amy marcy beach

Born September 5, 1867, in New Hampshire, Amy Marcy Beach (née Cheney) quickly made a name for herself as a prodigious pianist, having debuted with Moscheles' *Concerto No. 3*, Op. 58 at age 16. However, her marriage in 1885 changed the course of her artistic aspirations as her husband, the surgeon Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, did not approve of her pursuing a concert career.

Faced with these new constraints, Beach turned her focus toward composition and achieved remarkable success. Among Beach's laurels is her distinction as the first female composer to have a work performed by a major orchestra (the Boston Symphony Orchestra's 1896 premiere of her *"Gaelic" Symphony in E minor,* Op. 32).

Her output of more than 300 works encompasses sacred and secular choral music, art song, chamber music, orchestral works, and an opera. Beach's compositions for piano include sets of character pieces, freestanding shorter works, larger-scale pieces such as the ferociously difficult *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, and a concerto.

Written in 1928, the *Three Pieces*, Op. 128 are at first glance more unassuming that some of Beach's earlier works. The first and third of the set are especially concise; their transparent textures and slightly more dissonant harmonies eschew the grand Romanticism popular in the preceding decades. Beach was fond enough of these *Three Pieces* that she played them on two separate occasions at the White House, in 1934 and 1936.

Amy Beach died in New York City on December 27, 1944.

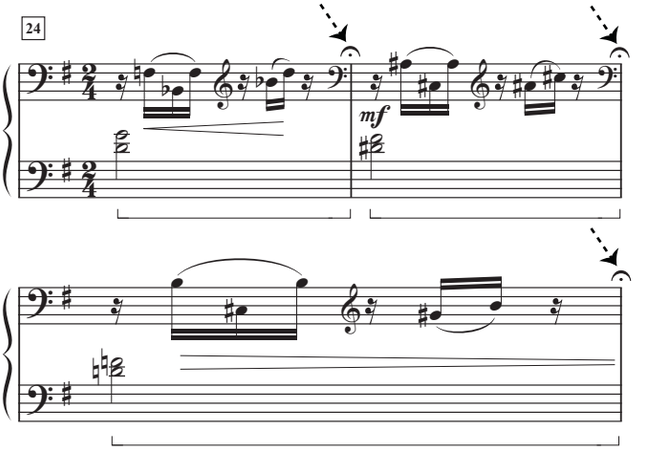
practice & performance

I. Scherzino

(A Peterborough Chipmunk)

The opening piece of this set takes its subtitle from the location of Beach's compositional activity during this time—Peterborough, New Hampshire (home to the MacDowell, a center for artist residencies).

Our "chipmunk" is skittish and unpredictable, as evidenced by the piece's capricious pacing: in its ephemeral 40 measures there are no fewer than twelve ***fermatas***!



Conveying the character of this mischievous rodent is the chief interpretive task. Create a story, or try to imagine specific scenes for each passage: Does he jump from branch to branch in these measures? Perhaps this pattern depicts him burying an acorn, then scurrying for cover?

The dynamic gradations required here are quite subtle: "Scherzino" remains almost entirely within ***pp*** , aside from two brief swells to a single measure of ***mf***. After controlling various degrees of ***p*** and ***pp*** throughout the piece, an even softer touch must be held in reserve, as the music disappears into ***ppp*** at the end.

Practice using a variety of pedaling techniques to discover where their use enhances or detracts from the musical meaning. For example, the pedal in mm. 3 and 6 could either be released with the final RH note (for an abrupt silence), or held through the ***fermata*** (for a gentler, almost tentative gesture). Experiment

