Innovative Percussion Inc.

The Importance of Proper Warm-up: Daily Warm-ups and Technical Exercises for Marimba

Andy Harnsberger

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BY ANDY HARNSBERGER

Avoiding Injury by Warming Up

If you are anything like the average person, you are constantly faced with time constraints. Because of this, our practice sessions often turn into "note cramming sessions", where we try to learn as many notes as possible in a short amount of time, or play through our recital pieces up to tempo several times within that short period. Not only is this detrimental to the hands, but it can also be harmful to the overall performance in recital situations.

For many percussionists, warming up is walking into the practice room, picking up the mallets and whizzing through some scales or technical exercises. Remember you are using some very delicate muscles, and these muscles need to be warmed up BEFORE you use them. Just as athletes incorporate stretching into their warm-up routine, so should you stretch before you start to play.

I like to begin warming up by doing very gentle stretches with my arms, hands, and fingers. It is necessary to flex and extend the muscles, especially the thumb (*pollicis)*, forearm (*brachioradialis)*, and fingers (*digitorum)*. To get the blood flowing, I run hot water over my hands while continuing to stretch. This will take anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes, depending on your own circulation. For very poor circulation, you might try a "contrast bath" – 5 minutes in cold water, 5 minutes in hot water (repeat).

After you have warmed up your muscles, begin your exercises or easy playing on the instrument. Continue stretching and take short breaks occasionally, about 10 minutes every hour. By taking regular breaks, you get a chance to recuperate mentally as well as physically. Make it a ritual! Chances are, if you have warmed up properly you can practice longer hours without fatigue, and, if you must leave your practice session for an extended period of time, you are likely to still be warm when you return. Warming up properly and taking care of your hands during practice sessions can prevent serious injuries such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

Take the time to stretch your hands, arms, and wrists before extended practice sessions to avoid injury in the long run. Running your hands under warm water while stretching will improve your endurance. I have included a few warm-ups/technical exercises that will benefit the beginner to advanced mallet player. These exercises are beneficial to any player, regardless of the preferred grip.

Exercise 1
Always start your warm-ups with block chords – "double vertical strokes." By doing this, you are warming up the larger muscles first, before focusing on smaller muscle groups. This exercise is great for several reasons. It is meant to help develop the "piston" stroke: bringing the mallets back up to starting position after striking the instrument, and set for the next chord in the upstroke. Think of getting a good "lift" off the bars. This eliminates extra motion and forces you to think ahead to the next chord and position. It also helps to create a smooth, fluid motion between chords, and to increase the range of motion in your wrists. There are three elbow positions to concentrate on: neutral, inside, and outside. The first measure utilizes only neutral position – elbows straight, by your sides. In the second measure, on beat one, your left hand should be in an outside elbow shift – elbow away from your body. On beat two, both hands need to be in an inside elbow shift – elbows toward your side, or in front of your body. Pay particular attention to where your mallet placement is on the bar to avoid undesirable playing area. Strike each chord several times to get used to the stroke and elbow position. You should be concentrating on your sound production as well as body positioning, mallet placement, and piston stroke.

Exercise 2
This exercise focuses on "single independent strokes" with each mallet. The primary goal is to develop independence of the mallets. The most common mistake when practicing this exercise is taking it too fast. Concentrate on making each stroke the same, and get a good "lift" off the bar. Strive for an even balance in dynamic levels between mallets and evenness in stick height. I have written the exercise at an interval of perfect fifths when ascending and major thirds when descending, however, it would be useful to practice this exercise using many different intervals.

Exercises 3
Like exercise 1, this forces the player to think ahead. Exercise 3 utilizes the "single alternating stroke," going through the major chords and inversions in the form of arpeggios. Again, take it slowly to develop a good rotation and maintain good sound production. Use a pivot between each stroke (bringing the mallet back to playing position – piston stroke), not merely a rotation from one mallet to the next. For added skill, practice using minor, diminished, and augmented chords.

Exercise 4
Strive for an even sound between all four mallets. To gain control over accented patterns, focus on these general tips:

For accents with the outside mallet in a 1-2 permutation, there should be more of a down stroke and less rotation. In a 3-4 permutation, there should be more rotation and less of a down stroke.
For accents with the inside mallet in a 1-2 permutation, there should be more rotation and less down stroke. In a 3-4 permutation, there should be more down stroke and less rotation.

The exercise should be practiced with different permutations and at different intervals. Use the above guidelines when practicing other permutations.

