Two Piano Pieces

In Smyrna · Skizze

Edward Elgar

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INTRODUCTION

These two small but significant Elgar piano pieces are now published practically for the first time. For the *Skizze* was previously printed only in an obscure German periodical of 1903, and *In Smyrna* made its only appearance in an artistic anthology for charity in 1905. Yet these two pieces contain all the music which Elgar conceived and wrote entirely for the piano between the *Concert Allegro* of 1901 and three little works which appeared in the composer's old age. The *Concert Allegro* was never quite finished, so the pages of the *Skizze* and *In Smyrna* give us a special insight into Elgar's understanding of the piano at the summit of his career. That is important to any understanding of Elgar and his music. For throughout his creative life the piano figured along with the writing table, paper, pens, and ink of Elgar's study as the indispensable tool of his composition process.

The actual invention of Elgar's ideas, as he himself was fond of insisting, took place mostly away from the piano – often when walking, golfing, or cycling. And therefore those ideas typically did not form themselves 'in a keyboard shape'. Yet ideas once invented have still to be developed. And the essence of developing an idea lies of course in making some sort of extemporisation upon it. This was where the piano came in for Elgar. He had from childhood an immense skill as a keyboard extemporiser, and he regularly used this skill to develop thematic ideas for himself and exhibit them for his friends in partly finished or nearly finished sections of music. So valuable was this extemporising skill to him that he often practised it as if for its own sake. Thus the actress Nancy Price recalled:

> Many delightful hours I spent with Elgar in his studio. He liked me to read poetry while he improvised music to accompany it. I often wish some of that music had been preserved . . . [He] was able to improvise on the instant of the spoken word.*

Samples of Elgar's improvising can still be heard in a series of gramophone recordings made in 1929, when the composer was seventy-two. But the best index of his keyboard skill during his greatest years is to be found in the *Concert Allegro*† and the two pieces printed here.

The music of the *Skizze* appears in fact to have been started side by side with that of the *Concert Allegro*. The fairly advanced draft of the *Skizze* now in the British Museum is dated 16 November 1901. By 21 and 22 November Elgar was deep in the composition of the *Concert Allegro*. Unlike the longer work, however, the *Skizze* was ultimately finished – exquisitely finished. And its tiny structure contains within it the most advanced of all Elgar's keyboard writing. In the *pianissimo – diminuendo – accelerando* that leads up to the *Skizze*'s little coda, one finds oneself suddenly inside a microcosm of the musical world with which the composer surrounded *The Apostles*. *The Apostles*, written in 1902-1903, was to be the largest work of Elgar's life; the *Skizze*, evolved at almost the same time, was paradoxically the smallest.

Perhaps it was this hint of musical connection with *The Apostles* that prompted Elgar to dedicate the *Skizze* 'To my dear friend, Professor Julius Buths, Düsseldorf'. Julius Buths (1851-1920), conductor at Düsseldorf and director of the great triennial Lower Rhine Festivals, was one of the best friends Elgar and his music ever had. Buths was well known to Elgar's great friend at Novello's,

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Into an Hour-Glass (London: Museum Press, 1953) pp. 212, 216.
†Novello, in preparation (1976).

A. J. Jaeger ('Nimrod' of the *'Enigma' Variations*), who was himself a native of Düsseldorf. It was at Jaeger's suggestion that Buths had been invited to attend the Birmingham Festival of 1900. There he heard the premiere of *The Dream of Gerontius*. And despite the poor performance he was so struck by the beauty and grandeur of Elgar's music that he took a score back to Düsseldorf with him, determined to produce the work at the next Lower Rhine Festival. This he did in May 1902, having conducted a prior performance in December 1901, and also the first German performance of the *'Enigma' Variations* earlier in that year. Buths then employed his literary skills to translate *The Dream of Gerontius* into German for future performances in German-speaking countries. This translation pleased Elgar so much that he asked Buths to undertake an immediate German translation of *The Apostles*, and had the libretto sent to him in Düsseldorf section by section as it was finished. It was probably near this time that the *Skizze* was dedicated to Buths. And from that dedication followed its printed appearance in Germany.

In January 1903 the Elgars were staying for a few days at Ridgehurst, the home of another German friend, Edward Speyer. On the evening of 17 January Elgar himself played the *Skizze* to another of the guests at Ridgehurst, the pianist Leonard Borwick. Borwick and Fanny Davies, for whom the *Concert Allegro* had been written, were both of them pupils of Clara Schumann. And later on Elgar was to make an opportunity for praising especially the art of these two players when he lectured at the University of Birmingham in November 1905 on the subject of 'English Executants':

> When we come to piano playing . . . a series of great names is immediately called to mind; not of the Herculean school, but real artists – restrained and capable of the highest things; one name occurs to me here in Birmingham, Fanny Davies, a name known all over Europe. And I will add one more – the player who gives me among Englishmen the greatest and highest satisfaction, Leonard Borwick.*

When Elgar spoke those words at the end of November 1905, he had a special reason to be thinking about the piano. For in the previous month he had written the only other piano work of his middle years, *In Smyrna*. It was the musical result of a Mediterranean cruise which the composer had been invited to join with other friends in September and October 1905. A few passages from Elgar's own diary† kept during the cruise tell more than anything else could possibly tell about the inspiration for *In Smyrna*:

