The Flaying of Marsyas was commissioned by the English Chamber Orchestra.
It was first performed by The Spohr String Quartet with
Neil Black at the Purcell Room, London on 6 May 1987.
The work is also recorded by Nicholas Daniel and
the Brindisi String Quartet on Metronome MET CD 1005-01

Duration: 18 minutes

The Flaying of Marsyas for Oboe and String Quartet Op 42

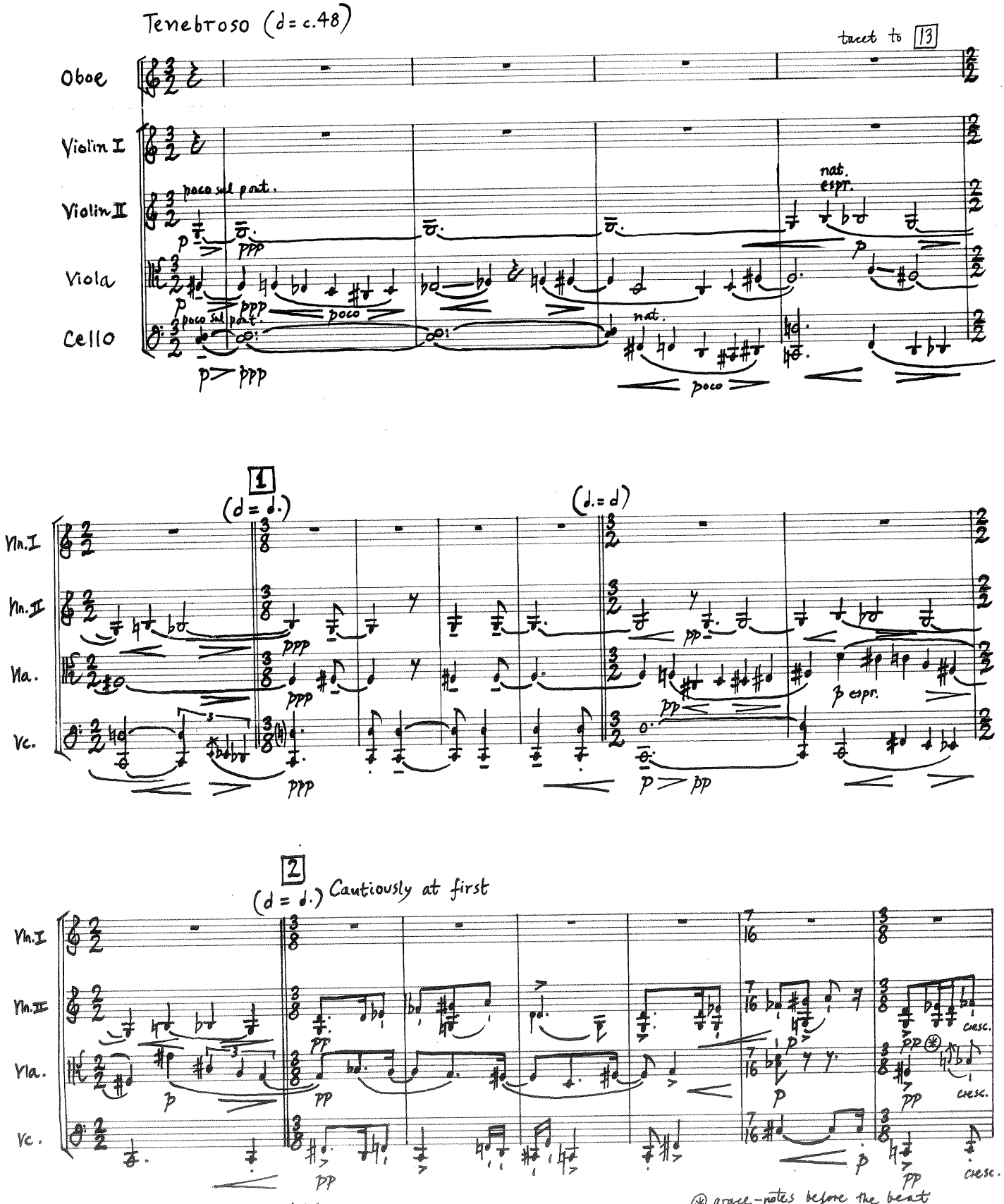
In October 1986, when I was in Czechoslovakia, I visited the town of Kroměřiž to see again Titian's great painting The Flaying of Marsyas, which had been the star of the Royal Academy's Venice exhibition in 1983. It is a horrifying painting, but also full of compassion. In particular, the figure of Apollo playing the *lira da braccio* has a miraculously calming effect on the torture being enacted in his presence. Looking at the painting, I imagined I could hear the music Apollo was playing, and I realised it offered me a fortuitous starting point for the piece for oboe and string quartet I was about to write. For Marsyas, who challenged Apollo to a musical contest and whose punishment for being defeated was to be flayed, played the *aulos*, which is usually translated as flute but was in fact a reed instrument, a kind of oboe. If the oboe could represent Marsyas and the 1st violin Apollo, I had both a formal idea for my piece, which could have as its centre a competition between oboe and violin, and a solution to the chief problem about oboe quintets which is one of balance (there are too many treble instruments). So the piece became a little concerto for oboe, violin and string trio, and I followed the story of the contest quite closely in the music.

