‘Für Elise’, WoO 59

Composer: Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Nationality: German
Date: Approximately 1810

‘Für Elise’, also known as ‘Bagatelle No. 25 in A Minor’, is arguably the most famous work by German composer Ludwig van Beethoven. Although the composition wasn’t published until 1867 (40 years after Beethoven’s death) it is thought that the first notated versions of the piece date back as far as 1810.

Ludwig van Beethoven’s first published composition was released in 1783, when the musician and composer was just thirteen years old. This consisted of a suite of keyboard variations and was the first of many to be released by perhaps the world’s most successful classical composer. Beethoven is widely regarded as a key influencer in the transition from the Classical to the Romantic period as he pushed the boundaries of the standard musical forms of the time. By 1814 Beethoven was almost completely deaf, having suffered with hearing problems for years.

Preparation

Notice how the music begins on the third beat of a bar, then the phrase propels you through the next bar to land on the crotchet (quarter note) A on beat 1 of bar 2. This natural flow across barlines helps provide a sense of direction and movement. However, this can lead to errors with rhythmic patterns and timing, so be careful to maintain a steady crotchet pulse throughout.

Practise the opening theme at a slow tempo, making sure that you can play the pattern as evenly and *legato* as possible. Some students may find it easier to control the first half of the phrase by starting on the fourth finger rather than the weaker fifth finger.

Take time to study bars 13 to 15 carefully to ensure you maintain the correct rhythm pattern and don’t inadvertently embellish the music with extra notes! As with a lot of passages requiring quick hand position changes, the key is to practise slowly and learn the notes well enough so that your focus can be on your position changes.

Avoid any temptation to rush through the triplet patterns in bars 23 to 28. Rehearse this section slowly, aiming for well-prepared hand position changes that feel relaxed and in control. Moving from the descending triplet chromatic passage back into the return of the main theme can be challenging. Practise bars 27 to 29 in isolation, maintaining a steady crotchet pulse until ready to introduce a small *rallentando* to lead back into the main theme. Be careful not to over-do the *rallentando*, or risk losing the smooth transition needed into bar 29.

While a little *rubato* may help to deliver an expressive performance, be careful not to overuse and risk losing momentum or the elegant simplicity of the lyrical line.

Performance

This arrangement of one of Beethoven’s most famous solo piano pieces requires good dexterity in fingerwork, a light, even touch and careful *legato* phrasing. While light pedalling can help to maintain a *legato* feel as the music passes between the two hands, be careful not to overuse the pedal and lose clarity of tone. Take note of the opening instruction *‘poco moto’* meaning with a little motion. Keeping the sense of fluidity and forward motion going throughout the piece is key to a successful performance.

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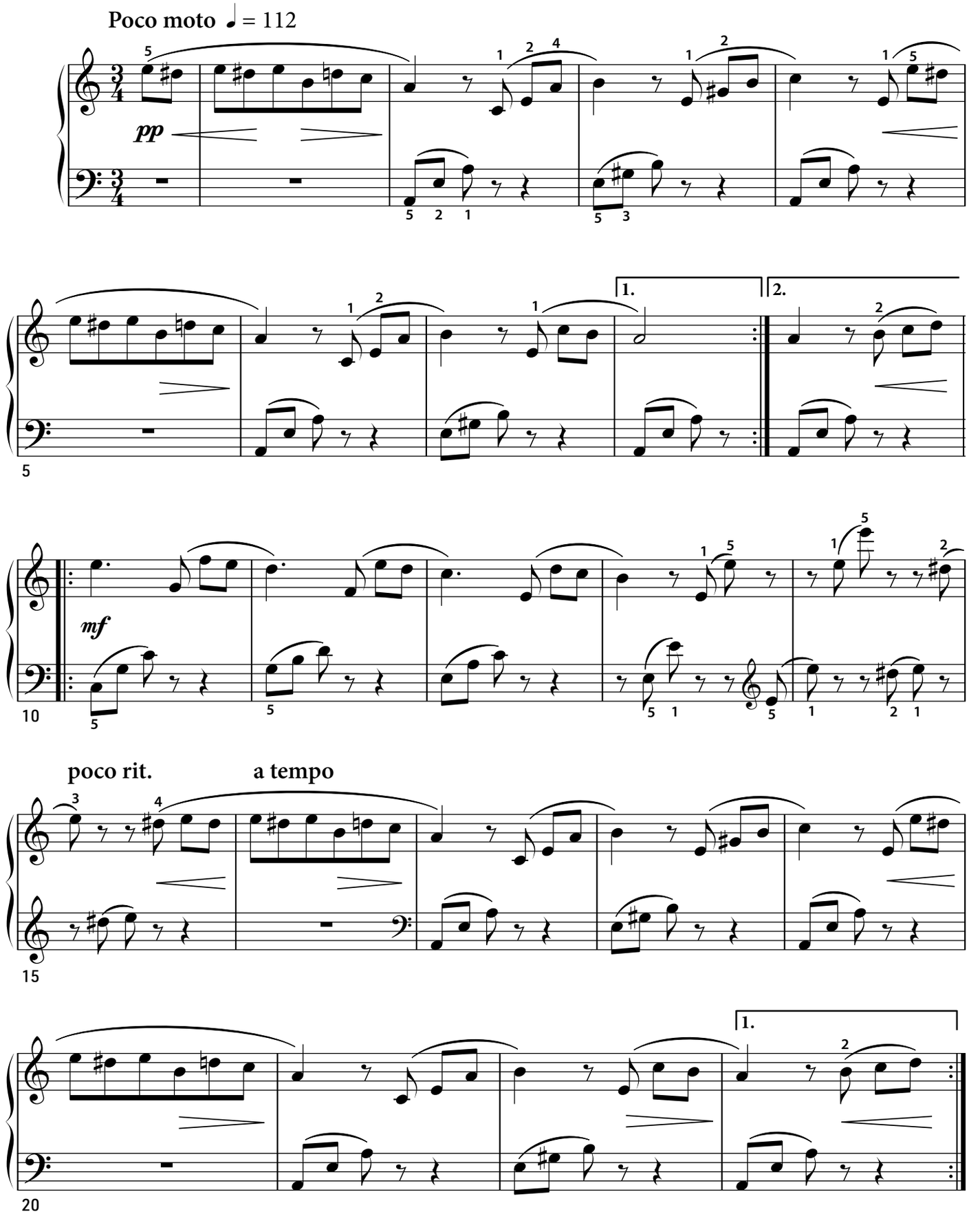
By Ludwig van Beethoven



