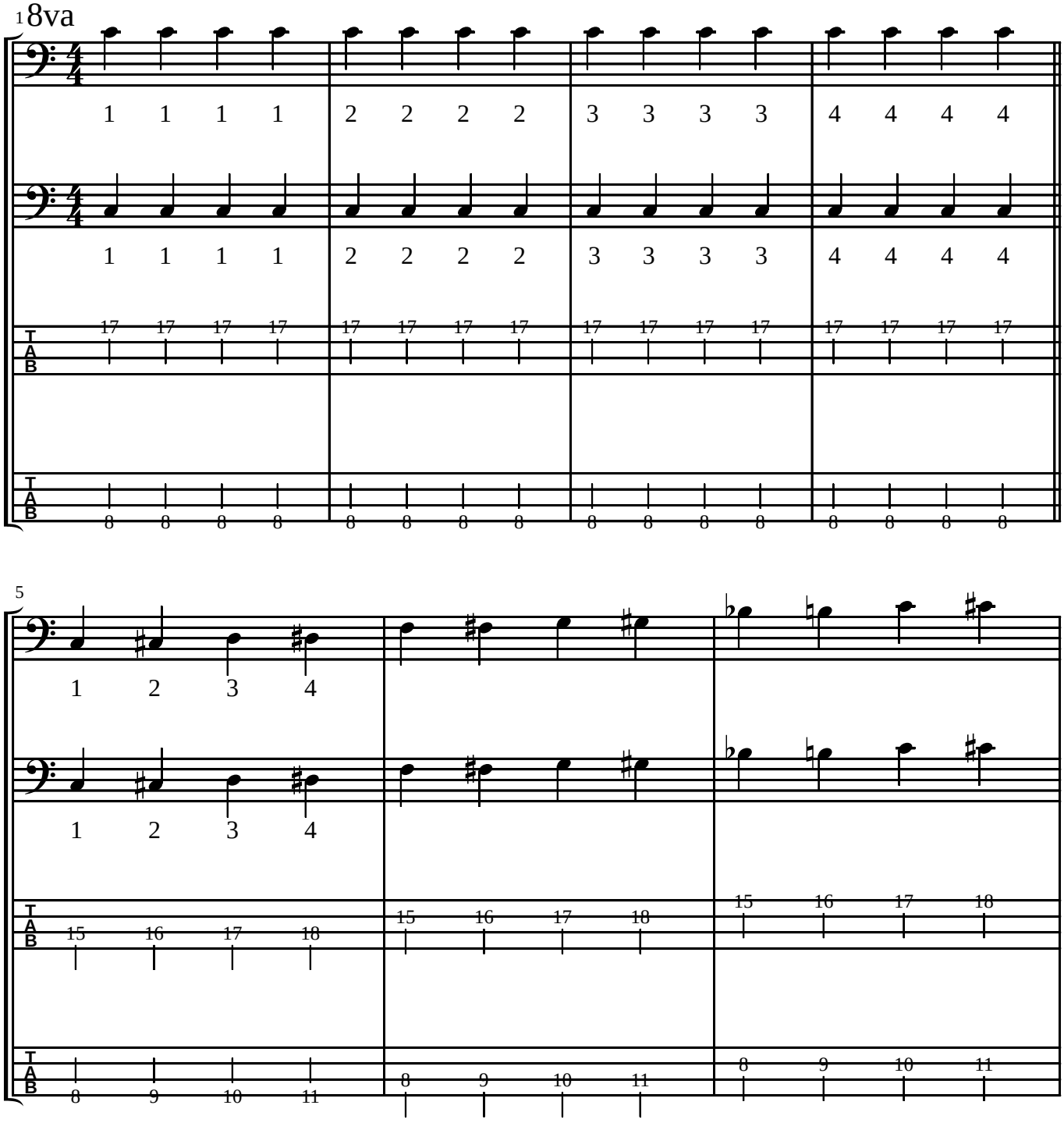
Contemporary Tapping Techniques

Introduction

By Cliff Engel

Unison Exercises



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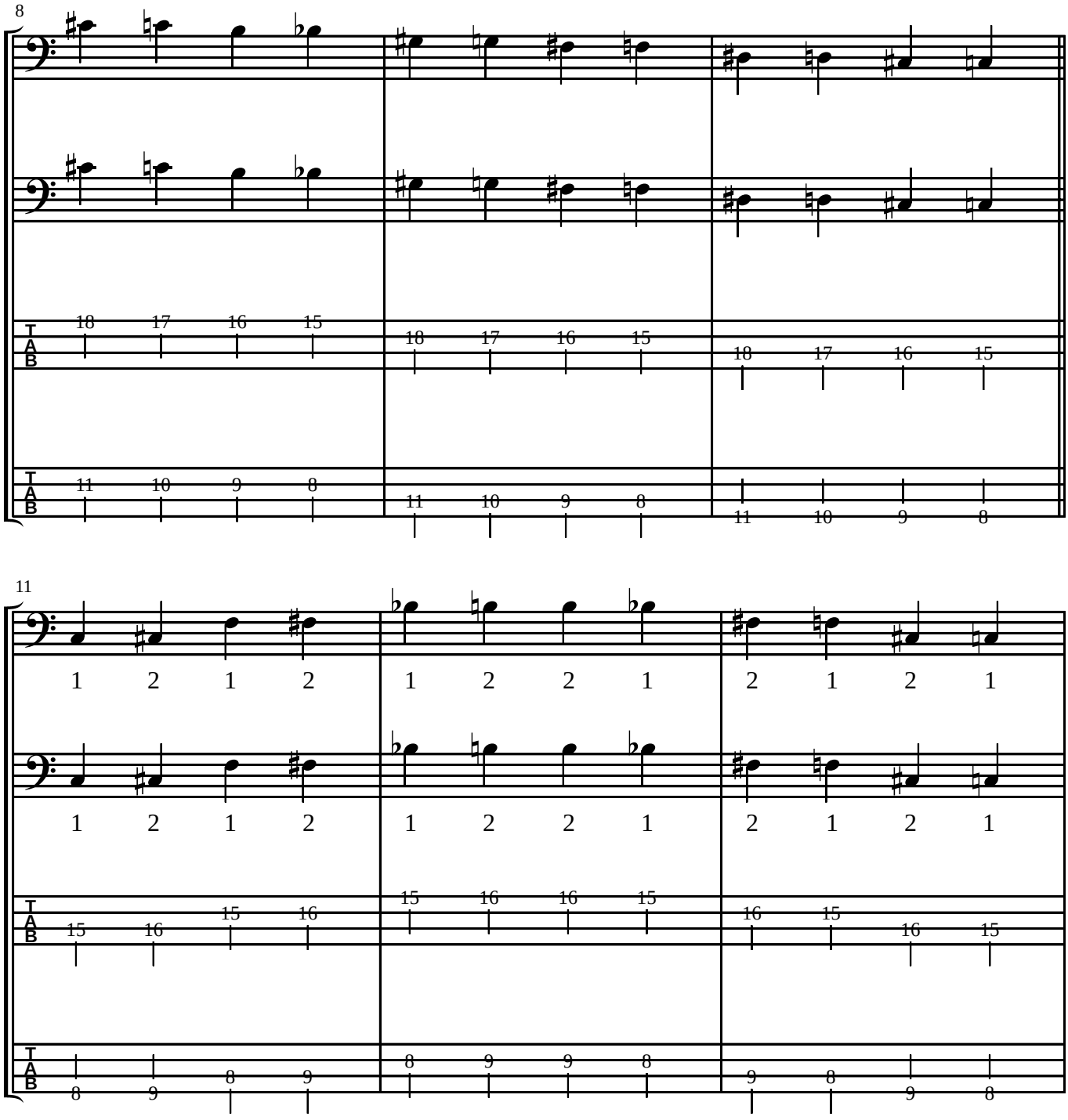
