Six Rhythmic Breathing Etudes

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Introduction

Breathing is an involuntary activity, typically happening without much effort or thought, yet it has a massive impact on our functioning and performance. It can be enlightening to bring the breath to the foreground of our awareness in order to examine it more closely. Each person breathes in a unique way, and the single most important function of respiration is to keep us alive and well. There isn't really a right or wrong way to breathe but rather a plethora of options. Certain options that are optimal for certain situations. It is worthwhile to explore these options and to take a deeper look into ways breathing impacts enjoyment, ease, and success in playing and performance.

How to Breathe

For this practice I recommend breathing in the most natural, familiar, and comfortable way possible. You may find that you breathe more forcefully than usual as you first attempt these experiments. As you gain a clearer sense of the breathing movements, aim to reduce the amount of effort needed to bring in and expel air from your lungs. It's possible to sense the slightest change in breath direction, and it's not necessary or beneficial to take large, dramatic, or effortful breaths. You may also experiment with where the breath goes in your body. Do you breathe more into the chest or the belly, or perhaps the back? Try out all of the options to discover what's best for you!

Observing the Breath

These breathing etudes deal with observing and directing the timing of the four movements of the breath; inhalation, pause, exhalation, pause. The process is part inquiry and part experiment. Intentionally directing the timing and duration of the breathing movements increases our awareness of the breath and how it relates to our playing.

Some pianists prefer to maintain a specific rhythmic breathing pattern throughout an entire piece while others prefer to breathe following the phrase structure. This is not a requirement or even a suggestion. Playing piano is challenging, and the end goal is to be able to reduce mental effort and hold fewer thoughts in the conscious mind. It's lovely to work with the breath in an intentional way for short periods of time, but at some point it will be necessary to abandon the directed breathing activities altogether.

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In the end you may find it most comfortable to allow the breath to unfold naturally and without effort. Awareness of the connection between breath, fingers, mind, and body is enough to lead to profound changes in one's playing.

Mindful breathing is a powerful tool for increasing present moment awareness. Athletes and other performers use intentional breathing practices to enhance performance and control any anxiety that may arise. Sensing the movements of the breath can be enough to pull you back into the present moment if your mind starts anxiously racing during performance, thus it's a worthwhile endeavor to cultivate this skill.

Considerations for Comfort

It's important to keep yourself comfortable during this practice. If you become dizzy or lightheaded you should stop and allow yourself to breathe normally for a good chunk of time. It may be that your body and mind need more time to digest this material. Focus on a small section and allow yourself many breaks in between repetitions of the breathing sequence. I recommend going through this process on more than one occasion. Ten minutes of practice a few days a week is enough to create noticeable differences.

The tempos of the etudes are variable and the notated breathing patterns are not a rule but merely a suggestion. Children have smaller lungs, and thus might need to play these at a faster tempo or breathe more frequently than marked in the score. It's possible that adults also may prefer more rapid breathing patterns than are recommended in some of the pieces. Please adjust the tempo and breathing patterns as necessary to maintain comfort.

What is the Feldenkrais Method®?

The Feldenkrais Method is a method of movement education. In a lesson, students examine their habits and patterns in order to increase awareness of potential options for movement. The movement lessons typically follow a theme and variation format, exploring movements related to a particular function like walking, rolling, or sitting. The aim of this work is to find greater ease in movement through exploration, experimentation, and play.

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The Breathing Etude Process

Part 1: Initial Impressions

There are two scores included in this PDF. The first version is traditional and the second version includes annotated inquiries for further exploration. Begin this process by playing through the pieces using the traditional scores. The purpose is simply to become acquainted with the music. Once you've played through them a few times you may move on to part two.

Part 2: Feldenkrais® Lesson on Rhythmic Breathing

Visit www.pianowithkatie.com/breath to access the audio recording. The movement lesson is intended to be practiced while lying on the floor using a yoga mat, folded up blanket, or carpet for extra cushioning. Throughout this lesson please do what you need to do to remain comfortable. You may pause and rest your mind and your breath at any time. An outline of the movement lesson is provided for your reference on page 22, but I recommend first doing the lesson from the recording.

Part 3: Rhythmic Breathing In Practice

After completing the movement lesson play the breathing etudes again using the score with annotated breathing inquiries. The breathing patterns are indicated by "IN" and "OUT". These are merely suggestions for experimentation, so feel free to try out various patterns of breathing. Below are further inquiries to expand upon your explorations:

- Take note of the places in the music where you can easily adhere to a breathing pattern as well as where the pattern gets disrupted.
- What tempo allows you to breathe comfortably? Does the comfortable tempo change at different times of the day or throughout your practice session?
- What is the smallest breathing movement you can sense and feel?
- Notice your sense of overall ease and if this has any relationship to your breathing.
- Where does the air go when you breathe? (Belly, chest, throat, shoulders?)
- How does your posture impact your breath? Try out some familiar "bad habit" postures such as slouching or raising the shoulders to the ears. How does this impact the breath?
- Notice how the musical elements of pitch, harmony, and rhythm impact your breathing pattern.

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Suggestions for Tackling the Challenging Bits

It typically becomes more challenging to maintain a healthy breath pattern as musical material increases in difficulty. If the priority is the breath, it will be necessary to creatively limit the challenge of the material so that a natural breathing pattern can be more easily maintained. Here are a few strategies for exploring and integrating the breath in the most difficult of passages:

- Explore various breath patterns while playing hands separately
- Explore various breath patterns while playing one part divided in between two hands (Ex. Use the right and left hand to play the notes of the lower staff that typically belong only to the left hand.)
- Explore various breath patterns while playing single voices
- Explore various breath patterns while imagining the sound of the music
- Work in small sections
- Play with a flexible tempo and match the music to your natural breathing cycle
- Use a metronome to cue the breathing movements (I recommend the Impulse Metronome App for this.)
- Say the words “in” and “out” rather than performing the breathing movements
- Experiment with your breathing while listening to a recording of the piece

Further Learning

Share your own recordings of the *Six Rhythmic Breathing Etudes* and gain access to a collection of recordings by other pianists. It is possible to hear how each person’s unique approach to breathing shapes the music and this can bring your awareness and playing to a whole new level! Upload your recording to YouTube and share a link or share your file through Google Drive, Dropbox or another file sharing service. For more info contact Katie at pianowithkt@gmail.com.

Schedule a coaching session with Katie to dive deeper into the function of breath. As though piano weren’t already hard enough, breathing is a highly complex and elusive part of human functioning. It’s normal to have many questions! Visit www.awarenessthroughmusic.com/feldenkraisformusicians for more information.

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Reading Recommendations

The resources below provide an in-depth view of the function of breath along with tools for working with the breath.

- Stasis Breath Training - Website with free breath training programs
- *The Breathing Book* by Donna Farhi
- *Breath* by James Nestor
- *The Oxygen Advantage* by Patrick Mckeown

About the Author

Katie O'Rourke is a pianist, composer and Feldenkrais® practitioner based in Seattle, Washington. Katie works with pianists who are interested in exploring the ways we use the mind and body to make music in a comfortable and pleasurable way. Katie's interests include injury prevention and recovery, anatomically informed playing, as well as strategies for incorporating the healing power of music into the learning process.

Visit www.awarenessthroughmusic.com to learn more about Katie's work.

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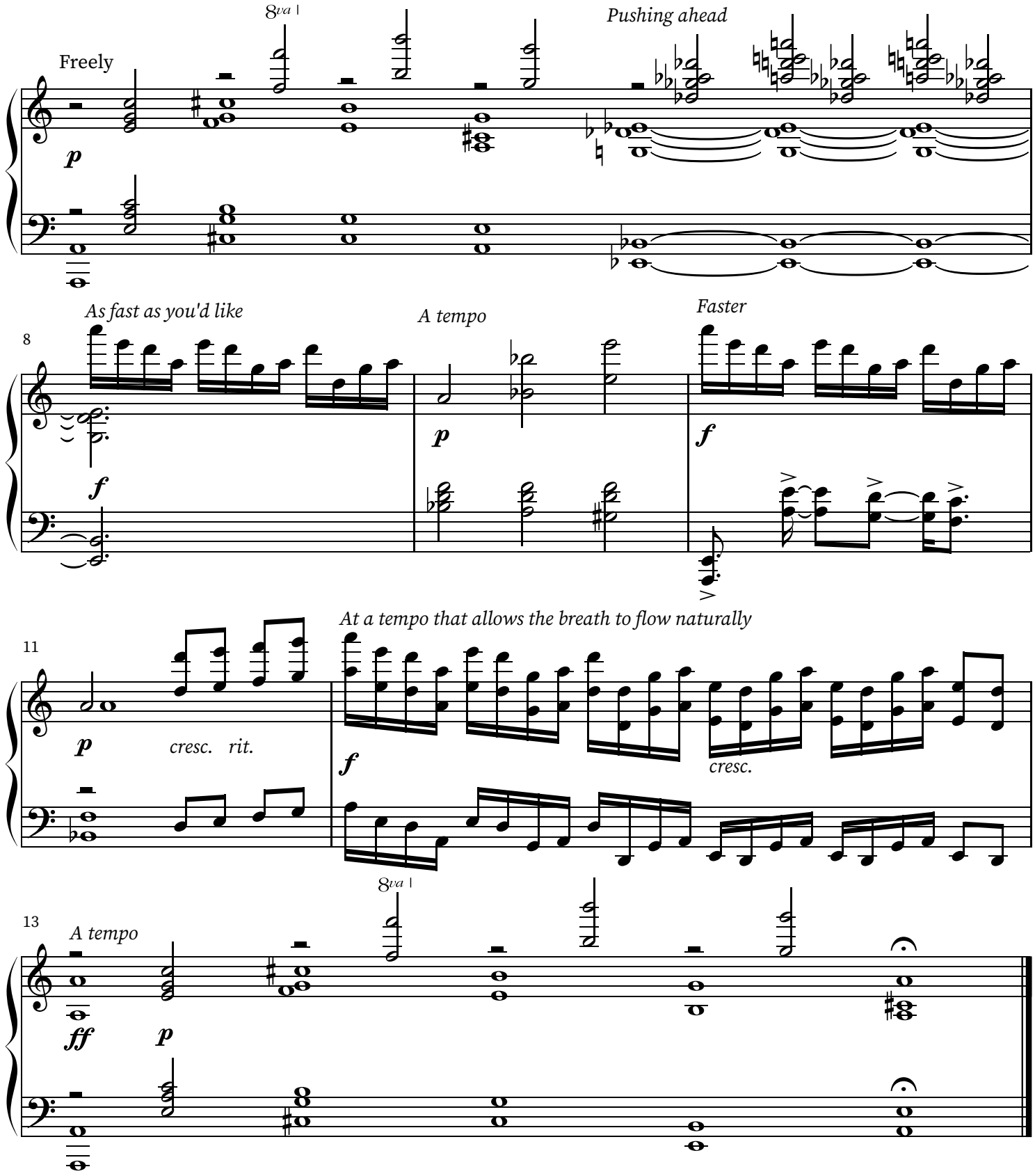
1. Breath Perception



