Phrase: An Action Verb

Our approach to musical phrasing greatly parallels the way we intone speech. We use variations in pitch, volume, articulation, and timing to delineate ideas and to give specific meaning to what we say. And what vocal intonation is to speech, phrasing is to music.

The term phrasing in music refers to what we do as performers to bring the listener's attention to the melodic structures of a piece of music, from large musical phrases to smaller note groupings (often referred to as musical ideas or motives). We phrase to create meaning, beauty, and impact in our sound. And just like in speech, we do this by manipulating volume, articulation, tempo, tone color, and other expressive devices. (Pitches and basic rhythms are the only non-variable aspects of musical phrasing).

Their is a natural logic to the rise and fall of speech patterns, and when those predictable patterns aren't there, we perceive a disconnect, which in turn makes the meaning of the words less intelligible. Same goes for phrasing in music. There are dynamic gestures that mimic speech which help to communicate the natural logic of melody. When these expressive gestures aren't there, or when there are irregular musical gestures, the musical phrase becomes less intelligible.

So phrasing, or expressive playing, is more than just "adding dynamics" to evoke an emotional response in the listener, or to "make the music more interesting". It's to make music more intelligible. Although adding dynamics and ritards may seem like good expressive playing, the phrase may sound awkward or clumsy unless there is a coherency and logic to the use of dynamics.

Phrasing is a technique just like spiccato or vibrato. You have to exercise it for it to become automatic. And just like vibrato, at first you have to consciously turn it on, but once the motor has been going for a long period of time, you won't want to shut it off. Just like the actor, you are in control of how you 'deliver your lines'. Phrasing keeps you engaged and focussed when you perform, and it goes without saying that it keeps your audience more engaged as well.

The first step to phrasing well is to have a clear overview of the melodic and harmonic structure of the piece you're working on. You may not know much about theory, but the more you listen and study the score (that means looking at the notes without playing), the more you will become aware of things like phrases, sequences, cadences, and other compositional techniques.

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How to Build Good Phrasing Skills

Analyze

1. **Mark Phrases with brackets.** Listen for musical sentences. Phrases are usually delineated by a cadence, which is the equivalent of the period at the end of a sentence.

Look for:
- longer note values often followed by a break in sound.
- final sounding notes that end on the tonic.

In simple pieces phrases are often 8 measure long, with two four measure sub- phrases. This is often the case in folk music and Classical era music. However, in Romantic and Baroque music phrases can be much longer.

In the absence of a strong cadence, look for:

- change in melodic material (new rhythmic figures, new melodic patterns)
- New harmonic or key area (Perpetual Motion Book 4)
- Elisions: When the end of one phrase is also the beginning of the next. This is a frequent occurrence in Baroque music as phrases seemlessly flow from one to another.

2. **Mark lines over "Points of Arrival".** This term is used in music analysis and refers to culminating moments where there is a feeling of having arrived at a musical goal. These are places where musical energy is either heightened or dissipated. There is perceived musical emphasis or importance that requires special treatment - an "aaahhh" moment if you will.

Harmonic Points of Arrival and Places of Harmonic Interest:

- **Cadences:** big arrival points where there is an anticipated return to tonic. The greater the tension before the resolution, the more satisfying the cadence. Some of the most poignant points of arrival are at the return of the main theme.
- **Reinforced tonics**: minor cadences and other places where tonic notes need reinforcement.
- **Altered Notes** that shift the music into a new key or new key area.
- **Mode Changes** - going from major to minor

3. Mark other places of Melodic Interest:

- **High Points** in the melodic line. Look for the highest notes.
- **Chromatic** neighbors or passing tones: These notes give color and interest to the melody.
- **Accidentals** - Brings a new chord or fresh harmony and melody.
- **Contrasts in melodic material,** especially mood shifts (Bach Gavotte)
-**Sequences:** Patterns and Repetitions
-**Study Contour** -

Take note of the rises and falls. Are they slow rises or quick rises? Slow falls or quick falls? This will determine how gradual the crescendos and decrescendos are.

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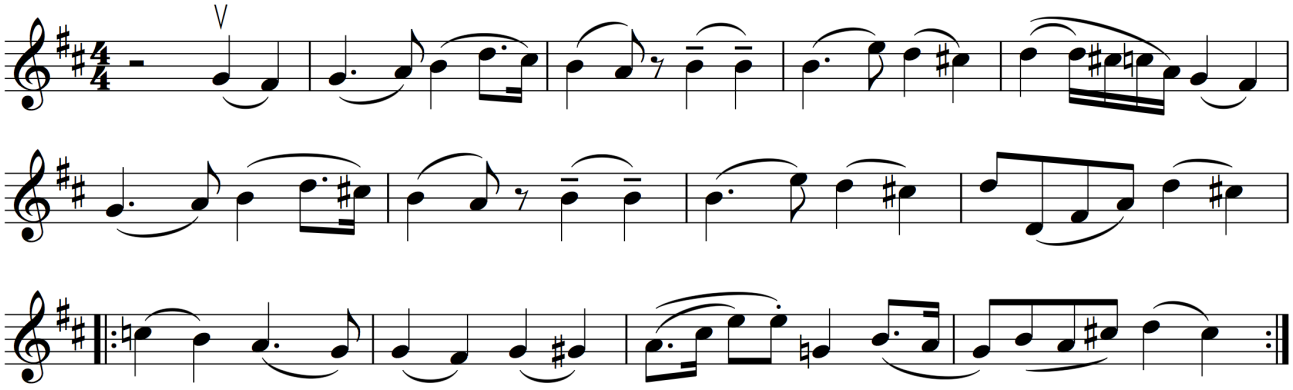
Learn the Conventions

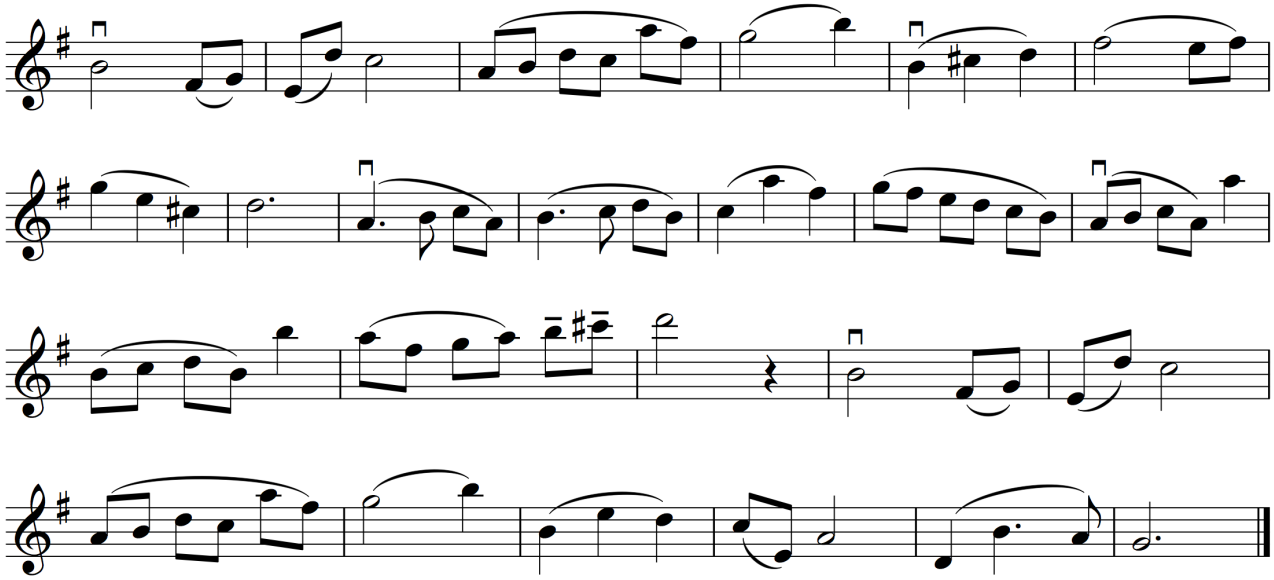
Contour - Follow the landscape with crescendos and decrescendos. When notes ascend, the usual practice is to make a crescendo. And, when notes descend, we most often make a decrescendo. You often see crescendo/decrescendo pairs (called hairpins) in short melodic units that rise and fall. The hairpin not only makes the music more expressive but is like an aural bracket, combing measures to make a unit.

Beethoven Romance in G



High Points - The highest point in the phrase is most often the climax of the phrase. This should always be prepared with a crescendo.

