How to apply movable-do technique to learning atonal melodies.

As a starting point, I've lifted most of the examples from chapter 4 of Lars Edlund's "Modus Novus: Studies in reading atonal melodies." I did so to avoid the danger of cherry-picking my own excerpts from the literature, and as a way of framing a critique of this widely used and highly googled book. More important than either of these considerations, however, is that the passages are here supplied with solfa syllables, allowing anyone interested to see, in detail, how the movable-do method may be applied to atonal music.

As I've mentioned in a couple of places on this website, the movable-do method subscribed to here allows the tonic note to carry any solfa syllable. In other words, although the tonic may always be considered note #1, it is not necessarily called do. In the minor, to restrict our attention for a moment to the major/minor key system, the tonic will be la.

In his preface, Edlund refers approvingly to the possibilty that, even in a twelve-tone row, a student might perceive a fragment of a major or minor scale, and that they might successfully apply that perception to navigating the notes on the page. Edlund's statement should be commended for its psychological insight but, unfortunately, he fails to follow up on it.

To students who may have used Edlund's book or have been engaged by the idea of referring to perceived major/minor cells as a conduit for accessing atonal music, I would like to propose a thought experiment. What if our view of music prior to the period of atonal composition is expanded to include, not only the period of major/minor tonality - roughly, the 18th & 19th centuries - but to earlier centuries as well? For anyone with experience in applying solmization syllables to music before 1600, the whole controversy over whether the tonic note should always be called do is flatly ridiculous. Further, the fact that the "tonic = do" absurdity is still promoted in certain quarters stands both as disturbing evidence that the students are being short-changed and as a clear indication that their teachers, probably owing to their own foreshortened educations, are working with a shockingly blinkered view of music's history.

Suffice it to point out that the theory of modes, which developed to address the question of tonality in plainchant, and which remained the main organizing principle for understanding tonality for hundreds of years, stipulated that the tonic note may be identified by any one of the following four names: re, mi, fa, sol. Not a do or a la in sight. The implications for our understanding of what it might be like to recognize tonal "bits" in atonal melodies are far-reaching. But as far as Lars Edlund and his adherents are concerned, these implications are apparently best not considered at all. Judging by both the title and the contents of his later book, "Modus Vetus: sight singing and ear-training in major/minor tonality," Edlund coninued to double down on his tunnel vision.

But much closer to home than any discussion of the storied and exotic realms of medieval and renaissance music, we can also extend our thought experiment to address the vast repertory of folksongs in dorian or mixolydian modes, or those that use

pentatonic or hexatonic scales, or even those phrygian-mode chorale melodies set by Bach. In the face of this huge body of evidence that “tonality” as a concept cannot with sanity be confined to exemplars from the major/minor key system, Edlund is silent. To oppose atonal music exclusively to music written in the major/minor key system is to impose a simplistic and truly appalling binarism on the history of music itself.

Having allowed for a broader sense of what sort of music a more comprehensive understanding of “tonality” ought to subsume, we will be in a much better, because more flexible, position to apply our perceptual experience and predispositions to the problem of singing atonal music. In the examples on the following pages, I simply added the solfa syllables I preferred. A couple of remarks about my “solutions” are in order.

First, the syllables you read there document my own perception at the time I was working through them. Because of the flexible and often ambiguous nature of the simplest intervals, there is often more than one valid choice. Whether, for example, to sing a major third as do-mi or fa-la or sol-ti or something else comes down to a matter of what works for you. One of the most interesting aspects of this movable-everything approach is that you are part of the picture: whatever the “correct” answer might be, it’s correctedness can only be established by your ability to sing it. Without that, we just have more pie-in-the-sky theory. Another thing to mention in this connection is that, as you become more comfortable with a particular passage, you might find that an alternate set of syllables works just as well. This mirrors the function of the solmization system as a perceptual tool, under constant construction and renewal even as it is being utilized. The more complex or tonally ambiguous a passage is, the more open it is to different responses. So to repeat, the right answer is the one that works for the person singing.

