BLOW FLUTE: ANSWER ECHOES IN ANTIQUE LANDS DYING

for solo flute

by JENNIFER FOWLER

Preview File Only

Duration: 9½ minutes

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for Solo Flute

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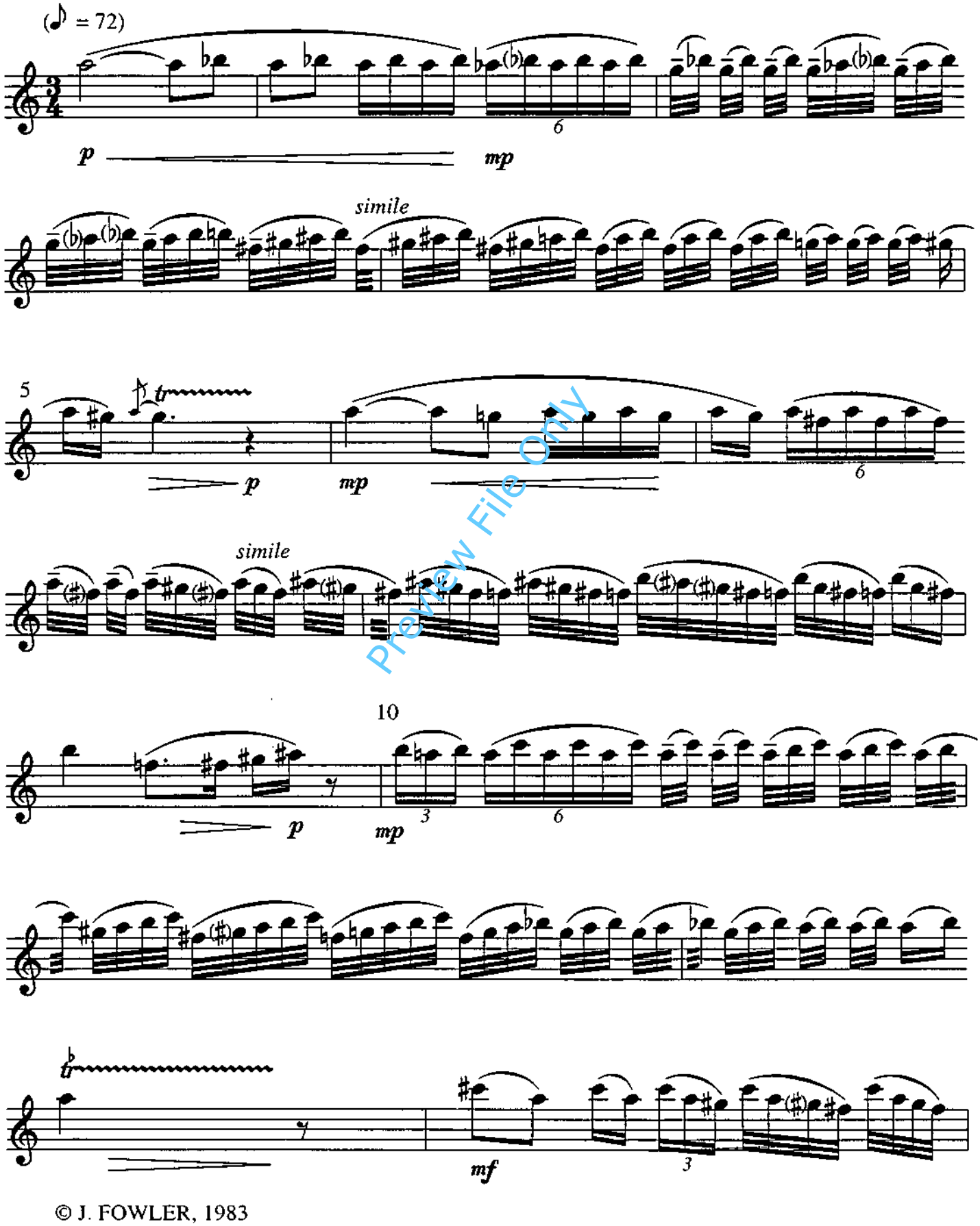

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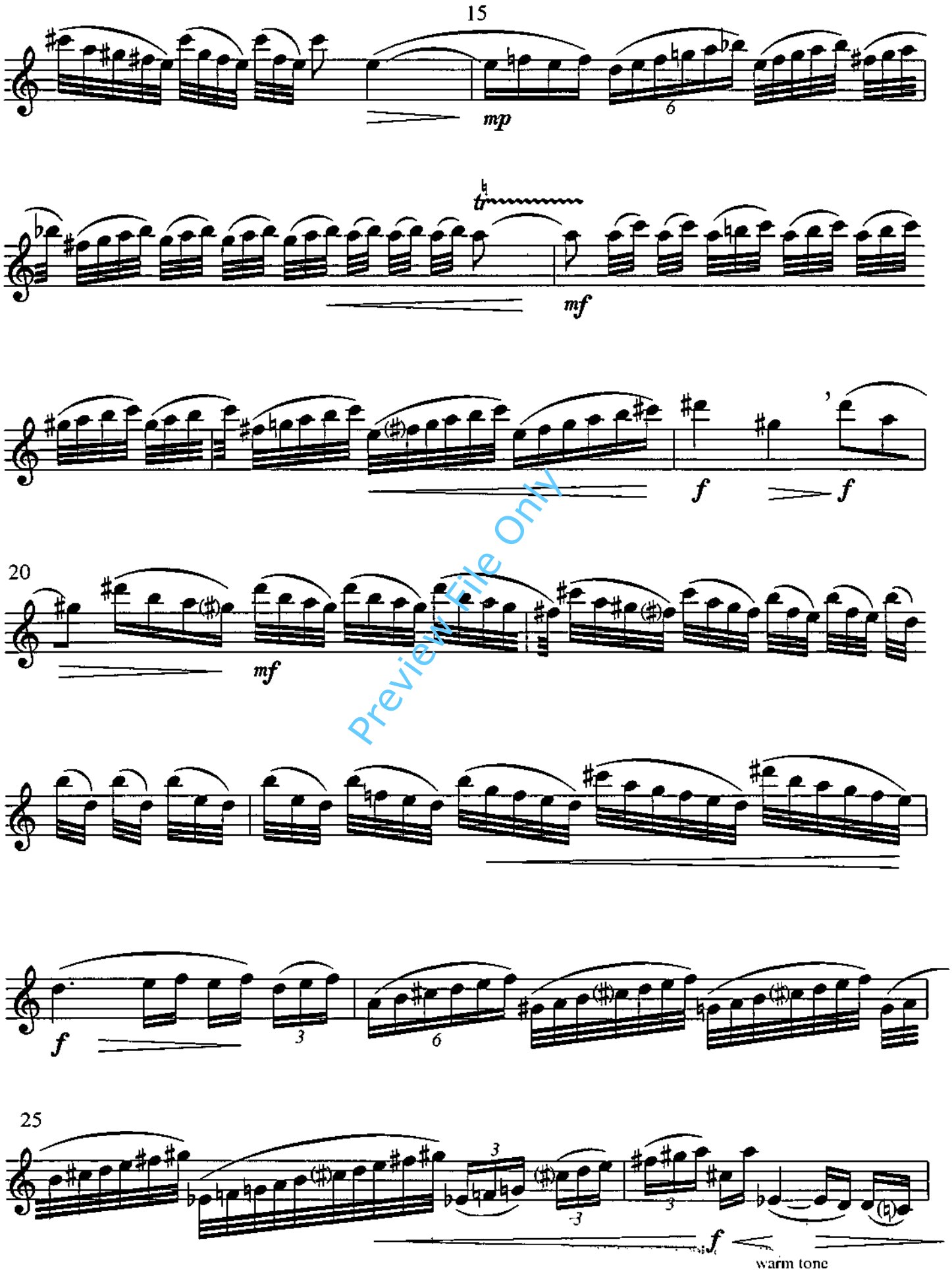

