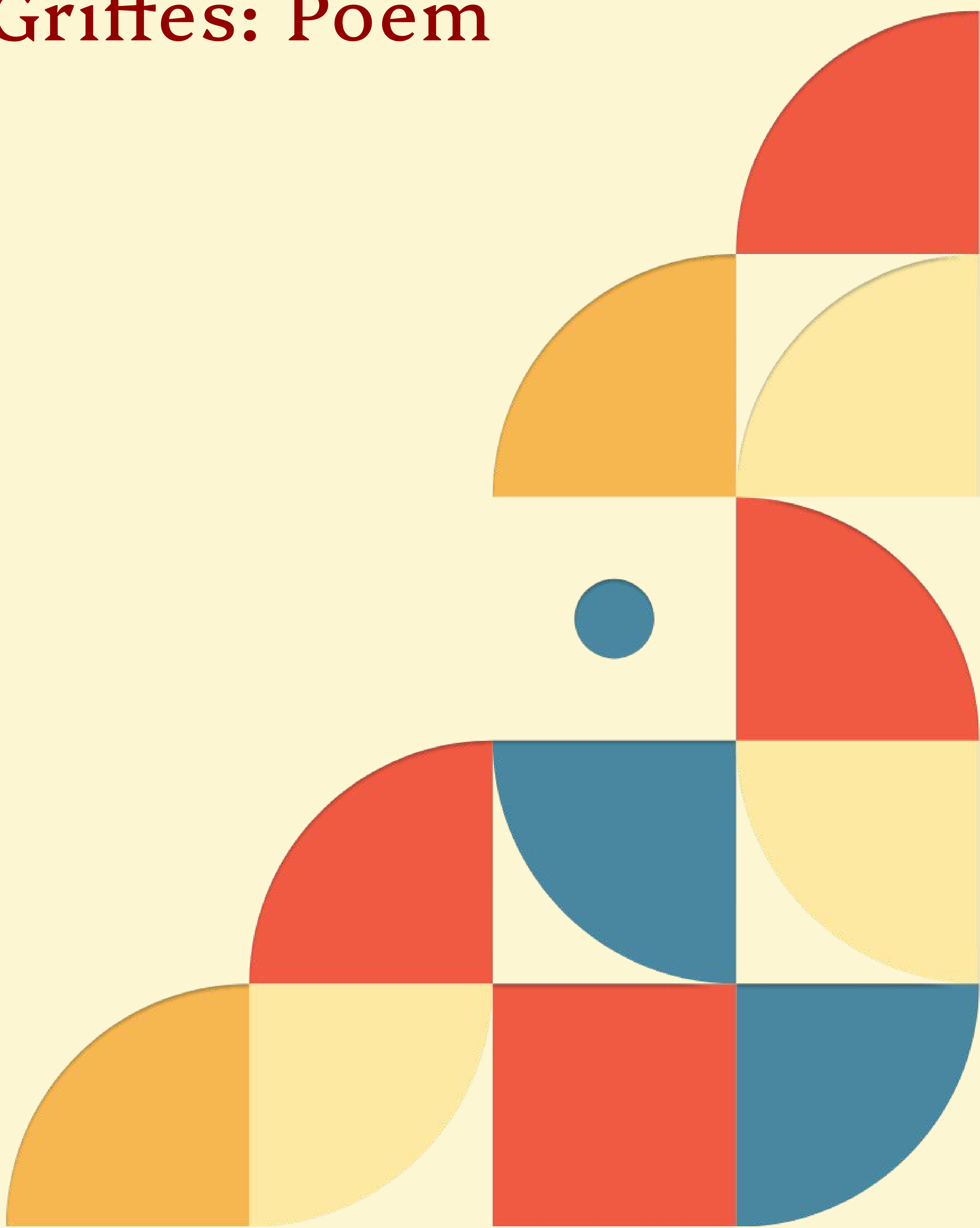


CHRISTINA JENNINGS

Charles Griffes: Poem



ABOUT THIS COURSE

In this course, renowned soloist Christina Jennings guides us through a comprehensive look into Charles Griffes' Poem for Flute and Piano. She speaks about the history of the work, the poetic underpinnings of each phrase, and the various themes that bring this piece to life.

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Overview

Charles Griffes was born in 1884 in Upstate New York, in Elmira. As a young man, Griffes excelled at the piano and was fortunate enough to study with Mary Selena Broughton, who recognized his ability and then financed his studies in Europe. In 1903 Griffes moved to Berlin to study piano with Engelbert Humperdink, who encouraged him to shift his focus to composition. Around the outbreak of the First World War, Griffes returned to the United States and reluctantly took a job at Hackley Boys School in Tarrytown, NY. Although Griffes studied in Germany, where he was surrounded by the sounds of late German romanticism, his music demonstrates influences of the French impressionist composers, most prominently Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. Griffes died in 1920 from complications after an influenza infection, just six months after the premiere of the Poem for Flute and Orchestra.



