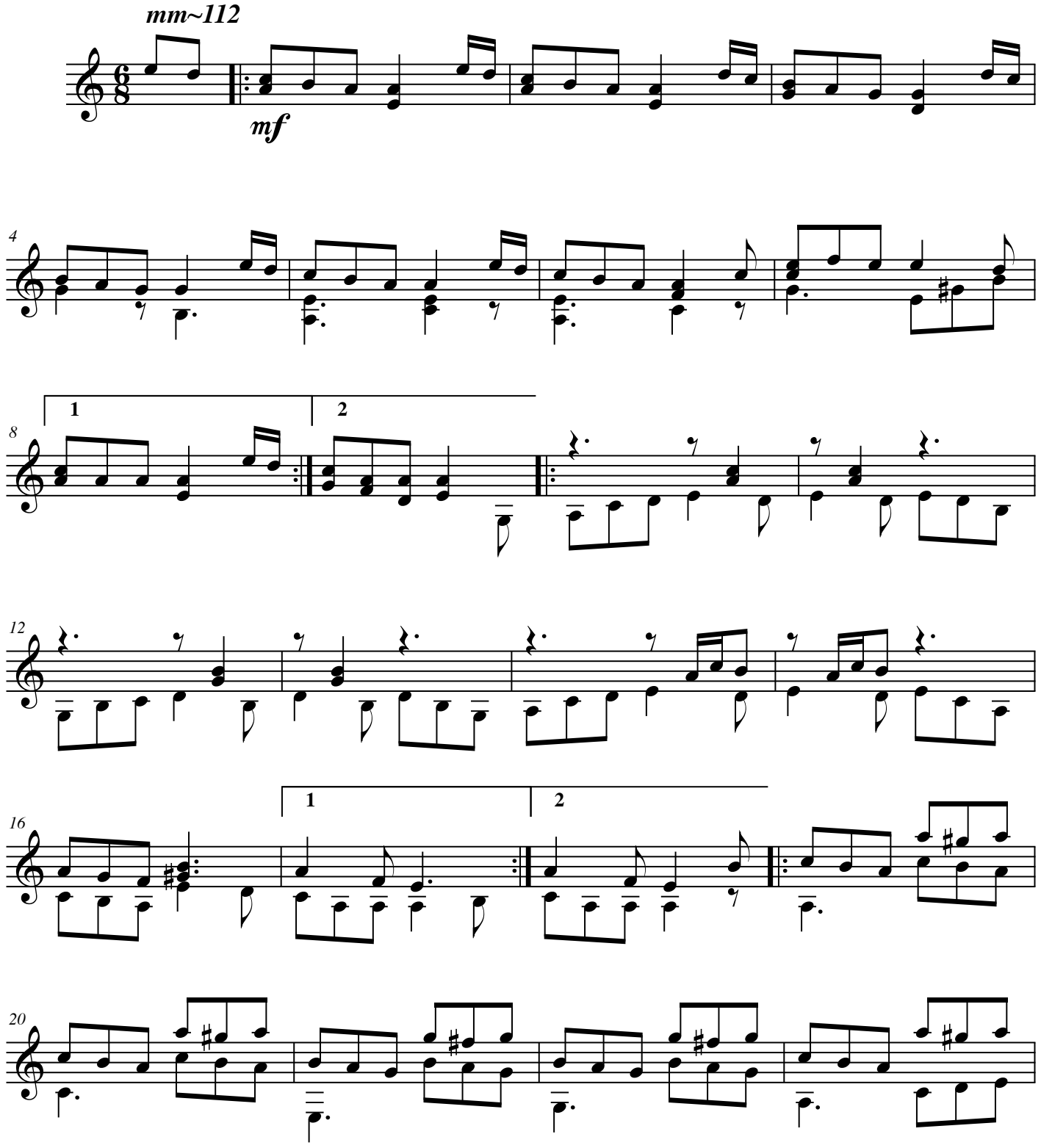
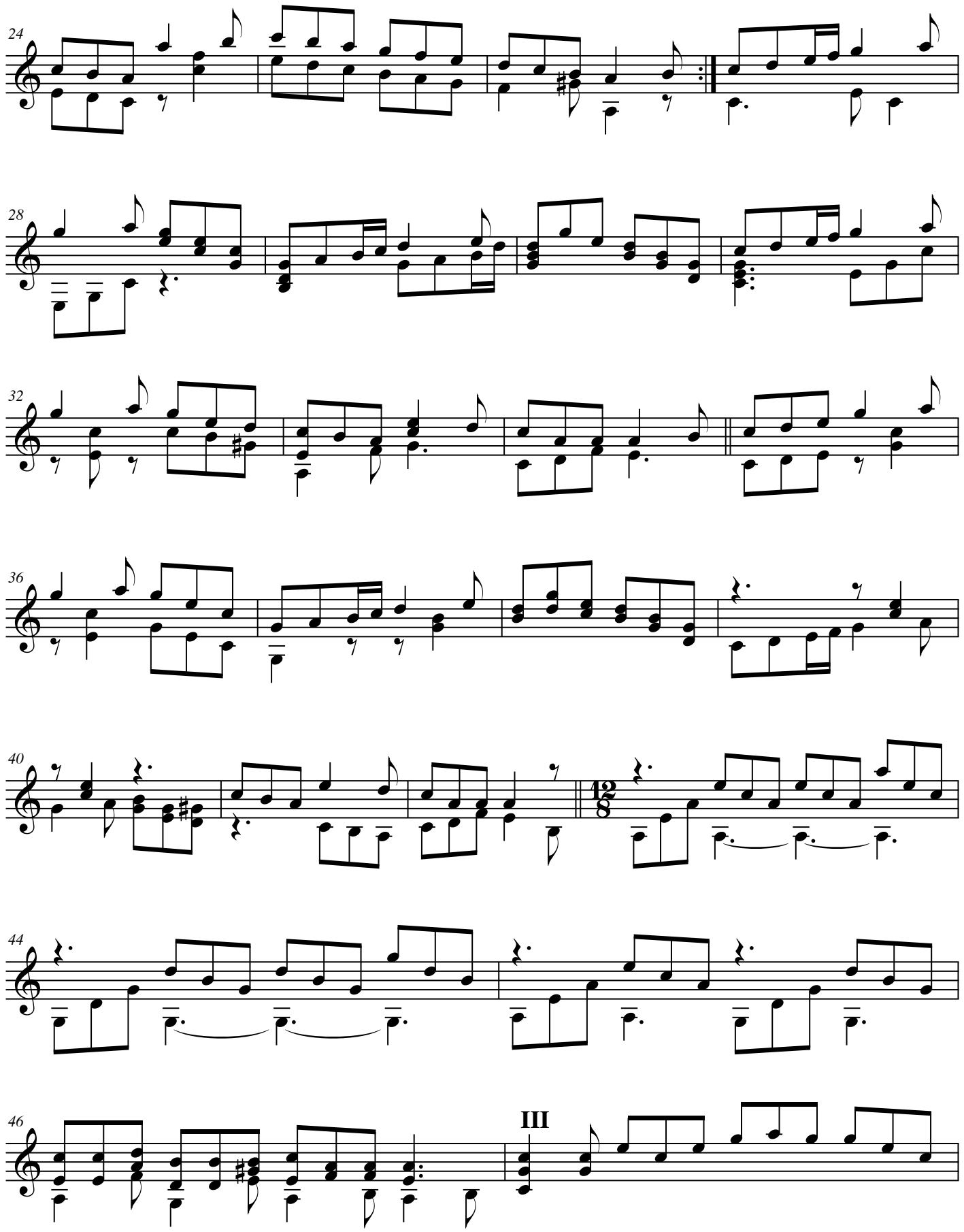