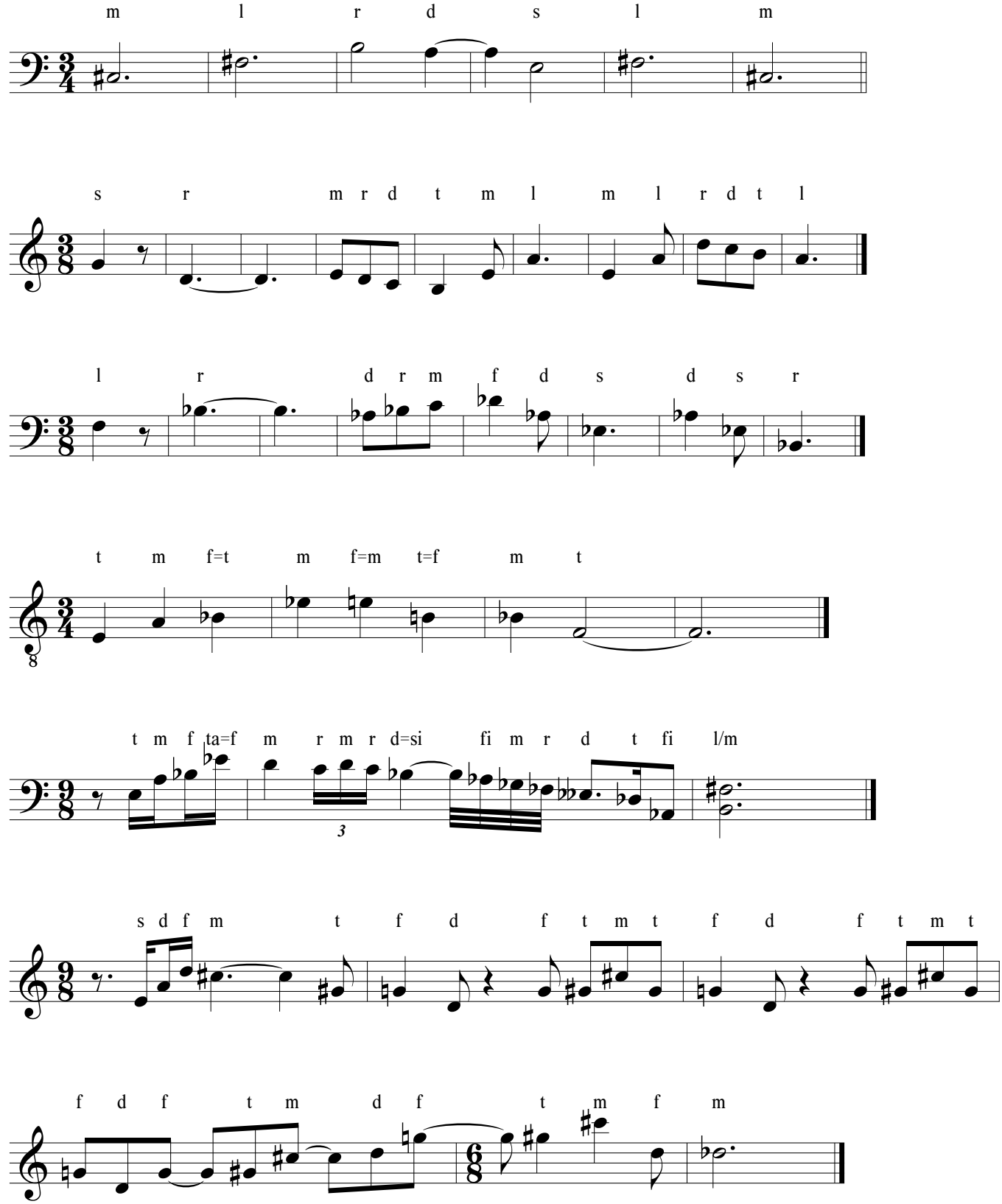
You’ll also notice that there are numerous instances where a given note has two names, such as “d=r.” This indicates a splice or, as Edlund would have it, a “mutation” between two syllable sets (or scale segments or tonalities, as you prefer). Again, the choice of precisely where to make the splice, or whether to make one at all, reflects my own response to these melodies.

