Matt Geer

The Burning Lamp

for organ

2025

Full Score

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Programme note

The Burning Lamp is constructed from a fixed melodic chain of 32 bars, generated from non-repeating combinations of the pitch material {C, D, E, F, G, A}. The right hand carries this chain, in which each note's rhythmic value is determined by a simple rule: all notes last a crotchet, with the exception of E and G (extended to minims), and F (extended to dotted minims). This procedure produces a sequence of varying bar lengths, expressed as time signatures from 1/4 through to 8/4, assigned bar by bar.

The melodic chain unfolds in a rising process: pitches are placed systematically within two octaves according to a staircase rule, beginning in Octave 1 (middle C upwards), climbing until the upper boundary (C_2), and then resetting back to Octave 1 to begin the ascent again. This produces a controlled contour in which the right-hand line consistently rises over the span of the first 32 bars.

Accompanying material in the left hand and pedals is derived functionally from the same pitch collection. The pedal outlines a quasi-tonal cycle (C–D–A–G–F) while the left hand supplies two-note harmonies, usually in 3rds or 6ths, ensuring horizontal voice-leading coherence. Modal inflections (such as the introduction of Bb against G and D) are employed to prevent a purely diatonic surface and to reinforce contrapuntal movement against the fixed right-hand chain.

The structural principle of the work is one of mirror form. Bars 33–63 present a retrograde of the entire opening chain: time signatures, rhythms, and pitch order are reversed. In this second half the melodic contour is correspondingly inverted, descending systematically rather than rising. In effect, the composition is symmetrical: a strict ascent followed by a strict descent, bound by identical processes applied in reverse order.

The title refers to this overall shape: the first half rises like the gradual kindling of a flame, while the second half diminishes symmetrically, mirroring its ascent. The piece therefore embodies a single process articulated twice, once forwards and once backwards, creating a complete and balanced structure.

