gershwin's® improvisations for solo piano

transcribed from the 1926 and 1928 disc recordings

by artis wodehouse

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INTRODUCTION

George Gershwin (1898-1937) was a brilliant pianist, perhaps the most outstanding interpreter of his own works ever to have recorded. His two recordings of the *Rhapsody in Blue* with the Paul Whiteman Band, his rendition of the *Three Piano Preludes,* and the *Improvisations* of this volume are among the most extraordinary Gershwin performances captured on disc.

Gershwin's development as a composer centered on the piano and piano performance, and even though he did not begin formal piano studies till the age of twelve, his progress as a student of Charles Hambitzer was phenomenal. Hambitzer secured Gershwin's knowledge of the standard classical piano repertoire of the day (Bach, Czerny, Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin) but was open-minded enough to introduce the young Gershwin to the then-new compositions of Debussy and Ravel. Hambitzer was also wise enough not to discourage Gershwin's interest in popular music. From the very beginning Gershwin felt no conflict between classical and popular idioms, and moved freely between them.

By the age of 15, Gershwin justifiably felt that he had gained sufficient keyboard skills to quit high school and become a song-plugger on Tin Pan Alley. As such, he spent eight hours or more a day playing new songs for vaudeville artists in search of new materials for their acts. Gershwin's ability to play pieces in all keys with virtuosic improvised variations soon gained him a reputation as one of the best pluggers in the business. This improvisational skill also led him to make piano rolls. For more than a decade beginning in 1915, he cut more than 100 piano rolls on popular tunes. His roll improvisations were initially based on tunes by others, but gradually gave way to improvisations on his songs as Gershwin established his reputation as a song-writer.

It was as a piano roll artist that Gershwin assimilated the keyboard style which is directly reflected in the disc improvisations of this volume. This piano roll style (of which Gershwin was one of the most gifted practitioners) had several well-defined characteristics. First, it was almost always dance music, played at danceable tempos. Most were fox-trots and one-steps and the left hand was invariably a ragtime or ragtime-stride accompaniment typical for these dances. In addition to laying down the appropriate rhythms and tempos of these dances, the roll pianist created dense, near-orchestral textures that would conjure up the rich sonority of a live dance band. Much like over-dubbing in a modern sound studio, the roll pianist could create extremely thick and complex textures by first cutting a roll, and then going back over it to insert additional notes and contrapuntal melodies. Gershwin could, in fact, accomplish a great deal even on a single pass through a roll. He was able to play consecutive four-note chords spread to the octave in the right hand at fast speeds and filled-in 10ths and even larger intervals in the left with extraordinary fluency. Gershwin mastered this technique during his years as piano roll artist, and it is reflected in the transcribed disc *Improvisations.*

An improvisation of real distinction required the pianist's abilty to weave into his variations styles taken from the wealth and variety of musical contexts familiar to the music-loving public. These styles ranged from the spicy and dream-like harmonies of the French Impressionists, to jazz-like melodies and rhythms, the dizzying cross-rhythms of the novelty ragtime players then so popular, to Yiddish theater music, hints of other dance types (for instance, a suggestion of a waltz in the midst of a fox-trot) and even sly quotes from the well-known classical masters. The best improvisations, like those by Gershwin, had enough virtuoso flair, craftsmanship and whimsical invention to hold the interest of even the most discriminating music lover of the period.

The introduction of the microphone and electrical recording in 1924 resulted in the eventual demise of the piano roll. The frequency range captured by the new process far surpassed that of acoustic recordings, producing much more life-like sound, particularly in the case of the piano. This advance coincided with Gershwin's meteoric rise to fame in the mid-20's, and he was subsequently asked by the Columbia Recording Company in 1926 to record improvisations on his most popular tunes in the style he had mastered as a roll pianist. It should be noted that the Columbia discs were live studio performances and not roll recordings; Gershwin could not make a second pass over them as he could in making rolls. Nonetheless, the complexity and inventiveness of the disc improvisations is astonishing, and the artistic achievement they represent equals Gershwin's irmprovisations on piano roll.

Though the 1926 and 1928 disc improvisations are electric recordings, they still lack the fidelity of modern recordings. The bass in particular lacks the clarity to which we are now accustomed. The piano's rich spectrum of overtones also presents a problem for the transcriber, a problem in turn exacerbated by the lack of bass clarity: the harmonics generated by low bass notes can be strong enough to sound as if they had actually been played. Conversely, notes actually played are occasionally lost, as for instance in the densely packed off-beat left hand chords played at close range to the right and at top speed.

Given these limitations, these transcriptions attempt to present as accurately as possible in standard notation both the music and the performance style of Gershwin's disc improvisations. However, a musical score can only go so far toward indicating the performance style of jazz-oriented compositions like these improvisations. For instance, differences in length of the so-called swing 8th notes, the long-short groupings of pairs of notes played within a single beat are in some cases quite pronounced, while in others they are very subtle. Precise notation of these groupings would be forbiddingly complicated, and for this reason only noticeably swung 8th notes are notated as a dotted 8th followed by a 16th. Other 8th note subdivisions of the beat that are not swung, or only slightly swung are notated as equal 8ths. Naturally, it is advisable for anyone studying these *Improvisations* to listen to Gershwin's own performance.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

I. Tempo

The metronome markings will strike most musicians as astonishingly fast. Even more remarkable is that they are only starting tempi, because Gershwin invariably speeds up as he plays. We might attribute Gershwin's fast tempi to the 3-minute limit of a 10-inch 78 rpm disc, but Gershwin's fast tempi also prevail on his radio broadcast recordings, where time constraints would be less likely. Thus, it seems that Gershwin preferred quick tempi. While Gershwin's recorded performances are clearly dance-like and therefore rhythmic, they are not metronomic. Since it is impossible to synchronize a metronome to any of Gershwin's recorded performances for more than a few measures at a time, the beginning metronome markings in the score are intended only as an approximate guide to his tempi.

II. Dynamics

Gershwin's use of dynamics appear unconventional from the perspective of the classically-trained pianist. In traditional classical performance style, dynamics play a major role in shaping phrases. Instead, Gershwin tends to stay at one dynamic level for long sections. Generally, he varies dynamic levels only to highlight major structural contrasts in the music. His dynamics range from a rich *mezzoforte* to a very full *forte.* Only rarely does he employ the extremes of *piano* or *fortissimo.*

III. Touch

Classically-trained pianists normally use a legato touch in their performance. But while Gershwin uses certain aspects of classical phrasing in these *Improvisations,* his normal touch is detached, rather than legato. He uses legato only for rare and important special effects, and for this reason his legato touch is marked in the score with the term, *legato.* These brief appearances of a true legato touch are not to be confused with the long slurrings that are used in the score to delineate the antiphonal construction of much of this music. Phrases marked with long slurs are susidiary "response" material which play off the main melodies. Acquaintance with the tunes upon which the improvisations are based is necessary for developing a faithful rendition.

IV. Articulation

Gershwin's articulations (staccato, accent, portamento, tenuto) are notated liberally in these transcriptions because his jazz and dance-style renditions are based upon these kinds of interpretive devices. Rolled chords, another important form of articulation, are marked as such when distinctly rolled on the recordings. When Gershwin rolled chords, it was a deliberate choice that almost always functioned as an accentuation device, a way of drawing special attention to the chord or placing the melody note into relief. We can infer this from his recordings since Gershwin did not need to roll chords to facilitate their execution: he could and did play filled-in 10ths as block chords. Grace notes, mordents and rolled chords should come slightly before the beat, and be played very quickly. In sections of the music that have chords (or notes) marked "sic," music within the transcription is what Gershwin actually played. Music notated in cue size reflects what I believe Gershwin intended to play.

V. Pedalling

Gershwin's pedallings don't conform to classical performance style, where the pedal is used to create legato melodies. Gershwin uses the pedal to enhance sonorities at key structural points in the composition or to suppress for very brief moments the more accented effect of non-pedalled playing. Gershwin's extremely subtle and complex use of the pedal works in tandem with the astonishing variety of his articulations to create the dance character of his renditions.

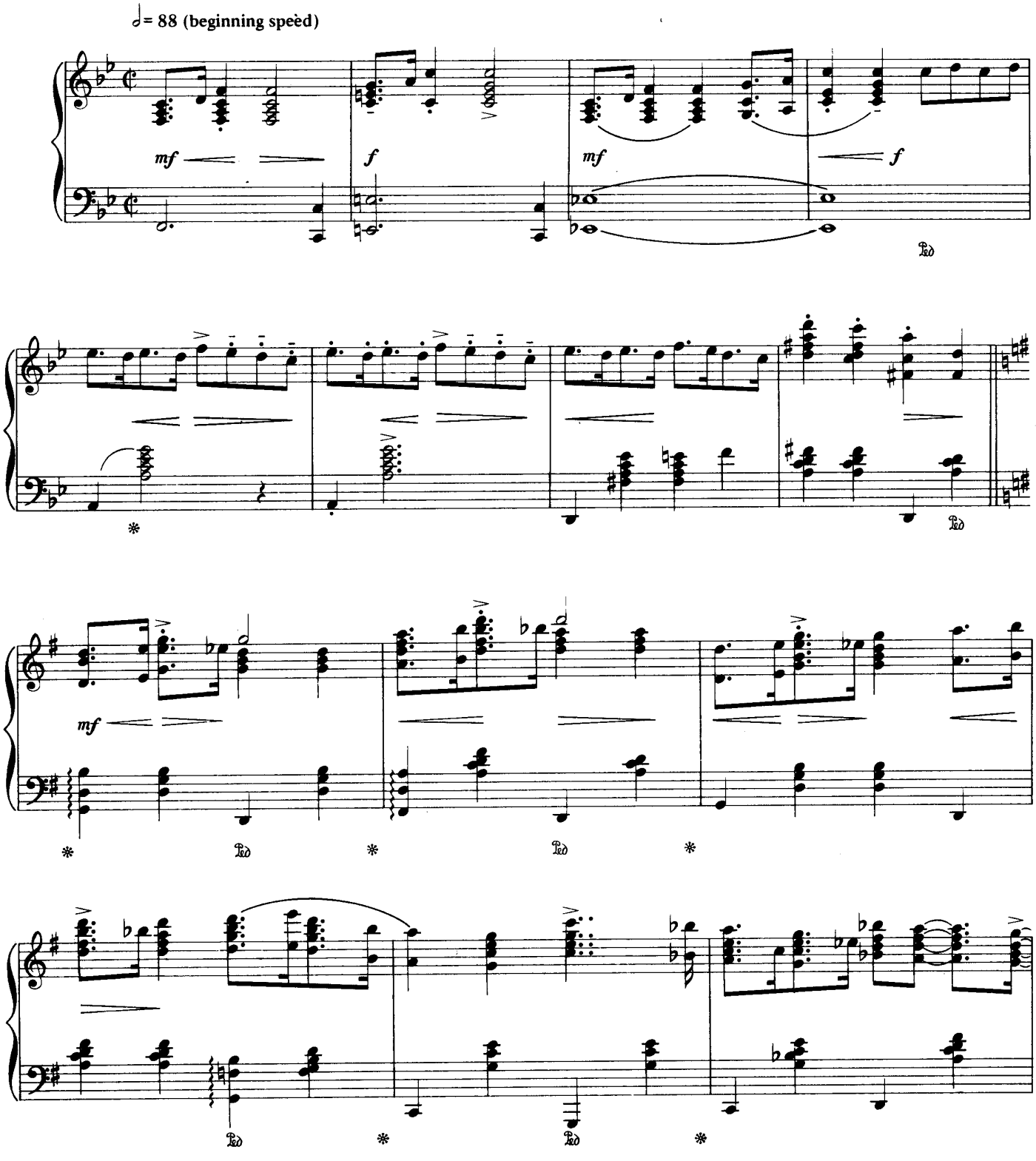
"I want to express my gratitude to Barbara Sawka of the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound and the musicologist Douglas Alton Smith without whose help and encouragement this project would never have been completed."

Artis Wodehouse

Dedicated to Edmund Wodehouse

CLAP YO' HANDS

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



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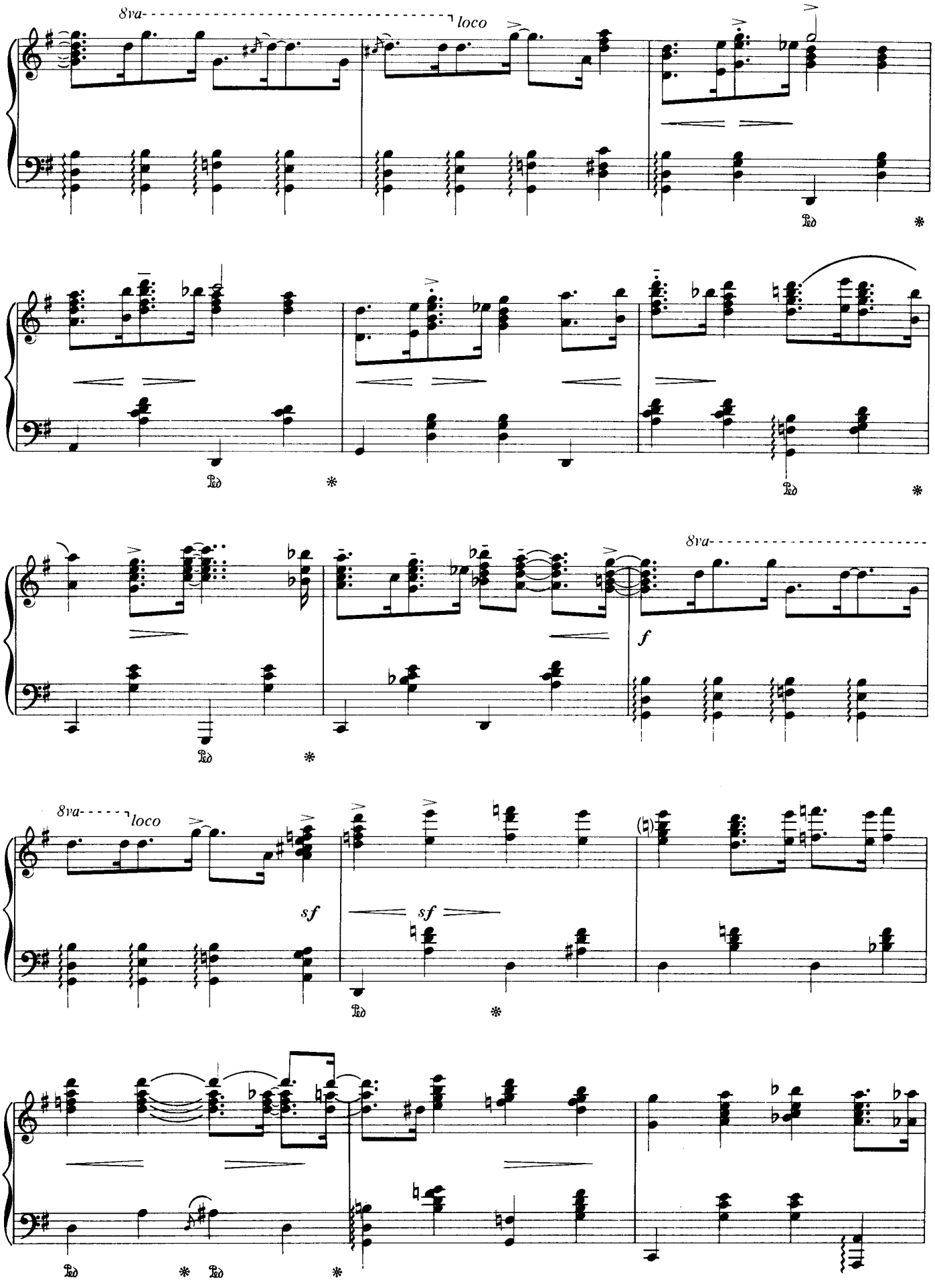
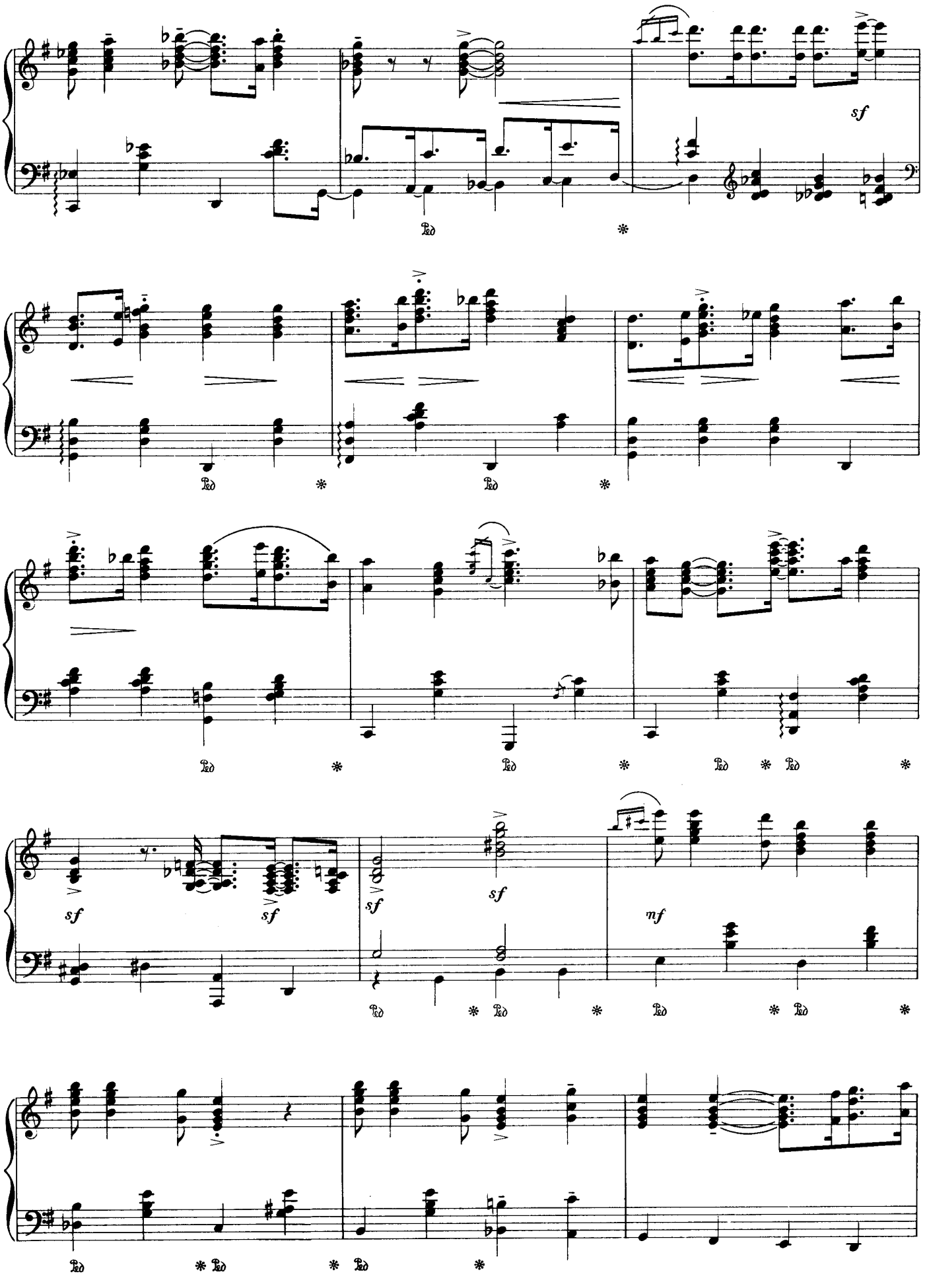
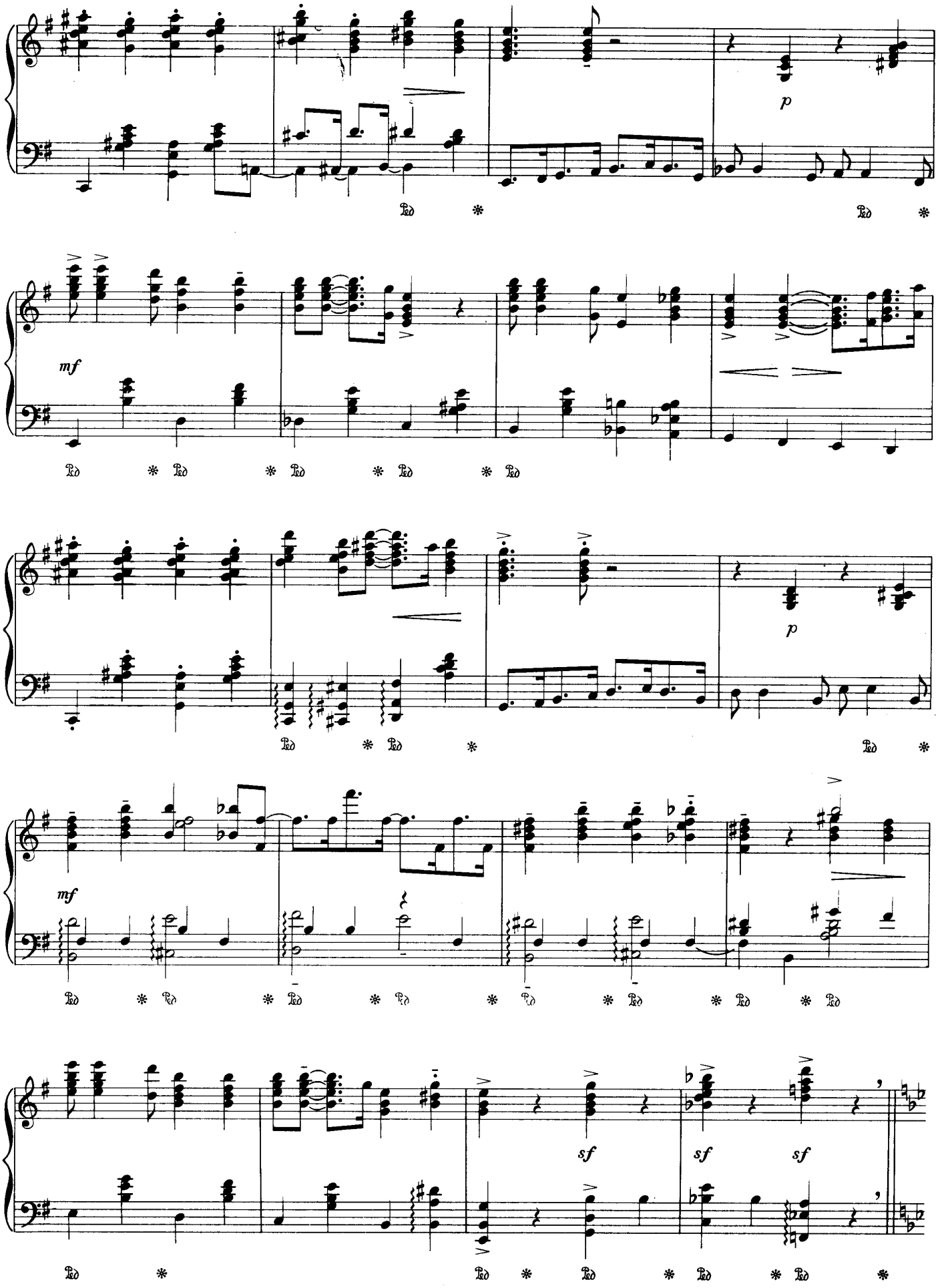

