Daniel-François-Esprit Auber:
Le Lac des fées

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Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier

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D.F.E. Auber (c. 1850). Contemporary engraving of an ink drawing

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INTRODUCTION

Le Lac des fées, an *opéra* in five acts, with libretto by Eugène Scribe and Mélesville (Anne-Honoré-Joseph Duveyrier), was premiered at the Académie nationale de musique (Salle de la rue Le Peletier) on 1 April 1839.

The story is derived from the tale "Der geraubte Schleier" from Johann Karl August Musäus's *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (1782-86). Musäus's collection of fairy tales was also the basis of Wenzel Reisinger's scenario for Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake* (*Lebedinoje osero*, 1877).

The opera is set in the Harz Mountains and Cologne, in the fifteenth century. Albert, a young student, has fallen in love with a fairy, Zélia: she has been forced to live on earth because Albert has stolen her veil. Albert borrows 30 thalers from the Jew Issachar, and pawns his freedom in order to settle his debt to Marguerite, his betrothed, since he wants to live with Zélia from now on. The lord of the castle, Rodolphe, has also fallen in love with Zélia and therefore buys the bond from Issachar. On the date of its maturity, Albert cannot repay the debt, so that Rodolphe is able to draw Albert (and Zélia by implication) into his power. In order to save Albert's life, Zélia promises to marry Rodolphe. At the last moment, however, she regains her veil from Marguerite, and disappears to her fairy sisters. To welcome her back, the Fairy Queen allows Zélia a wish: but she chooses to renounce immortality, and returns to Albert on the earth.

The closing transformation scene (Zélia's return to earth) is described in detail in the scene directions, and demands great technical skill and resources: "...we see her passing through the clouds, which, tinted variously by the rays of the sun, continually change; finally...we see the earth appear, first the tops of the mountains, then the buildings, the towns, the rivers, the prairies, the house, then the room that Albert inhabited in the third act. Albert, alone in his room and weighed down with despair, is about to kill himself—He raises his eyes and sees Zélia who is coming down on a cloud towards him, holding out her arms. He runs to her, and the curtain falls."

Despite its five acts, the opera is not overtly concerned with the great historical themes usually associated with *grand-opéra*, but exemplifies Scribe's third type of opera libretto (after *opéra-comique* and *grand-opéra*), derived from exotic or legendary material. However, the literary source is remarkable for its depiction of the rebellion of the people and students against the feudal lord Rodolphe—themes that have a strong affinity with the historical and political concerns of Auber's earlier *grands-opéras, La Muette de Portici* and *Gustave III*. This thematic affinity is also evident in the musical aspects of the work.

Scribe combined the sentimental expectations of contemporary taste and the venerable Baroque operatic tradition of *le merveilleux* with consummate theatrical acumen. Much time in *Le Lac des fées* is taken in elaborating the central depiction of popular festivity. Indeed, the requirements of *grand-opéra* are realized with an original twist in the big act 3 depiction of the medieval Epiphany celebrations, with its attempt at recreating the variety of genre and mood. There is a detailed description of the procession through the streets of Cologne, organized by the medieval guilds, each preceded by its own standard, with choruses. It unfolds in several movements:—the chorus of students "Vive la jeunesse", the *Fête des Rois* with its *Chant de Noël*, the

whole culminating in a big ballet sequence of four dances: 1) Valse des Étudiants, 2) Pas de Bacchus et Erigone, 3) Styrienne, and 4) Bacchanale.

The composer handled this legendary and supernatural subject with a certain poetic grace and dramatic inspiration. The G-major overture captures the essence of the work. Its incisive opening focuses on Albert and his words to Zélia during the act 3 *Fête des rois*, extolling her beauty above royal pretension ("C'est le sort qui seul to donne sceptre d'or...par la beauté tu regnerais encor"). It leads into the strutting dotted rhythms that refer to Rodolphe and his search for power, taken from the act 4 quartet.

A transition for solo flute leads into the undulating and mystical C major music of Zélia's supernatural nature, smooth and lyrical as compared with the brusque and jerky human music just heard—the melody arching over the arpeggios and floating on a pedal point of C for 18 bars. This becomes a Leitmotif of the Fairies, and recurs whenever the crisis over Zélia's nature is in question, especially in act 5. It flows immediately into the E-flat major music of the fairy apotheosis at the end of the opera—a serene melody moving in small intervals soaring in octaves over upward rippling harp figures, extended for some 20 bars. The melody will recur in huge chords in the finale, and in the closing moments of the opera. It is also germane to the central conflict of the overture which erupts in a fraught G minor episode, a sequence of demisemiquaver turns resting on long notes over a restless bassline. This motif opens the act 2 finale, where it accompanies Marguerite's anguished outburst, and becomes a cypher for human pain, something that becomes clearer when it recurs in act 5 where Zélia is confronted with the choice of detached immortality or the vibrant but painful human condition.

The choice is dramatized in the proem by the second subject, a D-major rhythmically transformed variant of the fairy apotheosis, with fleeting references to Albert's skipping praise of Zélia's beauty. This development is unfolded at length, as Zélia's existential dilemma. It is resolved in the return to the home key of G in the *Allegro* conclusion: the *alle breve* sprung music of Zélia's decision to give up her fairy nature for the sake of love ("Que Dieu daigne m'entendre qu'il t'élève à moi, ou me laisse descendre mon bien aimé vers toi").

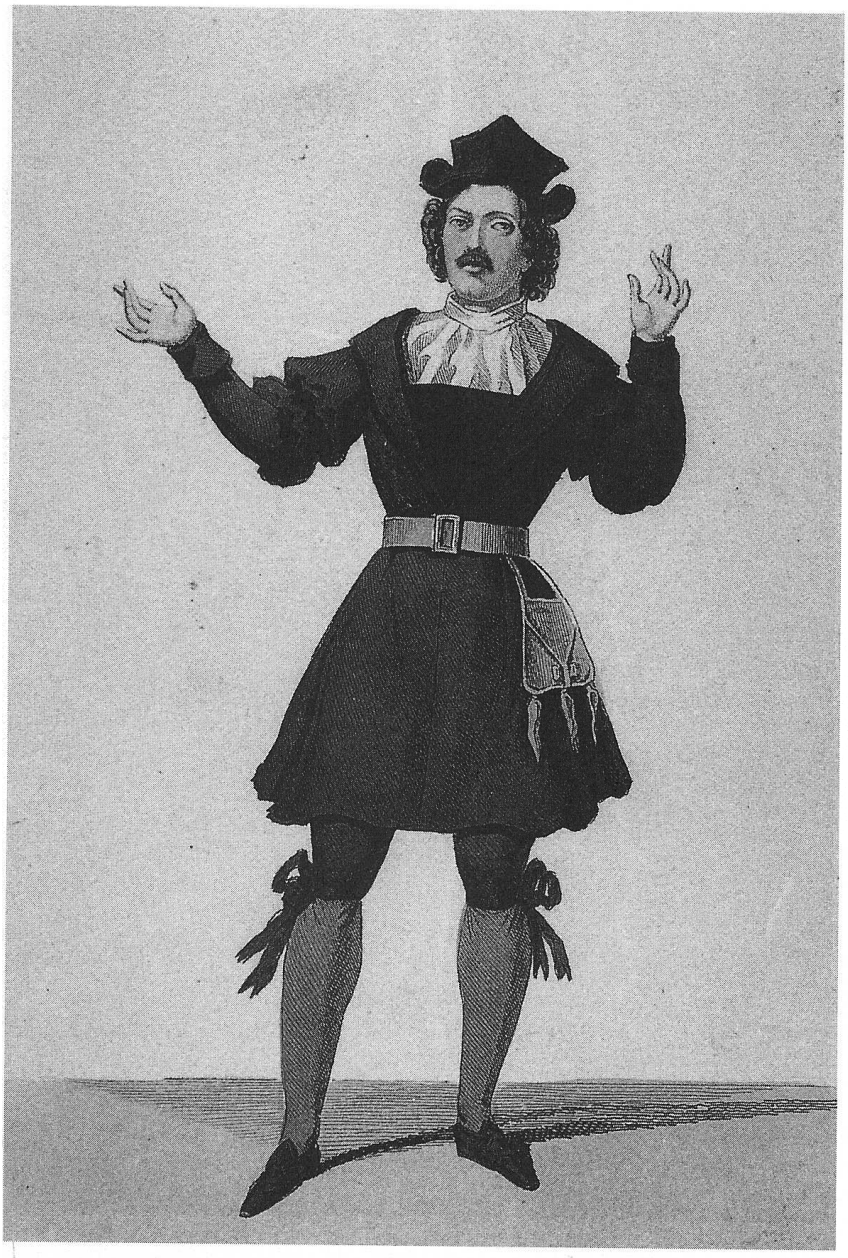
The dramatic highpoints of the score provide impressive examples of Auber's art. Remarkable pieces include: the overture, the cavatina for Albert "Gentille fée"; Rodolphe's *grand air* "Avec addresse" with its striking use of syncopation (reminiscent of Hérold); the Scene of the Fairies, Zélia's scene of despair in act 1 ("Mes soeurs, attendez-moi!...Je tremble, je frissonne") and her *complaint* "C'est est donc fait"; the extensive duet for Zélia and Albert in act 3 ("Asile modeste et tranquille"), and Albert's mad scene in act 4 ("C'est moi, c'est moi, qui l'ai frappée...Quand viendra la déesse"). Of special note are the graceful and effective fairy choruses (partially offstage, and accompanied by the mélophone, a type of harmonium, invented in 1831, and resembling a guitar, with knobs on the haft functioning as a keyboard). There is also a very Romantic sense of tonal painting, with the moonlit serenity of the fairy lake conveyed in mellifluous orchestral detail.