Exercise 5
Use double vertical strokes with each hand, and practice using the piston stroke. Take the exercise slow enough to think ahead and concentrate on proper mallet placement and getting a good sound out of the bar.

Exercise 6
This exercise is for the development of one-handed rolls. Practice this exercise very slowly with a pivot between each note, and also work up to faster tempos using only a rotation from one mallet to the next. By practicing slowly, you will develop the necessary strength in your wrists to control the mallets. By practicing the rotation at different speeds, you will develop the skill necessary to execute one-handed rolls using varying speeds. Practice this exercise at different intervals as well. This exercise helps to develop the ability to start and stop rolls with each mallet.

All of the above exercises should be practiced slowly at first with a metronome to insure proper technique. Practicing at painfully slow tempos forces you to concentrate on each note, as well as focusing on technical problems, body positioning, and musical gestures. The exercises are guidelines. Use them as a foundation to create other exercises and incorporate them into your warm-up routine as well.

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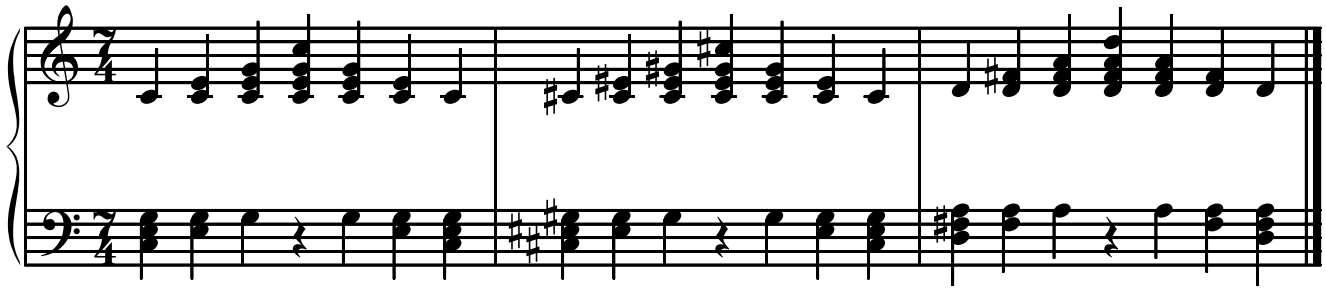
Daily Marimba Warm-up and Technique

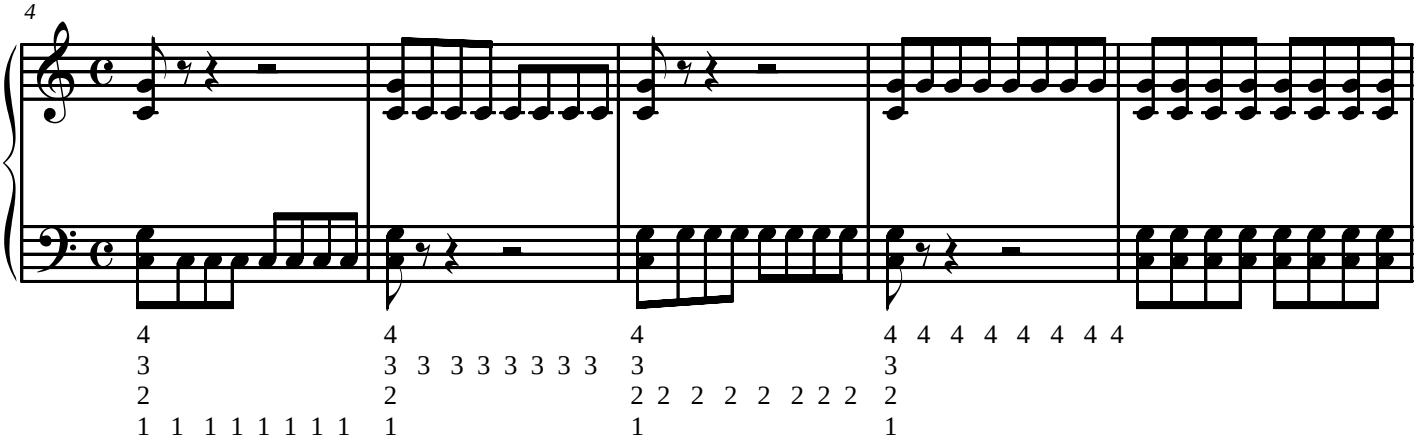
Andy Harnsberger

Exercise 1 ♩ = 50



etc.

