The Mechanics Behind Piano Comping:

A Practical Analysis of Herbie Hancock's Piano Comping in "Seven Steps to Heaven"

In jazz music the term "comping" refers to the chords, rhythms and melodies that the piano, guitar or other chordal instruments play in rhythm to support an improvised solo. Comping or "to comp" is not limited only to the short and percussive components that propel the soloist; comping can be supple and delicate or vigorous and driving. The term differs from the musical term "accompaniment" in that rhythm, the most important element to comping, is used to interact spontaneously with the soloist. It creates a conversation and makes the music come alive, ultimately touching the listener.

Comping is a complex subject of study for jazz musicians because of the numerous elements involved in the communication between the soloist and the comper. To comp effectively, a clear understanding of the basic elements of the piece (form, melody, harmony and rhythm) is required. The comper is also expected to make the most appropriate selection and combination of registers, dynamics, and textures to best compliment the soloist's intentions, without overwhelming them or "getting in the way." In an effort to uncover some of the mechanics behind piano comping, I will analyze a full transcription I made (included at the end of this paper) by one of the most iconic jazz piano accompanists, Herbie Hancock, to illustrate his different techniques and approaches. Even though this transcription cannot represent the impalpable elements of the interaction between the musicians, it will facilitate a better understanding of the role of a jazz accompanist and how his or her musical intellect and sensitivity contribute to the flow of the performance.

This analysis represents something that I have been looking for since I first started playing jazz: a study that would help pianists understand what their role is when comping. To comprehend this process, it is important to understand the main aspects of the different styles and eras of jazz, especially from the 1950s through to the 1960s. While investigating, I realized that there was a lack

of information available on the subject, which led me to learn in the most traditional way for a jazz musician: to copy from recordings. Through the process of hearing a rhythm or melody over and over again, the pianist can begin to grasp the mechanism which is at the heart of "hearing" rhythms and melody lines. This is a practice that can be applied to the comper's own creations and aid in the search for his or her own voice. I have found the book *An Approach to Comping*, by pianist and composer Jeb Patton, to contain information vital to this study.

Herbie Hancock: A Brief Introduction

Herbie Hancock is one of the most revered musicians in the pantheon of jazz compers, improvisers and composers. Although Hancock backed up many of the jazz greats—such as Lee Morgan, Donald Byrd, Wayne Shorter, and Freddie Hubbard—it was not until he began working with the Miles Davis Quintet that Herbie gained proper recognition. For five years (1964 to 1969), he was part of the Miles Davis Quintet, providing Miles the ultimate comfort in comping: constant, driven, rhythmic support coupled with shouts and rapid reflexes. Although Hancock was only 21 when the album *Seven Steps to Heaven* was recorded, he was already showing a firm command of both traditional and modern jazz music. Of particular interest on this album was his interaction with both the bassist, Ron Carter, and the drummer, Tony Williams, with whom he created one of the most influential rhythm sections in jazz.

Herbie Hancock's unique comping behind Miles Davis is shown in the following transcription. It comprises a mixture of spread voicings (chord tones that are arranged in an interval wider than an octave), sometimes without the root, drop two chords (a closed position chord with the second highest note dropped one octave), and conventional closed position chords. Significantly, he makes use of different registers of the piano, supplying the soloist with a generous palette of rich chords: spread chords and open harmonies on the high register and thick and standard harmonies in

the middle range of the piano. All of these elements are coupled with an intense rhythmic background, constantly pushing the rhythm section forward.

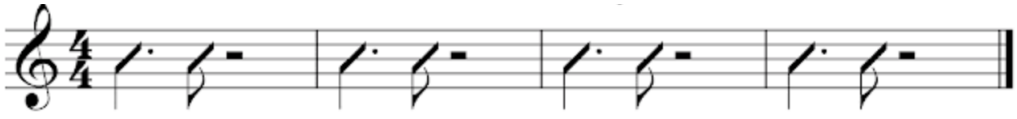
Herbie Hancock's Comp on "Seven Steps to Heaven"

My analysis of this song is divided into three sections: rhythmic analysis, analysis of the voicings (how chord tones are ordered), and textural analysis. In the first section, I summarize the rhythmic cells or motives, one measure or two measure rhythmic motives, syncopations and rhythmic displacements. In the second section, I examine the structure of the chords, e.g. upper structures, quartal voicings and soprano pedal voicings. In the third section, I describe how texture is applied: the use of the tempo, range, and harmonic ideas that determine the quality of the comping.

Rhythm

Hancock's rhythmic choices mainly consists of six note values: whole notes, half notes, eighth notes, quarter notes, as well as dotted quarter- and eighth notes. By combining these rhythms, he creates patterns and sentences important for the unity of the comping part. One of the recurrent patterns present throughout the piece is the dotted quarter note, followed by an eight note. This rhythm, derived from clave sentences, is also known as the "Charleston," and is one of the fundamental patterns of jazz comping (see Figure 1).[1]

Figure 1: Charleston rhythm



[1] Ethan Iverson, "Piano Lesson," *DO THE M@TH* (blog), https://ethaniverson.com/piano-lesson/.

The Charleston rhythm is present in different forms throughout the whole piece: at the beginning of the bar, it is displaced and varied (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Herbie Hancock's isolated comping rhythms, first chorus