Air Varie by Oskar Rieding



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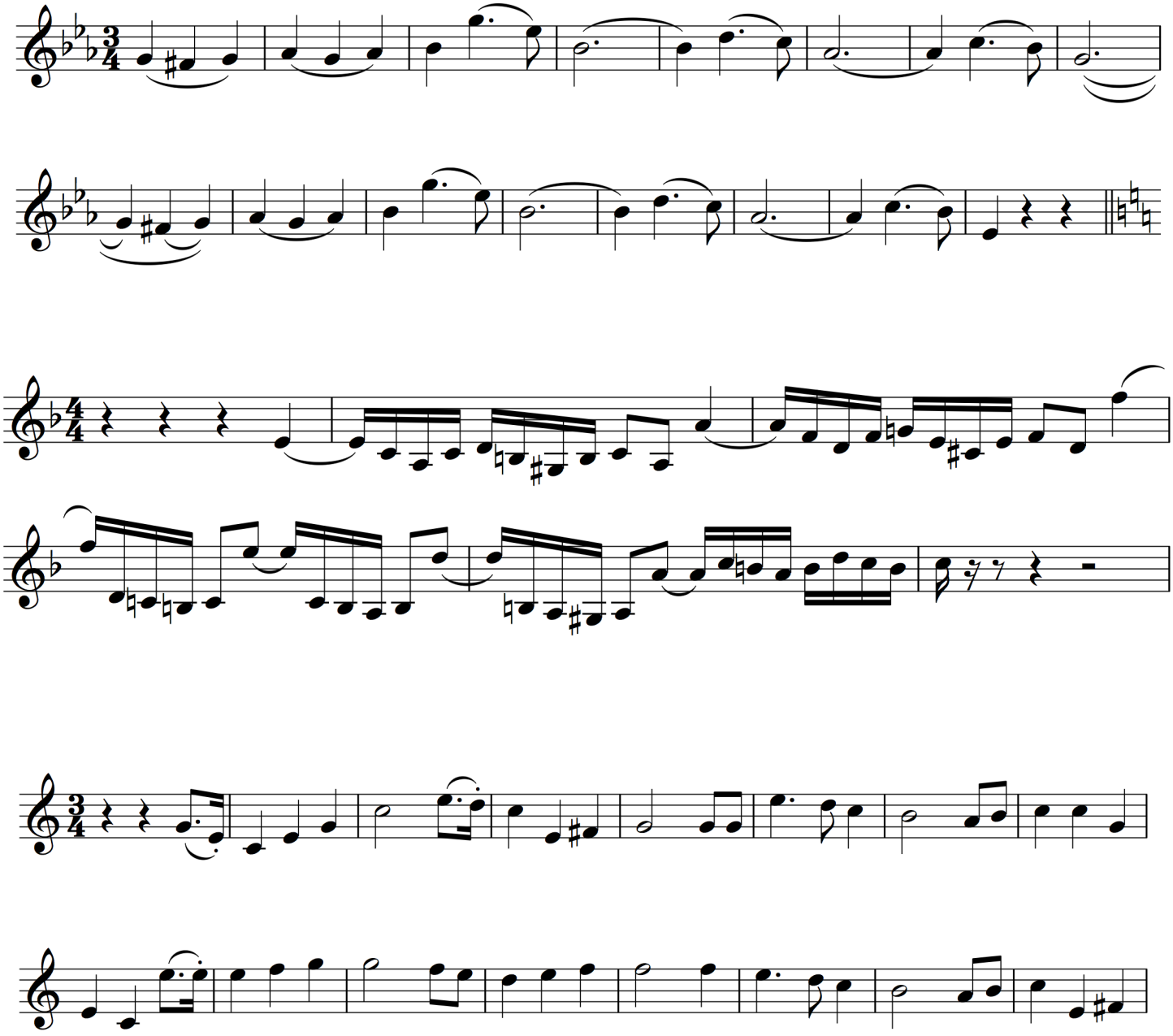
Leaps to Higher Notes
(intervals of a fifth or wider) almost always need a lift in dynamic. We either lean on the higher note or prepare the leap by increasing bow speed and pressure on the note prior.

Viennese Waltz Evening Stars (Joseph Lanner)



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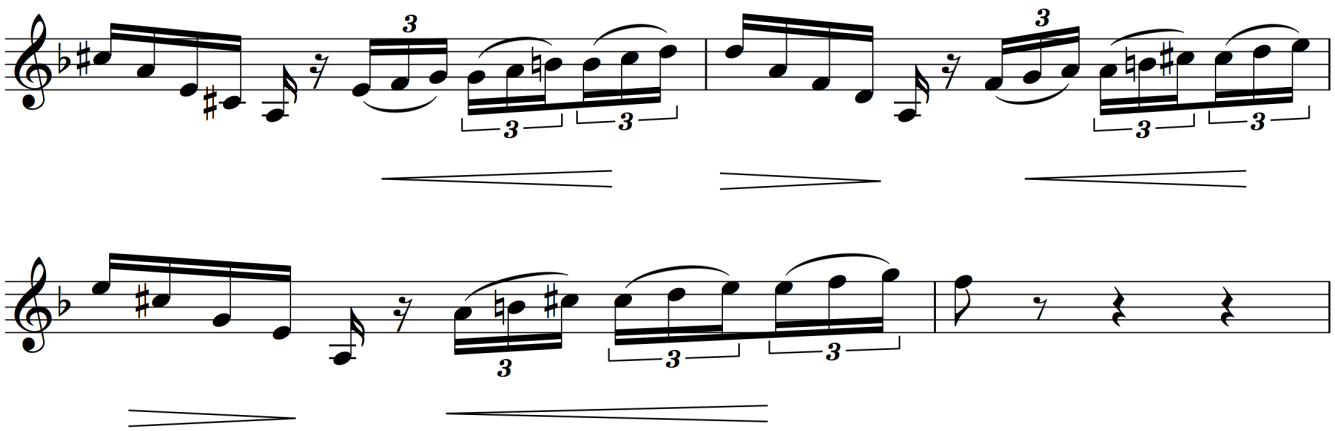
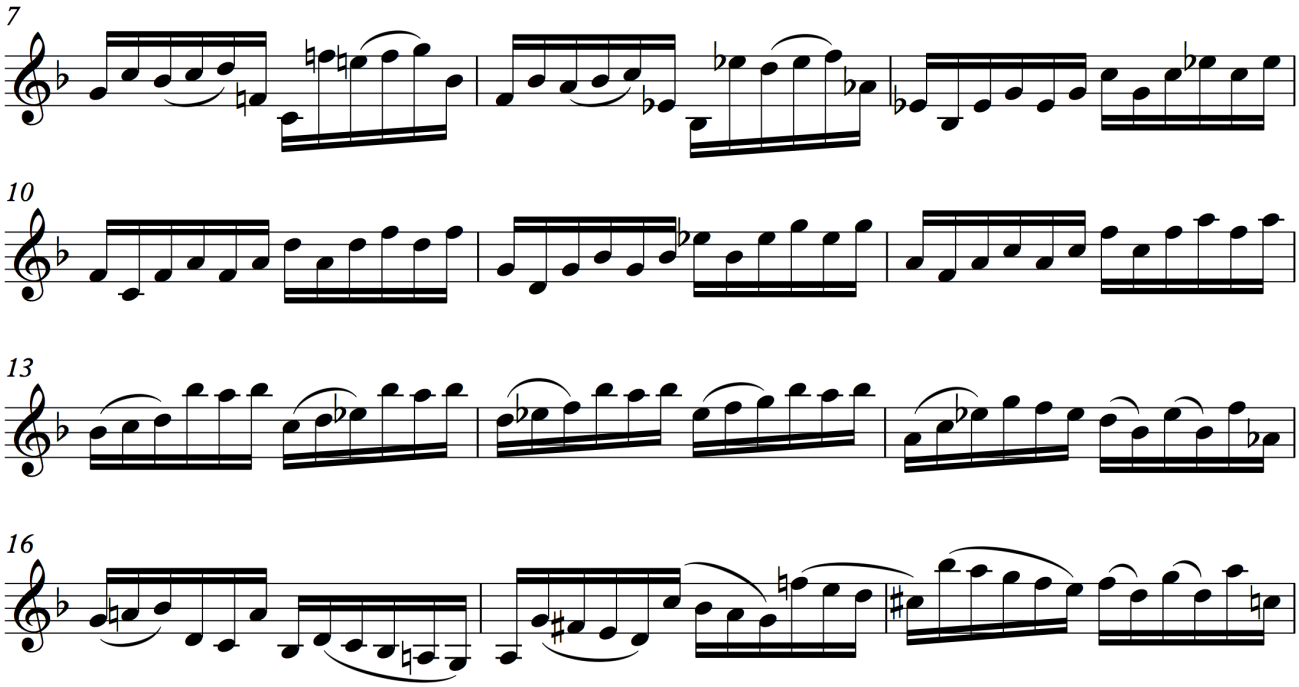
Look for larger, gradual ascents and descents. Create more coherency by terracing dynamics. By stair stepping up and down, you draw attention to larger melodic structures.

Bach Double 3rd Movement



For slow building passages, bring down beginning dynamic further than marked to create more room to grow. It's also a signalto the listner that a crescendo is coming.



