# COMPOSING WITH YOUR STUDENTS

*DR. ROB DEEMER, SUNY FREDONIA*

## Introduction

Brief introduction and history (or "How to go from music education undergrad and jazz arranger to concert composer in a few not-so-easy steps!")

## Issues for Teachers

- **Issue #1:** There is a growing need for composition instruction at the pre-college levels, both from the student body (spurred on by the easy access to tools through technology) and by administrators (soon to be spurred on by the new NCCAS Music Standards).
- **Issue #2:** Teachers often have little exposure to theory pedagogy – and even less exposure to composition pedagogy – in their undergraduate and graduate training.
- **Issue #3:** Teachers understand the basics of theory, but are often almost as inexperienced in *composing* as their students, much less in teaching composition.
- **Issue #4:** Teachers will be less likely to compose or teach composition because of this inexperience, primarily due to the perceived risk/threat of "doing it wrong".

## Solutions for Teachers

- **Solution #1:** Teachers can avoid the trap of "going it alone" by creating support groups of like-minded colleagues as well as experienced composers.
- **Solution #2:** Begin with low-impact composition projects that stem from experiences that most teachers may already have (arranging) or projects that have stringent limitations on most if not all of the creative parameters (melodic material, form, harmonic content, style, tempo, meter, etc.).
- **Solution #3:** Gain experience in composing by *composing;* take part in composition projects that are assigned to students either on an individual basis or in groups.
- **Solution #4:** Create a healthy, creative environment by allowing students to critique the teacher's composition while the teacher critiques the student's composition. While this may seem counter-intuitive at first, the student will learn what to look for (after modeling off of the teacher's critiques) on the teacher's compositions and subsequently begin to incorporate those critiques into their own works. Not only should the student gain confidence by this leveling of the student-teacher relationship, but with care and thoughtful critiquing techniques, both teacher and student should improve as composers.

## What do we start with when arranging? Melodic Material/Pre-existing Music (Find a tune!)

Simplicity is a good thing…the simpler the tune, the easier the arrangement.
Musical parameters of the pre-existing melody:

- Melodic Shape (global)
- Motivic Shapes (local)
- Formal Structure
- Harmonic Language
- Meter
- Tempo
- Style Characteristics (ex. Both rhythmic figurations and rhythmic interpretations)
- Intangibles (what makes it "catchy" or memorable?)

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**Example #1: Christmas Carol *(Veni, Veni Emmanuel)***

- Melodic Shape (undulating line vs. repeated pitches)
- Motivic Shapes (triads, m.2-3, m. 5-6)
- Formal Structure (uneven 3-measure phrases, ABCADB structure)
- Harmonic Language (modal – Aeolian, emphasis on lowered 7th)
- Meter (simple duple/quadruple with possibilities of metric variation)
- Tempo (slow to medium – allows for flexibility)
- Style Characteristics (chant-like, lyrical)
- Intangibles (repeated pitches, triumphant "peak")

**Basic Arranging Strategies**

What to add?
What to change?

- Melodic material & shape should stay recognizable
- Texture (how many ideas at once?)
- Form (basic formal structure - start with one or two statements of the tune)
- Harmonic Voicings/Flavor (try thinking vertically - scales - first)
- Rhythmic Motives (repetition is a good, good, good, good thing…)
- Meter & Tempo (best to choose one of each and stick with 'em…simple)

**Example #2 (Basic Arrangement)**

- Quartet Rendition of *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, homophonic and heterophonic textures.

**More Arranging Strategies**

- Historical/Cultural Context (do you go with or against what is expected?)
- Textual Concepts (what can the lyrics of a song suggest to the arranger?)
- Rhythmic Concepts (how far can you push rhythmic interest and still keep the tune clear?)
- Form (creating introductions, transitions, codas, contrasting sections is basically "composing", or at least planting the seeds of composition)
- Harmonic Substitution/Voicings (examples include juxtaposing more than one scale a the same time and adding "color" notes to standard harmonies)
- Counterpoint (creating counterpoint to pre-existing melodies is usually how arrangers "discover" composing)

**Example #3 (Advanced Arrangement)**

- Quartet setting of *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, much more contrapuntal and complex in texture.

**Taking the first steps from Arranging to Composing**

- Arrangements are tied to their melodic content; compositions can be free to explore abstract ideas as well as musical content.
- Composing can be much more scary – you don't have the "safety net" of the tune.
- Remember, simplicity still holds true for composing as well as arranging – if you start with simple material, the more options you will allow yourself to investigate.
- If you feel the need for new material, try to find the seeds of it in the material you've already written down – even the most innocuous fragment may spawn a host of new ideas.

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- There are really only three decisions to make while composing – repeat what you've written, vary what you've written, or write something new and contrasting. Repeating material in slightly different ways is very much allowed – and quite similar to arranging.
- Don't worry about whether or not it's good or not – write it down and you can always change it later!

**Example #4 (Basic Composition)**

- Simple composition based on *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* for clarinet quartet.

**Building a composition with five 1-measure motives**

- Select 3-5 diatonic pitches that create an interesting melodic shape.
- Using various rhythmic durations and metric placements, create 12-15 1-measure motives using just those pitches. (Use common time for starting out - that can always be adjusted later on.)
- Do that four more times (you'll have 60-75 motives to work with).
- Inexperienced composers will not instinctively add rests; that will need to be suggested by the instructor.
- The "character" of each motive should vary; some may want to lead into the following bar because of a pick-up note, while others may settle into a cadence on a strong beat.

**Example #5 (Sample Assignment)**

- First assignment from MUS 129 Beginning Composition; create a 36-measure solo work for viola, working within the guidelines in the assignment.

**Critiquing Each Other's Works**

- Stick to objective criticisms at first (notation, instrumentation, etc.) and as the comfort and trust level rises, subjective suggestions may be offered.
- Don't leave it open-ended; explain what the critiquing parameters are at the outset and don't be afraid to enforce critiquing boundaries when necessary.
- Model a "safe-zone" approach where criticism is constructive; questions are better than statements and suggestions are better than demands.
- When the student asks you why you chose to write your music the way you did, be careful to strike a balance between explanation and personal taste; you want to demonstrate that what you've created is one option, but the only option.
- Once mutual respect and collaborative dialogue set in, you're on your way.

