

John Coltrane:

**Jazz Improvisation, Performance, and
Transcription**

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BACKGROUND

John William Coltrane (1926-1967) was a prominent African-American jazz saxophonist and prolific composer. The evolution of his mature career seems, from my perspective, to fall roughly into the following periods: (1) “Vertical” (ca. 1955-59), (2) “Modal” (ca. 1960-63) and (3) “Avant-garde” (ca. 1964-67). During this entire 12-year interlude, the artist was moving in several different directions.

Coltrane first began to gain prominence during his tenure with the Miles Davis ensemble (1955-1960). He replaced tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins in October 1955 and stayed with the group until April 1960. During this time he participated in many major jazz recording sessions, including the LP album *Kind of Blue* (1959), and recorded his own masterpieces, namely *Blue Train* (1957) and *Giant Steps* (1959). In *Blue Train*, his hard bop soloing on the blues found him thinking in terms of harmonic extensions, chord alterations and chord substitutions. The *Blue Train* album also demonstrates Coltrane’s ability to shed new light on standards, e.g., “I’m Old Fashioned.” In the later of these two albums, Coltrane fragmented the idiomatic ii-V-I progression, and introduced the concepts of arbitrary root movement and non-functional harmony.

Towards the end of his tenure with Davis, Coltrane brought the nearly forgotten soprano saxophone to unprecedented popularity. Coltrane’s style at this point was at once both loquacious and taut, characterized by lightening-fast triple- and quadruple-time runs. His crossover to soprano saxophone, therefore, makes sense: the instrument was

conducive for the execution of Coltrane's discrete "sheets of sound"¹ improvisational style.

In 1960, Coltrane formed his own quartet where his playing underwent many important changes. This quartet featured pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Steve Davis and drummer Elvin Jones. During this period, Coltrane explored modal improvisation, and transformed the musical parameters of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things" with his own modal rendition. As Ingrid Monson explains, Coltrane turned "a 'corny' tune into a vehicle for serious jazz improvisation" (Monson, 107).

In the last years of his career, it became clear that John Coltrane was again changing course. In December 1964, the quartet (with bassist Jimmy Garrison, who had replaced Steve Davis since 1962) produced its most famous album, *A Love Supreme*. The album is a four-part suite, whose separate movements Coltrane titled *Acknowledgement* (including the well-known mantra after which the suite is named), *Resolution*, *Pursuance*, and *Psalm*, respectively. Through this album, Coltrane pays homage to and declares his love for God. This newfound spirituality remains prevalent in the latter part of Coltrane's musical career. After "A Love Supreme," Coltrane's playing became increasingly abstract and dissonant, with greater assimilation of improvisational devices like multiphonics, overblowing, playing in the altissimo register, and panmodality, i.e., playing freely through a multiplicity of keys or modes.

While 1955-1967 were Coltrane's prime years, "1957 was the year Coltrane truly became Coltrane—on a number of levels—and Thelonious Monk had more than a little

¹ According to Lewis Porter, Ira Gitler first used the term in his notes on the back of the *Soultrane* album (Prestige LP 7142) recorded February 7, 1958, and released later that year.

to do with it” (Kahn, 9). Monk encouraged Coltrane to prolong his improvised solos and explore advanced rhythmic and harmonic concepts. As a result, Coltrane developed even greater technical fluency, which gave rise to his “sheets of sound” improvisational style. In July 1957, Coltrane joined Thelonious Monk at New York’s *Five Spot Café*, a legendary gig that lasted for most of the remainder of that year:

“In Monk, Coltrane found ‘a musical architect of the highest order.’ In Coltrane, Monk found an analytical brother—a musician who shared in his intellectual approach and remained true to the sound and structure of his music” (10).

Unfortunately, this working band was not well documented. However, a recording of this group in concert at Carnegie Hall in 1957 was discovered and issued in 2005 by Blue Note Records. The Blue Note compilation is the first and only full-length high-quality recording of the group. Many rare recordings have achieved posthumous fame, but this one is special: “it fully lives up to expectations!” (Porter, 20).