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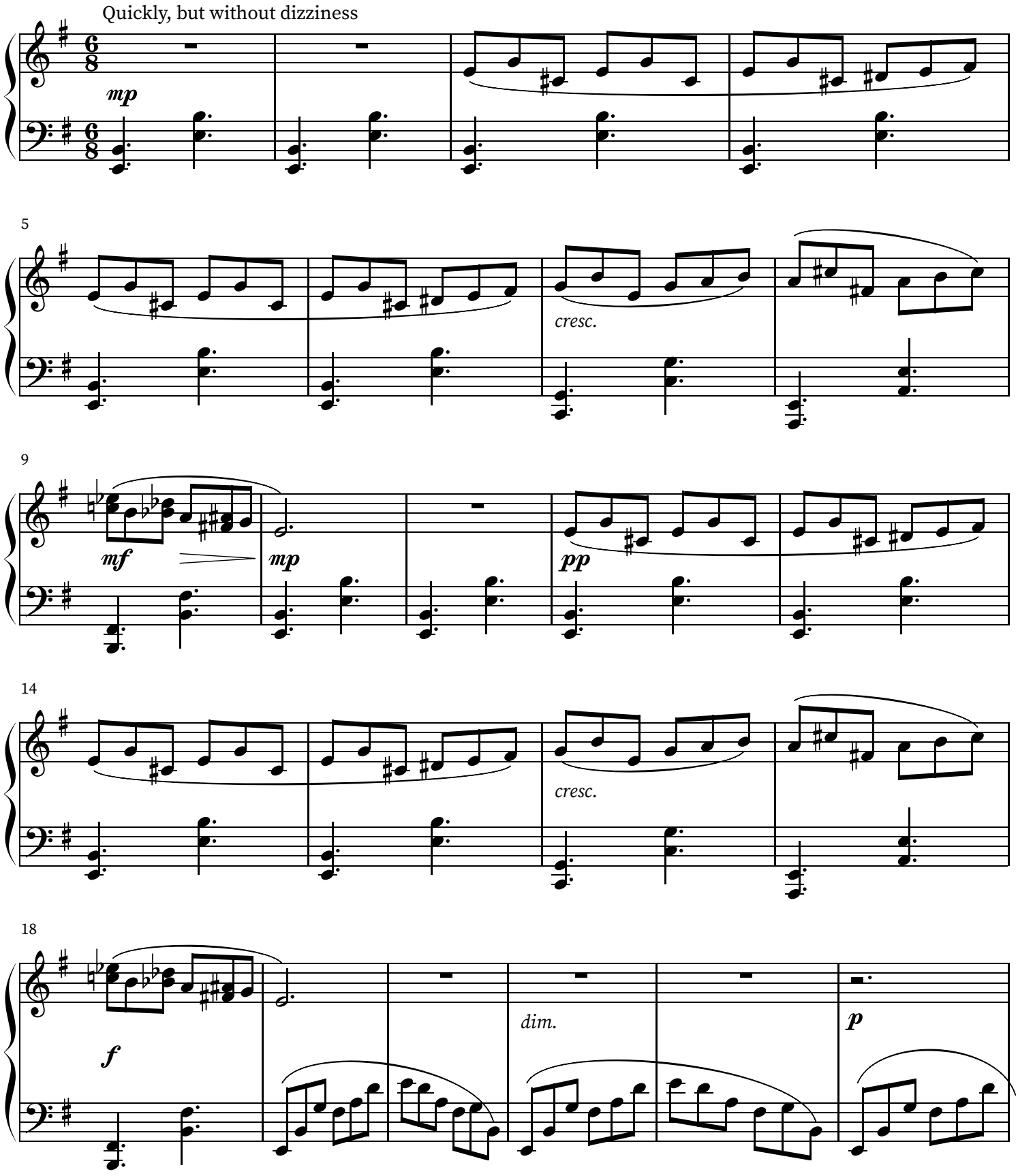
2. Hyperventilation



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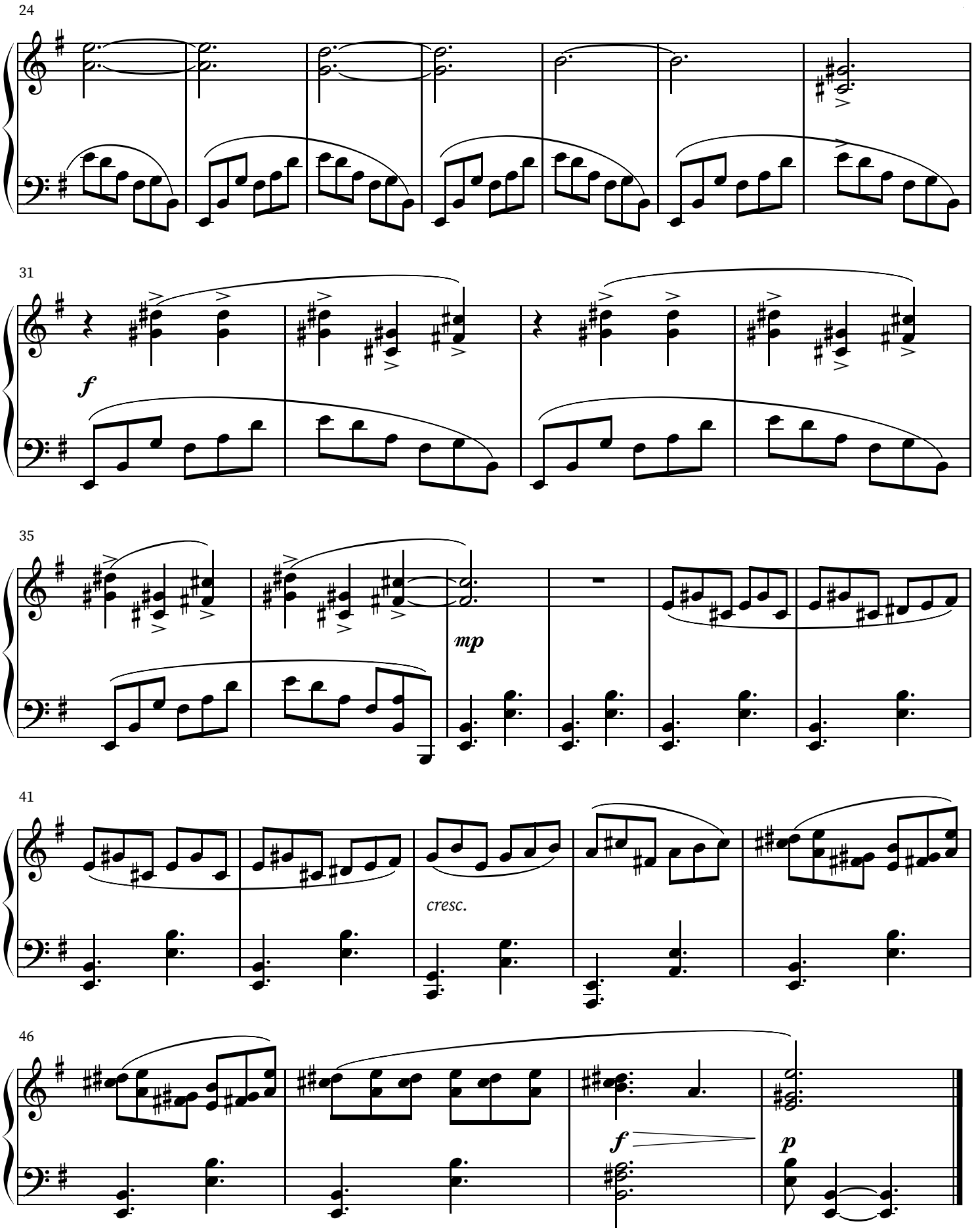

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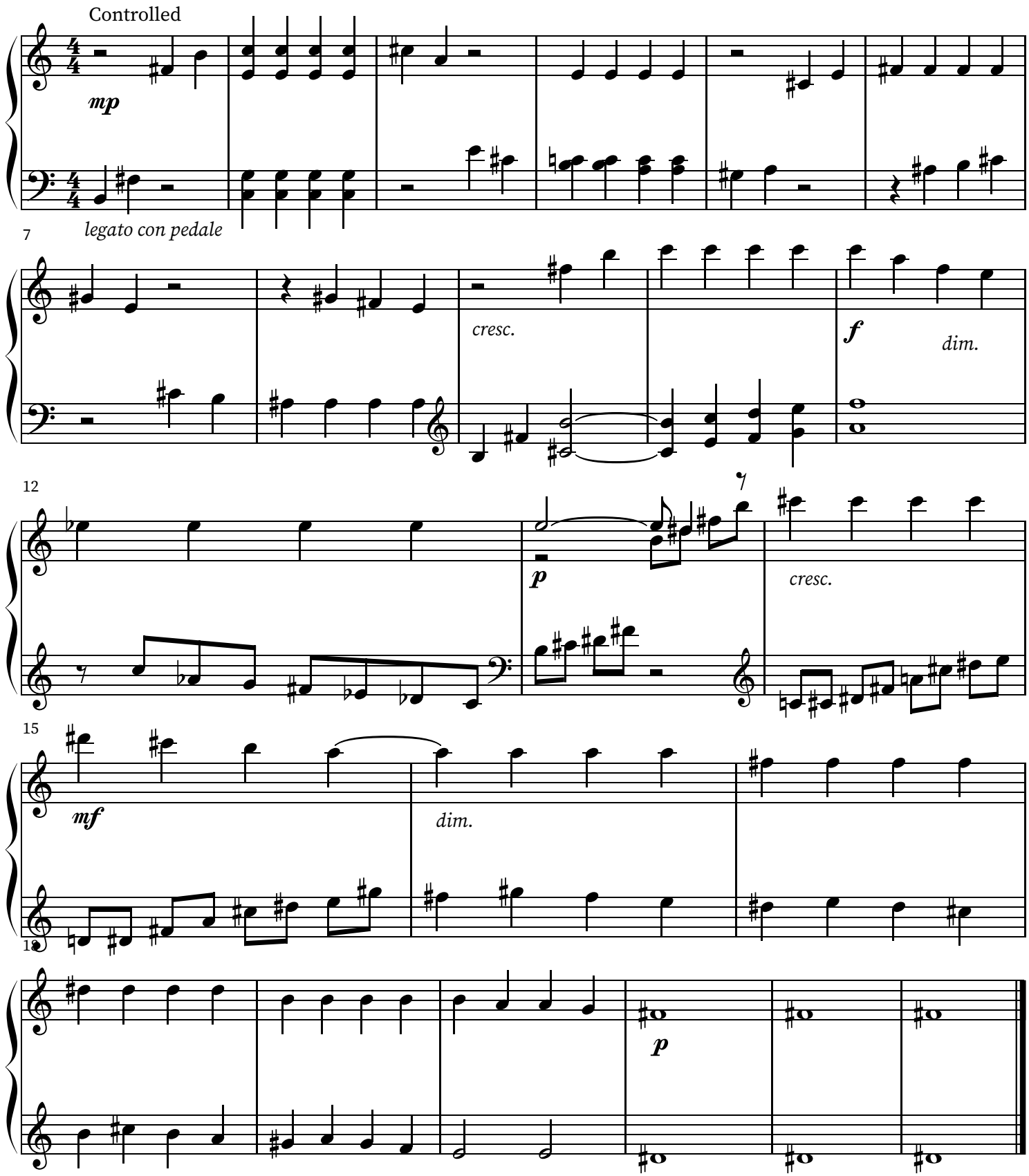
3. A Box for Holding the Breath



