Daniel-François-Esprit Auber:
Le Domino noir

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Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier

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Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, lithograph by Grèvedon after a drawing by Haudebourt

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INTRODUCTION

Le Domino noir, an opéra-comique in three acts, with libretto by Eugène Scribe, was premiered at the Opéra-Comique (Salle de la place de la Bourse/Salle des Nouveautés) on 2 December 1837. It was an instant success, and remained hugely popular, with the 1000th performance taking place on 3 April 1882. The opera was last revived in Paris at the Théâtre Porte Saint Martin on 10 June 1935, and was playing in the French provinces until 1940. This is one of Scribe's most elegant and witty comedies, satirically spicy and particularly exciting because at no point is the audience any more aware of the unfolding developments than the characters in the plot. With *Fra Diavolo* (1830), this score was to prove the best that Auber wrote for the Opéra-Comique. The music is employed with economy, mellifluous, but pared and pointed. Its wit and elements of parody look forward to Jacques Offenbach.

The action takes place in Madrid, around 1780; alternatively, some versions set the piece later, during the Restoration, around 1837. Angèle, a noblewoman who is about to take solemn vows and become the Abbess of a convent at the behest of the Queen of Spain, nonetheless still attends masked balls, disguised in a black domino. At one of the balls she falls in love with the handsome and eligible Horace de Massarena, who is equally smitten. Act 1 opens in a small salon adjoining the ballroom in the royal palace of Madrid, where another ball is about to take place. Angèle appears in her black domino with her friend Brigitte. Horace, who is sitting in the salon, recognises her as the woman he fell in love with, and pretends to fall asleep in an armchair in order to overhear her conversation with Brigitte. Angèle leaves her bouquet beside him as a token of her affection. Horace later disengages her from the crowd and declares his love, but she discourages him. At midnight Angèle leaves to return to the convent, but without Brigitte.

In act 2, Angèle tries to find her way back to the convent unaided but, frightened by the dark streets, knocks at the first door, that of Juliano, Horace's friend. The gentlemen, returning from the ball, enter for supper and are waited on by Angèle, disguised in Aragonese costume as the niece of Jacinthe, Juliano's housekeeper. Horace recognizes her, but she flees after frightening the porter of the convent, Gil Perez (who is Jacinthe's lover), into surrendering his keys.

Act 3 is set in the convent, where Brigitte is ably covering up for Angèle. Horace attends the installation of the new abbess and sees Angèle about to receive this great honour. Suddenly a messenger from the Queen of Spain appears, ordering the convent to select a new abbess and releasing Angèle from her vows. She and Horace are now free to marry.

The libretto is one of the best from the great dramatist. The choice of subject, characterized as it was by ideas current at the time of its creation—the emancipated view of womanhood and the daring treatment of religious themes—was felt by the middle of the nineteenth century not to be in the best taste. However, the unconventional daring and single-mindedness of the fashionable heroine becomes a kind of celebration of feminine independence and resourcefulness. The dynamic, protean heroine dominates this opera, with her activities, both religious and profane, blending in the metonymic black domino she uses to disguise and mystify her identity on all her nocturnal adventures. The concealing nature of this garment, and its black

colour, pertain to both the religious and secular dimensions of her experience. Her moment of self-disclosure in act 3 is full of the same ambiguity of identity and intention, and in its fusion of soliloquy and ballad, captures the mercurial and perplexing nature of the party-going abbess, where the mystique of religion and the glamour of high society are captured in her symbolic cloak and mask. Angèle is without doubt the most intriguing and original creation of the two masters of *opéra-comique*.

This independence of spirit passes down in variation to the other female characters of the scenario. The evocation of a gracious high society and the enterprising servanthood of the *opéra-comique* tradition, as well as the tender, romanticized evocation of the convent and religious life, invest the whole with the aura of an urban pastoral.

Le Domino noir was celebrated for its lightness, elegance and wit, the libretto and music complementing each other perfectly in realizing a masterpiece of this genre. This is Auber's most original *opéra-comique*, the one in which he most fully abandoned himself to charming fantasy and melodic grace. Nearly all the pieces became popular. The overture, which is perfect in itself, presents the context of the romance, and sketches the elusive charm of the heroine. Dramaturgically, it sets the scene for the opening party given by the Queen of Spain. In structure, it recalls the Baroque suite in a variety of linked dances; but this episodic character is fused into an effective whole by swift transitions and the all-pervasive mood of gracious restraint.

It begins with a chain of rather formal dance tunes in waltz-time. A processional *ritornello* in A-flat frames three contrasting episodes in F minor, all of them conjuring up a remote and faraway mood in their pared and exquisitely crafted recitals and delicate counterpoint. This sequence is succeeded by a syncopated melody taken from the duet for Angèle and Count Horace, who falls in love with the masked beauty at the ball—a melody that distils the quintessence of Auber's Gallic detachment, elegance and restraint, and captures both the mystique of Angèle's ambiguous character and its symbolic correlative in the mask and cloak of the black domino. Then follows the lively Aragonaise that Angèle, disguised as the servant girl Inesille, sings for the entertainment of the bachelor party in act 2. The conclusion, launching into a bustling bolero taken from the act 2 finale, brings the overture to an exciting climax.

The romances for Angèle ("Le trouble et la frayeur") and Horace ("Amour, viens finir mon supplice") have a suavity and enchanting distinction, as do Angèle's couplets "Une fée, un bon ange" and her dialogue with Juliano ("D'où venez-vous ma chère?"). The couplets for Gil Perez, the convent porter ("Deo gratias") and Dame Brigitte ("S'il est sur terre") have roundness and zest; the *aragonaise* for 'Inésille' ("La belle Inès fait florès") much ingenuity. Angèle's big syllabic aria "Ah! quelle nuit!" successfully depicts the range of emotions experienced by the imprudent abbess.

The big Supper Scene in act 2 is an ensemble of fleetness and mercurial moods. Auber's employment of Spanish rhythms adds a most appropriate *couleur locale* to the whole of the score, with its typical traits of excitable note repetitions, chromaticism, augmented seconds in the melody, and groups of triplets. The dramatic situation in the last act provided the composer with one of his most beautiful inspirations. The *cantique* with chorus ("Hereux qui ne respire") can by its very nature disarm those who could be tempted to reproach the authors for having treated religious matters with the daring frankness they have.

The roles were created by Laure Cinti-Damoreau (Angèle); Joseph-Antoine-Charles Couderc (Horace); Mlle Berthaut (Brigitte); Théodore-Étienne Moreau-Sainti

(Juliano); Marie-Julienne Boulanger (Jacinthe); Honoré Grignon (Lord Elfort); Roy (Gil Perez); Thérésè Olivier (Ursule, a lay sister) and Mme Roy (Gertrude, the tourière at the convent). Mme Cinti-Damoreau realized the role of Angèle in one of her greatest successes. That of Horace later became one of the best interpretations of Gustave Roger who, by his acting and sympathetic voice, almost managed to make the public believe in this taking of the veil.

This work was more popular in Paris than *Fra Diavolo*: the 1000th performance took place in 1882, the 1209th in 1909. Between 1838 and 1845 translations were made into German, English, Russian, Danish, Czech, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Hungarian and Swedish, with later versions in Finnish, Croatian, Polish and Norwegian. It was performed across Europe and beyond, from Moscow and St Petersburg to New York and Rio de Janeiro The opera was particularly popular in England, where by 1846 it was already being presented at the Haymarket Theatre. By comparison with *Fra Diavolo* the opera was less popular in Germany, possibly because of its unique position between spoken and sung comedy. In 1929 a silent film of *Le Domino noir* was made with Harry Liedke as Horace and Vera Schmiterlow as Angèle. An Italian version of the libretto was set by Lauro Rossi (*Il domino nero*, Milan 1849).

In the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries there were performances in Paris (ORTF, 1950, 1965), London (Opera Viva, 1979) and Compiègne (2006). The London recording of 1995 (Decca) features Sumi Jo, Isabelle Vernet and Bruce Ford, with the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Richard Bonynge. There is a DVD of the 2006 Compiègne Théâtre Impérial production with Sophie Fournier, Lucile Vignon and Alain Gabriel, conducted by Michel Swierczewski.

Angèle. Etching after Tony and Alfred Johannot from Scribe's Works (1847)

Nouvelle Edition.

