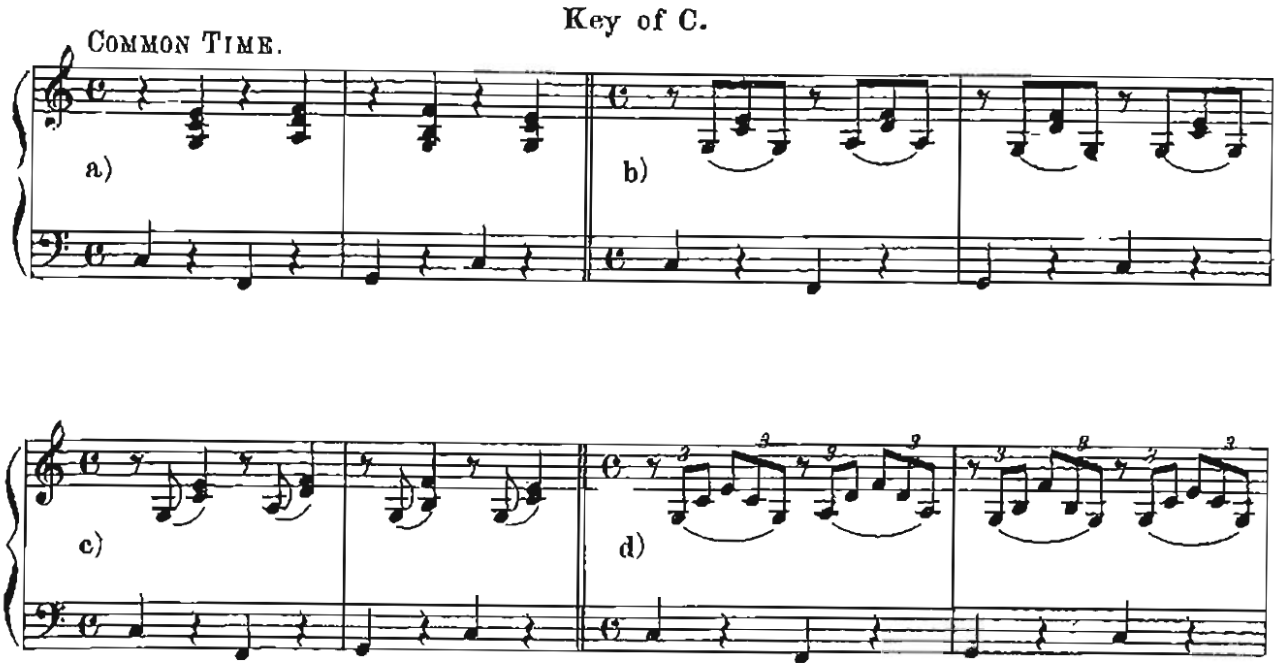
A JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY FOR MUSIC THEORY

MTO 31.3 Examples: Martin, The Evolution of Improvisation in Early Jazz Piano Pedagogy

(Note: audio, video, and other interactive examples are only available online)
https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.25.31.3/mto.25.31.3.martin.html

Example 1. Theodore La Motte (1894, 8) accompaniment forms

The following illustrates how accompaniments may be varied in form. Attention is called to the fact that the notes used at b, c and d are the same as at a but placed in different forms, giving variety which greatly enhances the accompaniment.



Example 2. Scott Joplin's *School of Ragtime* ([1908] 1988, 2)

SCHOOL OF RAGTIME

BY

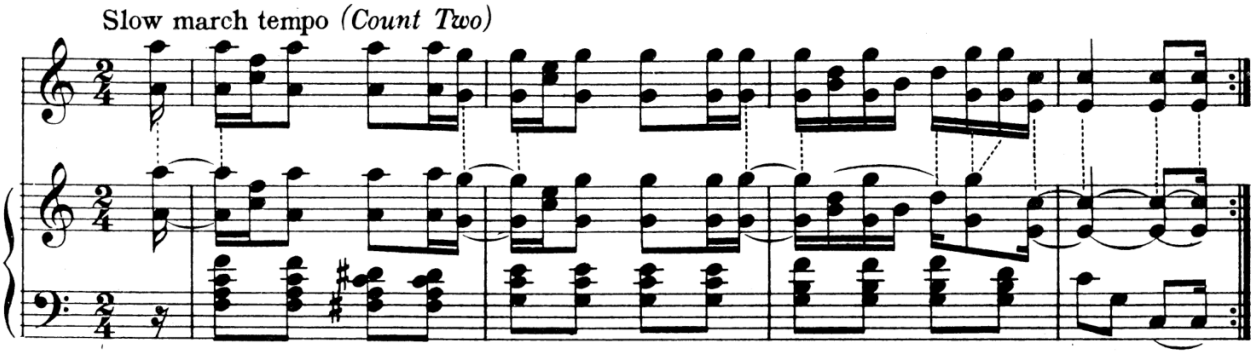
SCOTT JOPLIN

Composer of "Maple Leaf Rag."

REMARKS– What is scurrilously called ragtime is an invention that is here to stay. That is now conceded by all classes of musicians. That all publications masquerading under the name of ragtime are not the genuine article will be better known when these exercises are studied. That real ragtime of the higher class is rather difficult to play is a painful truth which most pianists have discovered. Syncopations are no indication of light or trashy music, and to shy bricks at "hateful ragtime" no longer passes for musical culture. To assist amateur players in giving the "Joplin Rags" that weird and intoxicating effect intended by the composer is the object of this work.

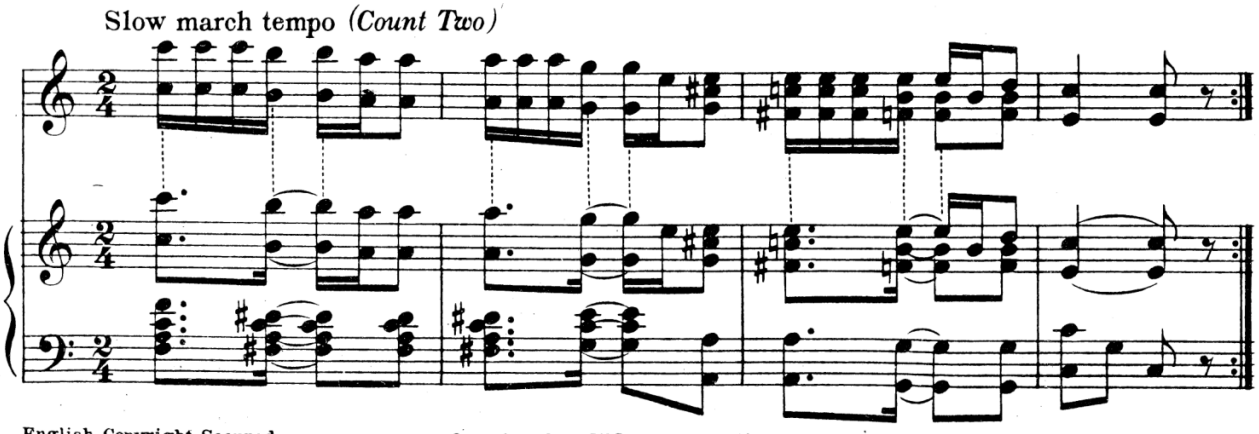
Exercise No. 1.

It is evident that, by giving each note its proper time and by scrupulously observing the ties, you will get the effect. So many are careless in these respects that we will specify each feature. In this number, strike the first note and hold it through the time belonging to the second note. The upper staff is not syncopated, and is not to be played. The perpendicular dotted lines running from the syncopated note below to the two notes above will show exactly its duration. Play slowly until you catch the swing, and never play ragtime fast at any time.



Exercise No. 2.

This style is rather more difficult, especially for those who are careless with the left hand, and are prone to vamp. The first note should be given the full length of three sixteenths, and no more. The second note is struck in its proper place and the third note is not struck but is joined with the second as though they were one note. This treatment is continued to the end of the exercise.

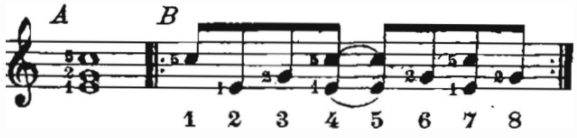


Example 3. Axel Christensen's "first ragtime movement" (1909, 7)

The First Ragtime Movement.

The Christensen system of playing ragtime is based on three different ragtime movements to which we will get the fingers accustomed. We will proceed to take up the first movement.

Example "A" shows a chord, composed of the three notes e, g, and c. Example "B" shows how the same chord is played in the first movement.



The large numbers represent the beats or counts and in this lesson ♪ = 1 beat, ♩ = 2 beats, 𝅗𝅥 = 4 beats and 𝅝 - 8 beats.

The small numbers indicate the fingering, 1 being the thumb (in either hand), 2 the finger next to the thumb, etc.

The first ragtime movement is always played according to the following table which should be memorized:

Count 1 = top note.
" 2 = bottom note.
" 3 = middle note.
" 4 = top and bottom notes.
" 5 = tied and held.
" 6 = middle note.
" 7 = top and bottom notes.
" 8 = middle note.

When there are two middle notes to a chord, they are considered the same as one middle note and are both played together wherever the middle note is called for.

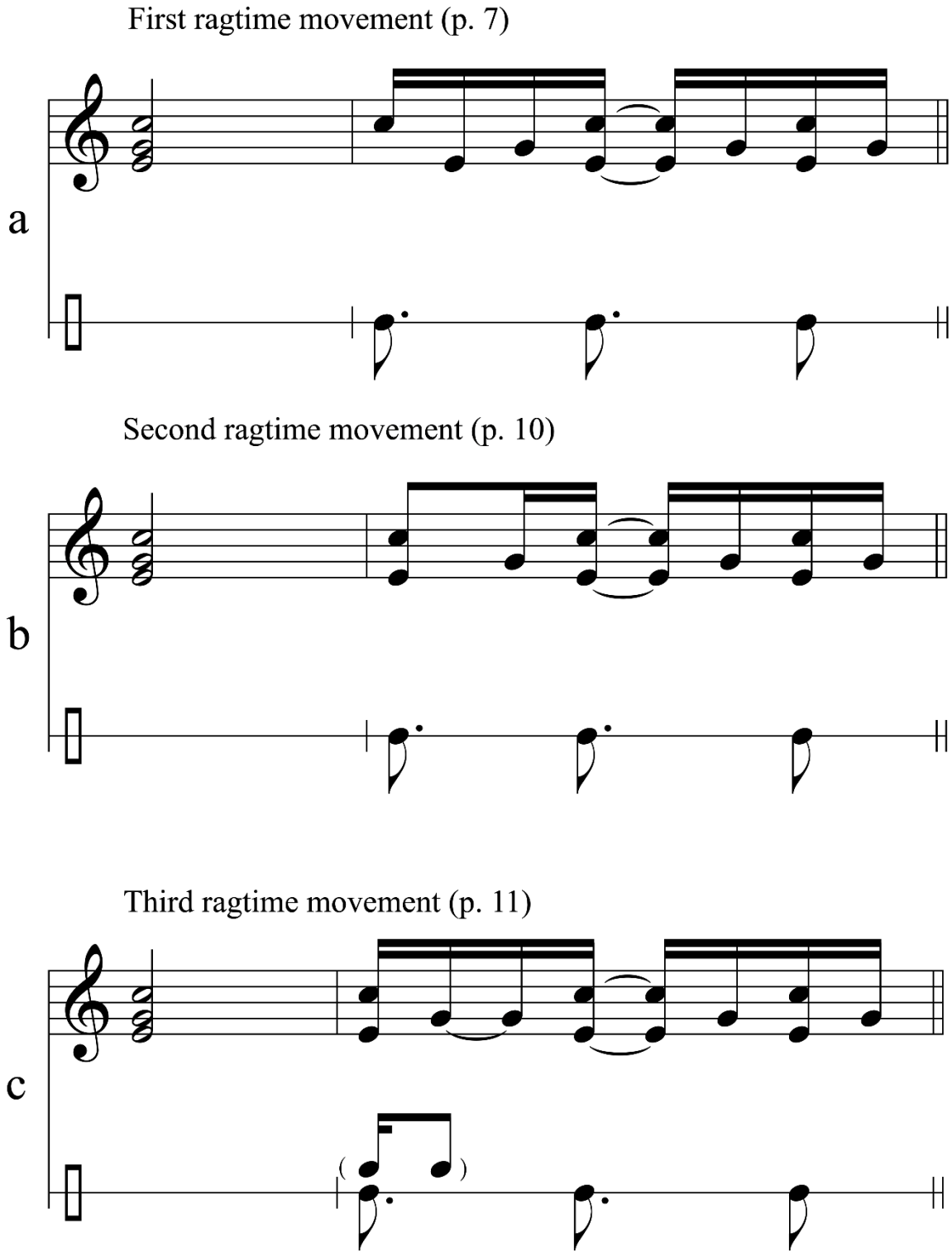
Your touch must be strong and firm, your time smooth and even. Never let go of one key until you strike the next.

