Saxophone Warm-up
Steven Stusek

The most important aspect of each day's practice for me is my warm-up period. A good warm-up prepares the muscles in your arms, fingers, face, and breathing apparatus for performance, and gives you the best chance to achieve your ideal tone. I have used variations of the following warm-up nearly every day of my career, and I believe the following elements are essential to developing a beautiful saxophone tone and a fluent technique. Keep in mind that this is a warm-up. The goal is to relax the body and mind and prepare yourself for learning new musical elements. We are warming up all muscle groups, from small to large. One aspect should lead to the next and cover all areas of saxophone performance. These aspects include breathing, tone production, intonation, vibrato, homogeneity of sound, efficient finger motion, and extremes of range.

I always begin with long tones. I use a metronome and a tuner for this exercise as well as with all of the following exercises. Set the metronome at 60. I first play a descending chromatic scale starting on middle B with a forte dynamic. I play each note for four counts making sure that each note has a beautiful tone and is perfectly in tune. Breath when necessary, but only between notes. Descend in this manner to low Bb. I then return to B and ascend chromatically until I reach altissimo E, the highest note I currently can consistently play in tune and with a good tone (see Saxophone Warm-up, p. 3). By performing this exercise I know I have played every note on the saxophone with a beautiful tone and in tune, every day. Any note that does not sound beautiful or is not in tune can easily be fixed at this stage. After you can play this long tone exercise comfortably I suggest introducing vibrato. I alternate straight tone daily with 4, 5, or 6 vibrations per beat. Vibrato will be covered in a separate article.

Next I begin to introduce simple finger patterns to the warm-up. I use what in North Carolina is known as the "All-State pattern." I play through all major scales in this pattern (see Saxophone Warm-up, p. 4), two octaves, beginning with Bb, and ascending chromatically. When you can do this easily with the metronome at 60 begin to introduce the third octave into the pattern. Remember, speed is not the goal here. Playing with a warm, beautiful tone, throughout the range of the instrument, with a relaxed facility, should be the goal. Allow your fingers to remain in contact with the keys at all times, helping to eliminate extraneous motion, which can lead to tension.

Using the same progression I next play all major scales in thirds, utilizing the full range. The metronome should still be set to 60. The focus here is the same – a beautiful, homogeneous tone, a fluid, relaxed technique (p. 5).

My hands have begun to warm up and are relaxed, so I begin to play my scales more quickly. I keep the metronome at 60, but I am playing twice as fast – 32nds (or 16ths

at 120). I begin on low Bb and play each major scale twice through, full range, slurred, all notes even. I then play all my harmonic minor scales, again beginning on low Bb and ascending chromatically.