LE

DOMINO NOIR

Opéra Comique en 3 actes

Paroles de

EUGÈNE SCRIBE

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DE

D.F.E.AUBER

Partition Piano et Chant

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EUGÈNE SCRIBE

Musique de
D. F. E. AUBER

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PERSONNAGES

ANGÈLE	*Soprano*	Damoreau
BRIGITTE	*Soprano*	Berthaut
JACINTHE	*Soprano*	Boulanger
URSULE	*Soprano*	Olivier
LA TOURIERE	*Soprano*	Roy
HORACE	1er *Ténor*	Couderc
JULIANO	2e *Ténor*	Moreau-Sainti
LORD ELFORT	*Basse*	Guignon
GIL PEREZ	*Basse*	Roy

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LE DOMINO NOIR

Opéra Comique en trois actes

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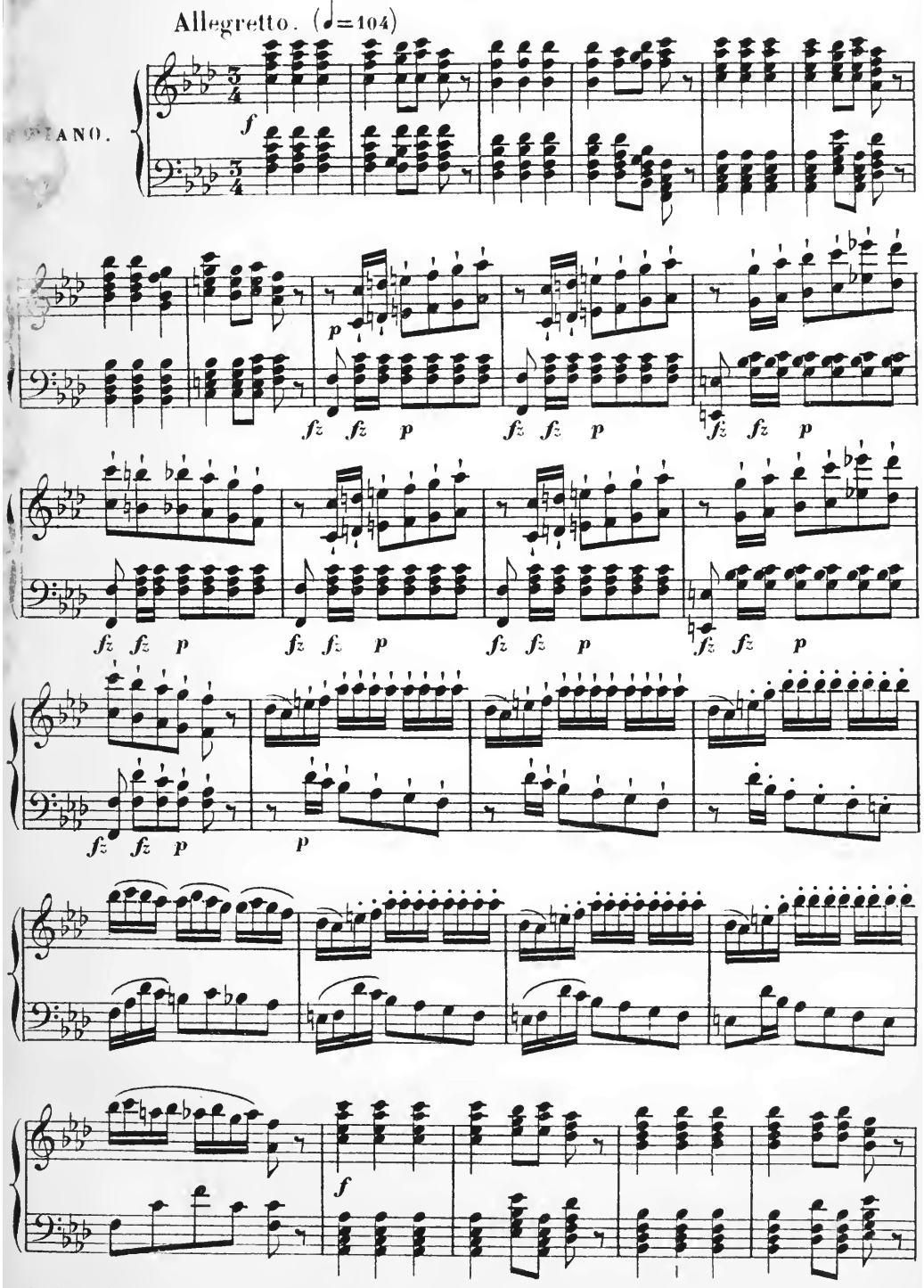
OUVERTURE