All the exercises and pieces in this book should be played very slowly at first (each hand seperately, if necessary) gradually increasing the speed.

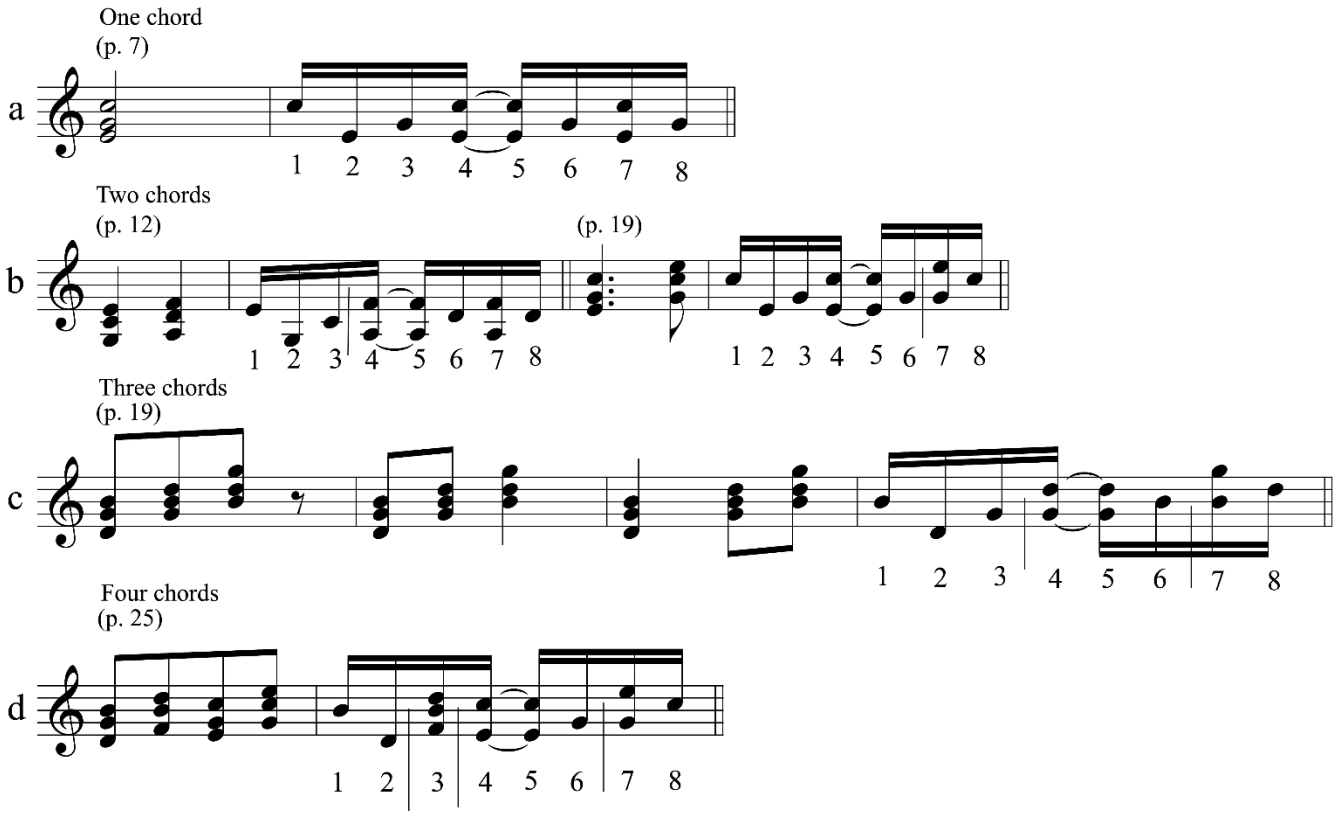
Count the beats out loud.

The bass notes are played on counts 1, 3, 5, and 7.

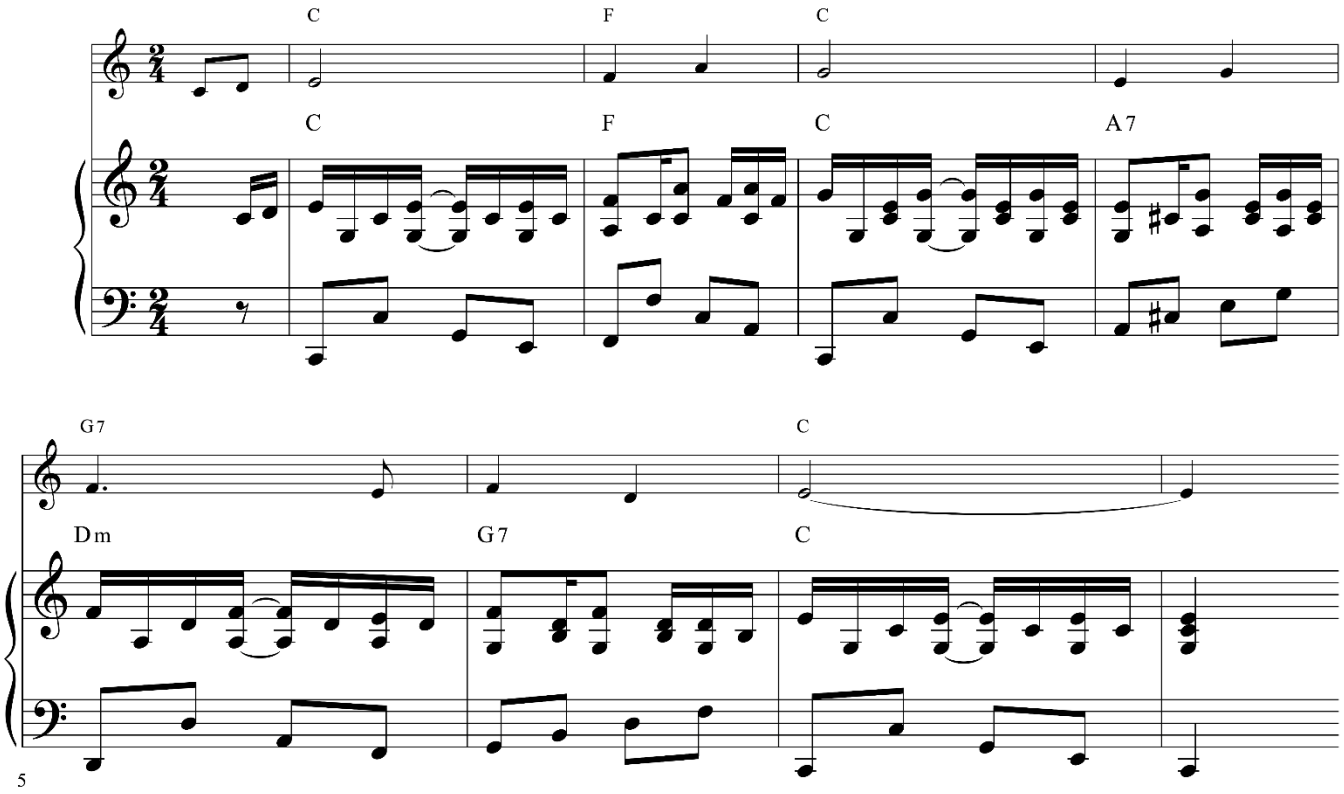
Example 4. Christensen's second and third ragtime movements compared to the first movement (1909, 10–11)



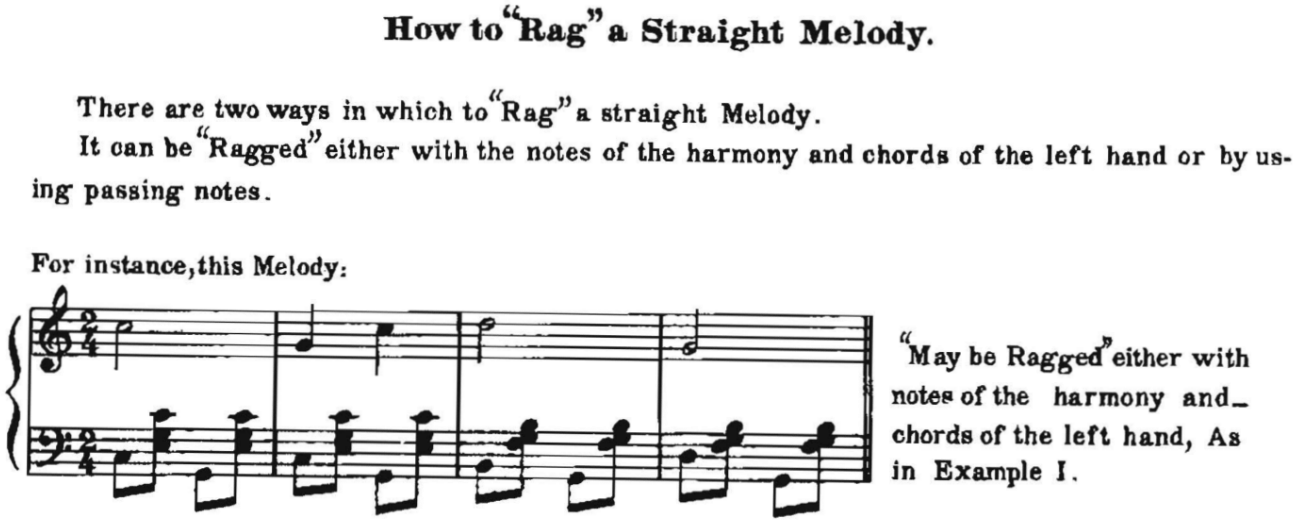
Example 5. Christensen's demonstration of four ways to rag a melody in the first ragtime movement



Example 6. Christensen's ragtime interpretation of "Home, Sweet Home" (1909, 16)



Example 7. H. J. Beckerman's "straight" version of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (1918, 33)



How to "Rag" a Straight Melody.

There are two ways in which to "Rag" a straight Melody.

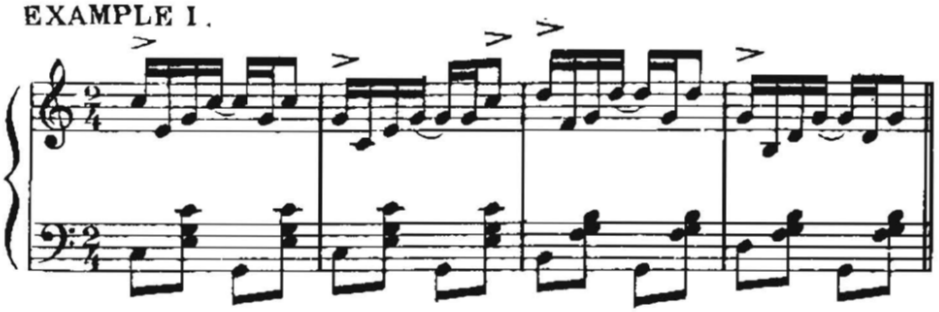
It can be "Ragged" either with the notes of the harmony and chords of the left hand or by using passing notes.

For instance, this Melody:

"May be Ragged" either with notes of the harmony and chords of the left hand, As in Example I.

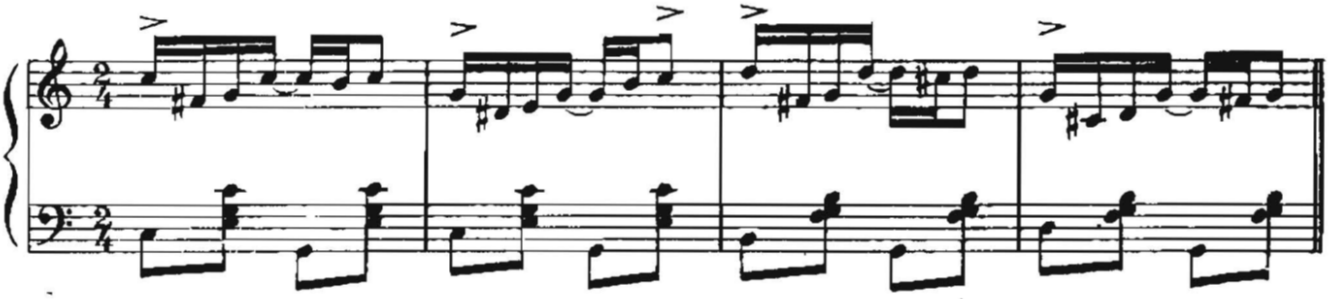
Example 8. Beckerman's two ragtime versions of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (1918, 34)

EXAMPLE I.



Or by using passing notes; as long as you remain in the same key, as in example II.

EXAMPLE II.



Almost any figure may be used to "Rag" a straight Melody.

