Chausson's Sarabande

In order to recall the glorious past of their national music, modern French composers have enjoyed revisiting the style of Rameau and Couperin, both of whom composed dance suites for keyboard. Because Chausson, Debussy and Ravel share this intent in composing their own dance suites for piano, a comparison reveals telling differences in their approaches.

In his *Suite Bergamasque* (1890-1905), Debussy preserves the rhythmic character of the minuet and passepied, but in regard to sonority, he softens their outlines—the eighteenth century is not so much revived as affectionately recalled. Thus, there is no great stylistic disparity between the subdued mood picture *Clair de Lune* and the "baroque" movements which surround it. Ravel, on the other hand, in his *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1917), actually imitates baroque keyboard style: his etched piano writing evokes the crispness of the harpsichord, the piquancy of Couperin's ornamentation, and, in the final Toccata's hail of repeated notes and tangle of hands, typical two-manual effects. (Poulenc, in his youthful *Suite Française*, goes all the way back to the Renaissance, treating dance tunes by Gervais with an ingratiating blend of homage and impudence.) Of all these suites, though, Chausson's *Quelques Danses* (Some Dances) was the first to be completed (1896), and remains the least-known, and unquestionably the strangest.

Ernest Chausson and his wife in Basle, 1883

Chausson's music is pervaded with a gentle melancholy. (The word "melancholy" with all its synonyms is ubiquitous in Chausson criticism.) His most popular work, the *Poème* for violin and orchestra, is also one of the most unrelievedly sad. Density of texture and of chromatic progressions lend even such vigorous major-key movements as the first of the *Symphonie* or of the *Concert** a mitigating gravity. Chausson remembered experiencing depression without cause even as a child—one wonders how his art might have differed had he lived in the age of Prozac. How does this temperament adapt itself to the lightness and clarity of the baroque? Very little, in fact.

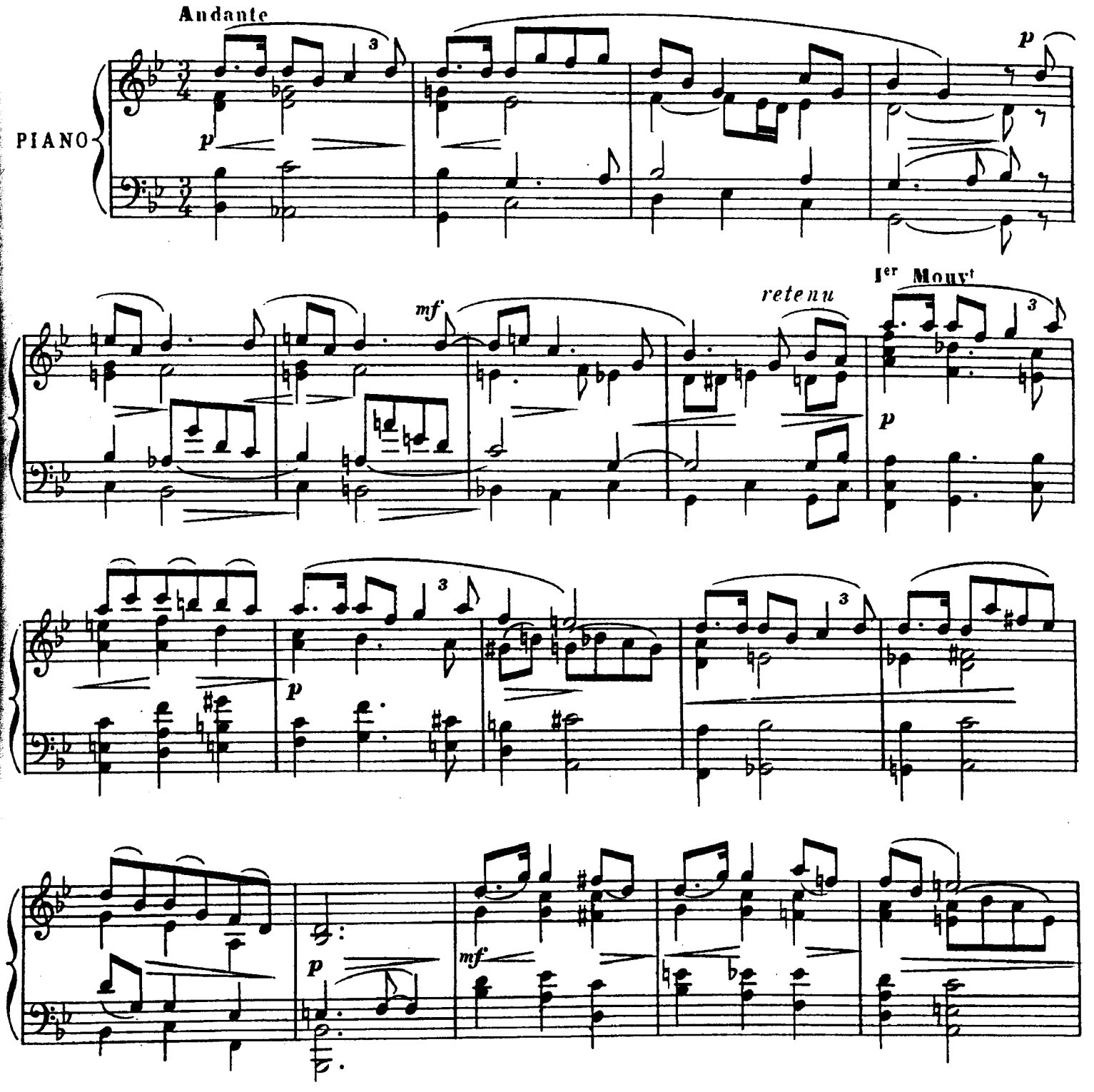
The present Sarabande is "in"—at least, begins and ends in—B-flat major. Yet, at every turn, Chausson evades the key's comparative brightness, preferring the shadier byways of the relative and parallel minors. Of course, the Sarabande (like the Pavane which follows) is a slow dance, but even the Forlane—the work's only fast movement—rather than proceeding in articulated phrases delineating steps, flows in so unbroken and regular a stream of eighth-notes that it conveys stasis rather than motion. Each movement, if unsuccessful at suggesting the baroque, is utterly successful in distilling the composer's most characteristic mood. Debussy, reviewing a performance in 1903, was especially touched by this Sarabande. (Did he know it earlier, and did he think of it when he was composing the Sarabande in his *Pour le Piano?*)