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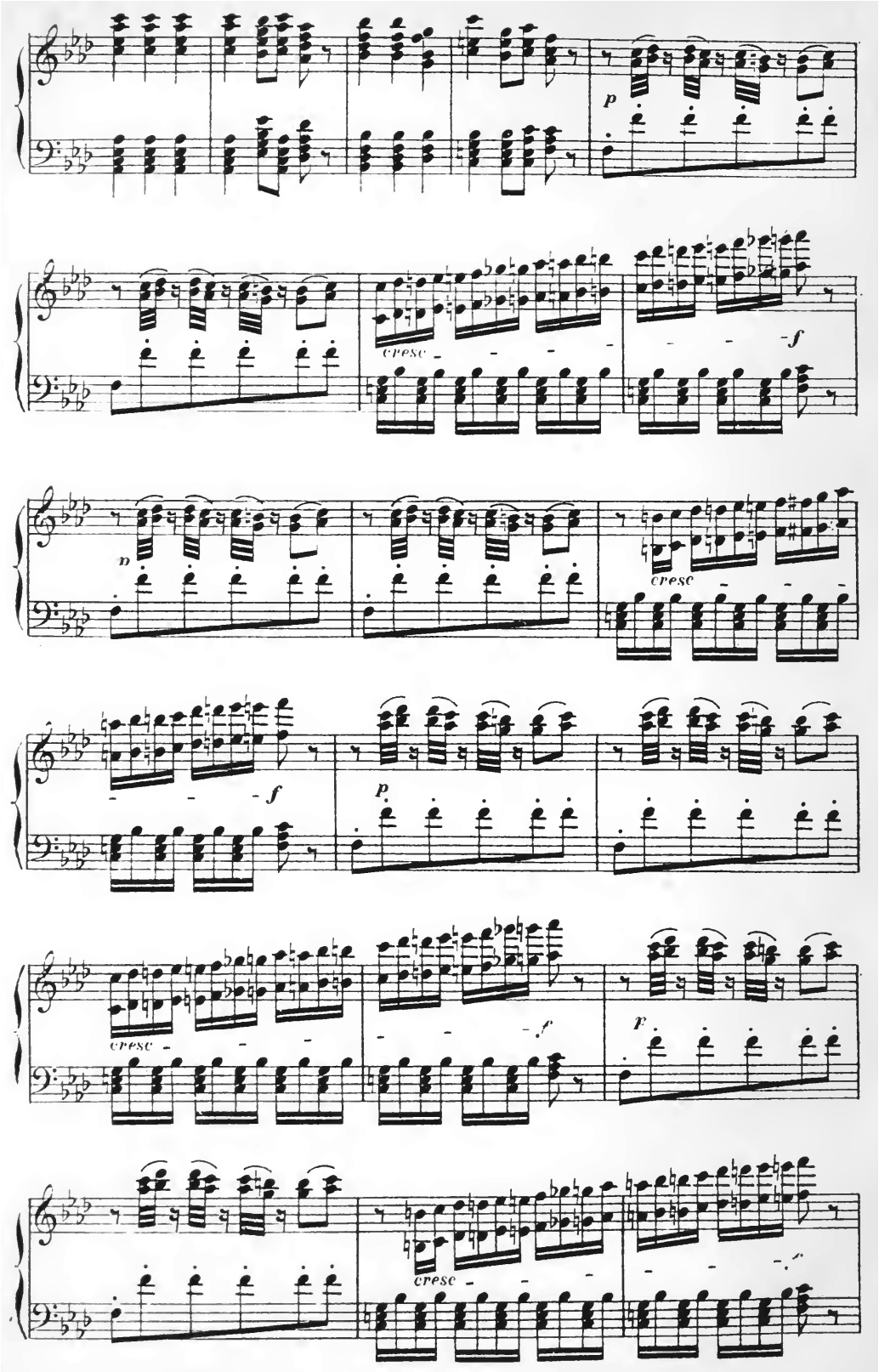
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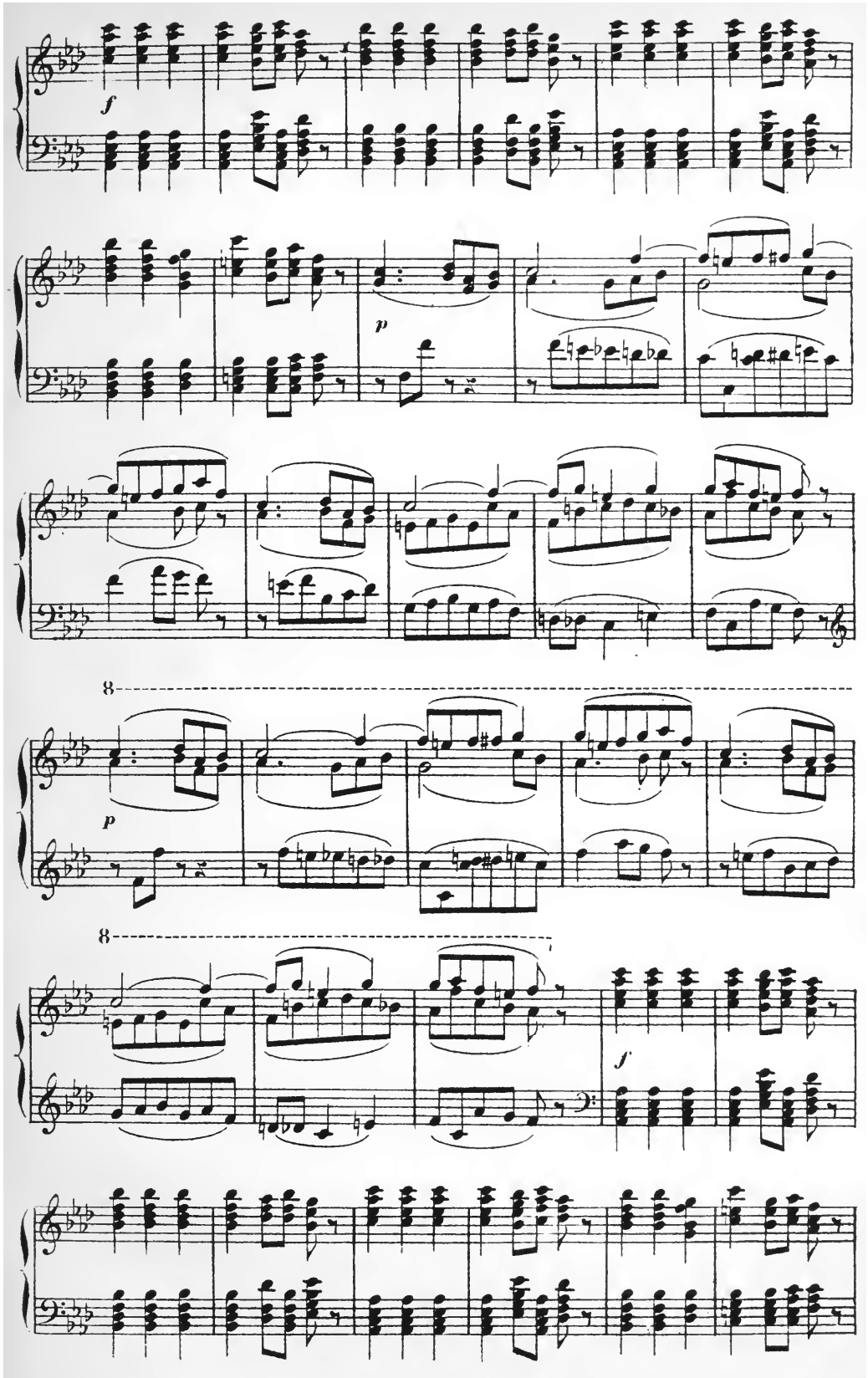
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