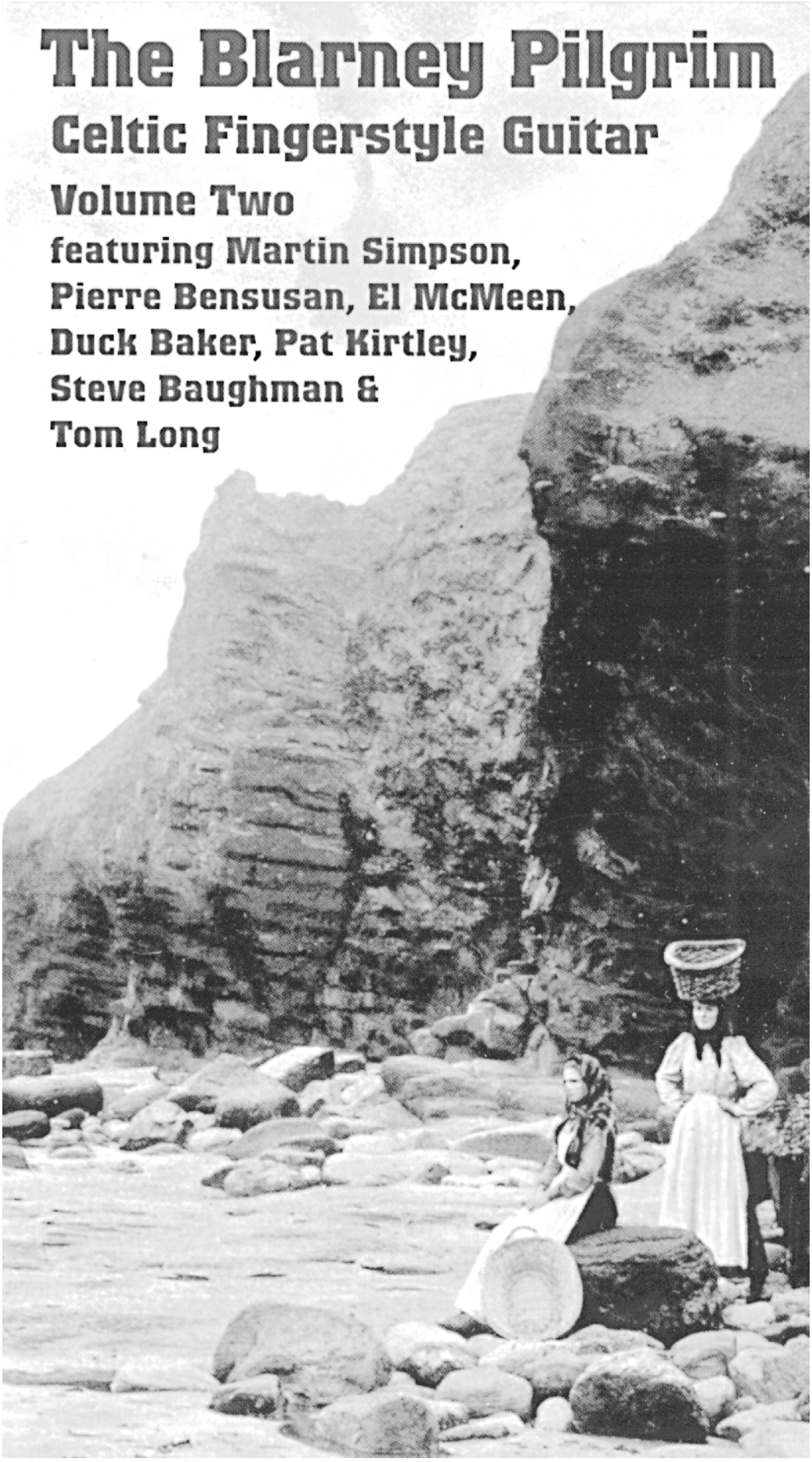
The Blarney Pilgrim

Celtic Fingerstyle Guitar

Volume Two

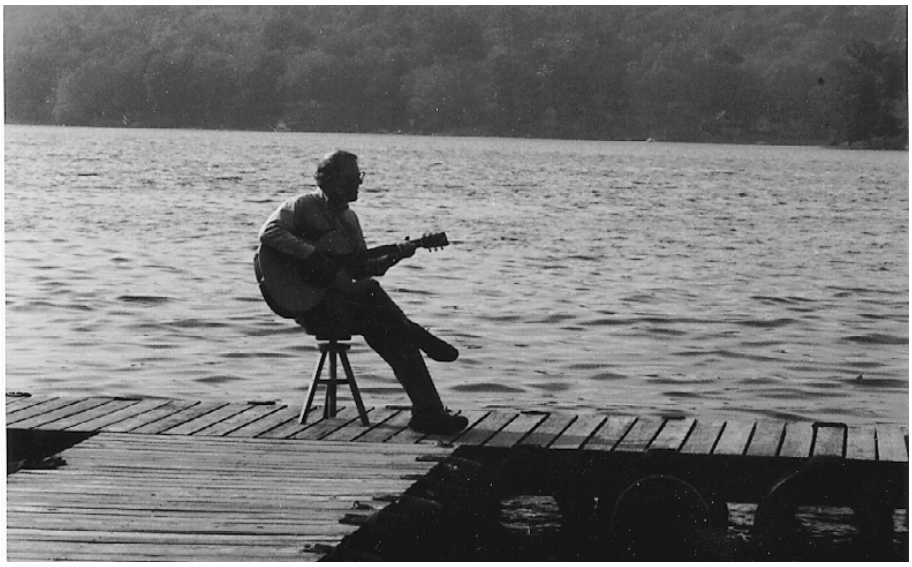
featuring Martin Simpson,
Pierre Bensusan, El McMeen,
Duck Baker, Pat Kirtley,
Steve Baughman &
Tom Long



The Blarney Pilgrim

World of Celtic Fingerstyle Guitar

Volume Two



This collection of traditional music from Ireland and Scotland arranged for solo guitar is the result of a passionate study and adaptation of the tradition by the musicians featured here. The idea of arranging this music for solo guitar is still relatively new – the steel-stringed acoustic guitar appears in the Irish-Scottish tradition only in relatively recent times. Looking back less than a century, you would find this music performed on fiddle, pipes, button accordion, flutes and whistles, in solo and ensemble settings, but never guitar, even in its basic role of providing rhythm and chord backup.

The guitar, in its basic role of accompaniment in folk-type music, had been (and still is) used as a chordal instrument. But the sound of Celtic traditional music requires, above all else, attention to just two elements: melody and rhythm. Stark melody, often excluding all chordal accompaniment, is a signature of Irish and Scottish music. Examples are numerous. Many traditional Irish and Scottish fiddlers perform solo in a this style. The intricacy of their playing comes in the form of precise nuance and ornamentation, not chords, harmony, or counterpoint. A similar characteristic is carried over to Celtic ensemble playing – even with a group of players on different instruments, it's typical for everyone to play the melody in unison.

Beyond the dominant importance of melody, there is the element of *accented rhythms.* Celtic dance rhythms – jigs, reels, hornpipes – are built upon simple meters of 3, 4, or 6 beats per

measure, but with accents that give each form its unique rhythmic feel. Observing an unaccompanied Irish fiddler performing dance pieces, you realize that the underlying pulse of the music is entirely imagined or "felt". If the listener cannot figure out "where the beat is", the convoluted twists and embellishments of melody render it all the more puzzling. But learning to listen is part of the experience. And if the performers don't provide an obvious rhythm in the instrumentation, tapping feet in the audience usually will. A major challenge fingerstyle guitarists have undertaken is to construct the whole dance-band scenario – embellished melody playing over a throbbing dance rhythm – at once on the guitar.

The earliest efforts in this direction on solo guitar were probably from American ragtime guitarists such as Dave Laibman, around 1960. He began to work out arrangements of fiddle tunes, and he was recorded in the early sixties by Stefan Grossman, who observes "These players, having successfully worked out things like arrangements of Scott Joplin's piano rags on fingerstyle guitar, were looking for some new challenges. They began to find that challenge in arranging fiddle tunes".

At the same time, a new stylistic level of guitar playing was developing within the folk scene in England. The eclectic tastes of the 1960's British fingerstylists guided them to experiment in certain musical directions. When the first wave of British acoustic nonclassical fingerpickers (notably Martin Carthy, Davey Graham, John Renbourn, Bert Jansch, and Dave Evans) began creating complex embellishments and arrangements of English folk music in the early and mid-1960's, it was almost instinctive for them to begin working as well with melodies and tunes from the immediate environs of Ireland and Scotland. These players were the vanguard of a progression of guitarists who have focused both creative talent and sustained effort in bringing old music of the Celtic lands to fingerstyle guitar. Davey Graham – who in 1960 recorded the bellwether tune *She Moves Through The Fair* – was one of the earliest experimenters, and appreciated not only the old Irish fiddle and pipe tunes, but made a passion of visiting countries in the middle east and north Africa to absorb and translate those musical styles too. None of this music was new – far from it – but it was a curiously novel idea to arrange it for solo steel-stringed "folk guitar".

The solo playing style created by these musicians did not become popular in a commercial sense, but it did become an influence for guitarists in the pop world, Paul Simon being a notable example. The complex fingerstyle arrangements, many employing alternate guitar tunings, have remained a small but significant extension of guitar repertoire. In the rediscovery of

this genre, beautiful, haunting tonalities and rhythmic forms had been brought to light. The contributions of the British pioneers began to be studied and slowly absorbed by others in the fingerstyle guitar world.

A following generation of contributors, notably Duck Baker, Pierre Bensusan, and Martin Simpson (all of whom are happily present in this collection), continued to explore the music. They found more tunes to try, and brought varied backgrounds and influences to the mix. Duck Baker, for instance, was first piqued to investigate Irish music via the Appalachian fiddle tunes that traditional banjoist Art Rosenbaum was playing. Algerian-born Pierre Bensusan, as a young guitar prodigy, was fascinated with American Bluegrass music. These immensely talented artists were able to do something wonderful and essential: they could hear the basic core of the music stripped to its essentials – melodies and rhythms – and weave arrangements that worked beautifully on the steel-stringed acoustic guitar.

