Sight Reading For Bass

Rhythm Studies

By Cliff Engel

Half, Quarter & Eighth Notes

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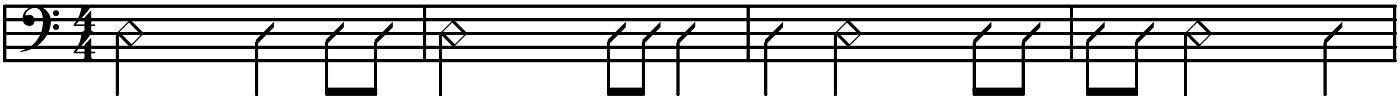

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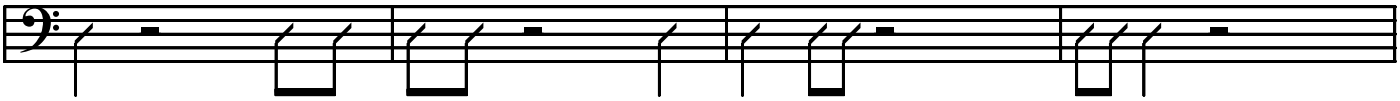

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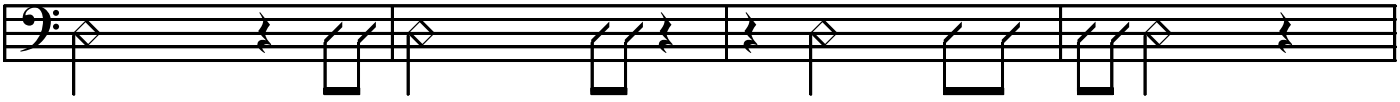

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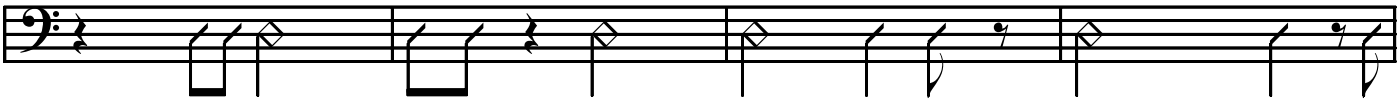

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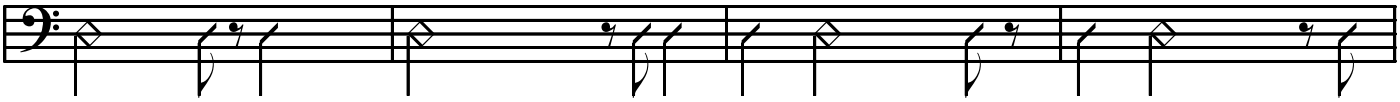

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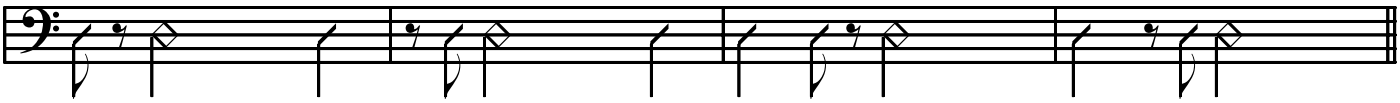

Half & Eighth Notes

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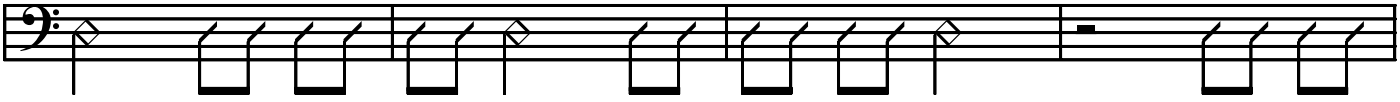

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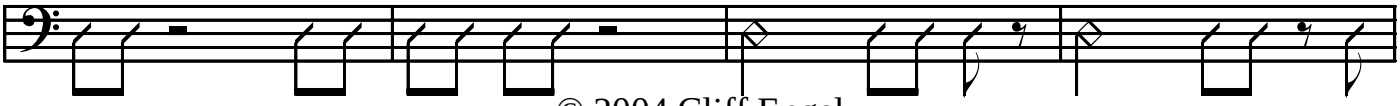

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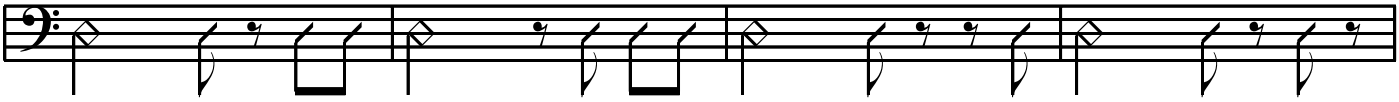
37



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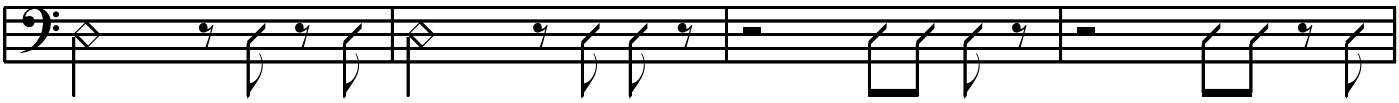

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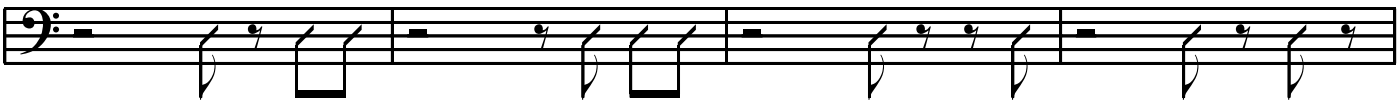

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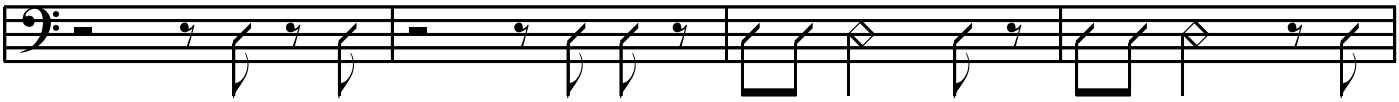