8va
loco
Ped
*
8va
f
8va
loco
sf
sf


sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
mf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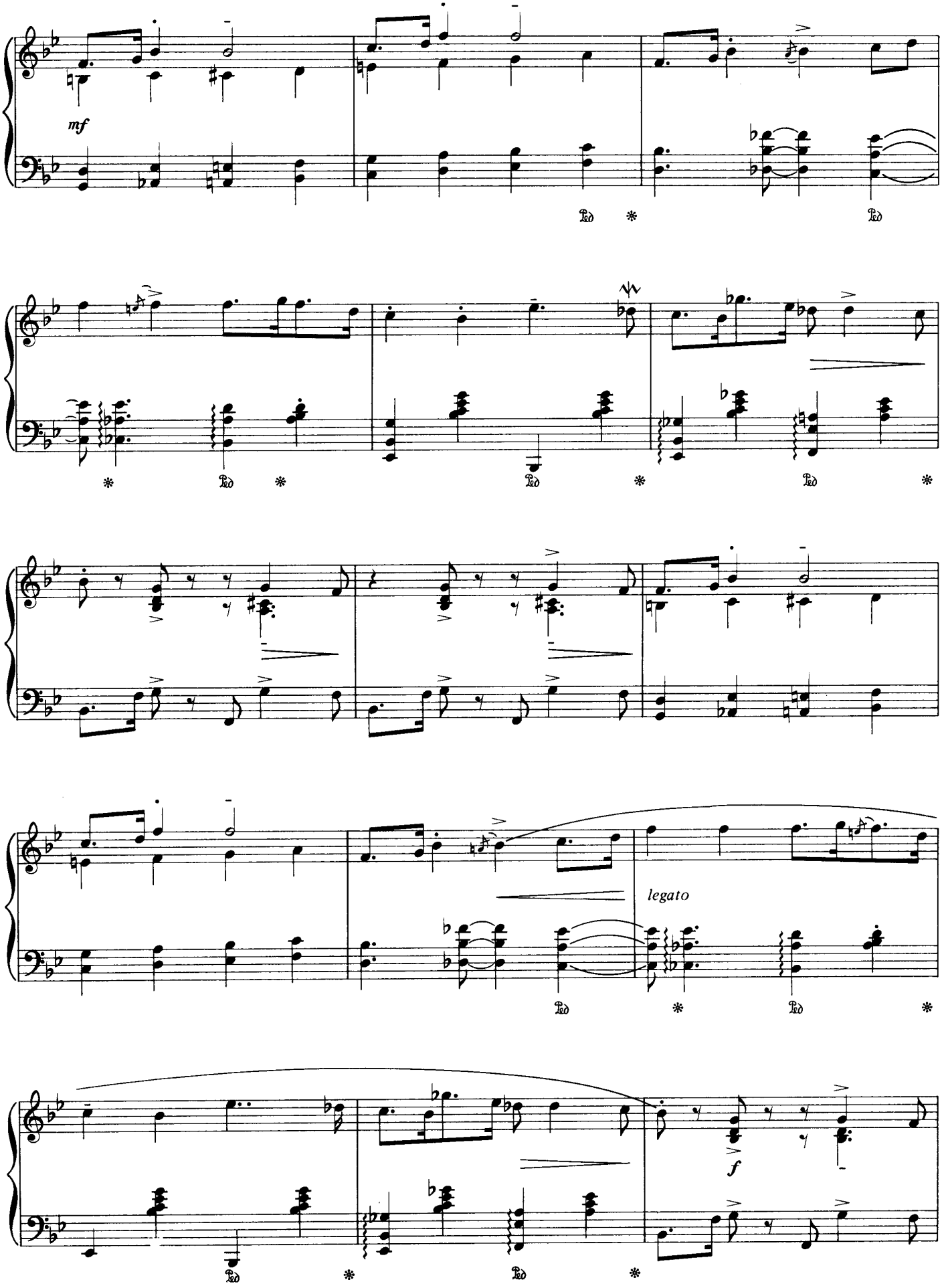
mf
p
mf
sf
sf
sf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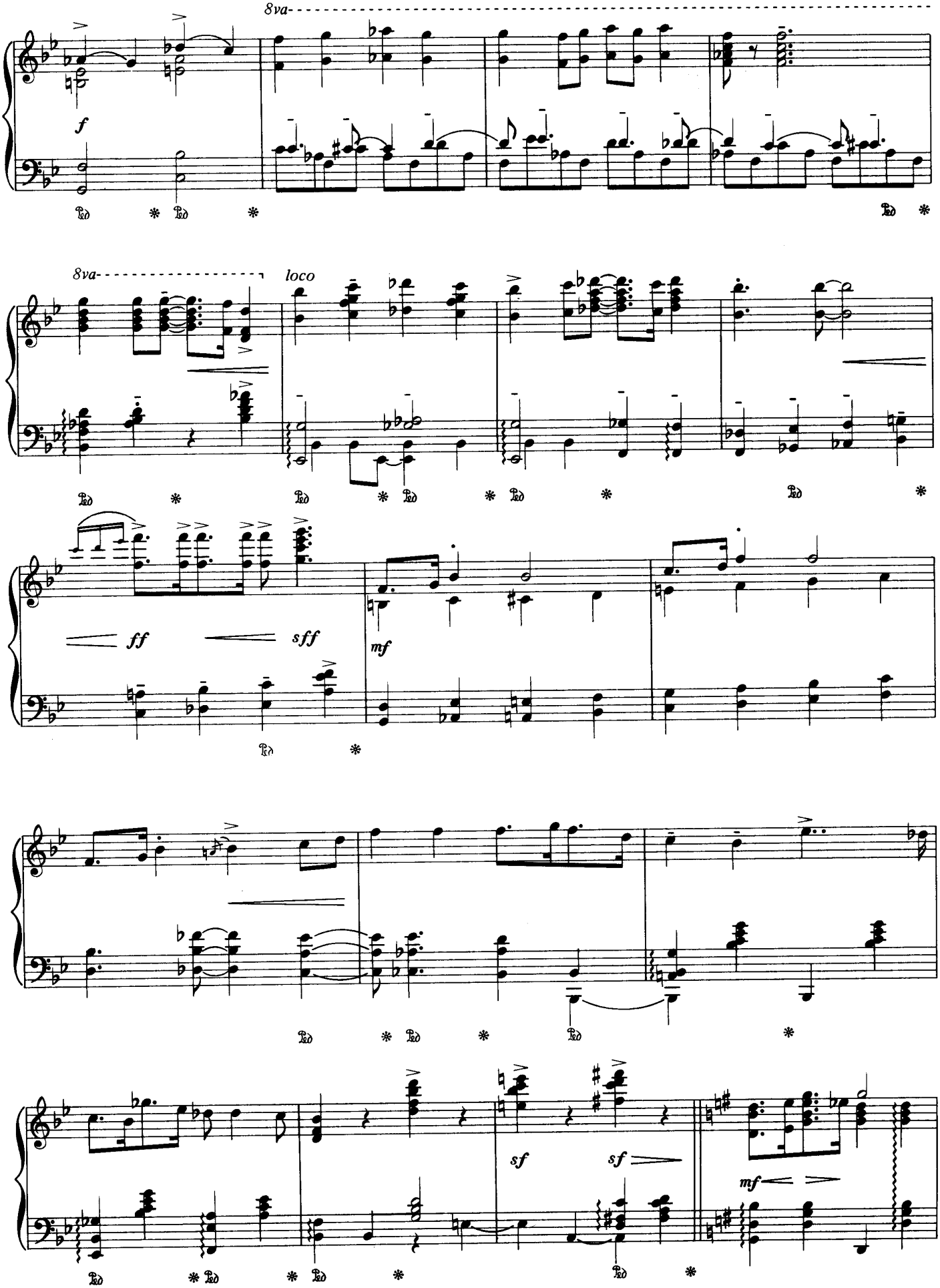
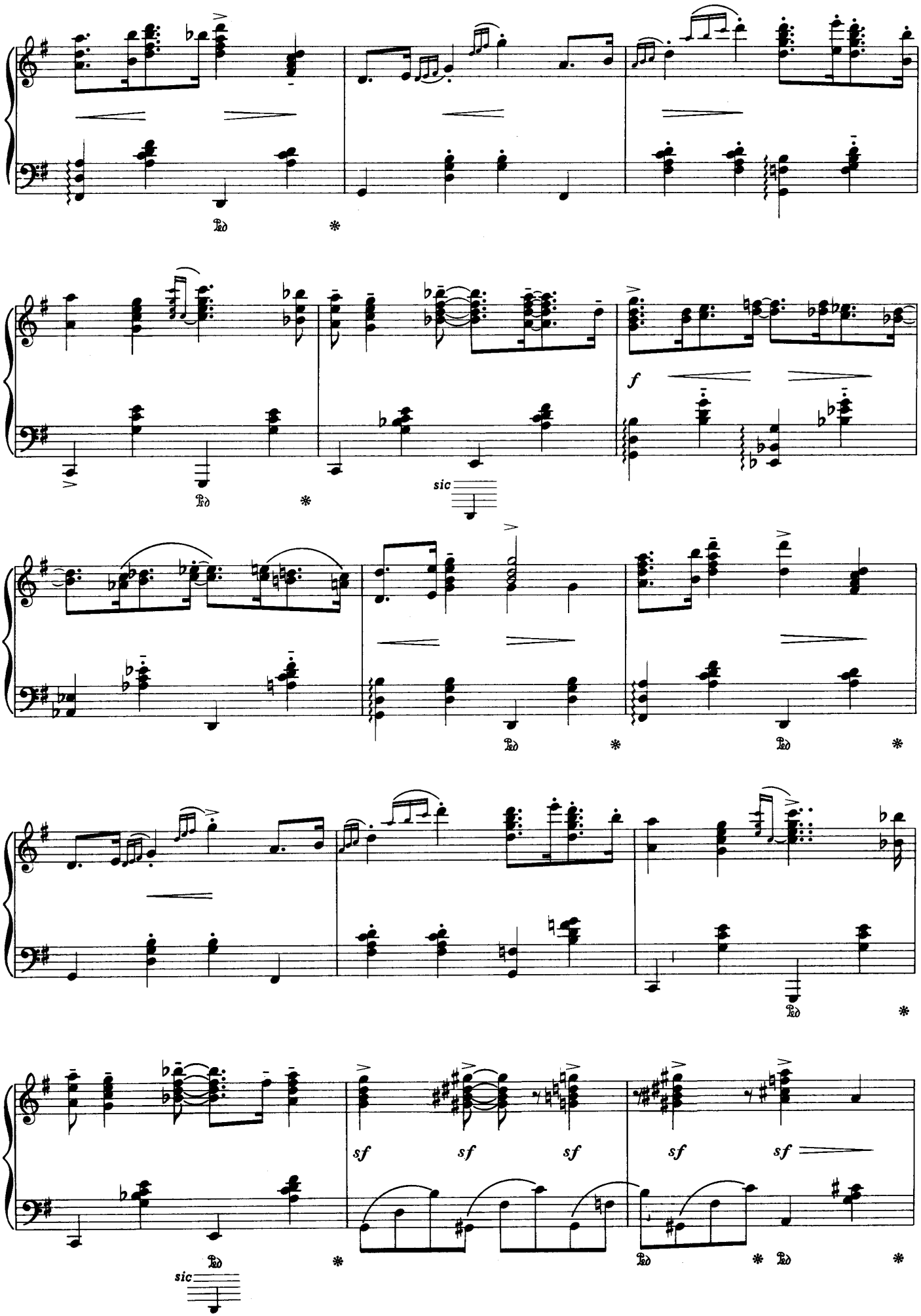
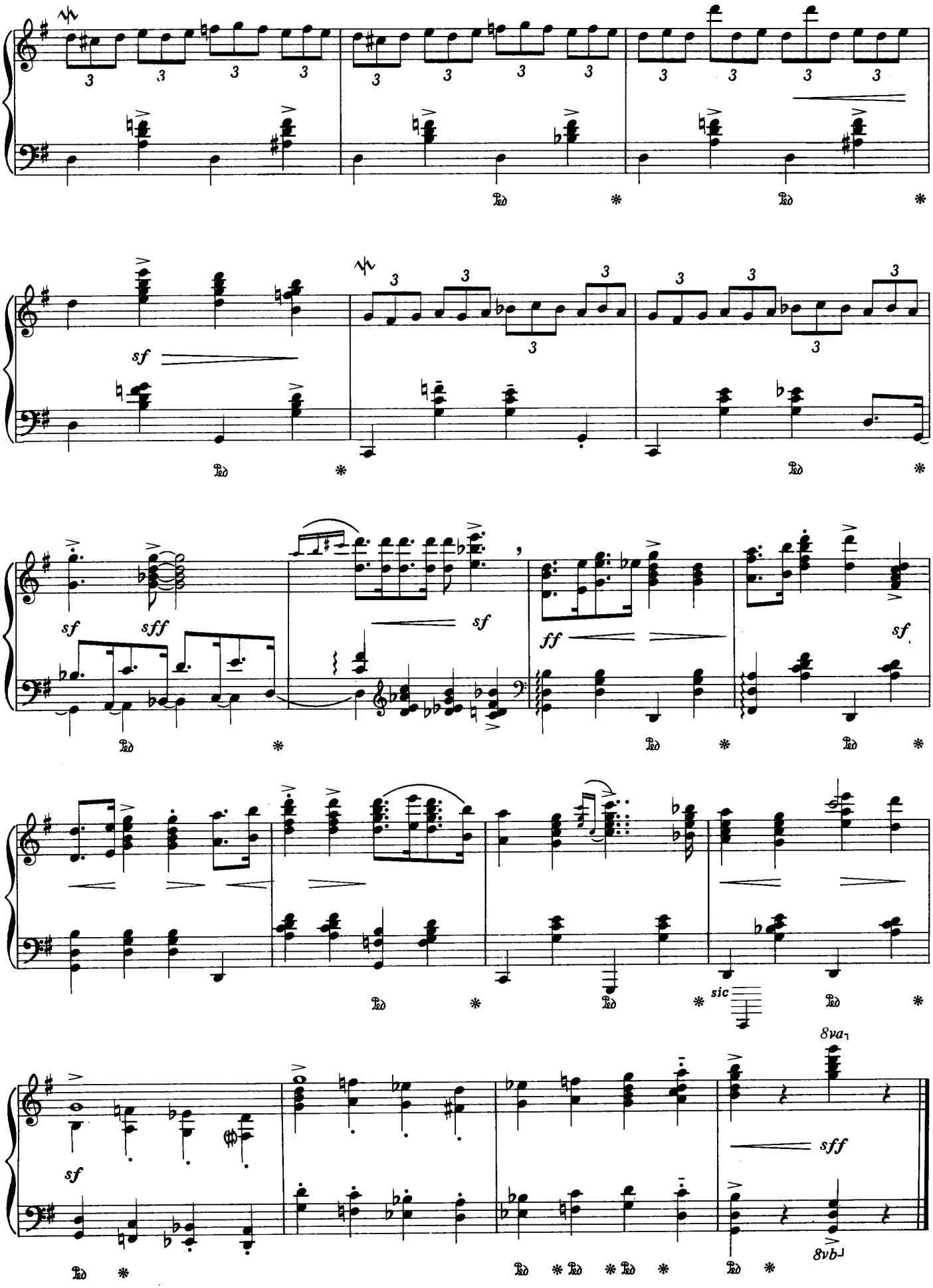
legato
f

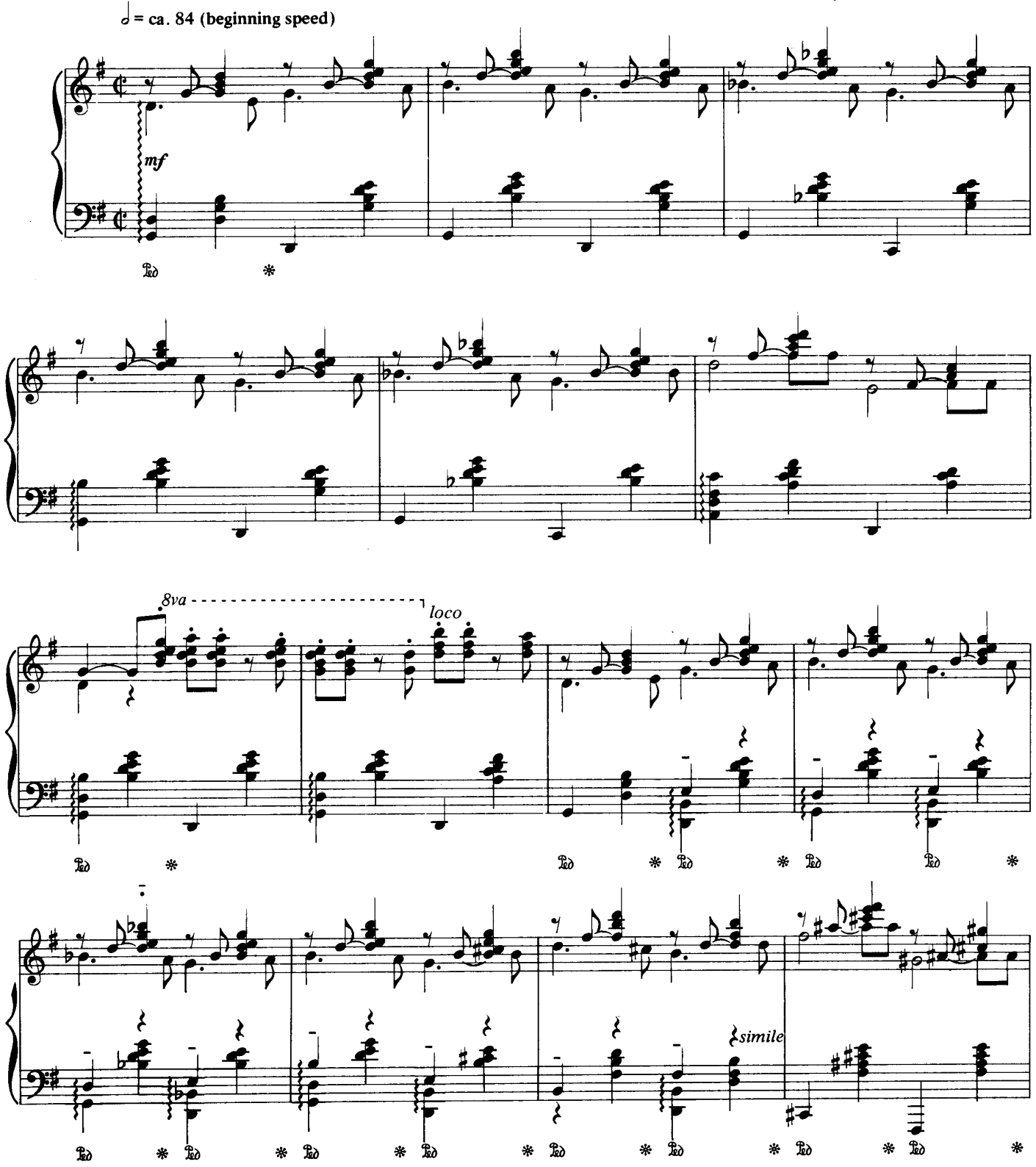

8va
f
8va
loco
ff
sff
mf
sf
sf
mf


f
sic
sf
sf
sf
sf
sf
sic


sf
sff
sf
ff
sf
sic
8va
sff
8vb

LOOKING FOR A BOY

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



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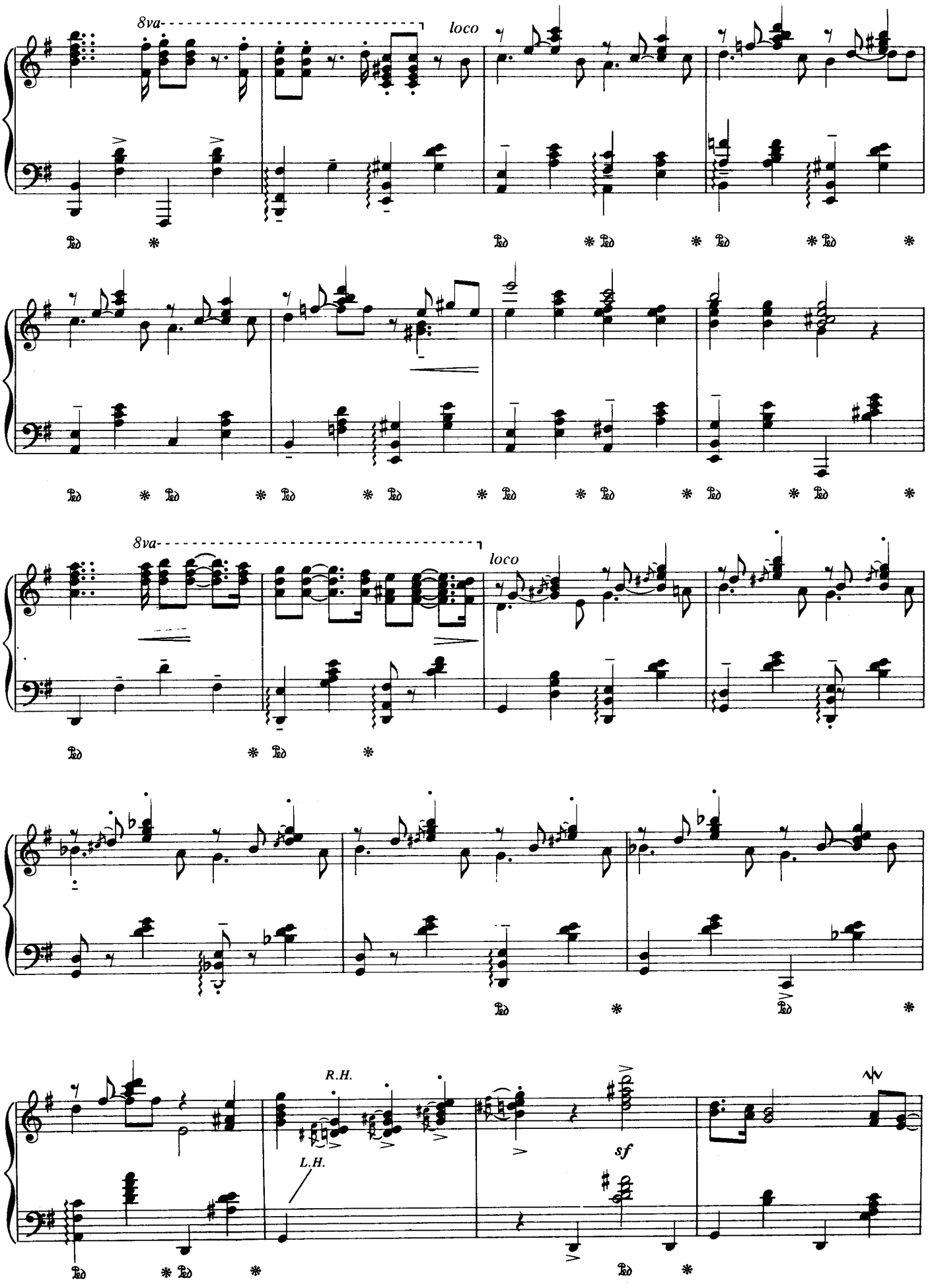
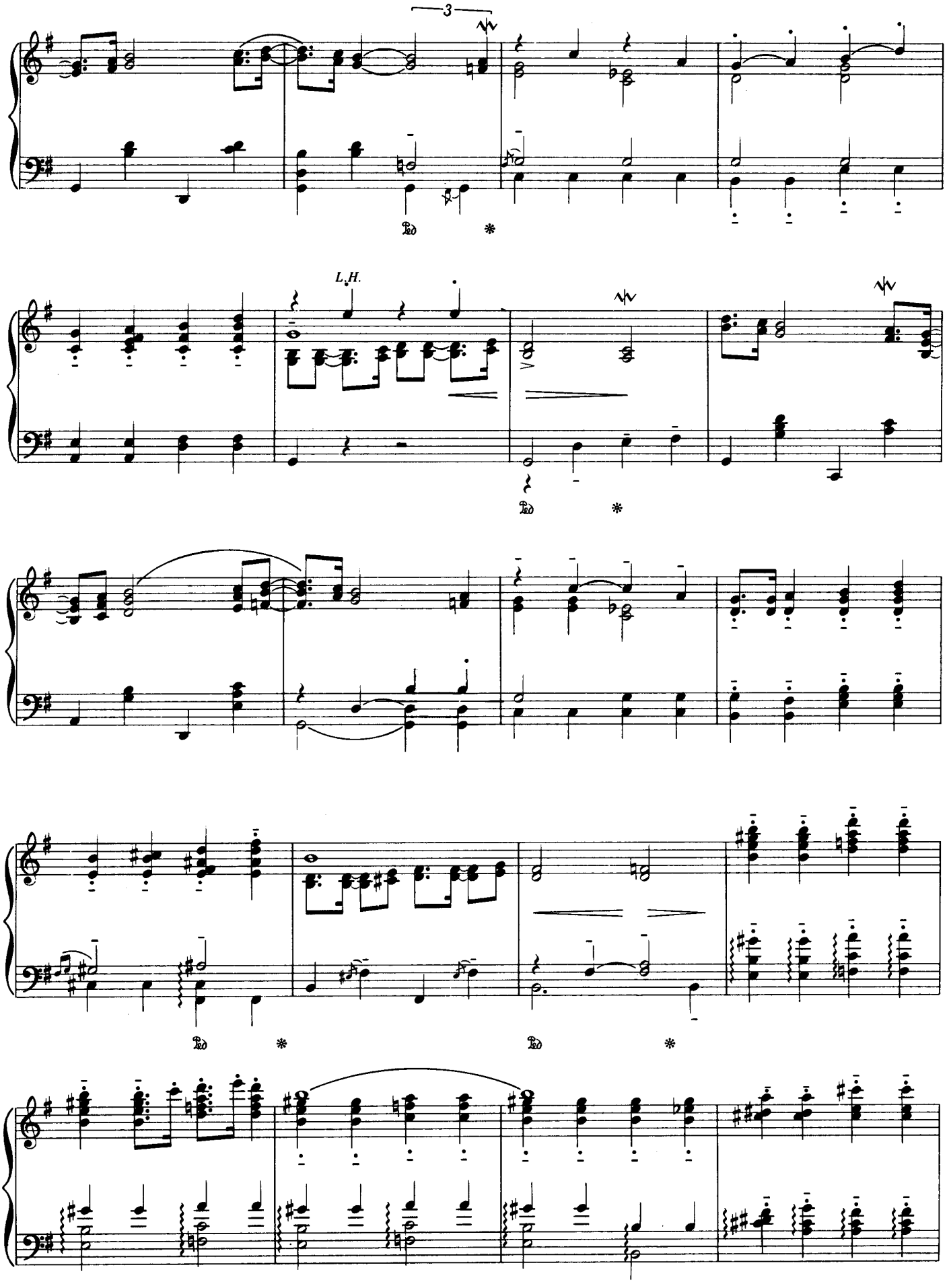
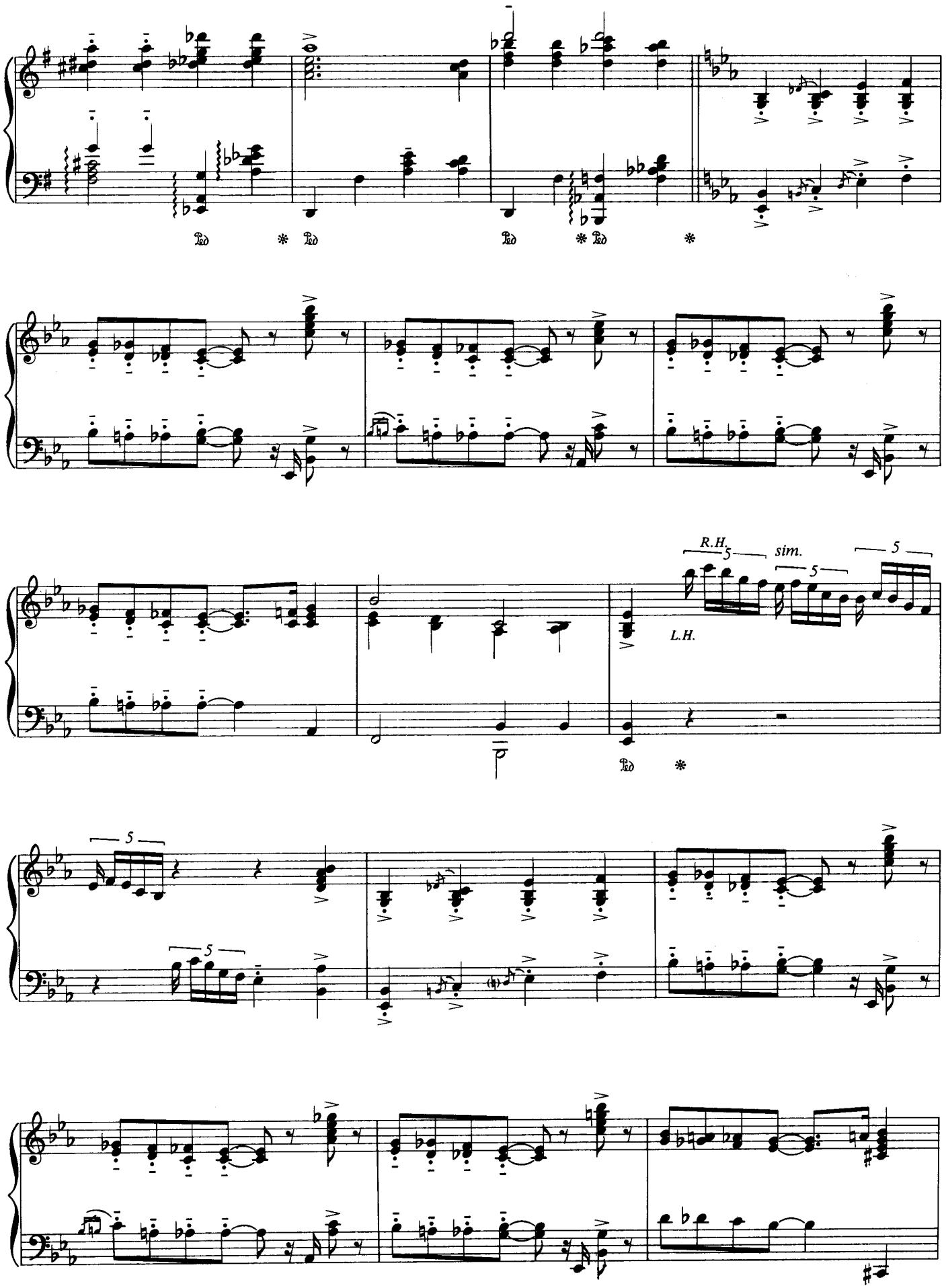
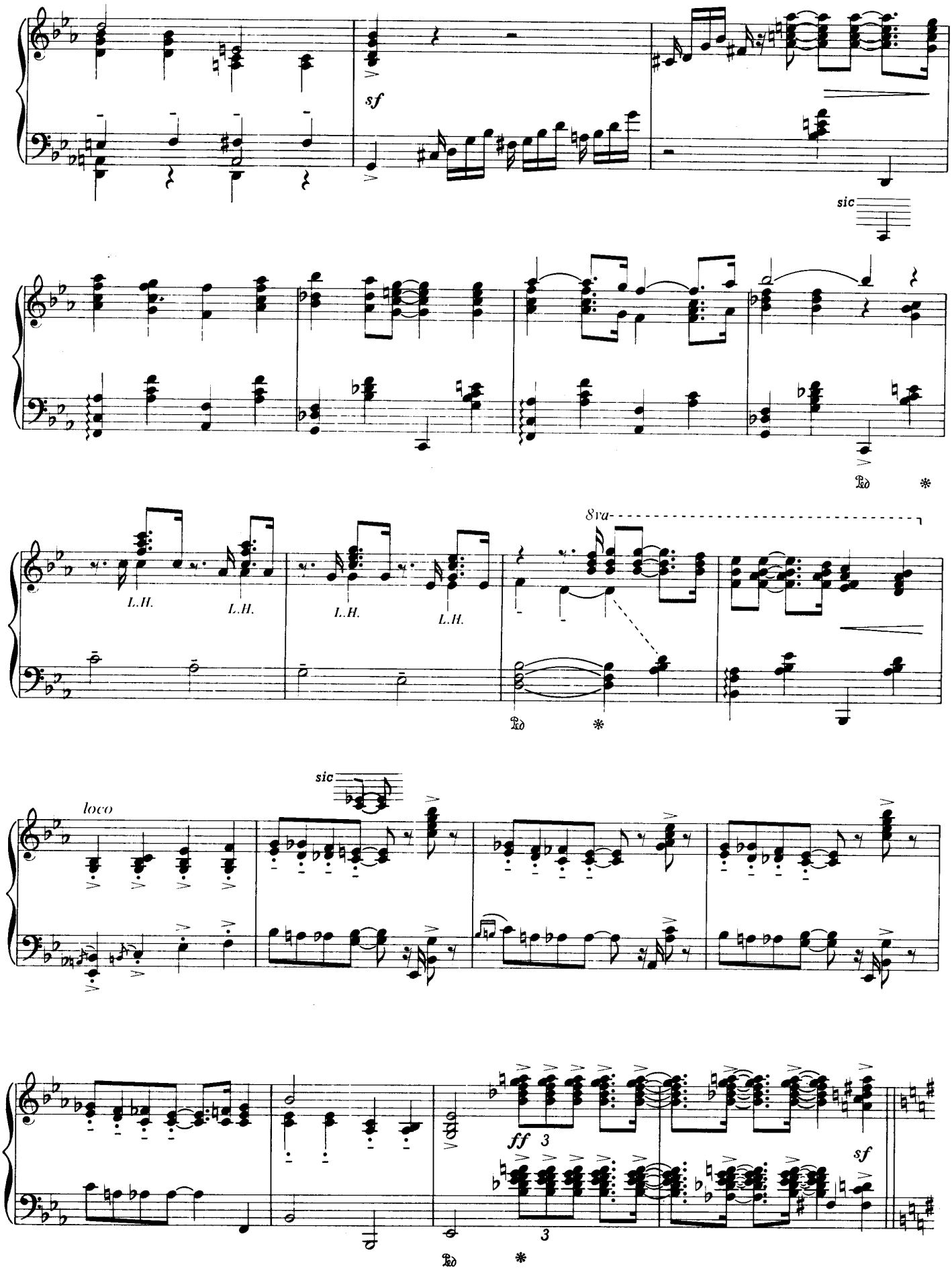
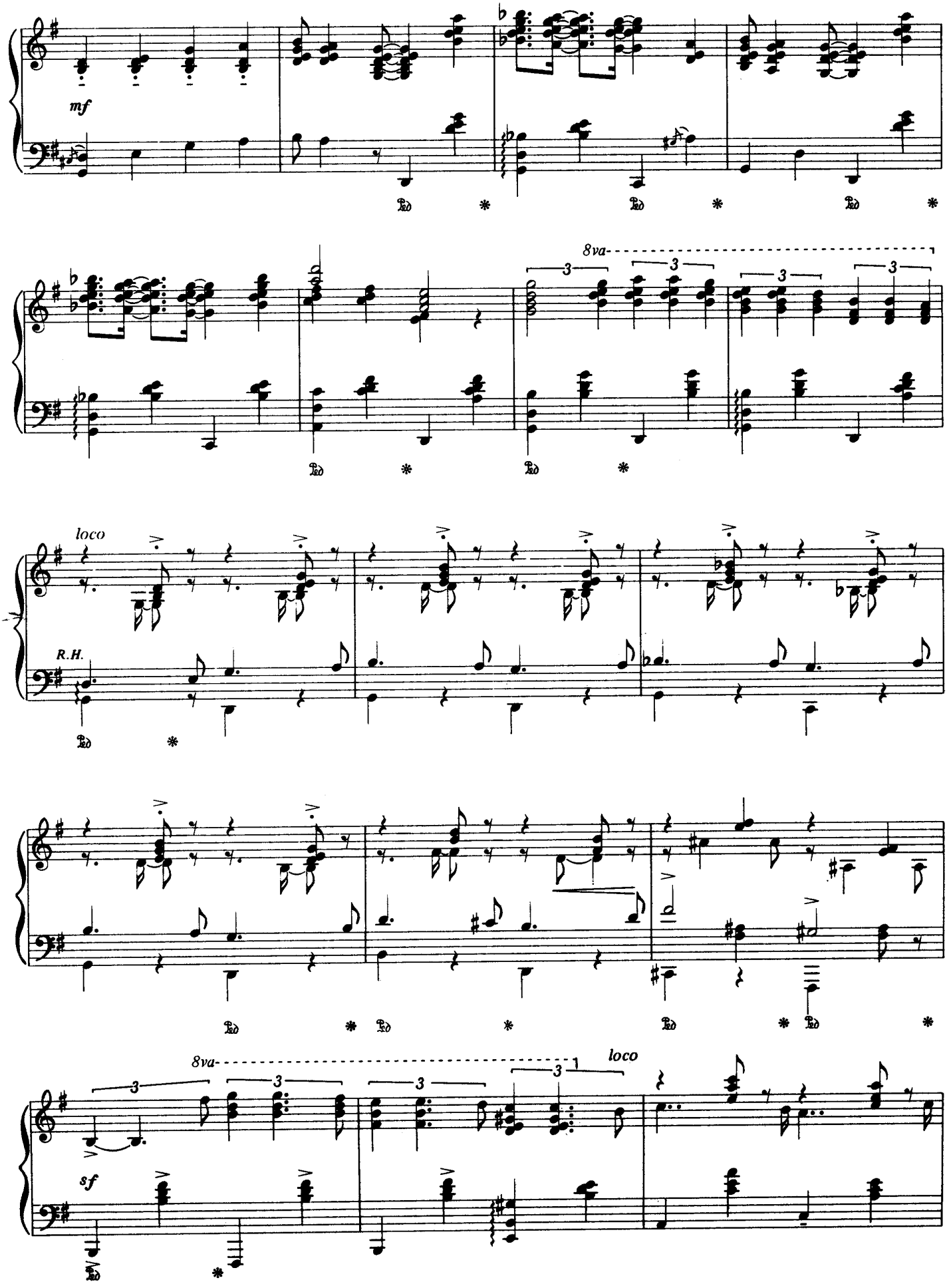
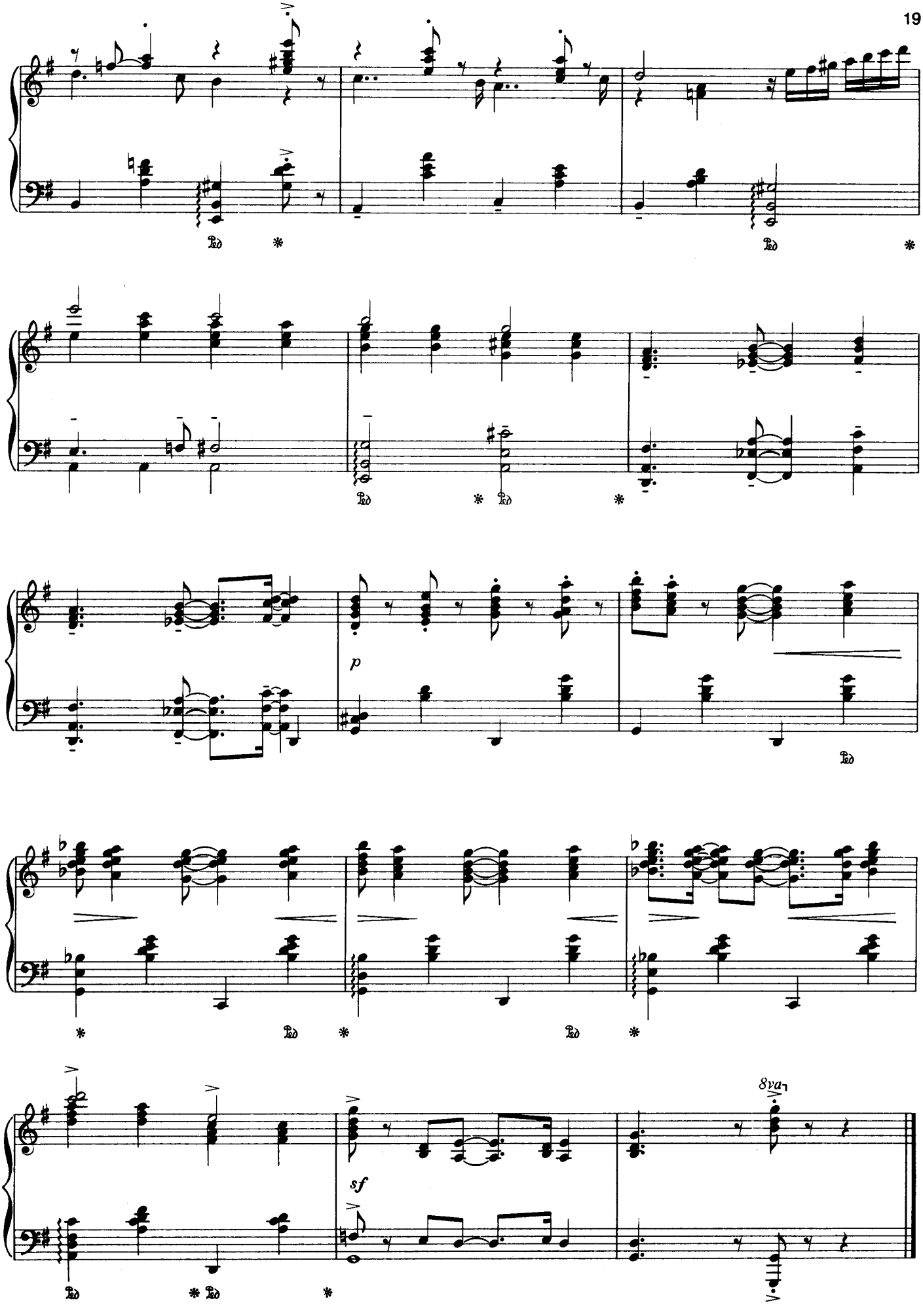

8va
loco
8va
loco
R.H.
L.H.
sf


3
L. H.
Ped.
*


R.H.
sim.
L.H.