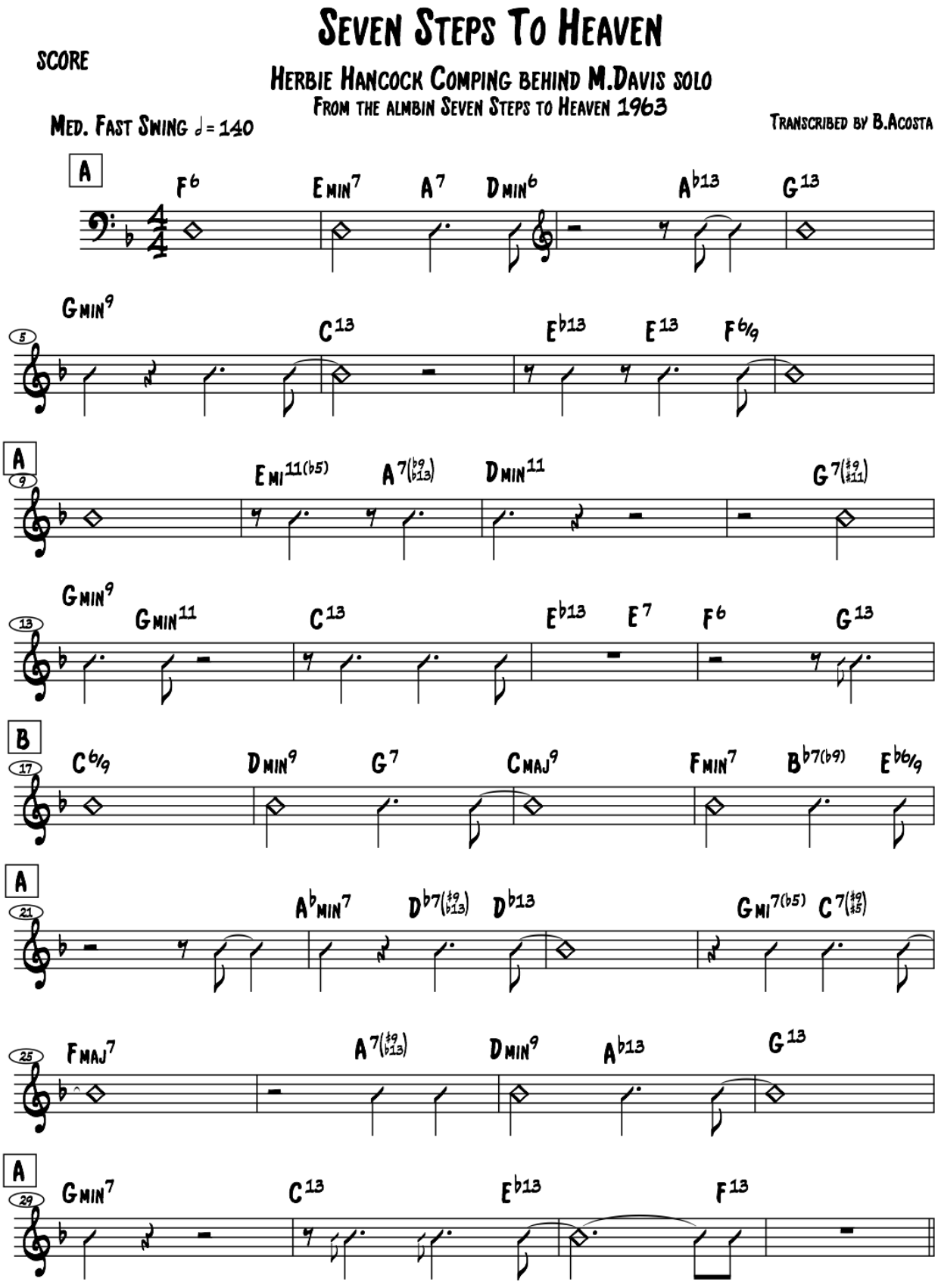
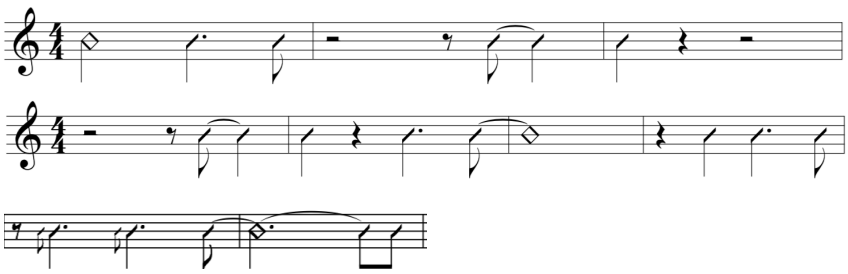


Figure 3: Charleston rhythm displaced and varied



Each of these rhythms provides a certain feeling. The Charleston, particularly the long-to-short rhythmic relationship, has a propelling quality that pushes the rhythm forward. The use of syncopation, placing accents on weak parts of the beat, creates a feeling of surprise and uncertainty. The displacement, as a rhythmic variation, supplies the rhythm section with challenging and stimulating textures. All these rhythms are balanced with simple, non-syncopated rhythms (quarter notes and half notes) that create a rhythmic stability.

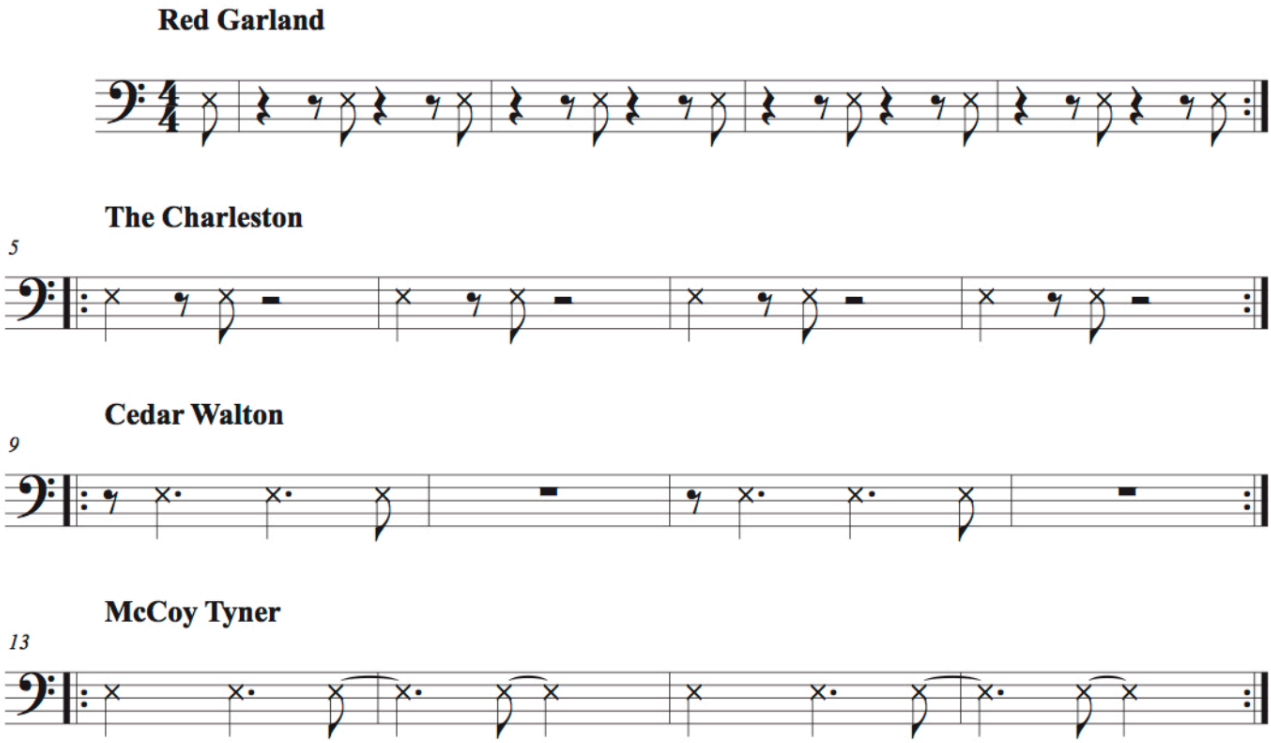
Jazz piano greats use repetitive rhythmic cells or clave-based patterns to play behind the soloist to develop a sense of groove. Repetitive rhythms help "lock in" or tie together the rhythm section effectively. Two of the most widely respected jazz pianists, Ahmad Jamal and Red Garland, are famous for making use of the "and of two" and "and of four" patterns to propel the section forward.[2] Garland often uses this rhythm while comping horn players, while Jamal uses it in his left hand while soloing with his right hand.[3] Other players have also developed their own patterns to support soloists (see Figure 4). Hancock's particular comping style, however, has a wider variety of contrasting rhythms as compared to other pianists. As seen before, these rhythms are constantly varied and less arbitrary.