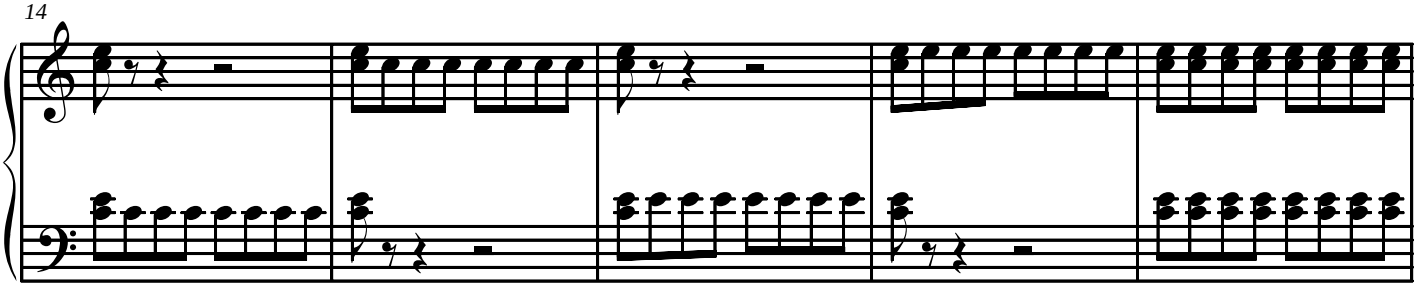
Exercise 2 (ascending)



simile

etc.

(descending)



Exercise 2 continued

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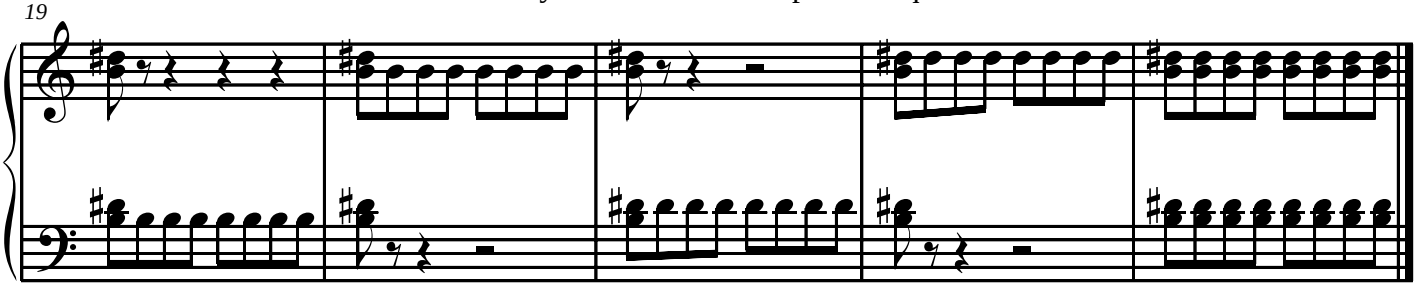
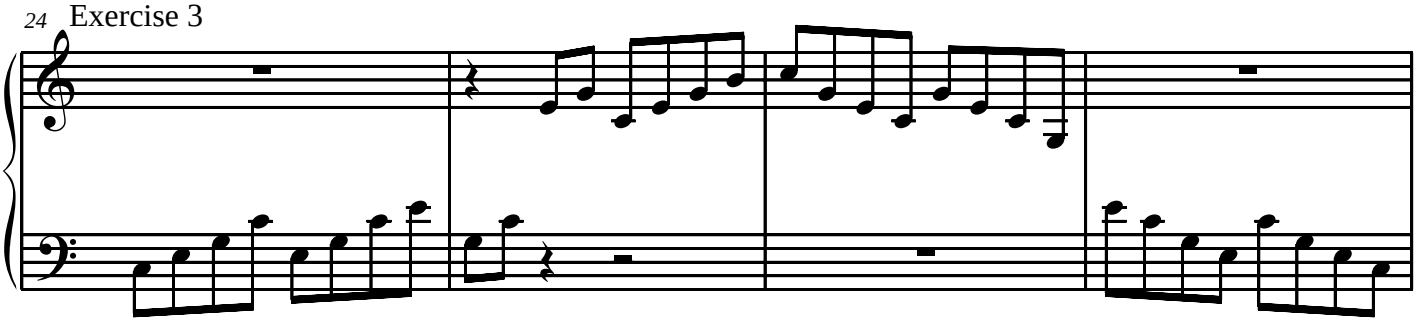