Richard Wagner arrived in Paris 1839, and perhaps saw one of the last of the stagings. The influence of the final transformation scene must have affected him deeply—both as stagecraft and music. The many transformation scenes in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *Parsifal* are based on this dramaturgy: the Entry of the Gods into Valhalla in *Das Rheingold*, and the music of the Rainbow Bridge owe much to the final scene of *Le Lac des fées*. Further, the Feast of the Magi in act 3 provided the model for the great procession of the guilds and townspeople to the Meadow of Song in the last scene of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. This too culminates in a ballet

sequence: the Dance of the Apprentices (cf. Auber's Valse des Étudiants).

The original cast were: Gilbert Duprez (Albert); Mlle Maria-Dolorès-Bénédicta-Joséphine Nau (Zélia); Nicholas-Prosper Levasseur (Rodolphe); Louis-Émile Wartel (Issachar); Ferdinand Prévôt and Alexis Dupont (Fritz and Conrad, students); Molinier (Pikler, a vagrant); Rosine Stoltz (Marguerite, an innkeeper); and Mlle Elian Barthélémy (Edda and a young herdsman).

Despite the cast of exceptional quality, *Le Lac* was not a success in Paris, where it was performed 30 times, with no reprise On the other hand, the German version of the work enjoyed great popularity; there is a discernible resemblance in this work, both of subject and form, to German Romantic opera (for example Hoffmann's *Undine* 1816, Marschner's *Hans Heiling* 1833, Wagner's *Die Feen* 1833/1888). The work was also translated into English and Polish, and produced in a number of European countries and in New York between 1839 and 1847, with revivals in Karlsruhe and Stuttgart in 1865 and 1871.



Gilbert-Louis Duprez as Albrecht. Engraving by Hautecourt-Martinet

LE

LAC

DES

FÉES,

Opéra en cinq actes,

Paroles de M.r

E. Scribe,

Musique de

D. F. E. AUBER,

DE L'INSTITUT.

PARTITION PIANO *ET CHANT*

A.V

PARIS,

G. BRANDUS, DUFOUR et C.ie, editeurs,

103, Rue Richelieu.

LE LAC DES FÉES.

PERSONNAGES.

DESSUS.	TÉNORS	BASSES.
ZÉILA.	ALBERT.	RODOLPHE.
MARGUERITE.	ISSACHAR.	FRITZ
EDDA.	CONRAD.	PICKLER.

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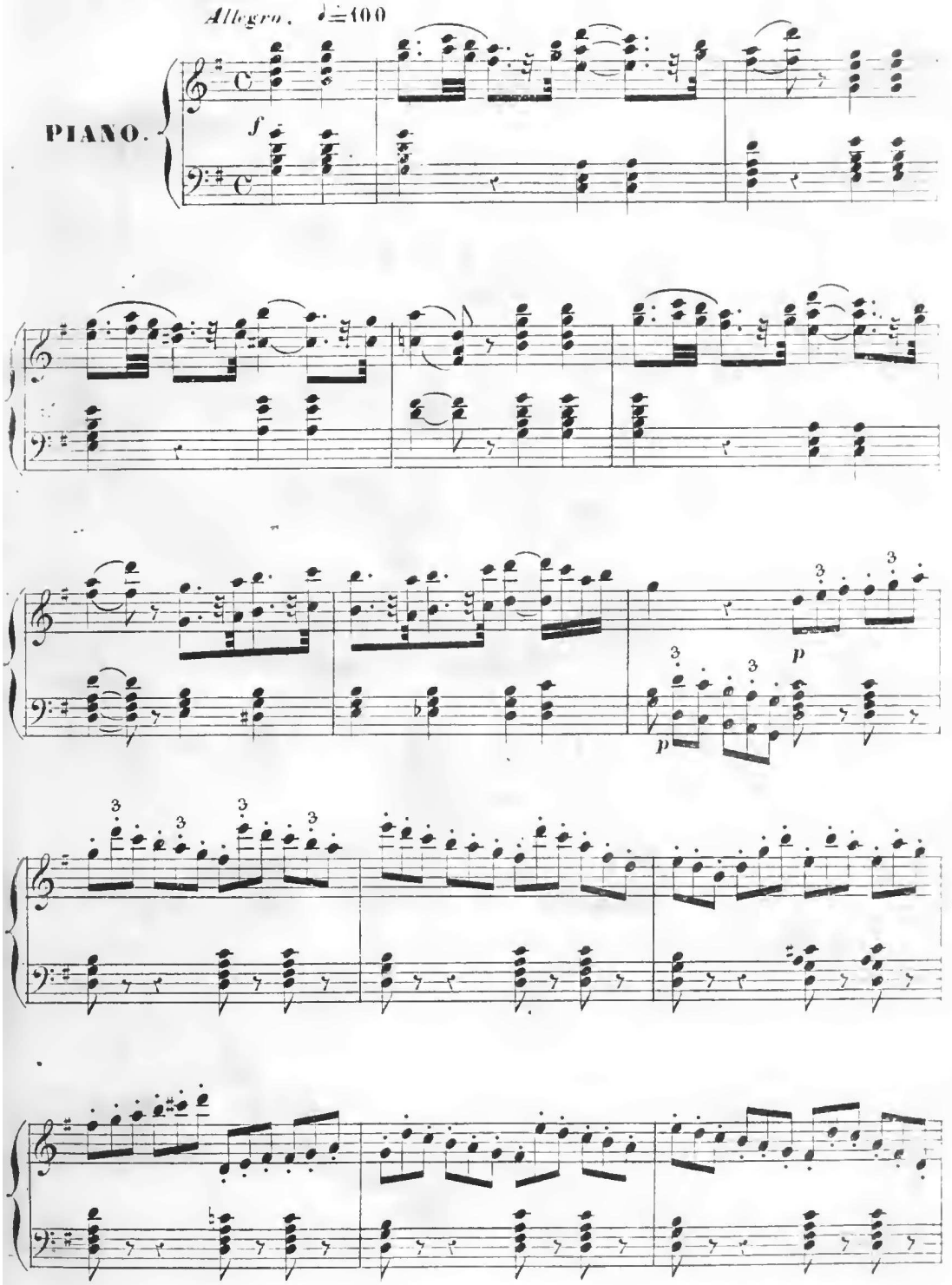
LE LAC DES FÉES,

MUSIQUE DE D. F. E. AUBER.

OUVERTURE.



