Daniel-François-Esprit Auber:
Fra Diavolo

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Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier

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Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (c. 1835)

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INTRODUCTION

Fra Diavolo, an *opéra-comique* in three acts with libretto by Eugène Scribe, was premiered at the Opéra-Comique (Salle Ventadour), on 28 January 1830. It was hugely successful, and remained in the theatre's repertoire until 1907.

The opera is set in Terracina, in Italy, around 1830. The figure of the robber chief Fra Diavolo is based on a real Italian bandit, Michele Pezza, whose exploits during the Napoleonic occupation had become so well-known that folk memory ascribed supernatural powers to him. Pezza was eventually captured by French troops under General Joseph Comte Hugo (the father of Victor Hugo) in 1806, and executed. The action of Scribe's libretto is not drawn from historical events, but makes use of a name that was rich in association—even during his lifetime Fra Diavolo was known in Paris.

The plot of *Fra Diavolo* represents Scribe's most brilliant handling of the techniques of the theatre, which he disposes with effective fluency and seamless control of dramaturgy. As act 1 opens, the innkeeper Matteo's daughter Zerline is about to marry a wealthy peasant, but is unhappy because she really loves Lorenzo, a poor officer of the carabinieri. Lorenzo and his troops are searching for the robber chief Fra Diavolo. An English couple, Lord and Lady Cockburn, appear, claiming to have been robbed by Diavolo. They are followed by another traveller, who is recognised by Lord Cockburn as the Marquis with whom Lady Pamela had been flirting at a previous inn. A secret is then revealed to the audience, but not to the principal characters: two ragged and menacing individuals, Beppo and Giacomo, enter, disclose their own identity as bandits, and reveal that the Marquis is Diavolo in disguise. The supposed Marquis pretends an amorous interest in Lady Pamela, and persuades her to give him her locket. The soldiers return, and Lorenzo describes the defeat of the bandit group and the recovery of the Cockburn jewels. He is rewarded, and can now marry Zerline. Diavolo and his henchmen plot revenge.

The second act opens with Zerline lyrically contemplating her future wedded bliss. Lord Cockburn, on his way to bed with Lady Pamela, then discovers that his wife's locket is missing, but his suspicions are allayed. Pursuing their plans of robbery, the Marquis and his henchmen enter Zerline's room. Zerline's sudden entry forces them to hide in the closet, providing a comic interlude as she prepares for bed, undressing and admiring herself, to the *sotto voce* comments of the bandits. After Zerline goes to sleep Diavolo orders Beppo to kill her, but she begins to pray in her sleep, which stays Beppo's hand. Lorenzo's arrival awakens her and sets the inn in uproar. The bandits are forced back into the closet. In the second finale Scribe reveals his mastery of intrigue. The clumsy Beppo knocks over a chair, and Fra Diavolo is forced to emerge as the Marquis, and cover his tracks by explaining to Lord Cockburn and Lorenzo in turn that his presence in the closet was for a rendezvous. First Lord Cockburn is shown Lady Pamela's locket as proof of his amorous intention; circumstantial evidence is sufficient for Lorenzo. The ensuing jealousy and growing confusion allow Diavolo to escape.

The third act opens with the wedding festivities for Zerline and the wealthy peasant. Beppo and Giacomo recognize Zerline as the girl they observed undressing, and mock her song from the previous evening. Zerline identifies the song as her own,

so revealing that Beppo and Giacomo must have been hiding in the closet along with the Marquis. They are forced to disclose Fra Diavolo's plan to rob the English couple during the wedding service. The soldiers set an ambush for the bandit chief, and force Beppo to signal that all is well. The Marquis saunters down the hillside, and is identified by one of his victims as Diavolo. He falls into his own net and is captured by Lorenzo and his troops who have been hiding in ambush. Lorenzo receives a reward, and, finally, can marry Zerline.

The libretto is one of Scribe's most entertaining, and the score one of the composer's best. Scribe's dramatic instinct for a thrilling plot is shown through the numerous devices by which he causes changes in the fortunes of both hero and anti-hero. These ploys range from the melodramatic (where Zerline's murder is narrowly averted), to the comic (where the Marquis extricates himself from the tight predicament in the Act 2 finale). All of Scribe's *opéra-comique* librettos contain some sort of tactically withheld information, the revelation of which is essential for the proper resolution of the intrigue, a *quid pro quo*. *Fra Diavolo* provides one of Scribe's longest, for although the identity of the Marquis is revealed to the audience midway through the first act, the participants in the drama do not learn who he really is until the final scene.

The anti-hero Fra Diavolo is in fact a type of Don Giovanni, and every scene and every character in the opera is dependent on him in some way or another. The vivid apprehension of the Act 1 ballad "Voyez sur cette roche", with its simple direct imagery and bold action, conjures up a unique picture with a sense of mountainous perspective, of changing vantage and sudden movement. There is a powerful mythology at work, captured in the hero-villain's name, suggestive as it is of primal disobedience, diabolical pride and monstrous crime. When we meet Fra Diavolo in his moment of self-revelation, "Je vois marcher sous mes bannières" he seeks to establish himself with outrageous presumption as the Robin Hood of more recent times. Scribe's brilliant sense of control and compression conveys all in a few deft strokes full of comic insight. Diavolo may be a folk hero figure of romance, but he is also a callous amoralist. His multifarious personality, suggested by his disguises and power to control, represents a freedom of spirit, a moral libertinism, and a liberation from ethical restraint characteristic of his activities as a robber and violator of social codes and expectations. This great tenor role is covered in glorious lyricism, from the Marquis's pretended wooing of the English aristocrat, with its beautiful barcarolle and virtuosic patter, through his taking up of his own ballad after Zerline has started it, his second beautiful barcarolle as signal to his henchmen in act 2, to his extended and rapturous credo proclaimed in the aria at the beginning of act 3.

By comparison the earnest and noble young officer Lorenzo—who, like Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, is concerned with social order and moral rectitude, and driven by a pure love for his fiancée—comes across as pallid, despite the mellifluous effusion of his act 3 romance, a very considerable love song.

The two women characters add to the subtlety of the situation and characterization, with Lady Pamela a very funny and ambiguous realization that moves beyond comic stereotyping of the English traveller abroad (a character assumption fulfilled perfectly by her husband in his *buffo* blustering). The Bedtime Trio with Zerline and her husband is more than just a piece of comic relief: it makes a serious point about the vitality of human relationships and the potential stultification of feeling in institutionalized love. Scribe's acute social observation is nowhere more ironic than in his depiction of these English aristocrats and the daily mundaneness of their married life.

Zerline is not quite the putty in the hands of her potential seducer as is her rustic namesake in *Don Giovanni*. From the first she shows her devotion to her beloved Lorenzo, and her awareness of both the attractiveness and danger in the outlaw. Her bustling aria at the beginning of act 2 encapsulates one of opera's most archetypal characters—the servant girl Serpina in *La serva padrona*. Zerlina's anticipation of her nuptials is given a potentially shocking effect in her soliloquy before going to bed when she undresses and naively assesses herself in the mirror (to the comic-ironic pleasure of the hidden bandit observers). This scene observed by Fra Diavolo's henchmen becomes the signature tune of Zerline's pert and self-possessed personality. Her charming prayer, with its restricted *mezza voce* vocal line and rustling string arpeggios, that follows on the undressing, is a masterpiece of miniature, restrained characterization, depicting a world of tender idealism and childlike trust, a situation reinforced when the same prayer, murmured in sleep, causes the robbers to hold back from her murder. Zerline, with her high soubrette tessitura and crisp restrained coloratura, her deliberate and unconscious allusion to the definitive types created by Pergolesi and Mozart, creates an interesting role that is a fusion of traditional subservience and enterprising independence. For all her urban busyness in the inn, she speaks for the ancient pastoral heritage of comedy, something that emerges in the preparations for her wedding in act 3 where the extended and recurring morning chorus is an epithalamium linking her to the countryside and the church, and so to the ancient values of comedy with its integration and right order—an element emphasized in the following tarantella that adds both to the pastoral festivity and develops the Italian local colour that subtly invests the story.

