Bill Evans's Five: Who Could Ask for Anything More?

Peter Bouffard (April 2001)

Abstract

It is likely that the words freedom and creativity will eventually arise in any discussion of jazz improvisation. One might even say that the history of jazz as a whole can be viewed as a progression toward musical emancipation.

Since the 1930s, jazz musicians have relied heavily upon the 32-bar standard song form as a framework for performance. It seems paradoxical that jazz musicians, who would claim to be the modern day torch bearers for musical freedom and creativity through improvisation, would choose such a seemingly restrictive cyclic formal skeleton—utilizing repeated cycles of 32-bars conveniently divided into four eight-measure phrases. Initiators of the Free Jazz movement drew their freedom from the renunciation of the harmonic and metrical patterns, the regulative force of the beat, and the structural principles of the "jazz piece."

But what of the musicians who continued to cling to the standard song forms as vehicles for composition and improvisation? Bill Evans, who utilized the standard song forms until his death, is often conspicuously absent from any discussion of Free Jazz. One might be left to conclude that Evans's music lacked freedom and creativity.

It was Evans's view that freedom and creativity are inextricably linked to constraints in music. For Evans, the most meaningful type of freedom was realized through the manner in which he attempted to transcend the regularity of the 32-bar form. There are a number of ways in which jazz musicians have dealt with the formal boundaries in their compositions and improvisations. Two devices appear to stand out: altering the expected harmonic structure and temporarily disrupting the metric character of a piece. With regard to harmonic elaboration, chord substitution and addition may be used which can alter both the harmonic progression and the harmonic rhythm. In the rhythmic domain, novelty is often achieved through the use of polymeters or through rhythmic accents in conflict with the regular meter—in effect obscuring the bar lines. Indeed, the composers of these standard songs themselves utilized a large inventory of syncopated figures that reflects their basic concern to avoid metric squareness.

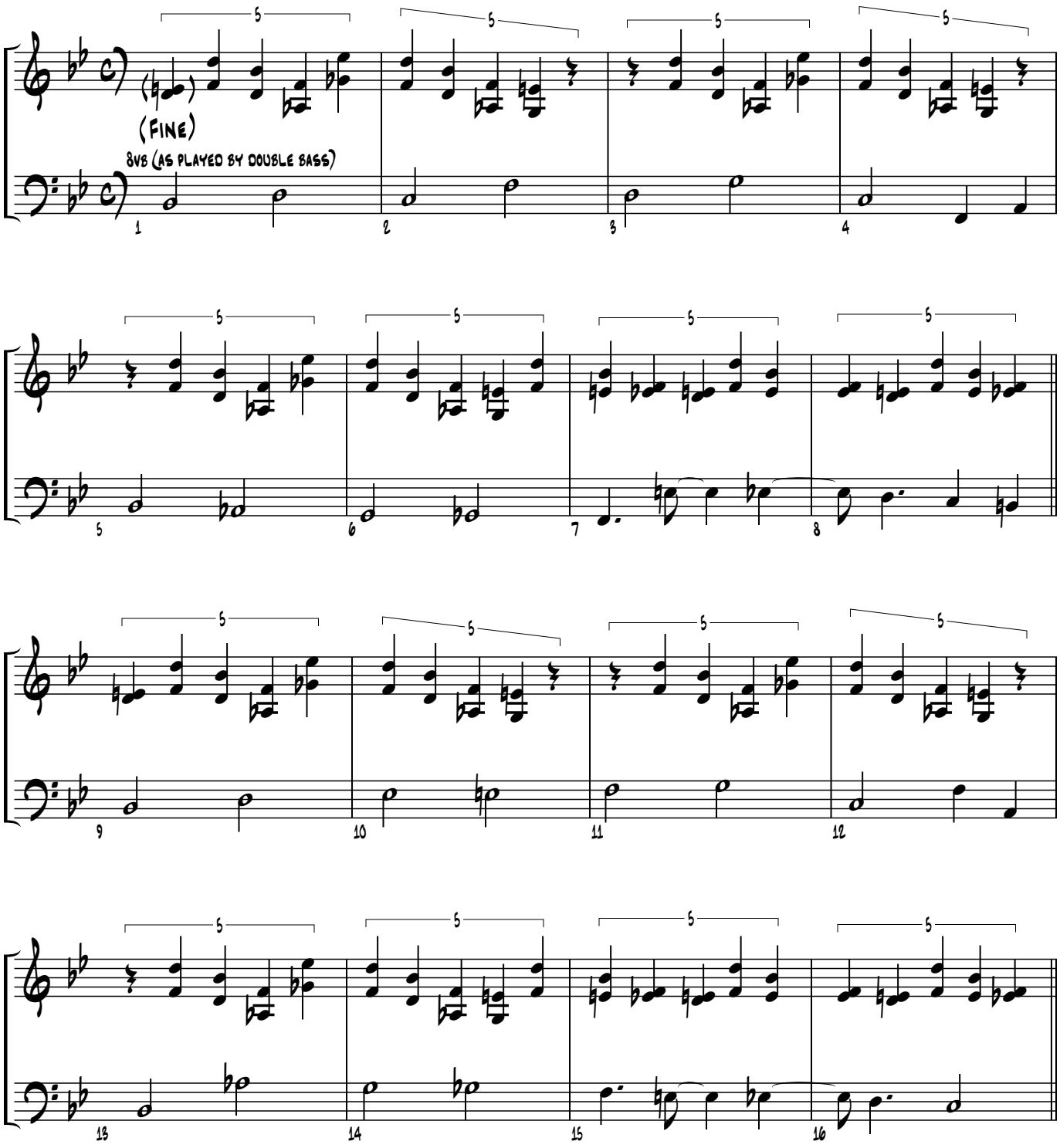
Five, composed by Bill Evans in the middle fifties, provides an ideal model for the employment of these procedures. Interestingly, this piece appears on Evans's first and last studio recordings, in 1956 and 1979 respectively, providing an exceptional glimpse at his evolution as an improviser. In this document, I examine not only my transcription of the composition itself, but also a portion of each transcribed solo based on the tune from both the 1956 recording and the 1979 recording. This piece is particularly problematic in terms of transcription. Pettinger has written that "Evans himself was undecided how to notate the more complex middle eight." The manner in which I have chosen to notate this piece plays a significant role in my analysis.

