So What

Miles Davis

By Cliff Engel

In 1959 Miles Davis released *Kind of Blue*, a recording that influenced jazz of the 60's more profoundly than any other single work. This historic release produced many jazz standards including "All Blues" and "So What," the quintessential modal composition. *Kind of Blue* revealed Davis' experimentation with modal improvising and the melodic freedom it allowed the soloist.

Modal compositions are characterized by a form which contains few chord changes and lots of space that lasts for several measures. The end result is a single chordal/scalar tonality which continues for an extended period of time. Davis thought the jazz music of the 1940's and 50's was becoming too constrained and over crowded with chords. As compared to jazz compositions from the bebop era, modal tunes offered much more freedom for improvising on each individual chord change. Improvisers could focus their attention on the entire scale or mode which was related to the particular chord type, rather than using the chord-based approach to improvisation of the swing and bebop periods. Instead of thinking vertically (chords), jazz musicians now started to take a more horizontal or scale-based approach to improvisation. This was a radical departure from the standard functional harmony of the bebop era where vertical harmonies (chords) were utilized extensively and the tonality of a composition often moved through many key centers.

The harmonic concept behind "So What" is very simple. It is a 32-bar AABA song form composed of only two chord changes, Dm7 and Ebm7. The harmonic formula consists of 8 measures of Dm7, followed by another 8 bars of Dm7, then 8 measures of Ebm7, and finally 8 bars of Dm7. Rather than using a chordal approach to improvising over Dm7 and Ebm7, musicians approach it modally, choosing to play D Dorian and Eb Dorian over the two respective chord changes.

Not only is "So What" historic from an improvisational point of view in moving from a chordal to a scalar approach of improvisation, but it is also just one of a couple jazz standards which features the melody played on bass. On the *Kind of Blue*, "So What" was played by one of Miles Davis' most renowned bassists, Paul Chambers.

Although the song form of modal tunes like "So What" is really basic in theory, modal tunes are one of the most difficult styles of music for bassists to improvise on because they present the bass player with a number of formidable challenges. As outlined above, "So What" is comprised of 16 measures of Dm7 (AA), followed by 8 bars of Ebm7 (B), and then another 8 measures of Dm7 (A). As the bassist, you will be faced with the daunting task of sustaining musical interest over that extended period of time using only two chord changes. When you combine the last eight measures of "So What" with the first sixteen bars, you will be playing 24 continuous measures of Dm7!

In the notation that follows, you will notice two bass staves. Piano comping is located in the top bass staff and the bass melody is notated in the bottom bass staff during the first chorus (the first time through the song form or in other words the first 32 measures). Then, sample bass lines have been provided for you demonstrating a few of the techniques that can be utilized on modal tunes. "So What" became one of Davis' signature pieces and depending on which of his bassists interpreted the melody, you will hear slight variation on the transcribed melody notated here. For example, Mr. P.C. played "So What" straight-ahead whereas Ron Carter often took great liberty in embellishing the melody. Also, Davis' late 50's band with Chambers often played "So What" at a slower tempo compared to the uptempo rendition regularly performed by Miles' famous quintet of the mid-60's with Carter on bass. The melody included here has been transcribed from *Kind of Blue* as played by Chambers.

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During the second chorus, measures 33-64, I have notated many sample bass lines utilizing several different walking bass line techniques over modal-based compositions. In measures 33-40 you will find the most common walking bass line technique used on modal tunes. In measures 33, 35, 37, and 39, the root of Dm7 (D) is played on the first beat of the measure while in bars 34, 36, 38, and 40, the perfect fifth of Dm7 (A) is placed on the downbeat of the bar. With this walking technique, the bass line alternates back and forth between the root and the fifth of Dm7 played on the downbeat of every other measure. To break up the roller coaster feeling created in the previous measures, bars 45, 49, 50, 61, and 62 contain lines built in thirds. You can also construct lines in other intervals as well including fourths, fifths, sixths, sevenths, and octaves like the lines found in bars 57-60. If you are experiencing problems in losing your place within the form of a modal tune, you can place a simple repetitive figure (ostinato or pedal point) in the final few measures of a chorus to help create tension as in bars 63 and 64. An ostinato or pedal point can also function as a signal to the other members of the band that the song form is about repeat from the top.

Although the melody of "So What" utilizes the Dorian mode, other scales such as natural minor, melodic minor, and even harmonic minor can be used in the construction of walking lines throughout the solos to add more flavor to the monotonous sound of Dorian, if played over a prolonged period of time.