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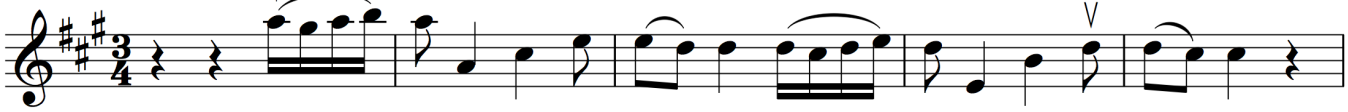
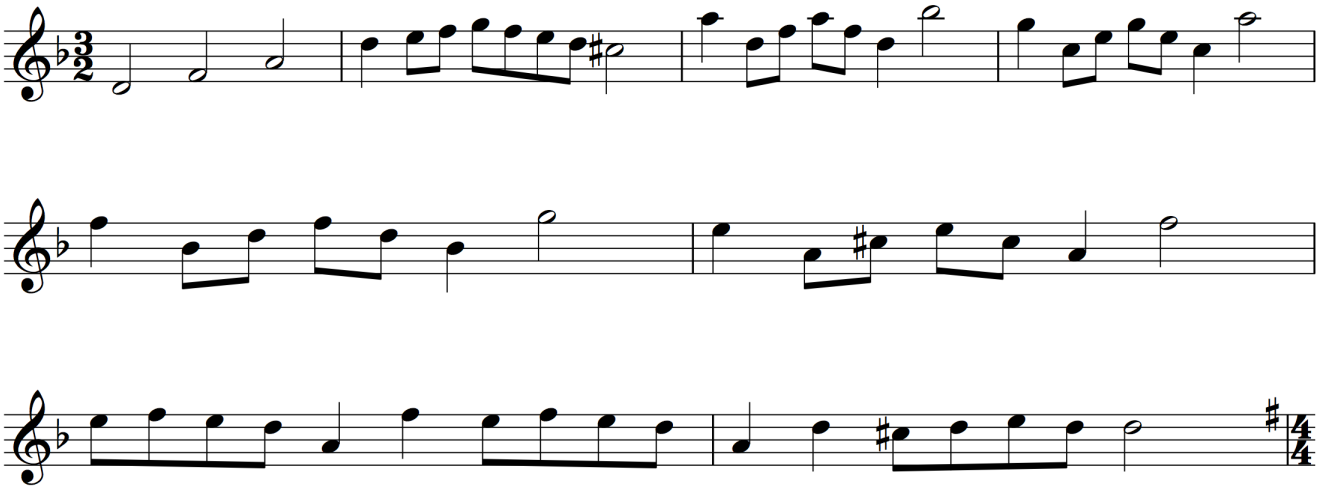
Bring out interesting rhythmic patterns by adding crisp articulation (staccato, martelé) to punch out the rhythm, particularly with syncopations and hemiola. Get jaunty! [Ex. 2 , 3, 15, 16]

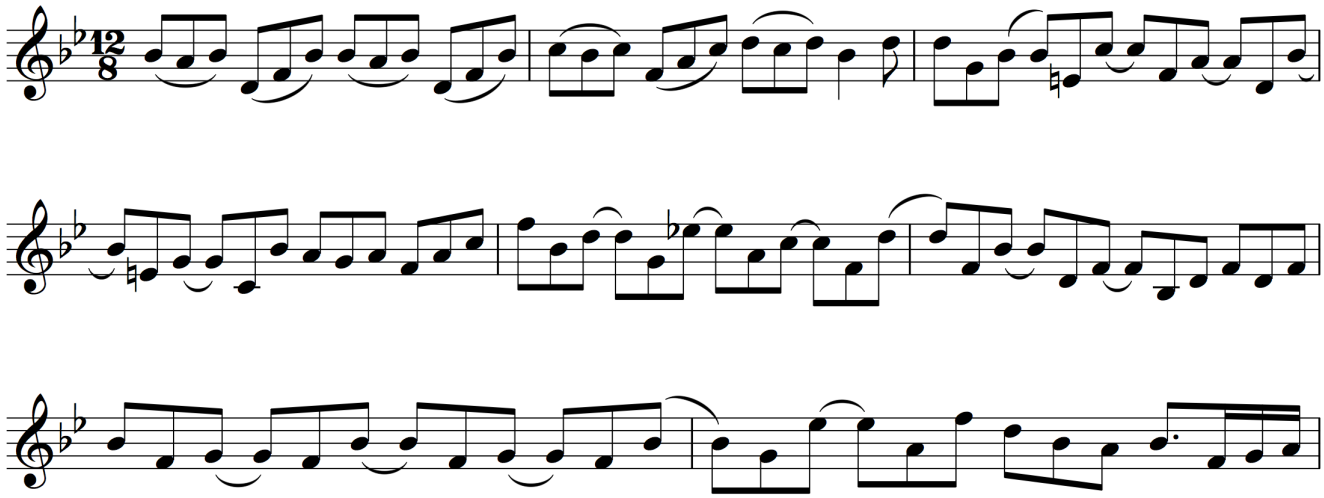
Boccherini Minuet



Purcell Rondeau



Brandenburg Concerto no.6 3rd mvmnt



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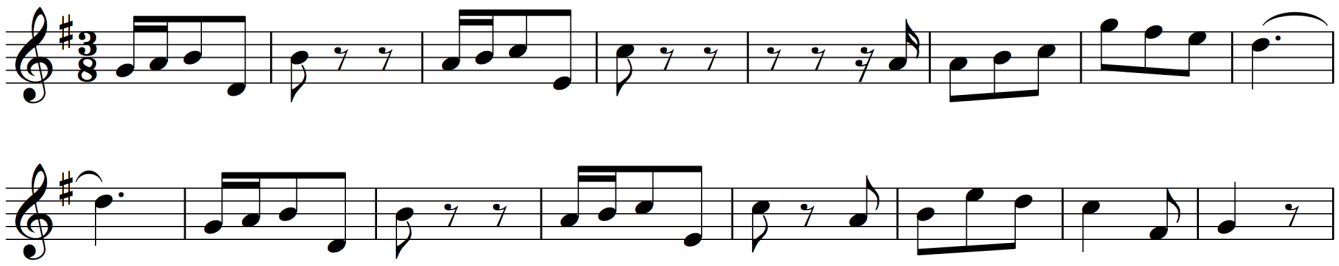
Triple Meters - If there is a pronaounced dance feel, keep the unaccented beats (2, and 3, especially 3!) lighter than the down beats.

The Laughing Song Johann Strauss

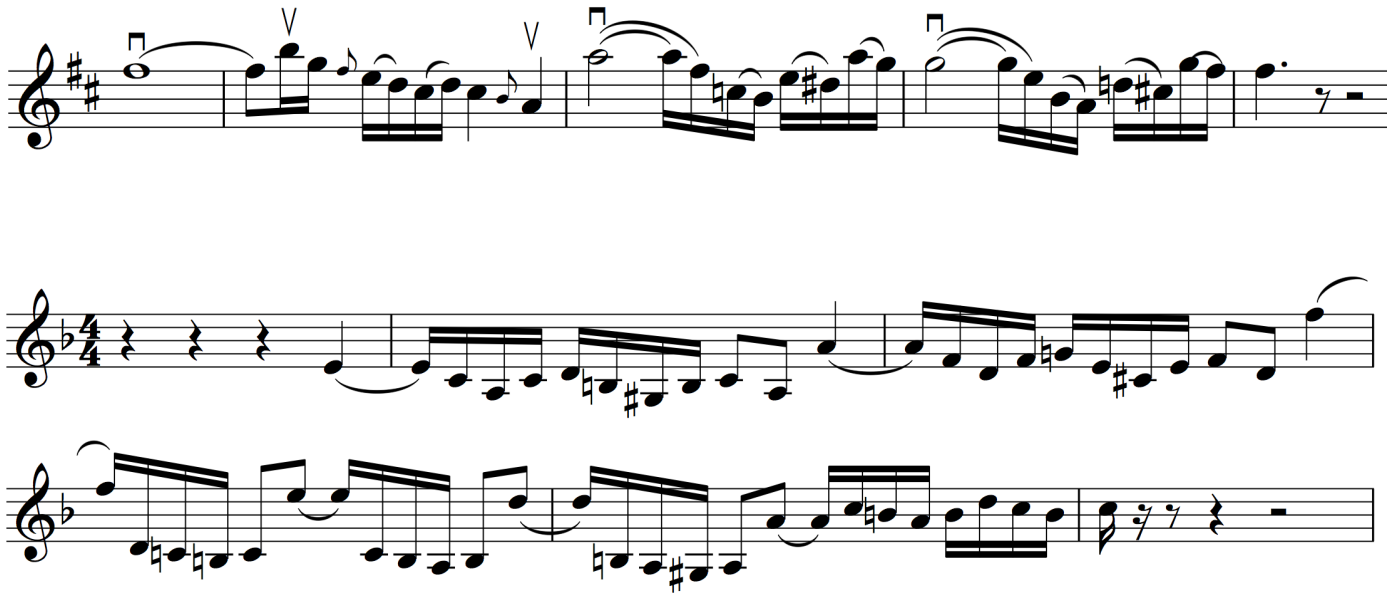


Long notes, tied notes, and dotted rhythms in slow pieces lead to the next note in a passage. They have to push energy forward to compensate for natural relaxation. If not, the energy will die.