---

[2] Jeb Patton, *An Approach to Comping: The Essentials* (Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co., 2013), 10.

[3] Patton, 10.

Figure 4: Different piano comping patterns.



Voicings

During the bebop era of the 1940s, the harmonies used for comping were primarily in the middle and low register of the piano. The left hand generally played only the root, the third, or the seventh of any chord, although pianists with larger hands could play a tenth consistently. The right hand would fill in the harmony by playing tensions: ninth, sharp ninth, sharp eleventh, etc. (see Figure 5).[4]

Figure 5: Traditional left-hand voicings.

[4] Patton, 37.

These two- and three-note voicings were frequently used by pianists such as Tad Dameron, Thelonious Monk, and Bud Powell during the 1940s. They provided an easy, complete accompaniment for melodies, and jazz scholars call them “shell voicings.” Bebop players used them effectively, not only while soloing and playing lines with their right hand, but also while playing behind horn players. This style became the foundation for the comping sound of the bebop era.

Herbie Hancock, in contrast, was part of a new generation of jazz pianists that, during the late 1950s and 1960s, began to explore different sonorities, textures and harmonic possibilities.[5] Hancock had a clear interest in harmonic richness, texture and color, of which western classical music provided extensive examples. His explorations of composers such as Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky, lead to radical changes in the sound of jazz. Some new harmonic techniques that were introduced in this era comprised of omitting the root of the chord, which the bass player was already providing. This allowed compers to supply the soloist with a wider and richer selection of textures and colors in their chords. In the transcription of “Seven Steps to Heaven” we can find examples of the different techniques he used: quartal voicings, soprano-pedal chord progressions, upper structure voicings, as well as traditional shell voicings.

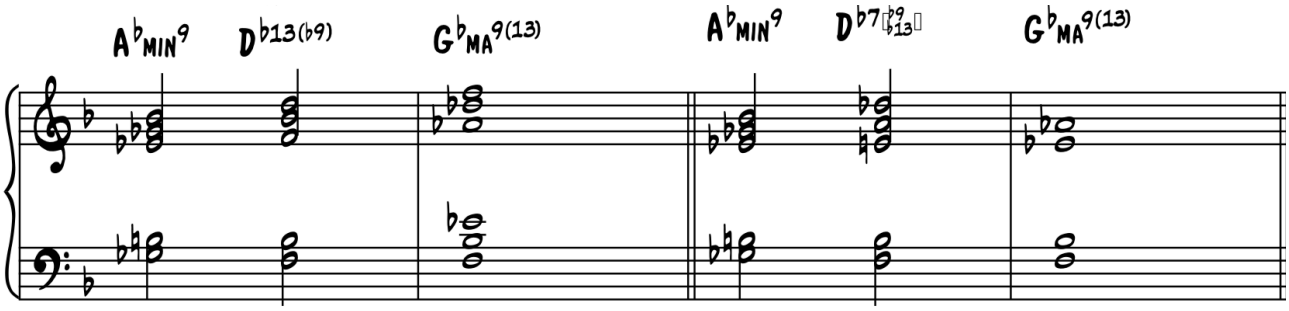
Rootless voicings

Upper structure chords and quartal voicings offer a different texture and a complex harmony. Unlike shell chords, upper structure chords – which can contain up to six notes – provide the harmony with fewer seconds and more thirds and fourths, while the notes are distributed more evenly. In the lower stave, the seventh and the third of the chord (which are the notes used to define the harmonic quality of the chords) are so placed to provide the harmonic content. The other voices in the uppermost pitches form minor or major triads in different inversions creating rich and bal-

[5] Murph, John, "NPR's Jazz Profiles: Herbie Hancock,” *www.npr.org*. Retrieved March 4, 2017.

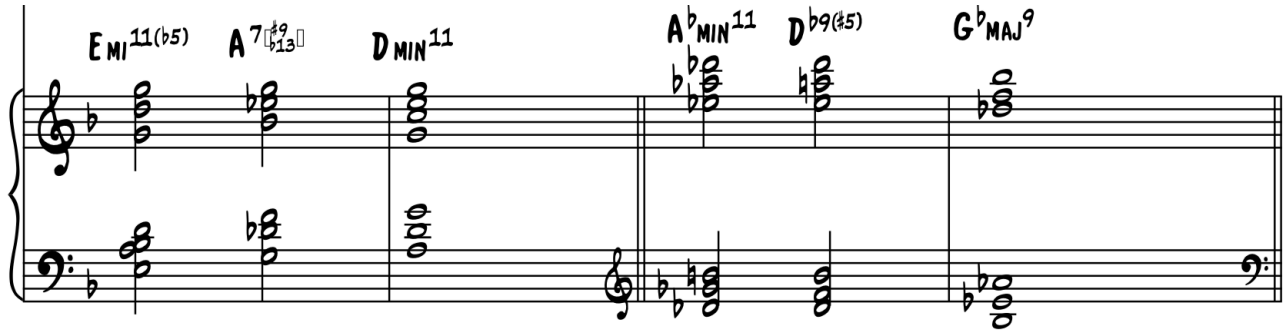
anced structures. Here are some upper structure chords used by Herbie Hancock in this transcription:

Figure 6: Upper-structure voicings.



Another device used by Hancock is the use of soprano pedal points and quartal voicings, or fourth voicings. Soprano pedal points create a strong tonal effect with a dense structure, sometimes using five or six different notes. Contrary to the effect of bass pedal points, where suspensions, retardations, and passing tones are used to create tension and expectation, the soprano pedal point provides harmonic progressions with a rich and balanced sound, particularly in the inner voices. Soprano pedal point chord progressions, unlike upper structure chords, might include sevenths and thirds in the uppermost pitches. The employment of fourth voicings, already introduced by Bill Evans in the modal composition "So What" on Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue,* is another device used by Hancock, however this time in a tonal context. These quartal voicings comprise at least three perfect fourths and a third, which are distributed in different ways (see Figure 10).

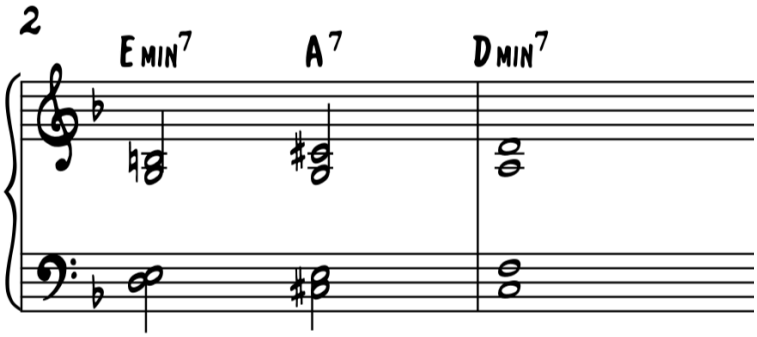
Figure 7 :Quartal voicings.



