The United States Army Field Band

The Musical Ambassadors of the Army
Washington, DC

Bass Clarinet Basics

by
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HISTORY

The bass clarinet was invented in the second half of the Eighteenth Century, and was originally used only in orchestras. By the 1920s, the bass clarinet was being used in bands, but usually doubled other parts or substituted when other bass-voiced instruments were unavailable. Since the 1950s, the bass clarinet has been treated more as a solo instrument, and in today's band literature often has a prominent role.

THE INSTRUMENT

Using proper equipment is very important when playing any musical instrument. Selmer and Yamaha are probably the most common brands of bass clarinet. It is imperative that the instrument be given proper care. It should be swabbed out after each use and cork grease should be applied to the joints regularly. Whenever the instrument is not being used, it should be stored in its case.

MOUTHPIECES

The bass clarinet mouthpiece plays an important role in the production of sound. The mouthpiece should fit securely in the neck of the instrument and should not be used if chipped, warped, or cracked. About once a week the mouthpiece should be cleaned in warm, soapy water. Never swab a mouthpiece or put anything with a sharp edge inside. Some brands of mouthpieces that are good choices for high school musicians include Selmer, Vandoren, and Bay.

REEDS

Players should use the type of reed best suited to their playing levels. When not being used, reeds should be stored in a reed guard or secured on a piece of plexiglass with rubber bands. Reeds should not be stored on the mouthpiece. Beginning students should use a softer reed (strength 2 to 3), which will allow easy sound production in the lower register; however, these are not stiff enough to be consistent in the upper register. One should consider a strength of $3^1/_2$ to 4 for this purpose. Brands of reeds that are good choices for the developing bass clarinetist include Rico Royal, La Voz, Olivieri, and Vandoren. If bass clarinet reeds are not available, tenor sax reeds will fit the mouthpiece. However, they do not function as well as reeds made specifically for the bass clarinet.

WARM-UP AND PRACTICE

Warming up properly is one of the most important aspects of a daily practice routine. Since instrumental music is composed along scale and chord lines, it makes sense to use scales and chords as an integral part of one's warm-up. Major and melodic minor scales are a good place to start *(see Example 1 and Scale Supplement)*. Scales should be practiced slowly at first, using different articulations to develop legato and staccato tonguing. Broken chords *(see Example 2)* may also be practiced using different articulations as well.

Standard study books for the Bb soprano clarinet may also be used for the bass clarinet. Some recommended titles include Rose *30 Etudes*, Rose *40 Studies*, and any of the etude books by Klosé or Baermann.

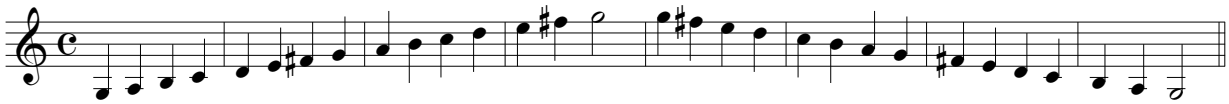
Long tones *(see Example 3)* are also effective as they help the player develop good control of each note throughout the entire dynamic spectrum. Playing each note of a scale as a long tone is another way to improve the sound *(see Example 4)*.

Producing an acceptable sound in the low register is usually achieved in a short time by most people who play the bass clarinet. However, because of the physics of the instrument, producing an appropriate sound in the upper register is more challenging. The purpose of the following exercise is to teach the player to keep a constant stream of air entering the horn by supporting the air with the abdominal muscles. The notes should all sound the same; no one note should sound louder than any other. Start in the second octave of any scale with the tonic note and ascend for one octave. Remember to keep the lower jaw relaxed and the throat open *(see Example 5)*.

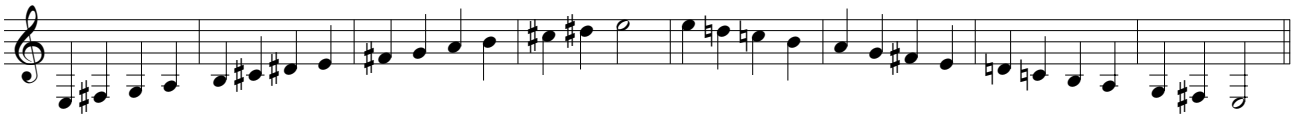
BASS CLARINET EXAMPLES

Example 1

G Major

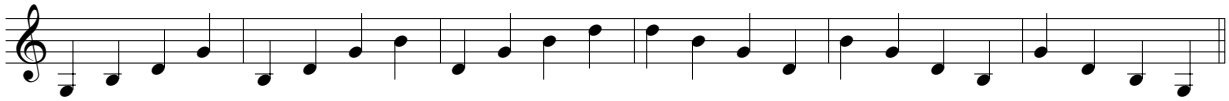


E minor (melodic)

