Songs Without Words for Ralph Vaughan Williams

Vol. I

Garreth Brooke

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Introduction: folk music, Vaughan Williams, and us

In the admittedly unlikely event that he were alive today, Ralph Vaughan Williams would reach his 150th birthday on the 12th October 2022: a grand old age for a grand old man, and a good reason to celebrate.

Some people are a bit sniffy about RVW, dismissing his music as sentimental. This judgement—though not totally without justification—is often no more than a sign that the person expressing it hasn't really listened widely enough or taken the time to appreciate his skill. He is capable of enormous power and profoundly beautiful expression. He has a great sense of how to build and release structural tension that can cause the more emotionally-aware audience members to reach for the tissues. One reviewer aptly described him as "a genius driven by emotion".

Vaughan Williams believed that composers had an important role in society; their job was to make music accessible to all. He did this in many ways, including conducting and composing music for amateur orchestras and choirs, editing *The English Hymnal*, a book that would be found in churches all over England, founding and running musical festivals and—most relevantly for this book—traveling around England and transcribing folk songs as sung by locals.

Folk song "collecting", as it was known, is a fundamentally democratic process: the transcriber might hear variants of same song sung in several different ways by several different people over the course of their travels, and would record them all. Folk music, in contrast to the classical music with which Vaughan Williams spent most of his time, was a flexible, constantly evolving thing. There can be no one final version of a folk song, in the way that there can be a final or "best" version of a classical composition (although even that is contentious!)

Folk music evolves, it is organic. Best of all, that means we can engage in that process, we can make our own versions, adapt old melodies and make them our own. Vaughan Williams frequently did that himself, when arranging, for example, 'Dives and Lazarus' into the glorious suite for orchestra and harp that bears its name. That's a tradition that I've continued here, and I've created space for you to do the same, whether that be by adding improvisations or your own melodies to my scores, or by following my guidelines to create your own arrangement one of these wonderful melodies.

This project would not have been possible without the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, a massive online archive of Vaughan Williams' work, including his folk song collections and those of many others. You can find the link to the original transcriptions in the song descriptions. Another key inspiration was Caroline Davison's Substack, "Vaughan Williams's Journey into Folk". I encourage you to check out both of these wonderful resources.

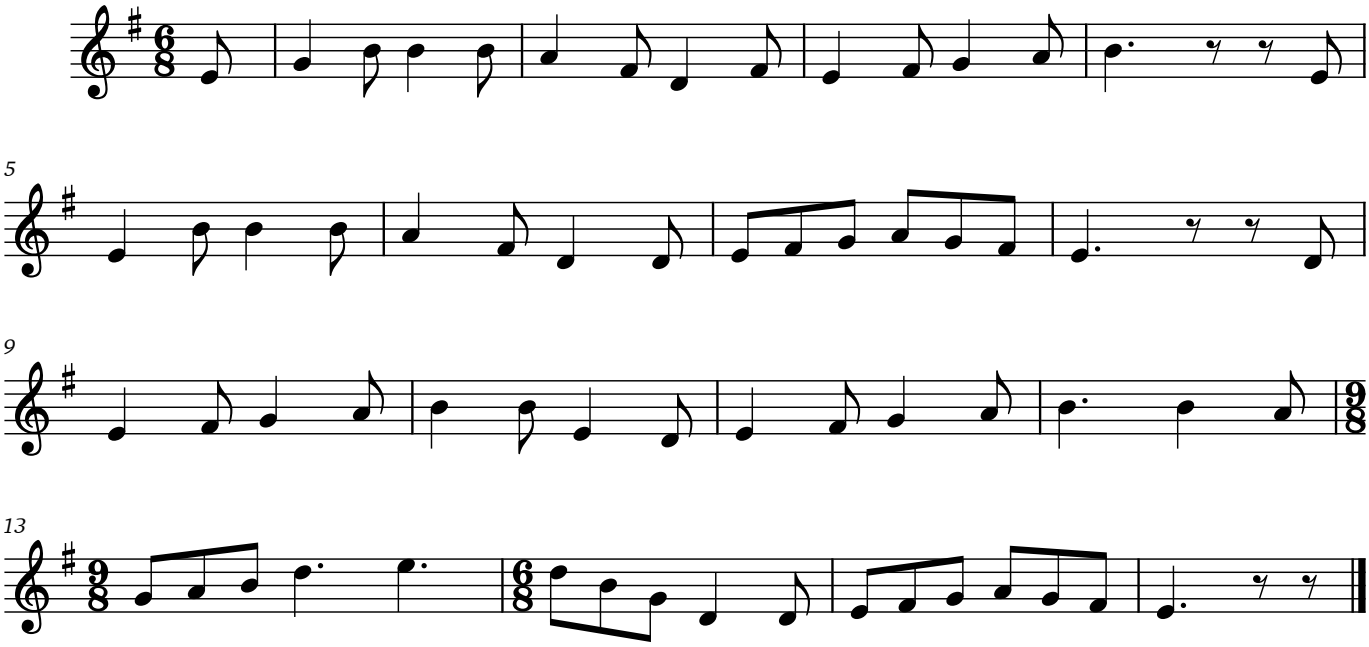
I hope you enjoy this book as much as I've enjoyed creating it. Happy birthday RWV!

Garreth Brooke, Frankfurt, Germany, September 2022.

When I Was Young (Broken Down Gentleman)

Transcribed by Ralph Vaughan Williams on 1st September 1907 in Hadleigh, Suffolk

Traditional English



Intermediate (Grade 4) – E Aeolian – 6/8

About the tune
Vaughan Williams collected this piece from a Mr Warner in Hadleigh, Suffolk, on the 1st September 1904. He included lyrics but his handwriting is unfortunately very difficult to read. Here's what I can make out:

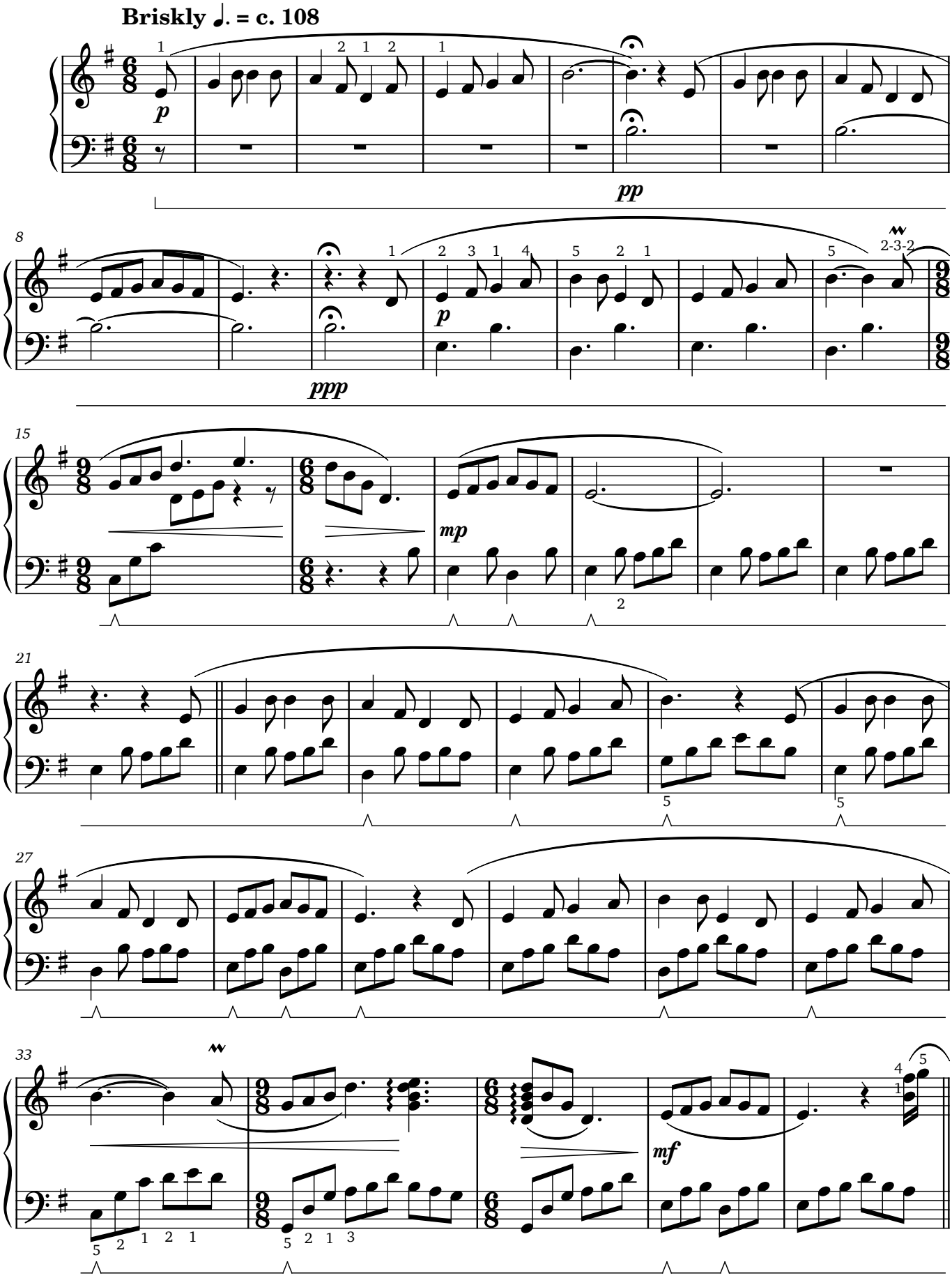
> *When I was young and in my prime, just twenty-four years old*
> *I spent my time in ?vanity?……*

About the arrangement
Enjoy the rich sonority of the piano when the pedal is held in the quieter sections, and make the most of the tempo changes at the end for dramatic effect.

