Playing The Saxophone

by Bob Mintzer

CONTENTS

Introduction ii
Chapter 1 • Sound Production 1
Chapter 2 • Intonation 8
Chapter 3 • Articulation 9
Chapter 4 • Vibrato 14
Chapter 5 • Glissing Up To And Down From Notes 16
Chapter 6 • Growling 18
Chapter 7 • Scales & Patterns 18
Chapter 8 • Playing Fast! 52
Chapter 9 • Playing With Dynamics 54
Chapter 10 • Some Trouble Spots On The Horn 57
Chapter 11 • How & What To Practice 59
Chapter 12 • Who To Listen To & What To Listen For 60
Chapter 13 • Developing A Sound & Style Of Your Own 62
Chapter 14 • Six Etudes 63
Chapter 15 • What They Didn't Tell Me In Music School 73
Closing 78
About The Author 78

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Introduction

This book is a compilation of ideas acquired through playing, teaching and composing music via the saxophone. It encompasses techniques which deal with general musicianship, and then goes on to deal with different styles of saxophone playing (jazz, classical, funk, etc.). The intention here is to provide saxophonists with a solid foundation in playing their instrument, as well as to suggest things to do to get their playing to a place where it will be possible to work in today's music scene.

Some of the topics covered are what and how to practice, listening to music and what to listen for, what makes an original sound and style, how to play with dynamics, shape and style, how to practice scales and what to do with them to form melodic ideas, and what is expected of you on the bandstand. At the end of the book are six etudes which incorporate the various techniques explored in the text. They are composed in a variety of styles ranging from bebop to orchestral.

Everything in this book is information that has been passed on to me from all the great musicians with whom I have had the good fortune to come in contact. To pass this material on to you is both a great honor and the logical thing to do for the purpose of keeping quality music alive. I hope you can incorporate some of the things here into your routine, and in turn, come up with your own interpretation of playing the saxophone.

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CHAPTER 1
Sound Production

The saxophonist's sound or tone is the main ingredient of his/her essence as a player. Listen to one bar of Coltrane, Stan Getz, Sonny Rollins, Marcel Mule or Dave Sanborn, and you should be able to identify them. What sets them apart is the different way each player connects notes together, articulates, uses dynamics, and various other effects (bending notes, growling, etc.). The common thread between all of the great saxophonists is that they all play with a full, vibrant tone from top to bottom of the horn. This is achieved, in great part, due to the way they move air through their horn at a quick enough velocity to make the reed, mouthpiece, and horn vibrate with intensity.

While experimenting with air velocity I discovered that moving the air quickly through the horn made for a vibrant and projecting sound, while not moving air quickly enough resulted in an anemic, less-projecting sound. It soon became apparent that to move the air at the velocity required to produce a tone pleasing to my ear would require a substantial amount of breath support.

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Breathing

I use a form of breathing borrowed from yoga breathing techniques. It enables me to take in the maximum amount of air without straining or tensing up. It works as follows:

1. Comfortably exhale air from your lungs and diaphragm area. Relax.

2. With an open and relaxed throat, begin to take in air to the stomach or diaphragm area first. Try to expand your stomach (push it out) while filling up with air.

3. Next begin to fill up your lungs comfortably (without straining) with air. Again, try not to strain, and keep your throat open and relaxed.

4. Put the mouthpiece in your mouth with your embouchure set and the tip of the tongue on the reed. Release the tongue and simultaneously start the air flow.

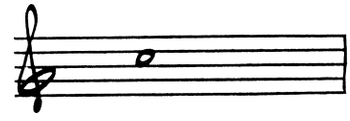
5. Flex the diaphragm to create pressure, which will move air through your chest, throat, and into the mouthpiece. Keep your throat relaxed and open (almost as if you were yawning -- *aw*). The diaphragm should be the only thing to tighten. You should think of sticking it out rather than pulling it in, although it will ultimately go in as you run out of air.

6. Think of "shooting" or "spinning" air through the horn. Make the reed, mouthpiece, horn and air molecules in and around the horn vibrate in an intense way.

You can get comfortable with this breathing technique at first by practicing it without your horn. By doing this for a few minutes a day you can expand your lung and diaphragm capacity, thus enabling you to take in more air and play longer phrases.

This technique works for me. However, the bottom line is that your ear will tell you if your tone is full enough. If you hear your sound as being right for you, then do whatever it takes to get that sound. Frequently your lungs and breath will follow the direction of your ears. If not, then try my method.

Practice your breathing starting on middle C.



Holding each note as long as you can, proceed down chromatically to low Bb, then return to middle C and go up chromatically to high F.

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As you practice this breathing exercise, remember to think of "spinning" the air through your horn and making it vibrate in a vigorous way. You can also imagine that you are trying to project your sound to the back of a large room -- aim for the farthest point from where you are.

This exercise will hopefully add projection, focus and vitality to your sound, while also providing greater endurance and capacity to sustain notes. When taking a quick breath, the same technique applies, although it happens more quickly and less air is taken in.

It is worth mentioning at this point that getting a full, vibrant tone also is, in great part, contingent on having a saxophone, mouthpiece and proper reed to help you in this endeavor. If your reed is too soft for the mouthpiece you are using, or if the reed is generally unresponsive, clipping the reed will help. If the mouthpiece has too dull or bright a quality, you will have a hard time getting a well-balanced and full tone. If your horn is too resistant or not resistant enough, or is not sealing properly, the instrument will not vibrate efficiently, and will sound dull or muffled.

I use a Selmer Mark 6 tenor sax from the 1950's, which has a rich, full tone and the right amount of resistance for me. My mouthpiece is a Freddy Gregory 7 Star metal,

handmade mouthpiece which, like my horn, provides the proper amount of brightness, darkness and fullness. I generally have to taylor a reed for my setup. This involves either clipping a Rico 3.5 slightly or shaving down an RKM medium-hard reed a bit (RKM is a new reed on the market which I like very much). In either case, I try to create the right amount of resistance for me, which facilitates playing full with a wide variety of dynamics; specifically, really loud and really soft, really bright and really dark or covered. The amount of resistance should also allow me to blow hard into the horn without the reed closing up, while at the same time enabling me to play both low and high on the horn at all dynamic levels. If you can't play the low notes softly, your reed may be too hard.

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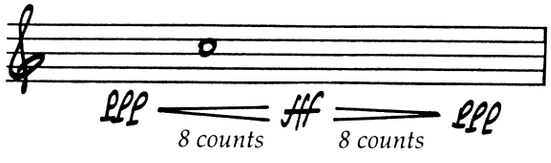
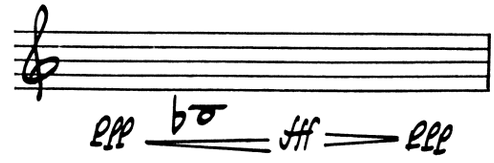
Long Tones With Dynamic & Timbral Changes

This exercise deals with exploring the various dynamic and tone or timbral capabilities of your saxophone. Play each note for sixteen counts (♩= 80). Start the note as softly as you possibly can, and in eight counts crescendo to the loudest volume you are able to. For the remaining eight counts, decrescendo back to the softest volume again. As you crescendo, think of adding brightness to the sound; the loudest volume should be the brightest or "edgiest" tone. As you decrescendo, go for a darker or softer tone. And remember to use the breathing techniques from the previous section.

1. ♩= 80



descend chromatically to

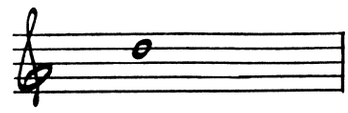


then

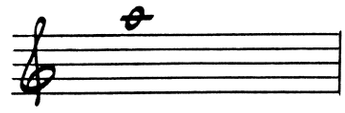
ascend chromatically to

Playing with dynamics and shape are an important part of being an expressive player. We will discuss the use of these various dynamic and timbral techniques later.

Some notes on your saxophone may be stuffy or more resistant than others. Middle D is a problem note; I like to add the D side key to brighten it up.



Also A is sometimes stuffy. By moving the air a little faster you can make the stuffy note be more in character with its surrounding notes.



Be sure to keep your throat open when playing the high notes (𝅗𝅥 to 𝅗𝅥). Think of what it feels like to yawn and you will prevent those high notes from sounding pinched.

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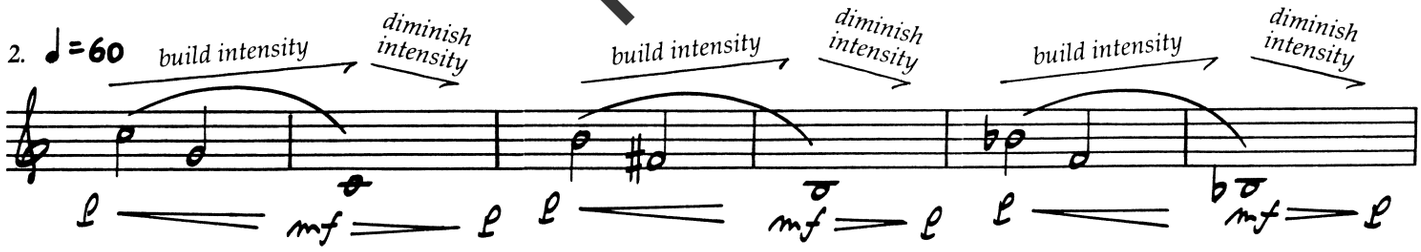
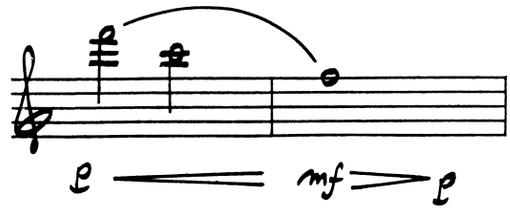
Putting The Notes Together

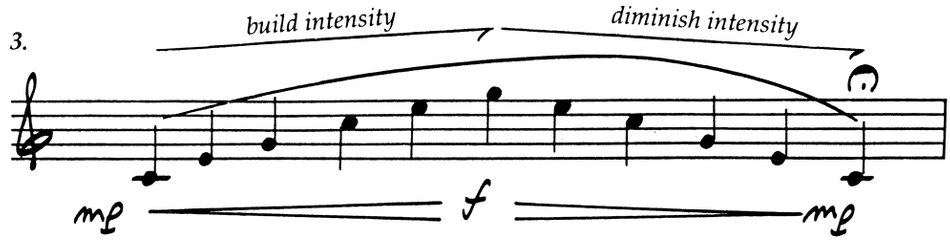
The following exercises should be played slowly (♩ = 60) and smoothly. Try to really connect the notes so that there is little or no break between them. Take in your air, put your tongue on the reed and release it to start the air. Crescendo from *p* to *mf* and back to *p*. Along with this, try to build in intensity as you crescendo. This will make the connection between notes smoother and will add a sense of forward motion to the line. Think of "leaning into" the next note as you crescendo.



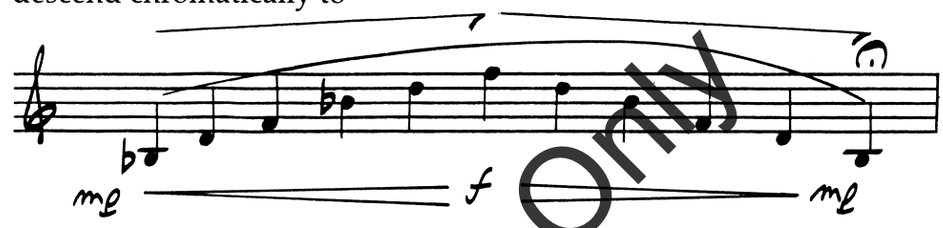
then return to the initial C-G-C pattern and ascend chromatically to



3.



descend chromatically to



and ascend chromatically to

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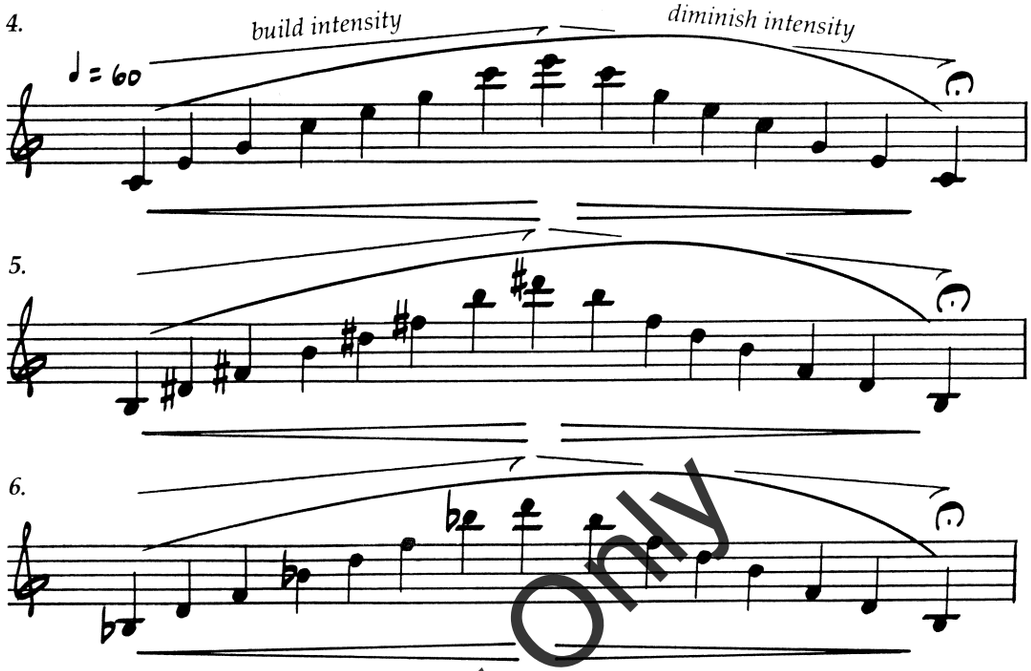
In order to play legato and smoothly, it is essential that your fingers move accurately and in sync with one another. One of the harder interval jumps is from middle C to the E above. Your thumb must hit the octave key at the exact same moment as your other fingers hit their keys (2 and 4 in the left hand and 2, 3 and 4 in the right), or a glitch or gap will occur between the notes.

Do not slam your fingers down on the keys. This will also impede legato playing and add an accent to a note. Try to move your fingers gently and precisely.

Try to let the air move the phrase. Let the air propel you from note to note, with the fingers light and precise.



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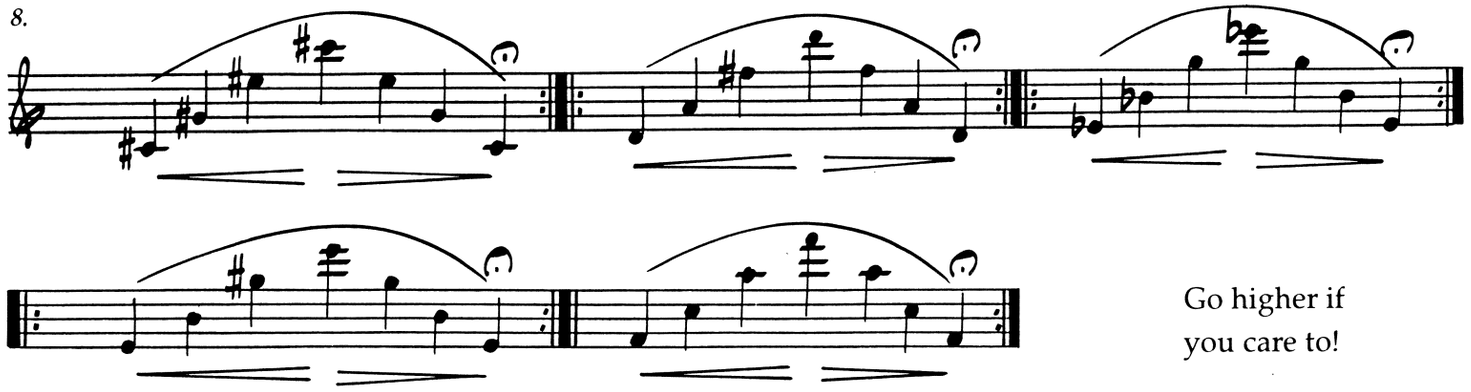
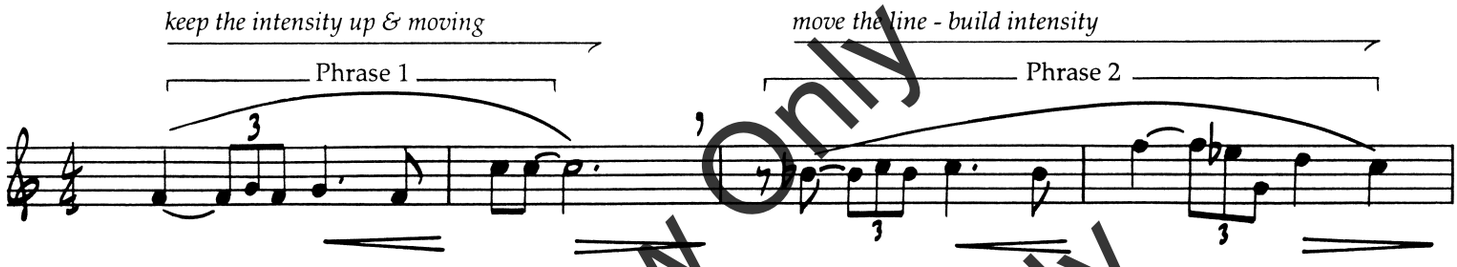
On the next series of exercises try to keep your tone fat and even from bottom to top of your horn. Keep your throat open for the high notes.



Go higher if you care to!

Playing slowly and connected is the foundation of good saxophone playing. It is essential for executing a melody in any style of music. One must be able to play slowly in a correct fashion before he/she can play fast; if the notes don't connect at a slow tempo, you will have difficulty playing smoothly and evenly at fast tempos. The way you put notes together and move from one to another will reveal a lot about you as a player. In the following exercise, connect the notes -- play pretty and smooth!

"Body & Soul" - tenor sax



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CHAPTER 2
Intonation

At this point it is worth bringing up the issue of playing in tune. Playing with good intonation is crucial, particularly when it comes to playing in ensembles. It is most crucial when you find yourself having to play in unison with a keyboard that has a stationary pitch. Two wind players can adjust their pitch to one another. However, I have been in recording situations where I had to play unison with a synthesizer and it was quite demanding.

It is strongly recommended that you get a tuner (the small digital tuners are reasonable and very good). Use the tuner frequently during practice sessions to check the various notes on your horn.

The sound production exercises (putting the notes together) are good for working on intonation because they are simple major triads which are easily heard for the sake of tuning.

Saxophones vary greatly in terms of intonation. Some of the newer horns play more in tune, based on improvements in the design of those instruments. However, some older horns have a richness of tone that the new ones don't have, along with some intonation problems. Have a teacher or professional help you pick an instrument with a good scale and sound.

No horn is perfectly in tune. You will have to compensate slightly with your jaw or air column to get certain notes where they should be. A tuner can help you see what needs to be done (even possibly get another instrument).

Certain mouthpieces make it more difficult to play in tune as well. Trying a different mouthpiece on a horn with intonation problems is a good first step. It may just be a case of finding the appropriate mouthpiece for your horn.

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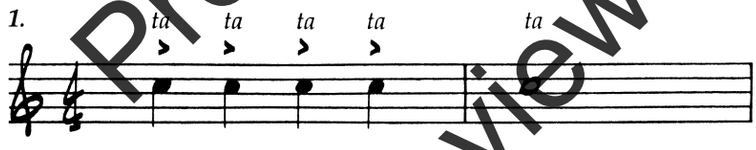
CHAPTER 3
Articulation

Articulation, or the way you stop and start notes with the tongue and air column, varies greatly from situation to situation. It is something which demands attention in order to play articulately and clearly. It is also something which, when used effectively, will create contrast and color in your playing.

Starting A Note

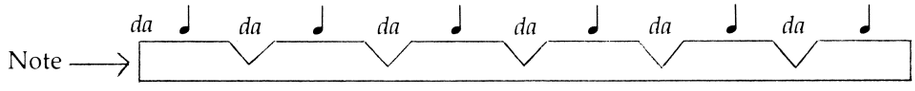
The typical way to start a note on the saxophone involves first taking in your air, getting the embouchure set, placing the correct part of your tongue (one-quarter to one-half inch from the tip) on the reed, then releasing your tongue and simultaneously starting the air flow. This will produce a *ta* sound and is a good way to start a note with a clean, precise attack. The tongue should be placed gently on the reed and removed in a fairly gentle way as well. Play the following exercise:



Descend chromatically to low Bb, then go from middle C up to high F.

Legato Tonguing

Legato tonguing is a type of articulation used to join notes smoothly together. Think of the sound *da* (softer than *ta* in the previous section). Legato tonguing might look like this:



As you can see, the note never completely stops. Instead you make "indentations" or soft attacks at a given tempo, which works well for smooth, connected playing. Try the first exercise in this chapter using legato tonguing.

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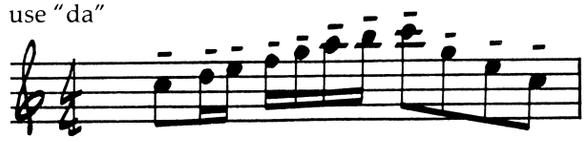
Use legato tonguing for the following exercise, keeping the tongue light and letting the air move the line. This exercise should be played at ♩ = 120 or as close as you can get to it.

2.
use "da"



Descend chromatically to

then ascend chromatically to

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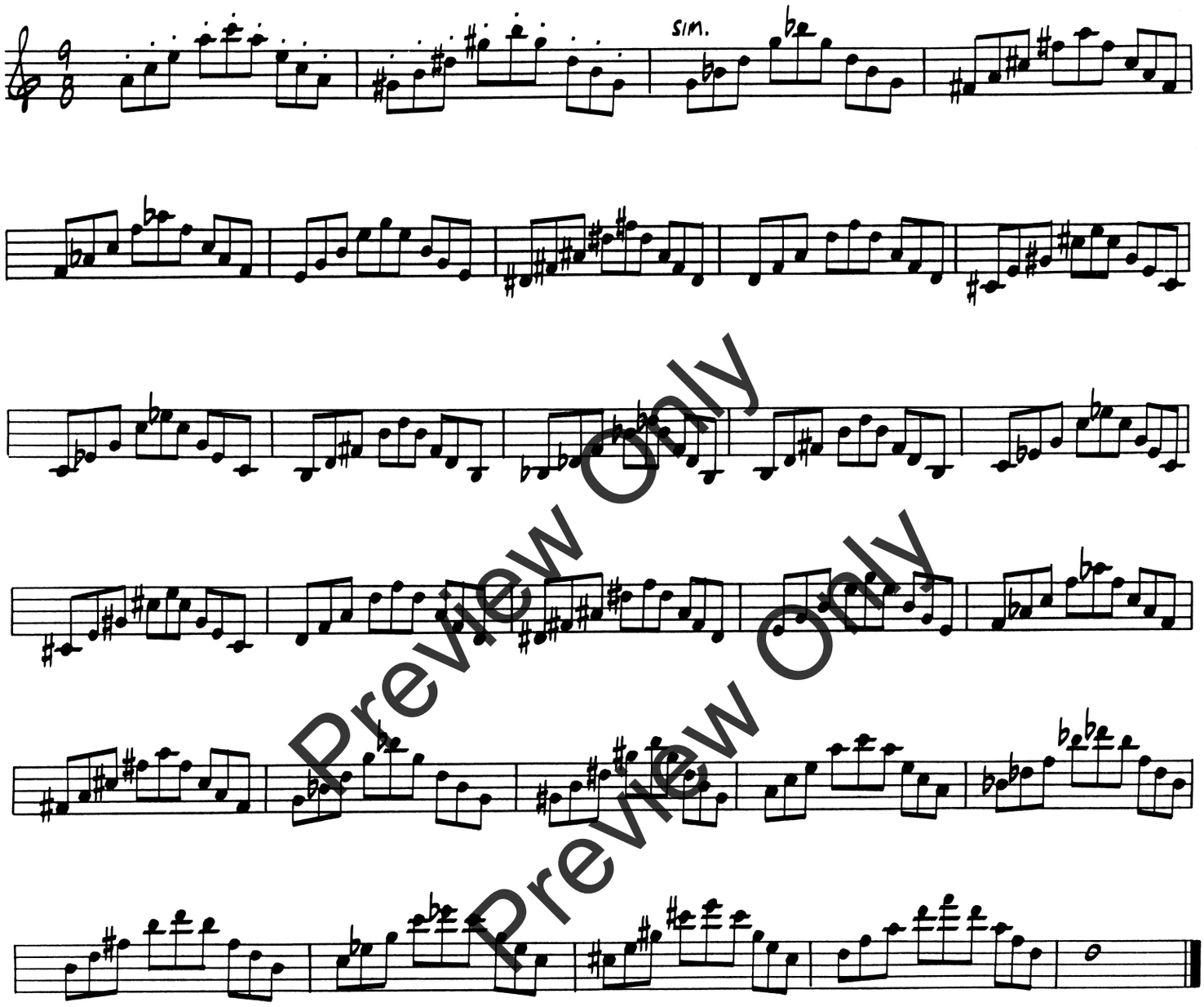
Staccato Tonguing

In staccato tonguing, the tongue moves off the reed and back on very quickly, thus producing an extremely short note. Again, keep the tongue light; let air move the tongue. You might think of the tongue as a valve on a tire, letting the air out when removed from the reed.

3. ♩. = 100 *(increase as is comfortable)*



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Be sure that there is ample air support when tonguing. Tonguing too hard with not enough air pressure will make your tonguing cumbersome and could prevent you from playing fast passages.

Some Other Tonguing Effects

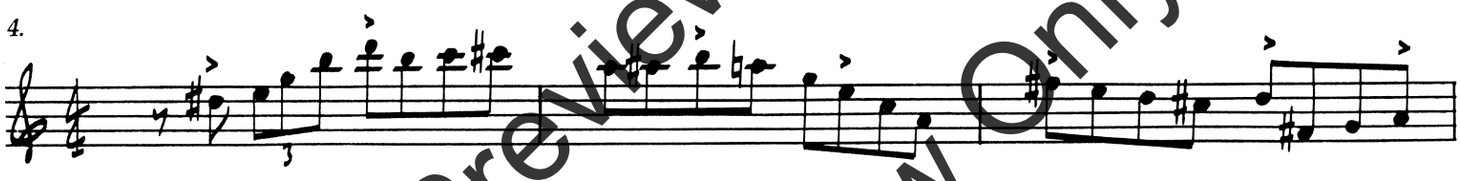
1. By building up an excessive amount of air pressure before releasing the tongue and then playing a short note while tonguing harder than usual, you can add a percussive accent to your playing. Check out Sonny Rollins and the way he used this percussive tonguing effect.

2. There is a version of legato tonguing where the reed still vibrates with your tongue on it. Take your tongue off the reed and put it back on fairly quickly (as if you were playing staccato). However, the tongue should be placed on the reed very lightly so that it is free to vibrate. Think of *lull, lull, lull.* Mike Brecker has used this effect periodically.

3. Many jazz saxophonists have started notes without the tongue on the reed at all (Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young). This produces a gentle and somewhat airy attack.

4. Bop and swing saxophonists have used the tongue to accent or emphasize certain notes in an eighth-note passage. For example, Charlie Parker might have played:

4.



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Notes with > were accented and played more strongly than the other notes. These strategically placed, accented notes were responsible for setting up the jazz swing feel that was typical of that era.

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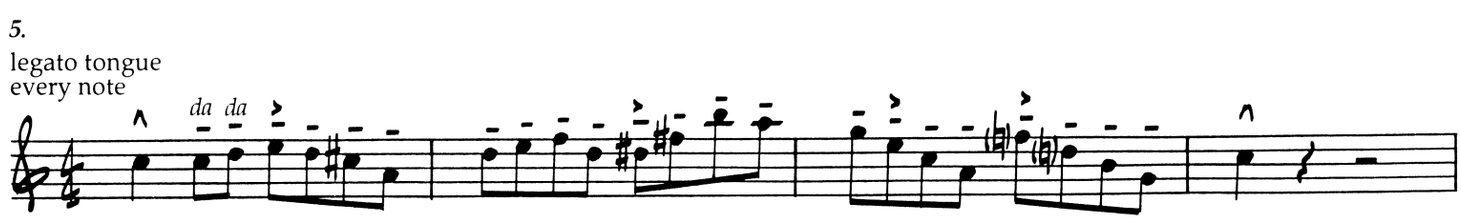
5. John Coltrane used another tonguing technique in combination with the one explained in #4 above. He frequently legato-tongued every note in an eighth-note passage. This is particularly evident on the recordings he did with Miles Davis, *Cooking* and *Working.*

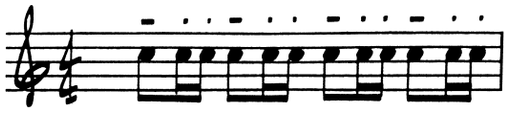
5.



Having a quick and smooth articulation is integral to playing clearly and accurately in all styles of music.

Here are some other tonguing exercises you should practice:

6.



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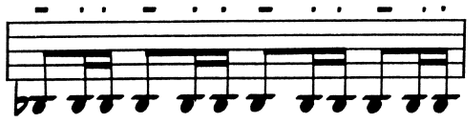
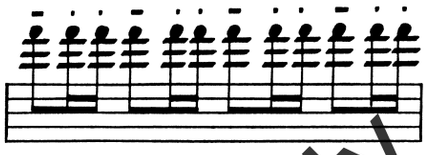


then ascend chromatically to



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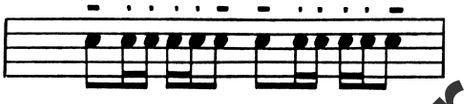

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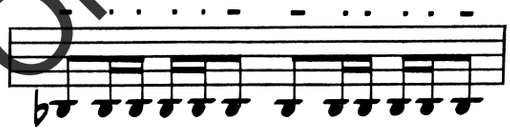
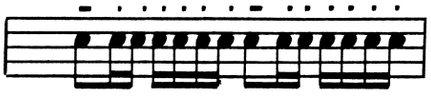


then ascend chromatically to

8.



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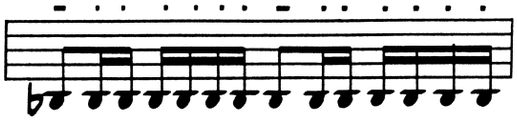
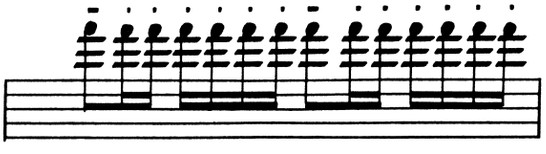


then ascend chromatically to



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CHAPTER 4
Vibrato

Modern saxophone vibrato uses the movement of the lower jaw to create a fluctuation of pitch at a given tempo. I like to think of *ow-ow-ow.* Vibrato can be practiced with a metronome. The idea is to be able to use vibrato at a variety of tempos (slow pulse to fast pulse) with evenness and consistency.

Start at a tempo which enables you to sustain the vibrato evenly and clearly (♩ = 60 for the following exercise). Then gradually increase your tempo, making sure your vibrato is steady before getting faster.

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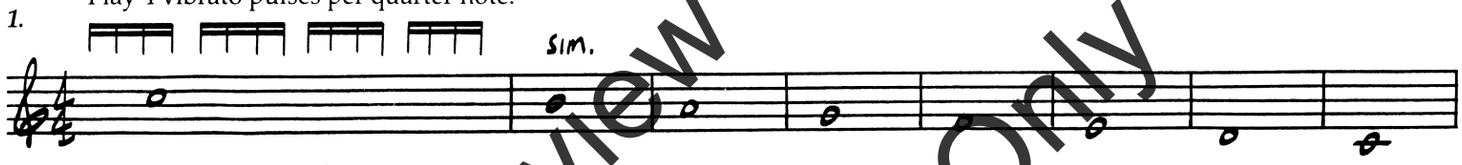
1. Play 4 vibrato pulses per quarter note.



Repeat exercise ascending chromatically to high F.

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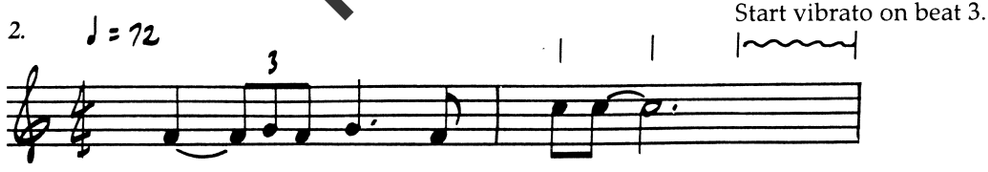
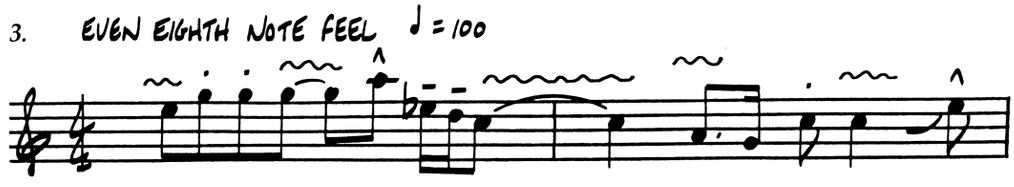
Vibrato has different applications, depending on the style of playing with which you are dealing. For example, when playing a jazz ballad like *Body And Soul,* one might introduce vibrato in the middle of a long note towards the end of the first phrase.

2. ♩ = 72

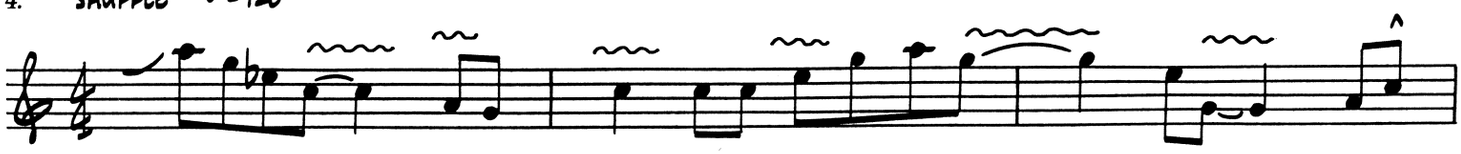


In R&B saxophone playing, vibrato is typically used throughout, and especially on long notes:

3. EVEN EIGHTH NOTE FEEL ♩ = 100



4. SHUFFLE ♩ = 120



The great alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges used vibrato on most of his lead alto passages with the Duke Ellington orchestra. On the other hand, vibrato was used sparingly or not at all by the lead alto players in the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra -- Jerome Richardson, Jerry Dodgion, Dick Oates.

In classical saxophone playing a constant vibrato is sometimes used, or perhaps certain crucial notes are "vibrated" while others are not.

Listen to a variety of saxophone players in different styles to see what they do with vibrato. No two vibratos are exactly alike. In fact, the older jazz and classical players used a quick vibrato while the more modern players have slowed down the vibrato pulse. You must see what feels comfortable and sounds right to you.

Finally, when playing in a horn ensemble, it is advisable to not use too extreme a vibrato, unless the lead player is doing so. Too wide a vibrato might make it difficult for the ensemble to achieve a good blend. In a contemporary big band sax section the inner parts typically do not use any vibrato, even if the lead alto does.

Preview Only
Preview Only

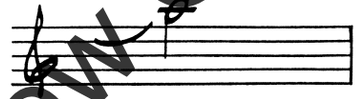
CHAPTER 5
Glissing Up To And Down From Notes

In the jazz and R&B style of saxophone playing it is common to *gliss* or slide up to and down from a note. This will add quite a bit of color and expression to your playing. The best way to check out how this is done is to listen specifically for it when listening to your favorite players, and then trying to emulate what you have heard. In the meantime, here are a few things I do.

Preview Only

Scooping Up To A Note

Notated like this:



I generally finger the note a half-step below the note I am going for. Along with this I drop my jaw to start the note. As I tighten my jaw, I gently lift my finger and slide up to the note smoothly from a half-step below.

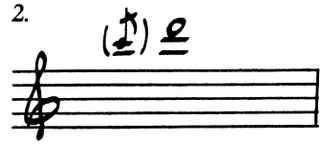
Preview Only

1.

