Cesare Pugni:
Esmeralda and *Le Violon du diable*

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Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Cesare Pugni: *Esmeralda* and *Le Violon du diable*,
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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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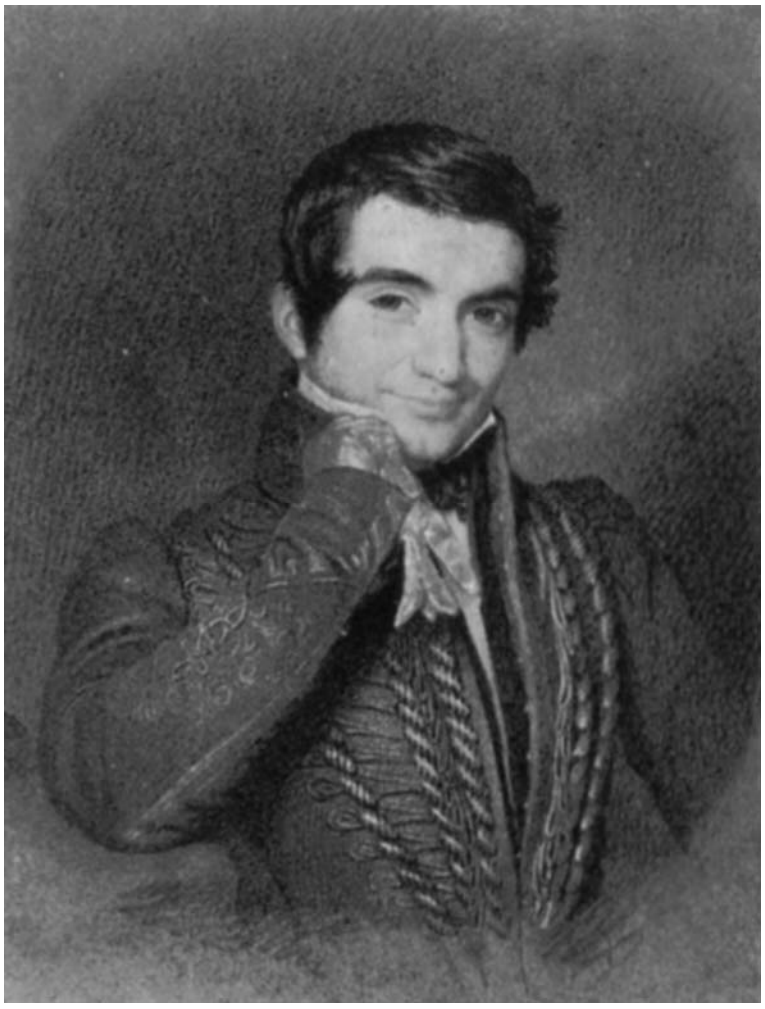
ISBN (10): 1-4438-3608-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3608-1



Cesare Pugni in London (c. 1845)

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INTRODUCTION

Esmeralda

Ballet in 3 acts and 5 scenes
Scenario and choreography: Jules Perrot
Music: Cesare Pugni
Sets: William Grieve
Costumes: Mme Copère
Machinery: D. Sloman
First performance: London, Her Majesty's Theatre, 9 March 1844
Principal dancers: Carlotta Grisi (Esmeralda), Jules Perrot (Pierre Gringoire), Arthur Saint-Léon (Febo), Louis-François Gosselin (Claude Frollo), Antoine-Louis Coulon (Quasimodo), Adelaide Frassi (Fleur-de-Lys), Mme Copère (Aloisa)

The ballet is based on the story of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), somewhat altered and without the final catastrophe. It depicts the hopeless love of the deaf and hunchbacked Quasimodo for the gypsy girl Esmeralda. She has inadvertently become the wife of the student poet Gringoire during the follies of the Cour de Miracles, and is also being pursued by the evil archdeacon Claude Frollo. Her principal rescuer from Frollo's attempted abduction is the handsome Captain Phoebus, with whom Esmeralda falls in love. Frollo's jealous intrigues cause her to be accused of murder, and she is awaiting execution when Quasimodo exposes Frollo as the real villain. The early versions of the ballet have this happy ending.

The poet Gringoire is captured by pickpockets and taken to their lair, 'the Court of Miracles'. There he is condemned to be hanged for the crime of having no money in his pockets. He will be reprieved only if some woman among those present will consent to marry him. The young Esmeralda, moved to pity, consents to the bargain, but the archdeacon of Notre Dame de Paris, Claude Frollo, enamoured of her, plans to possess her that very night. The gang who have taken them prisoner, together with Frollo's servant and henchman the hunchbacked Quasimodo, are foiled by the arrival of the officer Captain Phoebus. Love between Phoebus and Esmeralda blossoms immediately, although he is engaged to marry Fleur-de-Lys. Esmeralda and her husband Gringoire are invited to dance at the wedding as an entertainment. Forgetting all prudence, Esmeralda and Phoebus turn towards each other, and dance together to the despair of the bride and the indignation of the guests. Leaving the crowd, they declare their mutual love. Frollo, who has been watching unseen, throws himself at Phoebus, and stabs him. Esmeralda is accused of Phoebus' murder, and condemned to death. Just as the gallows are being erected, Phoebus appears. Frollo's blow was not mortal after all. Reunited with him, Esmeralda shows the crowd who the real villain is.

The ballet was reasonably successful, and Carlotta Grisi was pronounced the perfect personification of Esmeralda, combining the innocent gaiety of Fanny Cerrito, the sparkling coquetry of Fanny Elssler, and the ineffable poetry of Marie Taglioni. A year after the London premiere, Grisi introduced two of the variations from *Esmeralda* into Mazilier's *Le Diable à quatre*. Another great Esmeralda, especially praised for her superlative dramatic interpretation, was Fanny Elssler, prima ballerina of the first performance in St Petersburg on 21 December 1848. Her partners were Didier (Quasimodo), Perrot (Gringoire), and Golts (Frollo). Elssler chose the part again for her farewell performance at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in March 1851. Cyril Beaumont recounted an

anecdote passed on by Prince Egalytchev, who was an eyewitness on that occasion. So many bouquets, over 300, were thrown on the stage at the end of the first act that Elssler used them in place of a sofa in the second. In this act she used to write her lover's name, Febo, on a wall in chalk, instead of composing it with cut-out letters according to established tradition. But that evening the ballerina wrote Moscow in Cyrillic letters ('Mockba') which set off an ovation that seemed endless.

Esmeralda was in the vein of historical romantic dance that had given rise to *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*. It was almost half a century before this vein was exhausted, lasting into the Second Empire until the death of Saint-Léon, one of the leading figures of the last phase of the Romantic ballet. In spite of the great interpretive opportunities it offered, *Esmeralda* made little enduring impression in England, France and Italy. On the other hand, when it reached Russia, it immediately established itself in the repertory. The ballet became immensely popular and was repeatedly revived and adapted. Fanny Elssler enjoyed one of her biggest triumphs in the title role. Among other distinguished ballerinas who danced the role were Marie Petipa, Carolina Rosati, Nadejda Bogdanova, Claudia Cucchi, Eugenia Sokolova, Virginia Zucchi, and Matilda Kschessinskaya. For the production of 1888 by Marius Petipa, Riccardo Drigo was asked to compose several new numbers, including the *Esmeralda* Pas de Deux and the Diana and Acteon Pas de Deux. These became very popular in their own right.

Other notable versions of the ballet include:

1) Arthur Saint-Léon (after Jules Perrot), Berlin, Court Theatre, 19 January 1847;
2) Hippolyte Monplaisir (after Perrot), New York, Park Theater, 18 September 1847;
3) Domenico Ronzani (after Perrot), Milan, La Scala, 31 January 1854; with scenery by Filippo Peroni and Luigi Vimercati; principal dancers: Caroline Pochini, Effisio Catte, Domenico Rossi;
4) Ferdinando Pratesi (after Perrot), Milan Canobbiana Theatre, spring 1865;
5) Marius Petipa (after Perrot), St Petersburg, Bolshoi Theatre, 17 December 1886; then at the Maryinsky Theatre, 21 November 1899;
6) Agrippina Vaganova (after Perrot), Leningrad, Kirov Theatre, 3 April 1935, with scenery by V. Khodasevich;
7) Nicholas Beriozoff (from the original), London, Festival Hall, 15 July 1954; scenery Nicola Benois; principal dancers: Nathalie Krassovska, John Gilpin, Anton Dolin, London Festival Ballet.