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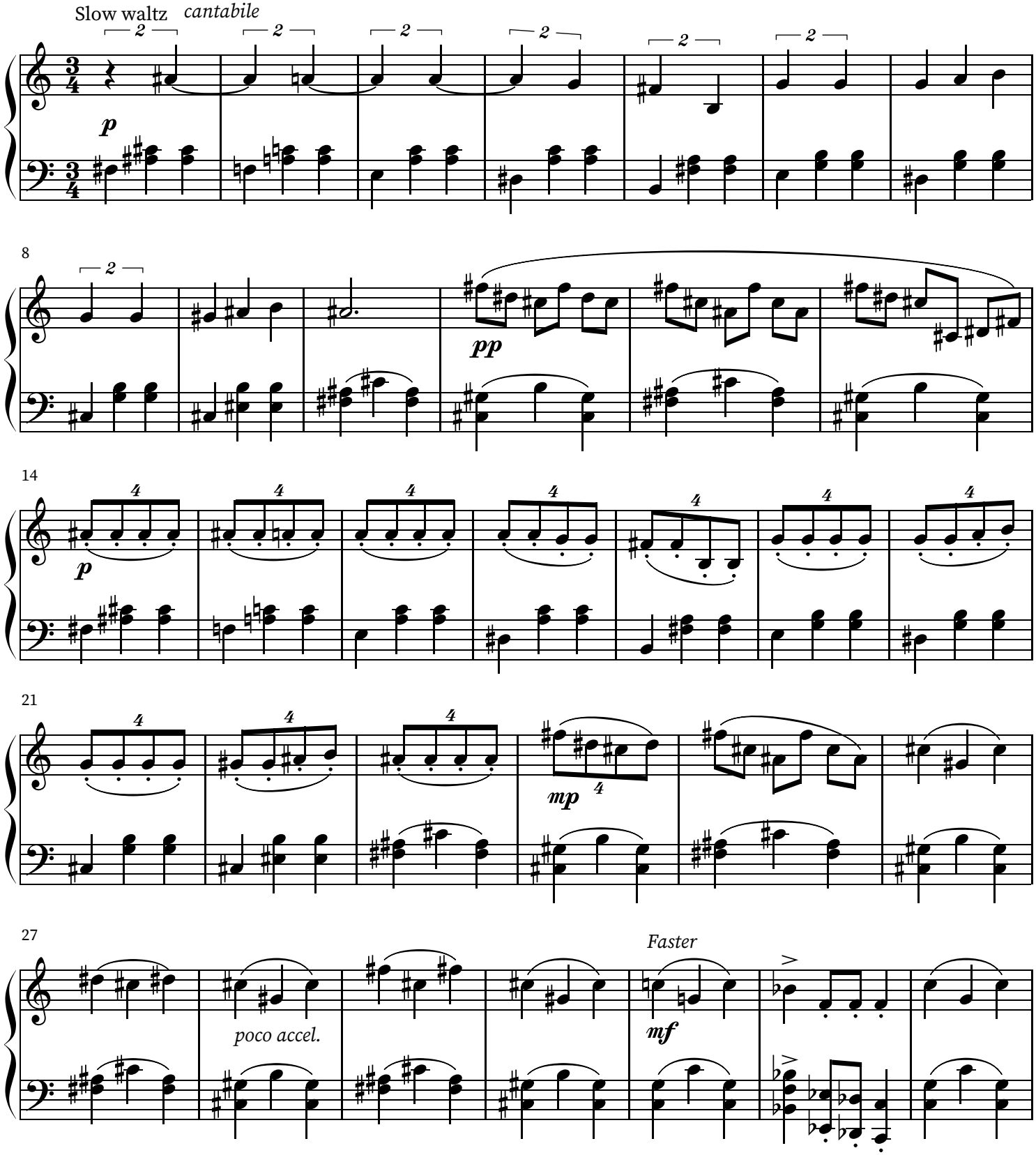
4. Polyrhythmic Breathing



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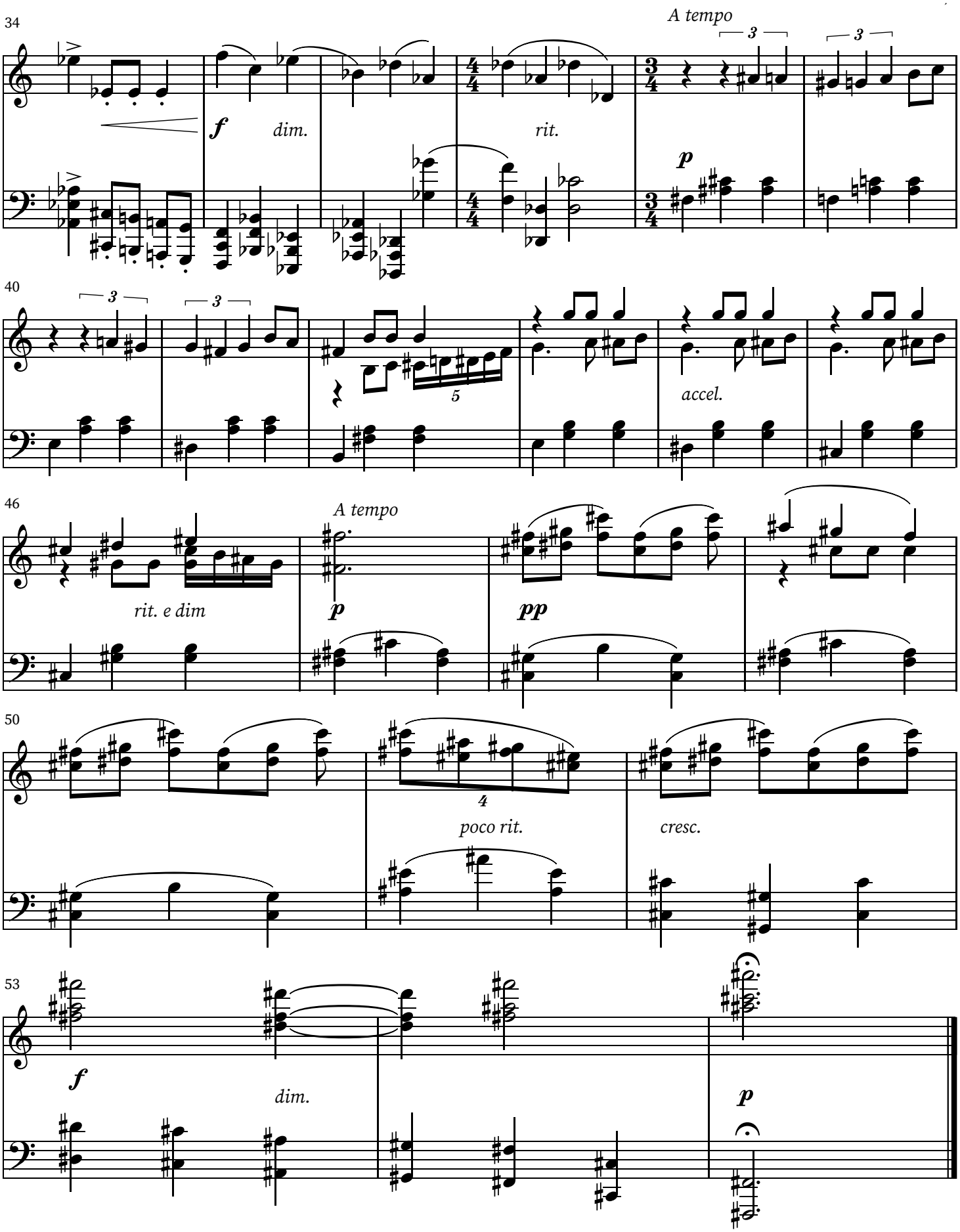

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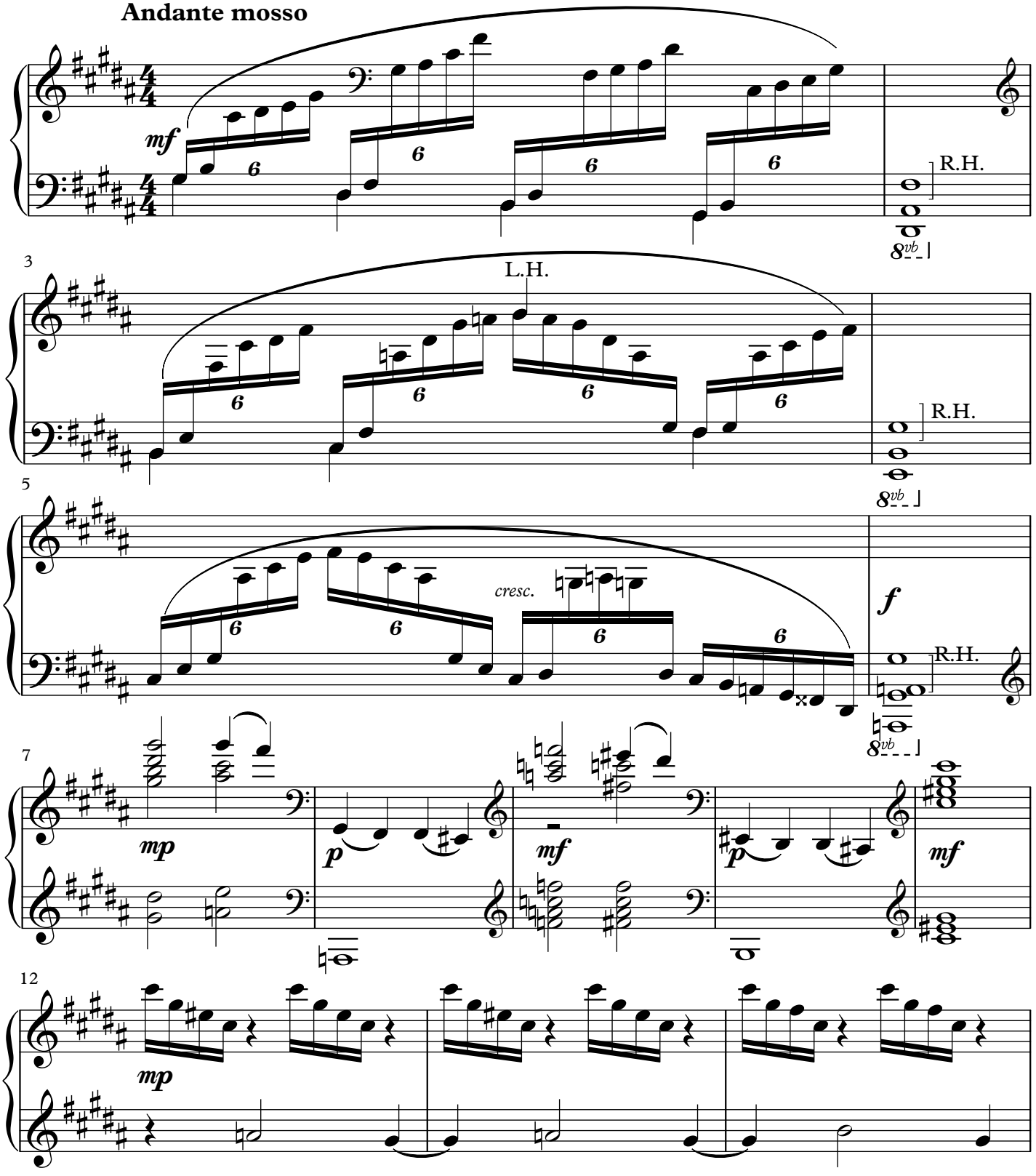
5. To the Left