There were a number of solo fingerstyle guitar recordings of Irish and Scottish jigs, reels, and airs by the above artists, as well as others, in the period from about 1978 to 1988. The recordings of this period, and since, have provided inspiration for an ever growing contingent of players and listeners.

The Music

Of the music played by guitarists such as those represented in this collection, there are four major categories: Dance music, Songs (i.e. ballads and airs), martial (i.e. marches) music, and the unique music of Turlough O'Carolan. Nearly every piece presented here traces back to one of these four lines. Of dance music there are the rhythmic styles characterized as jigs, reels, hornpipes, etc., many of which fall into the category loosely known as "fiddle tunes". The category of songs includes instrumental arrangements of music that is easily recognizable by the casual listener, and would include titles like *Danny Boy*, *Down by the Sally Gardens,* and *Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms*. Martial music, some of it going back to feudal times, would be characterized by pieces like *Scotland the Brave*, *March of the High Kings of Laoise*, *Sir Sidney Smith's March*, and *Duke of Fife's Welcome to Deeside*.

The music written by the blind harp-player Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738) is notable because it is stylistically separate from the other music which was performed (by most musicians in his homeland of Ireland) at the time it was written, yet is now accepted by musicians as an essential component of the tradition. Remarkably, the 200 or so pieces of music he created, which were presented as "new music" in his time, were

immediately adopted by the traditional musicians of Ireland, and began to be performed by fiddlers, harpists, and ensembles. Even without written transcription in many cases, the folk tradition adopted and carried on O'Carolan's melodies all the way to the present. In modern times, credit is due to O'Carolan biographer Donal O'Sullivan, who in the 1950's assembled and documented most of the 200 existing pieces of music.

Writer Art Edelstein comments on the continuing appeal of O'Carolan to modern musicians "Carolan composed his music on the traditional Irish harp at a time when that instrument was beginning to decline in popularity. The long sustain of the brass strings on that instrument produces a sound very different from that heard on the modern nylon or gut strung harp. We suspect the sparse harmonies he wrote were a result of his harp's particular sound." Indeed, you will find guitar arrangements of O'Carolan pieces played by most every guitarist who performs Irish traditional music. These tunes work beautifully on the guitar, and it could be observed that the tonality of the brass-strung Irish harp, now essentially lost, is well reproduced by the tone of the steel stringed acoustic guitar.

Guitar Approaches

The challenge for those who attempt to translate Irish and Scottish traditional music for fingerstyle guitar is to preserve the unique qualities which are the essence of the style. This has been achieved by taking a minimalist approach in arranging, and by using alternate tunings. The minimalist direction is characterized by the thought that most of this music consists of but two elements: melody and rhythm. Harmonization, in the classical sense, tends to sound out of place and uncharacteristic. With this standard musical device unavailable, successful approaches are found in fiddle-and-pipe-like embellishment of melody, and rhythmic bass patterns.

The popularity of alternate tunings in this music tends to come from two different directions. One is in the desire for production of tonalities of droning instruments, · la the bagpipes, and tunings such as DADGAD and EADEAE make this effect relatively easy. On the other hand, there are guitar tunings which lend themselves easily to the melodic steps and fullness found in the diatonic Celtic harp, such and DGDGBD (open G tuning) and the CGDGAD favored by Dave Evans and El McMeen. Perhaps one of the reasons for the apparent popularity of the DADGAD tuning in celtic music is that it offers a compromise to the utilization of both approaches, providing easily achieved droning tonalities, while not being at all unfriendly to major-key melodies.

– Pat Kirtley

THE PERFORMERS

MARTIN SIMPSON

Martin Simpson was born in Northern England, played his first paid gig at fourteen, became professional at seventeen, and since then has become known as one of the most widely admired acoustic guitar players in the world. He has played with Richard Thompson, Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention as well as working in the Albion Band and for 10 years as collaborator with June Tabor.

His solo guitar performances showcase his mastery of the guitar as well as his far ranging repertoire. Martin achieves a very clear bell-like tone here with his Sobell Model One guitar, (crafted by Northumberland luthier Stefan Sobell) on which he is using medium gauge strings. He adds that it's his favorite guitar.

Simpson emphasizes that his approach to arranging traditional celtic tunes in fingerstyle form comes more from the realm of songs than from the instrumental tradition. In other words, most of these pieces he arranges for guitar normally have words. He tells the story of the medley here of tunes from the northeast region of Scotland: "This trio of tunes is about the idea of love gone wrong. *Rosie Anderson* is a classic 'big ballad'. The story concerns a tragic divorce which took place in the early 19th century in Scotland. It's very much the story of the upper classes. The third party in the divorce was Lord Elgin who is historically famous for stealing marble from the Parthenon to take back to England, but also stole peoples' wives. *The Shearing's Not For You* and *Bogie's Bonnie Belle* are both ballads that are rural in origin and both concern girls who have gotten pregnant outside of marriage – totally on the opposite end of the class spectrum – the working class".

Pierre Bensusan

Pierre Bensusan has, throughout his career and string of recordings, confirmed his place as an acoustic visionary who combines sensibility with shadings of ethereal jazz, pop, ethnic and classical melodies, free and fusion styles. Born in 1957 in French Algeria, Pierre Bensusan released his debut album *Prés de Paris* in 1975, which included brilliant interpretations of Irish jigs and reels – at the age of 17 – and won *Le Grand Prix du Disque* at the Montreux Festival in Switzerland (1976). He was also a Bluegrass musician and started his career playing guitar and mandolin with the Bill Keith Bluegrass Band in France, Belgium and Switzerland. More albums and extensive touring followed, as well as a recording contract with Columbia in the U.S. Beyond his reputation as a musical colorist and composer, he is known for his adoption and comprehensive knowledge of the guitar tuning DADGAD.

Though Bensusan exploits a widely varied palette of musical styles and colors, he returns time and again to explorations of the music of Ireland. On the collection here, he gives us welcome new recordings – of a reel that is a signature tune from the days of *Prés de Paris – The Pure Drop*, an old Irish melody *Heman Dubh* (originally recorded on his album Musiques), and his eclectic exploration of that most popular O'Carolan composition, *Sheebeg An Sheemor.*

El McMeen

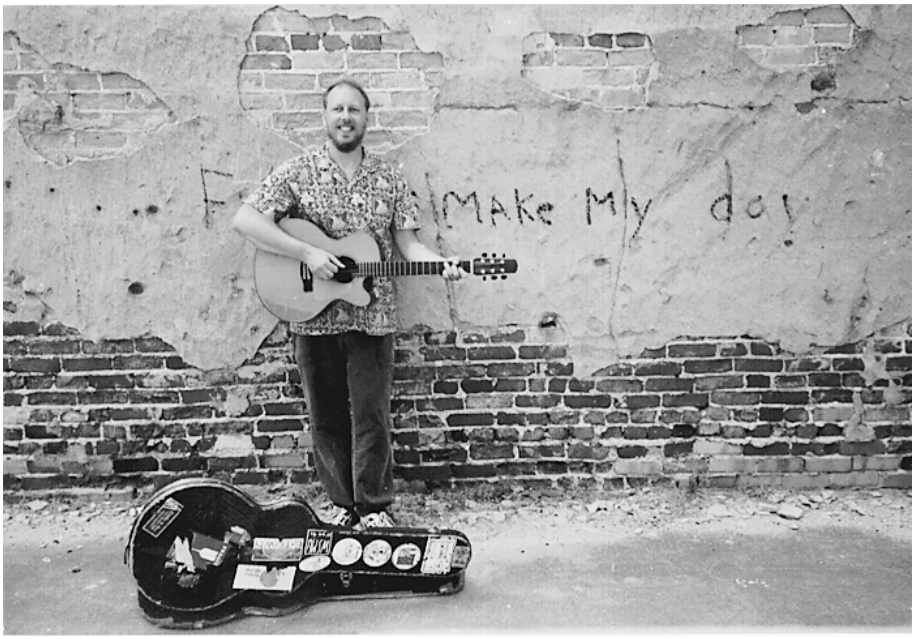
El McMeen began playing the acoustic guitar while attending Harvard College and notes that one of his greatest influences was folksinger Phil Ochs. At that time, McMeen didn't approach the guitar as a solo instrument. Upon reapplying himself in the early 1980's to the instrument (and intensively studying numerous cassette lessons from Stefan Grossman, which he strongly endorses) he encountered what he saw as an incred-

ible breadth of new music. In studying the guitar now as a solo instrument, he moved away from relying solely on alternating bass technique and the standard American repertoire. He found himself attracted to Irish music, alternate tunings, and different approaches to arranging.

Within this musical style, he notes some recurring influences "My favorites are the Bothy Band albums from the 1970's – the greatest of all Irish bands in my opinion; Liz Carroll and Martin Hayes on fiddle; and Kim Robertson on harp". Primarily he plays in Low C tuning (CGDGAD) which he discovered after listening to Dave Evans on *Irish Jigs, Reels, Hornpipes, and Airs* (1979, Kicking Mule, reissued on Shanachie 97011). He says he was attracted to the richness of the tuning and found it accessible, evocative and versatile. Occasionally, he plays in DADGAD tuning also.

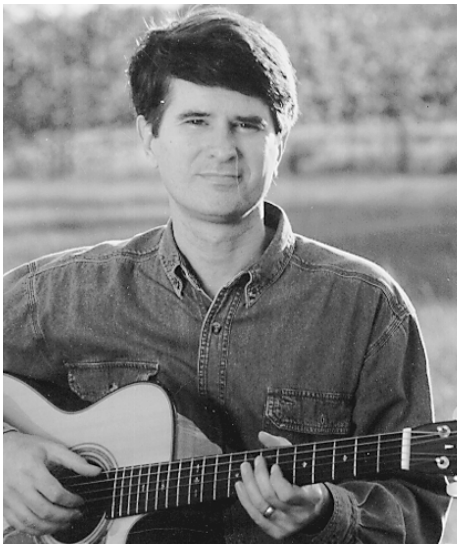
Duck Baker

Duck Baker has been a seminal figure and influence in the bringing of Irish traditional music to the guitar. Baker is one of those rare musicians who doesn't draw upon the repertory of his chosen instrument for musical raw material, but rather finds ideas in the broader musical stream, and shapes them to the sensibilities of the guitar. From the application of that talent comes his acknowledged success at translating Irish fiddle, pipe, and harp music for the guitar. His memorable but not widely distributed 1980 album *Kid On the Mountain* outlined a stylistic approach that eschews any cosmetic prettiness of tone, and focuses rather upon the possibilities of stark, open harmonies and complex interwoven bass lines. That album first introduced to many guitarists in America viable arrangements of some es-



sential Irish tunes, a few of which are found in the volumes of this video collection, including *The Blarney Pilgrim, Morgan Magan* and *Duke of Fife's Welcome to Deeside* . Though that album is long out of print, many of the landmark arrangements found there have been reissued on various CD collections.