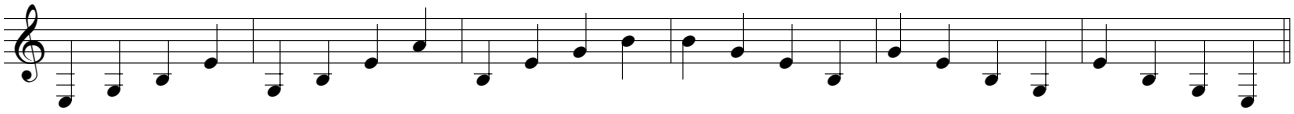


Example 2

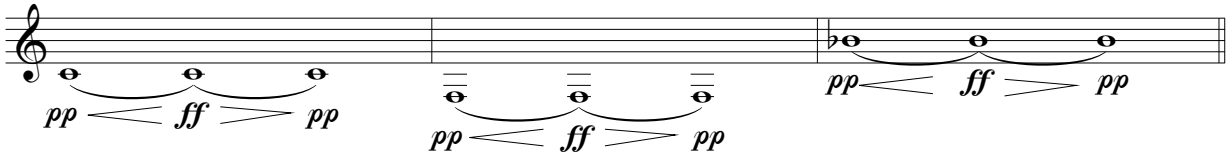
G Major



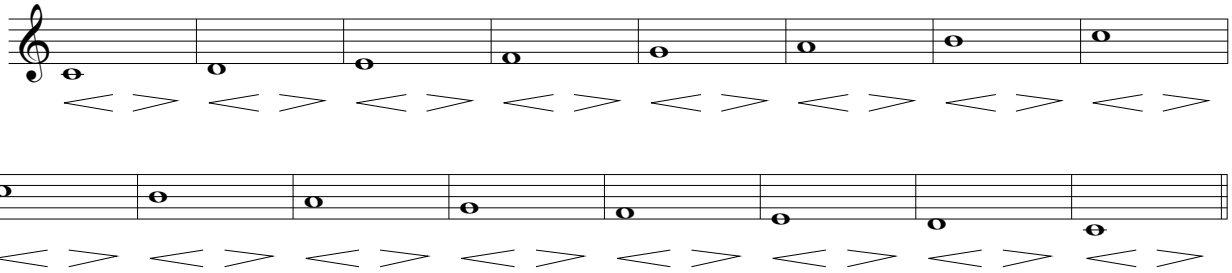
E minor



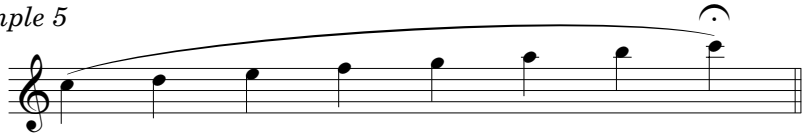
Example 3



Example 4



Example 5

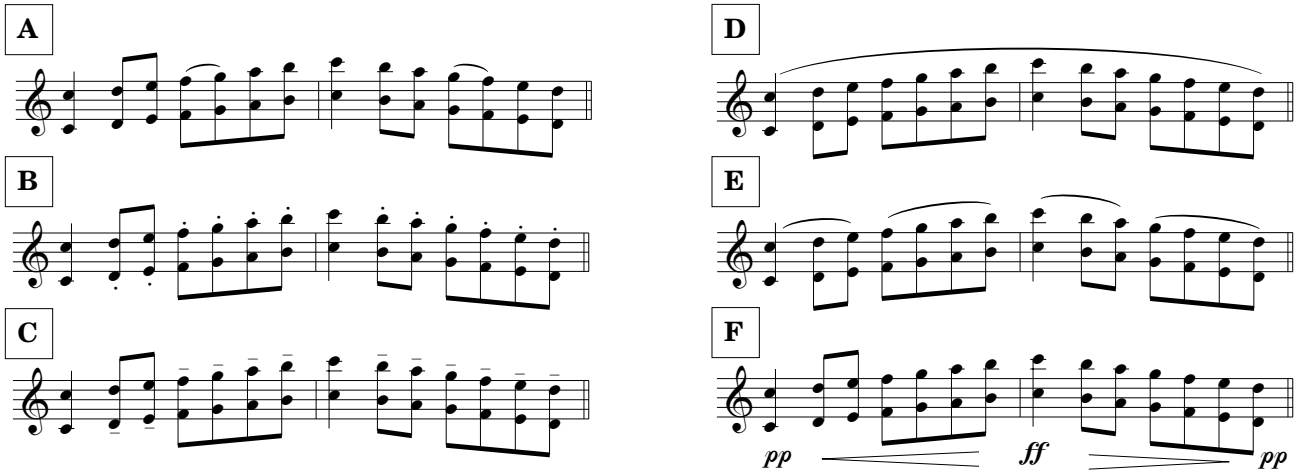


Scale Supplement

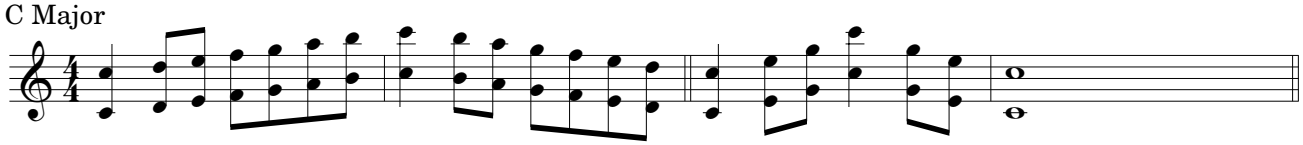
The fifteen major and minor scales make up our musical "ABCs." Just as a person wishing to read learns the alphabet first, a musician cannot expect to master an instrument without first learning the basic set of scales. By diligently practicing the major scales and all three forms of the minor scales, they will become automatic, just like reading the alphabet. This will make playing, especially sight reading, much easier so that the musician can concentrate towards the ultimate goal—making music!

Each scale below should be played slowly at first, ensuring that each note is played correctly. Gradually work for speed, but do not rush. Use a metronome whenever possible to guarantee evenness and a steady tempo. The player should practice difficult scales twice as often as easy ones to develop competence in all keys. As skills increase, change rhythmic patterns and increase tempos. Advanced players can still use scales to work on intonation, technique, range, and dynamics.

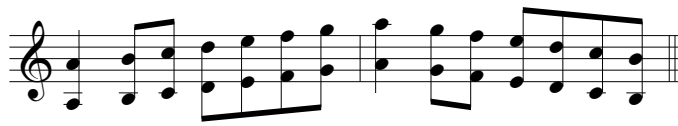
Use the following patterns one at a time or in combination to get even more benefit from scale practice:



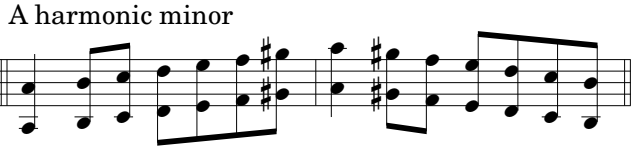
C Major



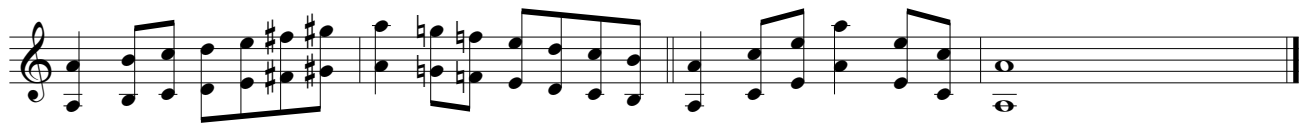
A natural minor



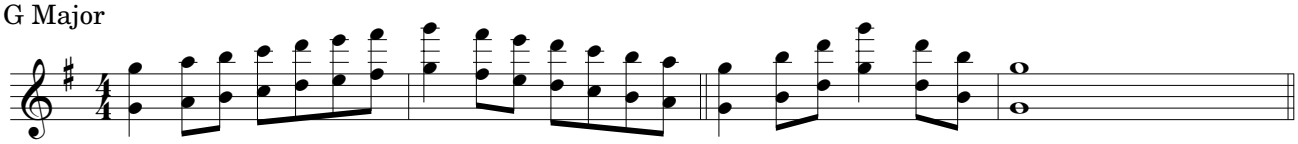
A harmonic minor



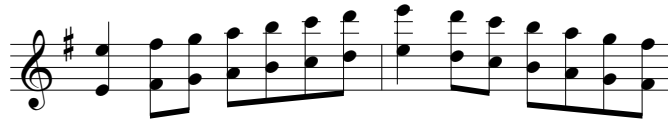
A melodic minor



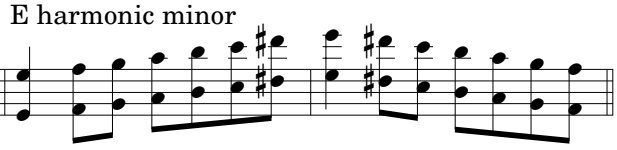
G Major



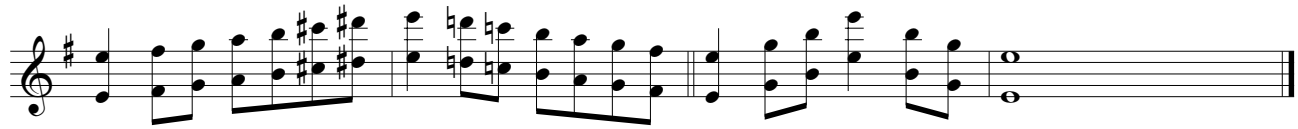
E natural minor



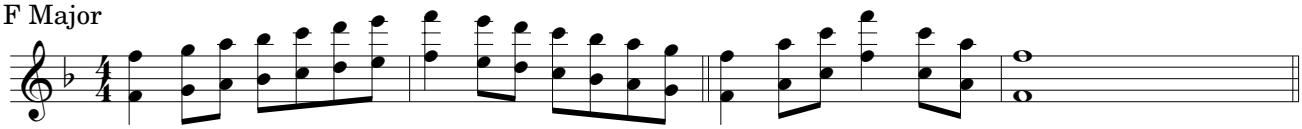
E harmonic minor



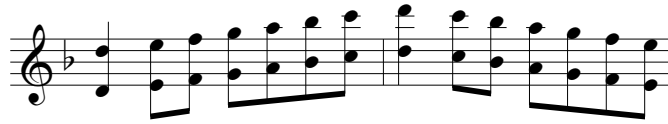
E melodic minor



F Major



D natural minor



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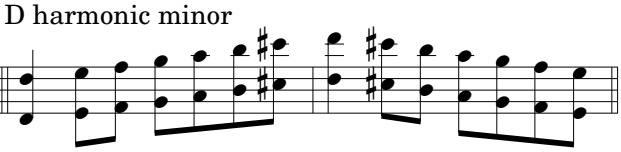

