Arcomusical: Honoring the Berimbau

By Gregory Beyer

Arcomusical (Portuguese for "musical bow") is a non-profit organization with a mission to spread the joy of the Afro-Brazilian berimbau and related African and Afrodiasporic musical bows. Arcomusical's multiple programs in composition, performance, research, publication, education, and community function in consort to realize this vision. Through the development and presentation of a pioneering musical bow repertoire that includes solo, chamber, and concerto settings, Arcomusical's two flagship ensembles, Arcomusical Brasil (Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil) and Projeto Arcomusical (DeKalb, Illinois) afford audiences a unique experience.

Whereas U.S. audiences frequently experience the musical bow for the first time, in Brazil and in Africa audiences find themselves in disbelief at the music coming from a well-known instrument carrying a strong association with either the Afro-Brazilian body game of capoeira or a myriad of southern African bow traditions. In performance, melody and counterpoint ricochet in hockets that spiral across the ensemble. As every member of Arcomusical contributes to the whole in critical ways, the ideal of *community belonging* is inherent in every performance. Remove just one voice from the whole and the music becomes impossible to convey.

Projeto Arcomusical
Friday, Nov. 15, 5:00 P.M.
World Showcase Concert
Projeto Arcomusical (from L to R: Daniel Eastwood, Raychel Taylor, Kyle Flens, Alexis Lamb, Ethan Martin, Gregory Beyer) July 2018, Cherry Valley, IL.
Photo Credit: Four/Ten Media

Furthermore, both Arcomusical ensembles invite audiences to hold and play the instruments after concerts and to engage with questions and in conversation. The group's instruments are meant to be in community. There is nothing "precious" about them.

At PASIC 2019, the American group Projeto Arcomusical will offer a world music showcase, performing music from its second album release, *Spinning in the Wheel*. [Note: This CD is reviewed in the "New Percussion Literature and Recordings" section of this issue.] The theme of the album is a celebration of the berimbau's deep connection to capoeira. In particular, selections by myself and Elliot Cole pay tribute to the berimbau's association with capoeira Angola, considered the most traditional form of capoeira.

The name of the album is an English translation of one line from a *ladainha* ("litany") composed and recorded by the widely respected master *Angoleiro*, Me-

stre Moraes: "…quero ver rodar na roda / na roda viver o rodar / na roda vou dar uma volta / vou ver o mundo girar…" ("…I want to see the spinning in the wheel / in the wheel [long] live the spinning / in the wheel I'll take a spin / I'll see the world turn…").

In capoeira, the *roda* bears both practical and symbolic significance. The game is played in a circular physical space defined by the battery of eight percussionists at one end completed by a ring formed by the bodies of the participants, stretched from one end of the battery to the other. Sitting cross-legged in the roda, participants sing, observe, and eventually take a spin in the wheel themselves. Whether young or old, female or male, everyone in capoeira is invited to participate. Capoeiristas are expected to be able singers, musicians, and players, and the lessons learned in the circle of capoeira (e.g., attention to community, respect for one's elders, alertness, improvisation, strategy, self-confidence, self-defense) are lessons that easily transfer to the "circle of life."

The anchor of *Spinning in the Wheel* is Elliot Cole's "Roda," a 20-minute, four-movement tour-de-force. The rapid-fire percussive twists and turns of the first movement contrast mightily with the gorgeous lullabye-esque second movement. The third movement's punk-rock density gives way to singing in the fourth movement that deliberately quotes one of capoeira's most famous *corridos* (a call-and-response song form), "Paranauê," whose lyrics reference the river Paranâ that separates Paraguay from the Brazilian states of Paraná and Mato Grosso do Sul.

The Paranâ, whose waters extend from the Rio del Plata basin, was critical for mid-nineteenth century trade. This site became the geographical focal point of the devastating Paraguayan War (1864–1870) in which the Brazilian Empire was the leading force of the Triple Alliance with Uruguay and Argentina against Paraguay. Desperate for soldiers, the Brazilian army conscripted thousands of Brazilian slaves who fought and died in the bloodiest battles in Brazilian history. The impact of this war on the surviving Afro-Brazilian soldiers was scarring and permanent.[1]

Arcomusical Brasil (from L to R: Natália Mitre, Breno Bragança, Mateus Oliveira, Zé Henrique Soares, Daniela Oliveira, Rafael Matos) February 2018, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil.
Photo Credit: Thiago Mourão.

Mestre Gato Preto, Mestre Traíra, and Naná Vasconcelos. Mestre Traíra Capoeira da Bahia album cover, Itamar Crispim

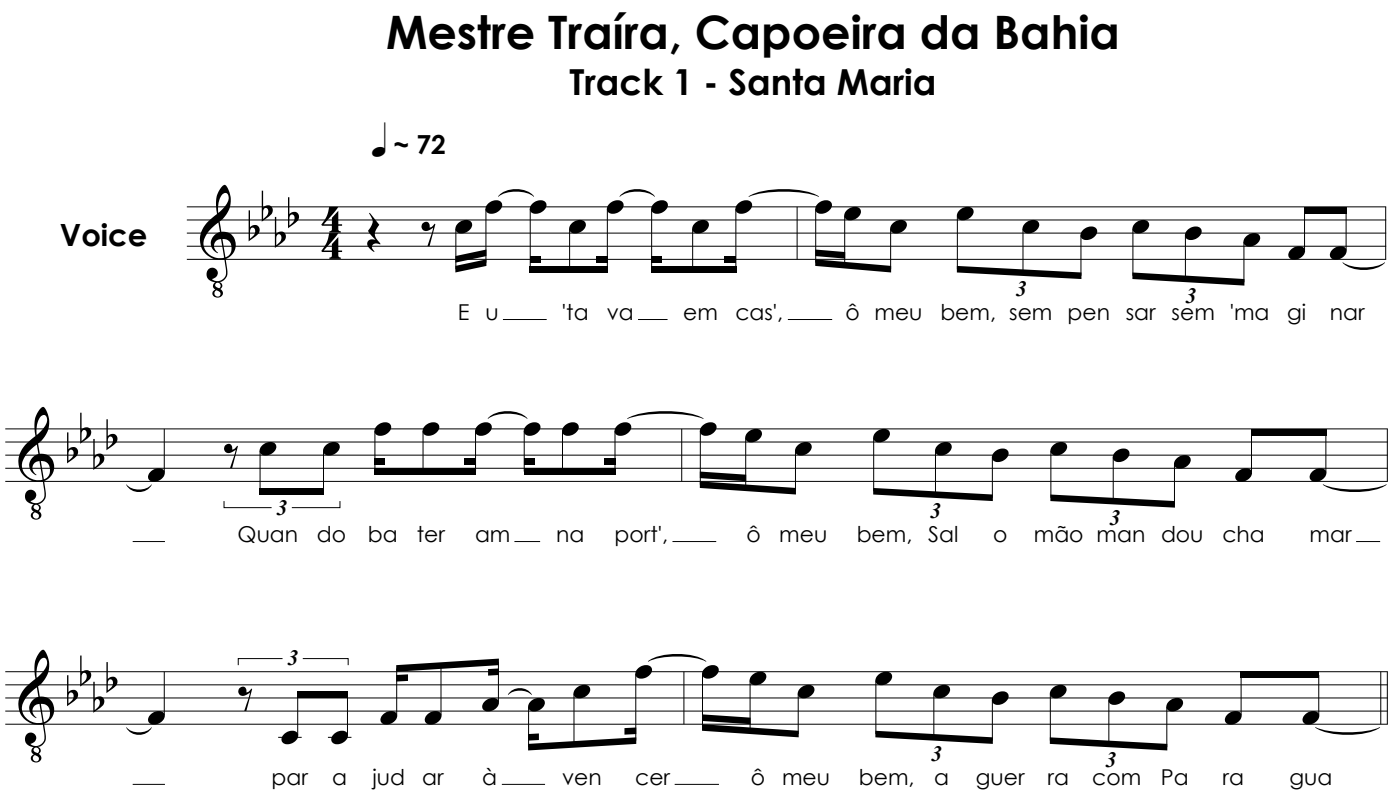
It is, therefore, not surprising that several songs from the capoeira tradition make reference to the Paraguayan War. They are sung with pride, having certainly been composed by the war's Afro-Brazilian survivors, who were promised their freedom in exchange for their service. At PASIC, Projeto Arcomusical will present my Berimbau Sextet no. 2, "Traíra," into which is deliberately woven another famous capoeira *ladainha* (litany) referencing the same war, "Eu 'tava em casa": "Eu 'tava em casa, o meu bem / sem pensar sem imaginar / quando bateram na porta, o meu bem / Salamão mandou chamar / para ajudar a vencer, o meu bem / a guerra com Paraguay." ("I was at home, my love / without thinking or imagining / when they knocked on the door, my love / Solomon sent them calling / to help to win, my love / the war with Paraguay.").

