Teaching Ragtime

by
Carol Matz

carol matz PIANO
carolmatzpiano.com

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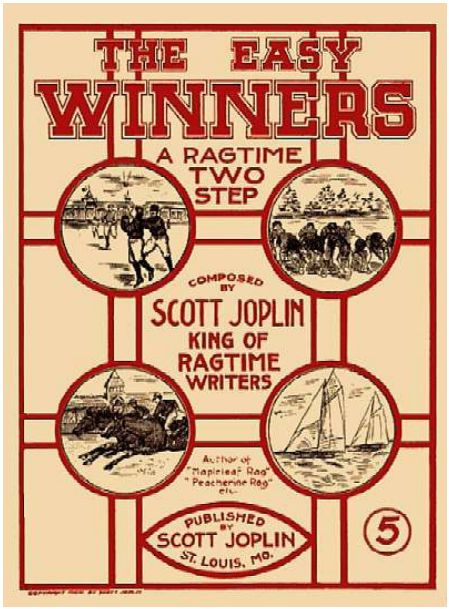
Ragtime in Context

In the 1970s, there was a major ragtime revival, partly due to the popular movie *The Sting*. This revival was great for piano teachers and students since it opened up a whole new genre to further explore. The soundtrack to *The Sting* featured many Scott Joplin pieces, including "The Entertainer," "The Easy Winners," and "Solace." The great Marvin Hamlisch created orchestrations of many of the ragtime pieces featured in the film. His versions are in a rather up-tempo, staccato style, which is an interpretation that has stuck in a lot of people's minds whenever they think of ragtime.

However, I want to emphasize that most of Joplin's rags have a tempo marking that simply says "Not fast," with no metronome mark. Ragtime developed from marches, which are usually around 120 beats per minute. (Think of Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" as an example). You might use this march tempo as a guideline, but rags can be played slower than this, especially when Joplin indicates *Slow march tempo*.

In addition to tempo, another ragtime performance issue to think about is the use of pedal, which is a bit controversial and has no "right answer," since pedal is not indicated in the score. Most rags, in their original form, contain numerous octave-to-chord jumps, and many performers use pedal to bridge this jump (pedal down on the octave, up on the chord). In any case, pedal is appropriate in slower ragtime pieces, such as Joplin's "Solace." In mid-tempo rags, it's up to the performer whether the piece should be staccato or more lyrical. Rags can be beautiful pieces when interpreted lyrically. If you're interested in hearing some wonderful interpretations, you might listen to the Joplin recordings by pianist Joshua Rifkin (especially his recordings of "The Entertainer" and "Gladiolus Rag").



"The Easy Winners" cover (1901)

The most defining characteristic of ragtime is a syncopated melody against a steady left-hand accompaniment. To help students work on common syncopations found in ragtime, I've created the "Ragtime Exercises" pages found in this PDF. These exercises help students develop *rhythmic coordination between the hands*, which is essential for ragtime performance.

In addition to the exercises, I have also included an Early Intermediate to Intermediate arrangement of the Joplin piece "The Easy Winners." Please enjoy using these free materials in your studio! (Photocopying for your own students is allowed, but please, no mass distribution or sharing online.)

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Ragtime Exercises
by Carol Matz

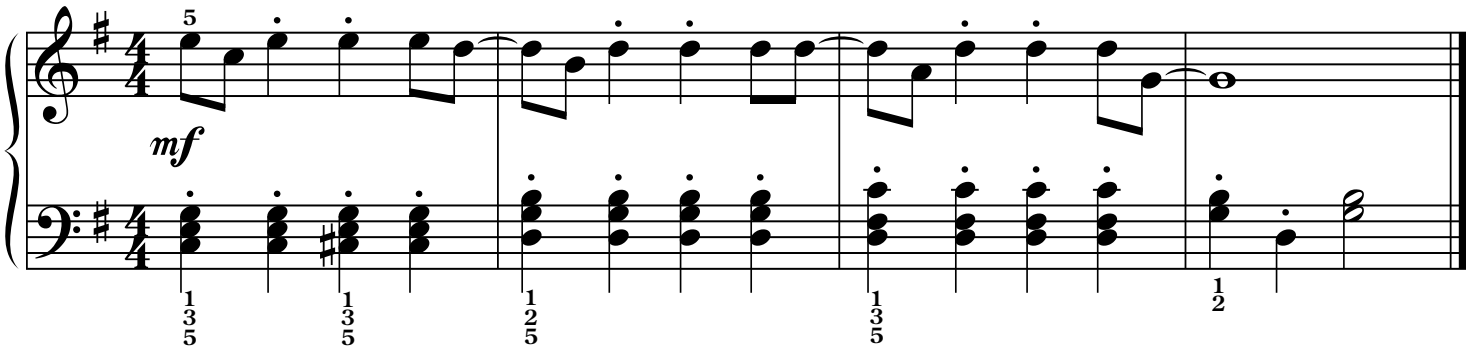
Overview
Syncopation is an accent, or stress, on an upbeat, which is normally a weak beat. It is one of the most characteristic elements of ragtime, but it can be tricky for students to feel. The following exercises help develop rhythmic coordination between the hands, using three common syncopations.

