YORK BOWEN

The Way to Polden

Op. 76

FOR PIANO SOLO

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EDWIN YORKE BOWEN was born on 22 February 1884 at Crouch Hill, London, the third son of the founder of Bowen and McKechnie, whisky distillers. After piano studies with Alfred Izard at the Blackheath Conservatoire the boy won the Erard Scholarship of the Royal Academy of Music in 1889, having already accumulated numerous prizes. Despite initial reluctance to leave Izard he became a devoted and highly successful student of the famously eccentric Tobias Matthay. He dropped his baptismal name and the 'e' in 'Yorke' early in his career. Already a talking point among his peers, who included the then inconspicuous Arnold Bax, he was to earn a reputation as 'a pianist of remarkable brilliance' [*Grove*] which continues nowadays to eclipse his prestige as a composer, great though that once was. He was also an accomplished violist and horn player, in the latter capacity joining the regimental band of the Scots Guards at the start of the Great War. Invalided home with pneumonia in 1916, he became one of many for whom the harsh realities of the time brought artistic disappointment. He had probably confronted already the fact that his creativity turned upon abstract poetic romanticism rather than unflinching human or social commentary. His remaining decades were lived out in uneventful domesticity in North London and in faithful service to the RAM as a professor of piano, a position from which he finally retired in 1959. He died suddenly in November 1961, active to the last as a pianist, composer and pedagogue. A stoically humorous personality, he bore the bathos of his last years without bitterness.

This summary invites comparison with Nicolas Medtner, domiciled also in North London from 1935. Both he and Bowen were pianists of the utmost distinction who wrote predominantly for their own instrument. Moreover, both still espoused the same idiom and aesthetic in the middle of the twentieth century as they had at its outset. Bowen's performing repertoire included Medtner's *Sonata in G minor opus 22*, also embracing the formidable demands of Liapunov's *Transcendental Etudes* and of Liszt and Chopin. Between 1904 and 1908 his own first three piano concerti appeared and he performed nos. 1 and 3 under Hans Richter in the Promenade Concerts at Queen's Hall. By 1912 two symphonies had received favourable public notices. A fourth piano concerto followed in 1929. This music evinces a variable but still significant debt to the Russian romantic piano tradition of Balakirev, Liapunov, Medtner and Rakhmaninov, as do Bowen's many effective solo pieces. Capable of delicacy and refinement or of a *virtuoso* muscularity which often calls forth greater terseness and astringency, they deserve belated recognition of their honest and red-blooded virtues, while their creator stands almost on his own among his British contemporaries as a true pianist-composer in the mould of Saint-Saëns, Scharwenka or the Russians already mentioned. For this alone Bowen would merit attention. Meanwhile, his work awaits the pleasurably surprised enthusiasm of our own resurgently liberal and inquisitive age.

