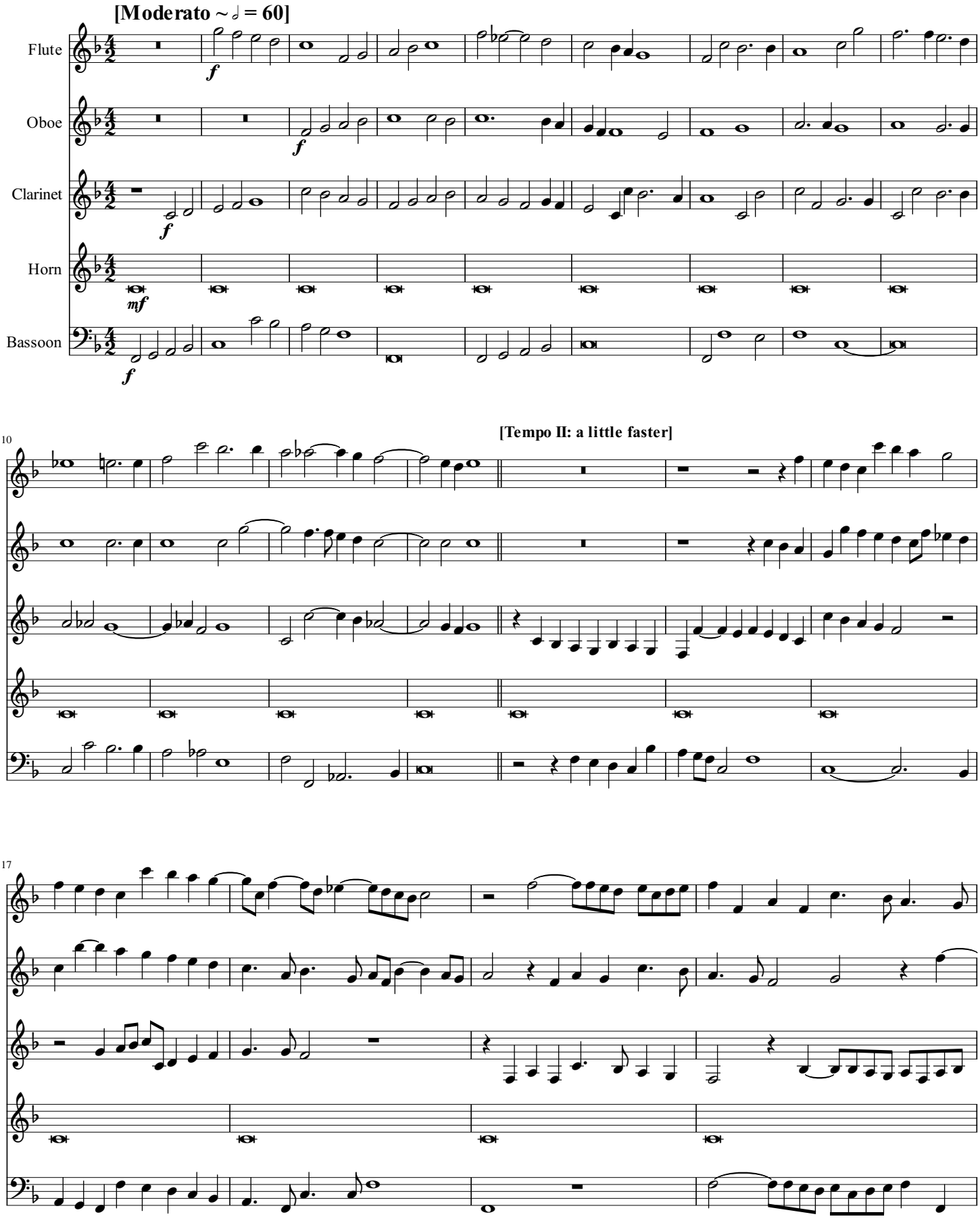
Fantasia upon one Note for 5 parts (? Viols) Z.745

