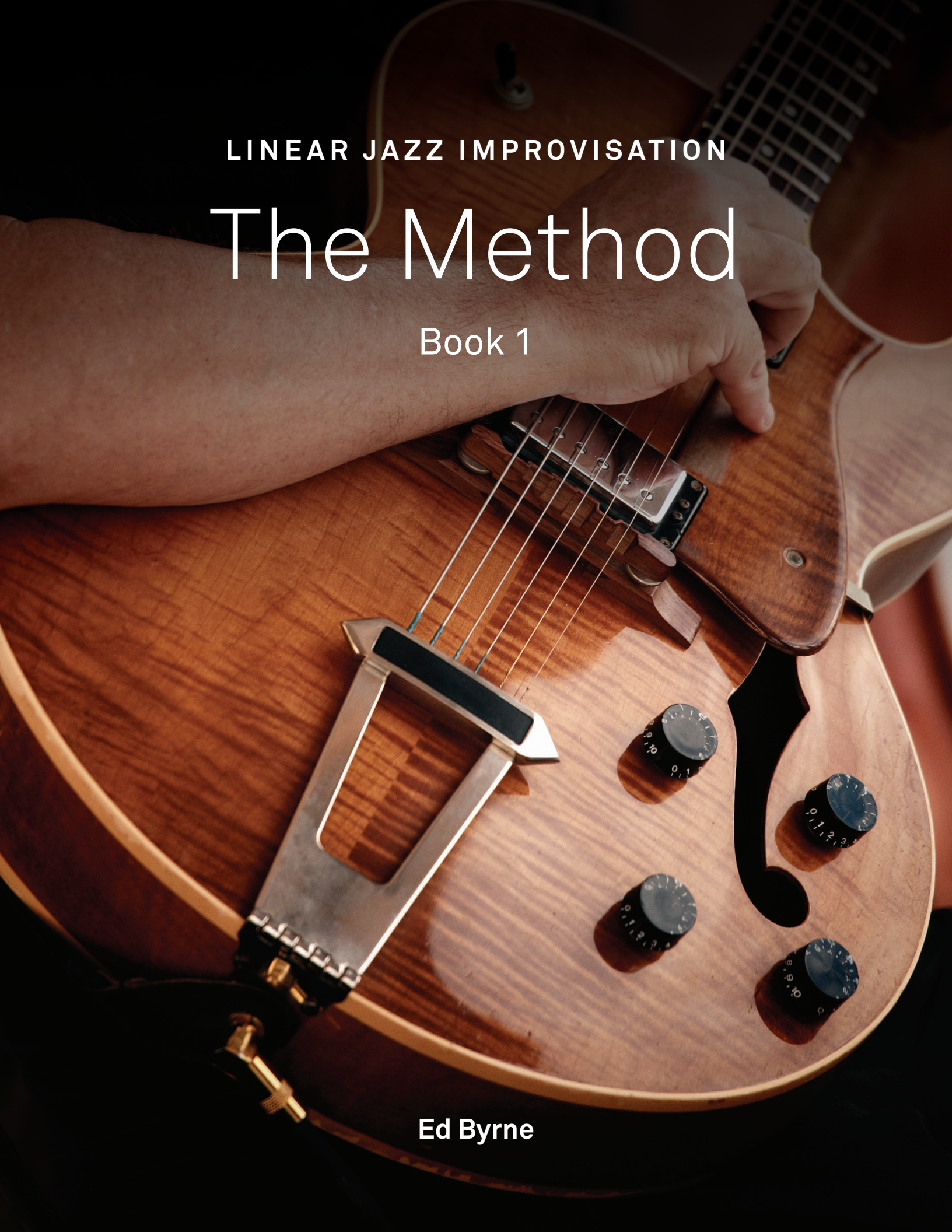
LINEAR JAZZ IMPROVISATION

The Method

Book 1



Ed Byrne

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Jazz improvisation is best viewed as a melodic and rhythmic concept, rather than a merely harmonic one. Melodic ornamentation was the initial stage in the development of jazz, as with all Western musical styles. Traditionally, musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbeck based their improvisations on specific melodies and their rhythms. In contrast, the current prevailing jazz pedagogy, Chord Scale Theory, involves the application of scales to the chords that *accompany* tunes, scales in which all seven pitch classes are represented. While it may seem expedient, this procedure does not address the composition's most important subject matter; and it often causes the student jazz improviser to play lines that are unmelodic, since good tunes and lines are not usually completely conjunct, and do not usually contain too much information for the listener to follow. Rather, great composers have traditionally limited the amount of compositional information, while developing its essentials extensively. Thus, to create lines which are *meaningful* the student who employs the chord scale method will eventually have to learn to leave notes out and address the composition at hand in order to create lines relevant to the composition.

While Chord Scale Theory is the prevailing pedagogy in jazz, it is not the most direct path to meaningful improvisation, which would be to address the essential elements of specific compositions. Moreover, seven-note scales often present too much meaningless information to the listener, especially when these scales are derived from chords rather than melodies, lines, and rhythms. They also tend to be too conjunct. How often, for instance, do you hear a good melody or line that moves exclusively stepwise? Many artists agree: Joe Henderson, for example, used to say, *I don't want to sound like the index of a book,* meaning that the graduates of college jazz departments sounded to him like they were demonstrating their knowledge of scales out of a book, rather than improvising meaningful statements on the specific song. Good lines, moreover, are usually propelled forward by means of chromatic non-harmonic tones (as with Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Parker, Davis, et al); and chord scales don't address the blues, which can be played over virtually any harmony.