**Questions, anyone?**

**If you do have any questions in the future, feel free to contact me at deemer@fredonia.edu!**

*2013 NAfME National In-Service Conference*

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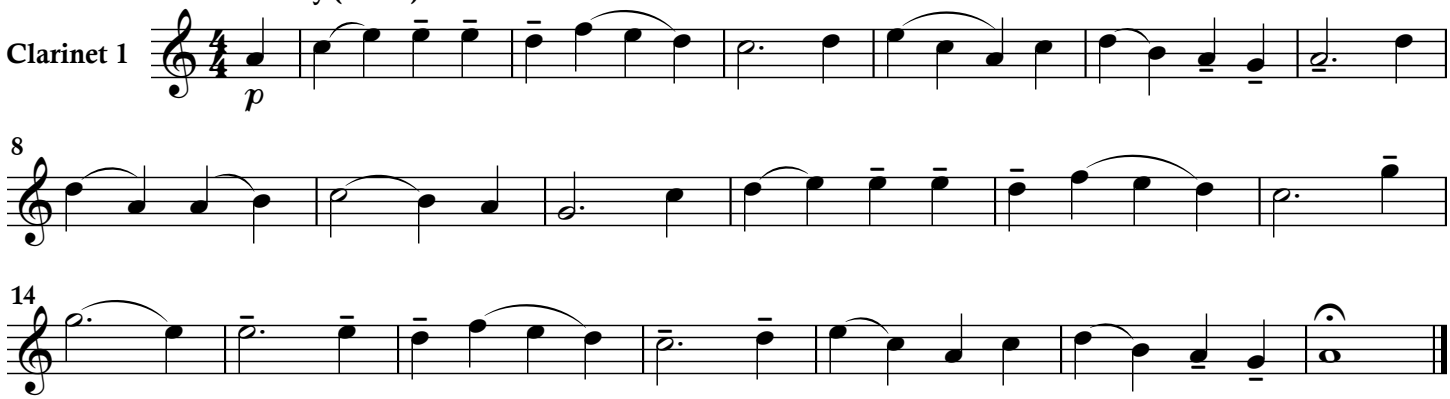
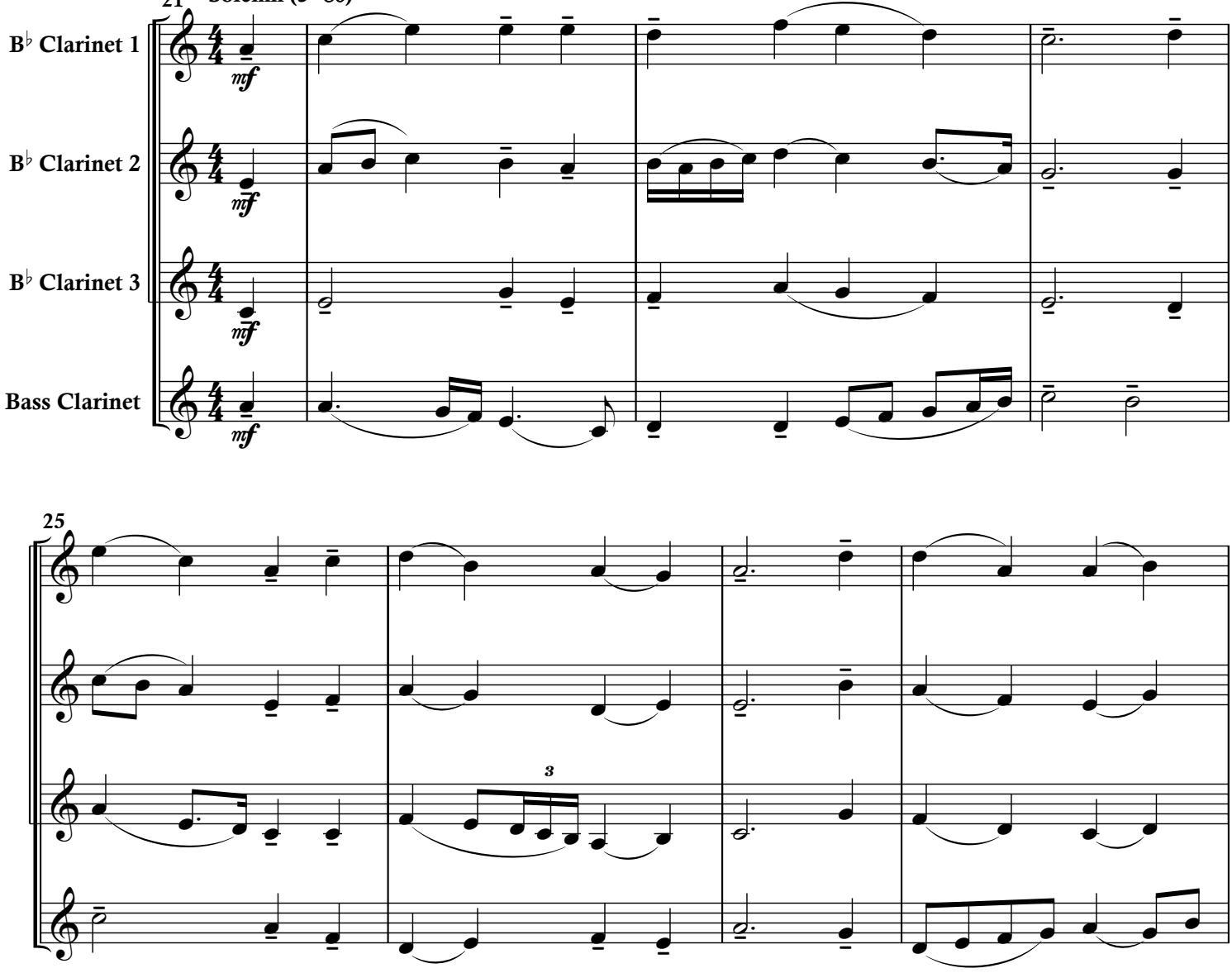
**ROB DEEMER**
*(b. 1970)*

