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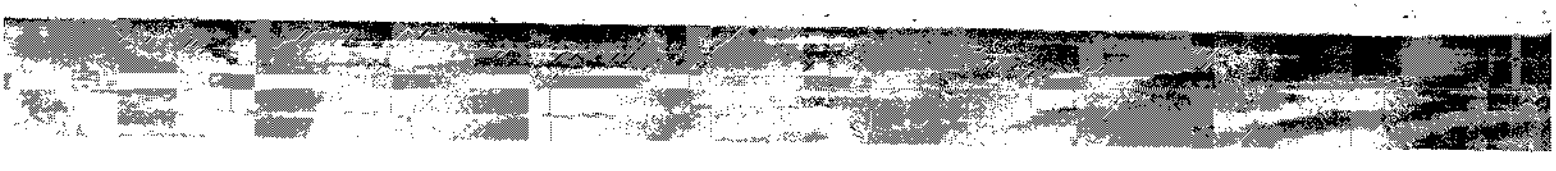
Vibraphone Technique

dampening and pedaling

David Friedman

8-40



Introduction

Although there is an abundance of study books for the mallet instruments, there is a conspicuous lack of material dealing with phrasing and a general musical approach to four mallet playing. This is especially true for the vibraphone, as this instrument, of all the mallet instruments, possesses the greatest potential for realizing interesting and exciting textural and phrasing possibilities. It is with these possibilities that this book will primarily deal.

Unlike most mallet study books, this one contains no exercises or studies based on rigid scale patterns, except as introductory material. The reason for this is two-fold. First of all, scale patterns are generally not of a musical nature and as a result are generally dull and tedious. Practicing dull and tedious music produces a dull and bored musician. If the exercise offers, aside from the technical challenge, no musical challenge, it has done only half the job and more than half the damage. Exercises should not be approached mechanically; they should be approached with the same joy and sense of musical challenge as a piece of music, which is exactly what a good exercise is; a good piece of music.

Secondly, it is very important for the improvising musician to keep in mind that the more scale patterns, or any patterns for that matter, that he practices, the more rigid and 'patterned' his improvisations will be. If a student must practice scales, he should practice the notes of the scale in random order. In other words, instead of this:

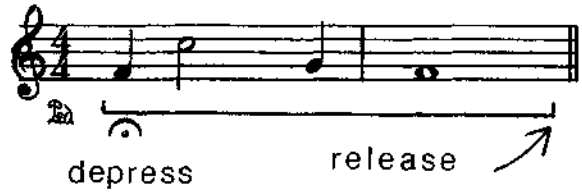
the student should play something like this.

So, instead of saying: "I'm playing an F major scale," he could say: "I'm playing in the tonal area of F major." The student can practice the tonal area of F major as often as he wants, and as fast or as slow as he wants and play it with great variety and interest. He can and should vary dynamics, tempo and phrasing with each playing. This, then, becomes music.

The exercises in this book are in etude form. They are complete musical thoughts and each one concentrates on one or two problem areas.

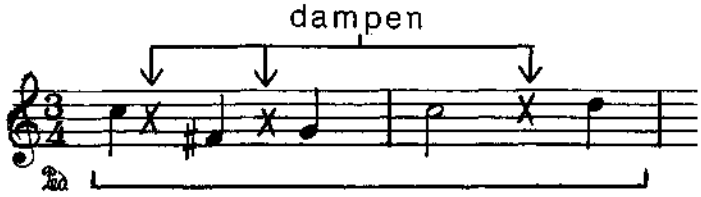
Very little will be said about technique per se: (holding the mallets, speed, mallet control, etc.) since these topics have been quite successfully dealt with in other mallet studies, particularly in the Gary Burton "Four Mallet Studies" book. Occasionally I will make sticking suggestions when I feel that they can be of some help with a particularly awkward passage.

There are certain markings that I will use with which the student may not be familiar. The first is a horizontal line below the staff which is the sign for pedaling.



The pedal is depressed and held down for the duration of the horizontal line and then, at the point the line terminates, the pedal is released. This is exactly the same marking used to indicate pedal use in piano music.

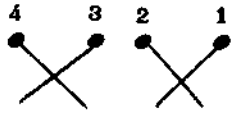
The second marking used in this book is an *X* between two notes. This *X* is used to indicate dampening. After the first note is struck, it is dampened or 'muffled' (not allowed to ring or sustain) with one mallet while, at the same time, the next note is struck by another mallet.



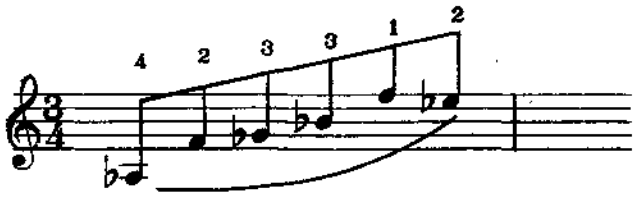
Both pedaling and mallet dampening will be explained in further detail throughout the book.

There is a suggested tempo marking for each etude. The tempo can naturally be varied according to the student's technical ability, interpretation and taste. However, it should not vary too radically because the purpose of the etude might then be nullified or obscured.

I will refer to the mallets from this point on in the following order.



It is assumed that the student will hold four mallets throughout this book. Even when executing linear passages, a workable four mallet technique can be an invaluable aid in bringing off lines with large skips, by distributing the notes of the line among the four mallets.

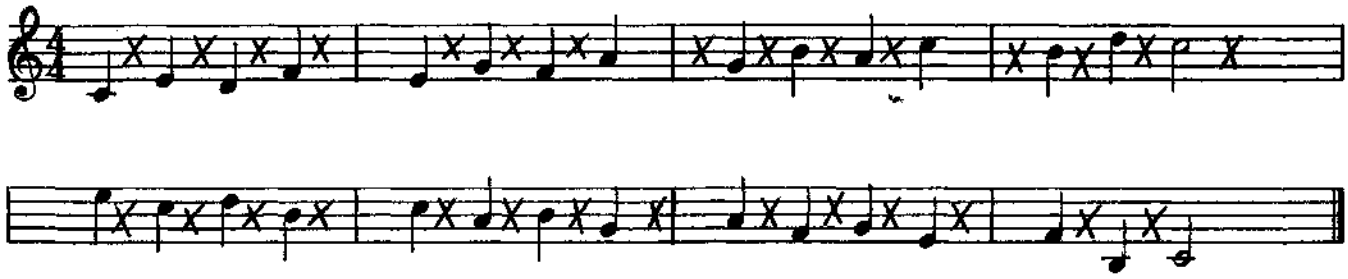


I hope these etudes accomplish their intended goals, but most of all, I hope that they provide for each student some enjoyable playing material.

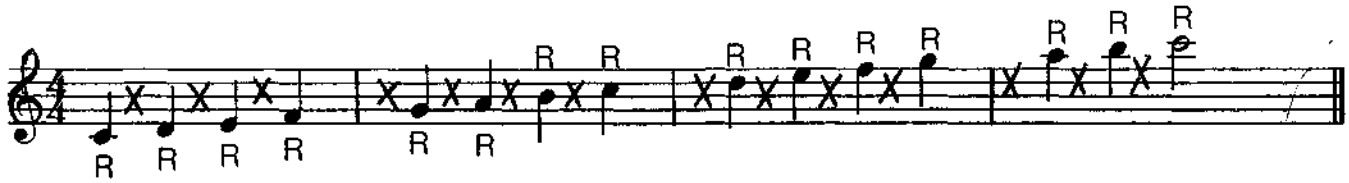
David Friedman

Section I: Mallet Dampening

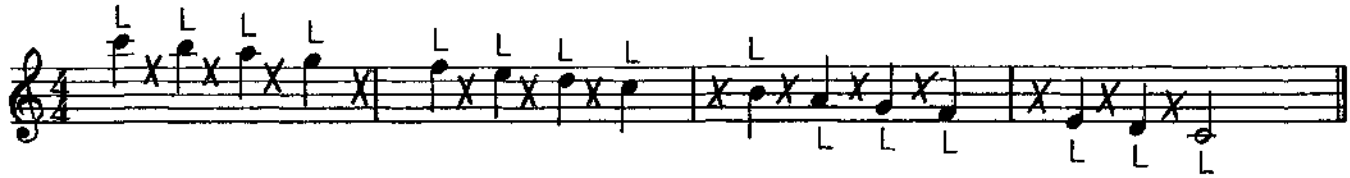
Mallet dampening is accomplished by striking a note, and dampening (pressing the head of the mallet on the bar so as to stop the vibrations) it with the same mallet while another mallet strikes the next note, and so on. The pedal is sustained (depressed) throughout the process. Mallet dampening is indicated by an *X* placed after the note to be dampened.



Occasionally, a melodic pattern will move consistently in one direction. In this case, the notes can be struck with the mallet in one hand, while the mallet in the other hand sort of trails behind, dampening the struck note simultaneously with the attack of the next.

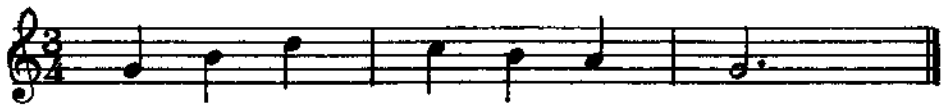


In the previous example, the right hand strikes the notes while the left dampens. It also works the other way around.

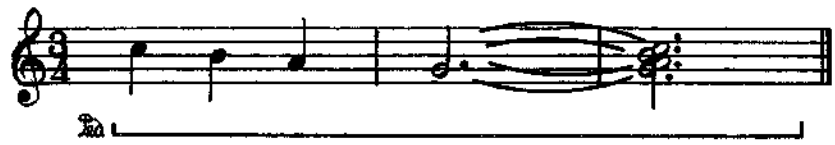


Why use mallet dampening? The technique of dampening is primarily in the service of smooth phrasing. Structurally, the vibraphone is a rather cold and limited instrument, which makes smooth phrasing quite

difficult. The pedal is indeed an asset, but certainly not the whole solution to the problem. Look at this line.

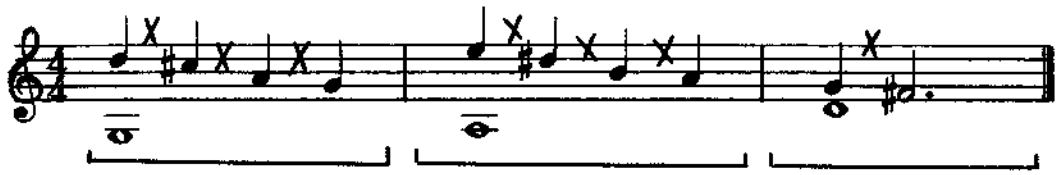


The first three notes, being a triad, can be played smoothly by sustaining the pedal. But what about the four notes that follow? If the pedal is sustained under these notes, they will all ring together and sound like this.

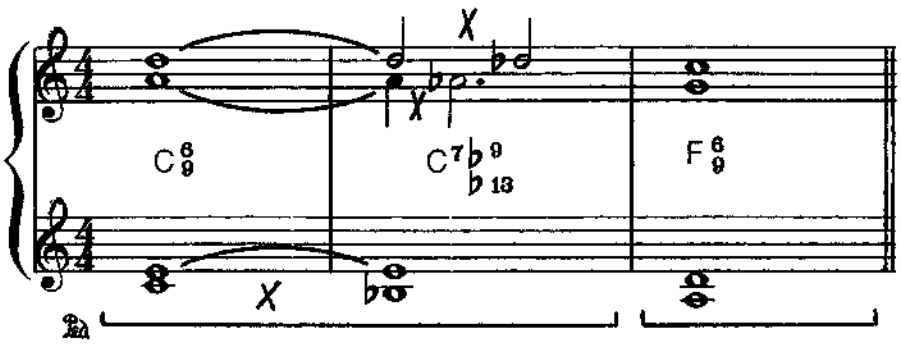


If the pedal is depressed on each quarter note, a semi-legato is achieved. But if dampening is employed, there is a totally legato transition from note to note.

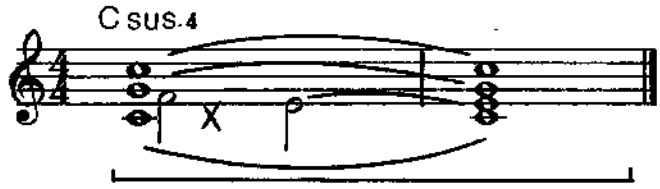
Playing a line over a sustained chord or tone is virtually impossible without the aid of dampening.



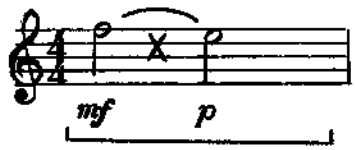
Along the same lines, with the use of dampening, one or more notes within a chord can be altered without raising the pedal, thus changing the harmonic function or tonality of the chord.



As you can see in the last example, a major quality chord is altered by dampening the appropriate chord tones to become a dominant quality chord, which then is resolved to the tonic. This process of changing the quality of a chord by altering a tone or tones within the chord, becomes obvious in the following resolution of a suspended 4th chord to the major tonic (a 4 to 3 suspension).



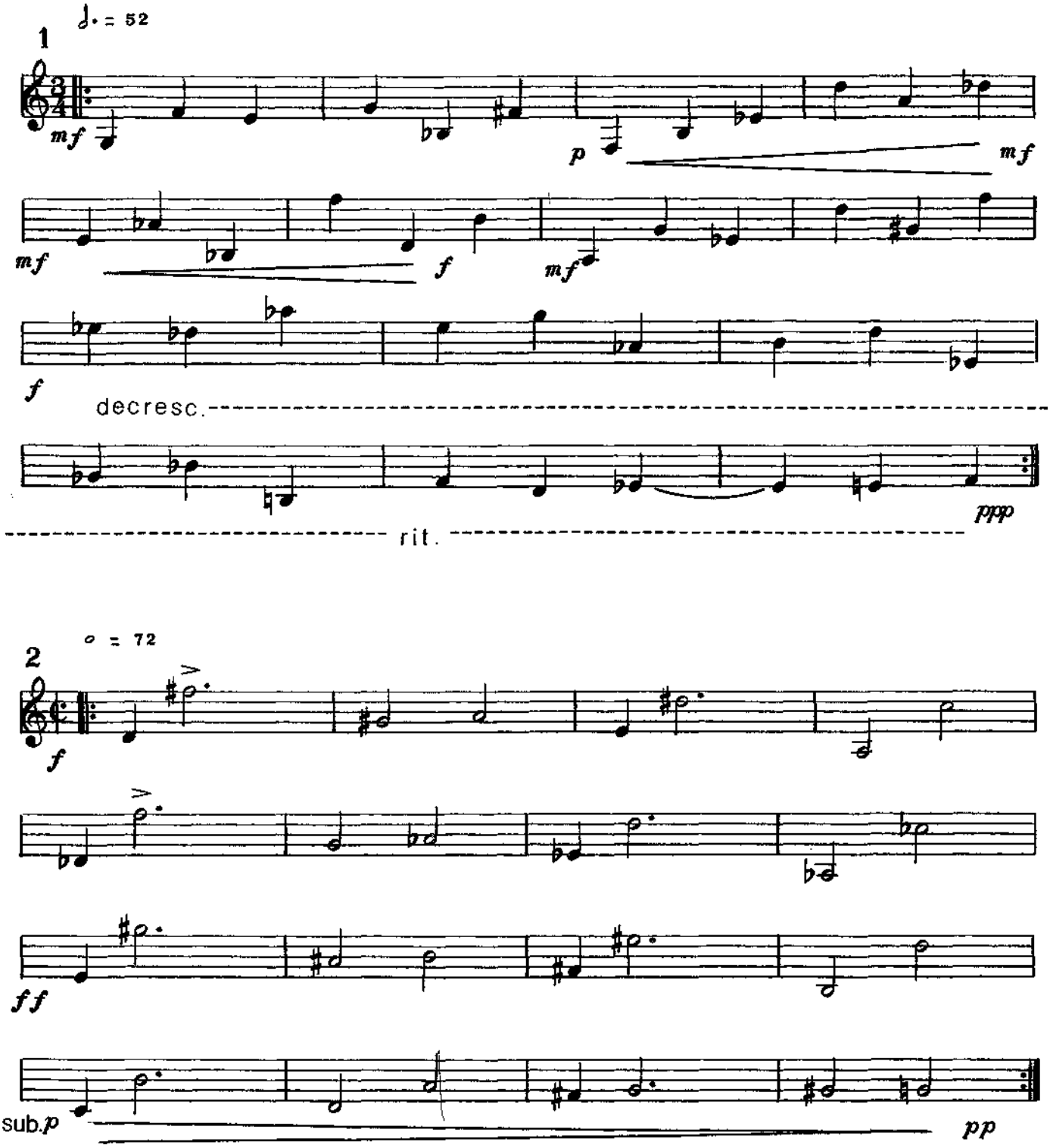
If a slur effect between two notes is desired, the second note should be played softer than the first.

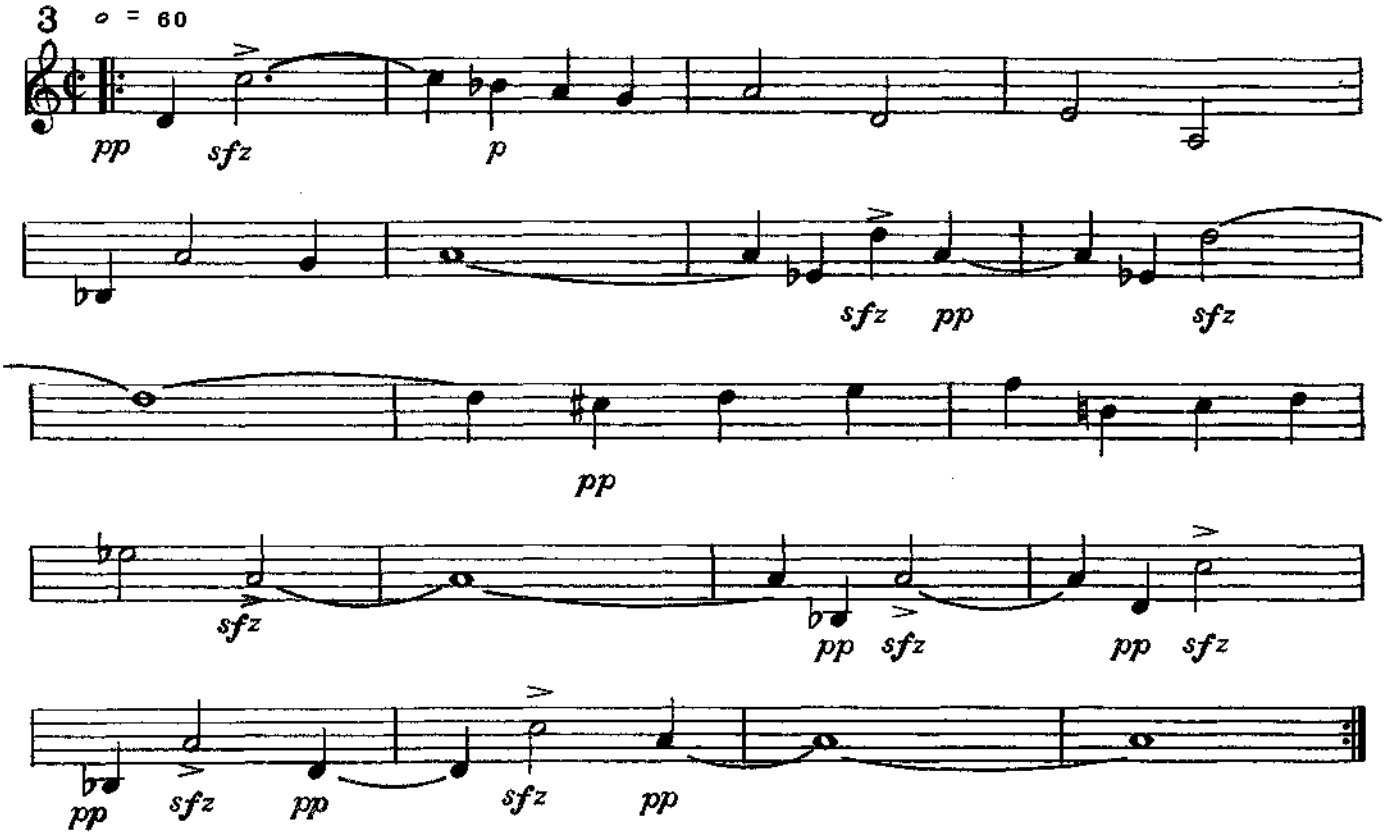


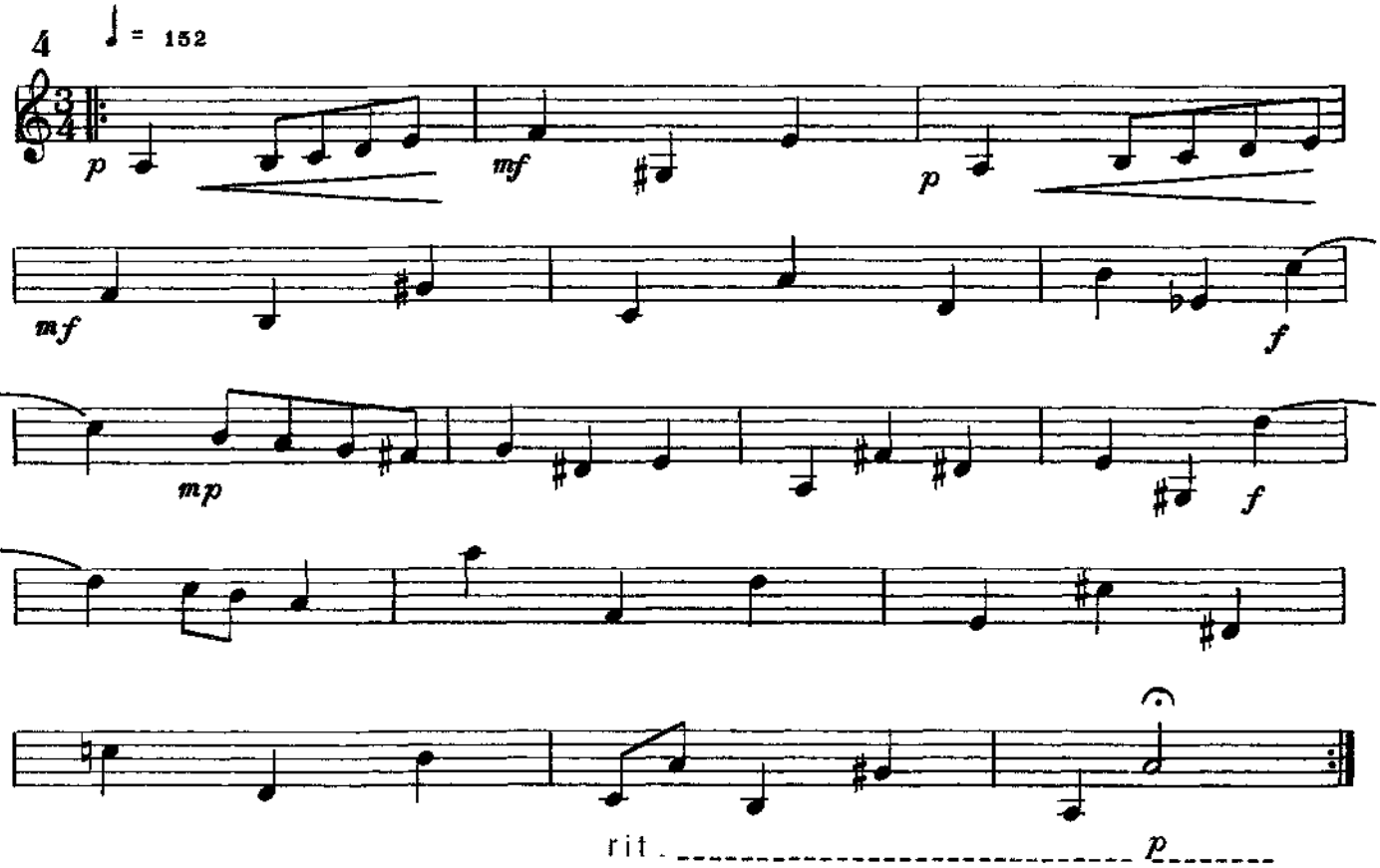
Dampening: Etudes

1–4

In each one of these first four etudes, the pedal should be sustained throughout and each note should be dampened.