Practice Steps
Be sure that students practice the following exercises *slowly*, eventually building to a moderate tempo. Ragtime should not be played quickly.

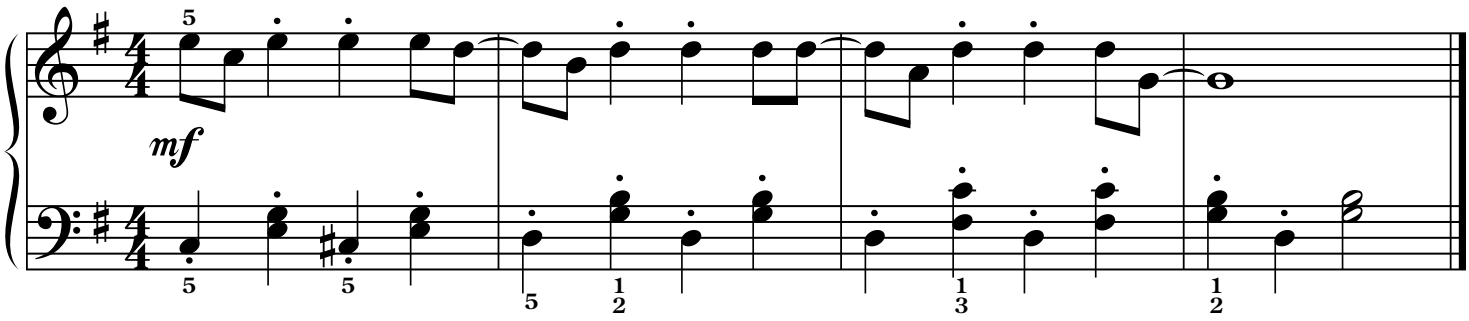
1. For each exercise, have the student practice *hands separately* first.
2. Before putting the hands together, have the student play the right-hand melody while the left hand taps quarter-note beats on his or her lap.
3. Have the student practice both variations of each exercise. The first variation uses *blocked chords* in the LH. The second variation uses *broken chords*.

Exercise 1 Eighth notes tied between measures

Variation 1 (LH blocked chords)



Variation 2 (LH broken chords)



(Syncopation exercises based on Scott Joplin's *School of Ragtime*.)