In Five, Evans was able to interpolate into the 32-bar formal structure another structure whose harmonic and rhythmic sophistication and pliability transcended the inherent regularity and periodic nature. Evans's music lets the listener experience the delight of liberation juxtaposed within an environment of constraint. He has achieved a high artistic goal by transforming a simple song into an expression of freedom. And who could ask for anything more?

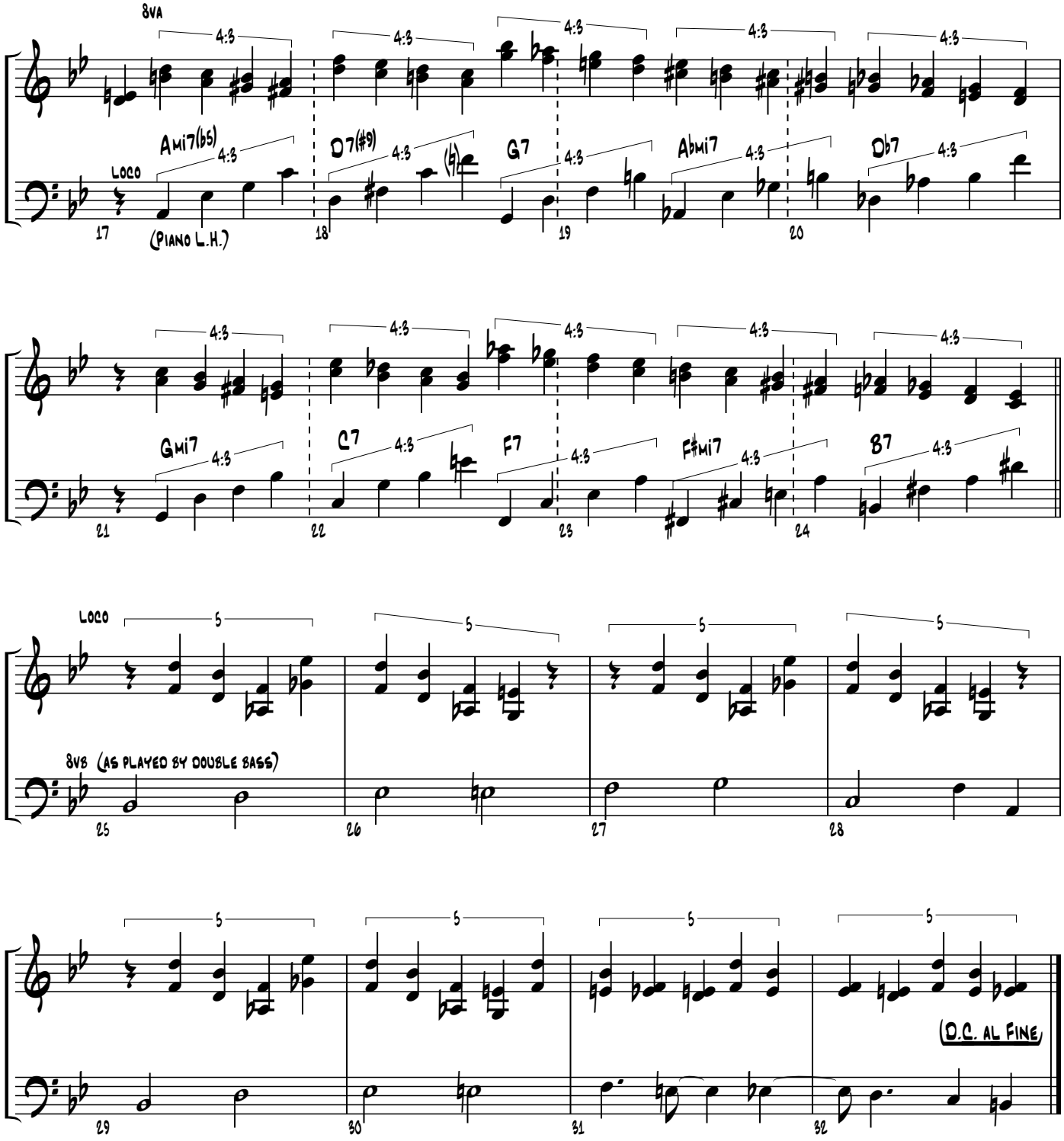
Five

As recorded on *We Will Meet Again*, 1979

Bill Evans
Trans. Bouffard



FIVE -2-


8va
4:3
Ami7(b5)
D7(#9)
G7
Abmi7
Db7
LOCO
(PIANO L.H.)
17
18
19
20
Gmi7
C7
F7
F#mi7
B7
21
22
23
24
LOCO
5
8vb (AS PLAYED BY DOUBLE BASS)
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
D.C. AL FINE