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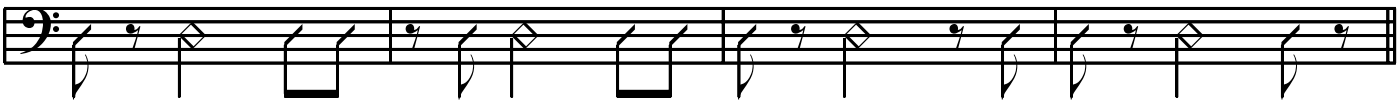

Quarter & Eighth Notes

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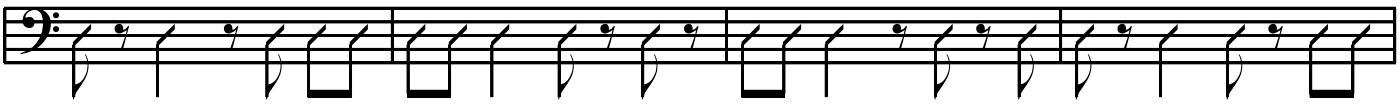

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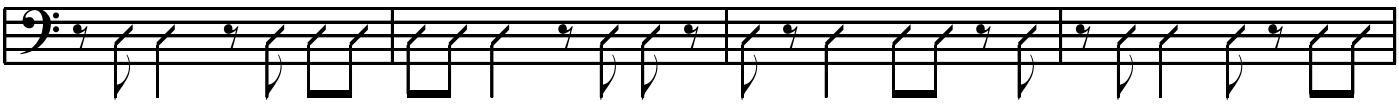

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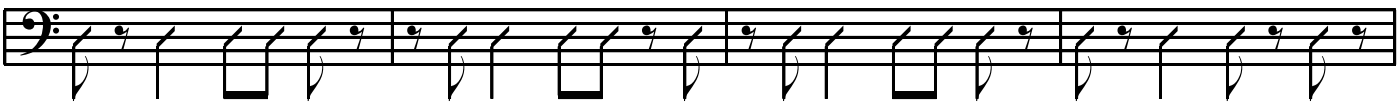

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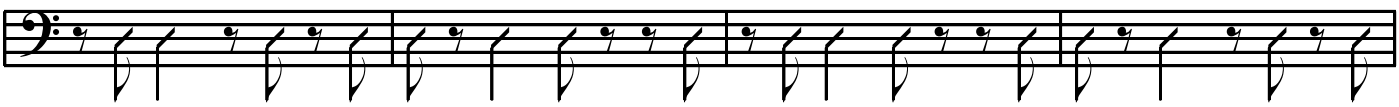

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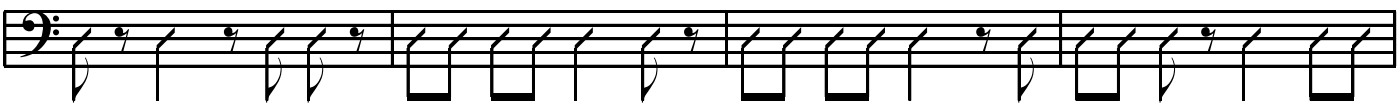

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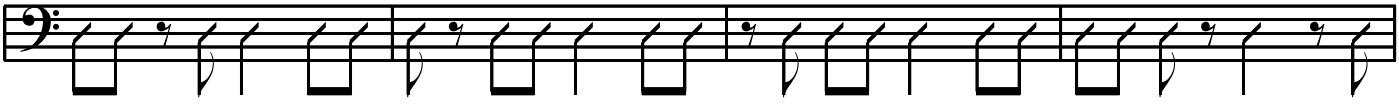

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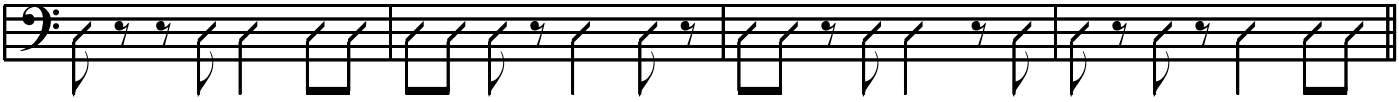

Eighth Notes

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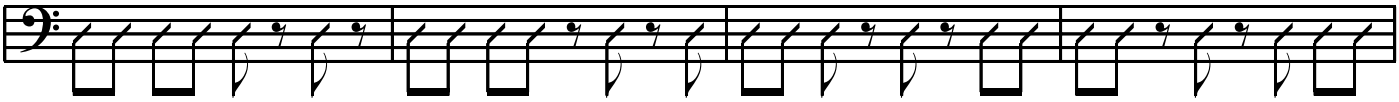

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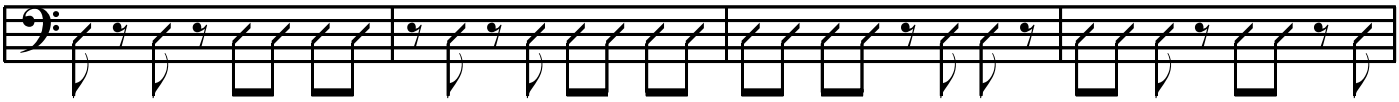

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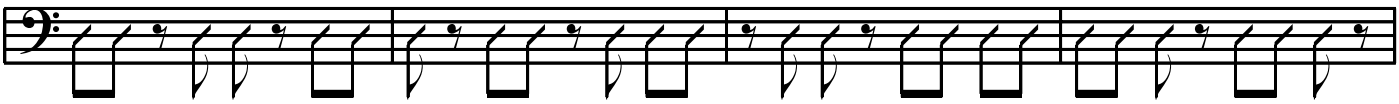

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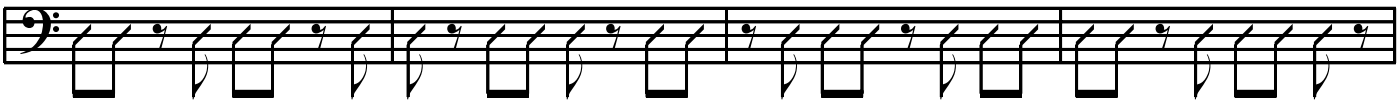

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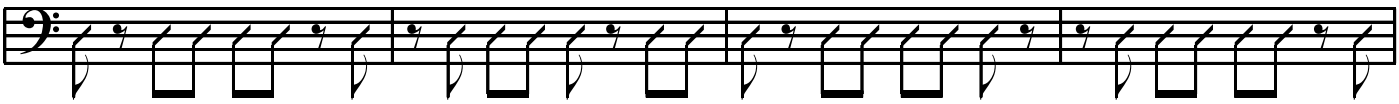