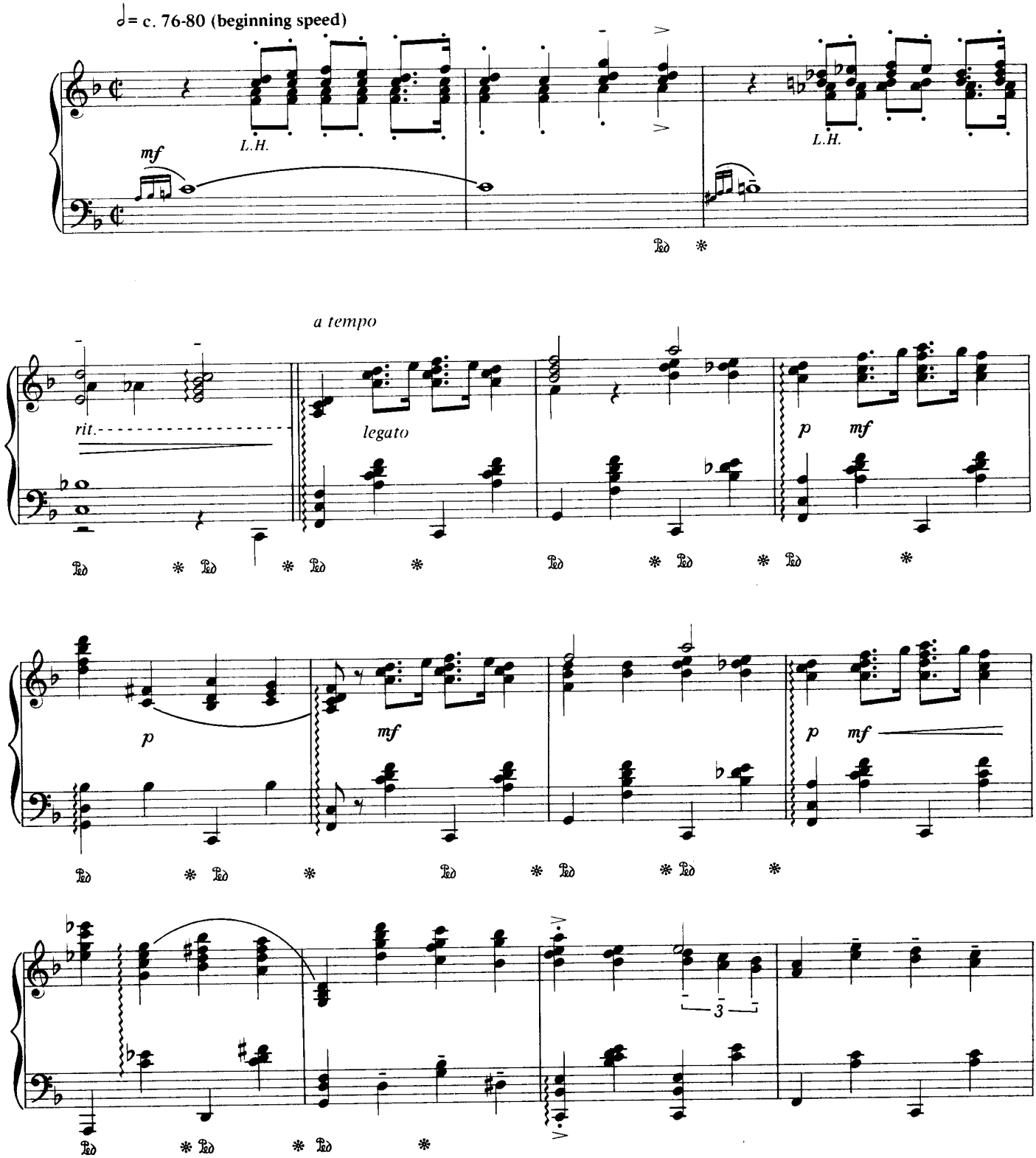

sf
sic
Ped
*
8va
L.H.
L.H.
L.H.
L.H.
Ped
*
sic
loco
ff
3
sf
3
Ped
*


mf
8va
loco
R.H.
sf
8va
loco


p
sf
8va

MAYBE

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



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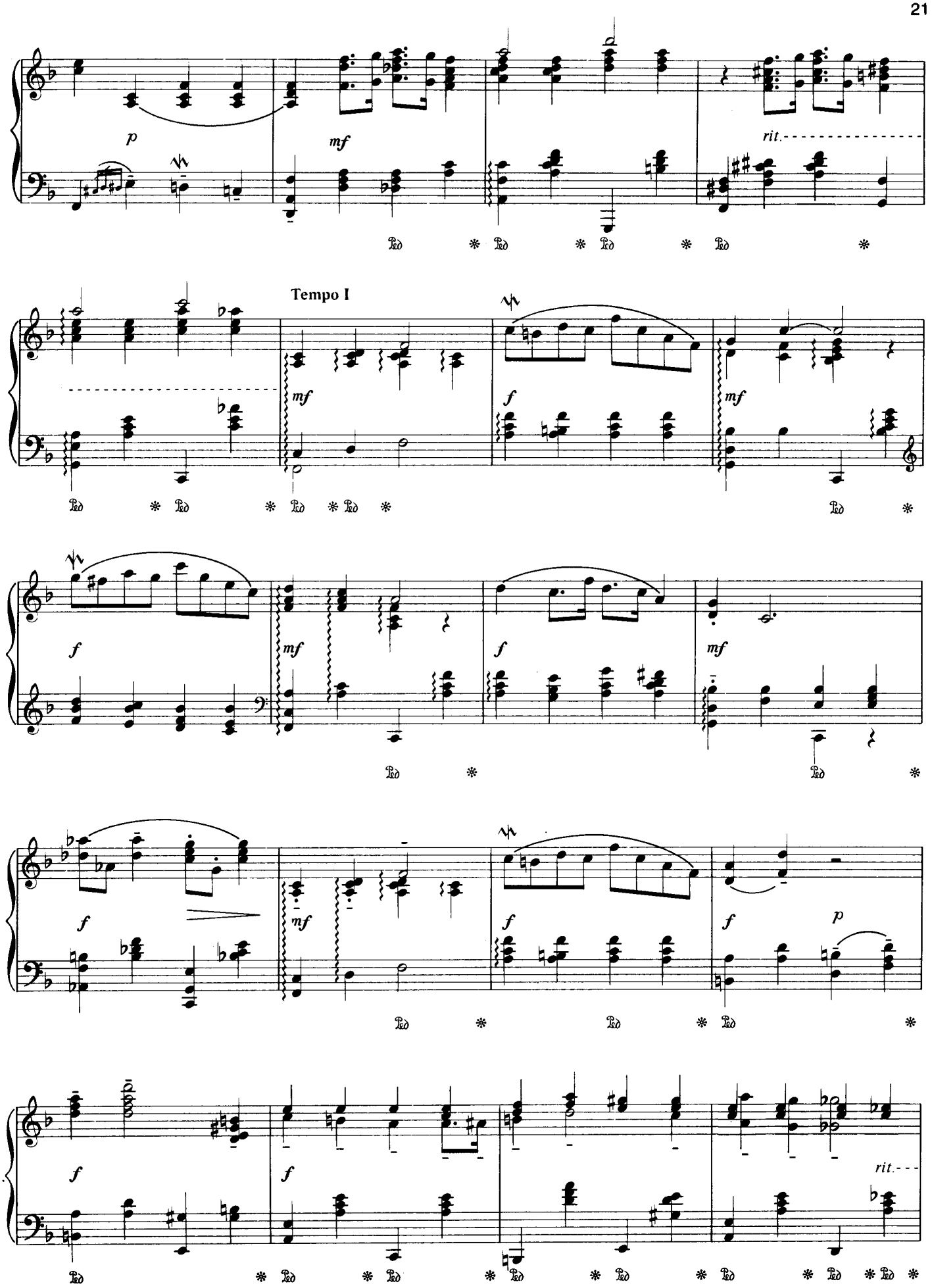
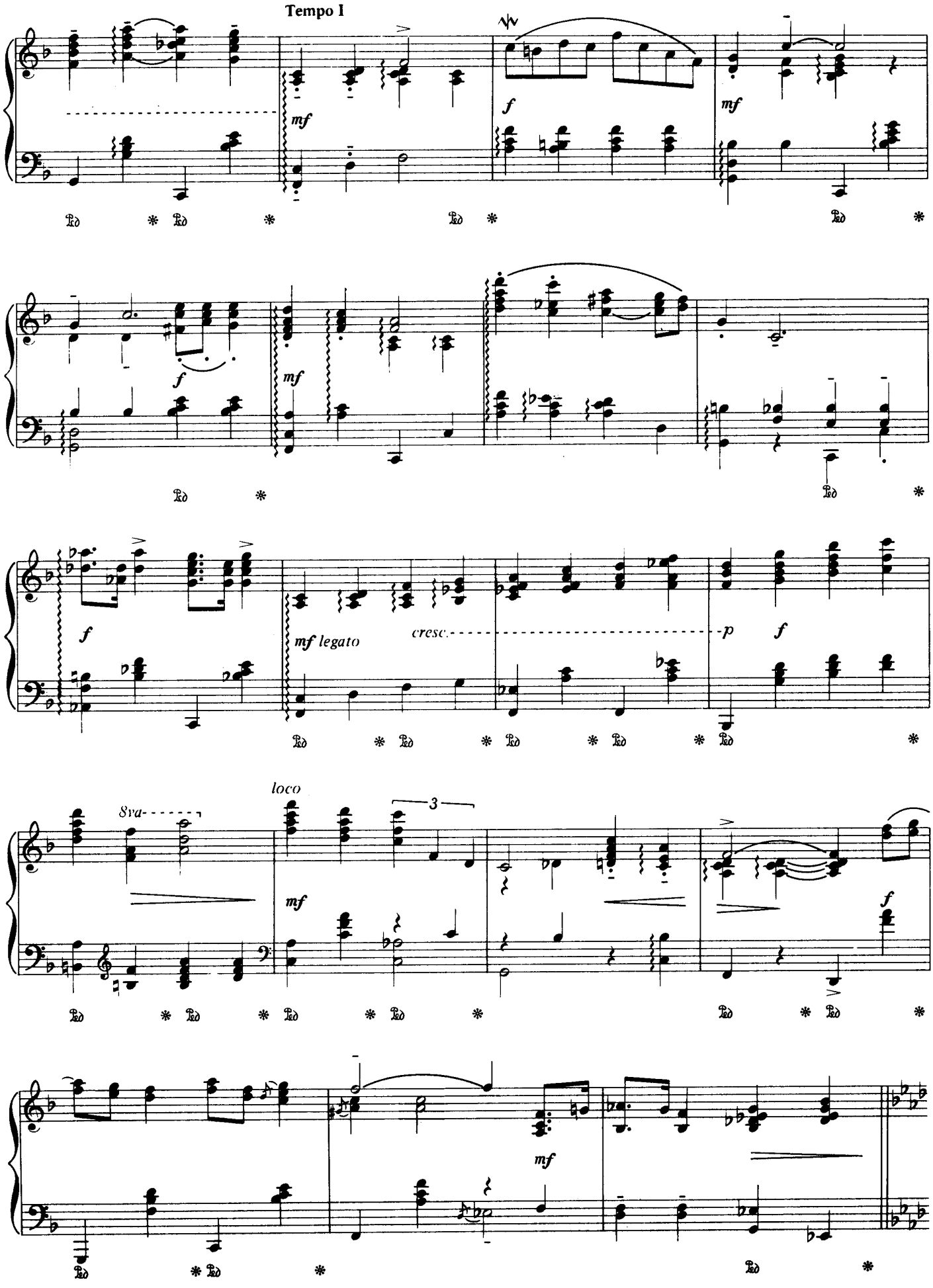
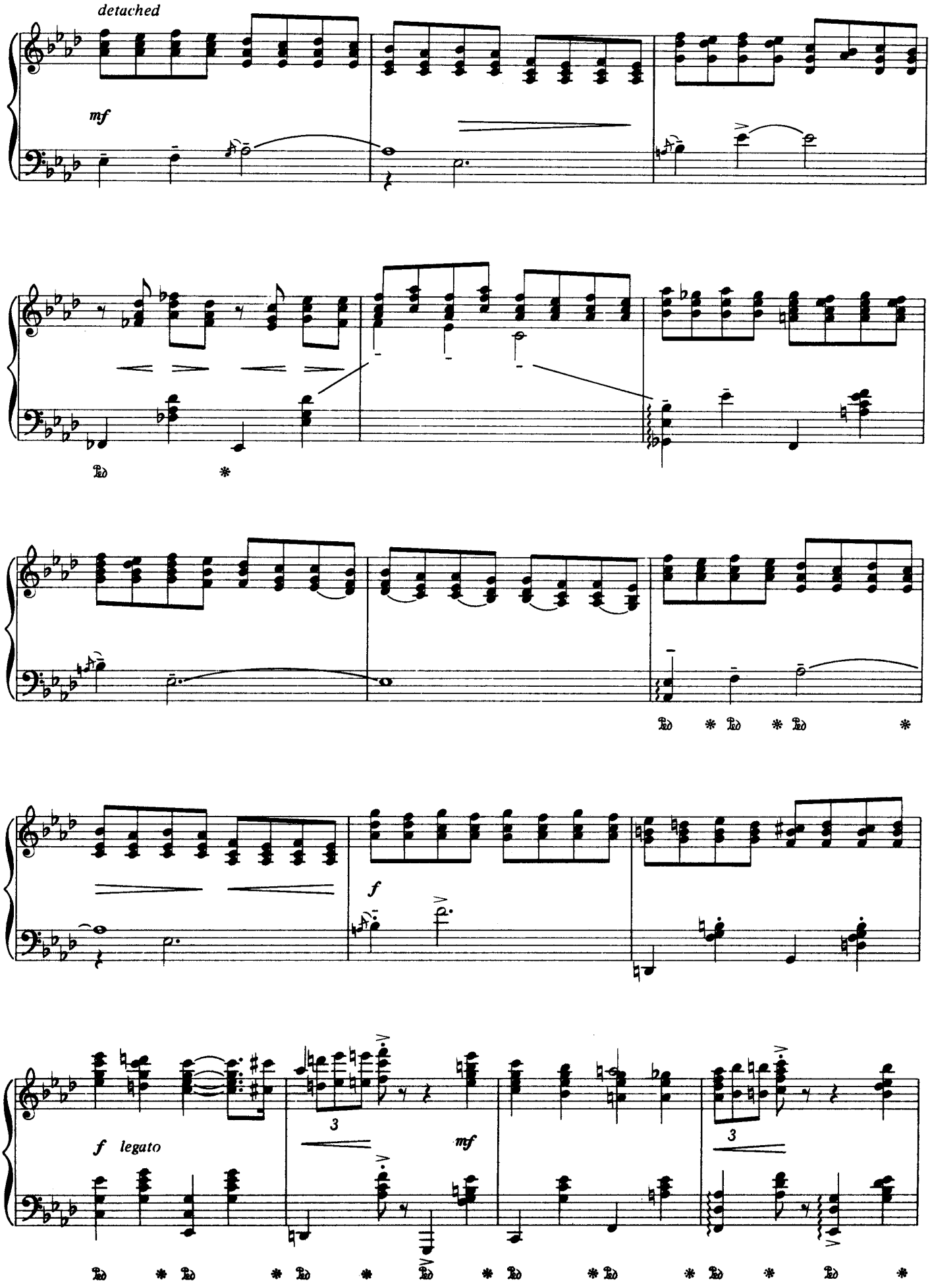
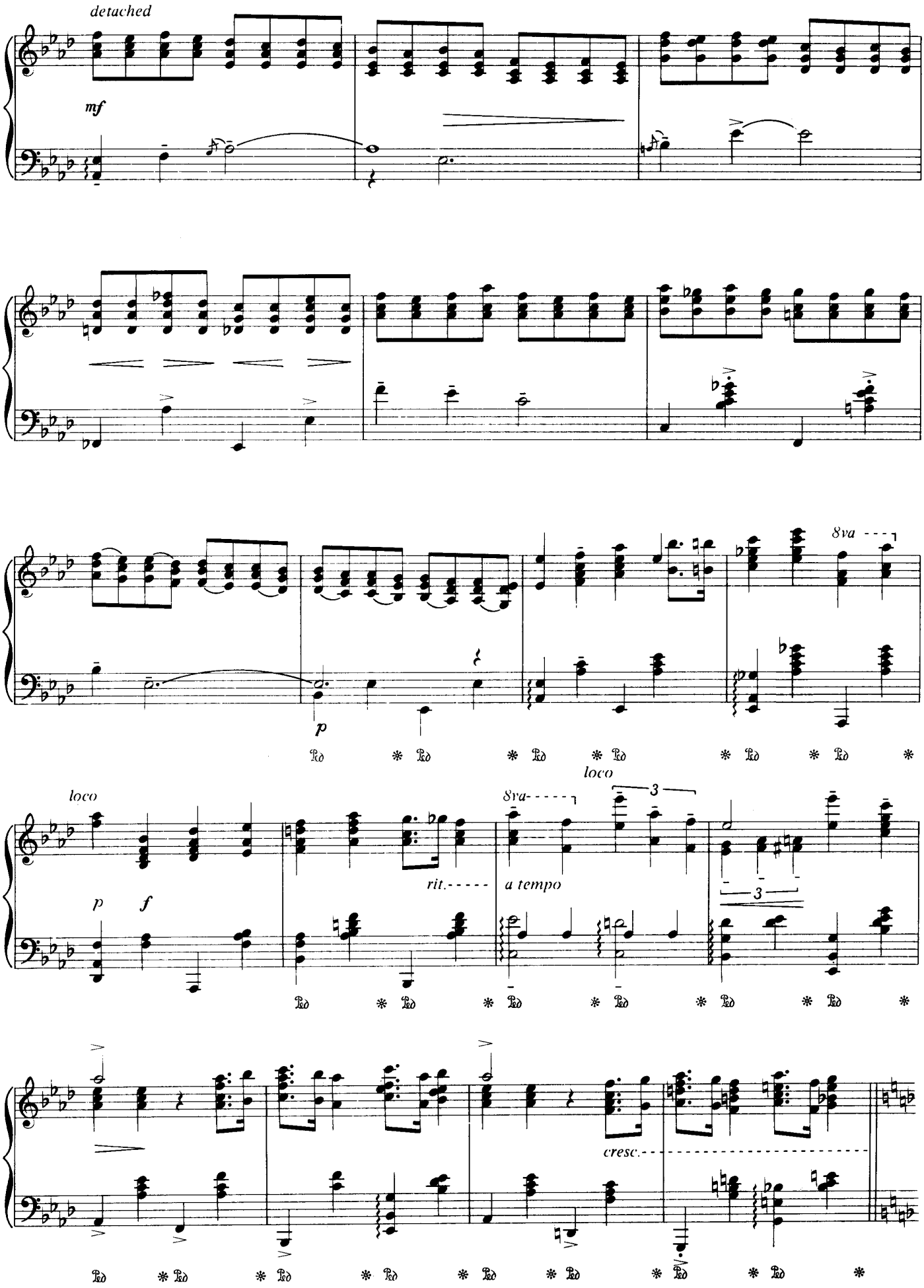
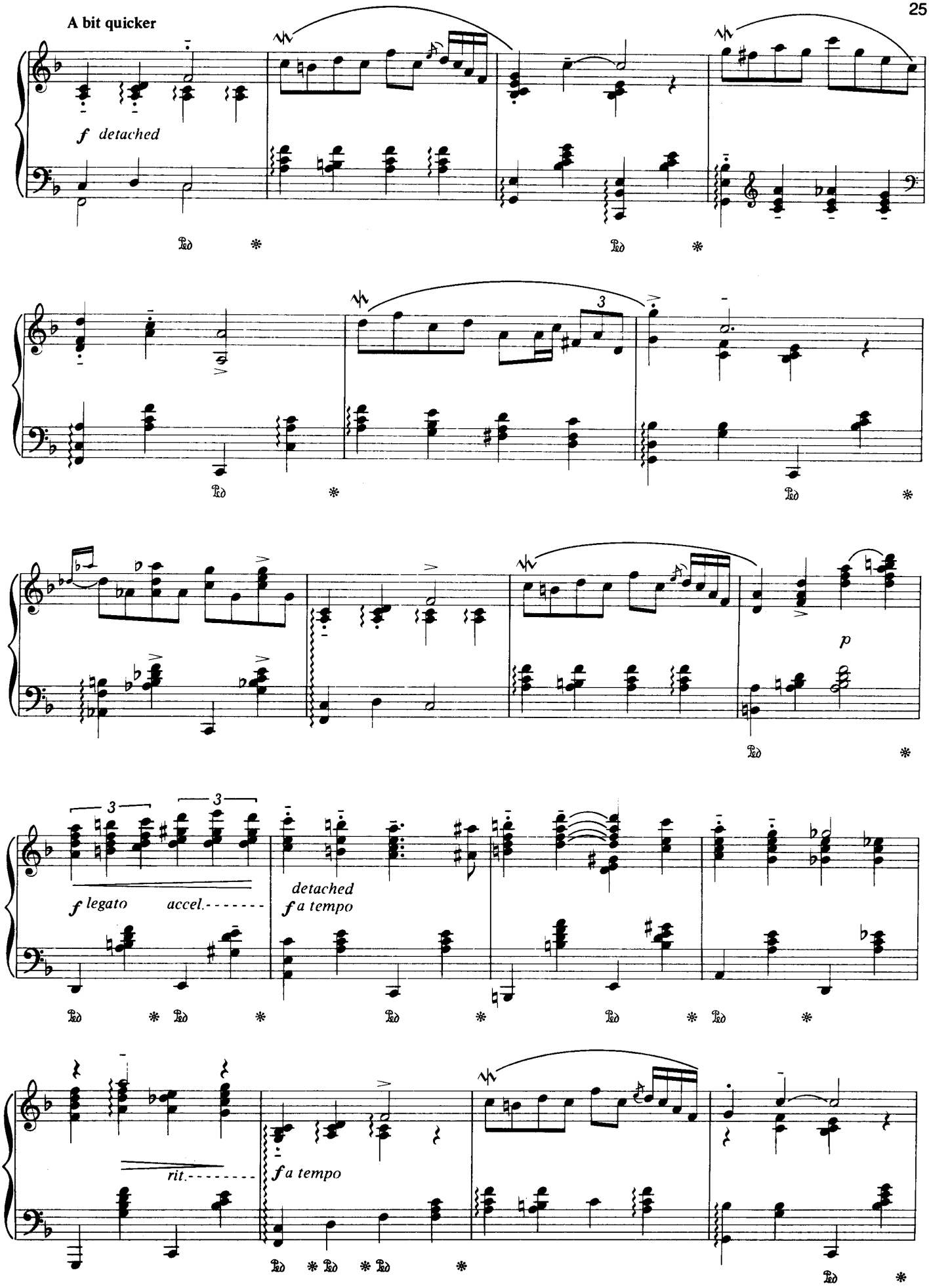
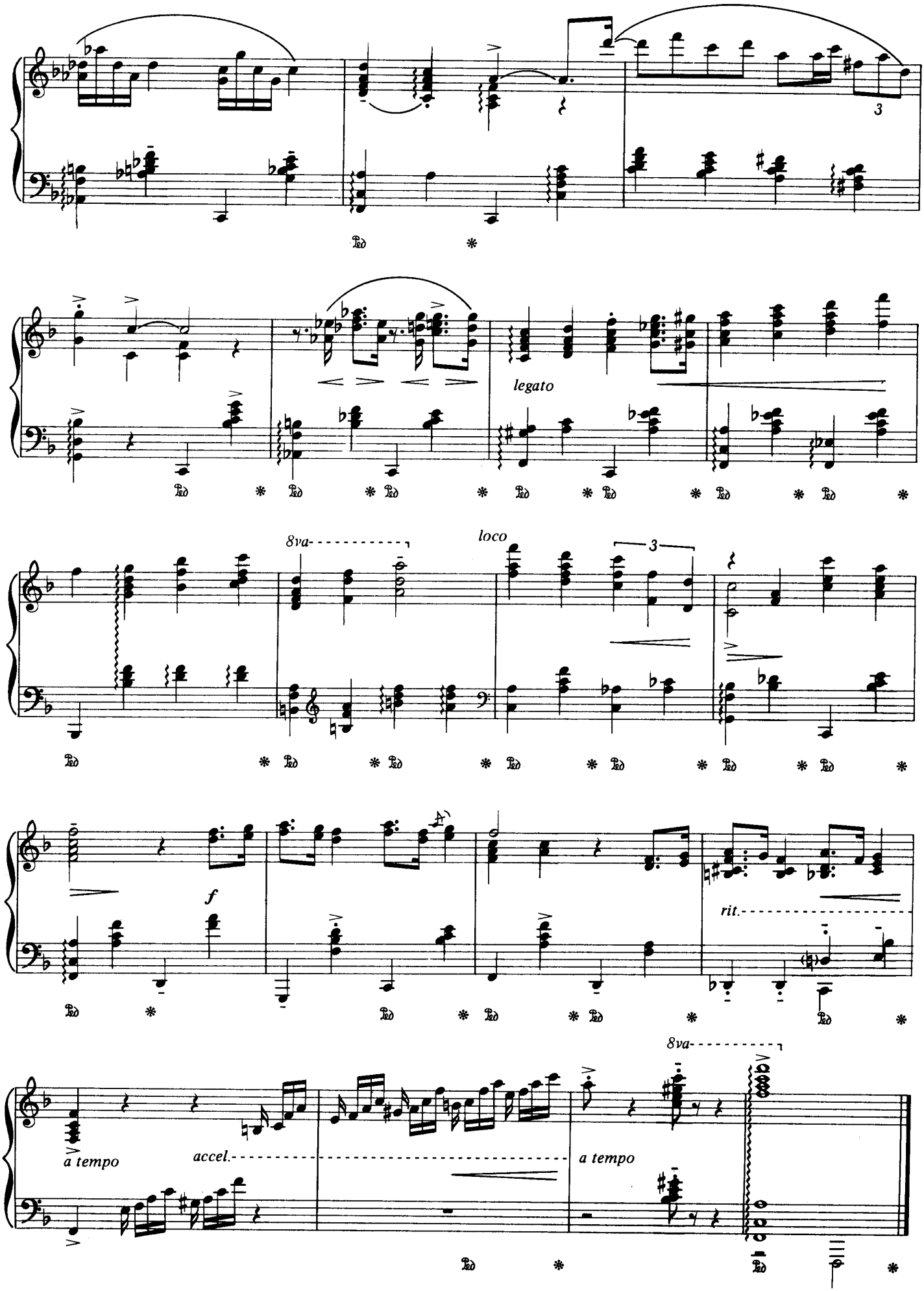

p
mf
rit.
Tempo I
mf
f
mf
f
mf
f
mf
f
f
p
f
f
rit.


