SUITE BERGAMASQUE

FOR SOLO PIANO

by

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

CD 82/ L 75

Edited by
RICHARD DOWLING

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Suite bergamasque (1890, revised 1905)
by Claude Debussy

(born August 22, 1862 Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France
died March 25, 1918 Paris, France)

PREFACE

Some of Debussy's most popular piano works were composed before 1900—the *Arabesques*, *Rêverie*, and *Suite bergamasque* among them. These works are full of lightness and spontaneity, and always exude a refined sense of elegance and charm. Later in life Debussy tried to distance himself from his youthful works, claiming that they were not really worthy of serious consideration. Nevertheless their popularity has endured for over a hundred years now. The third movement of *Suite bergamasque* is probably Debussy's best-known work, the perennial favorite *Clair de lune*.

Debussy began composing this four-movement suite sometime in 1889 and sold his manuscript to a Paris music publisher in February 1891. The ownership rights to many of Debussy's early works were transferred among a handful of French publishing companies due to a bankruptcy proceeding and the death of one of the publishers, and consequently most were never printed for many years. Finally in 1905 the newest owner, Eugène Fromont, decided to publish several of these early piano works in order to capitalize on Debussy's increasing popularity with the musical public. Debussy's orchestral masterpieces *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and *La mer*, and his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* had recently brought him great acclaim thus making him significantly valuable to his publisher. Over the ensuing fifteen years however, Debussy had radically changed his style of composition and was not happy with the prospect of his early works suddenly being made available. Under these circumstances, he undertook a revision of *Suite bergamasque* in 1905. In order to distance himself from this "immature" work, he insisted that a special "C.D." monogram appear on the cover rather than his full name, and also that the date "1890" be printed on the cover and on the first page of music. Presumably this was to alert connoisseurs and critics that this work was not representative of his current style.

Bergamasque is an unusual word that refers to the northern Italian region of Bergamo, and also to a particular character of the 17th-century *commedia dell'arte* theater, specifically "Harlequin," the buffoon who satirized the rustic qualities and peasant-like nature of the citizens of Bergamo. Renaissance Italian composer Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643) also wrote dance works called *bergamascas*. Debussy would undoubtedly have been aware of both of these connotations and connections especially since the *commedia dell'arte* was popular across all of Europe for well over a hundred years. However Debussy's initial interest in the word *bergamasque* was probably piqued by a set of Paul Verlaine's poetry from 1869 called *Fêtes galantes*. One of the poems is entitled *Clair de lune*:

Votre âme est un paysage choisi	Your soul is a chosen landscape
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques	Where charming masks and Bergamasks
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi	Playing the lute and dancing are somewhat
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.	Sad underneath their fanciful disguises.
Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur	Singing in minor mode of
L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune	Victorious love and fortunate life
Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur	They are reluctant to believe their happiness
Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune,	And their song mingles with the moonlight,
Au calme clair de lune triste et beau,	The calm moonlight, sad and beautiful,
Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres	Makes the birds dream in the trees
Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,	And the fountains sob with ecstasy,
Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.	The tall fountains, slender among the marble statues.

Debussy had already used this poem in an early setting for voice and piano in 1882-83 called *Clair de lune*. (Then in 1891 he composed yet another song called *Clair de lune* as part of a larger song cycle based on Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*.) Interestingly, Debussy also composed a piano work called *Masques* (published in 1904) that may have been originally conceived as another movement of *Suite bergamasque*. Later in 1909-10 he wrote a scenario for a ballet entitled *Masques et Bergamasques*, but never composed any music for it. Evidently he remained quite inspired by Verlaine's poetry for a long time.