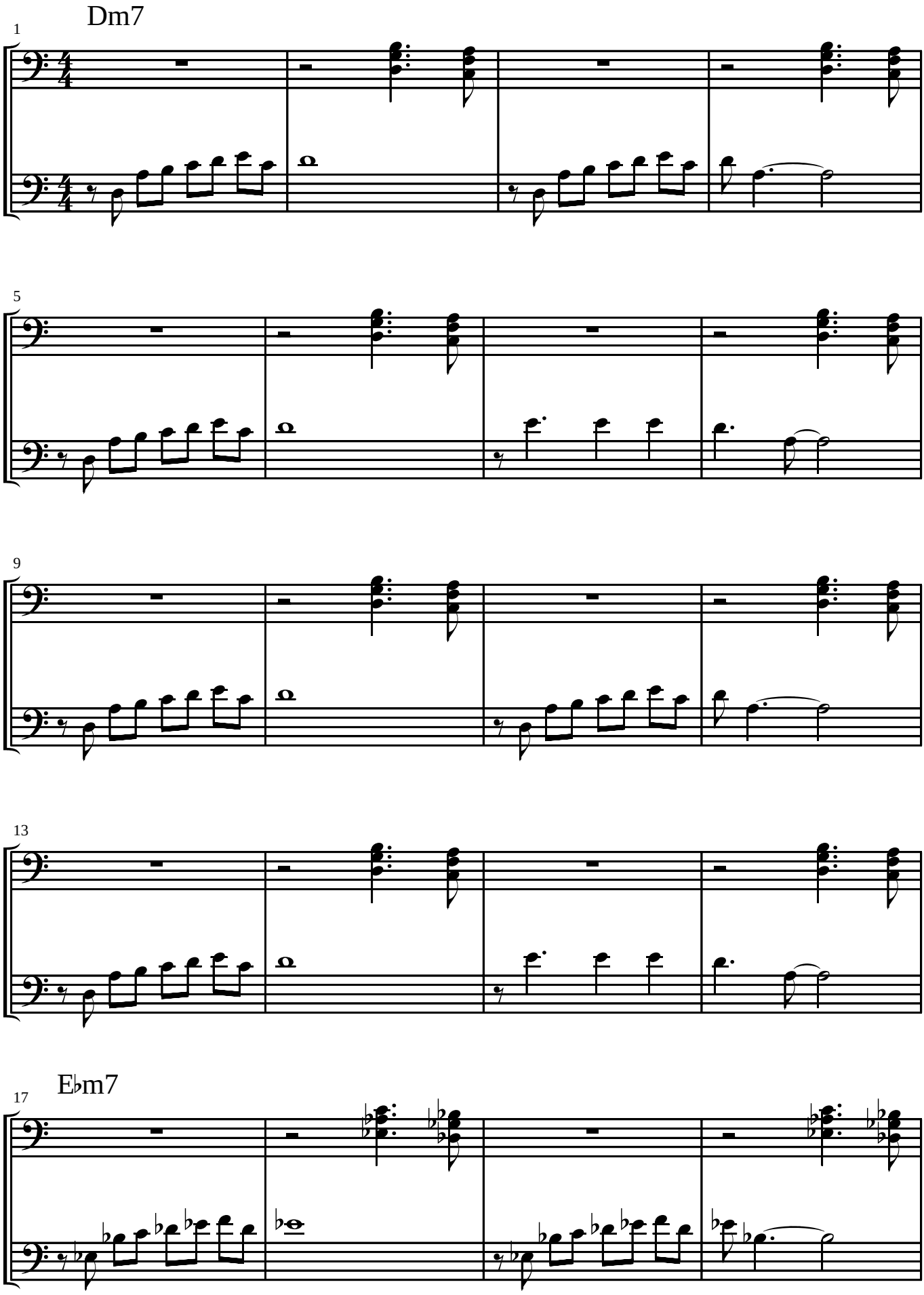
To further enhance your walking bass lines over modal tunes, incorporate rhythmic embellishments such as skips, ghost skips, pull-off skips, slurred skips, syncopated rhythms, and triplets. Rhythmic embellishments add rhythmic interest to straight-ahead, quarter note-based walking lines and create a feeling of forward motion. These embellishments provide a rhythmic tension which is then released upon the playing of subsequent quarter notes. Rhythmic embellishments are especially useful on compositions that are played for an extended period of time, as many jazz tunes are often played for up to 10-20 minutes in length. By combining the chromatic approach of walking bass line construction with the various rhythmic embellishments, you can improvise more advanced sounding lines by increasing that underlying sense of harmonic and rhythmic tension and release.

