Organ Symphony No. 1

on Lutheran Christmas Chorales

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Alexander Kirsch

Organ Symphony No. 1 on Lutheran Christmas Chorales

A preface by the composer

The Lutheran Chorale in classical music

Johann Sebastian Bach gave the *Lutheran Chorale* its firm place in music. With him it occupies two fundamental main roles: In his cantatas and oratorios as four-part homophonic choral settings, providing a 'commentary' to the story told; and, in a more embellished, individual form, as 'Chorale Preludes' for organ (*Choralvorspiele* or *Orgelchoräle*) to be played before the communal singing by the congregation during the Protestant service, evoking and consolidating the relevant mood expressed by the tune and by its text.

Whilst widely incorporated in the works of his predecessors and contemporaries, many great composers after Bach - mainly of Germanic origin but regardless of their faith - continued to find inspiration in the *chorale* or used specific ones in their works: As a fellow Protestant, Johannes Brahms used *chorales* in his organ and religious choral music; the staunch Bavarian and Catholic Max Reger expanded Bach's version of the *Choral Fantasie* to the highest expressive level known within the organ repertoire; the Jewish-born Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy used one of Luther's most famous *chorales ("Ein' Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott!")* in the finale of his 5th symphony, the 'Reformation'; and Richard Wagner based a whole opera on the subject of the 'Master Craft of Singing': *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*[1]. In the 20th century, Hugo Distler, Sigfrid Karg-Elert and Ernst Pepping took the *Lutheran Chorales* to a new and contemporary form of expression.

Throughout history, however, the use of *chorale* melodies as substitutes for the contrasting themes within a classical sonata form has not previously occurred. To find out how these ancient tunes adapt to the 18th century principle of juxtaposing different subjects, developing and recapitulating them in a dramatic move from the tonic to the dominant (or the mediant or another distant tonality) and back to the tonic, it pays off to have a closer look at some of the *chorales* themselves. Rather than this being a general treatise on the matter, we will analyse only the *chorales* used in the *Organ Symphony No. 1.*

The Lutheran Chorales of the Organ Symphony No. 1

Four *chorales* make up all the musical material of this work: two for the season of *Advent* (nos. 1 & 4) and two for *Christmas* (nos. 2 & 3):[2]

[1] where the main protagonist Hans Sachs was - in real life - an ardent follower of Martin Luther.
[2] There is a firm distinction between Advent and Christmas within the Protestant liturgical year and within its hymnal, the *Gesangbuch*.

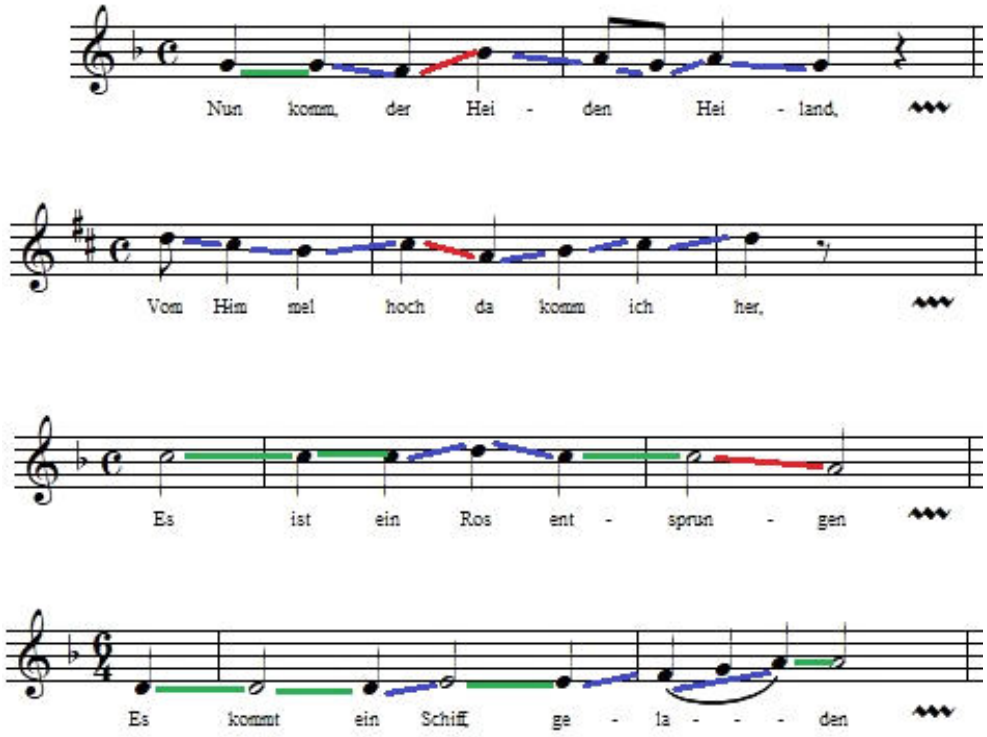
I. "Nun Komm' Der Heiden Heiland" (*Martin Luther 1524, after* Veni redemptor gentium *by Bishop Ambrosius ca. 340 - 397*)

II. "Vom Himmel Hoch Da Komm' Ich Her" (*Martin Luther 1539*)

III. "Es Ist Ein Ros Entsprungen" (*15. century, by Michael Praetorius 1609*)

IV. "Es Kommt Ein Schiff Geladen" (*Anon. Cologne 1608*)

Harmonically the *chorales* are based on either the *Dorian* (nos. I & IV)[3] or the *Ionian* (nos. II & III) mode. The unifying principle, however, is found in the melodic progressions of the opening phrase of each of the tunes: tone repetitions (—), stepwise movements in major/minor seconds (—) and leaps of thirds or fourths (—).



The strict rules of 16th century counterpoint apply to all the *chorales* regardless, which makes them ideal to all sorts of contrapuntal elaboration, as shown throughout the whole of the *Organ Symphony No. 1* and culminating in the double fugue of the final coda. To illustrate how these are combined to take up their individual roles within the building plan of the classical sonata movement, the following diagram provides a better understanding:

[3] No. IV originally belongs to the *Aeonian* mode, but it has here been altered into *Dorian*.

FORMAL SECTIONS	*Timing*
• Exposition / 1. Group / [Sonata] Movement I. - Moderato	(ca. 7:00 ')
Exposition:	
Motto* - 1. Subject "Nun Komm' Der Heiden Heiland" **- Transition**	
2. Subject "Vom Himmel Hoch Da Komm' Ich Her" - Codetta	
Development	
Recapitulation:	
Motto - 1. Subject "... Heiden Heiland"	
2. Subject "Vom Himmel Hoch ..."	
Transition **/ Coda**	
• **2. Group / [Slow] Movement II. - *Aria, Adagio cantabile***	*(ca. 5:00')*
*Cadenza*** - **A.** "Es Ist Ein Ros Entsprungen" 1. phrase - *Cadenza* - **A'.**	
B. 2. phrase	
Cadenza - **A''.** 3. phrase [equals the 1. phrase]- codetta	
• **Development / [Scherzo] Movement III. - *Allegro scherzando***	*(ca. 4:00')*
A. "Vom Himmel Hoch ..."	
B. "Es Kommt Ein Schiff Geladen"	
A'. "Vom Himmel Hoch ..." - re-transition [pedal point on D]	
• **Recapitulation / Movement IV. - [Rondo] *Finale. Moderato***	*(ca. 9:30' incl. Coda)*
Motto - 1. Subject "... Heiden Heiland"	
1. Episode: *Cadenza* - "Es Ist Ein Ros ..." 1. phrase	
1. Subject "... Heiden Heiland" - Transition	
2. Episode / 2. subject "Vom Himmel ...", "... Heiden Heiland" & "Es Ist Ein Ros ..." [Development]	
1. Subject "... Heiden Heiland"	
3. Episode: *Cadenza* - "Es Ist Ein Ros ..." phrase 1 **& 2 - *Motto***	
• **Coda - [Double Fugue]**	
"... Heiden Heiland" / "Vom Himmel Hoch ..." - *Motto*	

* The "*Motto*" consists of the first 7 or 8 notes of *chorale* no. I (1. Subject).
** The "*Cadenza*" is a short recitative-like introduction to *chorale* no. III / 2. Subject.

Key Index:

G Minor / Major
Bb Major
B Major
D Major / Minor
E Major
modulatory

Considerations of Form and Cohesion

As exemplarily demonstrated by Charles Rosen[4], the sonata form comprises the creation of drama through the modulation from the tonic to the dominant / mediant during the exposition[5]; a subsequent development of the musical material; and a consolidation of the tonic during the

[4] Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style - Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*; 1971, Faber and Faber Ltd., London
[5] The "drama" during the exposition of the *Organ Symphony No. 1* being further intensified by the 2. subject-group (slow movement) set in B Major instead of the expected Bb Major.

recapitulation and coda, therefore roughly creating three equal sections.[6] However, the sonata / symphonic form at its height in the outgoing 18th century usually sported four movements (Allegro - Adagio *or* Andante - Minuet/Scherzo - Finale: Allegro *or* Presto). Arnold Schoenberg's attempt - little over a hundred years later - to combine both the sonata movement with the four movement framework (in his *String Quartet No. 1, op. 7* & *Chamber Symphony No. 1, op. 9*) yielded some satisfactory, yet by no means fully satisfying outcomes, and he soon after abandoned the idea completely.[7]

As it can be seen from the timings indicated in the table above, the 1. & 2. subject groups take up nearly half of the overall performance time of the *Organ Symphony No. 1*, therefore shifting its balance towards the exposition (or rather two expositions, one also appearing as part of the 1. group) and - at a first glance - lessening the importance of both any in-depth thematic elaboration during the main development section (i.e. III. Movement / Scherzo), and a thorough affirmation of the tonic within the recapitulation - which has now become a busy rondo form with alternating episodes and an additional development (the 3rd overall). Whilst the introduction of an additional theme during the development is nothing new or unusual (see Beethoven's "Eroica"), and here provides little else other than a trio episode within the scherzo, at least there are nearly ten minutes of music in the minor and major tonic during the recapitulation and coda, restoring somewhat the overall balance which had been so important to the Classical masters.

Whether for an equilibrium of the formal scheme it would be advantageous to place the scherzo movement as the 2. group and develop all thematic material during the slow movement - as shown in the author's *String Quartet No. 2 "Choros"* - or to use the present model of a slow 2. group and a scherzo-development, shall possibly be decided in future projects of this nature. The listener meanwhile may make up his or her mind based on the examples provided thus far by the aforementioned works. It certainly will not be an easy decision, and should involve the repeated listening to those works, just as recommended by Schoenberg with regards to any serious piece of contemporary music.

Alexander Kirsch

Blackpool, in February 2020

[6] as opposed to the two parts of the Baroque *Da Capo* form

[7] For an overview of Schoenberg's evolution of the single movement sonata form, see the author's preface to his *String Quartet No. 2 "Choros"*; likewise, Schoenberg's symphonic poem "*Pelleas und Melisande*" may serve as an example of this form.

duration: ca. 25' 30''

sections:

- **I.** ***Moderato*** - p. 1
- **II.** ***Aria, Adagio cantabile*** - p. 16
- **III.** ***Allegro scherzando*** - p. 23
- **IV.** ***Finale. Moderato*** - p. 36

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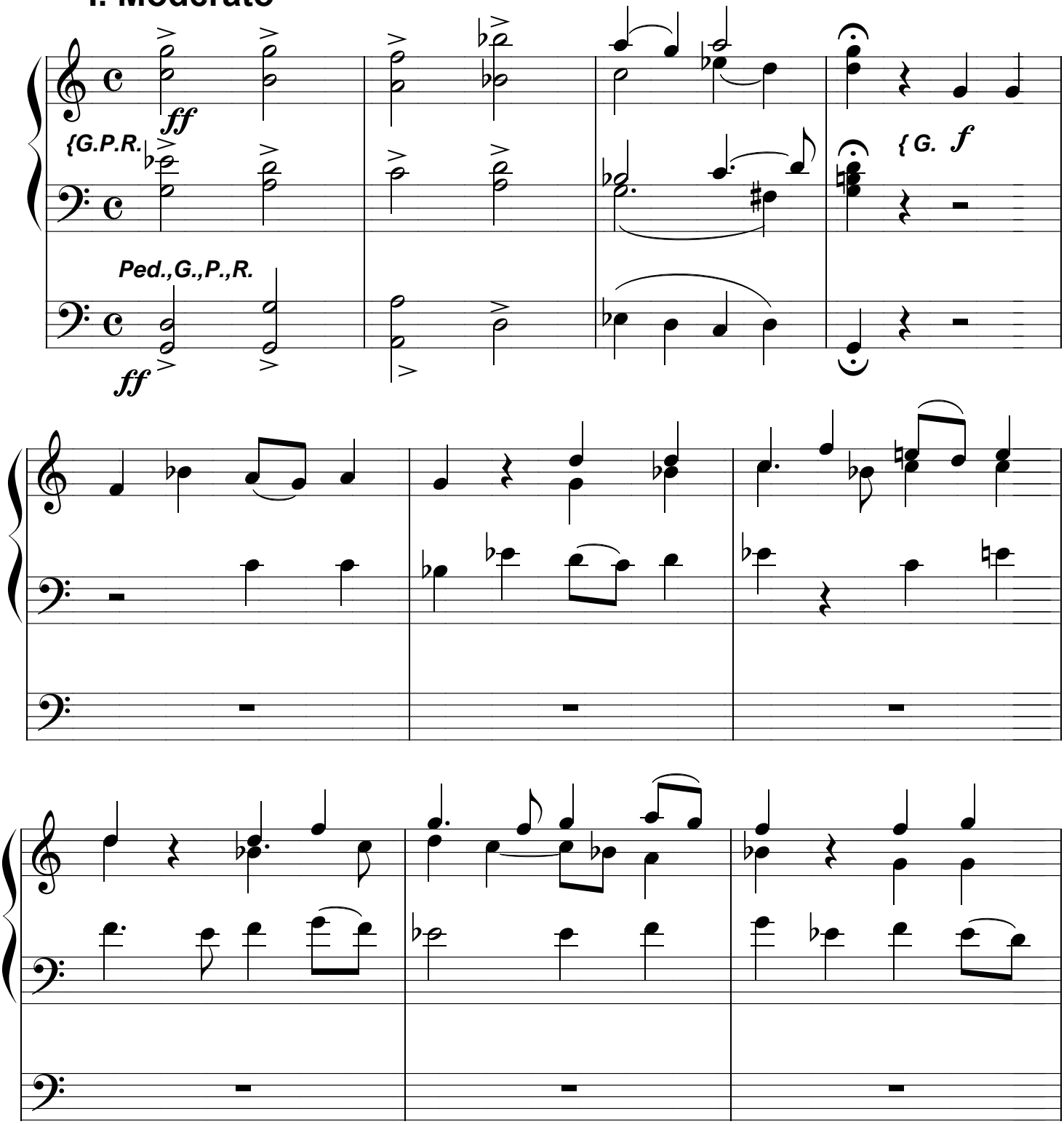
P. 8,4' - R. 8,4' - G. 16,8,4' - Ped. 16,8'

I. Moderato



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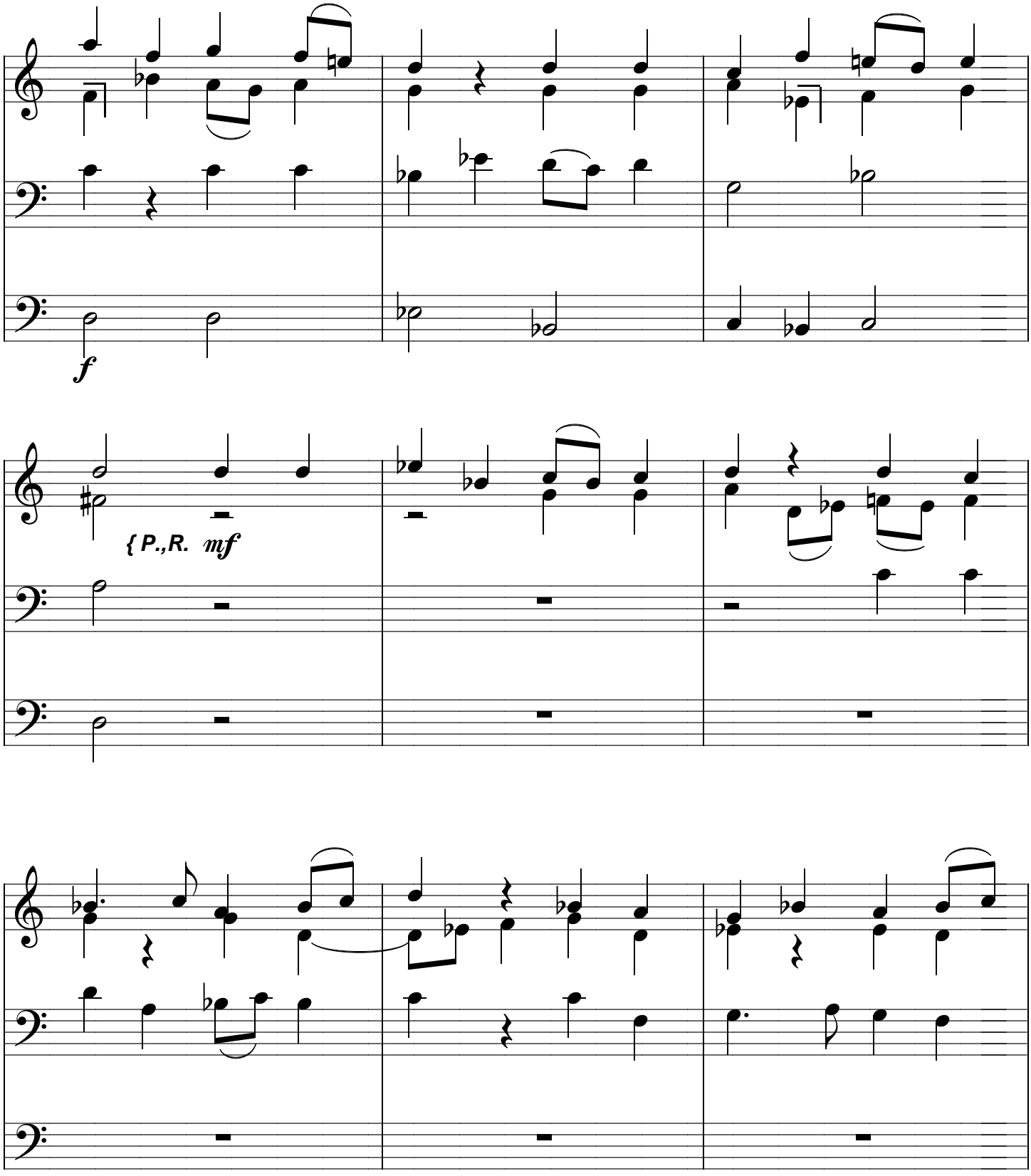
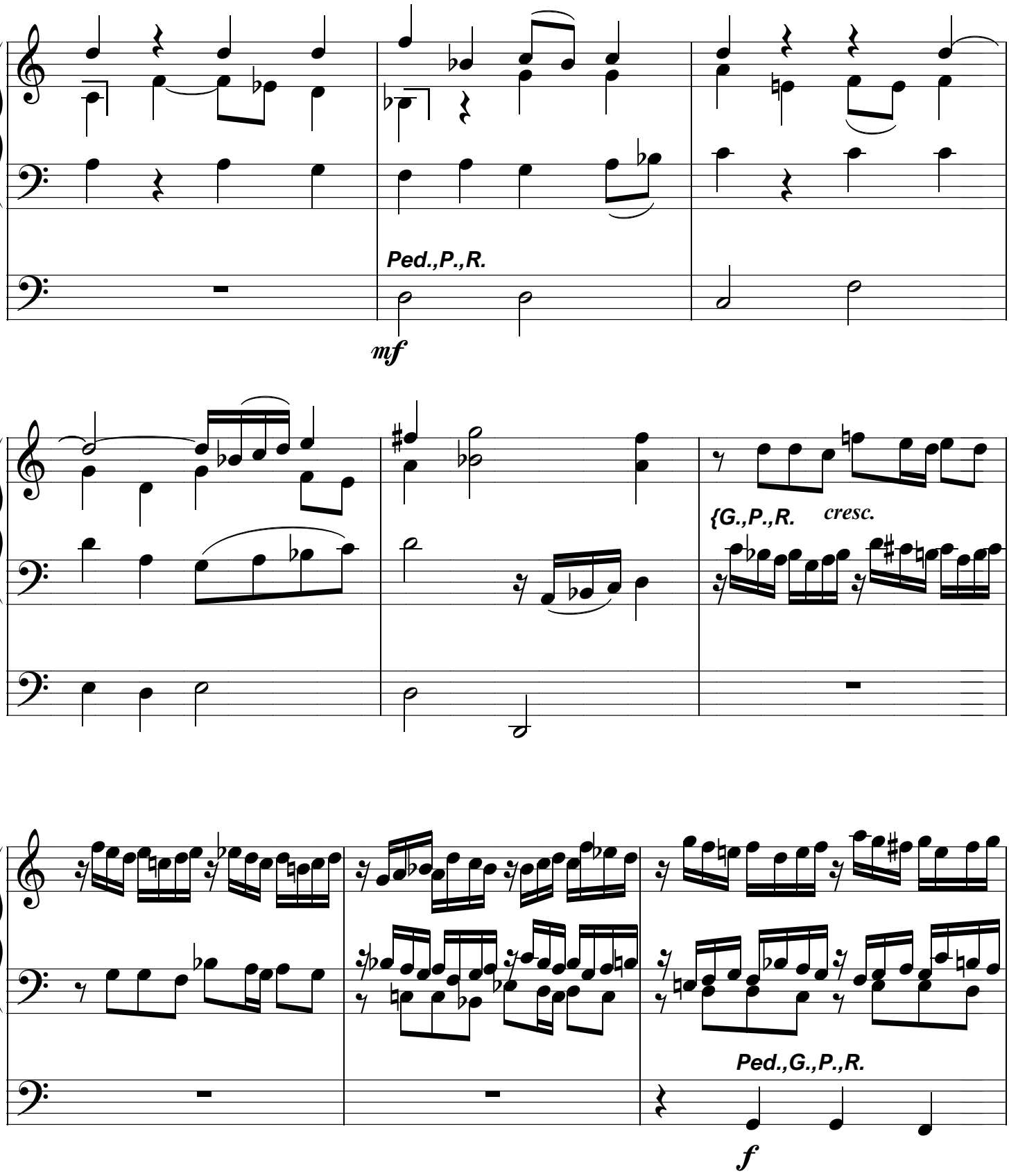
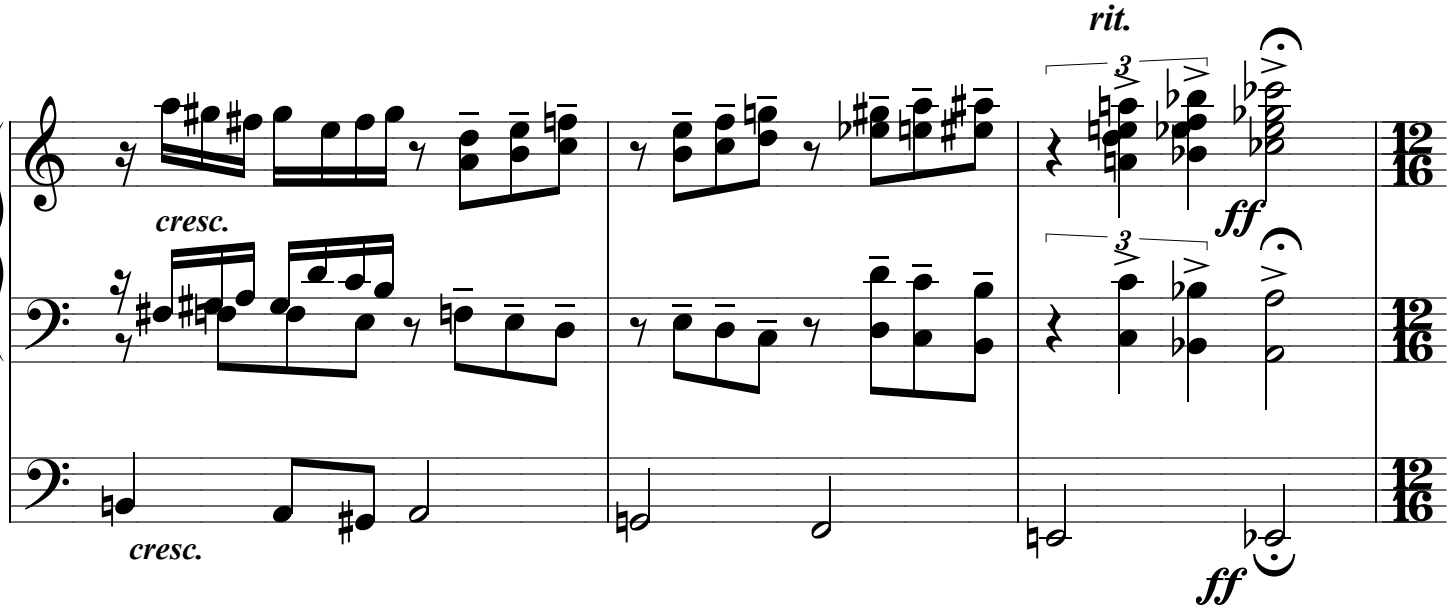
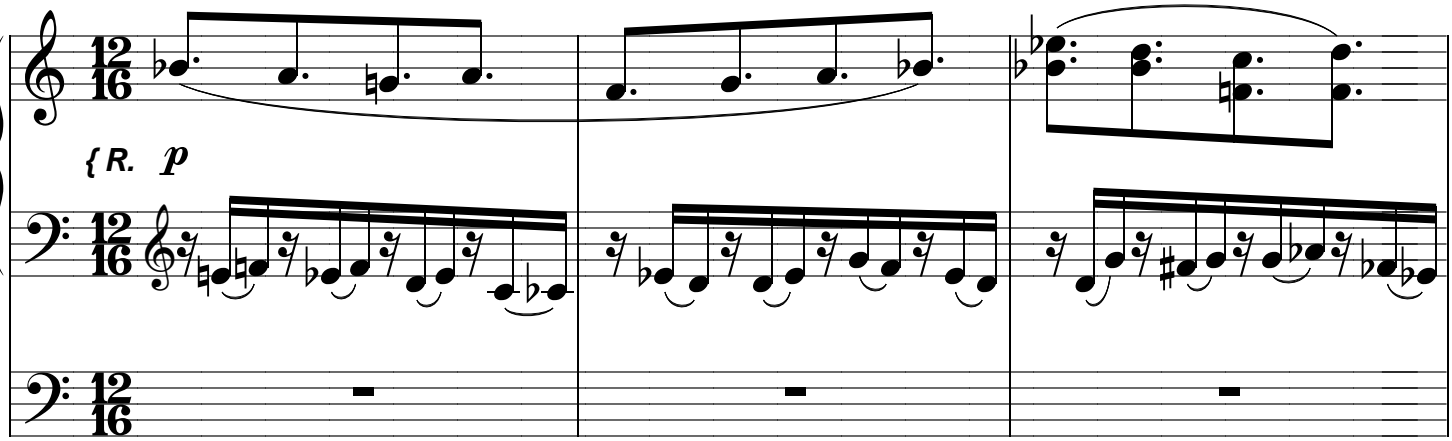
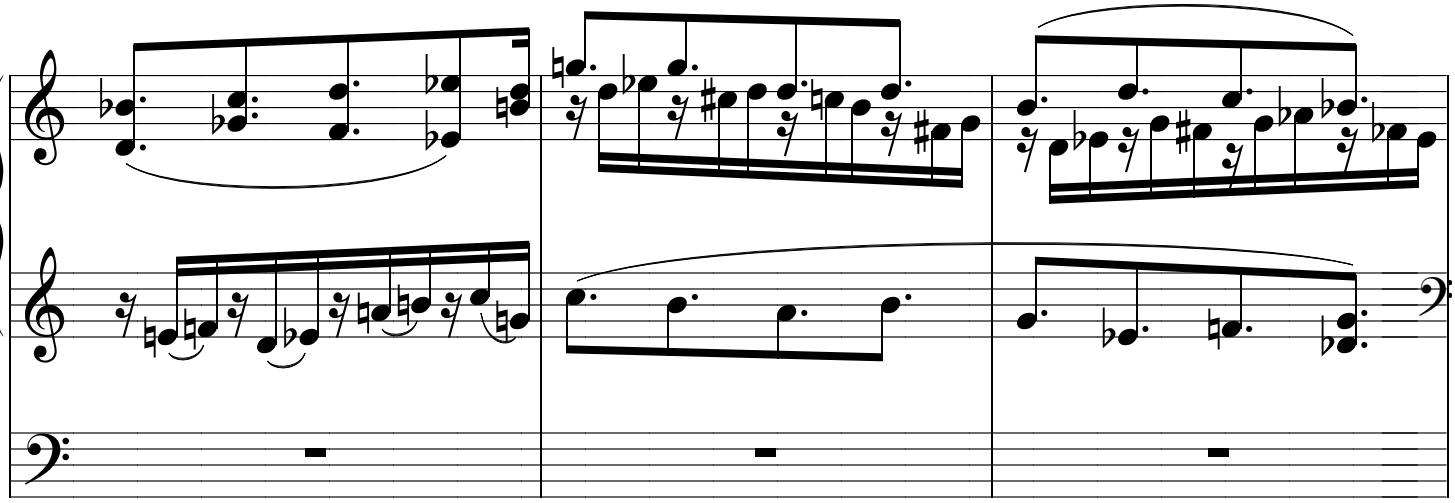