On volume two of our video collection, Baker reprises his arrangement of *Blarney Pilgrim,* among others, and one of his own recent compositions, a modern jig called *The Rakes of Waterloo.*

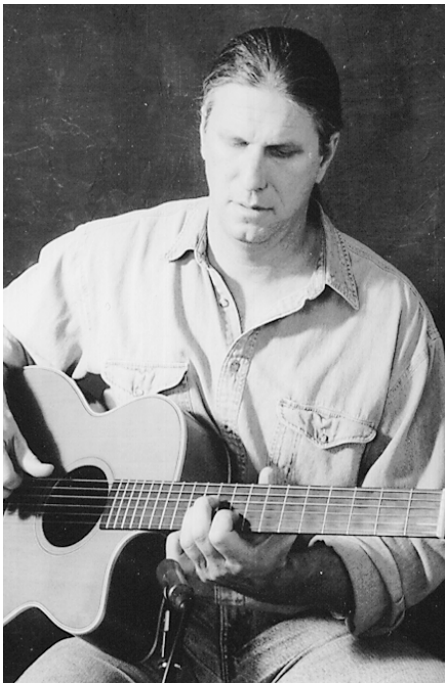


Pat Kirtley

A Kentucky-born guitarist who learned the instrument at an early age via the Atkins / Travis / Doc Watson heritage, Kirtley admits to having been hard-bitten by the Irish music bug in the late 1980's after hearing guitarist John McCormick playing celtic tunes in DADGAD tuning. He began exploring that tuning, and channeling significant creative energy into arranging Irish fiddle tunes and airs. "I am as fascinated by the fabulous wealth of musicality represented in the Irish folk-tradition as I am by the fact that I went through most of my musical life being totally ignorant of its existence" remarks Kirtley. The results of that work are here

represented by his arrangements of *Planxty Irwin* (in DADEAD tuning), the set dance *Rodney's Glory*, and airs *Moran's Return* and *The South Wind*, all taken from his 1997 album *Irish Guitar*.

Tom Long



California guitarist Tom Long muses about his early exposure to the specialized niche which now provides fodder for his guitar repertoire "In the late 1960s I definitely heard stuff on FM radio that was an open-tuned guitar doing a traditional Irish tune. In maybe 1975 I was trying to play an 'Irishy-sounding thing' and there was a girl, Beth, at school who was a fiddler I only knew in a bluegrass context. She played me some Irish tunes a couple of times. What turns me on about it is the access that I have, via recordings, to a living musical culture. I can take any one of these traditional tunes and try to make it my own thing"

"I can't put my finger on any single experience that got me interested in Irish tunes. I'm sure that it was a common process of being aware of others doing it and saying 'I could do that.' I did hear Stefan Grossman play a tune at a concert in 1980 at UCLA's Royce Hall, where he played with John Renbourn, and Ralph McTell. I don't know what tune it was but it was obviously (to me anyway) a fiddler's tune that he worked up for solo guitar, and that night was a transcendent experience I guess."

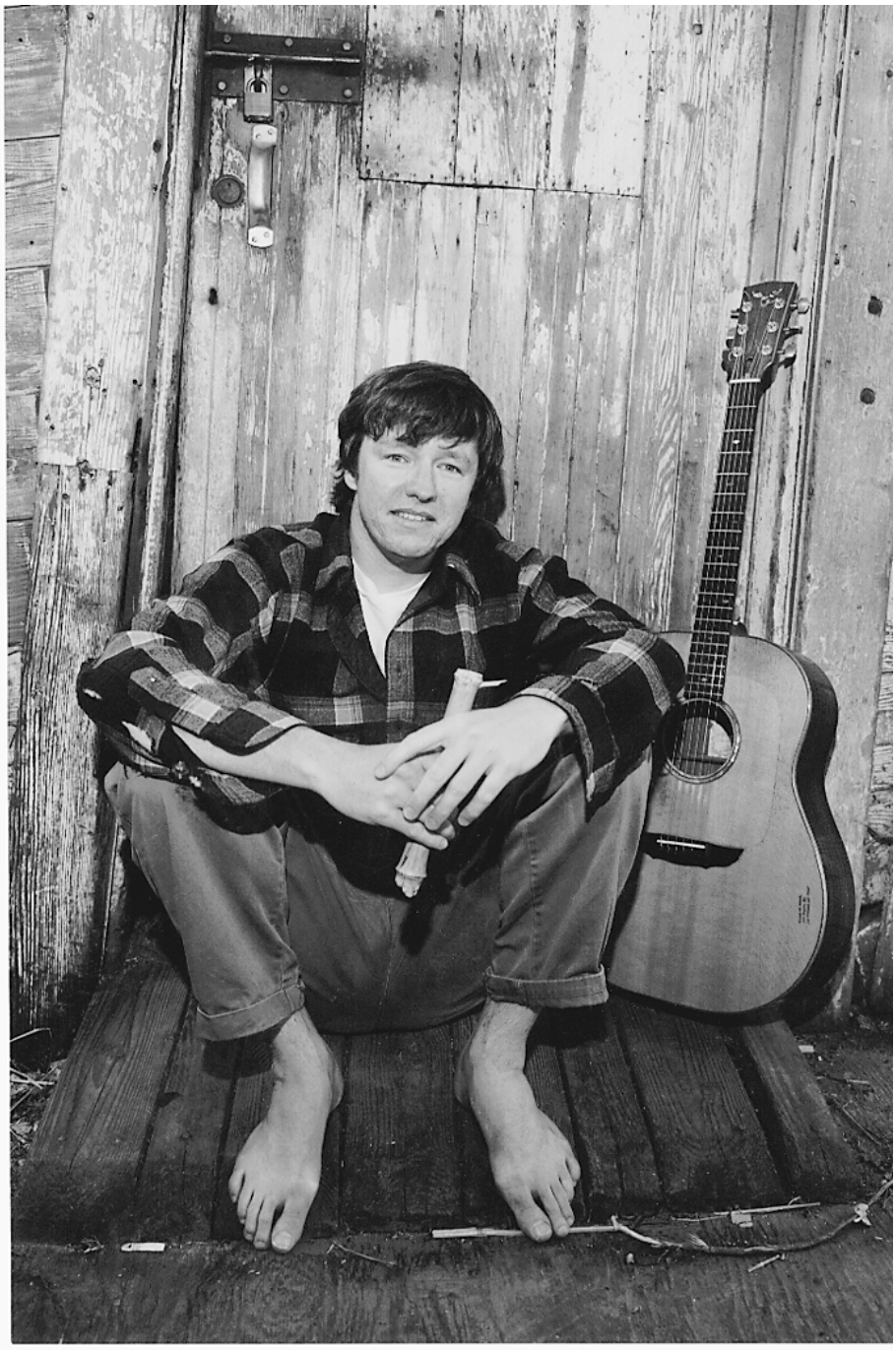
Long's two tunes in this collection, *Jenny Picking Cockles* and *The Broken Pledge*, both showcase his bare-bones rhythm and melody approach to arranging Irish music for guitar. His intense use of guitaristic elements – such as hammer-ons, pull-offs, and slides – conveys the articulation of pipes and celtic fiddling very effectively.

Steve Baughman

An American born and raised in Southeast Asia, Steve Baughman now makes his home in San Francisco. He derives his musical style primarily from British Isles fiddlers, most sig-

nificantly Martin Hayes. His album *A Drop of the Pure* features his extremely rhythmic and lyrical arrangements, and showcases his unique touch on the guitar.

