

Melody as Motive: An Analysis of Wayne Shorter's Improvisational Approach on "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" and "Infant Eyes"

By Joel Linscheid

Over the course of his more than sixty-year career, Wayne Shorter has earned a reputation as one of the most unique and innovative musicians in jazz history. He is renowned not only as a saxophonist, but also as a composer. In both arenas, Shorter exhibits an individual style that has long set him apart from his contemporaries. Shorter's musical style is often described as being equally informed by a sense of tradition and innovation. Trumpeter Nicholas Payton described Shorter in *Downbeat* magazine as "modern but rooted at the same time."¹

Shorter's complex style is apparent on his 1964 album, *Speak No Evil*.² Recorded just three months after Shorter left Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers and joined Miles Davis's "Second Quintet," the album exhibits the influence of both past and future. In his improvisational and compositional style, Shorter demonstrates a strong foundation of the blues and traditional conventions of bebop, but also an increasingly modern style that favors motivic development and smoother lines. Also evident throughout the entire album is a strong sense of unity between Shorter's improvised solos and the compositions themselves. In his analysis of *Speak No Evil*,

¹ Dan Ouellette and Ted Panken, "My Favorite Blue Note Album," *Downbeat*, March 2009, 28.

² Wayne Shorter, *Speak No Evil*. Blue Note Records 84194, recorded December 24, 1964.

Stuart Nicholson writes, “What was striking about his work was a highly developed sense of melodic construction within his solos. Often, his improvisations appeared as logical extensions of his compositions...”³

Saxophonist David Sanchez offers similar commentary on the album, noting that:

“On “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum,” “Speak No Evil” and “Infant Eyes,” Wayne isn’t playing the changes, but plays around the composition—he’s creative within the composition, distinct from a lot of other Blue Note recordings of the period on which, generally speaking, people would improvise on the changes once the head or theme was over.”⁴

This commentary will serve as a framework for the following analysis of two of Wayne Shorter’s solos from *Speak No Evil*, on “Infant Eyes” and “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum.” The analysis will demonstrate how Shorter relies on melodic content from his compositions as the motivic foundation for his improvised solos. The examples discussed will illustrate how he draws inspiration from the melody in a variety of ways, including: direct quotes of melody, use of melodic fragments and development of motivic elements, and imitation of melodic phrase contours. Additionally, consideration will be given to how Shorter more broadly reflects the compositional elements in “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum” through his use of long-range linear motion and contrasting stylistic sections.

³ Stuart Nicholson, *The Essential Jazz Records: Volume 2*, (London and New York: Mansell Publishing Limited, 2000), 332.

⁴ Dan Ouellette and Ted Panken, “My Favorite Blue Note Album,” *Downbeat*, March 2009, 28.

I. “Infant Eyes” (Melody)

Shorter’s composition “Infant Eyes” is constructed in a unique 27-measure ABA form, comprised of three 9-measure phrases. The melody is simple, made up of a repeating phrase structure that includes a pick-up to a half note, followed by three eighth notes. Within the melody to “Infant Eyes,” three motives have been identified, shown in Example 1.⁵

Example 1: Motives in “Infant Eyes” Melody, mm.1-4



Motive a is classified broadly as Shorter’s use of the interval of the third, which occurs frequently throughout the composition. While the interval of a third is common in tonal music and its repetition doesn’t always constitute a motive, it seems to be more important to the melodic structure of “Infant Eyes” and therefore is worth noting. As seen in the above example, the points of rest within the melody are often a third apart, and serve as melodic points of arrival. In this sense, the interval holds melodic significance, rather than being used in a triadic manner to outline the harmony.

⁵ For a motivic analysis of the full melody, see Appendix A

Shorter contrasts the long notes in “Infant Eyes” with motive b, a recurring set of three eighth notes. The eighth notes balance the phrase, connecting the long notes and providing forward motion to the next point of arrival. The descending three-note motive is further developed in Shorter’s solo, described later.