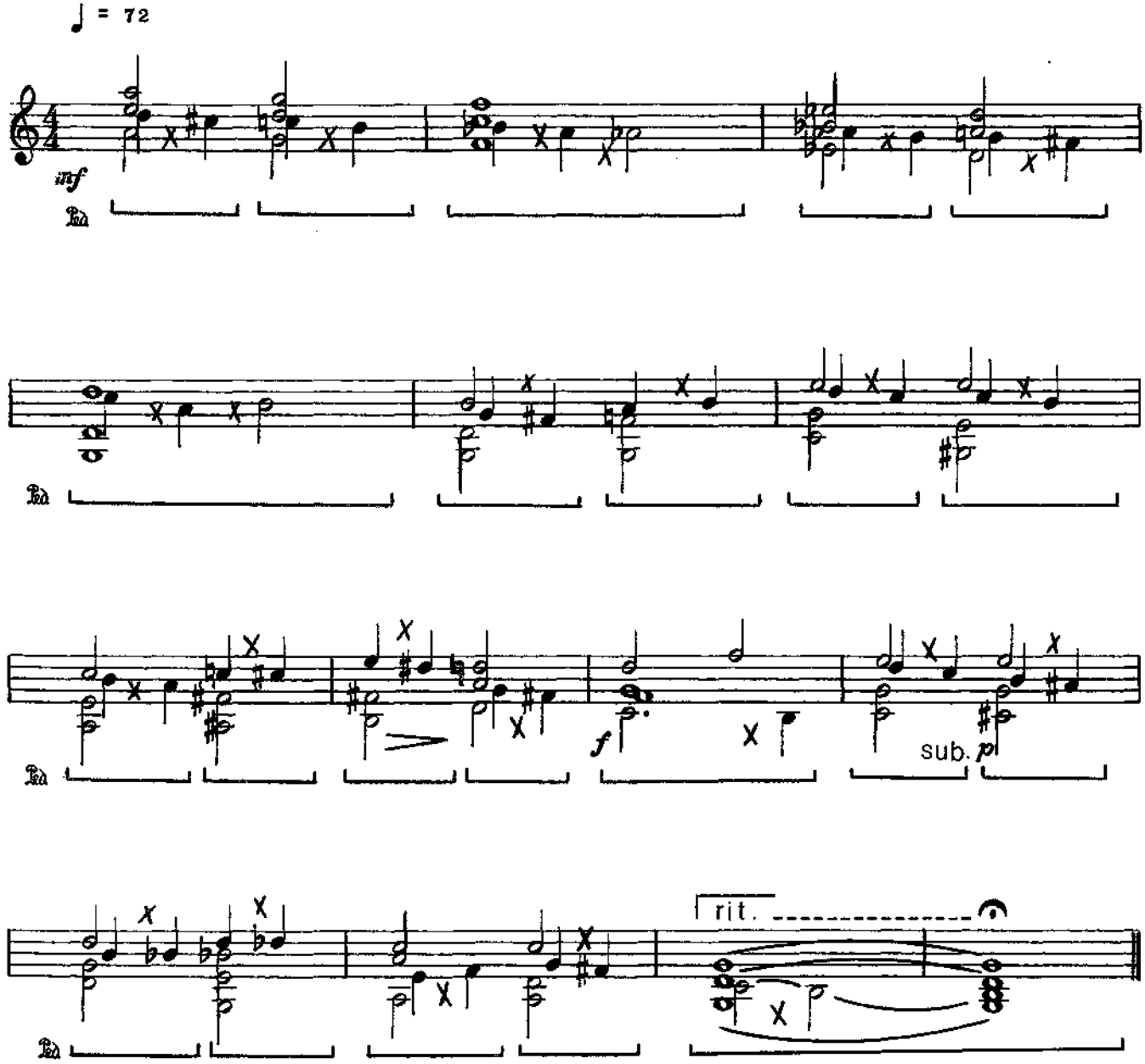

3
o = 60
pp
sfz
p
sfz
pp
sfz
pp
sfz
pp
sfz
pp
sfz
pp
sfz
pp


4
♩ = 152
p
mf
p
mf
f
mp
f
rit.
p

Dampening: Etudes

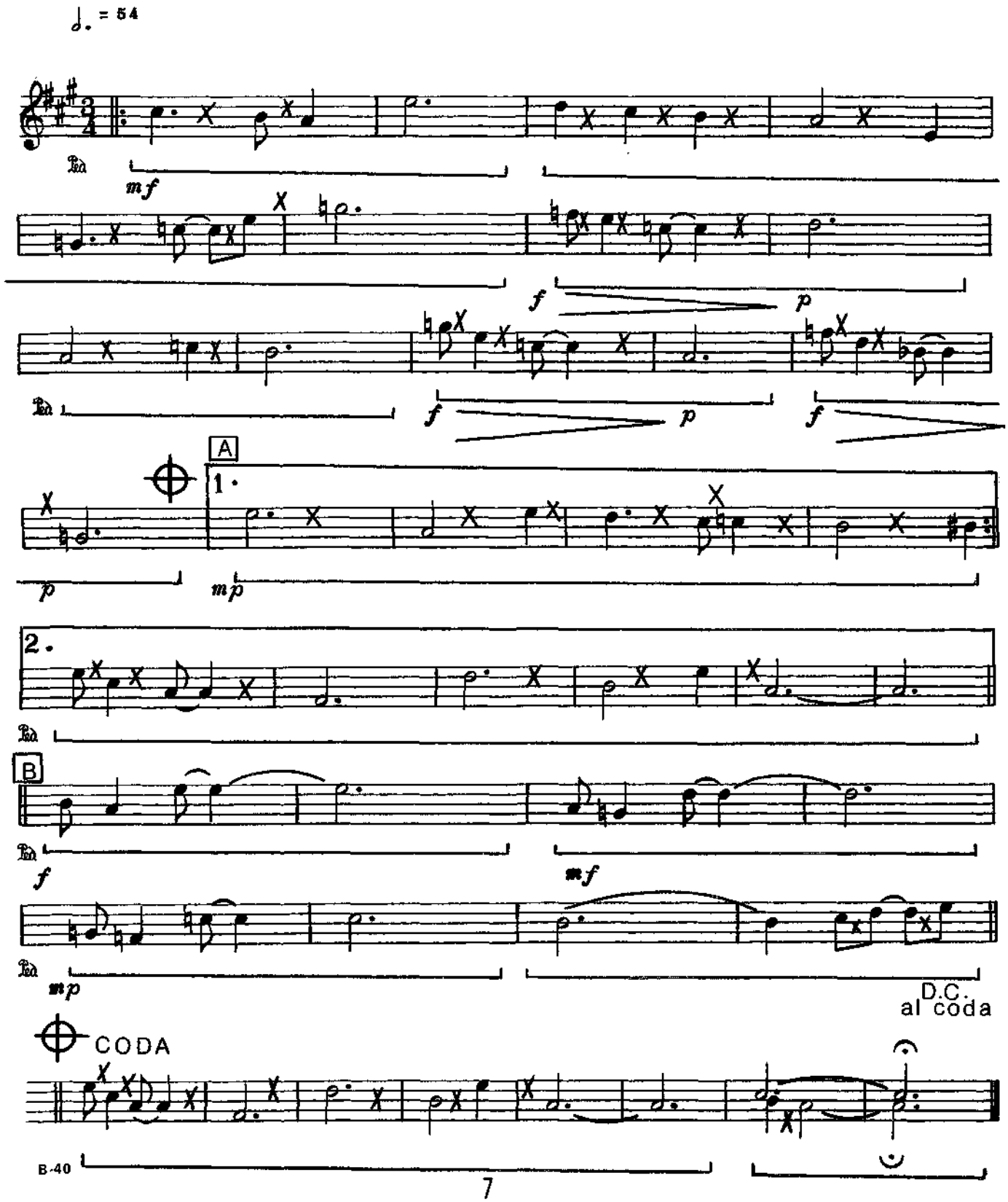
5

In this etude, I have included pedal markings since the pedal will not be sustained throughout. In the first bar, for instance, the pedal is sustained for two beats, released and then sustained for another two beats. The second bar is different, so watch the pedal markings carefully. I have also included the *X* between notes that are to be dampened.

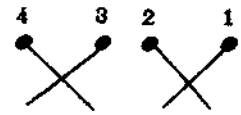


6

Observe the indicated dynamics and be sure to notice that at letter B, there are no X's present, therefore do not dampen until the eighth bar of B where the X's reoccur.

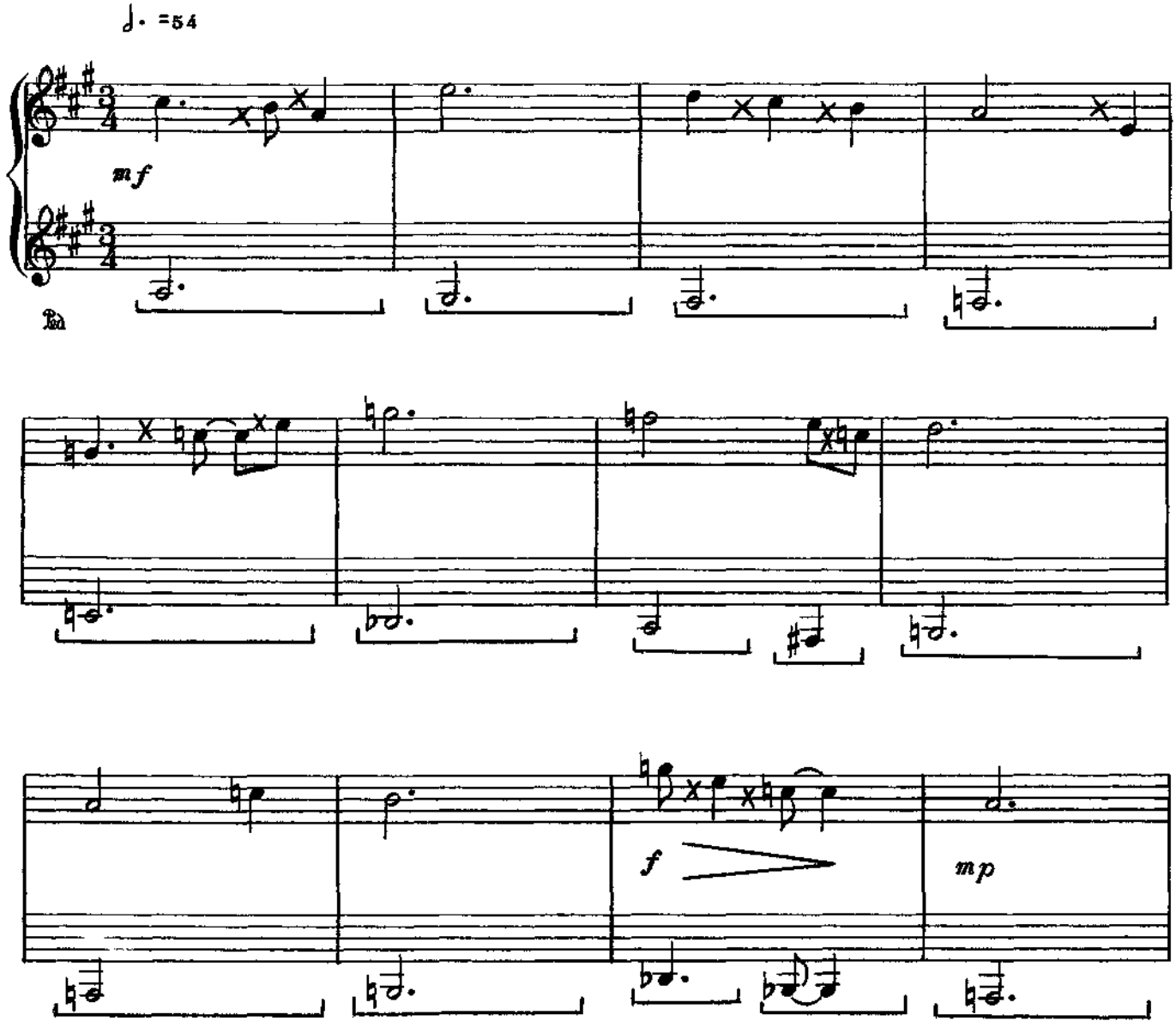


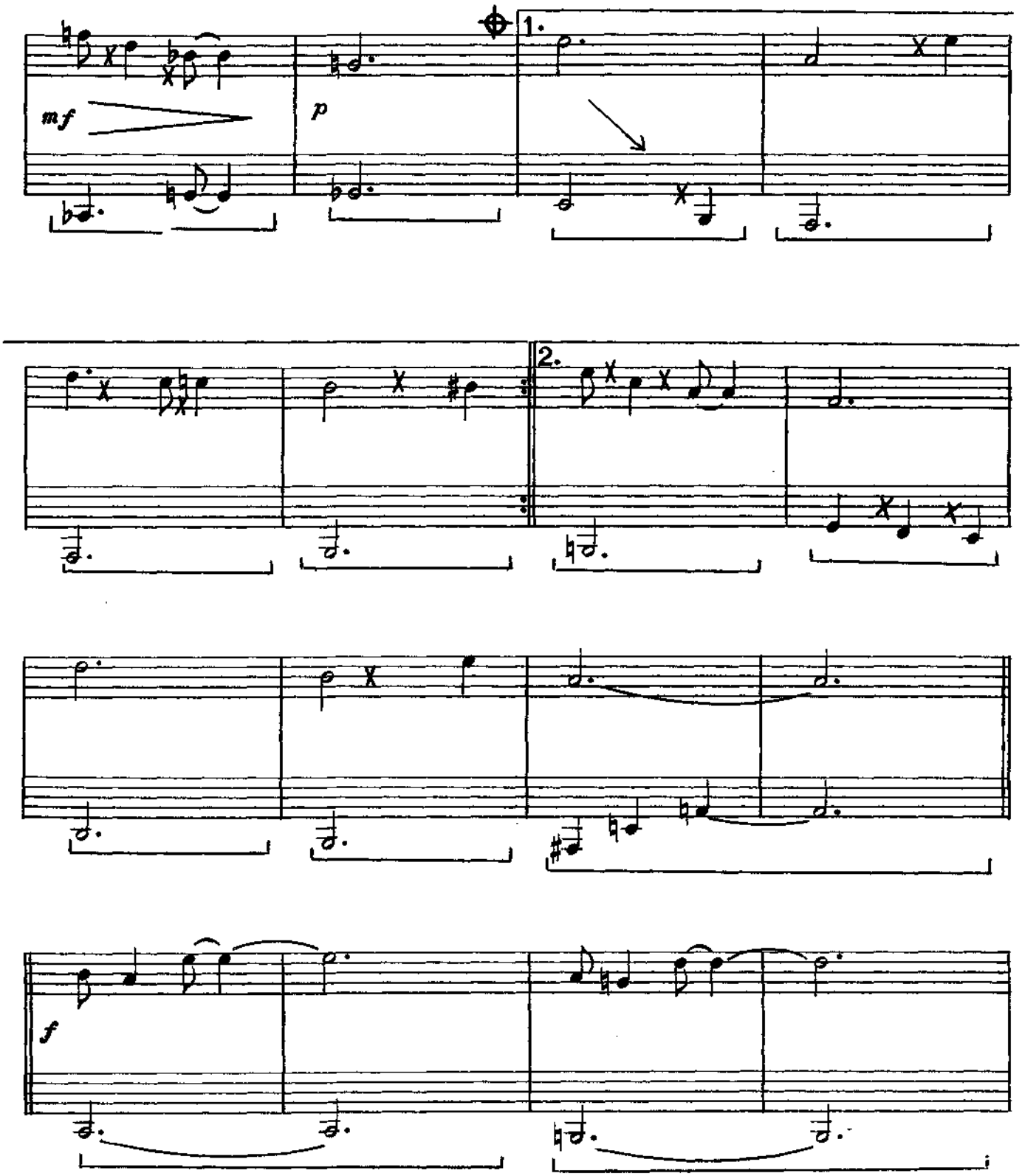
Dampening: Etudes



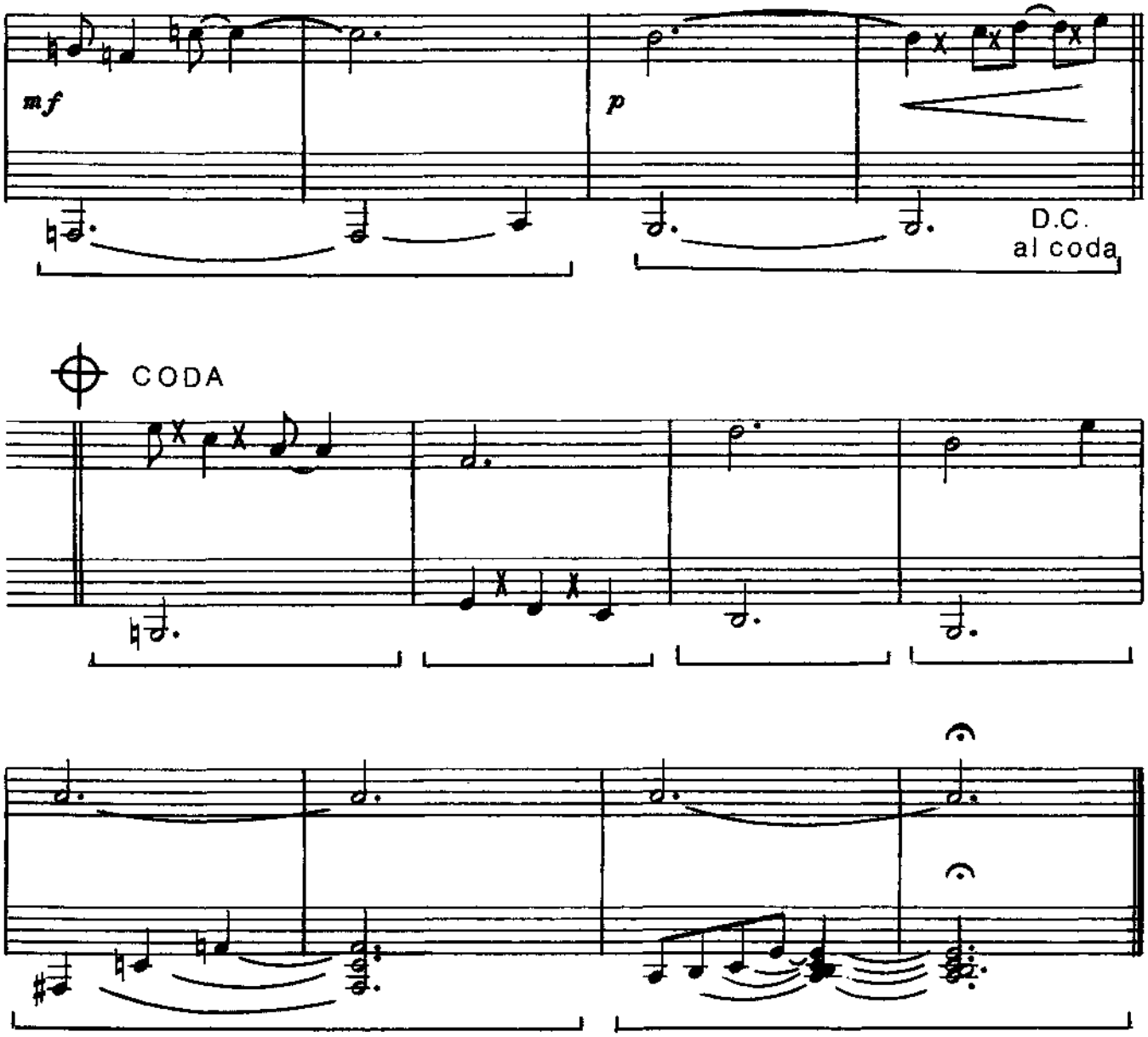
7

As you will notice, the melodic line is the same as No. 6, but I have added a single bass line. The problem here is dampening over a sustained note or contrapuntal line. In some cases I find it easier to play the bass note with the No. 4 mallet, in order to leave the No. 3 mallet free to dampen. (See diagram at top of page.) Otherwise, the No. 3 mallet would be constantly jumping to perform two functions—playing the bass note and dampening. It is very important to utilize all four mallets when possible to limit excess movement. This is the real meaning of four-mallet technique. Also, try to play the melody slightly louder than the accompaniment.



