The Clarinetist's Octatonic Workbook

Matthew Weger

Introduction

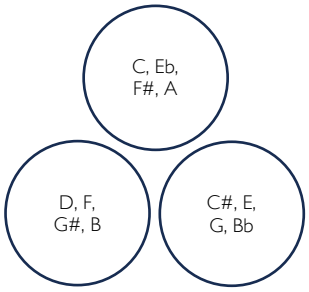
Throughout my studies as a clarinetist and music theorist, I have often found myself trying to adapt new (to me) theory concepts into my practice. While the octatonic collection or scale is certainly not new, it has recently piqued my interest especially since it is a hallmark of many twentieth-century works, to which the clarinet is no stranger.

The purpose of this workbook is to provide fellow clarinetists with exercises and studies based solely on octatonic collections, helping to familiarize themselves with the unique tonal and sonic properties of these collections. The workbook is divided into several sections: scales, thirds, triads, fourths, tritones, mixed chords, dexterity passages, miscellaneous patterns, and études. For the studies no articulation has been provided—please use any you desire. To that end, this workbook is designed for any clarinet and includes Low C bass clarinet studies.

I hope to make this project expandable, so when you find errors (as I am sure there are many), or have suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact me so version 2 can be even better!

The Octatonic Collection

Octatonic collections/scales are groups of eight notes that are arranged by alternating whole and half steps. They are also referred to as diminished scales since they are based on fully diminished seventh chords.



Using the above image, by selecting two adjacent diminished chord "pools" an octatonic collection is formed. When reordered, scales may be formed: C, Db, Eb, E, F#, G#, A, Bb, C, etc. It is important to note there are only 3 distinct octatonic collections (0,1); (0,2); (2,3) in pitch class notation, any others are rotations or transpositions of them. Respellings occur as needed.

A unique property of the octatonic collection is symmetry. There are two fully diminished seventh chords separated by a whole or half step. There are two 4-note segments of minor scales [C, D, Eb, F | F#, G#, A B] which are transposed by a tritone. In a smaller division, this can also be thought of as four 3-note segments of minor scales (do, re, me) [C, D Eb | Eb, F, Gb | F#, G# A | A, B, C] that when looking at the roots of these segments outline a diminished chord, with the compliment containing the same. Many chords can be extracted a few abnormal ones which are explored in the latter half of the studies (even between what would appear as "primary" chords [split major/minor chords]).

There is a great deal of literature that explains much more about the octatonic collection in depth—but that is beyond this project as this is a workbook, not a textbook.

TLDR: very cool theory things, but it's really about the studies anyway, it just sounds spooky.

About the Études

I have composed four small études solely from octatonic collections—a fun challenge as a novice composer. Composing has always been intimidating to me for several years, and this project has finally allowed me to overcome this fear.

The first, marked *Allegro*, is a duality between major and minor. A small interlude and "mock cadenza" create a B section before requoting A material.

The second, *Semplice*, is a dance—rather mocking in nature. Disjunct leaps should be well defined—especially dissonances.

The third, *orbital*, explores "centricity" around F-sharp, hence orbital. The dynamics should reflect the non-linear (orbital) path when approaching F-sharp. Unlike the small forms demonstrated in the first two études, orbital was composed using serialized rhythmic patterns (over two beats), but in no way is related to pitch or dynamics.

The last, *groove*, is another dance. Provided in two versions, 4a is written for a Low C bass clarinet, and 4b written a tritone above, for soprano clarinets (but also bass clarinets too—for a real challenge). This étude is a study in register leaps; a grooving bassline, and a disjunct upper melody, pointillistic and angular.

Last Remarks

Whether you use this workbook as an amateur, student, teacher, or professional clarinetist, I hope it offers enjoyable challenges, inspiration, and the curiosity to identify the use of the octatonic collections elsewhere. Happy practicing!

-Matthew Weger

Bowling Green, Ohio
October 2023

Octatonic Exercises

Scales (3 Octaves)

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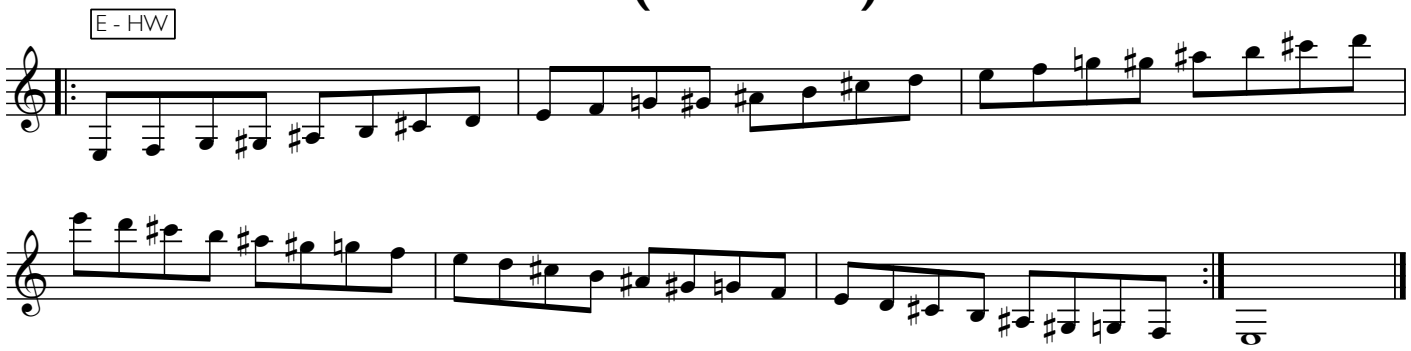

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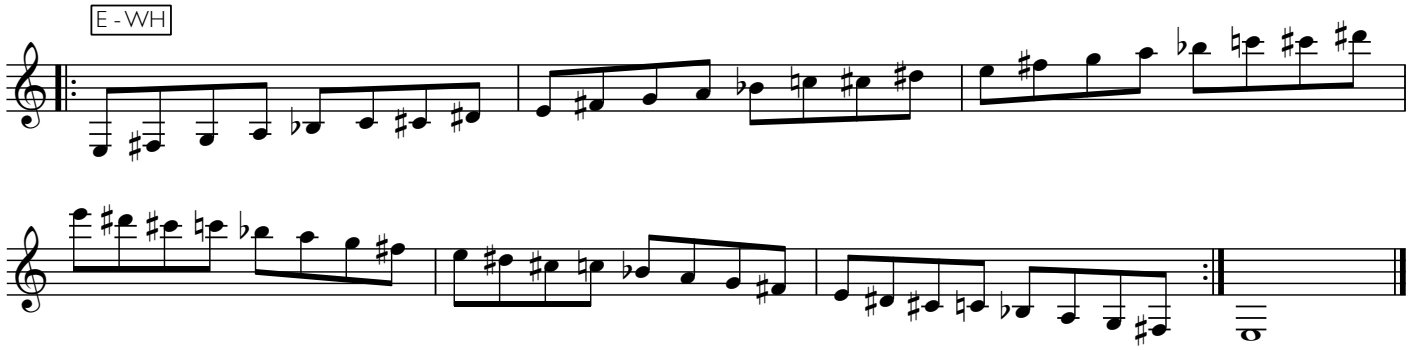

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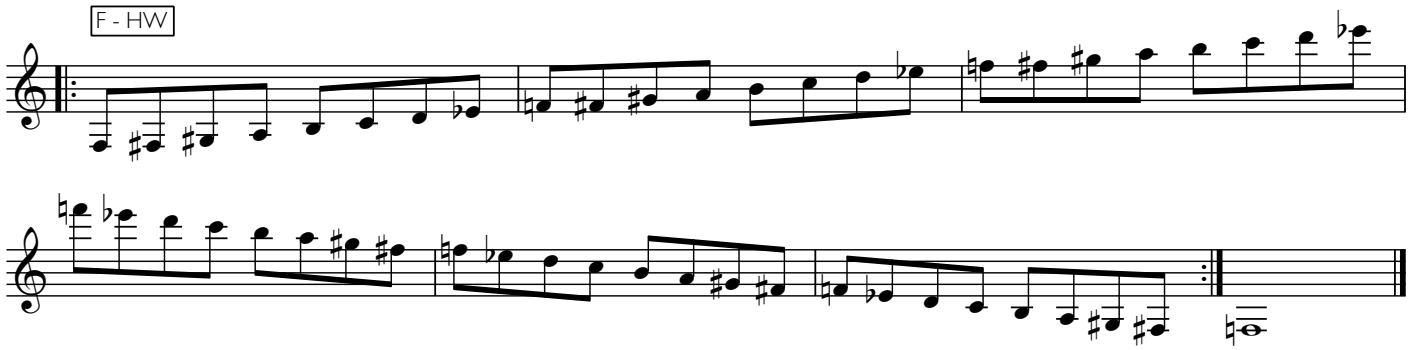

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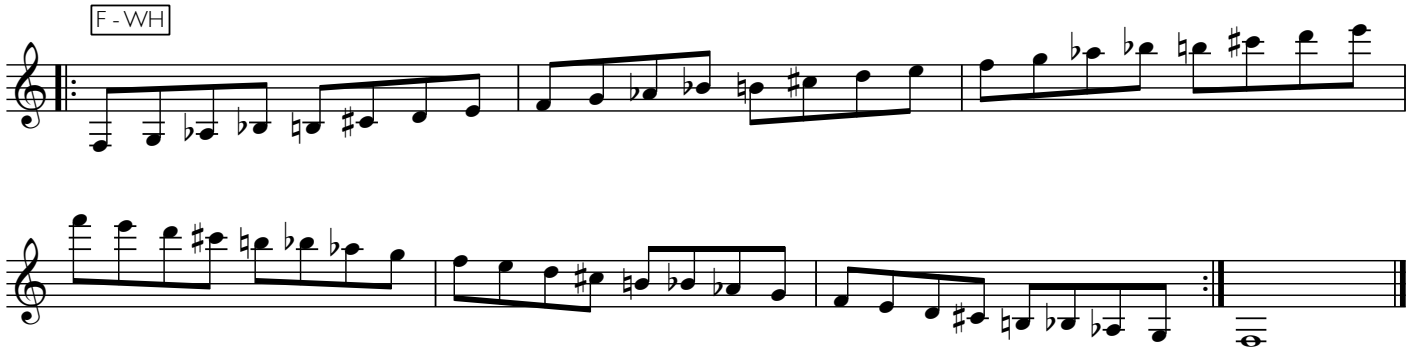

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Scales (3 Octaves) Cont.

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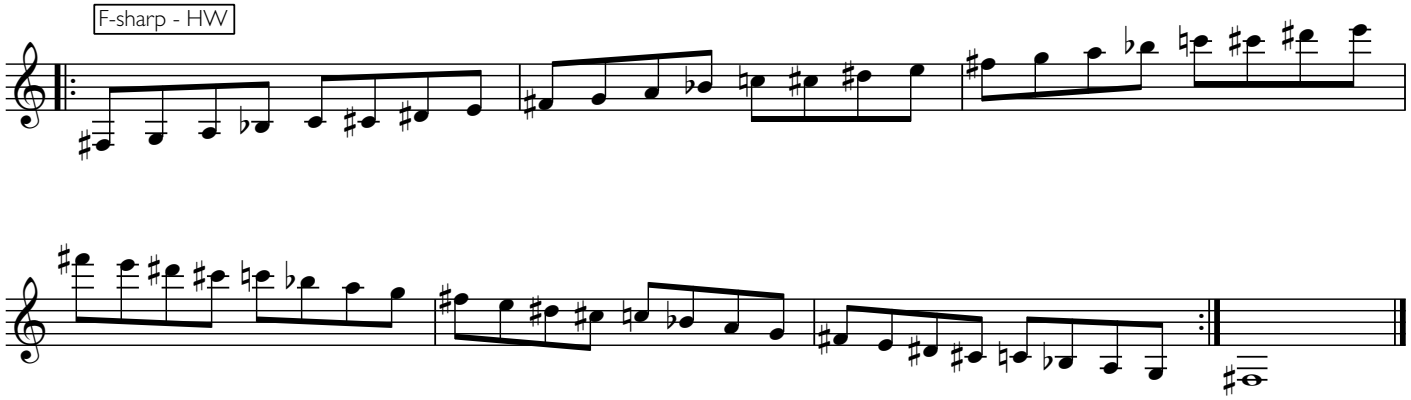

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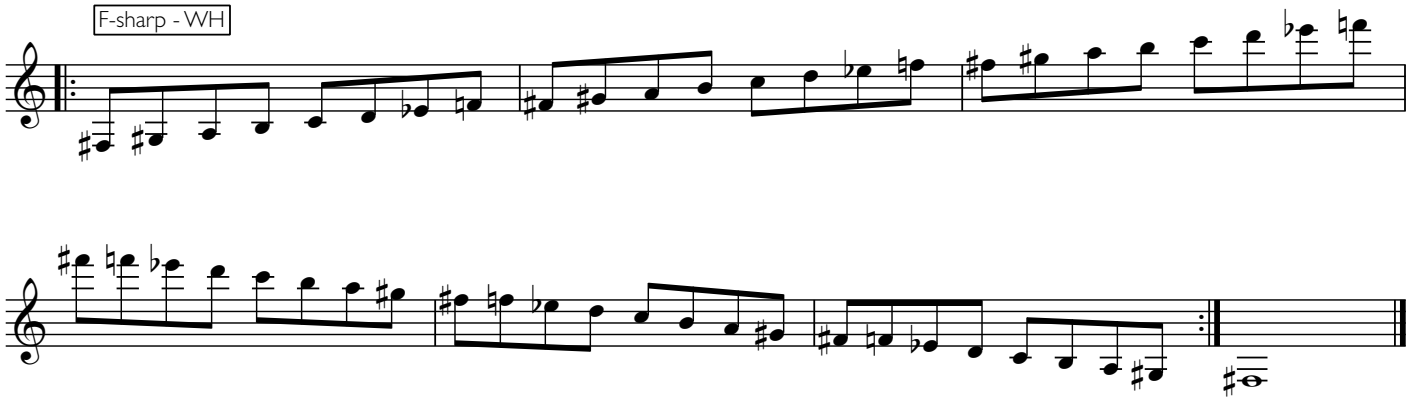

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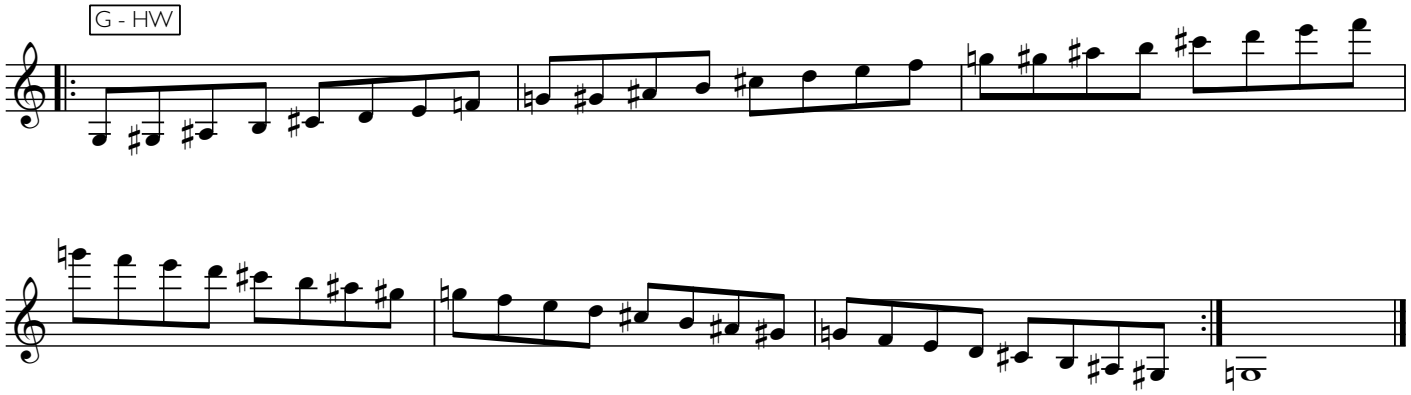

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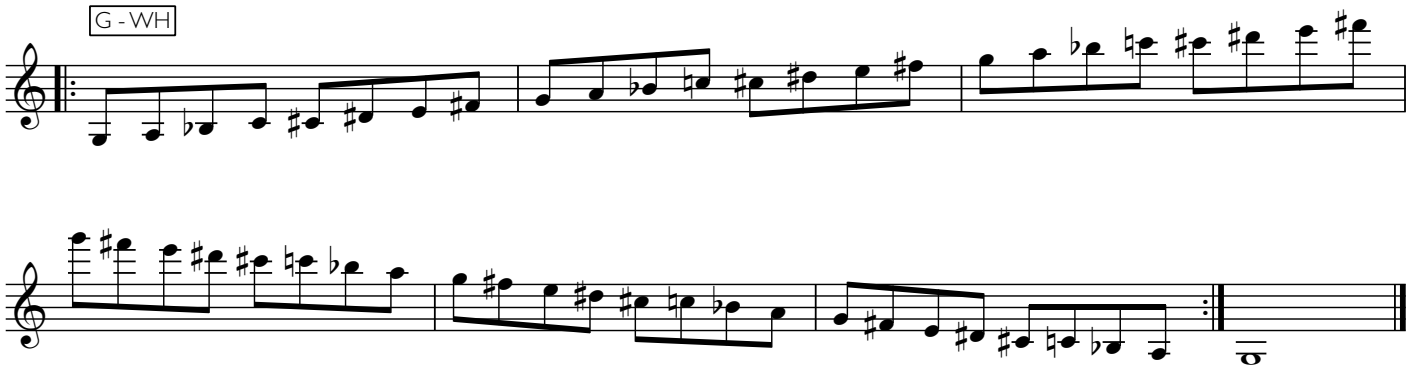

Scales (2 Octave)

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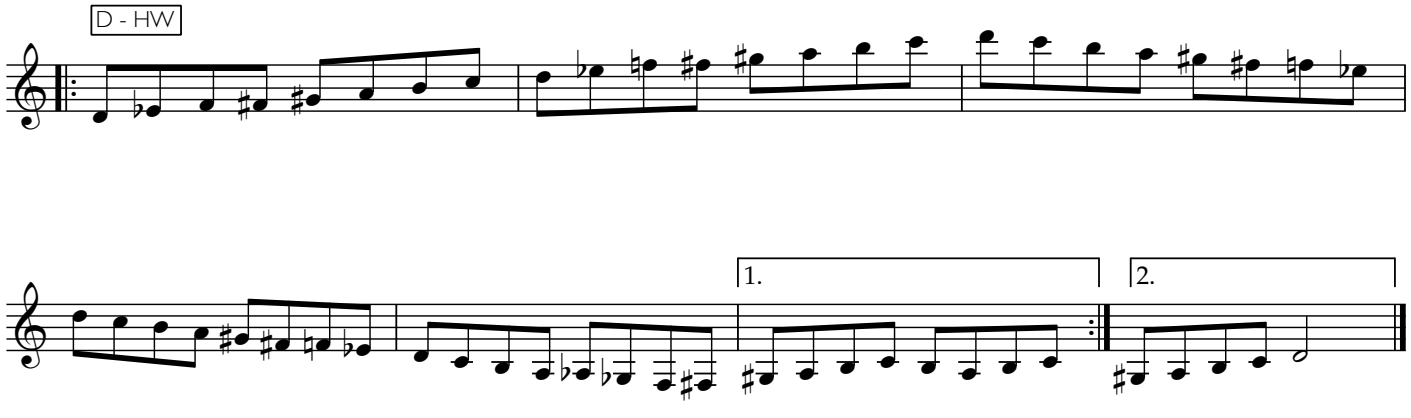