The composition of *Fra Diavolo* showed Auber reaching a height which he seldom achieved again. It is pointed, concise, and develops organically out of the action in all the big scenes. In the main it is characterized by simple small forms with piquant rhythms and harmonic effects, and a direct but refined background. Many comic effects are derived from Rossini, but the tonality, melody and rhythm are entirely French, like the brilliant galop from act 3, performed by an offstage band. Ensembles dominate, with solos sparsely employed, but the shift between solo numbers and small and large ensembles is scenically motivated, and musically balanced with great care.

The overture begins with a solo side drum, but gradually the whole orchestra joins in, creating the effect of an approaching procession which passes and gradually fades into the distance. The side-drum and rich cello solo are followed by a trumpet that immediately strikes the military note that will be one of the major registers of the opera. This call leads to a strenuous transitional passage, out of which emerges a spritely tune on the woodwinds, over pizzicato strings, followed by a dance-like section for the whole orchestra. Both these themes come from the act 1 finale, the military music in which Lorenzo and his carabinieri bring news of the defeat of Fra Diavolo, with members of the gang killed in a skirmish. After a further military fanfare, the themes are repeated and lead to a *presto* coda. Embedded in this military music of victory is the beautiful hopeful exchange of Lorenzo and Zerline (a foreshortened love duet) as they anticipate the imminence of their union brought forward by the soldiers' success.

Even after 180 years the melodies conserve a freshness that testifies to Auber's originality: in act 1 the introduction (soldiers' drinking chorus with asides for Zerline and Lorenzo); Lord Cockburn's *couplets syllabiques*; the quintet heralding the arrival of the Marquis; Zerline's ballad about Fra Diavolo "Voyez sur cette roche"; the seduction trio built around the barcarolle "Le gondolier fidèle"; all are instances of high musical comedy. The vein continues in act 2, with the Bedtime Trio for Zerline

and the English couple. Fra Diavolo's barcarolle serenade "Agnès, la jouvencelle" is a charming, but double-edged inspiration. Zerline's bedroom scene is beautifully handled, with its hopes, naive self-regard and beautiful bedtime prayer. The Act 2 finale is brilliant in its complex musical realization of Fra Diavolo's twisting intrigue.

Act 3 is dominated by Fra Diavolo's extended monologue ("Je vois marcher sous ma bannière"), a scintillating *tour de force* in several movements, requiring lyricism of a high order, an extended tessitura, head voice and falsetto comic facility if the actor is to realize its potential. The opening is a bold march in E major; the cabaletta in G major ("Il faut nous hâter le temps presse"), a virtuoso galop in 6/8—the usual 2/4 of this dance given a frenetic extra inner propulsion by the play with metre. The pastoral chorus ("Pâques fleuries") has an enchanting effect, conveying a sense of the serene Easter morning and radiant Italian landscape. The mood is sustained by Lorenzo's sentimental romance ("Pour toujours, disait-elle")—a wistful effusion, the polar opposite to Fra Diavolo's monstrously egoistic and glorious soliloquy—before the comic uncovering of the rascals, and the rush to the finale, with its lingering revisiting of the ballad.

Fra Diavolo was created by Jean-Baptist Chollet (Fra Diavolo), Geneviève-Aimeé-Zoe Prévost (Zerline), Marie-Julienne Boulanger (Lady Cockburn), Louis-Auguste Féréol (Lord Cockburn), Théodore-Étienne Moreau-Sainti (Lorenzo), Henri (Matteo), Fargueil and Belnie (Giacomo and Beppo). Between 1830 and 1907 it was performed over 900 times at the Opéra-Comique. There were productions in Berlin as early as 1830 and 1831 (in two different translations by Karl August Ritter and Karl Ludwig Blum), and it was given there 177 times until 1890. The opera soon spread to Brussels, Graz, Hamburg, Vienna, Dresden, Munich, Stuttgart, Pest/Budapest, St Petersburg (in Russian), London, Brünn, Copenhagen (in Danish), Zagreb/Agram, Prague, Warsaw (in Polish), and New York. By 1852 it had appeared in Klausenburg/Cluj-Napoca, Bucharest, Helsinki, Calcutta, Sydney and Buenos Aires.

In 1858 the Folies Nouvelles in Paris brought out a parody (*Fra Diavolino*, operetta in one act, text by Amédée de Jallais, music by Roques). The opera has been filmed twice: in 1931 by Mario Bonnard (*Fra Diavolo*), and in 1933 as a freely rendered adaptation for Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (*The Devil's Brother*), with a sometimes witty use of Auber's music as soundtrack. It was revived at the Opéra-Comique on 29 January 2009, with Kenneth Tarver, Sumi Jo, Antonio Figueroa, Doris Lamprecht, Marc Molomot, Vincent Pavesi, Thomas Dolié, Thomas Morris, with the Choeur Les Eléments and Orchestre Le Cercle de l'Harmonie, conducted by Jérémie Rhorer. *Fra Diavolo* is the only one of Auber's operas still in the international repertoire.

Fra Diavolo: Etching after Tony and Alfred Johannot
from Scribe's Works (1847)

Florian Bruyas

Nouvelle Edition.

FRA DIAVOLO,

Opéra Comique en trois actes,

Paroles de M

E. Scribe,

MUSIQUE DE

D. F. E. AUBER.

PARTITION PIANO ET CHANT.

PRIX 15^f^ *NET*

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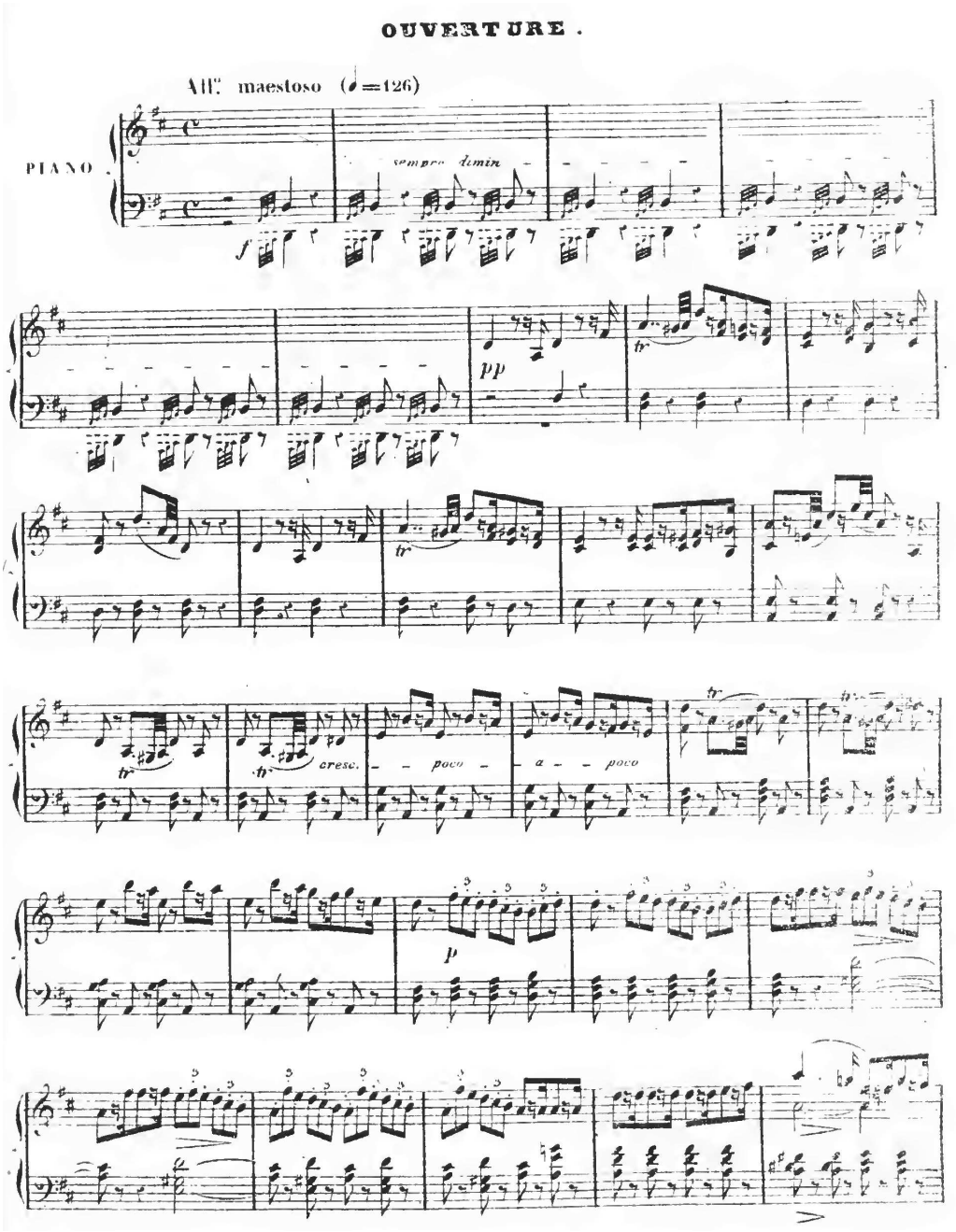
Brandus et Cie

