Parking an Octatonic Truck

Ten Explorations for Young Pianists

by **John Burge**

late Elementary/Intermediate

All Graphics and Artwork by Susan Griesdale

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PARKING AN OCTATONIC TRUCK is a set of ten solo piano pieces that explore a few different approaches to composition and the piano. This volume of pieces is a compilation that was primarily written in 1999 and 2006 with the two additional pieces created in 2013. Dating back to the early 1990's, I have spent time almost ever year adjudicating music festival classes primarily in the area of piano performance. It is not uncommon to be asked to adjudicate sight-reading and quick study classes and in both cases, it is important that the performer be given a piece that is completely unfamiliar. Being a composer, one of the best ways to ensure that the student's assigned piece for quick study or sight-reading is completely unknown, is to sit down and write a short work at a suitable level of difficulty. For this collection I have brought together many of the compositions that I have used a number of times under these circumstances in the past.

The works are arranged in order of increasing difficulty, covering approximately Grade 1 to Grade 6. That said, I would be the first to admit that assessing an appropriate grade level can be quite challenging as I sometimes misjudge what I think should be easy. I would add though, that three of these pieces have been previously published in the Canadian National Conservatory of Music's ***Northern Lights Piano Series*** as follows: "High Fives" in Volume 2B, "Parking an Octatonic Truck" in Volume 4B and "Dodge Ball" in 5B.

I would like to thank Martha Hill Duncan for her encouragement and advice in bringing out this volume and in getting me to join the Red Leaf Pianoworks collective of Canadian composers. Martha is a fine composer and great inspiration and sometimes one just needs a bit of repeated prodding to take care of the details that often get overlooked. It has also been a true pleasure to work with Susan Griesdale who created the illustrations for this volume. I find it remarkable that such a successful composer also has so much artistic and creative talent with pen and ink drawings.

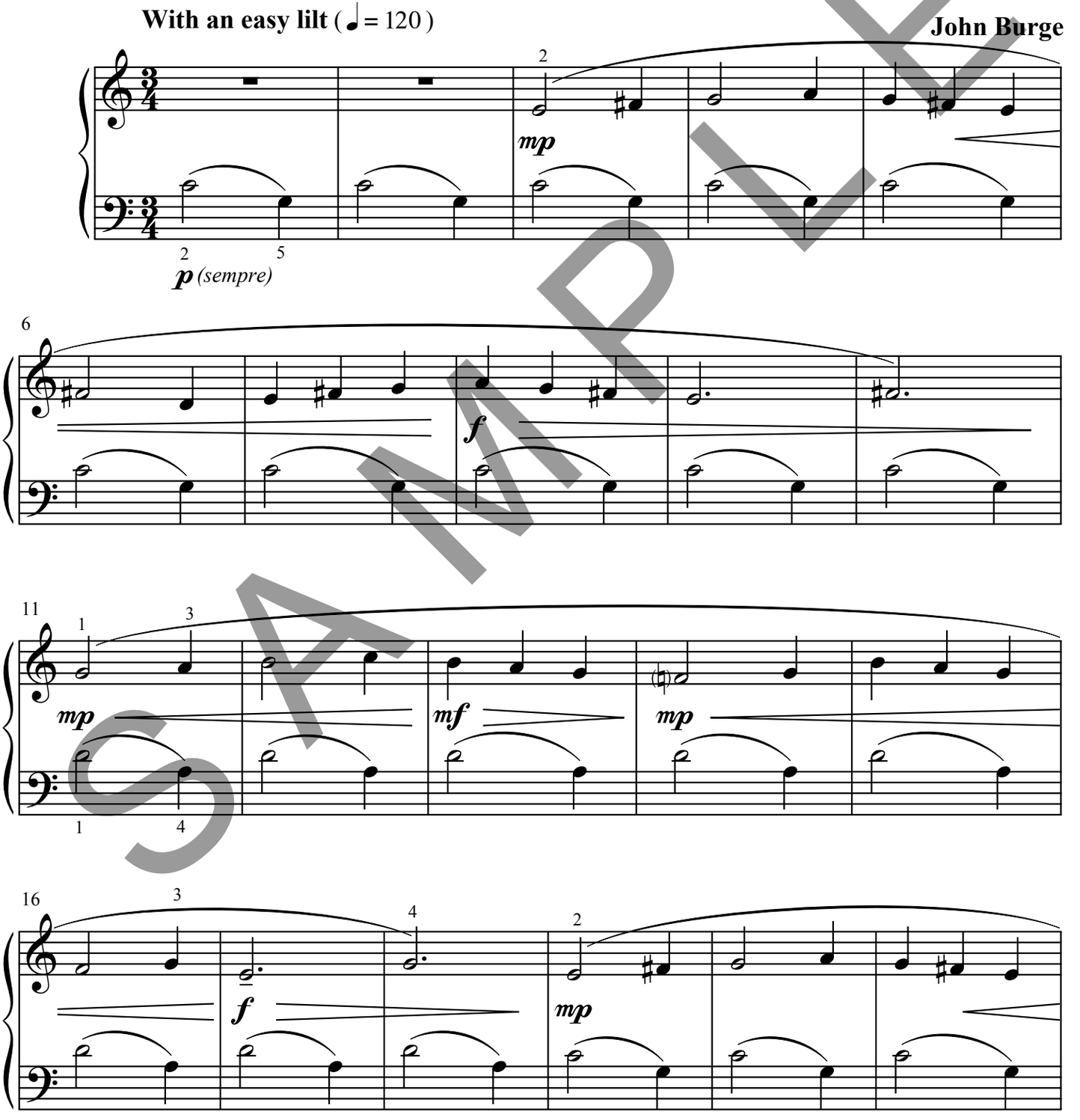
Now that these pieces are finally out in the world, I will have to start writing another set of quick study and sight-reading pieces to use for earlier grades but it is always good to have a list of composition projects.

John Burge, June 2013

A Gentle Waltz

(In Two Keys)

This composition is structured such that while one hand outlines the key of C Major, the other hand implies the key of D Major. As these two keys share many notes in common, the effect of the combined keys is very gentle with only a hint of dissonance at times. It is best to keep the left hand much softer than the right hand throughout, always giving the downbeat a slight stress.



SAMPLE

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22

f

27

mp *mf* *mp* *mf* *mp*

32

f *p*

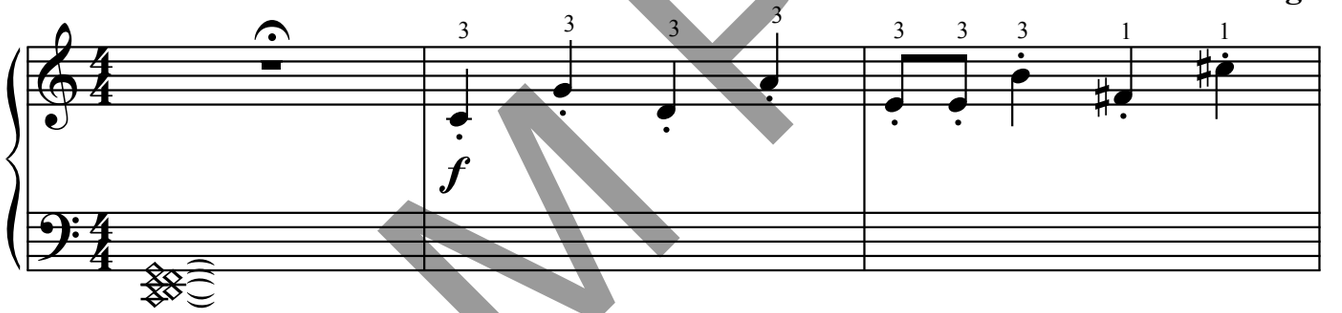
SAMPLE

PLAYING WITH PRISMS

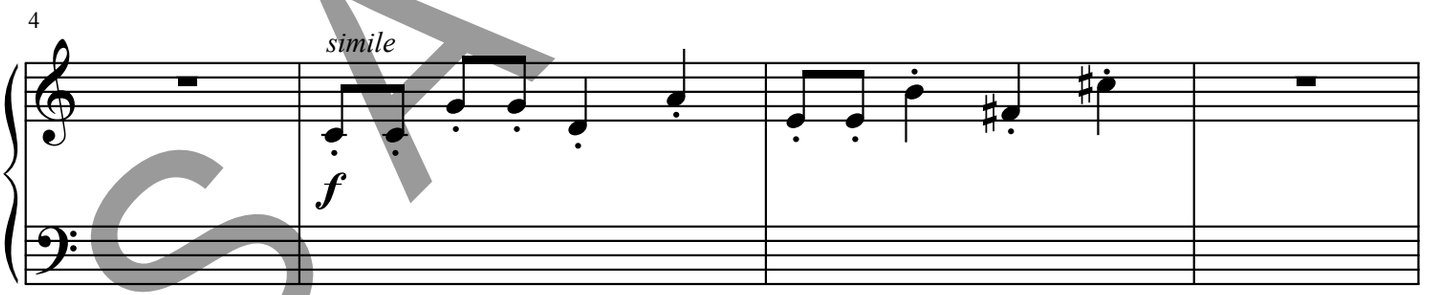
SAMPLE

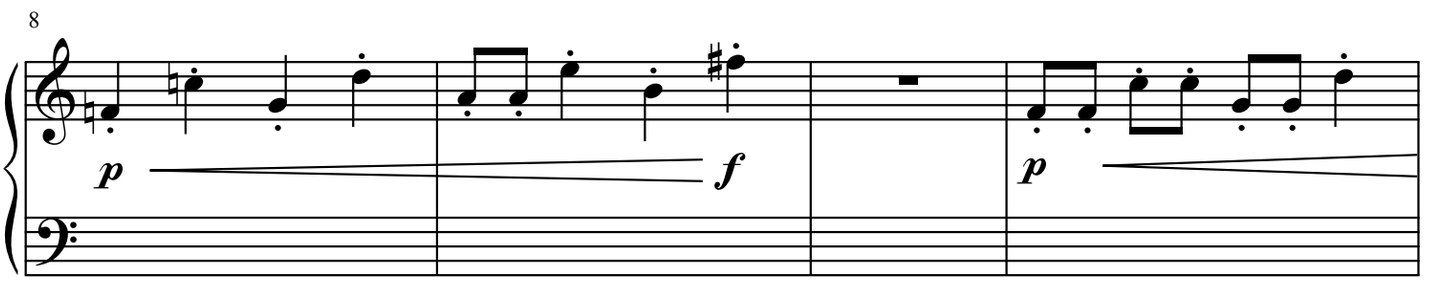
With energy and brilliance

John Burge



[Depress these notes silently and hold until the end.]