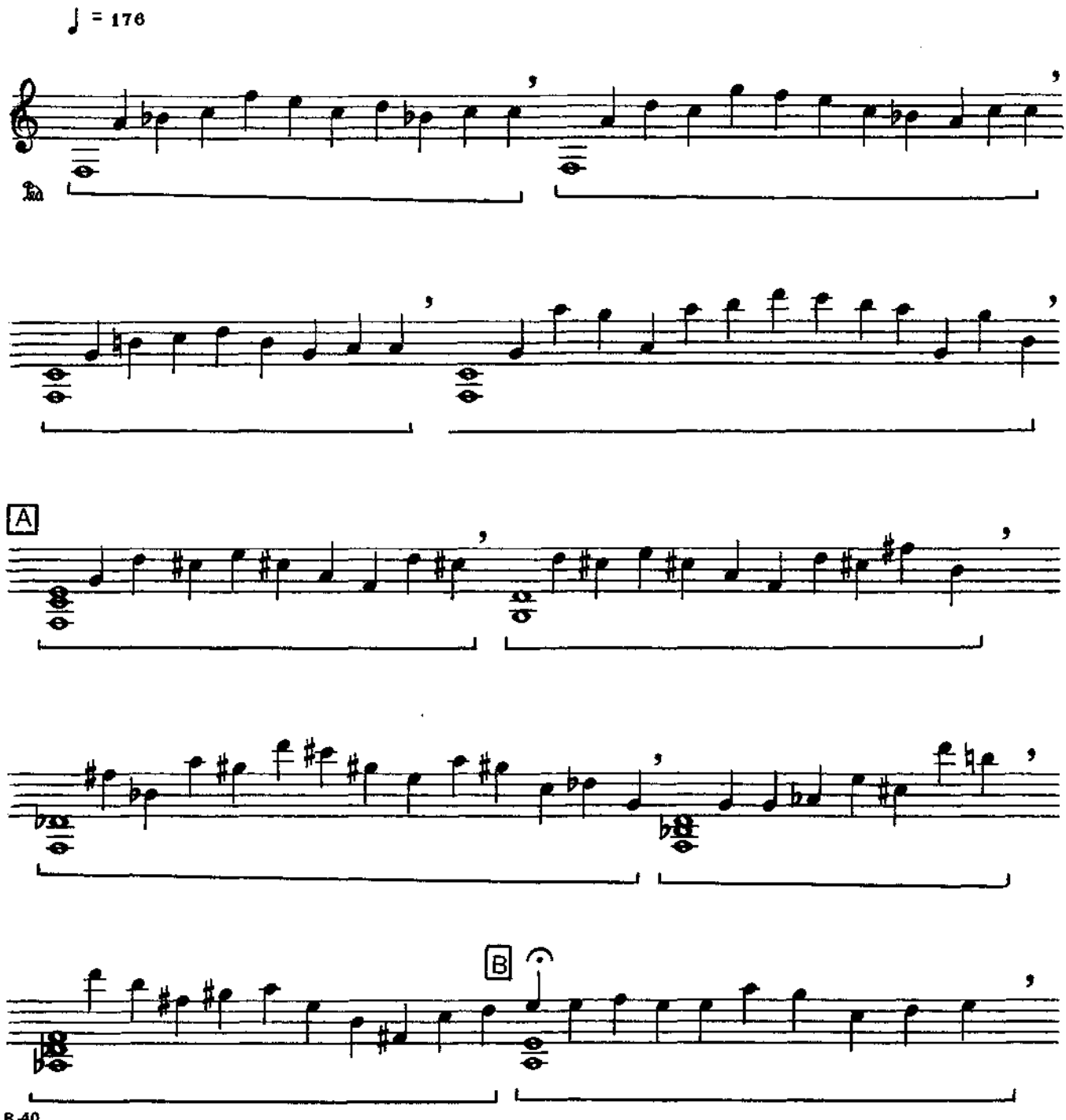

1.
mf
p
2.
f

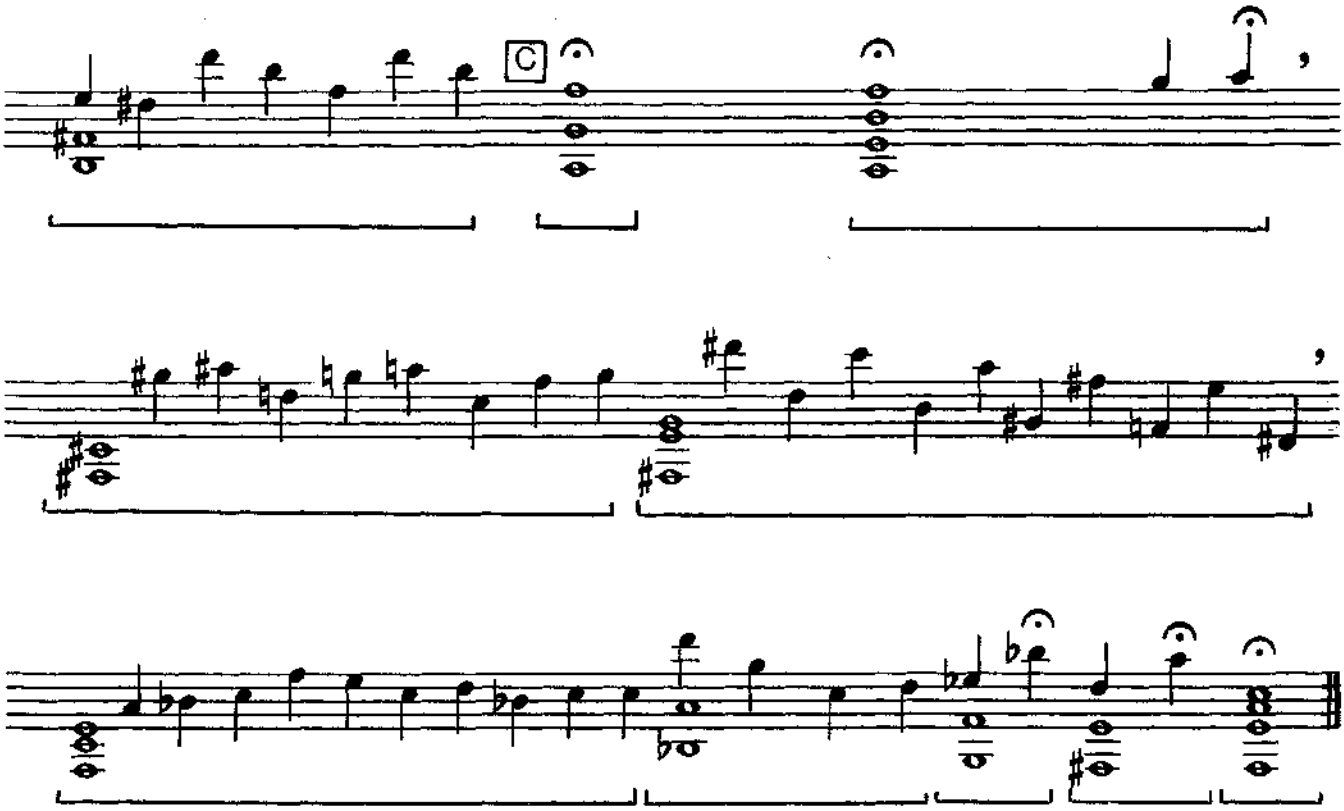
Dampening: Etudes



8

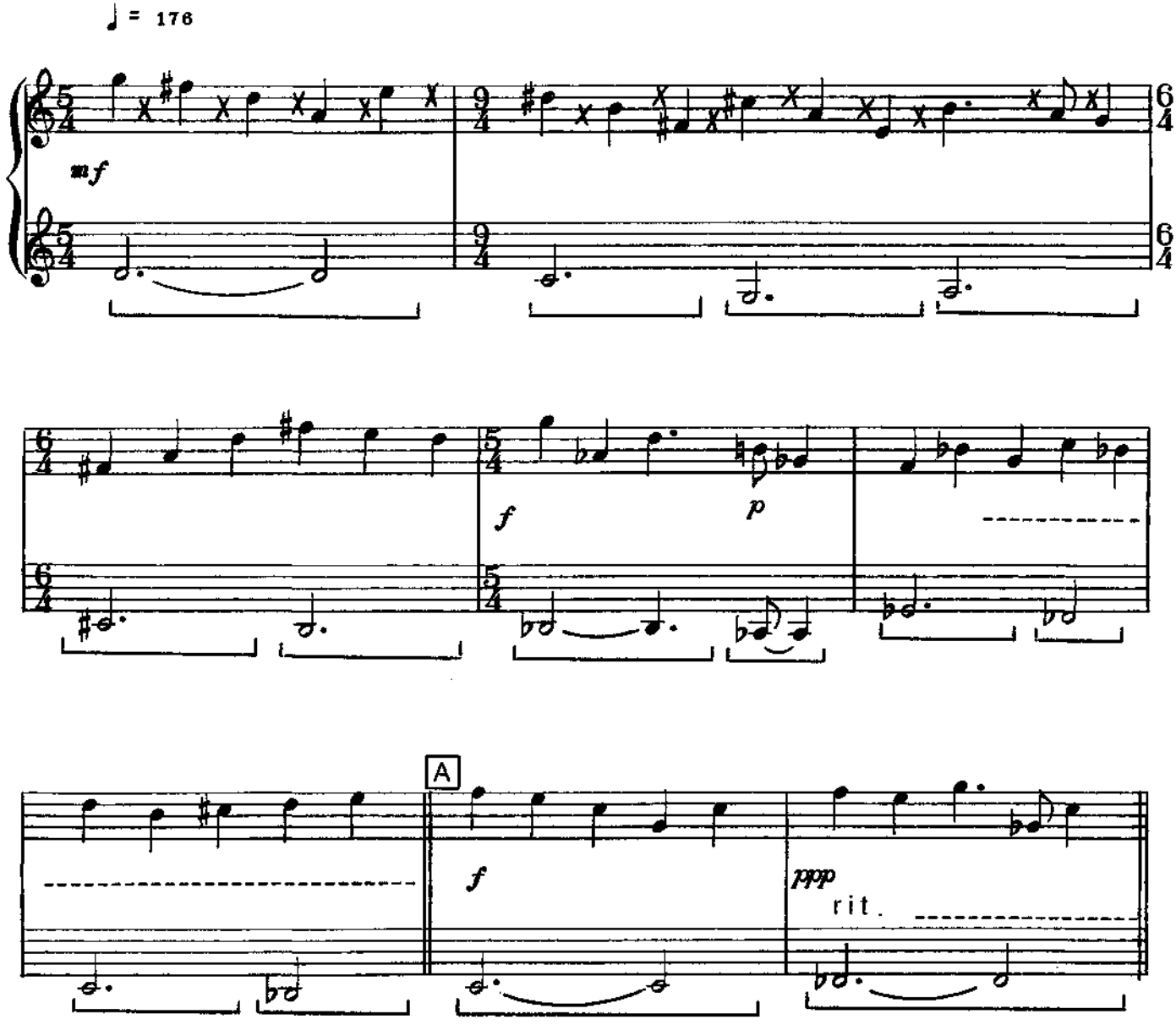
This etude also concentrates on playing a melodic line over a sustained tone or chord. There is no time signature. I have used the quarter note as the constant here, but have left tempo dynamics and phrasing up to the discretion of the performer. The apostrophe at the end of each short phrase means there should be a very slight pause before going on. At letter C, the whole notes should not be given an exact value of four beats but should be sustained slightly longer than the quarter notes. In general, the piece should have a Gregorian chant-like quality. Dampen throughout.

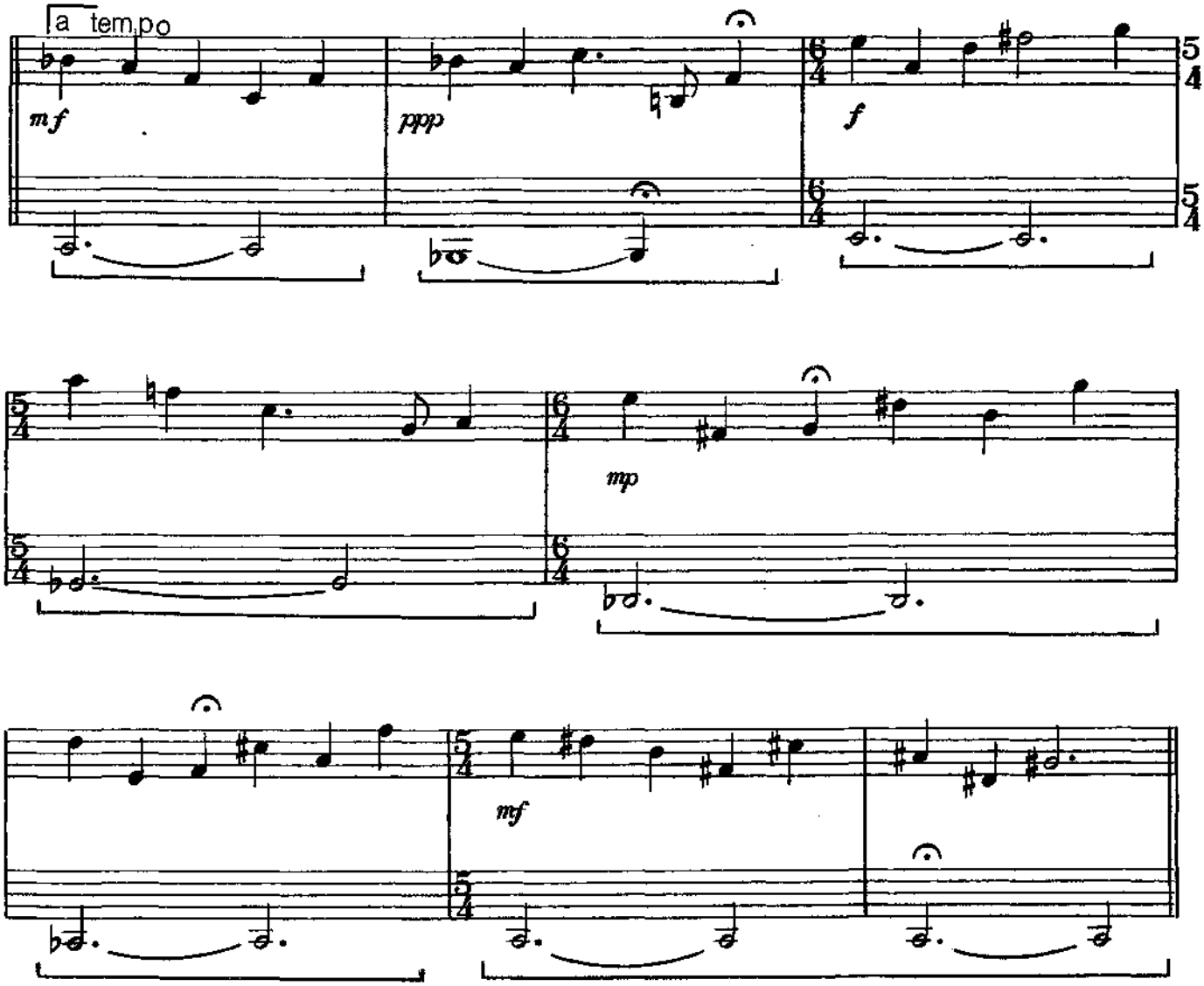




9

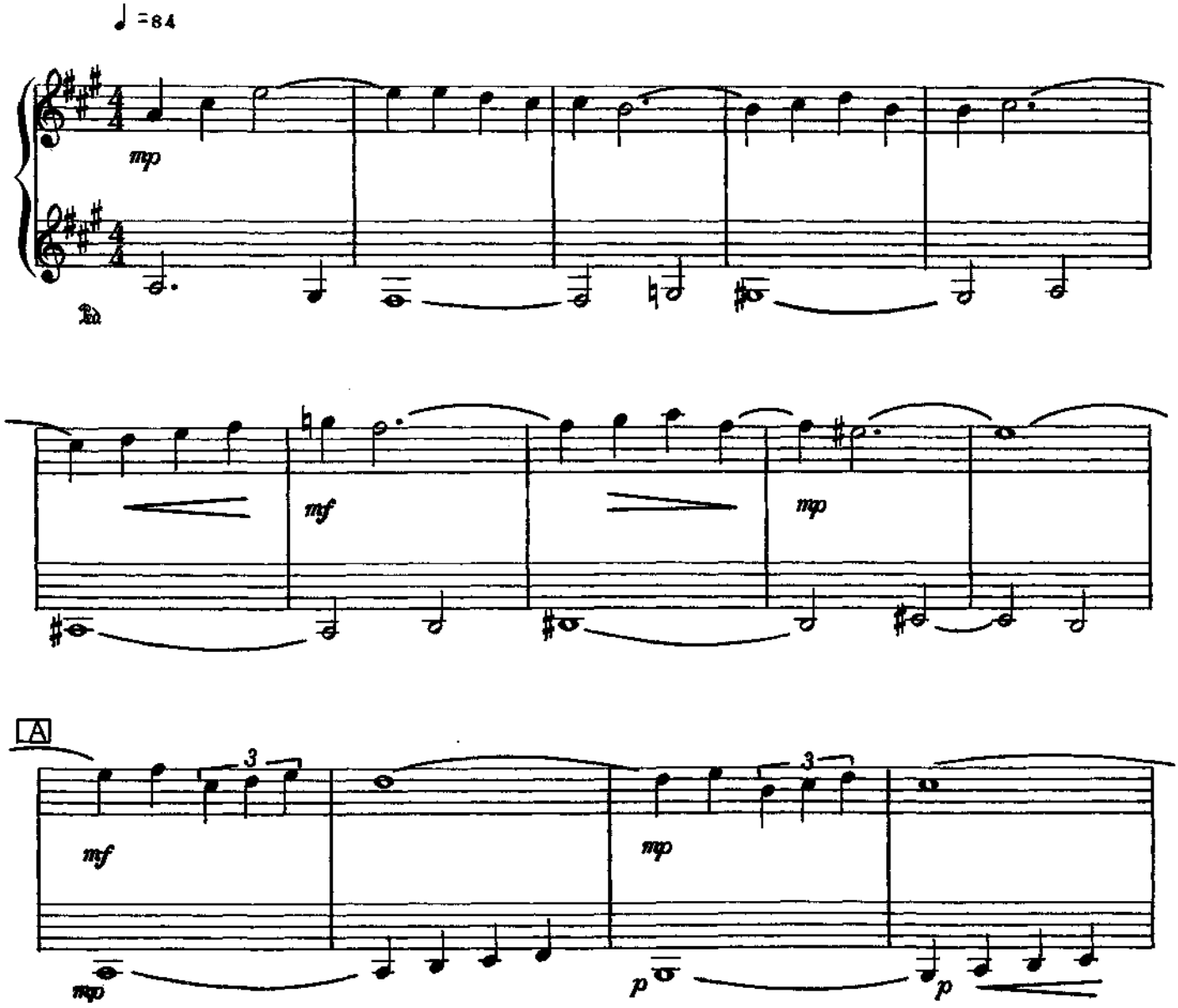
Dynamics are very important here, being especially careful with the fourth bar. Please notice that I have placed *X*'s only in the first two measures. Since most music you will be reading will not have dampening indications, you must learn to "feel" when dampening is necessary. In this etude, dampen each note in the same manner as the first two measures. Even though it is not physically indicated, you can easily see that dampening here is a musical requirement.

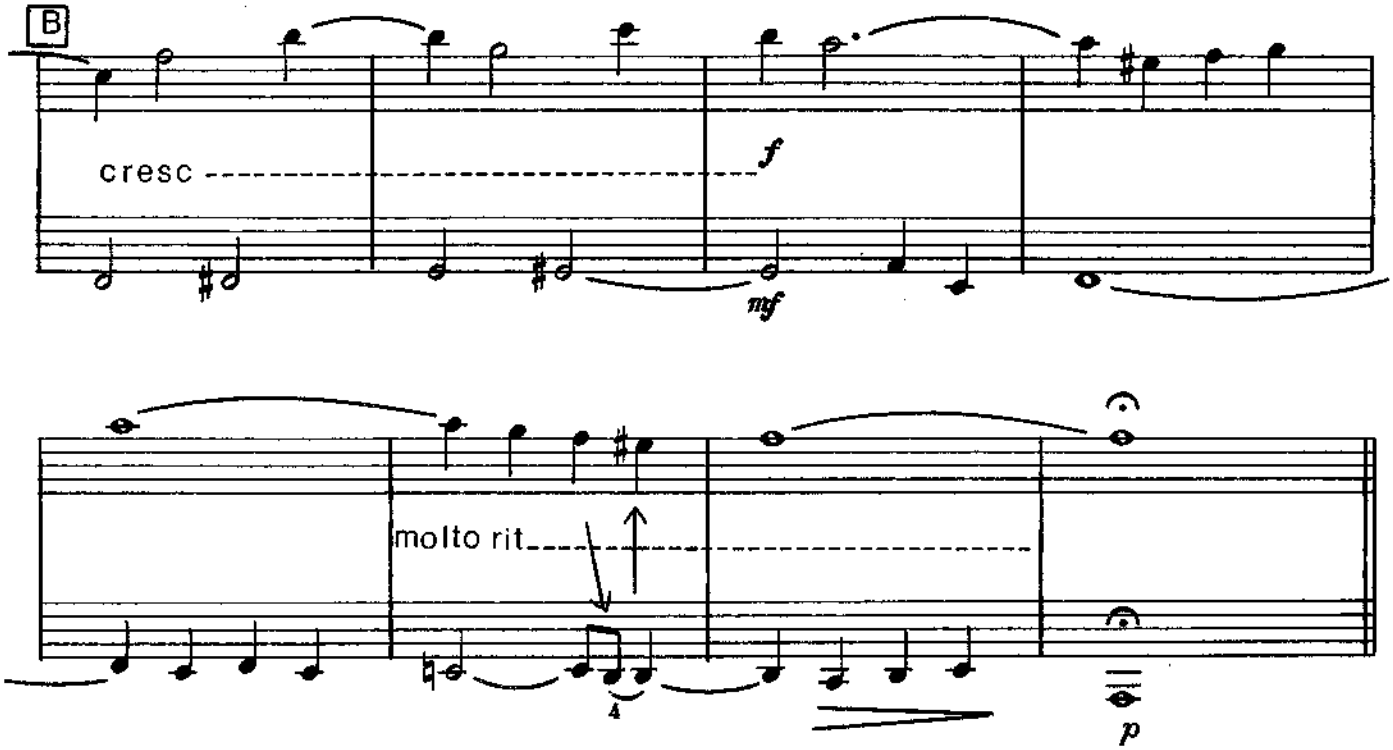



a tempo
mf
ppp
f
mp
mf

10

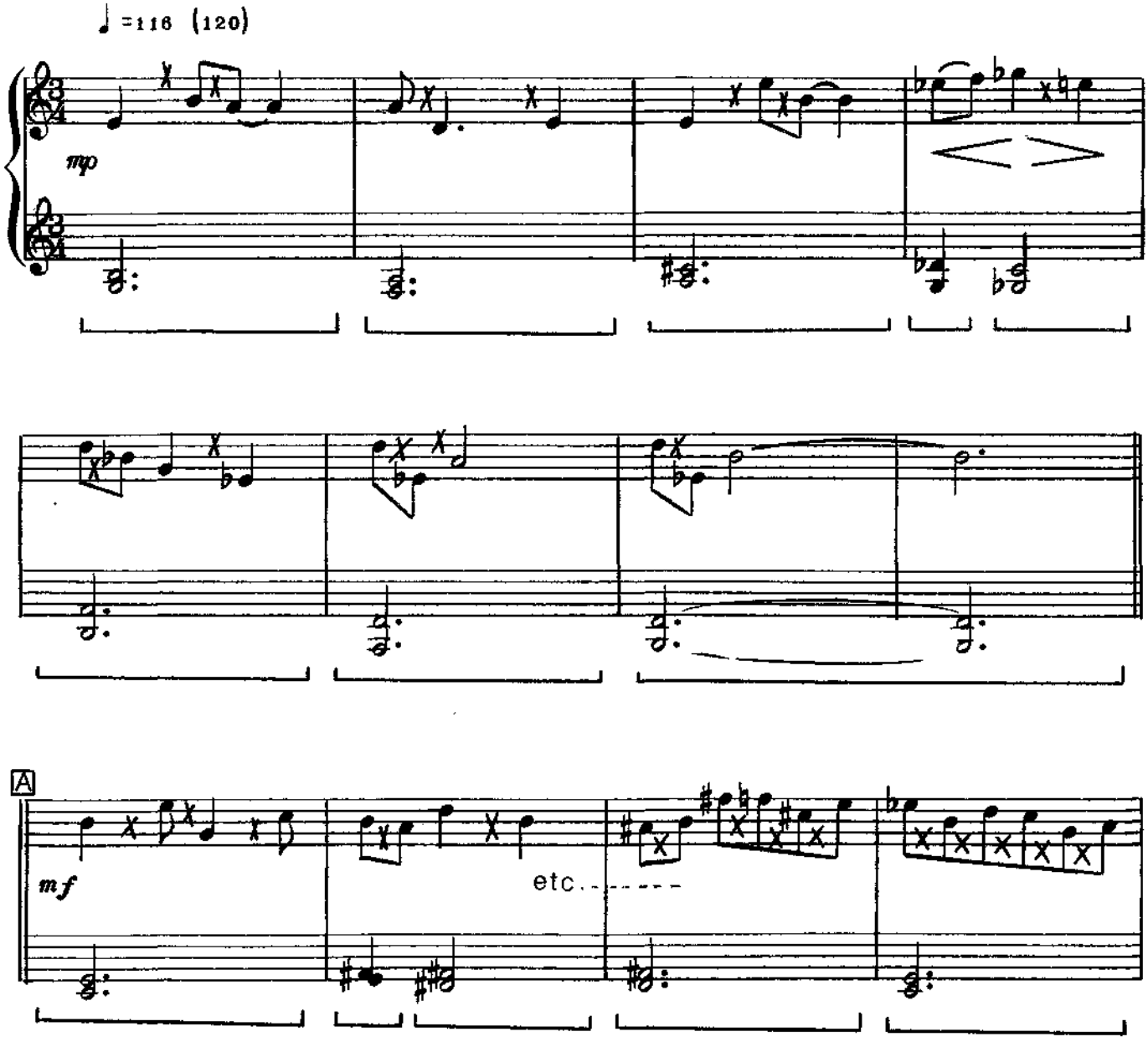
Here, the top line and bottom line should be played at equal volume, since this is not a melody with accompaniment but rather a contrapuntal piece. The pedal is sustained throughout, and everything is dampened, hence, no pedal markings. The problem here is remembering which notes have or have not been dampened when jumping from line to line. This is especially difficult at letter B, so take it slowly.