Debussy admired the 17th and 18th-century French harpsichord composers, especially Rameau, and proudly considered himself to be a direct descendant in the French tradition of keyboard composition. Both his 1890 *Suite bergamasque* and his 1901 *Pour le piano* suite are Debussy's homages to French musical heritage (c.f., the *Petite suite* for piano duet). The titles of the individual movements of these suites are taken from common Baroque dance forms: prelude, menuet, sarabande, passepied, and toccata. The *Clair de lune* obviously replaces the typical Baroque sarabande. (Similarly, from Ravel we have *Le Tombeau de Couperin*.) Modal harmonies and ornamentation reinforce the "antique" nature of these works. Curiously, the original titles of the third and fourth movements of *Suite bergamasque* appeared respectively as *Promenade sentimentale* (another reference to Verlaine) and *Pavane*. In point of fact, both titles are quite appropriate to their content. The *Pavane* was probably changed to *Passepied* so as not to resemble too closely Gabriel Fauré's *Pavane* of 1886 (also composed in the key of F-sharp Minor). The problem with the revised designation however is that a passepied was traditionally a quick dance in triple meter. Debussy's *Passepied* is in duple meter and thus more closely resembles a pavane, albeit a livelier one. (The original time signature for the *Passepied* was 4/4. I have changed it to 2/2 because the tempo marking *Allegretto ma non troppo* does not make sense otherwise.)

The *Prélude* begins with a robust declamation followed by a rapid descending melody line that is quasi-pentatonic and strongly reminiscent of harpsichord figuration. The second theme at Measure 20 is in Aeolian mode but does not reappear in the recapitulation of this abbreviated sonata form. The *Menuet* is unusual in two ways. First, Debussy stresses the second beat throughout this ternary meter movement thus shifting the emphasis away from the downbeat. This renders a lightness and elegance to this Baroque dance. Secondly, Debussy employs different church modes to enhance the "antique" nature of the work, starting with Dorian at the beginning and ending with a surprise coda in Aeolian.

Clair de lune is the most "impressionist" work of the suite. It stands in distinct contrast to the other movements in its romantically intense expression and delicately ethereal texture. French pianist Maurice Dumesnil was fortunate to play it for Debussy and related his "lesson" with the composer in an article published in 1962 (and reprinted in Roger Nichols' book *Debussy Remembered*). According to Dumesnil, in *Clair de lune* Debussy advised "to depress the two pedals before starting, so that the overtones would vibrate immediately upon contact," and that in Measure 59 "the C-flat in the left hand [should] be brought out, thus emphasizing the change of color." He also mentions that the triplets throughout should be "generally flexible," but that the overall expression "had to remain dignified," that is without exaggerated crescendos or rubatos. In the second section (beginning at Measure 27), Debussy reportedly told him, "The left-hand arpeggios should be fluid, mellow, drowned in pedal, as if played by a harp on a background of strings." The *Passepied* most closely resembles the 18th-century French *claveciniste* style, especially in the staccato left-hand accompaniment. It is a modified sonata form composed mostly in Aeolian mode, with a surprising Dorian-mode coda.

Unfortunately, there is no autograph manuscript of *Suite bergamasque* remaining. This new Masters Music edition was prepared in a careful evaluation of the first and amended editions published in Paris by Eugène Fromont in 1905 and 1910. Numerous corrections have been made to the original misprinted notes and accidentals. Many markings such as slurs and accents have been added or changed for the sake of conformity

in recurrences of identical phrasing and articulation. Based on study and performing experience, I have added fingerings and redistributed many notes between the hands in order to make certain complicated passages easier to play. Some of these redistributions are not rewritten and instead are simply marked with brackets and abbreviated hand indications (*l.h.*, *r.h.*). I have added a few additional pedaling suggestions in parentheses as well.

Richard Dowling, D.M.A.
New York, November 2006

photo: Peter Schaaf

Pianist **Richard Dowling** consistently wins high praise for his musical abilities. *American Record Guide* wrote of his all-Gershwin Klavier Records CD, *Sweet and Low-Down*, "Dowling dances through 29 numbers with exuberance and a natural feel for rubato…if you love Gershwin, don't miss this!" In a review of his *World's Greatest Piano Rags* album another *ARG* critic said that "Dowling plays with tremendous zip and zest…I am sure he is the best ragtime pianist I have ever heard." *The New York Times* has described him as an "especially impressive fine pianist." *The Singapore Business Times* hailed him as "a master of creating beautiful sounds with impeccable control of colors and textures" and for giving "a superb recital that left the audience craving for more at the end." *The San Antonio Express-News* called him "a musician with something to say, the skill to say it and the magnetic power to make you want to listen." *The Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* wrote that he "gave a high-voltage recital and obviously has technique to spare." His repertoire includes the complete solo piano works of the renowned French composer Maurice Ravel. He is currently preparing a new authoritative multi-volume edition of Ravel's complete piano works for Masters Music Publications. For more information about Mr. Dowling's performances, recordings, and his MMP sheet music editions please visit his official website at **www.richard-dowling.com**.