Long notes, tied notes, dotted rhythms in medium tempi need to be considered in context. As the performer you have to decide if these notes nead to lead or to dissipate energy to set off the notes to follow.

Tied notes and dotted rhythms in fast pieces need a small break before the next note to give definition to the rhythm and melodic structure. Long notes can be separated or will lead to the next note.

Bach Air



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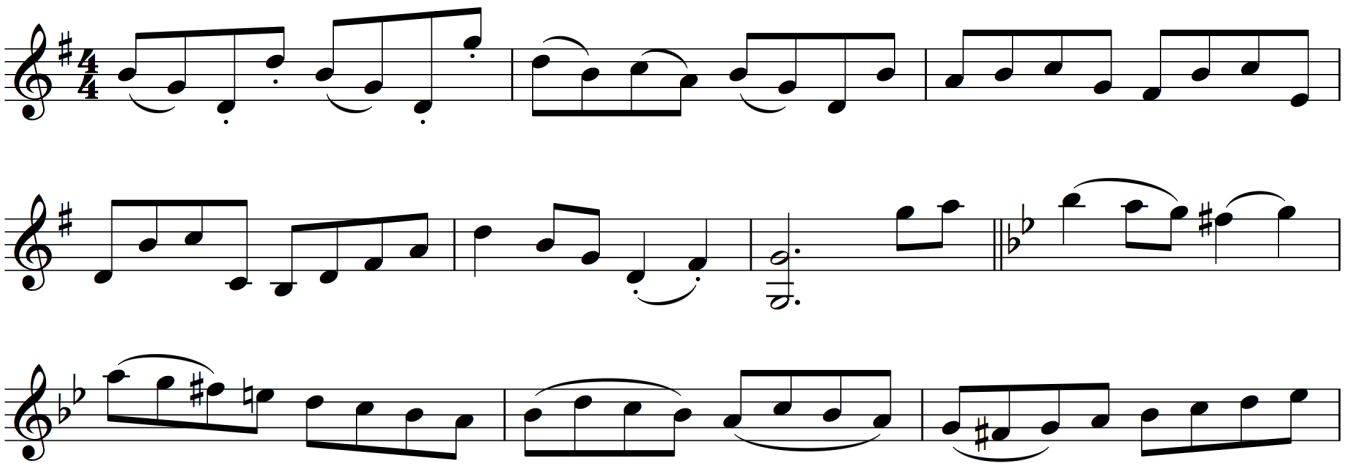
Bowing Patterns: (Particularly relevant to Baroque and Classical)

Note groupings with a mix of slurs and separated notes - Bring out the slurs by adding more wieght and using more bow.

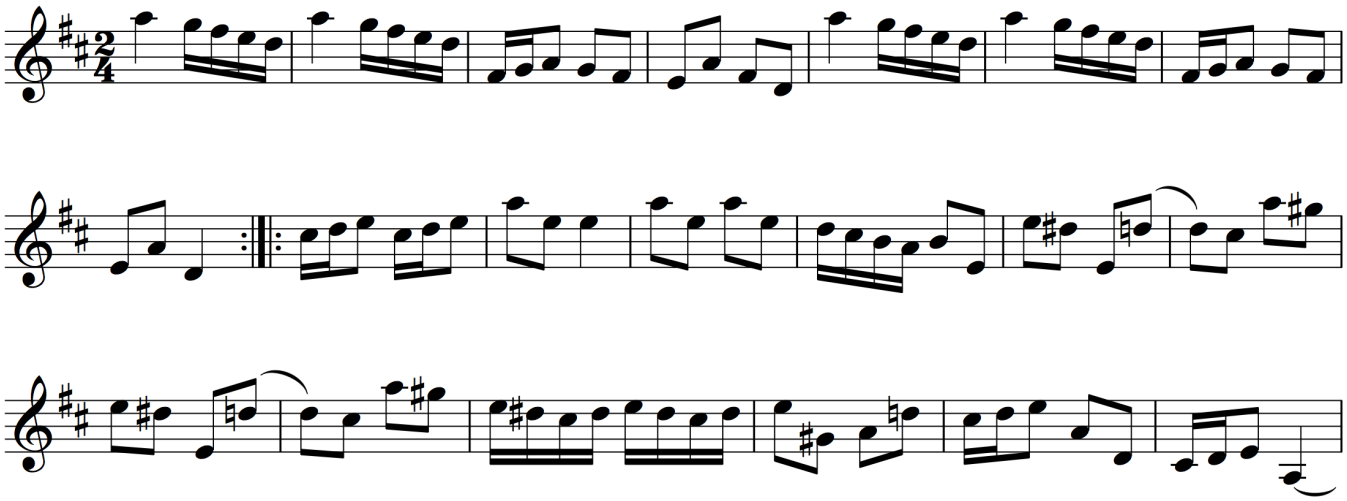
Couplets: two note slurred groupings: lean into the bow at the
beginning of each stroke, then release at the end of the stroke. This creates a scalloped effect. How ever, this is not the conventionalpractice in Romantic period. In Romantic music slurred notes are gernerally played very legato.

Bouree Bach



Contrasting Phrases or Sub Phrases: Change articulation style between sections of contrasting melodic material. One phrase may be lively with staccato and martelé, the next may call for super legato playing. Basically, vary bow lengths to help bring out contrasting melodic material.

Musette Anna Magdalena



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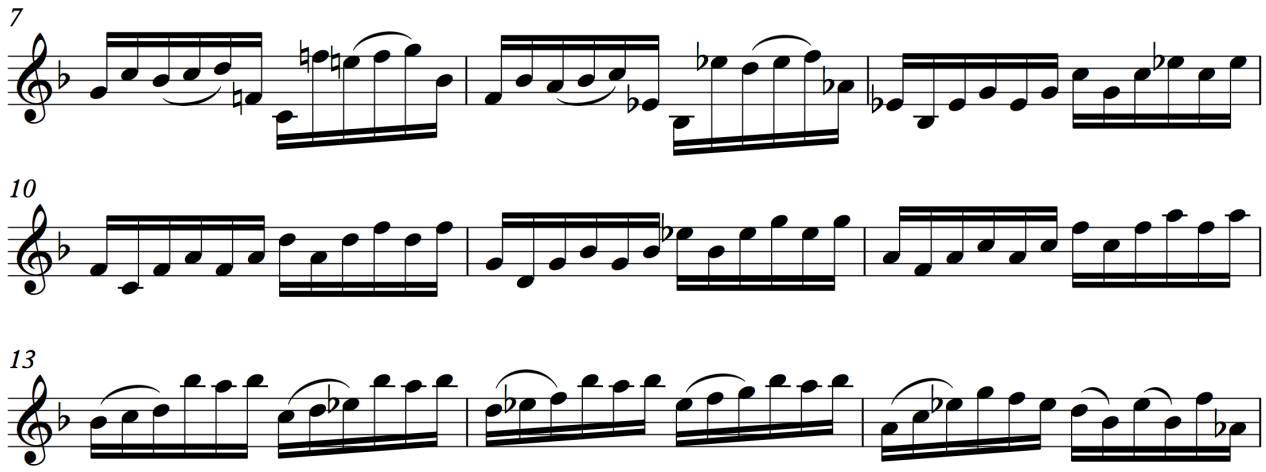
Patterns:

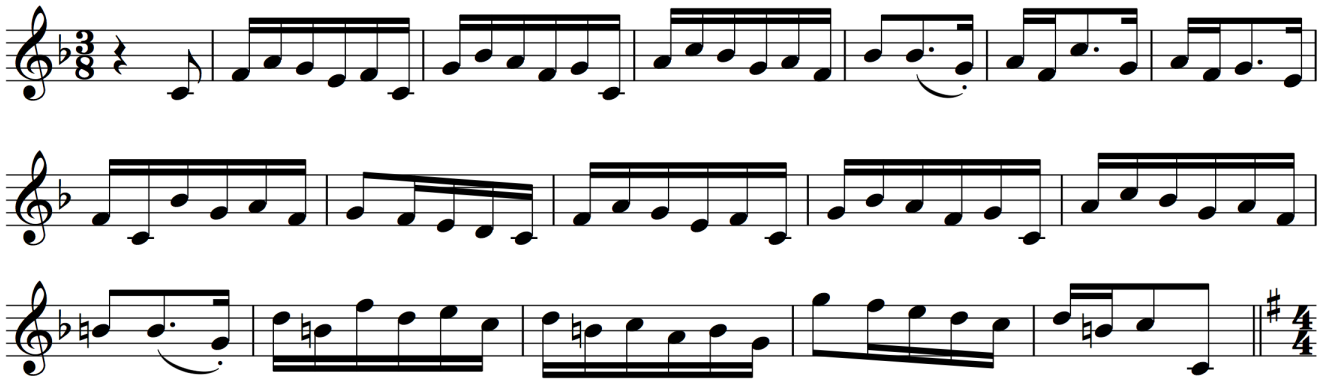
-**Sequences** are when there is repeating melodic bits either ascending or descending. Bring out first notes of each melodic unit to highlight the fact there is a sequence, while making a crescendo if it's an ascending sequence, and a decrescendo if it's a descending sequence.