Cesare Pugni was born in Genoa on 31 May 1802, and studied in Milan from 1815 to 1822 with Antonio Rollo and Bonifazio Asioli. He made his debut as a composer at La Scala in 1826 with the opera *Elerz e Zulmida*. He became a cymbalist in the theatre orchestra, and on the death of Vincenzo Lavigna was appointed musical director. He later moved to Paris where he became director of the Paganini Institute. There he met the great choreographers of the time and started an artistic collaboration that was to prove one of the most productive in the history of ballet. He began working closely with Jules Perrot, first in Paris, then in London. He later followed him to St Petersburg and became official composer of the Imperial theatres in St Petersburg. His most famous collaboration, with Marius Petipa, now followed, lasting until his death on 26 January 1870.

Pugni is known above all for his enormous output of musical works, including more than 300 ballets, a dozen operas, over 40 masses, other polyphonic works and a few symphonies, among which was a *Sinfonia a canone* highly praised by Meyerbeer. This extremely prolific composer was very popular with the public, his ballets being so easy to to listen to and to understand. He also found no difficulty in adapting his music to suit all sorts of choreographic needs, and many different performers. His versatility and facility in composition helped him succeed in his international career, even when they set limits on his artistic achievement. His time in Paris with

Perrot was marked by an extraordinarily intense activity, which became even more evident when he reached Her Majesty's Theatre in London. Here Pugni presented some of the most renowned ballets of the 19th century, such as *Esmeralda* and the *Pas de Quatre* (in 1844 and 1845 respectively), which still find their place in some modern repertories. He also worked with Saint-Léon, Paolo Taglioni, Marius Petipa, and some of the greatest dancers of the century. Some of his ballets already well-known in Europe were transferred to St Petersburg, although he also composed new ballets for that city.

Jules Perrot & Carlotta Grisi in *Esmeralda*

Le Violon du diable

Fantastic Ballet in 2 acts
Scenario and choreography: Arthur Saint-Léon
Music: Cesare Pugni
Sets: Despléchins and Thierry
Costumes: Lormier
First performance: Paris Opéra, 19 January 1849, with Fanny Cerrito, Arthur Saint-Léon and Jean Coralli

Urbain, a young violinist, is deeply in love with the beautiful Hélène de Vardeck, but she prefers her suitor Saint-Ybars. The sinister Doctor Matheus offers Urbain the power to play his violin so irresistibly as to win the heart of his beloved, but in return he asks for the player's soul. Urbain refuses, and the doctor breaks his magic instrument. Everything works out for the best through the intervention of a holy man, Pater Anselm, the violinist's friend and master. He provides Urbain with another violin possessing beneficent powers no less effective than the evil forces of the first. When it is discovered that Urbain is not only a distinguished instrumentalist, but also a youth of noble heritage, his marriage with Hélène is approved, and the ballet ends with an independent *divertissement* based on a theme of hothouse flowers which transport their gardener to the land of roses where he marries their queen.

Arthur Saint-Léon (1821-1870) had married the famous dancer Fanny Cerrito (1817-1909) in 1845. They were to be separated five years later and divorced in 1851, but in the meantime worked well together. Saint-Léon was not only a choreographer, he was the best dancer of his day, after Jules Perrot. His elevation and *ballon* were exceptional. But he was also a violinist, a virtuoso in the tradition of Paganini. He played with an accomplishment and brilliance much admired by Adolphe Adam. In the review written in 1847 for *La Fille de marbre* (which Saint-Léon had adapted from *Alma*, 1842), Théophile Gautier had suggested that "Saint-Léon, as well as being a dancer and choreographer, is an excellent violinist, according to what people say who have heard him. Surely it must be possible to find a subject that will show off his talents as both dancer and musician" (*La Presse*, 25 October 1847). The result was *Le Violon du diable* in which he devised the role of the violinist Urbain for himself.

The ballet was a revival and elaboration of an earlier version called *Tartini il violinista* (with scenario by Saint-Léon after Gavarini, choreography by Emmanuele Viotti, and music by Saint-Léon, Felis and Pugni, first performed in Venice at La Fenice on 29 February 1848). The posters for the Venetian entertainment describe the ballet as "taken from an opera by Gavarini and written by Arthur Saint-Léon, with music by Saint-Léon and Felis, except the second act music composed by Cesare Pugni". At the Paris premiere, however, subject and choreography were attributed exclusively to Saint-Léon, and the music exclusively to Pugni.

The ballet was well received. The music was praised: "M. Pugni's score is very pleasing. In the second act one singles out a charming waltz and a number of captivating themes". The *mise-en-scène* and choreography were also admired: "The inn at Roscoff, the Chateau du Poulighein, the farm, the green-house, and the rose kingdom are all pictures full of colour, splendour and attraction....The dances in general are delightfully imagined" (*Le Corsaire*, 22 January 1849). There were also some critical comments: "Coralli is a bit plump for the devil. If he had not taken care to have little horns peeping out of his wig, and thrown in a terrifying glare from time to time, he might have been mistaken for an abbé..." *Le Corsaire* further observed that "Fanny Cerrito exhibits her rare and diverse qualities, but is perhaps not dramatic enough; at her first appearance one could describe her as a cold and pallid statue revolving on a marble pedestal. Elssler would have made a memorable interpretation of the part!...In the *pas de deux* with her husband, all Cerrito's gestures were of the greatest tenderness. It would be difficult to to find more grace, freshness, lightness, or elevation".

Arthur Saint-Léon & Fanny Cerrito in *Le Violon du Diable*

ESMERALDA

GRAN BALLO

Composto dal Sr.