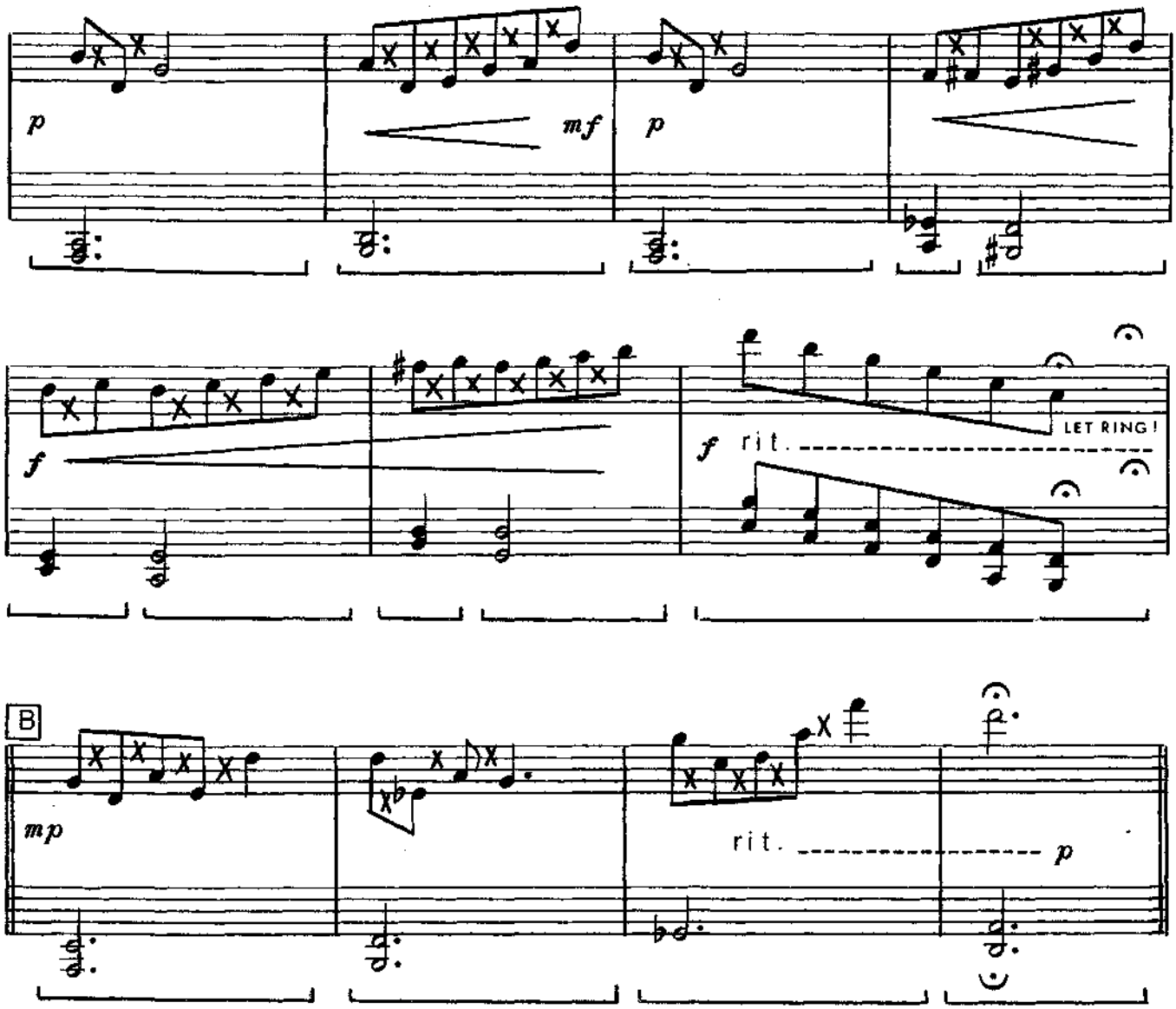



B
cresc
f
mf
molto rit
4
p

11

This etude is more in the style of the traditional melody and accompaniment. The melody should be played slightly louder than the accompaniment. Interesting sonorities will be achieved in measures 6 and 7 and the second measure after B, as a result of dampening.

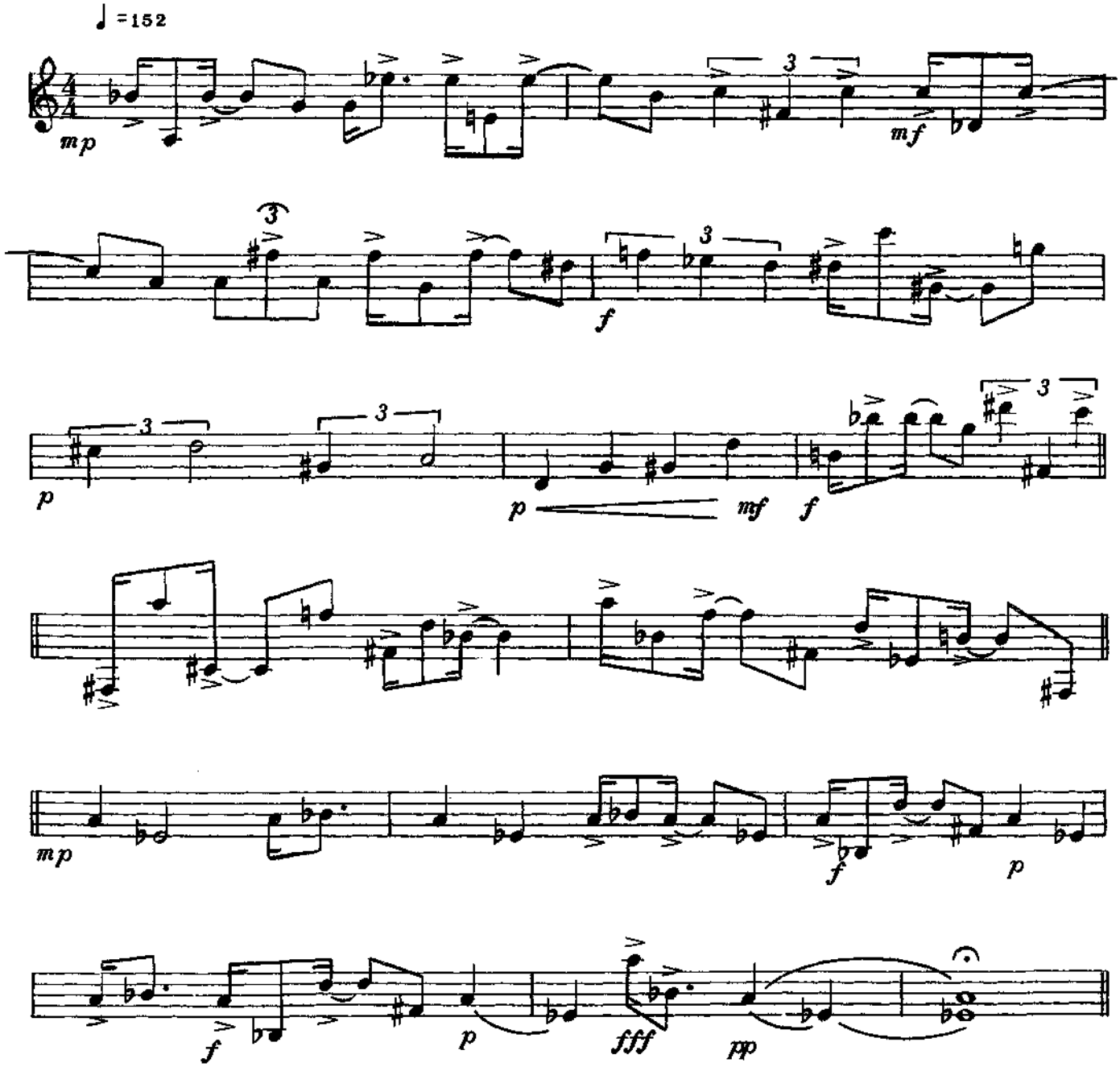



p
mf
p
f
LET RING!
f rit.
B
mp
rit.
p

Dampening: Etudes

12

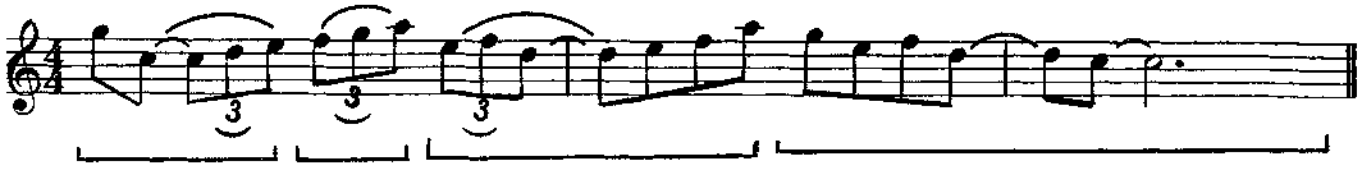
This etude goes rather fast and requires deft dampening ability. The whole effect of the piece, in fact, lies in an observance of good dampening and exaggeration of dynamics. It will probably be necessary to take it slowly at first, then work up to the indicated tempo. The pedal is sustained throughout.



Section II: Pedaling

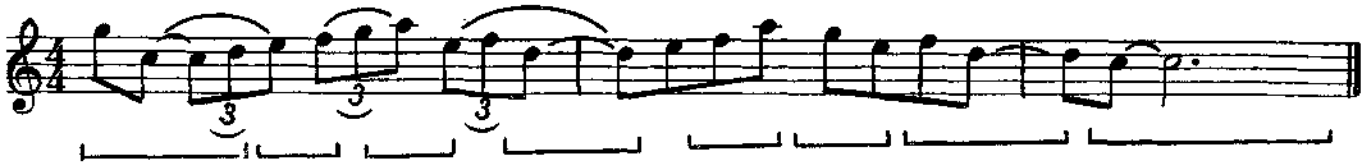
Most mallet players arrive at the Vibraphone by way of the Marimba and/or the Xylophone. Therefore, one of the first difficulties they encounter with the vibes is that of knowing what to do with the pedal. The most obvious conclusion is that it is capable of sustaining tones and chords. So, as a result, the pedal is then limited to performing this simple function alone.

Deft use of the pedal, however, can mean the difference between a smooth legato line and a confused, undefined cluster of notes.



If this line is pedaled this way, according to beats and phrases, the triplets will ring into each other, obscuring the clarity of the line.

Below is a more correct way of pedaling the same line, so that the notes do not obscure and ring into each other.

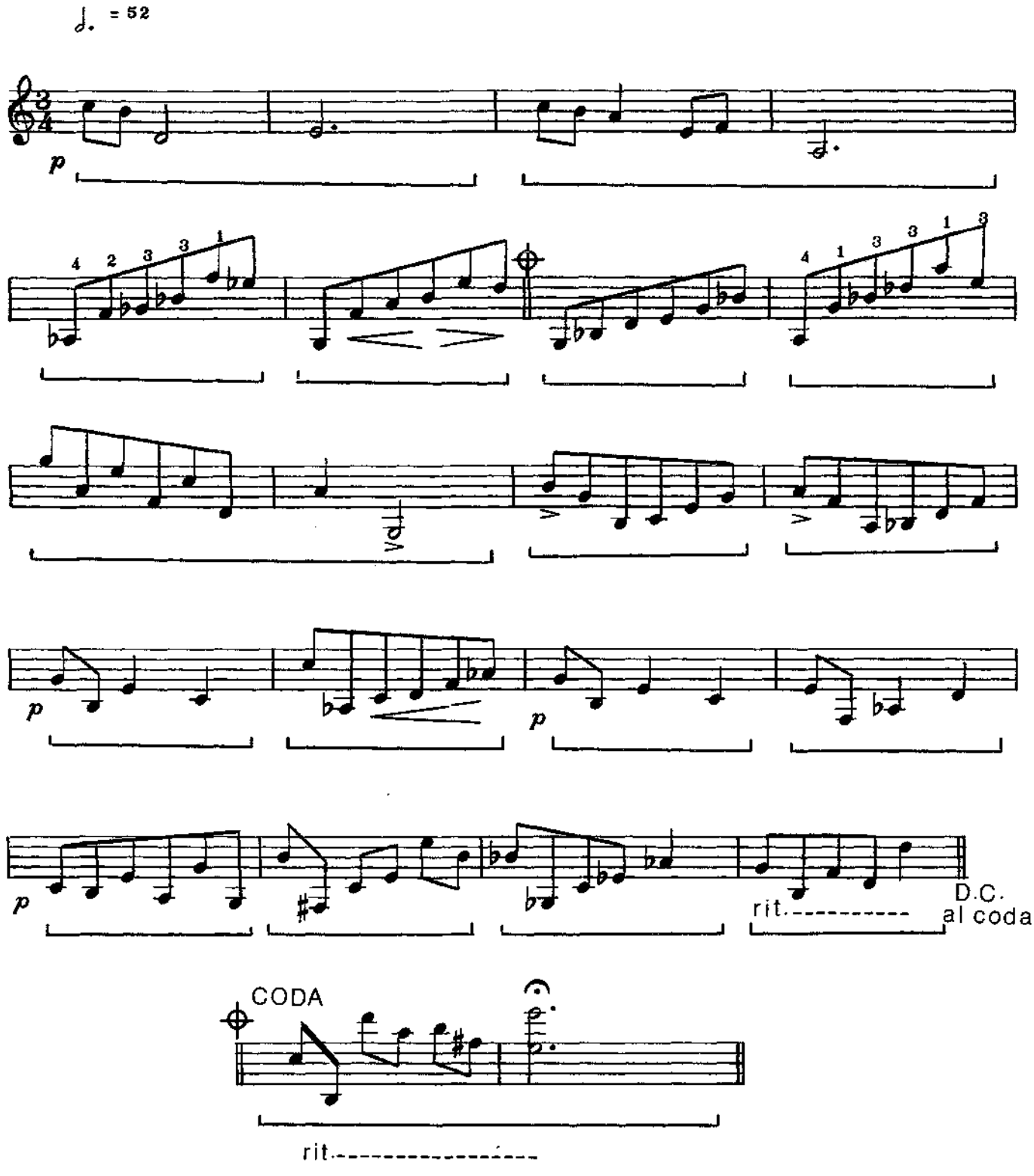


Try playing tunes or pieces and use the pedal where you see fit. You will be able to tell if you are phrasing properly by listening to clarity of line. If the notes consistently ring into one another where you don't want them to, you are doing something wrong. Let your ear be your guide. Soon, the process of pedaling will be as unconscious and natural as the ability to operate, without deliberation, the gear shift and clutch of an automobile.

I would just like to stress that the most important thing to do while playing these next etudes on pedaling is to listen to the sound you are producing with a critical ear and adjust it according to your own aesthetic sense.

13

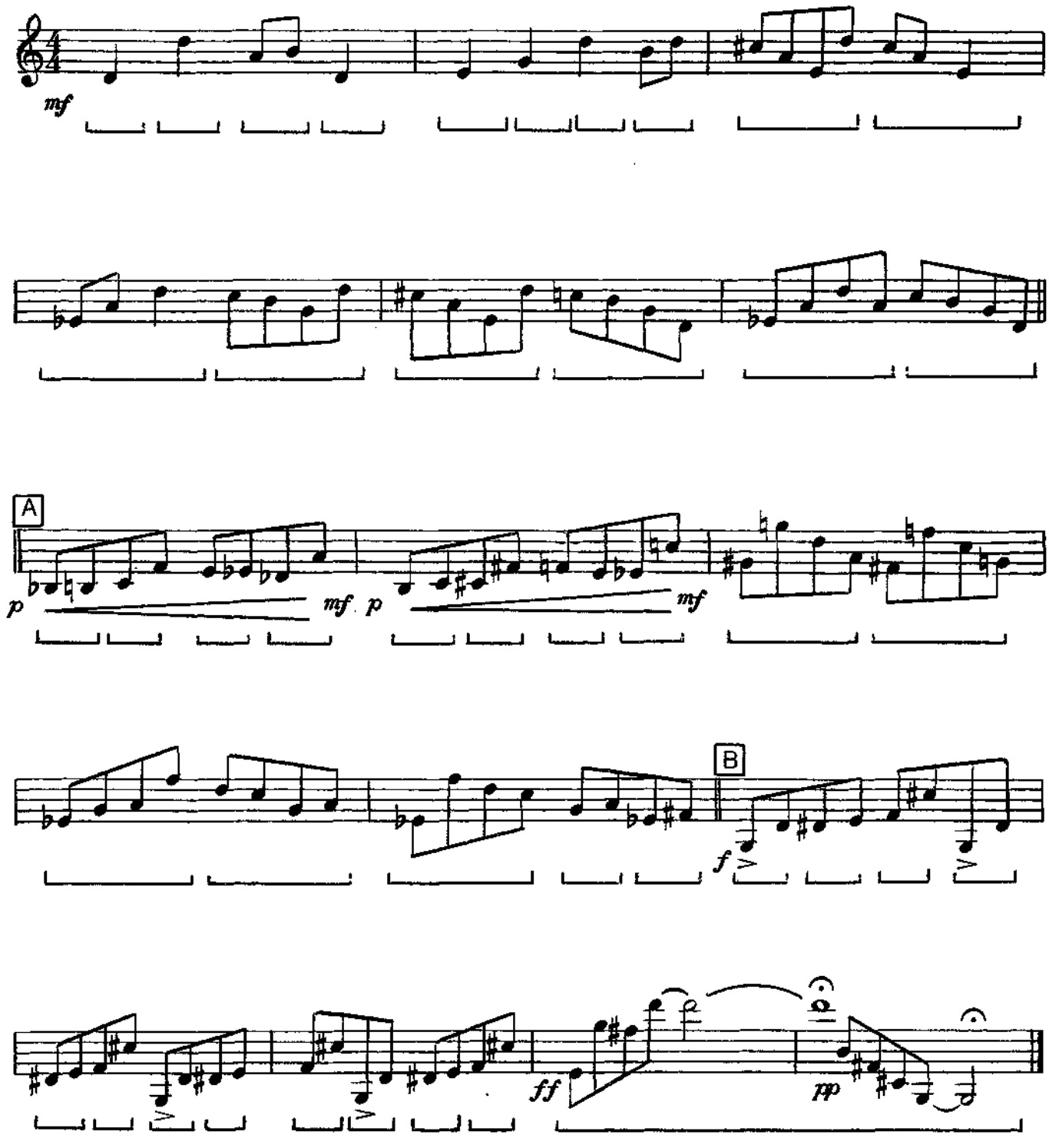
This piece is basically a series of arpeggiated chords. Therefore, if the pedal markings are not carefully observed, so that the appropriate tones ring together, the piece will sound senseless.



14

When it is musically required to pedal on every beat, try using half-pedaling. See how far you have to depress the pedal for the felt bar to leave the keys. Then, only depress the pedal that far. This helps avoid undesired ringing.