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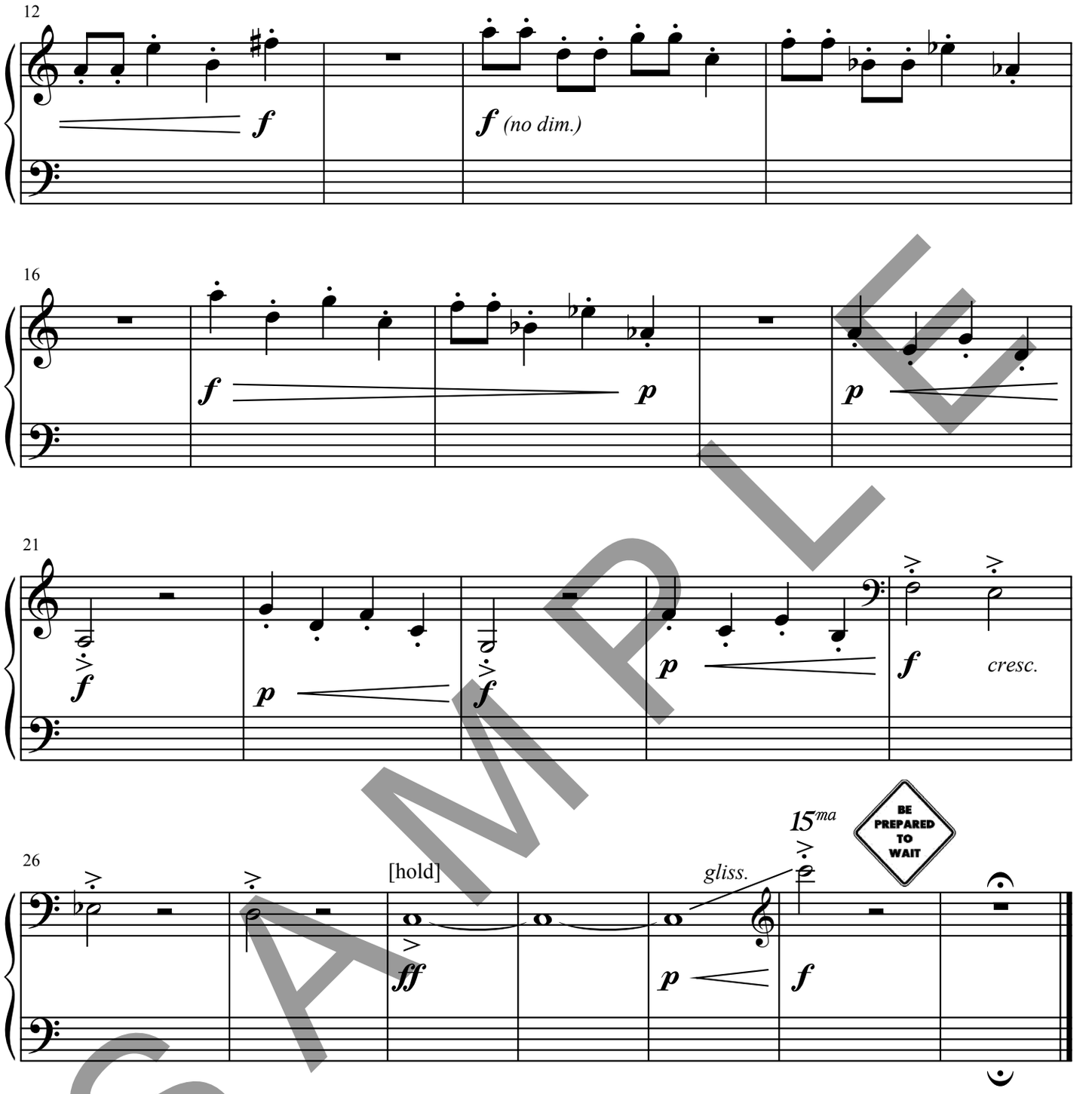


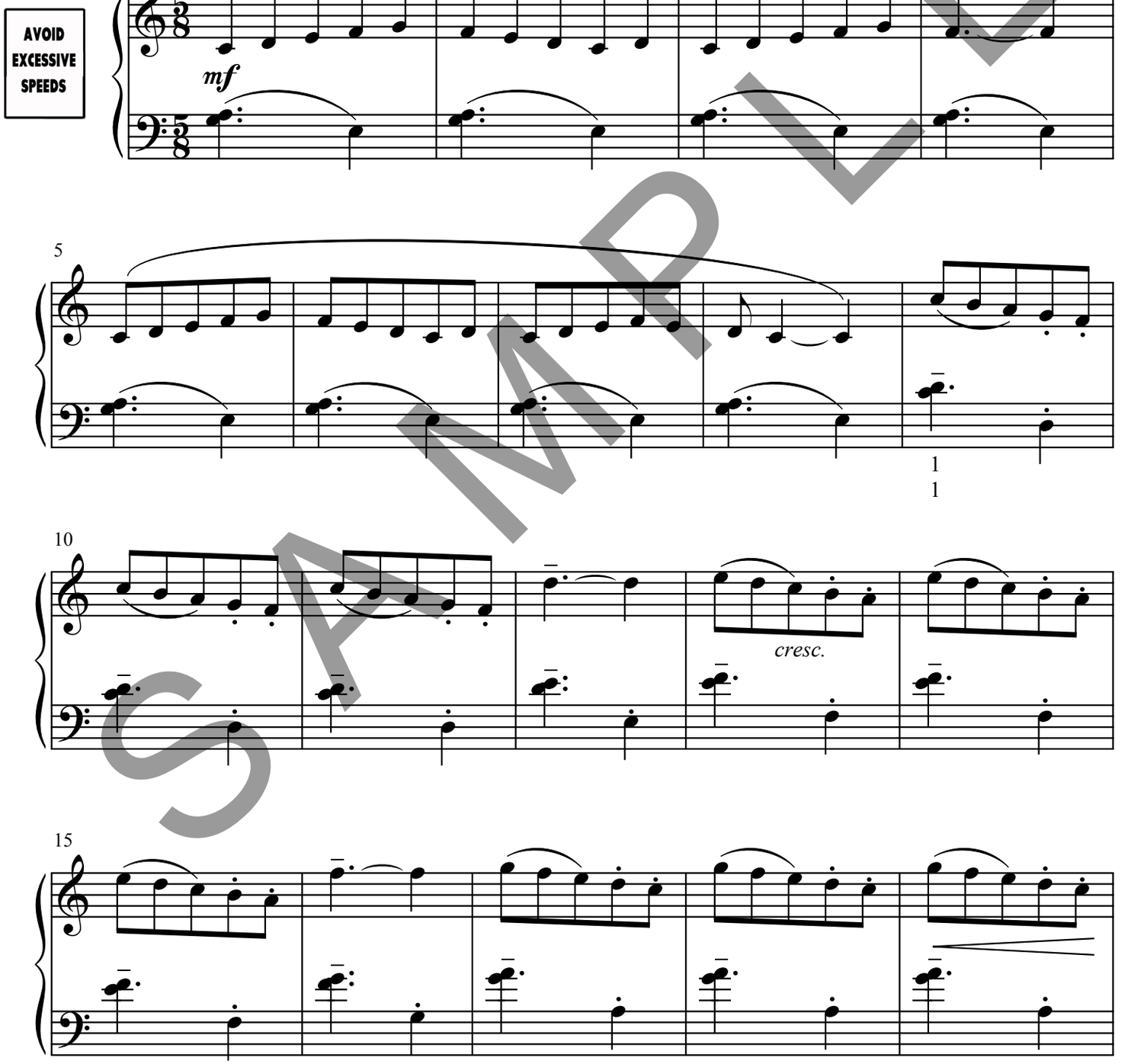
SAMPLE

This composition makes use of the principle of sympathetic reverberation as the overtones of the silently depressed lower strings are reinforced by the right hand notes. Do not use the damper pedal in this piece or the colours created by the reverberation will be seriously compromised. Always play the staccatos with a bit of an accent, even when the dynamic level is soft as this will generate a rhythmic precision that is highly desireable. The fingering is suggested to encourage an accented touch that is even throughout. Please note that there is a wide range of tempos possible to successfully perform this piece. Finally, do enjoy the concluding resonance created by the glissando for a duration that is long enough to make the overtones mingle in an aurally intriguing fashion. I personally always like to play the last note of a rising right-hand glissando with my thumb by turning over the hand at the last minute. This provides lots of accent to the top note of the glissando and is very accurate.

High 5's

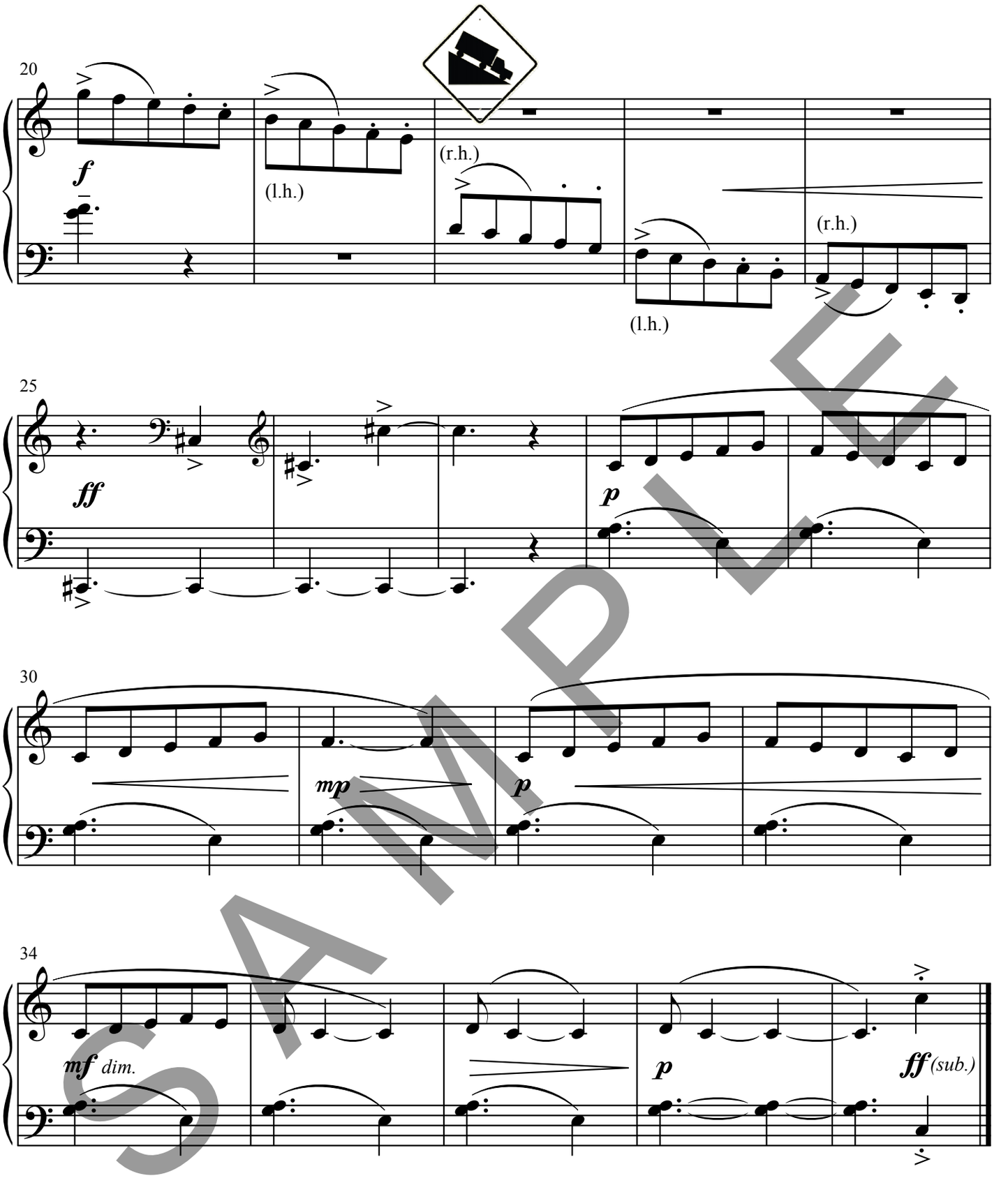
Happily and steady (not too fast)

John Burge



SAMPLE

2006 by John Burge



SAMPLE

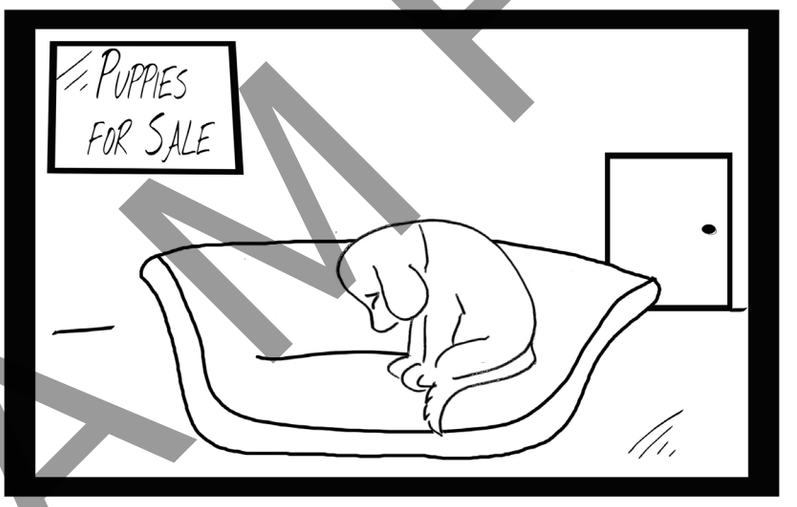
This is a cheerful, carefree kind of piece that needs to be played with a firm hand position with a slightly accented finger action especially for the staccato notes. It is important that all the eighth notes have the same volume which can be difficult because the fifth finger is often weaker than the others. In bars 9 to 20, it is suggested that both the left hand notes at the beginning of the bar be played with the side of the thumb to help reach the leap down to the quarter note that follows.