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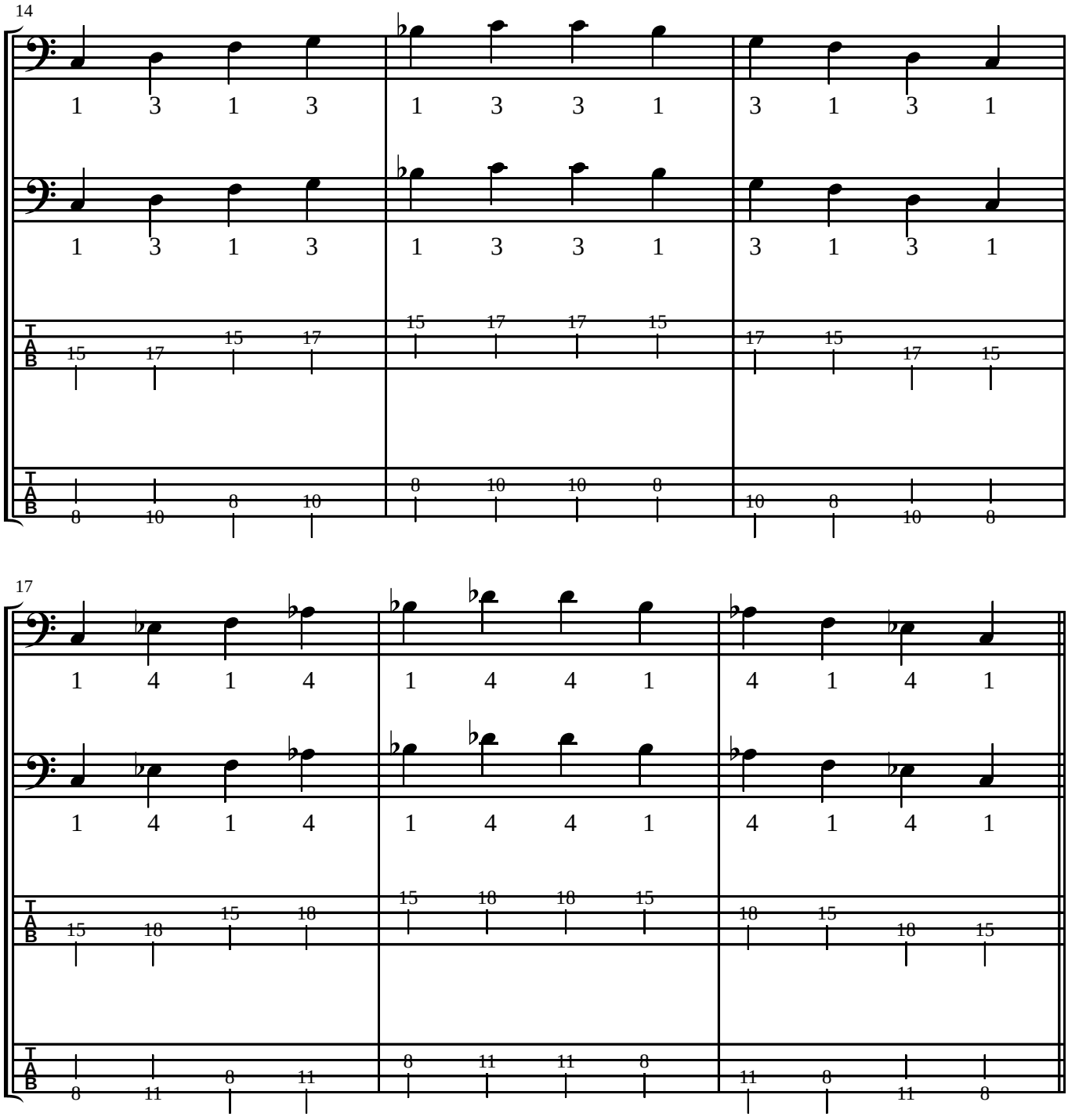
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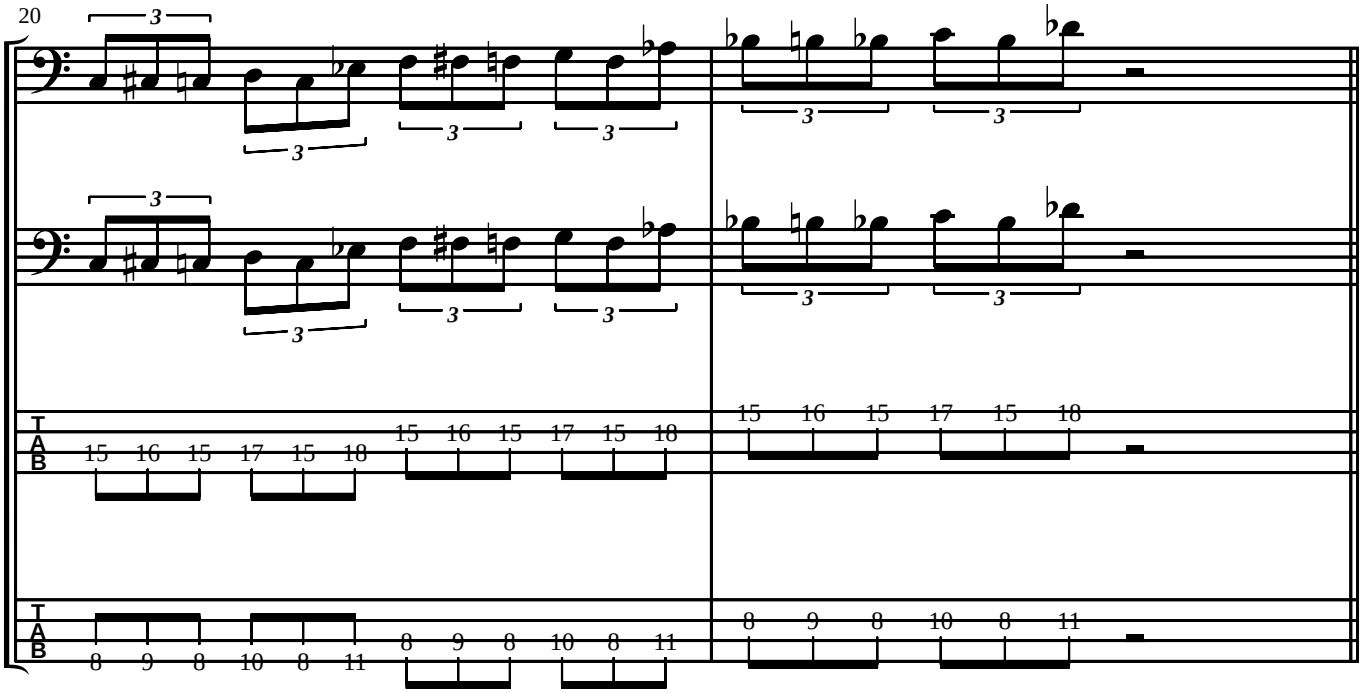