Finger Bb and slowly remove the righthand index finger while tightening the dropped jaw.

This can also be done from a whole step below:

2.

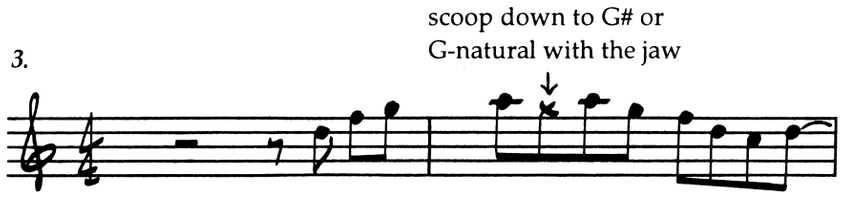


Finger C; drop the jaw slightly and then gently slide from C to D while tightening the jaw.

Scooping Down From A Note

There are a few ways to approach scooping down. The first way is to gliss or scoop down between notes in a phrase:

3.



In this first example you don't move the fingers from the note A. Only the jaw drops, which lowers the pitch either a half step or whole step, or more if you can.

Another way to scoop down is to simply end a note with a downward gliss. This can be done with the jaw alone, the fingers alone, or both together.

4.

5.

Preview Only
Preview Only

CHAPTER 6
Growling

Adding *growl* to your tone is a great way to add some color and intensity in spots. Rock and roll saxophone frequently calls for growl playing. Again, everyone does it a little differently with a different resulting sound. What I do is sing (or almost scream!) a note into my horn while playing a note. The pitch you choose to sing and the intensity at which the pitch is sung will determine the character of the growl tone.

You can get some really interesting effects by singing pitches a fixed interval from the note you play on the horn. Try to sing a third, fifth, sixth or octave away from the note you are playing. As your singing note changes, the overtone configuration of the growl tone will change.

Preview Only
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Preview Only

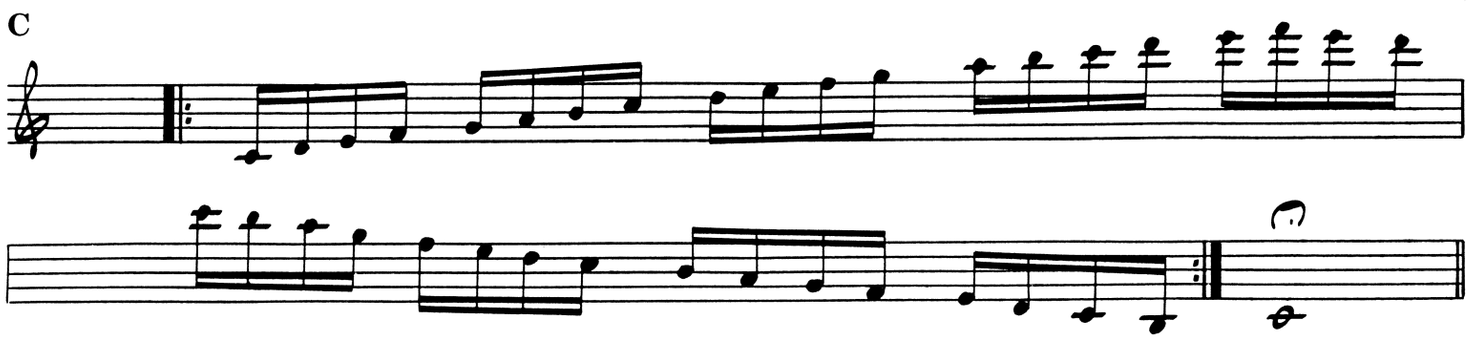
CHAPTER 7
Scales & Patterns

Scales are to music what verbs are to language. They play a crucial role in correct musicianship and should be dealt with aggressively at an early stage in one's training.

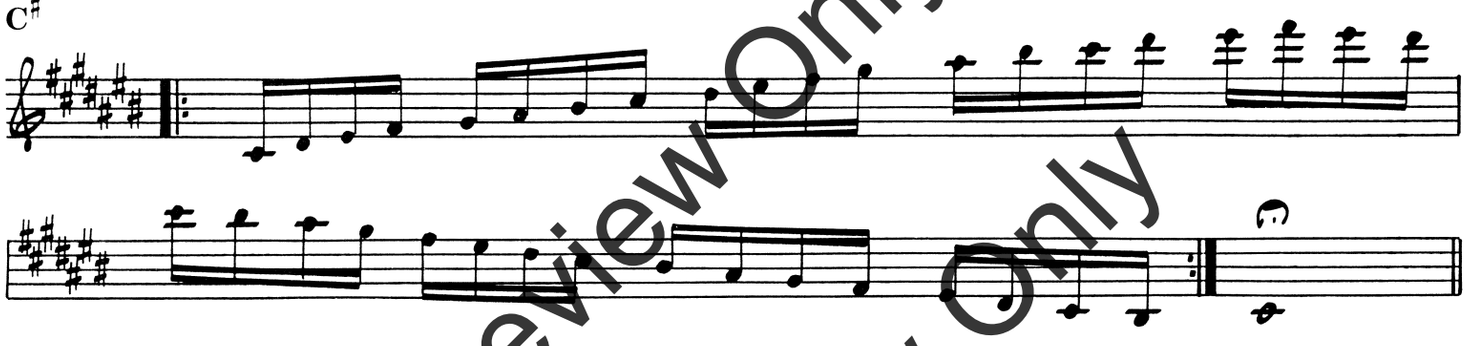
Scales should be played from top to bottom of the horn. Use a metronome for accuracy and consistency of timing. Start at whatever tempo enables you to play each scale accurately, and then gradually increase the tempo to as fast as you can get it! Your goal should be to play all the scales fast, smoothly and evenly, like a machine. Once this is achieved, you can forget the scales and move on to the finer points of music making.

Major Scales

C



C♯



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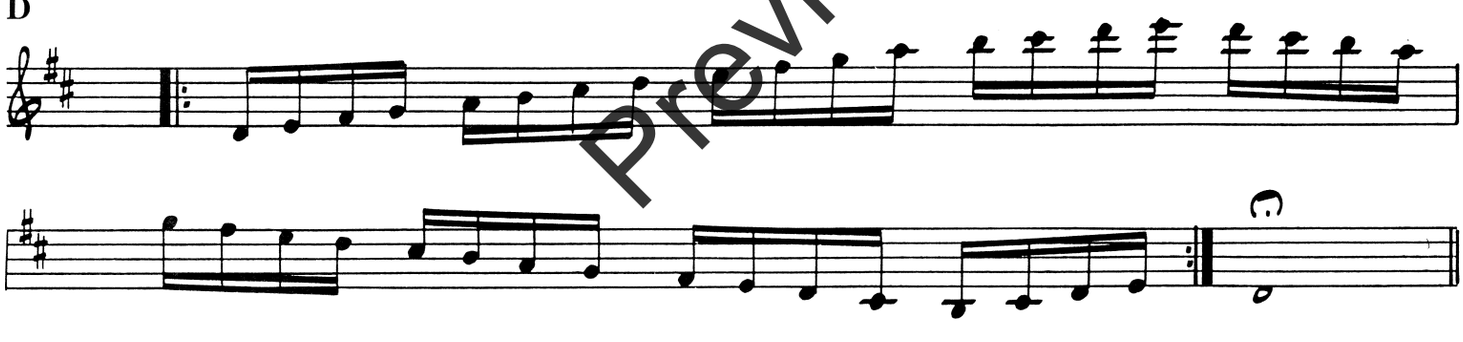

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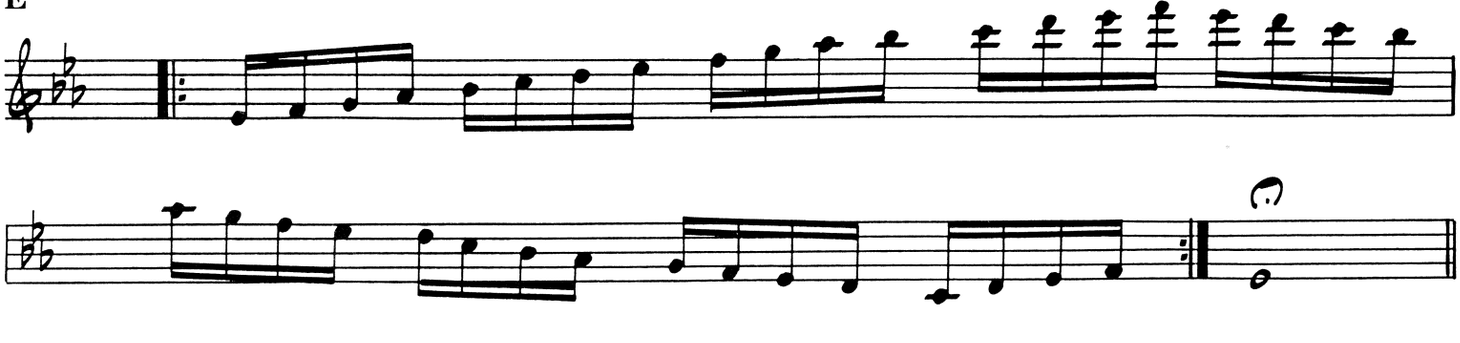
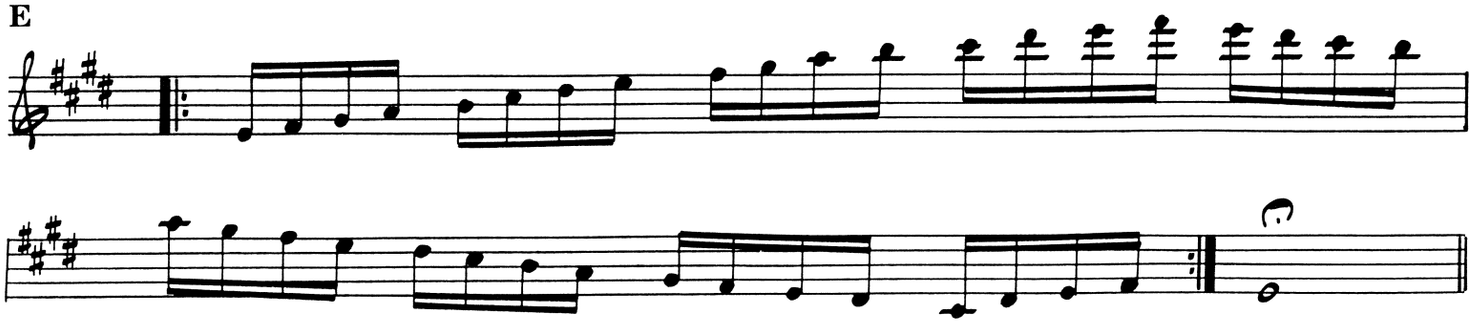


more Major Scales

E



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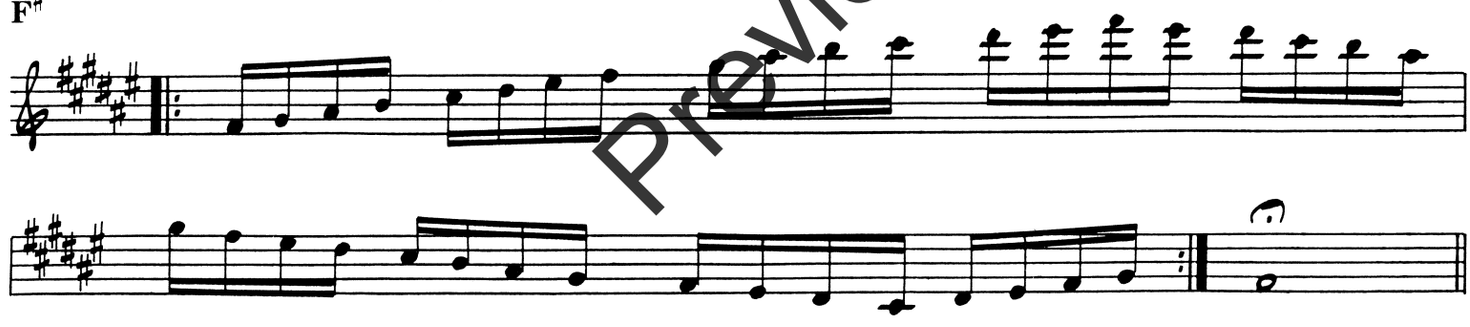

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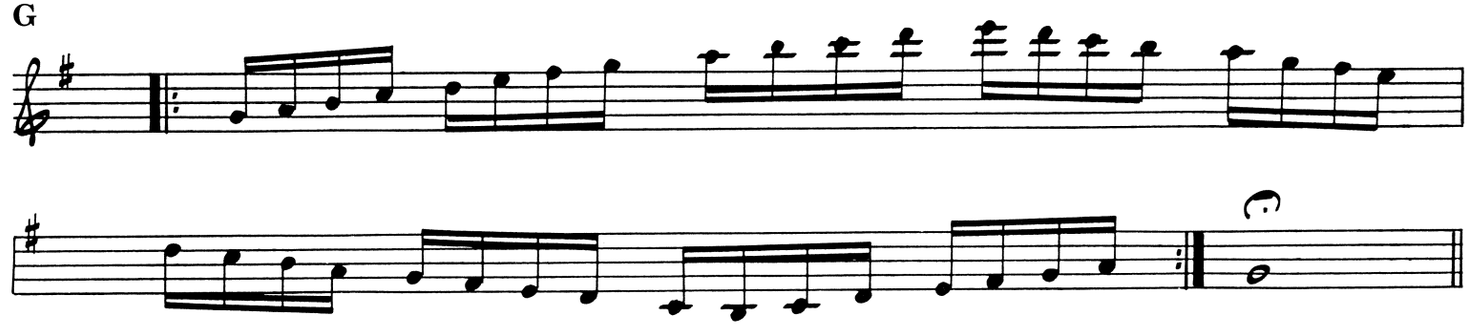

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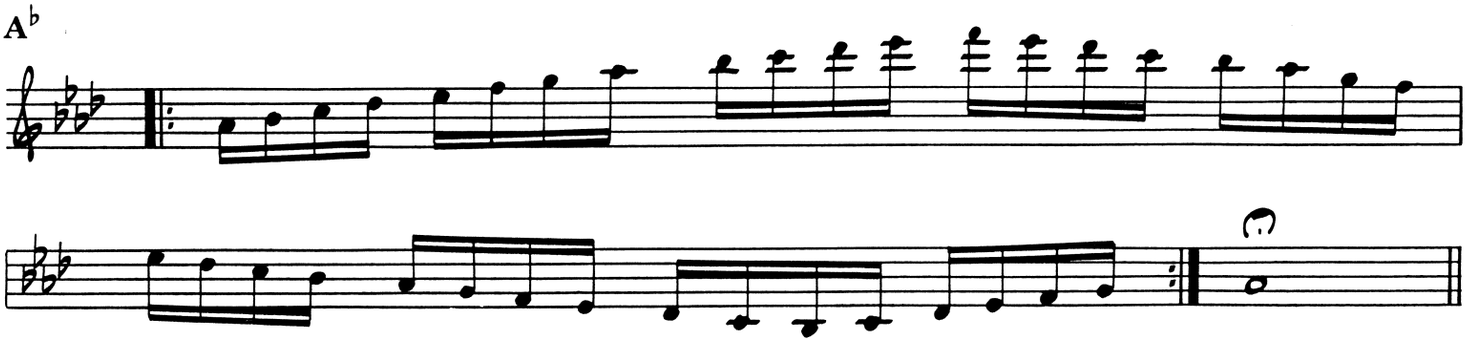
more Major Scales

A♭



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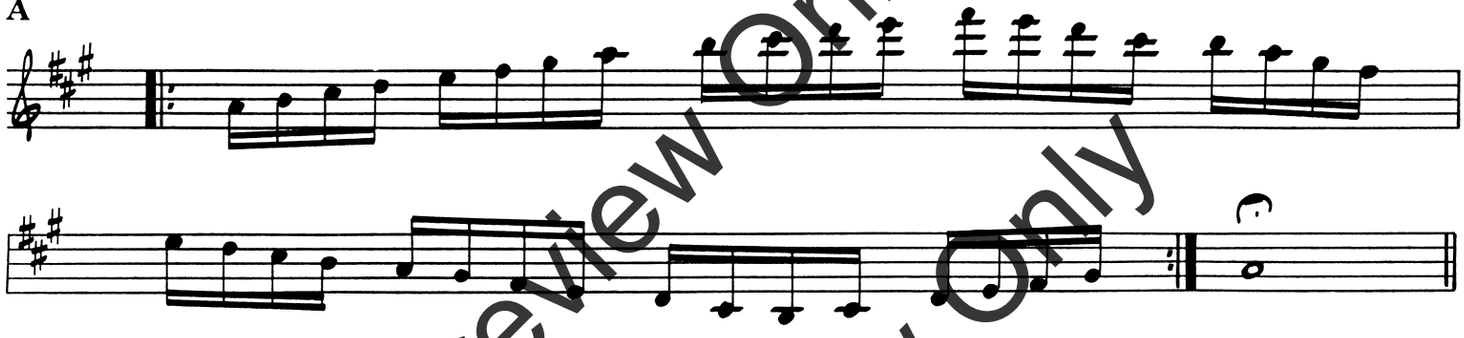

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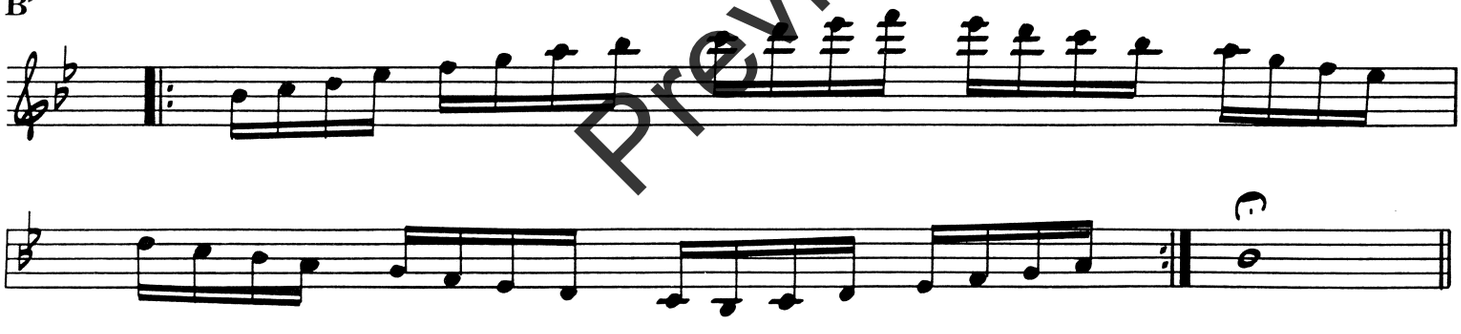
B♭



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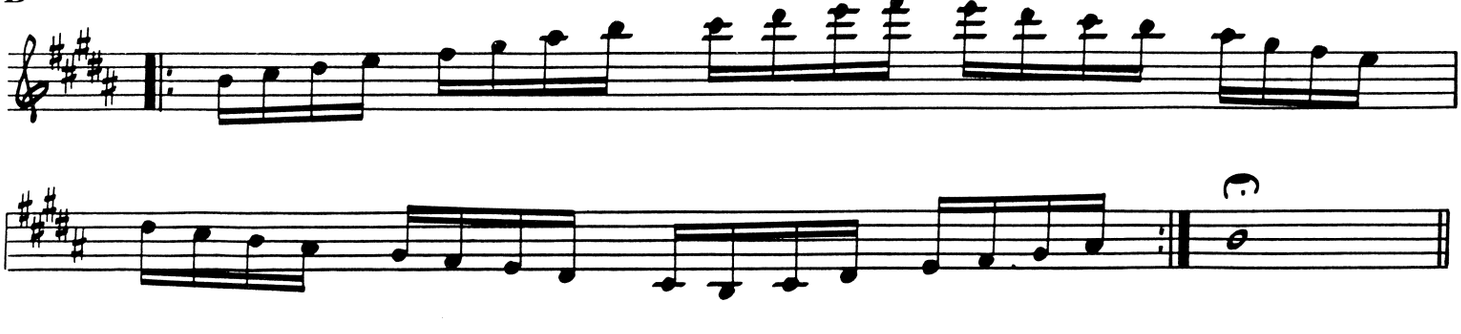
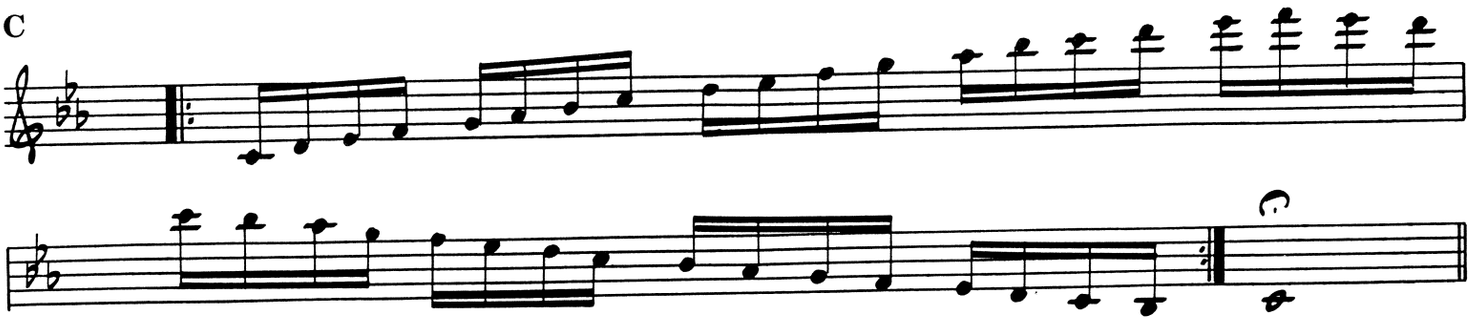


Pure Minor Scales

C



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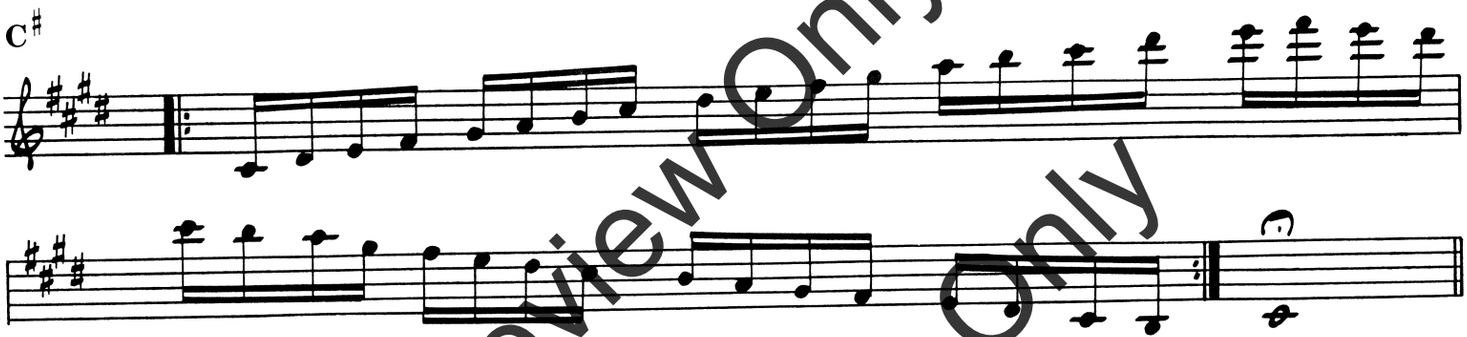

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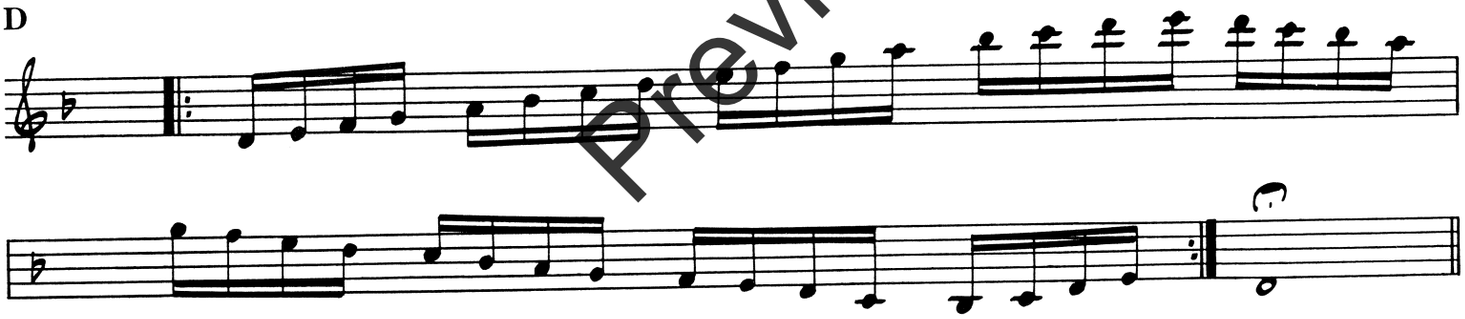

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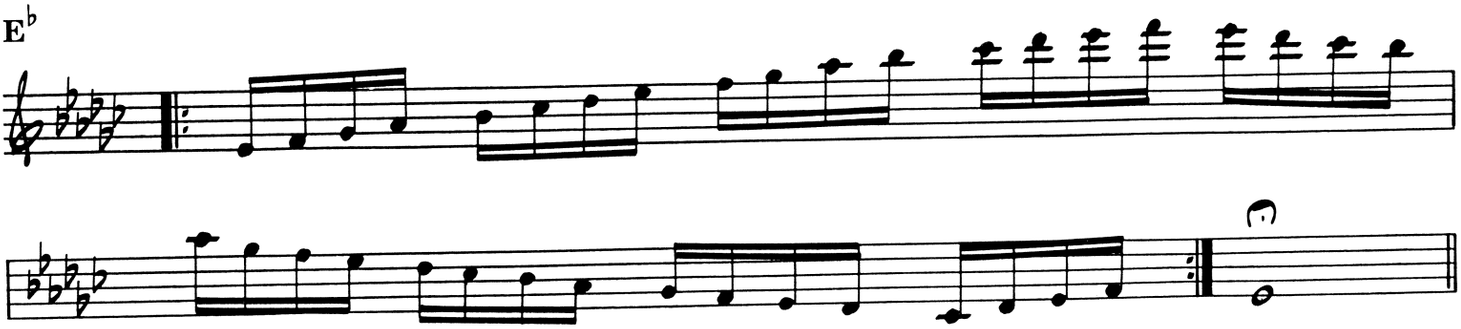
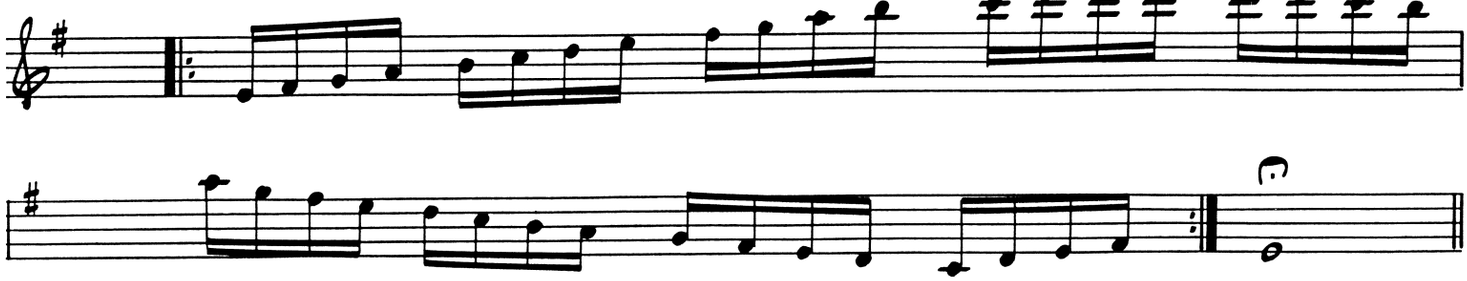


more Pure Minor Scales

E



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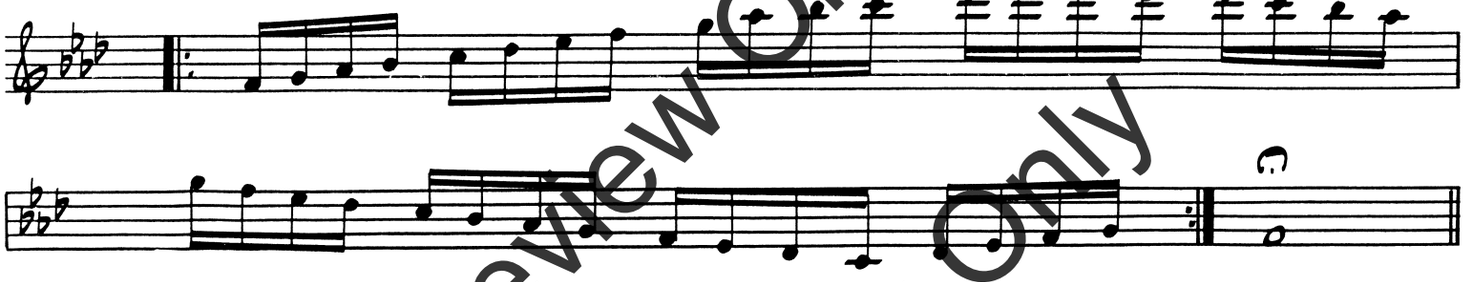

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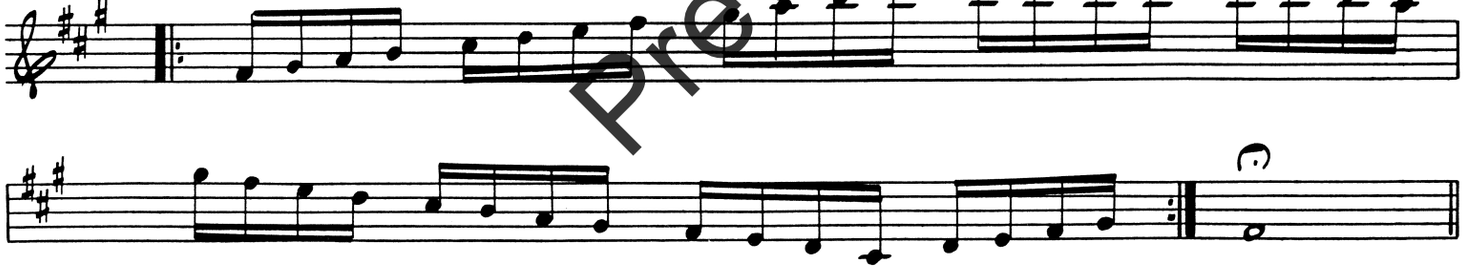

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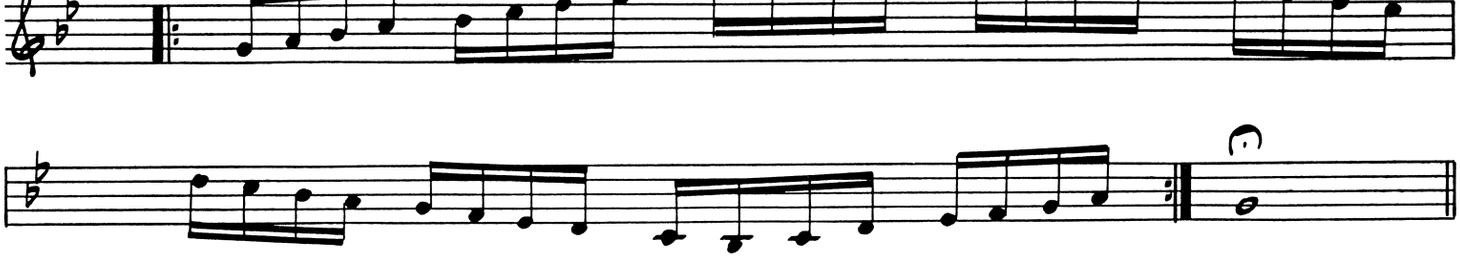

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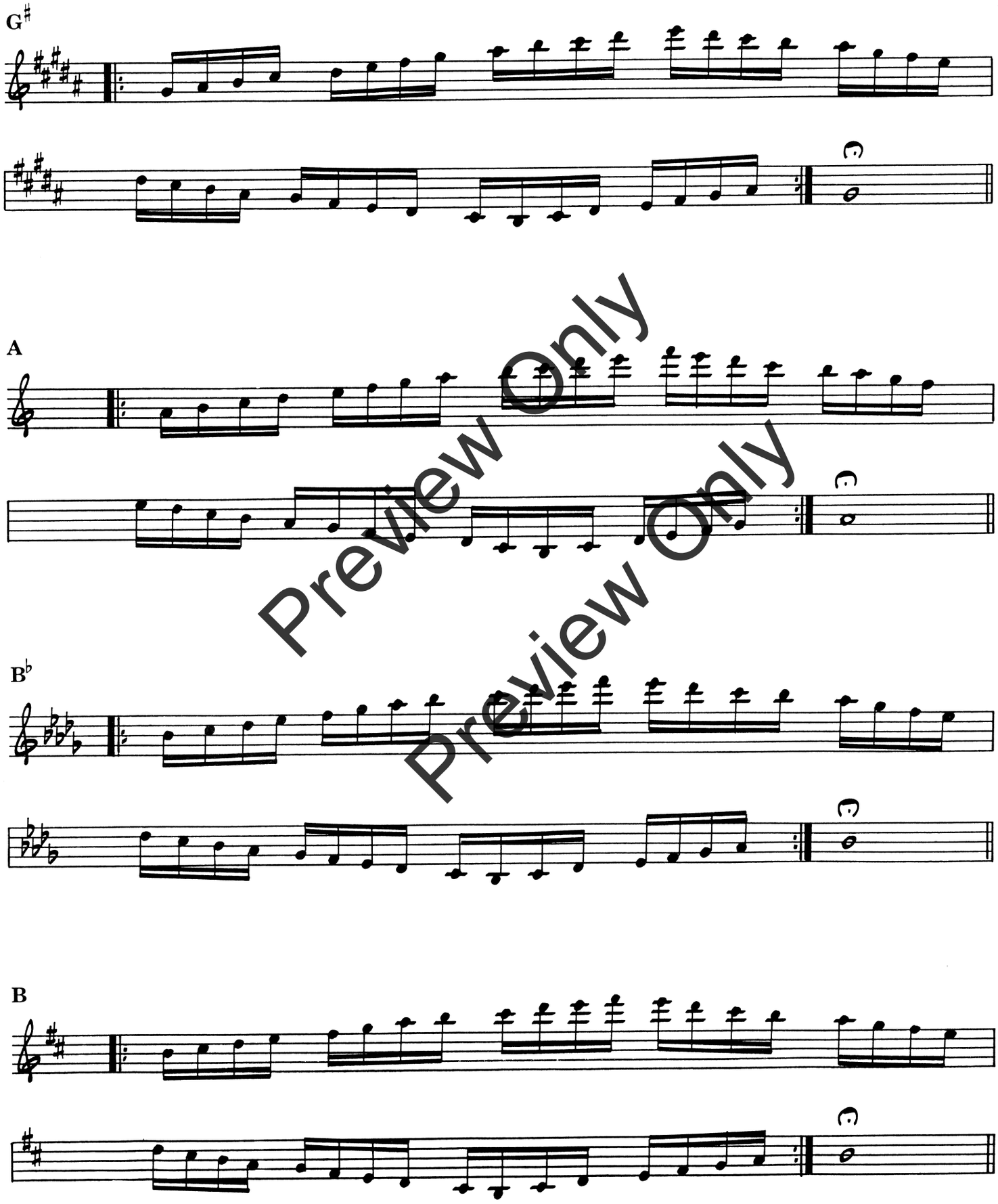
more Pure Minor Scales