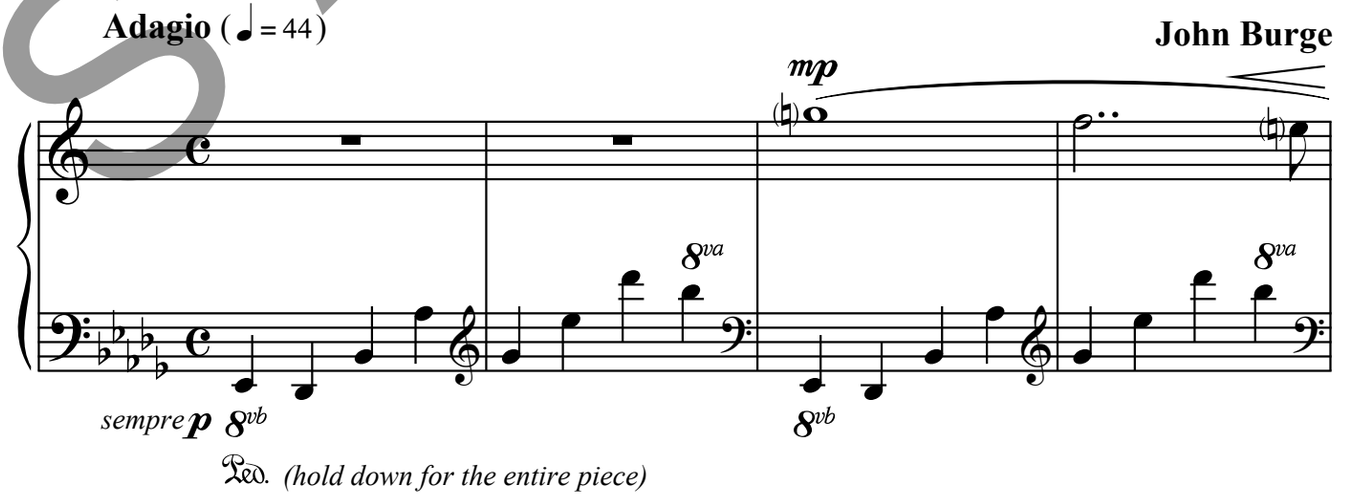
Lonely

This piece is really in two different keys at the same time which is why the right hand has no key signature (C Major) and the left hand has five flats (E Flat Minor). The left hand actually consists of only eight different notes that climb through the piano's black keys.

There are a couple of ways to memorize the left hand easily. One method is to start on the low E flat, skip over the three black notes and play the next highest black note and repeat this process seven times. Alternatively, the actual black notes spell the name, ED BAG followed by the shortened form of just ED B (E flat, D flat, B flat, etc.).

To really capture the mood of this piece, it is important that the left hand be played as lightly as possible. Consider brushing these notes using the second and third fingers held together by simultaeously stroking the key or pulling the fingers towards your body. The right hand needs a bit more projection to help the longer rhythmic values of the melody project clearly but don't accent these notes.





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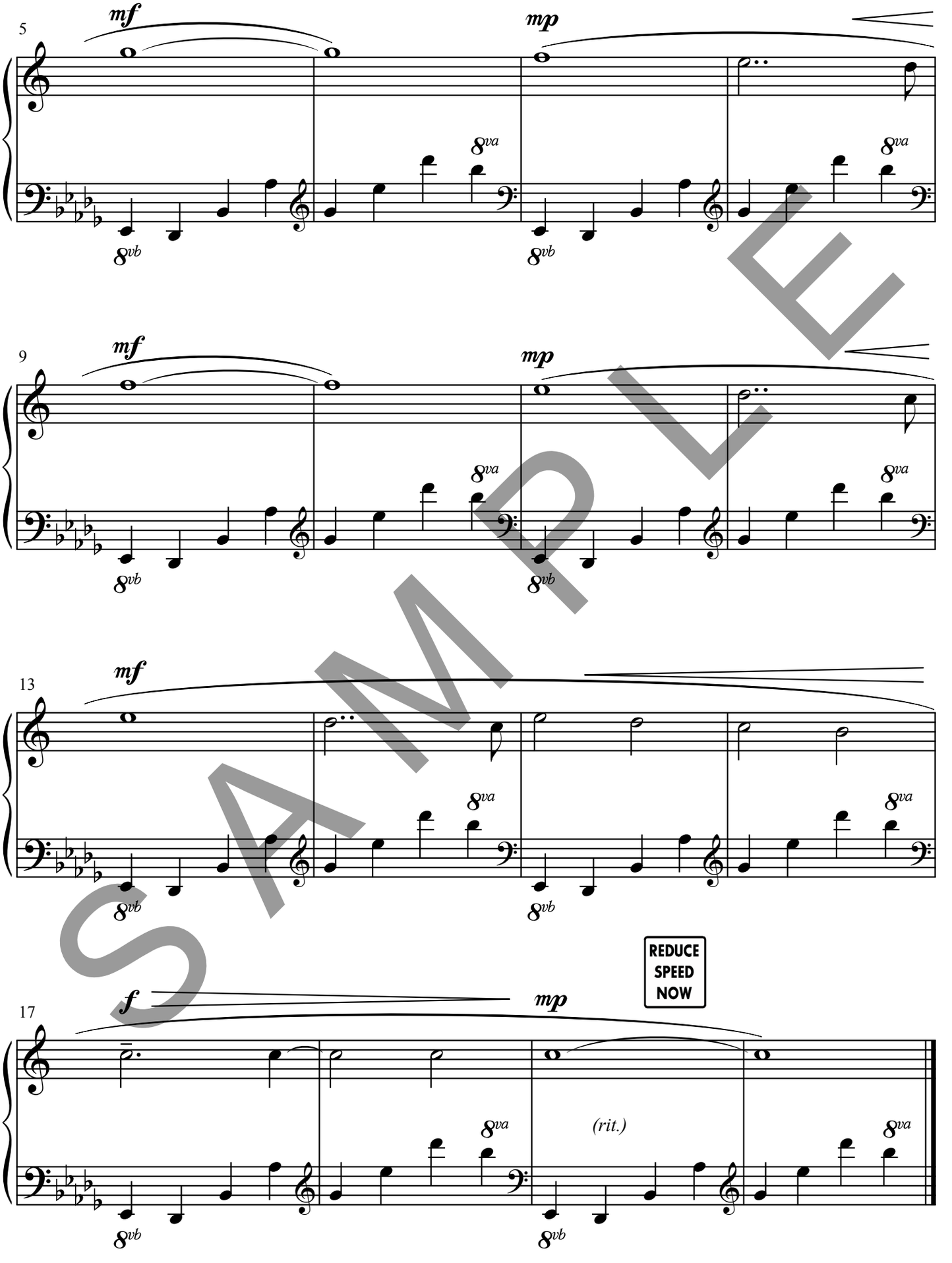
5
mf
mp
8va
8vb
9
mf
mp
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13
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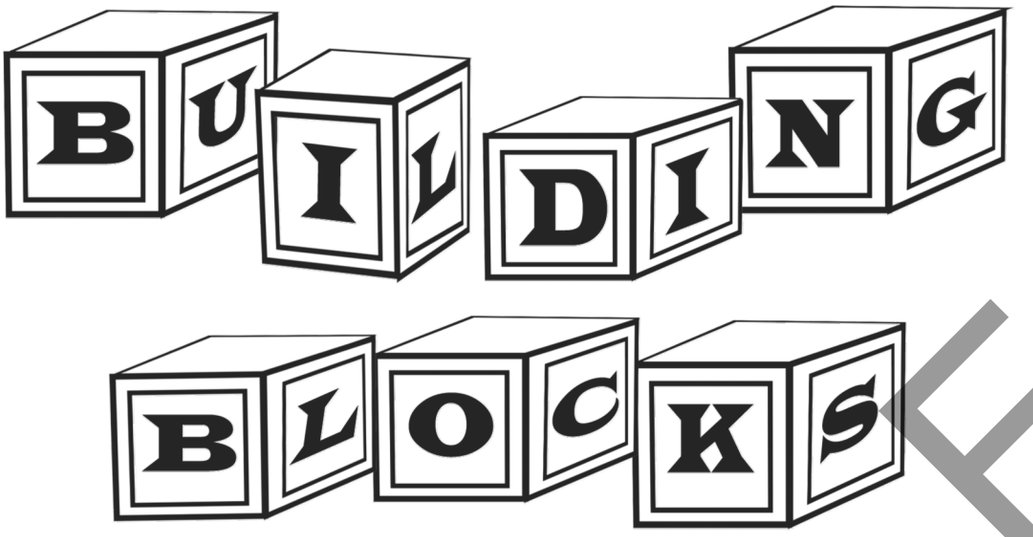
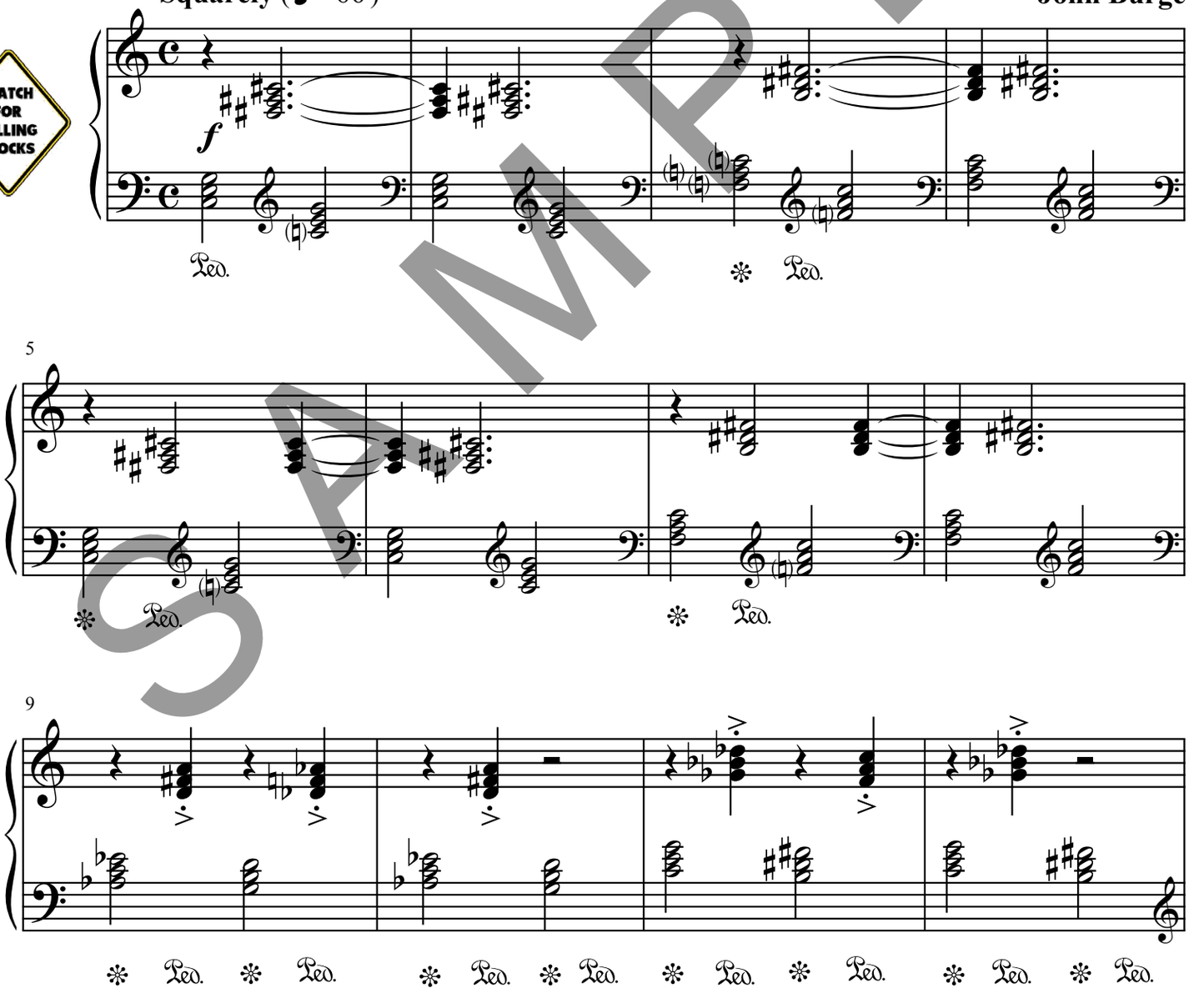
REDUCE
SPEED
NOW
17
f
mp
(rit.)
8va
8vb

