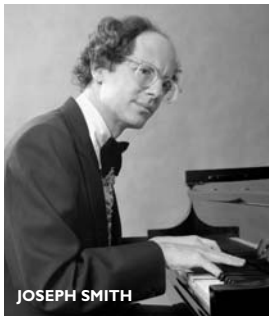
RARE FINDS

NONCONFORMIST KEY SIGNATURES


JOSEPH SMITH

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Key signatures are usually our friends: they eliminate the need for endless repetitive accidentals and facilitate identifying a piece's tonality—an identification essential to reading, memory, and analysis. But, on occasion, key signatures can be misleading: obsolete, unconventional, mischievous, or just plain wrong.

In the baroque era, a composer writing in a flat minor key often dropped the last flat of the key signature—for instance, no. 19 of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is in F minor, but is written with only three flats, and no. 20, in C minor, is written with only two flats. This makes practical sense. In the minor, the last flat applies to the sixth degree of the scale, yet in the minor this degree is frequently raised. So why put a flat in the key signature, only to continually cancel it with accidentals? (On the other hand, the seventh degree of the minor is often raised as well, so I suppose one could rationally argue that C minor could have a single flat—E flat—as its key signature!) Another obsolete procedure is found in the original publications of Scarlatti sonatas: the last sharp of B major was sometimes dropped, and supplied in the form of accidentals. When good sight readers play, however, they do not just remember the individual sharps or flats of a key signature—they perceive the key as a conceptual totality and thus find these practices distracting.

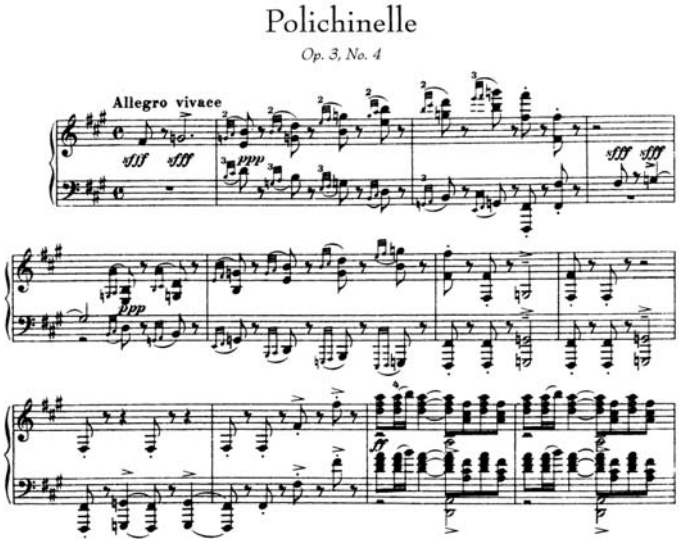
In notating his String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, Beethoven faced an interesting problem. The third movement is in F Lydian, the scale that begins on F and uses only white notes. But Beethoven recognized a danger. Encountering the quartet for the first time, and perceiving F as the tonic, players of Beethoven's day might easily have assumed that a key signature of one flat was accidentally omitted. Beethoven's title, "A Convalescent's Song of Gratitude to God, in the Lydian Mode," may be awkward, but it does convey the necessary information. I suppose one could also solve this problem with an unconventional key signature: B natural in parentheses.

Bartok gives the first of his *Fourteen Bagatelles* an intentionally misleading key signature—or rather, a *pair* of misleading key signatures. Although the right hand is notated in C-sharp minor and the left in F minor, the piece is actually in a "Phrygian-colored C major." This aberration slyly hints that key signatures have become irrelevant to much modern music.

Now, let's consider a real rarity—a great composer assigning the wrong key signature to a piece. We have considered the Baroque practice of omitting a sign from the signature and supplying it in the form of accidentals. I think, however, there can be no excuse for adding an *extra* sign to the key signature, and continually canceling it with accidentals! Tchaikovsky made masterful four-hand settings of *Fifty Russian Folksongs,* even the simplest of which has charm and invention. Number 49 is the famous "Volga Boat Song." The key signature declares the piece to be in E-flat minor, but the music itself is unequivocally in B-flat minor. (The only C flats appear in an applied dominant.) What could have so misled him? I suspect it was the unconventional musical language of the collection as a whole. In response to the harmonic implications of the tunes themselves, Tchaikovsky ends only thirty of the fifty songs with a tonic chord in root position.