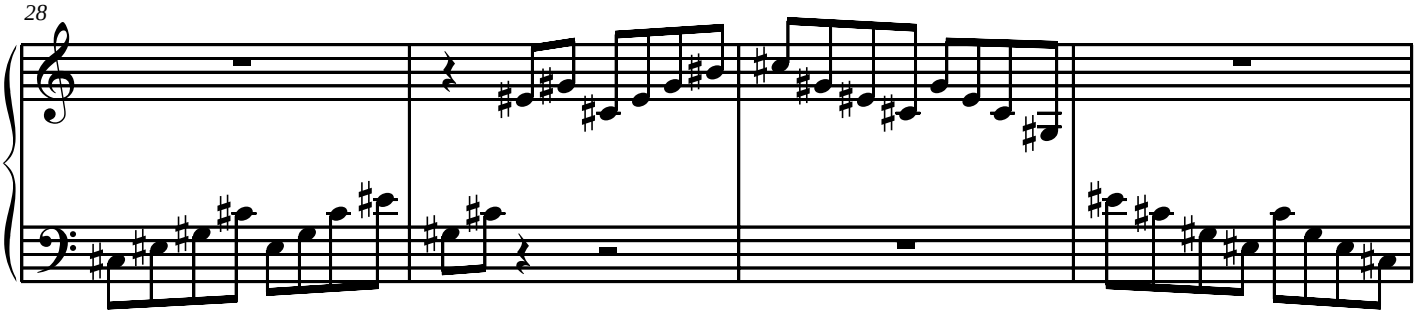
etc.

24 Exercise 3



1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 4 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 etc.