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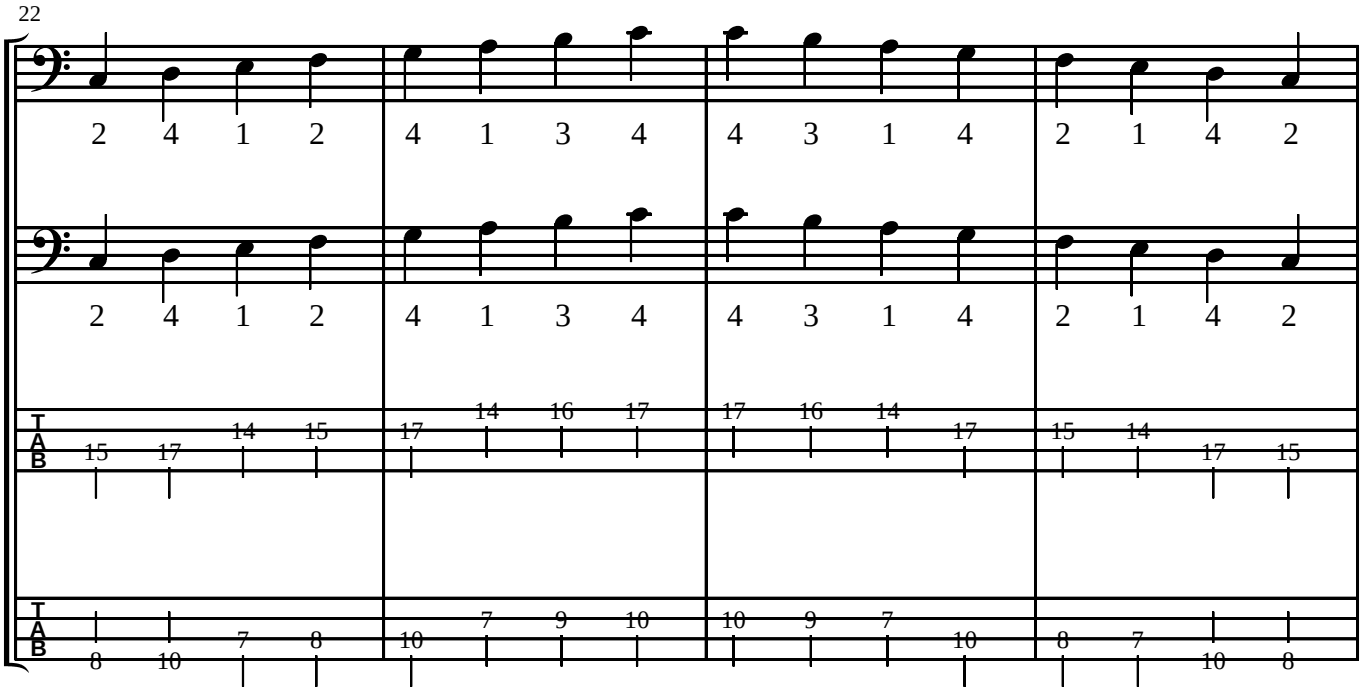
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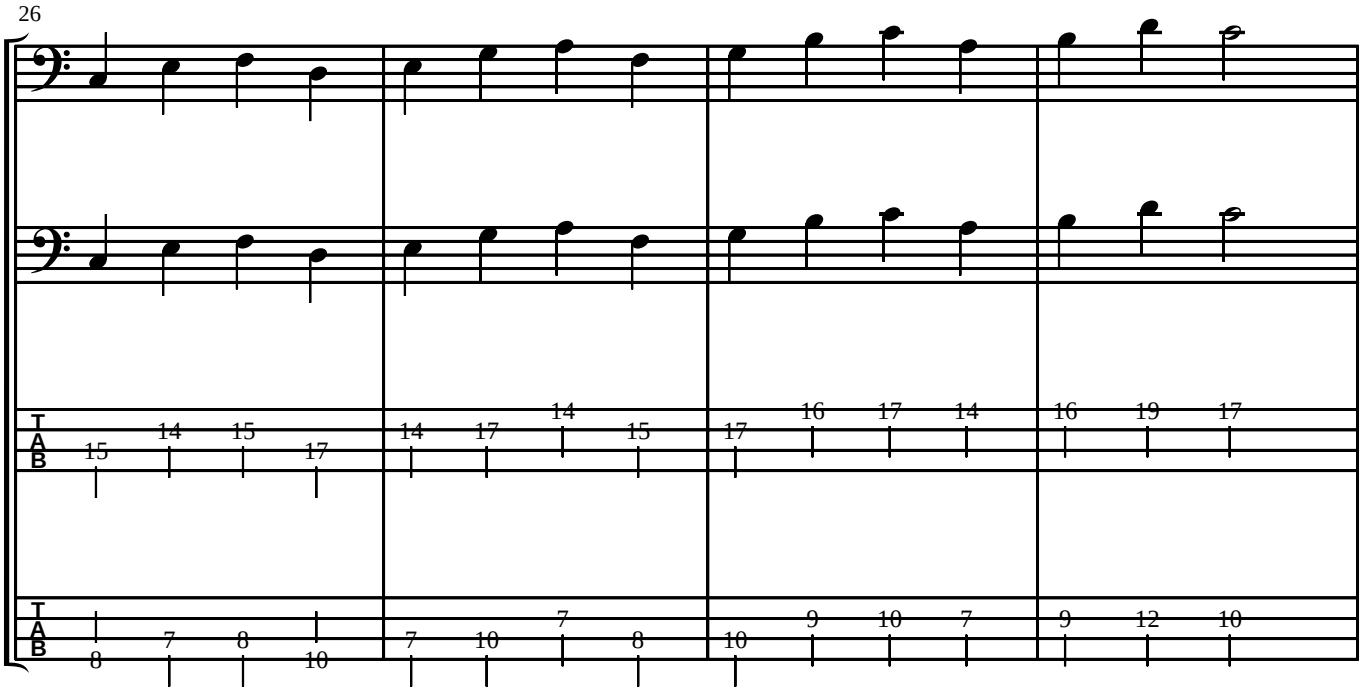
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