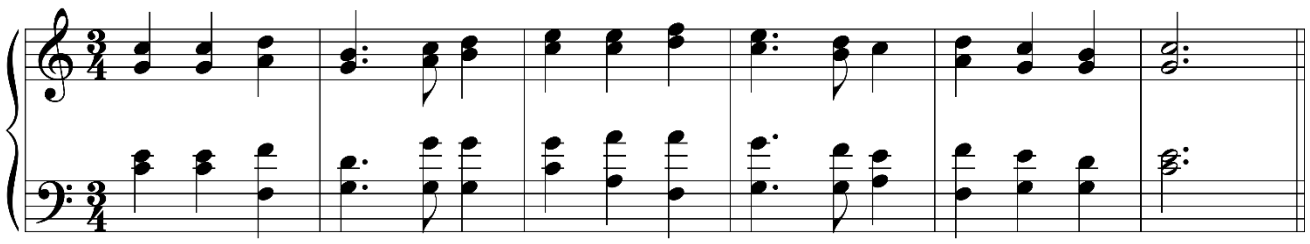
In the above examples I use figure V. on page 18.

In order to become familiar with "Ragging" a straight Melody, practice the above by using all of the principle figures on pages 17, 18, 19 & 20.

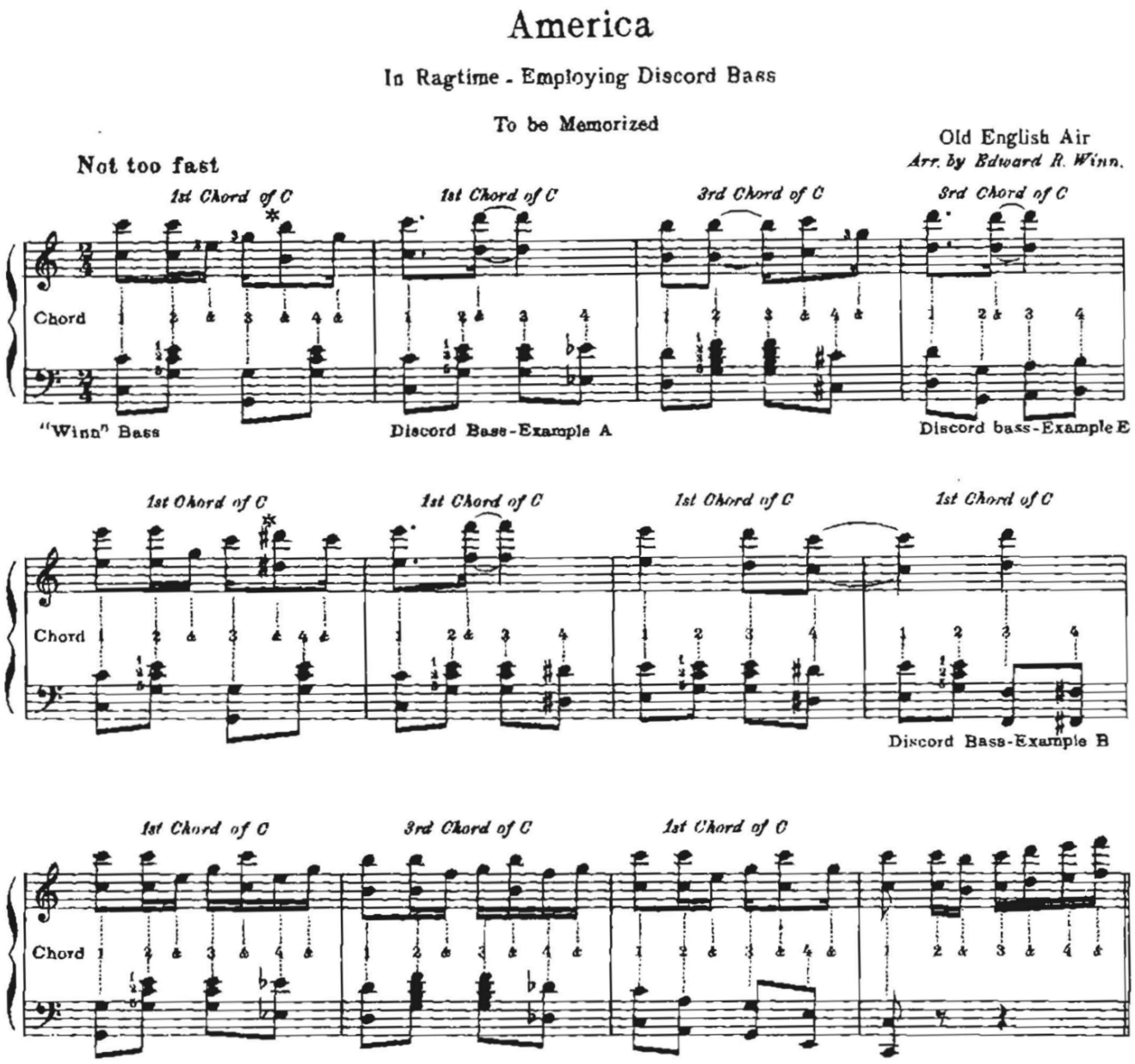
The melody should be more prominent than the syncopation, therefore a slight accent is necessary.

Following are a few more examples in "Ragging" a straight melody.

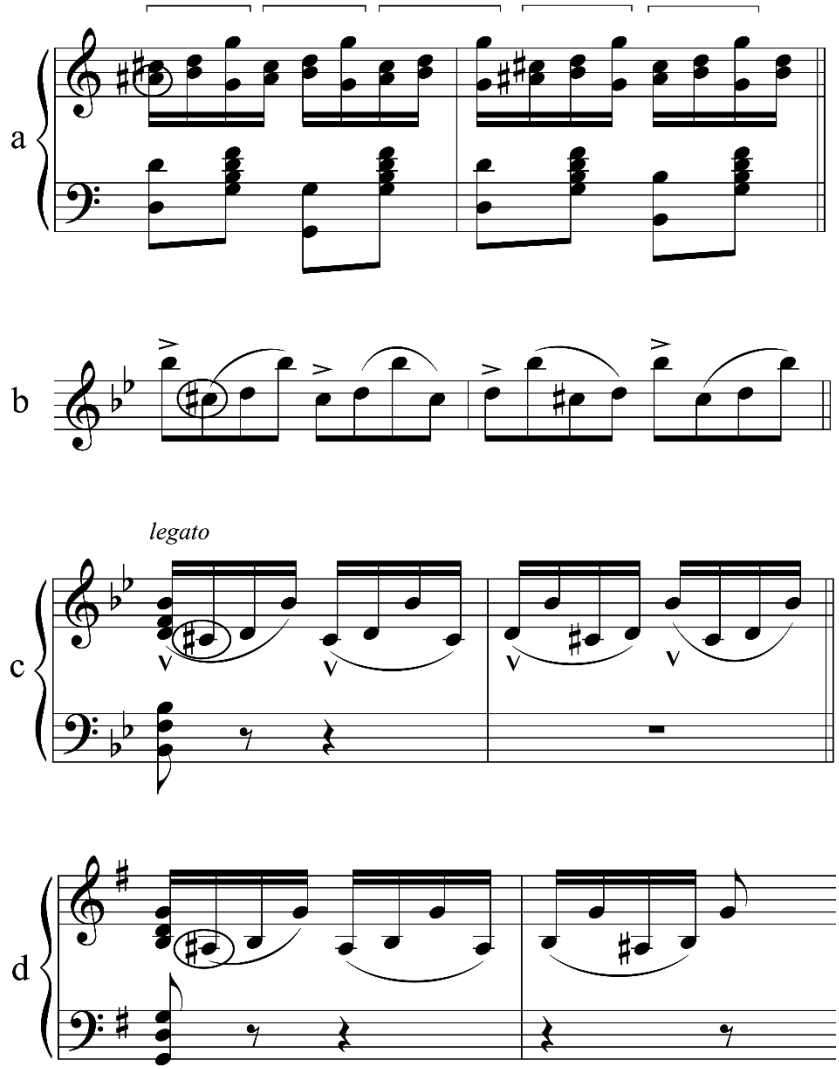
Example 9. Basic choral arrangement of "America" ("God Save the King/Queen")



Example 10. Edward Winn's ragtime version of "America" with "discord bass" (1920, 16)



Example 11. "Secondary rag" in a 1905 ragtime work and as "breaks" in blues works



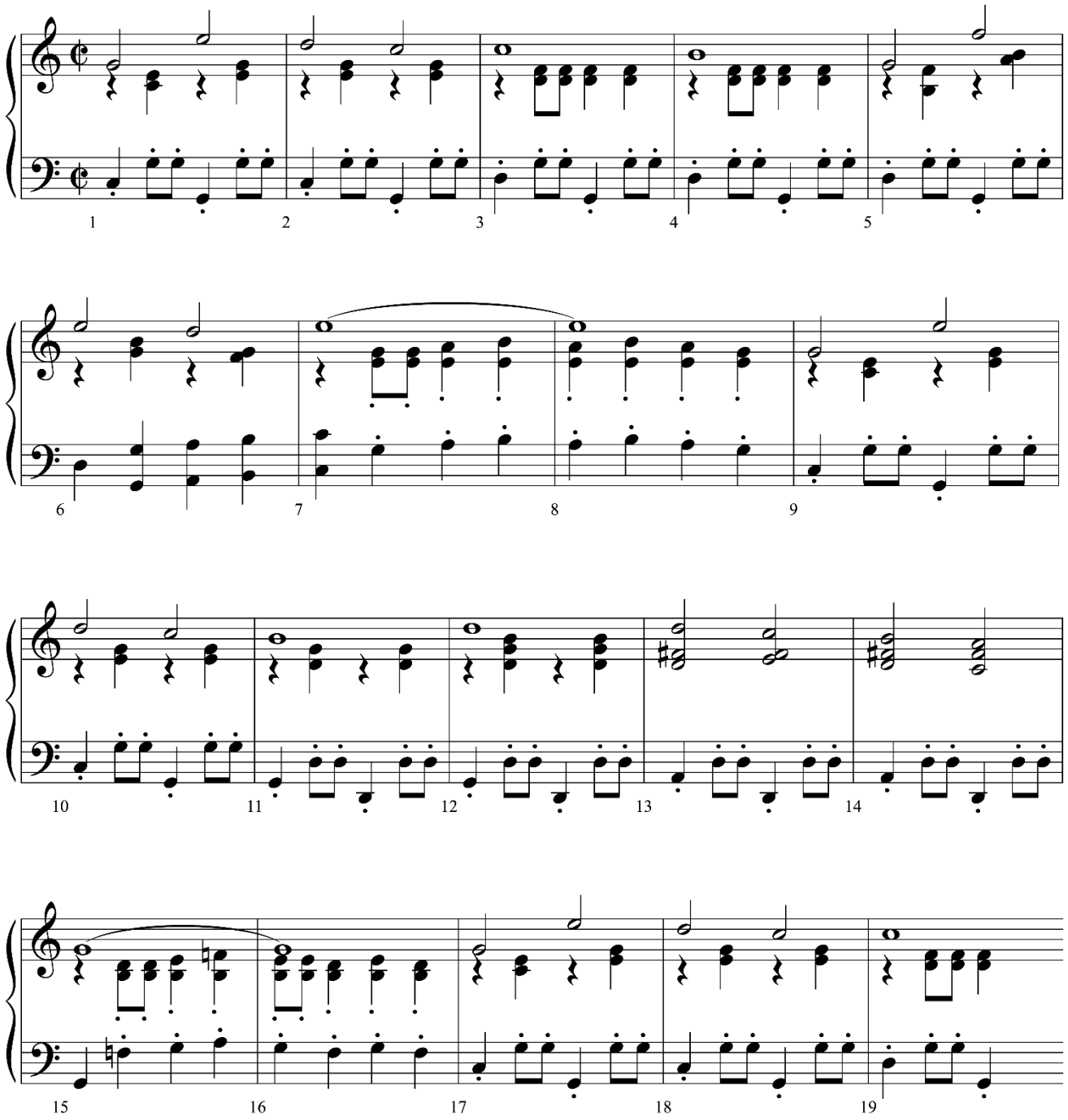
Joseph Northup, "The Cannon Ball"
(Chicago: Harold Rositer, 1905)
[Berlin (1980, 132)]
(Chicago: Victor Kremer, 1905)
[Tichenor 1979, 204]

Paul Wyer, violinist in Handy's
Memphis Band, ca. 1909
[Niles 1926, 16]