Finally, motive c is the large melodic leap, most often of an octave, that occurs throughout the melody. The large leaps also seem to offer balance to the melody line, the rest of which typically moves by stepwise motion or in thirds. Shorter’s melodic construction adheres to typical conventions, as he follows each large leap with melodic movement in the opposite direction.

II. “Infant Eyes” (Solo)

After stating the melody, Shorter improvises one chorus, in which he references and develops the motives found in the melody. As indicated above in the commentary by Sanchez and Nicholson, Shorter’s approach to the improvisation on “Infant Eyes” is rooted in the melody, not in an effort to create new, unrelated content based on the harmony.⁶

As seen in Example 2, beginning in measure 10, rather than improvising a new melody based on the chord progression, Shorter essentially embellishes the existing melody. While his improvised embellishments obscure this fact to the casual listener, the comparison shows that his improvised line continues to closely follow the melody from mm. 10-27.

⁶ For a transcription of Shorter’s entire solo on “Infant Eyes,” see Appendix B.

Example 2: Comparison of Melody and Shorter's Improvisation on "Infant Eyes" (mm.10-27)

The musical score consists of two staves: 'Melody' and 'Shorter's Improvisation'. The melody is marked with a box labeled 'B' and a measure number '10'. Shorter's improvisation includes several triplet markings (indicated by '3' above the notes). The score is divided into three systems, with a box labeled 'A' appearing above the second system.

In addition to its close relationship to the original melody, Shorter's improvised solo also exhibits further development of the motives established in the theme.⁷ Example 3 (below) shows measures 1-9 of Shorter's solo. Unlike the later

⁷ For motivic analysis of Shorter's entire solo on "Infant Eyes," see Appendix C.

section (seen above), Shorter doesn't explicitly quote the melody in the first A section, but does reference each of the three motives identified in Example 1.

Example 3: Motivic analysis of Wayne Shorter's solo on "Infant Eyes" (mm. 1-9)

Shorter's reference to motive a (the interval of a third) is less explicit than in the melody, but is present nonetheless. He ends each of his phrases with the interval, first descending from Bb to G, then ascending from Bb to D. In m. 4, Shorter transforms the 3-note descending line from m. 4 of the melody into a repetition of three descending chromatic 3-note gestures. He continues the motive into measure 6, where it occurs twice more. Finally, in measures 6 and 8, Shorter draws on motive c from the melody, beginning each of the phrases with large melodic leaps, followed by linear movement in the opposite direction.

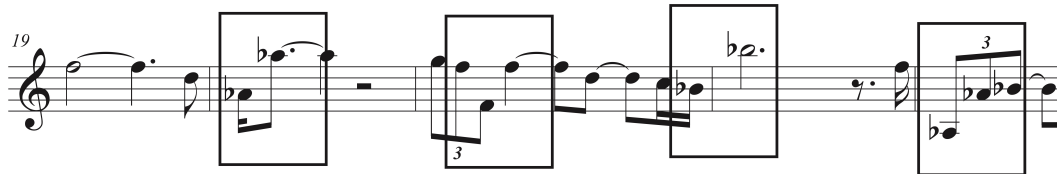
Even as Shorter stays closer to the original melody in the last two sections of his solo, his embellishments tend to be based on these three motives. In measure 14 (Example 4), Shorter embellishes the original melody by oscillating between the main pitch, C#, and A#, referencing motive a.

Example 4: Use of motive a in Shorter’s solo on “Infant Eyes” (m.14)



Five measures later, Shorter references motive c by including four separate octave leaps in his phrase between measures 19 and 22 (see Example 5). Notably, each of the octave leaps is played on a note that is part of the original melody (see Example 2 above for comparison).

