

Maurice Ravel

Boléro



This month **Bridget Mermikides** transcribes a piece featured in the film 10 with Bo Derek and Dudley Moore, and also used by ice skating champions Torvill and Dean.

ABILITY RATING

● ● ● ● ● Moderate/Advanced

INFO	WILL IMPROVE YOUR
KEY: C	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bass-line palm-muting
TEMPO: 58 bpm	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Scale knowledge
CD: Tracks 56-57	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Playing in altered tunings


THIS MONTH we're looking at an arrangement of the ever-popular Boléro by the French composer Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). Ravel was France's most financially successful composer, and was a master of orchestration, texture and melody. Like his contemporary Debussy, he adopted the existing classical and romantic music forms, and reinvigorated them with imaginative and evocative ideas. Inspired by the minimalism of Satie, the atonality of Schoenberg, Debussy's impressionism, gypsy, jazz and folk styles, Chopin's romanticism and modal harmony, Ravel crafted exquisite and meticulously constructed pieces that are admired and enjoyed to this day.

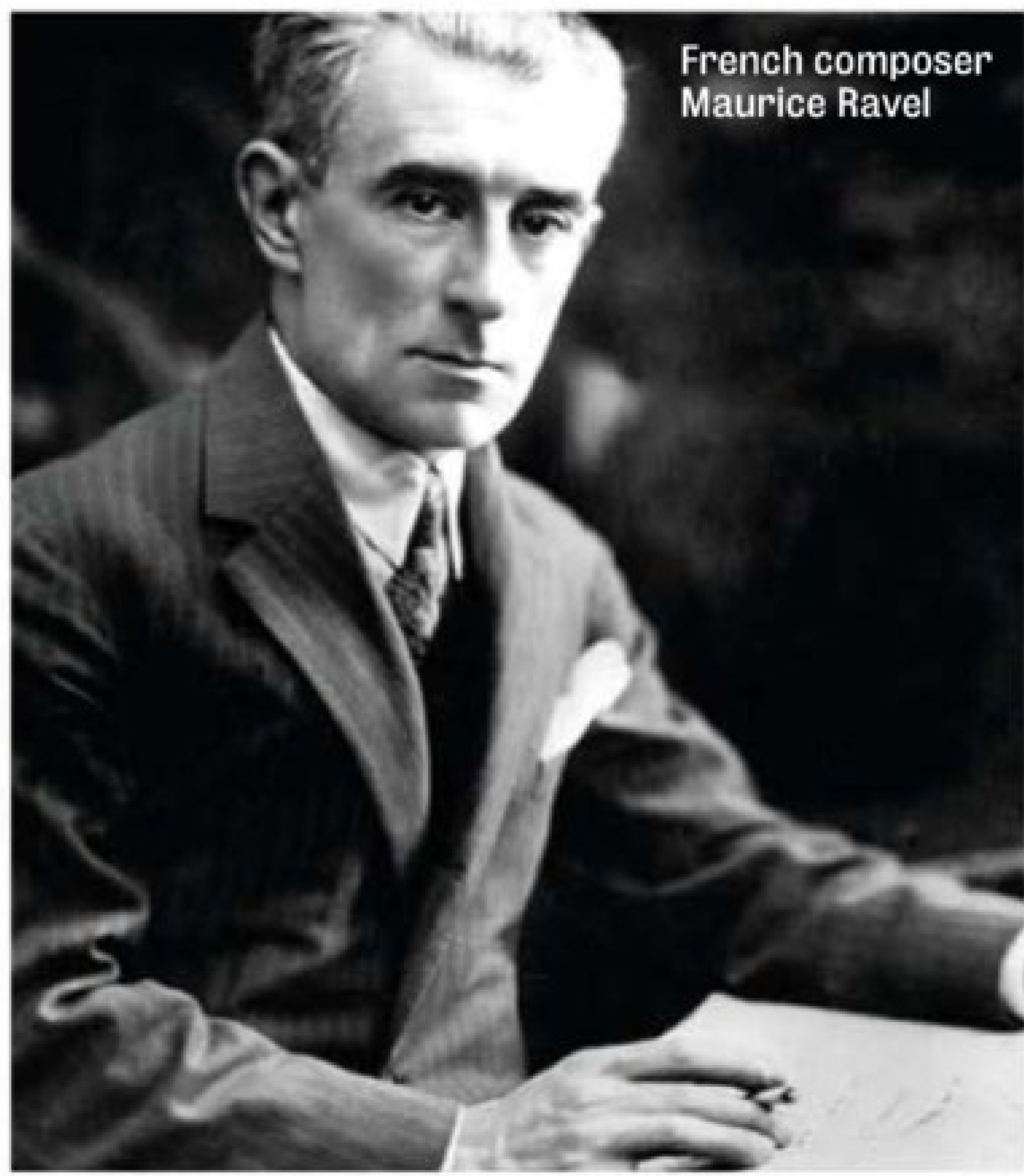
Unlike some composers who were happy to produce a lot of music quickly with little revision, Ravel spent years perfecting his pieces like – as Stravinsky put it – ‘the most perfect of Swiss watchmakers’. Ravel's dedication to his work (‘the only love affair I ever had was with music’) produced dozens of sublime compositions and orchestrations that escape easy categorisation but have had a