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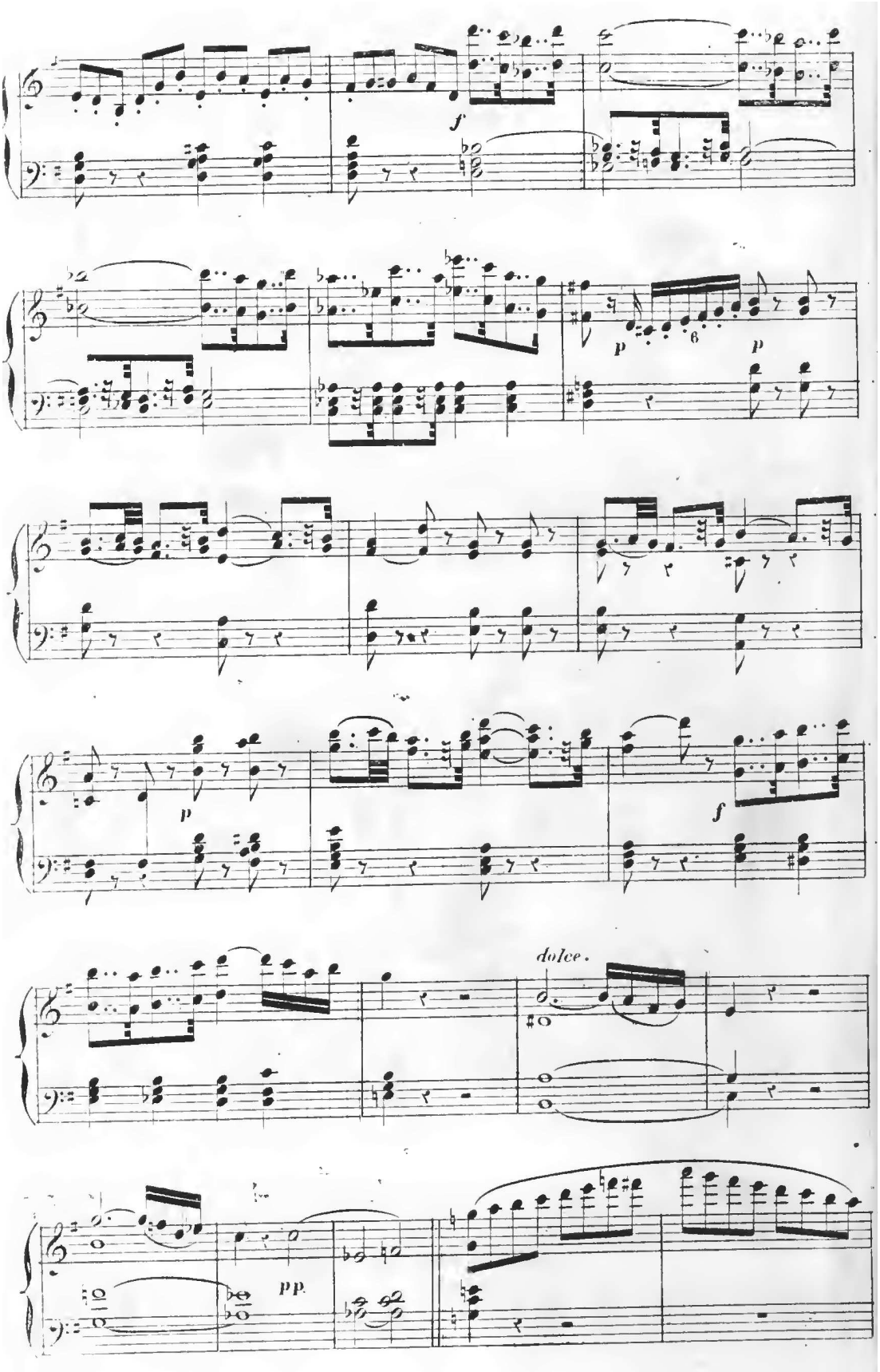
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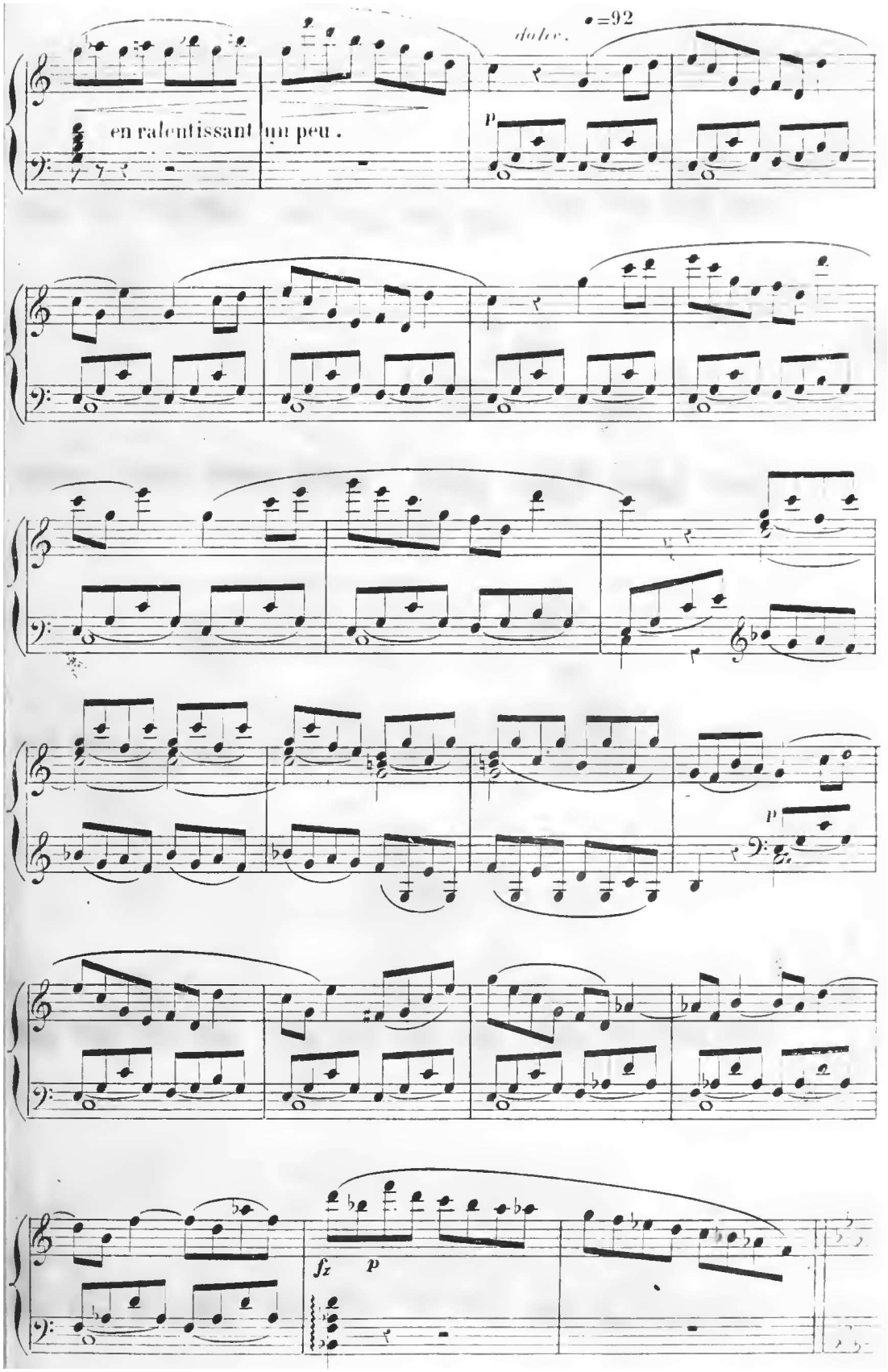
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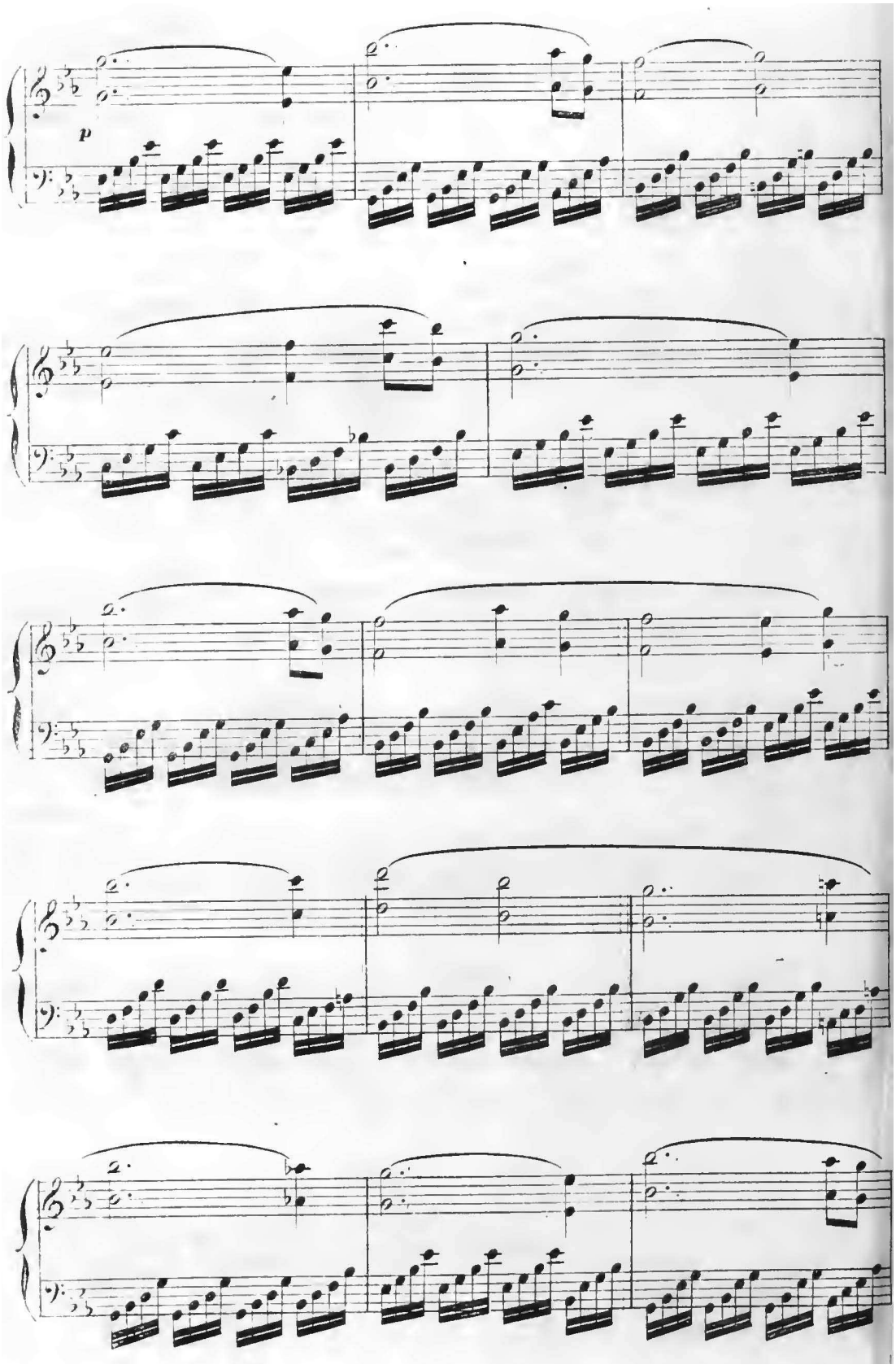