Example 5: Use of motive c in Shorter’s solo on “Infant Eyes” (m. 19)



Shorter’s use of motives from the melody as further embellishments of the melodic line underscores the way in which he treats the improvisation as a development of the main theme, rather than an opportunity to create new, unrelated melodies over the chord progression. It is important to note, however, that Shorter’s approach is by no means a “simpler” one. His ability to subtly transform the melody in ways that are not trite or predictable is extraordinary—the connections between the solo and melody are often only recognizable through analysis.

III. “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum” (Melody)

As with many of the compositions on *Speak No Evil*, “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum” exhibits a blend of modern and traditional elements. Like “Infant Eyes,” the piece is in ABA form, but is constructed of typical 8-measure phrases.⁸ The A sections contains more modal, chromatic harmony, while the B section exhibits a more traditional approach, imitating the harmonic movement of a blues.⁹ Shorter mirrors this contrasting approach between traditional and contemporary styles in his solo--shifting between chromatic, harmonically ambiguous playing and simpler, blues-based vocabulary.¹⁰

While “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum” doesn’t contain the same type of clear melodic motives as “Infant Eyes,” it does have a distinct melodic contour, which Shorter uses motivically in his improvisation. As shown in Example 6a, the opening two measures (repeated with variation in mm. 5-6) contain a descending line, followed by an ascending line in the last two measures of the phrase. The first two measures seem to be most significant to Shorter, and serve as the foundation for development in his solo.

Example 6a: Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum Melody (mm.1-4)

E \flat 7#4 D7(#9) Gmin A \flat maj Bmaj D7 Dmin G7

⁸ For a leadsheet of “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum,” see Appendix D.

⁹ For a more in depth analysis of the harmonic structure of Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum, see Steven Strunk, “Notes on Harmony in Wayne Shorter’s Compositions, 1964-67,” *Journal of Music Theory* 49, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 301-332.

¹⁰ For full transcription of Shorter’s solo on “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum,” see Appendix E.

The opening phrase is contrasted in the B section, where the phrase begins with upward chromatic motion followed by descending motion (Example 6b).

Example 6b: Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum Melody (mm. 9-12)

9 Eb7 Bb7

IV. “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum” (Solo)

As in “Infant Eyes,” Shorter directly quotes the melody several times in his solo on “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum.” Three times, he references the opening two measures of the melody. As shown in Examples 7a and 7b, Shorter plays the line with only slight alteration in the last 4 measures of both improvised choruses, inserting it at the same place in the form that it occurs in the melody.

Example 7a: Comparison of Melody and Wayne Shorter’s Solo on “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum” (mm.21-22)

Melody Shorter's Improvisation

Example 7b: Comparison of Melody and Wayne Shorter's Solo on "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" (mm.45-47)

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is labeled 'Melody' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Shorter's Improvisation'. Both staves start at measure 45. The melody consists of a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. Shorter's improvisation follows the same general contour but includes chromatic alterations, such as a Bb4 in measure 46 and a B4 in measure 47.

However, a more unique instance occurs in mm. 18-19 of Shorter's first chorus (Example 7c), where he takes the same melodic line, but places it one measure later than where it should occur in the form. In order to account for the shift in harmony, Shorter adds several chromatic passing tones to the line. Though it may not initially be apparent to the listener, the connection to the melody is clear.

Example 7c: Comparison of Melody and Wayne Shorter's Solo on "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" (mm.17-20)

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is labeled 'Melody' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Shorter's Improvisation'. Above the melody staff are chord symbols: Eb7#4, D7(#9), Gmin, Abmaj, Bmaj, D7. The melody starts at measure 17 with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. Shorter's improvisation starts at measure 17 with notes G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3, D3.

