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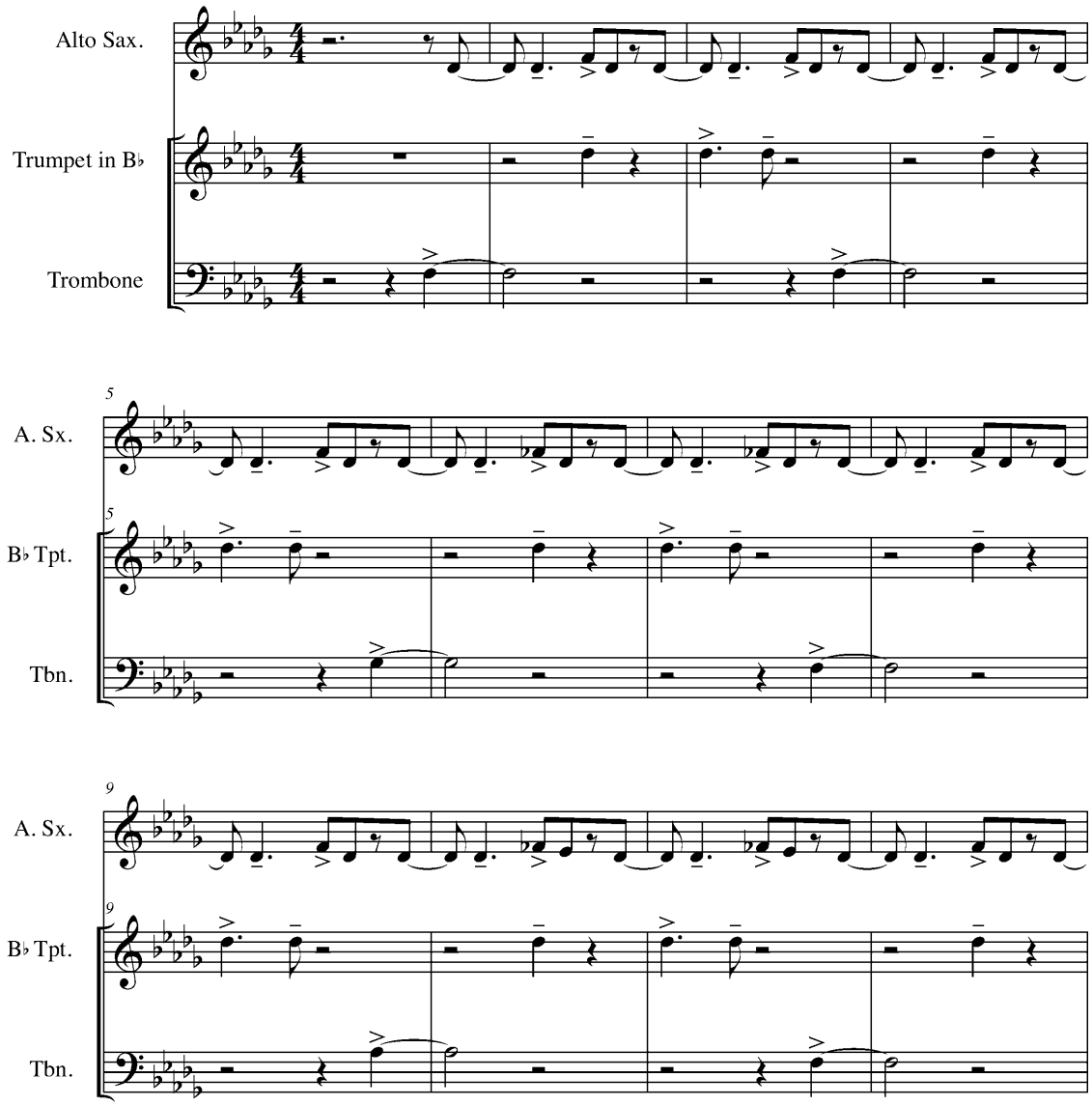
Interlocking Riff Complexes in Big Band Mambo, Latin Jazz, and Swing arrangements from the Early- to Mid-Twentieth Century

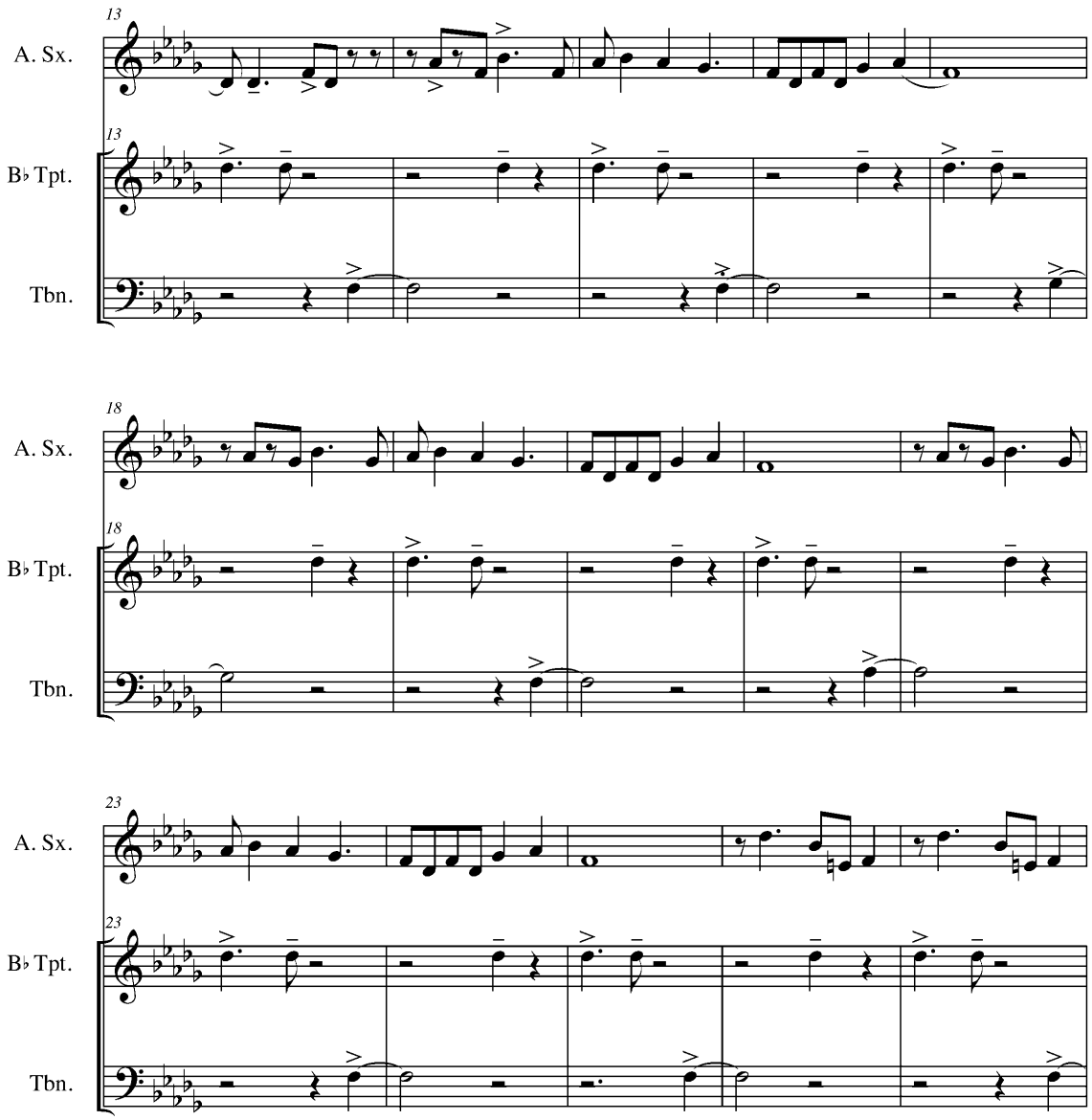
Intersectional interlocking riff complexes pervade the big band arranging styles of classic mambo, Latin jazz, and swing, and are particularly prominent in the music of Machito, Count Basie, Tito Rodriguez, Tito Puente, and Perez Prado. This paper examines the functionality of this device and discusses the ways in which it fits into the broader framework of 20th century Afro-Cuban