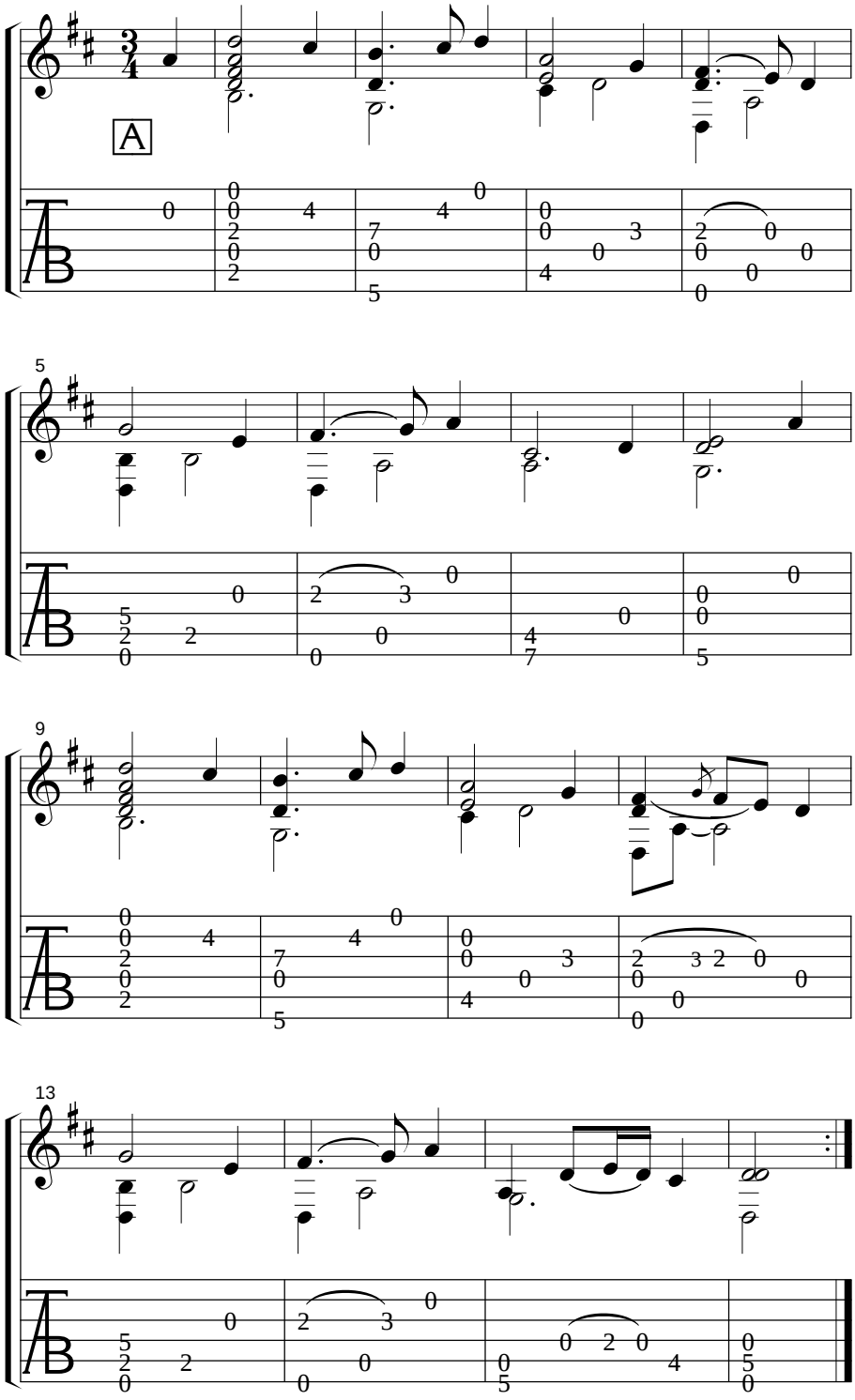
His two tunes here are representative of his style. *Bill Malley's Barndance* is his arrangement of a fiddle tune from Martin Hayes' album *Under the Moon,* and the stately version of *Fanny Power* is a Turlough O'Carolan tune that Steve says "is one of my all-time favorite melodies".



PLANXTY IRWIN

DADEAD, Capo 2

Trad. arr. Pat Kirtley



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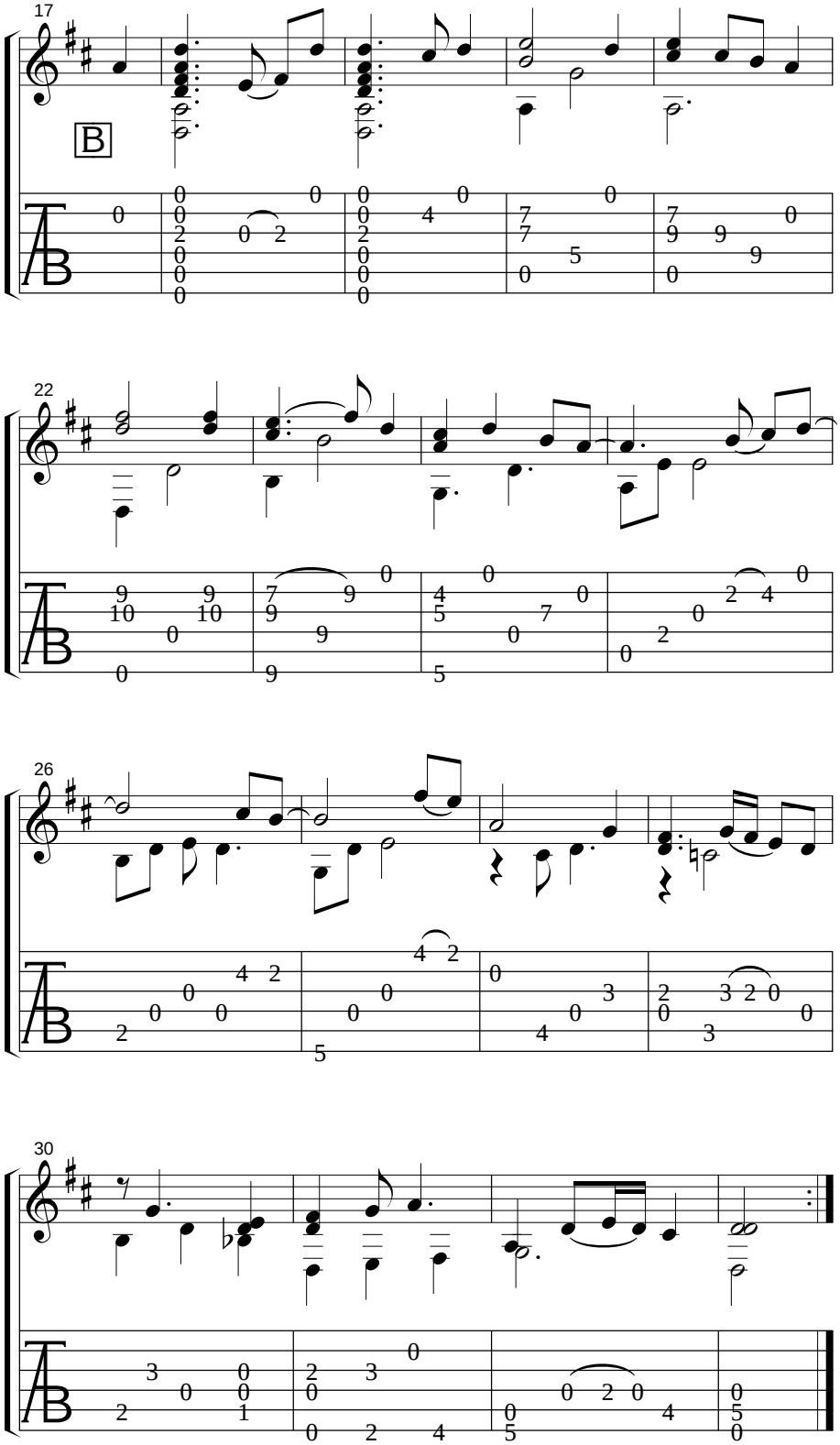
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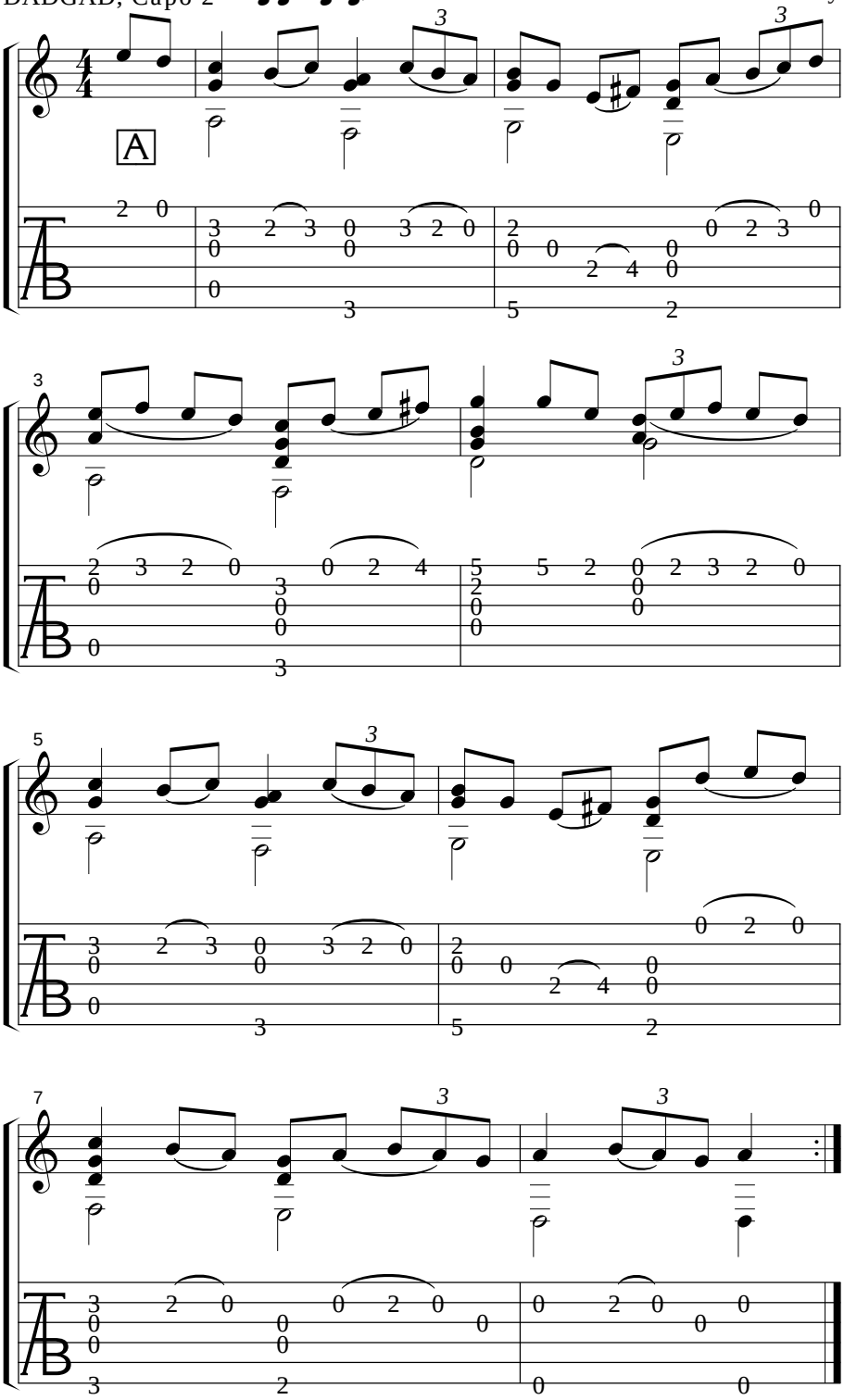
RODNEY'S GLORY