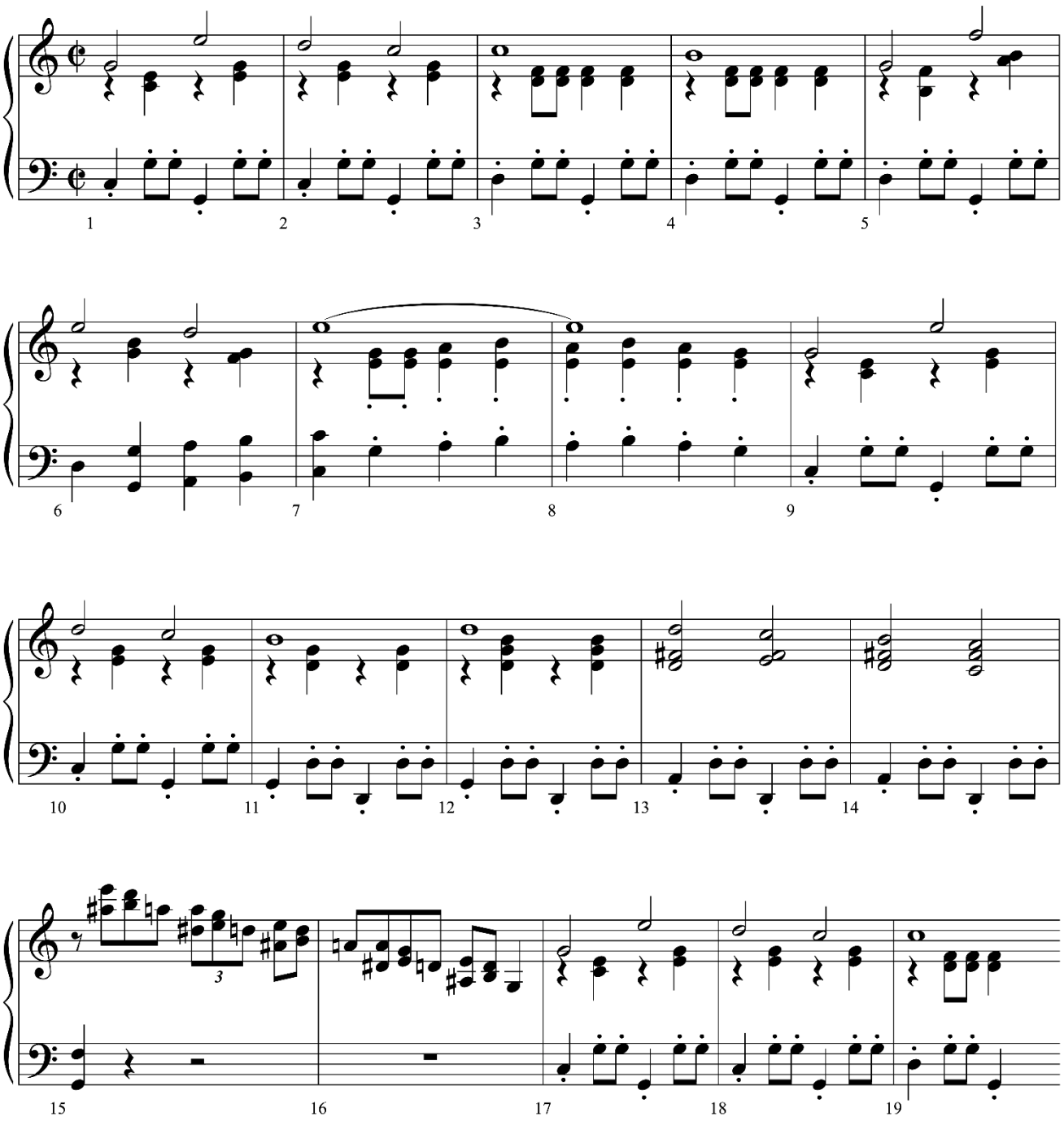
W. C. Handy, "The Memphis Blues"
(Memphis: Theron C. Bennett, 1912)
[Jasen 1998, 81]

W. C. Handy, "The St. Louis Blues"
(Memphis: Pace & Handy Music, 1914)
[Jasen 1998, 120]

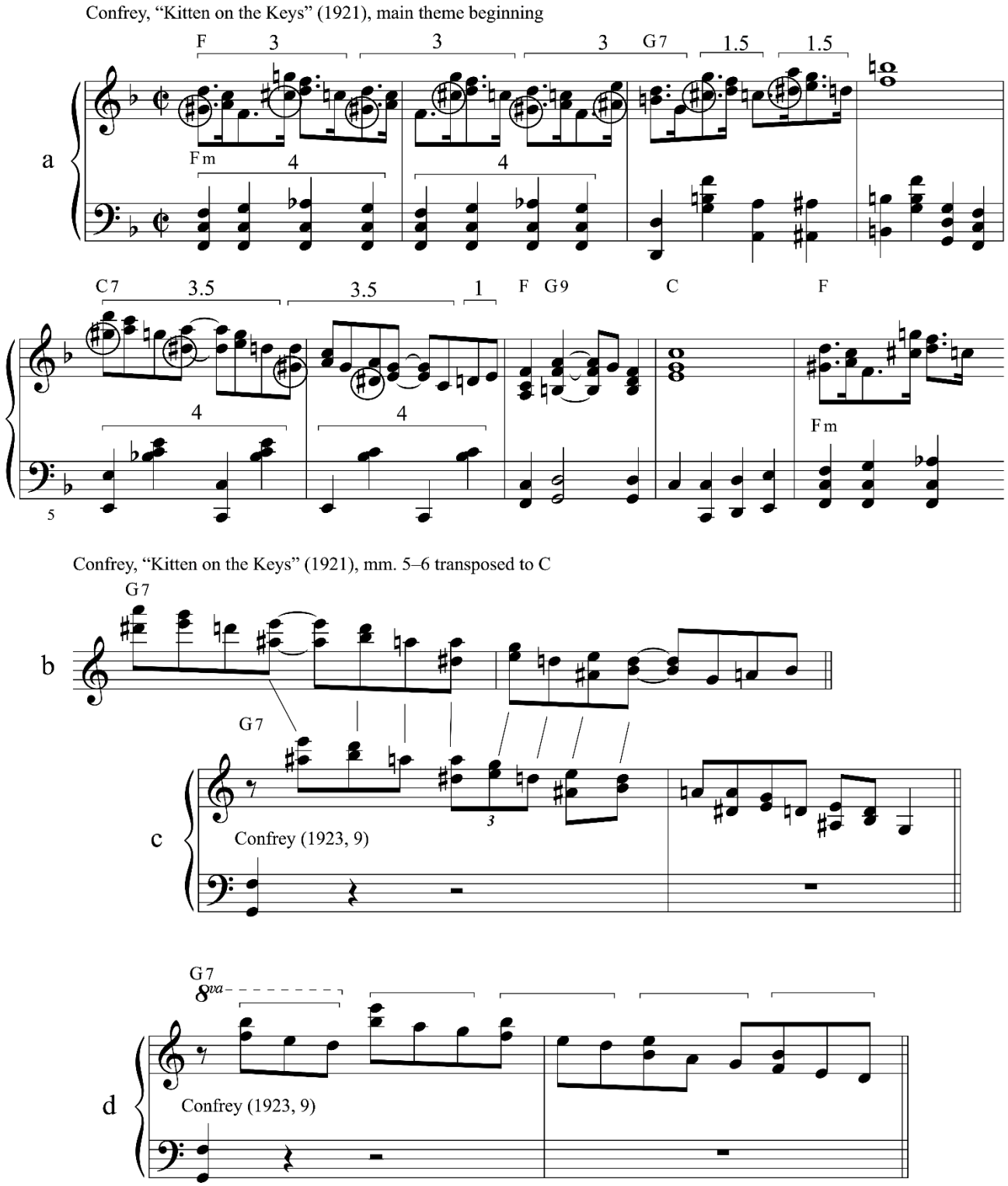
Example 12. Zez Confrey's "Simple Melody in C Major" (1923, 8)



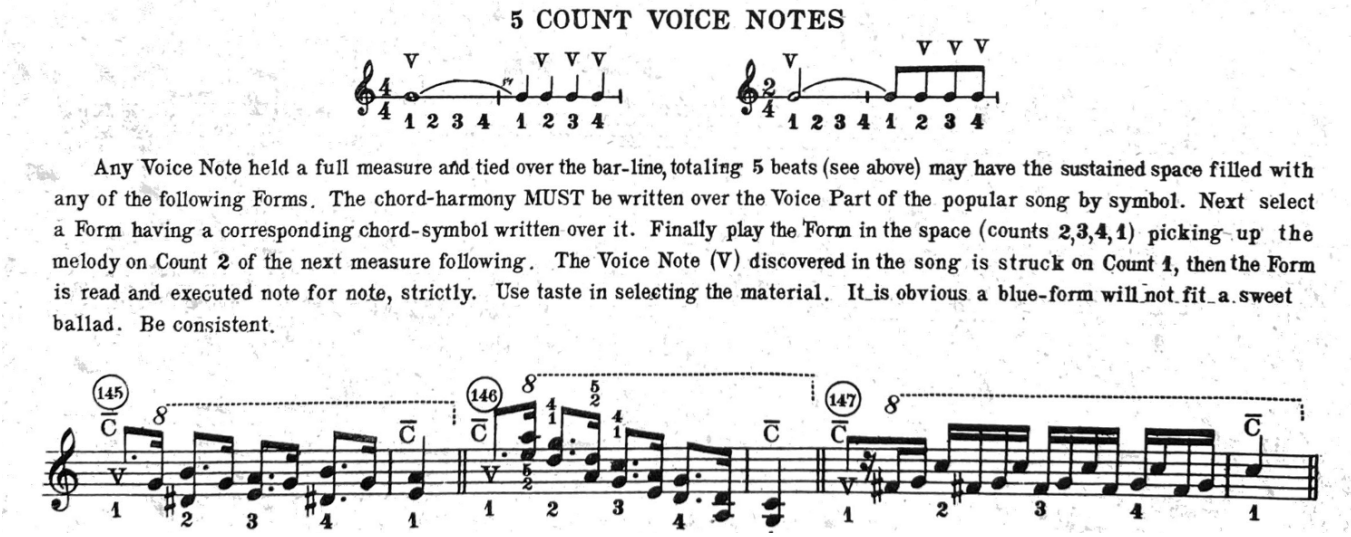
Example 13. Confrey's "Simple Melody in C Major" with a break in mm. 15–16 (1923, 9)



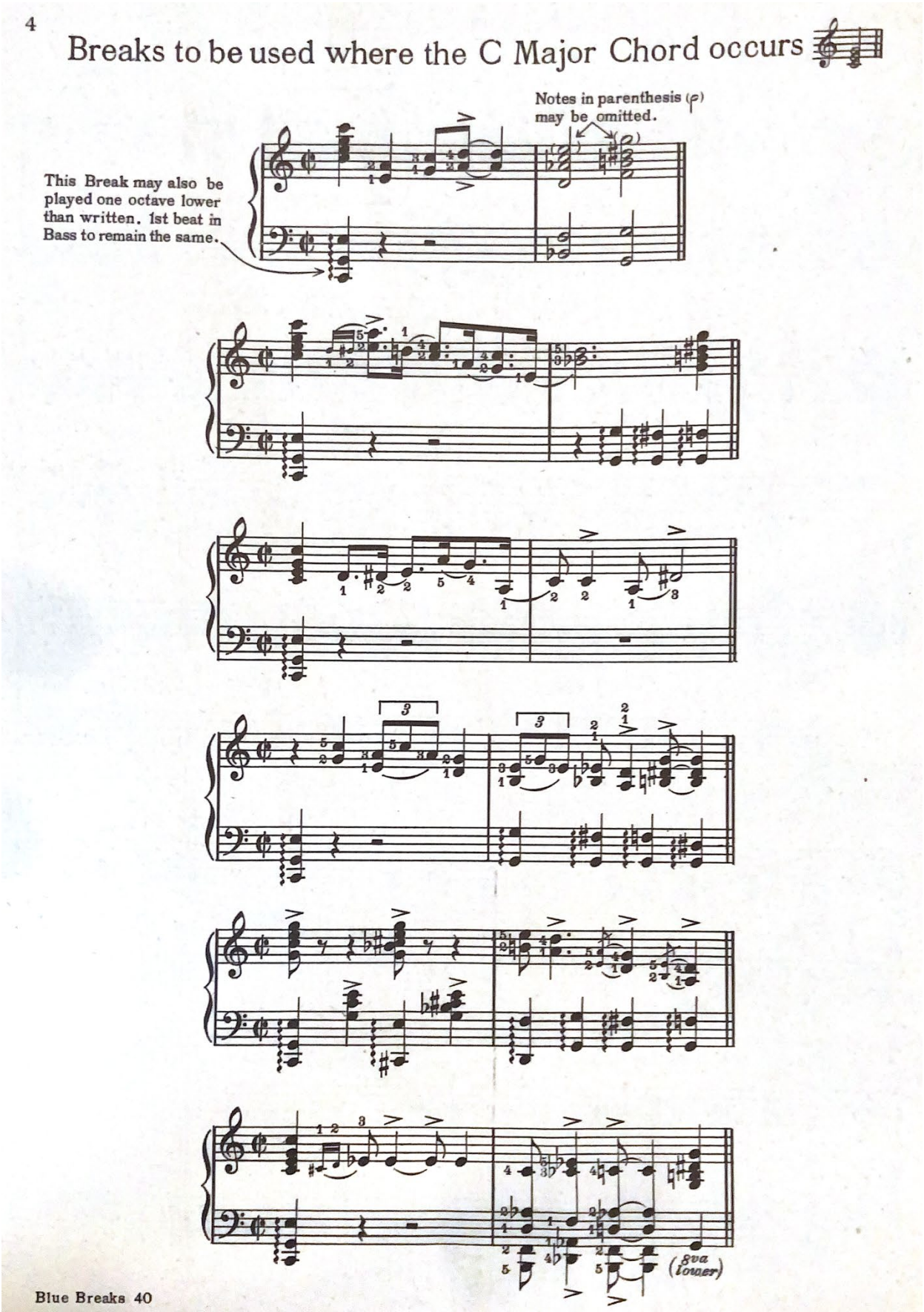
Example 14. Derivation of the break for "Simple Melody in C Major" from Confrey's "Kitten on the Keys"