and Afro-American musical aesthetics. In the big band context, the term interlocking riff complex—sometimes called a "head arrangement" or "compound riff"—refers to the compiling of opposing sections simultaneously playing repeated, independent riffs on complementary but overlapping positions of a rhythmic cycle, hence creating a polyphonic and polyrhythmic effect that consists of two, three, or four interlocking parts. While interlocking riff complexes in the big-band context primarily employ the opposition of horn sections (trumpets, trombones, saxes), sometimes rhythm section instruments or vocals are used as well. The effectiveness of this device stems from the arrangers' creative uses of melodic activity to highlight certain positions of a rhythmic cycle and the inherent textural ambiguity that allows listeners to shift their focus between the individual riffs as entities in themselves and the various composite rhythmic/melodic phrases created by combinations of riffs. While Afro-Cuban manifestations of this technique purposefully adhere to the clave rhythm, examinations of interlocking riff complexes in Afro-American music often reveal an underlying rhythmic structure strikingly similar to clave.

In addition to extending the theoretical discourses of jazz and Latin American musics, an analysis of this technique as it appears in Afro-Cuban and Afro-American big band arranging will contribute to the understanding of certain underlying aesthetics common to African diasporic musical practices that fall both outside big-band genres and the aforementioned timeframe. Accordingly, in the paper, I briefly discuss some historical precedents of interlocking rhythmic and melodic phrases found in Afro-American and Afro-Cuban music, closely examine the manifestations of this device in the 1930s – 1950s music of Machito, Count Basie, Tito Rodriguez, Tito Puente, and Perez Prado, and finally, I