VWML Link:
https://www.vwml.org/record/RVW2/1/5

When I was young

Traditional English, arr. Garreth Brooke



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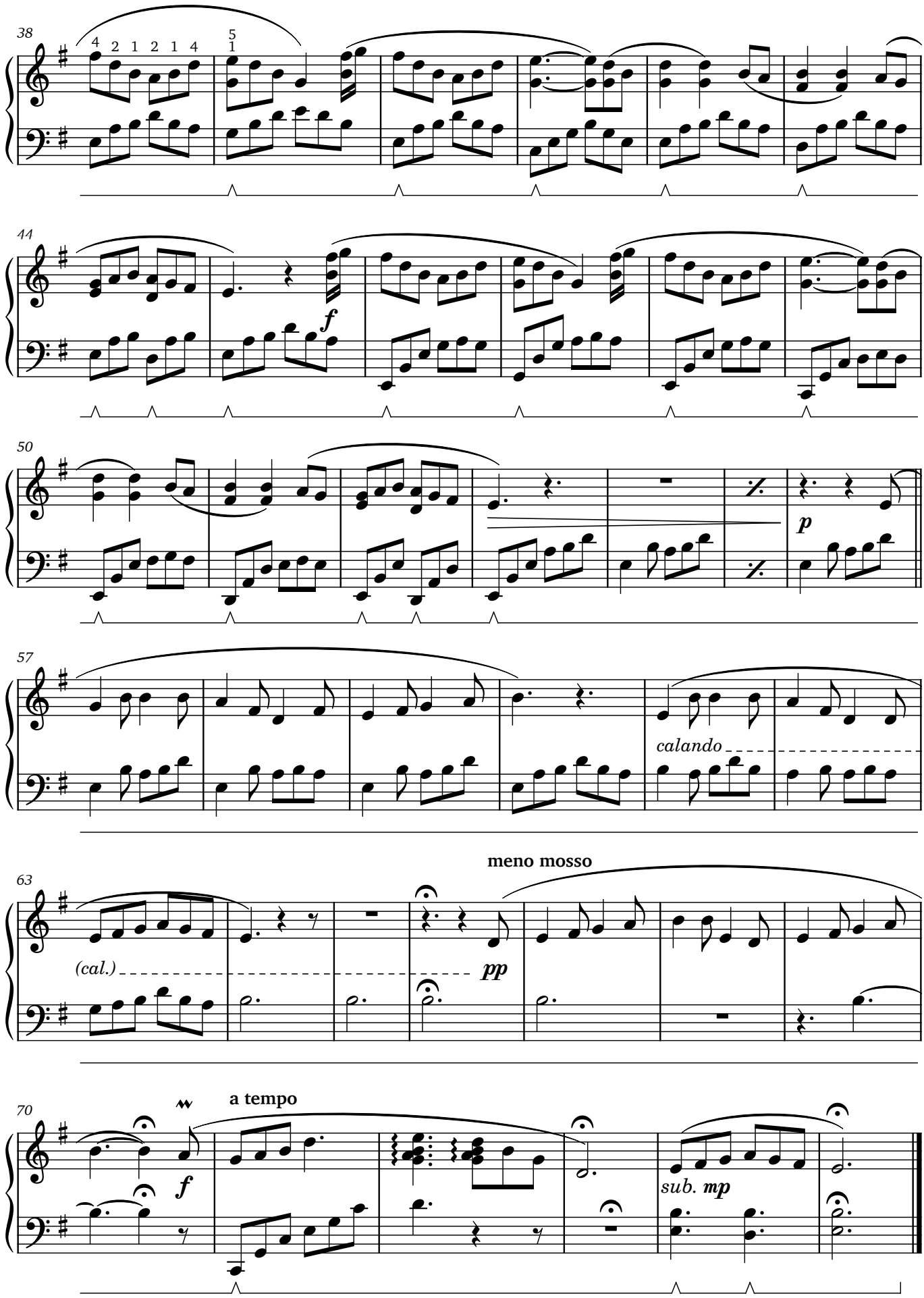

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Arranging 'When I Was Young'

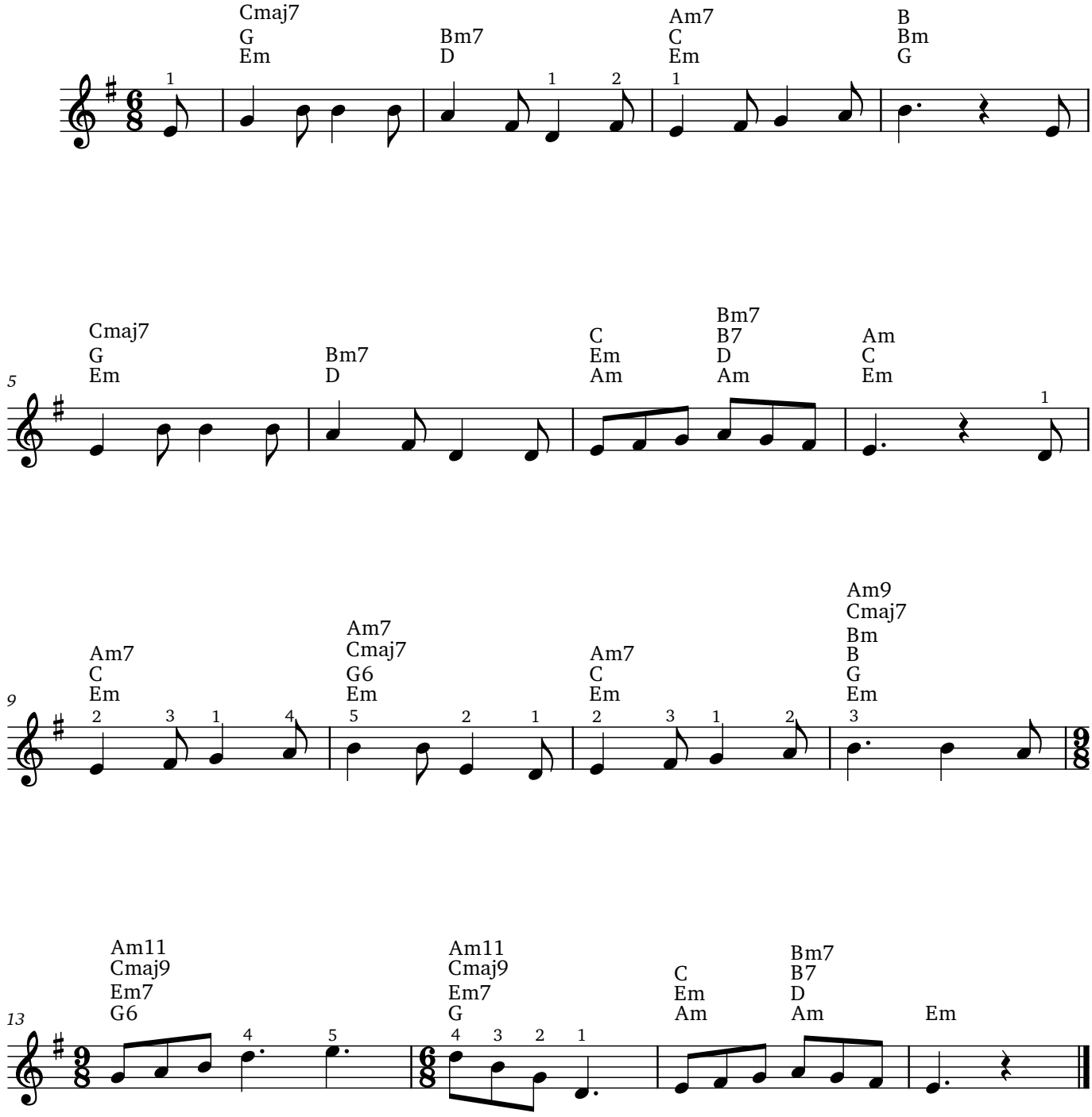
Traditional English

When you're arranging a melody for the piano, you typically add harmony and an accompaniment.