Example 15. Glenn R. Waterman's breaks 145–147 for 5-beat sustained notes (1924, 60)



Example 16. Art Shefte's suggestions for "blue breaks" on a C triad (1927a, 4)

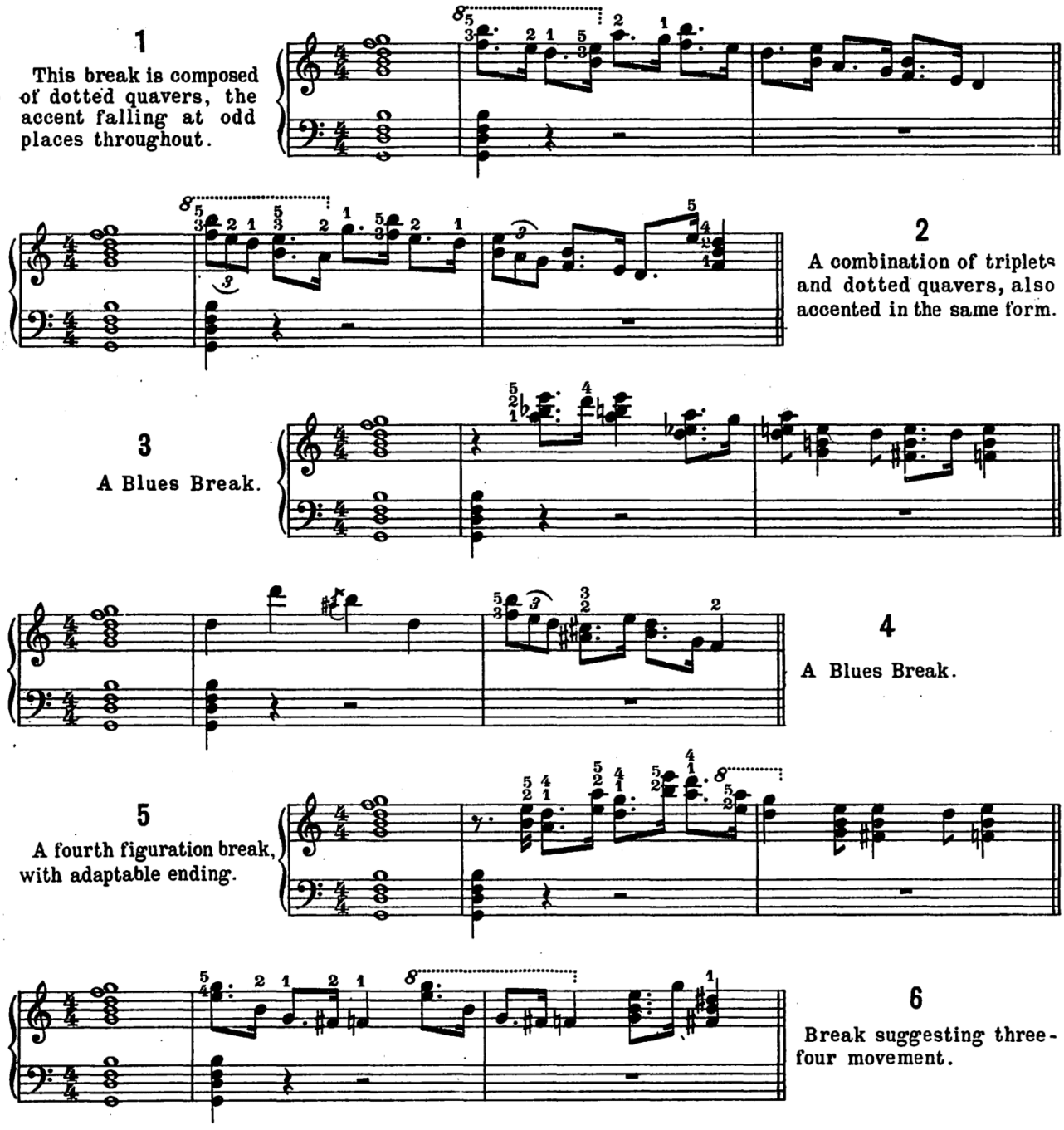


Example 17. Billy Mayerl's suggested "syncopated breaks" for piano (1927, 4)

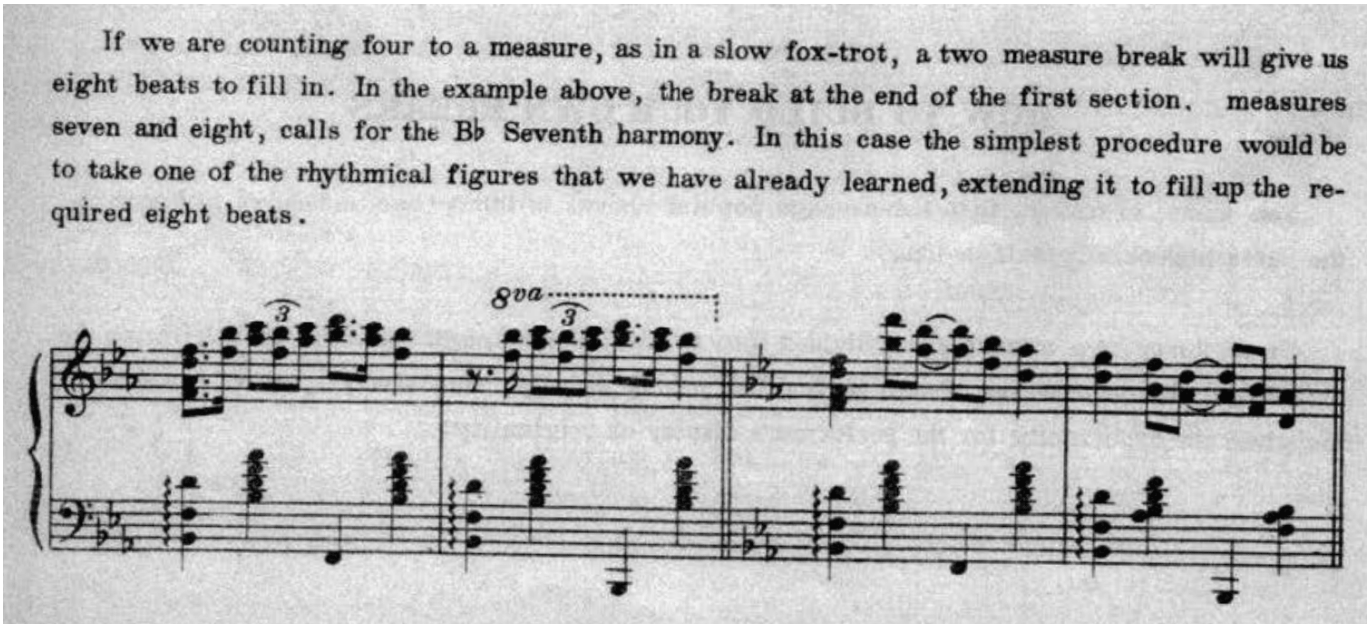
SYNCOPATED BREAKS
for PIANO

by
BILLY MAYERL

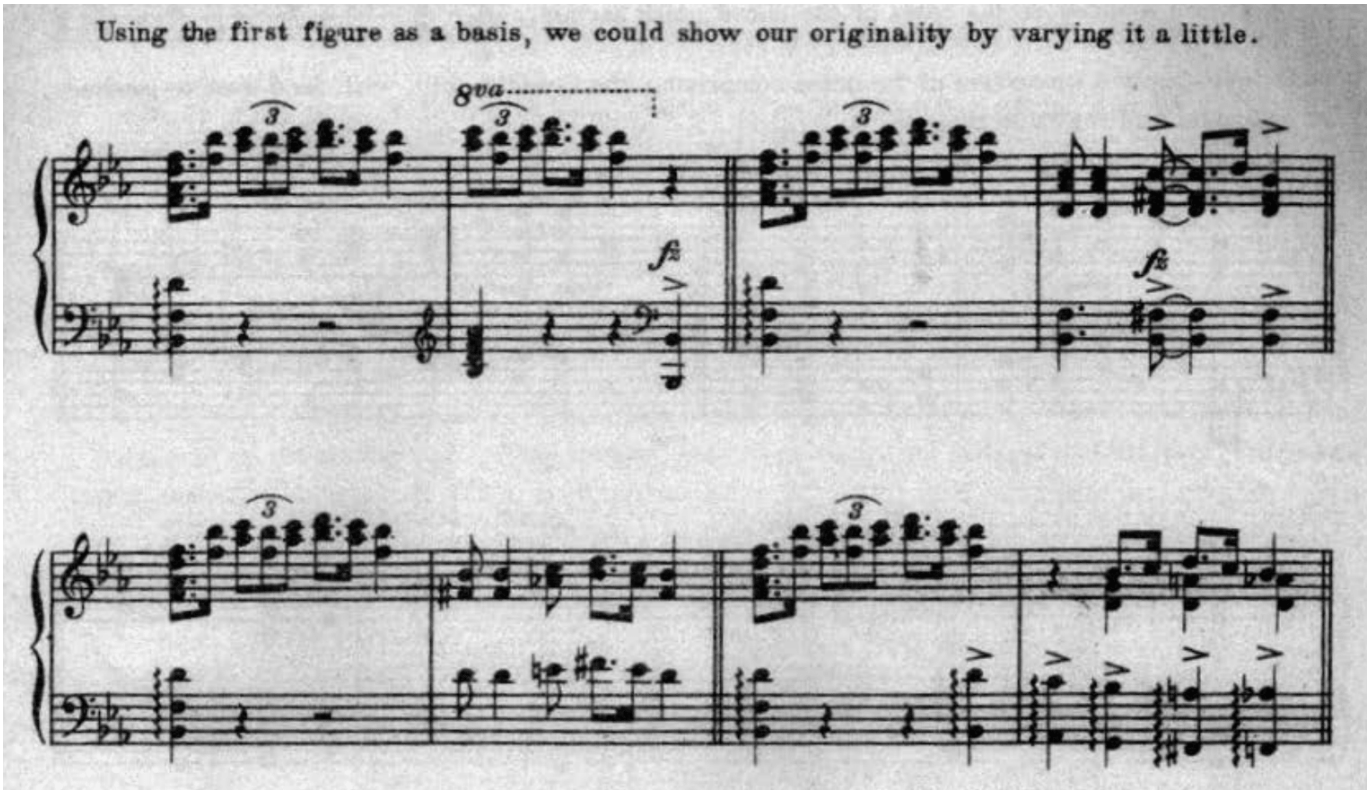
Key C



Example 18. Lee Sims's extension of a "rhythmical figure" to eight beats (1928, 48)



Example 19. Possible variants of the Sims break in Ex. 18 to "show our originality" (1928, 49)



Example 20. First page of the "BLUES" section of Lopez Book III (1934a, 131)

BLUES

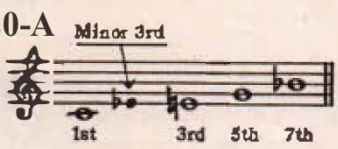
Blue playing is one of the most popular styles of playing and is easy to master and play spontaneously.

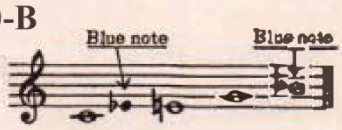
In order to play blue and hot convincingly and with ease, practice the following exercises over and over. The more you play these blue chords and scales, the easier it will be for you to improvise and invent figures and melodies. You will find that after the proper practice, blue figures will "spont" right out of your playing with no conscious effort.

There are two blue notes in every Seventh chord: the Minor 3rd which is added to the chord, and the 7th of the chord.

In the Major chord we have no Seventh, so we have only one blue note which is the minor 3rd. The Minor 3rd is the 3rd of the chord flatted.

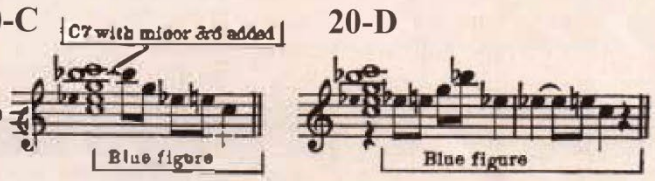
C7 with Minor 3rd added





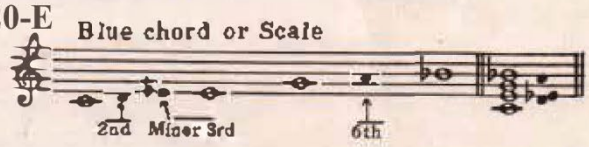
To insert a blue break or figure in a measure, all we have to do is break up the chord any way we wish, run up or down, but get the Minor 3rd or 7th in the figure in order to make it sound BLUE.