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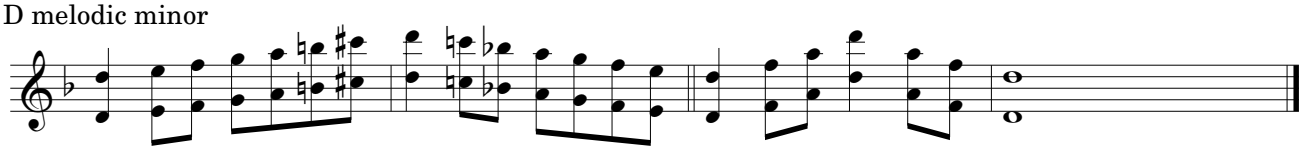
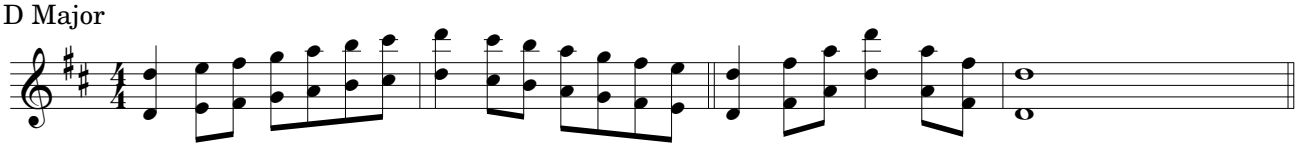
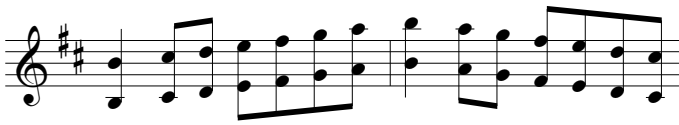


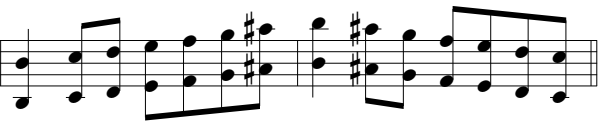
D Major



B natural minor



B harmonic minor



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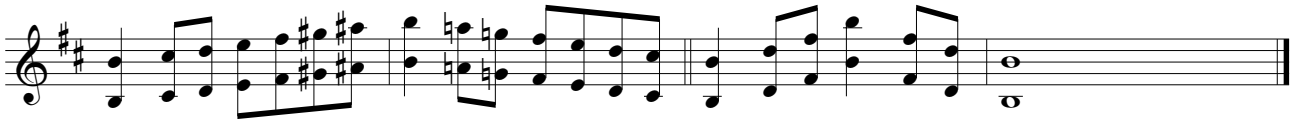

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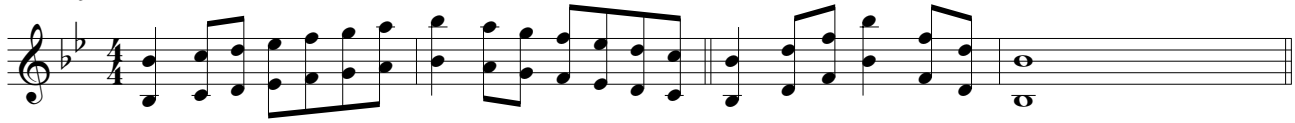
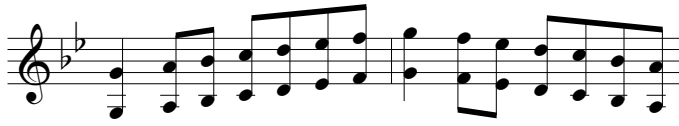


G natural minor



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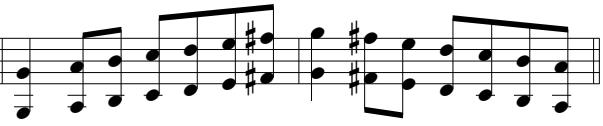

