SHAPING THE PHRASE

By John Riley

A brief outline of some strategies for giving your improvisations extra shape, substance, and engagement with the listener…

Are improvised interludes within the liturgy something that should merely demonstrate sufficient craft to provide an appropriate ‘ambience’ or ‘cover’ …but not draw undue attention to themselves, (perhaps a consideration even in some choices of written repertoire)? Or do we aspire to create something more memorable and engaging that does indeed draw the attention to the music (for all the right reasons) and encompass as much as possible the expectations and disciplines of a written piece of music? Let us assume the latter as our goal. And key to this is a sense of structure and direction, very often, –though by no means always – carried primarily through the melody. In this article we shall look very briefly at just a few basic ways in which melody might be structured. And if the opening phrases are essential in engaging the ear, and determining how the music should continue, then so is the ending in drawing the music to a meaningful and controlled conclusion.

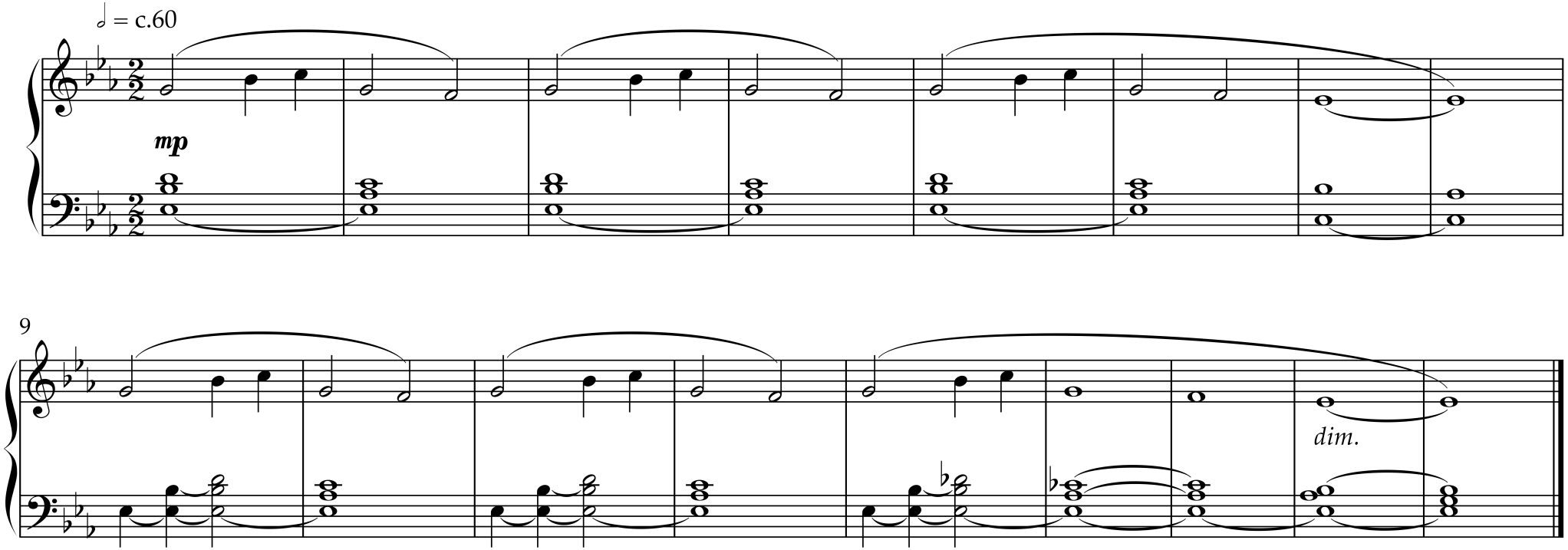
Beware though of the traps of endless strings of shapeless phrases, particularly those that have little to do with one another. Rather, focus on establishing at least one prominent idea - i.e. a ‘theme’, and developing melodic shapes and rhythmic elements within this, and indeed other stated material. Music of course does not always consist of neat four bar phases; (how narrow and limiting if it did!). However, irregular phrase lengths and mixed time signatures should be a result of intent, not accident. Phrases may be repeated, varied to lesser and greater extents, or mixed with complementary and contrasting phrases; modulation, decoration and reharmonisation are the main ways in which this may be effected. Beware too, of complex and constantly changing harmonies; wonderful if done well, but these can also be destabilising and take up valuable mental bandwidth that would often be better spent focussing on the essential melodic phrase structure.

Shaping phrases then is an essential skill for any improviser. Creative freedom and spontaneity also has to be underpinned by internal discipline and sometimes even external and prescriptive guides.