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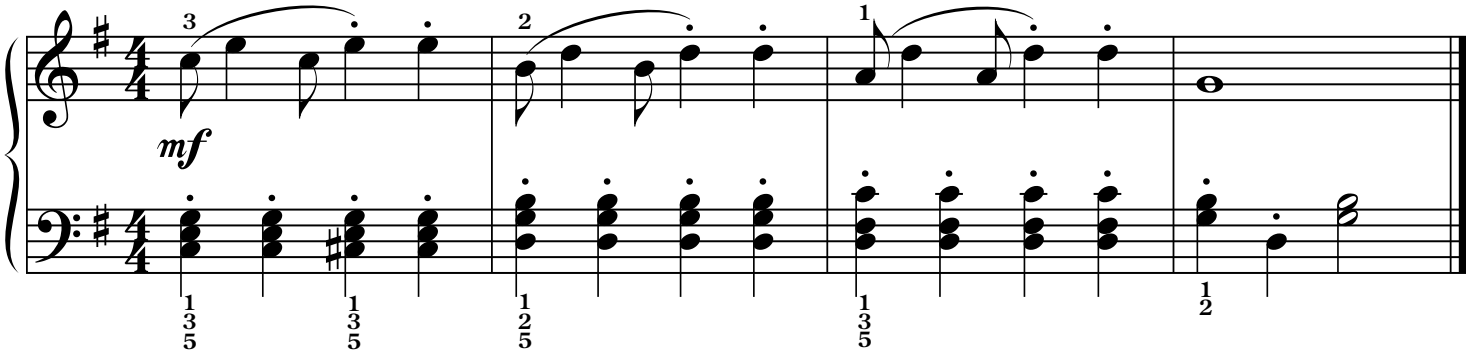
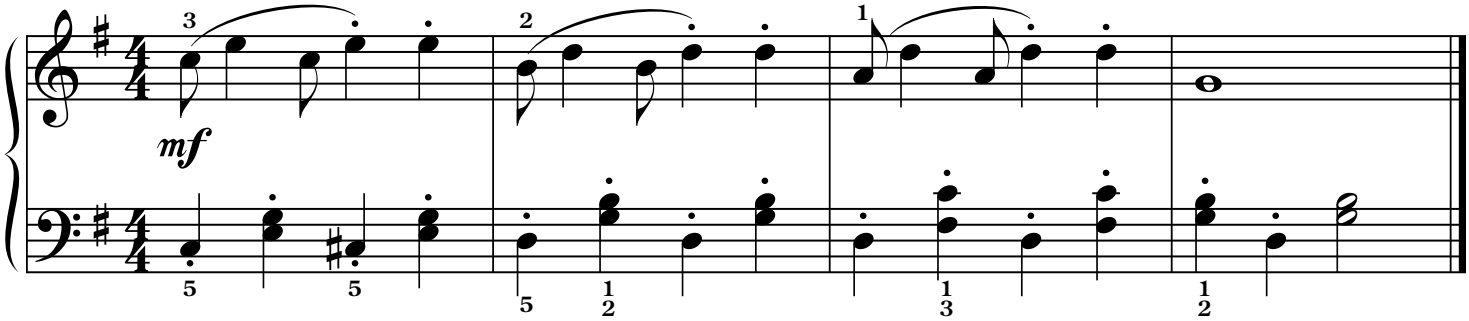
Exercise 2 Quarter note on the upbeat

Variation 1 (LH blocked chords)

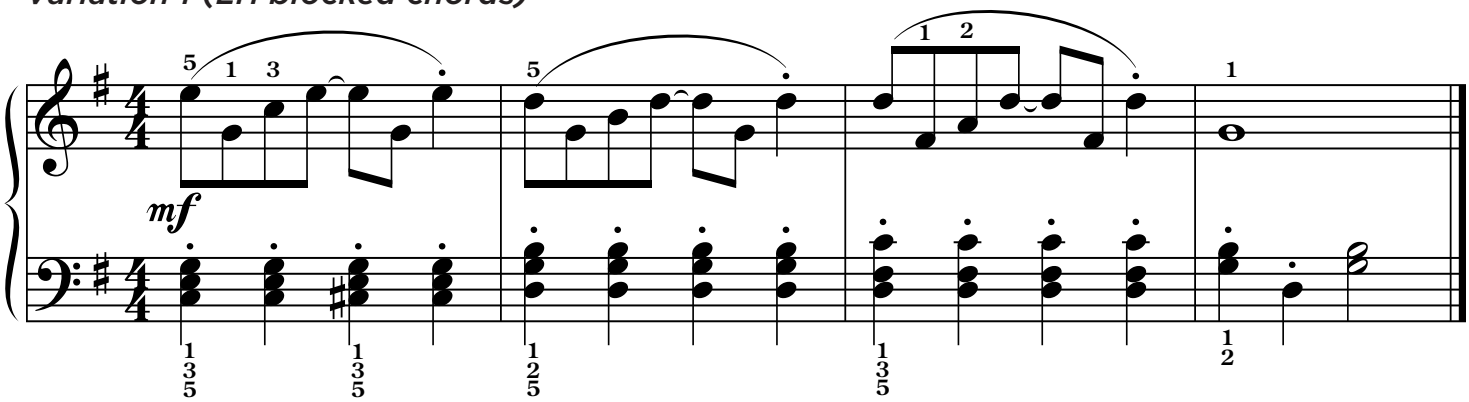


Variation 2 (LH broken chords)