**Example #1: Pre-existing Melody (*Veni, Veni Emmanuel*)**
**Smoothly (♩=100)**




**Example #2: Basic Arrangement**
**Solemn (♩=80)**

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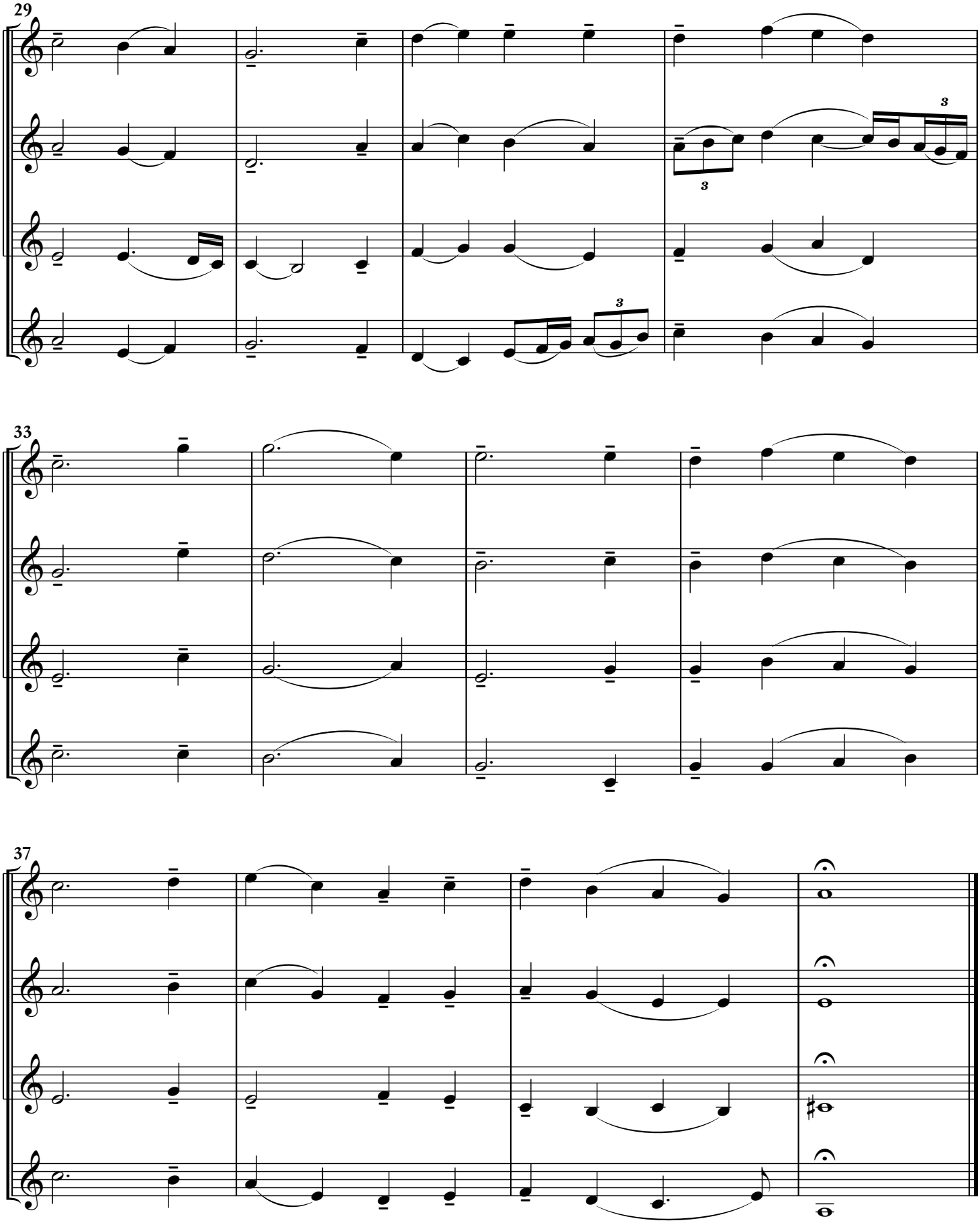
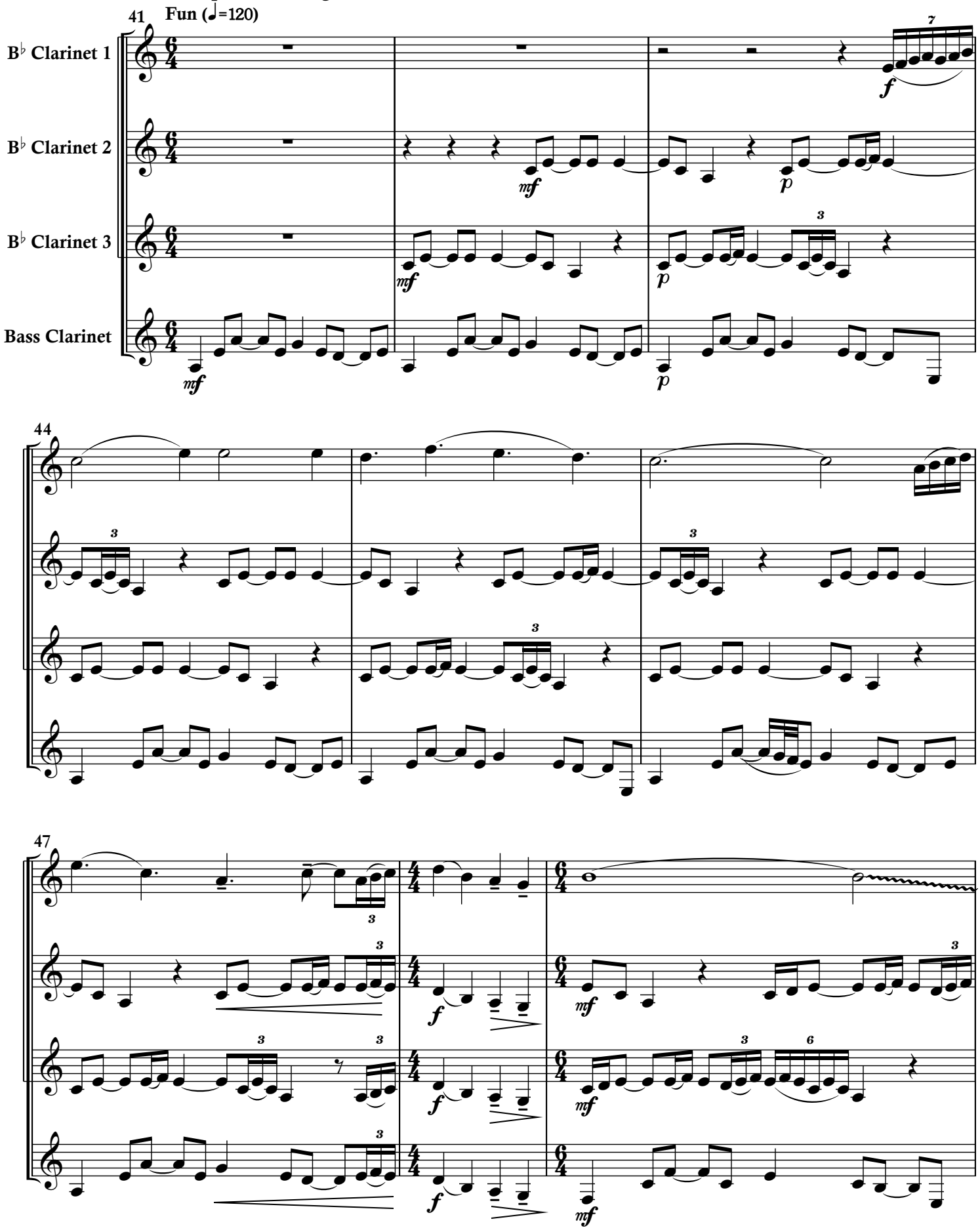