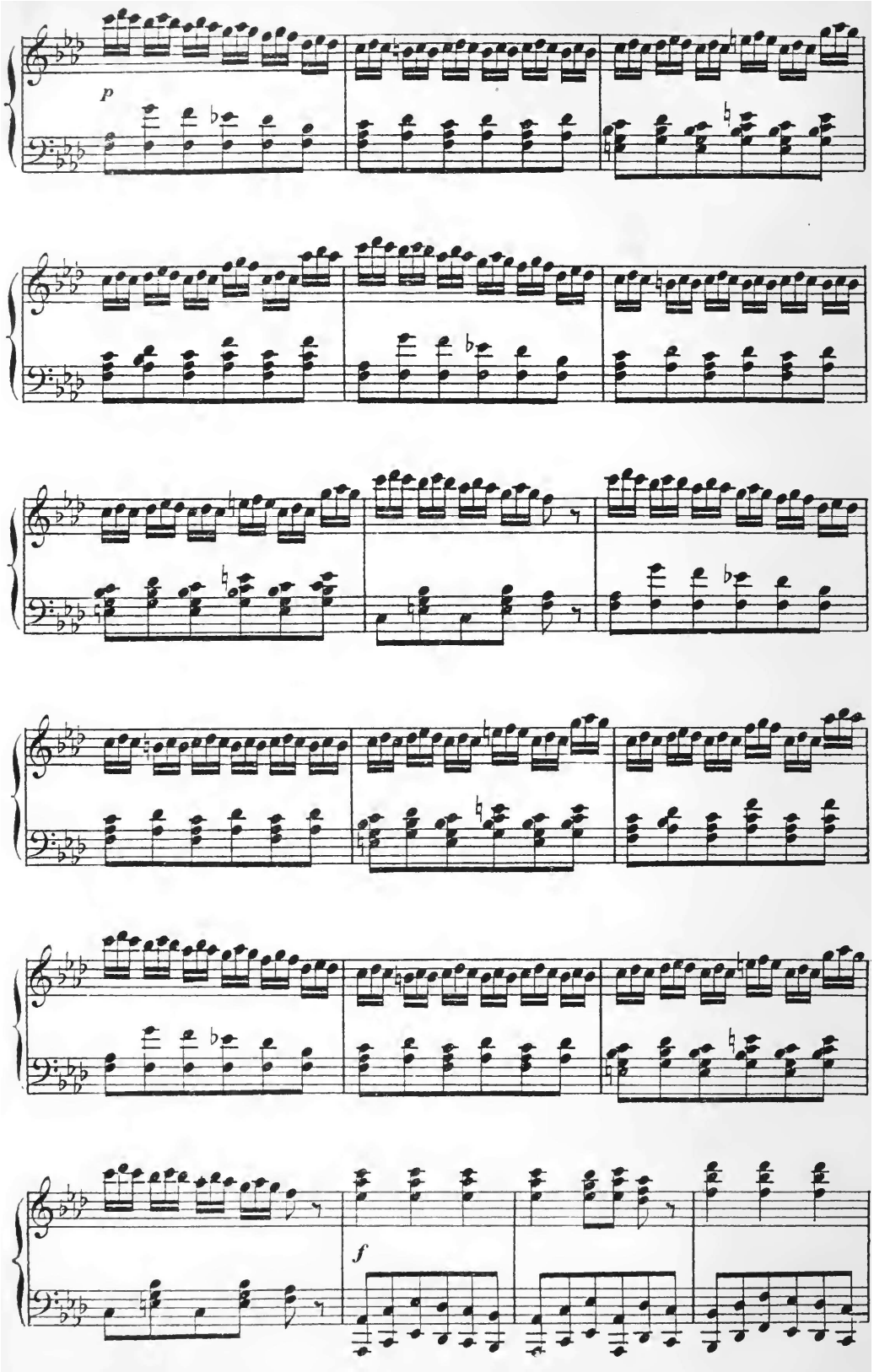
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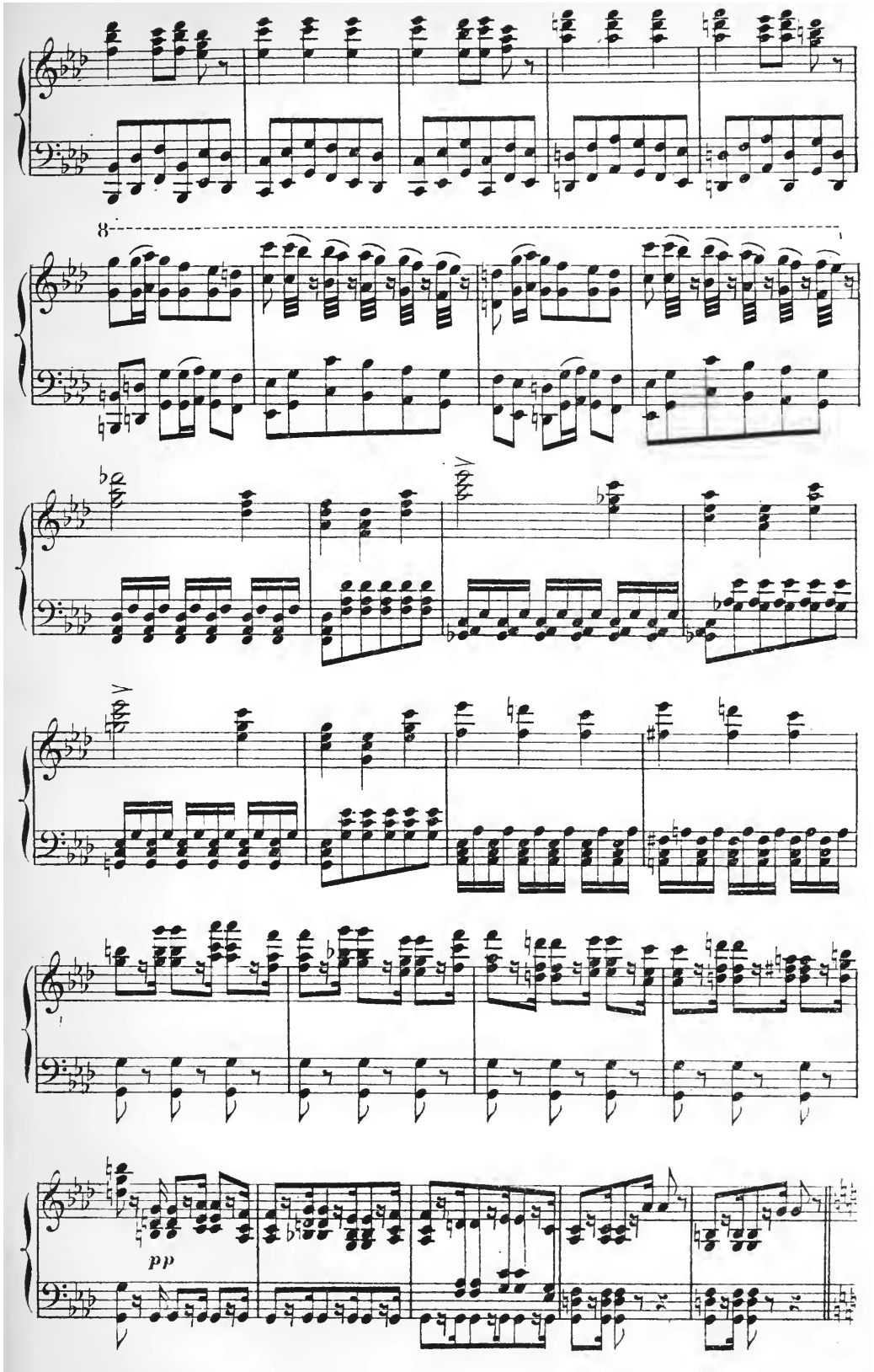
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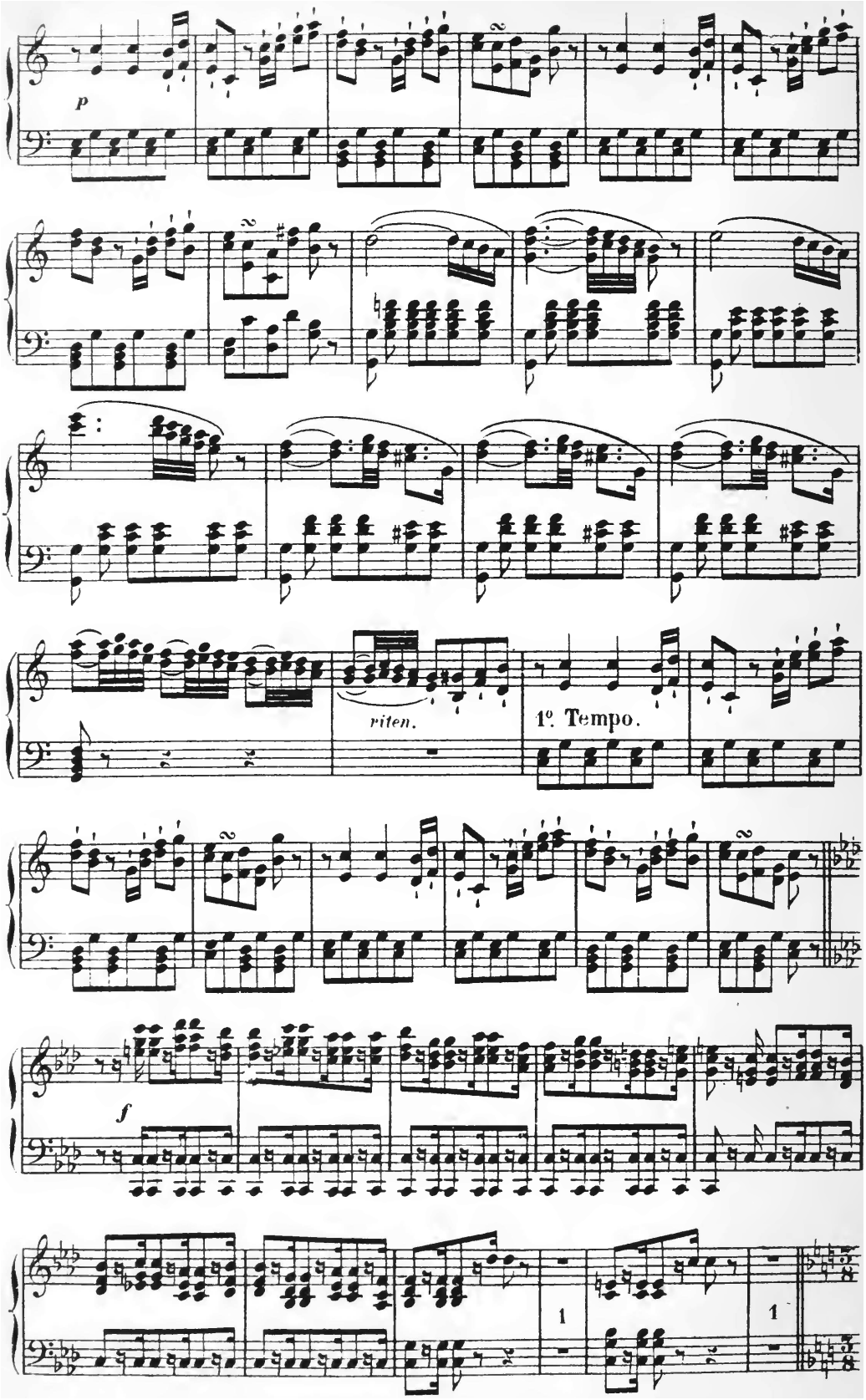
