RACHMANINOFF

10 PRELUDES OPUS 23 FOR THE PIANO

EDITED BY MURRAY BAYLOR

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ABOUT THE PIECES

PRELUDE IN F-SHARP MINOR, OP. 23, NO. 1 Page 4

The brooding quality of this prelude results from the key, the tempo, the close-knit melody of single notes, and the chromatic motion of the rich accompaniment. The initial five-measure phrase is repeated in varied form and then moves to the relative major key of A where a dialogue between soprano and bass begins (measure 13). The exchange becomes more animated after measure 21 where, against the step-wise descent of the bass line, the melody in octaves rises to a powerful climax with an appoggiatura on the tonic chord of F-sharp minor. At measure 30 a return to the beginning is suggested, but a delicate coda begins (measure 33) which ends surprisingly with reiterated, vigorous tonic chords.

The technical demands of this piece are rather modest, but a good interpretation needs fastidious management of the dynamics, carefully calculated balances between the parts, and subtle rubato to project its melancholy message. The piece moves into one full-bodied climax before subsiding; the crescendo (measures 17 to 24) should be gradual and a long descrescendo in effect (measure 25 to 38) should also be gradual.

PRELUDE IN B-FLAT, OP. 23, NO. 2 Page 9

Unlike the preceding prelude this one is joyous and exuberant with great surges of sound. After the left hand begins its sweeping arpeggios, a bristling, intense, right-hand melody is enunciated in two-measure phrases. The first phrase on the tonic is repeated before the harmony moves to the mediant and the dominant, and then to a change of meter at the cadence point (measure 10). A varied return follows at measure 17, then a second change of meter introduces the middle section of the ternary form. A lyric melody in the middle register with lush harmony begins to unfold (measure 20), while a variant of the original melody becomes a lacy accompaniment in the treble. A long transitional passage (measures 28–37) moves to a literal return of the first section to complete the ternary form. The passionate coda, which begins at measure 54, brings the piece to a triumphant conclusion.

This is virtuoso music for pianists with a well-developed technique, and its huge sonorities must be produced from the shoulders. Physically strenuous, it is particularly difficult for small hands. The dynamic balance in the middle section is no small problem since the melody is surrounded both above and below with rich harmony. Particularly treacherous are passages like those in measures 15, 52, and 60 which must be played with hands close to the keys for security. If the speed indicated by Rachmaninoff's metronome mark—or one very close to it—isn't maintained, the effect is heavy and labored rather than majestic. For some pianos and certain halls, one might use the sostenuto pedal on the low B-flats for the first six measures. (See sostenuto pedal discussion under Prelude in D, Op. 23, No. 4.)

PRELUDE IN D MINOR, OP. 23, NO. 3 Page 17

The D-minor prelude is one of the most contrapuntal of Rachmaninoff's preludes, using such traditional techniques as sequence, canonic imitation, augmentation and diminution. Though a minuet tempo and a metronome mark are specified, the piece is more like a polonaise, with strutting strides and capricious gestures. The first two measures contain most of the thematic matter used in the piece. The first eight measures arrive at a half cadence which is followed by a varied repeat of equal length