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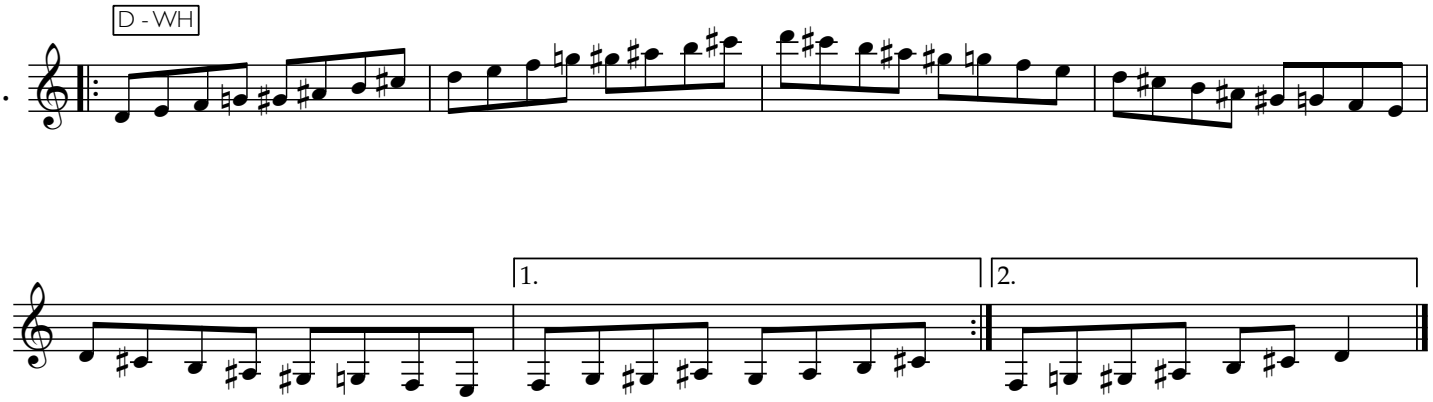

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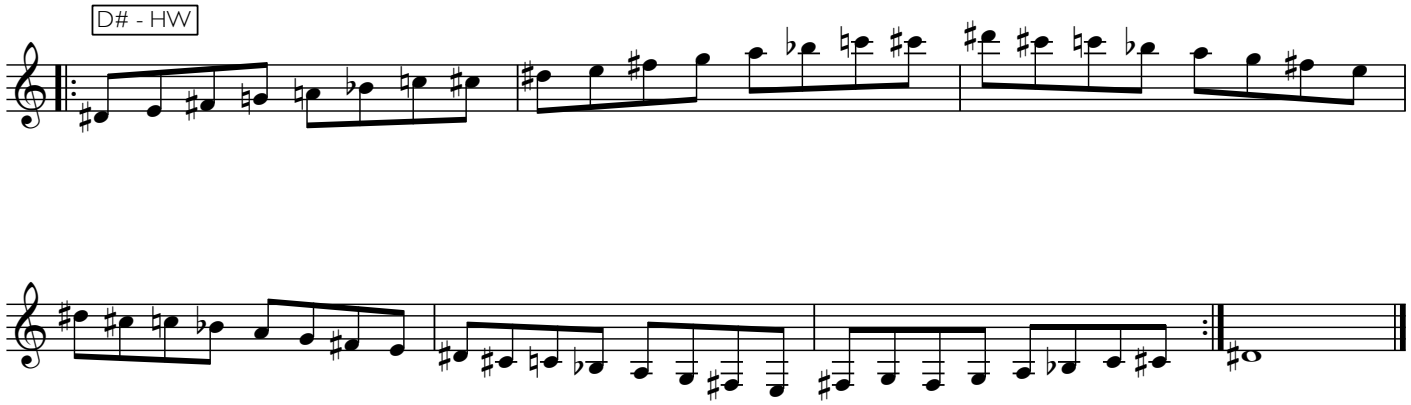
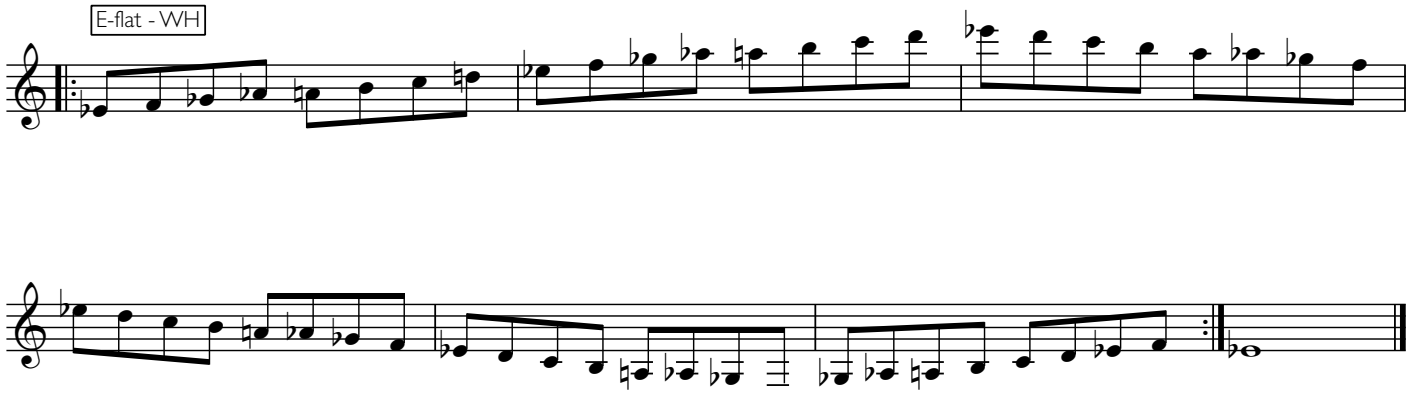


12. E-flat - WH



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Extended Range

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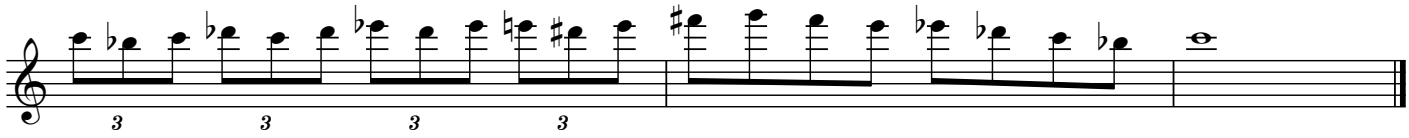

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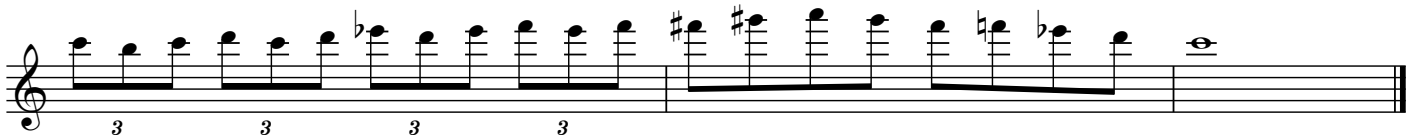

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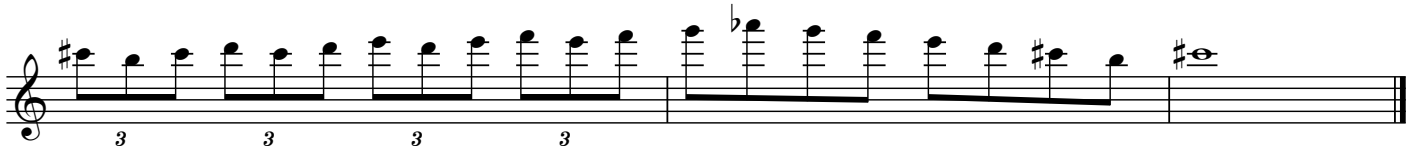

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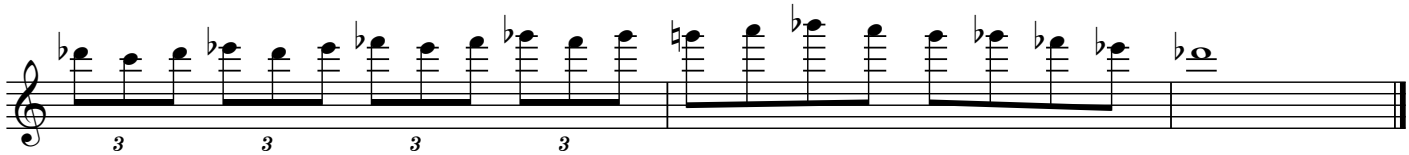

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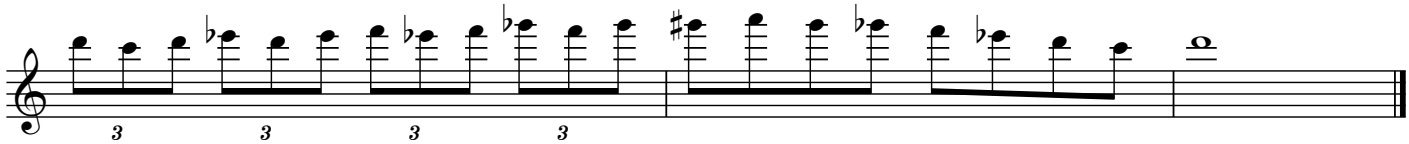

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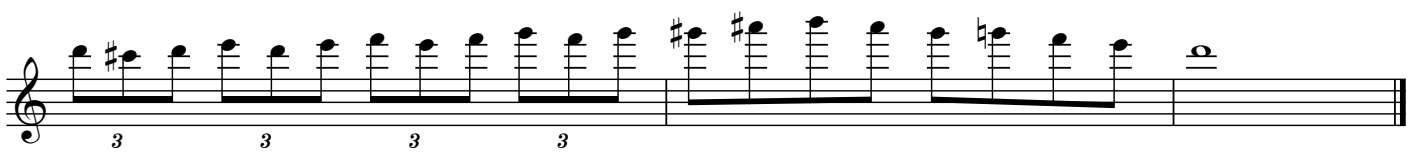

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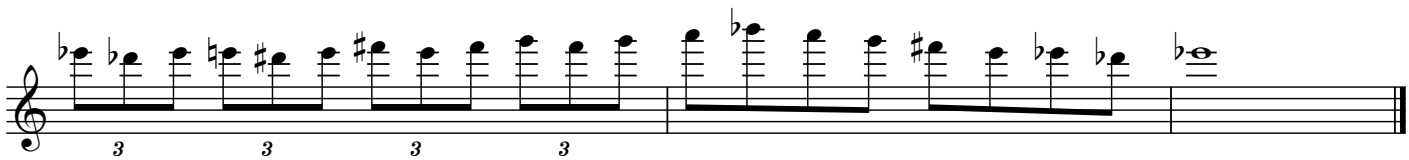

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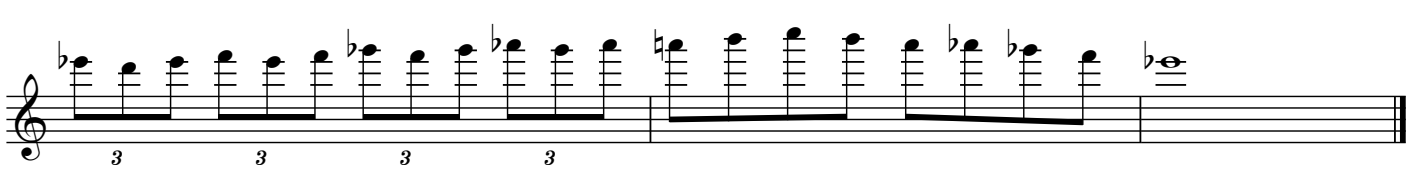

Low C - Extended Range

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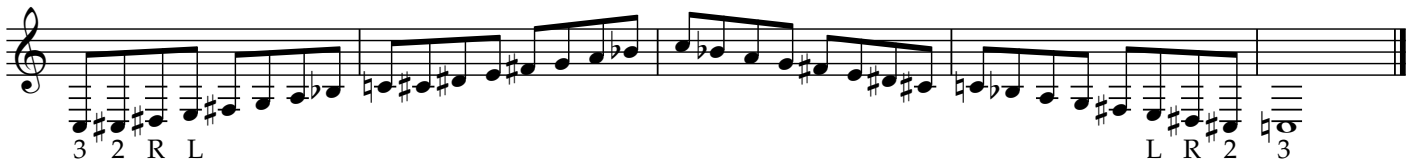

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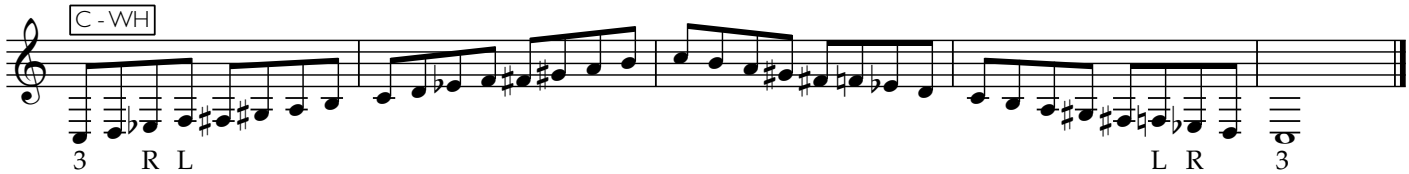

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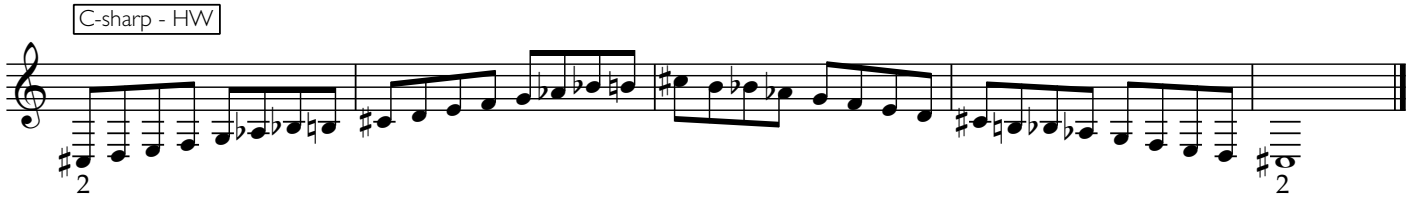

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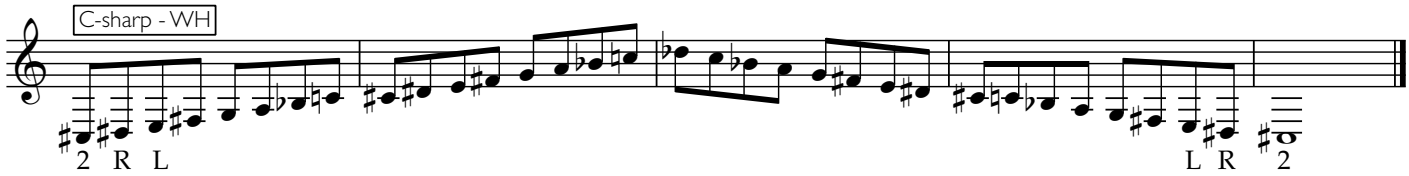

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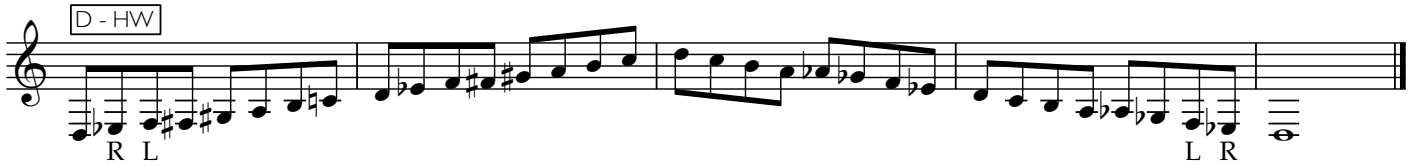

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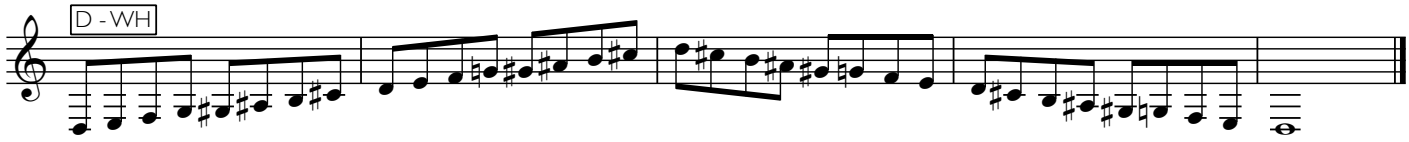

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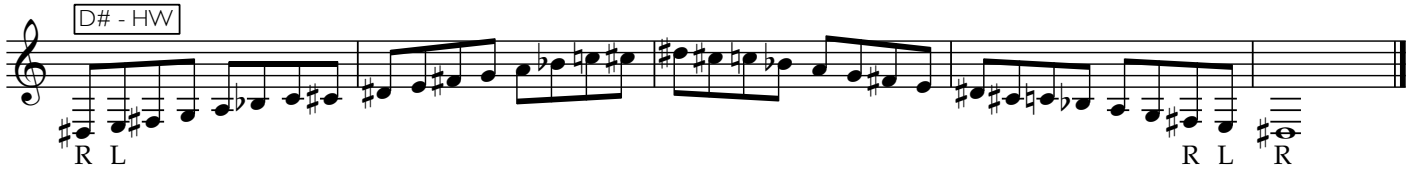
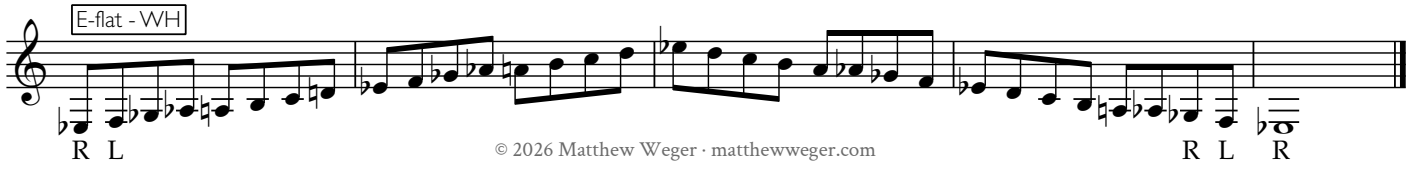