f
{ P.,R. mf

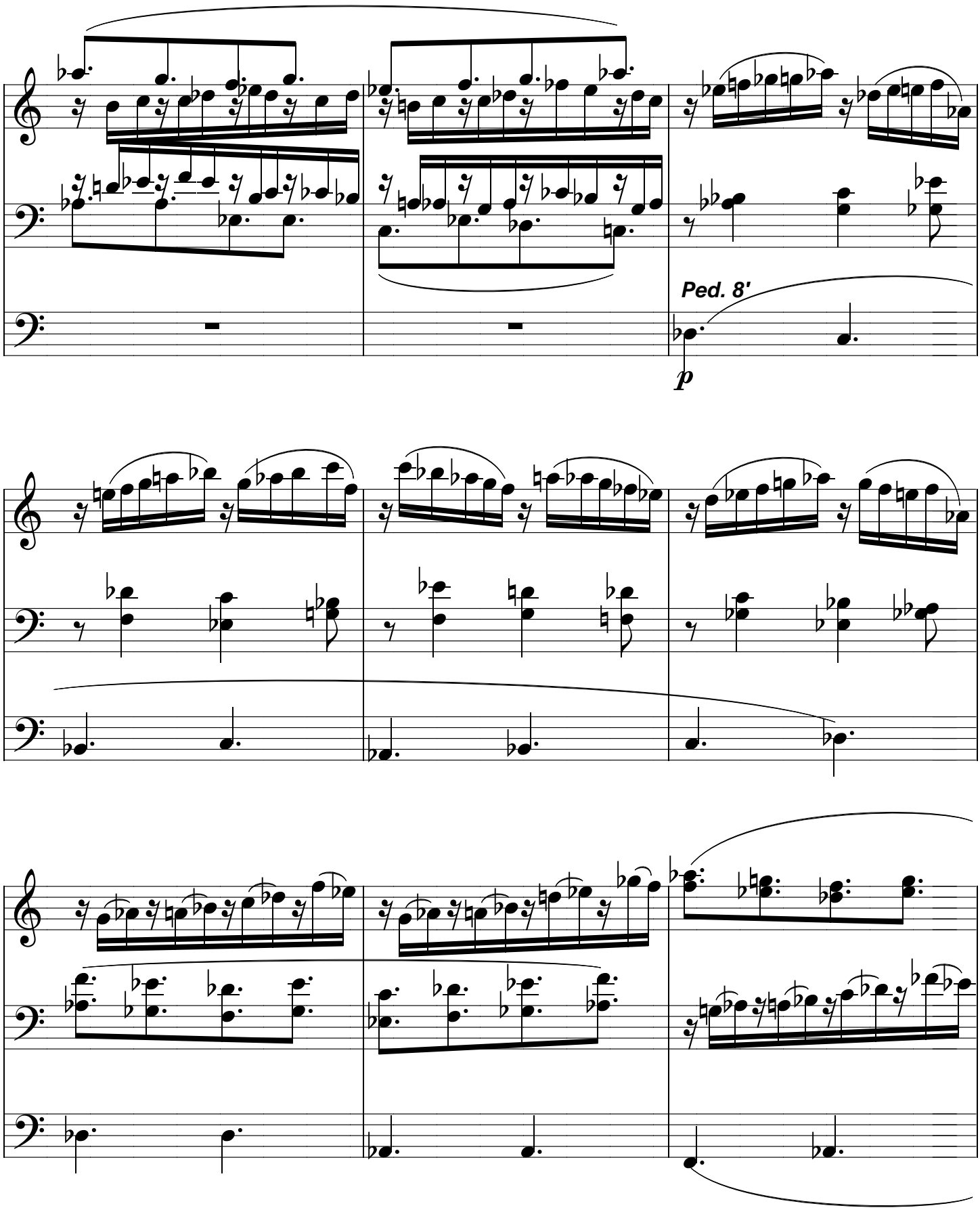

Ped.,P.,R.
mf
{G.,P.,R.
cresc.
Ped.,G.,P.,R.
f

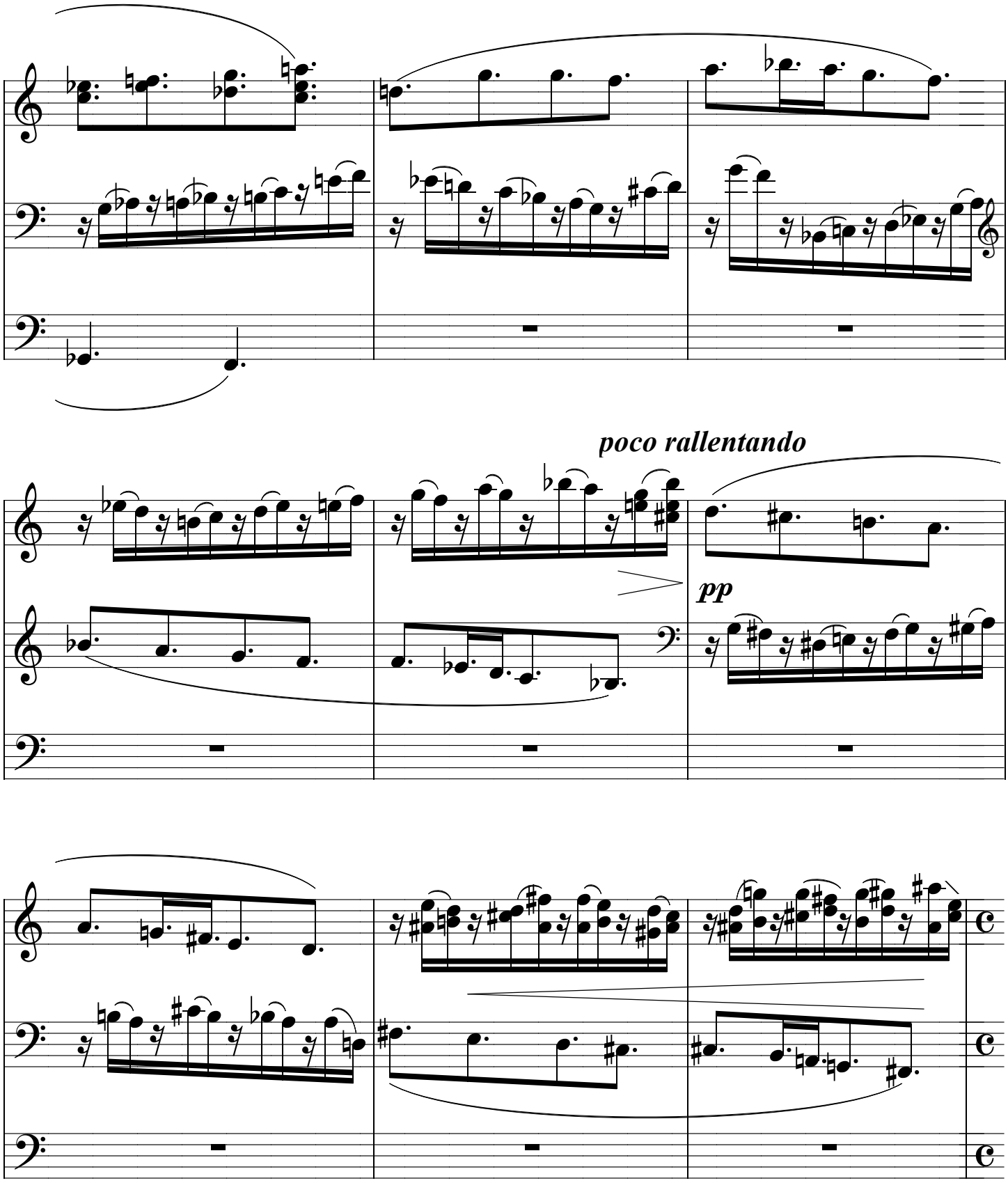


Andante con moto

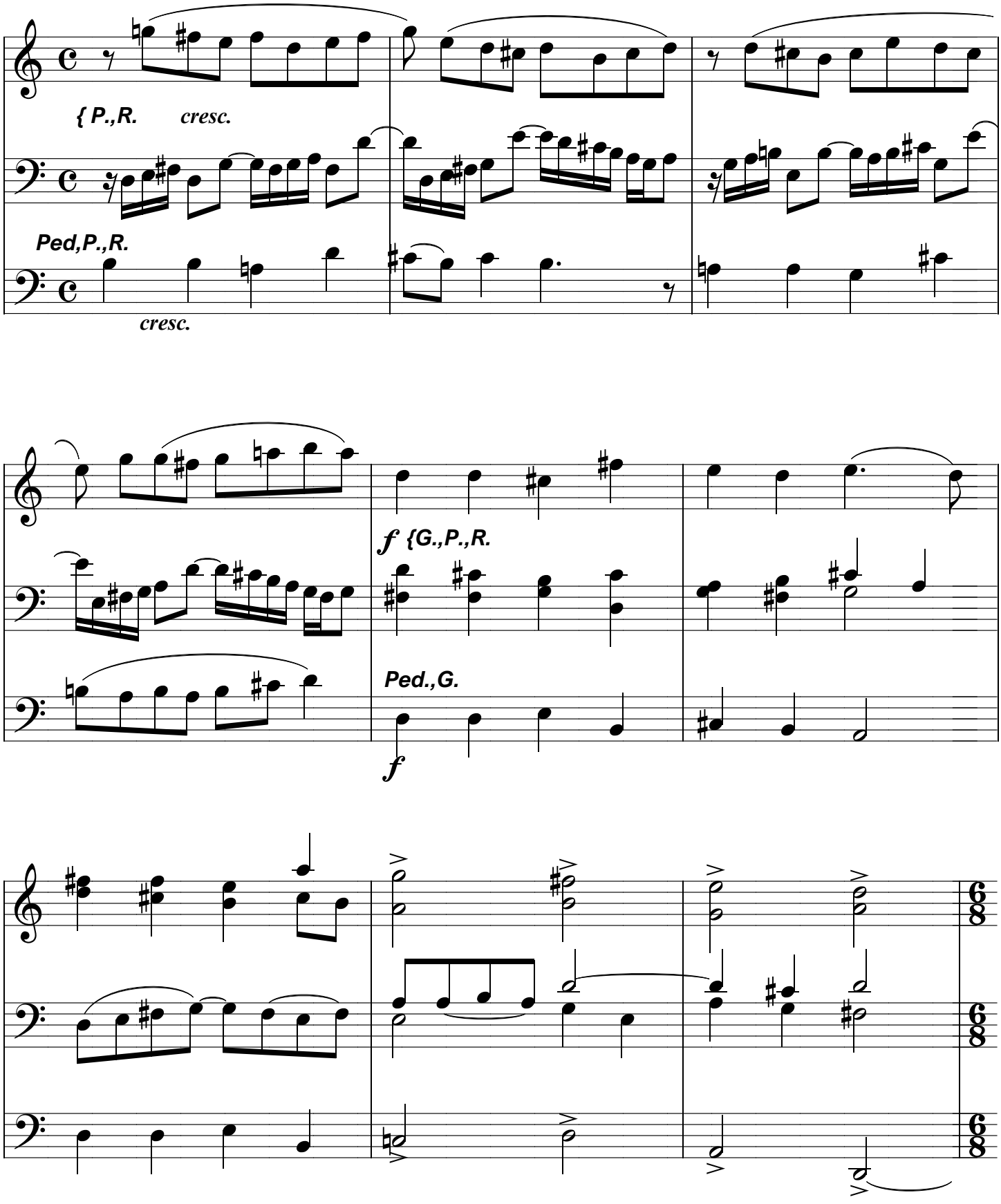


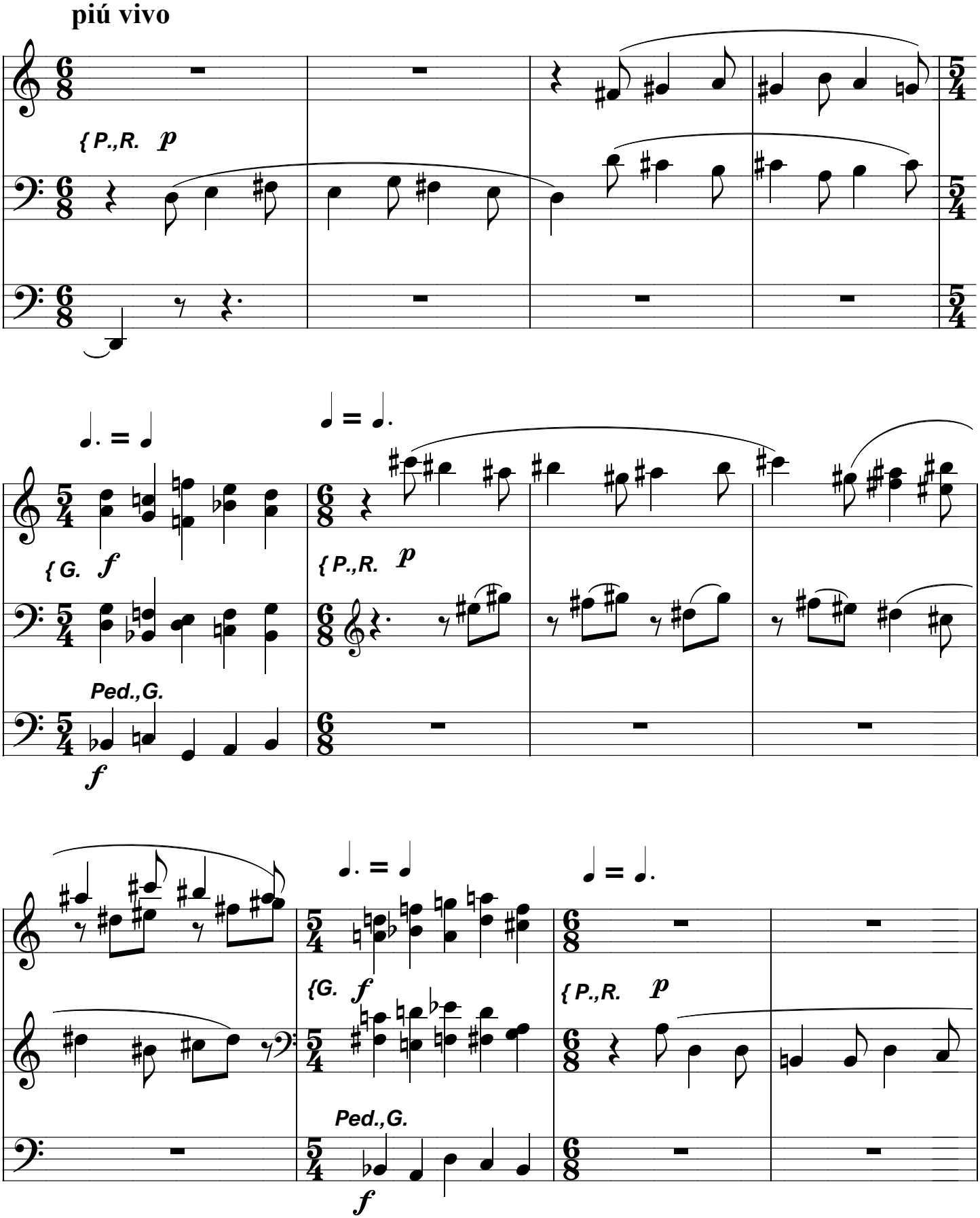


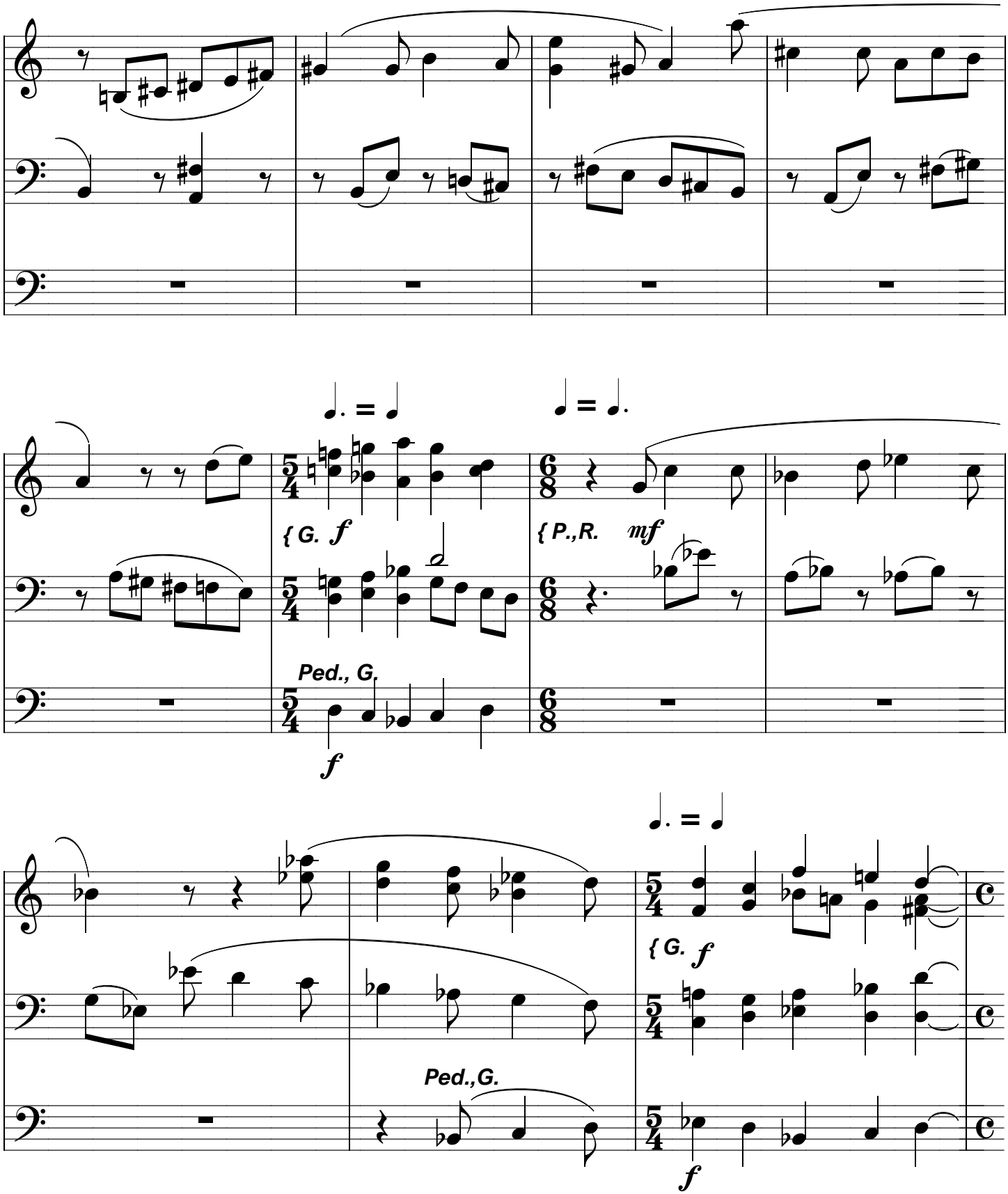

Ped. 8'
p

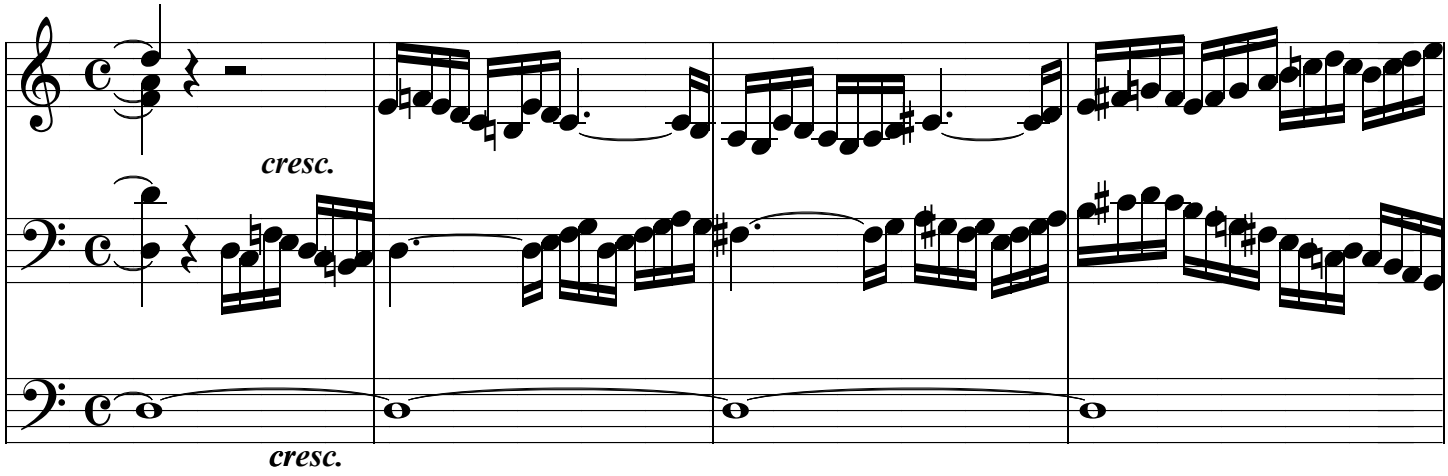

poco rallentando
pp

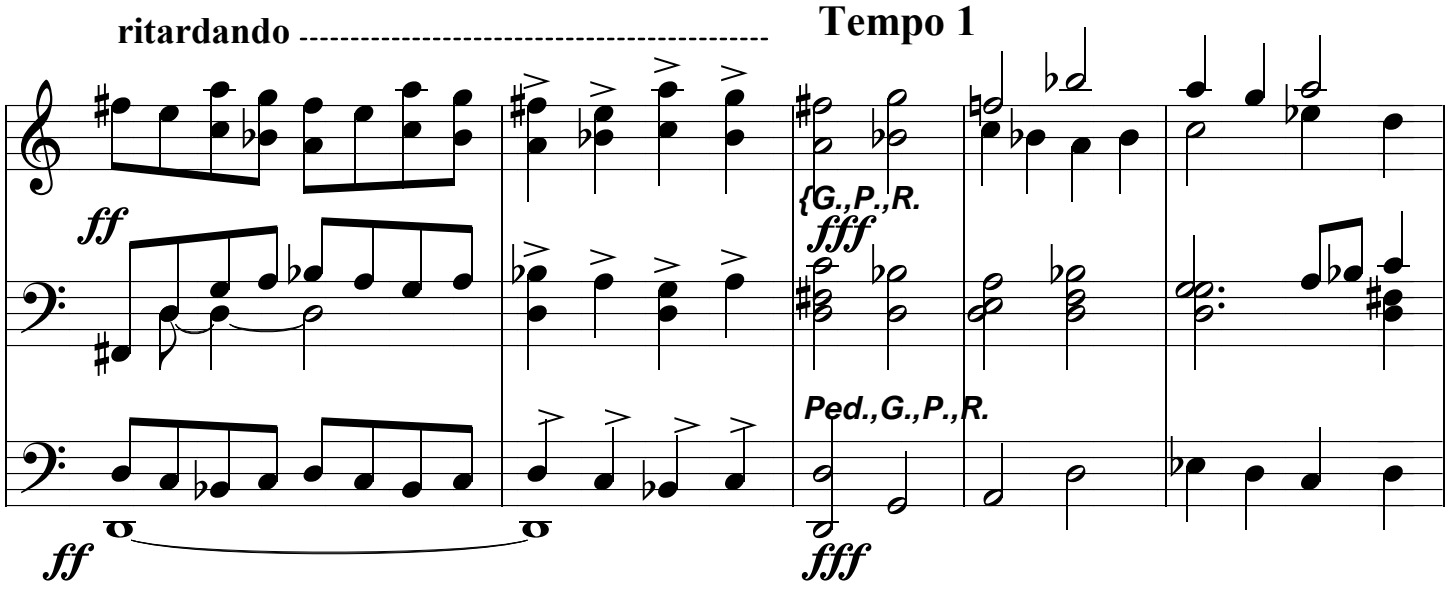
Tempo 1




piú vivo
{ P.,R. p
{ G. f
{ P.,R. p
Ped.,G.
f
{G. f
{ P.,R. p
Ped.,G.
f


{ G.
{ P.,R.
mf
Ped., G.
Ped.,G.


cresc.
cresc.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Tempo 1
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Ped.,G.,P.,R.
ff
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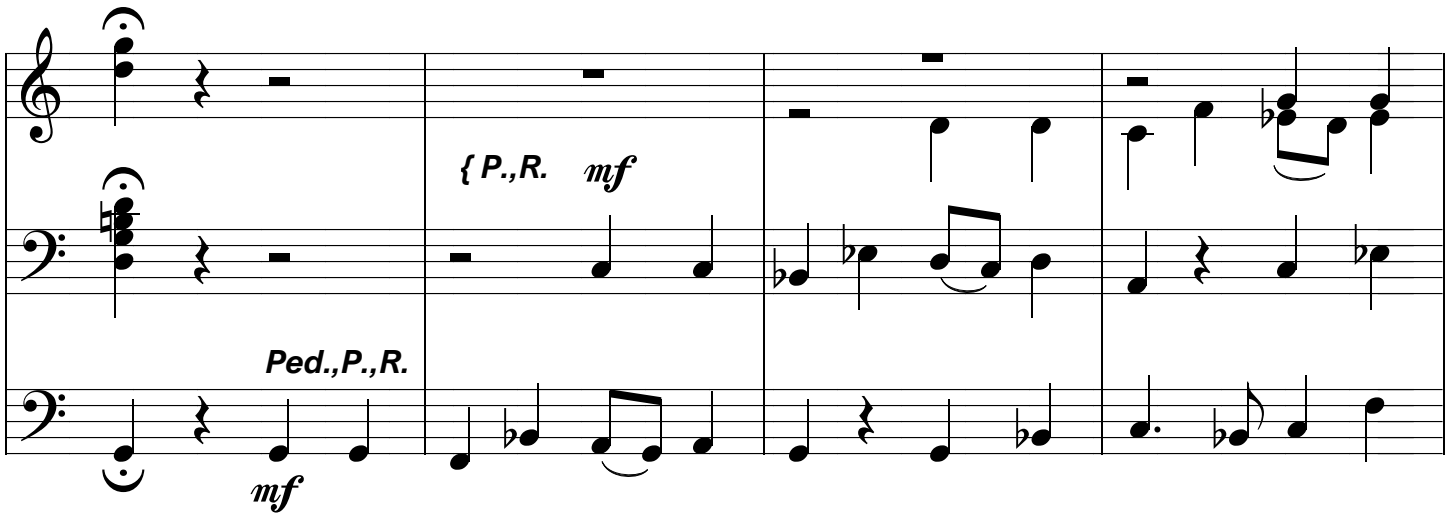
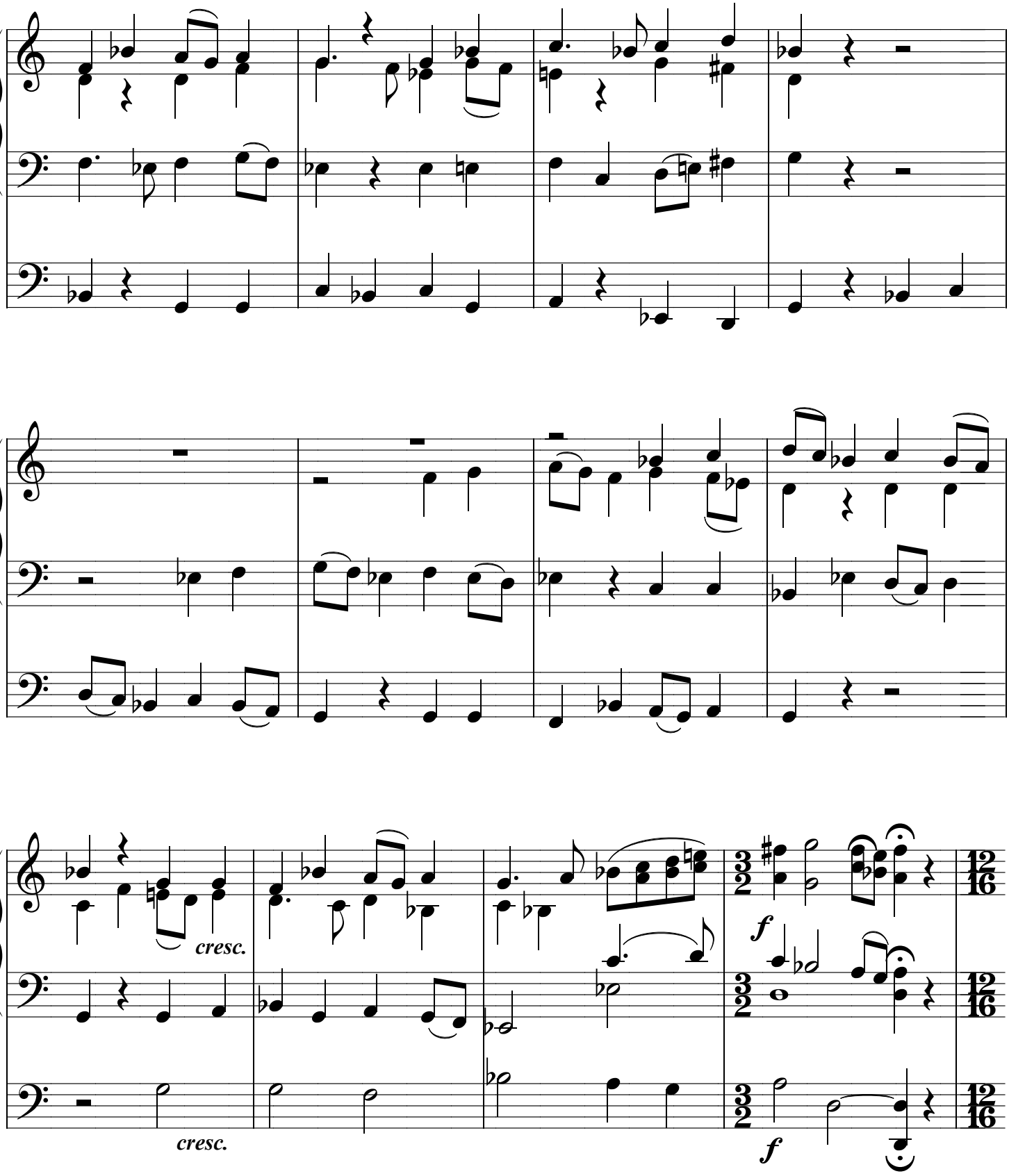
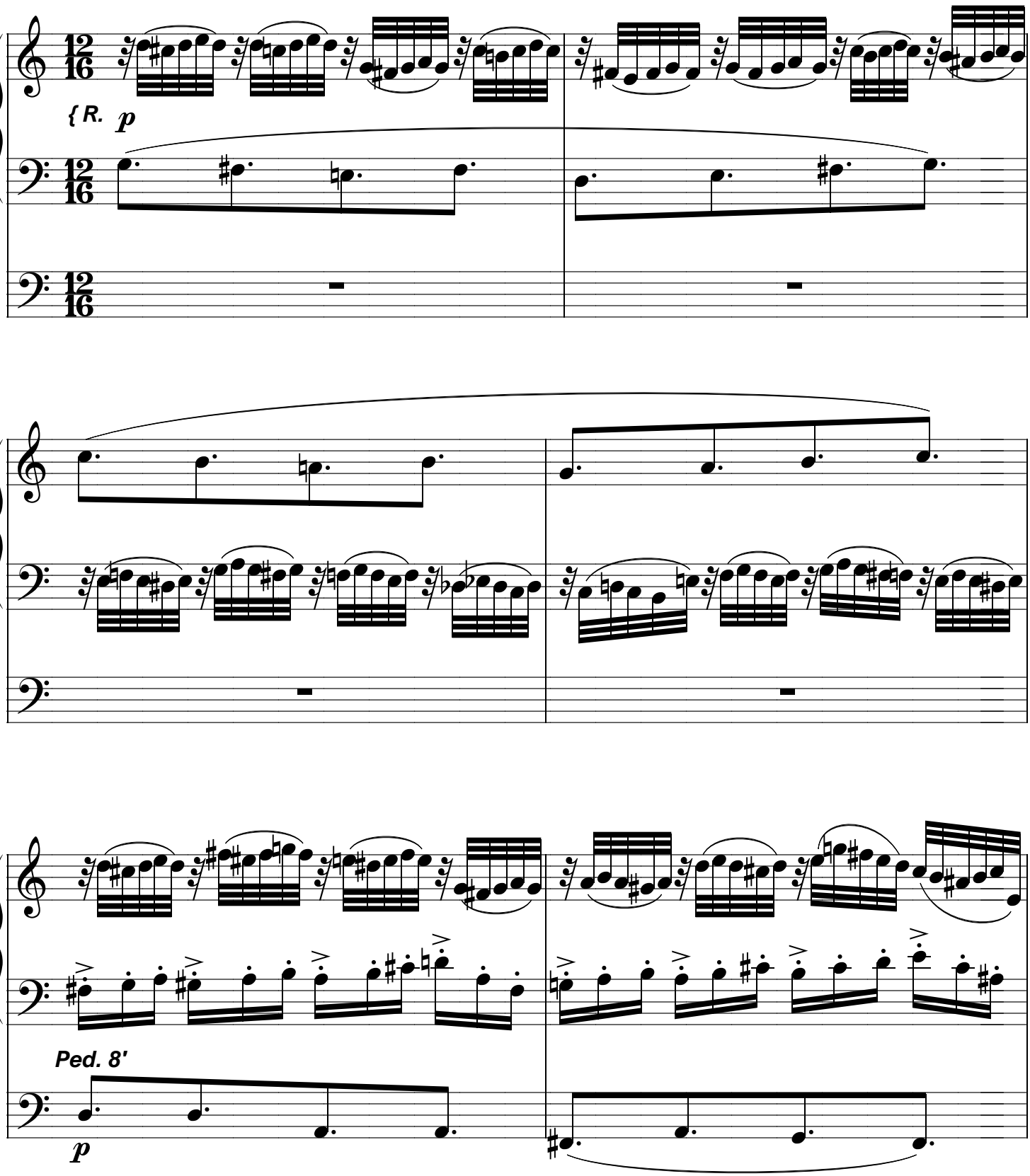
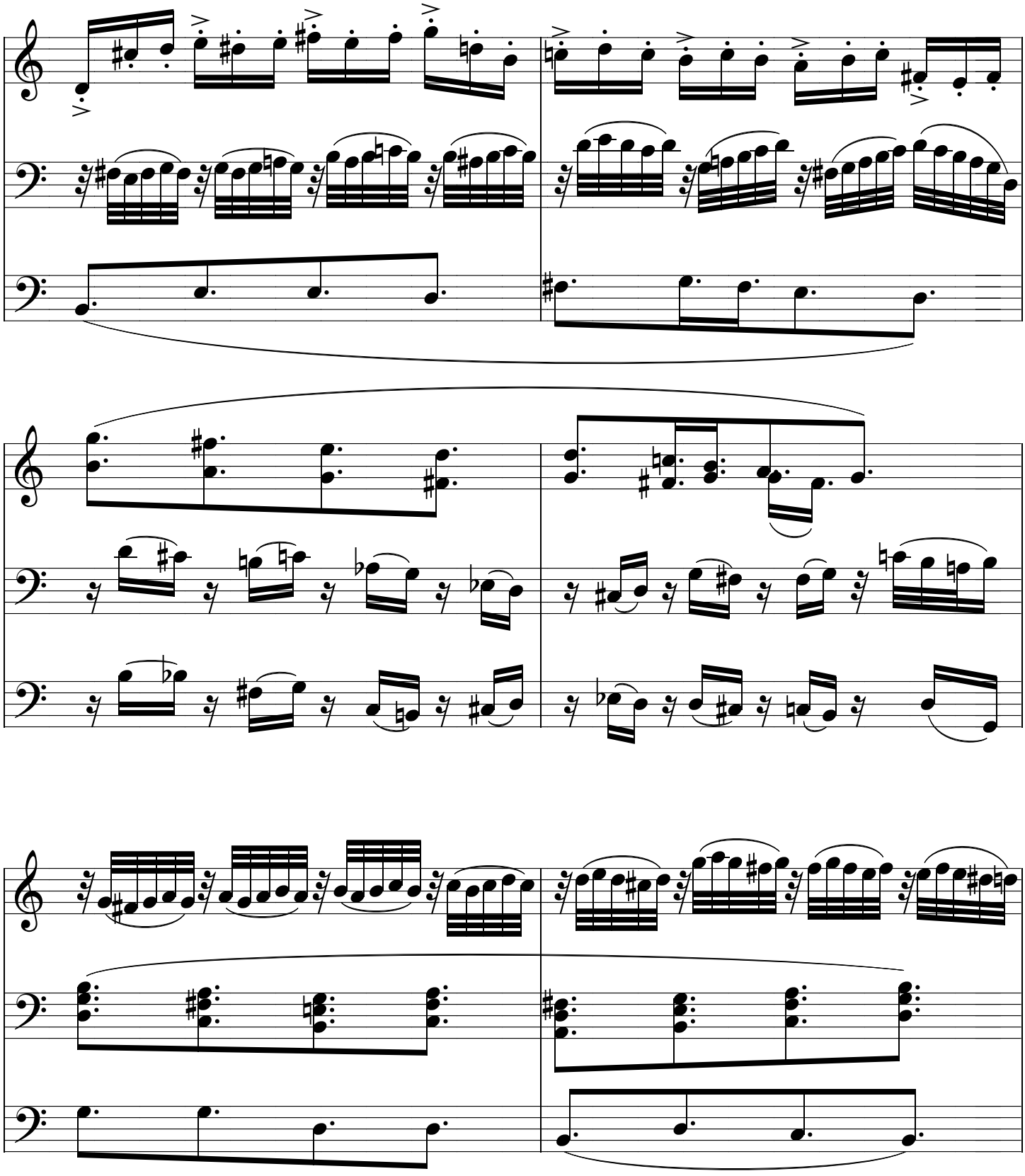
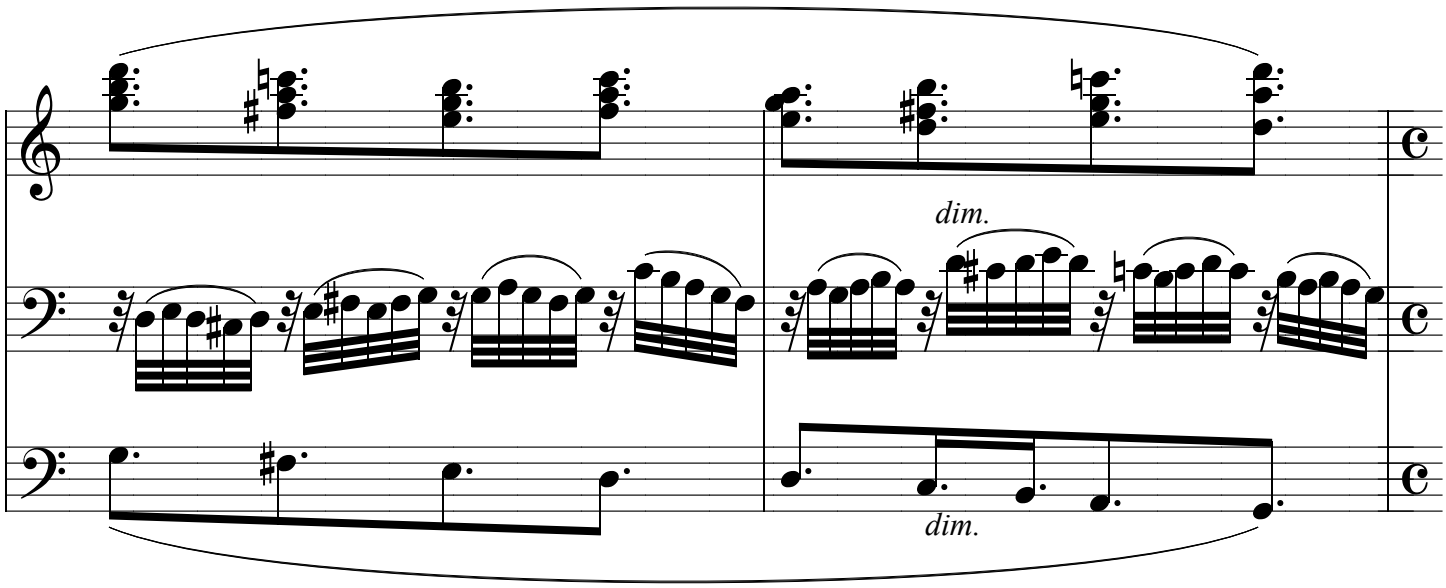