Second Edition

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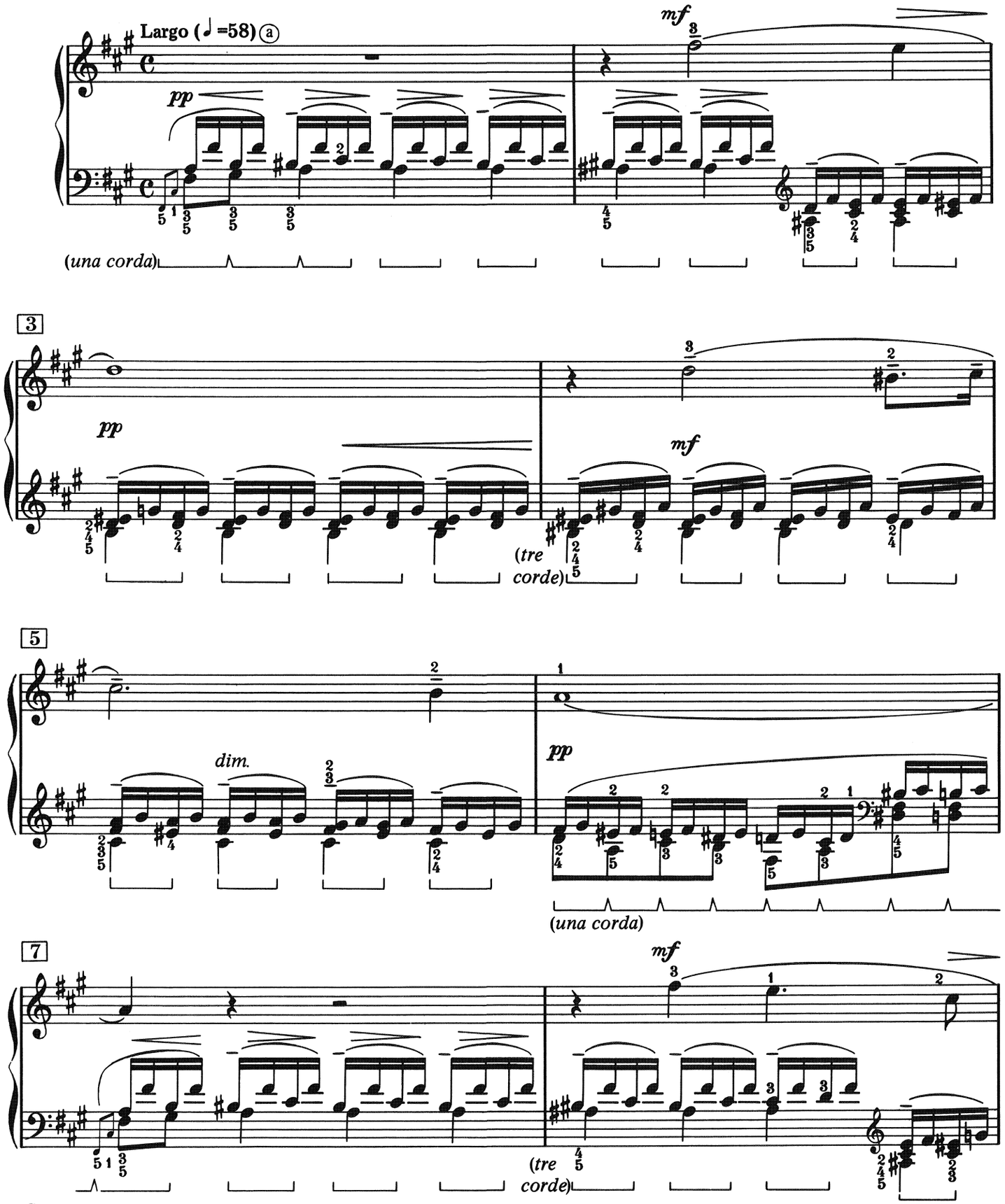
TEN PRELUDES

