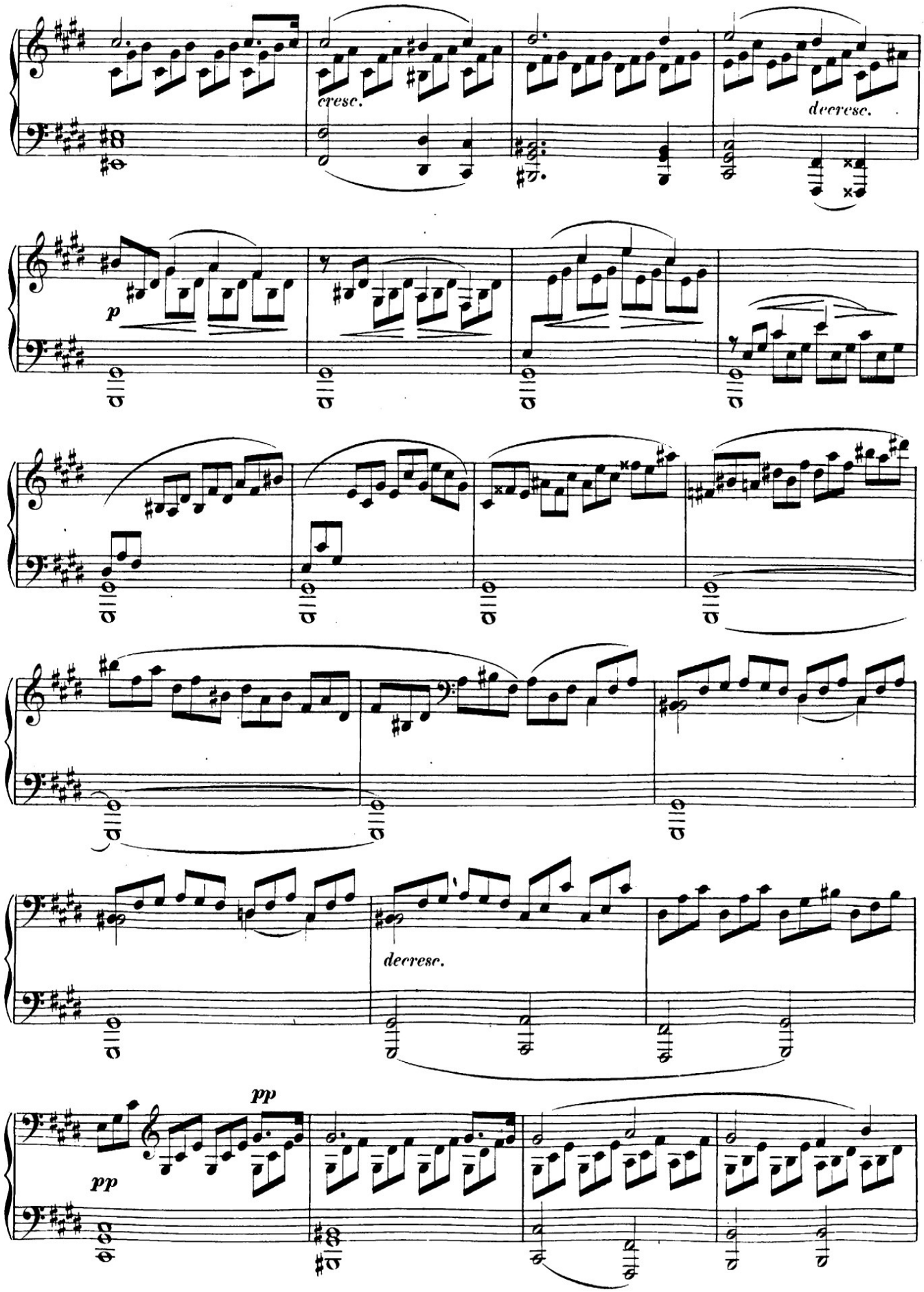
Si deve suonare tutto questo pezzo delicatissimamente e senza sordini.

Sonate Nº 14.

*sempre pp e senza sordini.*

*pp*

Original-Verleger: A. O. Witzendorf in Wien. B. 137. Stich und Druck von Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig.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