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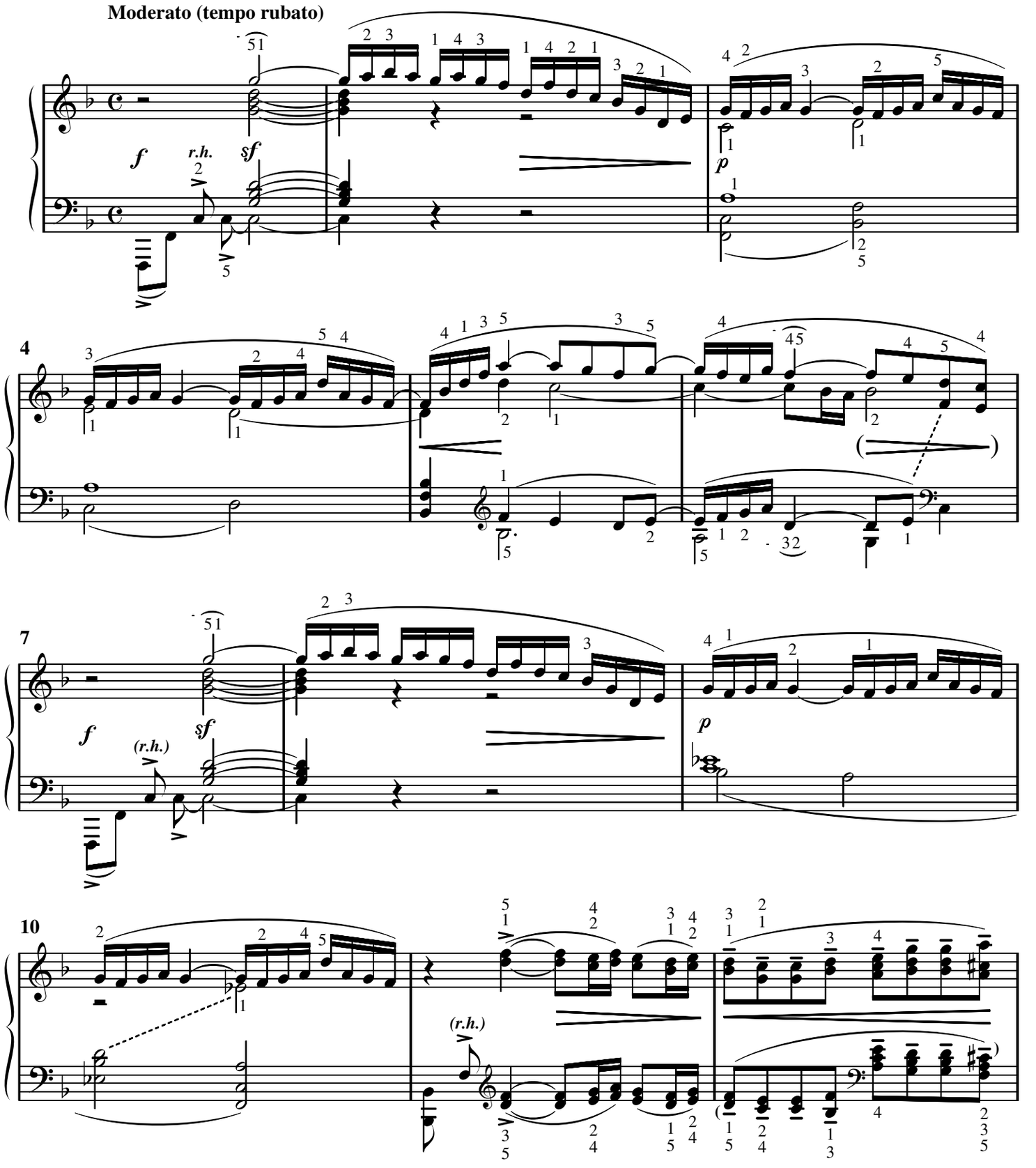
Suite bergamasque