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Harmonic Minor Scales

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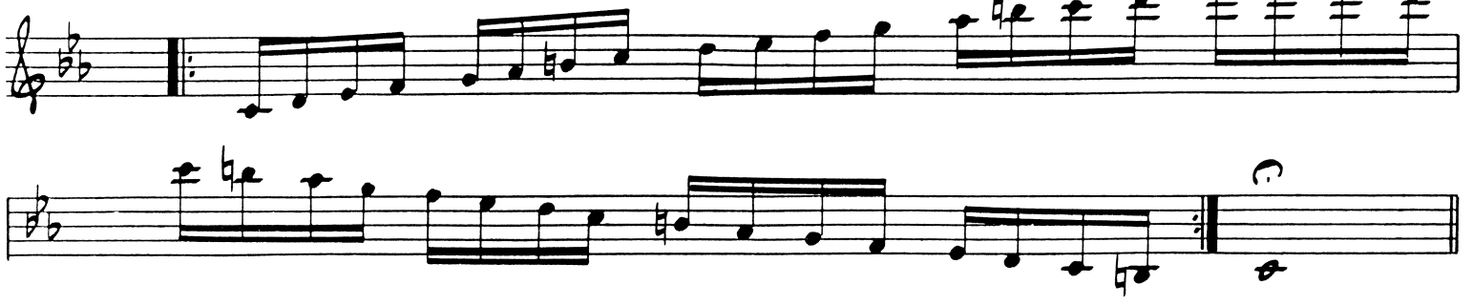

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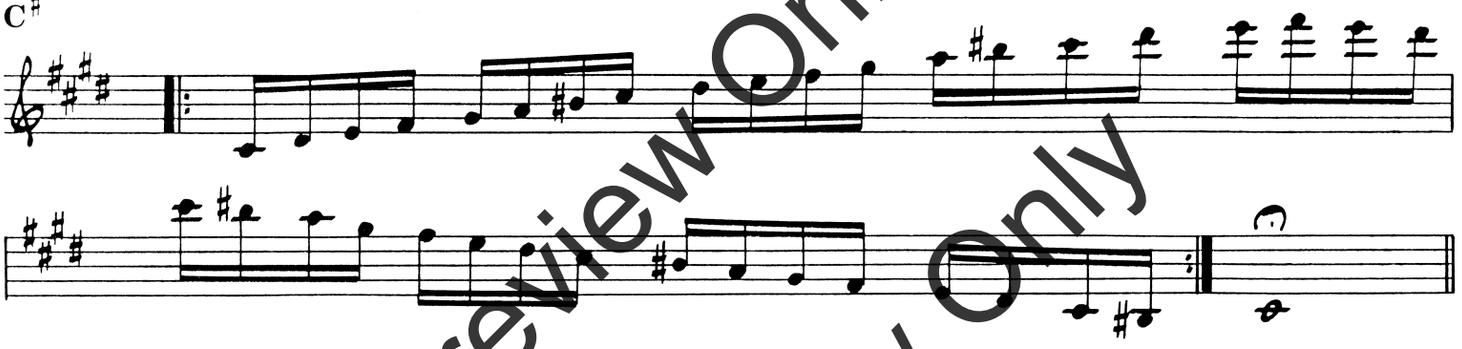

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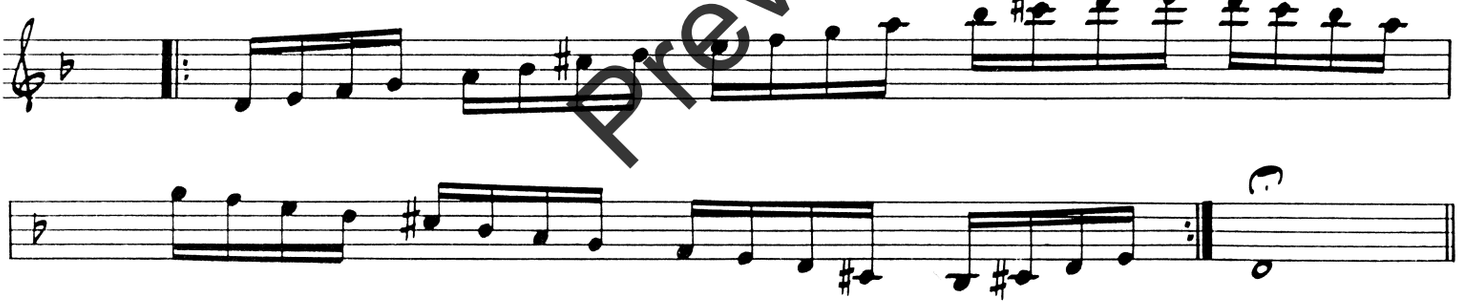

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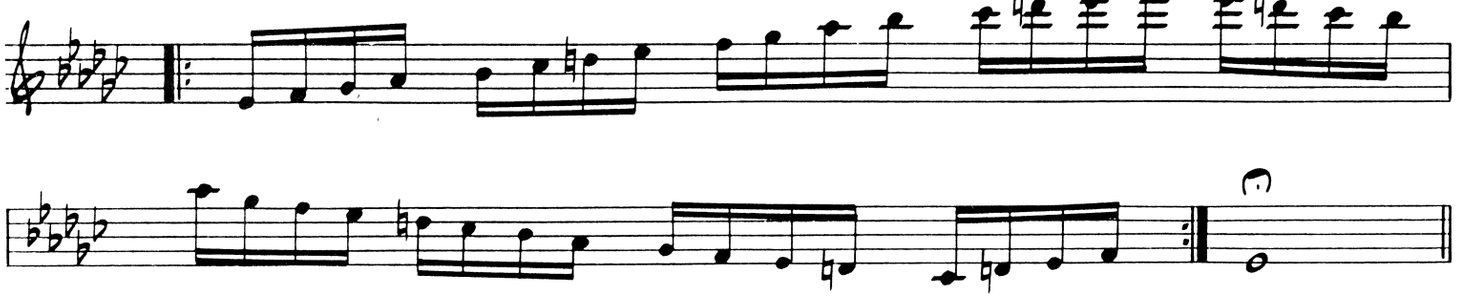
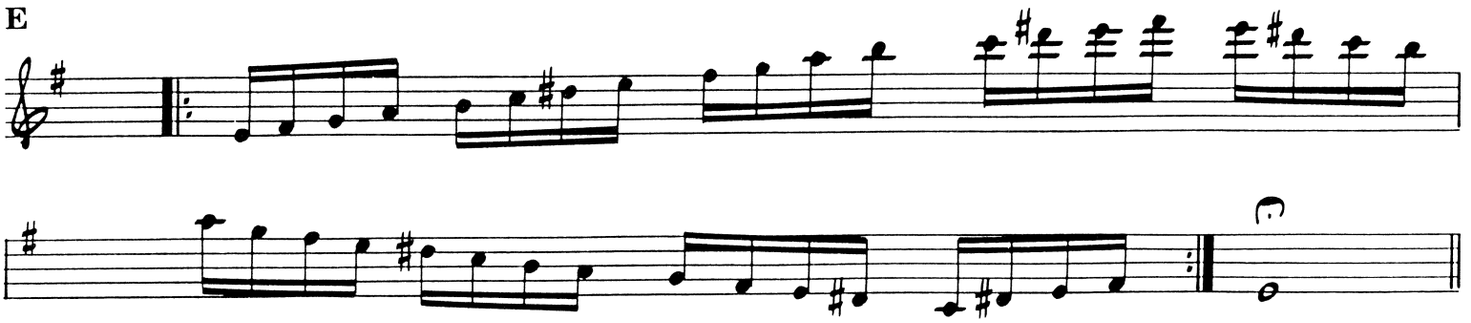


more Harmonic Minor Scales

E



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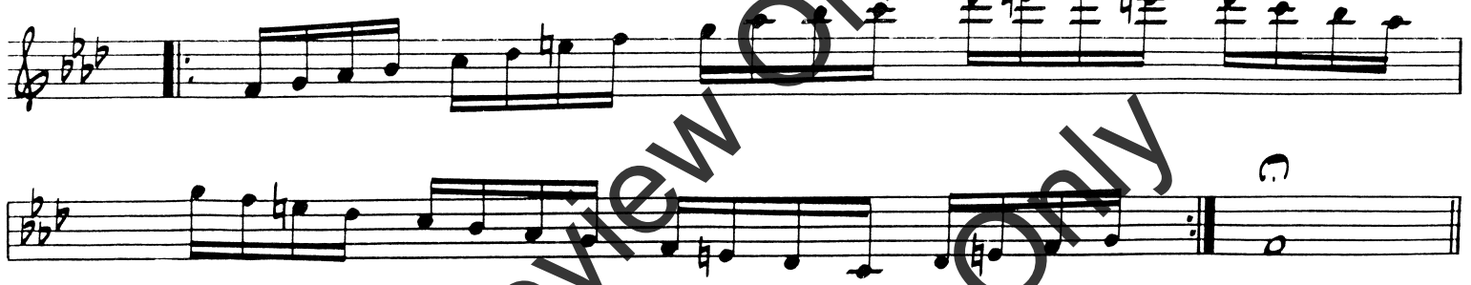

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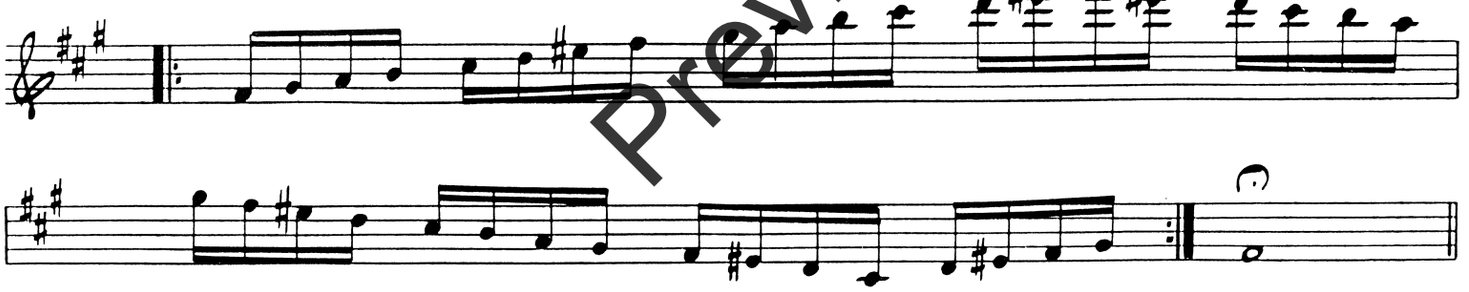

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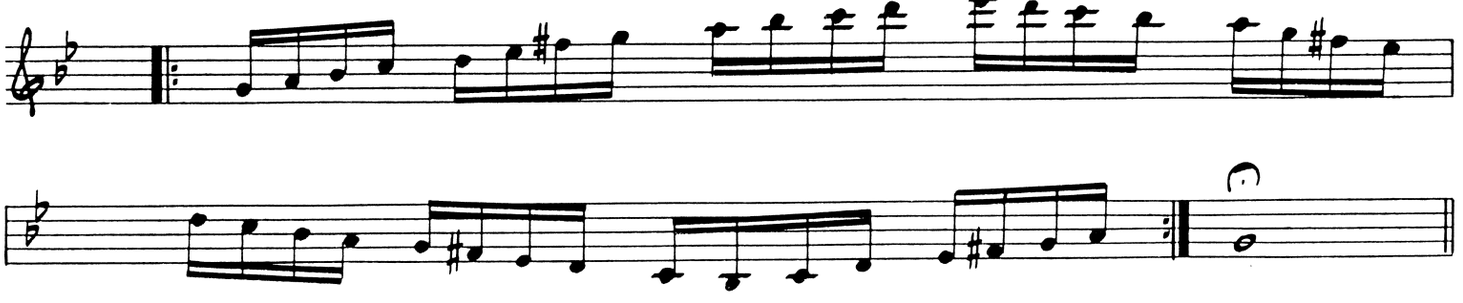

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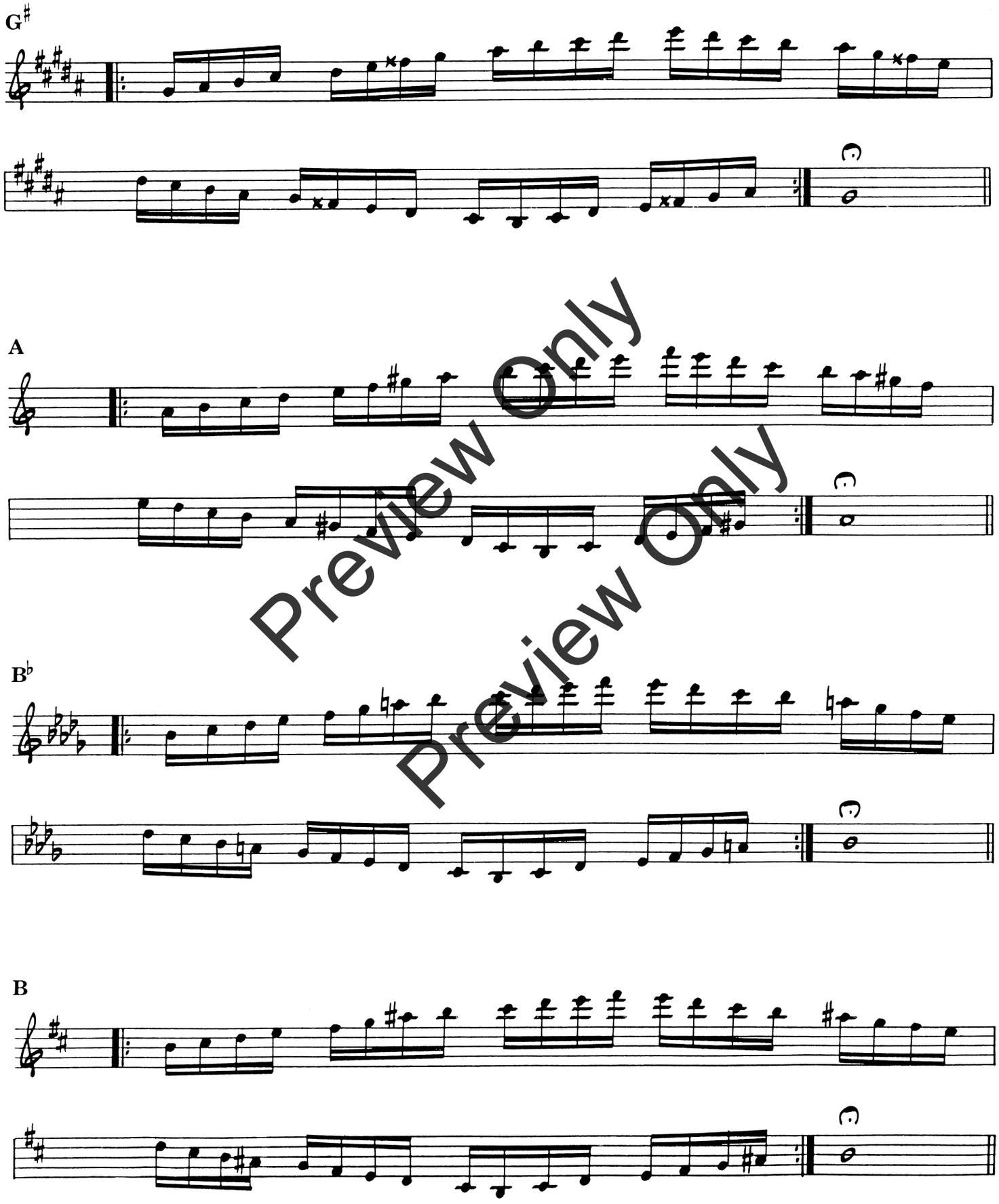
more Harmonic Minor Scales



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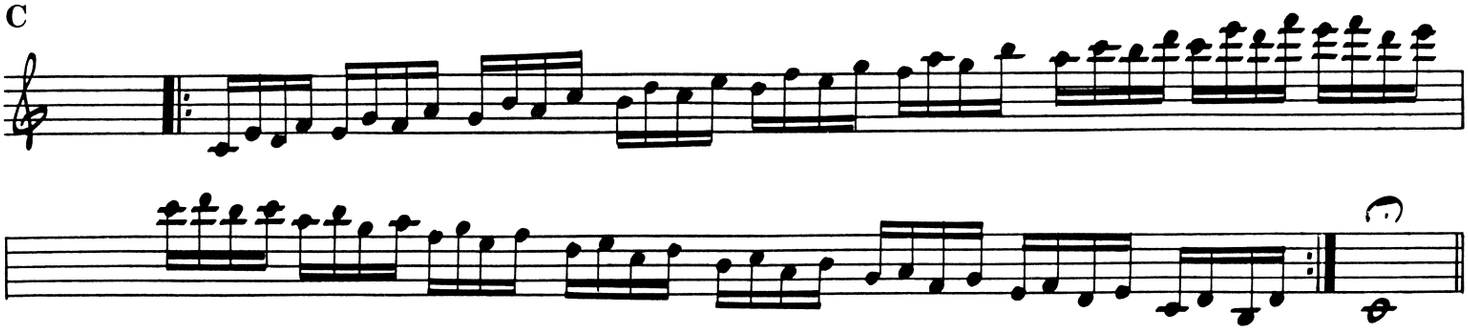
Major Scales in 3rds

C



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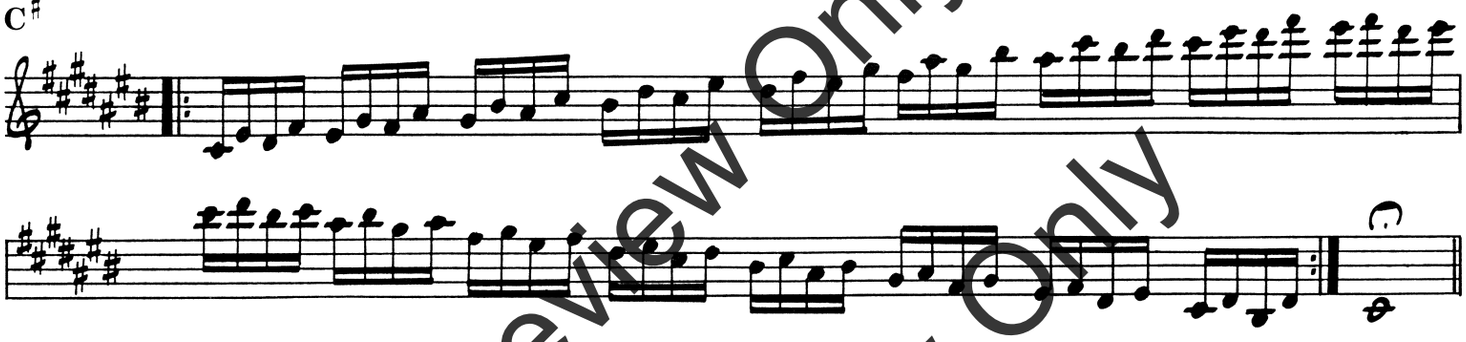

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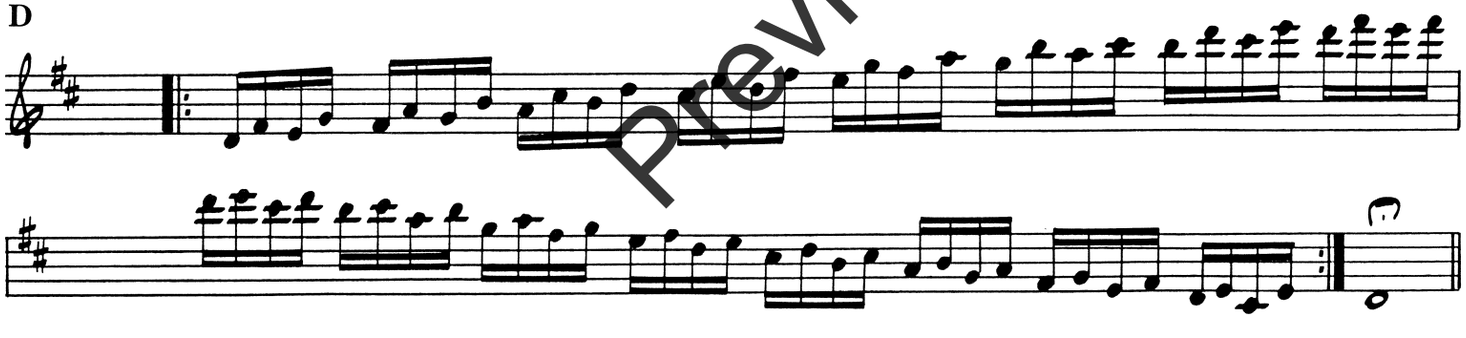

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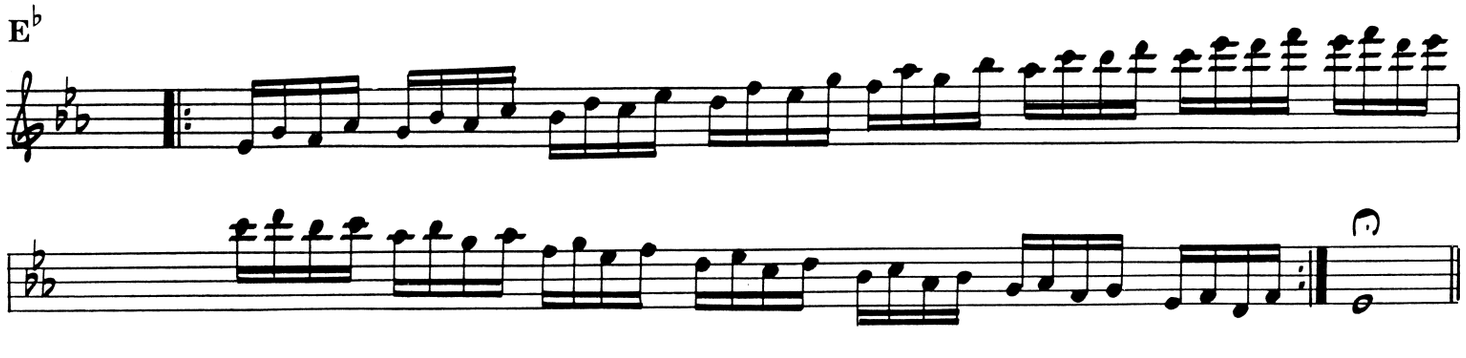
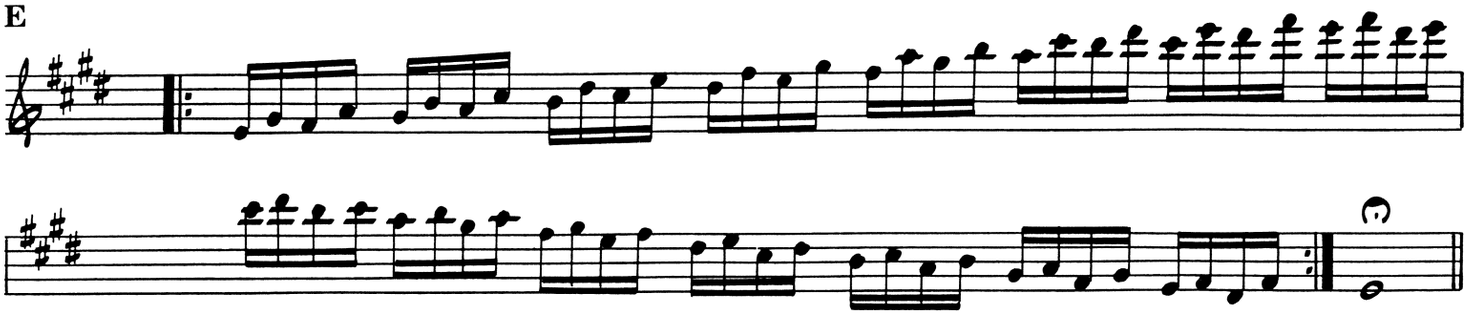


more Major Scales in 3rds

E



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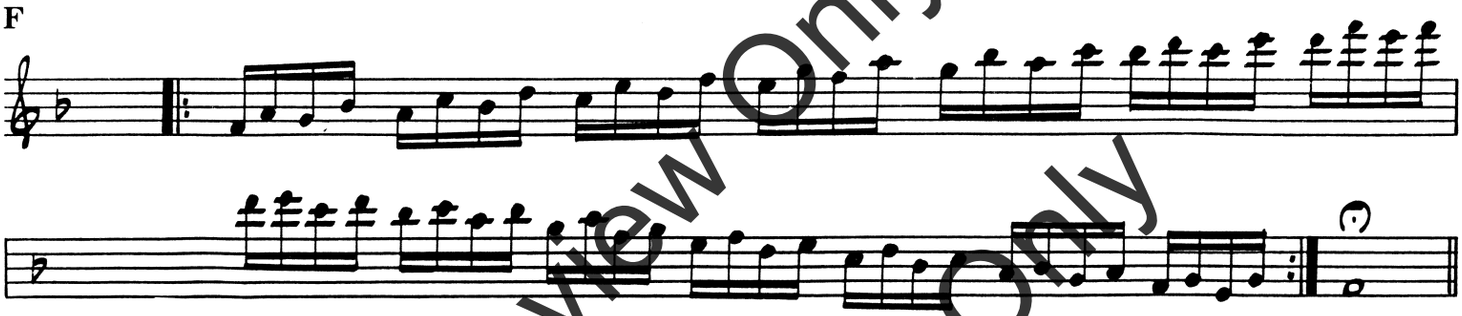

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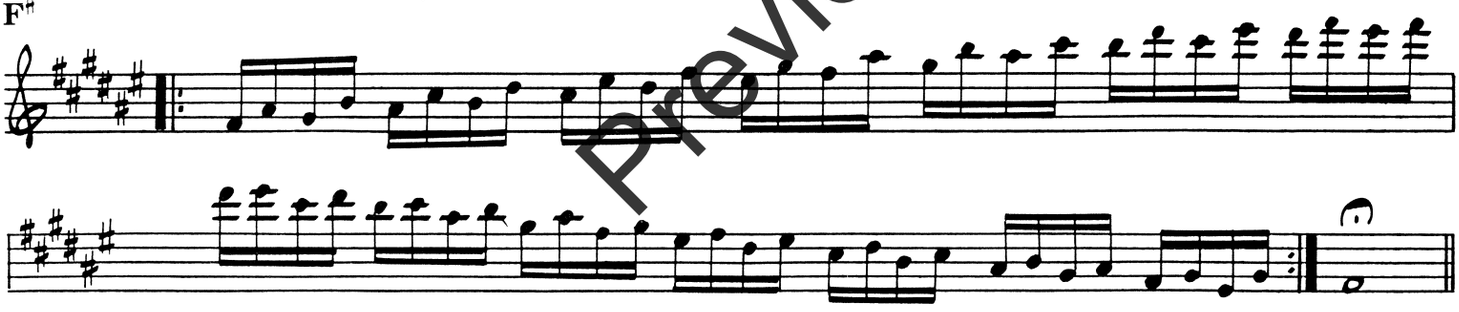

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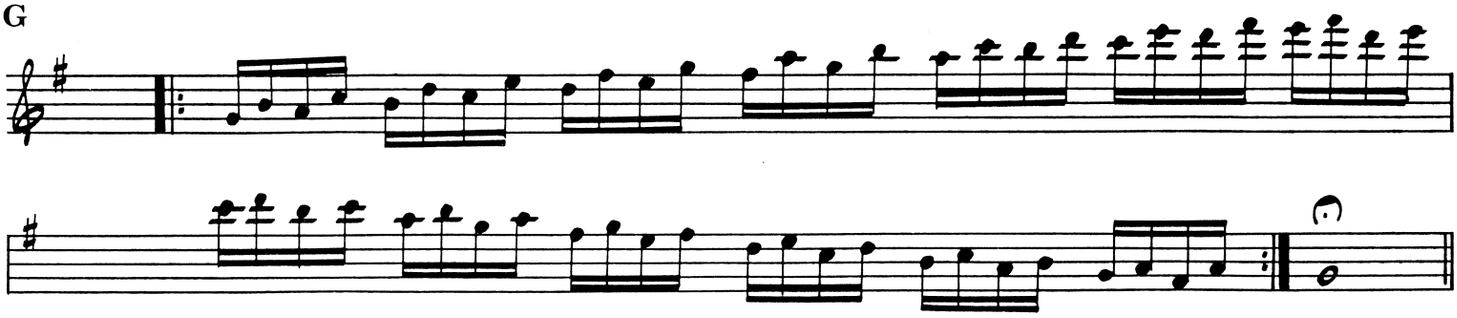

Preview Only
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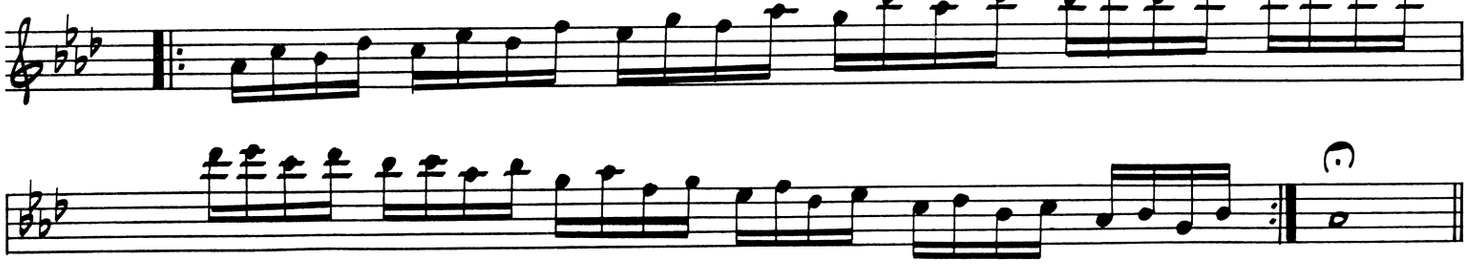
more Major Scales in 3rds

A♭



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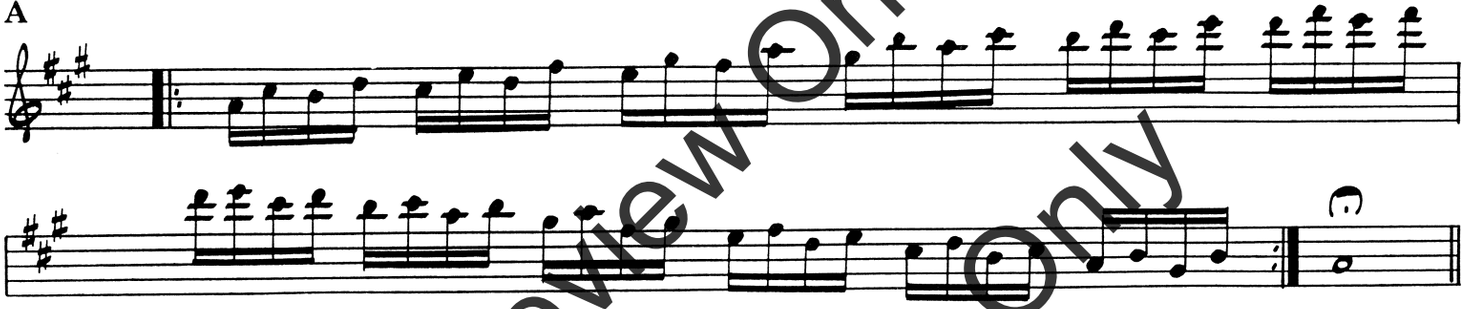
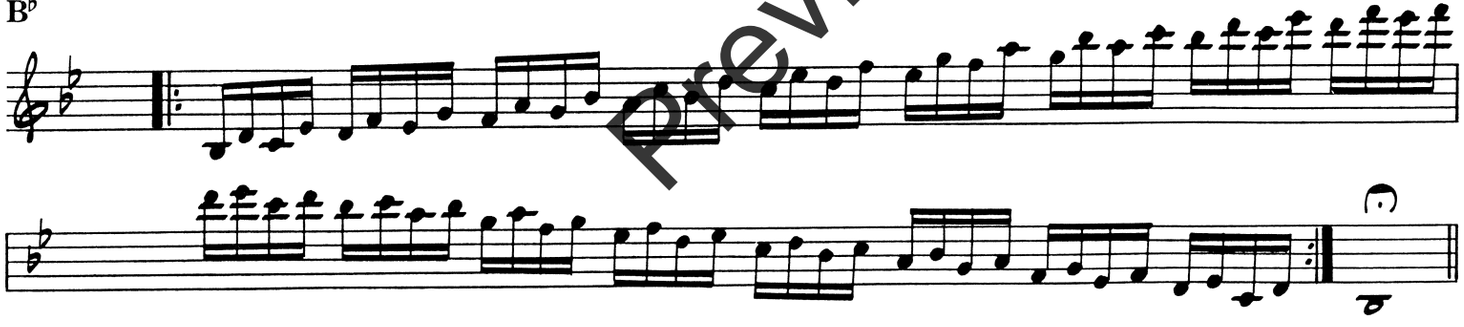


B♭



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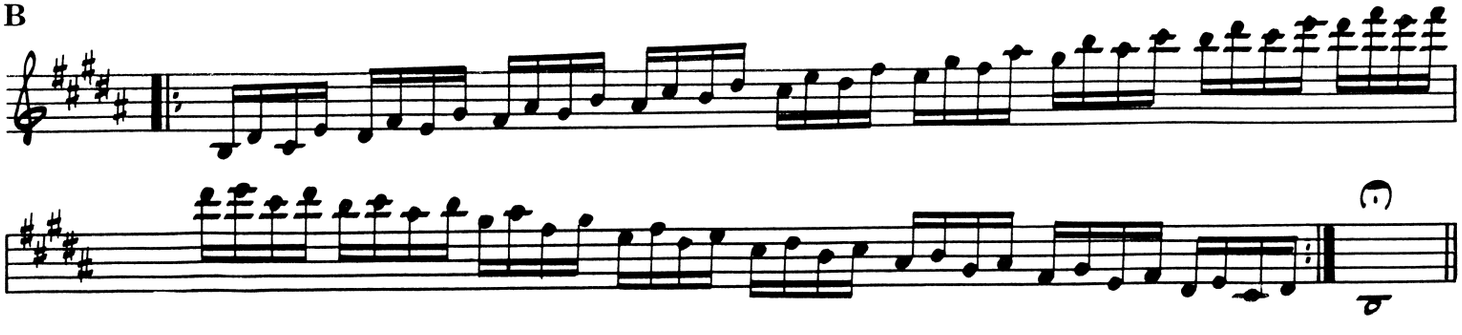

Preview Only
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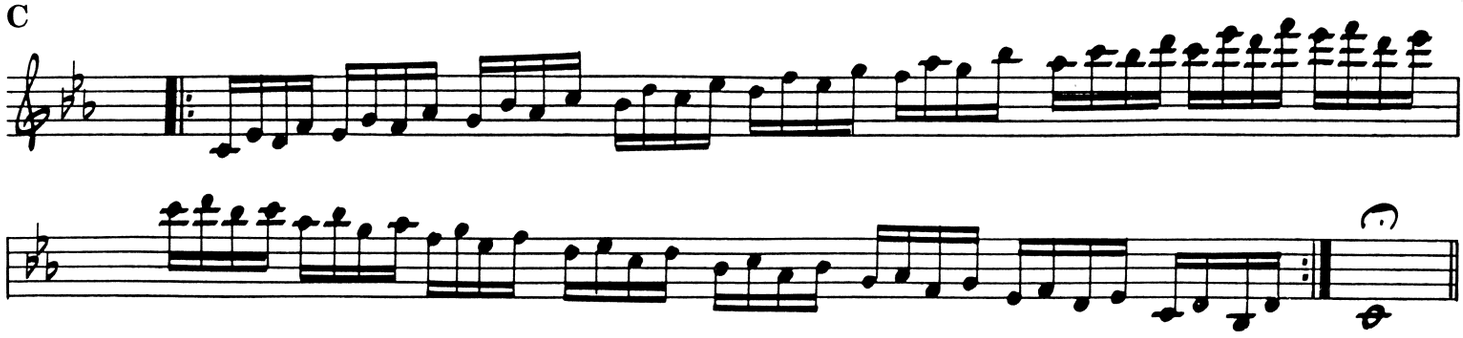
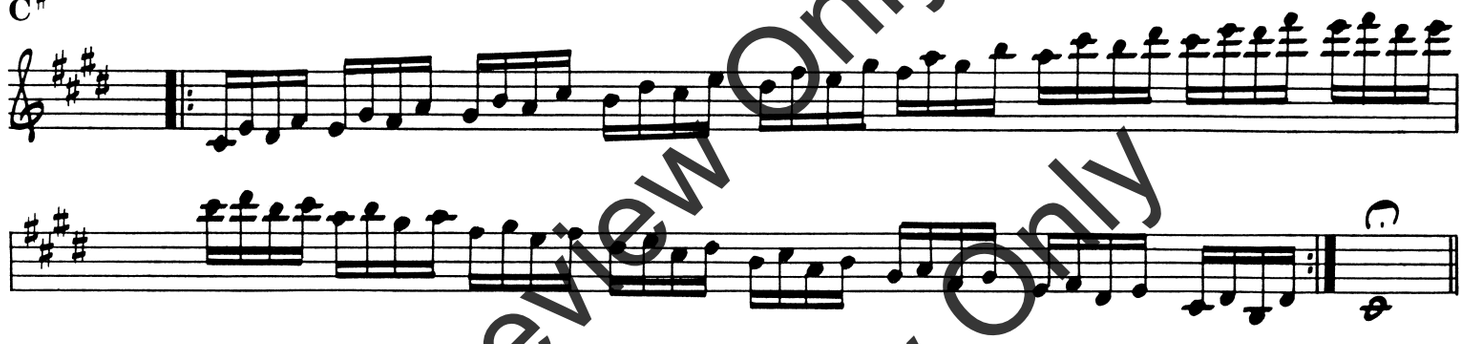
Pure Minor Scales in 3rds