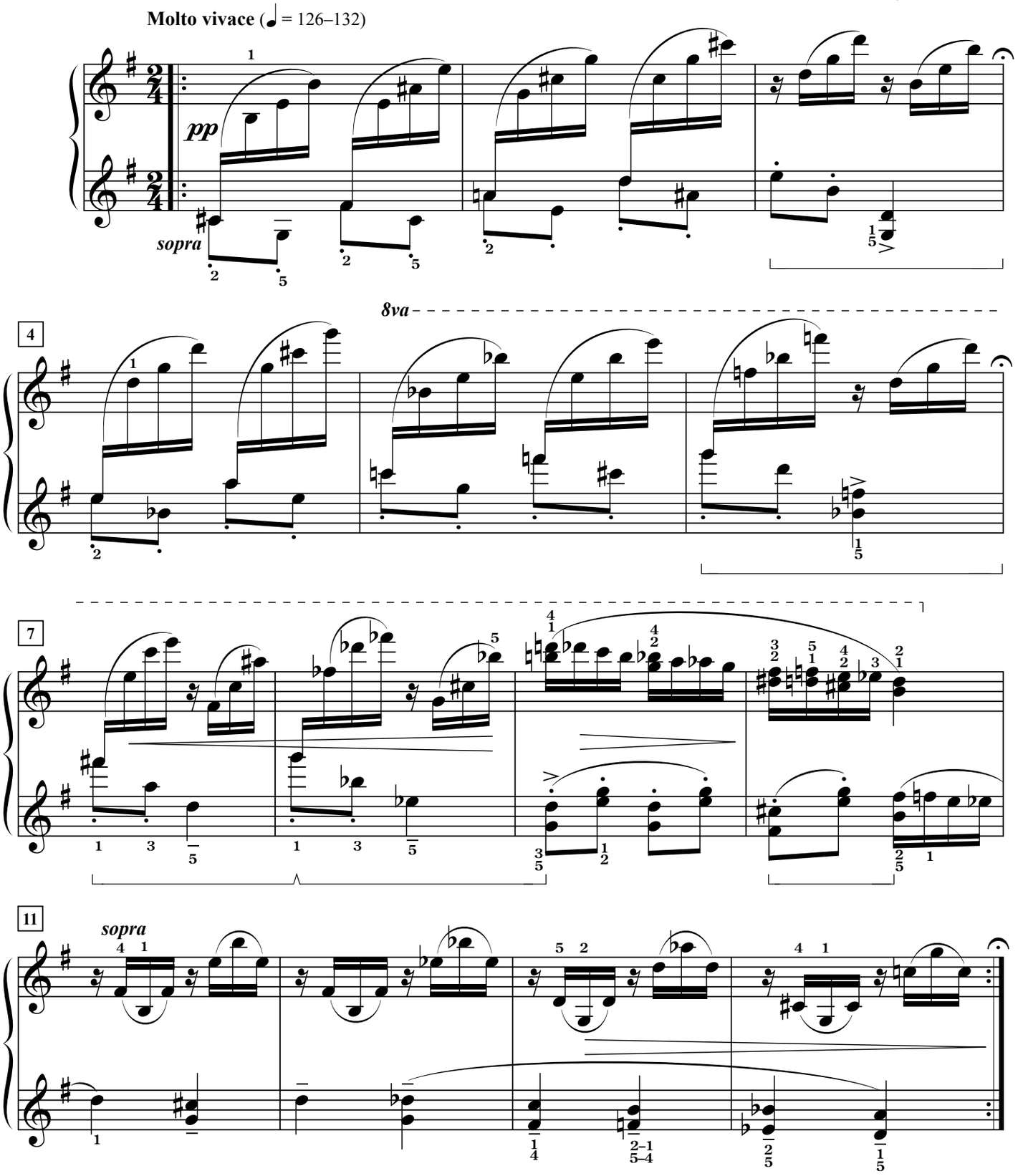
To Mrs. Edward MacDowell

Three Pieces