A single, simple phrase can be made to work well over a short length, even with a minimum of variable elements. In *Meditation on ‘Love Unknown’, (Ex.1)*, a harmonic pendulum could help create motion and an almost incantational effect. There are many examples of hymn phrases that could be used as the theme. Such an improvisation could be used as the basis for a brief interlude and a commentary on something that has just been sung.

Sound file ♫

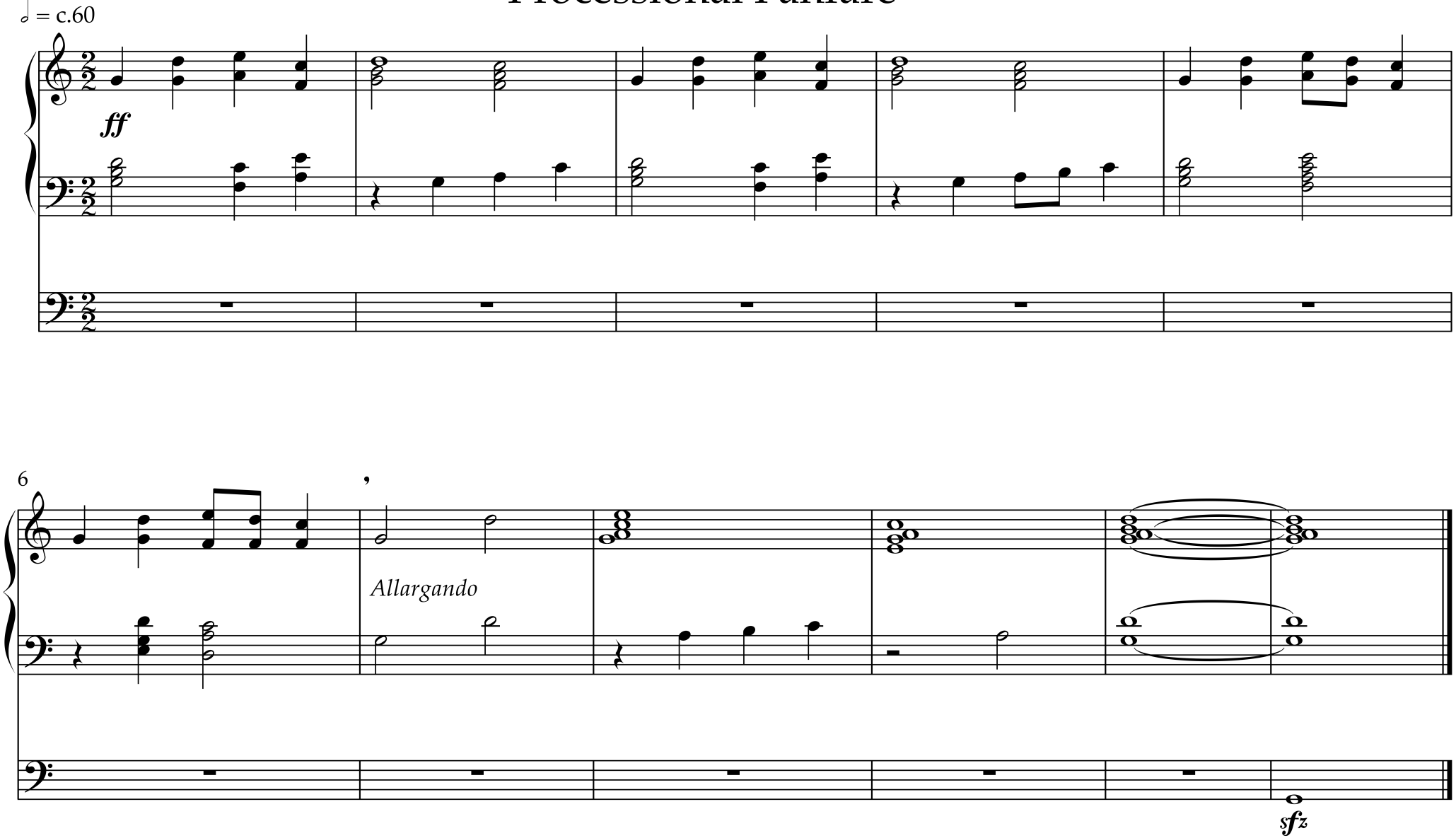
Meditation on 'Love Unknown'



A single phrase can be repeated but with some variation through decoration and augmentation of the melody, as with *Processional Fanfare (Ex.2) - overleaf*