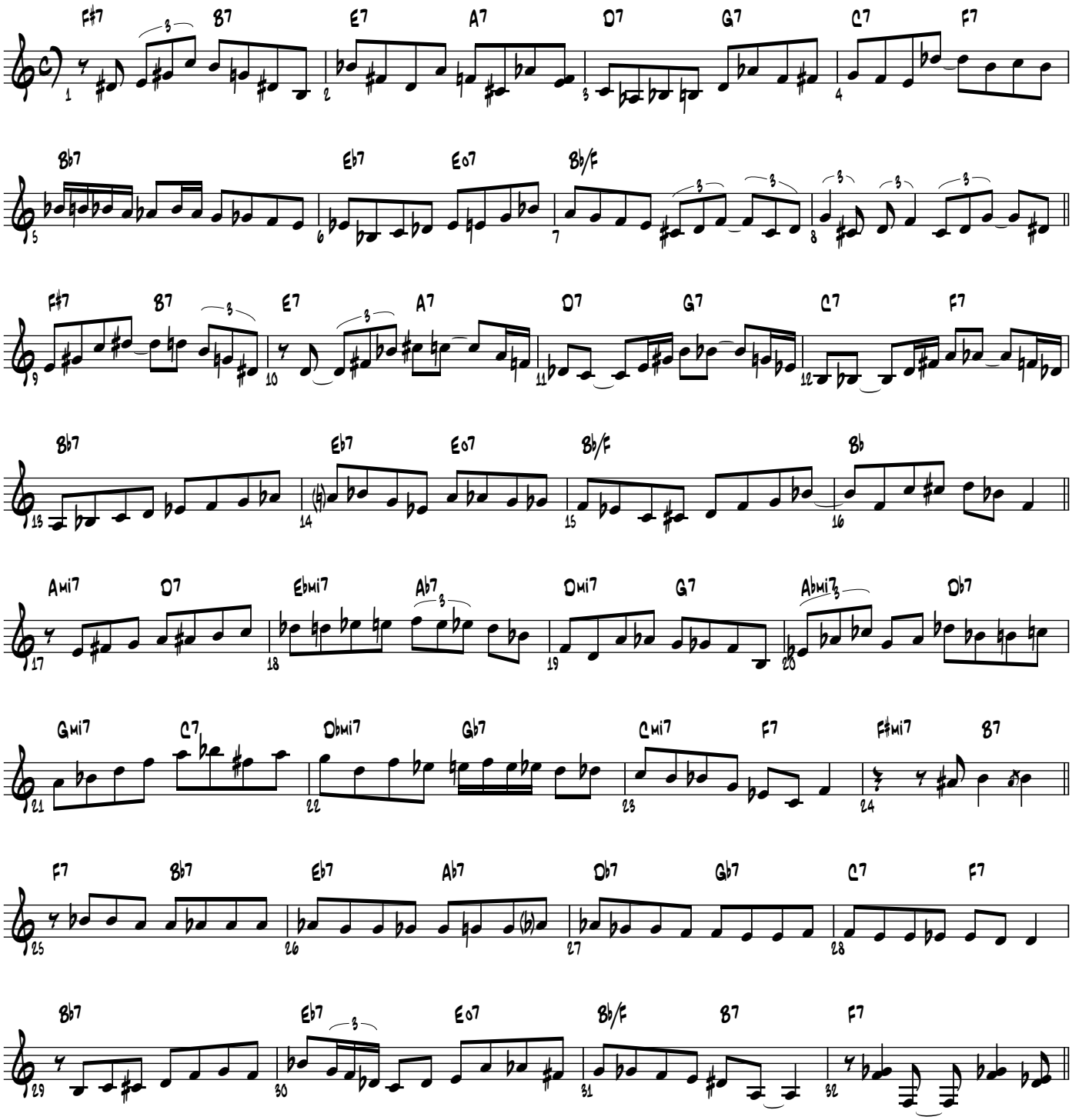
Appendix Figure 2

*solo notated without key signature

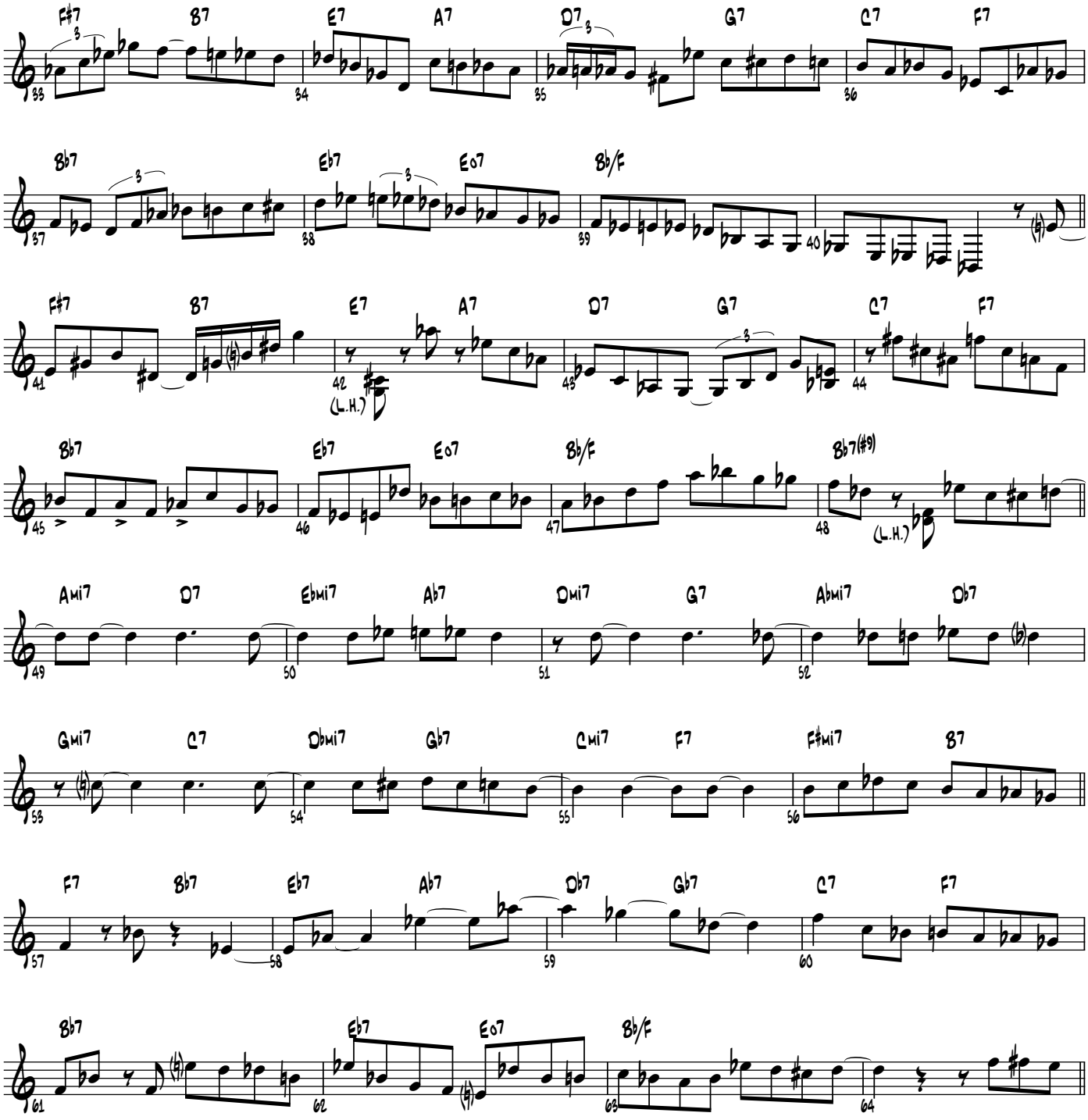
Five

