Silvio Dalla Torre

BASSics 1

Basics of the four-finger-technique for playing the double bass
according to the "New Dutch School"

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What is the "New Dutch School"?

Neither Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven nor any other pre-1800s composer had ever heard of the "two-semitone-application" for playing the double bass. This technique, which is used worldwide today was not propagated until 1809 by Wenzel Hause and popularized by Franz Simandl's method book published around 1870. Therefore, this 1-2-4 fingering technique is also known as the "Simandl Technique".

140 years have passed since then, which amounts rarely a third of the 500-year history of the double bass. According to the latest research, the instrument has always been played - in addition to a variety of fingering techniques - in the 1-2-3-4 system. Johann Matthias Sperger (1750 - 1812), the great double bass virtuoso of the Viennese Classical period, and Domenico Dragonetti (1763 - 1846) may have been the most prominent representatives of this technique.[1] Upon analysis of the melodic movement of the classic double bass concertos, most of which were conceived in close cooperation with the performer and in consideration with the playing technique used at the time, one can conclude, that the four-finger-technique must have been the standard for above-average players. This theory is supported by the first double bass methods by Nicolai and Friedrich Christoph Franke[2], above all, both of who taught the four-finger-system without considering it something special. Not until later when the new two-half-step-system became known, did Franke defend himself against hostilities: "There is hardly anything more natural than to use all four fingers equally to stop the four notes (which separate one string from the next)."[3]

Because of its historical development the "New Dutch School" is also known as "The New Renaissance". The English double bassist Anthony Woodrow, a student of James Merrett, adopted the four-finger-system (see below for explanation by Friedrich Warnecke) and introduced it in the Netherlands, where he taught at the Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam. His student Hans Roelofsen developed the technique further and added the use of the little finger in conjunction with the thumb position, the "extended position" as well as an absolutely novel bow. The technique of the "New Dutch School" can be applied without a problem with the high-quality strings available today. In its time, Simandl's method was a great progress compared to the "fisticuffs" frequently used at the time. But the future lies in the four-finger-system because it offers the most possibilities for both musicality and technique of all applications.

Friedrich Warnecke (1856-1931)[4]:

"Just like one had to - after much resistance - acquiesce to utilizing the third finger in thumb position, one will have to surrender to employing it for the rest of the fingerboard, because not only the ever increasing level of technique but also the progressing knowledge of phrasing, its rules and exact rendition must eventually lead to it."

"The popular excuse that the third finger is too weak to produce a clean sound is invalid and not only every doctor but also practical experience, particularly as played in the Italian School, will convince every disbeliever."

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1 *Fiona Palmer: Domenico Dragonetti in England - the Career of a Double Bass Virtuoso, Oxford 1997*

2 *Friedrich Christoph Franke: Anleitung, den Contrabaß zu spielen, Chemnitz (around 1820)*

3 *Friedrich Christoph Franke: Ueber den Contrabaß. Article in "New Journal for Music", Leipzig 1851*

4 *in: Ad Infinitum - Der Kontrabaß. Seine Geschichte und seine Zukunft. Probleme und deren Lösung zur Hebung des Kontrabaßspiels, Hamburg 1909*

Suggestions

This compilation of exercises (volume 1) and practical examples (volume 2) is my response to the increasing demand for practice materials and playing instructions for the four-finger-technique. A comprehensive, multi-volume method book is in its planning stages. Until this method book is published I would like to provide some basic information about this new technique. Previous knowledge and experience in playing the double bass are helpful in understanding the exercises and examples. This is not a conventional double bass method and it does not claim to be neither exhaustive nor complete.

Please bear in mind the following points for self-study:

1. **The four-finger-technique has nothing to do with stretching!** You would risk serious damage to your left hand through overstretching. The most important basic rule is to place only the stopping finger (and its neighbor finger if necessary) on the strings in its ideal position. Static hand position, pre-placing the finger, leaving it in position and placing first and fourth fingers simultaneously (as used in conventional technique) should be avoided and used as an exception only.

2. The "Innervation-Technique" needed in exercise #1 is a motion sequence which utilizes neuro-physiological insight (interaction between antagonists forearm flexor and extensor) for playing the double bass. It is designed to reduce the necessary effort and to improve the quality of sound and intonation equally. Place the indicated finger on the string (the contact point should not be under but slightly behind the fingertip). Where indicated with "i" pull the following finger up quickly using maximum strength (away from the string) without lifting the stopping finger off the string. The synchronization with the bow arm creates the desired bow accent. Keep the active finger energized until it has to reach for the next stop. Avoid slapping your finger. Allow your finger to sink onto the string in a slow and controlled manner while maintaining the energy. This exercise requires great concentration but its effect will surprise you once you have mastered it.

3. Taking breaks at regular intervals is far more effective than practising continuously and overtaxing yourself. Be patient, the process of reorientation will take its time. It may take a year or more until you feel comfortable with the four-finger-technique.

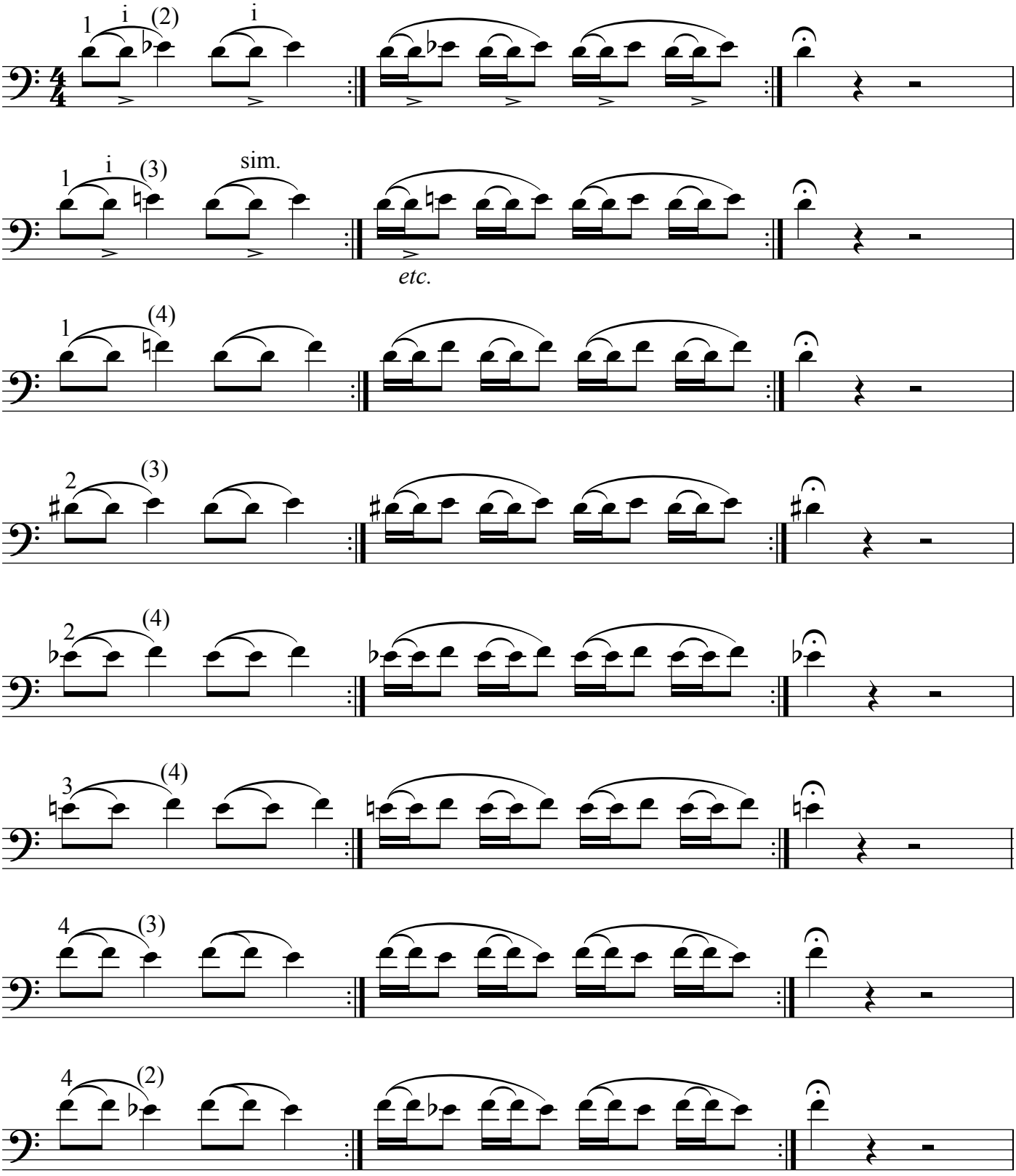
Please visit my website (www.silviodallatorre.com) if you would like to learn more about the "New Dutch School". You will find background information, answers to frequently asked questions, impressions of double bass studies in Rostock as well as numerous suggestions. Additional exercises (scale and chord studies) and some of my adaptations for double bass and piano as well as for violoncello and double bass can be found at "Edition Hoffmann" (www.editionhoffmann.de).

Rostock, October 2004

1

Elementary exercise

Exercise to "liberate" the active finger while simultaneously "innervating" (=i)
the following stopping finger. Mastering this technique is a prerequisite to learning the
four-finger-technique. Avoid the widespread slapping of the fingers on the string.
It invalidates the desired effect of physical coordination ("self regulation") and is thus counterproductive.



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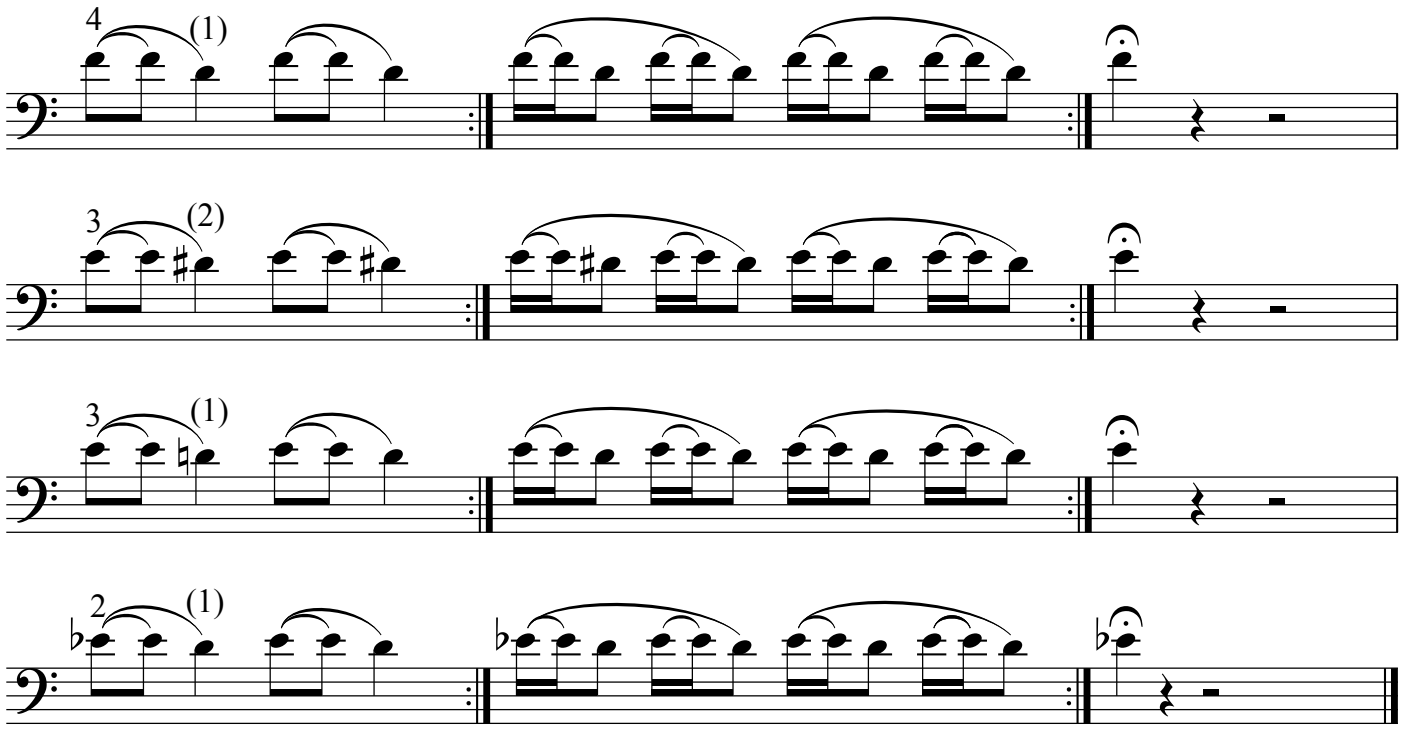
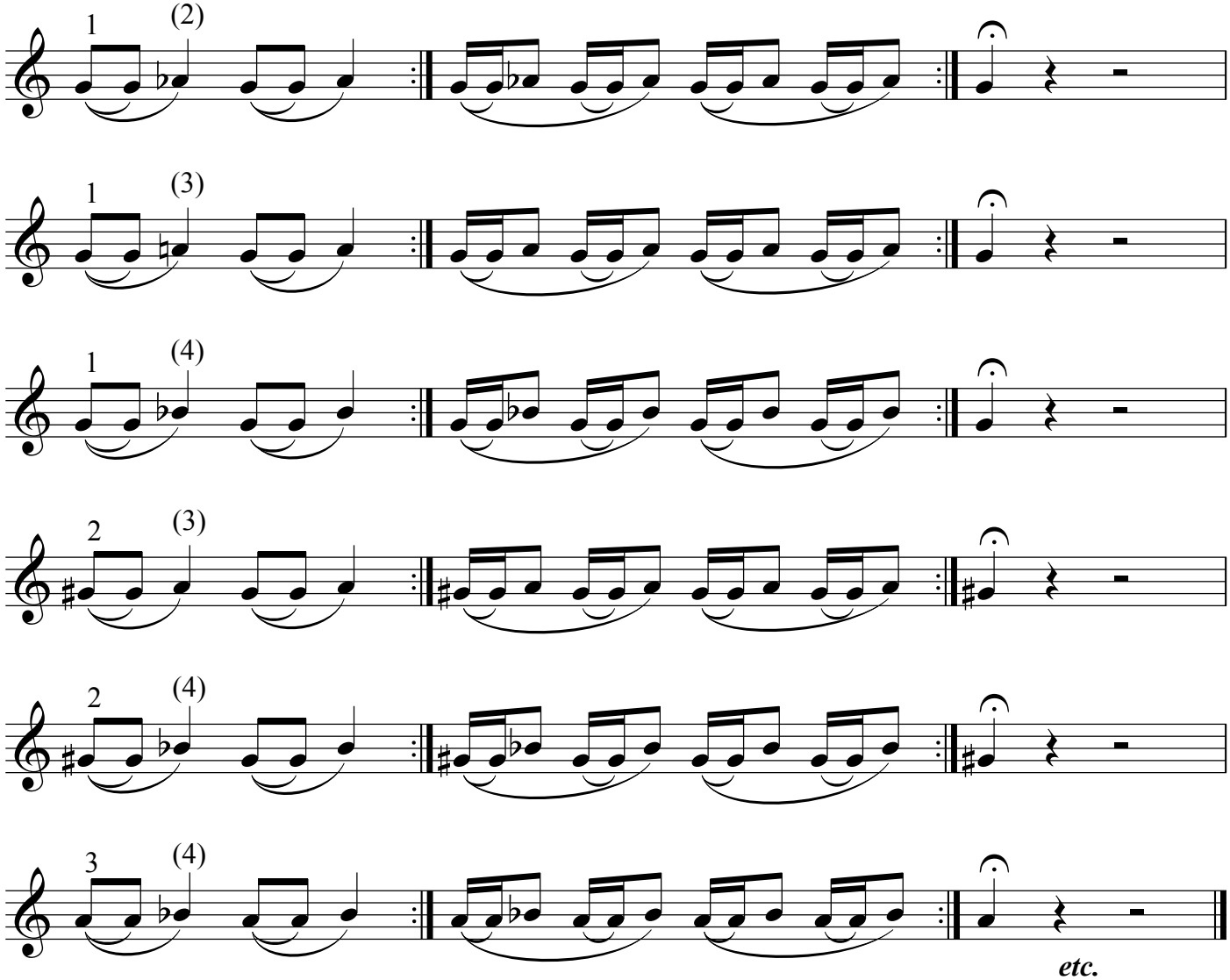
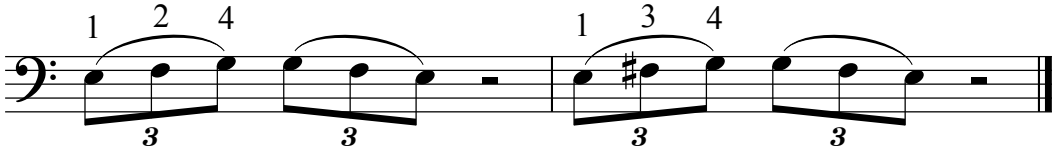


Use of all fingers also in thumb position: this is facilitated by the technique described.