> Friday, Sept. 29, 1905. At sea . . . Arrived at Smyrna about 2 . . . but Frank [Schuster], Mrs Craigie, & I remained on 'Carnarvon' till 7 . . .
>
> Saturday, Sept. 30. Rose early – glorious day. Frank, Lady M[aud Warrender] & I ashore – went to the bazaar. Much finer sight than Constantinople. Colour; movement; & camels – 100s – led by a donkey through the bazaar. (This was my first touch with Asia, & I was quite overcome. The endless camels made the scene more *real* than in Stamboul – the extraordinary colour & movement, light & shade were intoxicating . . .) Drove thro' the town right up to the fortifications – tomb of S. Polycarp. Tremendous view. Last part on foot to the watch tower. Descended & made detour round the 'Camel bridge' . . . wonderful gorges with remains of ancient aqueducts . . .
>
> Sunday, Oct. 1. Rose late. Very, very hot & sirocco blowing – Peculiar feeling

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**A Future for English Music and other lectures*, edited P. M. Young (London: Dennis Dobson, 1968) pp. 127, 129.

†*Letters of Edward Elgar*, edited P. M. Young (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956) pp. 156-8.

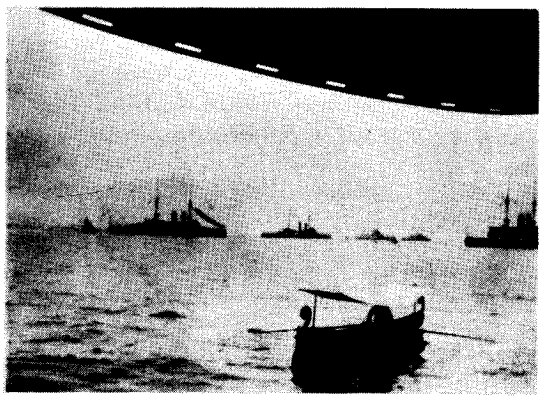
of intense heat & wind . . . Ashore & drove to the Mosque of dancing dervishes . . . Music by five or six people very strange & some of it quite beautiful – incessant drums & cymbals (small) thro' the quick movements . . .

Monday, Oct. 2 . . . Went for a short trip in the steam launch round the fleet. Beautiful views of a most beautiful place . . .

Tuesday, Oct. 3 . . . Awoke at 4 by anchors weighing. Left Smyrna at five . . .

The special moment out of all this experience which may have focussed Elgar's musical expression was noted in his sketchbook beside an early idea for the music: 'In Smyrna (In the Mosque)'. It was nothing but the sheer musical need to evoke this exotic experience again that led Elgar irresistibly to the piano. So a representation of actual place allied itself to the music of *In Smyrna* in 1905, just as an abstraction of musical thought had allied itself to the music of the *Skizze* four years earlier.