28



Exercise 4

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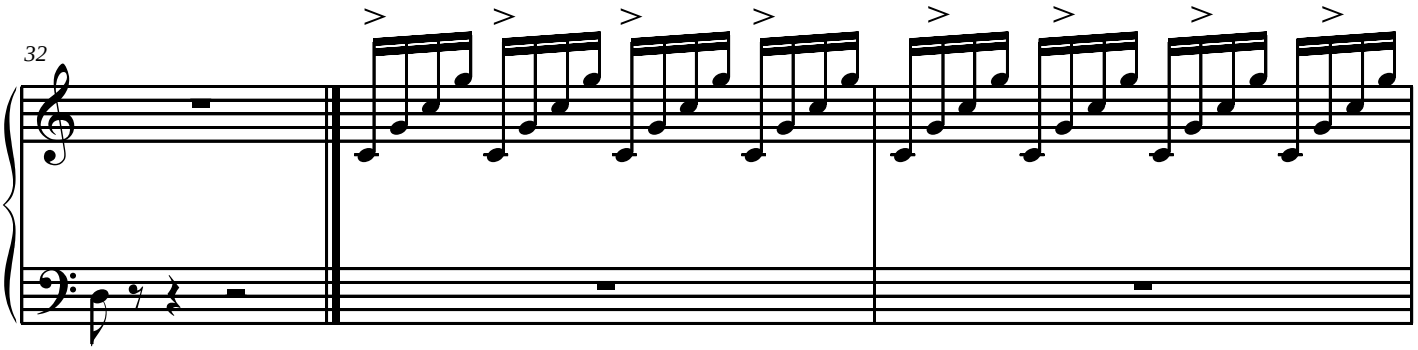
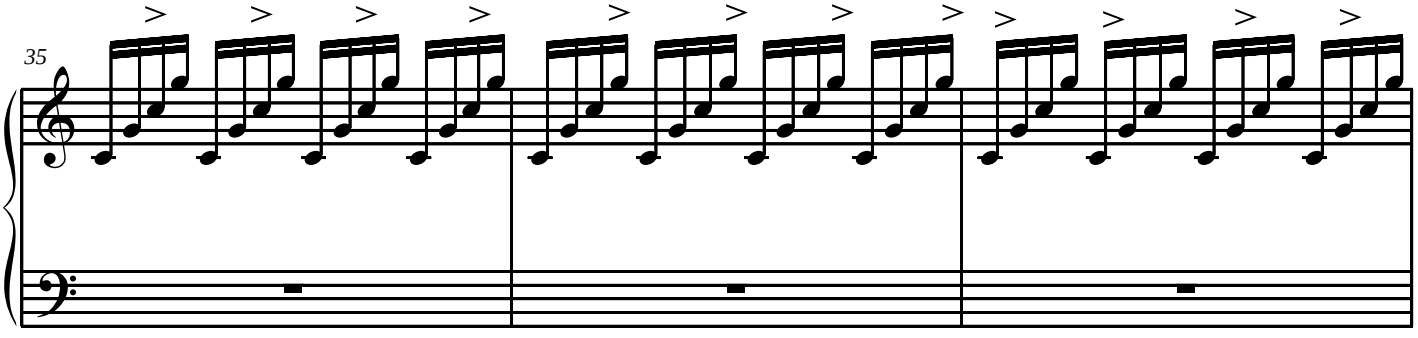
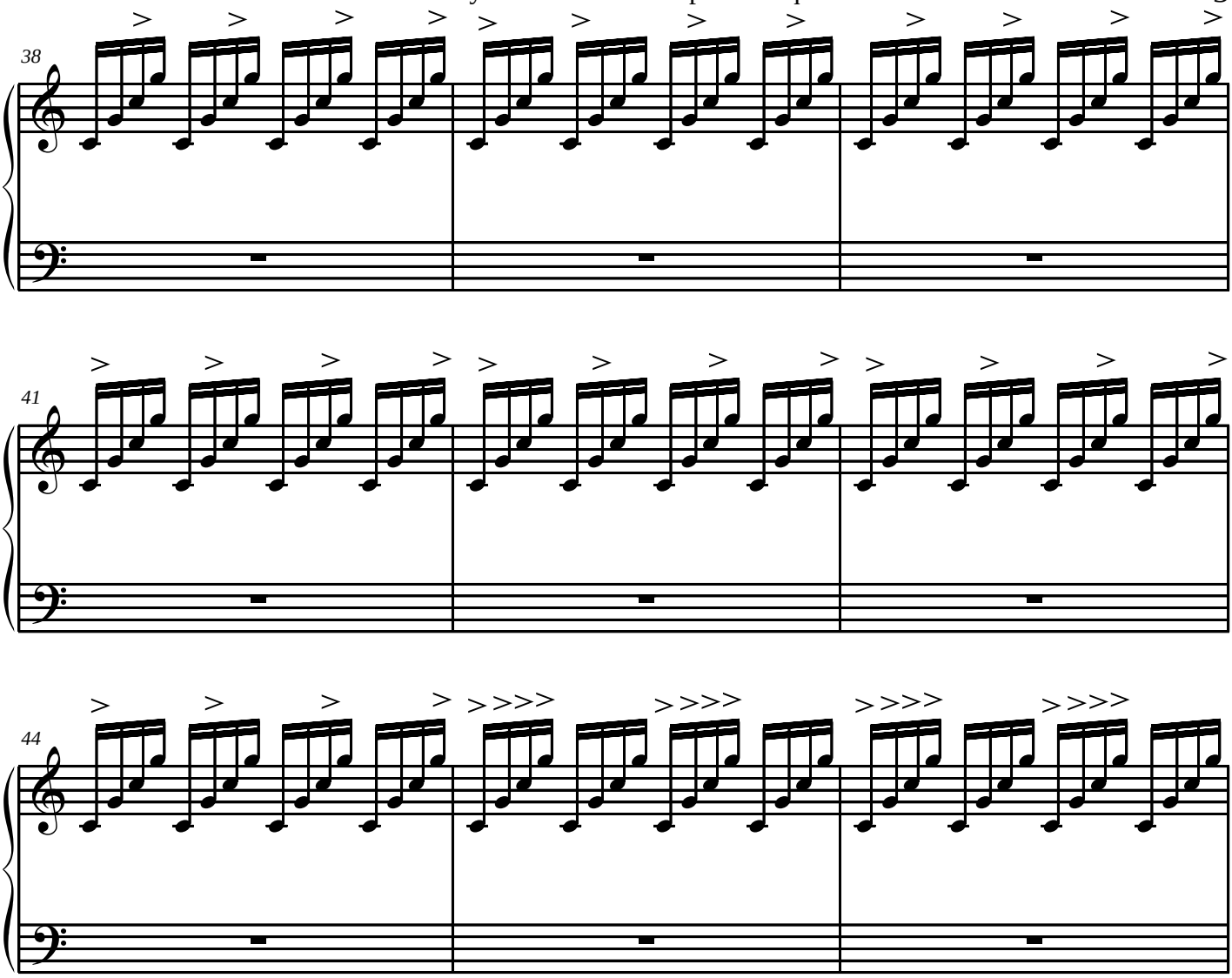


