Ways of improvising.

Insights from recording sessions and surveys with young jazz musicians

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Overview

1. Introducing the approach of *Talking Analysis*
2. Method
3. Case study: solo and comments on „Impressions“
4. Further observations
5. Summary

Goals

- We want to examine: What do jazz musicians have in mind while improvising and which specific playing decisions are made during the improvisational process?

- We want to compare these findings with more global training strategies and ways of improvisation – probably bound to explicit concepts or role models – of young musicians at different levels of mastery and playing experience

[- Additionally, we want to evaluate the IFA model and the mid-level annotation method (MLA)]

Method

- Three young jazz musicians from Weimar and Berlin

- Sessions lasted about 3 hours

- Expense allowance of 80 €

- The session:

  Introduction and sound-check | recording (one take for each of the three tunes) | interview after every recording (general and phrase-by-phrase-listening)

  general interview (biography, general approaches to improvisation)

  mid-level analysis (MLA): introduction into the nine main categories of and segmentation and categorization of one of his solos

- recordings and interviews were transcribed by a staff member and explored by the authors

The tunes

Three tunes with different chord changes:

“Freddie Freeloader”, a mid-tempo blues, four choruses

“Good Bait” by Tadd Dameron, mid-tempo , AABA-form (32 measures), functional harmony, two choruses

“Impressions” by John Coltrane, mid-tempo, AABA-form (32 measures), modal harmony, three choruses

The musicians

A – mid-20s, just finished his bachelor degree in Weimar; tenor saxophone

B – early 20s, studies at the Jazz Institute Berlin, 4th semester; tenor saxophone

C – mid-30s, alumni since 2011, saxophone teacher and freelance musician in Weimar; tenor saxophone

CASE STUDY : Solo and comments of musician A on „Impressions“

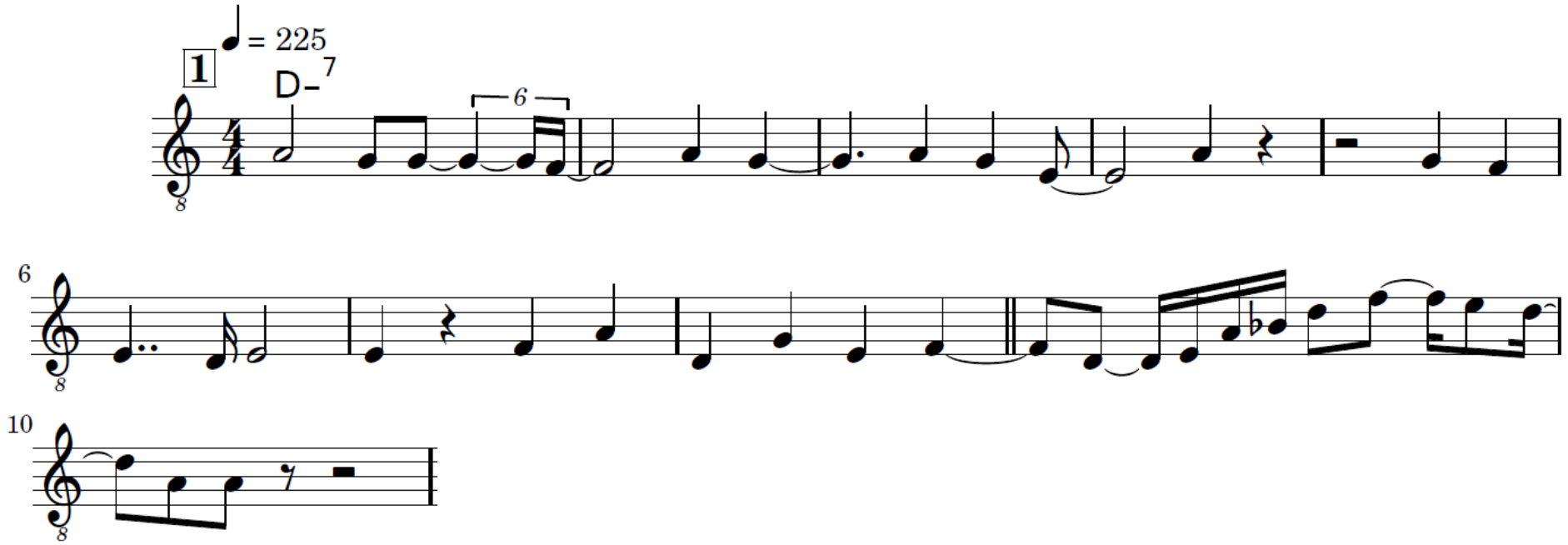
- Last of the three recordings

- He started with comments on how he felt in general: overall good and positive, “relaxed”