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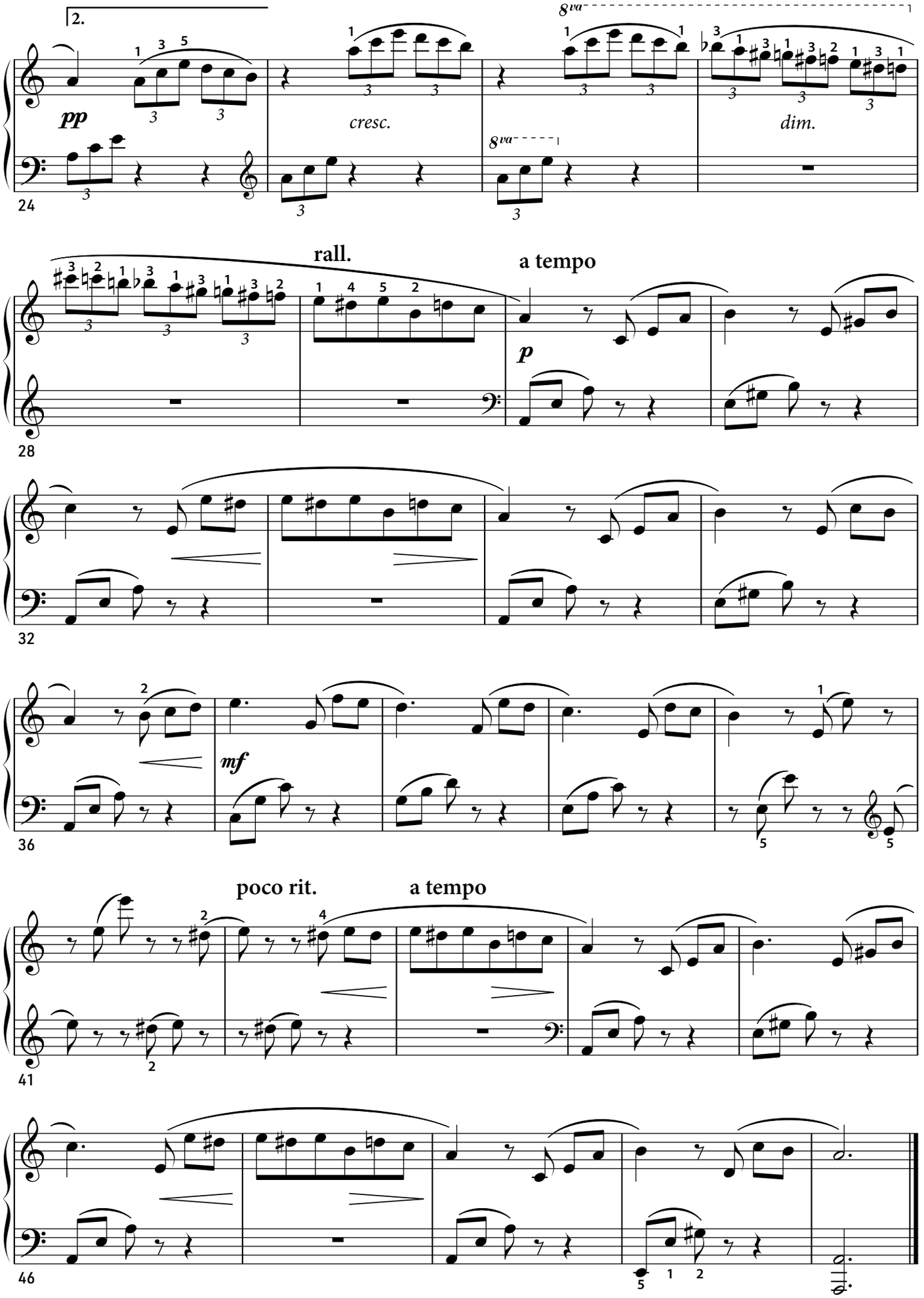
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