Let the music flow

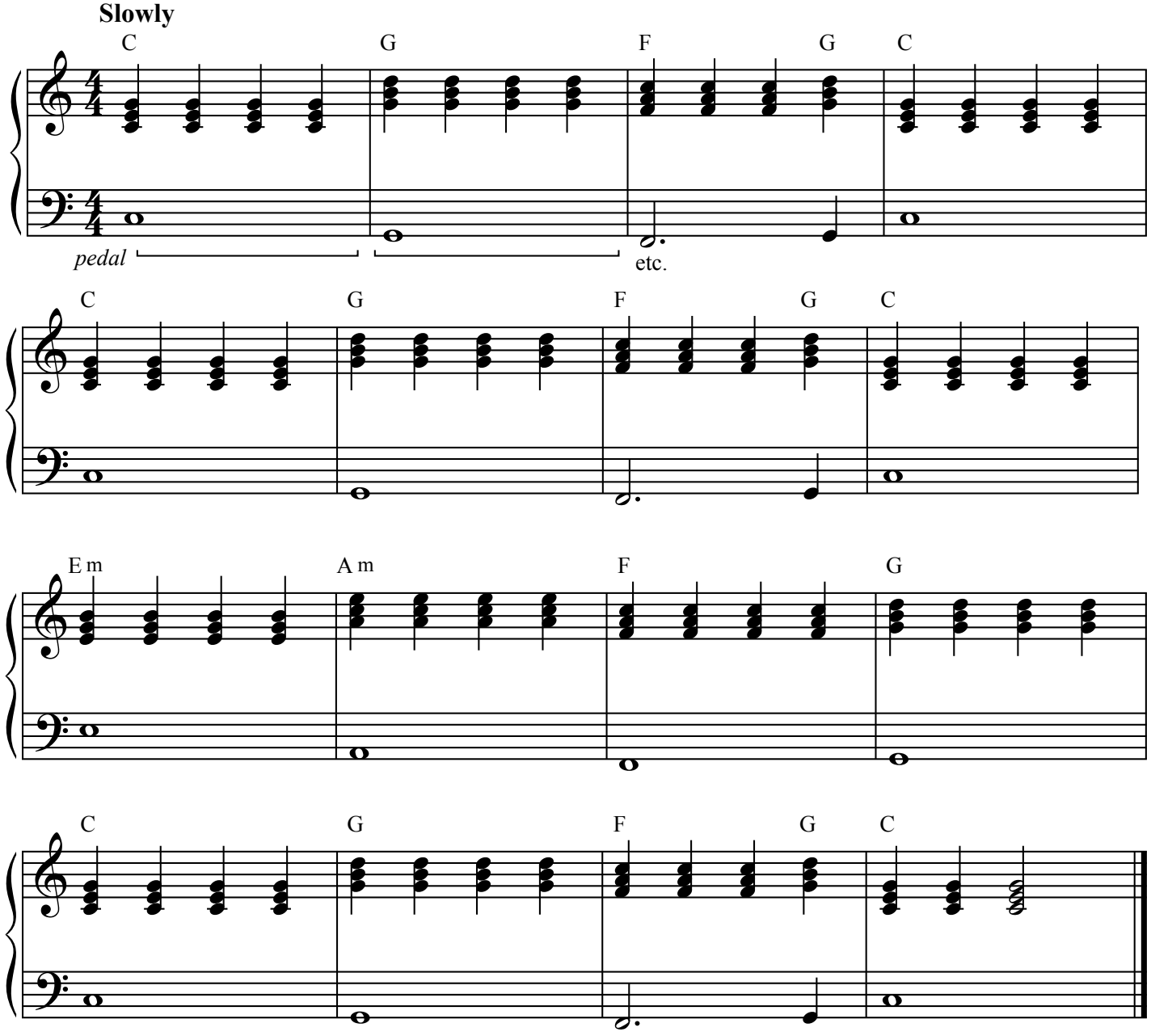
KEYBOARD IMPROV.COM

Pop Ballad Accompaniment for Piano and Keyboard

by Ron Drotos

Lesson 1:

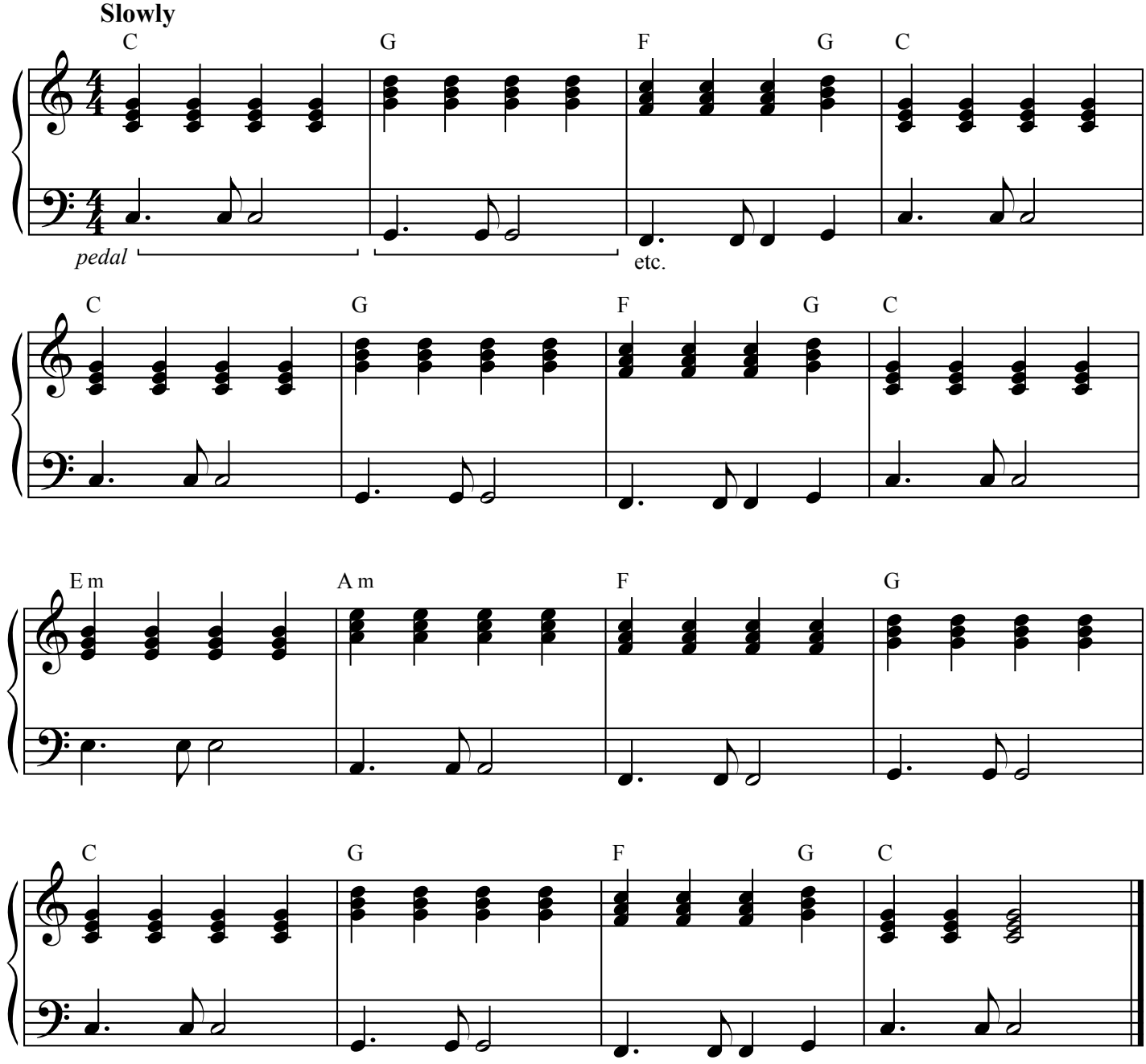
There are many types of piano accompaniment that work well behind a vocalist, whether you yourself are singing or you're playing piano/keyboard while someone else sings. A simple way to get started is to play root-position chords in your right hand and the chord roots, or letter names, in your left. The right hand plays quarter notes while the left holds each note for the duration of the chord. Change the pedal whenever the chord changes. This very simple style of accompaniment is surprisingly effective and versatile.