C7 chord broken up into several figures



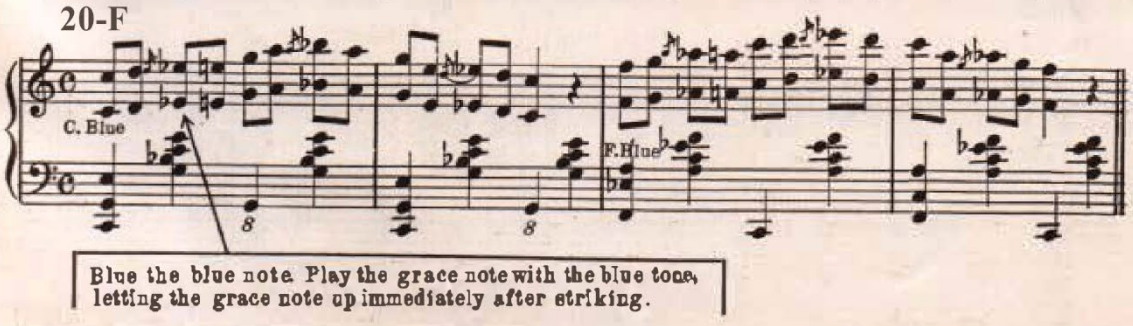
The 2nd and 6th may also be added to this chord, giving us more tones to work with.

C7 with 2nd, 6th, and Minor 3rd added

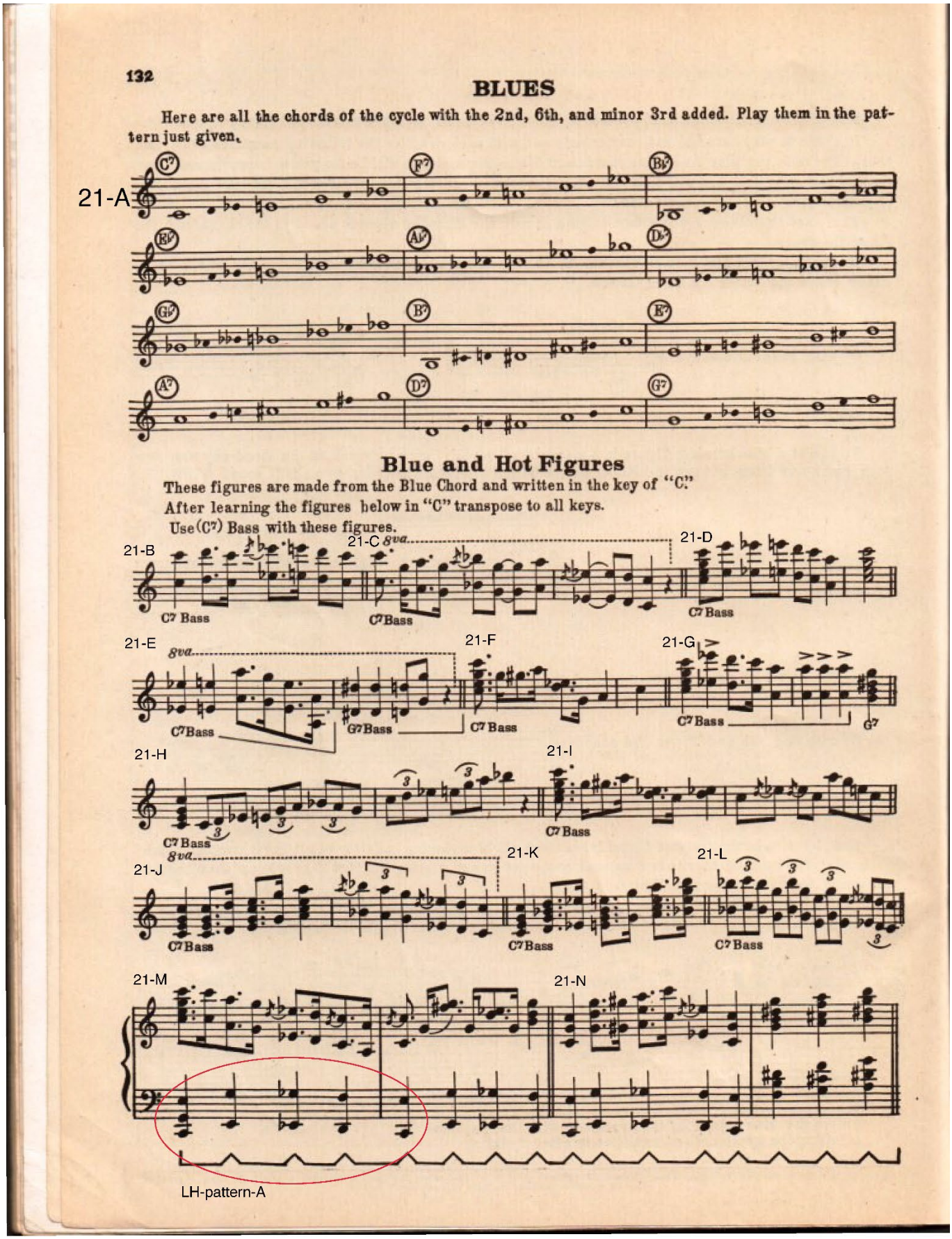


Now, let us take the finished chord from which all blue playing is derived and play it around the cycle of chords. The cycle of chords is a natural progression and playing the blue chords around it will train the ear to fake and hear new figures.

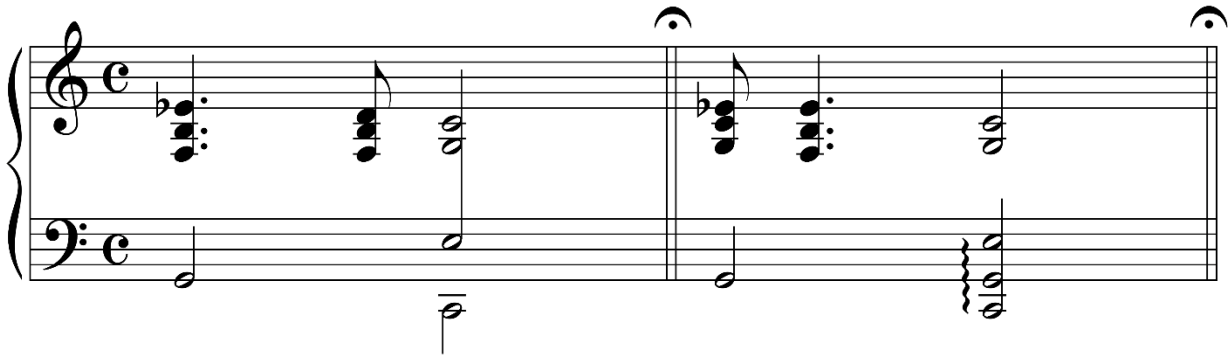
In the example below, we take the blue chord on the first two chords of the cycle in the pattern to be followed in practice. We run up and down the chord in regular order playing the tones as eighth notes.



Example 21. Second page of the "BLUES" section of Lopez Book III (1934a, 132)



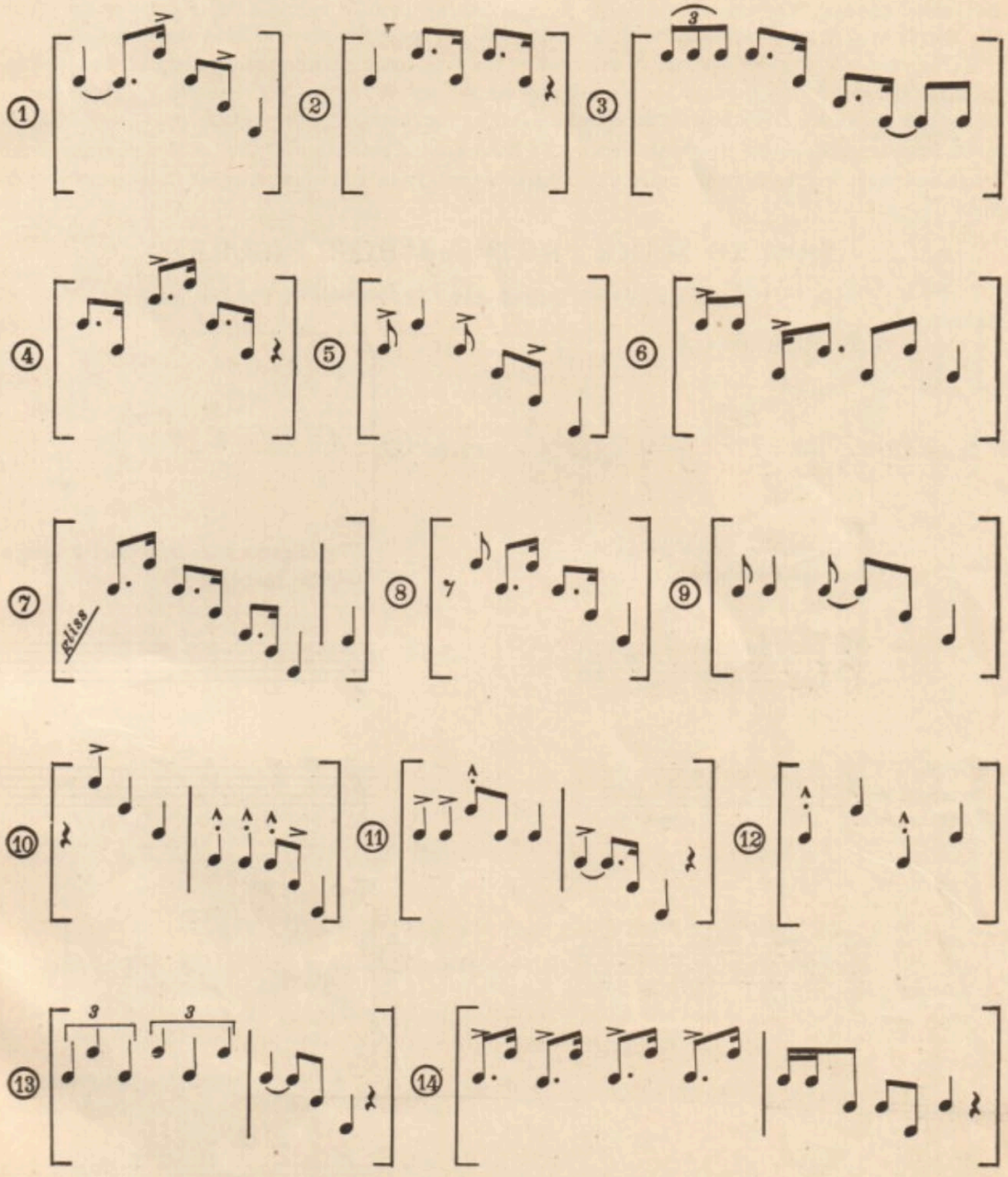
Example 22. Blue cadences from Niles (1926, 23)



Example 23. Third and fourth pages of the "BLUES" section of Lopez Book III (1934a, 133–34)

CHART for MAKING FIGURES

The following patterns are to help you in making figures. First get the rhythm of the figures, then take your blue chord and go high or low on it, jumping around on the tones just as the diagram indicates. Sing the diagram first, then try it on the keyboard. Watch the accents.



Turn to the following page for a more thorough explanation of how to use this chart.

MAKING FIGURES

After learning the rhythms just given, apply them to your improvising patterns. Making a "hot" or "blue" melody is nothing more than joining different figures together so that they make a well sounding melody.

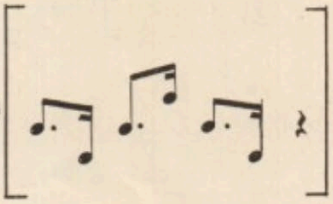
These "hot" melodys you invent may be added to any song in solo playing as a TRIO, or they may be used in place of part of the song itself. For example: use the "hot" or "blue" melody you invent in place of the last 8 measures of a song. A "Hot Chorus" is made by combining figures made from the chords in each measure of the song and using this hot melody in place of the regular melody.

For example: suppose the last 8 measures of the song has a harmony background of G major for the first 2 measures, E Seventh for the 3rd and 4th, A Seventh for the 5th measure, D Seventh for the 6th and G major for the 7th and 8th. Now in making your "hot" or "blue" melody, use the chord given in each measure. Make the figure out of it or it's blue chord. This then will "jibe" with the harmony in the music and there will be no "wet" notes. Your harmony will fit in with what the other instruments are playing.

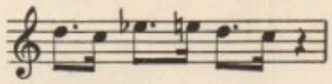
HOW TO MAKE "HOT" and "BLUE FIGURES"

We have taken several of the patterns on page (133) to demonstrate how you may make your own figures.

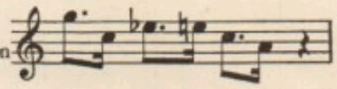
Chart ④



The figures below are made from chart 4 using a "C" blue chord.



Starting a different position of the chord.



