Daniel-François-Esprit Auber:
Zerline

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Zerline

Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier

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D.F.E. Auber. Stipple drawing (c. 1850)

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INTRODUCTION

Zerline, an opera in three acts with libretto by Eugène Scribe, was first performed at the Académie nationale de musique (Salle de la rue Le Peletier) on 16th May 1851.

The scene is set in Palermo, during the Restoration. The Prince of Roccanera, married to the sister of the King, has a supposed niece, Gemma. She is really his daughter by Zerline, an orange-seller. The latter was abducted by pirates, and having returned to Palermo after many trials, now meets her daughter, assuming the role of her aunt. She learns that Gemma loves a young naval officer, Rodolphe, but that the Prince's wife wishes Gemma to marry the King's cousin, much against the girl's wishes.

In the third act, Zerline, already alerted to an intrigue compromising to the two young lovers, is able to safeguard their integrity and bring about their union. During a ball she intercepts a basket of oranges (which plays the role usually reserved for flowers in declarations of love), and hands over this basket to her pretended niece, with the words: "Je sais tout", so circumventing their elopement, and facilitating the public union of Gemma with her young officer.

The action is better suited to a vaudeville than an opera, and the scenario has little innate interest. The role of Zerline was written especially for the famous contralto Marietta Alboni (1823-94), the first role she created. Scribe, having just devised with Meyerbeer the great maternal role of Fidès in *Le Prophète* (1849) for Pauline Viardot-Garcia, seized the opportunity for another variation on the theme of maternal love.

The B-flat major overture immediately establishes the family nature of the drama, with its parable of past sins, social disparity and all-conquering maternal love. It opens with the displaced love duet for Zerline and her Roccanera, her child's natural father, and the memory of their love in the past. It moves through the fussy pointed demisemiquaver figures associated with Zerline, before reaching the central mystery of Zerline's anonymity in the melody of the beloved child, Gemma ("Toi, dont je n'ose dire, hélas, le nom"), from her act 2 aria.

There is allusion to the Sicilian setting in the two opening choruses of act 1 which are dominated by barcarolle rhythms in establishing the *couleur locale*. Alboni's magnificent talent added great value to the light music written by Auber for this slight canvas. The work consequently contains many pieces of a purely virtuoso nature. Among them are the *grand air d'entrée* "Ô Palerme! Ô Sicile!", the thematically central *canzonetta* "Achetez mes belles oranges", and the duet for soprano and contralto "Quel trouble en mon âme" in act 1. It is as though the Italian setting of the story and the Italian origins of the prima donna caused Auber to look to his early love for Rossini, and his enduring attachment to Italian musical forms and local colour (as in *Fiorella*, *La Muette de Portici*, *Fra Diavolo*, *Actéon*, *La Sirène*, *Zanetta* and *Haydée*).

The vocal part of Zerline is a conscious re-creation of the old Rossini mode, and her various solos are written in the style of the virtuoso contralto of the *opera seria*, obviously with a contemporary Gallic fleetness all Auber's own. The *Grand Air* demonstrates all the features: a portentous *ritornello*, the *andante* cavatina ("Ô Palerme! Ô Sicile!") almost a pastiche, with its dotted rhythms and hemidemisemiquaver *fioriture* on the final syllable of the declamatory first subject, the chugging arpeggios

of the accompaniment, and the cadenzas of the more lyrical second subject. The 2/4 *Allegretto* cabaletta ("Le ciel pur est plus sûr"), with its high clear introduction using the piccolos so typical of Auber, is entirely French in its sprung briskness, until the Rossinian embellishments of the conclusion.

This deliberate appropriation of the old conventions of *bel canto* is evident in the mother-daughter duet for Zerline and Gemma, with its extended decorative writing in thirds for soprano and contralto. The act 2 duet with Roccanera is written in the same vein, and requires an extremely flexible technique from the baritone. The bel canto style is crowned in the *air final* for soloist and chorus ("Victoire! Ah! quelle ivresse"): Zerline's elaborately decorated line and cadenzas, with the full ensemble simply providing rhythmic and harmonic contribution, is modelled along the lines of the rondo finale of *La Cenerentola* in its joyful celebration of restitution and right order.

Three duets mark the stages of Zerline's quest. The duet for Zerline and Roccanera is dramaturgically central, and contains the exquisite melody "Souviens-toi de nos beaux jours" which carries the emotional burden of the tale, and Zerline's search to make good the problems of the past. This is echoed by the theme of the orange vendor's *canzonetta* ("Achetez! Voici des oranges!"), which becomes a cypher for Zerline's love of Gemma and her disguise which is the medium of her saving acts of grace, and so appropriately features in the duet with her daughter. The third duet is Zerline's short encounter with Rodolphe in act 2 in which she probes his worthiness and motivation in loving Gemma.

In the rest of the work other striking pieces are the pretty trio "Qu'importent les obstacles", a harmonious ensemble "Bonne espérance et confiance", and at the beginning of act 3, a chorus ("Délices de la cour"), most originally imagined, with a highly piquant orchestral accompaniment. Act 3 is dominated by the great princely festivities featuring eight dance movements (No. 15 *Airs de Ballet* and No. 16 *Choeur (Valse)*), a pallid reminiscence of the great Masked Ball of 1832. Auber reused much of the ballet music from act 3 of *Le Lac des fées* in this elaborate semi-allegorical masque that uses a variety of forms and fuses various types of danced entertainment, from classical *pas de deux* and formal ball through national dance, vaudeville and children's routines to carnival. The eight movements are:

1) La Styrienne (*Le Lac des fées*)

2) Les Muses et les Grâces (Pas Bacchus et Erigone) (*Le Lac des fées*) [Adèle Plunkett and Monsieur Gray]

3) Pas Chinois (*Le Lac des fées*)

4) La Sentimentale et L'Enjouée [Adèle Plunkett and Lucien Petipa]

5) Le Bal d'enfants (based on Zerline's *La Marchande d'Oranges*)

6) Quadrille des fous

7) Le Carnaval de Palerme (Bacchanale)

8) Choeur (Valse)

The original cast was: Merly (Roccanera); Mlle Marietta Alboni (Zerline); Mlle Maria-Dolorès-Bénédicta-Joséphine Nau (Gemma); Aimès (Rodolphe); Mlle Dameron (the Princess of Roccanera); and Lyons (the Marquis of Bettura, cousin of the king). The work was only performed 14 times in Paris, with no reprise. It was translated into Italian, and produced in Brussels (in French) and London (in Italian).

Because the impact of the opera was so considerably influenced by the great talent of Marietta Alboni, the work became a triumph for the female protagonist rather than for the composer. Thus, despite the high praise of the critics for the score's innate worth, the opera was withdrawn after Alboni's departure. Very few contraltos could encompass the bravura style with its demanding tessitura (a-b") that Auber had

especially written for the celebrated singer, so the work languished and was forgotten. It has been a remarkable development of the past twenty-five years that this most neglected of Auber's operas should have been brought to public attention again by the revival of Zerline's brilliant entrance aria in recitals by the American mezzo-sopranos Marilyn Horne (1985) and Jennifer Larmore (2001).

Scribe's simple but effective poetry for this *Grand Air* captures the rapture of a long-delayed homecoming, the radiant beauty of a sun-drenched Sicily, the sorrow of a precious love long-lost, and the hope of a providential reunion. The pure clarity of the Mediterranean light seems to penetrate Zerline's sensibilities, filling her with expectation, a correlative of the aspiration to see her child again:

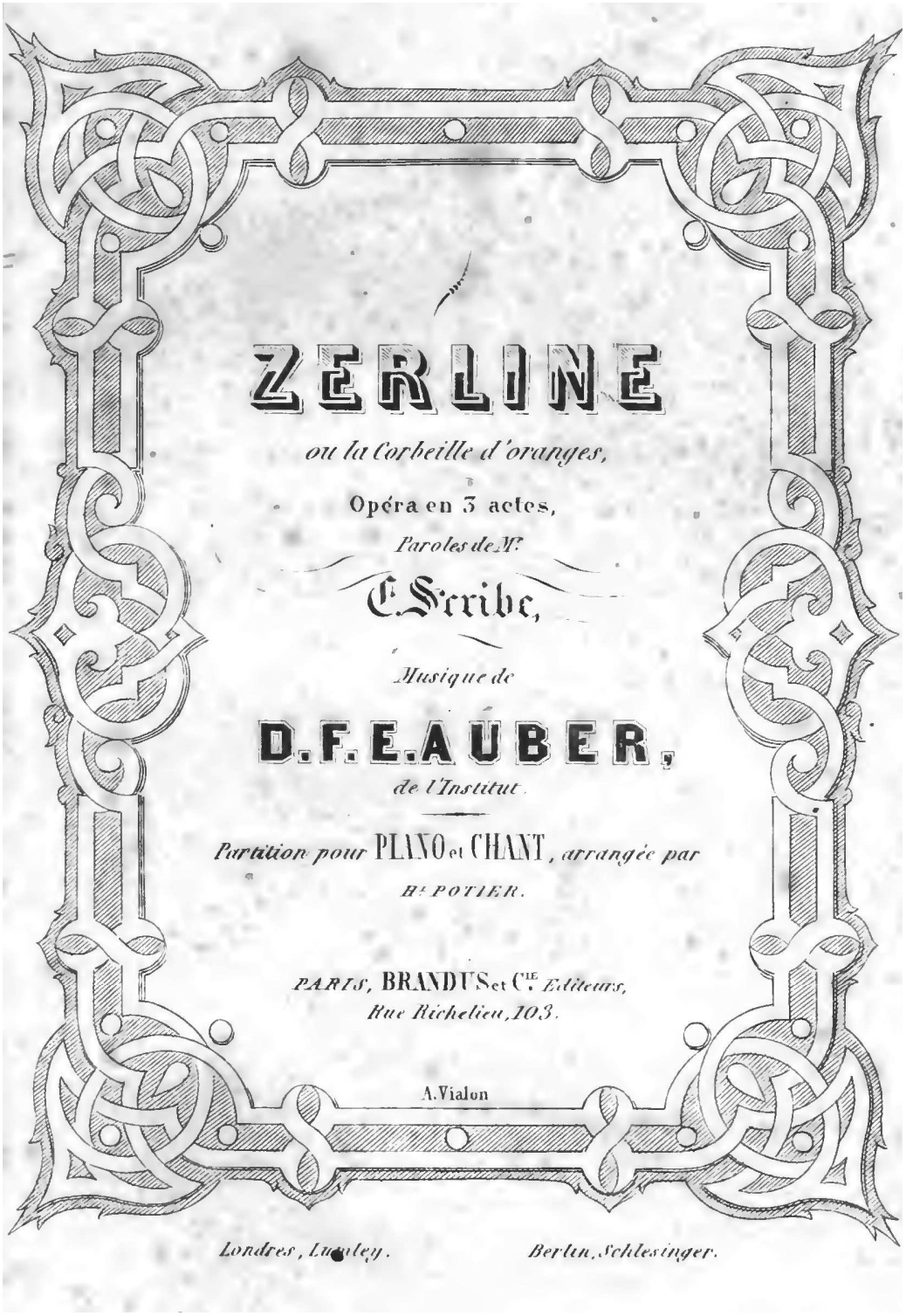
Ô Palerme ! Ô Sicile !
Beau ciel, plaine fertile,
Mes amours d'autrefois !
Ô campagne chérie,
Rêve de ma vie,
Enfin je vous voir !
Ô mon doux et beau pays,
Je te revois ;
Rêve de ma vie,
Enfin je vous vois ;
Mon doux pays, mon beaux pays,
Je te revois !