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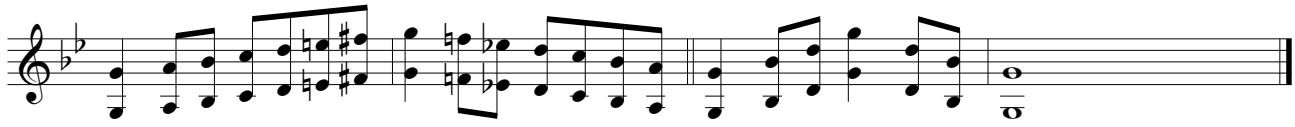

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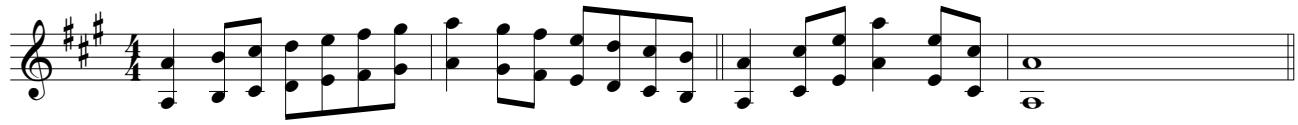

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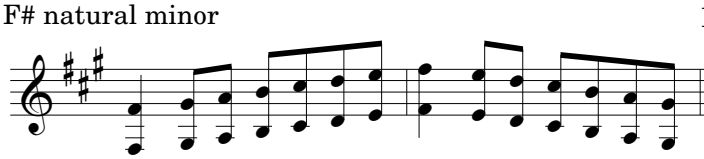

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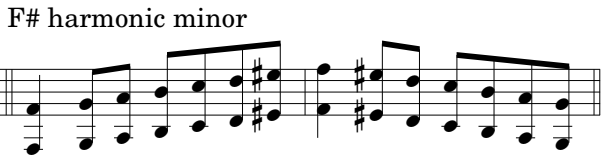

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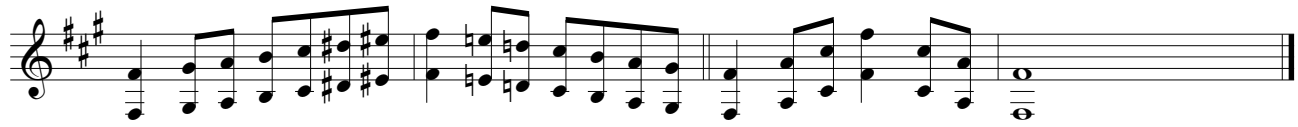
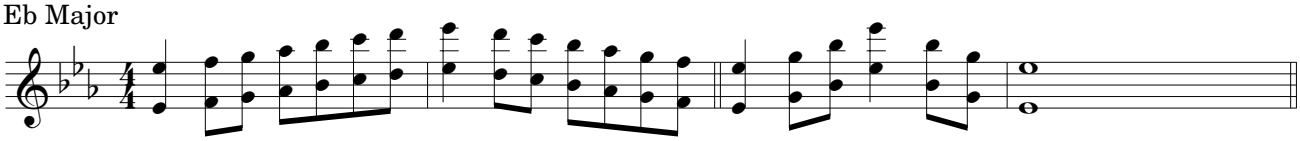
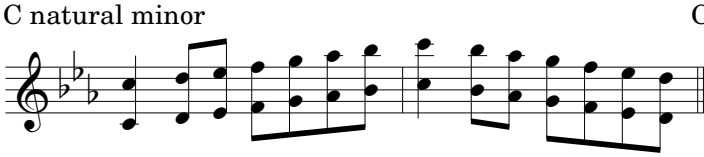


Eb Major



C natural minor



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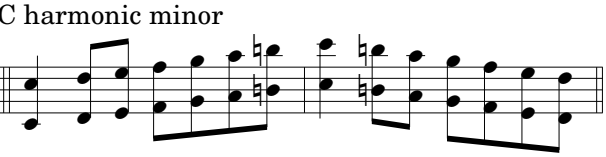

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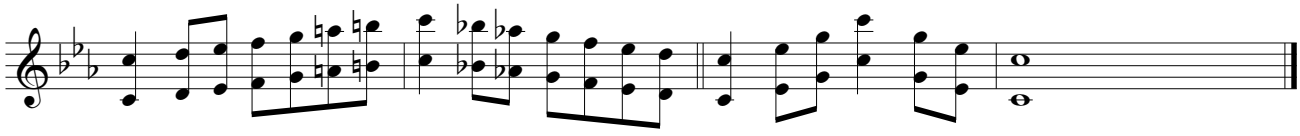

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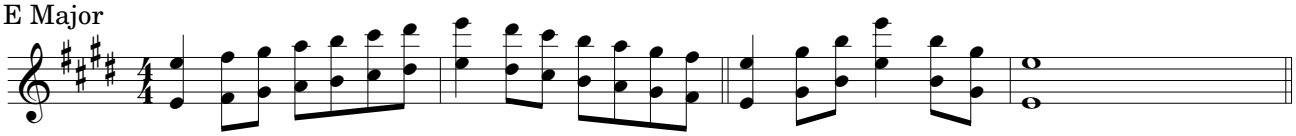