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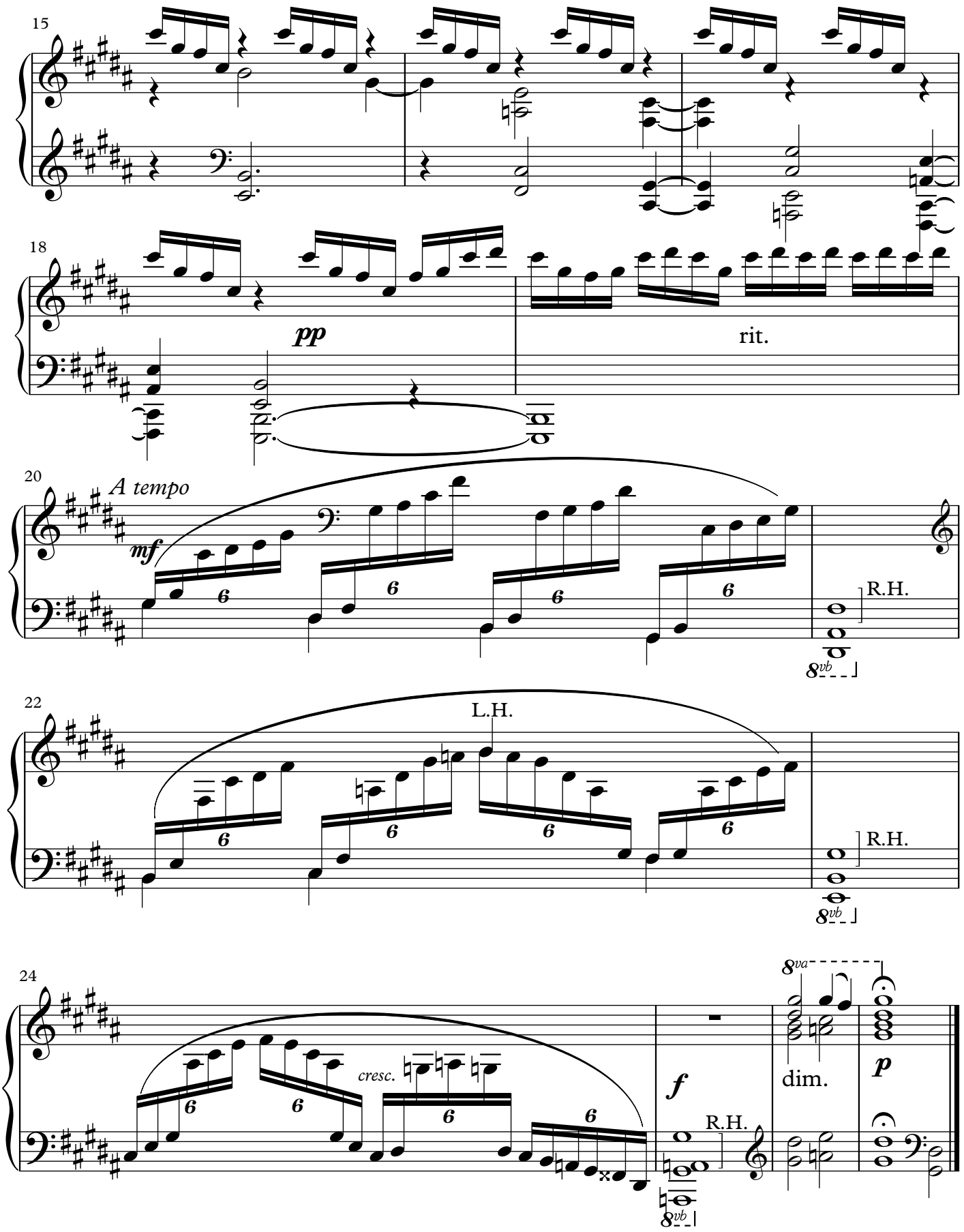

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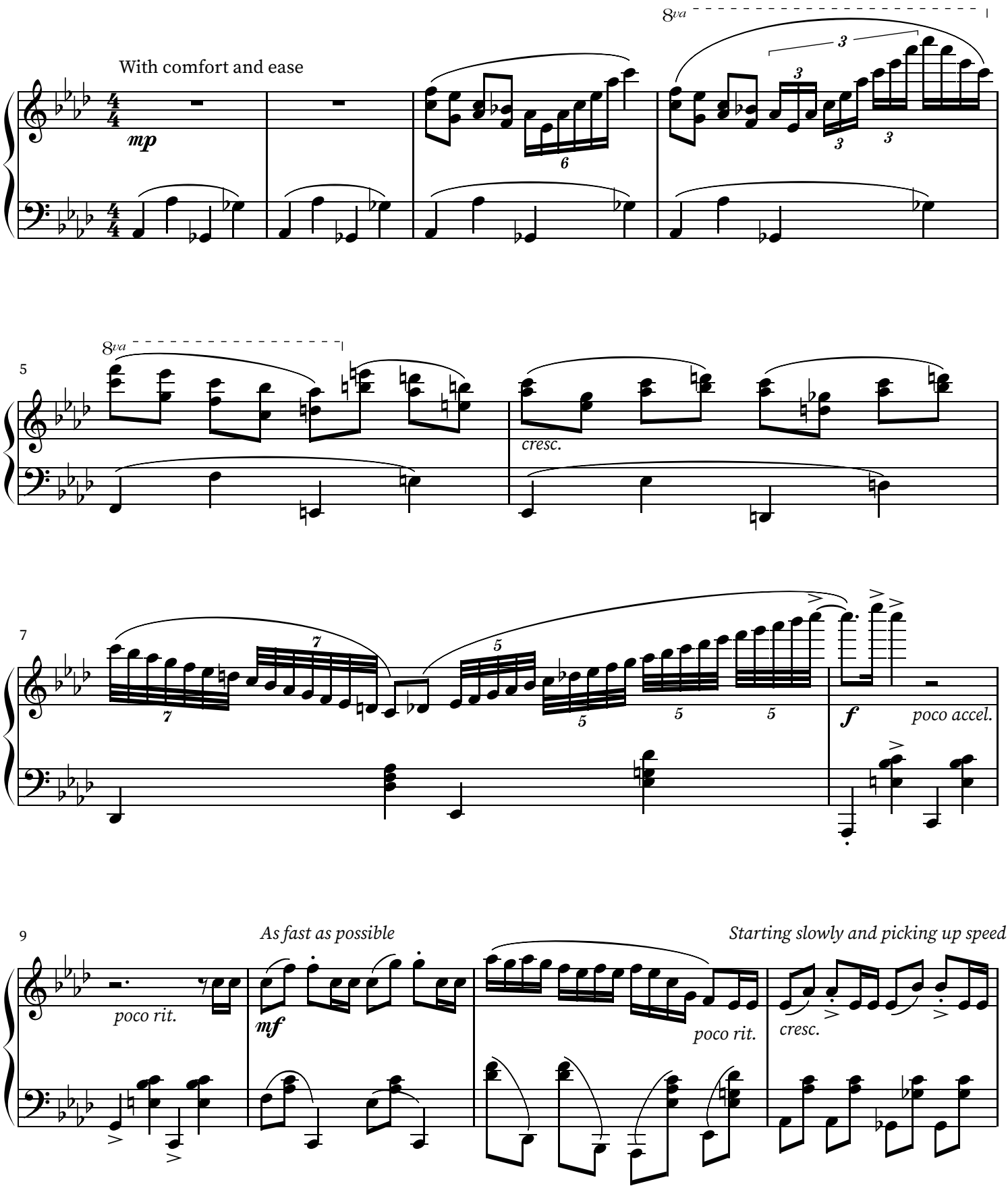
6. Obstacles



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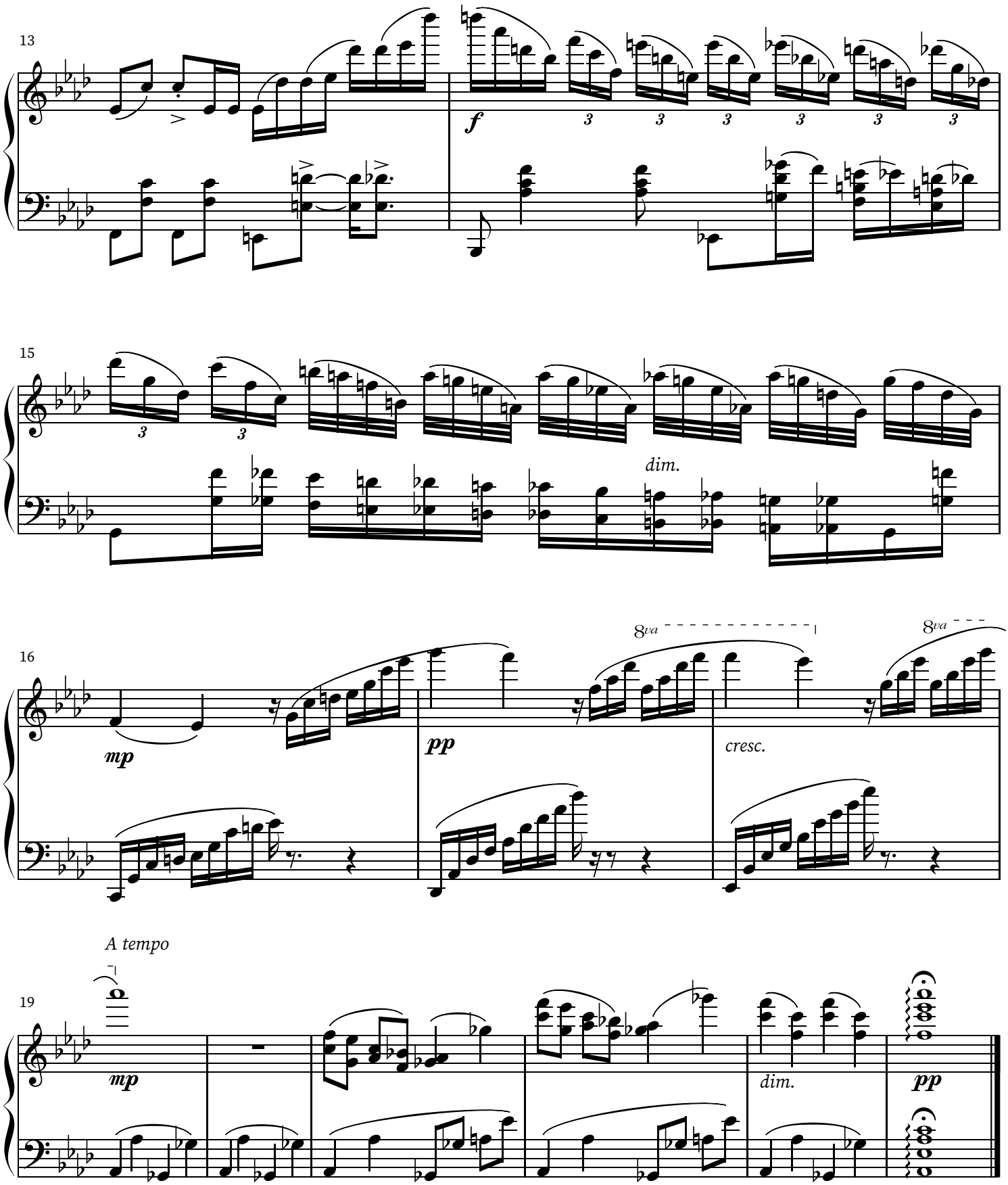

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Outline of Rhythmic Breathing Lesson

Introduction

This is a series of explorations intended to allow us to closely examine the rhythm of the breath. We are meant to breathe in many different ways and breathing is unique to each person. Please don't fuss about doing it the correct way as there is no correct way! There is nothing to achieve in this practice other than increased awareness. These are explorations and not exercises.

Initial Body Scan

1. Notice how you make contact with the floor. As you lie still can you sense some movements of the breath? Where does it originate?
2. Track where the air goes as it fills your lungs.
3. What is the pace of the breath? Choose a tempo marking that best describes the pace of your breath.

Lie on your back with the knees bent and point towards the ceiling, standing on your feet. Begin to roll the left hand on the floor going from palm up to palm down. Make this an easy and continuous movement.

1. Begin to coordinate your breath with the movement of the arm. The arm will turn once as you inhale, and turn again as you exhale.
2. Observe the inhale - which direction do you take the arm as you inhale?
3. Observe the exhale - which direction do you take the arm as you exhale?
4. Make the arm go in the opposite pattern now. Which do you prefer?

Stop the movement and rest your mind. Then begin to turn the arm again, left and right, in coordination with your breath. What is your natural pace?

1. Experiment with different speeds
2. Do it while breathing through the mouth
3. Do it while breathing through the nose
    - Does mouth vs. nose breathing impact the pace of the breath?

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Turn one direction for the inhale and the other direction for the exhale, finding your natural rhythm.

1. Add a hold after the inhale. This hold will be equal to one movement of the arm.
2. Add a hold after the exhale that is equal to one movement of the arm. Now there are four parts to the breath, (inhale-hold-exhale-hold) and each part is equal to one movement of turning the arm.
3. Now make two arm movements per breath movement. (Two per inhale, two per hold, etc.)
4. Now make four arm movements per breath. (Four per inhale, four per hold, etc.)

Lie on your stomach. (If this is uncomfortable you may remain on your back.) If you are on your stomach, rest your forehead on top of the right hand and extend the left hand straight above your head and place the left palm on the floor. (You may modify this position if needed.)

1. Tap the index finger rhymically and use this tapping to measure the four parts of the breath. Try not to interfere with what you naturally do, but simply use the tapping to observe the length of each breathing movement.
2. First observe the inhale. Is there a pause after the inhale?
3. Listen for the inhale. How many taps fit in one inhale? Match the exhalation to the inhalation.
4. Add in the pauses, and do all four parts equally. Inhale-hold-exhale-hold will all be equal in duration.