DADGAD, Capo 2 ♫ = ♩³♪ Trad. arr. Pat Kirtley



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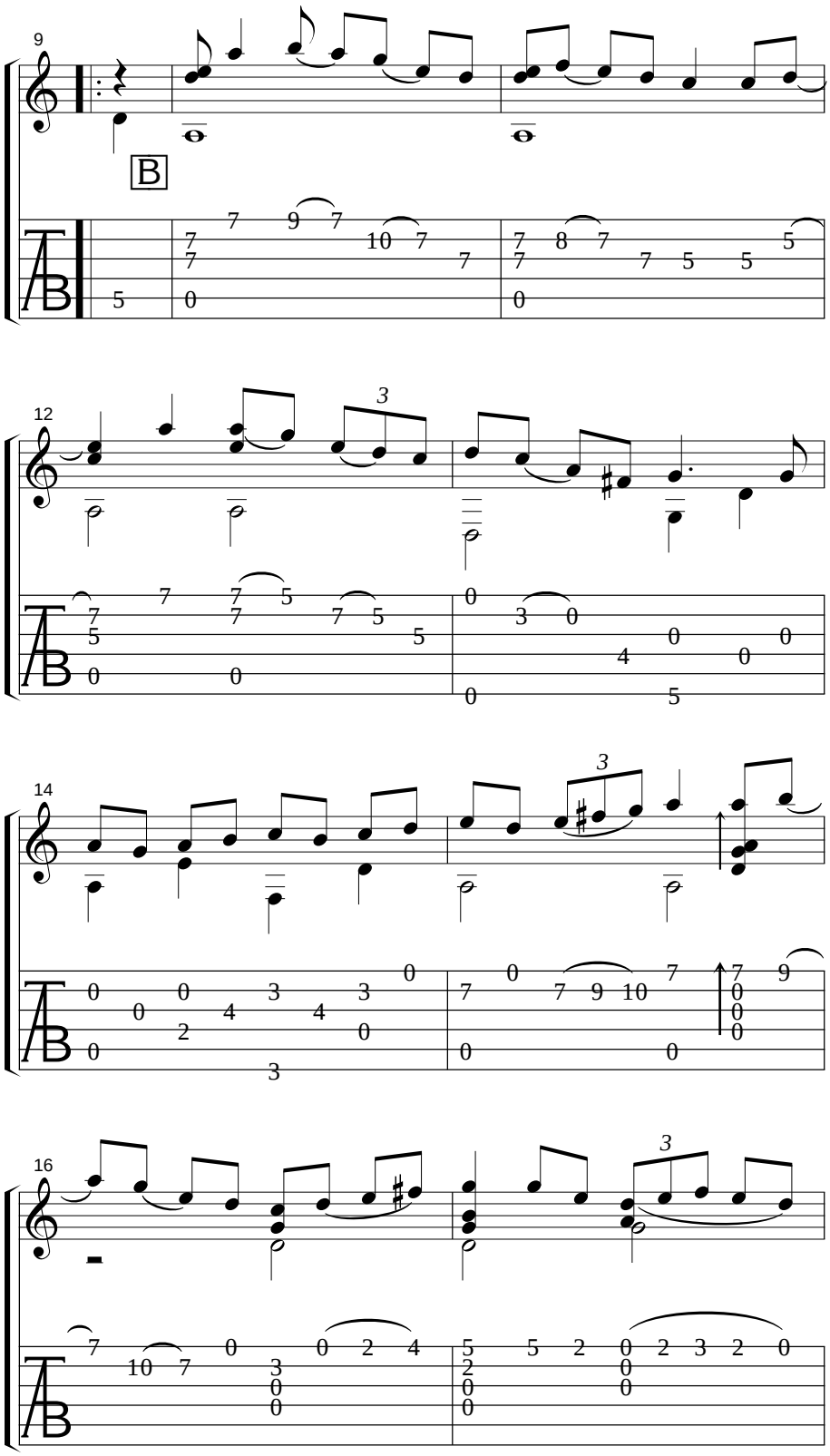
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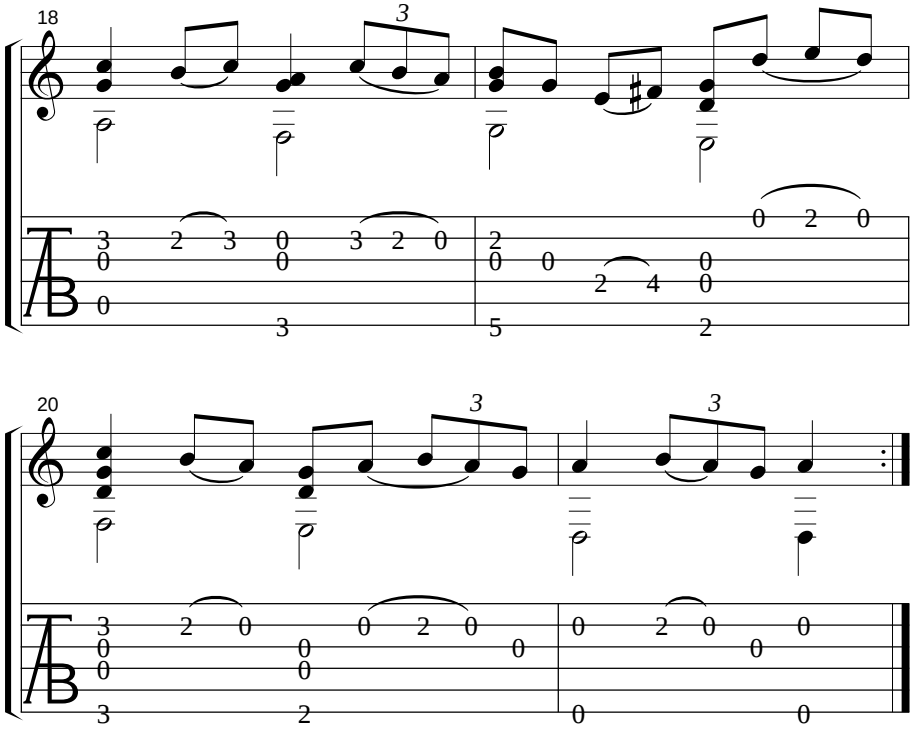
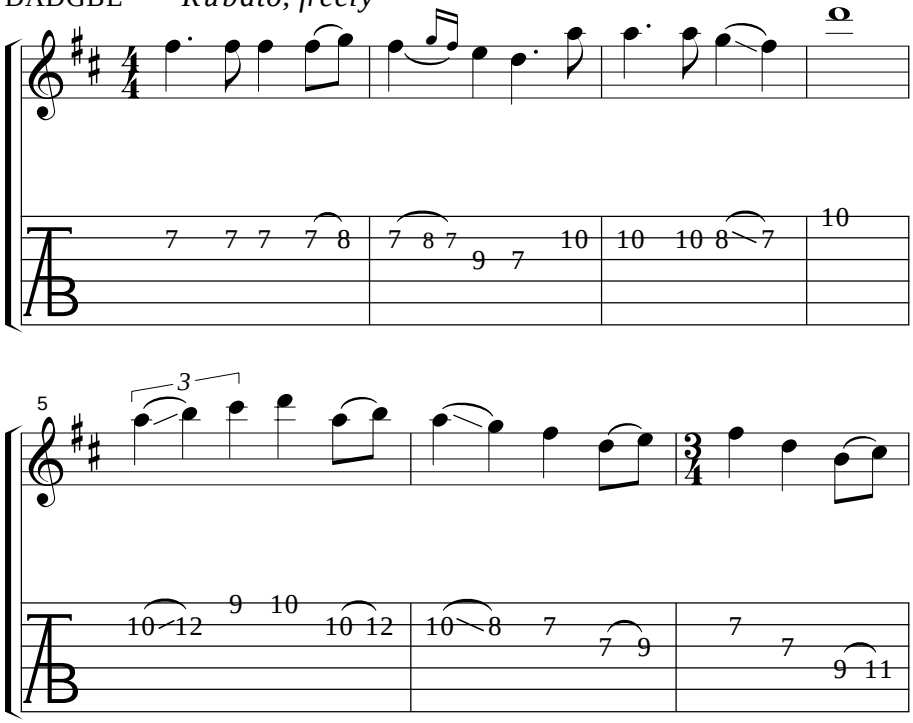