- improvisational strategies that he remembered:
    - side stepping/slipping, like playing the B-section-chord over the A-section
    - using the whole range of the saxophone
    - concepts of reharmonization, that change the harmony
        - playing minor with a major seven
        - playing Aeolian minor rather than Dorian minor

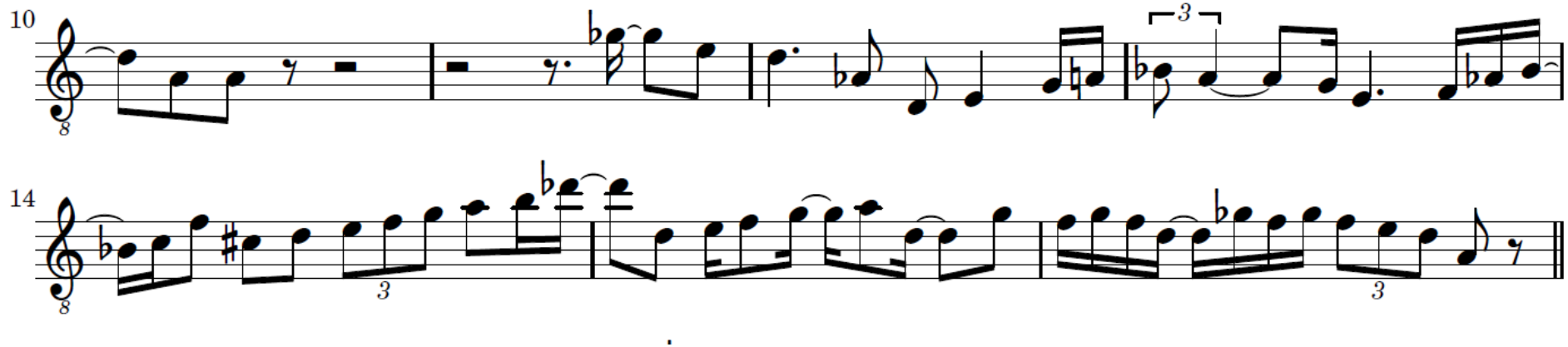
Case study: A on "Impressions"

introduction, simple rhythmic idea



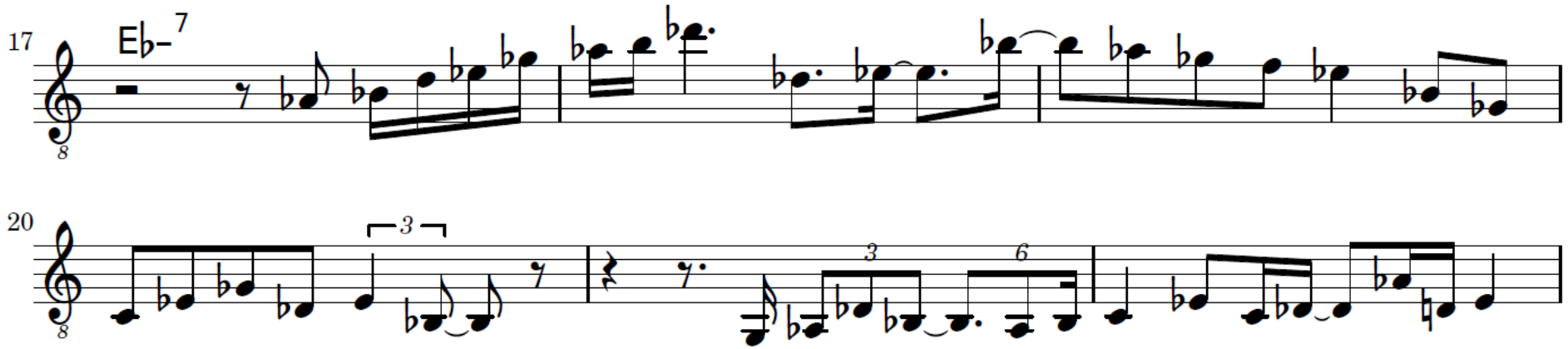
Case study: A on “Impressions”