Harmony

Here's the melody with a list of chords that fit well (harmonise) with it. The chords are stacked in order of complexity, with the simplest ones at the bottom. Different chords will change the way the melody sounds: sometimes these changes are minor, but sometimes they can be quite dramatic.

Task 1: play through the melody whilst playing the chords as block chords, and circle which chord you would like to use.



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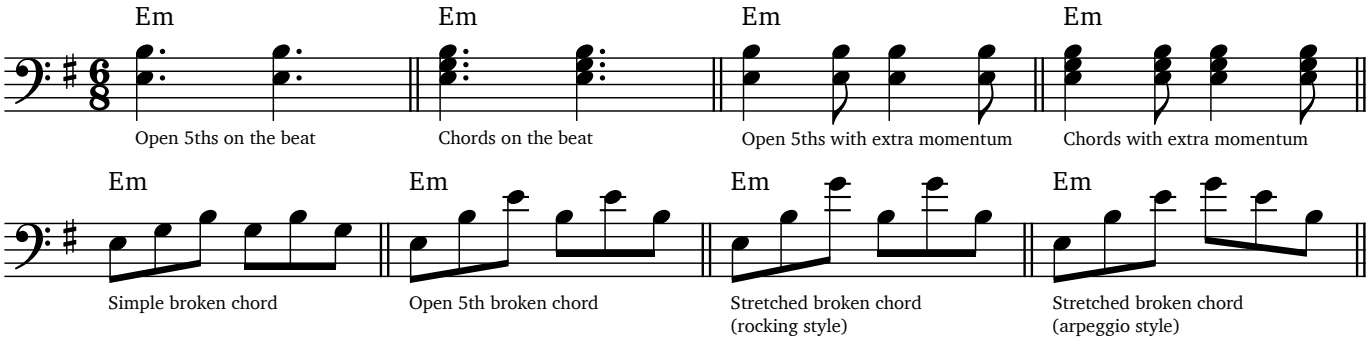
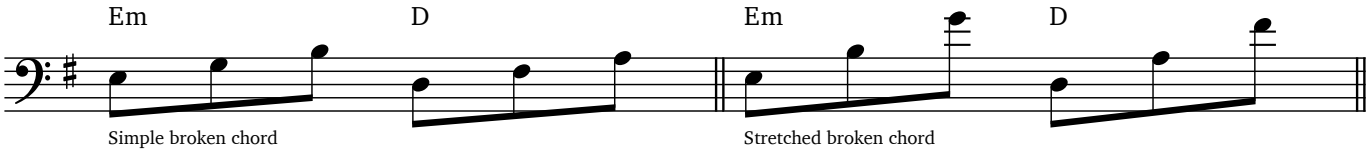
Accompaniment

Here's a series of basic accompaniment patterns that work well with the time signature 6/8, roughly in order of complexity.

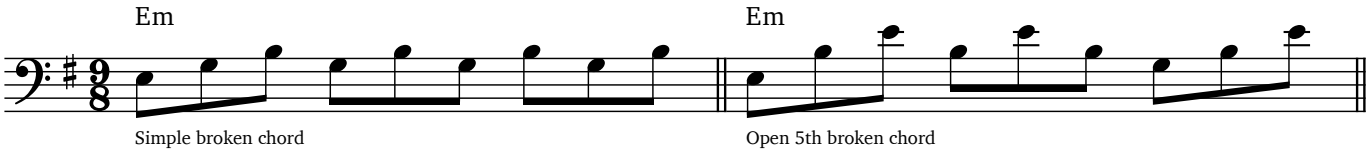
Task 2: pick a pattern and use it to accompany the melody with your chosen chords.



You may have to adapt the pattern at times, e.g. when there are two chords per bar. Here's a couple of examples of how you could do this:



You'll also have to adapt the pattern in bar 13, where the time signature changes to 9/8. There are many ways to do this, here are a couple of examples:



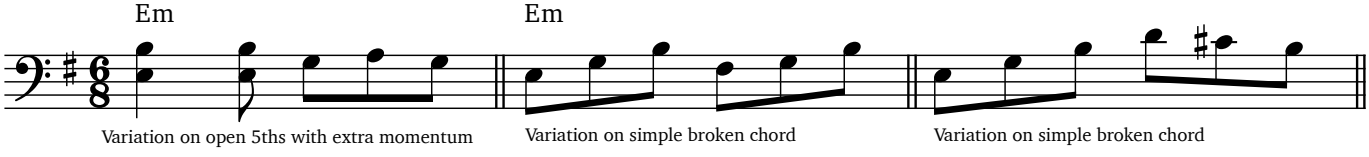
You might like to change accompaniment pattern during the piece, that's fine. Here's one example of how you could do this:

— bar 1: open 5ths on the beat
— bar 5: chords on the beat
— bar 9: simple broken chord
— bar 15: open 5ths on the beat

Once you've done all this, you've got the main ingredients of your arrangement. Here are some things you could do next:

— add more variety to your accompaniment pattern (see below)
— create a varied second verse (or more!) by repeating both tasks but choosing different chords and accompaniment patterns
— create your own melody that fits to the chords and accompaniment patterns that you've chosen

It's a good idea to add variety to your accompaniment patterns, particularly when the melody isn't very active (e.g. bars 4 and 8). Try adding passing notes or changing the accompaniment pattern:



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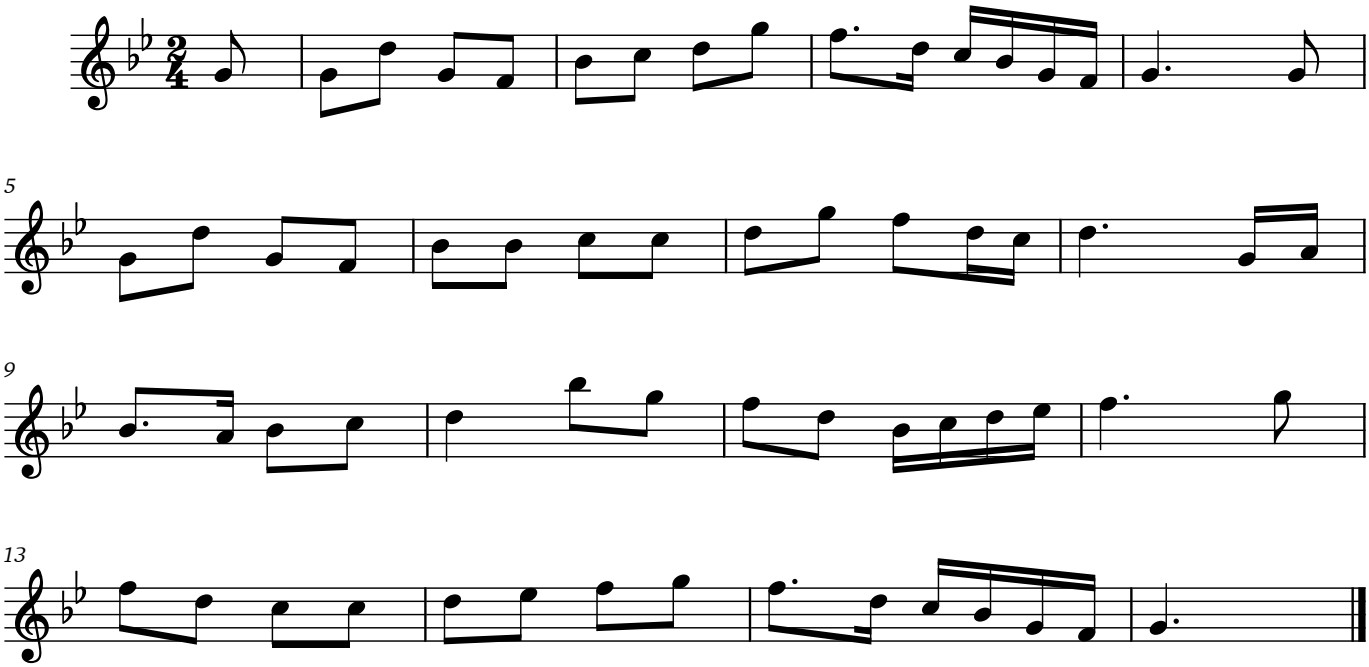
Covent Garden

Transcribed by Ralph Vaughan Williams on 24th May 1904 in Monk's Gate, Sussex

Traditional English



Intermediate (Grade 5) – G Aeolian – 2/4

About the tune

A Mrs Verrall of Horsham in Sussex sang this melancholy song to Vaughan Williams on 24th May, 1904.

