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Music at Sight Tutorials

Improve Your Sight Reading in Three Short Lessons

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Introduction

When I was learning the piano as a child, I couldn't sight read, but my mother was really good at it. And I always thought: That's just the way it is. You're either good at sight reading (like she was) or good at memorising (like I was), and I really envied how my mother could open any book of music and just play!

Fast forward to my university years, and I found out you can learn how to sight read. You can even get really good at it, even if it doesn't come naturally to you at first. I went from not being able to sight read at all to earning my living from it!

The trick to becoming a good sight reader is to know how to practice it. I've put together these three tutorials. They include tips and suggestions to quickly get you started, and you can use these ideas to practice sight reading other pieces.

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Tutorial 1

Mozart, German Dance

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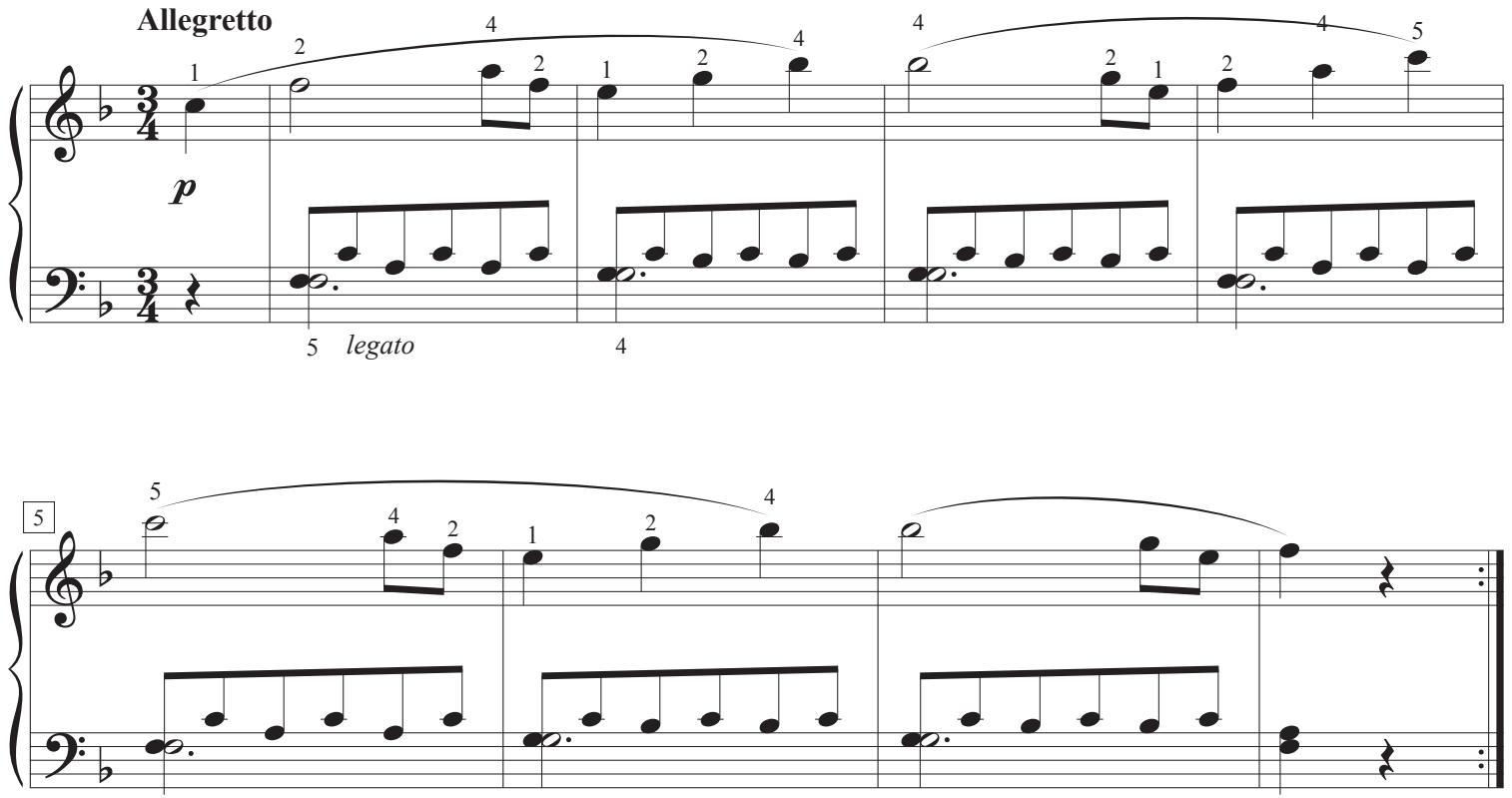
German Dance

"The Sleighride" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



- Our first piece is Mozart's German Dance. Where do we start?
- The first thing is to notice that there are three layers of music.

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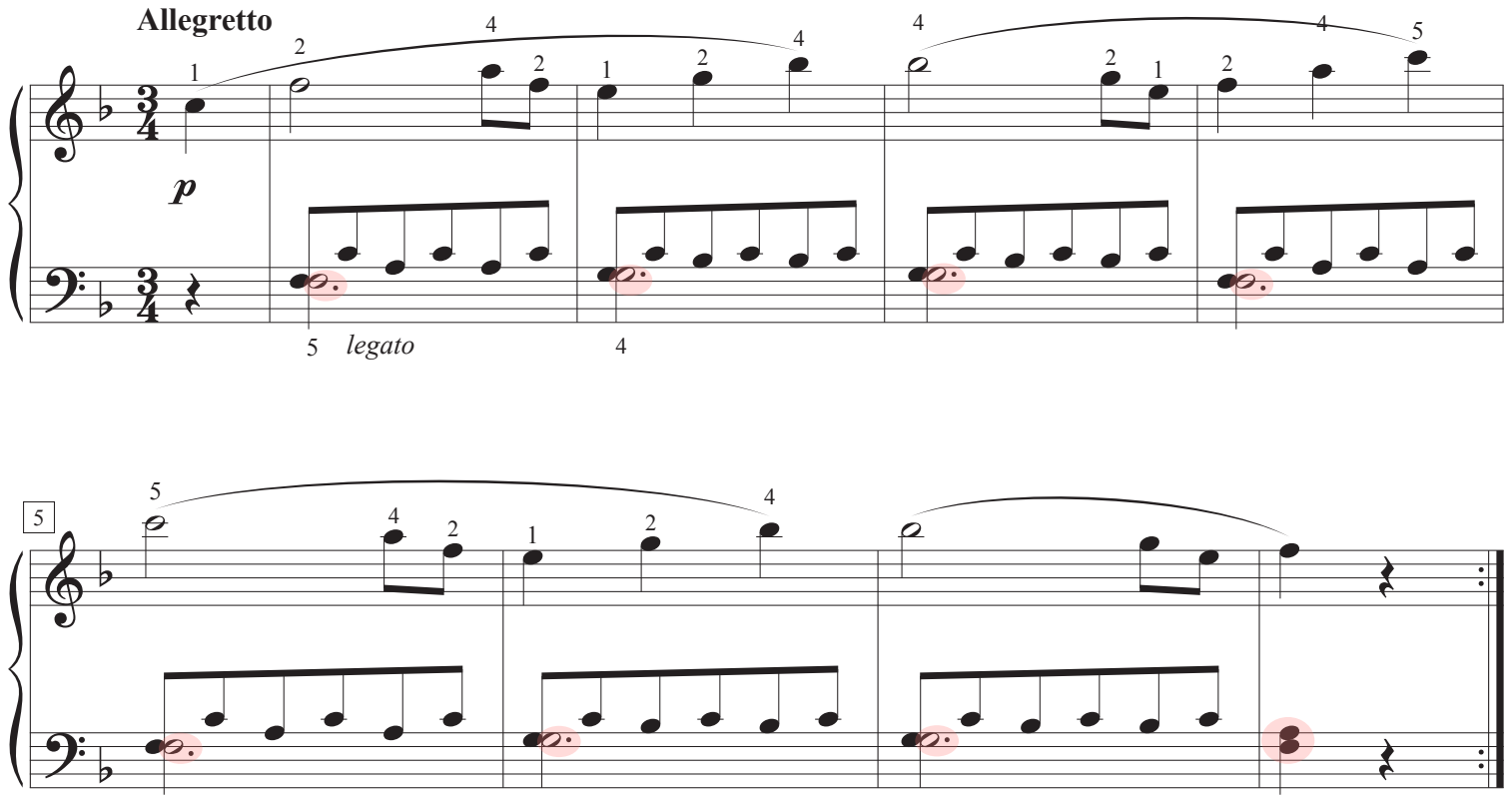
German Dance

"The Sleighride" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



- The bass part → bass clef, stems pointing down (highlighted in red)
- The tenor part → bass clef, stems pointing up
- The soprano part → treble clef, the melody

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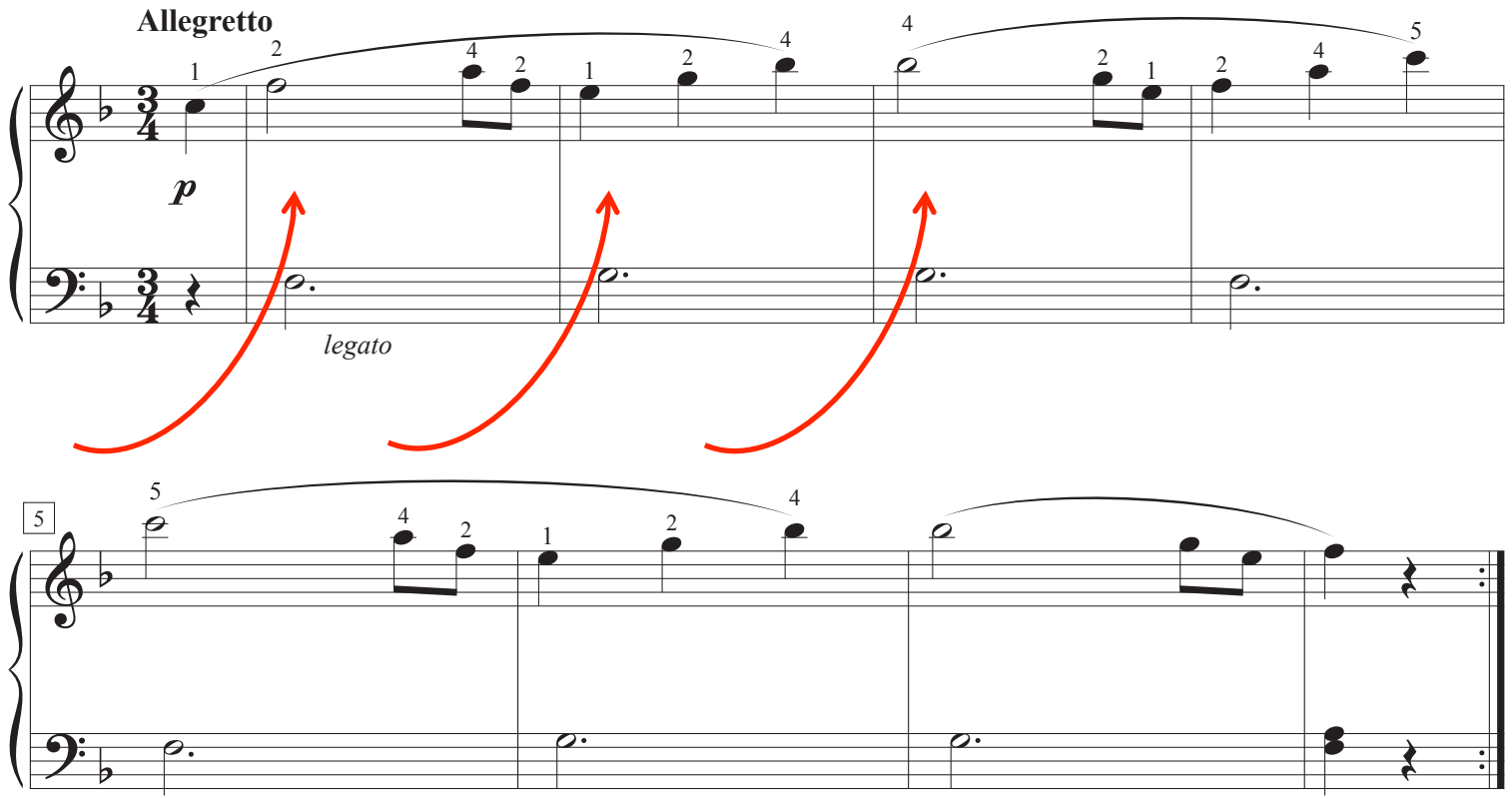
German Dance

"The Sleighride" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



- Step 1 - On the first reading, take out the tenor part and just take in the bass and soprano.
- Read each bar from the bottom up in a quick sweep of the eye.