If you keep losing your place within the form of modal tunes, there are a couple things you can do to help alleviate that problem. First, divide the form of a 32-bar AABA modal tune such as "So What" into four sections of eight measures. When you are playing, place your left foot forward for the first eight measures (A). To signify the second set of eight bars (A), place your right foot in front of your left. For the next eight measures (B), place your left foot in front of your right, and then again for the final set of eight measures (A), put your right foot in front of your left. This technique will help keep your place in the form and will remain totally undetected by the audience. Another technique to help ensure that you stay true to the form involves picking four fixed points in the room (don't use people because they can relocate), and then move from points A-D as the song form progresses. Not only do both of these techniques work great on 32-bar AABA modal tunes, but you can apply them to other song forms in different styles as well.

After you play through the notated bass lines several times, improvise your own walking lines using the concepts outlined above with rhythmic embellishments. Check out recordings by Miles Davis, and listen to how Paul Chambers and Ron Carter approached playing modal tunes like "So What." Transcribe some of their walking lines and assimilate them into your own style.

Modal tunes such as "So What" and "Impressions" are a great place to start experimenting with playing "outside" the changes because they provide plenty of space to establish the tonality on a single chord type. Plus, by going outside the key center of a modal composition, you can create more interest over the inherently static harmony through dissonance and resolution.

Other modal compositions include John Coltrane's "Impressions," Herbie Hancock's "Maiden Voyage," and Freddie Hubbard's "Little Sunflower."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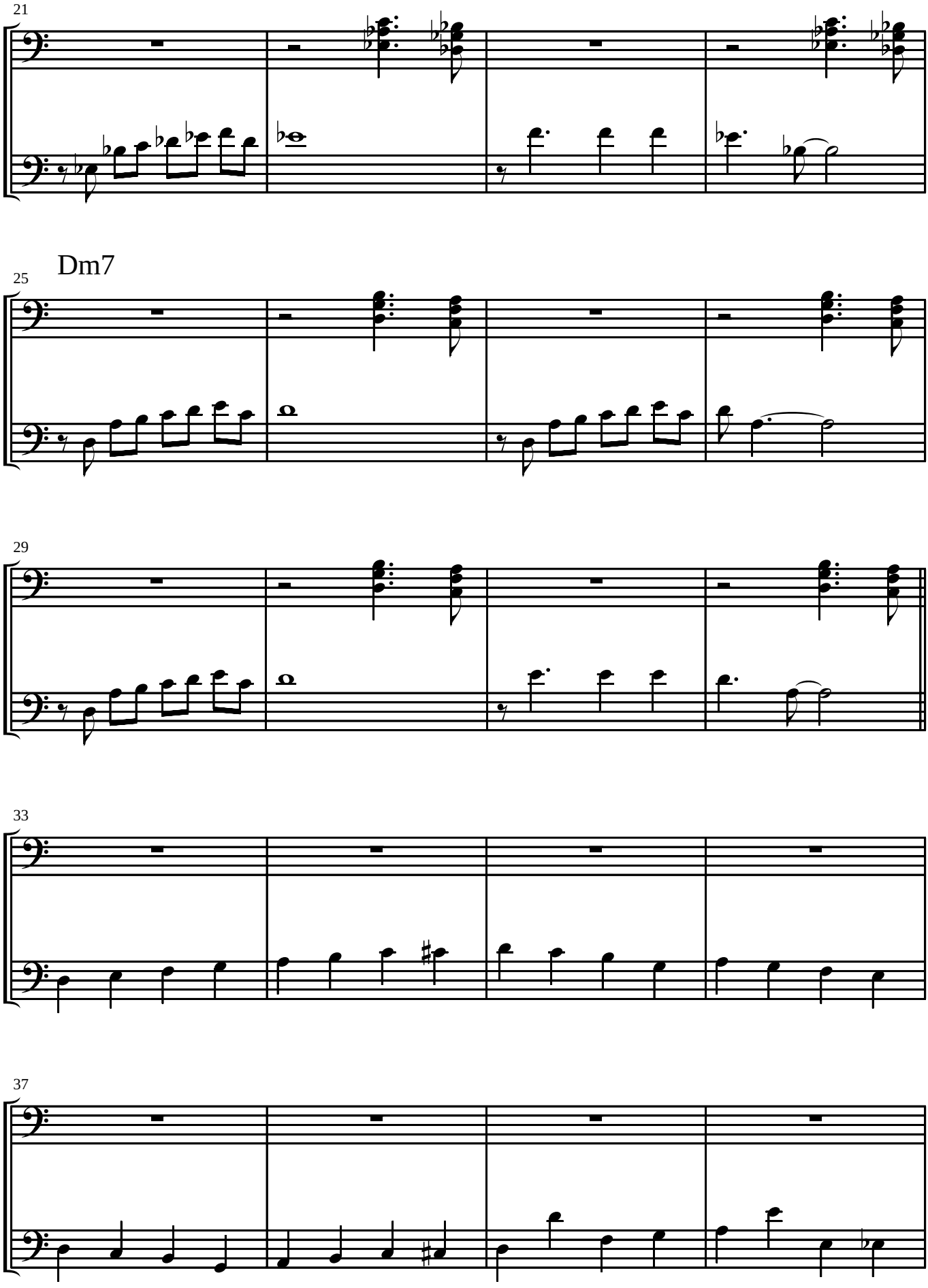
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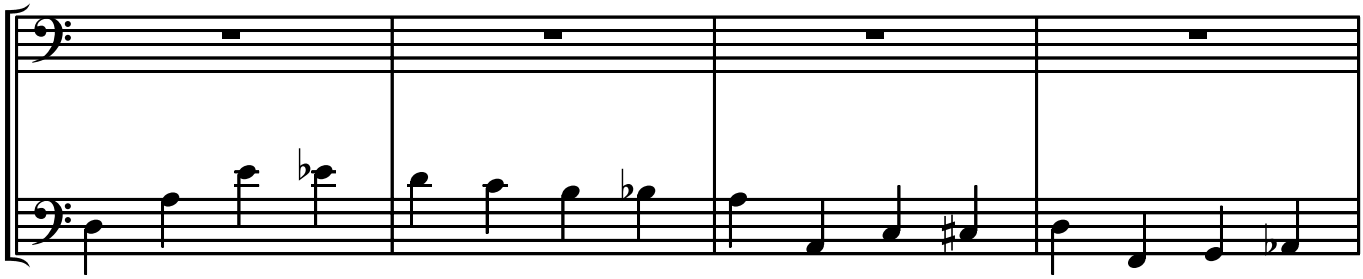