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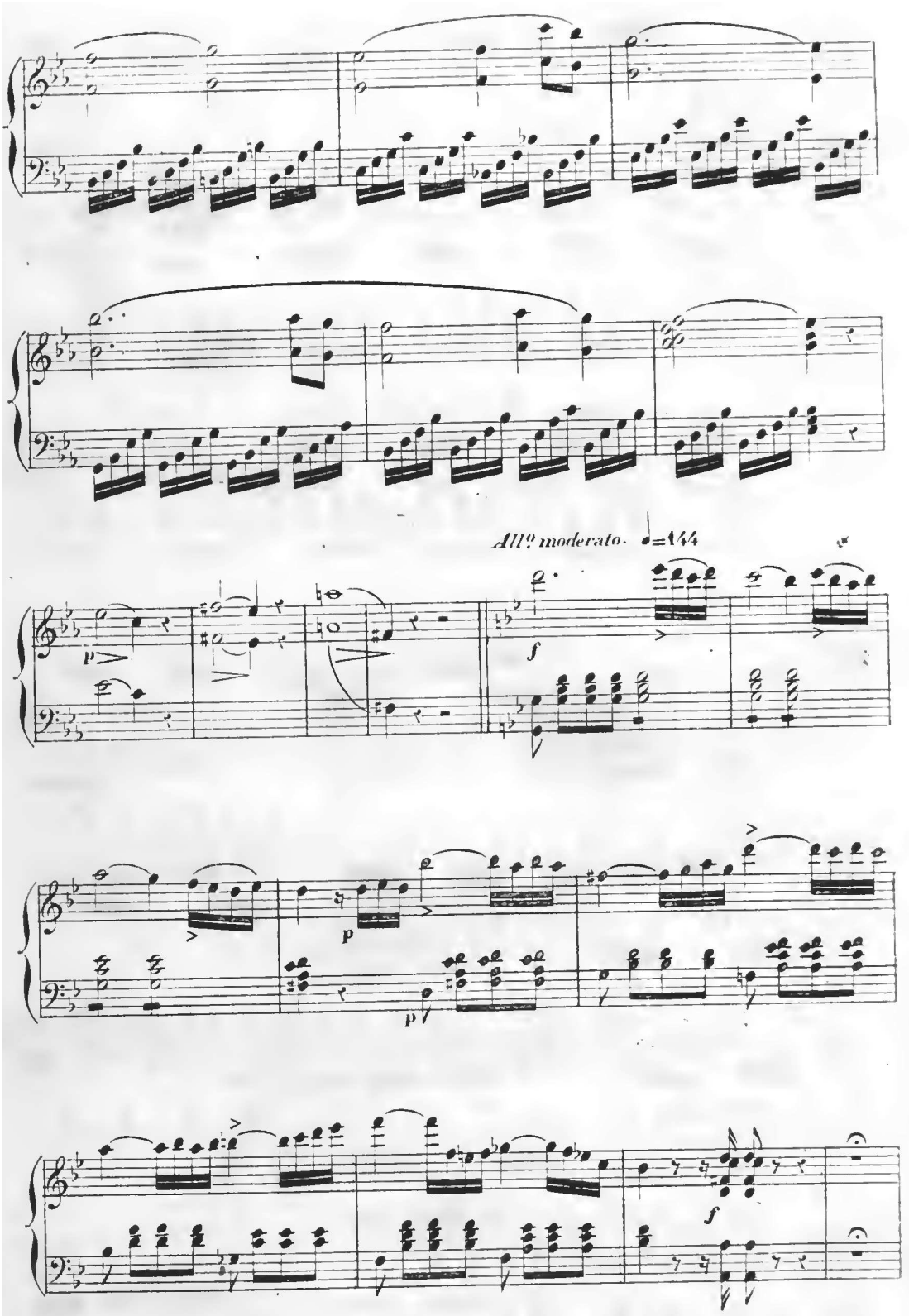
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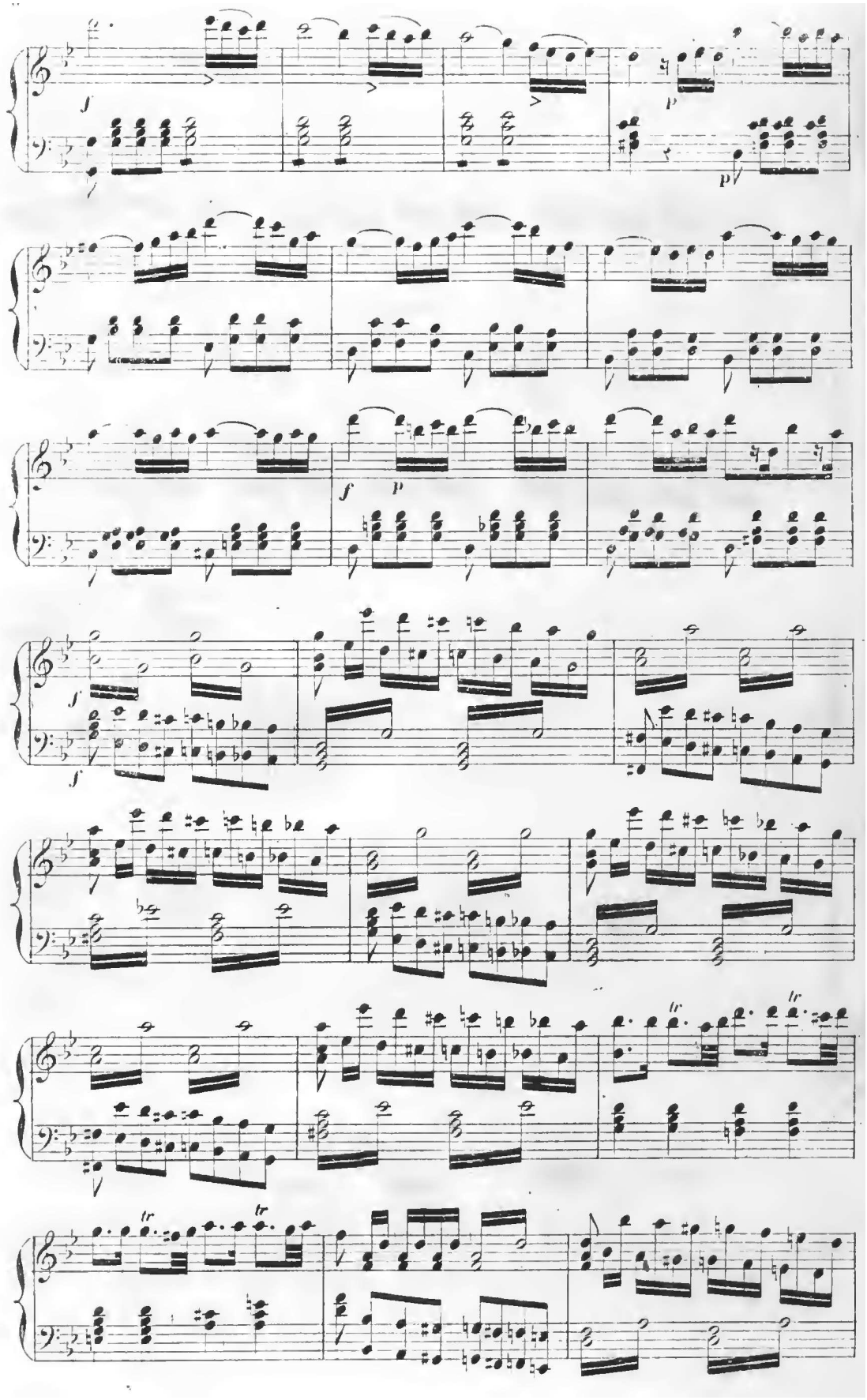