PERSONNAGES.

Soprani.	*Tenors.*	*Basses.*
ZERLINE	DIAVOLO 1.er Tenor	MATHEO
PAMELA	LORENZO 2.d Tenor (ligne)	GIACOMO
.....	MILORD bial	.....
.....	BEPPO	.....

TABLE DES MORCEAUX.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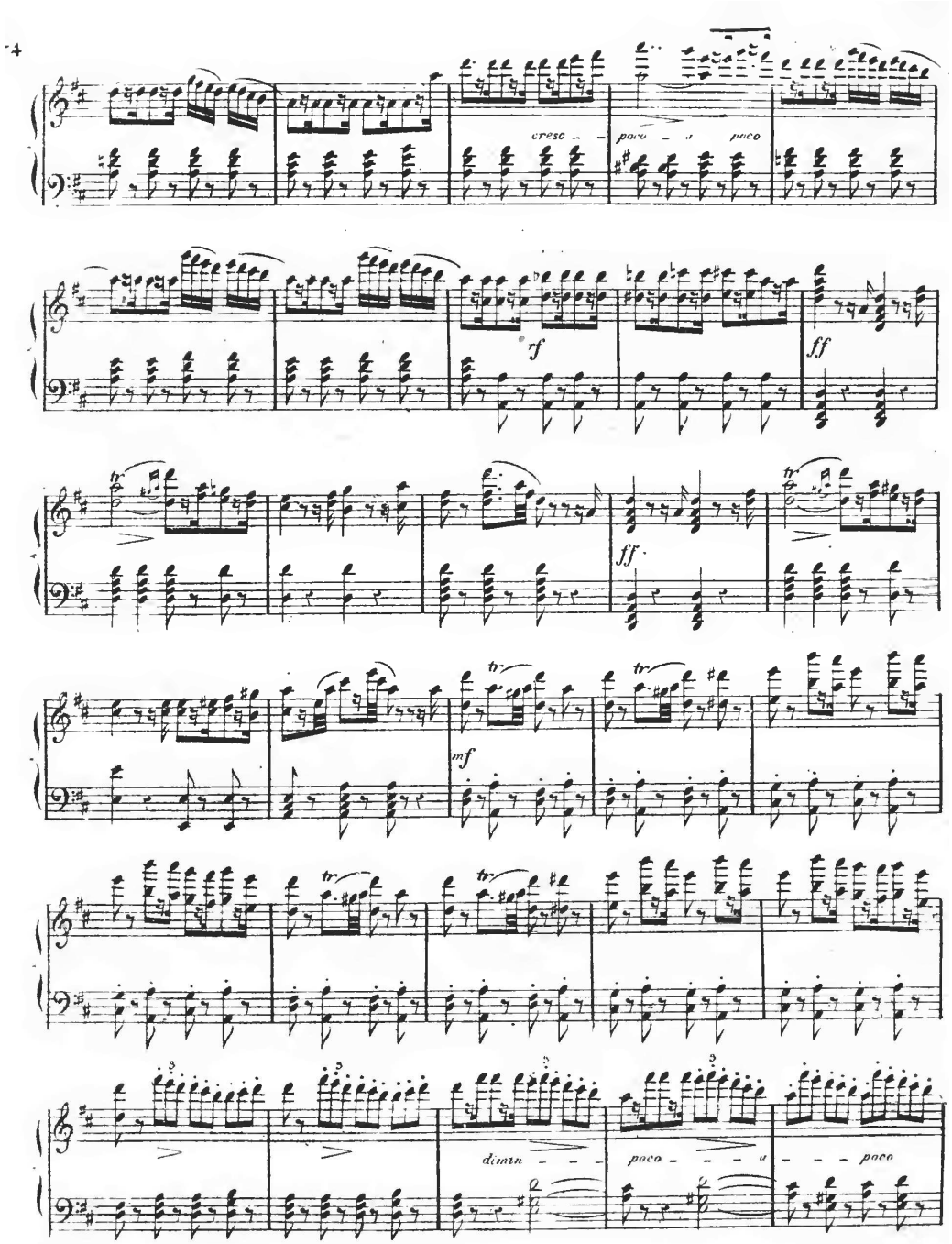
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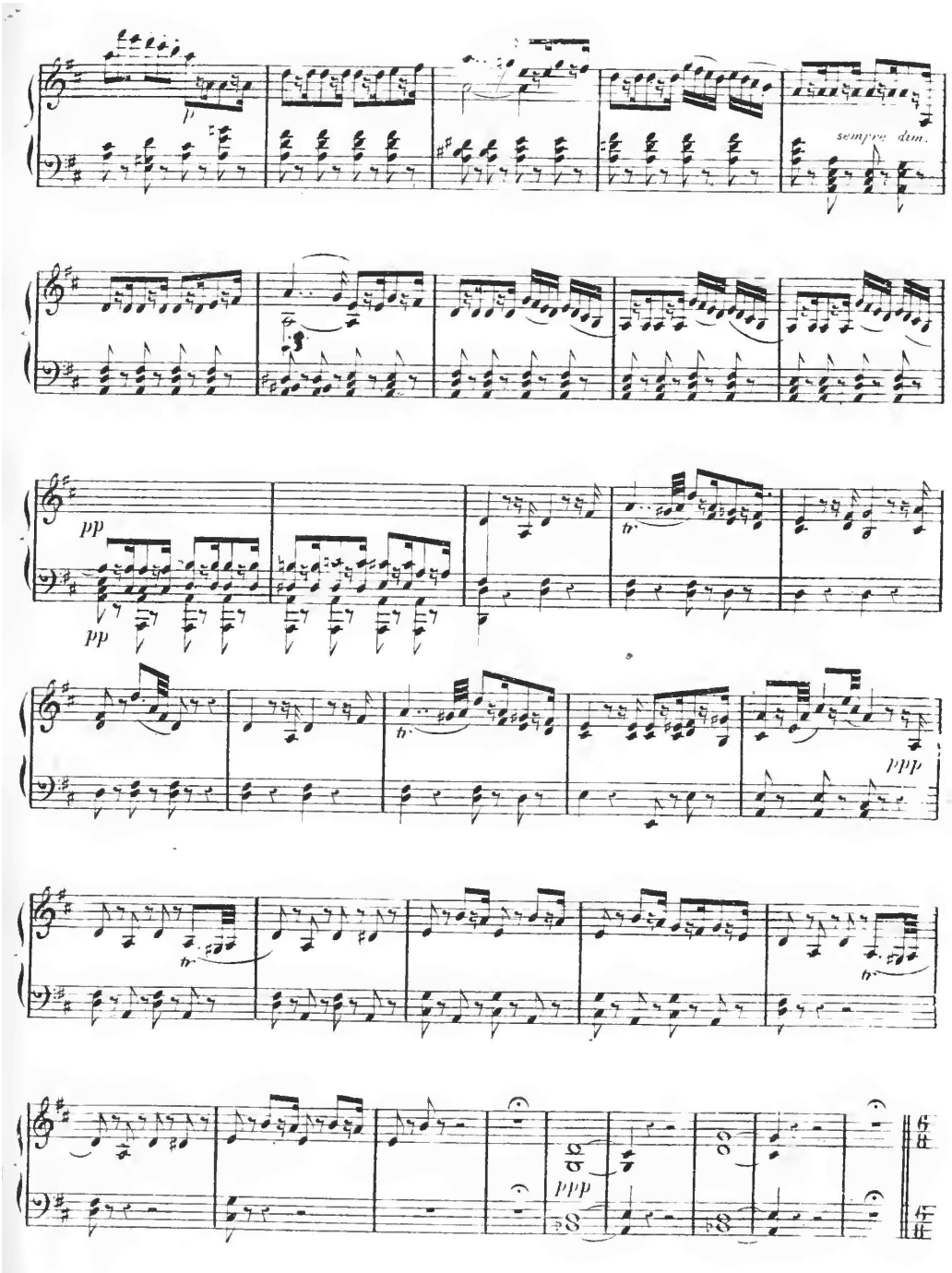
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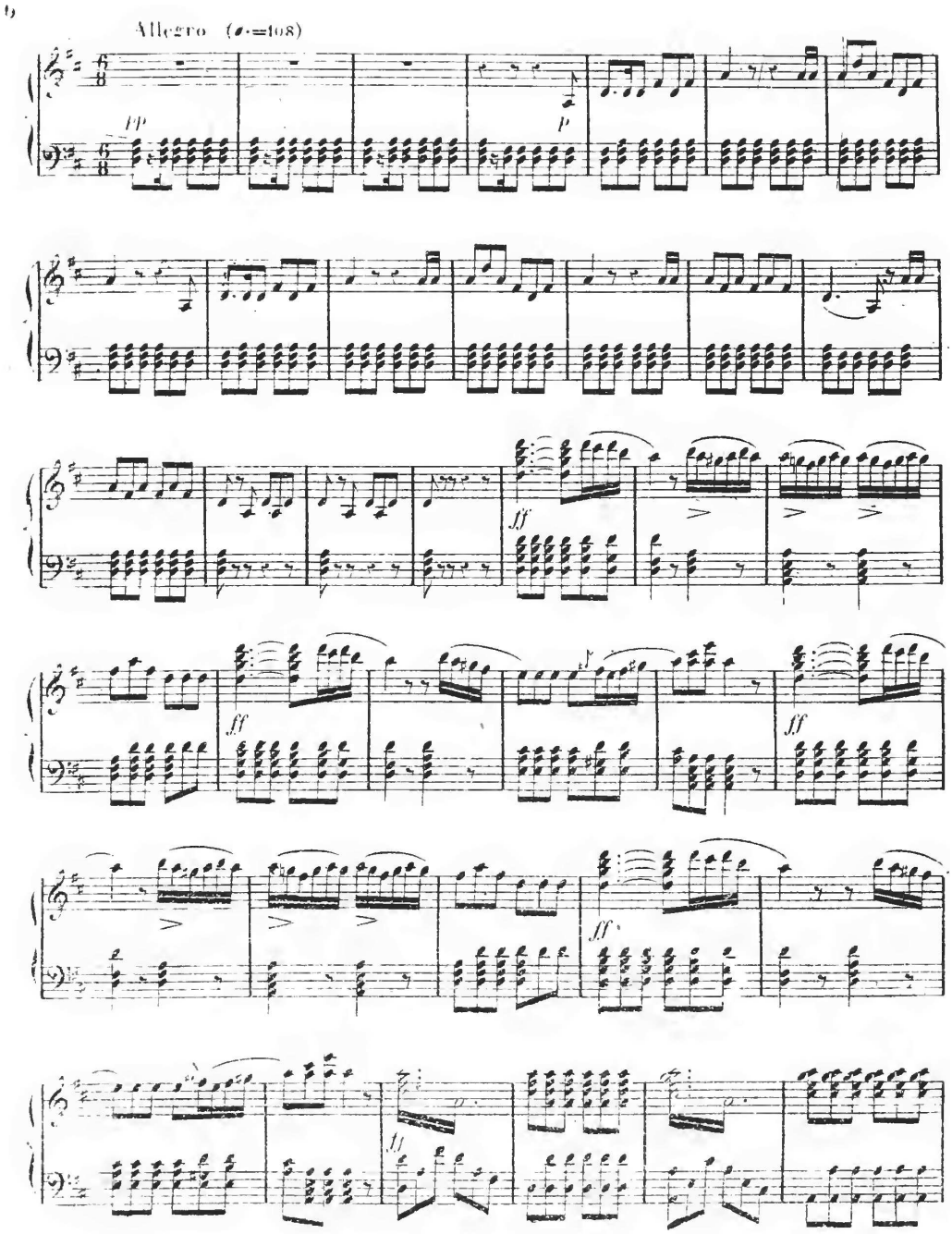