Quand je reviens de la rive lointaine,
Qui me rendra ce que j'aimais ?
Aucune voix ne repond a la mienne,
Et nul ne reconnaît mes traits;
Mais moi, mais moi, moi je vous reconnais,
Ô Palerme, ô Sicile !
Beau ciel, plaine fertile,
Mes amours d'autrefois !
Ô campagne chérie,
Rêve de ma vie,
Enfin je vous vois !
Ô mon doux et beau pays,
Je te revois !
Rêve de ma vie,
Enfin je vous vois ;
Mon doux pays, je te revois,
Je te revois !

Le ciel pur est plus sùr,
Son azur est sans nuage,
Du plaisir l'avenir vient m'offrir
La douce image;
Oui, dans mon coeur
Elle s'est glissée,
Et le bonheur
S'offre a ma pensée !
Ô ma fille, ô trésor
Pour qui j'ai voulu vivre,
Où te trouver, hélas !
Inspire moi, mon Dieu !
Ta voix, mon Dieu, ta voix
Que je dois suivre,
Dirigera, dirigera mes pas!
Dieu, dirigera mes pas!

Le ciel pur est plus sûr,
Son azur est sans nuage,
Du plaisir l'avenir vient m'offrir
La douce image!
Oui, dans mon coeur
Elle s'est glissée,
Et le bonheur
S'offre à ma pensée ;
Oui, je sens mon coeur
Battre de bonheur !
Ô campagnes chéries,
Par moi soyez bénies !
Beau ciel, plaines fertiles,
Soyez, soyez bénies !
Enfin je vous revois,
Enfin je vous revois,
Enfin je vous revois,
Ô campagnes chéries,
Soyez, soyez bénies;
Campagnes, soyez bénies!
Enfin je vous revois,
Enfin je vous revois,
Je vous revois,
Campagnes chéries,
Enfin je vous revois.

Marietta Alboni in the role of Urbain in *Les Huguenots*



ZERLINE

ou la Corbeille d'oranges,

Opéra en 3 actes,

Paroles de M.

E. Scribe,

Musique de

D. F. E. AUBER,

de l'Institut.

Partition pour PIANO *et* CHANT, *arrangée par*

H. POTIER.

PARIS, BRANDUS *et* Cie. *Editeurs,*
Rue Richelieu, 103.

A. Vialon

Londres, Lumley. *Berlin, Schlesinger.*

ZERLINE
ou
La Corbeille d'Oranges.

PERSONNAGES.	ACTEURS.
LE PRINCE DE ROCCANERA, ministre du roi de Sicile ...	M^r MERLY.
LA PRINCESSE, sa femme	M^lle DAMERON.
GEMMA, leur nièce	M^lle NAU.
LE MARQUIS DE BUTTURA, cousin du roi	M^r LYONS.
RODOLFE, officier de marine	M^r AIMÈS.
ZERLINE, marchande d'oranges	M^lle ALBONI.

Matelots, gens du port, lazzaroni.
Hommes et Femmes du peuple.
Marchandes de fleurs et de fruits.
Seigneurs et Dames de la cour.

La scène se passe à Palerme, en Sicile.

CATALOGUE DES MORCEAUX.

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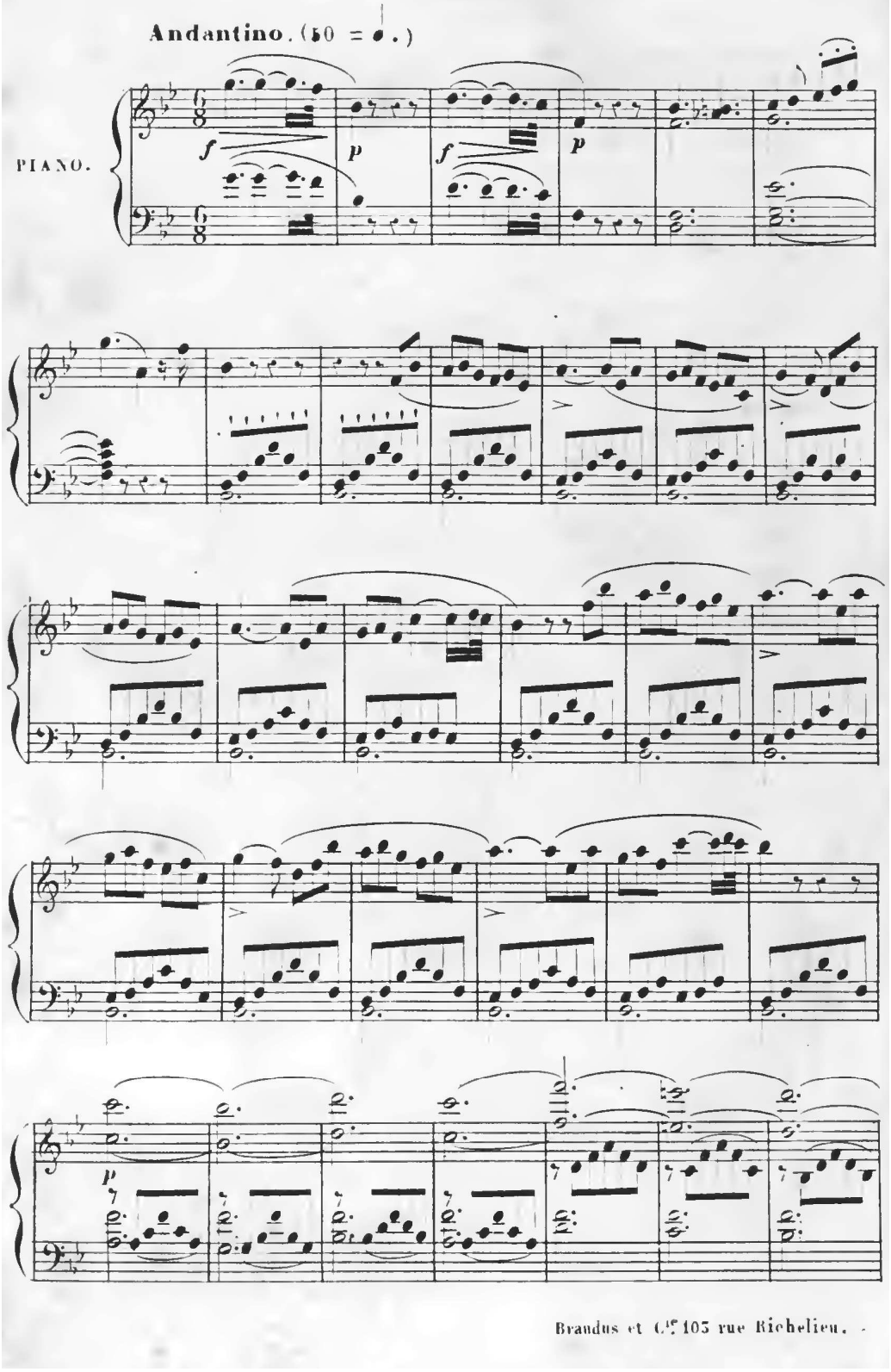
THIERRY frères imp. Cité Bergère, PARIS

OUVERTURE.