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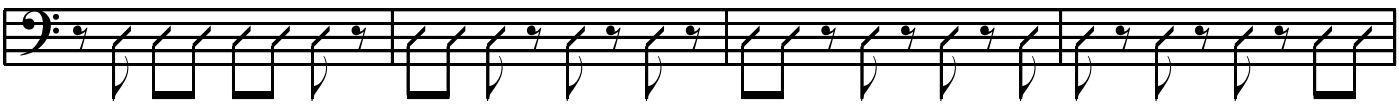

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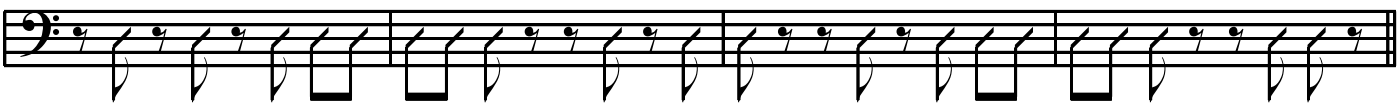

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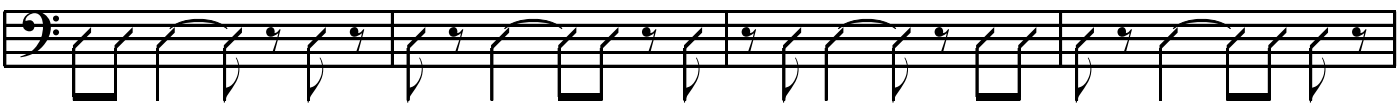

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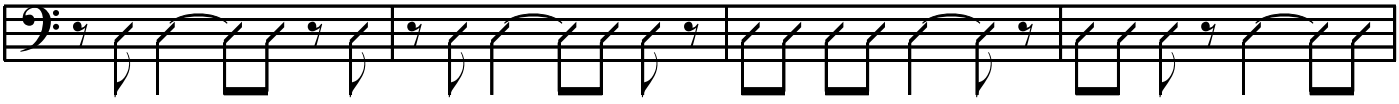

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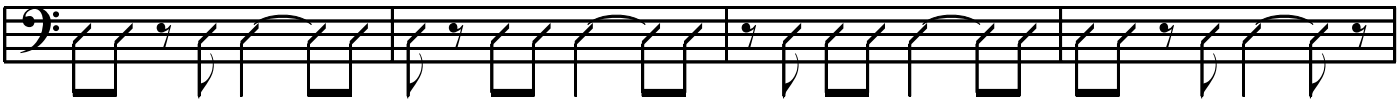

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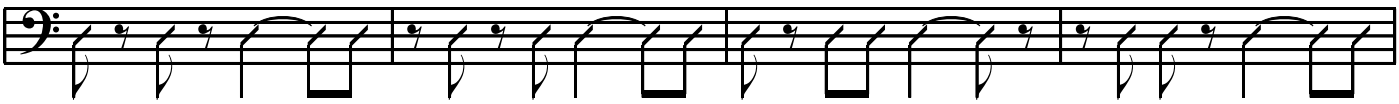

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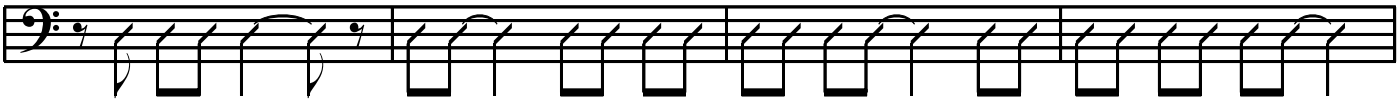

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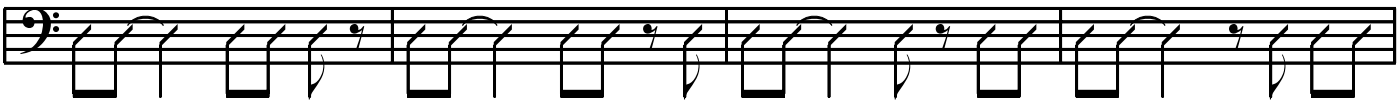

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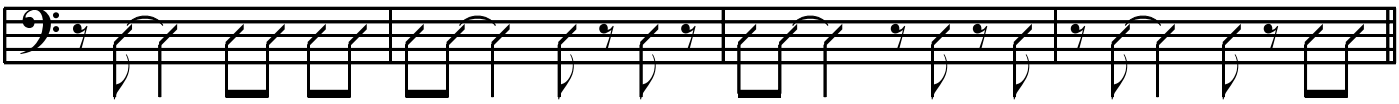

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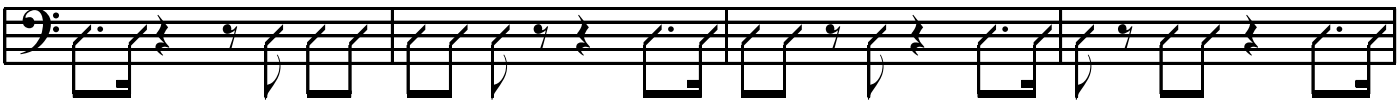

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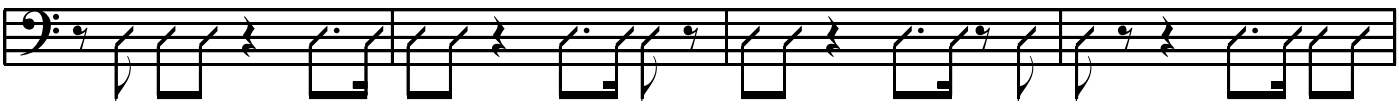

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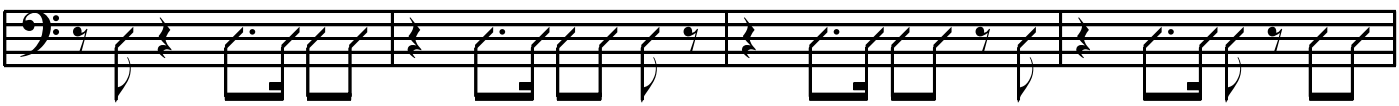

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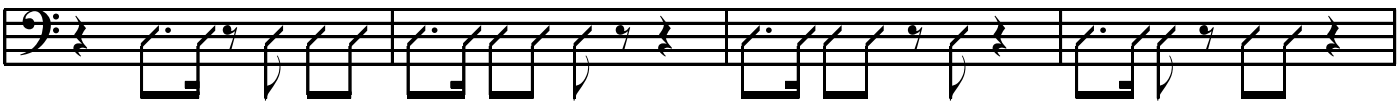