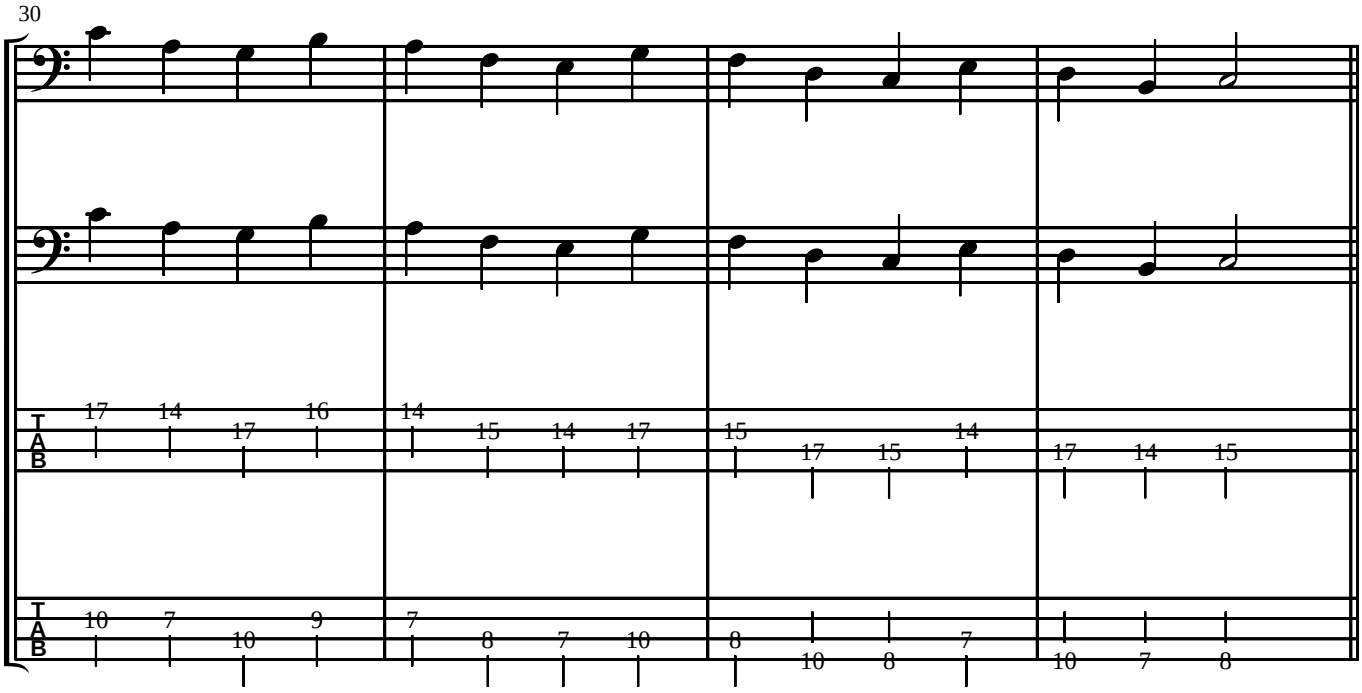
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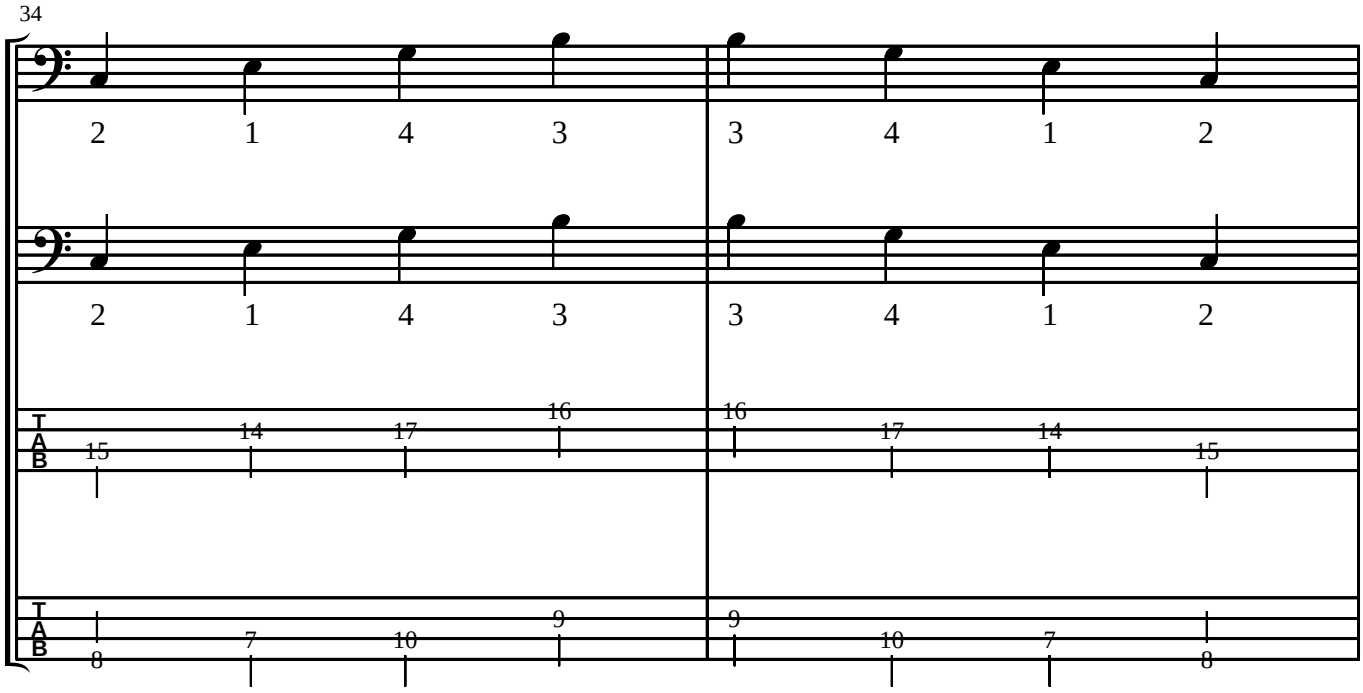
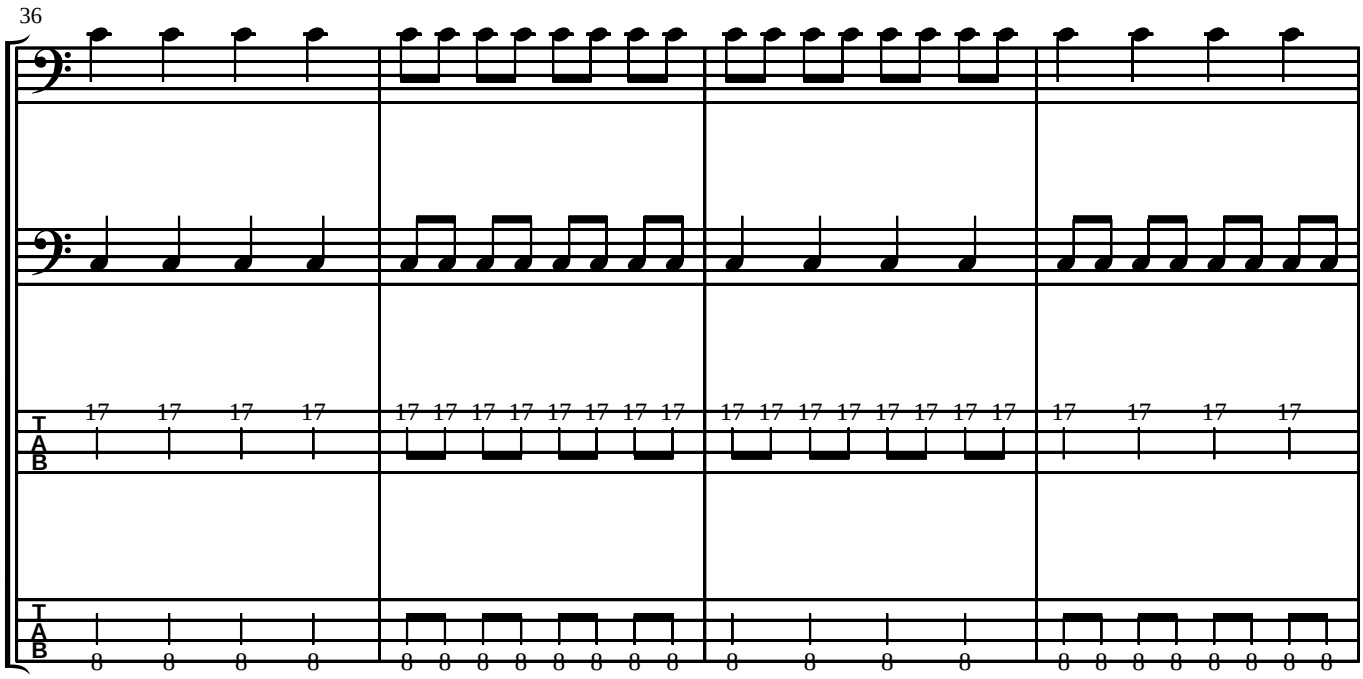
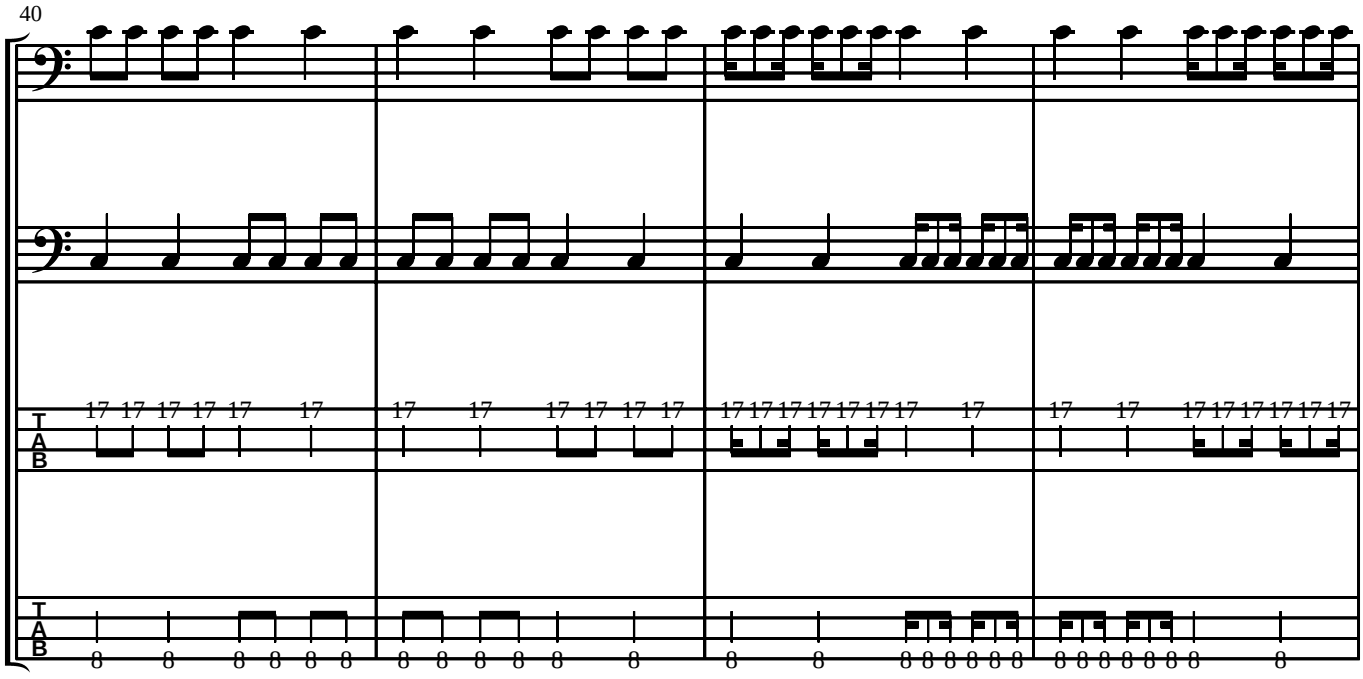