ROSIE ANDERSON

DADGBE

Rubato, freely

Trad. arr. M. Simpson



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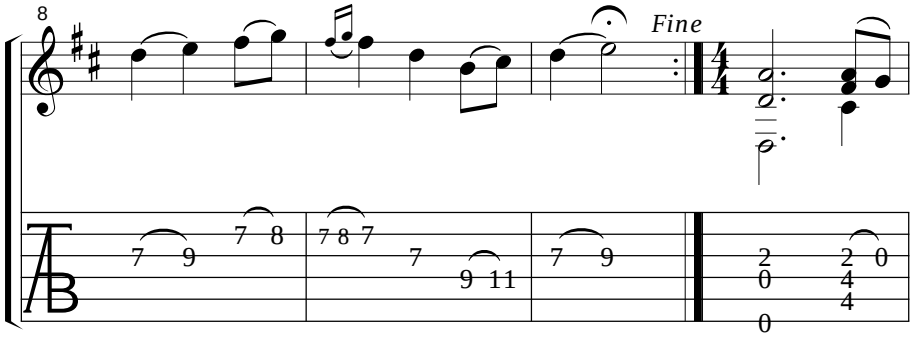
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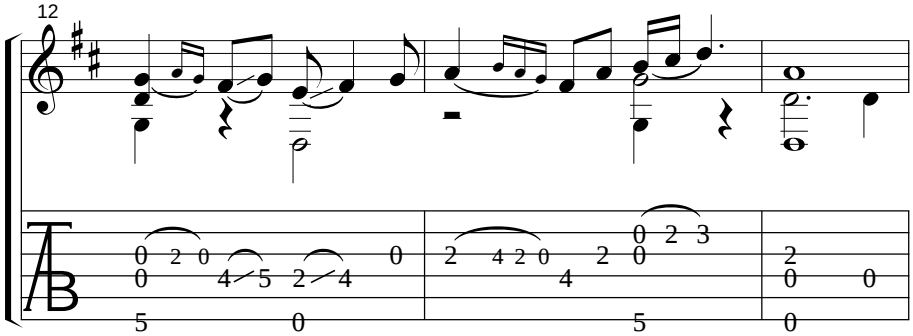
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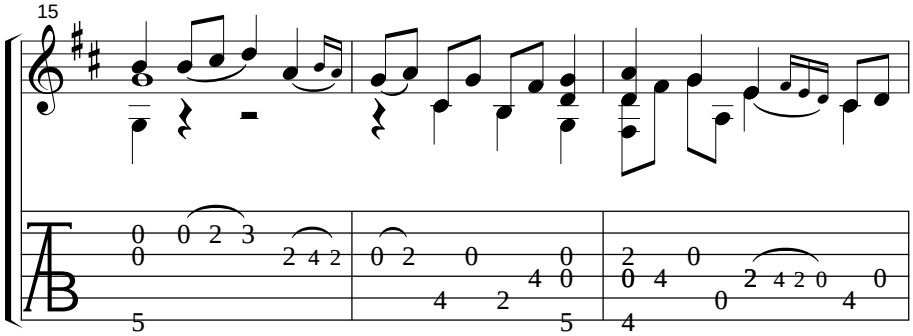
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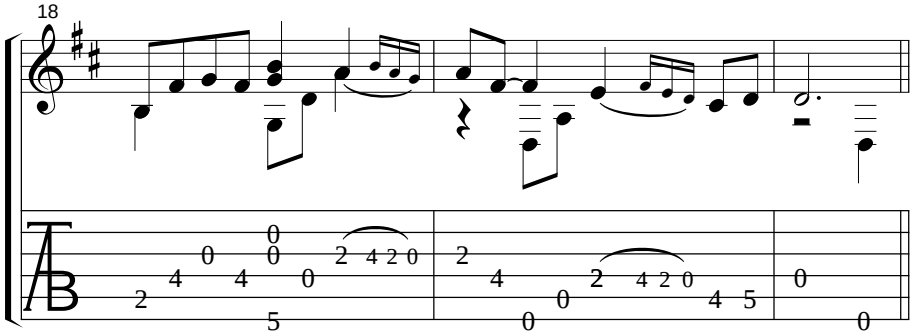
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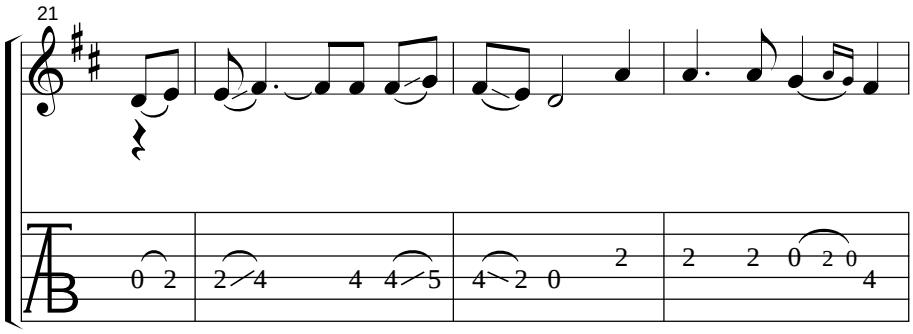
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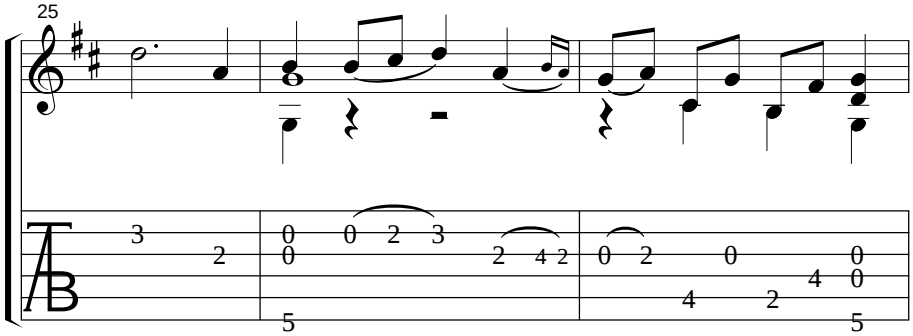
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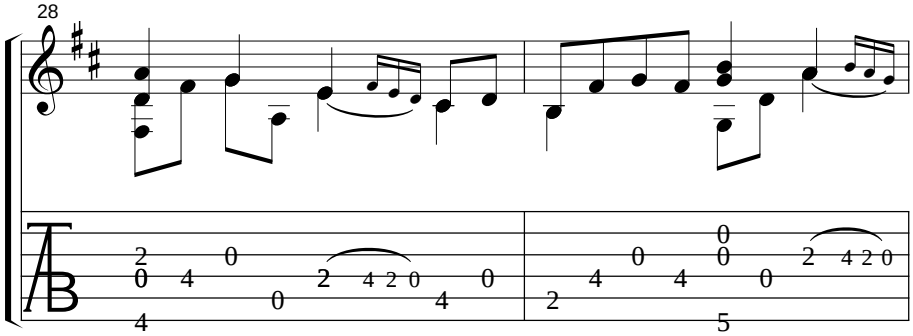
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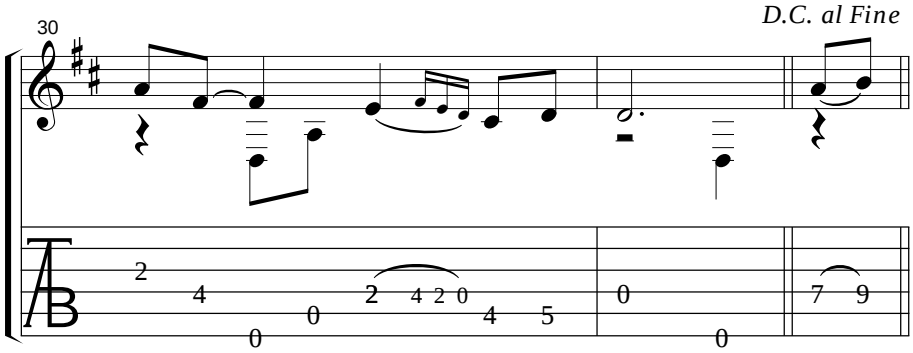
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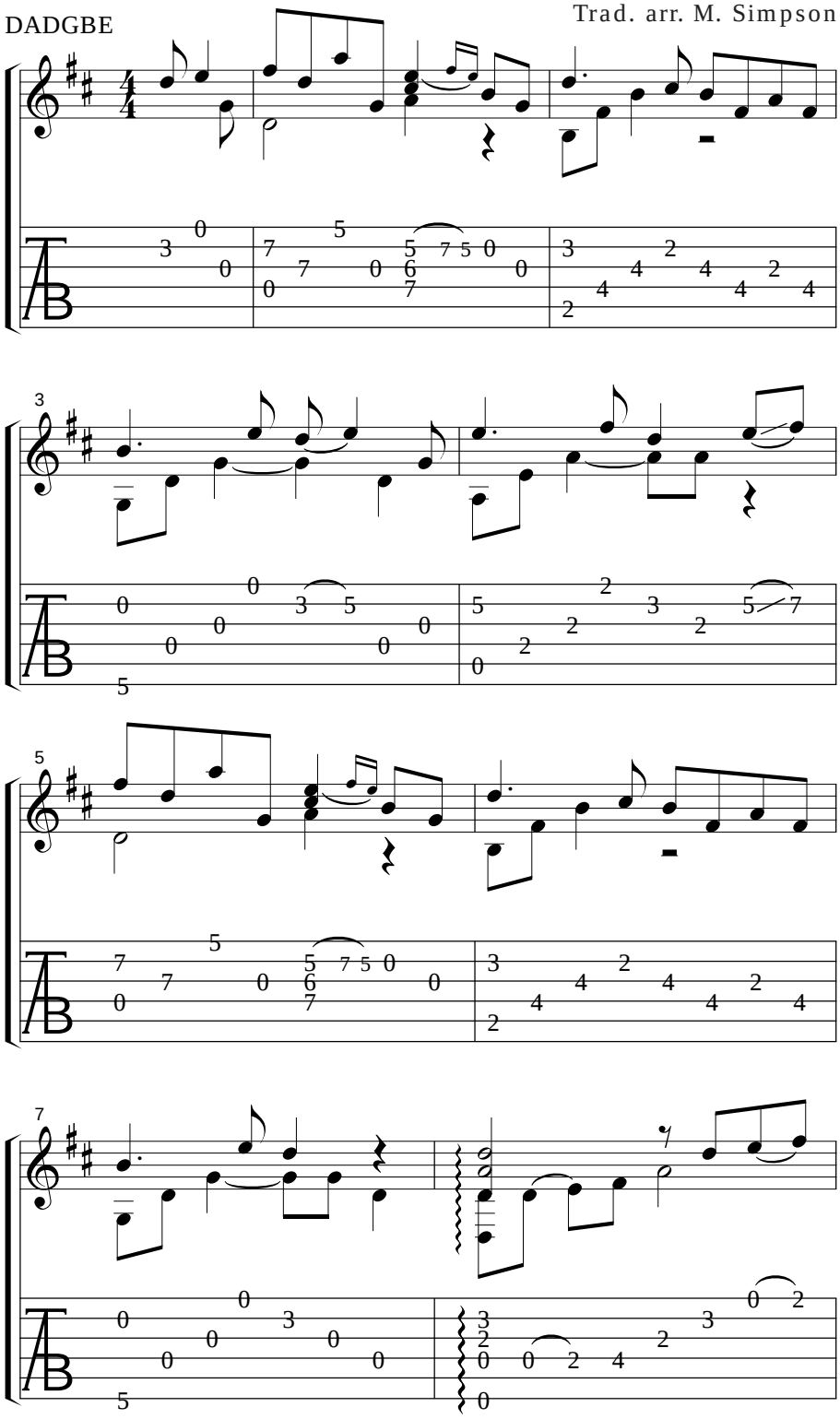
THE SHEARING'S NOT FOR YOU