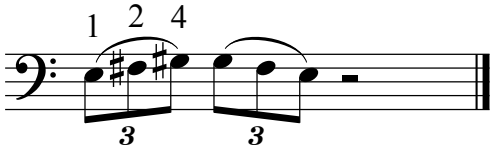


etc.

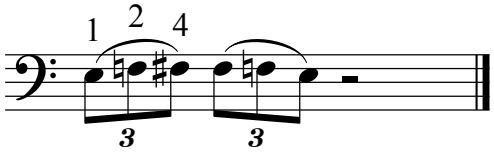
Basic position:



Extended position:



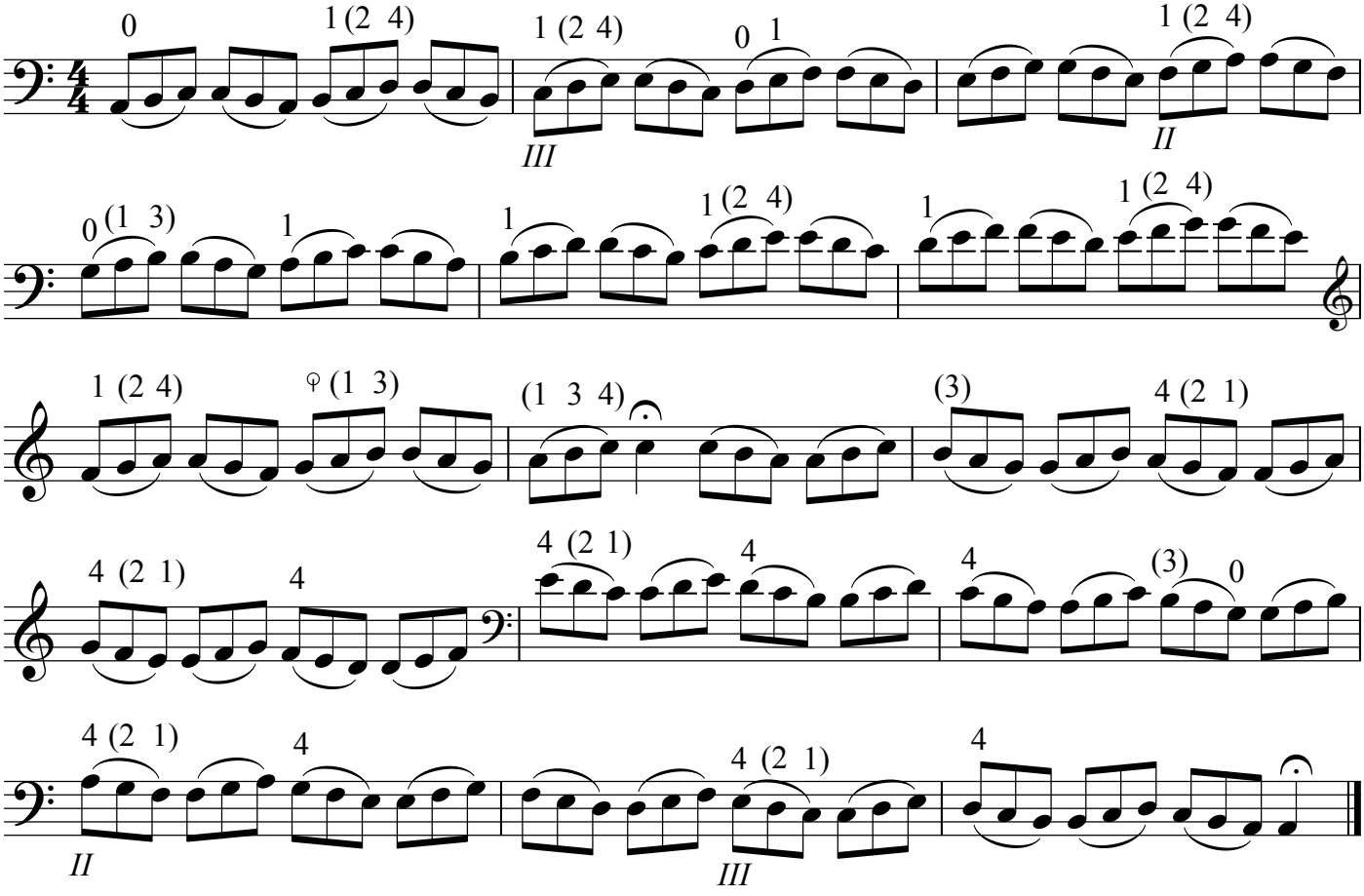
Close position:



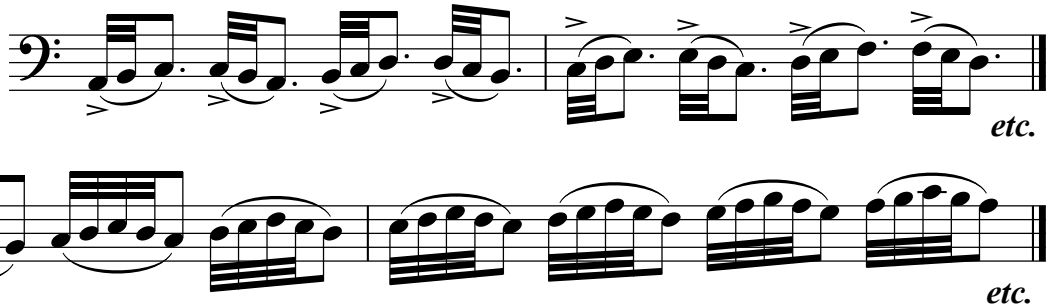
2

Triplet exercise

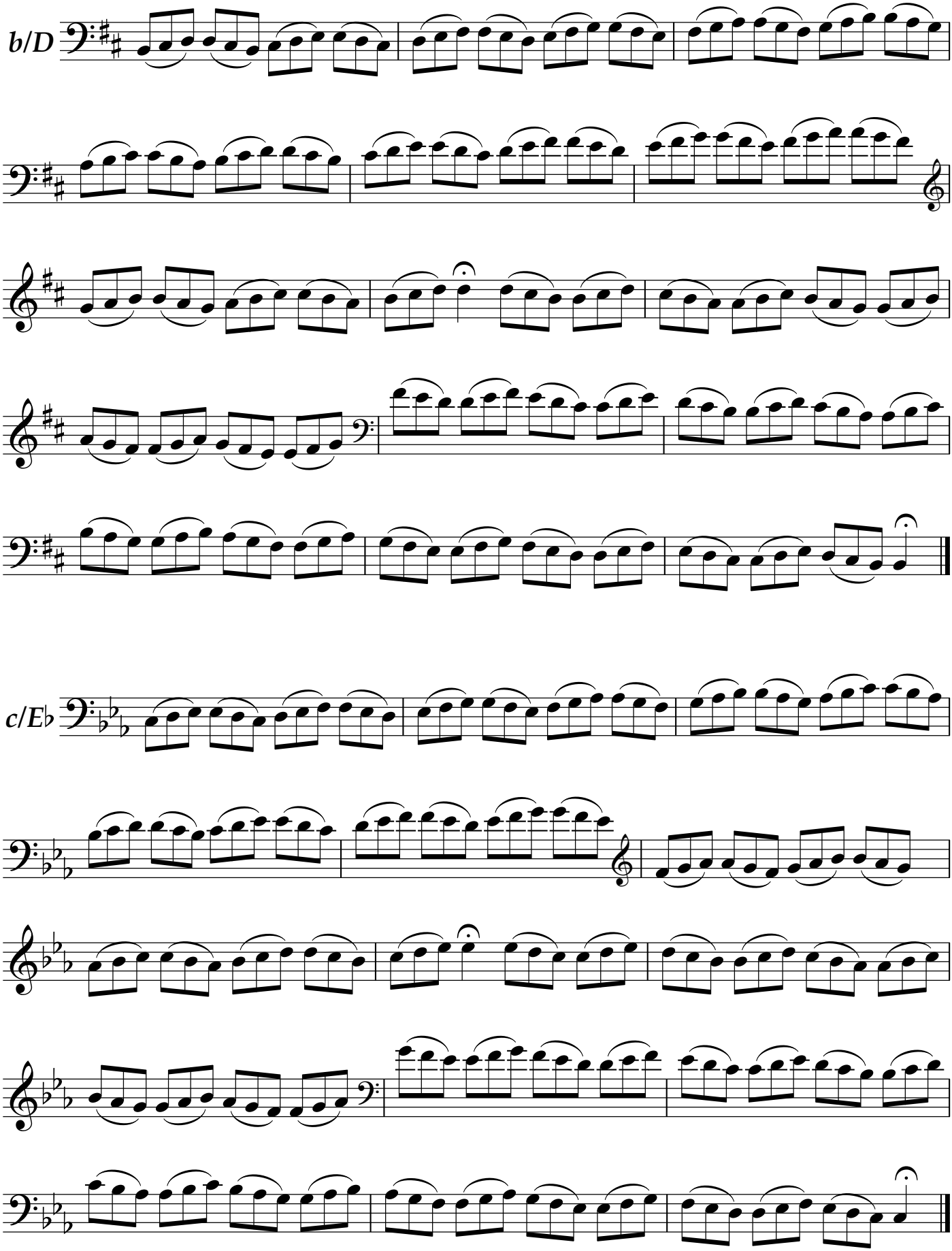
Let the fingers "run". Similar to playing the piano the fingers should enjoy the freedom to approach every note. Static hand and finger posture impedes the flexibility necessary to take the respective ideal position.

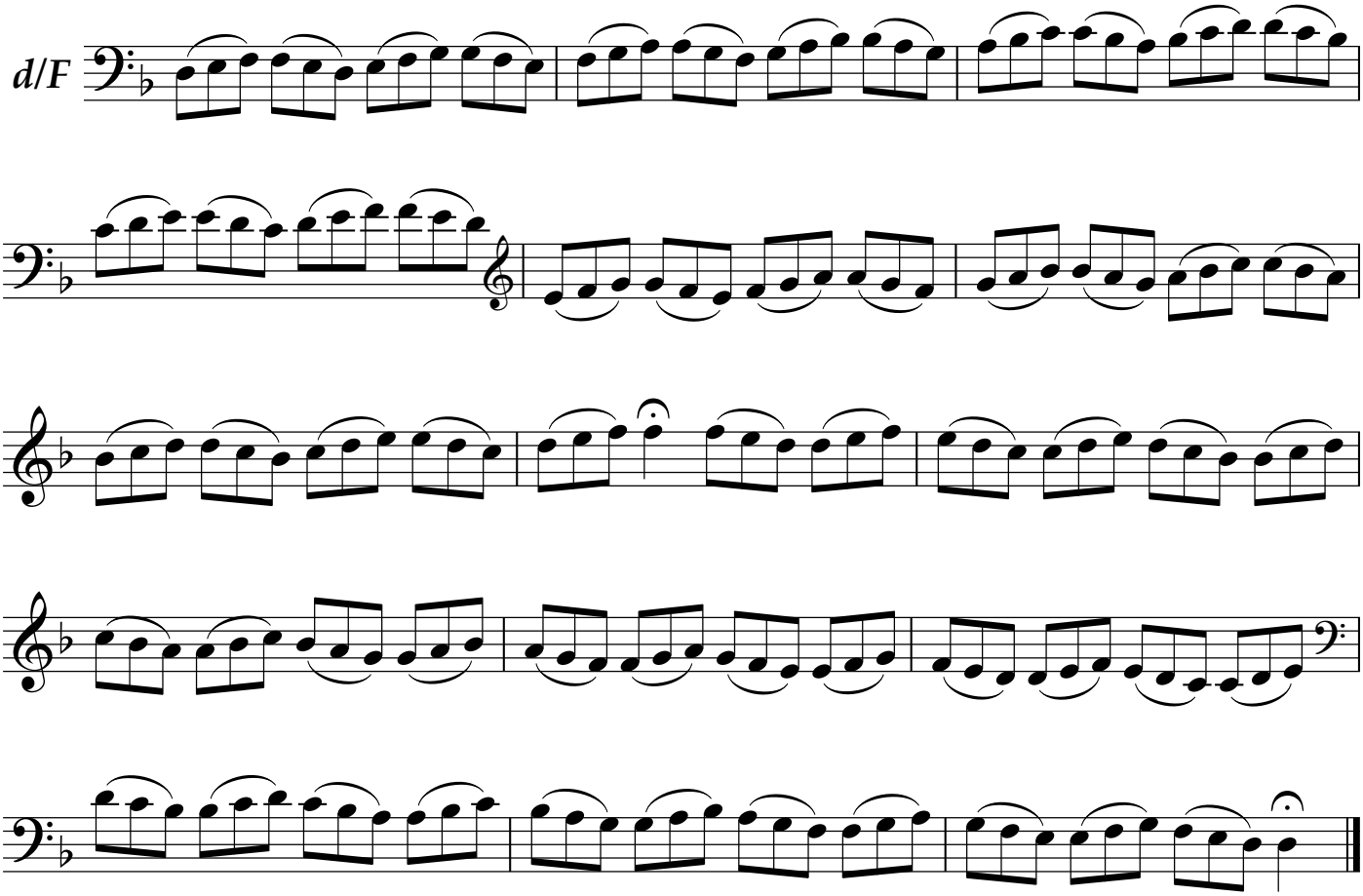


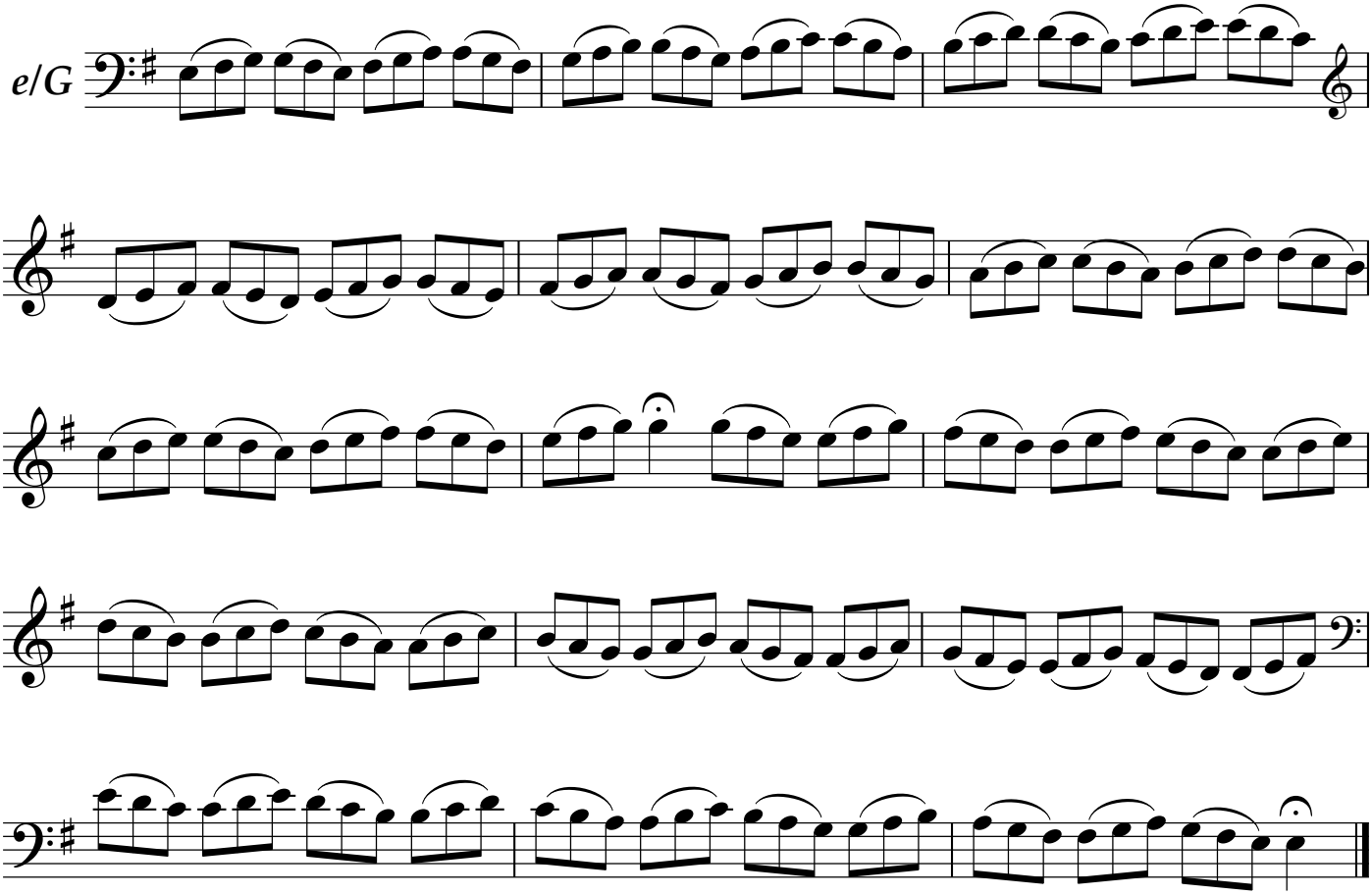
Rhythmic variations:

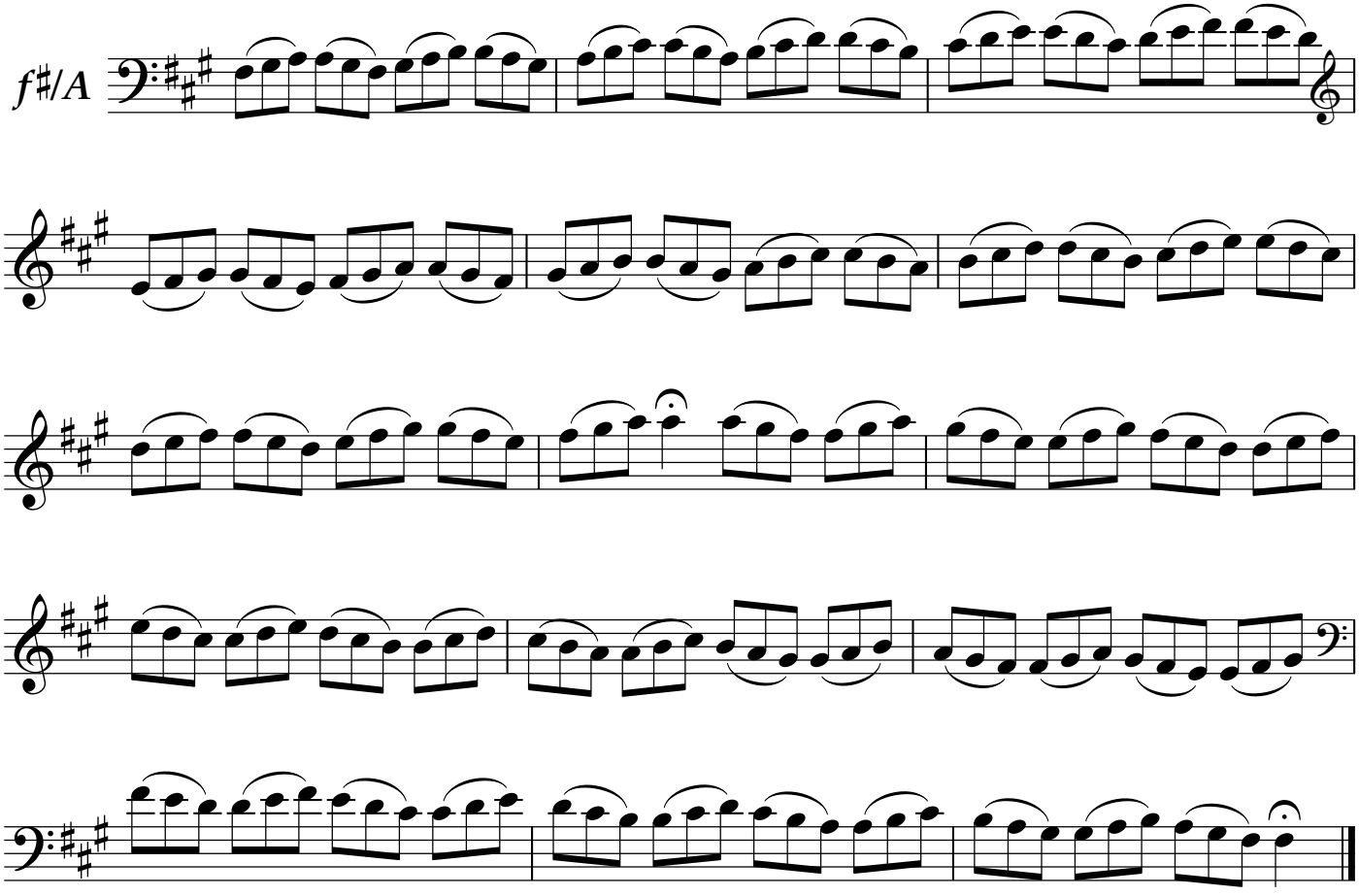


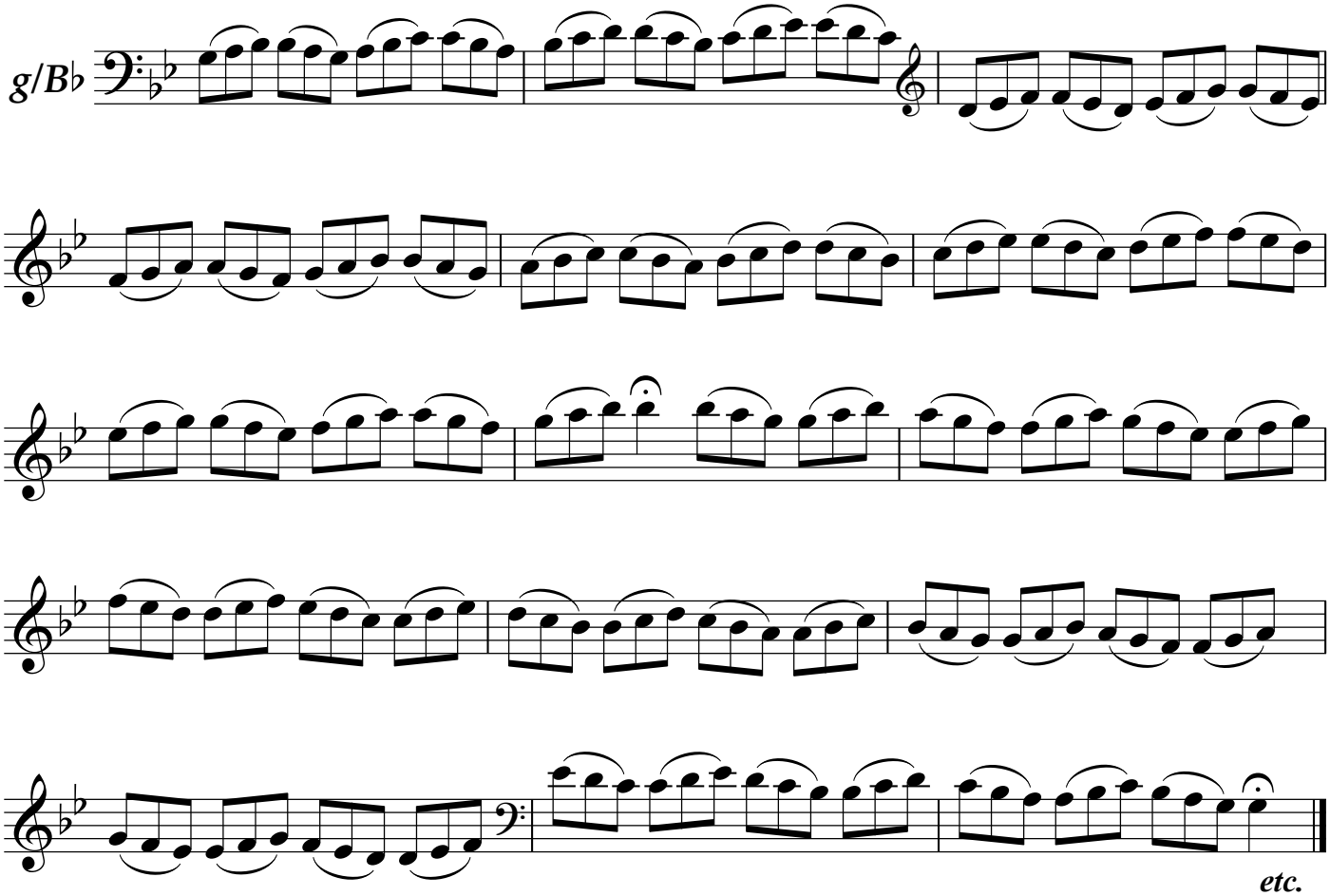
Examples in other key signatures. The fingering pattern always stays the same: triplets each in one position (minor third: basic position, major third: extended position) and inclusion of the open strings;




d/F


e/G



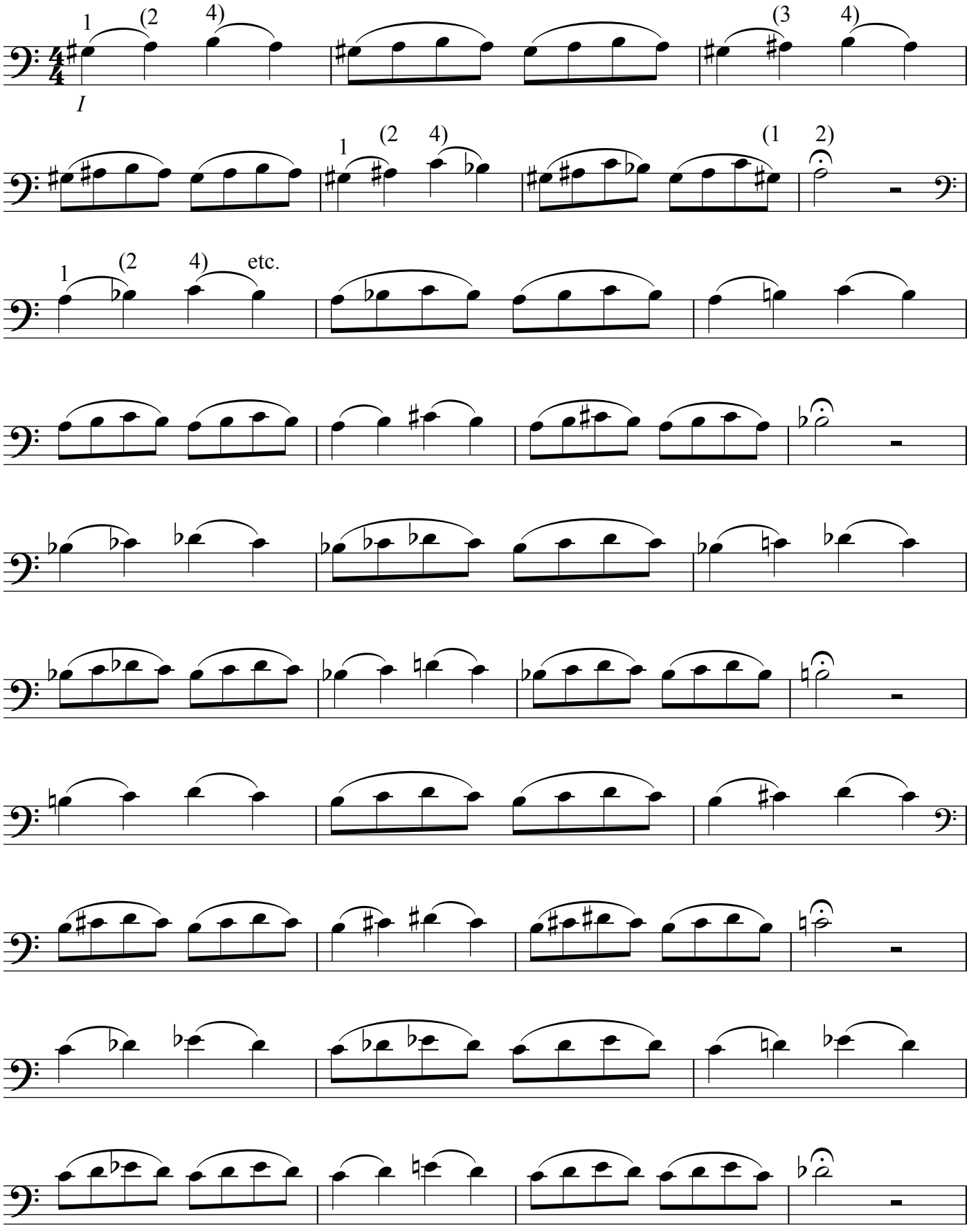


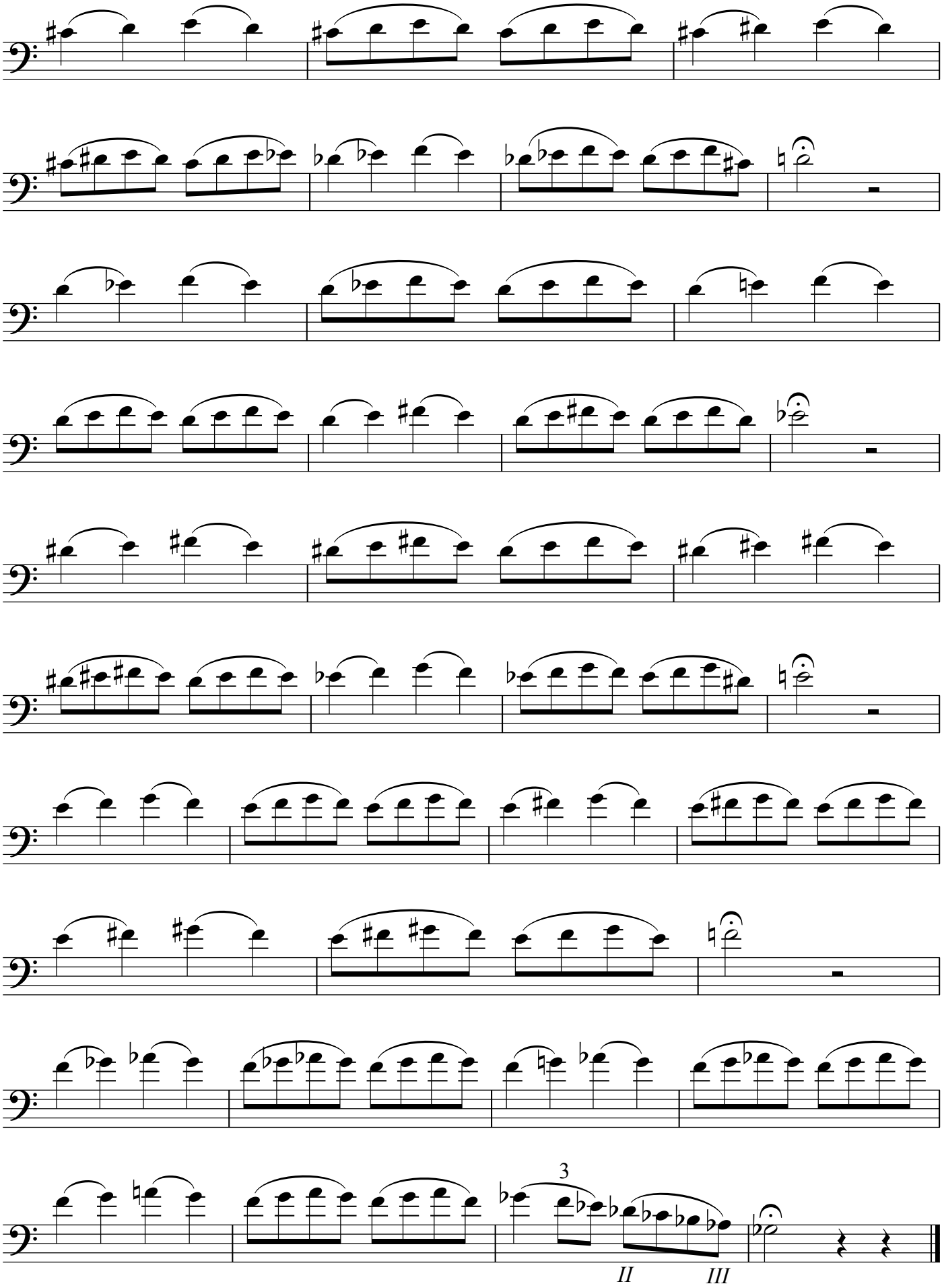
etc.