Prelude in F-Sharp Minor

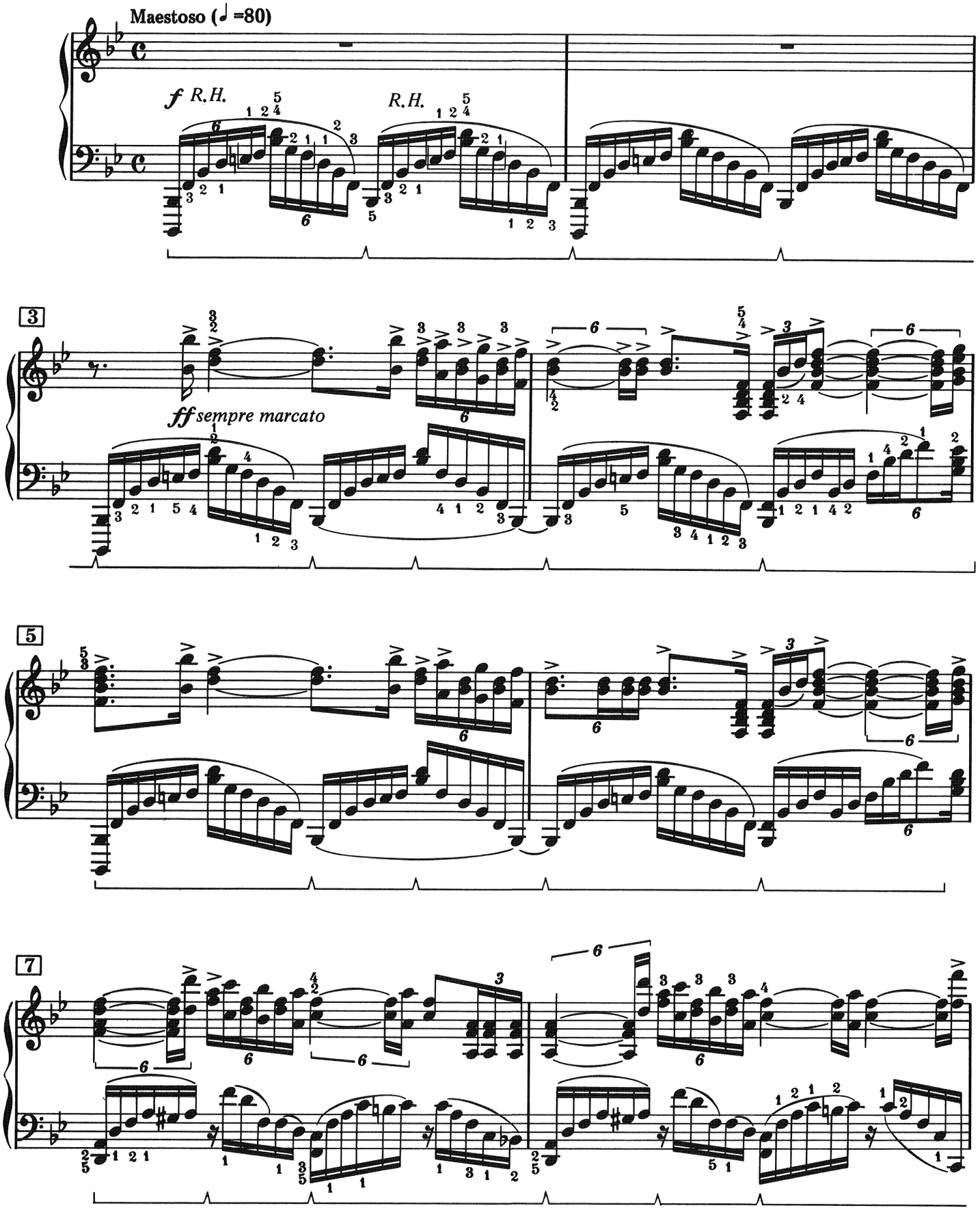
Op. 23, No. 1
(1903)



ⓐ The metronome mark is by the composer, though a slightly faster tempo makes it easier to maintain the continuity of the melody with its many long, single notes.