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Perfectionism

A quick note about perfectionism – It's important to let go of perfectionism when working on sight reading.

It's common for pianists to leave out nonessential parts of music when sight reading. This is especially true when reading orchestral reductions.

Here, we have a piano piece by Mozart, and the ideal would be to sight read everything the first time through. If that's not yet possible, then it's important to work on the piece in the steps given here.

Step 1 is to leave out a nonessential part. In this case, the bass notes and the melody are the first priority, as is often the case. So don't feel bad about leaving out the middle part. Read this piece the first time through with just the bass and soprano, and get used to the feeling of playing with consistent tempo and without stopping.

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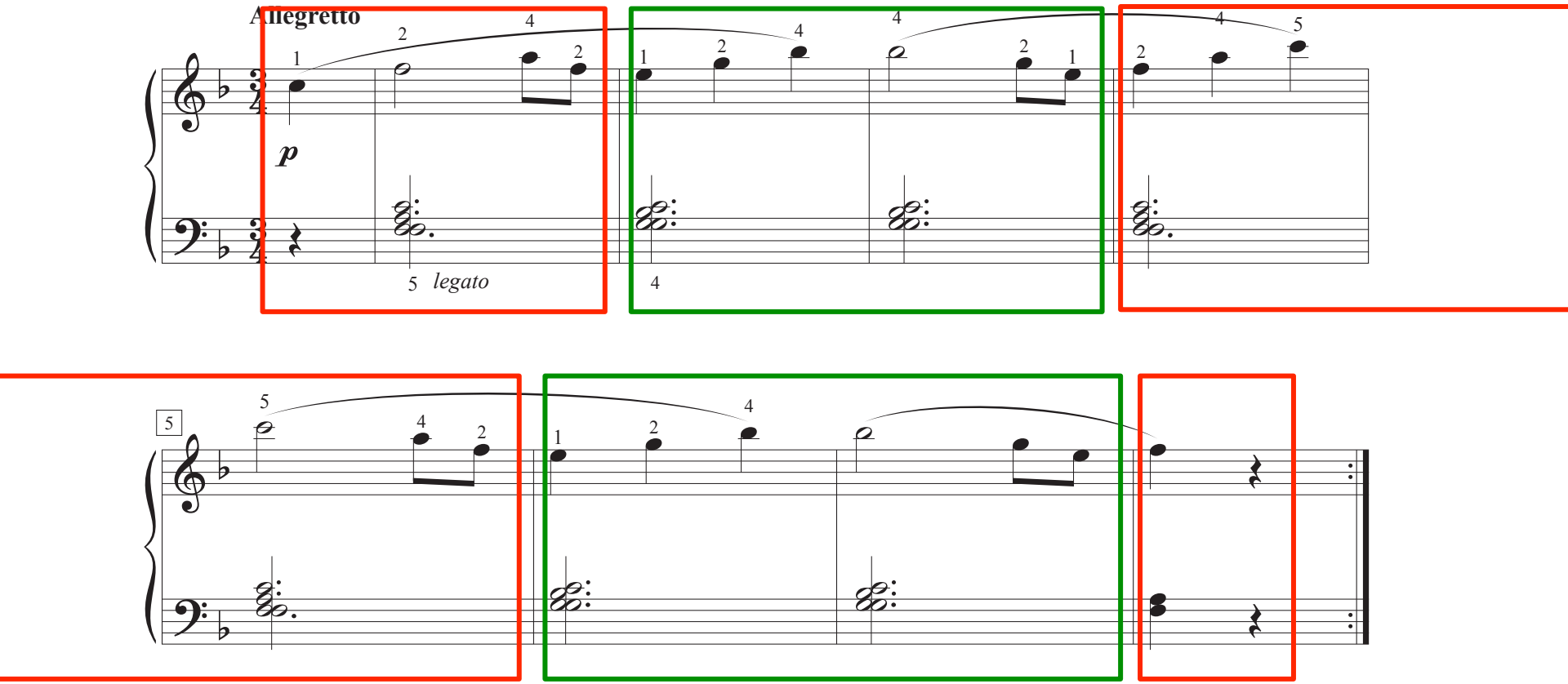
German Dance

"The Sleighride" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



- Step 2 – Block the left hand chords, and play again.
- Notice the right hand melody outlines the same chords as in the left hand.
- In fact, the first part of this piece is made up of just two chords.

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Think in Chords

If you can think in chords, sight reading becomes much easier!

For example, the first part of this dance is based on two chords – F major and C7. Recognising and reading different iterations of two chords is far easier than trying to read 74 separate notes.

Making time to work on keyboard harmony helps this process. Practicing scales and chords in all positions will build up your harmonic vocabulary and muscle memory.

When you frame your sight reading practice in terms of chords in a key, you can think in blocks rather than individual notes. This helps you to take in more music at once which makes it easier to look ahead. Have you ever been told to look ahead when you're sight reading but wondered how? This is the skill you need to help with looking ahead.

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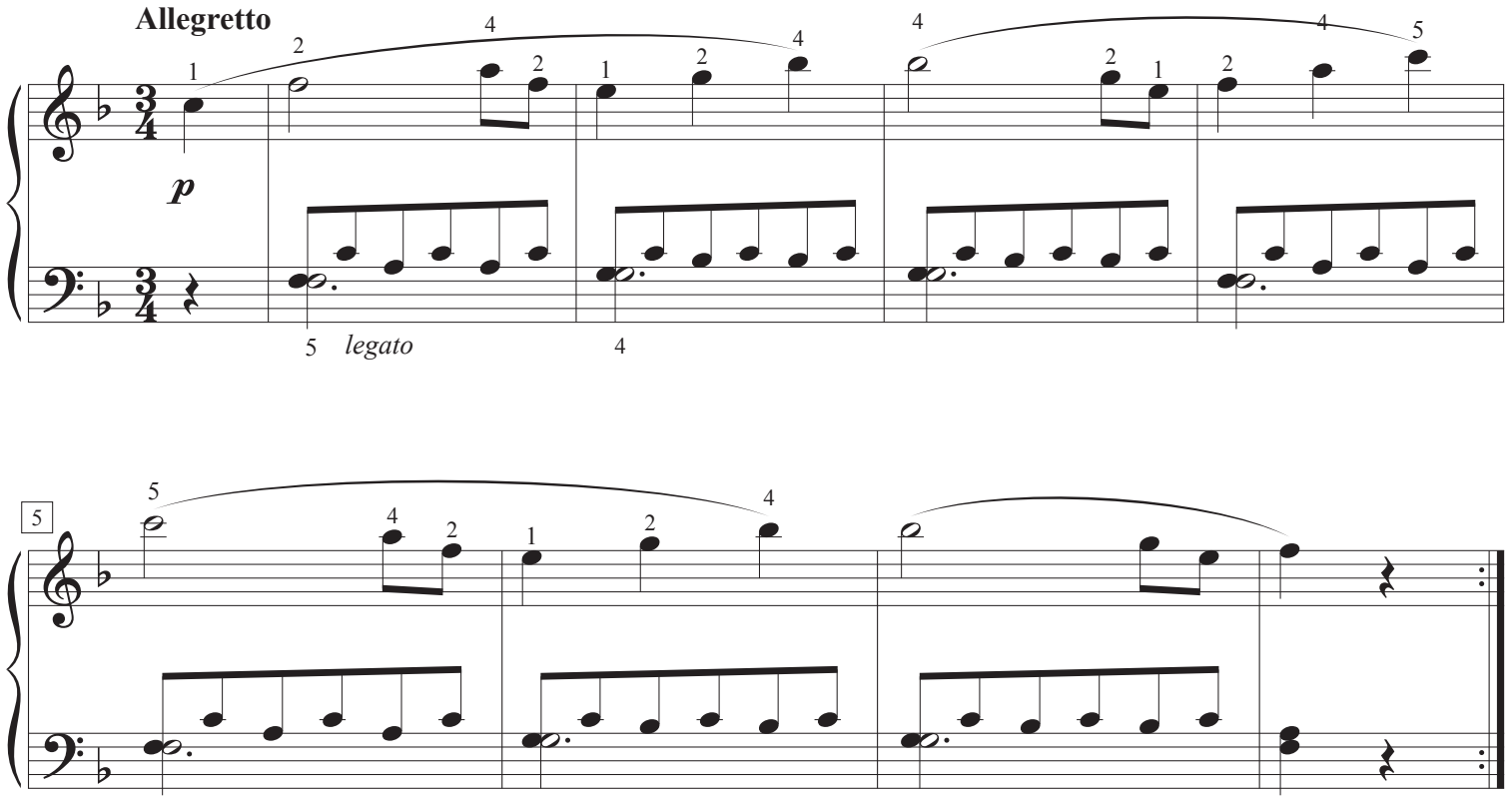
German Dance

"The Sleighride" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



- Step 3 – Play the piece as written. This means "activating" the block chords from step 2 into the Alberti bass written here.
- If along the way the texture becomes too much, revert back to the blocks in step 2 or single bass notes in step 1. The main thing is to keep going. Rather than worrying about playing every note perfectly, focus on playing without stopping.