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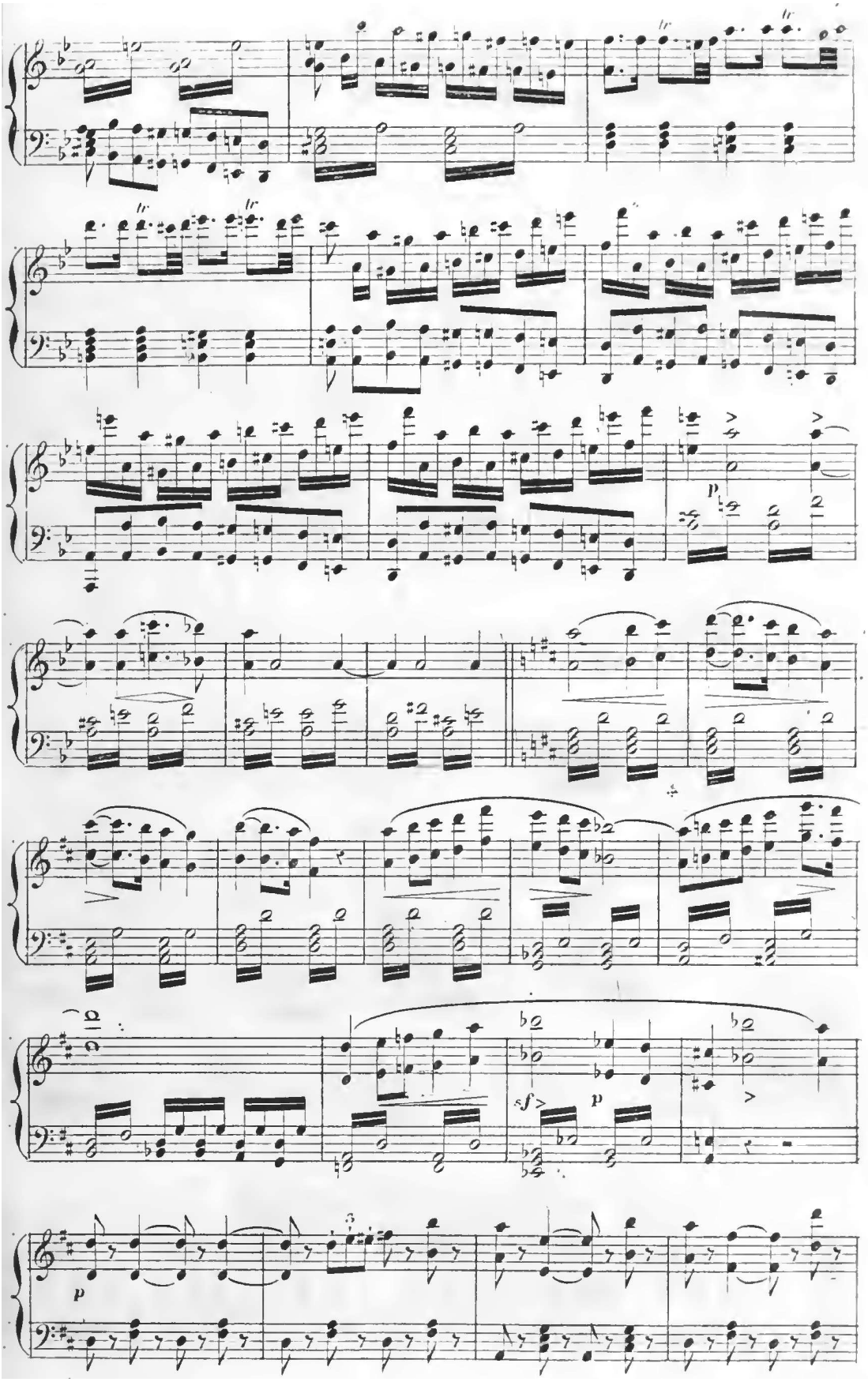
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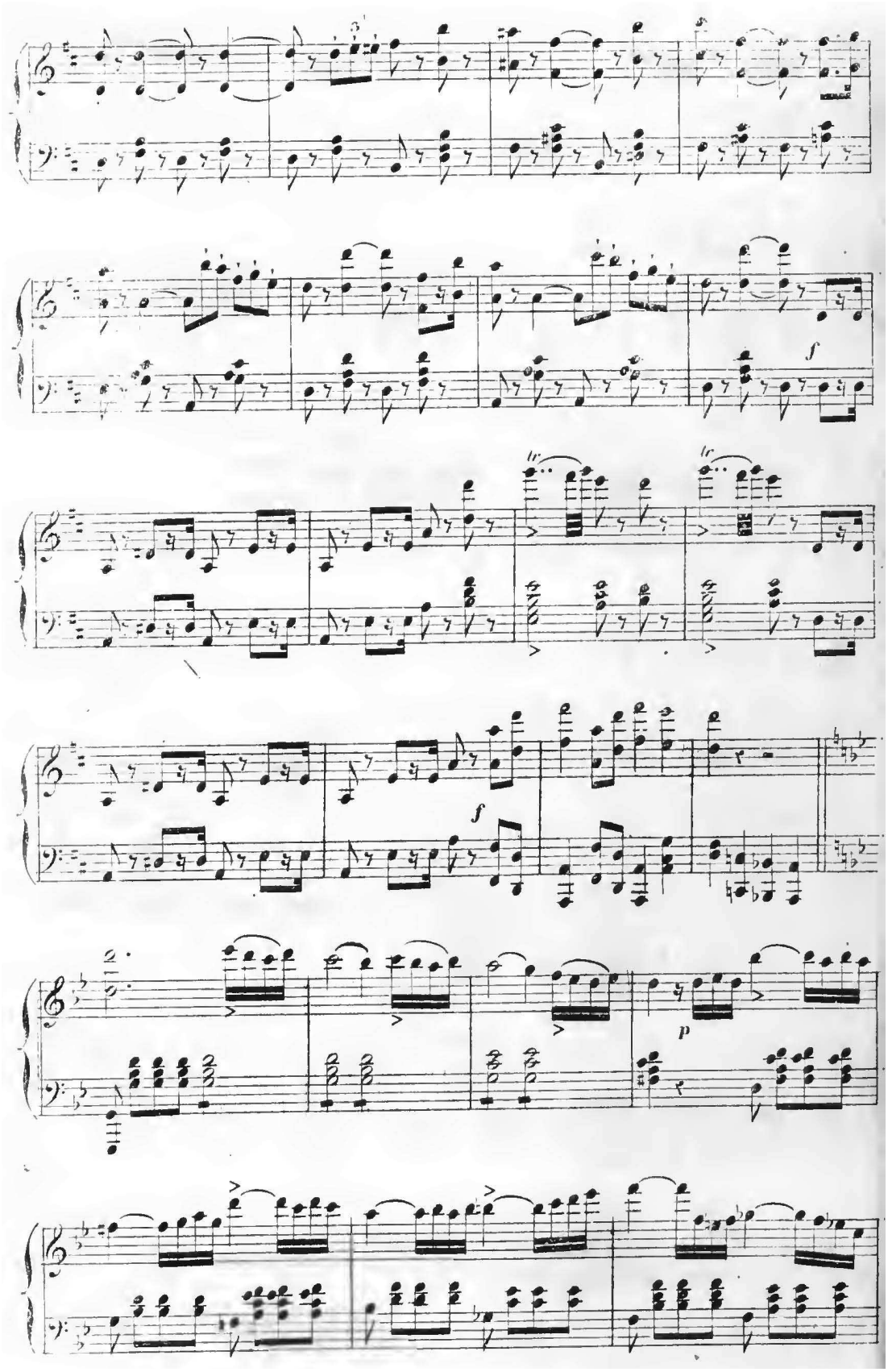
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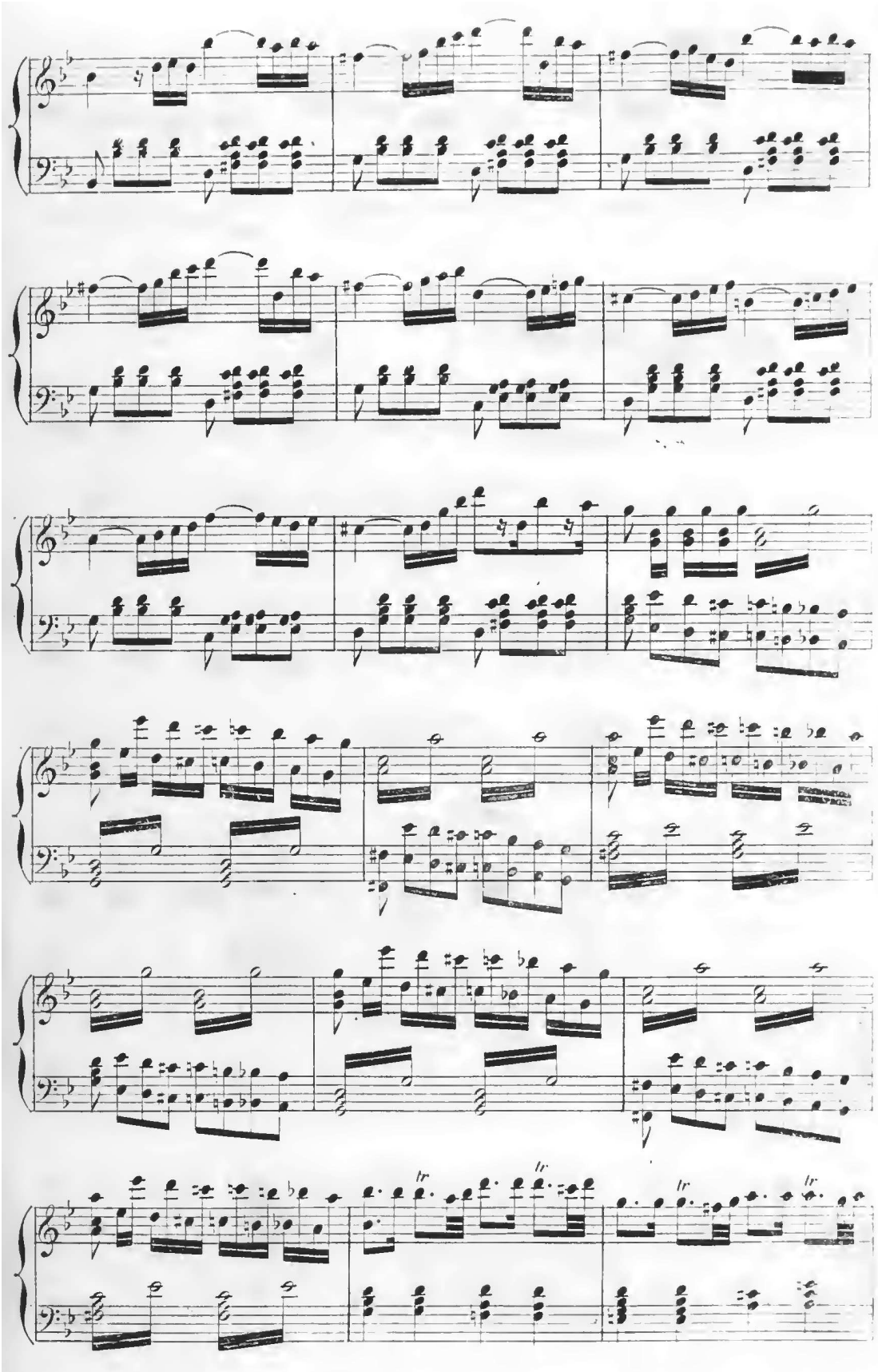