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)
Edited by Richard Dowling

I. Prélude

Moderato (tempo rubato)



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II. Menuet

Claude Debussy
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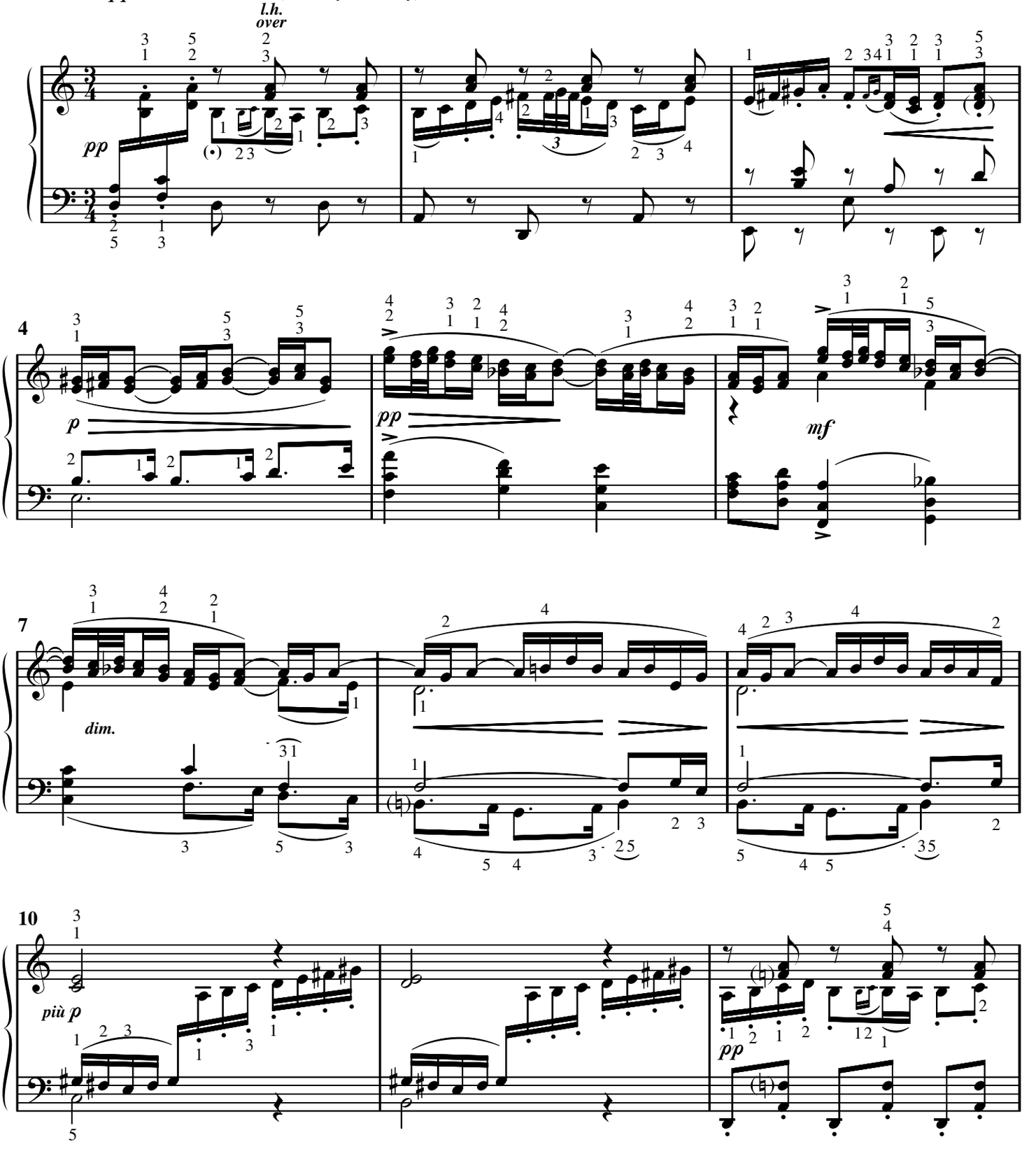
Andantino