3

Position exercise

You should practice this exercise until you are able to play halftones,
whole tones and thirds with absolute precision. The fingers have to get accustomed to "walking".
This will take time - so be patient!

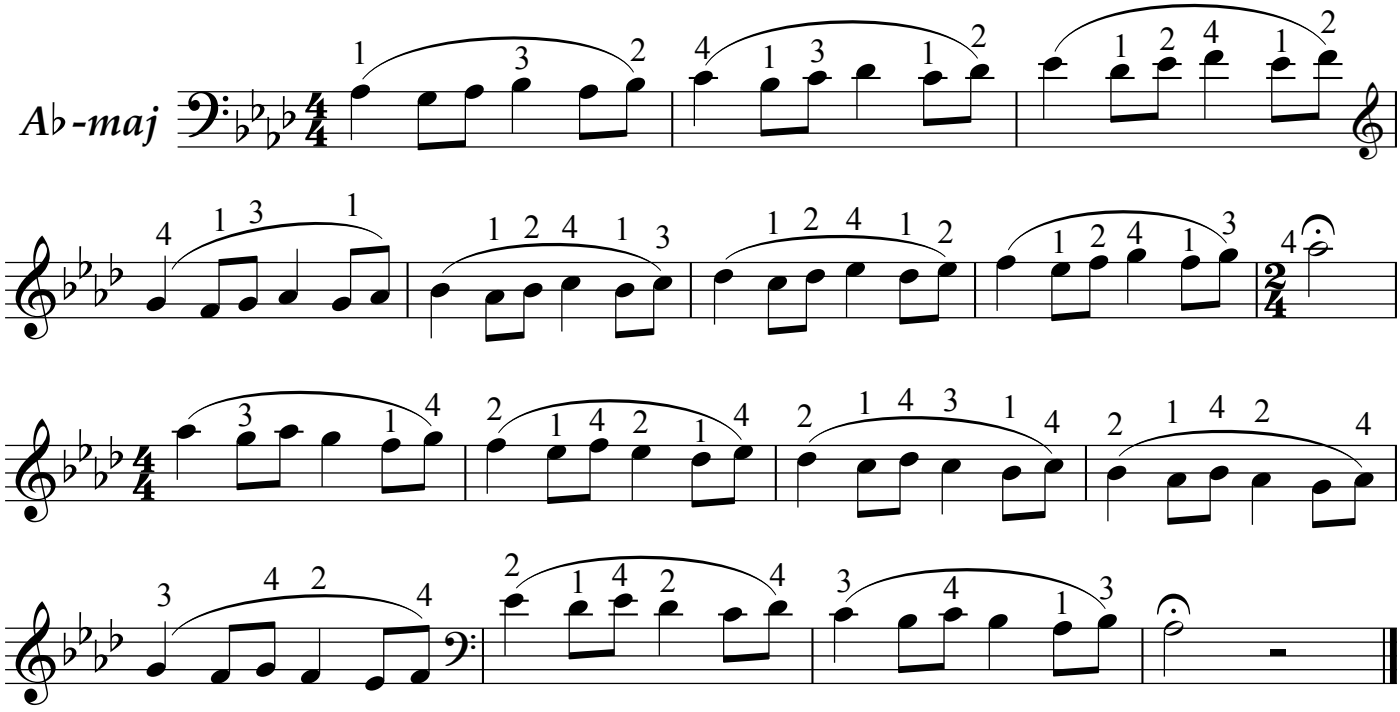



3
II
III

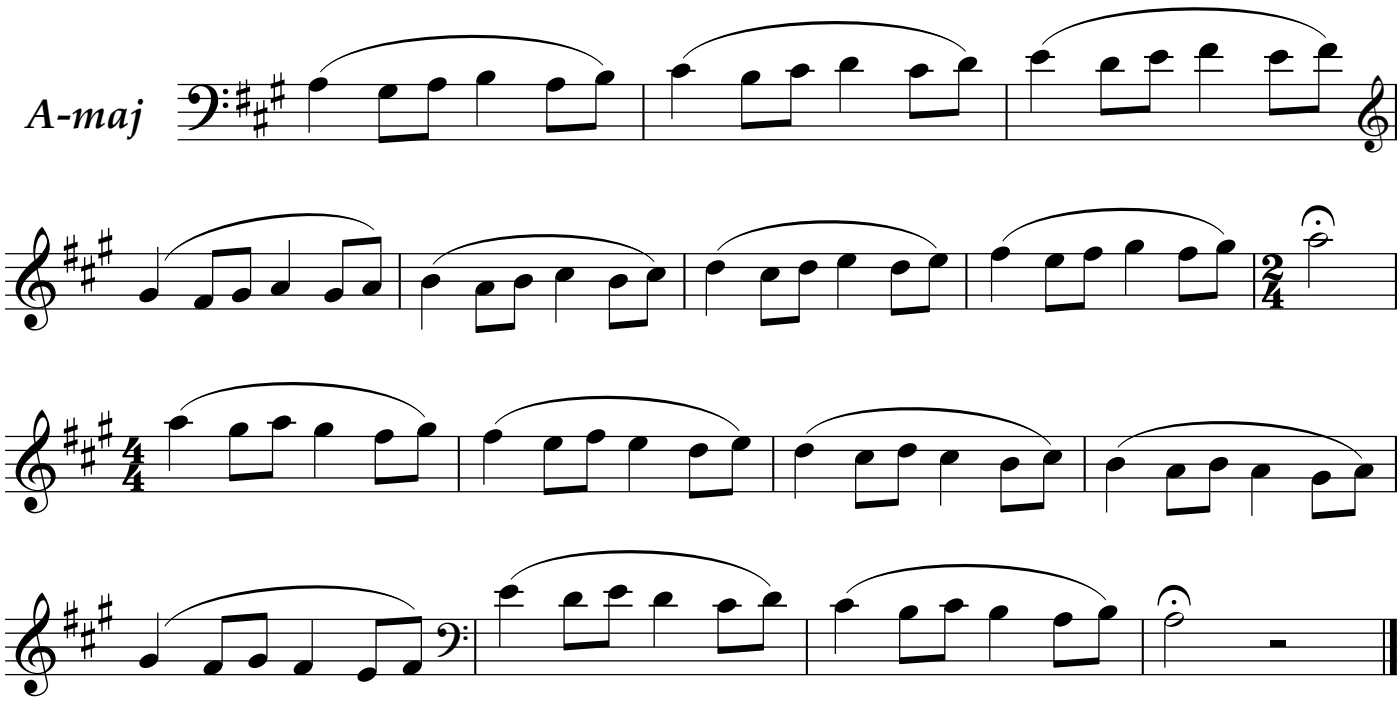
4

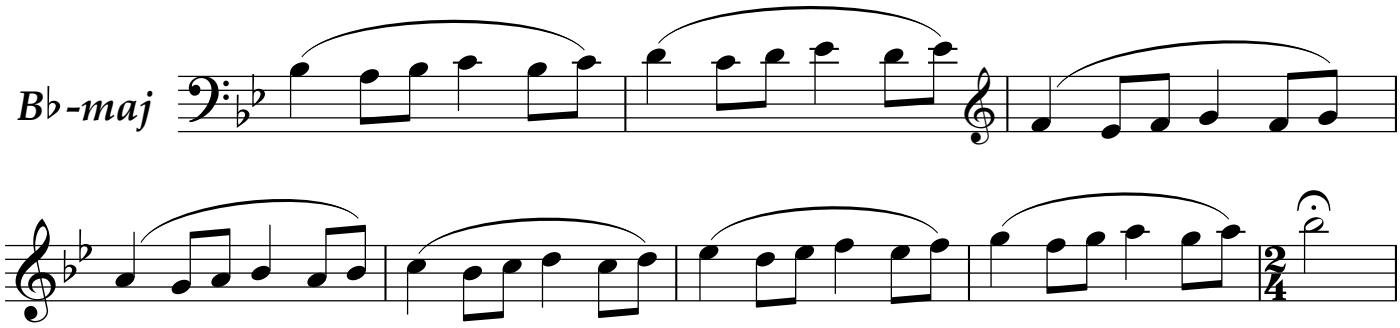
Shiftless scales

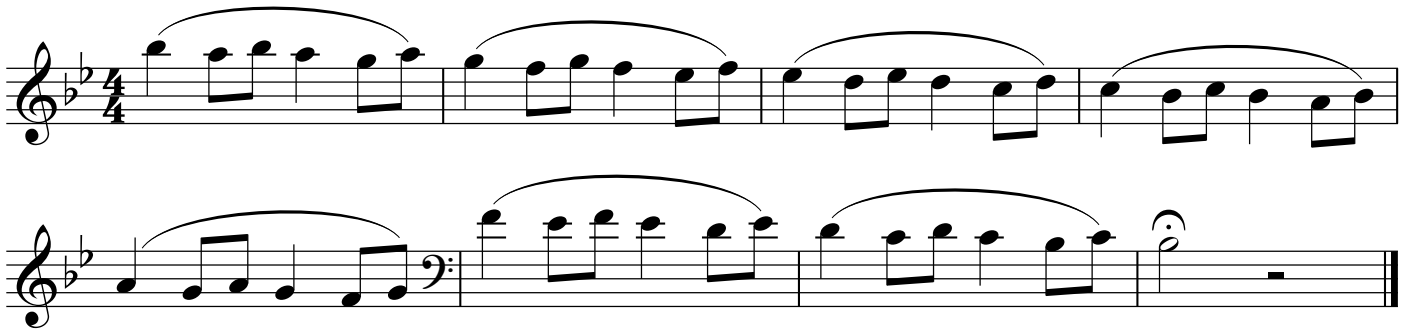
a: on one string



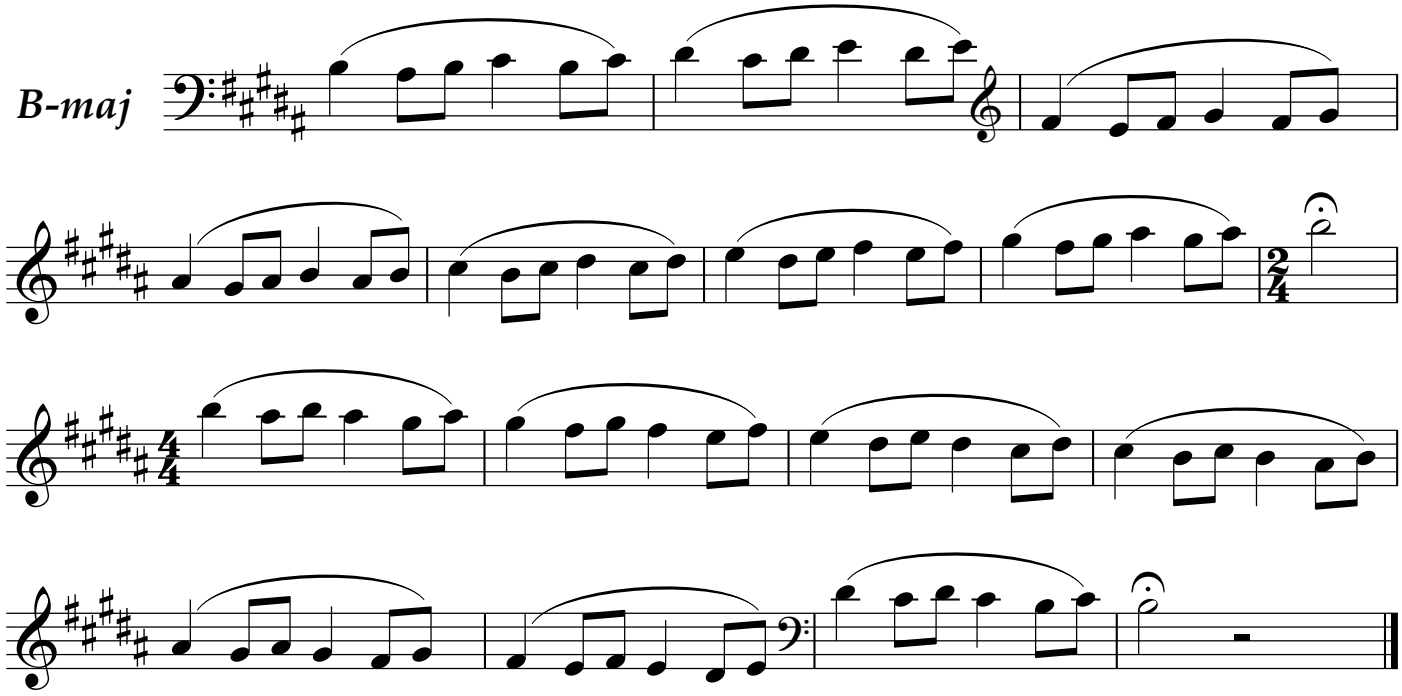
Fingerings are according to above-mentioned pattern!