SAMPLE



SAMPLE

Squarely (♩ = 60) **John Burge**



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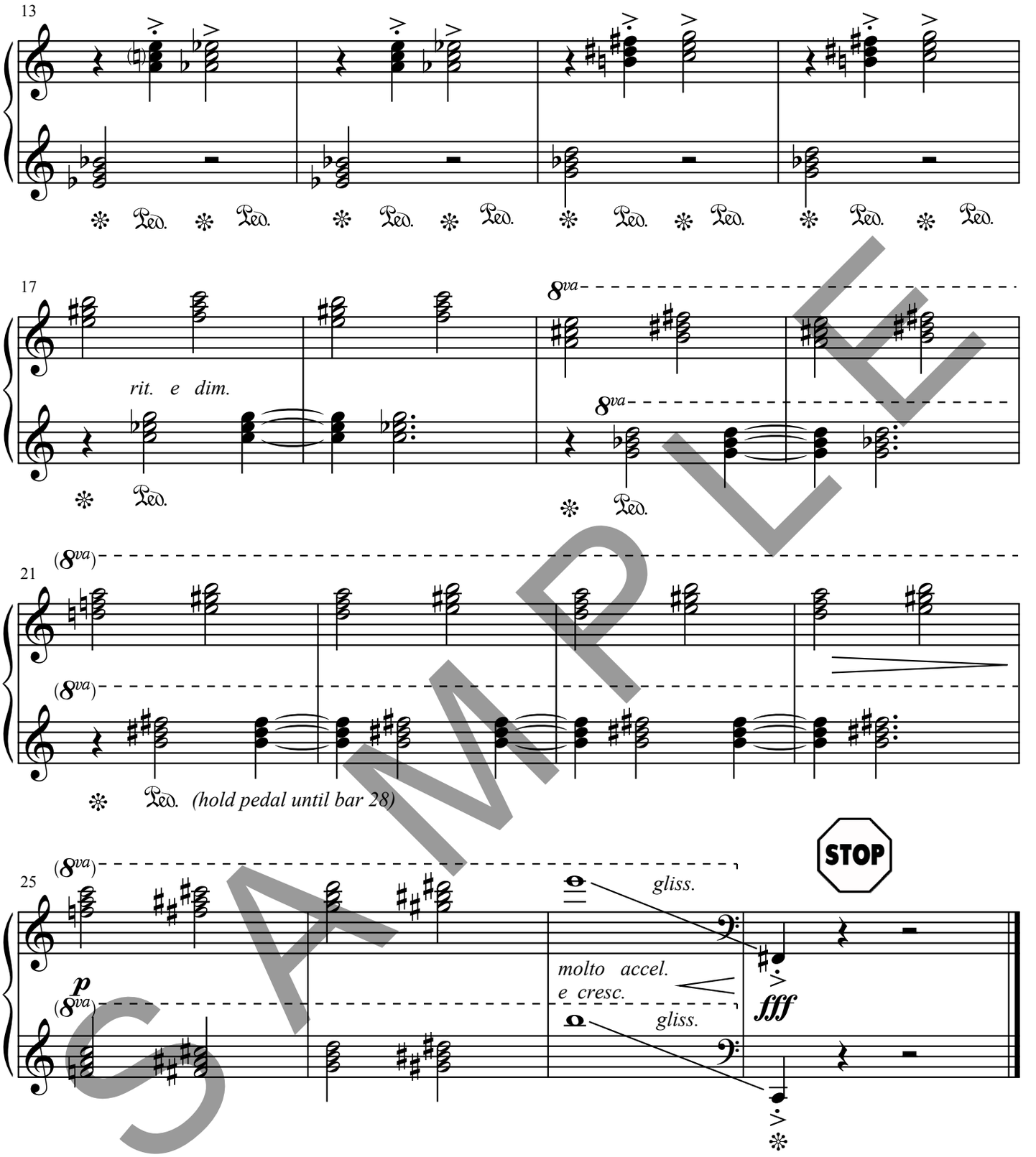


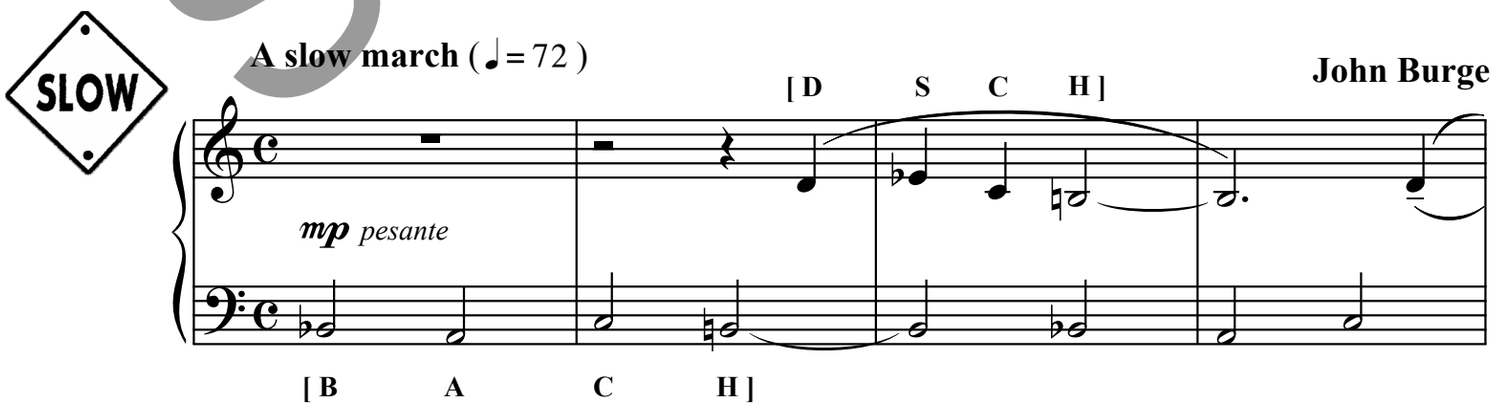
SAMPLE

By using solid triads and a crashing ending, this piece is obvious in the way that the compositional material and overall design reflect the title, “Building Blocks.” The two hands usually appear to be at odds tonally in a process that is often referred to as polytonality. For example, the first two bars contrast C Major with F# Major triads. Stravinsky made great use of these exact same pair of chords in his ballet, “Petroushka,” and for this reason, two major triads in root position played together a tritone apart are often called the “Petroushka chord.” The pedal indications are written such that the pedal is released on the left hand's strong beat and engaged on the weak beats which will encourage the right hand to play with lots of accent.

In the German language the black notes on the piano have an actual letter name. In fact, the note we would call B flat in North America is simply "B" in German, while our B natural is referred to as "H". In this way a composer like Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) can spell his surname musically. This is something he occasionally did in his compositions as a kind of musical signature (for example, see the final Contrapunctus in his work, *The Art of Fugue*).

The note we call E flat is known as "S" in German and the Russian composer, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), created his own musical signature by using the note names of his first name's initial followed by the first three letters of his surname as it would be spelt in the German language (D. Schostakovich). Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet is probably his most famous composition in which he uses these four pitches.

While this piece looks very chromatic it is actually quite simple in the way that the left hand always repeats Bach's note names in almost the same rhythm throughout. It is as if Bach only has one thing to say on the phone. The Shostakovich inspired right hand, however, expands his signature tune in a way that eventually arrives on the same note names that began the piece but placed an octave higher.



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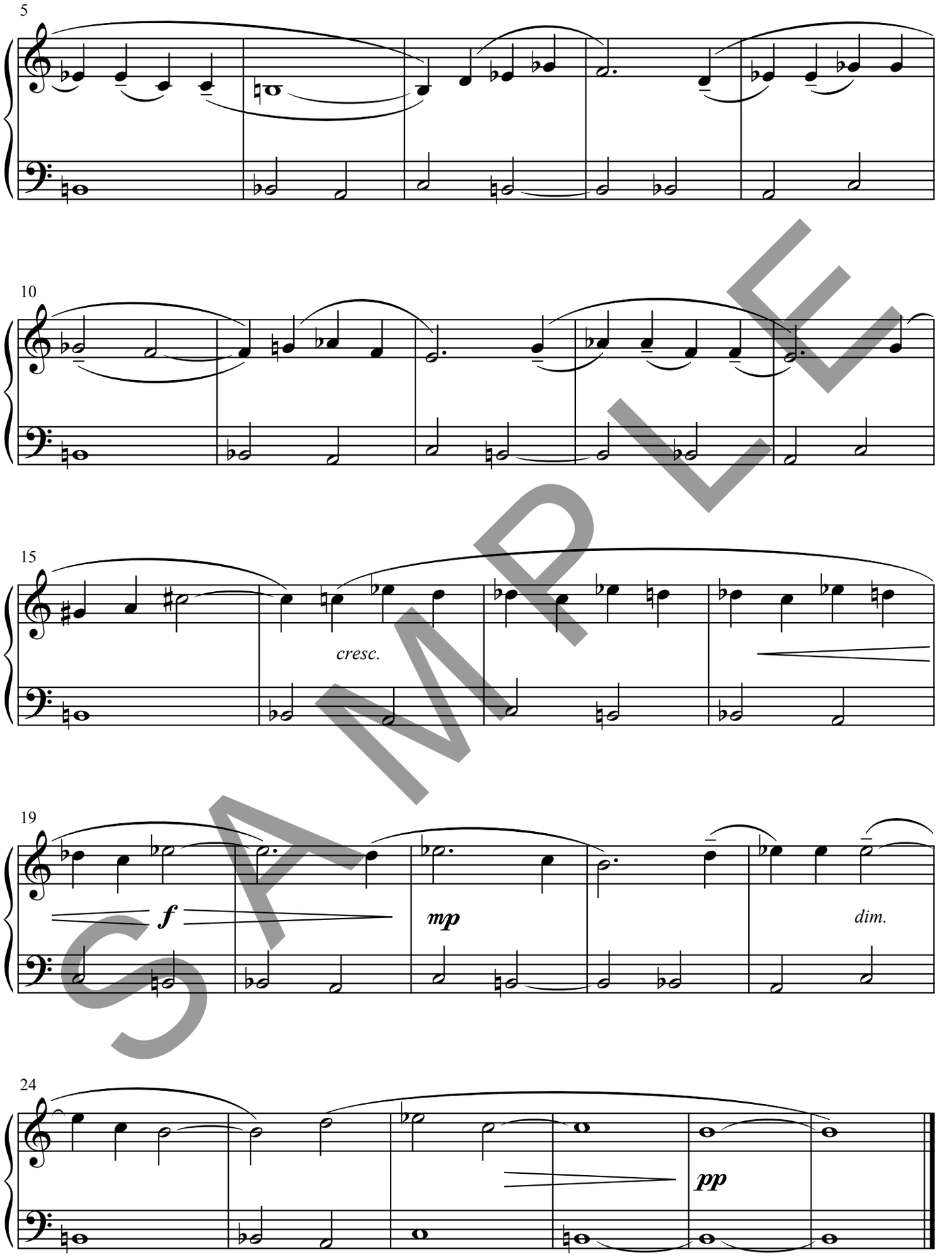


SAMPLE

Parking an Octatonic Truck

An "octatonic" scale is a fancy name for any scale that has 8 different pitches. The more common major scale by contrast has only 7 different pitches (and for some reason is referred to as a diatonic scale).