pp et très délicatement (and very delicately)

l.h. over



III. Clair de lune

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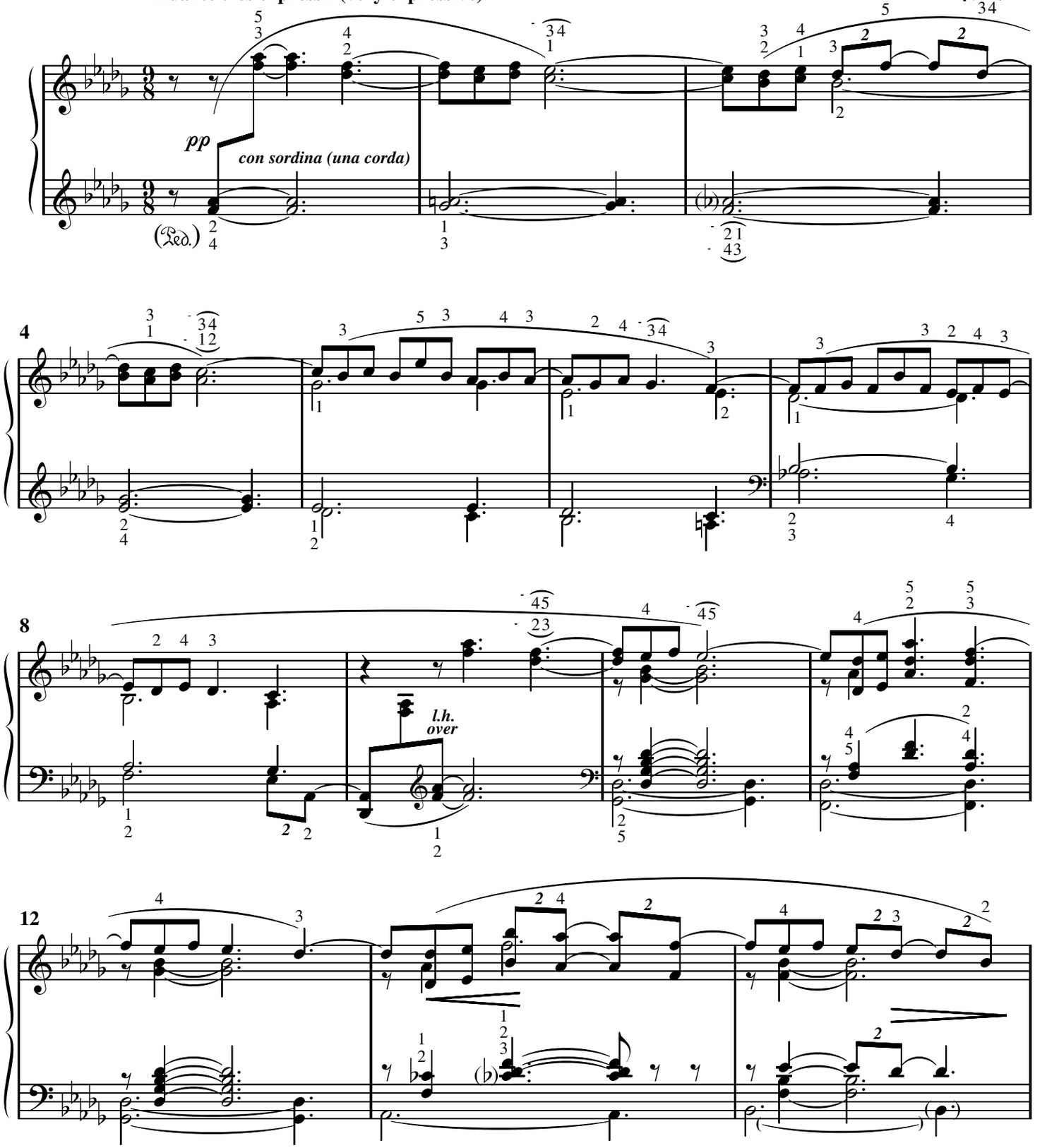
Andante très expressif (very expressive)