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Summary

1. Reduce the texture to bass and soprano only. Read the score from the bass note up.

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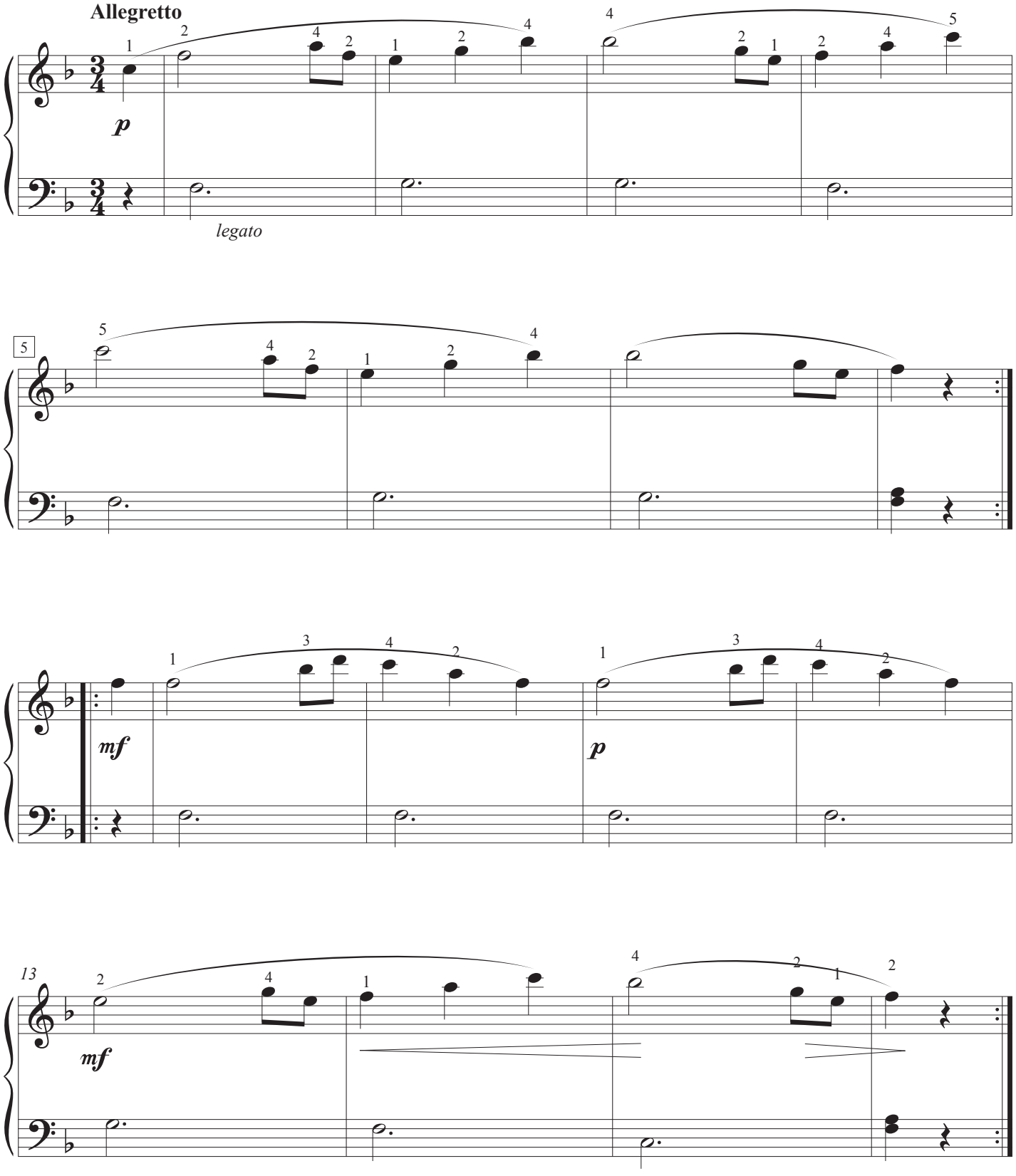
German Dance

"The Sleighride" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



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Summary

1. Reduce the texture to bass and soprano only. Read the score from the bass note up.
2. Add the chords from the middle tenor part. Play them as block chords.

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German Dance

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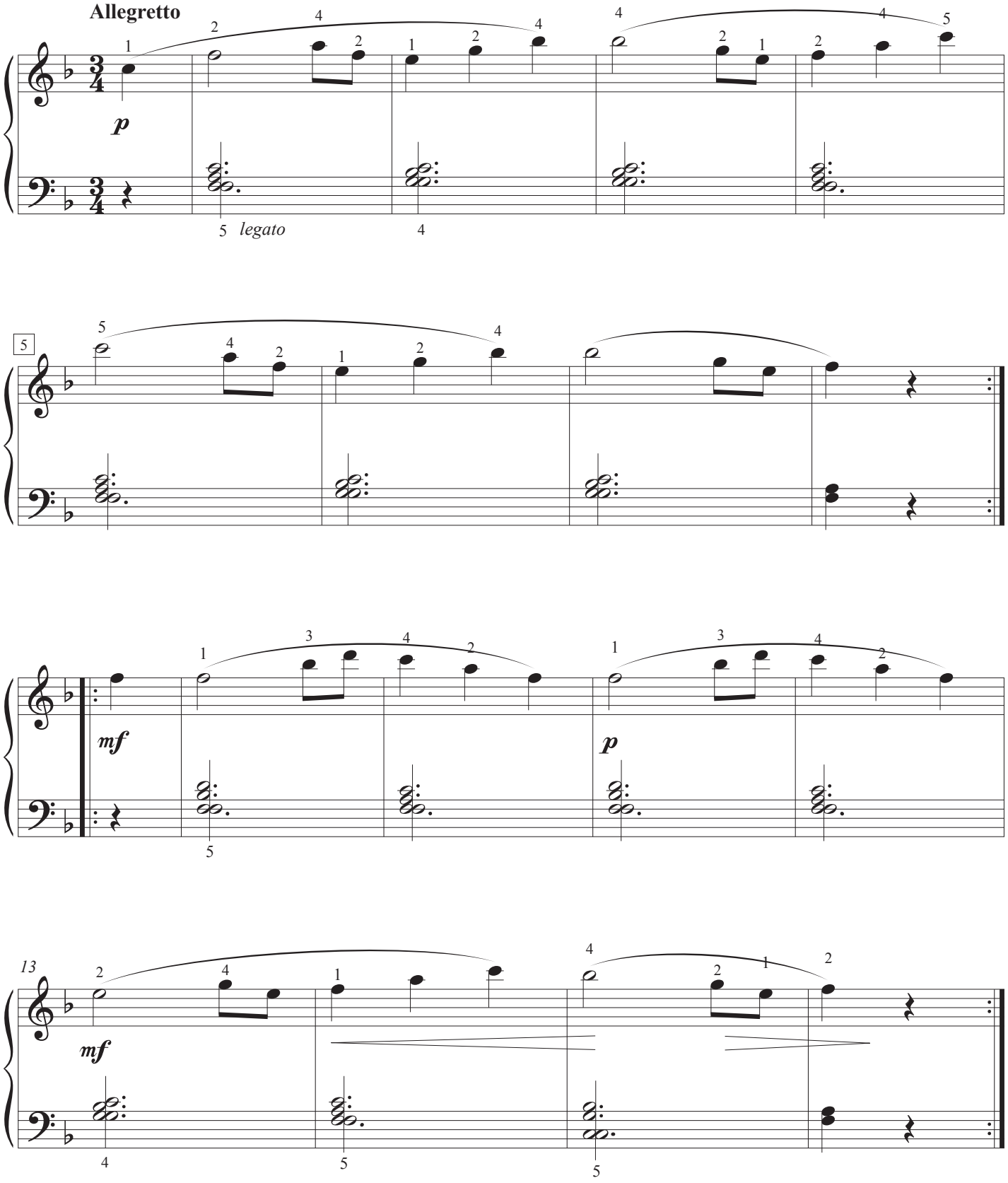

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Summary

1. Reduce the texture to bass and soprano only. Read the score from the bass note up.
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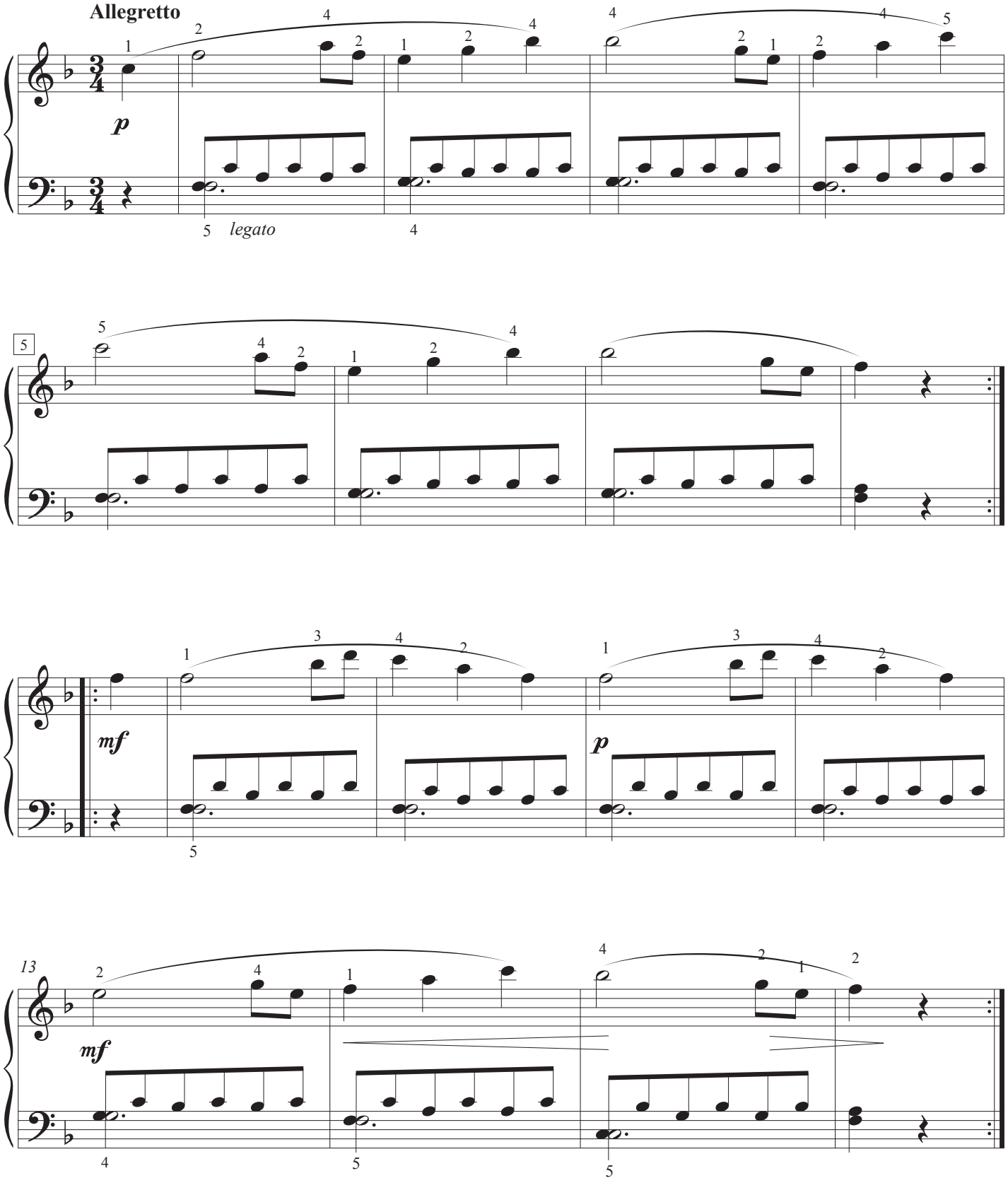
German Dance