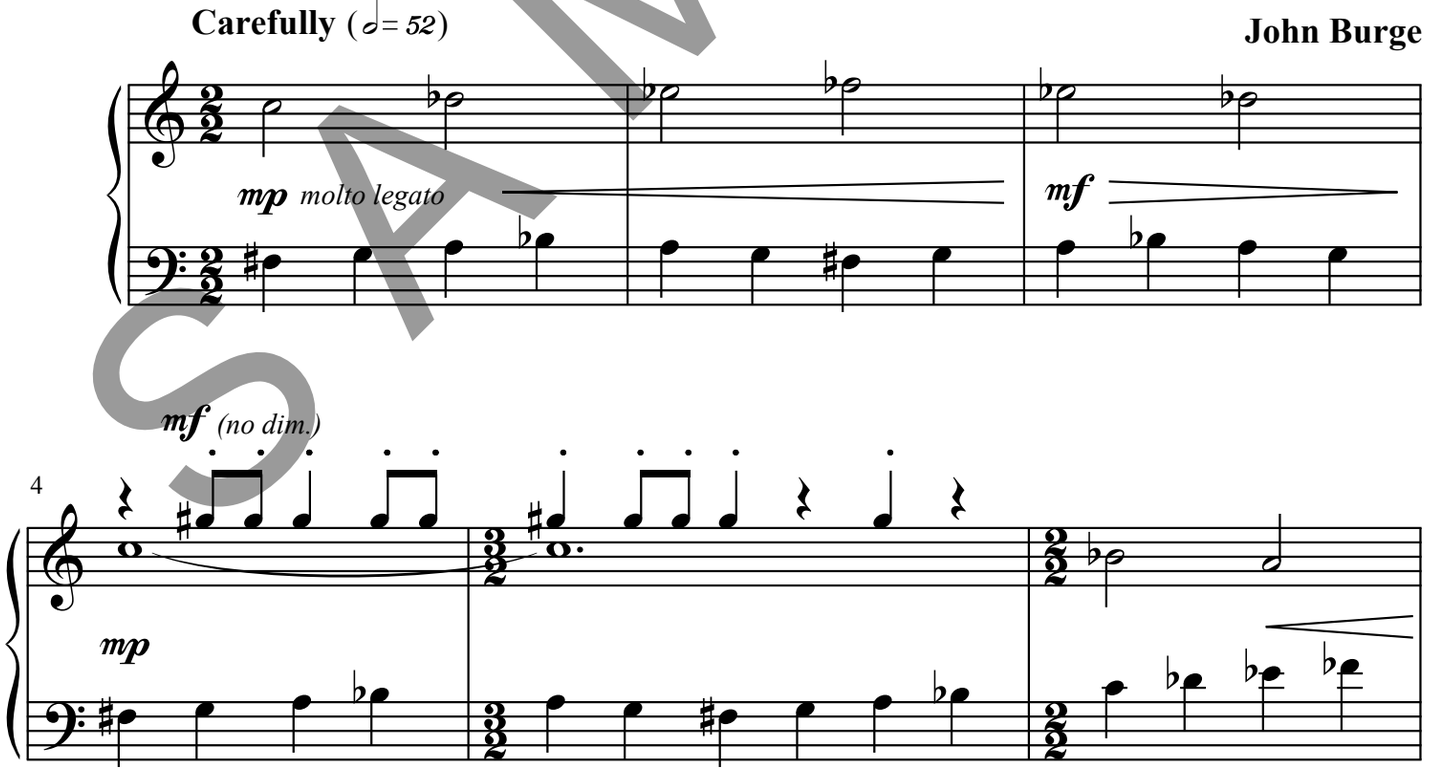
The most common octatonic scales are created by systematically alternating intervals of semitones with whole tones. A number of composers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries incorporated the octatonic scale into their music. Two of the more notable composers to do this were Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) and Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992).

This piece uses the following octatonic scale by dividing it into two groups of 4 notes:

F♯ G A B♭ C D♭ E♭ F♭

Once you have learned this pattern you will see that the piece is put together very simply.

One other feature of this piece is that there are always four other pitches on the piano that will be left out of any octatonic scale. These notes have been used to audibly convey the warning beeps of a truck after it shifts into reverse and begins to back up.



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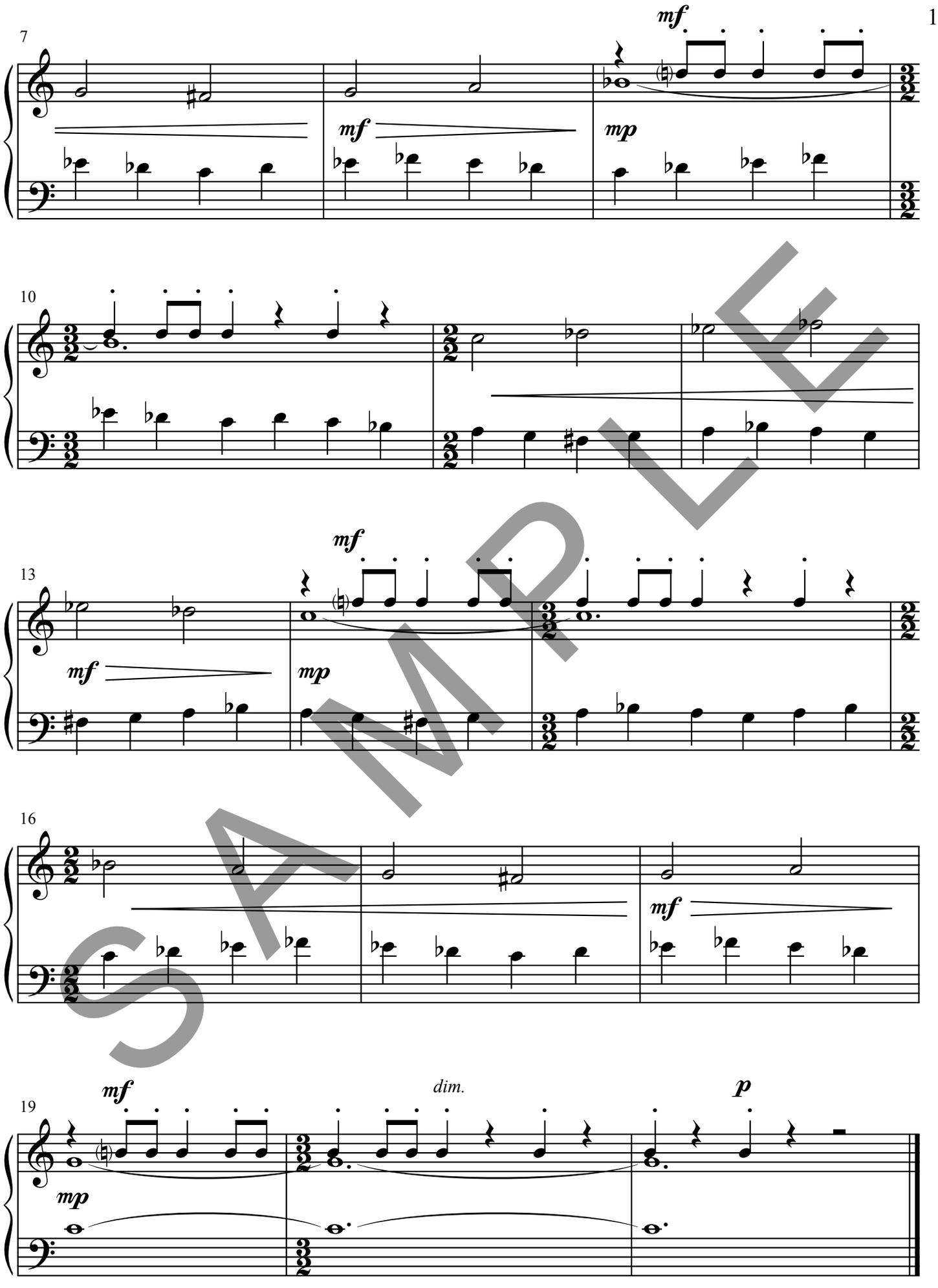

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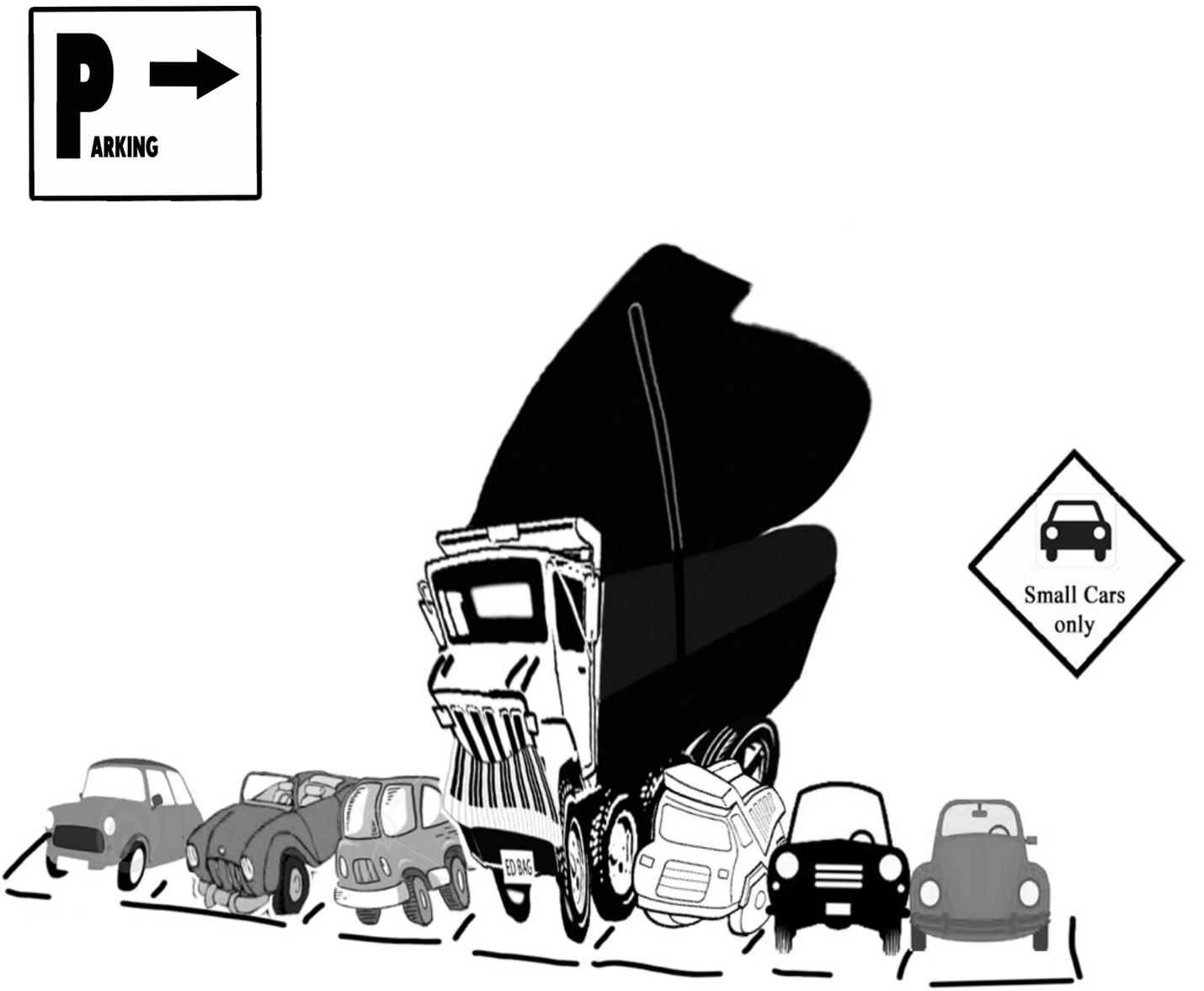
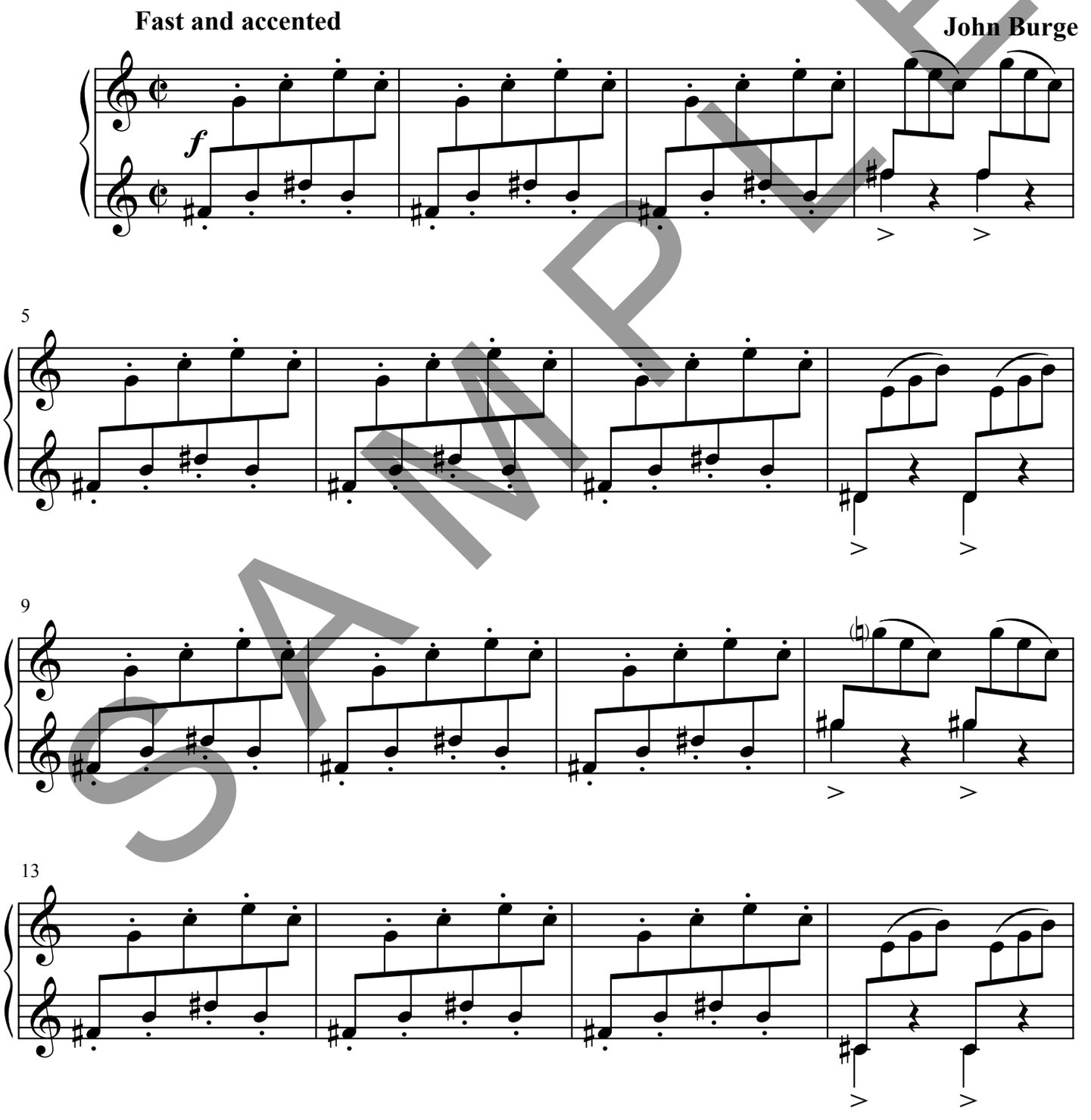