My training in capoeira Angola began in Chicago with Contramestre Beto DeFreitas and continued in Belo Horizonte,

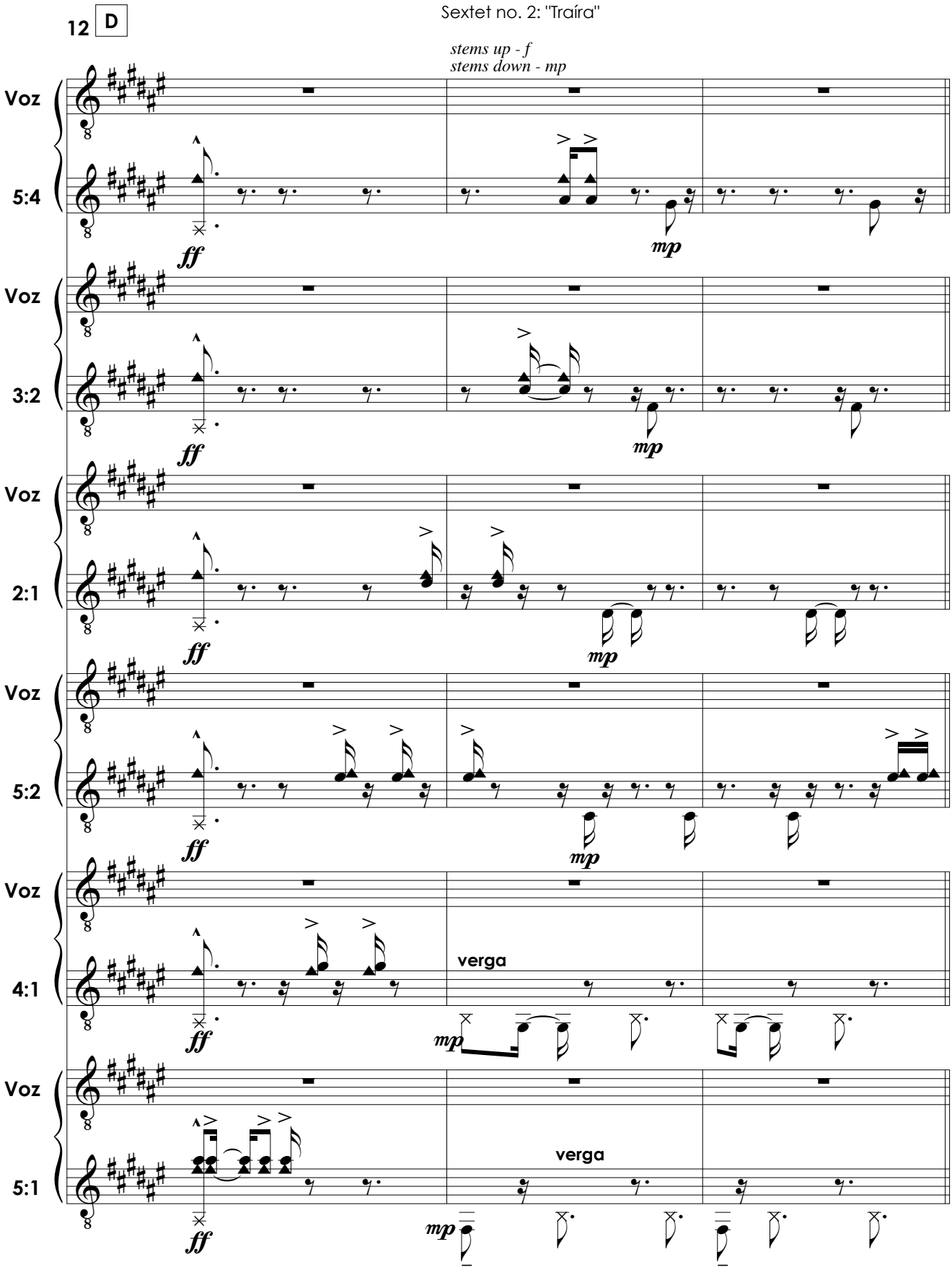
Brazil during a year-long sabbatical with support from Northern Illinois University and the Fulbright Scholar program. Choosing Mestra Alcione Oliveira as my principal teacher, I learned about the historical importance of the capoeira recording *Mestre Traíra, Capoeira da Bahia*. Released in 1963, it was the first commercial recording of of capoeira music in Brazil and today is a widely admired musical reference in the capoeira community. Indeed, it is an incredible exemplar of the complex, tightly woven counterpoint of three berimbaus led by Mestre Gato Preto (José Gabriel Góes b. 1929) accompanying the unforgettable singing of Mestre Traíra (born José Ramos do Nascimento,1916–1970). To understand the inner workings of this recording, I made note-for-note transcriptions of the first and final tracks, "Santa Maria" and "Sequência de rítmos." (See Examples 1A and 2A.)