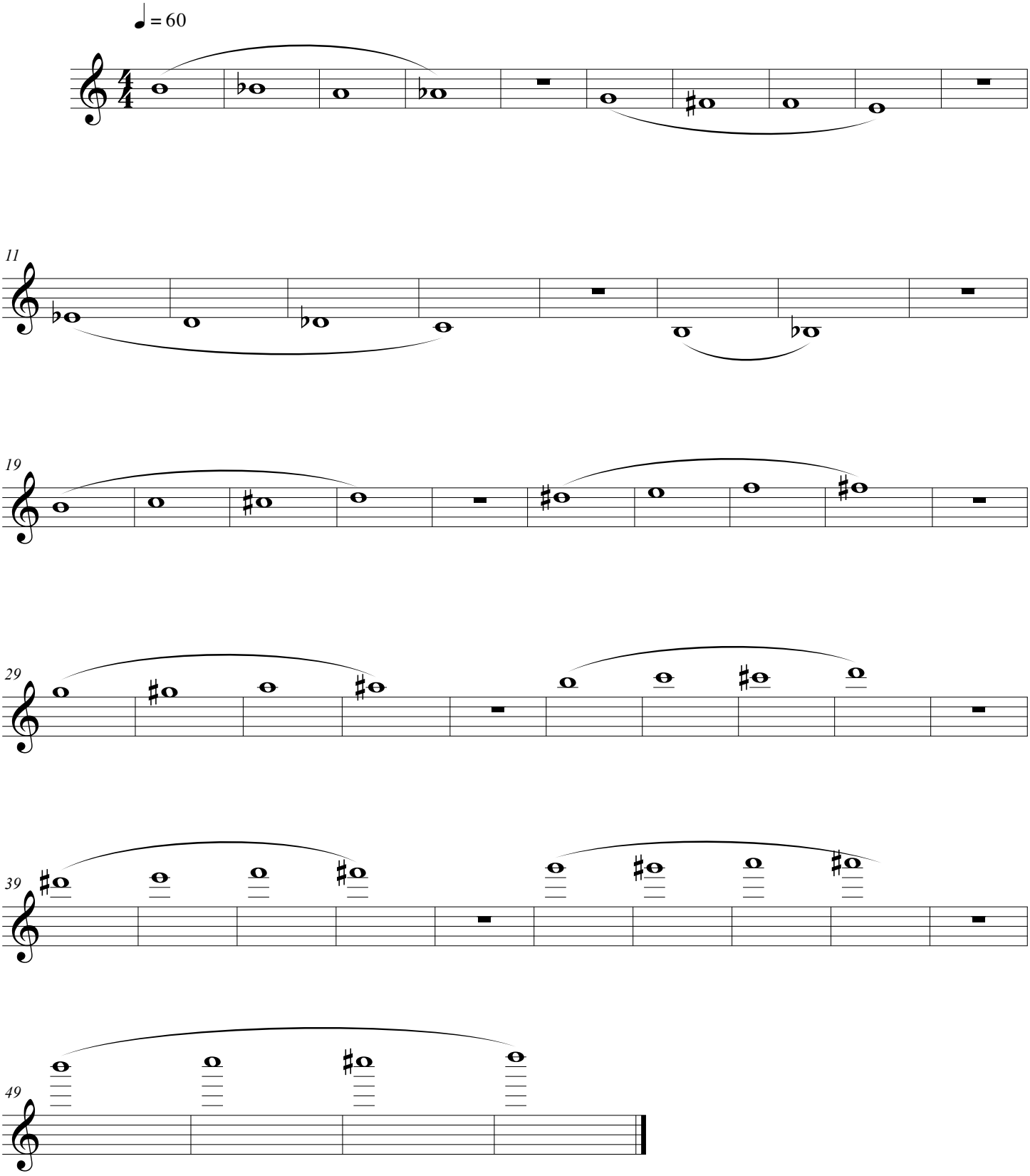
By this point my fingers are beginning to feel very fluid and I concentrate on the tongue. I used to play a pattern of arpeggios and scales for this, but I have recently found an etude that is very similar but much better. This is page 22 of the Langenus studies for clarinet (see Saxophone Warm-up, p. 7). I do this at 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, and 180. I usually single tongue the exercise through 150 and begin double tonguing at 160. I suggest you begin at 100 and repeat each time a little faster. Feel free to take the last note up an octave! There is no ultimate tempo goal here, though this exercise is essential in developing a light, quick, and natural articulation. Clarinetist Robert Spring believes this exercise is the single most important one for developing a quick articulation.

Finally, I repeat the all-state pattern, but this time ascending one octave only, but all notes articulated. I start at 140 and then do 145, 150, 155, 160, 165, 170, and on good days, 175.