The tape recording of the concert, which took place on November 29, 1957, was located by Larry Appelbaum at the Library of Congress in February 2005. The concert, which was a benefit for the Morningside Community Center in Harlem, included many well-known artists and ensembles, among them Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, Chet Baker and “Zoot” Sims, Sonny Rollins, the full Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra, as well as the Thelonious Monk Quartet with Coltrane. Monk’s quartet, including drummer Shadow Wilson and bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik, performed two short sets. The first set included five numbers: “Monk’s Mood,” “Evidence,” “Crepuscule with Nellie,” “Nutty,” and “Epistrophy.” The second set added three more: “Bye-Ya,” “Sweet & Lovely,” “Blue Monk” and an incomplete second take of “Epistrophy.”

John Coltrane had already performed at Carnegie Hall with Dizzy Gillespie (1949) and Miles Davis (1955), but the 1957 performance was extraordinary. As Kahn notes, this was “the year Coltrane truly became Coltrane” (Kahn, 9). When I listen to Coltrane’s playing with the Thelonious Monk Quartet at Carnegie Hall, I am reminded of Stanley Crouch’s rendering of Sonny Rollins in performance: “immense, summoning the entire history of jazz, [and] capable of blowing a hole through a wall” (Crouch, 64). The significance of the Carnegie Hall performance is most evident in the caliber of John Coltrane’s improvised solos. On November 29, 1957, John Coltrane gave us more than a polished performance—in my view, he gave us perfection.

Interestingly, there are no solos from Wilson or Abdul-Malik, but that is not surprising. Porter suggests that this was necessary “so as to keep things within the allotted time” (Porter, 18). I think, in addition, that any soloist from the group attempting to follow Coltrane, with the exception of Monk, would have probably come up short. Curtis Fuller once recalled how he and Lee Morgan looked at each other during Coltrane’s solo on the master of *Blue Train*, a look that was not to be described (Blumenthal, 2003). After hearing *Blue Train*, Art Pepper explained, “The other cats sound ridiculous, like little children after Trane’s solos. He was so cruel on *Blue Train*. He should have let the rest of the band play before him” (2003).

The Carnegie Hall recording, which on paper might appear to be just another gig, was something extraordinary. In my opinion, this performance was the second definitive recital by Coltrane (the first being *Blue Train*). Indeed, he was “cruel” on *Blue Train*, but John Coltrane was a monster at Carnegie Hall. In 1957, he was clearly playing on

another, higher, level. Like Fuller and Morgan, Monk knew that he had better play his best here. As one thing was clear: Coltrane wasn't holding back—not at all.

ANALYSIS

The entire Carnegie Hall performance is extraordinary, as a comparison of the two alternate takes of *Epistrophy* illustrates. I hope to demonstrate, through the forthcoming analysis, three aspects of Coltrane's technique of improvisation: (1) his conscious development of melodic gestures, and their maximum implication level (namely the ascending melodic gesture in m.8 of the first *Epistrophy*); (2) his systematic scalar approach; and (3) the ways in which Coltrane's solo on the second *Epistrophy* is an extrapolation or development of the first. In the end, I want to explore what the music is doing, not just on the surface level from gesture to gesture, but more importantly, in terms of the compositional relationship between the two solos. There are many structural connections.

The lick that Coltrane plays in m.8 of the first take of *Epistrophy* is prominent in both takes. On November 27, Coltrane played it, by my count, a total of fifteen times.

Examples 1a.-1e. are from John Coltrane's improvised solo on the first *Epistrophy* (Blue Note: 35173, 2005):

[Example 1a.]
m.8



[Example 1b.]
m.30



[Example 1c.]
m.42



[Example 1d.]
m.48



[Example 1e.]
m.64



Examples 1f.-1o. are from John Coltrane's improvised solo on the second *Epistrophy* (Blue Note: 35173, 2005):