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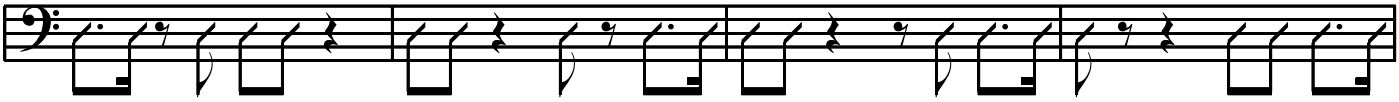

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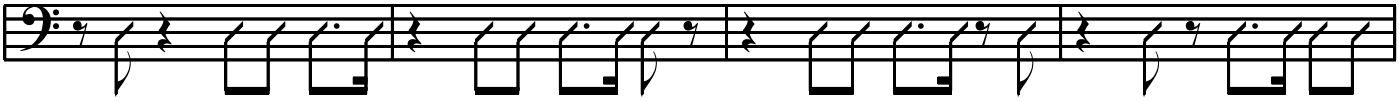

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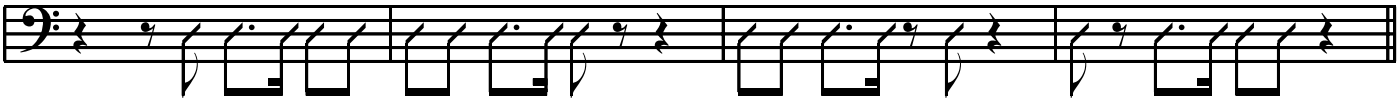

Triplets

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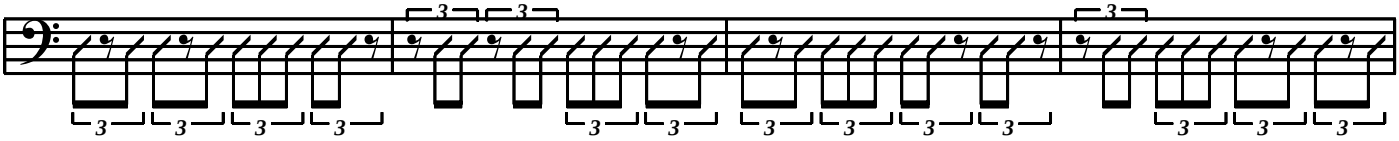

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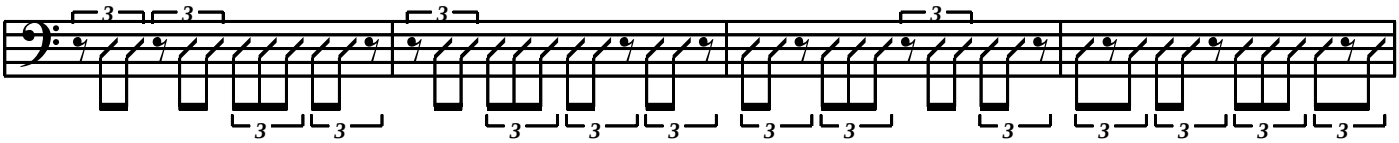

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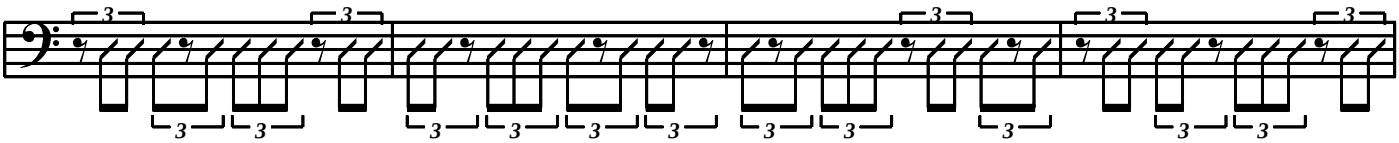

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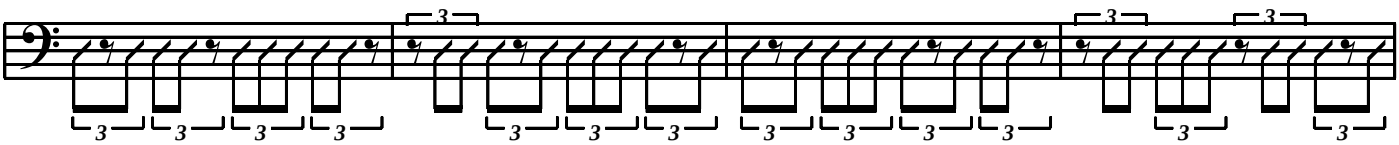

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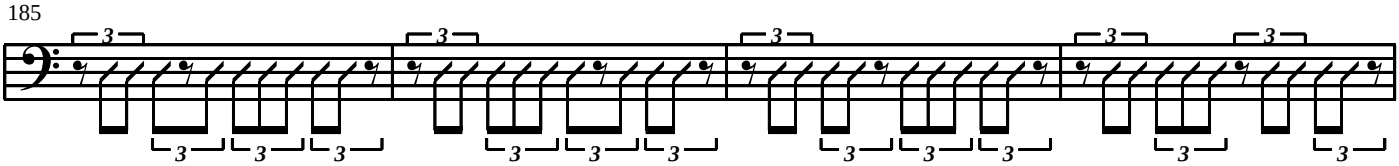

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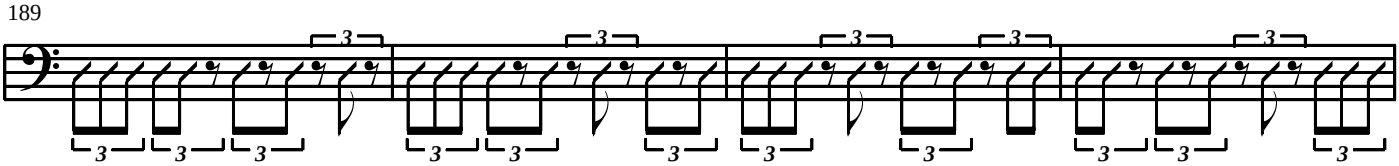