In addition to directly quoting the initial melody phrase, Shorter also draws inspiration from the general melodic contour of the melody. Example 8 shows a

graphic representation of the phrase contours in the first part of Shorter's solo.¹¹

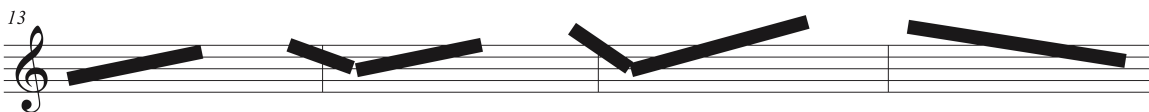
Though Shorter doesn't explicitly quote the melody in these 12 measures of his solo, the graphic illustrates how his phrases clearly mirror the descending contour of the initial phrase of the composition.

Example 8: Melodic Contour of Shorter's solo on Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum (mm.1-12)



During the B section, Shorter provides contrast, playing ascending shapes that mimic the upward motion of the initial phrase of the bridge (see Example 8b).

Example 8b: Melodic Contour of Shorter's solo on Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum (mm.13-16)



¹¹ For an illustration of the phrase contour of Shorter's entire solo, see Appendix F.

V. Large-Scale Analysis of “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum”

While the preceding analysis has largely focused on specific ways Shorter draws on the melody in his improvisation, there are also two more general ways that he mirrors the composition in his improvisation, and creates a sense of large-scale unity in “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum.”

First, Shorter exhibits a compositional approach to his solo, alternating stylistic and thematic approaches to denote different sections within the solos. The result is that the broader structure of Shorter’s improvisation reflects the juxtaposition of contrasting elements found in the composition itself. While the stylistic sections sometimes align with significant points in the formal structure of the composition, they don’t follow a clear pattern, giving the solo a separate structure of its own. As discussed above, Shorter’s first chorus is primarily constructed of long, smooth, descending phrases. At the beginning of the second chorus, Shorter changes course dramatically—shifting to fragmented 16th lines (see Example 9a).

Example 9a: Wayne Shorter’s Solo on “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum” (mm. 21-26)

21 $E\flat 7\#4$ $D7(\#9)$ $D\flat maj$ $C7\flat 9$ $Bmaj$

22 $E\flat 7\#4$ $D7(\#9)$ $Gmin$ $A\flat maj$

Shorter continues the 16th note lines through the A section, then returns to the more lyrical approach in mm. 33-36. He begins a rapid repetition of three-note gestures in measure 37, continuing this motive until measure 45, where he returns to the previous approach and references the melody to end his solo (as shown in Example 9b).

Example 9b: Wayne Shorter's Solo on "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" (mm. 41-49)

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff starts at measure 41 and contains the following chord symbols above the notes: Eb7#4, D7(#9), Gmin, Abmaj, Bmaj, D7, Dmin, and G7. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with two triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a bracket) under the notes in measures 42 and 43. The second staff starts at measure 45 and contains the following chord symbols: Eb7#4, D7(#9), Dbmaj, and C7b9 Bmaj. The melody continues with eighth and quarter notes, ending with a double bar line.

The second large-scale element present in Shorter's solo is a sense of long-range linear motion. As discussed above, Shorter uses the general contour of the melodic phrase as inspiration for the phrase shapes in his improvisation. In the first chorus, he plays primarily descending lines, contrasted only briefly on the bridge. However, in several instances, within the larger phrase contour, there is more concrete, stepwise linear motion present. This demonstrates that even while improvising, Shorter is implying clear linear progressions, not simply playing an abstract phrase shapes or outlines of the harmony.

Shorter's sense of line is apparent in the first phrase of his solo. As shown in the linear reduction below (Example 10a), he is clearly structuring his improvised line around the descending stepwise motion from C to Gb.

Example 10a: Linear Motion in Shorter's solo on "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" (mm.1-3)

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff, labeled "Shorter's Improvisation", is in 4/4 time and begins with a first-measure rest. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, including a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure and another triplet in the third measure. The bottom staff, labeled "Linear Reduction", shows the underlying stepwise motion from C4 to Gb4, with curved lines connecting the notes across the measures.