Copyright © 2012 Ron Drotos

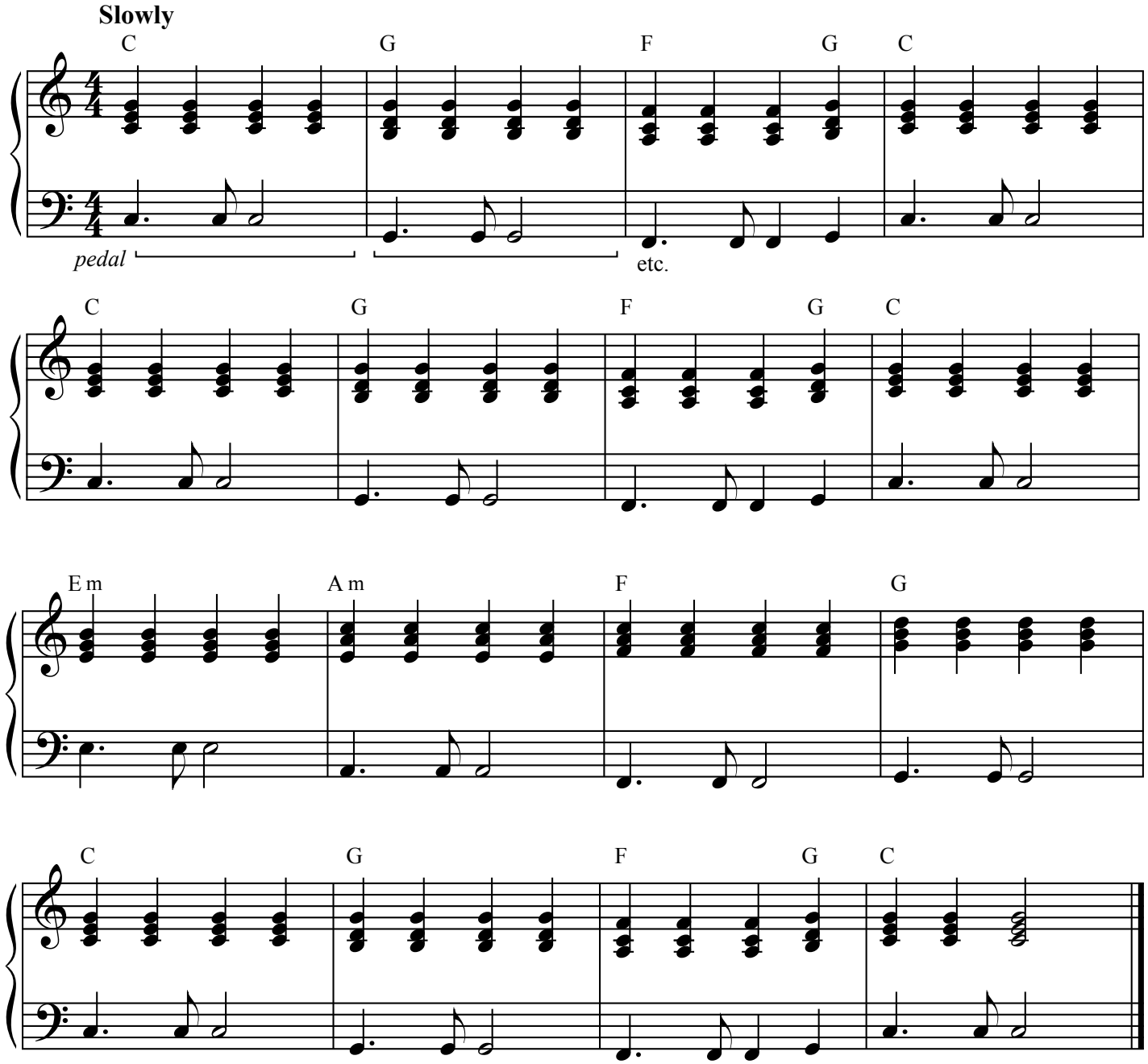
Lesson 2:

Let's see what else we can do with the same chords we played in Lesson 1. This chord progression uses common chords in the key of 'C' (all white notes) and was used in the song "The Rose", among others. We can add a little more of a Rock rhythm to the left hand, as shown below.



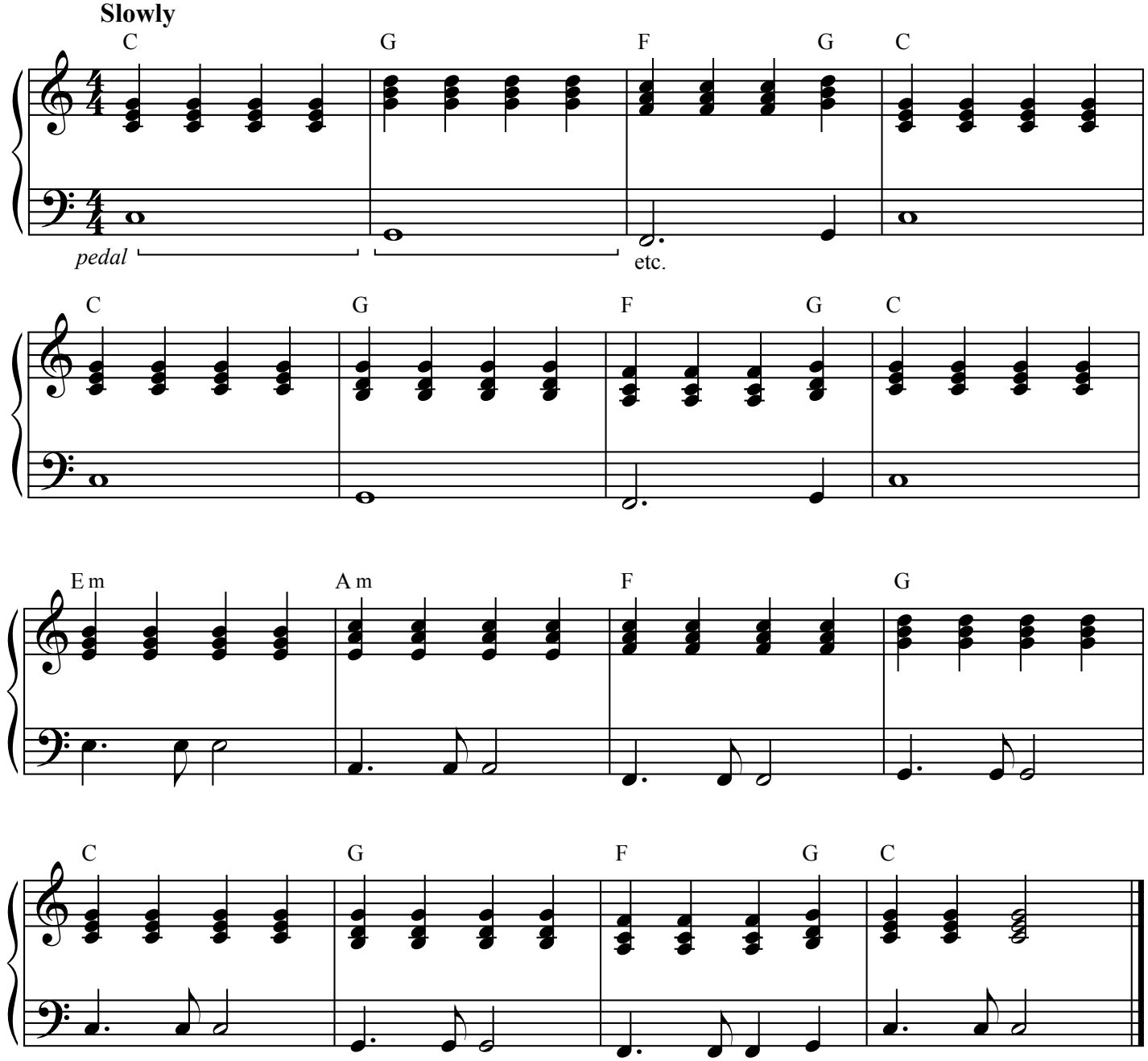
Lesson 3:

Playing root position chords in the right hand can go a long way, especially if you're just starting to use chords to improvise your own accompaniments. After a while, though, you may find that you don't want to move your right hand so much. At this point, try inverting some of the chords. This will let you keep your hand in the same area of the keyboard, and will also result in a smoother sound.