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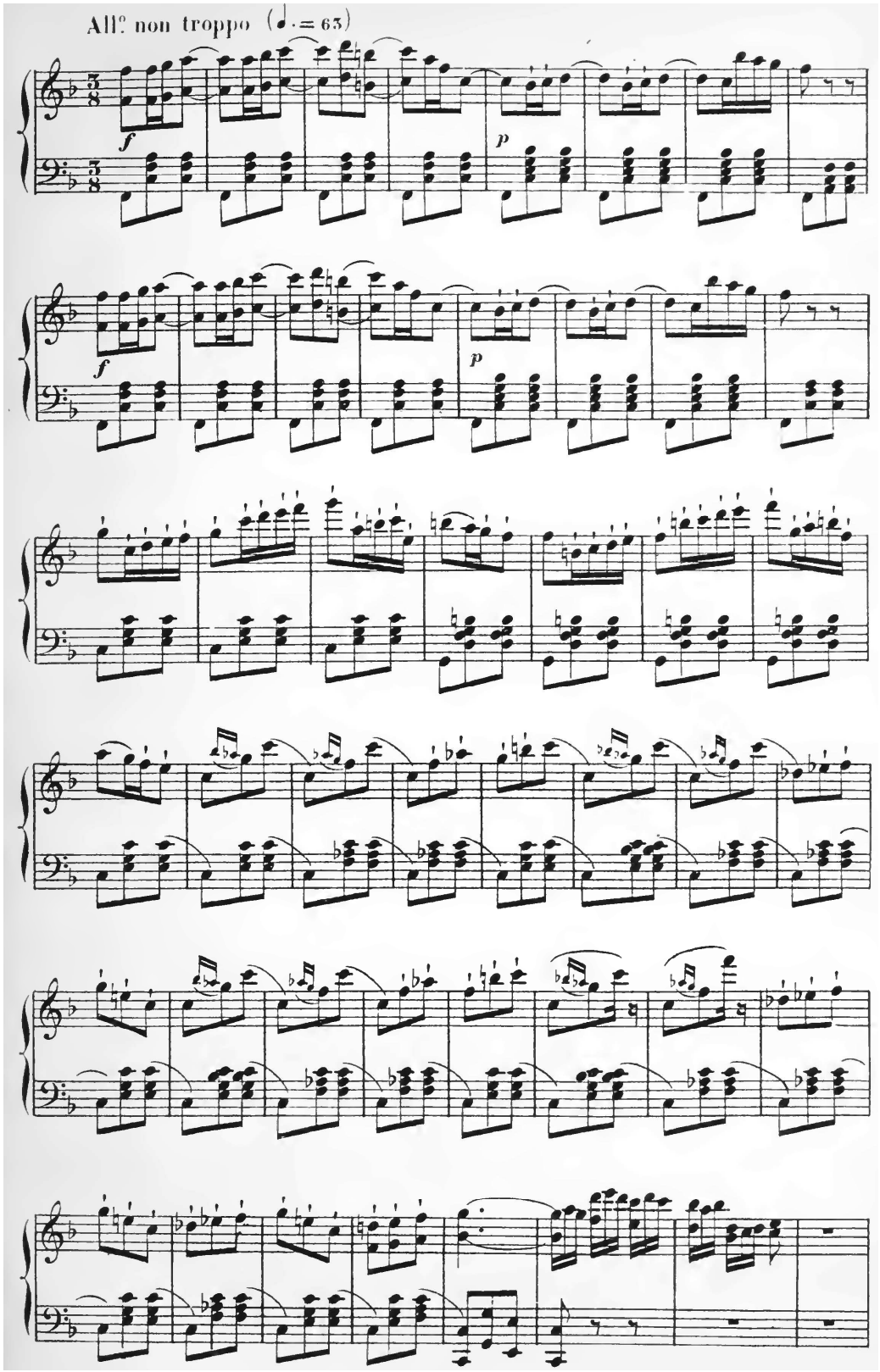
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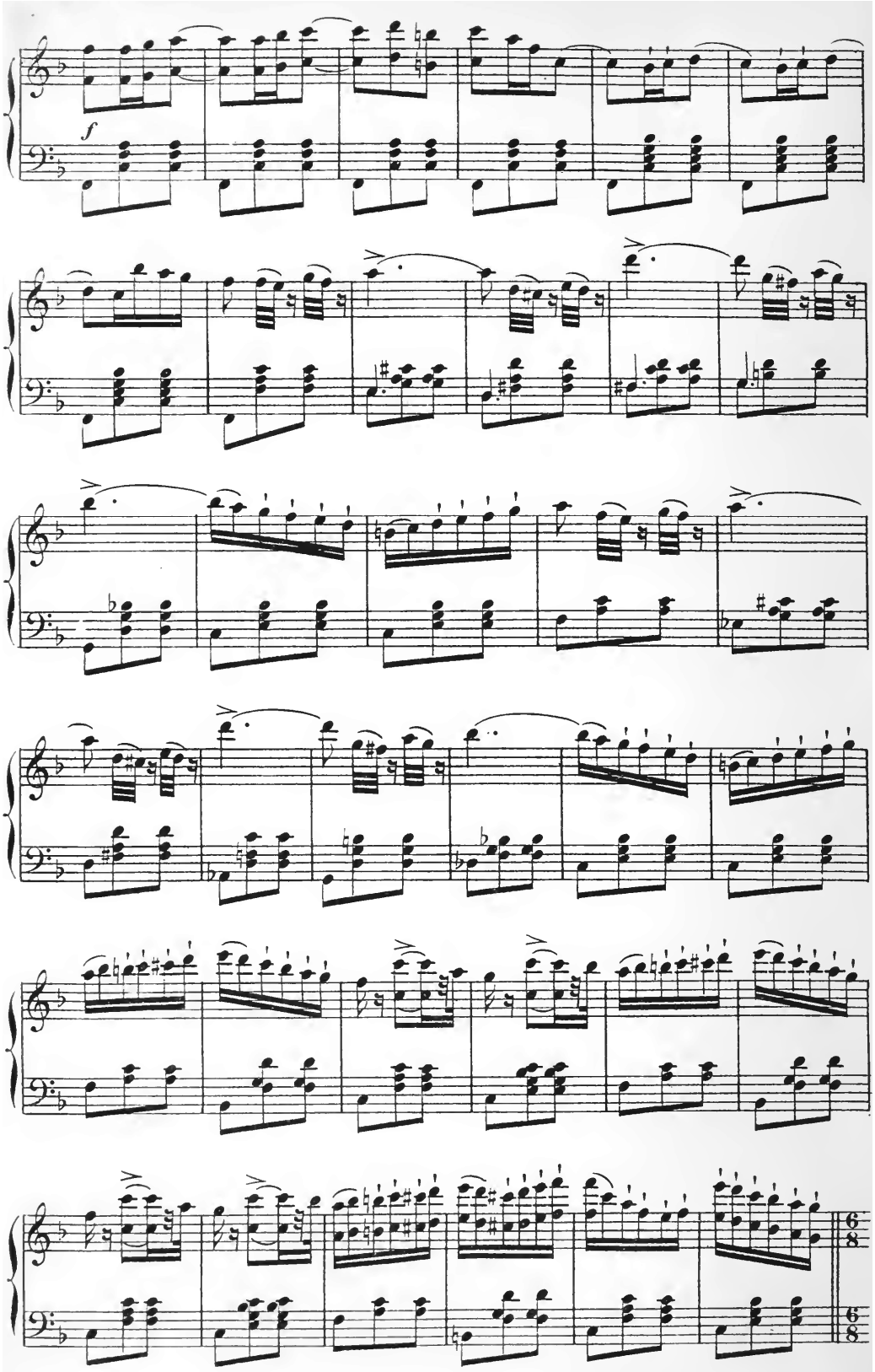