-**Some notes are repeated others are moving** - bring out moving notes and play down repeated notes.

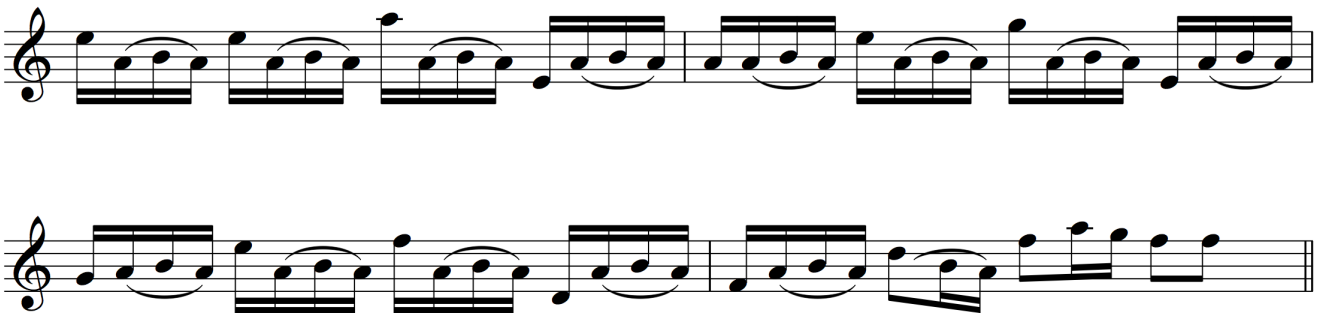
Bach G Minor Partita



Brandenburg 1 Polacca



Vivaldi A minor



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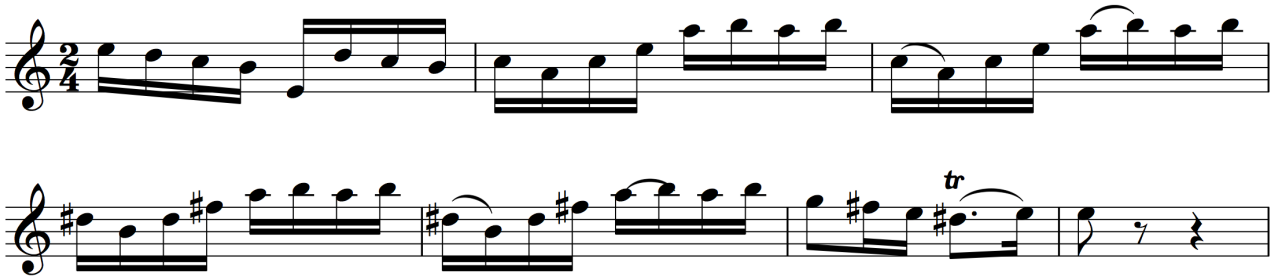
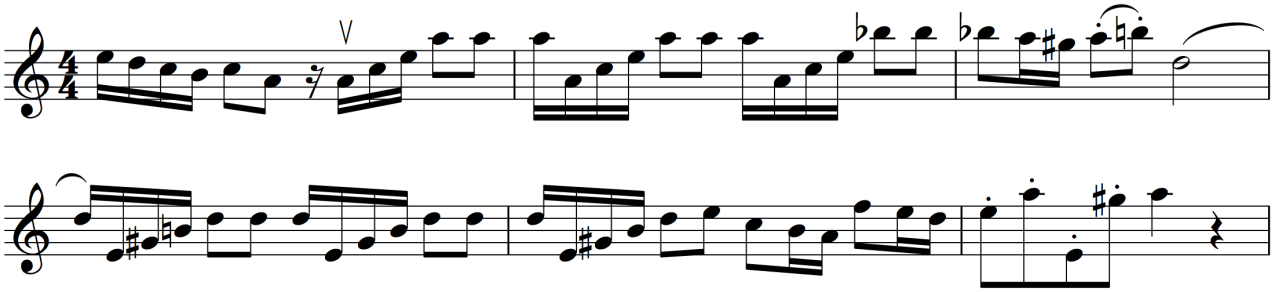
Repetitions -Often repeating material needs some kind of dynamic treatment. The most used dynamic formula for a single repetition is an echo (loud-soft)

The formula for two repetitions is loud-soft-loud, or to build to an arrival point.

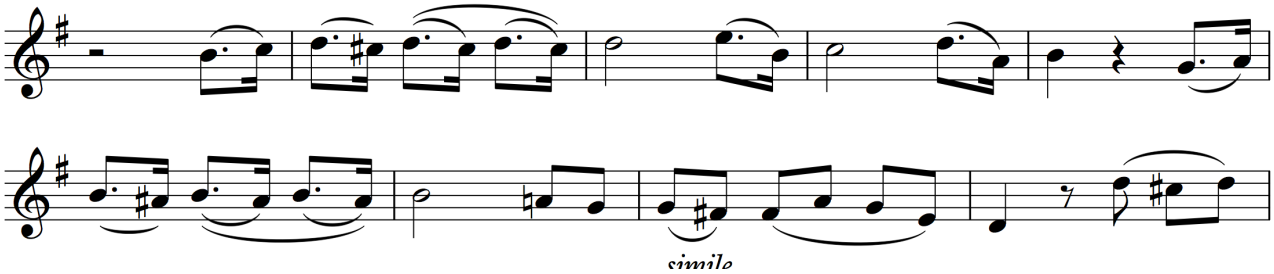
Vivaldi A minor 3rd mvmnt



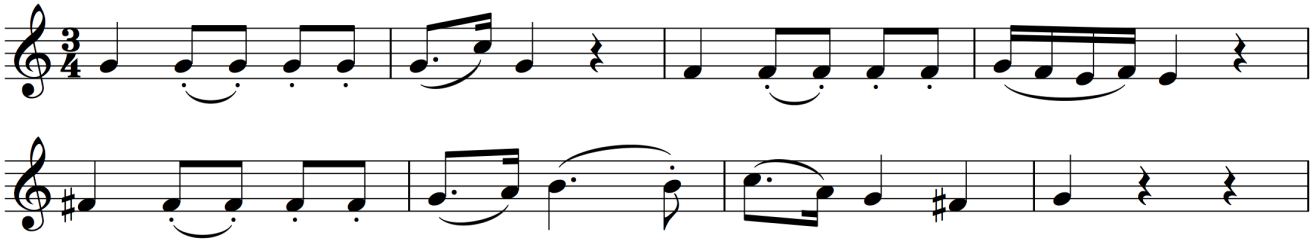
Vivaldi A minor 1st movement



Beethoven Minuet in G



Mozart Minuet from Don Giovanni



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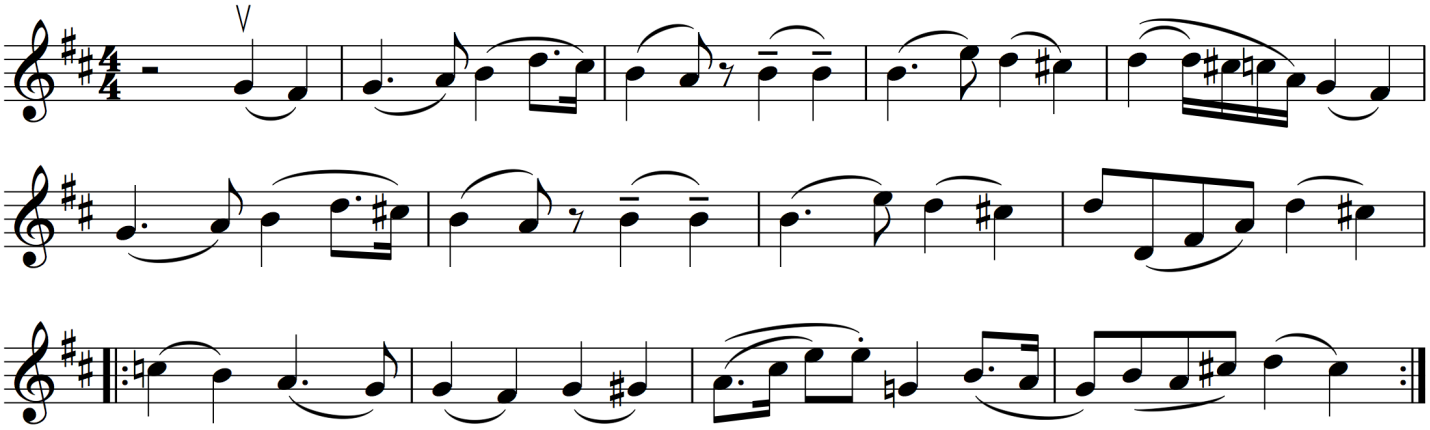
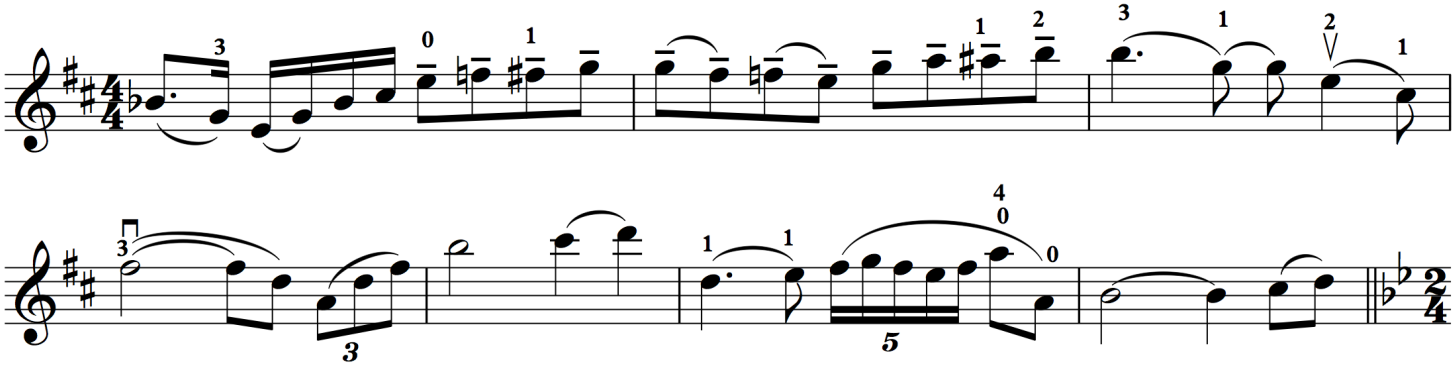
Chromatic passing notes - Bring them out to intensify emotional content of the music. “Play through them” by adding more pressure to deepen the tone. Widening the vibrato will help pop them out as well.