Score (concert pitch)

arranged for Wind Quintet by Toby Miller

Purcell



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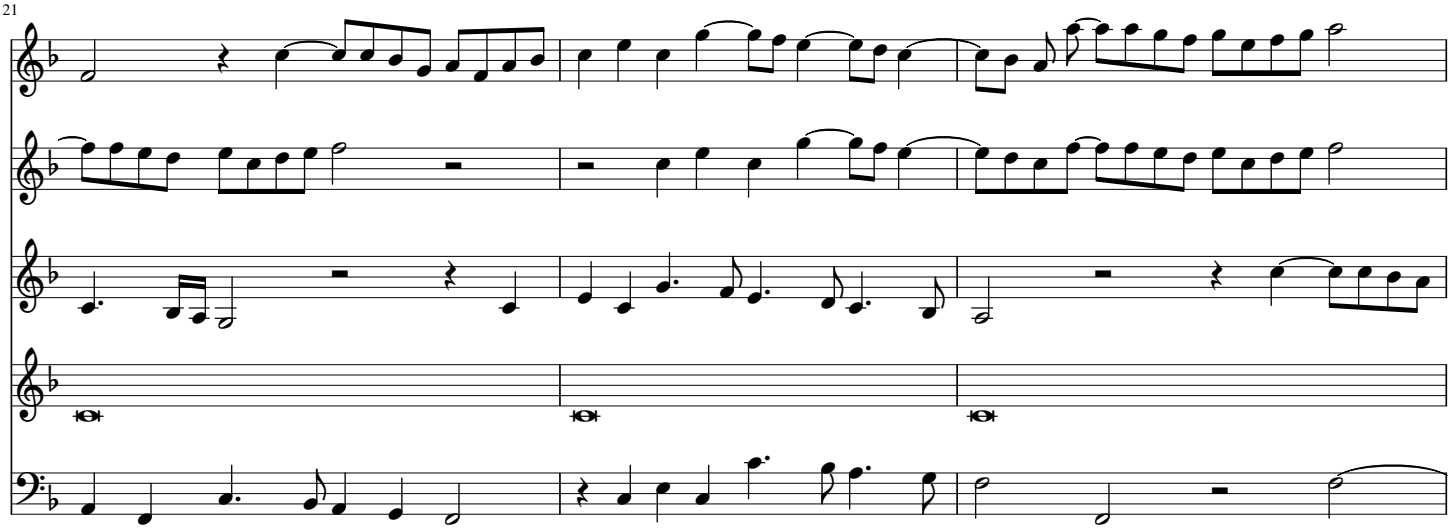
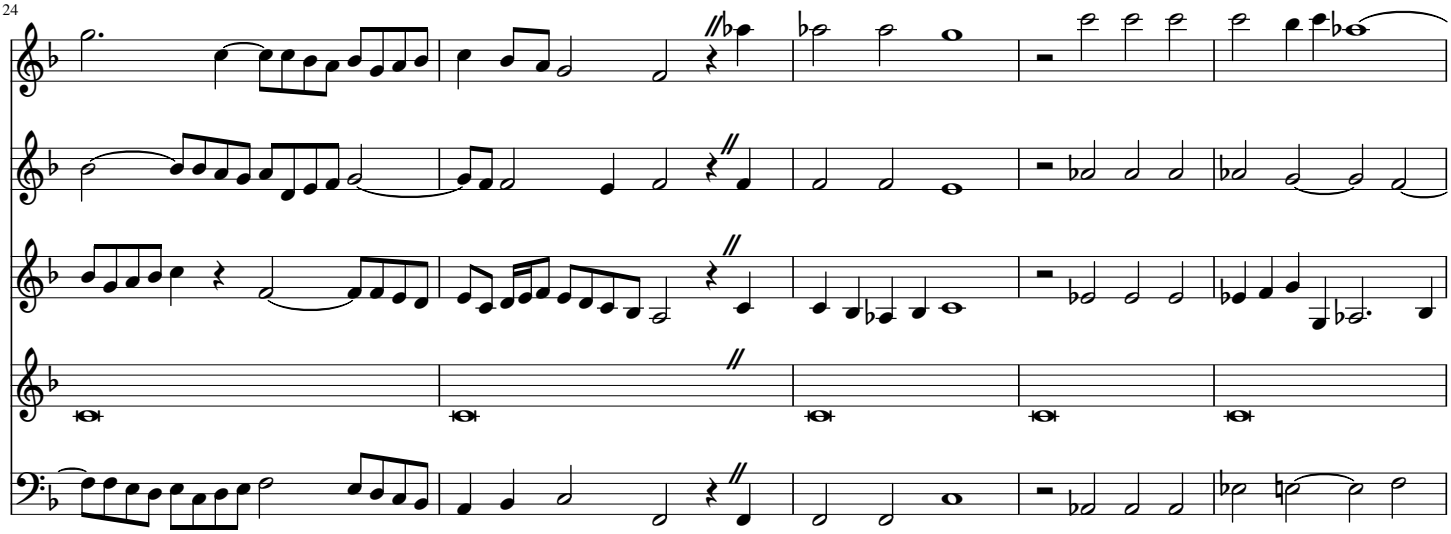