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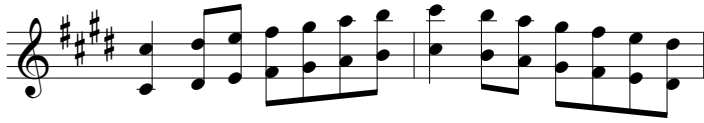

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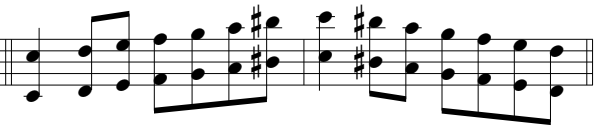

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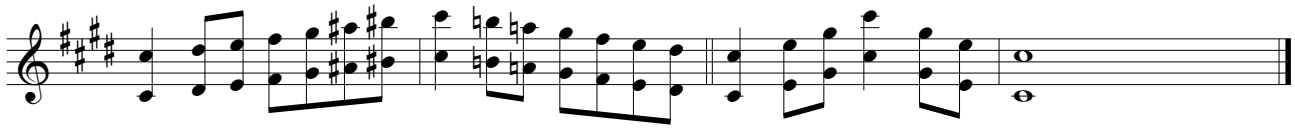
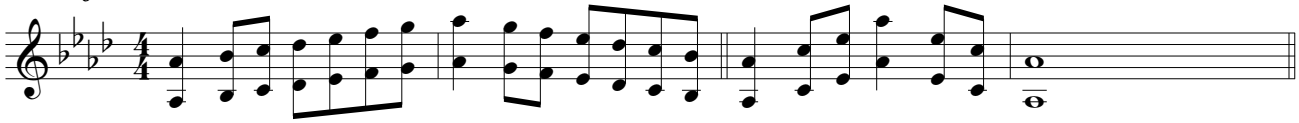


Ab Major



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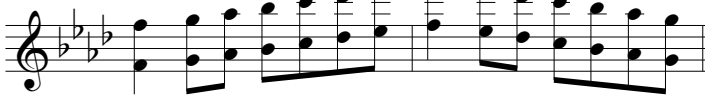

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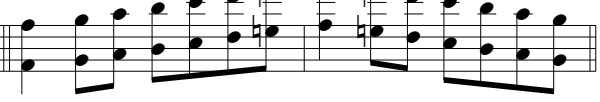

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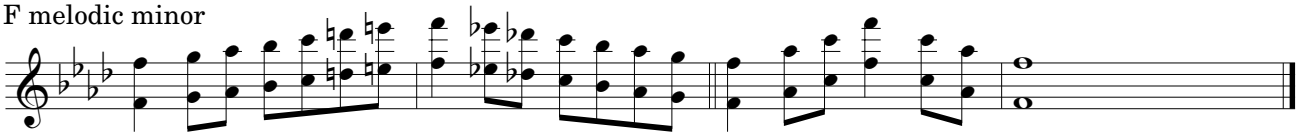

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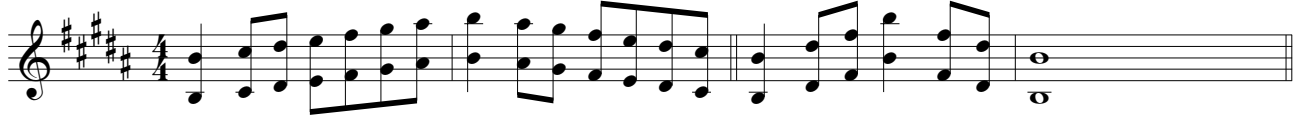

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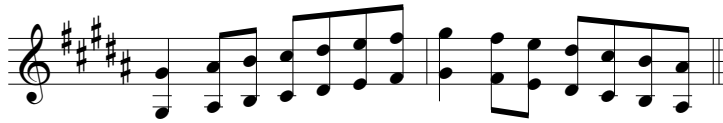