several lines related to each other, counterpart to the beginning



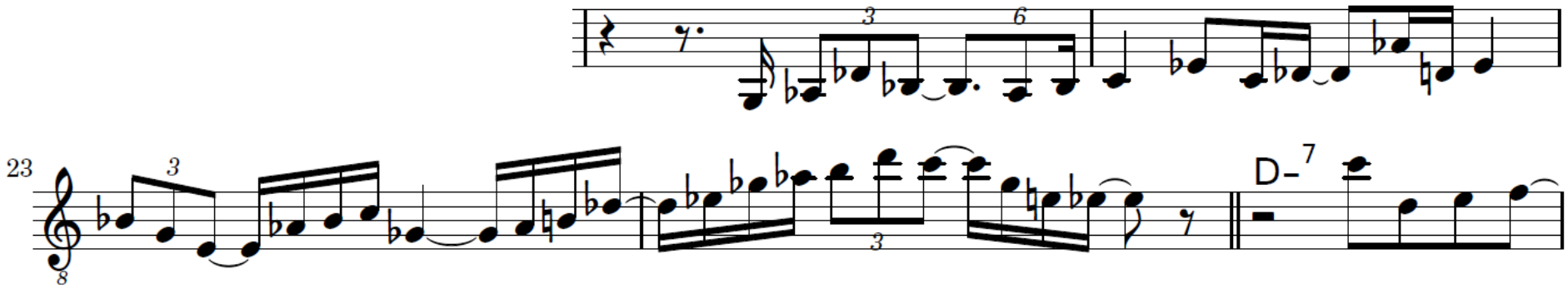
Case study: A on "Impressions"

B-section, answering the line before



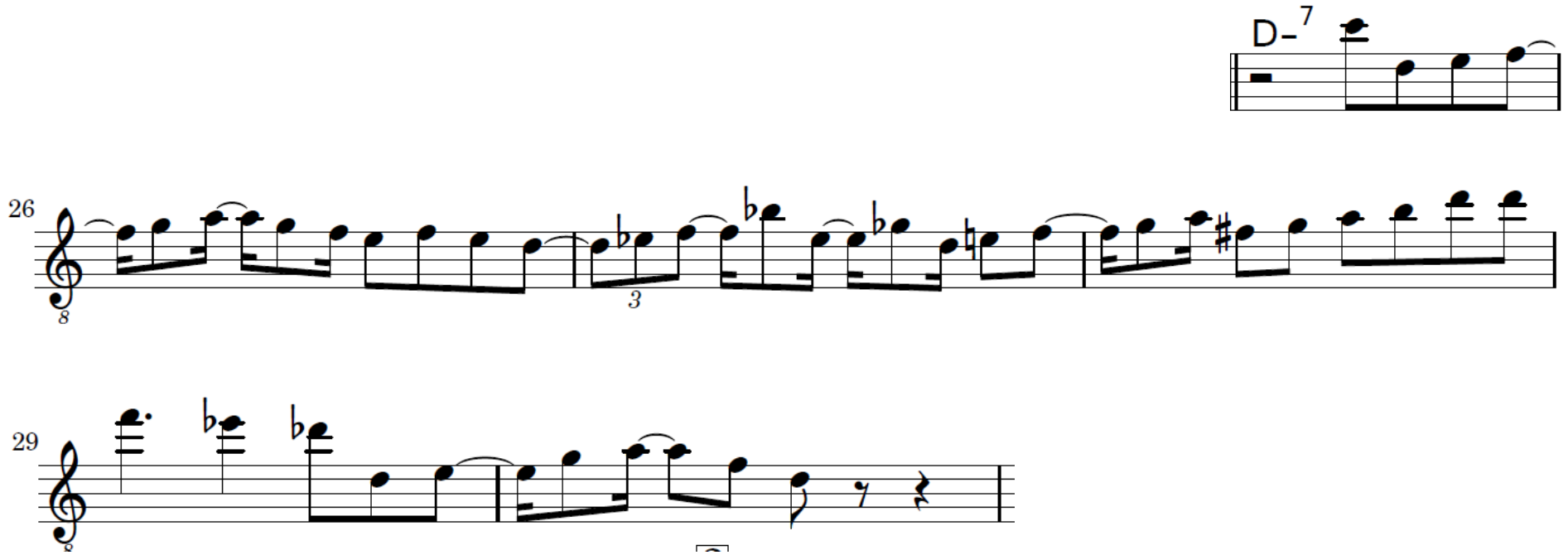
Case study: A on “Impressions”