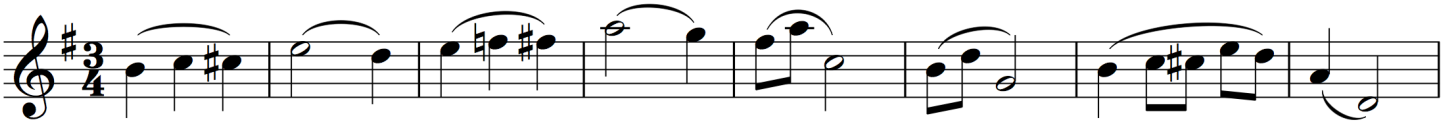
Beethoven Romance in G



Meditation Massenet



Petite Valse Dancla



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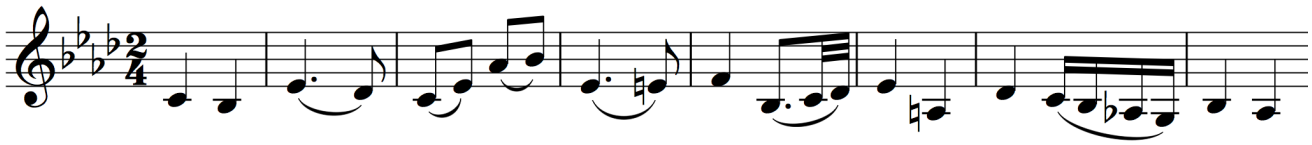
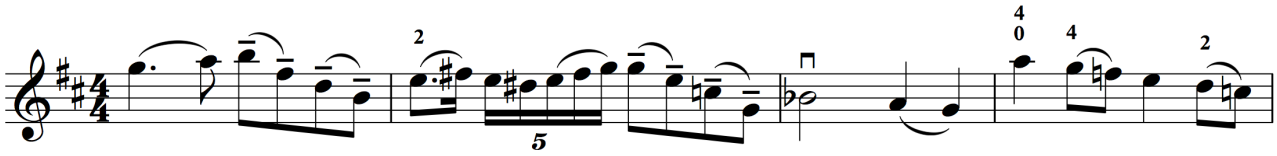
Altered notes (Accidentals)

Bring out these notes as they are the game changing notes of the moment. Emphasize with longer bows and added pressure. Also when emphasizing the note, you have to grow through the preceding note or notes, otherwise it will sound like you are adding accents. You can also treat these spots with the reverse scheme: diminuendo and caress the altered note with a floating bow and wide vibrato. We often use the word "tender" to describe this kind of moment.

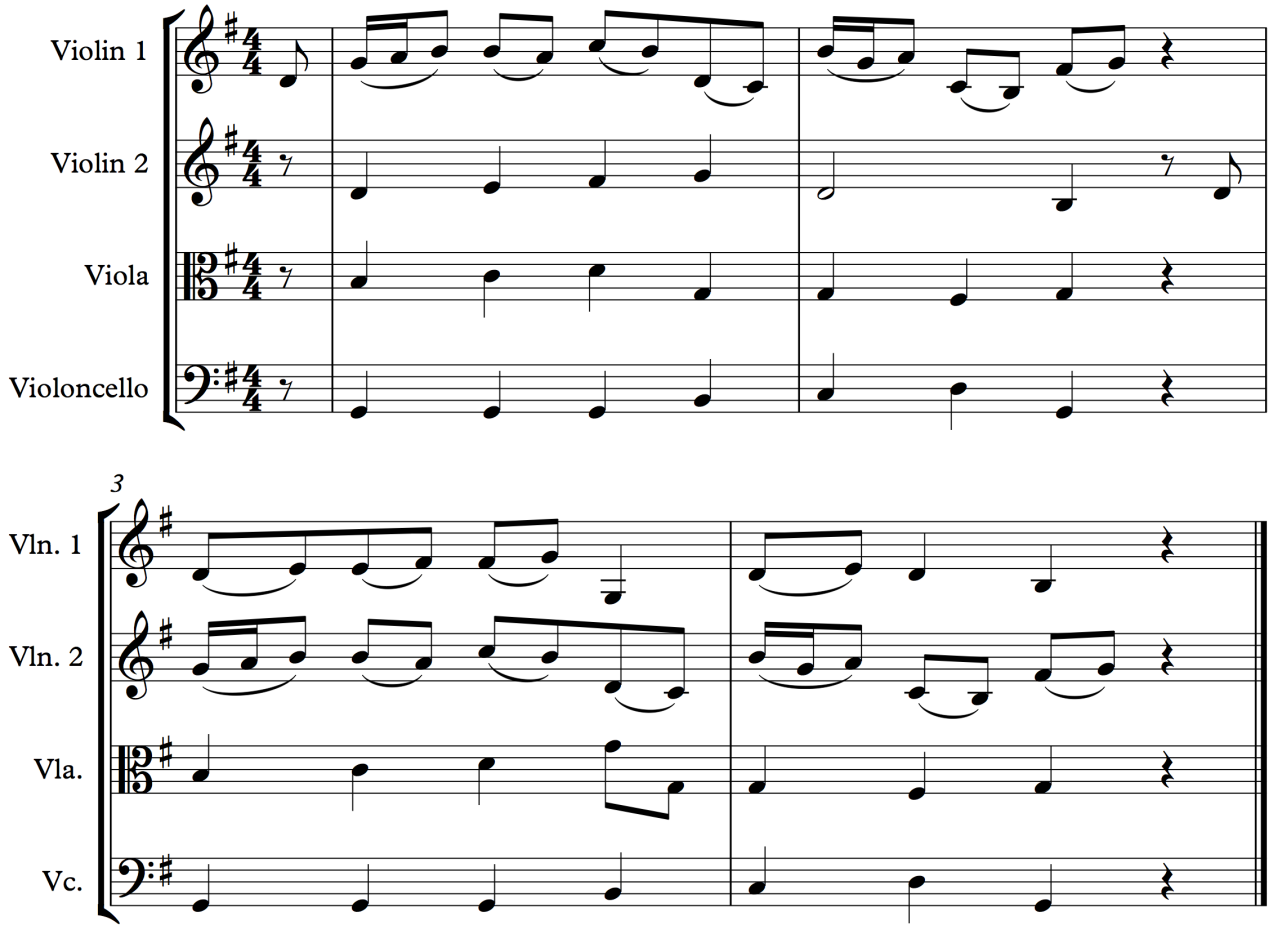
Beethoven Pathetique



Meditation



Appoggiaturas - emphasize dissonance when it occurs on a beat, then taper the subsequent resolution. Appogiaturas create tension and we want to heighten that tension by leaning on them and then release the tension with the taper.