I was in Covent Garden, three paces did I walk.
I met two pretty lovyers, so sweetly to talk.
'Twas of a gay young lady and her young 'prentice boy,
In private they were courting, for he was all her joy.

One would imagine from the melancholy tone of the melody that the "gay young lady and her young 'prentice boy" did not have a happy ending but the Vaughan Williams' archive includes another set of lyrics in a different hand, which tells of how the lady's parents banish the apprentice to "foreign lands", where he makes his fortune and returns…

When she beheld his features and flew into his arms
With kisses out of measure she enjoyed his charms.
'Twas down in Covent Garden their road to church they found,
In everlasting comfort, these lovers they were bound.

About the arrangement

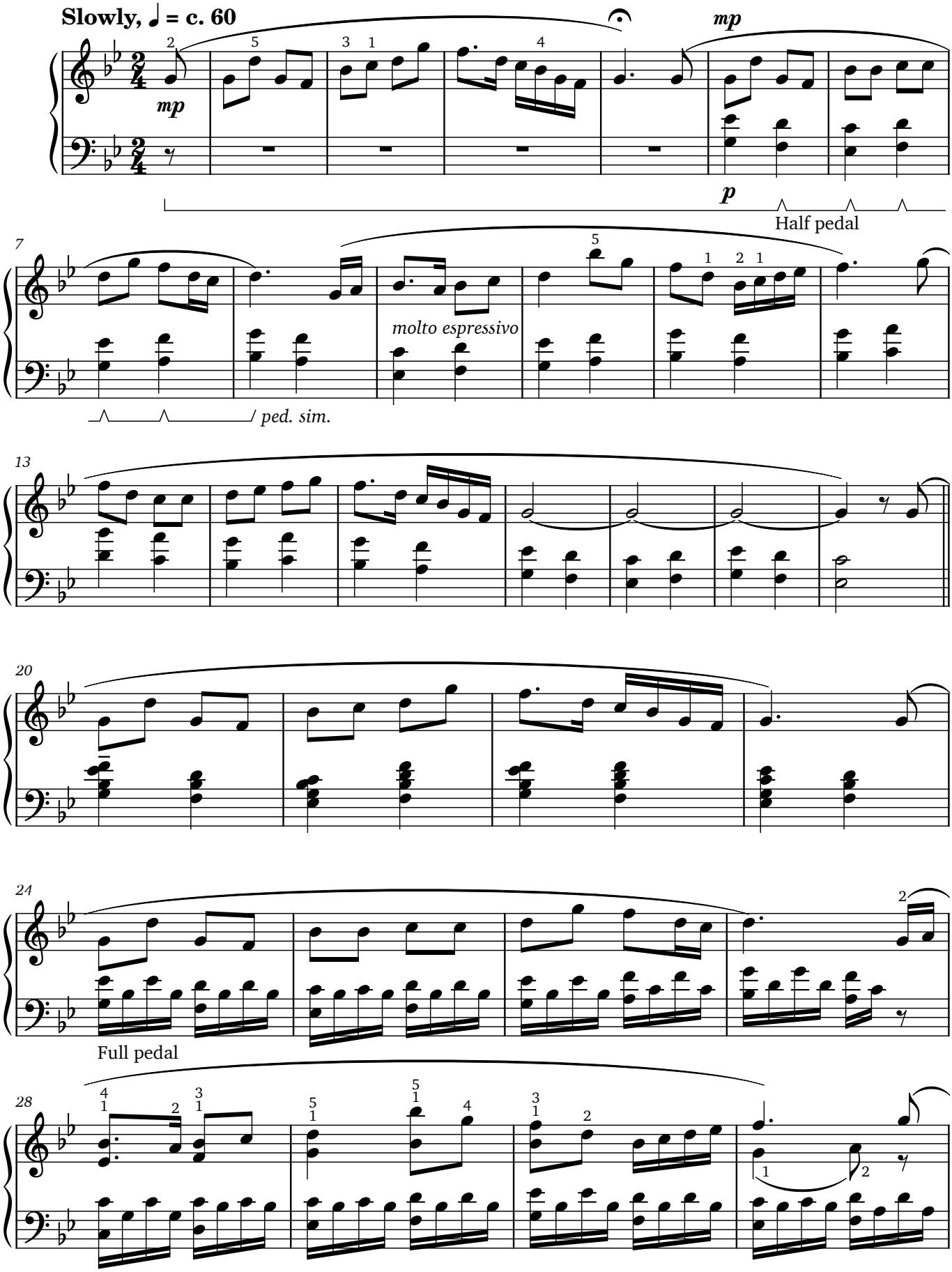
Carefully half-pedalling in the opening section will retain some of the richness, without causing dissonance. Make the most of the tempo changes at the end for dramatic effect. In bar 54 of the final phrase, the left hand F at the top of the chord on beat 3 can be played by the right hand if the stretch is too much. If you're an improvisor or composer, there's space for you to be creative in bars 36-43.

Links

VWML: https://www.vwml.org/record/RVW2/2/98
Detailed information from Caroline Davison:
https://carolinedavison.substack.com/p/vaughan-williamss-journey-into-folk-aae

Covent Garden

Traditional English, arr. Garreth Brooke



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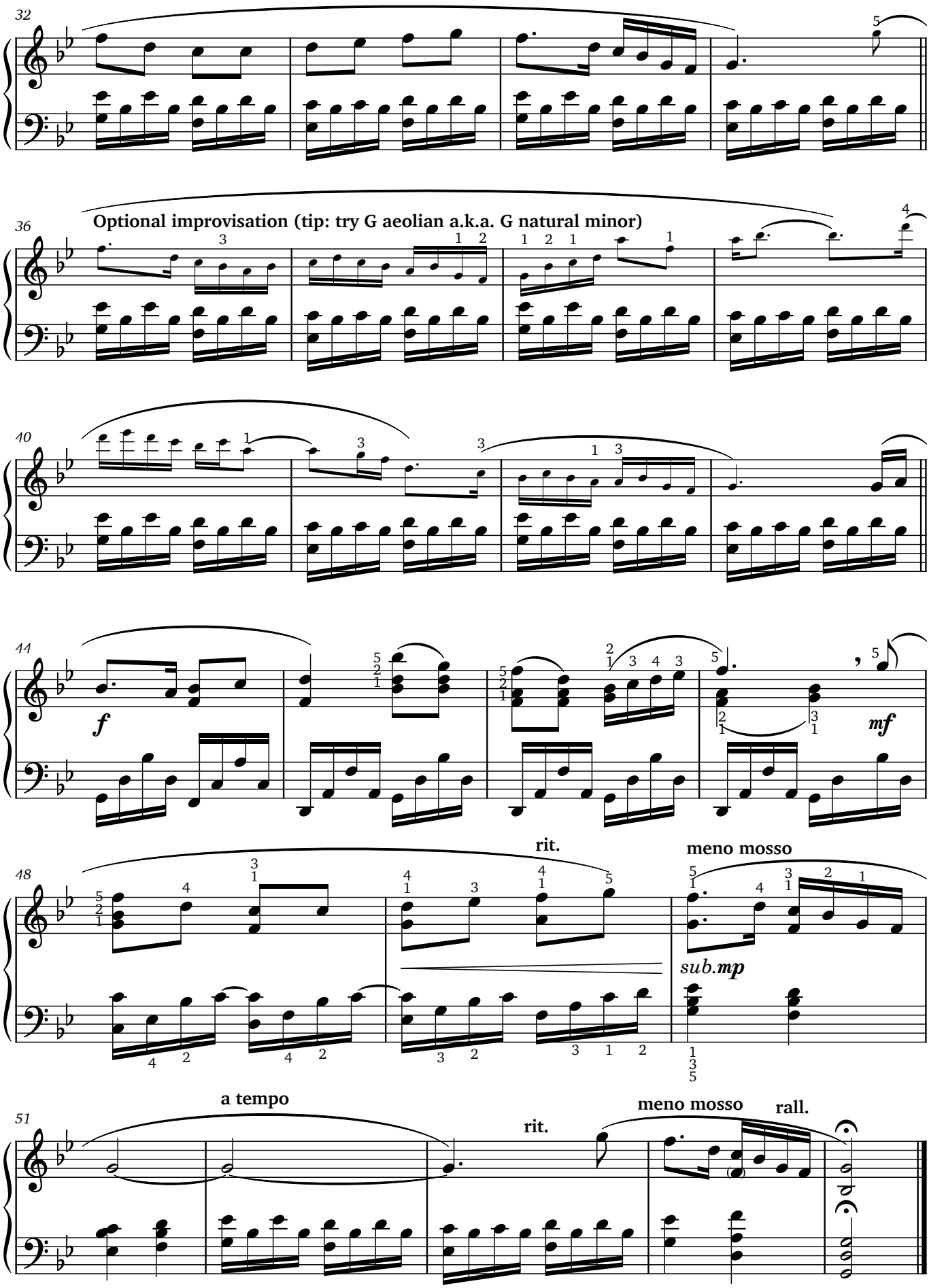