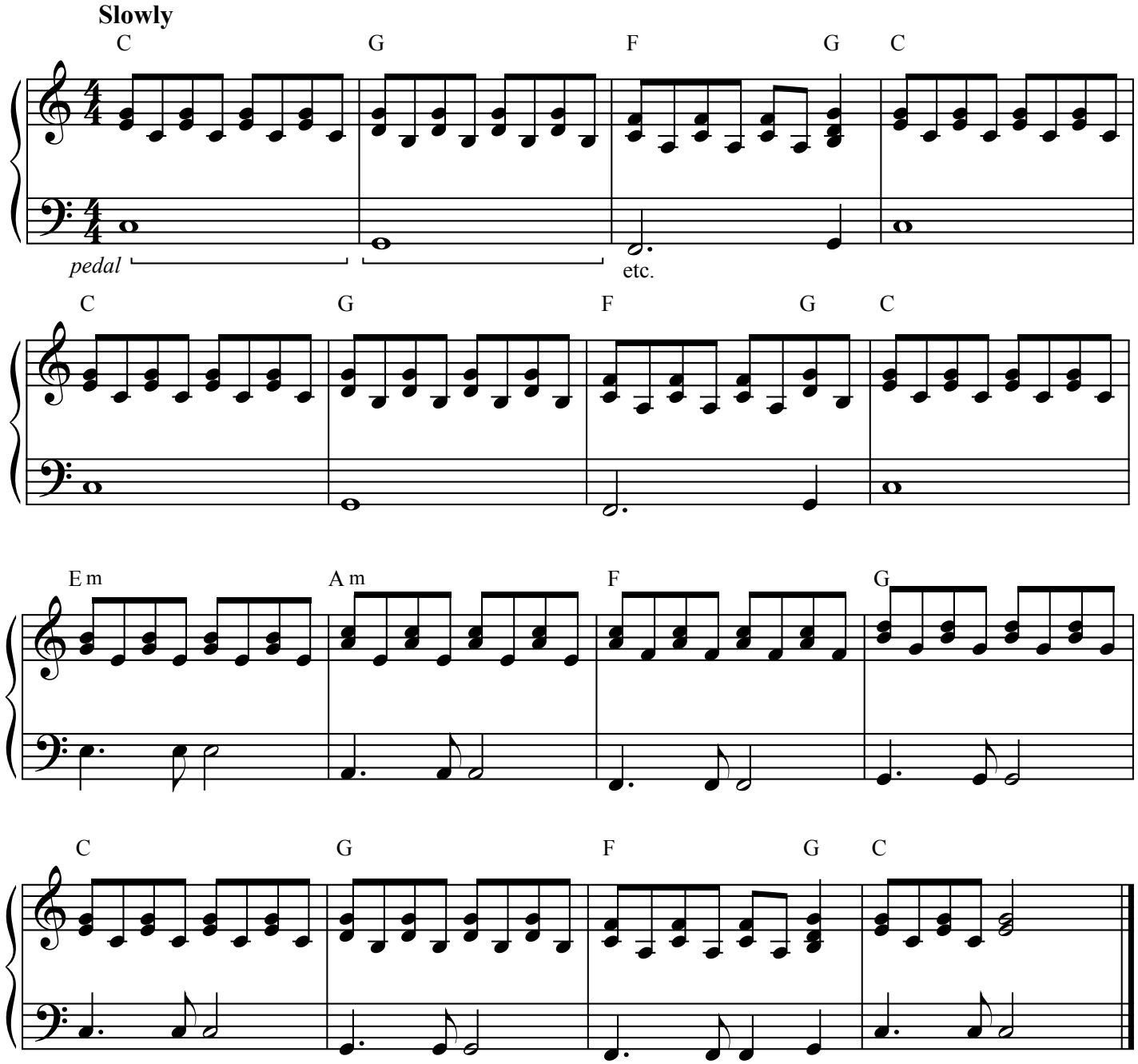
Lesson 4:

By now, you may have noticed that some famous pianists like Elton John often play simple accompaniments like these. Listen to how simply Paul McCartney plays at the beginning of 'Hey Jude'. This quarter note based style can even work on songs that originally had a more complicated piano part, such as Elton John's 'Your Song'. This example combines all three approaches, which lets the music grow and develop as the song progresses.



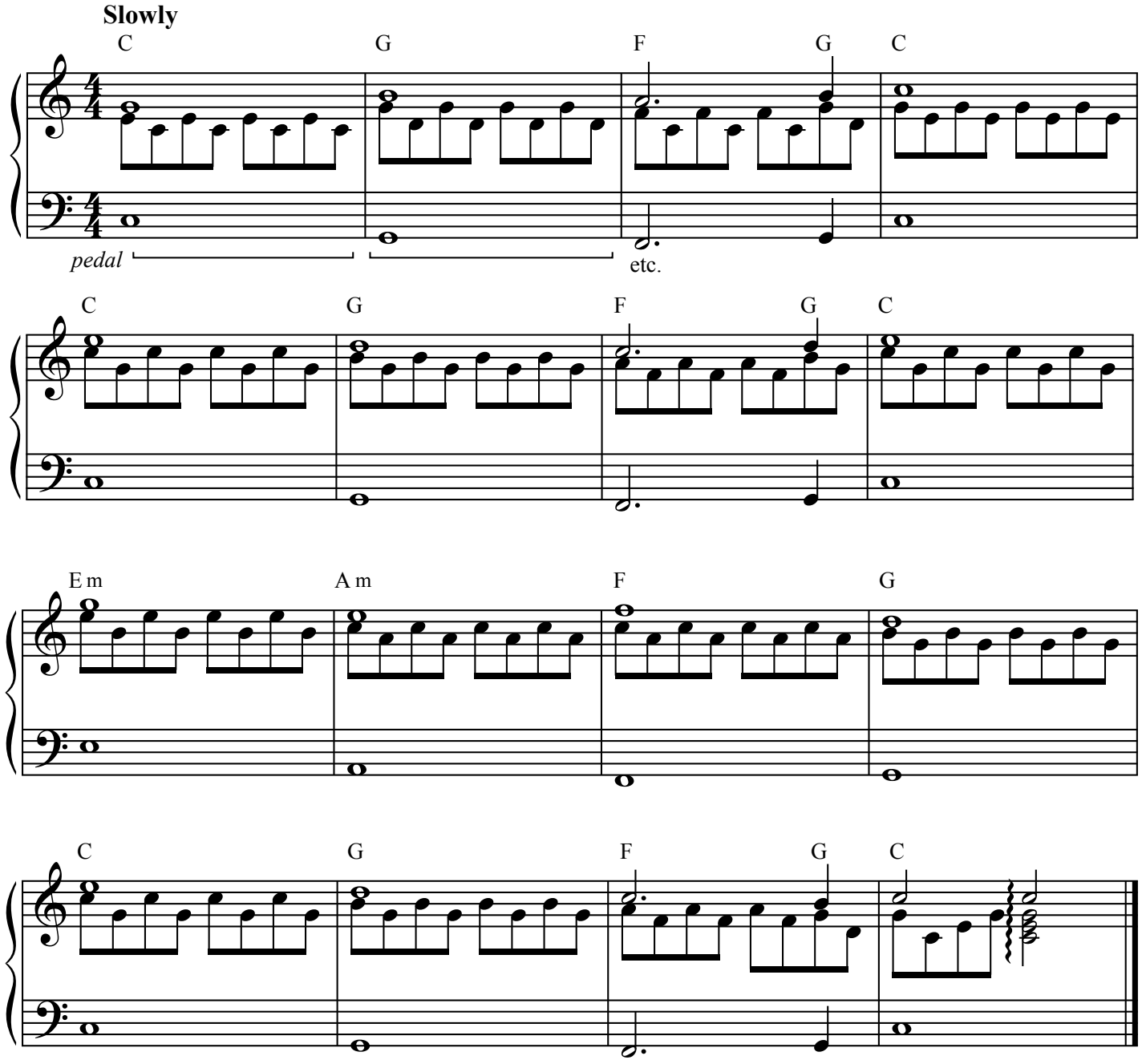
Lesson 5:

Let's try an 8th note pattern that give a little more sense of motion to our accompaniment. Notice, too, how higher inversions are used on the 2nd line to give variety to the sound.



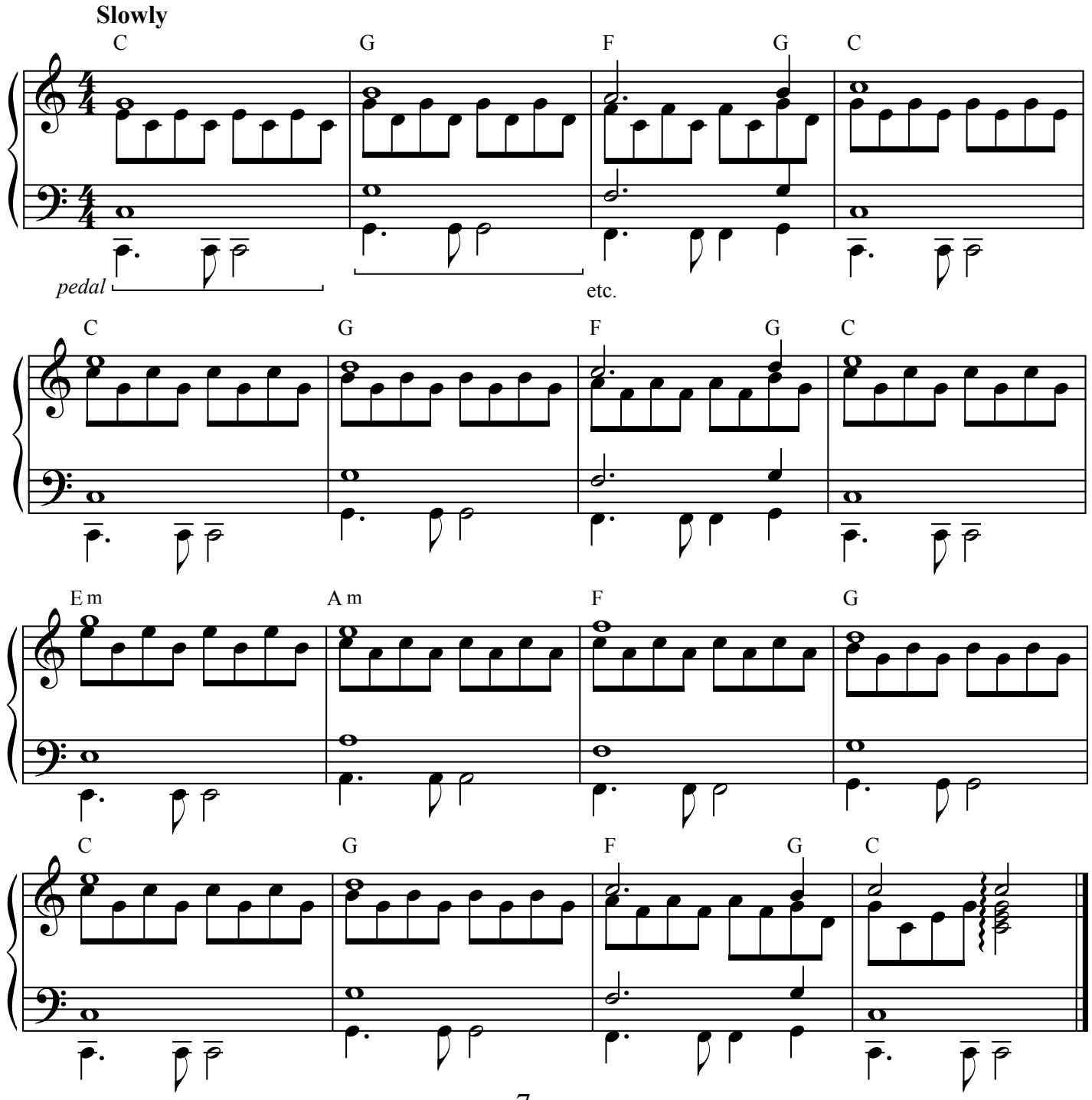
Lesson 6:

The top note of each right hand chord can be heard as part of it's own melody, independent from the melody of the song. To play this example, use the 4th and 5th fingers of your right hand to hold the sustained notes, while fingers 1, 2, and 3 play a steady 8th note pattern.



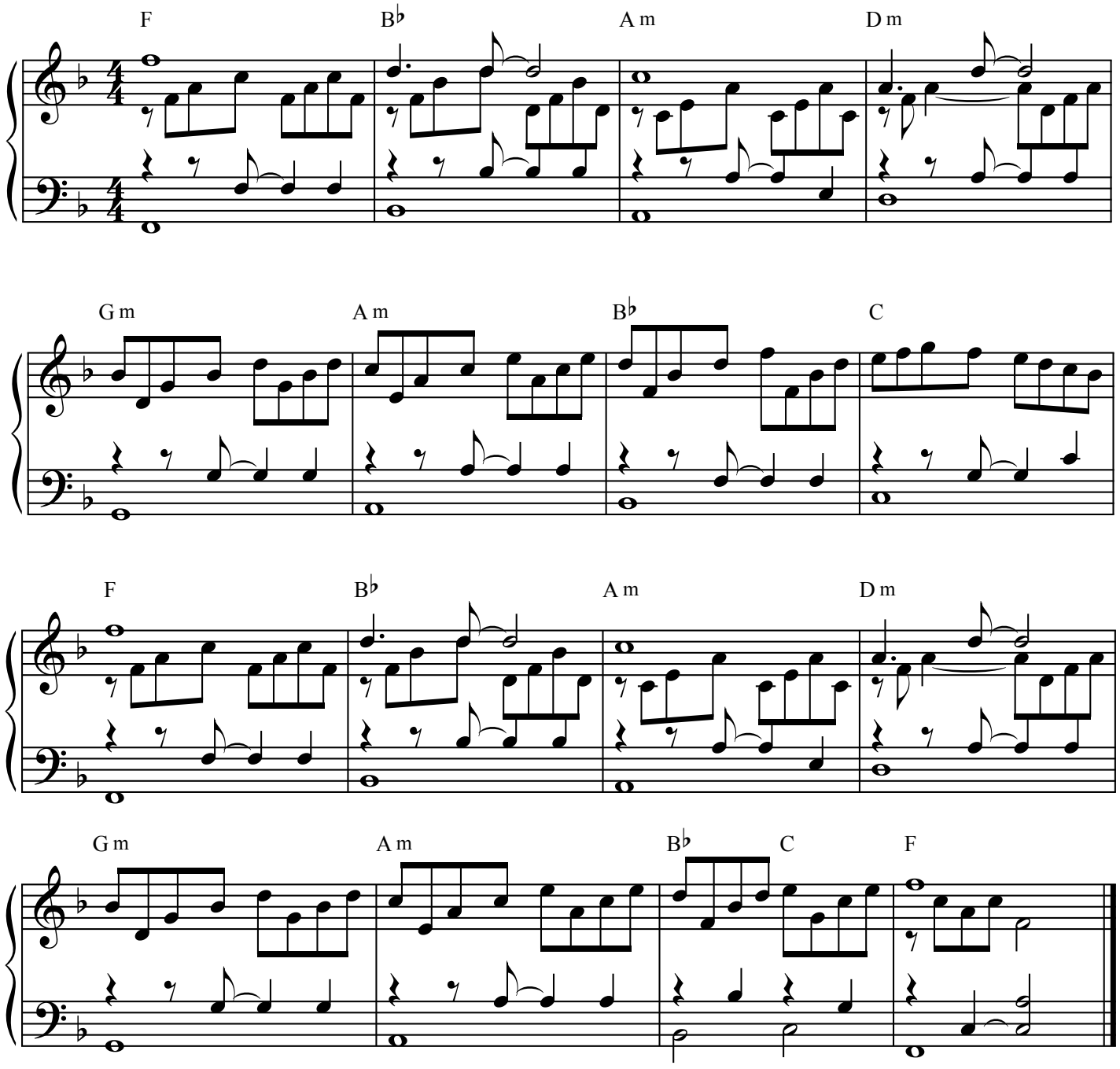
Lesson 7:

Let's add a more intricate left hand approach that contains sustained and rhythmic elements simulaneously.



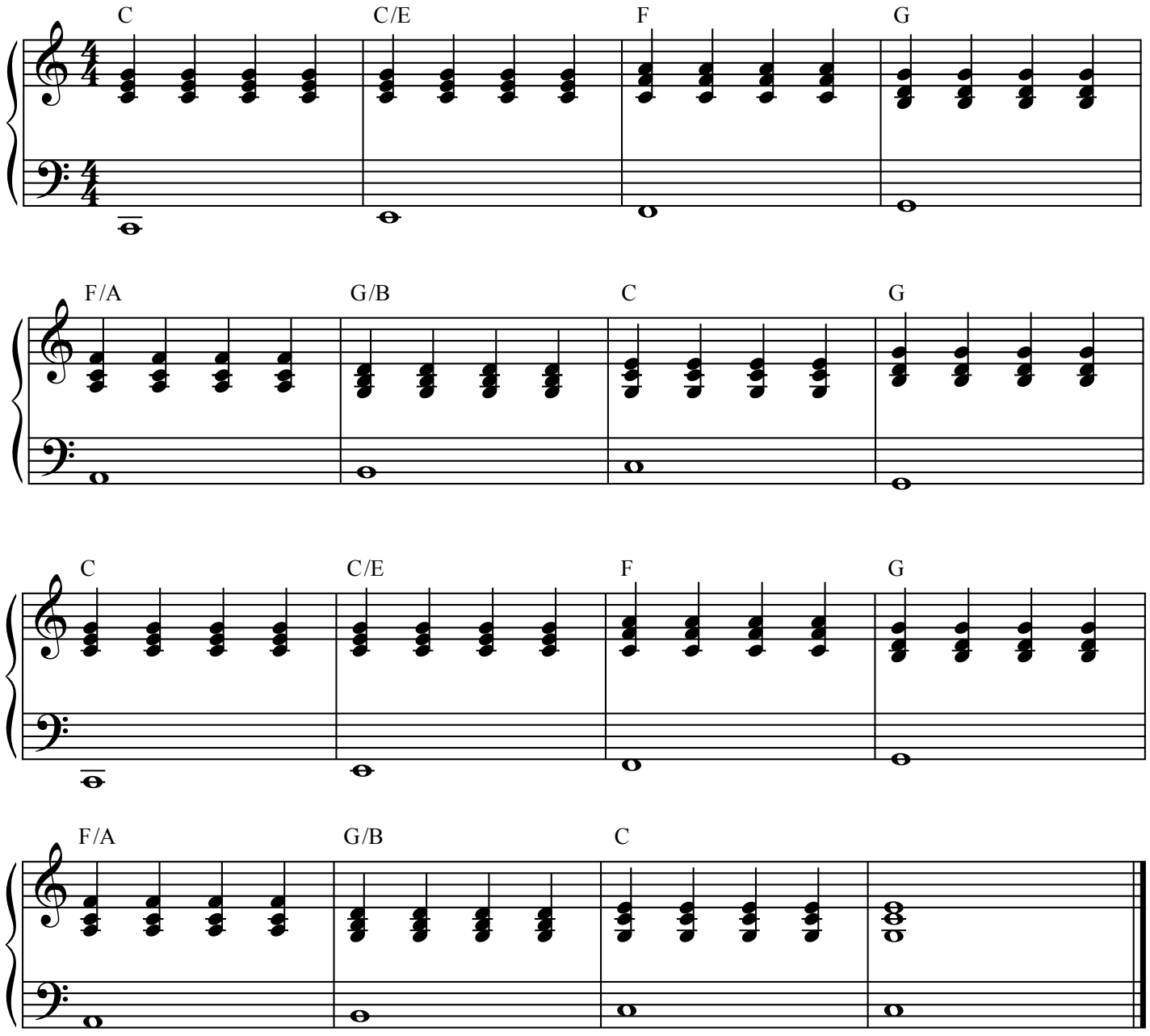
Lesson 8:

Some pop ballads call for an arpeggiated approach that mimics the sound of an acoustic guitar. For a little variety, we'll move into the key of 'F' major.



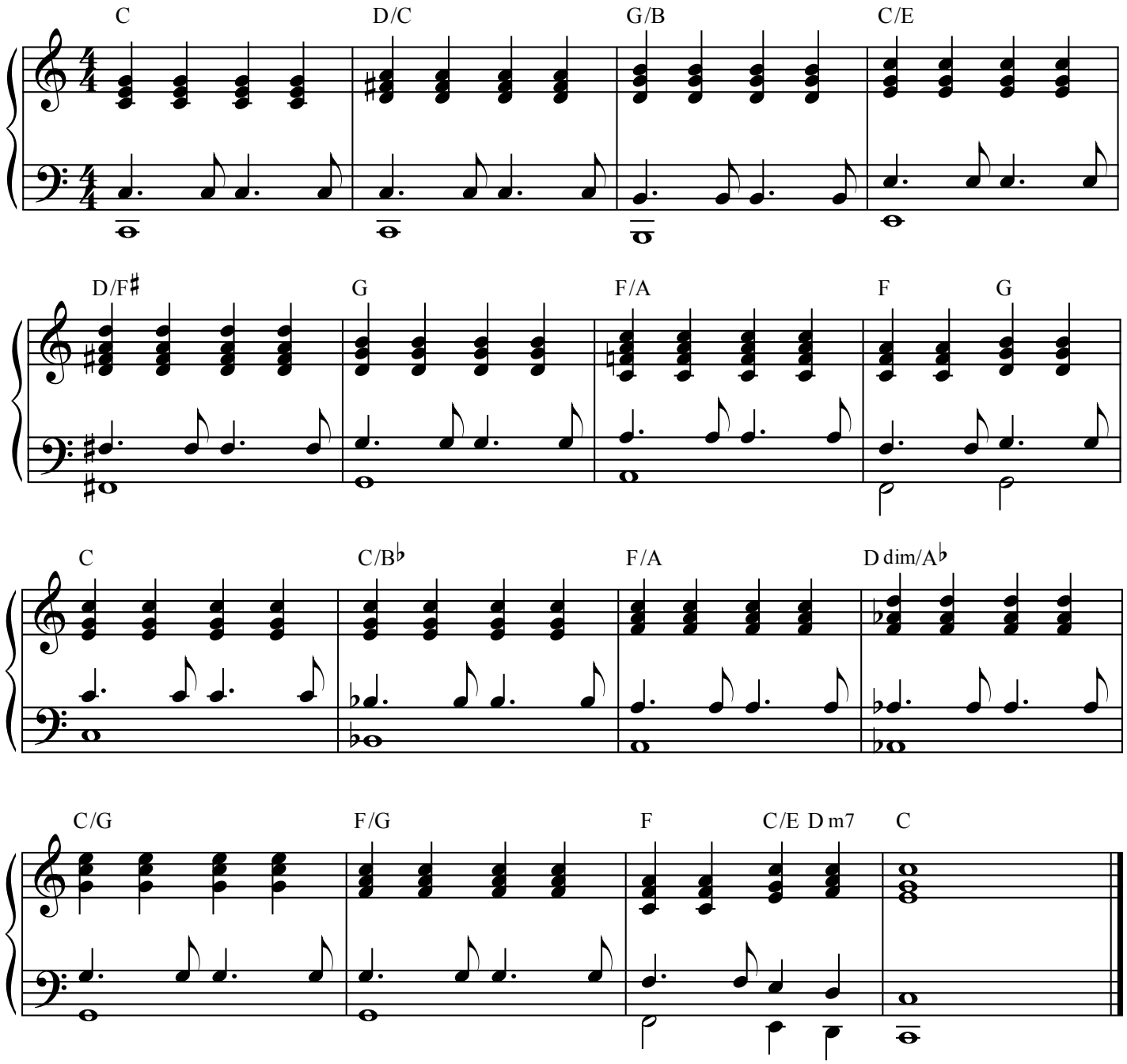
Lesson 9:

Sometimes a note other than the chord's root is in the bass part. The alternate bass note is often another chord tone, such as the 3rd or 5th. The chord is then written as a fraction, with the chord above the bass note. For example, C/E means that you play a 'C' chord with 'E' in the bass.



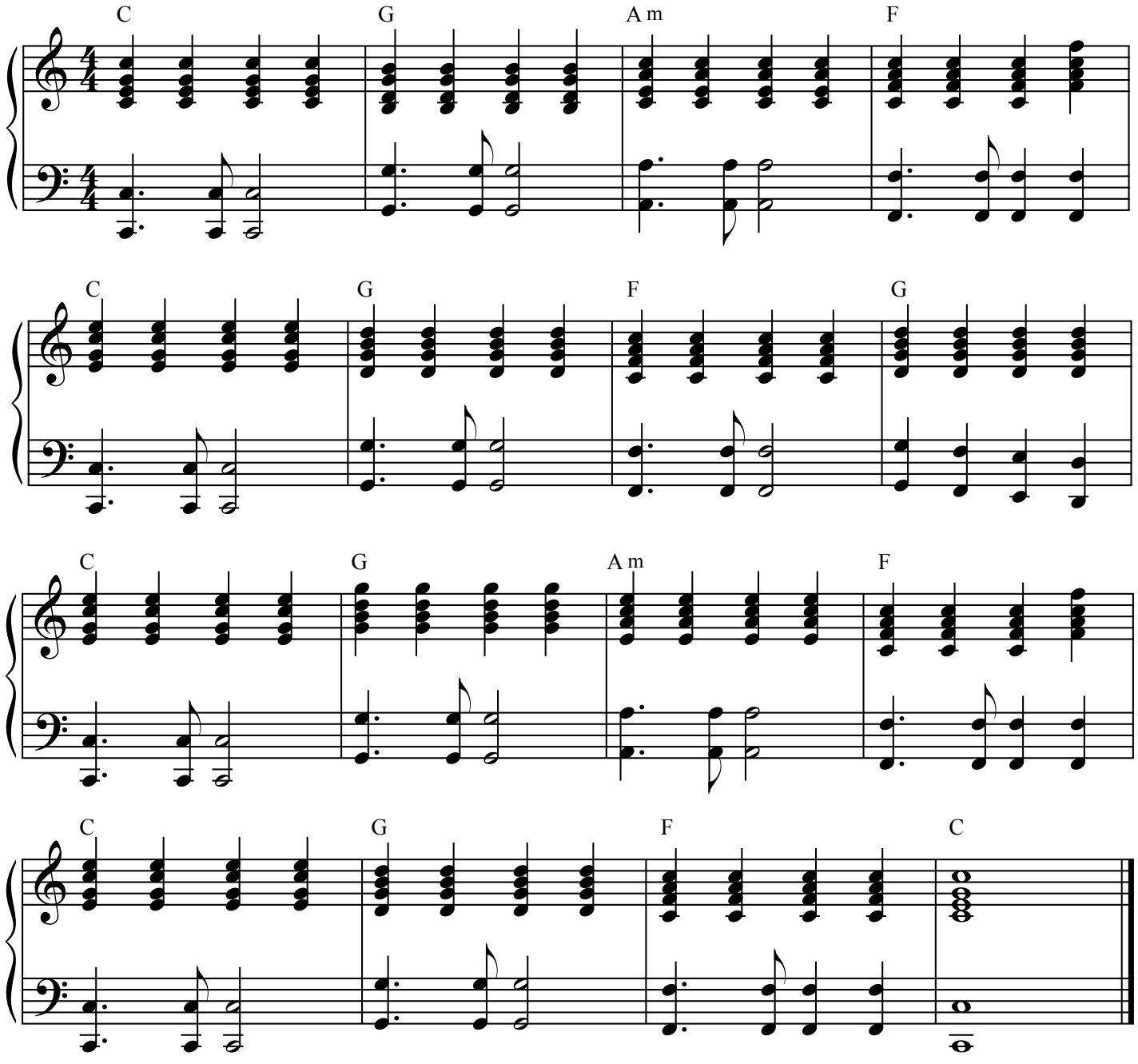
Lesson 10:

You might even see a bass note that is not part of the chord it's paired with. In that case, simply play the bass note with your left hand and the chord with your right.