Rhythmic Exercises

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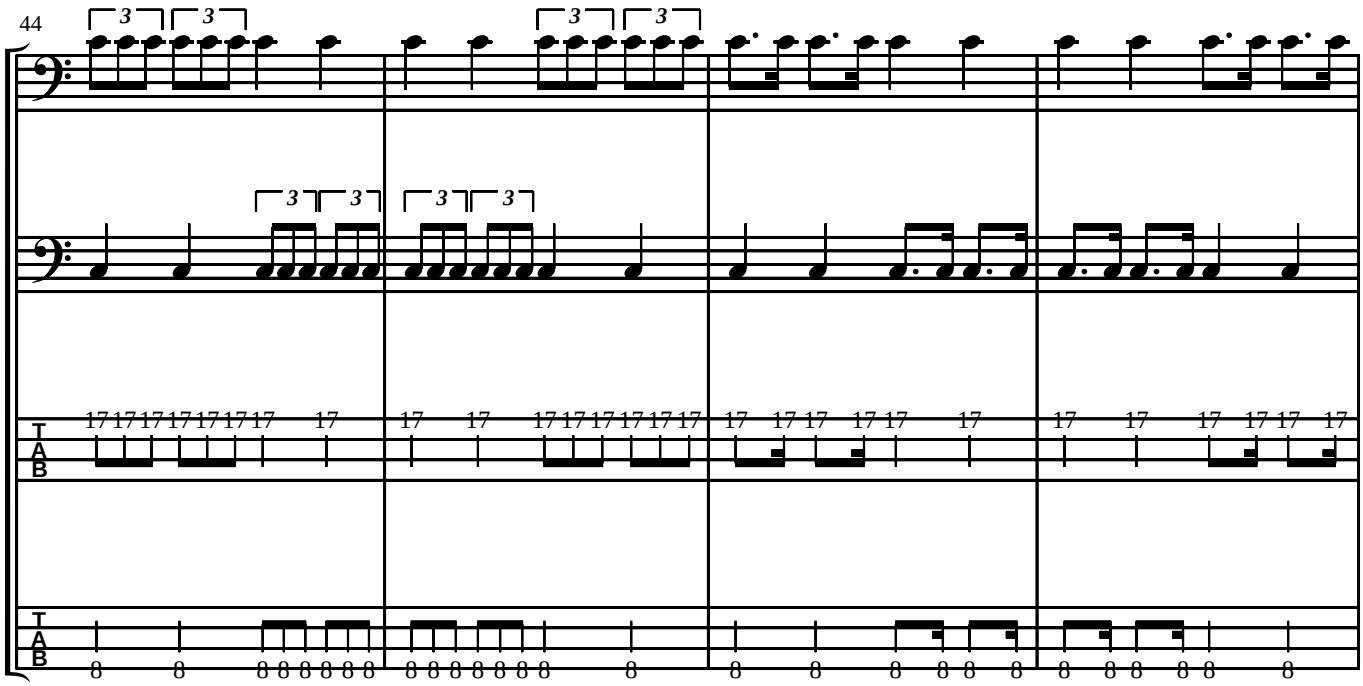
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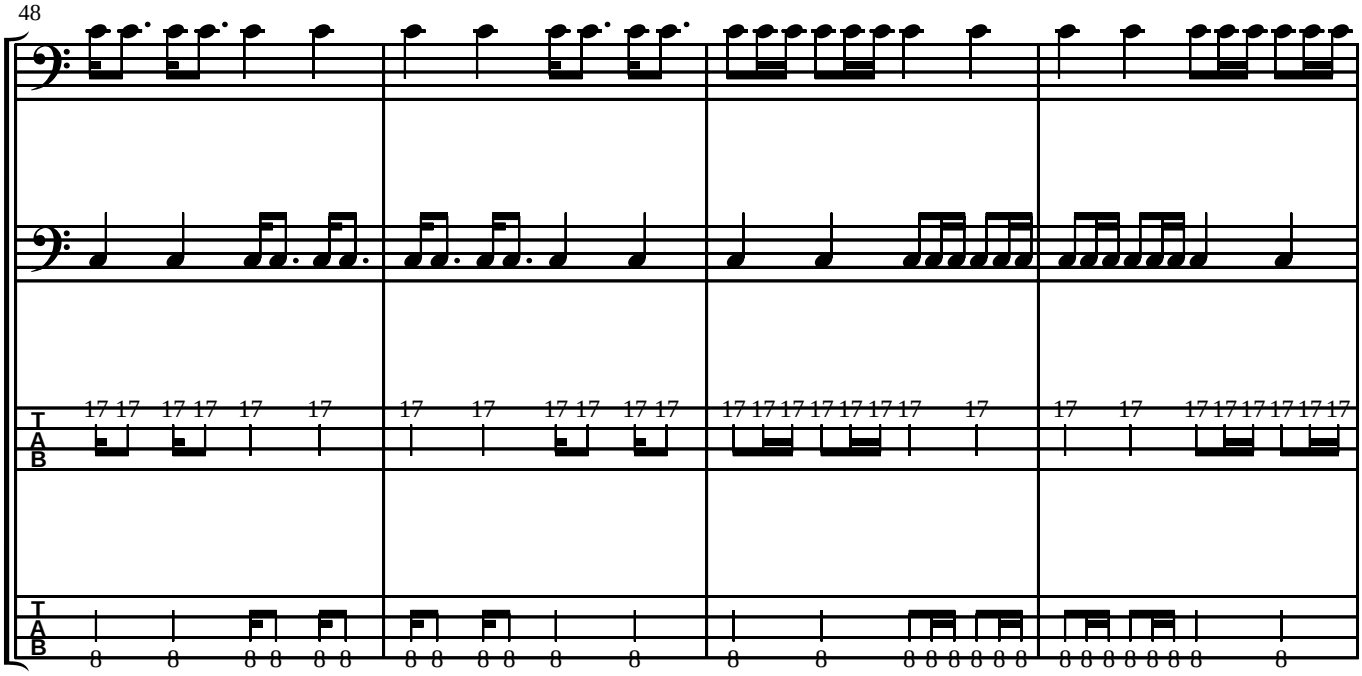

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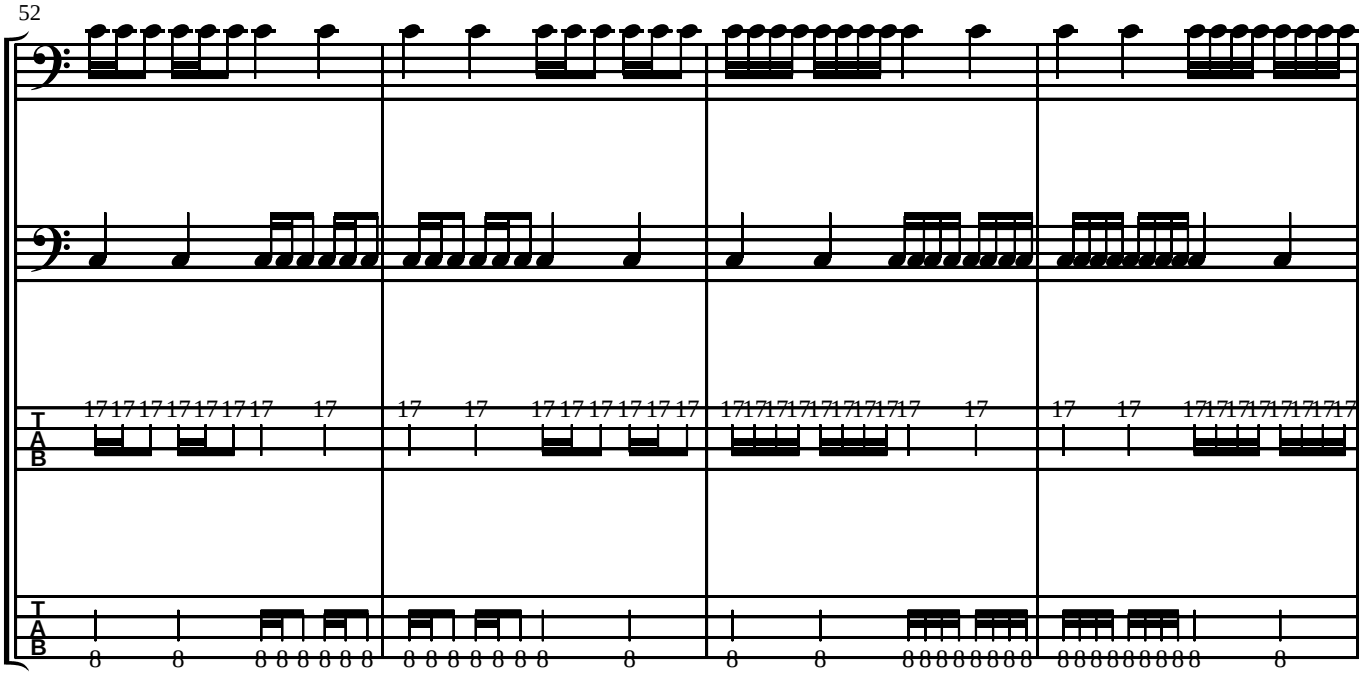