JERROLD NORTHROP MOORE

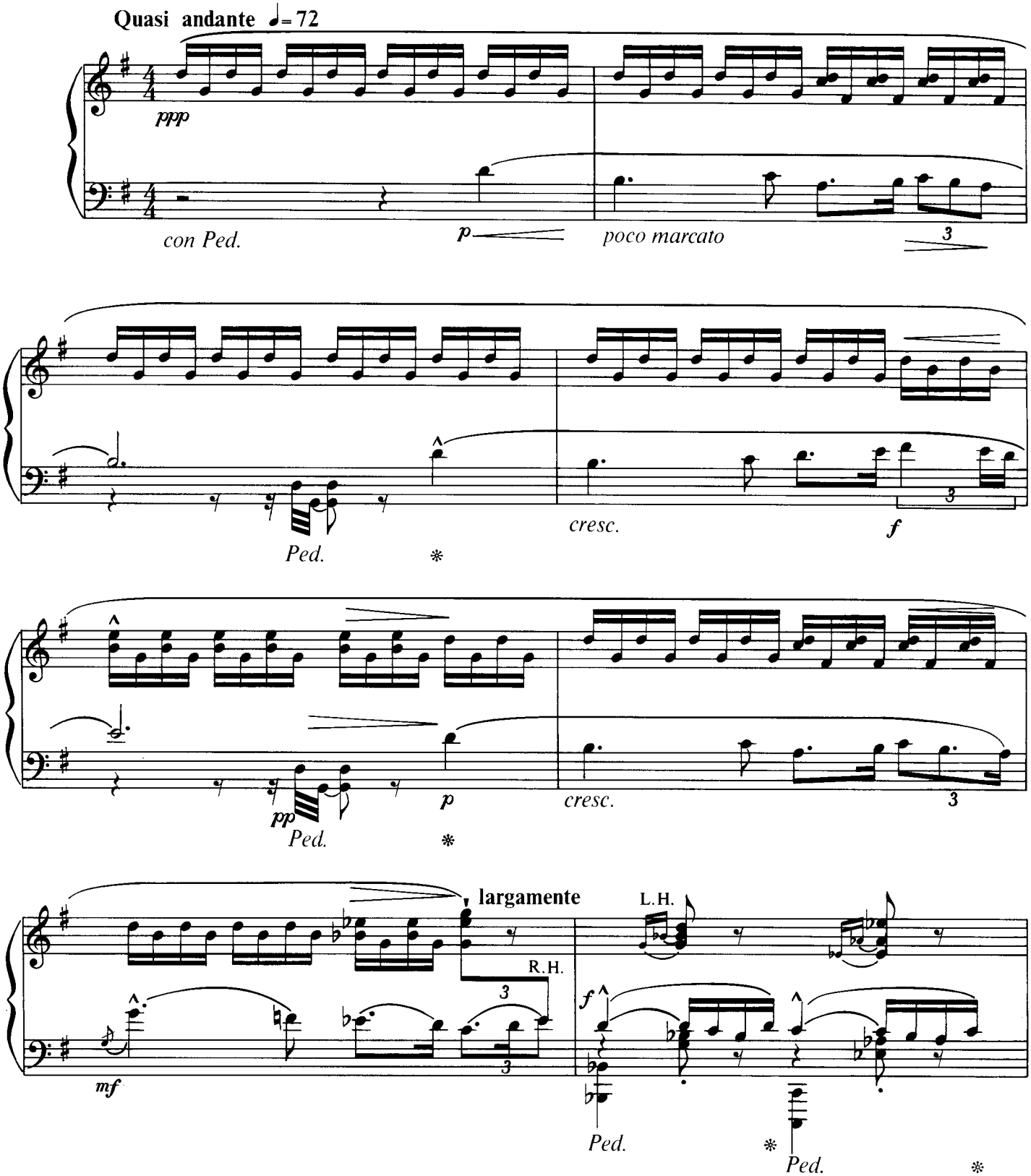


Photographs taken by Elgar during the Mediterranean cruise