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lasting influence on the development of classical music. Furthermore, his music is also greatly admired by, and a source of inspiration for, musicians from the jazz and popular music styles including Frank Zappa, who name-checked Ravel on his debut album, and rearranged Boléro for his own band. You may also recognise it from Torvill and Dean's medal winning ice-skating performance at the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo - where they scored an unprecedented top mark of 6 by all the judges. It was also famously used in the film 10, featuring Dudley Moore and Bo Derek.

Boléro is Ravel's most famous work, and although it includes some astonishingly progressive musical devices, remains popular to this day. The piece is remarkably unusual: a long, floating and increasingly elaborately orchestrated melody is underpinned by a continuous 3/4 snare drum and bass boléro dance rhythm, almost entirely over a C pedal note. This approach was so unusual for the time that some thought it a sign of Ravel's impending dementia, and even the composer himself described it as ‘a piece for orchestra without music’. And yet it works amazingly well, the constant bass-line and steady rhythm providing a hypnotic foundation for a melody that explores exotic scales and magical orchestral textures. As Ravel intended, it is important that the rhythm remains steady and not rushed or pulled around. So bear this in mind when learning and performing this amazing piece.

I've arranged the abbreviated version of the full version of Boléro, and used a Cmajor7 tuning (CGCGBE) so that the bass line and melody become practical to play. 



French composer Maurice Ravel

TECHNIQUE FOCUS

FRETTING HAND STRENGTH

Adopting an efficient and strong fretting hand is essential when learning classical guitar. Unlike popular guitar styles where the thumb often wraps itself around the guitar neck in a grip position, the thumb for a classical guitar technique should remain permanently behind the neck of the instrument, straight with the tip pointing upwards the wrist pushed slightly forwards, enabling the fingers to be separated, positioned on their tips, and able to span across four frets much of the time. The neck of a classical guitar is wider than that of an electric or steel string and because we play music polyphonically – two or more voices at the same time - the fingers need to be poised and ready in this way. Developing stamina can be tiring and if aches and pains occur, stop and rest. A moderate amount of regular practice will benefit best!

POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES



TRACK RECORD The LSO's Boléro on Virgin's 101 Classical Hits is excellent. If you'd like to delve deeper, try Abbado with the London Symphony Orchestra on Ravel: Complete Orchestra Works (2002, Deutsche Grammophon). You might also enjoy Ravel's piano works including Piano Concerto for Left Hand in D (written for pianist Paul Wittgenstein after he lost his right arm in WWI).

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 57

[Bars 1-20] The melody is composed in 18-bar phrases (8+8+2) and from bars 3 to 20 we are in the key of C major. The opening two bars set the tempo and need to be played with the flesh of the picking hand thumb, and palm muted so the notes do not ring on but instead emulate the double bass pizzicatos. What makes it even more tricky is that the bass notes must remain muted but the melody

needs to be sustained. This means palm muting the bass strings only, leaving the melody to sound potentially brittle because we are forced to pluck the strings close to the bridge. The overall effect is worth it though! At bar 19 the triplet figure first appears and there is some indicated plucking hand fingering to help organise the fingers efficiently.