This adaptation of an essay written for Hyperion Records. © 1996 by Francis Pott

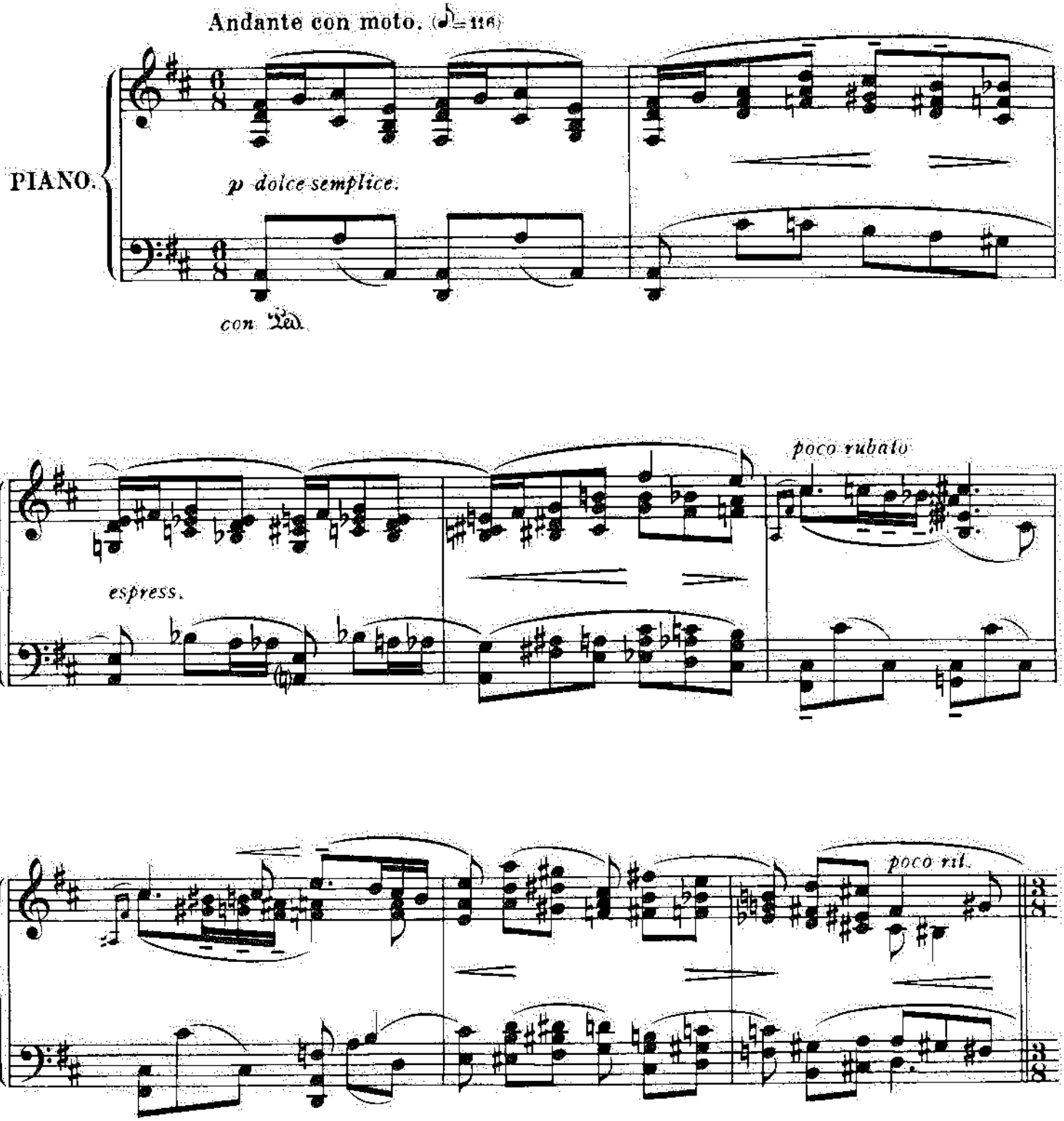
Published in association with the Royal Academy of Music where York Bowen was professor from 1909 to 1959. The manuscript of this work is part of the Royal Academy of Music's York Bowen Collection.

To Philip Reeves.

THE WAY TO POLDEN.

AN AMBLING TUNE.

YORK BOWEN.
Op. 76.