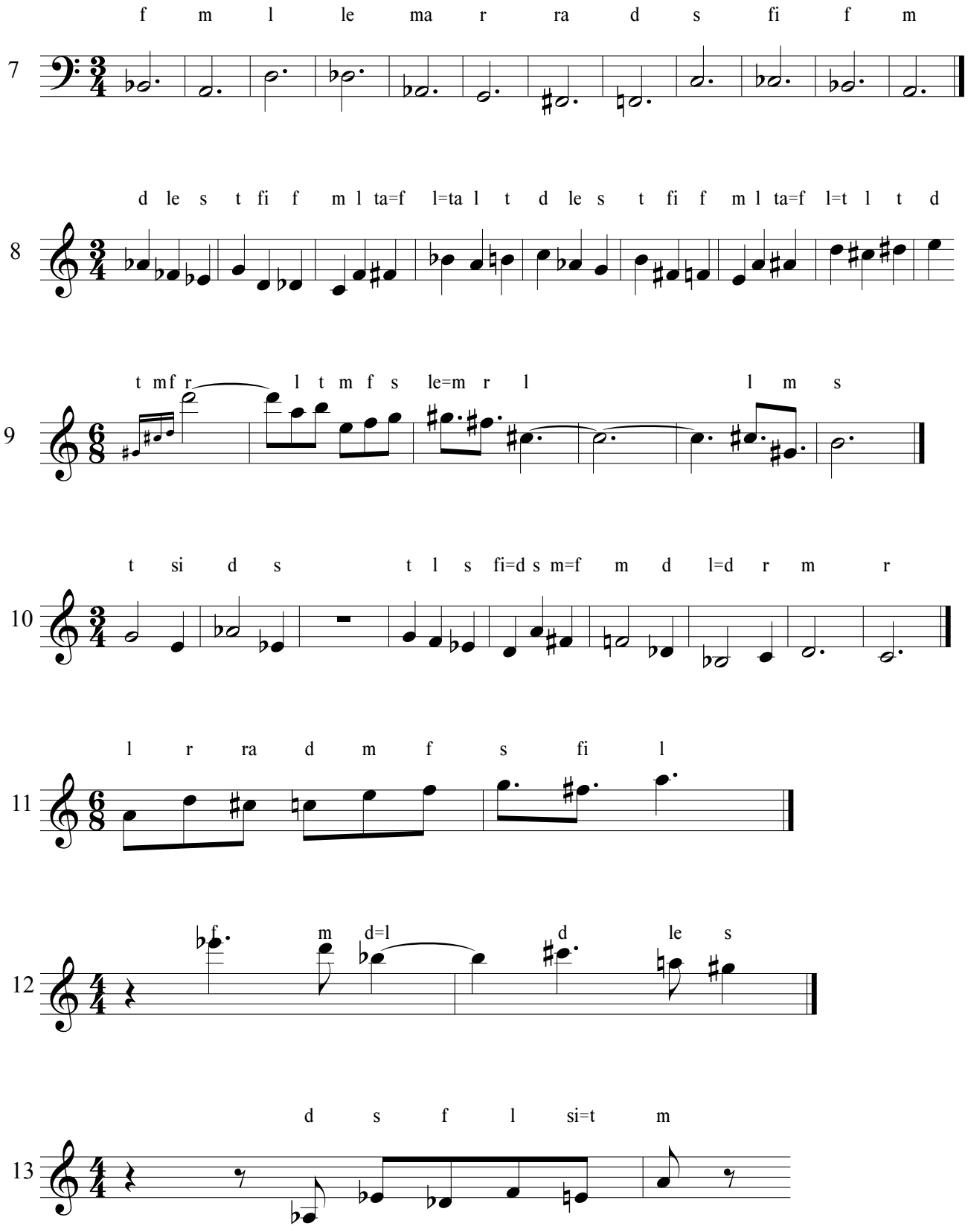
Beyond his cryptic comment about seeing major and minor scale fragments in atonal melodies, Edlund offers no advice about how to approach the material. The following pages document a method that is at once flexible and powerful, and one which will incidentally consign its competitors, fixed do and tonic=do, to the nearest dustbin. But, while I may have managed in this respect to add to what Edlund put together, I can’t do much about the poor choice of the examples themselves. Perhaps it was a conscious decision to subtitle the book “Studies in reading atonal melodies” rather the “Studies in singing atonal melodies,” but it is clear enough from reading the preface that vocal performance is what the author had in mind. Why then, it must be asked, were there only eleven vocal excerpts out of the forty examples originally comprising this particular chapter? What advantage is supposed to accrue to a student attempting to render an atonal passage to expect them to negotiate not only the pitch materials and the intervallic complexites, but also a range of up to two octaves? Given the richness of the vocal repertory left to us not only by the atonal high-priests Schoenberg, Berg, and