"The Sleighride" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



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Tutorial 2

Schumann, The Wild Horseman

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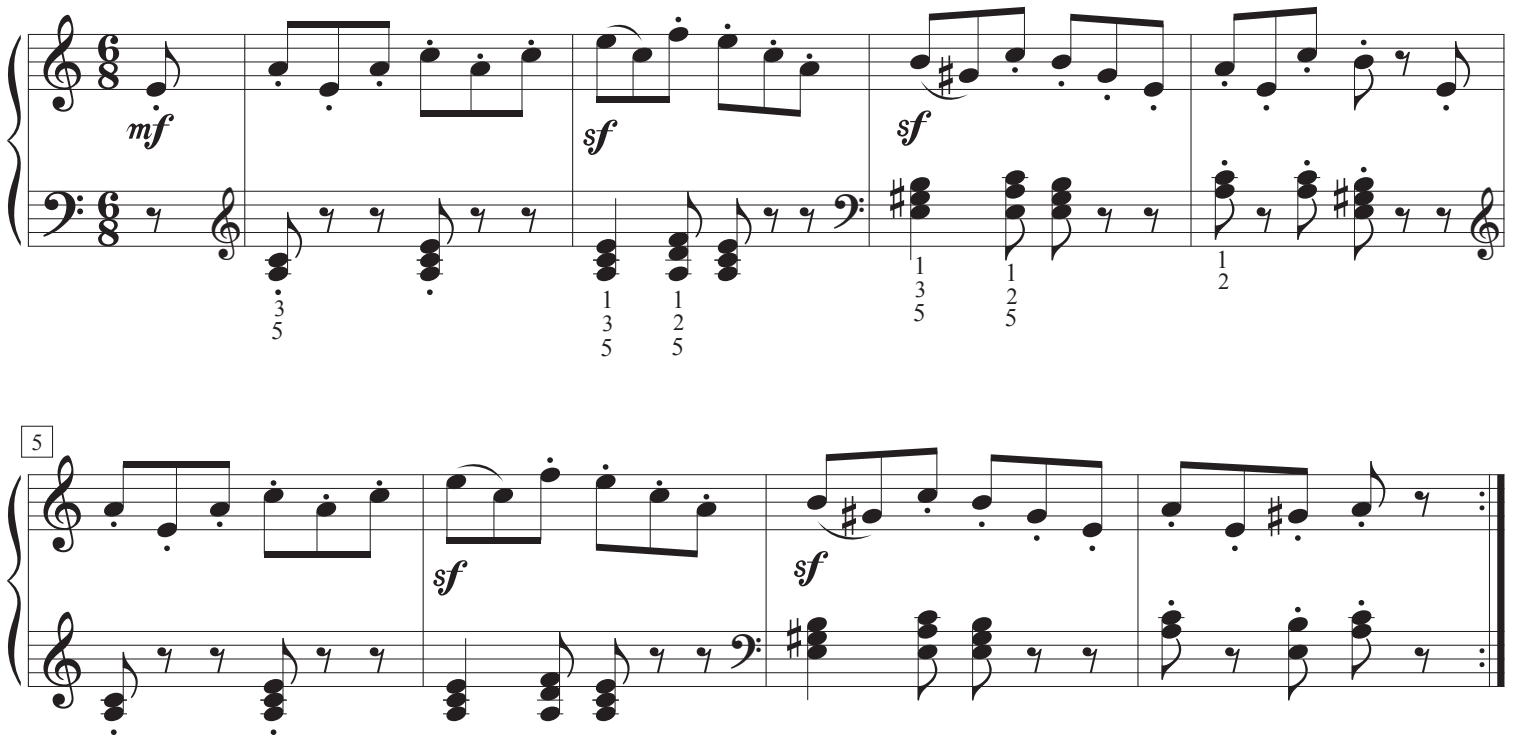
The Wild Horseman

Op. 68 No. 8

Robert Schumann



- Schumann's "The Wild Horseman" is from his collection, *Album for the Young*.
- There are two layers of music here – block chords in the left hand, and a melody that outlines arpeggios in the right hand.

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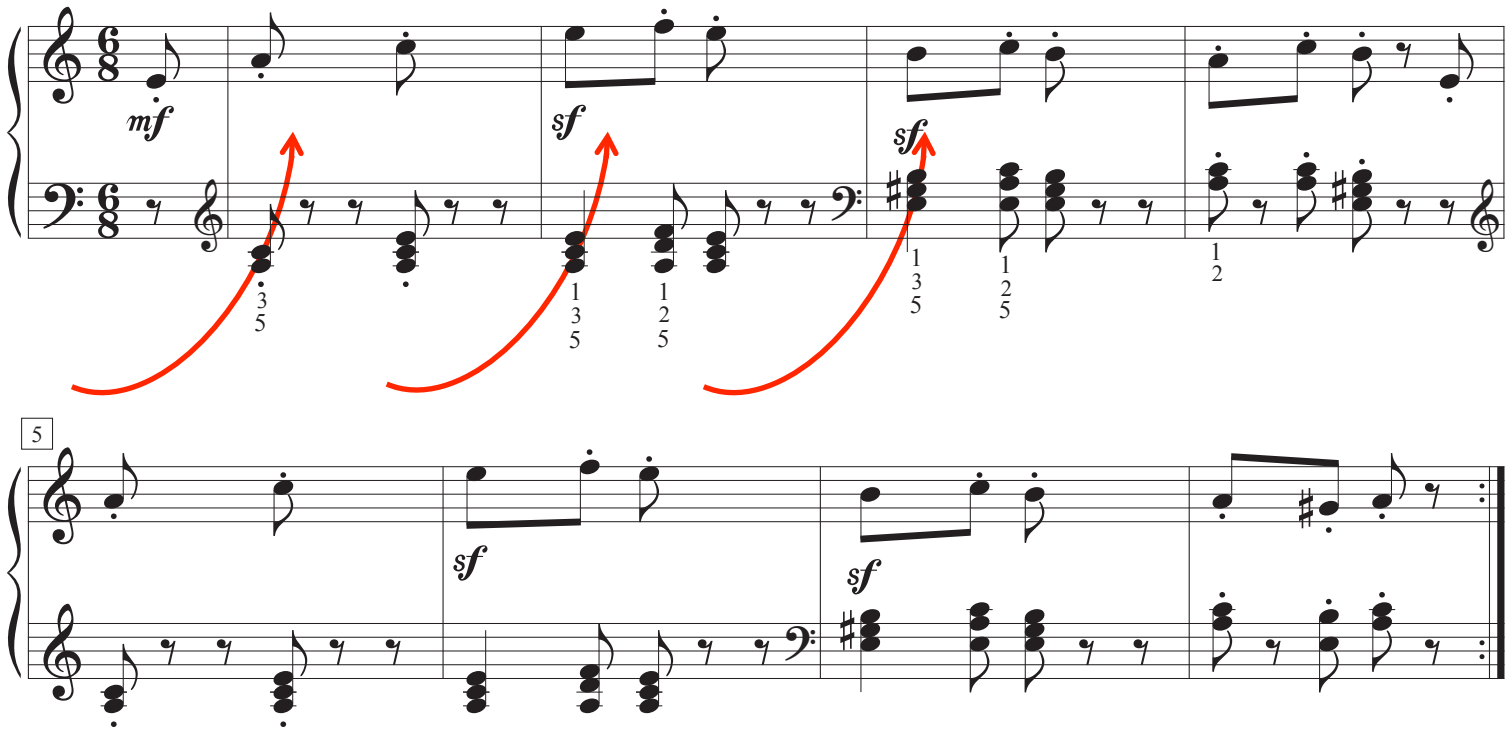
The Wild Horseman

Op. 68 No. 8

Robert Schumann



- Step 1 – Focus on reading the block chords in the bass clef and quickly glance up to include the treble clef note that goes with each chord.
- Remember to read each bar from the bottom up in a quick sweep of the eye.

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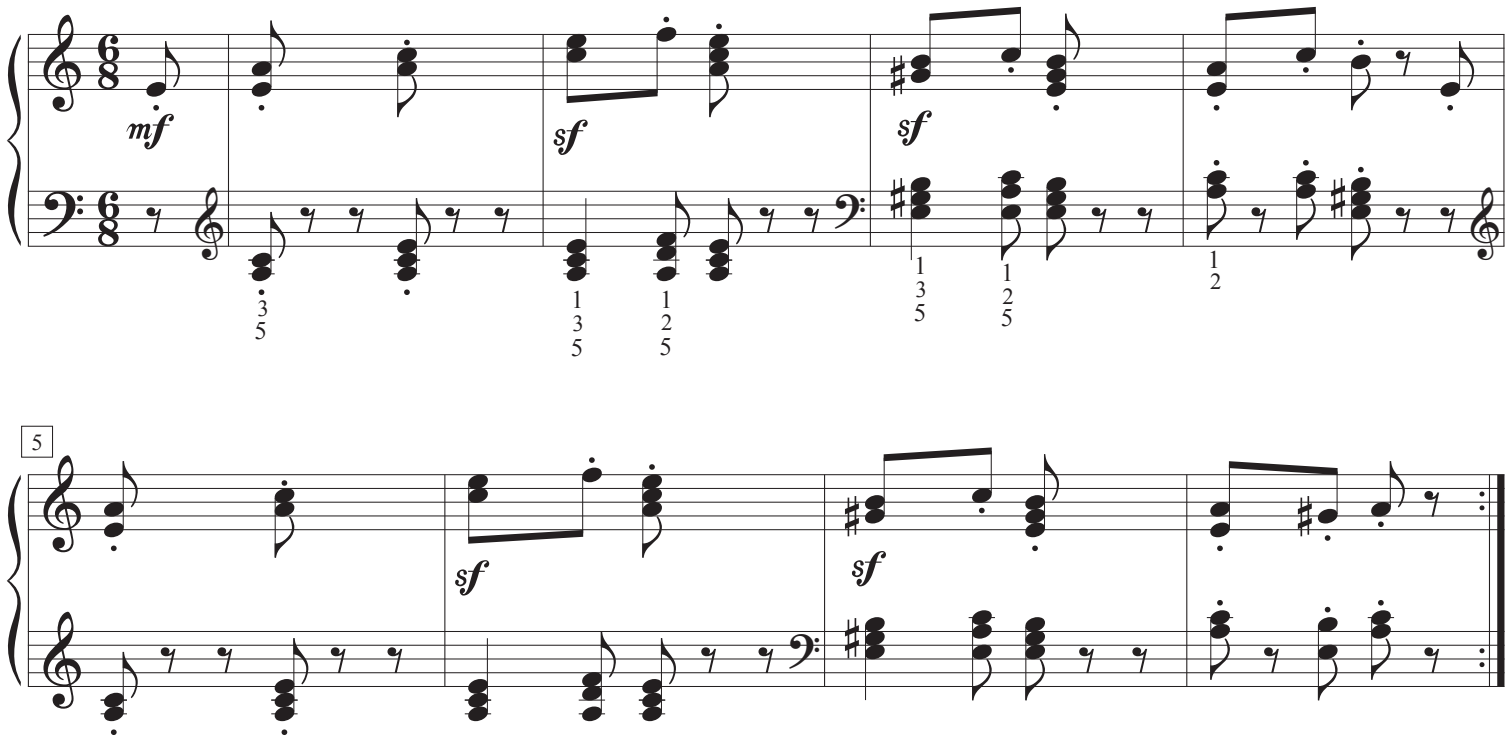
The Wild Horseman

Op. 68 No. 8

Robert Schumann



- Step 2 – Play the right hand arpeggios as block chords.
- Notice that the first part of this piece is made up of just three chords – A minor, D minor and E major. These are the primary chords of A minor.