C



C♯



Preview Only
Preview Only

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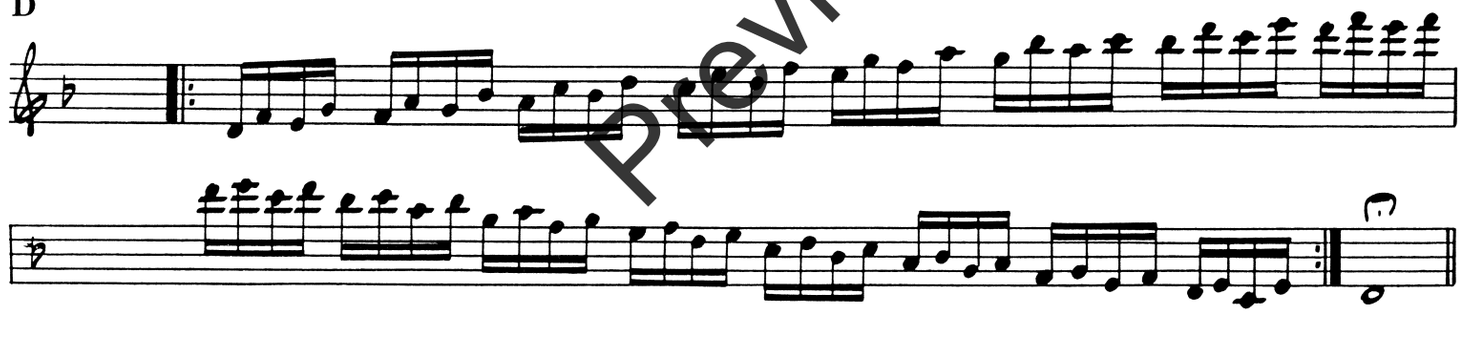
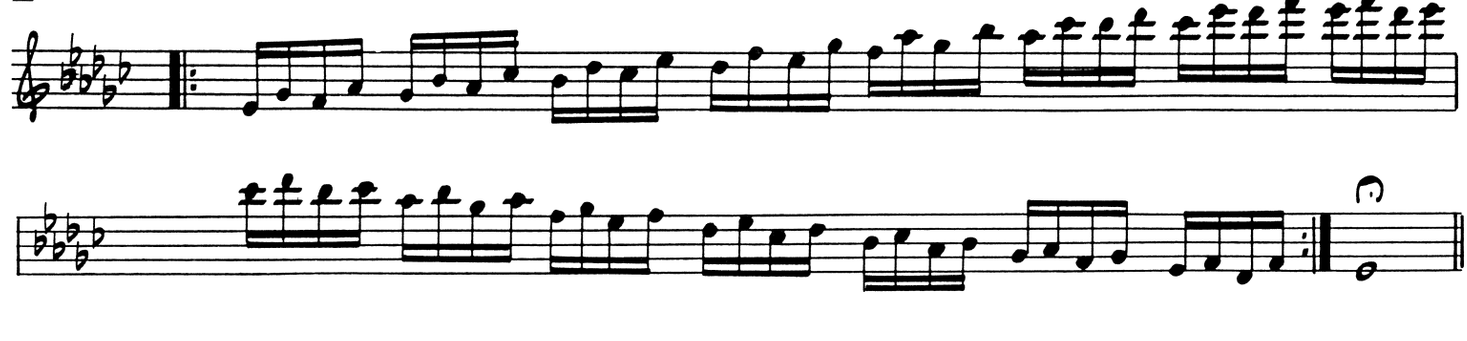
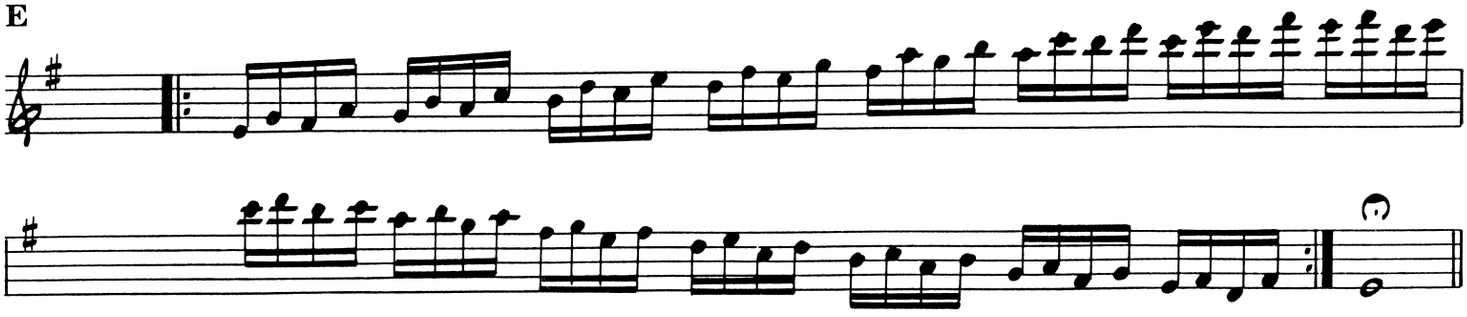


E♭



more Pure Minor Scales in 3rds

E



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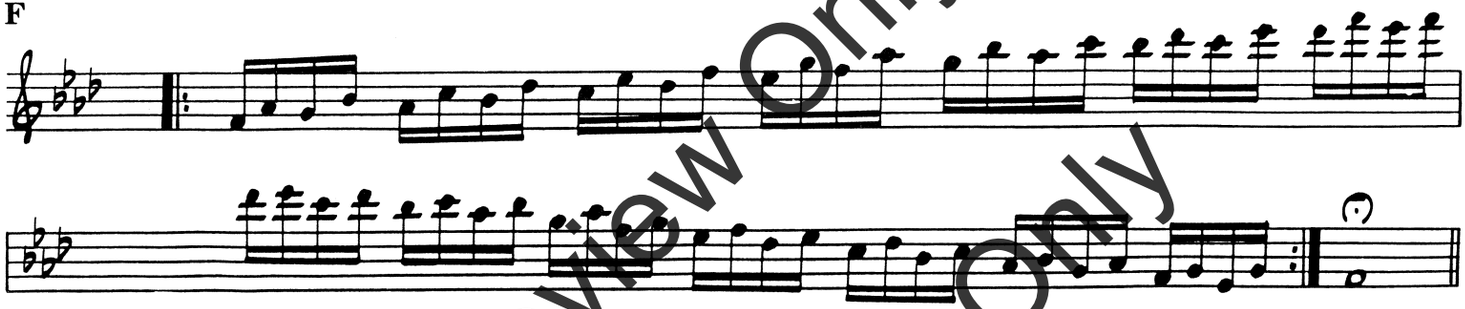

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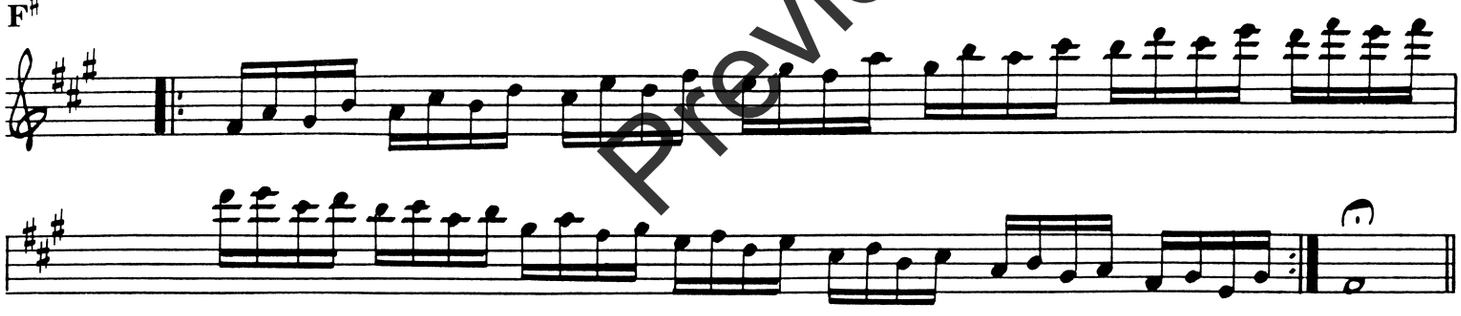

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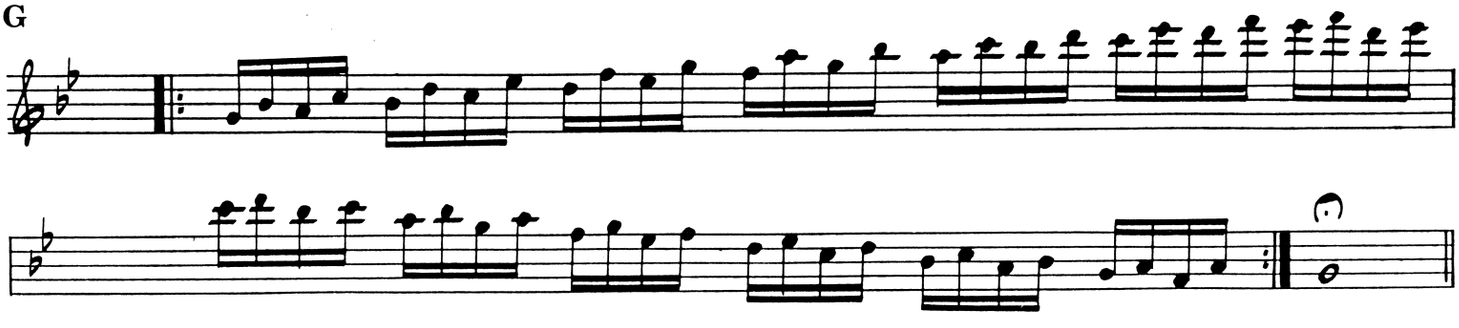
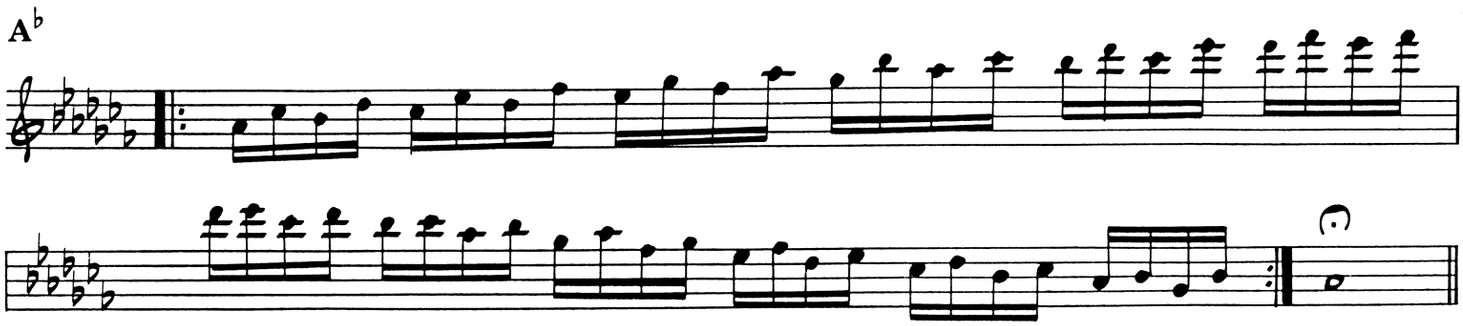


Preview Only
Preview Only

more Pure Minor Scales in 3rds

A♭



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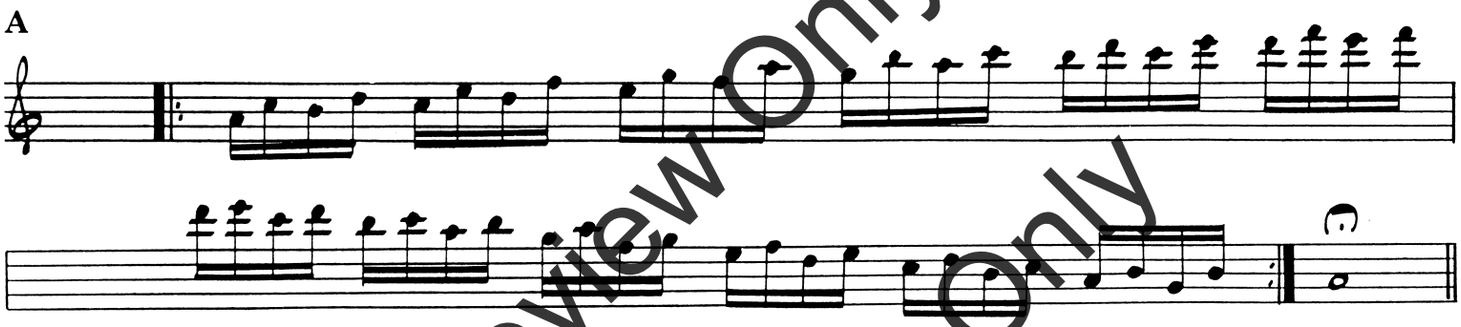
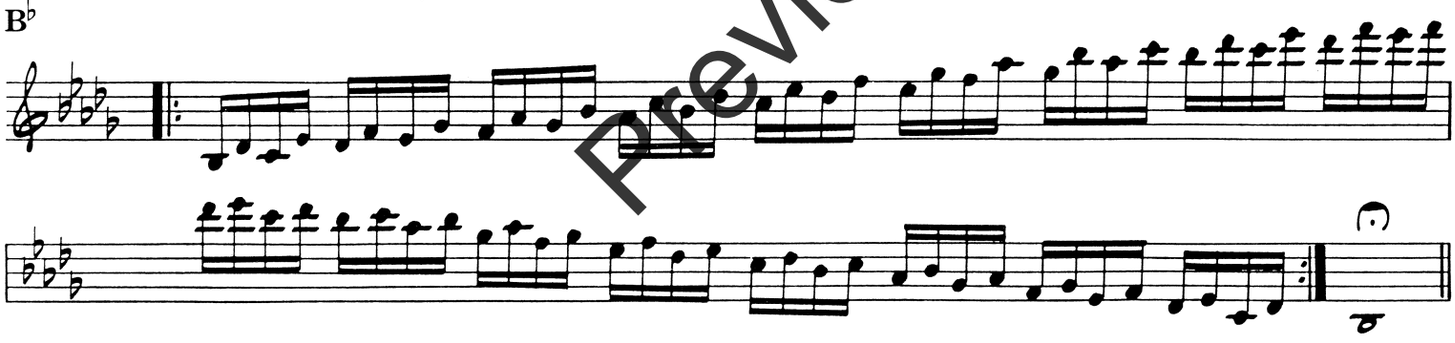


Preview Only
Preview Only

B♭



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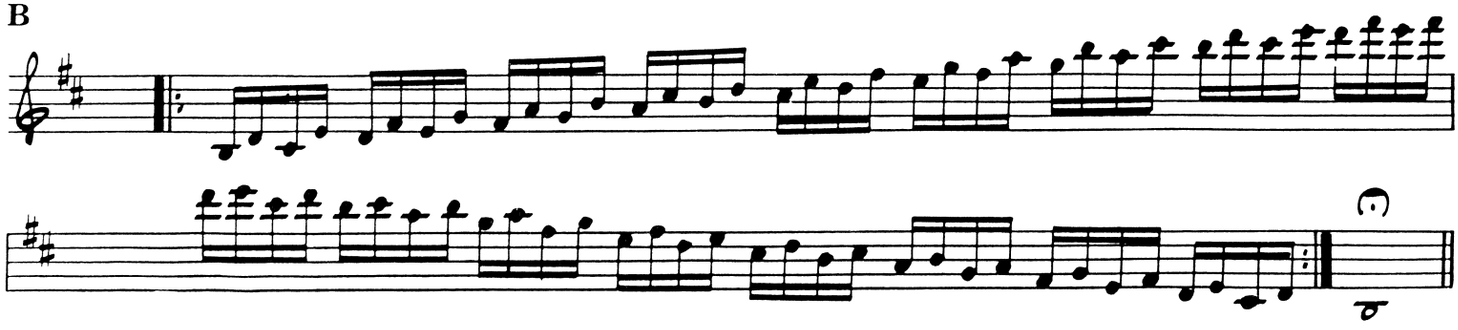
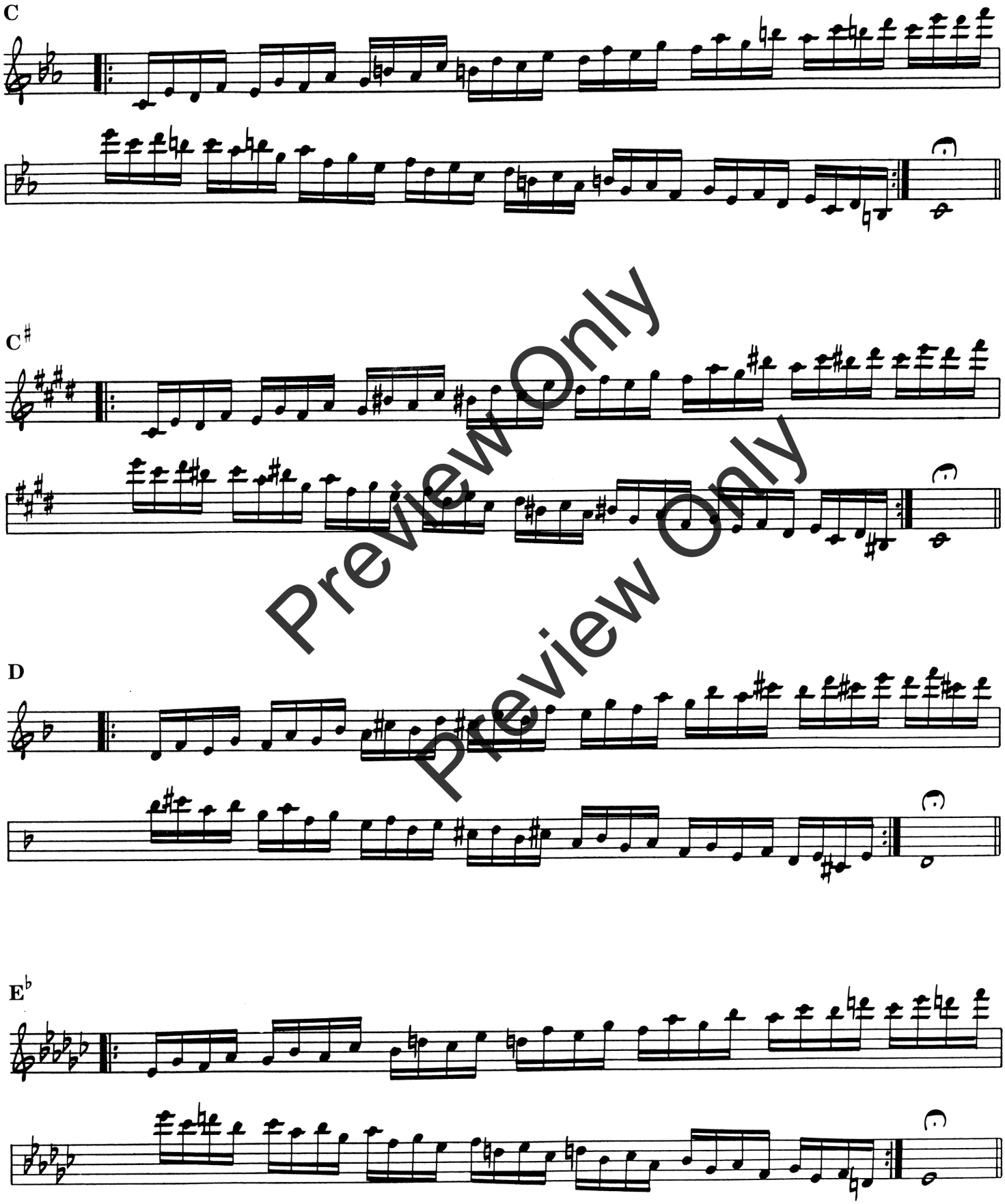


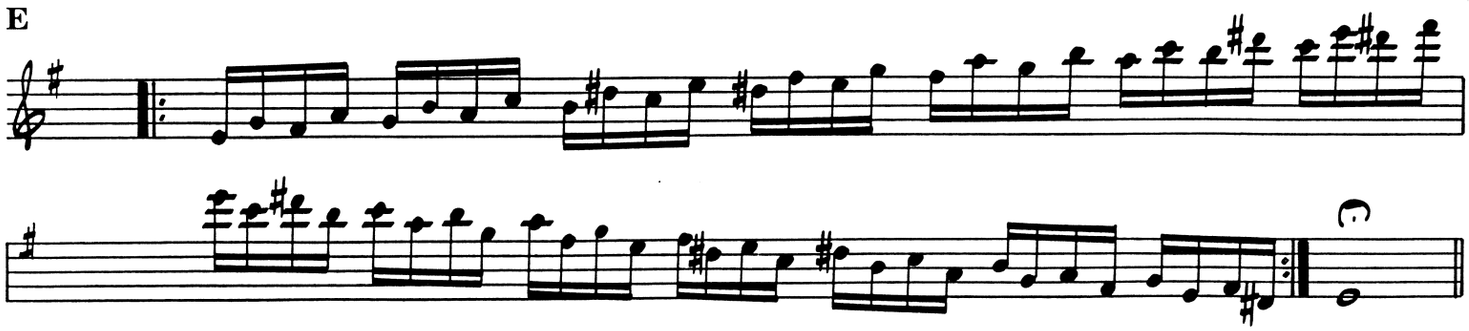
Harmonic Minor Scales in 3rds



Preview Only
Preview Only

more Harmonic Minor Scales in 3rds

E



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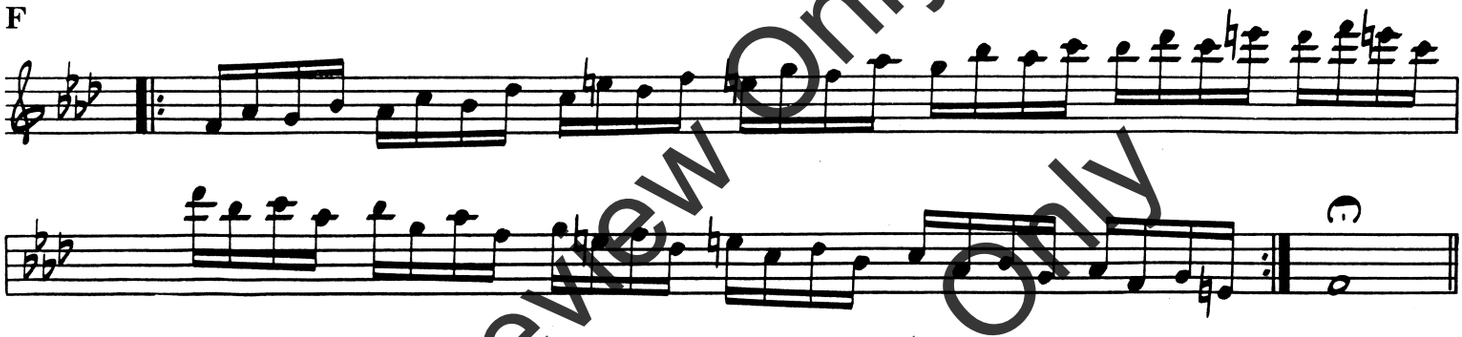

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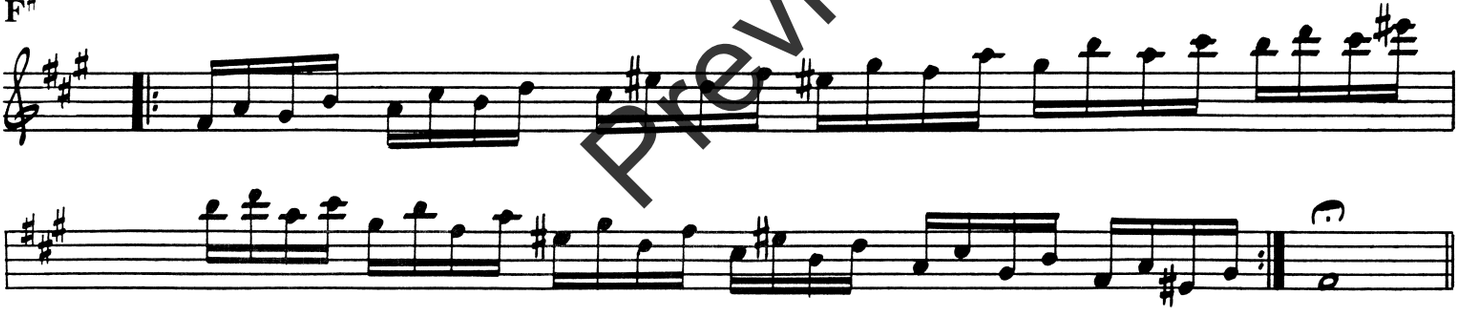

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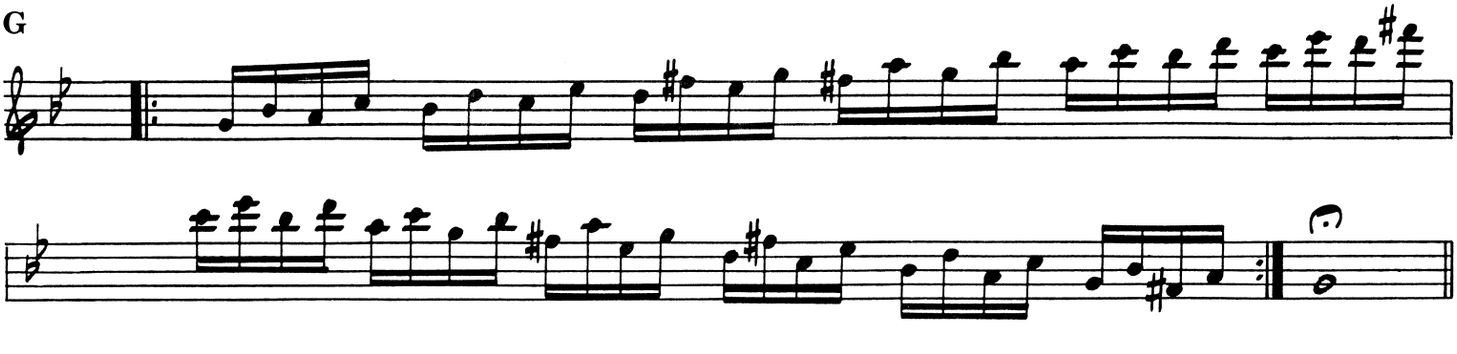
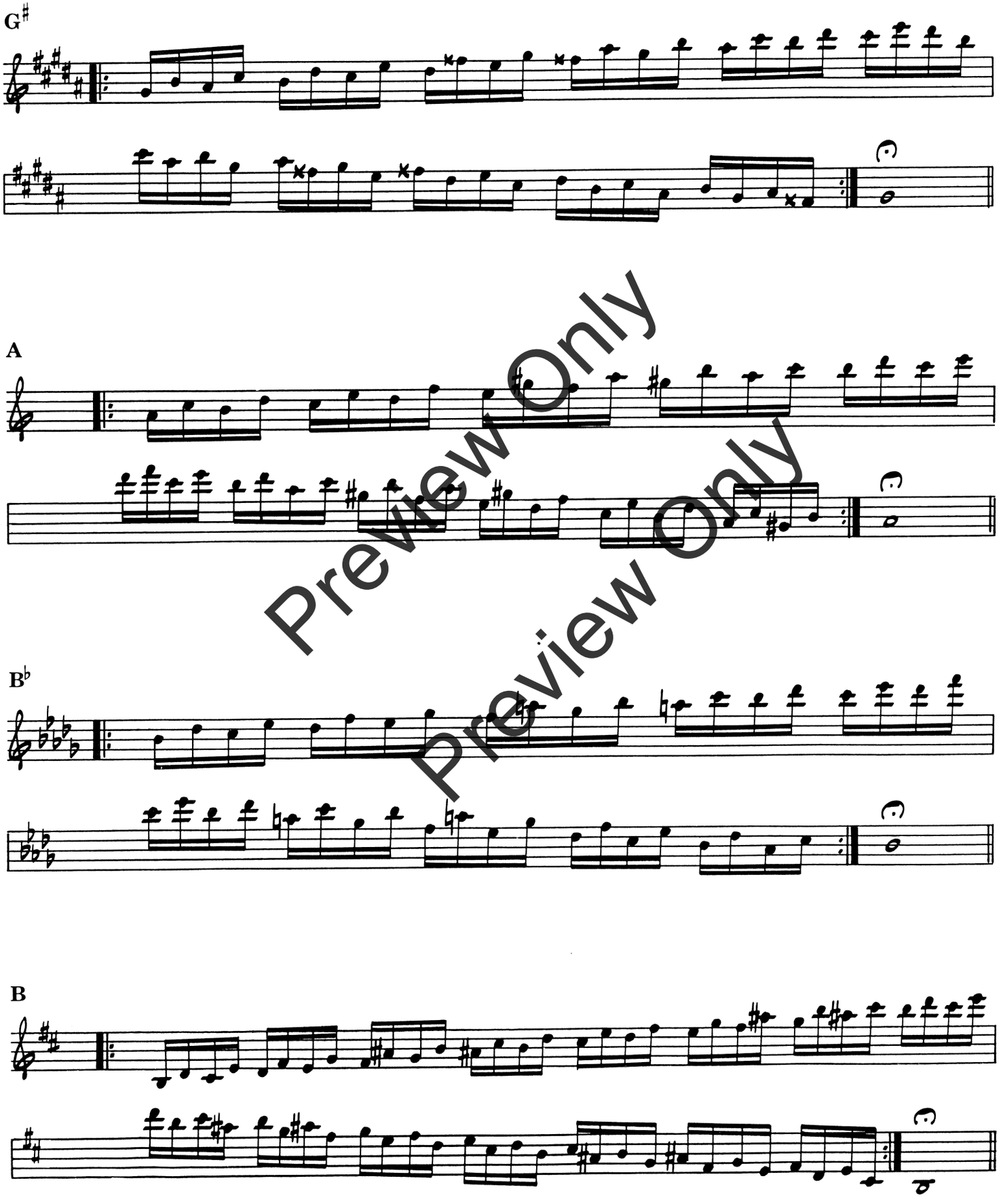


Preview Only
Preview Only

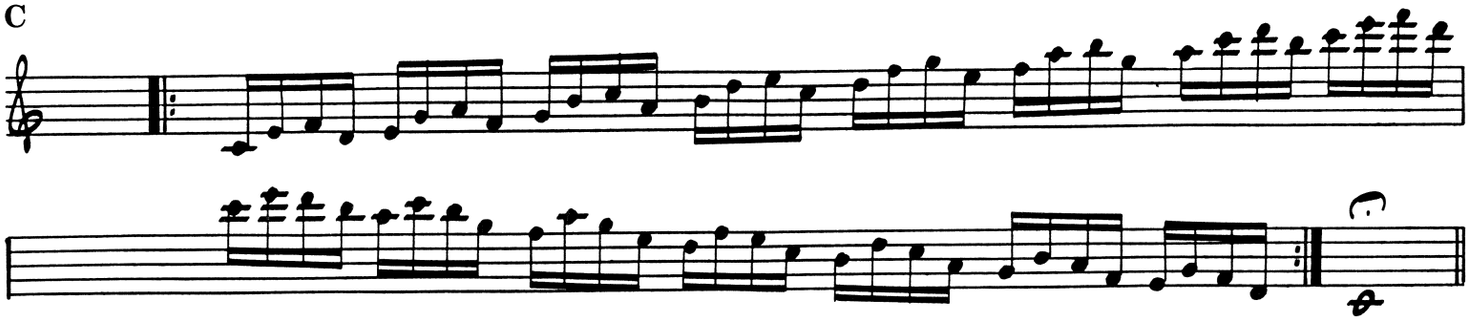
more Harmonic Minor Scales in 3rds



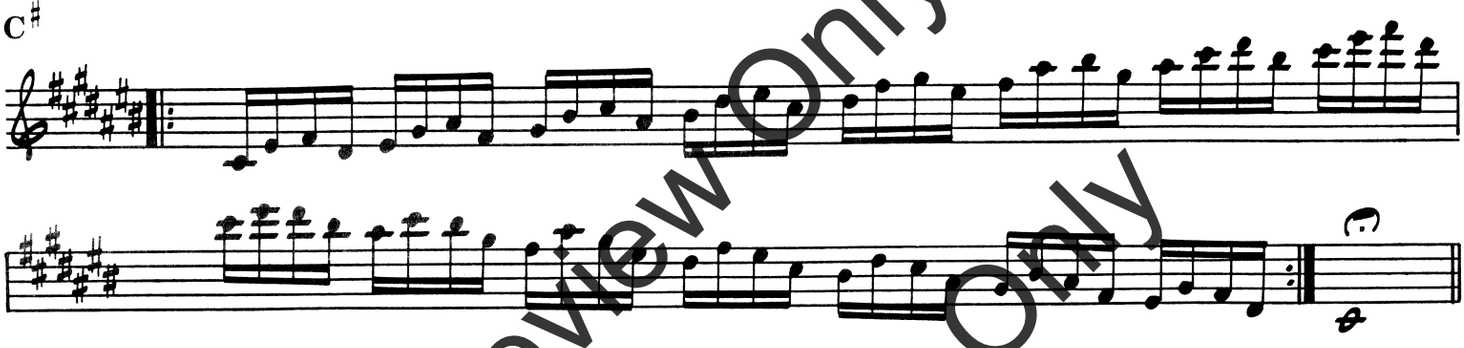
Preview Only
Preview Only

Major Scale Sequential Patterns

C



C♯



Preview Only
Preview Only

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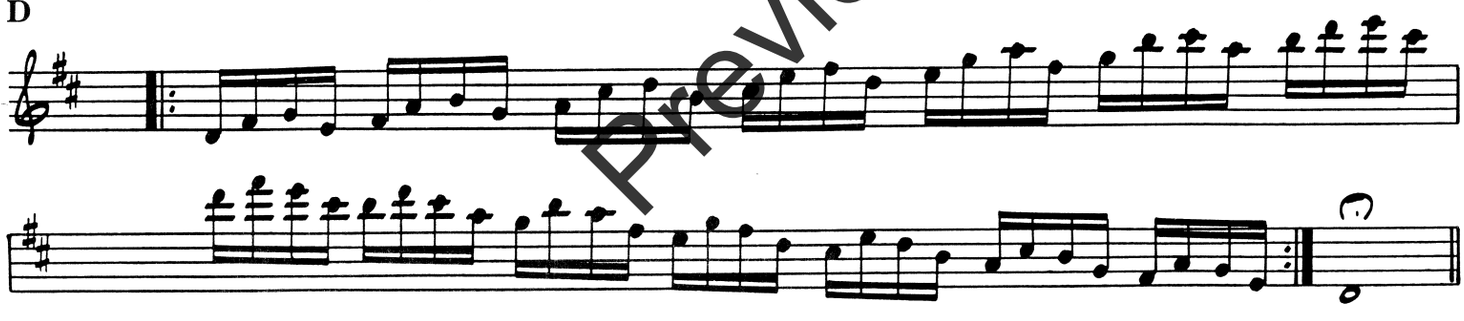
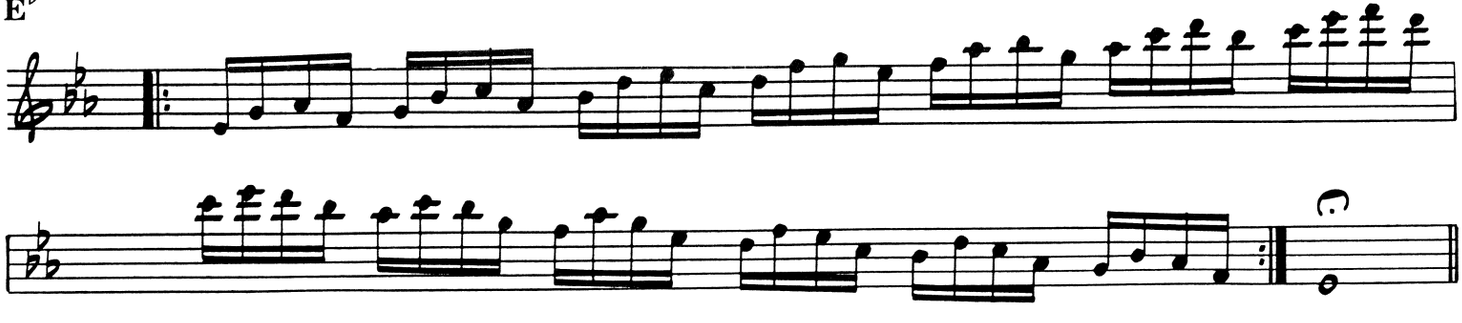
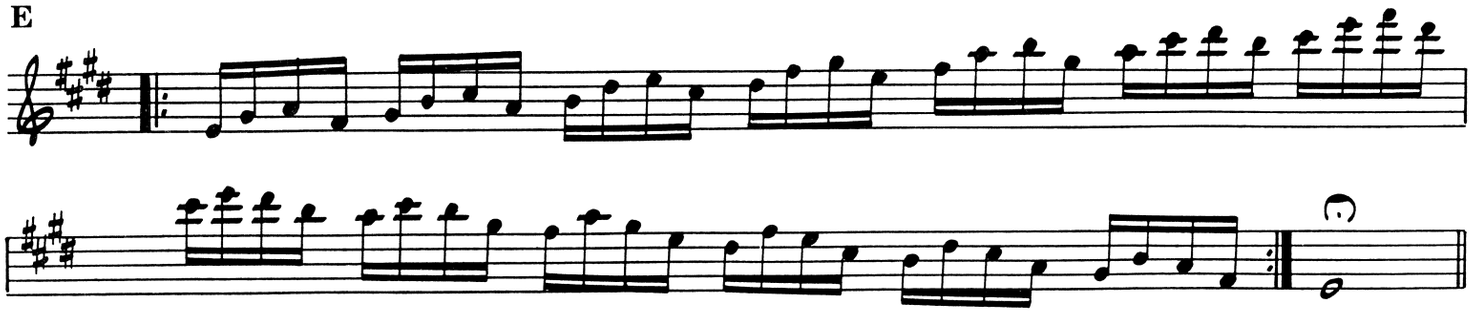