{ P.,R. mf
Ped.,P.,R.
mf


cresc.
cresc.
f
f

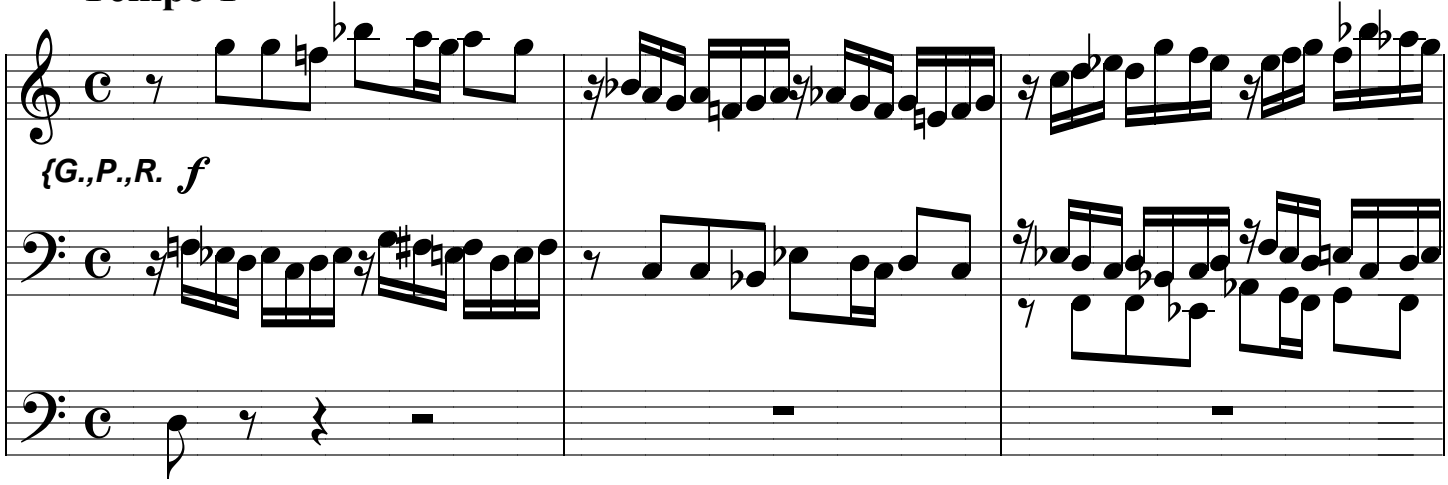
Andante

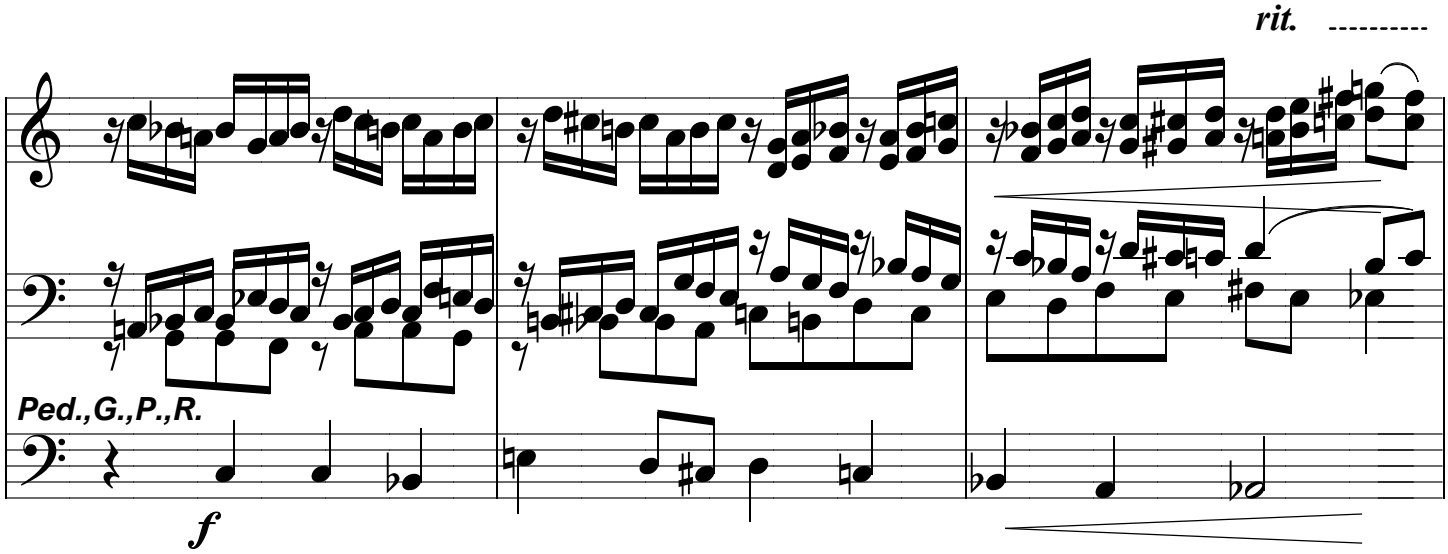


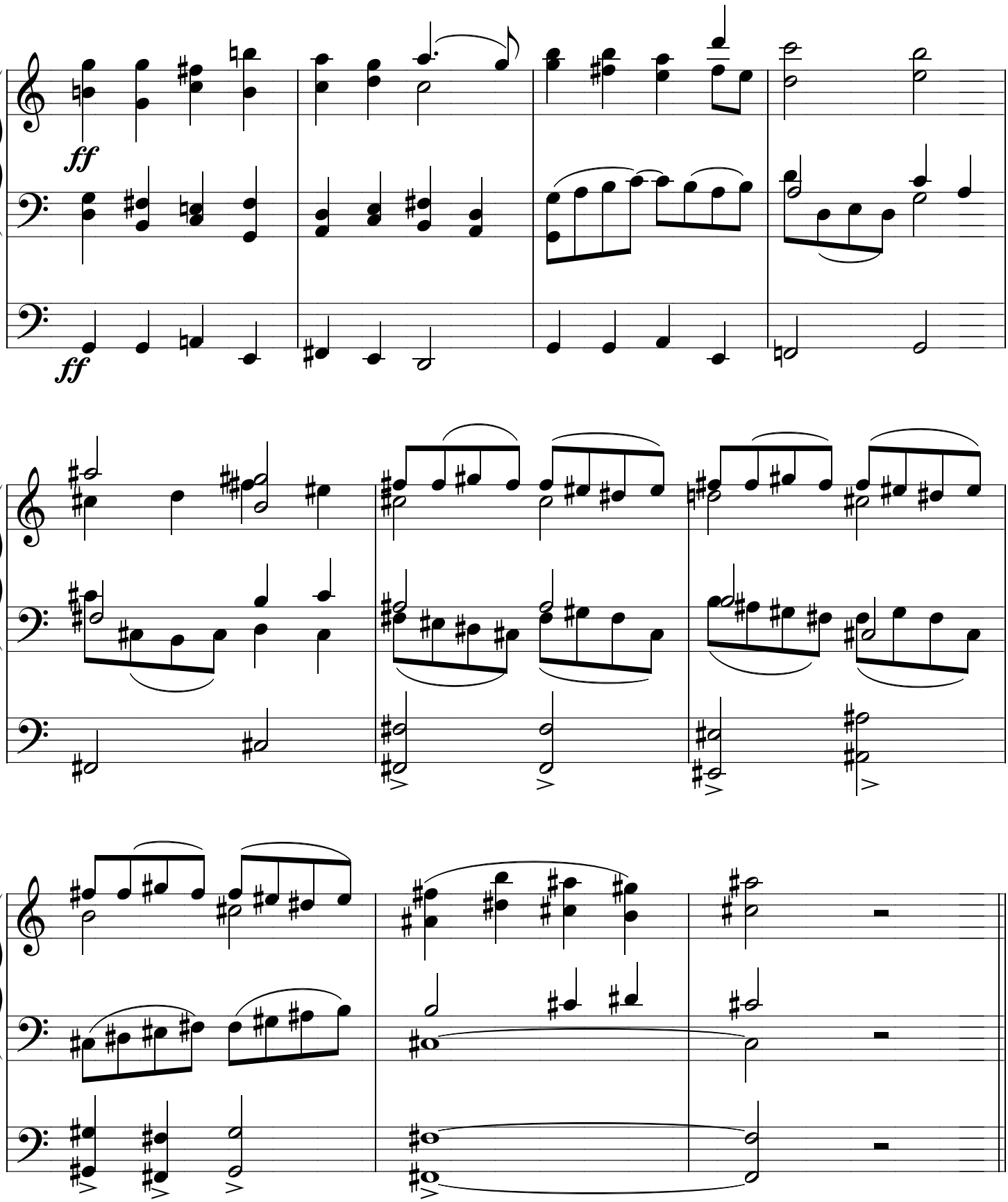




Tempo 1



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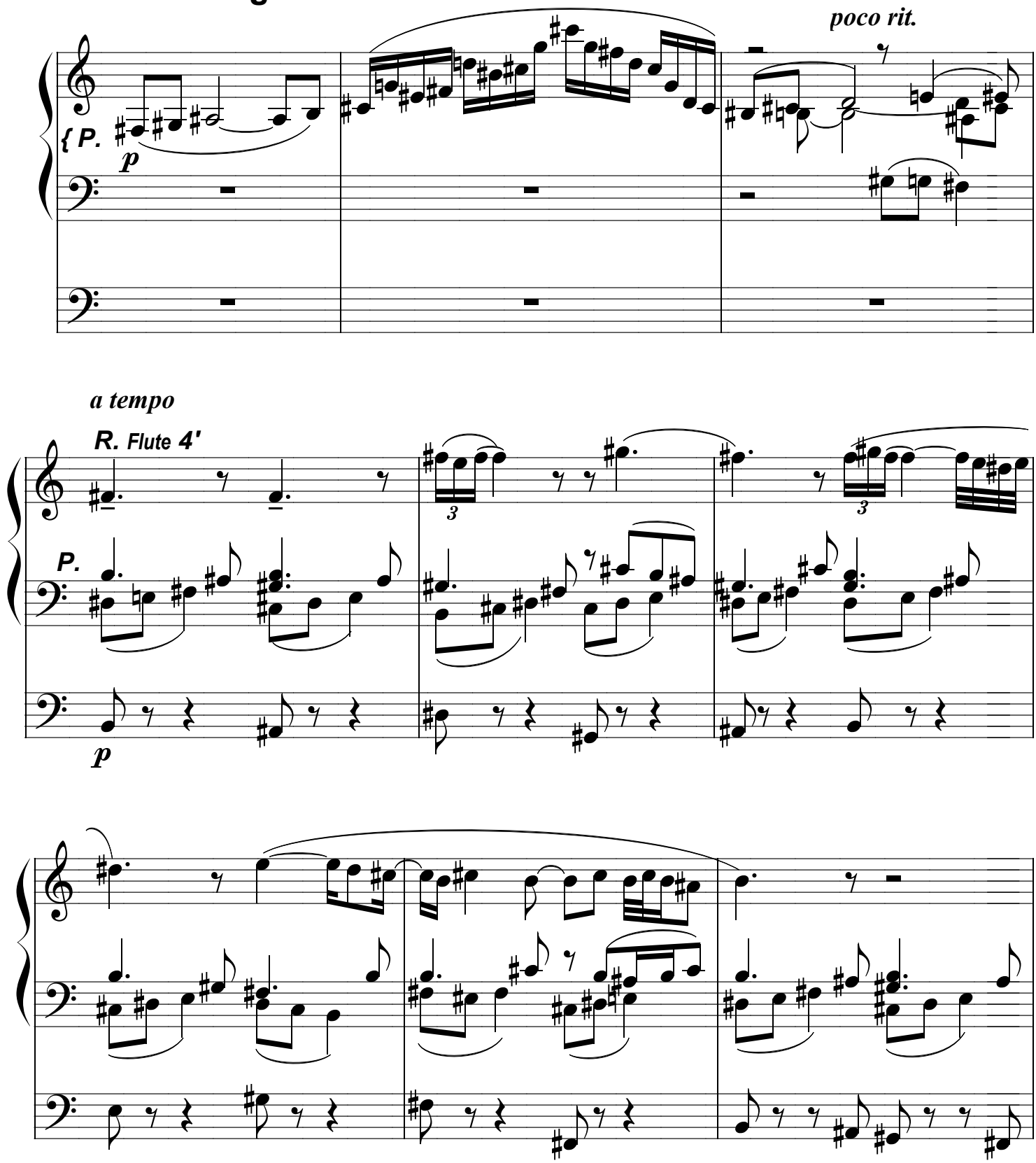
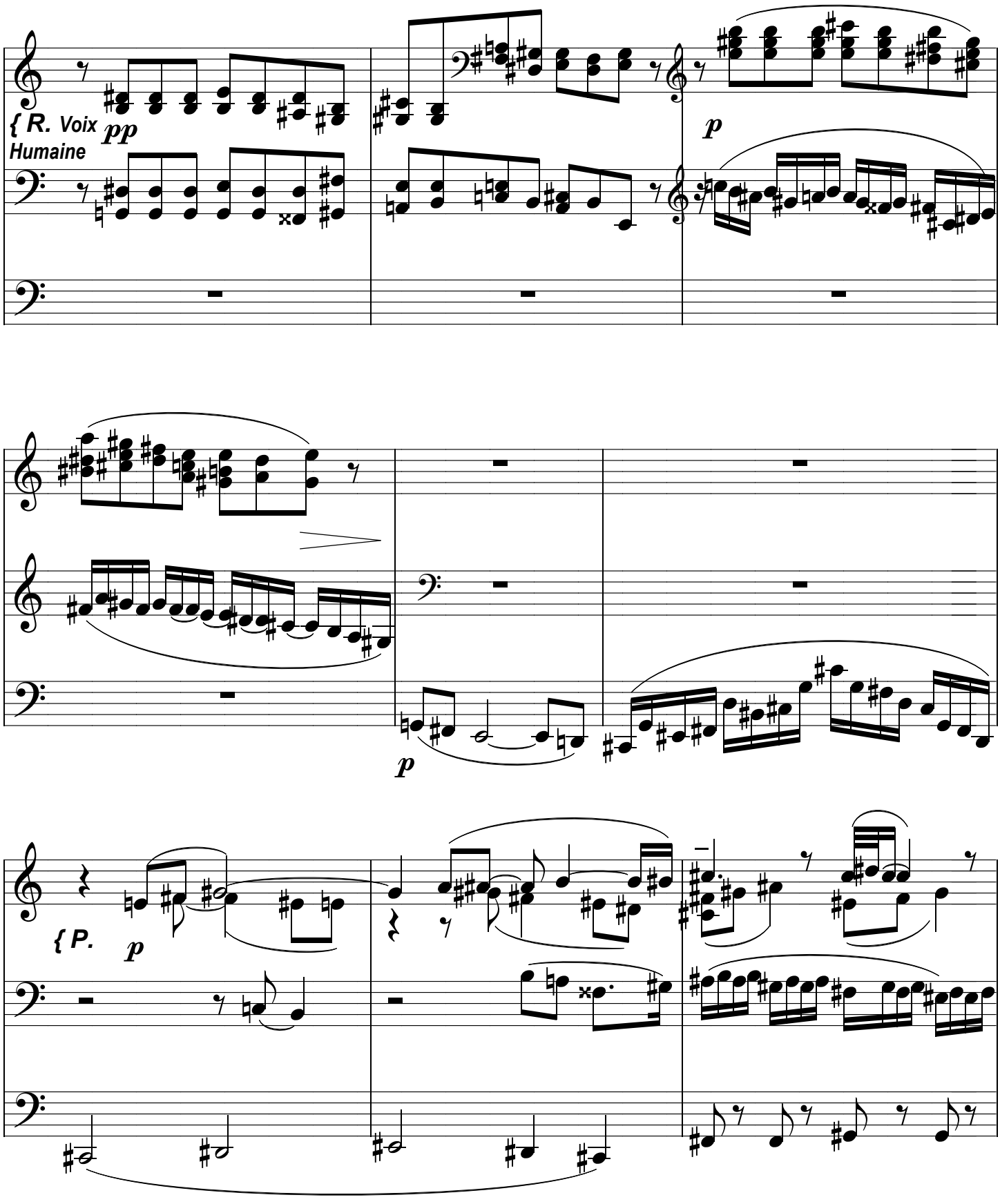
P. 8,4' - R. 8,4' / Voix Humain - G. 16,8,4' - Ped 8,4'

II. Aria. Adagio e cantabile




{ R. Voix Humaine
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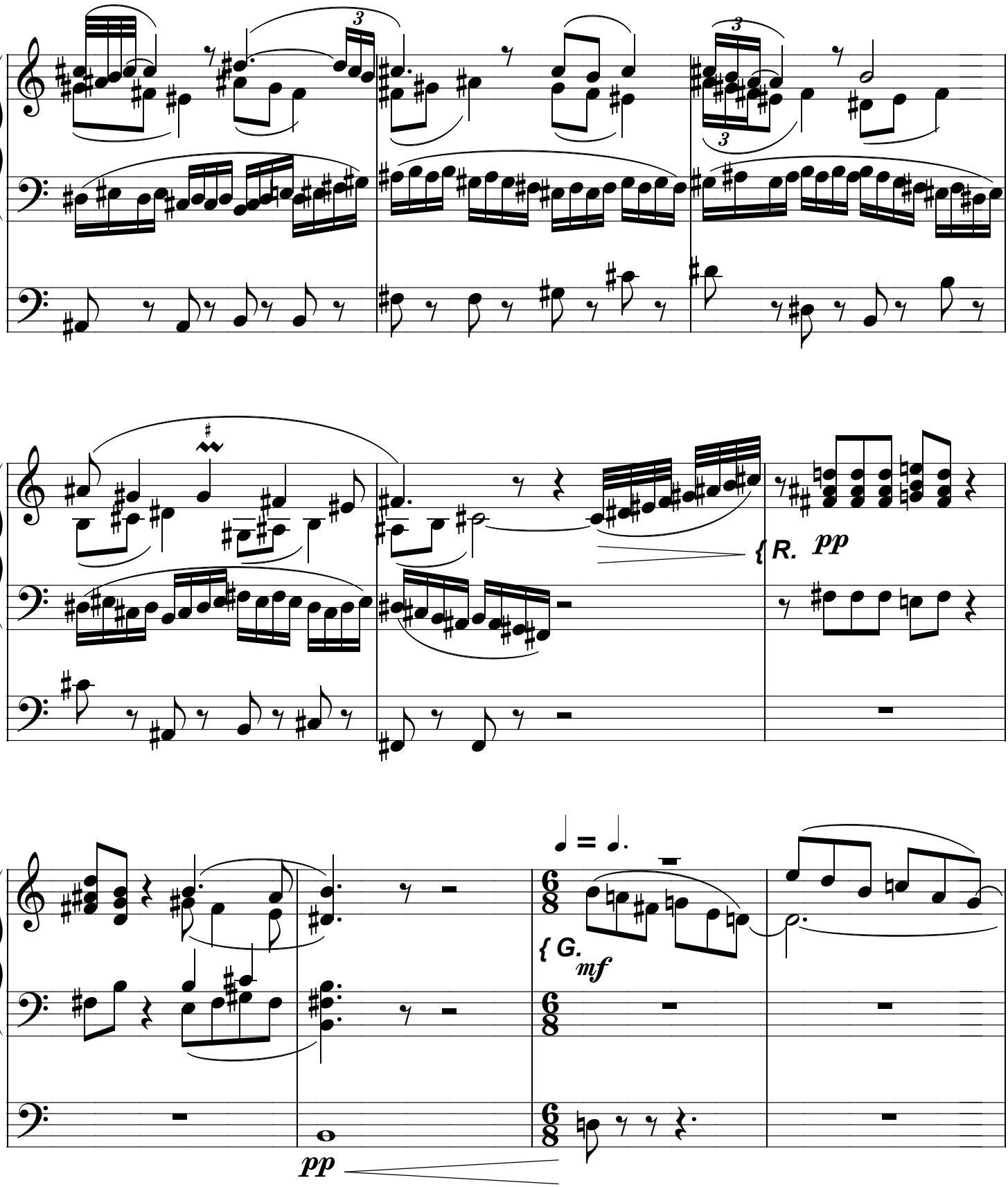
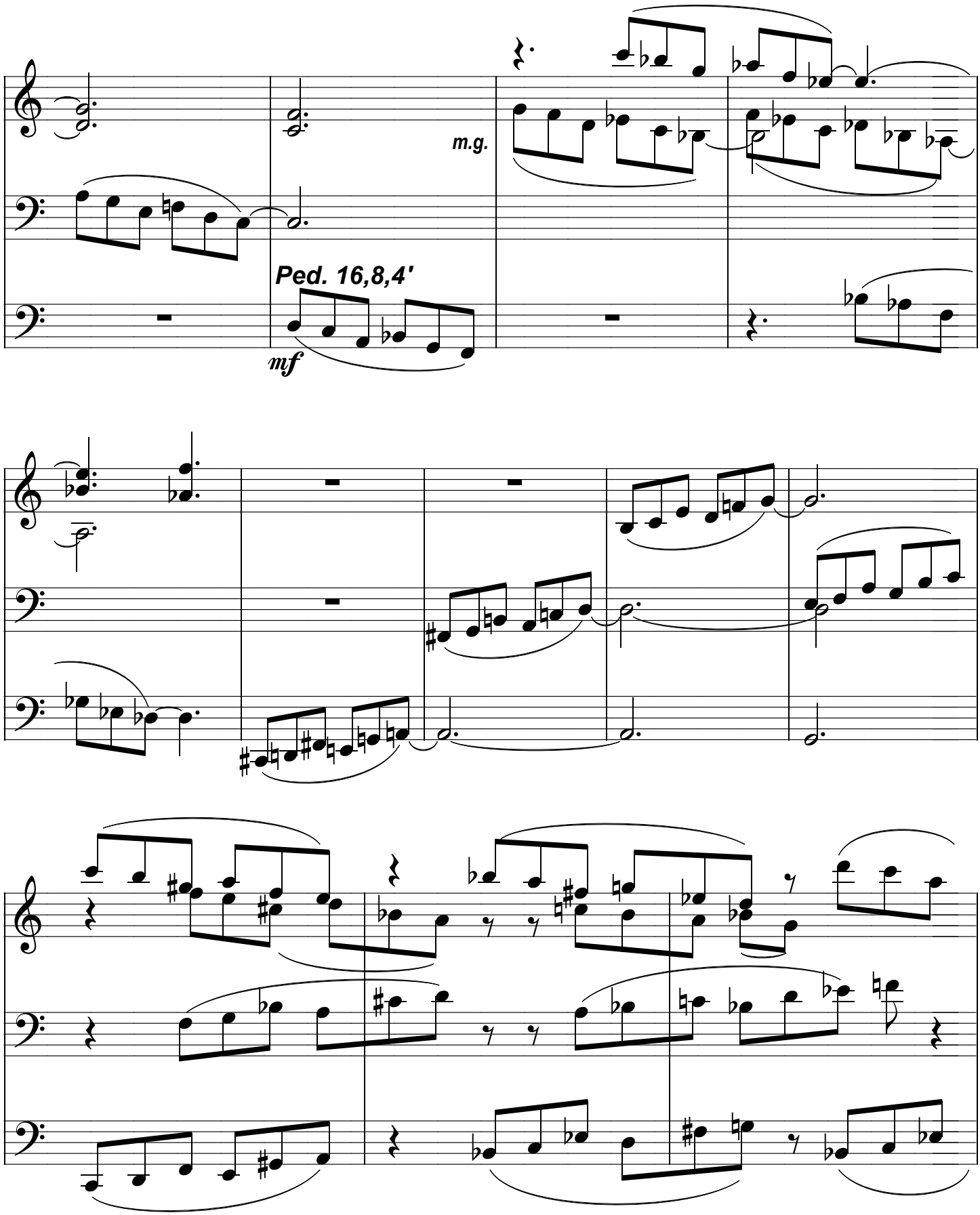
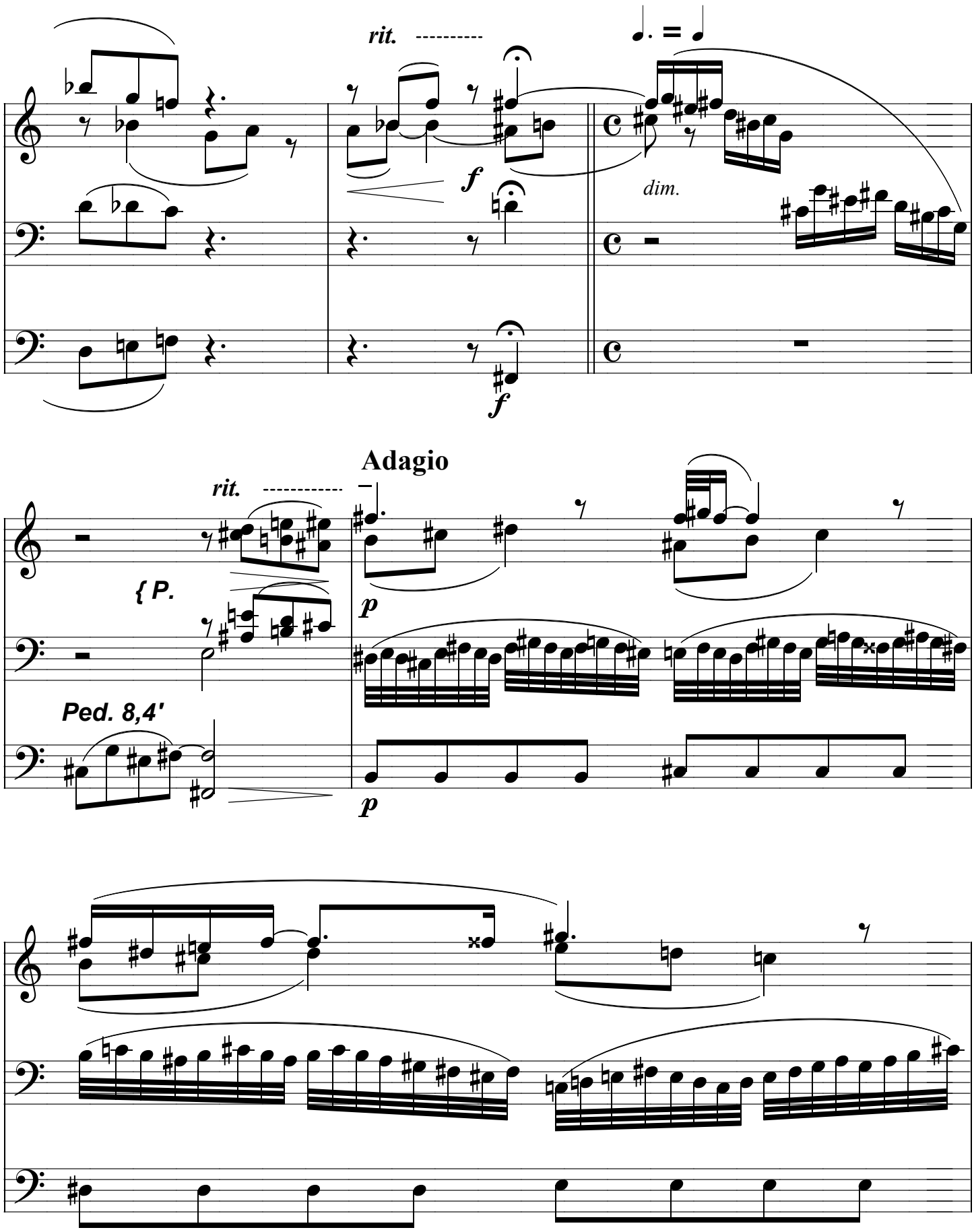
p
p
{ P.
p