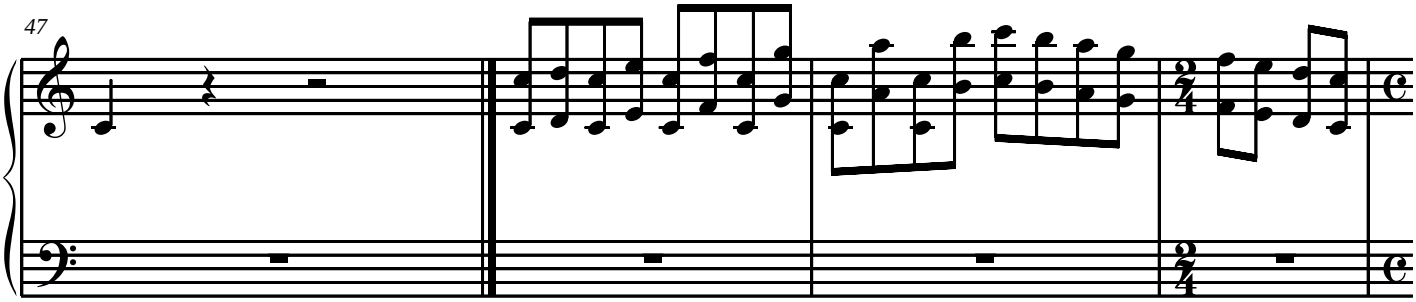
etc. 1 2 3 4 etc.