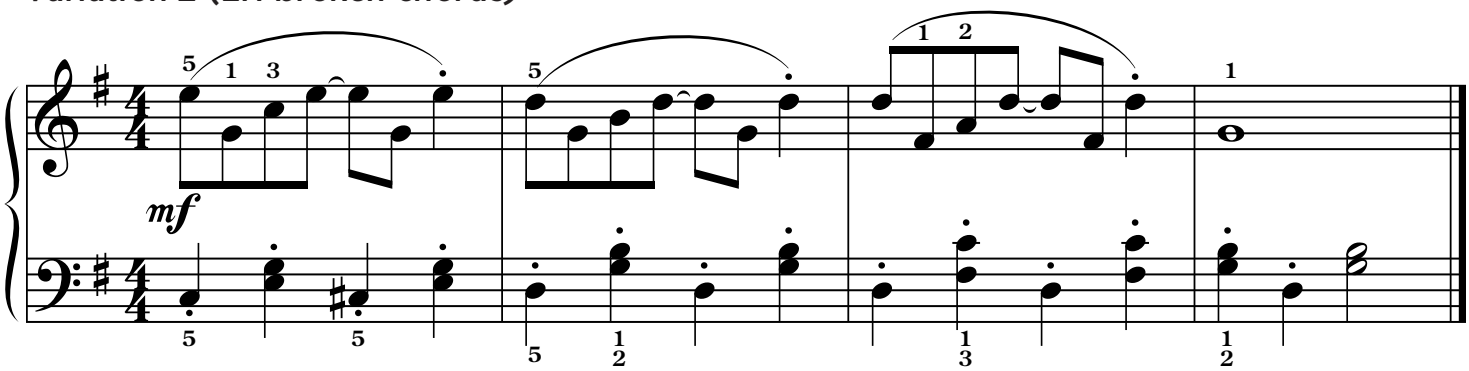


Exercise 3 Eighth notes tied between beats 2 and 3

Variation 1 (LH blocked chords)



Variation 2 (LH broken chords)



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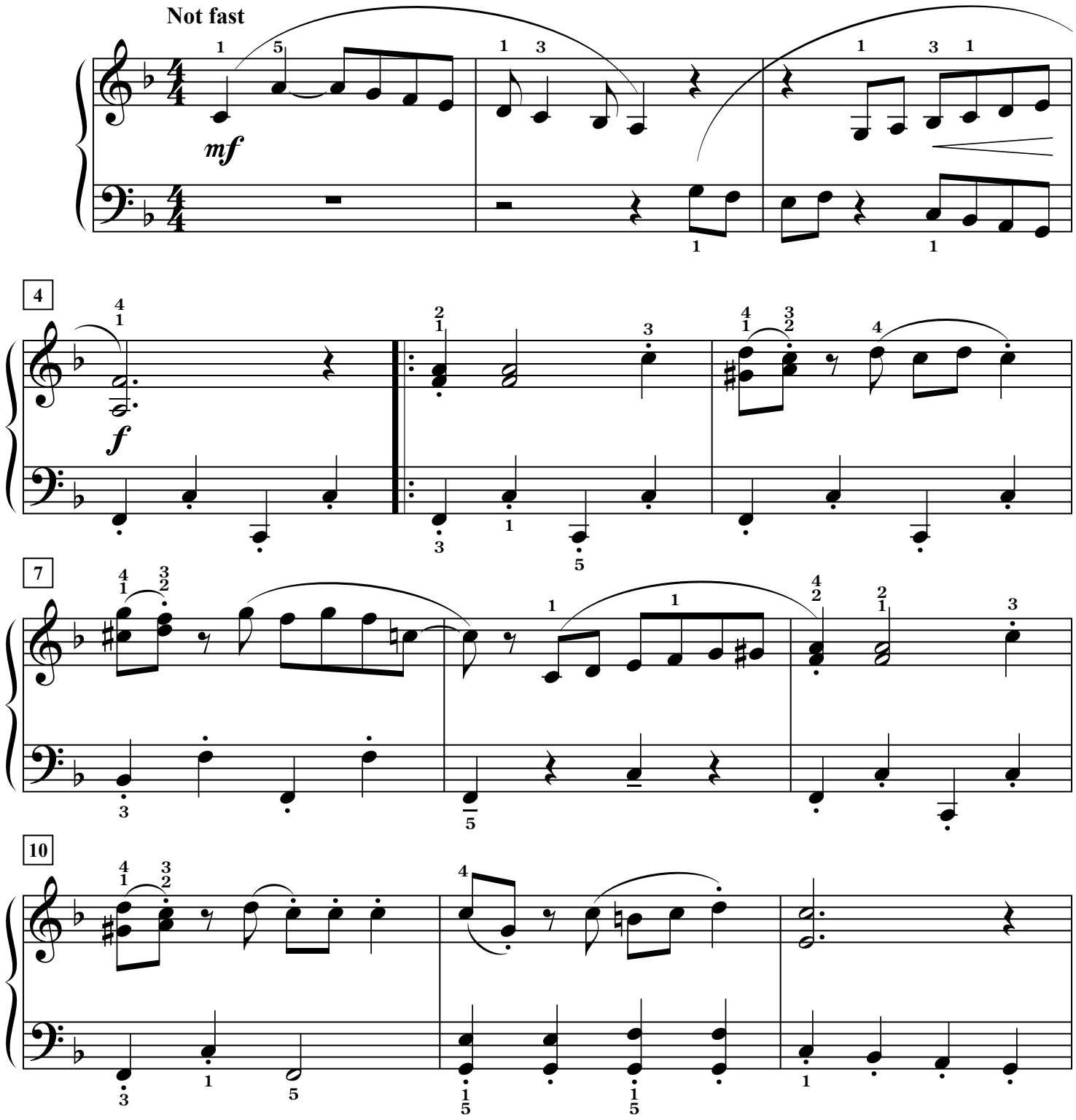
The Easy Winners
(A Ragtime Two Step)