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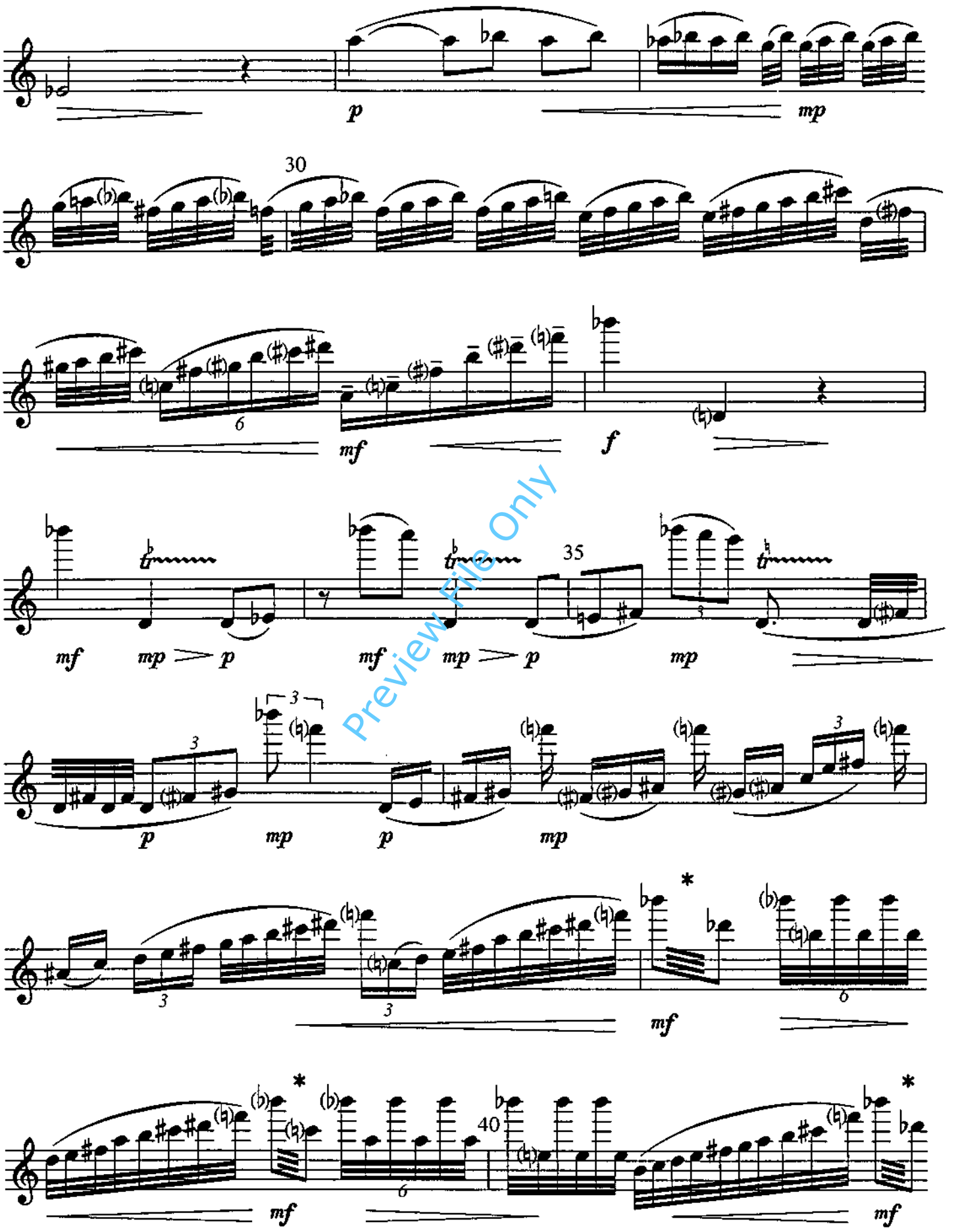