Tempo I
mf
f
mf
f
mf
f
mf legato
cresc.
p
f
8va
loco
3
mf
f
mf


detached
mf
f
mf
f legato
mf
3
3

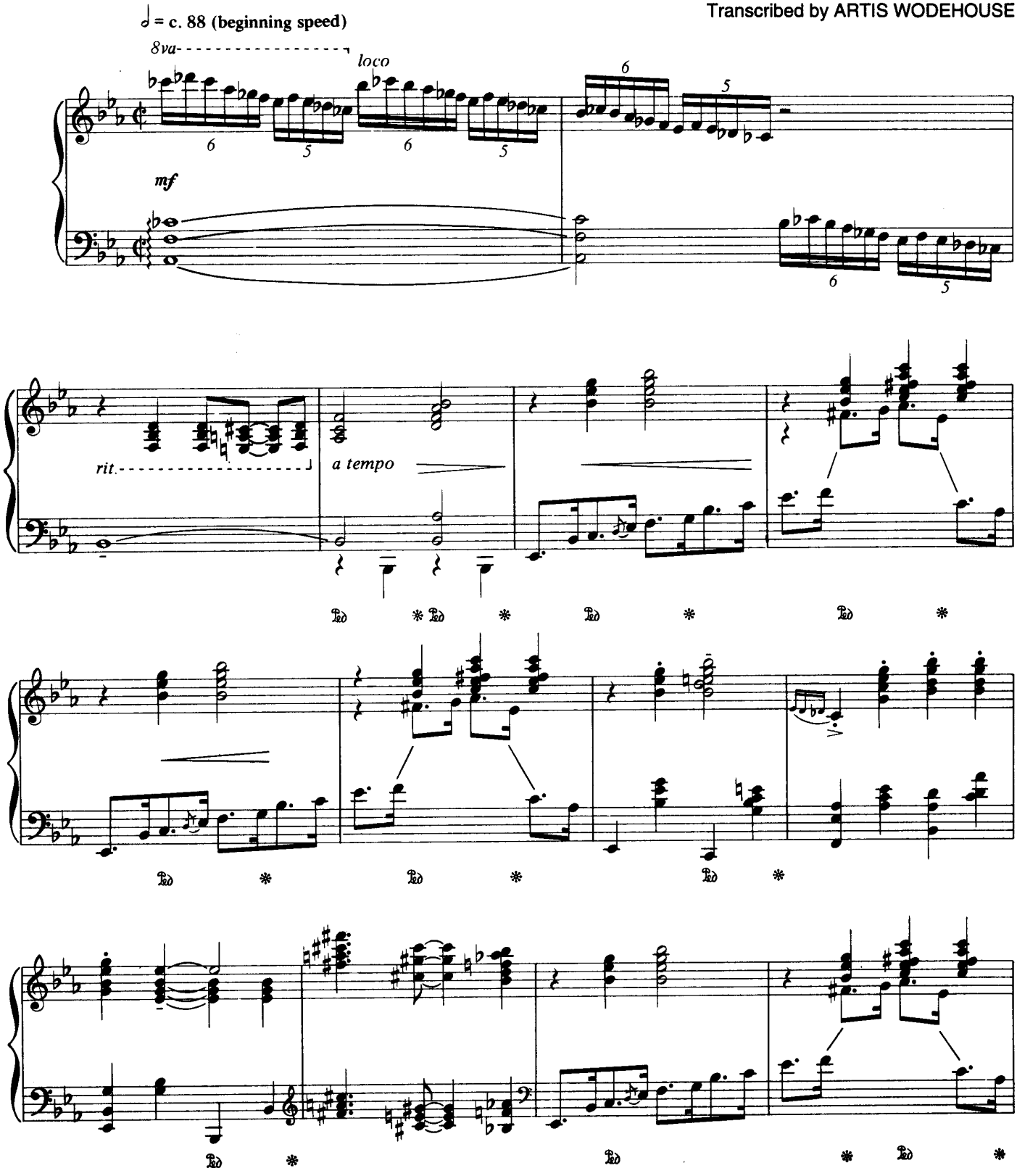

detached
mf
8va
p
loco
p
f
rit.
a tempo
8va
loco
3
3
cresc.


A bit quicker
f detached
3
p
3
3
f legato
accel.
detached
f a tempo
rit.
f a tempo


3
legato
8va
loco
3
f
rit.
a tempo
accel.
a tempo
8va

MY ONE AND ONLY
(What Am I Gonna Do)

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



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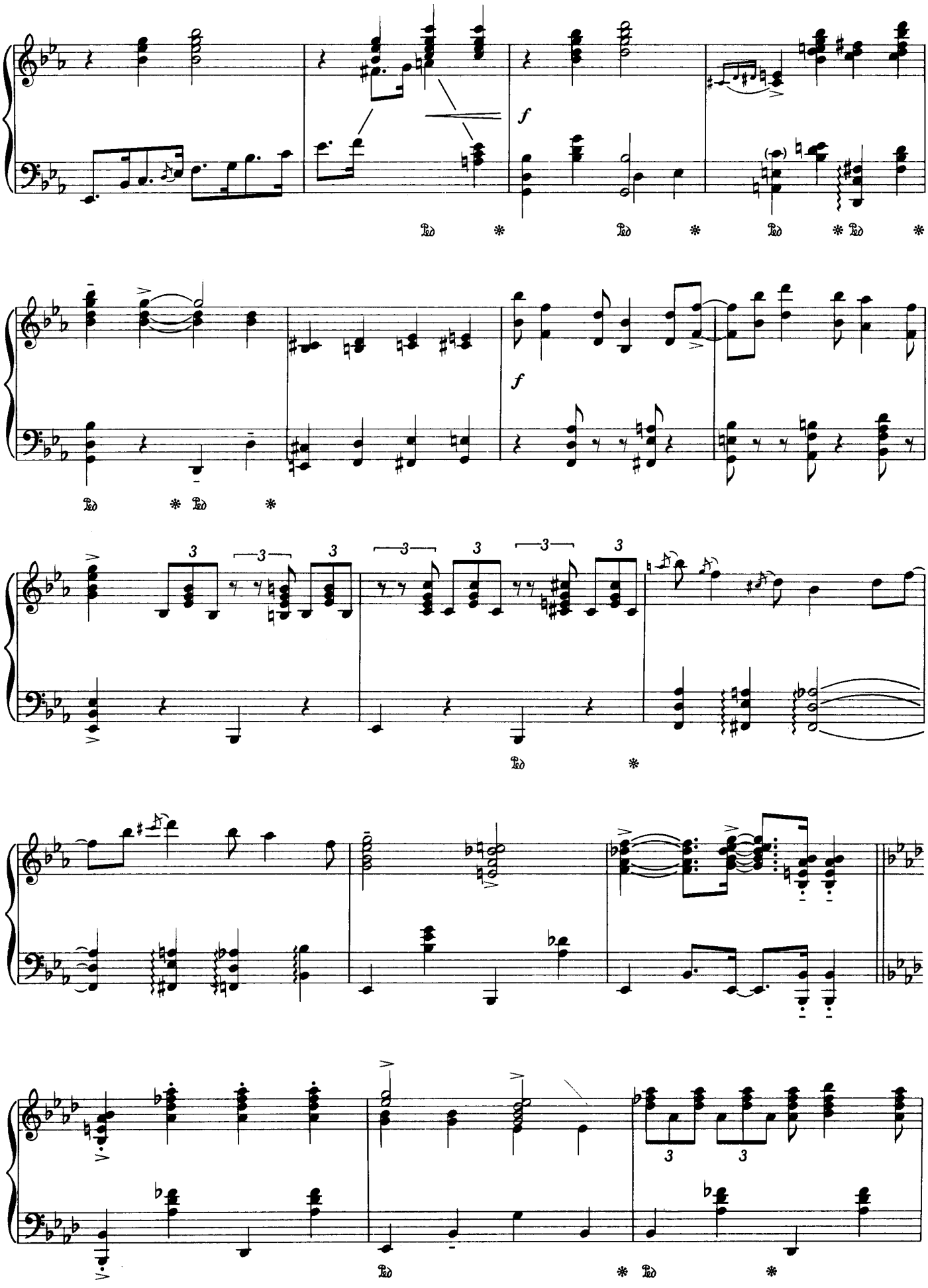
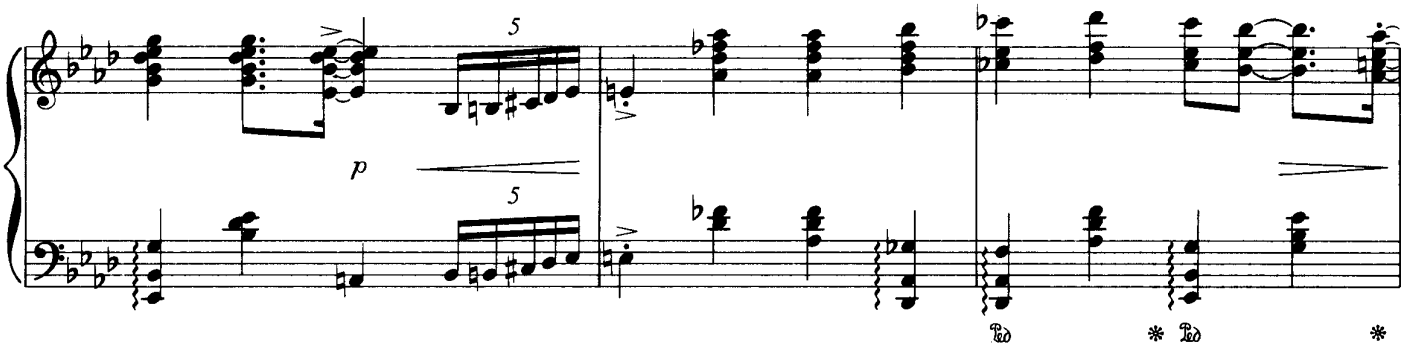
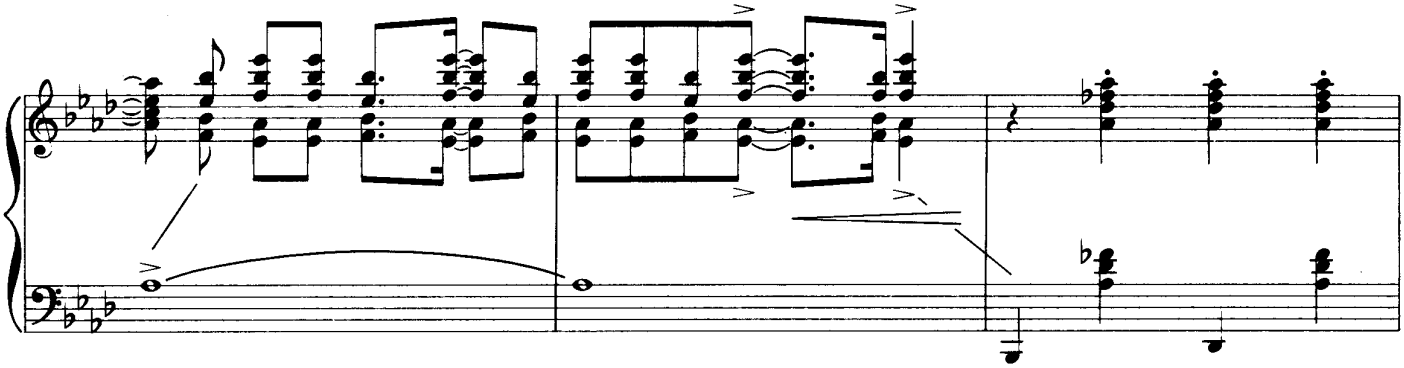
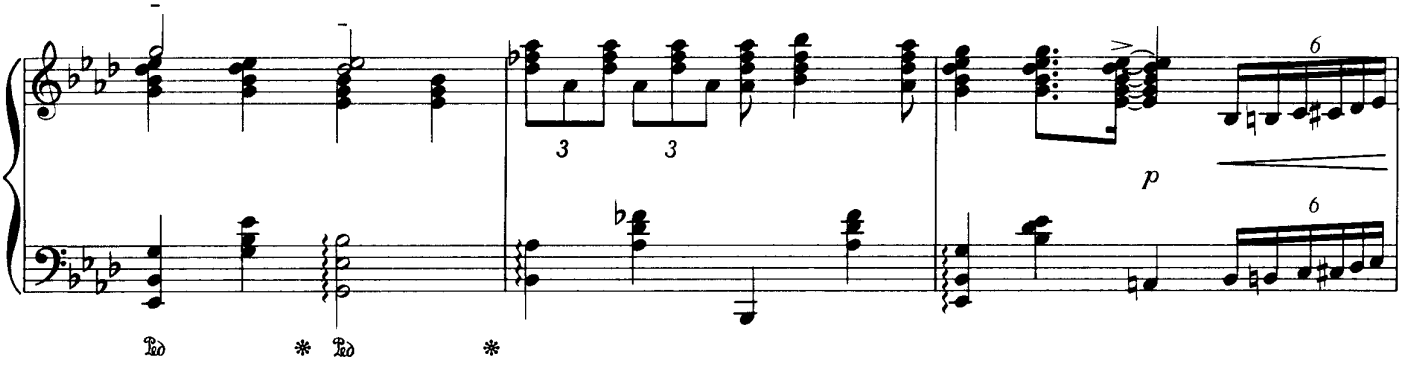
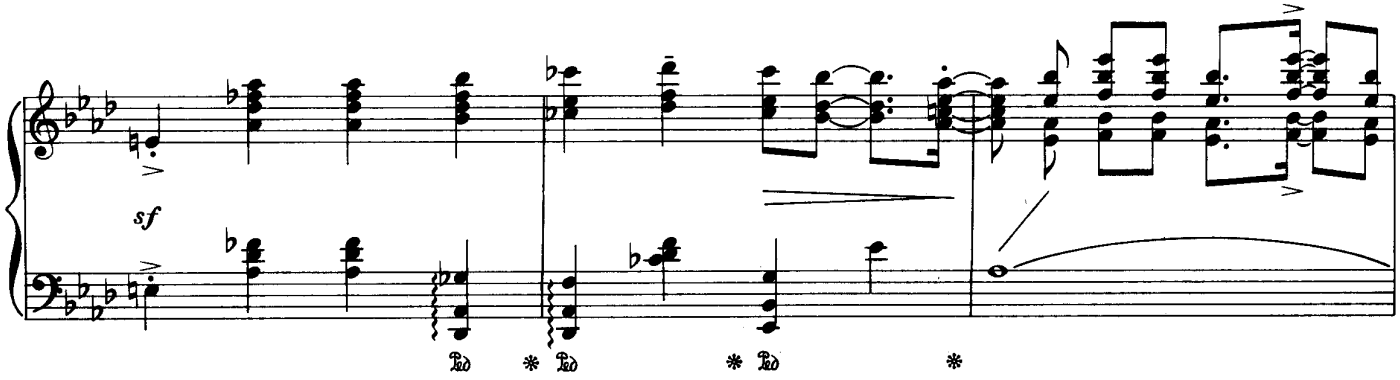
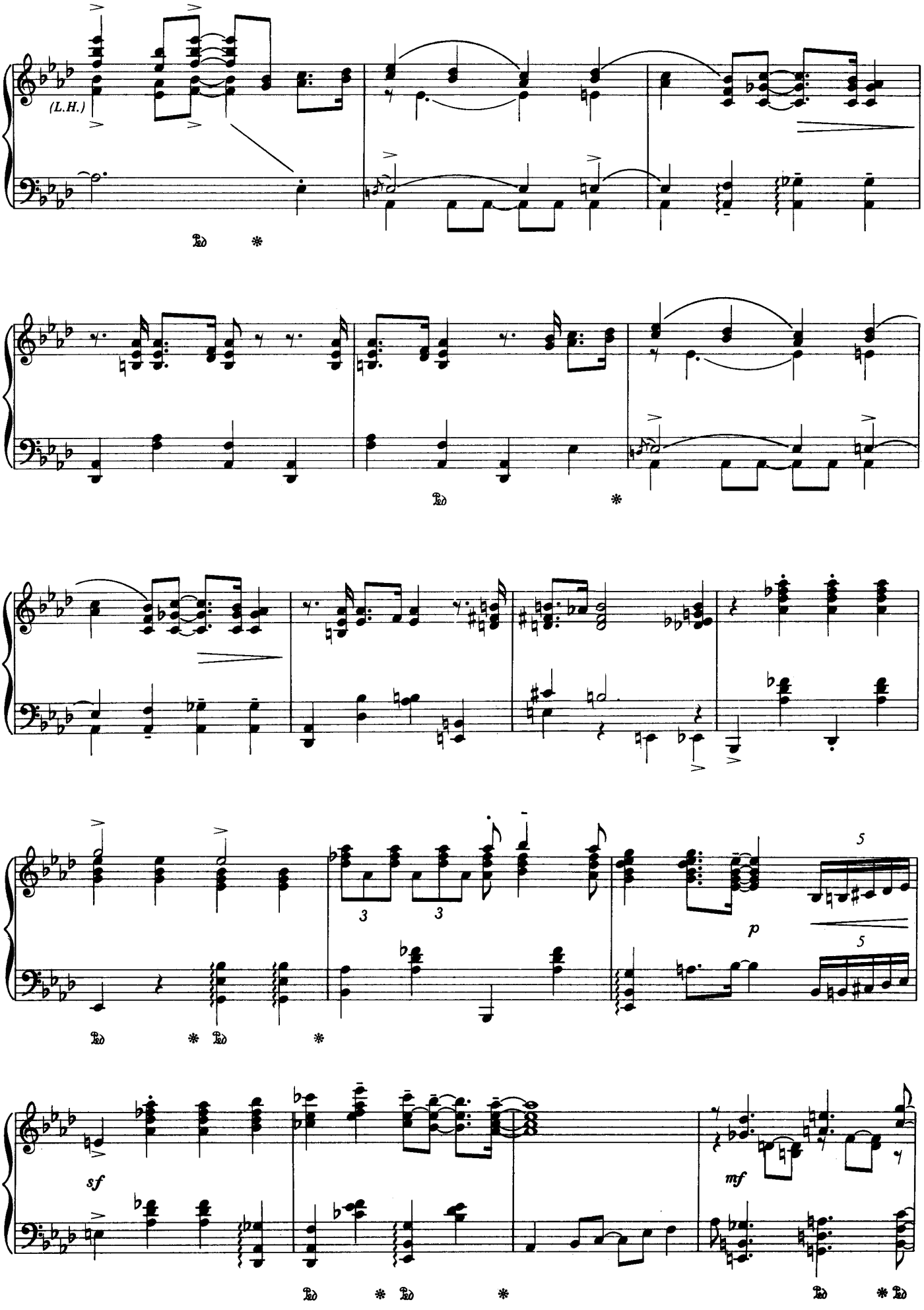

f
f
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3

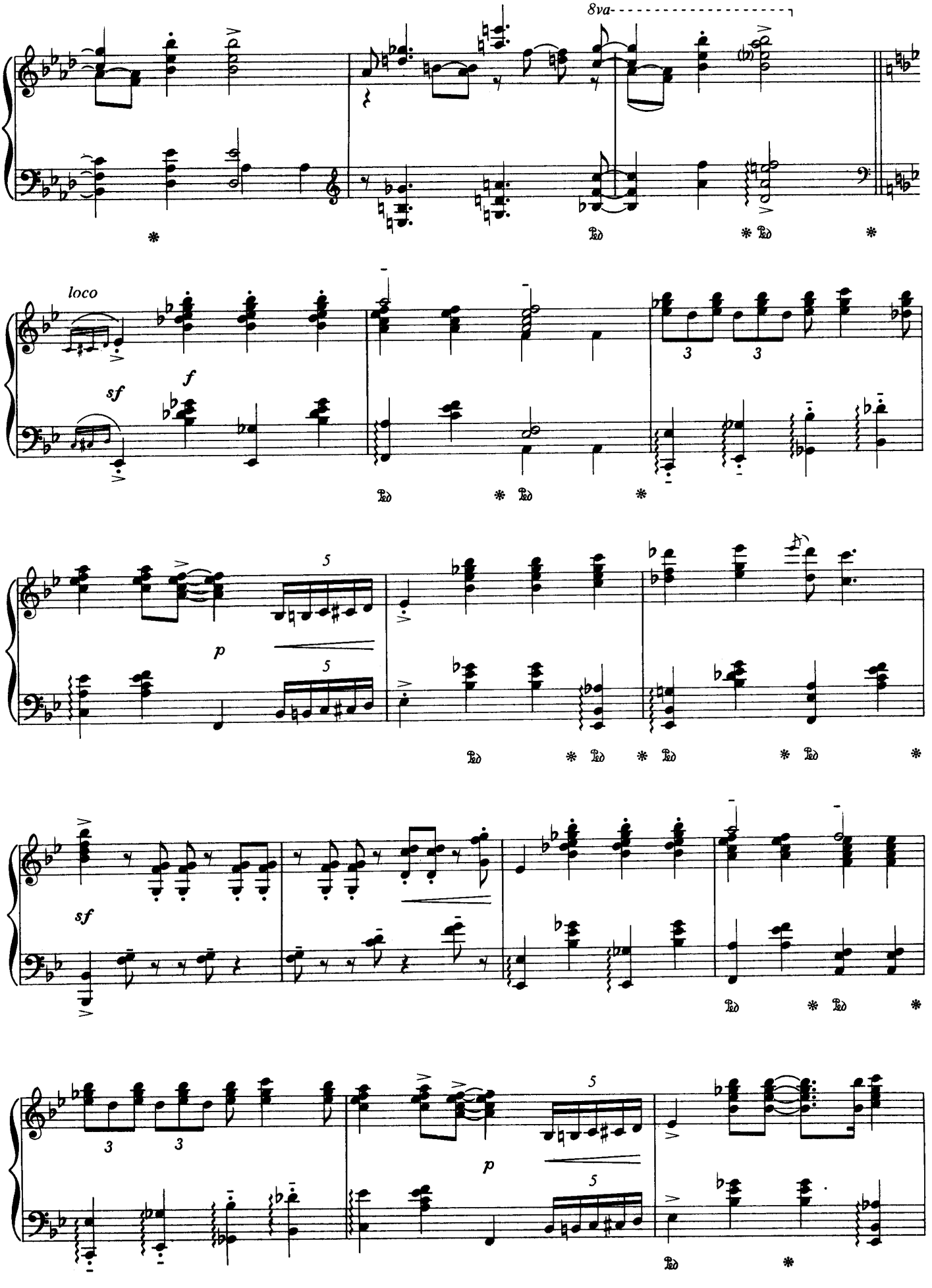

5
p
5
Ped
* Ped
*




3
3
6
p
6
Ped
* Ped
*


sf
Ped
* Ped
* Ped
*


(L.H.)
Ped
*
3
3
5
p
5
sf
mf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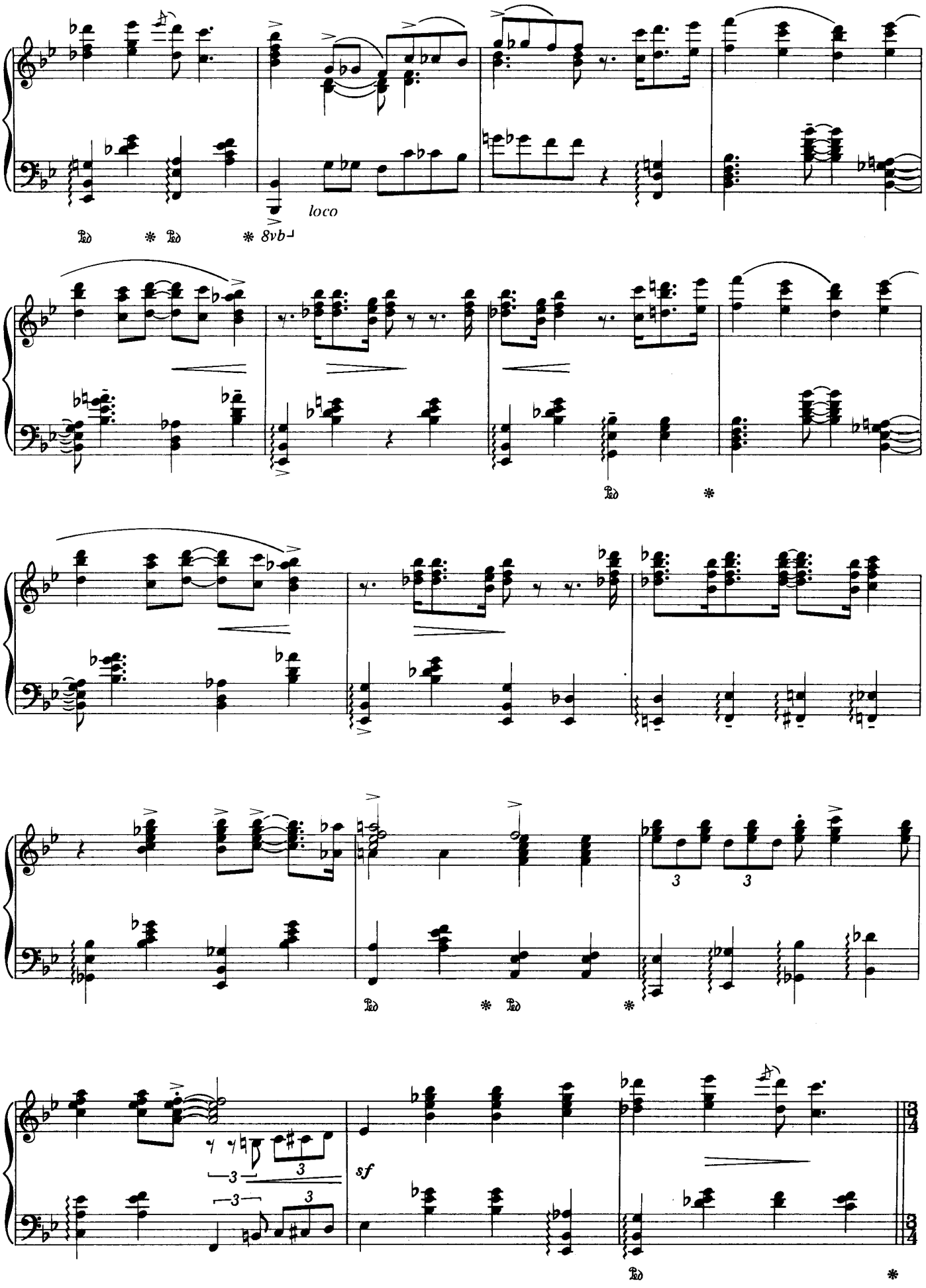
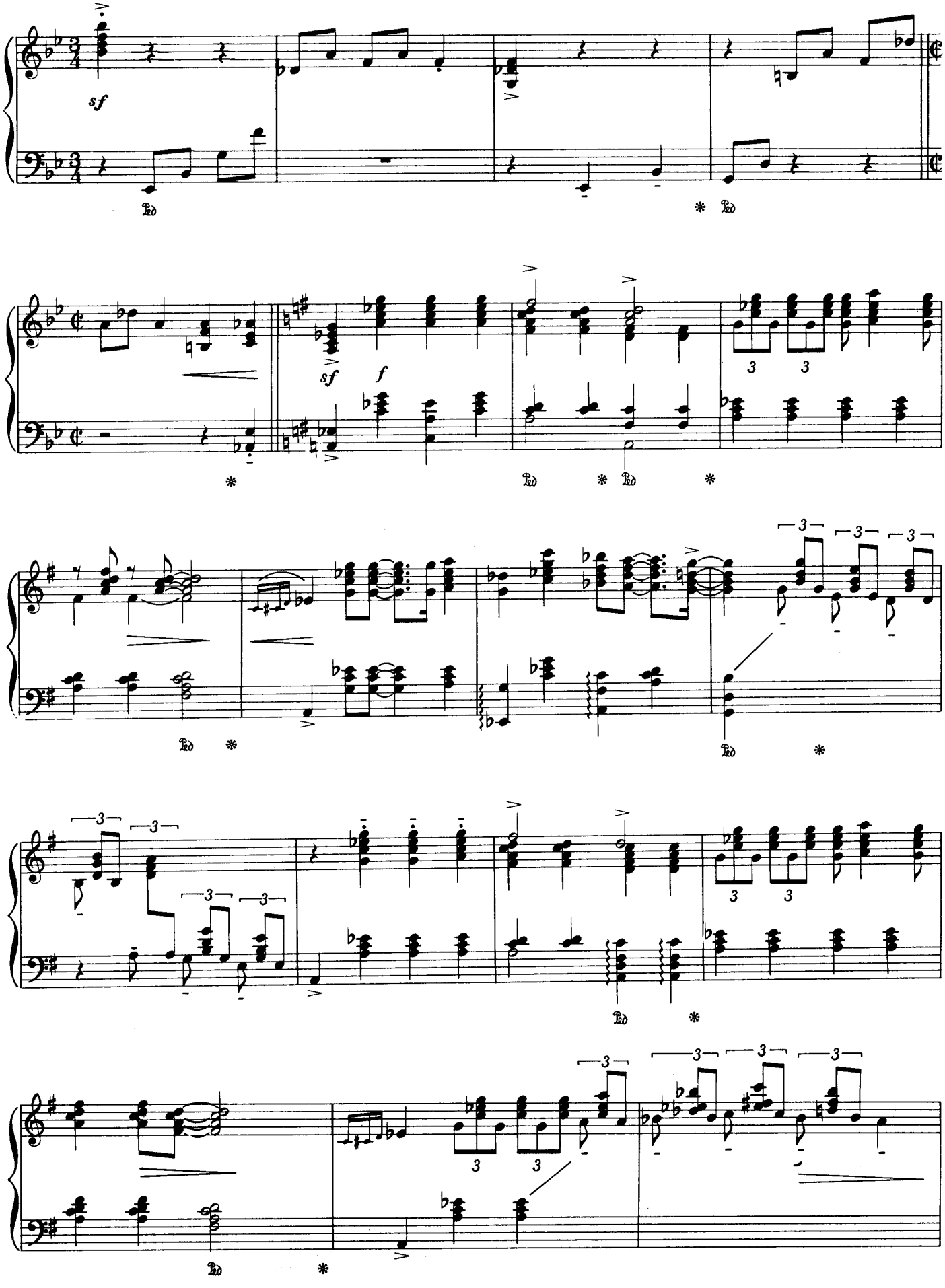
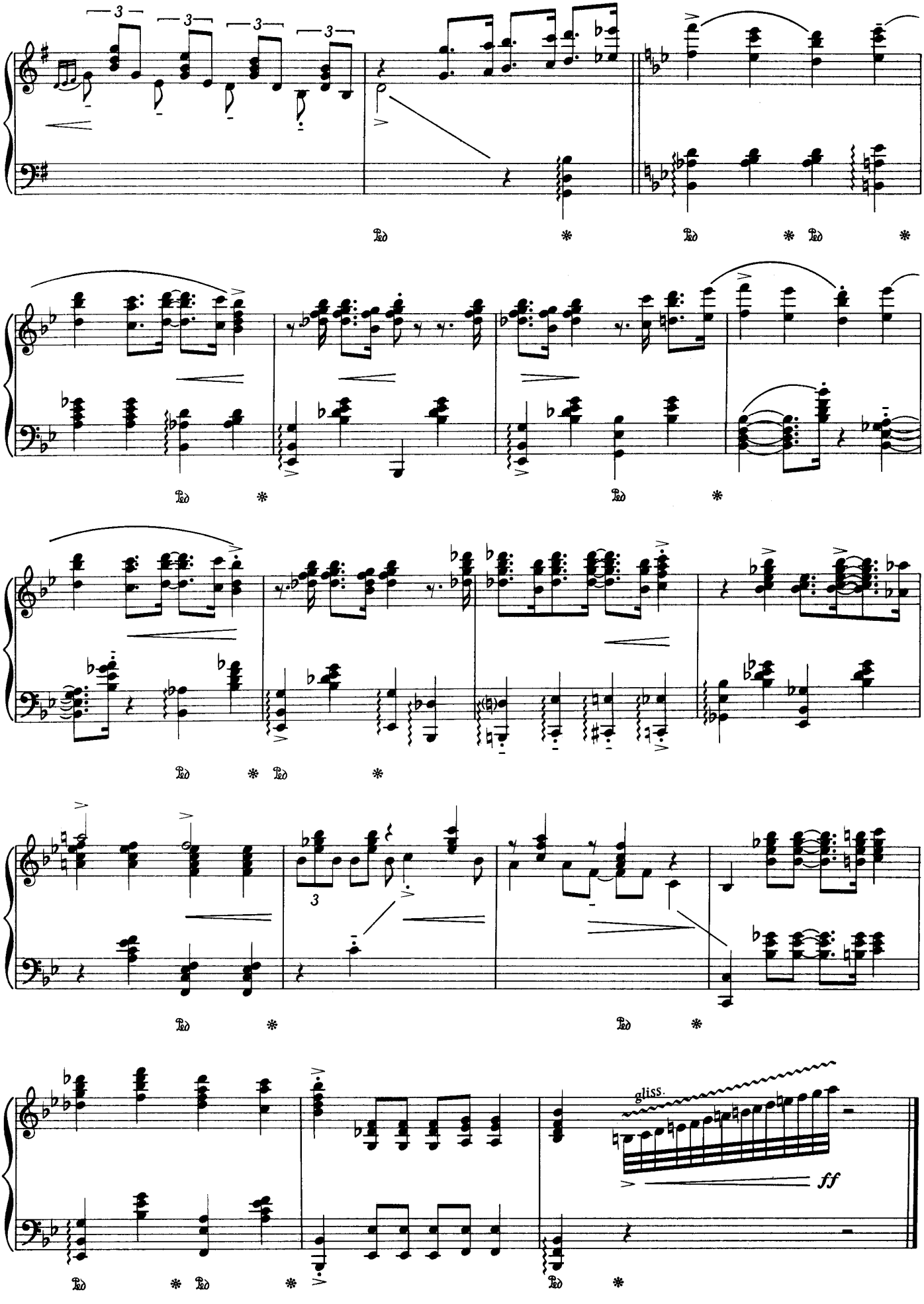
loco
sf
f
p
sf
p