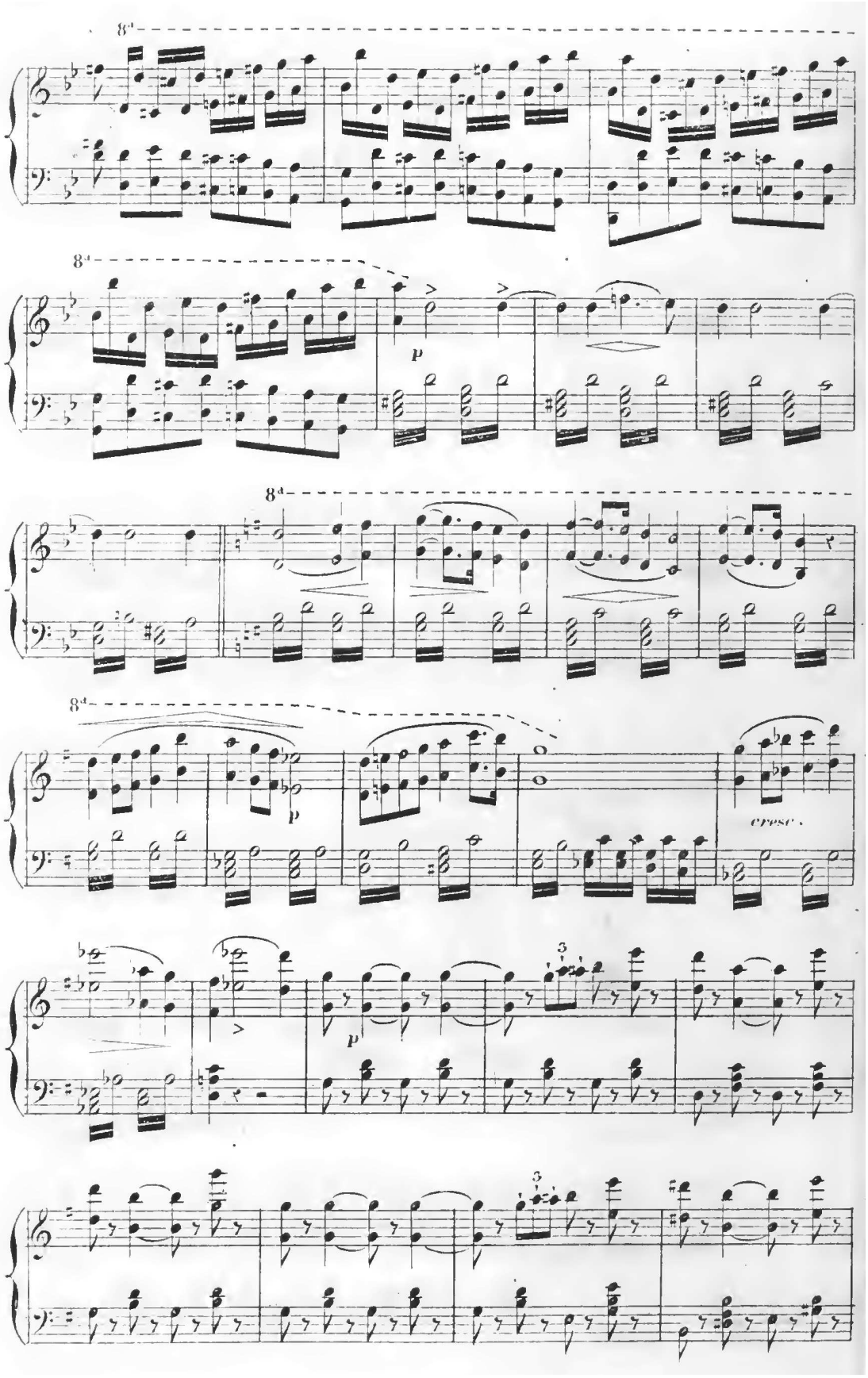
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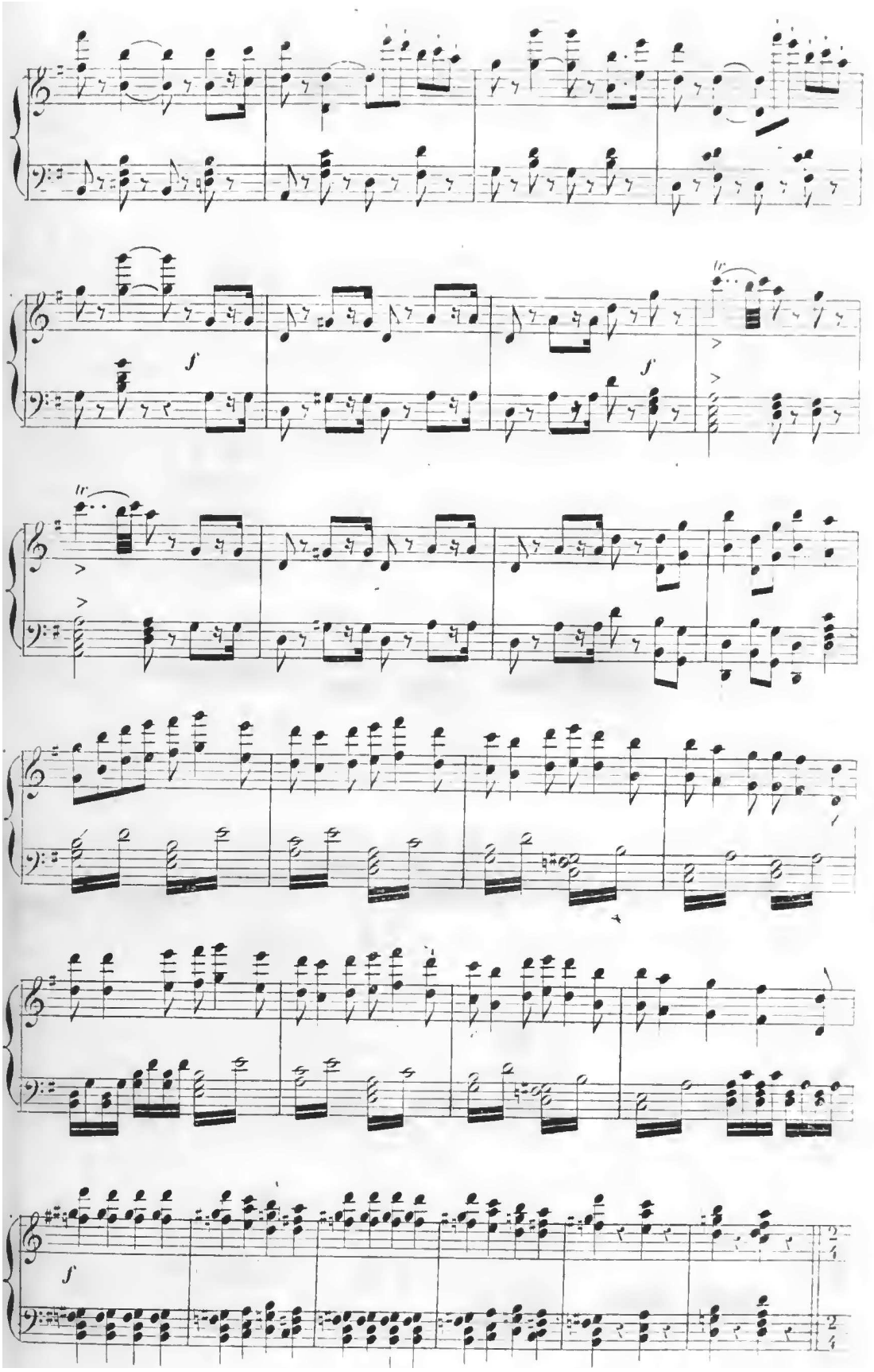
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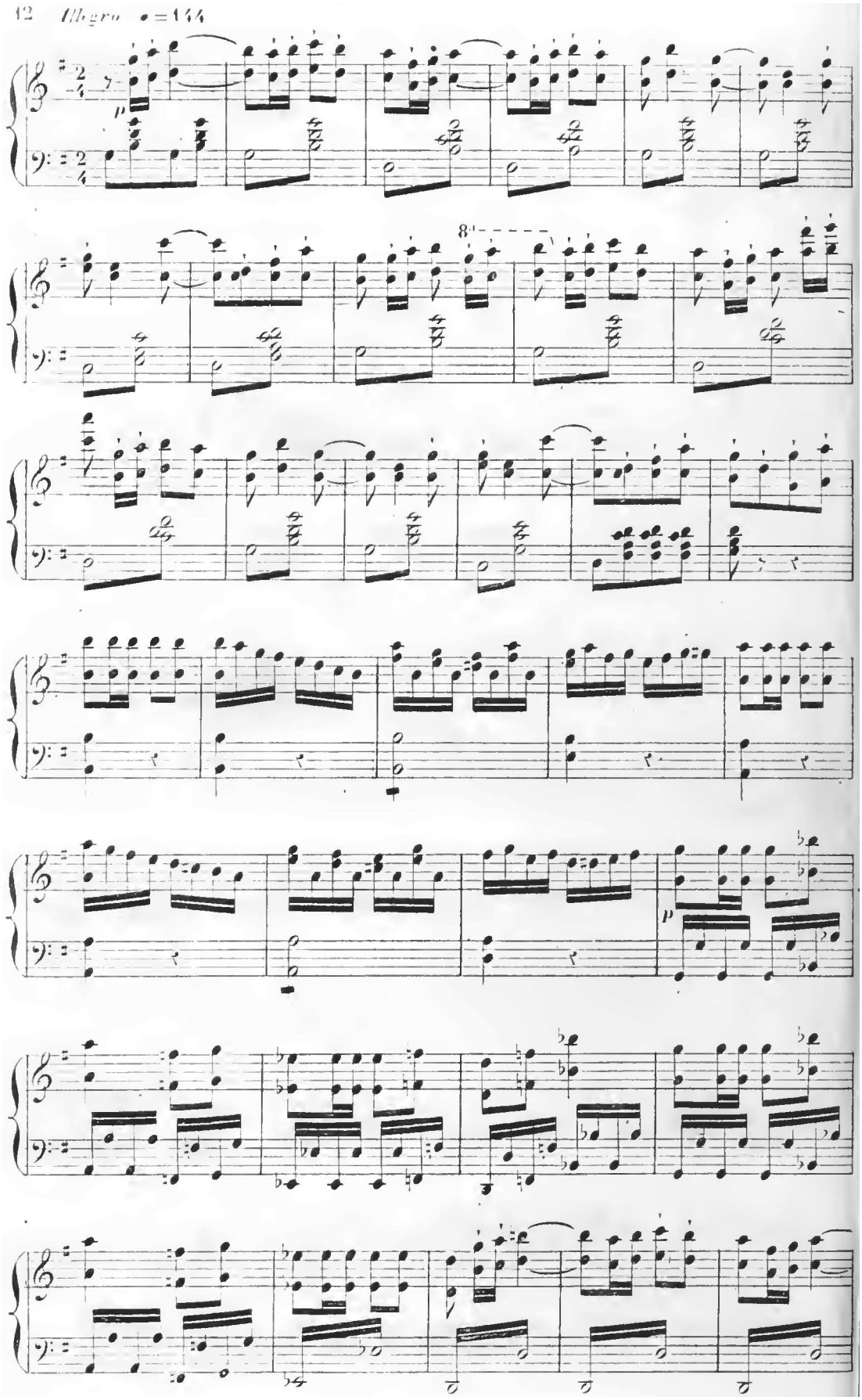