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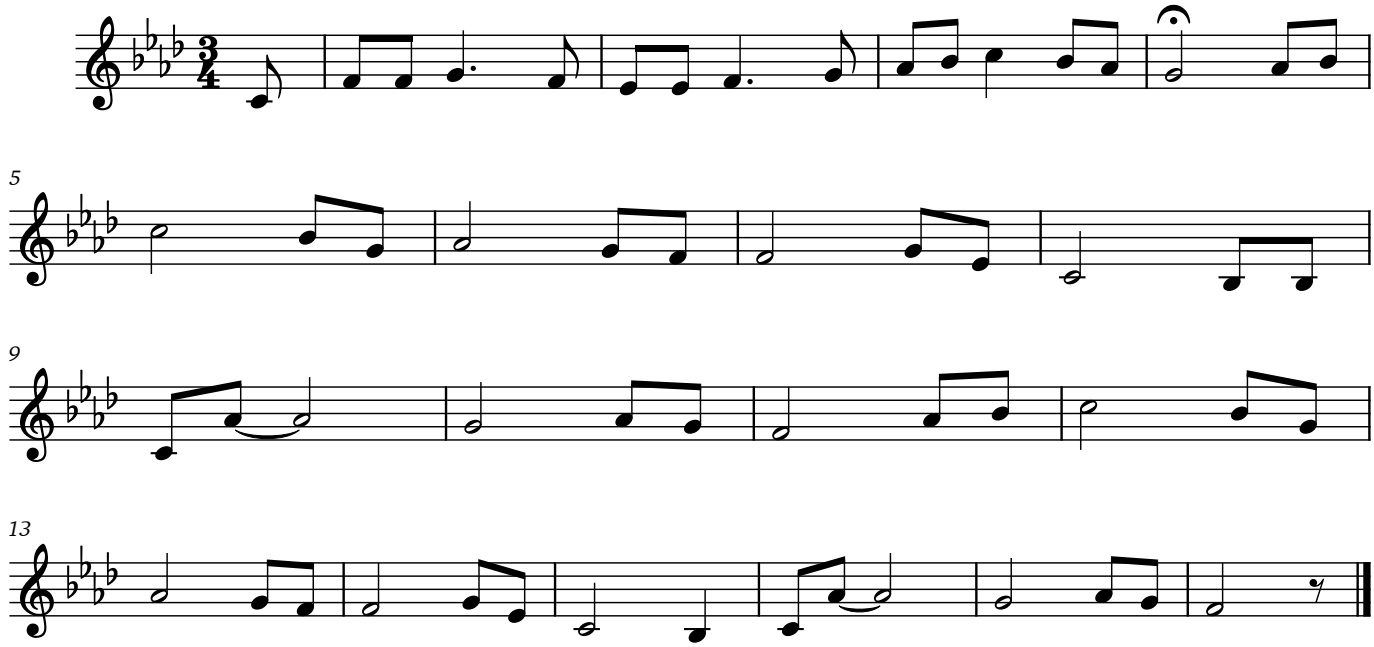
Bushes and Briars

Transcribed by Ralph Vaughan Williams on 4th December 1903 in Ingrave, Essex

Traditional English



Intermediate (Grade 5) – F Aeolian – 3/4

About the tune

This is one of the first tunes collected by Vaughan Williams, dating to 4th December 1903, and sung by Charles Pottipher.

> Through bushes and through briars I lately took my way
> All for to hear the small birds sing and the lambs to skip and play.

About the arrangement

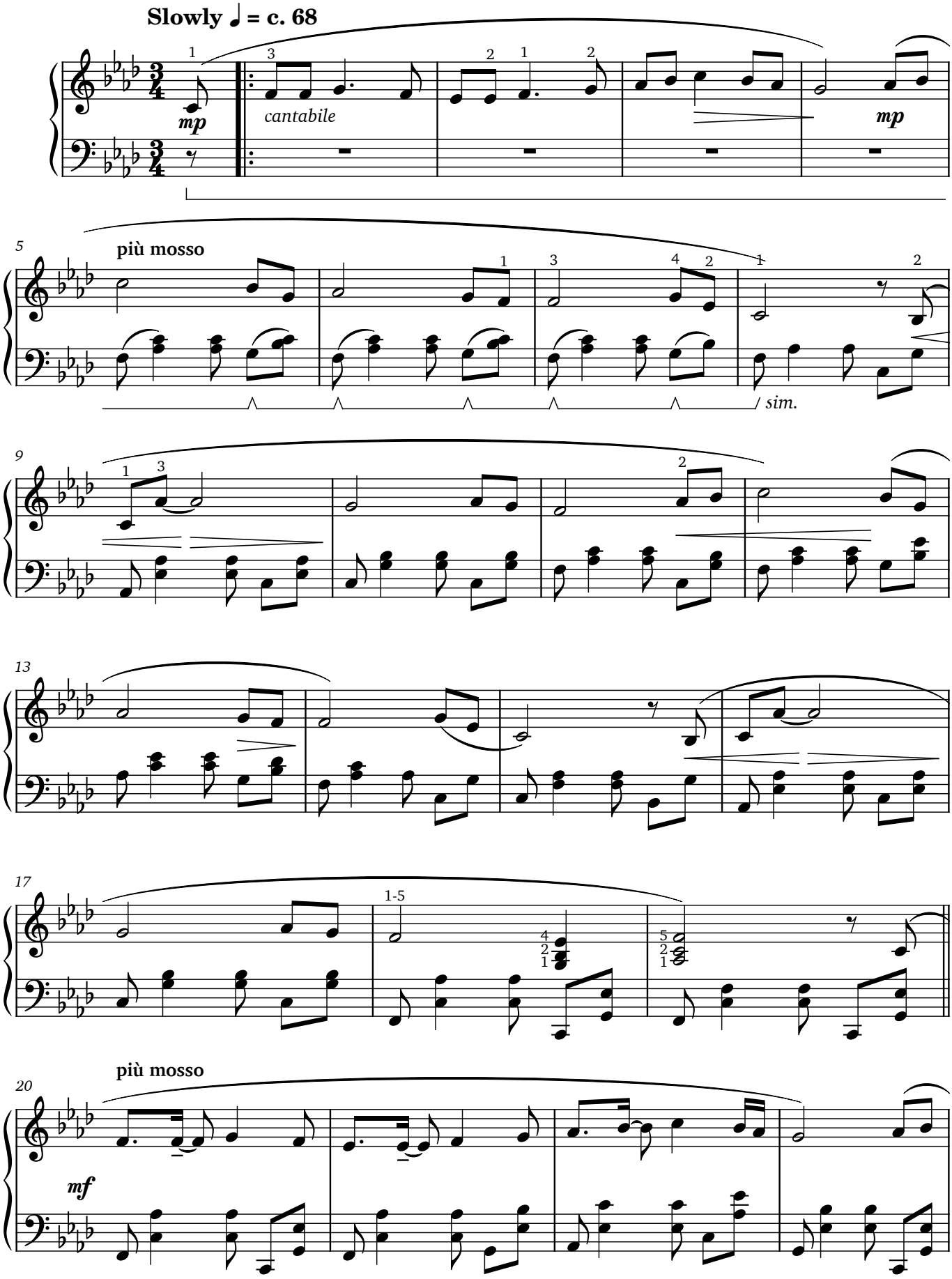
Although the opening lyrics might sound cheerful, this is another melancholy tune, and its long held notes invited an accompaniment that filled in the gaps. This rhythmic interplay, with its hints of Dave Brubeck, led to the piece taking on a slightly jazzy air: play the solo in bars 39-54 with plenty of rhythmic flair, or make up your own!