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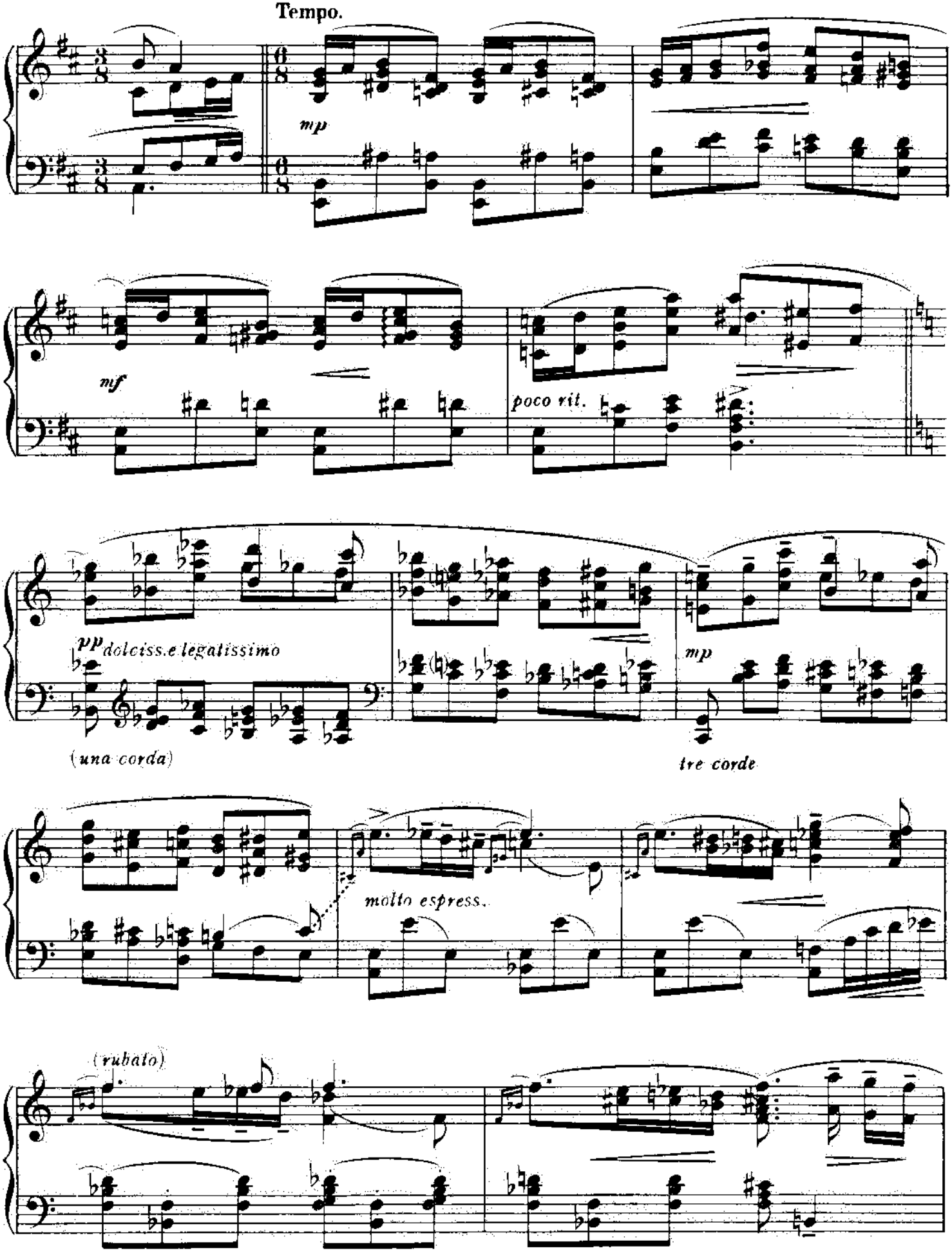
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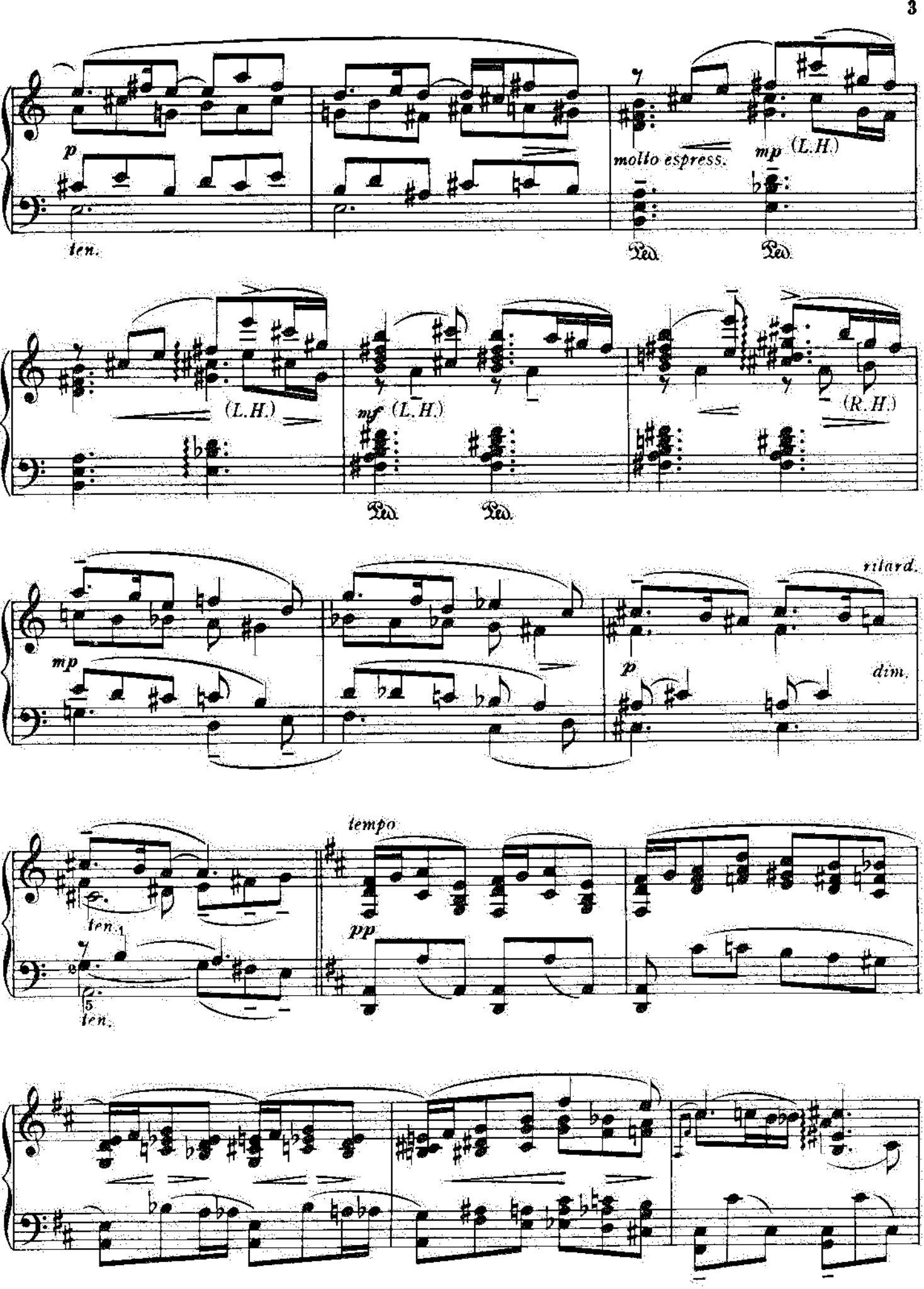