3
3
3
R.
pp
G.
mf
pp


m.g.
Ped. 16,8,4'
mf


rit.
f
dim.
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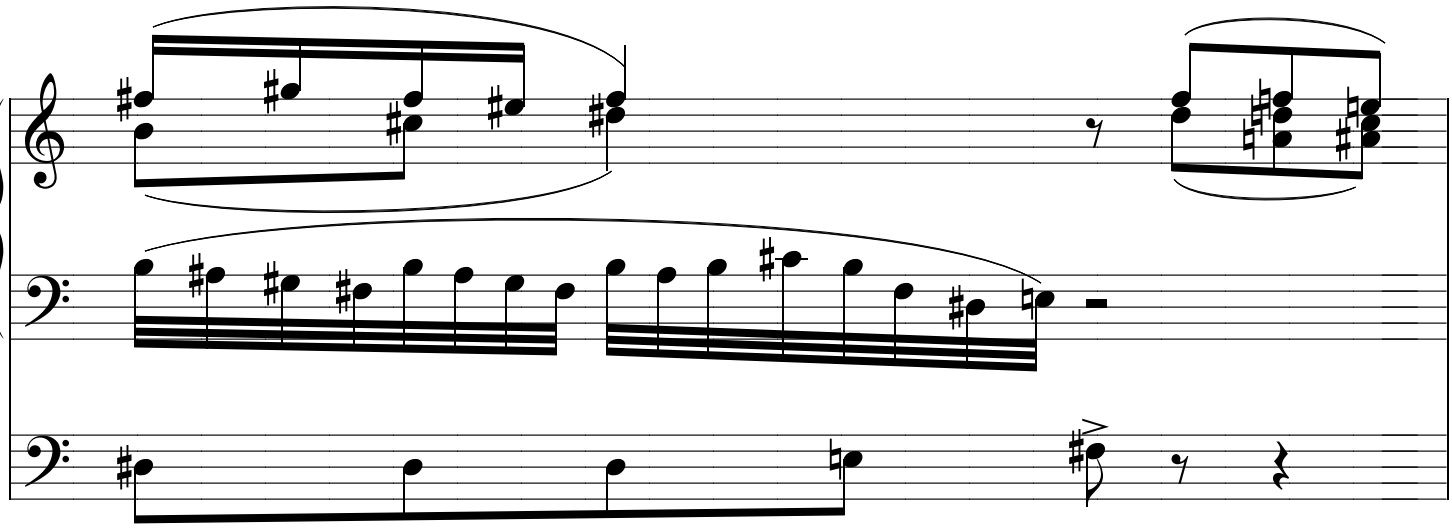
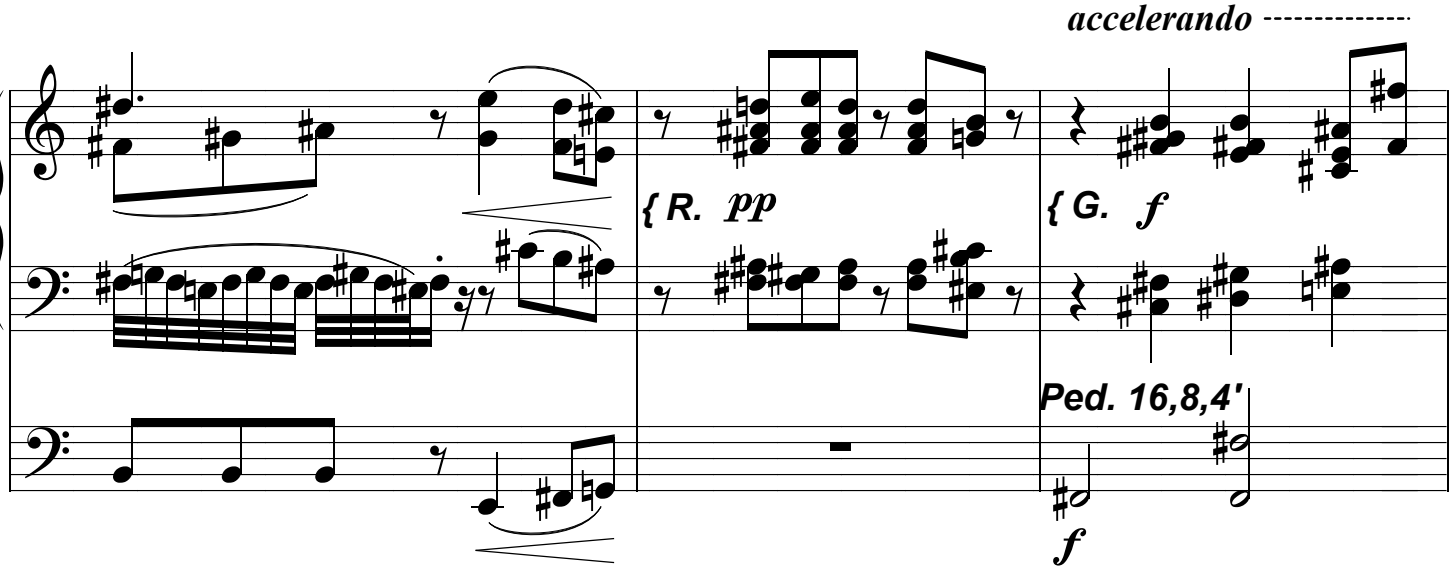
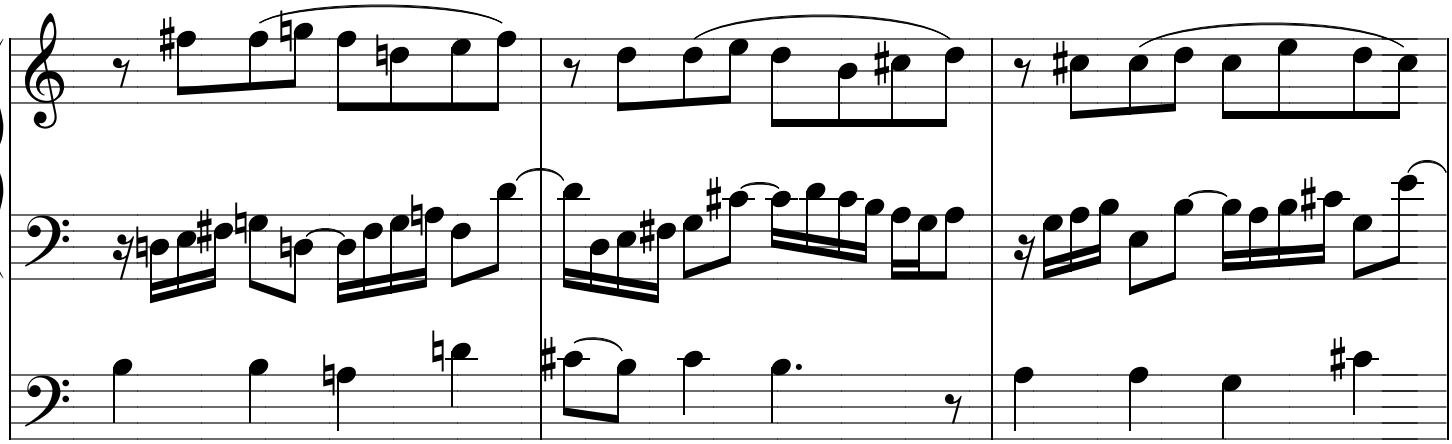
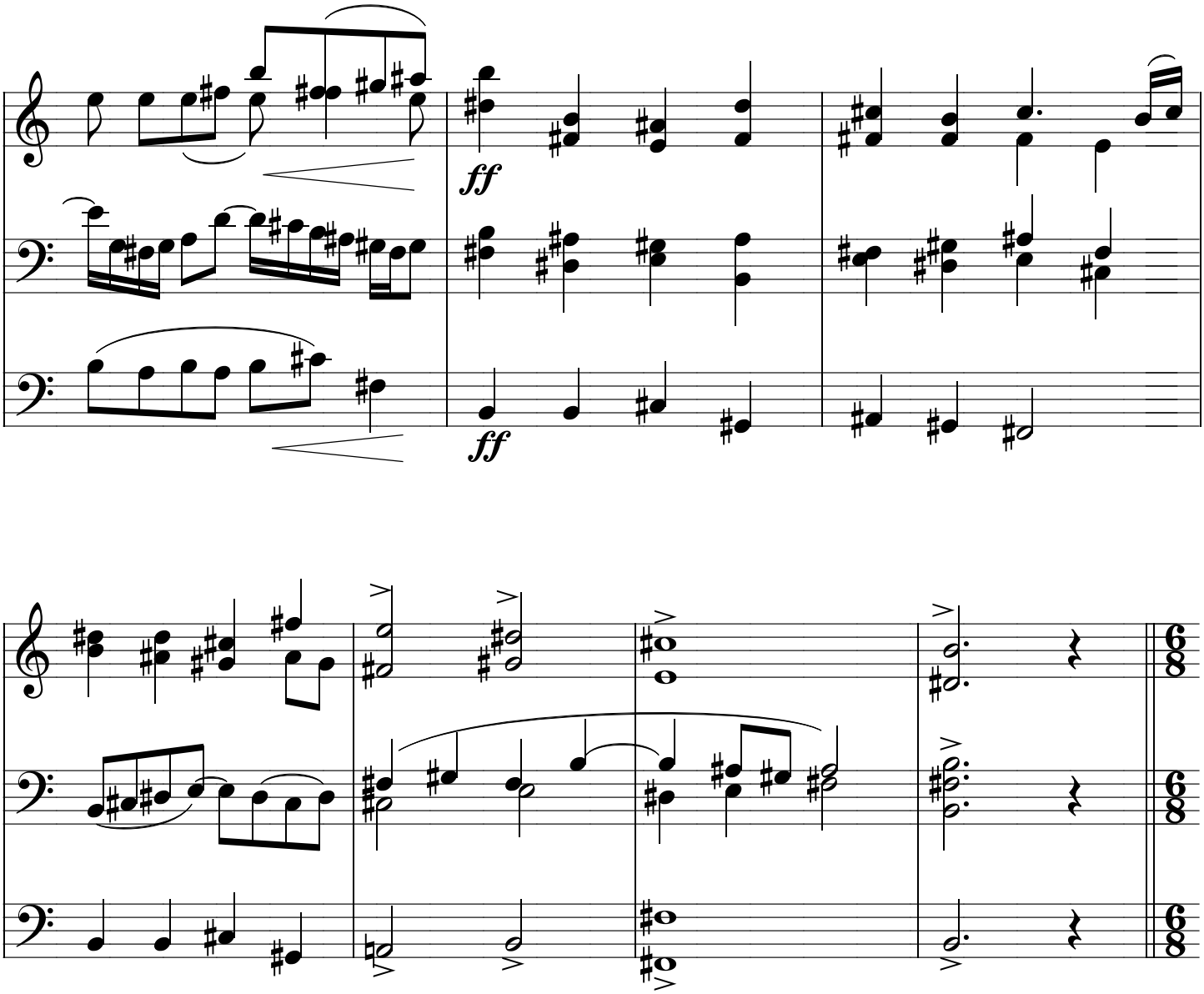
Adagio
rit.
{ P.
p
Ped. 8,4'
p





Tempo 1 (Moderato)

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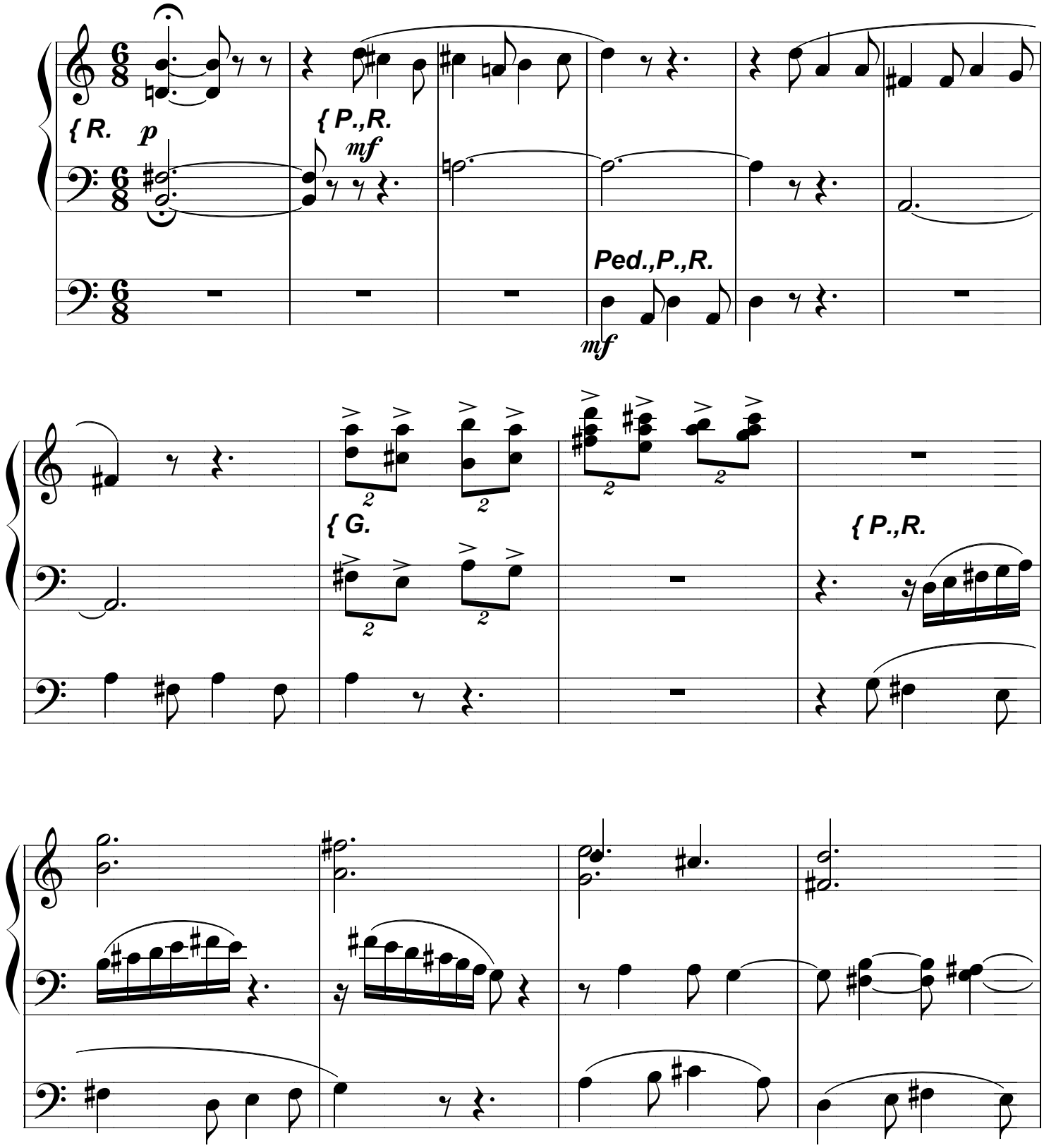
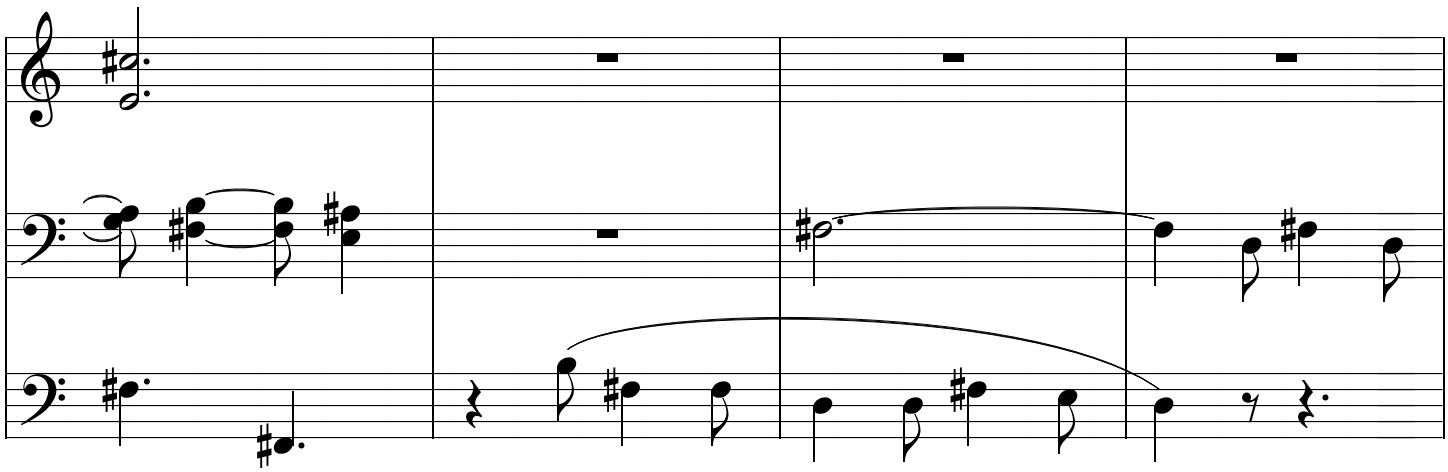
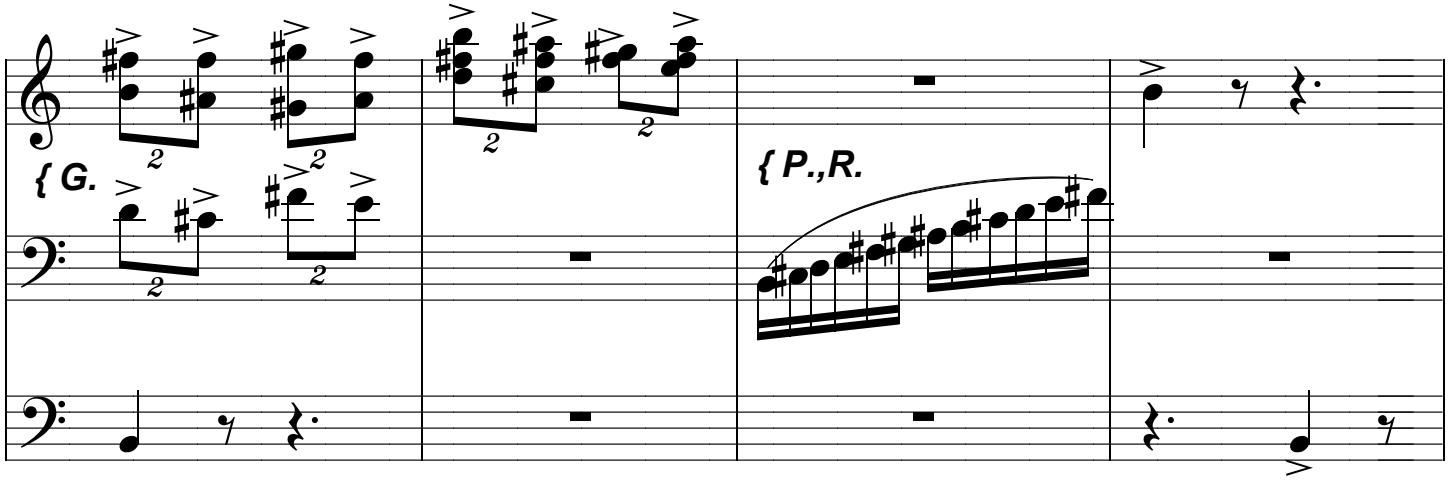
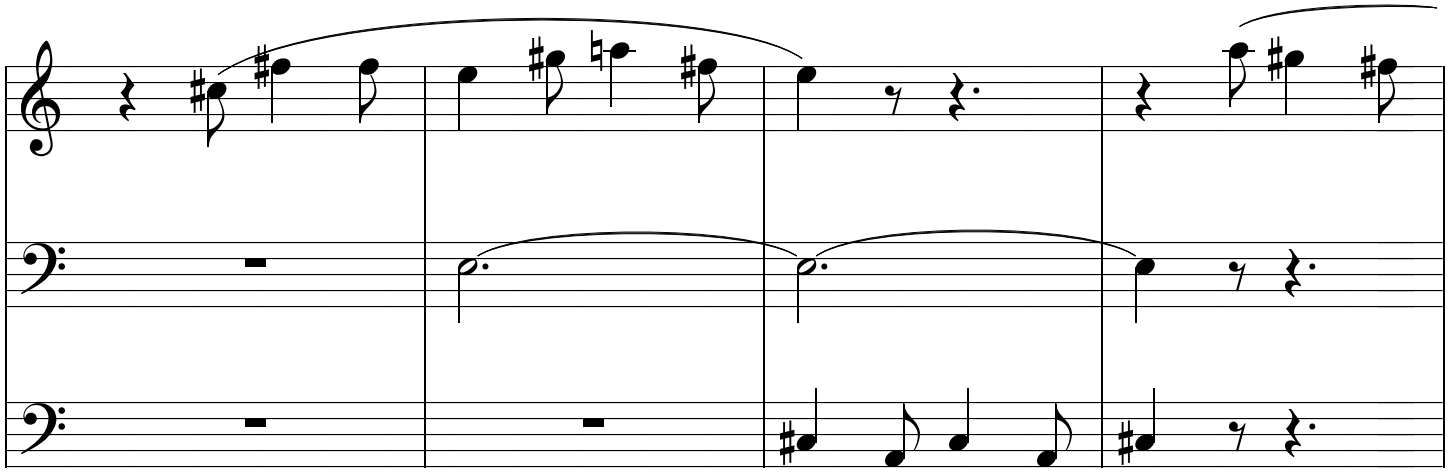
P. 8,4' - R. 8,4' - G. 16,8,4' - Ped. 16,8'

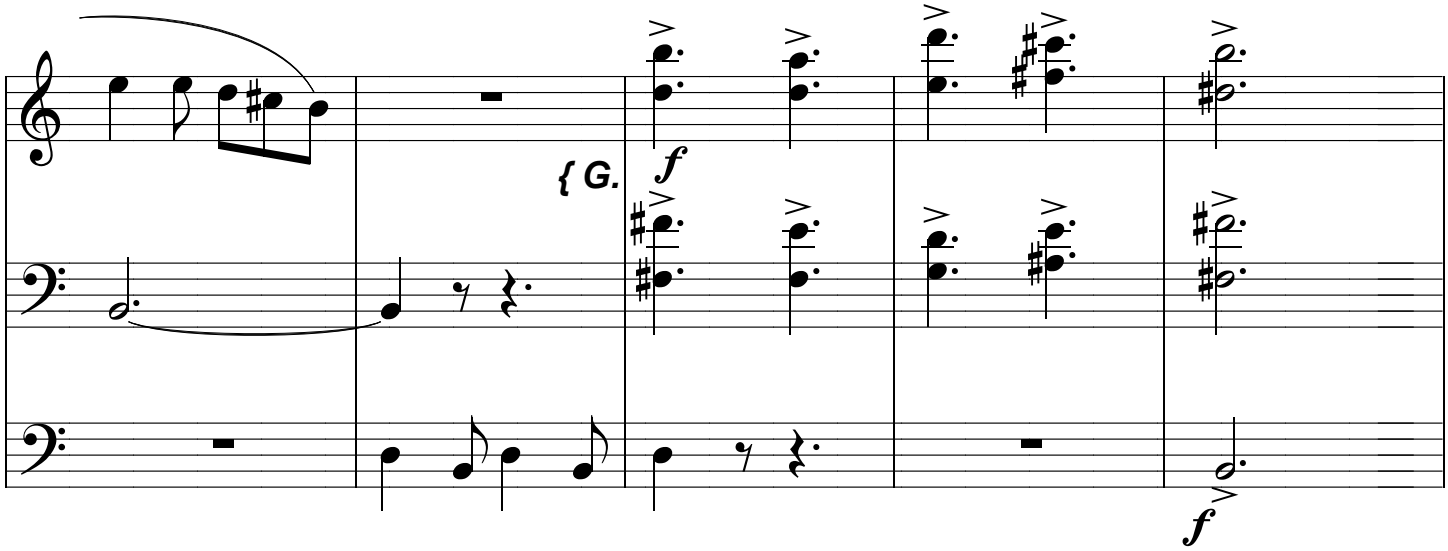
III. Allegro scherzando

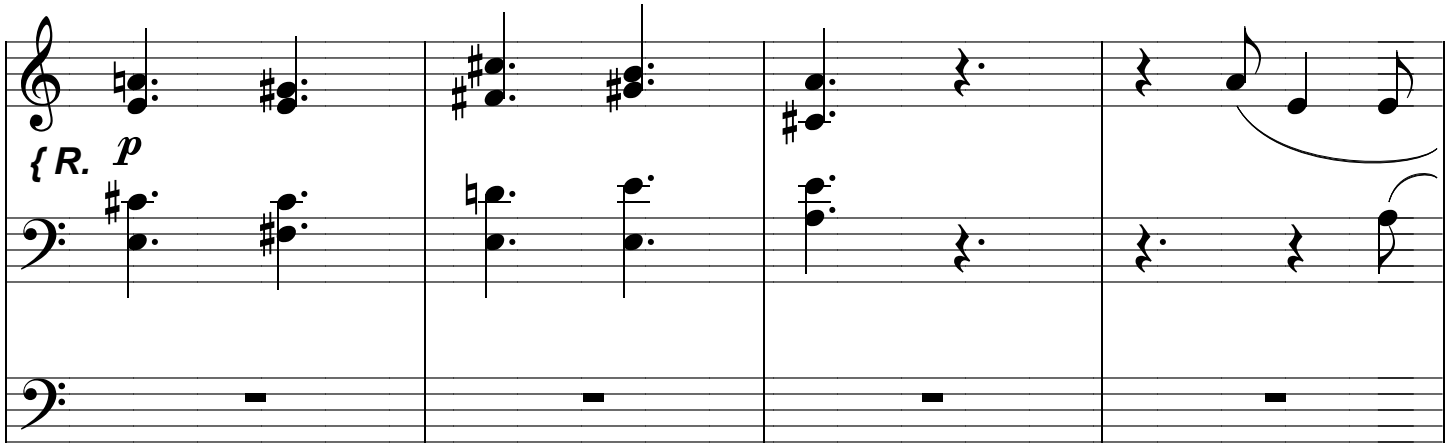


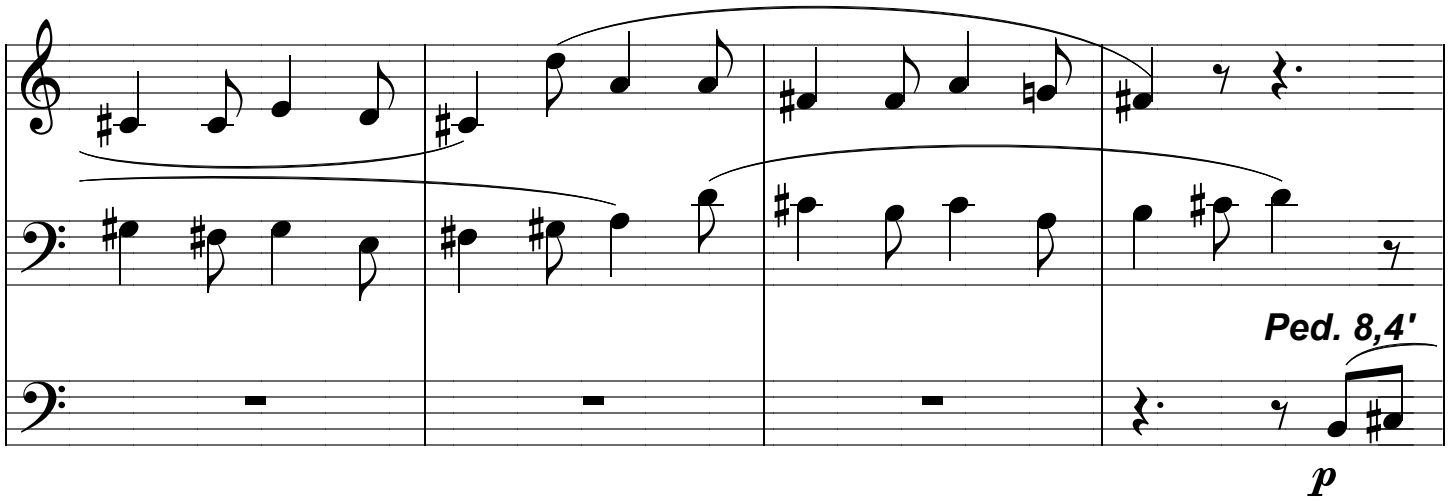


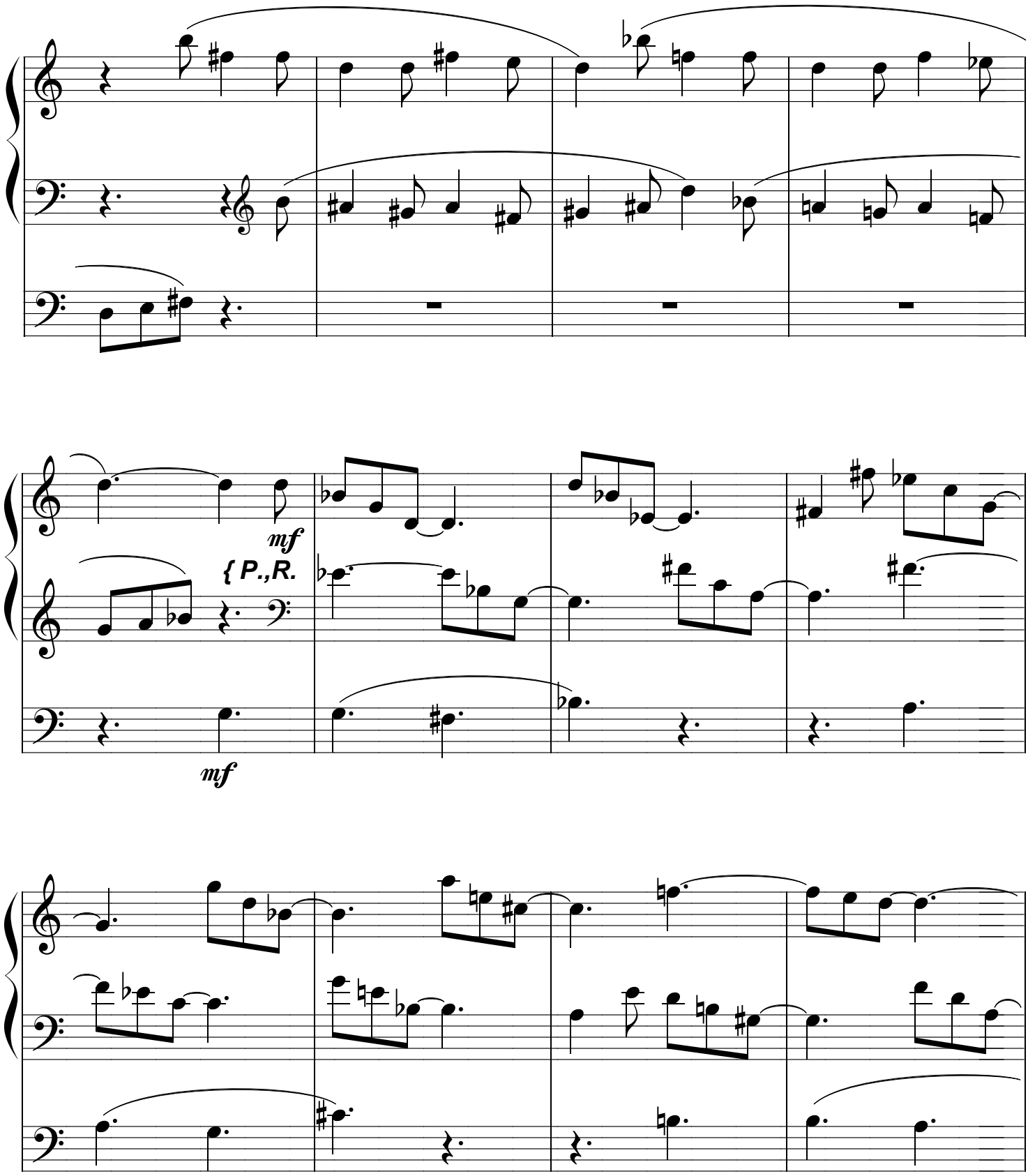

{ G.
{ P.,R.