discuss how constructions based on similar principals are evident in later genres such as funk, salsa, and hip-hop. All analytical arguments are supported by notated transcriptions.

The following pages contain three reduced transcriptions of interlocking riff complexes taken from swing, mambo, and Latin jazz.

Example 1: Swing: Count Basie's "One O'clock Jump" (1938).

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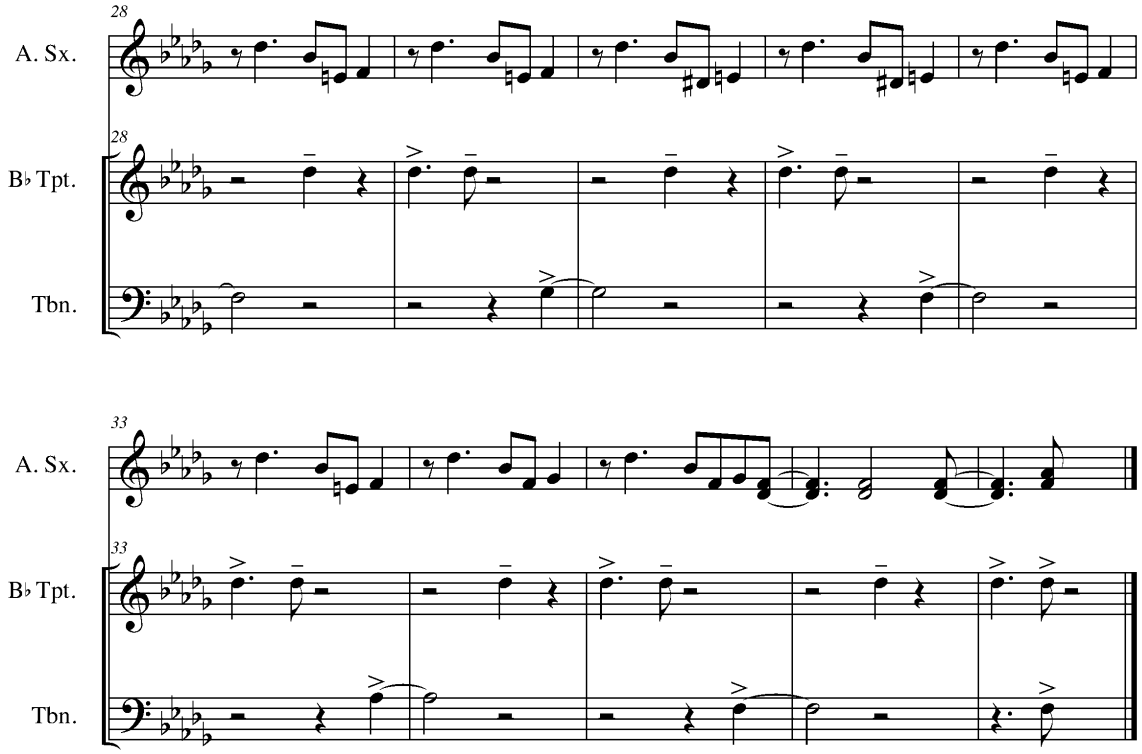
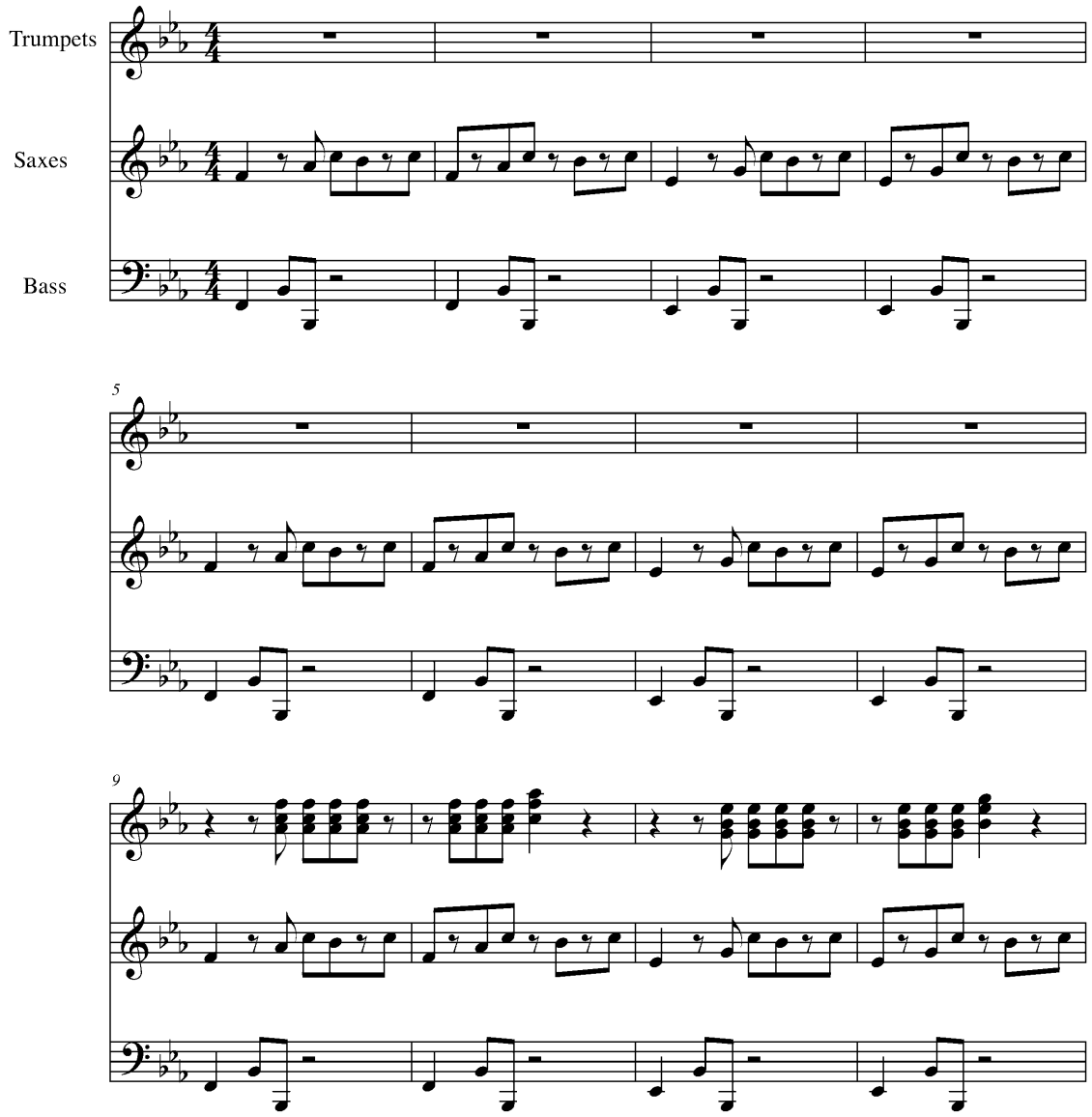
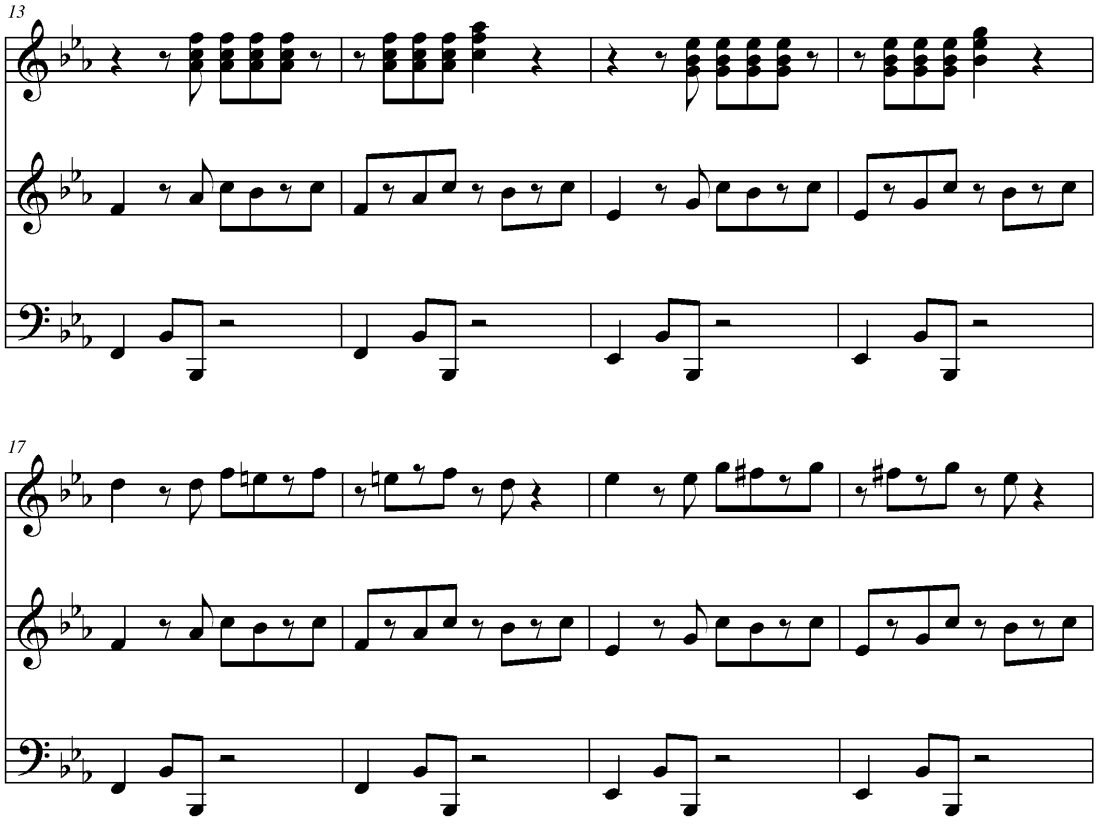
A. Sx.
B♭ Tpt.
Tbn.
18
A. Sx.
B♭ Tpt.
Tbn.
23
A. Sx.
B♭ Tpt.
Tbn.


28
A. Sx.
B♭ Tpt.
Tbn.