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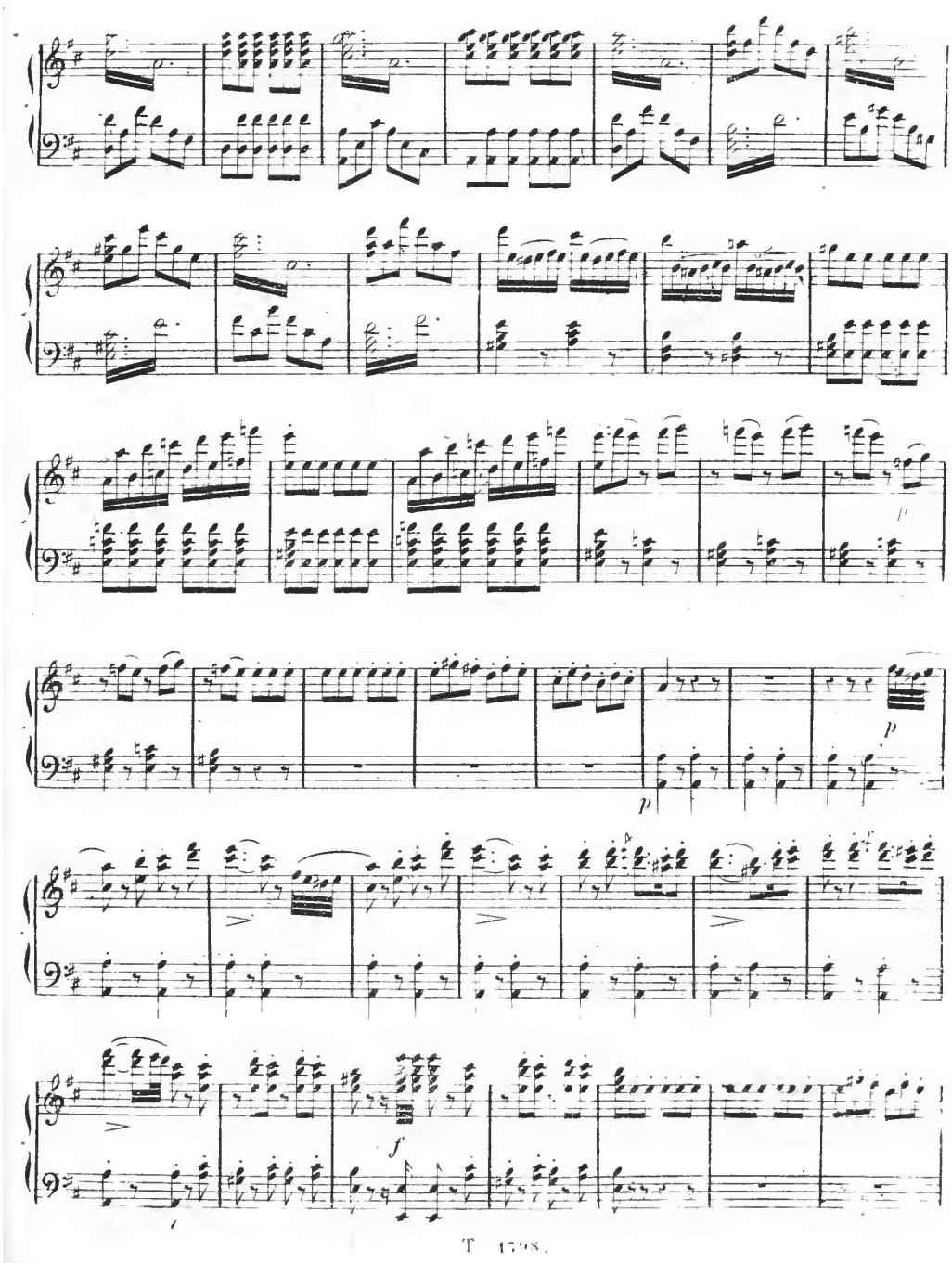
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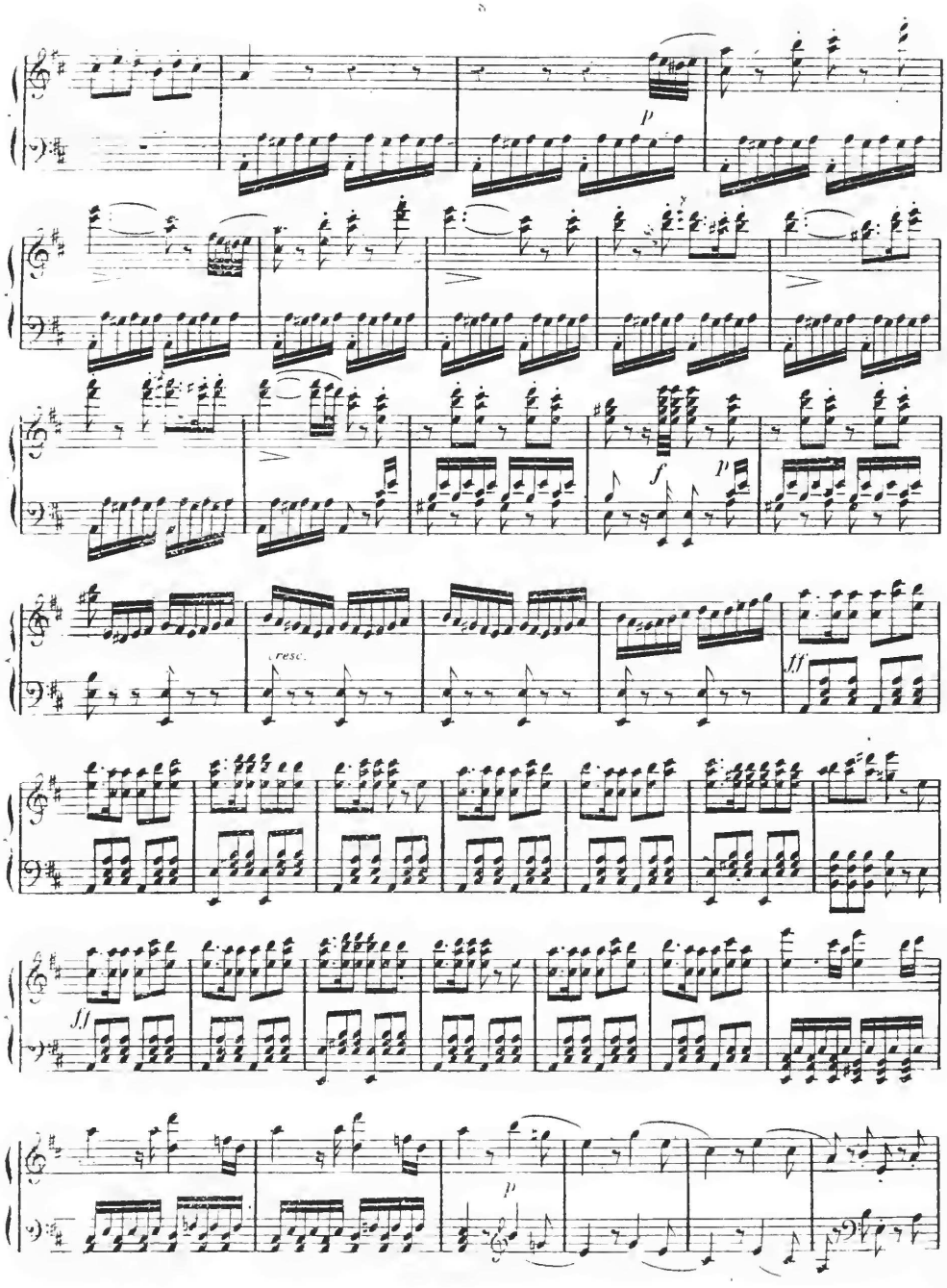
