Violin I

Greensleeves

("What Child is This?")

Traditional
arranged by Matthew Naughtin

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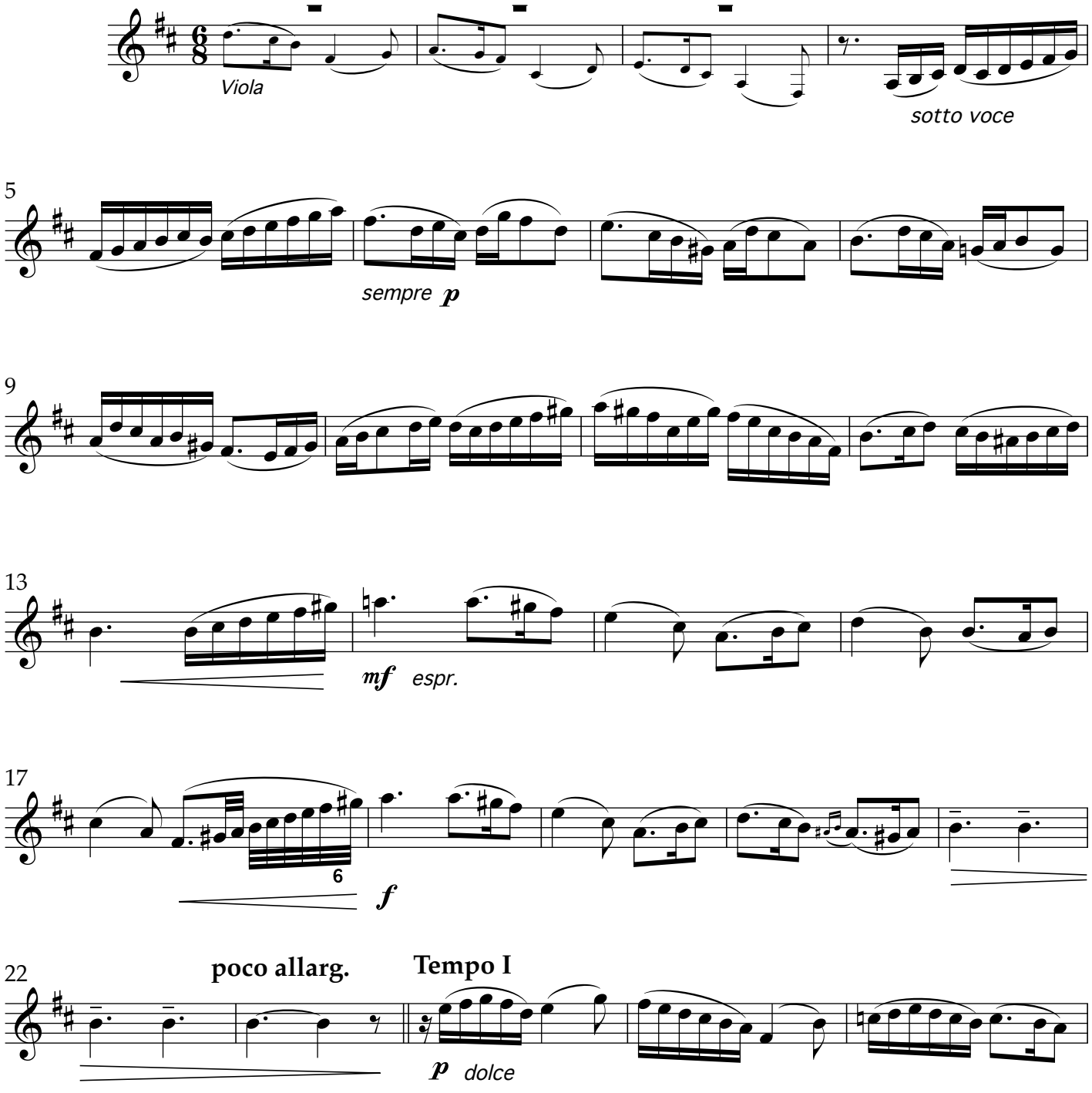
Moderate & Flowing (♩. = 46)