The aim of *Linear Jazz Improvisation, Book I* is to offer the basics of melodic jazz improvisation with no theoretical terminology. We will examine how traditional melodic and rhythmic ornamentation can be applied in a modern context. The object is to learn how to base improvisations on the composition's salient elements: Melody, Guide-Tone Lines, Root Progression, and Rhythmic Motives. We will begin by reducing and compressing the melody for ease in internalization and to achieve a better understanding of the composition, and then systematically apply chromatic targeting to modify and enhance the reduced melody. The same procedure will be used on the melody's rhythms. You will learn the composition so thoroughly that its material becomes the primary source for improvisation, rather than chords, scales, and modes. Below is an outline of the process we will use in learning a tune:

LINEAR JAZZ IMPROVISATION—LEARNING A SONG

1. Reduce and Internalize Reduced Melody.

2. Derive and Internalize Guide-Tone Lines.

3. Internalize and Compress Root Progression.

4. Apply Chromatic Targeting to each of the above. (*Linear Jazz Improvisation* has 10 Chromatic Groups)

5. Identify and Simplify Basic Melodic Rhythms of the Piece.

6. Develop and Permutate Rhythms.

7. Combine Chromatic Targeting with Rhythmic Development.

Techniques will be systematically explored, enhanced by many examples made available in state-of-the-art *Finale* files. We will then apply these techniques to our respective instruments. In addition to instruments, the only tools needed for practicing the *Linear Jazz Improvisation* method are your voice and a metronome. The essential skills learned here will be applicable to all other approaches. Further investigation into jazz improvisation could build upon this material by adding such techniques as thematic development, symmetrical and constant structures, motivic transposition, idiomatic rhythmic styles, and idiomatic jazz and blues formulas. Traditional systematic melodic developmental procedures such as retrograde, inversion, retrograde inversion, mirror, cellular development, augmentation, and diminution could be explored and then applied to the essential elements of specific compositions in preparation for jazz improvisation.

In approaching this method in a group context, *Linear Jazz Improvisation* works with any combination of instrumentalists possessing a firm foundation on his or her respective instrument. Indeed, it works with players with no background in jazz alongside those who are highly experienced.