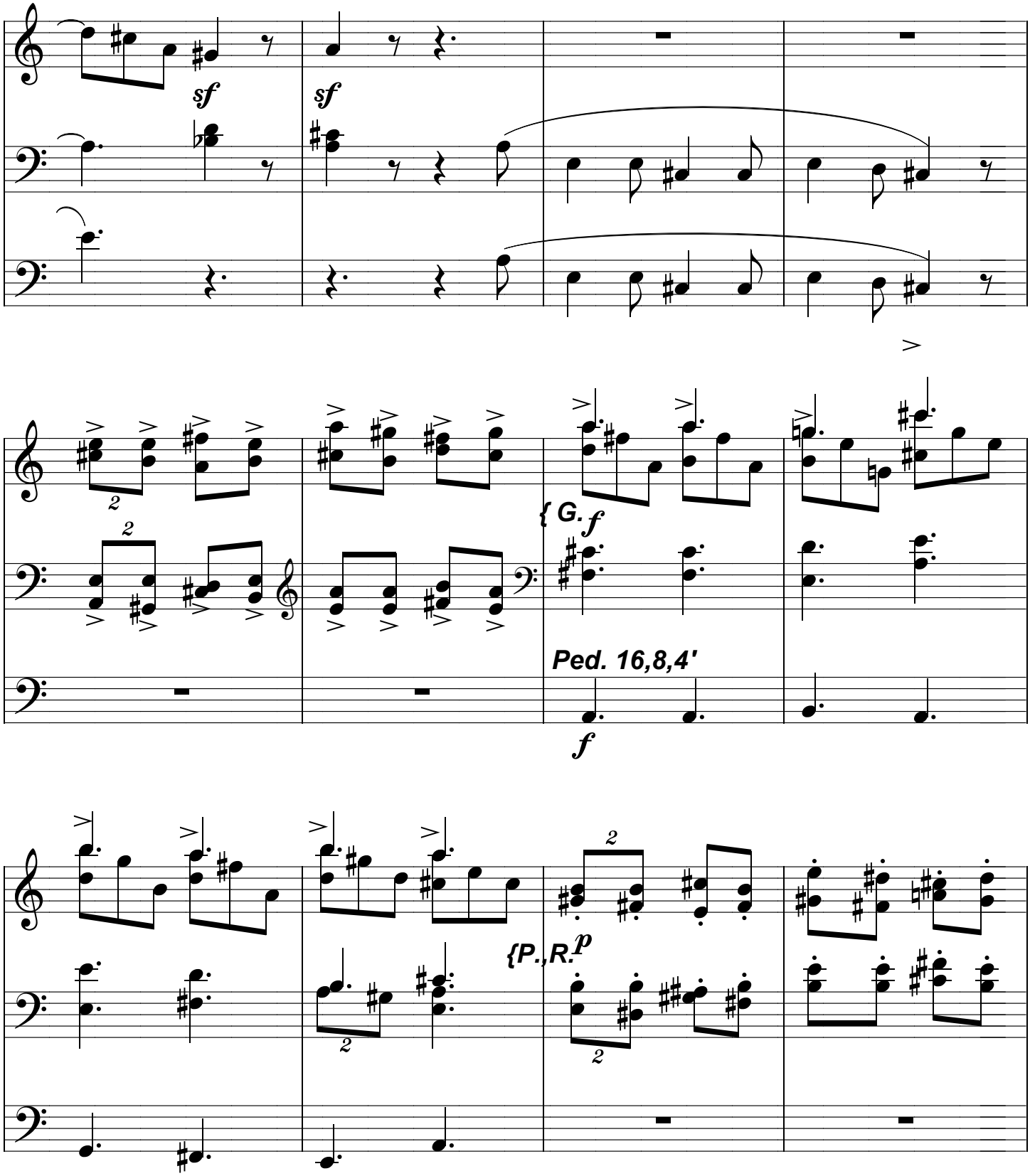


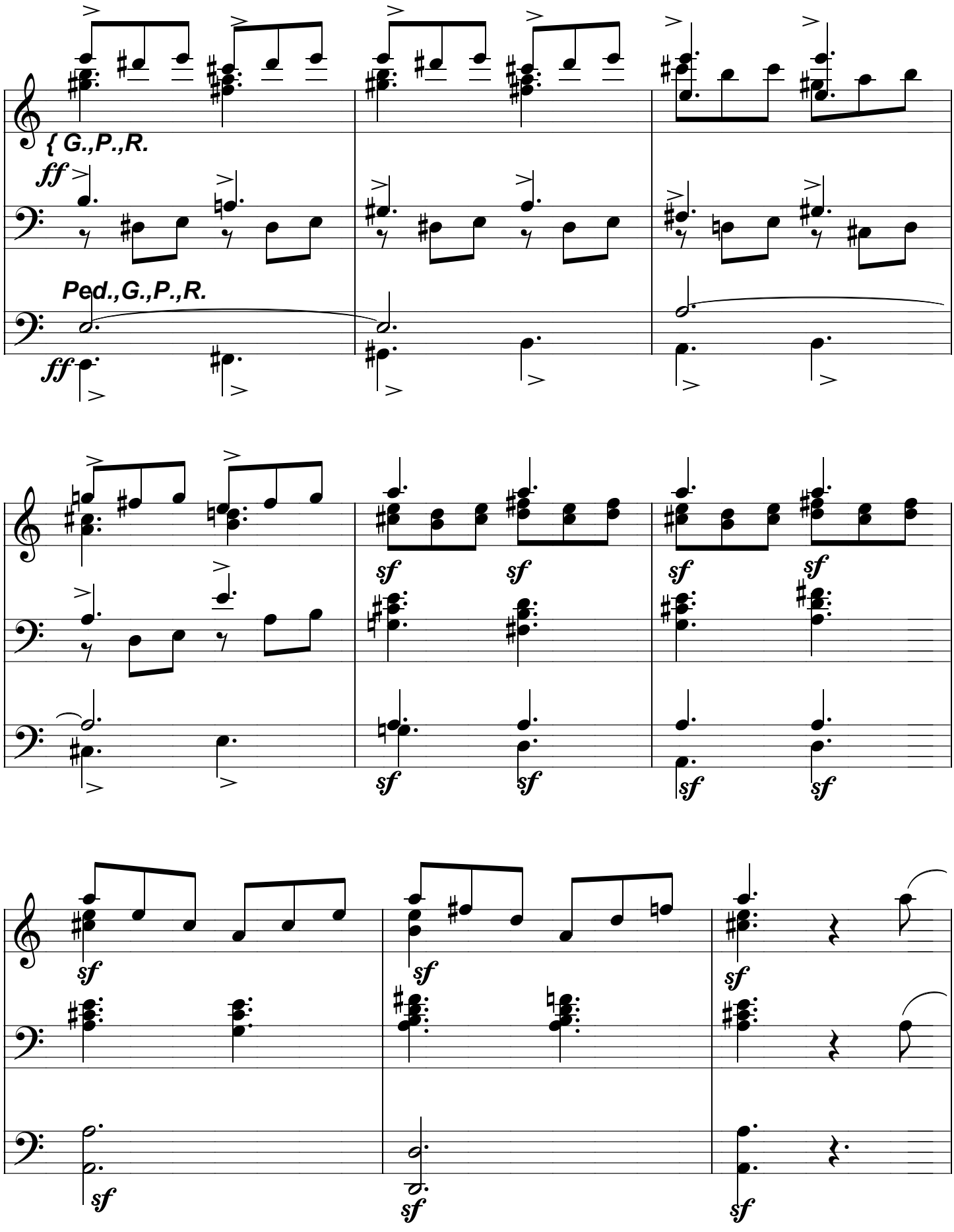

{ G.
f
f


{ R.
p


Ped. 8,4'
p


mf
{ P.,R.
mf


sf
sf
{ G.
f
Ped. 16,8,4'
f
{P.,R.
p


{ G.,P.,R.
ff
Ped.,G.,P.,R.
ff
sf
sf
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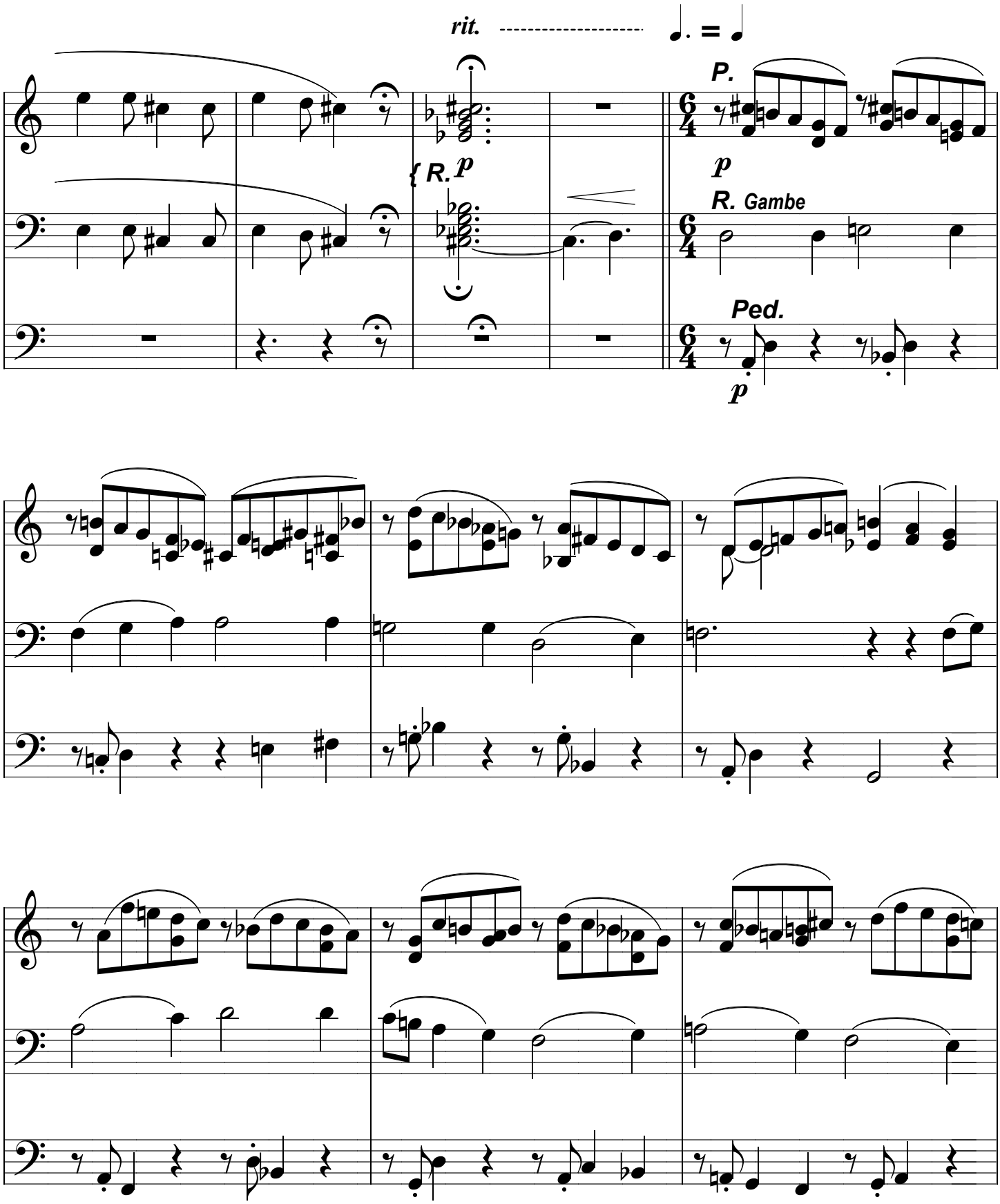
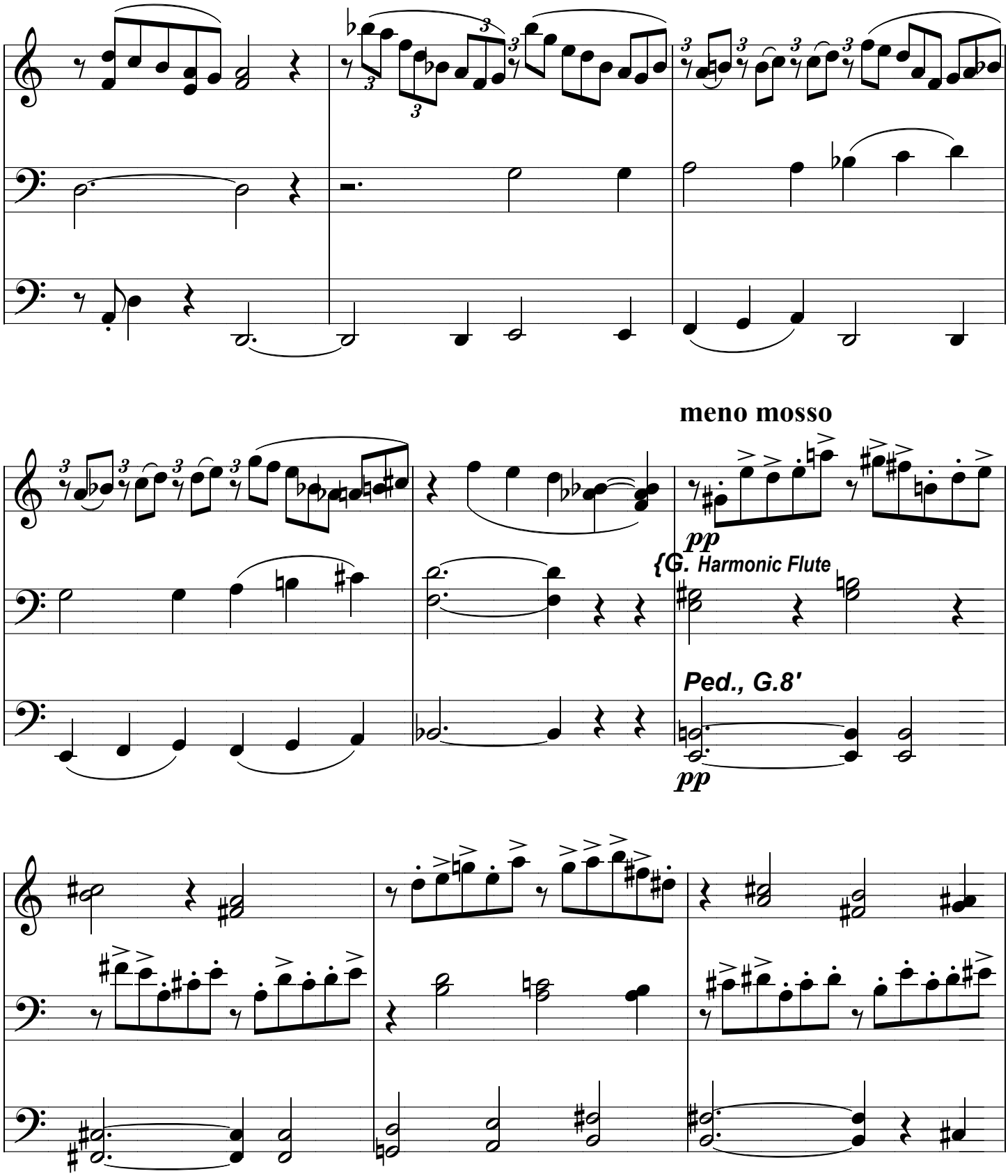
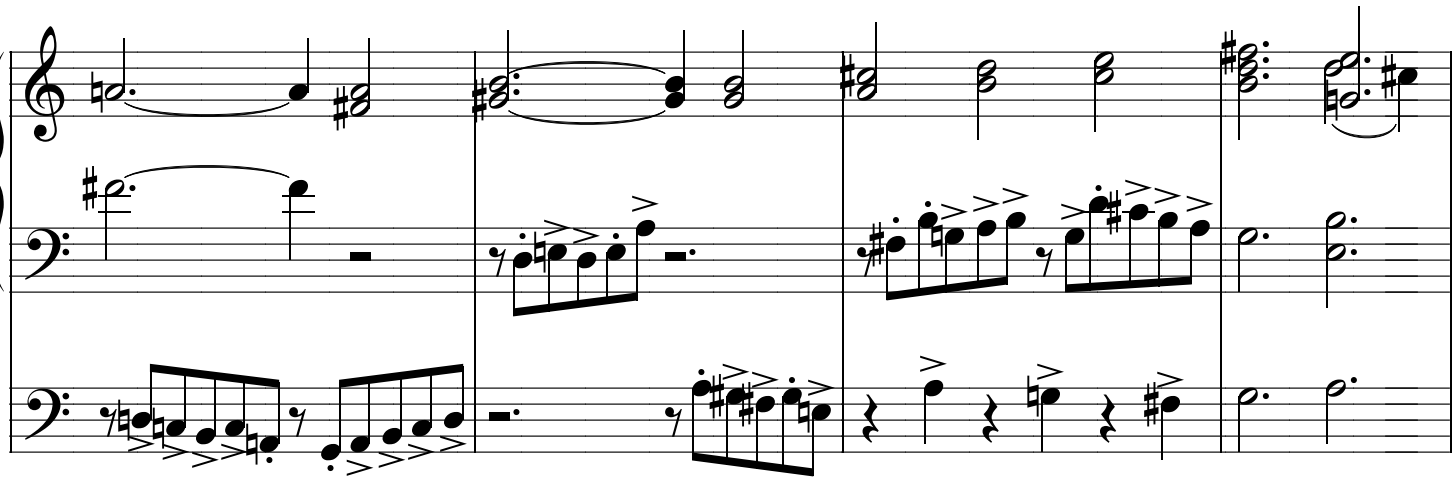
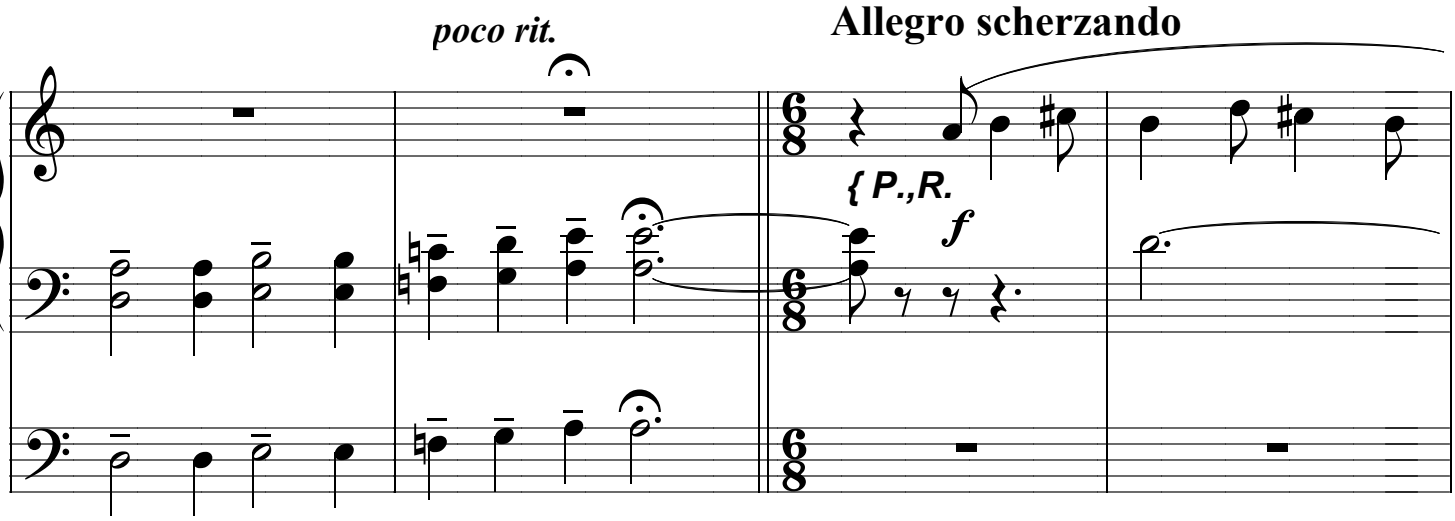
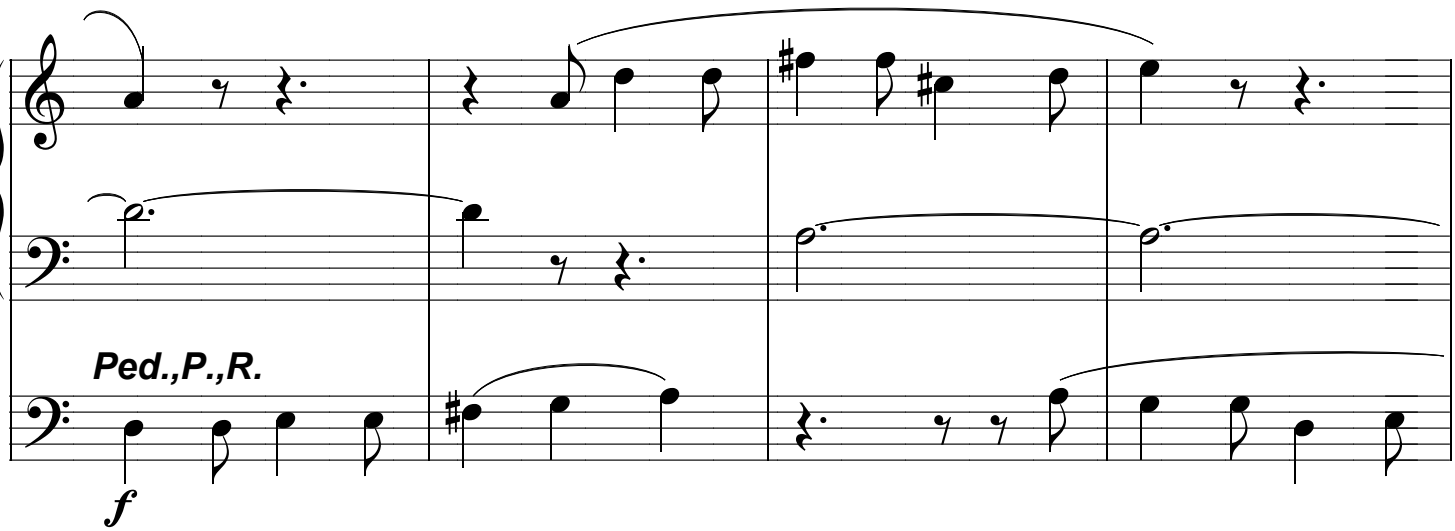
sf
sf

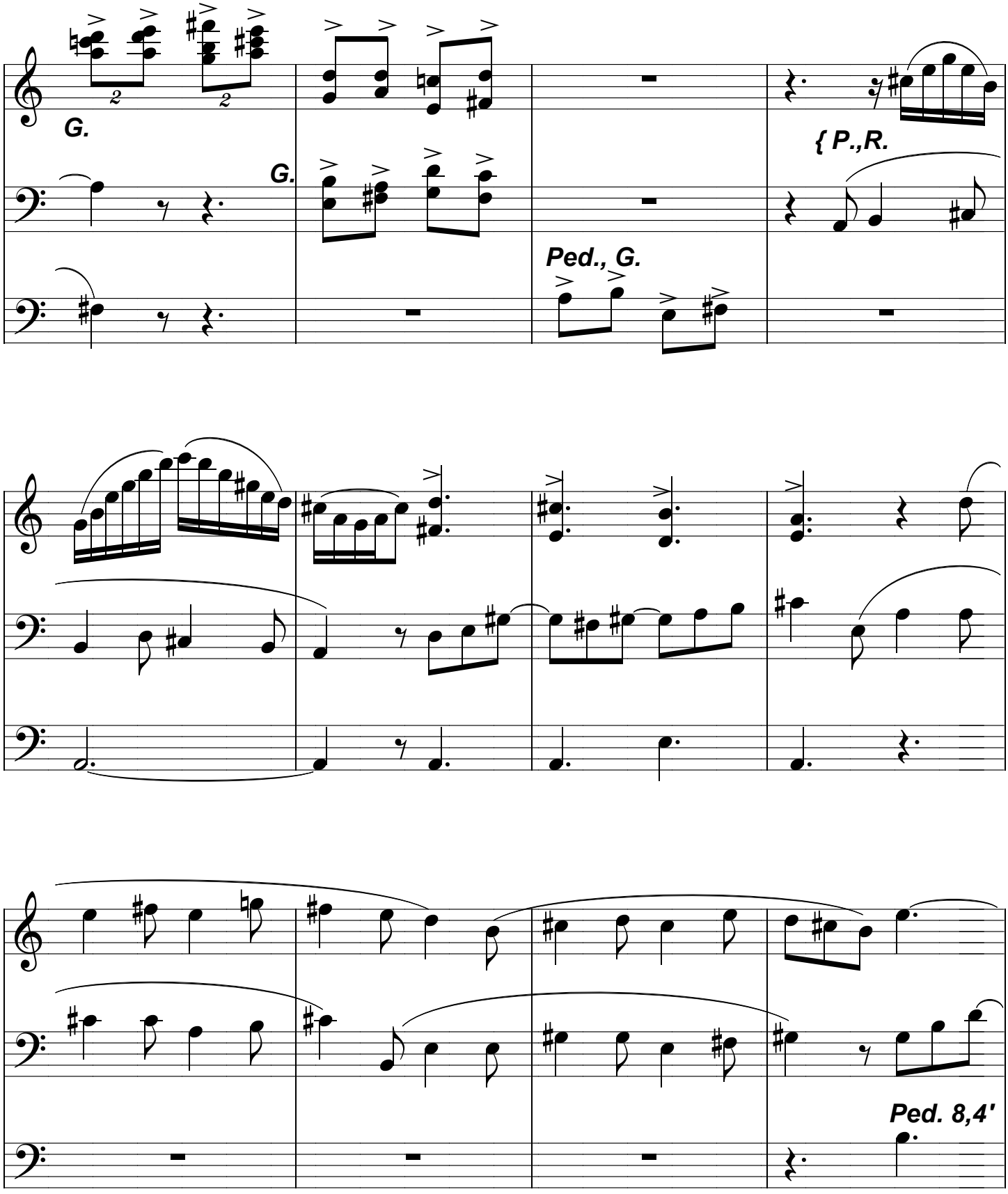

rit.
P.
p
R. Gambe
Ped.
p

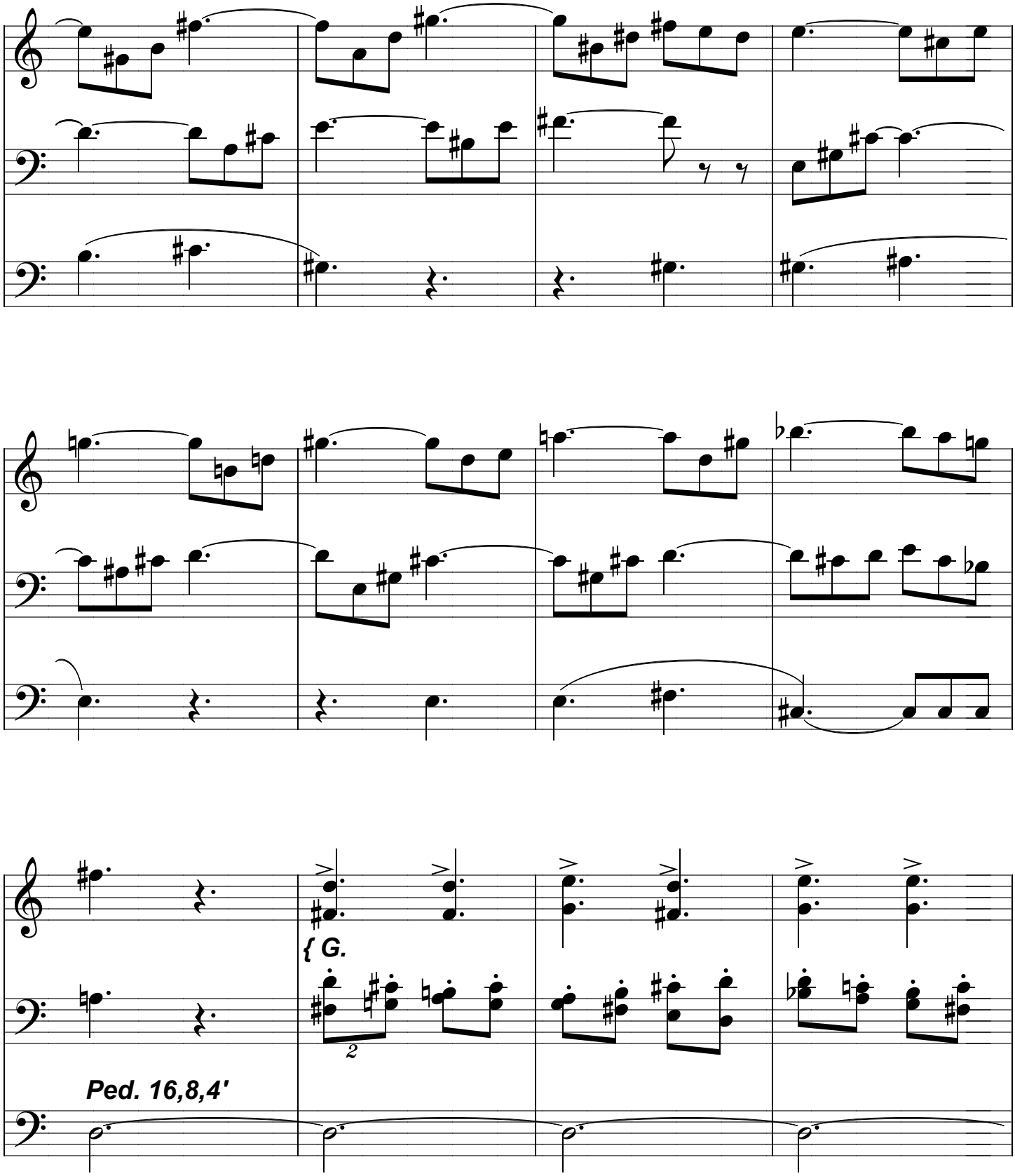

meno mosso
pp
{G. Harmonic Flute
Ped., G.8'
pp

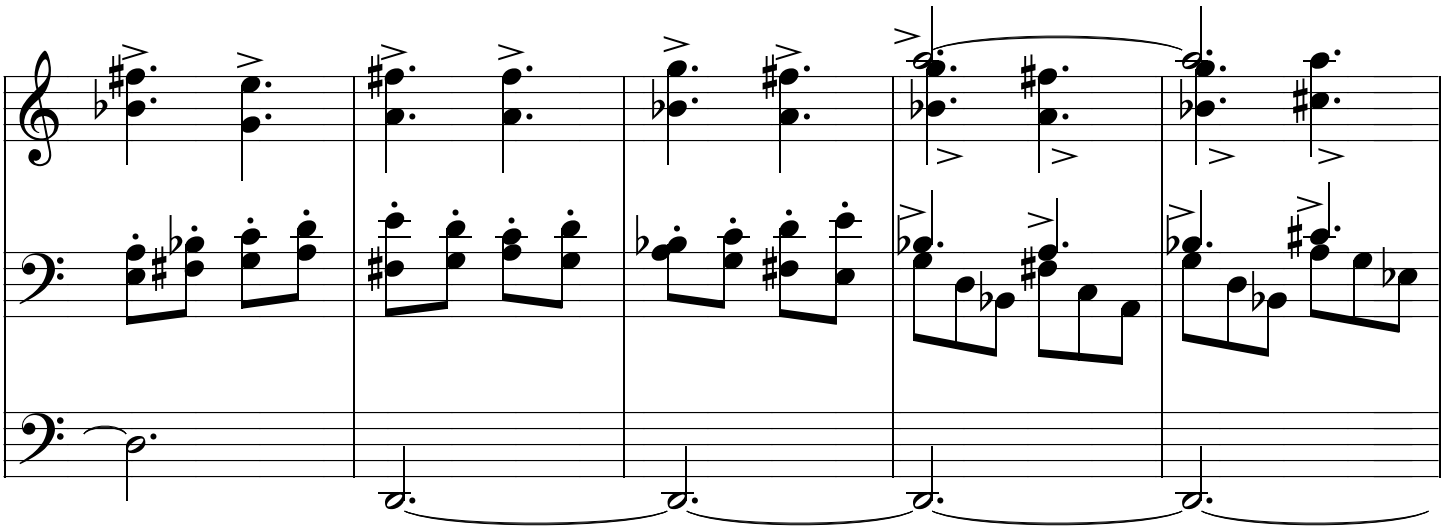



poco rit.
Allegro scherzando
{ P.,R.
f

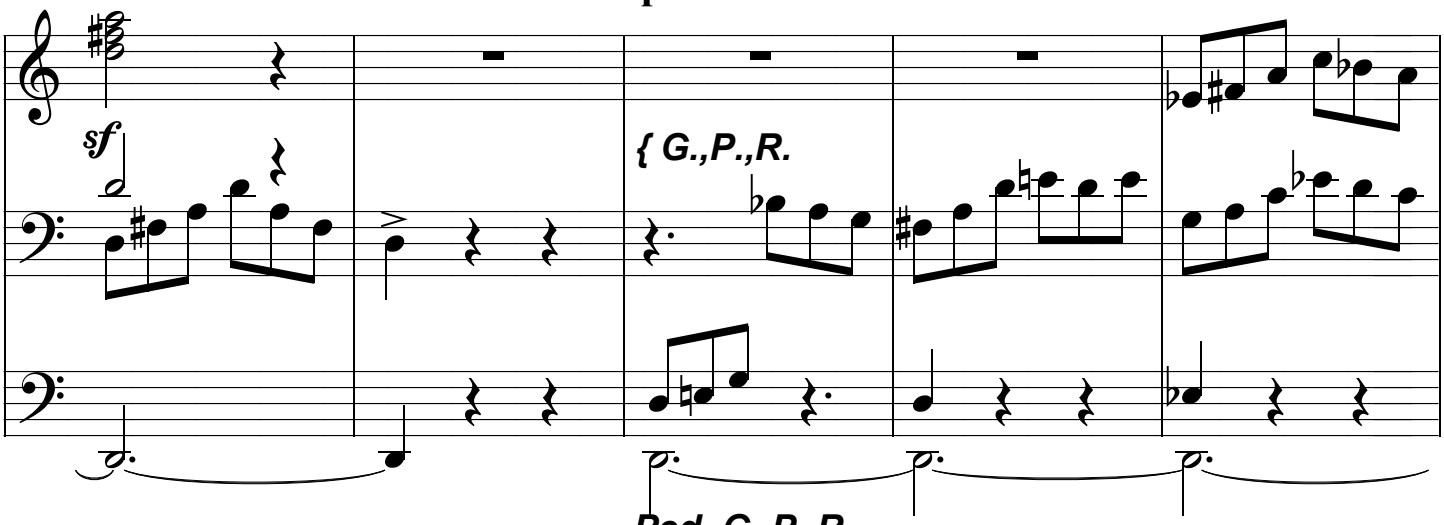

Ped.,P.,R.
f

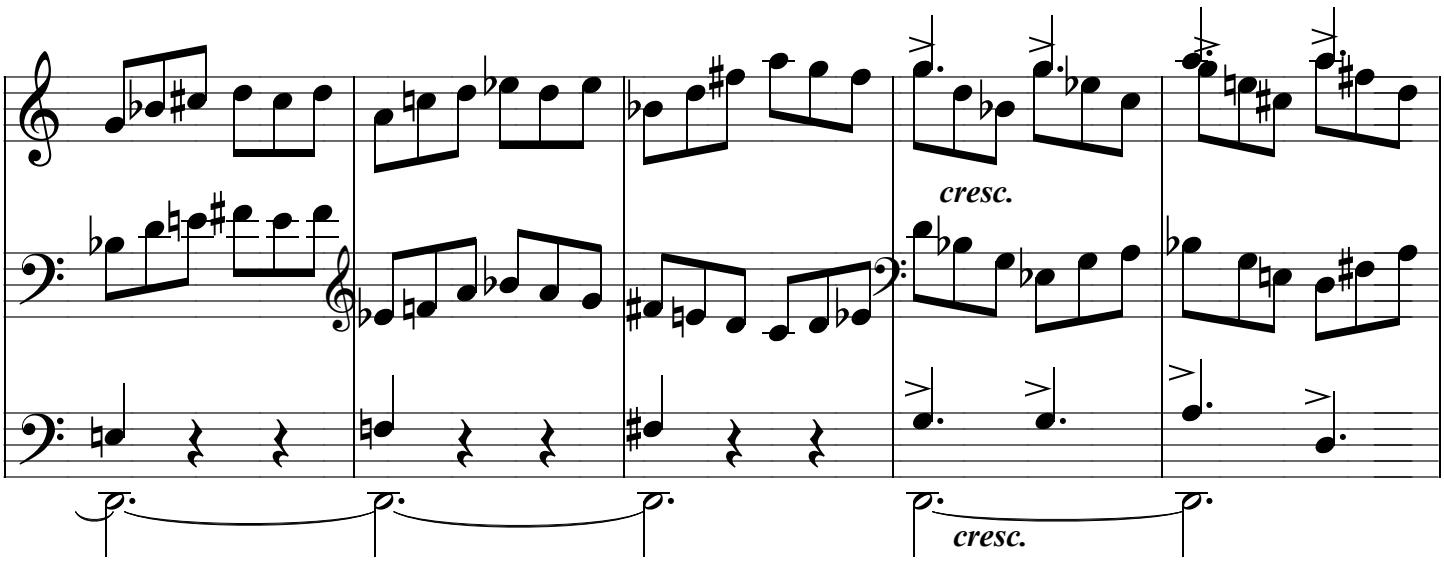

G.
G.
{ P.,R.
Ped., G.
Ped. 8,4'

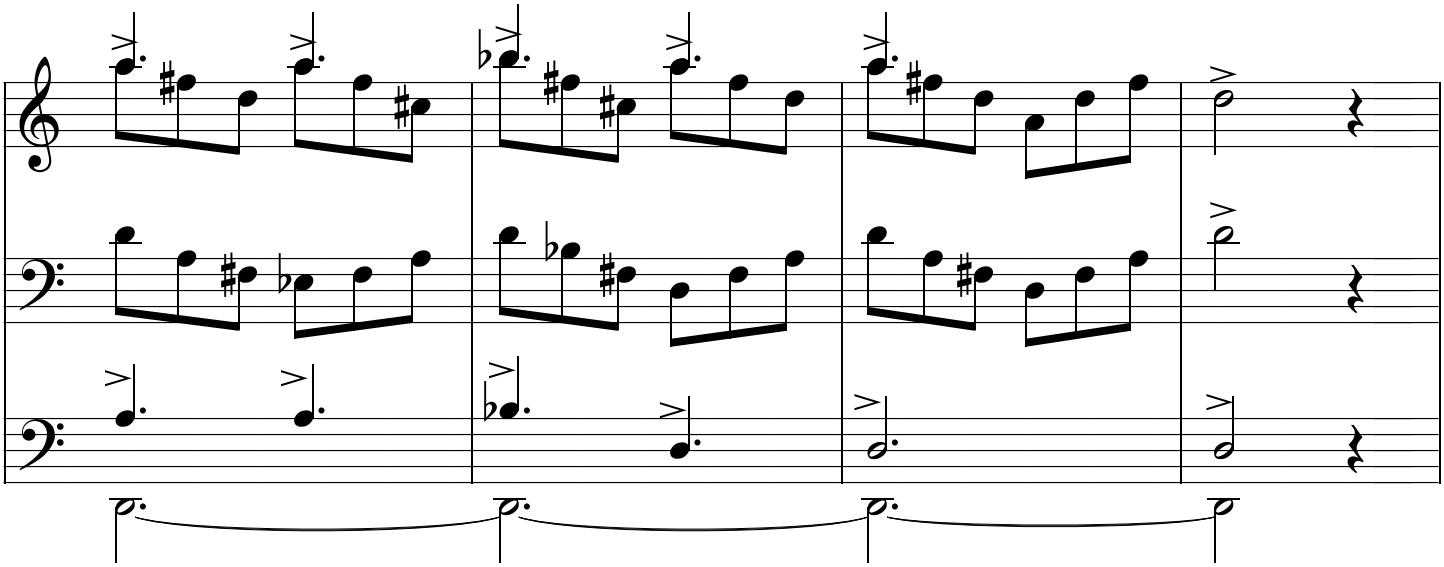

{ G.
Ped. 16,8,4'