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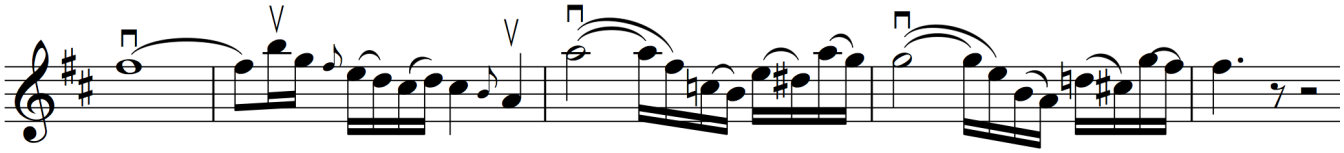
Bach Air



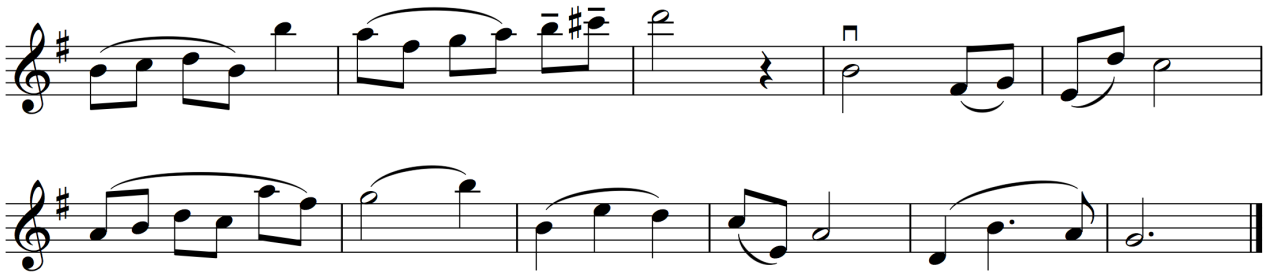
Cadences and Tapers

A cadence always signals the end of a phrase (or the piece), or in the case of an elision, it signals the end of one phrase and the beginning of the next. Our treatment of cadences depends on the context.

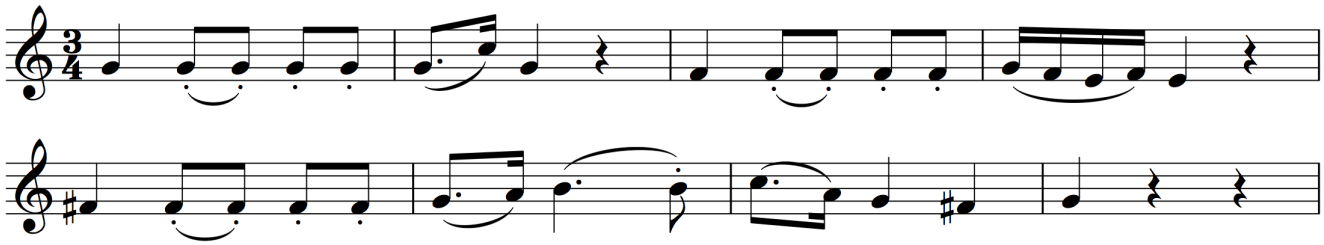
Most often a cadence or a phrase ending is tapered to some degree or another! Usually the end of a piece winds down. However, sometimes the music builds all the way toward the final cadence, which requires finishing with heavy vibrato and a crescendo.

When the tonic is on a downbeat there is a hint of taper. When the tonic is on a weaker beat there is more taper.

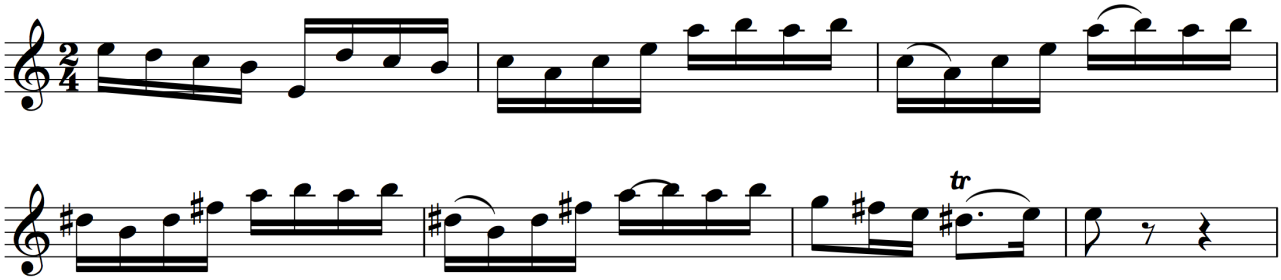
Always taper a note before a rest!



Mozart Minuet from Don Giovanni



Vivaldi A minor 3rd mvmnt



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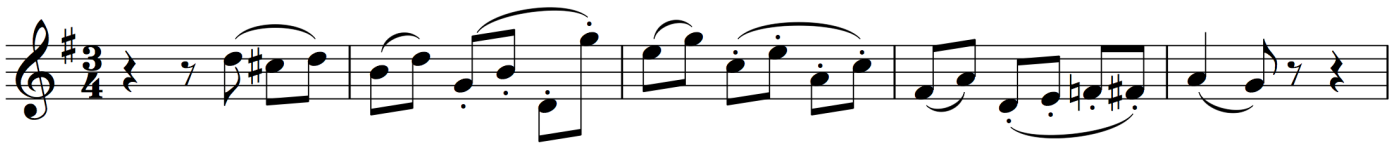
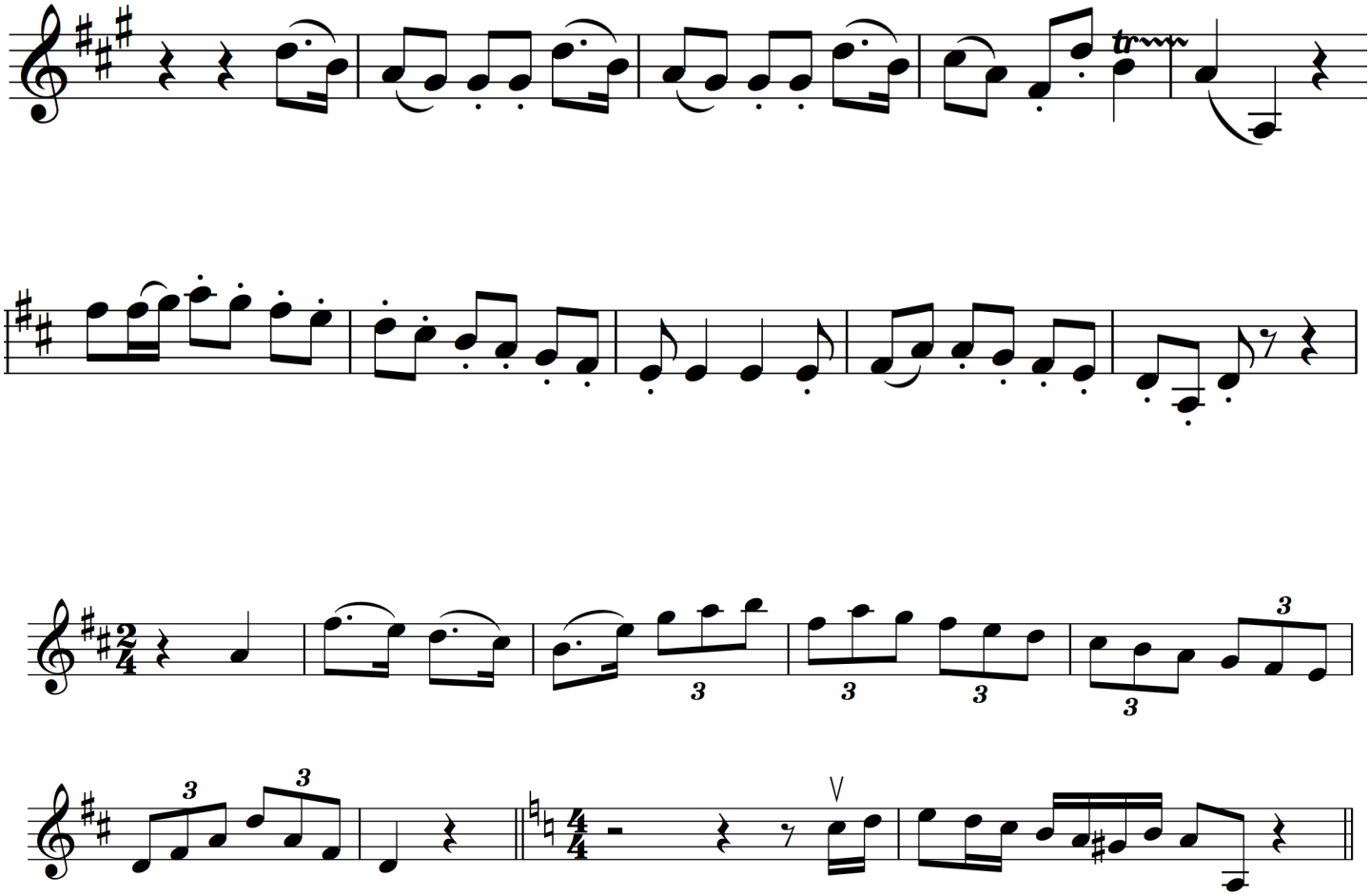


Rebound Notes - Make sure to have a pronounced taper when extra notes appear after the arrival of the tonic chord. Unaccentuate rebound notes after the main tonic chord note is played. This happens frequently in Classical and Baroque music.