4b. E-flat - WH



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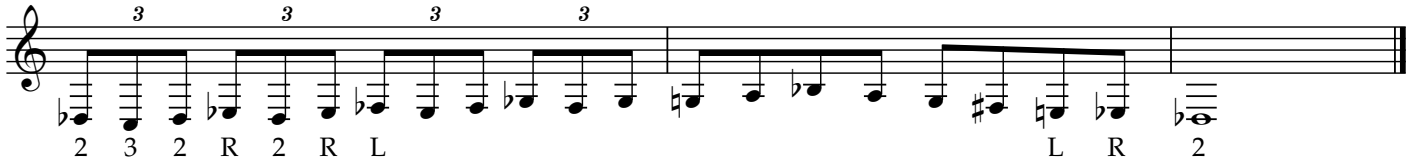

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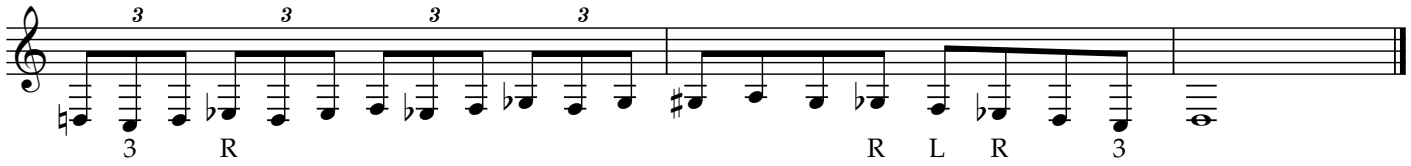

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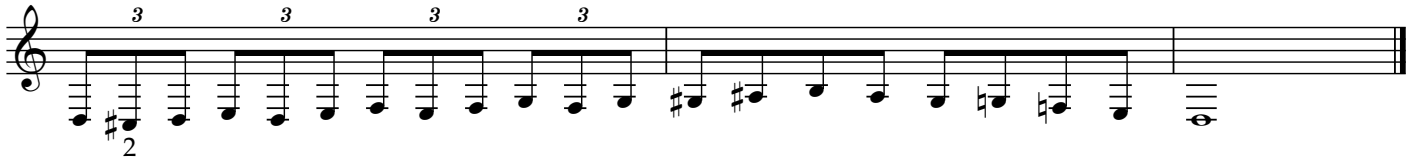

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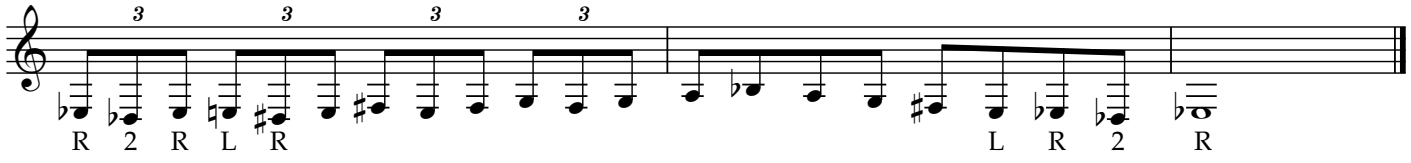

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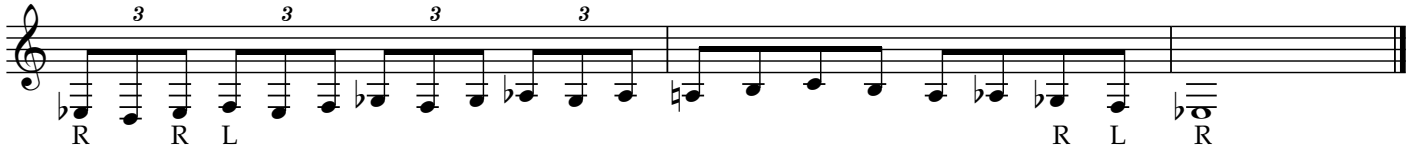

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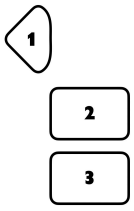

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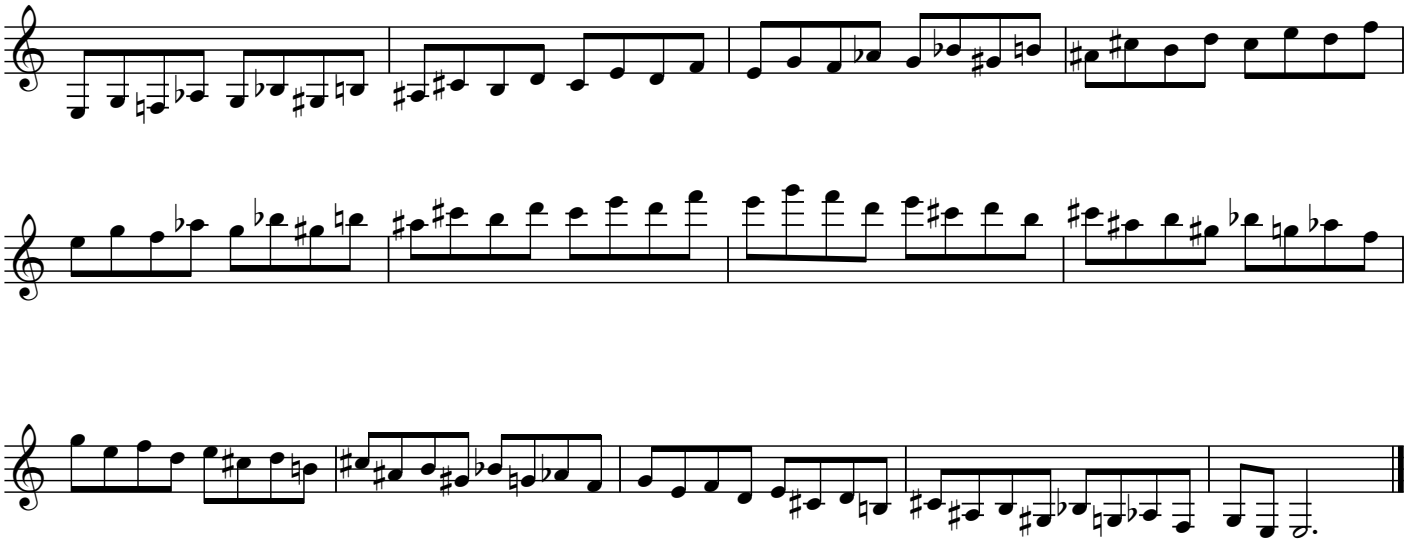

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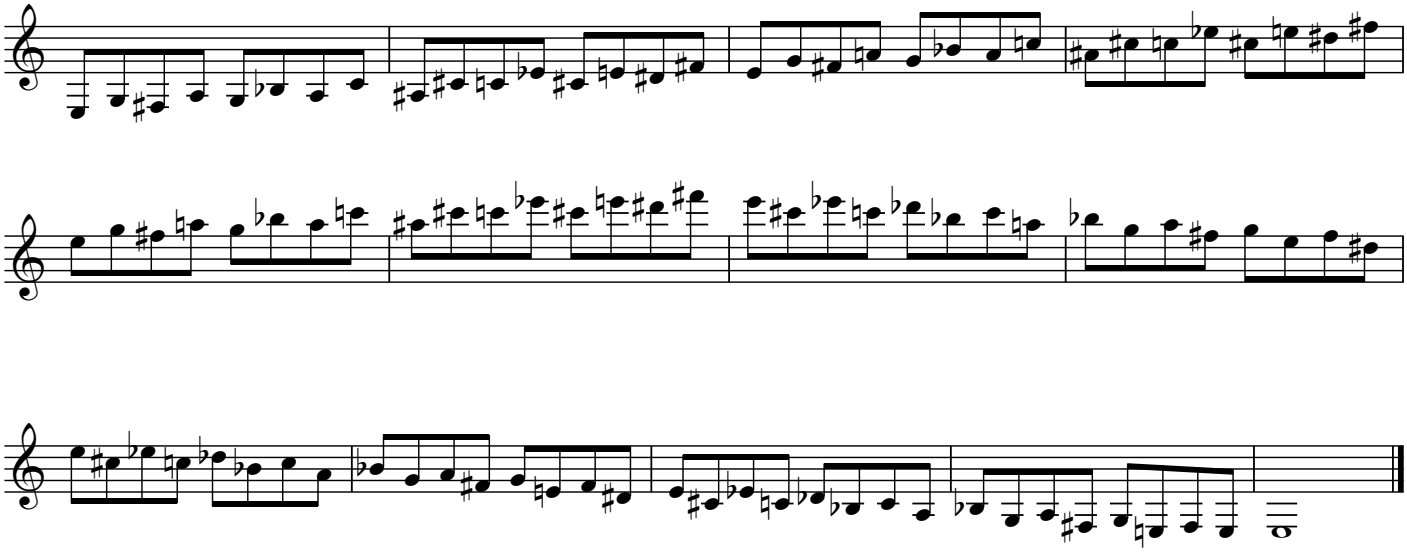

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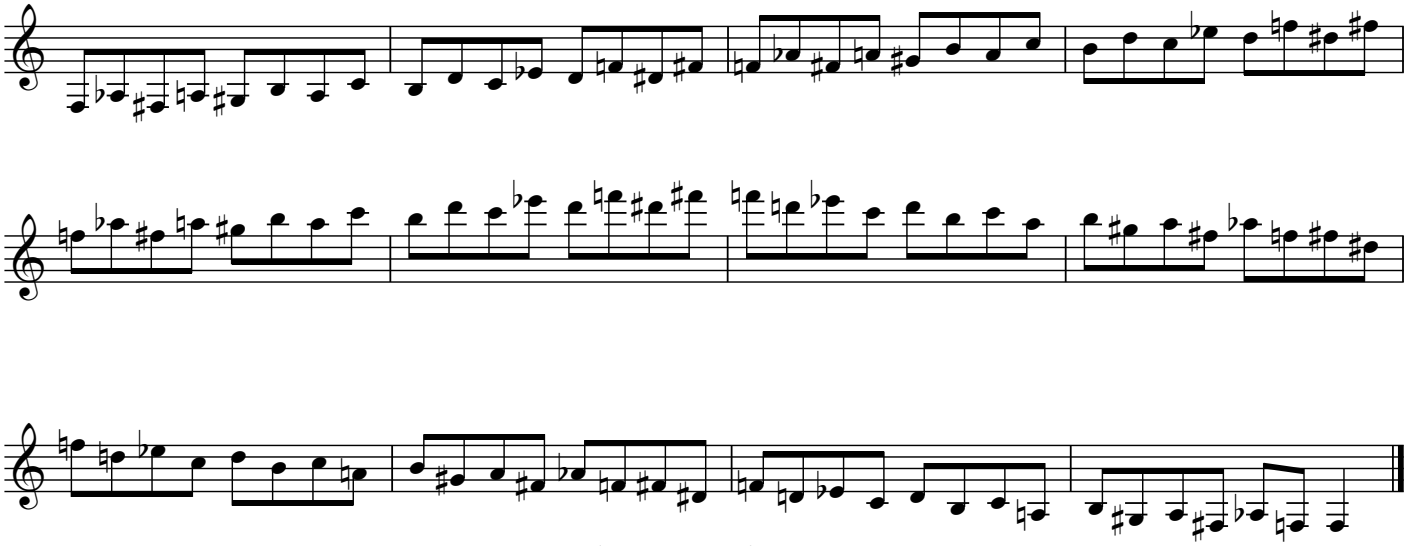

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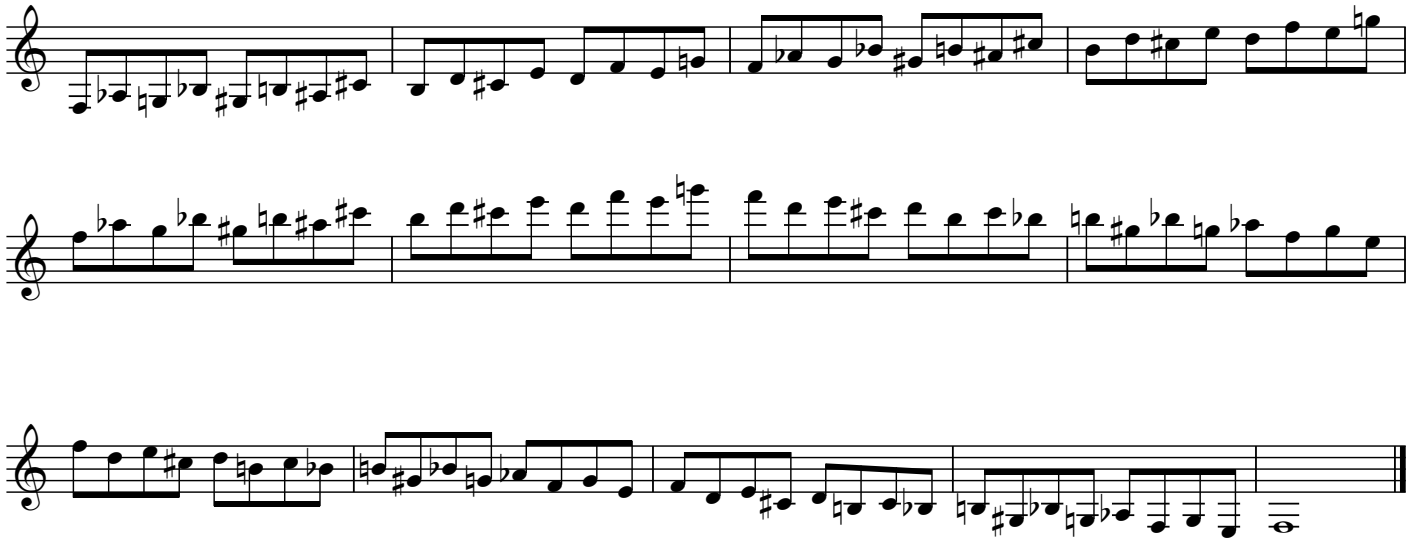

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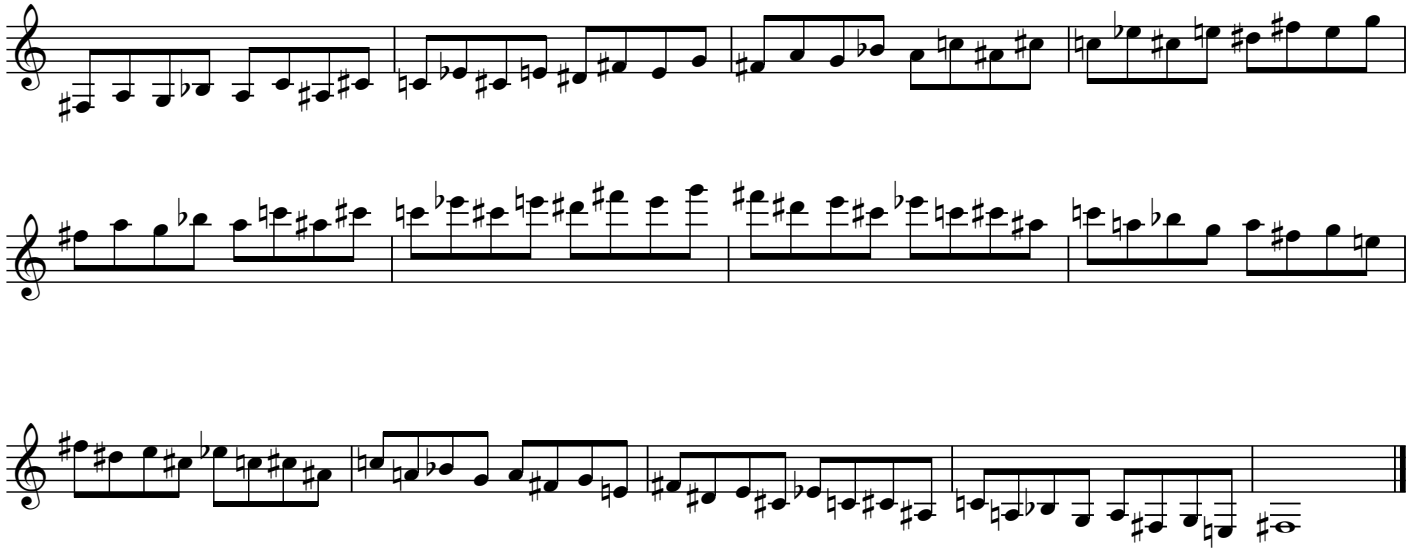

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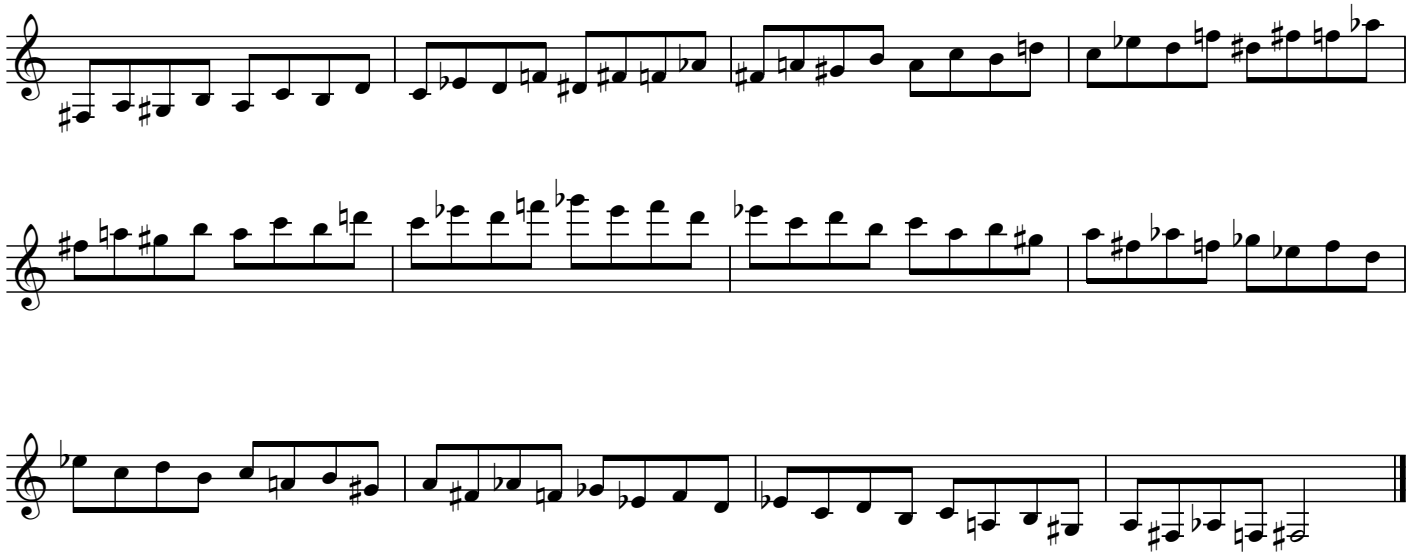

Fourths

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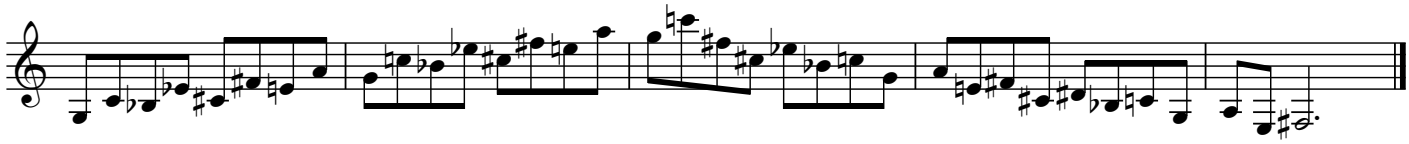