PEROT

Pel Reale Teatro di Londra e riprodotto dallo Stesso sulle Scene

dell'I. R. Teatro alla Scala

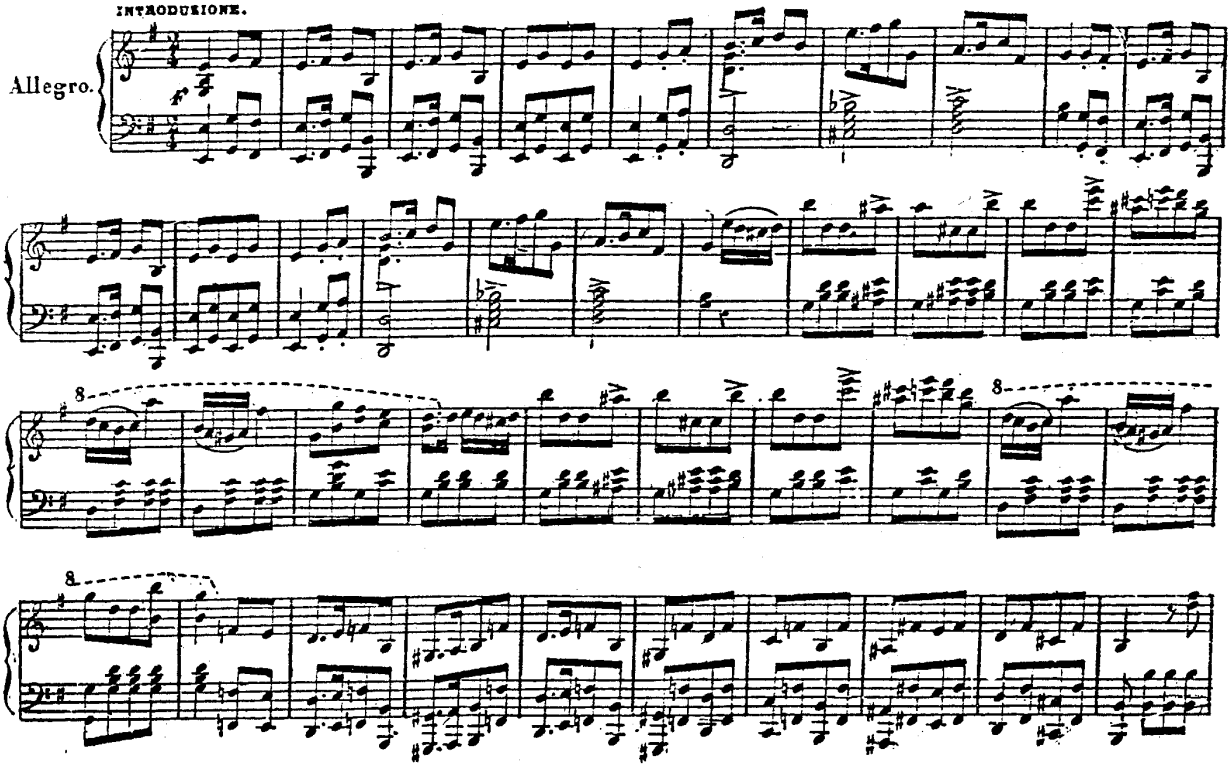
MUSICA

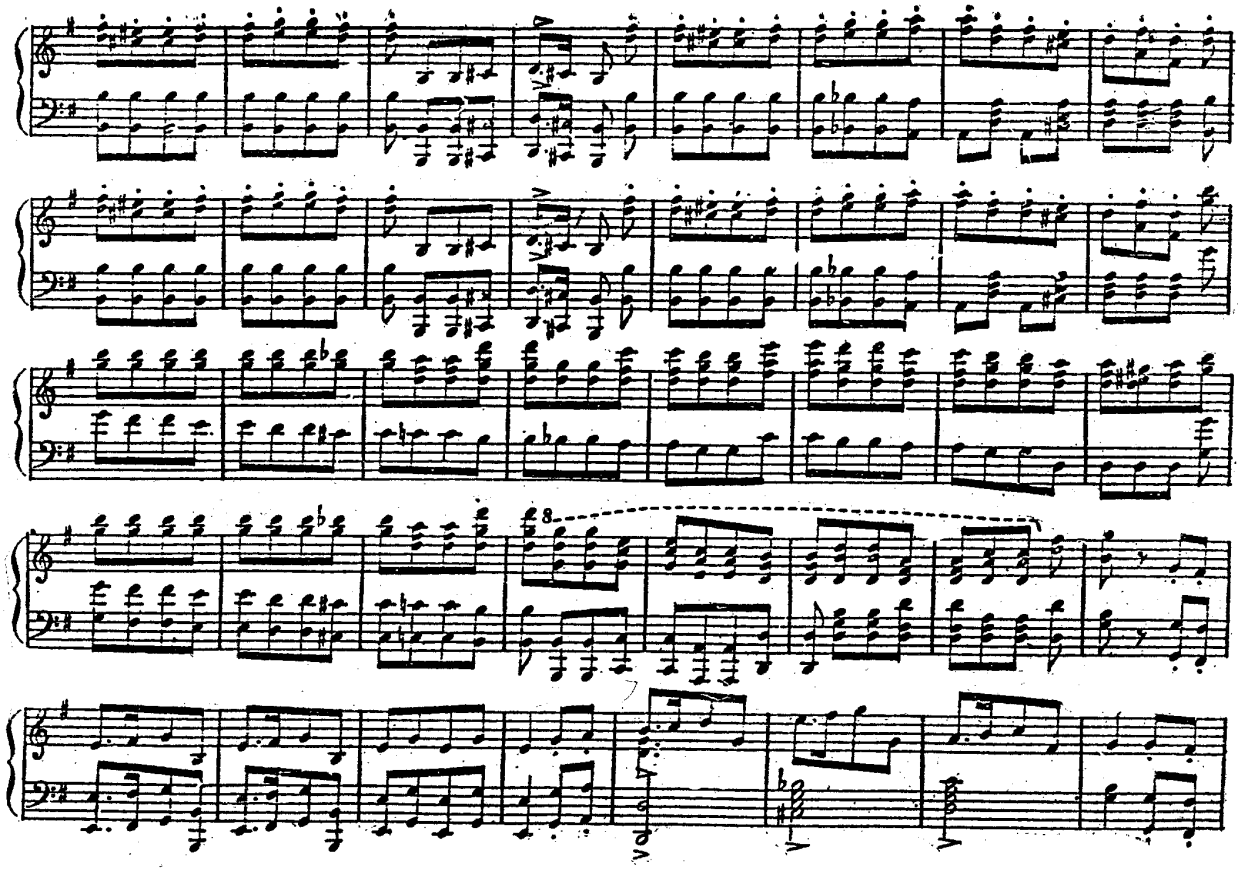