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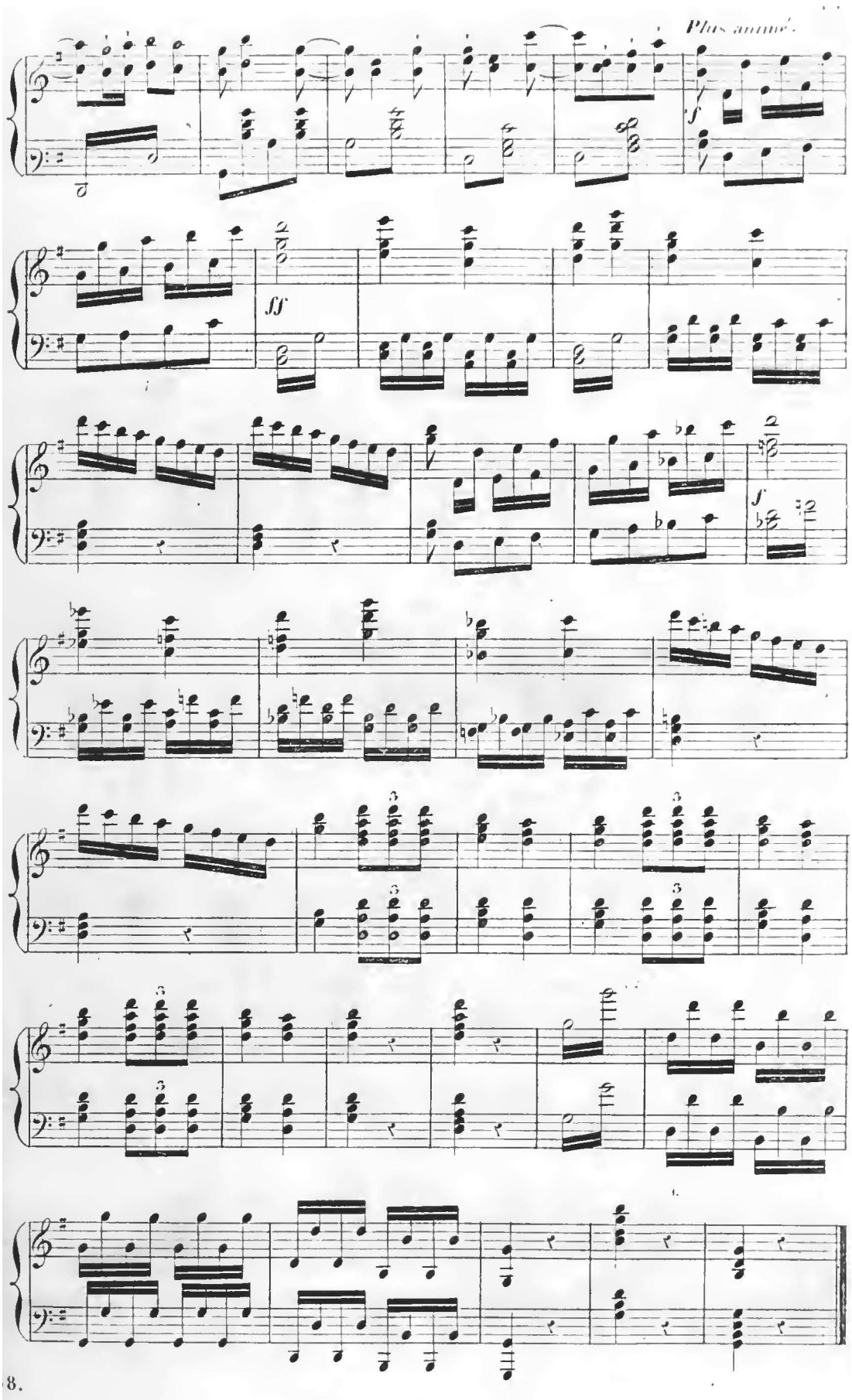
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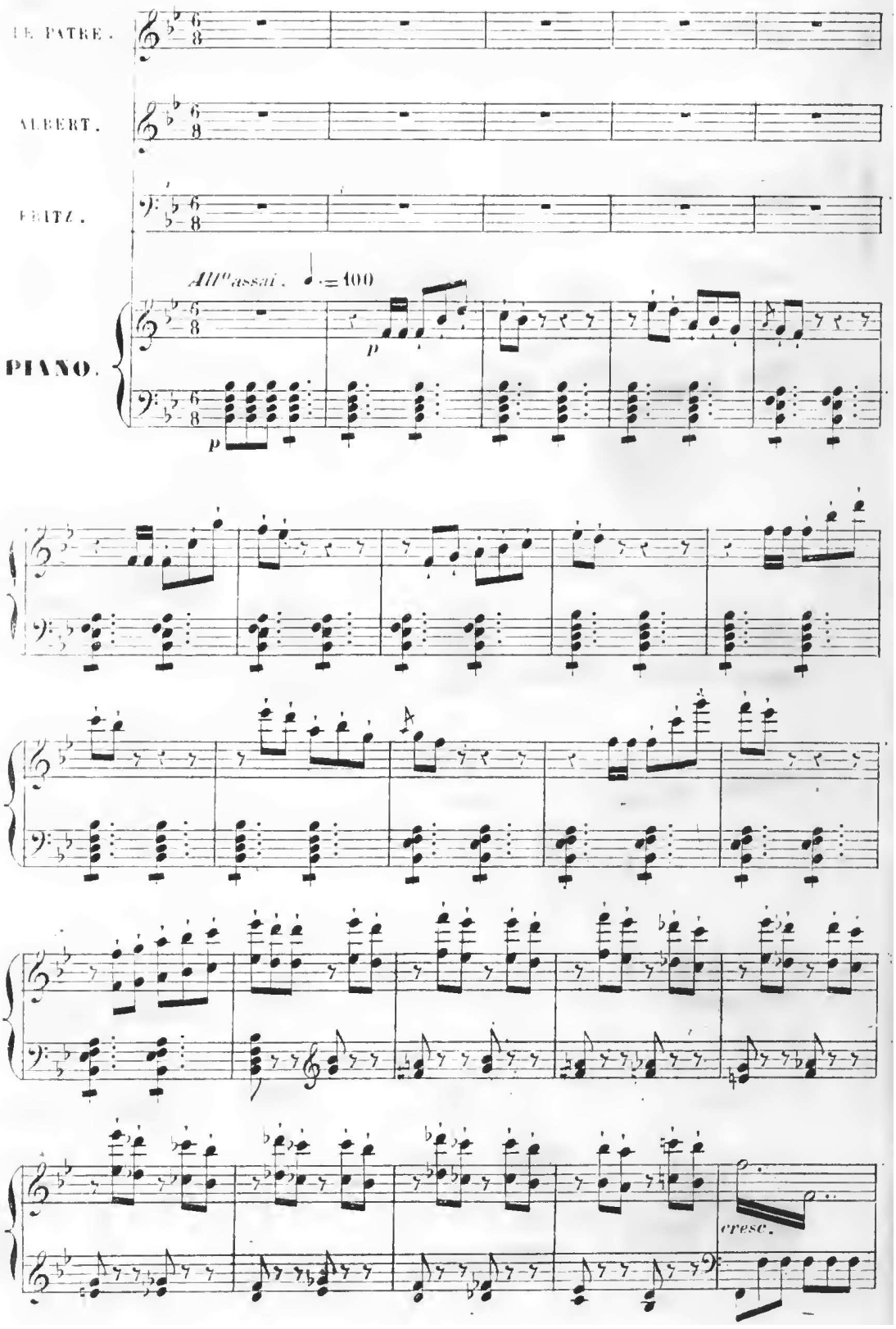