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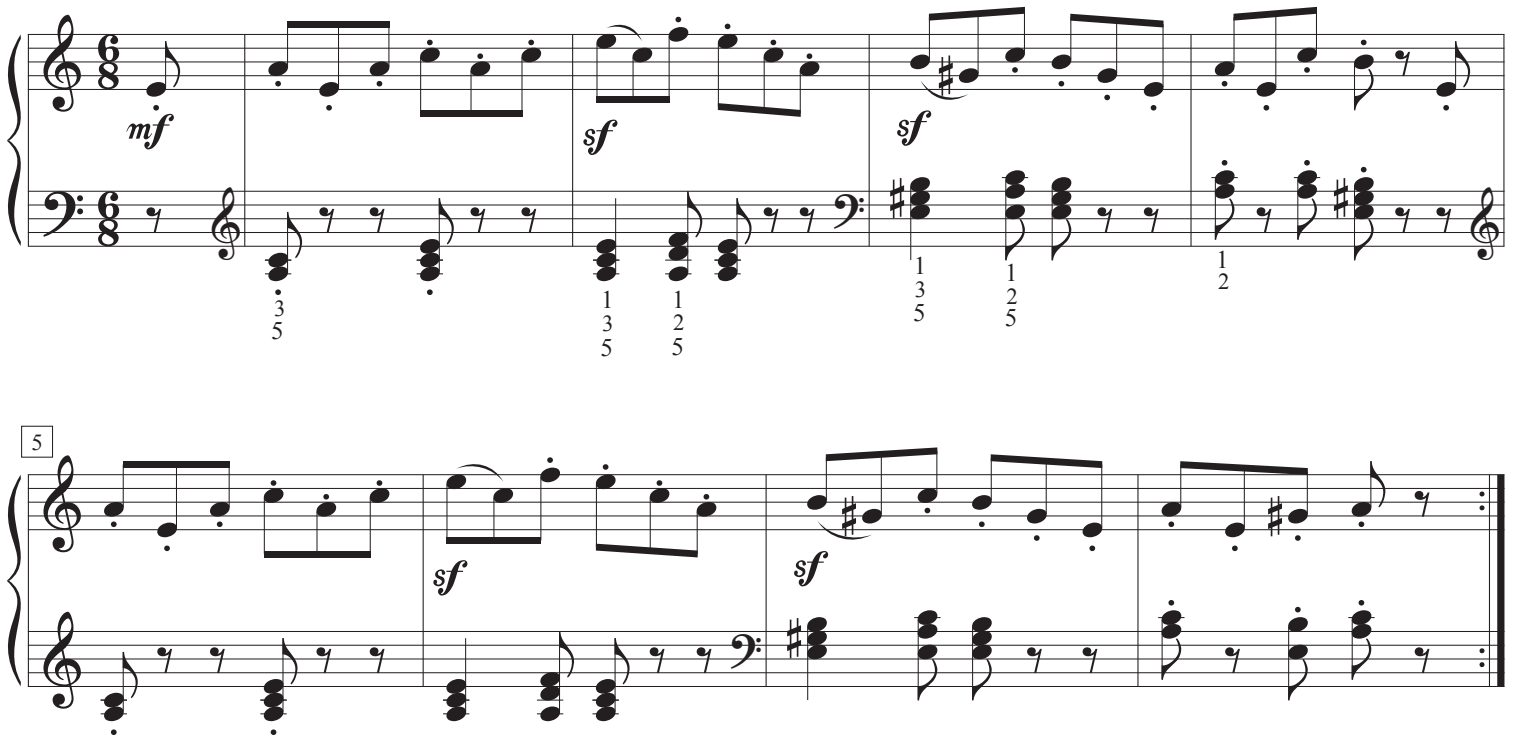
The Wild Horseman

Op. 68 No. 8

Robert Schumann



- Step 3 – Play the piece as written. This means "activating" the block chords from step 2 into the arpeggios that make up the right hand melody.
- If along the way the texture becomes too much, revert back to the blocks in step 2 or chord + single melody note in step 1. Remember to let go of perfectionism and play without stopping.

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Summary

1. For this piece, reduce the treble clef part. Play the bass clef chords with corresponding single treble clef notes. Read the score from the bass note up.

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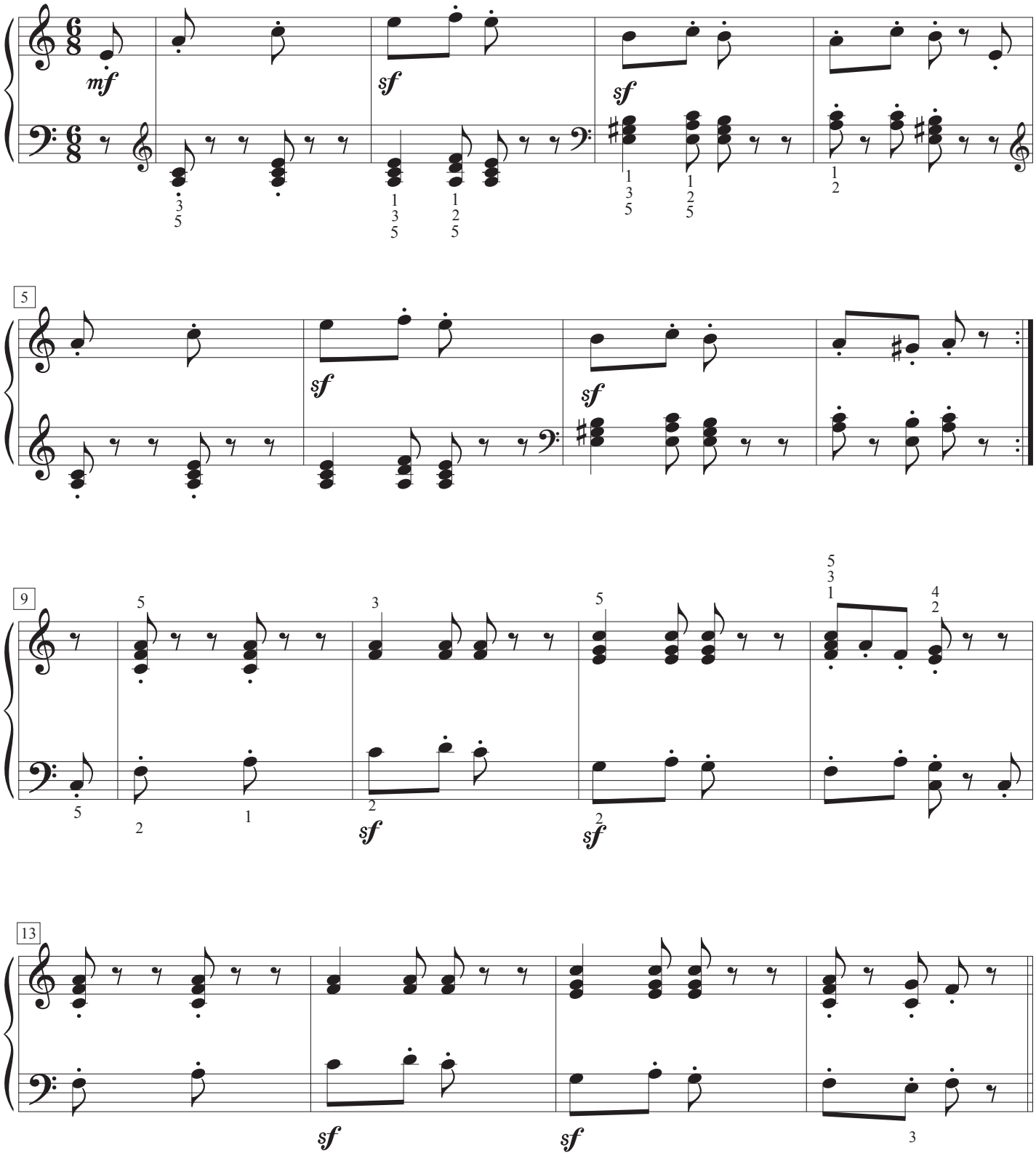

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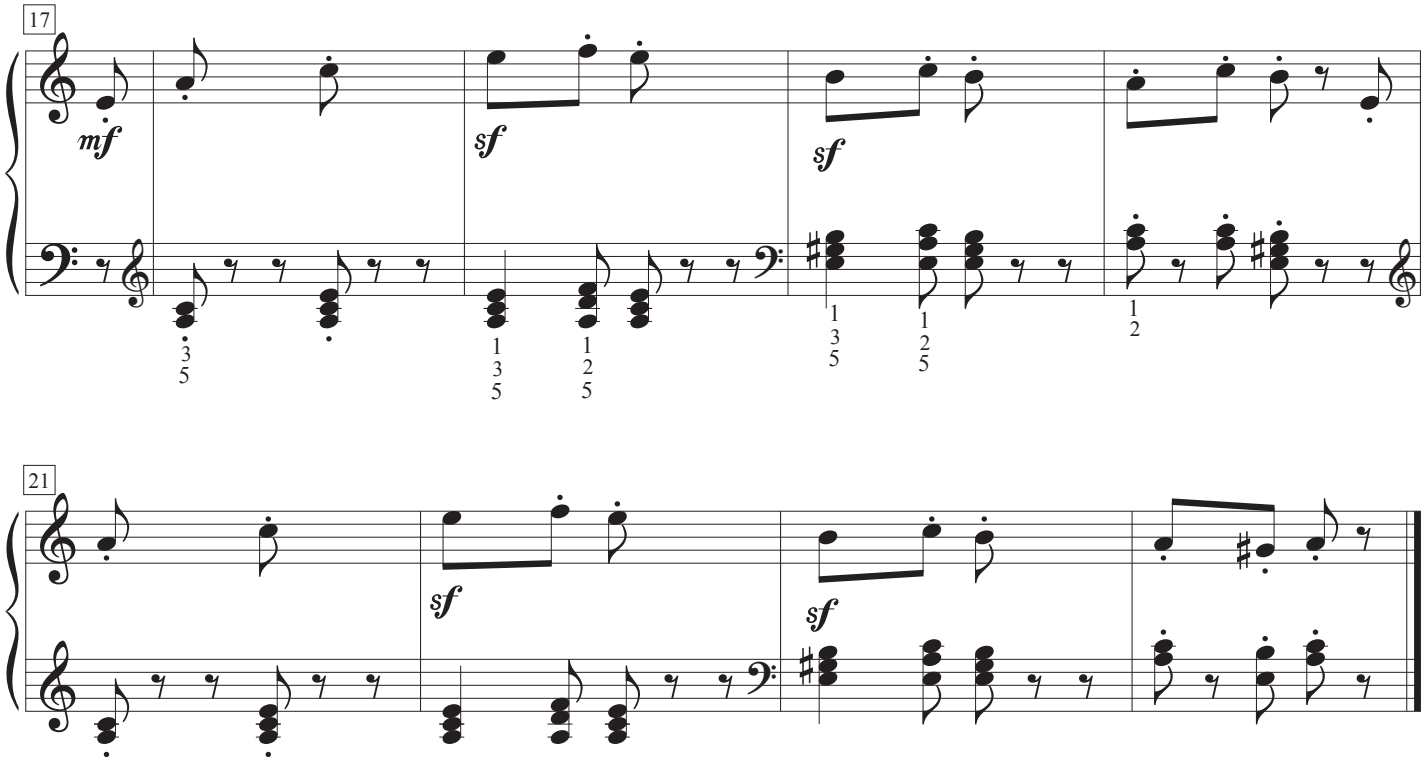

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Summary

1. For this piece, reduce the treble clef part. Play the bass clef chords with corresponding single treble clef notes. Read the score from the bass note up.
2. Add the rest of the melody notes. Play them as block chords.