DEL M.° CESARE PUGNI *RIDOTTA*

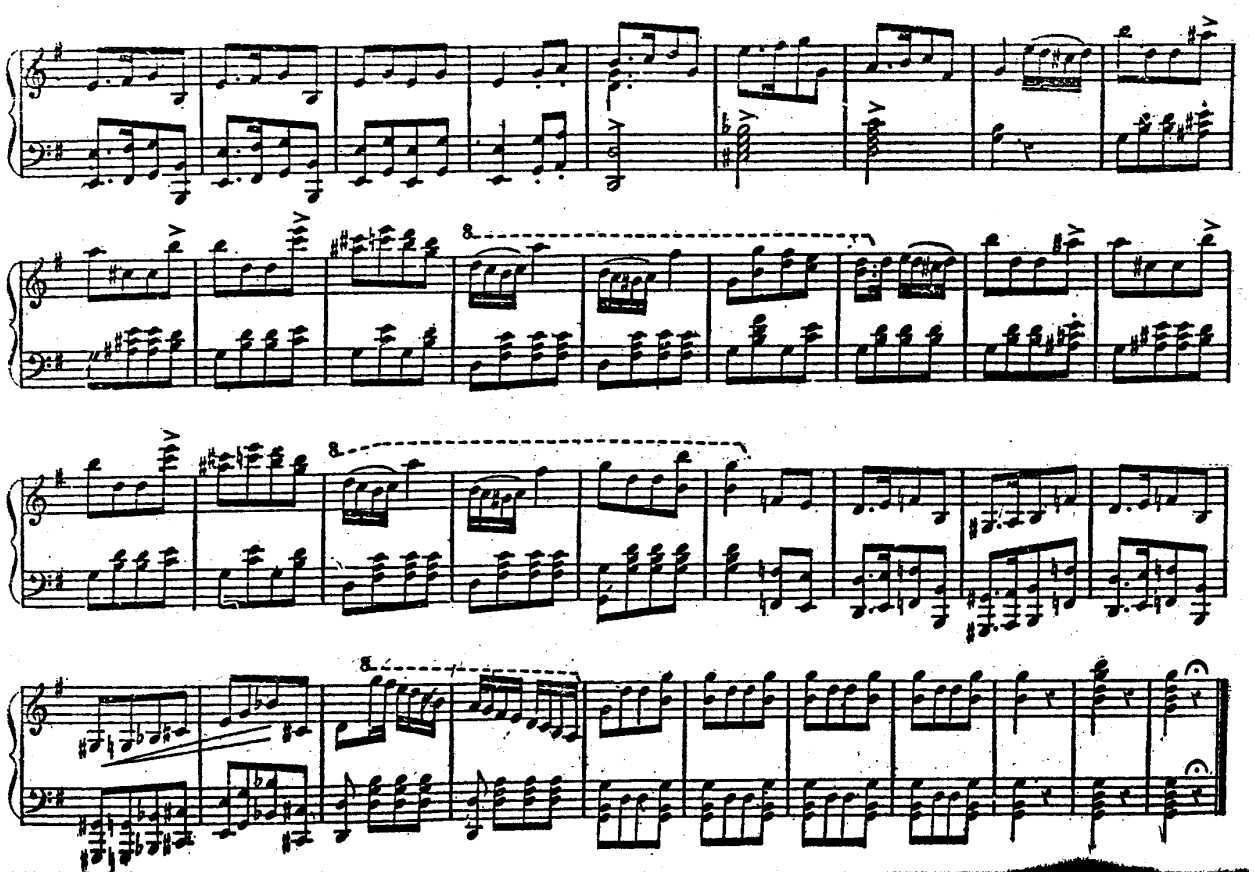
PER

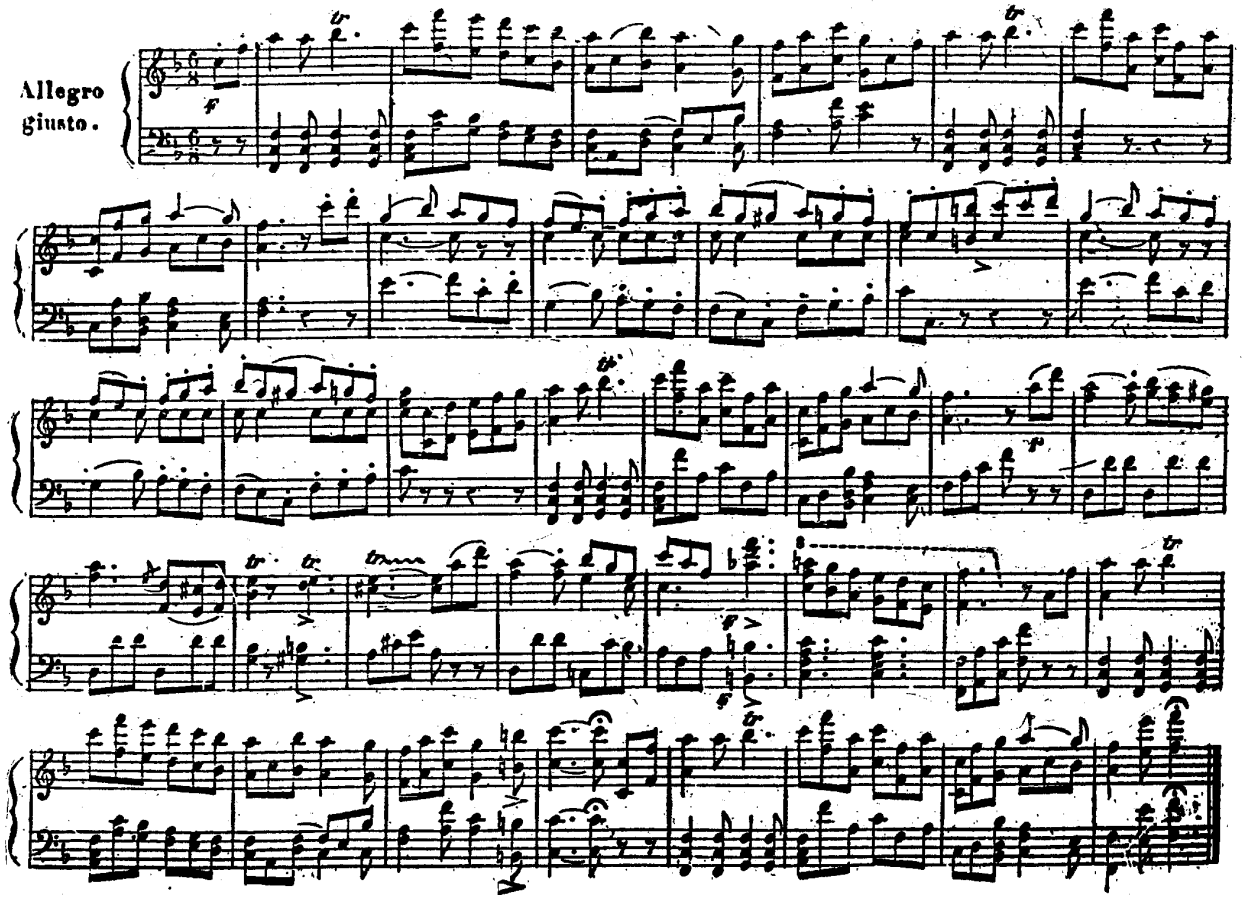
Piano Forte

LA CORTE DEL MIRACOLI.








Allegro