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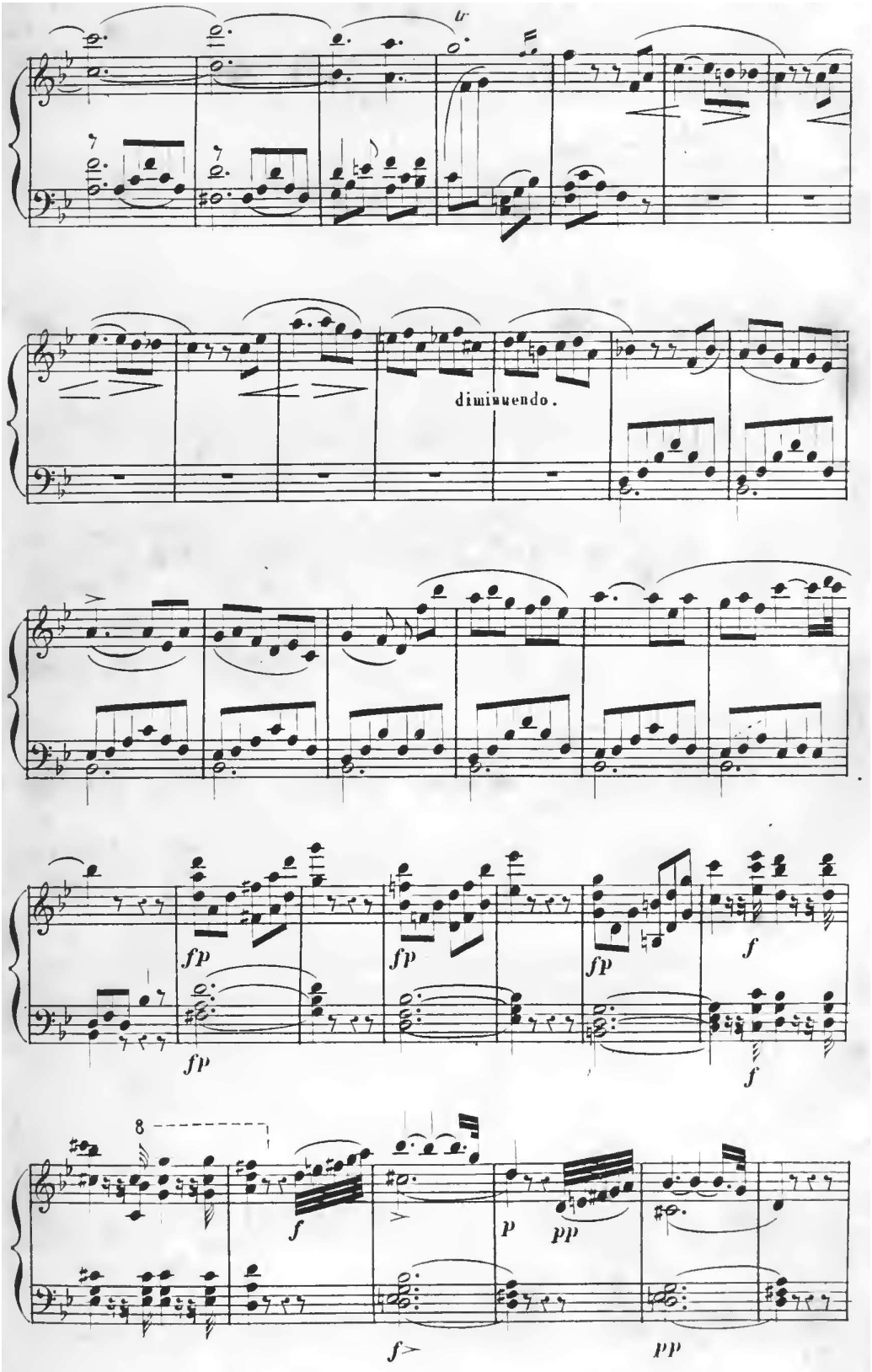
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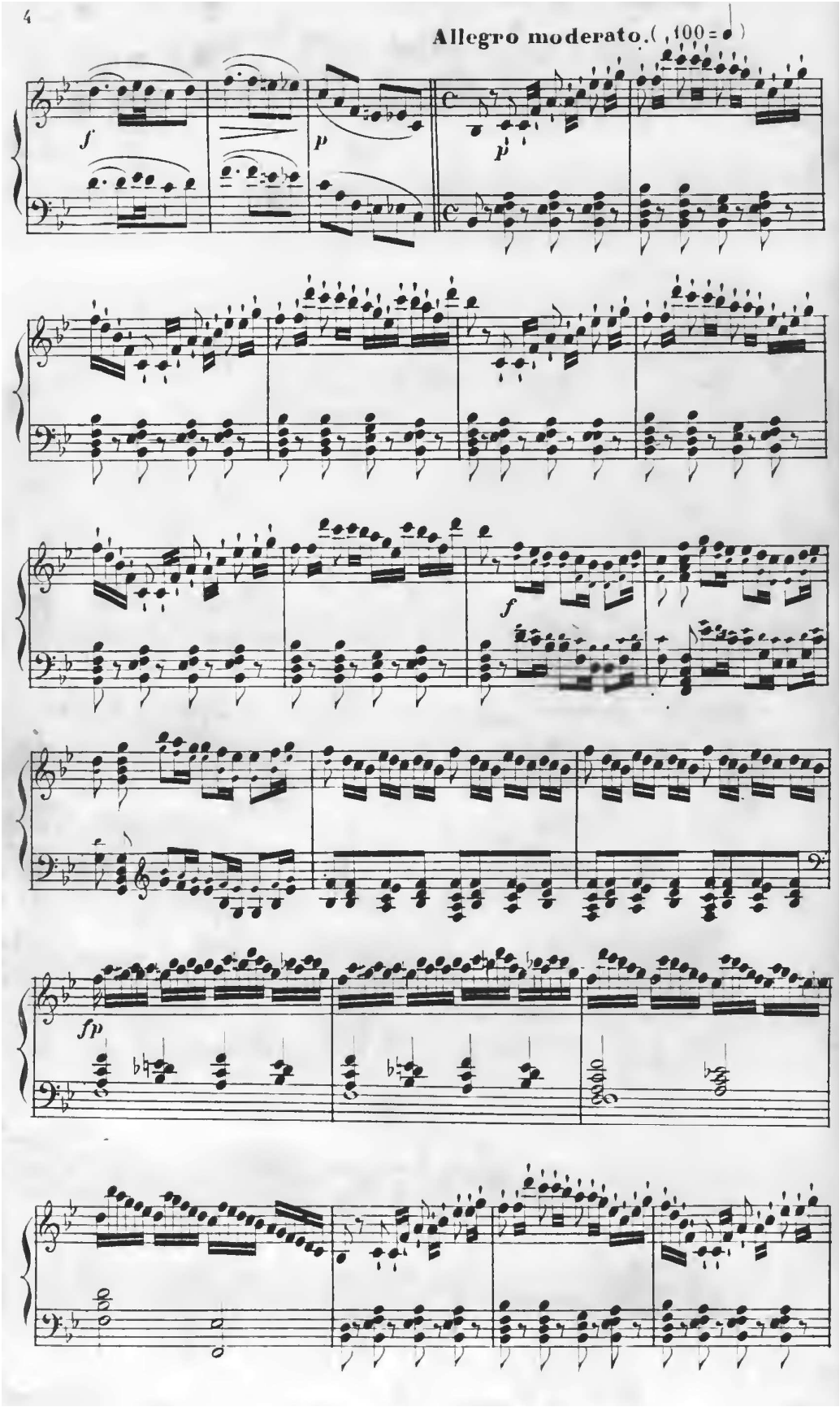
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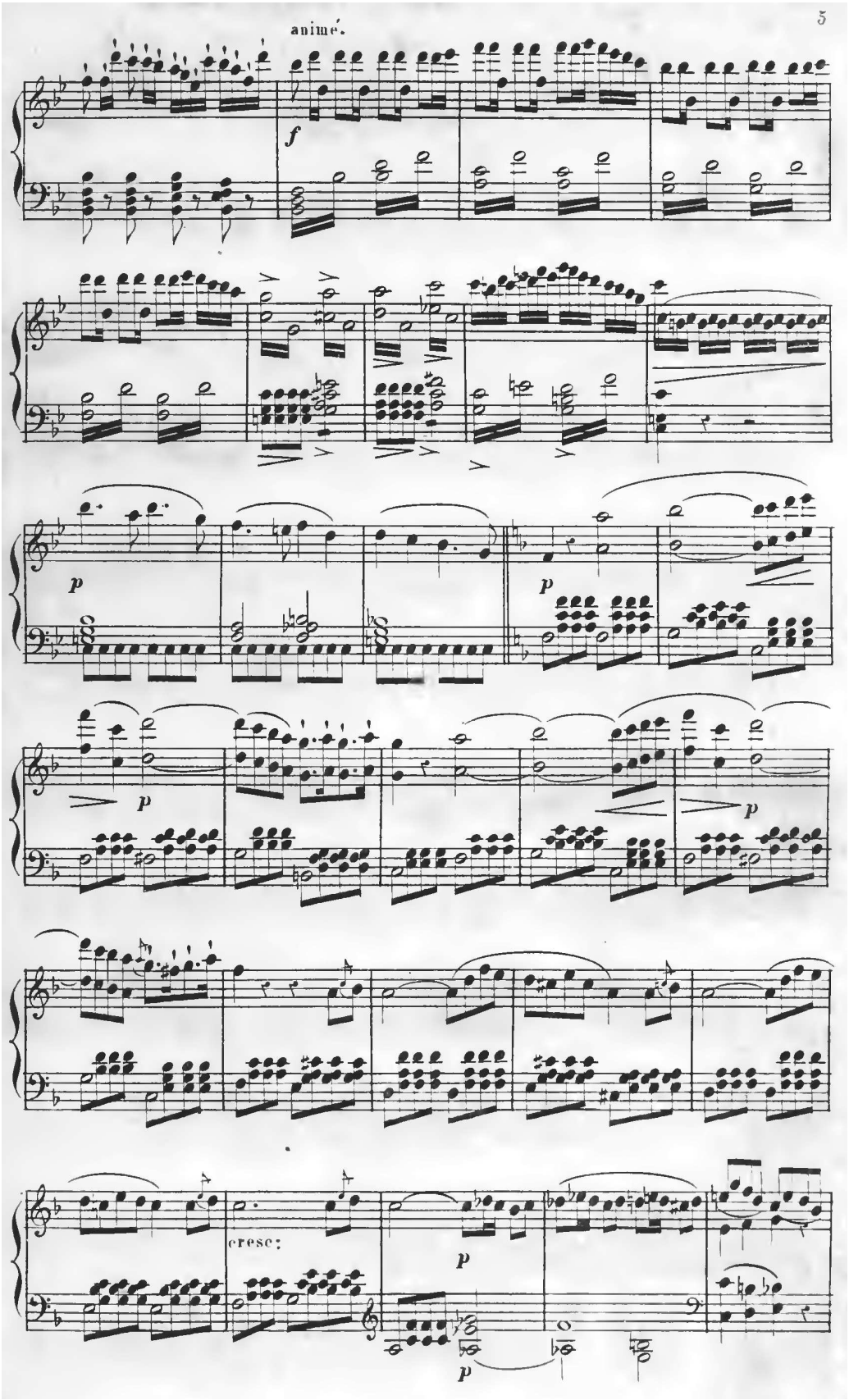
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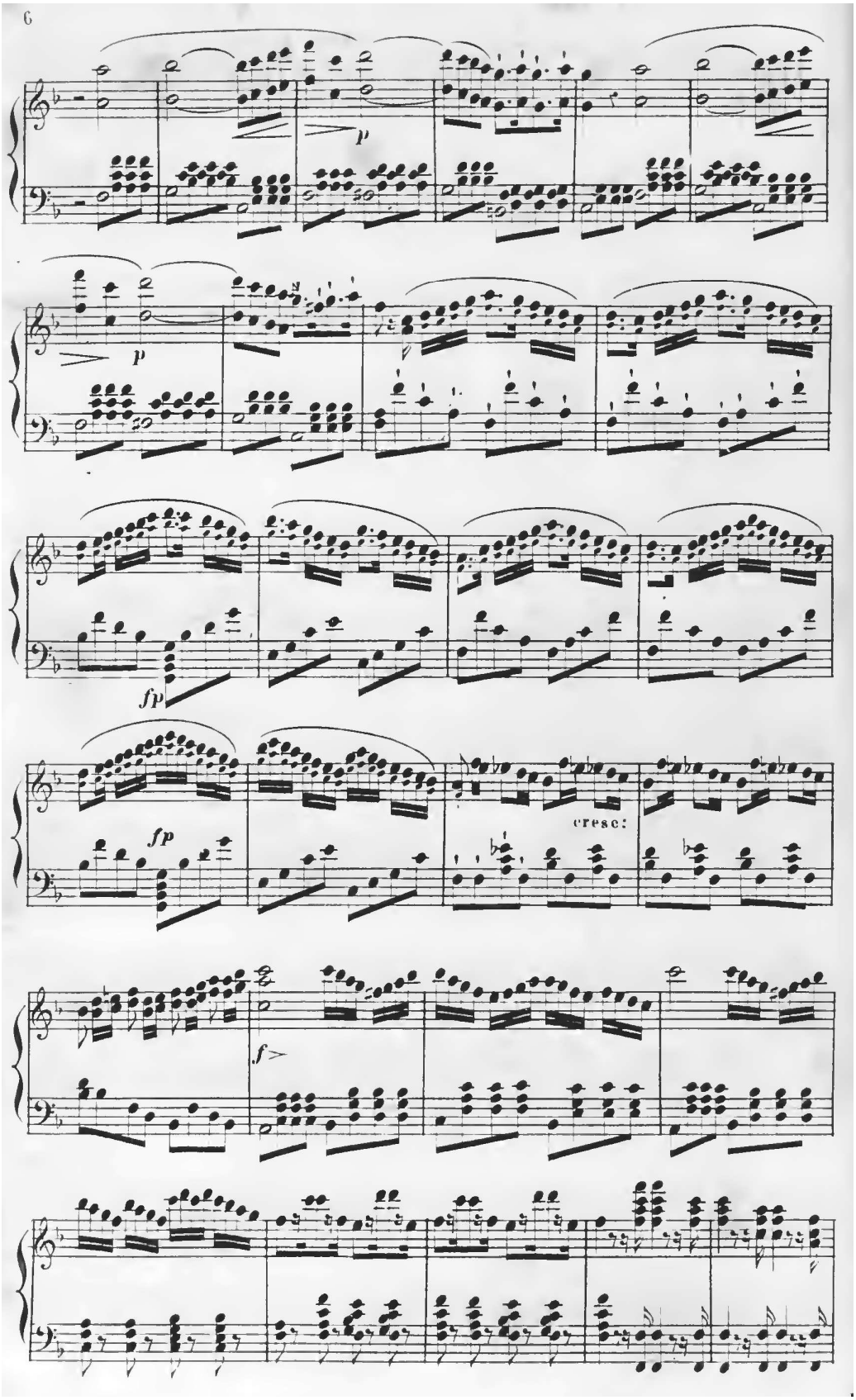