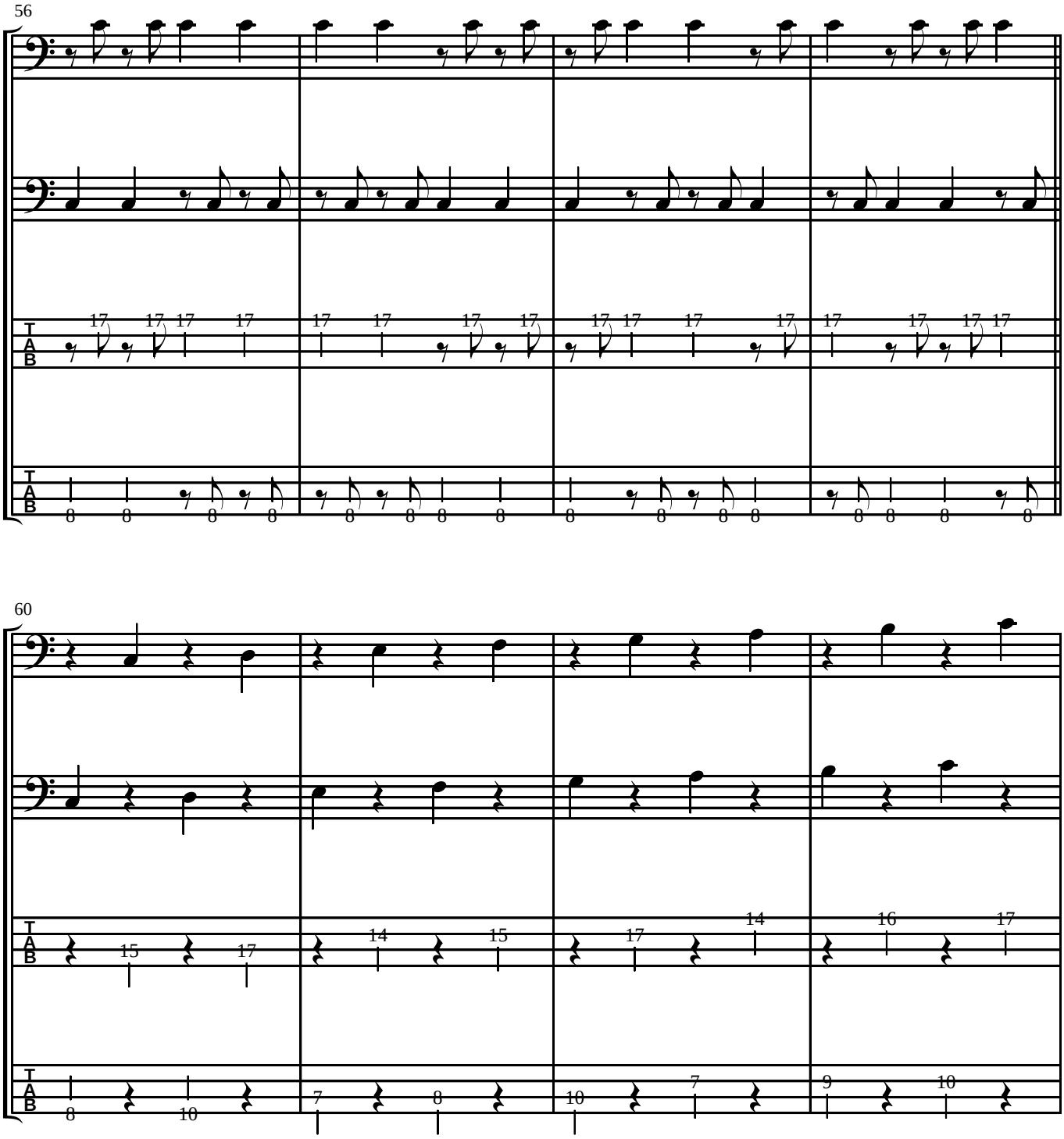
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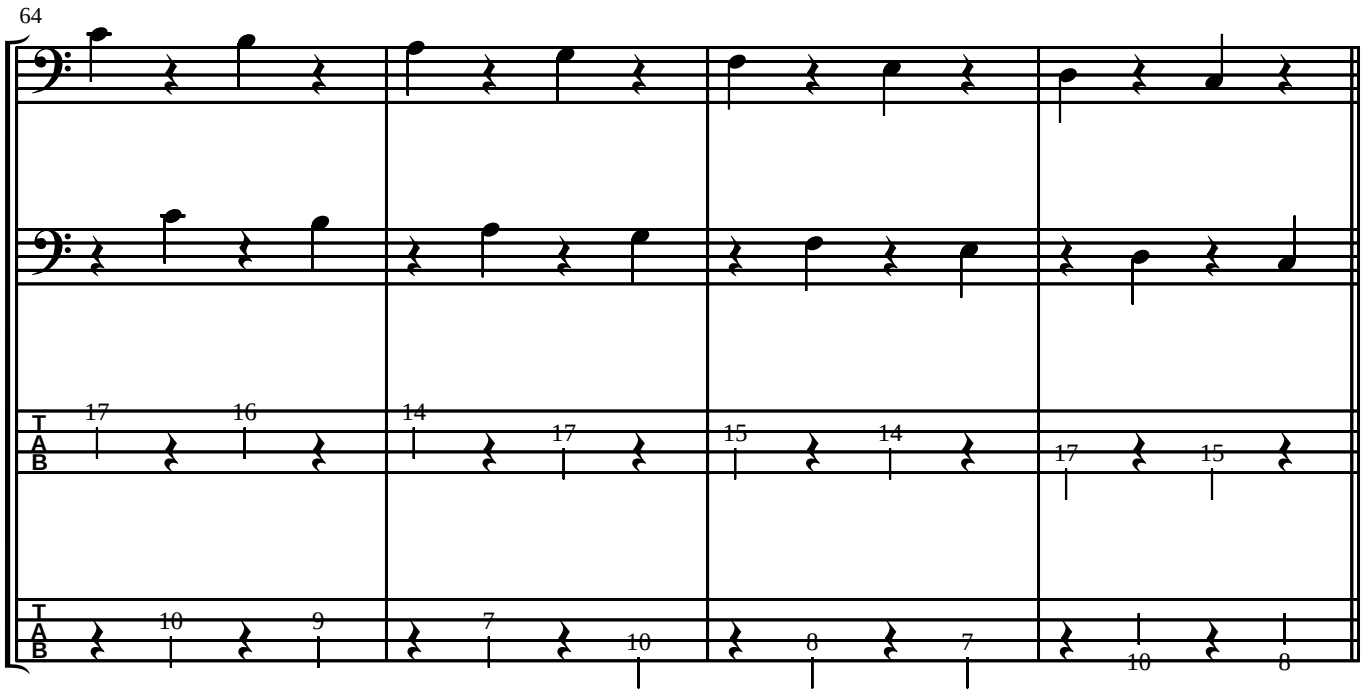
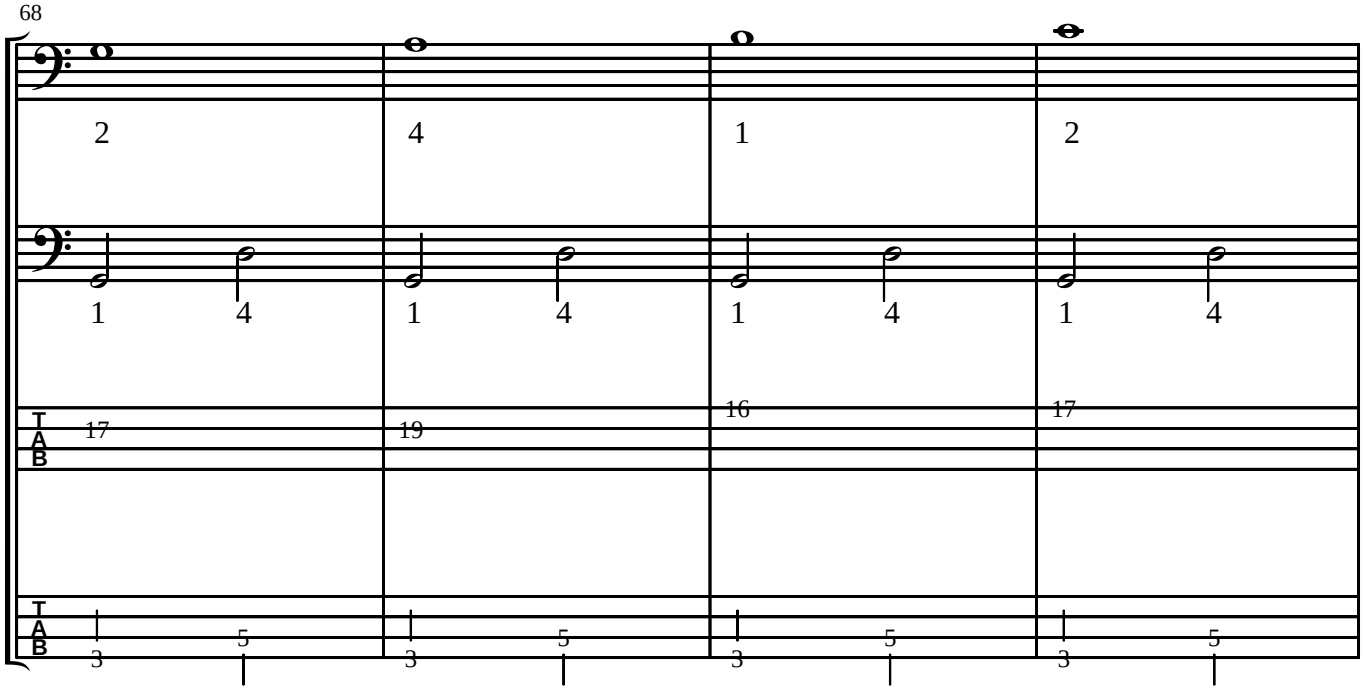
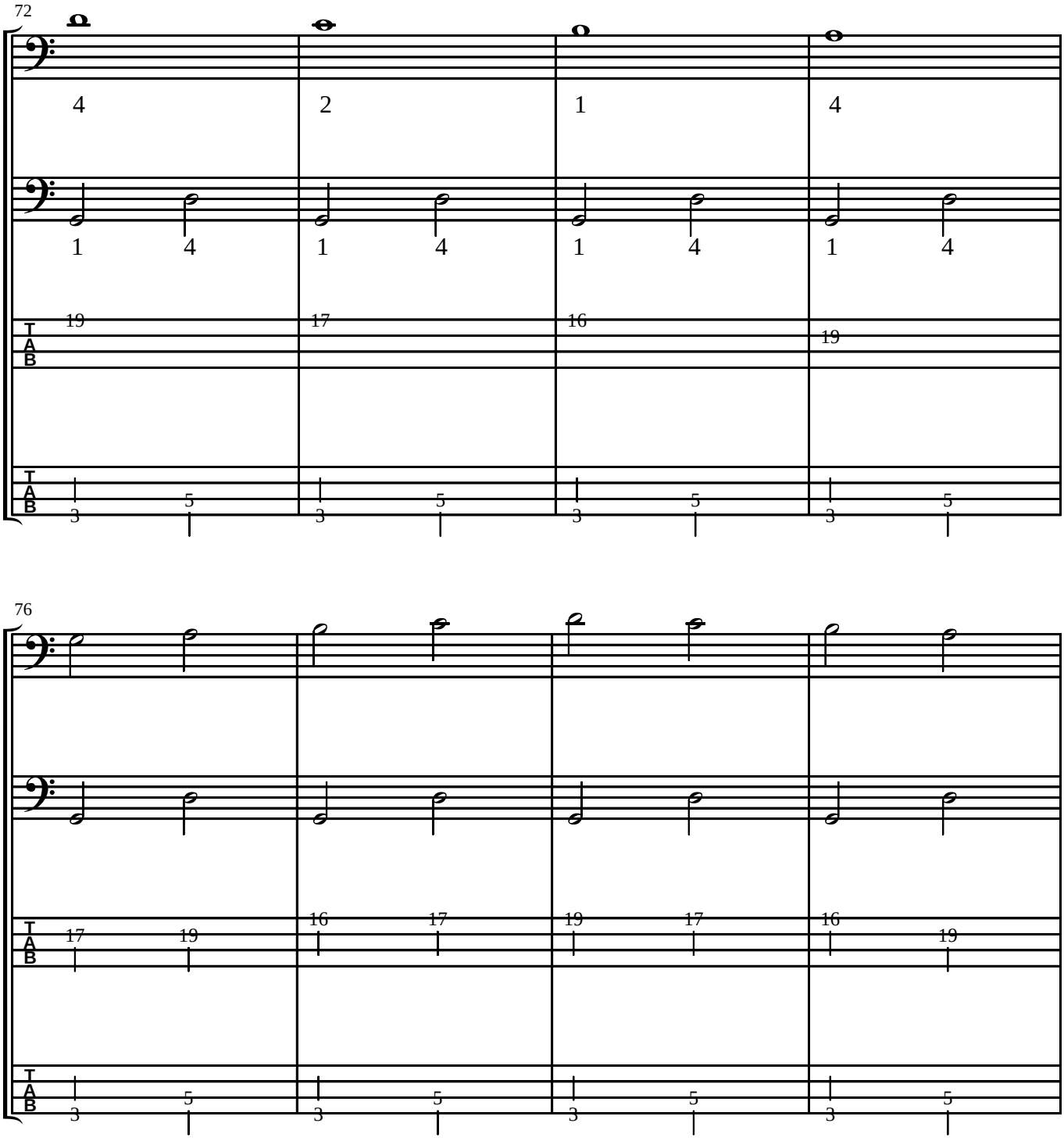