♩ = 58 approx

C (C major)

Implied harmony/modes are notated throughout

pp
Palm mute bass line but not melody

C Cadd9 Csus2 C C7 (C mixolydian)

p

C C7b9 (C phrygian dominant)

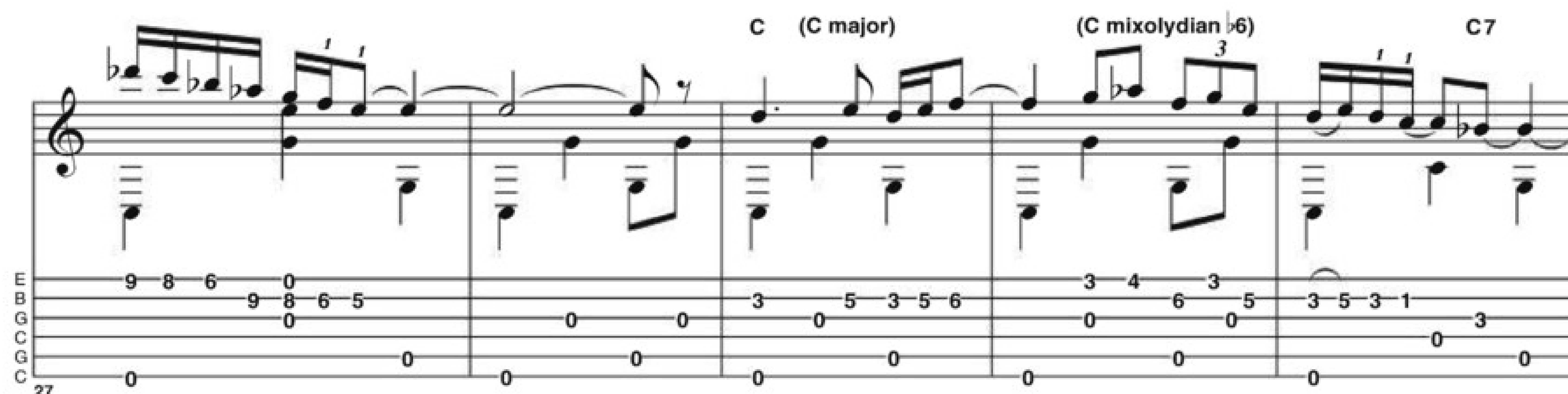
PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 57

[Bars 21-36] The score uses scales over a pedal tone rather than a chord progression, and the scales are indicated in the score (with implied chords when appropriate). Bars 21 to 24 use the C Mixolydian (C D E F G A Bb), bars 24 to 28 are C Phrygian dominant (C Db E F G Ab Bb), bars 30 to 34 use C Mixolydian b6 (or Hindustan or Aeolian dominant - C D E F G Ab Bb) and bars 34 to 36 use C

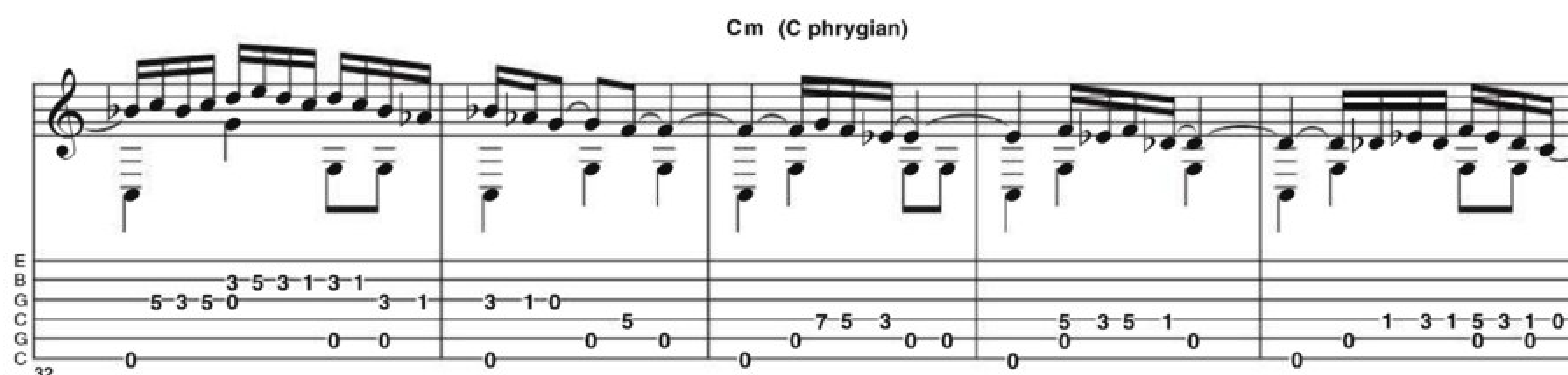
Phrygian (C Db Eb F G Ab Bb). Exotic scales over the relentless pedal bass give the piece its hypnotic character. At bar 25 there is a fretting hand stretch back to the E on the second string and the fourth finger should not lose contact with the Db on the melody. The plucking hand may feel 'crowded' when trying to maintain the muted bass plus sustained melody, but it is possible so do persevere!

