5. Intensity in music

Dynamics and dynamic markings

In preceding Units we have seen that music is capable of creating different moods in listeners: optimism, pessimism, and feelings of joy and sadness...

We have also seen that rhythm is one of the elements used by composers to create in audiences a series of sensations, like energy, relaxation...

In this Unit we will look at a new resource that enables composers to create a wide variety of contrasts and achieve greater or lesser tension in certain musical fragments. We are going to look at ***dynamics*** and ***dynamic markings***.

SECTION 1 MUSICAL CONTEXT

The term **dynamics** refers to the intensity or volume with which certain passages or an entire piece of music are interpreted.

The term **dynamic markings** refers to the signs that normally use abbreviated Italian words to indicate changes in intensity.

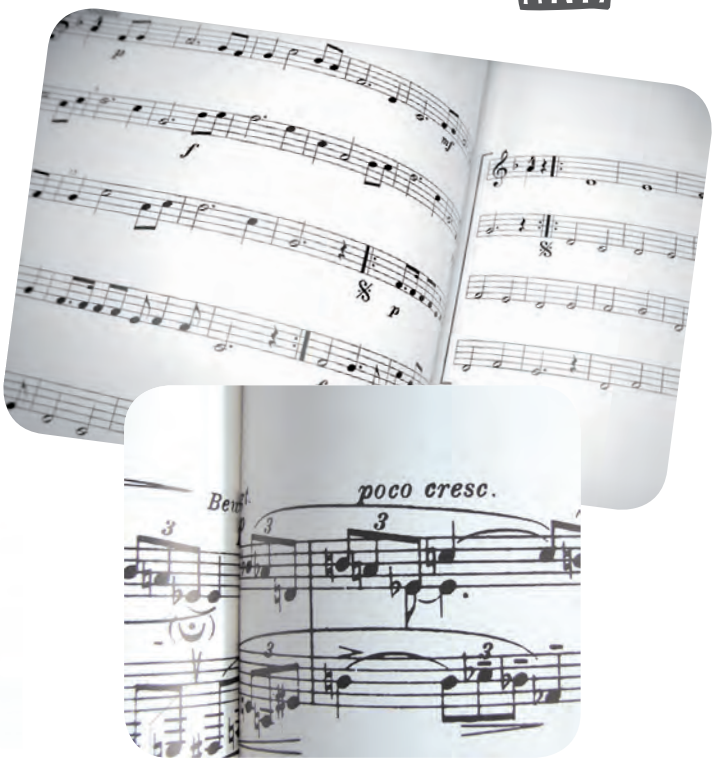
These resources are very important in achieving expressiveness in music, and they are used by a composer to create different degrees of intensity and contrast so as to suggest a variety of different sensations during a musical piece.

According to the level of intensity or volume required from the musicians, we can find the following **types of dynamic markings**:

1. MARKINGS INDICATING A FIXED VOLUME

These are used to indicate that the volume should be maintained until another marking is given to modify it. Note that although these terms are applicable to instrumental music, they are also related to human expressiveness, as you will see in the following videos, where different intensities or dynamics of voice are capable of transmitting different sensations.

SIGN	TERM	MEANING	
pp	pianissimo	very soft	Video 1
p	piano	soft	
mp	mezzo piano	medium soft	Video 2
mf	mezzo forte	medium loud	
f	forte	loud	Video 3
ff	fortissimo	very loud	Video 4



2. MARKINGS INDICATING A VARIABLE VOLUME

These are used to indicate a changing intensity, or an intensity that should vary. Here are some of the most frequently used terms:

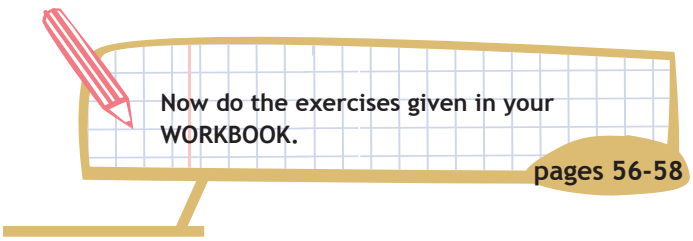
SIGN	TERM	MEANING
	**crescendo** (cresc.)	gradually increasing in volume/intensity
	**diminuendo** (dim.)	gradually decreasing in volume/intensity
	**double hairpin**	a combination of the two above
sfz	**sforzando**	accenting or stressing the note

Listen to the following video and note how the composer "plays" with nuances of variable intensity to create powerful sensations of movement in the listener.