Texture

One of the main characteristics of Herbie Hancock's comping style is his constant search for harmonic possibilities to provide the soloist with more open and adventurous textures. In this transcription we can appreciate how he approaches chords: the use of range between the lowest pitches and the highest pitches and the number of voices and the relationship between them, which determines the overall texture of his sound. Hancock's harmonic choices include close-position chords, within the span of an octave, which offer an indispensable basic structure and thick texture for other chords used in jazz comping; they provide clear harmonic content and are easy to create. They are also typically used with rhythms and progressions. Below are two isolated examples of close-position chords used by Hancock.

Figure 8: Close position chords used by Herbie Hancock



Spread voicing allows the comper to distribute the voices of the chords more evenly and to add richness and depth to the sound. To achieve this, Hancock introduces a distinctive structure: three-note right hand structures over two notes with, sometimes, three-note left hand structures. The left-hand structure provides the quality of the chord while the right hand provides the color. The following figures show some isolated voicings used by Hancock to achieve different chord qualities: major, minor and dominant.

Figure 9: Major chords

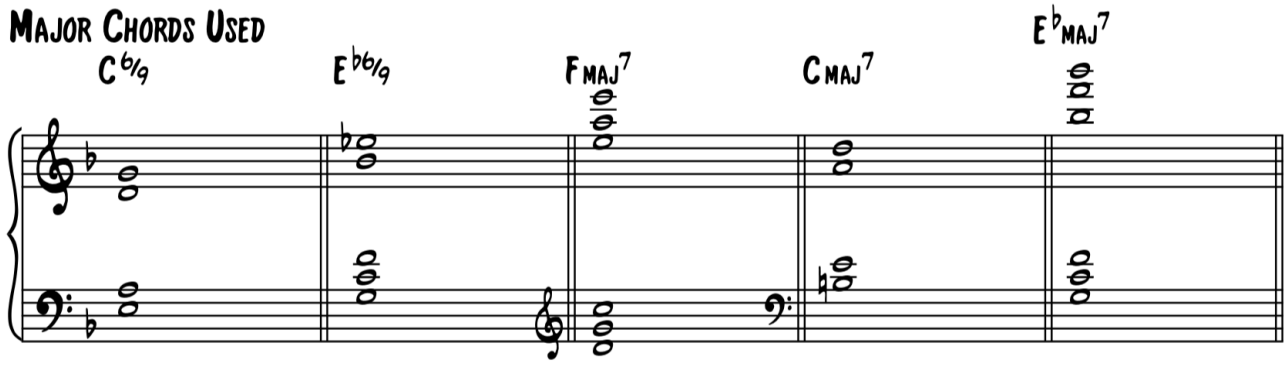


Figure 10: Minor chords

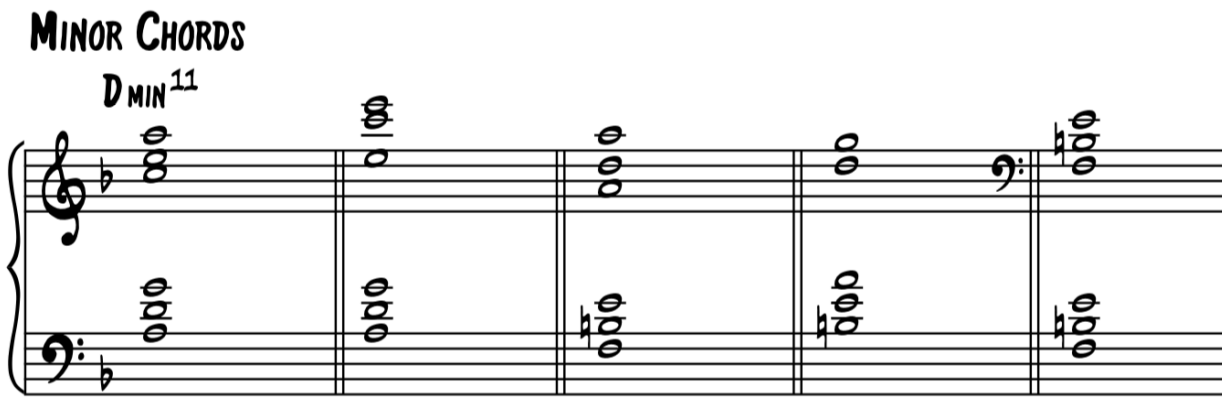
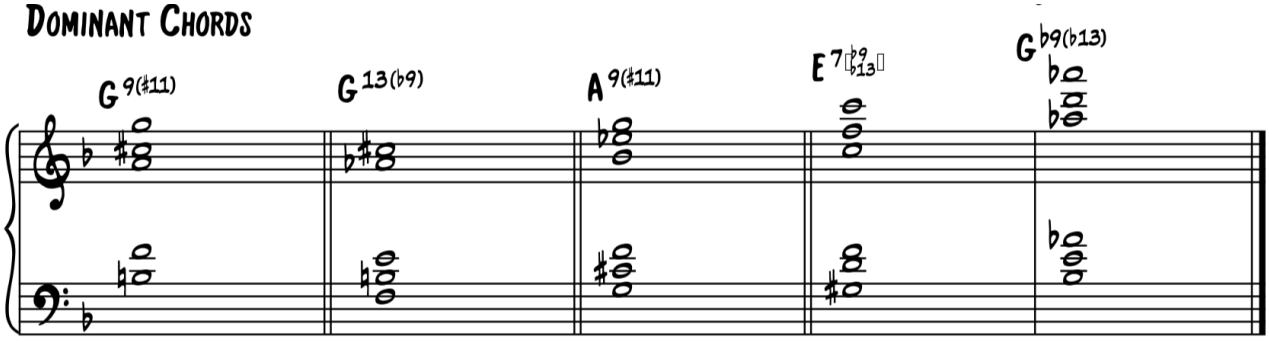


Figure 11: Dominant chords



In the major chords, the structure displays no thirds or seconds, but rather, fourths and fifths, thus cutting down the space between the bass and the second tenor (second note from the bottom); as a result, the voices are distributed more evenly.

Hancock's use of range for all spread chords span intervals larger than two octaves, sometimes using up to six voices. This texture remains consistent throughout the whole comping. Spread voicings have a more transparent, sonorous texture compared to more compact and austere close-position chords or shell chords. Despite the contrast, they still work well together in progressions. These two chords share the structural characteristics mentioned before: three-note right hand shape over a two-note left hand.

Conclusion

This transcription offers an opportunity to understand the comper's role in jazz piano by addressing some of the most important aspects of comping as practiced by Herbie Hancock. Piano compers are expected to propel the rhythm section, and to react to soloists with harmonic textures and colors over which soloists can express themselves without losing the basic harmony. Understanding jazz involves not only learning solos from the jazz masters but also studying what they are playing when they are not soloing. Hancock's sophisticated playing behind Miles Davis is a good example of tasteful and intelligent comping which is expressed through his approach to harmonies, rhythms, textures and colors.