**Example #3: Arrangement with more liberties**

**Fun (♩=120)**



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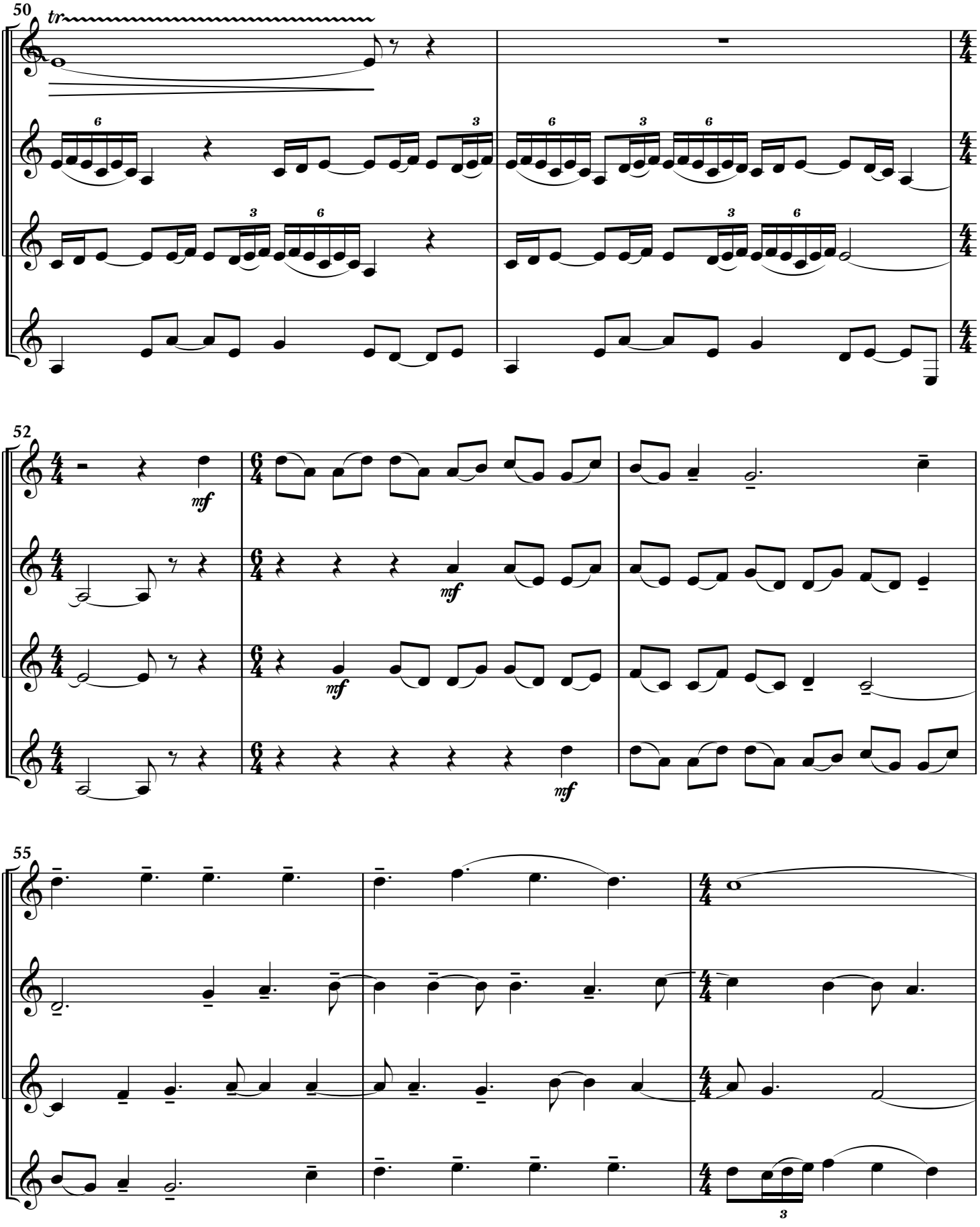