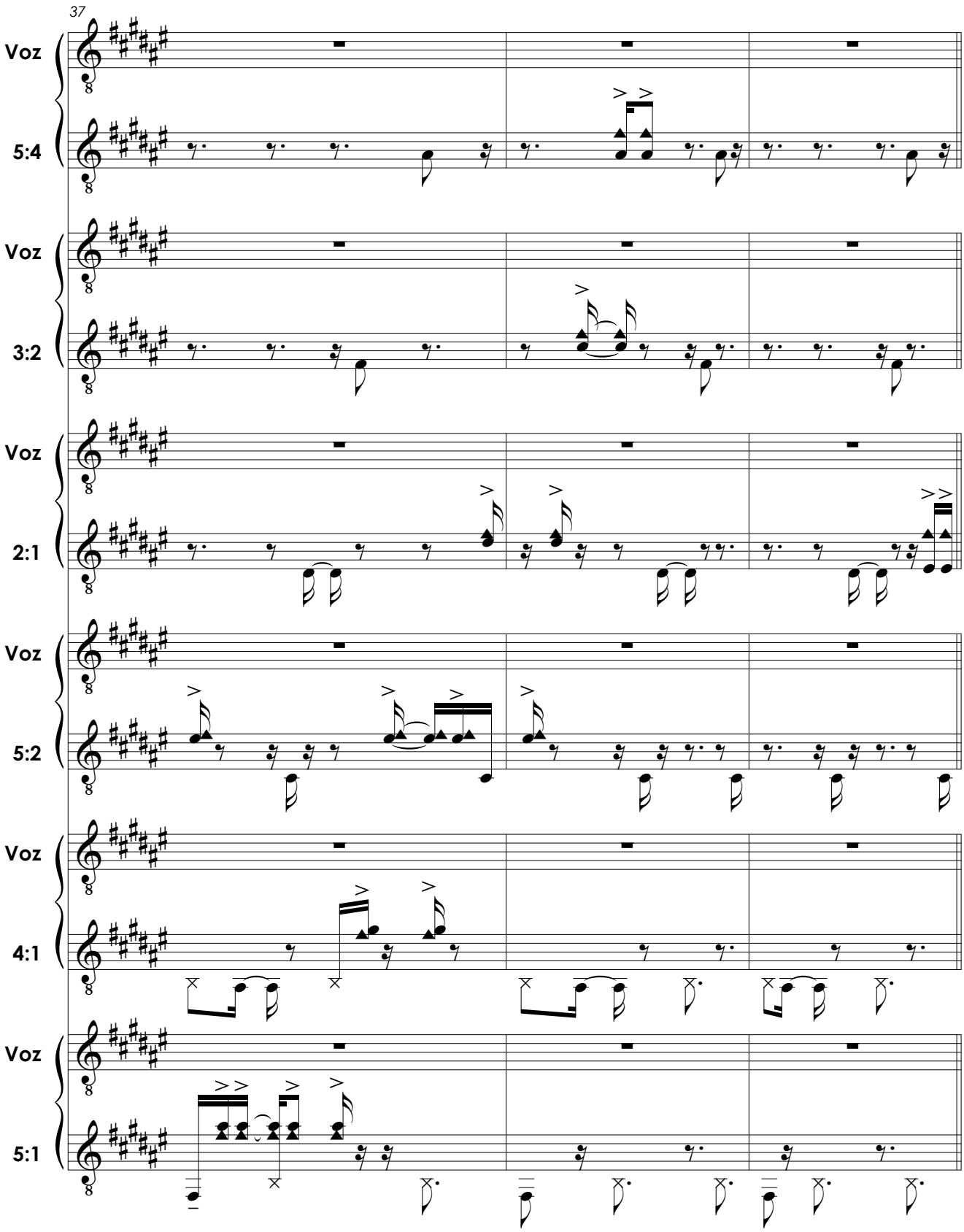
In the composition "Traíra," I re-imagined this material in the hands and voices of six berimbau performers. The sextet is an intentional homage to the capoeira community, and in particular to the musicality of Mestres Gato Preto and Traíra. Furthermore, the spirit and voice of seminal berimbau artist Naná Vasconcelos (1944–2016) makes a special appearance later in the work.[2]

EXAMPLE 1A. MESTRE TRAÍRA, CAPOEIRA DA BAHIA, TRACK ONE, "SANTA MARIA," FIRST THREE PHRASES OF THE LADAINHA MELODY, "EU 'TAVA EM CASA."



EXAMPLE 1B. GREGORY BEYER, BERIMBAU SEXTET NO. 2, "TRAÍRA." RE-SETTING OF THE SAME MELODY IN A DIFFERENT KEY AND OVER THE 12/16 AFRO-BRAZILIAN RHYTHM, BARRAVENTO, SPLIT BETWEEN SIX BERIMBAUS.