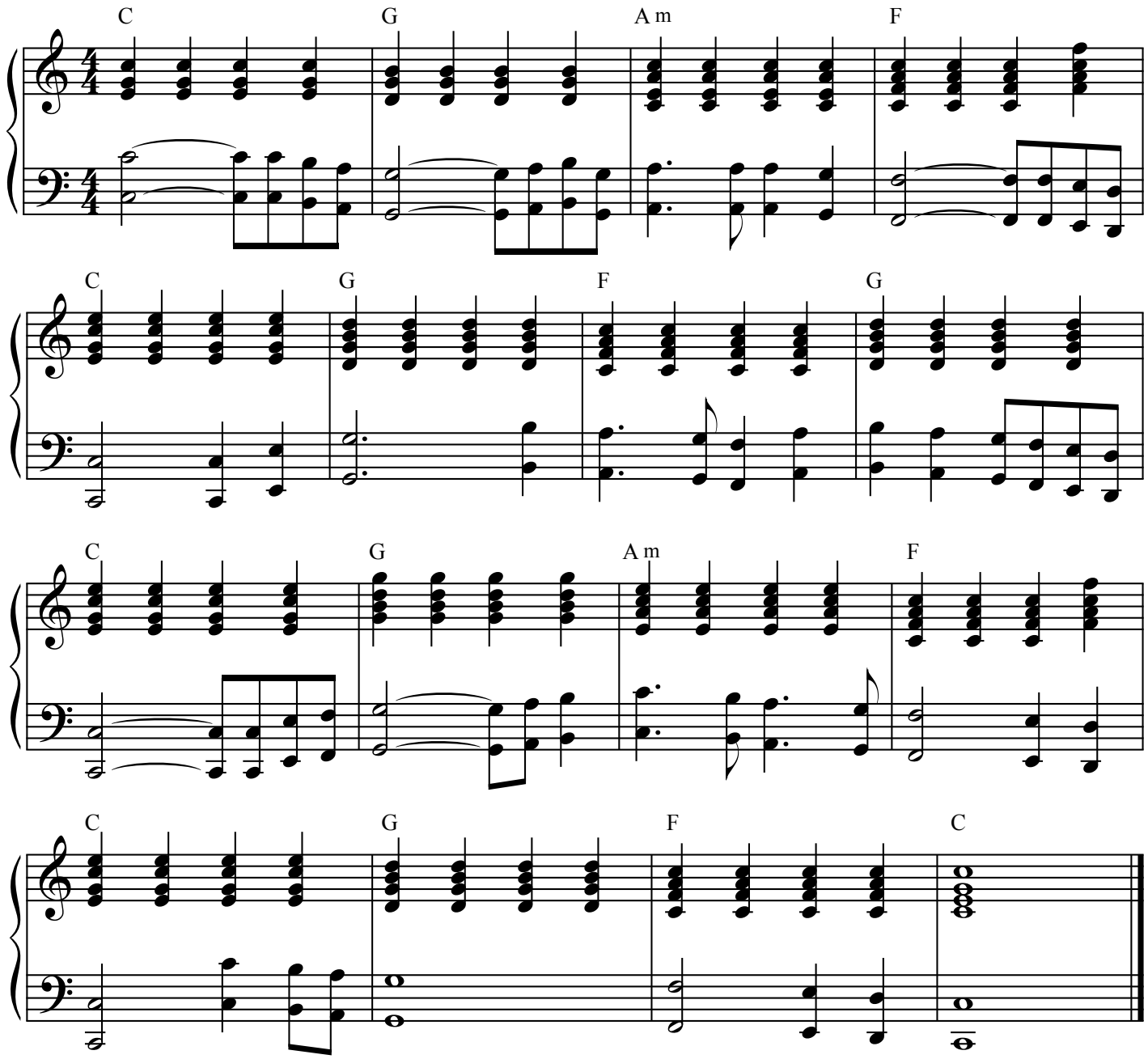
Lesson 11:

The right hand can play bigger chord voicings for a fuller sound. Also, a bass line in octaves gives more power.



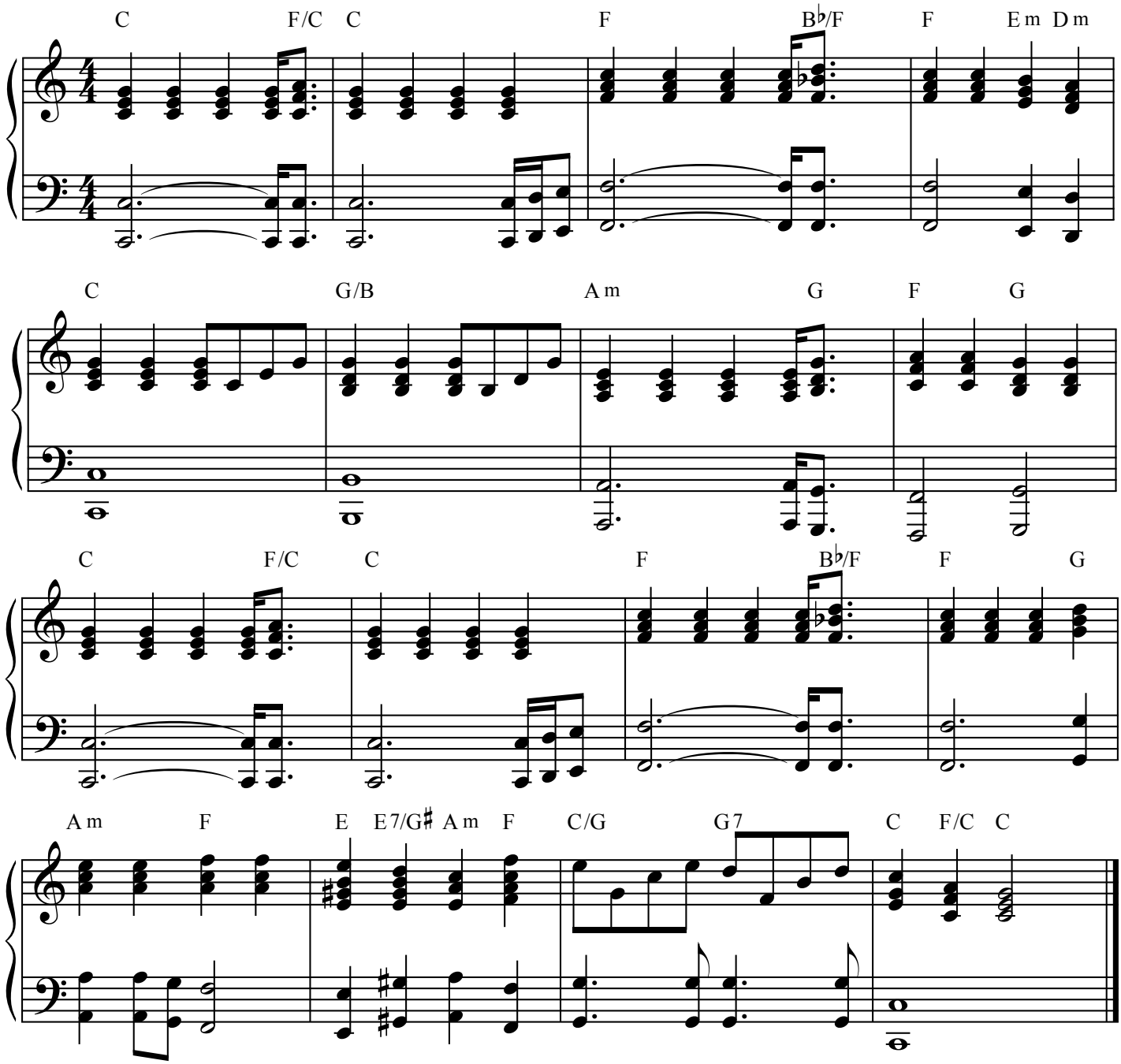
Lesson 12:

This example adds melodic passing notes in the left hand to the music from Lesson 11.