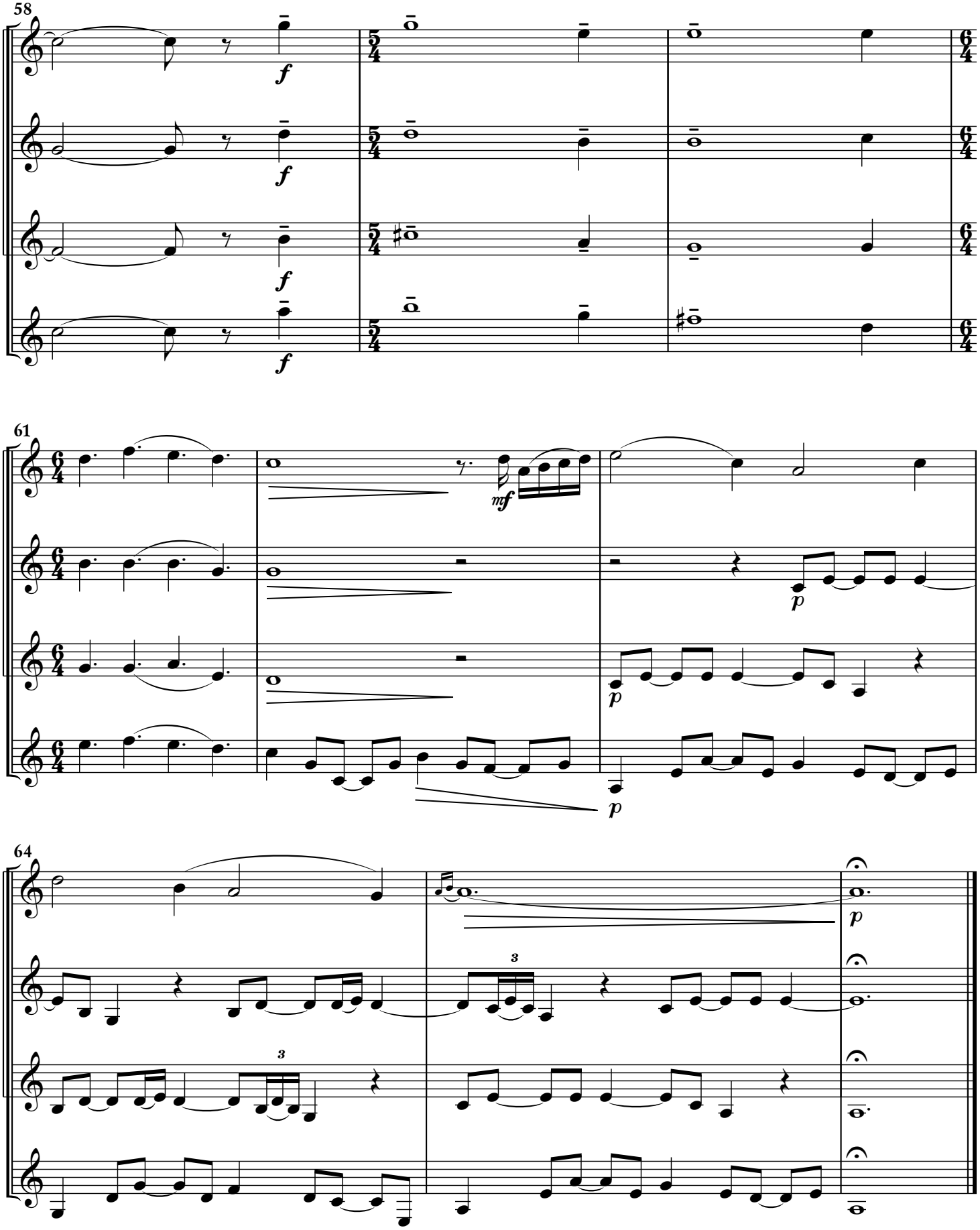
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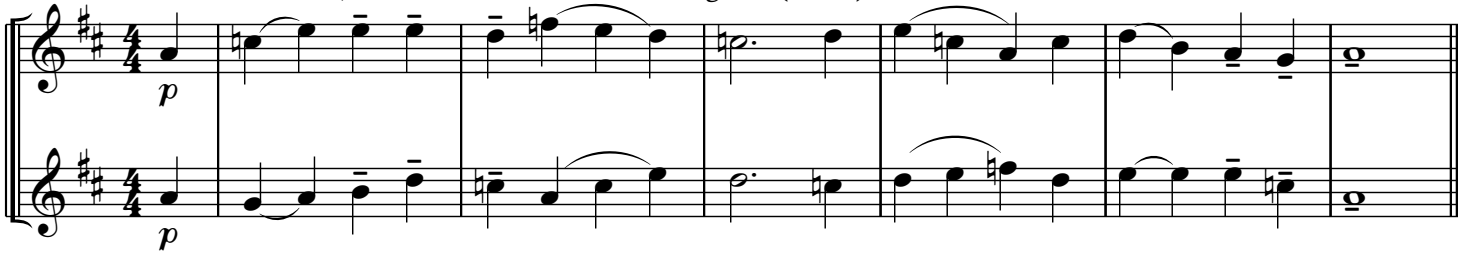
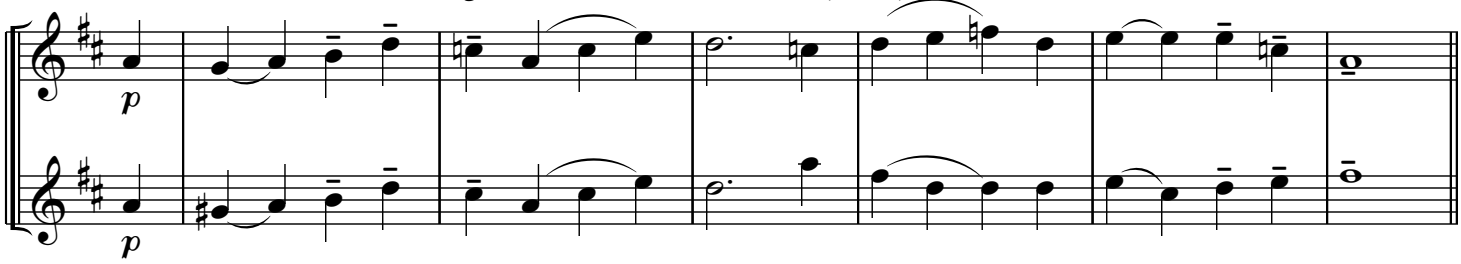
**The Evolution of Melodic Material from Pre-existing Music**