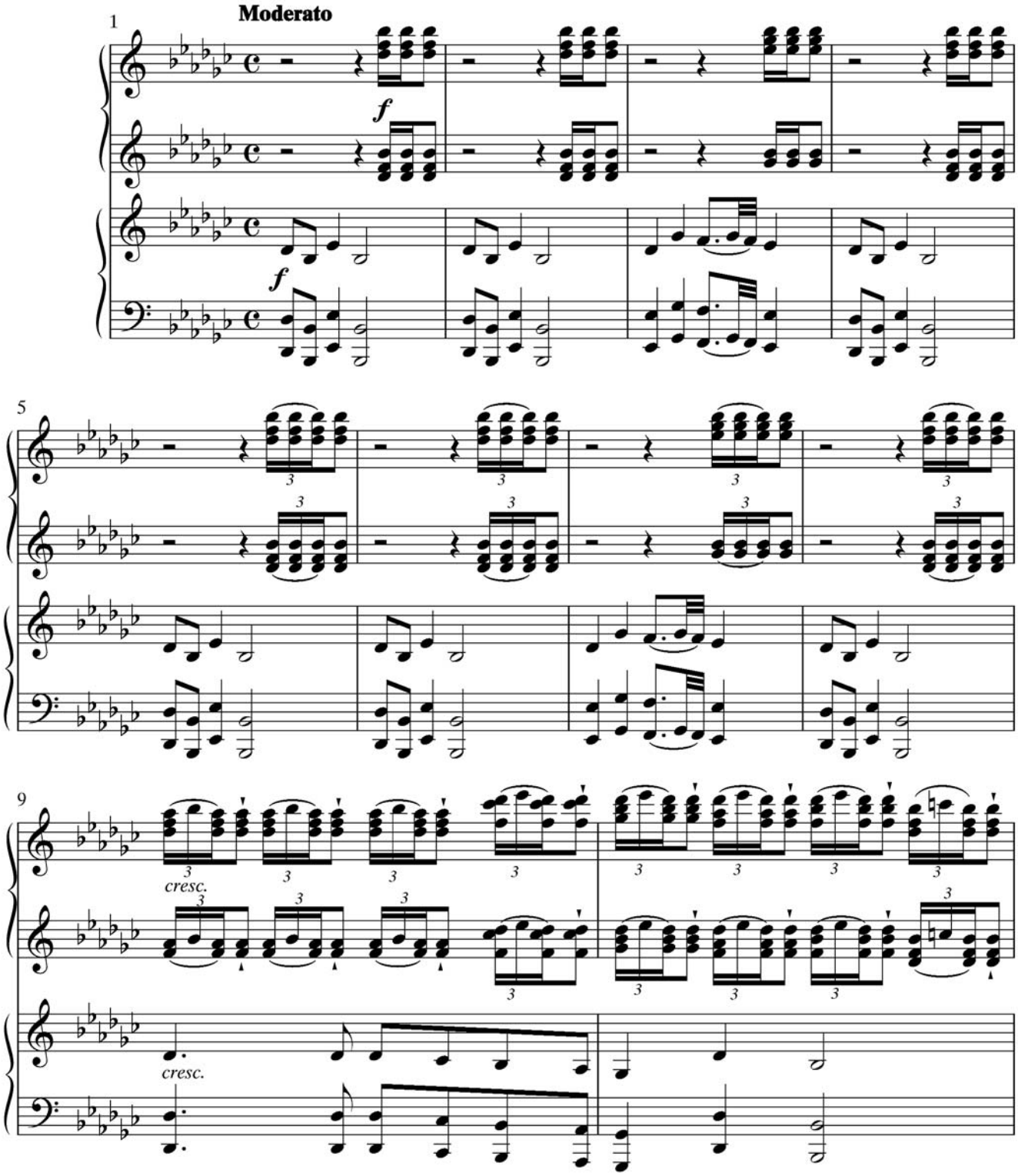
In his emotional extroversion and rich melodic gift, Rachmaninoff continued the tradition of Tchaikovsky. But he also followed Tchaikovsky in another, less admirable respect: assigning the wrong key signature to a piece. Before he turned twenty, Rachmaninoff composed his "Polichinelle"; with its extremes of sardonic humor and lyrical ardor, and its pianistic exuberance, few other pieces bring such joy to the hot-blooded adolescent pianist. Rachmaninoff gives it a key signature of F-sharp minor, but proceeds to sprinkle the pages with G naturals. In the entire piece, eight busy pages, we encounter only *three* G-sharps! "Polichinelle" is, in fact, in B minor. (Here the final F-sharp octave stands for the major dominant, which can end a piece in a minor key.)