C (C major) **(C mixolydian b6)** **C7**



27

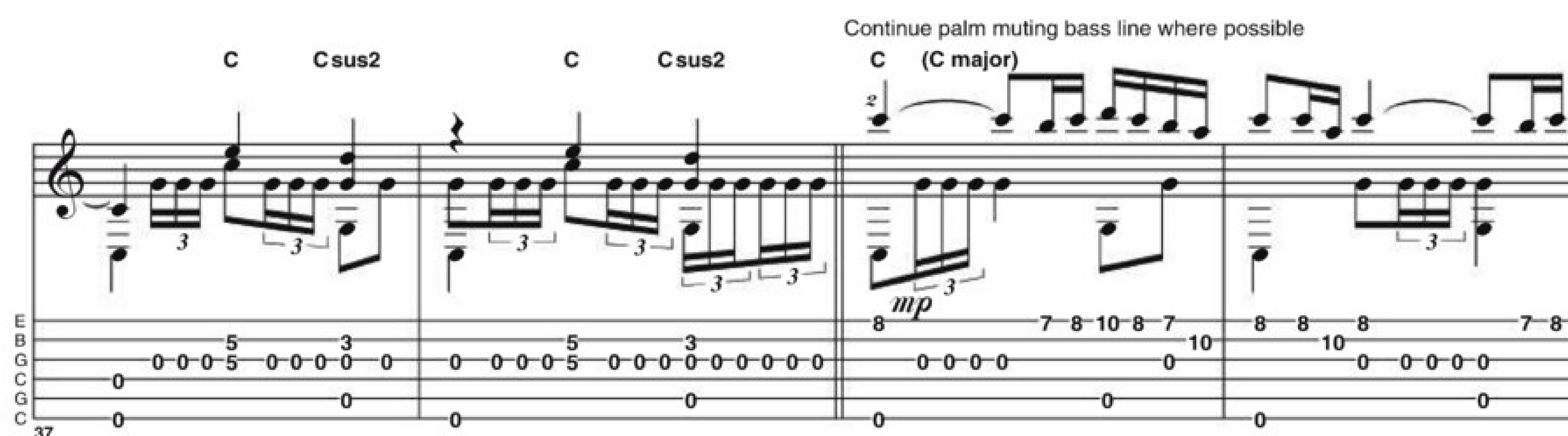
Cm (C phrygian)