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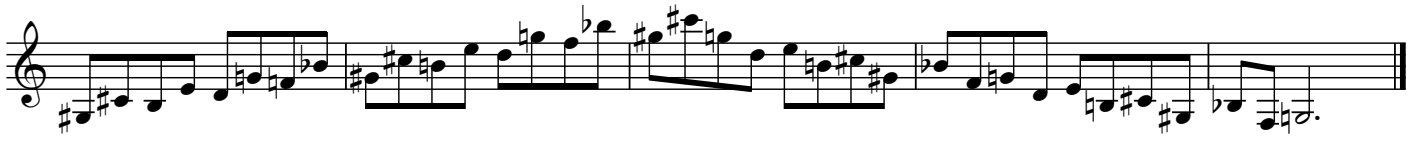

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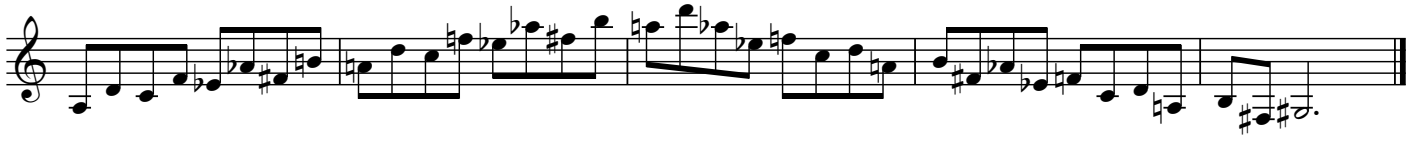

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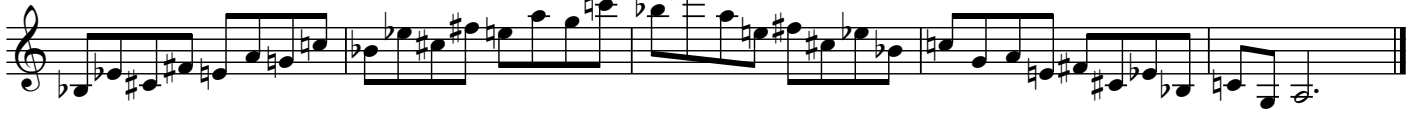

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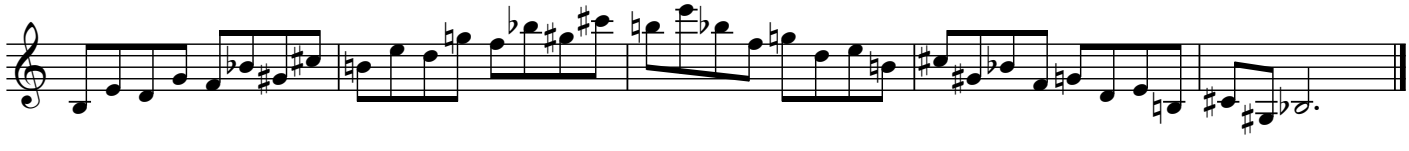

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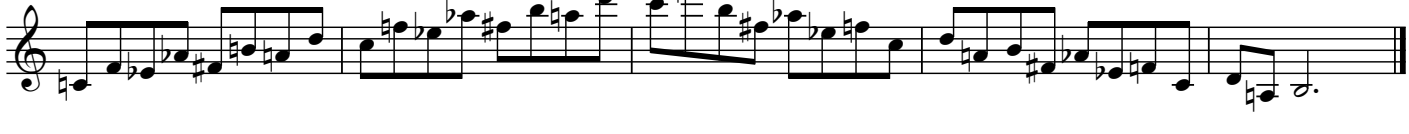

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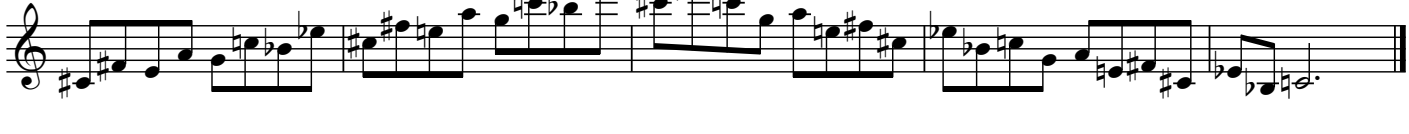

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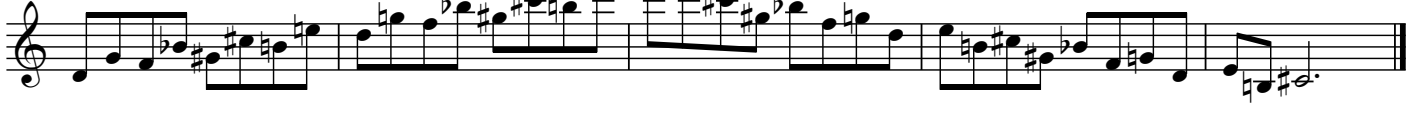

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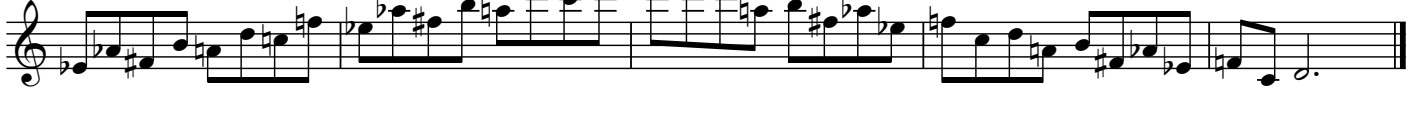

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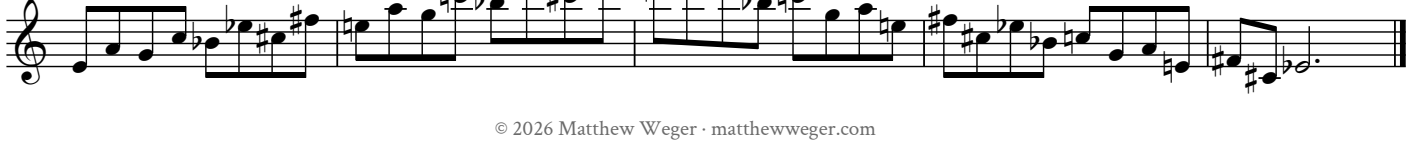

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Fully Diminished 7th chords

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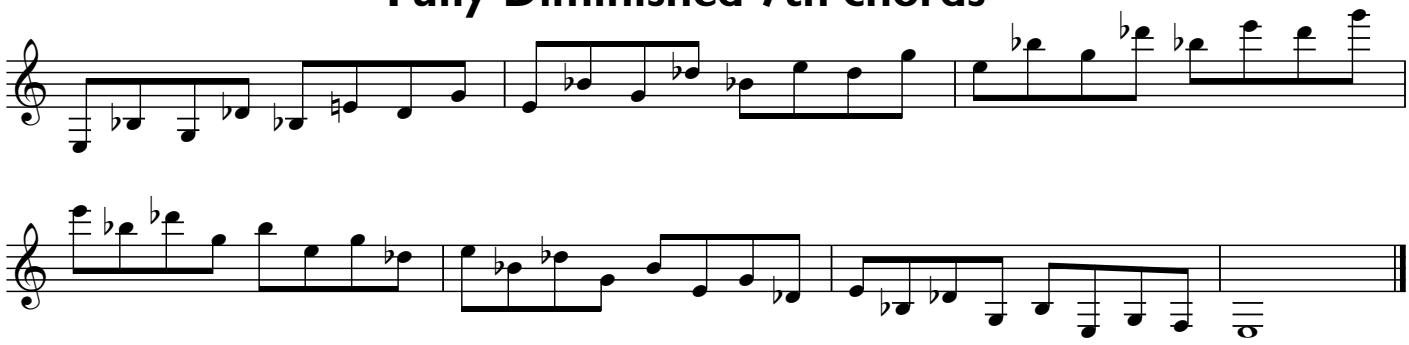

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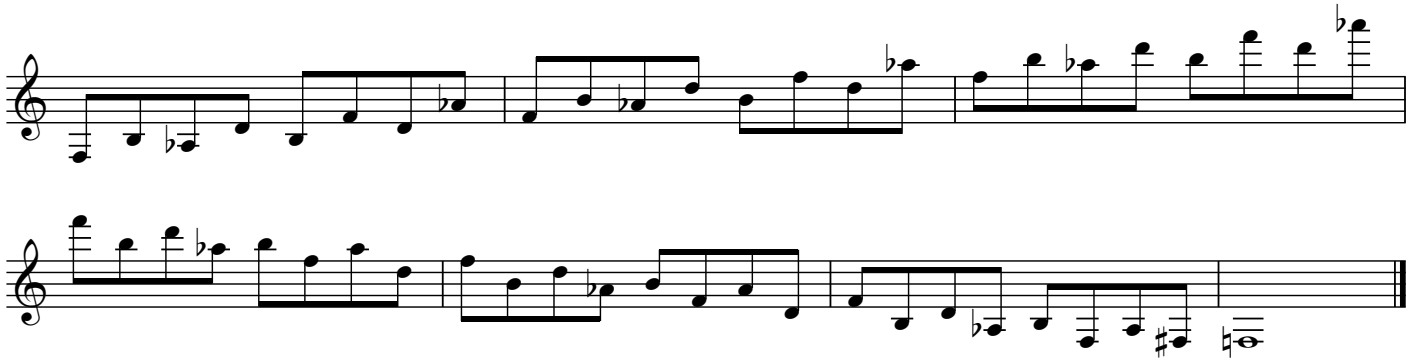

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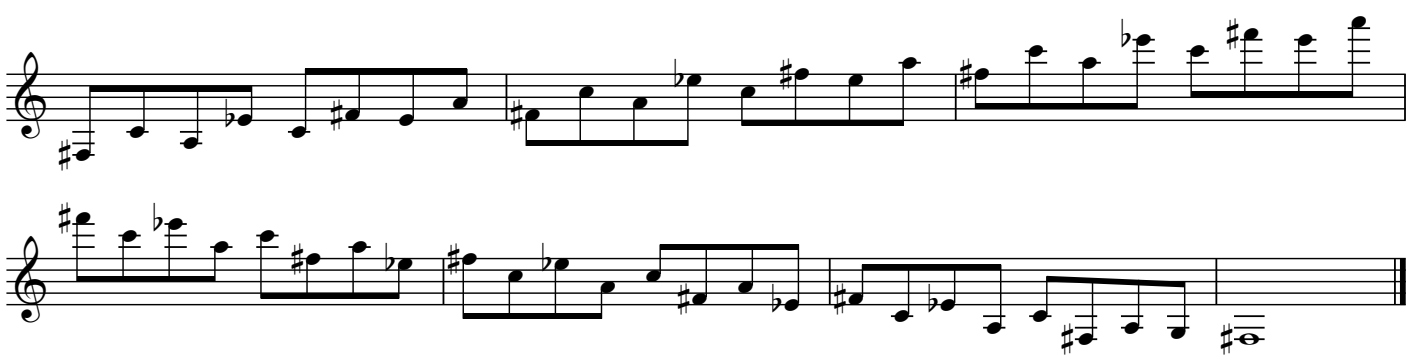
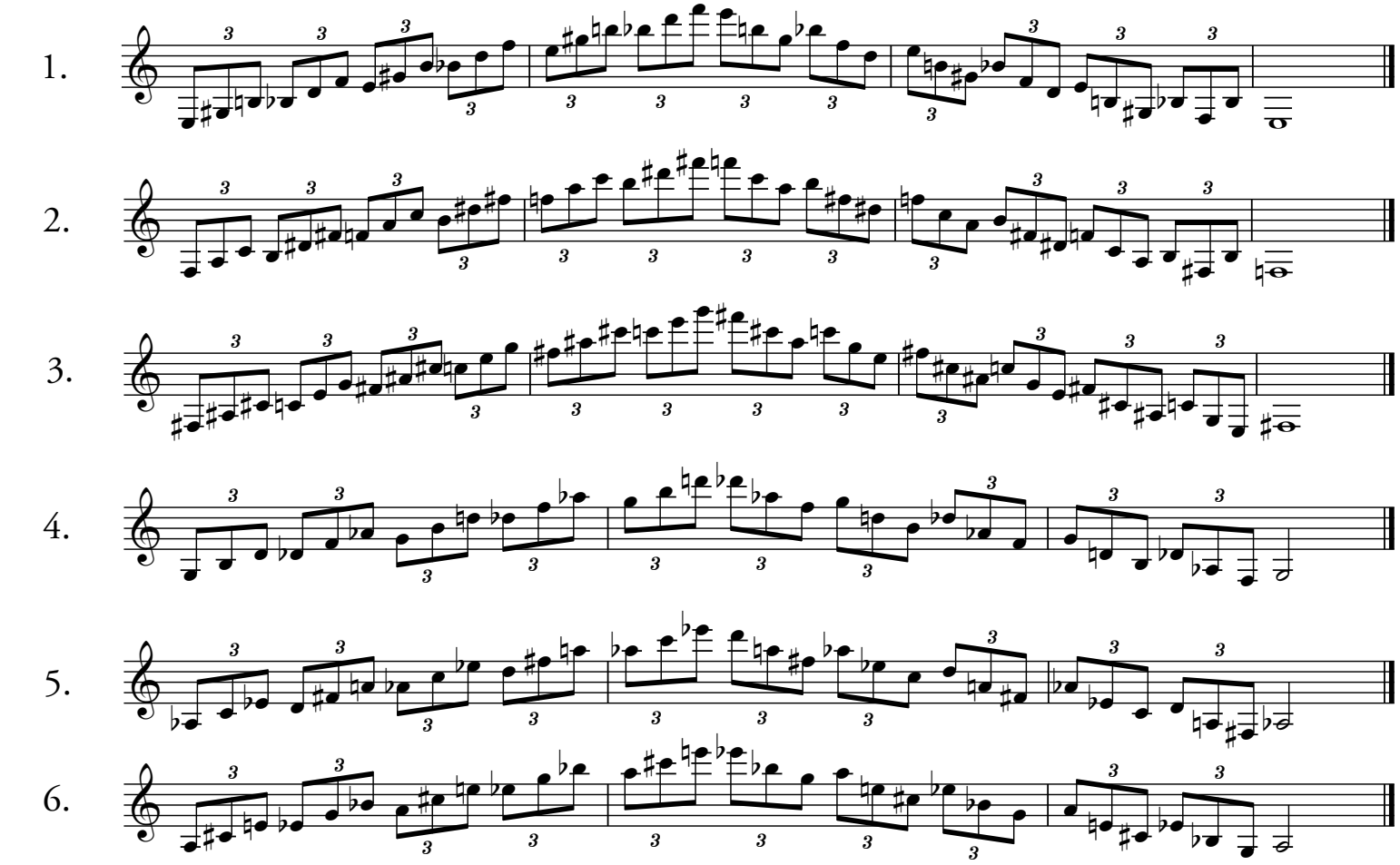
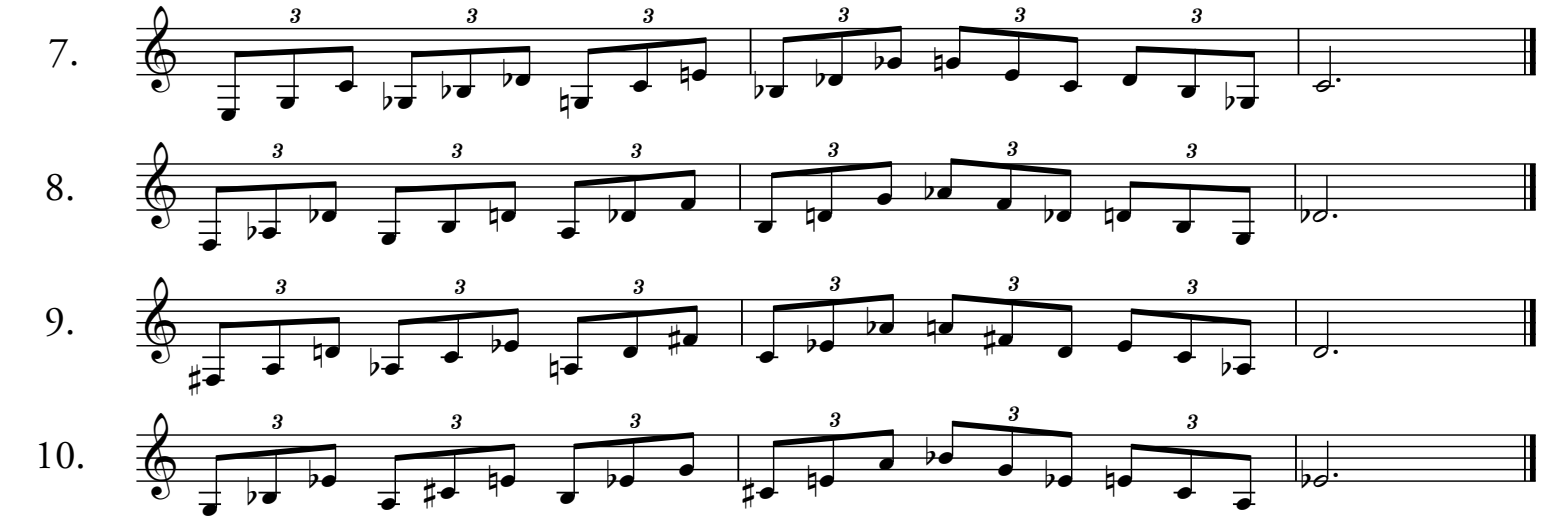


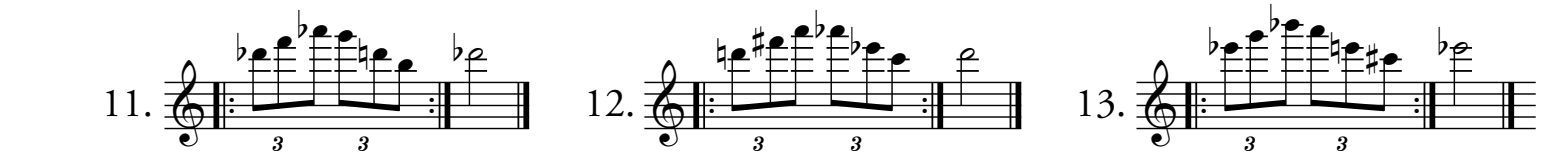
Major Triads Related by Tritones



Chalumeau



Altissimo



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Minor Chords

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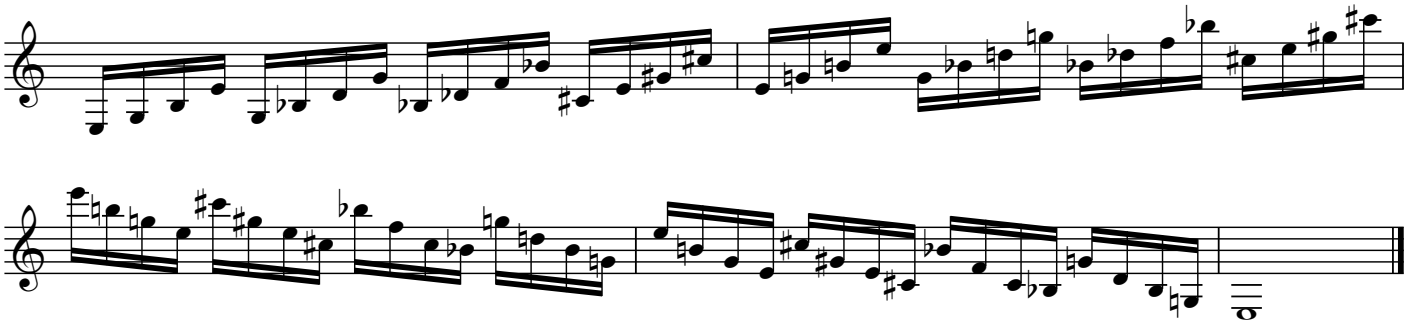