[Example 1f.]
m.12



[Example 1g.]
m.13



[Example 1h.]
m.16



[Example 1i.]
m.23



[Example 1j.]
m.27



[Example 1k.]
m.35



[Example 1l.]
m.40



[Example 1m.]
m.54



[Example 1n.]
m.58



[Example 1o.]
m.60



While some of the above patterns are not exact replicas of the original (Ex. 1a.), almost all of them maintain a clear structural connection to the lick in its original form. These connections exist even if no pitch classes are invariant from gesture to gesture, e.g., compare Ex. 1a. and 1b. (1b. is 1a. transposed down by a major second). Sometimes the original gesture is slightly permuted through additive and subtractive variation, and sometimes the phrase is transposed. Even as Coltrane’s “sheets of sound” consume most of the solos here, this lick (Ex. 1a.) is always audible. In my view, improvisers use repetition to enable the audience to remember what has been played. While most of Coltrane’s rapid sixteenth-note runs seem to fly by, the recurring licks (Ex. 1a.) are aurally retained. In this way, Coltrane’s licks function as the glue that holds each solo

together. Perhaps Coltrane played it fifteen times in *Epistrophy* because he liked it. Indeed, the pattern of the second half of Ex. 1.a. ($G^b-A^b-B^b-D^b$) stayed in Coltrane's repertoire for at least the next two years. In 1959, when he recorded *Giant Steps*, the pattern 1-2-3-5 (scale degrees in relation to the tonic) is as frequent as Ex. 1a. is in the alternate takes of *Epistrophy*.

Coltrane's opening statement on the second *Epistrophy* is worth examining in detail (See Ex. 2a.).

[Example 2a.]

John Coltrane's improvised solo on the second *Epistrophy* (Blue Note: 35173, 2005) mm.1-8



Here, he begins his solo with tantalizing arpeggiated figures. The arpeggios oscillate (like the rope in a game of tug-of-war) between E^b -major and E -major, starting on the dominant (scale degree 5) and outlining the major triad: 5-1-3-5, respectively. Coltrane is arpeggiating the underlying chord progression of the head, which is $E^{b7} - E^7 // E^{b7} - E^7 // \dots$. In m.6 Coltrane begins to toggle between an arpeggio based upon an F dominant-seventh chord and one based on the $F^\#$ -major triad (he is still following the underlying chord progression of the tune, which is now $F^7 - F^{\#7} // F^7 - F^{\#7} // \dots$). Here he is outlining F^7 by playing E^b-F-A ($^b7-1-3$) and $F^{\#7}$ (enharmonically G^{b7}) by playing $G^b-B^b-D^b$ (1-3-5).

By m.9 he is done with these little rising arpeggios, and in m.10 he returns to the prevailing figure in Ex. 1a..

[Example 2b.]

John Coltrane's improvised solo on the second *Epistrophe* (Blue Note: 35173, 2005)
mm.42-47

In mm.42-47, Coltrane expands upon this opening gesture, and introduces a similar idea (See Ex. 2b.). Here, Coltrane is working-out the material that he introduced in mm.1-8 in an additive and retroactive process. In mm.42-47, Ex. 2a. is not only reinterpreted and reworked, but also altered slightly from phrase to phrase in a chain progression. The conclusion of Coltrane's solo on the second *Epistrophe* is also an example of sequence (See Ex. 3). In fact, the last phrase of his solo is quoted by Thelonious Monk, and the quote serves as an introduction to Monk's piano solo.

[Example 3]

John Coltrane's improvised solo on the second *Epistrophe* (Blue Note: 35173, 2005)
mm.63-65

Improvising over *Epistrophe* is challenging (even as Coltrane seems to play with ease). The opening chords are all a semitone (minor second) apart (See Ex. 4).

[Example 4]
 Chord Progression to the head of *Epistrophy*
 by Thelonious Monk and Kenny Clarke
 mm.1-16

$E^{b7} - E^7 / E^{b7} - E^7 / E^{b7} - E^7 / E^{b7} - E^7$
 $F^7 - F^{\#7} / F^7 - F^{\#7} / F^7 - F^{\#7} / F^7 - F^{\#7}$
 $F^7 - F^{\#7} / F^7 - F^{\#7} / F^7 - F^{\#7} / F^7 - F^{\#7}$
 $E^{b7} - E^7 / E^{b7} - E^7 / E^{b7} - E^7 / E^{b7} - E^7$

What was Coltrane's response to the challenge of negotiating these highly chromatic changes? Instead of rapidly switching harmonies every two beats, Coltrane took advantage of the seemingly endless possibilities afforded by the diminished scale² (sometimes called an eight-tone or octatonic scale).