Elgar at the piano in his study at Plas Gwyn, 1905

1 IN SMYRNA

EDWARD ELGAR



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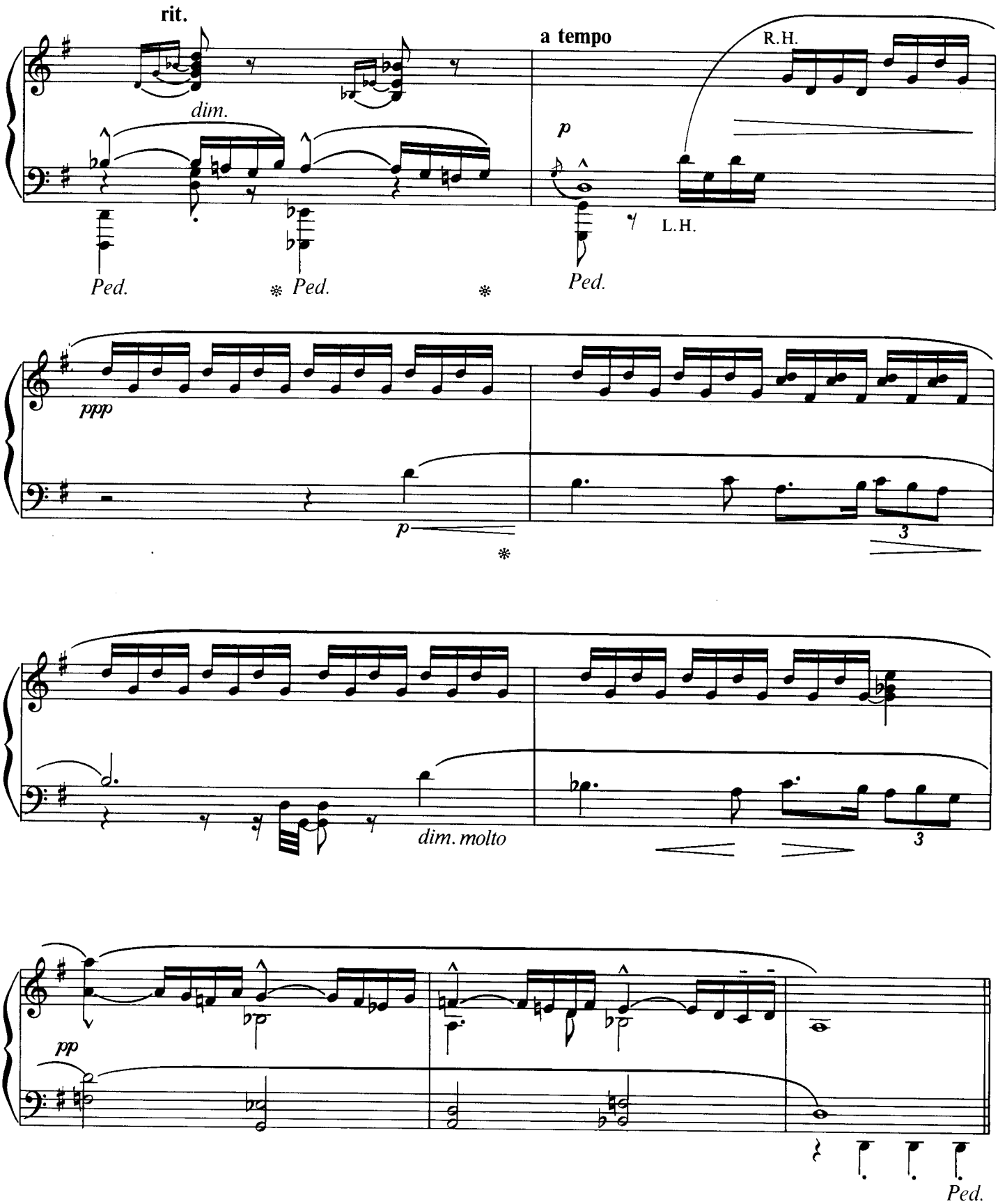