Sound file

Processional Fanfare

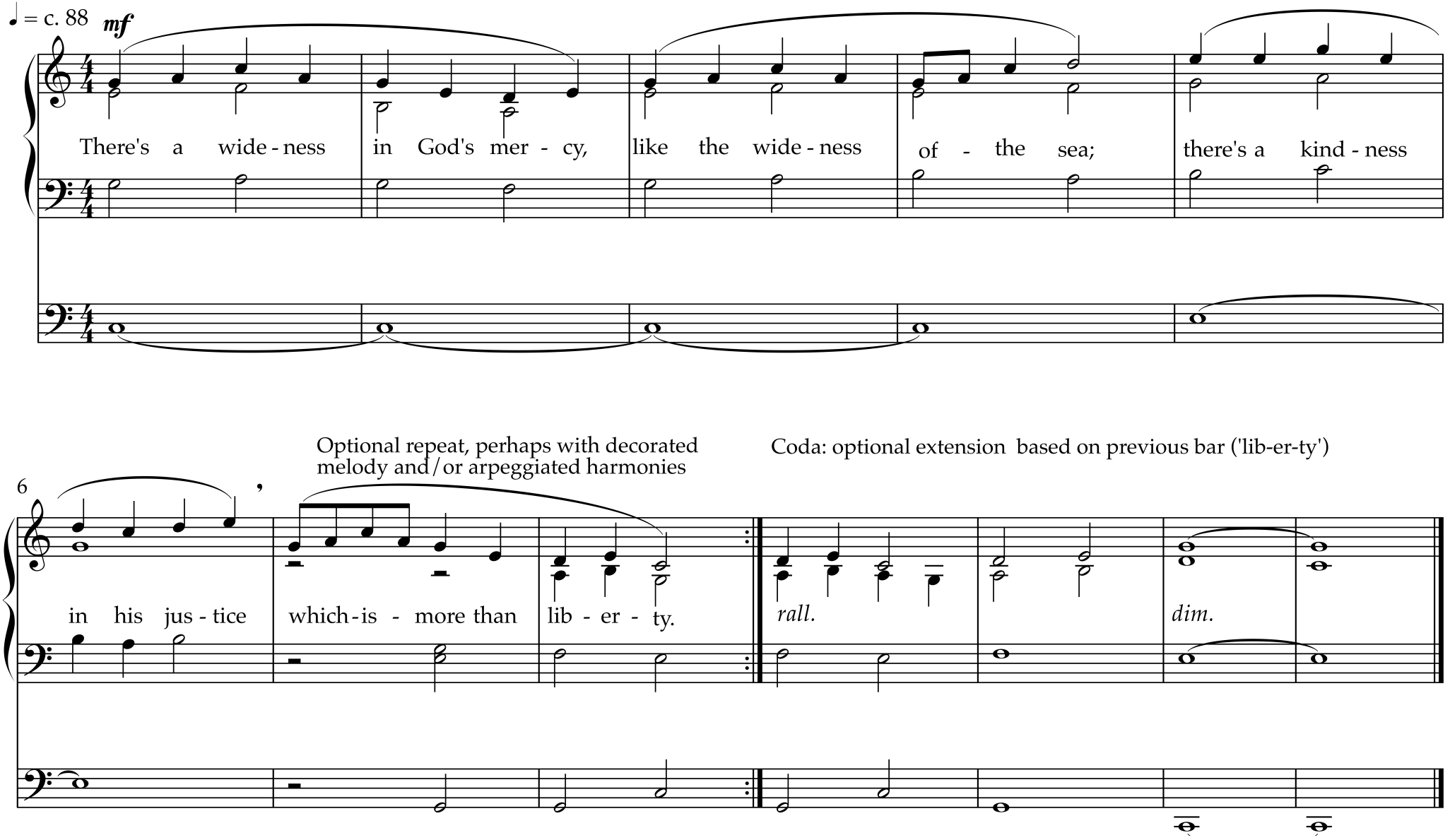


A useful way of developing an instinctive and subliminal facility for shaping phrases is through a template of a given metre and perhaps also a text. This can be particularly useful when creating a longer piece with a number of phrases which may be similar or very different. The expressive nuances within different phrases of the text might even help determine the same within the melody. One can easily progress beyond one note per syllable and incorporate passing notes and a greater overall mix of note values and rhythms, as seen in *Prelude on a text (Ex.3) - overleaf.* The harmony is based on just two bass notes with inner harmonies formed largely of parallel thirds or sixths, (always a usefully euphonious device). Note how each phrase is different from the others whilst being related in mood and with some thematic cross-references. Note also the options that this format can provide for various types of extensions. Flexibility in matching length to liturgical context and overall choreography is a particular advantage in improvised music, and yet another very good reason for developing the art.