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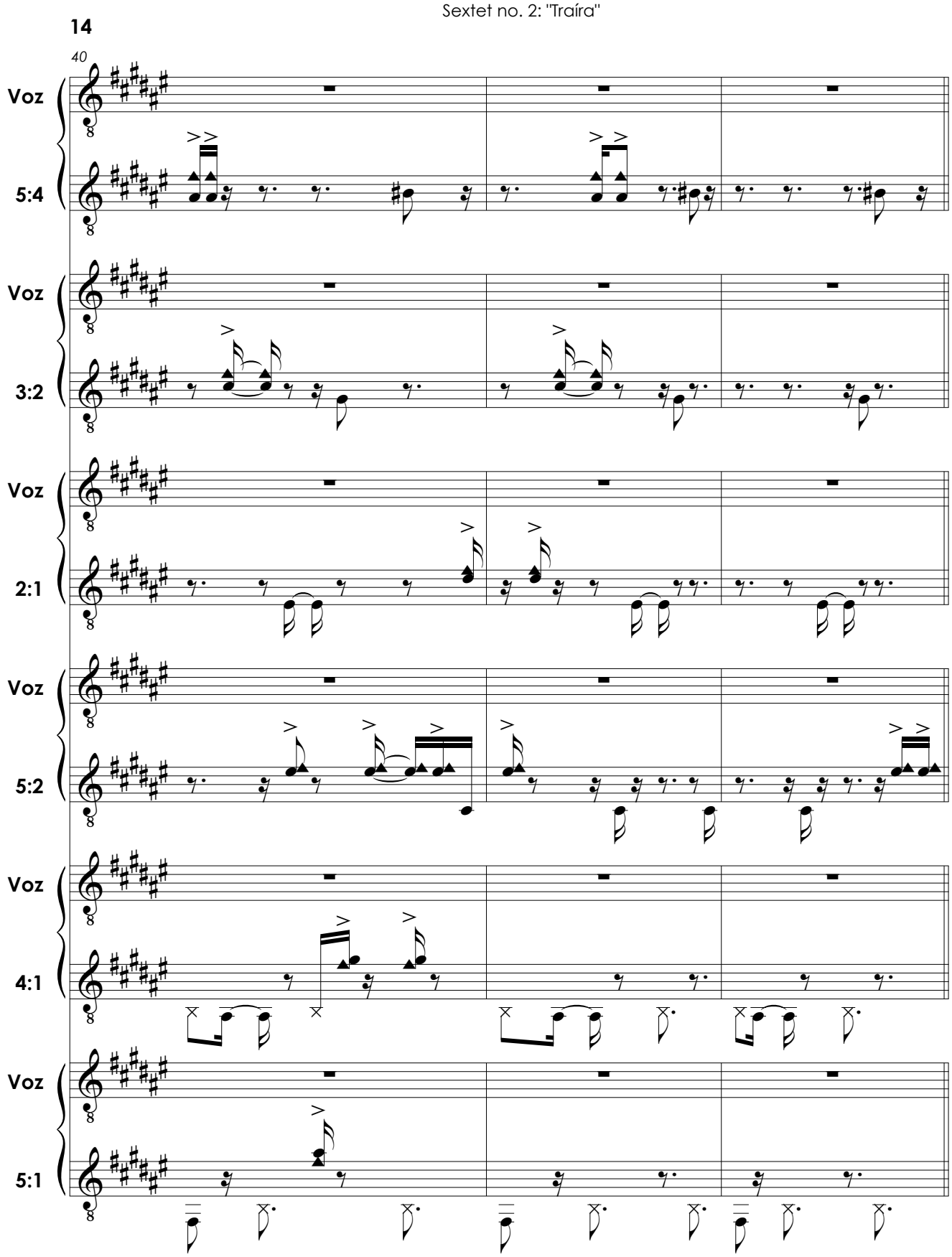
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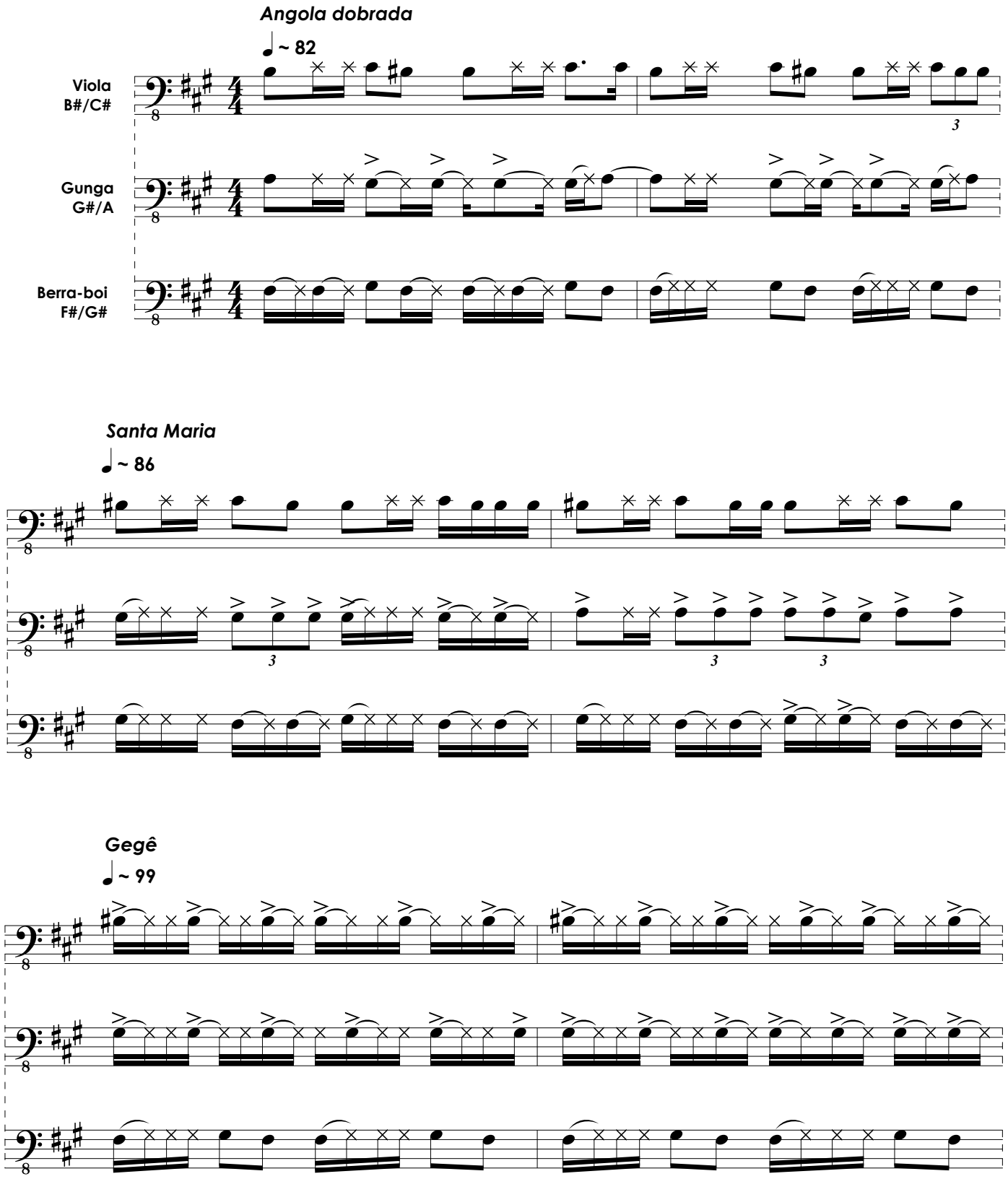