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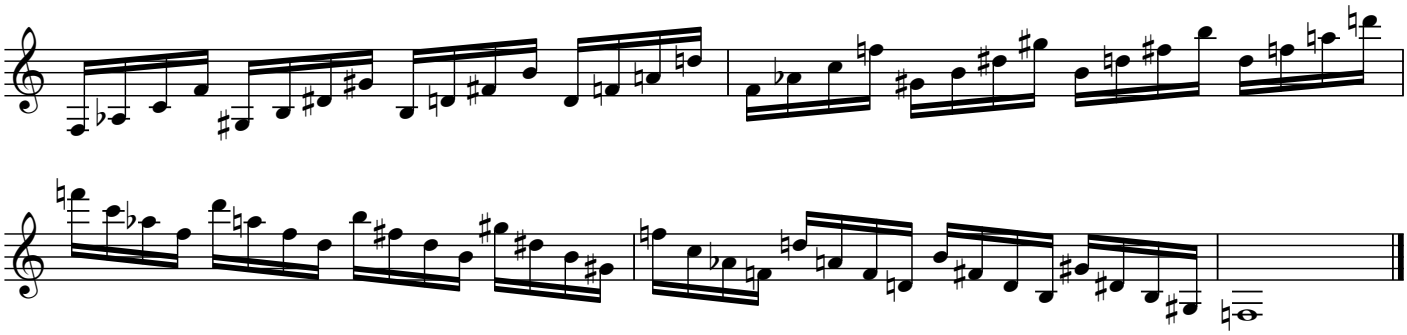

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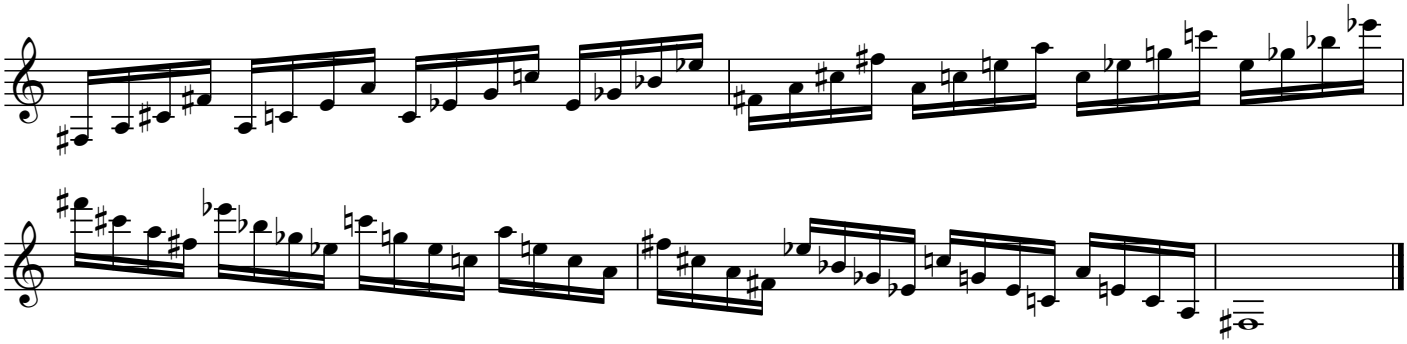

Major Chords

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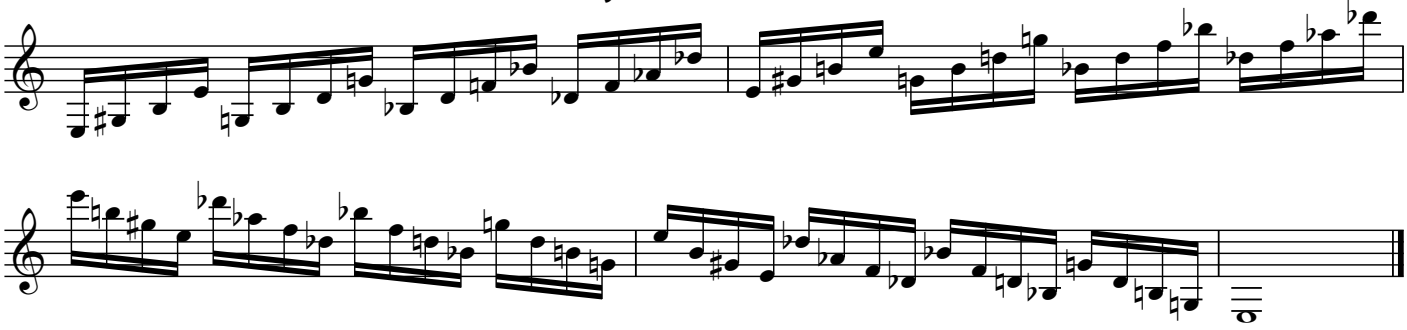

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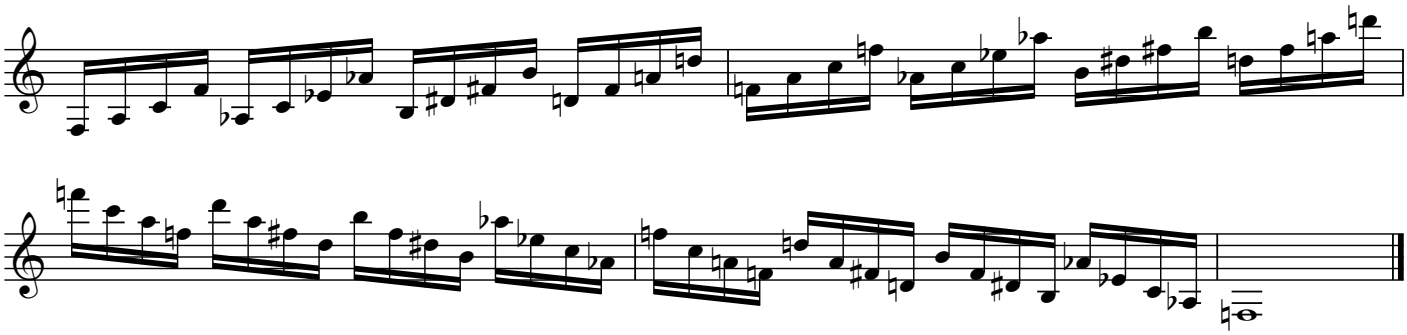

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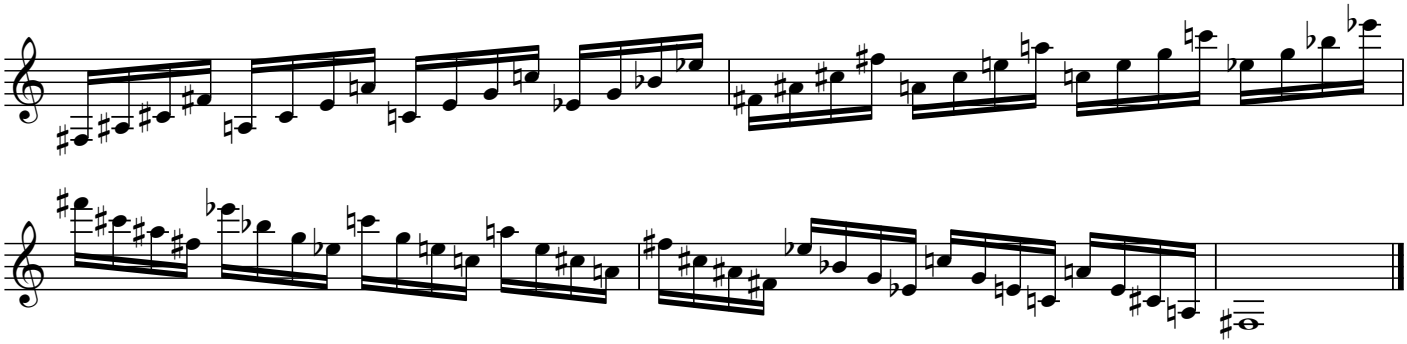

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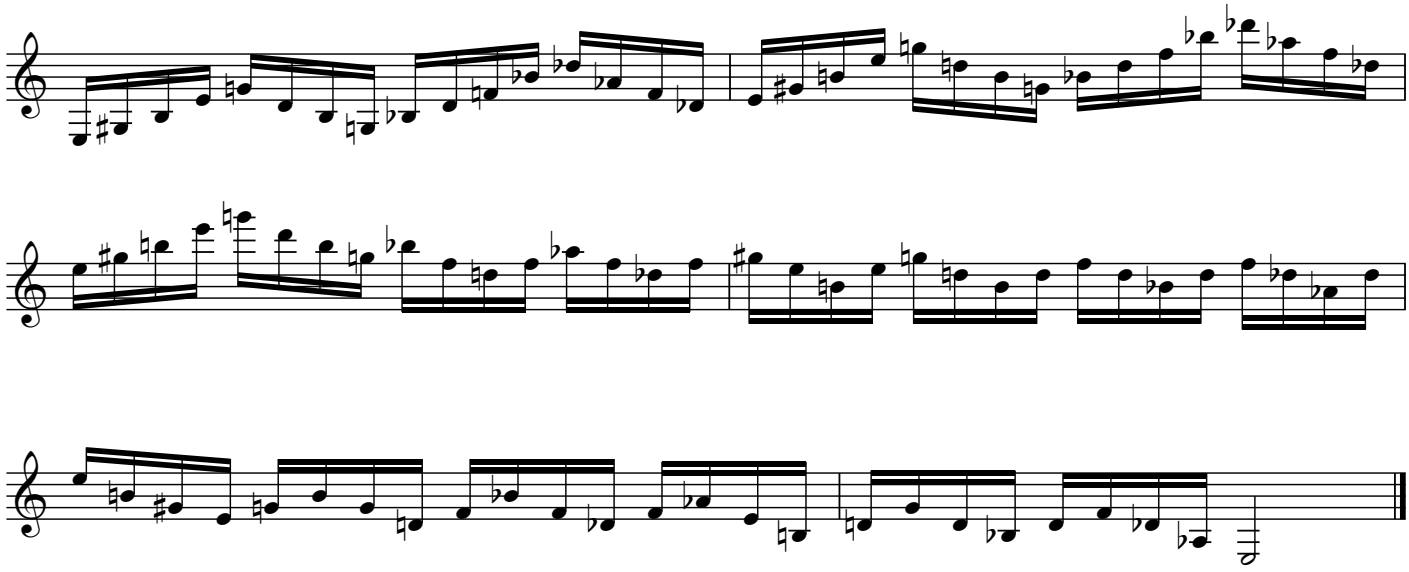

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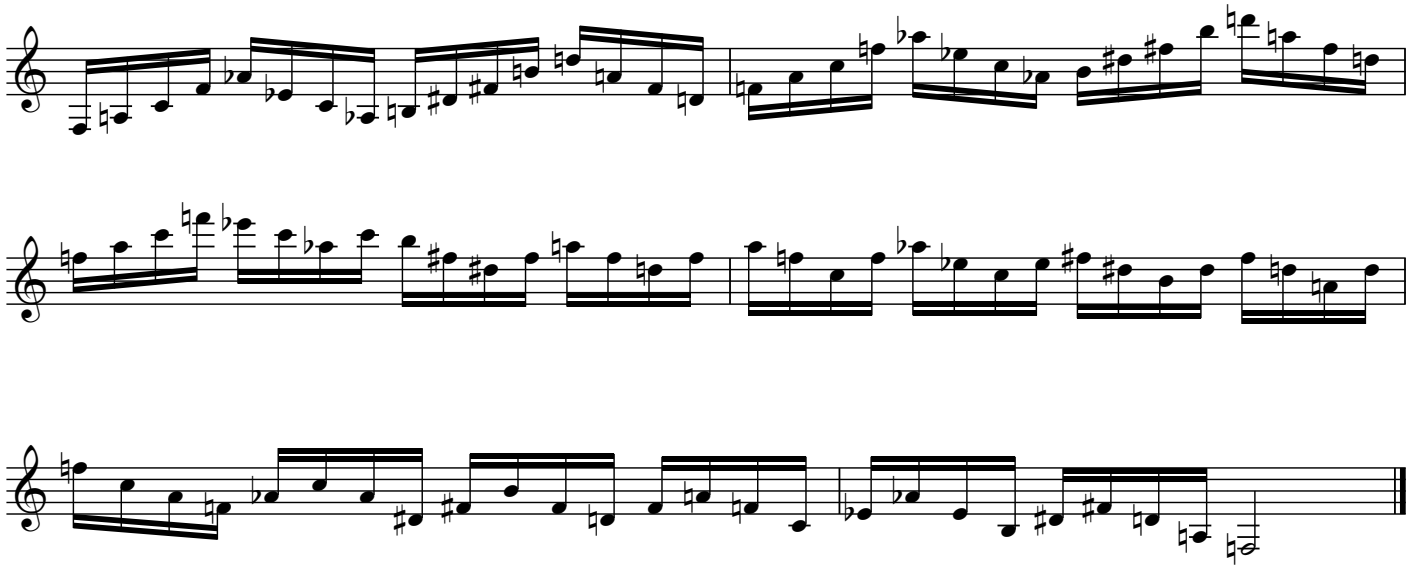

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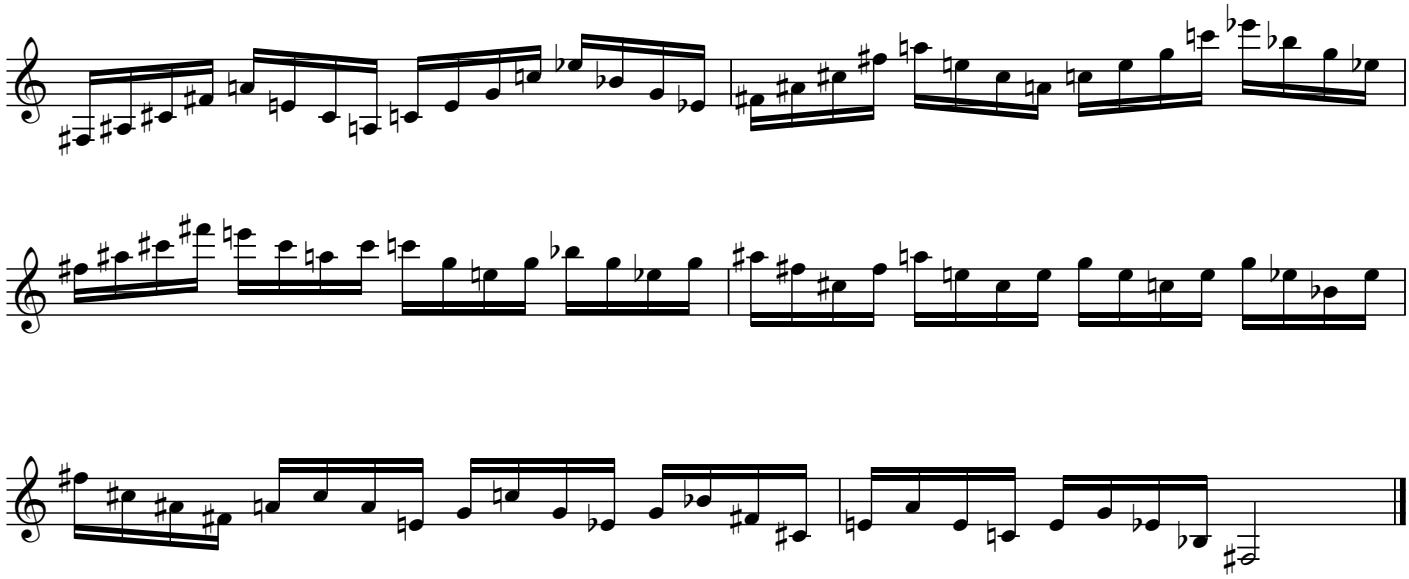

Misc. Chords (Major-Flat 5)

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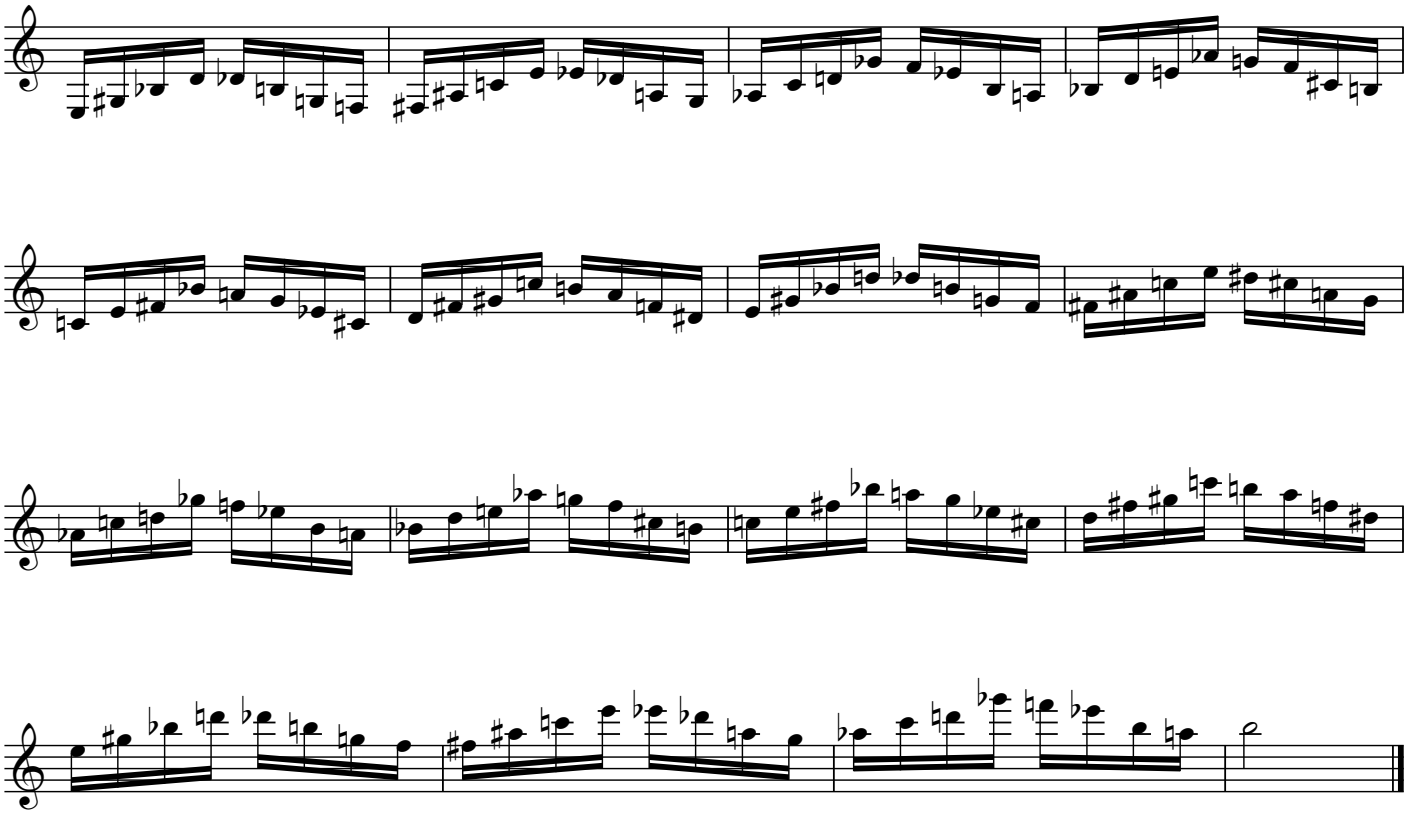