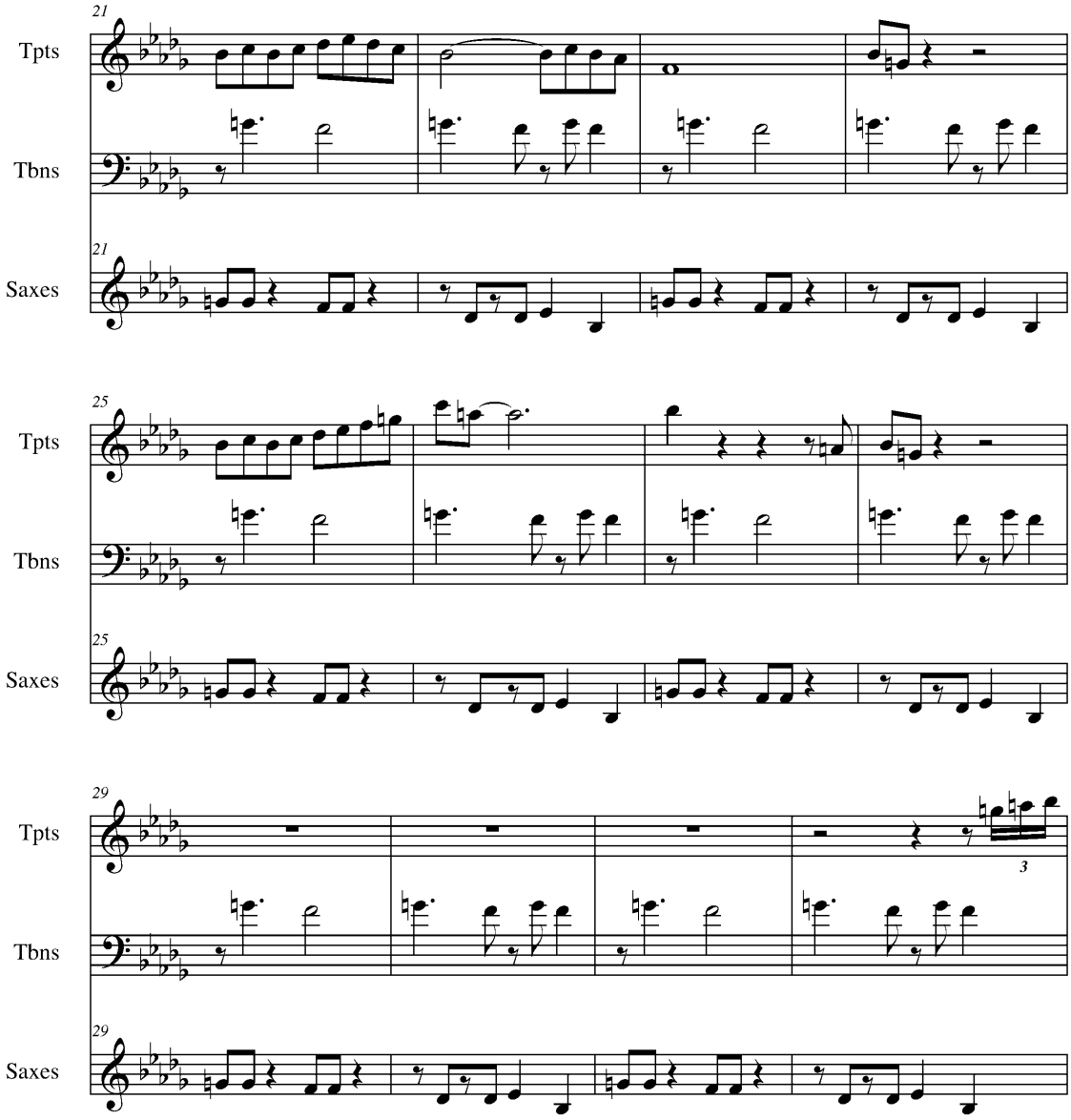
33
A. Sx.
B♭ Tpt.
Tbn.