Charles Griffes



Georges Barrère

The Poem for Flute and Orchestra was written in 1918 and received its premiere on November 16, 1919, under the baton of Walter Damrosch, with Georges Barrère as the soloist. The Poem was an instant success and has since become a mainstay of the American repertoire for flute. Somewhat unusually for solo repertoire, it demands lyricism over technical virtuosity from the performer. The opening melody acts as a tonal reference point, returning often throughout the work following episodes of chromatism, polymetric dance, and fast technical passages. The Oxford Dictionary defines a poem as “a piece of writing in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by particular attention to diction (sometimes involving rhyme), rhythm, and imagery.”

With this in mind, think about how you can structure your performance of the Griffes poem to intensify the feelings and ideas expressed in the piece. Some ideas as to how this may be done include applying grammar to the music: using a comma to indicate a breath, a dash to connect phrases, parenthesis to explain a phrase or to express an afterthought, or adding a question mark or a colon to round off a phrase and to link to a new one.

This idea of music as speech is an extremely old one, and an example of its description can be found in Johann Joachim Quantz' Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen (Introduction on playing the flute).

“Musical execution [the manner of performance] may be compared with the delivery of an orator. The orator and the musician have, at the bottom, the same aim in regard to both the preparation and the final execution of their productions, namely to make themselves masters of the hearts of their listeners, to arouse or still their passions, and to transport them now to this sentiment, now to that. Thus it is advantageous to both, if each has some knowledge of the duties of the other.” (Quantz Chapter XI ‘Of Good Execution in General in Singing and Playing’)

Form

As this piece is written in free form, it can be helpful to create a map of the various themes to give you a clearer idea of its structure.

An example of how this could look would be:

The opening theme, which can also be called a **dream theme**, is followed by the **Erlkönig theme**, the spooky theme, a **cadenza**, and the accelerating **folk dance**, which then melds back into the **dream theme**, all of which is concluded by a brief **coda**.

This is just one example of how this piece could be structured. Try to come up with one that resonates clearly with your perception of it.

Notes on Sections

Letter A

- The piece begins with a C-sharp in the flute which can be seen as an homage to the opening of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. This is a challenging note, so practice it using harmonics, drones and if you can, a piano.
- Be sure not to sacrifice articulation when searching for a smooth, long line in this section; the best clarity comes from clear articulation amid a long, smooth line.



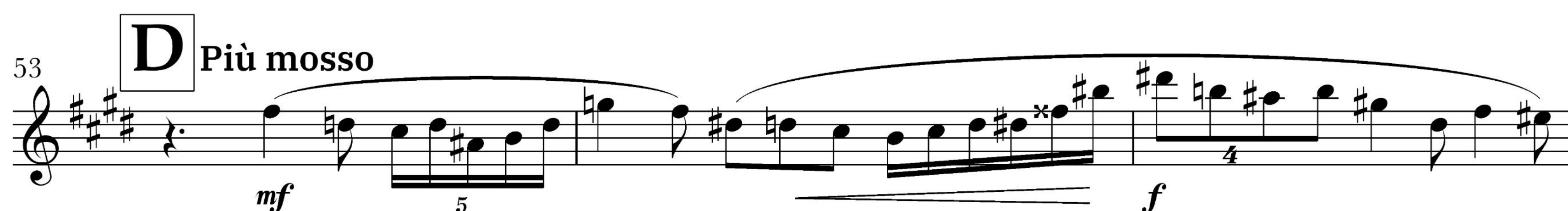
Letter C

- **The Dream** theme.
- You can raise the pitch of this opening section ever so slightly by using the G-sharp key.



Letter D

- The accompanying figure is similar to Schubert's *Erlkönig* theme, which returns sporadically until letter H.
- This section is full of duple and compound subdivisions; find a way of playing these subdivisions in a fluid and natural manner. Try using words that match the rhythm so the feeling doesn't become prescriptive or stilted.



Letter D

- In m. 61, there is an A-sharp/B technical tangle; use the thumb B-flat at the beginning of the bar and the thumb B-natural at the end.

59

ff *appassionato* 4 *cresc.*

Letter E

- Be emphatic with your dotted and straight eighth notes here. This section prioritizes rhythm, and clarity of rhythmic nuance will make this section shine.

63

E Più mosso

ff

Letter H

- This section begins with a simple dance, which can be used to contrast the dark and spooky nature of the previous sections.