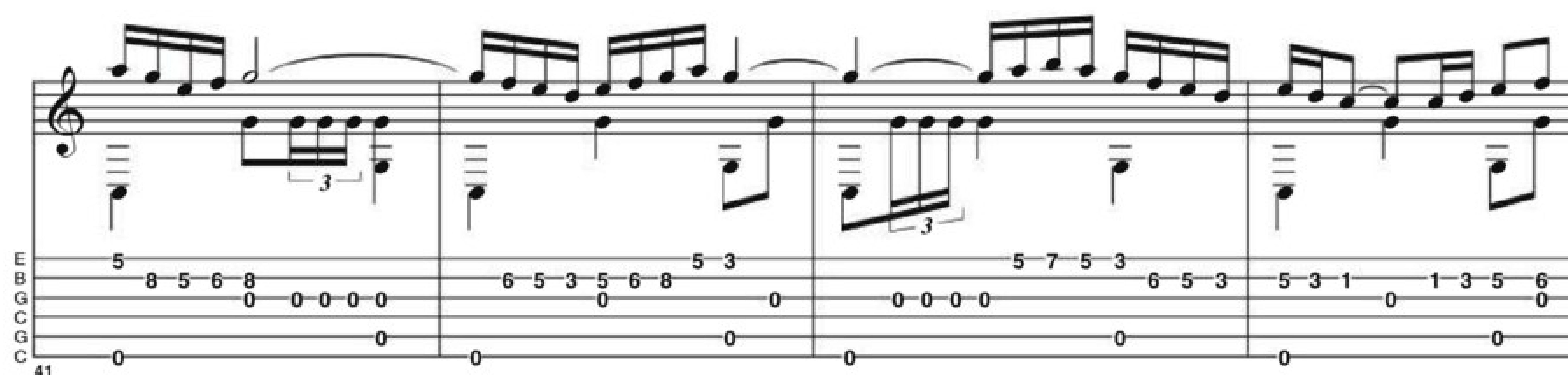
32

C Csus2 C Csus2 **C (C major)**

Continue palm muting bass line where possible

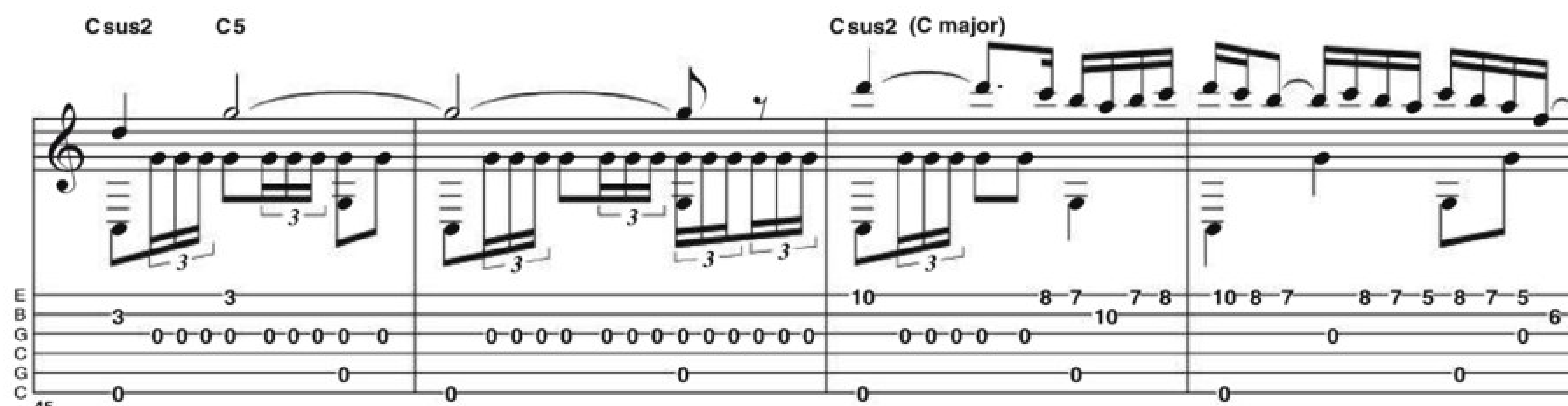


37



41

Csus2 C5 Csus2 (C major)



45

CD TRACK 57

possible to mute the low C at least. At bar 57 the piece begins to grow in orchestration and volume. I played this with more sustain and you'll notice I am no longer palm muting the bass line.

03

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 57

[Bars 73-98] The chords at the beginning of bars 73 and 74 are strummed downwards using the backs of the fingernails in a technique known as 'rasgueado'. There is an increasing build up in volume and orchestration throughout the composition and the section starting at bar 75 really starts to dig in. You'll need as much tone and volume as possible going into bar 79 and

beyond. The tension continues to build until finally we kick in to the surprising key change to E Mixolydian b6 at bar 91. Bars 95-96 use E Phrygian and then we're back to E Mixolydian b6 at bars 97-98. This is a tricky section to play well, and even harder to play loud, which is the aim, so practise it slowly at first to get the technique in place.

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 57

[Bar 99 to end] The final section beginning at bar 99 sounds huge in the orchestral score and we have to do our best to emulate it on a single guitar! So again we use a vigorous downwards rasgueado technique for the dissonant

chords – again using the backs of the fingernails. The final chords are also strummed, but this time down and up with the fingernails ending on an up stroke with the top string muted by the fretting hand.

E5 (E mixolydian ♭6)

E7

(E phrygian)

(E mixolydian ♭6)

Cmaj♭6 **Csus♯4add9/G** **C** **Cmaj♭6** **Csus♯4add9/G**

Cmaj♭6 **Csus♯4add9/G** **C** **Cmaj♭6** **Csus♯4add9/G**

C5 **D♭maj7** **(D♭ Lydian)** **C5**

rasg

1 a m p