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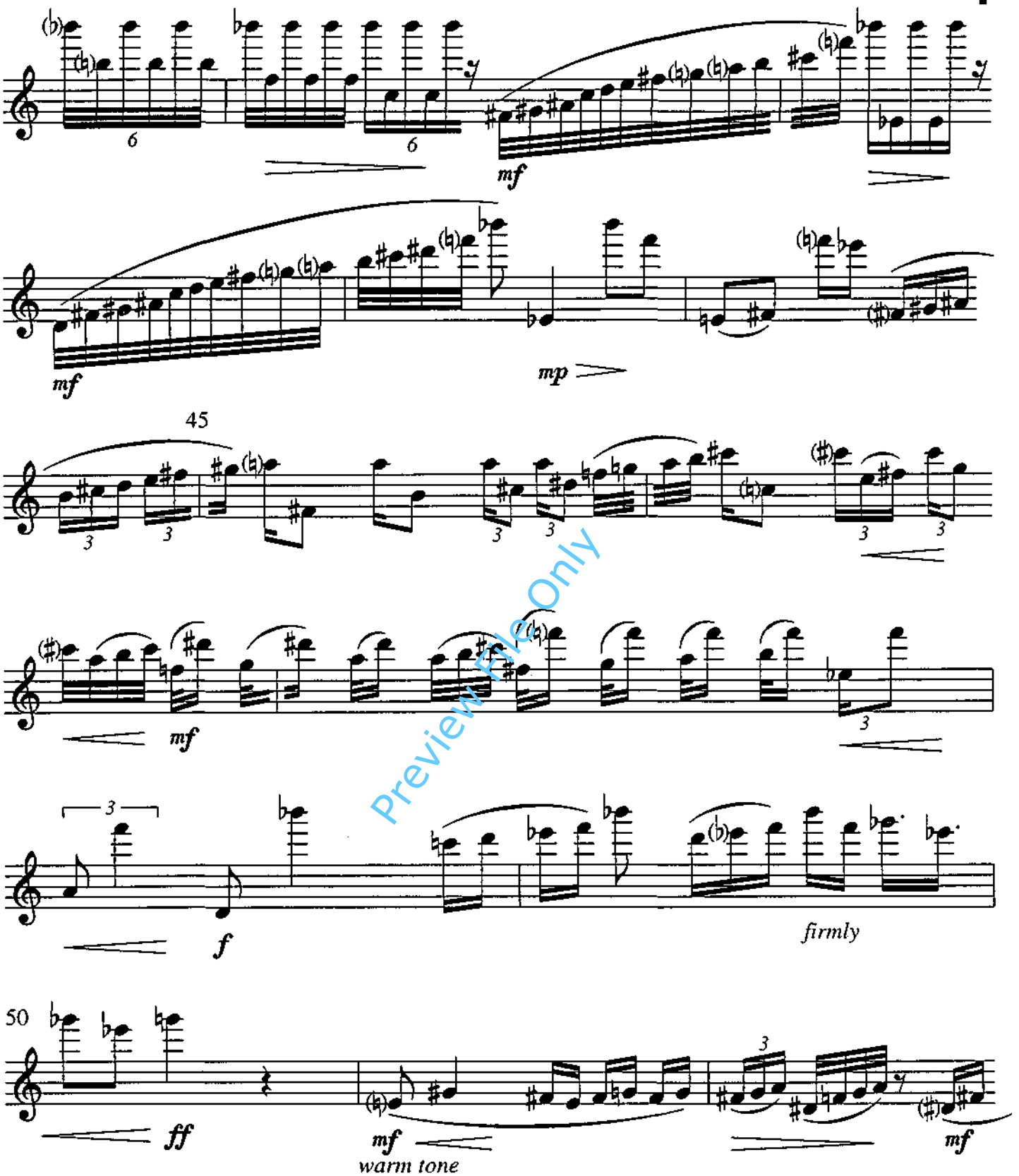
* *all tremolos as fast as possible*



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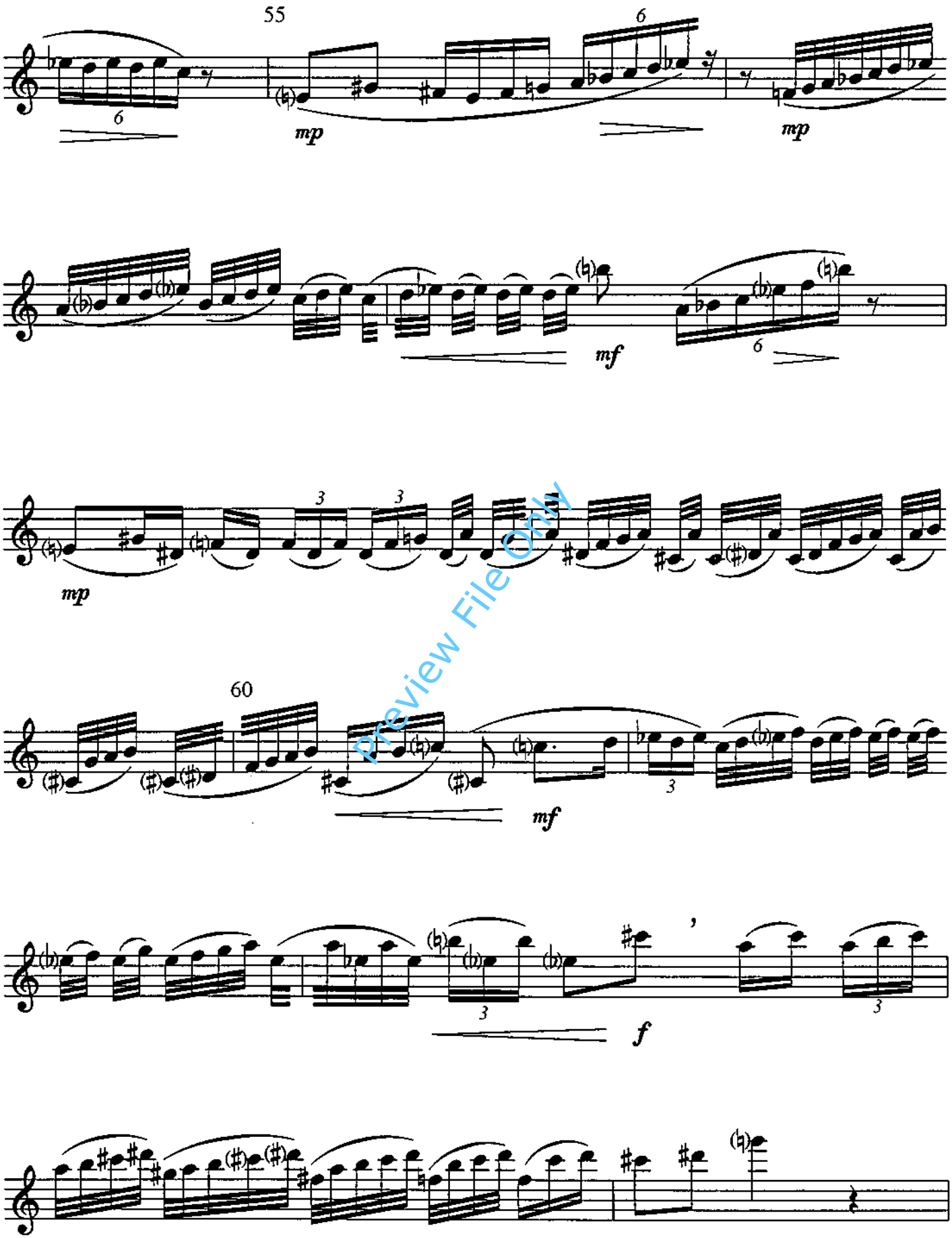