I. Scherzino

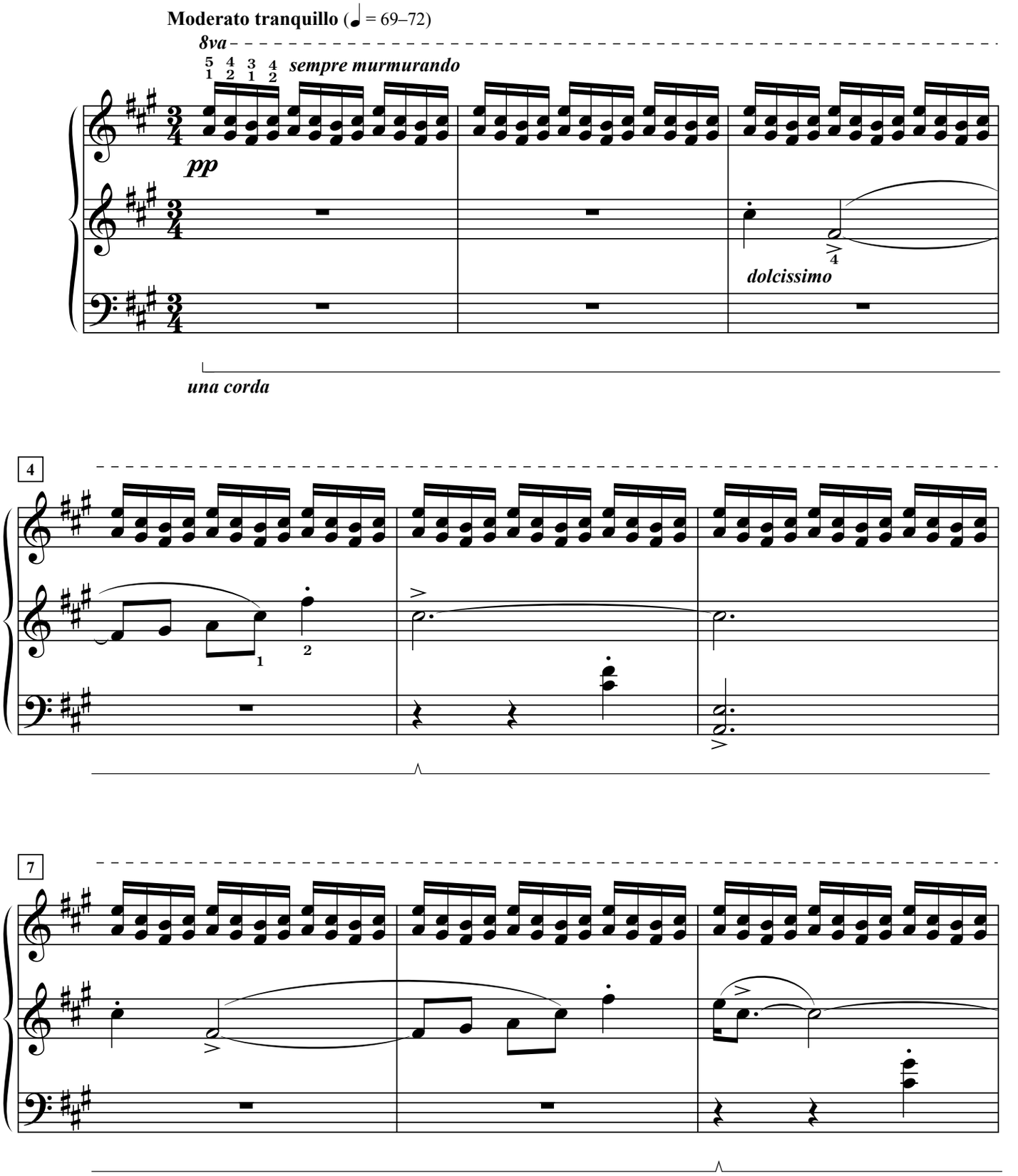
(A Peterborough Chipmunk)