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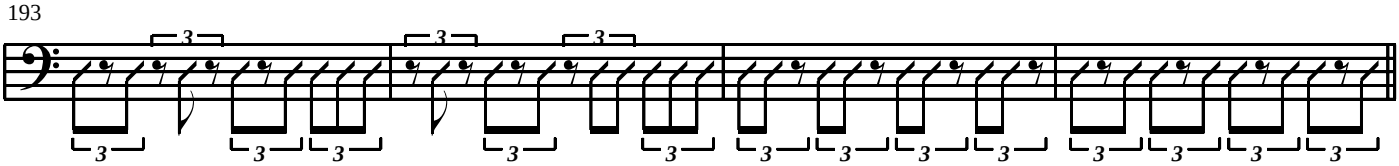
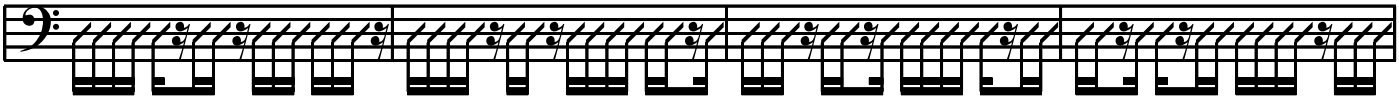


197 Sixteenth Notes



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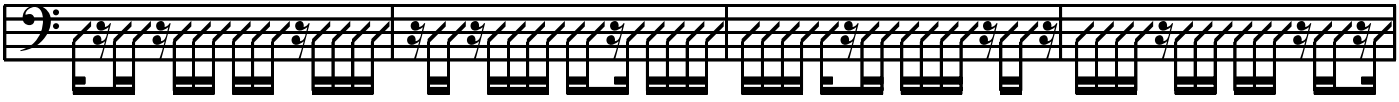

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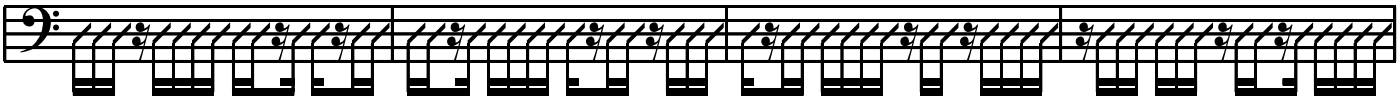

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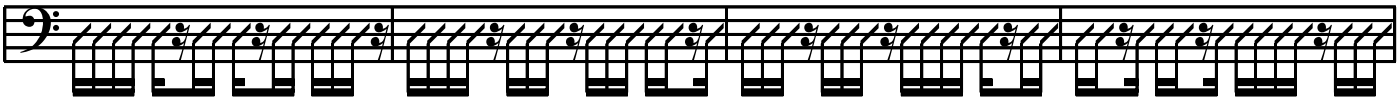

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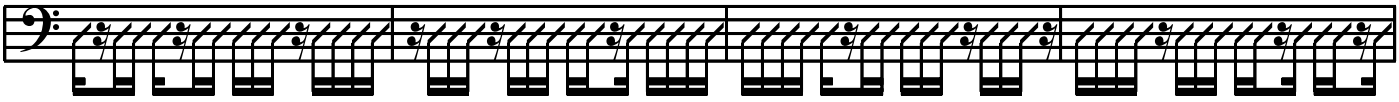

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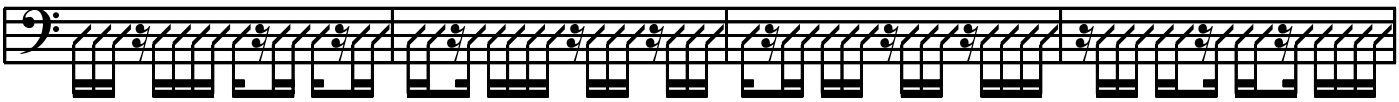

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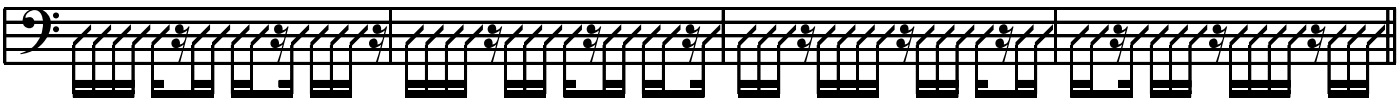
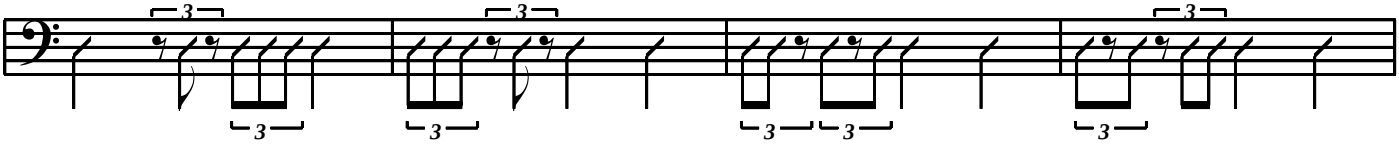


225 Quarter Notes & Triplets



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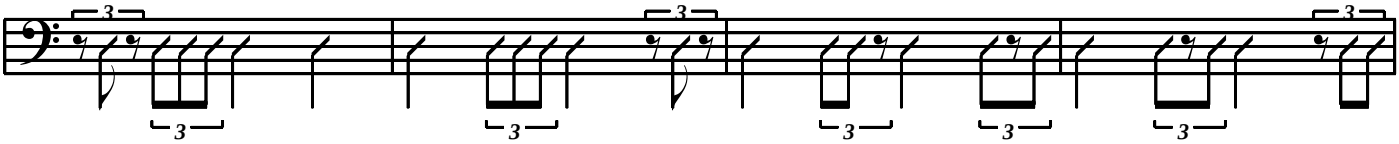

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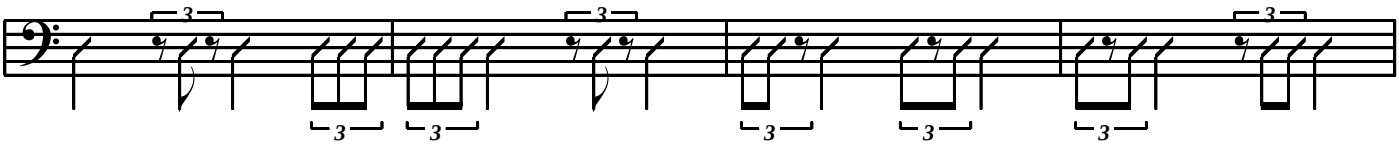