P
ARKING
Small Cars
only

Dodge Ball

This is the kind of piece that has only a few patterns so committing the notes to memory right away is adviseable. A teacher could also instruct the piece to a student by rote without ever showing the student the music which can work very well for younger pianists. The frenetic energy of dodge ball is best captured with an almost aggressive finger action. A good game of dodge ball gets down to just one person remaining at the end which is musically captured with the *ritardando* and *diminuendo* before the game starts all over.



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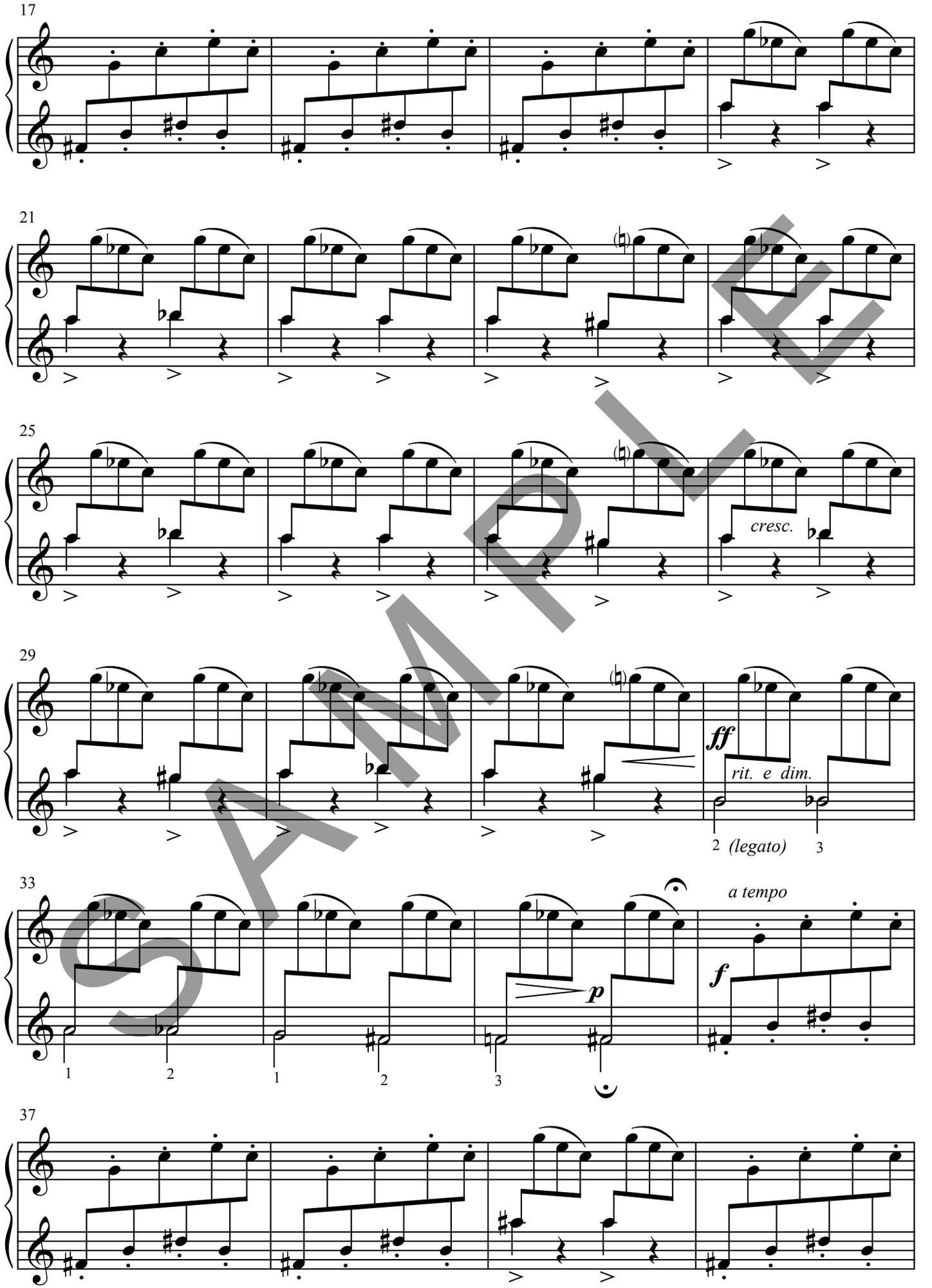


SAMPLE

41

45

dim.

8va

8va

(8va)

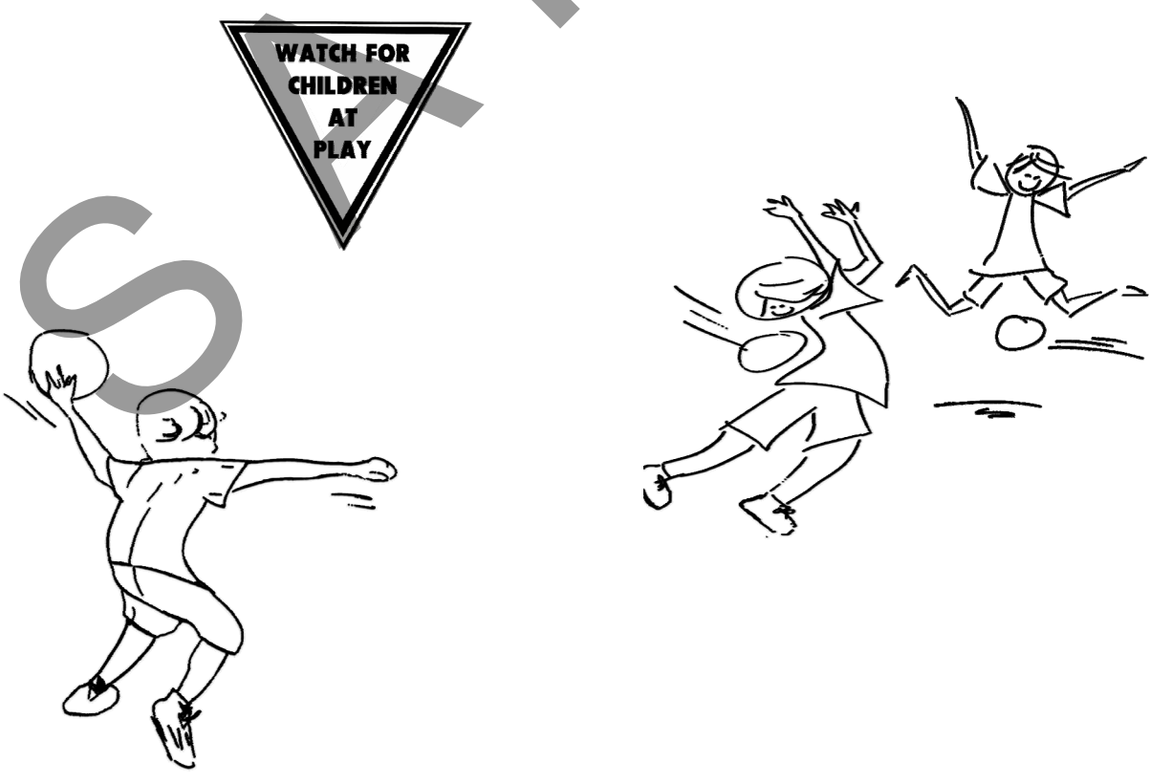
49

(8va)

p

mf

8vb

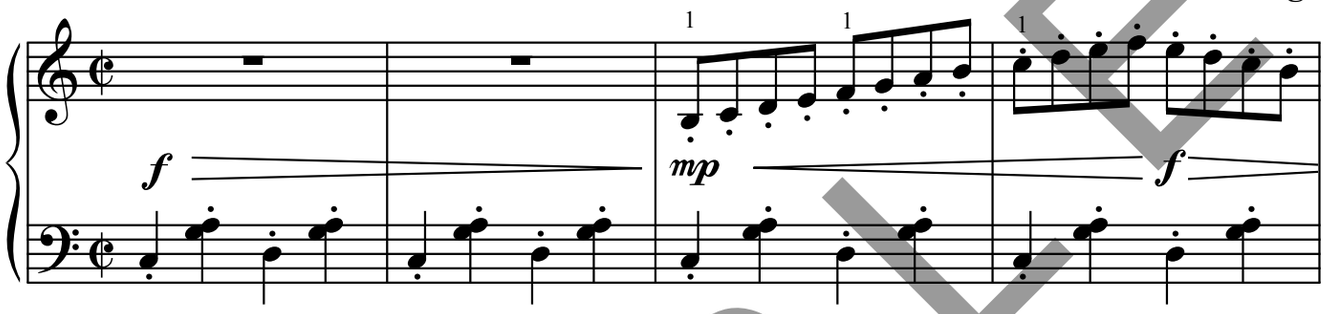


SAMPLE

DANCING SCALES

Allegretto (♩ = 80)