3. DYNAMIC MARKING TYPES

Throughout a musical work we can find a variety of dynamic changes, depending on the markings used in the score. Here are some examples of these changes:

1. **Sudden dynamic change**: this refers to sections of music in which extreme changes in volume can be appreciated. For example: from ***pp*** to ***ff*** or vice versa.
2. **Slight dynamic change**: fragments in which the changes are closer to each other, so the change in volume is not as dramatic as in a sudden change. For example: from ***p*** to ***mf***, ***mf*** to ***f***, etc.
3. **Flat dynamics**: fragments in which the intensity of the sounds remains more or less stable without changing much.
4. **Gradual dynamic change**: this dynamic level involves slow changes from one level of volume to another: crescendo, diminuendo and the double hairpin.



SECTION 2 LISTENING

Now that you know the various types of **musical dynamics**, let's try to distinguish them by listening to some musical fragments.

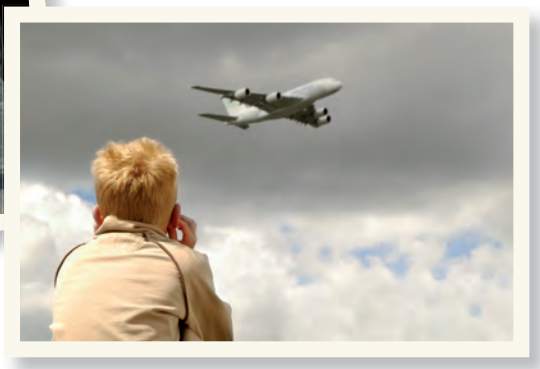
pages 59-67

Now do the exercises given in your WORKBOOK.

CURIOUSLY ENOUGH

Our daily exposure to noise produces many damaging reactions in our bodies, both physiological (auditory, respiratory and digestive systems) and psychological (anxiety, phobias, stress) which can seriously harm our health.

In view of this, a study from the World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that 50 decibels is the sound limit that is acceptable for human health. At over 120 decibels, the volume of sounds can actually harm the human ear. To get an idea, a motorbike without a silencer produces 115 decibels, and a car claxon has a level of 90.



Video 6

SECTION 3 CULTURAL CONTEXT

The concept of using music as an ideal vehicle for transmitting human sentiments and emotions is present in the composers of all ages. Below you can see how dynamic markings have been used throughout history.

5th-14th C

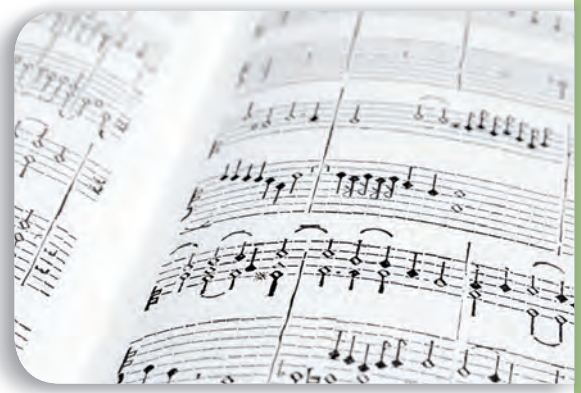
✓ The Middle Ages

Because of the calm, meditative character of religious music and its purpose of communication with God, exemplified in Gregorian chants, melodies presented no dynamic changes that would distract listeners or the faithful.

15th-16th C

✓ The Renaissance

Although dynamic markings were not yet included in musical scores, some dynamic changes were evident in interpretations, in an attempt to gain greater expressiveness in certain parts of a musical work.