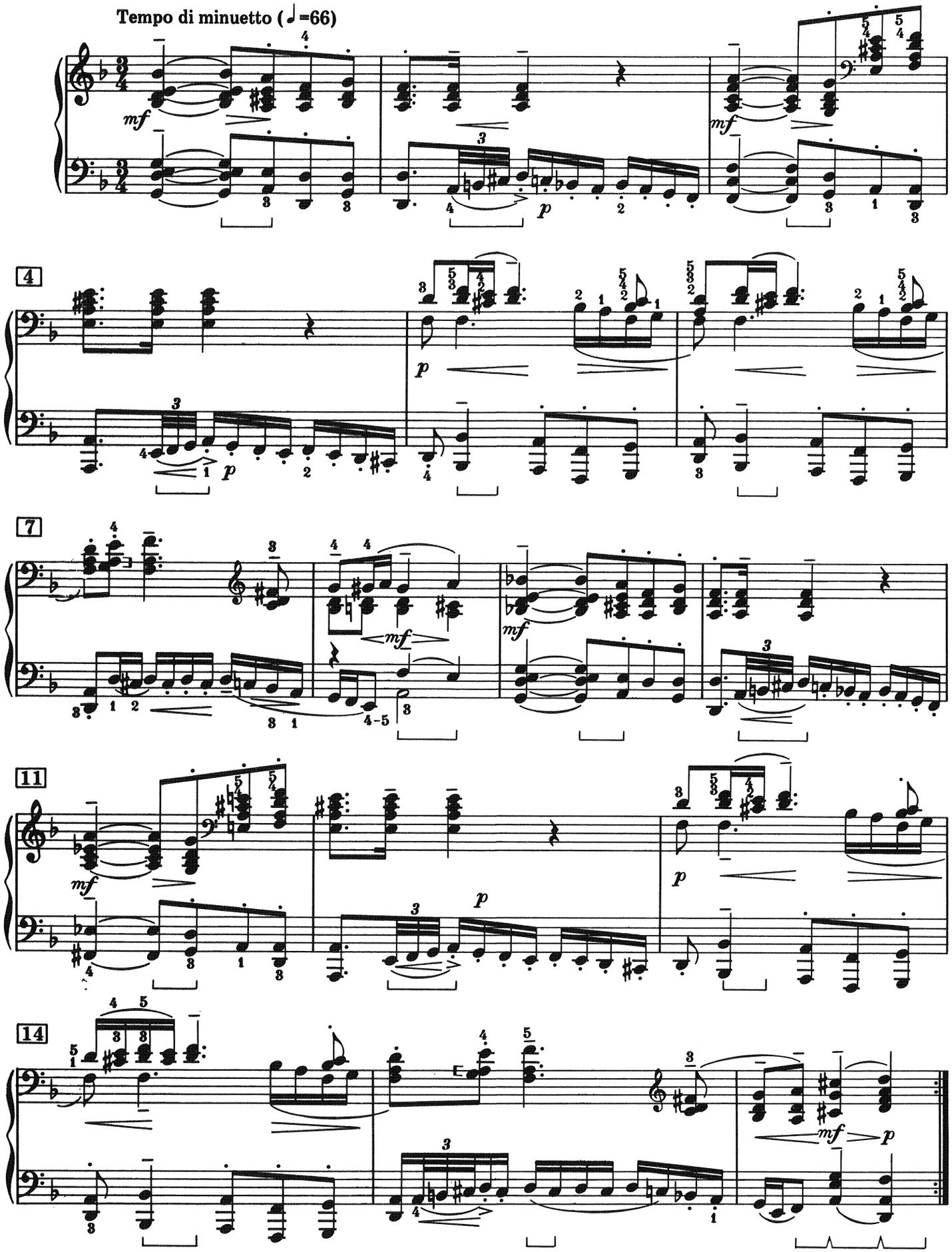
Prelude in B-flat

Op. 23, No. 2
(1903)