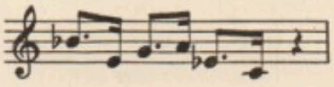
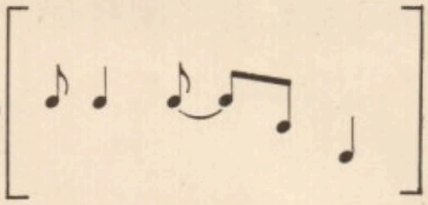
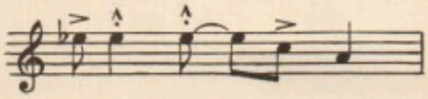


Chart ⑨



Two figures made from chart 9 using a "C" blue chord.



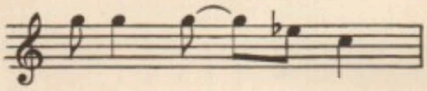
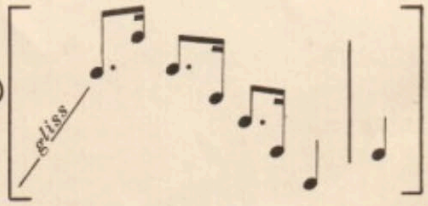
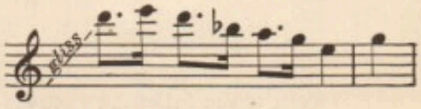


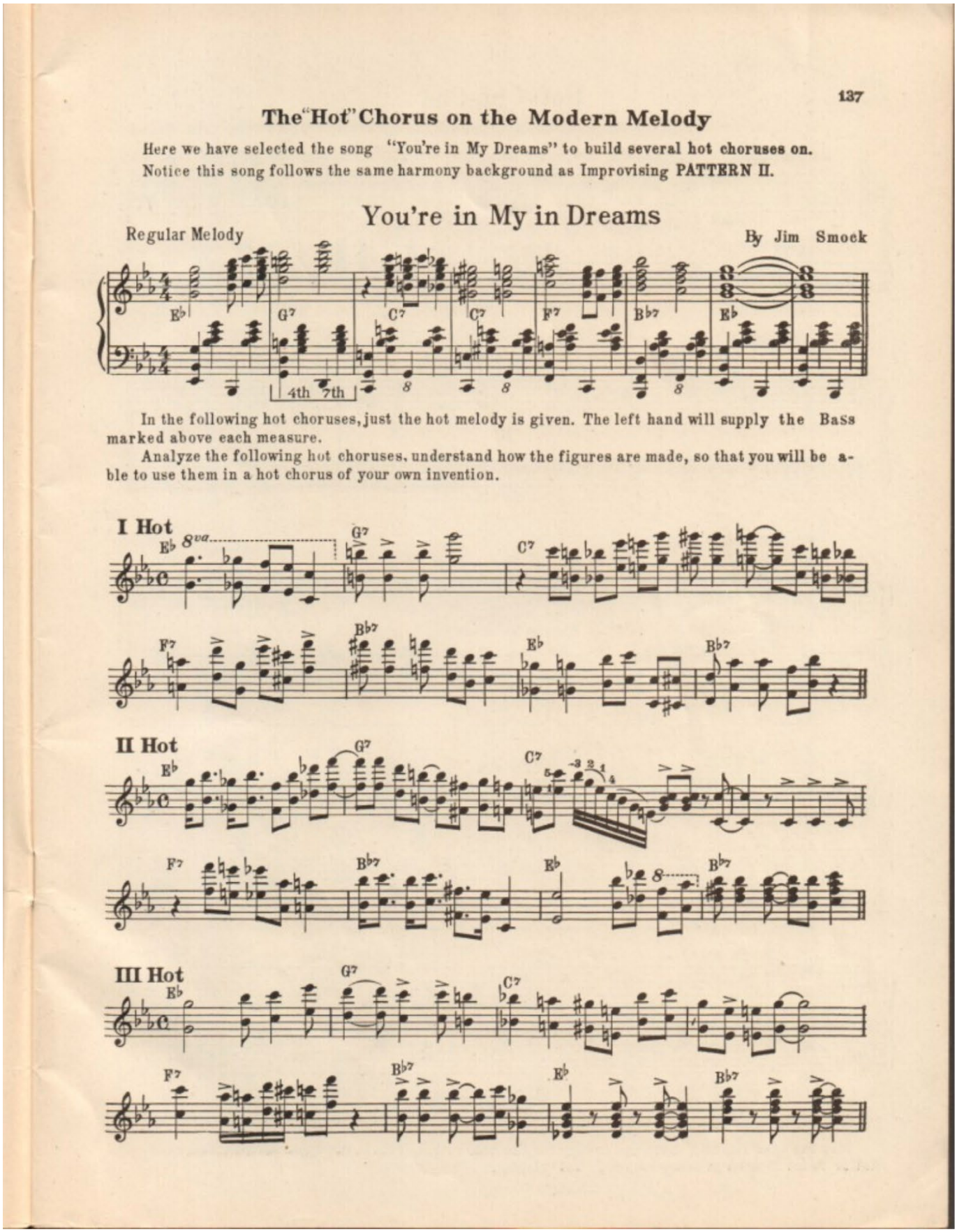
Chart ⑦



A figure made from chart 7 using the "G" blue.



Example 24. Eight-bar song section with three "hot choruses" as sample improvisations, Lopez Book III (1934a, 137)



137

The "Hot" Chorus on the Modern Melody

Here we have selected the song "You're in My Dreams" to build several hot choruses on. Notice this song follows the same harmony background as Improvising PATTERN II.

You're in My in Dreams

Regular Melody

By Jim Smock

In the following hot choruses, just the hot melody is given. The left hand will supply the Bass marked above each measure.

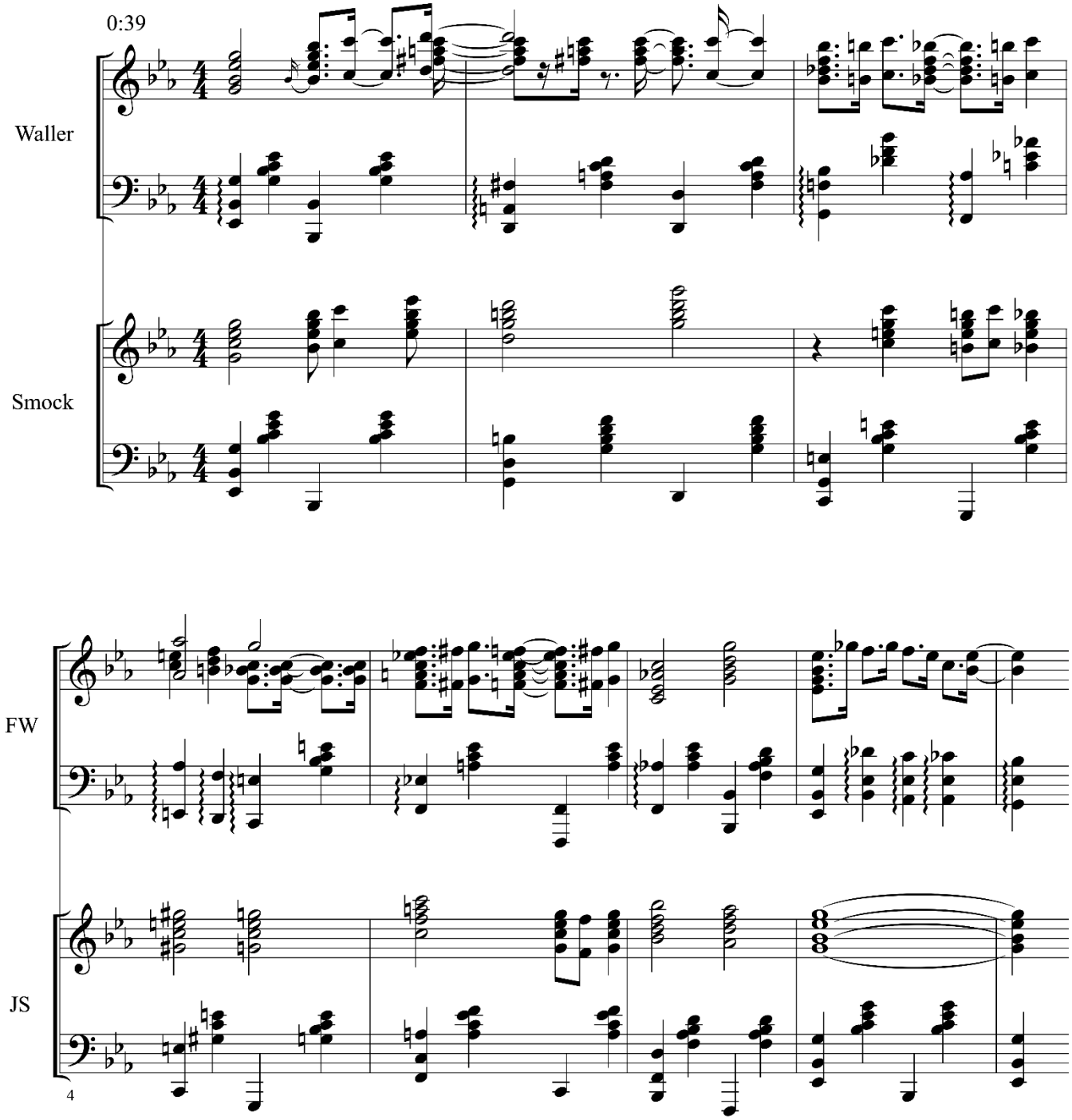
Analyze the following hot choruses, understand how the figures are made, so that you will be able to use them in a hot chorus of your own invention.