1600-1750

✓ The Baroque

- In this period changes in dynamics were achieved by increasing or diminishing the actual number of instruments being played: Forte = many instruments (*tutti*) / Piano = fewer instruments (concertinos or soloists). This technique was known as *terraced dynamics*.
- Another dynamic resources was to imitate physical echoes by playing a musical passage first in ***f*** and then repeating it in ***p***.

1750-1800

✓ Classical

Development in instrument manufacturing and the increase in members of orchestras favoured the appearance of new dynamic resources, such as the ***crescendo***  and the ***diminuendo***  , which were enthusiastically accepted by the public of the time.

19th C

✓ Romanticism

- The urge to reflect passion and sentiments through music brought about extreme dynamic changes as regards intensity (***pppp*** to ***ffff***).
- The **sforzando** (***sfz***) arises, consisting of the heavy accenting of a particular note, creating a high degree of tension at certain points of a musical work.

20th-21st C

✓ 20th C to present

Composers struggle to find new avenues for music and as a result explore a wide variety of dynamic contrasts, which are often sudden and unexpected, derived from their experimentation and innovation.

Video 7

Now do the exercises given in your WORKBOOK.

page 68

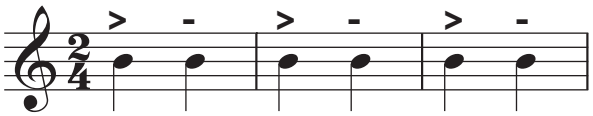
SYNCOPATION AND OFF-BEAT NOTES

1. ACCENTED BEATS

In the preceding Unit we saw how bars of music were distinguished by their cycle of **accented beats**, which determines the number of beats in each bar.

Strong and weak beats in bars are as follows:

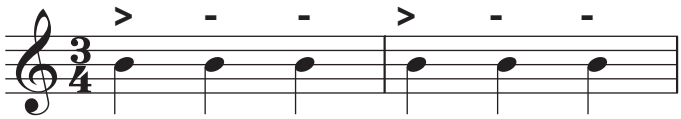
Binary time



In 2/4 time, the first beat is strong (>) and the second is weak (-).

If we compare these beats to words divided into syllables, we can see that 2/4 time is like two-syllable words with the accent on the first syllable, such as mú-sic, foót-ball, hóme-work, ác-cent…

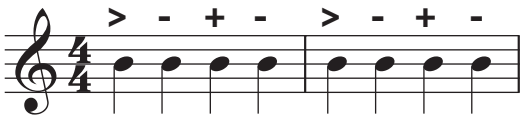
Ternary time



In 3/4 time, the first beat is strong (>) and the second and third are weak (-).

If we compare these beats to words divided into syllables, we can see that 3/4 time is like three-syllable words with the accent on the first syllable, such as mú-si-cal, bírd-lo-ver, trée-climb-er, más-ter-ful…

Quaternary time



In 4/4 time, the first beat is strong (>), the second weak (-), the third medium-strong (+) and the fourth weak (-)).

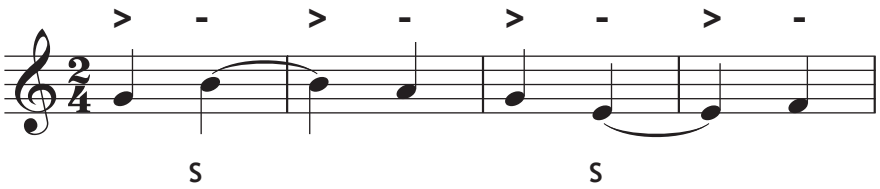
If we compare these beats to words divided into syllables, we can see that 4/4 time is like four-syllable words with the accent on the first syllable, such as cát-a-go-ry, dél-i-ca-cy, tés-ti-mo-ny, mém-o-ra-ble…