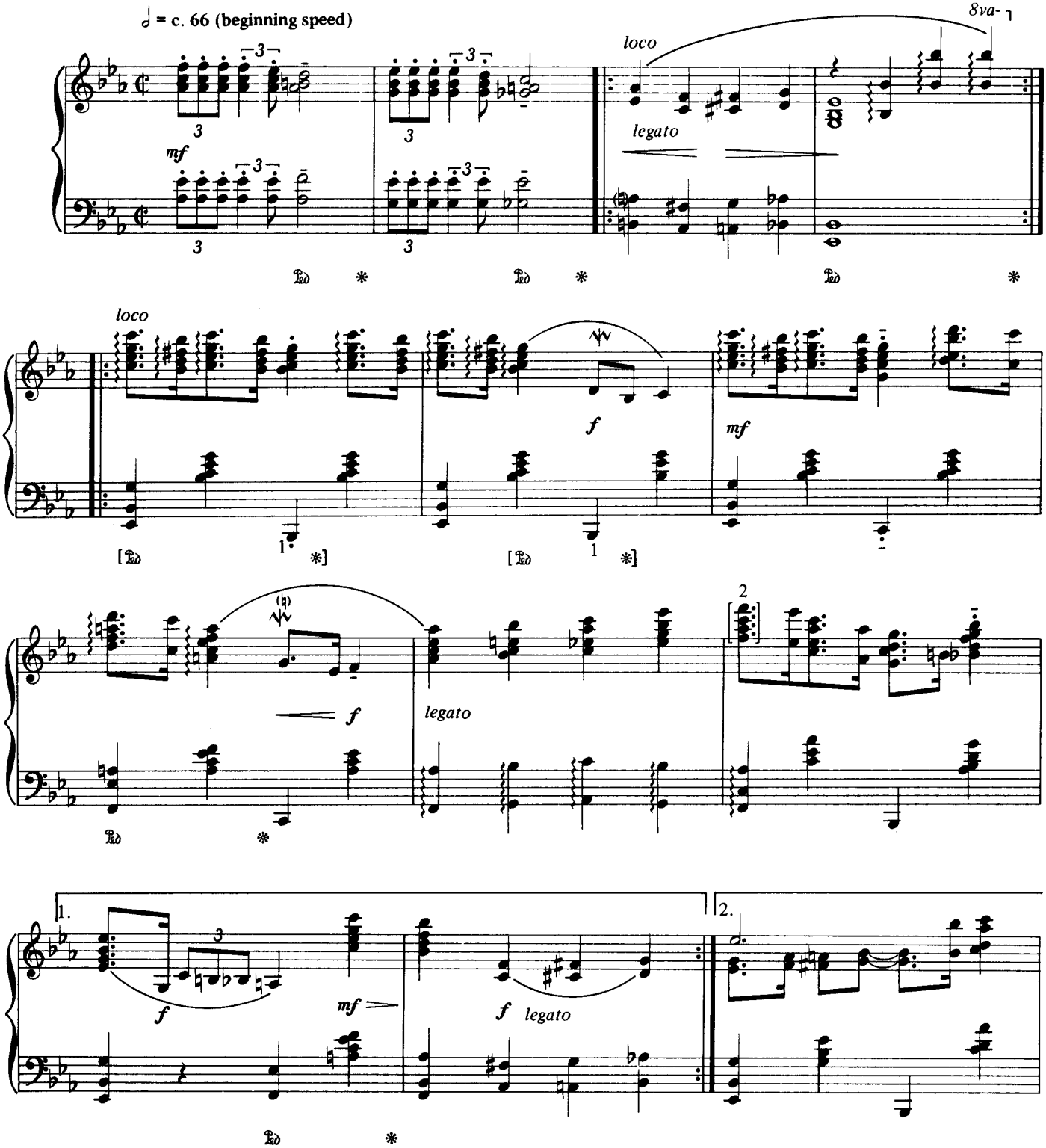

loco
8vb
Ped
*
sf
3


sf
sf
f
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3
3


gliss.
ff

SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



1. This pedalling used 1st time only.

2. On repeat, play

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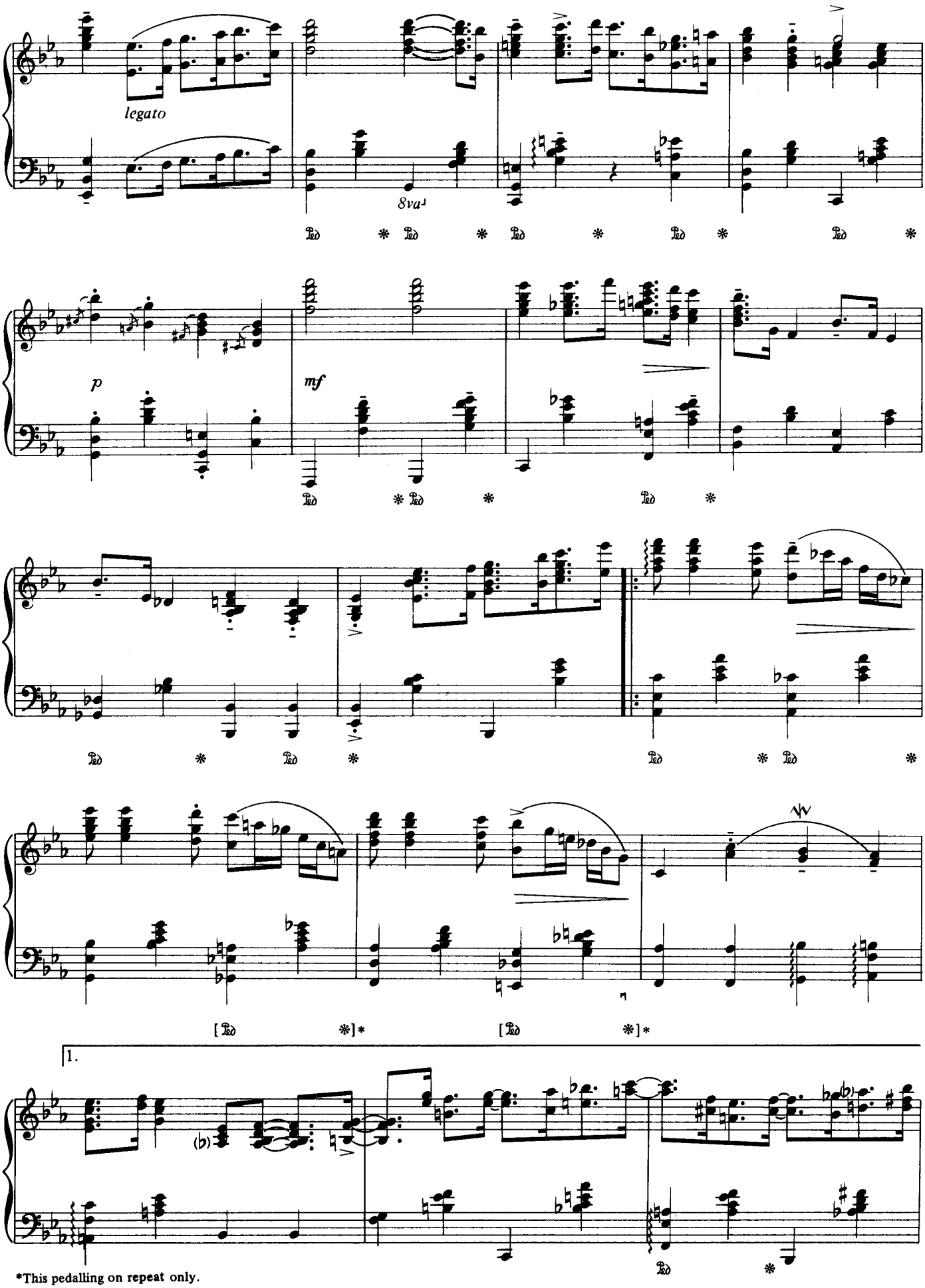
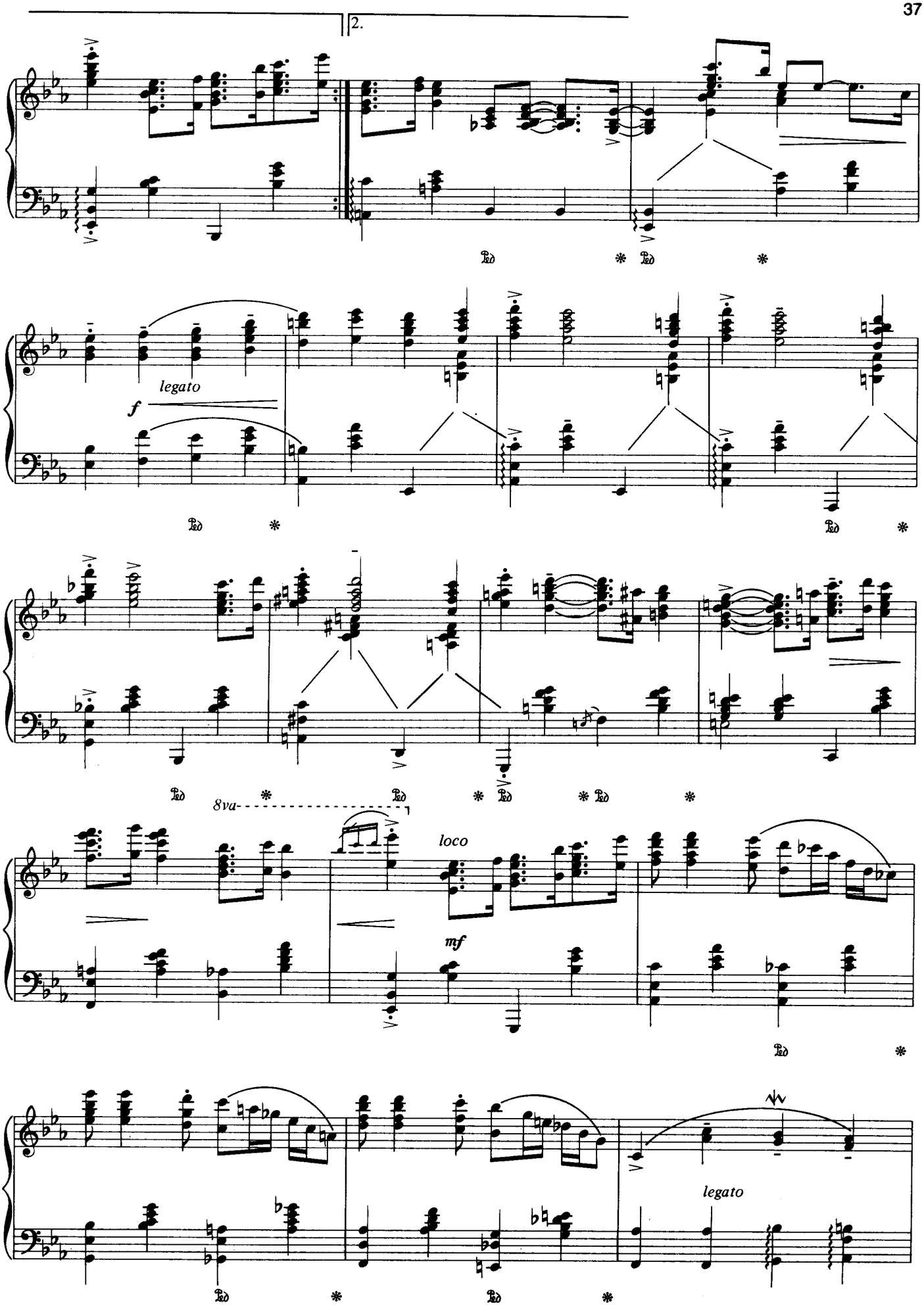
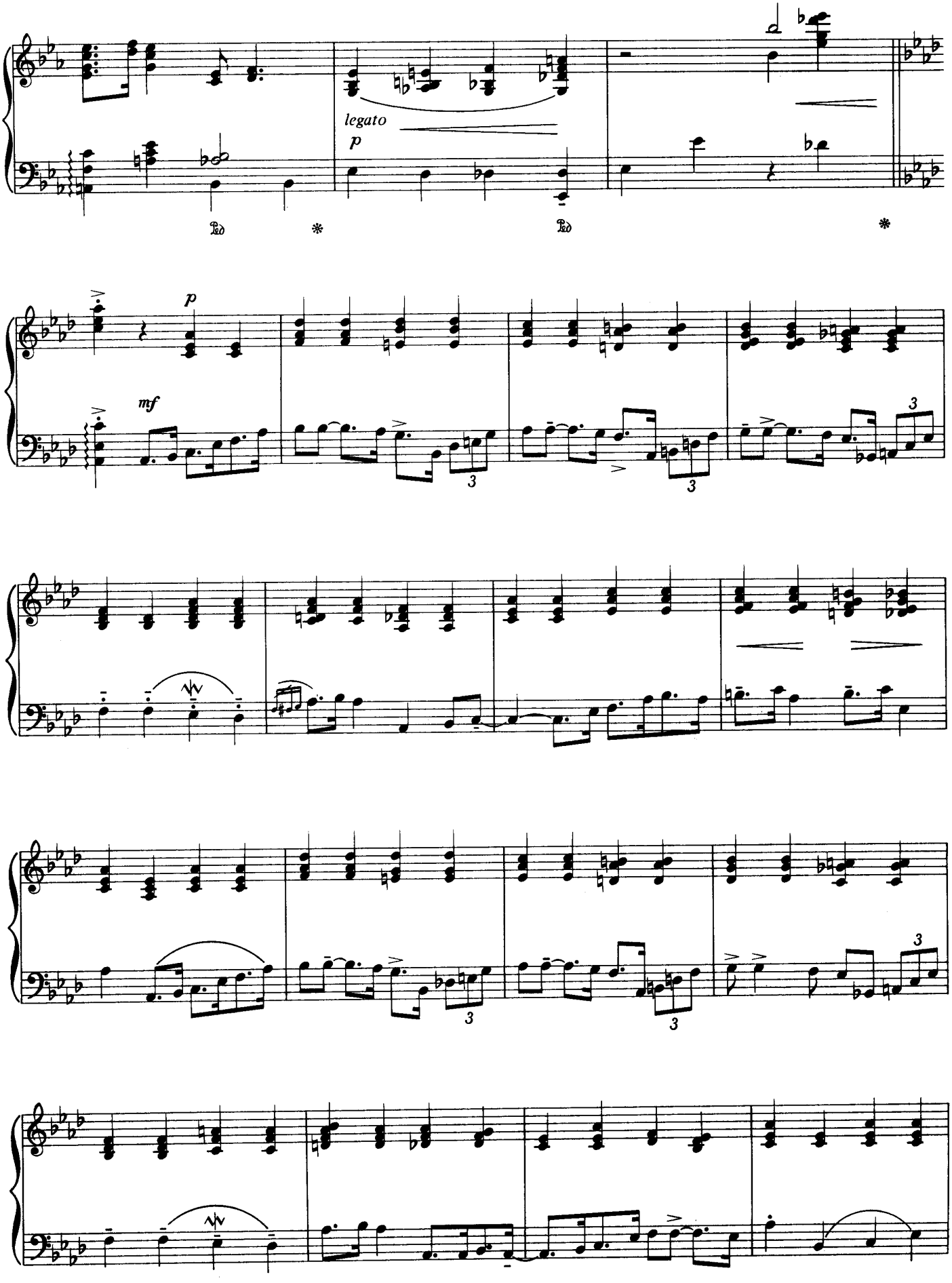
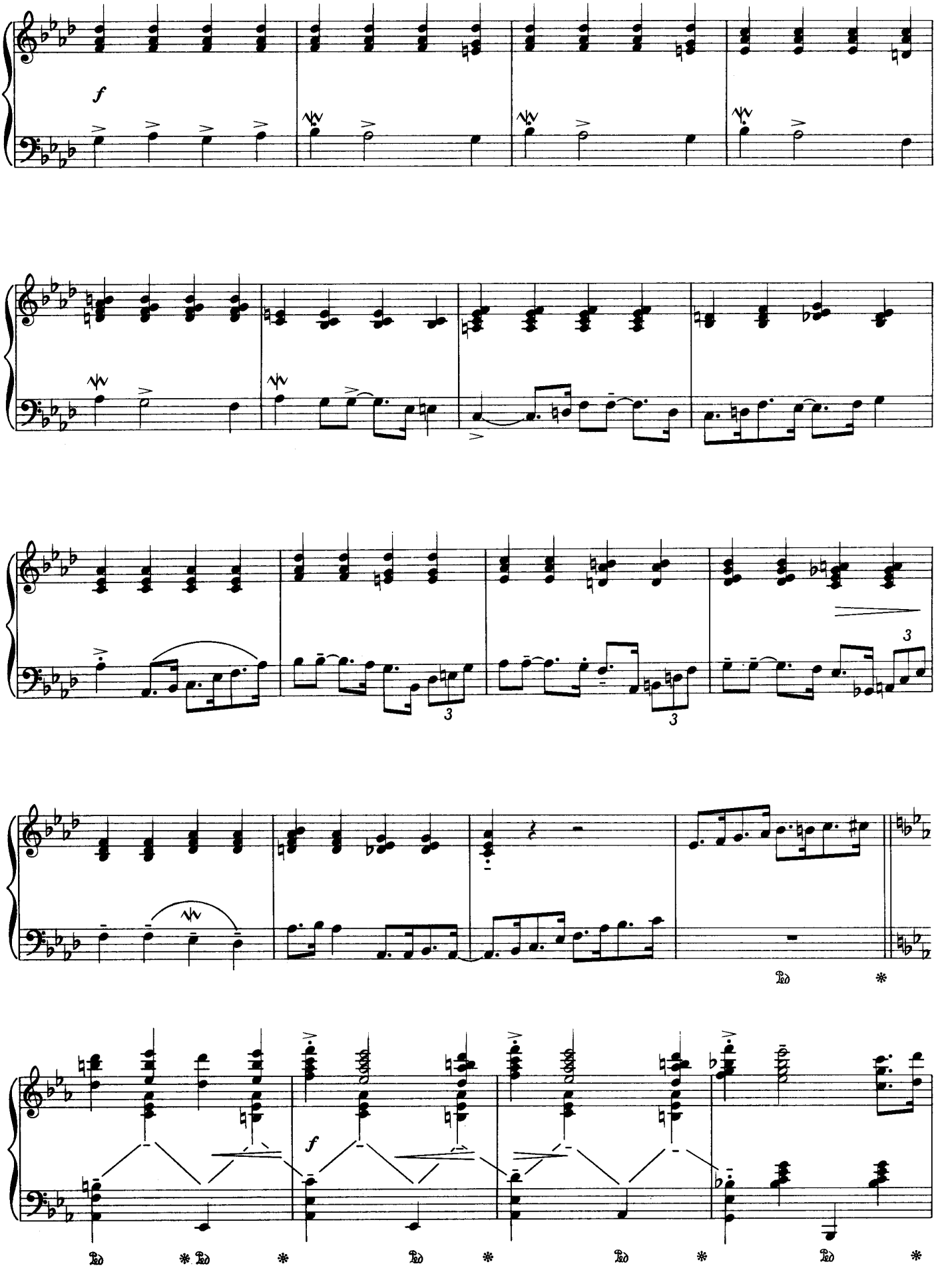
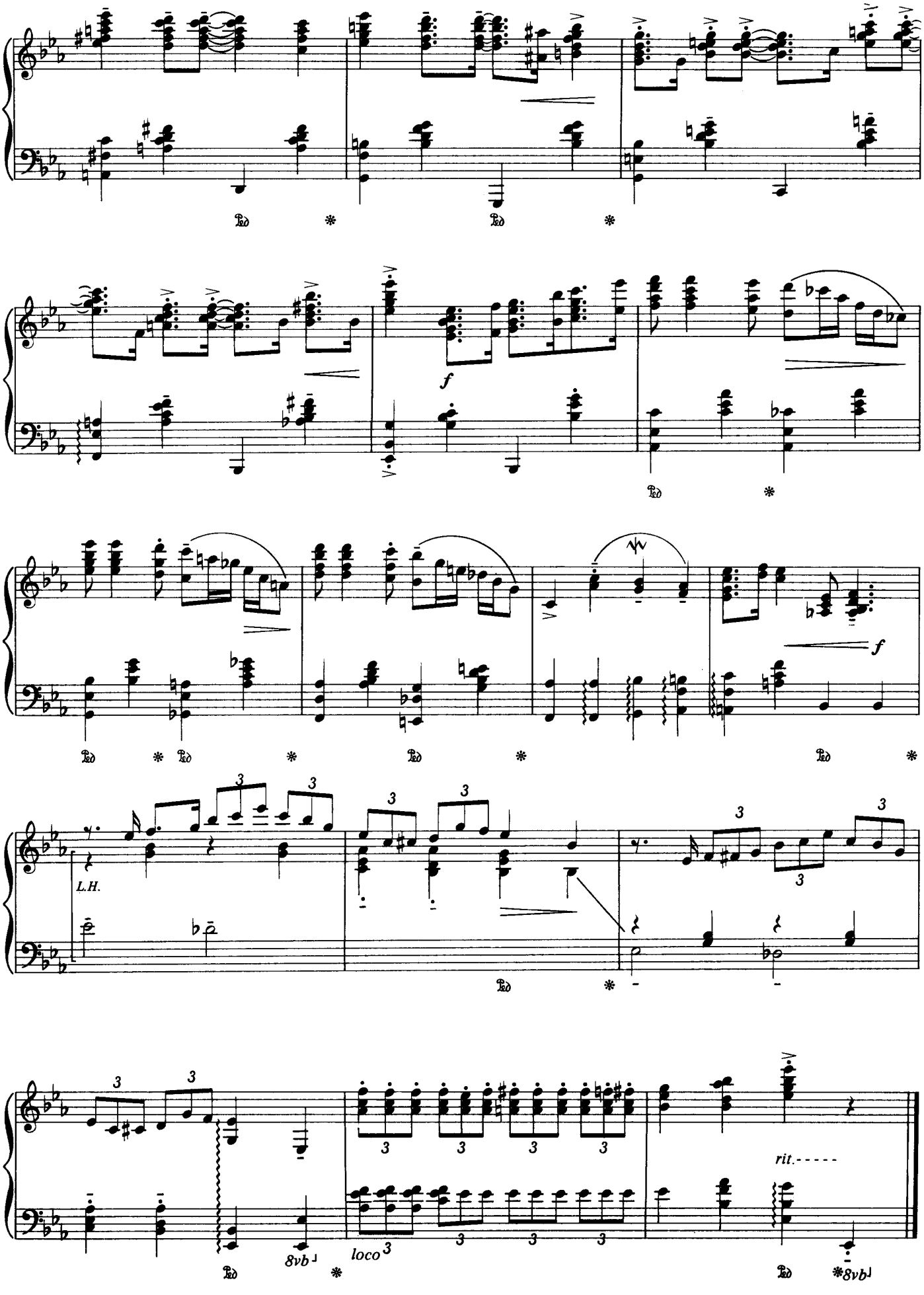


*This pedalling on repeat only.