John Burge



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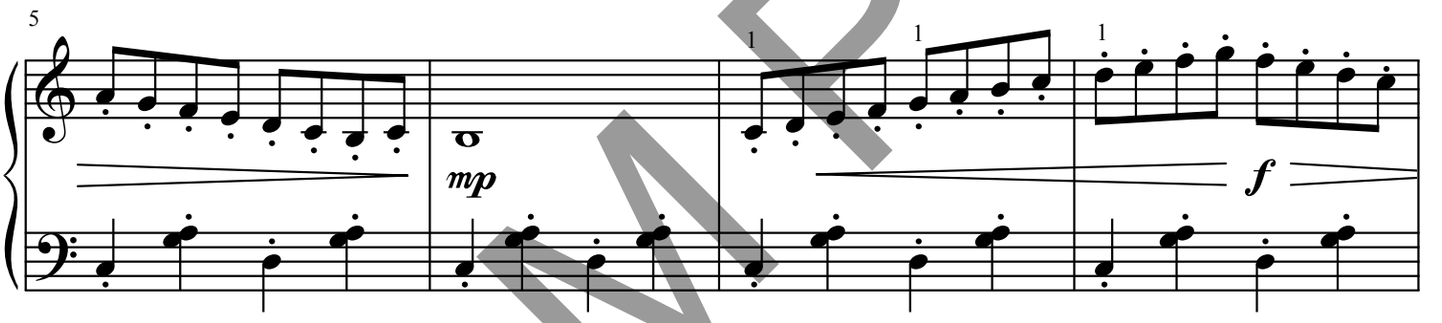

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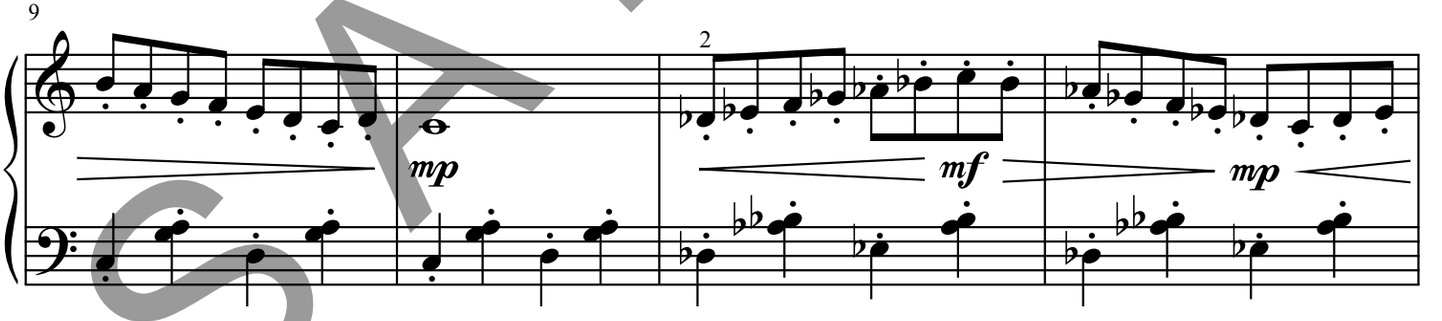

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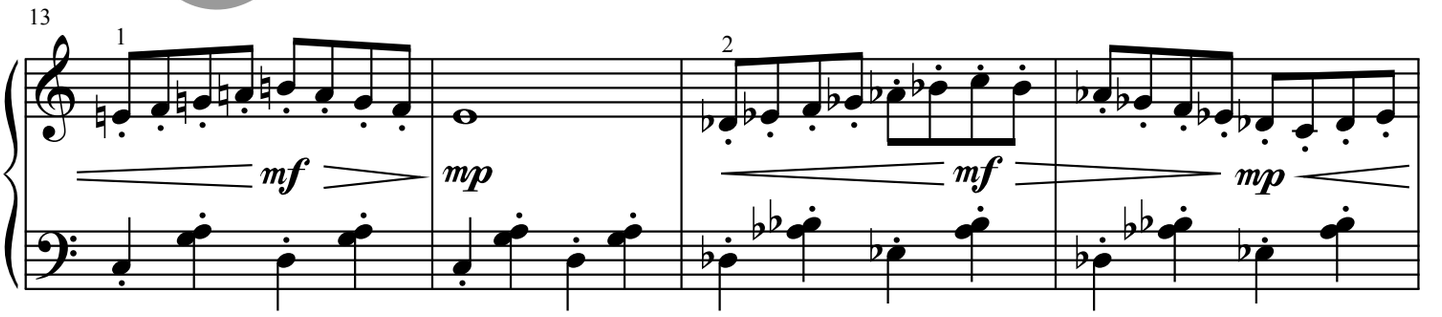

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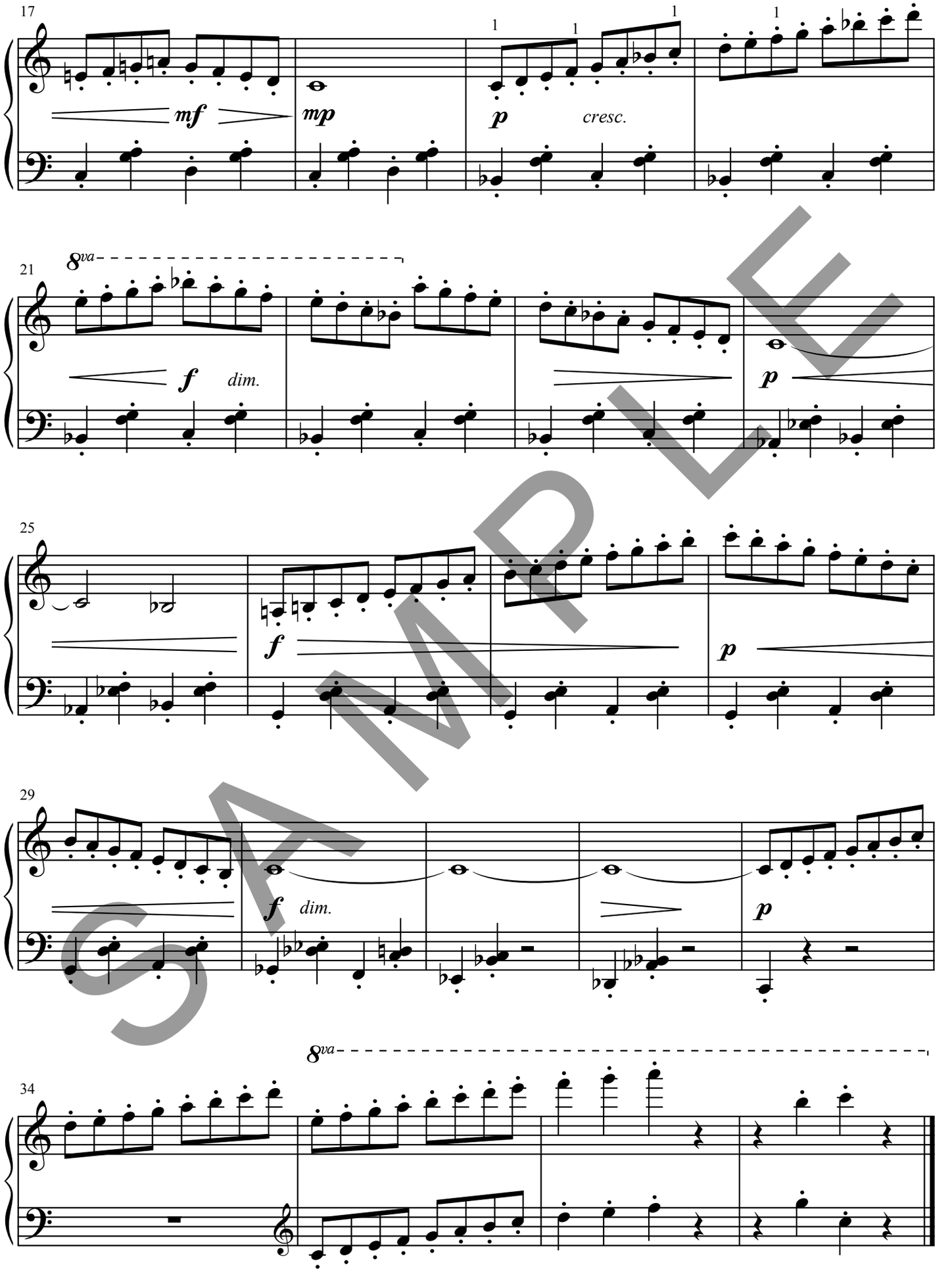

SAMPLE

Cluster Blues

SPEED LIMIT 132

With a steady groove and even eighths (♩ = 132)

John Burge

SAMPLE

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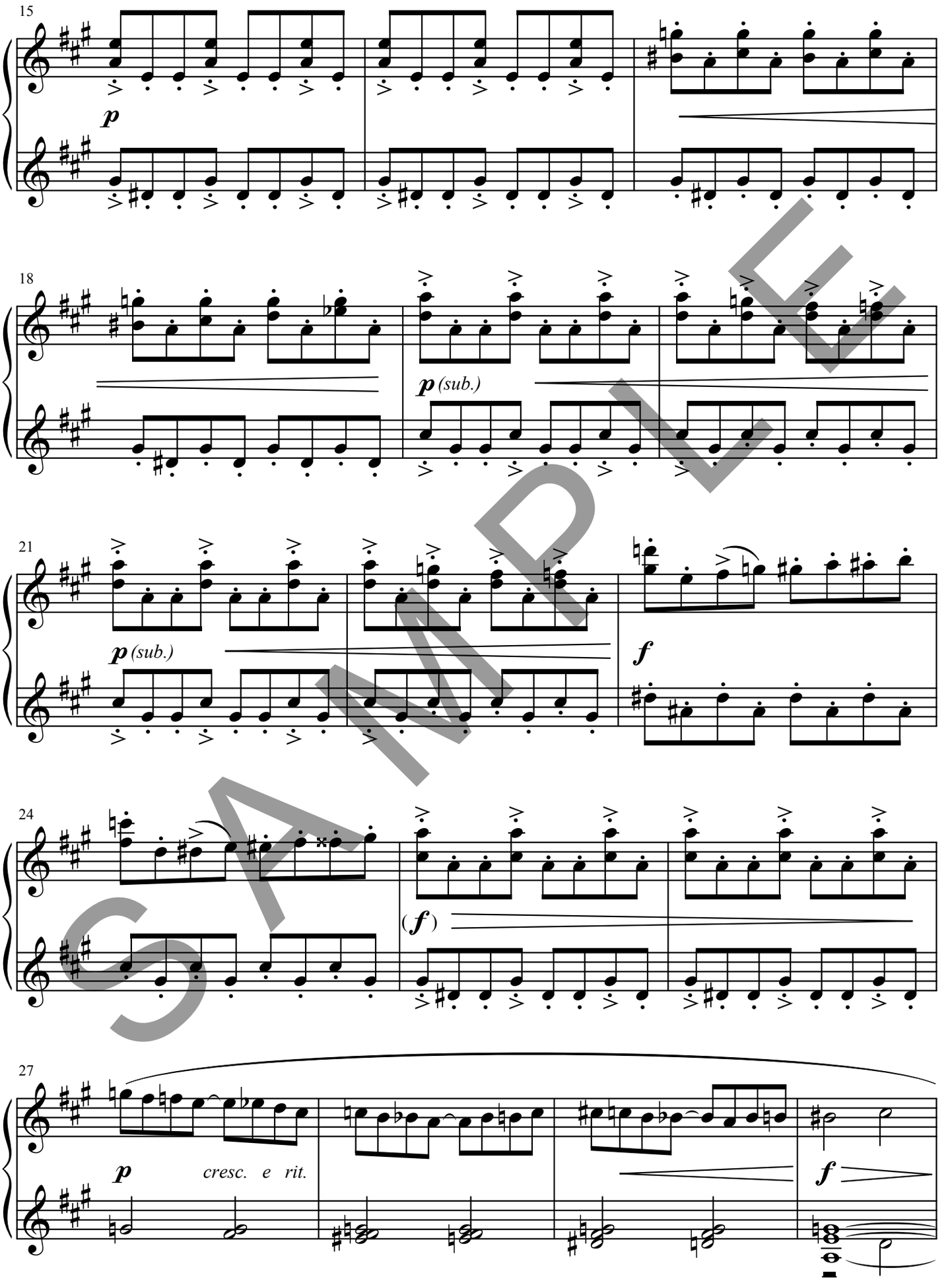