Solo from New Jazz Conception, 1956

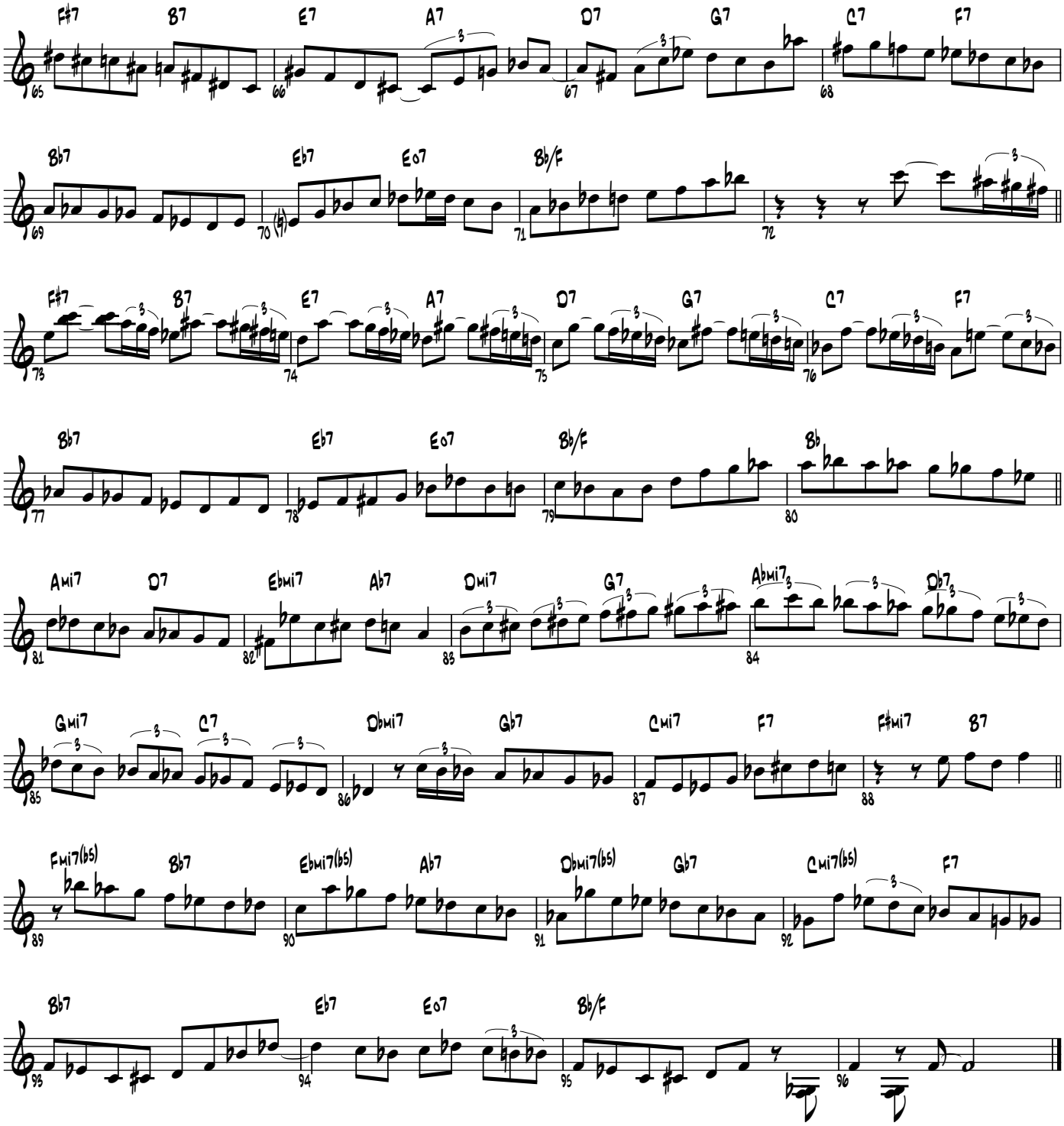
Bill Evans
Trans. Bouffard



FIVE SOLO (1956) -2-