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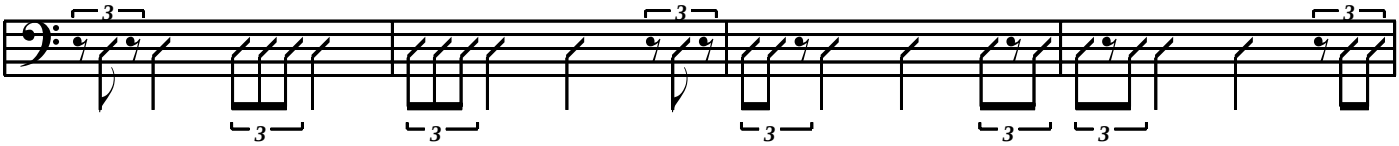

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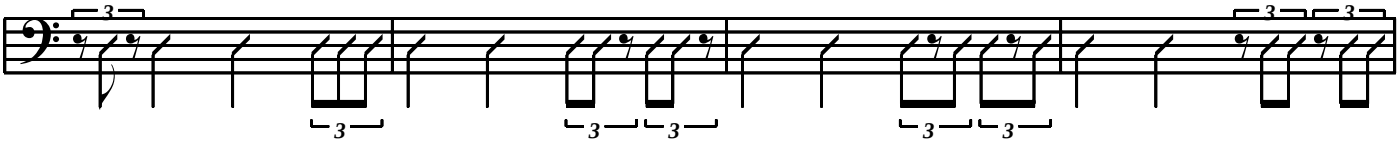

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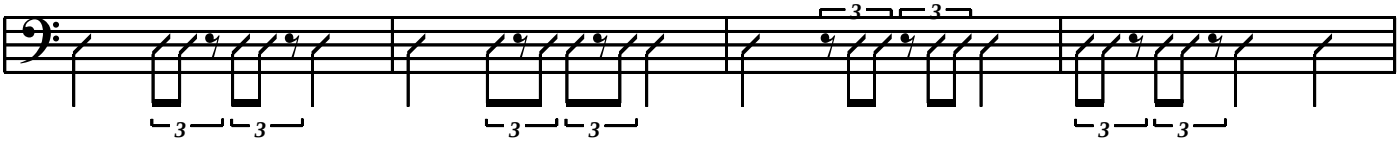

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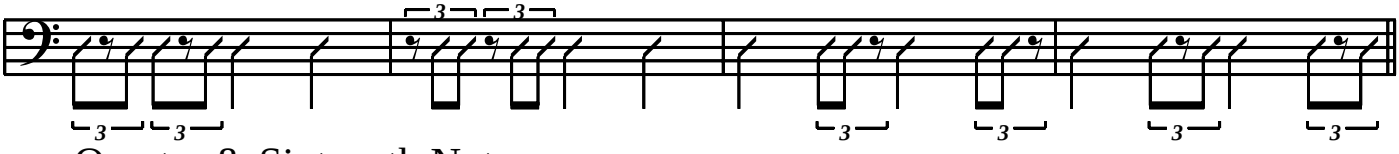

Quarter & Sixteenth Notes

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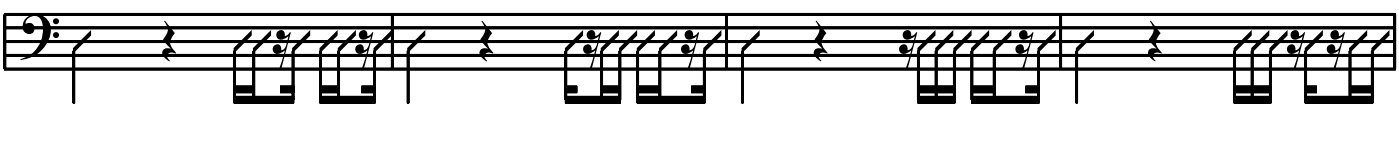

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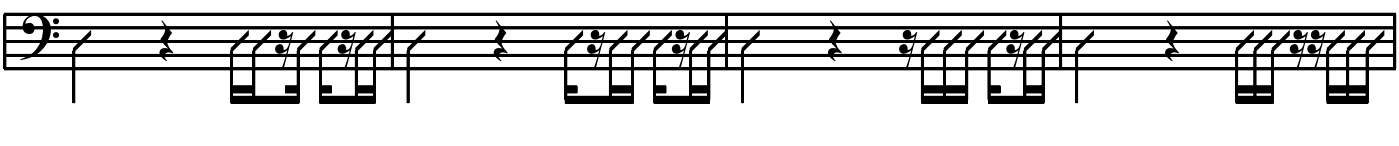

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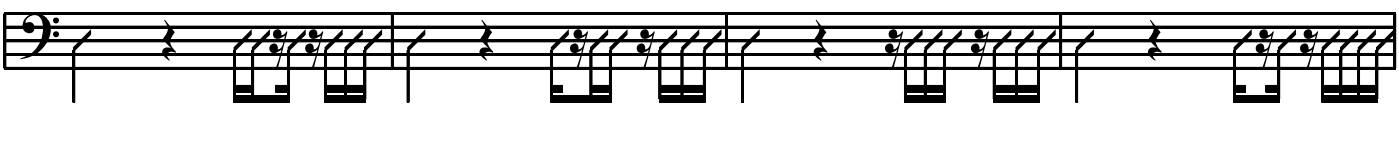

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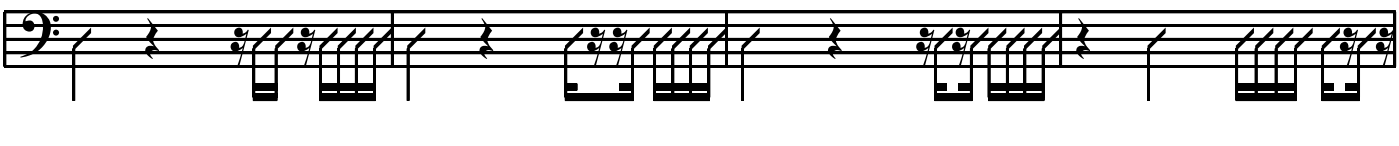

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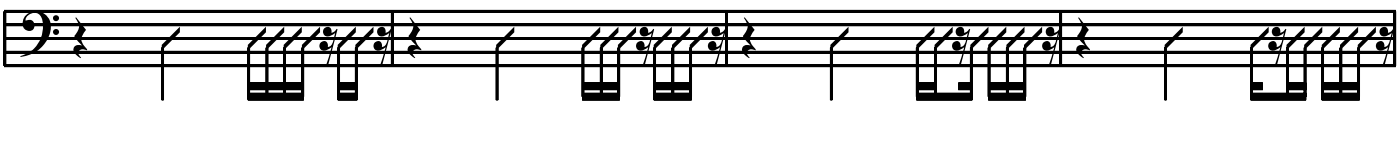