E♭



more Major Scale Sequential Patterns

E



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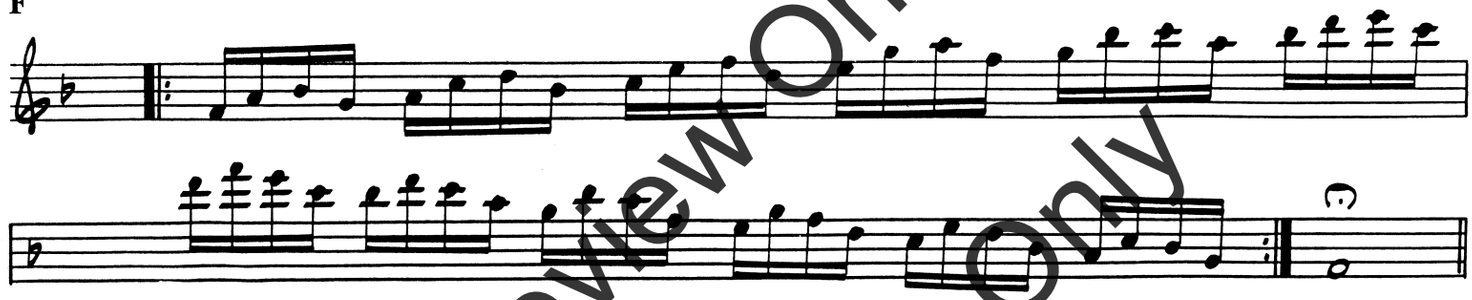

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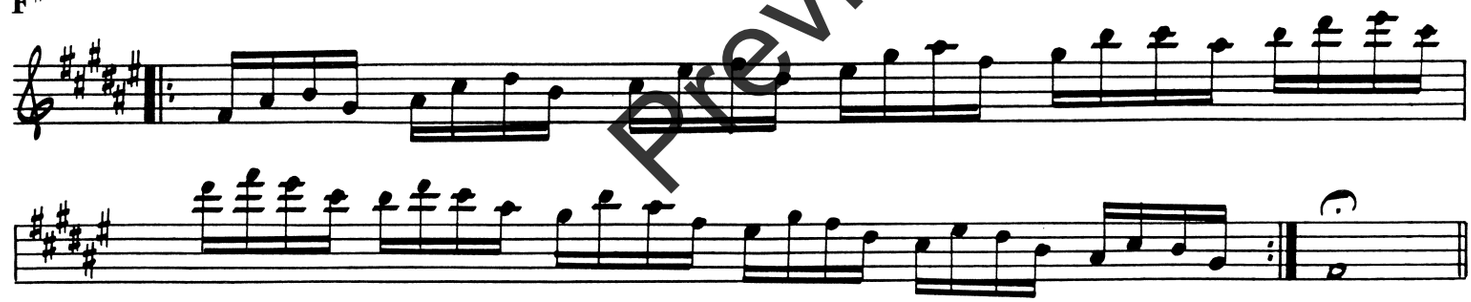

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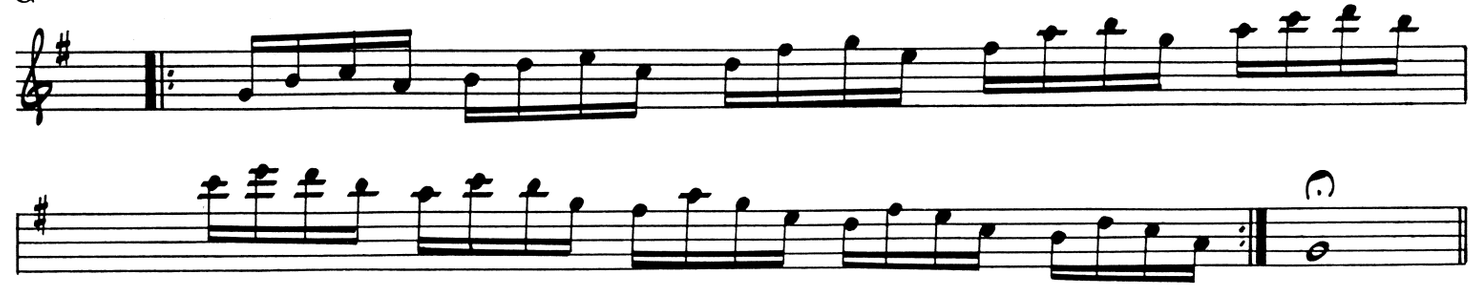
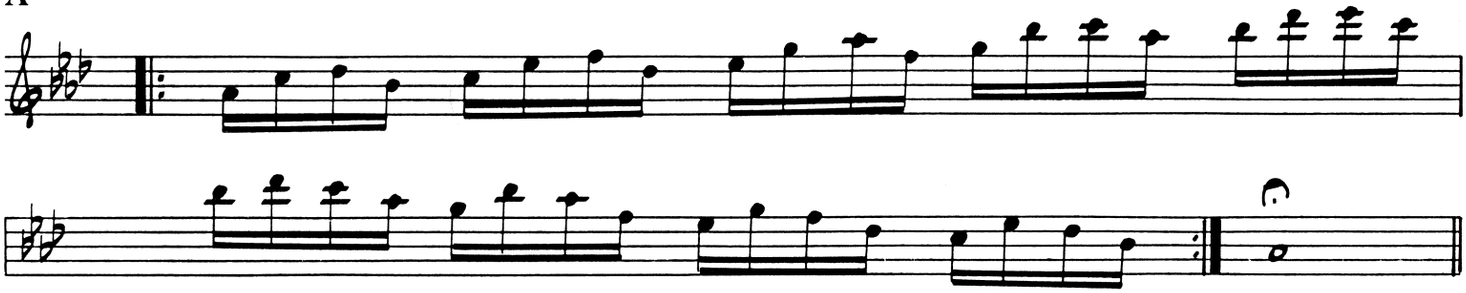


Preview Only
Preview Only

more Major Scale Sequential Patterns

A♭



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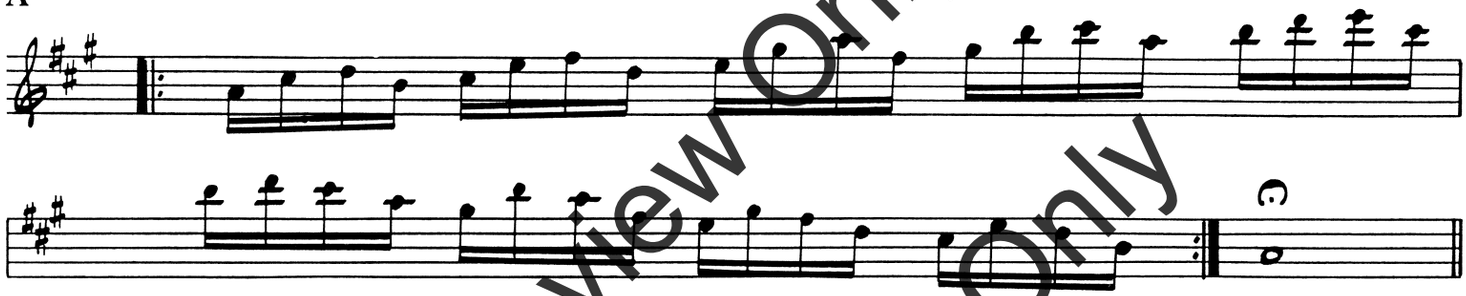
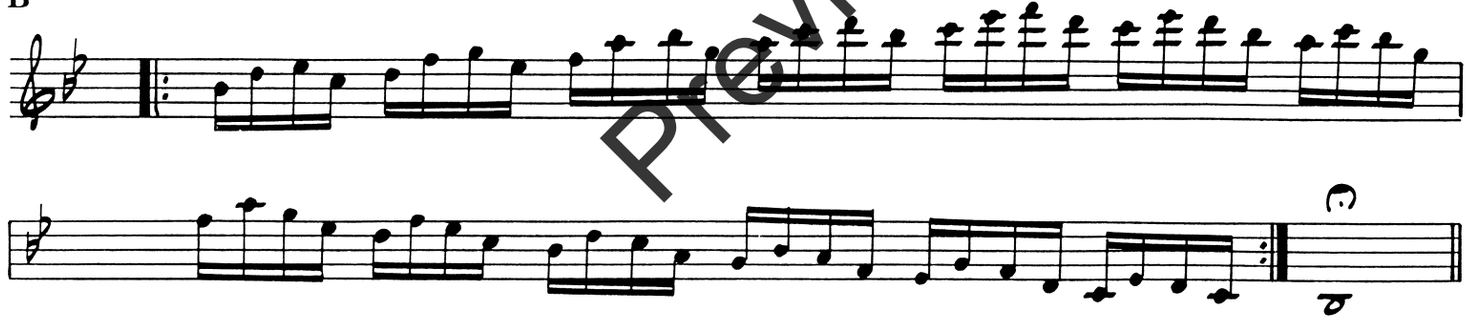


Preview Only
Preview Only

B♭



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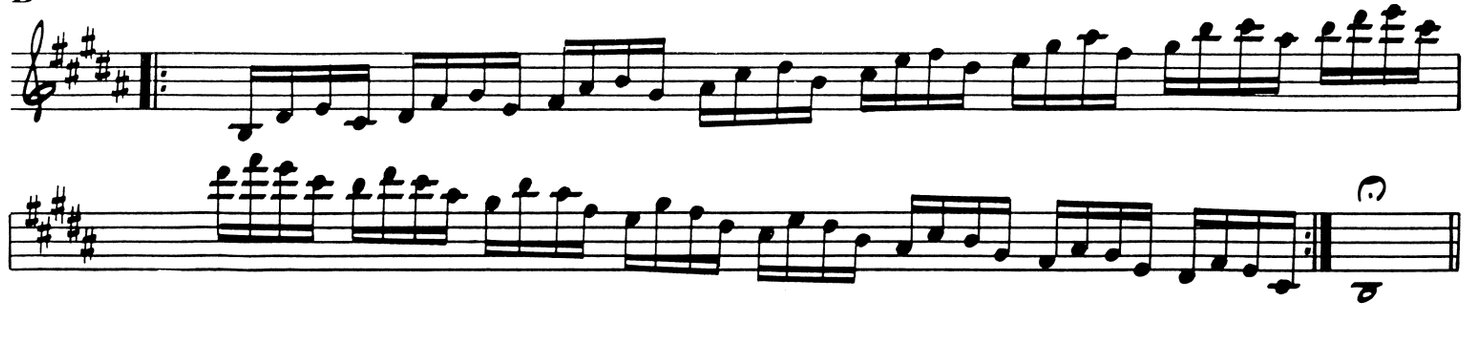
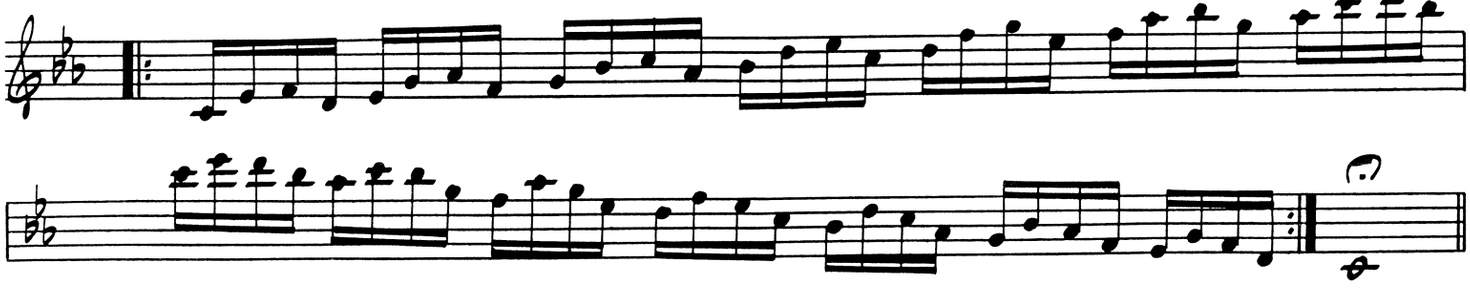
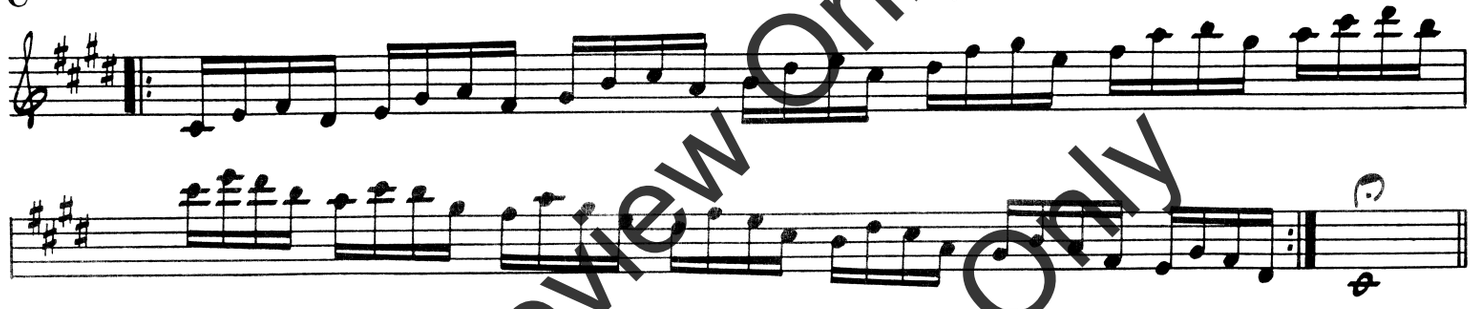


Pure Minor Scale Sequential Patterns

C



C♯



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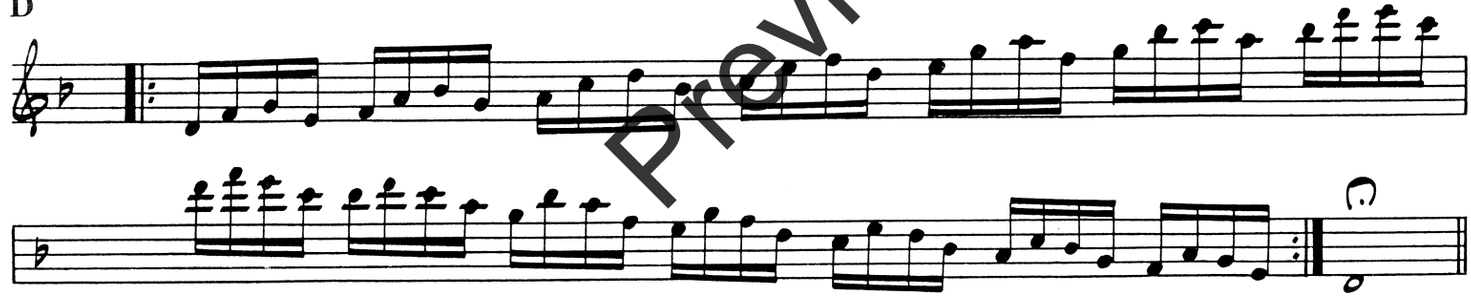
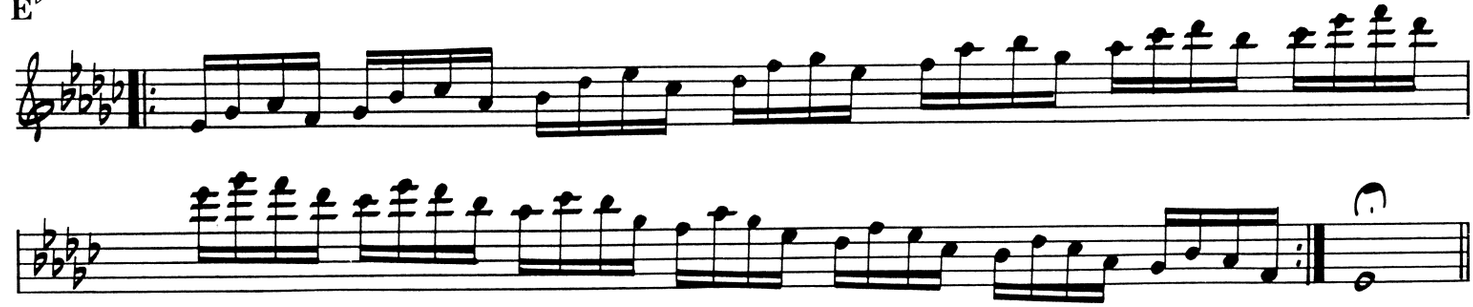


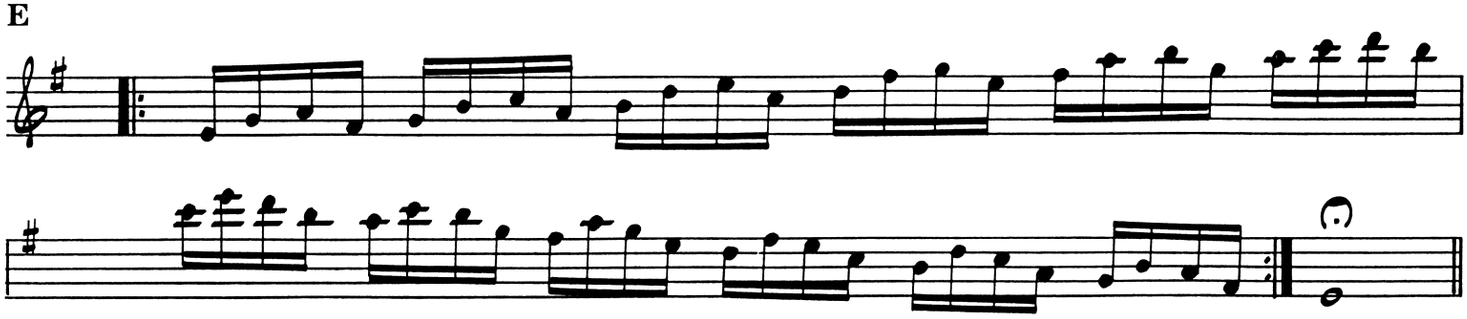
E♭



Preview Only
Preview Only

more Pure Minor Scale Sequential Patterns

E



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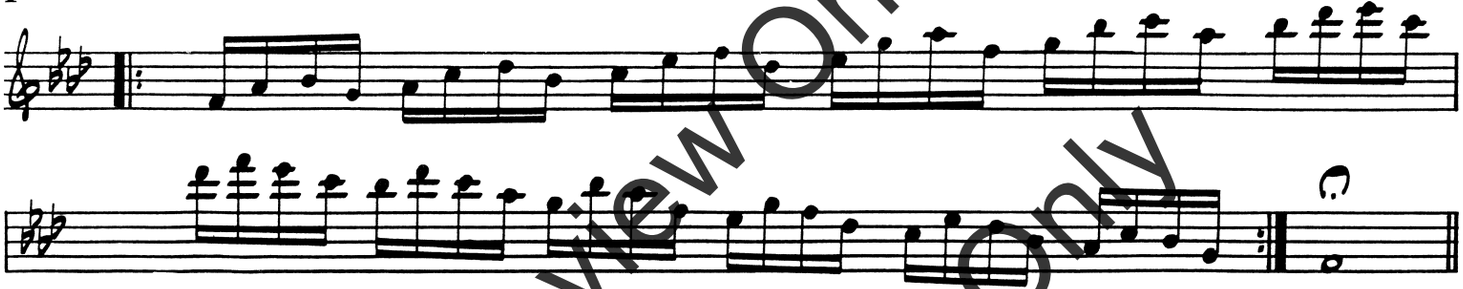

Preview Only
Preview Only

F♯

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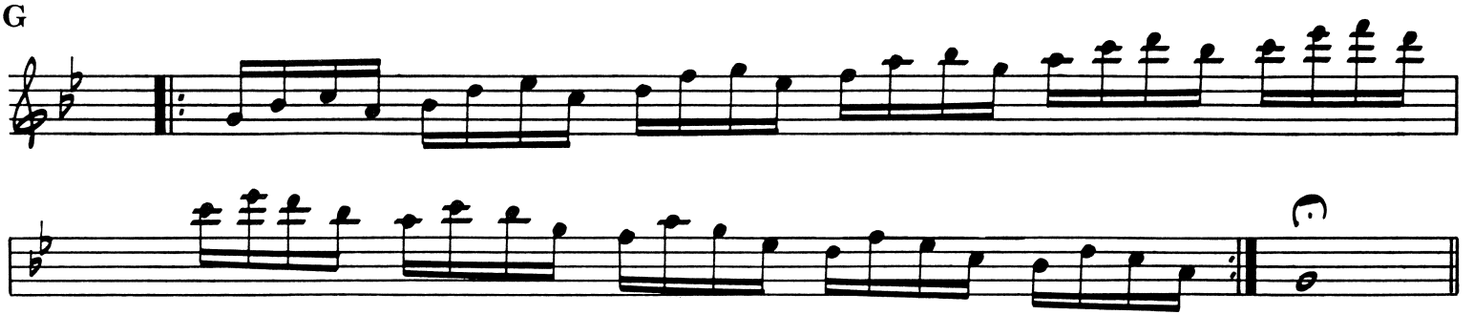
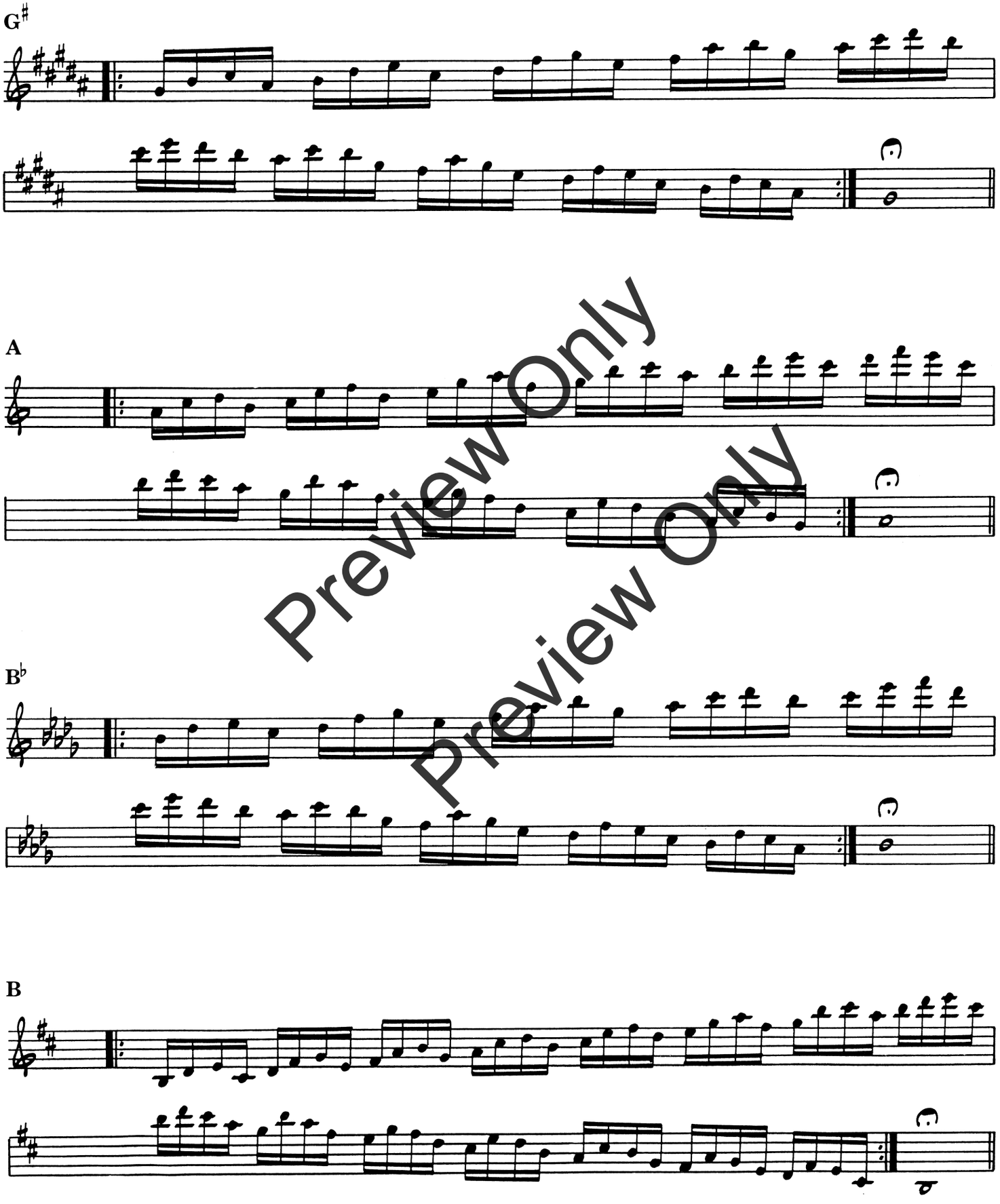


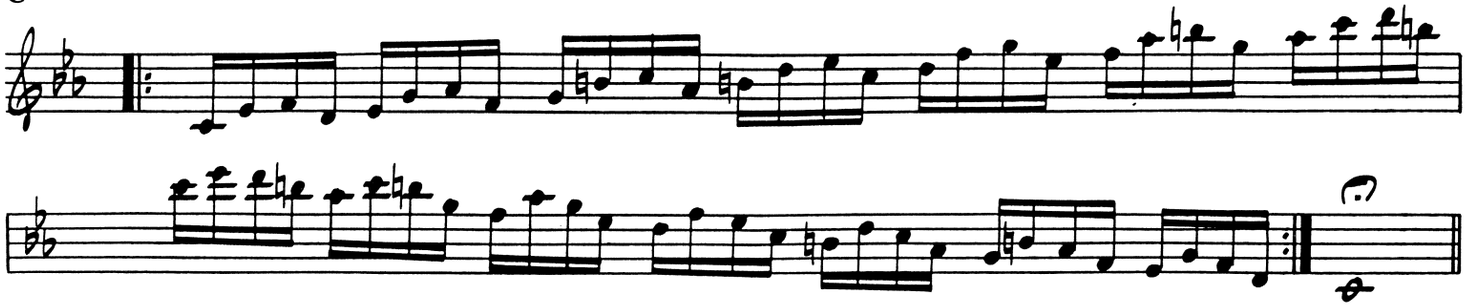
more Pure Minor Scale Sequential Patterns



Preview Only
Preview Only

Harmonic Minor Scale Sequential Patterns

C



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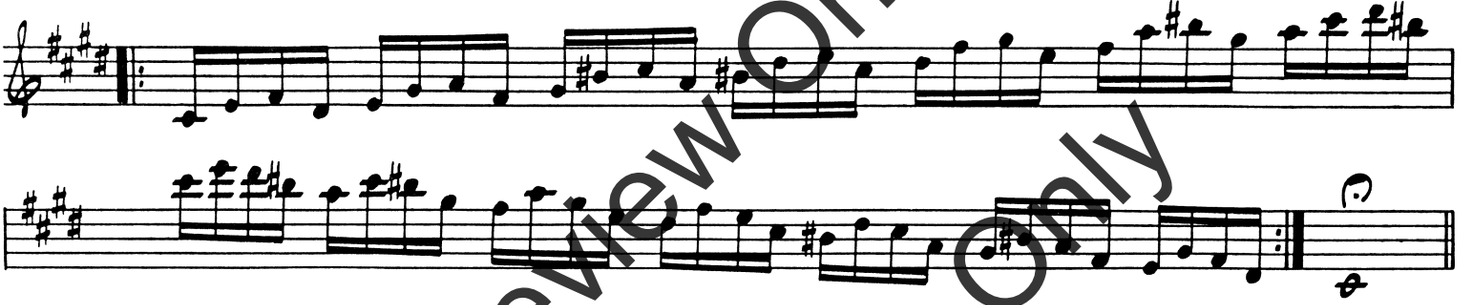

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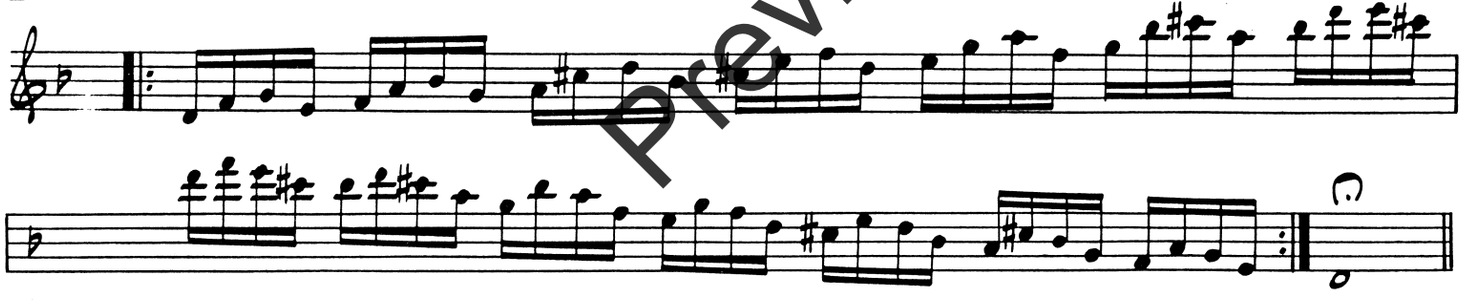

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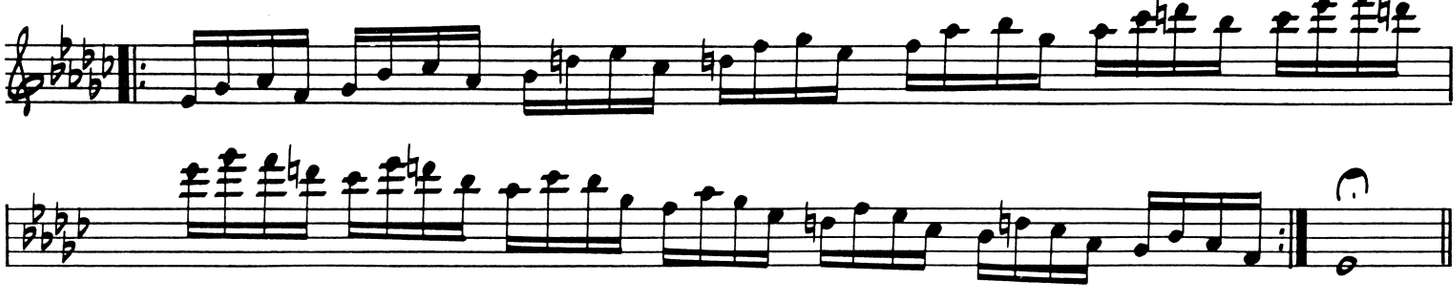
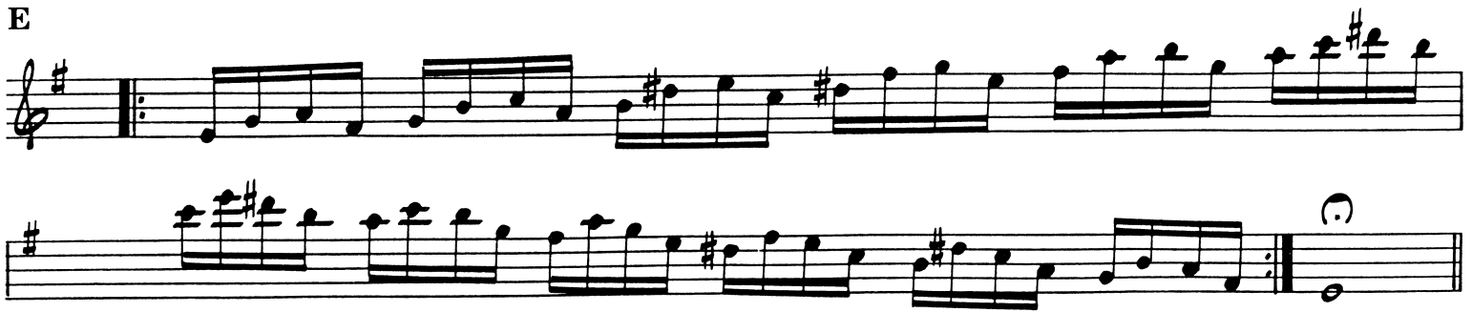


more Harmonic Minor Scale Sequential Patterns

E



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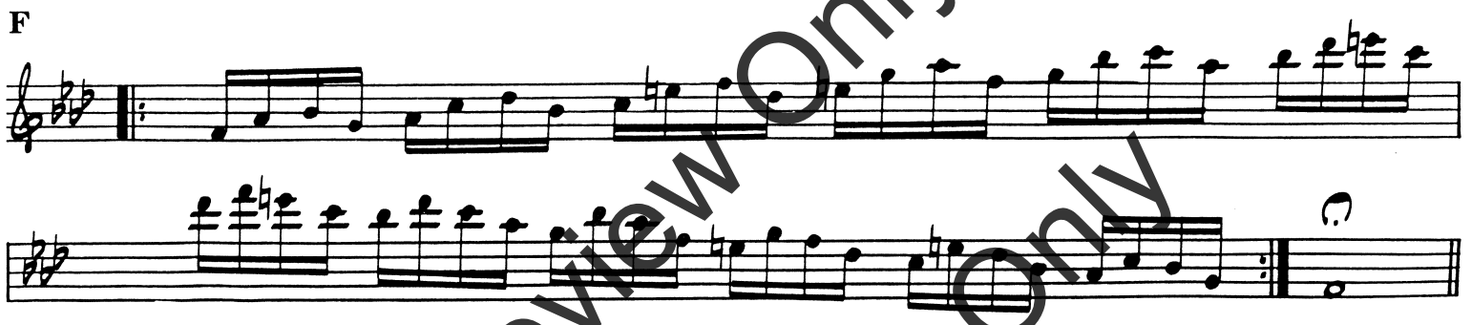
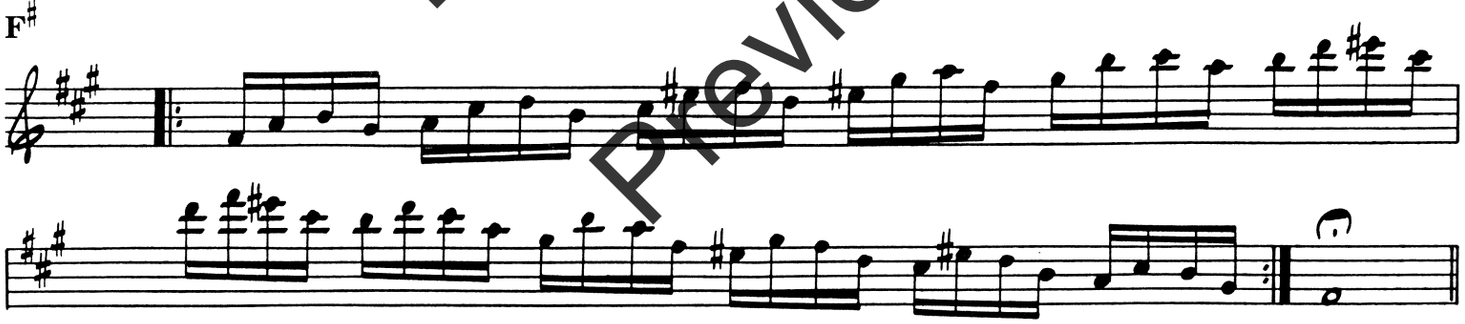