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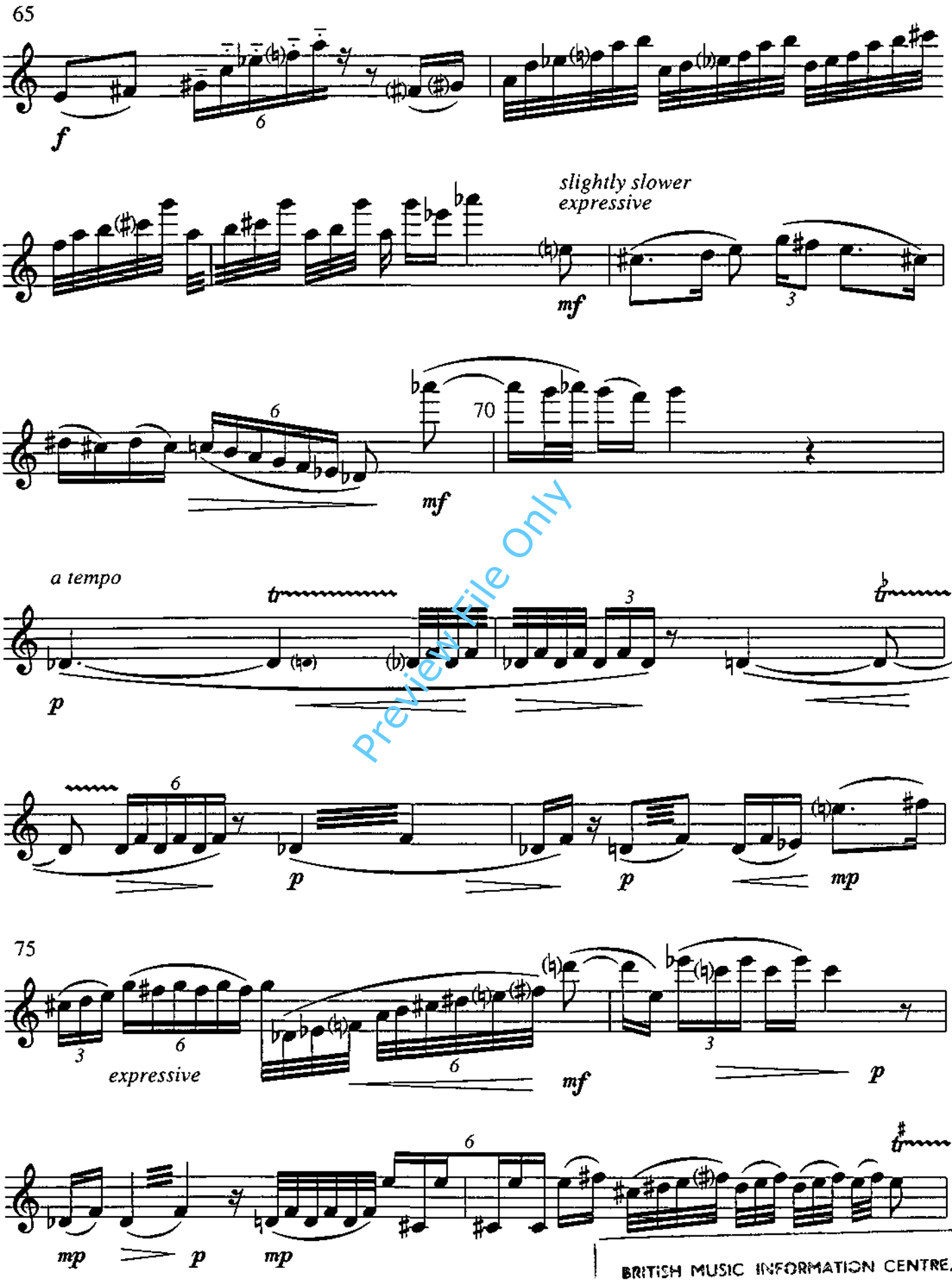

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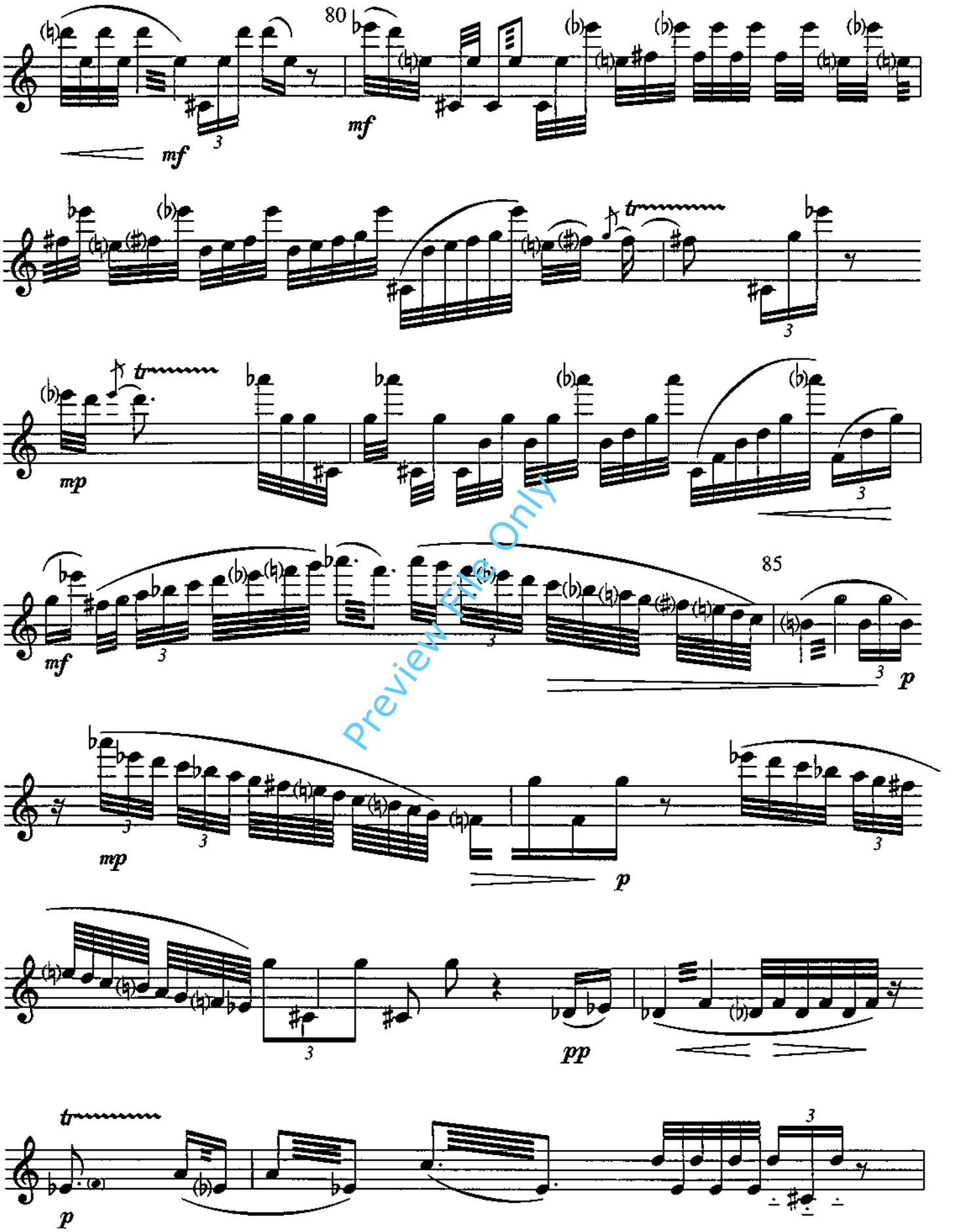