EXCERPT #1:

CHAPTER 1

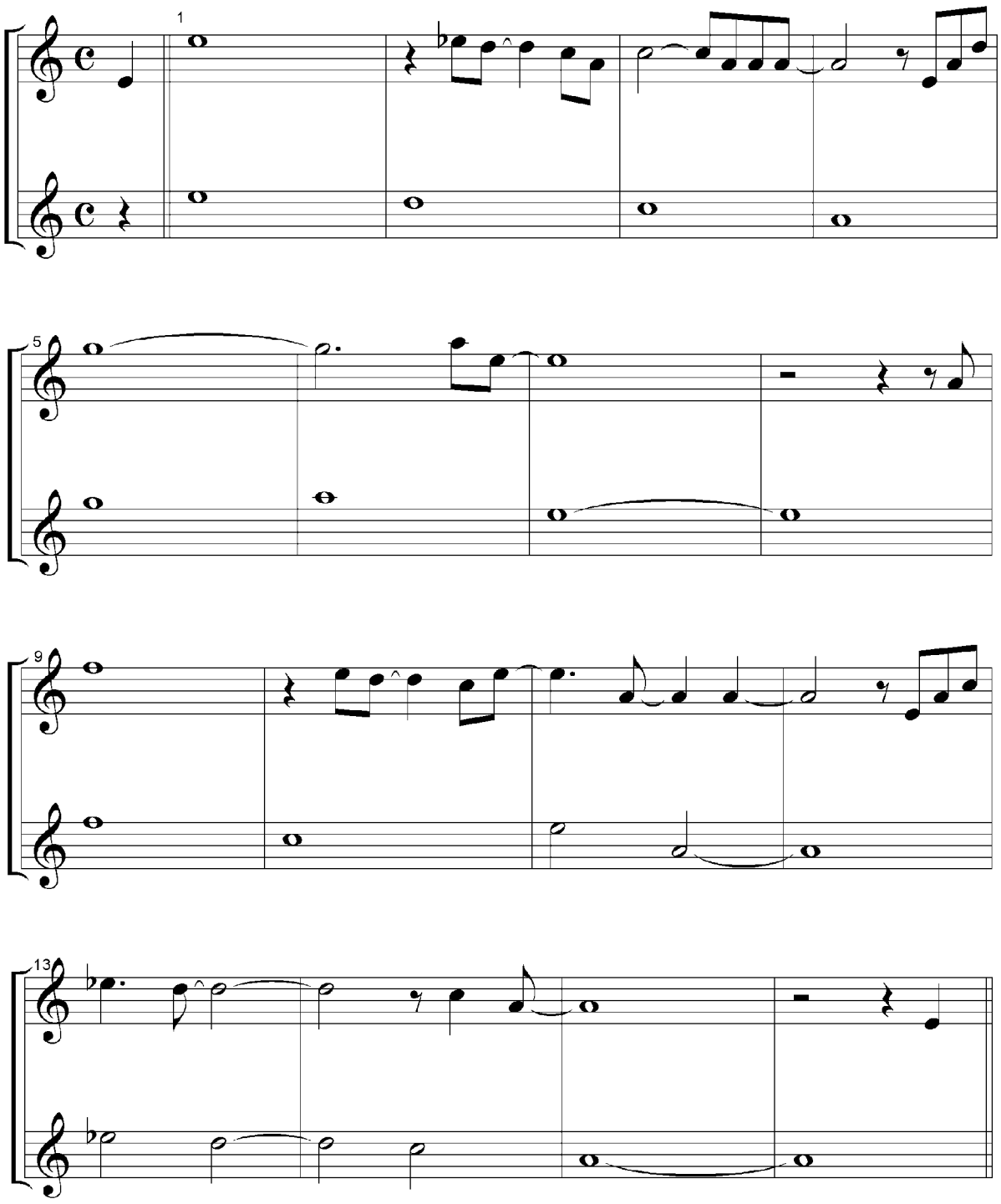
MELODY REDUCTION AND COMPRESSION

Melody Reduction is achieved by shrinking melodies to their fundamental pitches and rhythms by eliminating pick-ups, non-harmonic tones, and repeated notes, and simplifying the rhythms of these melodies by placing all notes squarely on the beat in order to secure a firm grasp of the essential compositional material upon which to create further development in improvisation. Indeed, these rhythmically simplified reduced melodies will become much like the traditional *cantus firmi* of medieval Western art music.