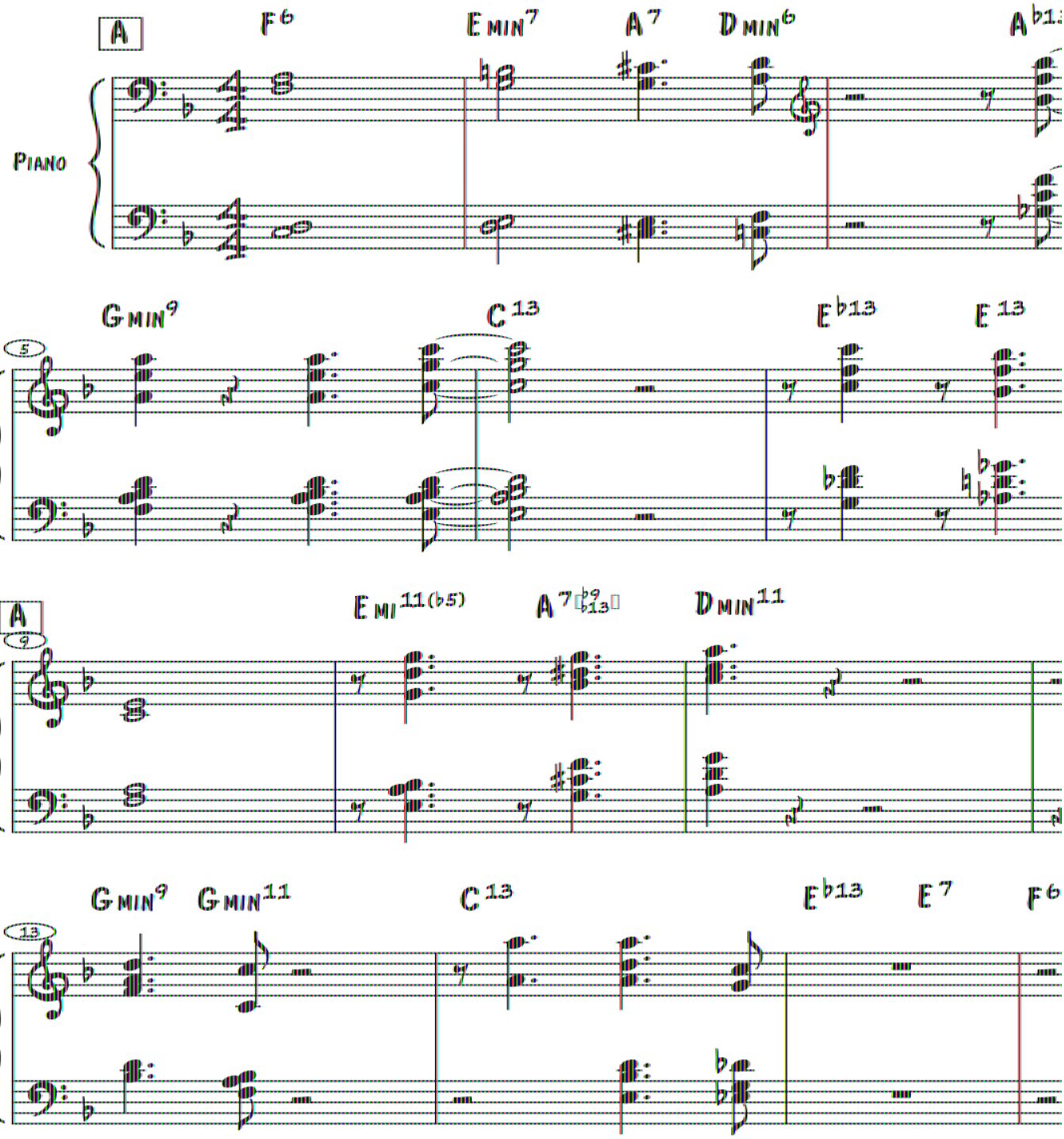
Seven Steps To Heaven

SCORE

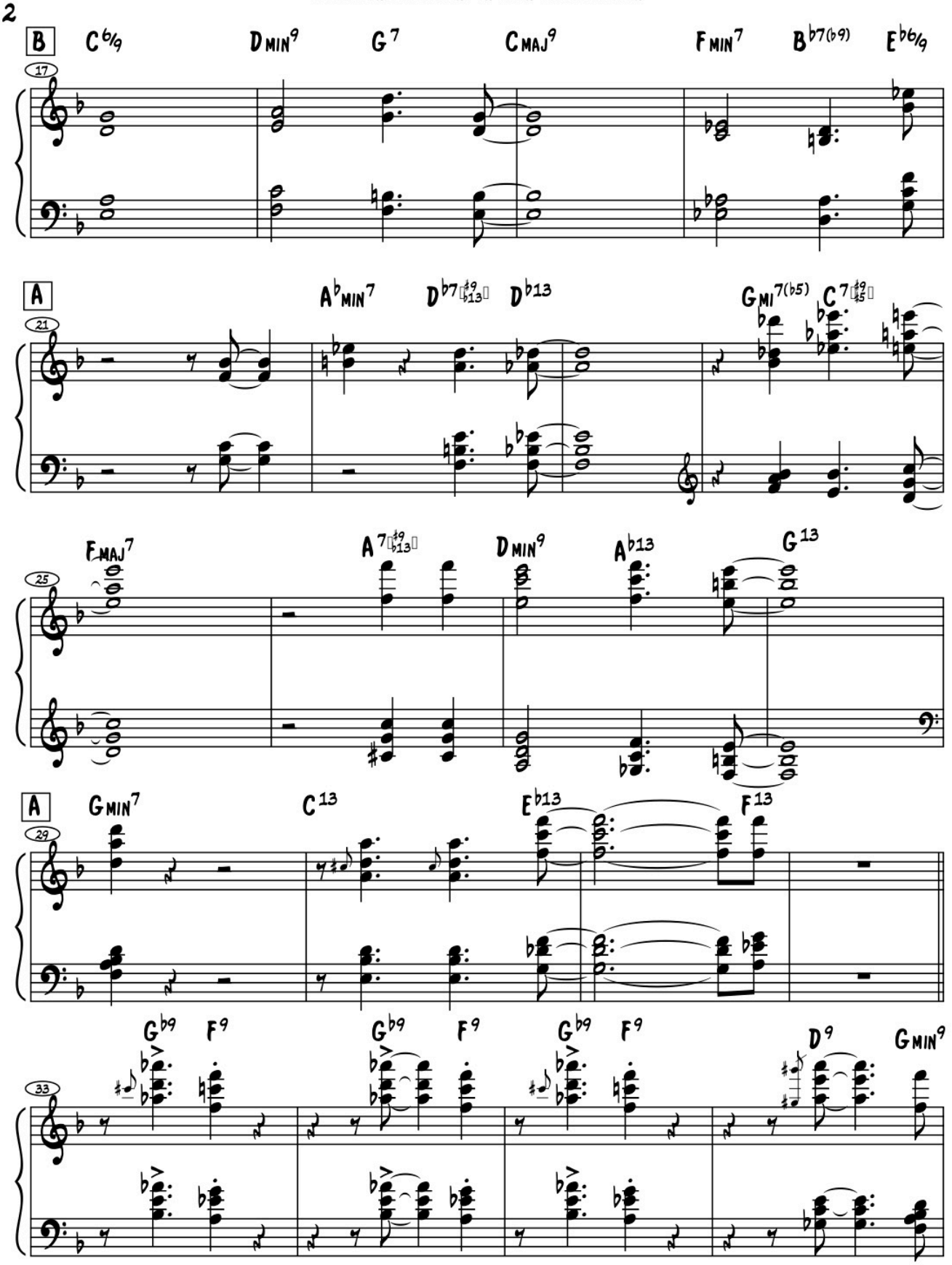
Herbie Hancock Comping behind M.Davis solo