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The Wild Horseman

Op. 68 No. 8

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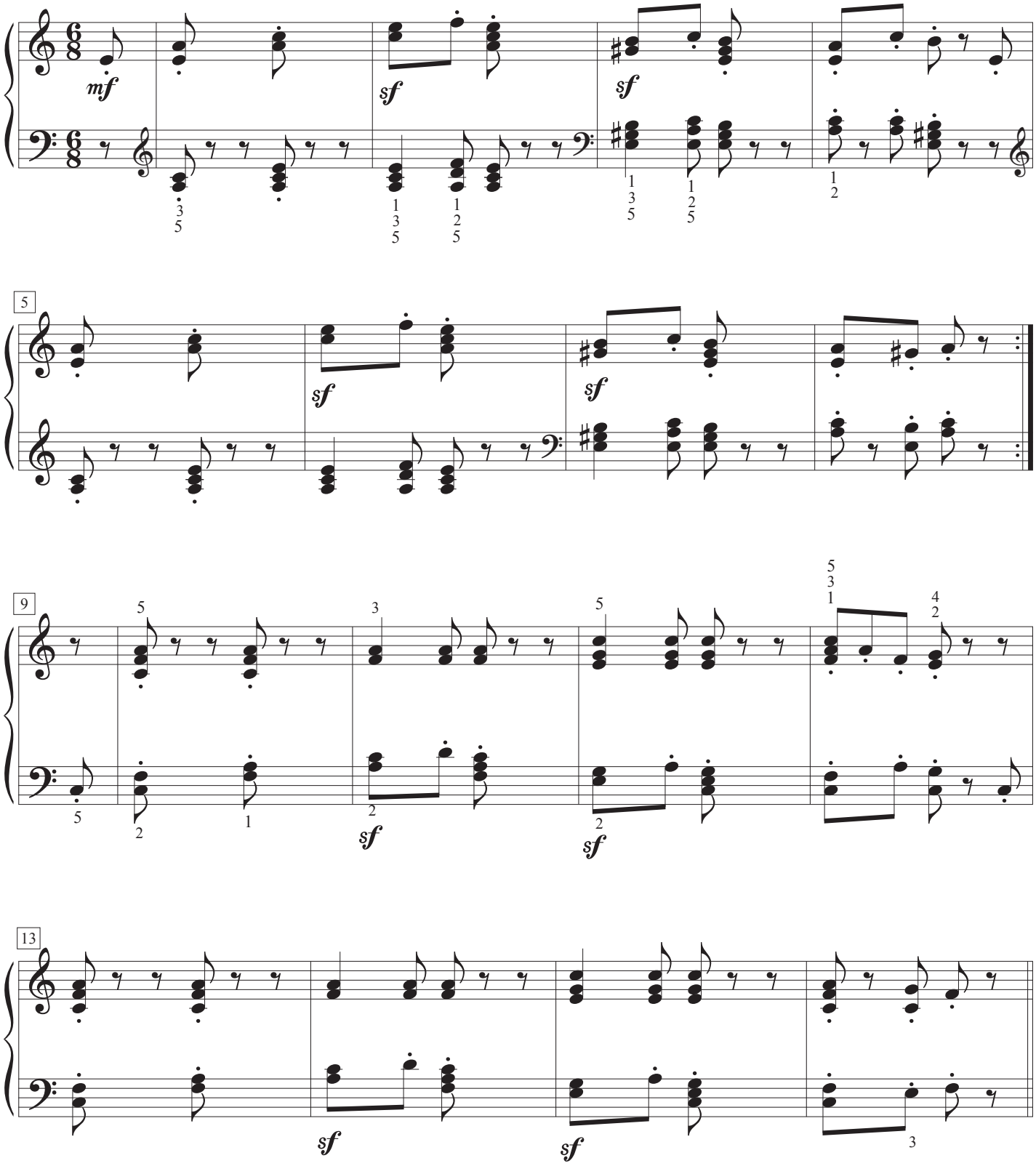

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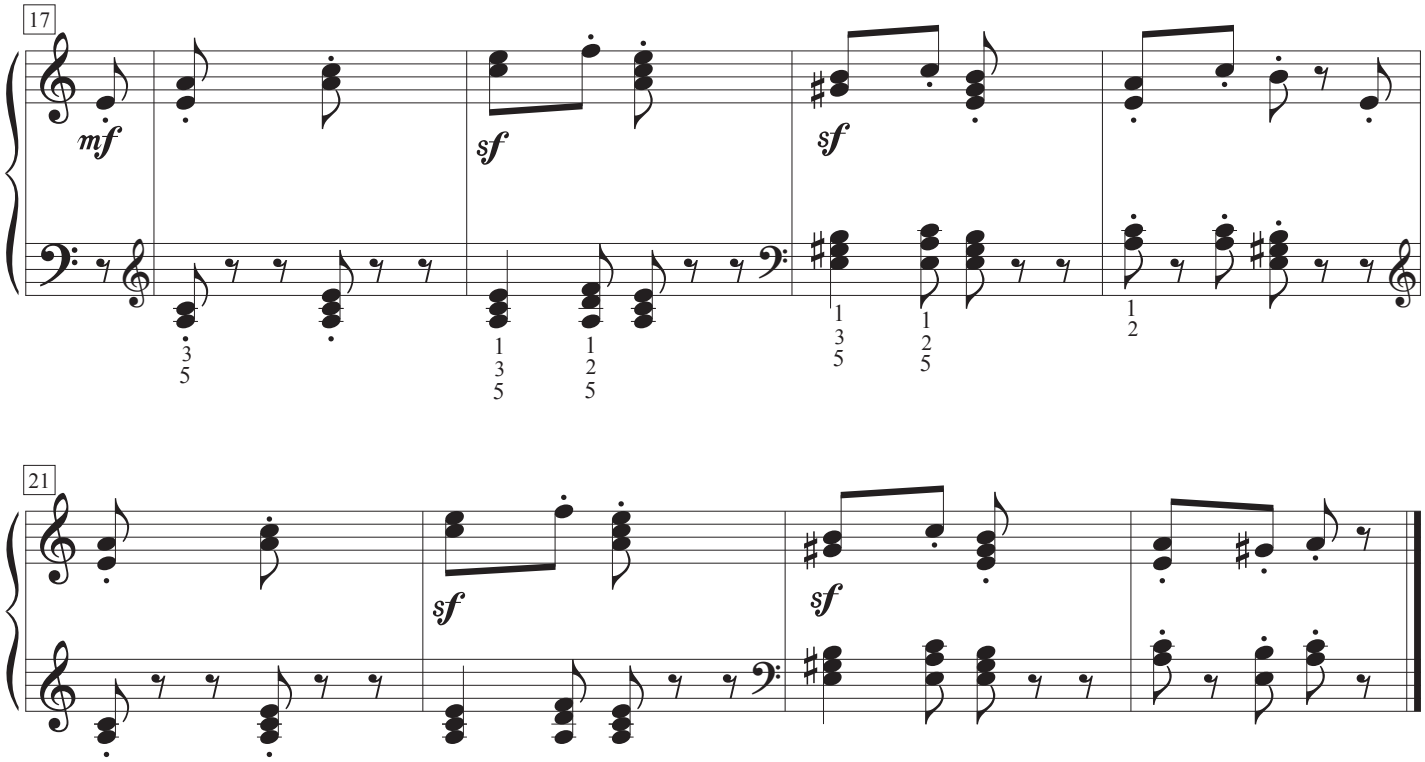

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Summary

1. For this piece, reduce the treble clef part. Play the bass clef chords with corresponding single treble clef notes. Read the score from the bass note up.
2. Add the rest of the melody notes. Play them as block chords.
3. Play the piece as written.

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The Wild Horseman

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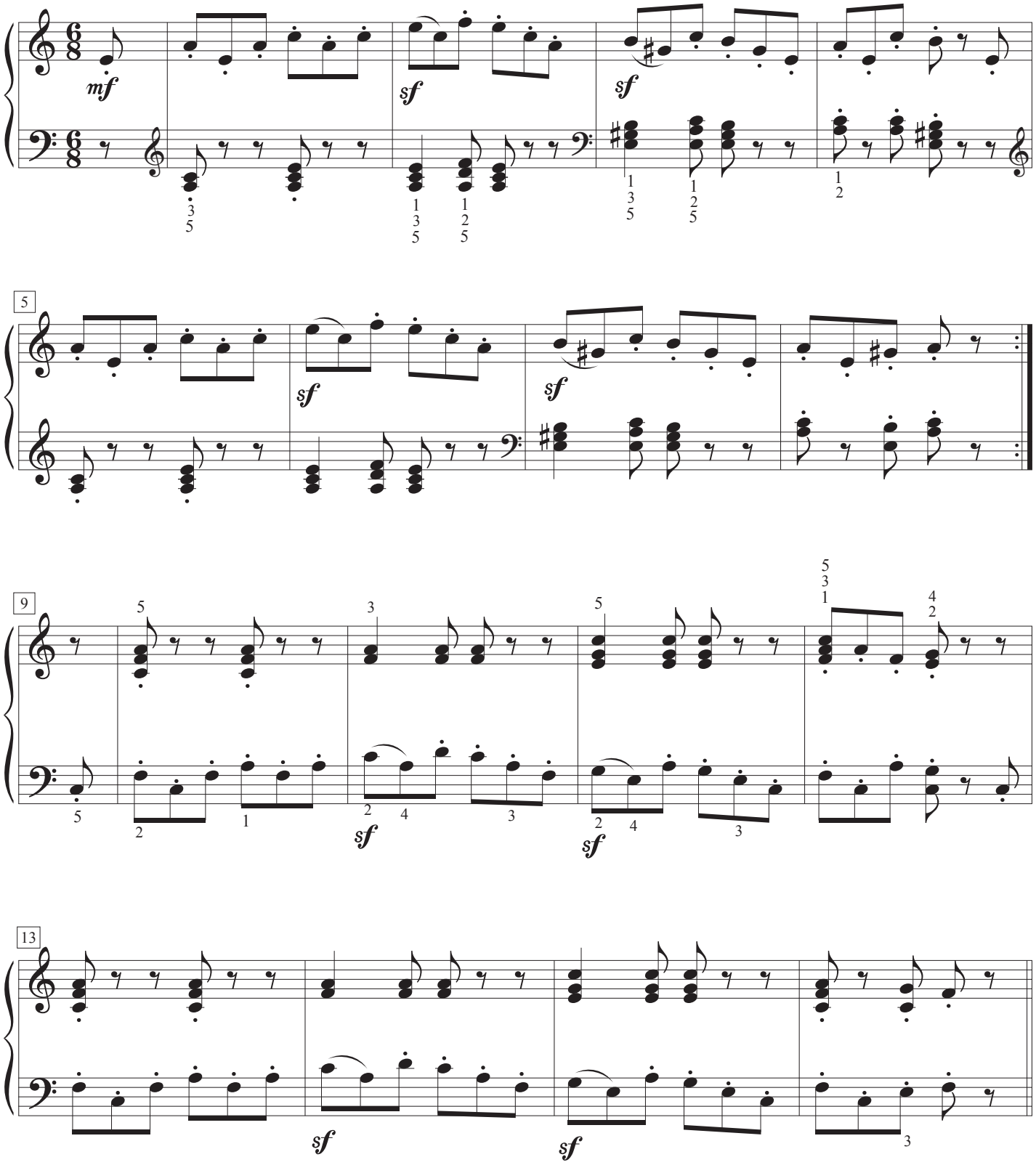