2.
legato
f
8va
loco
mf
legato

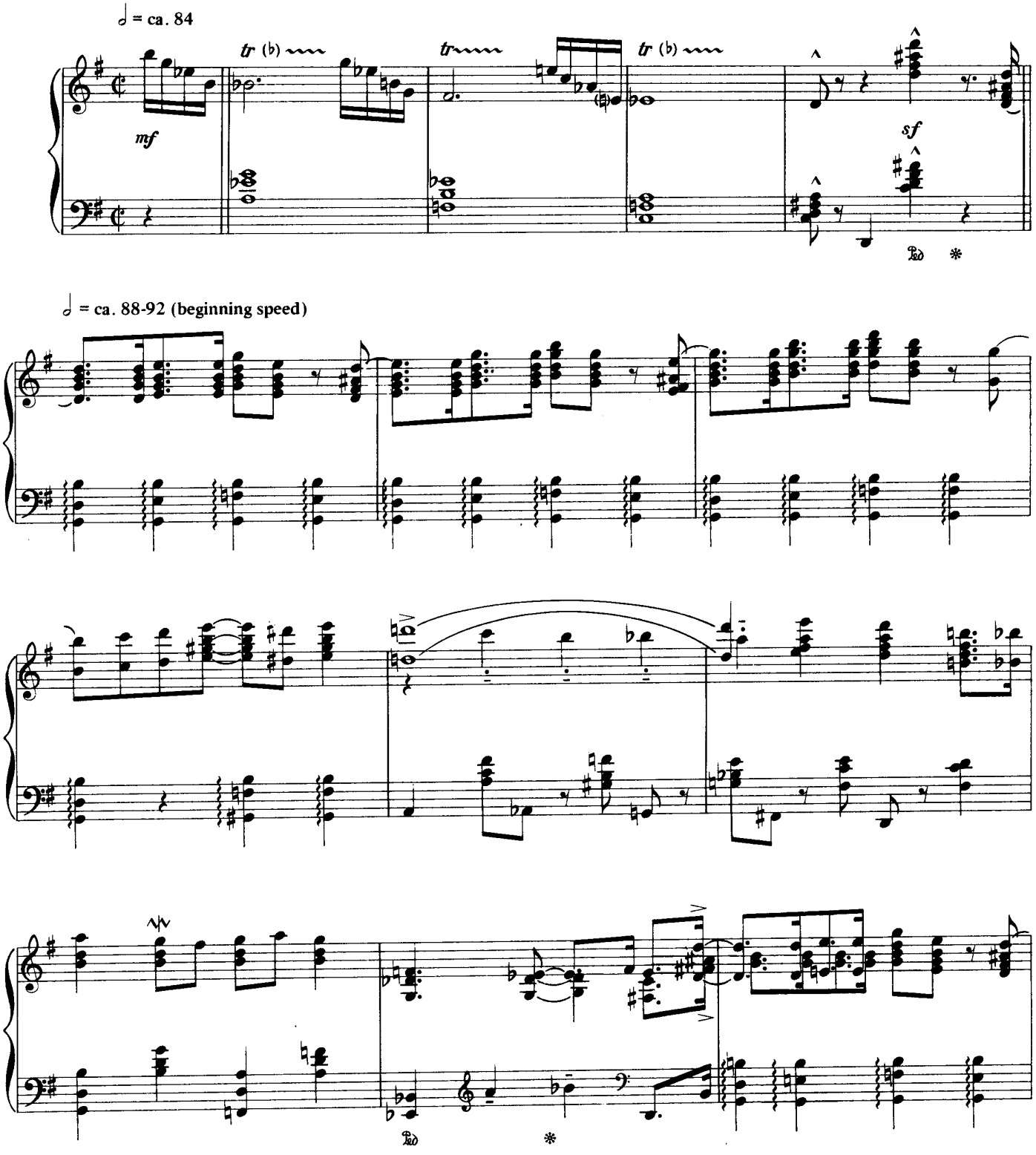

legato
p
Ped
*
Ped
*
p
mf
3
3
3
3


f
3
3
f
Ped
*


f
L.H.
rit.
8vb
loco
8vb

SWEET AND LOW-DOWN

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



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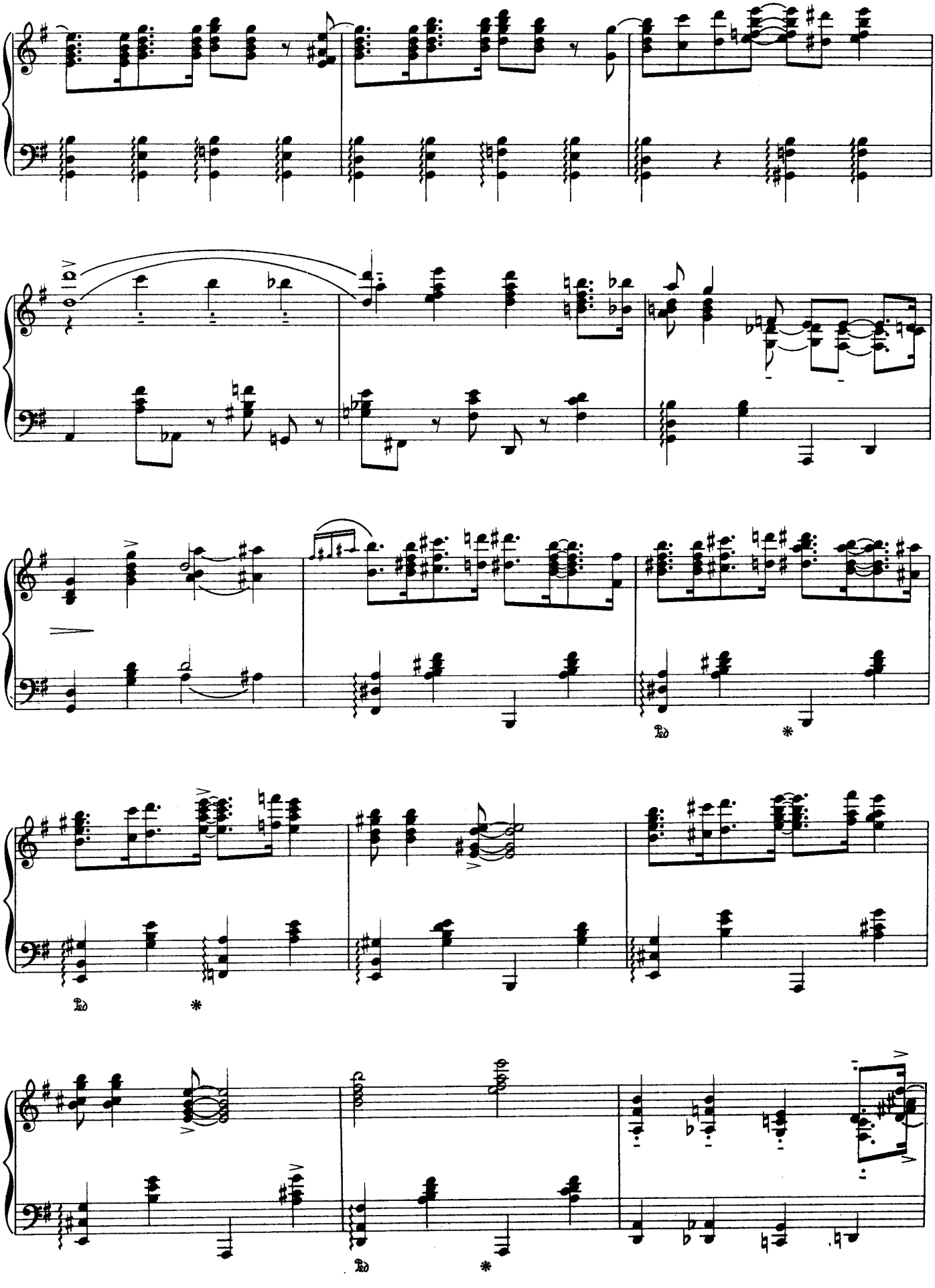
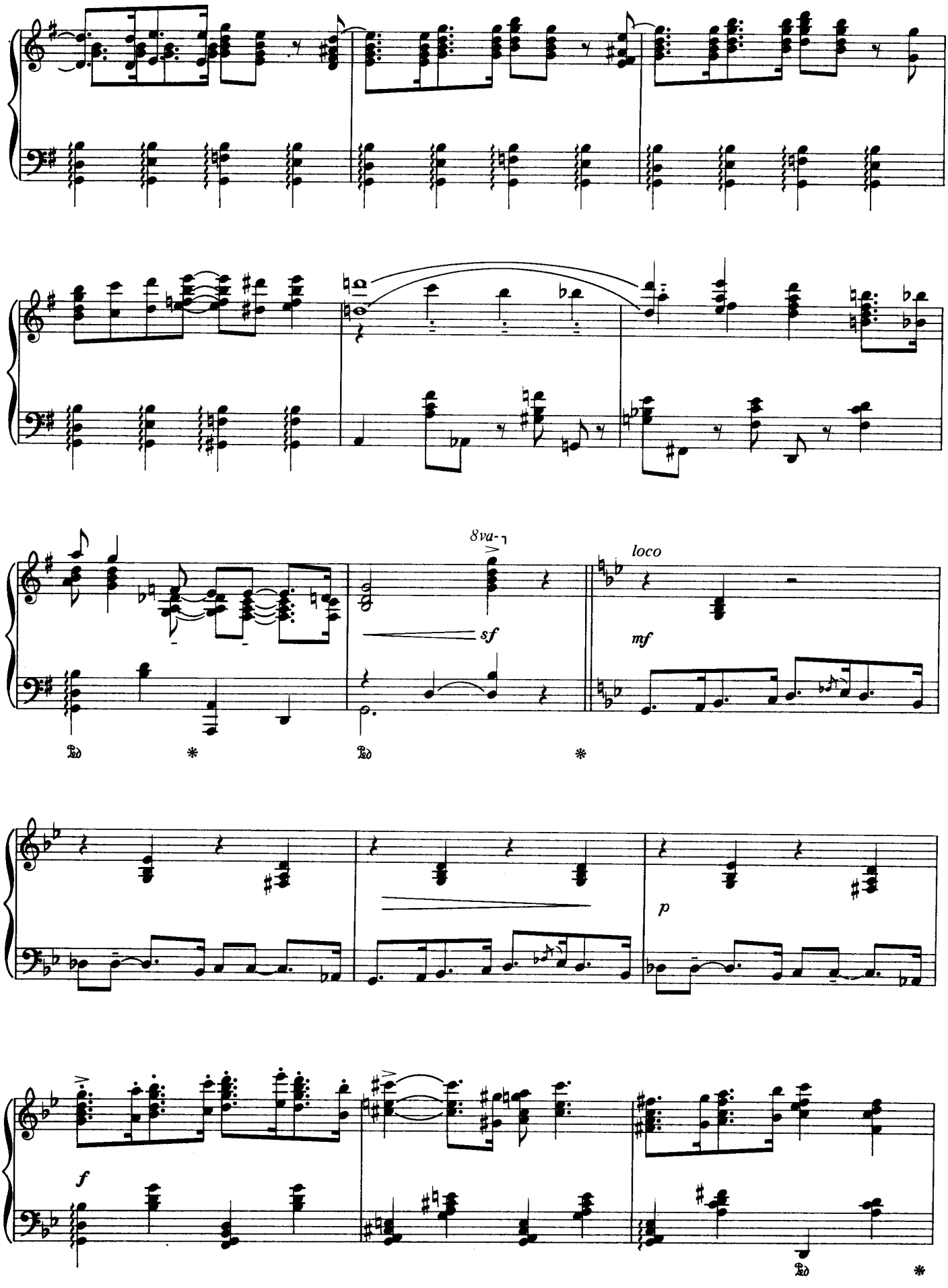
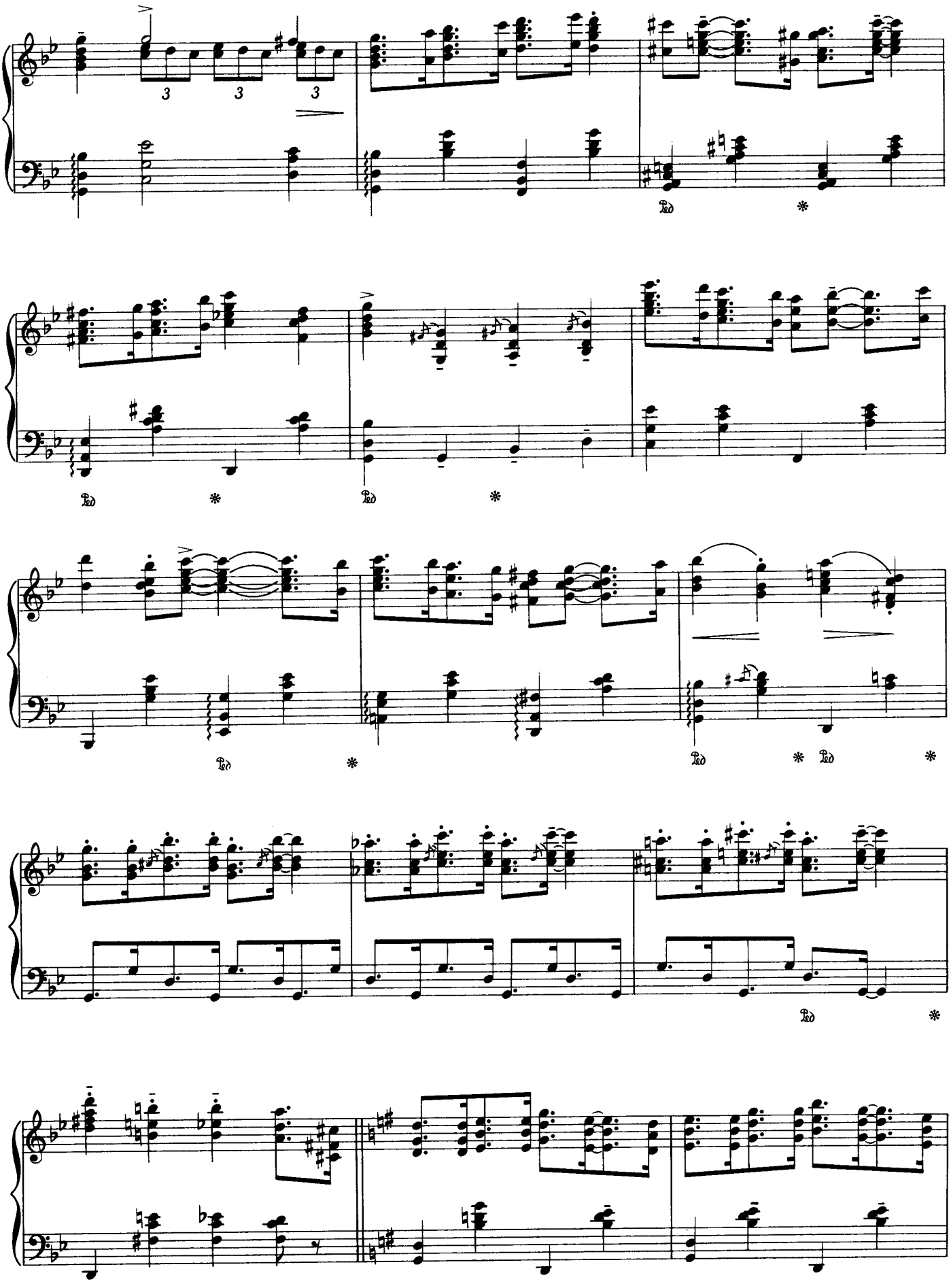
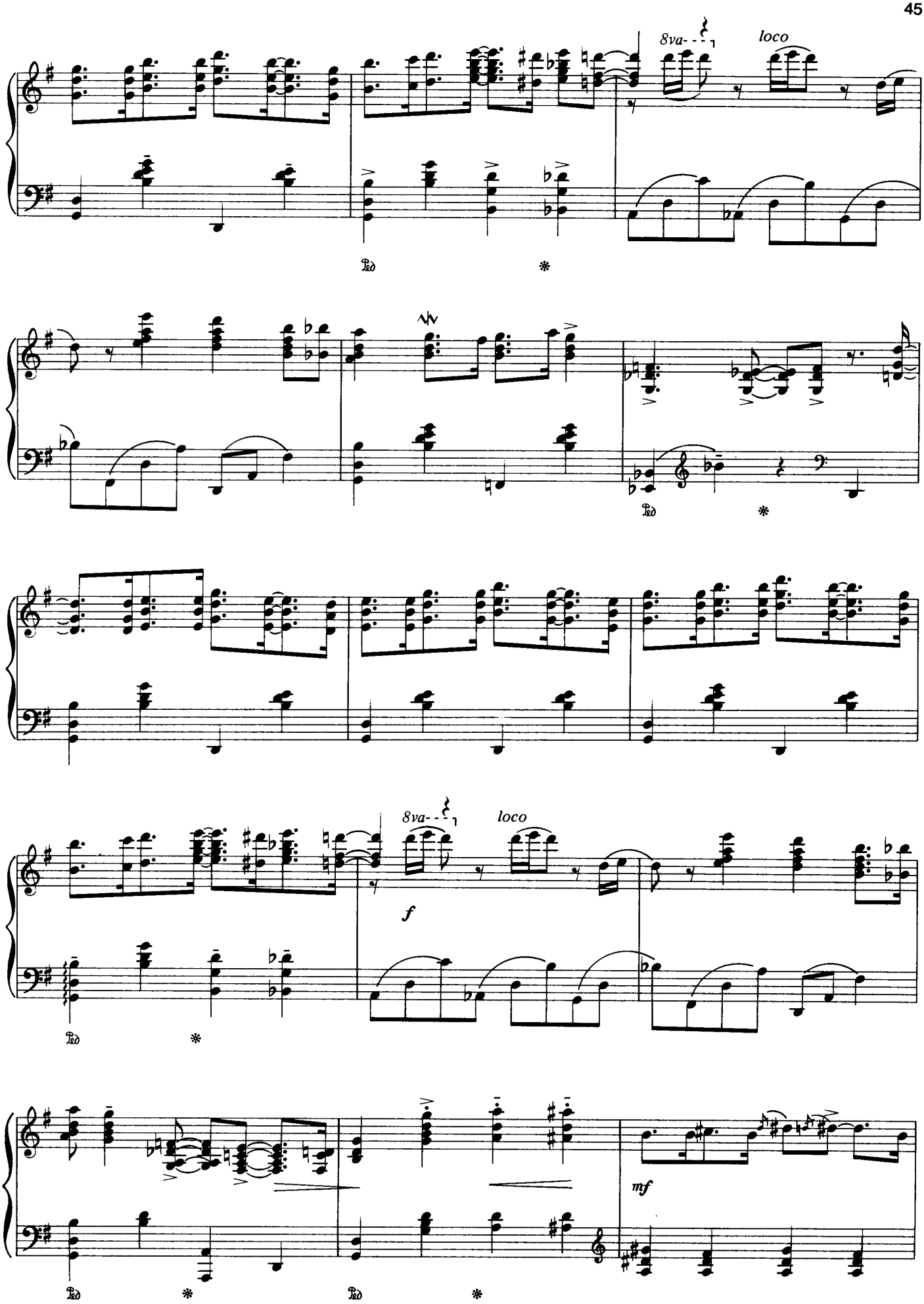
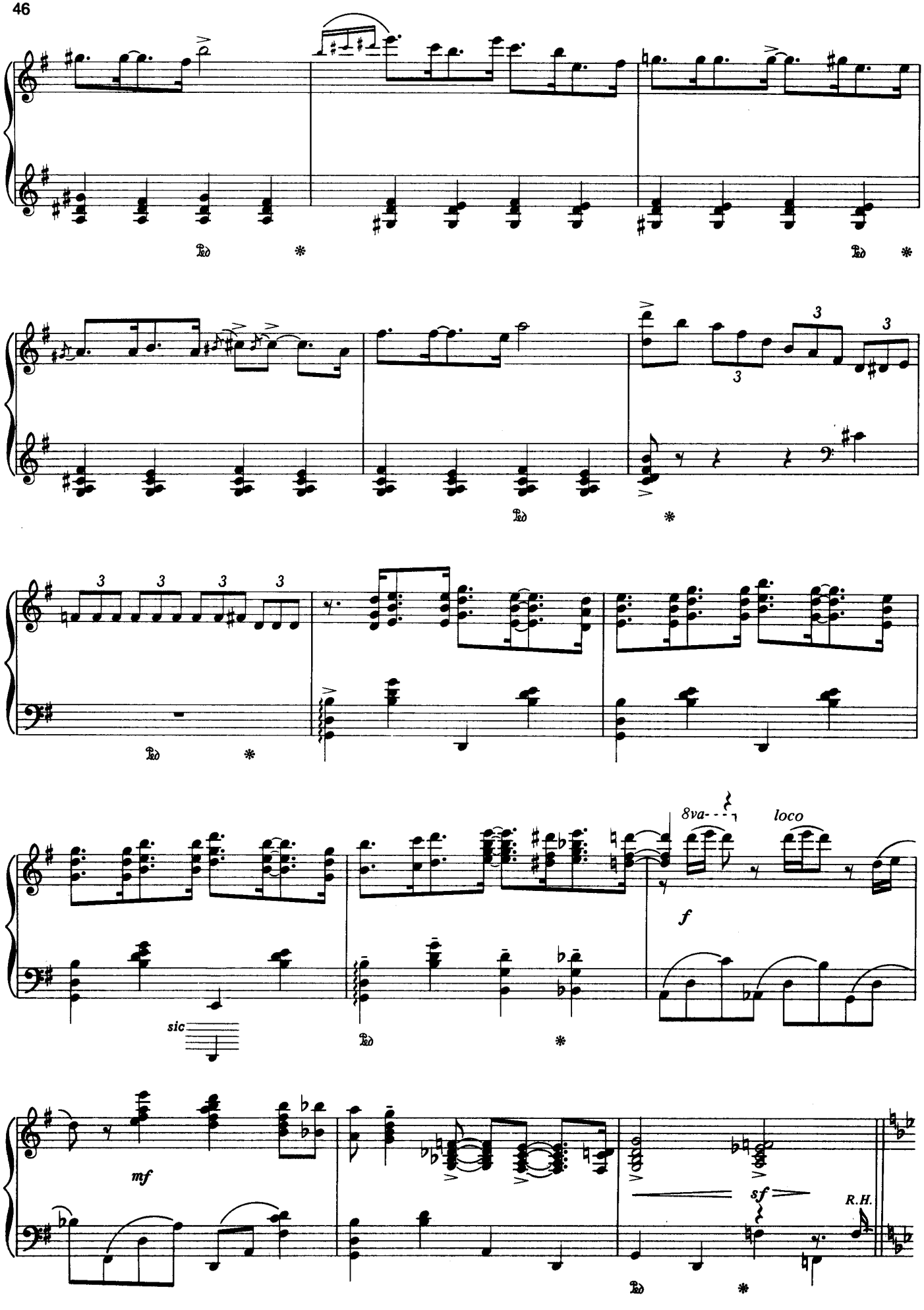
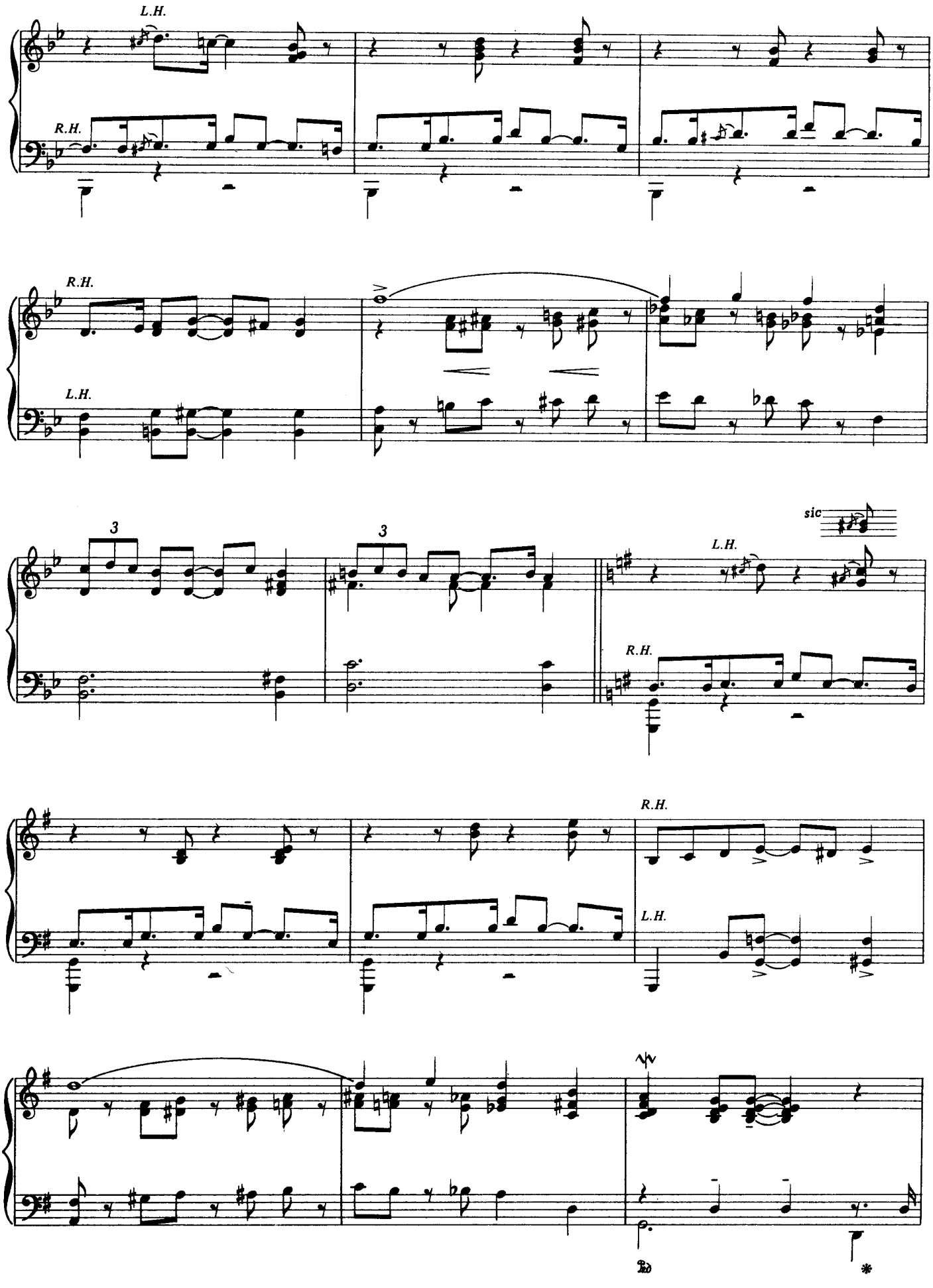


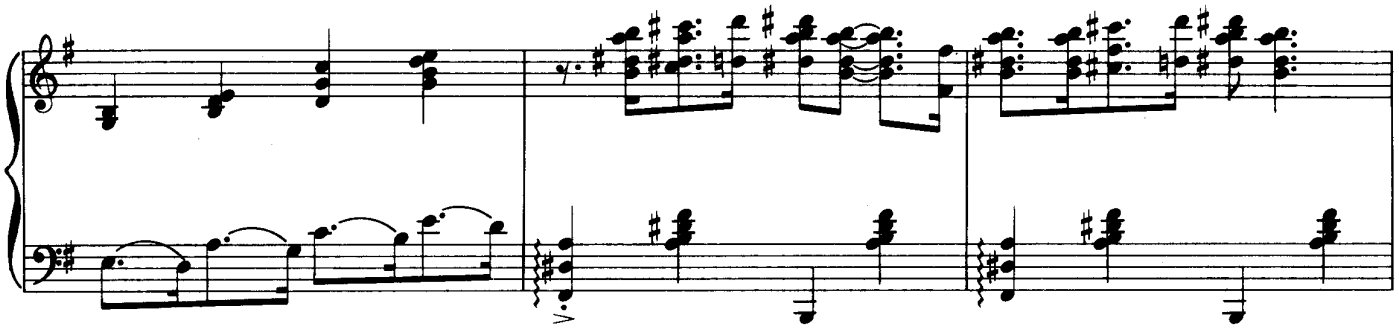

8va
sf
loco
mf
p
f

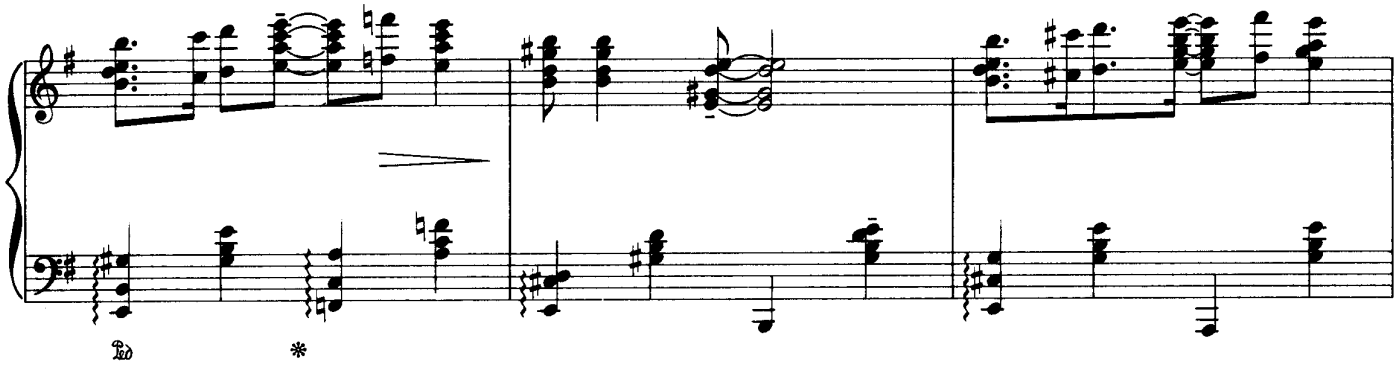


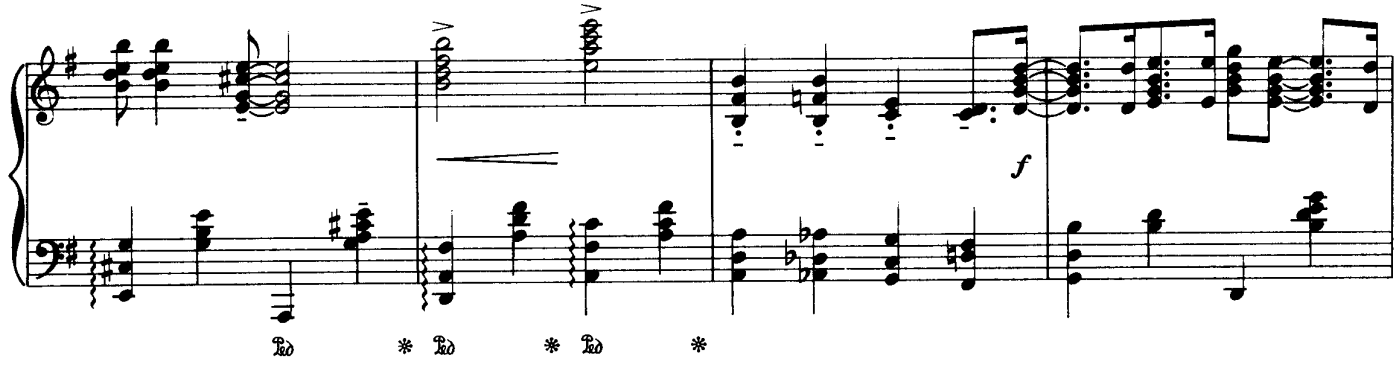

8va
loco
Ped
*
8va
loco
f
Ped
*
Ped
*
Ped
*
mf

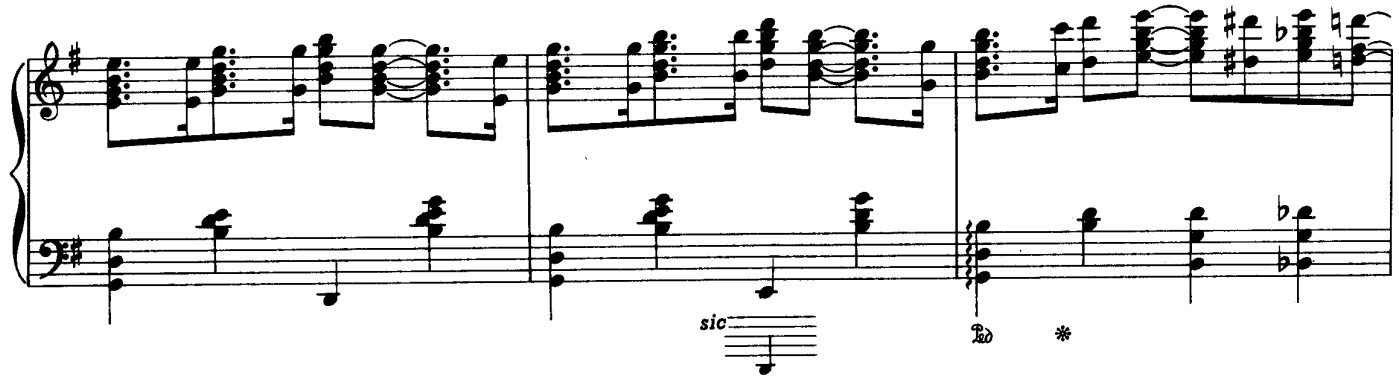

8va- - -
loco
f
sic
mf
sf
R.H.