There are only three different diminished scales due to the symmetrical shape of the scale. Each of the three scales may be defined in terms of four different roots, e.g., the D^b, E, G, and B^b diminished scales use the same eight pitches. (See Ex. 5b.)

[Example 5a.]
 D^b diminished scale (also E, G, and B^b diminished scales): D^b-E^b-E-F[#]-G-A-B^b-C-D^b

² A diminished scale is a scale in which the notes of the scale ascend in alternating intervals of a whole step and a half step (See Ex. 5a.).

[Example 5b.]

1. D^b diminished scale (also E, G, and B^b dim.)
2. D diminished scale (also F, A^b, and B dim.)
3. E^b diminished scale (also G^b, A, and C dim.)



By looking at the following ten musical examples, we can begin to form some tentative conclusions about John Coltrane's treatment of the diminished scale. The particular diminished scale underlying each example is identified by number, as in Ex. 5b..

Examples 6a.-6g. are from John Coltrane's improvised solo on the first *Epistrophe* (Blue Note: 35173, 2005):

[Example 6a.]

mm.4-5



In m. 4 Coltrane uses a rising form of (1), and, in m.5, he switches to a descending form of (2).

[Example 6b.]

mm.19-20



In m.19 he uses an ascending transformation of (1) and (2).

[Example 6g.]
mm.62-63



Here, (1) up and (2) down.

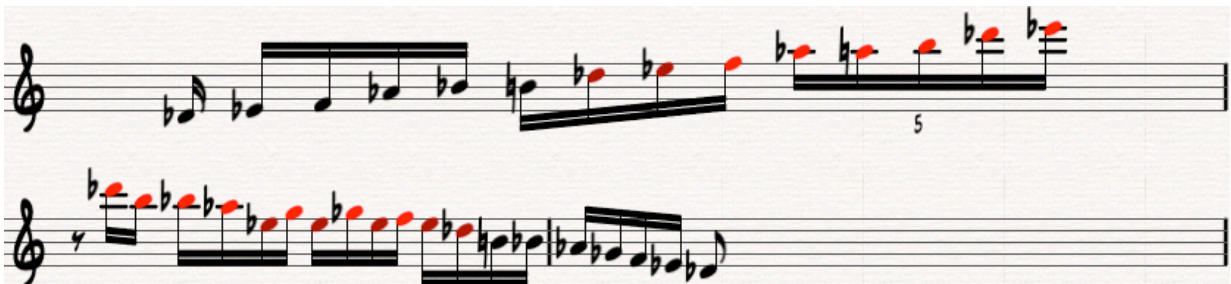
Examples 6h.-gj. are from John Coltrane's improvised solo on the second *Epistrophe* (Blue Note: 35173, 2005):

[Example 6h.]
mm.18-19



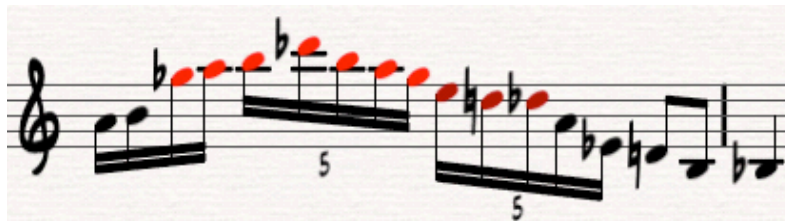
Here, a transformation of (1) and (2).

[Example 6i.]
mm.20-22



Here, a transformation of (1) and (3).

[Example 6j.]
mm.48-49



Here, a transformation of (1) and (2).

From these ten examples, then, it is clear that the diminished scales undergird Coltrane's scalar improvisatory passages. I think that one can hear the integration of the diminished

scale in his improvisations as both a reaction to and an extension of Bebop. Exponents of Bebop have been lauded for their abilities to “play outside” the changes via the Bebop scale (including a flat 7 or flat 6), upper extensions (ninths, eleventh, and thirteenths), tritone substitution (flatted fifth), and myriad chord alterations. From the foregoing analysis, it is also clear that Coltrane was “playing outside,” i.e., improvising with non-chordal notes. In the second *Epistrophy*, Coltrane is alternating between the arpeggiated chord formations (See Ex. 2a.-b.) and improvisations based upon intervallic structure, i.e., the diminished scale (See Ex. 6a.-j.).