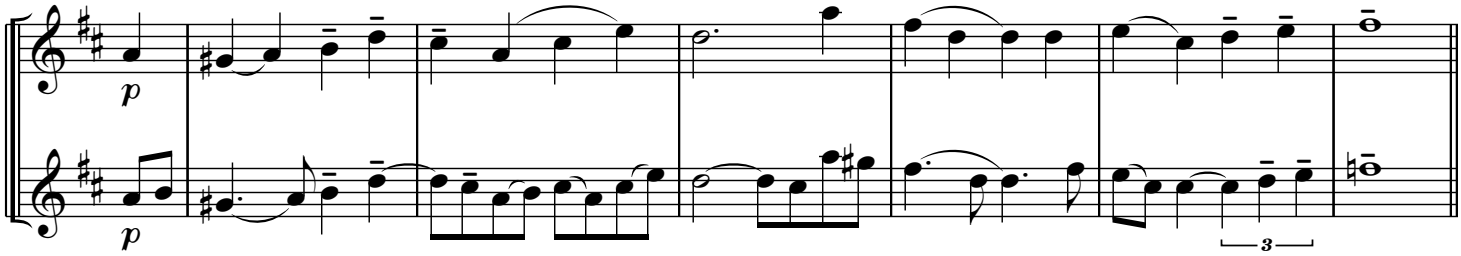
Phrase from "Veni, Veni Emmanuel" and its retrograde (Var. 1)



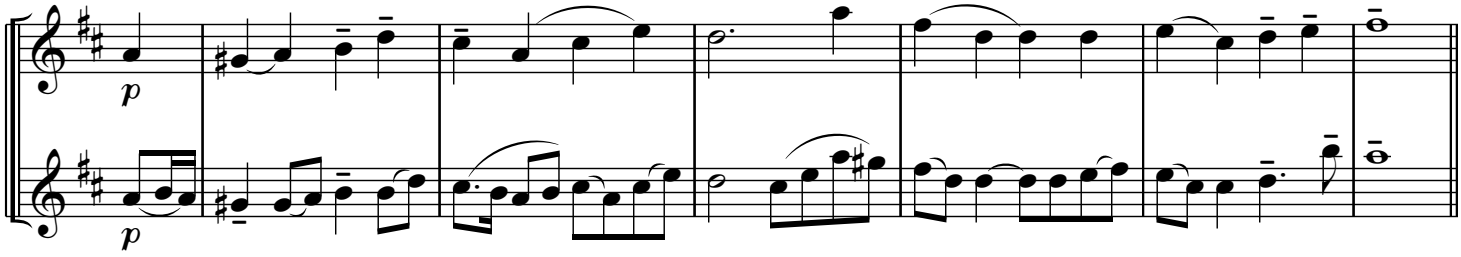
Var. 1 with modal shift throughout and 2nd 3 bars inverted (Var. 2)



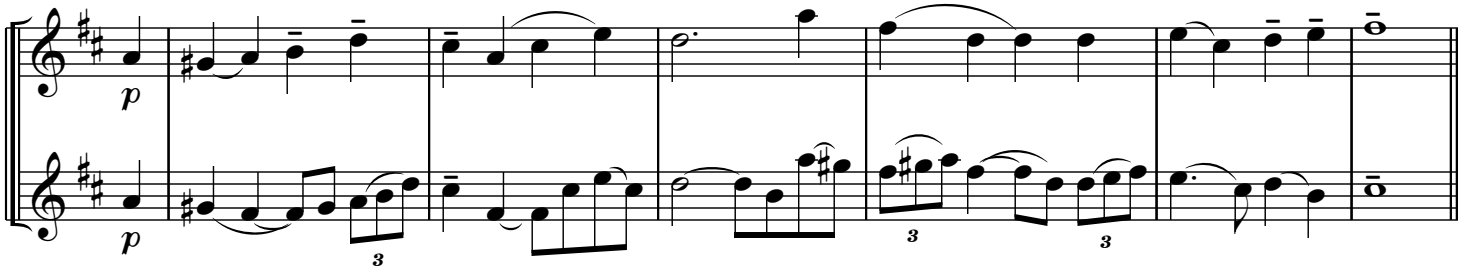
Var. 2 with first attempt at development (Var. 2a)




Var. 2 with second attempt at development (Var. 2b)