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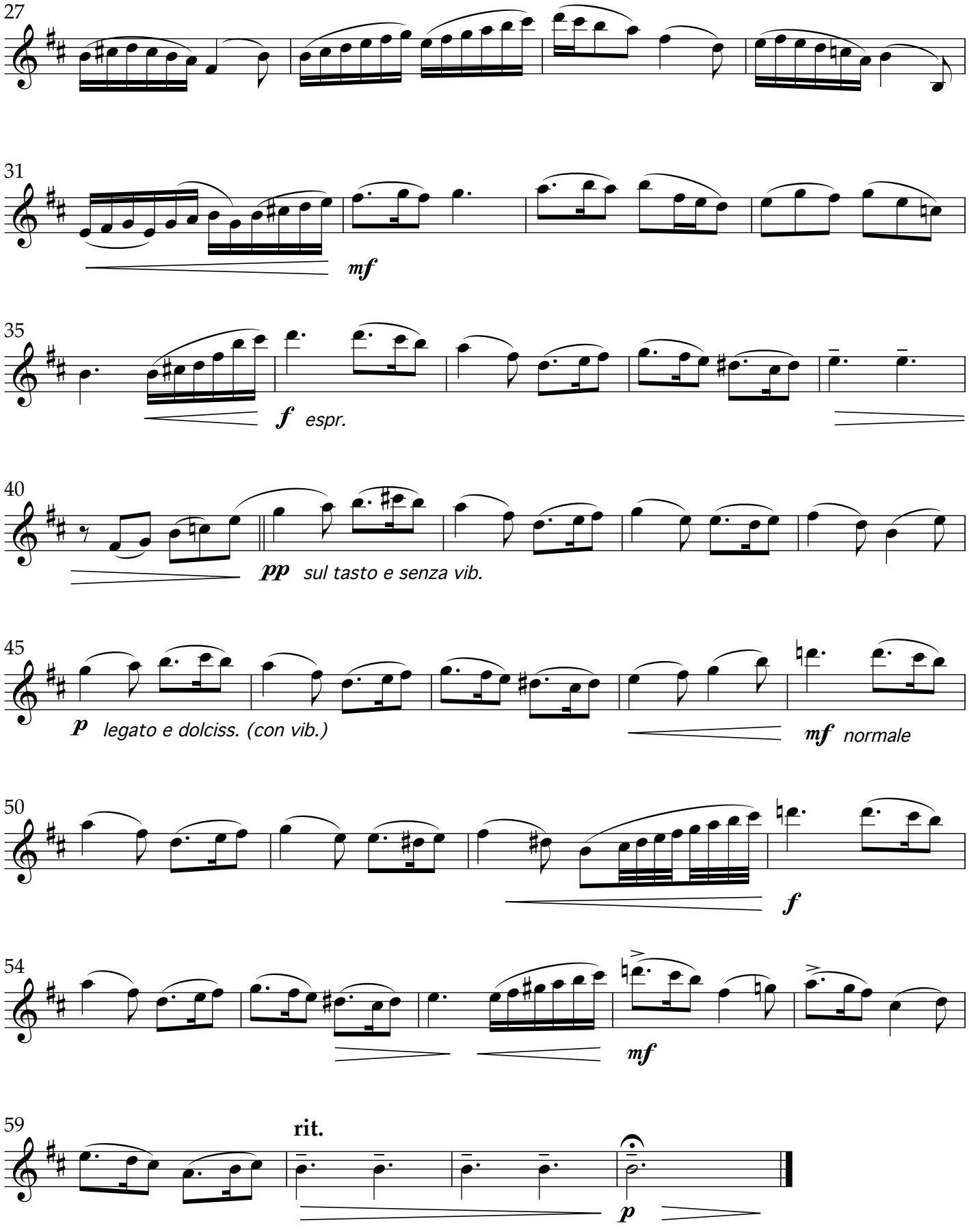
Music engraving by Mariusz Flis: maag@post.pl


27
31
mf
35
f espr.
40
pp sul tasto e senza vib.
45
p legato e dolciss. (con vib.)
mf normale
50
f
54
mf
59
rit.
p

"Greesleeves" is a traditional English folk song and tune, basically a ground in the form called a romanesca.

A broadside ballad by this name was registered at the London Stationer's Company in 1580 as " in the surviving A Handful of Pleasant Delights (1584) as "A New Courtly Sonnet of the Lady Green Sleeves. To the new tune of Green sleeves." It remains debatable whether this suggests that an 'old' tune of "Greensleeves" was in circulation, or which one our familiar tune is. Many surviving sets of lyrics were written to this tune.

The tune is also found in several late 16th century and early 17th century sources, such as Ballet's MS Lute Book and Het Luitboek van Thysius, as well as various manuscripts preserved in the Cambridge University libraries.

A widely-believed (but completely unproven) legend is that it was composed by King Henry VIII (1491-1547) for his lover and future queen consort Anne Boleyn. Anne, the youngest daughter of Thomas Boleyn, rejected Henry's attempts to seduce her. This rejection is apparently referred to in the song, when the writer's love "cast me off discourteously." However, it is most unlikely that King Henry VIII wrote it, as the song is written in a style which was not known in England until after Henry VIII died.

It is widely acknowledged that Lady Green Sleeves was at the very least a promiscuous young woman and perhaps a prostitute. The reference to the colour of her sleeves suggests grass stains from a recent rendezvous with a suitor. Additionally, in England the colour green was associated with prostitution. It is said that the green sleeves were removable and required to be worn by prostitutes as a label of their profession.

Sleeves in general were separate from bodices in this time period, and were made to be tied on and thus interchangeable.

An alternative explanation is that Lady Green Sleeves was, as a result of of her attire, incorrectly assumed to be immoral. Her "discourteous" rejection of the singer's advances quite clearly makes the point that she is not.

In the page 500 of the Canterbury Tales (Penguin Classics), the translator Nevill Coghill explains that "green (for Chaucer's age was the color of) lightness in love. This is echoed in 'Greensleeves is my delight' and elsewhere."

Never mind that "traditional English folk song" is simply a way of saying "we don't have a clue who wrote it, but obviously someone did!"

---John Howell