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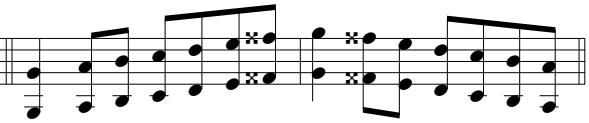
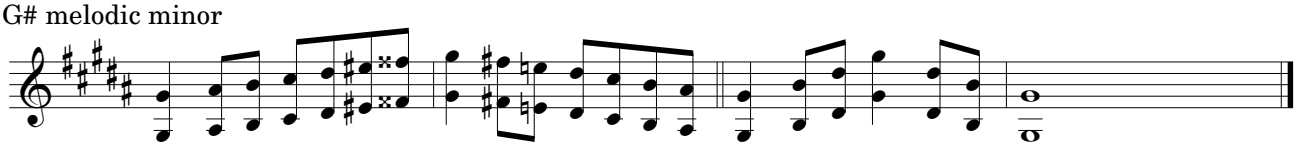
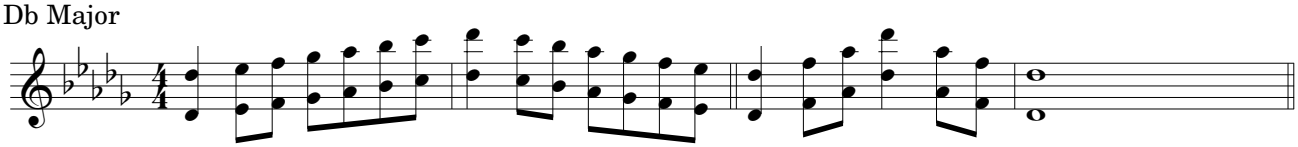


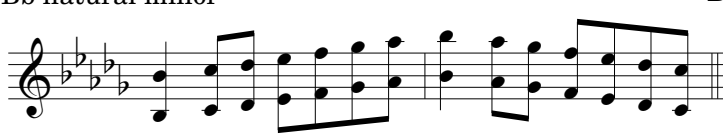
G# melodic minor



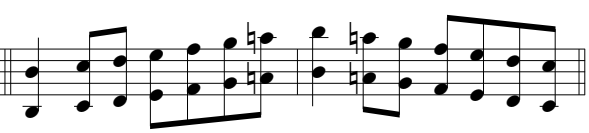
Db Major



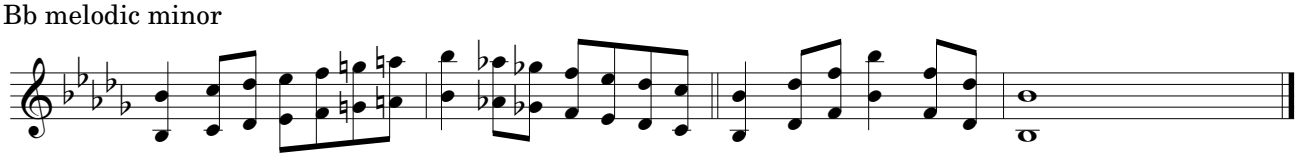
Bb natural minor



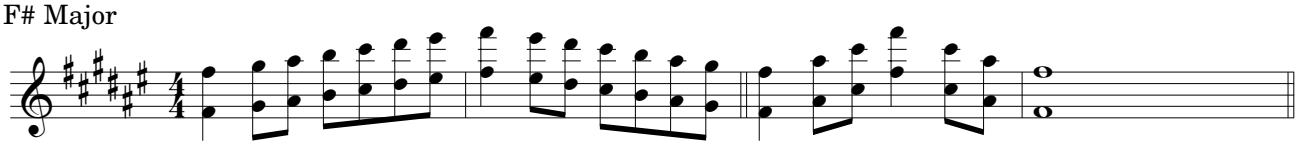
Bb harmonic minor



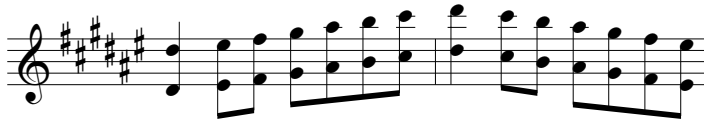
Bb melodic minor



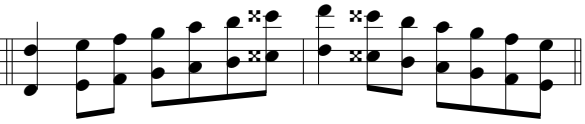
F# Major



D# natural minor



D# harmonic minor



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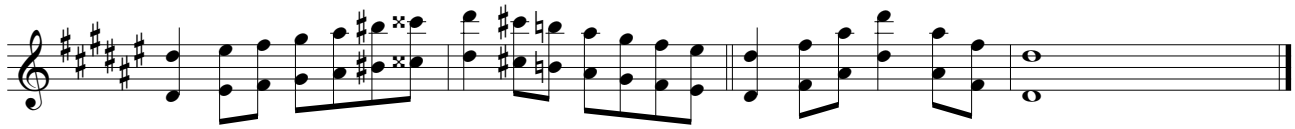
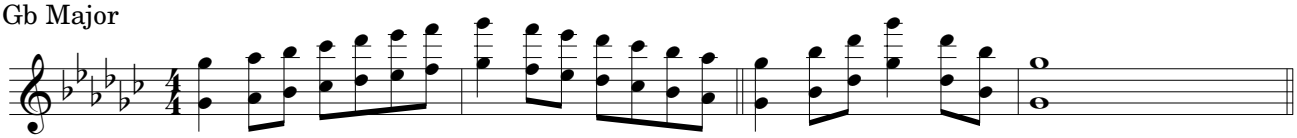
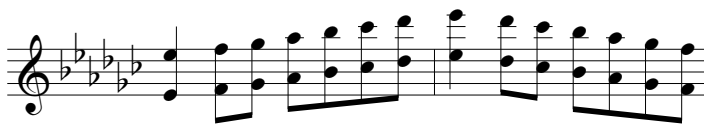