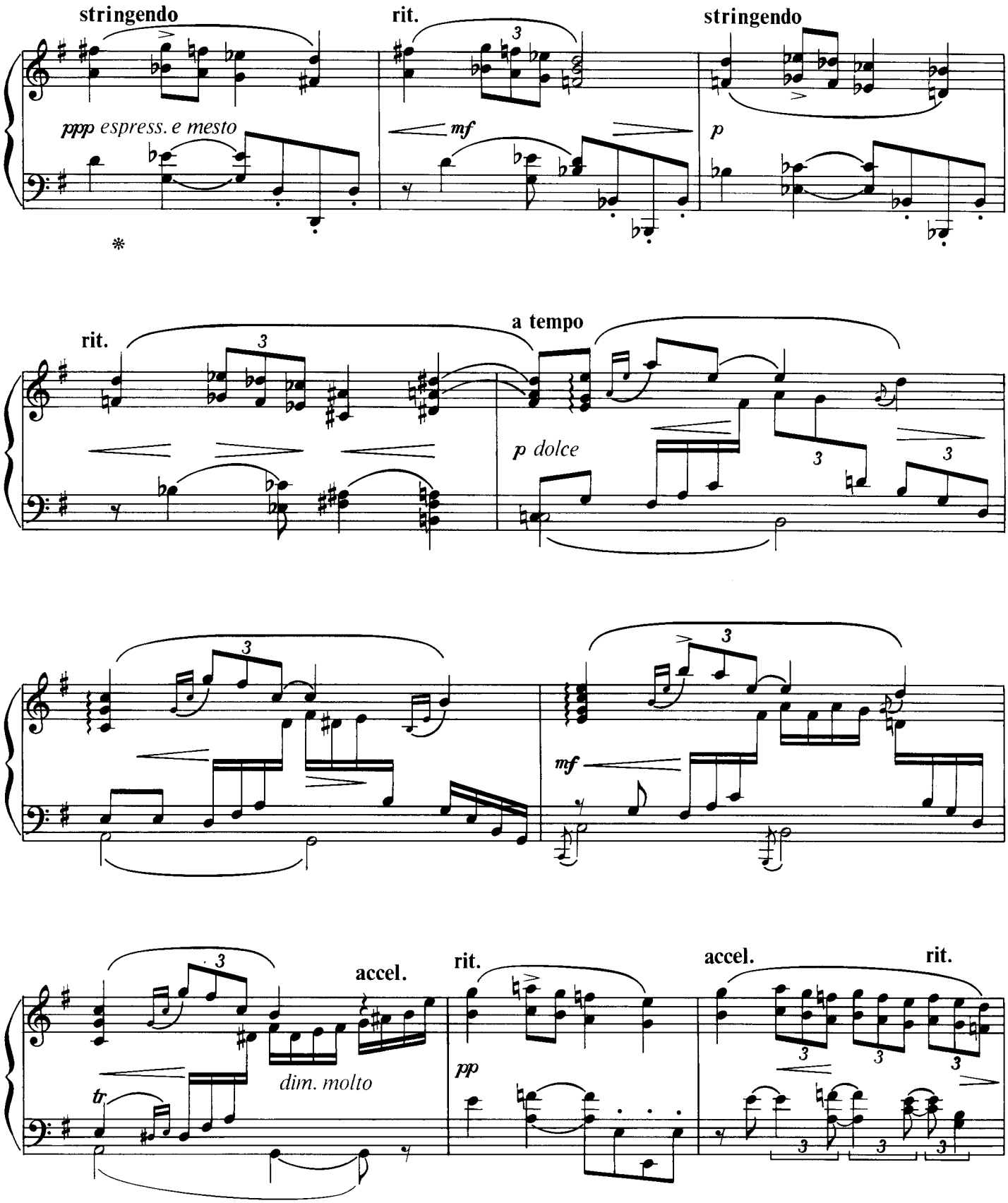
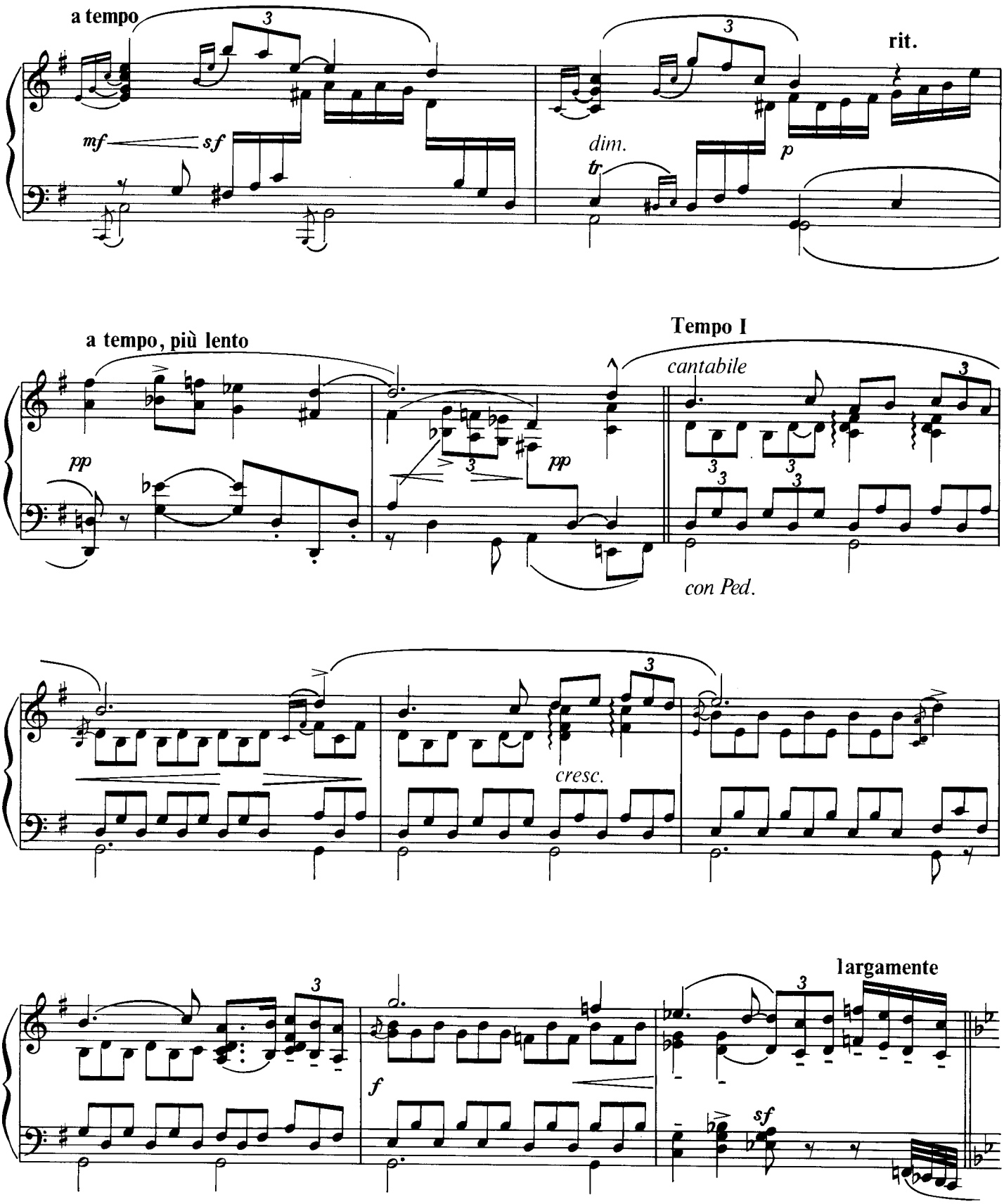
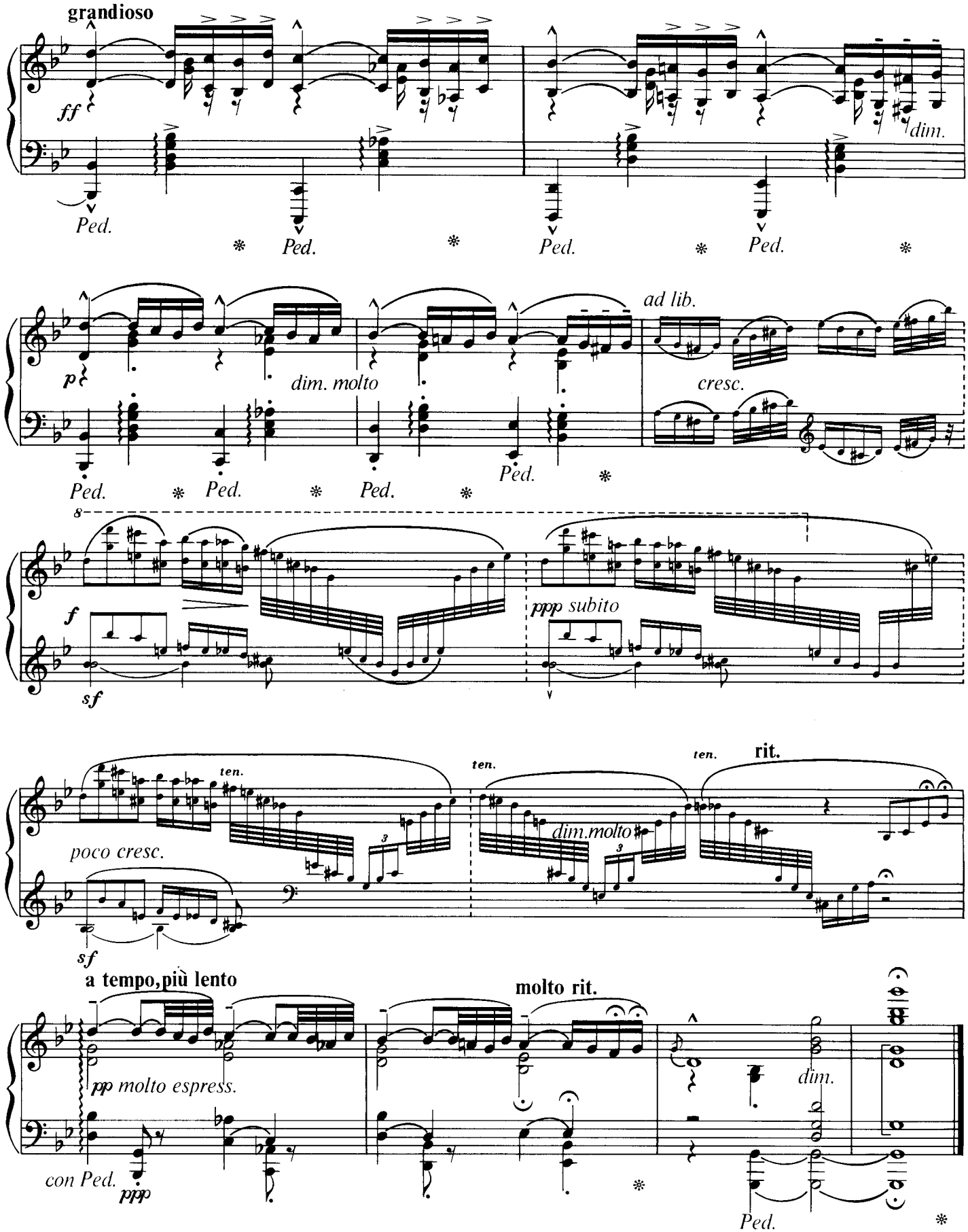