Return to lying on your back with the knees bent to a standing position. Roll the left palm up and palm down as we did in the beginning. Make one arm movement for each of the four parts of the breath.

1. Notice the sense of ease of this movement now.
2. Is it easier than before, or perhaps it's the same?
3. How can you describe the quality of the movement? Smooth, choppy, even, light, or thick?

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Return to the position on your stomach with the left hand extended above the head with the palm down.

1. Tap the fingers of the left hand in this pattern: 2345. One finger tap will equal one breath movement. (Finger 2=inhale, Finger 3=hold, Finger 4=exhale, finger 5=hold)
2. Notice how the breath is impacted by each individual finger.
3. Try using fingers 1234 and 5432 and choose the finger pattern that suits you.
4. Now tap two fingers for each breath part (Inhale while tapping finger 2 then 3, hold while tapping finger 4 then 5, etc.)

Return to lying on your back. Tap the whole hand in slow three beat groupings.

1. Inhale on the first count, and exhale on the “and” of beat 2.
2. Exhale on beat 1 and inhale on the “and” of beat 2.
    - Do you prefer to inhale or exhale on beat one?

Return to the initial movement of rolling the left hand and forearm on the floor. Make four movements for each part of the breath. Focus on the exhale. Exhale while opening the mouth and saying ahhh. Feel the effect this has on the upper chest area.

1. Shift your weight to the left by slightly tilting the knees or rolling the pelvis left. Focus on the exhale. Breathe out with an open mouth saying “ahhh”.
2. Shift your weight to the right by slightly tilting the knees or rolling the pelvis. Focus on the exhale. Breathe out saying” ahhh.”
    - Notice the differences between the two sides.

Final Body Scan

1. Before you get up, take note again of your contact with the floor and observe your mood and overall physical, mental, and emotional state.
2. Slowly move to standing and walking. While you walk, notice the length of your arms and the rhythm of your breath.
3. The next step is to take what we’ve explored back to the piano.

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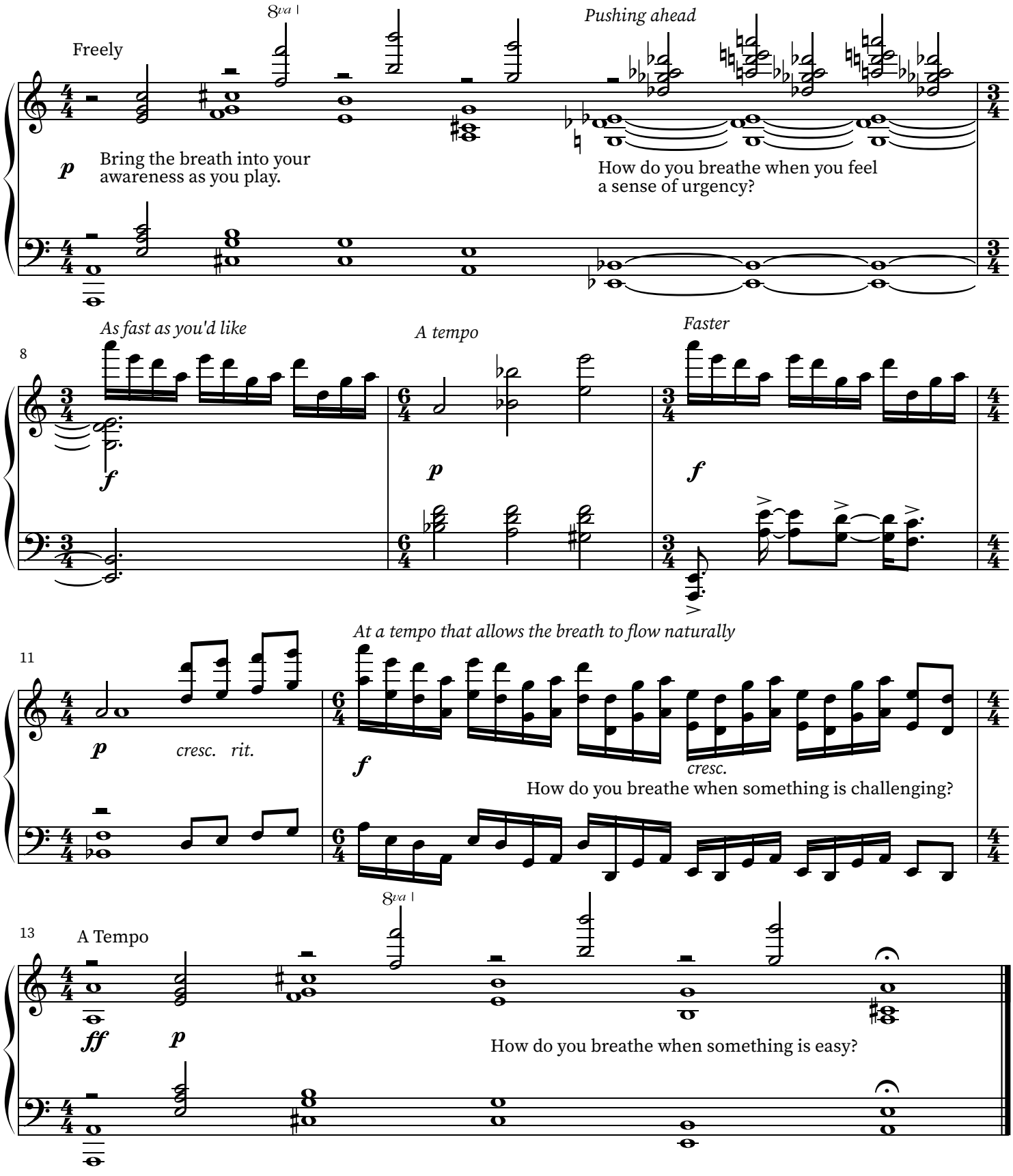
1. Breath Perception



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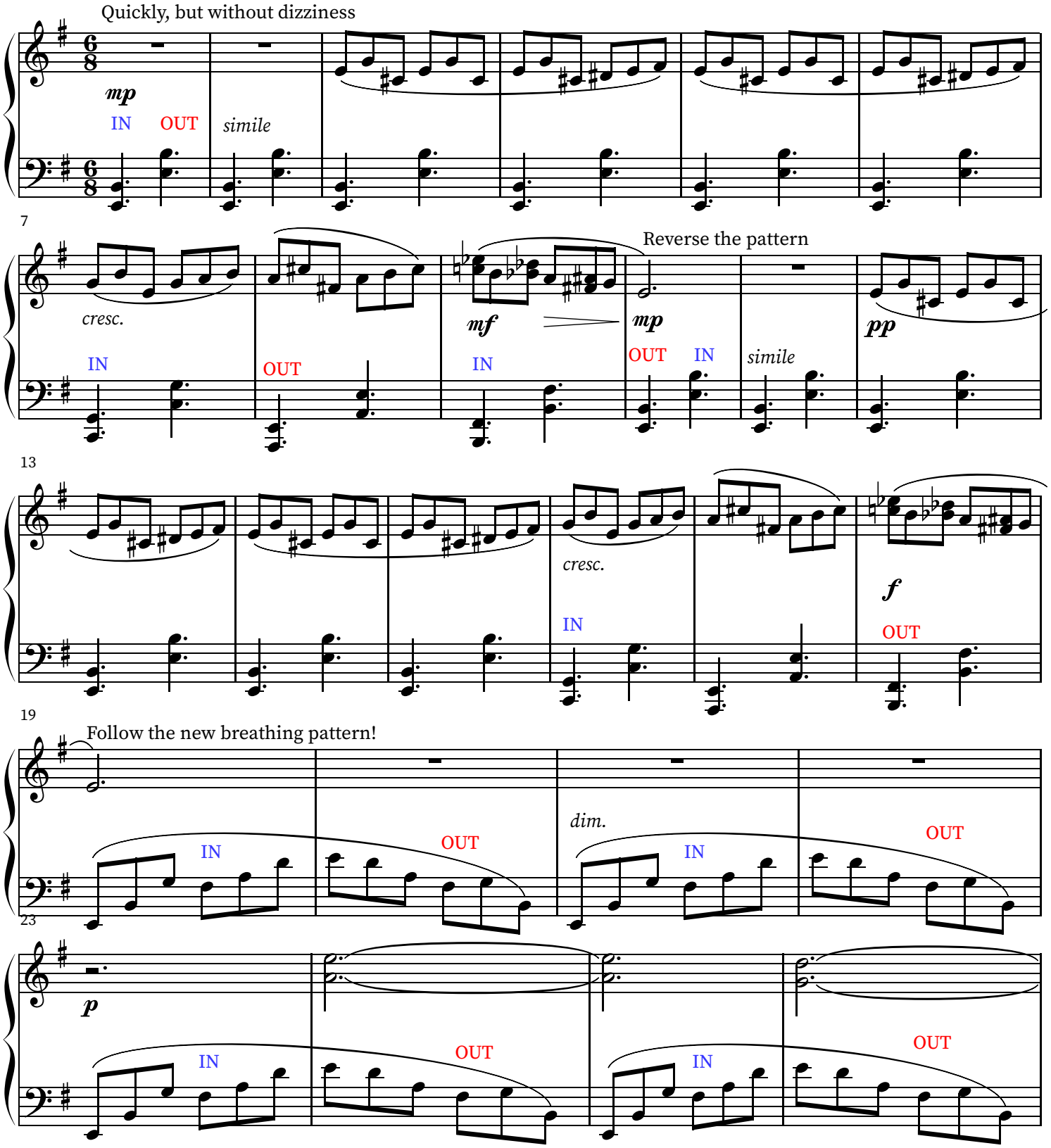
2. Hyperventilation



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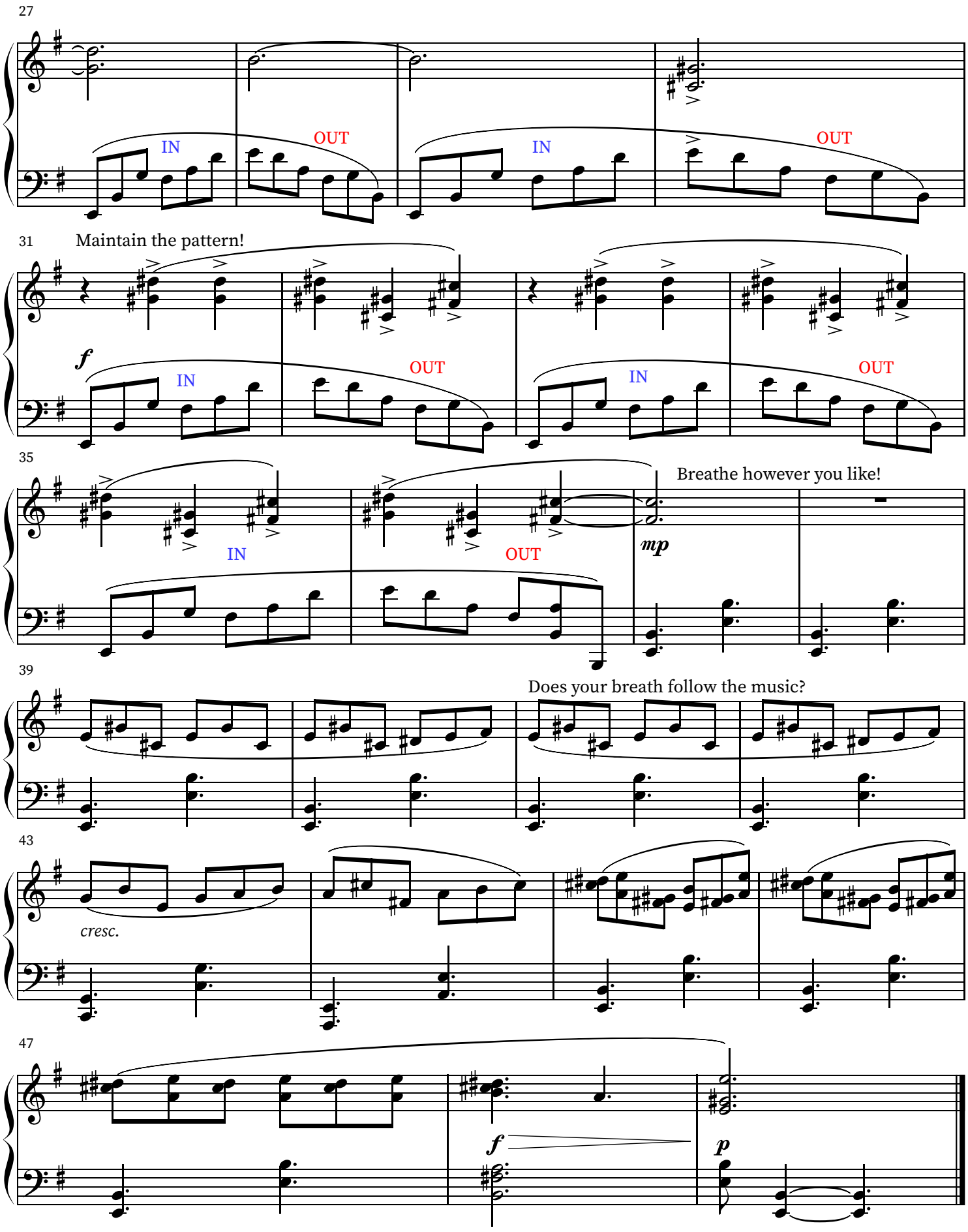