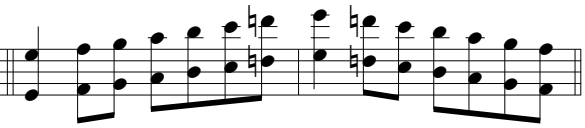
Gb Major



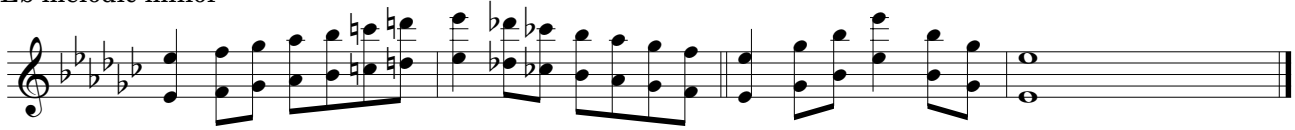
Eb natural minor



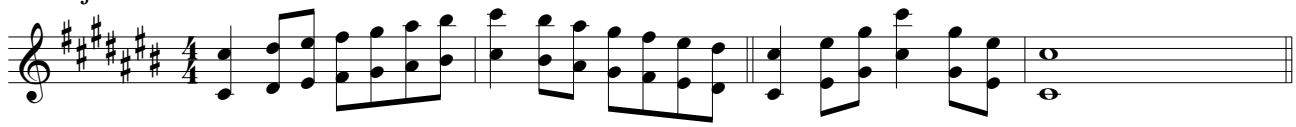
Eb harmonic minor



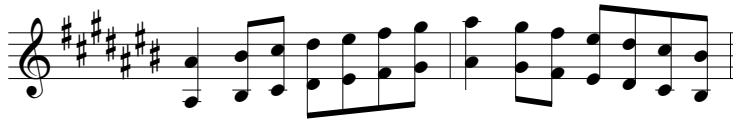
Eb melodic minor



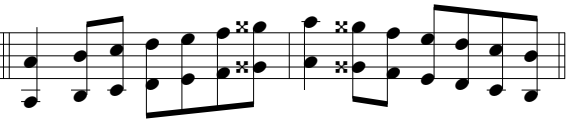
C# Major



A# natural minor



A# harmonic minor



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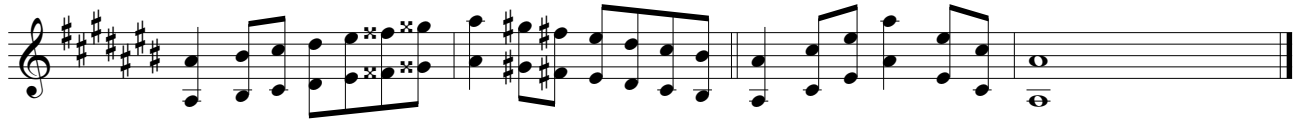
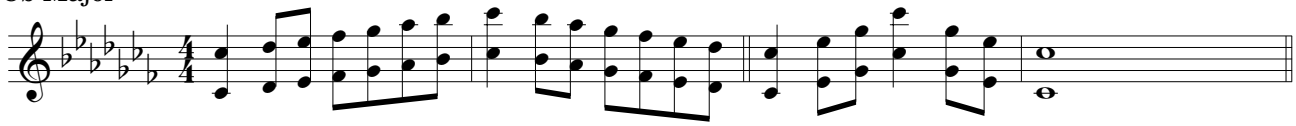
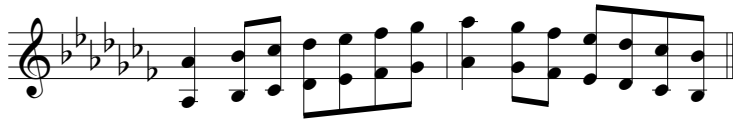


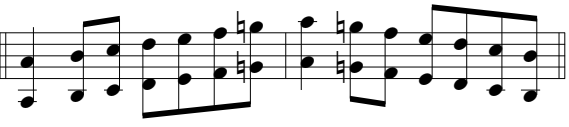
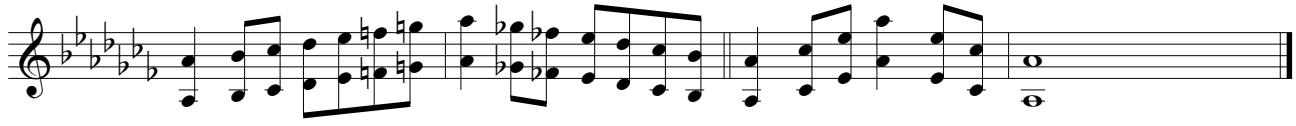
Cb Major



Ab natural minor



Ab harmonic minor



Ab melodic minor