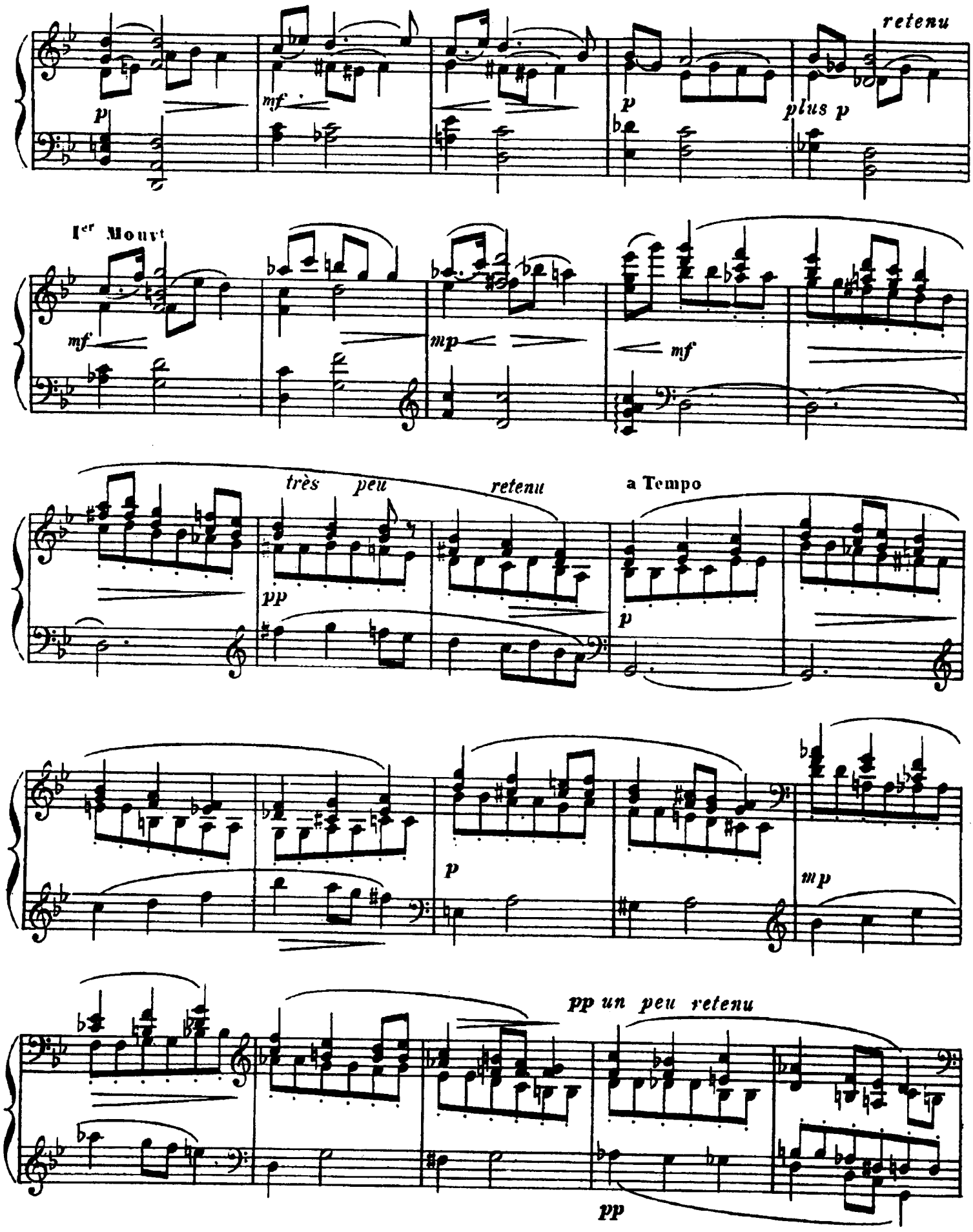
Even Chausson's most popular work, the Poème for violin and orchestra, is unrelievedly sad.