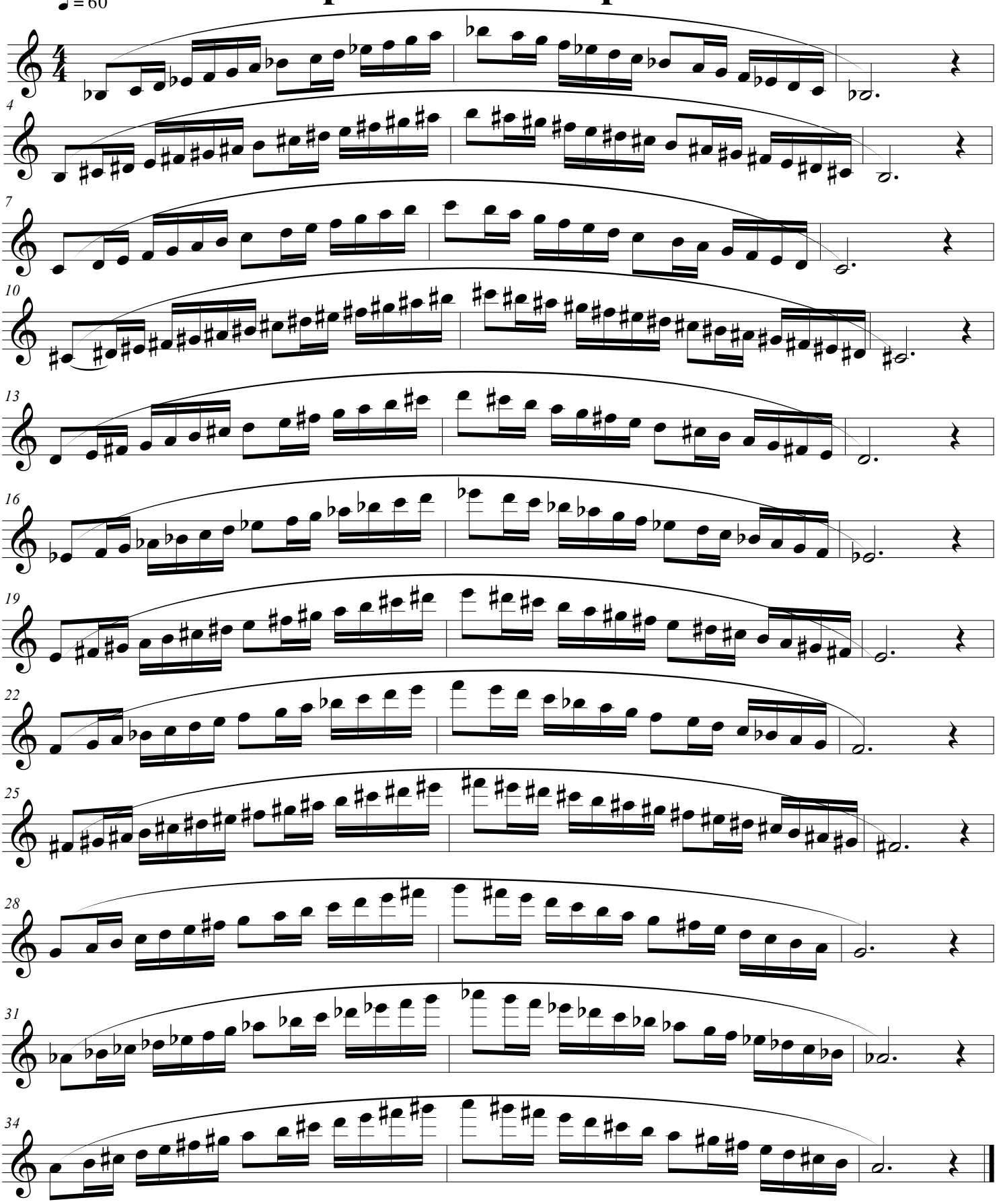
This warm-up takes me anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour to get through. Most days I do a little more than is mentioned here (minor thirds and major and minor arpeggios), but I do this at the very least, and I do it every day, in this order. I don't vary my routine on days I am giving performances. After the warm up I practice performance music for an additional 45 minutes to an hour.

Please note, this is not intended to be a scale guide. Far from it! The idea is simply to lay the foundations for the most important aspects of performance: to develop a beautiful tone, to play in tune, to develop a fluid technique, to have a quick articulation.