[Slower]

24



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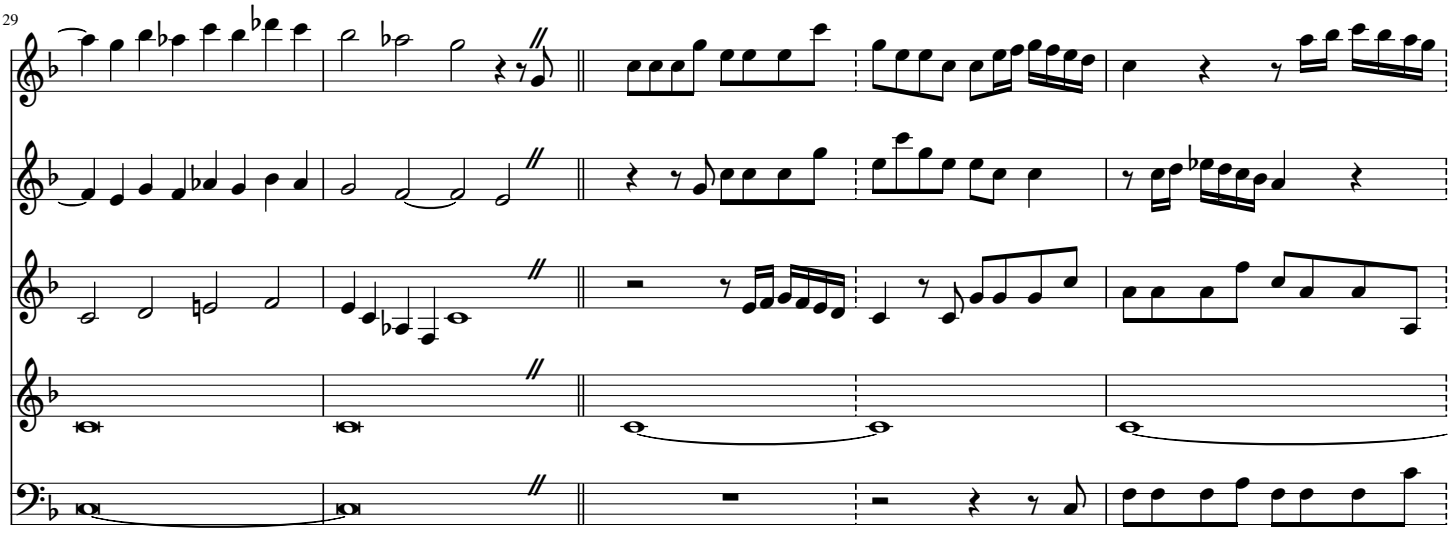