Melodic Accompaniment Exercises

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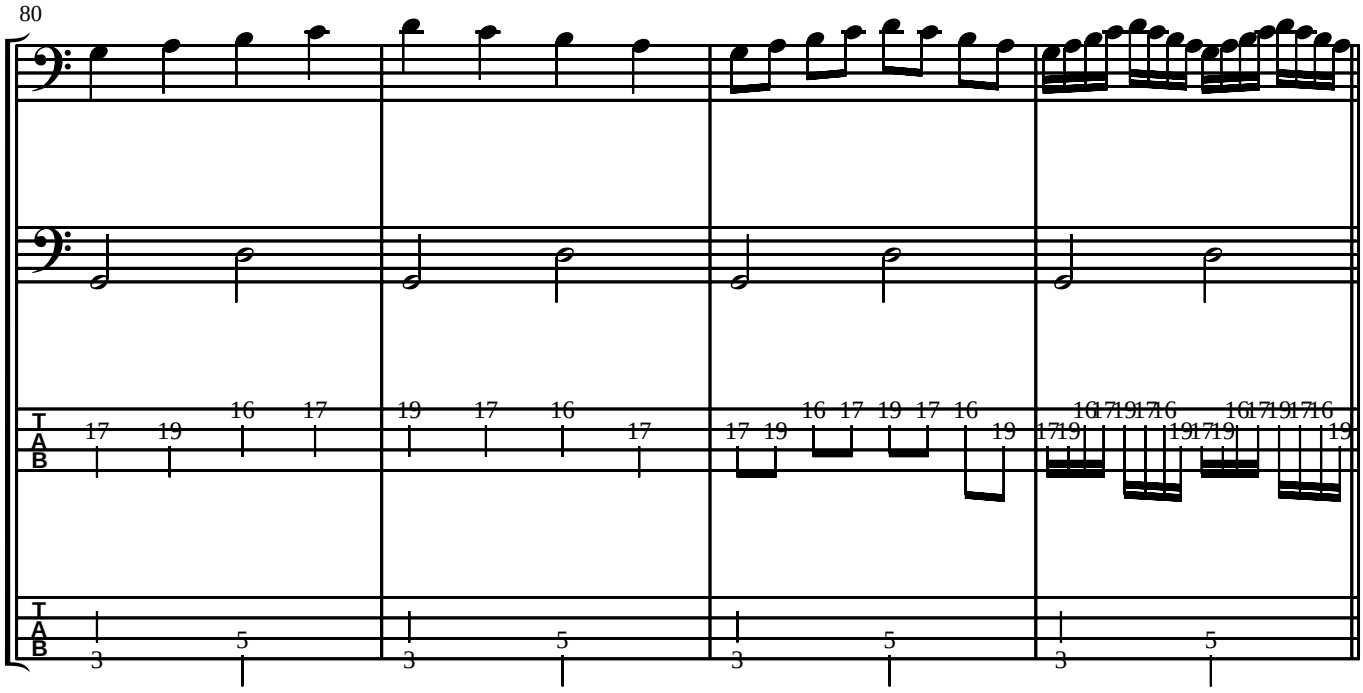
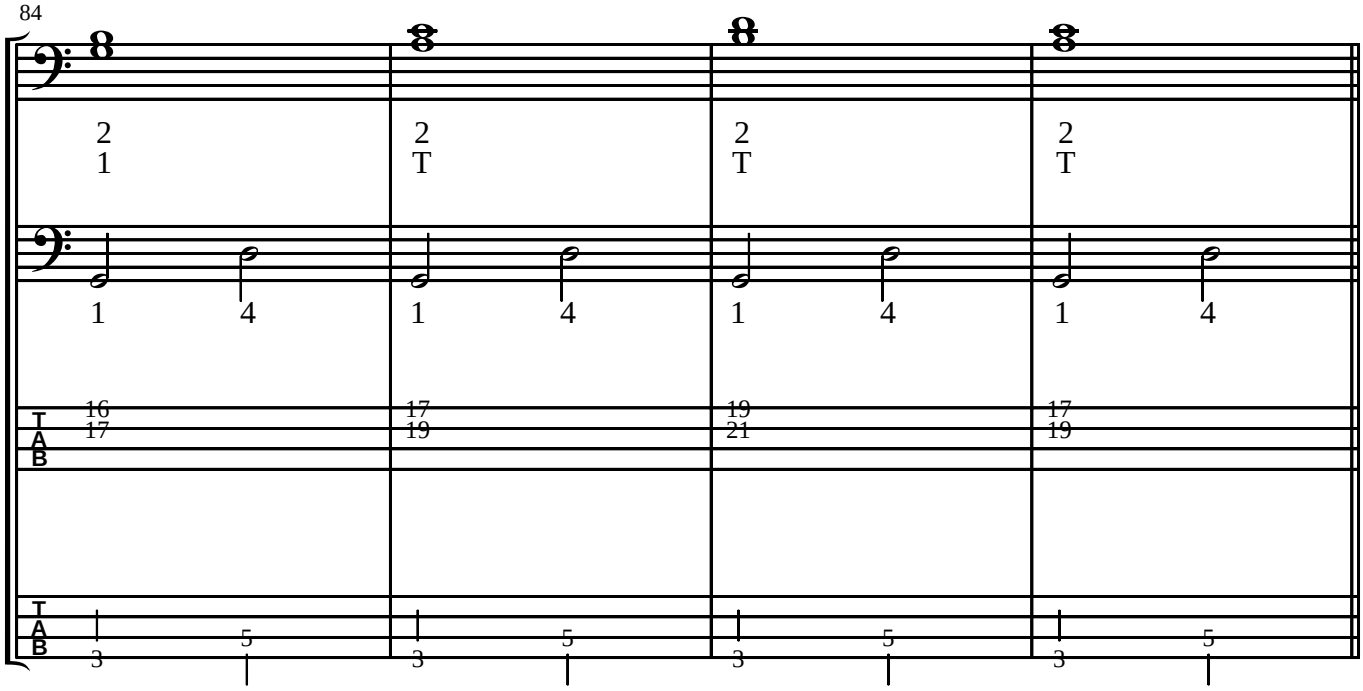