“Coltrane quote”



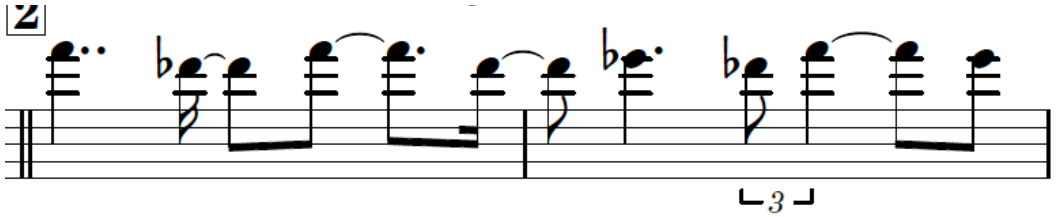
Case study: A on "Impressions"

first time playing outside, chain of 8th's



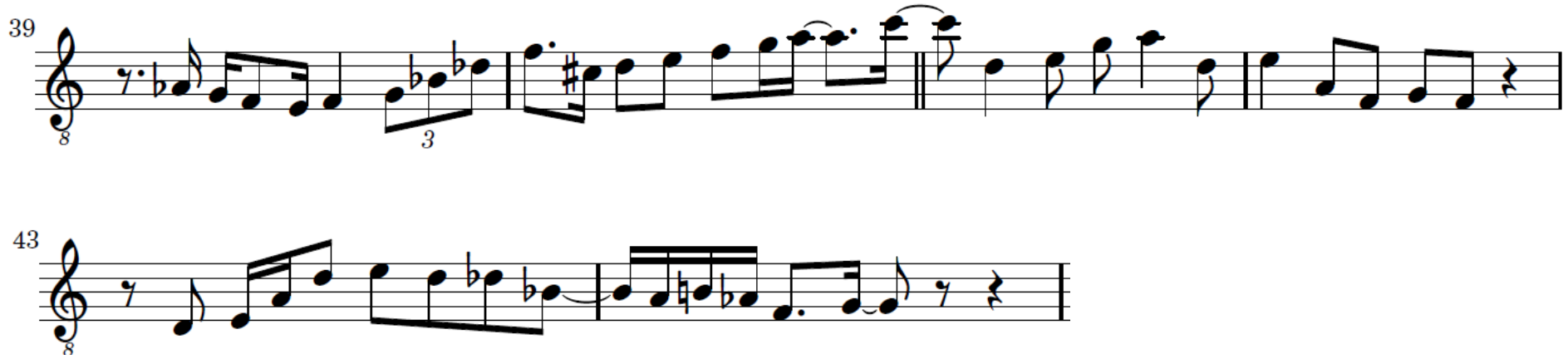
Case study: A on “Impressions”