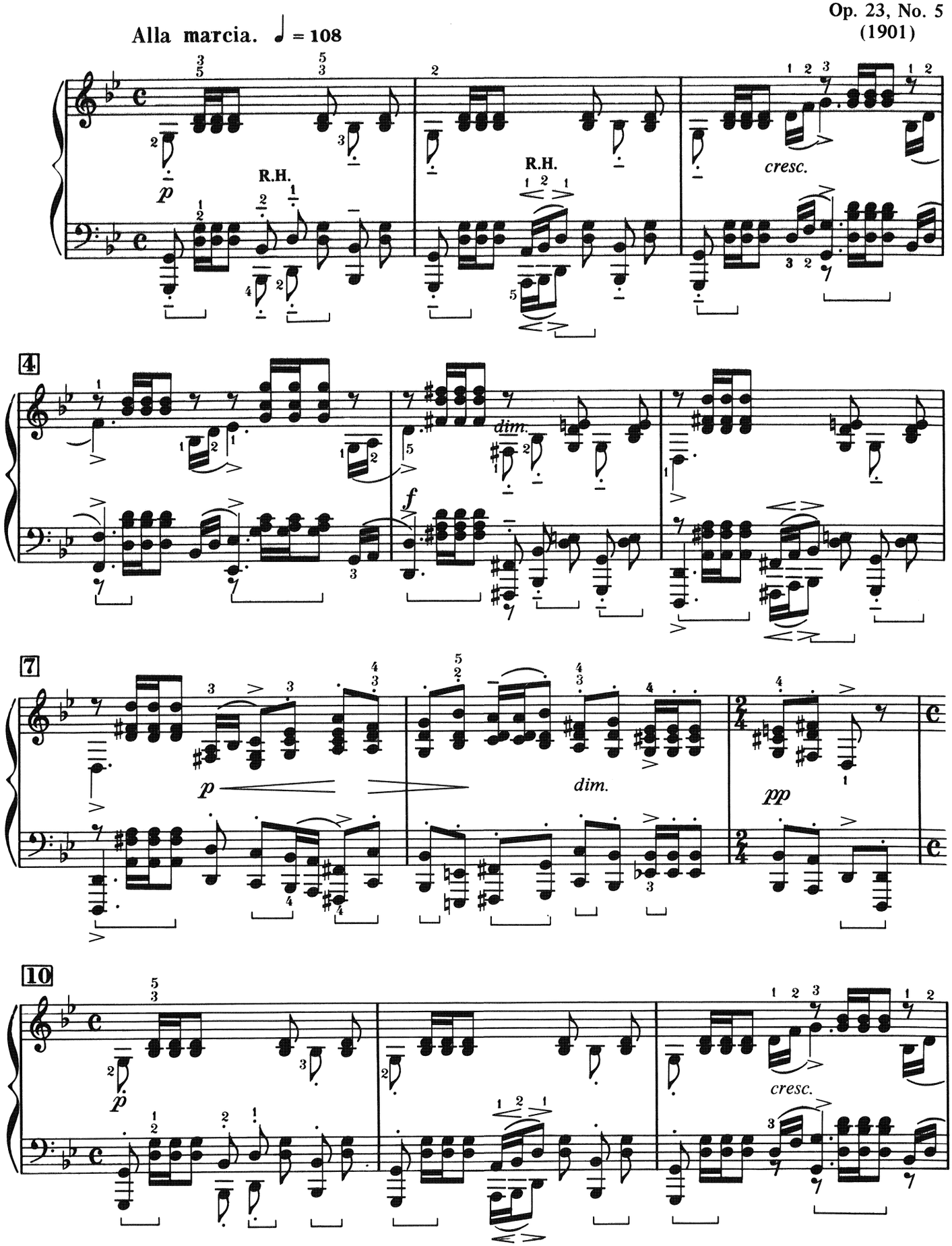
Prelude in D Minor

Op. 23, No. 3
(1903)