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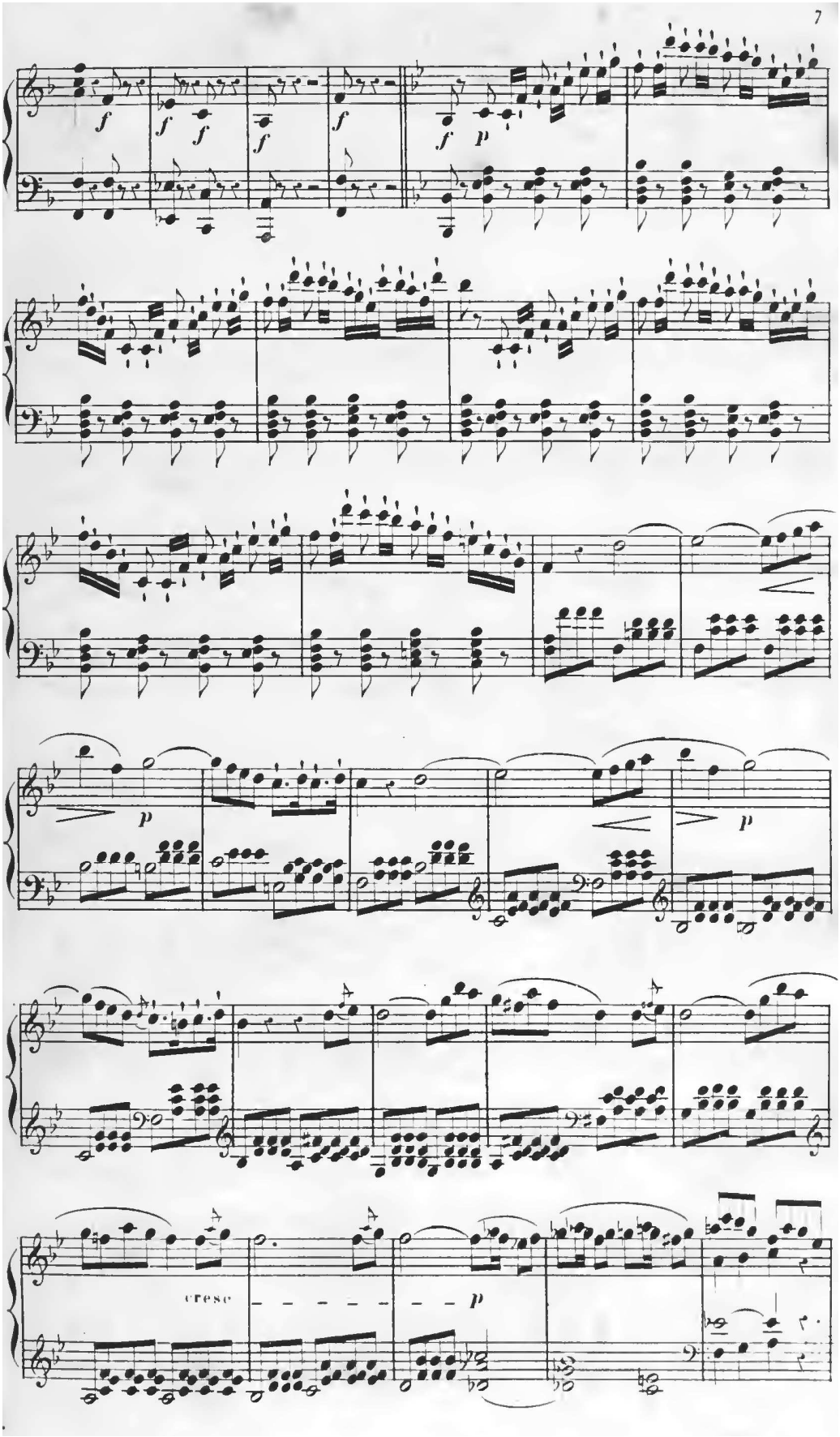
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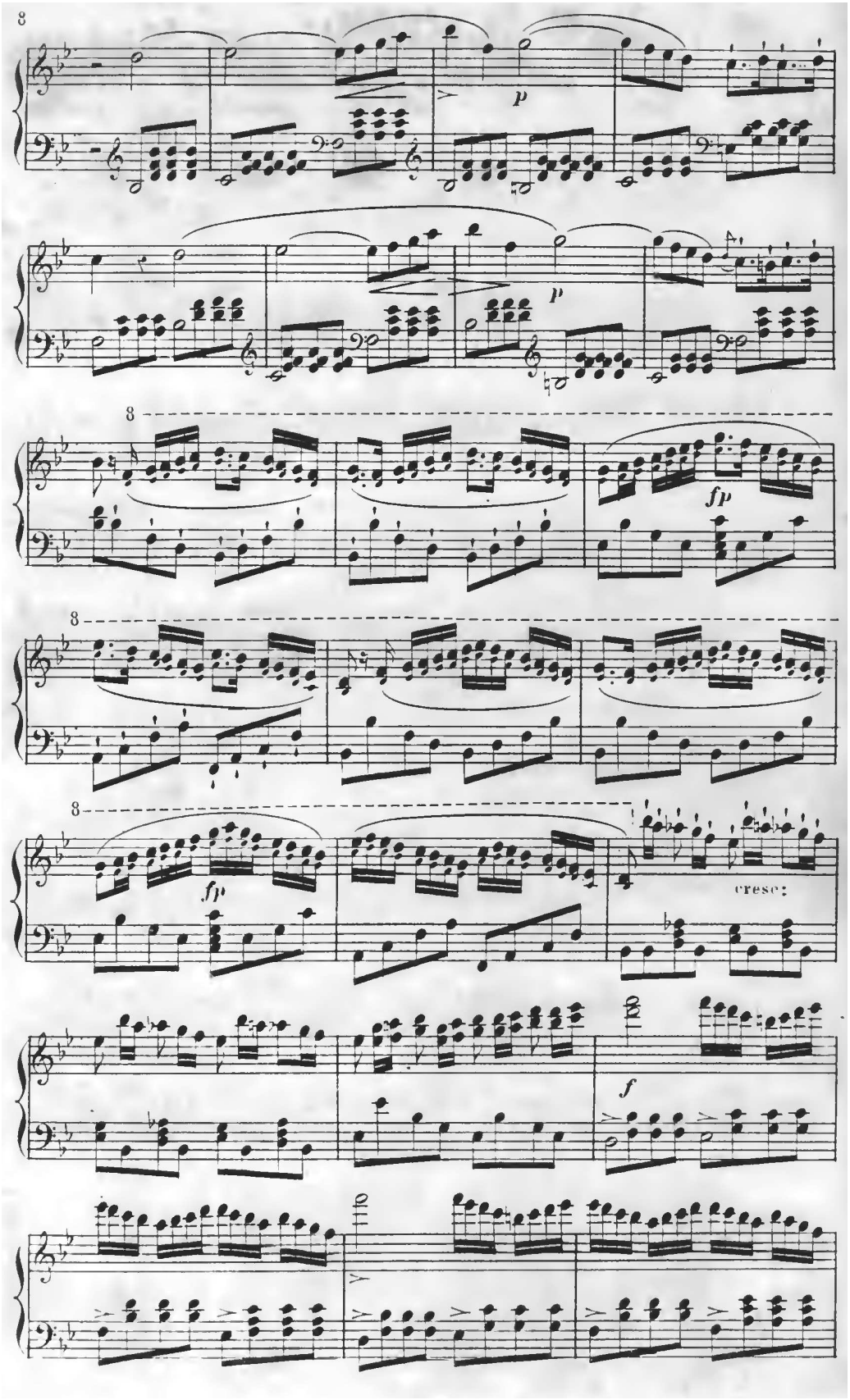
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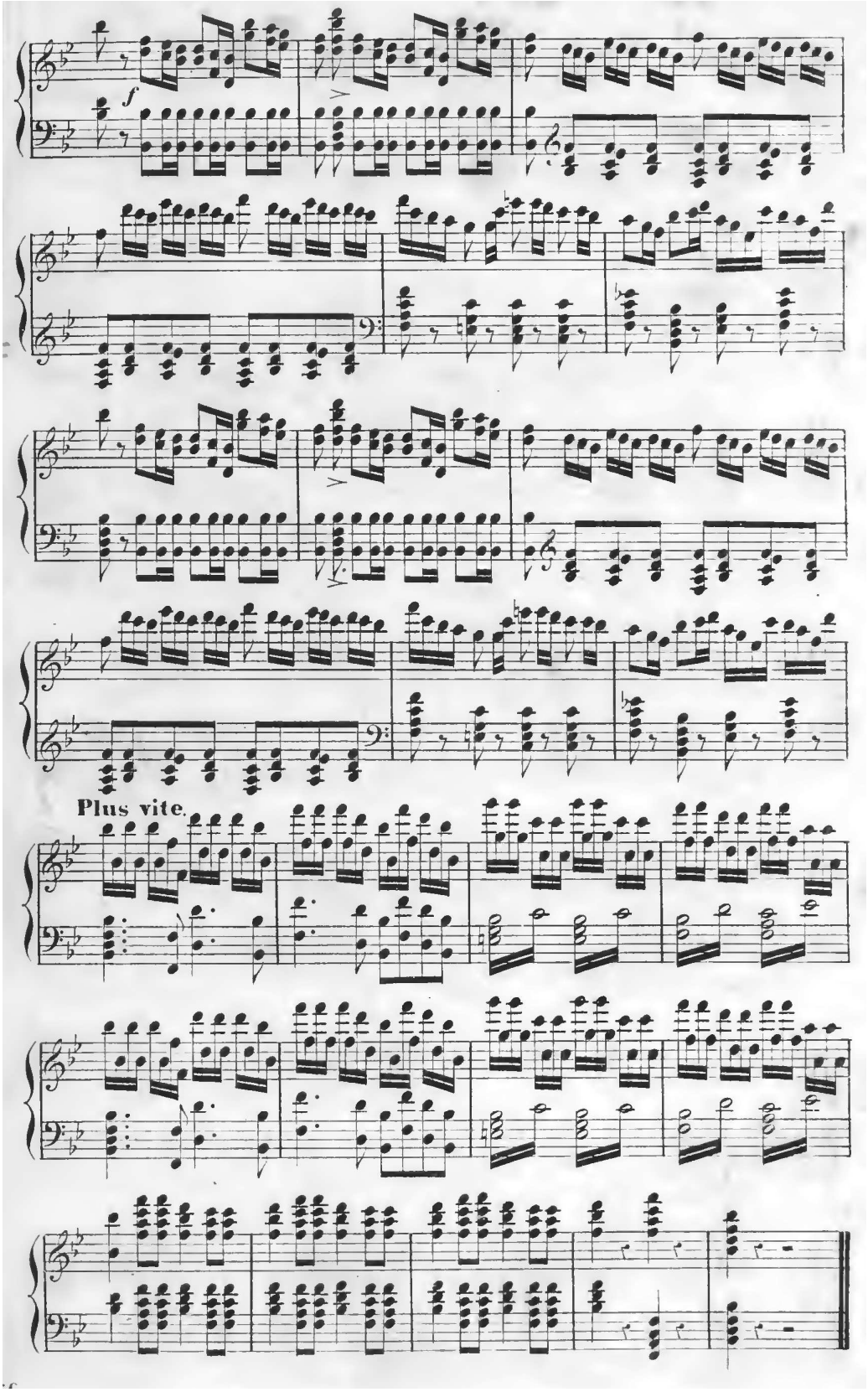
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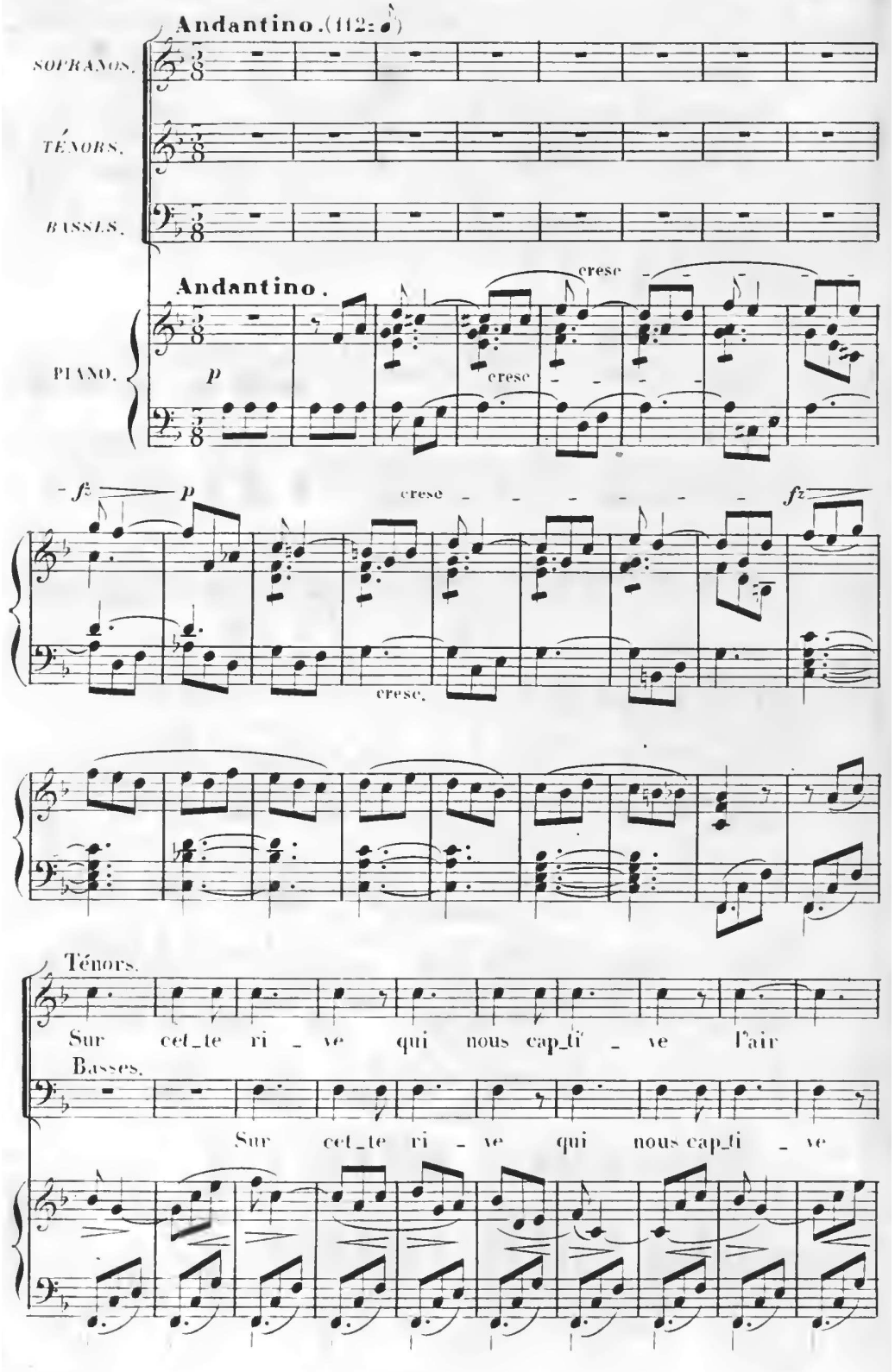
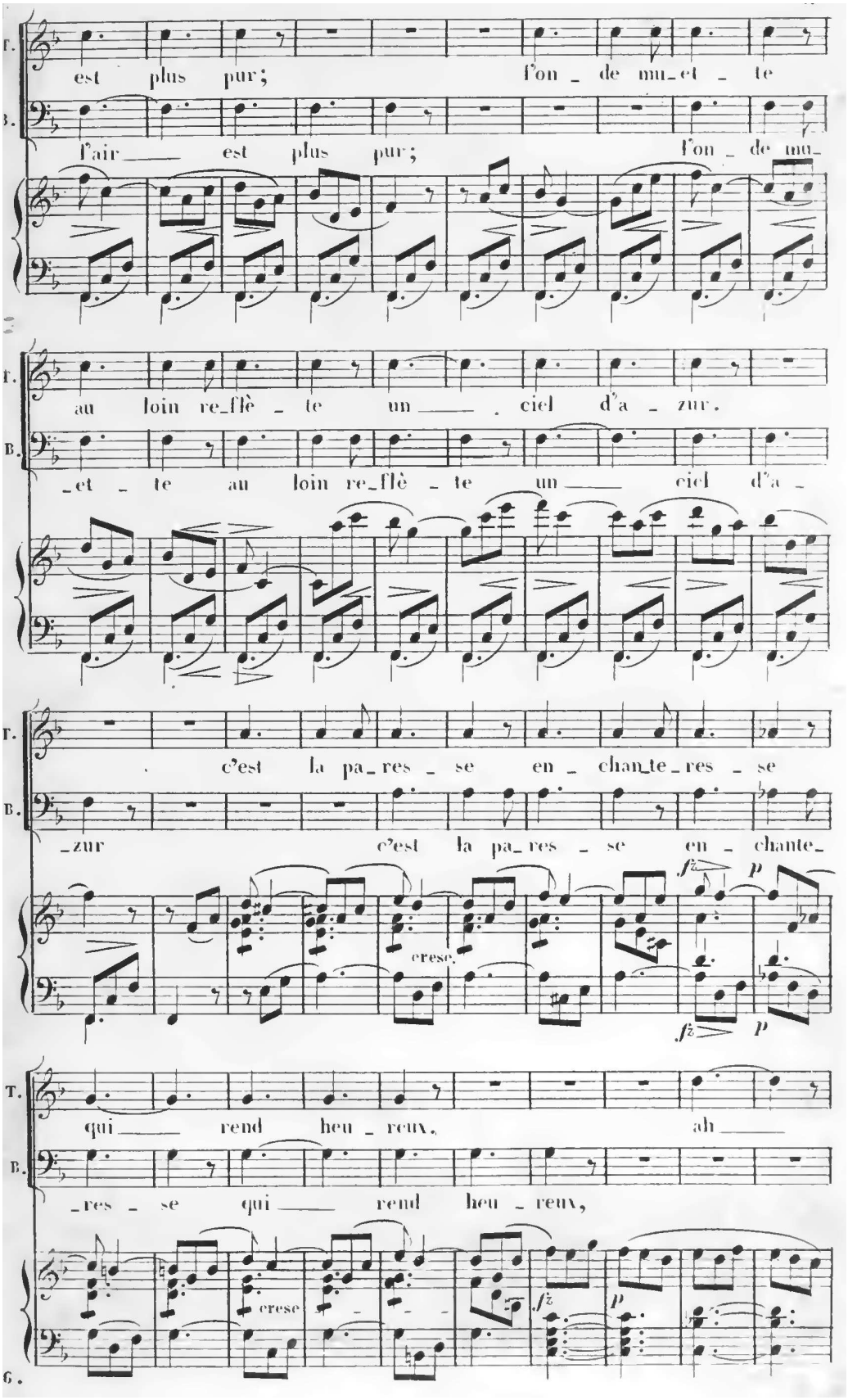
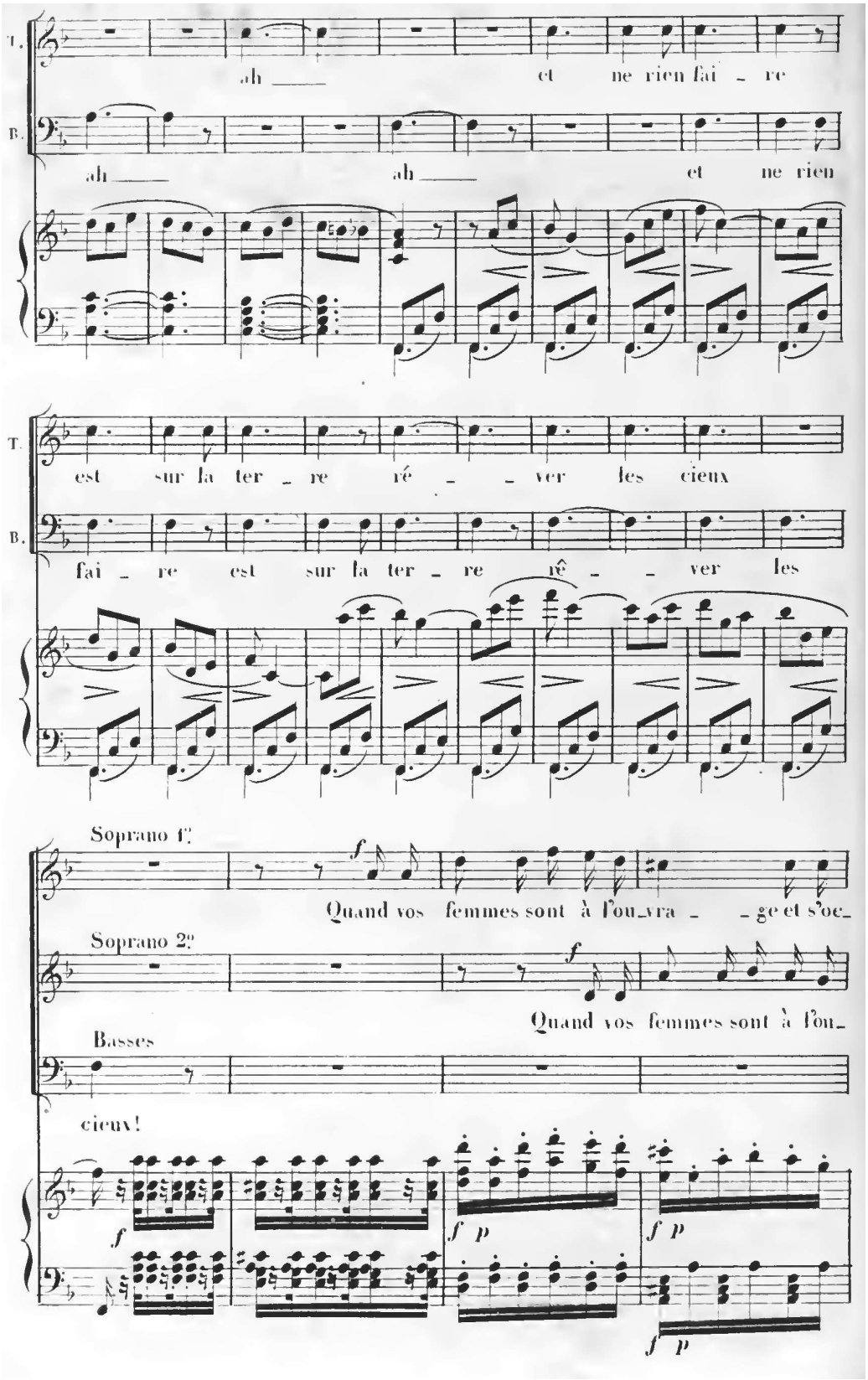
Plus vite.