Saxophone Warm-up: Long Tones



Saxophone Warm-up: Scales



MAJOR SCALES - THIRDS

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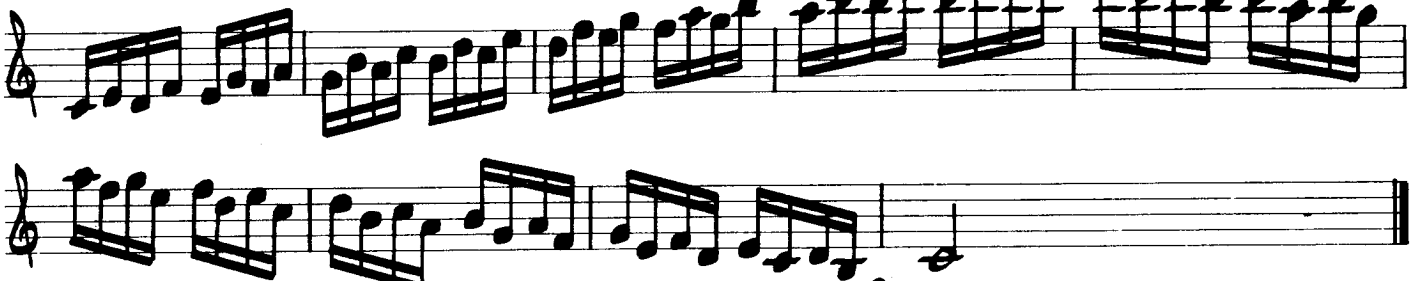

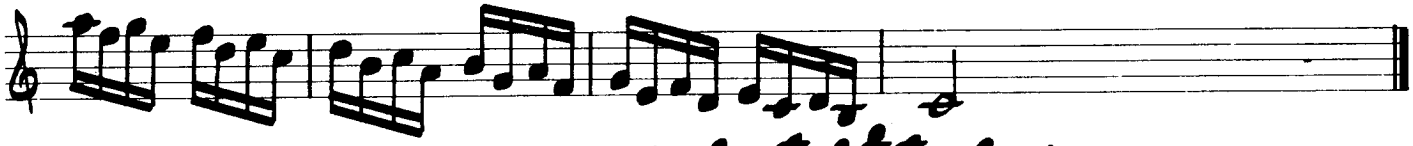

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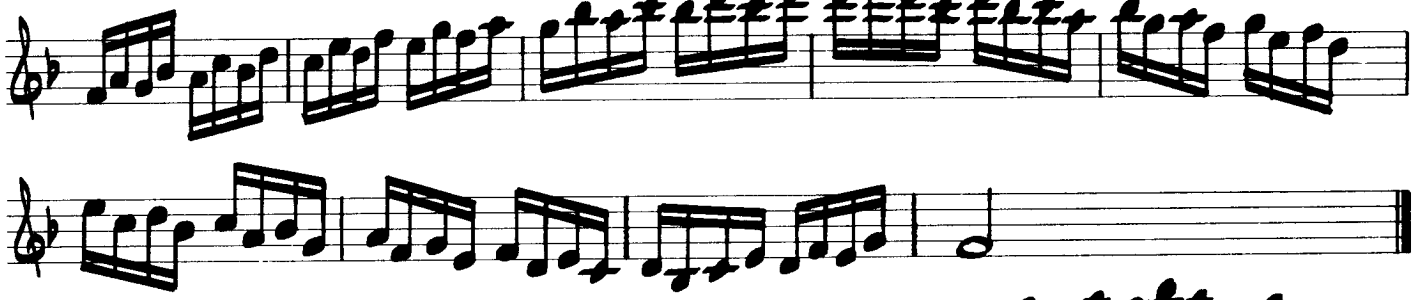
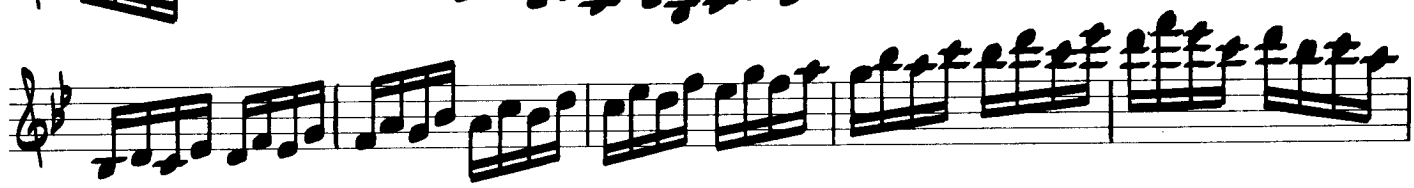
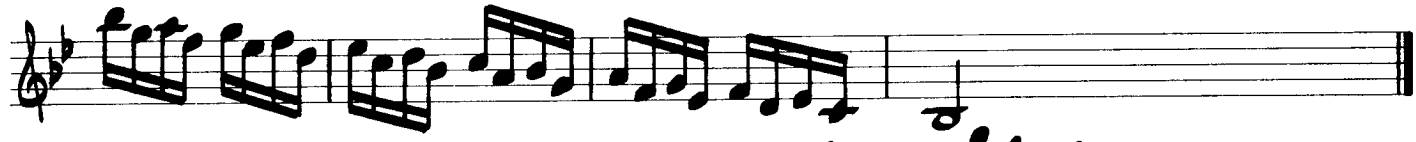
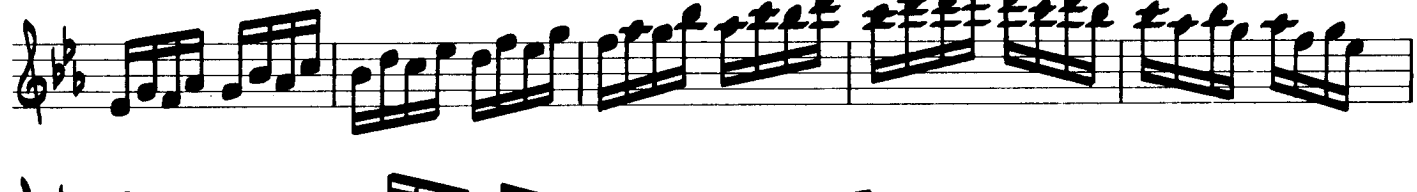