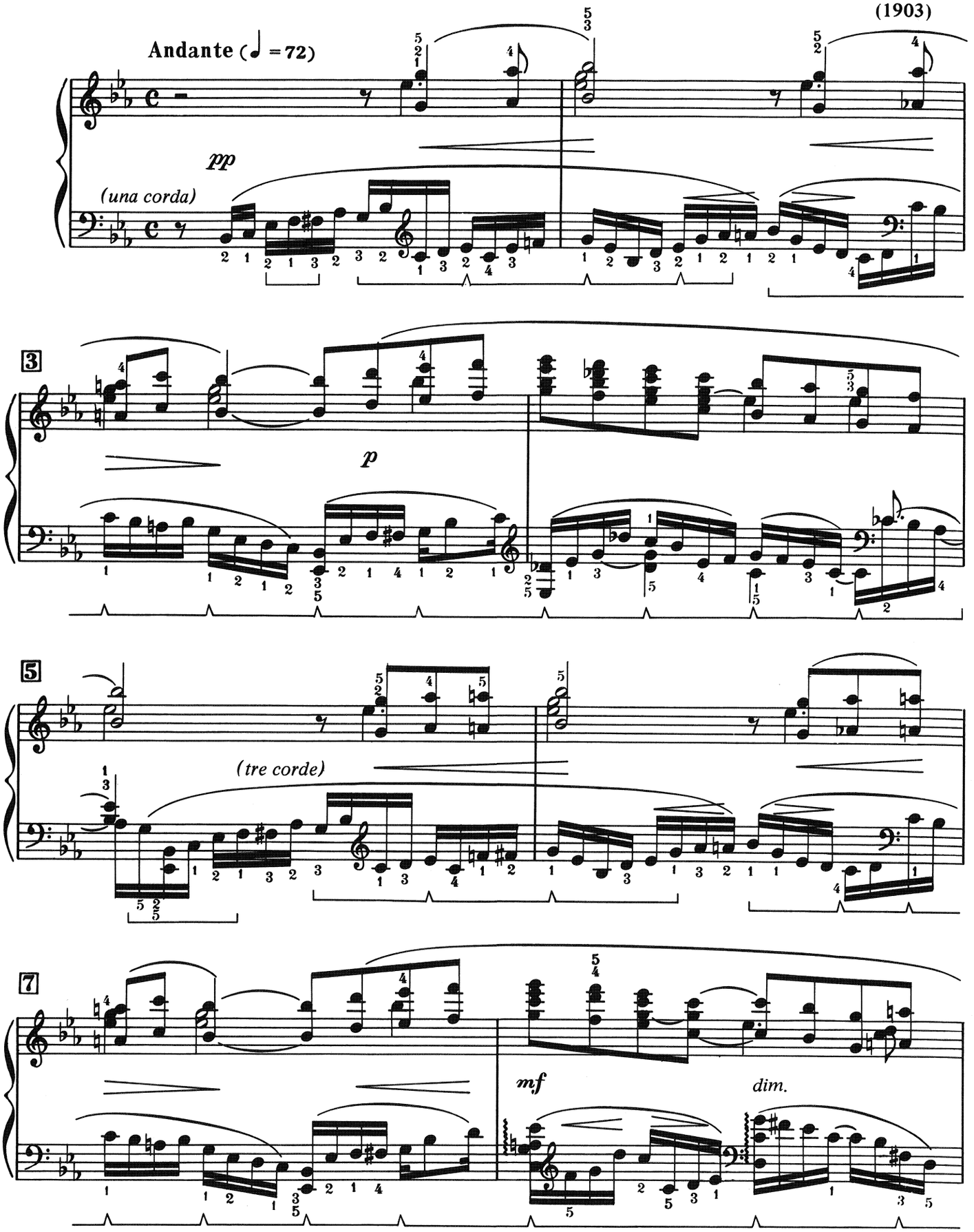
Prelude in G Minor

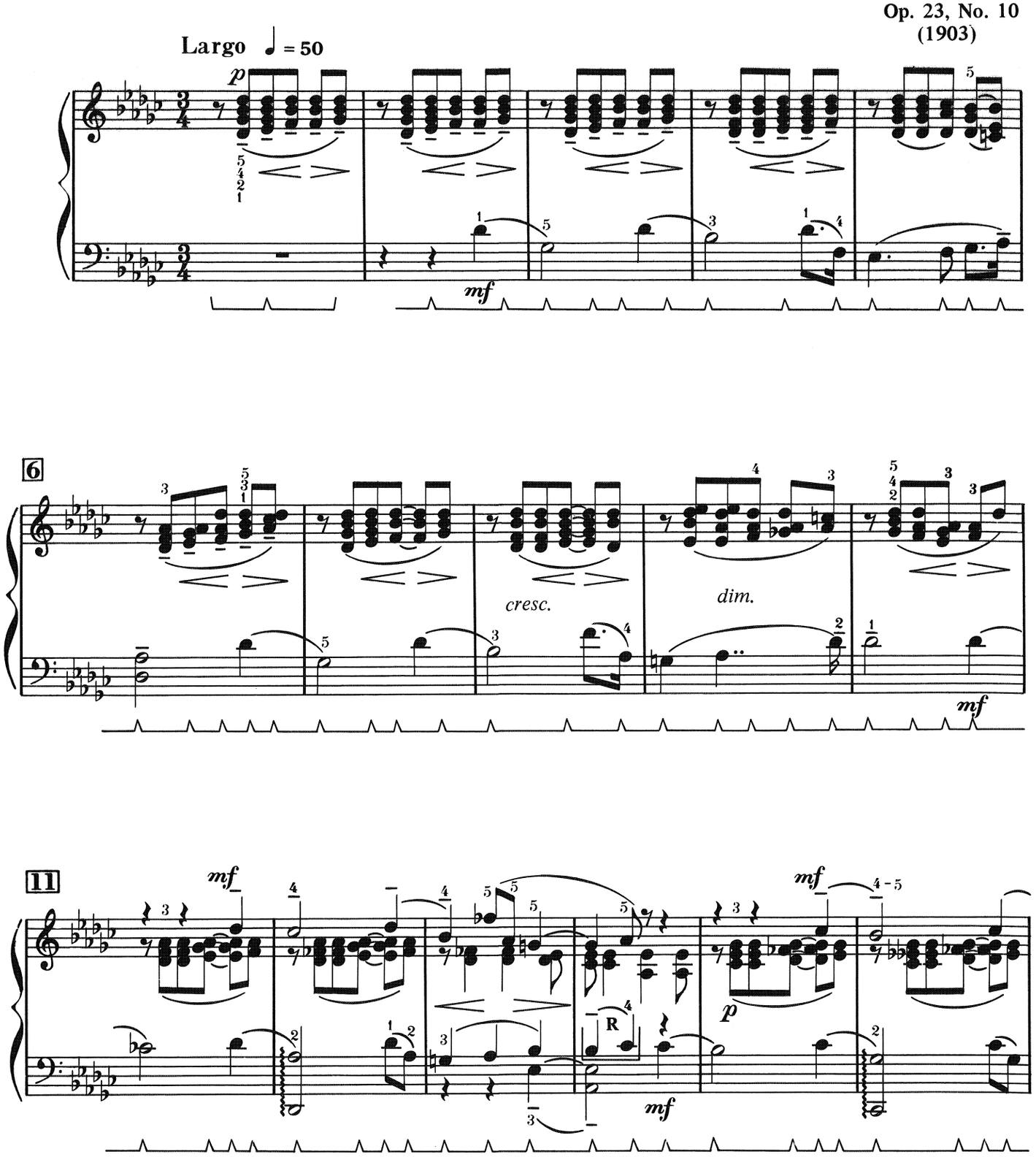
Op. 23, No. 5
(1901)



Prelude in E-flat

Op. 23, No. 6
(1903)



Prelude in G-flat

Op. 23, No. 10
(1903)