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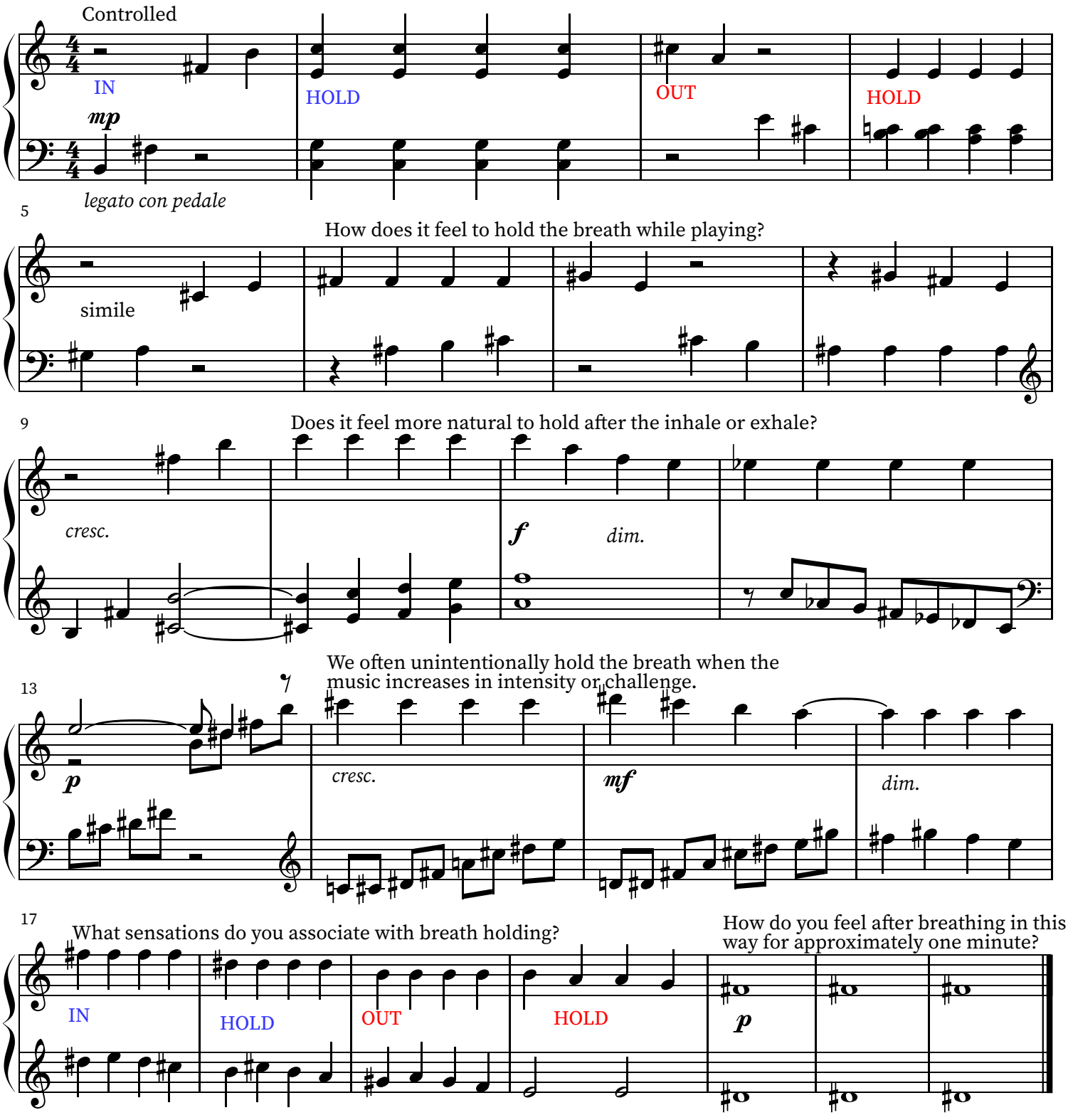
3. A Box for Holding the Breath



This 4-4-4-4 breath pattern can been used to calm the nervous system and is sometimes called square breathing or box breathing.

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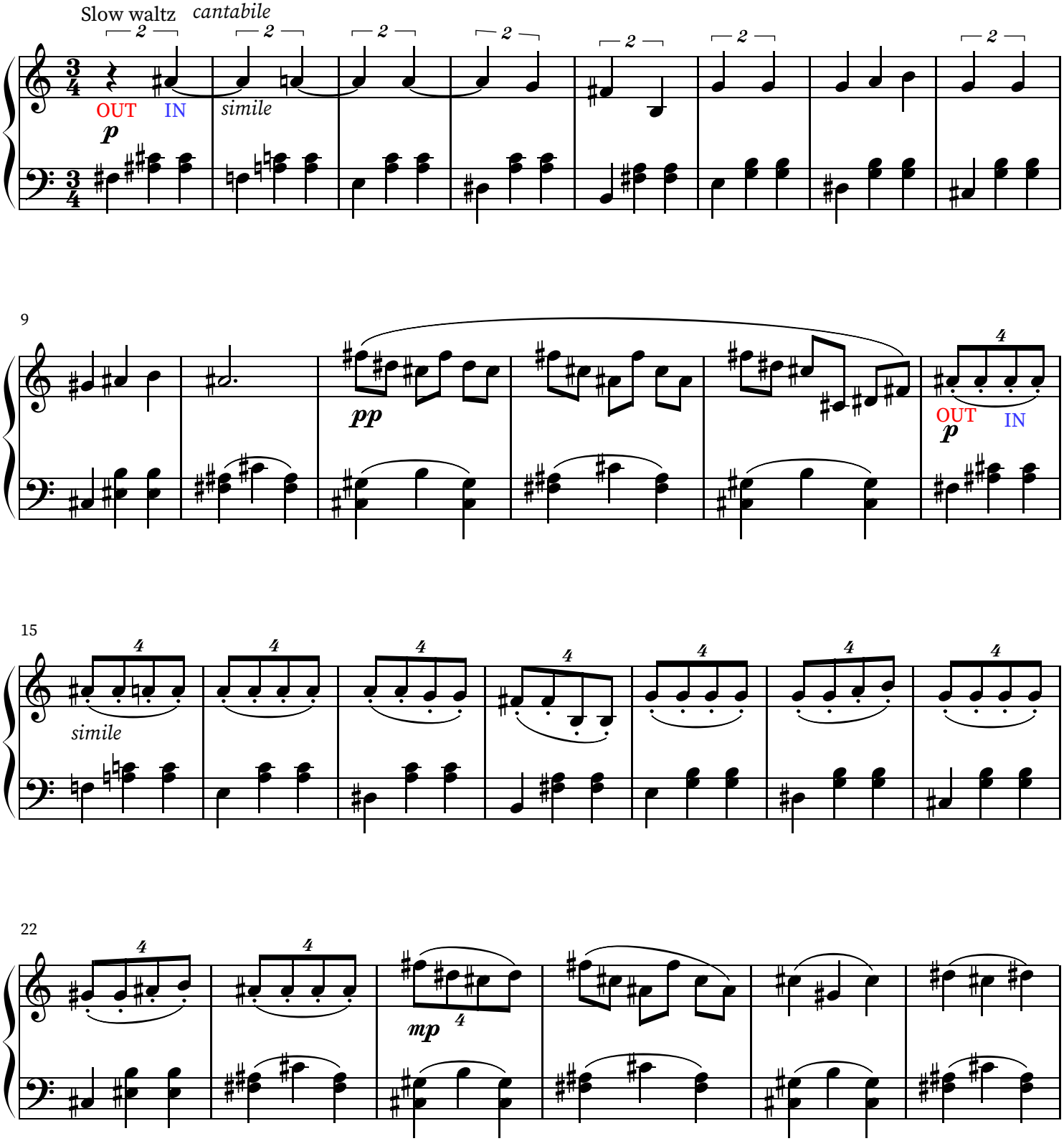
4. Polyrhythmic Breathing



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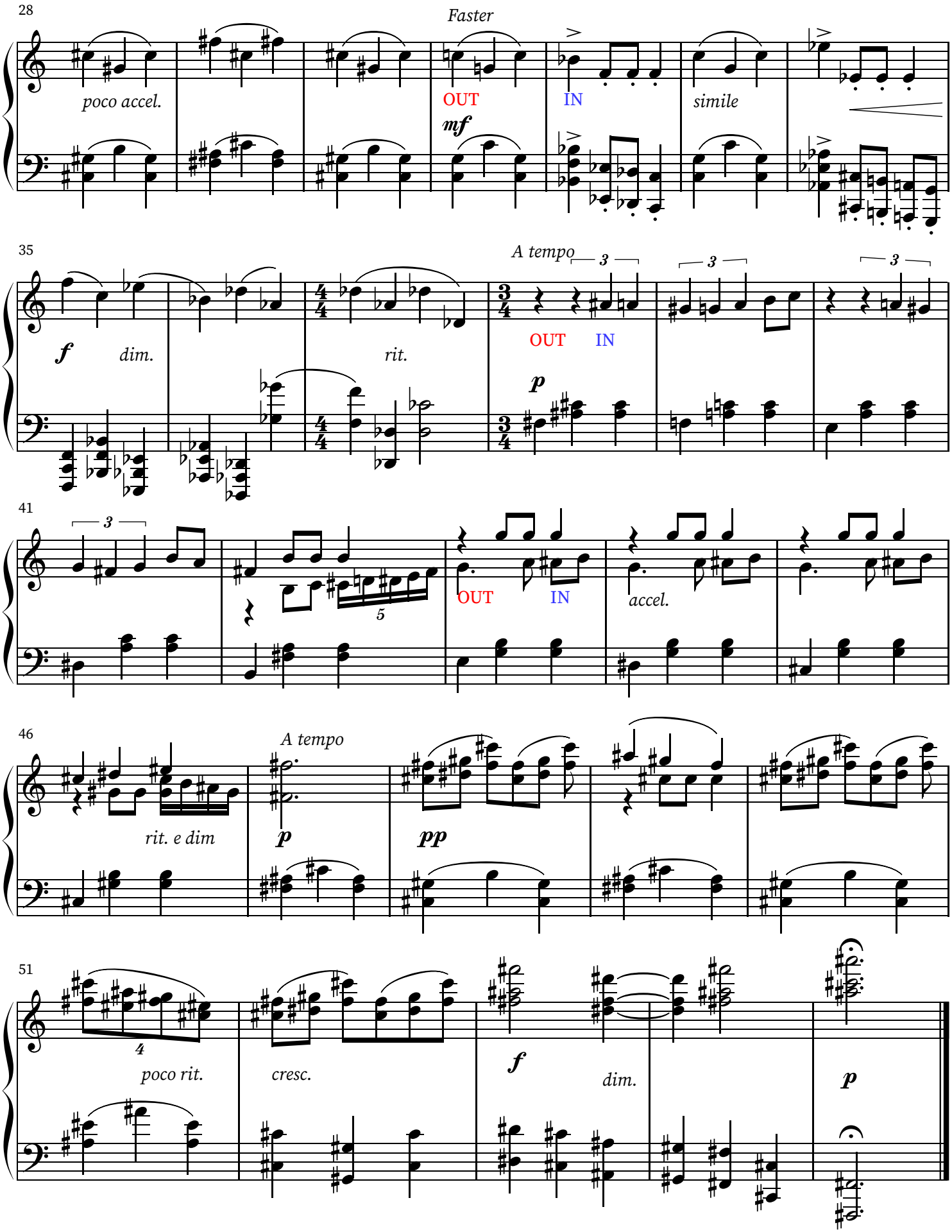