*This work (1889-91) is of special interest to pianists. Its bizarre combination—piano, "solo" violin and string quartet—proves to yield a fascinating array of textures, as violin and piano, singly and together, assert themselves soloistically against the quartet, or are blended in various combinations with it. Chausson's writing for the piano is thrillingly sonorous and virtuosic, not only in exposed but also in accompanying passages. Here, a Saint-Saëns-like brilliance serves an imposing and original work.

Sarabande

Ernest Chausson
(1855-1899)

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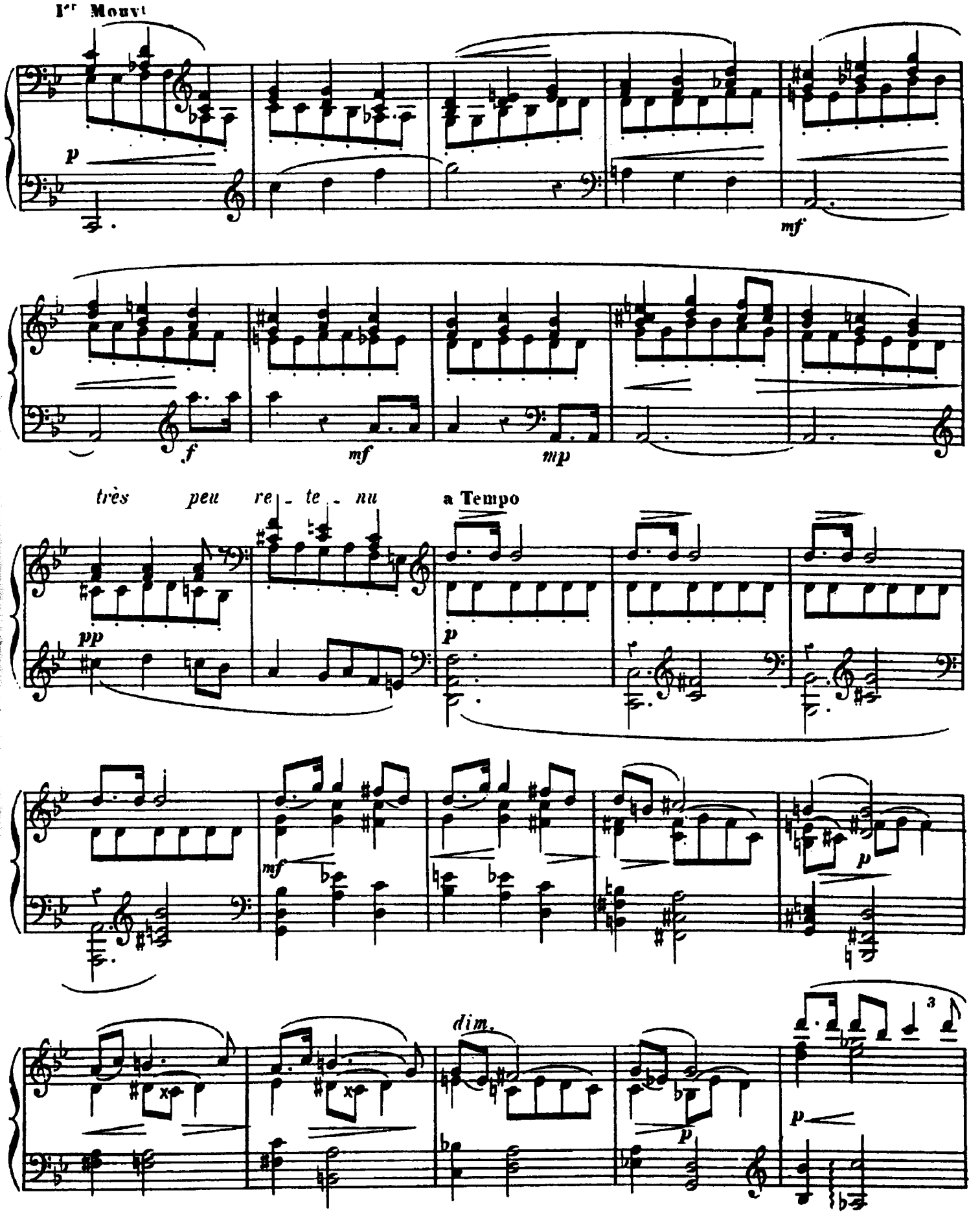
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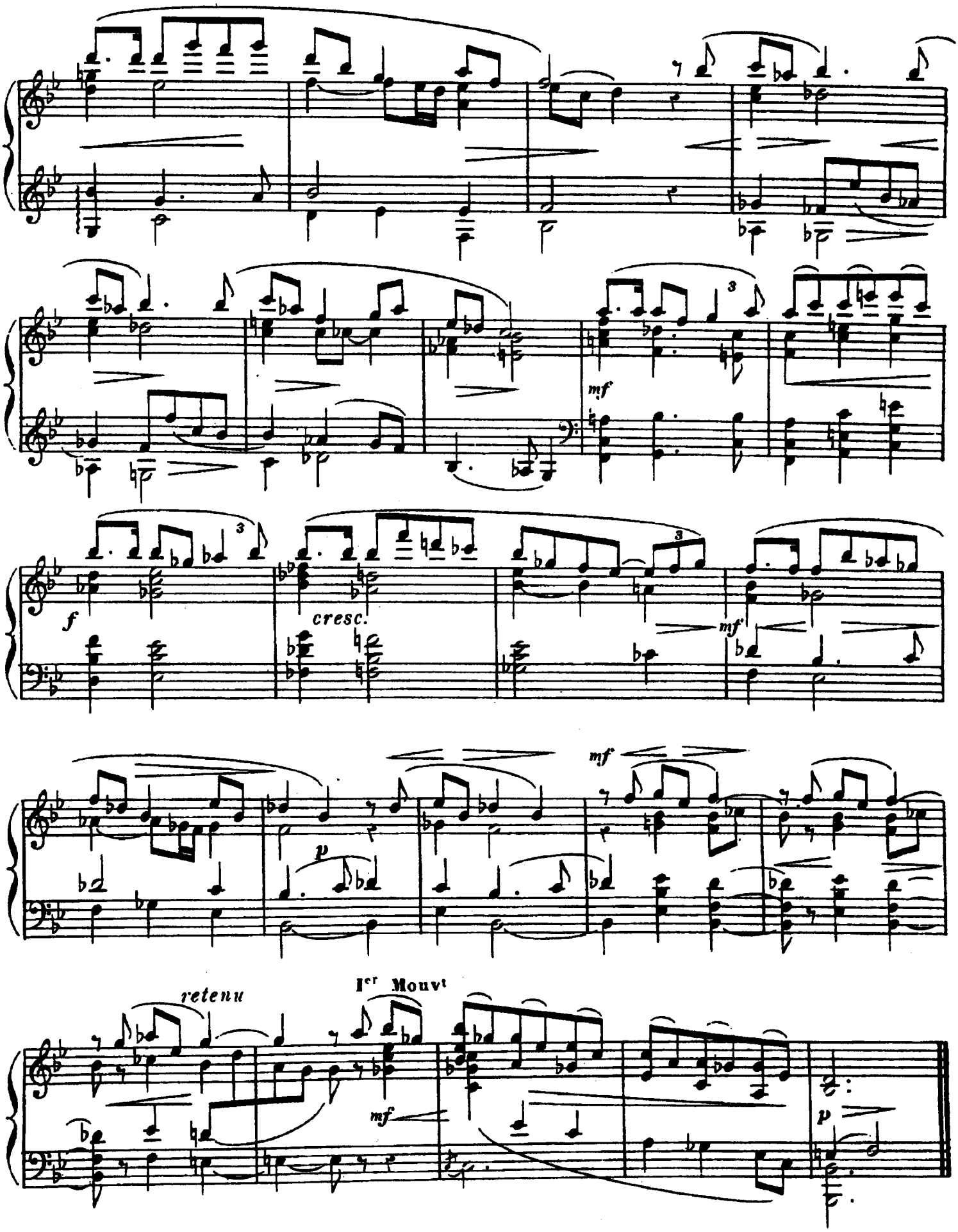
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