Preview Only
Preview Only

F♯



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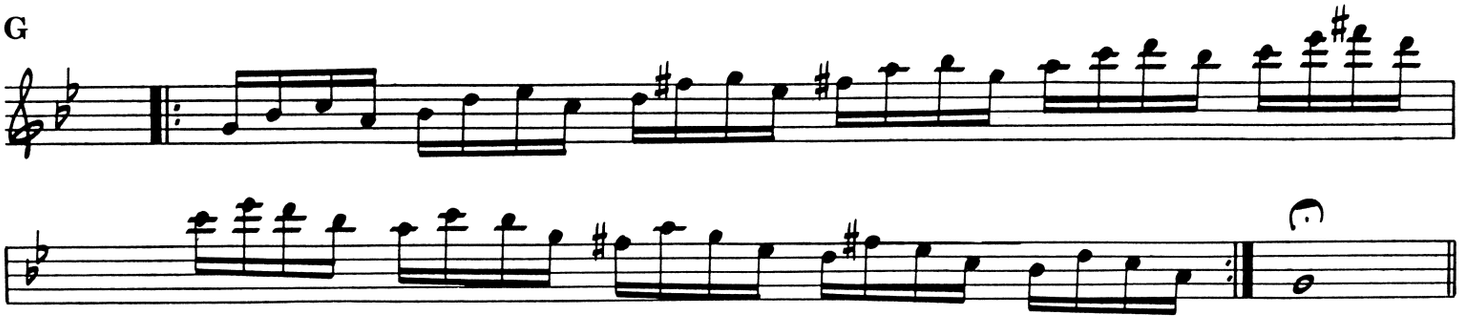
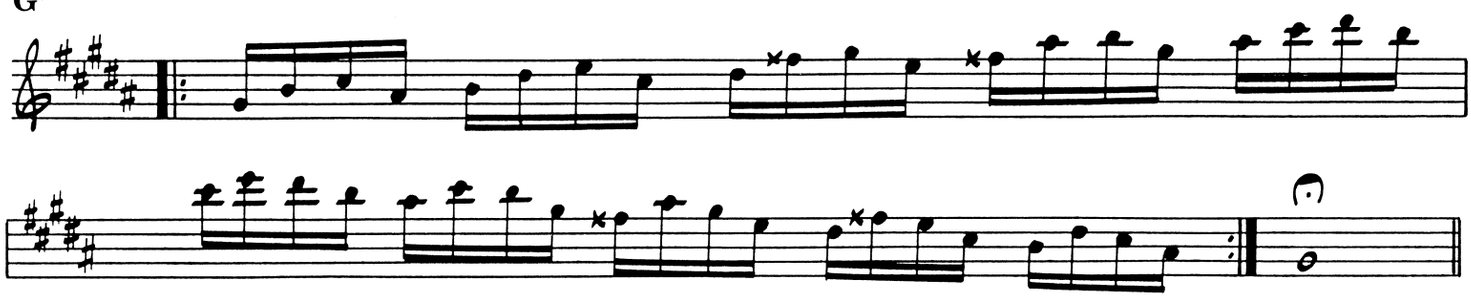


more Harmonic Minor Scale Sequential Patterns

G♯



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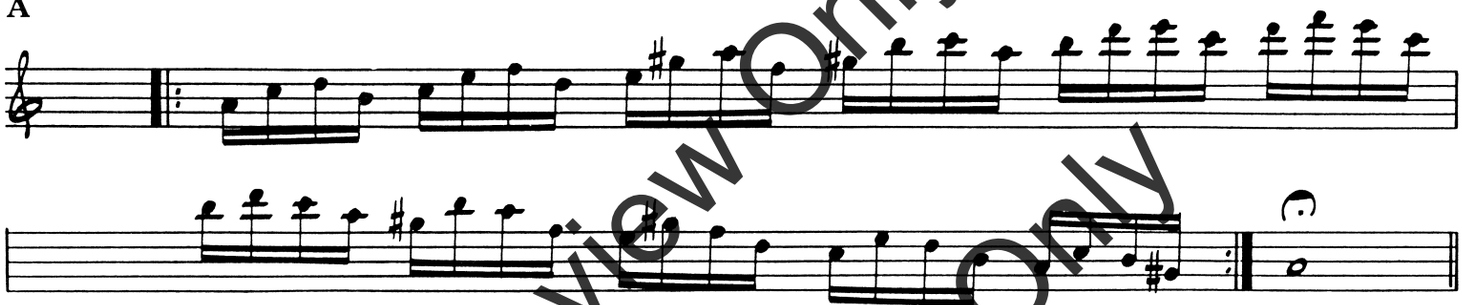
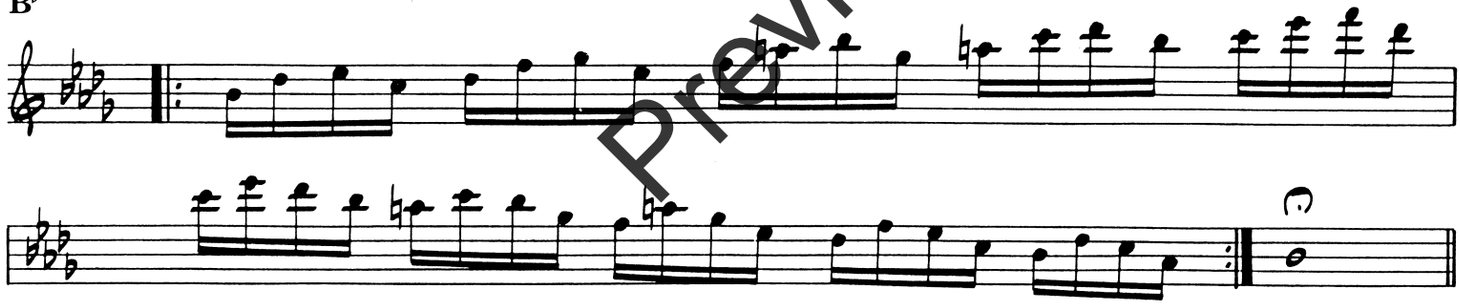


B♭



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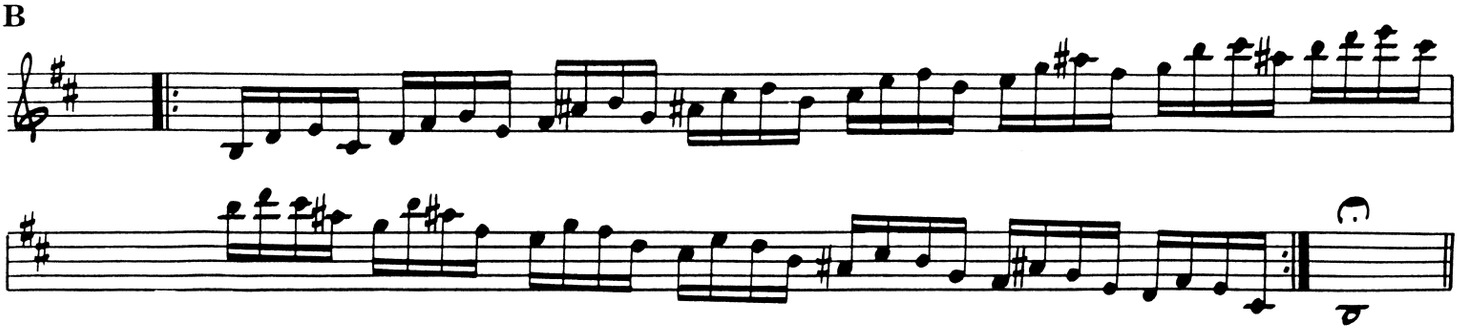
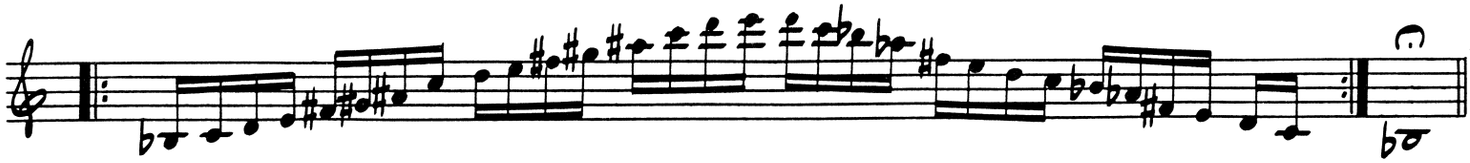
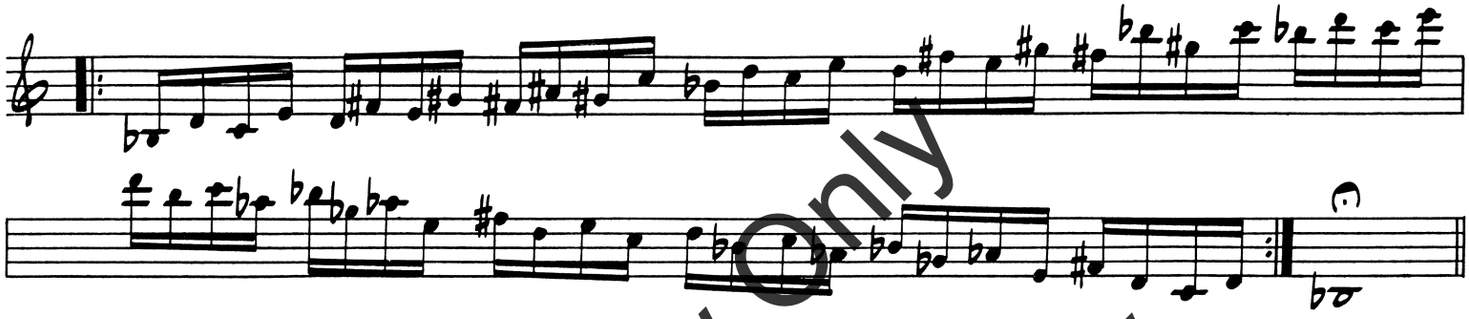


Preview Only
Preview Only

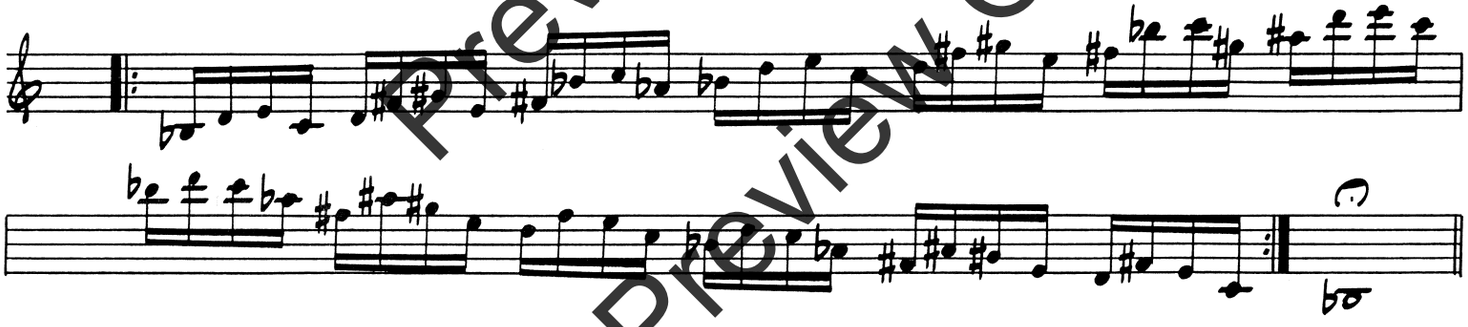
Whole-Tone Scale



Whole-Tone Scale in 3rds

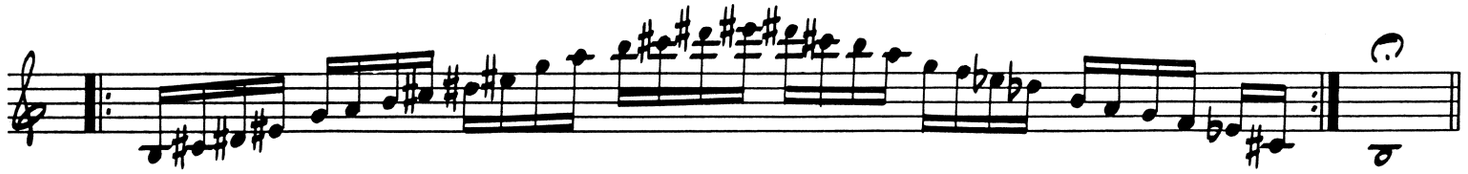


Whole-Tone Scale Sequential Pattern

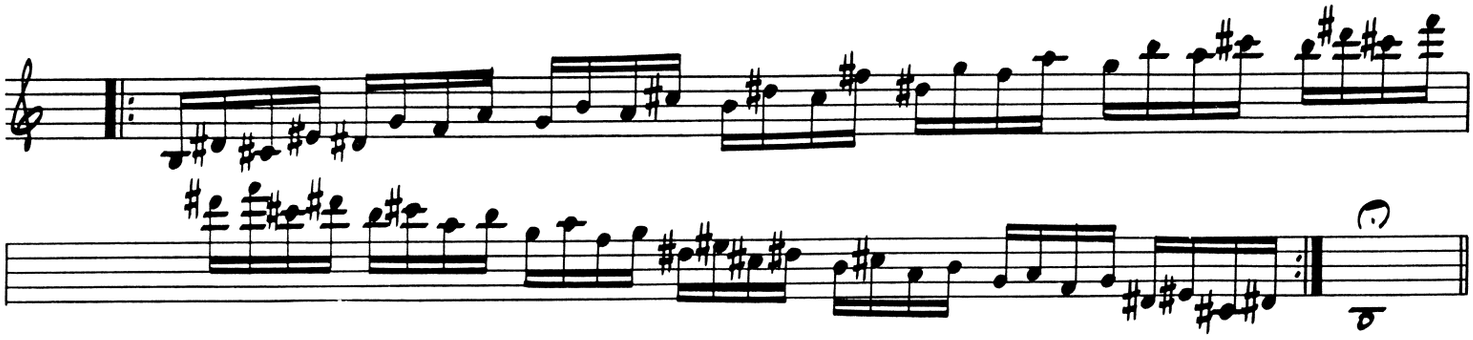


Preview Only
Preview Only

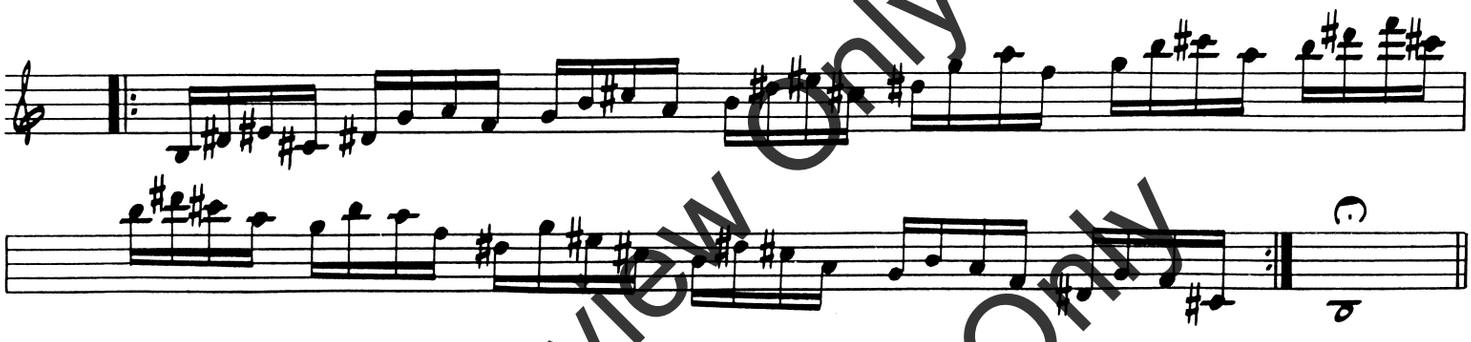
Whole-Tone Scale, Half Step Higher



Whole-Tone Scale in 3rds



Whole-Tone Scale Sequential Pattern



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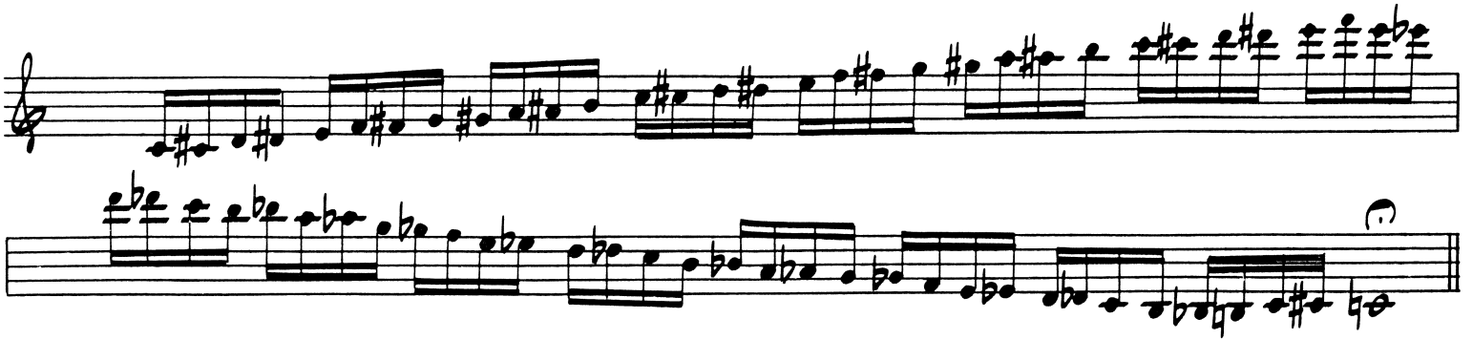
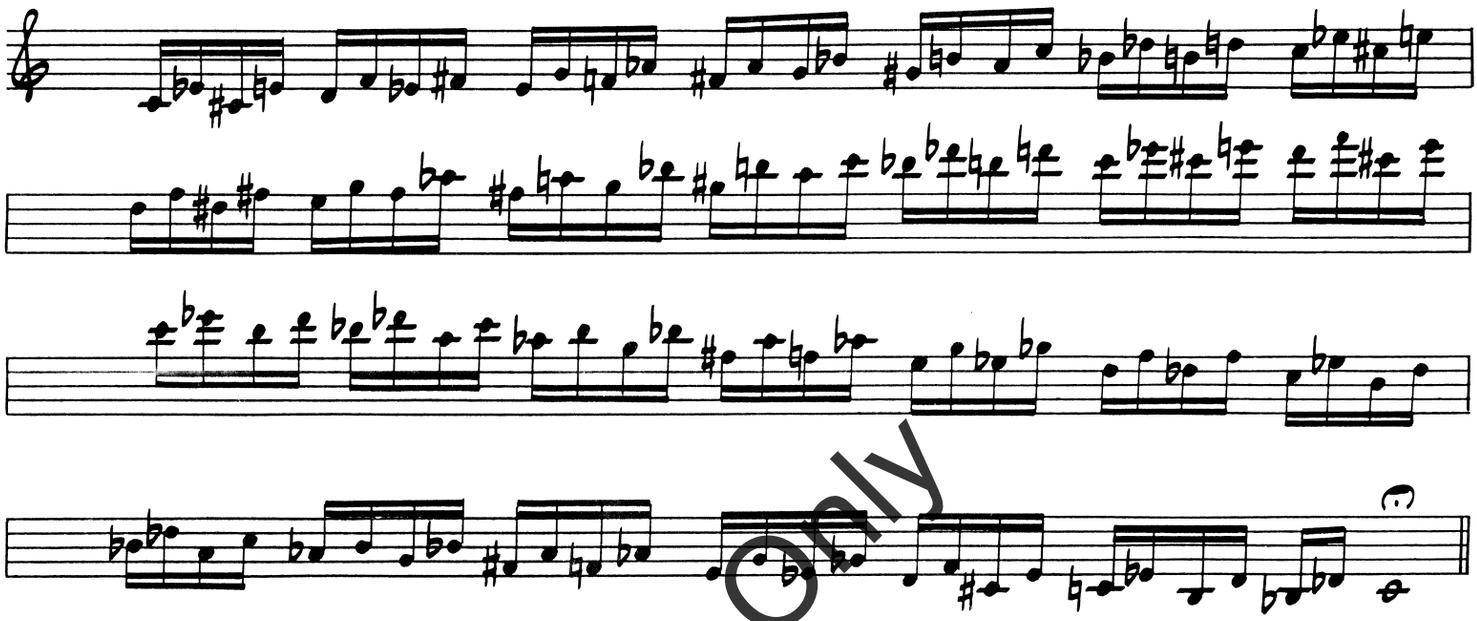
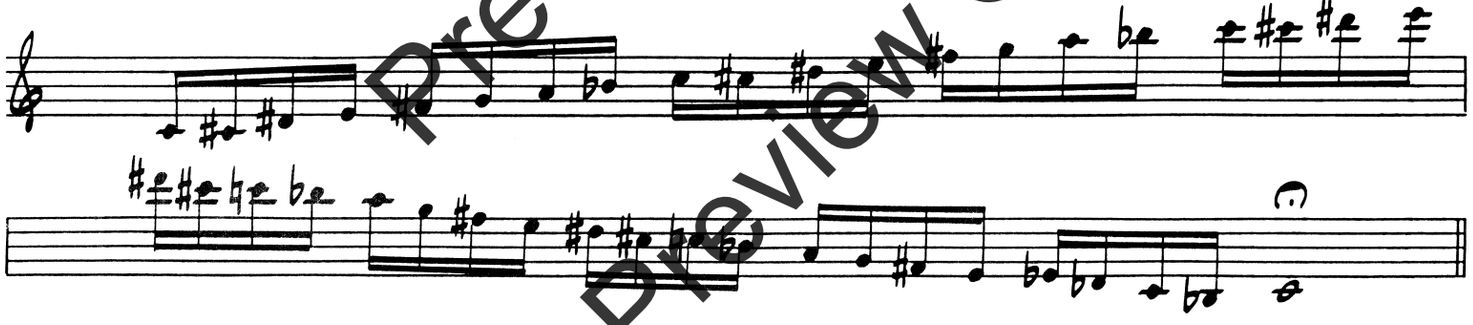
Chromatic Scale



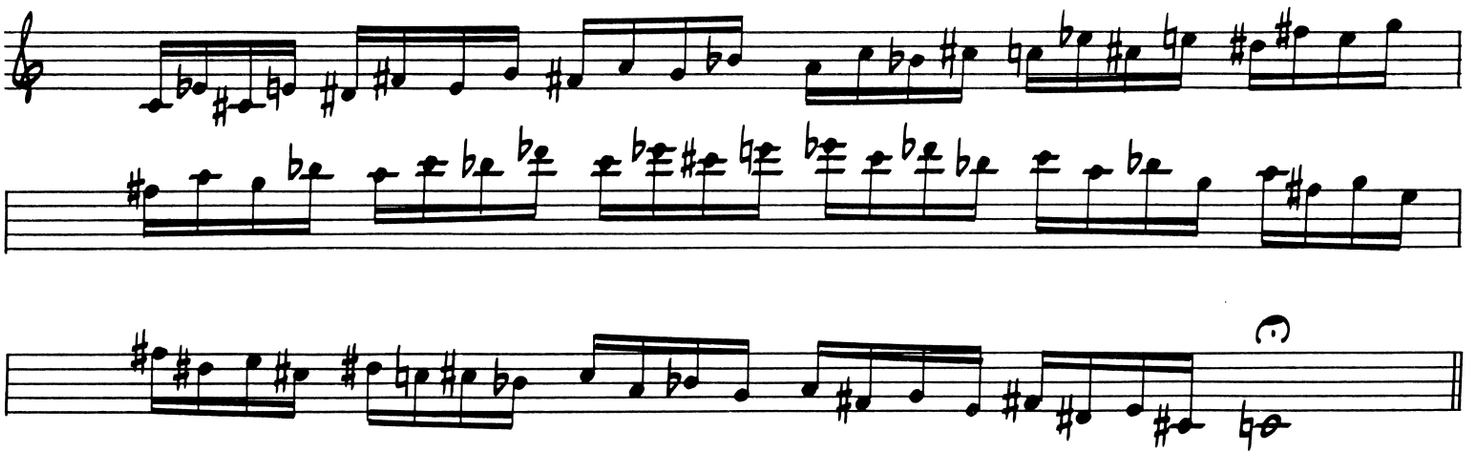
Chromatic Scale in 3rds



Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale



Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale in 3rds



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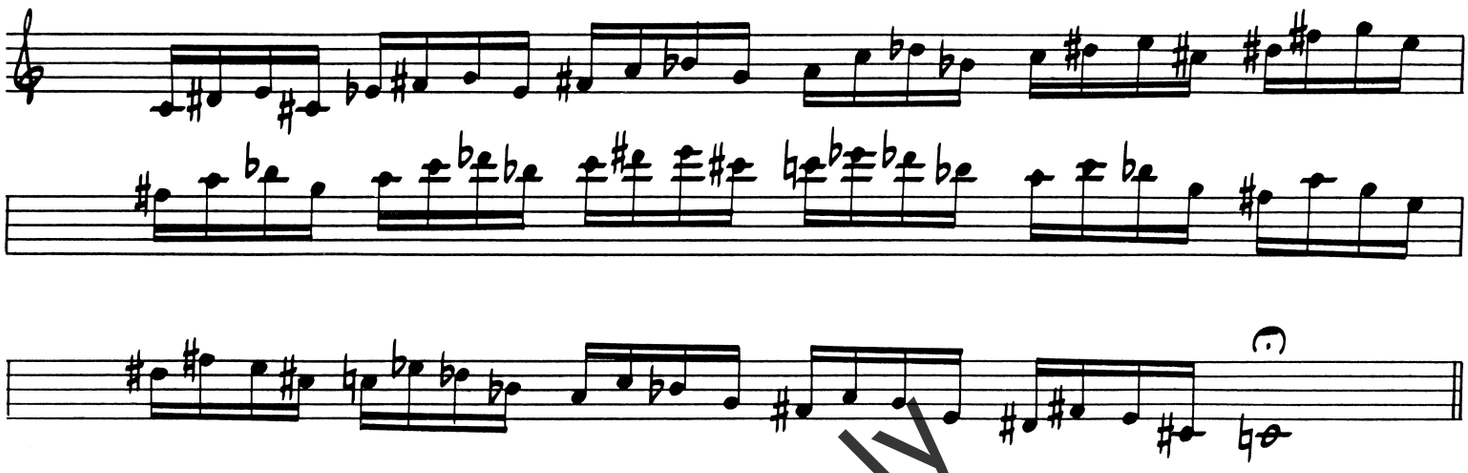
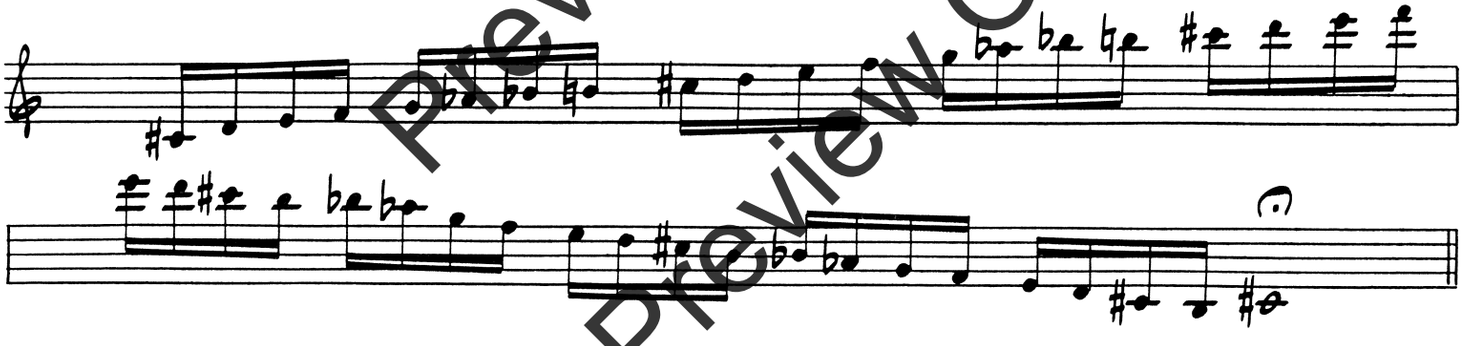
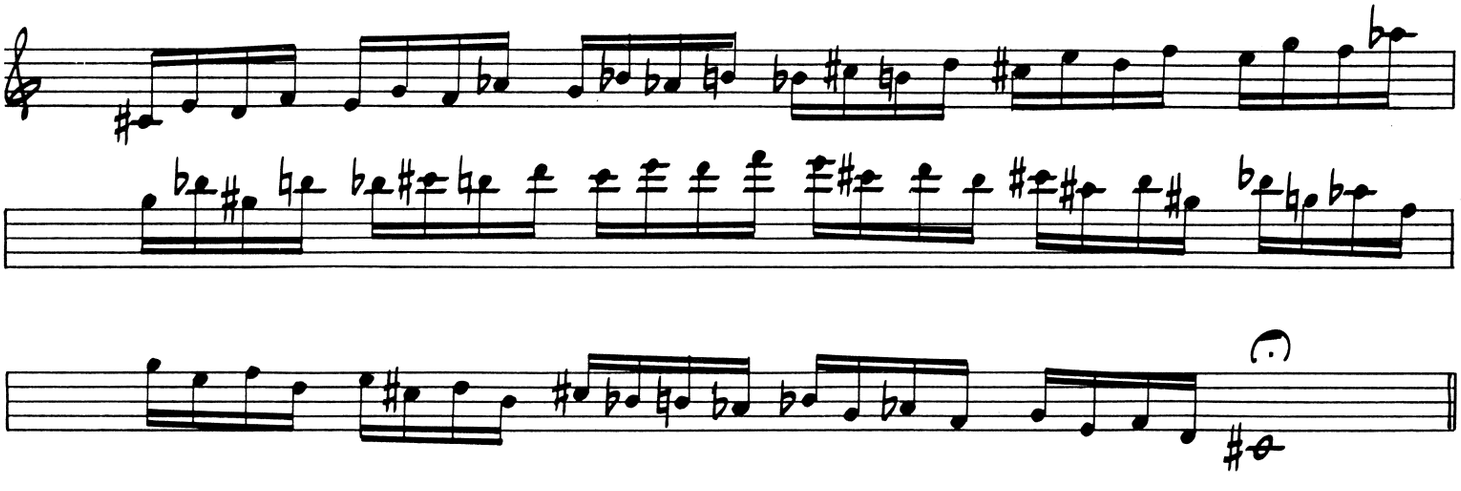
Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale
Sequential Pattern



Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale, Half Step Higher



Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale in 3rds



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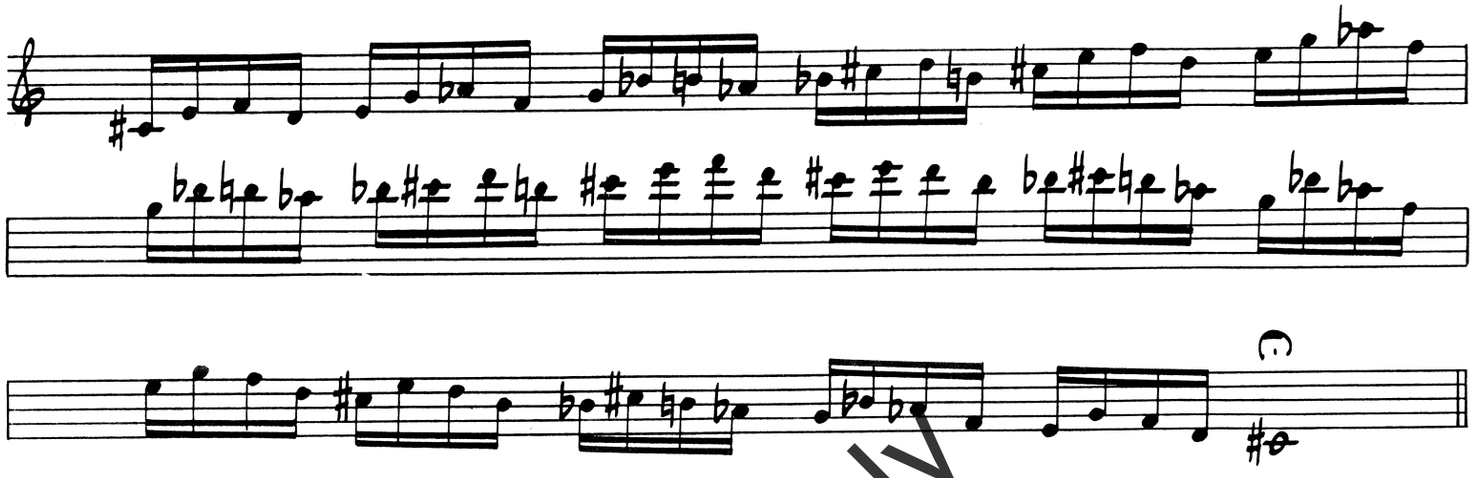
Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale
Sequential Pattern



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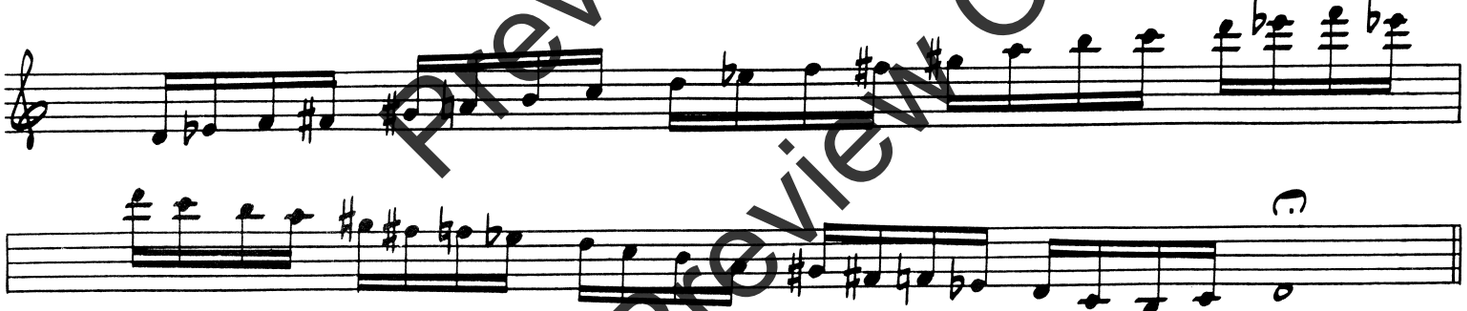
Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale, Whole Step Higher