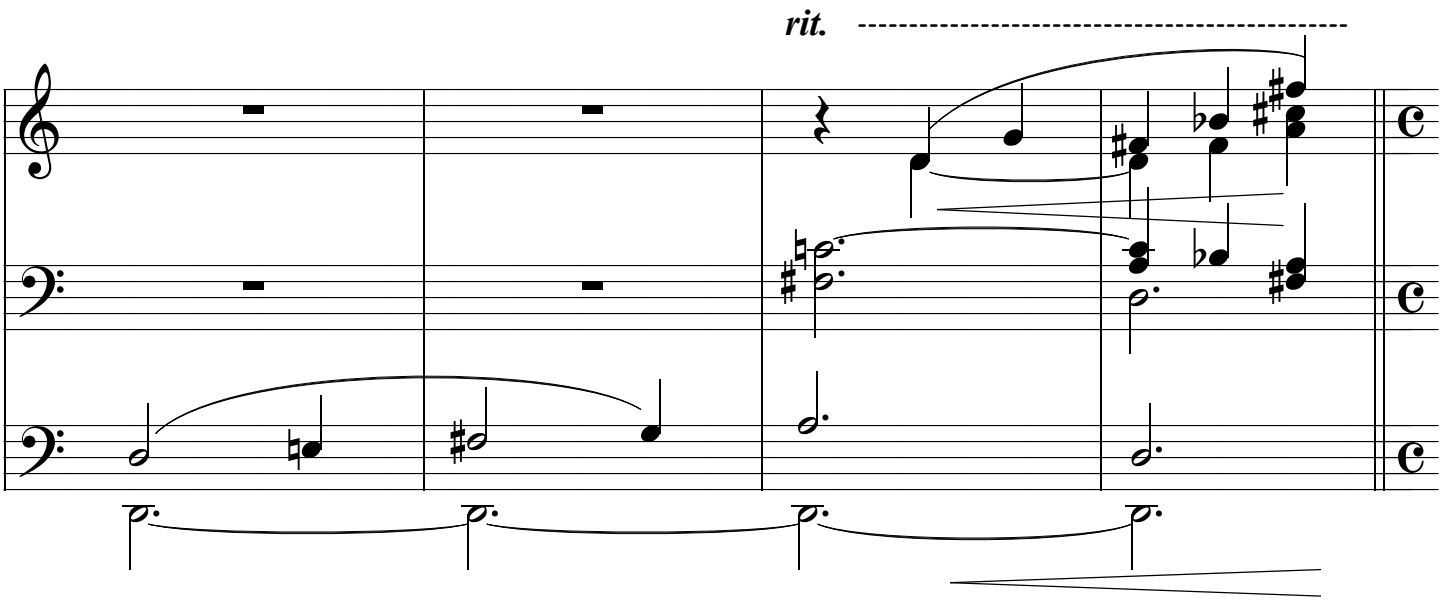


piú vivo



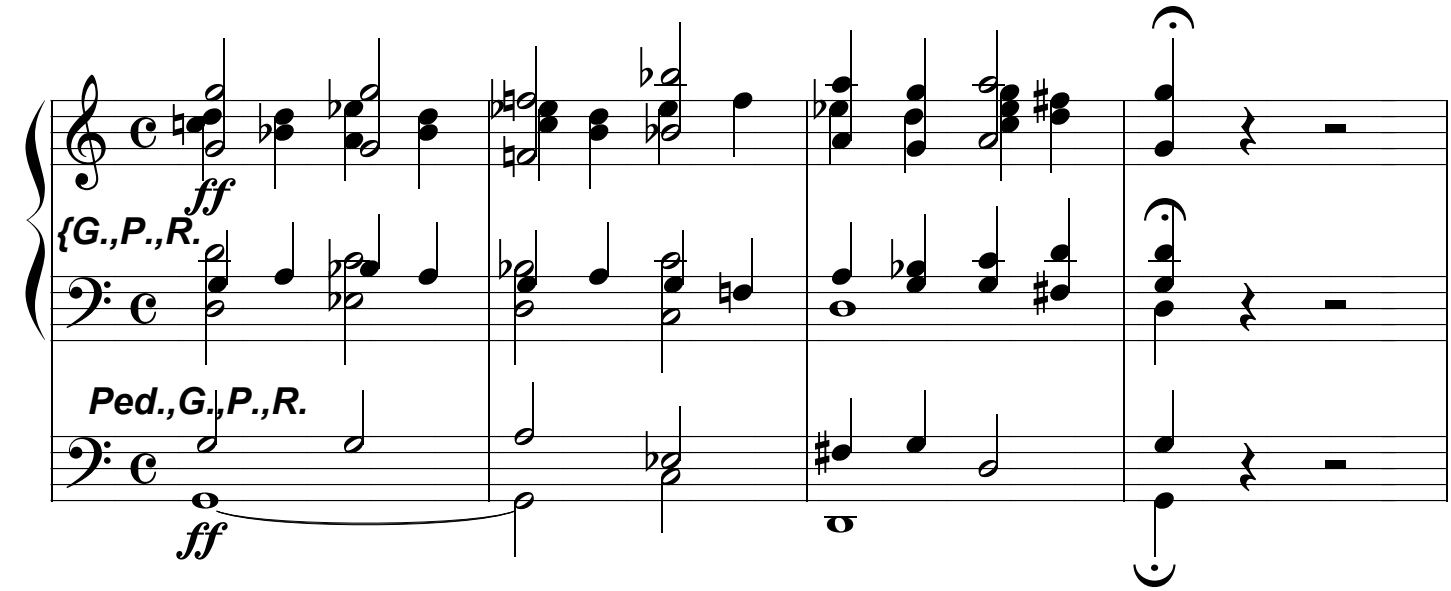


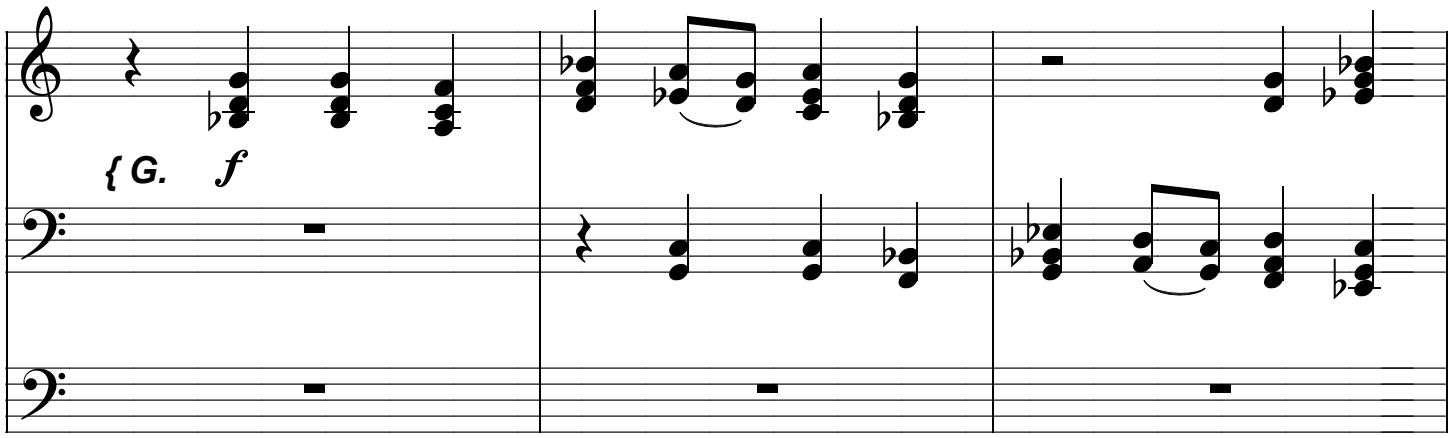


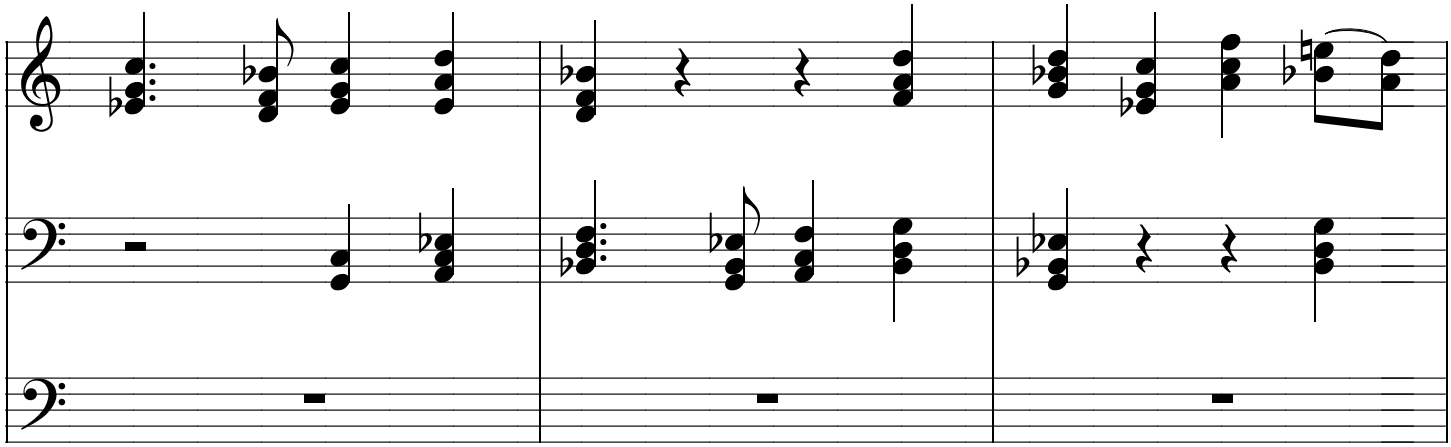

rit.

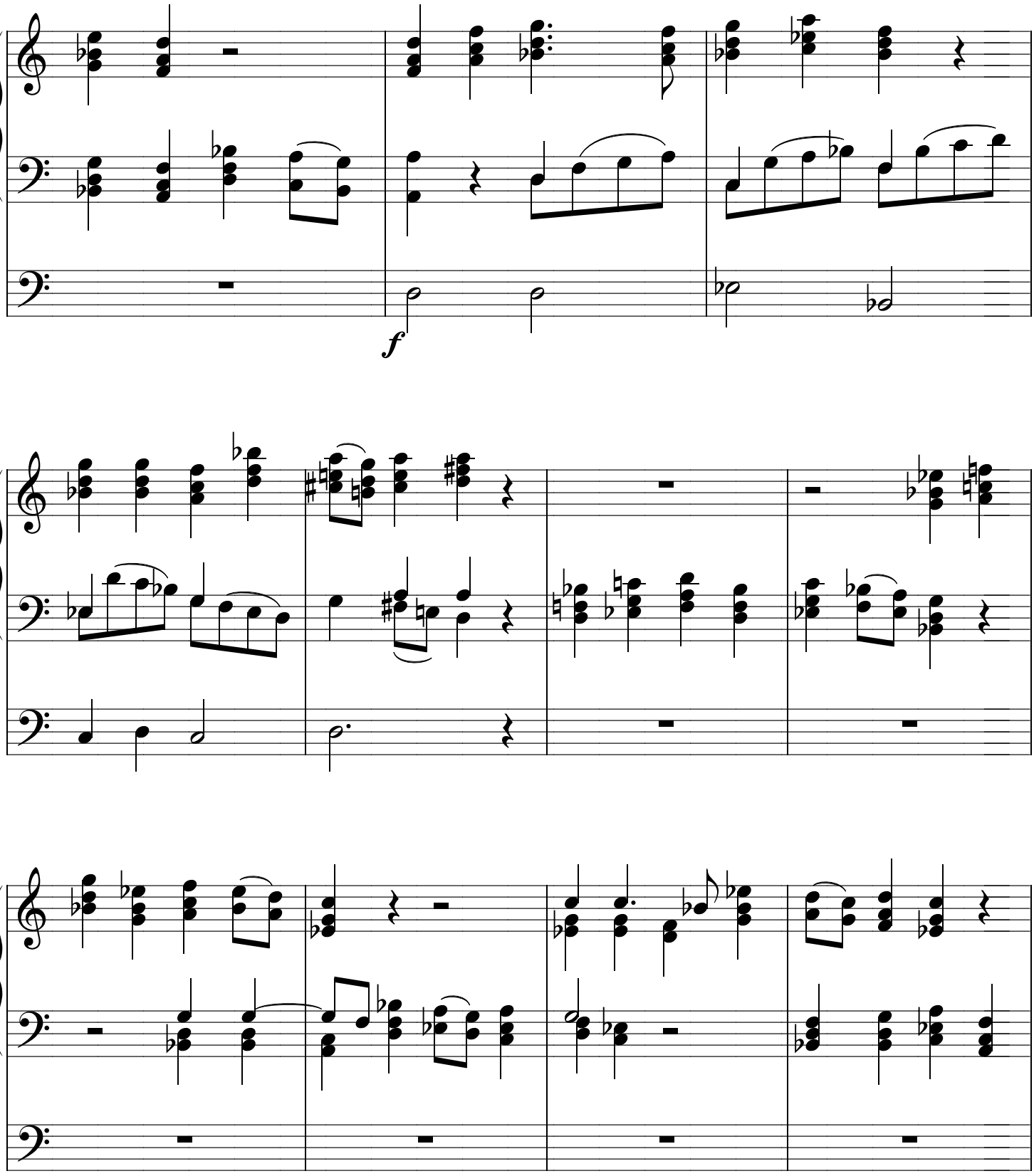
P. 8,4' - R. 8,4' - G. 16,8,4' - Ped. 16,8'

IV. Finale. Moderato





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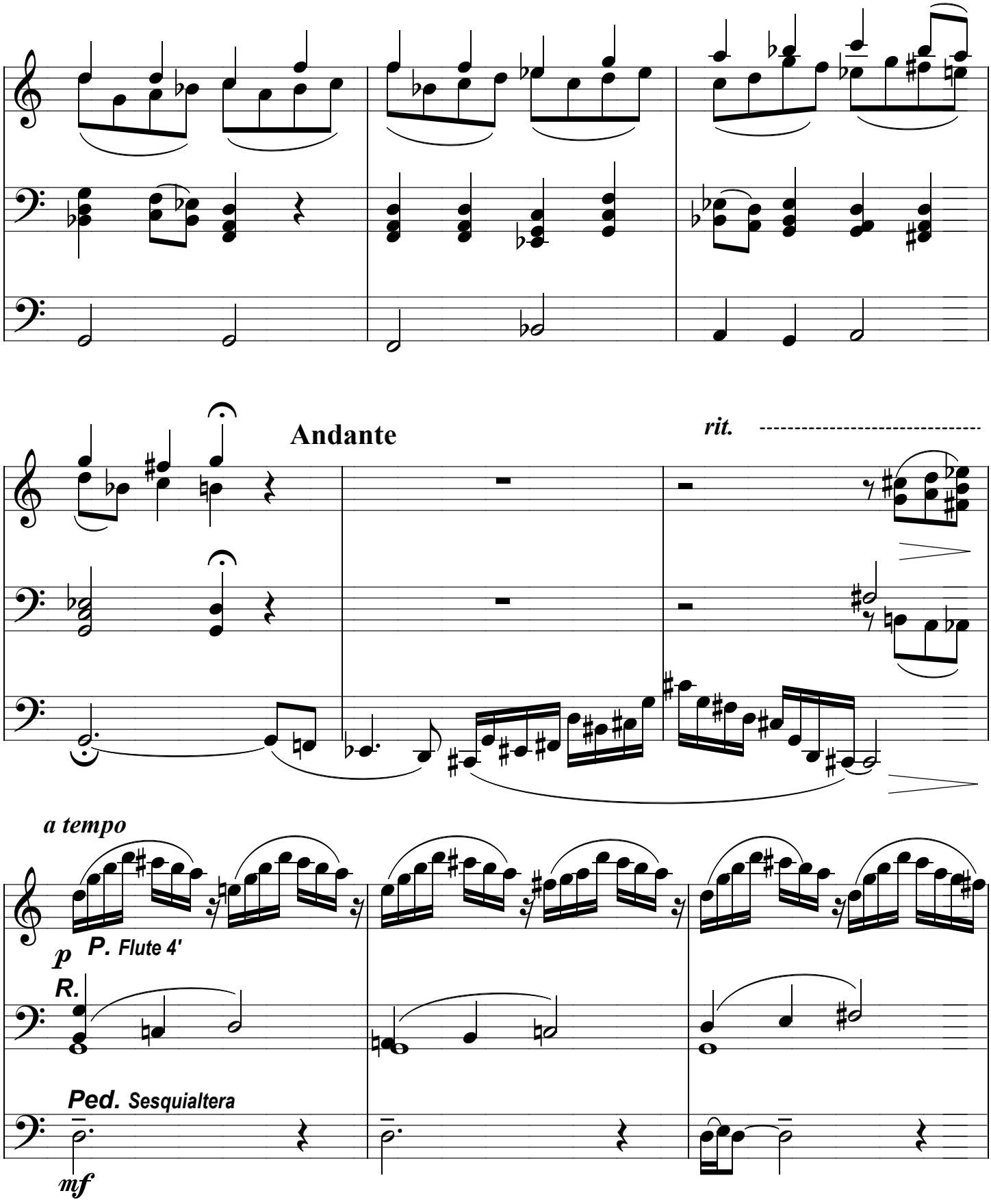
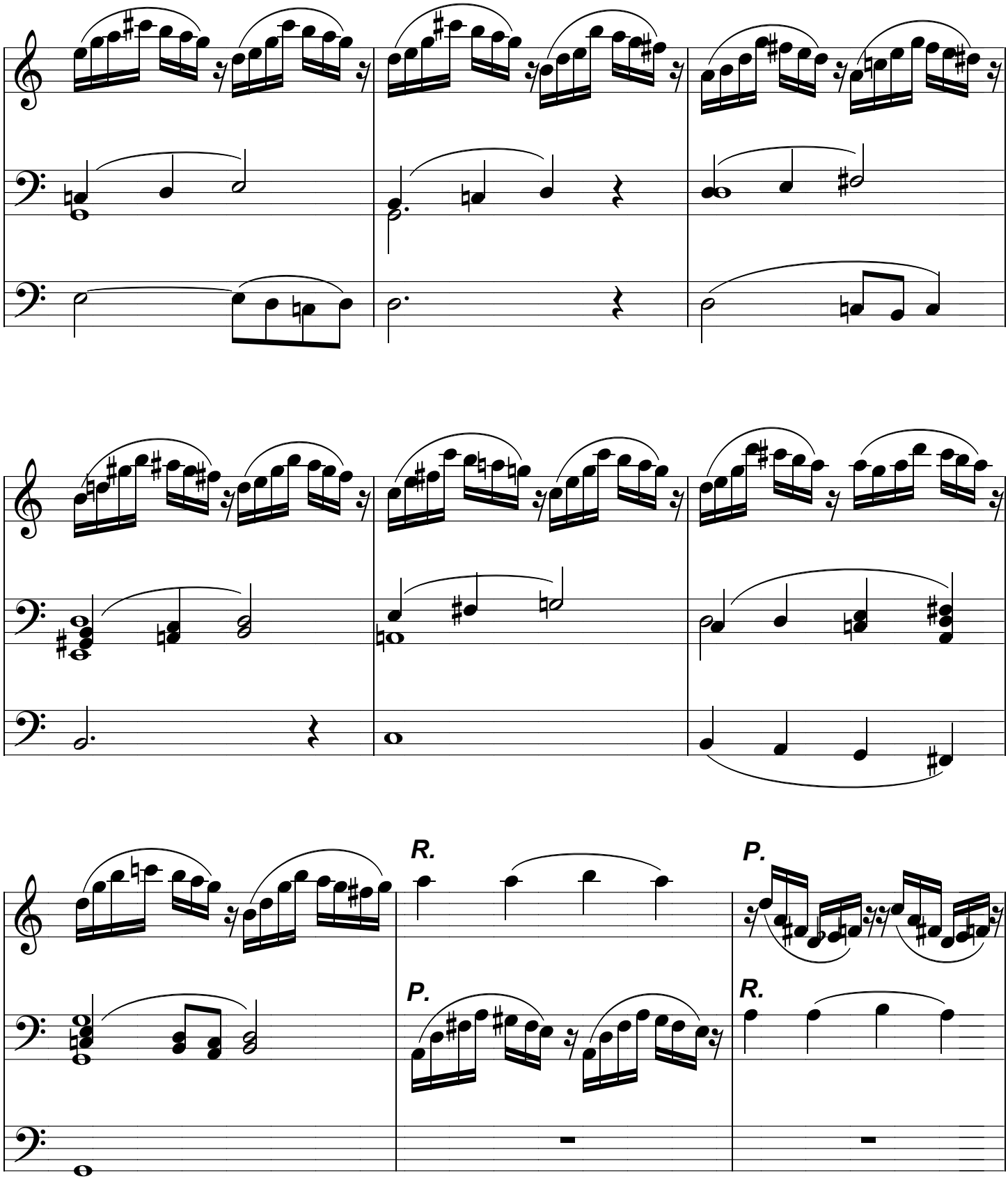
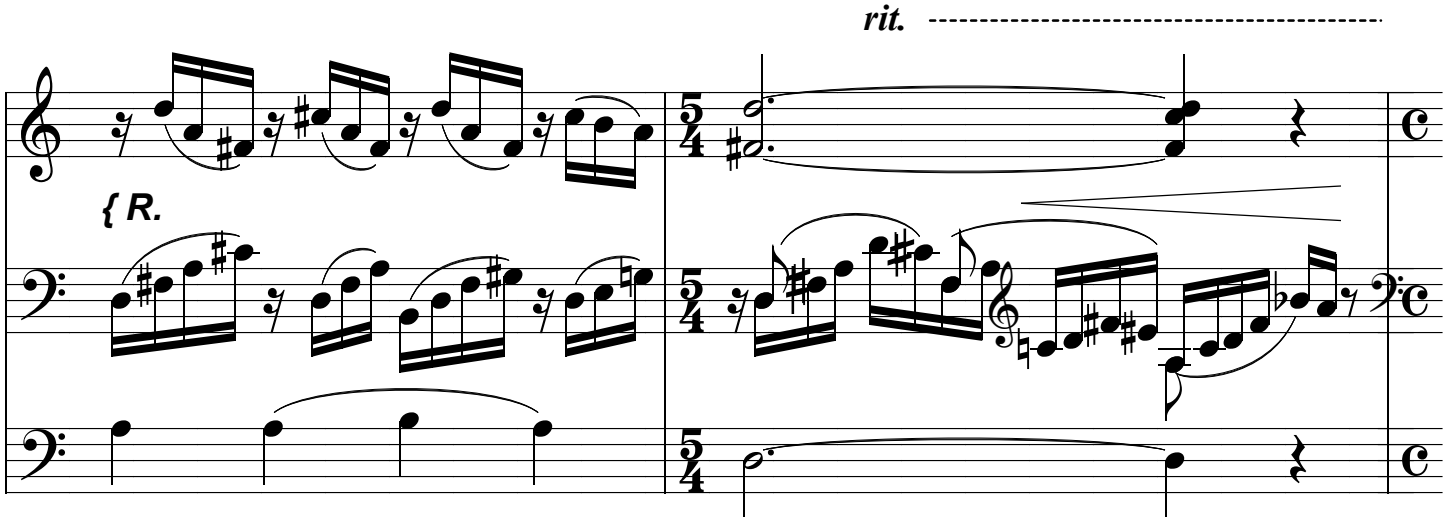
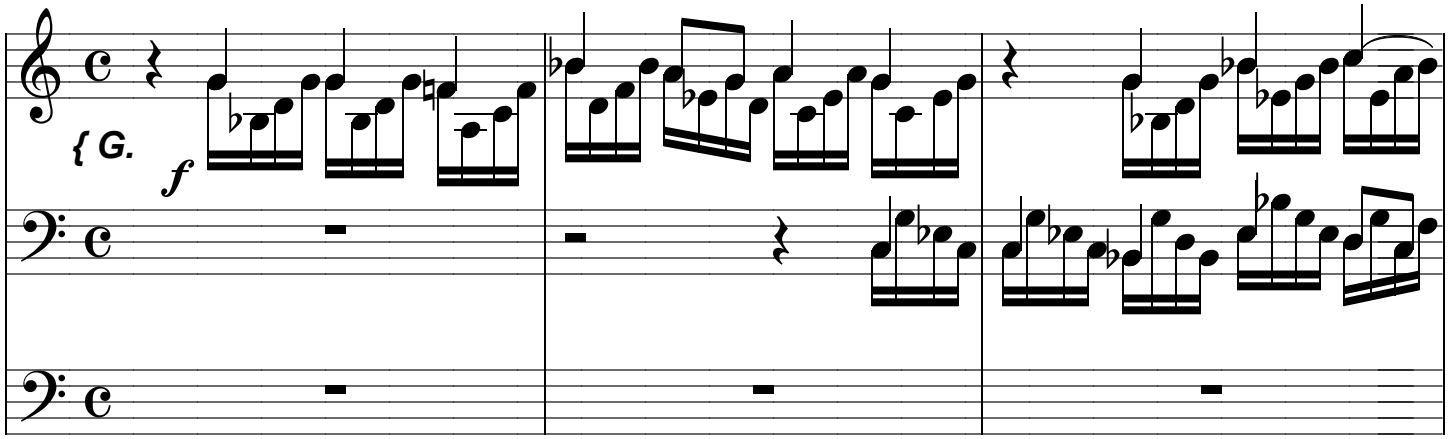
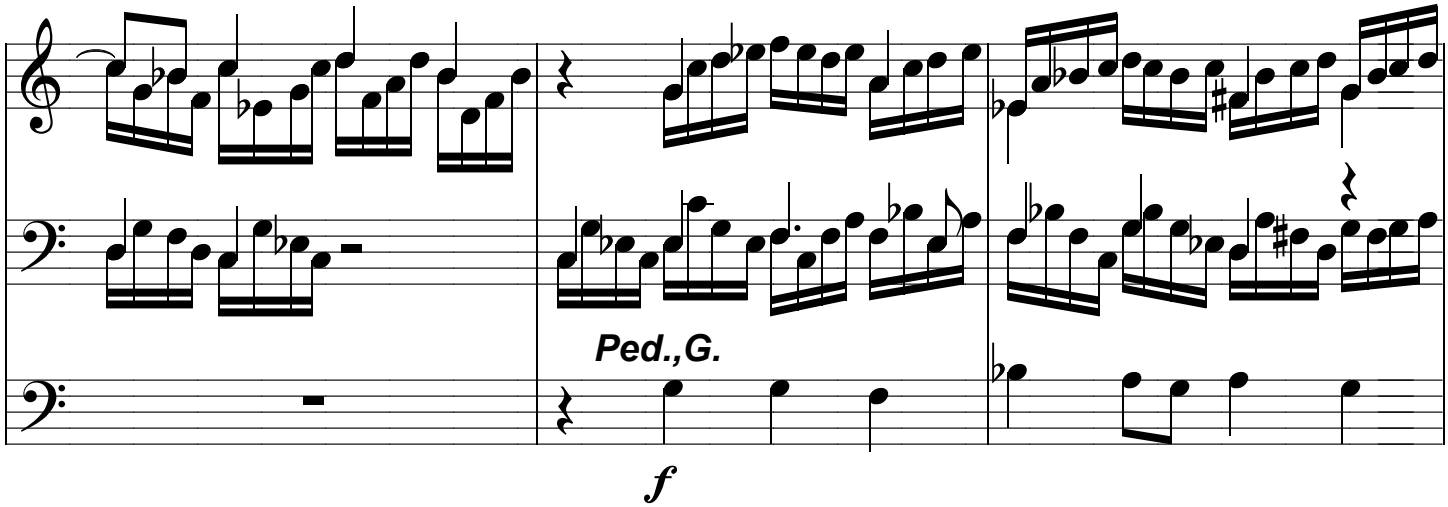