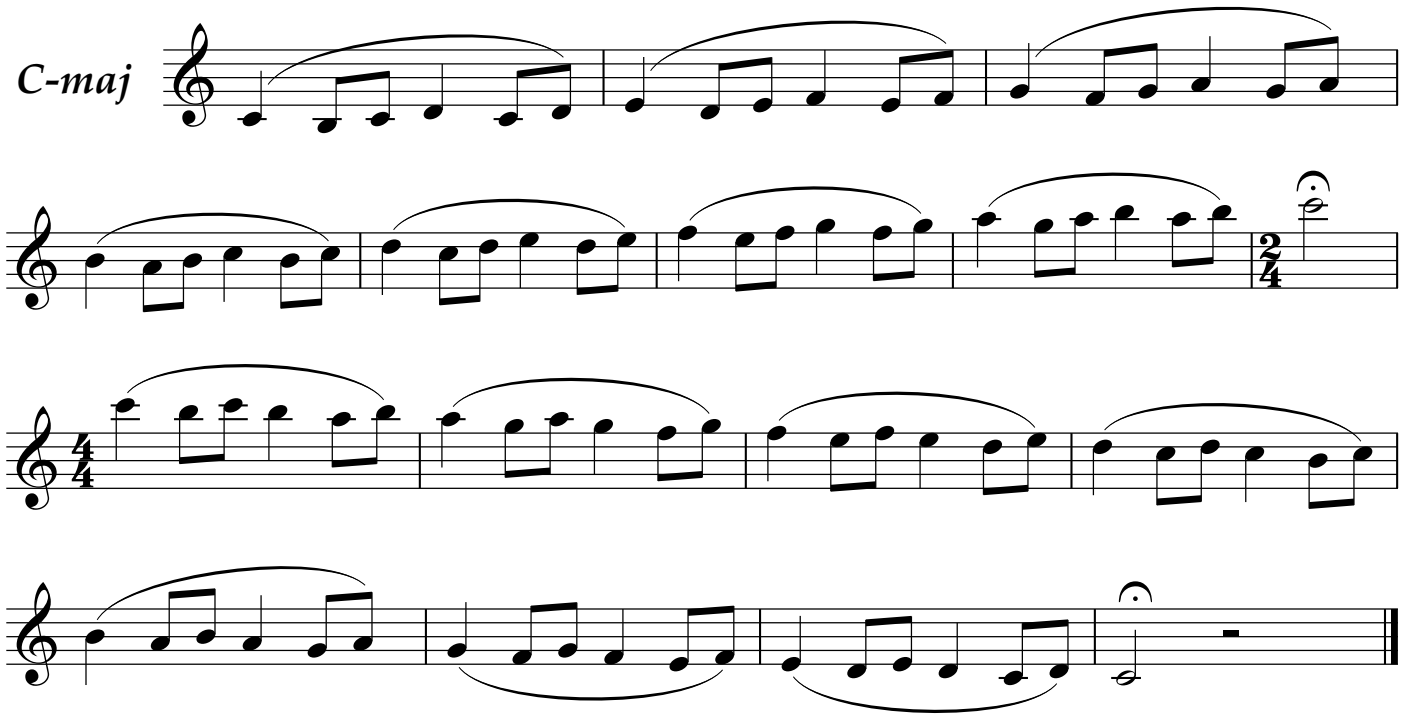




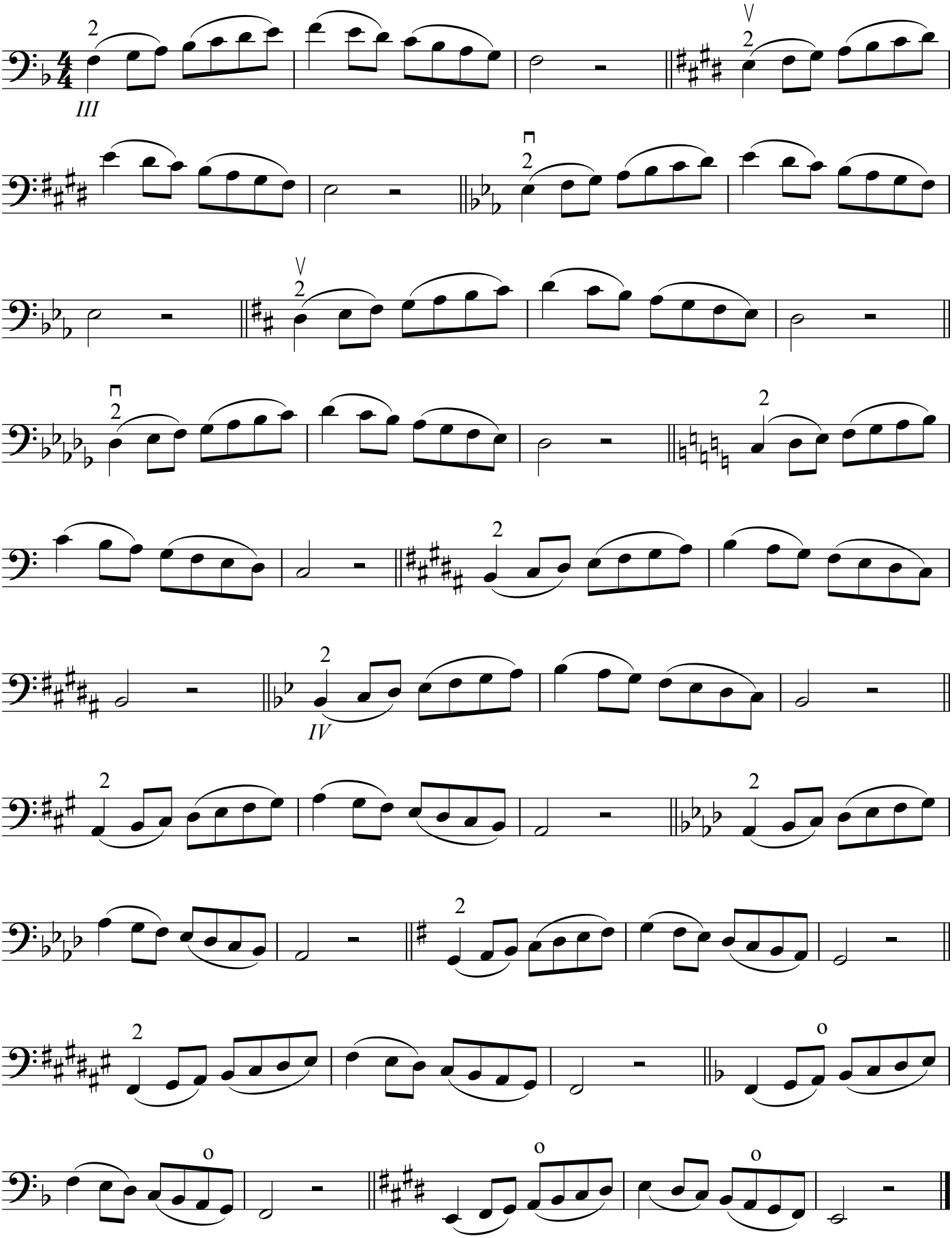
B-maj



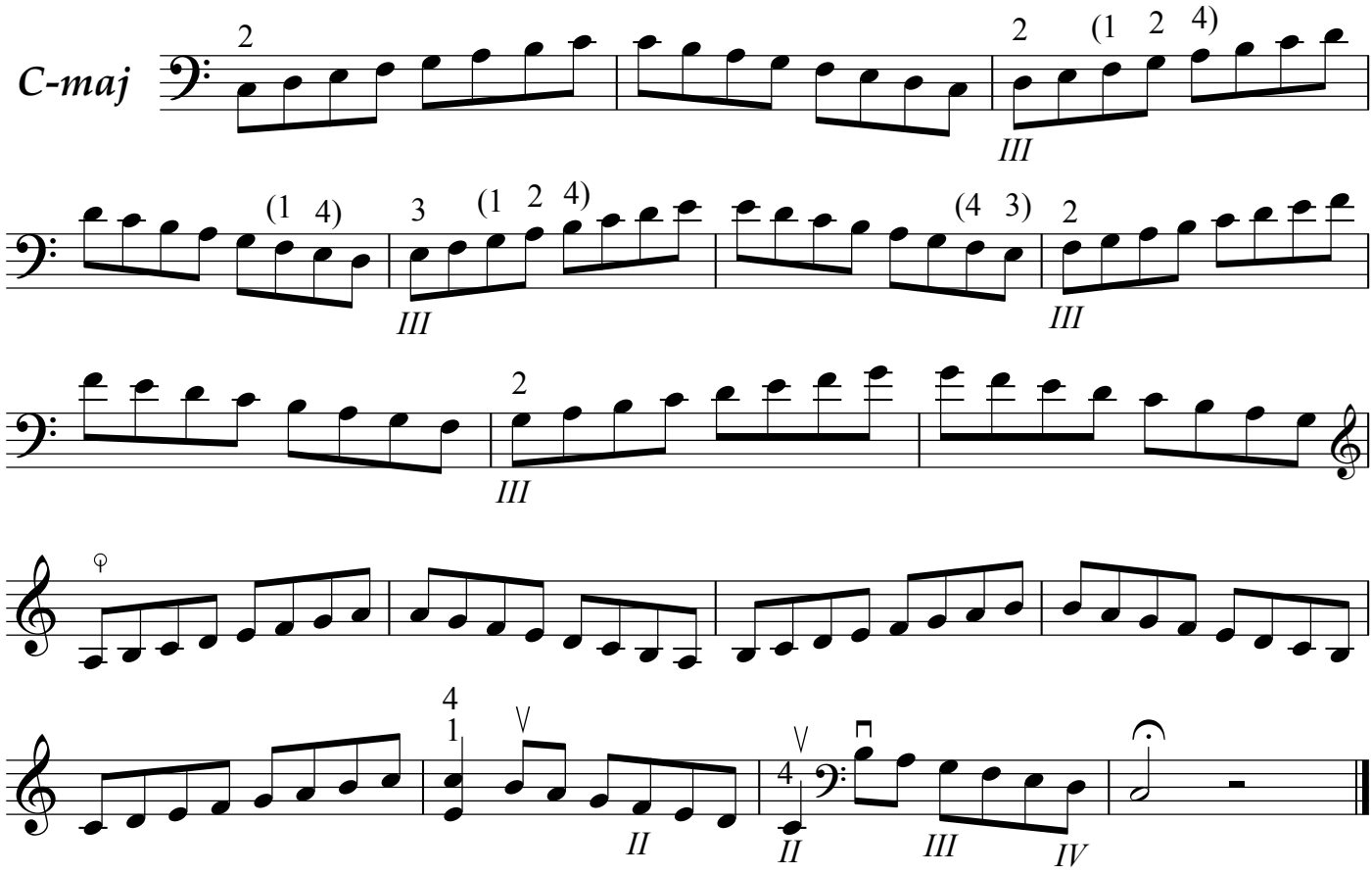
C-maj

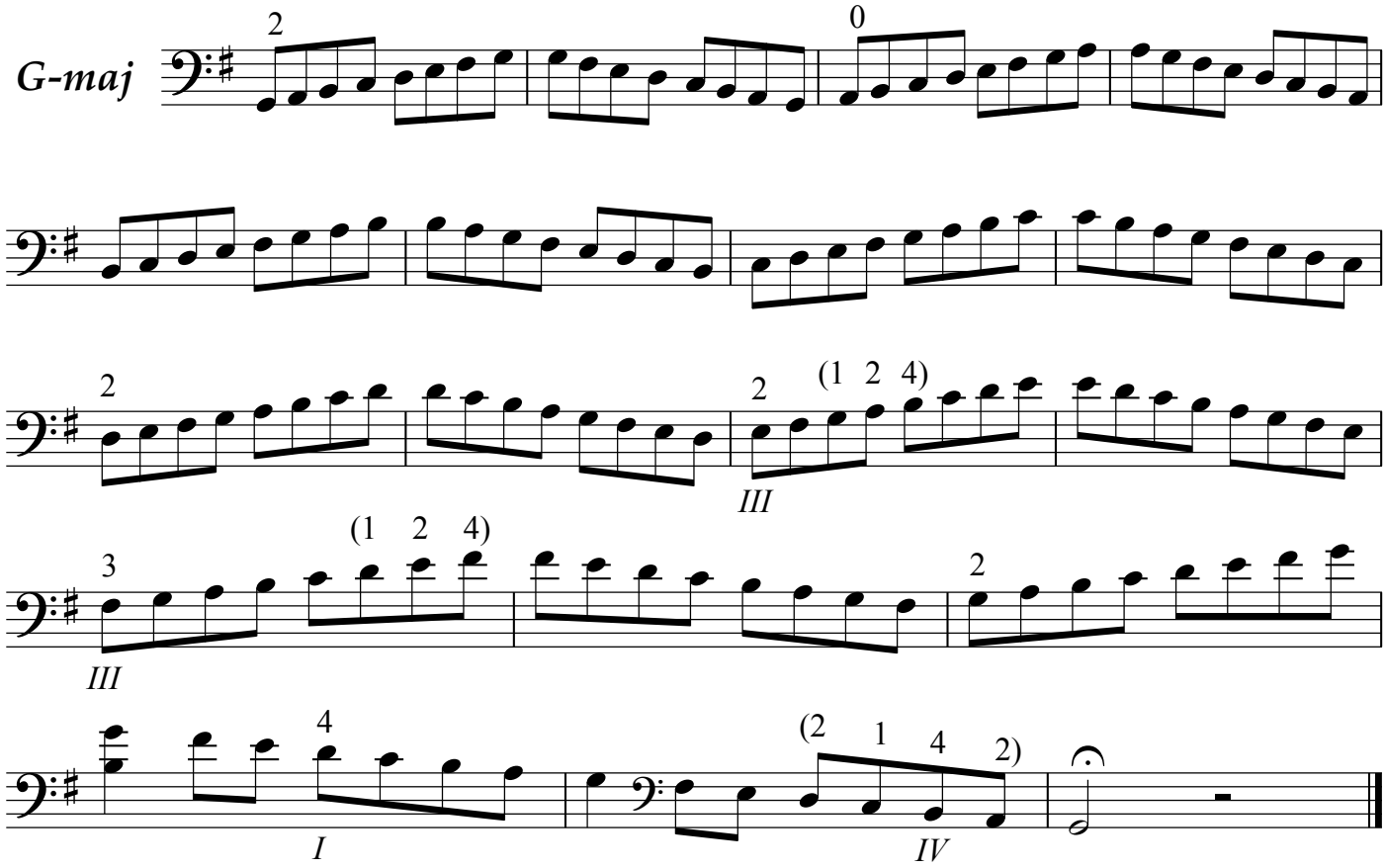


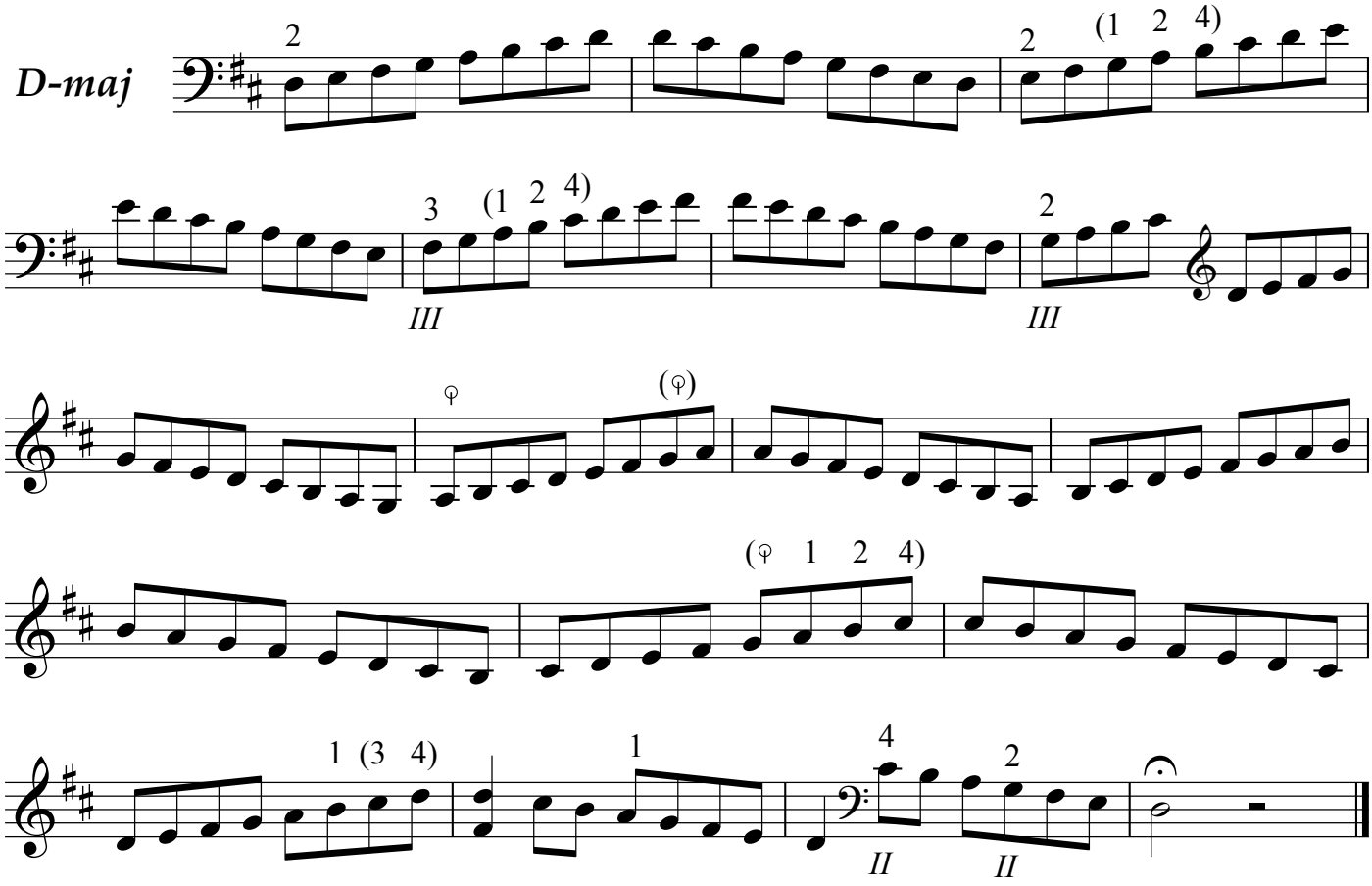
b: over the strings in basic position



c: over the strings in basic and extended positions






D-maj
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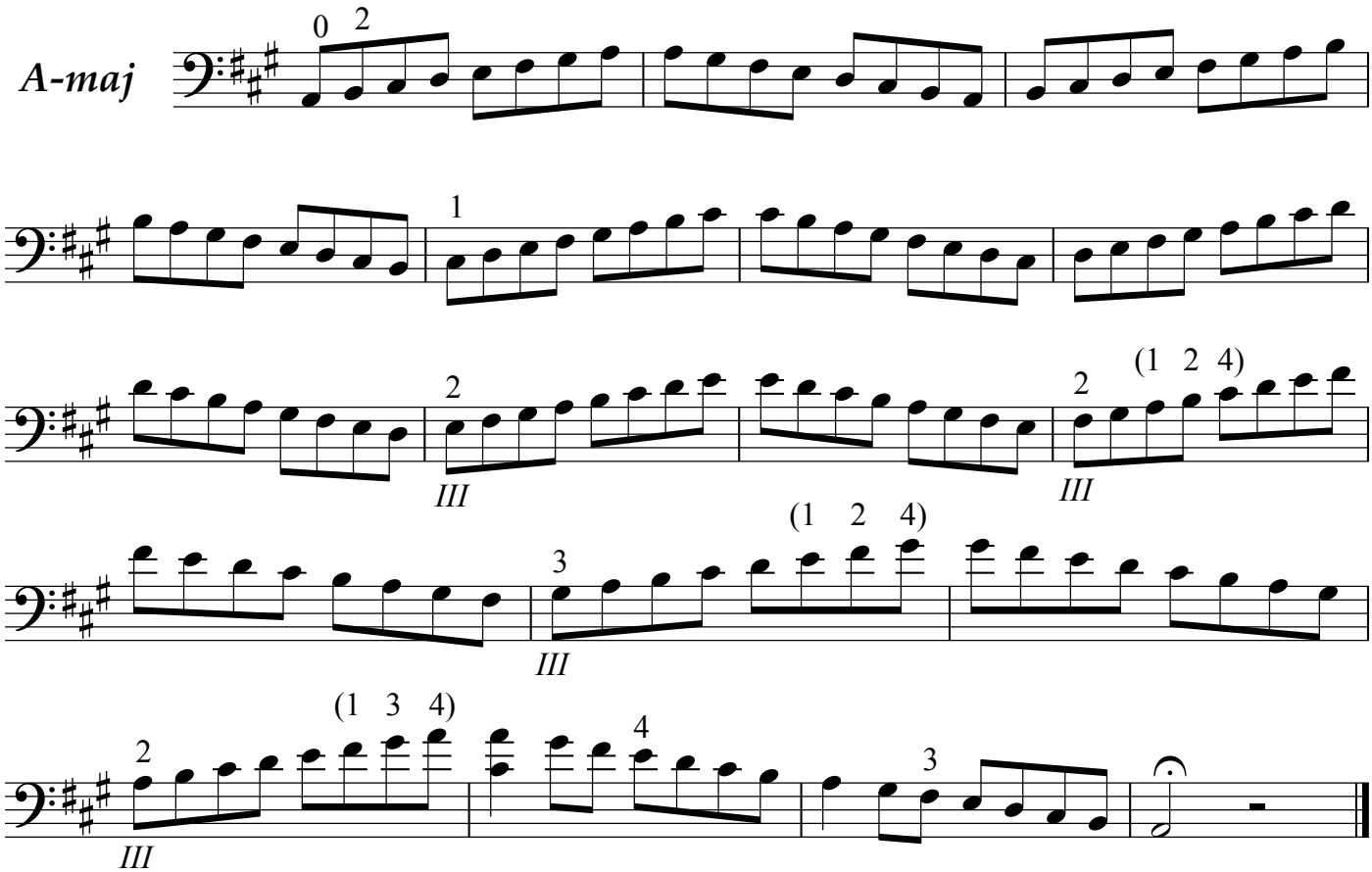