Amusing as it is to observe the gross notations lapses of these celebrated composers, these errors do not detract from their greatness. Many composers learn to notate correctly. Few produce a collection of easy pieces as imaginative and resourceful as *Fifty Russian Folksongs* or a piece as effective and fun to play as "Polichinelle." ■



Volga Boat Song

Arranged for four hands by Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky



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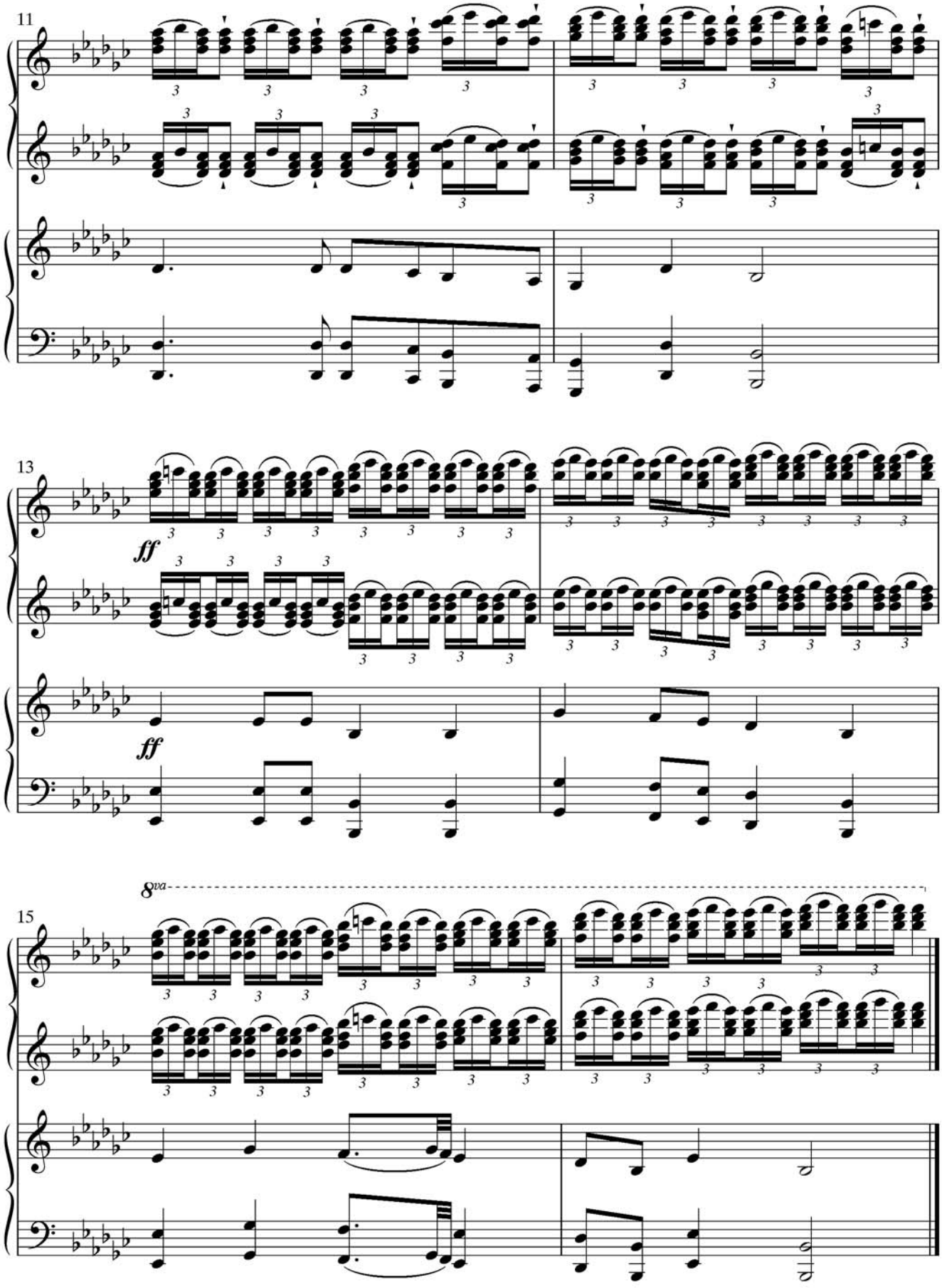
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