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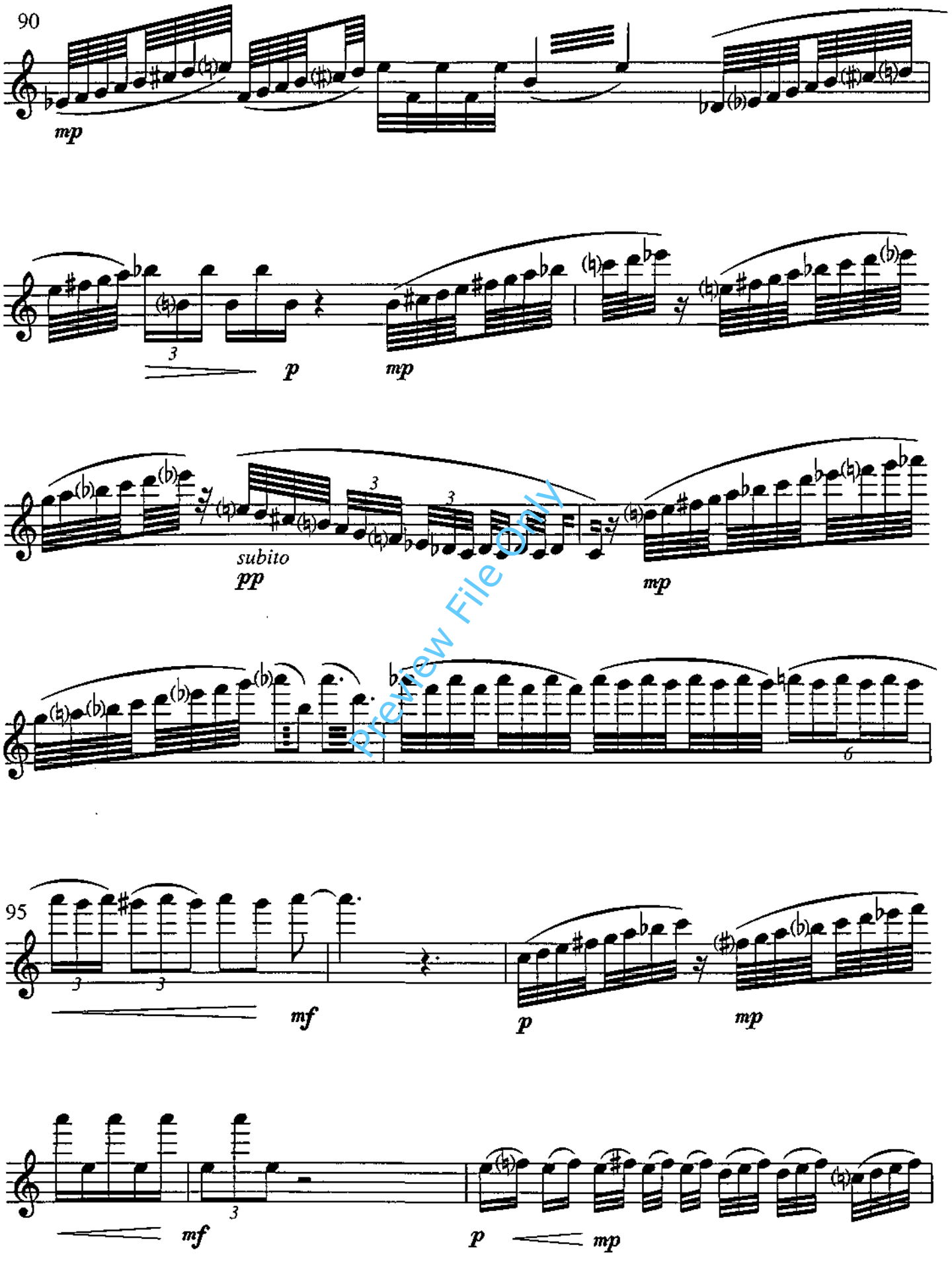

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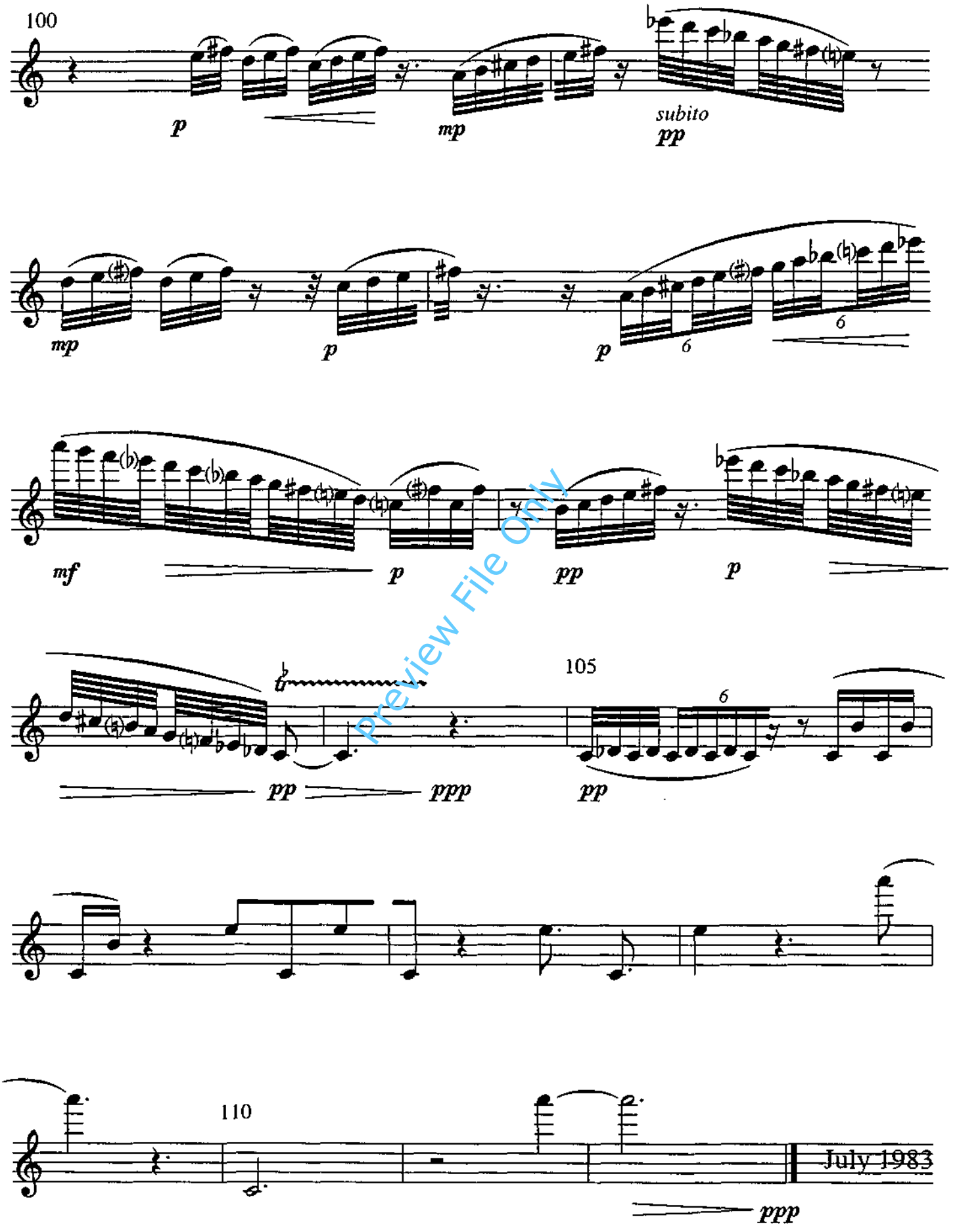

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BY JENNIFER FOWLER

Analysis by Jennifer Fowler.