35

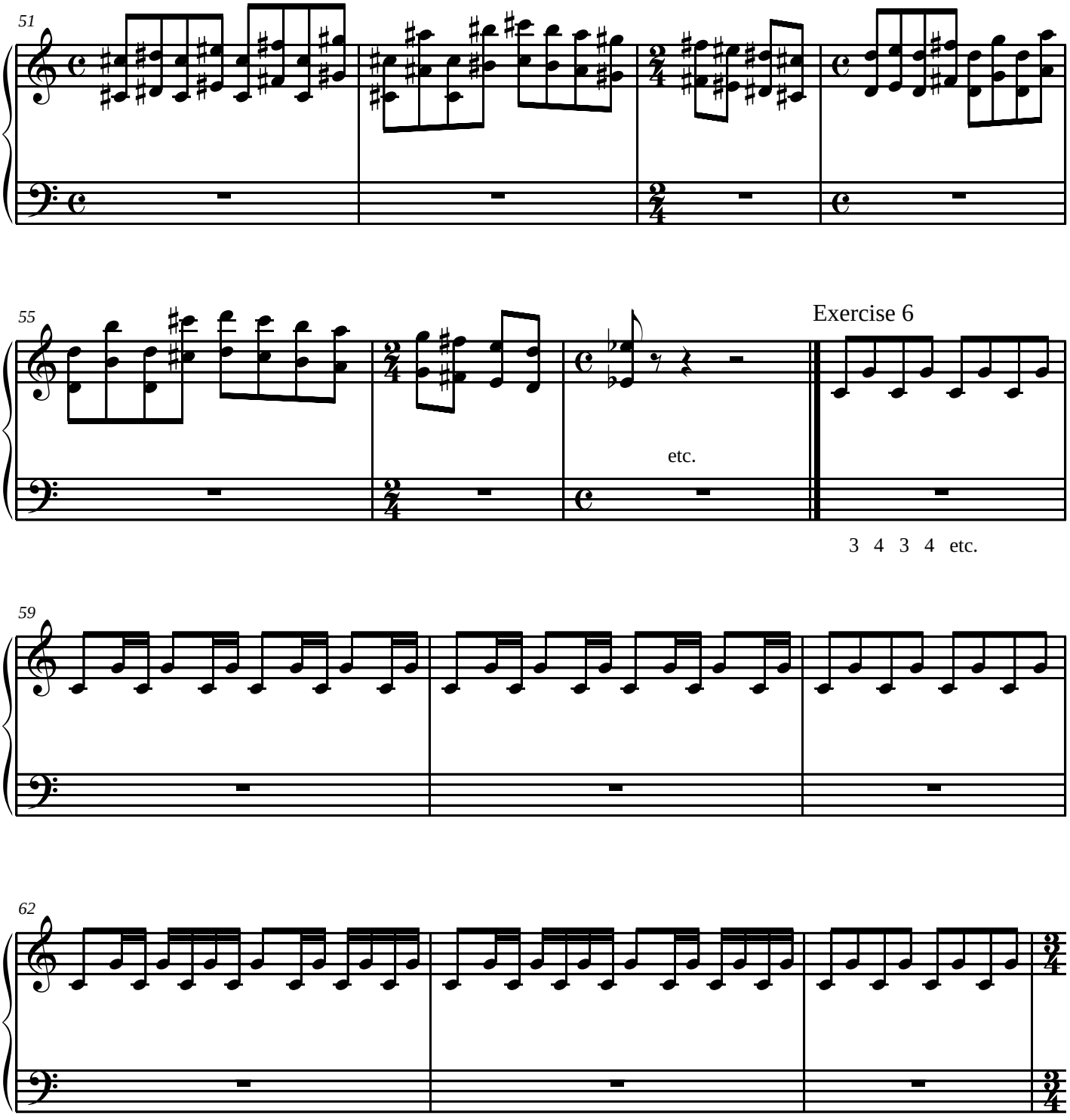




Exercise 5



R.H. alone
L.H. alone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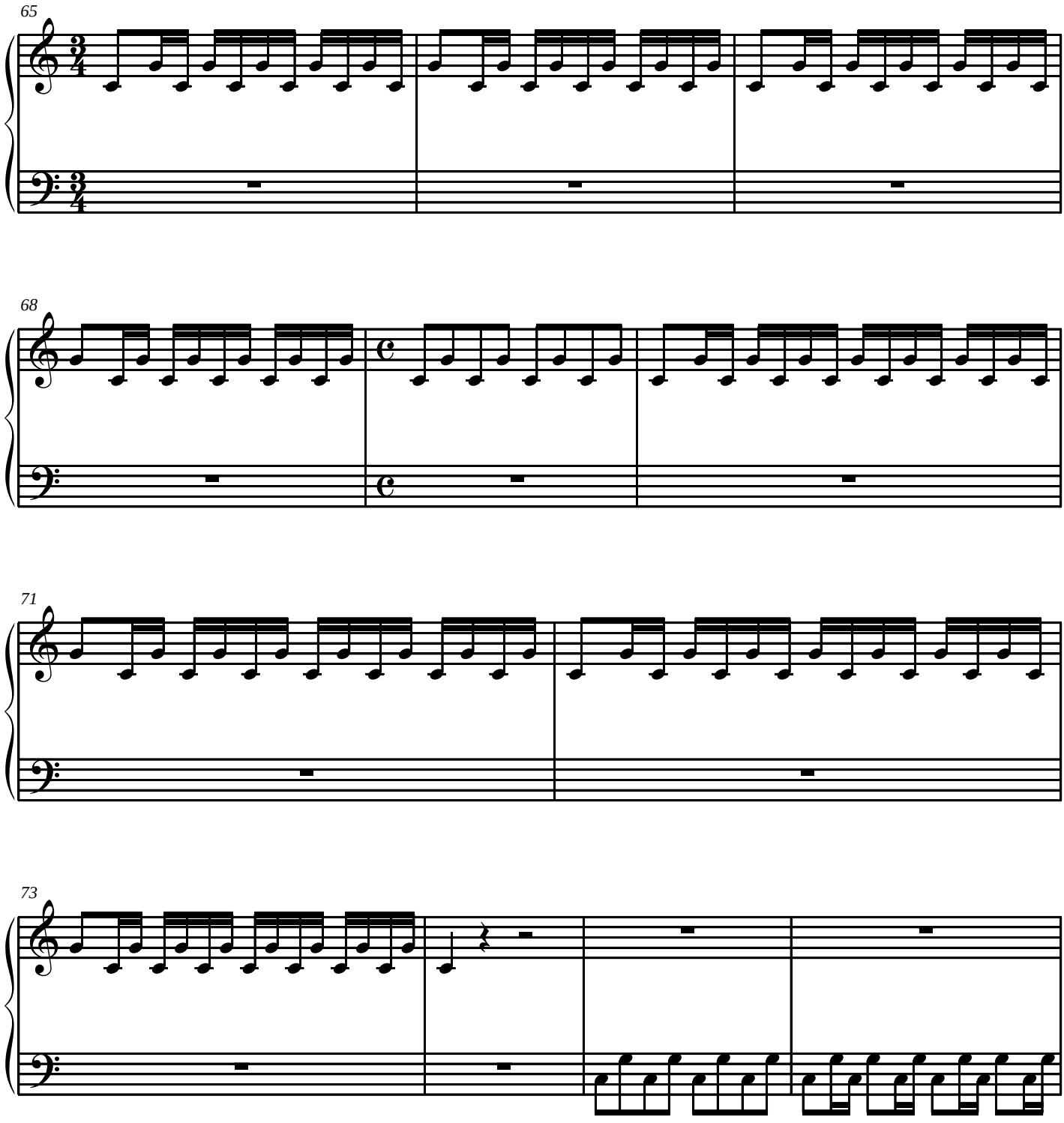
Exercise 6
etc.
3 4 3 4 etc.