In 1957, while Monk and Coltrane were gigging at The *Five Spot Café*, “free jazz” was also developing in this same crucible through the work of Cecil Taylor; Ornette Coleman debuted there in 1959. It is more than likely that Coltrane *heard* what Taylor was doing at the *Five Spot*, and saved it for an apropos time—perhaps for *Epistrophy*.

In the final years of his career, John Coltrane joined the ranks of Cecil Taylor (1930-) and Ornette Coleman (1930-), helping to forge the “free jazz” era. All of the examples examined here are shown to be based on tightly constructed conceptions which make use of such constructs as melodic sequence (See Ex. 3), permutation (See Ex. 1a.-1o.), transformation (See Ex. 6a.-6j.), transposition (See Ex. 1b.), arpeggiation (See Ex. 2a.), chain progression (See Ex. 2a.-2b.), additive and retroactive processes (See Ex. 2b.), systematic scalar approaches (See Ex. 6a.-6j.), and the use of “epistrophe” (literally, the repetition of a word or expression at the end of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses especially for rhetorical or poetic effect) in order to produce, not two disparate improvisations, but, in the end, one synergetic performance.

PERFORMANCE PREPARATIONS

Epistrophy would have taken down just about anyone facing it for the first time—anyone, that is, except for Thelonious Monk. John Coltrane was no exception; in the beginning of his stint at the *Five Spot*, he struggled with this tune. As Amiri Baraka explains, “the first couple of weeks [Coltrane] was near-pitiful [...] but Monk pounded away at the chords”(Baraka, 6). Steve Lacy recalls, “It started out...very clumsy, very obscure, very maladroit”(Kahn, 10). By juxtaposing Coltrane’s fluency (or lack thereof) at the onset of the *Five Spot* gigs with the 1957 Carnegie Hall performance, we can begin to form some tentative conclusions about the evolution of a working band.

It is imperative to understand how John Coltrane went from “near-pitiful”(Baraka, 6) to near-perfect. In order to meet fully the challenges posed by Monk’s music, Coltrane did what he did best—he practiced.

Coltrane’s practice regimen was “maniacal” and “obsessive” (Porter, 52), including a number of exercise and method books, e.g., Nicolas Slonimsky’s (1894-1995) *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* and Hyacinthe Klosé’s (1808-1880) *Daily Exercises for Saxophone*. He transcribed diligently and, most importantly, knew “how to listen to jazz”(Coker, 1978). He was devoted to increasing his finger and hand coordination: “Several people say that [Coltrane] even liked to practice long into the night, just the fingerings, without blowing air into the instrument, so as to not wake anyone.”(Porter, 52) Porter explains that this was “good practice for hearing the music in one’s head. That is essential for improvisation, since one must hear music in one’s head in order to produce it at will”(52).

TRANSCRIPTION METHODOLOGY

I used Paul Machlin's *Thomas 'Fats' Waller Performances in Transcription* as a model for my own transcription methodology. The process of transcribing John Coltrane's solos on *Epistrophy* involved listening to the recordings, and then translating the "sounds" I heard into formal Western music notation. My intent was to create an accurate representation of what Coltrane actually played—a graphic document that other jazz musicians could read and play themselves. Transcribing John Coltrane's solos from the alternate takes of *Epistrophy* was challenging. By offering two transcriptions of performances of the same tune, I have sought to explain the ways in which Coltrane treated the same material under different circumstances. In the end, I have tried to reproduce, with as much fidelity to the original recordings as possible, a physical description of what Coltrane actually played on this particular occasion.