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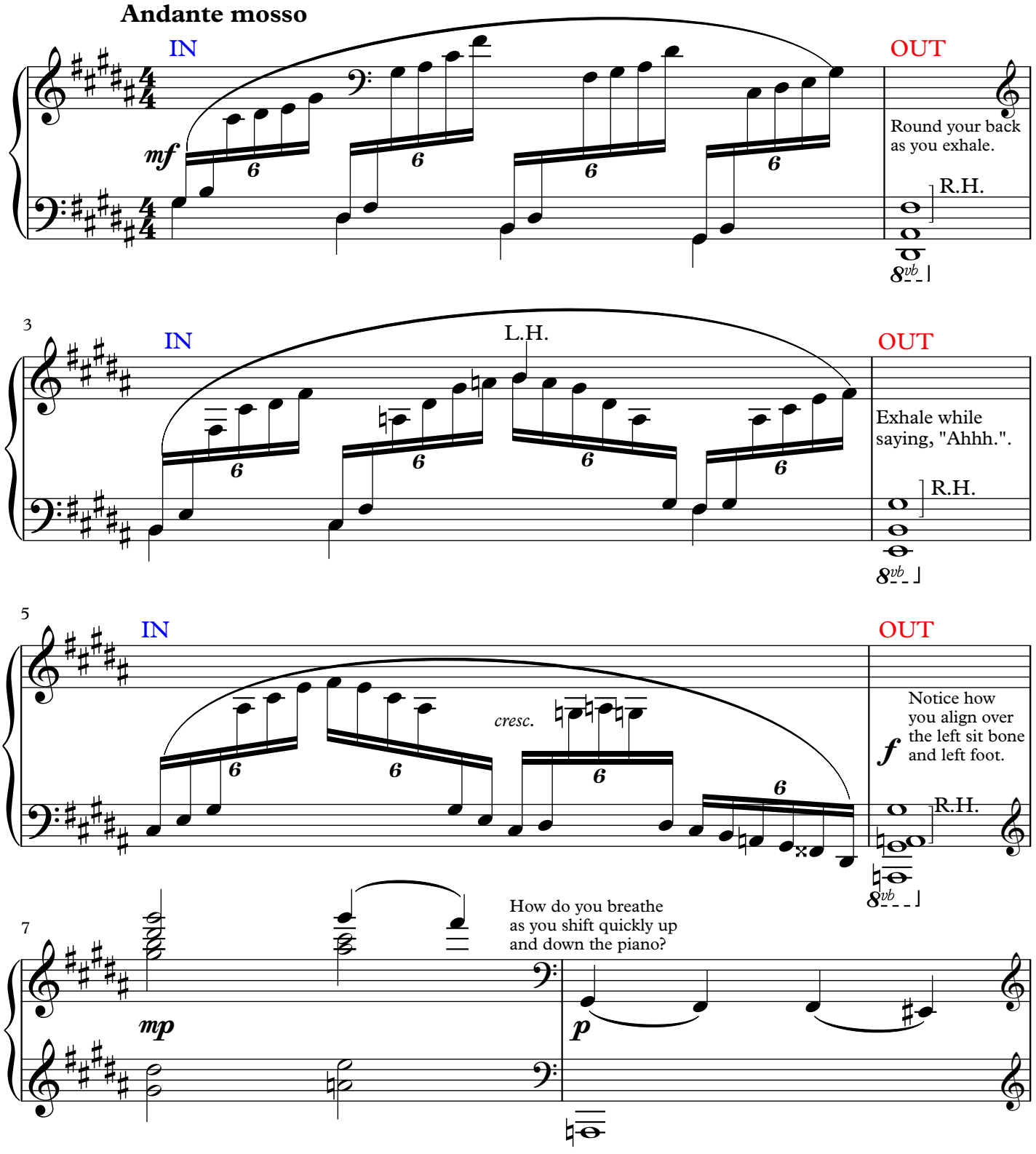
5. To the Left



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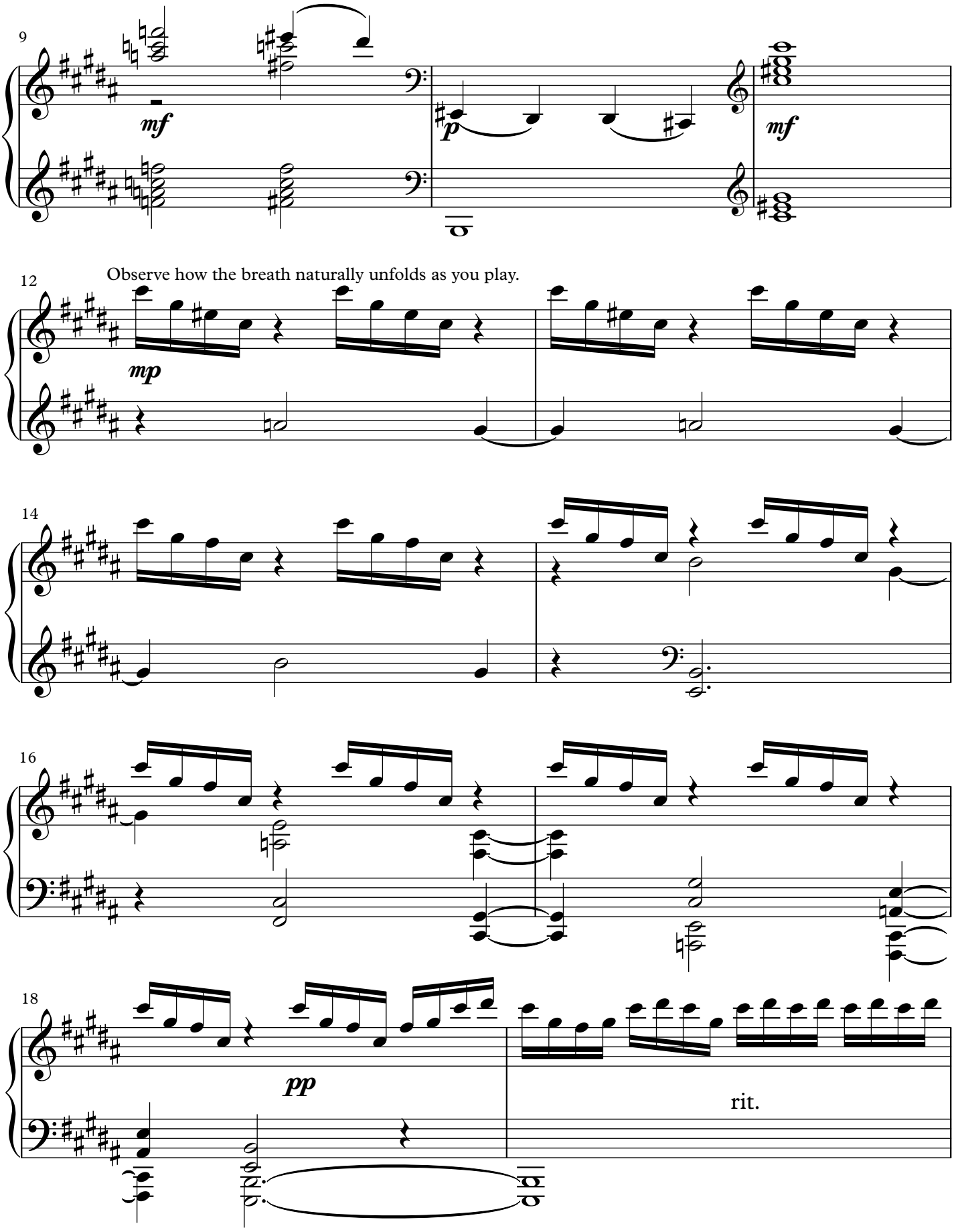

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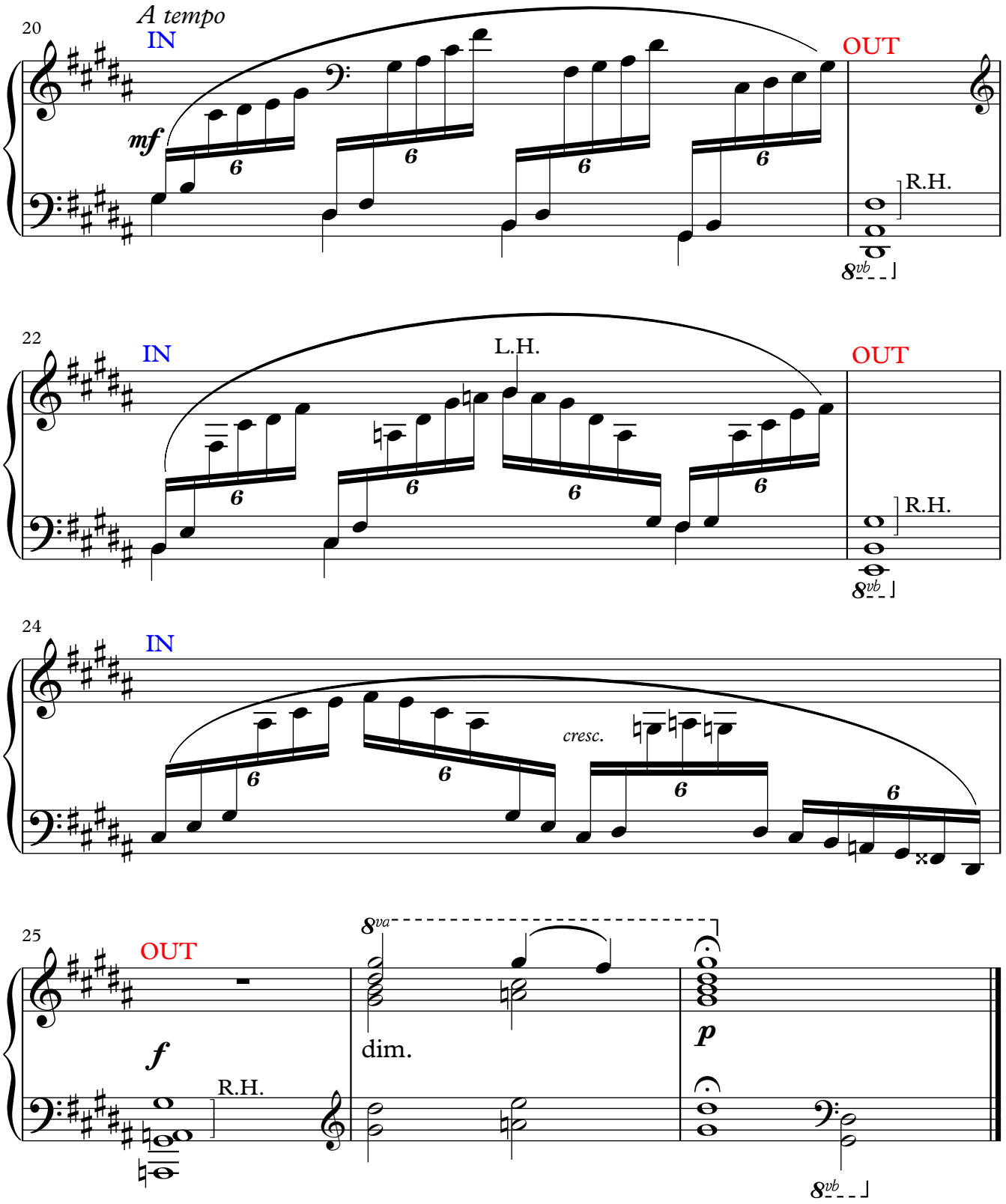