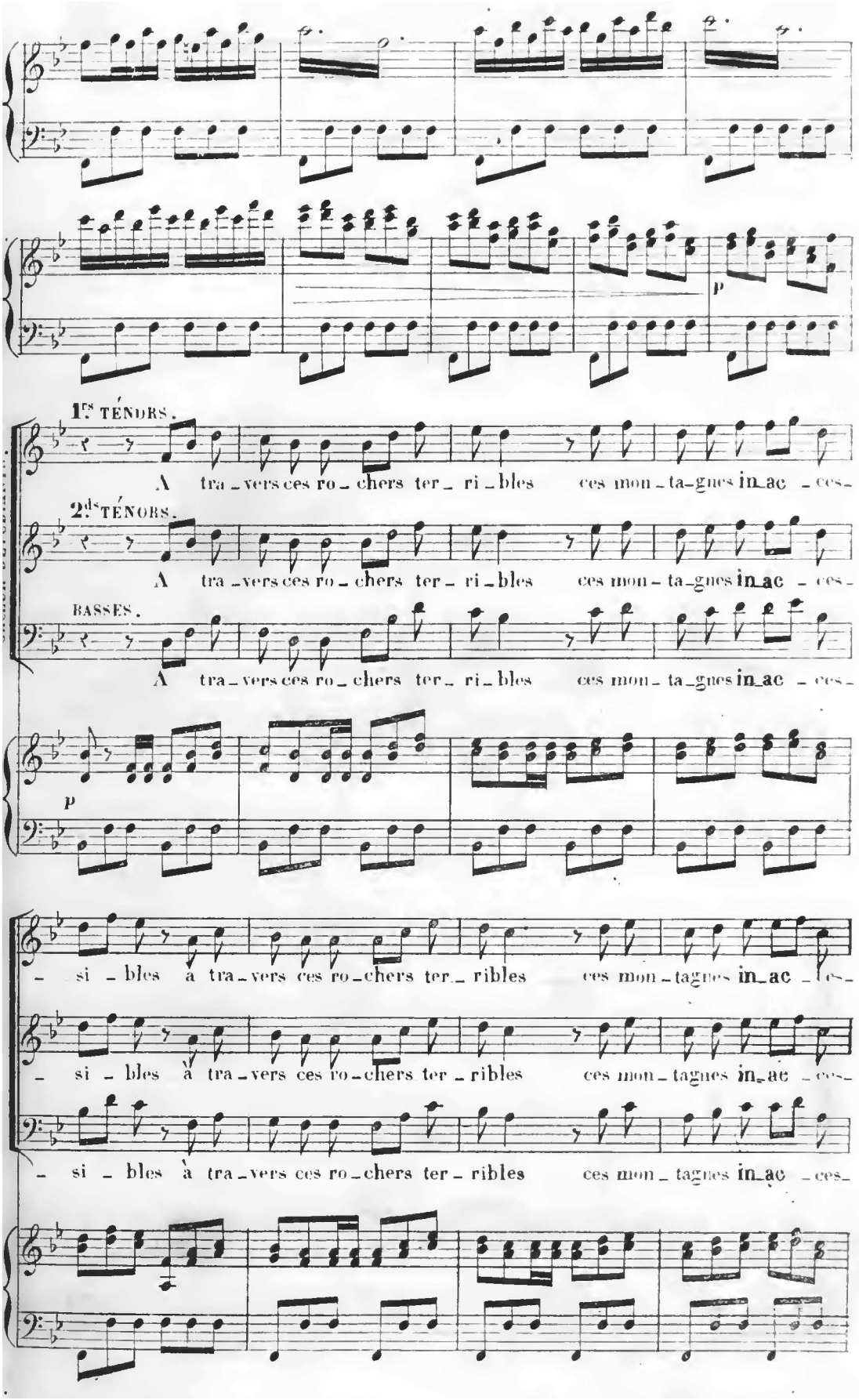
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