59
62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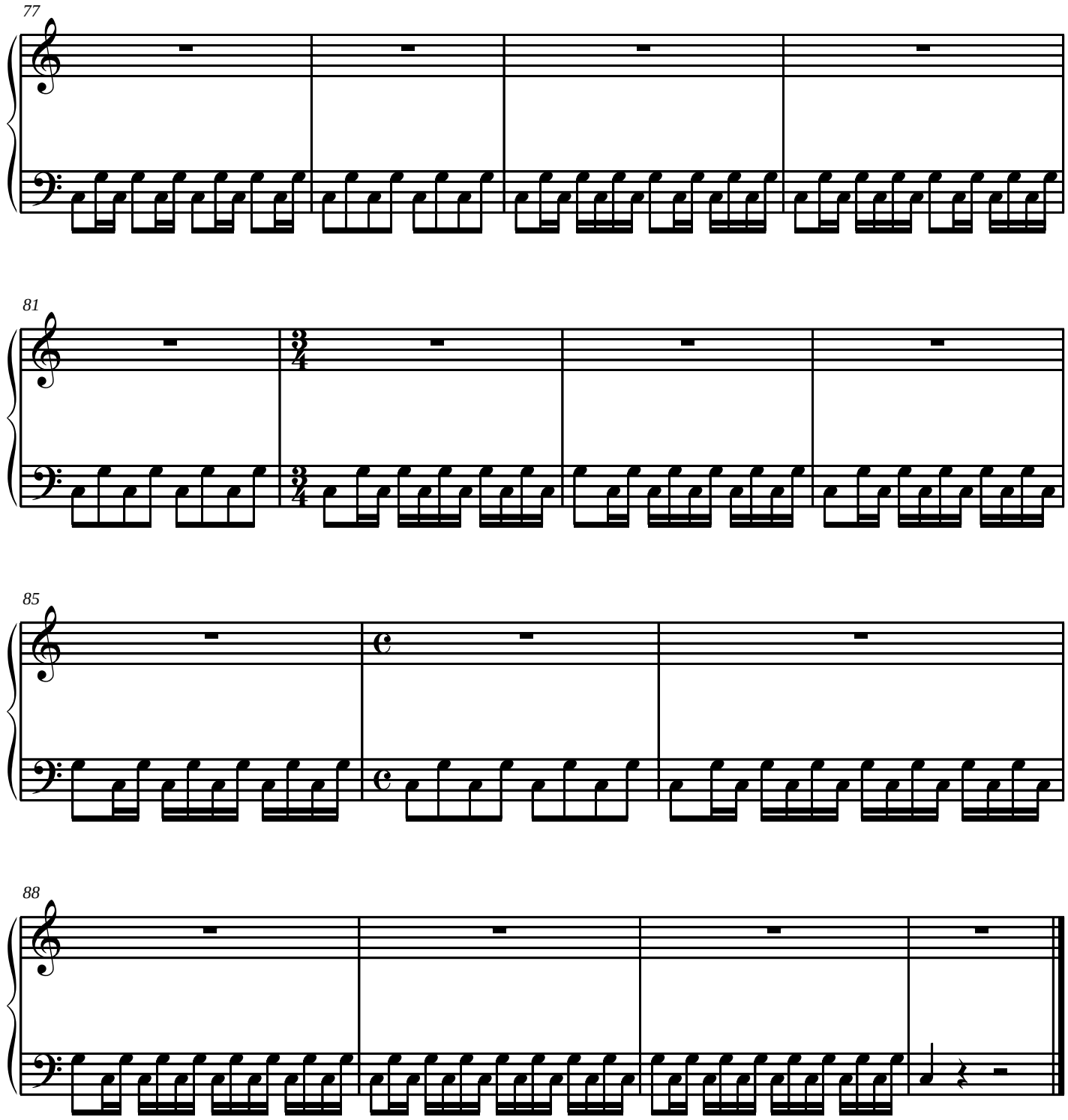
1 2 1 2 etc.



The above exercise should be practiced at different intervals, especially thirds and octaves.