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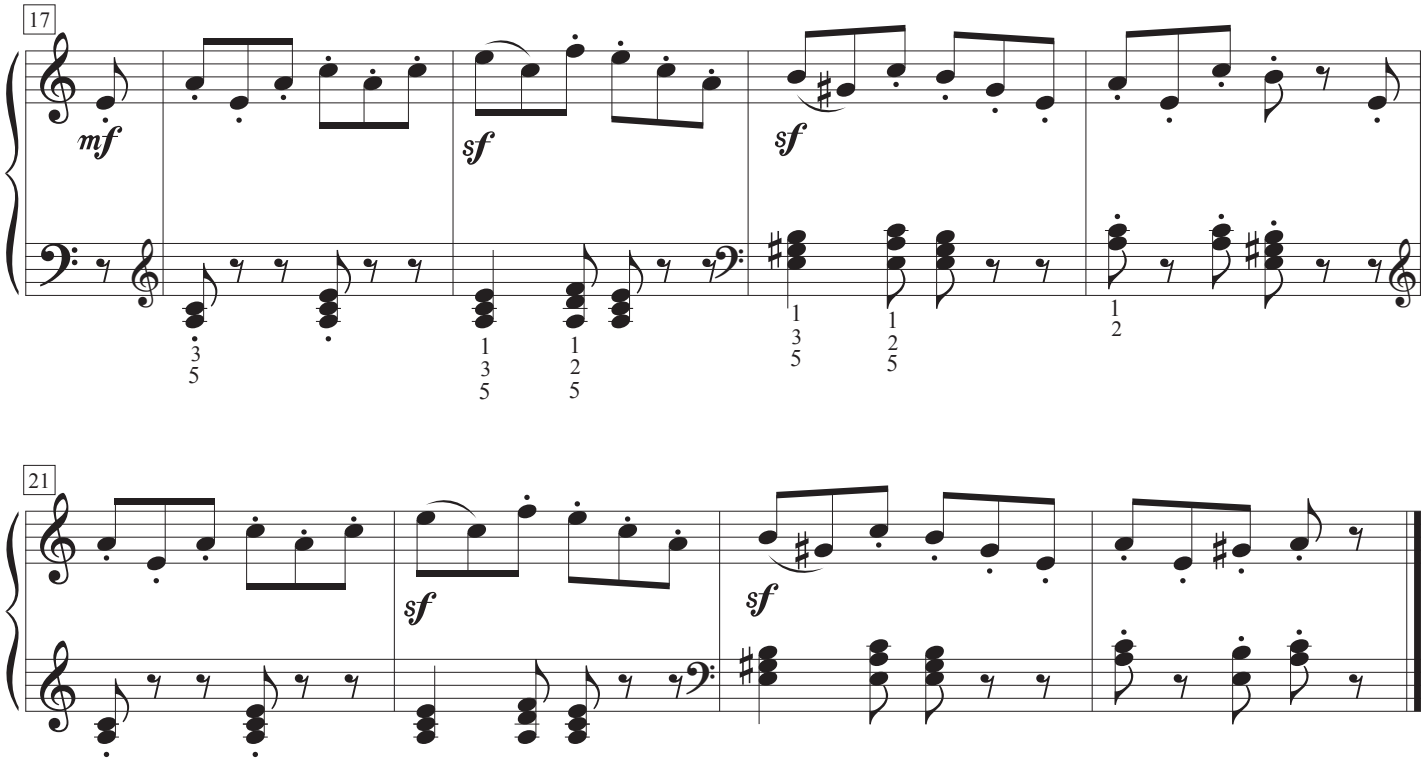

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Tutorial 3

Clementi, Sonatina in C
Op. 36 No. 1
1st movement

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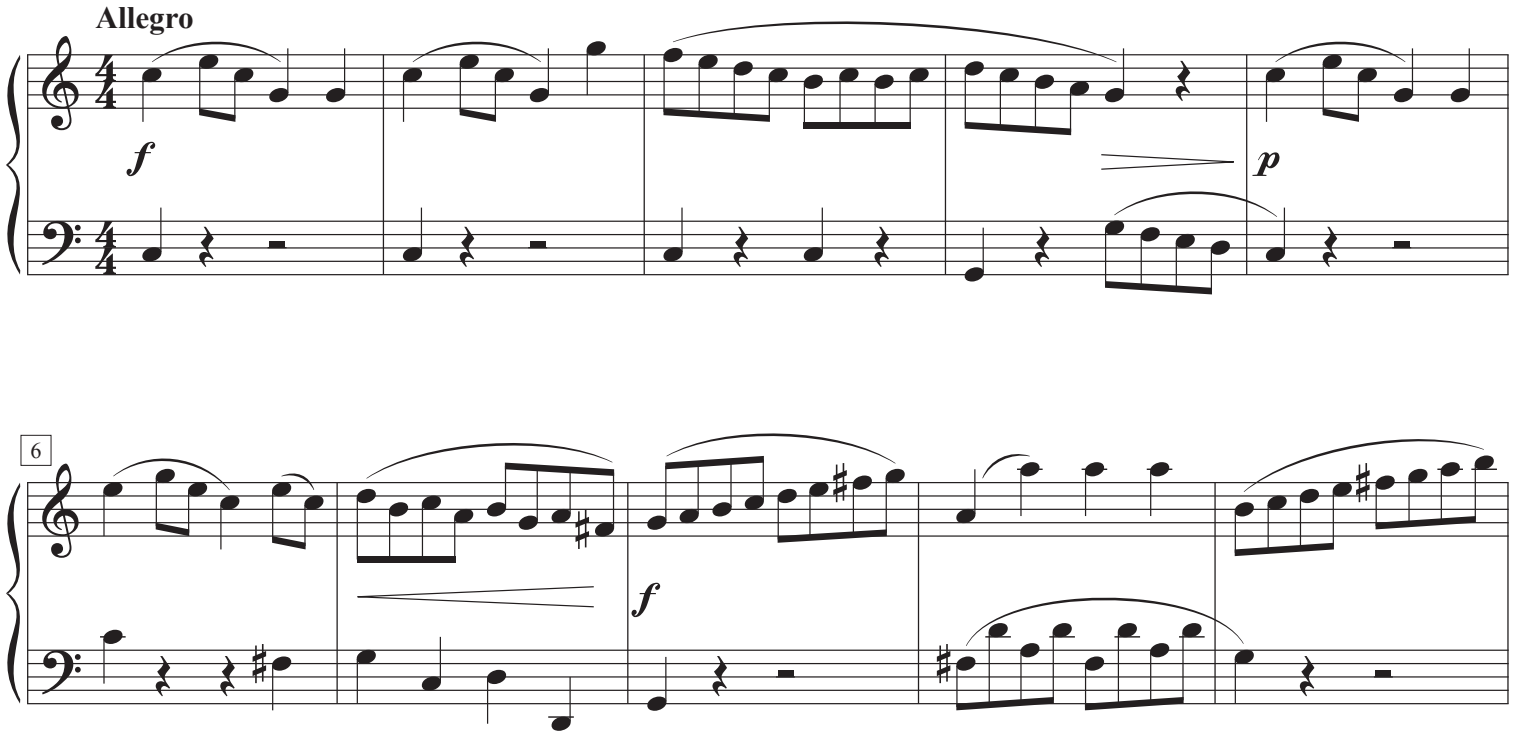
Sonatina in C

Op 36 No 1, I

Muzio Clementi



- You can use the same ideas from tutorials 1 and 2 to practice sight reading this piece from Clementi's Sonatina in C, Op. 36 No. 1.

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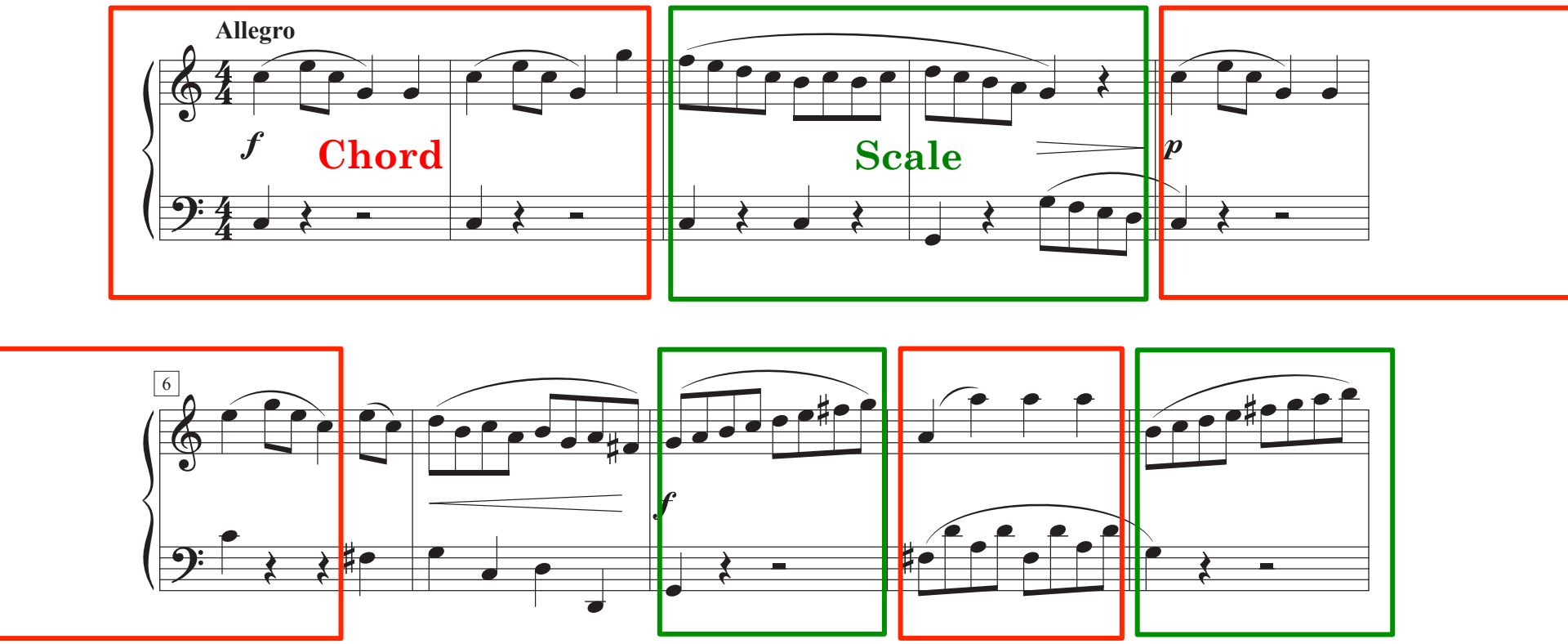
Sonatina in C

Op 36 No 1, I

Muzio Clementi



- Notice that each bar is either an arpeggio (broken chord) or a scale passage.
- Think of the piece as being made up of one of those two things to speed up your reading. For example, it's easier to think of the first two bars as a C chord (a single idea) than 12 notes.