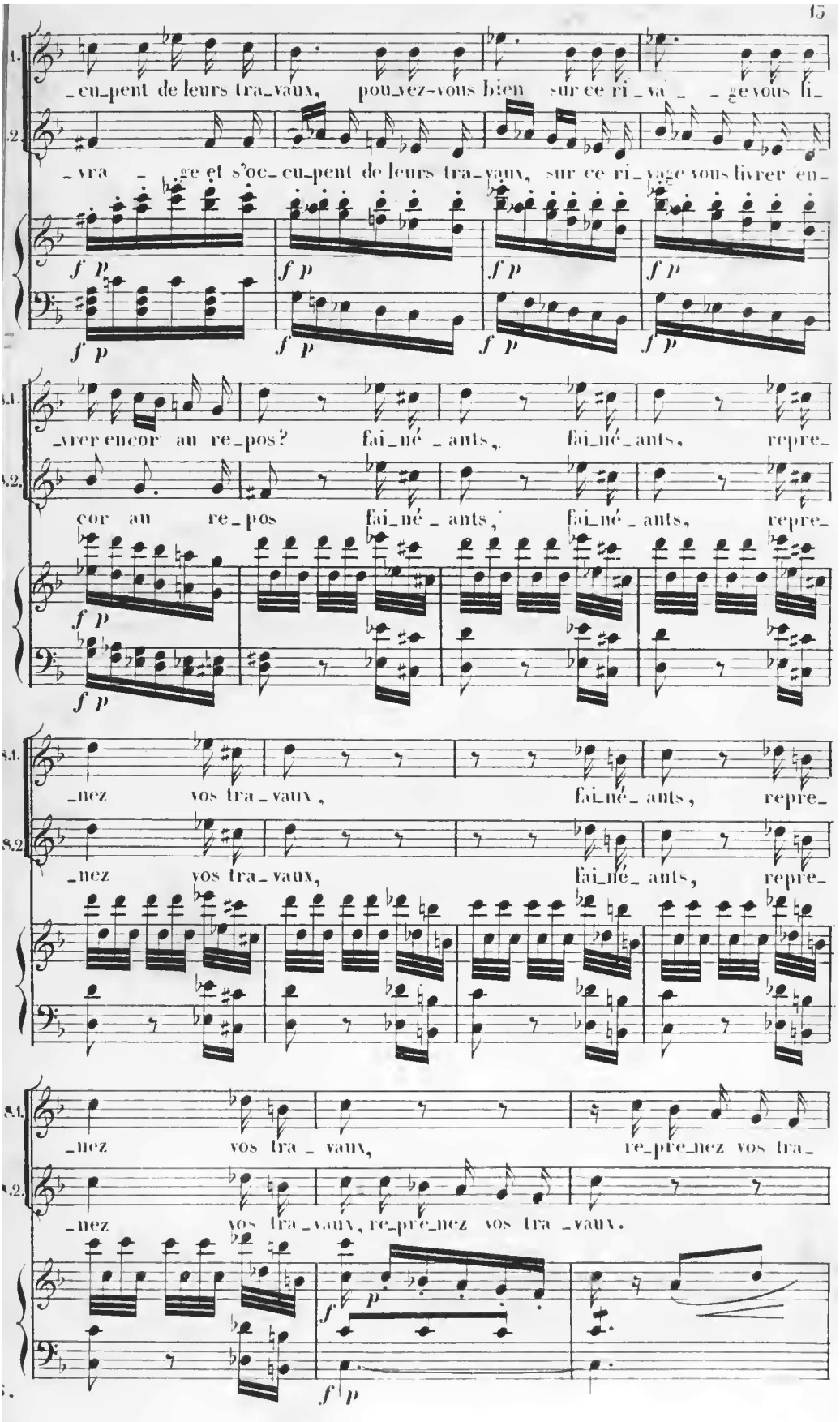
N.° 1.