“kitschy”, failed phrase



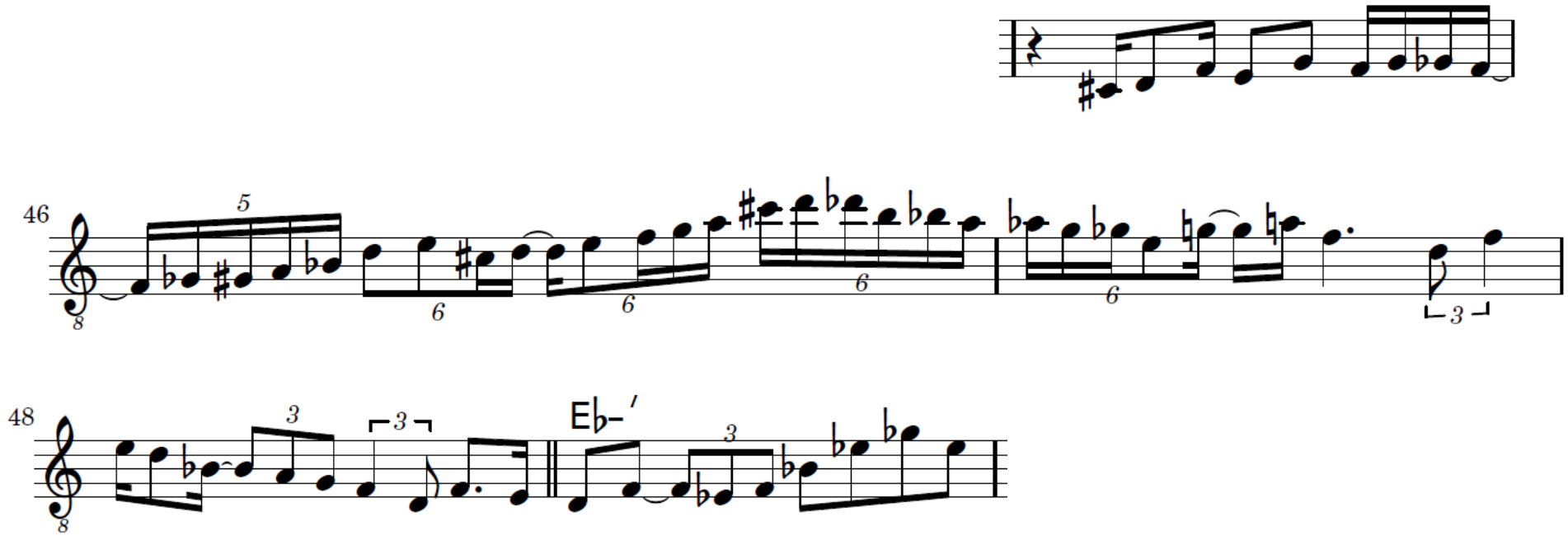
Case study: A on “Impressions”

“gap filler”



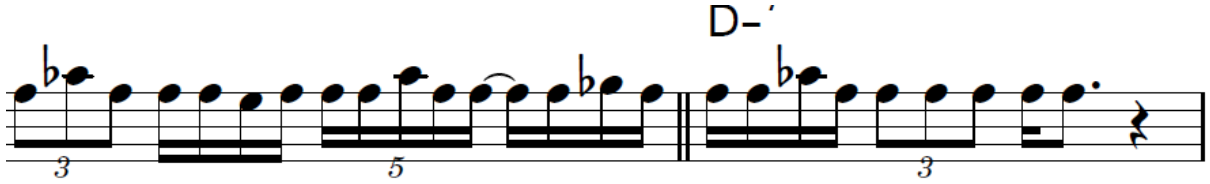
Case study: A on "Impressions"

climax leading into the B-section



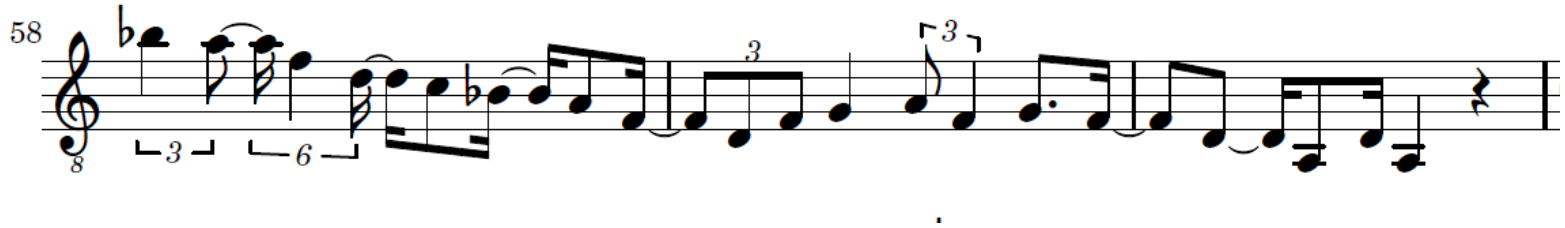
Case study: A on “Impressions”

rhythmic idea, “drumming”