II


A-maj
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(1 2 4)
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III
(1 3 4)
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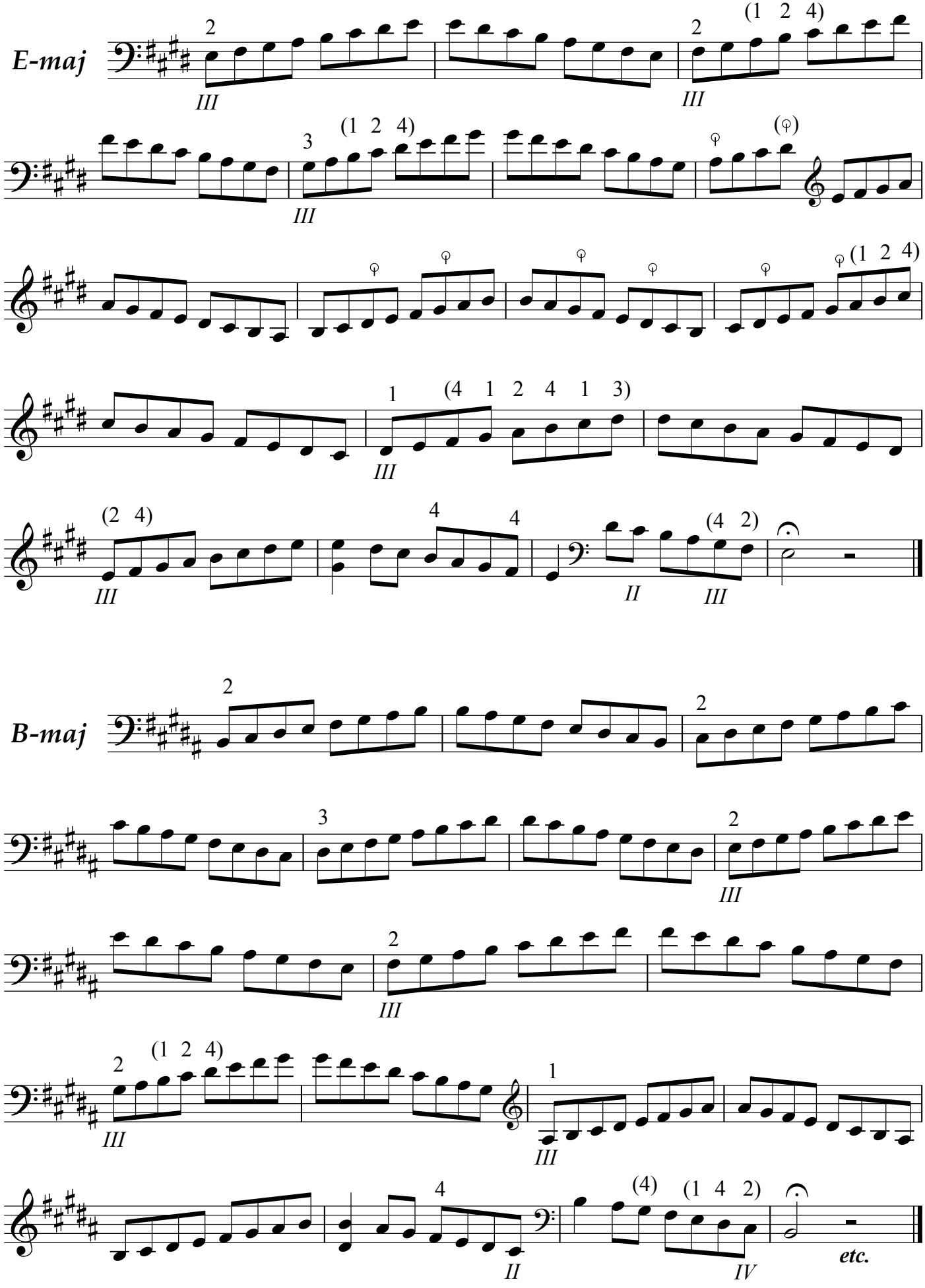
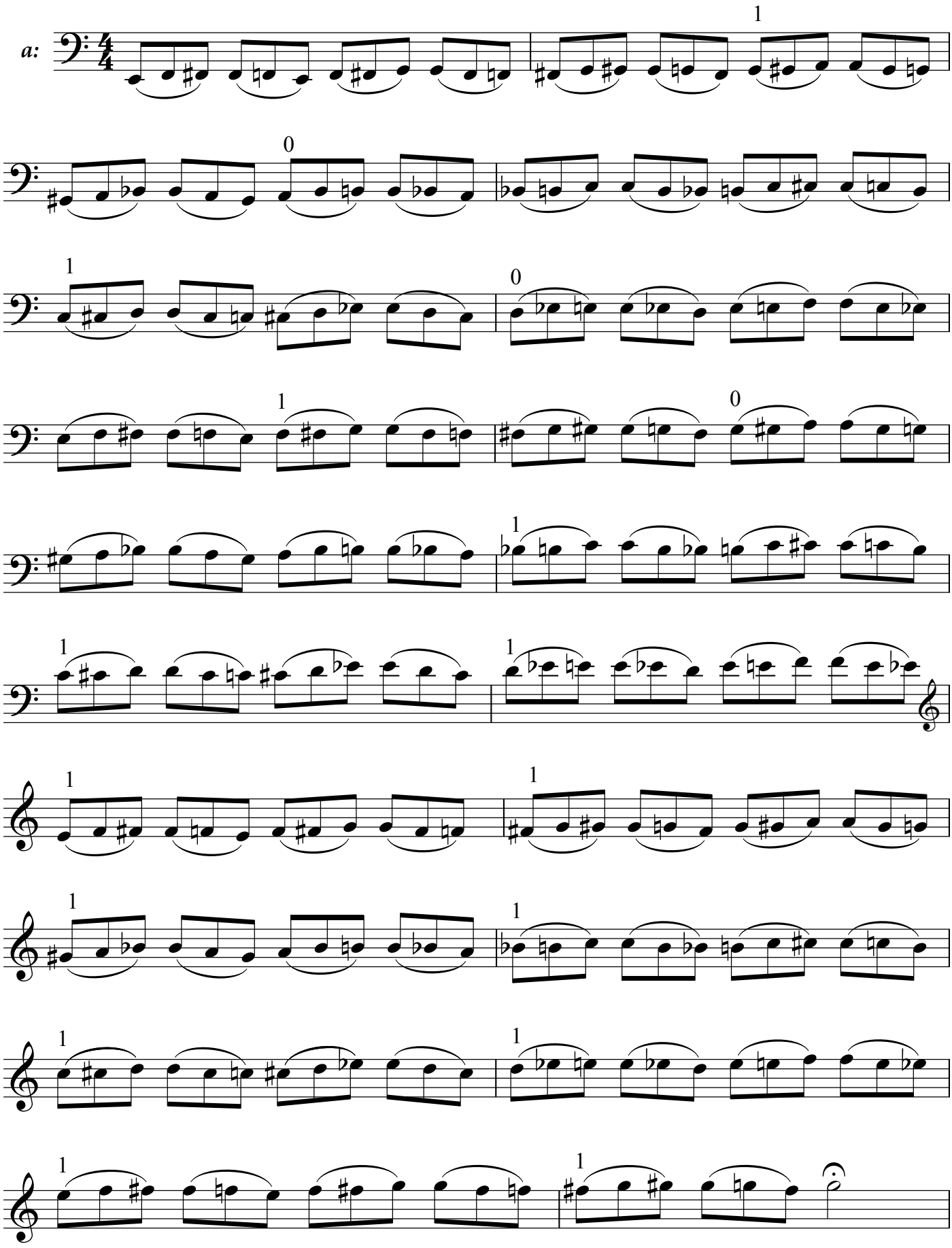
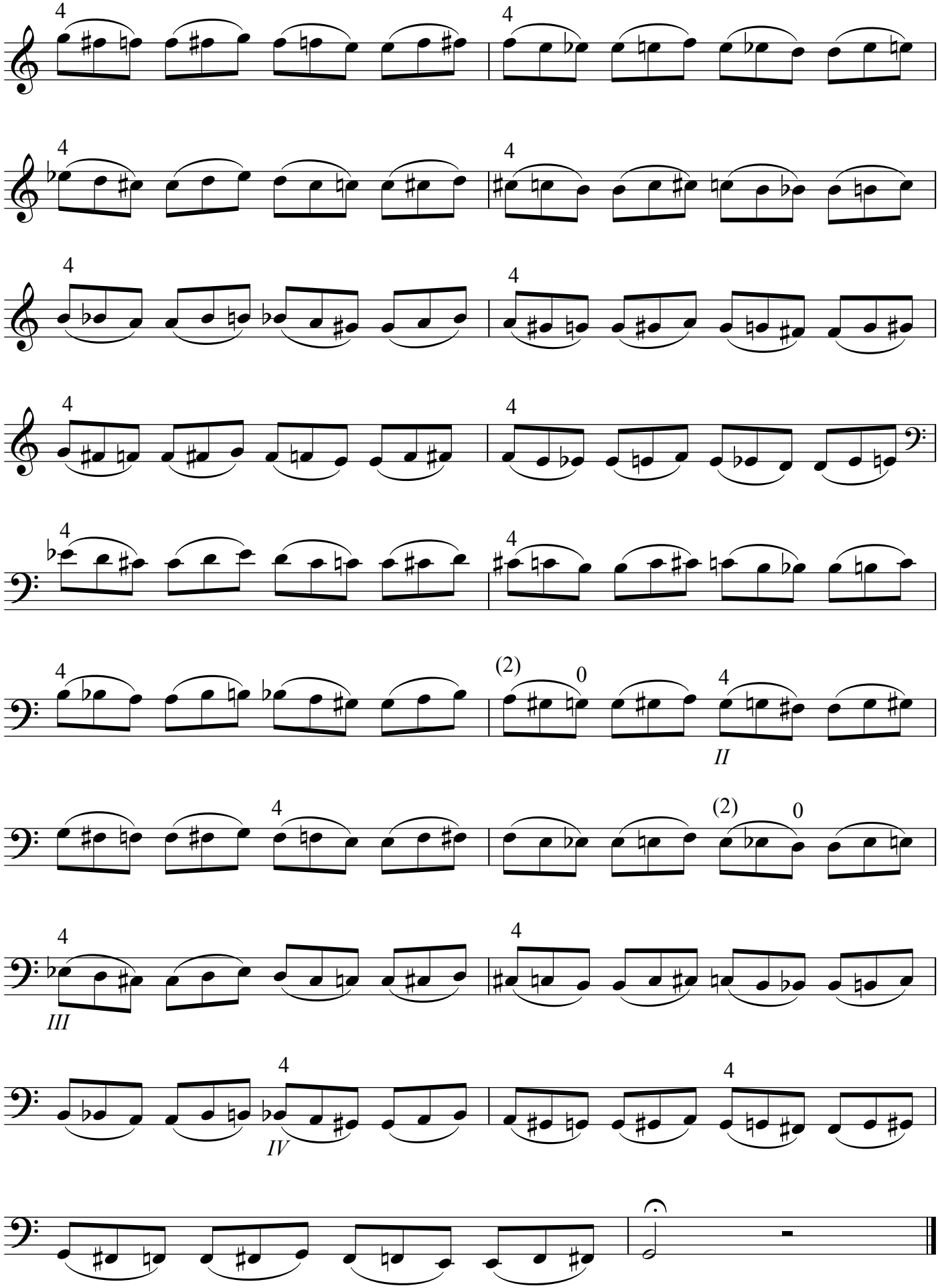
III
4
3


E-maj
B-maj
etc.