GENERAL AIMS

I set out with quite specific aims in this piece, mainly in reaction to various things in my own work and the work of other composers. I wanted to see what I could do with straightforward notes: notes that were clear, uncompromising and unambiguous, not blurred in any way. I wanted to see if I could do something new in the way I handled these notes: to use traditional means but with new guiding principles. So I started with some clear ideas of what I *wasn't* going to do.

(a) I would have notes of straight pitch, used one at a time. I would not have split notes; multiphonics; quarter tones; special effects; several instruments winding together, covering each other; or any music which was too fast to register the actual pitch of the notes.

(b) I would concentrate on notes in the middle range of the instrument (ie notes where the instrument could sound its best and most characteristic). I would exploit the whole range, but use the extremes sparsely, for maximum effect.

(c) I would aim for fluidity and flexibility of rhythm by simple means - for instance no "irrational" rhythms (eg 10 in the time of 2).

(d) I would be conscious of the flute as a wind instrument - ie progressing by means of expended breath. So phrasing would be important.

(e) I would sometimes make a feature of a particular simple interval (eg major 3rd), or familiar cadential formula, in order to see if one could hear it with "new ears", for instance by approaching it from out of a fairly restless pitch environment.

[Note: I am conscious that to a student these aims might seem completely unremarkable. So perhaps I should add that I set up these limits in a spirit of radicalism and adventure!]

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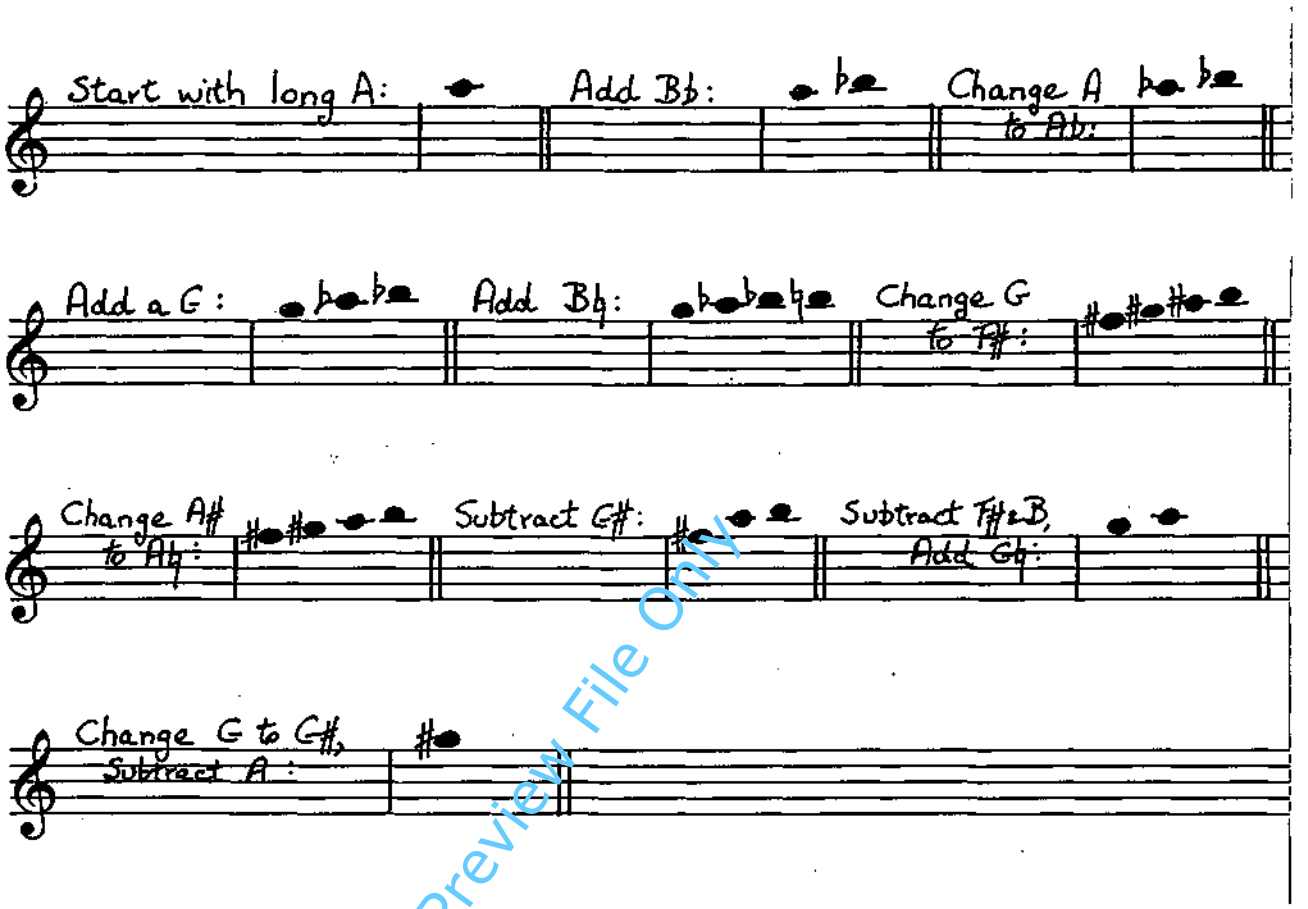
PITCH

At the start, just a few notes at a time are "in play". They progress by means of repetition, addition and subtraction.

Bars 1 - 5. 1st phrase.



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Bars 6 - 9. 2nd phrase.

Begins again on a long A (not as long as before). This time the groups descend. First interval is a tone, not semitone.

[A,G.] Change G to F#: [A,F#.] Add G#: [A,G#,F#.] Change A to A#: [A#,G#,F#] Add F♮: [A#,G#.F#,F♮.] Add B: [B,A#,G#,F#,F♮.] Subtract A#: [B,G#,F#,F♮.] End of phrase curls upwards.

This phrase has a semitone added to the lower end of the range (F♮-B♭) - 7 notes.