2. SYNCOPATION

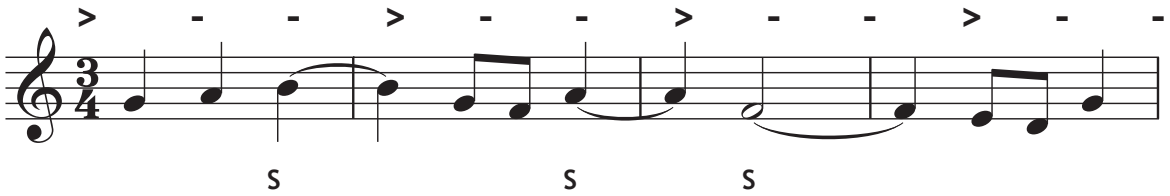
Sometimes, the beat is made to change its natural rhythm when musicians want to play around with the beat and change its normal place. When the beat changes its natural accent, it is called **syncopation**.

Syncopation is the disturbance or interruption of the regular flow of rhythm, placing stresses or accents in places where they don't normally occur, for instance replacing a strong note with a weak note and vice versa. This kind of rhythm is known as a syncopated rhythm, and its is frequent in jazz music, but it is also used in other musical styles such as rock, mambo and even in classical music.

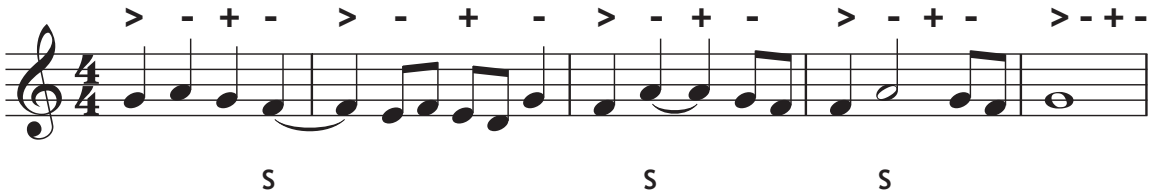
Examples:



Note how the tied notes start on a weak beat and are prolonged up to the strong beat.



The minim in the third bar starts at the second and third beat (both weak) but it continues to sound up to and including the first beat of the next bar (strong).



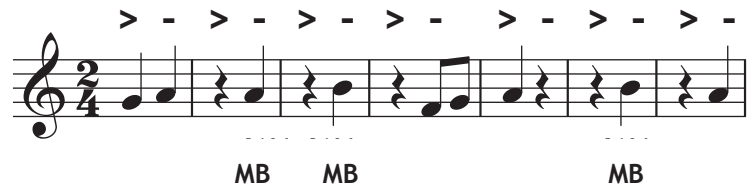
The tied crotchet in the third bar is syncopated, as it starts on a weak beat and continues over a medium-strong beat. The minim in the fourth bar is played in the same way as in the third bar, so it is also a syncopation.

3. MISSED-BEAT SYNCOPATION

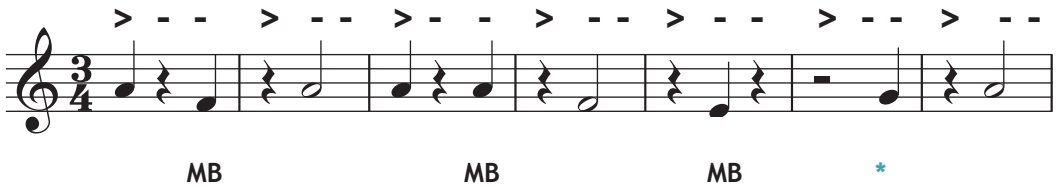
Missed beats are also used to emphasise weak beats. Basically, they are rests at strong beats with notes on weak beats, so missed beats are always preceded or followed by a rest (at the strong beat), with notes played on the weak beats.