Webern, but by dozens of other composers whose works are, from an ear-training and perceptual point of view, every bit as challenging (my picks here would include Ives, Barber, and earlier writers such as Debussy), Edlund's choices are puzzling, if not frankly perverse. Perhaps the explanation, hardly a musical one, lies in an study of academic culture, and of the shared assumptions among academic instructors of a certain type and at a particular point in history.

In any case, you should enjoy making your way through the examples. However one looks at it, this is very challenging music. If nothing else, I'm certain that the approach documented here will encourage some healthy discussion not only among those musicians who might be drawn to this repertoire from the performance side, but also among those interested in the cognitive aspects of the solmization system itself.

repertoire examples from Lars Edlund's "Modus Novus" - chapter 4

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d le s t fi f m l ta=f l=ta l t d le s t fi f m l ta=f l=t l t d
8
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t si d s t l s fi=d s m=f m d l=d r m r
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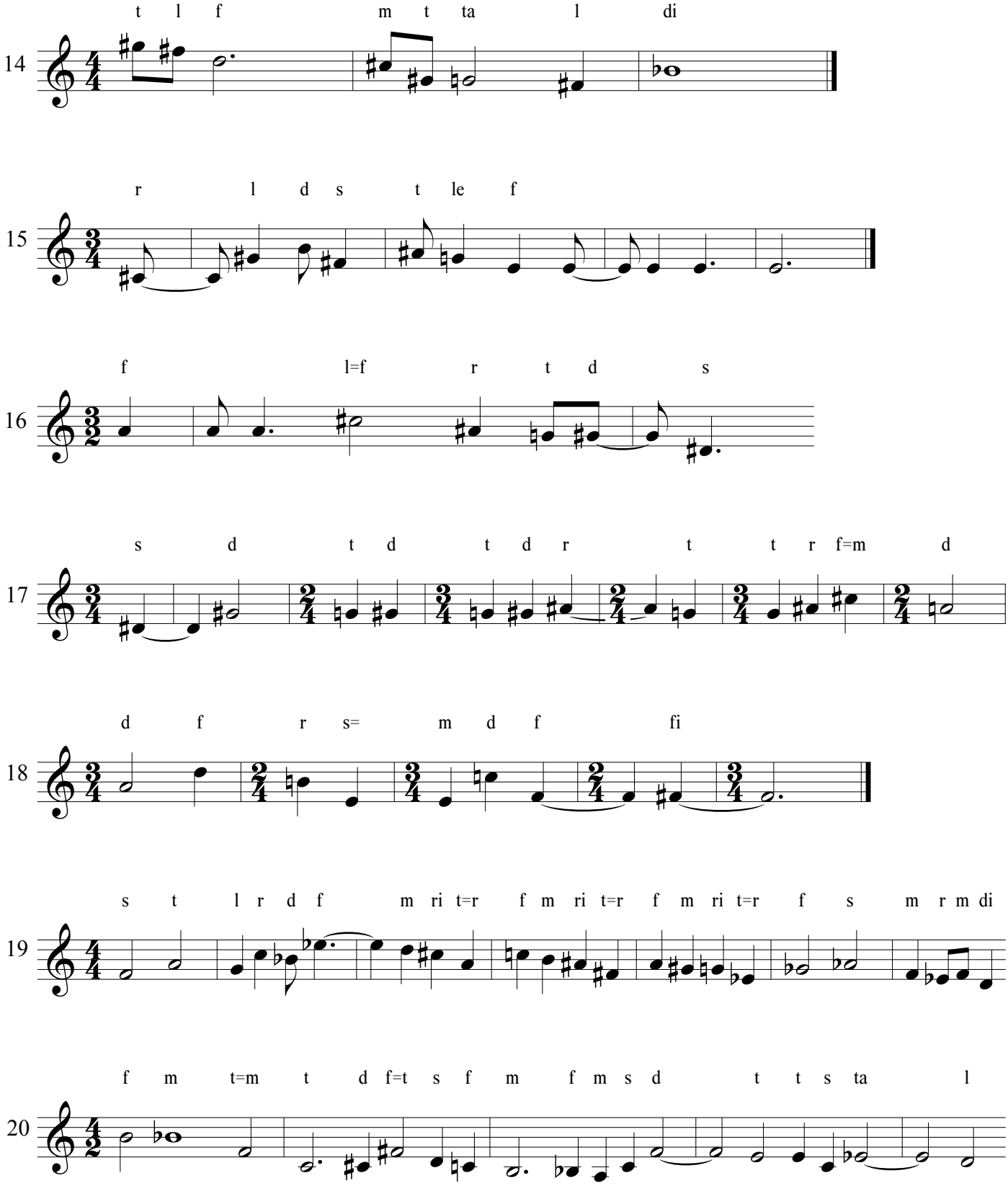