Sound file ♫

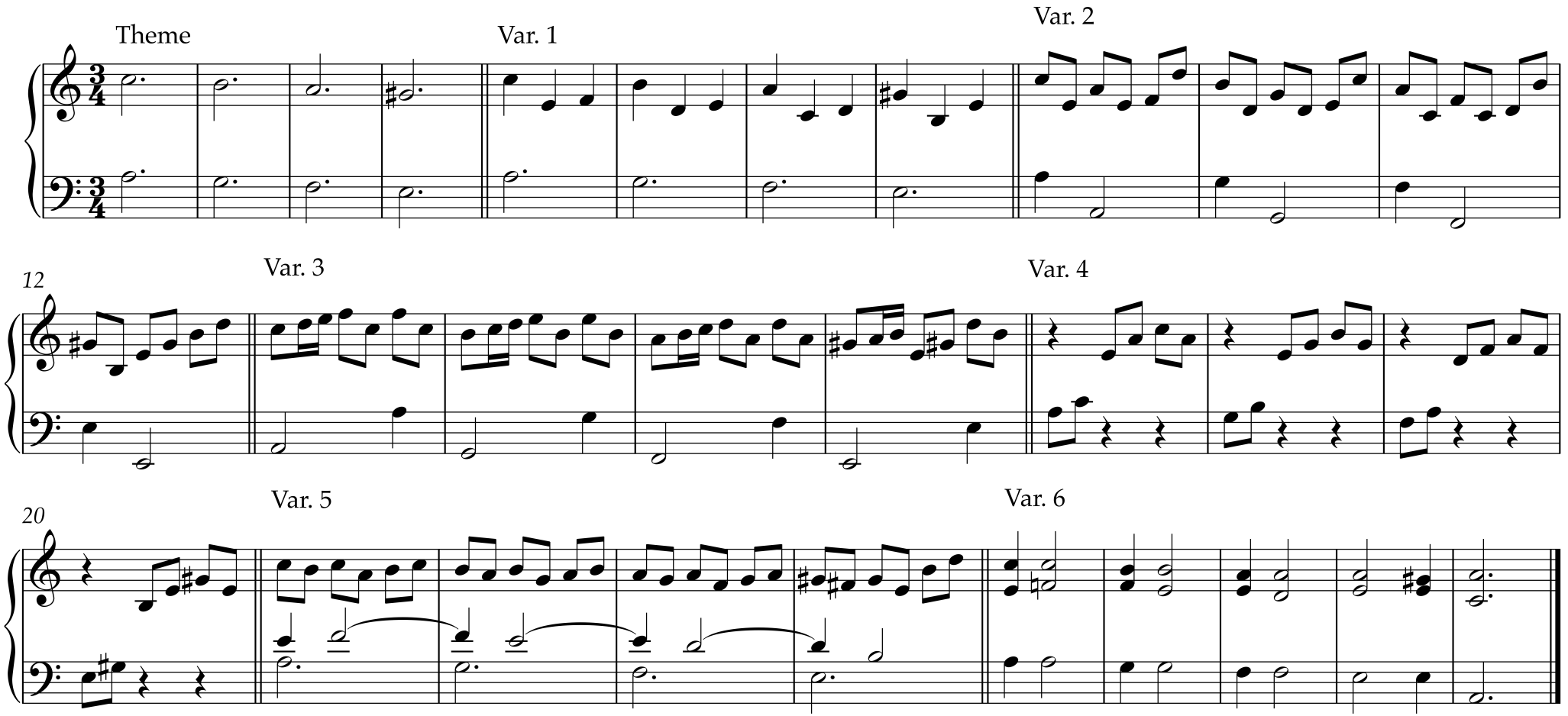
Prelude on a text

Words by Henry Faber (1814-63)