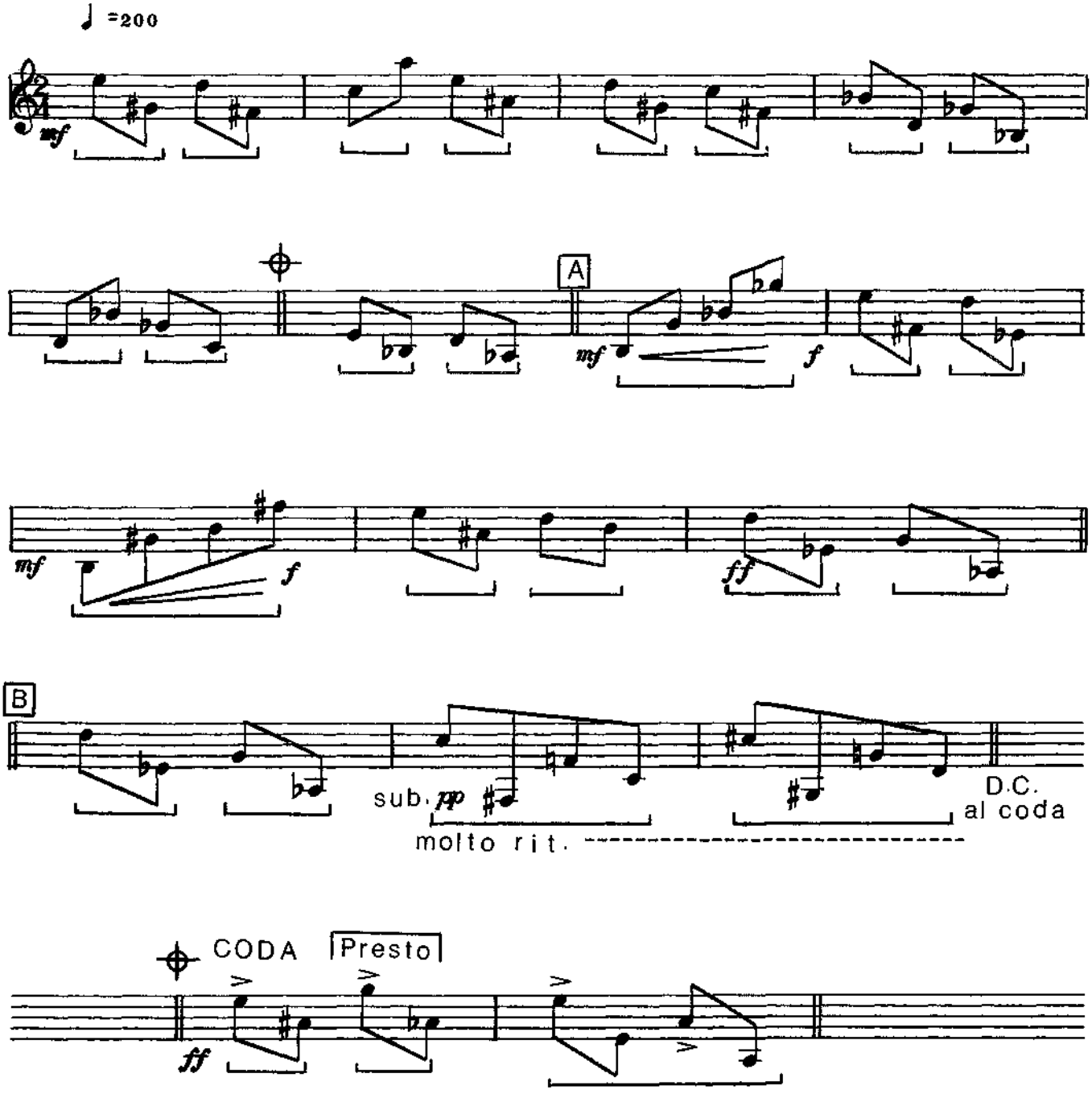
♩ = 176



Pedaling: Etudes

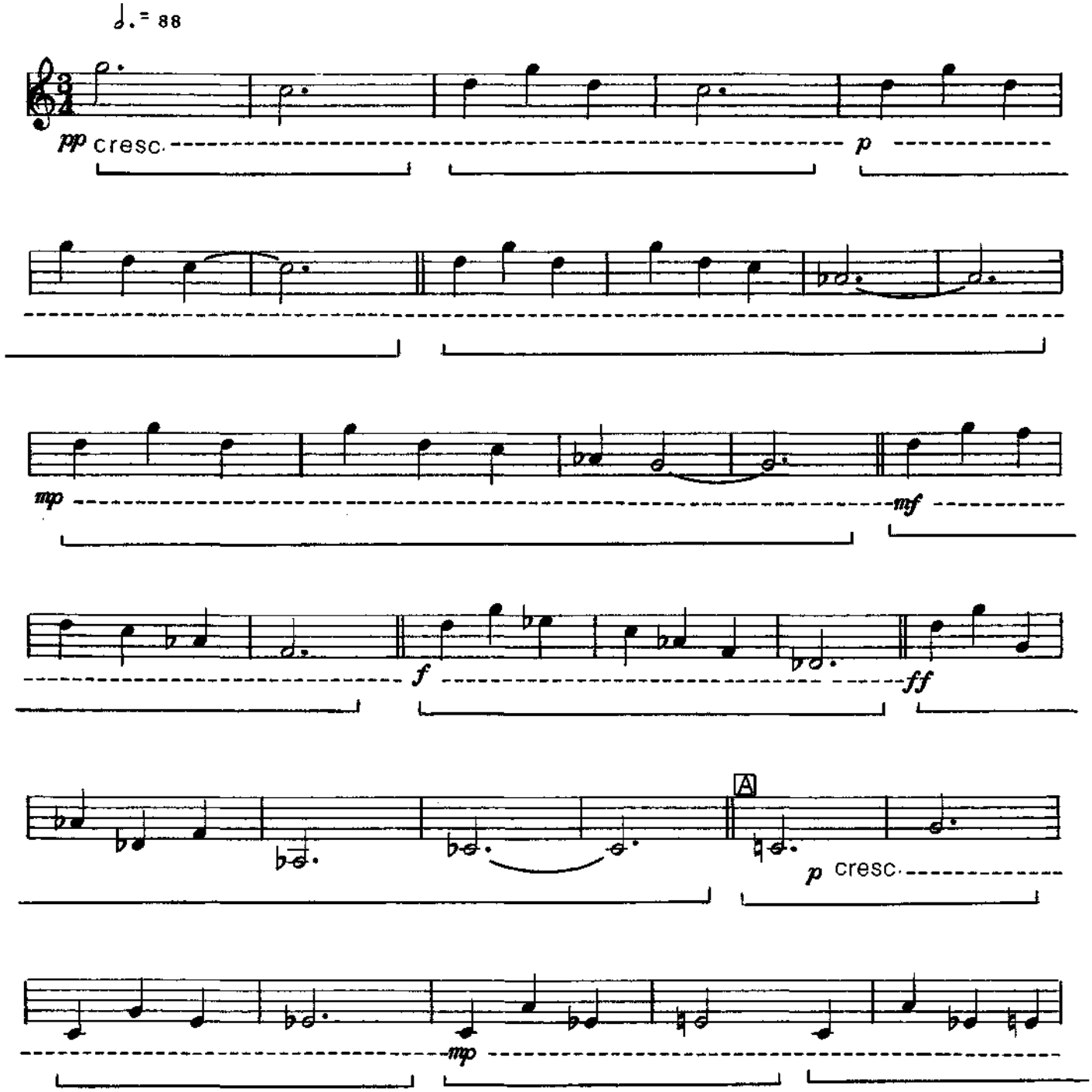
15

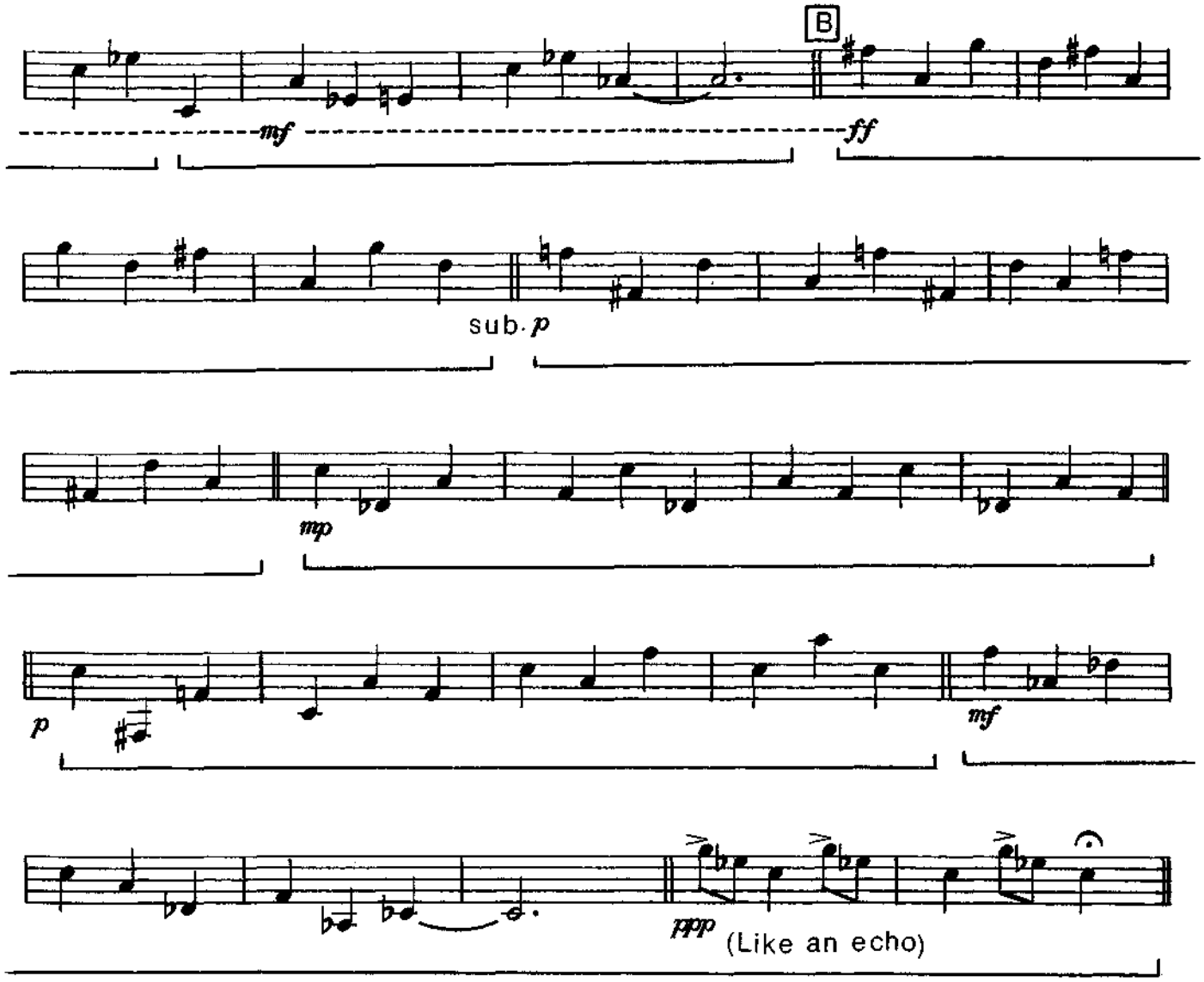
Here again you have to pedal on every beat at a fairly fast tempo. Watch the pedaling on the first and third bars of letter A and second and third bars of letter B.



16

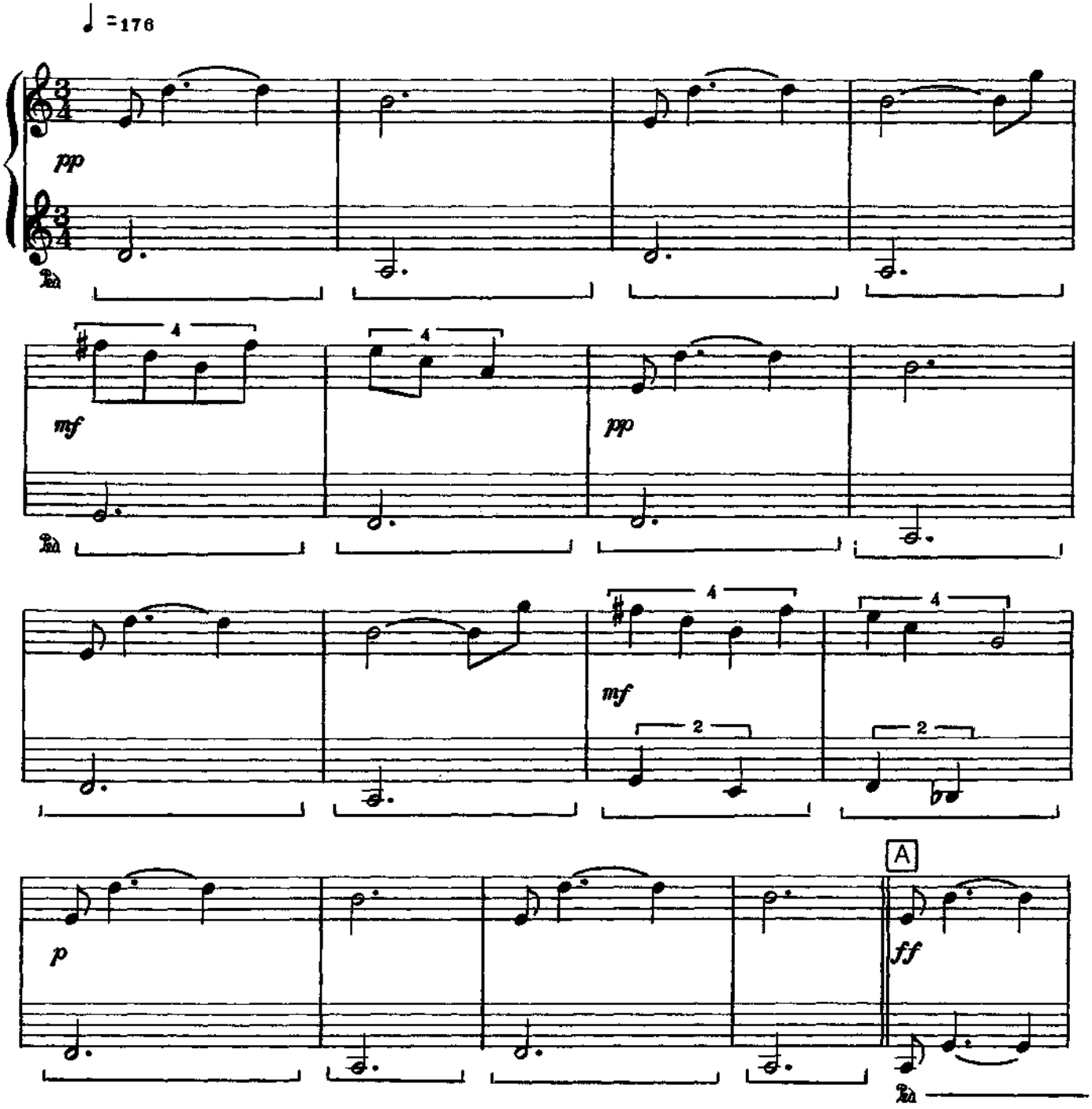
This is also an arpeggiated chord etude. Notice the sixth measure after A; the pedaling changes on the third beat of the measure. The same thing happens on the third beat of the eighth measure after A.

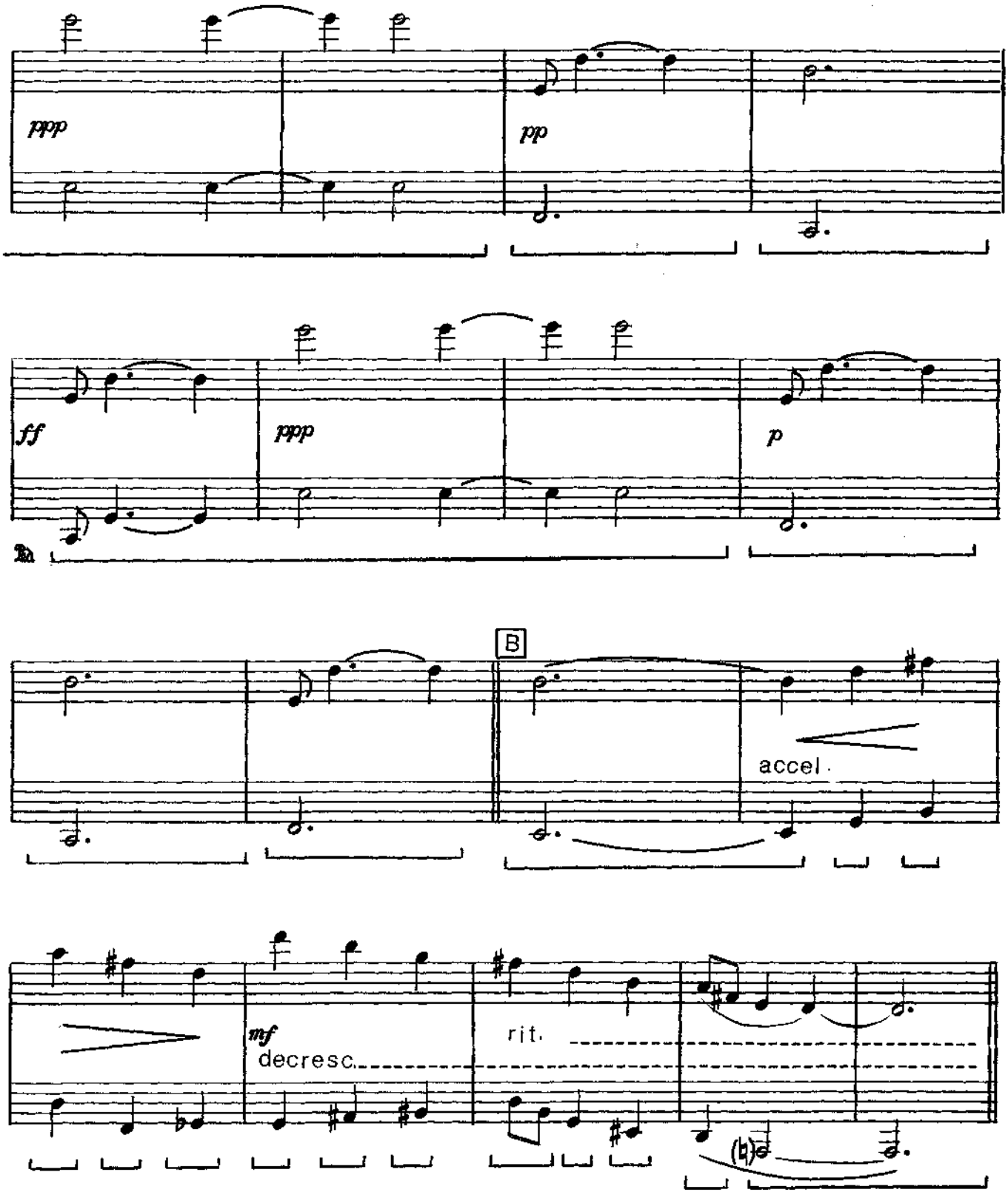



B
mf
ff
sub. p
mp
p
mf
ppp
(Like an echo)

17

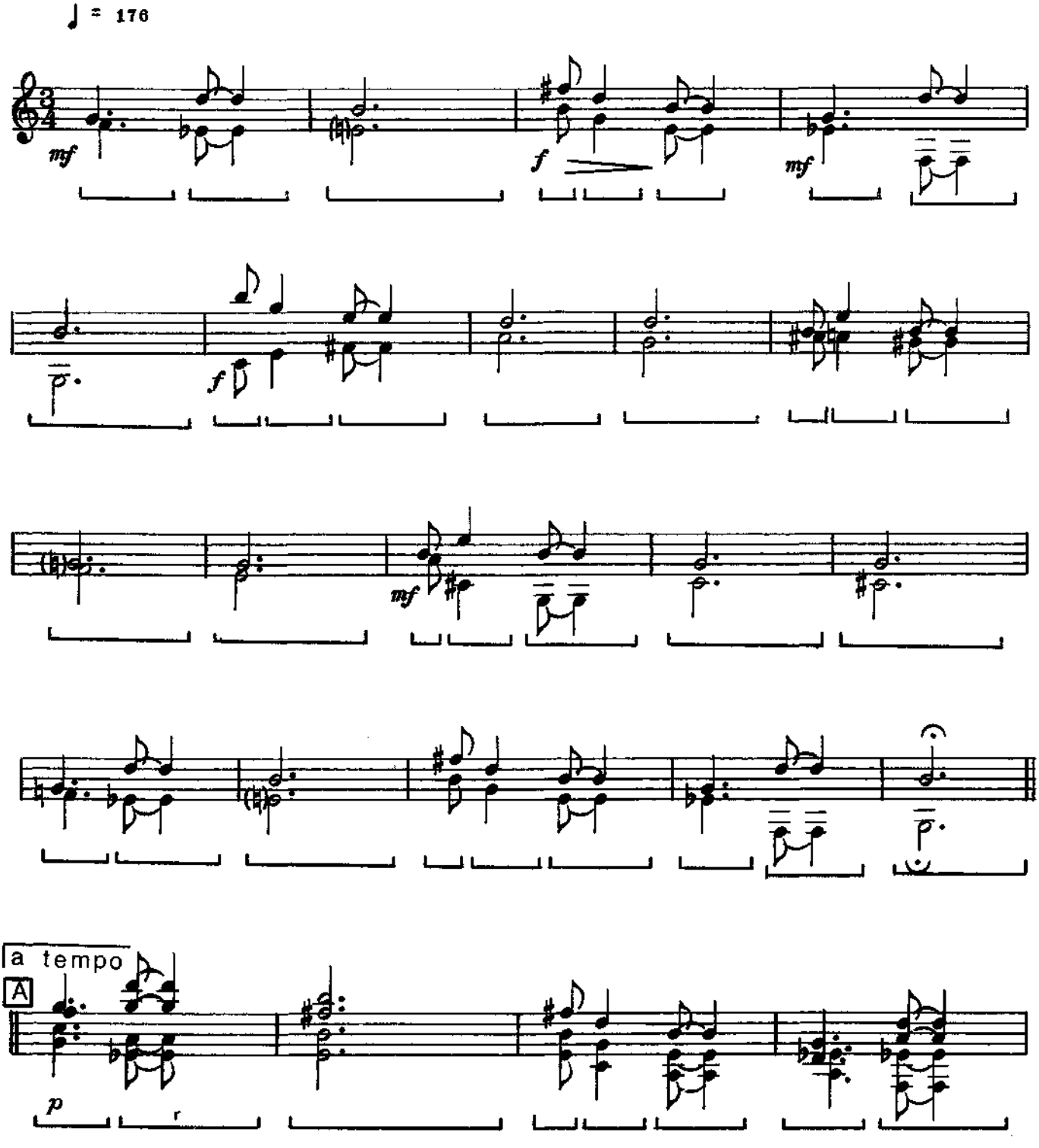
Note the similarity between this etude and the previous one. The basic difference is rhythmic and the rhythmic feeling is quite important. This might present some difficulty with smooth pedaling at a brisk tempo, so practice the etude slowly at first. The four mallet section at letter A should have the same rhythmic feeling as the two mallet section and should be played as smoothly as possible.



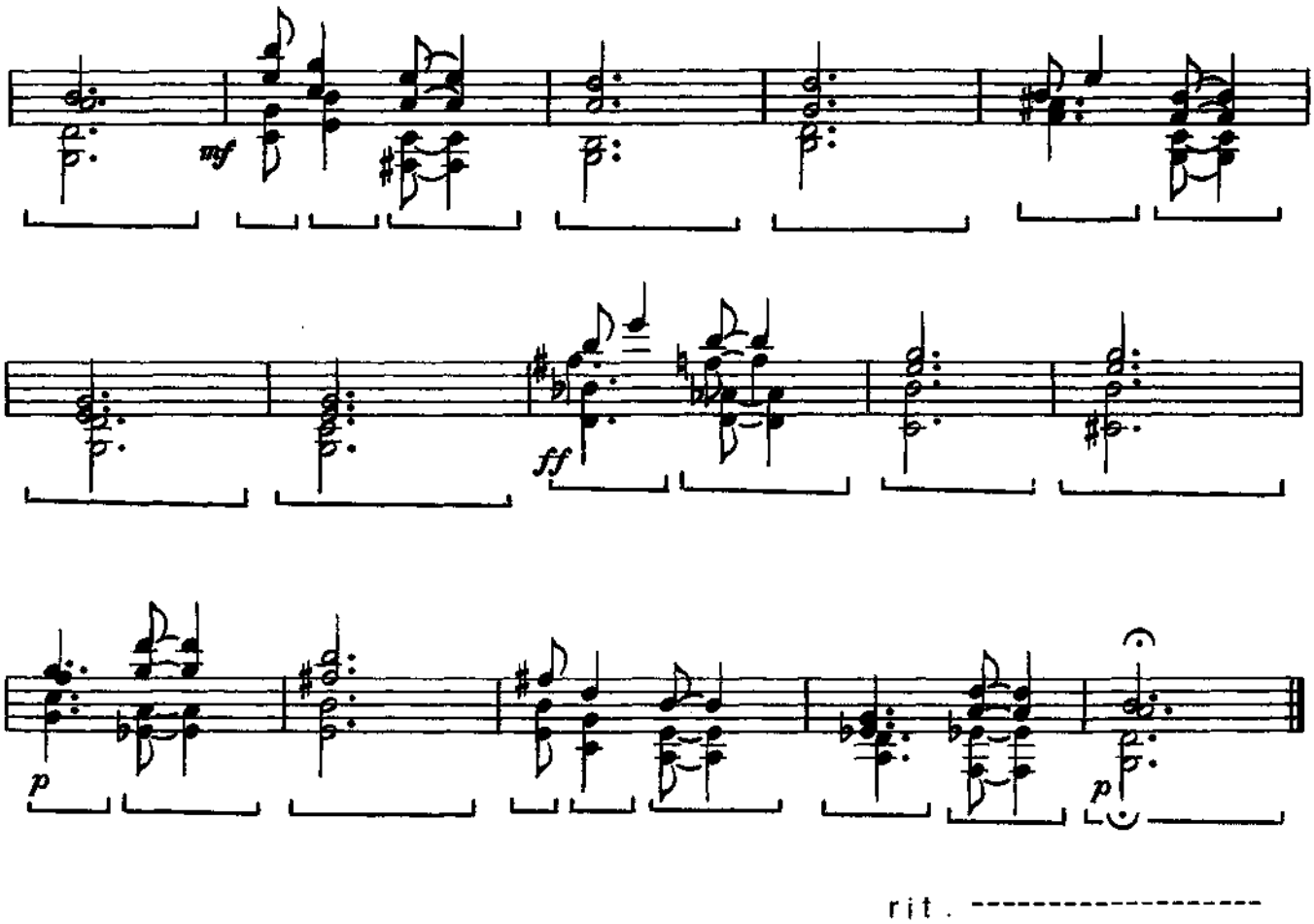

ppp
pp
ff
ppp
p
B
accel.
mf
decresc.
rit.

18

Note the similarity between this etude and the previous one. The basic difference is rhythmic and the rhythmic feeling is quite important. This might present some difficulty with smooth pedaling at a brisk tempo, so practice the etude slowly at first. The four mallet section at letter A should have the same rhythmic feeling as the two mallet section and should be played as smoothly as possible.

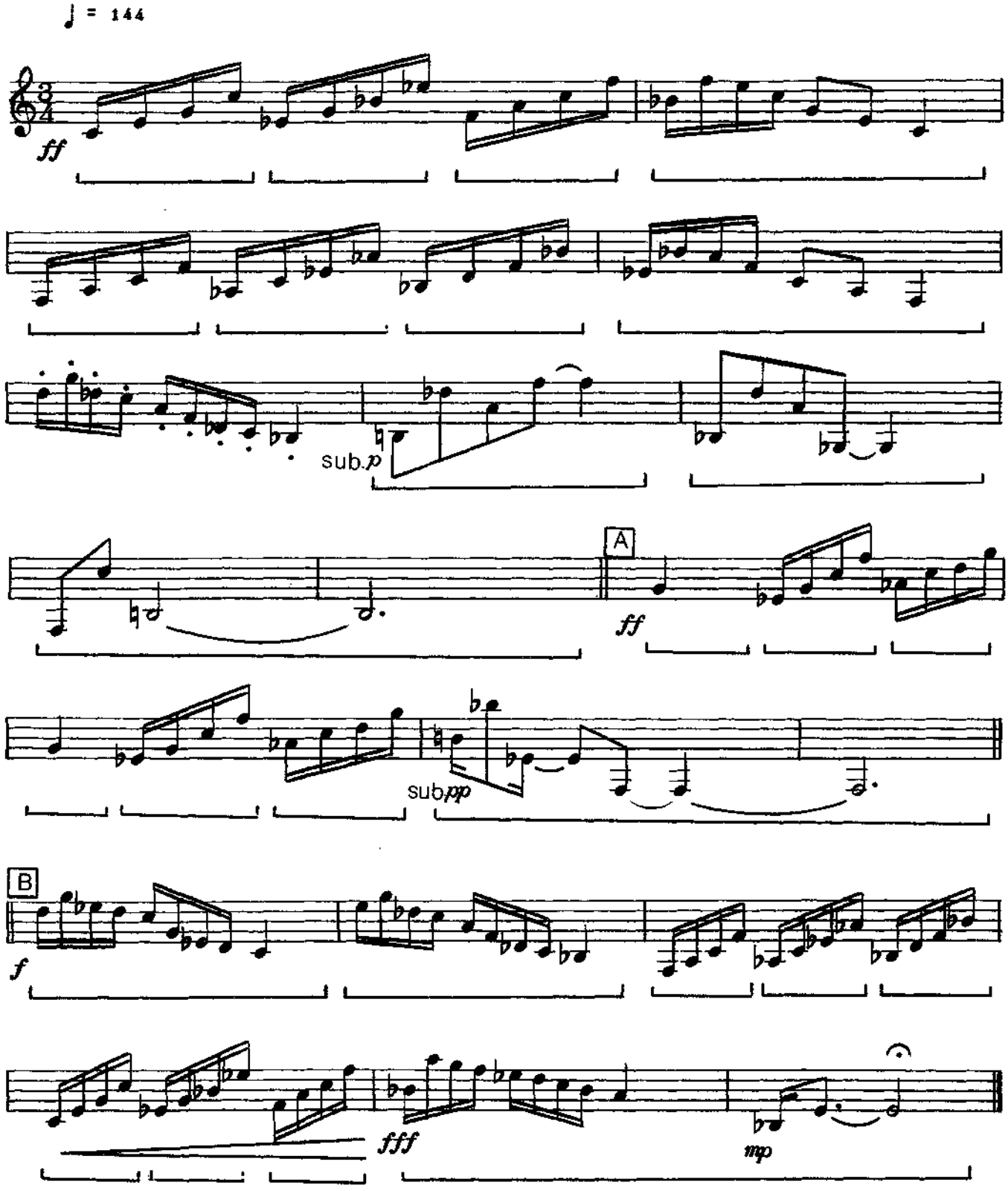


B-40


mf
ff
p
p
rit.