Links

VWML: https://www.vwml.org/record/RVW2/4/3
Detailed information from Caroline Davison: https://carolinedavison.substack.com/p/4-december-1903

Through bushes and briars I lately took my way

Traditional English, arr. Garreth Brooke



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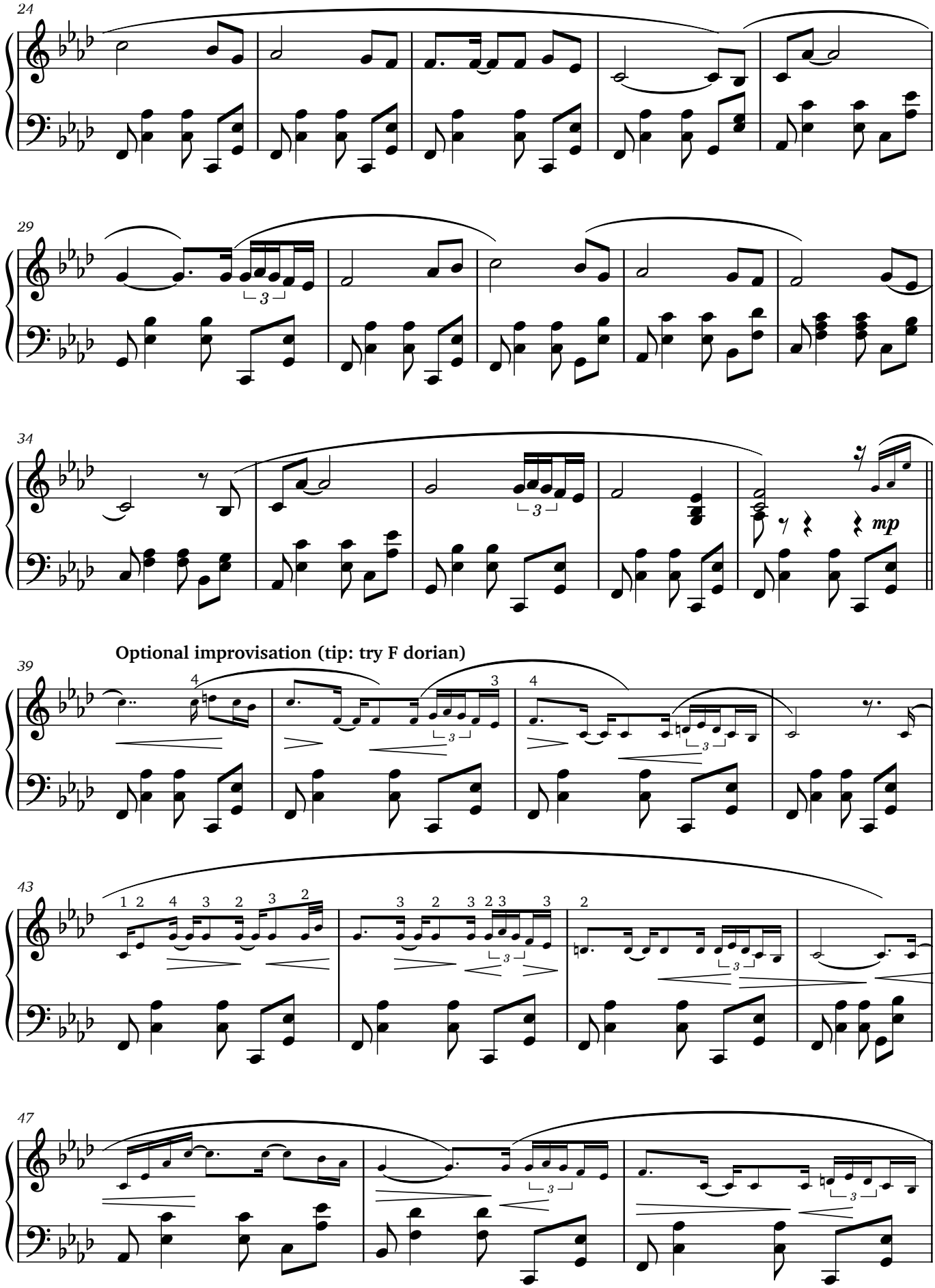

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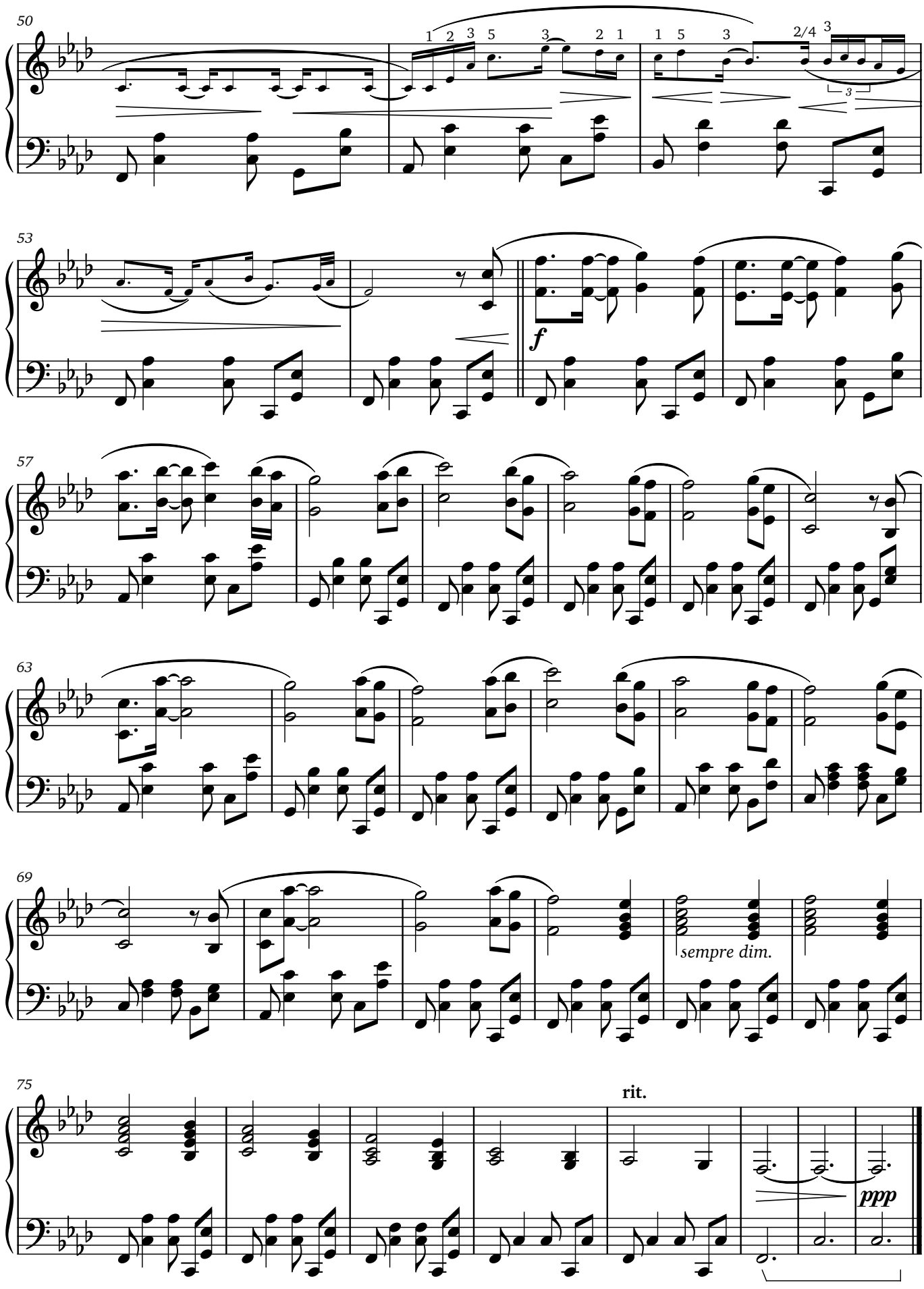

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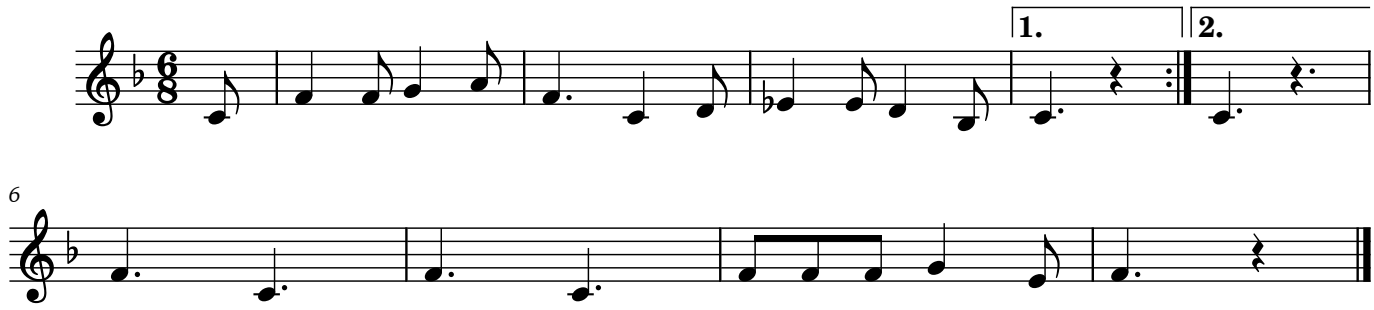
T'Old Tup

Transcribed by Ralph Vaughan Williams in September 1904 in Wickersley, Yorkshire

Traditional English



Intermediate (Grade 5) – F mixolydian – 6/8

About the tune

This piece comes from a “man in the inn” who Vaughan Williams encountered in Wickersley, Yorkshire in September 1907. A tup is a male sheep. Judging by the lively nature of the tune, this old tup has still got plenty of life in him yet! The only words recorded are as follows (assuming I’ve decyphered his handwriting correctly!). They apply to bars 13-20 of this arrangement.