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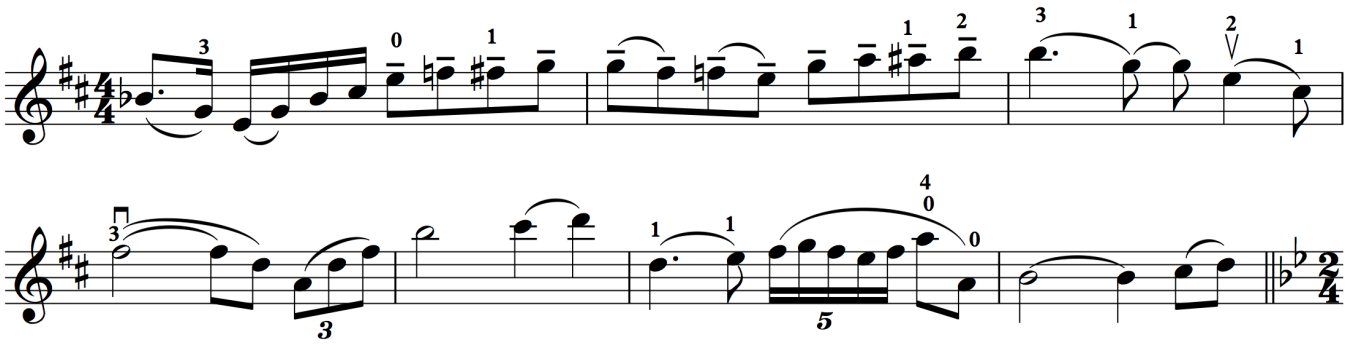
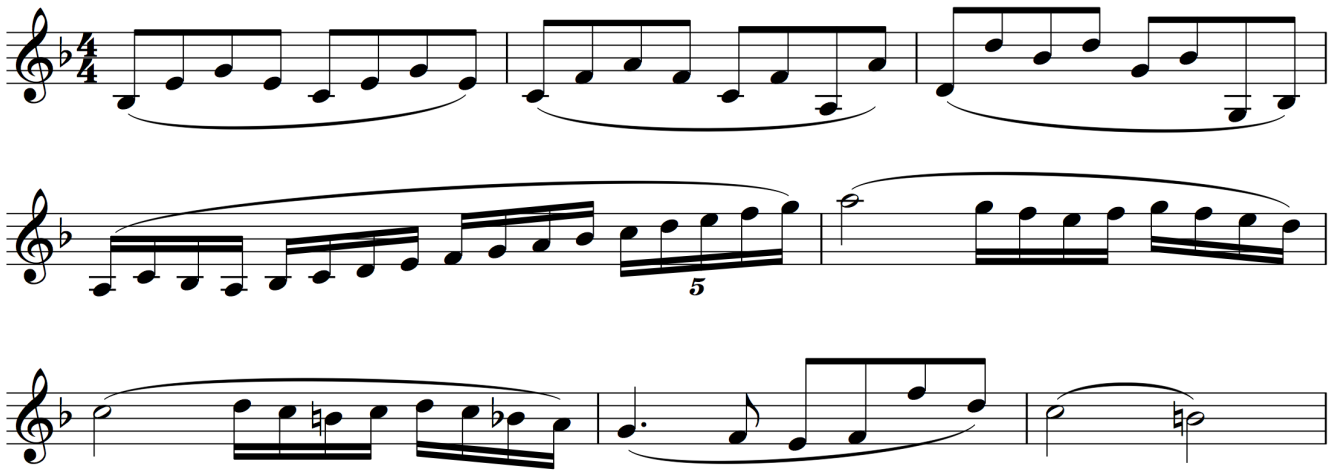
Return of Main Theme or Primary Thematic Material - The return of a main theme in music is a big culminating moment (Point of Arrival). Often the return of a main theme elides with the prior phrase. For these poignant moments we always make a ritard to prepare the return and typically make a pronounced descrescendo, or subito piano.

Meditation Massenet



Beethoven Spring Sonata



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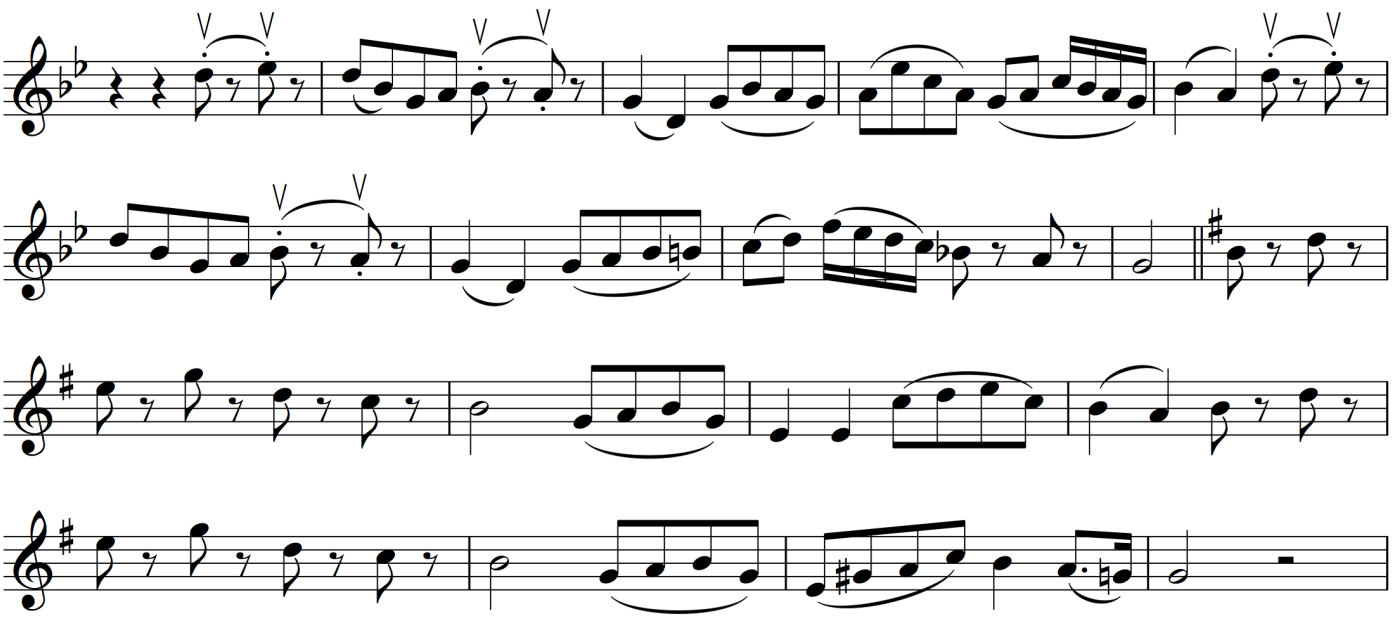
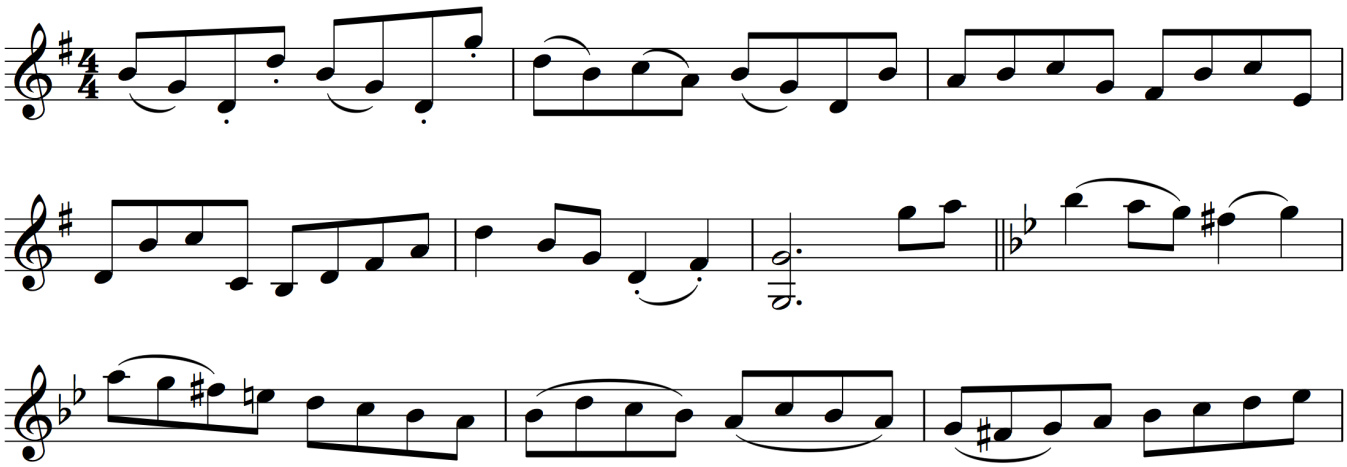
Mode changes - composers will change the mood of a piece by switching the mode from Major to Minor or Minor to Major. Bring out with a dynamic and articulation contrast. [Ex. 26, 27] Usually we use softer dynamics and a more legato style when switching to minor, and brighter dynamics and shorter, crisper articulations when switching to major.

Becker Gavotte



Bouree Bach



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