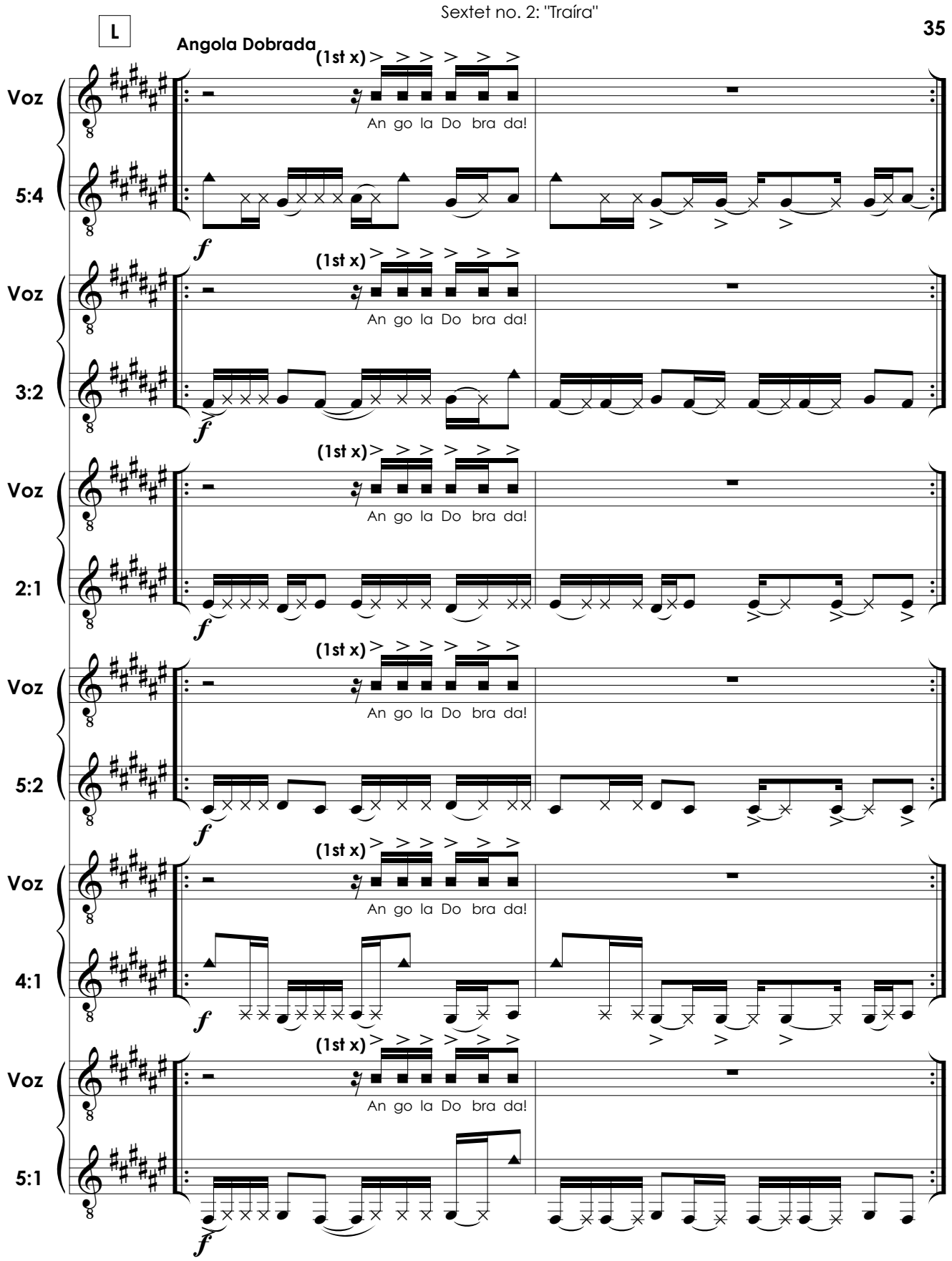
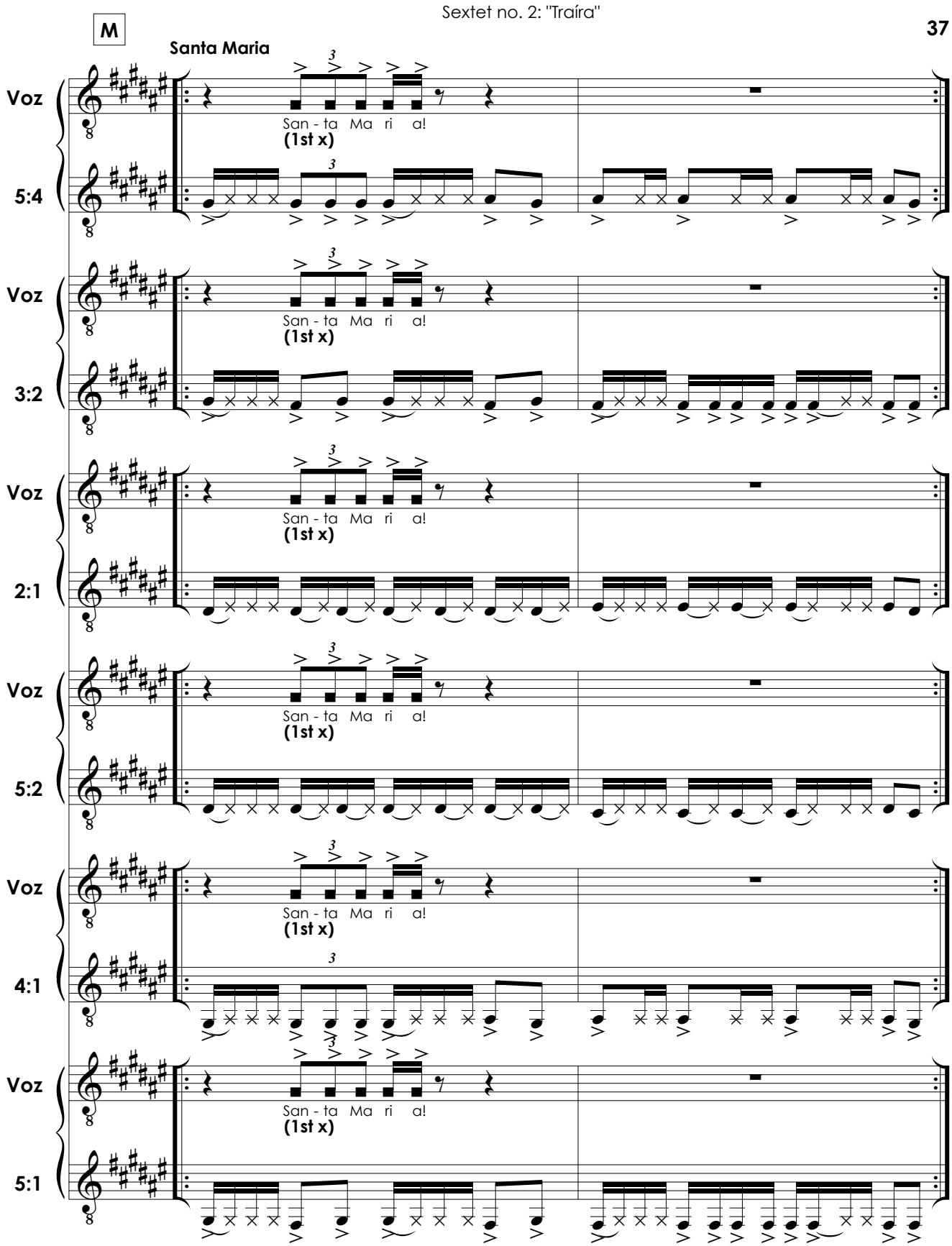
EXAMPLE 2A. *MESTRE TRAÍRA*, CAPOEIRA DA BAHIA, TRACK SEVEN, "SEQUÊNCIA DE RÍTMOS." TOQUES ANGOLA DOBRADA, SANTA MARIA, AND GEGÊ.