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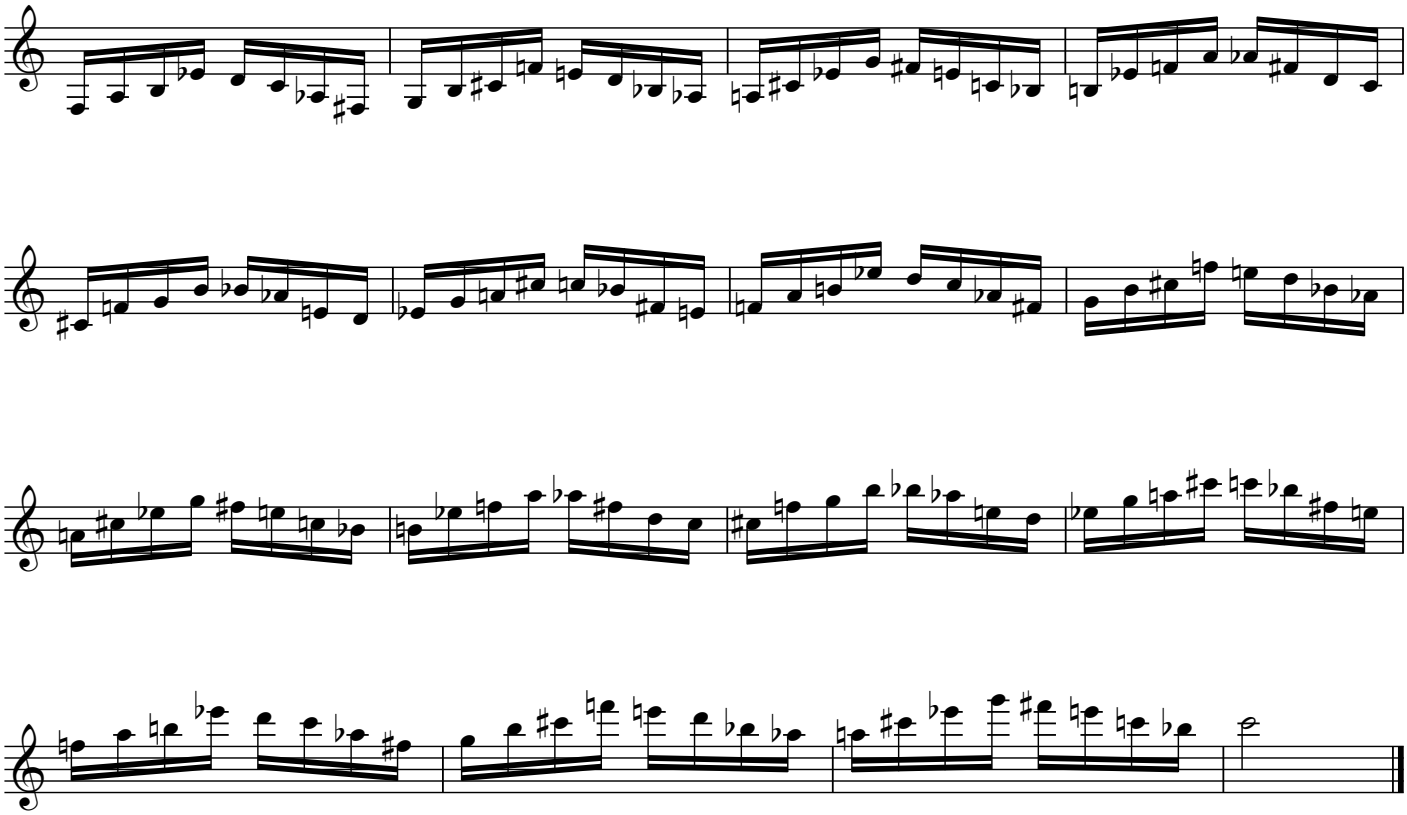

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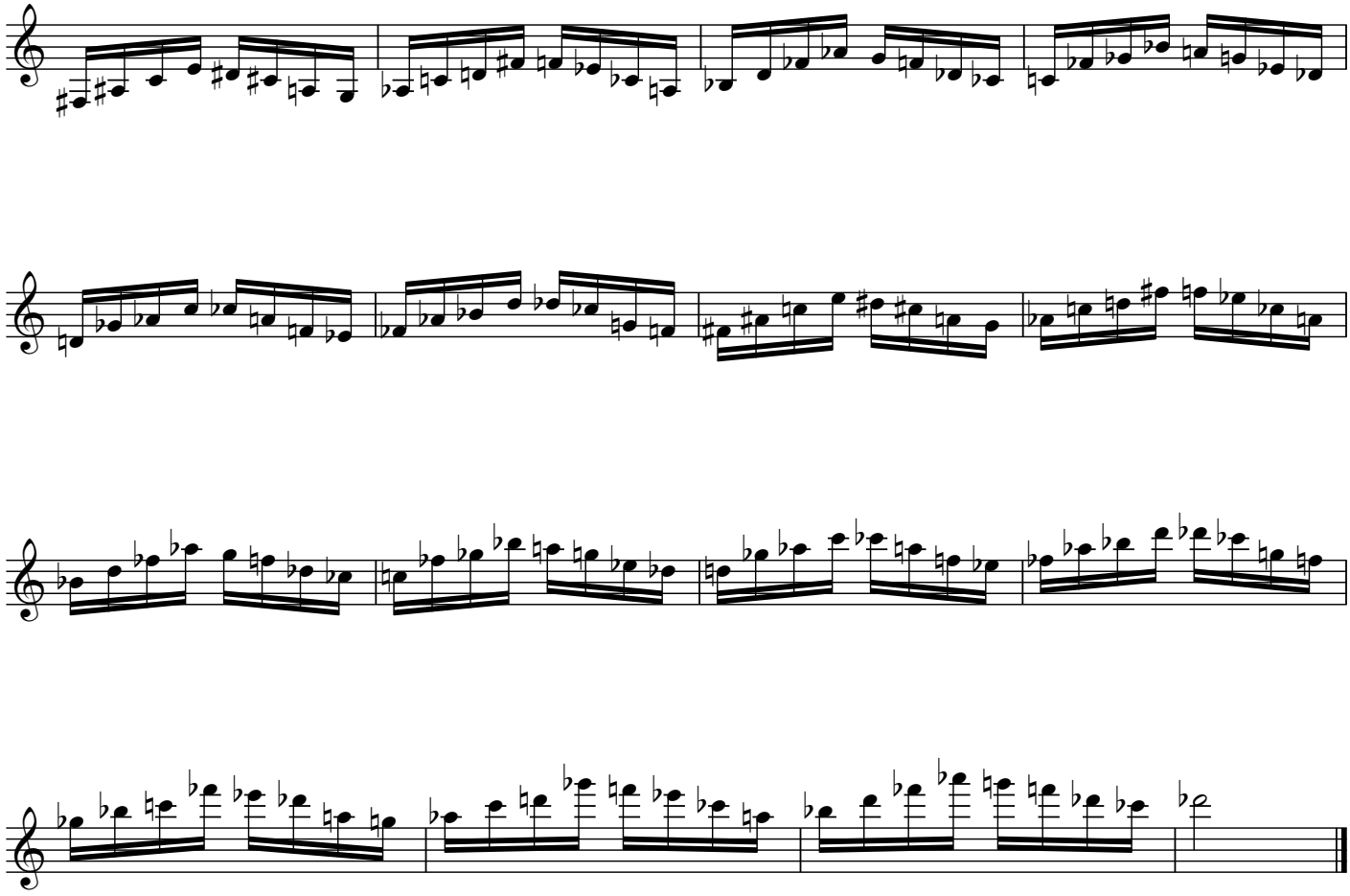

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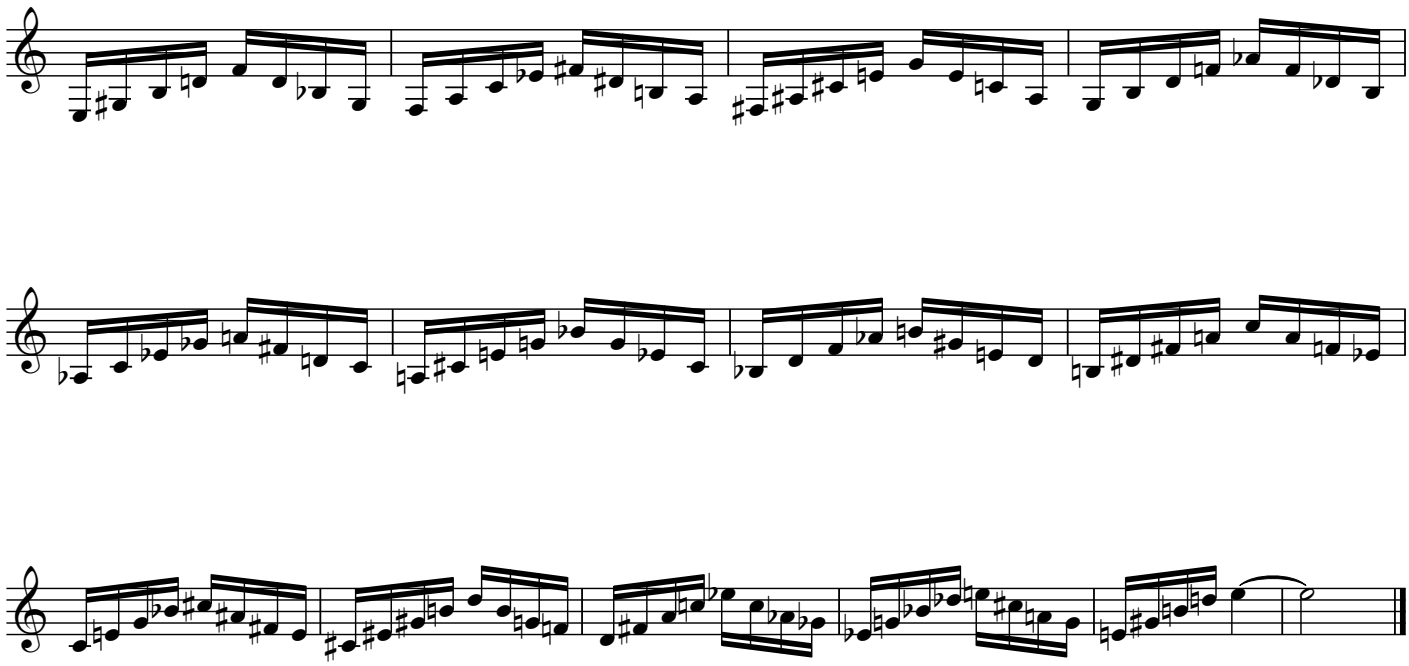
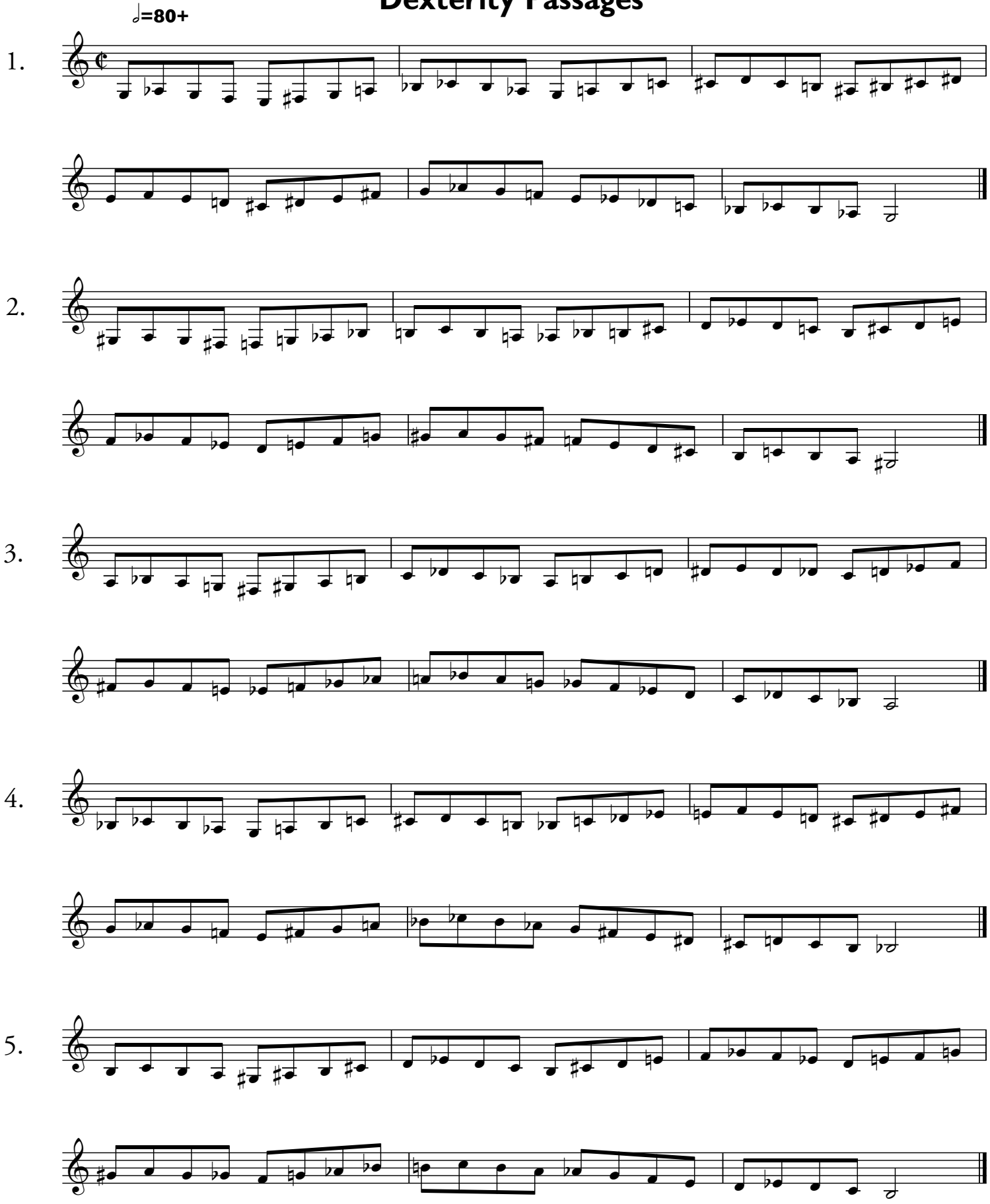


Dexterity Passages



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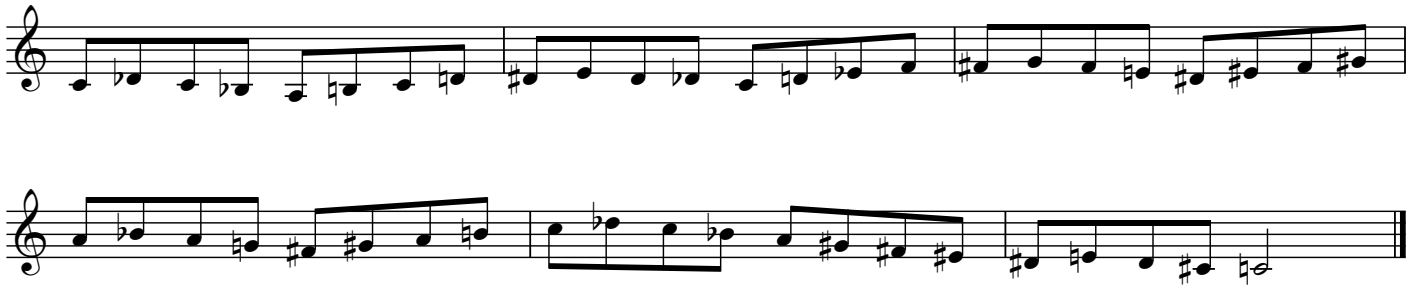

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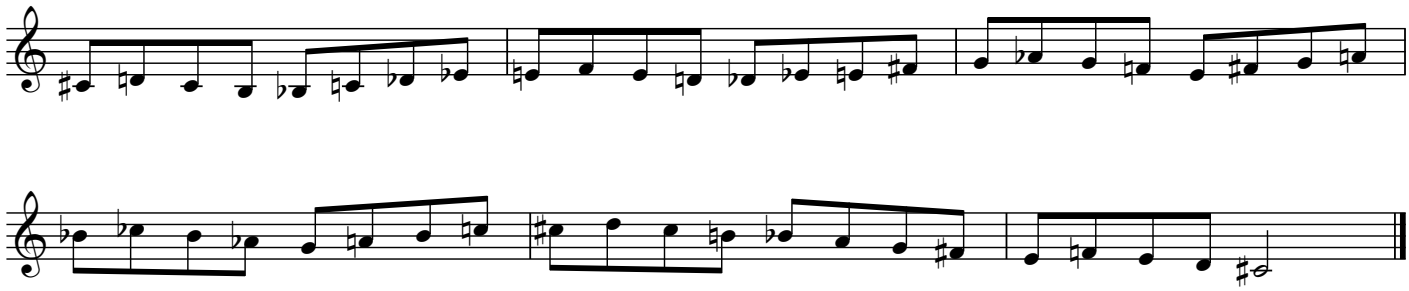

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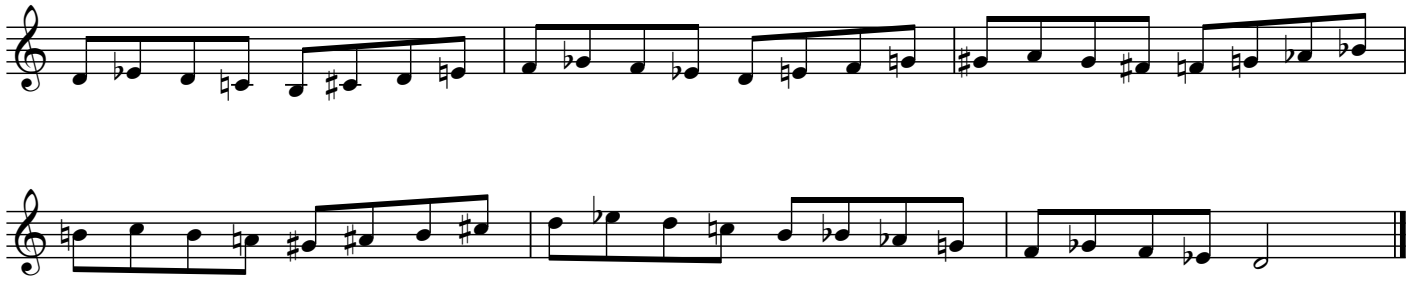