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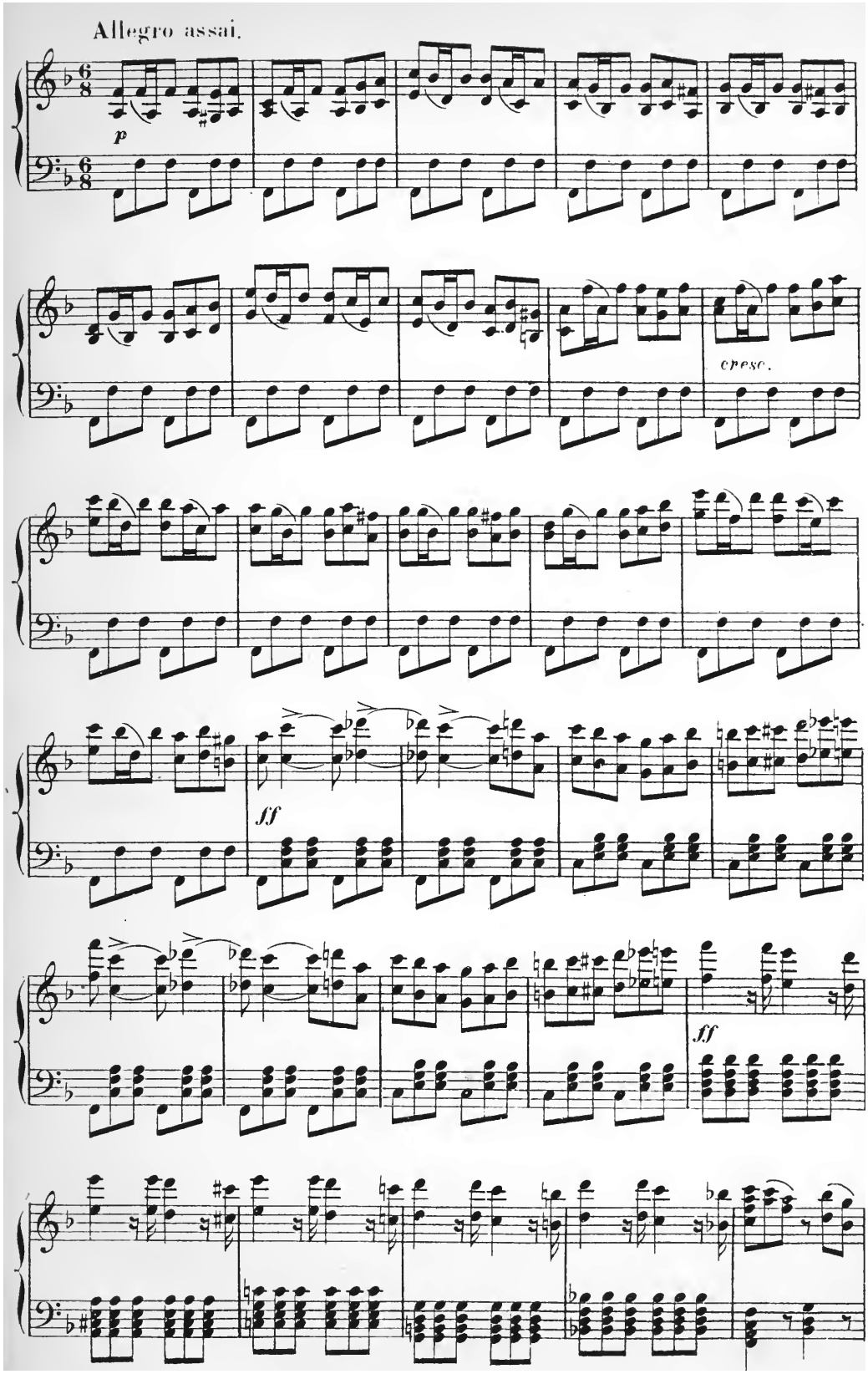
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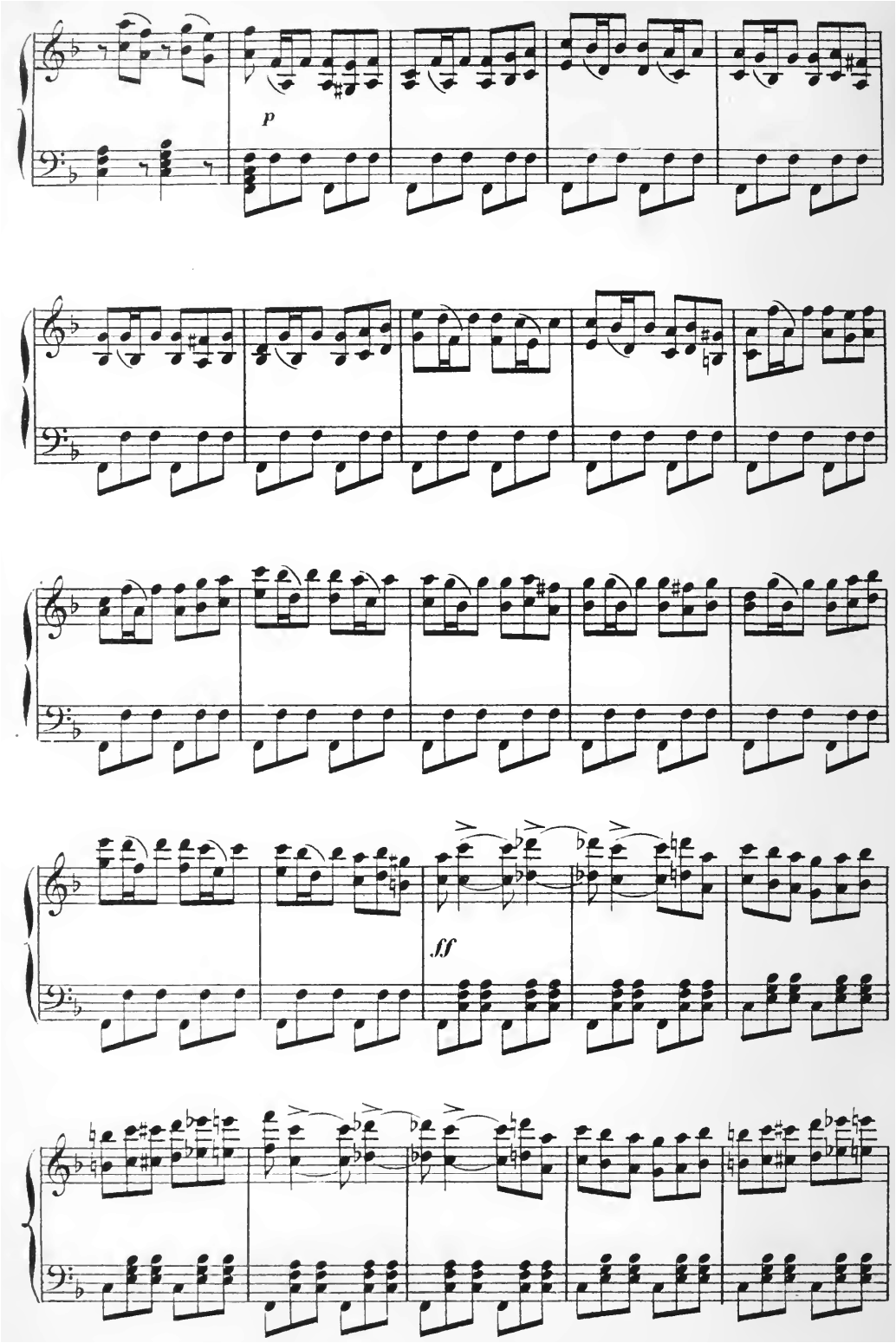
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