THE CREATIVE ORGANIST
Some strategies for improvisation
by John Riley

The PowerPoint aims to:-

- Provide some practical models for use within the church service…(and avoid ‘wallpaper preludes’!)
- Provide some wider insights into musical style – improvisations do not need to be ‘modern’ to be ‘original’.
- Widen creative horizons and exploring styles, genres and the possibilities of the organ well beyond its role in church worship.
- Provide models for the related and overlapping area of written compositions.

“SOME MISCONCEPTIONS….
Improvisation is a separate and mysterious art”

No - Improvisation is essentially ‘composition speeded up’ and feeds from and into all aspects of music…

E.g.

- Keyboard harmony.
- General composition.
- Performing and listening to the repertoire.
- General organ management.
- Analysing and appreciating different styles and formats of music.

“Improvisation is mainly a useful ‘filler’ – or to create an appropriate background ambience”

No – improvisation is far more:-

- Improvisation is a serious art form worthy of care and cultivation.
- An improvisation should go beyond just providing an appropriate background ambience – it is something to engage the ear fully.
- An improvisation should and can be music of substance and value in its own right.
- Music should not be just wallpaper - If it’s not worth saying – don’t say it!

“Improvisation is just for the gifted few”.

No….

- With practice, self-awareness and discipline, any organist can improvise.
- The art is to use a vocabulary and level of complexity that is appropriate for one’s level of experience – more anon.

“With so much printed music available, there is no need to improvise….”

Yes – there is….

Improvisation is a *creative* tool.

- Improvisation gives immediacy to the creative process.
- Improvising is a single creative conception – encompassing all dimensions of music – composition; instrumental colour; performance.

Improvisation is a *practical* tool…

- Length, mood and thematic content can be created to fit a given situation, (e.g. links within the church service, hymn extensions… or if somebody has just dropped the collection plate!)
- Improvisation skills can be a lifesaver –e.g. memory gap; misplaced page turn etc. etc.

Improvisation can be a confidence builder…

- The knowledge that you are not totally reliant on the printed page.

MEMORY IS THE KEY!

- **Memory files** a repertoire of possible musical building blocks, e.g. rhythms, melodic shapes, harmonic progressions etc.
- **Memory** informs what material has been presented, from which we can develop and balance it appropriately with other material. Concise and characterful material will greatly help this process.

PROCESSING POWER TOO!

- **Processing power** governs how much material can be successfully handled at the same time, as the processer **accesses** the various options on file. However, if the demands of the task outstrip available processing power, everything can **run slow** or, worst of all at erratic speed; **freeze** or totally **crash**; even require an embarrassing **reboot** during the performance!

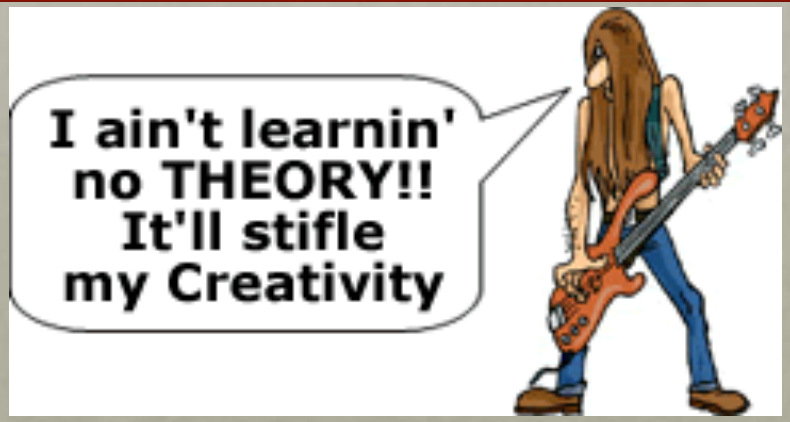
i.e. for best results keep it simple!

Simpler, i.e. fewer memory and processing demands.	**Advanced, i.e. much greater memory and processing demands.**
• Slow tempo. • Simple texture. • Lots of repetition. • Short length, e.g. brief linking interlude on a hymn tune. • Set parameters, e.g. improvising on a written out melodic and/or harmonic outline, such as a hymn tune. • Few compositional choices and decisions to make.	• Fast tempo • Complex texture. • Lots of different material. • More substantial length, e.g. an improvised final voluntary. • Few given parameters, e.g. a given 'theme' for a concert improvisation. • Many compositional choices and decisions.

GOOD NEWS …We get continuous upgrades

- i.e. - experience leads to greater facility. Conscious and explicit structures and guides – e.g. a given chord pattern - gradually become embedded into the subconscious, but they are nevertheless **running in the background.** (Driving a car similarly involves many instinctive and subconscious processes that come from experience).

“Improvisation means total freedom from music theory and rules”



On the contrary….. theory and music terminology can help to provide the frameworks and safety nets to channel creativity in a meaningful and liberating way….

An improvisation is like a sermon, it should:-

- Engage immediately.
- Carry the listener forward in anticipation.
- Communicate as much as possible with the smallest of means.
- End with a clear and memorable conclusion.

Above all – **avoid** an aimless start in the hope that a salient idea and overall purpose will gradually emerge.

….FINE AND GOOD…..BUT HOW?

ESTABLISH FROM THE OUTSET…

- **Pulse**… without which everything will be undermined.
- **Metre – single or mixed** (no 4 ½ beats in a bar!)
- **'Theme'/memorable idea –** capable of being developed **OR** a 'hook' that creates anticipation.
- **Mood & character:-** e.g. Jubilant, reflective; grand; jolly; conveyed through such aspects as tempo, type of rhythm and registration. Keep it organically linked, e.g. avoid a lullaby turning into an exuberant fanfare.
- **Style –** e.g. Renaissance, Scottish, Classical, Jazz/ Blues, 'English' modal etc.
- **Musical form/genre** – e.g. Decorated melody, 'song form', chorale prelude, variations above a bass etc.

GIVE IT SHAPE!

Overall Structure - An effective opening material can be lost if it soon loses the plot and direction. Just like an advert or a film, …or conversation.

For example:-

- ABA (ternary) form.
- ABACA etc. (Rondo) form.
- Theme and variation.
- Decoration of an existing melody.

…AND FINALLY- MAKE IT MANAGEABLE!

(you can only keep so many balls in the air, or plates spinning at the same time…)

Improvisation has lots of simultaneous demands… so aim for:-

- Simplicity of materials
- Stable hand positions – and harmonies
- Restrict parameters of length
- Repeat or develop what is there – not keep adding more
- Economy of gesture – make everything count
- Keep it short

CREATING STRUCTURE– Building phrases

Phrases are the building blocks of music

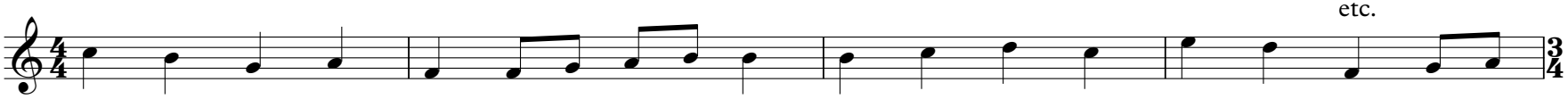
- Phrases that are identical
- Phrases that are slightly varied
- Phrases that are complimentary
- Phrases that are contrasting

(E.g. 'Ellacombe' and theme from Haydn's Surprise' Symphony)

Building Phrases

Poor

MELODY 1



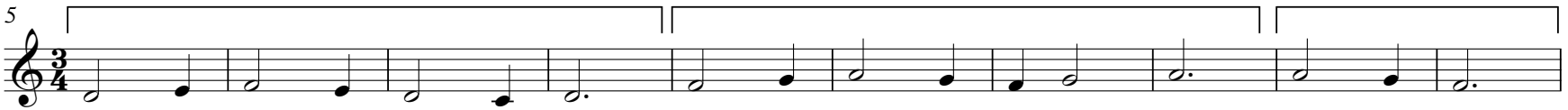
Better

MELODY 2

Theme

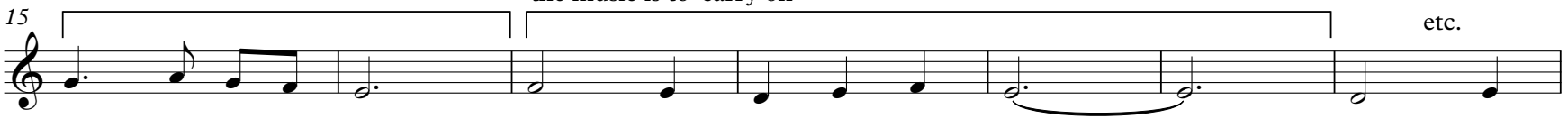
Theme transposed and varied

Theme segmented



Transposed and decorated as sequence

Ending on 'weak note' ('E'), suggesting a I - V cadence;
the music is to 'carry on'



© John Riley 2016

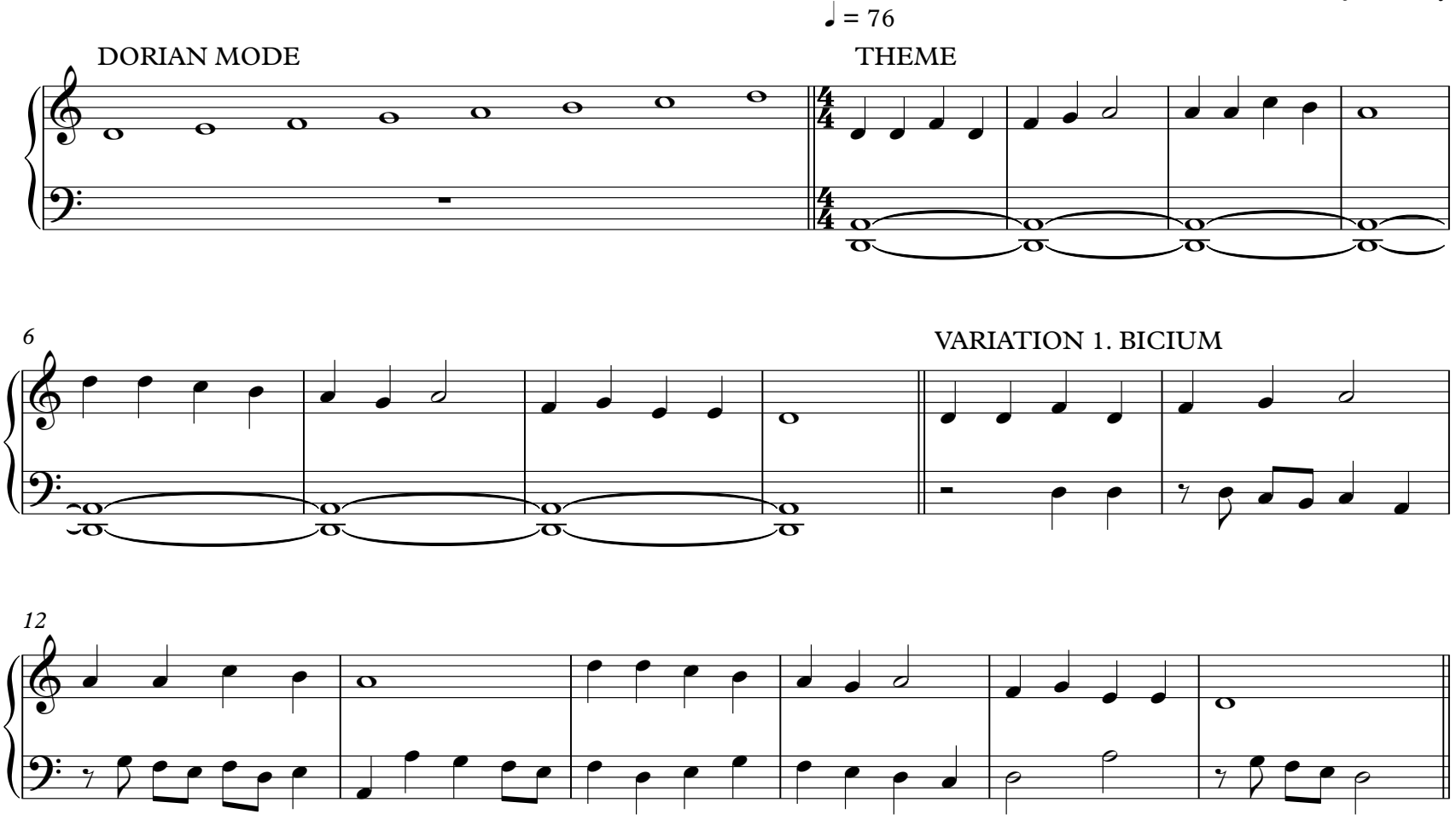
BASIC VOCABULARY – Using the modes.

Modes, especially the traditional ‘church’ modes have many advantages for improvisation over diatonic keys.

- Notes within the mode generally blend well with other notes.
- The notes can be easily found, e.g. the Dorian mode is all the white notes D to D’.
- Each mode has a particular flavour and modes are part of the basic language of much early music and music from the last 100 years or so.
- Music within the modes can still create varied harmony and counterpoint with various degrees of dissonance and consonance – tension and release.

Theme and Variations in the Dorian Mode

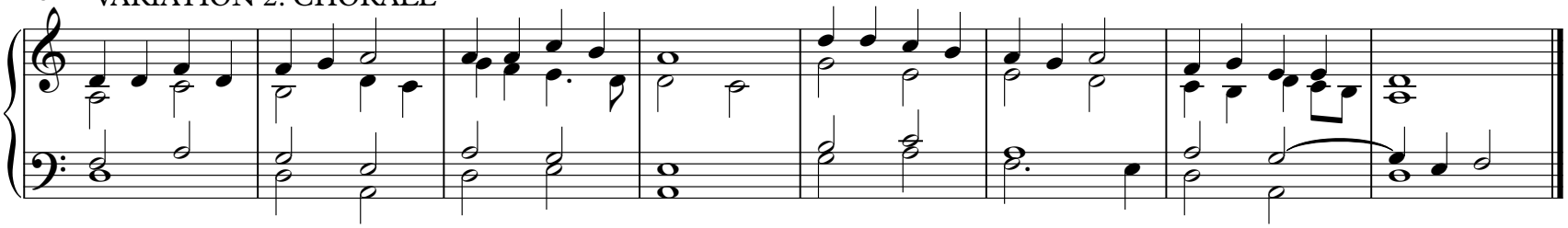
John Riley



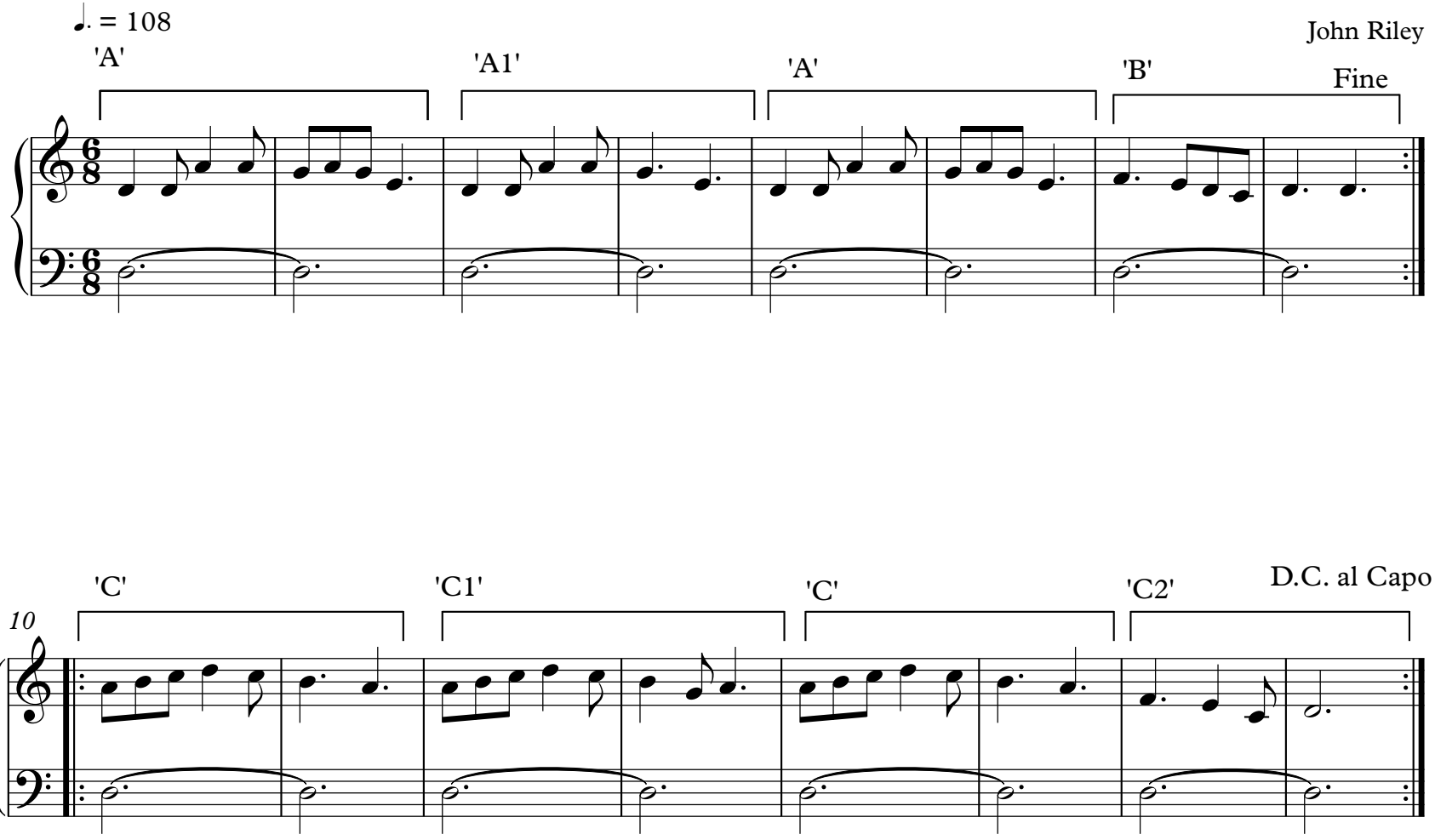
© John Riley 2017

Variation 2 - over

18 VARIATION 2. CHORALE

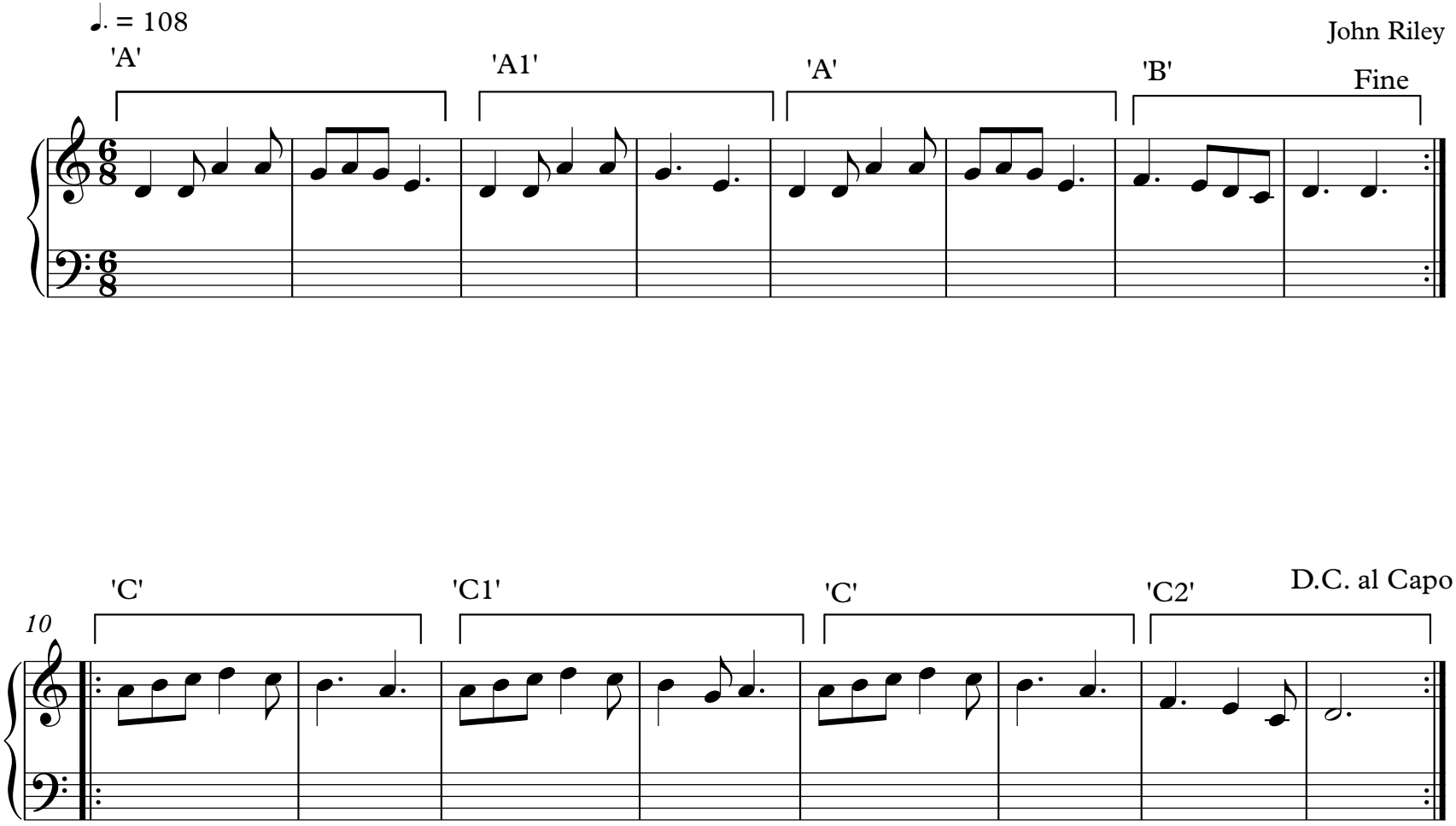


Jig in the Dorian Mode



© John Riley 2016

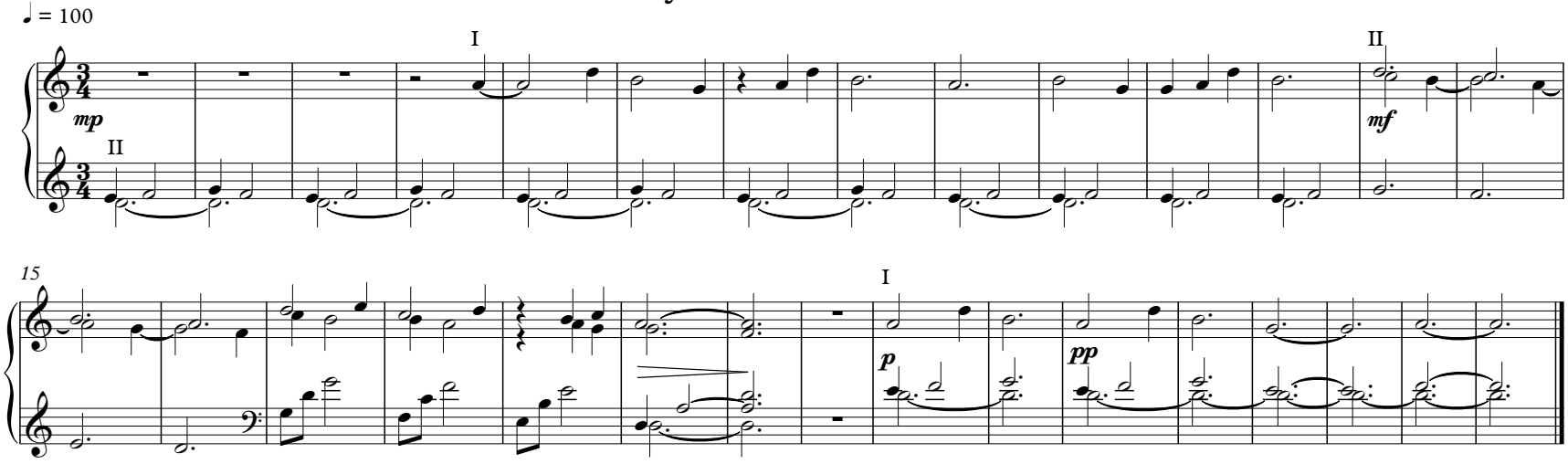
Jig in the Dorian Mode (Exercise ....create accompaniment)