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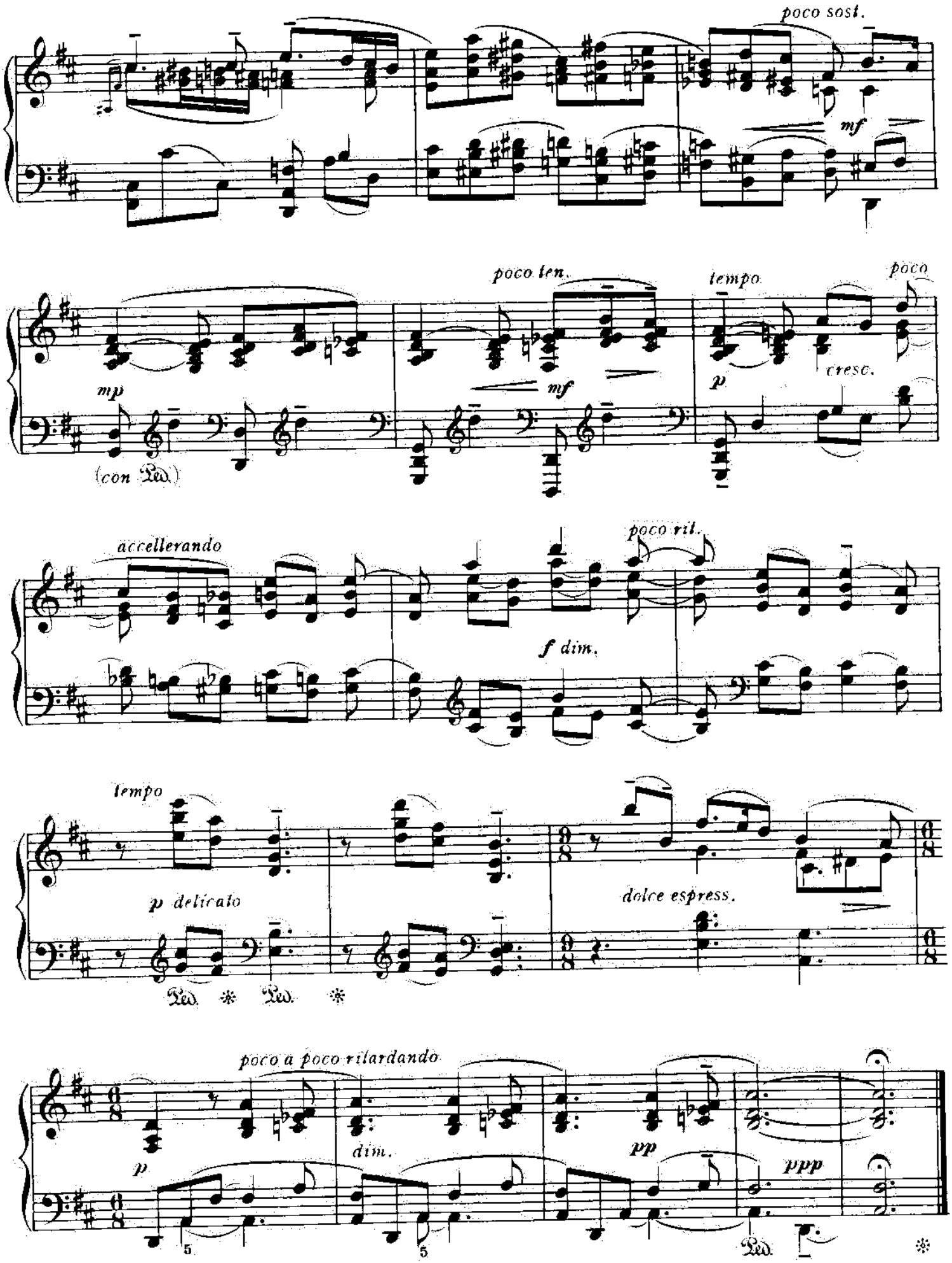

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