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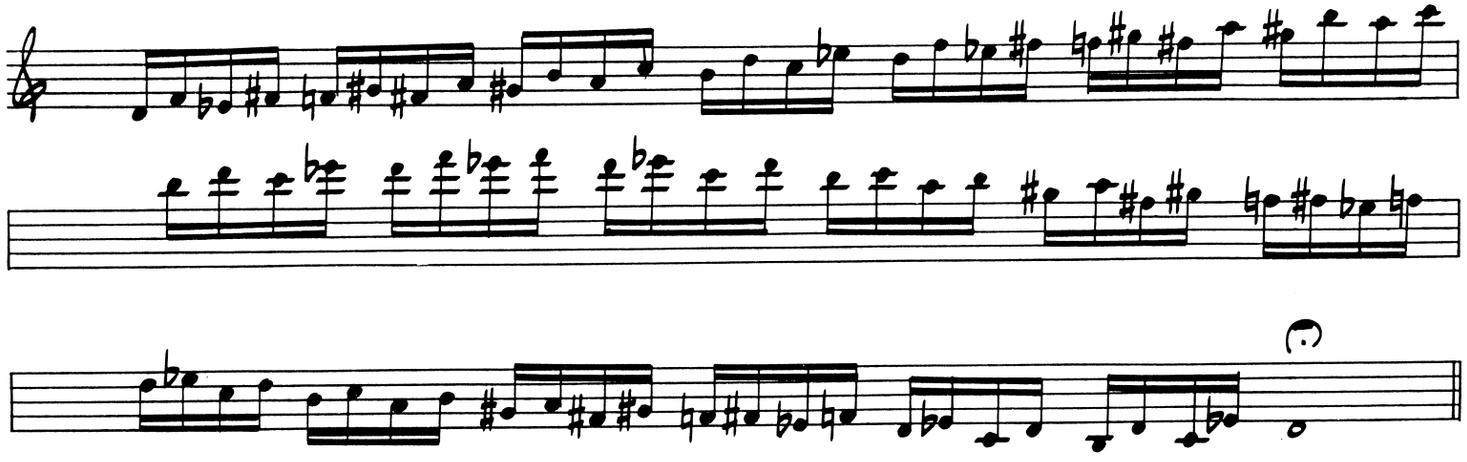
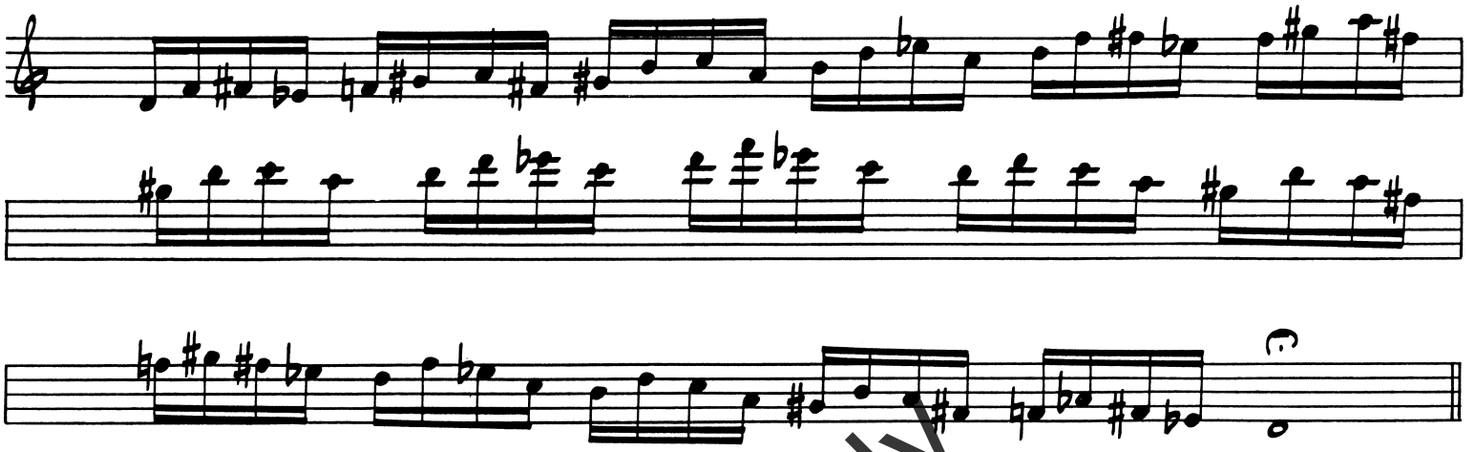
Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale in 3rds



Half Step-Whole Step Diminished Scale
Sequential Pattern



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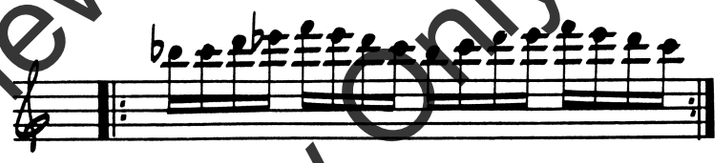
CHAPTER 8
Playing Fast!

A good place to start working on a fast and smooth technique is with something relatively diatonic and simple. The reason for this is that it is easier to hear and execute simple melodies at a fast tempo. The idea is to get comfortable with the fingers and the brain moving at a quick pace on simple melodies, and then move on to playing more complex passages at a fast clip.

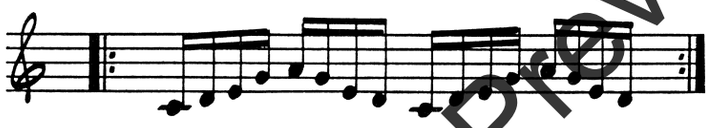
Set metronome at ♩ = 60 and gradually increase the tempo.

1. CLICKS:

and ascend chromatically to

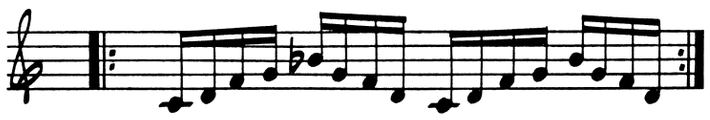


2.



and ascend chromatically

3.

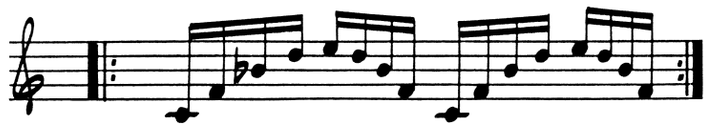


and ascend chromatically

4.

and ascend chromatically

5.



and ascend chromatically

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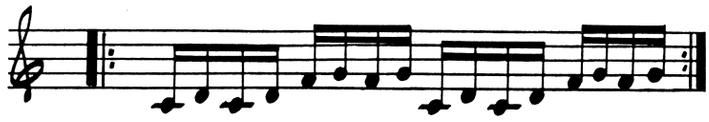
6.



and ascend chromatically

7.

and ascend chromatically

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CHAPTER 9
Playing With Dynamics

Playing with dynamic contrast is integral to playing the saxophone with style and flair. Dynamics are to the saxophonist what paints of different colors are to the artist. You will ultimately find yourself in a playing situation where extreme dynamic changes are indicated on a written part, or where dynamic change is called for based on the style of music. It is, therefore, necessary to know the extreme dynamic ranges of your instrument and be able to initiate dynamic change while playing.

Regardless of the particular style you are dealing with, a varied dynamic landscape is essential to an interesting presentation. It is all too easy to fall into a narrow volume area (usually *mf*) and get stuck there.

Listen to people talk. Certain words are louder or emphasized. Other words are softer and "farther back." It is this way of speaking or playing that makes for a shapely and colorful delivery. As an exercise, play the following passages with as *much* contrast between loud and soft as you can manage.

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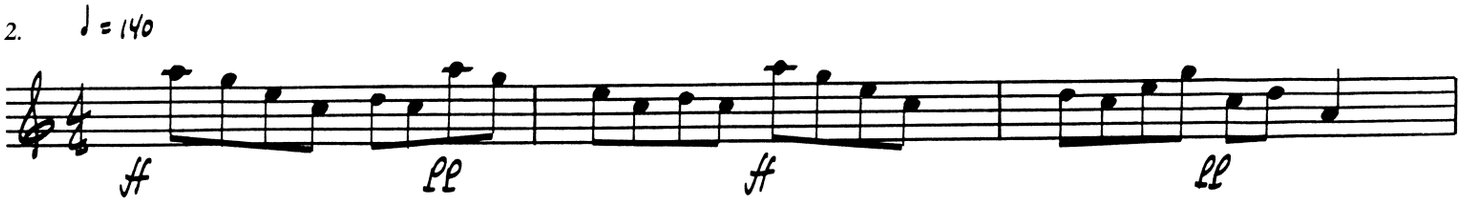
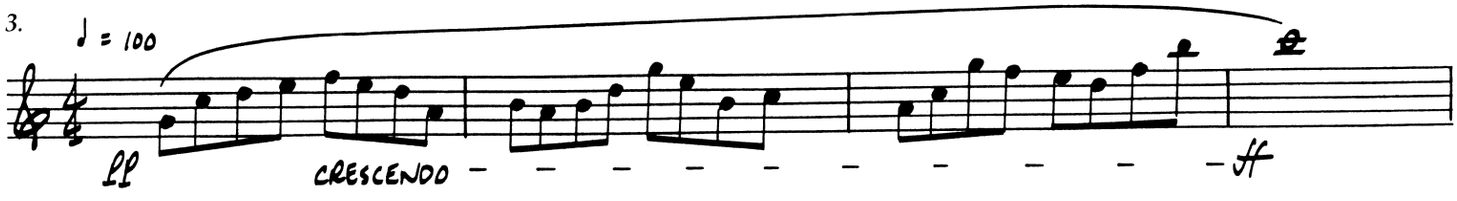
1. ♩ = 140

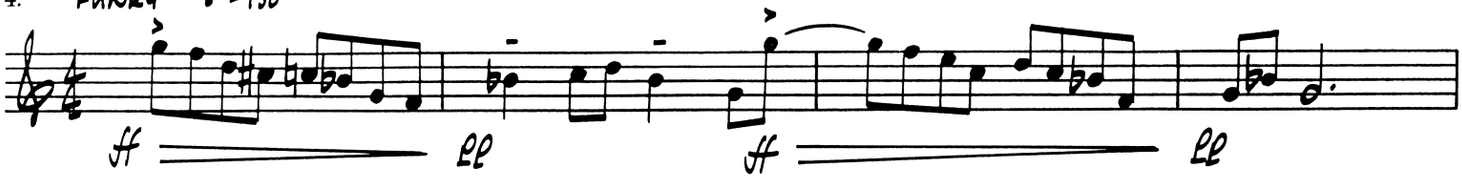
2. ♩ = 140



3. ♩ = 100

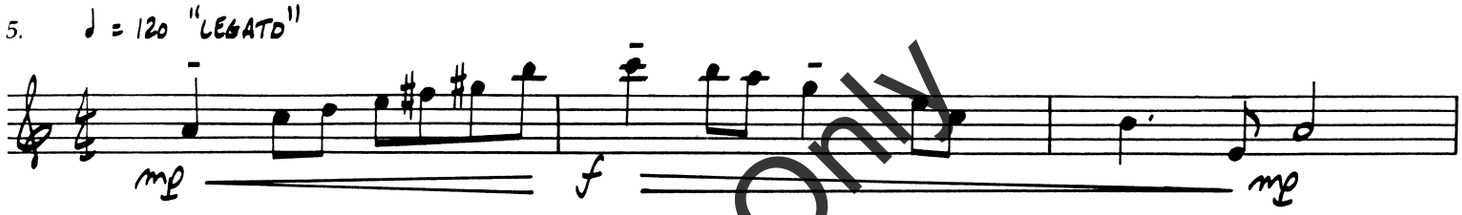


4. "FUNKY" ♩ = 130

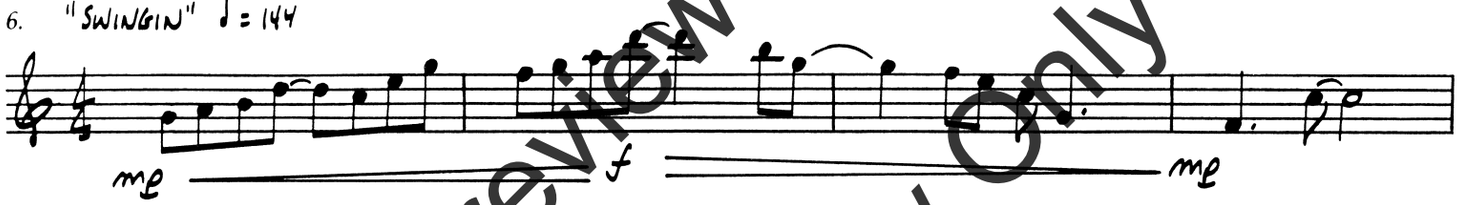


A good general rule for playing with dynamics is to crescendo when a melodic line ascends and decrescendo when the line descends.

5. ♩ = 120 "LEGATO"



6. "SWINGIN" ♩ = 144



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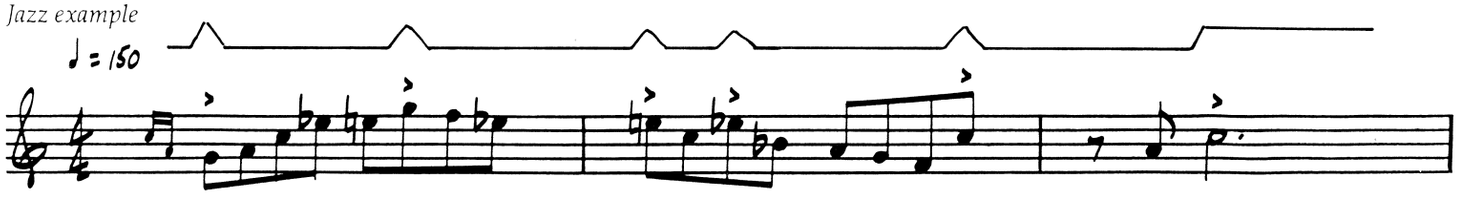
In jazz and rock saxophone playing, a wide variety of dynamics are often used. Certain notes are loud and accented for rhythmical emphasis and groove, while other notes are softer and implied. In the following examples showing musical "terrain", all accented notes are loud and all others soft.

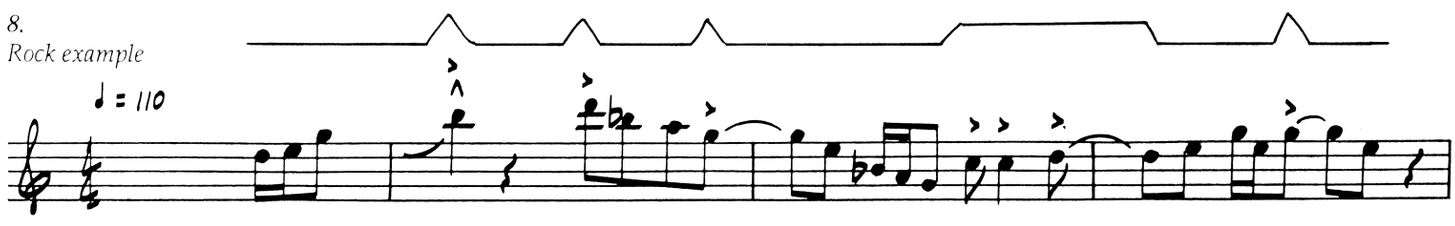
7.
Jazz example

♩ = 150



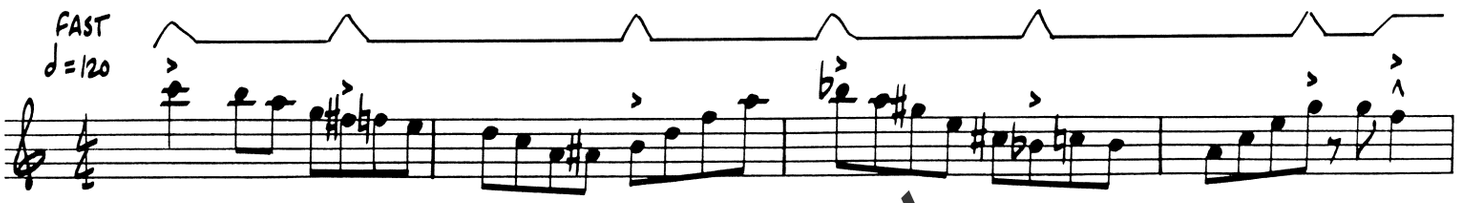
8.
Rock example

♩ = 110



When playing fast bebop lines, it is crucial that you accent certain select notes and play all others lightly for speed and ease of execution.

9.
Bebop example



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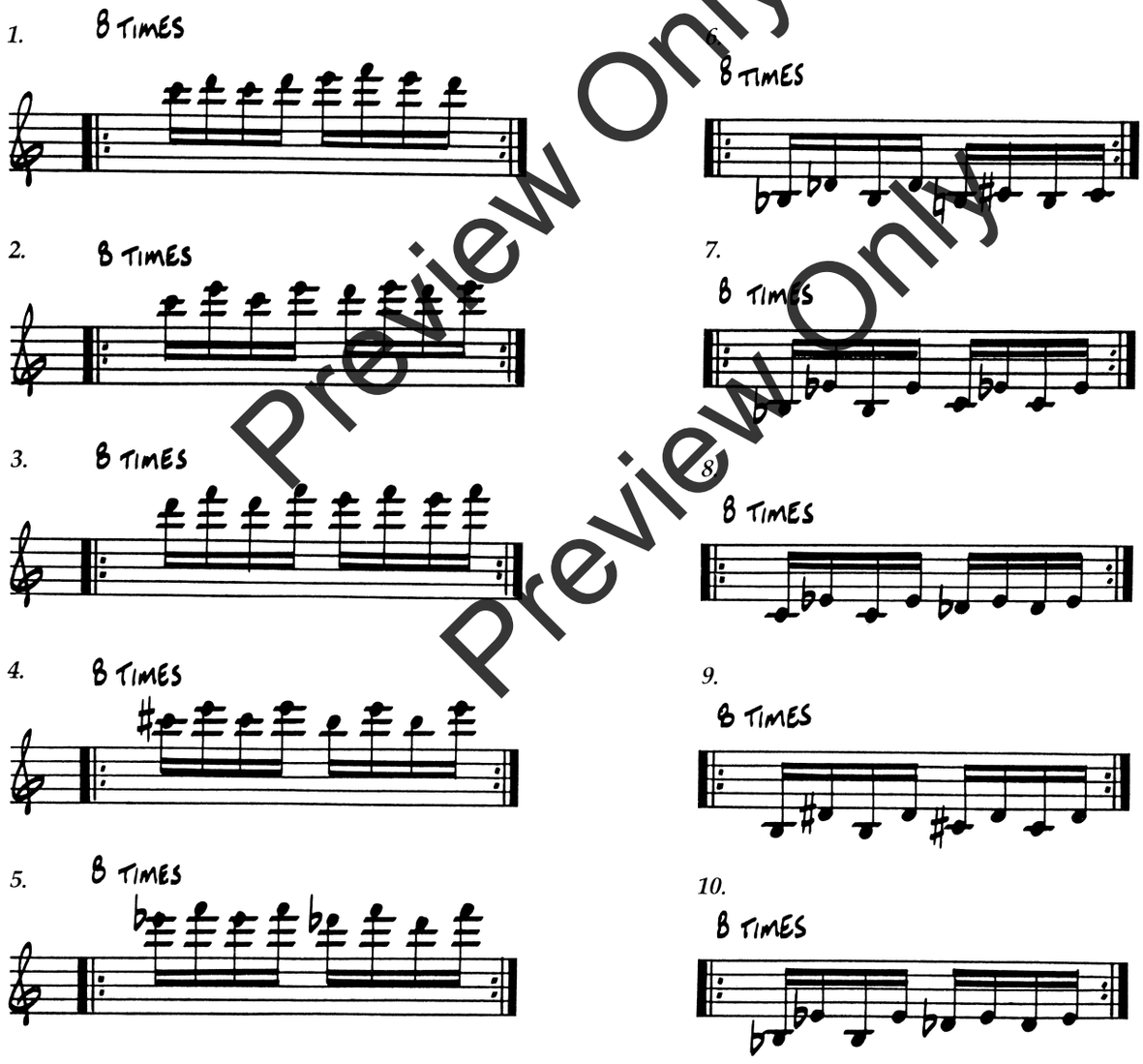
CHAPTER 10
Some Trouble Spots On The Horn

Certain intervals on the saxophone cause problems due to awkward fingering patterns. If not executed smoothly, a glitch or extra note may sound. Here are a few short exercises to smooth out some of those difficult fingering situations; these are particularly difficult if your horn is leaking even the slightest bit.



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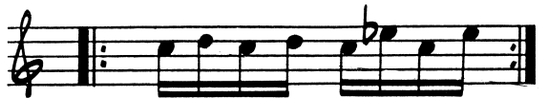
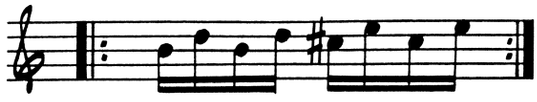
Practicing these finger-busters is about as much fun as having a toothache. But your chops and facility will feel quite a bit more comfortable if you spend a little time on them. Here are a few more:

11. 8 TIMES



12. 8 TIMES



13. 8 TIMES

14. 8 TIMES

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You can also make up your own exercises based on any specific problems you might be having.

CHAPTER 11
How & What To Practice

Practicing seems to be a dilemma for some people. How to most efficiently use your time is the topic I wish to address here.

When I was younger and had more time to practice, I constantly looked for a way to practice which would cover all the areas of music with which I was trying to deal. Being a clarinet major in college (having to practice orchestral and chamber music repertoire, as well as lesson material), I was also working on saxophone, flute, piano, composing, improvising, and playing jazz, rock and latin music -- it was crucial that I allot my practice time carefully.

The aspiring saxophonist should try to establish a practice routine geared to his or her particular direction, and then try to do it daily for a prolonged period of time. The most progress is usually made when practicing occurs on a daily basis. The length of time is not as important as the consistency factor.

Here is a model practice session that would occupy one hour:

1. 10 minutes on scales and scale configurations (such as thirds, fourths, patterns) and "trouble" spots.

2. 5 minutes on long tones and dynamic exercises.

3. 15 minutes working on an etude, transcription, or written piece of music. The best way to improve your reading skills is to *read, read, read!* The Bach cello suites work well on saxophone and are fun to play.

4. 10 minutes learning a new tune -- a jazz, standard or pop tune. Play the song on piano as well. Then practice playing the melody a few times in tempo and go on to improvising on the harmonic structure of the tune. Learn a tune a day!

5. 10 minutes playing on blues, rhythm changes, II-V-I progressions, one-chord vamps, substitute changes, etc. This could include patterns, riffs and melodies. An original tune could very well develop out of this activity.

6. 5-10 minutes freely improvising. Play anything that comes to mind. Try to improvise a song, or play and expand upon a rhythmic or melodic motif. Have some fun! By ending my practice session with this activity, I am able to stay focused on why I chose to play music in the first place.

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CHAPTER 12
Who To Listen To & What To Listen For

To get a well-balanced overview of playing the saxophone, it is advisable to look at a variety of players spanning the full history of the instrument. A medical student deals with general medicine before choosing a specialty. The modern saxophonist can benefit from this approach -- listening to fifteen of the more important jazz saxophonists from 1945-1985 would yield better results than focusing too heavily on one or two of the contemporary players prominent on the scene today.

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Who To Listen To

Alto Sax - Jazz	Charlie Parker	Johnny Hodges	Cannonball Adderly
	Jackie McLean	Phil Woods	Lee Konitz
	Sonny Stitt	Paul Desmond	Ornette Coleman
Alto Sax - R&B	Hank Crawford	Maceo Parker	Grover Washington
	Dave Sanborn		
Tenor Sax - Jazz	Coleman Hawkins	Hank Mobley	George Coleman
	Lester Young	Dexter Gordon	Wayne Shorter
	Ben Webster	Stan Getz	Lucky Thompson
	Gene Ammons	Sonny Rollins	Johnny Griffin
	Sonny Stitt	John Coltrane	Al Cohn
	Joe Henderson	Zoot Sims	Eddie Harris
	Michael Brecker		
Tenor Sax - R&B	Junior Walker	King Curtis	David Newman
	Eddie Harris	Louis Jordan	Grover Washington
	Michael Brecker	Maceo Parker	

This is by no means a complete list. However, if you were to listen carefully to one or two recordings from each player on the list, you would get a good look at the history of saxophone playing in the jazz and R&B idioms.

You may notice that many of the current players are missing from the listening list. I listen to the younger players to keep abreast of what is going on, yet for some reason I keep going back to my Coltrane, Rollins, "Prez" and "Bean" recordings for inspiration.

In a way, it is like going to the source. My motto has always been "listen to the players who the contemporary players listen to. Eliminate the middle man."

What To Listen For

I find myself listening to music in different ways at different times. Most of the time I listen for the *essence* of a piece of music to see what the player's and composer's intention is. I listen for the emotional content, the energy level, momentum, and the overall "vibe." Other times I will listen for melodic content, harmonic structure, form and phrasing interpretation. After repeated listenings of my favorite jazz recordings, I find that I can sing along with the solos. For some of the more dissonant parts of those solos, it is helpful to write the passage down and then play it on my saxophone.

On other occasions I find myself focusing on a saxophonist's sound exclusively. I listen for timbre (bright versus dark), articulation (starting and ending notes), pitch, and stuff related to sound effects (overblown notes, false fingerings, harmonics, dynamics, etc.).

During my early days of practicing and listening I would occasionally try to mimic the various qualities mentioned above of my favorite saxophonists. The things I mimicked would generally lead me towards playing other kinds of things which obscured the original music I was emulating. This process help me develop a foundation in jazz and R&B saxophone playing, as well as giving me an idea about how I wanted to play and sound.

The real progress came when I began playing with bands on a regular basis. Practicing puts ideas in your vocabulary, but the act of playing in live situations enables you to put your ideas together in your own unique way. Listening to what the other players are playing and responding to that in the moment on the bandstand is how I have developed most of what I do today.

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CHAPTER 13
Developing A Sound & Style Of Your Own

Developing your own sound and style is a long, involved quest which will take some intense initiative on your part. Initially you will want to absorb as much music from as wide a musical history period in your area of interest as is possible. Then you must be extremely proficient in the technical areas of playing your instrument, general musicianship, and playing in an ensemble. Then you will have to seek playing and performance situations with a vengeance -- you want to play as much as possible! A few ways of instigating playing situations are:

1. Write or arrange some music and put together an ensemble to play the music in concert, in a club, or to make a demo recording.

2. Approach a restaurant, small theatre, art gallery or arts council, and propose your idea of presenting your music with your ensemble.

3. Try to sit in with bands with members you know. Bring them some original music which includes you as a player.

4. Instigate jam sessions or reading sessions at your house, or somewhere you can play.

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Through these "live" playing situations you will find yourself coming up with things to play in your own unique way. When you are playing in a situation, you more or less have to come up with the "goods." Assuming all the other ingredients are right, you will come up with musical ideas that you can call your own.

Responding to other musicians in "live" playing situations in the moment is very much like having a conversation with a group of friends. It is different every time and you never know what will be said and how you will respond. Playing "live" will let your personality emerge. I beg of you to pursue this with all your heart and soul.

When playing in a setting that involves improvisation or soloistic playing, try to reach beyond what or how you might normally play. Try for something really far-out or adventurous. Go beyond the things you have worked out and practiced. Don't be afraid to try something out and fall down. It is here that you will find things to play that are unique.

The most compelling argument for seeking out many "live" playing situations is that this type of exposure increases the likelihood that you will be heard by someone

who can give you the opportunity to play with a name band or other working groups. Getting work in music is pretty much a word-of-mouth situation. Therefore, you must get out and play!

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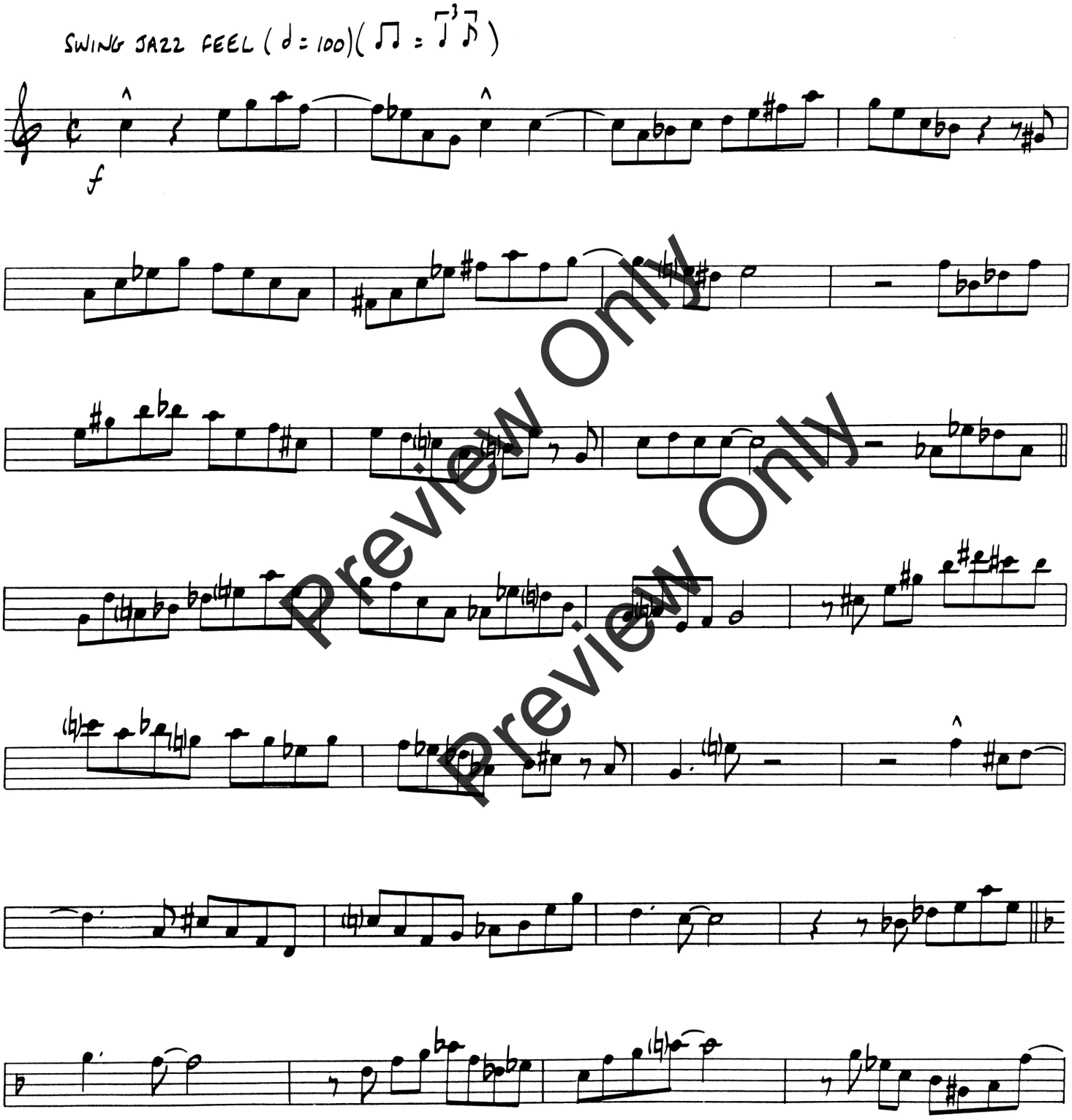
CHAPTER 14
Six Etudes

On the following pages you'll find six original etudes written in a variety of styles which incorporate most all of the playing techniques discussed in this book. Mastering the expressive and technical challenges they present will undoubtedly build your confidence and proficiency as a performer.