Groups of 2, 3, 4, & 5 notes.

Starts as a long note, expands out and ends by an interval defining the extremes (aug 4th), followed by a foldback.

Bars 10 - 12. 3rd phrase.

Dispenses with long note at beginning, starts with oscillation.

Total range F♮ - C♮ (8 notes). Ascending groups. As in 2nd phrase, has 2, 3, 4, or 5 note groups. As before, none repeats more than 3 times.

Starts with two notes, expands out, contracts back to one note.

Bars 13 - 14. 4th phrase.

Begins on a note we haven't heard before.

Total range E - C#, but only uses 5 notes of this (out of poss. 10). Descending groups. Ends on an interval defining the extremes (maj 6th).

Bars 15 - 16. 5th phrase.

Proceed from previous phrase without a break.

Total range D - B♮ (in the trill). Uses 8 (out of poss. 10) notes. Uses a group of 6 notes for the first time. Ascending groups.

Begins on long note. Expanded groups near beginning of phrase then contracts. Ends on oscillation between 2 notes.

Bars 17 - 19. 6th phrase.

Proceeds without a break. Continues with ascending groups. Total range is biggest yet : E - D#. Uses 9 (out of poss. 12) notes. Groups of 2 - 6 notes. Begins on an oscillation and ends on an interval defining part of the total range (perfect 5th). From the previous contraction, expands throughout phrase.

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Bars 19 - 23. 7th phrase.

Descending groups. Total range is biggest yet : D - D# (min. 9th). Uses 10 (out of poss. 14) notes. Groups of 2 - 6 notes. Groups expand, then contract, then expand again.

Bars 23 - 27. 8th phrase.

Proceeds without a break. Ascending groups. Total range C - A (maj 13th). Uses 15 (out of poss. 22 notes). Groups expand from 2 to 10 note groups. Starts with single note, expands to 10 note group, breaks up this group, then ends with an interval defining the best part of the range (aug. 11th).

To recapitulate: Bars 1 - 27.

Each successive phrase tends to expand the total number of notes "in play": 5 notes, 7, 8, 5, 8, 9, 10, 15.

Each phrase expands the range and includes a lower or higher note than we have heard before (even the 5th phrase which is contracting, slips in a low D which we haven't heard previously. 7th phrase doesn't have any new notes, but it makes a feature of the low D we have heard only once before).

In the first few phrases, the repetition of a small number of initial notes serves to emphasize the introduction of a new higher- or lower-than-previously-heard note when it finally arrives, making it sound as though it has broken through some kind of barrier.

On the other hand, in bar 13, a new high note (C#) is introduced without any preliminaries, on the prominent position of 1st note of a phrase. In bar 15, a new note (D) is slipped in. However, in this phrase the upper boundary of Bb is emphasized so much that the B♭ (in the trill, bar 16) sounds like a break-through, even though we have had this note earlier in the piece. The low D is taken up and firmly established in bars 21 - 23. Finally the expansion in bars 23 - 27 is much more rapid than previous expansions and achieves a more final-sounding rest point.

In general, the pitch is always going somewhere: heading up, heading down, adding new notes, expanding or contracting, but with enough changes of direction as to be unpredictable. The notes within each group tend to progress in steps of tones and semitones. This means that they often co-incide with the notes we would expect in an ordinary major or minor scale, but the context is restless and fluid.

To continue: Bars 28 - 32.

Returns to beginning. Expands out as before, but instead of contracting makes a rapid expansion and ends with an interval defining the extremes (min 20th).

Bars 33 - 50.

Pitch splits into two; alternates between extremes of range (high Bb and low D), then gradually fills up the gap. Alternates between upward runs and oscillations from the top. Ends on a new note (high G).

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Bars 51 - 52.

New start. Emphasizes interval of upward major 3rd (low E - G#). Register lies between D# - A (dim. 5th).

Bars 52 - 54.

Expands range to major 9th.

Bars 55 - 57.

Returns to low E - G#. This time rapidly expands upwards (perfect 12th).

Bars 58 - 60.

Returns again to E - G#. Slower expansion. Covers range C# - C♮ (maj .7th).

Bar 61 - 62.

Range C♮ - C# (min. 9th). Always ascending. Continuous with previous phrase - keeps momentum going.

Bars 62 - 64.

Keeps momentum. Further ascending groups, (from bar 58, a sweep of dim. 19th), ending at high G.

Bars 65 - 67.

Returns to low E. Ascends rapidly to high Ab. More jagged ascending movement.

Bar 68 is a quotation from the Tomkins motet: "When David Heard" (O Absolem, my son).

Bars 68 - 69 has the first descending movement heard for many pages, in otherwise unrelenting ascending scales (psychological effect?). Jumps an interval which defines the register of this part of the piece (from bar 51) - perfect 19th, and ends with a cadence.

Bar 71 - 76: New beginning on low Db. Three levels of pitch, sketchily filled in.

Bar 77 - 82: Return to low Db. Same three levels of pitch explored further, with jumps between them.

Bars 82 - 87: Range expands to (roughly) 4 levels of pitch with jumps between. Lowest level remains the low Db (retained as a kind of pedal note, since bar 71). Ends with some contrasting downward scales.

Bars 88 - 96: Moves off from low Db again. In bar 92 a downward scale, inserted as a pp parenthesis, introduces the lowest note of the flute (C♮) without dwelling on it. (We have not previously heard this note anywhere in the piece). The ascending runs are pushing insistently on the high Ab, which has been an upper "pedal note" since bar 67. Eventually breaks through this barrier to an A♮.

Bar 96 to end: The momentum begins to evaporate. In bar 103 we come to rest on the low C. Expands from there to various oscillations involving the low C, until ends on a slow oscillation with high A, defining the final expansion of the piece: a major 20th.

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RHYTHM

In order to achieve fluidity, the rhythm progresses in even notes of small value (mainly demi-semi-quavers), grouped into uneven bundles of 2, 3, 4, 5 (up to 16) units. These groups of notes steadily expand or contract and effectively dispel any idea of an underlying metre. The aim is for a line which will sound fluid, yet have rhythmic impetus and momentum; in which gathering accumulations and dispersions will give a feeling of eddies and currents.

PHRASING

The rhythm also helps to define the shape of the phrases. Each phrase almost invariably begins and ends in slower note values. Even when there is no pause at the end of a phrase, this then helps identify the phrase shape. The typical, almost invariable, rhythmic shape of each phrase is: Slower note values; groups of fast even notes; larger groups of fast even notes; (mostly but not always) followed by smaller groups of fast notes; then slower note values.

The expansion and contraction of pitch within the phrases, has already been dealt with.

The length of phrases varies considerably. Taken in crotchet beats it goes something like this (continuity makes the exact length slightly ambiguous):

Bars 1 - 27: 15, 12, 9, 6, 6½, 7½, 11½, 13½ [Cadence after 27 bars].