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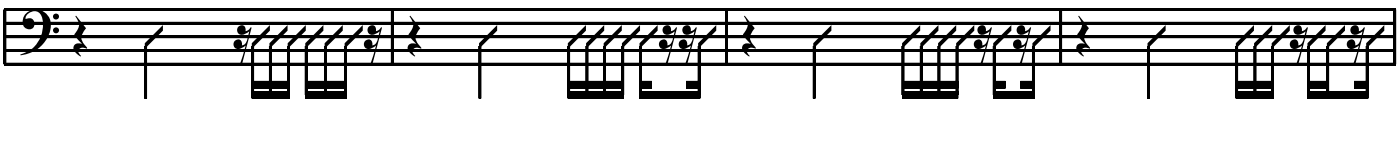

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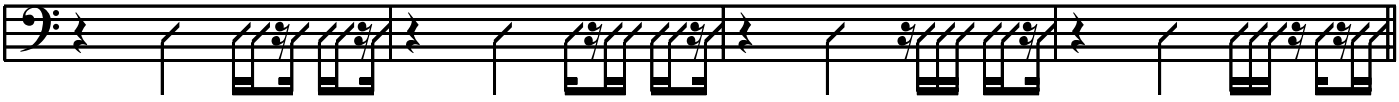

Eighth Notes & Triplets

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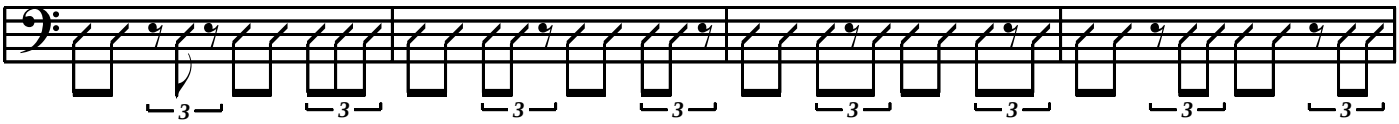

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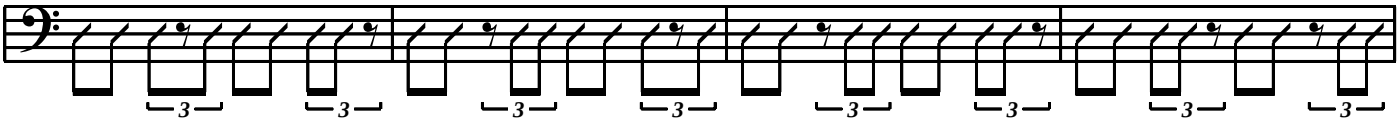

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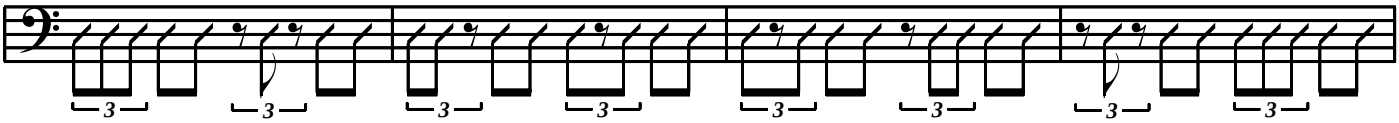

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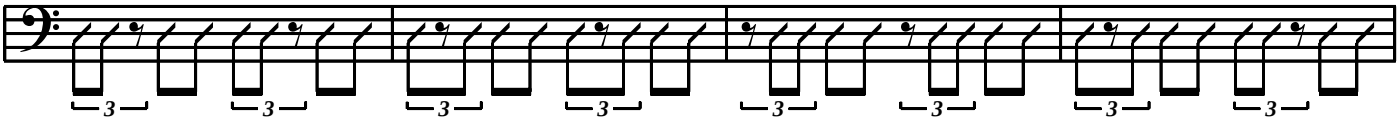

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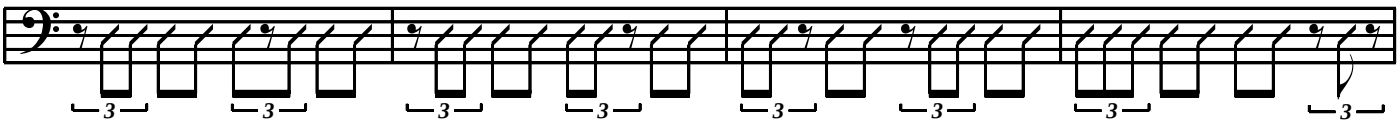

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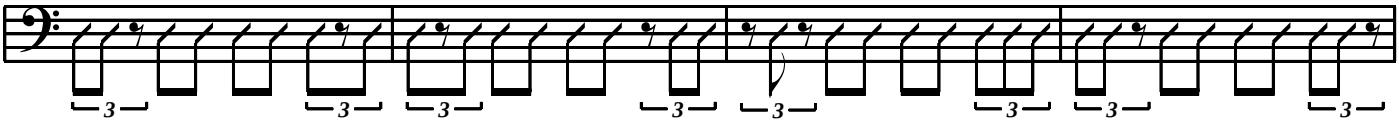

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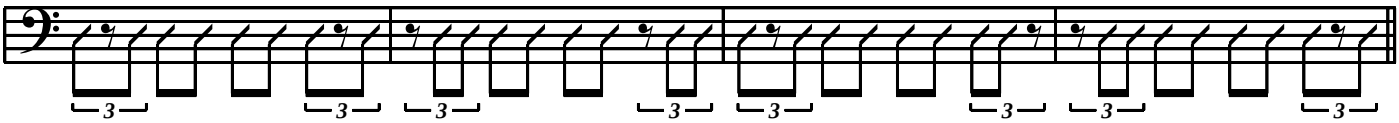

Eighth & Sixteenth Notes

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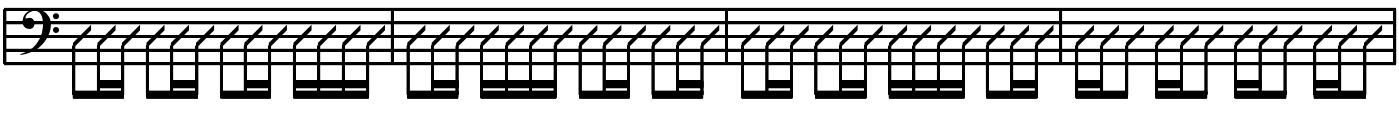