B♭

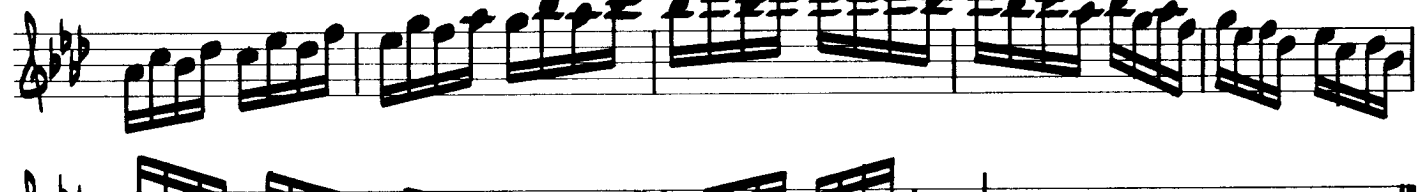


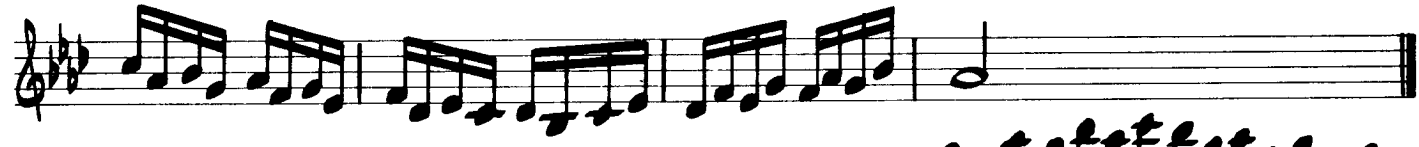


E♭



A♭





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