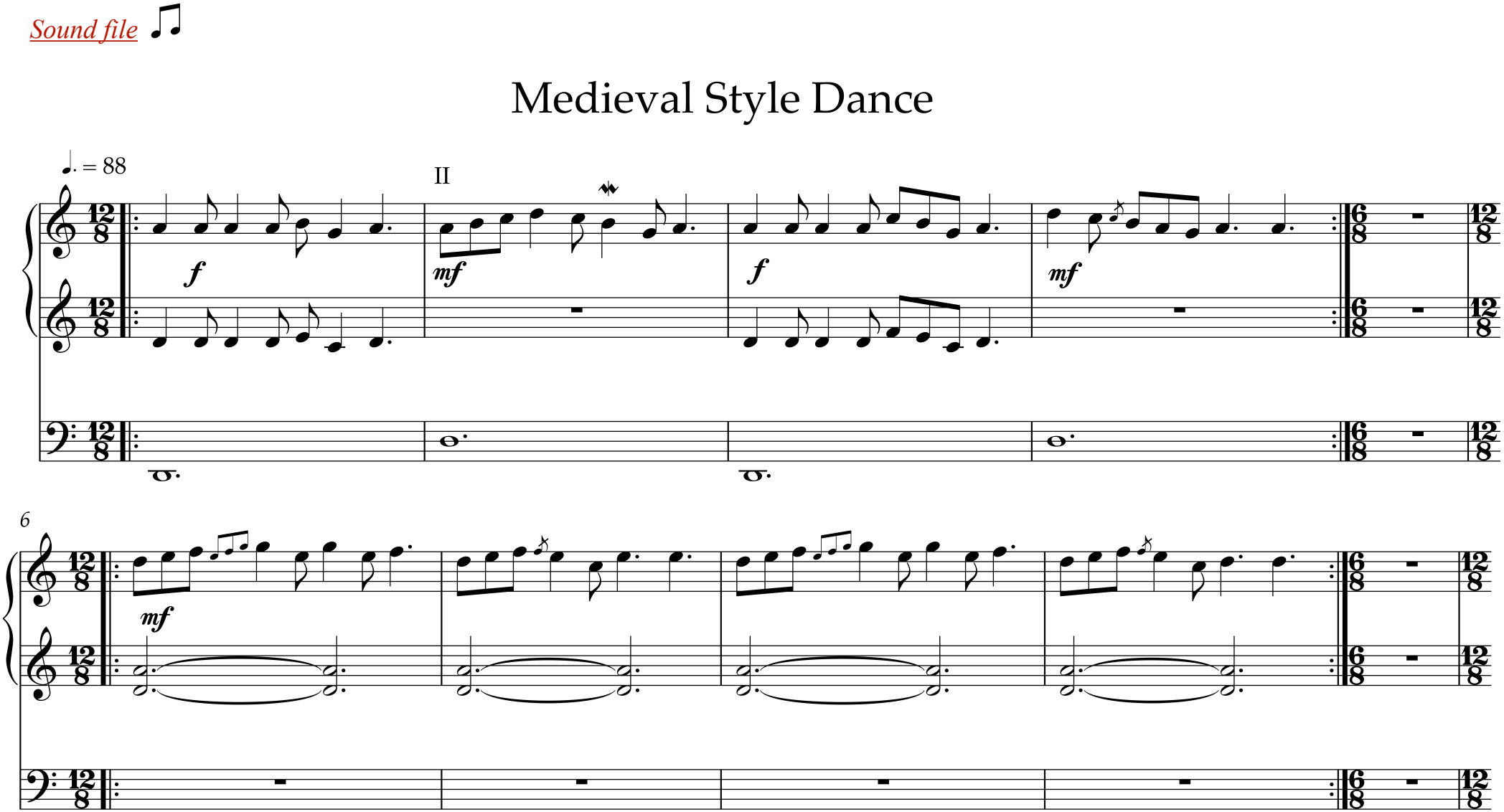
As we look towards longer and more complex structures, one very useful way of shaping phrases, (and an established art form in its own right) is by the underlying harmonic or rhythmic tread. This can offer both a solid structural framework but with the means to explore within given and safe limits. In particular though, it will help shape melodic phrases into a given metre - and avoid the dangers of phrases of, say, 3 ⅞ or 4 ¼ beats! For example, a simple pattern of alternating chords. As the 'feel' of the underlying harmony becomes more embedded, one can embellish the outline of the harmony with arpeggios and passing notes. Here is an example where you could try filling in some of the gaps yourself. *Medieval/Renaissance-style dance (Ex.4)*

Another example of a template with a firm underlying ‘tread’, a very simple recurring bass line and a melodic outline based on parallel thirds above it. No matter how adventurous we become, there is a regular and predictable point at which we can ‘return to base’. *Chaconne in the style of Pachelbel (Ex.5)* Sound file