EXAMPLE 2B. GREGORY BEYER, BERIMBAU SEXTET NO. 2, "TRAÍRA." THE SAME THREE TOQUES SET FOR 6 BERIMBAUS.




M
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San - ta Ma ri a!
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San - ta Ma ri a!
(1st x)
Voz
5:2
San - ta Ma ri a!
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Voz
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San - ta Ma ri a!
(1st x)
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5:1
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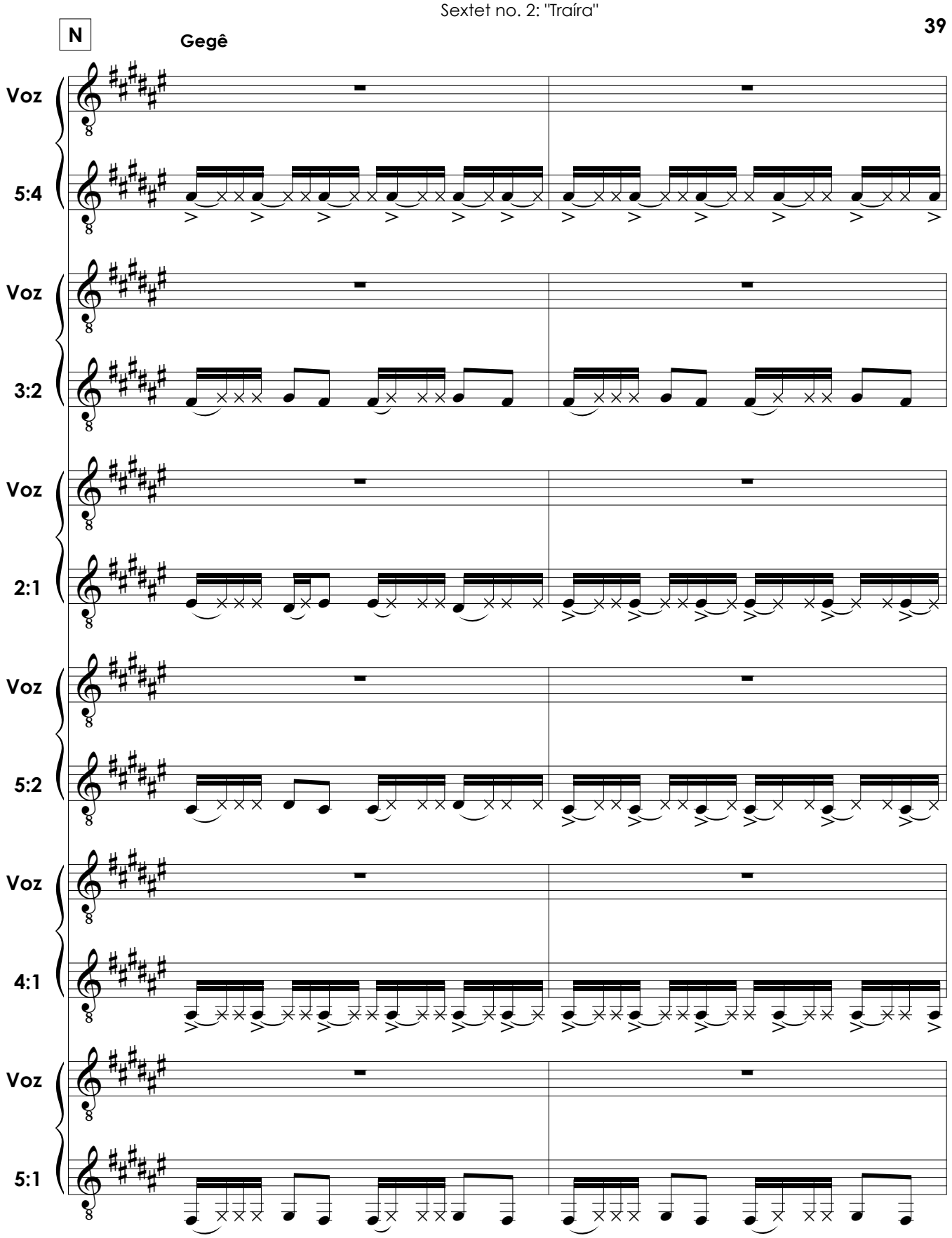
(1st x)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Voz
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2:1
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Voz
4:1
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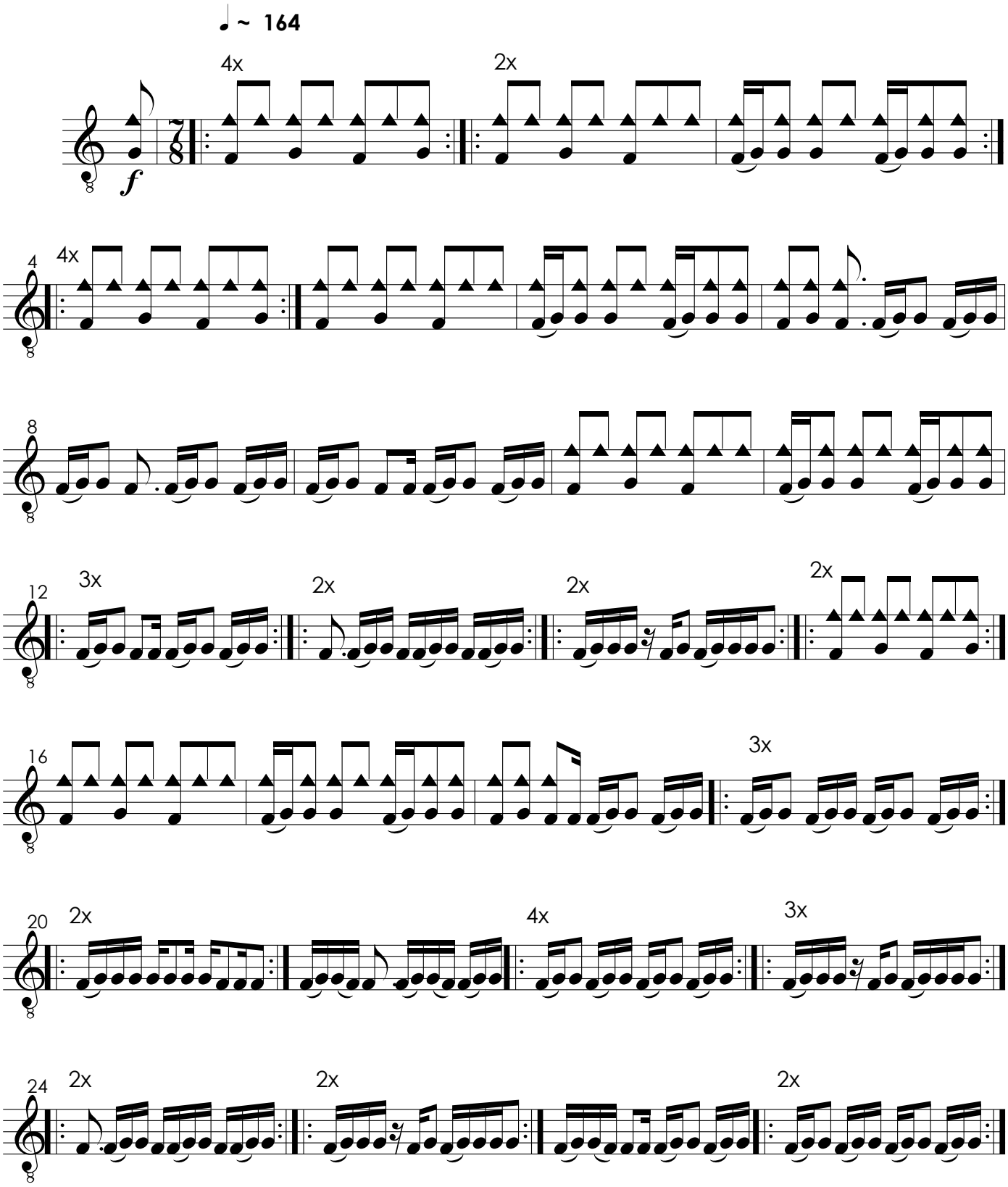
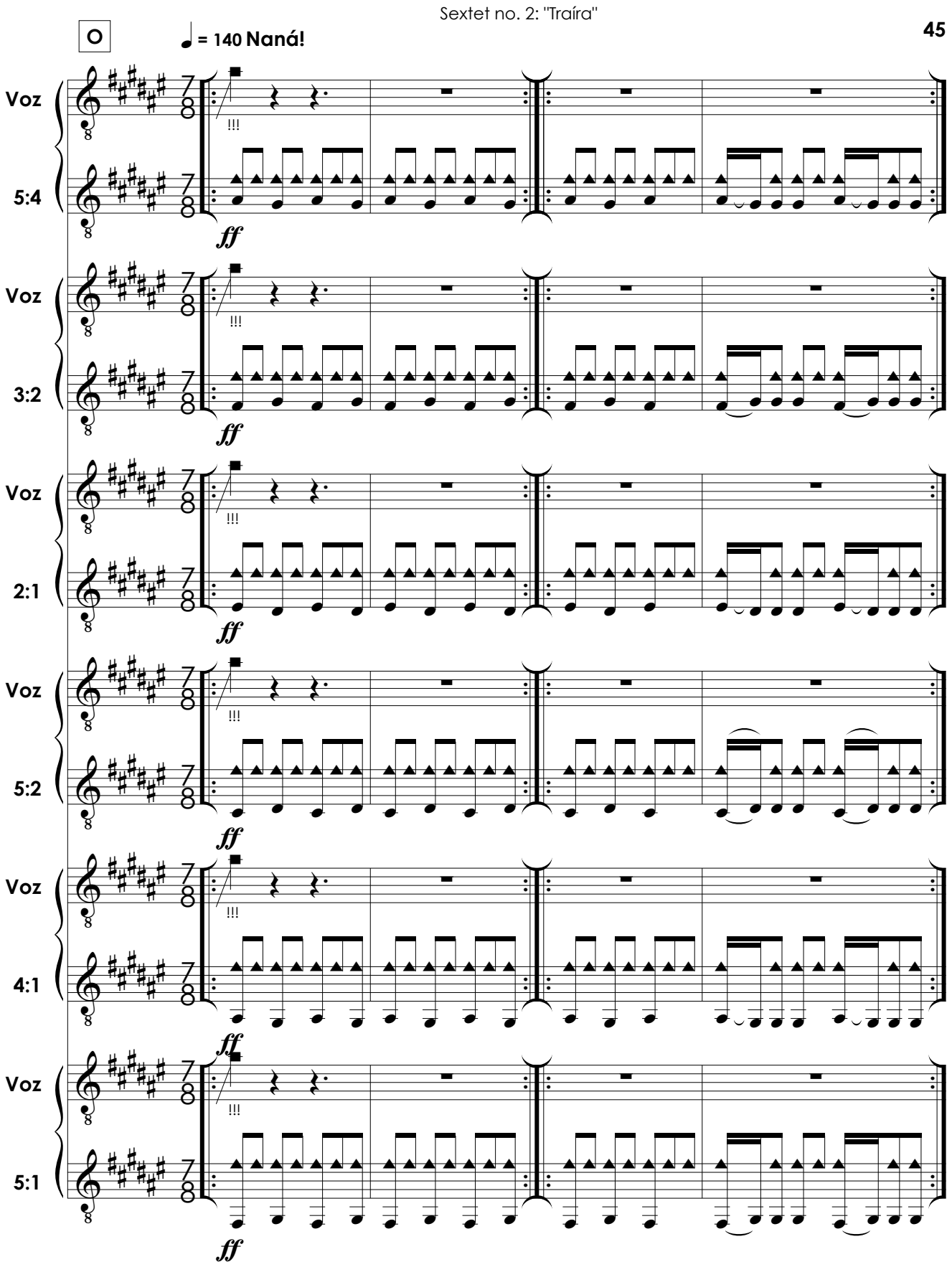
EXAMPLE 3A. NANÁ VASCONCELOS, *SAUDADES*, TRACK ONE, "O BERIMBAU."