t l f m t ta l di
14
r l d s t le f
15
f l=f r t d s
16
s d t d t d r t t r f=m d
17
d f r s= m d f fi
18
s t l r d f m ri t=r f m ri t=r f m ri t=r f s m r m di
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f m t=m t d f=t s f m f m s d t t s ta l
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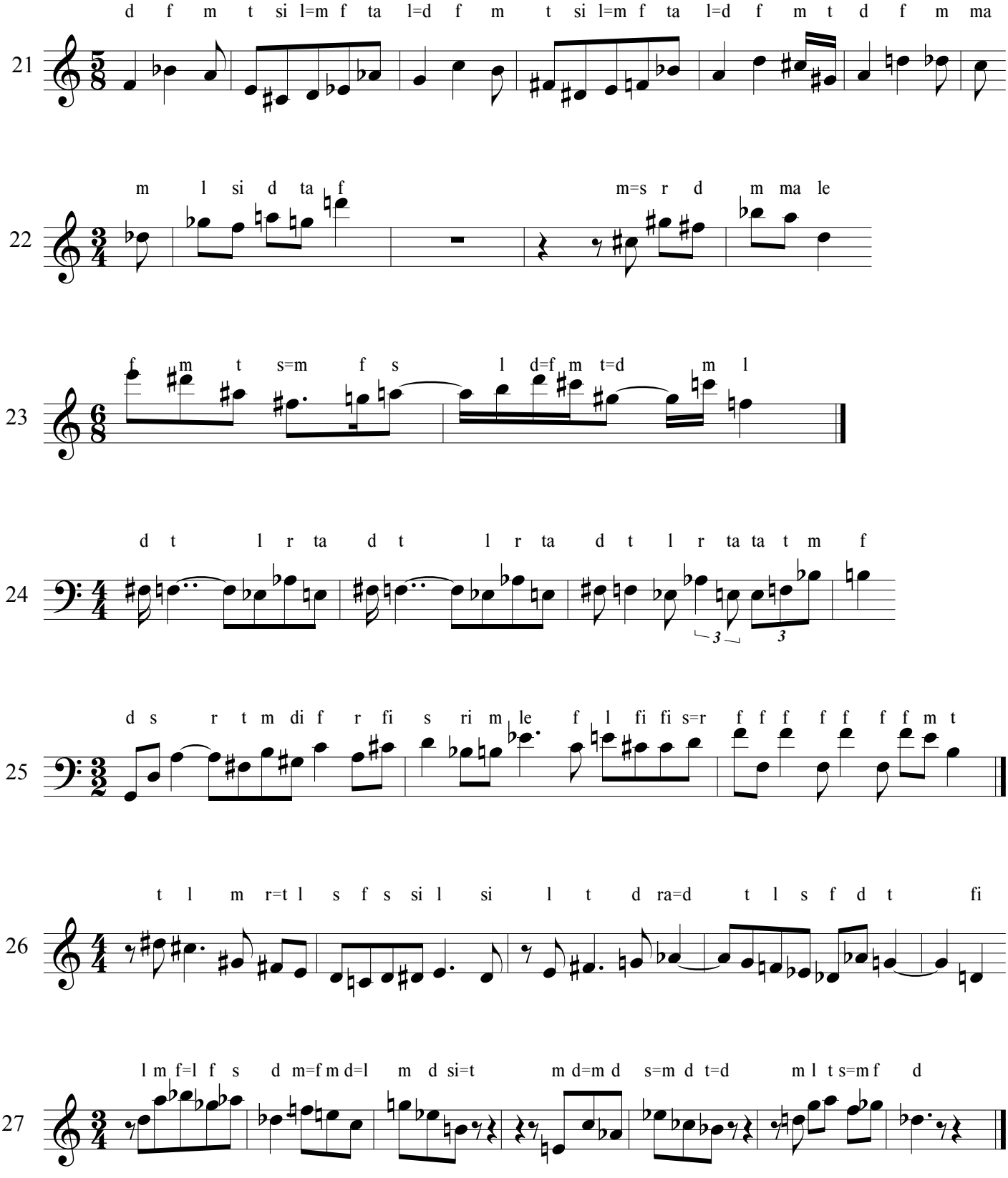
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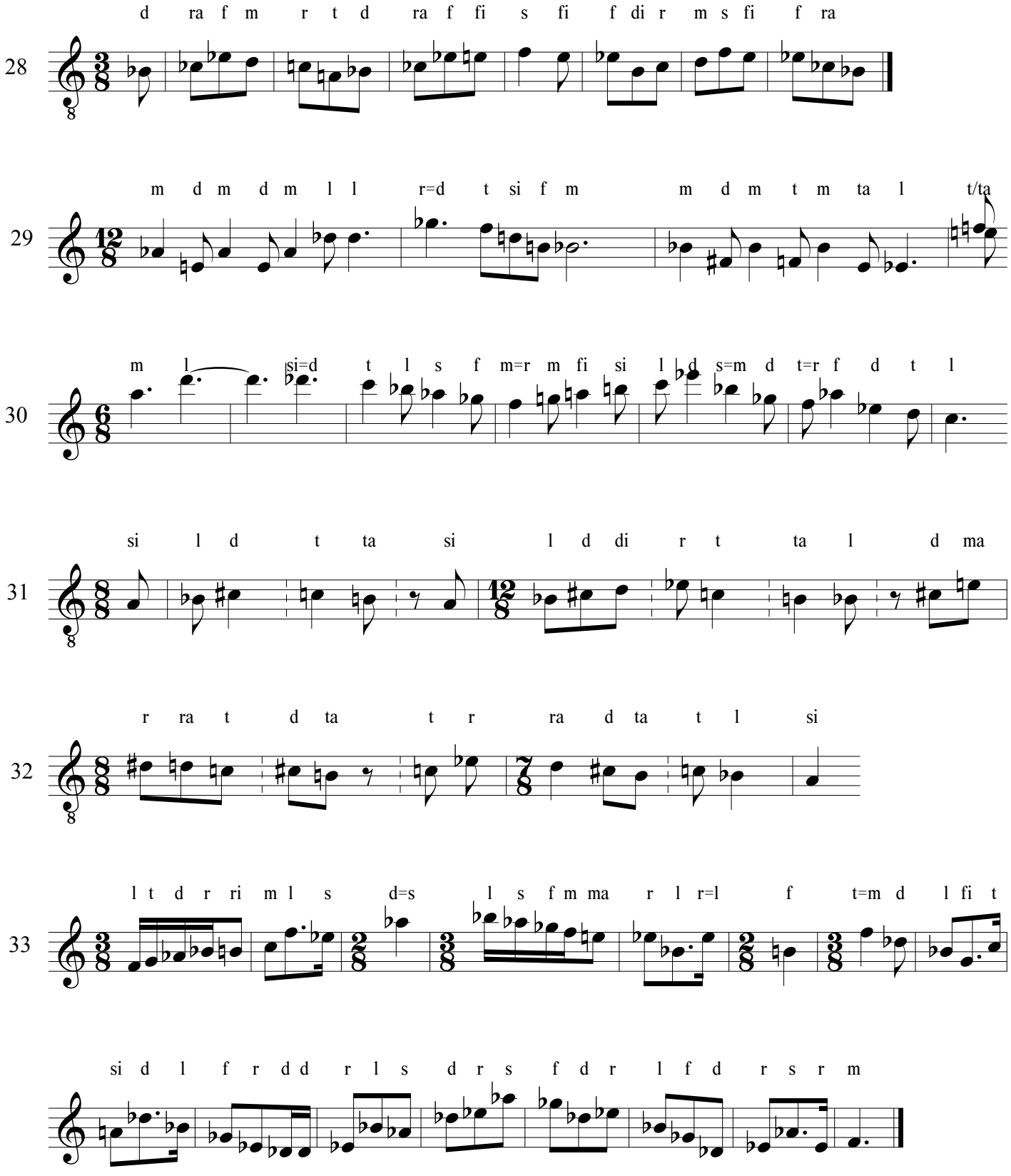
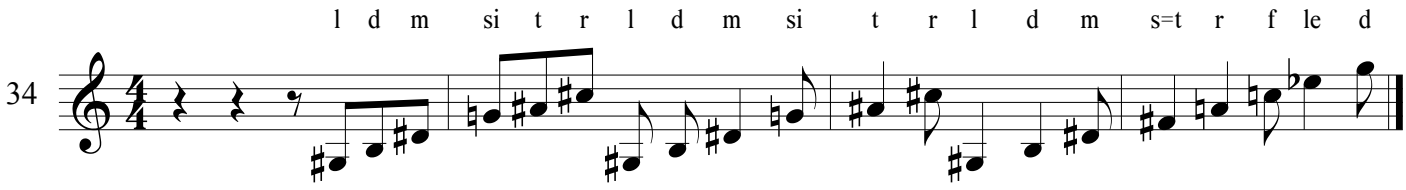
d f m t si l=m f ta l=d f m t si l=m f ta l=d f m t d f m ma
22
m l si d ta f m=s r d m ma le
23
f m t s=m f s l d=f m t=d m l
24
d t l r ta d t l r ta d t l r ta ta t m f
25
d s r t m di f r fi s ri m le f l fi fi s=r f f f f f f f m t
26
t l m r=t l s f s si l si l t d ra=d t l s f d t fi
27
l m f=l f s d m=f m d=l m d si=t m d=m d s=m d t=d m l t s=m f d


d ra f m r t d ra f fi s fi f di r m s fi f ra
28
m d m d m l l r=d t si f m m d m t m ta l t/ta
29
m l si=d t l s f m=r m fi si l d s=m d t=r f d t l
30
si l d t ta si l d di r t ta l d ma
31
r ra t d ta t r ra d ta t l si
32
l t d r ri m l s d=s l s f m ma r l r=l f t=m d l fi t
33
si d l f r d d r l s d r s f d r l f d r s r m


l d m si t r l d m si t r l d m s=t r f le d
34