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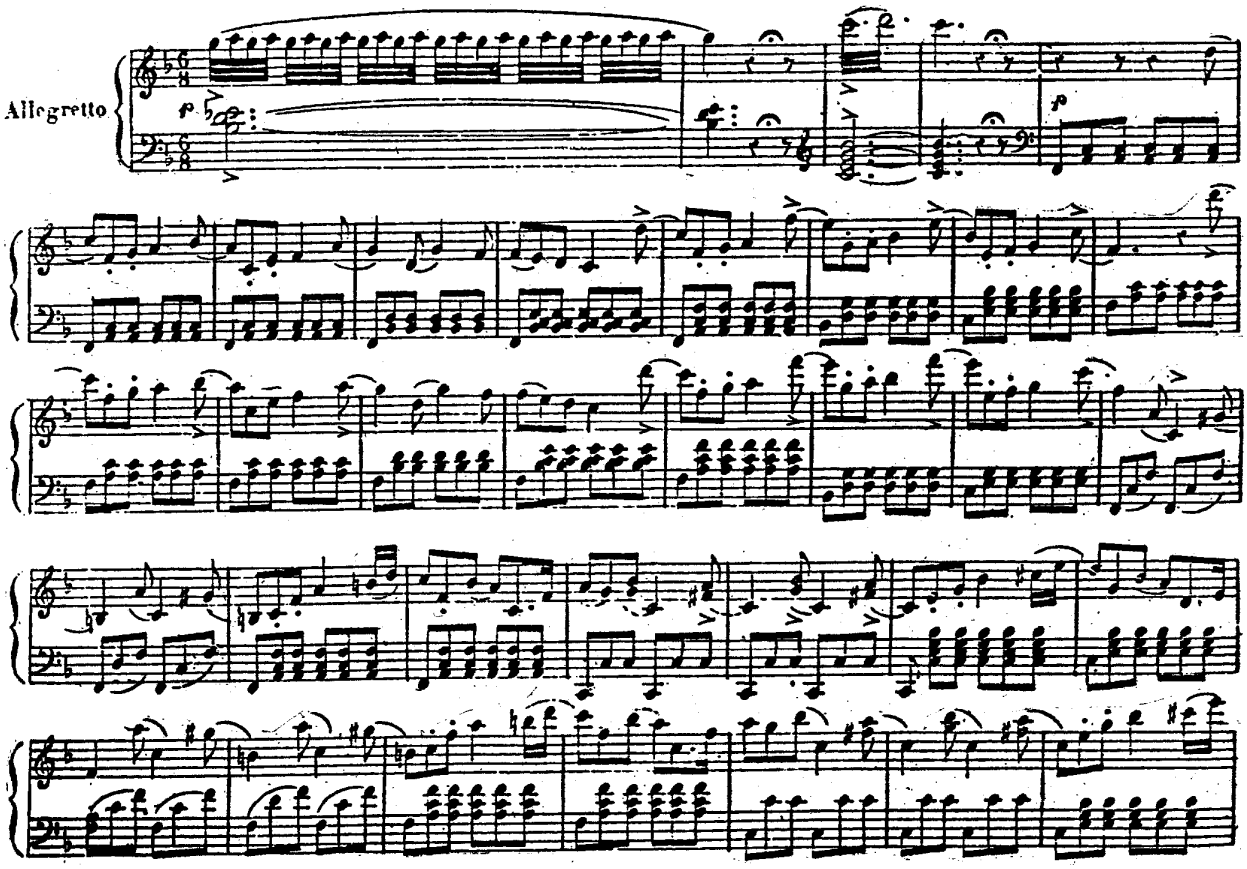
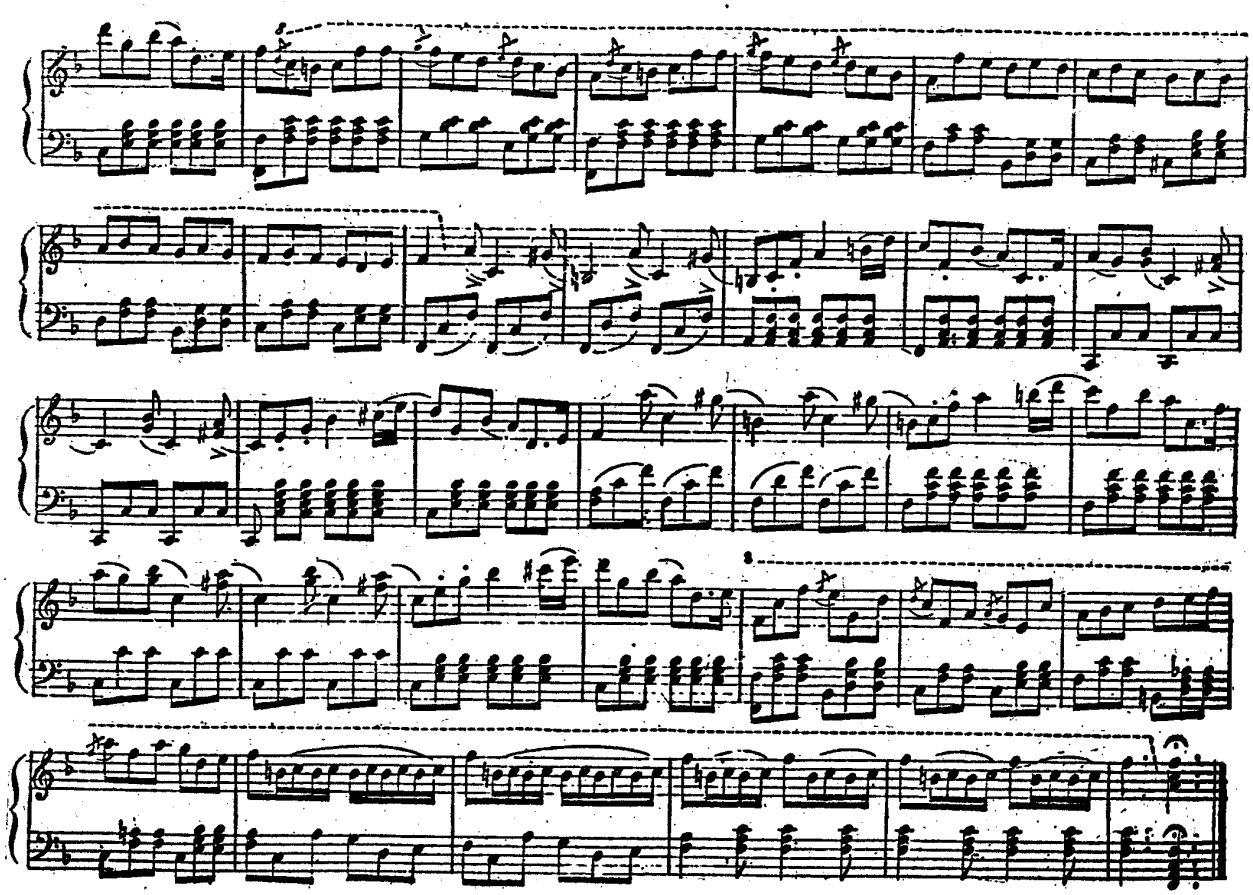
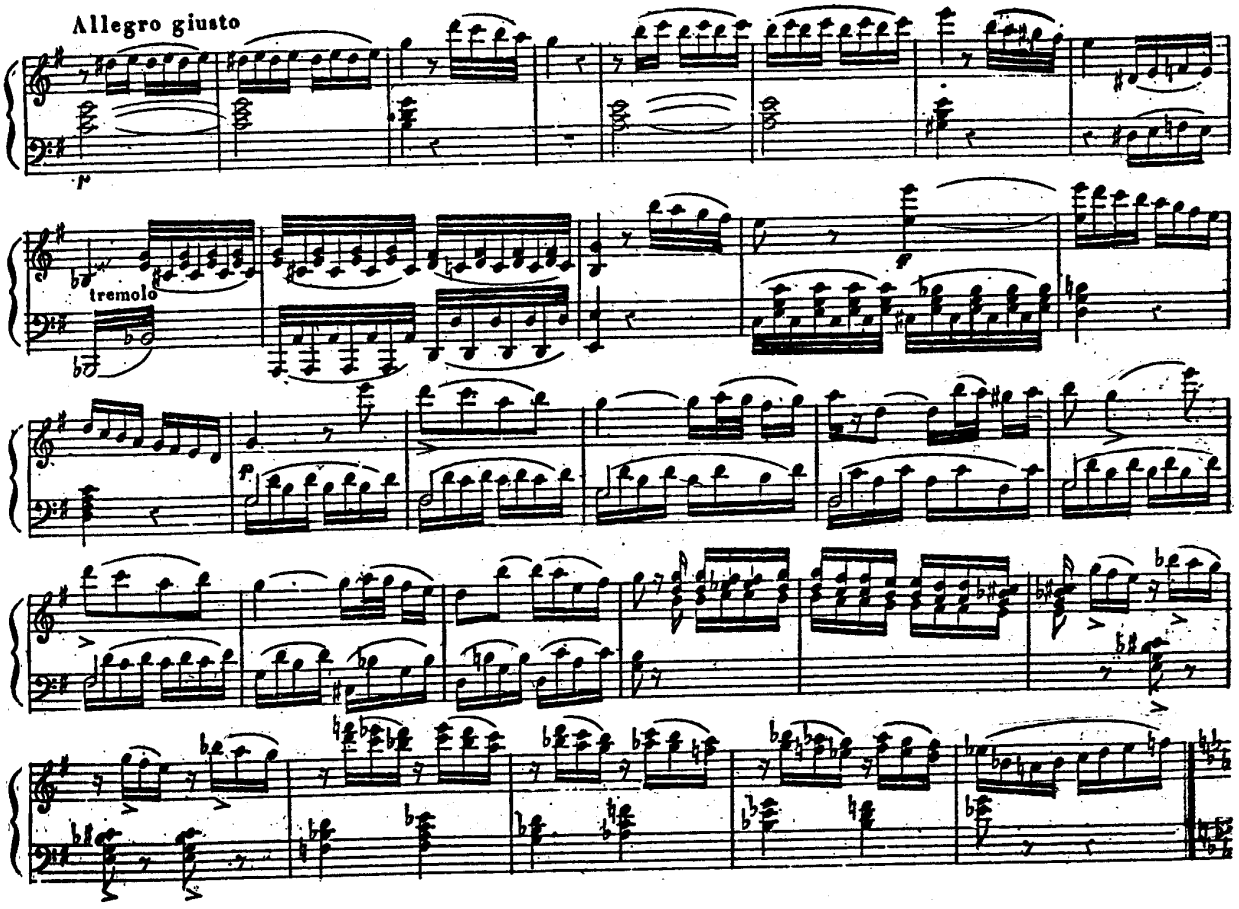
SPOSALIZIO DI ESMERALDA