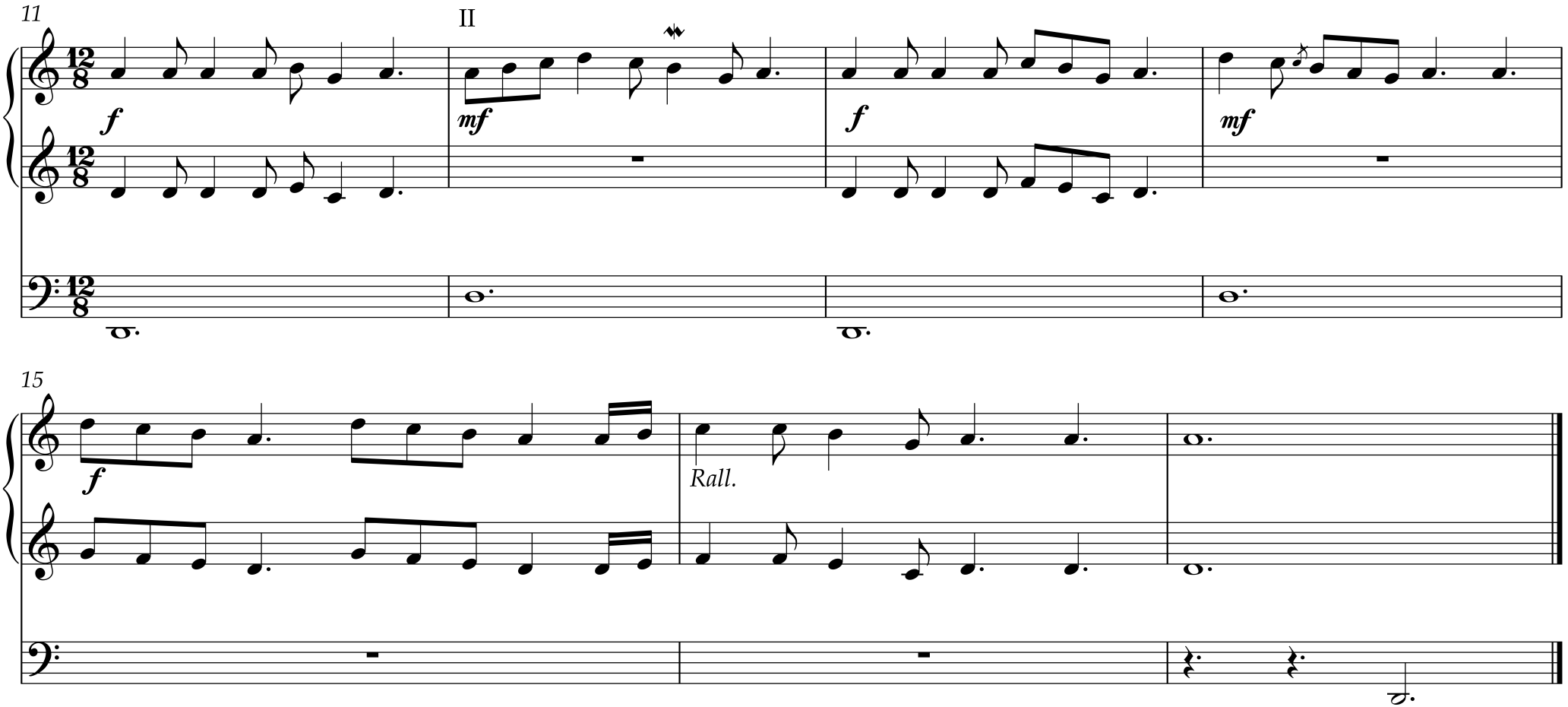


Similarly, a regular pattern of repeating or contrasting phrases within a given metrical structure will also help guide our phrases, as for example, in *Medieval-style Dance (Ex.6)*

Sound file



Medieval-style Dance p.2



We can create added structural subtlety and refinement by using a number of phrases which relate to the ‘theme’ with varying degrees. We can also enlarge the process of segmenting parts of an existing phrase to create a new one. Although the melody is relatively complex, the harmonic scheme is rather more basic: I and IV (D and G) in alternation, or to be more precise, Dorian mode alternating with the Mixolydian mode, and with a V-I cadence to signal the end. (*Ex.7) Varied and contrasting phrases.*

Sound file.