I Hot

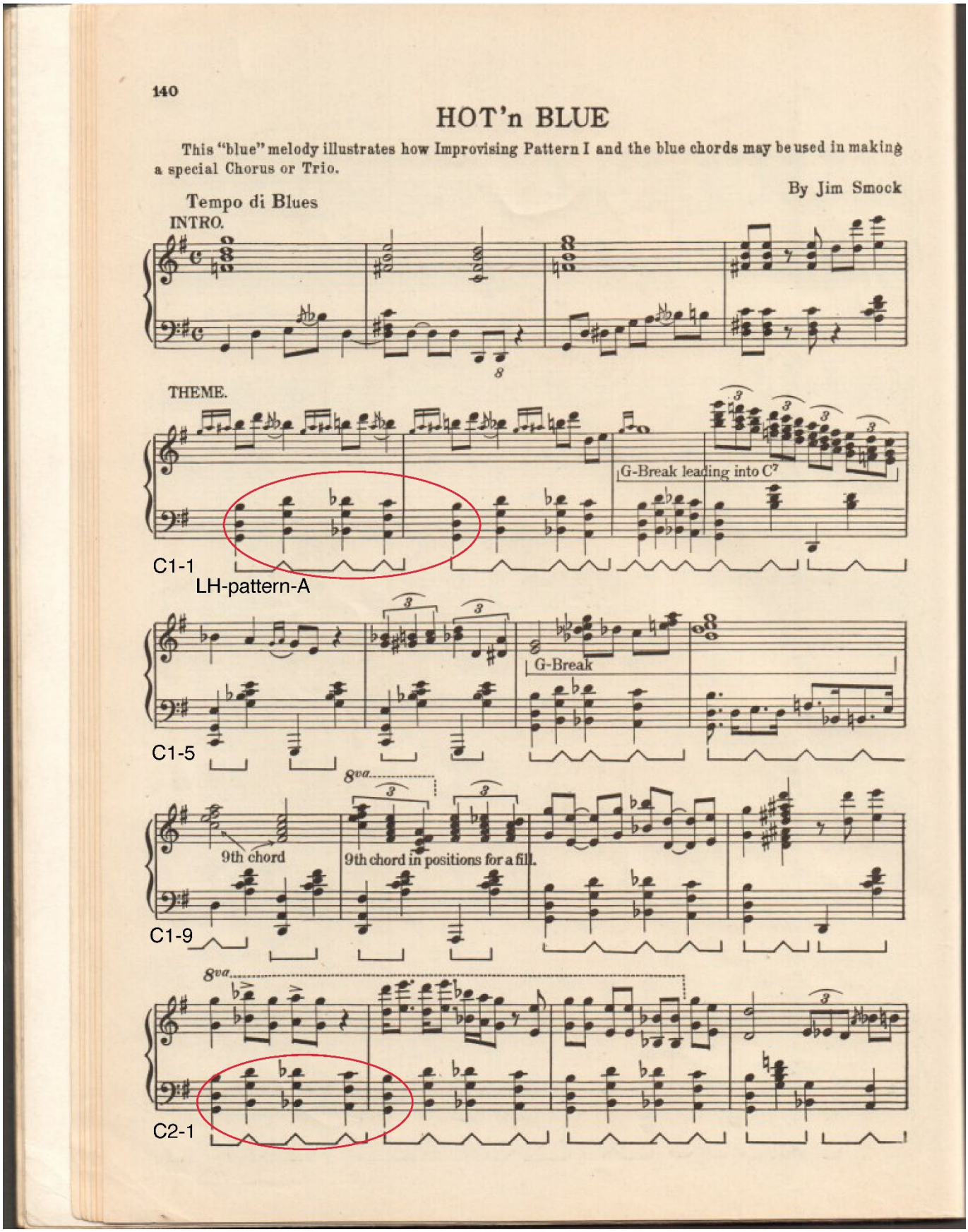
II Hot

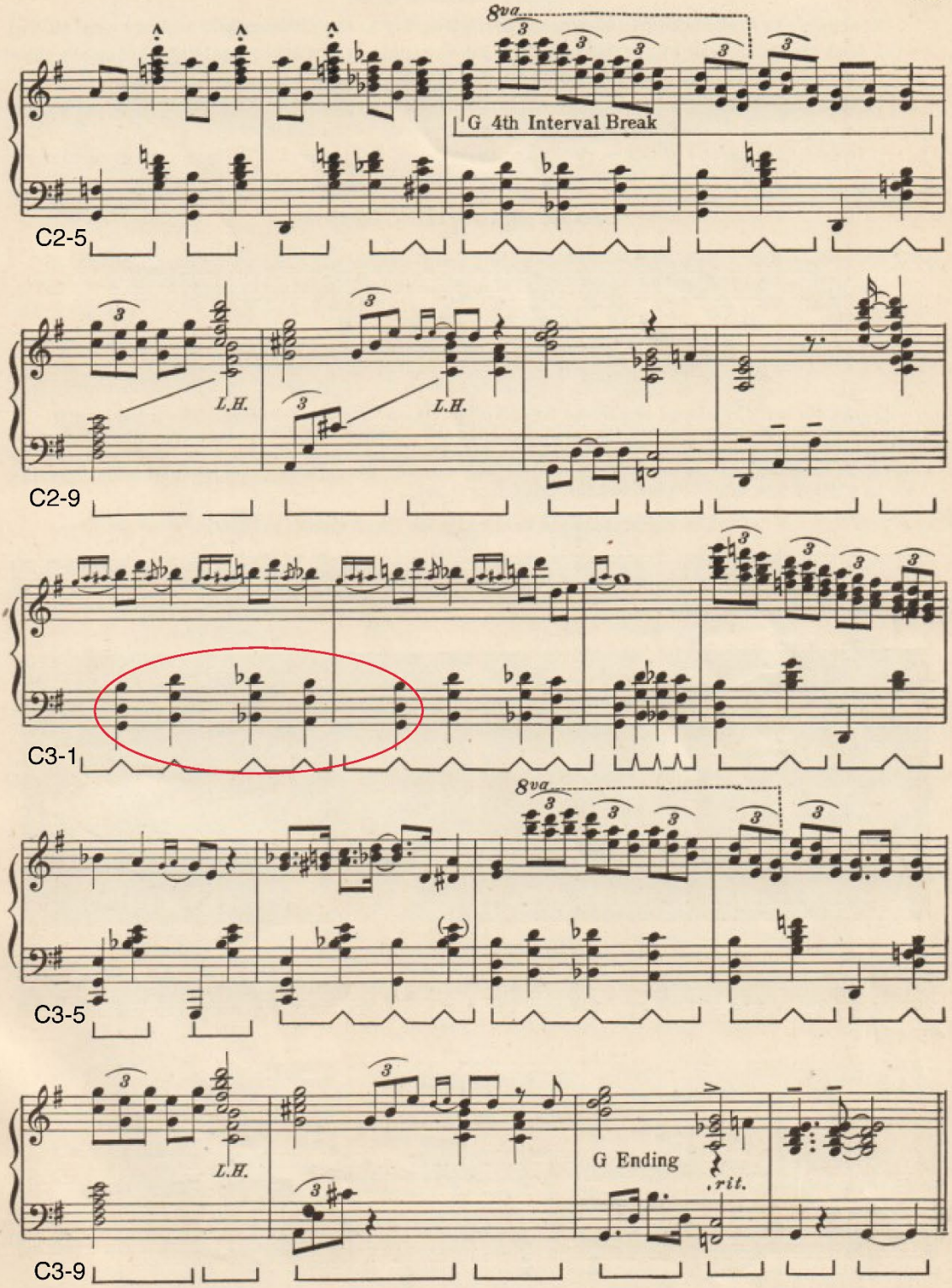
III Hot

Example 25. Fats Waller's "I've Got a Feeling I'm Falling," take 1 (1929) vs. Jim Smock's "You're in My Dreams," Lopez Book III (1934a, 137)

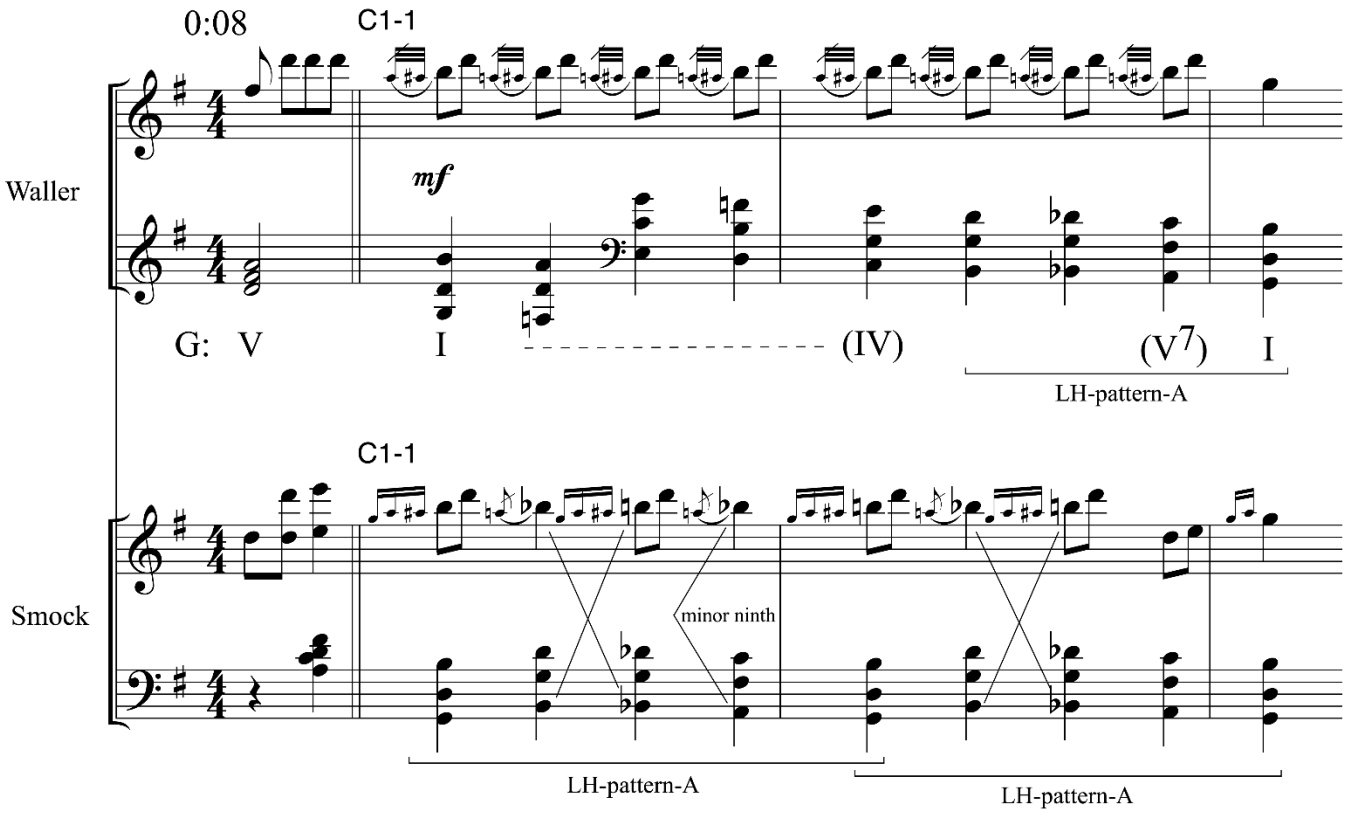


Example 26. Smock's "Hot'n Blue," Lopez Book III (1934a, 140–41)

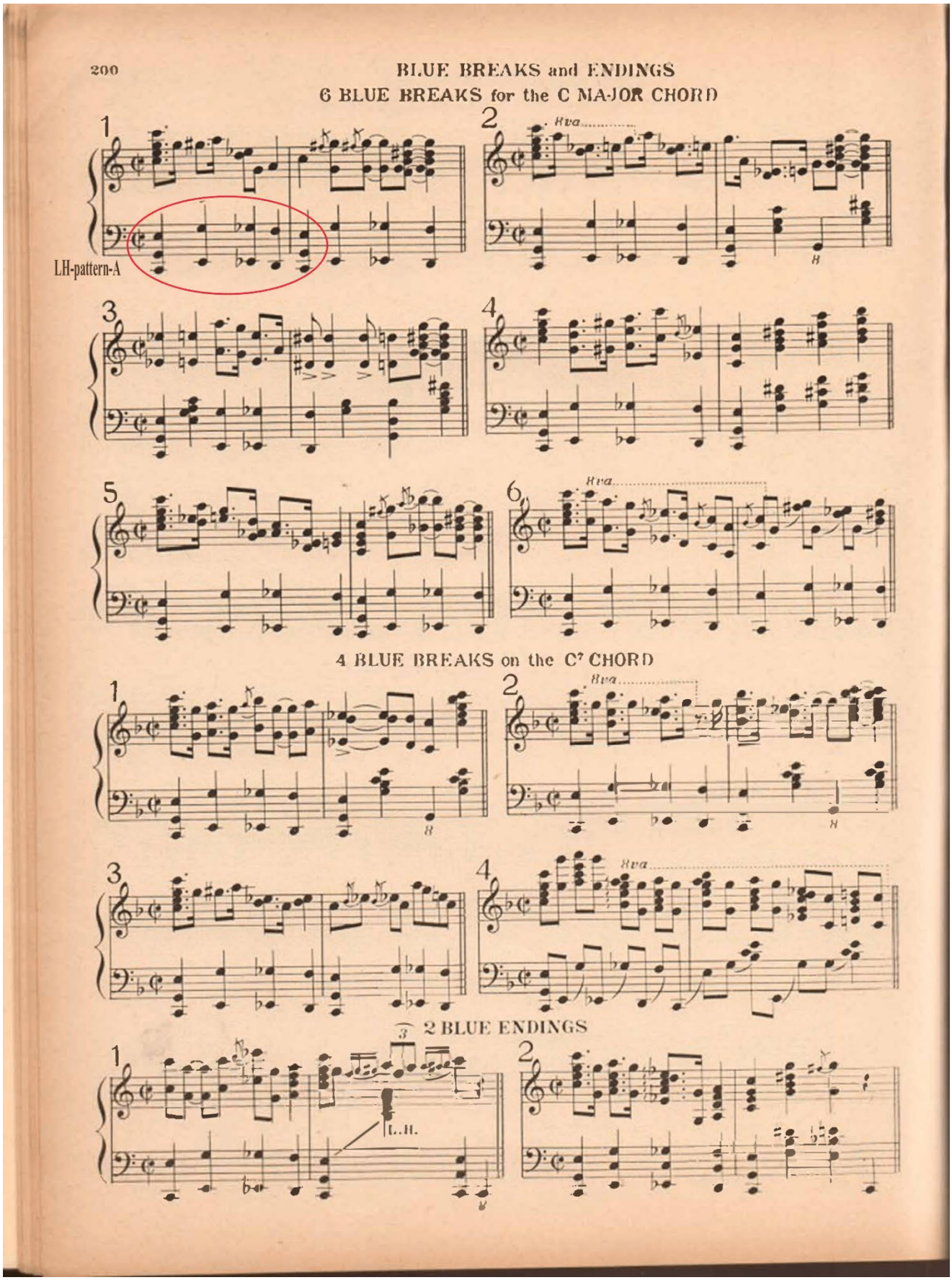



8va
G 4th Interval Break
C2-5
L.H.
L.H.
C2-9
C3-1
8va
C3-5
L.H.
G Ending
.rit.
C3-9

Example 27. Opening thematic idea of Fats Waller's "Numb Fumblin'" (1929) vs. Jim Smock's "Hot'n Blue," Lopez Book III (1934a, 140–41)



Example 28. Sample page of blue breaks and endings from Lopez Book IV (1934b, 200)



Example 29. Table of attributes of the Lopez method "figures" for improvisation

1. Distinct melodic fragments
    a. May have associated left-hand part
    b. May be constituents (segments) of improvised choruses
2. Comparable to improvisational formulas
3. Of varying length, from three beats to several bars
4. Derived from single chords, often considered momentary tonics
    a. In chord-scale relationships to originating chords
        i. Originating chords may be blued
        ii. Blued chords equivalent to blue scales
        iii. When derived from blue chord-scales, may reflect blues practice
    b. May function as breaks
5. May be associated with brief, common chord progressions
    a. May function as breaks or endings
    b. May effect tonicizations with, say, a blue third appearing as a raised fifth of the tonicizing dominant-seventh chord
    c. May be involved in half or full cadences
6. May refer to the original melodies directly or indirectly
7. May be constituents of hot choruses, particularly if including blued figures