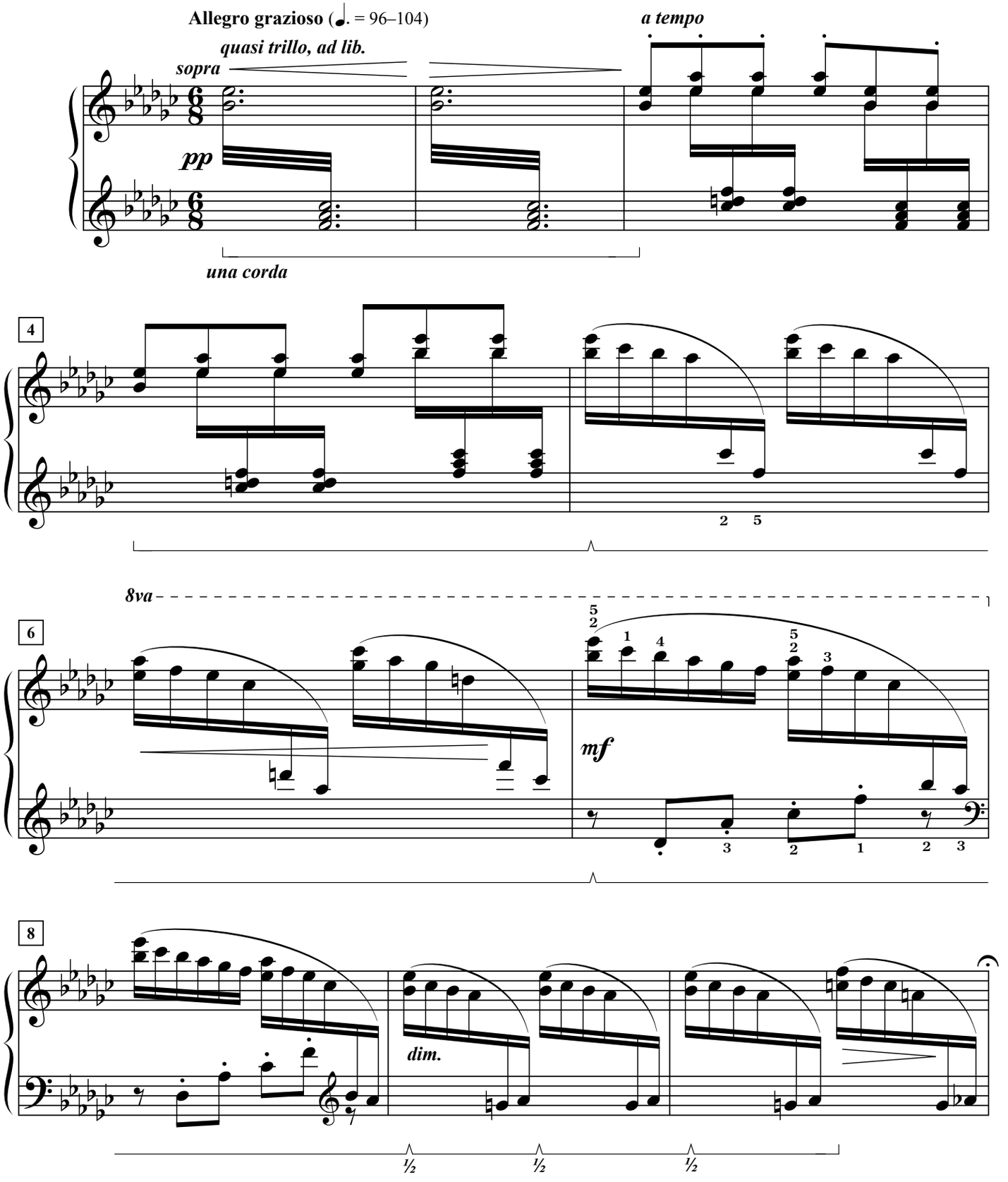
Amy M. Beach
Op. 128, No. 1



II. Young Birches

Amy M. Beach
Op. 128, No. 2



III. A Hummingbird

Amy M. Beach
Op. 128, No. 3