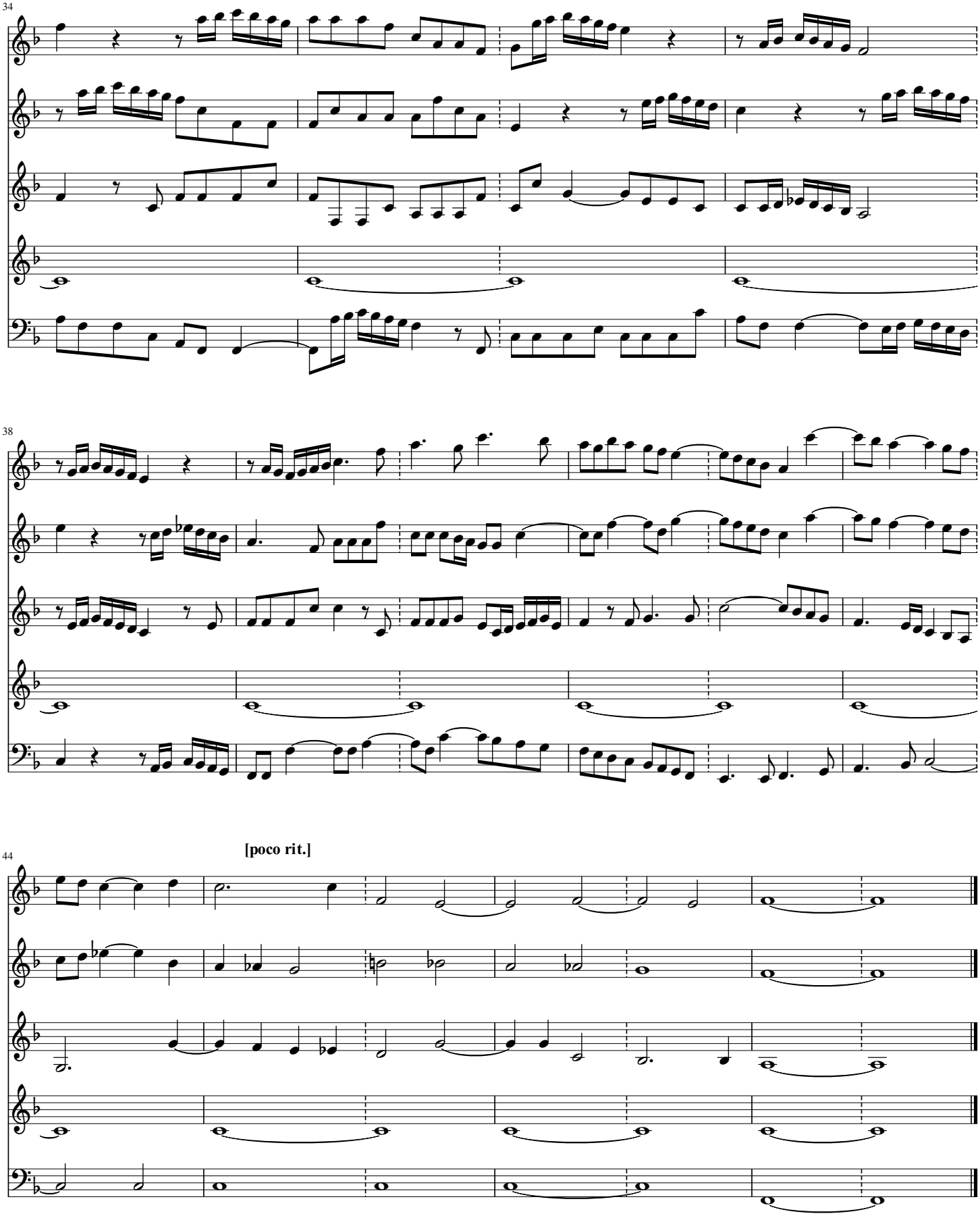
34
38
44
[poco rit.]

Henry Purcell was acknowledged by his contemporaries during his short lifetime as Britain's foremost composer. He was born probably in 1659 to Henry Purcell senior, the master of the choristers at Westminster Abbey, and his wife Elizabeth. When Henry was five his father died and his mother moved the six children to a smaller house. He was a chorister in the Chapel Royal, had keyboard lessons from the son of composer Orlando Gibbons, and in 1677 he himself became composer for the King's Violins. In 1679 John Blow resigned his post as organist of Westminster Abbey in favour of his precocious pupil (he was re-appointed on Purcell's early death).

Purcell composed his 15 surviving Fantasias ('Fancies') over the summer of 1680 between June 10 and August 31. The Fantasia, a form which had been very popular from the late 16th century onwards, was traditionally written for a 'consort' of viols. From the early 17th century the violin had gradually supplanted the viol at court, but in amateur circles this took somewhat longer. Both the form and the instruments were becoming old-fashioned, and Purcell's Trio Sonatas, a simpler form influenced by Italian composers, in which the middle parts of the musical texture were played on a keyboard, and the upper parts by violins, show the composer responding to this new style. However Purcell's Fantasias, in the older style, demonstrate his astonishing mastery of contrapuntal writing at the age of 21.

In this piece he sets himself the challenge of sounding a single note (middle C) throughout, alongside four further polyphonic lines. His success is attested by the numbers both of recordings of the piece, and of composers who have been inspired to write arrangements and further elaborations (Elliott Carter, Oliver Knussen, Steve Martland and Tim Jackson to name a few).

There is no indication of instrumentation, dynamics or speeds in the original. However tempo changes suggested by the notation (long/short note values) can be enhanced. In Elliott Carter's (transposed) version the held note is viewed as a bell, and in this transcription the horn can perhaps suggest that by its articulation, although always within a lower dynamic than the moving parts. Apart from a few bars where parts have been swapped to avoid extremes of range, and one or two changes of octave to ensure the flute can be heard, this transcription is unchanged from the original.