The piece begins with a prelude for string trio, deliberately primitive music suggesting the state of the world before Apollo brought enlightenment. Apollo's music, when he enters, is therefore in complete contrast. The oboe then makes its entry with a solo cadenza: Marsyas learns to play the *aulos* and, at first, each note is a discovery. When he has mastered the instrument, the others join him in a dance of triumph. Marsyas, now full of pride, challenges Apollo. In the ensuing contest oboe and violin play alternately, each trying to outdo the other. The contest is indecisive until Marsyas attempts a double harmonic, which does not work as well on the oboe as on the violin. Apollo leaps in and is immediately proclaimed victor. A short section depicting the flaying follows. Marsyas dies, and the music returns to the darkness of the beginning of the piece. But oboe and violin join together in a postlude which offers reconciliation, and the end of the piece suggests one ending of the myth: Marsyas' blood became a river, on the banks of which grew reeds, from which men made oboes; so his music continues.

THE FLAYING OF MARSYAS

concertino for oboe and string quartet

David Matthews, op. 42



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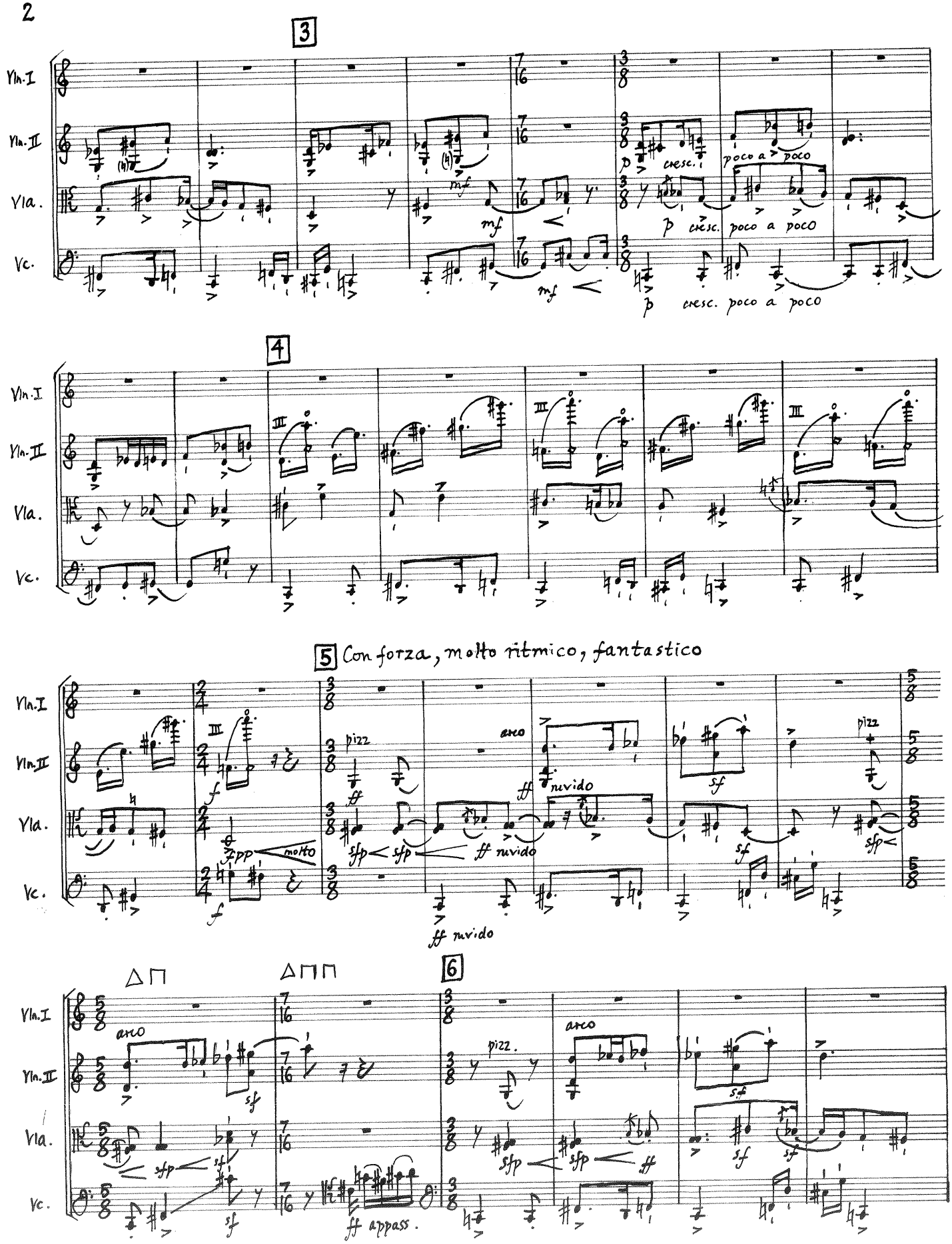
⊛ grace-notes before the beat


3
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vla.
Vc.
mf
p
cresc.
poco a poco
4
III
5 Con forza, molto ritmico, fantastico
pizz
arco
ff
sfp
ff ruvido
sf
fpp
molto
6
ff appass.