Although we apply the procedure somewhat differently, the idea of reducing a composition under analysis was inspired by the work of Austrian theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), who developed techniques of composing-out non-essential elements to better understand the works of the great Viennese composers of the nineteenth century. In our application of this procedure, reduced melodies will become the foundation of everything that we will play and/or sing in both practice and performance, regardless of which of the various musical roles we are performing at any given time. Reduced melodies and guide tone lines have the additional quality of making very good backgrounds behind soloists.

In our first example below, we begin by omitting the song's anacrusis (pick-up note). The Eb in measure 2 is a chromatic passing (non-harmonic) tone, while the eighth notes on beat 4 are non-essential, since the D in measure 2 clearly resolves to the C in measure 3. Since the As in measure 3 merely anticipate the A in measure 4, they are omitted in our reduction. The eighth notes in measure 4 are pick-ups to the G in measures 5 and 6. In spite of its short duration, the eighth-note A on beat 4 of measure 6 is important, since it is the goal of the sustained G that precedes it. The A pick-up note in measure 8 is omitted. Study the remainder of this example using these given parameters to ascertain why notes were omitted or retained.

Melody Reduction—Byrne, *Blue Sunday*:



EXCERPT #2:

CHAPTER 2

CHROMATIC TARGETING

Chromatic Targeting involves the systematic application of chromatic modifier groups to enhance and develop the reduced melody with specific vocabulary as a starting point. Targeting will be introduced in steps, first by approaching each melody note from a semitone below; then from a semitone above; from a semitone below and above; from a semitone above and below, and so on. All of these chromatic embellishments should be practiced separately—along the entire length of the instrument's range, and then on specific reduced melodies. Chromatic targeting should first be practiced on the *Four Triad Types* and *Twelve Seventh-Chord Types*, using chord tones as targets.

TEN CHROMATIC TARGETING GROUPS

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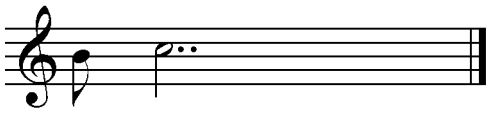

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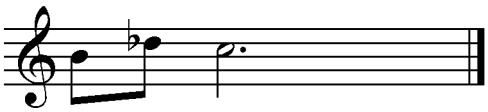

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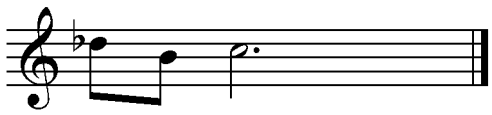

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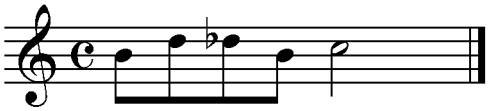

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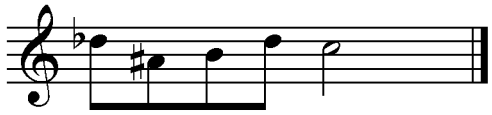

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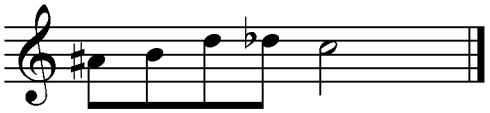

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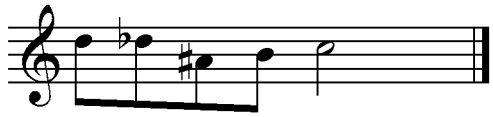

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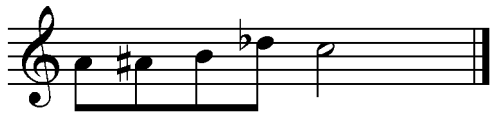

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