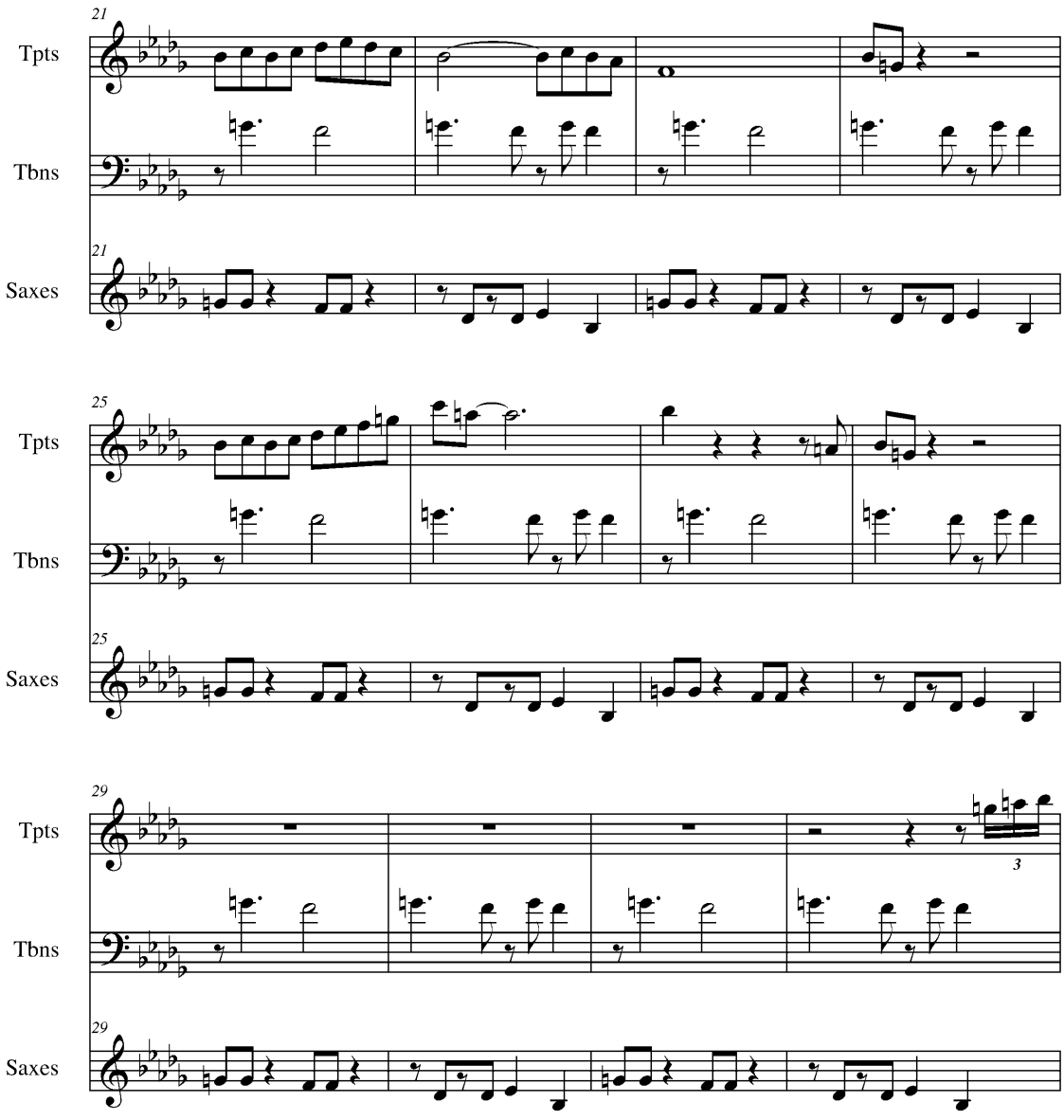
Example 2: Mambo: Perez Prado's "Mambo #5" (1949).




13
17

Example 3: Latin Jazz: Machito's "Wild Jungle" (1957).




21
Tpts
Tbns
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Saxes
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Tpts
Tbns
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Tpts
3
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Saxes