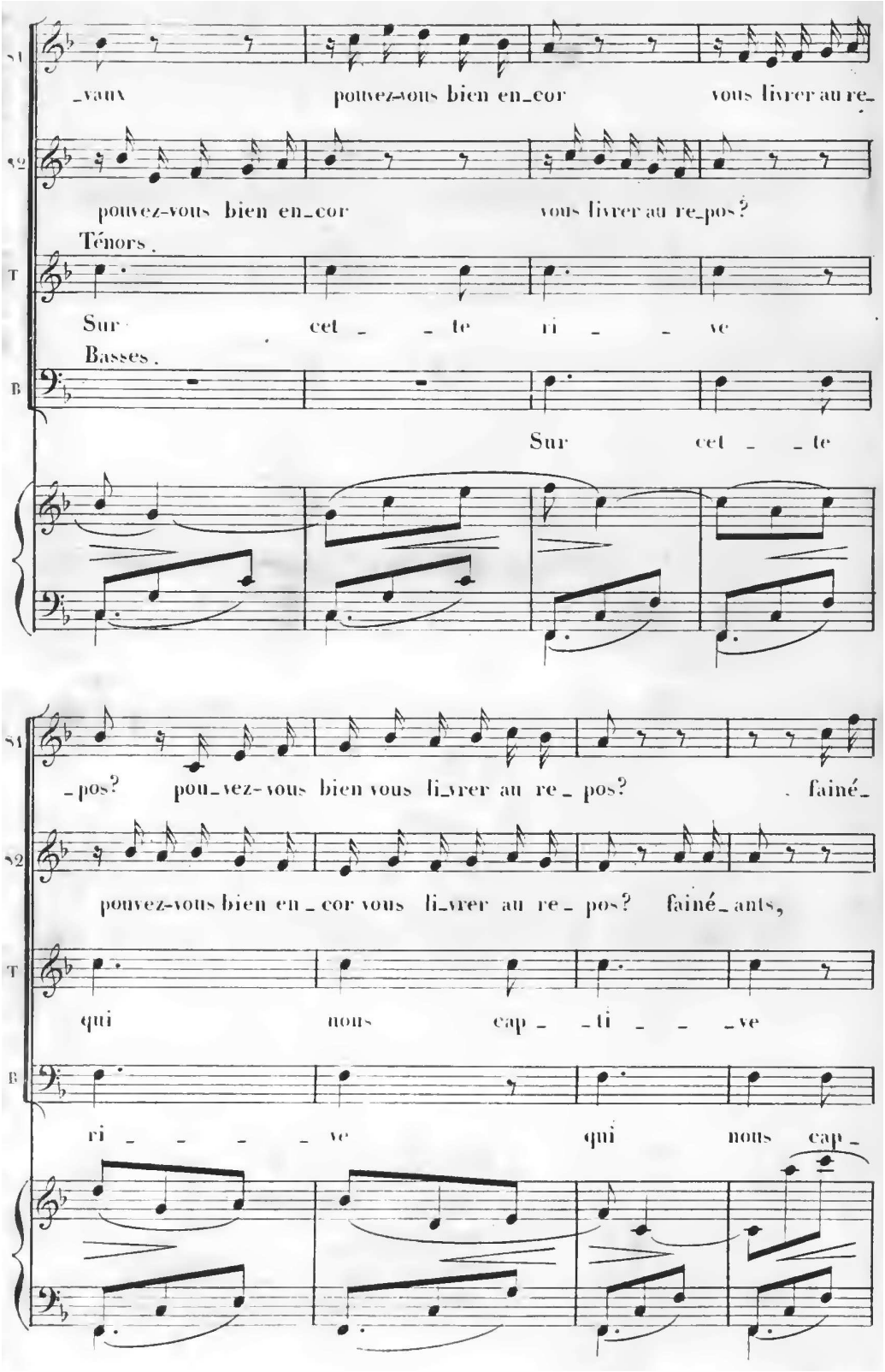
CHOEUR.