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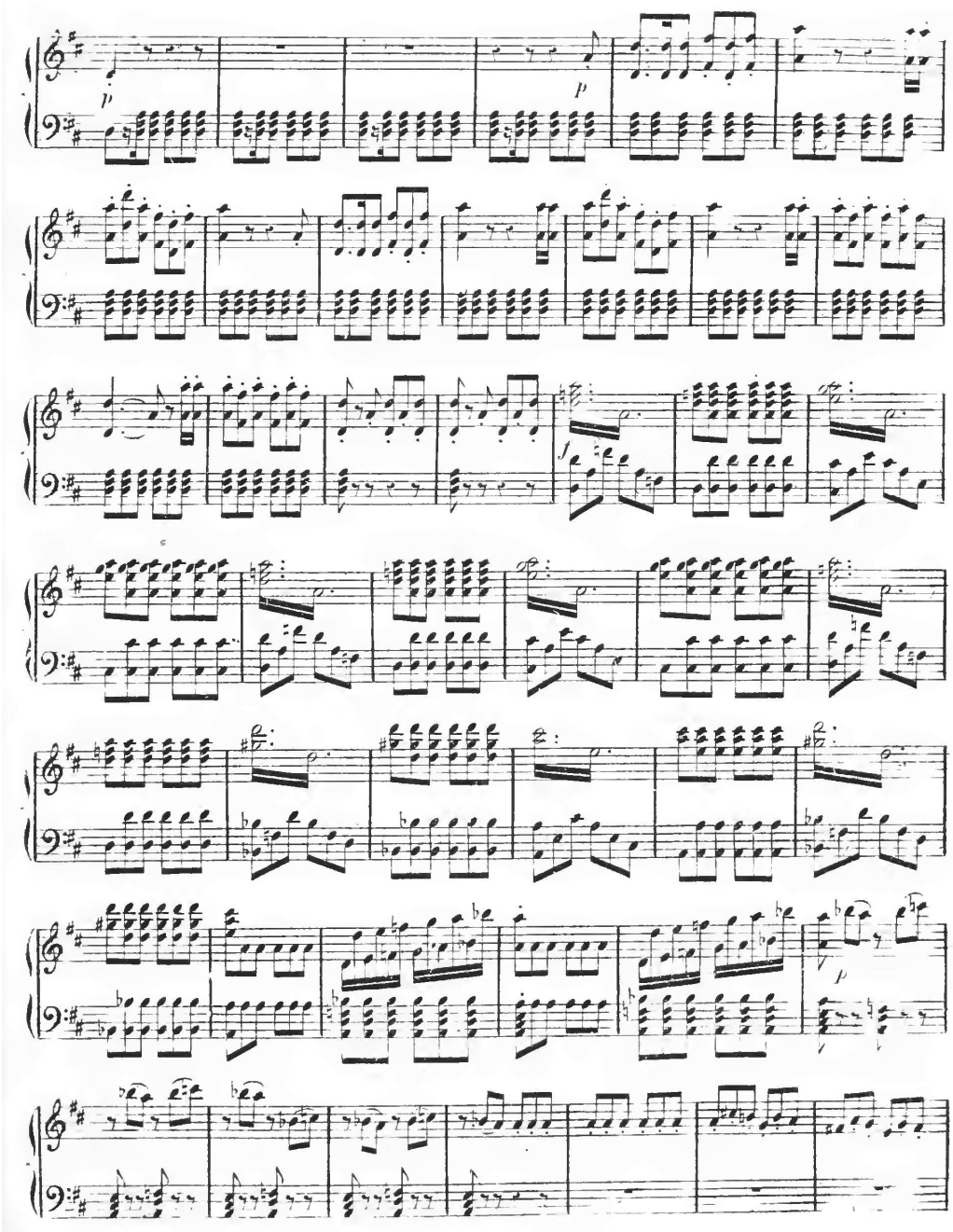
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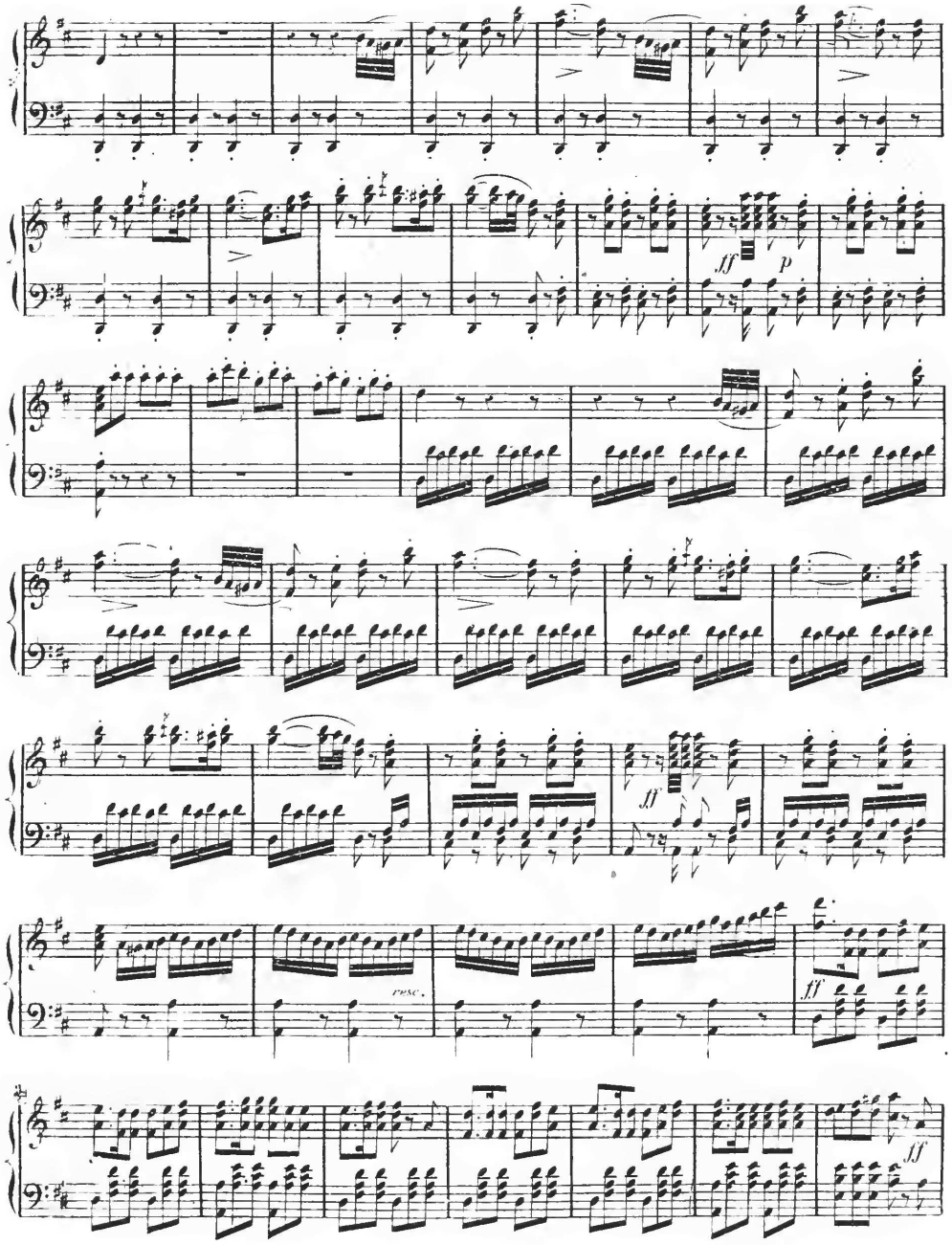