Fay lay, fay lay, fa la la le-o lay.

About the arrangement

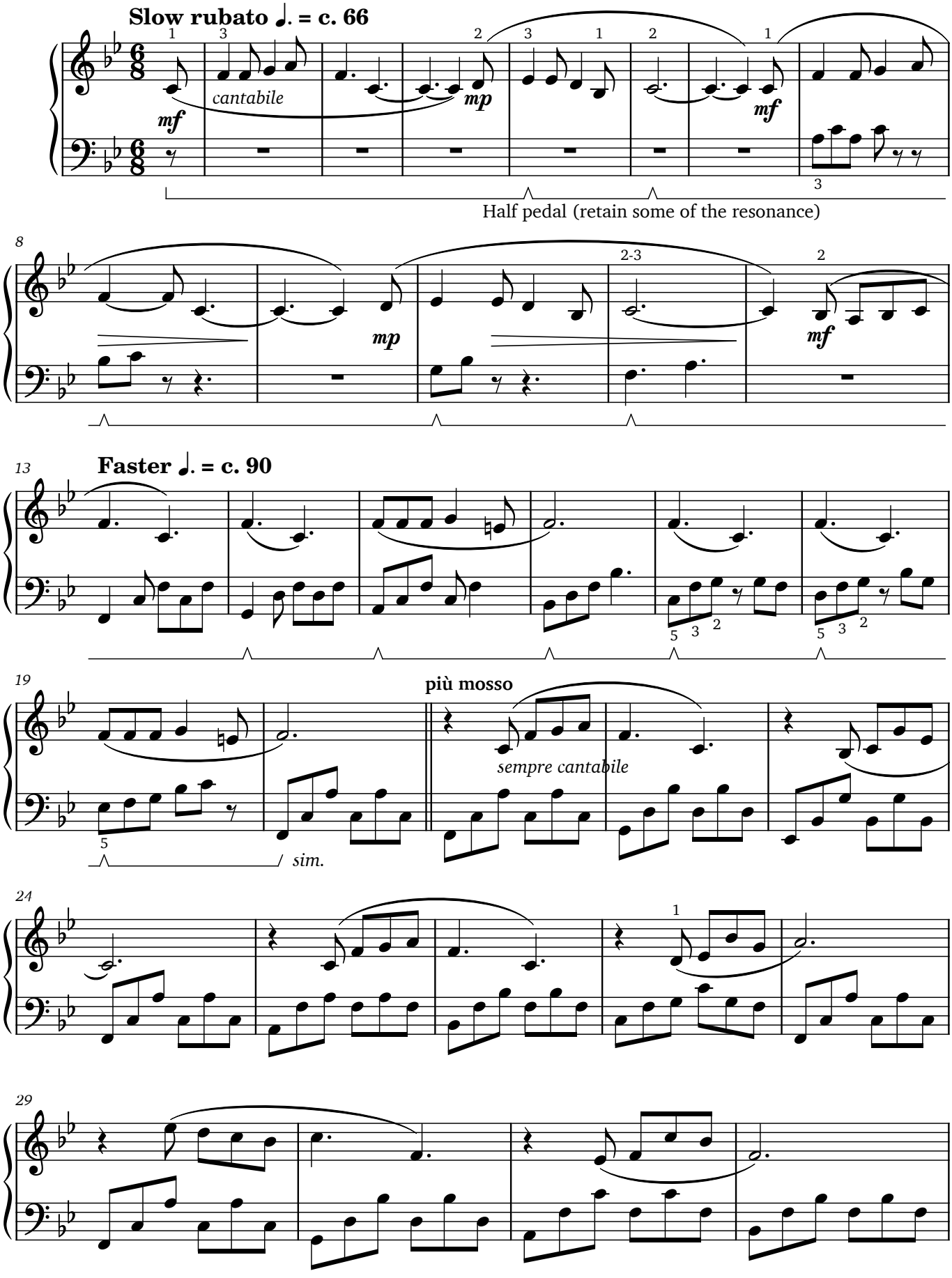
Lying somewhere between a classical theme and variations form and a jazz head and solos form, a good performance of this piece requires careful pacing to ensure that the long-awaited climax occurs at bar 105 and not before.

VWML Link

https://www.vwml.org/record/RVW2/1/20

T'Old Tup

Traditional English, arr. Garreth Brooke



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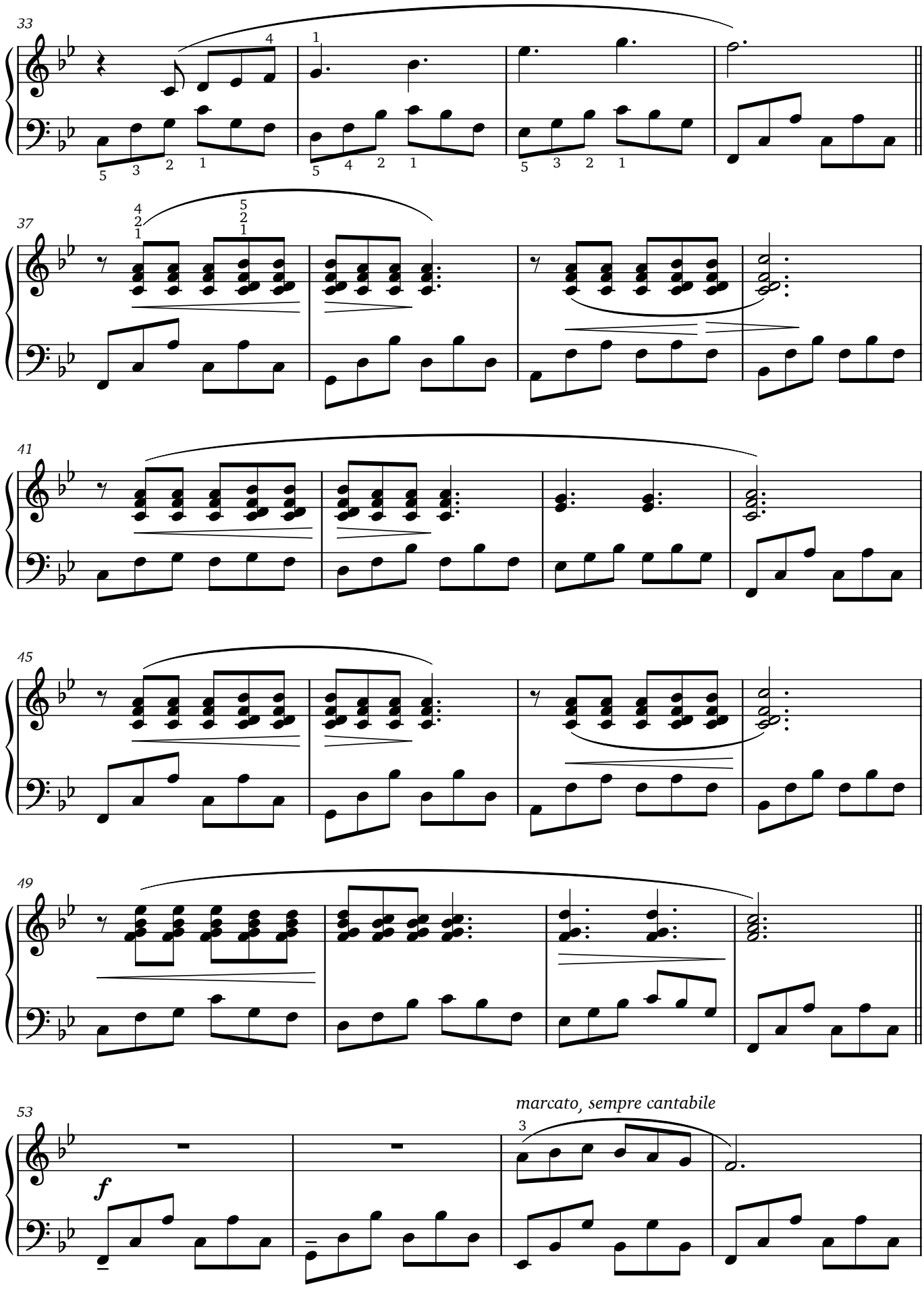