Chordal Accompaniment Exercises



Since the 1970's, solo bass virtuosos such as Michael Manring, Billy Sheehan, Stuart Hamm, and Brian Bromberg have all personalized their own style with two-handed tapping techniques. Today, more and more bassists are using these extremely versatile techniques. Tapping techniques can be applied to a wide range of musical settings. With tapping techniques, you can play melodies, comp chords, and even create amazing exhibitions for solo electric bass. The resulting harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic possibilities created through the utilization of two-handed tapping techniques has opened up an entirely new world of sound for bassists and has allowed the electric bass to become a much more expressive instrument both within the context of a band setting and as a legitimate solo instrument.

Within this lesson, we will systematically analyze the techniques behind two-handed tapping. Even if you have no ambition of becoming a tapping virtuoso, these lessons will present you with another useful tool to integrate into your existing playing style. We will begin with the most fundamental two-handed tapping techniques and in a step-by-step approach progress to much more challenging tapping concepts. Please keep in mind that your primary role as a bassist is to provide the foundation for the music. This basic principle will never change. However, with tapping techniques, you can now add another dimension to your overall approach to bass playing.

Bass Setup: Tapping techniques can be applied to practically any fretted or even fretless bass. However, there are a few things you can do which will make tapping techniques much easier to perform. First, adjust the action or string height as low as you can without creating too much fret-related buzzing. By making this simple modification, tapping becomes much easier because the strings are closer to the instrument, and little effort is then required to make the strings come in contact with the fingerboard. You can raise the height of your pickups to gain more output from your bass. Again, this is a simple adjustment which will assist your hands and allow you a greater range of dynamics. Strings are another important aspect to consider. There are a number of string types which can be used for tapping techniques, but light to medium gauge roundwound strings tend to work the best. Although stainless steel or nickel plated strings will both work nicely, I personally prefer stainless steel strings. Stainless steel strings produce a brighter tone than nickel plated strings and have much more of that clear, piano-like clarity that I prefer. Having properly dressed frets and a good intonation setup are also crucial factors in assisting you to play more in tune.

Getting Started: The concept of tapping is very simple. Instead of playing the instrument with standard fretting and alternating two-finger techniques, you will produce notes with two-handed tapping techniques simply by hammering the strings against the fingerboard with both hands. Since only one finger is required to produce any note, you now have both hands available to use in any position on the fingerboard. The most efficient method to two-handed tapping employs the one-finger-per-fret concept. By using each finger independently, you will be able to achieve maximum proficiency with two-handed tapping techniques. Through the coordination of both hands and by developing your finger dexterity, you will be able to play completely independent voicings.

The Fretting Hand: The technique required of your fretting hand in standard playing position remains essentially the same with tapping. Your thumb should be positioned on the back of the neck between your first and second fingers, and your fingers should be slightly curved over the fingerboard. Simply hammer down the strings to the fingerboard with the tips of your fingers. Hammer the strings just behind the fret wire (on a fretted bass) for optimum tone. Be as precise as possible with your attack while constantly muting all the strings. Only the notes that you are hammering down should sound. Play as legato as possible, and hold each note for its full rhythmic value.

The Picking Hand: To tap on the fingerboard with your standard picking hand, you will now position that hand over the fingerboard. The same basic principles that apply to your fretting hand also apply to your tapping hand: fingers slightly bent, tap near the fingertips, keep unwanted notes from ringing, and hold the notes for their full values. You will notice that your fourth or pinky finger will most likely be the weakest tapping finger. By isolating that finger and working with it independently, you will notice a dramatic increase its strength in no time at all. At first you may miss a few notes when attempting to tap them, but the accuracy of your tapping will increase with practice. Keep your thumb anchored along the top of the neck as much as possible, and slide it along the top as your tapping fingers move from position to position. This technique is referred to as "tracking." Your thumb can also be utilized as another appendage for tapping, but if the thumb is not being used in this fashion, then keep it placed alongside the top of the fingerboard. By anchoring your thumb along the top of the fingerboard, you can generate more power for your tapping fingers, and the tracking method also serves as a point of reference to your position on the fingerboard which will help improve the accuracy of your tapping. Like your fretting hand, tap the strings to the fingerboard just behind the fret wire. Doing so will produce the clearest, most articulate notes possible. Always strive for clear, articulate notes and consistent dynamics in every position across all the strings.

The Lesson: In the notated exercises, we will focus our attention on the most elemental technical aspects of two-handed tapping including increasing finger independence, strength, and coordination between both hands. In the first staff, you will find the notes to be tapped with your standard picking hand, and the notes which you will hammer with your fretting hand are located in the second staff. All the notes located in the top staff are to be tapped one octave higher than notated. Below selected measures you will find suggested fingerings which will help you progress through the entire lesson. As you will notice, all of these examples have been notated with regard to the one-finger-per-fret concept. Be sure to let each note ring into the next note throughout the lesson. Start slowly and gradually increase the tempo. I have also included tablature along with the standard notation so you can see the exact positions on the fingerboard that I am using. The tablature has been included to serve only as a source of reference for those positions.

The examples found in measures 1-4 are finger isolation exercises in unison which will help you adjust to the two-handed tapping position and help you strengthen each finger independently. Again, your picking hand pinky finger will most likely be your weakest tapping finger, but by diligently practicing these finger isolation exercises, you will feel a dramatic increase in finger strength and endurance. Measures 5-10 are comprised of a chromatic exercise to help increase finger dexterity and the coordination between both hands. For some bassists, it is easier to practice each line independently before attempting to play both lines simultaneously. Within measures 11-21, you will find more exercises to strengthen your fingers. Measures 22-33 include unison-based exercises constructed with the C Major scale, and measures 34-35 contain a CMaj7 arpeggio. Note that your hands are in a mirrored position, meaning that when you hammer a note with the first finger on your fretting hand, you tap that same note one octave higher with the first finger of your tapping hand. Experiment with all the numerous intervallic variations within scales and all of the inversions of an arpeggio, and apply these tapping techniques to all the scales and arpeggios you already know. After you feel comfortable playing these unison lines, the next step is to separate the lines and play different rhythms between both hands. Measures 36-59 contain various rhythmic permutations to facilitate the coordination between both hands. These are only a few of the possible rhythmic combinations. For the highly motivated, I would recommend experimenting with more advanced sixteenth-note combinations. In measures 60-67, we use the C Major scale in the mirrored position again, but now we separate the lines between the hands. The exercises found within measures 68-83 demonstrate basic melodic accompaniment. The fretting hand will hammer down a root note and fifth scale degree in the key of G Major on the E and A strings while the tapping hand will outline the first five scale degrees of G Major two octaves higher on the D and G strings. As you will notice, the fretting hand line remains constant, but the tapping hand line becomes increasingly more challenging as the measures progress and the rhythmic subdivisions become smaller.

In the remaining measures, the fretting hand will hammer down a root note and fifth scale degree in the key of G Major on the E and A strings while the tapping hand will provide basic chordal accompaniment two octaves higher on the D and G strings. Once you have successfully concluded the last set of exercises, you are well on the way to achieving complete finger and hand independence with two-handed tapping techniques.

If you play an extended range bass (5, 6, 7+ strings), you will have even more harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic possibilities available at your fingertips. I would recommend that you take all the exercises that I have included in this lesson and transpose them to every position of your fingerboard in order to achieve a complete mastery of two-handed tapping techniques. The permutations possible with these basic exercises are virtually limitless. Experiment with as many variations as time allows, and let your ears be the final judge as to what does and does not sound good with tapping techniques.

In future tapping lessons, we will delve deeper into the art of tapping with more solo electric bass tapping techniques including chordal accompaniment, melody with accompaniment, and completely independent voices. We will also study and analyze various examples across a wide range of styles.