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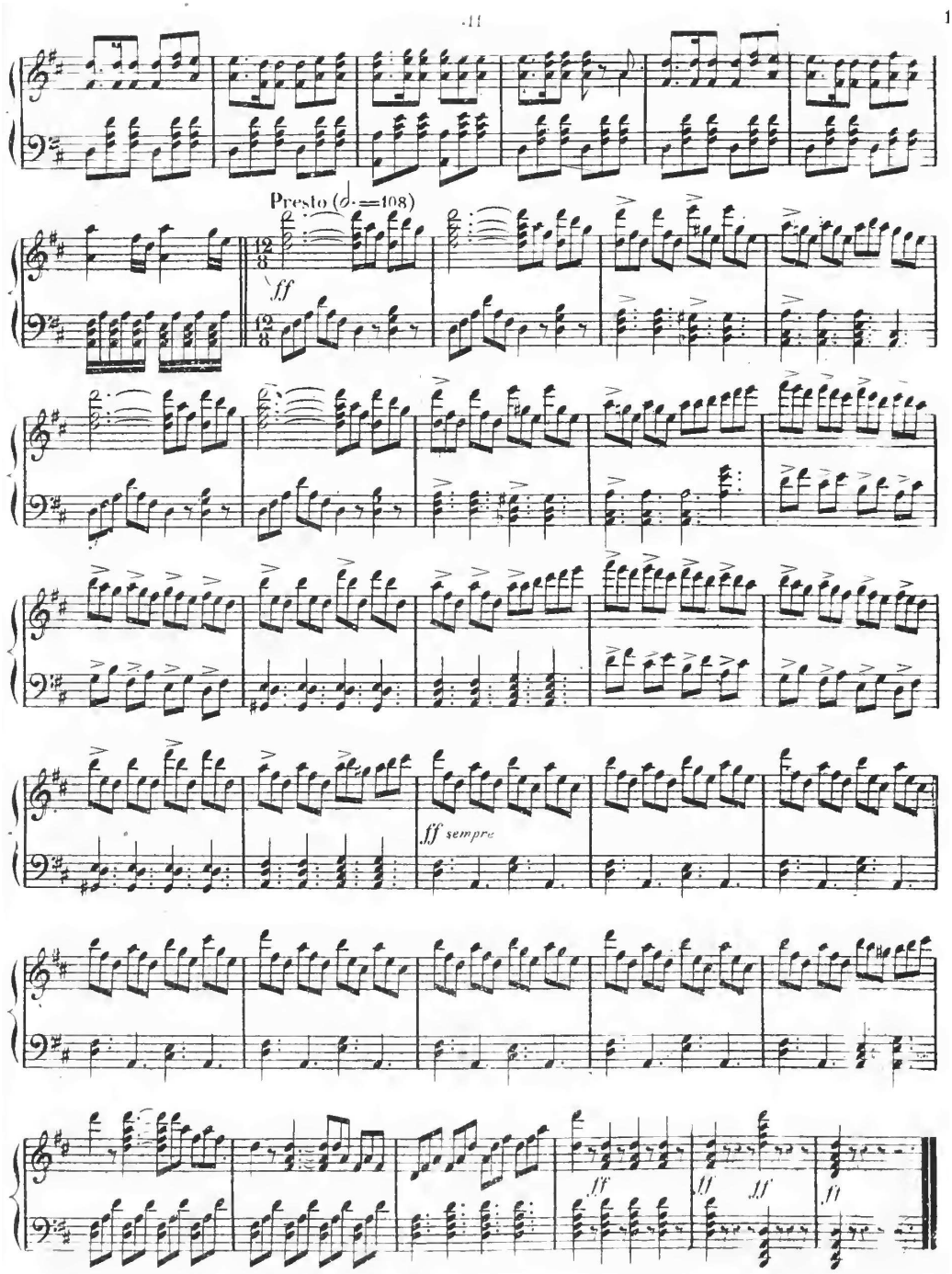
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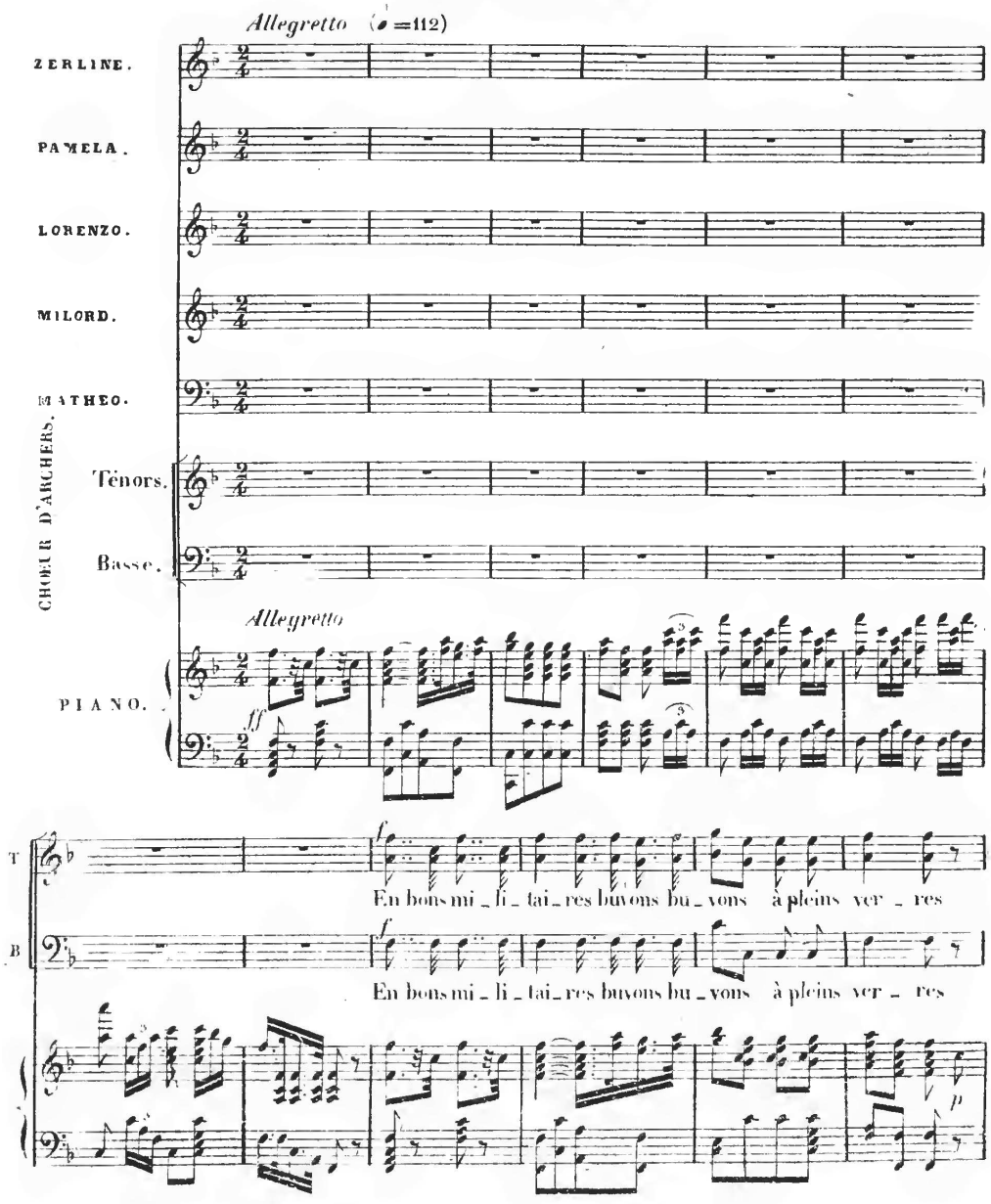
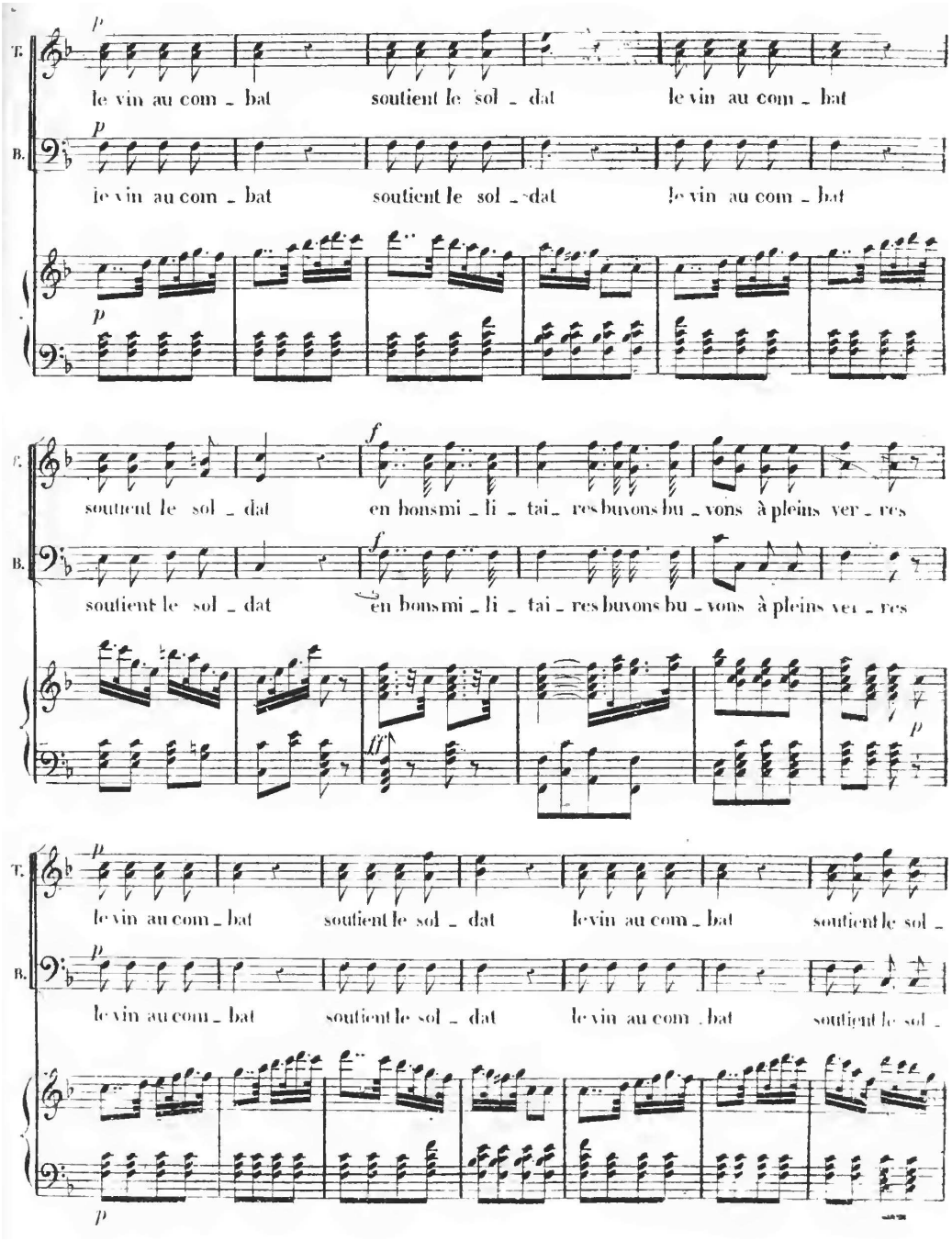
INTRODUCTION.