Scott Joplin
Arranged by Carol Matz



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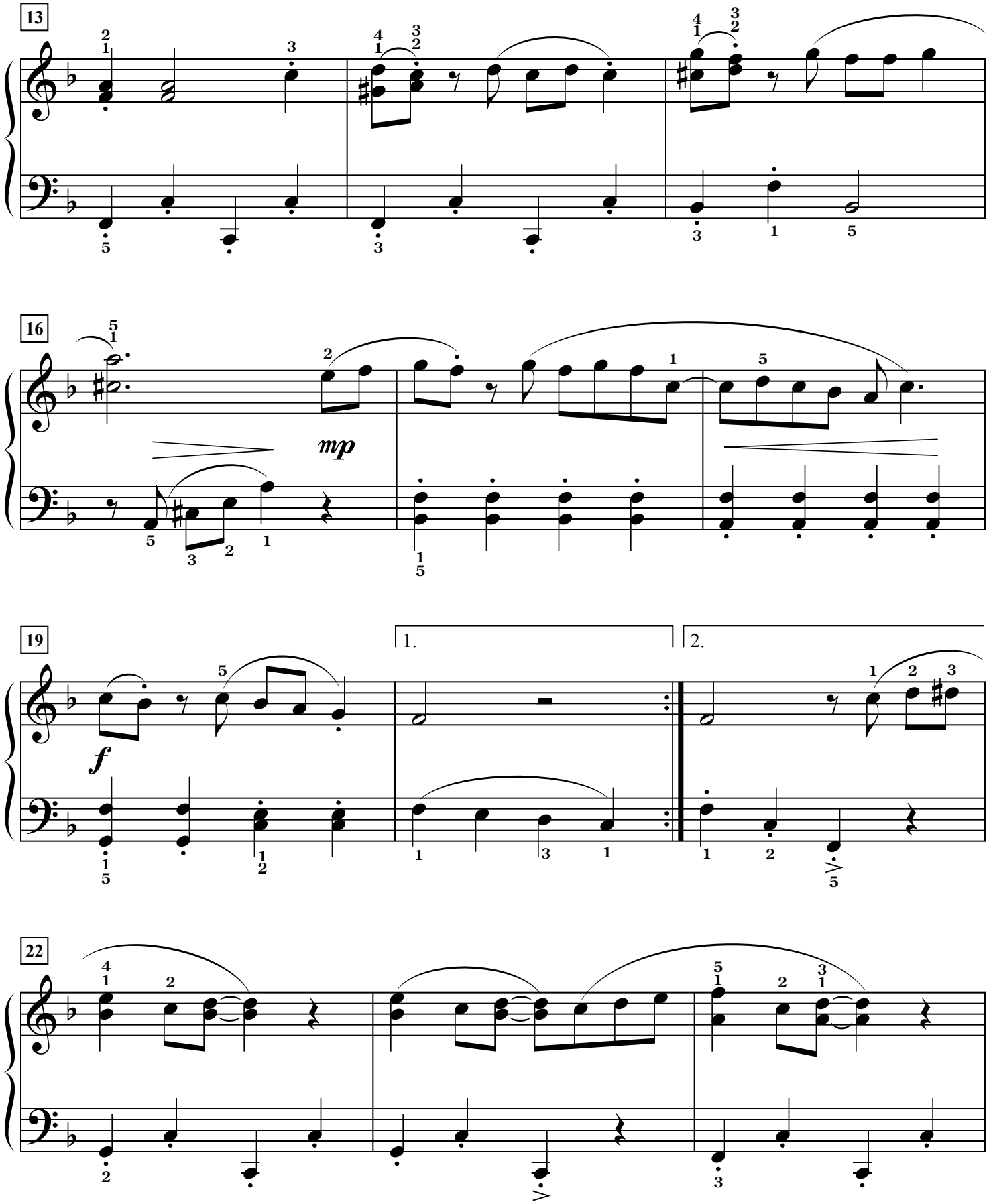
The Easy Winners Page 2