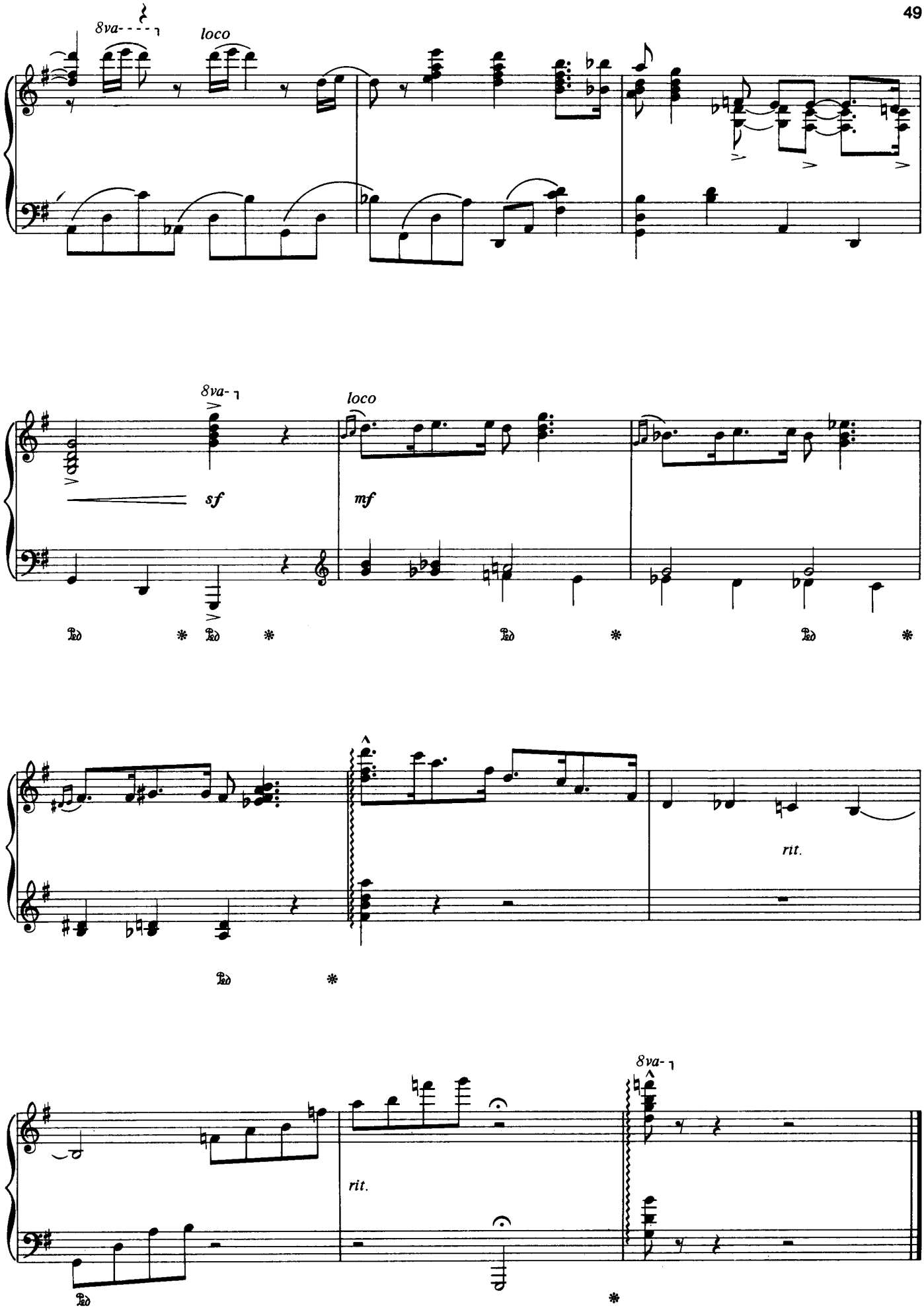

L.H.
R.H.
R.H.
L.H.
3
3
sic
L.H.
R.H.
R.H.
L.H.




Ped
*

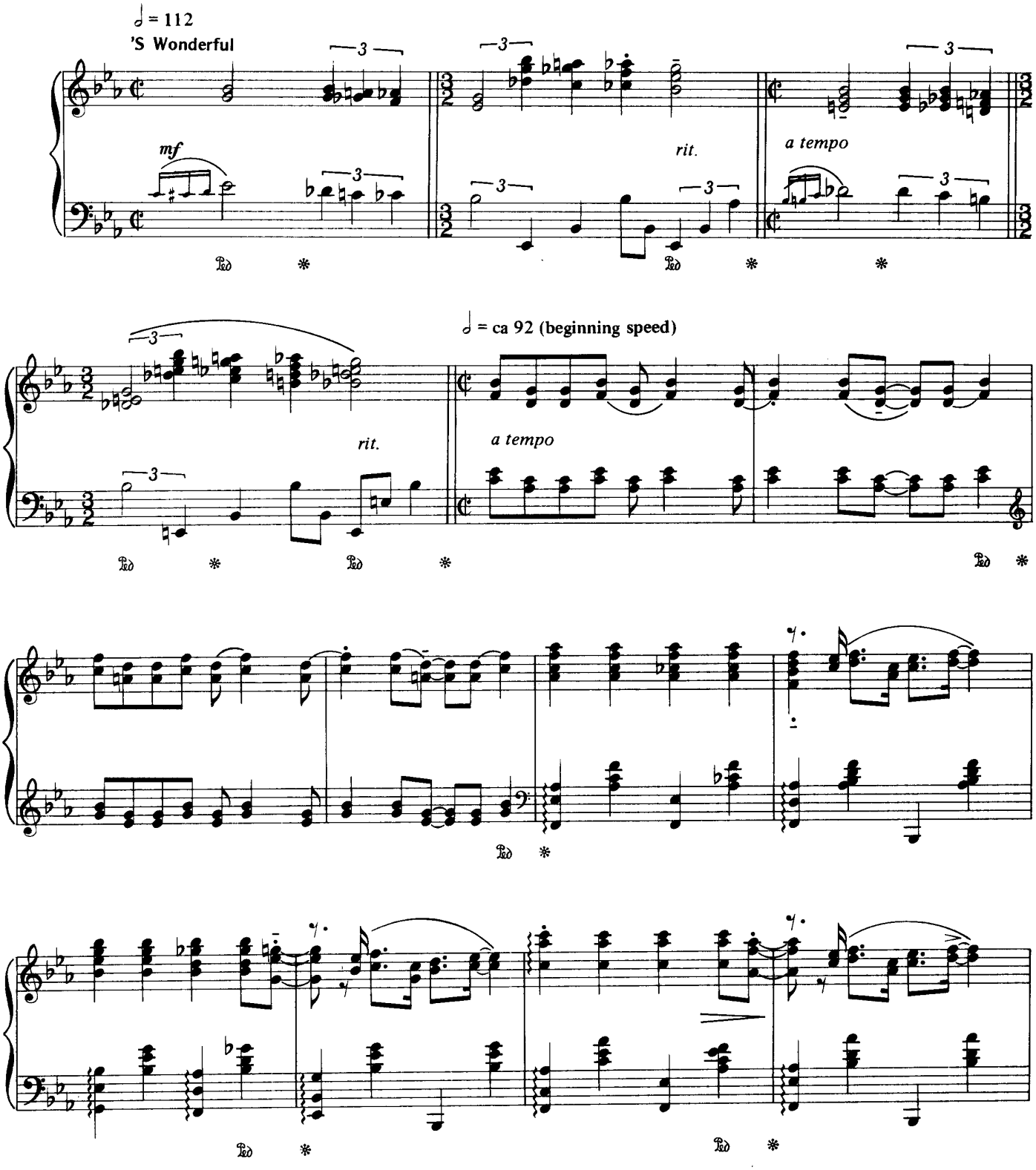

Ped
*
Ped
*
Ped
*
f


sic
Ped
*


8va
loco
8va
loco
sf
mf
rit.
rit.
8va

'S WONDERFUL/FUNNY FACE

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



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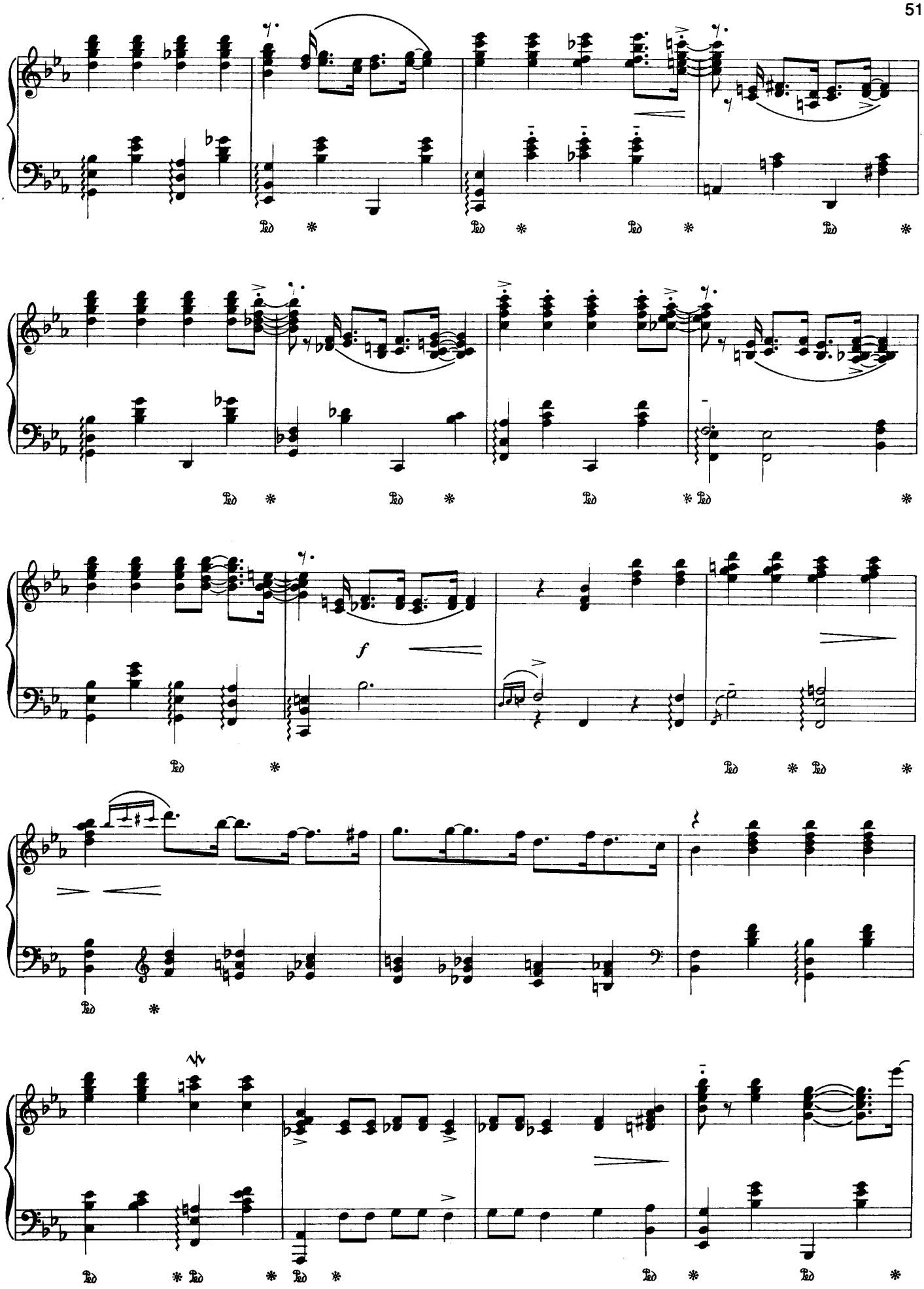
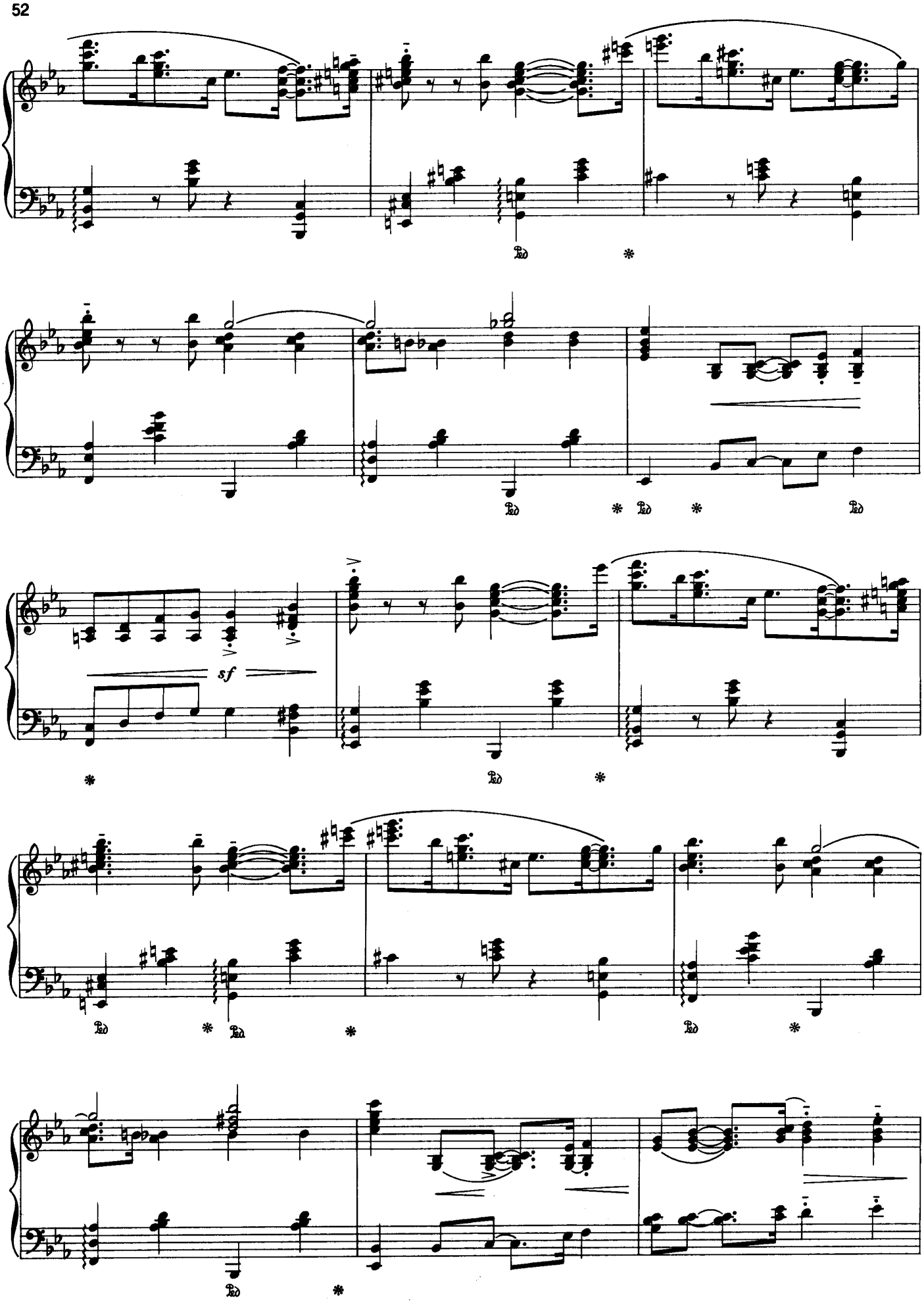
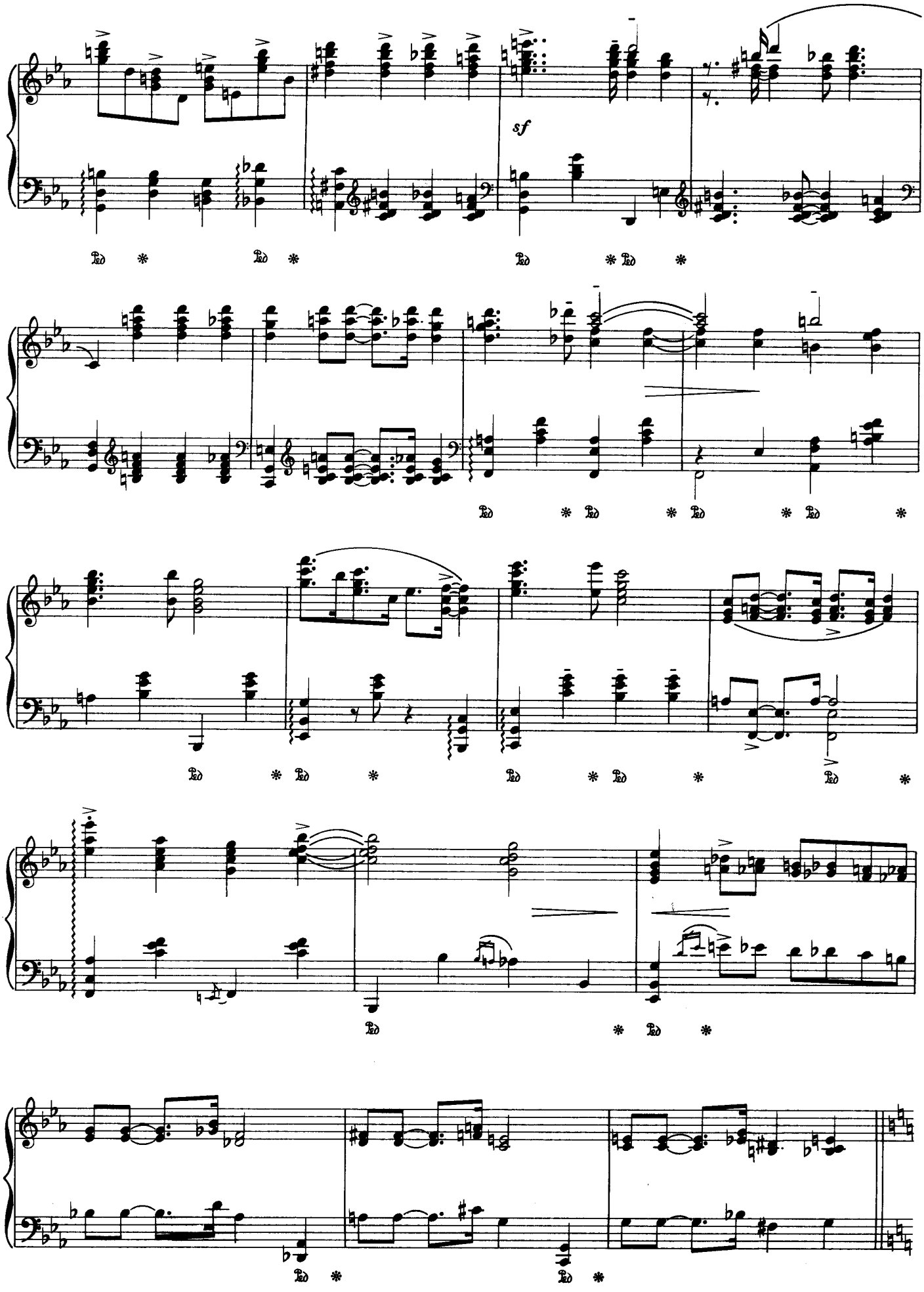
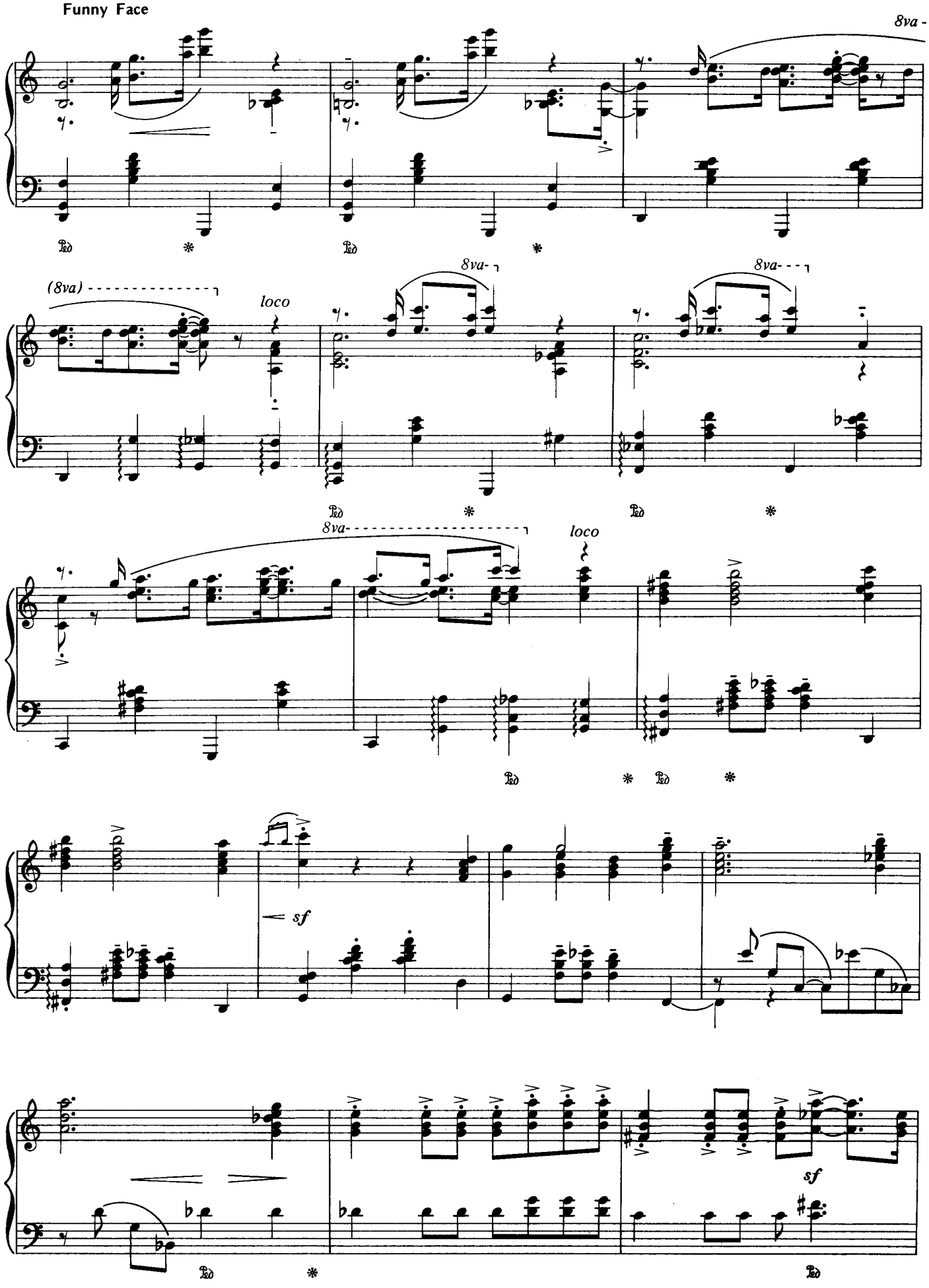
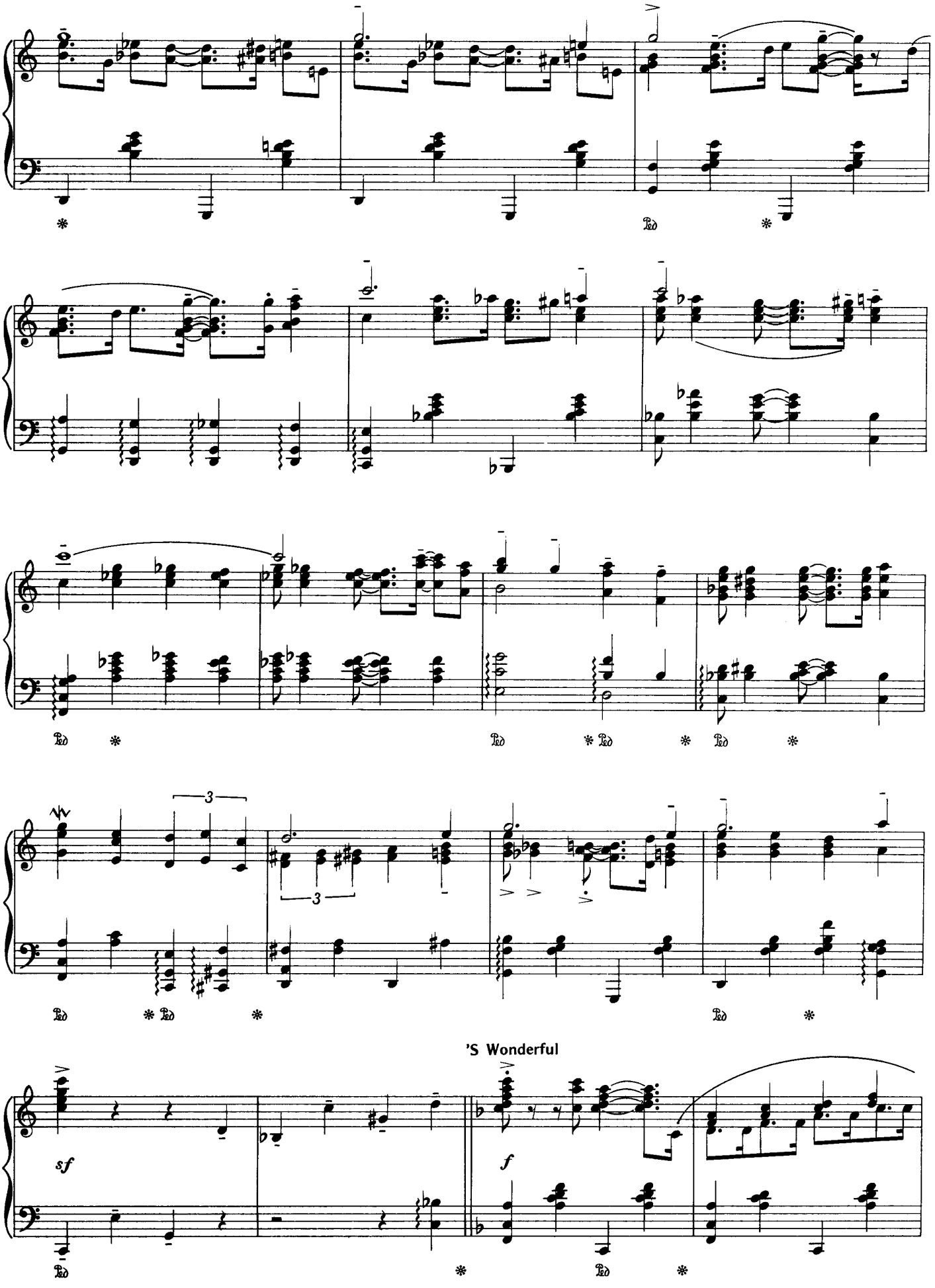
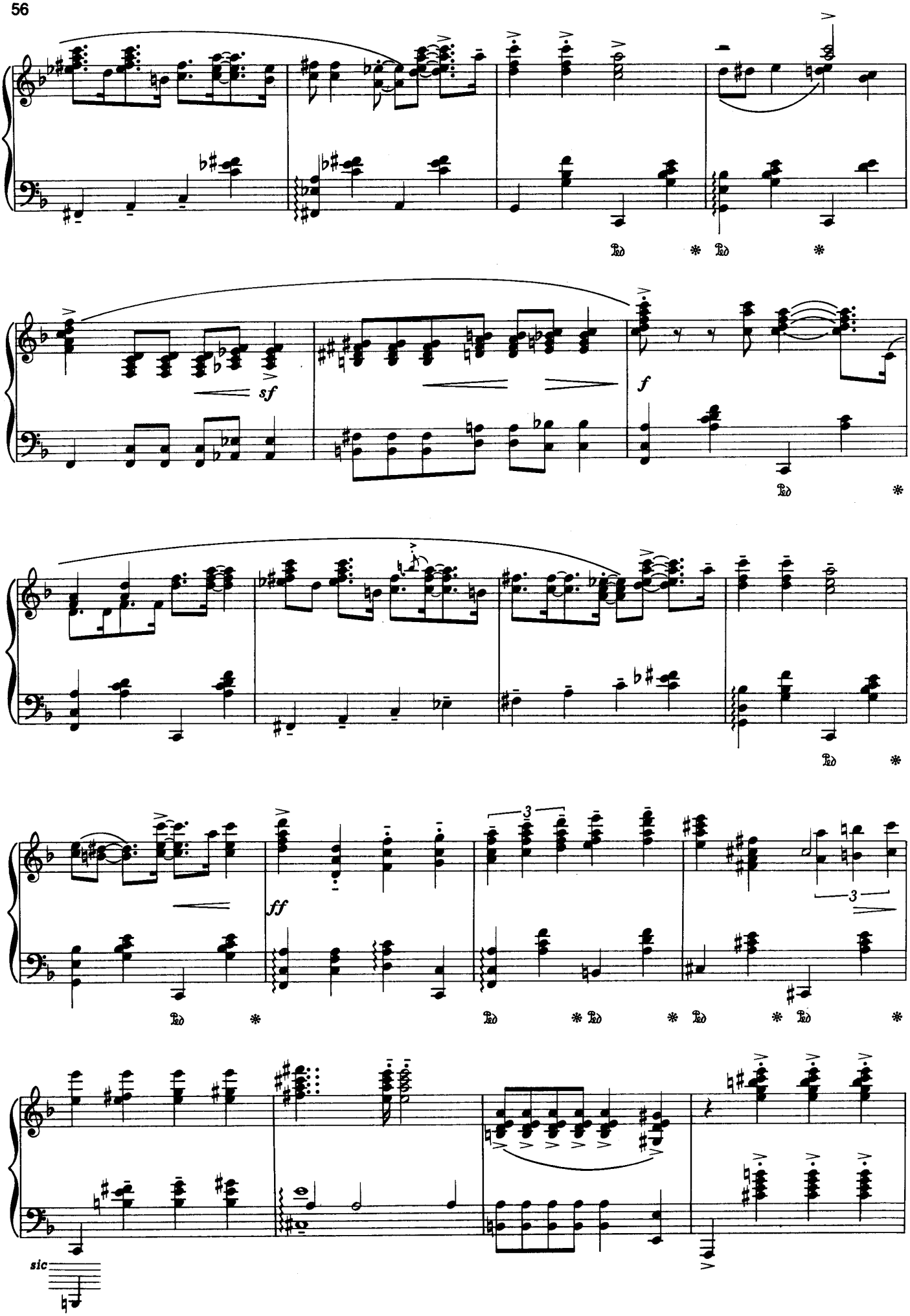