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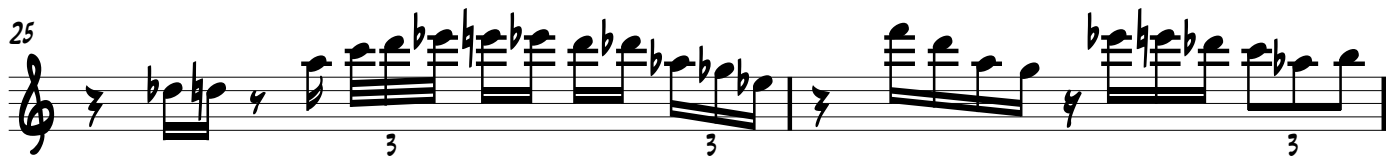
"EPISTROPHY"

JOHN COLTRANE IN CONCERT AT CARNEGIE HALL IN 1957

TENOR

The musical score is written for tenor saxophone in 4/4 time. It consists of nine staves of music, each starting with a measure number (1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor). The melody is highly chromatic, with frequent use of accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and triplets. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, and rests. The piece concludes on the ninth staff with a final note on the second line of the staff.

(EPISTROPHY, CONTO.; BERTHOLF, ED.)



4

62

3

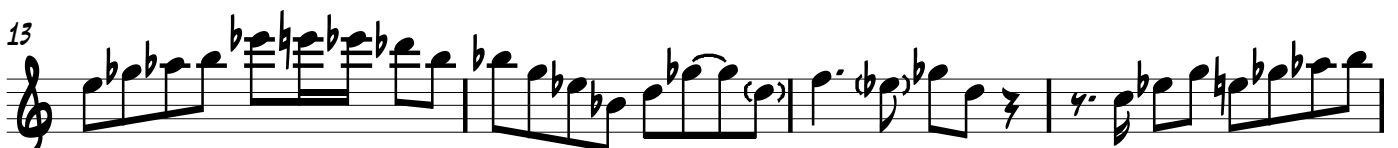
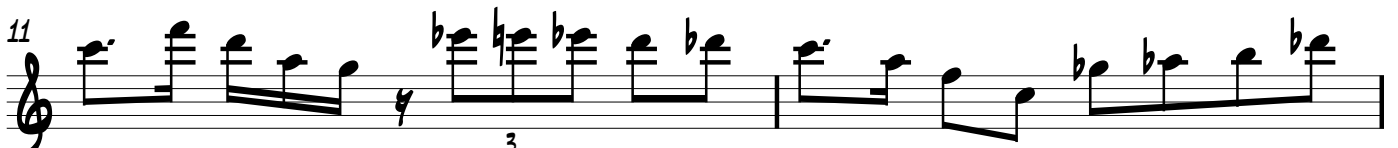
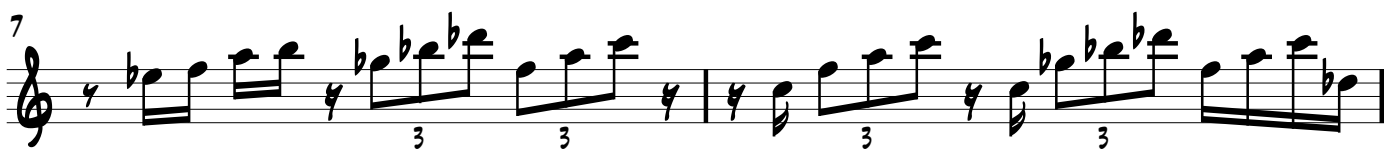
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3

"EPISTROPHY" (INCOMPLETE)

JOHN COLTRANE IN CONCERT AT CARNEGIE HALL IN 1957

TENOR



(EPISTROPHY, CONTO.; BERTHOLF, ED.)

2

21

Musical staff 21: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 21-22 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 23 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

23

Musical staff 23: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 23-24 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 25 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

DELAYED ...

25

Musical staff 25: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 25-26 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 27 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

27

Musical staff 27: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 27-28 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 29 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

DELAY

DELAY

29

Musical staff 29: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 29-30 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 31 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

34

Musical staff 34: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 34-35 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 36 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

37

Musical staff 37: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 37-38 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 39 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

40

Musical staff 40: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 40-41 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 42 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

43

Musical staff 43: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 43-44 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 45 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

45

Musical staff 45: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. Measures 45-46 contain eighth and sixteenth notes with flats. Measure 47 starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note.