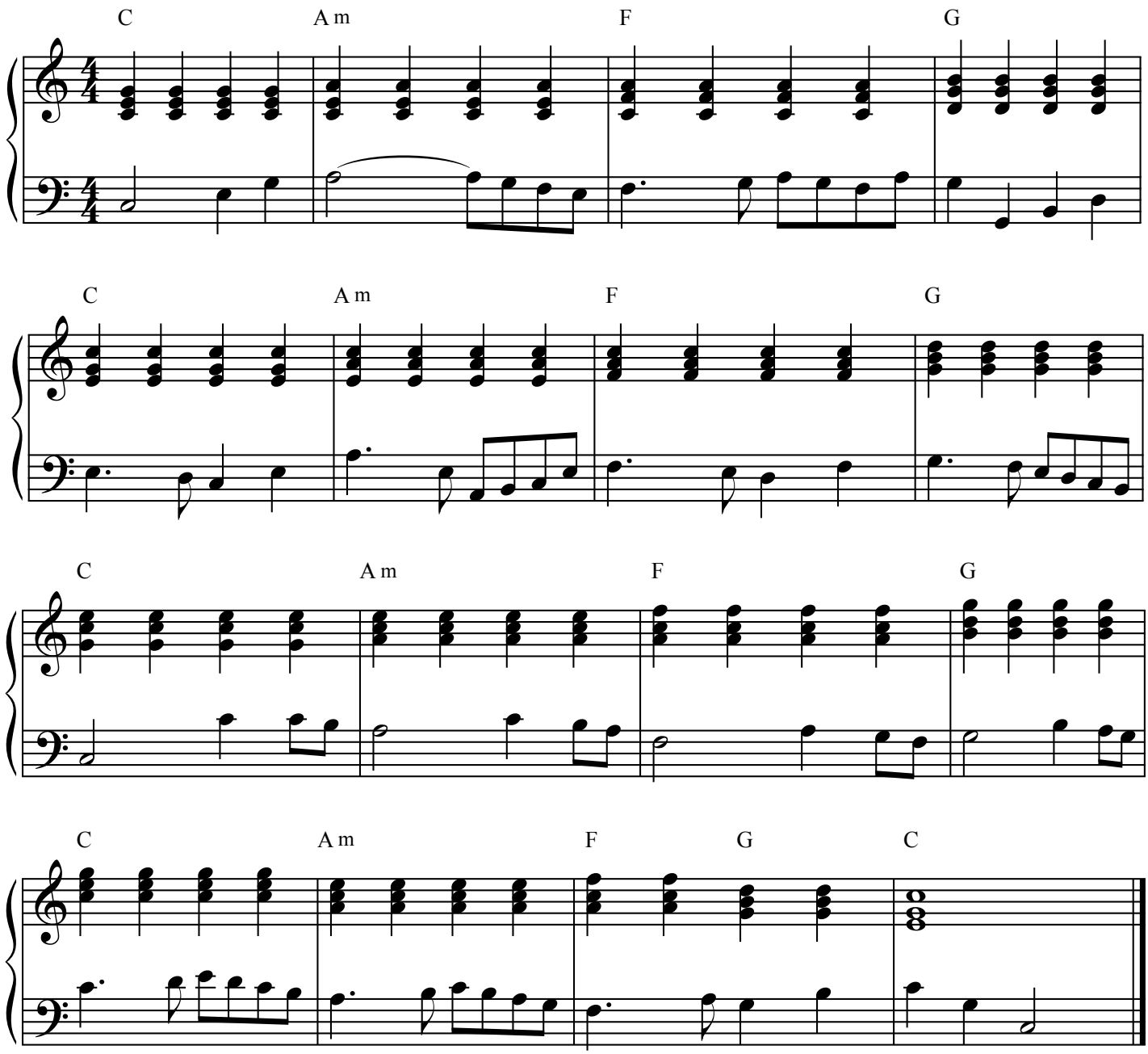
Lesson 13:

Pianists such as Elton John use techniques from gospel music, such as playing a 'neighbor' chord that's a 4th higher than the preceding chord, while keeping the bass note the same, as a 'pedal tone'.



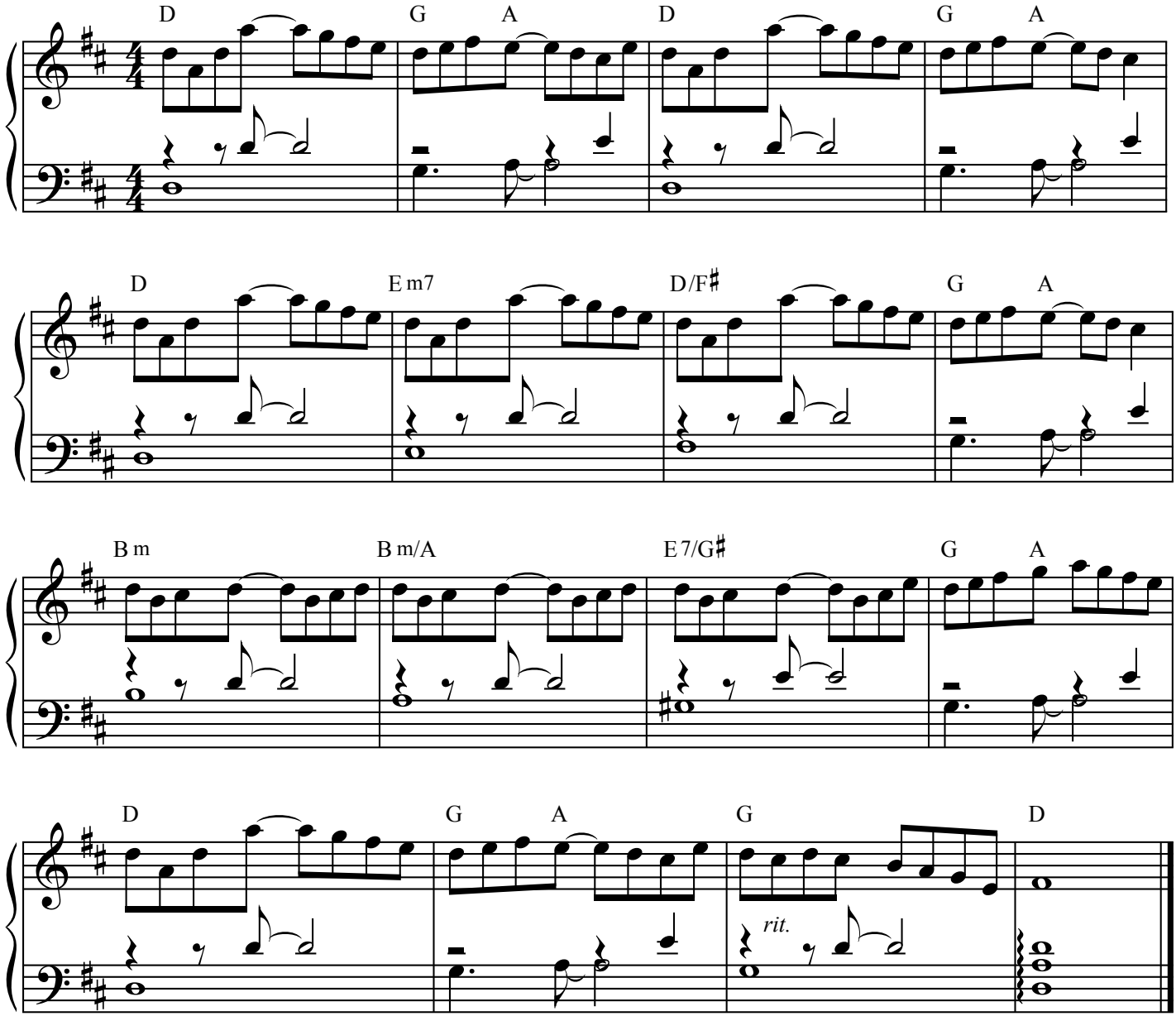
Lesson 14:

The left hand bass line can become very melodic at times, as in this example.



Lesson 15:

Many pop ballads have a dotted rhythm that emphasises the 'and' of beat 2. "Your Song" by Elton John uses this technique. Here's a simple example that combines a guitar-like pattern with this rhythmic feel.



We have covered many of the basic elements of pop ballad accompaniment. To learn more about these styles, listen to as many recordings as you can, and analyze which techniques are used, and in what context. Then you can freely mix and match these patterns to create fun and interesting accompaniments to your favorite songs. Enjoy!

About Ron Drotos

Ron Drotos has worked as a pianist, arranger, composer, and teacher in New York City since 1989. His career has brought him to Carnegie Hall, both as pianist and arranger for the NY Pops, and to the Broadway stage, where he has both conducted and played for shows such as Smokey Joe's Cafe, Swinging On A Star (Tony nomination for Best Musical), and Fosse. Ron has played piano with jazz greats Chris Brubeck and Giacomo Gates, and composes choral music that is heard in universities across the United States. Ron has orchestrated over 19 shows for the legendary Princeton Triangle Club, and particularly enjoys his time spent teaching and performing at the Fairbanks (Alaska) Summer Arts Festival. As a teacher of piano improvisation, he loves that magic moment when everything 'clicks' for the student, and the music begins flow!