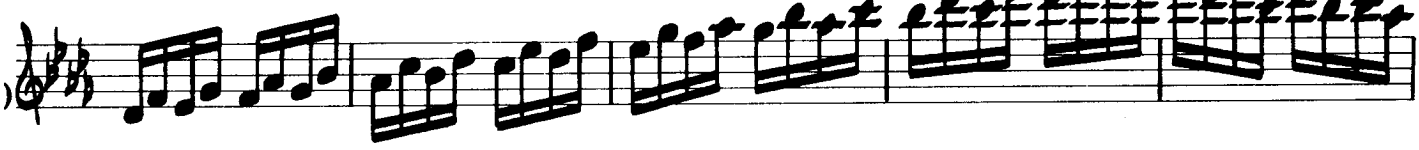
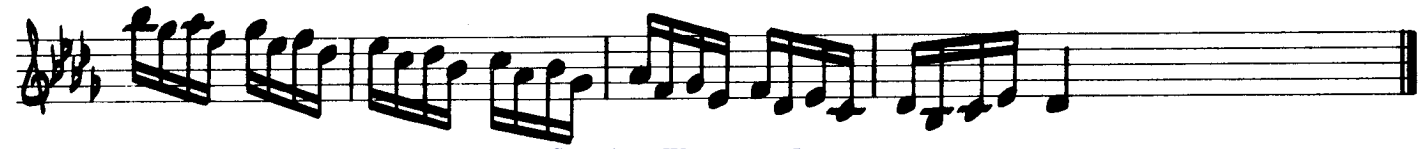
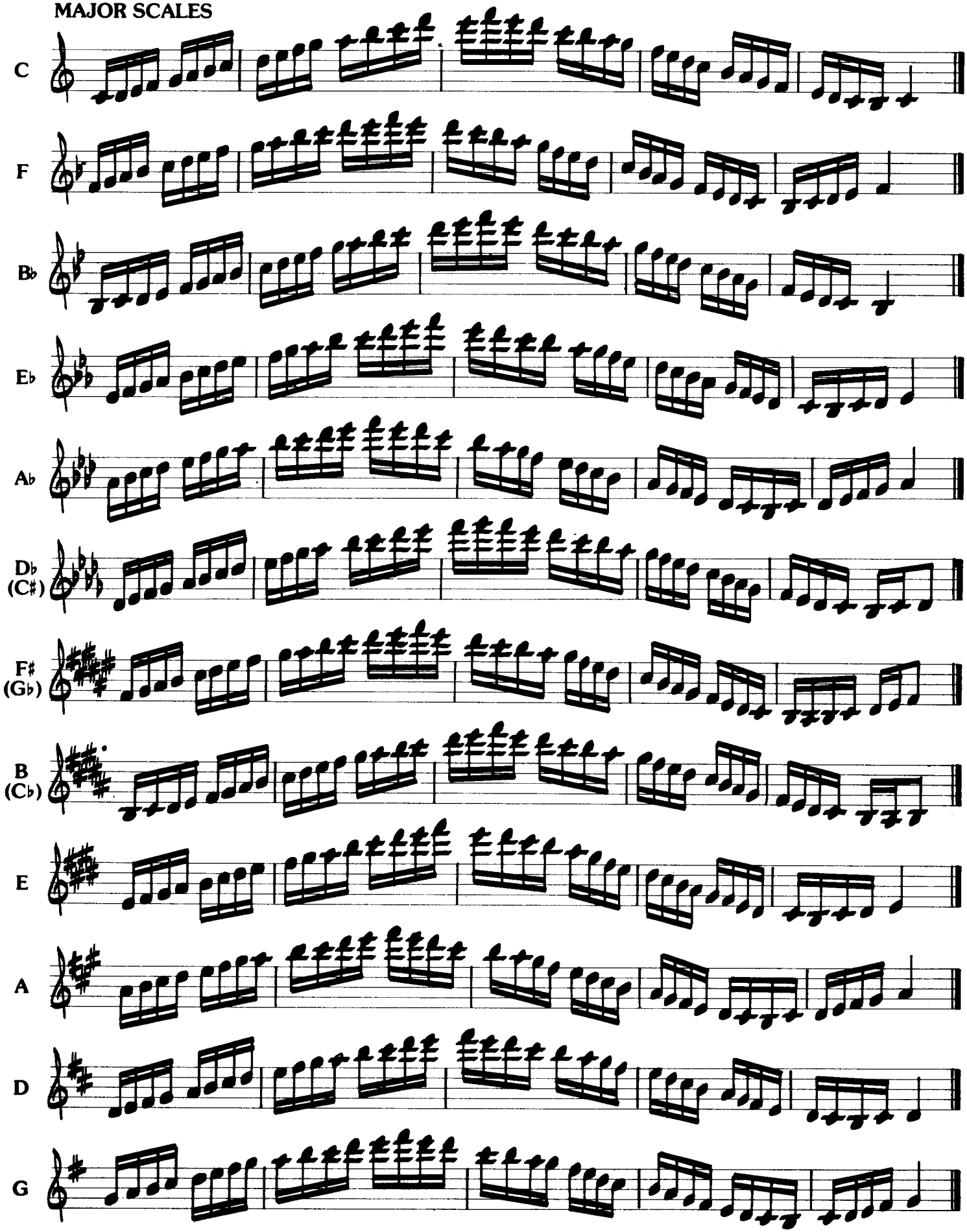