rit.
dim.
a tempo
R.H.
p
L.H.
Ped.
* Ped.
*
Ped.
ppp
p
*
3
dim. molto
3
pp
Ped.


stringendo
rit.
stringendo
ppp espress. e mesto
mf
p
*
rit.
a tempo
p dolce
mf
accel.
rit.
accel.
rit.
tr
dim. molto
pp

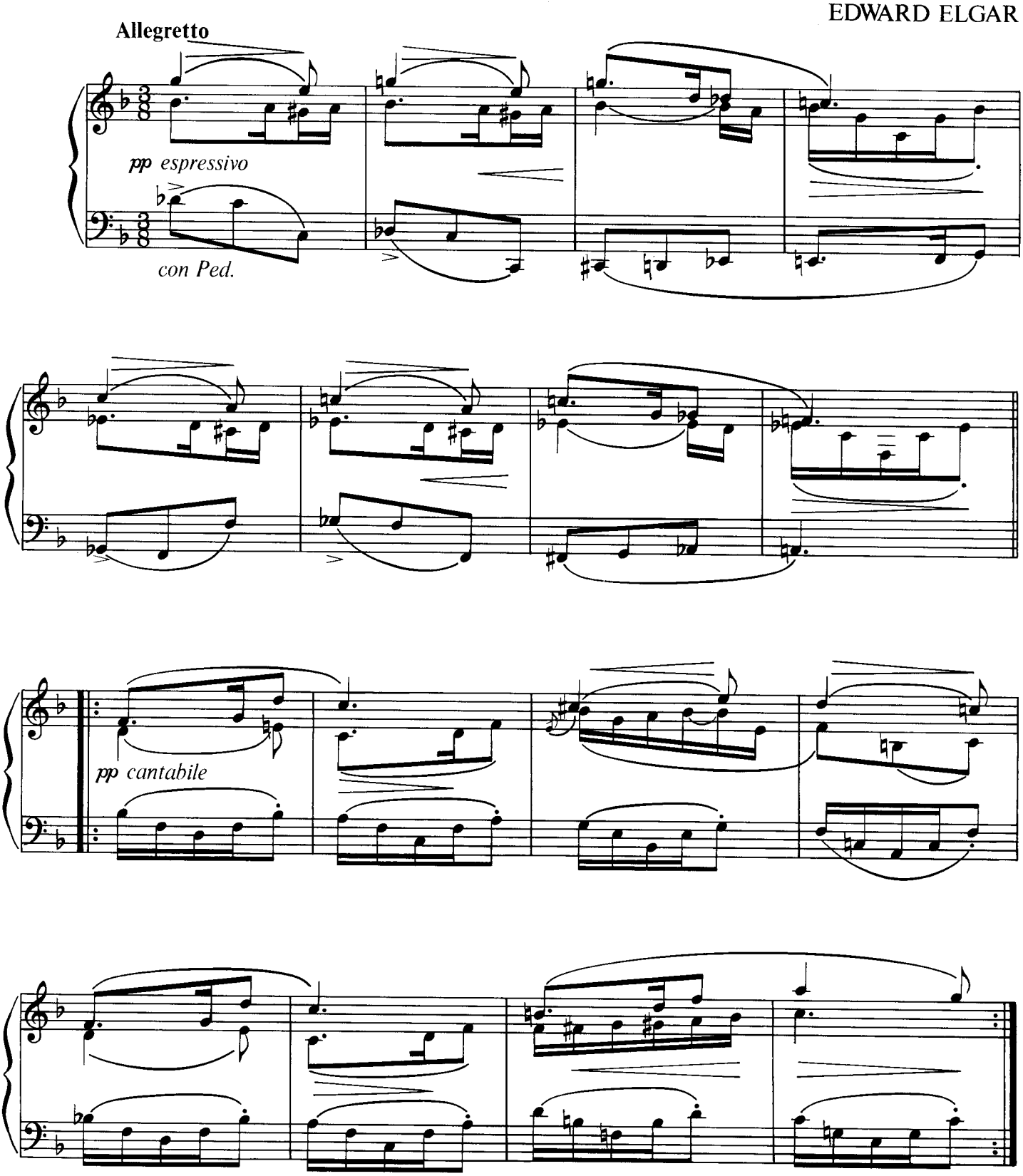

a tempo
mf
sf
dim.
tr
p
rit.
a tempo, più lento
pp
pp
Tempo I
cantabile
con Ped.
cresc.
largamente
f
sf