In measure 13, Shorter plays a more intervallic line, based on 3rds and 4ths. He repeats this line twice, moving up in register each time. As seen in Example 10b below, while the shape itself is more angular, underlying it is a clear linear progression that moves from Eb up to Bb, then resolves down to A natural (which was enclosed by the Ab and Bb preceding it).

Example 10b: Linear Motion in Shorter's solo on "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" (mm.13-16)

The image shows two staves of music starting at measure 13. The top staff, labeled "Shorter's Improvisation", features a more angular line with intervals of thirds and fourths. The bottom staff, labeled "Linear Reduction", shows the underlying stepwise motion from Eb4 up to Bb4 and then down to A4, with curved lines connecting the notes across the measures.

VI. Conclusion

As the preceding analysis of "Infant Eyes" and "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" illustrates, Wayne Shorter's improvisational style is rooted in a connection to and development

of the composition on which he is improvising. Shorter maintains a connection to the written melody in multiple ways: through direct use of melodic content, development of motivic elements, and imitation of phrase contour. Additionally, his playing reflects a compositional structural approach through use of contrasting improvisational styles and demonstrates an awareness of long-range linear motion.

Initially, Shorter's approach may not seem all that unusual. After all, improvisation is often first taught and attempted through the framework of "theme and variation." A fundamental connection to the written melody would seem foundational to that approach. However, Shorter's stylistic approach differs from many of the other prominent improvisers in 1964. The stylistic influence of the bebop era meant that most improvisers of the generation were playing highly involved, complex solos that were largely meant to outline the harmony of the composition and demonstrate a high level of virtuosity. Shorter's approach differed, as jazz historian Mark Gridley notes, writing:

"Shorter played lines of smoother contours than those of most hard bop saxophonists. His work did not have as many abrupt starts and stops, or the bobbing up and down that typified bop...Shorter brought an outstanding gift for melody to his solos. Listening to him improvise is like looking over the shoulder of a composer as he invents and develops themes.¹²

As can be seen through analysis of "Infant Eyes" and "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum," it is Shorter's clear sense of melody as the motivic foundation of his improvisations that made him so unique and influential.

¹² Mark Gridley. *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2006), 234.

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1 a b c

5 G \flat maj7 F7sus E \flat min7 B \flat 7sus

9 B \flat 7#5(#9) E \flat maj7 E \flat maj7 E \flat maj9#11

13 E \flat maj7 Bmaj7 B \flat 7sus A \flat min7

17 E \flat 7sus D7b9 Gmin7 Fmin7

21 E \flat maj7 A7#9 G \flat maj7 F7sus

25 E \flat min7 B \flat 7sus B \flat

Appendix B

Wayne Shorter's Solo on Infant Eyes

As published in "The New Best of Wayne Shorter: Artist Transcriptions"
(Hal Leonard: 2004)

Gmin7 Fmin7 Ebmaj7 A7



Gbmaj7 F7sus Ebmin7 Bb7sus



Bb7#5(#9) Ebmaj7 Emaj7 Ebmaj9#11



Emaj7 Bmaj7 Bb7sus Abmin7



Eb7sus D7b9 Gmin7 Fmin7



Ebmaj7 A7#9 Gbmaj7 F7sus



Ebmin7 Bb7sus Bb7 Gmin7



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The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of seven staves of music. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score includes various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs. Motives are highlighted with boxes and dashed lines.

Staff 1: Measures 1-4. Features a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) and another triplet (B4, A4, G4). A dashed line groups the first two measures.

Staff 2: Measures 5-8. Measure 5 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) enclosed in a box. Measure 8 contains a quarter note (B3) and a quarter rest, enclosed in a box.

Staff 3: Measures 9-12. Measure 9 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4). A dashed line groups measures 10-12.

Staff 4: Measures 13-16. Measure 13 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4). Measure 15 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4). Measure 16 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4).

Staff 5: Measures 17-20. Measure 17 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4). Measure 19 contains a quarter note (B3) and a quarter rest, enclosed in a box.