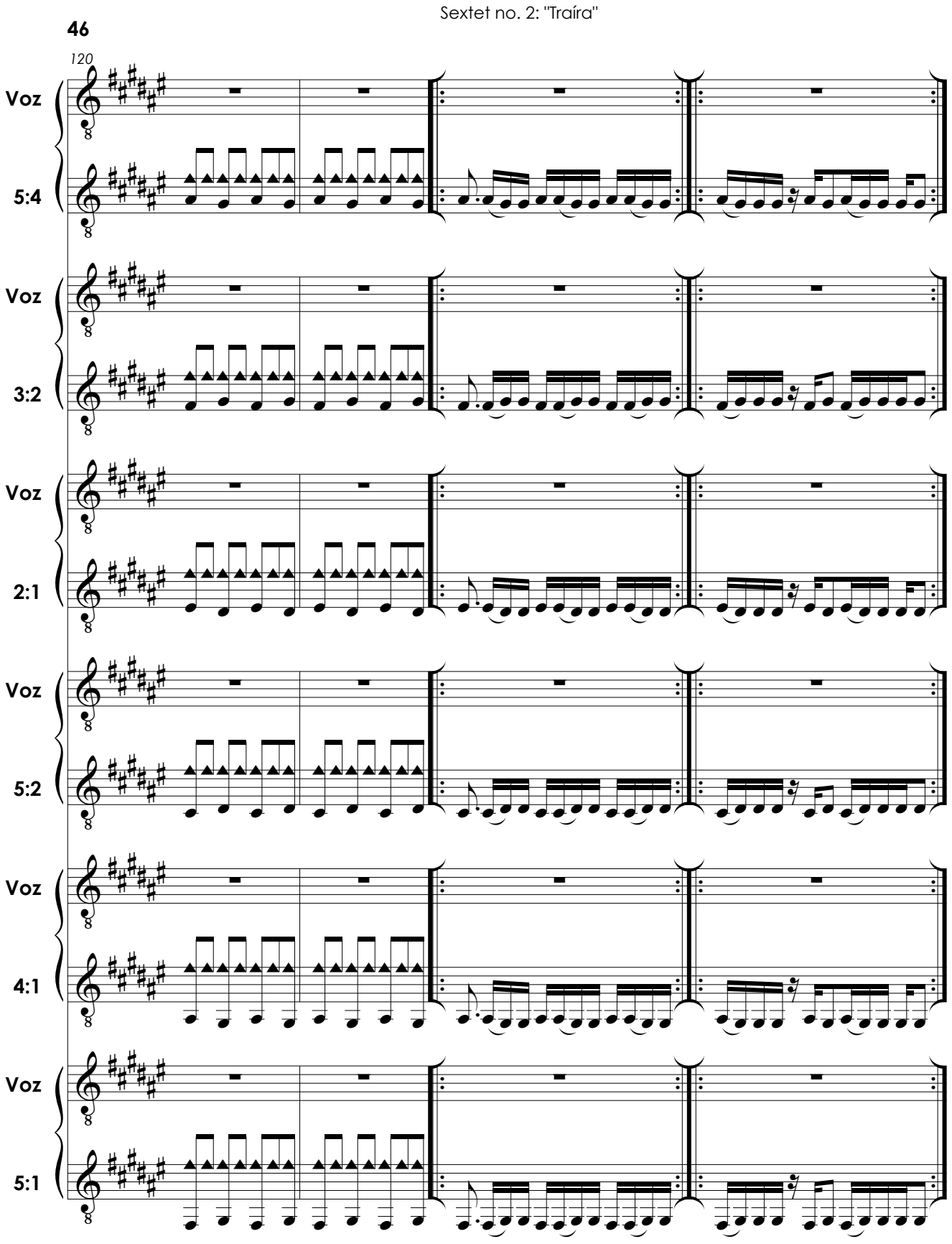
Naná Vasconcelos, "O Berimbau" (15:49)