© John Riley 2016

Lullaby in Dorian Mode

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

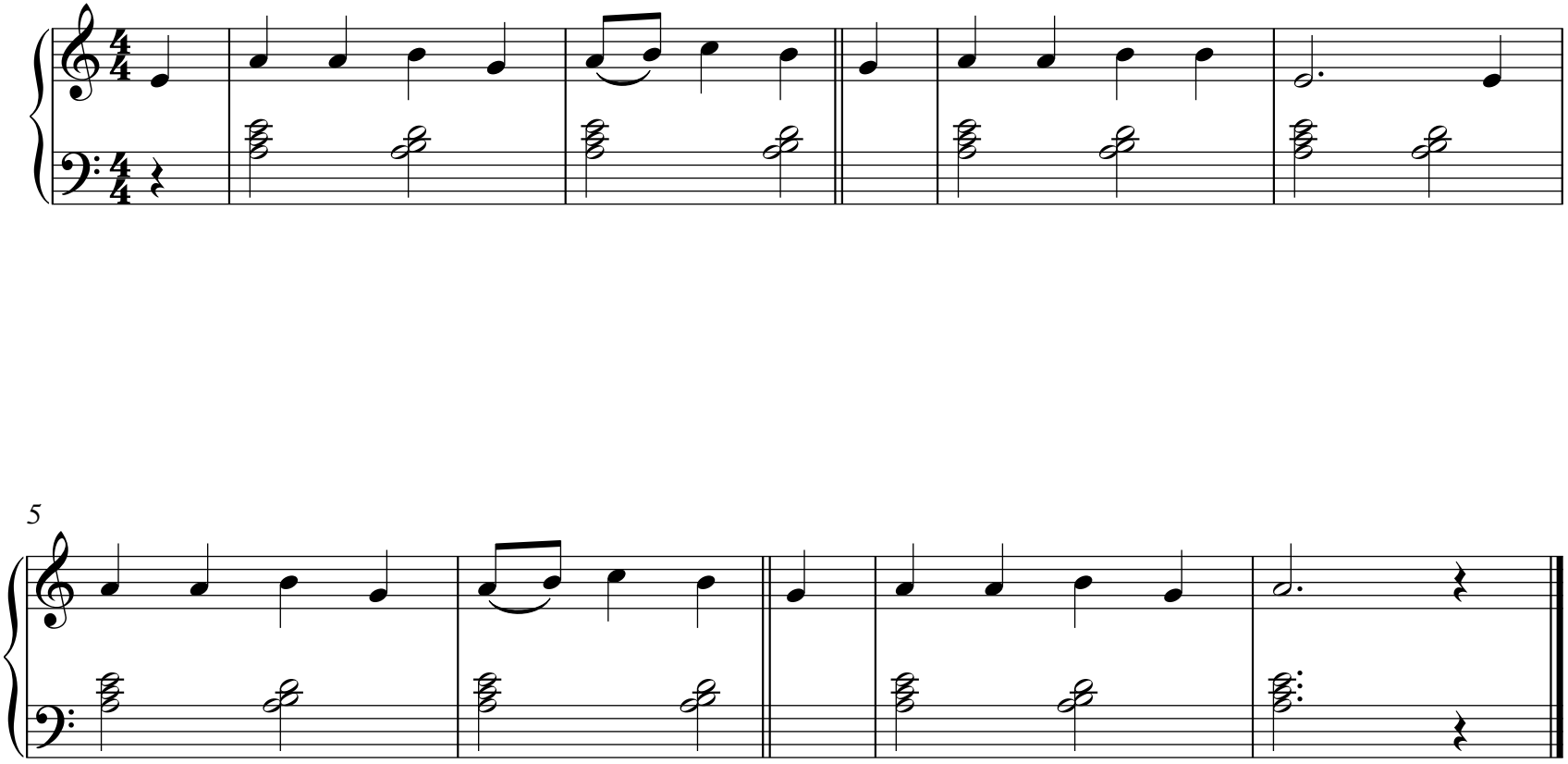
CREATING STRUCTURE– Word Rhythms

There are various ways of structuring an improvisation using the rhythms and broader patterns of words:-

- Individual words
- Phrases
- Whole hymn verses
- Shadow the rhythms of existing hymn tunes
- Wordless metre

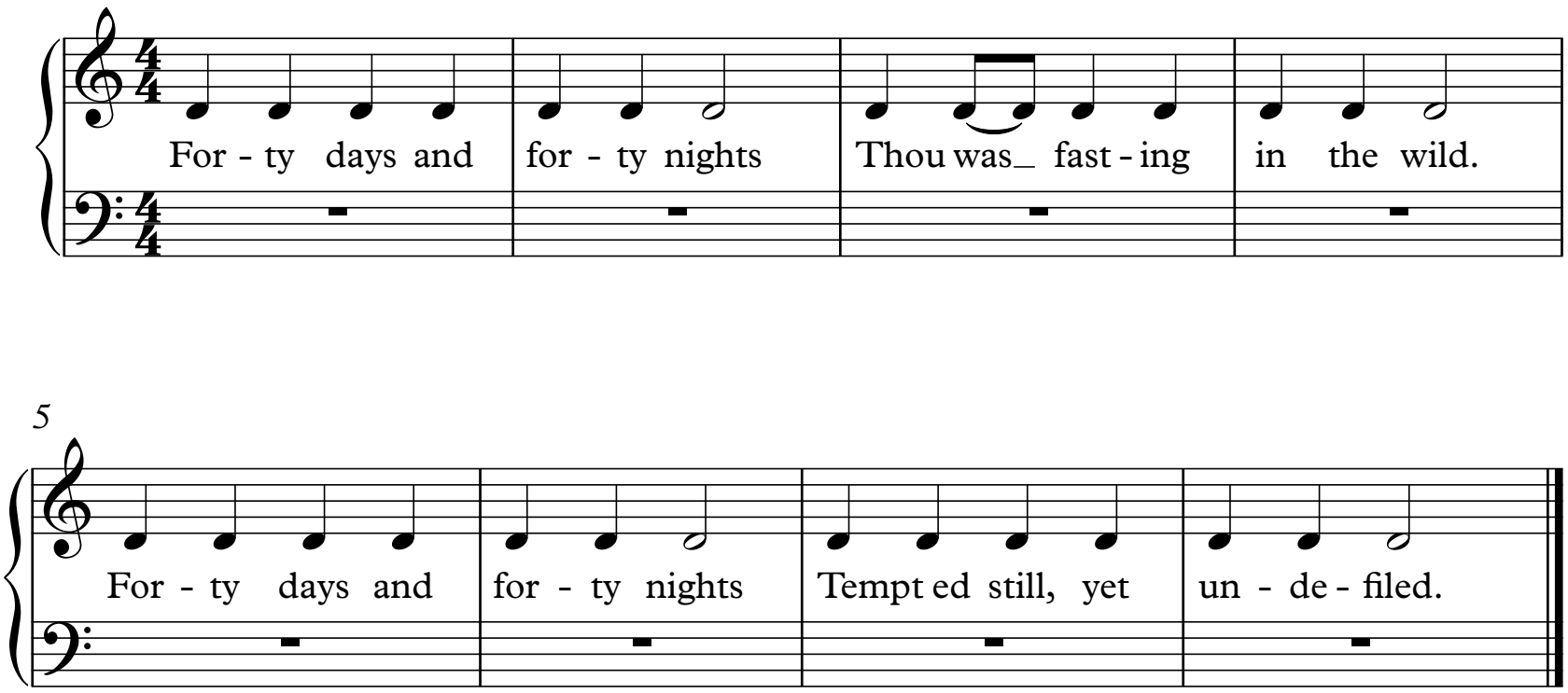
C.M. Melody (8.6.8.6.) in the Aeolian Mode

John Riley



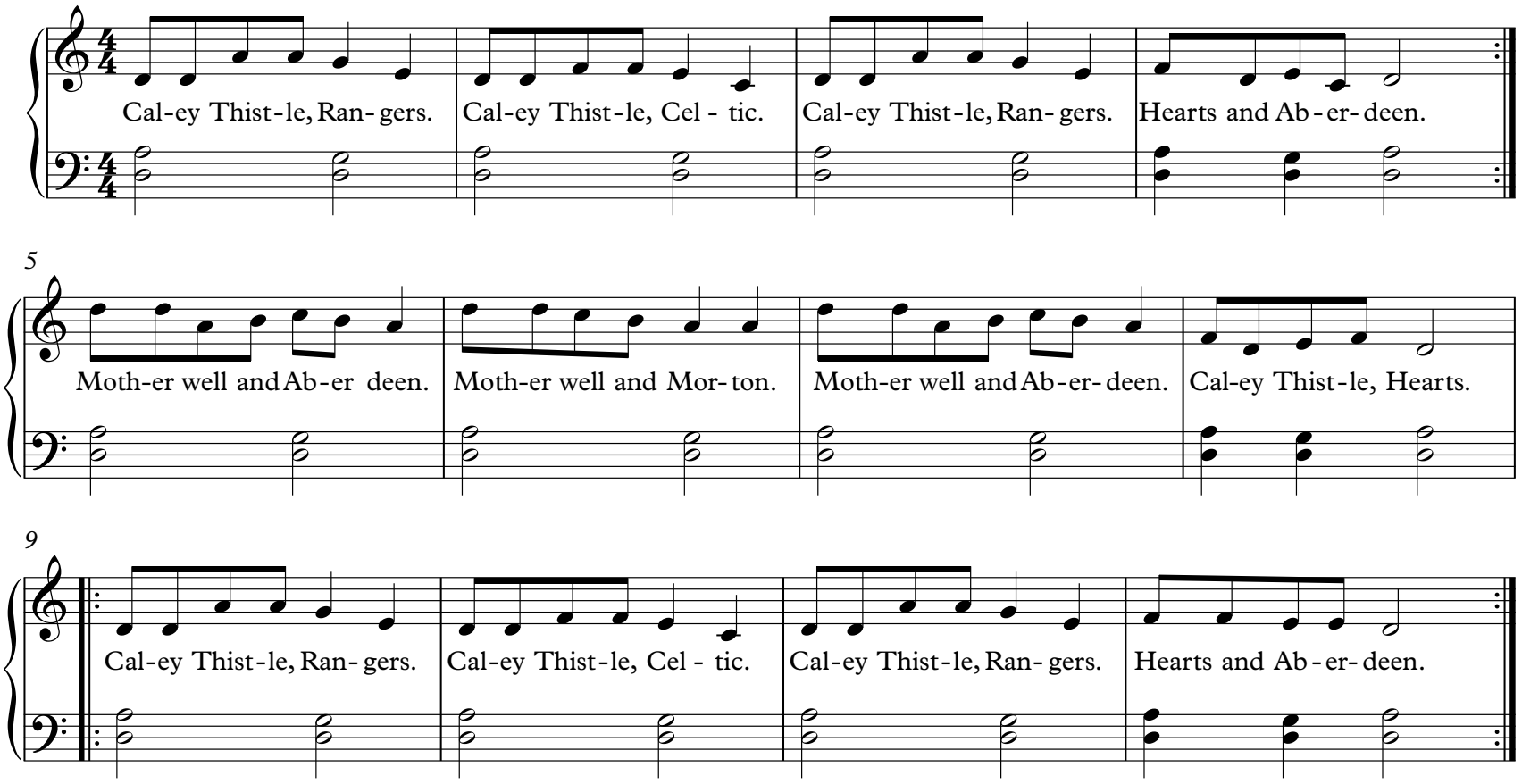
© John Riley 2016

Rhythmic template (7.7.7.7.)
(Suggested mode:- Dorian or Aeolian)



Word rhythms (Football Song) - Dorian Mode

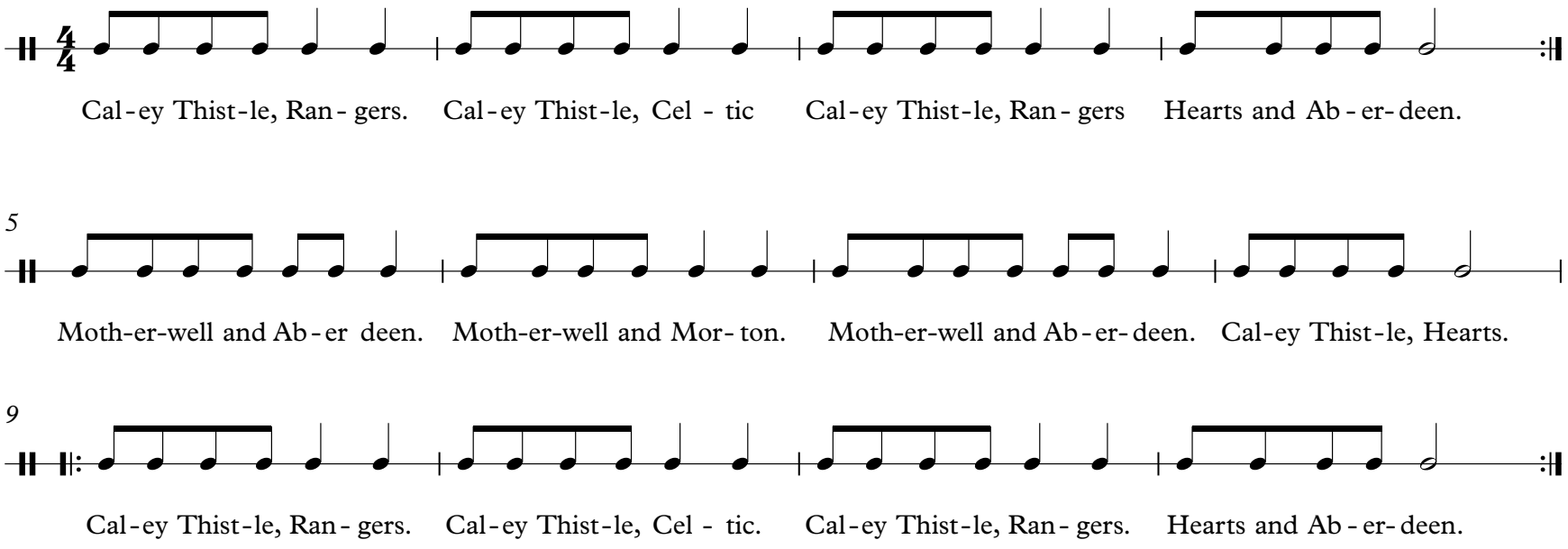
John Riley



OPTIONAL PEDAL 'D'

© John Riley 2016

Word rhythms (Football Song) - Rhythm only

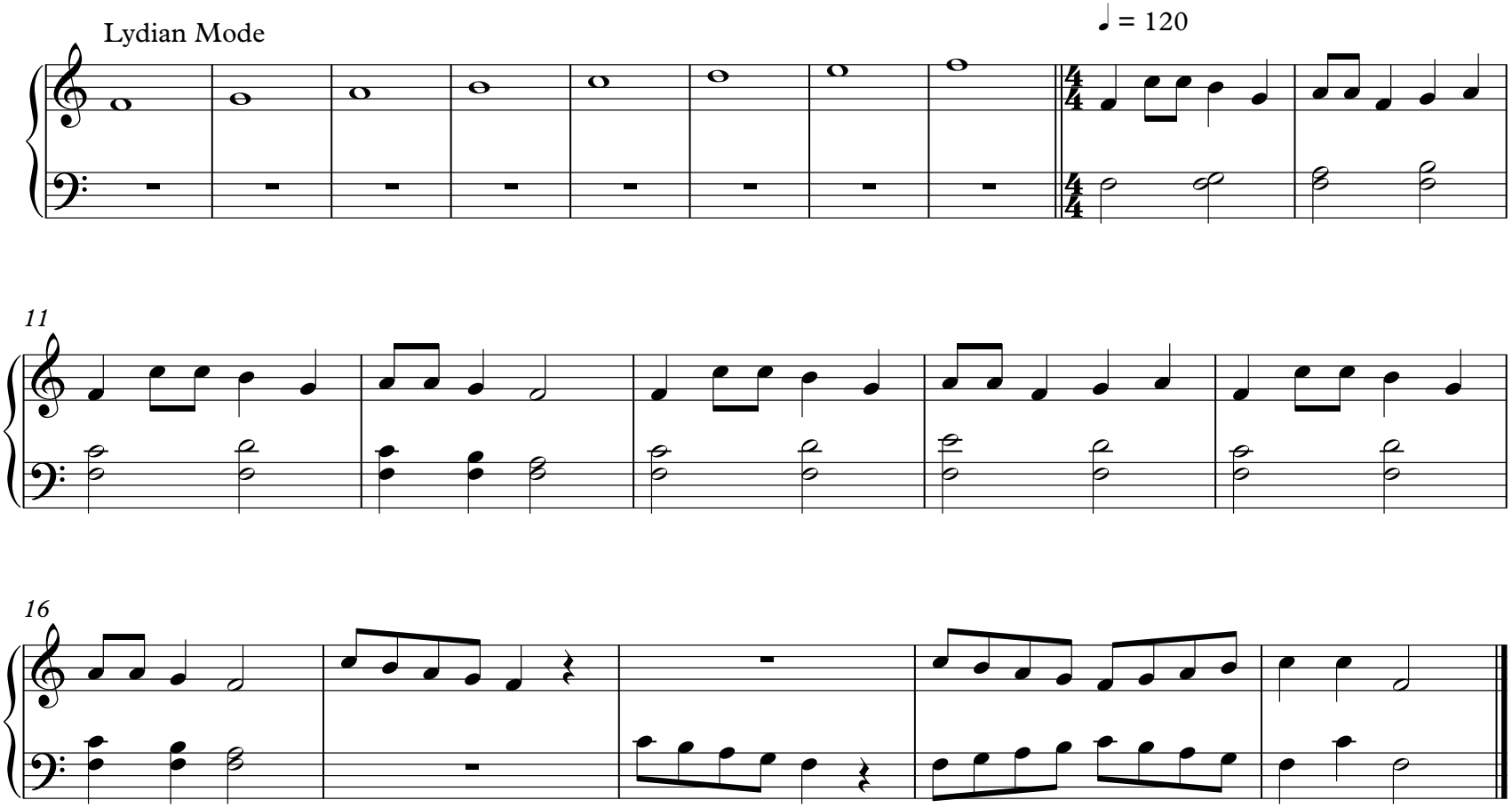


© John Riley 2016

Some further exploration of modes….

Dance in the Lydian Mode

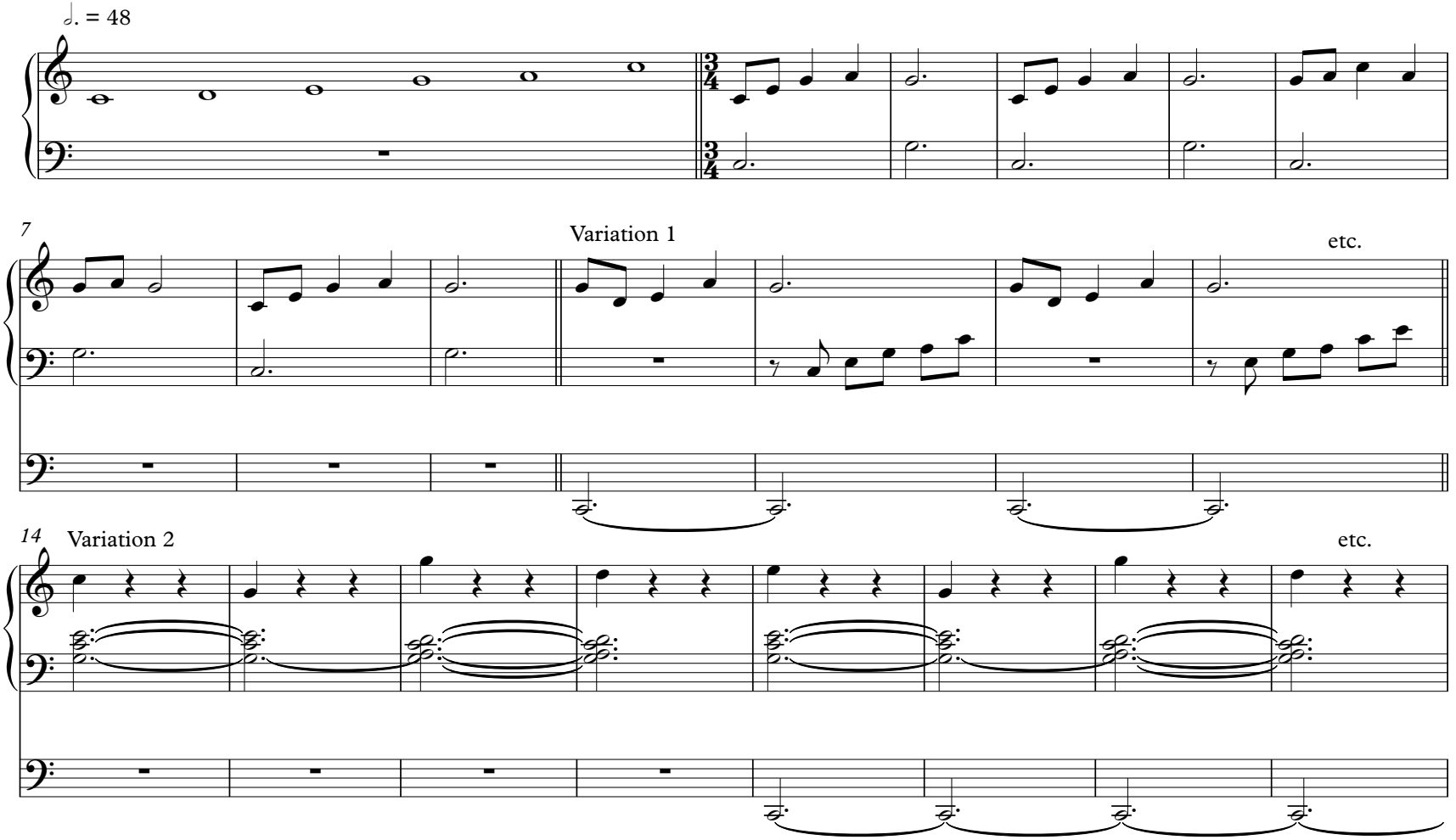
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Pentatonic Lullaby (open ended variations).