5

Chromatic exercises

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IV
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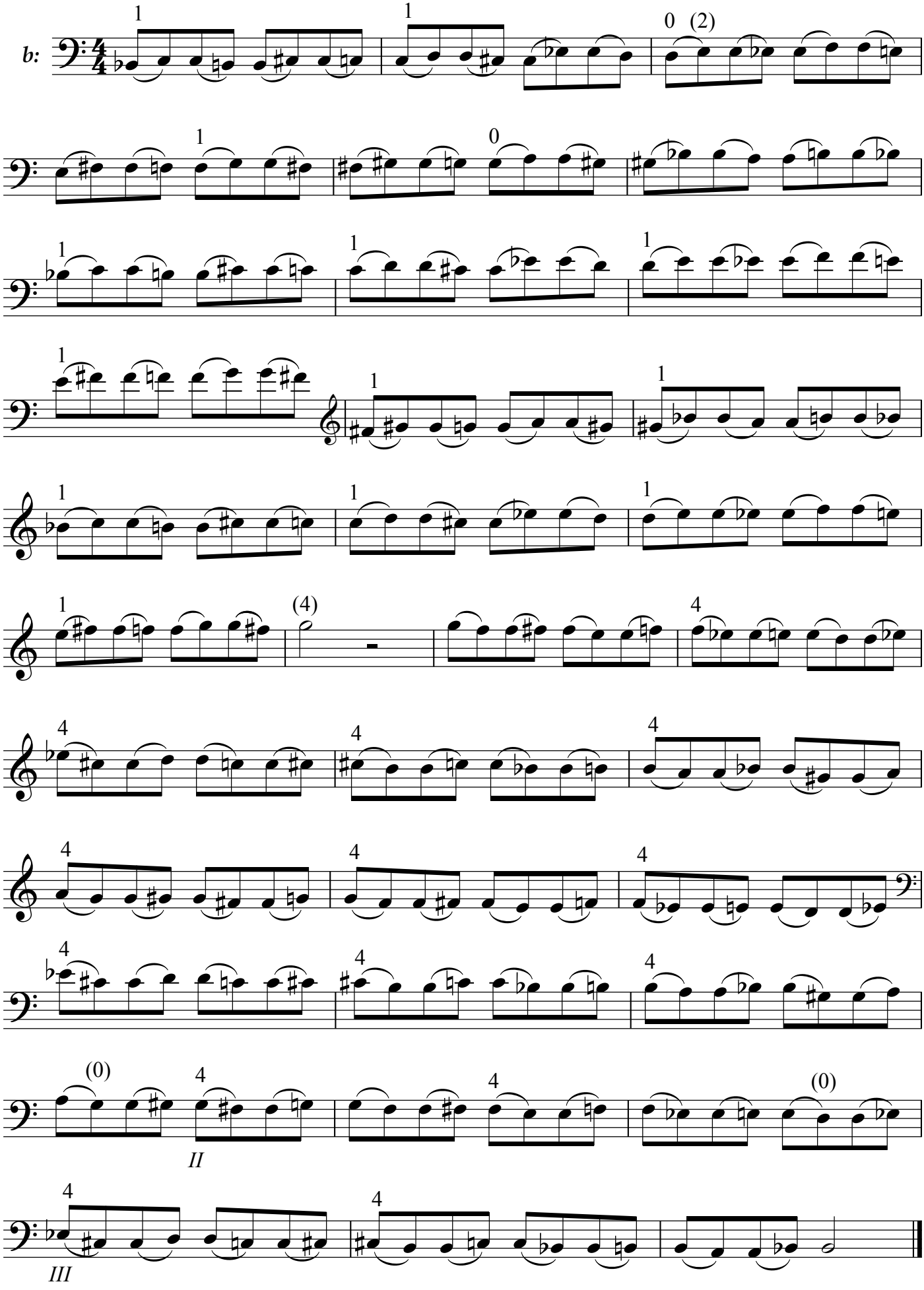
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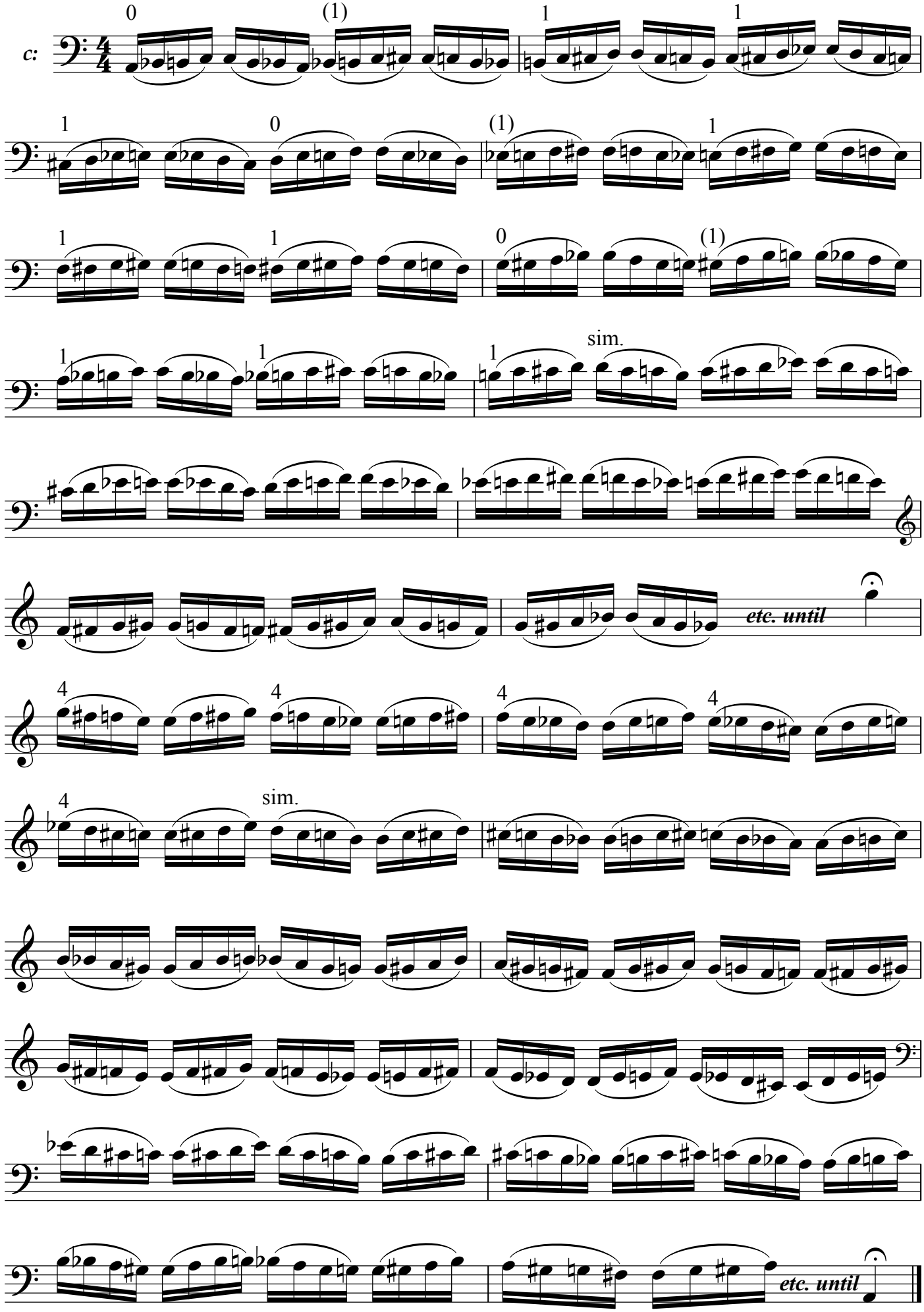
c:
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(1)
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etc. until
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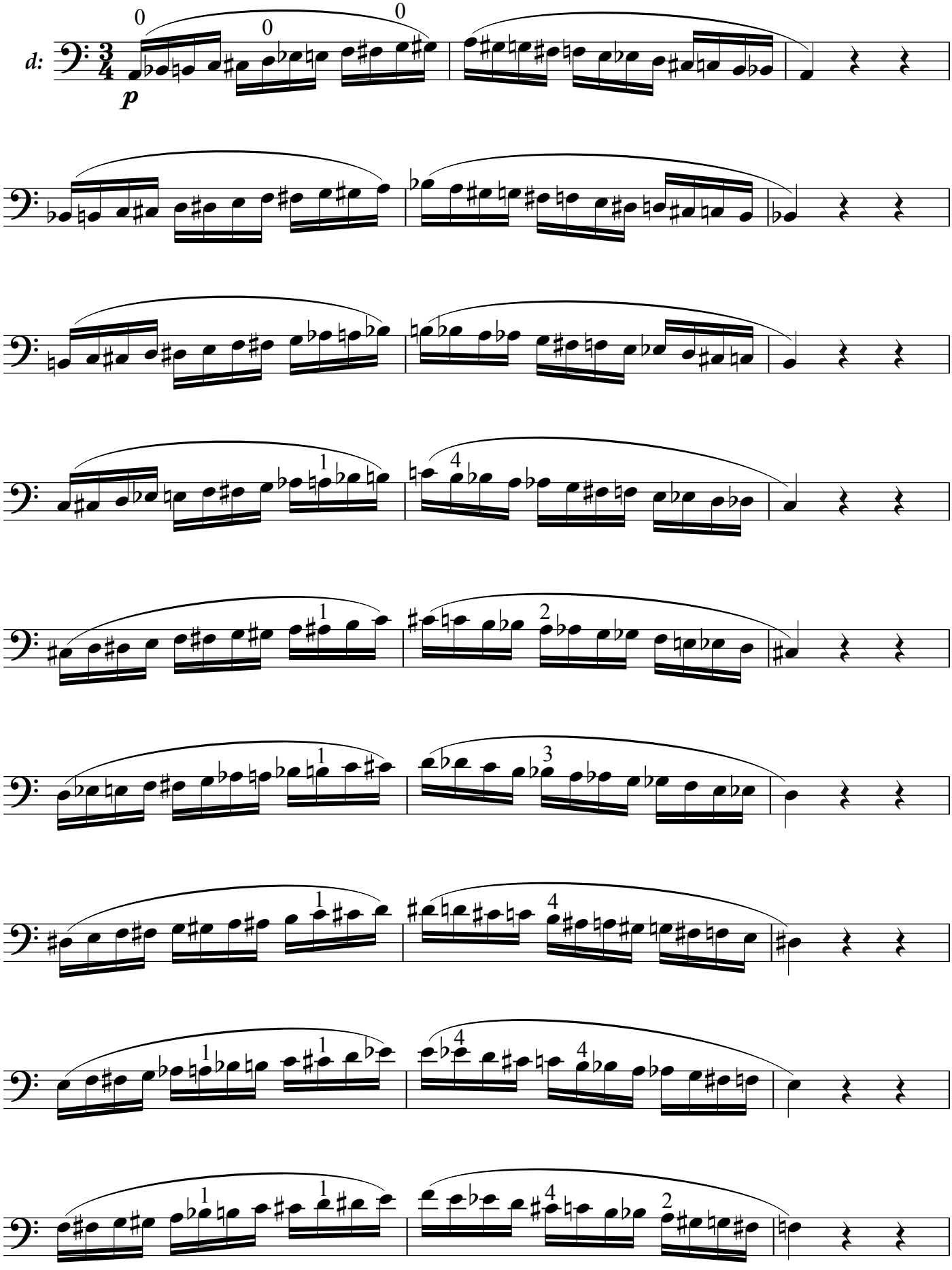
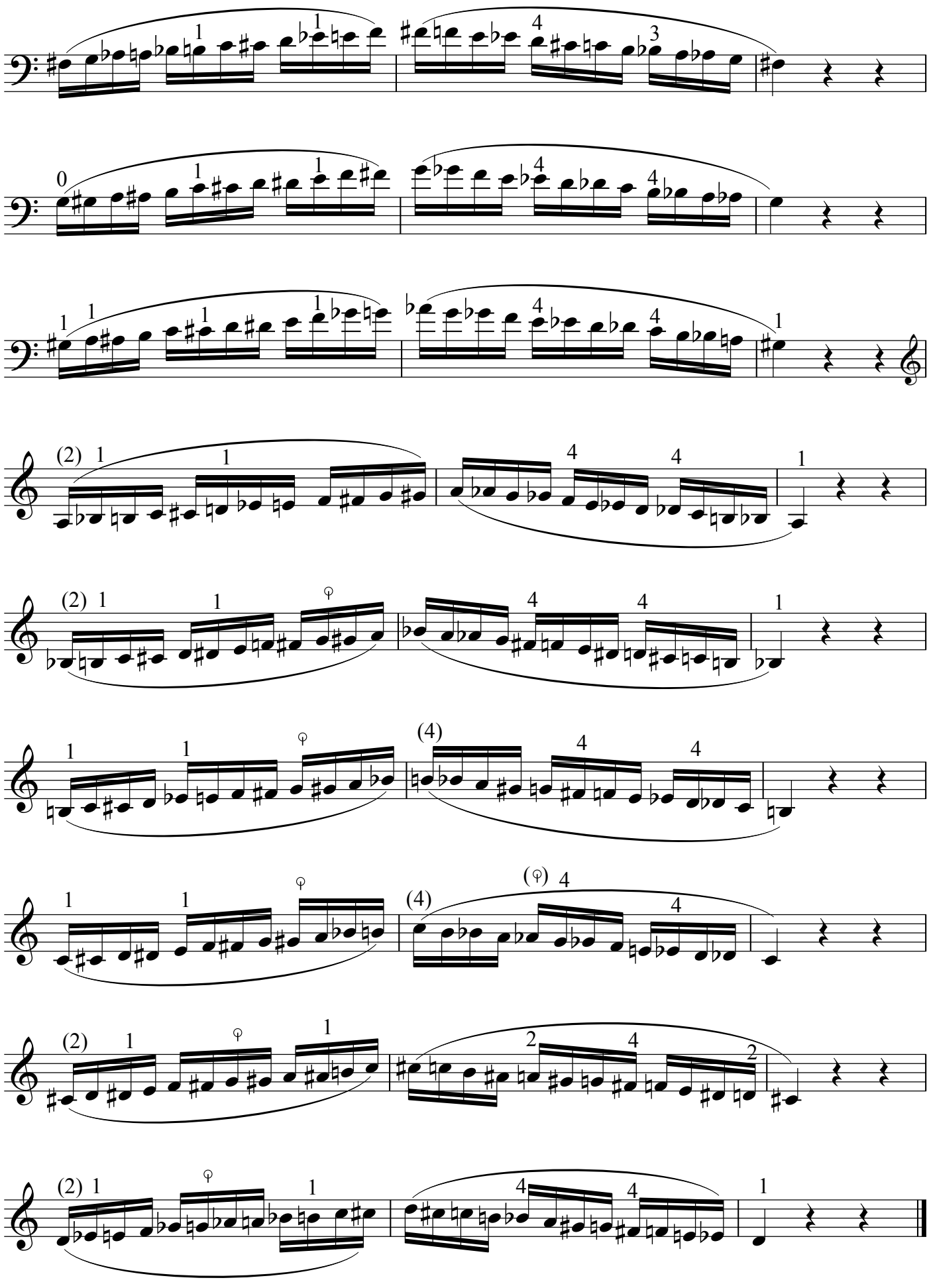
sim.
etc. until