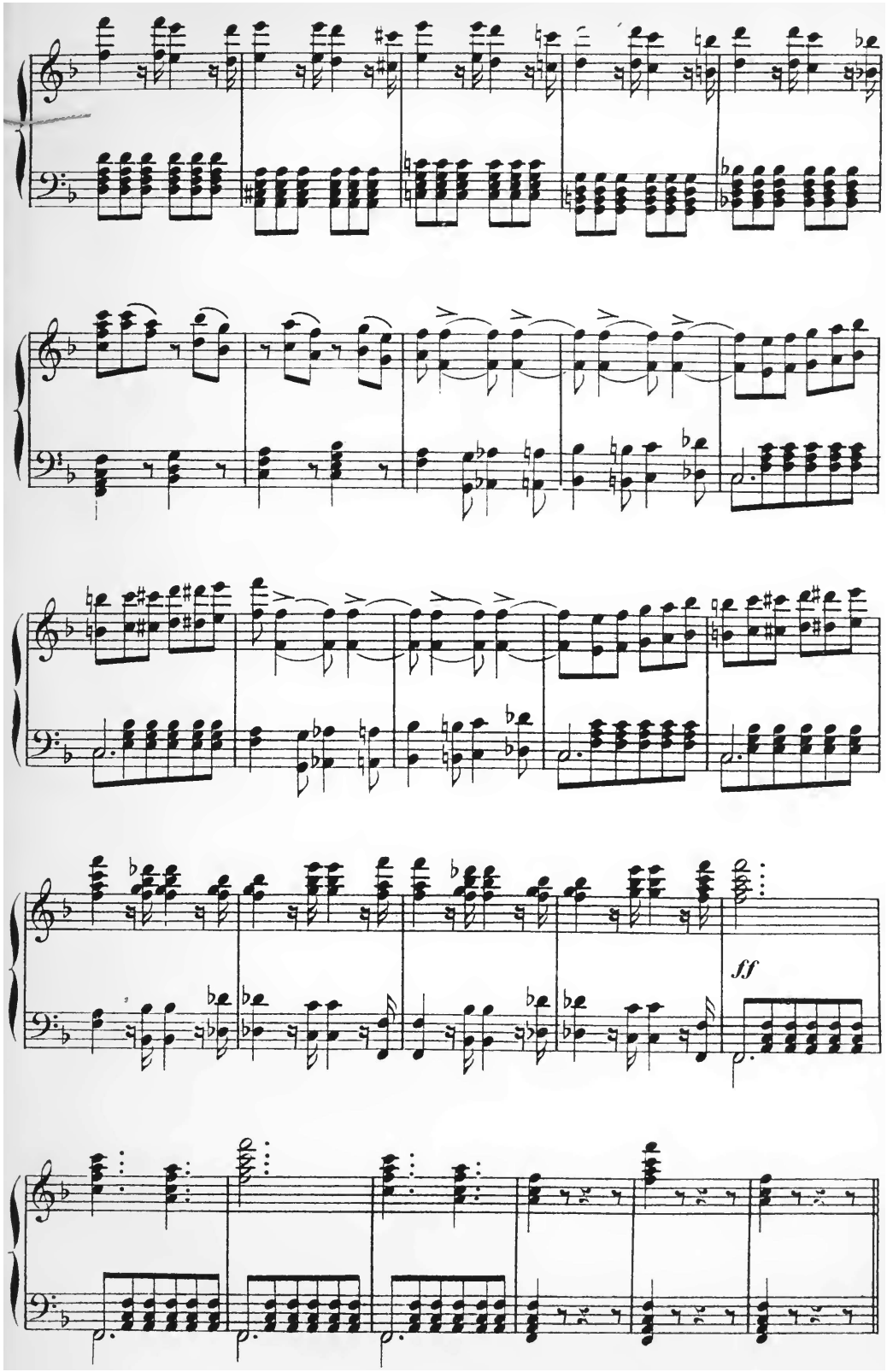
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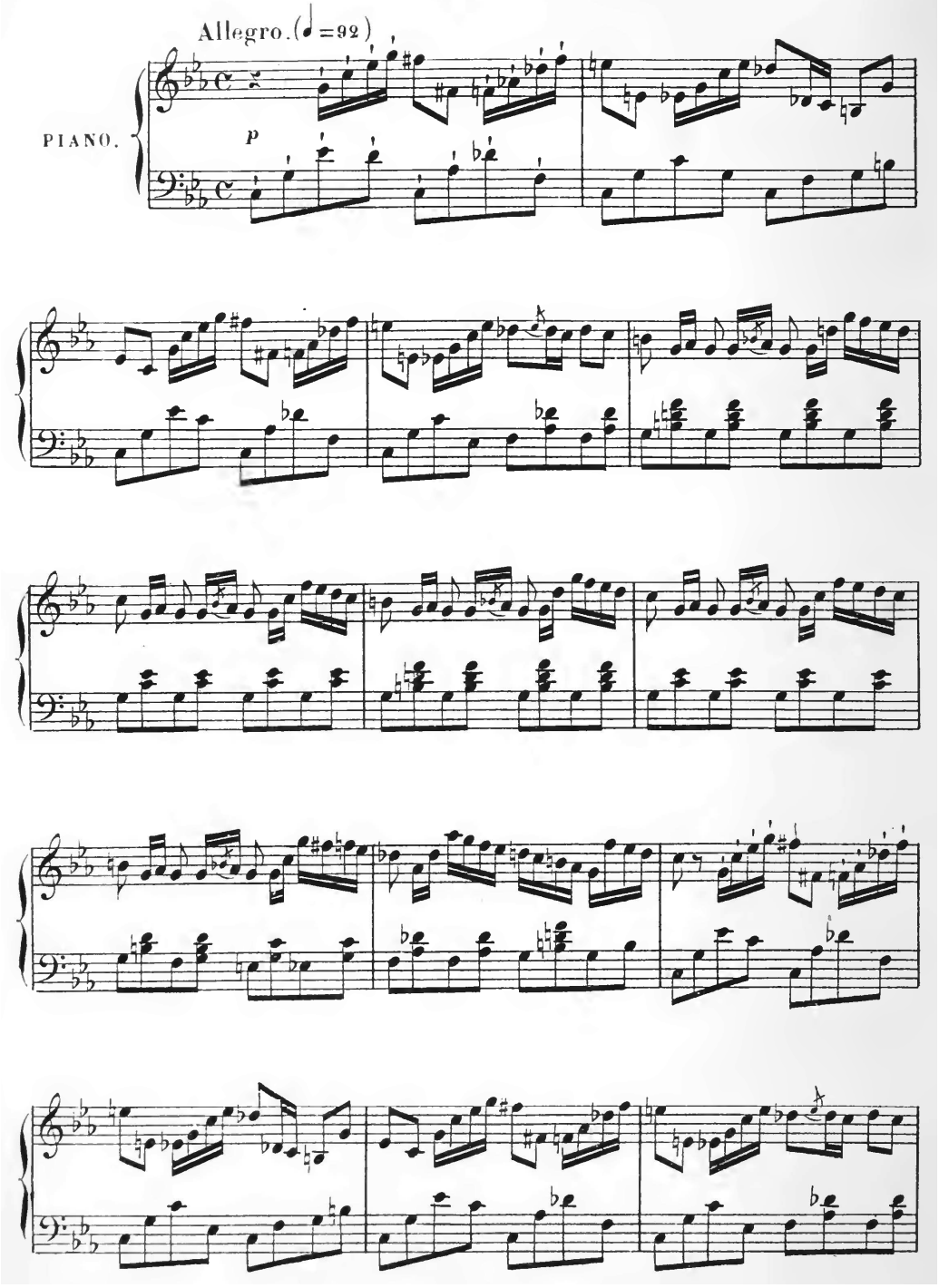
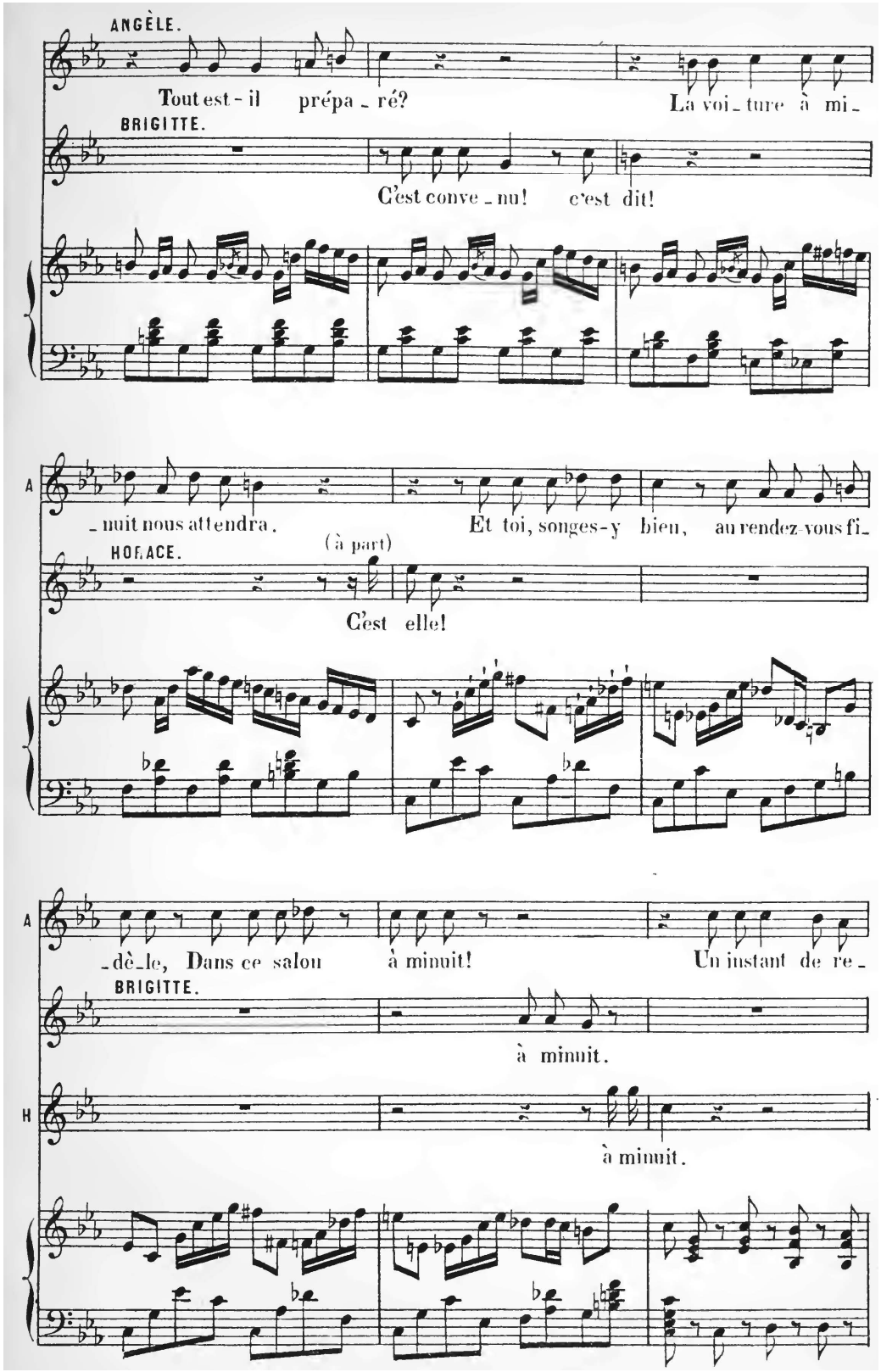
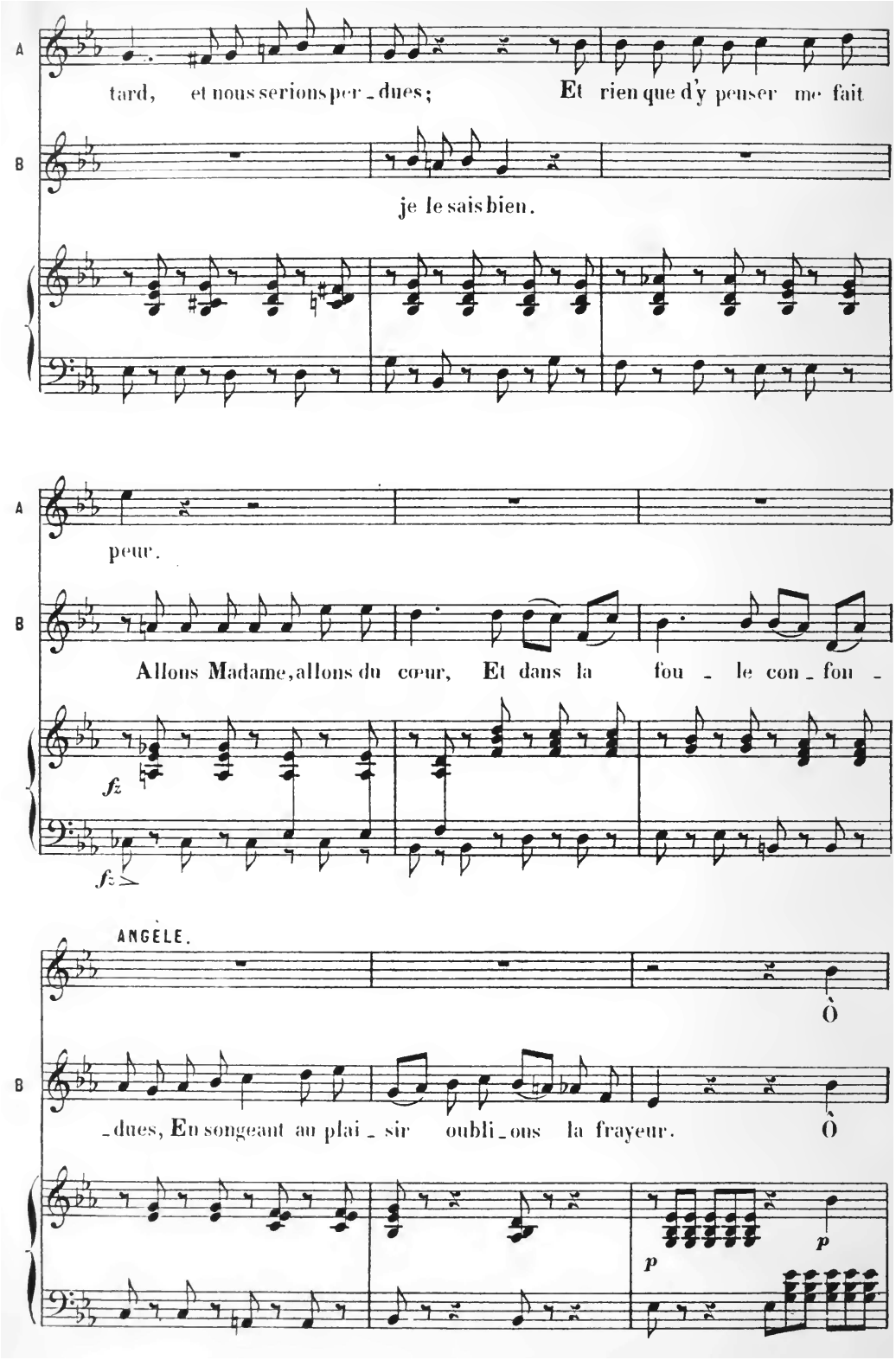
ACTE I