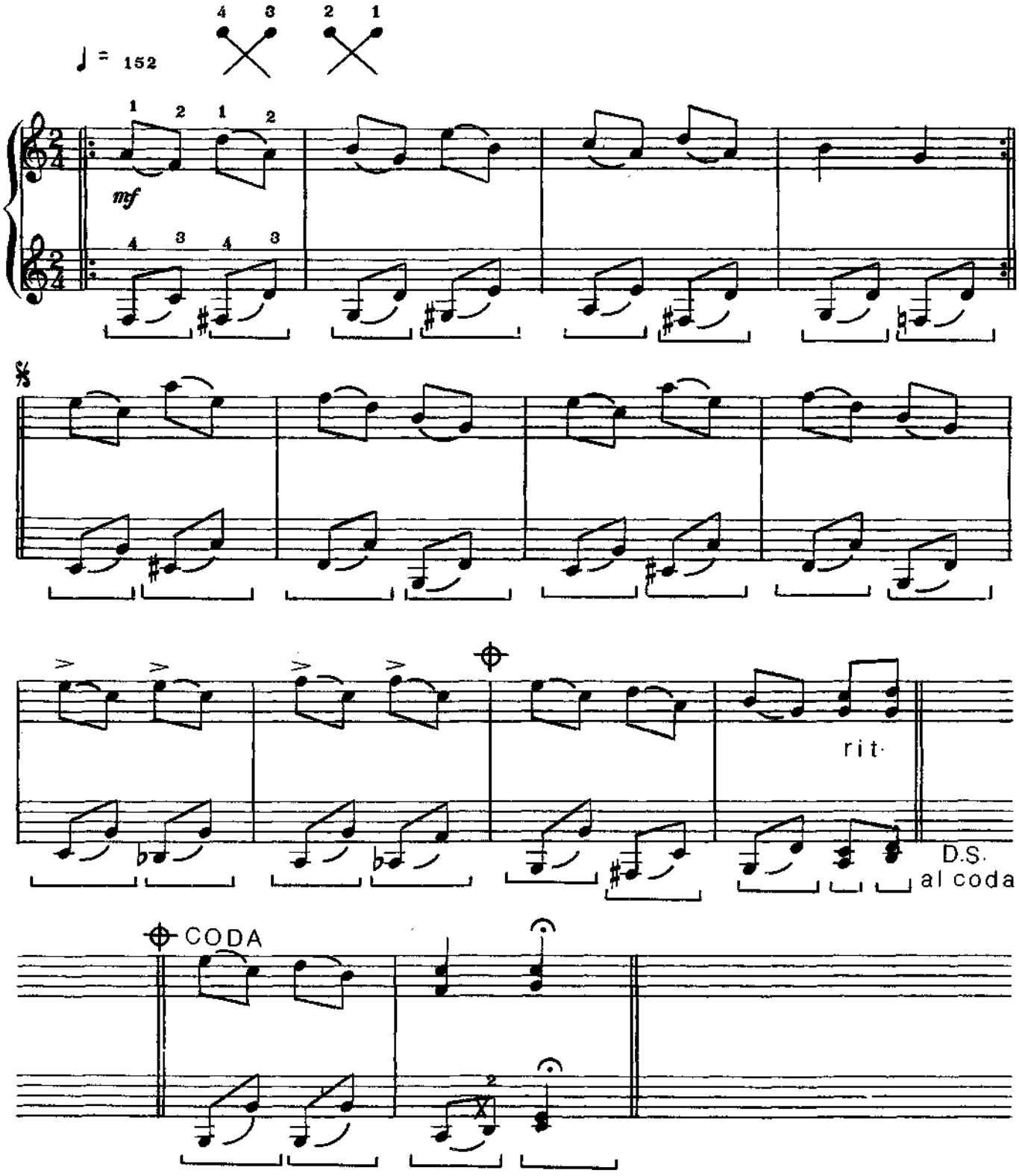
19

In the fifth measure of this etude the notes are to be played extremely staccato. Therefore, do not use any pedal.



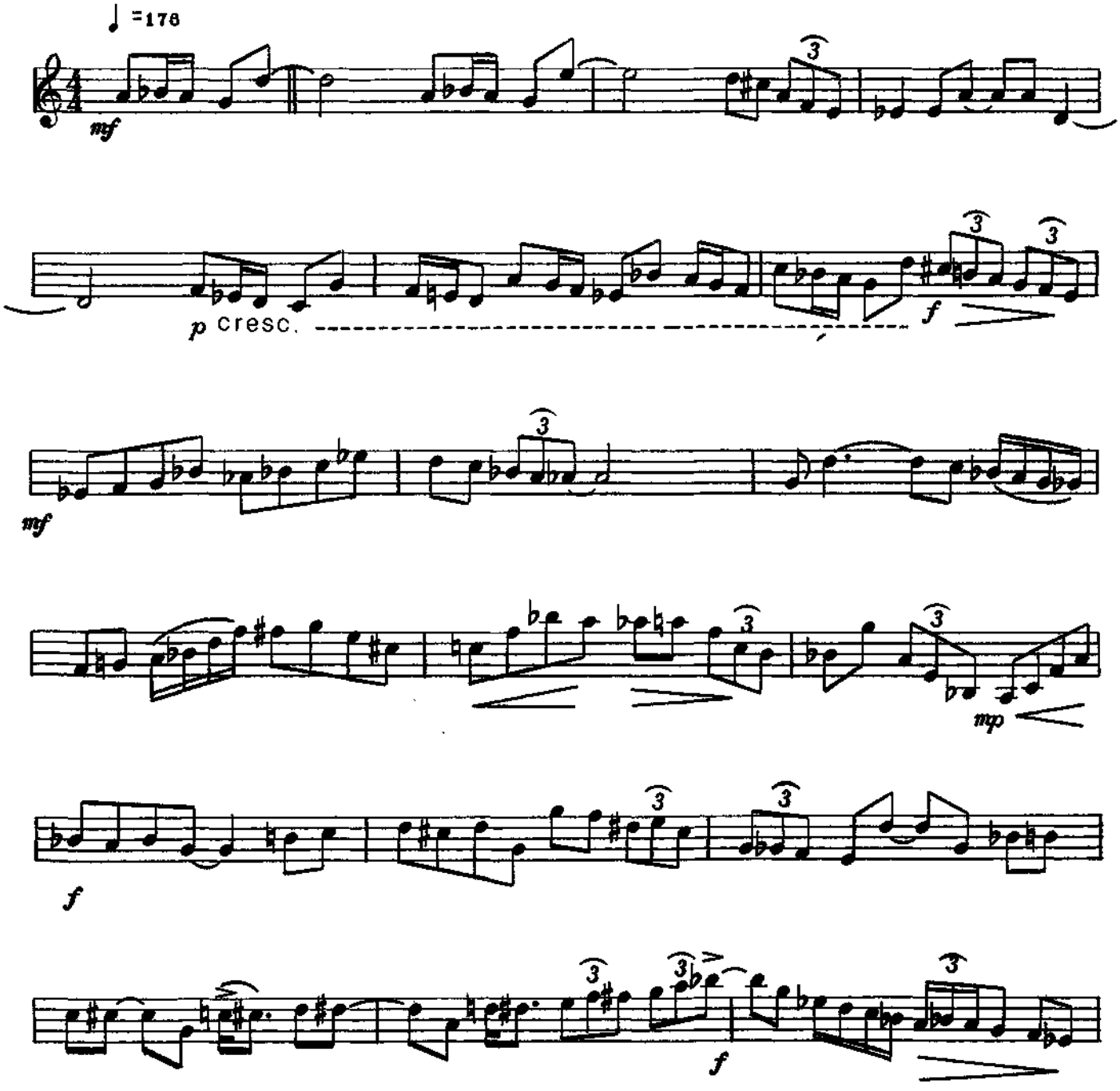
20

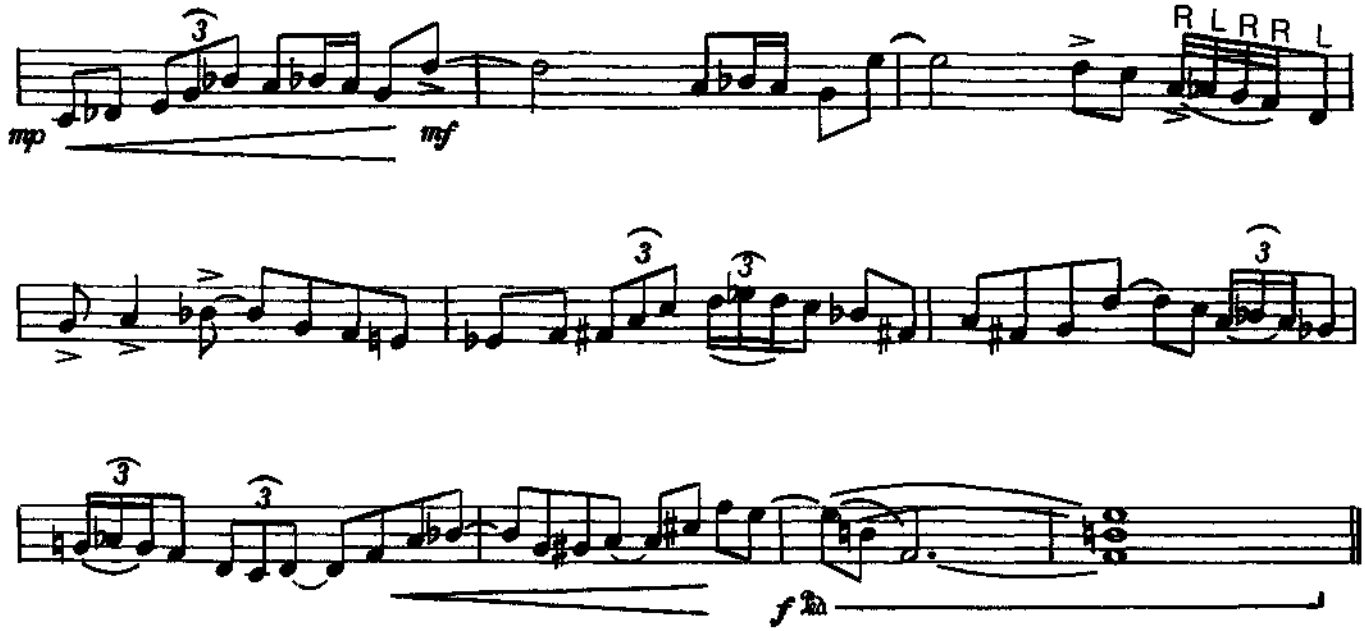
I suggest sticking this etude in the manner notated above the first four eighth notes in the first measure. (Look at the mallet diagrams at top of piece.) It cuts hand movement practically in half.



21

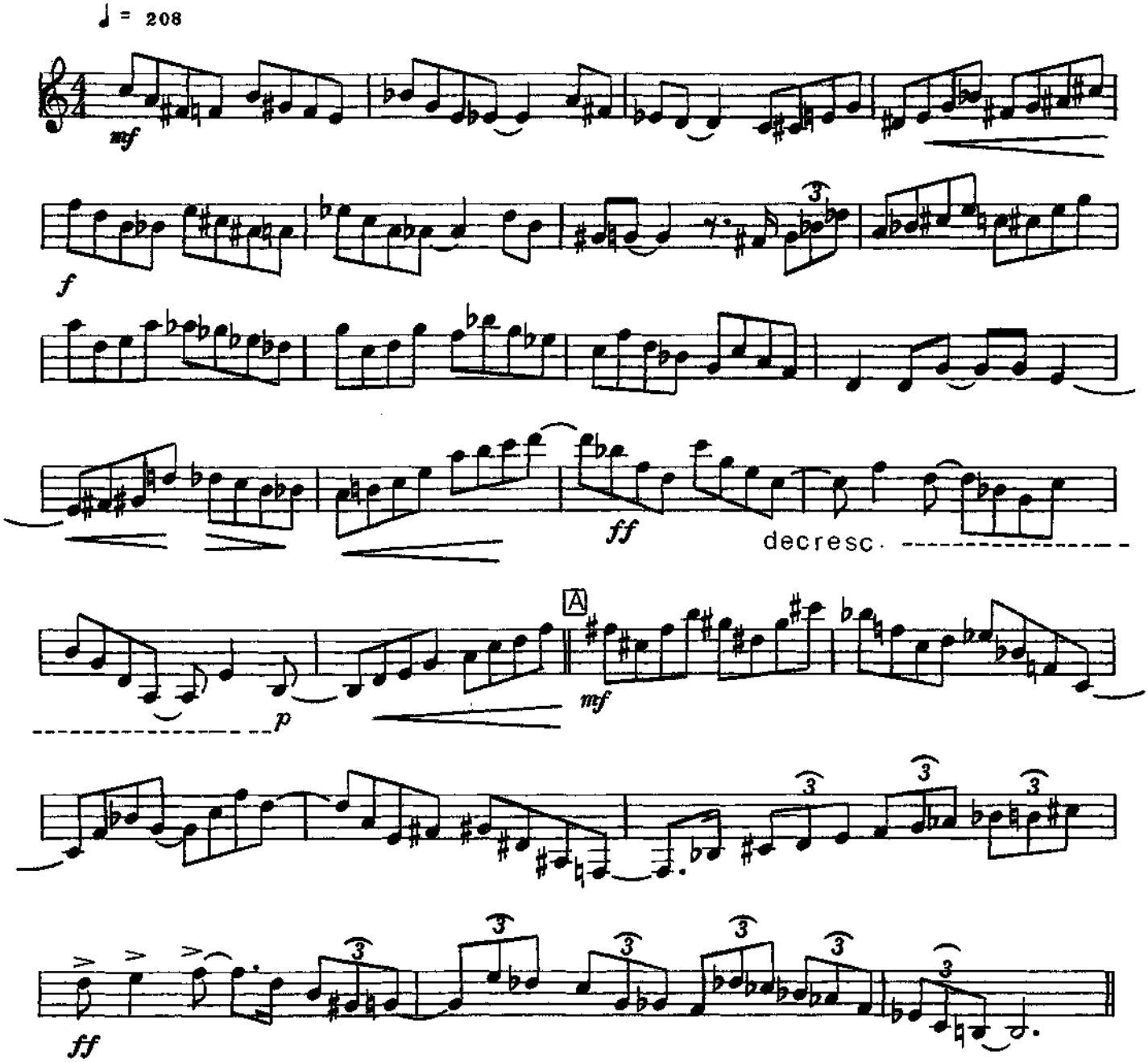
The next three etudes are to be given a jazz feel. That is, the eighth notes should not be played perfectly rigid but should be played somewhere between a straight eighth note feel and a triplet feel. With the help of pedaling, these pieces should be played with the same smoothness of phrase as a horn would play them, for instance. I have left pedal markings out in order to leave the pedaling and phrasing to the discretion of the player.




R L R R L
mp
mf
f

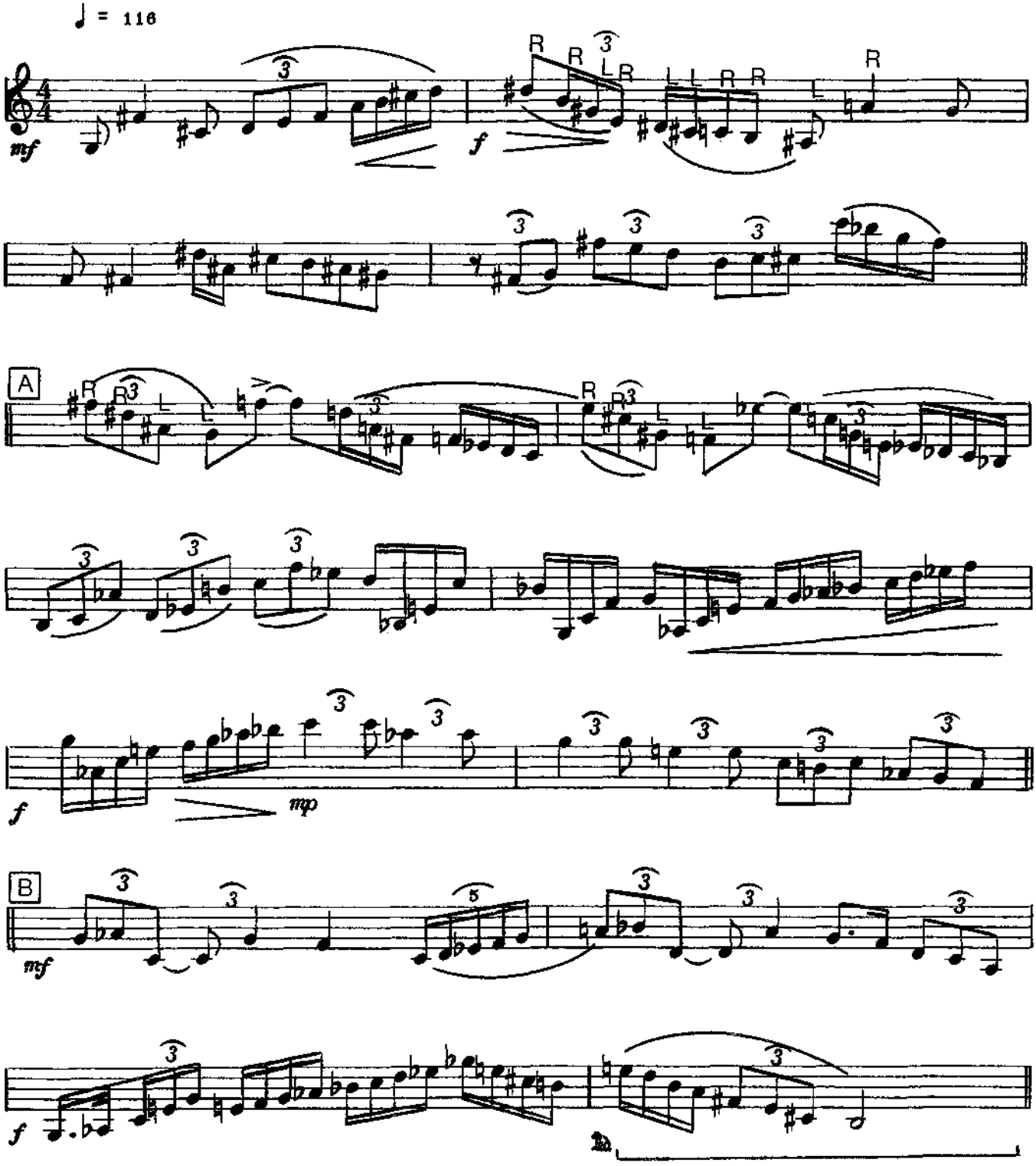
22

The lines in this etude are very 'patterned'. The patterns are varied harmonically through the use of sequence, *i.e.* the repetition of the intervallic shape of a line rather than the repetition of exact notes (see measures 1 and 4 in letter A). Alternating might cause these patterns to sound stiff, therefore, I have included suggested double stickings which often aid in giving certain awkward lines the same kind of flow that a wind or brass instrument might achieve. Try to play the triplets smoothly without letting them all ring together (fifth measure of letter A, for example, and the last two measures).