ETUDE 1
BLUESED



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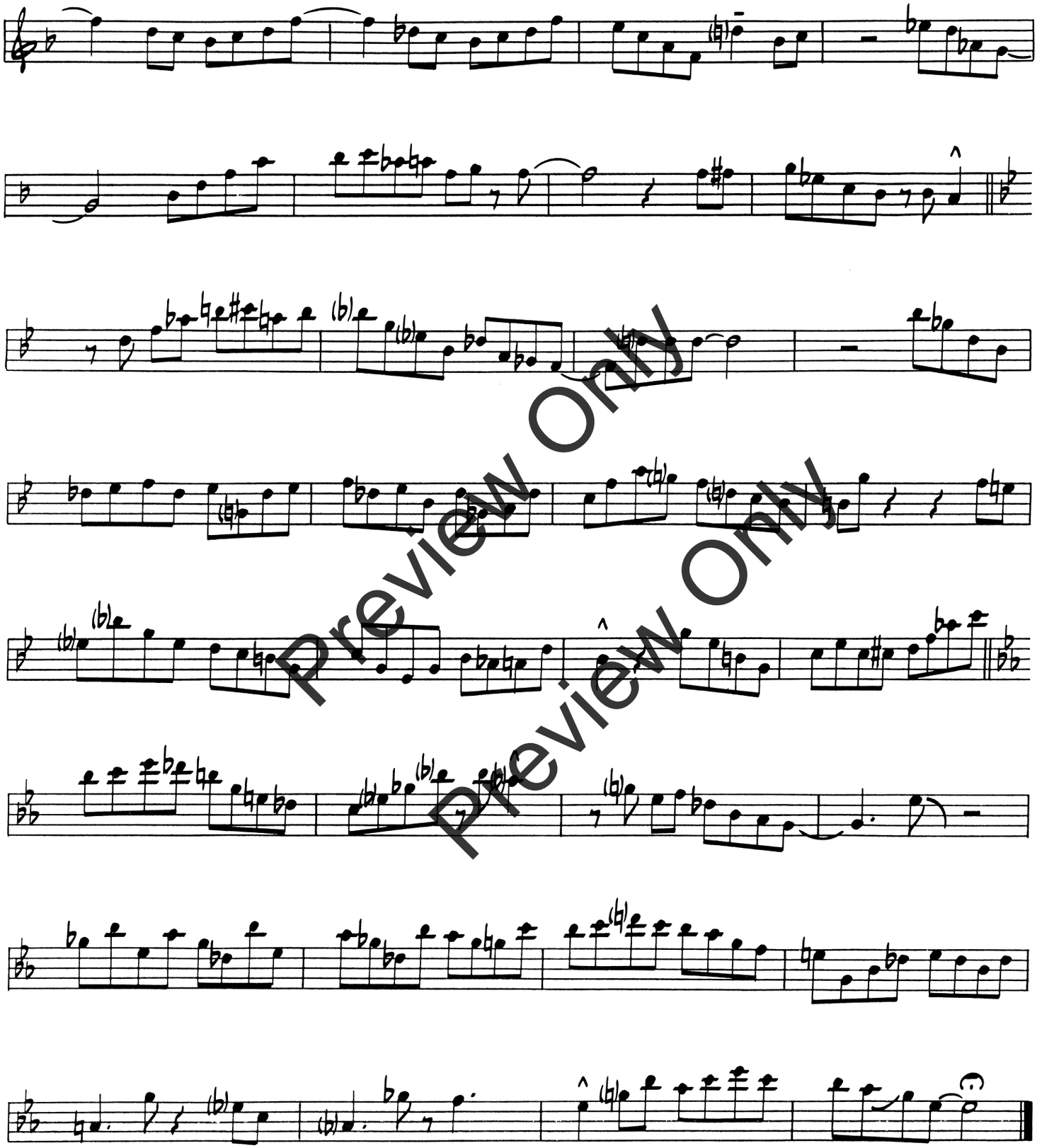

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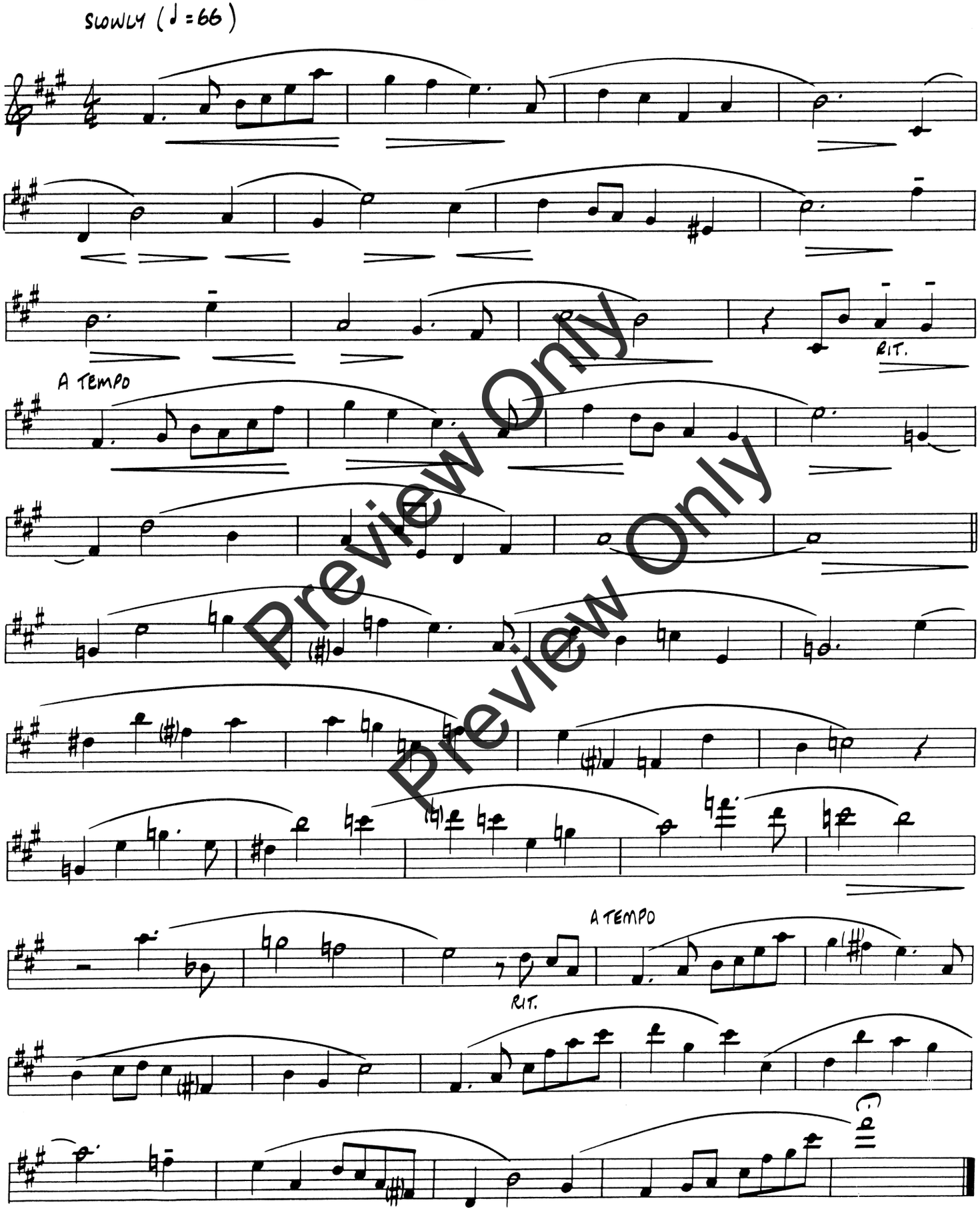
ETUDE 2
BALLAD



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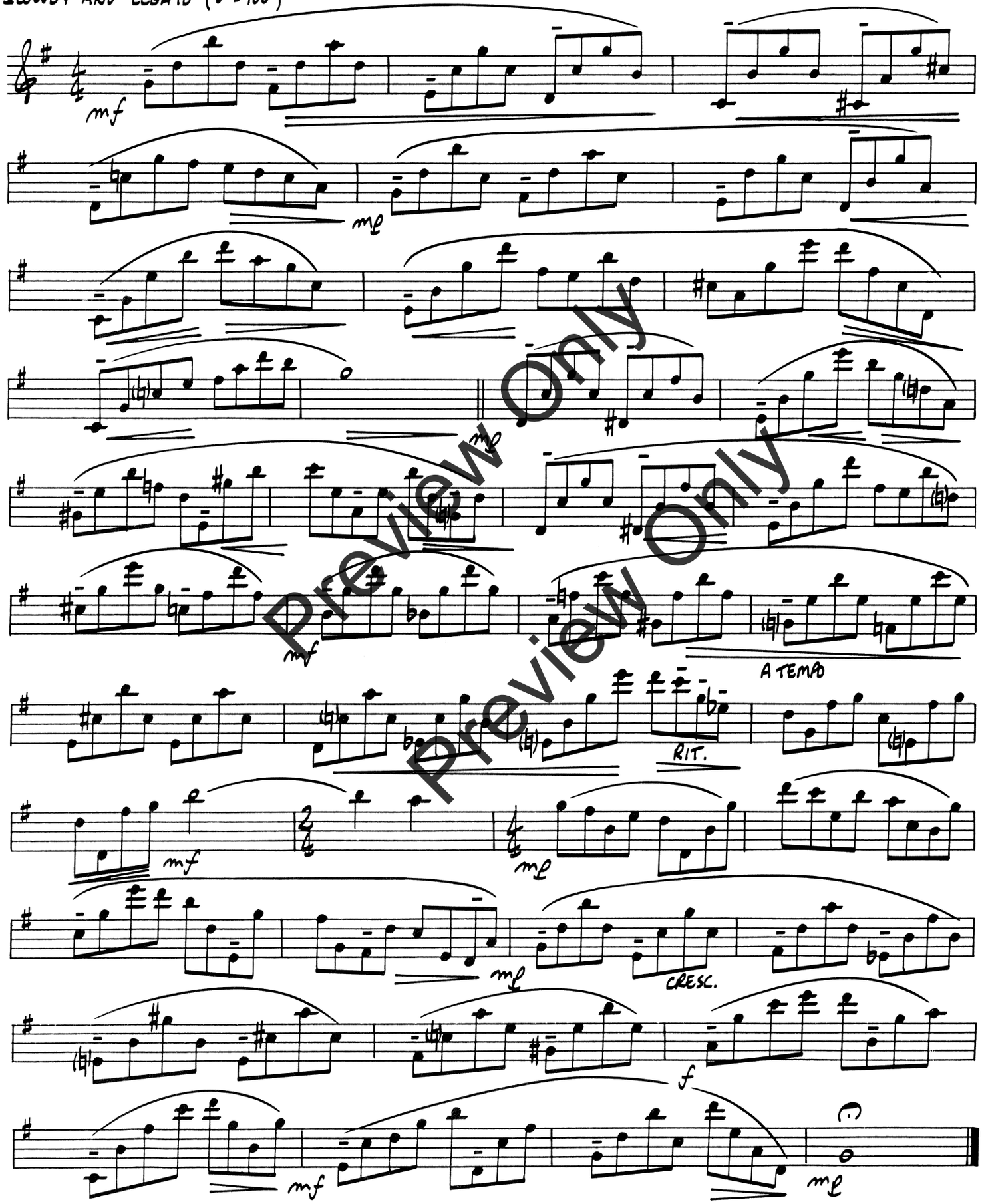
ETUDE 3
BROKEN CHORDS



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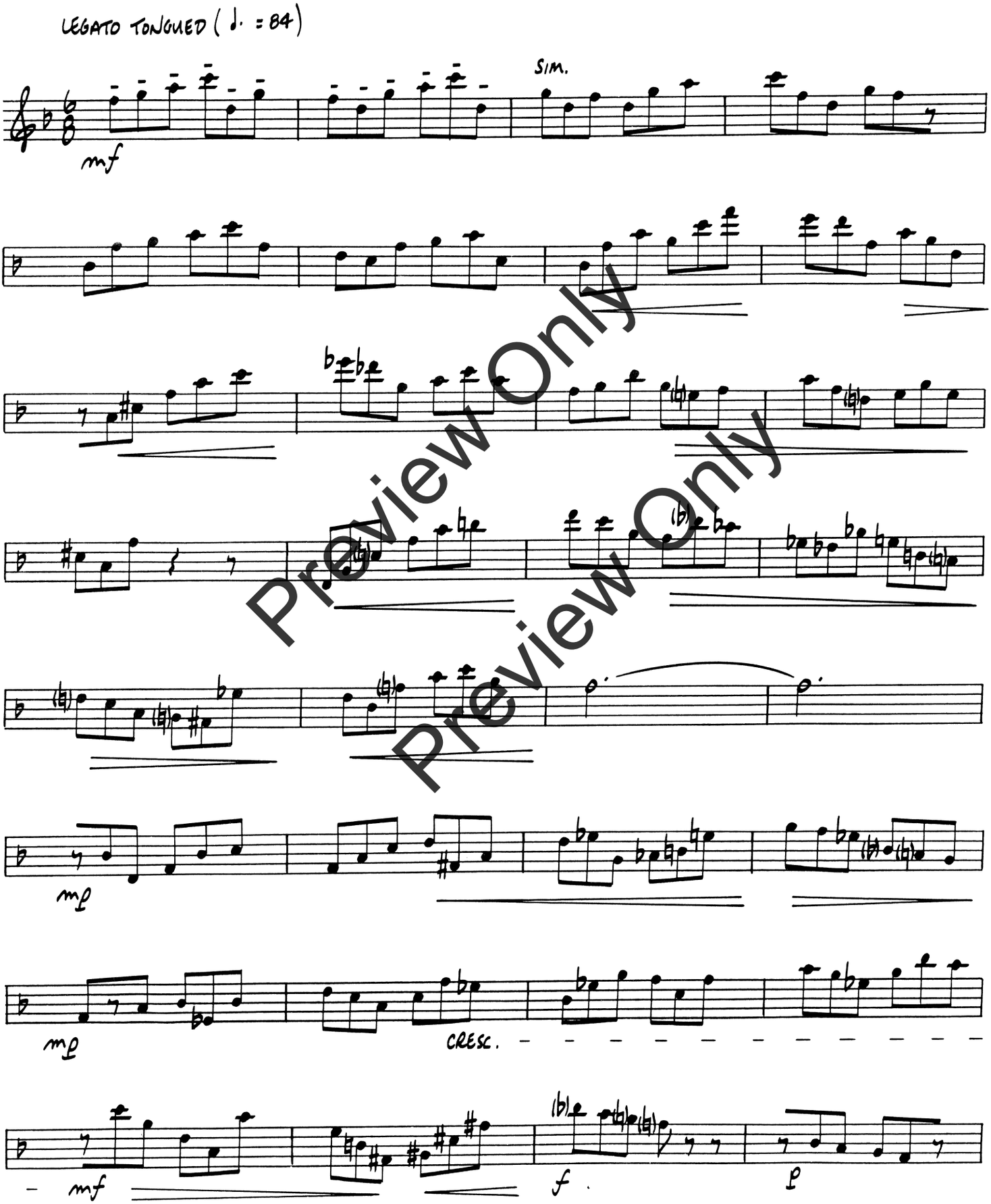
ETUDE 4
DISPLACED RHYTHMS



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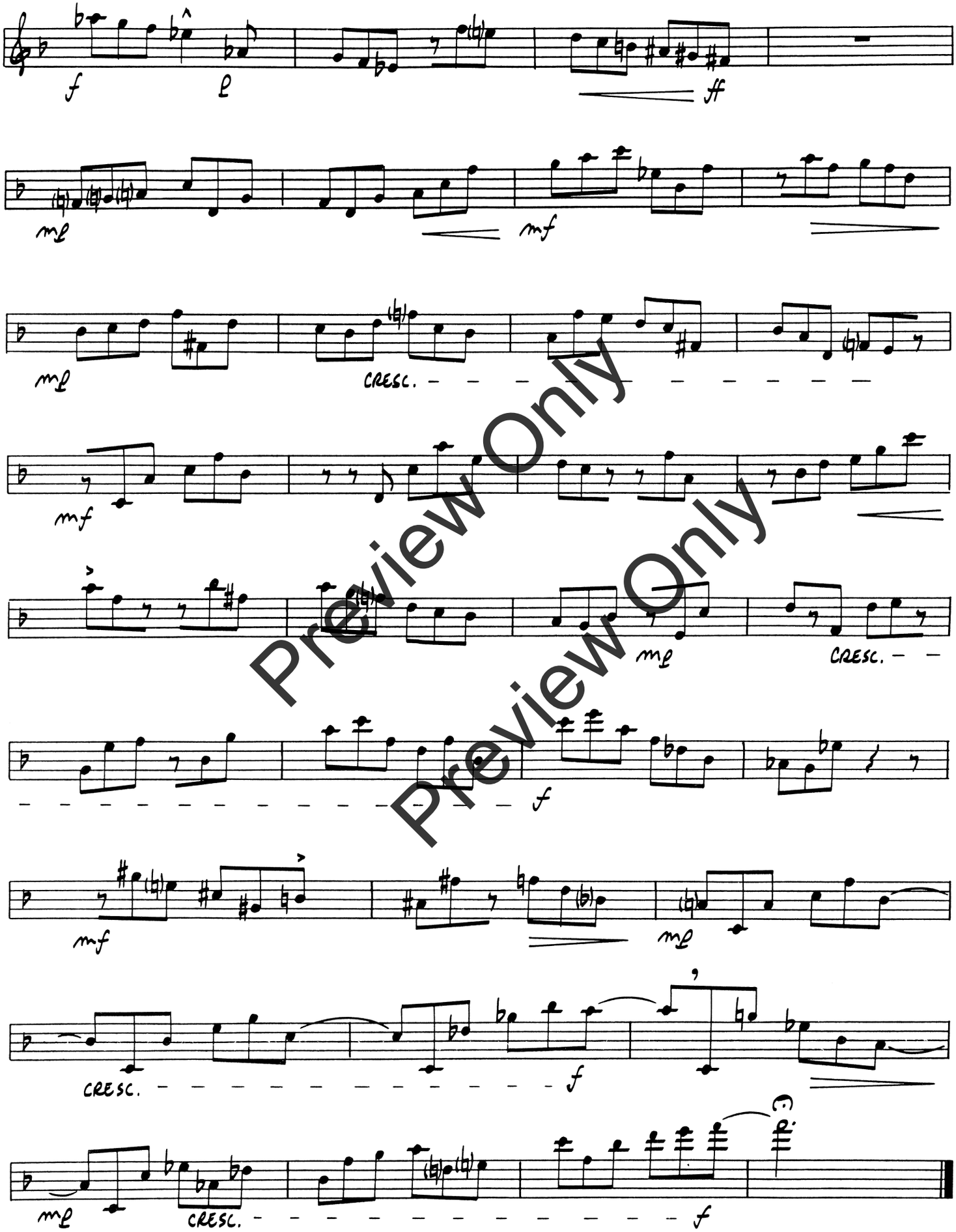

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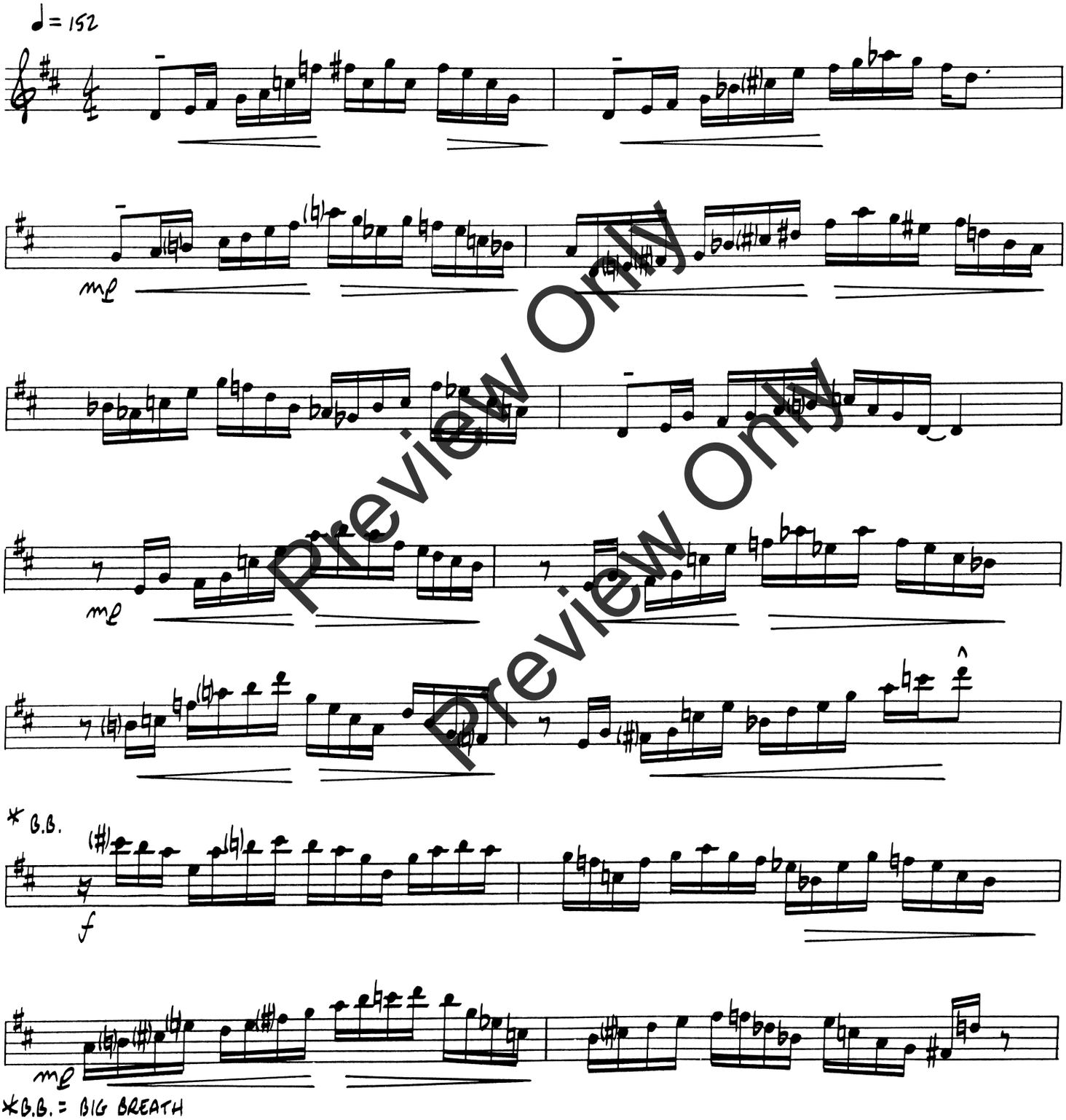

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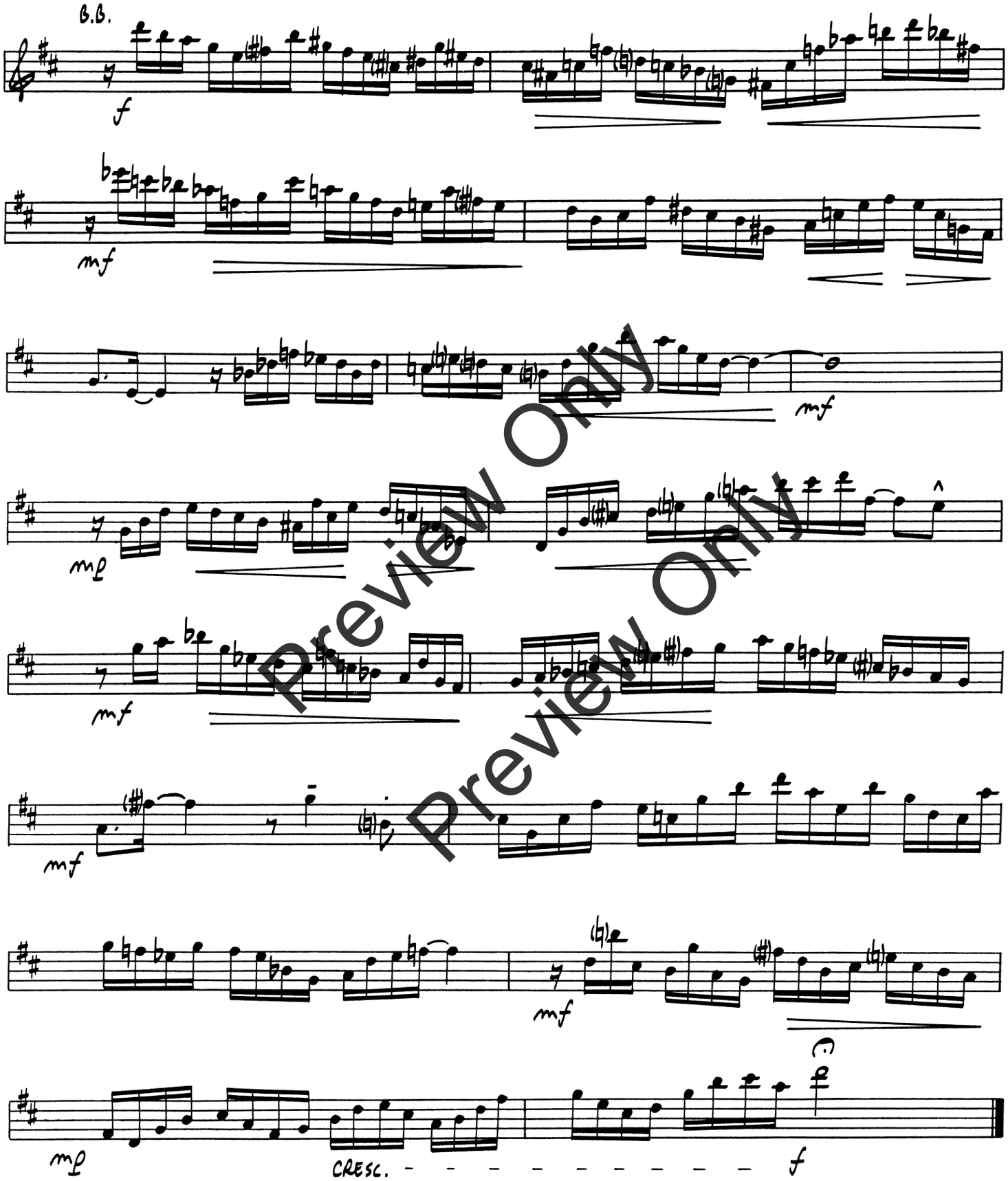

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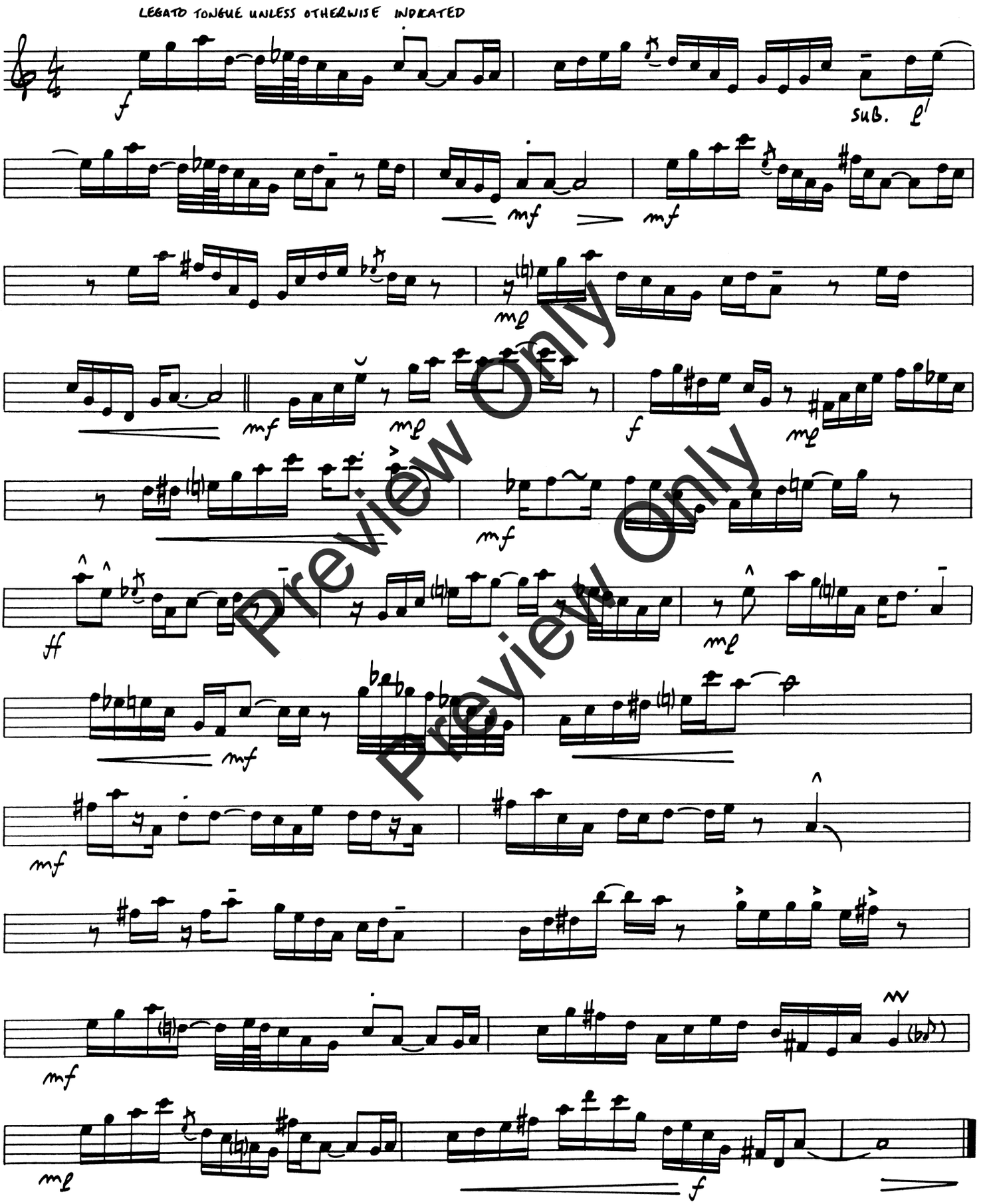

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CHAPTER 15
What They Didn't Tell Me In Music School
Some Anecdotes

One of my first gigs was playing with Eumir Deodato, who in 1974 had somewhat of a hit record with a disco version of Strauss' ***Zarathustra.*** The reason I got the call was because one of my classmates had recommended me after he turned the job down. As was the case with most of the playing situations that came my way, this was the first tried-and-proven example of getting work through word-of-mouth and being in a music scene with a large volume of activity (New York).

I learned a few important lessons on this job. Firstly, it became apparent that I would not benefit from playing a louder setup (more open mouthpiece, harder reed), even though the music was loud. I decided to go for a setup which afforded me the flexibility to execute the ideas in my head and which produced the sound I was hearing. Once you find this situation, try not to be thrown by a loud-playing band or a playing scenario in which you don't hear yourself comfortably. This could be caused by a lousy monitor or P.A. system, an inferior microphone, or less-than-ideal acoustics. Sometimes the playing environment makes you sound terrible, regardless of what equipment you use on your saxophone.

Secondly, I found out that, as a doubler, it is essential to take some flute and clarinet lessons, and put in some time before attempting to play on a recording. I had to play flute on one of Deodato's records, and my intonation was pretty horrible due to my lack of experience. Embarrassment and humiliation are very good motivators, however, and I quickly set out to correct the problem. It can be avoided, though, by preparing properly beforehand.

One of the most eye-opening experiences of my early musical career was playing with Buddy Rich. I worked with Buddy on and off for two years (1975-1977). In hindsight, I now realize that to be able to play and compose for a band of that calibre on a nightly basis was the best training I ever could have hoped for. As a player, I got to practice and compare notes with other fine players, and then get out on the bandstand and try stuff out. Also while on the road a bunch of the guys from the band would go to the local jazz joint and sit in or have a jam session.

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As a composer and arranger, the Buddy Rich band afforded me the opportunity to write, play, and record my songs on a regular basis. This helped to build "chops" in writing and arranging, and ultimately helped my playing as well; as an improvising saxophonist, I try to carry over compositional skills to my solo playing.

Here are some of my more memorable moments with Buddy:

1. At the first band rehearsal, Buddy karate-chopped a big piece of wood for all to see, and then we played all the most difficult charts he had as fast as they could be played.

2. Before the first concert we played, I went up to Buddy and said, "Buddy, my name is Bob Mintzer and I'm playing tenor sax." Buddy responsed with, "So what!" It was as if he didn't want to know who I was until I had proven myself on the bandstand. After the first couple of gigs, we became friends.

3. I had written a shuffle tune for the band, and at the rehearsal I played the first solo. After the second chorus, I started to solo on another chorus and Buddy stopped playing. I asked what was wrong, and Buddy said that the solo should end after two choruses. Rather than give the bandleader what he wanted, I questioned his decision and asked why the solo couldn't be longer. He said, "Because you aren't playing anything." Ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer! Also, give the bandleader what he wants -- it's easier that way.

4. Buddy was notorious for yelling at the band and, in my perception, from night to night it was Buddy who changed rather than the performance of the band. Nevertheless, I learned the importance of self-worth and being confident that you are doing a job to the best of your ability, regardless of what anybody says. Buddy was being Buddy. And I had put in the time on the music and my instrument and was supposed to be there. Once that was clear in my head, everything was fine.

5. Although things got pretty wacky at times in Buddy's band, I came to realize the importance of positive thinking and being clear on your motives. To this day, I appreciate the experience with Buddy as one in which I had the chance to play and write and learn. The only way to get better as a player is to play a lot.

Here are some of the things I was told by record company A&R men after they listened to my demo tape:

1. "Why don't you do something more like the Stray Cats?" (Say what?!)

2. "We already got a band that plays music like that."

3. "What am I gonna do with this? I can't sell this!"

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The first two years of playing demo tapes for record companies resulted in nothing but a bruised ego and a feeling of discouragement. So at that point I went back to the drawing board and worked harder at learning about *all* music while continuing to try and realize the music I heard in my head through composing and playing.

Here are some memorable things that listeners said to me after hearing me play:

1. "You sound just like Coltrane."

2. "I was listening to you play and you just never got me off." (Why is he telling me this?)

3. "You sound just like Mike Brecker and Wayne Shorter combined." -- a magazine writer in Japan.

4. "Can't you play more like Al Klink?" (from the Glenn Miller Band)

I should mention here that many people come up and say positive things about my playing as well. I bring up these less-than-glowing comments to illustrate the fact that not everyone will like what you do or understand what it is you are trying to do. Thus, it is crucial that you believe in yourself and trust what you hear in your head. Also, people like to associate your playing with someone else's playing they know and like as a way of being involved with your music. Many people who say these things are not equipped to hear the differences between you and to whom they are comparing you.

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Here is a story which illustrates that a little bit of brashness in the music scene can go a long way, if executed tastefully. I went down to the Village Vanguard in 1977 to sit in with Art Blakey. It was a Sunday night, and players were occasionally allowed to sit in with the bands on the last set. I went up to Art, and with the greatest confidence I could muster, asked to sit in. He said yes, and I played a few tunes with the band.

After the set, Art told me he liked my playing and asked if I had any tunes for an up-and-coming recording his band was going to do. I said yes without thinking much about it. Art said to bring the tunes to his rehearsal the next day. That night I went home and wrote a few tunes in the style of the Art Blakey records I had been listening to for years. I took them to the rehearsal the next day and Art seemed to like them. He asked if I would like to play with the band. I said I couldn't come right away because of my commitment with Buddy Rich; he didn't wait and hired someone else. Art did record my tunes on an album called ***Gypsy Folk Tales***.

It was an honor and an education to have had this brief encounter with Art Blakey. It came about as a result of taking a chance and asking to sit in.

On the topic of how to get a record deal . . . it still is not always apparent to me why certain people get recorded and others do not. The record business is a very trend-oriented situation, and your age, look, and attitude play as big a role as does your music.

I first worked on my music (and still do). I did this through practice, study, listening, searching, writing lines and songs, getting people together to play and demo the music, pursuing live playing situations, and jamming. Later I thought about how I would like to connect musically (and otherwise) with my audience. I thought about how the musician and non-musician listener might respond to various musical ideas. I also gave some thought to how I should look, act, and generally relate to the audience.

My recording situations have come about as the result of working very hard on my writing and playing and doing something that a record company was coincidentally interested in. I didn't plan it that way, but that is the way it happened. After years of rejection, a few different companies came along and expressed interest in what I was doing . . . first with a big band, and later as a solo saxophonist (here is a great example of how writing and arranging can add another dimension to your playing).

Even after doing 12 recordings as a solo artist, it is not always smooth sailing. While receiving praise from some on these projects, there have been others who were less-than-thrilled with what I was doing. Here are some choice comments from some of my record reviews:

1. *Down Beat:* "Bob Mintzer has a band of studio furniture." (Mike and Randy Brecker, Dave Sanborn, Peter Erskine, Don Grolnick??!)

2. *Digital Audio:* "His writing is uninspired and lacking in personality."

3. *Down Beat:* "The first all-Jewish sax section"

4. *Down Beat:* "You've heard it all before."

At the same time I was seeing reviews about the same music which were quite positive. Some of the things said were:

1. *Digital Audio:* "The best big band ever."

2. *Jazziz:* "Fresh, innovative writing."

3. *Jazz Times:* "Inspired playing."

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What's a player to do? Trust your instincts, believe in yourself, put your helmet on, and move forward!

Some Do's and Don'ts

DON'T:

1. Don't show your dissatisfaction with your playing to your listeners. It will effect their enjoyment of your playing.

2. Don't bad-mouth or complain about a musical situation in public.

3. Don't play late Coltrane licks on a wedding gig.

4. Don't beat yourself up for what you think was a poor performance. Leave it at being a reflection of that moment and try for a better one next time.

5. Don't wait for the phone to ring. Be an instigator! Set up jam sessions, write tunes, make tapes, find new places for gigs (restaurants, art galleries, street fairs), start a band (or many different bands).

DO:

1. Act positive, and be friendly and helpful on gigs, even if you are not fond of the music or the players. Offer compliments and support when it is due. Music is hard and we need each other's encouragement.

2. When someone tells you that they enjoyed your performance, say "thank you" even if you were dissatisfied.

3. Try to play appropriately for the kind of music you are dealing with. If it is a style with which you are unfamiliar, go and listen to a few recordings of that particular style.

4. Practice your scales, chords, lines and chord changes at home with great vigor so that, when you go to play with people, you are not thinking so much about technical matters and can focus on playing and interacting with the other musicians.

5. Arrange playing situations. Try out a new song with some friends. Start a band. Look for an off-night in your local bar or restaurant. Go get it! It will not always come to you.

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Closing

The quest to be an accomplished musician never ends. Please continue to look in all directions for information and inspiration with an open mind. What I've written here is a very small piece of the art of saxophone playing. I hope it encourages you to look further and develop your own practice habits, melodic ideas, and musical taste.

Special thanks to Don Sinta, Al Regni, Mike Brecker, Jack Kripl, Marvin Stamm, Jackie McLean, John Dearth, Alec McCullough, and Stanley Hammer, my teachers. Thanks also to Jeff Jarvis and everyone at Kendor Music.

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About The Author

Born January 27, 1953 in New Rochelle, New York, Bob Mintzer attended the Interlochen Arts Academy, the Hart School of Music, and the Manhattan School of Music. His formal education was followed by numerous playing, writing and recording experiences with Deodato, Buddy Rich, Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, Joe Chambers, Al Foster, Hubert Laws, Art Blakey, Tito Puente, and many others. In the 1980's Bob formed his own big band and began recording a series of critically-acclaimed albums for the prestigious DMP label -- "Incredible Journey", "Camouflage", "Spectrum", "Urban Contours", "Art Of The Big Band" and "Departure". Most recently, he became the newest member of The Yellowjackets and now pours most of his creative energies into their writing, touring and recording projects.