Staff 6: Measures 21-24. Measure 21 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) enclosed in a box. Measure 22 contains a quarter note (B3) and a quarter rest, enclosed in a box. Measure 23 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) enclosed in a box. Measure 24 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4).

Staff 7: Measures 25-28. Measure 25 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4). Measure 26 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4). Measure 27 contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4). Measure 28 contains a quarter note (B3) and a quarter rest.

♩ = 112

$E_b7\#4$ $D7(\#9)$ $Gmin$ $A\flat maj$ $Bmaj$ $D7$ $Dmin$ $G7$

1

5 $E_b7\#4$ $D7(\#9)$ $Gmin$ $A\flat maj$ $C7b9$ $F7$ $B\flat7$

9 E_b7 $B\flat7$

13 E_b7 $B\flat min$ E_b7 $Amin$ $D7$

17 $E_b7\#4$ $D7(\#9)$ $Gmin$ $A\flat maj$ $Bmaj$ $D7$ $Dmin$ $G7$

21 $E_b7\#4$ $D7(\#9)$ $D\flat maj$ $C7b9$ $Bmaj$ $Bmaj$

① Eb7#4 D7(#9) Gmin Abmaj Bmaj D7 Dmin G7

5 Eb7#4 D7(#9) Gmin Abmaj C7b9 F7 Bb7

9 Eb7 Bb7

13 Eb7 Bbmin Eb7 Amin D7

17 Eb7#4 D7(#9) Gmin Abmaj Bmaj D7 Dmin G7

21 Eb7#4 D7(#9) Dbmaj C7b9 Bmaj

② 25 Eb7#4 D7(#9) Gmin Abmaj

27 Bmaj D7 Dmin G7

29 Eb7#4 D7(#9) Gmin Abmaj

Musical staff 29-30: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Measure 29: Eb7#4, D7(#9). Measure 30: Gmin, Abmaj. The staff contains eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 30.

31 C7b9 F7 Bb7

Musical staff 31-32: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Measure 31: C7b9, F7. Measure 32: Bb7. The staff contains eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 31.

33 Eb7 Bb7

Musical staff 33-34: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Measure 33: Eb7, Bb7. The staff contains eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 33.

37 Eb7

Musical staff 37-38: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Measure 37: Eb7. The staff contains eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 37.

39 Bbmin Eb7 Amin D7

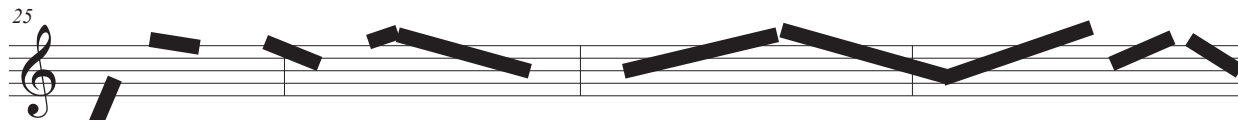
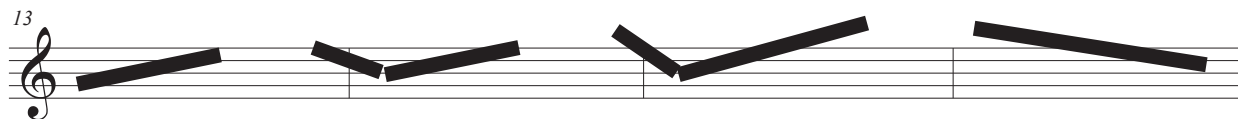
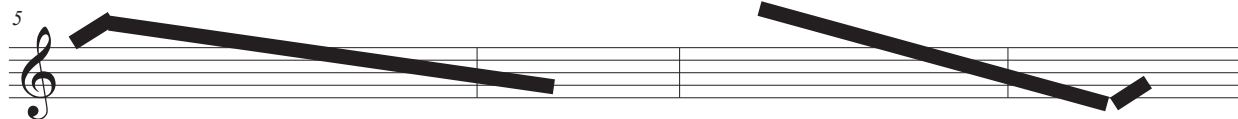
Musical staff 39-40: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Measure 39: Bbmin, Eb7. Measure 40: Amin, D7. The staff contains eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 39.