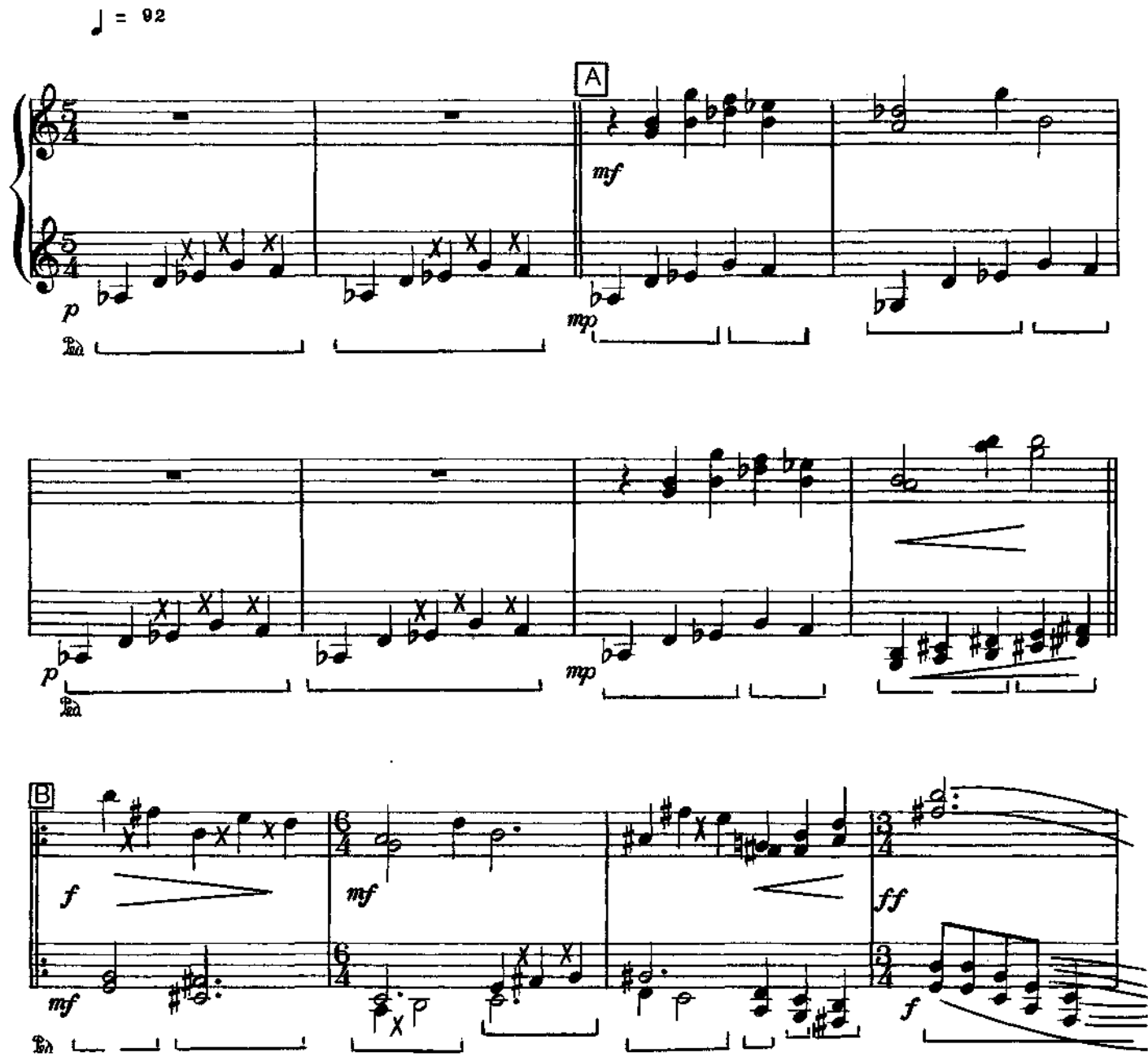
23

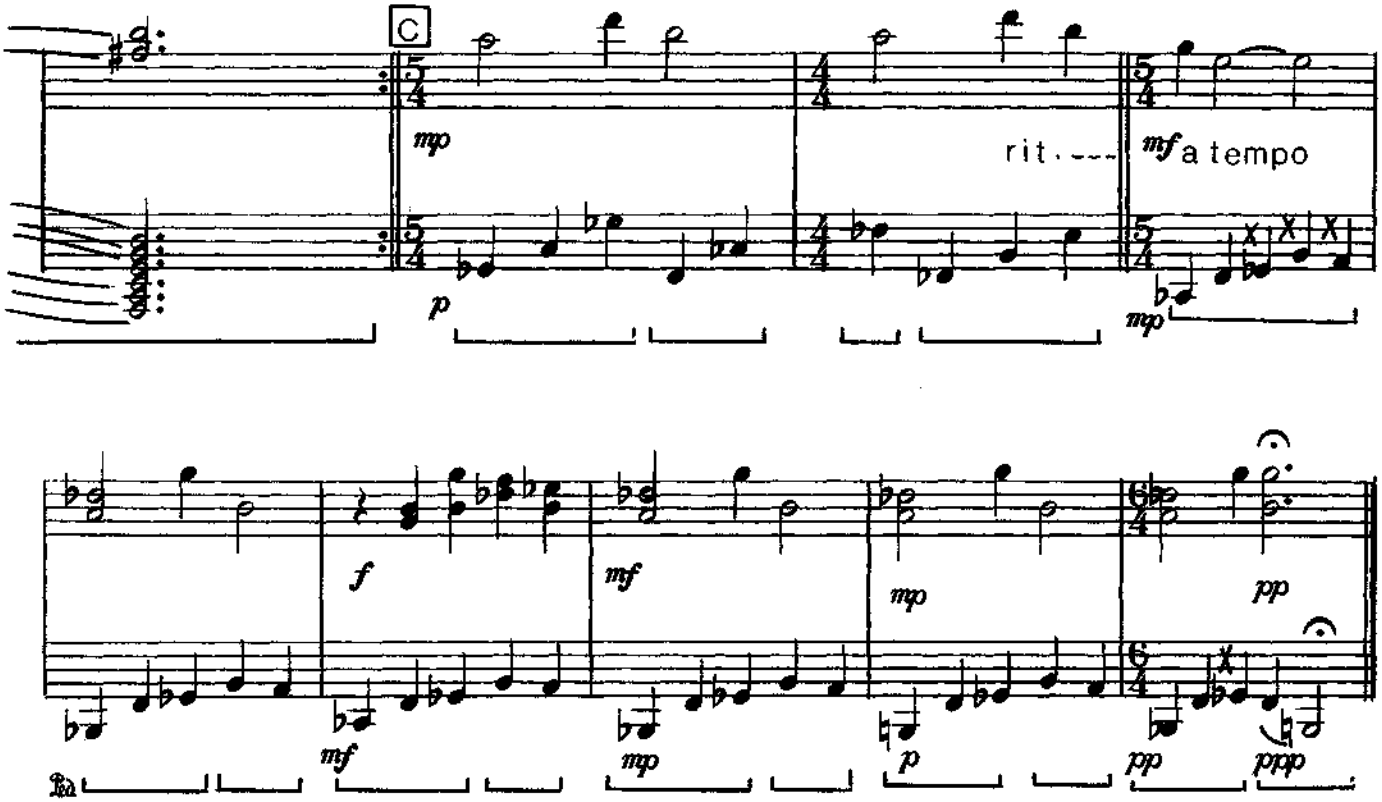
This piece has, perhaps, the most awkward lines of all three of the jazz pieces. Therefore, it will take careful pedaling and phrasing to make this etude sound smooth. This is especially true at letter A. Make sure to let the last measure ring.



24

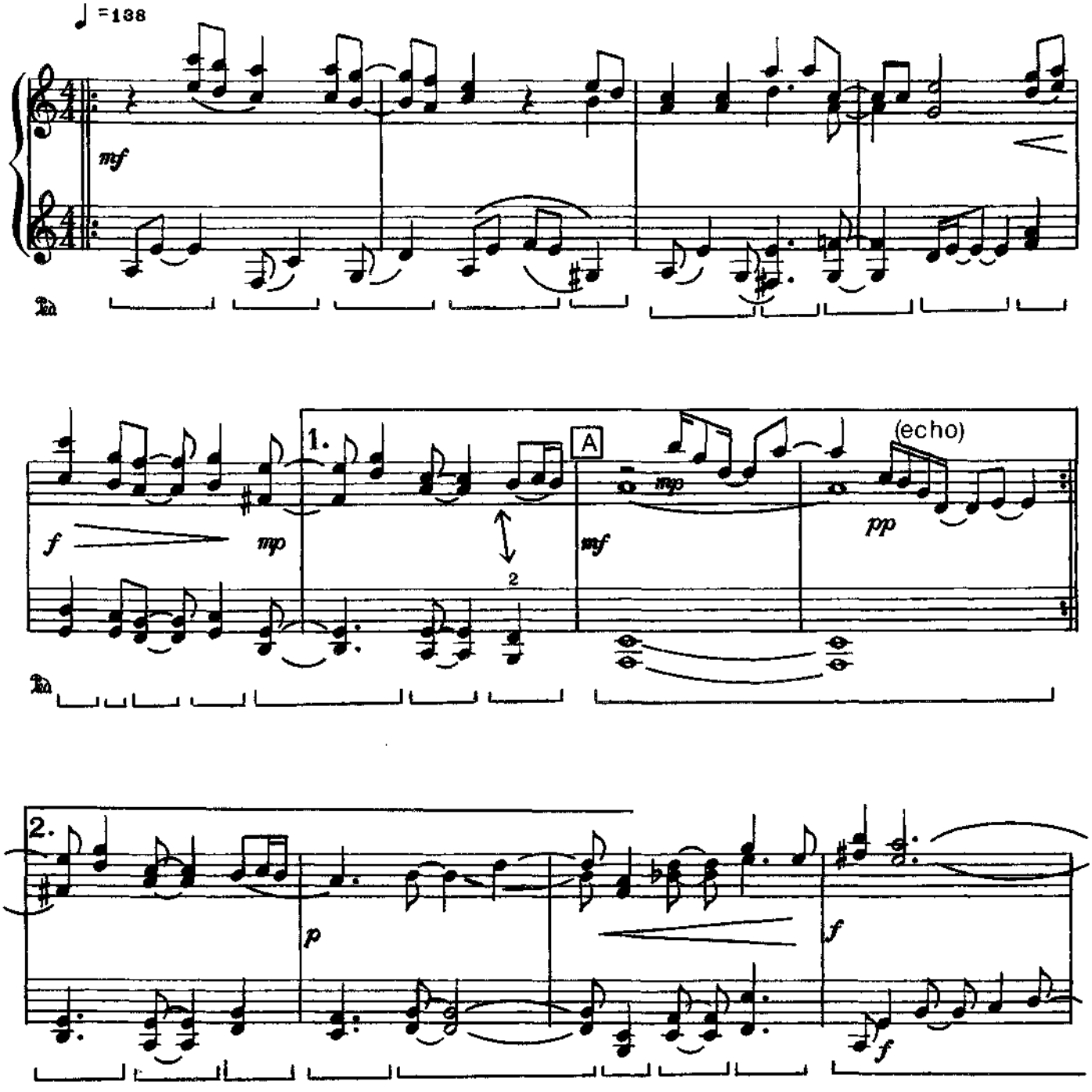
In this first etude you should make sure that you play, even exaggerate, the indicated dynamics. To get the best sound on the lower notes, strike just off the center of the bar.

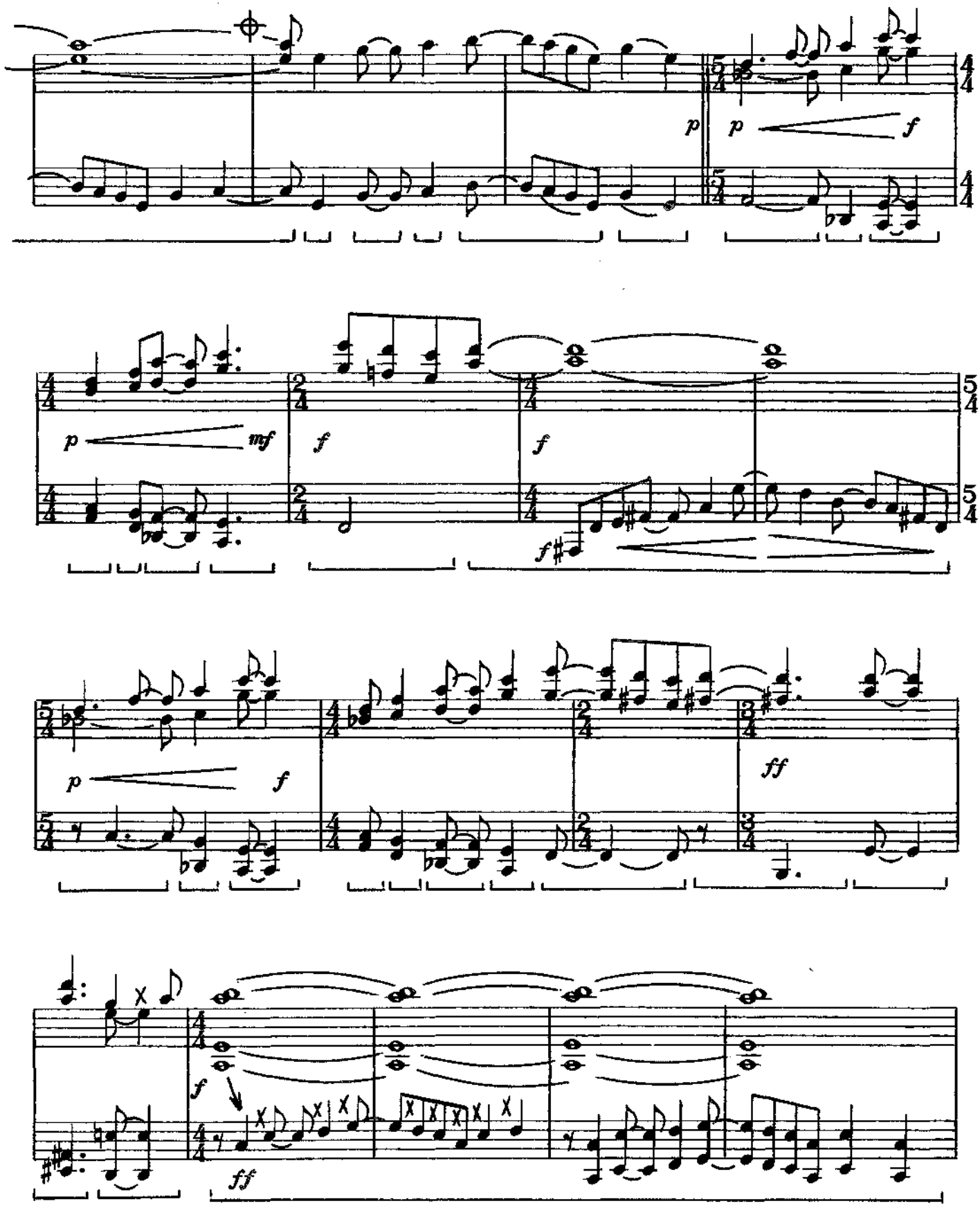



C
mp
p
rit.
mf a tempo
mp
f
mf
mf
mp
mp
p
pp
pp
ppp

25

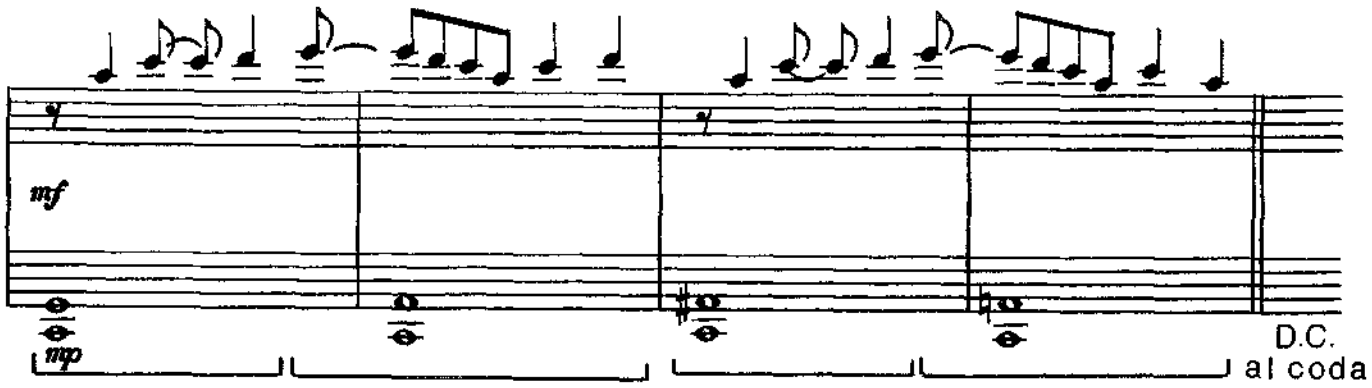
Be very careful of the pedaling in this etude. It is somewhat complicated at the beginning.