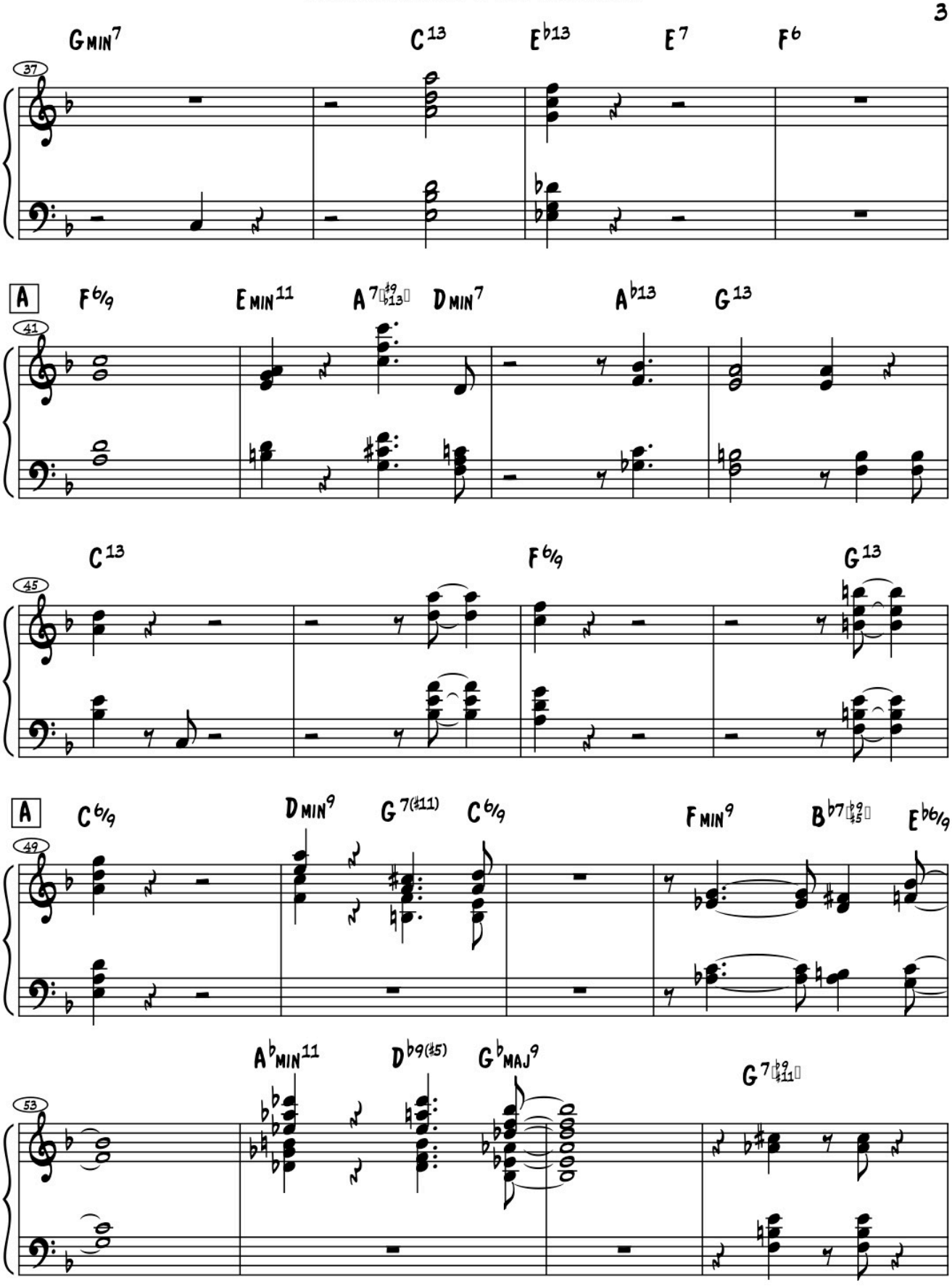
From the almbin Seven Steps to Heaven 1963