FIVE SOLO (1956) -3-



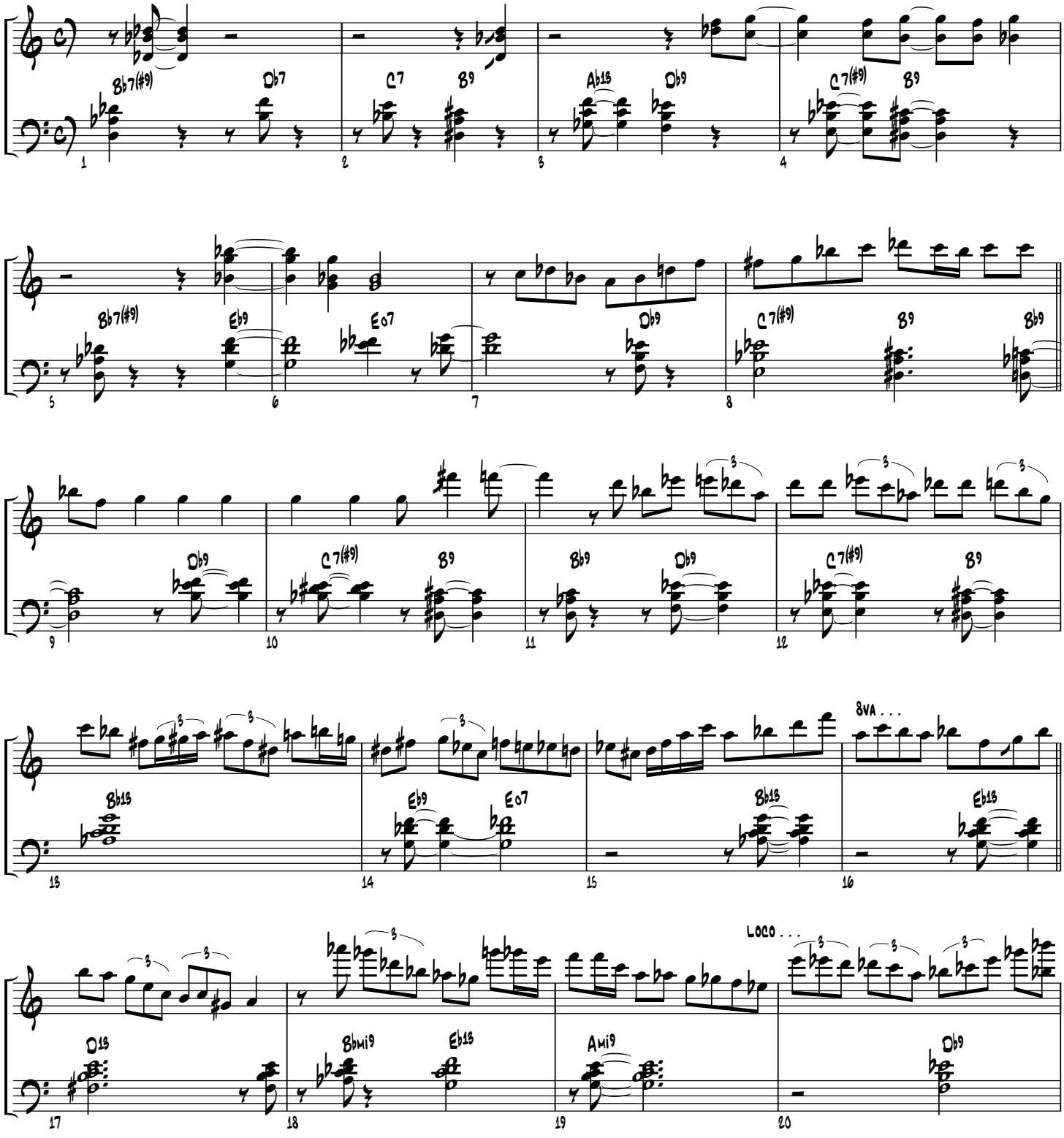
Appendix Example 2

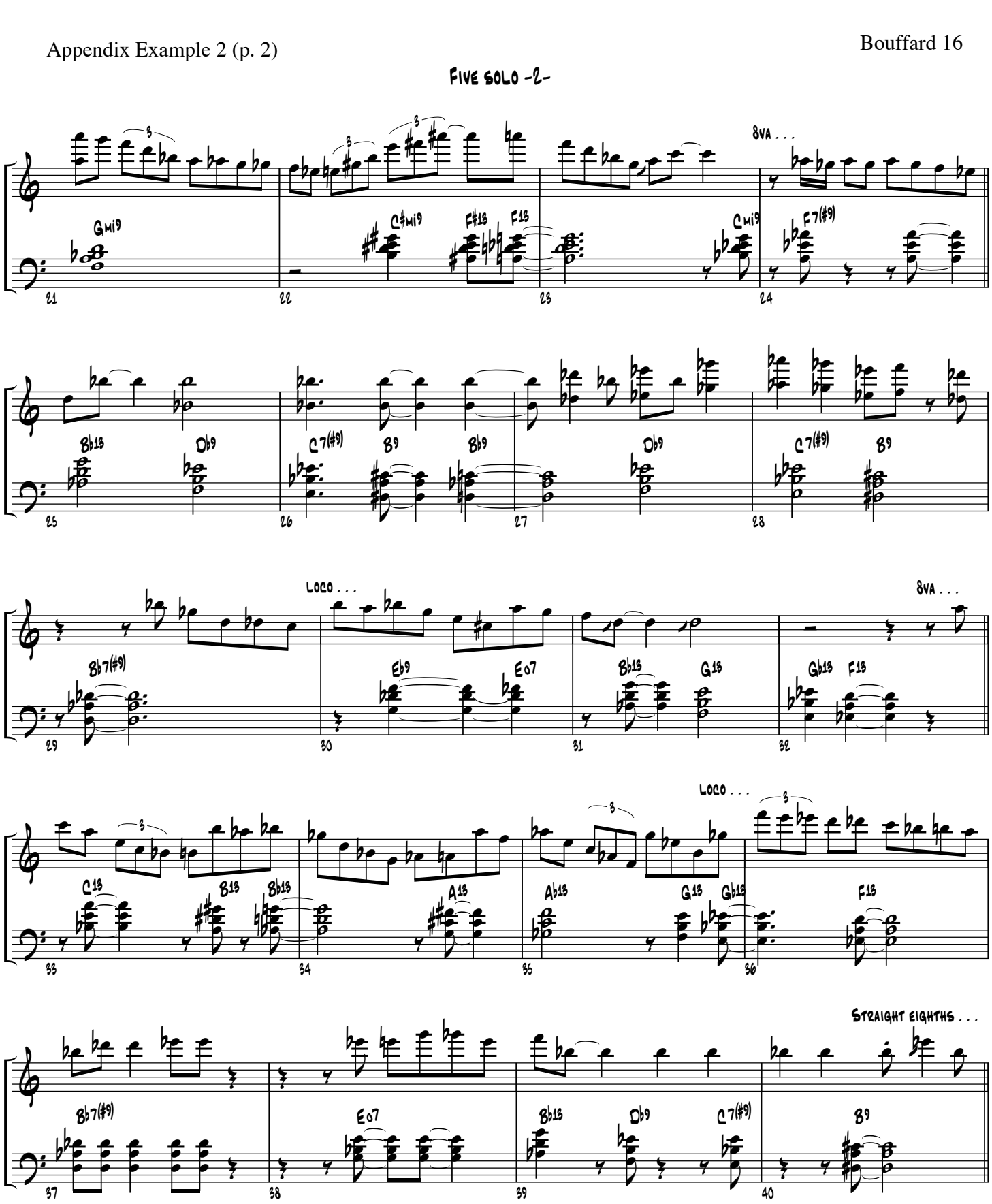
*solo notated without key signature