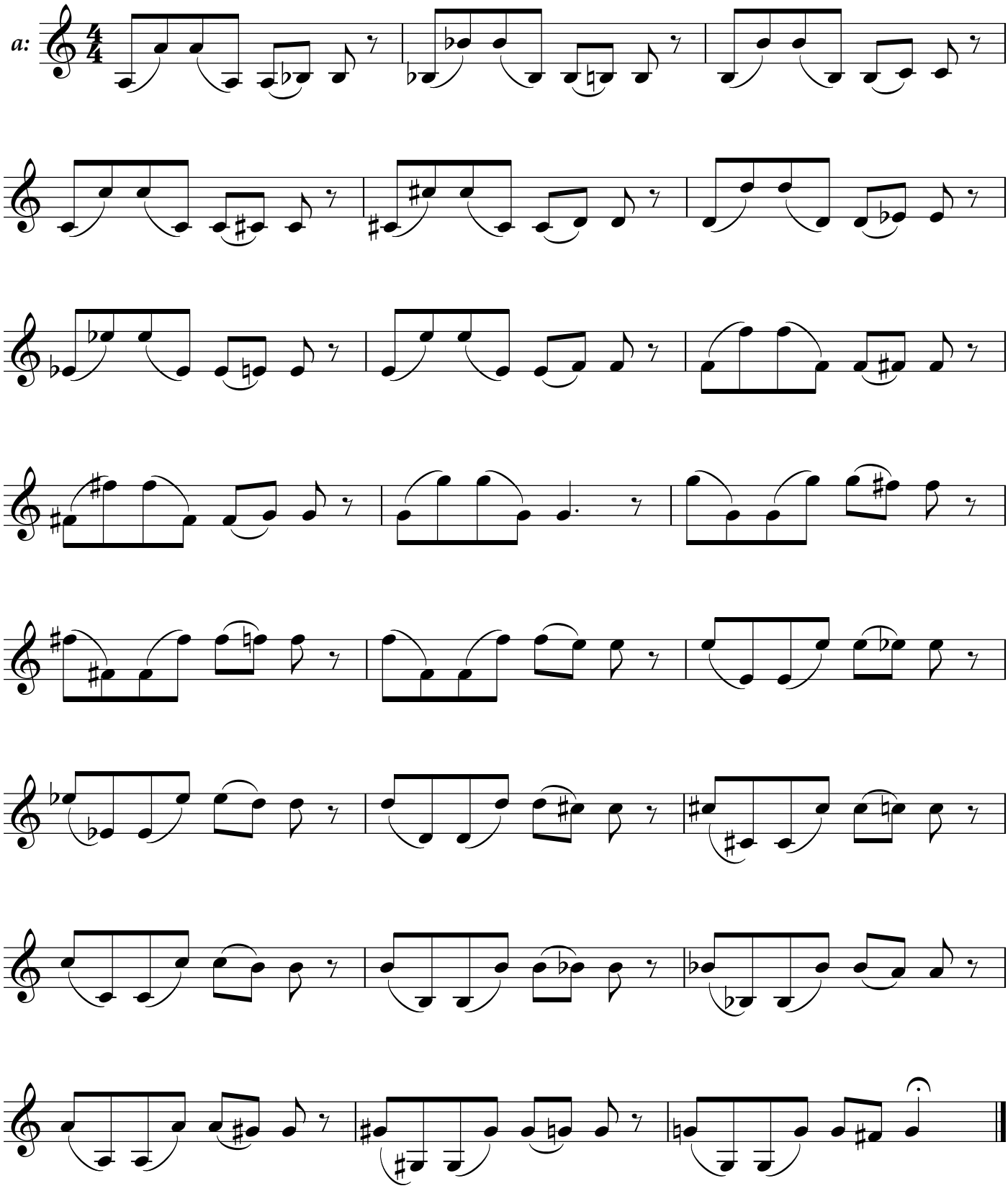

d:
p

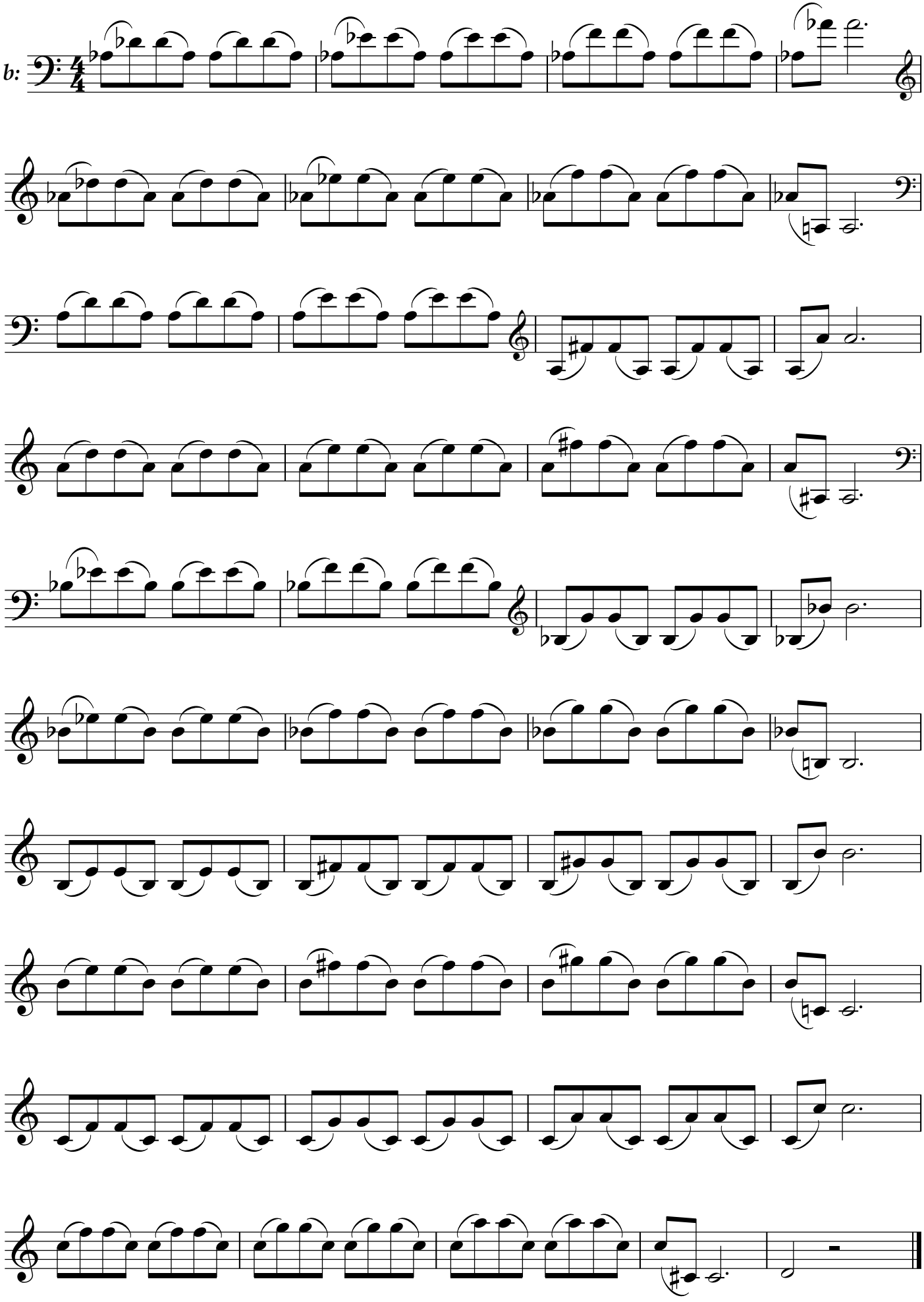


6

Shifting exercises

Both exercises should be worked out on one string with different fingering variations.

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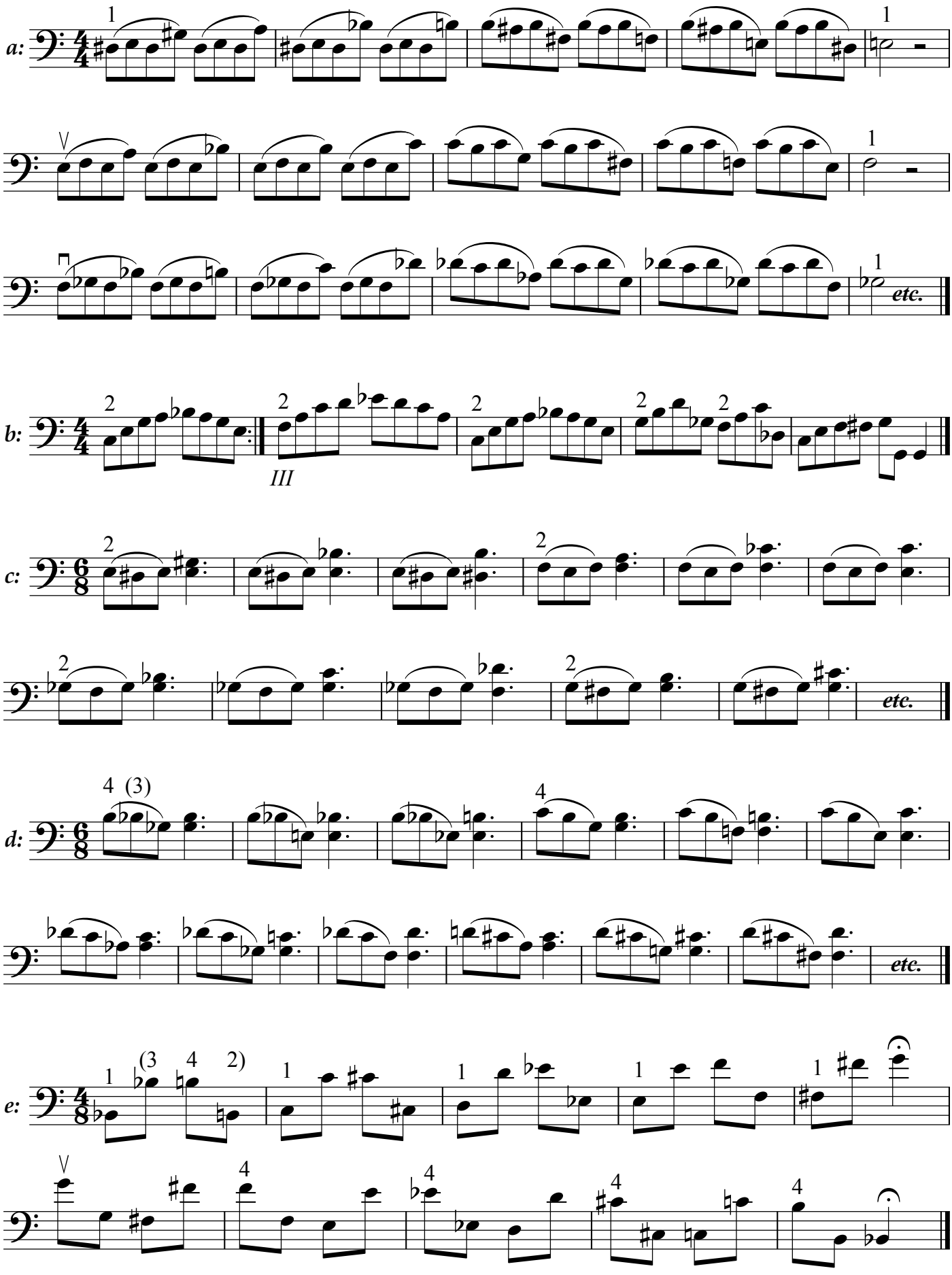
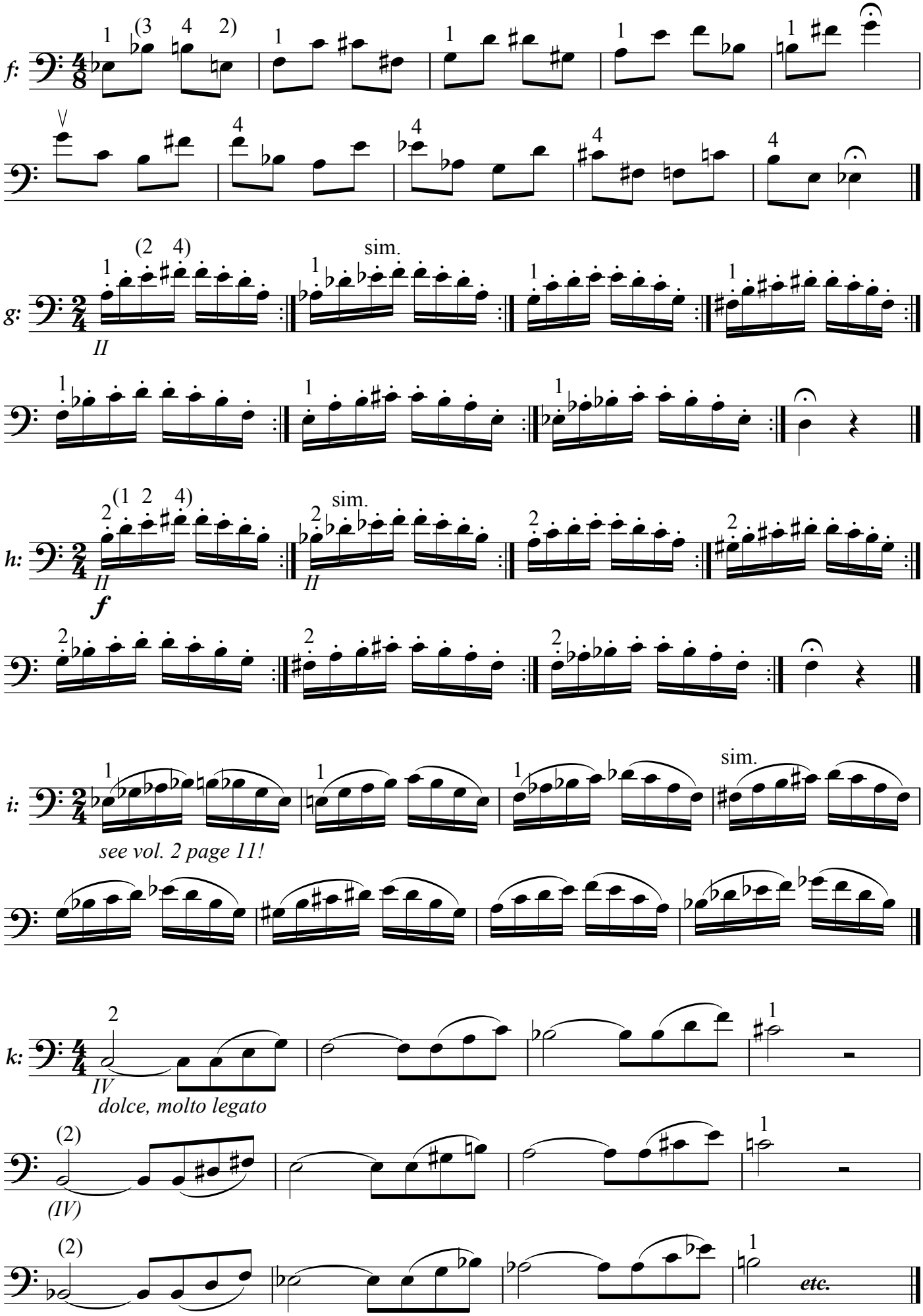
Final exercises




f:
g:
II
h:
II
II
f
i:
sim.
see vol. 2 page 11!
k:
IV
dolce, molto legato
(IV)
etc.

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Max Bruch:	Kol Nidrei*
Gabriel Fauré:	Élegie*
Robert Fuchs:	Sonata for double bass and piano
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