N° 1

TRIO




ANGÈLE.
Tout est-il prépa-ré? La voi-ture à mi-
BRIGITTE.
C'est conve-nu! c'est dit!
A
-nuit nous attendra. Et toi, songes-y bien, au rendez-vous fi-
HORACE. (à part)
C'est elle!
A
-dè-le, Dans ce salon à minuit! Un instant de re-
BRIGITTE.
à minuit.
H
à minuit.


A
tard, et nous serions per_dues; Et rien que d'y penser me fait
B
je le sais bien.
A
peur.
B
Allons Madame, allons du cœur, Et dans la fou_le con_fu_
fz
fz
ANGÈLE.
Ô
B
_dues, En songeant au plai_sir oubli_ons la frayeur.
Ô
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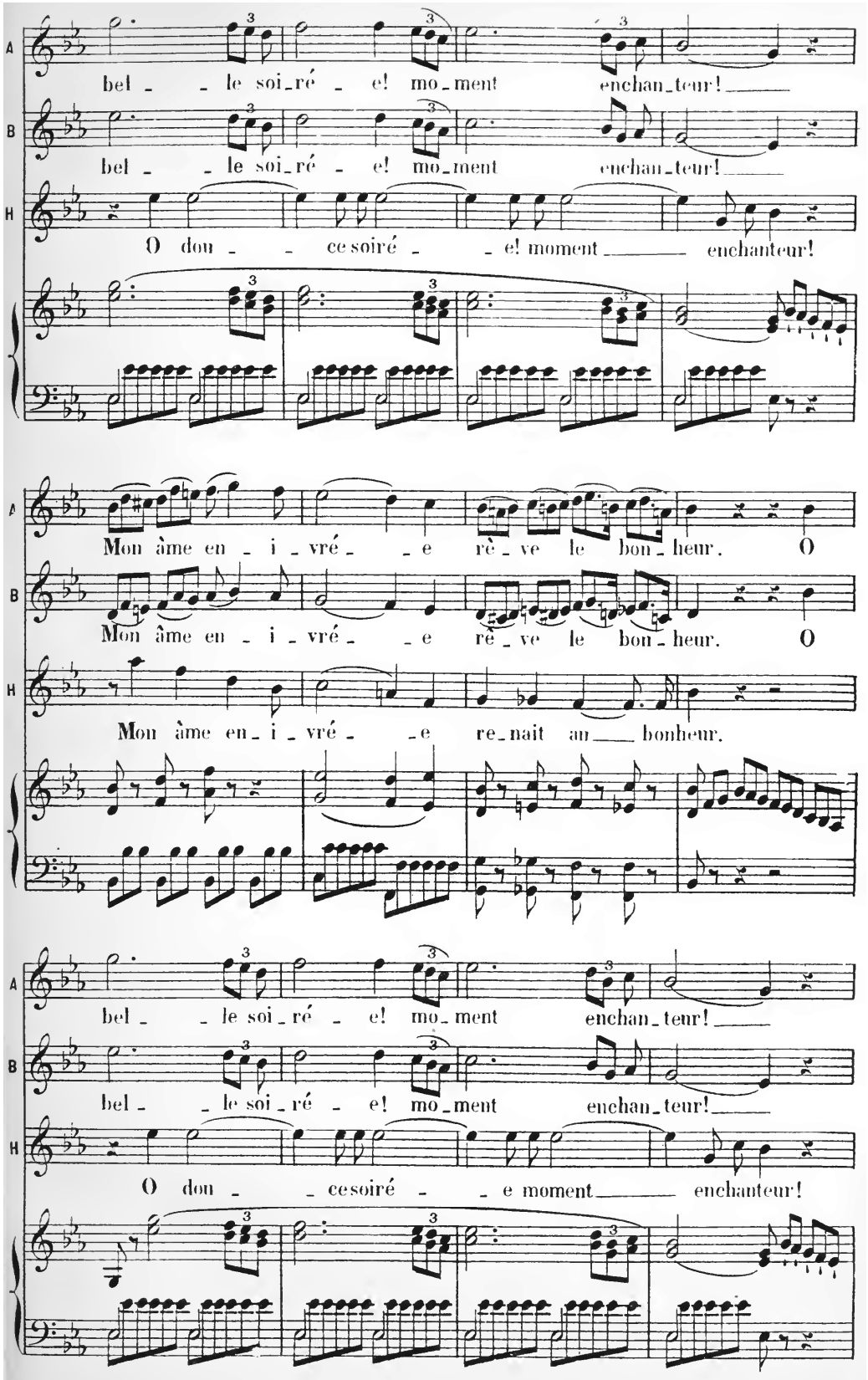
A
bel _ _ le soi_ré _ e! mo_ment enchan_teur! _____
B
bel _ _ le soi_ré _ e! mo_ment enchan_teur! _____
H
O don _ _ ce soiré _ _ e! moment _____ enchanteur!
Mon âme en _ i _ vré _ _ e rè _ ve le bon _ heur. O
Mon âme en _ i _ vré _ _ e rè _ ve le bon _ heur. O
Mon âme en _ i _ vré _ _ e re_nait au ____ bonheur.
bel _ _ le soi_ré _ e! mo_ment enchan_teur! _____
bel _ _ le soi_ré _ e! mo_ment enchan_teur! _____
O don _ _ ce soiré _ _ e moment _____ enchanteur!