Andante
rit.
a tempo
p
P. Flute 4'
R.
Ped. Sesquialtera
mf

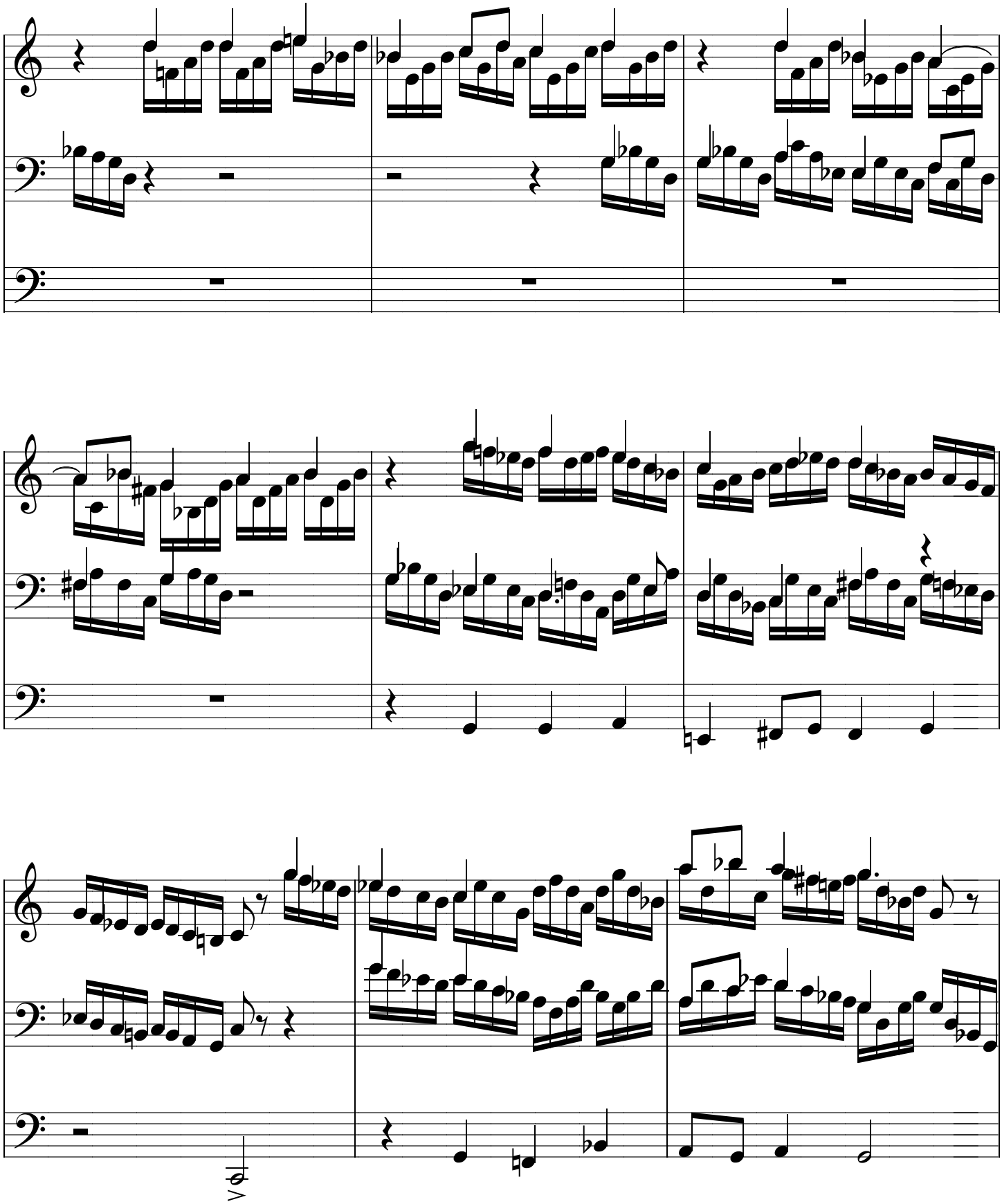

R.
P.
P.
R.

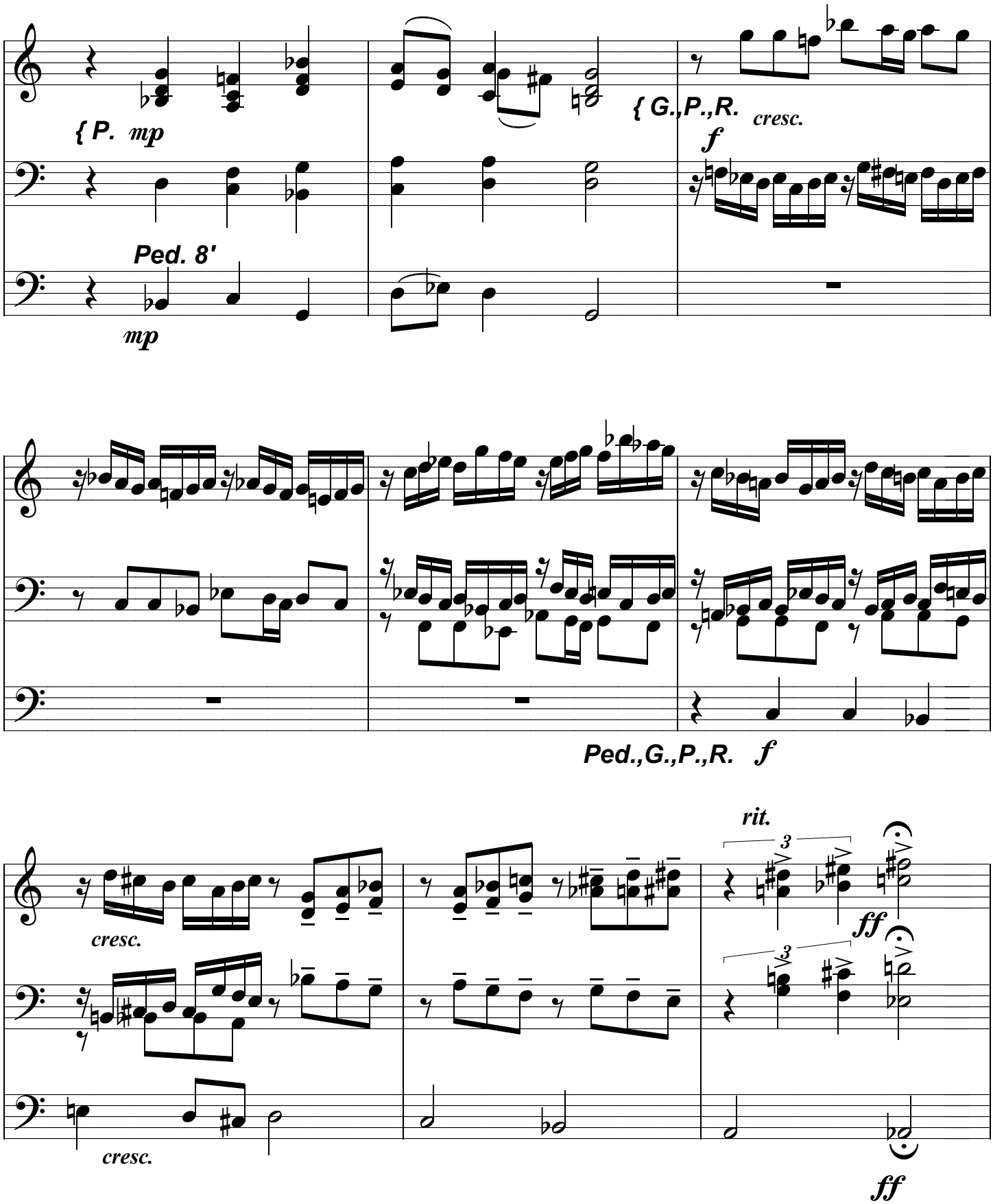


Tempo 1

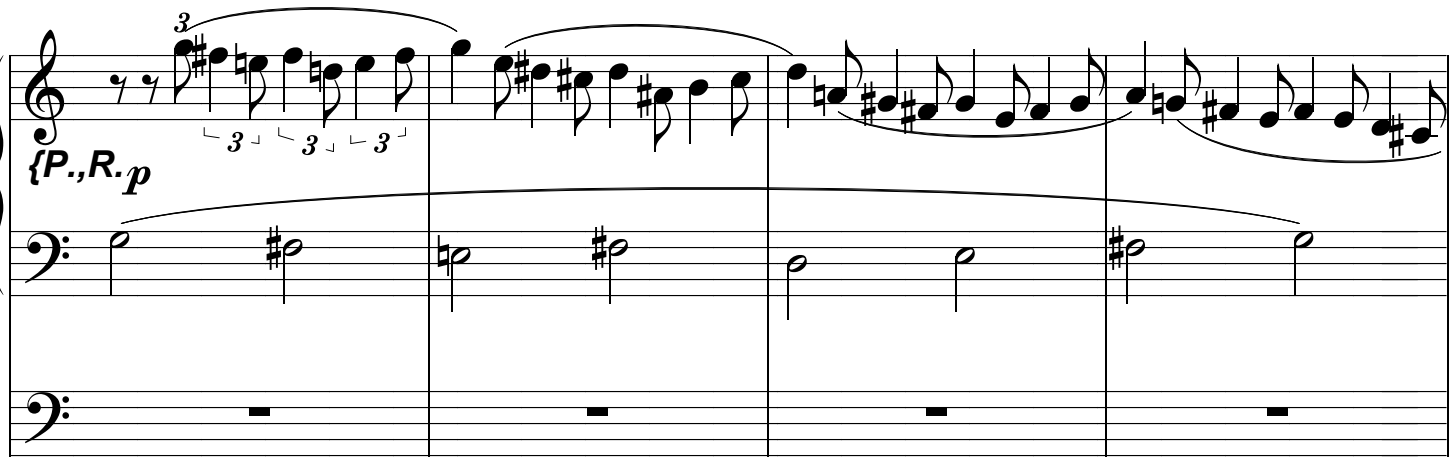


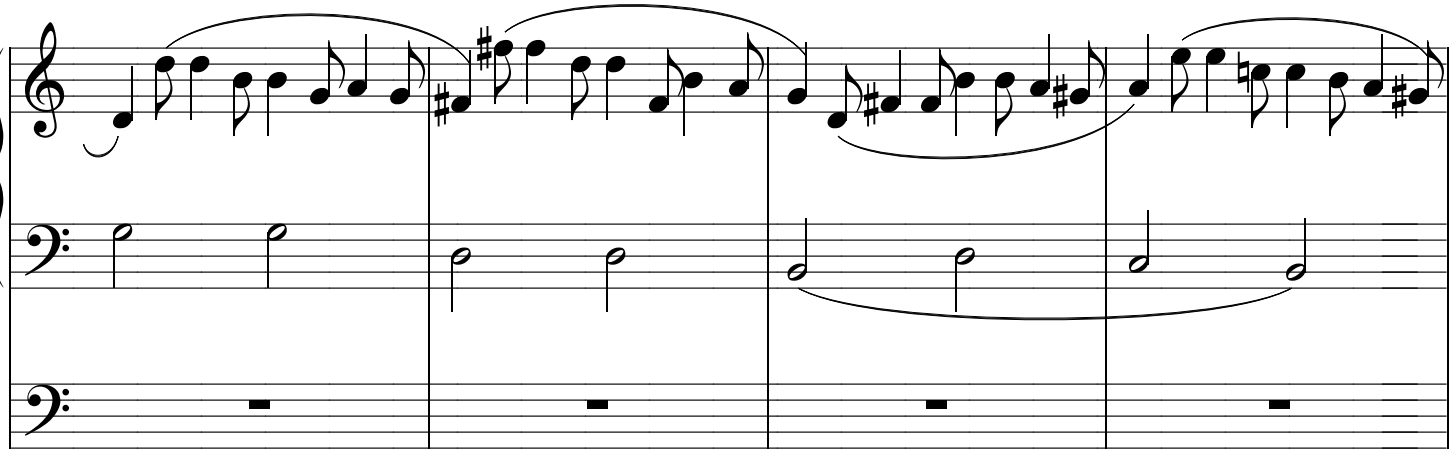


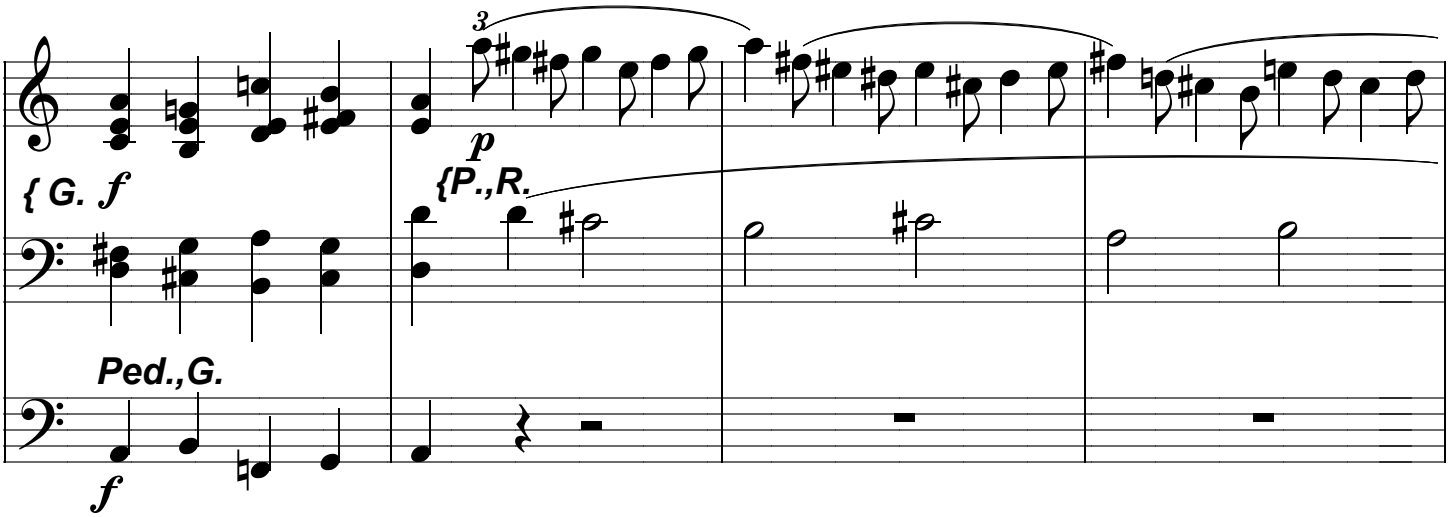


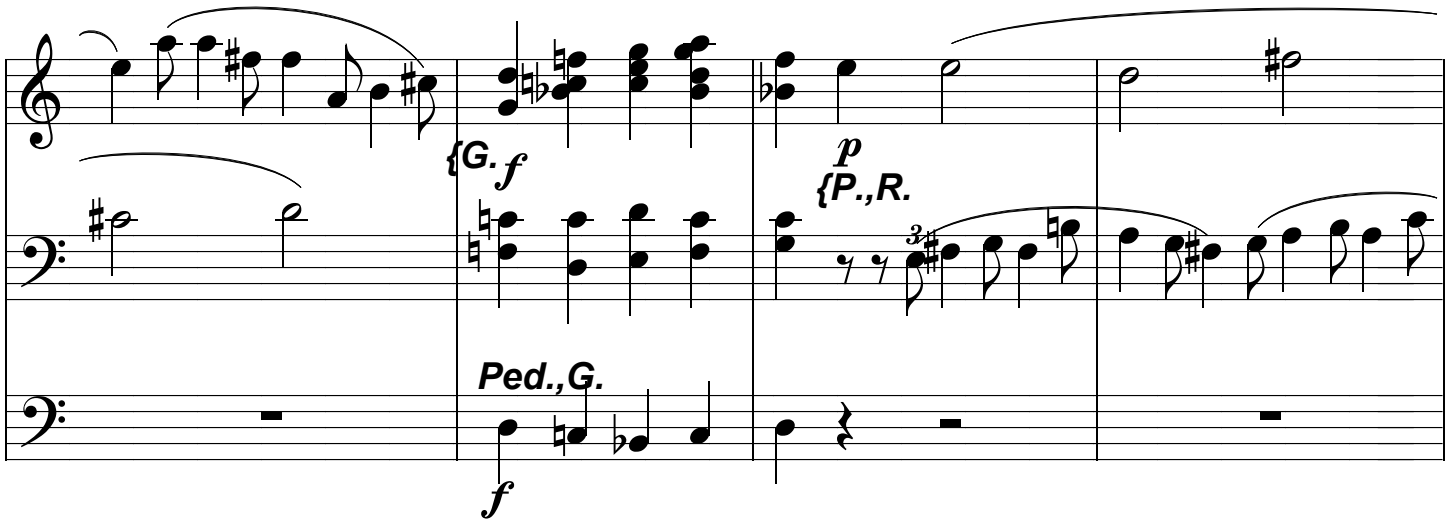

{ P. mp
Ped. 8'
mp
{ G.,P.,R.
cresc.
f
Ped.,G.,P.,R. f
rit.
3
ff
cresc.
cresc.
ff