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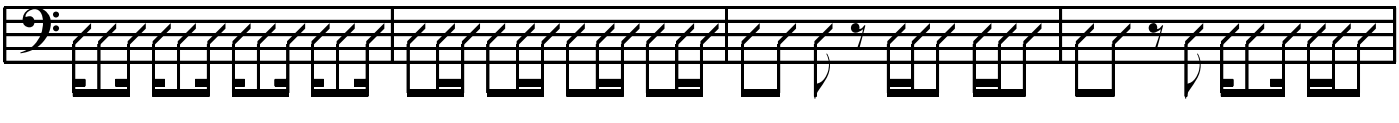

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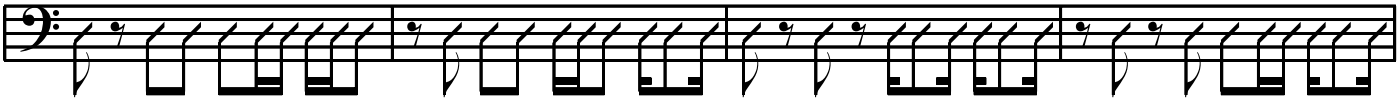

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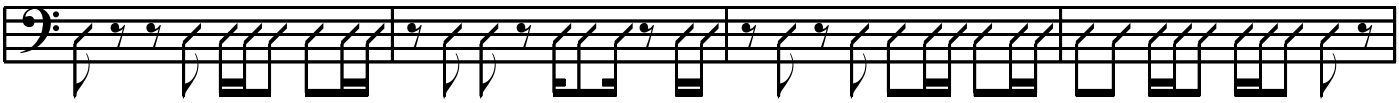

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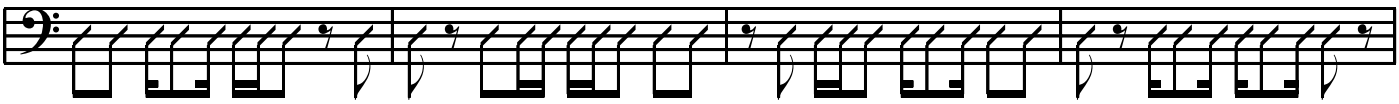

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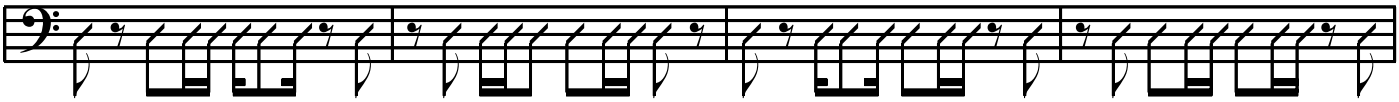

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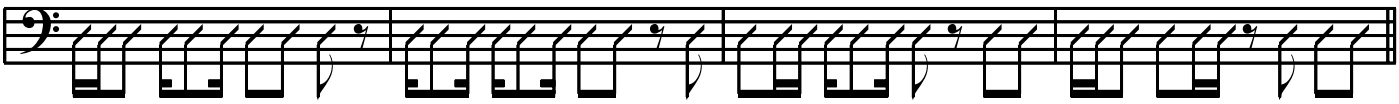

The ability to read standard music notation may be the most important skill a musician can ever learn. Yet, this aspect of musicianship is probably one of the most neglected and overlooked areas by bass players. By becoming a more proficient sight reader, you'll see your opportunities as a working bassist increase exponentially because you'll be able to more effectively communicate with other musicians. There are so many gigs available which require the ability to read standard notation. Whether your goal is to become a commercial session bassist, a member of the college jazz ensemble, bass chair of the local symphony orchestra, play in the school musical, or provide support in your community church, becoming a proficient sight reader will only increase your opportunities and chances of obtaining these gigs.

Although there are a number of excellent resources already available which will improve the skills required for sight reading, the vast majority of these books don't actually teach how to read music notation for bass in the most analytical fashion but rather provide the aspiring bassist with a collection of exercises over a wide range of styles, progressing from the easiest lines to the most challenging. While these resources provide superb material for practicing sight reading, they don't take a very thorough or methodical approach on how to learn it.

In order to get deeper inside the art of sight reading, we must break standard notation down into its most elemental components: notes and rhythms. There are only twelve different tones in western-based music. However, there are a limitless amount of rhythmic permutations. Memorizing where the notes are located on the fretboard and also where those same notes are positioned on the bass clef is relatively easy. This type of note recognition just takes an investment of time. After you have memorized the notes on the fretboard and also where those notes are located on the bass clef, the next step is to analyze rhythmic patterns and increase the proficiency of your rhythmic recognition skills. In this lesson, we will focus on the latter, rhythmic recognition.

Within these exercises, you will find a collection of rhythm studies in rhythmic notation which have been excerpted from my forthcoming book on sight reading for bass. Since these are rhythm studies and more precisely rhythmic recognition exercises, be sure to practice all these rhythms against a metronome, drum machine, sequencer, or any device that you have available which maintains a steady, even pulse. Begin with a tempo that is slow enough to minimize mistakes but at the same time fast enough to push yourself and create a challenge and then gradually increase the tempo. Because this lesson is quite lengthy, I would recommend breaking up these examples into smaller sections. Try playing through these rhythms in four, eight, and twelve bar segments. Before attempting to apply these rhythms to bass, simply clap them without your instrument. Our focus is on improving rhythmic recognition skills so notes are irrelevant at this time. After you feel comfortable with these rhythms and can play through them flawlessly, apply them to your bass by simply playing any single note or combination of notes on your instrument. At first glance, some of these rhythms look deceptively easy, but by increasing the tempo, great challenges can be realized with even the simplest of rhythms.

Although these exercises may seem somewhat dry, I've found that my current and former students have made great strides in their ability to sight read in a very short period of time by concentrating on these basic rhythmic recognition exercises.

Sight reading standard music notation is one aspect of music which I believe no musician can ever become too proficient. With all the rhythmic variability, no matter how good a musician becomes at reading music, there is always room for improvement. Learning how to read standard music notation will be more than worth the small investment of time that it takes now because you'll reap the benefits of being able to sight read for the rest of your career as a bassist. Not only does being able to sight read greatly increase your value as an in-demand bass player, but as a side benefit, it also makes your practice sessions much more productive because you are able to use that time more efficiently and cover more material.

Remember, no matter how fast you can read through these rhythms error-free, you can always go faster!