Note that if a rest falls on the weak beats and notes are played on the strong beats, these are not missed-beats, as they do not break with the natural rhythm of the bars

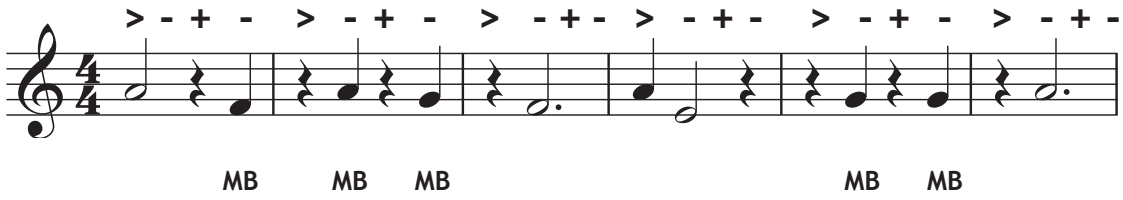
Examples:



See how the crotchets in bars 2 and 3 are missed-beats, as they occur on the weak beats and the rest is on the strong beat, but the crotchet in bar 5 follows the natural rhythm because it falls on a strong beat with a rest on the weak beat.



The three notes marked as MB fall on weak beats and are preceded by rests on the strong beat. But the crotchet in the third bar, despite falling on a weak beat, is preceded by a rest at the weak beat as well. The crotchet in the fifth bar is on a strong beat, so it follows a normal rhythm.



The notes marked as MB fall on weak beats preceded by rests on the strong or medium-strong beats. The other notes preceded by rests do not follow a normal rhythm and are therefore not missed-beat notes.

Now do the exercises given in your WORKBOOK.

pages 69-71

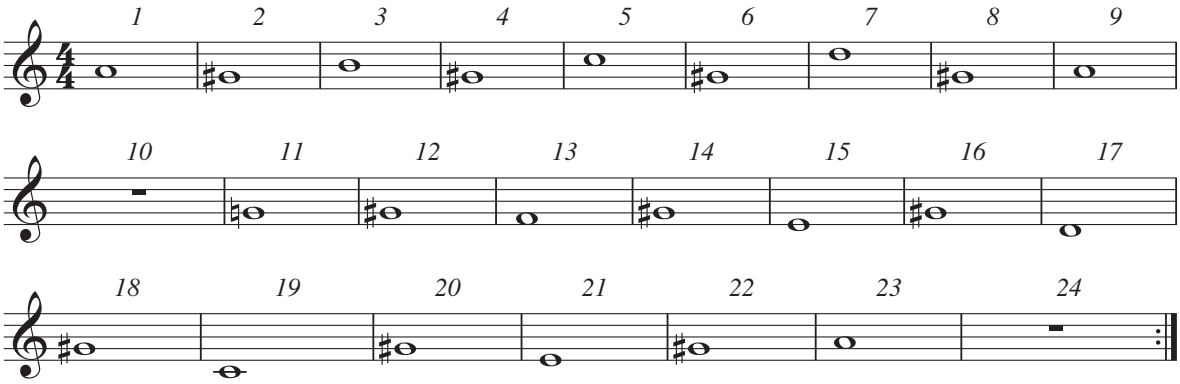
SECTION 5 MUSICAL INTERPRETATION

This section provides activities with melodic instruments that will help you to play and enjoy the music that we offer for interpretation.