from the album, *Saudades*, (1980)



EXAMPLE 3B. GREGORY BEYER, BERIMBAU SEXTET NO. 2, "TRAÍRA." EXCERPTS FROM THE SAME PASSAGE, SET FOR SIX BERIMBAUS.

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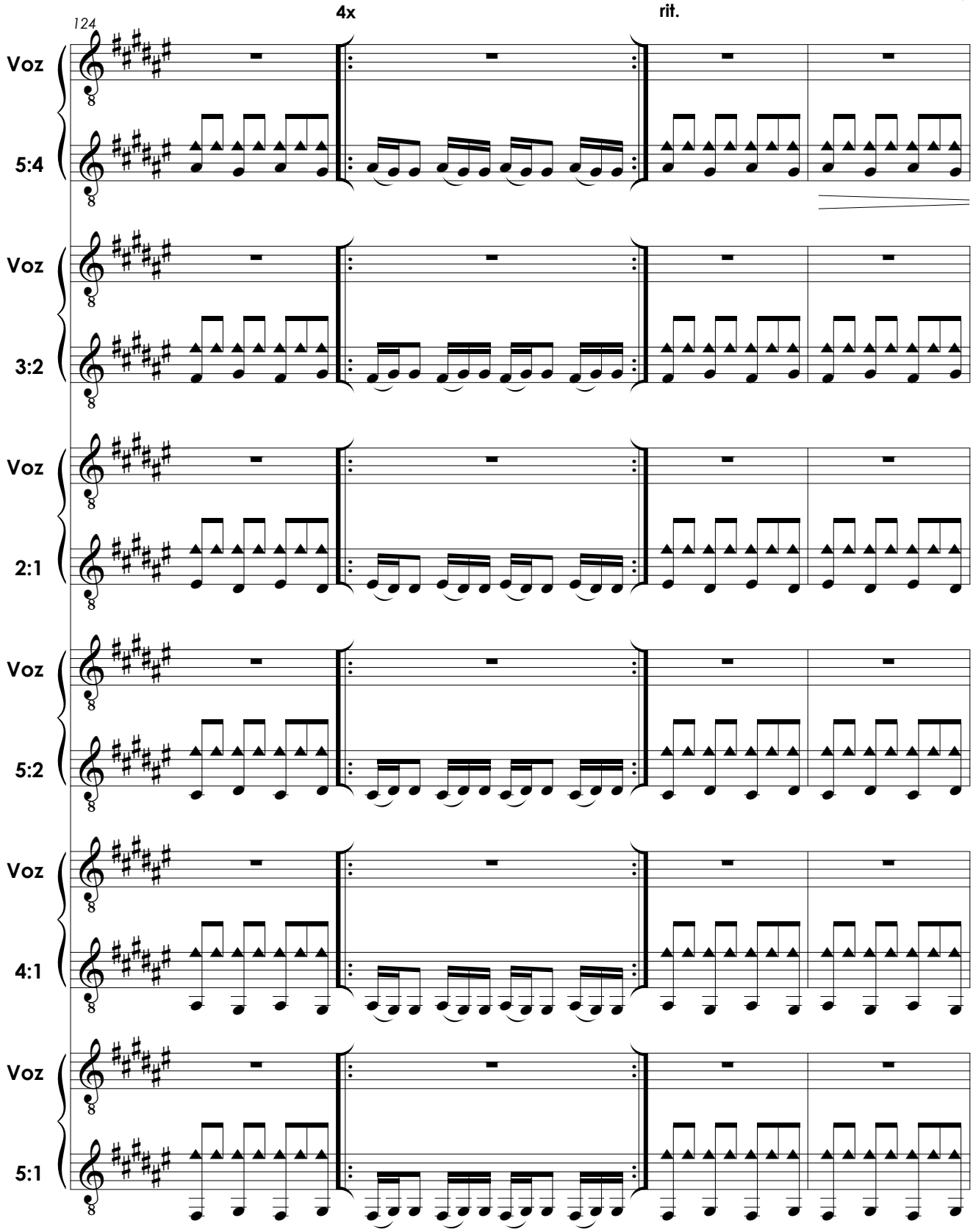
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Everything Arcomusical has created and stands for would not be possible without the musical legacy that these men bequeathed to the world. Arcomusical is honored to have the opportunity to present this special performance at PASIC to honor the artistry of these great masters and to continue to build international bridges through the percussive arts.

DISCOGRAPHY

Projeto Arcomusical, *Spinning in the Wheel* (National Sawdust Tracks NS-028, 2019).

Nana Vasconcelos, *Saudades* (ECM 1147, 1980).

José Ramos do Nascimento, *Mestre Traíra Capoeira da Bahia* (Editora Xauã, 1963).

ENDNOTES

1. For American readers, it may be useful to draw analogies between this war and the U.S. Civil War that unfolded just a few years earlier in the same decade (1861–65), between the Mississippi and Paranâ Rivers, and between the enslaved Brazilian soldiers and the United States Colored Troops (USCT) who were recruited to fight for the Union Army in the Civil War and later became known as "buffalo soldiers."
2. For copies of the complete transcriptions referenced above of recordings by Naná Vasconcelos and Mestre Traíra, or a copy of Berimbau Sextet no. 1, "Traíra," visit *www.arcomusical.com*. PN