As can be seen, the phrase lengths also define, over a longer span, a definite progression of expansion and contraction.

Bars 28 - 50. 15, the next bit you could regard as broken at the beginning in 3½, 3½, 3½, or in one full sweep of 32, which then carries straight on to a further 22 beats. [Cadence after 22 bars].

Bars 51 - 64: 4½, 7½, 9, 9, 5 + 7.

Bars 65 - 70: 2½, 6, 9½. [Cadence after 20 bars].

Bars 71 - 76: 4½, 3½, 1½, 2, 6½.

Bars 77 - 87: 1½, 7½, 7½, 9, 2½, 4.

Bars 87 - 96: 2½, 5, 5½, 4 + 11½. [Cadence after 26 bars].

Bars 97 - 104: 6, 4, 3½, 2, 3½, 5½

Bars 105 - end: 2, 2½, 3, 4, 12½. [Cadence after 16 bars].

The piece thus divides into sections, each of which has a pattern of phrase lengths.

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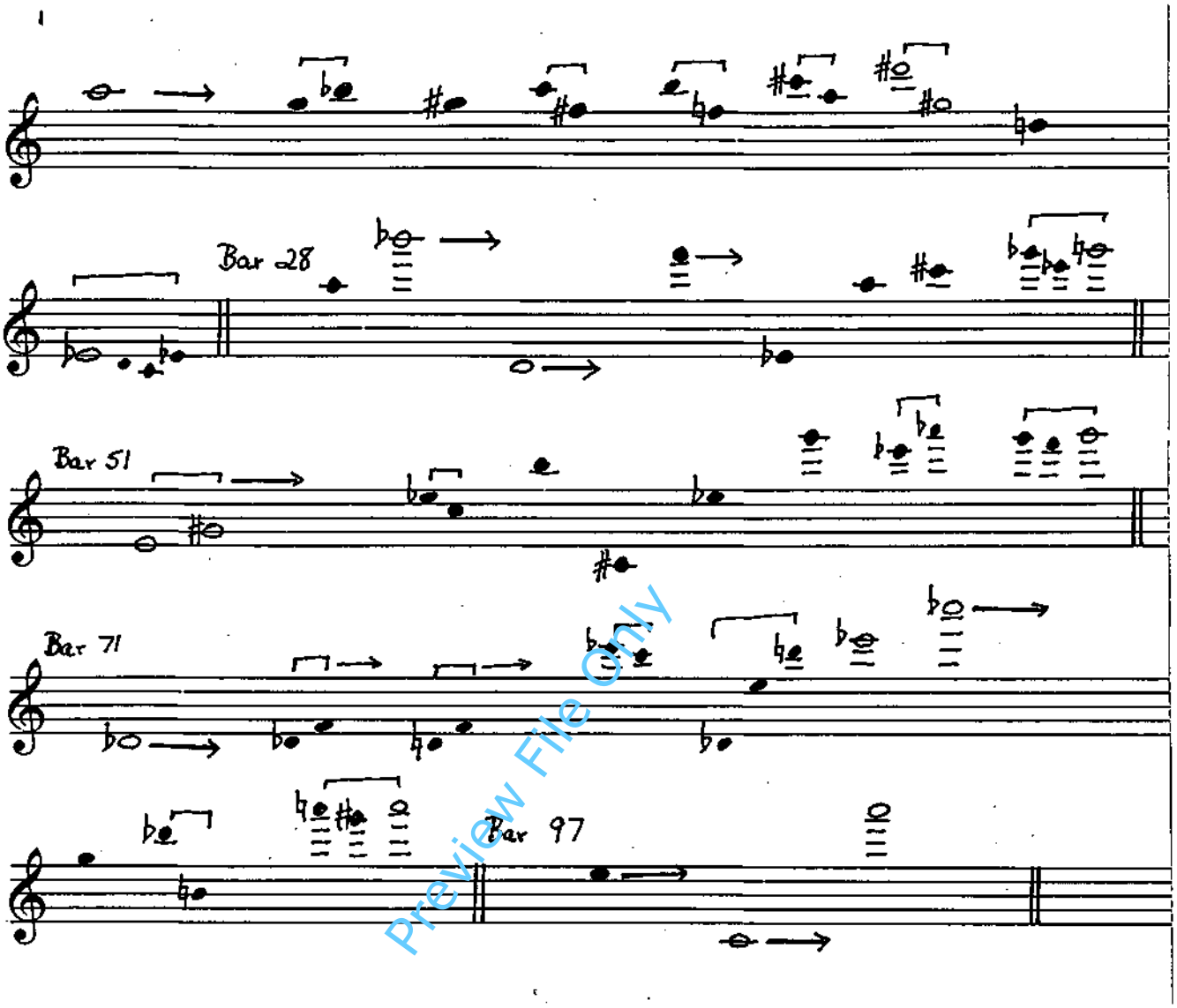
CADENCES, NODAL POINTS, [HARMONY?]

Some notes are obviously more important than others: because of their context, their relative length, their repetition and so on. Similarly some intervals are given an emphasis. One can pick out notes or intervals which, from out of a fairly restless flow, convey a psychological feeling of "settling", to a greater or lesser extent. There are even some spots in the piece which build to a deliberate cadential formula, for instance the cadence in bars 26 & 27 which is a borrowing of an archaic 15th century cadence (one of the "echoes" implied in the title). The idea of this was to see if one could use cadences for their "settling" implications in a piece not organised as a tonal structure.

Perhaps the easiest way to map the more significant notes, the nodal points, is simply to pick some out, as follows. This is just a rough choice, someone else could make a different choice.

White notes are more significant than black; arrows indicate that the feature returns several times; brackets join notes that are part of the same feature.



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FINAL REMARKS

Analysing a piece like this might sometimes seem to be a cold and calculating activity - like pinning down a dead butterfly perhaps, in order to observe it better! I should perhaps remark that analysing is a different activity from composing. The decisions a composer makes will be partly thought out and partly based on an instinct for what feels right. So by analysing this piece, I am approaching it differently than when I composed it and, yes, I did find some things I hadn't observed before. I have the advantage of knowing the piece well, and of being aware of some of the aims underlying it, but otherwise I am in the position of observer, along with anyone else.

Analysis which is simply looking for straight description: this happens, then that, then that.... would be boring and pointless. I have tried to hint that the interest of the activity lies somewhere in the closely interlinked questions: Why did the composer choose this (note or whatever) rather than something else, and what psychological effect does the choice have on the person experiencing the piece? Especially in the second part of the question other people may well disagree with things I have said. However, I do think that attempting to answer these kinds of questions can be valuable and lead to a more active listening. Would it be too fanciful to say that the butterfly is not dead, just stunned to find itself the centre of attention, and eager to flutter off, joined by all those who are searching for the secret of flight?

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