114

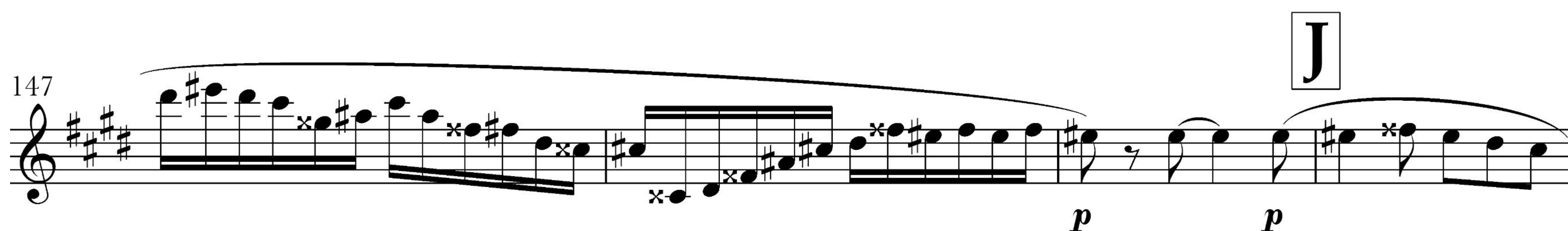
H Più mosso

dim. *rit.* *p*

119

Letter I

- In m. 147 there is a brief show of technical virtuosity. At this point, strive for effortless technique, and practice using your technical drills to make this sound as easy as possible.



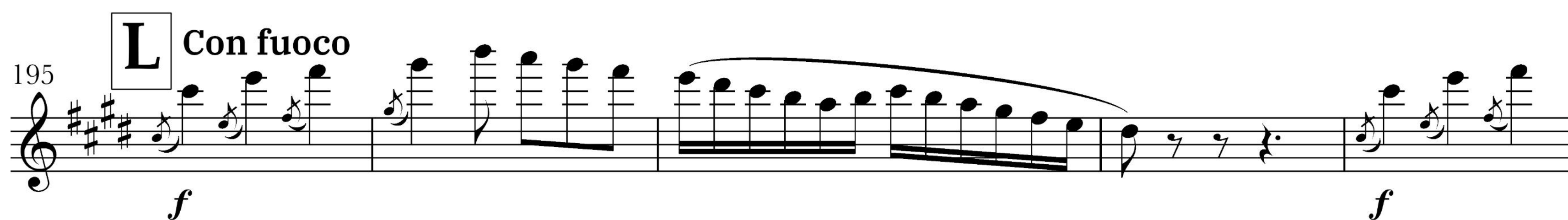
Letter K

- The marking here is poco meno mosso, which has less swing and a more questioning tone.

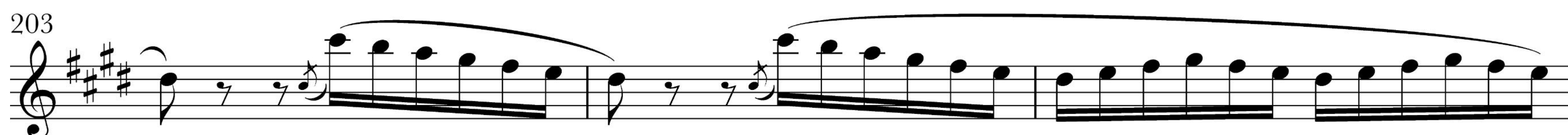


Letter L

- This is the most significant moment in the piece for the soloist. When practicing, try first taking out the grace notes to ensure that the rhythm is correct.



- M. 205 is one of the more challenging technical moments in the piece. In addition to practicing using rhythmic variation, you can try shifting the right hand a little to the right to make the challenging D-sharp-E-F-sharp finger combination feel a little bit lighter.



Letter M

- This feels like a recommitment to the four-bar phrasing idea that we had at the beginning.
- Be sure to make the most of the increasing energy of the tempo indications: Con fuoco, Vivace, poco a poco accelerando, and finally, Presto.

206

M Vivace
f

210

Letter O

- The final cadenza just before O is a moment where your creativity as a flutist can shine. There are many different ways of playing this cadenza, and you can explore them all to find one that resonates the most with your musical taste.

(8)

253

O Tempo I
pp

260

Errata

An errata to point out is a missing tie in the final C-sharp before rehearsal B. Until this point, all of the C-sharps have been tied, and the repeat of this passage towards the end ties this note over measures 278 to 279. It is safe to assume this figure should feature a tie on both occasions.

16

20

B Poco più mosso

mf

Measure 54 contains another errata: the B-sharp on the third beat. This note differs in the surviving scores, but the repetition of this gesture in measure 57 with the B-sharp printed in both octaves makes a compelling case for playing the same note in both places.

53

D Più mosso

mf

f

5

4

Final Thoughts

The untimely nature of Charles Griffes' death meant that he was unable to prepare the piano reduction of this work for publication. As such, there are significant differences between the various piano reductions that exist today. Thankfully, however, much study has been done on the manuscripts that survive. For those interested in reading about the differences between the manuscript and published editions, further information can be found in the following sources.

- **Irna Priore' Dissertation:** https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/I_Priore_Griffe_1996.pdf
- **John Wion website on Errata:** <https://www.johnwion.com/errata.html>