INSTRUMENT PRACTICE

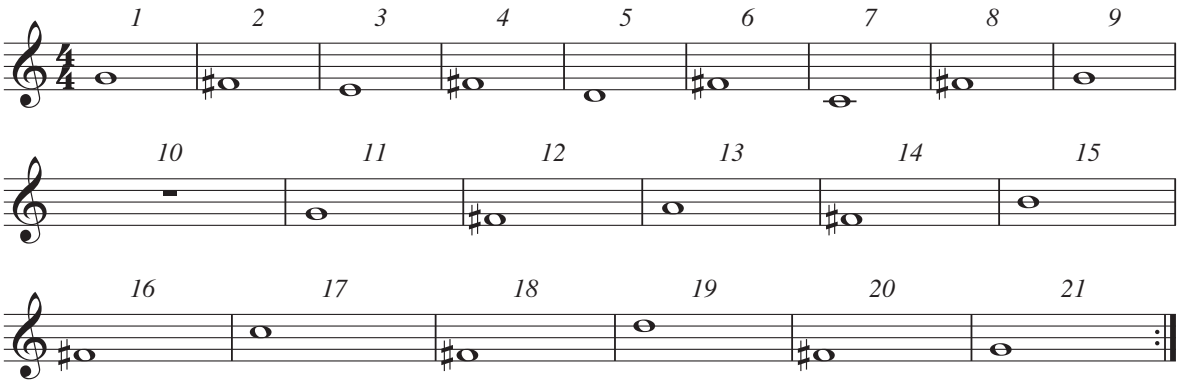
EXERCISE 13

Practise G#



EXERCISE 14

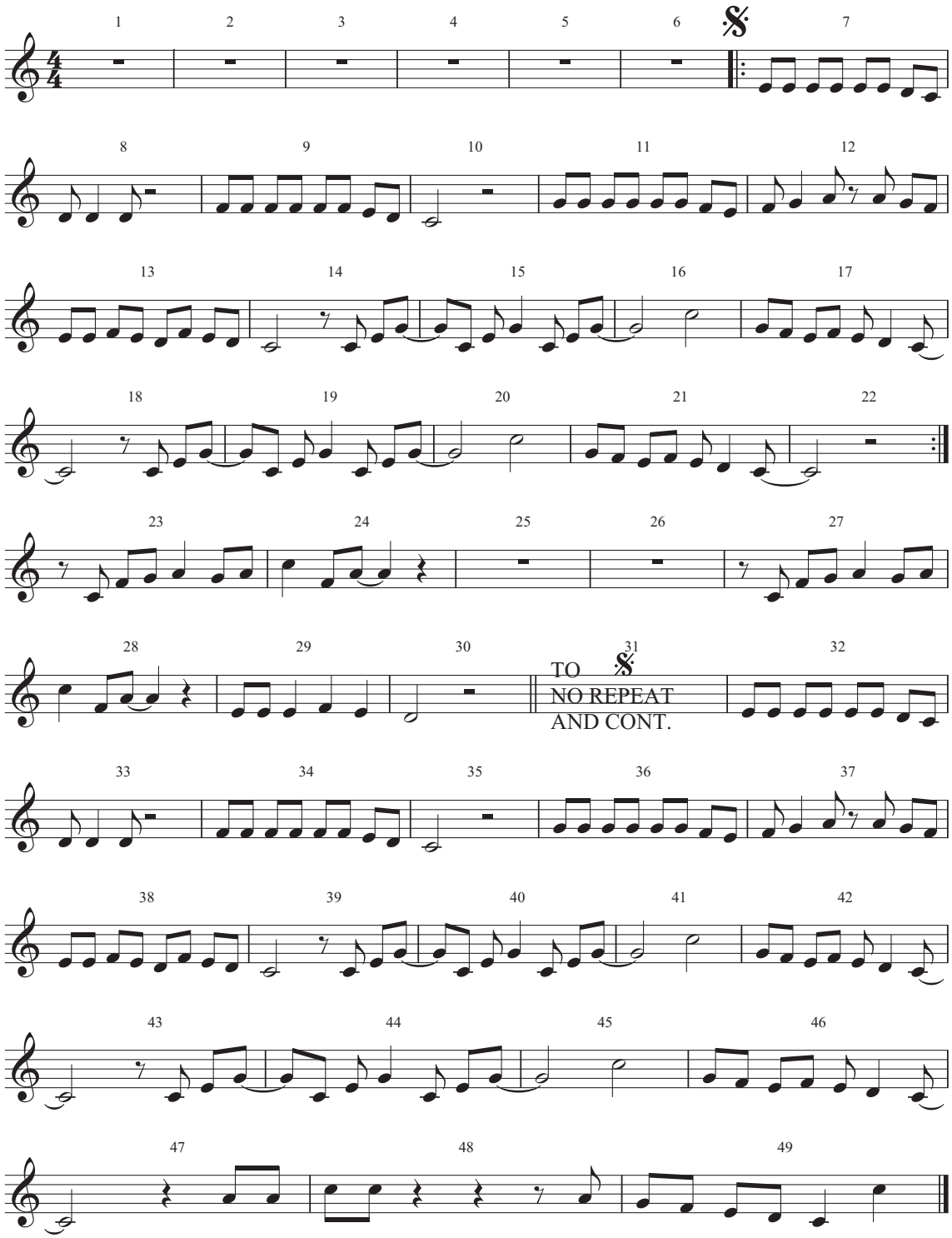