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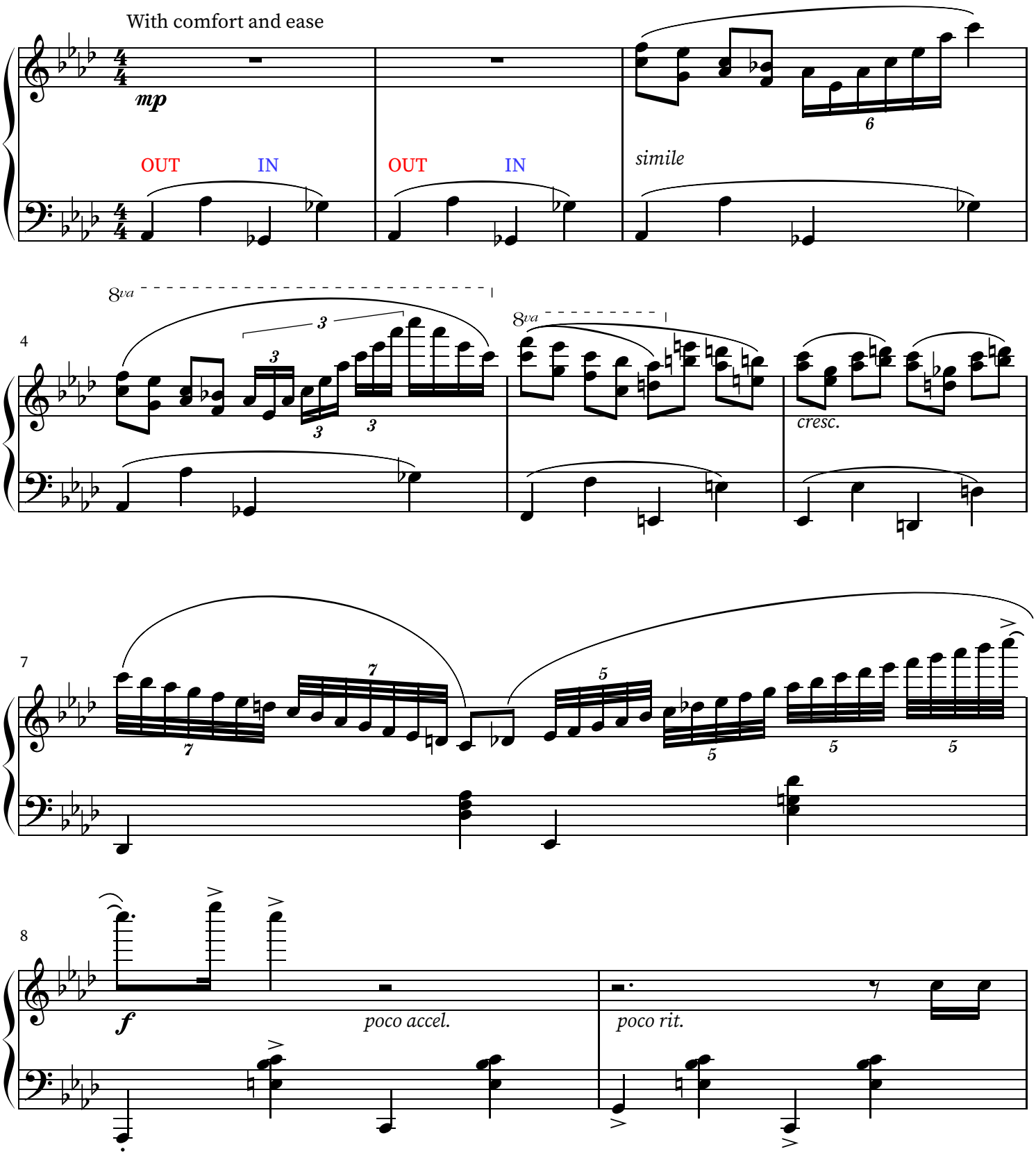
6. Obstacles



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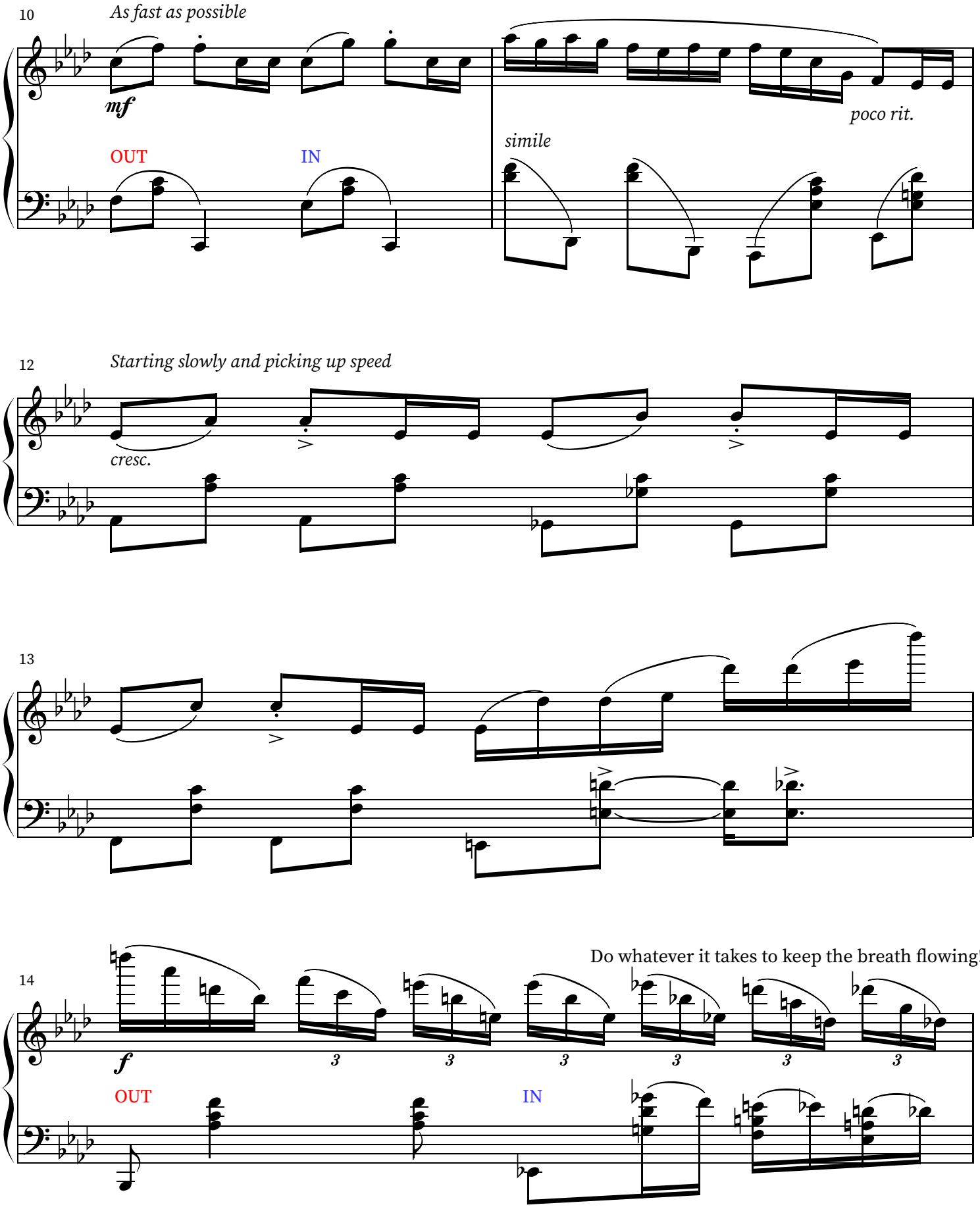

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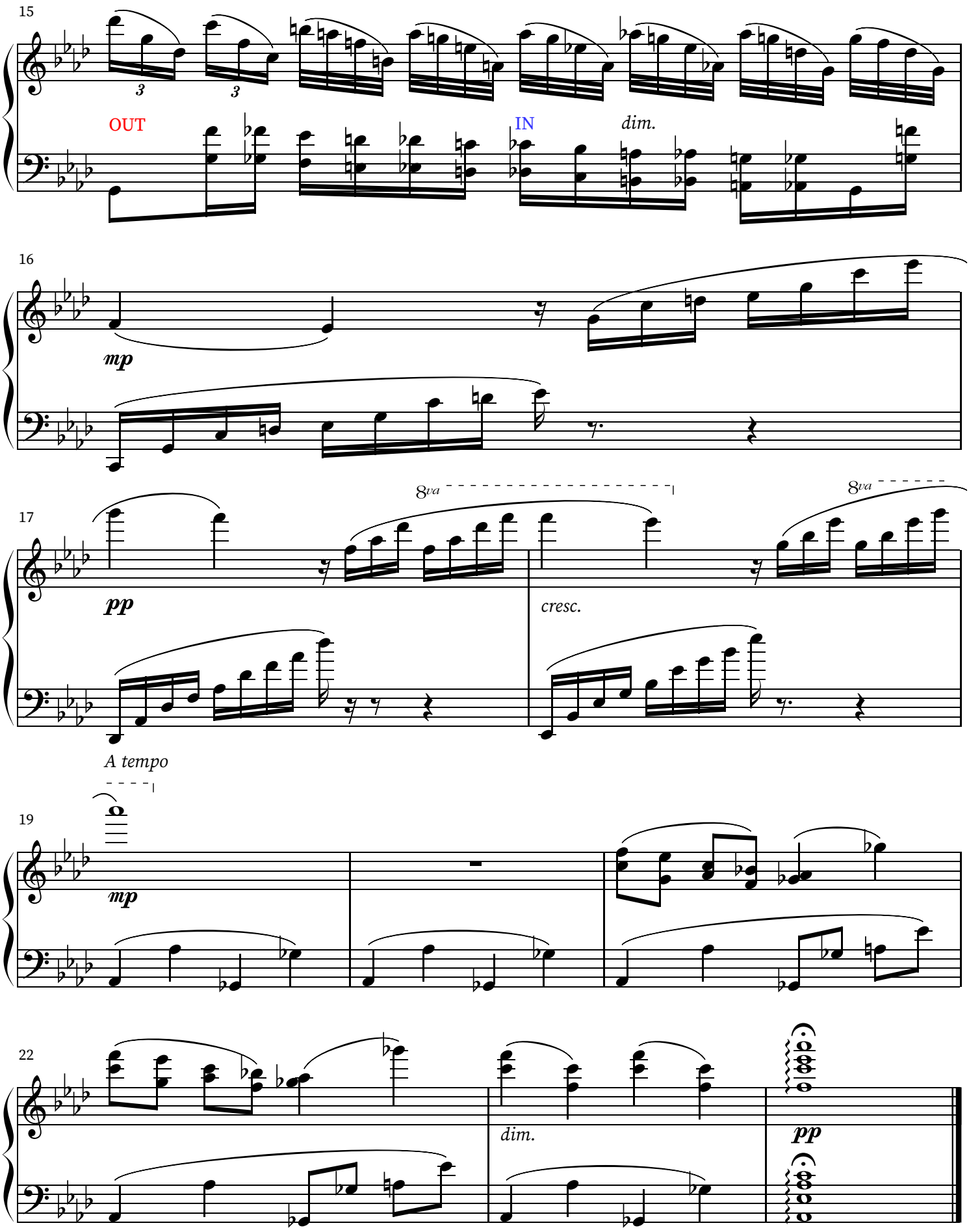

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