MAJOR SCALES



3 Studies for acquiring a light Staccato

G. LANGENUS

Allegretto ♪ = 144

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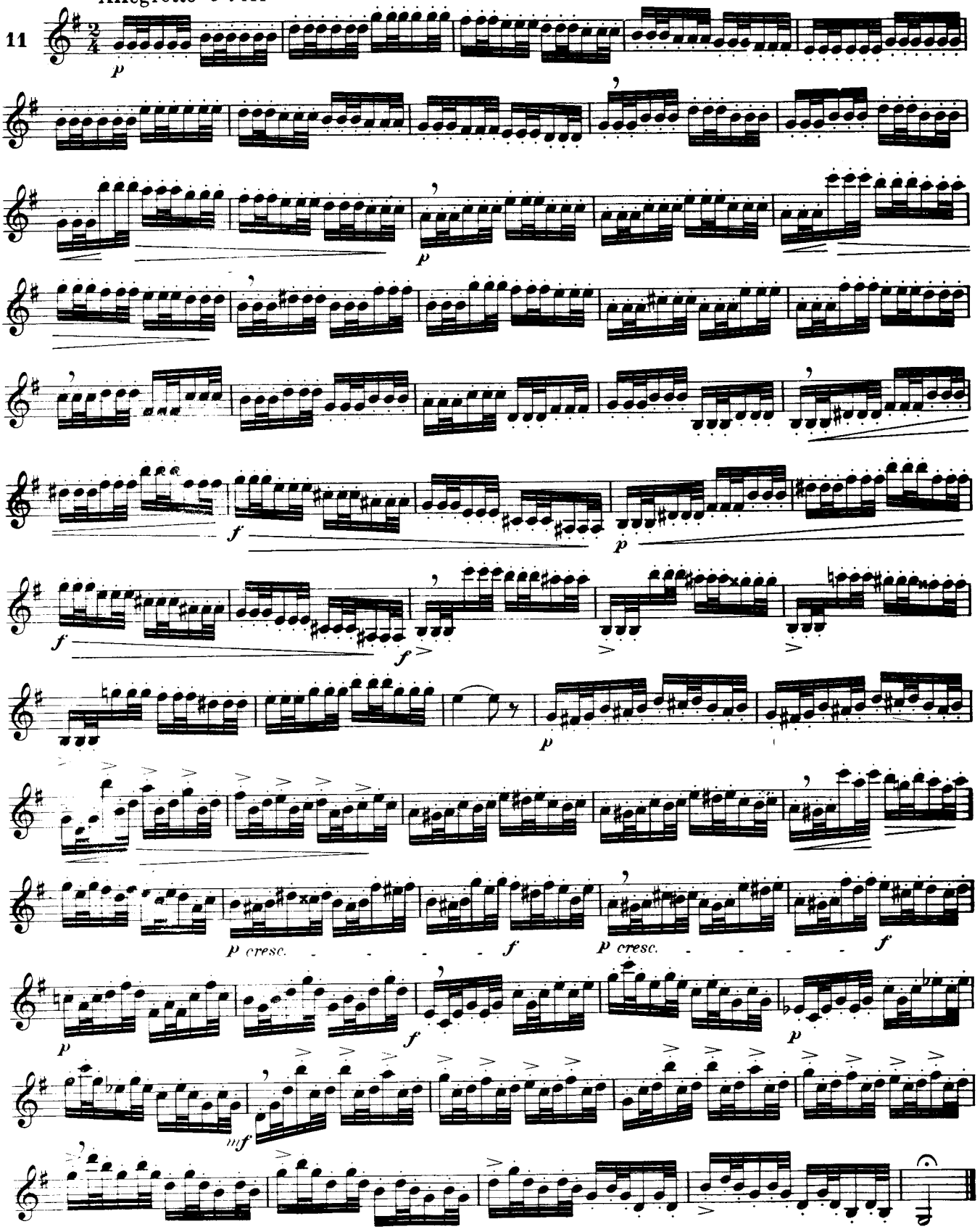

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