Practise F#



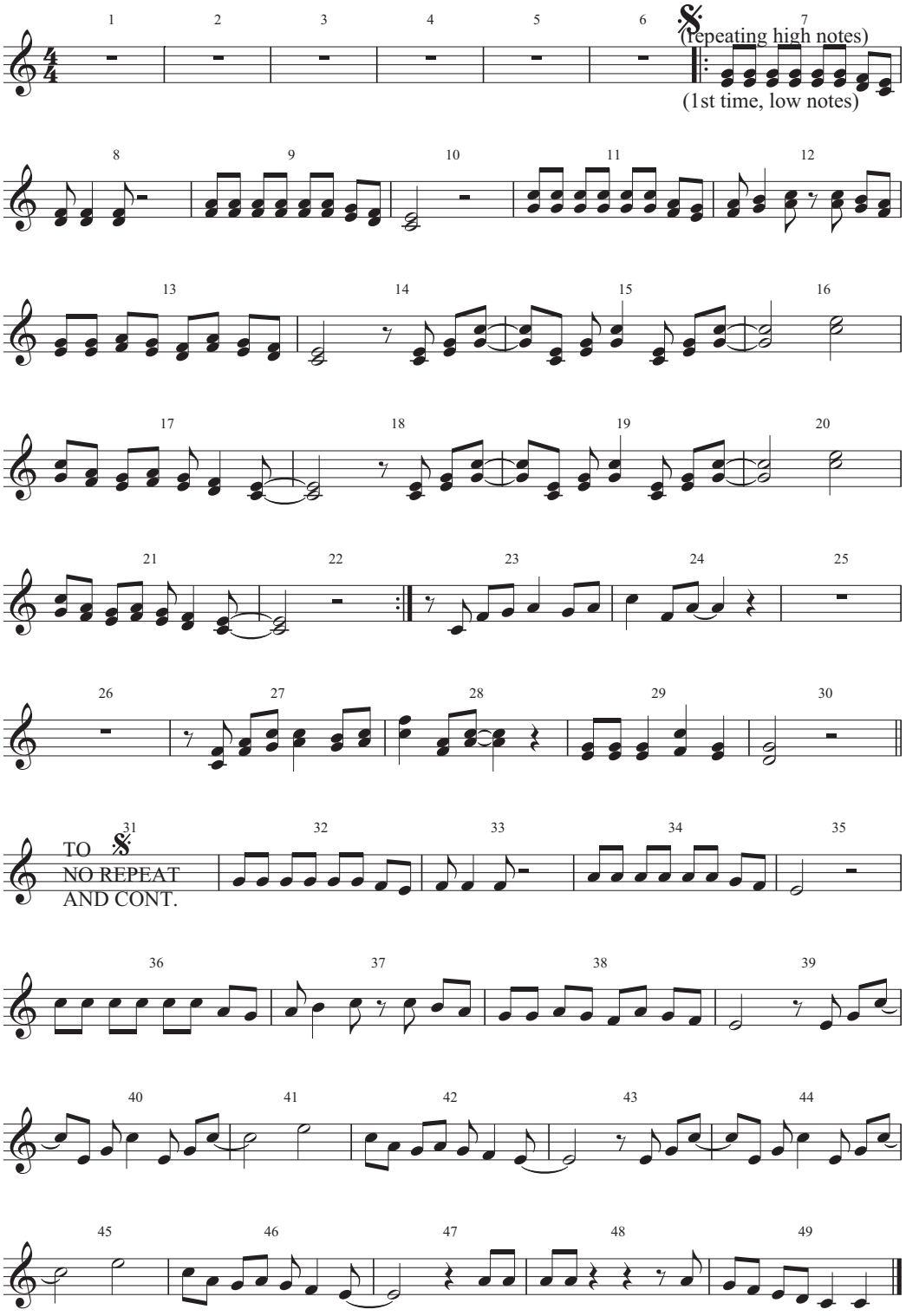
Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da