f

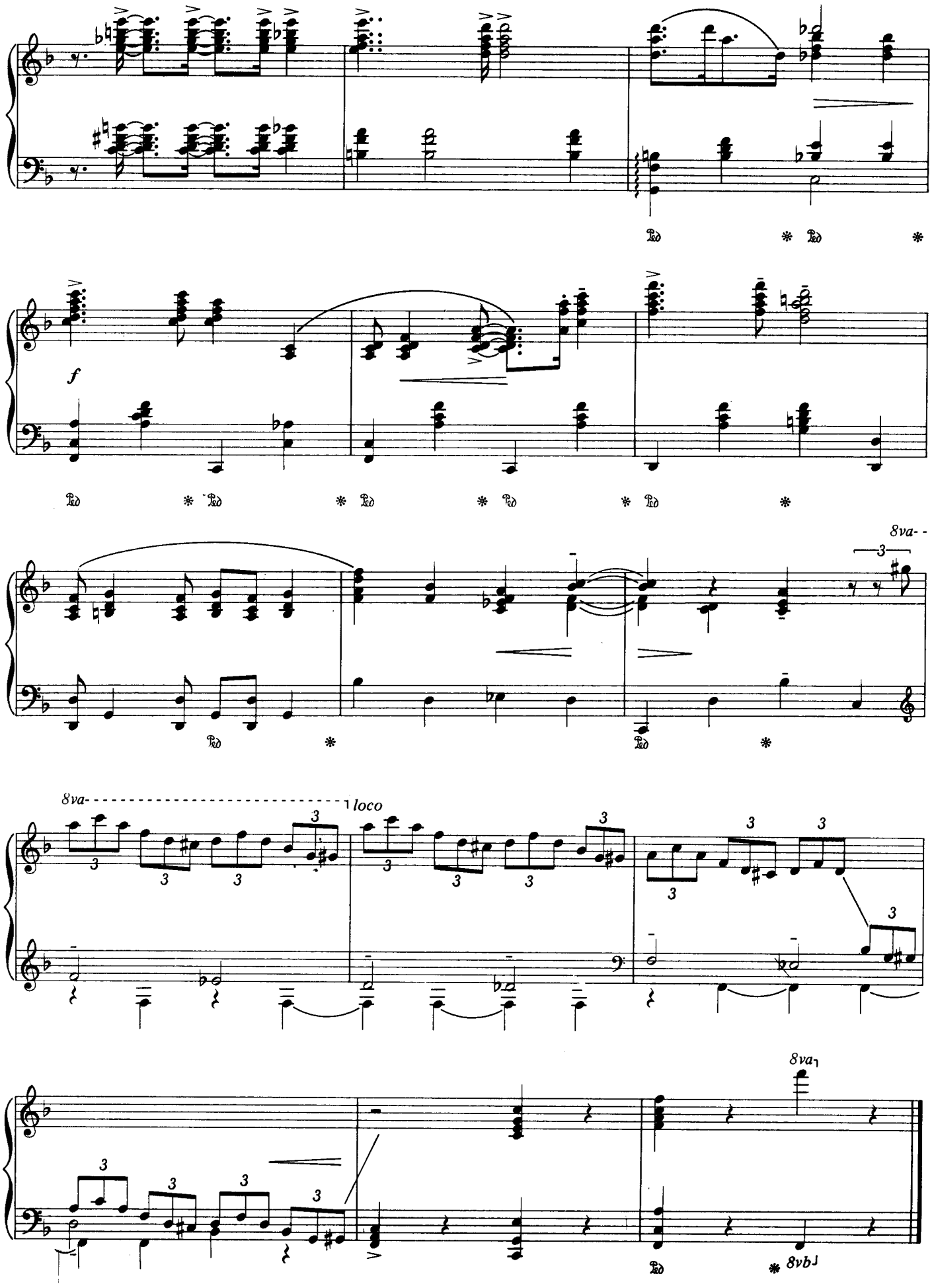

sf


sf


8va
(8va)
loco
8va
8va
8va
loco
sf
sf

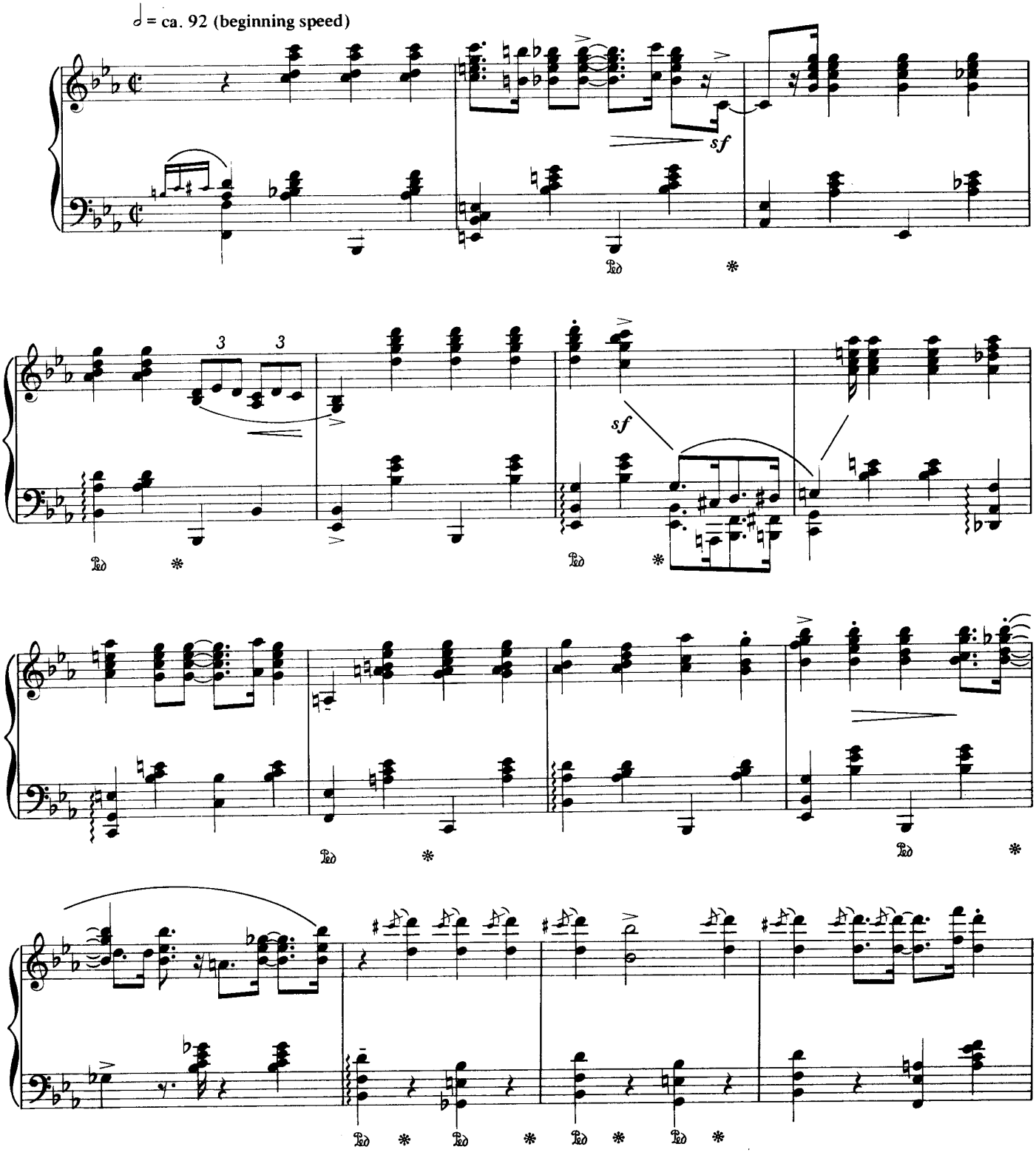

3
3
'S Wonderful
sf
f


sf
f
ff
3
3
sic


f
8va
loco
8va
8vb

THAT CERTAIN FEELING

Music by
GEORGE GERSHWIN
and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed by ARTIS WODEHOUSE



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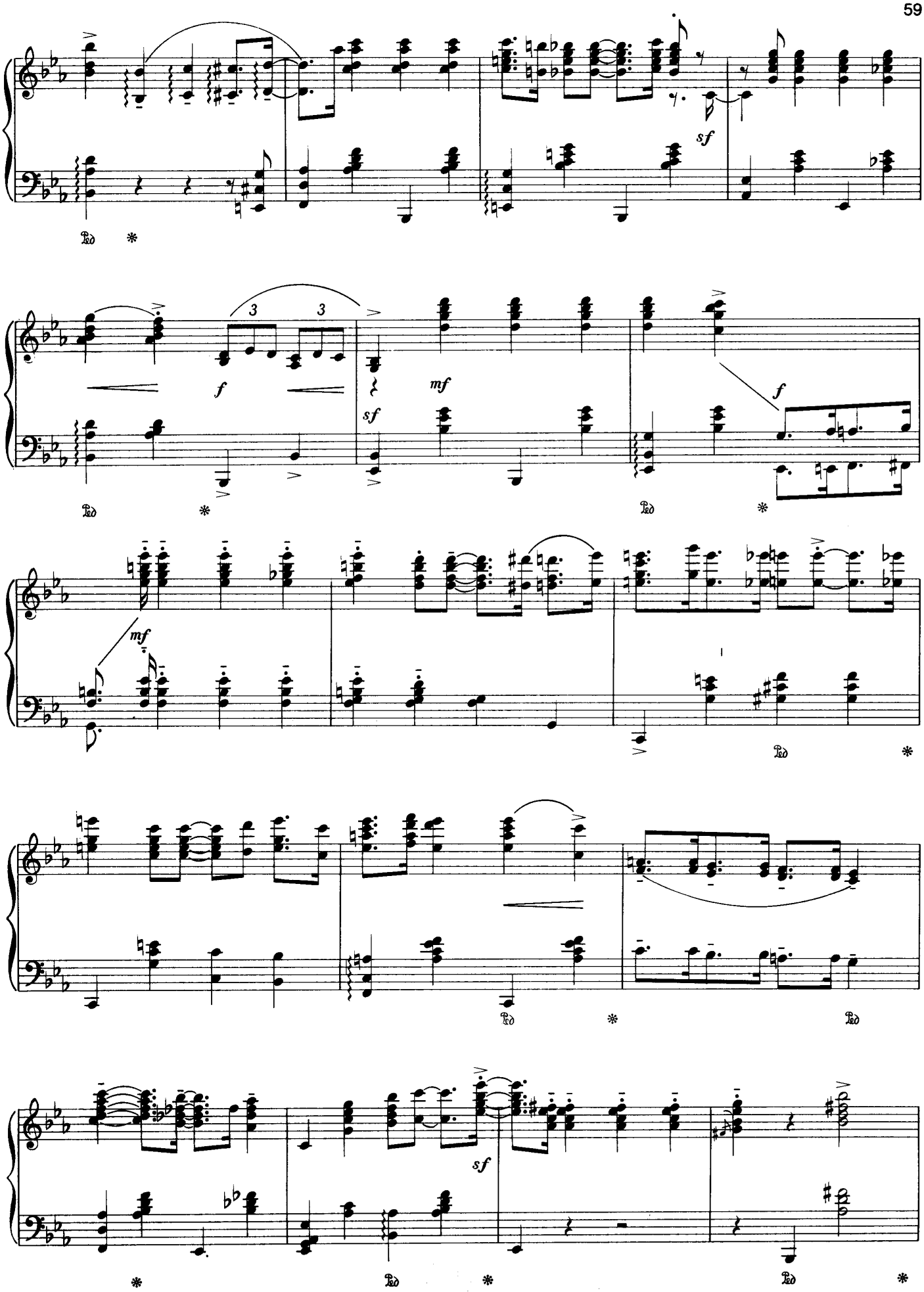
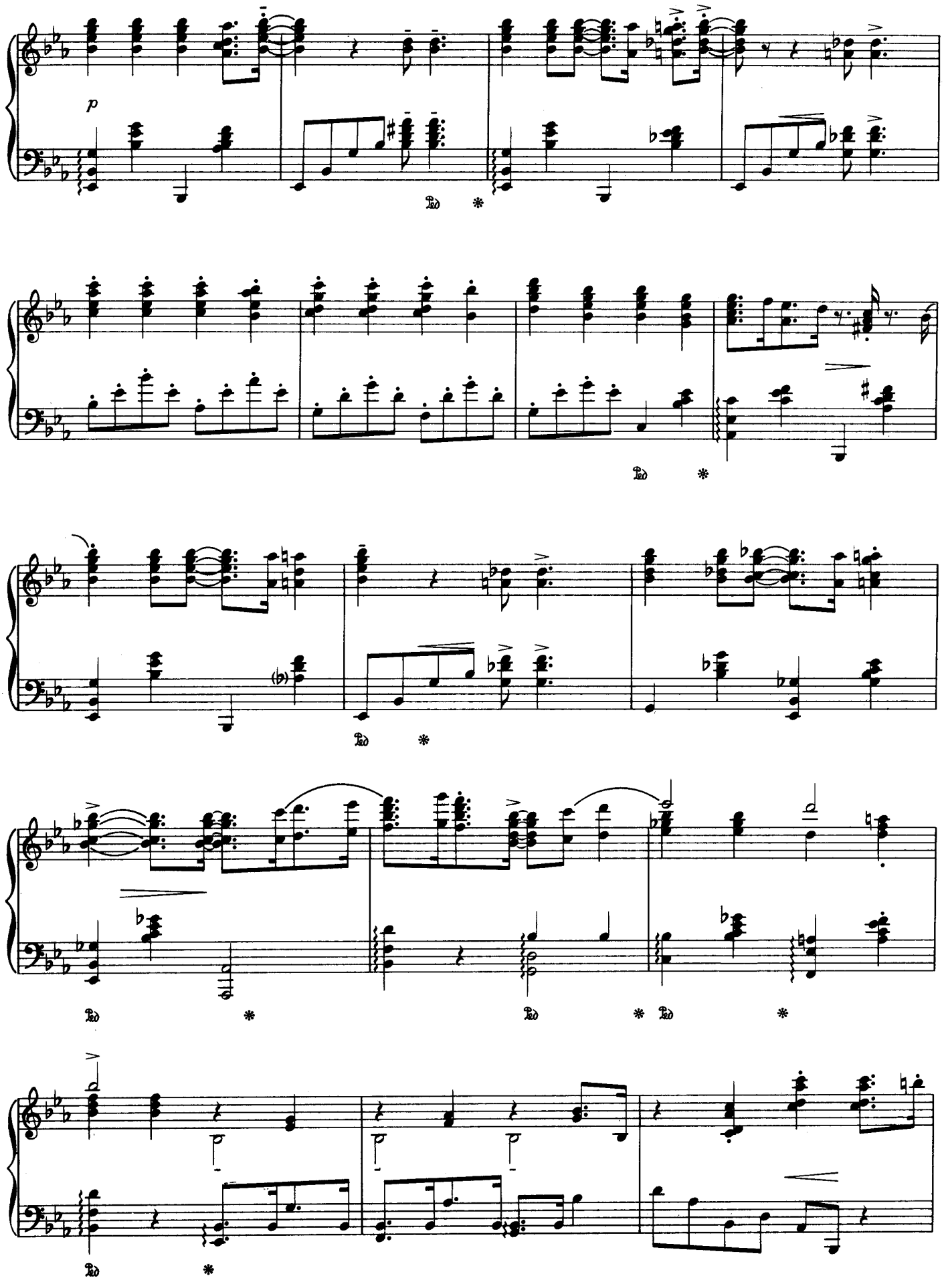
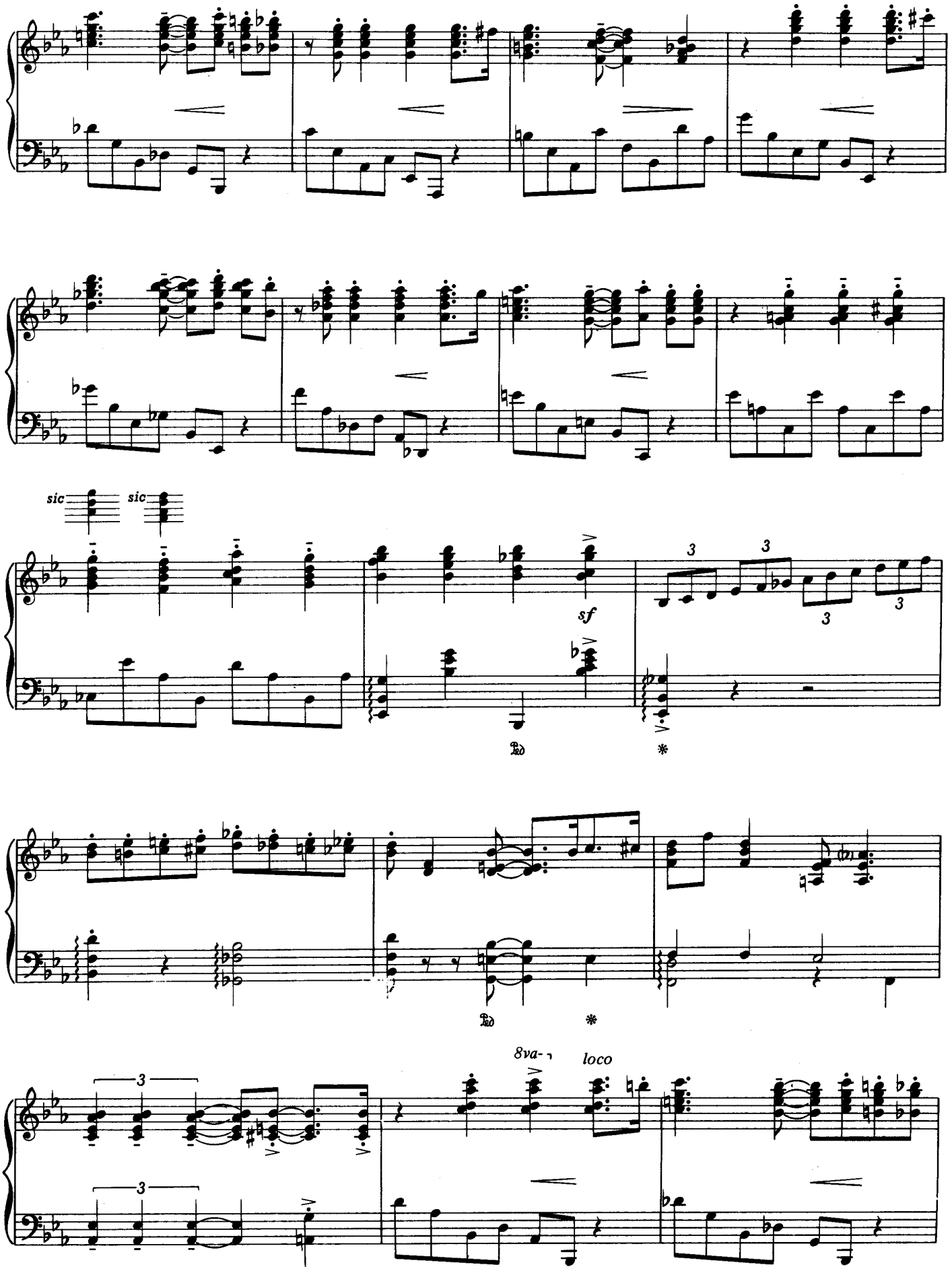
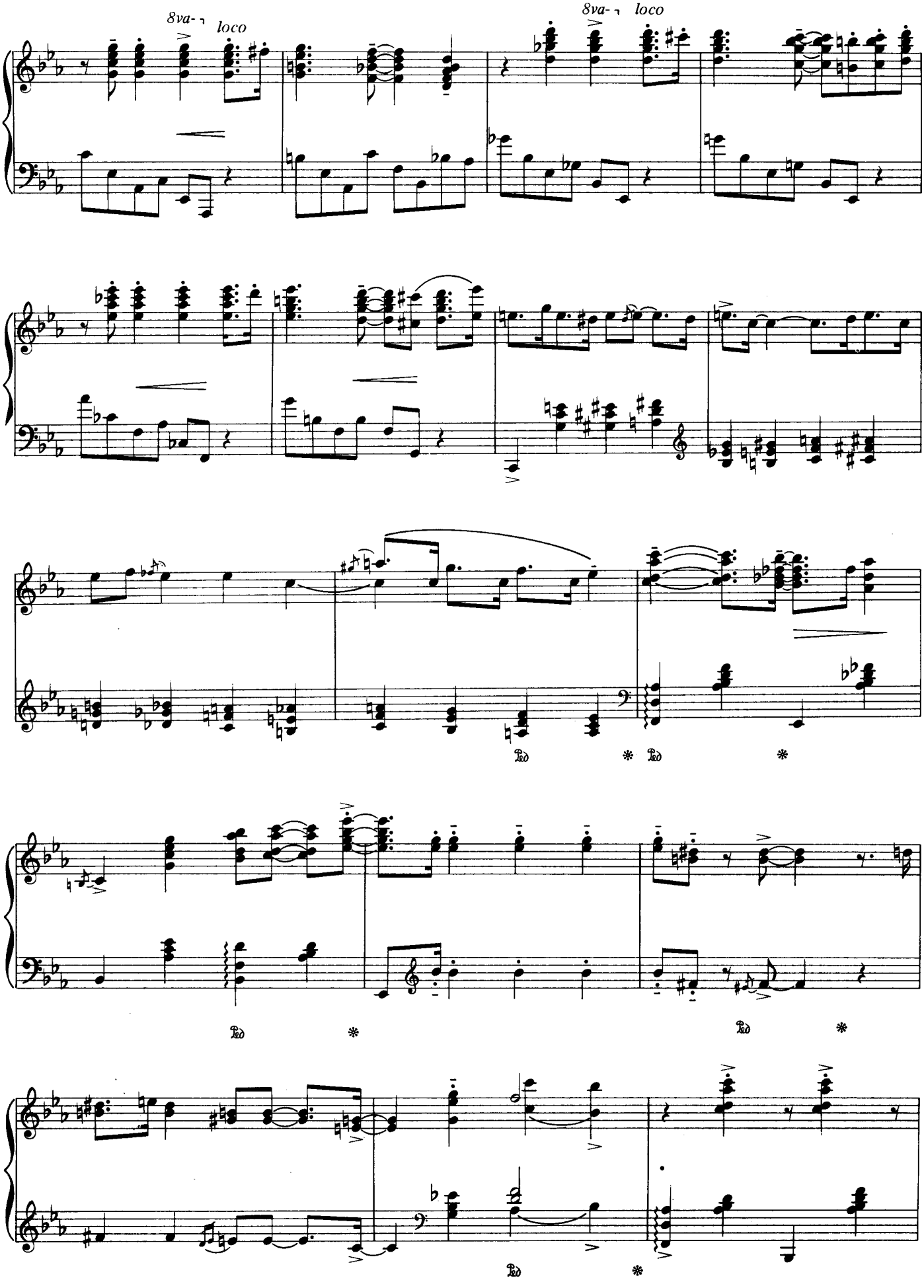
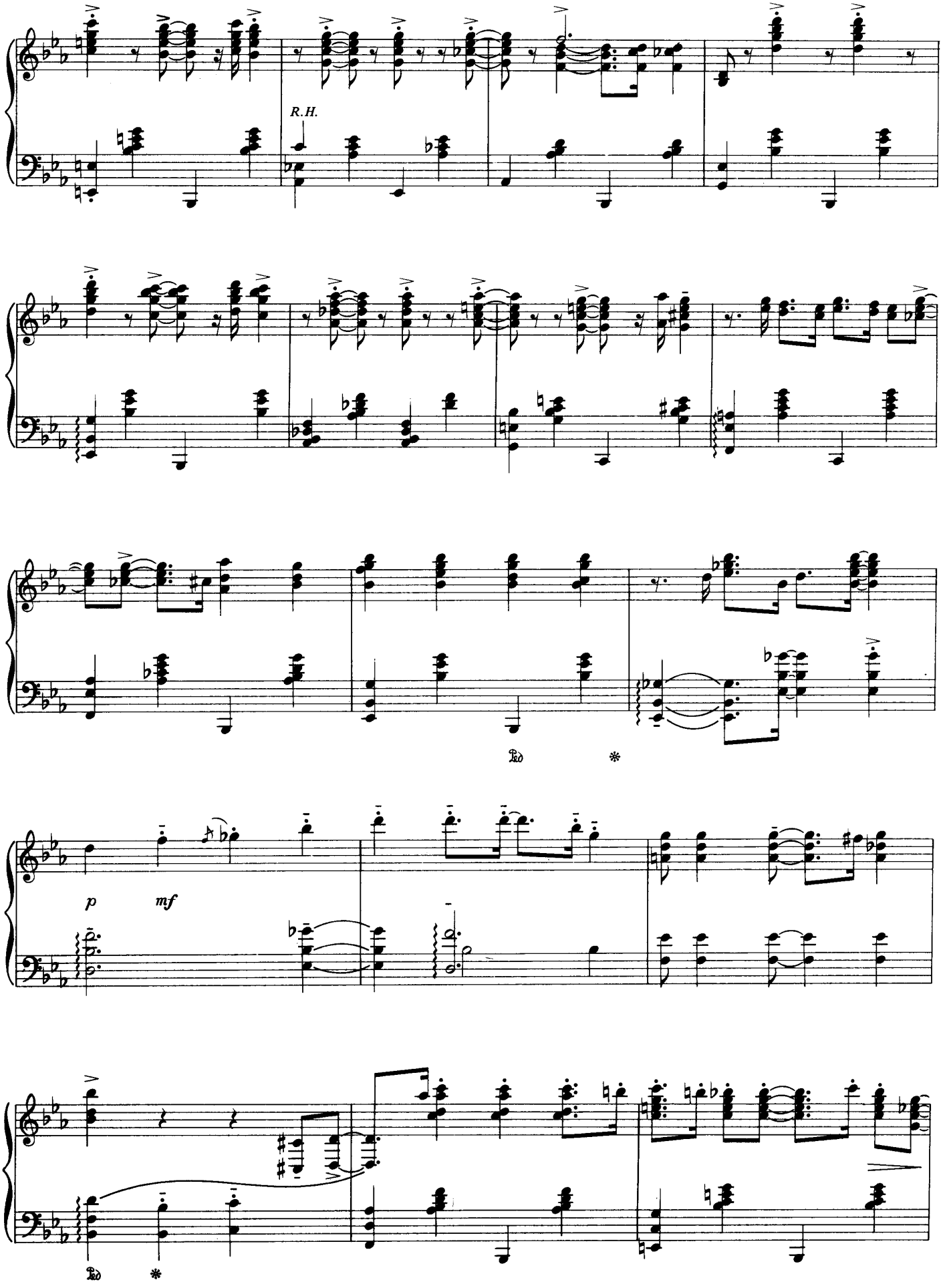
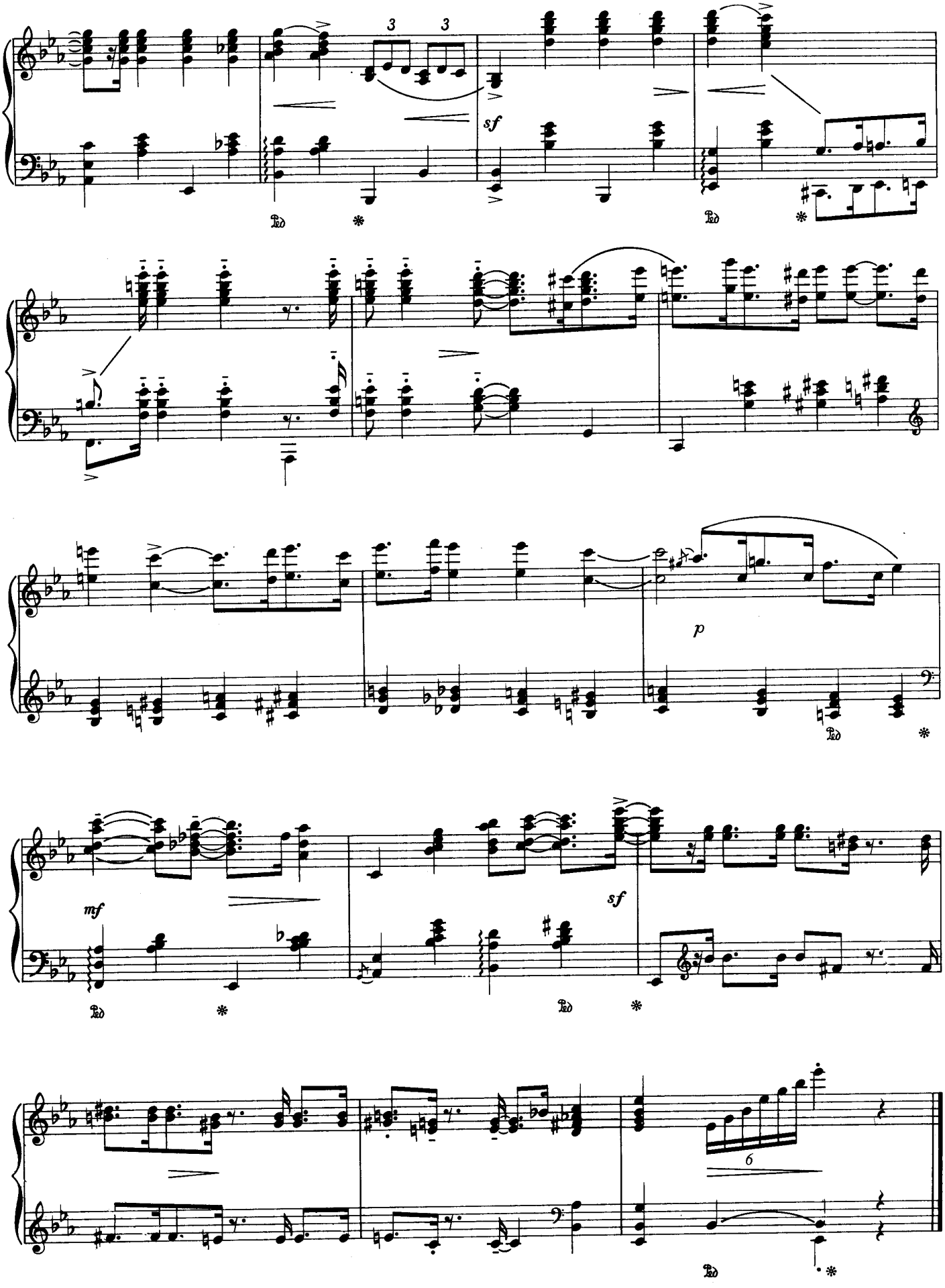

sf
3
3
f
mf
sf
f
mf
sf


p
Ped
*


sic
sic
sf
3
3
3
3
Ped
*
Ped
*
8va-
loco
3
3


8va- loco
8va- loco
Ped. * Ped. *
Ped. * Ped. *
Ped. *


R.H.
Ped
*
p
mf
Ped
*


3
3
sf
Ped
*
Ped
*
p
Ped
*
mf
Ped
*
sf
Ped
*
6
Ped
*