Dr Matt Geer

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Duration: 8'00

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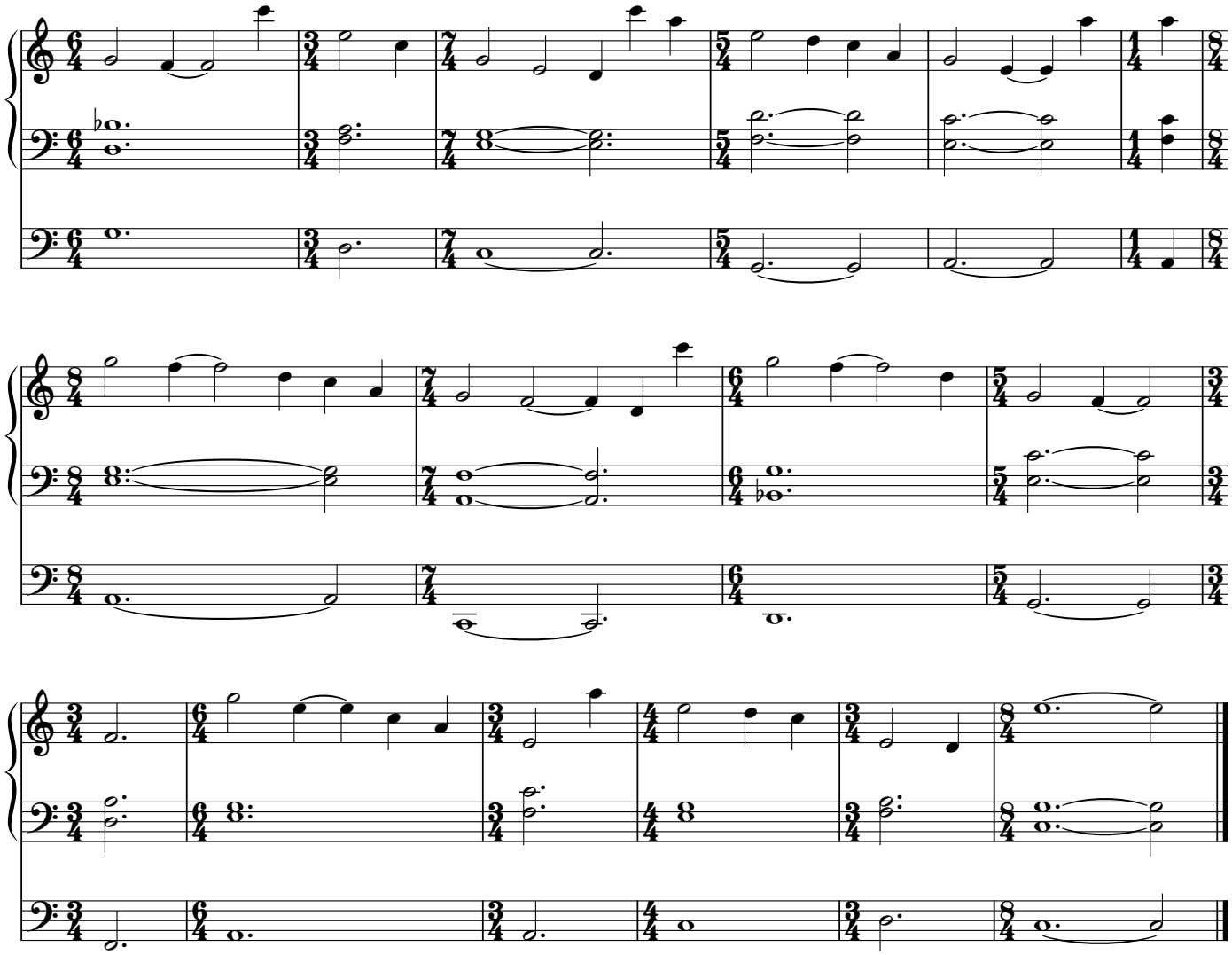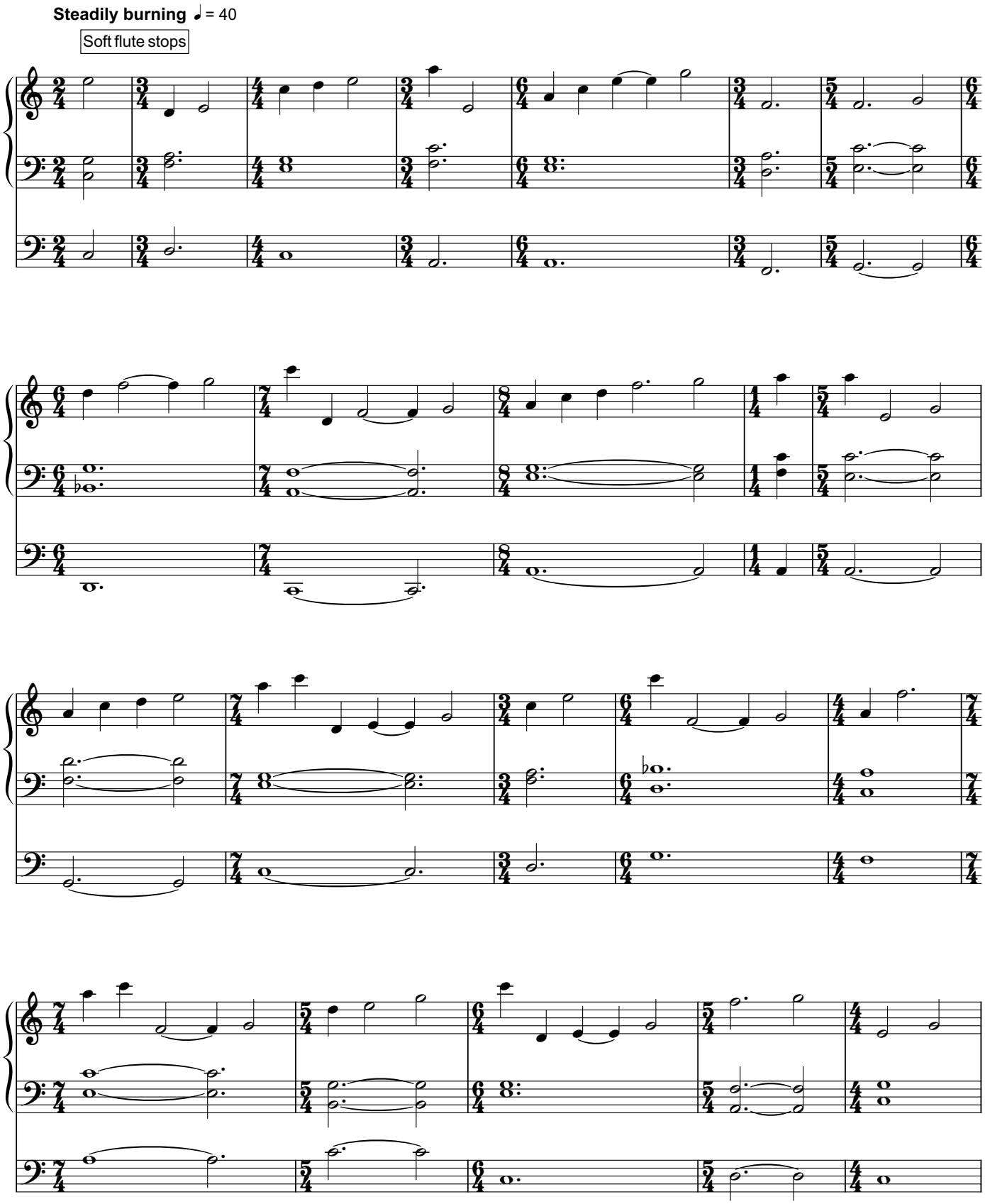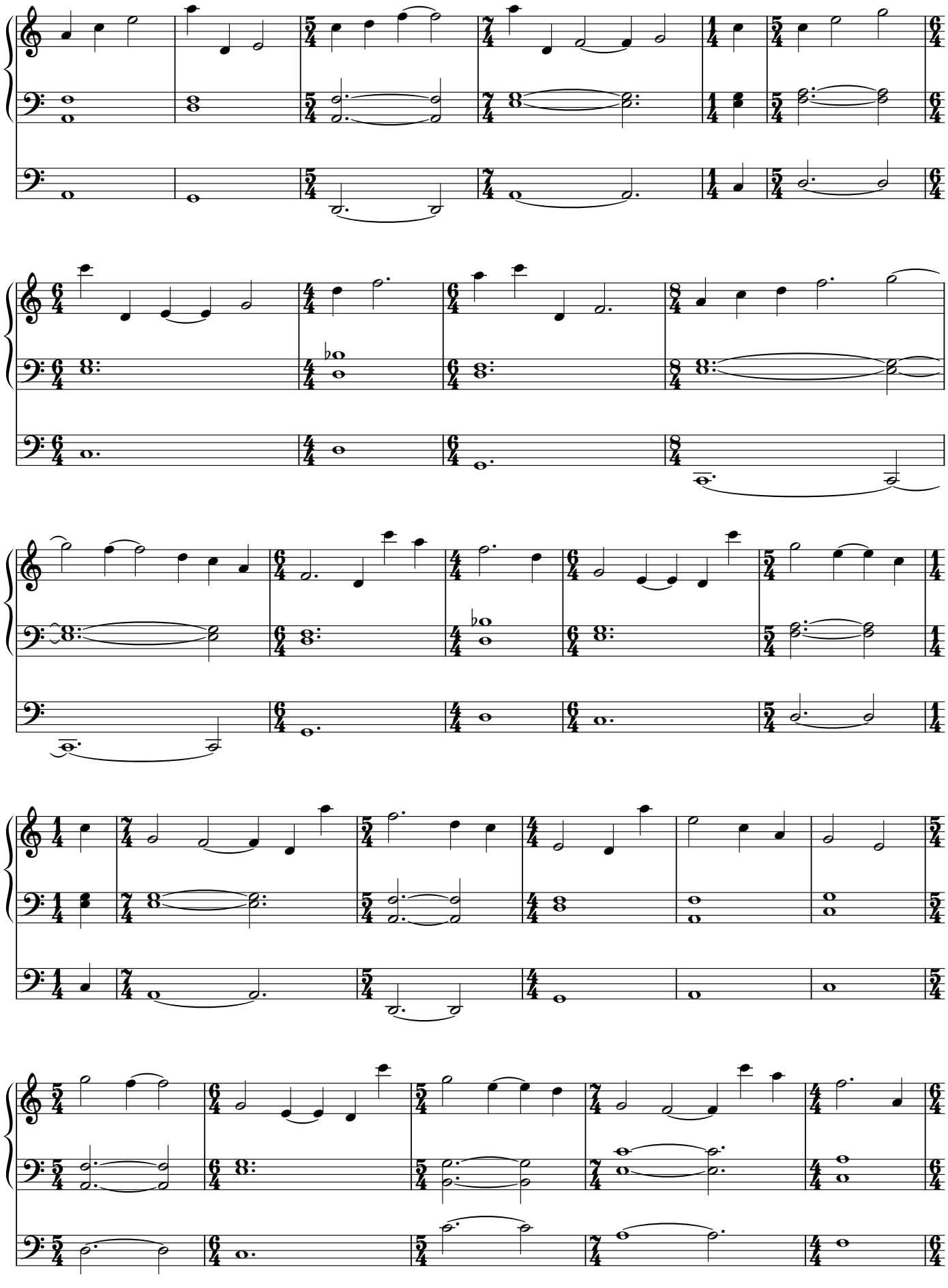
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