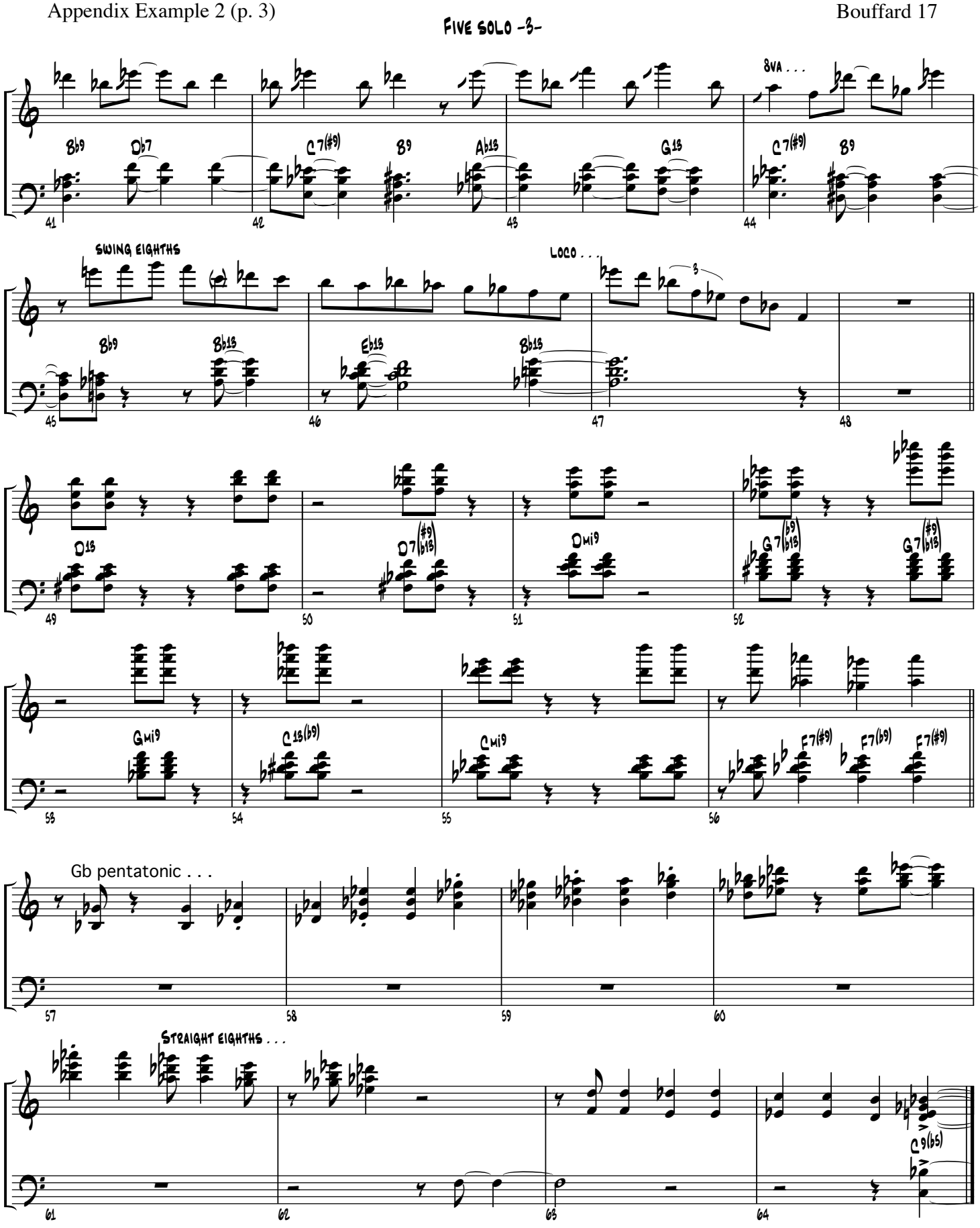
Five

SOLO FROM *We Will Meet Again*, 1979

Bill Evans
Trans. Bouffard




FIVE SOLO -2-
8VA . . .
Gmi9
C♯mi9
F♯13
F13
Cmi9
F7(♯9)
Bb13
Db9
C7(♯9)
B9
Bb9
LOCO . . .
Bb7(♯9)
Eb9
Eo7
Gb13
F13
C13
B13
A13
Ab13
G13
STRAIGHT EIGHTHS . . .
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40


FIVE SOLO -3-
8va . . .
SWING EIGHTHS
LOCO . . .
Gb pentatonic . . .
STRAIGHT EIGHTHS . . .