41 Eb7#4 D7(#9) Gmin Abmaj Bmaj D7 Dmin G7

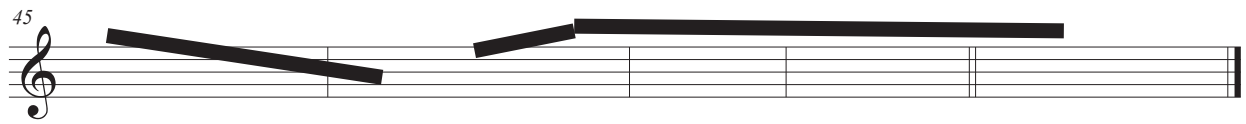
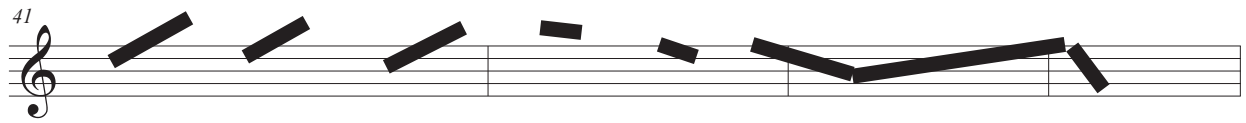
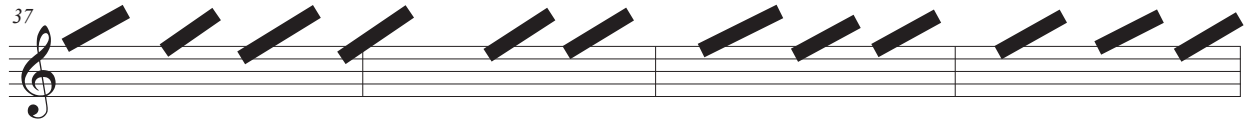
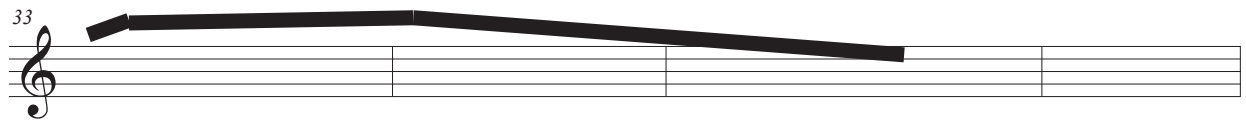
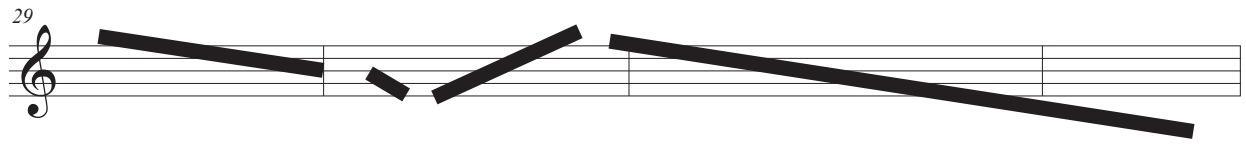
Musical staff 41-42: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Measure 41: Eb7#4, D7(#9). Measure 42: Gmin, Abmaj, Bmaj, D7, Dmin, G7. The staff contains eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 41.

45 Eb7#4 D7(#9) Dbmaj C7b9 Bmaj

Musical staff 45-46: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Measure 45: Eb7#4, D7(#9), Dbmaj, C7b9, Bmaj. The staff contains eighth and sixteenth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 45.



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