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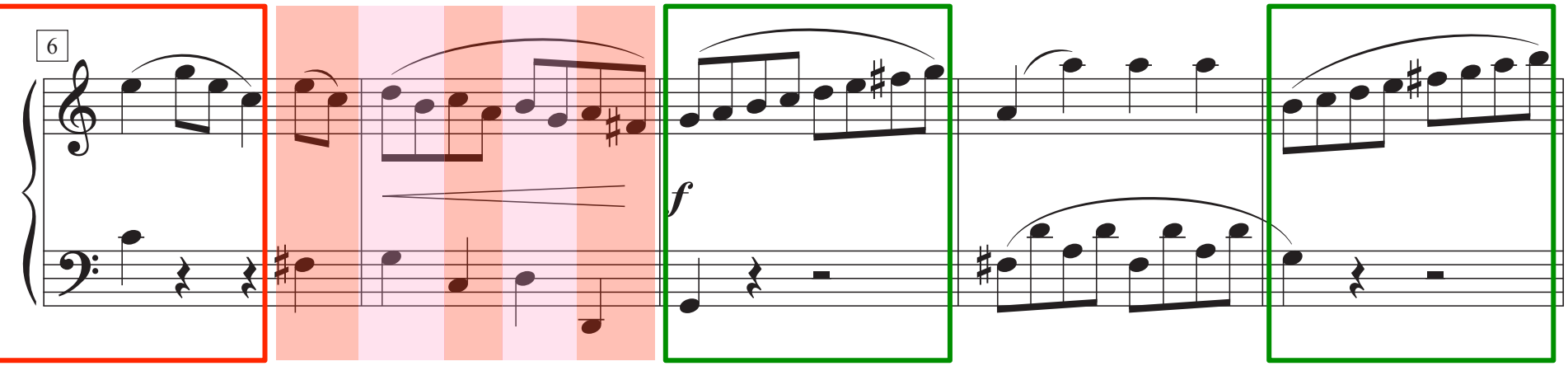

- Notice that the rate of chord change suddenly speeds up starting on beat 4 of bar 6.
- When you read the score in big pieces at once – either as the iteration of a chord or of a scale, you are freed up to look ahead and focus your attention on this slightly trickier passage without changing tempo.

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Summary

To sight read the first movement of the Clementi Sonatina in C, Op. 36 No. 1, think and read in terms of either chords (arpeggios) or scales. To do this, you must take in one or two full bars at a time.

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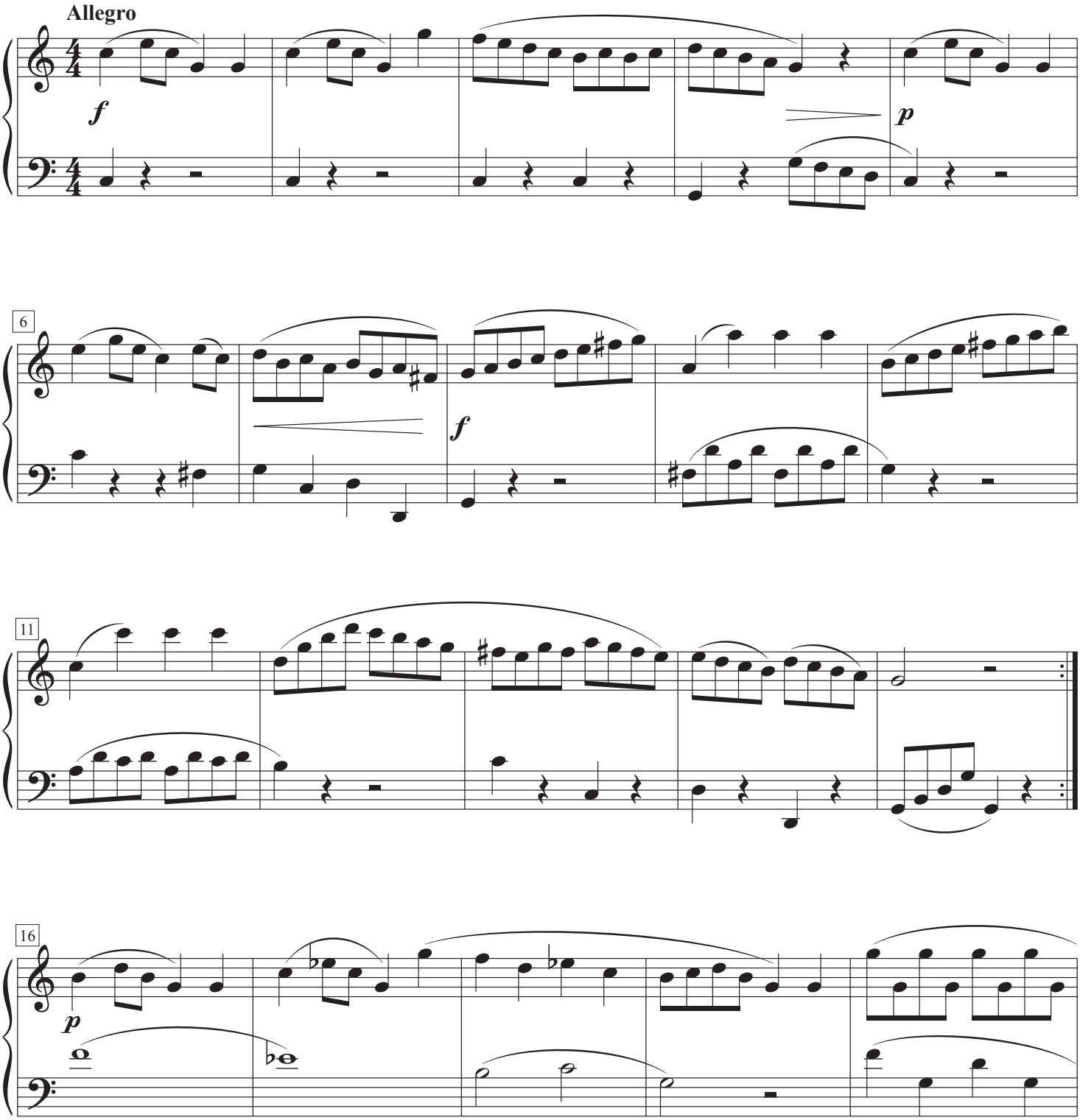
Sonatina in C

Op 36 No 1, I

Muzio Clementi



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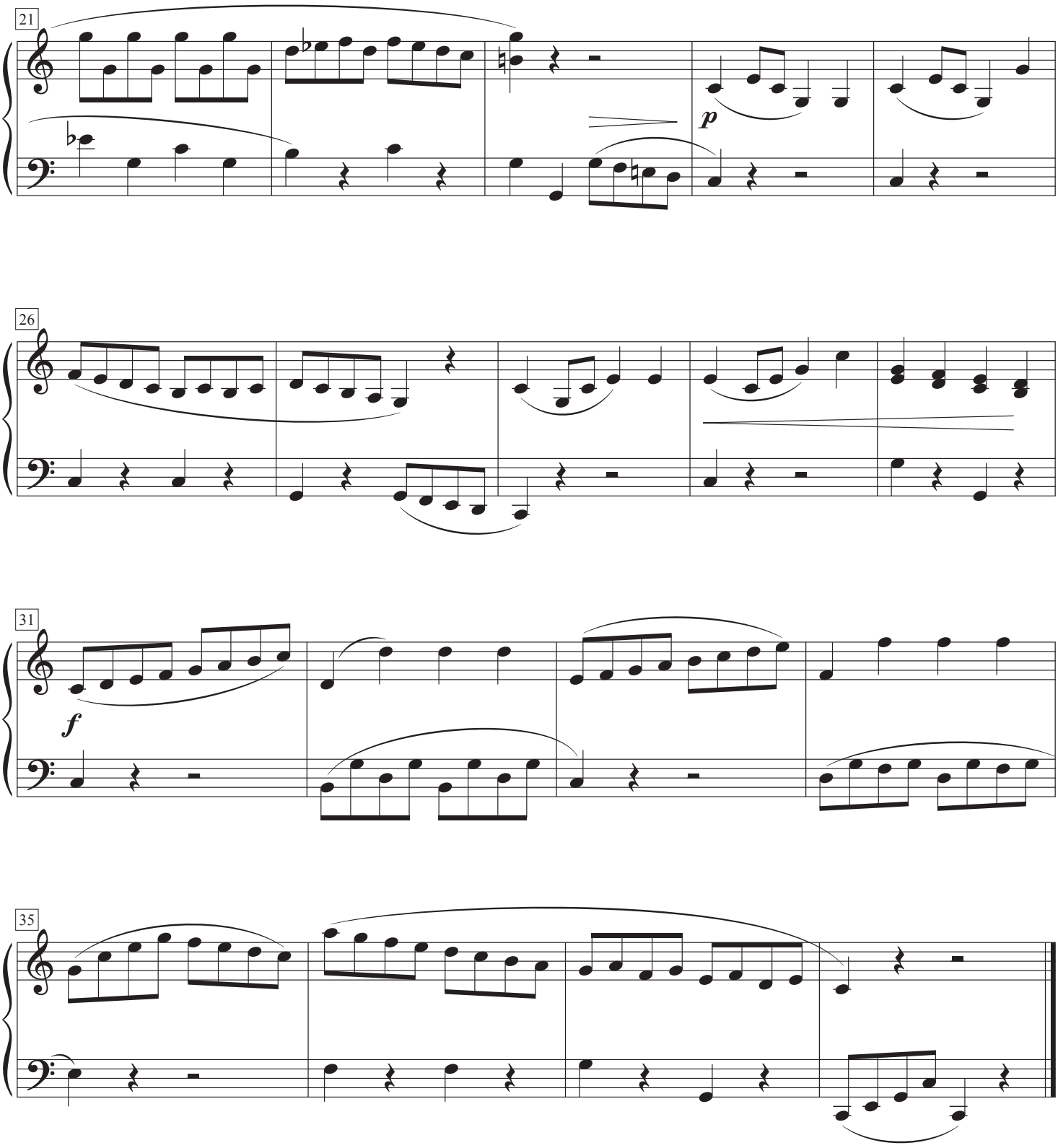

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