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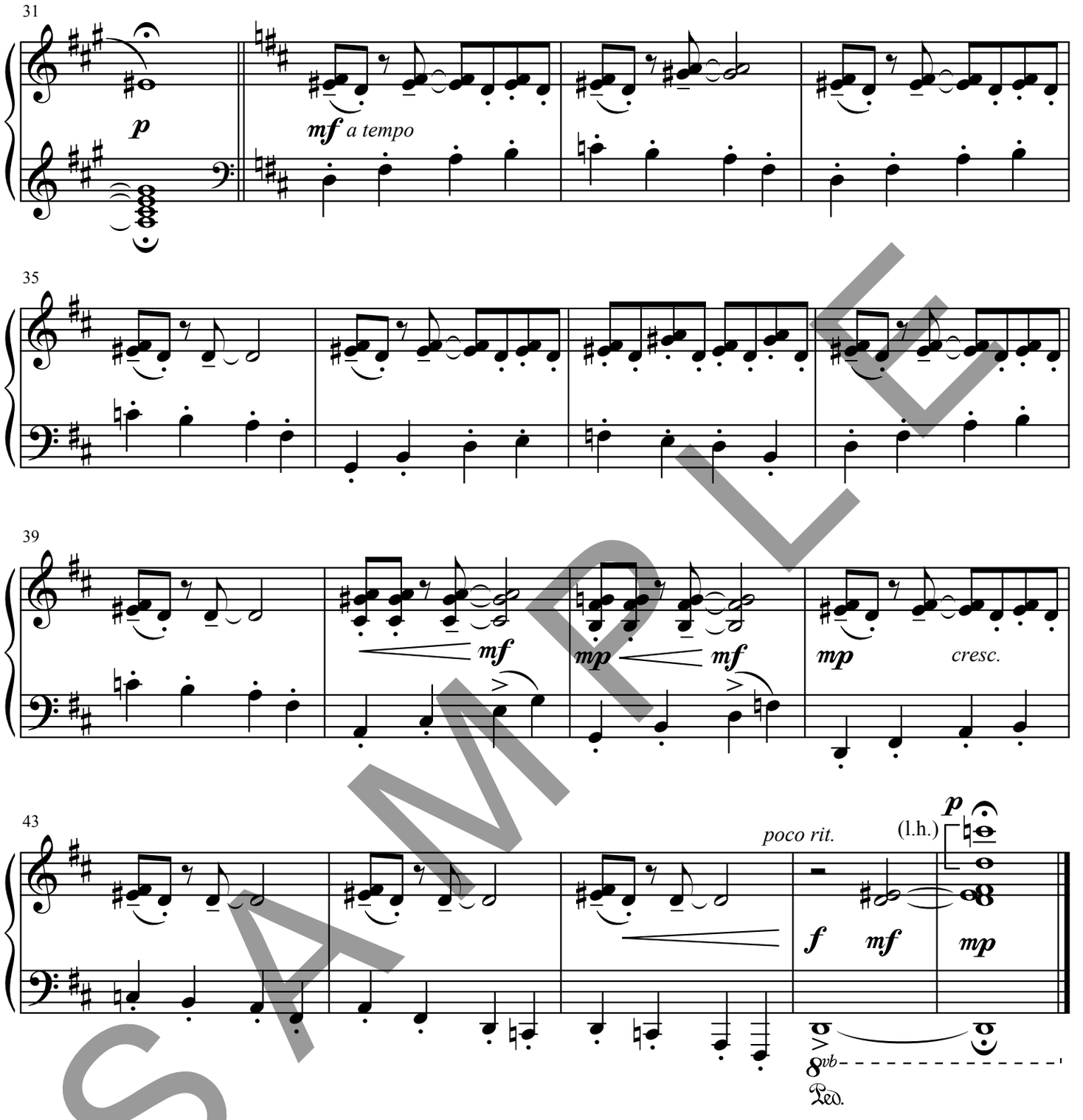
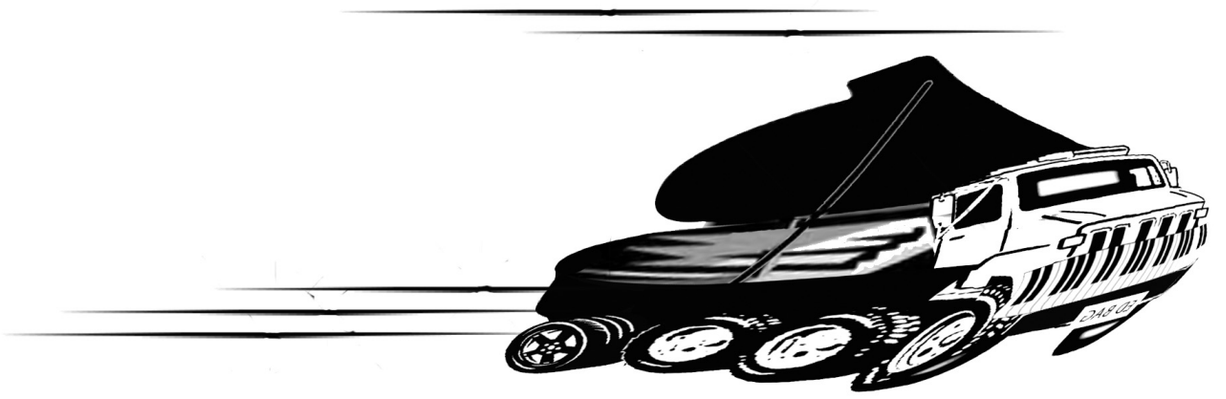


SAMPLE

In music, a "cluster" is a group of notes that are very close together, often semitones apart and played simultaneously. In this composition, the clusters will be immediately apparent, but to many listeners hearing the first bar it might actually sound like a mistake has been made. However, once the semitone clusters are heard a few times in the subsequent bars, it will become clear that these dissonances are intentional. A great jazz player has the ability to make the “wrong” notes sound “right” so enjoy the clusters by really emphasizing their edginess. This blues is somewhat unusual in the use of modulation in each verse although the primary key of D Major will seem obvious once one realizes that the keys of G Major and A Major in the first two verses, are really the sub-dominant and dominant to the D Major tonic key in the final verse.

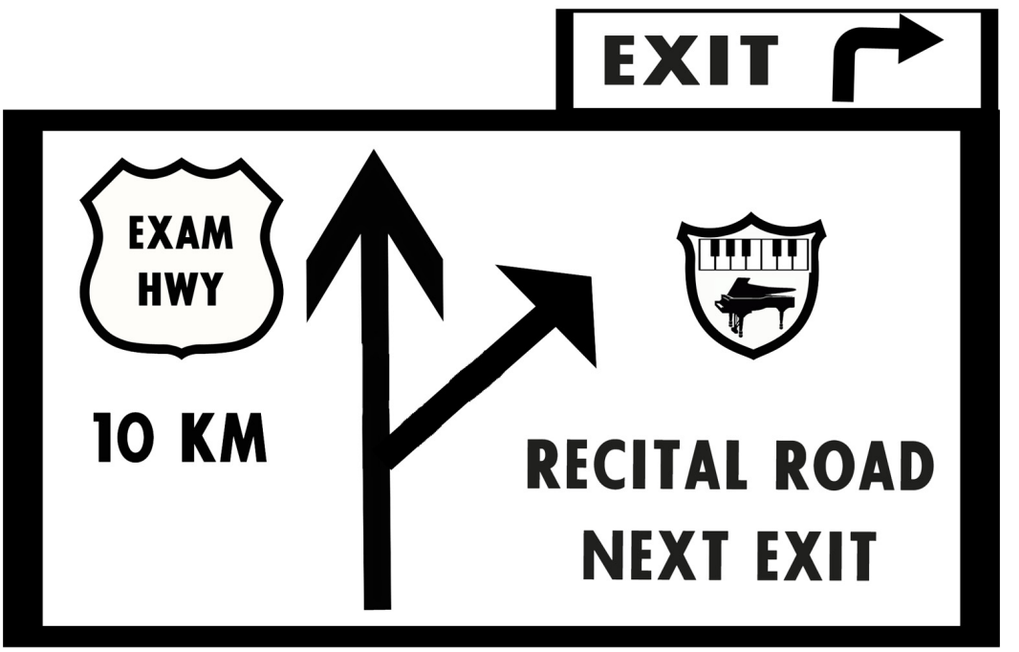


Dr. John Burge was born in Dryden, Ontario in 1961. While still in public school in Calgary, he received his Associate Diploma from the Royal Conservatory of Toronto in Piano Performance. He also holds degrees in Composition and Theory from the University of Toronto (B.Mus. and M.Mus.) and the University of British Columbia (D.M.A.). Since 1987 he has been teaching at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario where he currently holds the position of Full Professor at the School of Music.

John Burge has written a large body of vocal, chamber, and orchestral compositions. He is particularly well known for his choral music, which has been performed by such choirs as The Elmer Iseler Singers, The BBC Singers, The Amabile Youth Choir, The Toronto Children's Chorus and The St. Louis Symphony Children's Choir. Many of these choral works have been published by Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishers. His composition, ***Angels' Voices***, for choir and orchestra, received the 2006 Outstanding New Choral Composition Award from the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors and was performed in New York City's Carnegie Hall in 2005. The recording of his work, ***Flanders Fields Reflections***, by Sinfonia Toronto on the Marquis Classics label, received the 2009 Juno Award for the Best Canadian Classical Composition. ***Prelude Variations***, a set of variations on Chopin's C Minor "Prelude" for piano and orchestra, is one of Burge's most successful compositions. The work was collectively commissioned by the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, Kingston Symphony Association and L'Orchestre Symphonique de Québec, in tribute of the bicentennial of Chopin's birth. All three orchestras premiered the composition with pianist, Janina Fialkowska, to whom the work is dedicated in the fall of 2010.

Over the years John Burge has had a long and productive relationship with the Kingston Symphony and their Music Director, Glen Fast. Since 1991 they have commissioned and premiered many of his orchestral compositions, including a ***Piano Concerto***, ***Clarinet Concerto***, ***Trumpet Concerto*** and two ***Symphonies.*** Since 1993, Burge has also written five chamber orchestra works for The Thirteen Strings of Ottawa. With titles like, ***Snowdrift***, ***Rocky Mountain Overture***, ***Upper Canada Fiddle Suite***, and ***The Canadian Shield***, it is obvious that a number of his works for large ensemble draw their influence from a distinctively Canadian perspective. Orchestras and audiences seem taken with these works as they have received numerous performances across Canada and even as far away as Brazil and Russia.

John Burge greatly enjoys working with young musicians and in addition to his teaching duties at Queen's University, he is in demand as an adjudicator at Music Festivals across Canada. From 2001-2003, he was the Composer-in-Residence for the National Youth Orchestra of Canada during which time they premiered his work, ***Sonic Architecture***. A passionate advocate for Canadian music he was a member of the Executive of the Canadian League of Composers from 1993-2007, serving as President from 1998-2006. He is currently a board member for the SOCAN Foundation and the Music at Port Milford Summer Music School and Festival.


EXIT
EXAM
HWY
10 KM
RECITAL ROAD
NEXT EXIT

Parking an Octatonic Truck **JBCompositions — 001** **ISBN: 978-1-927836-00-2**

John Burge has been an active composer since the 1980's and a professor of composition and theory at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario since 1987. As a pianist himself, he has had a lifelong affinity for this instrument and counts himself very fortunate to have composed music for such talented pianists as Janina Fialkowska, Brian Finley, Shelley Katz, Stéphane Lemelin, Dina Namer, Angela Park, Michel Szczesniak, Cynthia Tormann and Ireneus and Luba Zuk. With his extensive knowledge of the piano repertoire and an engagingly informative speaking style, John Burge is in high demand as an adjudicator of music festival classes in Canada. Over the years of adjudicating he has often found it enjoyable (and somewhat expedient) to sit down and compose short piano pieces to use for quick study and sight-reading classes as needed. When invited to join the *Red Leaf Pianoworks* collective of Canadian composers, a proposition he gladly accepted, it was suggested that bringing out an initial volume of pieces for younger pianists would be a great start. PARKING AN OCTATONIC TRUCK takes the best of the pieces composed for music festivals and adds two new works to create a collection of ten pieces that explore some of the more unusual approaches to composition such as polytonality, sympathetic reverberation, less traditional meters and clusters. Each piece is put together in a logical fashion making them easy to teach, memorize and most importantly, fun to play.

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