DADGBE

Trad. arr. M. Simpson



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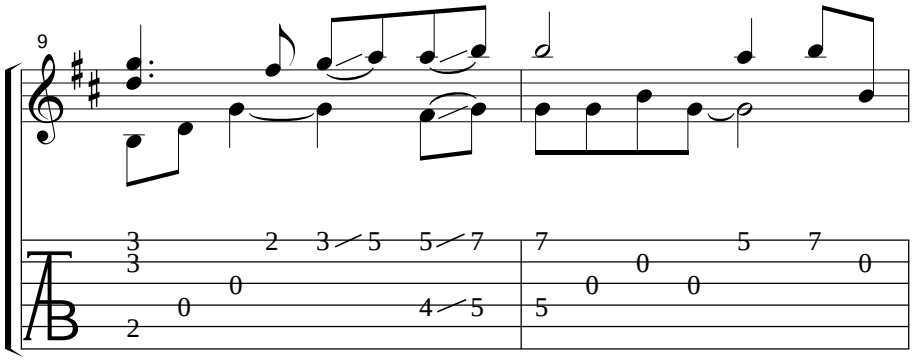
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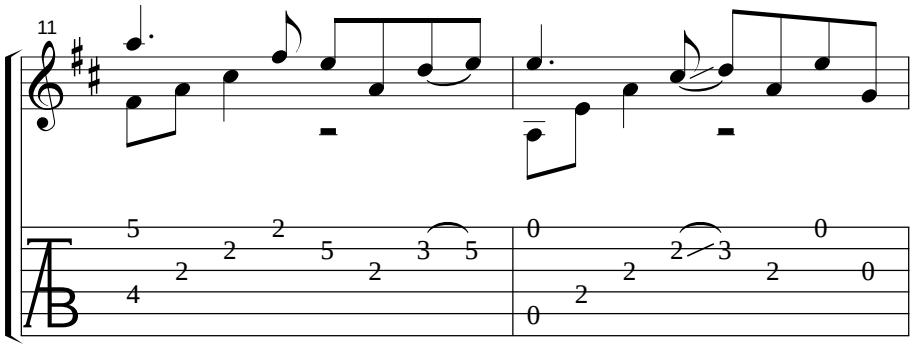
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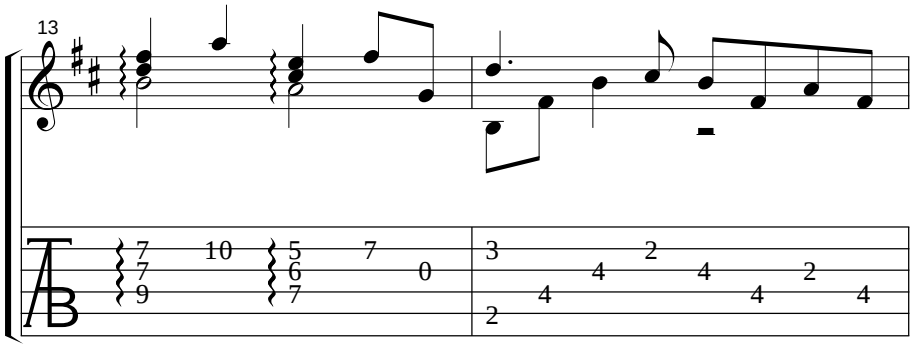
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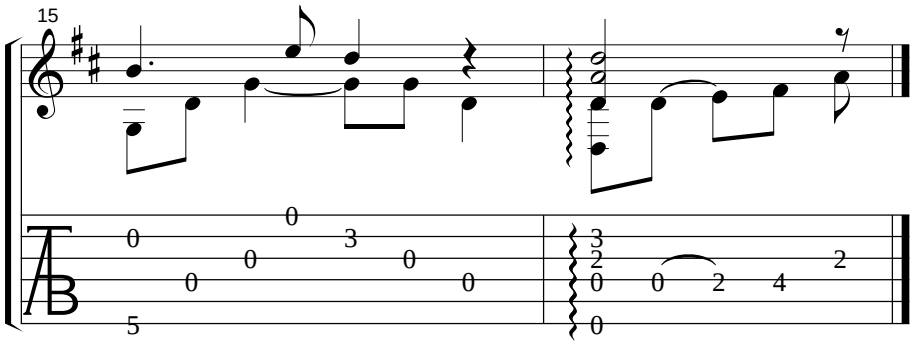
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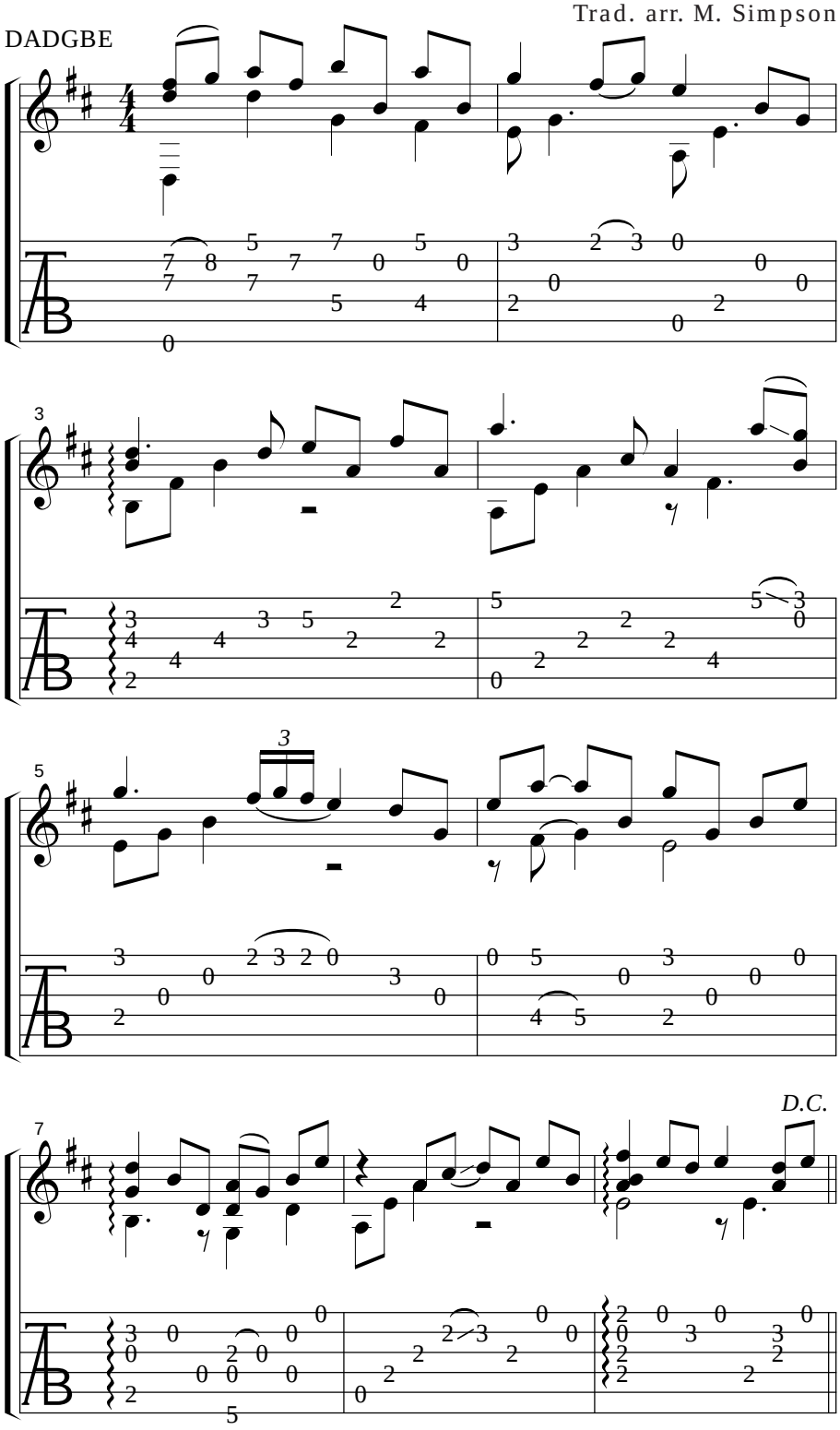
Bogie's Bonny Belle

Trad. arr. M. Simpson



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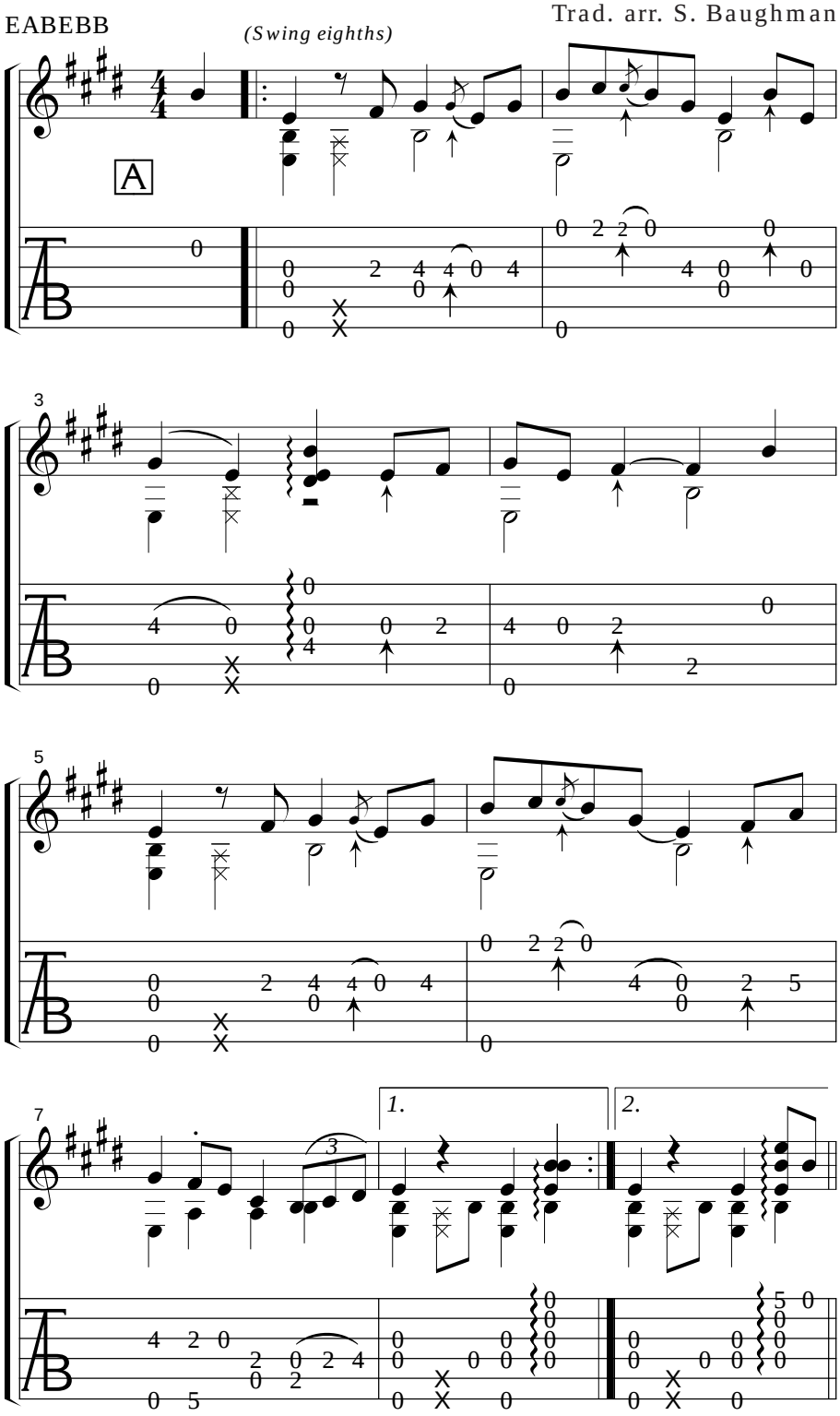
Bill Malley's Barndance