Misc. Patterns

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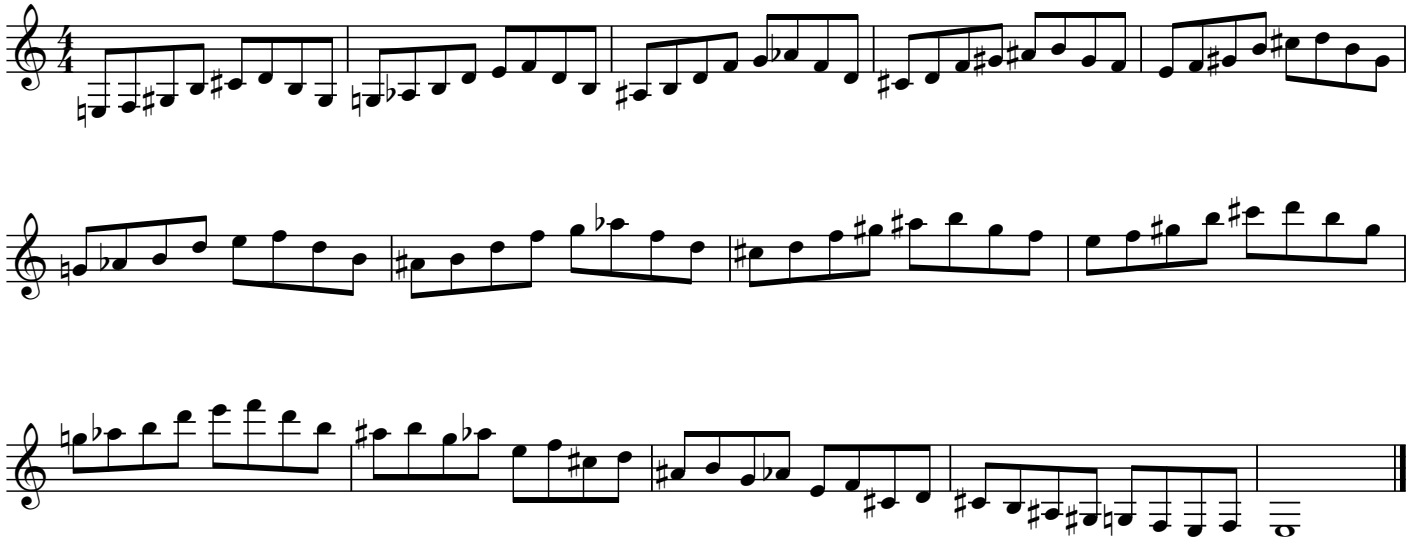

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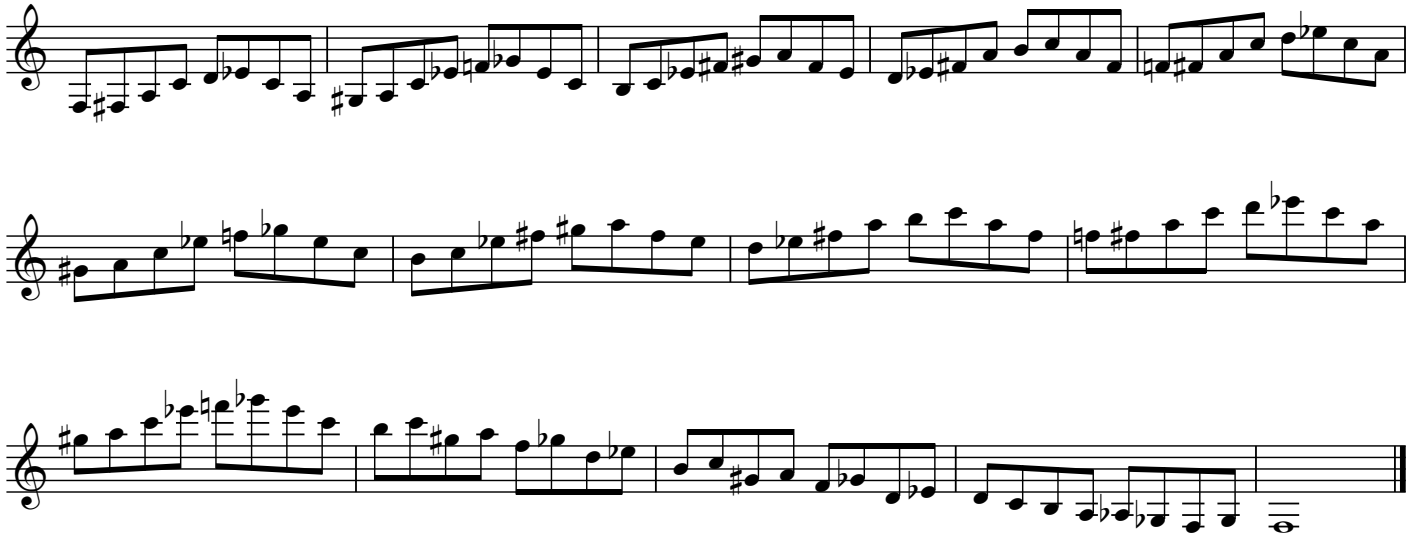

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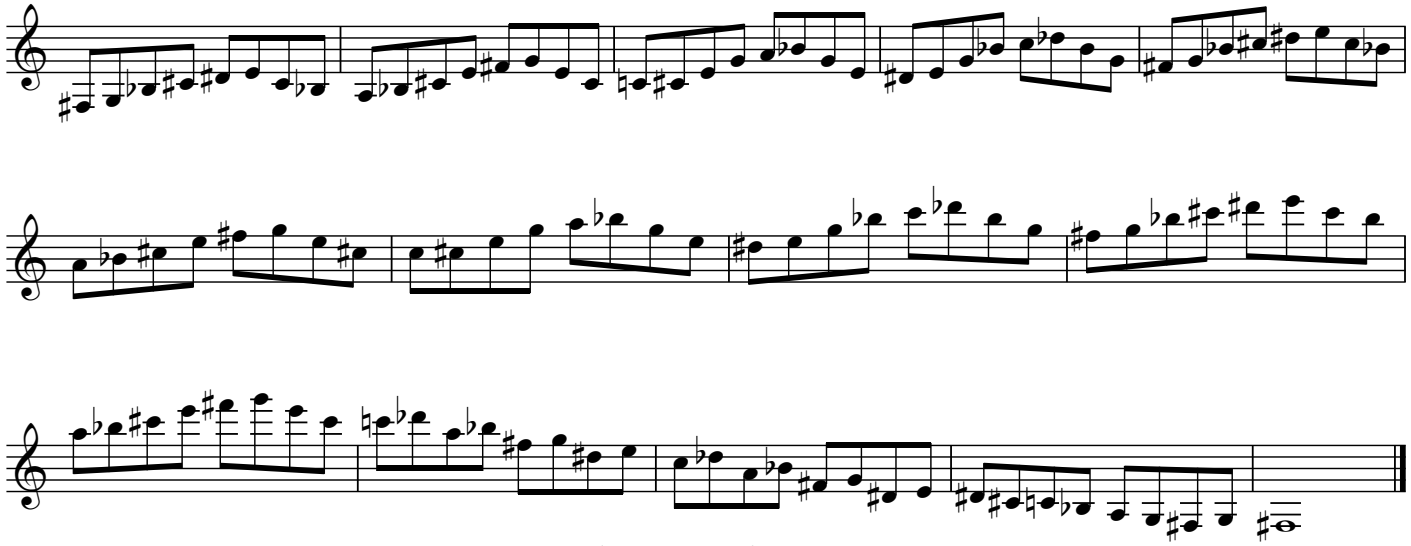

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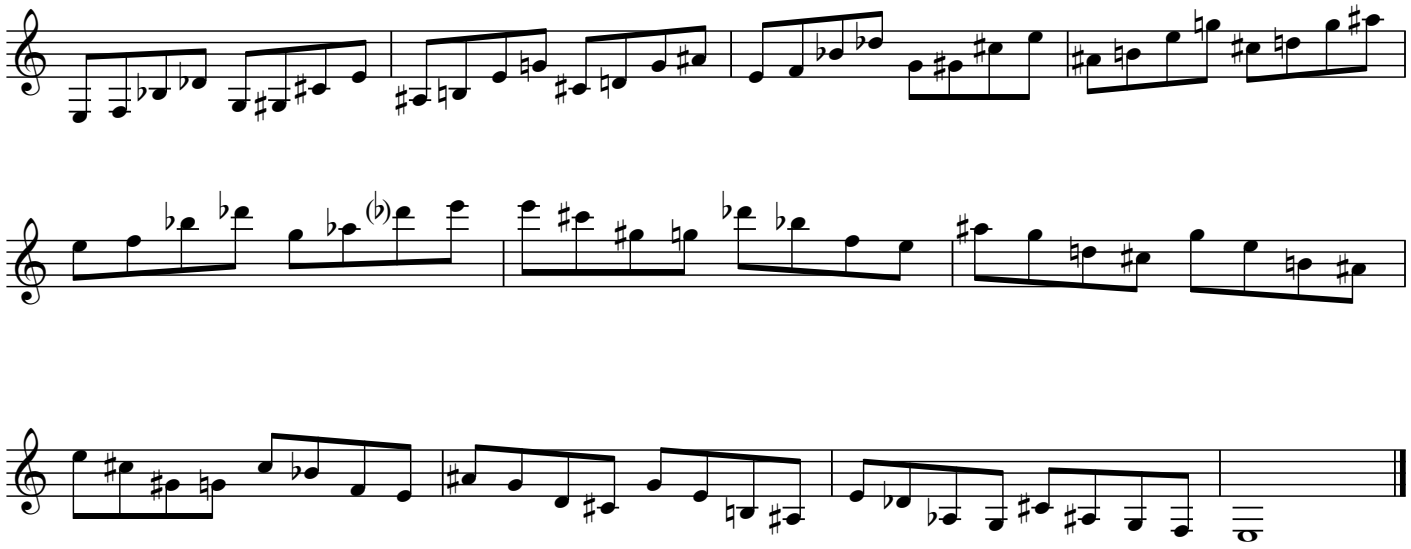

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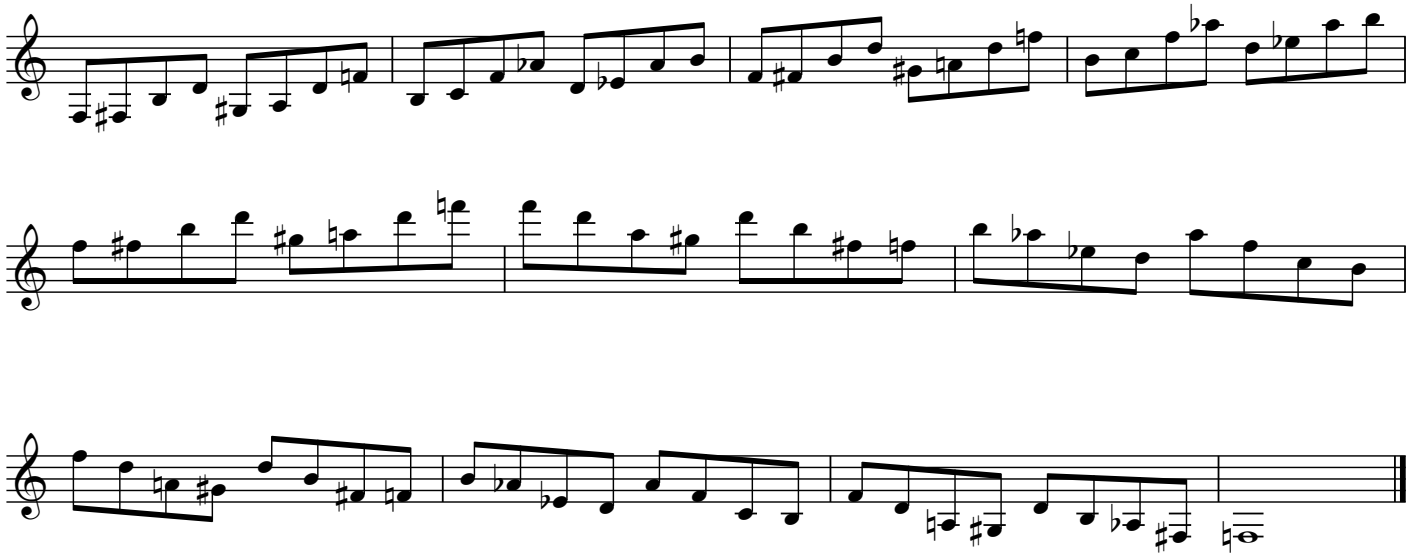

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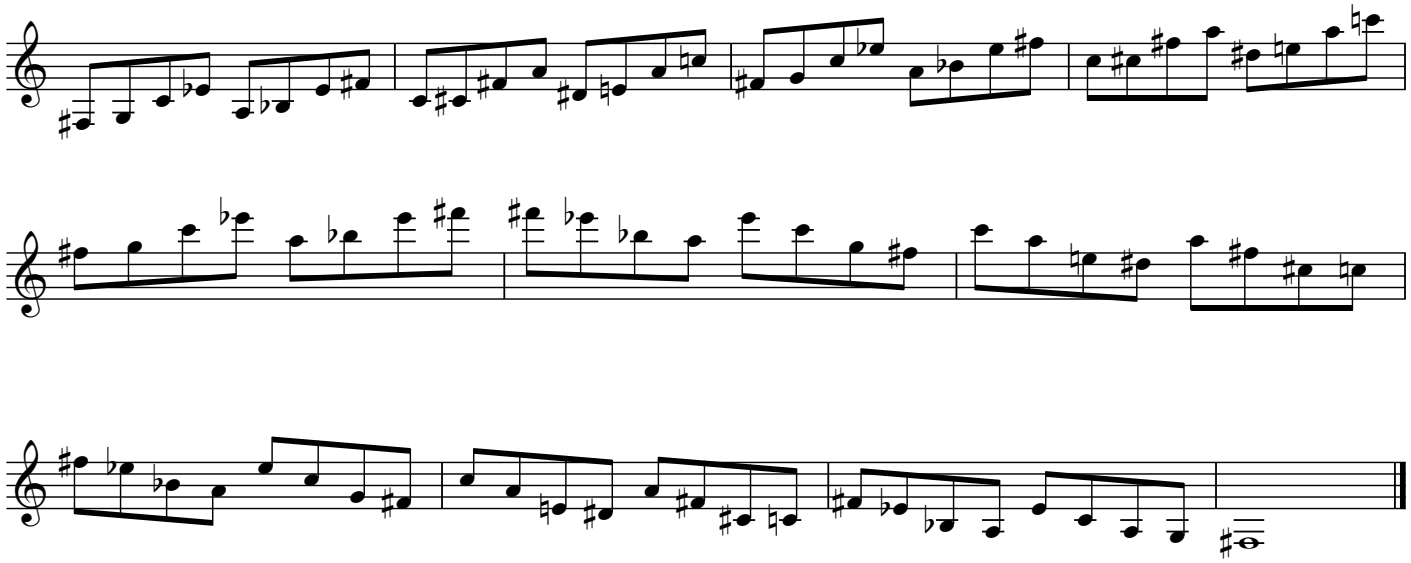