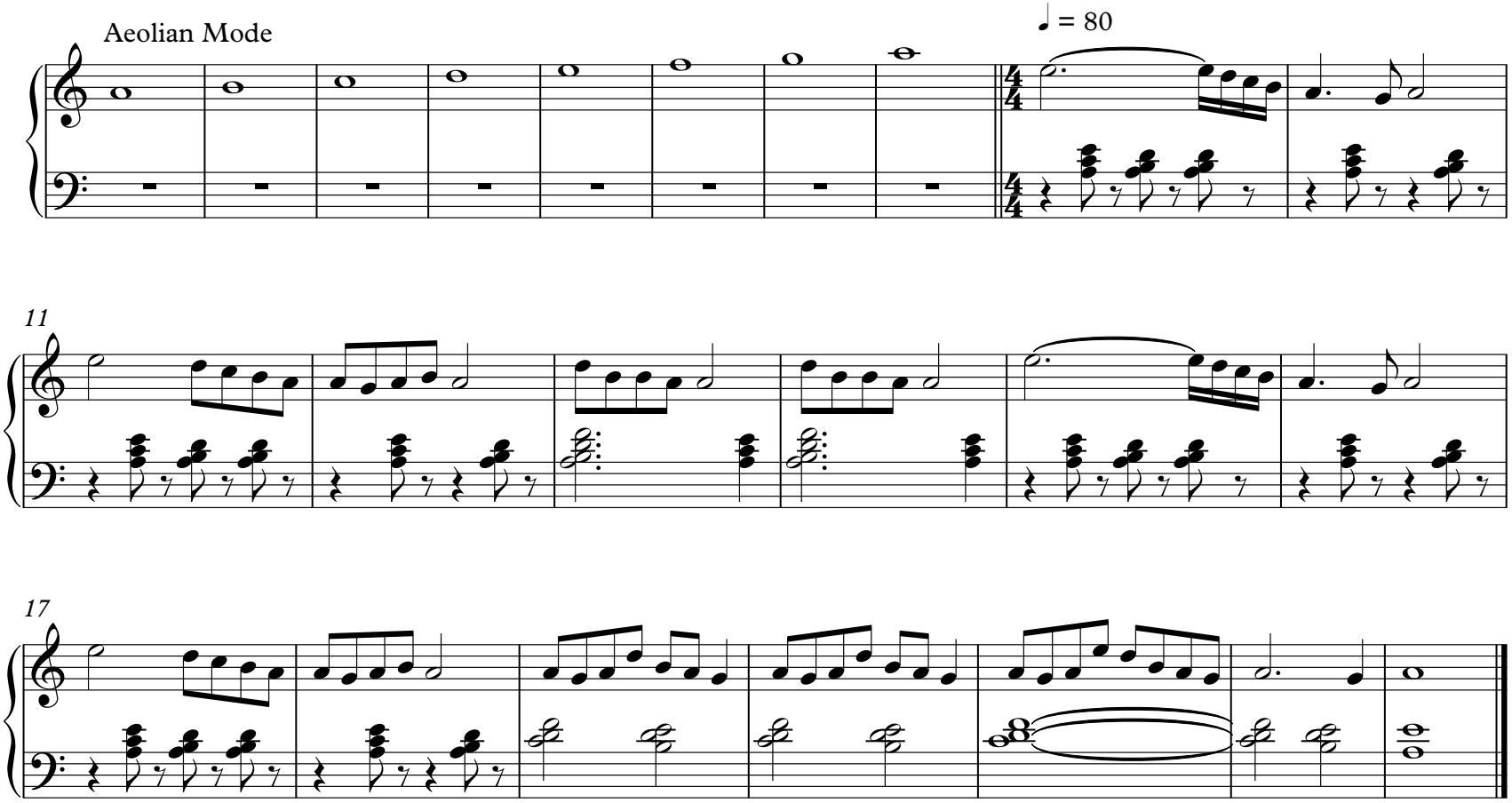
John Riley



© John Riley

Prelude in the Aeolian Mode

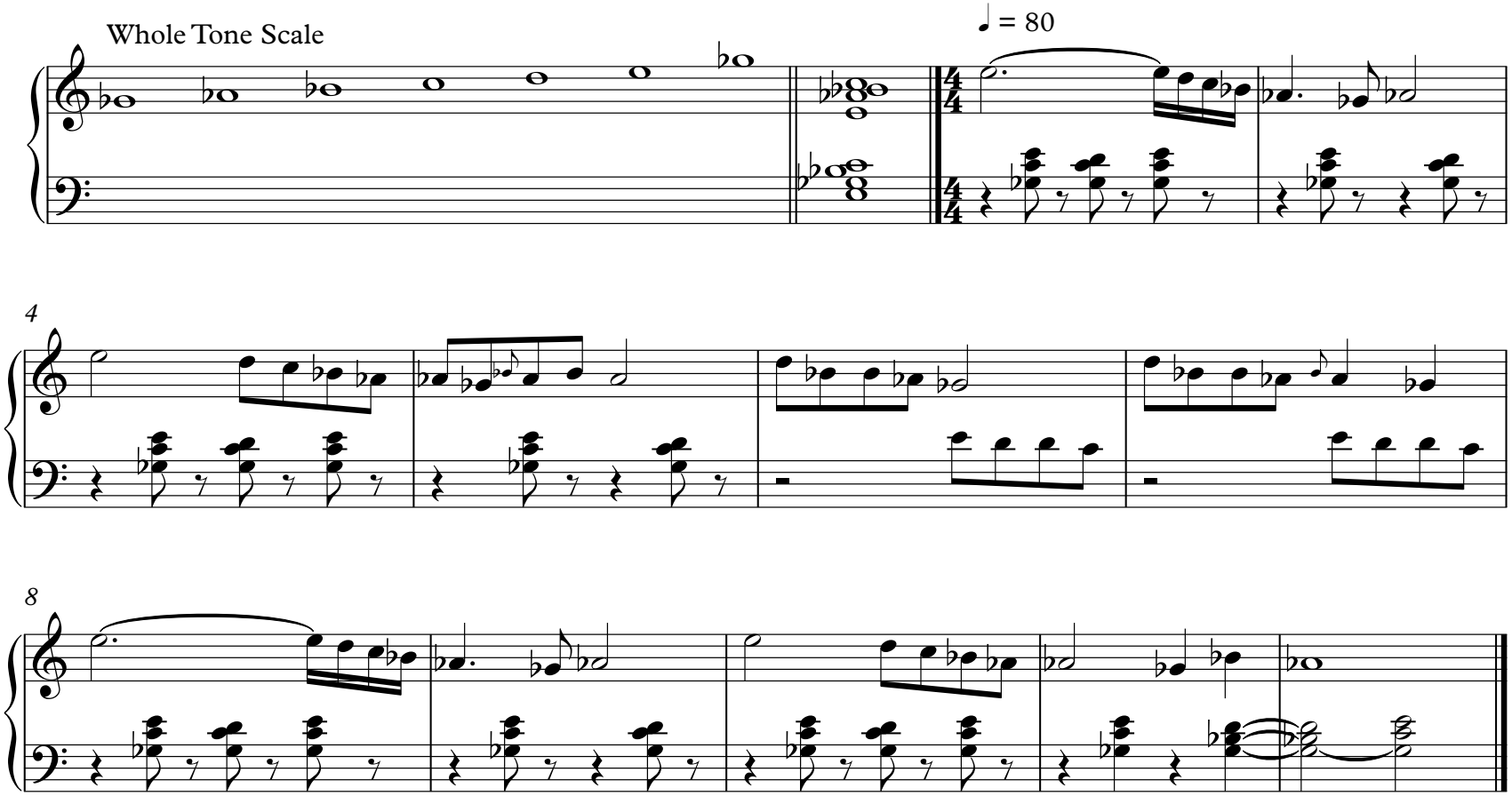
John Riley



© John Riley

Prelude on the Whole Tone Mode

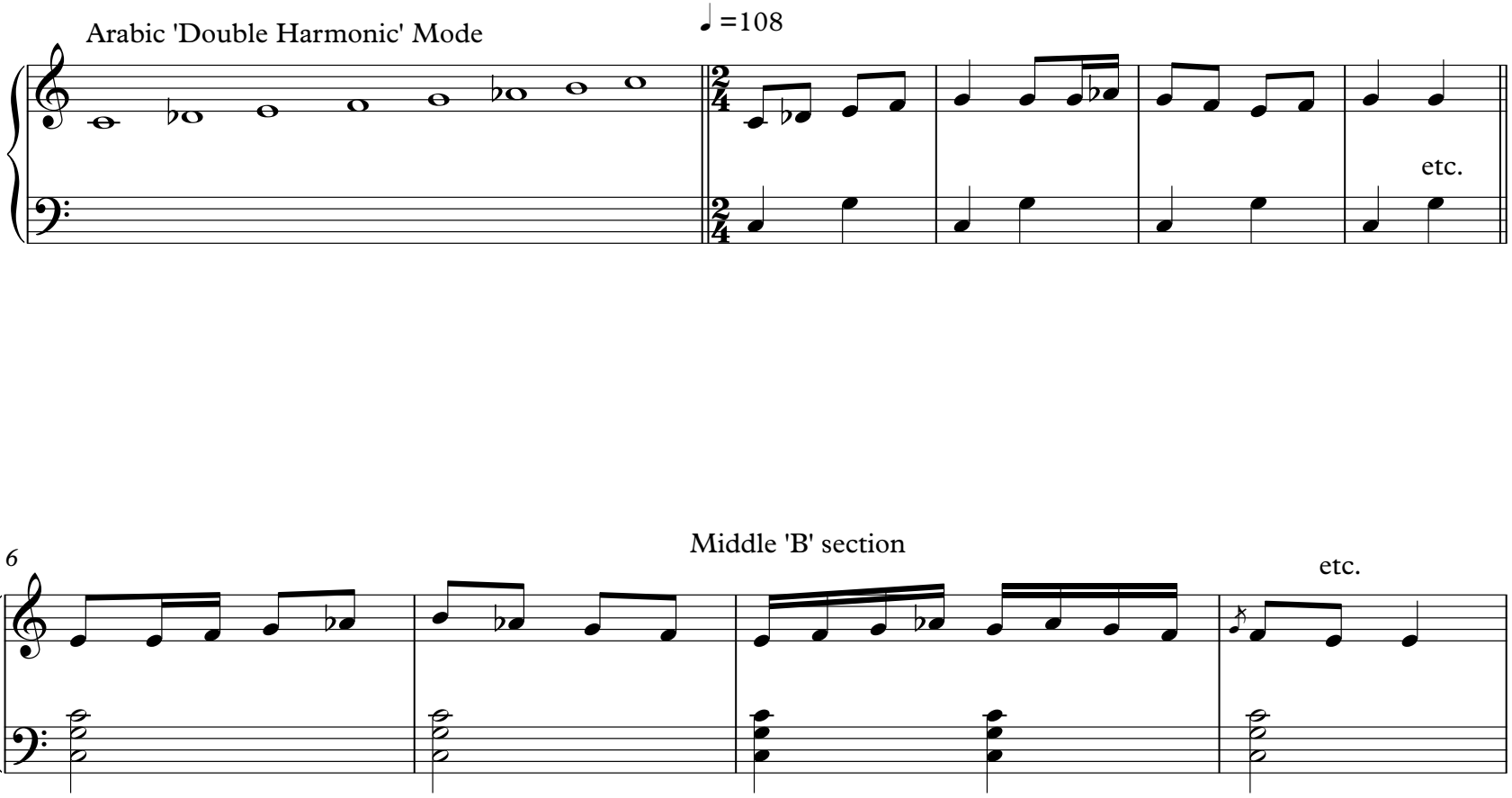
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Egyptian Dance in the Arabic Double Harmonic Mode.

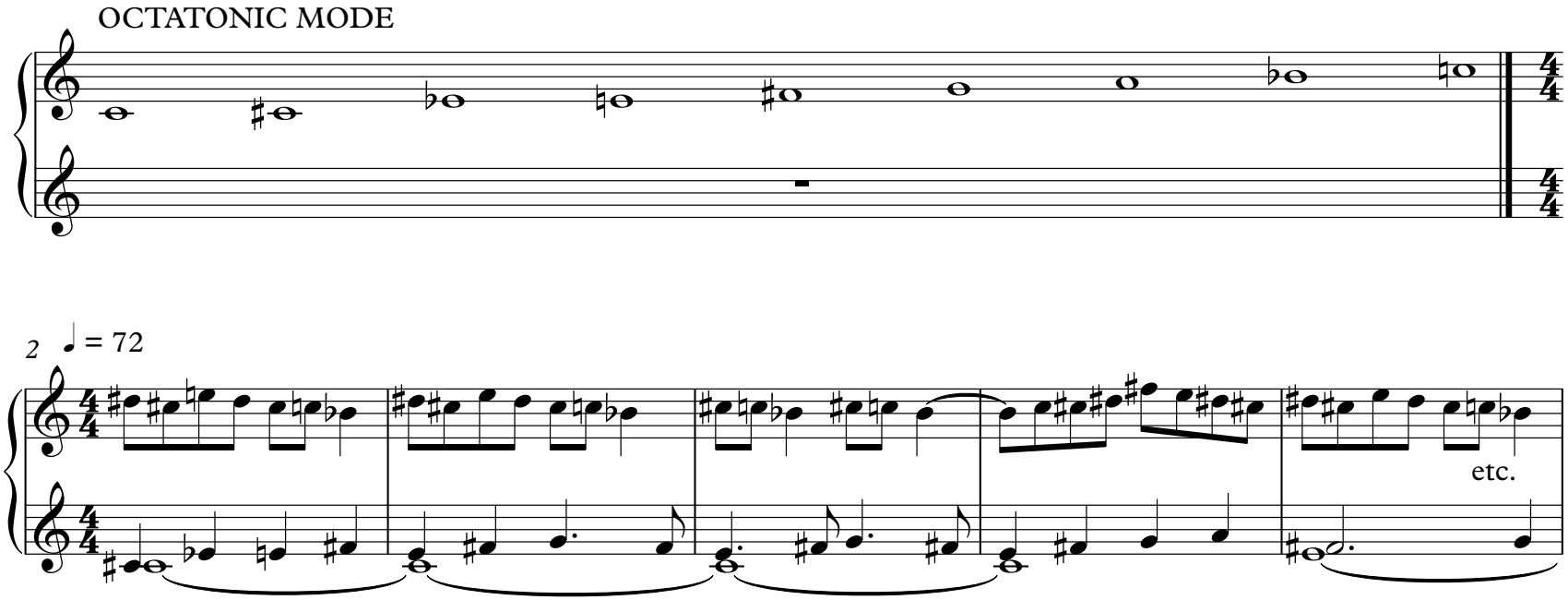
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Octatonic Prelude

John Riley



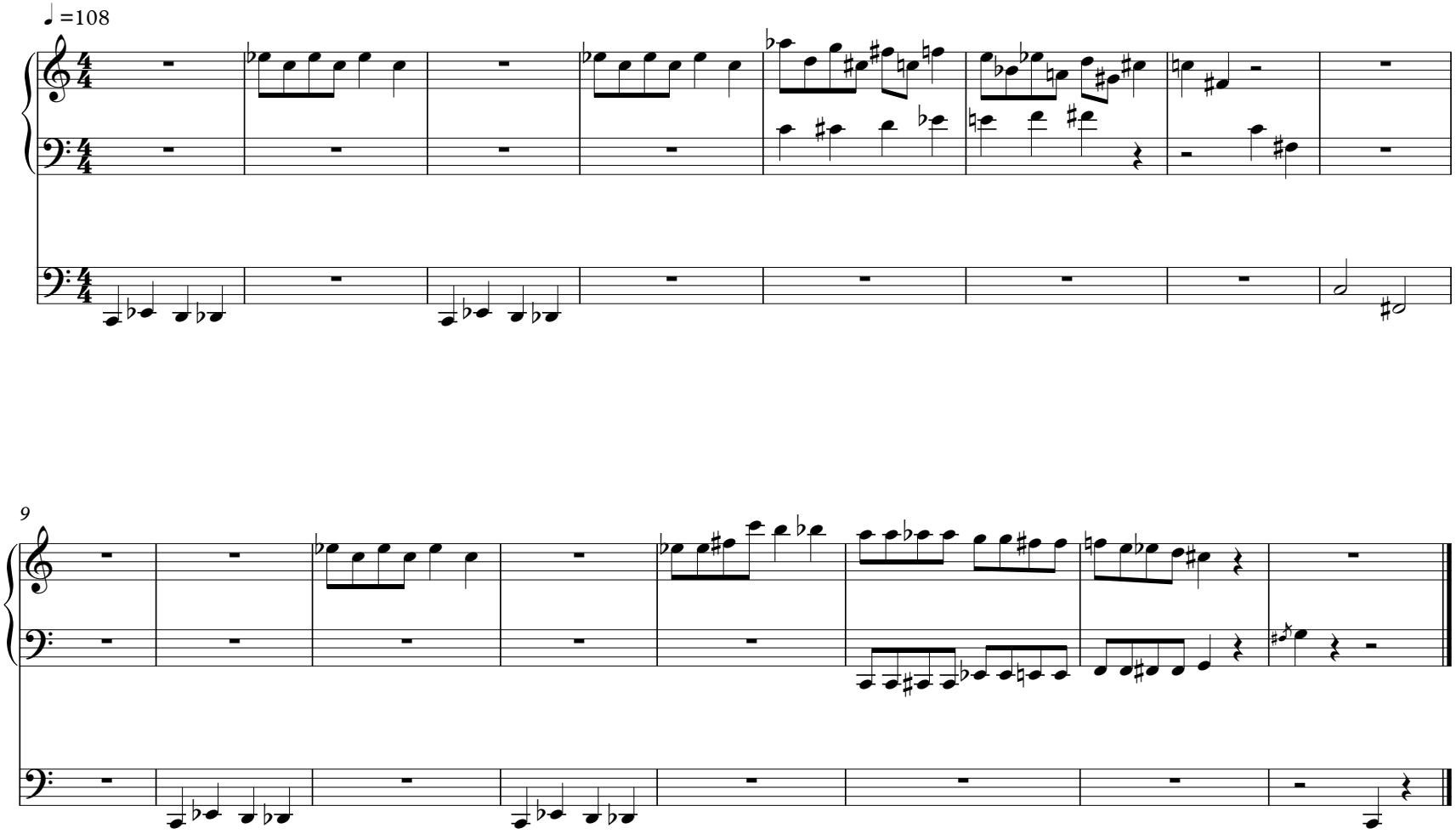
© John Riley 2016

12 TONE – every note is equal!
(Though occasionally, some notes are more equal than others)

- Freedom – but with structure
- Emphasis on development and contrasts of texture, colour, rhythm and melodic shapes – but without constraints of ‘correct’ harmony etc.