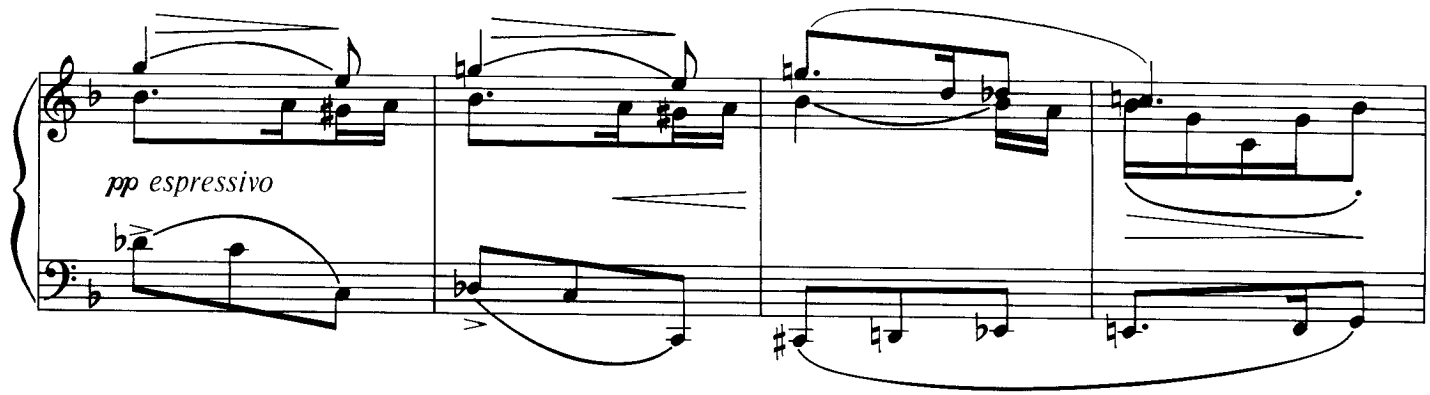

grandioso
ff
dim.
Ped.
p
dim. molto
ad lib.
cresc.
8
f
sf
ppp subito
ten.
rit.
poco cresc.
dim.molto
a tempo,più lento
molto rit.
pp molto espress.
con Ped.
ppp
dim.

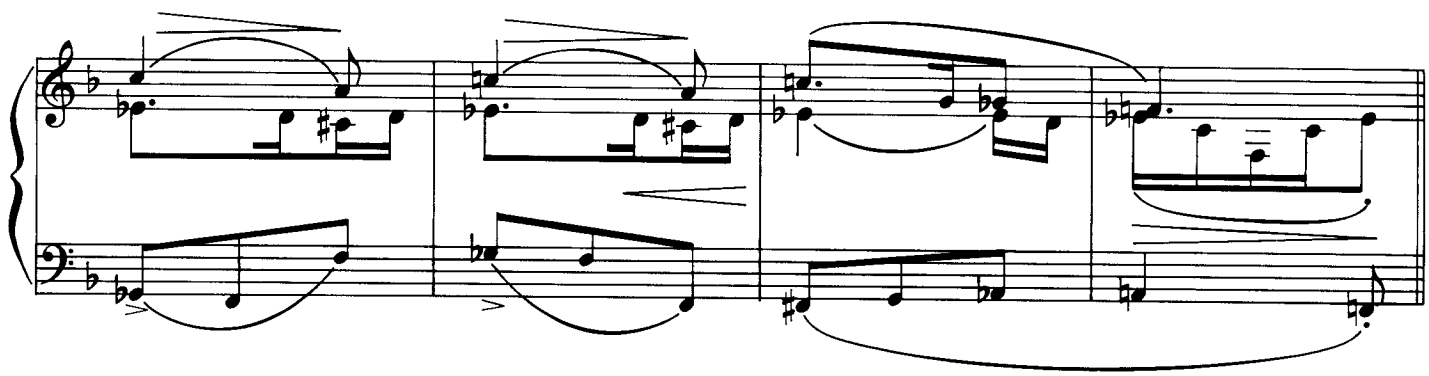
Meinem lieben Freunde, Professor Julius Buths, Düsseldorf