Med. Fast Swing ♩ = 140

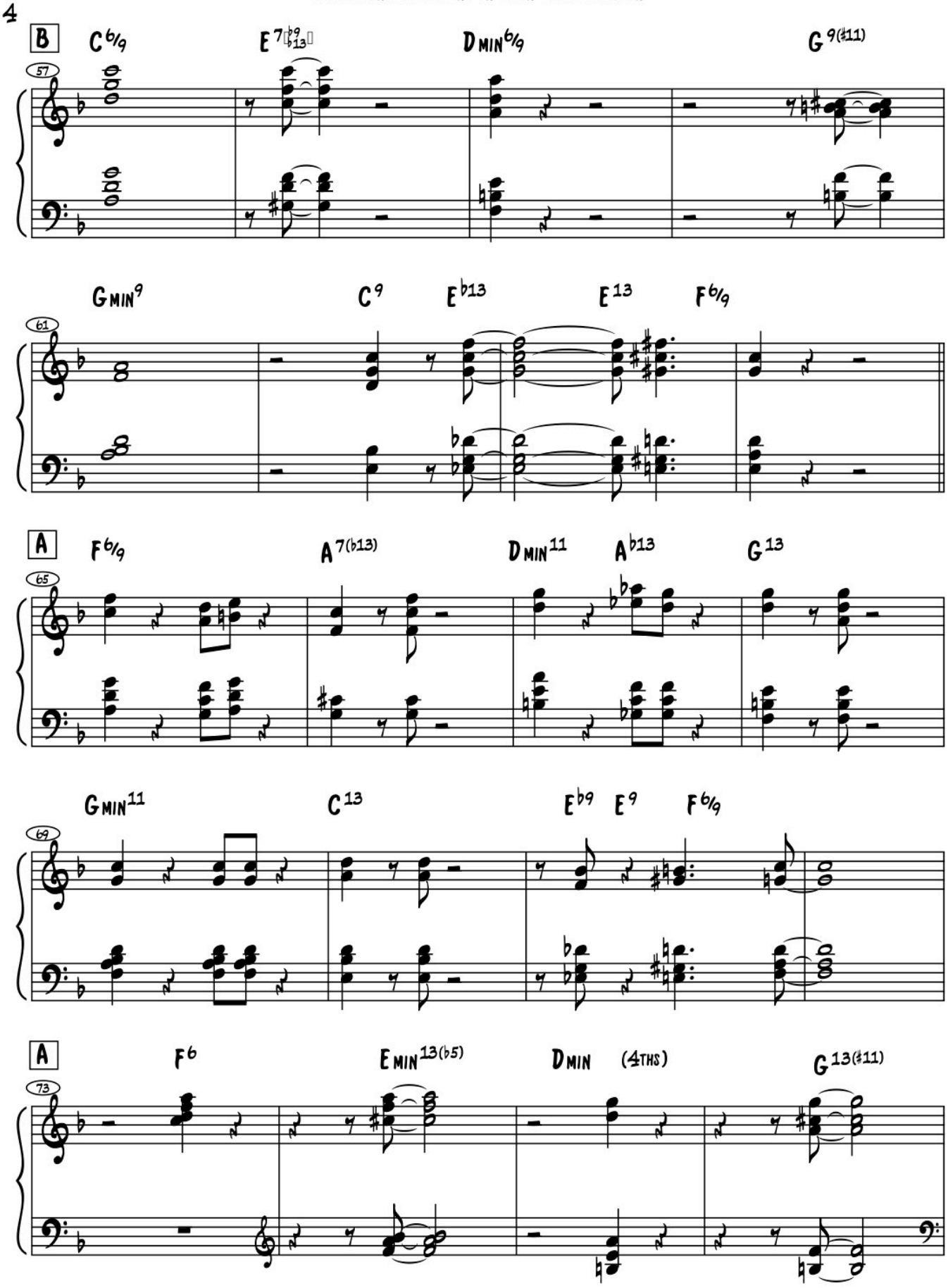


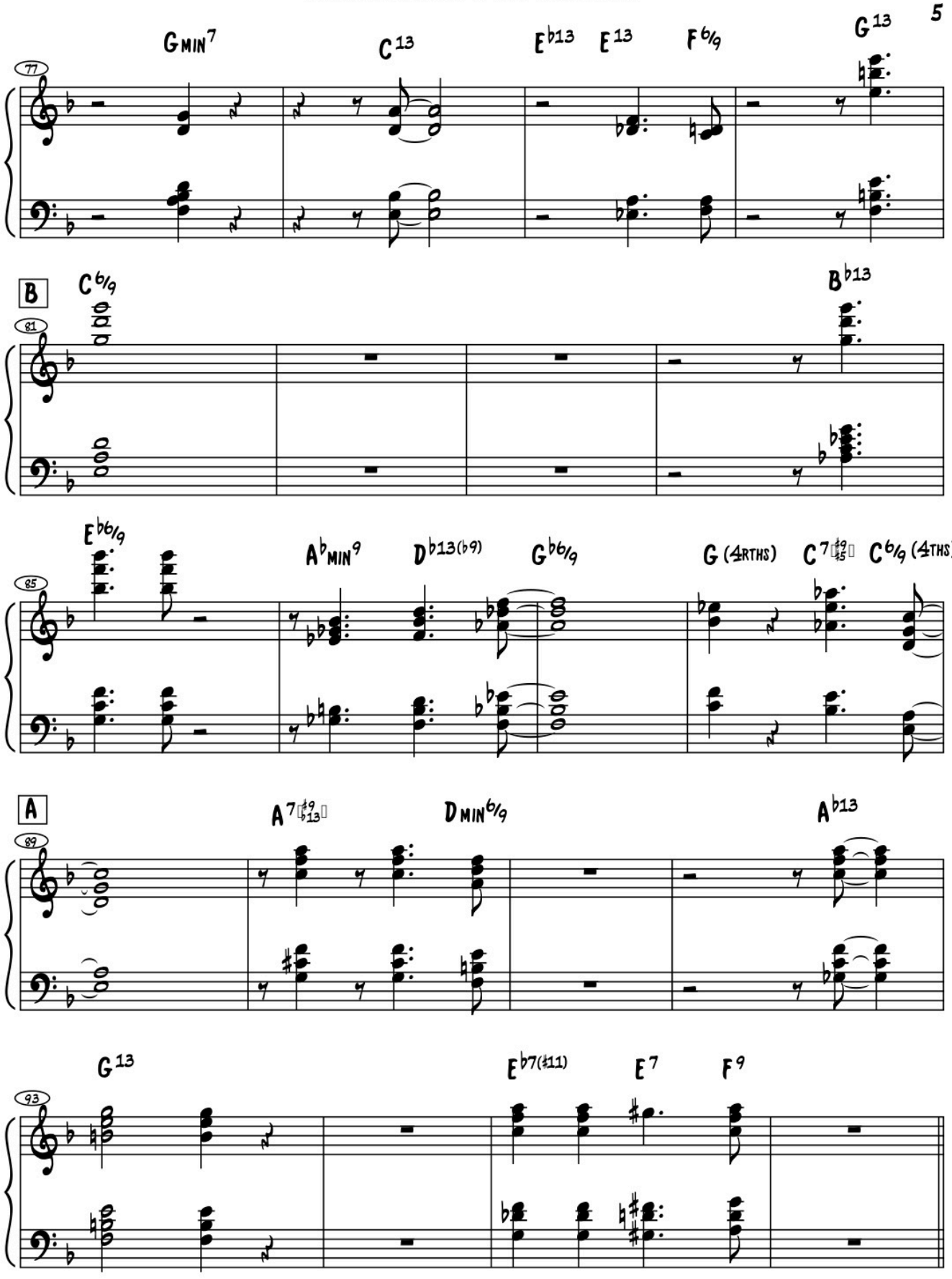
Herbie Hancock Comping on Seven Steps to Heaven