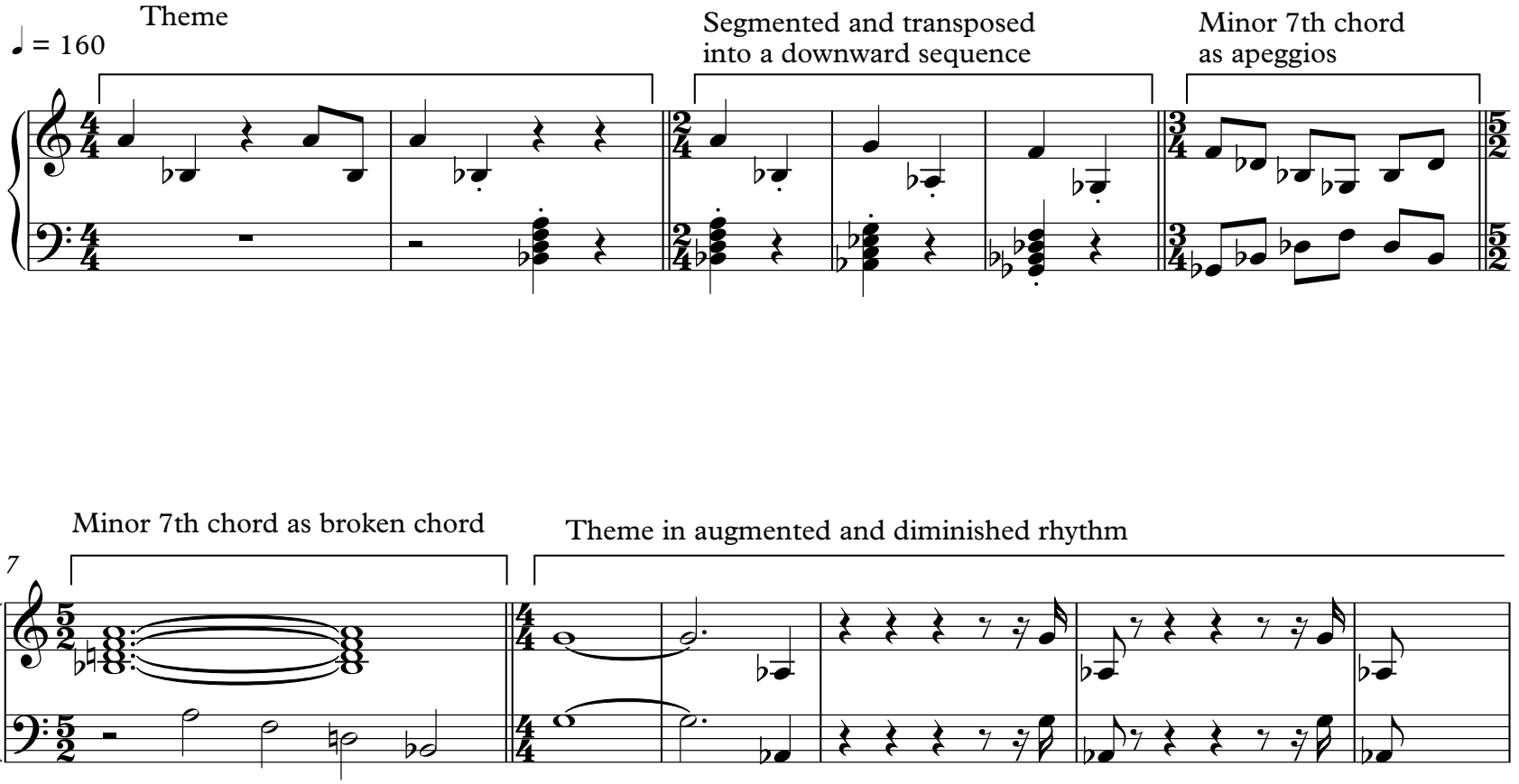
12 Tone Prelude

John Riley



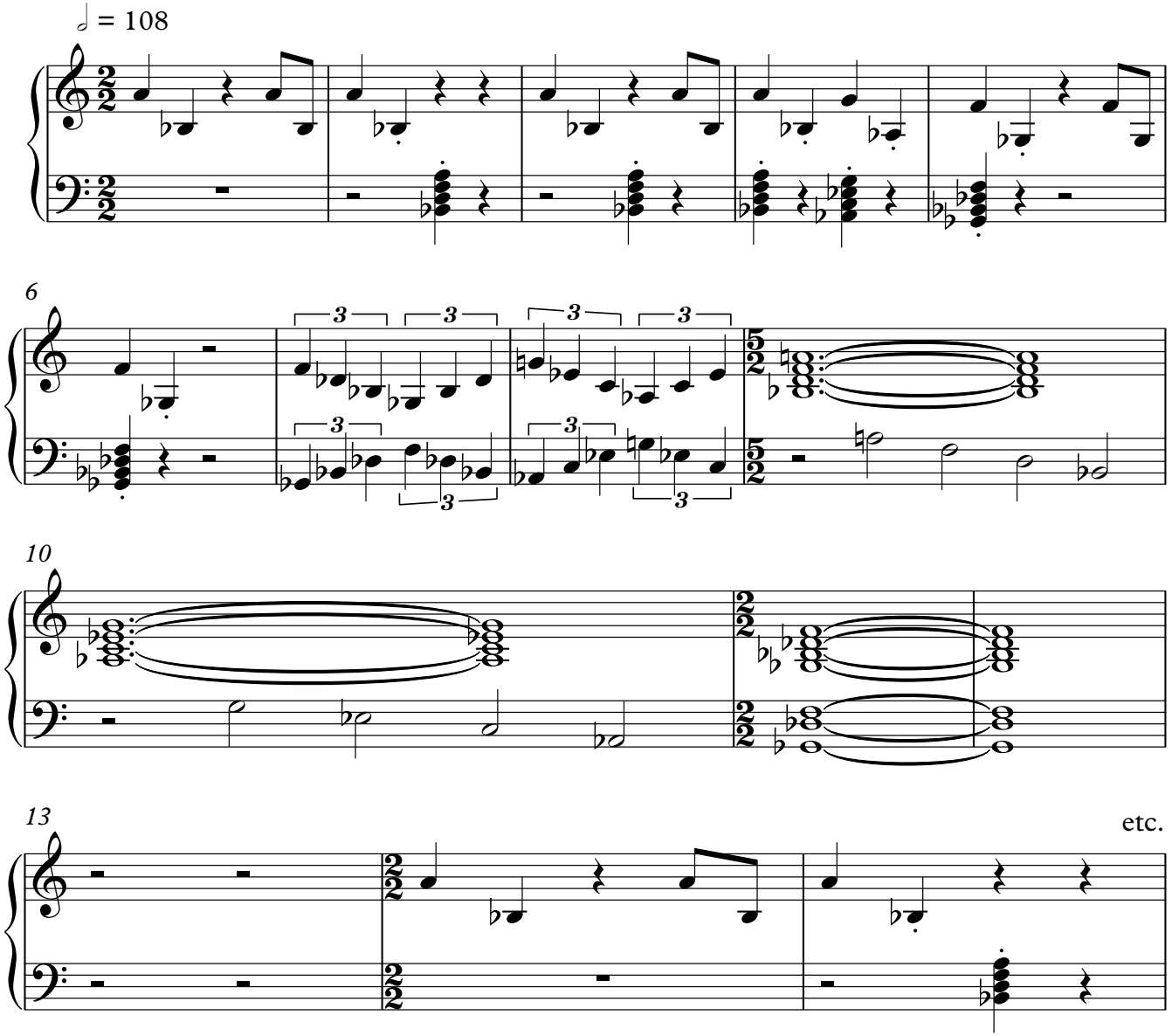
© John Riley

Improvisation on a major 7th (skeleton score)



© John Riley

Improvisation on a major 7th



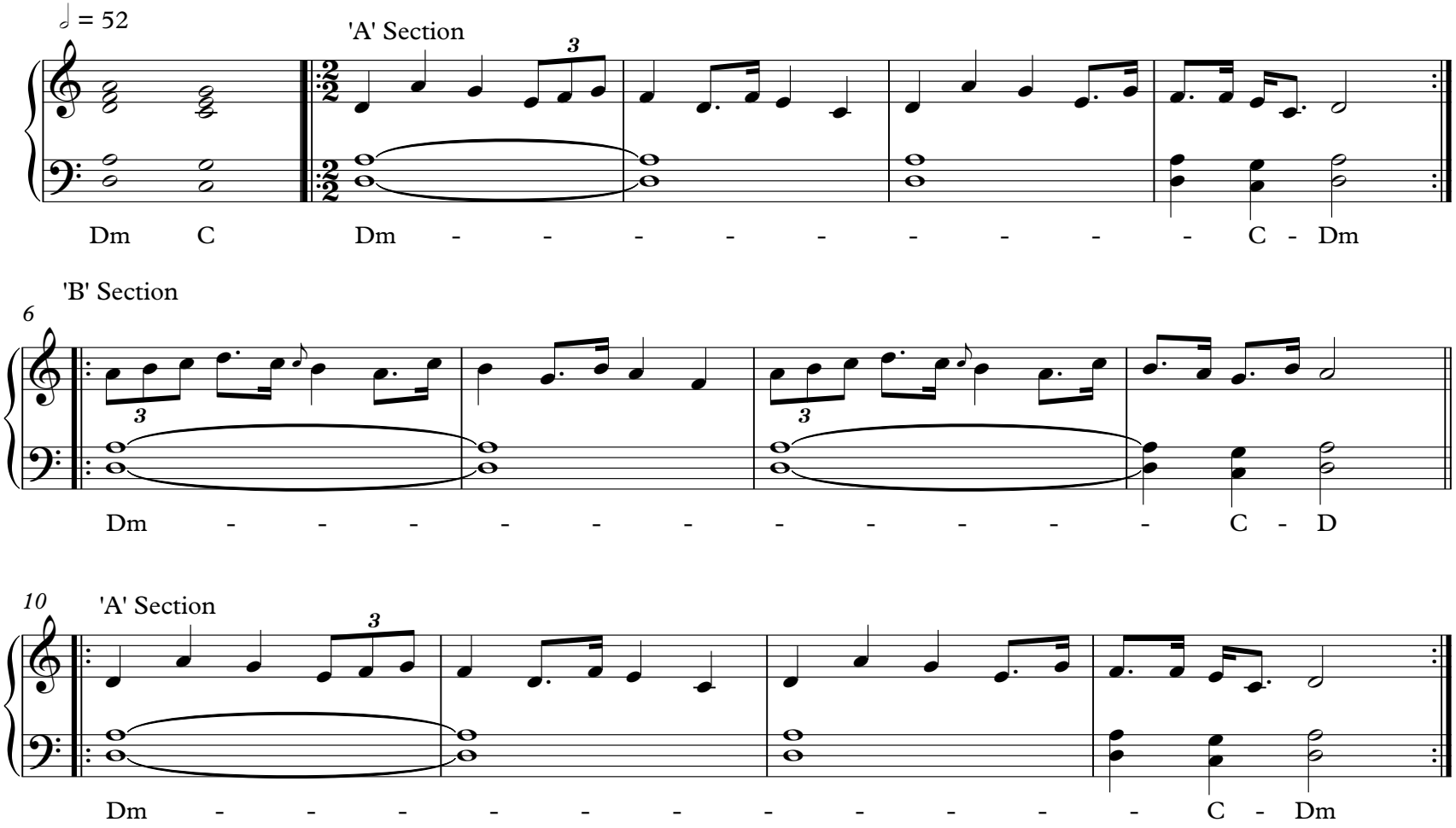
© John Riley 2016

Two Chords (Modal) – Early Music

- Modal harmony is appropriate for styles prior to c.1600 (and also features in some music of the Baroque period, albeit blended with diatonic elements).
- For simplicity's sake, the following examples are shown as in the Dorian Mode. However, despite the use of just the white notes, the patterns of intervals on melodies based on D and C are different; and arguably this places the piece in the Dorian and Mixolydian modes, (q.v.).

Scottish Dance (two chords at 'cadence') Dorian Mode

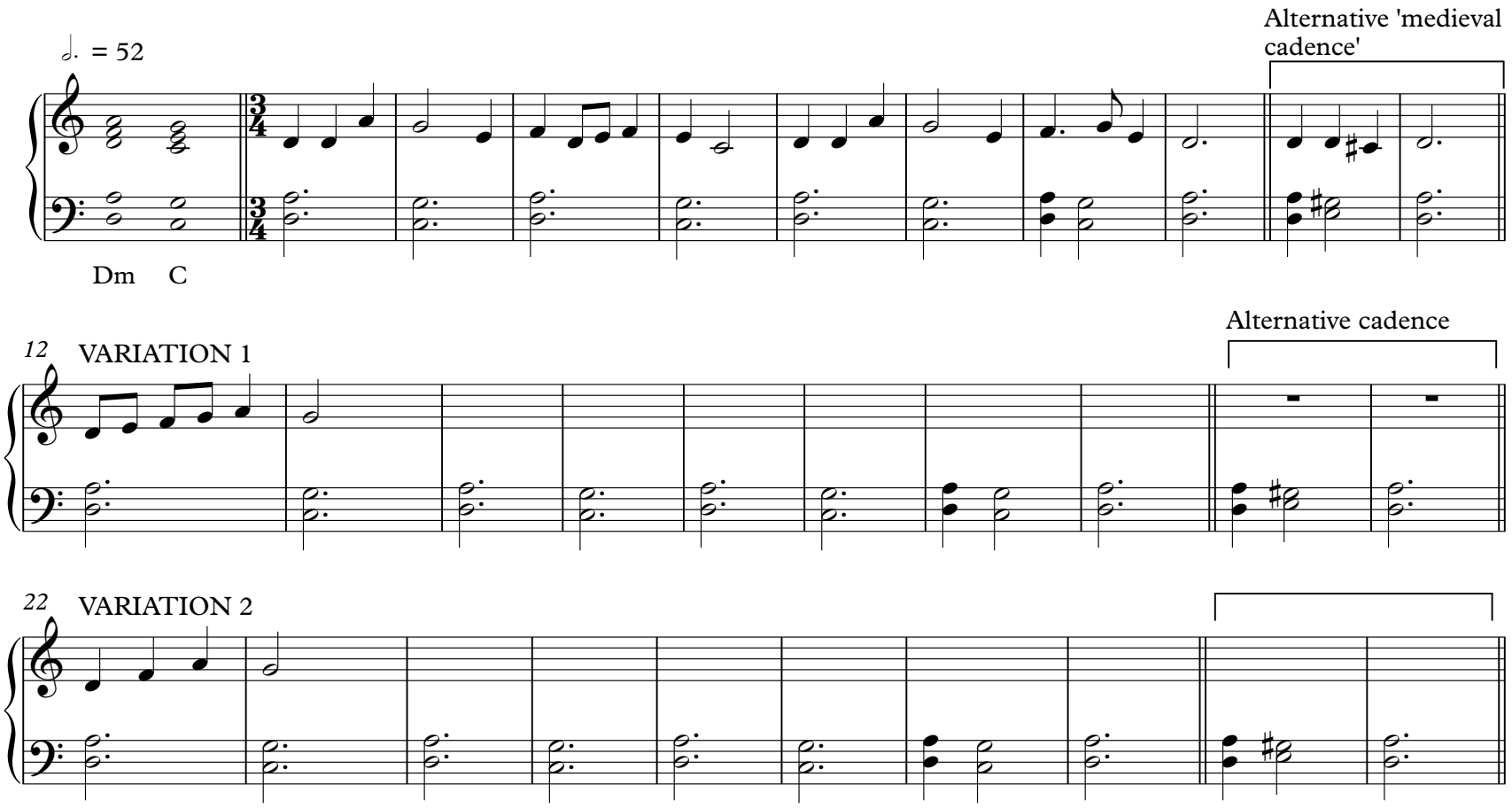
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

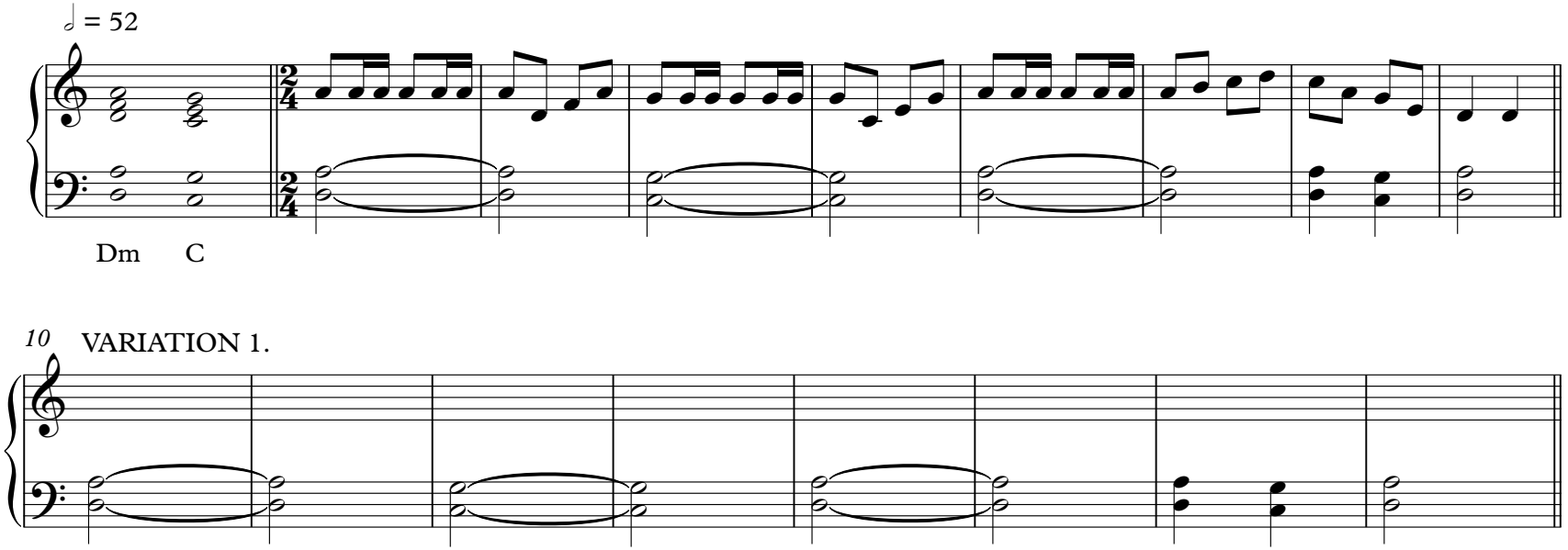
Medieval/Renaissance Dance (2 chords throughout) Dorian Mode

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

'What shall we do with Drunken Sailor' - Dorian Mode



© John Riley 2016

Chords in modal harmony – 20th Century

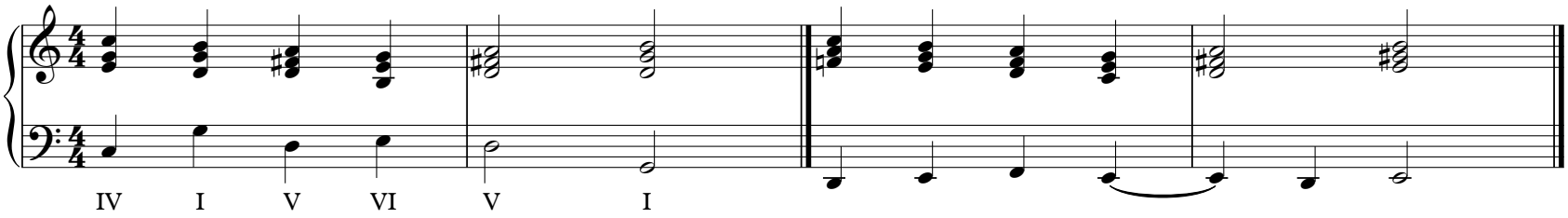
- Modal harmony is also appropriate for more 'modern' styles, c.1920 onwards – again with mixture of modal and diatonic elements, and different modes. As well as 'church' modes, these include Whole Tone, Pentatonic, and Octatonic modes.
- Modal harmony can feature parallel motion and repetition/ transposition into 'unrelated' keys.
- This can often use parallel intervals, e.g. 4ths, 5ths, or stacks of 3rds e.g. added 7ths and 9ths

(See Fanfare on Judas Maccabeus – later).

Diatonic and Modal harmony

Possible diatonic harmonisation - bass up.

Possible modal harmonisation - melody down.



N.B. In 20th Century harmony, notes from outside the mode are often used and even blended with elements of diatonic harmony.

© John Riley 2016

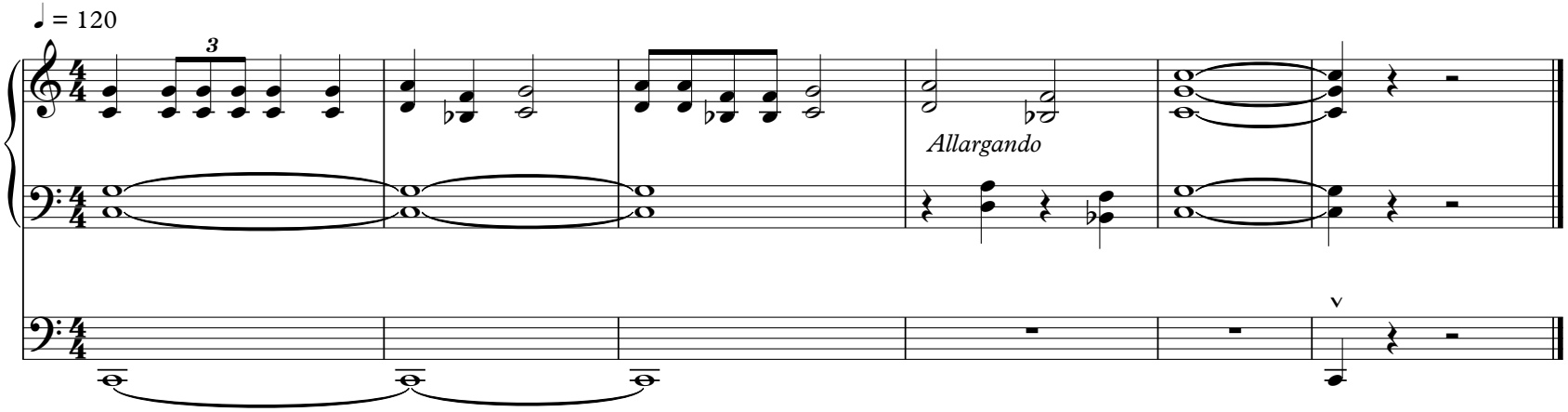
Using Parallel 5ths

Within modal writing, parallel 5ths are particularly suitable for creating fanfare or otherwise celebratory music, not least in styles of various 20th Century British composers such as Vaughan Williams and William Walton.

In the following fanfare, note also how the music grows out of the theme of the first two bars, creating variety yet with a unified structure.

Fanfare

John Riley

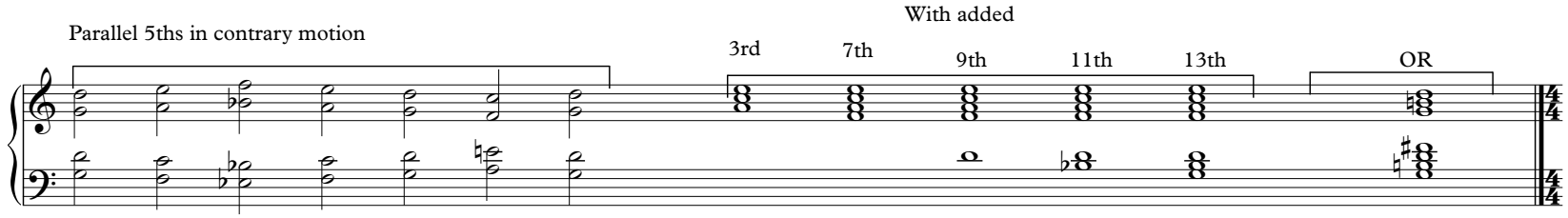


© John Riley 2016

Enriching Parallel 5ths

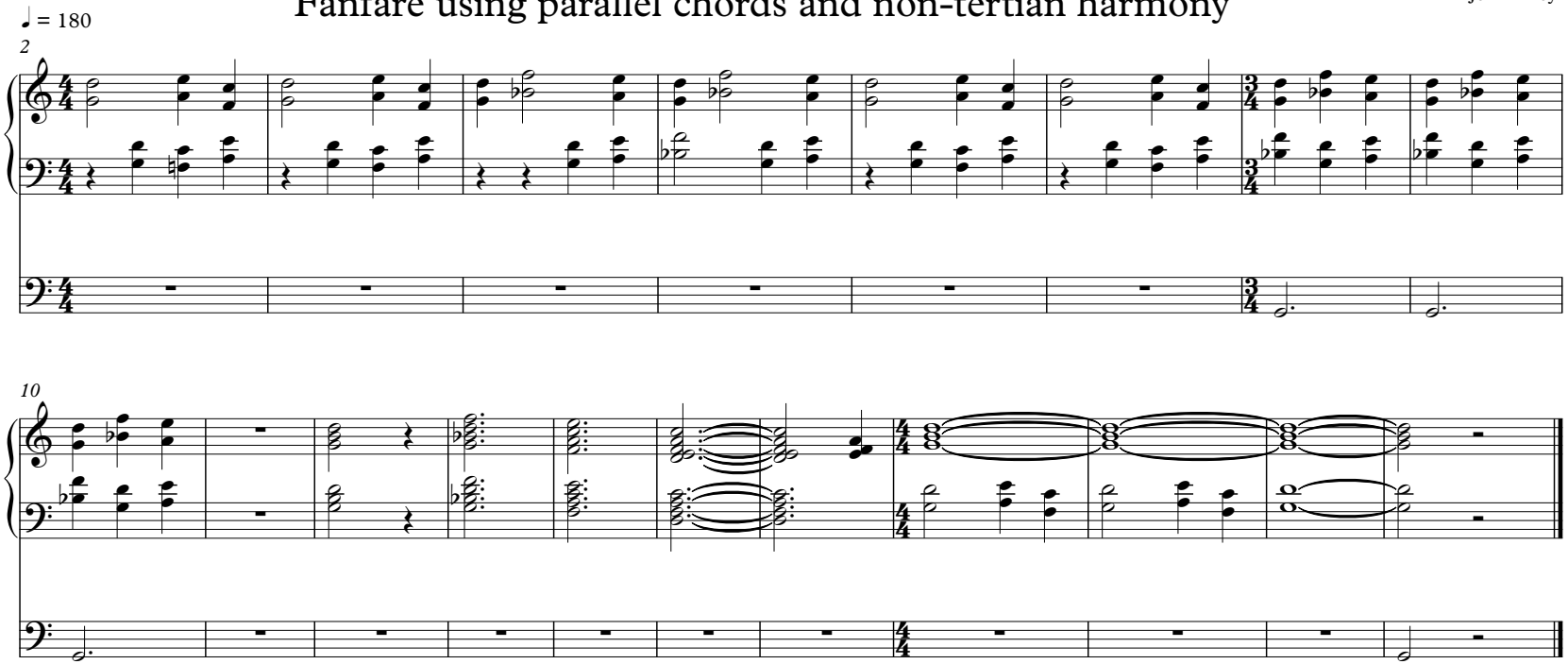
The bare fifths can be filled in by the third, and augmented even further with stacks of thirds creating 7^{th}, 9^{th} 11^{th} chords etc. Added major seconds can also add to the spice! Again this is a particular trait of 20^{th} Century British composers.

In the following example, mixing metre adds to the style.



Fanfare using parallel chords and non-tertian harmony

John Riley



“Transfers are not just with one player…but the whole team”

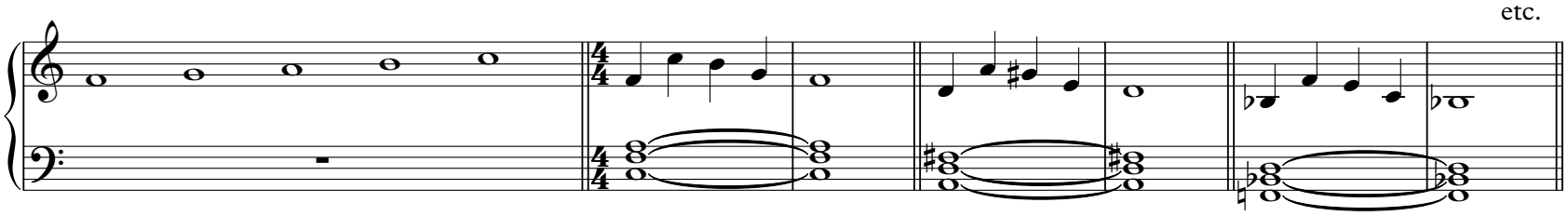
…not just melody but all the associated chords can make a transfer to another part of the keyboard – totally intact!

For example:- chords based on the Lydian mode, which can be turned into fanfares or into a toccata.

N.B. Transpositions of modes are literal – i.e. they totally preserve the pattern of intervals and therefore involve patterns of white and black notes.

See how this might be applied in the following examples.

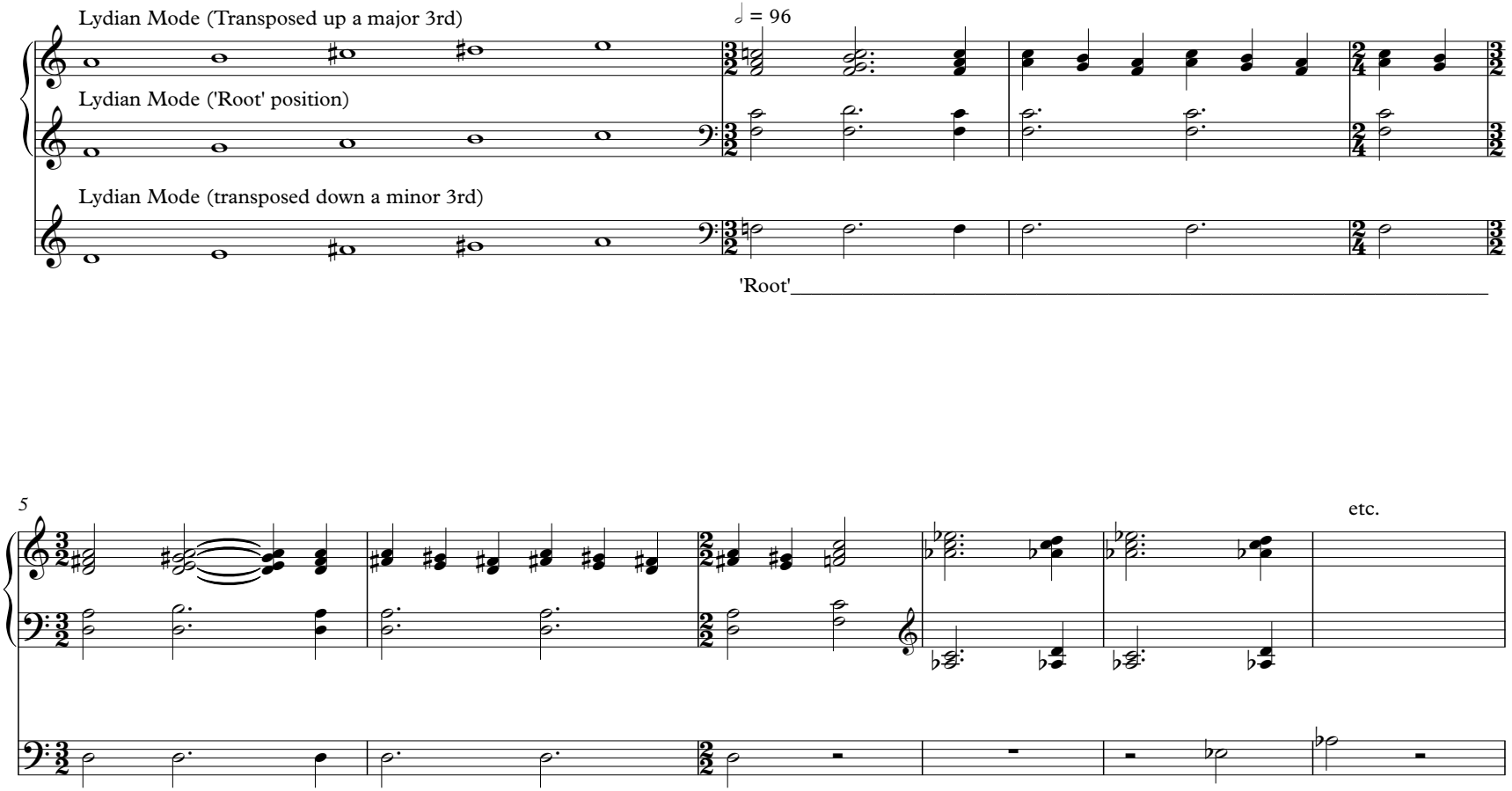
Lydian mode and transpositions



© John Riley 2016

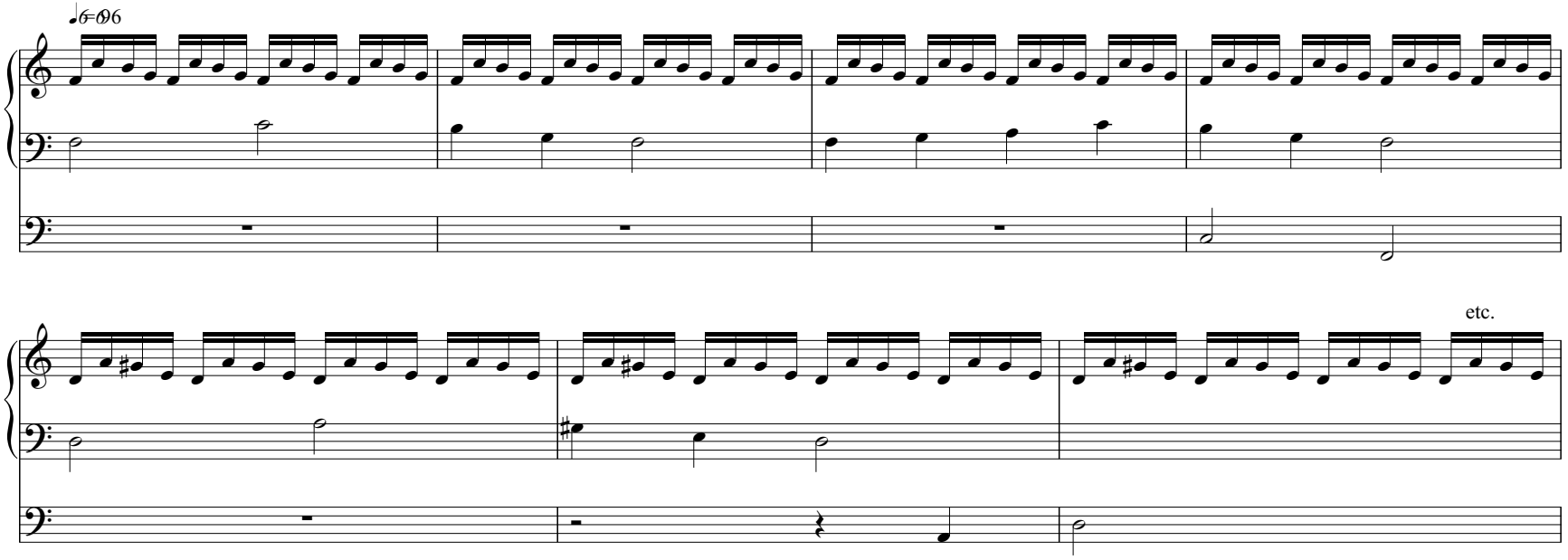
Fanfare in the Lydian Mode (with transpositions)

John Riley



© John Riley 2017

Lydian Toccata (with transpositions)



©John Riley 2017

‘GET MOTIVATED!’

Motifs enable us to squeeze every possibility out of a short amount of material. Even a short melodic phrase can breed an almost infinite number of possibilities by exploiting melodic and rhythmic components of the tune, and manipulating and combining them in many different ways; most notably through the techniques of segmentation and transposition, and rhythmic devices of diminution and augmentation.

In ‘Rudolph’, here are a number of possible treatments that can be ordered and combined in many different ways…

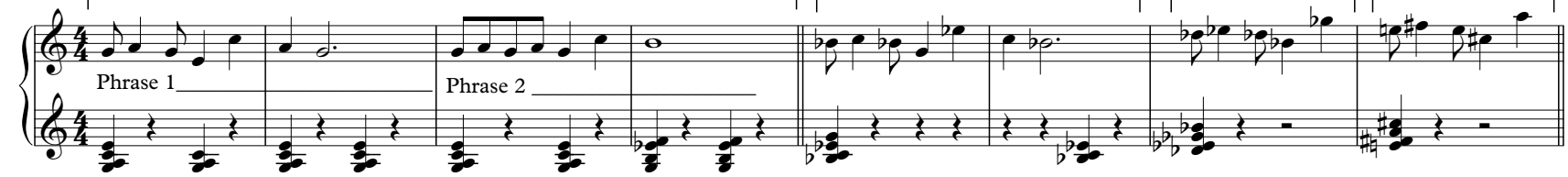
'Rudolph' - thematic development possibilities, (skeleton score)

Johnny Marks, arr. J. Riley

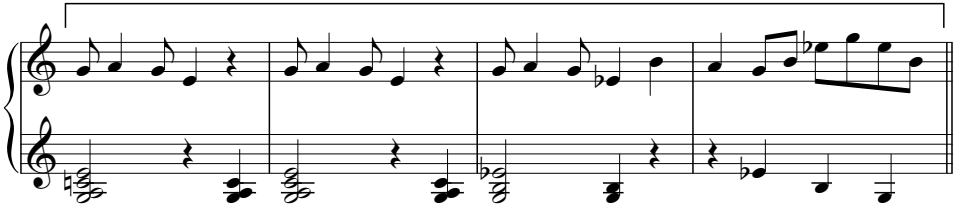
♩ = 172

Main theme built (mostly) on Pentatonic Mode

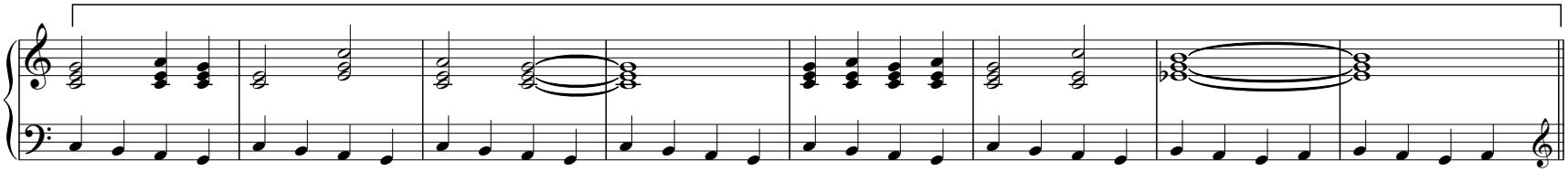
Theme (segmented) transposed up by minor 3rds



Further segmentation, melodic alteration and alternating Pentatonic with Diminished chords



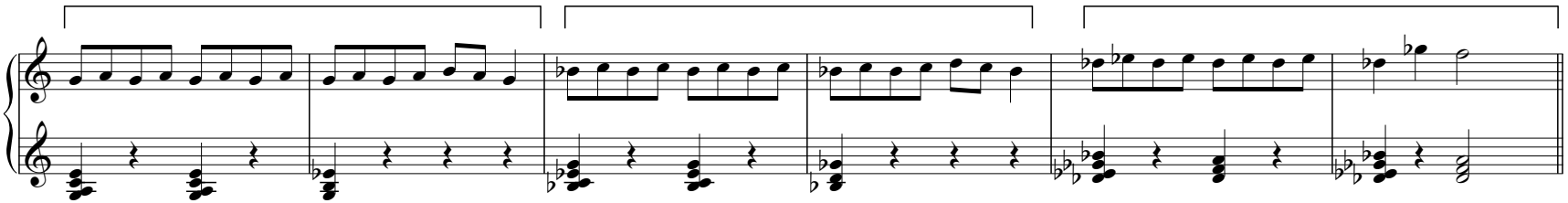
Theme in augmentation



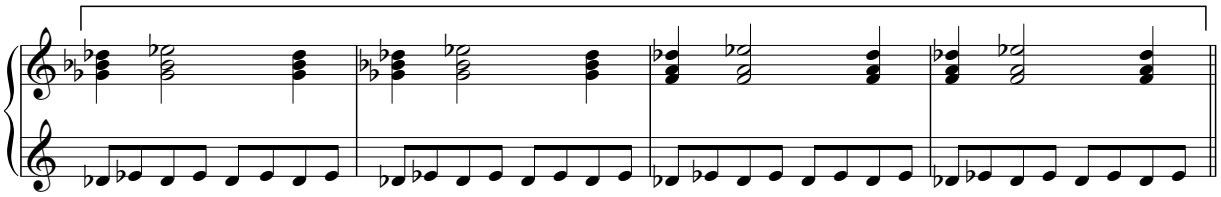
© John Riley 2017

Cont. ⟶

Theme (phrase 2.) segmented, transposed and with alternating chords



Phrases 1 & 2 (segmented) played simultaneously

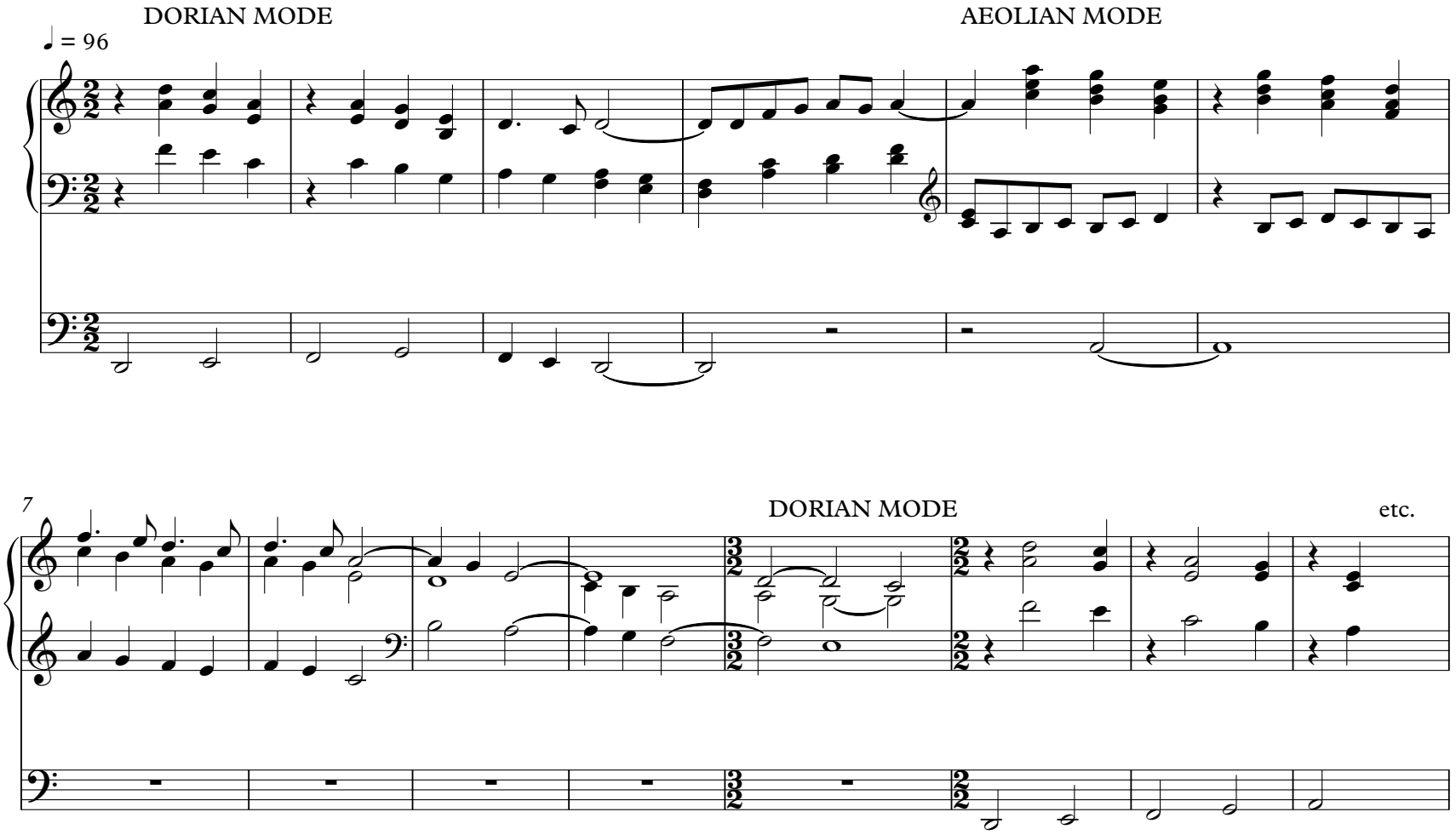


Using two modes

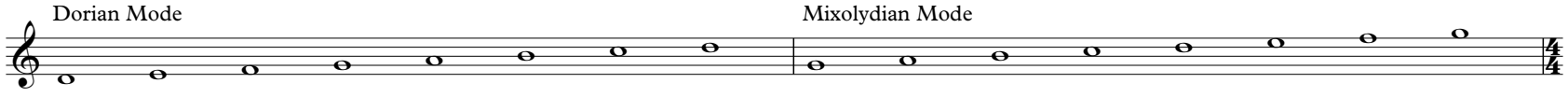
Unlike transposing a single mode, using two or more 'Church' modes uses just the white notes, but can add contrast; the patterns of intervals in each mode is different. Using two modes can also give the impression similar to moving through different keys in the diatonic system – even the alternation of major and minor.

English Rhapsody

John Riley

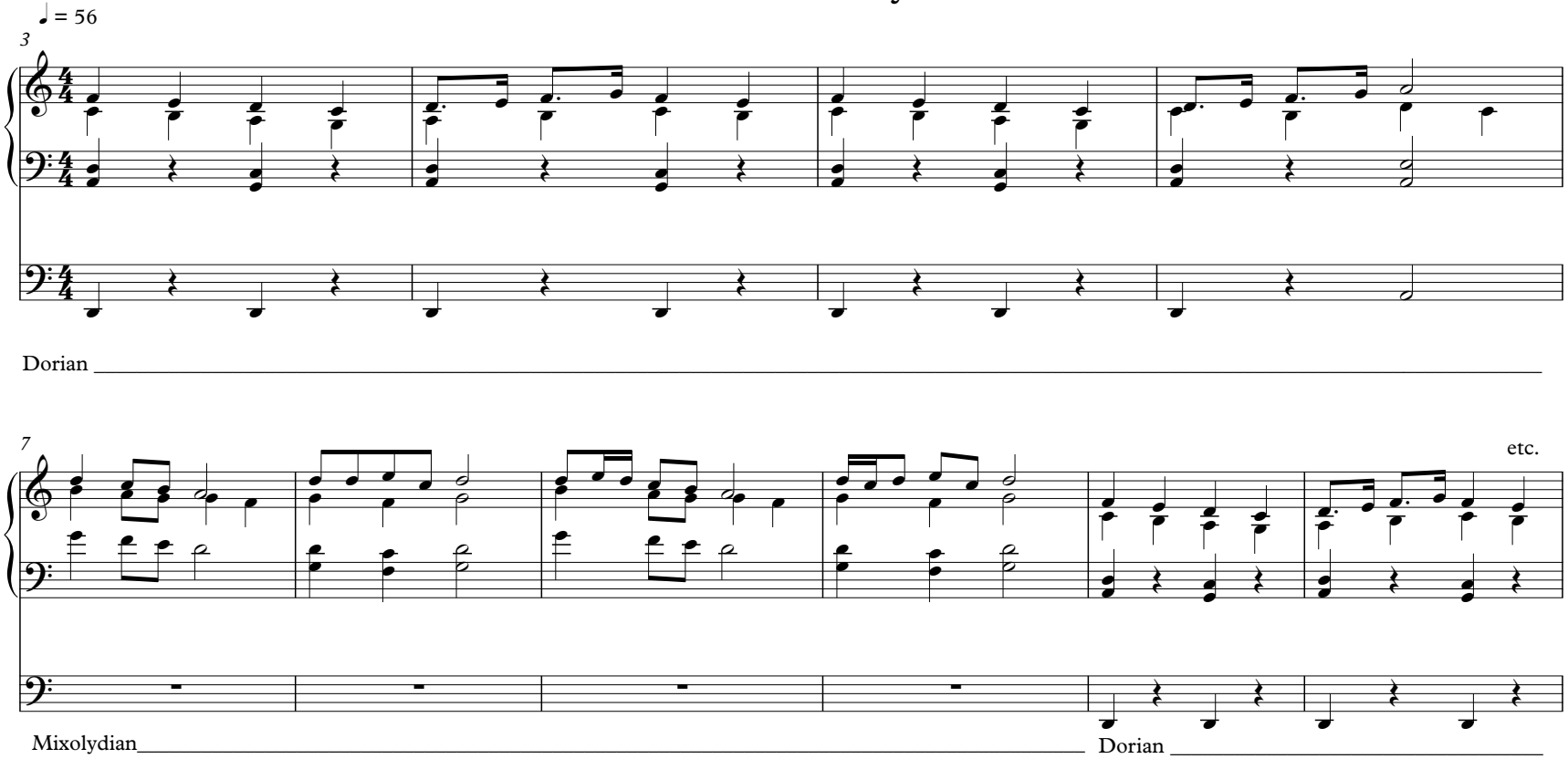


© John Riley 2016



March in Dorian and Mixolydian Modes

John Riley



© John Riley 2017

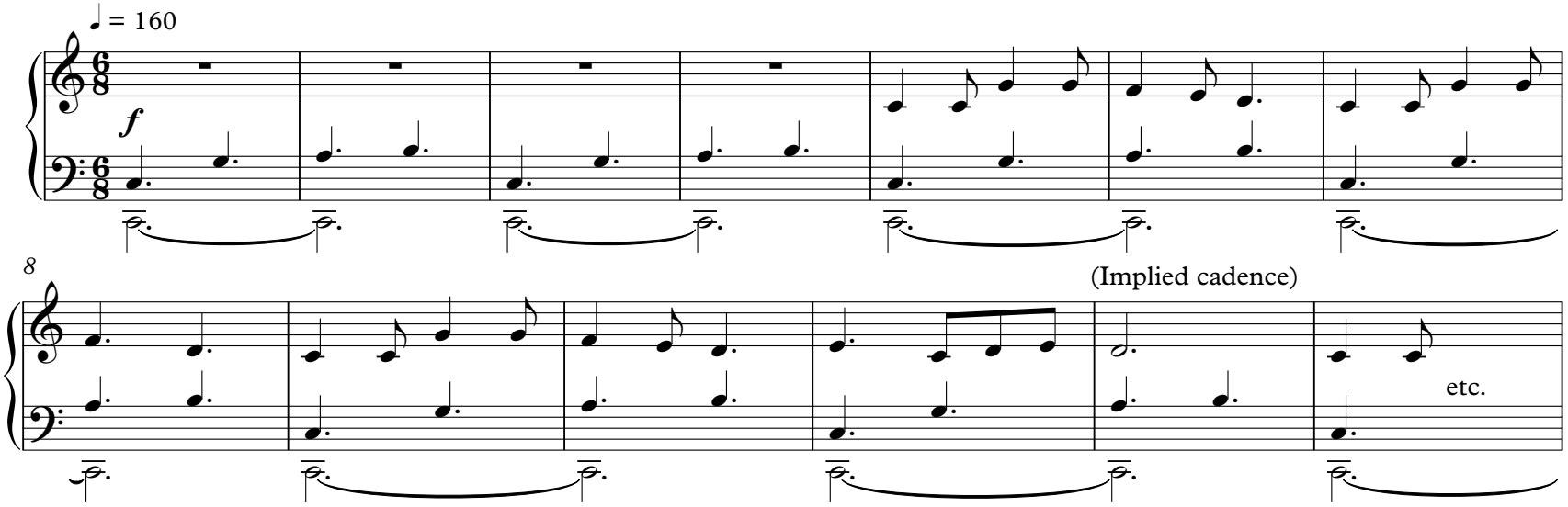
Repeating bass patterns:- The Ostinato

These have various useful characteristics.

- Easy to remember.
- Repeat frequently.
- Contain a definite ‘centre of gravity’ and anchor, especial if also containing a drone bass.
- Whilst providing a firm harmonic anchor, they do provide some flexibility; there are various fleeting harmonies that can be produced by any single bass note.
- They keep the music going if you need ‘thinking time’ for more complex parts of the texture, e.g. the melody line.
- They can be set to existing melodies, provided they do not modulate greatly; also to tonal and more dissonant styles.

Ostinato Scherzo

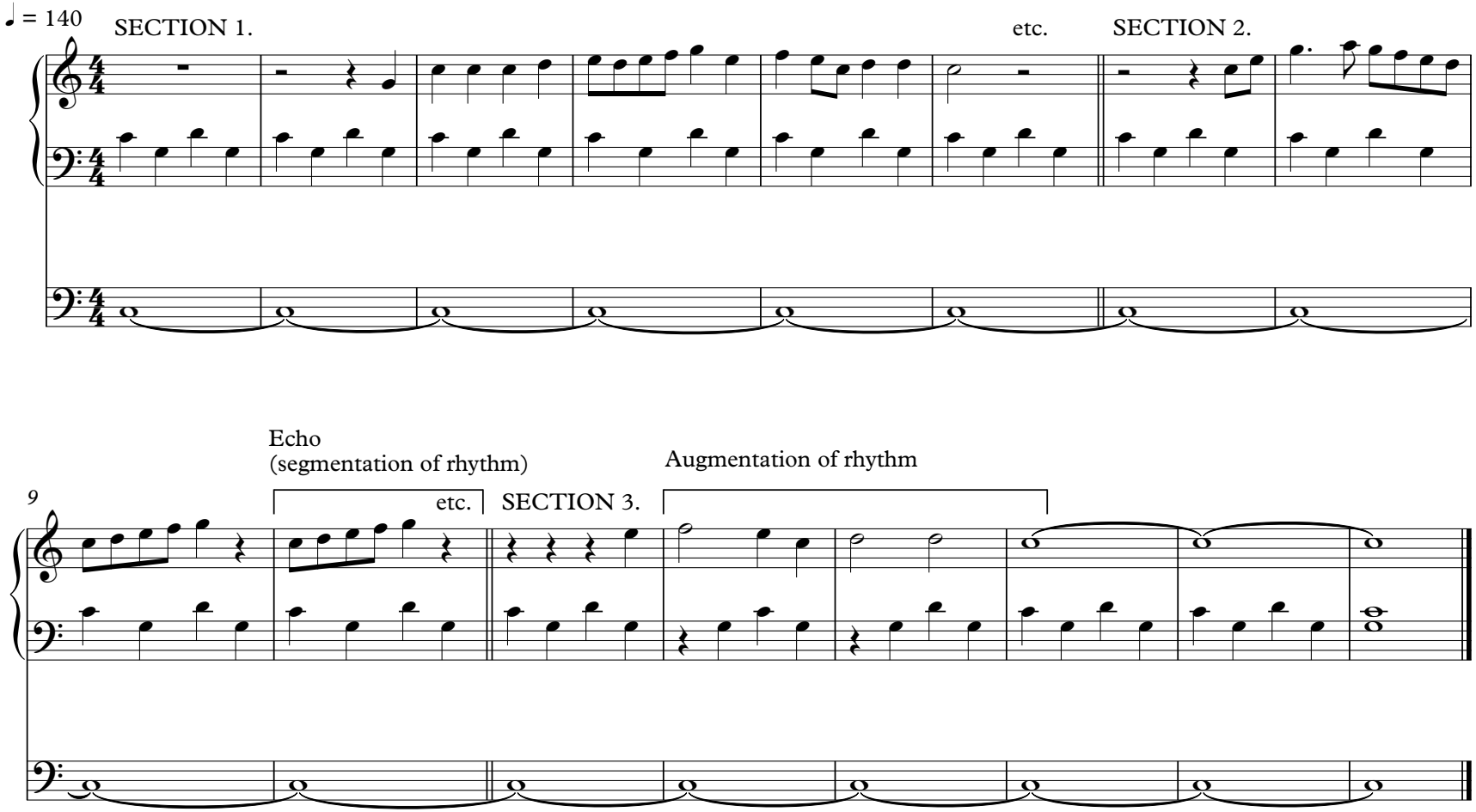
John Riley



© John Riley

Ostinato on 'O Little Town' (skeleton score)

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

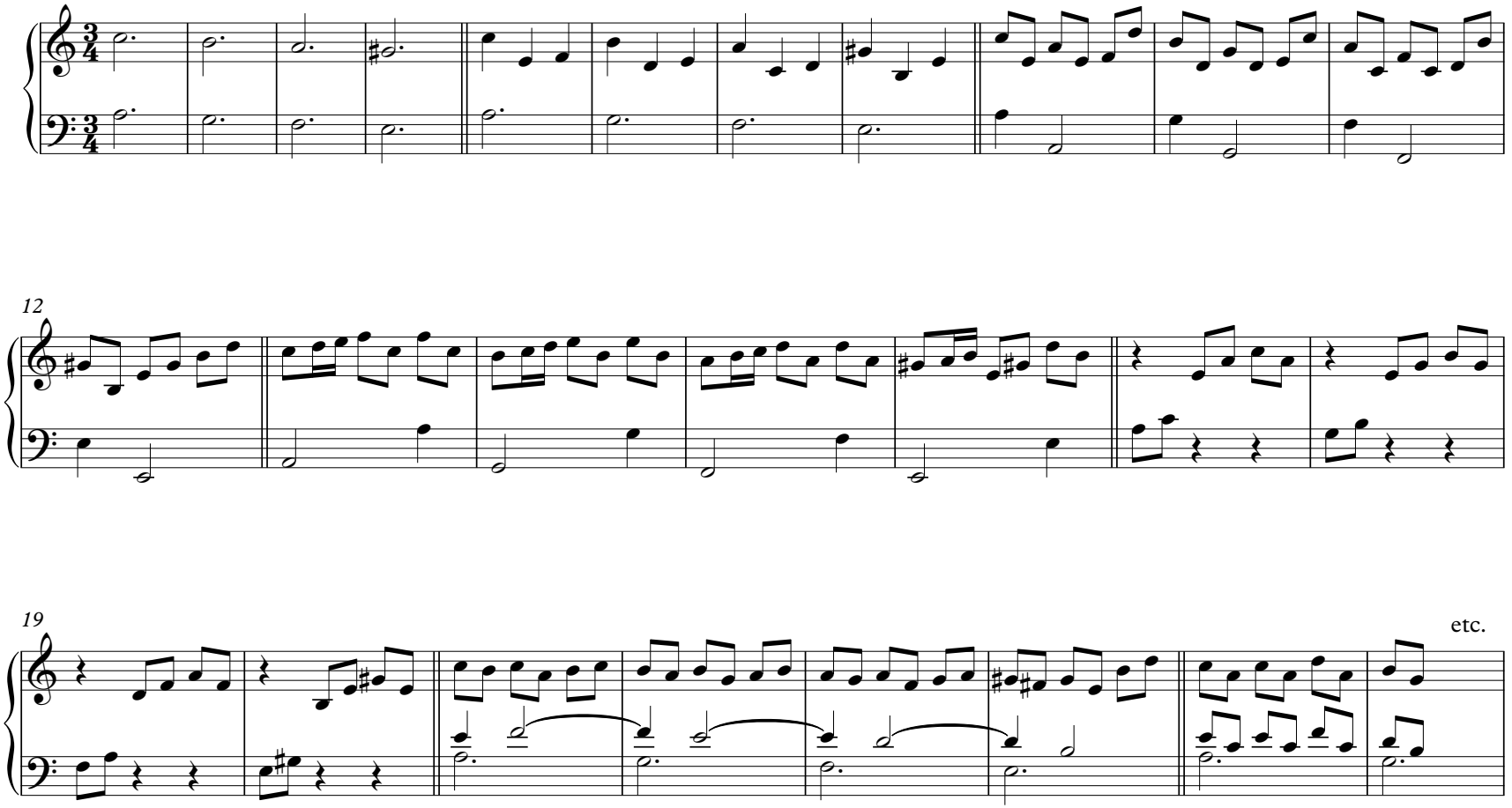
Repeating bass patterns:- The Chaconne

The Chaconne or Passacaglia, (the terms are often – though not entirely correctly - used interchangeably) is generally a longer form of the ostinato bass and with more harmonic flexibility.

A repeated chord pattern lays down a specific harmonic structure. A Chaconne contains a harmonic outline and guide too, but with some ambiguity; e.g. the 'A' could be the root of an 'A' chord, or the first inversion of an 'F' chord.

Chaconne

John Riley



© John Riley

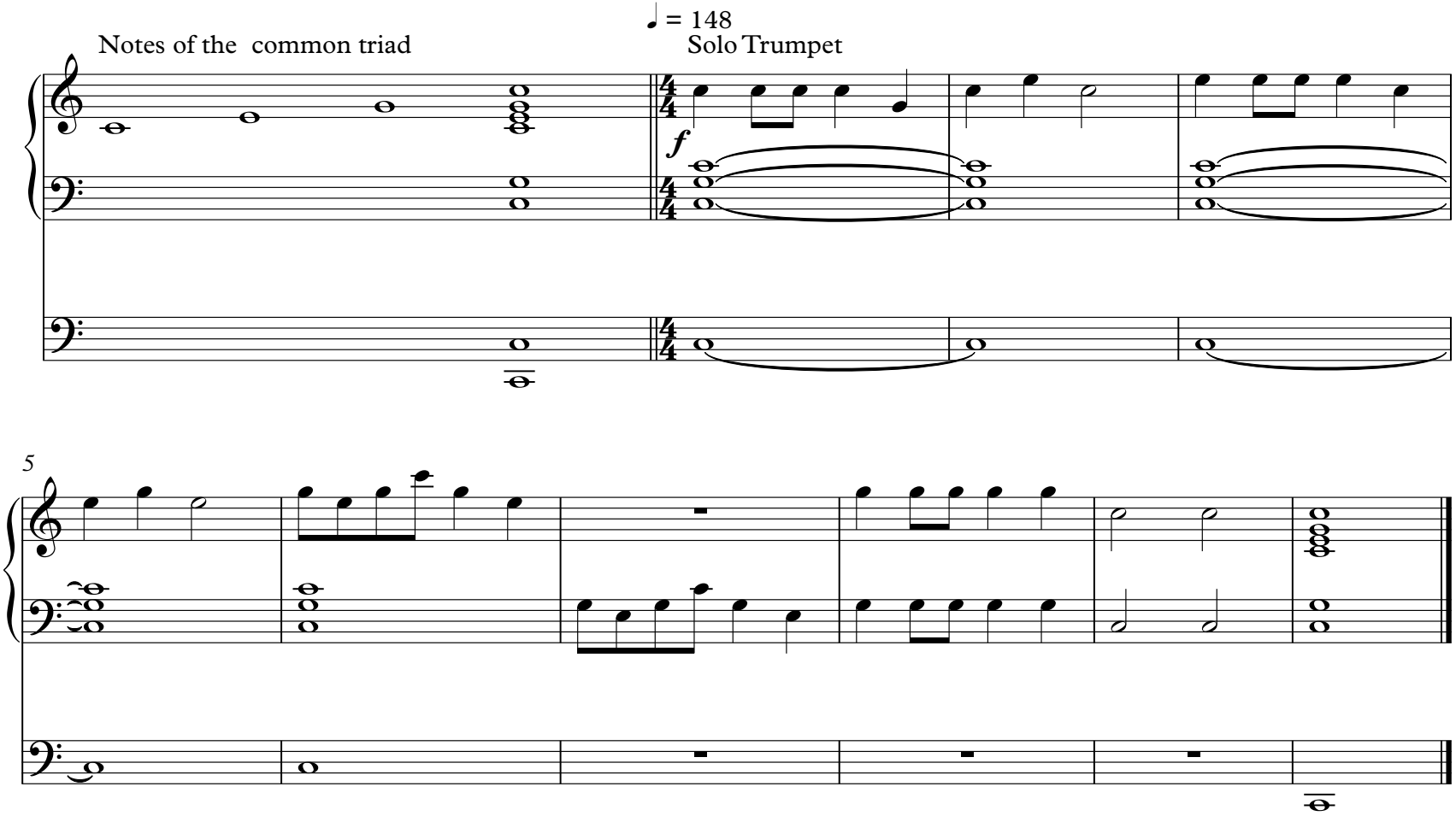
Diatonic Chord Patterns

Single chords – creates stability and centre of gravity.

'Open' chord, i.e. without the third removes one potential source of clashes.

Trumpet Fanfare (One Chord)

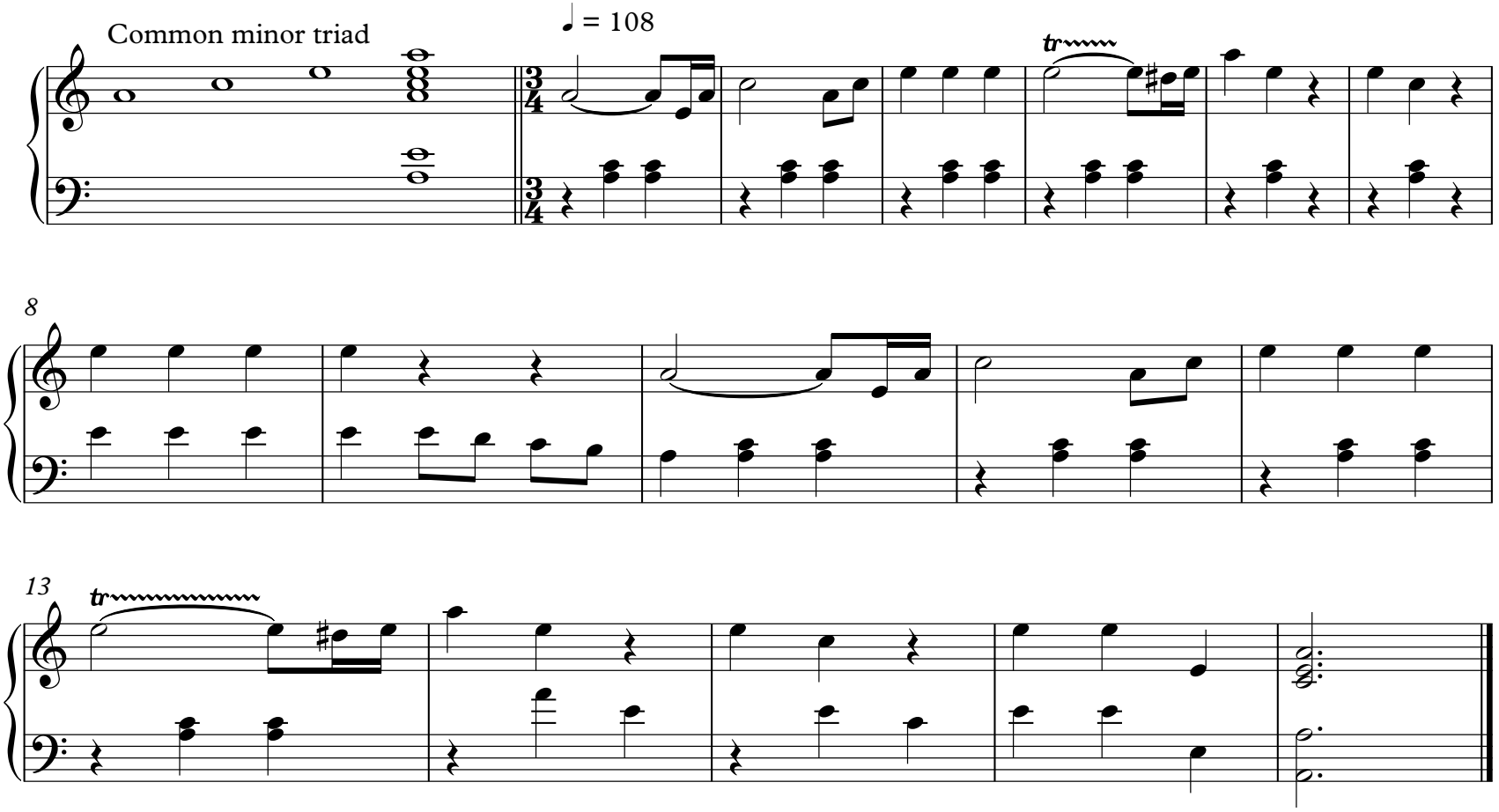
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Classical style minuet (one chord). With passing notes

John Riley



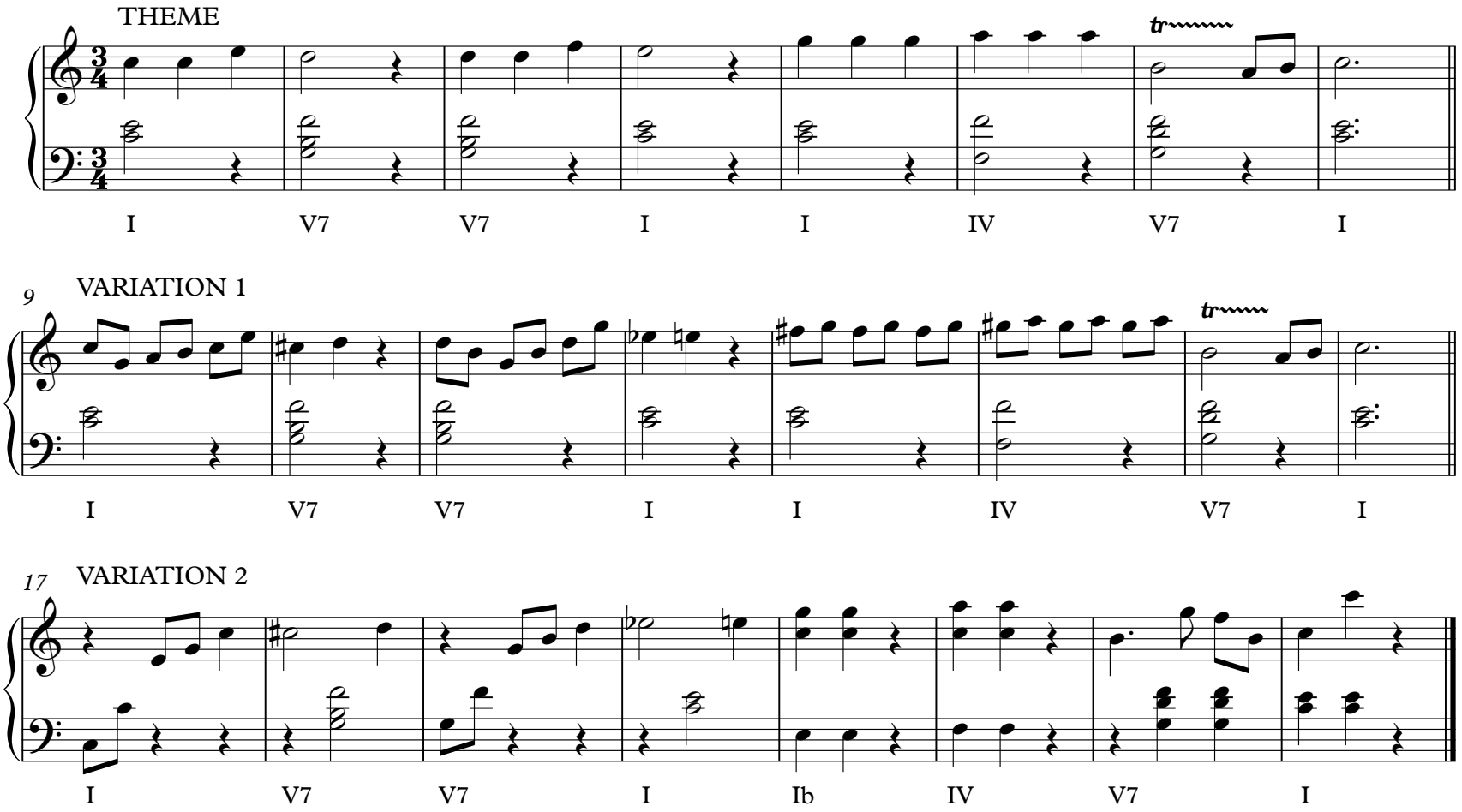
© John Riley 2016

Two and three Chords (Diatonic)

- Two or more chords creates more variety and contrast.
- Next most important chord to the tonic I is chord V, the ‘dominant’. Next most important is chord IV, the ‘subdominant’.
- The chord changes could be in a short and regular repeating pattern.
- The chord pattern could be taken from an existing piece of music, e.g. a hymn.
- The chord changes could be in a longer and less regular pattern.

Theme and variation over a harmonic pattern.

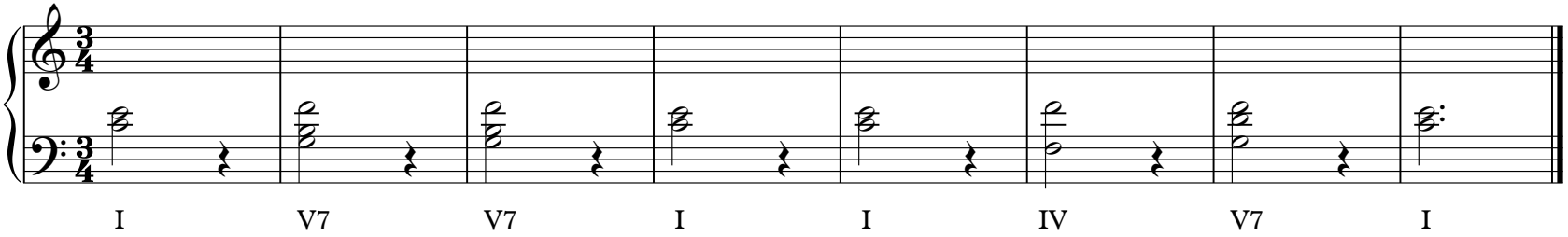
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Theme and variation over a harmonic pattern. (Exercise)

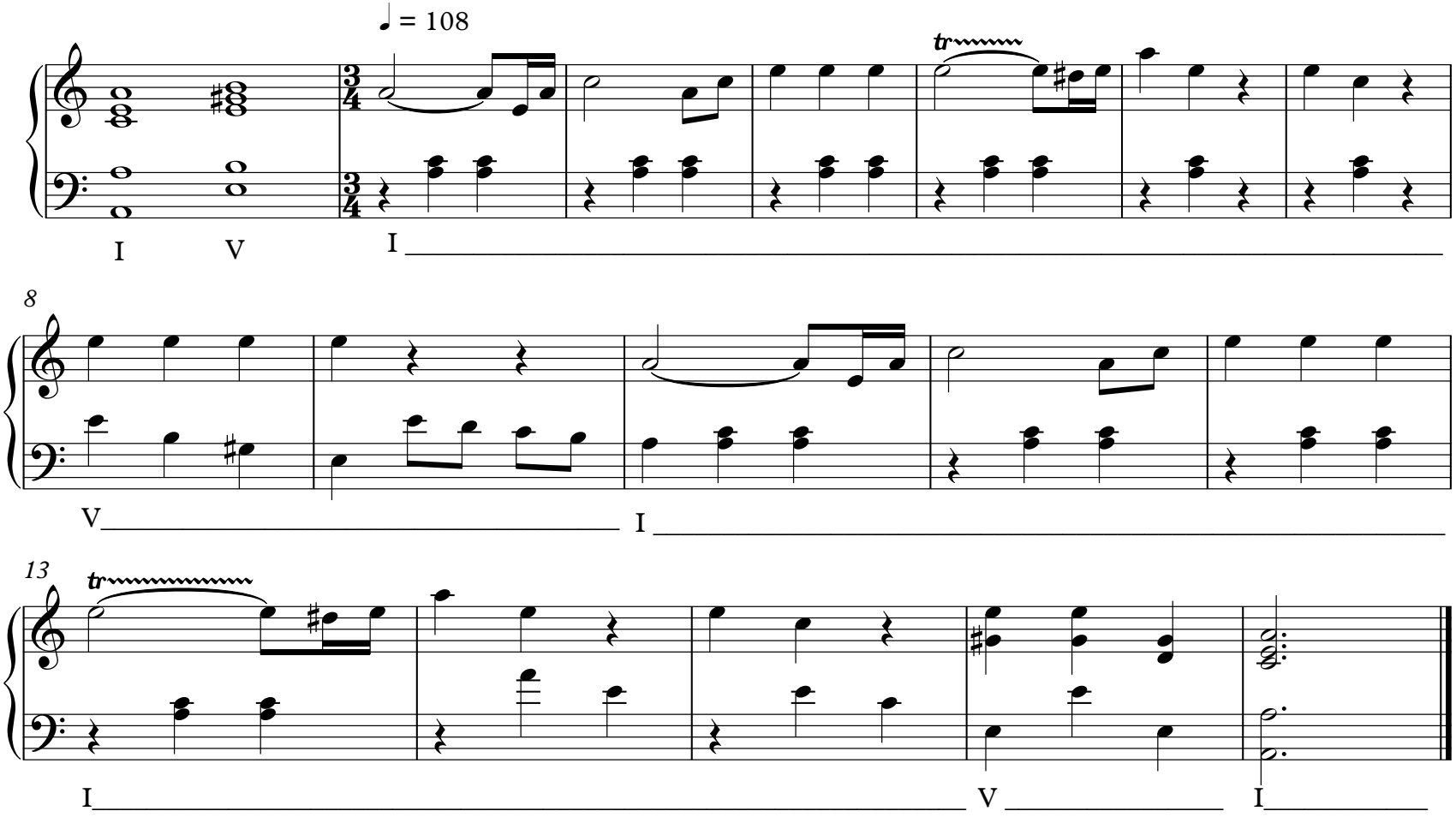
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Classical style minuet (two chords - I & V).

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Baroque Trumpet Tune (with minor middle ('B') section).

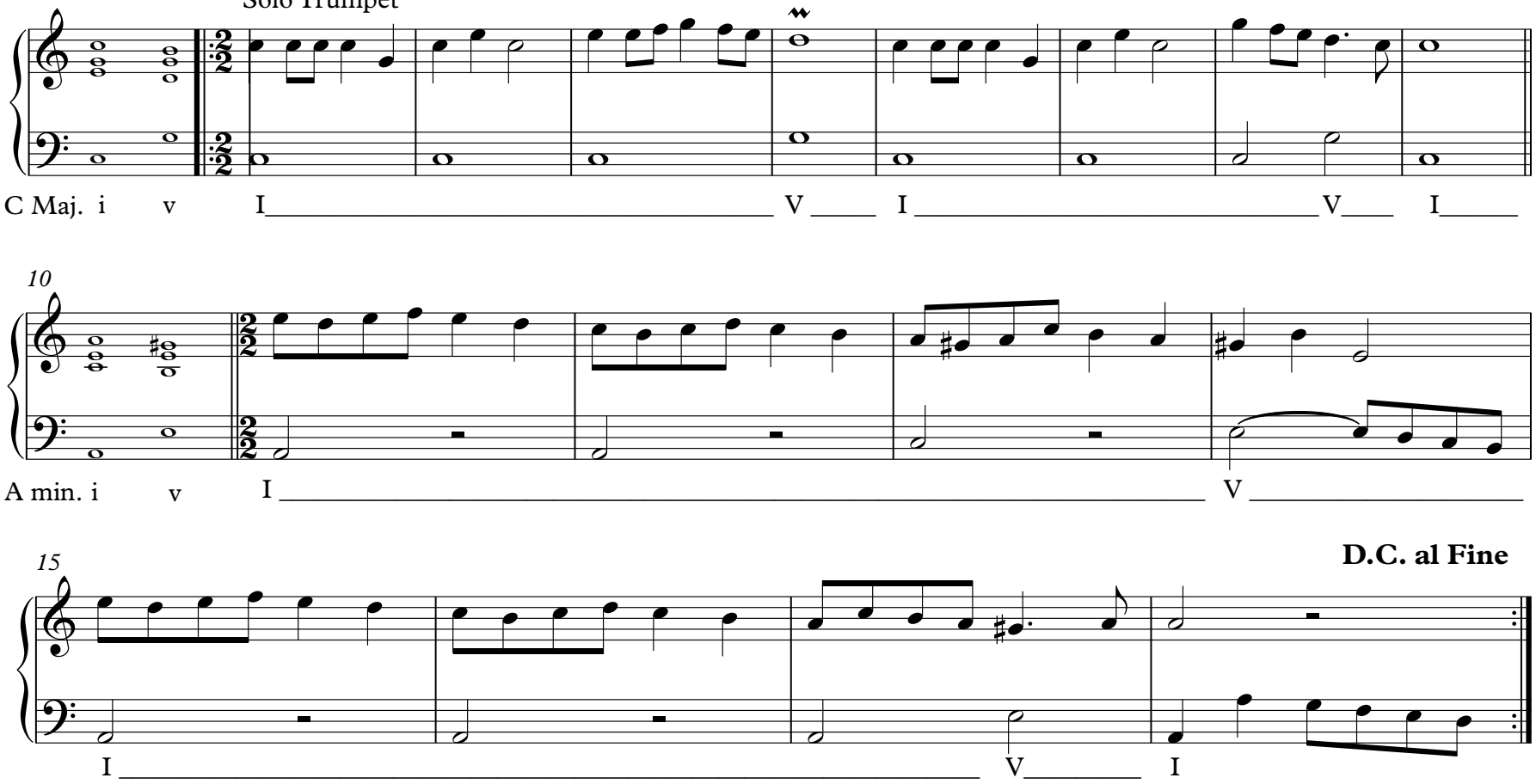
(Could also use certain hymn tunes as 'theme')

John Riley

♩ = 72

Solo Trumpet

Fine

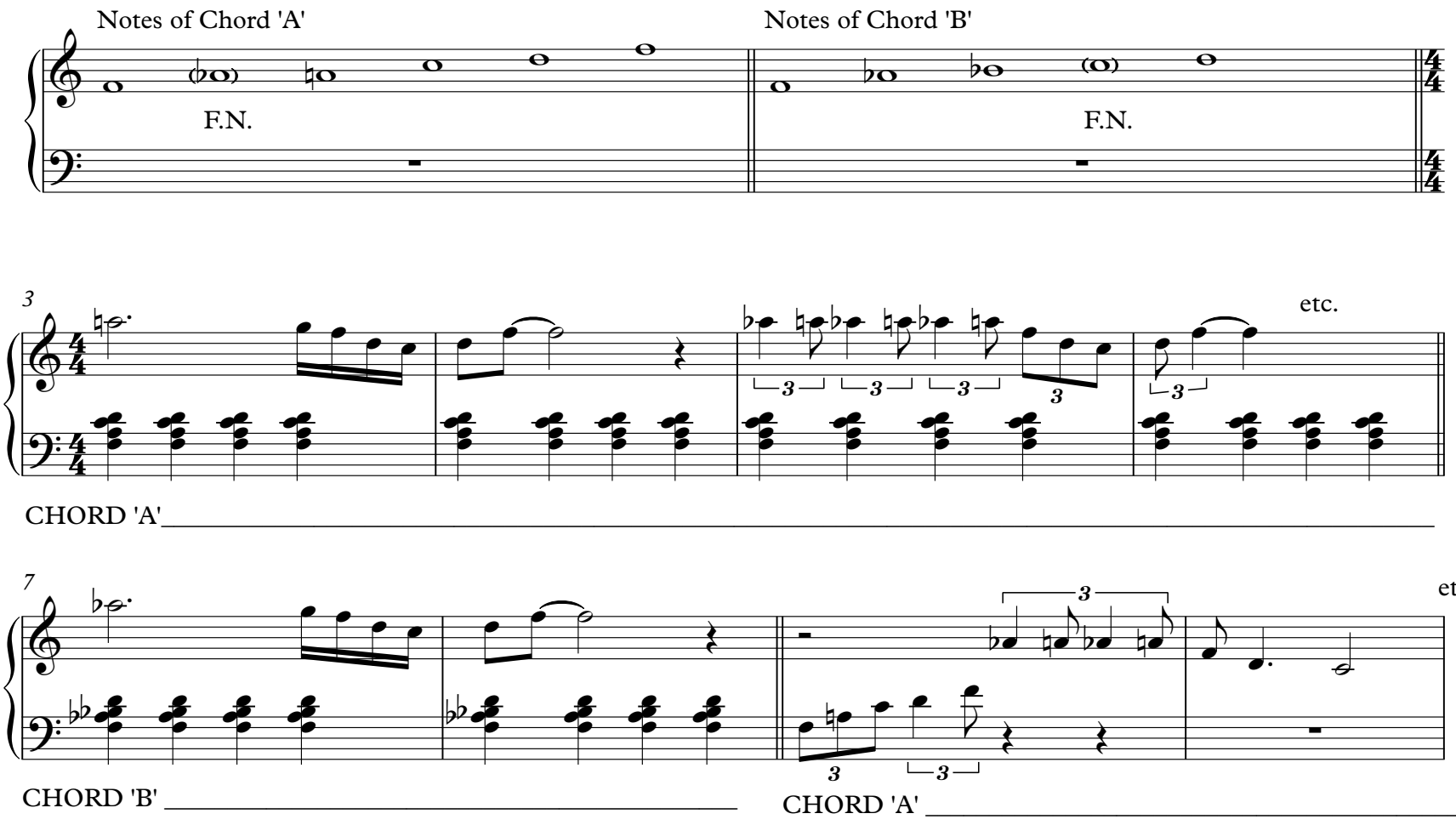


© John Riley 2016

Bluesy Prelude sketch (melody notes grow out of the chord)

F.N. = 'foreign, i.e. clashing, note.

John Riley



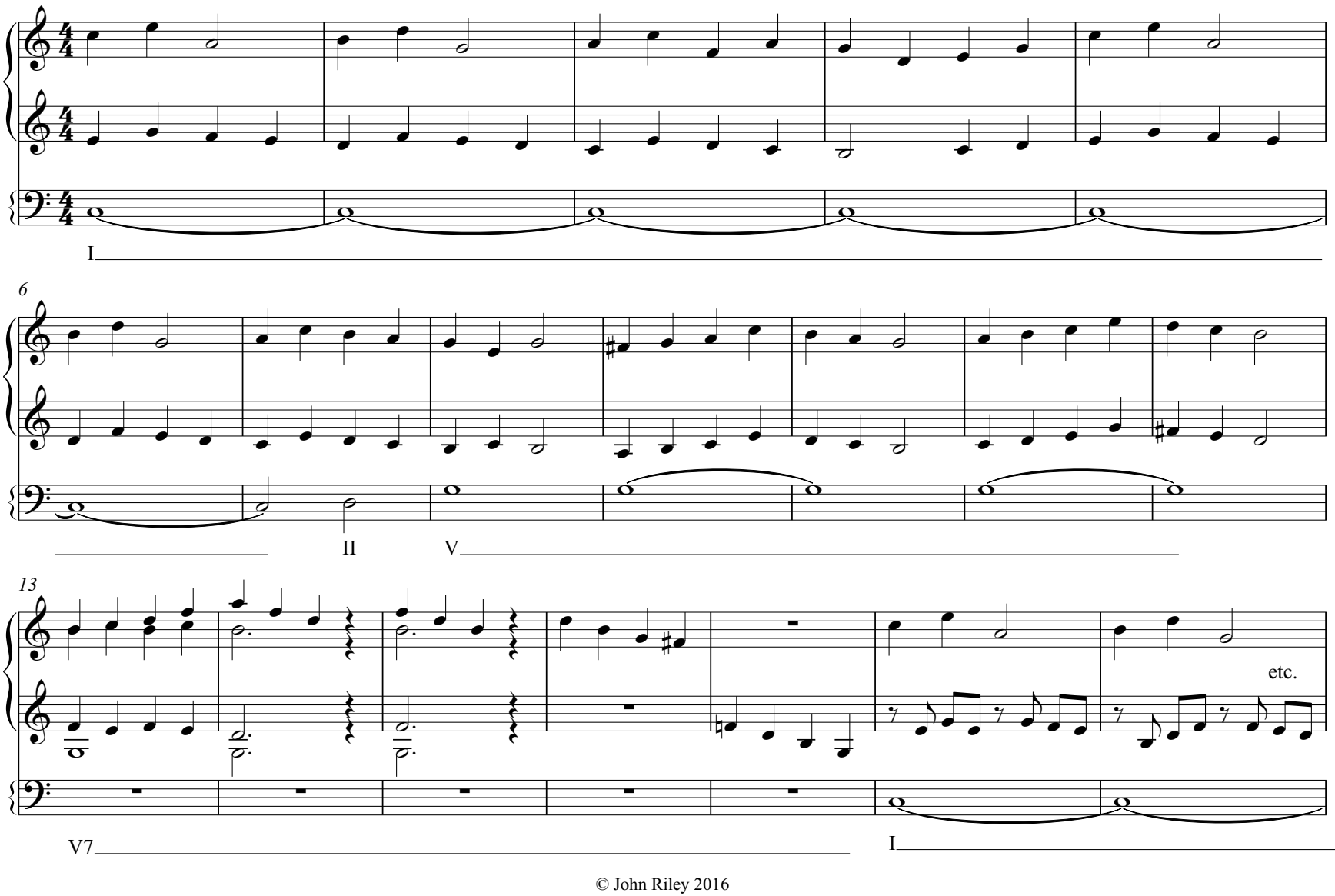
© John Riley 2016

BROADER HARMONIC STRUCTURE

- So far, the harmonic patterns have had a fixed length. However, a harmonic pattern can be applied much more flexibly.
- Harmony is not just about individual chords – but the broader direction and architecture of a piece.
- Individual chords might vary considerably, but underpinning them can be a much more stable underlying harmonic structure.
- E.g. a single pedal note can be an ‘anchor’ and ‘centre of gravity…albeit with considerable elasticity – the more unrelated that the harmonies become to the pedal note, the greater the ‘pull’ and tension, (dissonance).

Romance

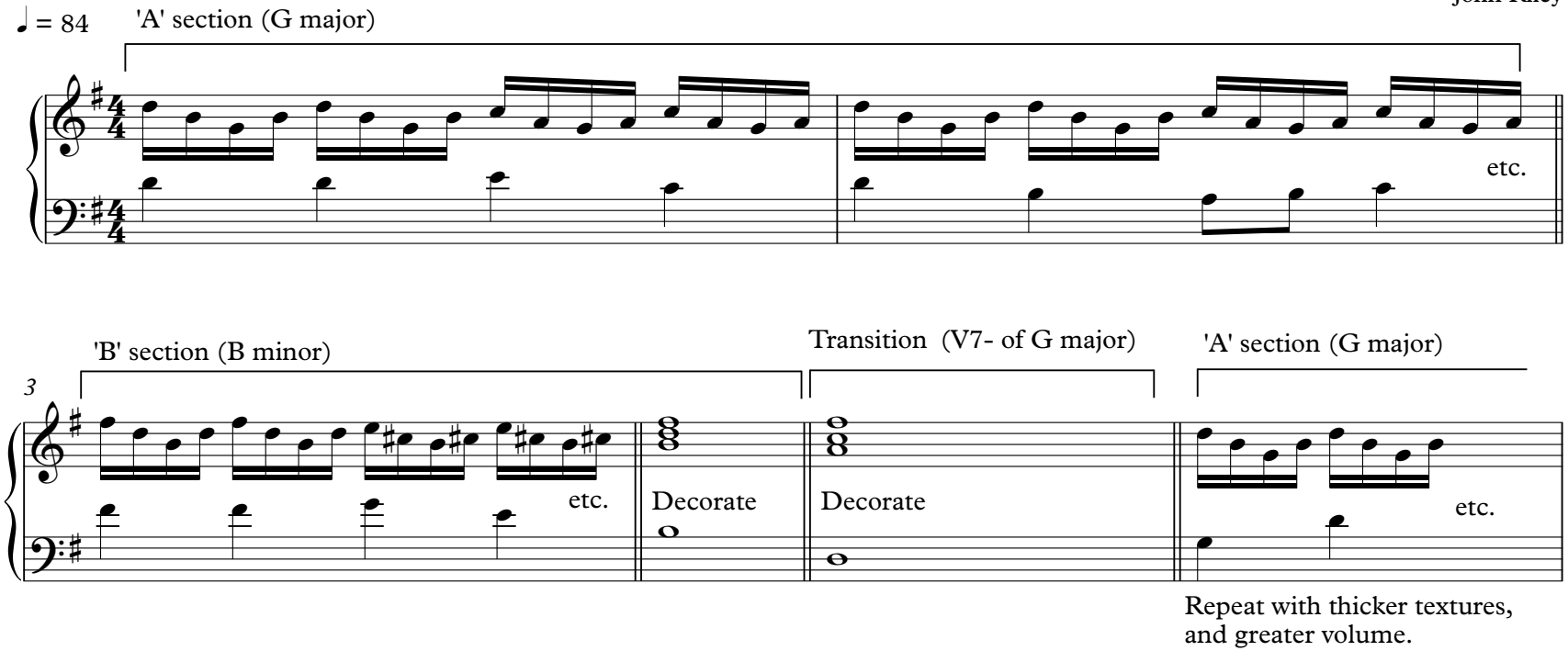
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Toccata - skeleton harmonic plan

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

DEVELOPING THE HYMN

Improvisation is not just about starting from scratch – it can be about creating something new from existing material, e.g. the hymn. Several basic types:-

1. The reharmonised last verse.

Done badly it can be the ‘kiss of death’…

Done well, it can be the crowning glory of the hymn…

Vast subject in its own right, so not something that can be covered here.

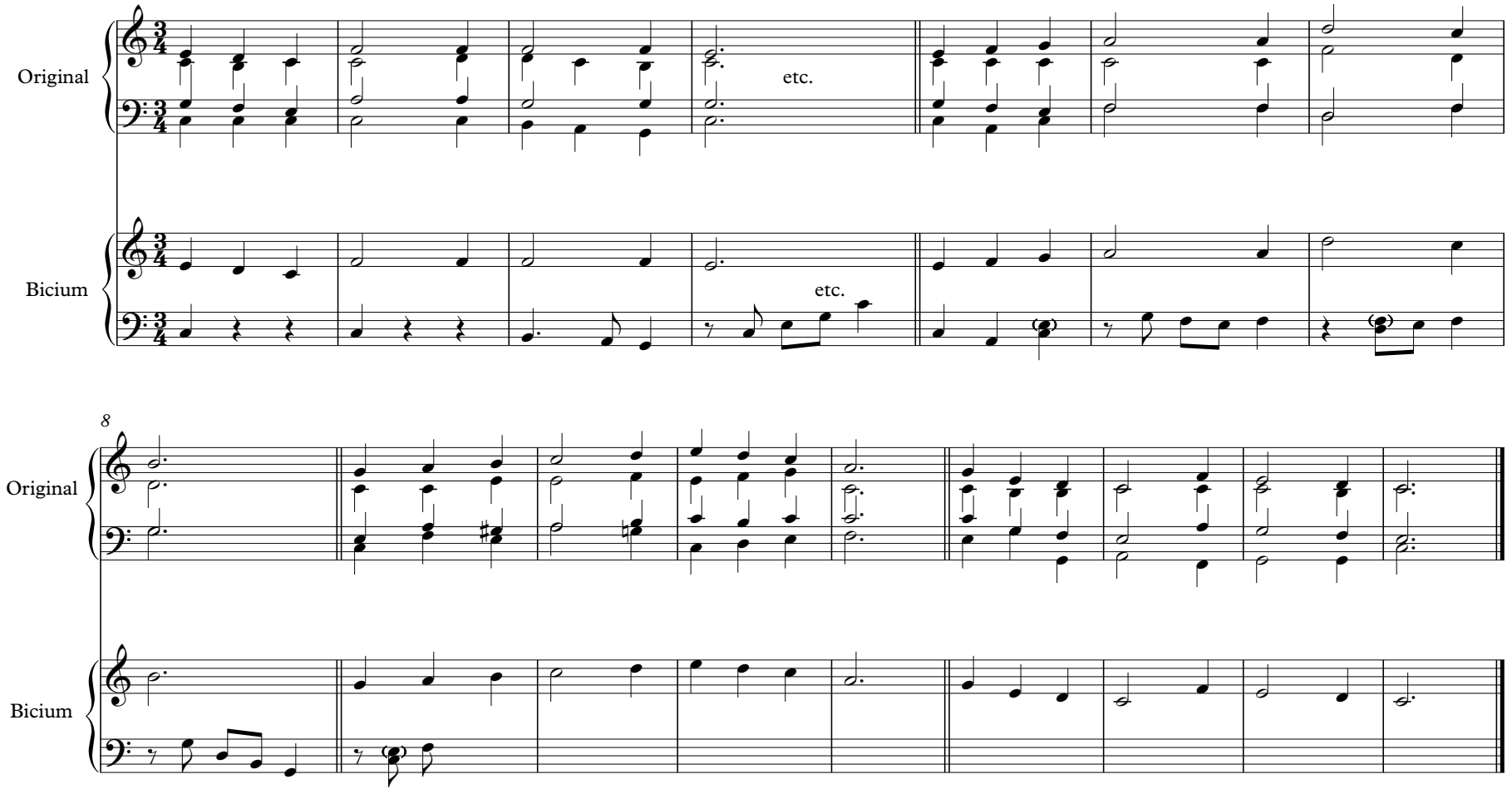
DEVELOPING THE HYMN

2. The chorale prelude in 'real time'.

Using the whole tune and the framework of the original harmonies – i.e. 'rebuilding within existing walls'.

Chorale Prelude on 'Ombersley'

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

DEVELOPING THE HYMN

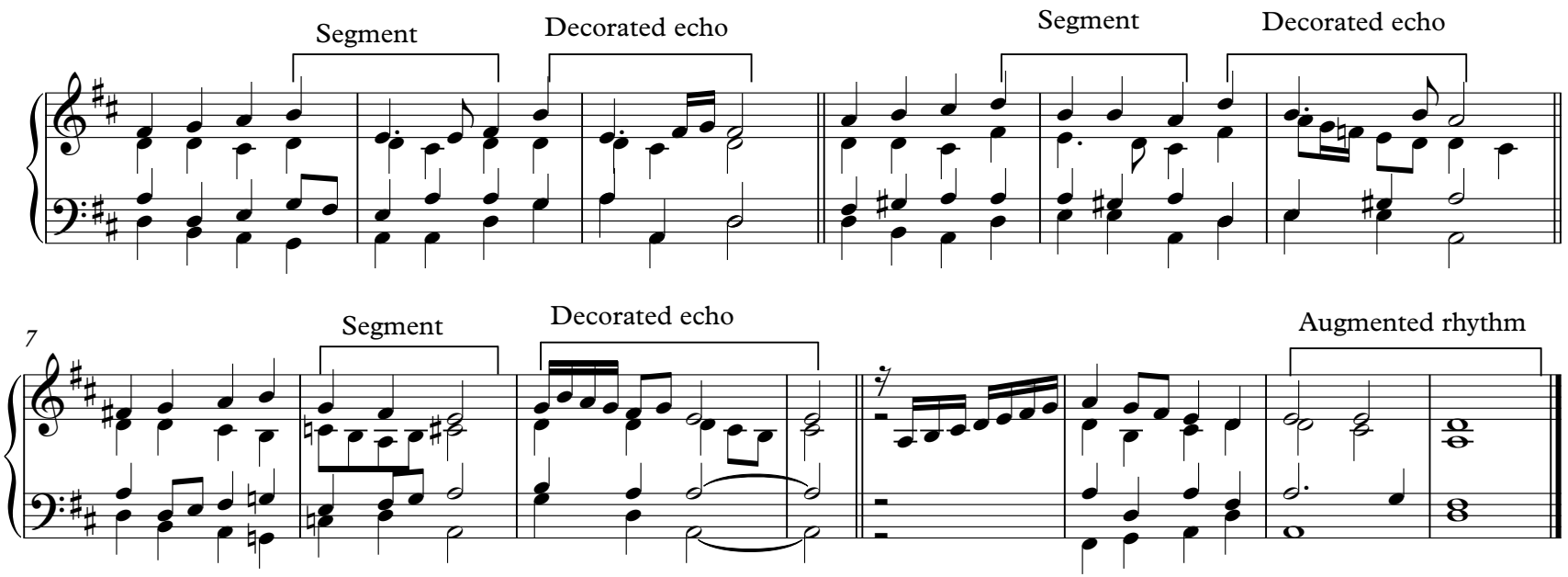
3. Chorale Fantasia-

Using the whole tune but broken up with various decorations and other changes,

e.g. as Echo Fantasia.

Echo Fantasia on Song 13 (Gibbons)

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

DEVELOPING THE HYMN

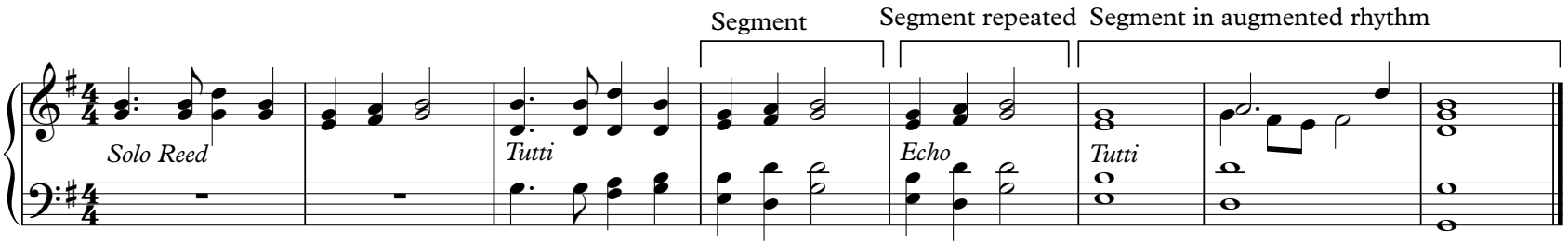
3. Motivic Variation.

Using the whole melody of a hymn provides structure and safety. However, it can be quite restrictive.

A motivic variation uses just part of the hymn and can be developed in many ways – ideal technique for short fanfares etc.

Fanfare on St George's (Windsor)

John Riley

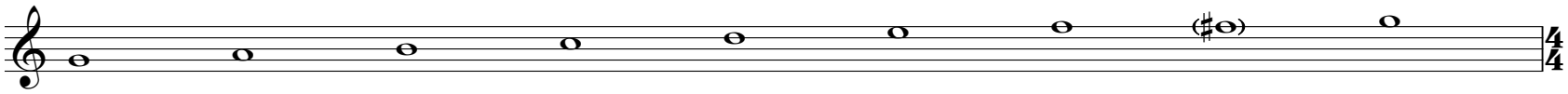


© John Riley 2016

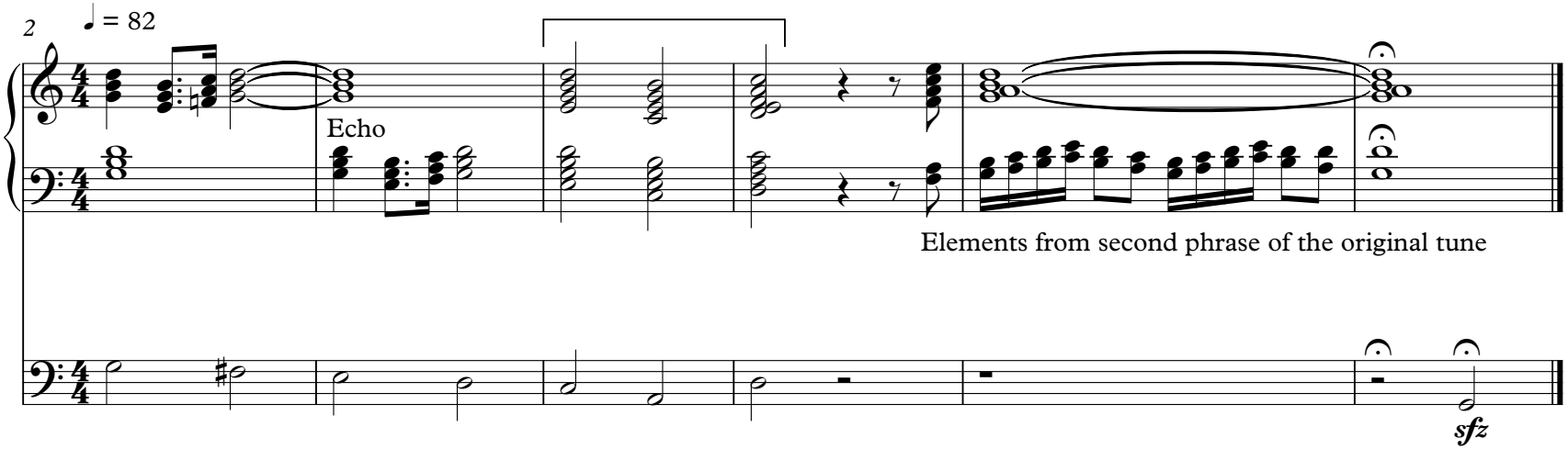
Fanfare on Judas Maccabeus

John Riley

MIXOLYDIAN MODE -blended with elements of G major diatonic scale



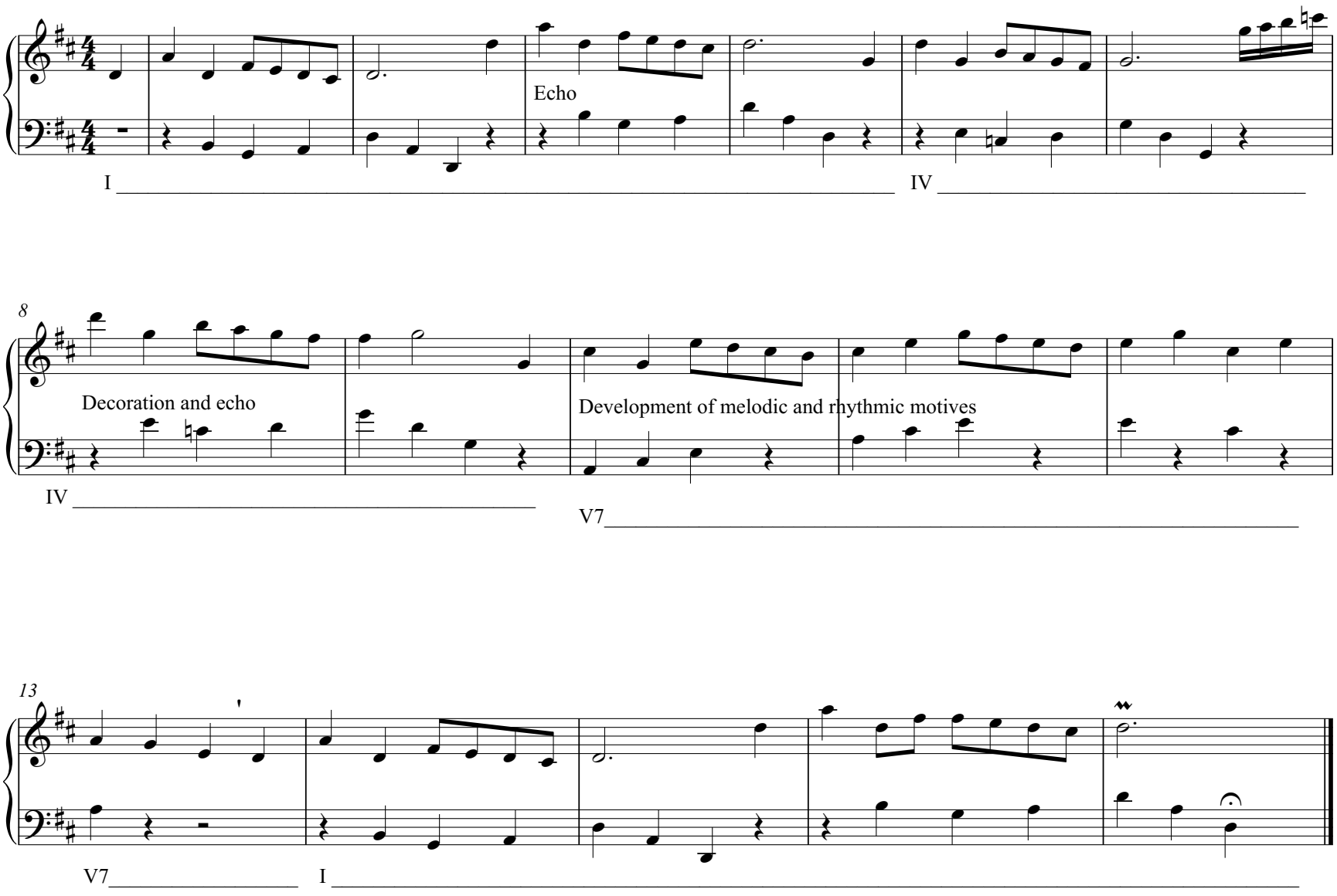
Theme - segmented
and augmented



© John Riley 2016

Prelude on 'Carlisle' (harmonic patterns and imitation)

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

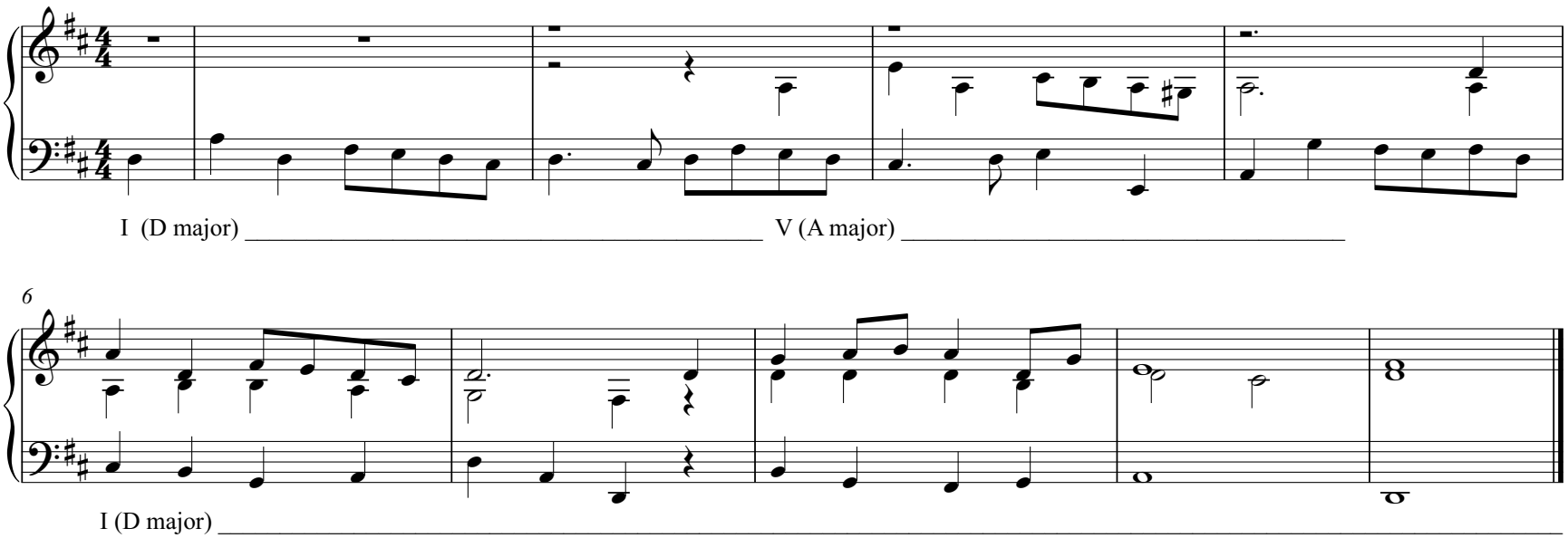
…and finally, the 'pièce de résistance'

THE FUGHETTA

- Easiest if starting from the bottom up, and on I – V – I degrees of the scale.
- Example on 'Aus der Tiefe' is more ambitious, but see if you can use it as a template.

Fughetta on 'Carlisle'

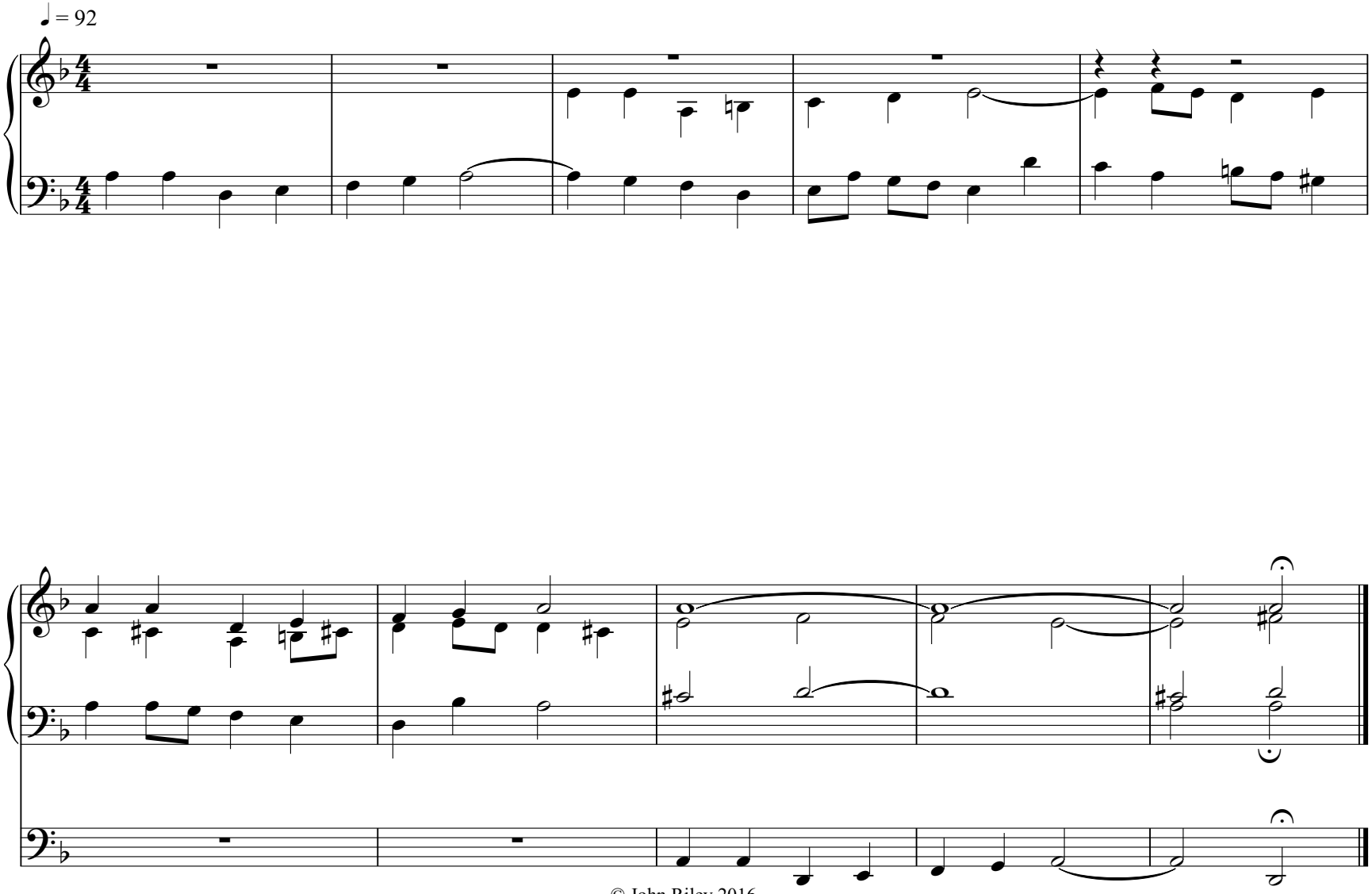
John Riley



© John Riley 2016

Fughetta on 'Aus der tiefe' ('Forty Days and Forty Nights')

John Riley



© John Riley 2016

SUMMARY…

- Focus on clear and purposeful beginnings **and** endings.
- Focus on giving each movement a specific character and fully developing an idea.
- Finish your improvisation sooner rather than later – avoid ‘playing after the music has finished’.
- **Look ahead…**Cruise within your known limits. As with driving, always allow adequate thinking time and space to manoeuver and plan ahead.
- **You are both creator and performer…**convey your ideas effectively through tidy playing and general management of the instrument - just as much as in the printed repertoire.

Hopefully the listener will eventually not be thinking – ‘improvisation’, but asking “what is that interesting piece you just played?”

MISSION STATEMENT

"To produce characterful and memorable ideas, developed in a cogent way and performed with precision and confidence"

All materials ©John Riley 2017

For contact details and further resources and recorded examples, visit **www.organimprovisation.net**