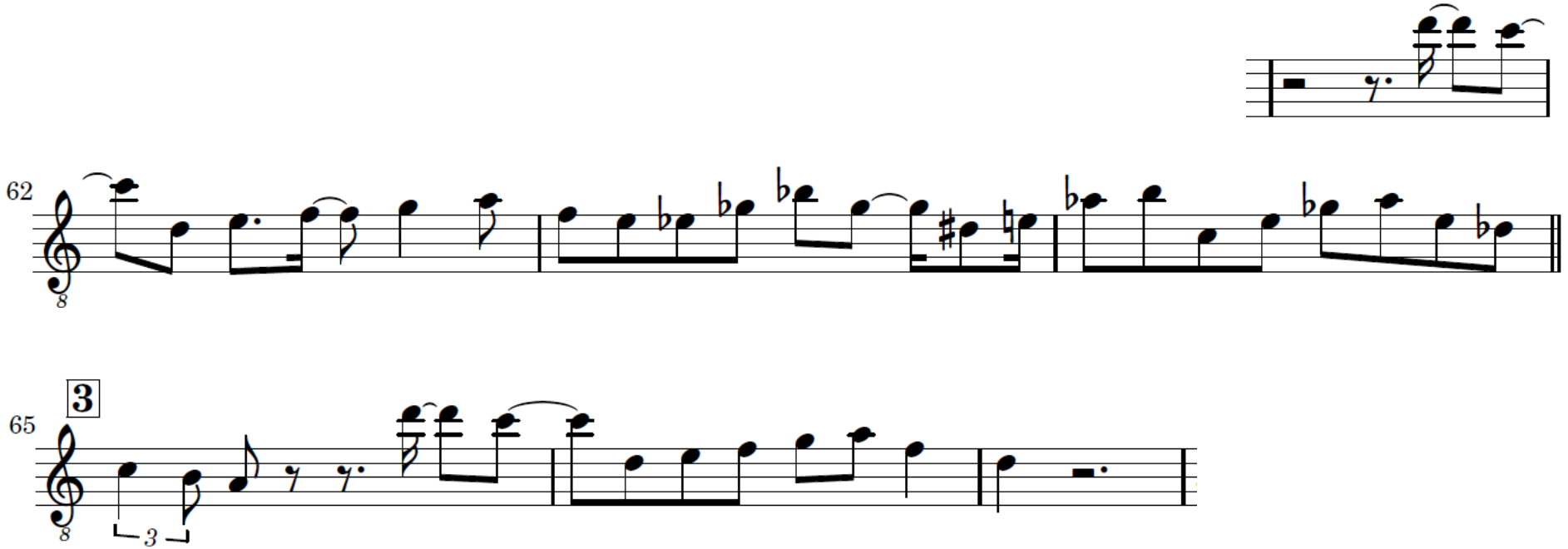
Case study: A on “Impressions”

line of 8th’s



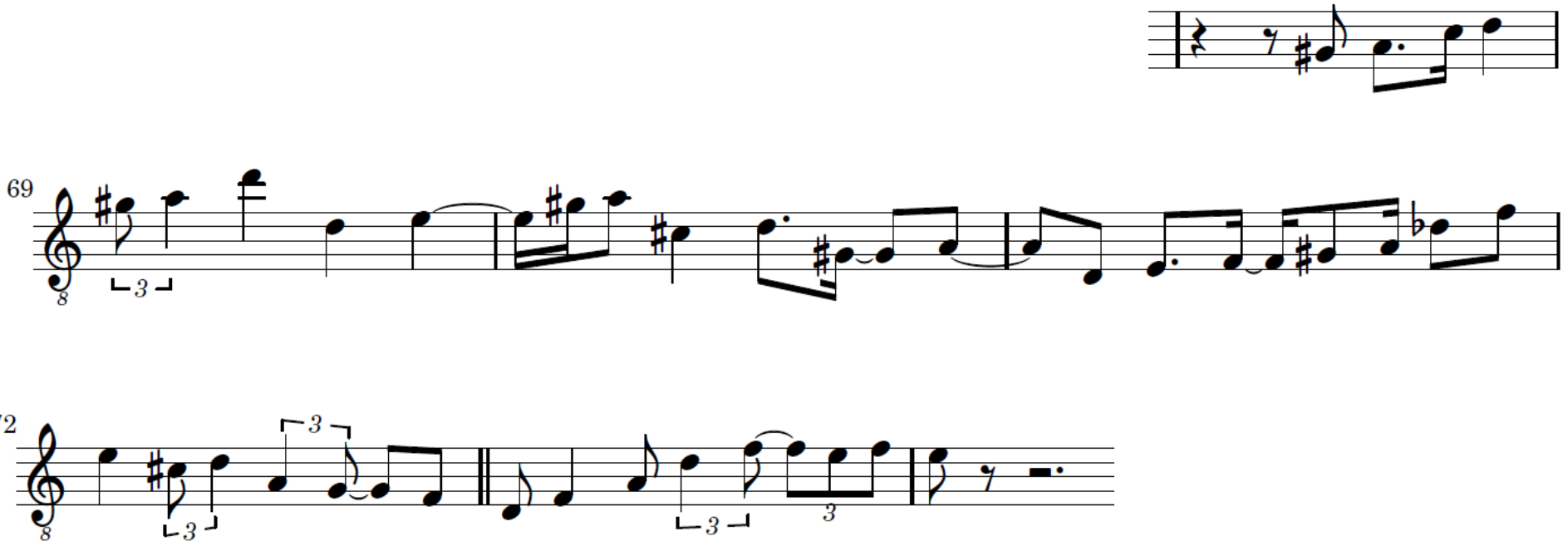
Case study: A on “Impressions”