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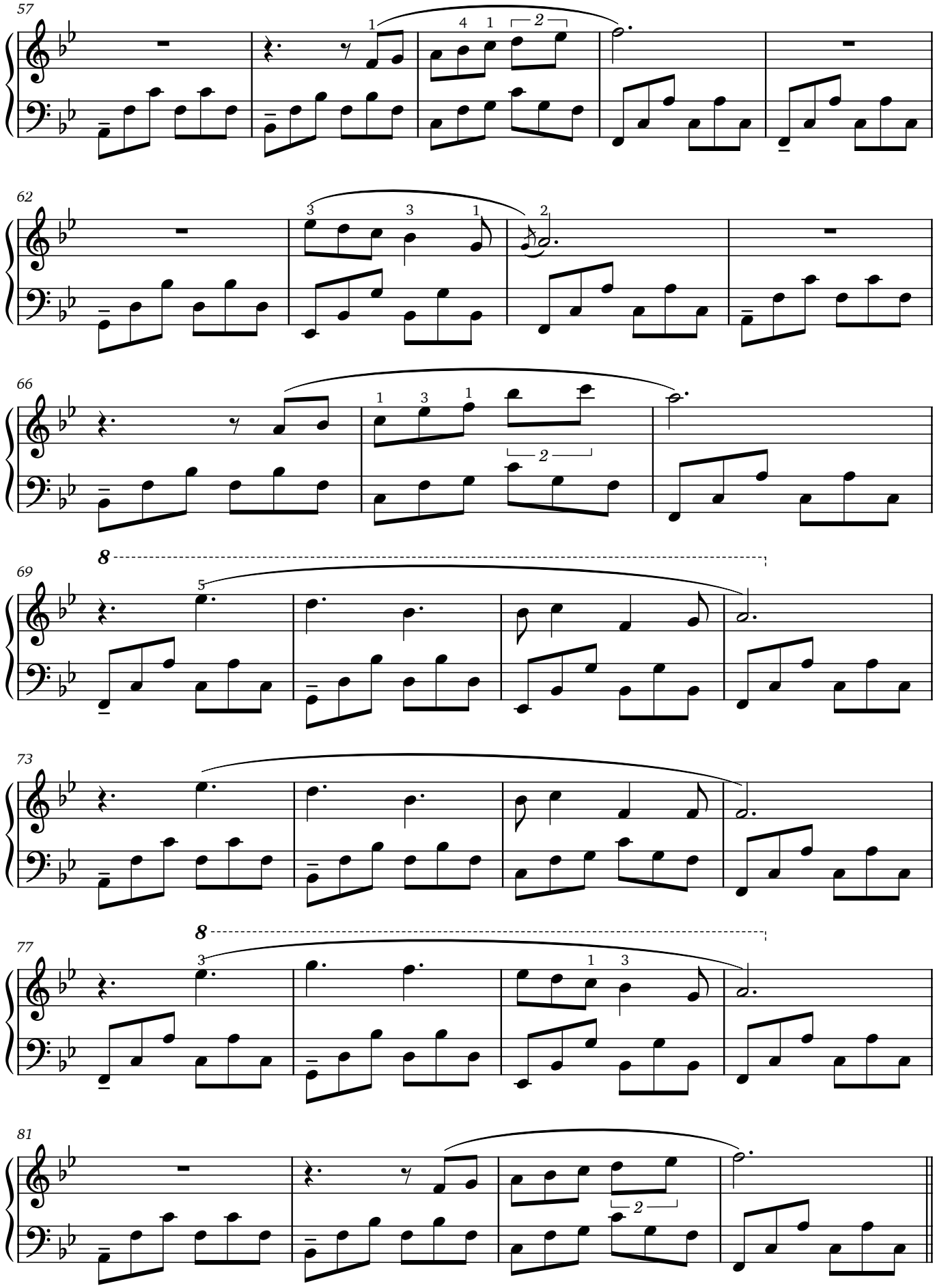

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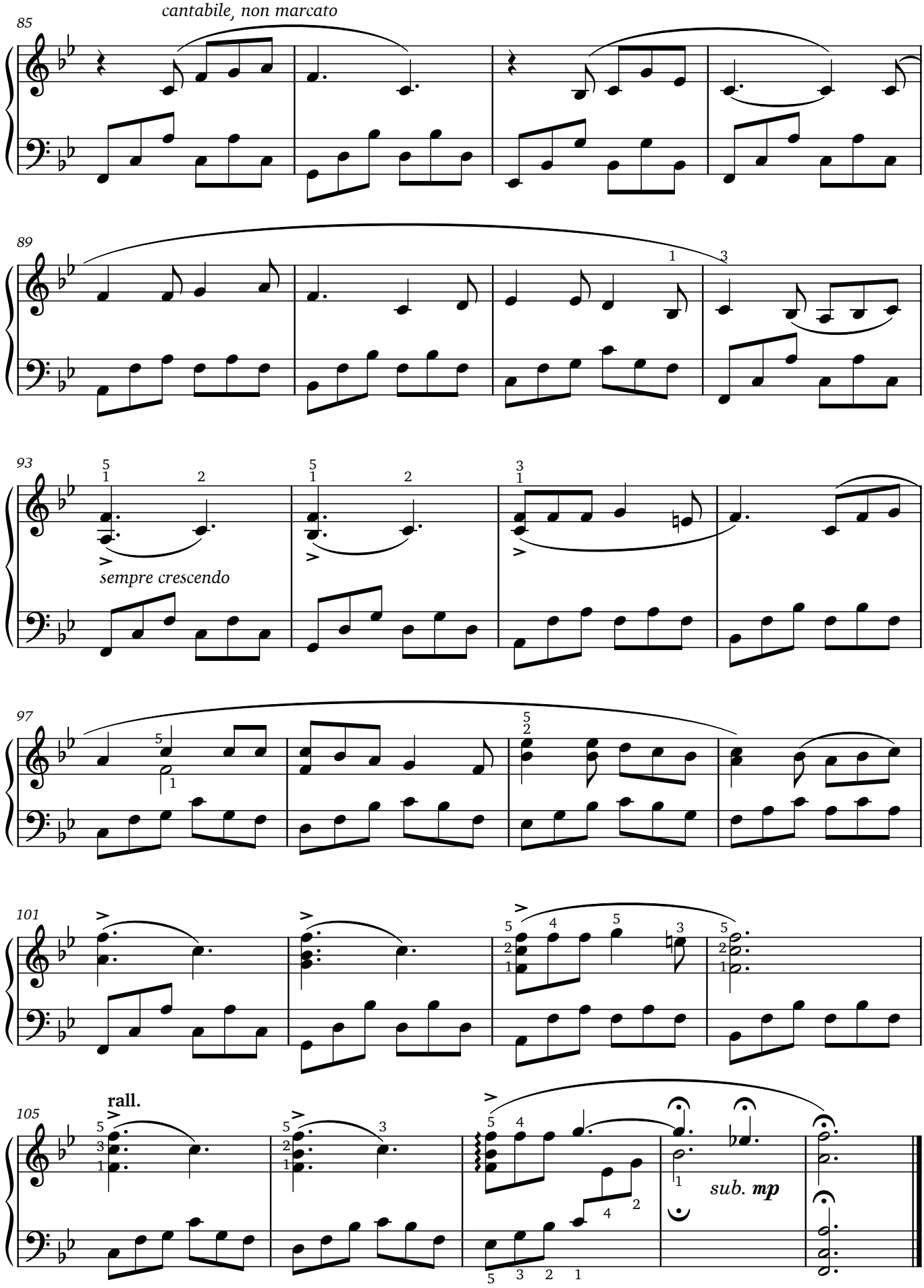

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About the composer

Garreth Brooke has been composing music since his early teens, initially purely for pleasure but increasingly as a way to escape the crisis that enveloped his family when his severely depressed mother attempted suicide. After studying music at the University of Oxford, he began collaborating with German contemporary artist Anna Salzmann on a series of works that combined music and art, using the pen name Garreth Broke. Since then he's released music with 1631 Recordings, Bigo & Twigetti, Moderna Records, and THESIS, received airplay from BBC Radio 3, KEXP and NTS, and shared the stage with musicians including Hania Rani, Clemens Christian Poetzsch, and Simeon Walker. He curated the Upright sheet music project, working with a wide range of contemporary composers including Michael Price, Nat Bartsch, and Peter Broderick. In his music and writing he explores what it means to be human in an unkind but beautiful world.

"a sensitive and profound artist" - PianoDao
"Lovely... genuinely uplifting" - Stationary Travels
"A joy to keep up with" - Piano & Coffee Co.

If you've enjoyed this, you will love Garreth's other music, including his *Healing* suite. Click here to listen to his music and here to explore his store, which includes many free downloads.

garrethbrooke.com

Thanks

Jim Perkins and the rest of the Bigo & Twigetti team, Elena Cobb at ECV Music, Caroline Davison, Alex Burton and the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Rosie Johnson MBE and the RVW Trust, Hugh Cobbe and the Vaughan Williams Charitable Trust, my lovely Patreon patrons for their financial support and their constant encouragement, my students who tested these pieces, Molly, and finally my partner Anna, without whom nothing is possible nor makes sense.