Allegro giusto
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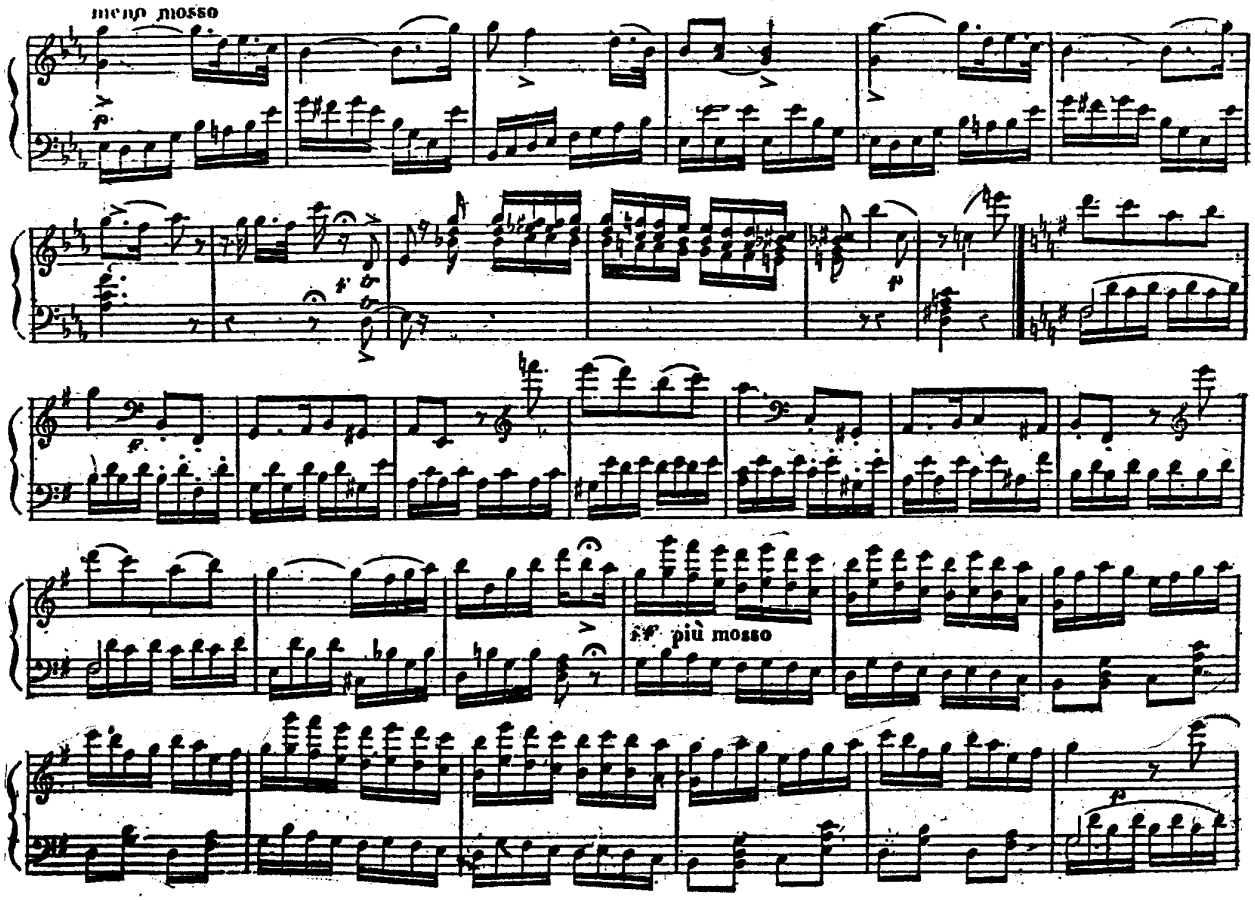
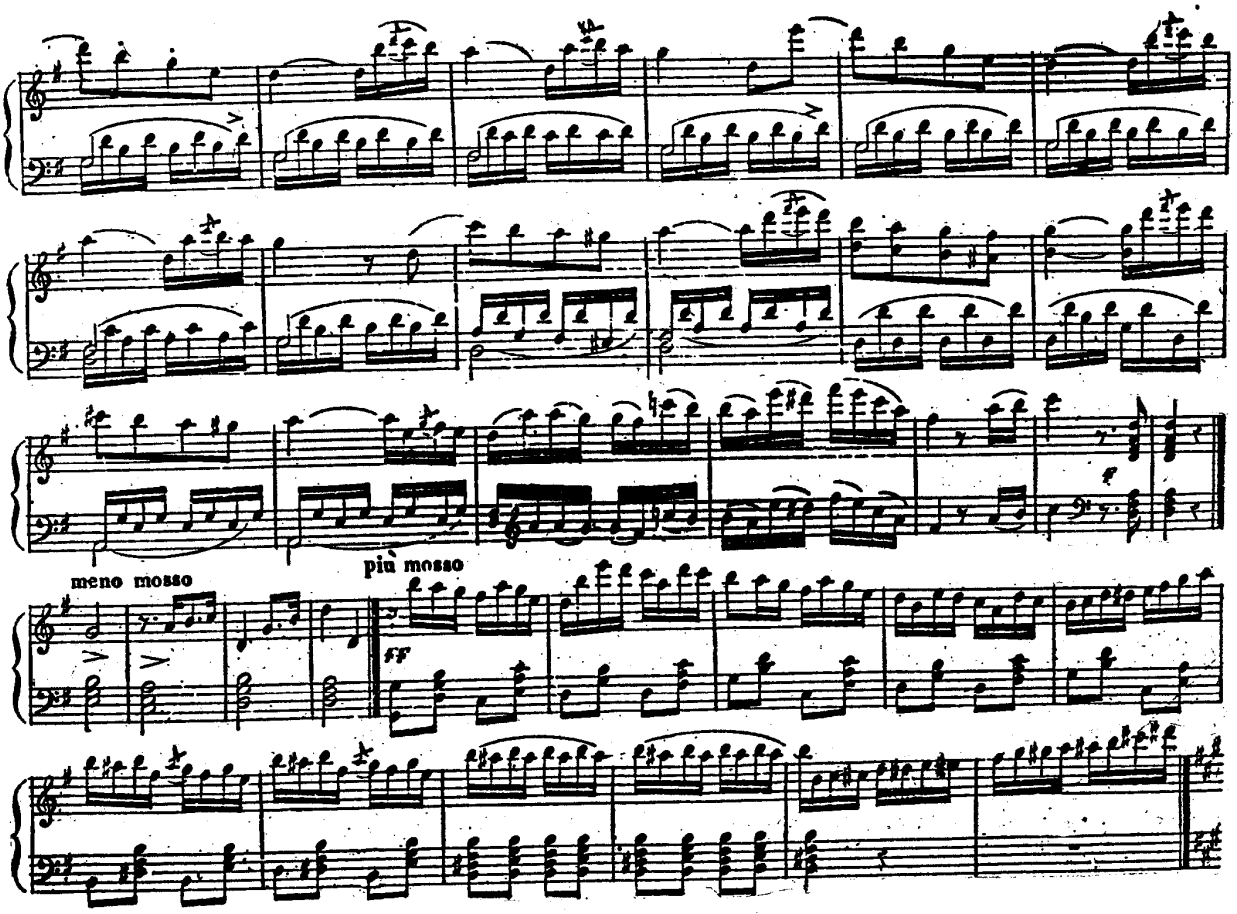