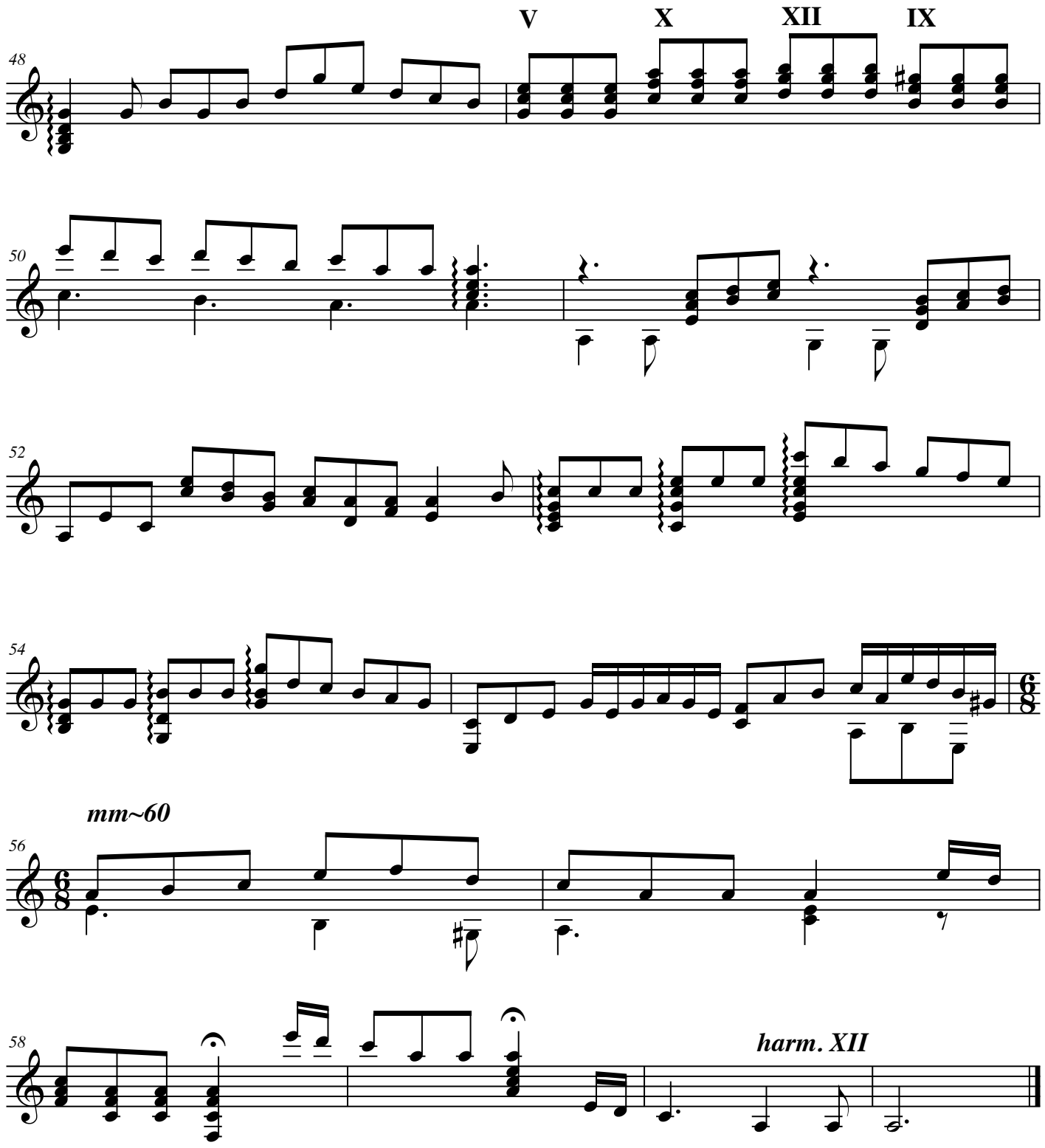
BRIAN BORU'S MARCH