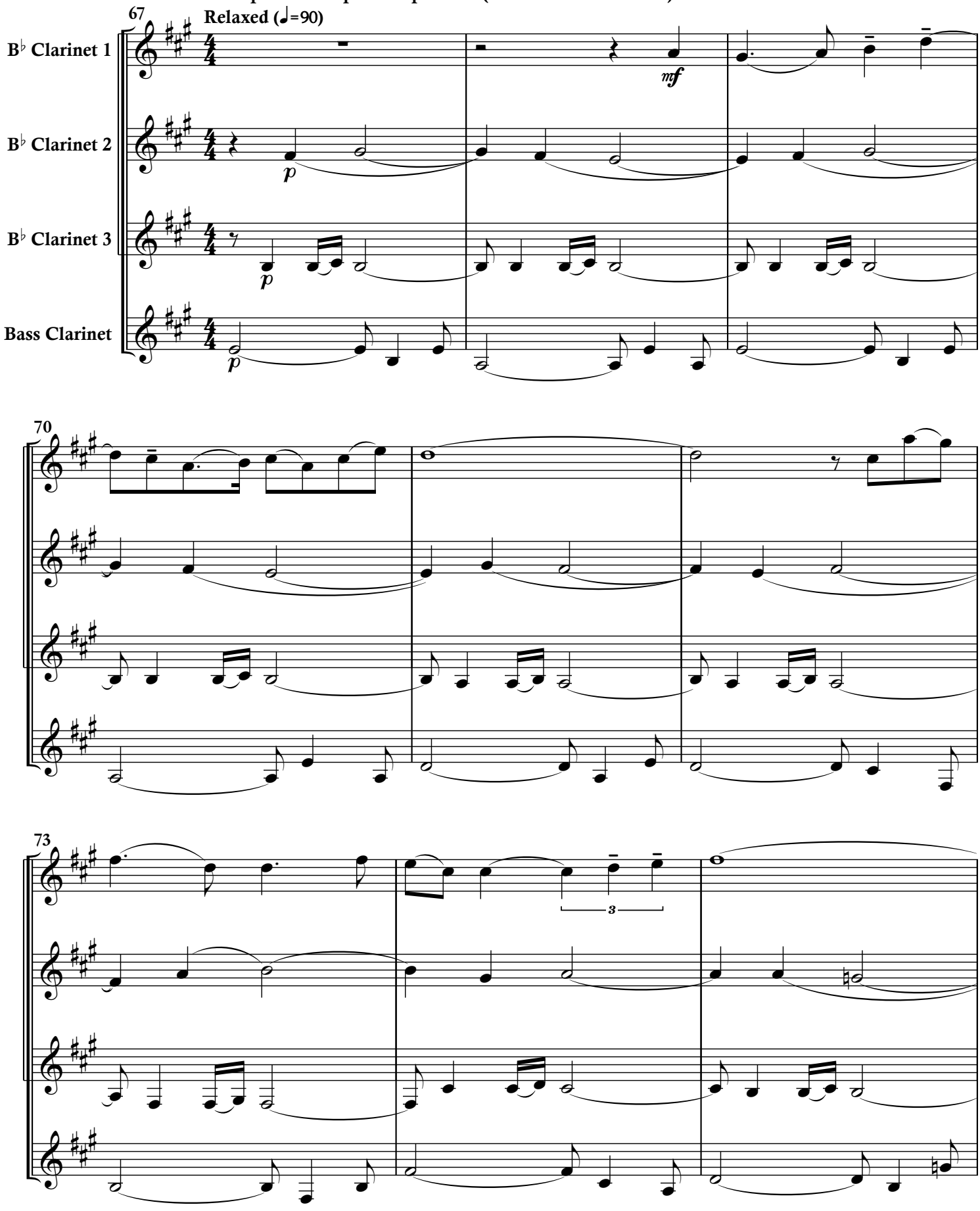


Var. 2 with third attempt at development (Var. 2c)



**Example #4: Simple Composition (uses both Var. 2a & 2b)**

**Relaxed (♩=90)**



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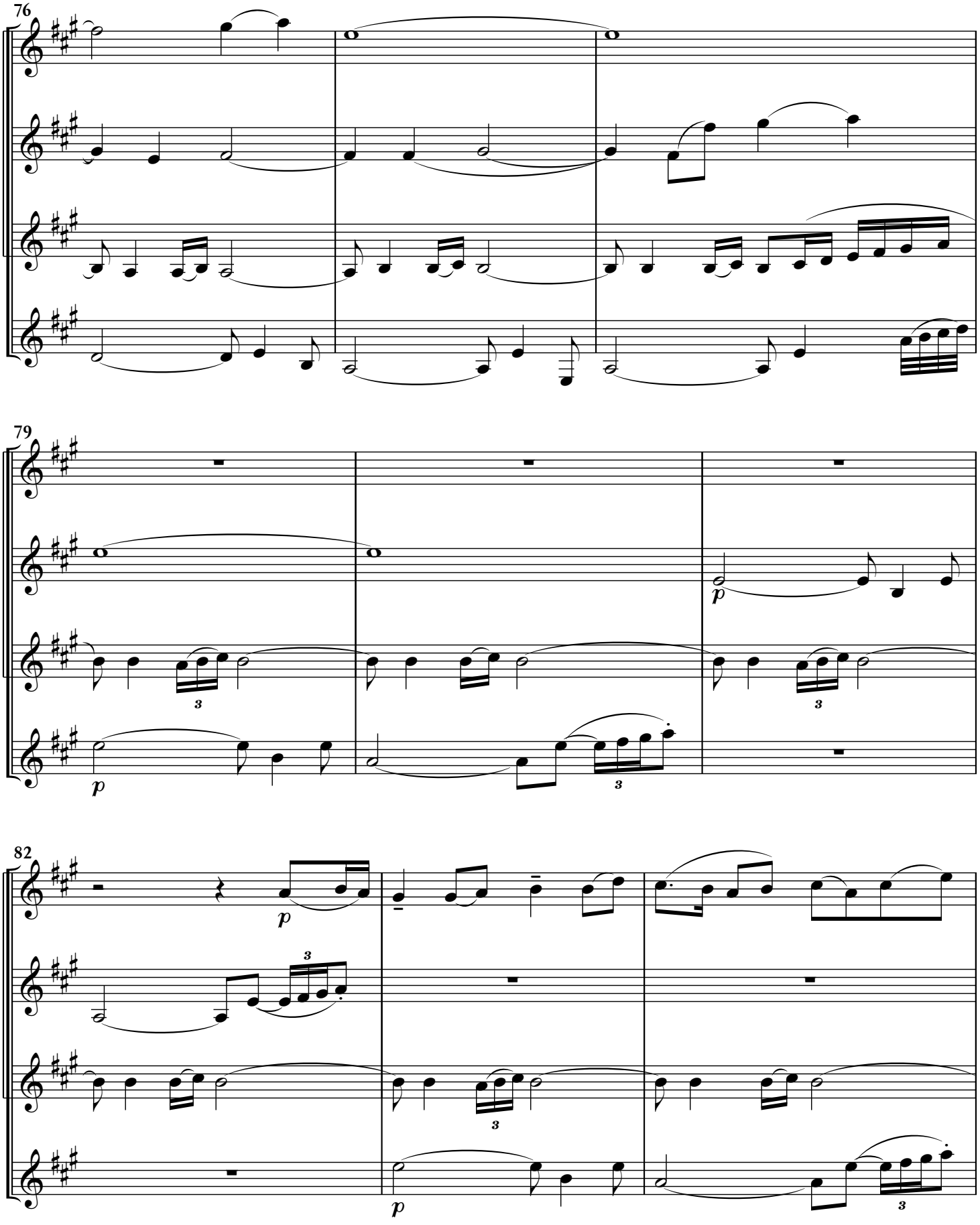