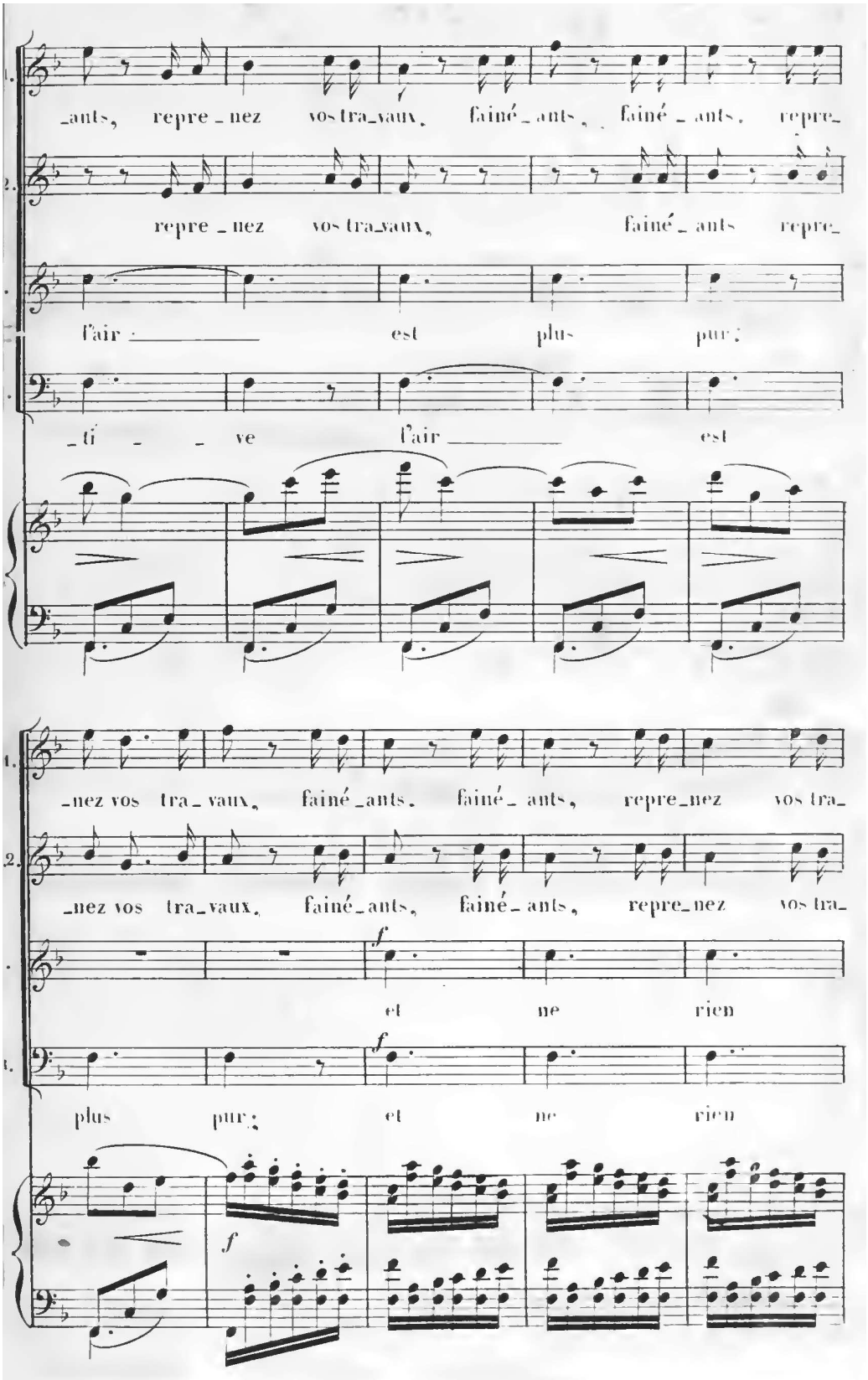

Andantino. (112: ♩)
SOPRANOS.
TÉNORS.
BASSES.
Andantino.
cresc
PIANO.
p
cresc
fz
p
cresc
cresc.
fz
Ténors.
Sur cet_te ri _ ve qui nous cap_ti _ ve l'air
Basses.
Sur cet_te ri _ ve qui nous cap_ti _ ve