inside-outside-inside, interrelation of the phrase-parts



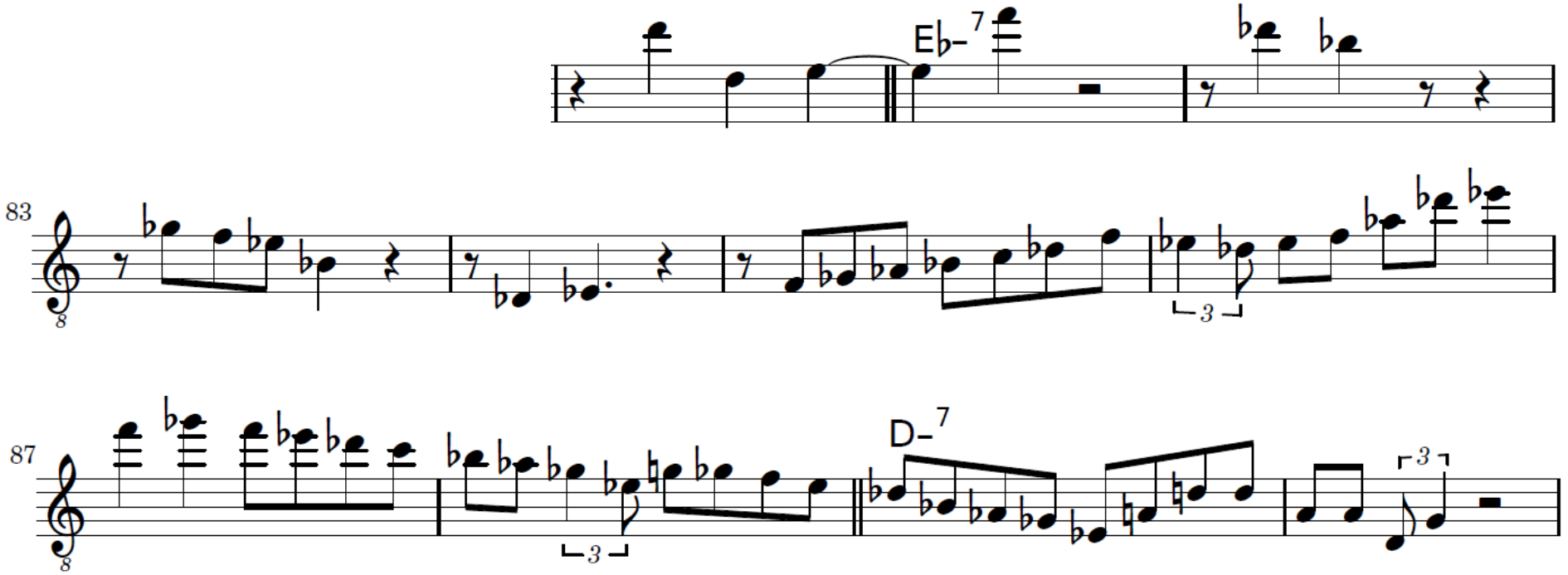
Case study: A on "Impressions"