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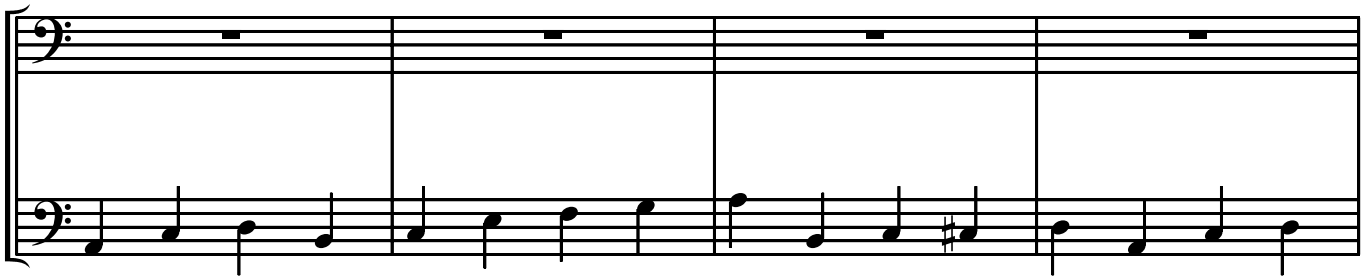

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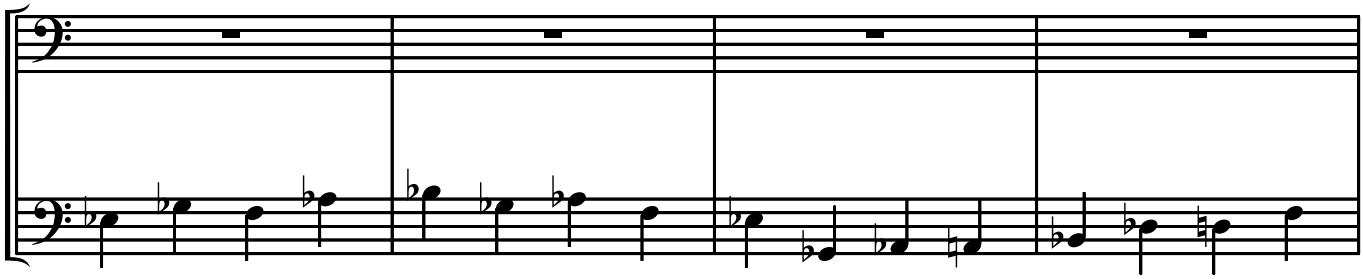

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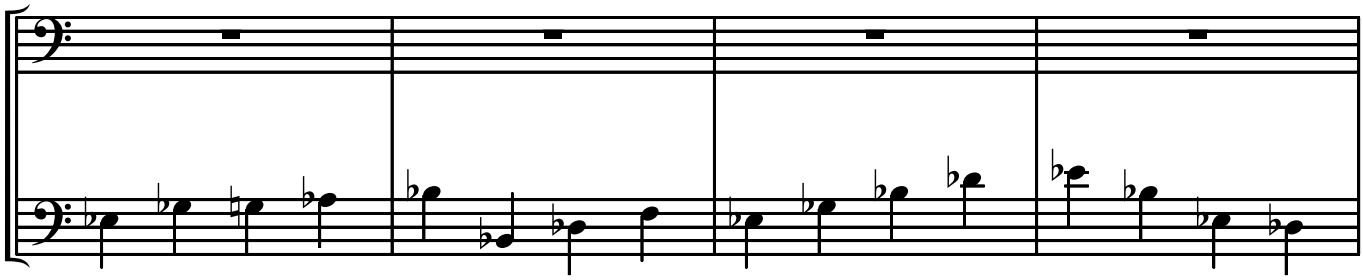
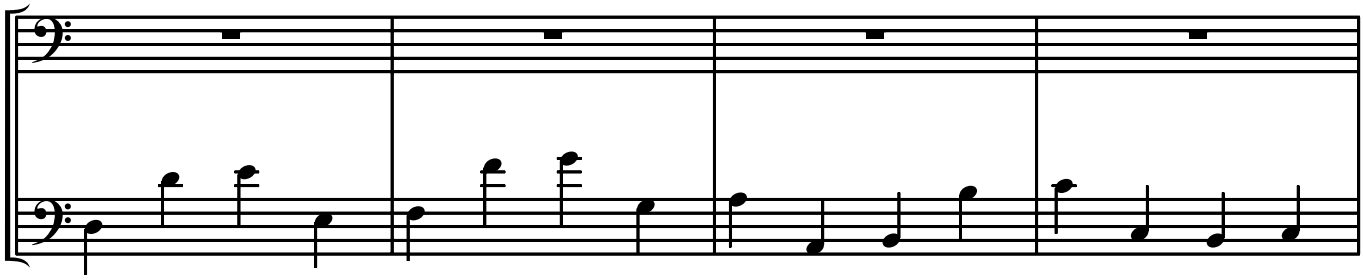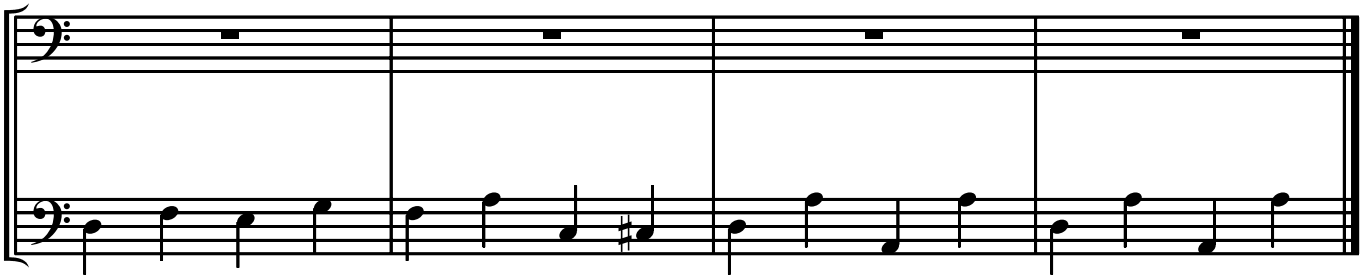
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