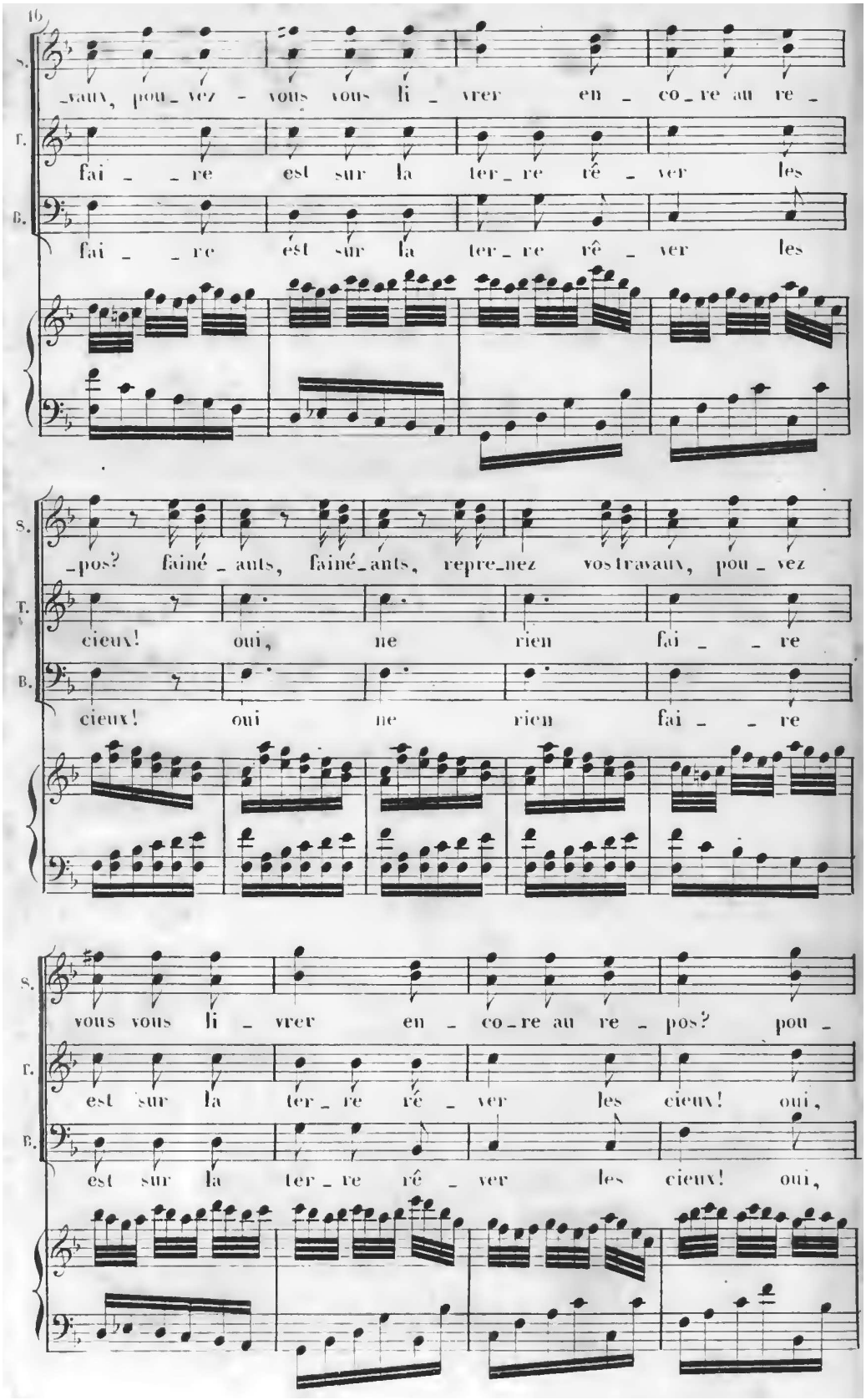

T.
est plus pur; l'on de mu et te
B.
l'air est plus pur; l'on de mu
T.
au loin re flè te un ciel d'a zur.
B.
et te au loin re flè te un ciel d'a
T.
c'est la pa res se en chan te res se
B.
zur c'est la pa res se en chante
cresc.
T.
qui rend heu reux. ah
B.
res se qui rend heu reux,
cresc.
G.

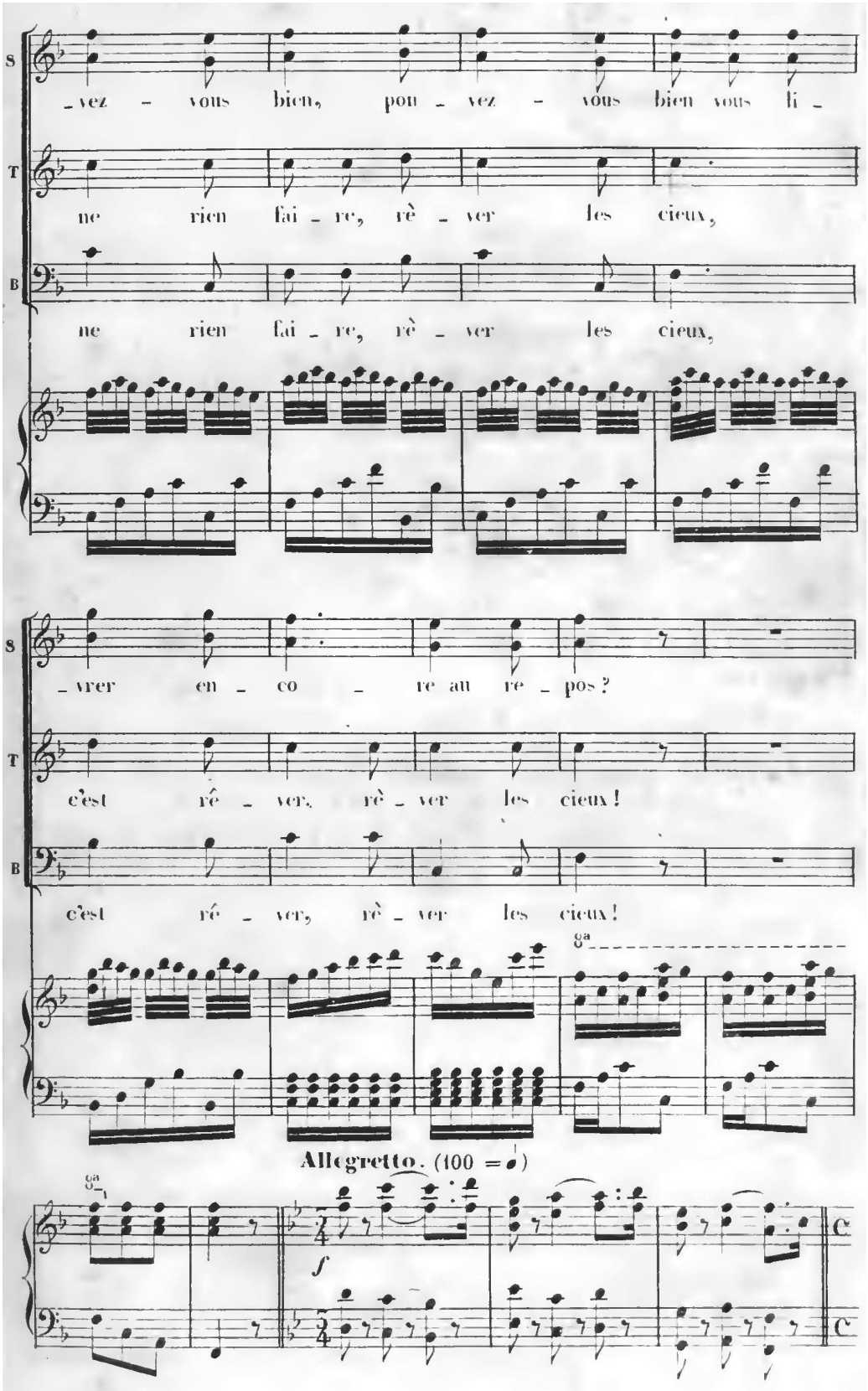

T.
ah ____ et ne rien fai - re
B.
ah ____ ah ____ et ne rien
T.
est sur la ter - re ré - - ver les cieux
B.
fai - re est sur la ter - re rê - - ver les
Soprano 1re
Quand vos femmes sont à l'ou_vra - - ge et s'oc_
Soprano 2e
Quand vos femmes sont à l'ou_
Basses
cieux!


15
1.
_eu_pent de leurs tra_vaux, pou_vez-vous bien sur ce ri_va _ _ge vous li_
2.
_vra _ _ge et s'oc_cu_pent de leurs tra_vaux, sur ce ri_vage vous livrer en_
f p
1.
_vrer encor au re_pos? fai_né _ants, fai_né_ants, repre_
2.
cor au re_pos fai_né _ants, fai_né _ants, repre_
1.
_nez vos tra_vaux, fai_né_ants, repre_
2.
_nez vos tra_vaux, fai_né_ants, repre_
1.
_nez vos tra _ vaux, re_pre_nez vos tra_
2.
_nez vos tra_vaux, re_pre_nez vos tra _vaux.
f p


S1
_vaux pouvez-vous bien en_cor vous livrer au re_
S2
pouvez-vous bien en_cor vous livrer au re_pos?
Ténors.
T
Sur cet _ _ te ri _ _ ve
Basses.
B
Sur cet _ _ te
S1
_pos? pou_vez-vous bien vous li_vrer au re_ pos? fainé_
S2
pouvez-vous bien en_cor vous li_vrer au re_ pos? fainé_ants,
T
qui nous cap_ _ti _ _ _ve
B
ri _ _ _ _ ve qui nous cap_


1. _ants, repre_nez vos tra_vaux, fainé_ants, fainé_ants, repre_
2. repre_nez vos tra_vaux, fainé_ants repre_
l'air est plus pur;
_ti_ve l'air est
1. _nez vos tra_vaux, fainé_ants, fainé_ants, repre_nez vos tra_
2. _nez vos tra_vaux, fainé_ants, fainé_ants, repre_nez vos tra_
f
et ne rien
f
plus pur; et ne rien
f


16
S.
T.
B.
_vaux, pou_vez - vous vous li _ vrer en _ co_re au re _
fai _ _ re est sur la ter_re rê _ ver les
fai _ _ re est sur la ter_re rê _ ver les
_pos? fainé _ auts, fainé_ants, repre_nez vos travaux, pou _ vez
cieux! oui, ne rien fai _ _ re
cieux! oui ne rien fai _ _ re
vous vous li _ vrer en _ co_re au re _ pos? pou _
est sur la ter_re rê _ ver les cieux! oui,
est sur la ter_re rê _ ver les cieux! oui,


S
T
B
_vez - vous bien, pou _ vez - vous bien vous li _
ne rien fai _ re, rè _ ver les cieux,
ne rien fai _ re, rè _ ver les cieux,
_vrer en _ co _ re au re _ pos?
c'est rê _ ver, rè _ ver les cieux!
c'est rê _ ver, rè _ ver les cieux!
8a
Allegretto. (100 =)
f