traditional clan march




24
28
32
36
40
44
46
III


V
X
XII
IX
48
50
52
54
mm~60
56
58
harm. XII

This a tune of great antiquity belonging to the class of tunes known as "clan marches", i.e. pieces that are the "property" of a particular family and are closely associated with that family (the musical analogue to the Scots highland tartan designs).

There is an excellent Wikipedia article on Brian Boru which makes it unnecessary for me to go into great detail about him here. Born into a family of local chieftains around 941, he was the "High King" of Ireland at the time of his defeat of the "Danes" at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. Prior to his death in that battle, he established the O'Brien dynasty as successors to the O'Neills. He is sometimes referred to as "the Emperor of the Irish" from the fact that by the year 1011, all the regional rulers of Ireland acknowledged Brian's authority - a situation that might have had a profound effect on subsequent Irish history if it had lasted.

There are no records actually relating this piece of music to Brian Boru or his any of his exploits - as "Chief" Francis O'Neill points out, the style of the tune suggests an origin much later than the 11th Century. That it is clearly in the clan march tradition, however, cannot be disputed, even if the actual origins of the tune are lost in the mists of time.

In his *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, O'Neill quotes as follows from the journal of a German traveller named Kohl, who heard *Brian Boru's March* performed on the pipes in County Louth in the mid 1800's:

"The music of this march is wildly powerful and at the same time melancholy. It is at once the music of victory and of mourning."

O'Neill also quotes the poet Thomas Davis, who writes in regards to the music of the clan marches:

"No enemy speaks slightlingly of Irish music and no friend need fear to boast of it. Its antique war-tunes ... stream and crash upon the ear like the warriors of a hundred glens meeting, and you are borne with them to battle ... "

It should be pointed out that not a few of the tunes played as jigs by today's traditional musicians actually began life as marches. *Brian Boru's* is still heard and loved anywhere that Irish music is performed (my first exposure to it was the playing of the great Galway accordion player Joe Burke in the 1960s).