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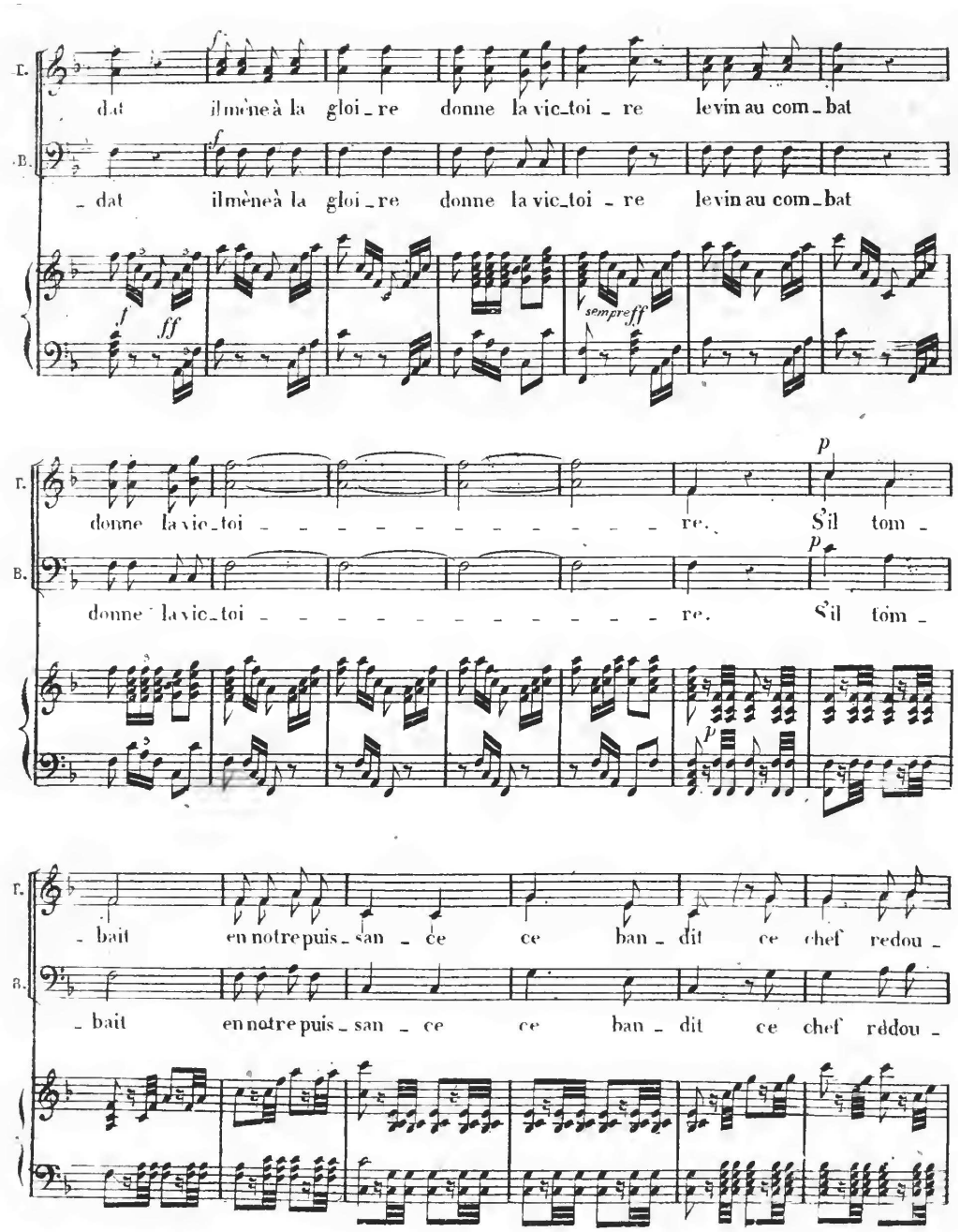
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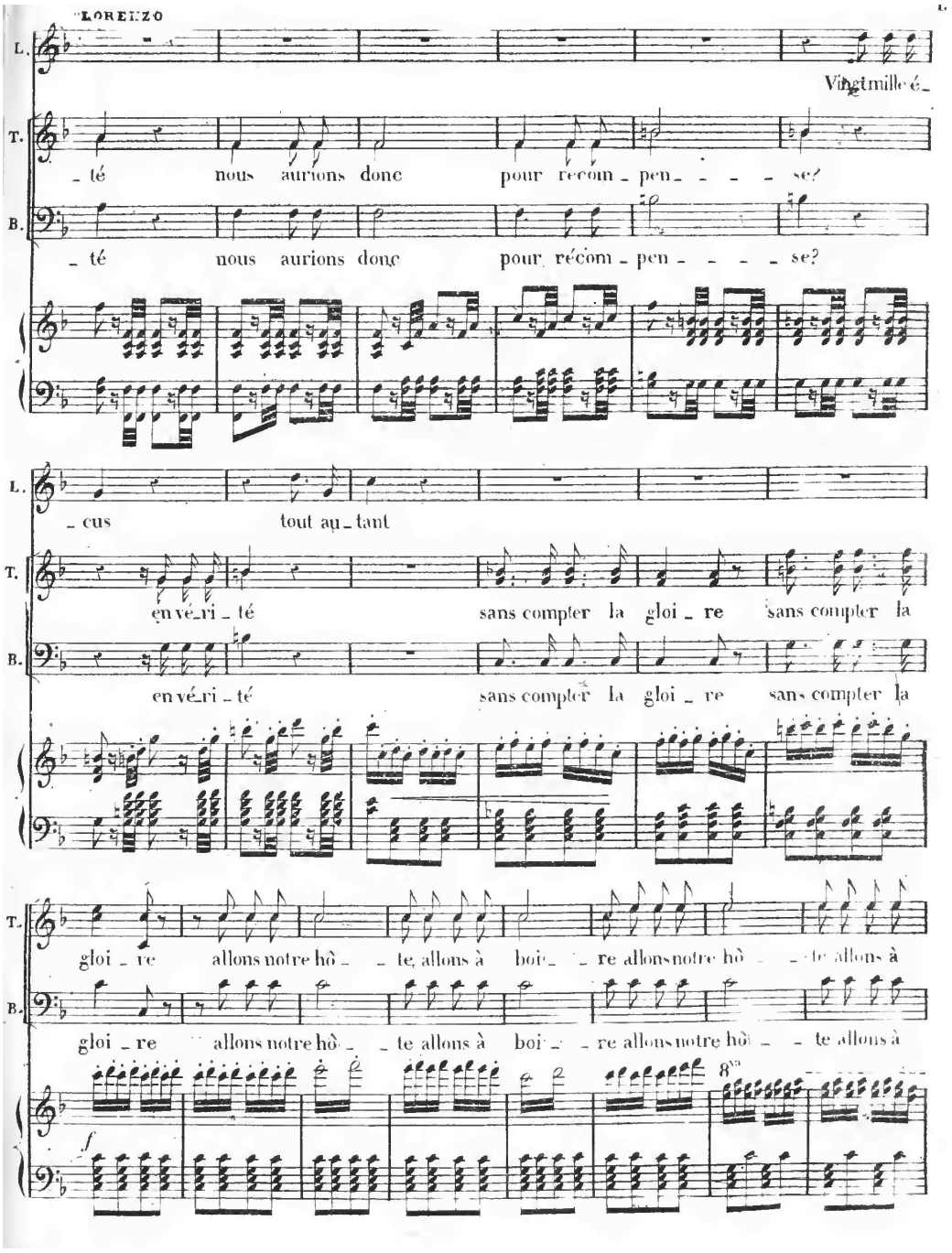
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