Varied and contrasting phrases

2

10

Repetition

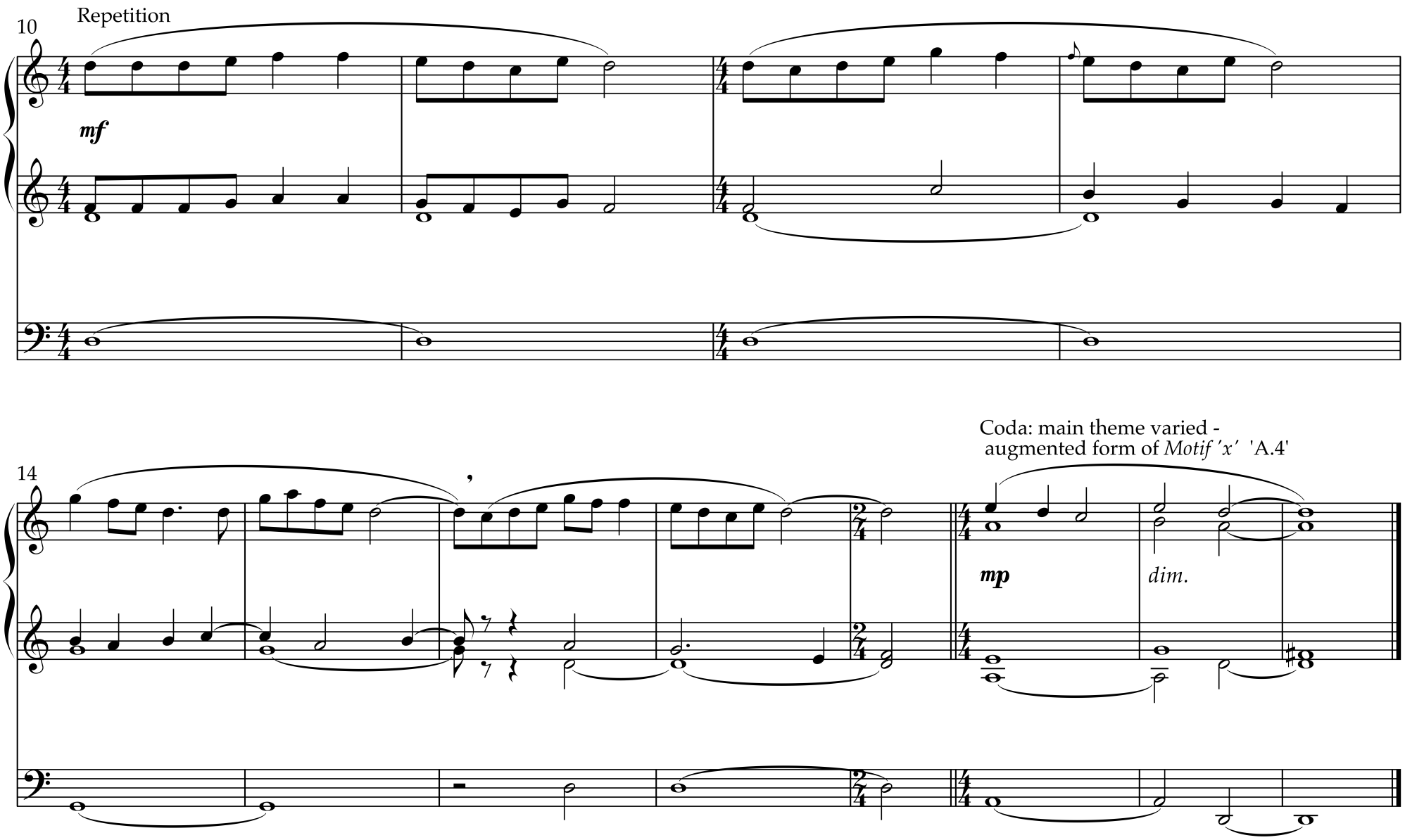
mf

14

Coda: main theme varied -
augmented form of *Motif 'x'* 'A.4'

mp

dim.