meno mosso
più mosso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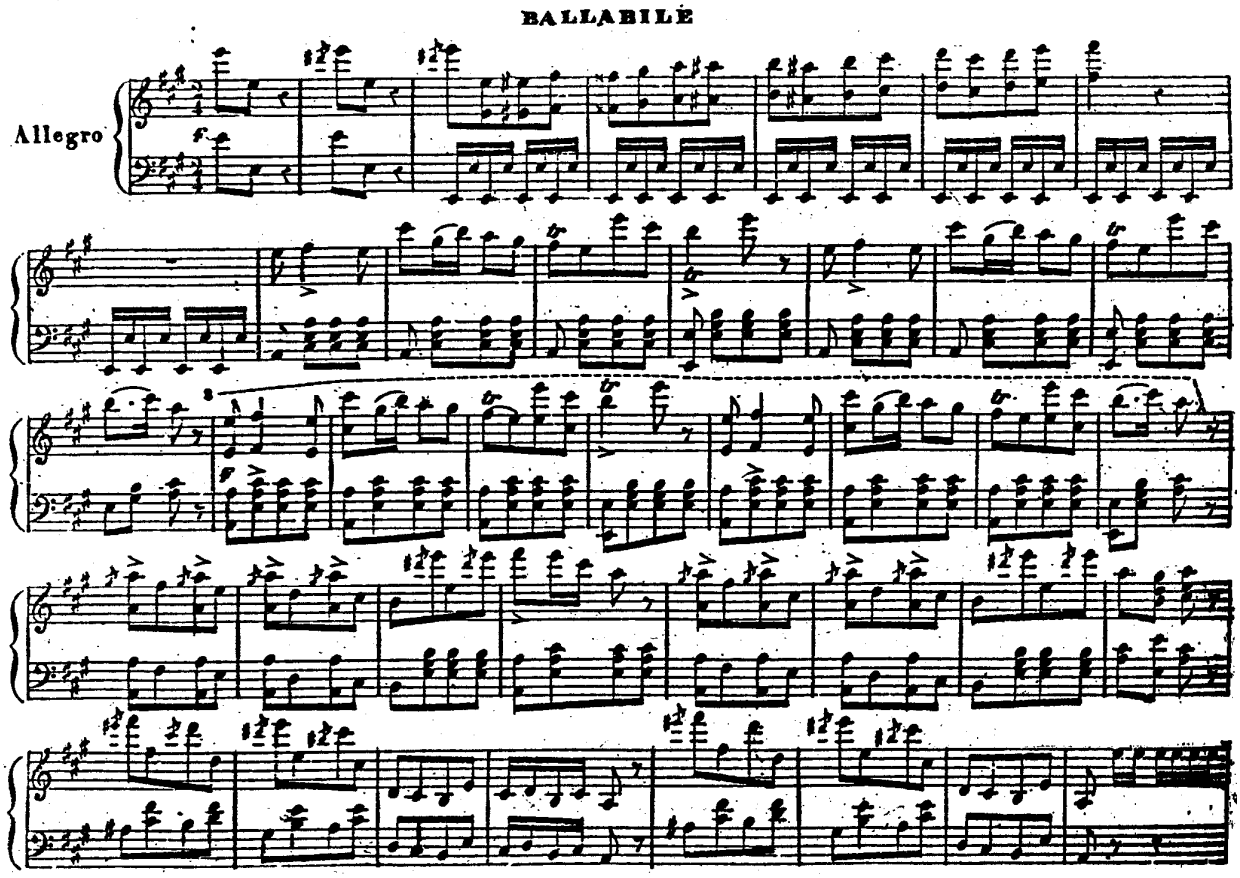
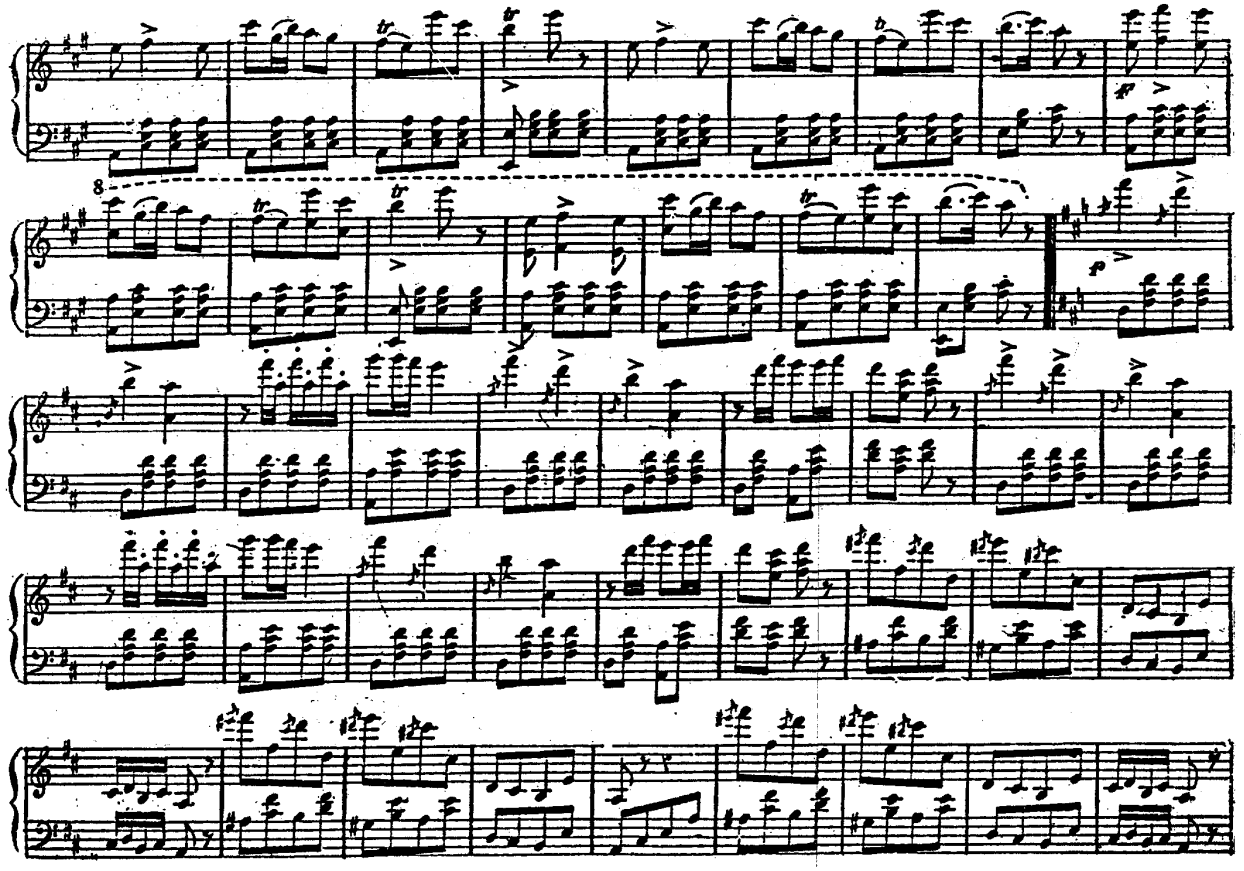
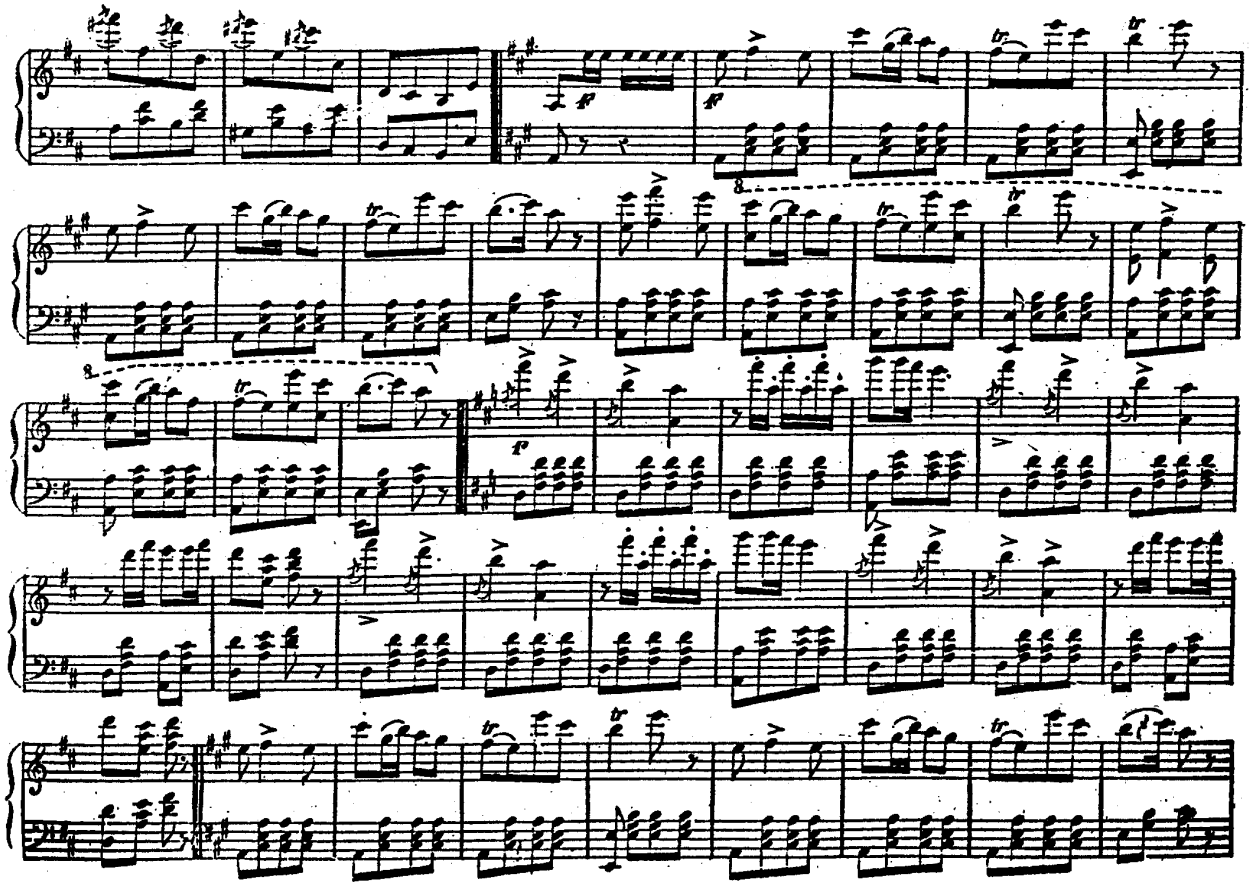
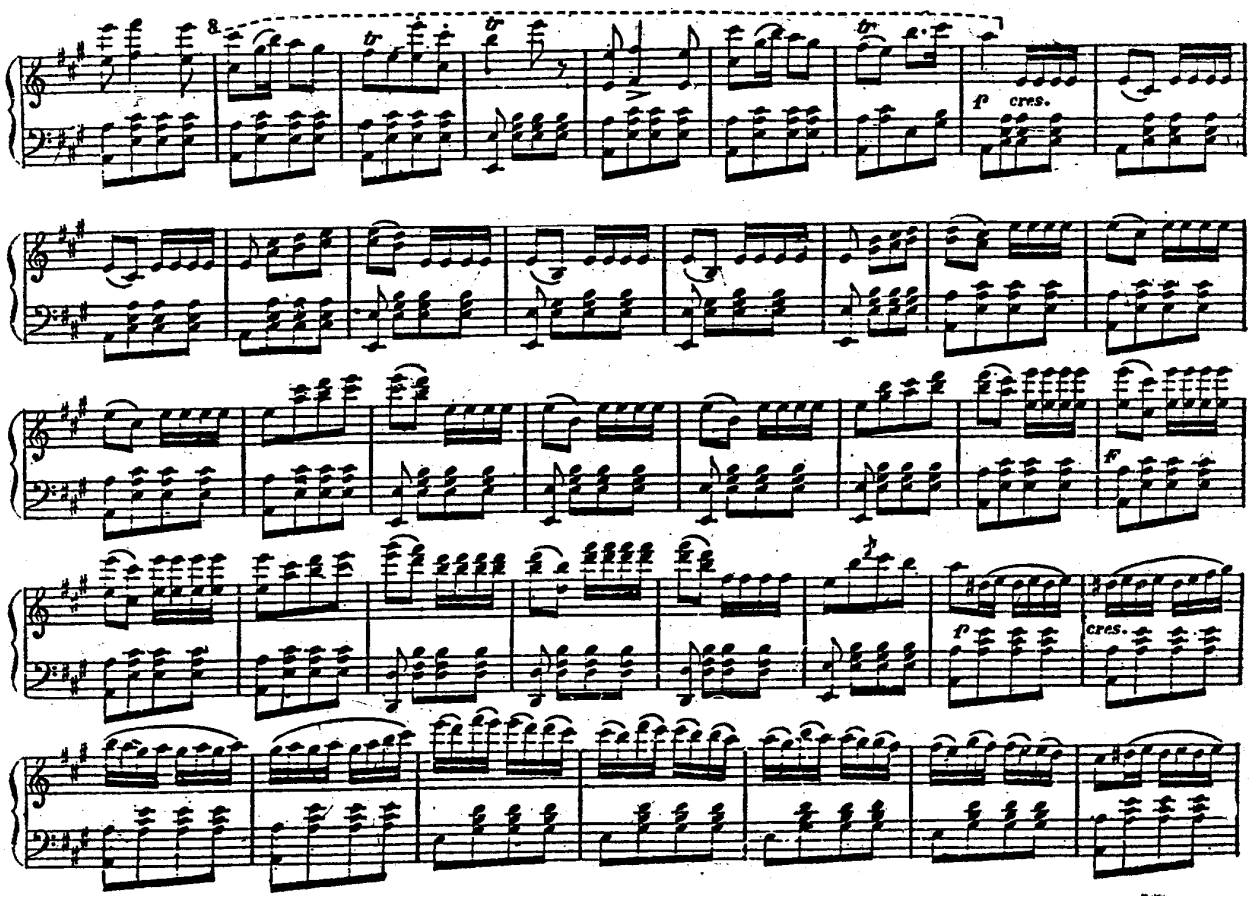