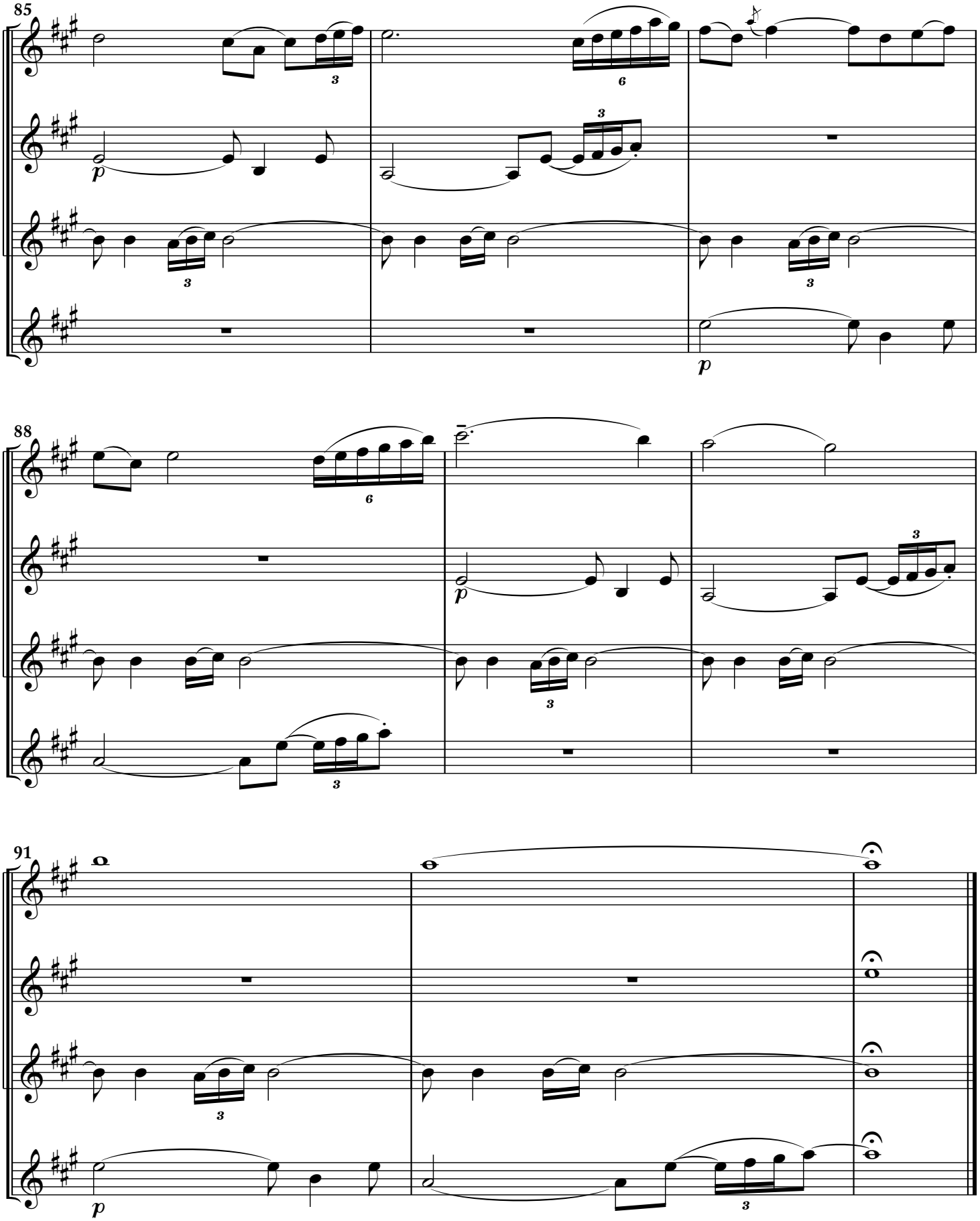
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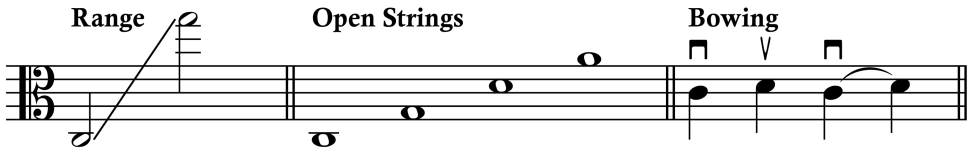
# BEGINNING COMPOSITION FALL 2013 PROJECTS

Project #1: Solo Viola
Tempo: Slow (±=60-76)
Length: 36 measures
Meter: Either 4/4, 5/4 or a combination of both
Range: C3-G5
Style: Lyrical, song-like
Form: AA'BA'' with extension:
[A=1121'32'1''1 (*motives*), B=434'3534_(*motives*)]

In other words, this is what your entire piece should look like from a motivic standpoint:
**A:** 1|1|2|1'|3|2'|1''|1|
**A':** 1|1|2|1'|3|2'|1''|1|
**B:** 4|3|4'|2|5|3'|4|_| (last bar can be held over from previous bar)
**A'':** 1|1|2|1'|3|2'|1''|1|+ 4 bars of your choosing as an extension.

Harmony: Pick two key areas and two related scales/modes
A=1st Key Area, 1st Scale
A'=2nd Key Area, 1st Scale
B=2nd Key Area, 1st Scale
A''=1st Key Area, 2nd Scale

Some Viola Basics: