Melodic Flexibility

An easier way to better playing

When something is accepted as new, others may point out that this revolutionary concept has been around for decades. With this in mind, I would like to say that what I am describing is new to me and I would like to share it with you.

Several months ago, I became bored with traditional methods for improving lip flexibility and finger coordination. As an older and supposedly more experienced teacher of the brass, I had enough with the Clarke Technical Studies and every lip flexibility book available to me. Practicing these repetitive patterns was like trying to take a bad tasting pill every day. I knew the exercises were of benefit to my playing but I was also bored out of my mind with these monotonous patterns and for that reason I began writing my own exercises to fill the need for both finger and lip exercises and that was how Melodic Flexibility began.

What is Melodic Flexibility?

Melodic playing has always been the most important phase of any musician's development. The melody coming from the front of our instrument defines our ability as a musician. If we are unable to demonstrate fine melodic skills, few will be interested in hearing us perform. To perform a melodic line musically requires many independent elements such as, an acceptable tone, intonation, flexibility, endurance, knowledge of key signature, dynamics and all the other elements of fine musicianship. Melodic flexibility would encompass every element of musical playing. Unfortunately the exercises we have repeated over the past history of brass playing have been far from melodic. Most of our lip flexibility books sound like primitive bugle calls and possibly the finest finger exercise studies (Clarke Technical Studies for the Cornet) is only slightly melodic in nature. Even though we respect the vast library of books dealing with both lip and finger development, how wonderful it would be to combine both the lip and finger development into one exercise and reap both benefits as well as save time in our practice routine. In my opinion, Melodic Flexibility succeeds in this venture.

As with both traditional lip exercises and finger exercises, Melodic Flexibility requires repetition. The difference between the traditional and my exercises is that Melodic Flexibility is based on well known and/or recognizable melodic patterns. When performing a melody which is known to you, it is more like reading a story than just pounding out short, repetitious patterns. A melody has a beginning, middle and an conclusion. Traditional patterns have no plot, no story and are consequently boring. Each time I play an exercise from the Earl Iron, "27 Groups of Exercises" or the Walter Smith "Lip Flexibility" book it is like taking short jabs to the face. I know they are good for me, just as medicine is good for me, but these patterns are as far from music as anything could get. The same is true for the finger development exercises. After playing every day out of these books for most of my life, I have decided to stop. For me, Melodic Flexibility is a better way to spend my time.

How to Begin Melodic Flexibility

By combining the basic concept of repetition used in traditional methods with well known melodic phrases, I feel every musician would gain more in a shorter amount of time by using this approach. I am not here to sell my method for the concept is so easy anyone can develop their own material and begin experiencing the benefits. If you have a program such as Finale, Finale Songwriter or any similar music writing software, you are ready to begin.

You first need to decide on a simple four measure melody which is limited to a range of about an octave. In your exercise sheet, I have used the song "**Humoresque**". This melody was ideal for it demonstrates a perfect melodic curve, beginning low, extending up an octave and eventually returning to the original starting note. One characteristic which must be in every song that you select is the element of familiarity. The selection of melodic material must be known to the performer for it is the *known melody* which replaces boredom with enjoyment while practicing. Notice that the melody begins in the low range. By starting low, the player will be able to relax and deliver a full, rich, warm sound. This is very important. The melody is then repeated up one half step. Notice that this is beginning to look very similar to the Clarke Studies with one big difference- the player is now performing a recognizable melody. By playing an actual melody, the player is drawn from the first note to the last in a musical fashion; not being forced to just bang valves down. How far you continue upward by half steps will be determined by the goal set and the limits of each player. Do not exceed the comfortable upper register of the player for discomfort is not what we are after at this point.

Once you have reached an upper register which is still comfortable to perform, it is now time to retrace our path back down to the low register. To do this we will now start a new melody. This time I have chosen "Happy Birthday" for our example. Begin in the upper register and descend back to the lower register. The reason for this is to let the embouchure gradually begin to relax. This "start low, work up, return to low concept" seems to work best for the gradual increase and decrease of your embouchure's work load gives the lip a pattern of work and rest which is very beneficial in gaining both strength and flexibility. Pay close attention to the measures indicated for resting. Make sure that you "rest as much as you play".

Slurring your material can not be stressed enough at this point. I have found that the more these melodies can be slurred, the more the air is allowed to flow through your instrument. The more slurring you do, the more relaxed your air passage will become. I have noticed that through the use of slurring, my tone quality has improved substantially. I am aware of more overtones in my tone than ever before. These additional overtones are good examples of an embouchure working more efficiently. As you practice these exercises, listen to the quality of your sound and if you experience more volume with less effort, you are beginning to use your air and embouchure more efficiently.

Gradually Increase the Work Load

Once you have established this basic concept, then you need to move on to more advanced levels. The example I have included at this point is the first phrase in an old melody called "**Nola**". I was amazed at the difficulty of this simple melody. Even in a comfortable key, you may find this a challenge. While playing this tune, notice that your concentration is directed to the melodic line more than to the key or fingering. Let the melody draw you through the notes. Keep thinking melody, not pitches, key or fingerings. Concentrate on the melody for by doing so, you are forcing yourself to play music and not just playing notes. There is nothing melodic about the Clarke Technical Studies. Those exercises are just that, exercises. This melody on the other hand is music.

The Eventual Goal

Once you have become at ease playing the four measure melodies, then it would be time to increase the length and difficulty of the songs. In my next example I have used the melody to "**The Nearness of You**". Because of the added length of the phrase, you will be required to use all of your air and take in additional air to complete the melody. The reason for this is to have you get used to longer phrases and also force you to use up all of your air and quickly refill your lungs to finish the example. This is a wonderful exercise to learn how to quickly fill your lungs.

The Many Benefits from the Practice of Melodic Flexibility

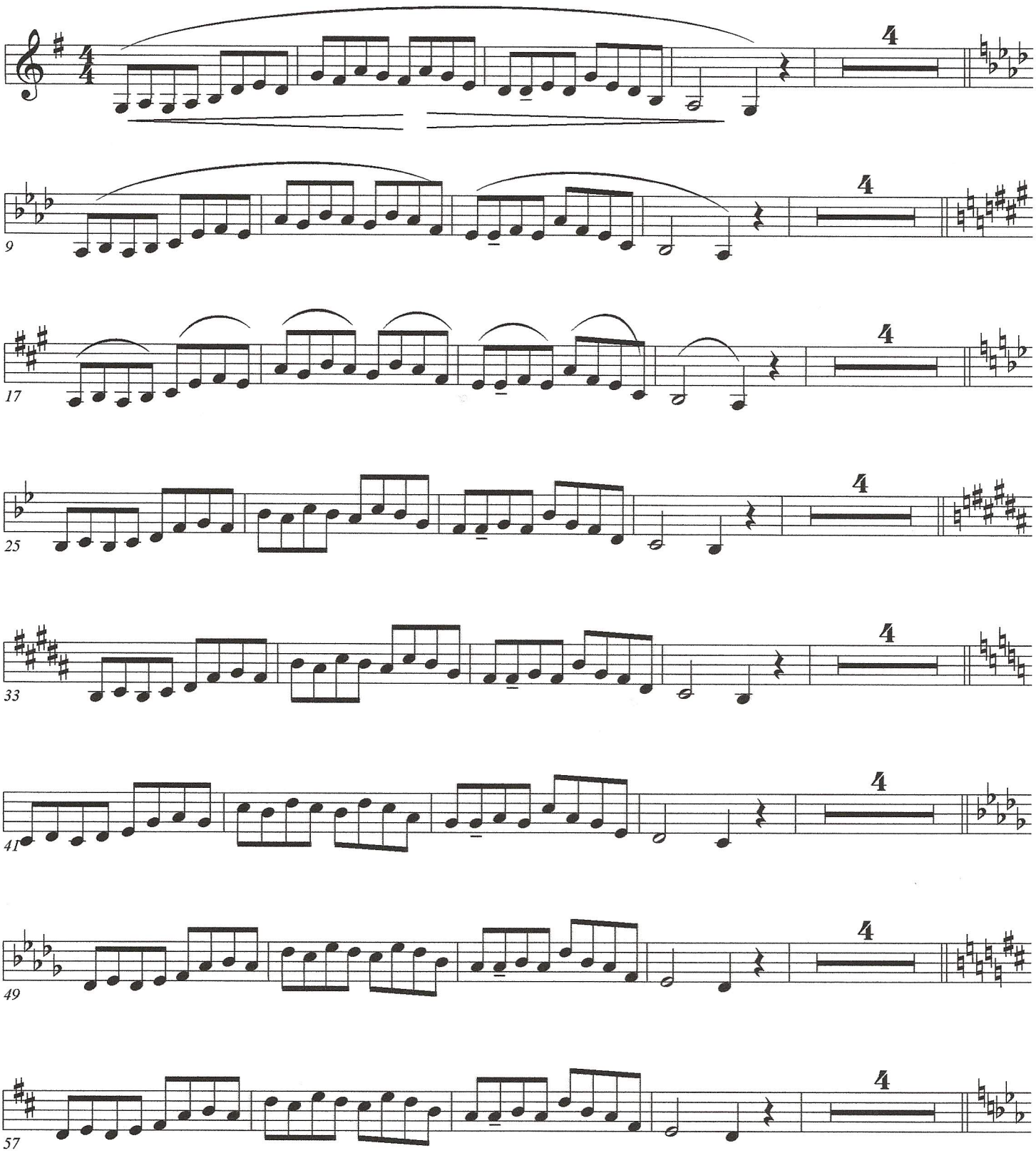
- Improved desire to practice
- Improved ability to play in all keys
- Increased playing efficiency
- Increased lip flexibility
- Increased finger control
- Improvement in tone quality
- Improved embouchure strength
- Increased upper range
- Decrease in practice time

If you have had experience using this concept, or a similar routine, I would be very interested in learning from your observations. By working together, we all might someday be able to be better musicians.

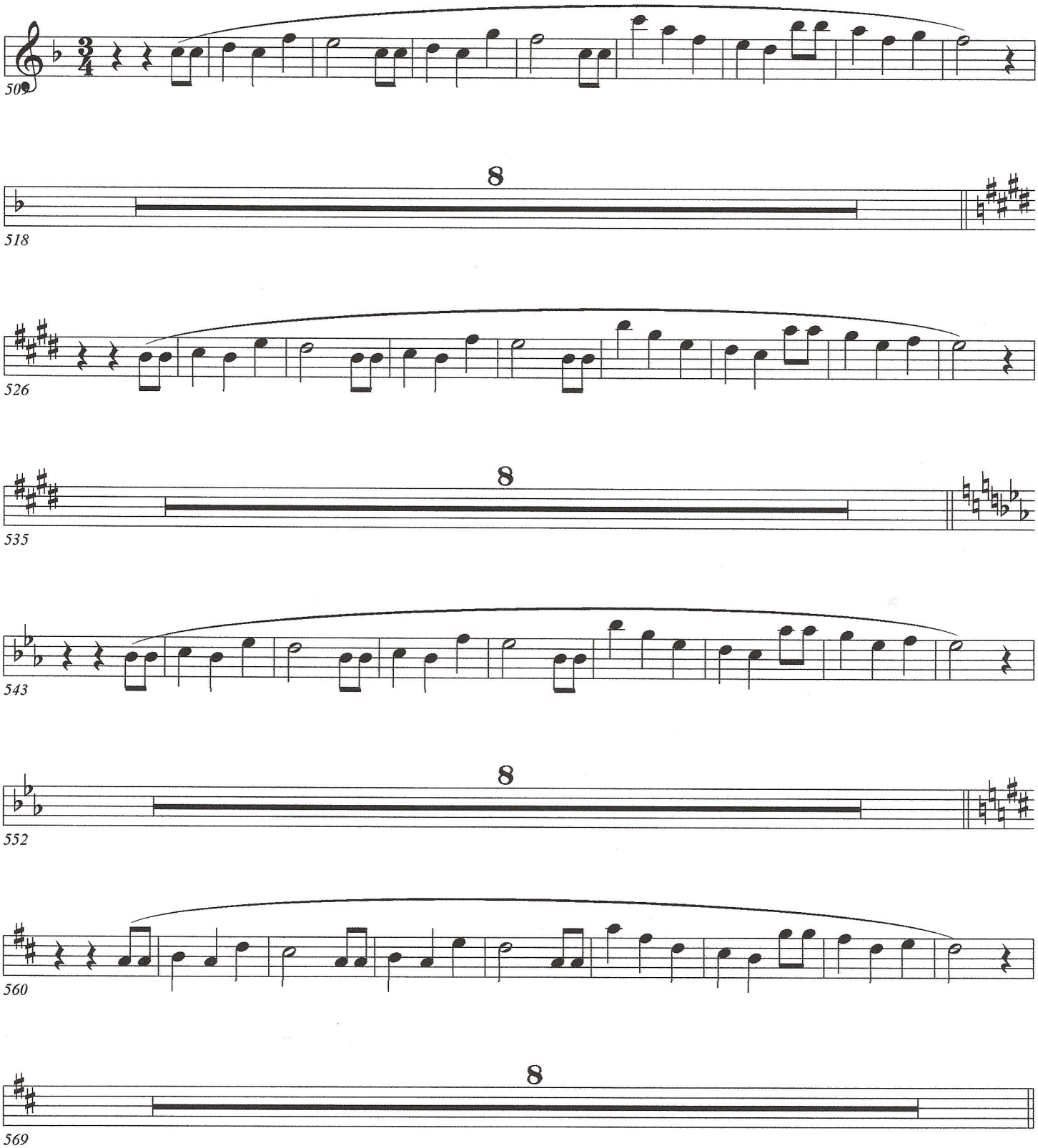
Melodic Flexibility

Humoresque.

Chidester

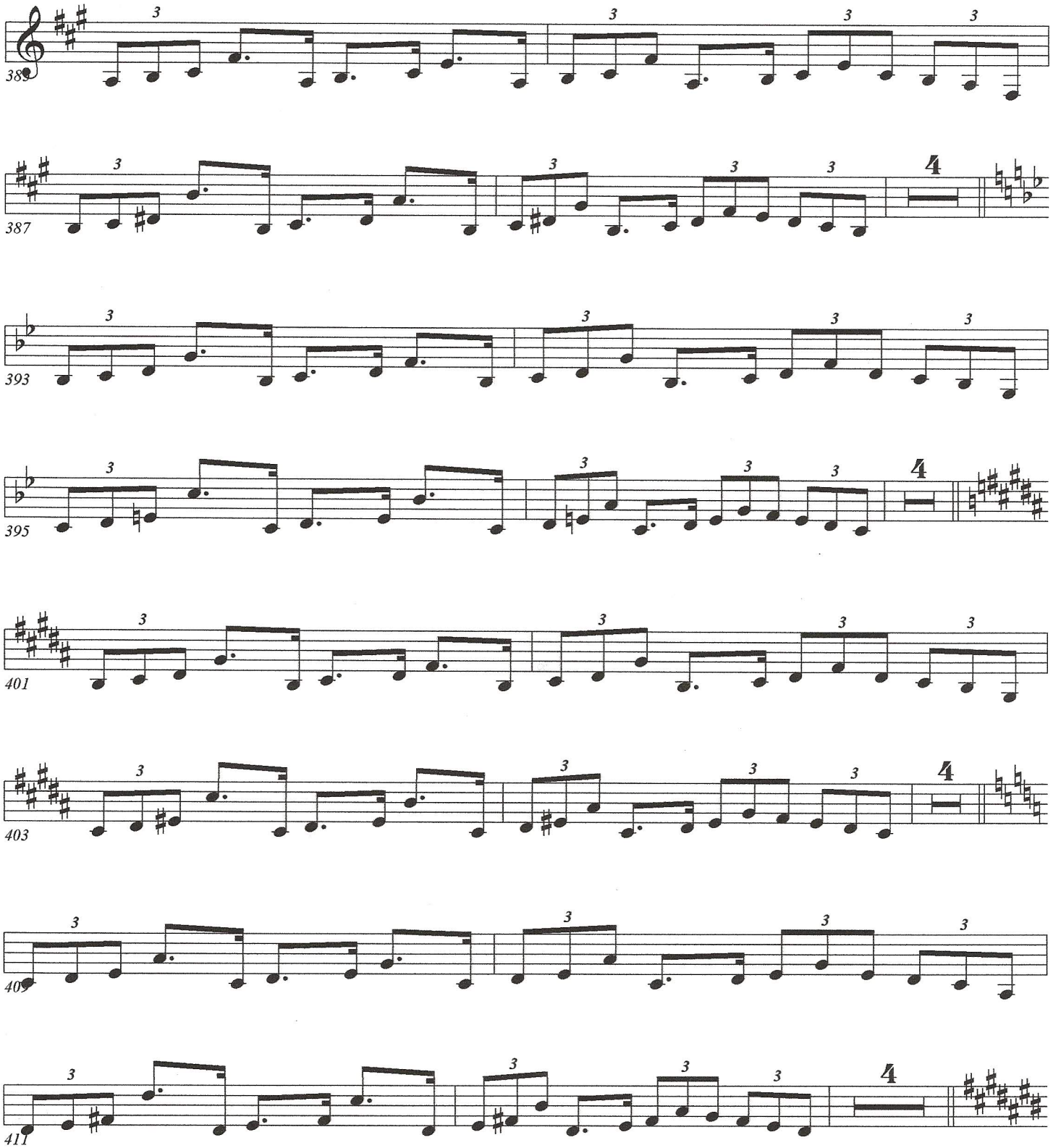


Happy Birthday



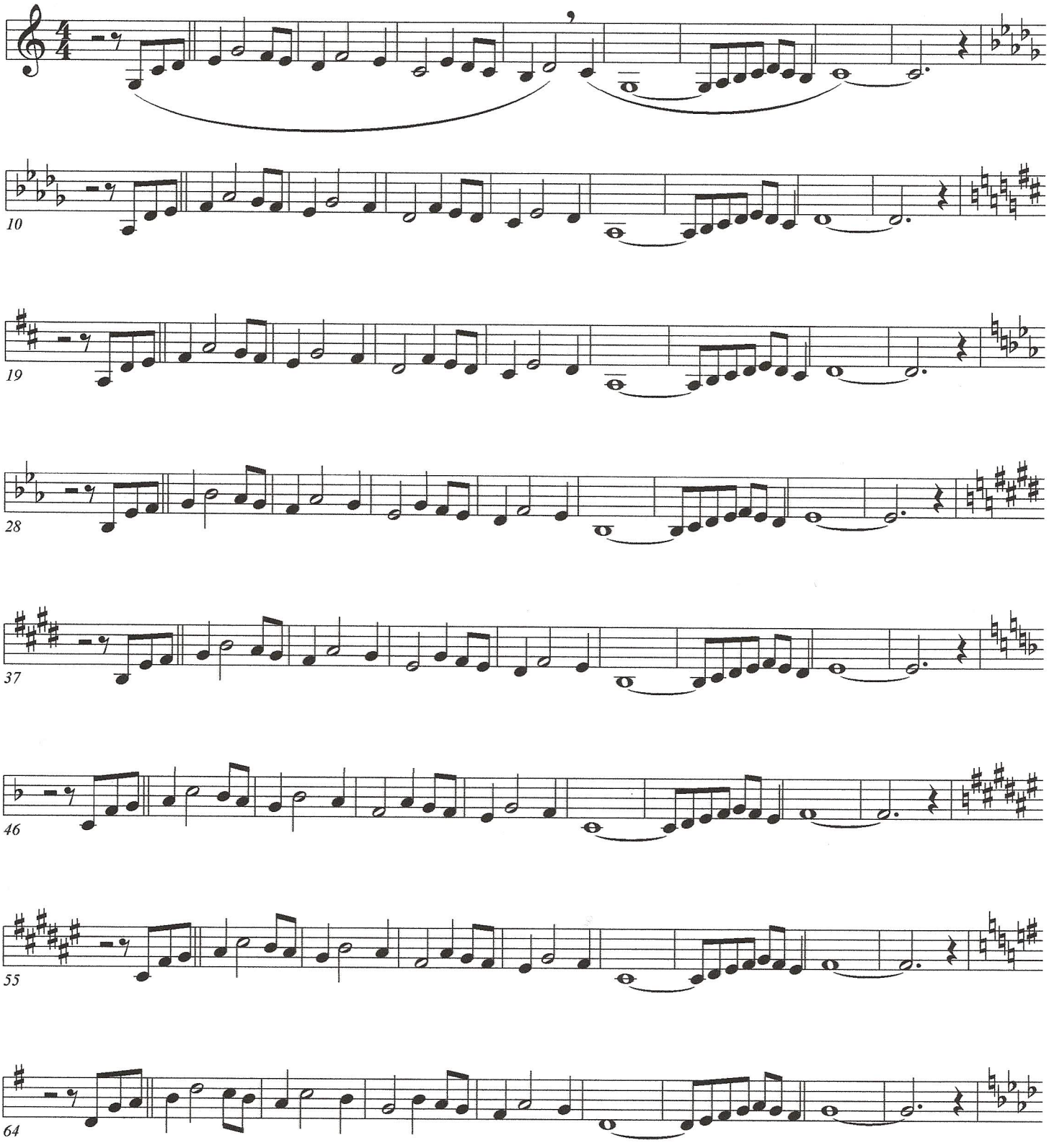
Melodic Flexibility

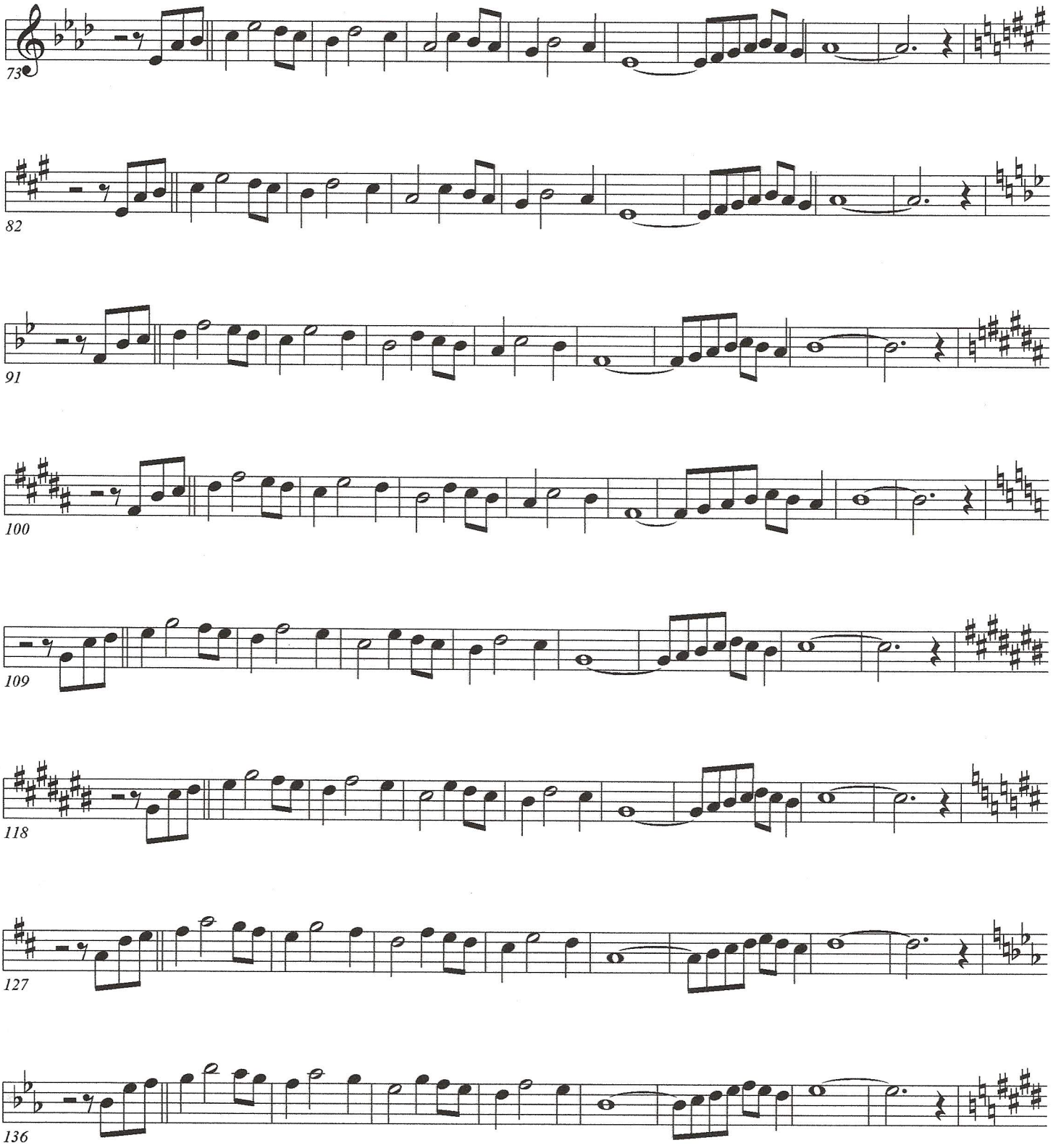
Nola



The Nearness of You

"Remember to rest as much as you play"

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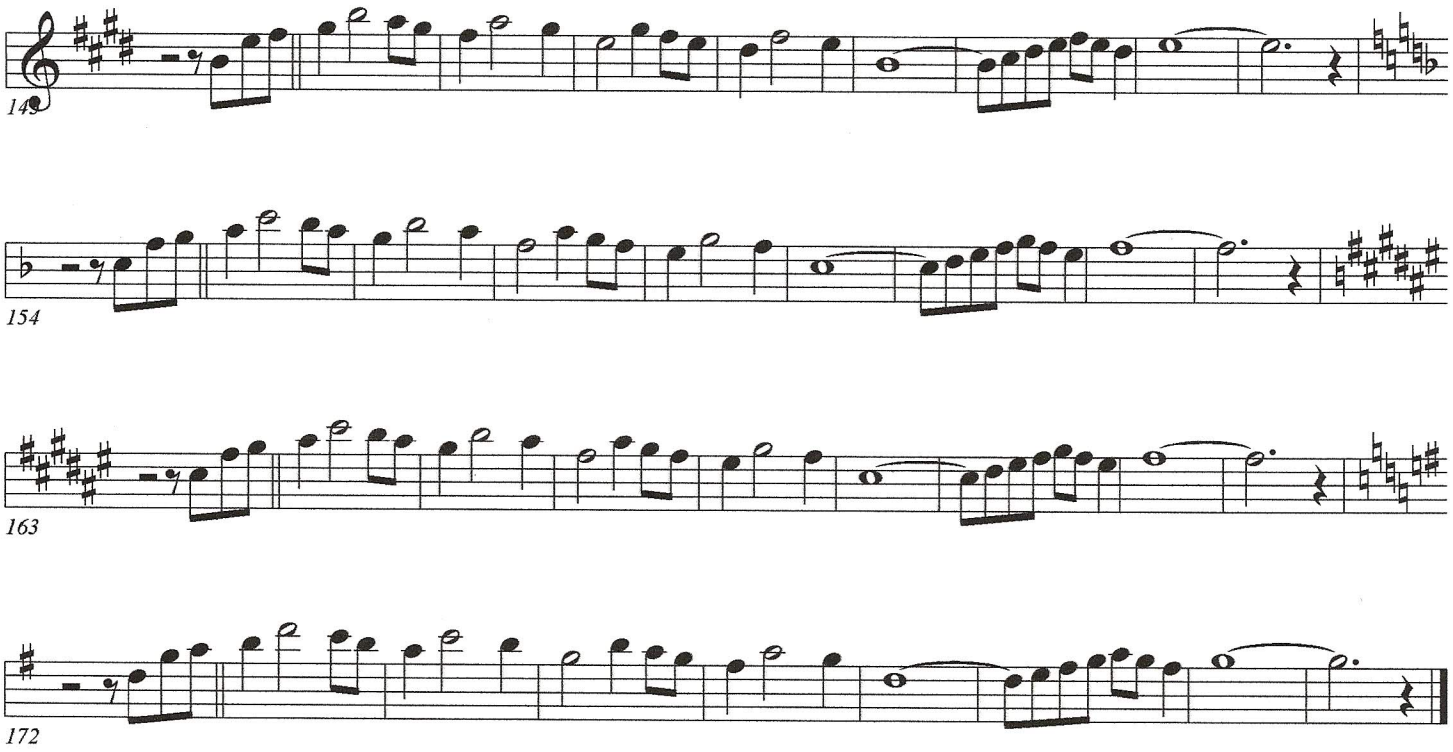
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