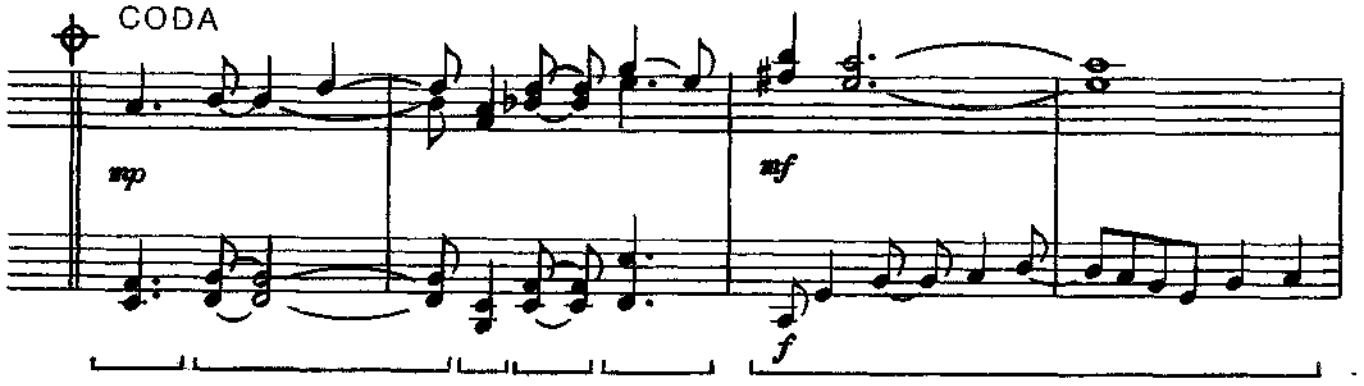


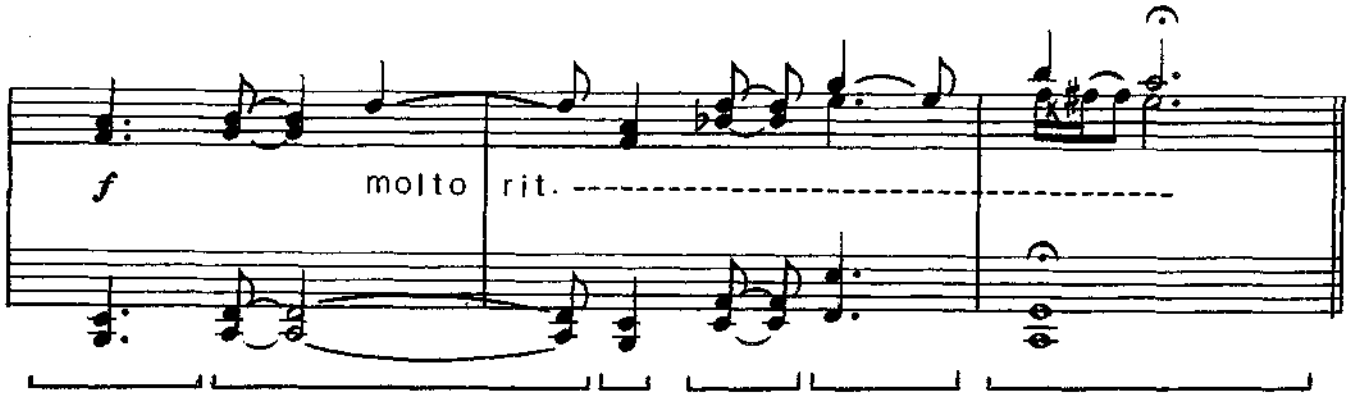


B-40

Pedaling and Dampening: Etudes

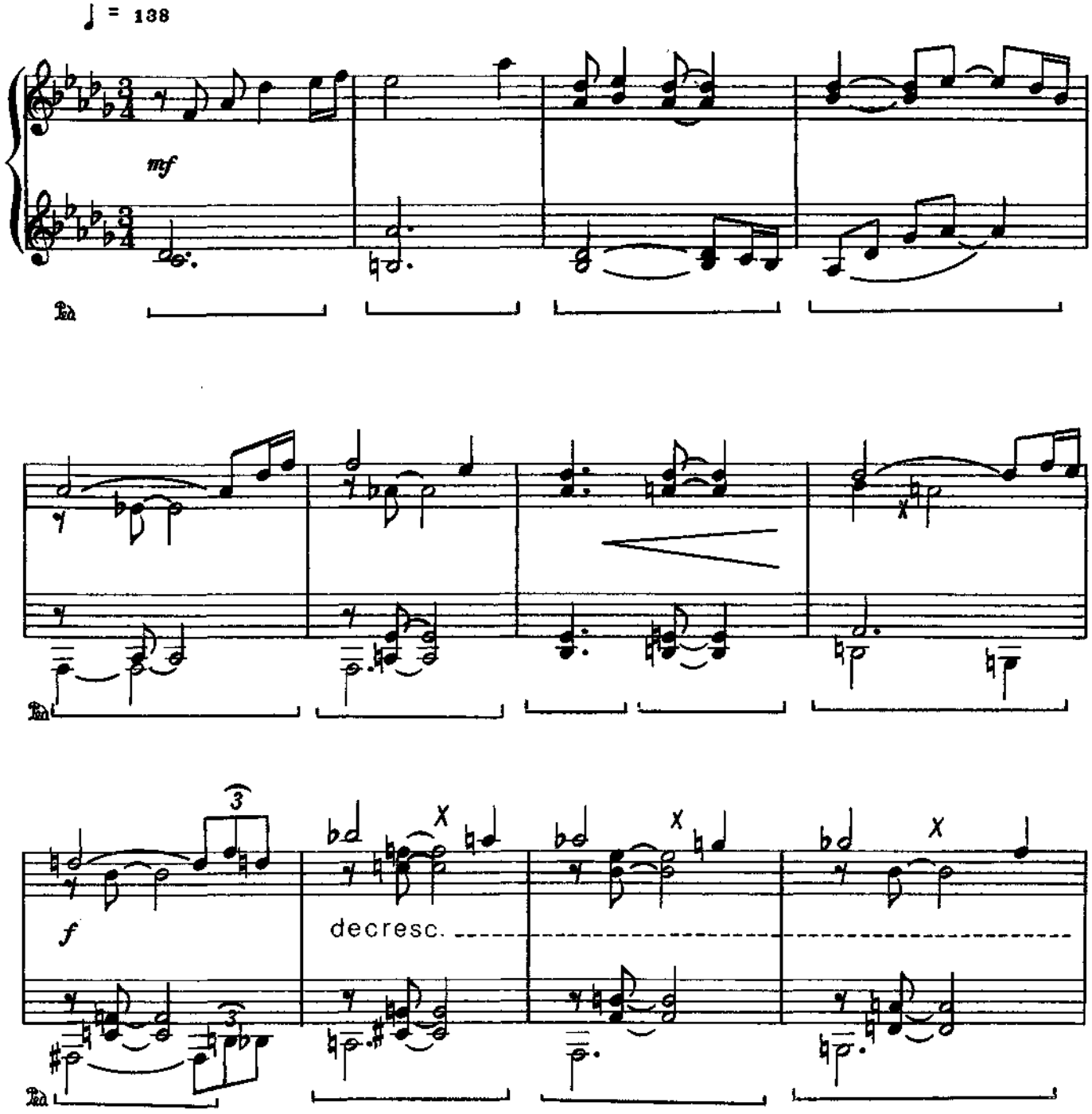




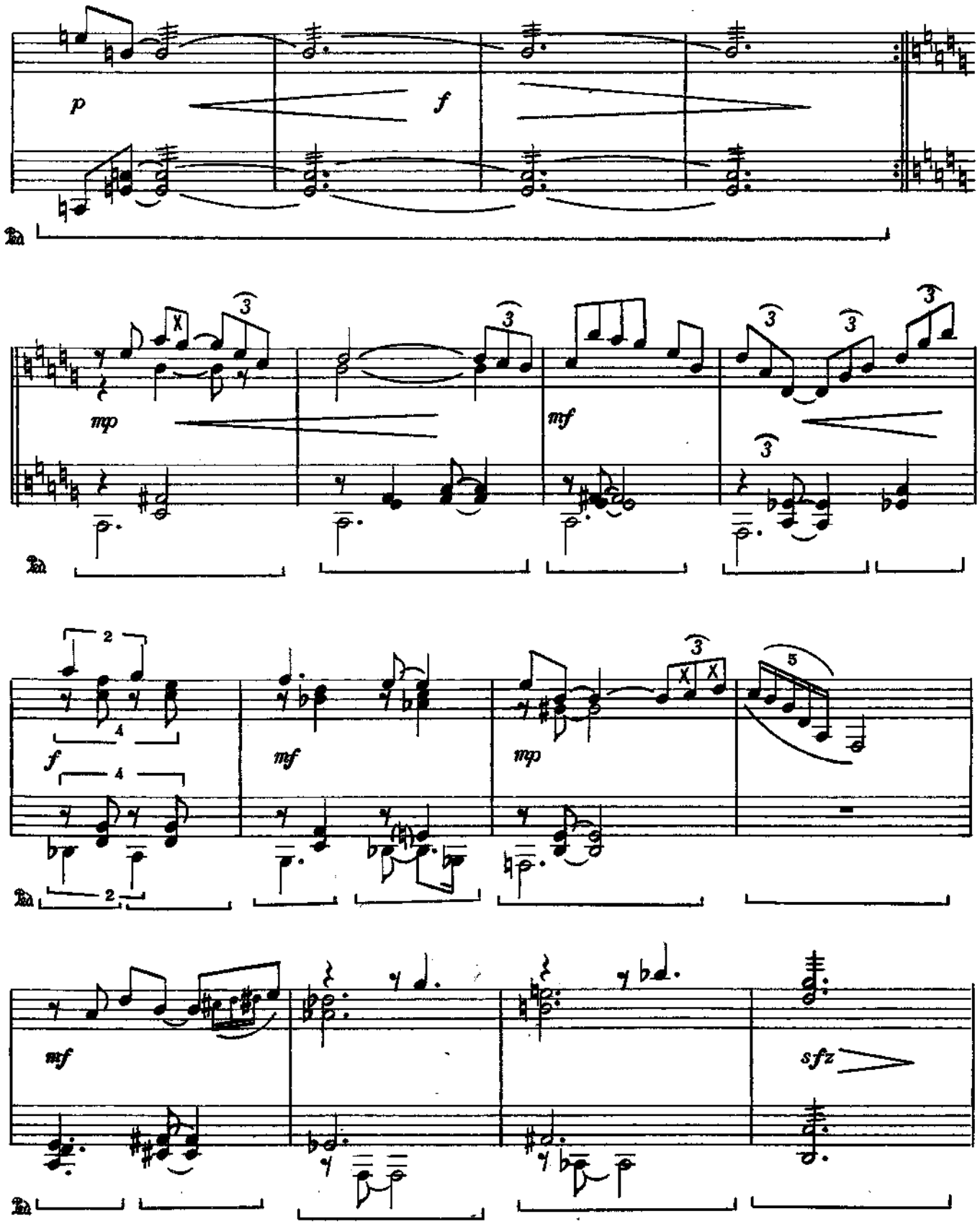


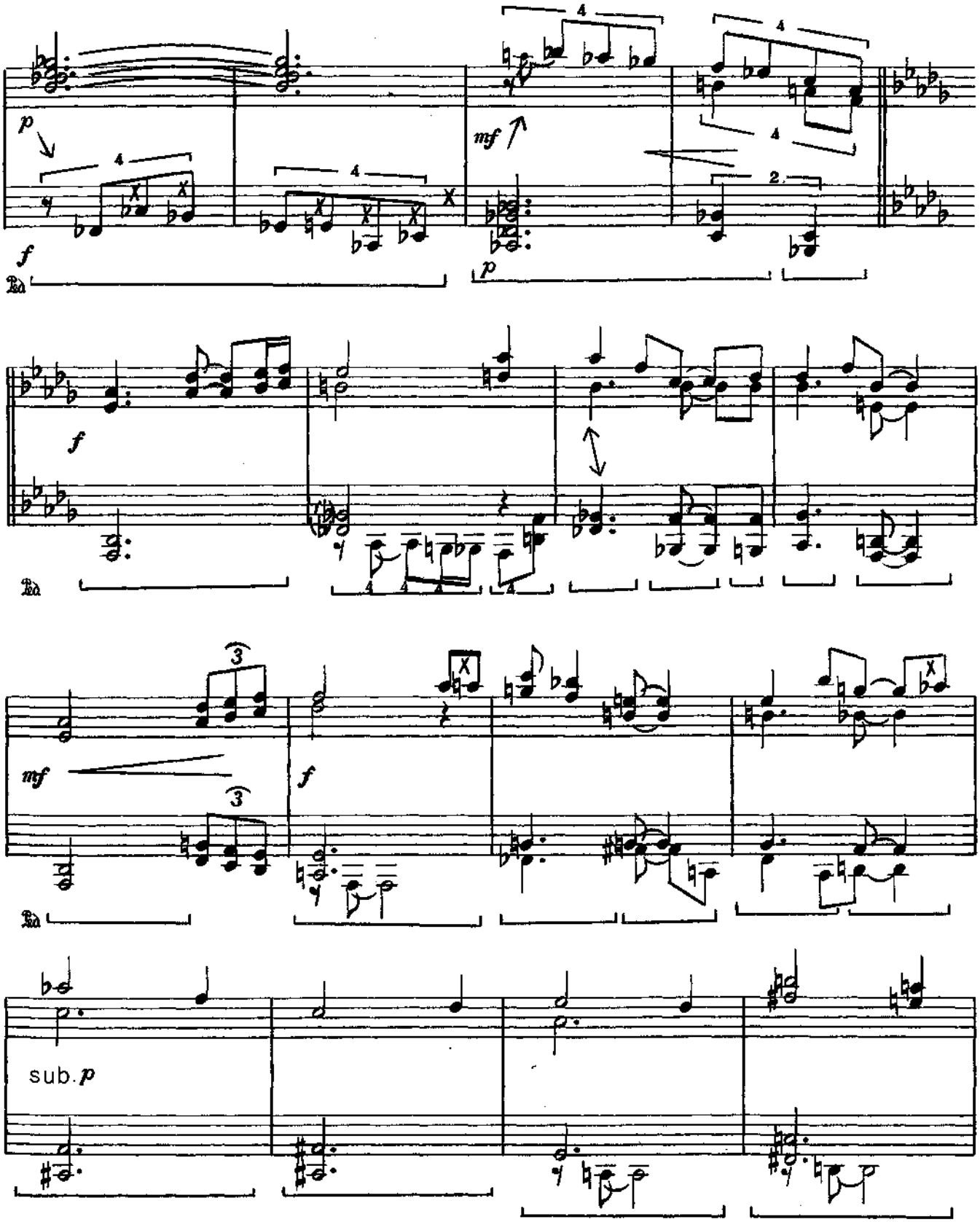
26

This piece has a jazz flavour and has, in fact, a traditional thirty-two bar structure with a repeat of the A section. It is also a little more contrapuntal in nature than the other pieces, so watch carefully the pedaling and dampening markings.



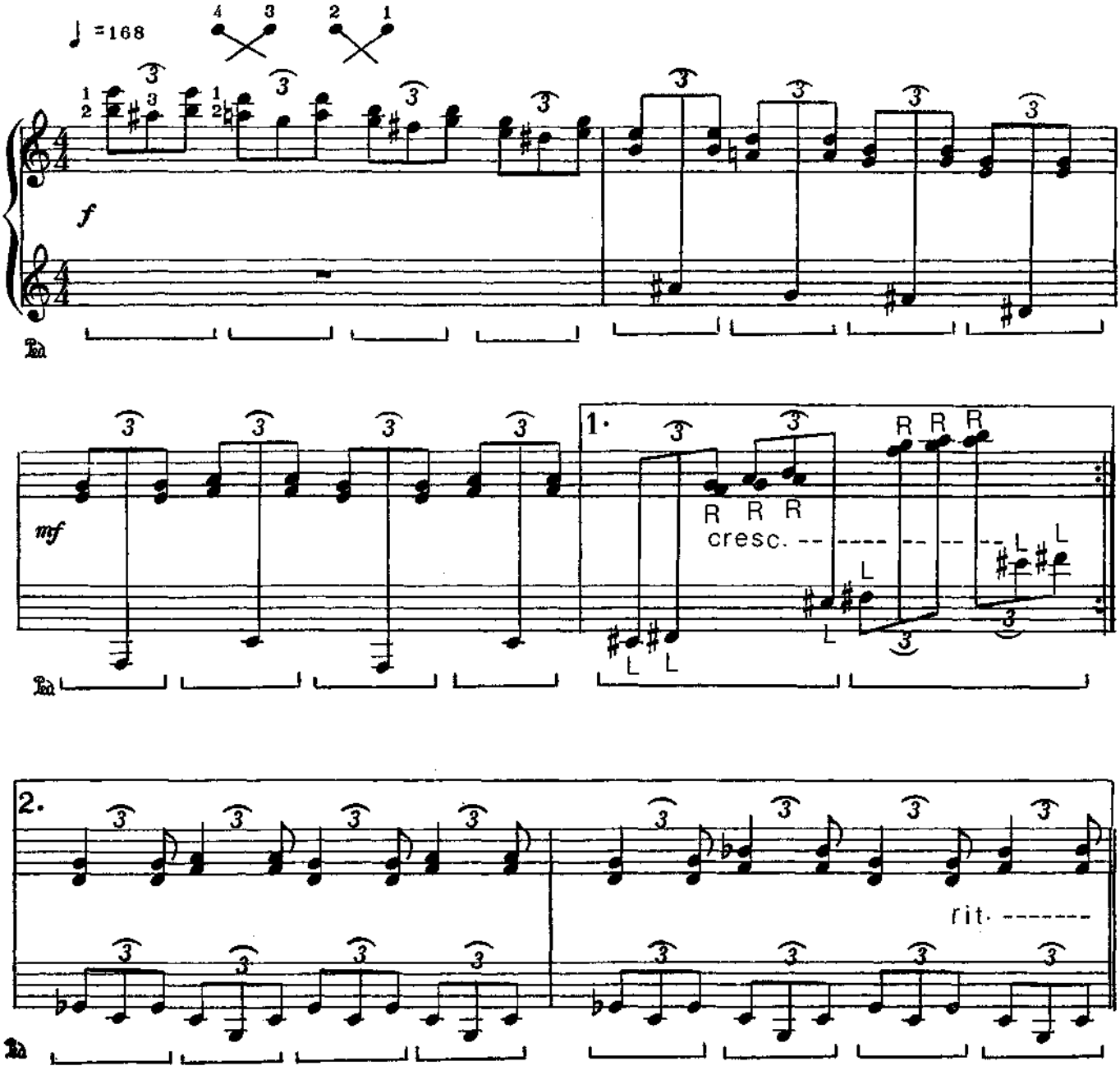
Pedaling and Dampening: Etudes



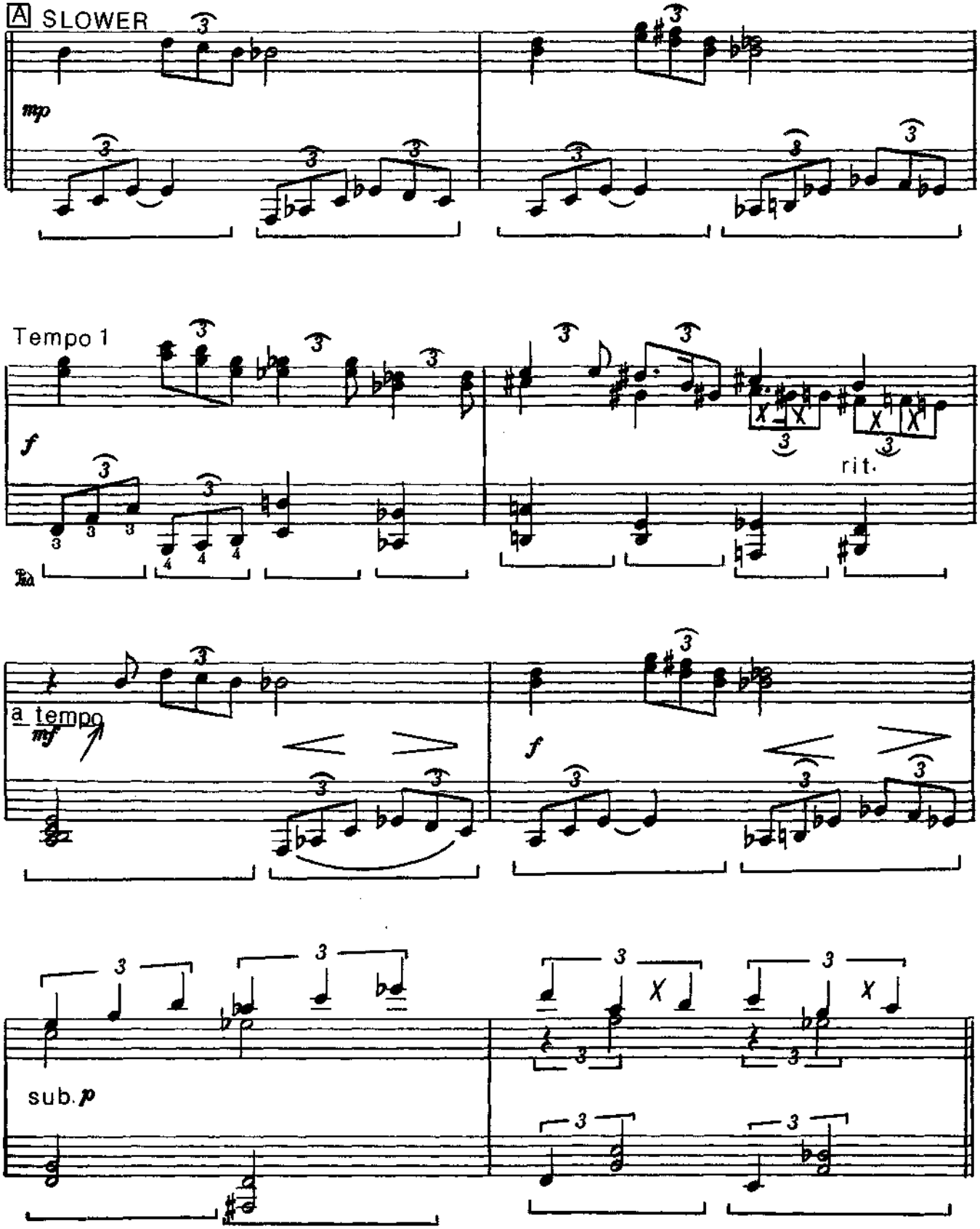

p
f
mf
p
f
mf
f
sub. p

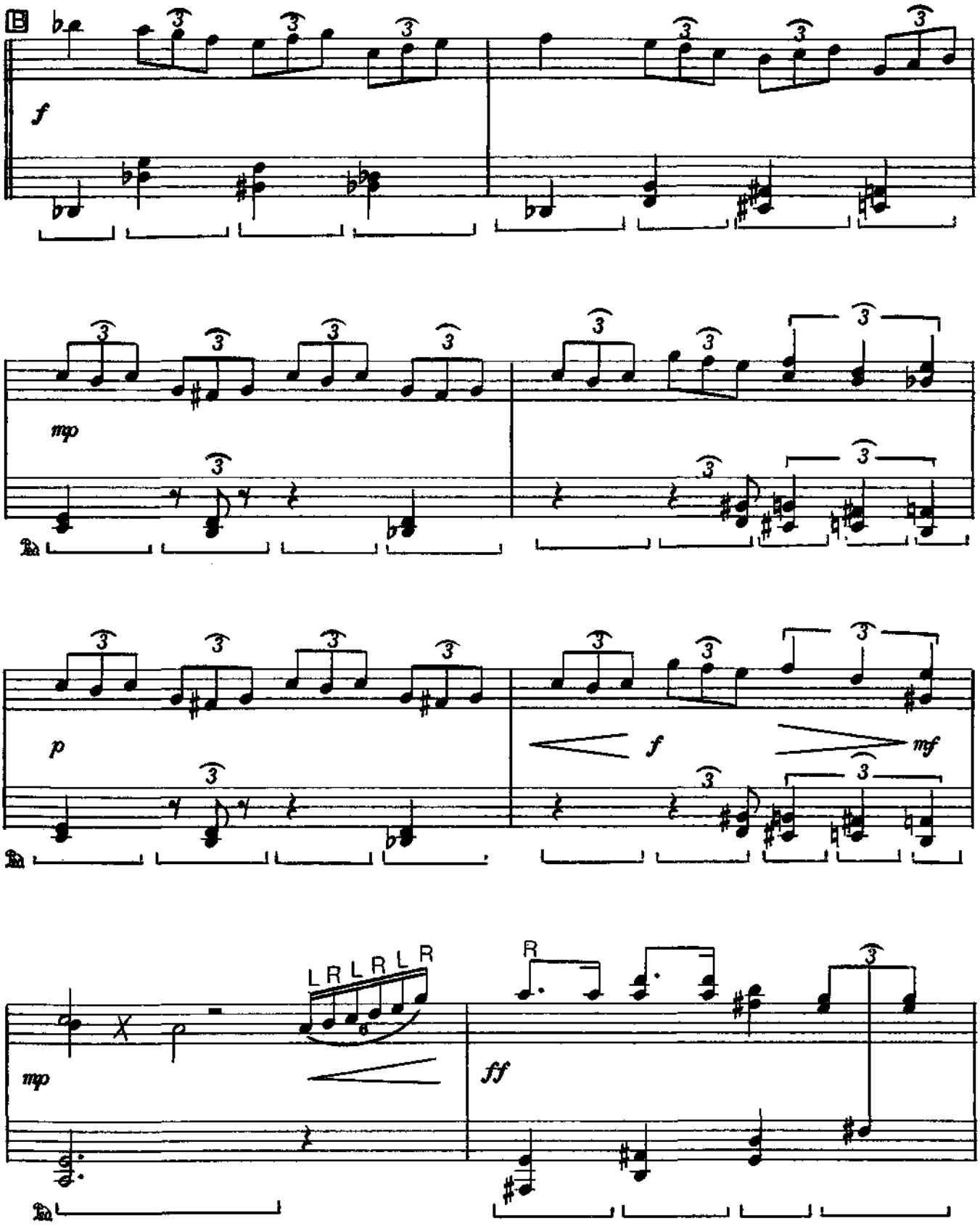
27

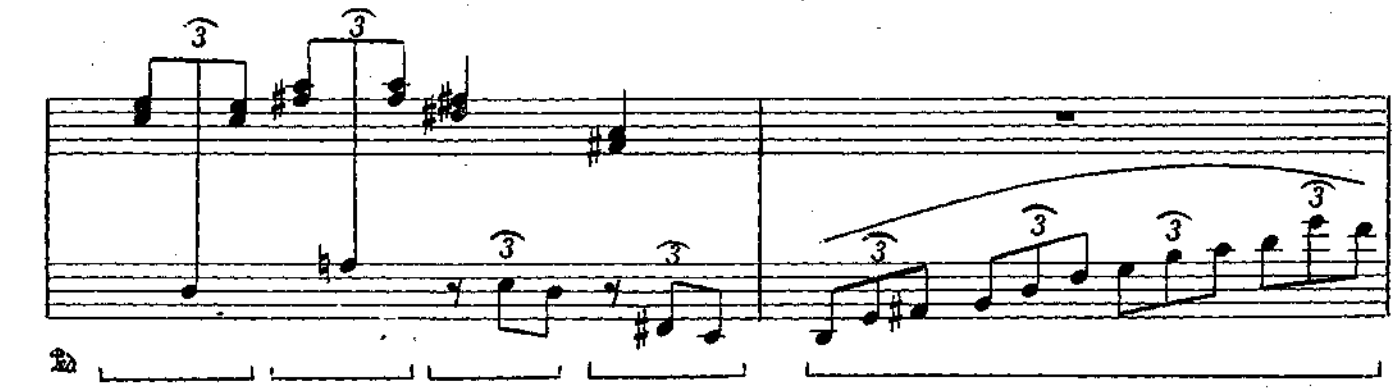
In this etude I have made some sticking suggestions. The beginning passage will probably present the most difficulty. Practice the pattern slowly, through the first ending. Do it a few times, then go on. At letter A, there is a melody and accompaniment section, so play the melody slightly louder.

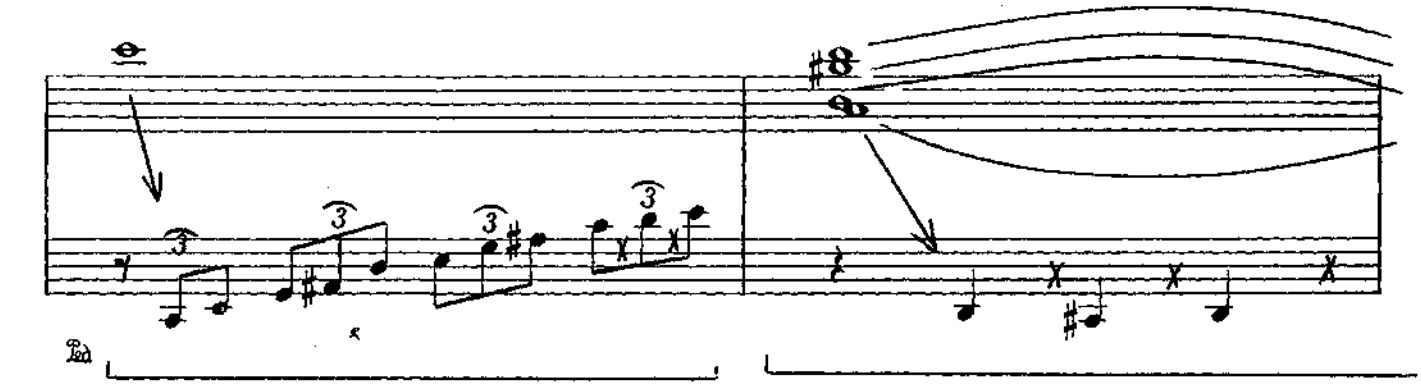


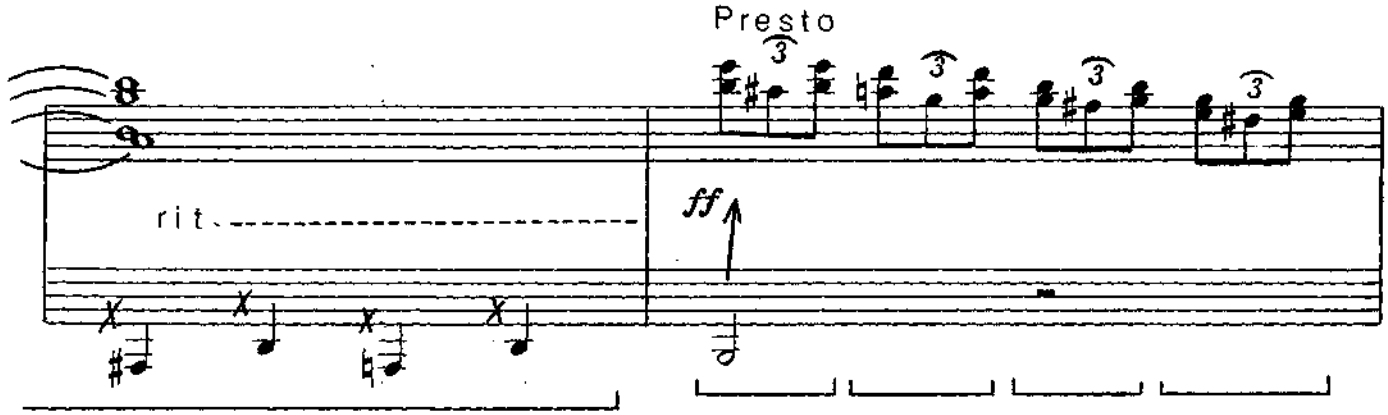
Pedaling and Dampening: Etudes

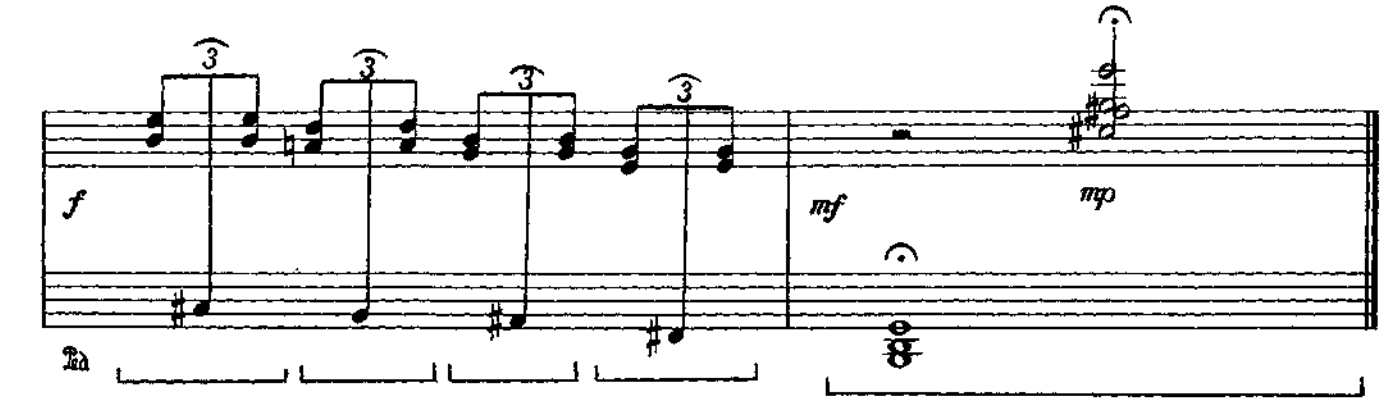



B
f
mp
p
f
mf
L R L R L R
R
mp
ff






Presto
rit.
ff


f
mf
mp