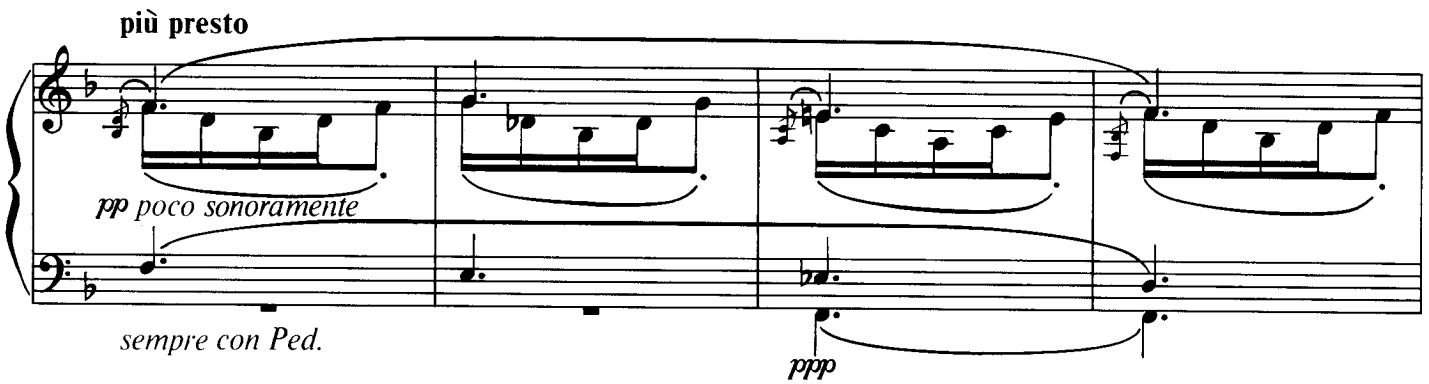
2 SKIZZE

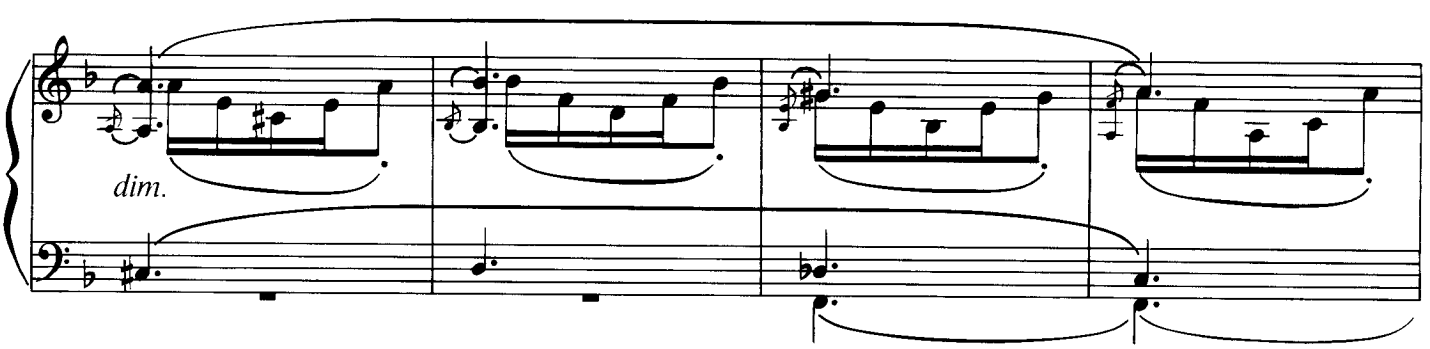
EDWARD ELGAR

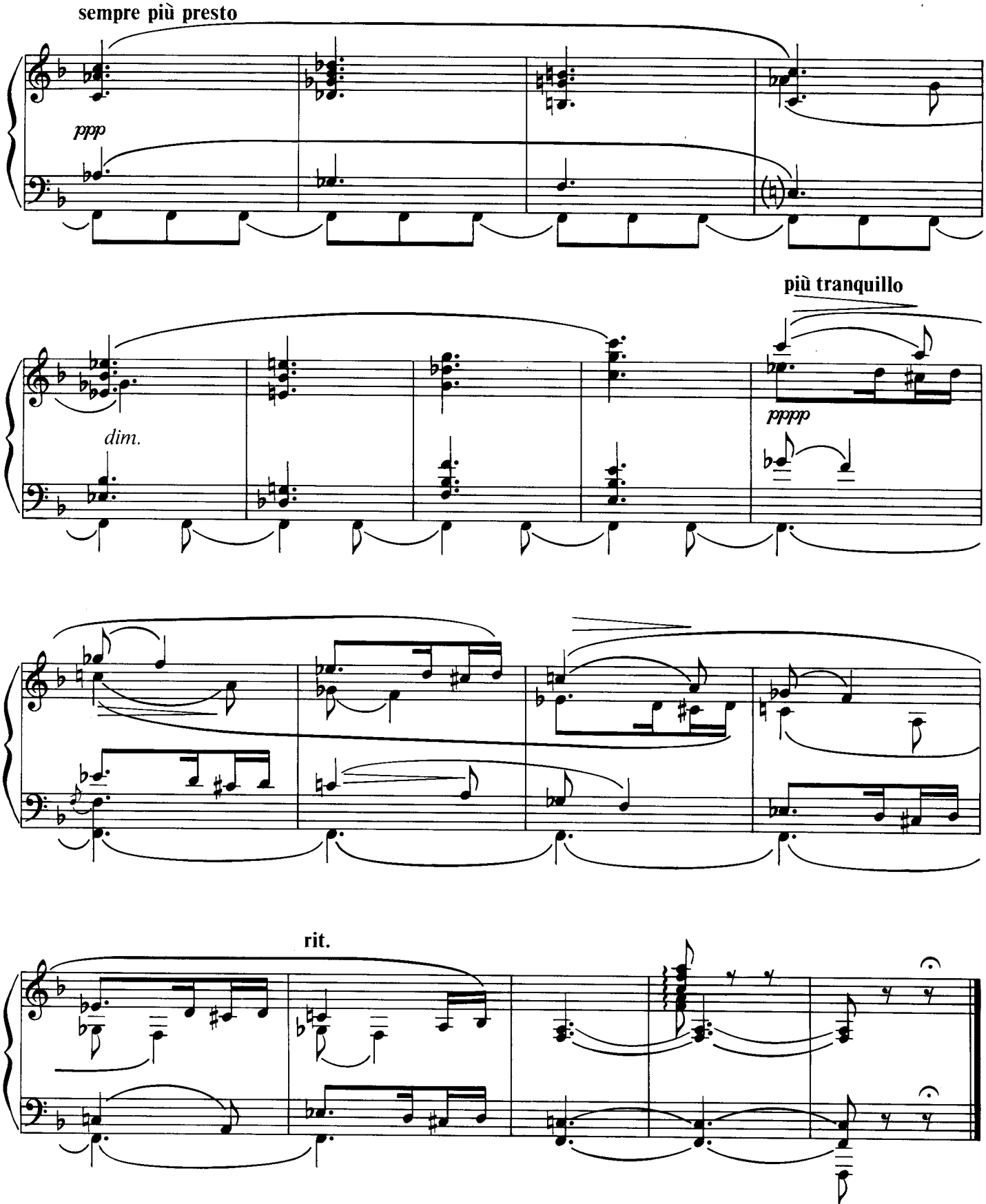



pp espressivo




più presto
pp poco sonoramente
sempre con Ped.
ppp


dim.



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