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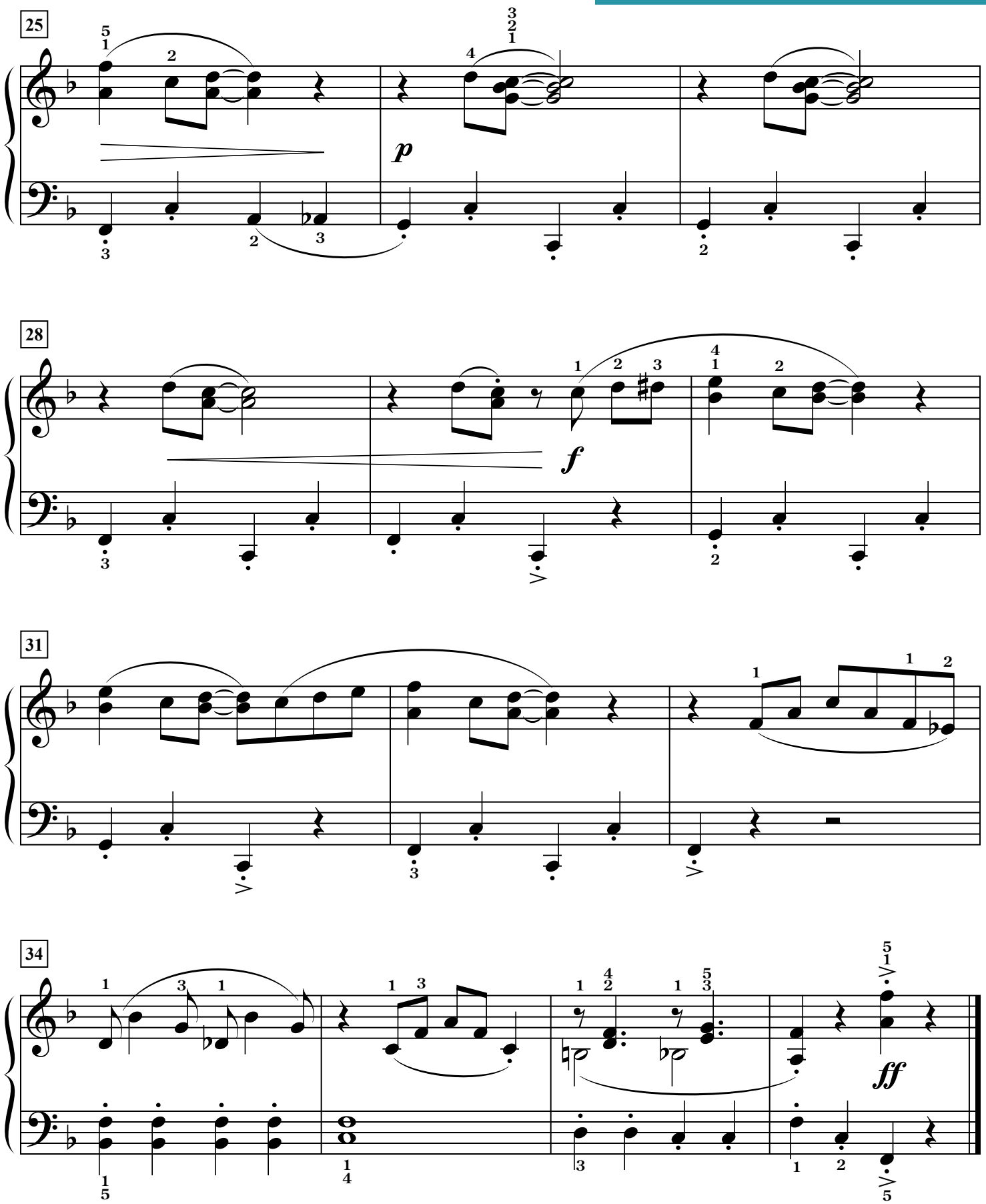

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