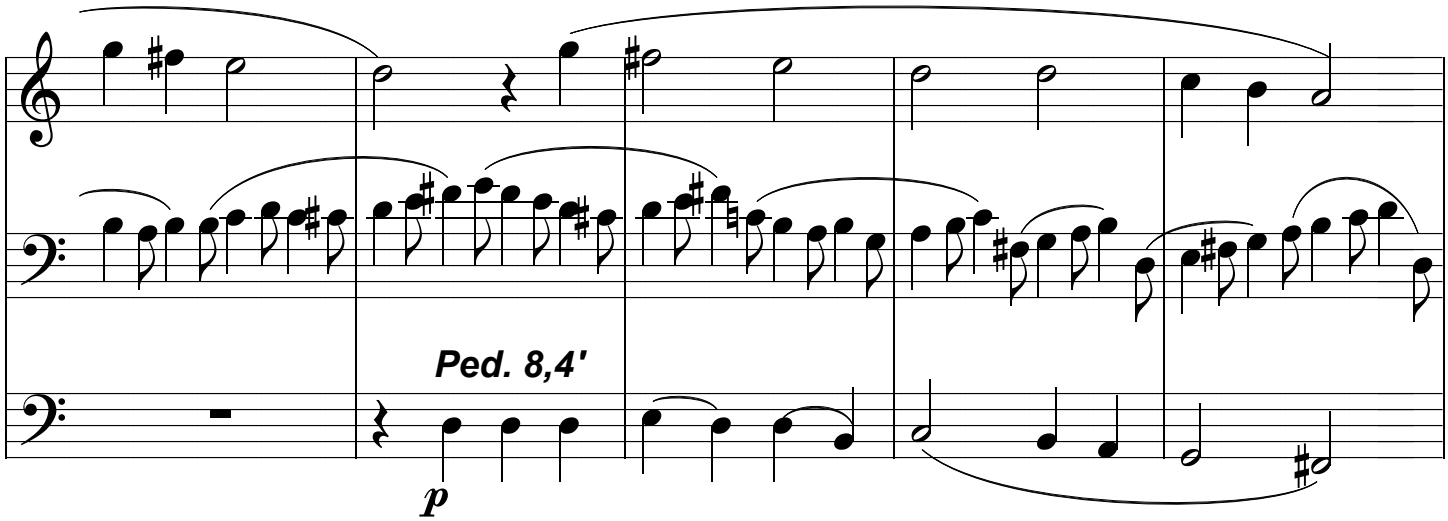
piú mosso

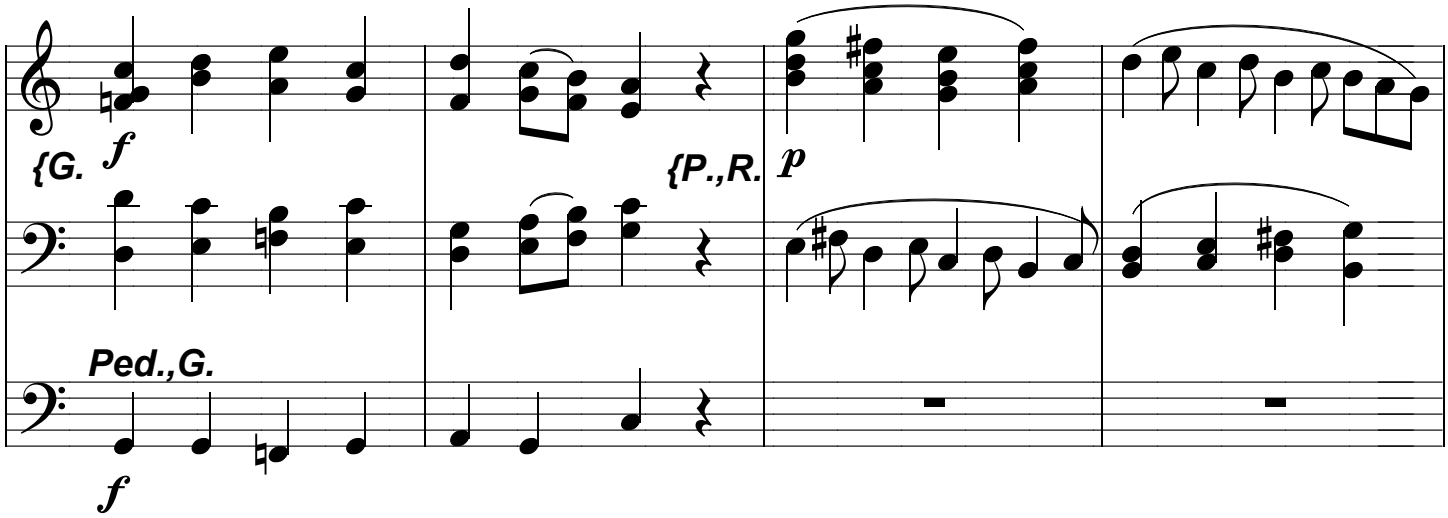


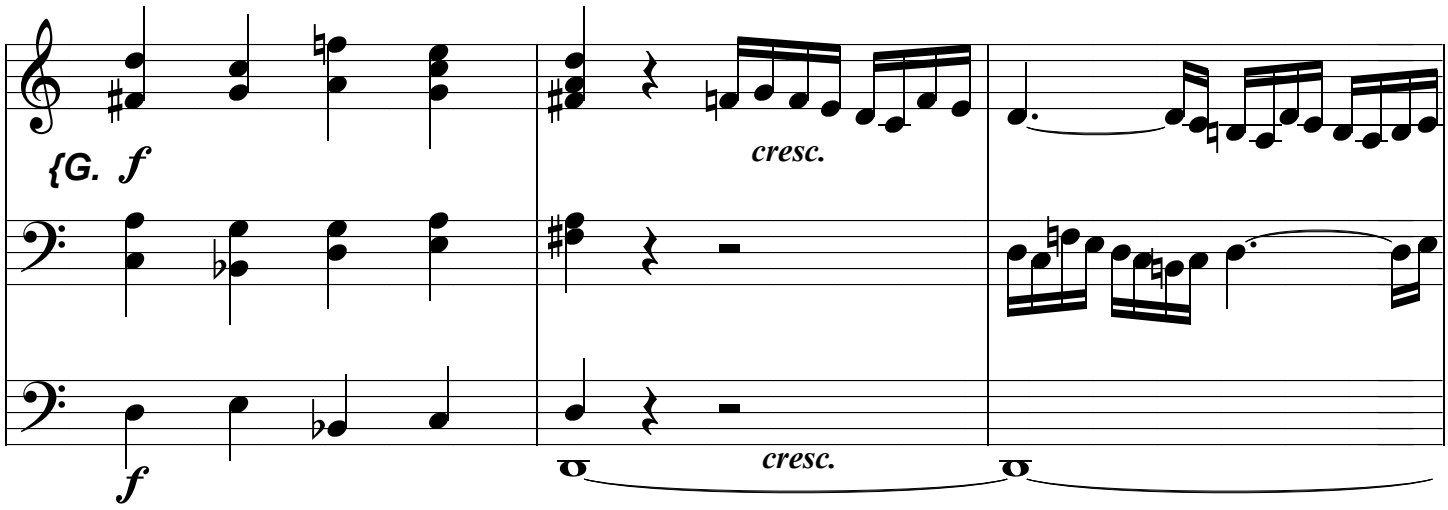


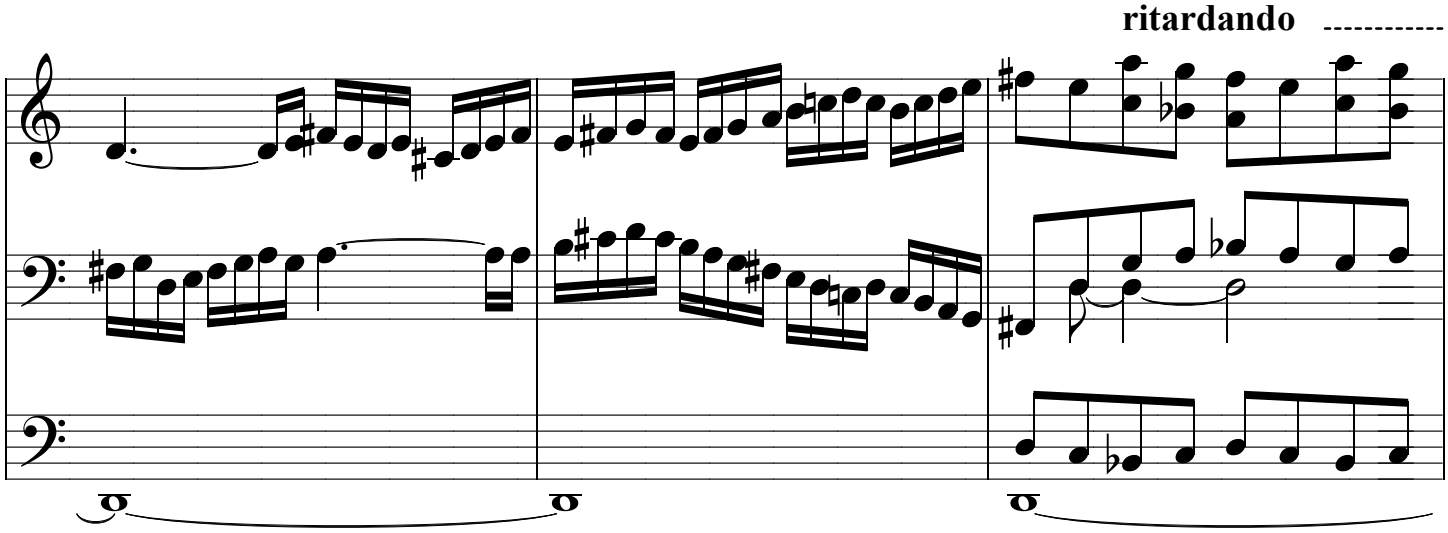


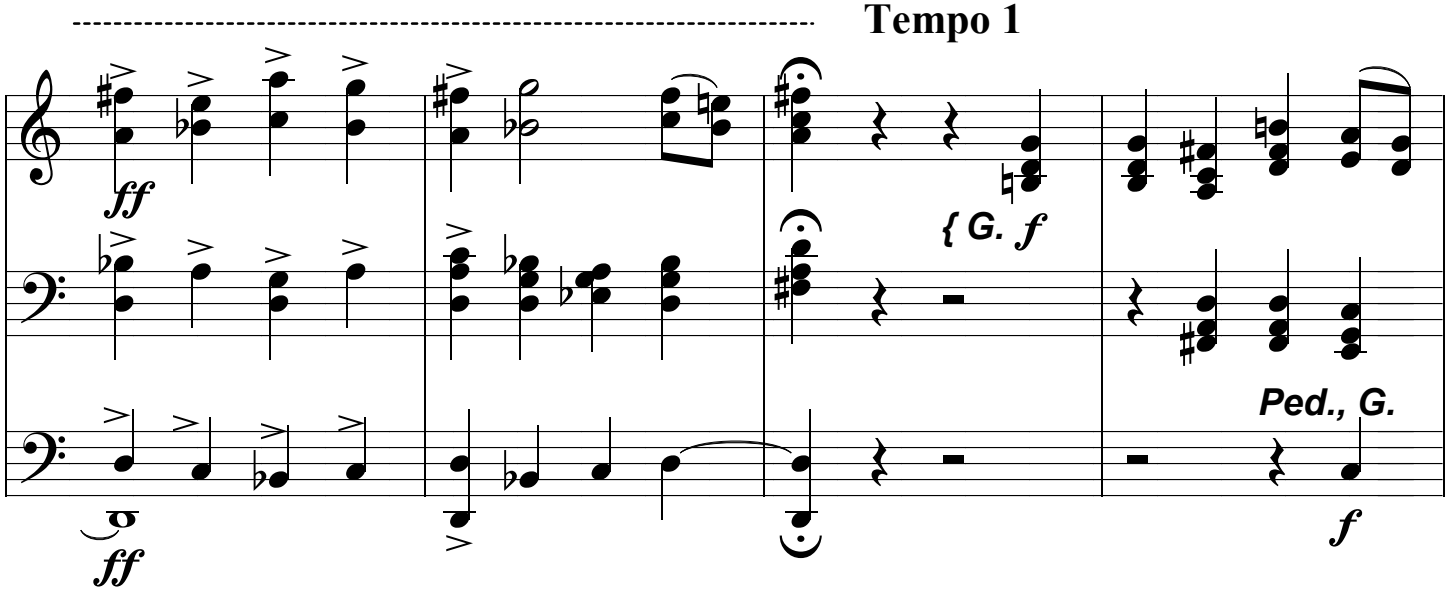

{G.
f
p
{P.,R.
Ped.,G.
f

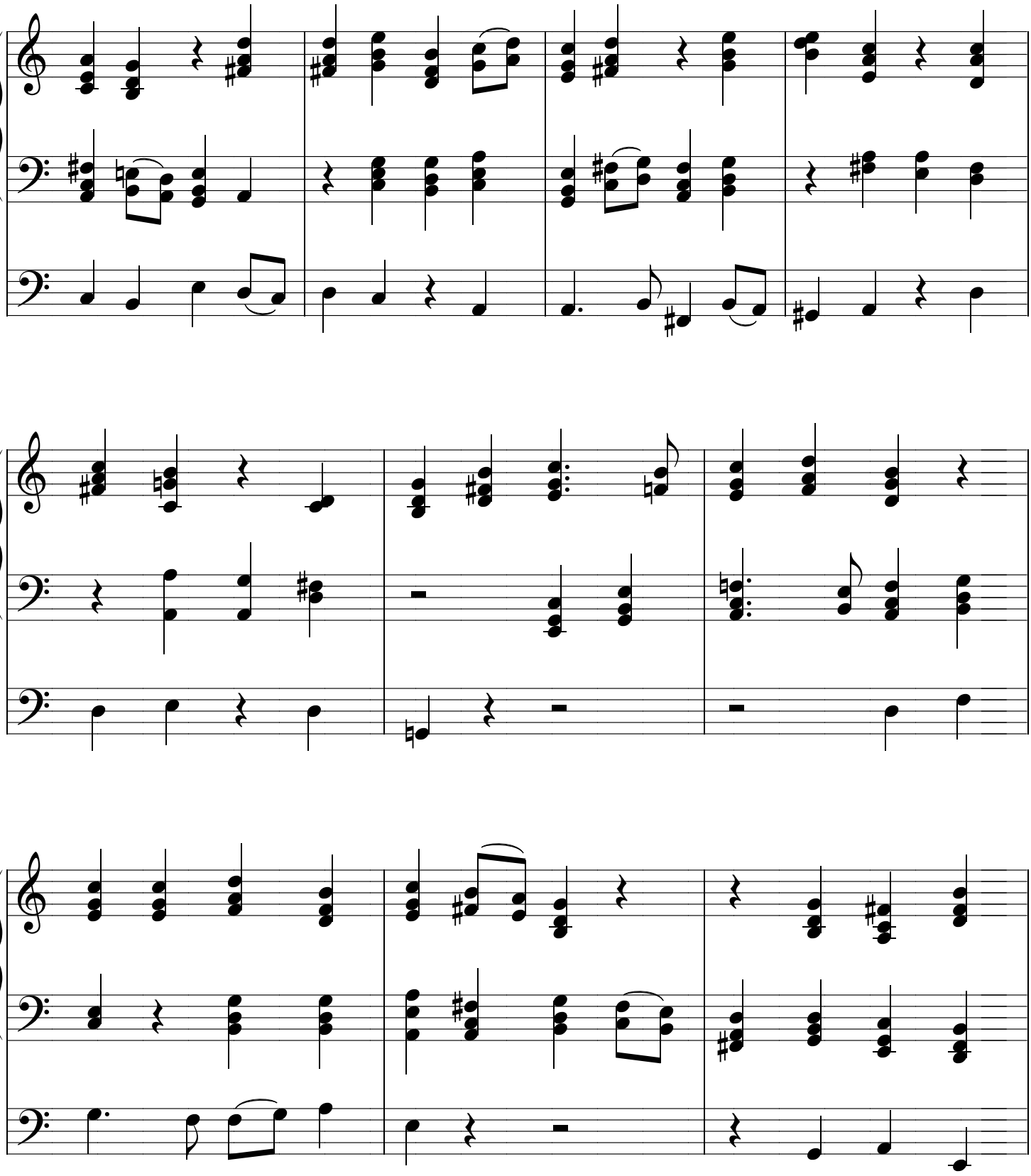

Ped. 8,4'
p

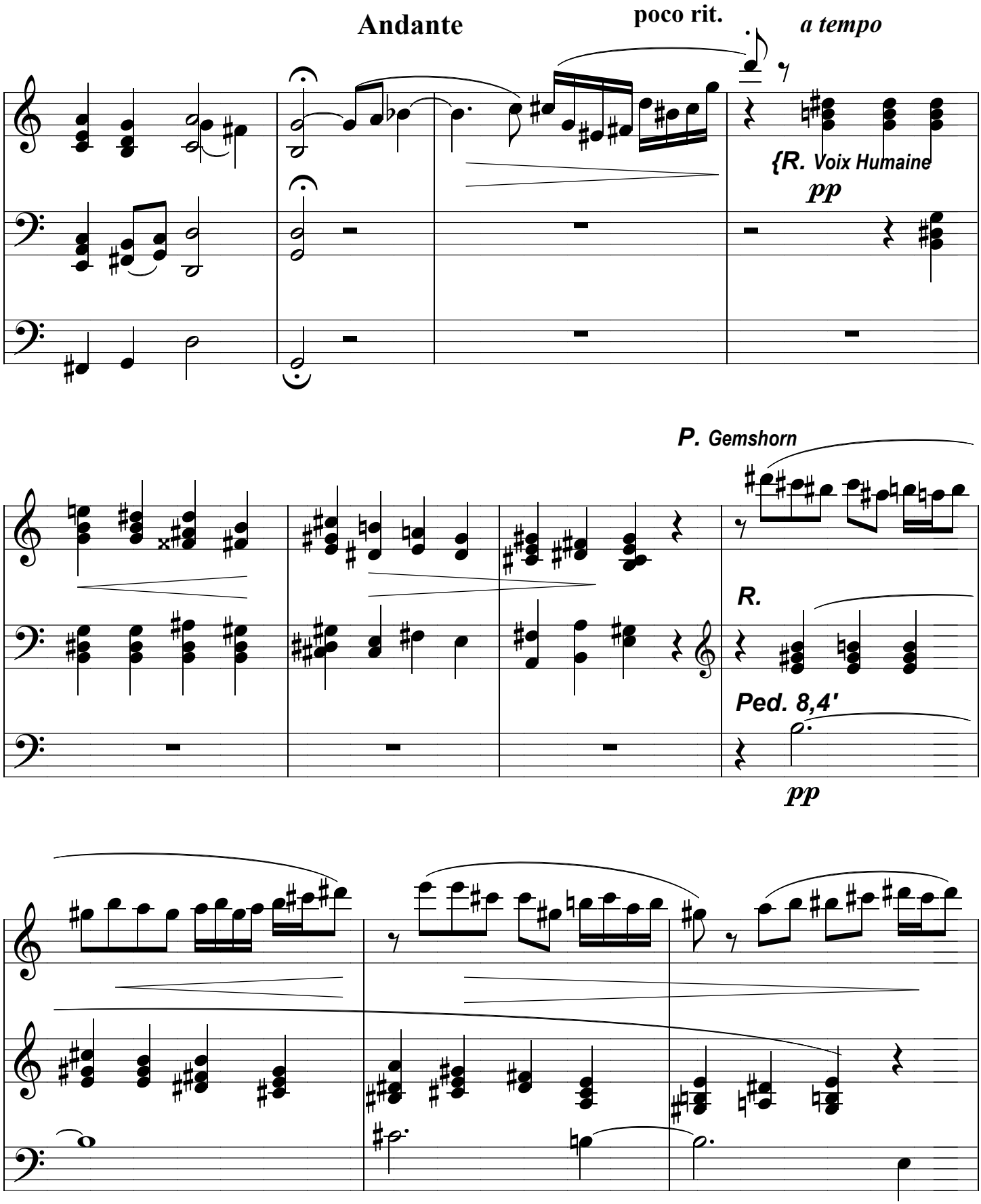

{G.
f
{P.,R.
p
Ped.,G.
f

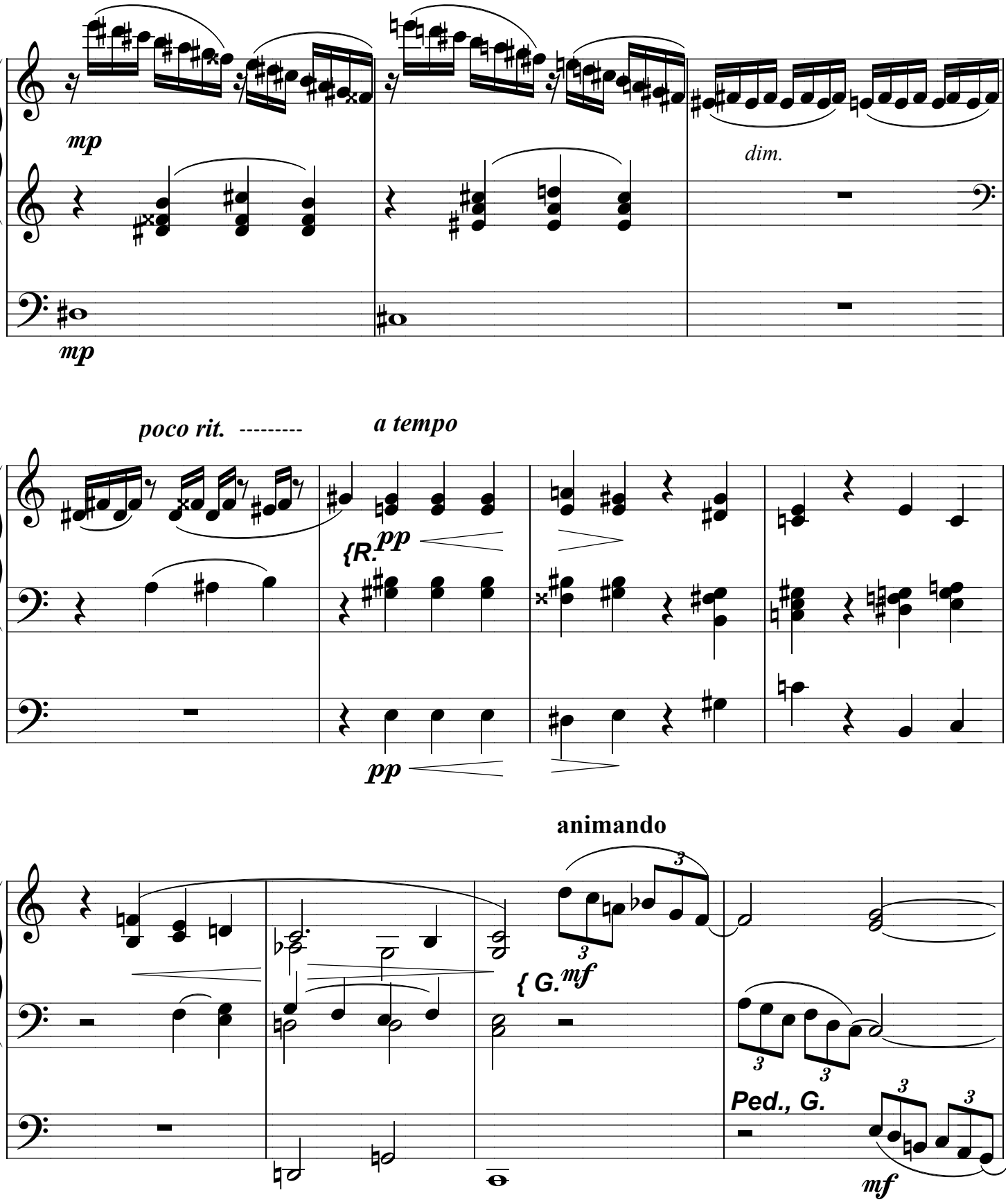

{G. f
cresc.
f
cresc.

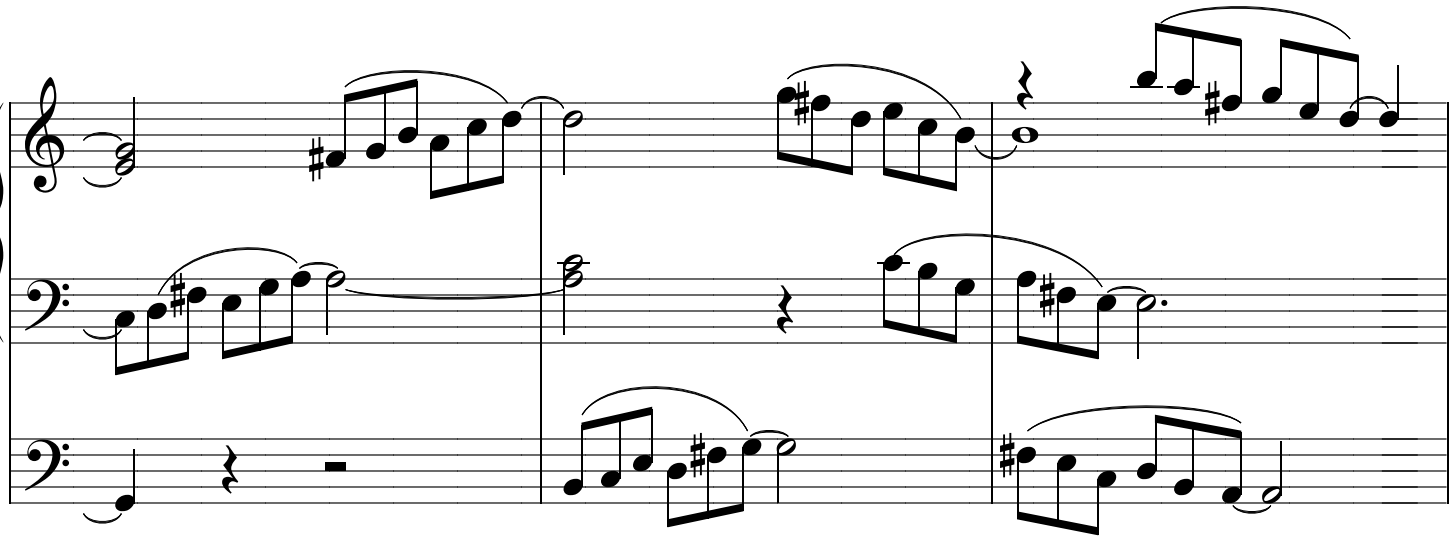

ritardando

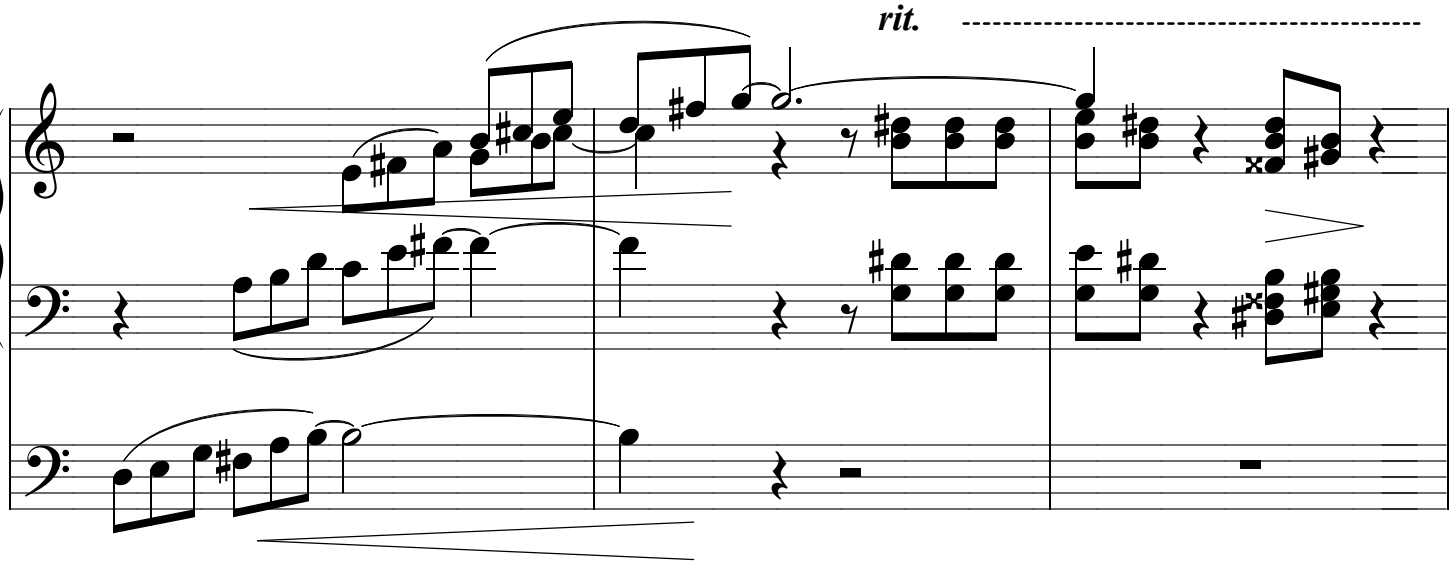

Tempo 1
ff
{ G. f
Ped., G.
f
ff

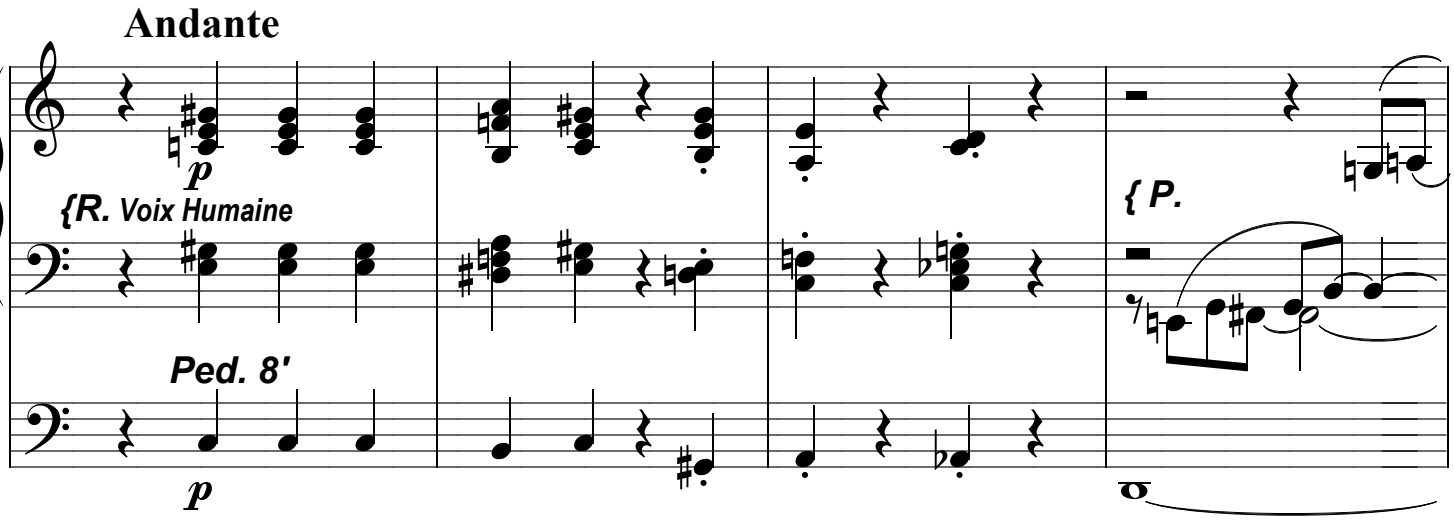


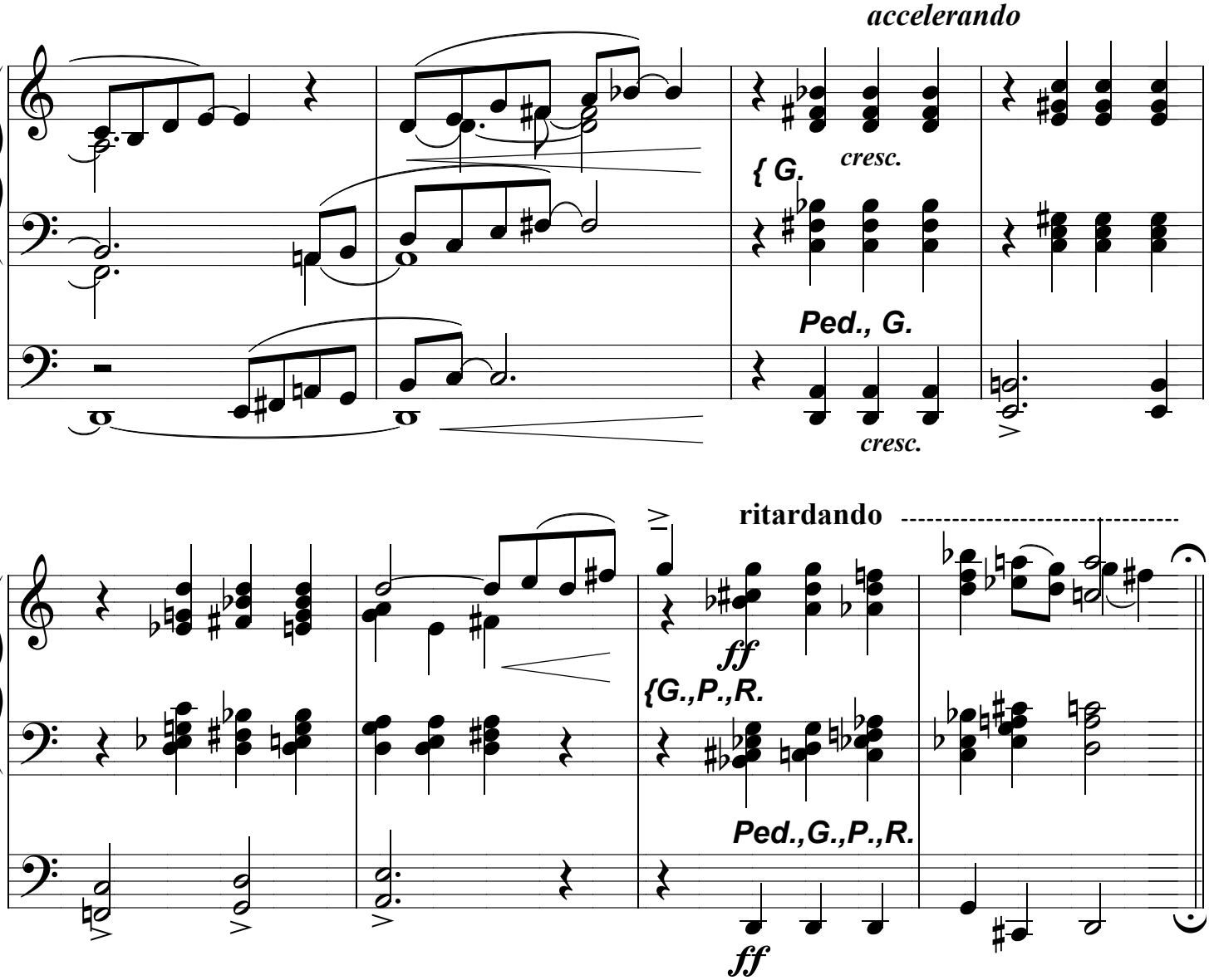

Andante
poco rit.
a tempo
{R. Voix Humaine
pp
P. Gemshorn
R.
Ped. 8,4'
pp


mp
dim.
mp
poco rit. ---------
a tempo
{R. pp
pp
animando
{ G. mf
Ped., G.
mf



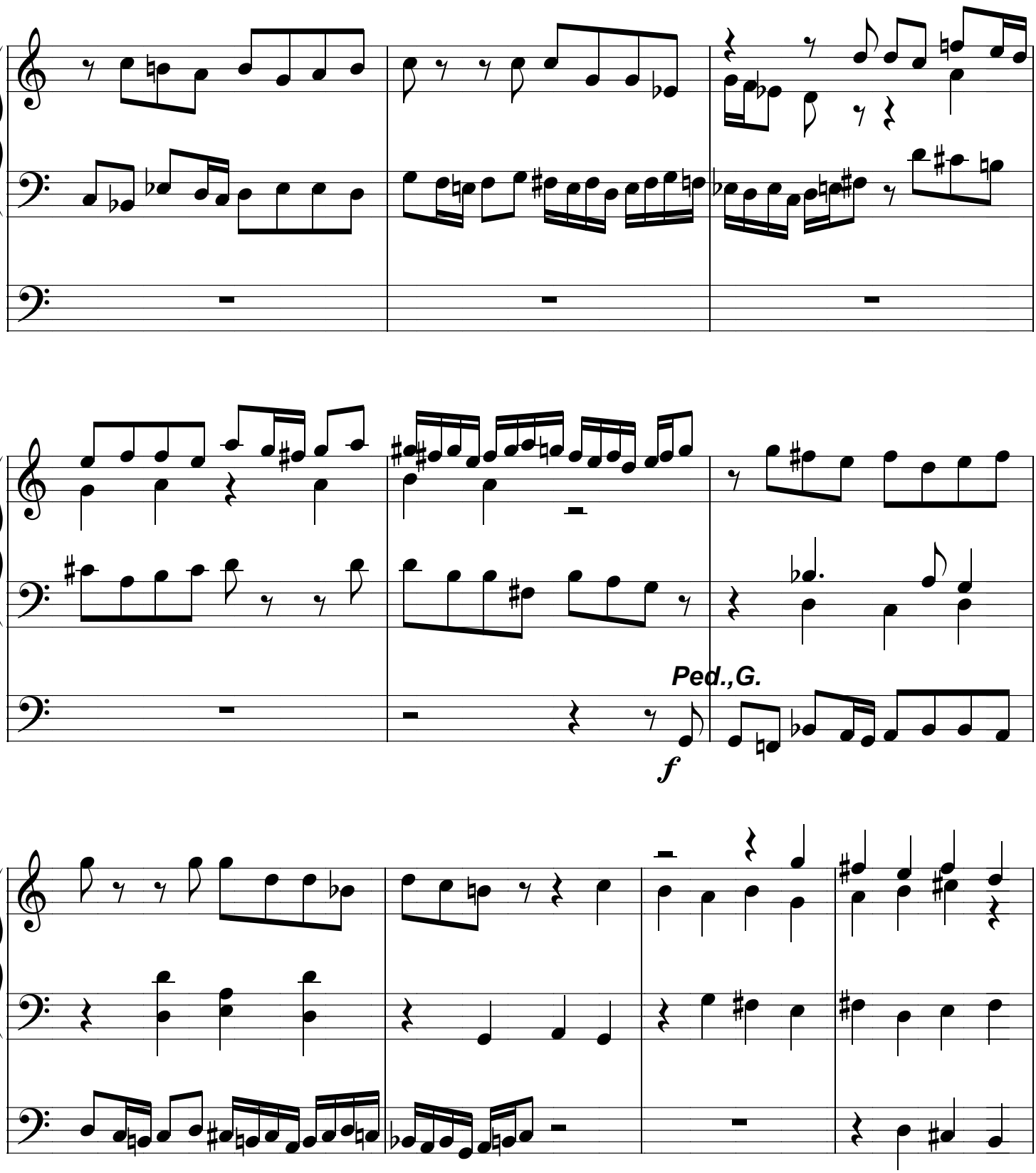

rit.

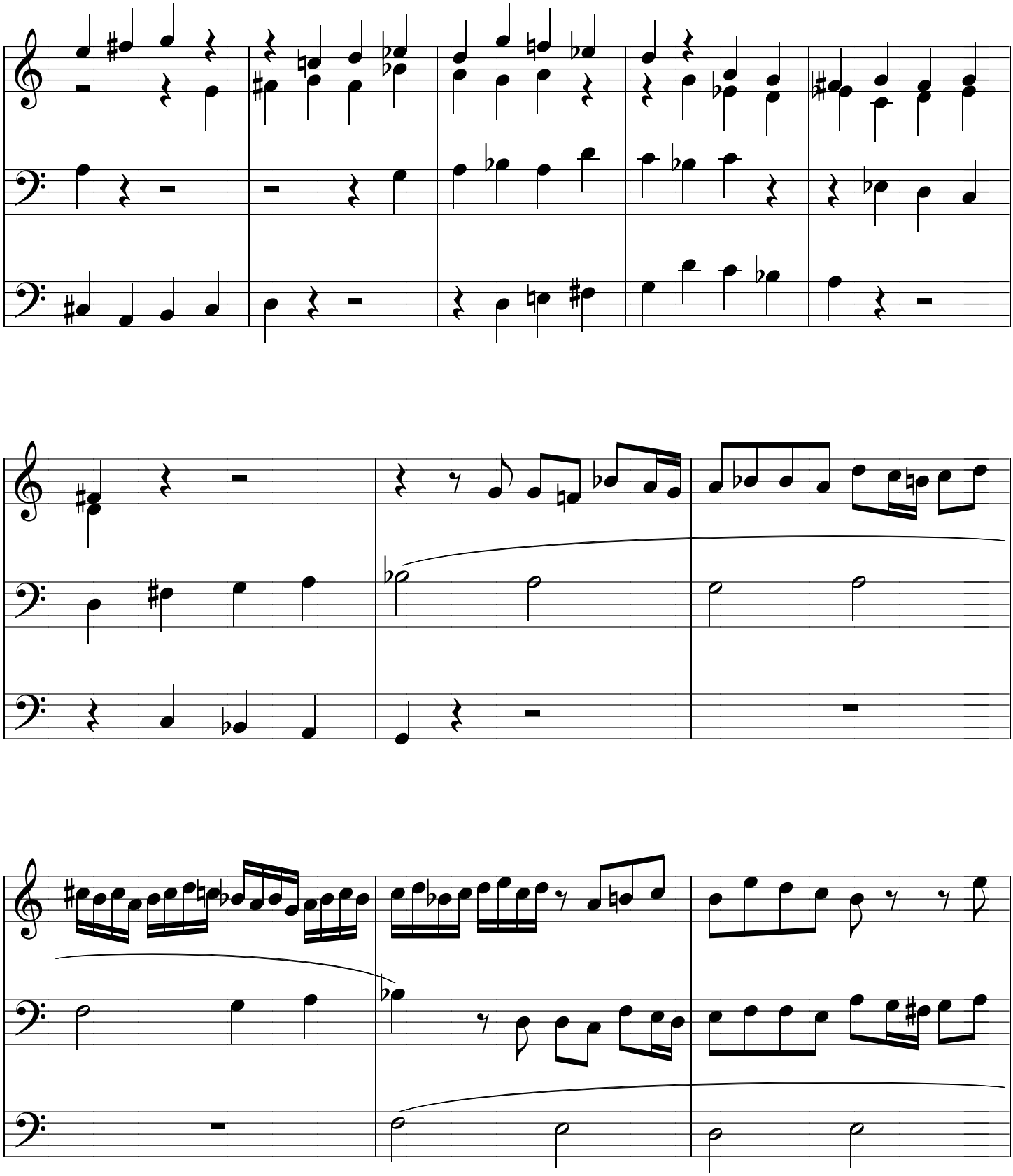

Andante
p
{R. Voix Humaine
Ped. 8'
p
{ P.

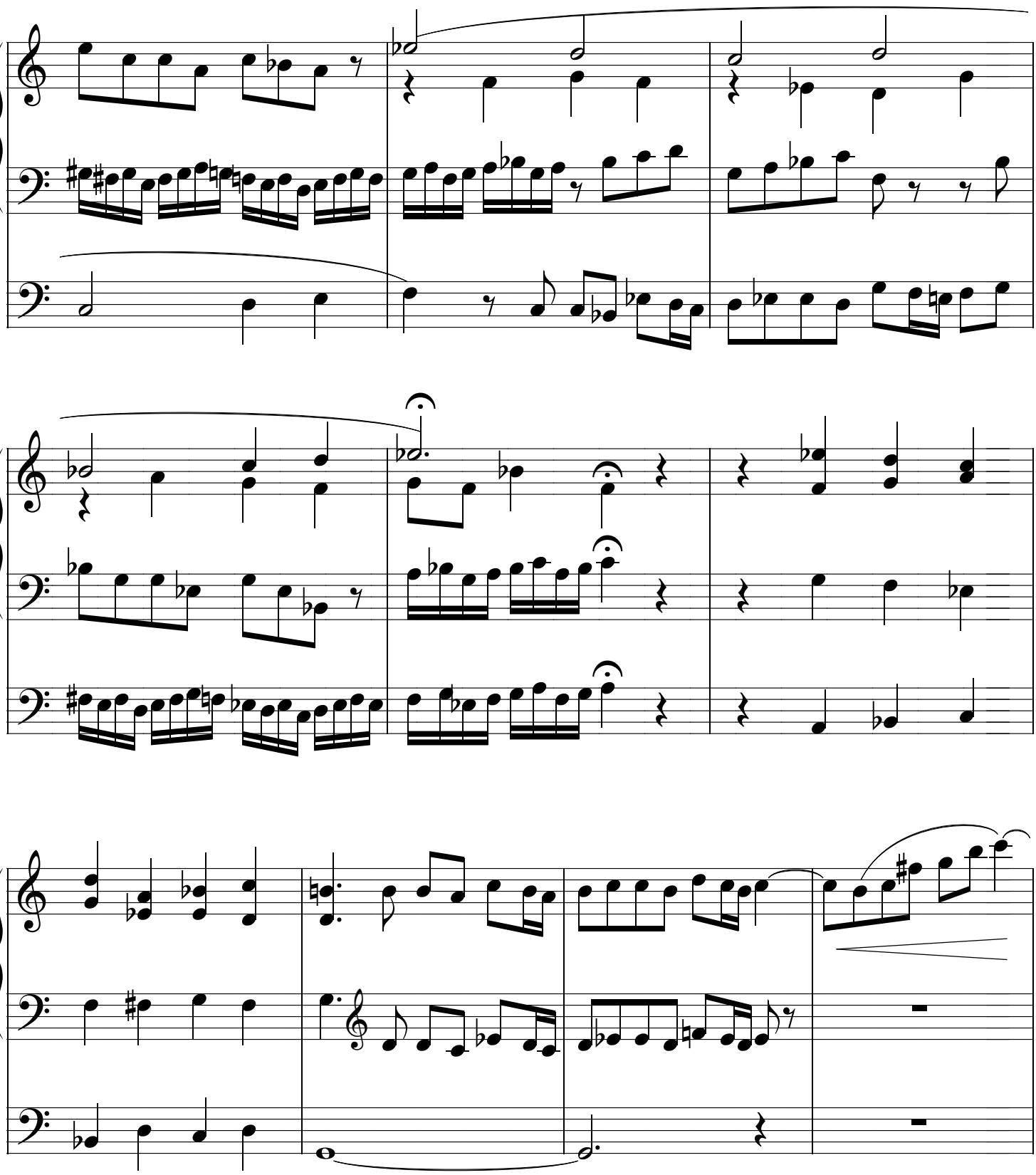
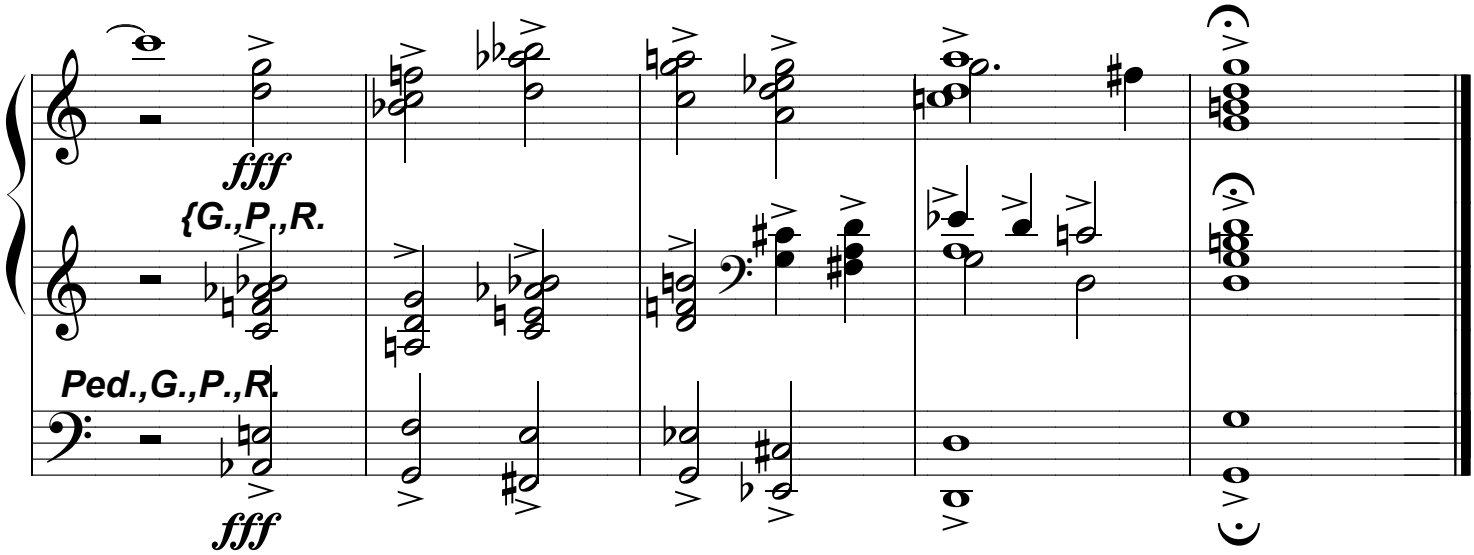


Tempo 1

{ G. *f*


Ped.,G.
f





Lento e pesante