Lennon-McCartney

Recorder 1



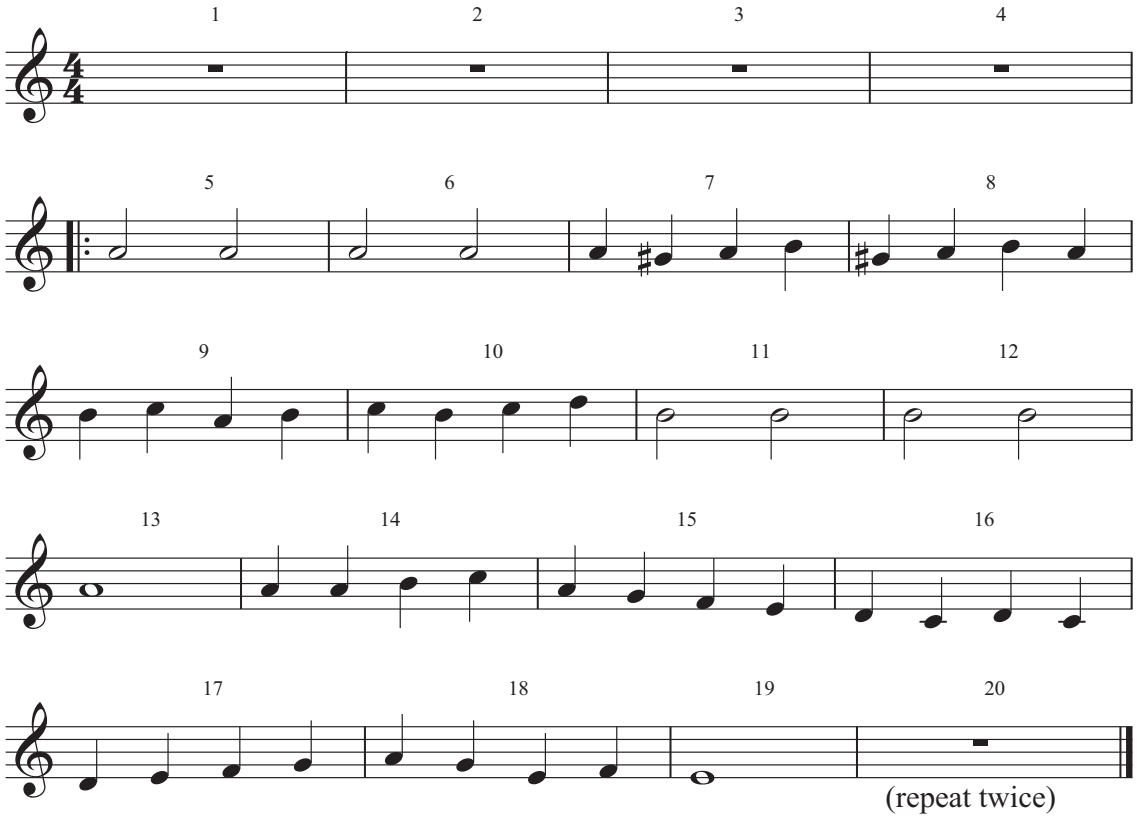
Recorder 2 *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* *Lennon-McCartney*



RECORDER 13

Adagio

Samuel Barber



RECORDER 14

The piece you are going to play below is from the German musician Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, an essential composer of the Classical period. This period between 1750 and 1805 was characterised by its order, balance and moderation. One example of this is this piece, in which Mozart musically reflects elegance and good taste in a piece intended for fun and entertainment.

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik

W. A. Mozart