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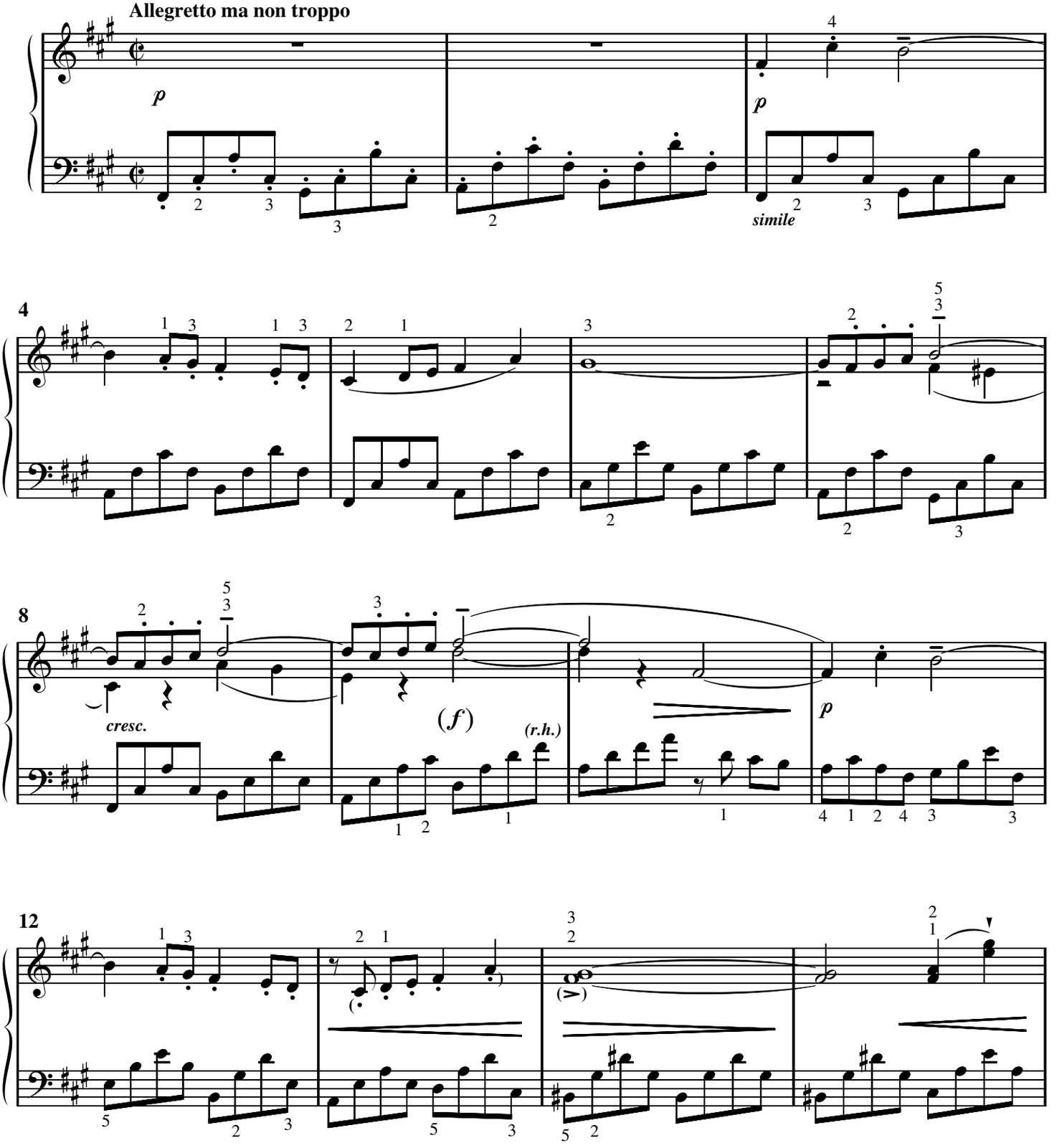
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