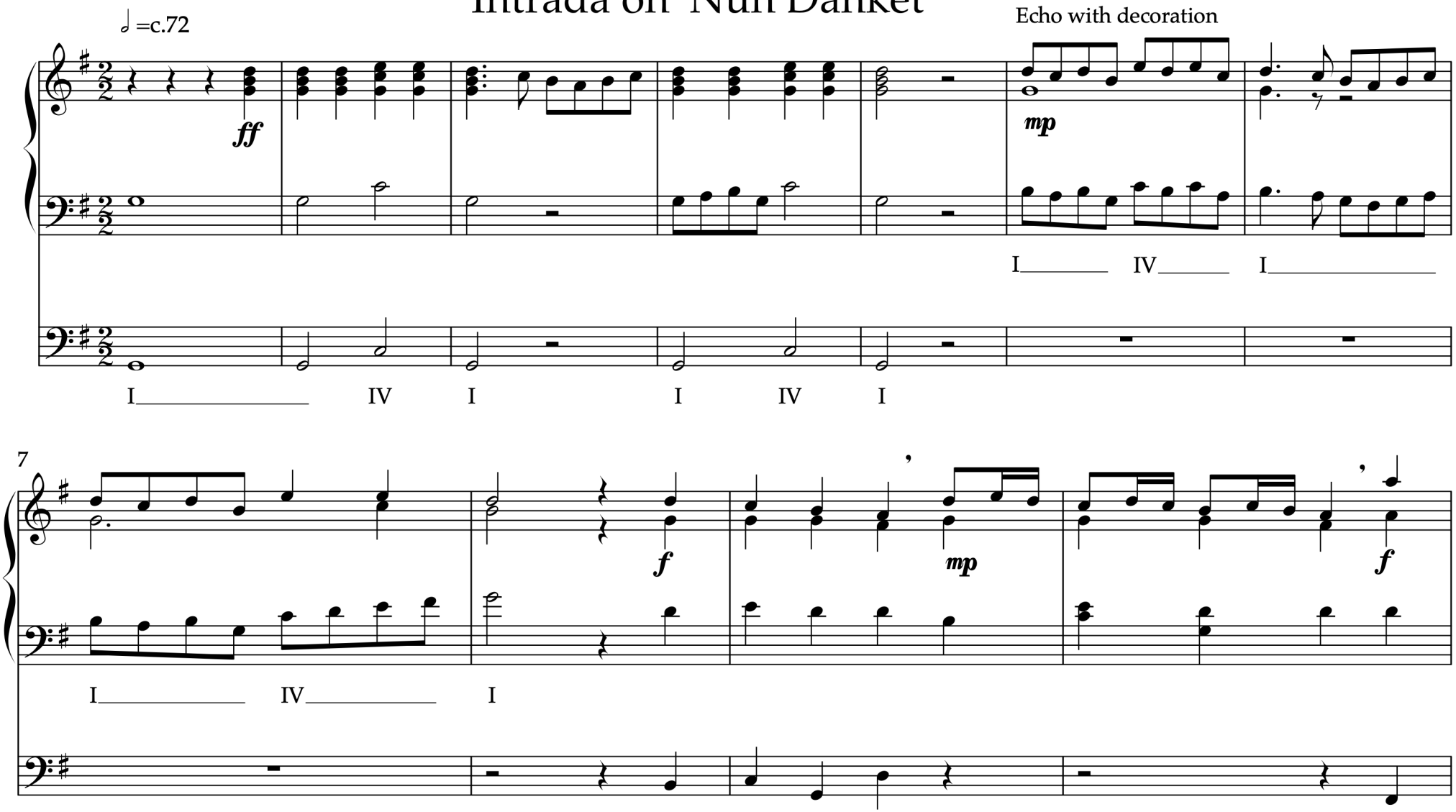


The source of our material could be from an existing hymn, and again use different forms of variation, such as decoration, augmentation, diminution and segmentation, as in *(Ex.8) Intrada on 'Nun Danket'*. Note also another very effective device; that of transposition.

The repeating simple bass patterns seen here are another very useful means of guiding the shape of the melody, and indeed the harmonic structure.

Sound file ♫

Intrada on 'Nun Danket'



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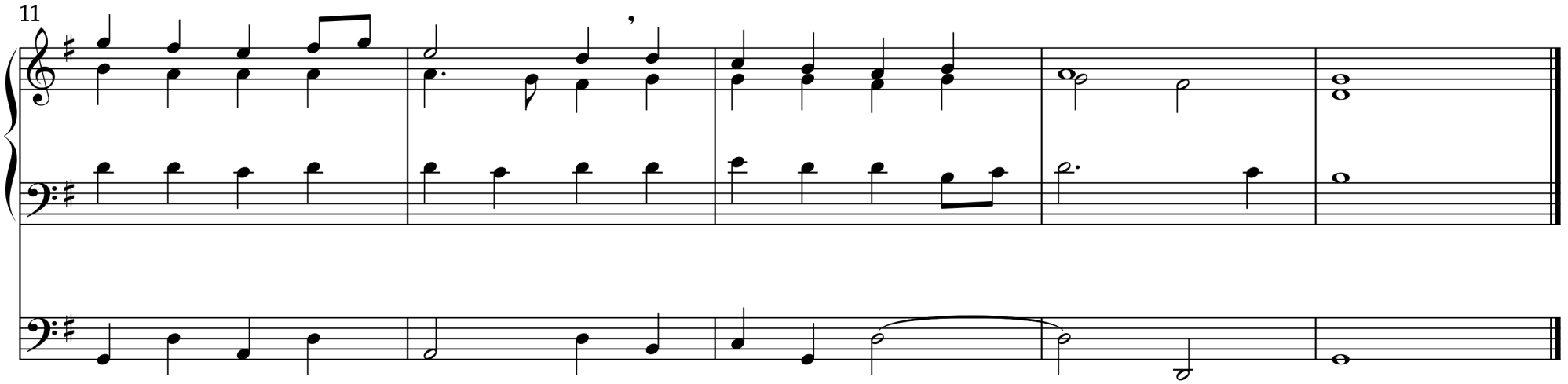

As a final example, listen to this following improvisation, *'Jig in modern style' (Ex.9).* *Sound file.*

As with other dance-like pieces the we have looked at, there are regular and repetitive elements but with some variation too. Perhaps it would be useful to analyse the techniques heard here in reference to other examples that we have looked at.

As we gain experience in shaping simple phrases, it becomes a more subliminal process within the creative act. At whatever length and level of complexity, this will undoubtedly lead to greater greater coherence, variety, and engagement for the listener. And from this we can develop even more complex phrases, metres and overall structures.

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Further materials on improvisation can be found on www.johnrileyorganist.com

All examples were recorded on the Kenneth Jones organ (1989) of Loretto School chapel, Musselburgh.

The Kenneth Jones (1989) organ at Loretto School, Musselburgh.

Specification:
https://www.npor.org.uk/NPORView.html?RI=N09196