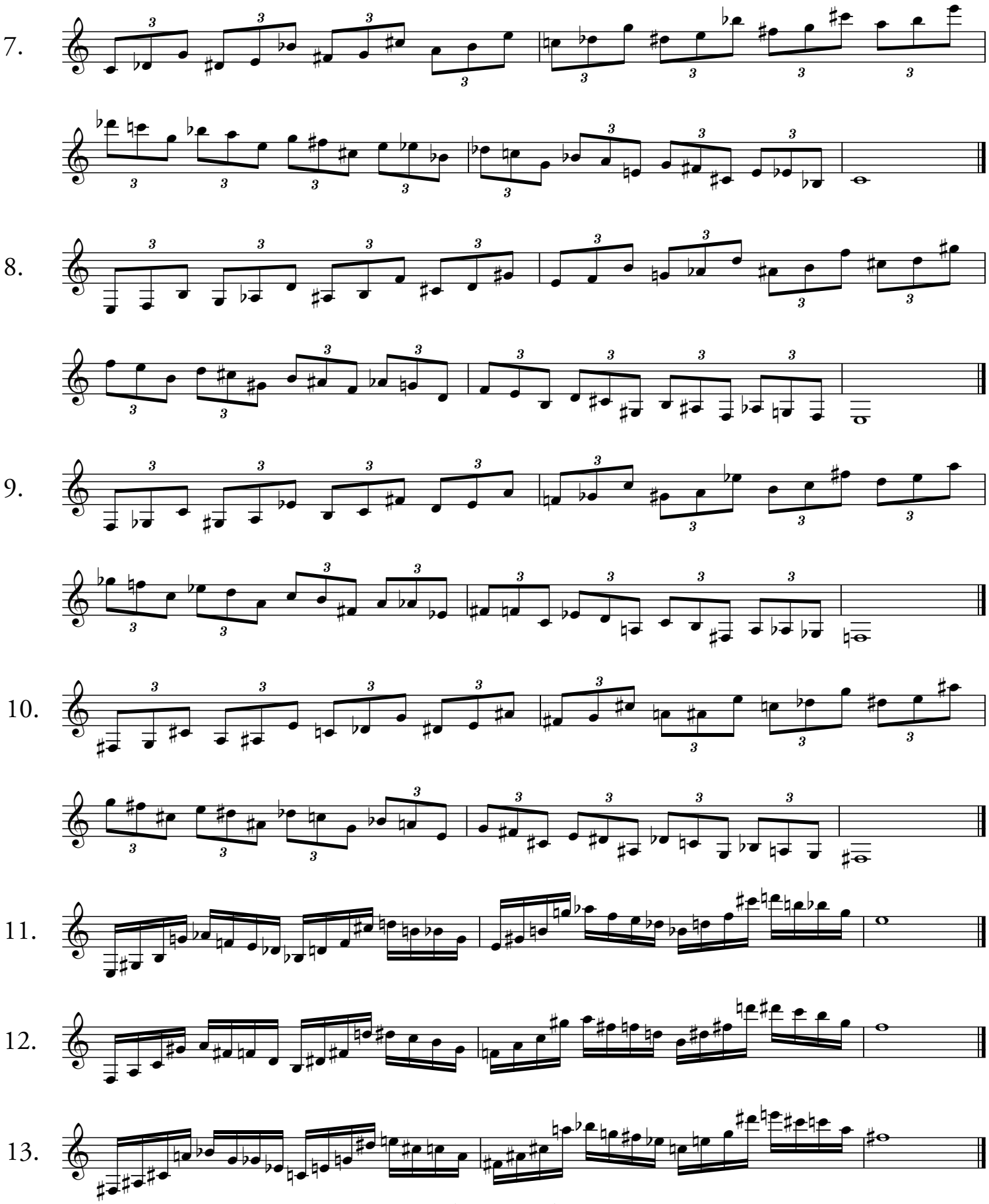

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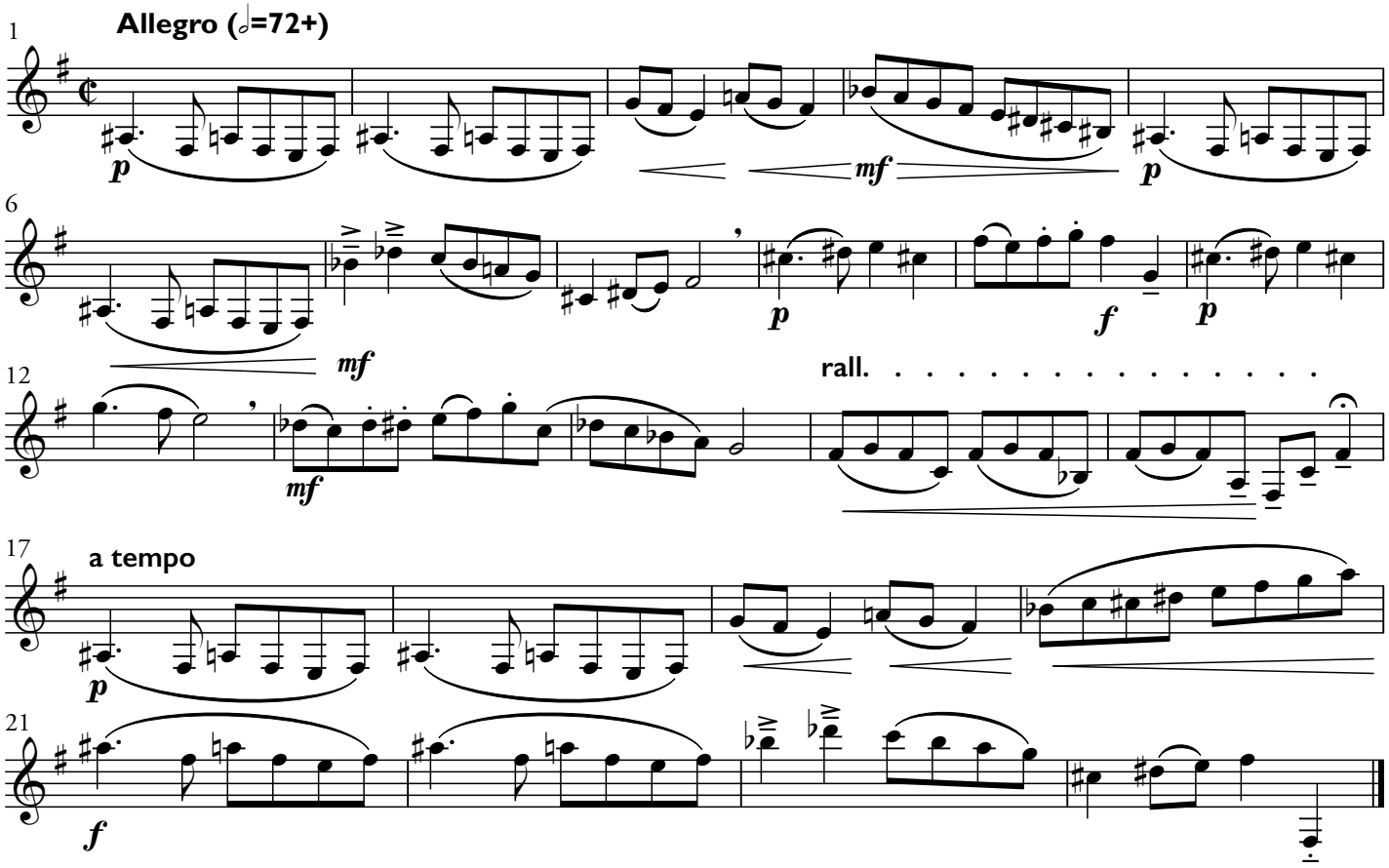
Étude 1

Matthew Weger



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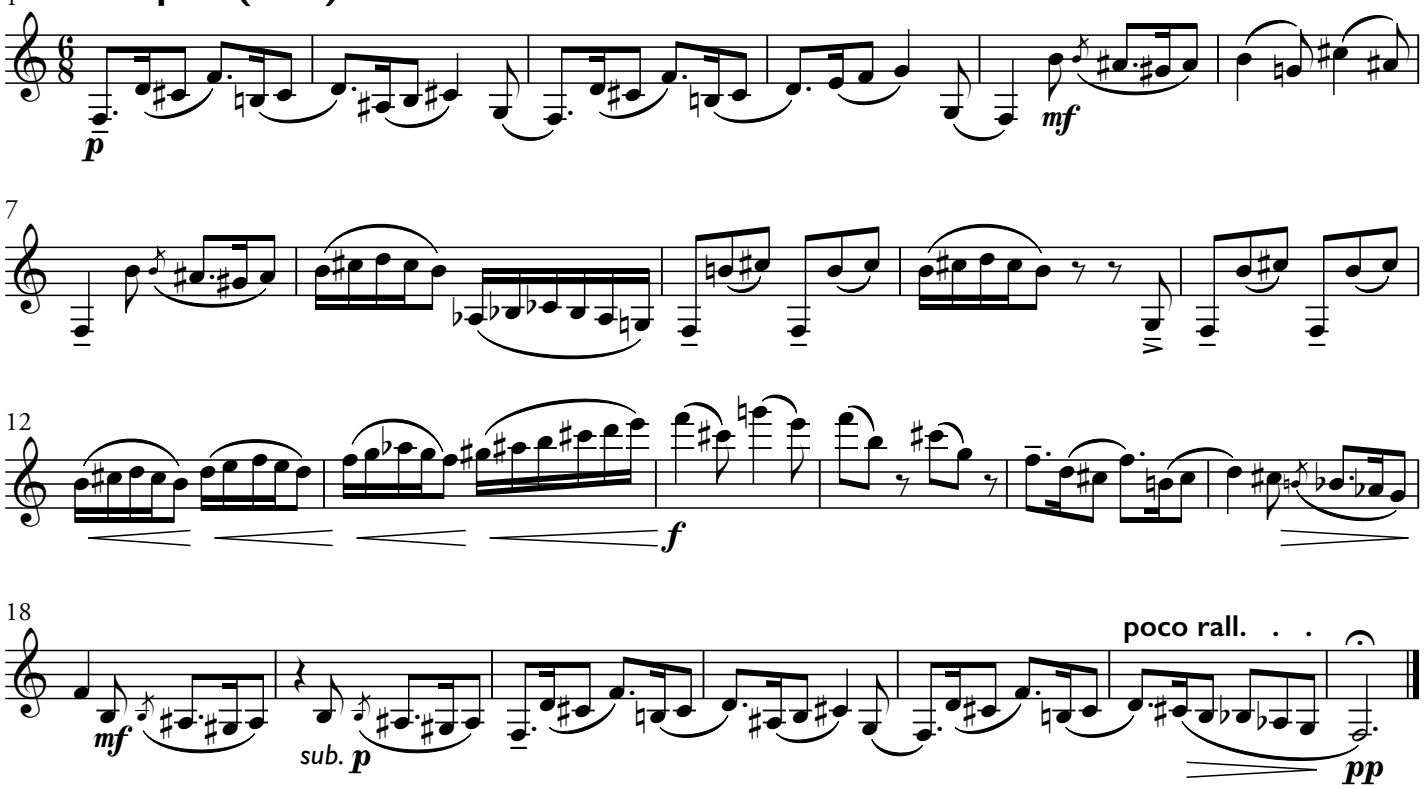

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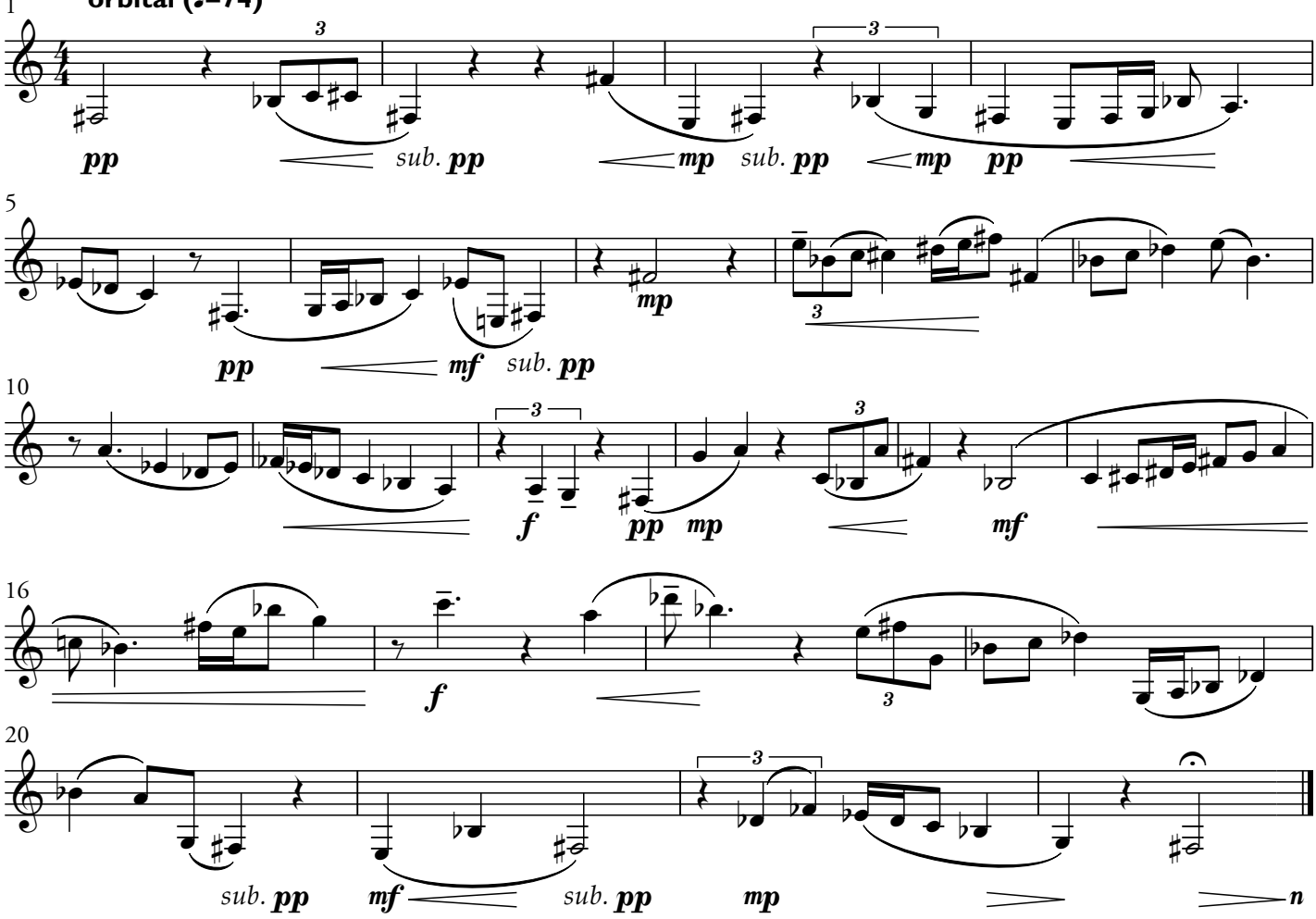
Étude 3

Matthew Weger



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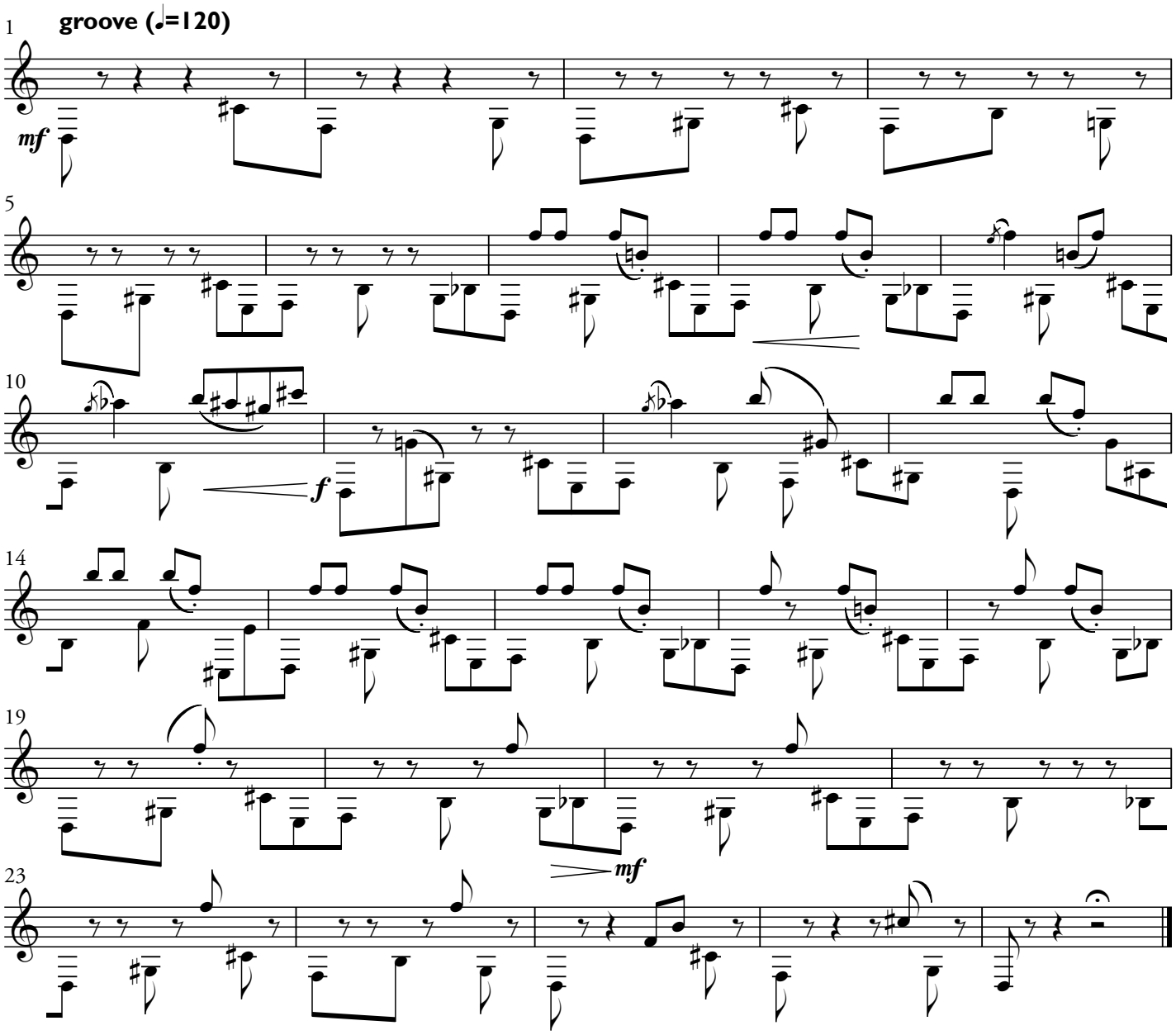
Étude 4a

Matthew Weger



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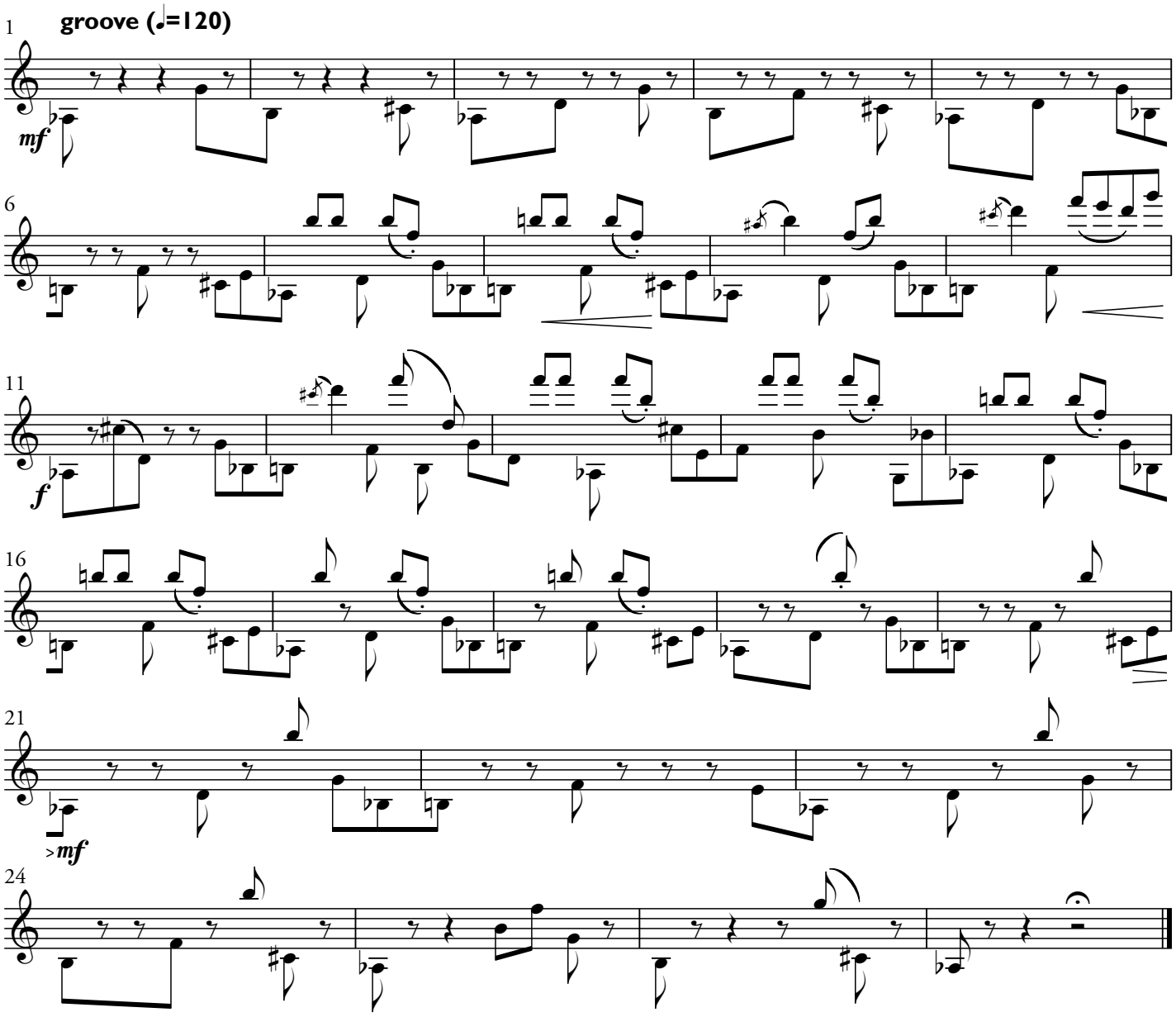
Étude 4b

Matthew Weger



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