minor triads with grace notes



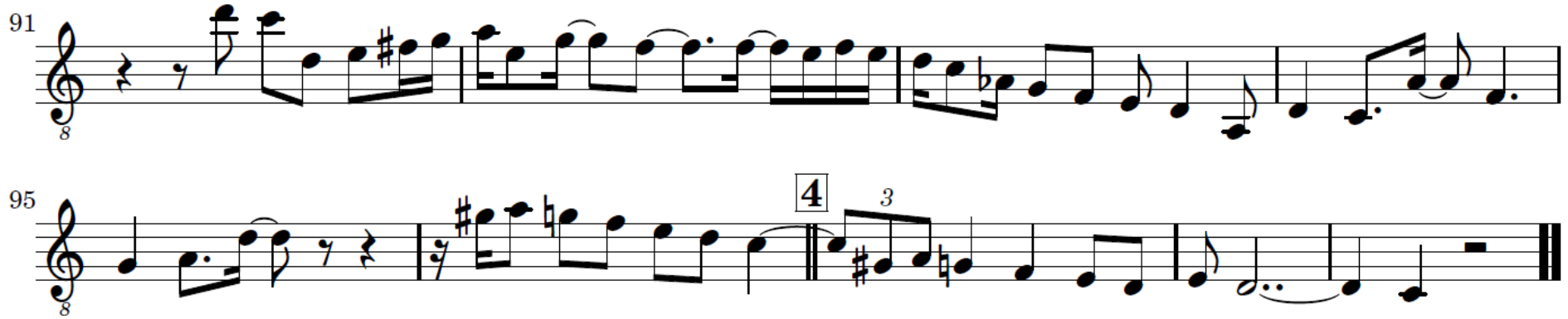
Case study: A on "Impressions"

simple short ideas evolving into lines



Case study: A on “Impressions”

ending phrase, “sneaking out”



Case study: A on "Impressions"

observations

In the general appreciation of his solo he speaks about
- his feeling and his satisfaction with the solo
- reflects on the overall shape and dramaturgy of the solo
- and names several ideas he remembered.

During the detailed comments
- A often just describes and analyses what he's listening to and, then, tries to name the idea either with musical terms or with associations and metaphors, on the one hand, or
- he sometimes recalls a concrete decision he made during the course of improvisation, on the other hand
- and sometimes he questions himself: Was that an unconscious decision? Was it involuntary? Do I play like that?

Case study: A On "Impressions"

observations

Ideas he could name:

rhythm | contrast | relation of motifs | quoting | chains of 8th's as "conversation" |

springboard | energy | overtone idea | overtones, outside and inside again |

grace-notes | minor-chord and reharmonisation | Triads | fade-out

→ problematic: discrepancy of conscious reflection in language vs. pre-/semi-conscious thinking in the moment („I think harmony in colours")

→ importance of the ear and hearing abilities

Musician B

observations and summary

B didn’t feel so comfortable with his solos and is very critical about his playing (“noodling”).

He plays rather automatically or unconsciously: “Keine Ahnung, das haben meine Finger irgendwie gemacht, weiß nicht” (bei Freddie Freeloader) or “das war einfach nur: uaah, ich muss irgendwas spielen”

He continuously monitors his playing for ideas (or “a story”, “a statement”), but often feels not capable to perform what he has in mind

Ideas:

- stable phrase target tones,
- repetition of patterns, sequencing
- call and response, playing bluesy
- harmonic ideas, to play certain intervals (e.g. the major 7^{th} in Impressions)
- rhythm
- quote of the theme, varying the theme
- expressive ideas: ghost notes

Musician C

observations and summary

C rather evaluates than describes his playing.

He criticizes that he sometimes plays half-consciously:
“Das sind so - immer so semi-bewusst Pläne bei mir oft. Also ich erinner‘ mich: okay, hier spiel ich jetzt mal diese Quart-Geschichte, und dann denk' ich aber nur so halb mit. Und wahrscheinlich ist das dann auch der Punkt, äh, wo's mich raushaut (lacht).“

Ideas:
- using the whole register
- playing with motives, motivic relations (“netter Sinnzusammenhang”)
- playing bluesy
- quote of earlier playing
- harmonic ideas, e.g., not to end on a chord root, to play patterns of fourths and strategies of outside-playing
- a certain energy level
- repeating tones within a line
- rhythmic ideas (variation between 8ths and double time / 16ths)

Summary

1. Musicians improvise and talk about their improvising in different ways – according to their peculiar training biography, their stylistic and aesthetic preferences, and their level of mastery (in regard to instrumental virtuosity, inventiveness etc.).

2. Some of the processes during improvisation are unconscious, other are conscious or deliberate decisions.

3. Many musical aspects could be identified and evaluated by the musicians – while improvising, or afterwards. However, there are personal differences, too.

4. *Talking Analysis* could be a helpful method to examine improvisational processes – and could be used for teaching and practicing, too!

Thank you for your attention!

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