BALLABILE
Allegro



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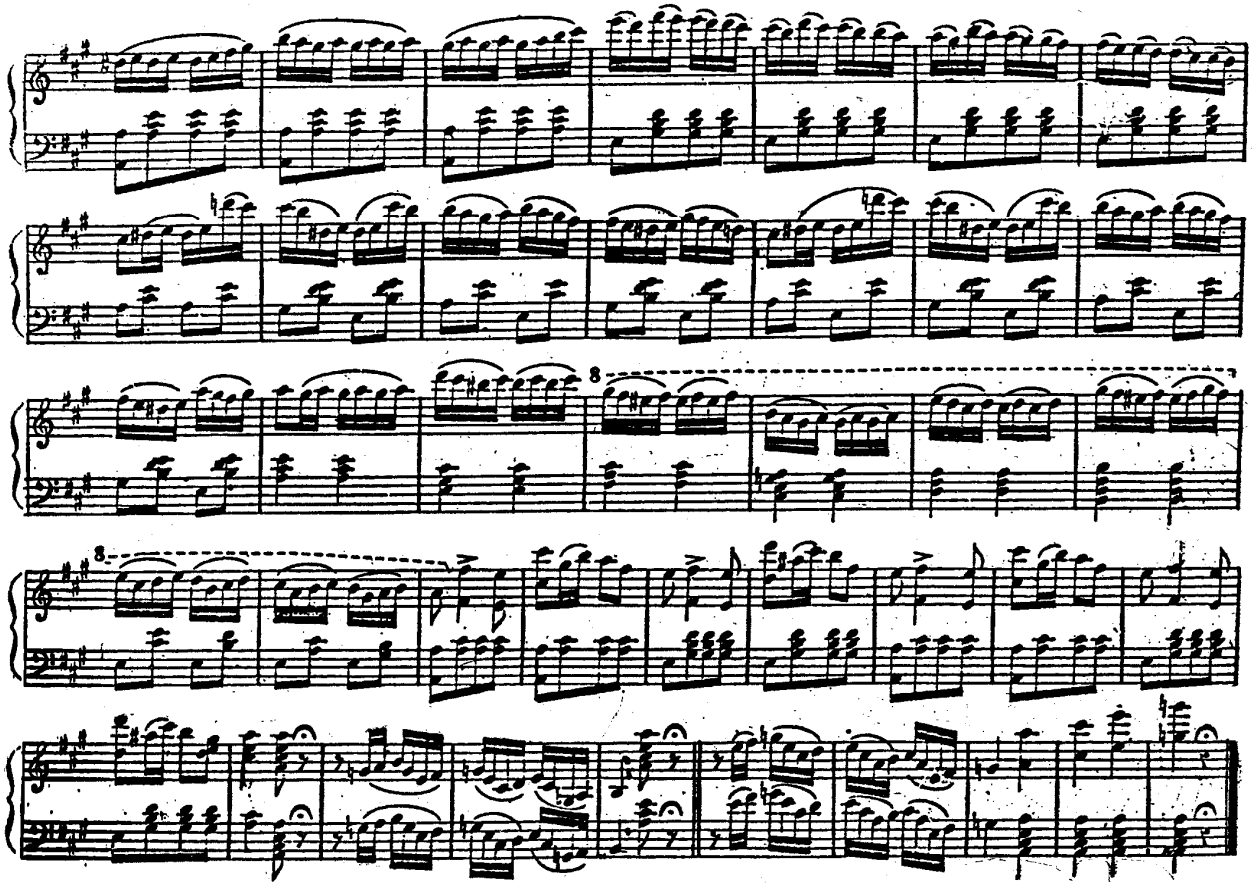
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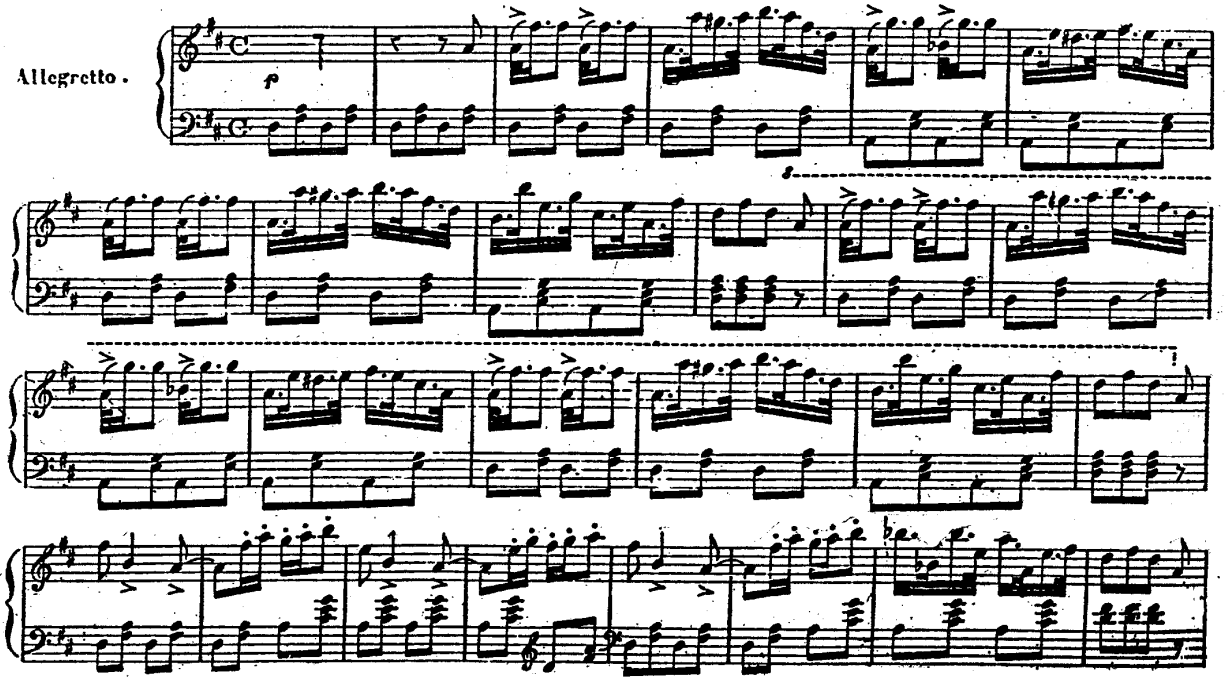
Allegretto.
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