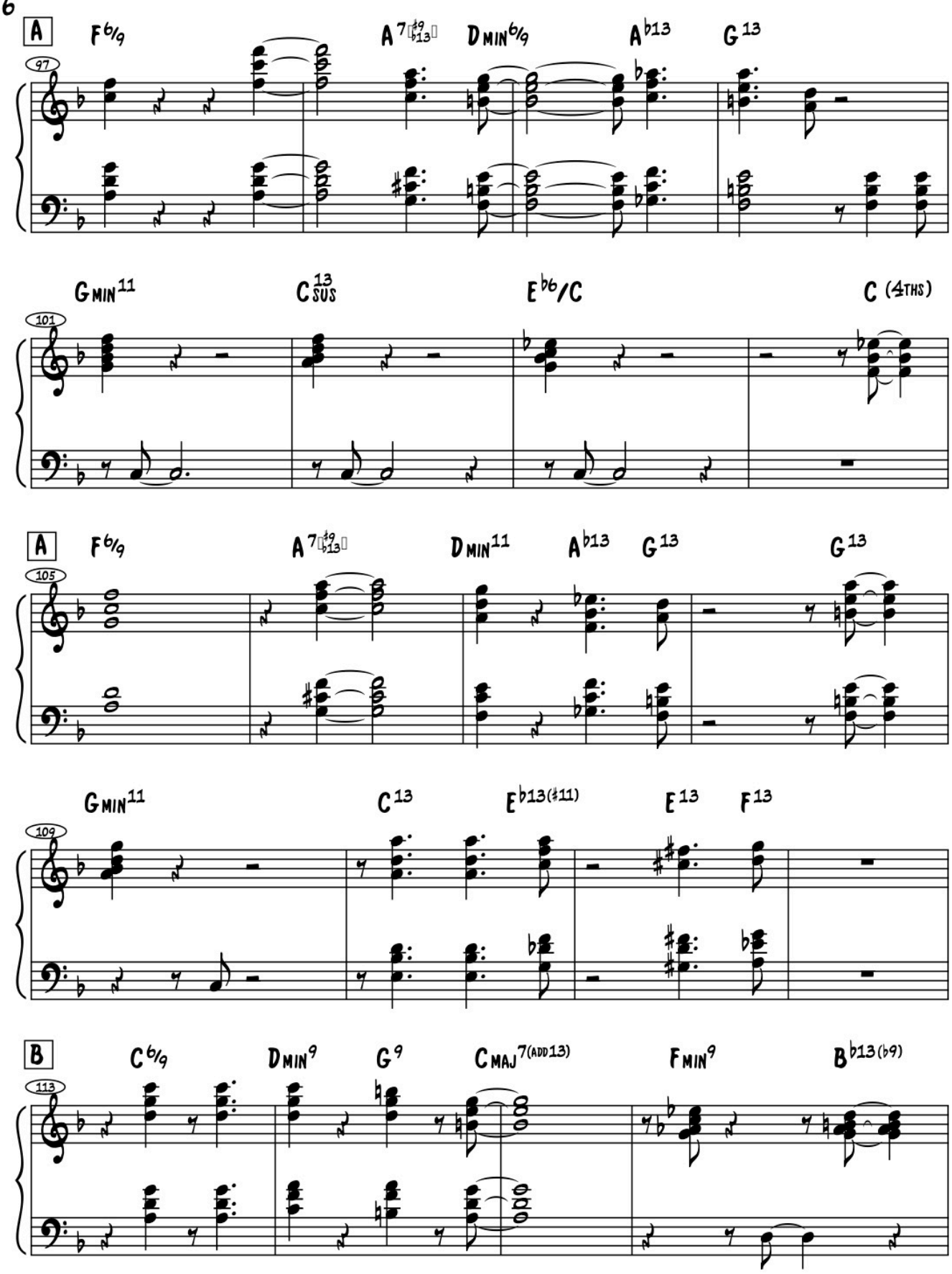

Gmin7
C13
Eb13
E7
F6
37
A
F6/9
Emin11
A7♯9♭13
Dmin7
Ab13
G13
41
C13
F6/9
G13
45
A
C6/9
Dmin9
G7(♯11)
C6/9
Fmin9
Bb7♯9♯5
Eb6/9
49
Abmin11
Db9(♯5)
GbMAJ9
G7♯9♯11
53

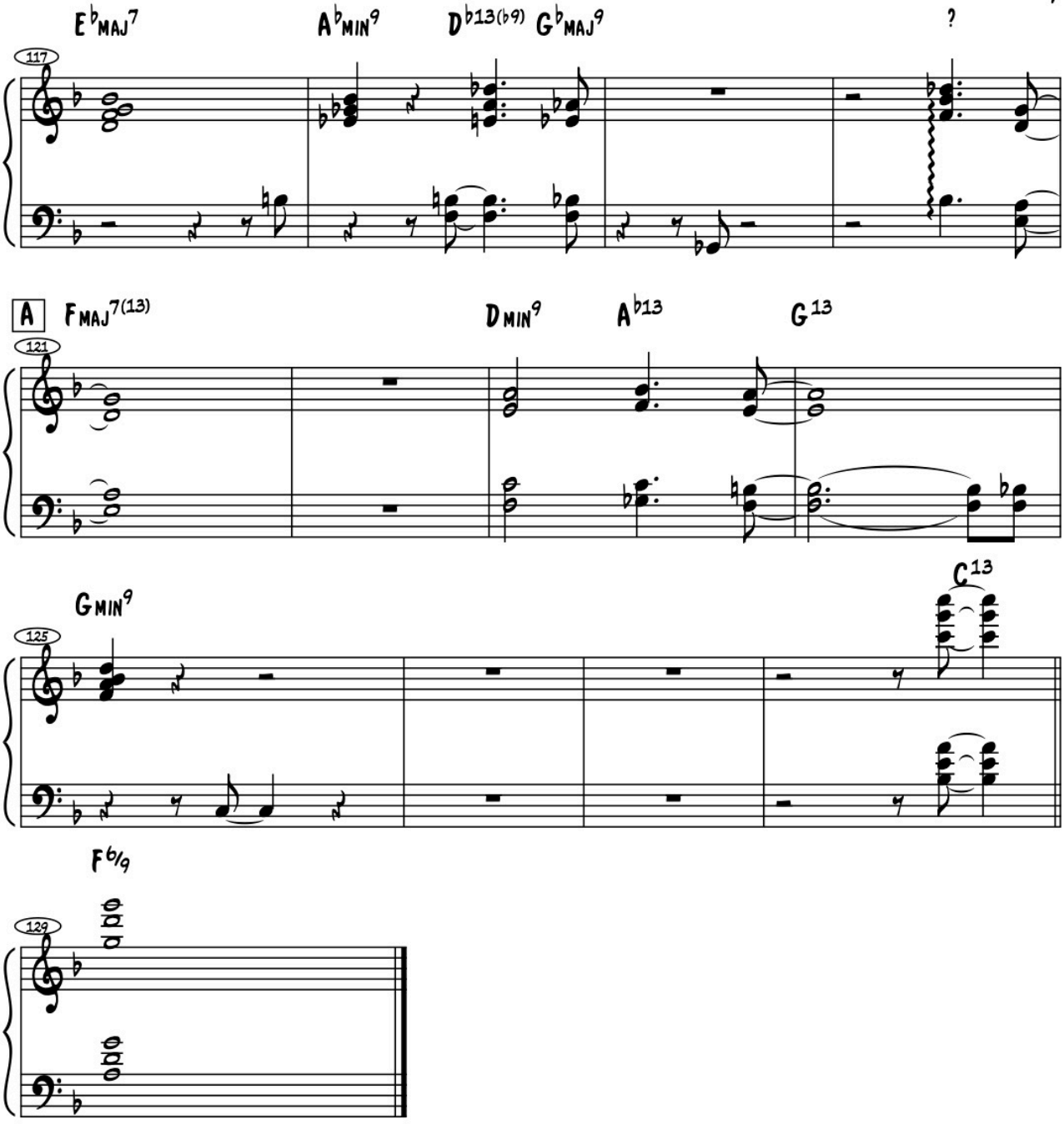
Herbie Hancock Comping on Seven Steps to Heaven




Gmin7
C13
Eb13
E13
F6/9
G13
77
B
C6/9
81
Bb13
Eb6/9
Abmin9
Db13(b9)
Gb6/9
G (4rths)
C7(#9 #5)
C6/9 (4ths)
85
A
A7(#9 b13)
Dmin6/9
Ab13
89
G13
Eb7(#11)
E7
F9
93

Herbie Hancock Comping on Seven Steps to Heaven




E♭MAJ7
A♭MIN9
D♭13(♭9)
G♭MAJ9
?
117
A
FMAJ7(13)
DMIN9
A♭13
G13
121
GMIN9
C13
125
F6/9
129