EABEBB

Trad. arr. S. Baughman



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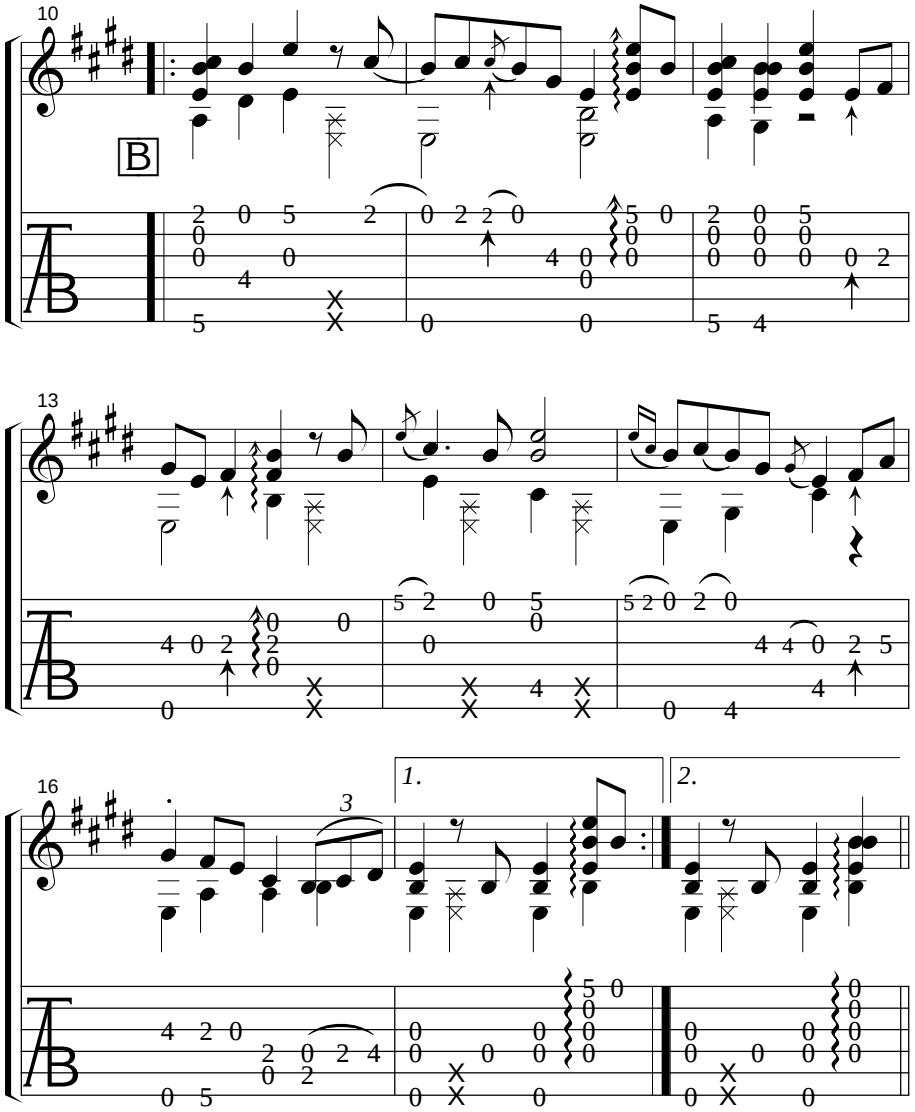
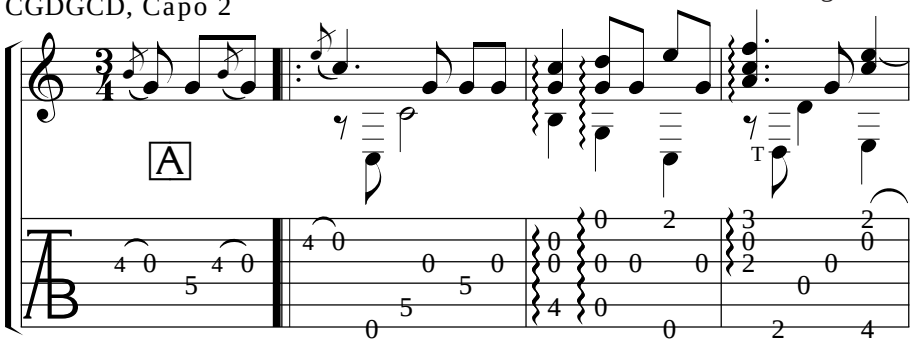


FANNY POWER

O'Carolan, arr. S. Baughman

CGDGCD, Capo 2



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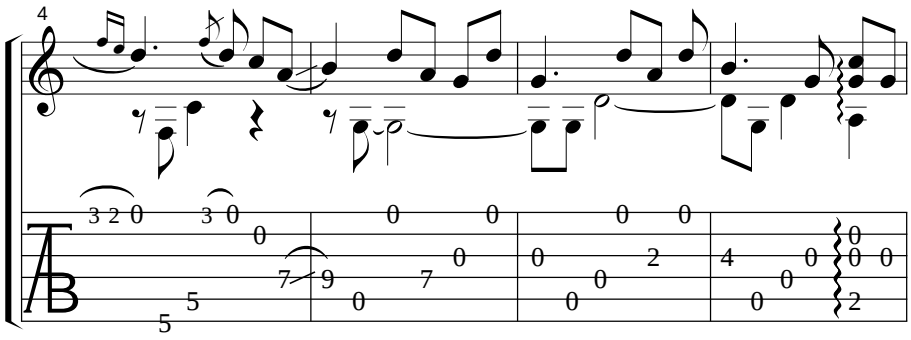
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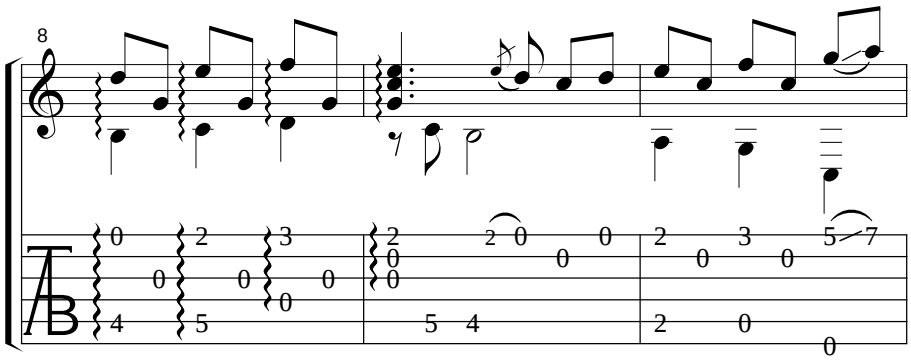
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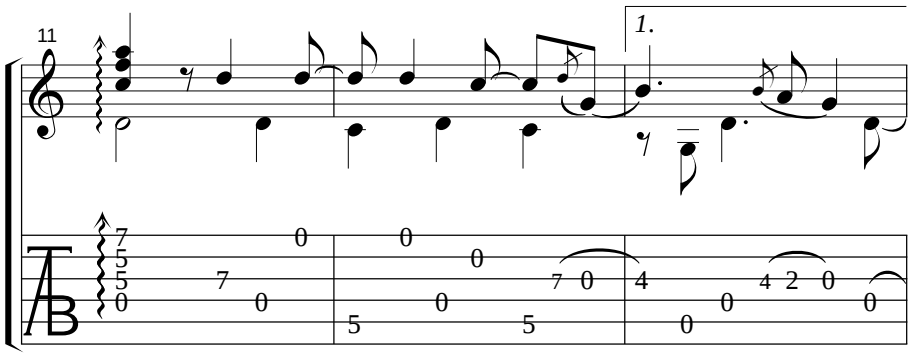
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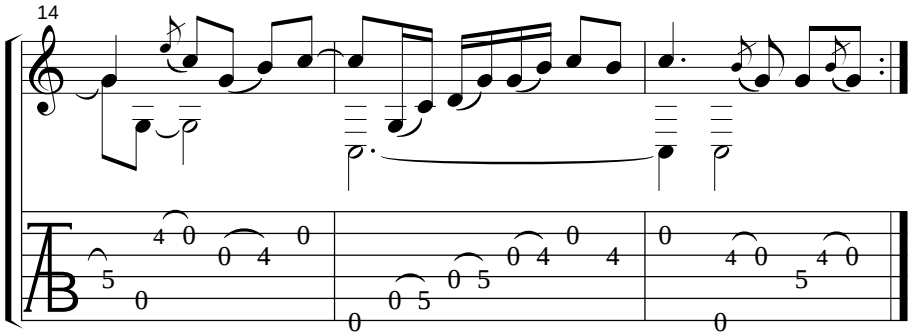
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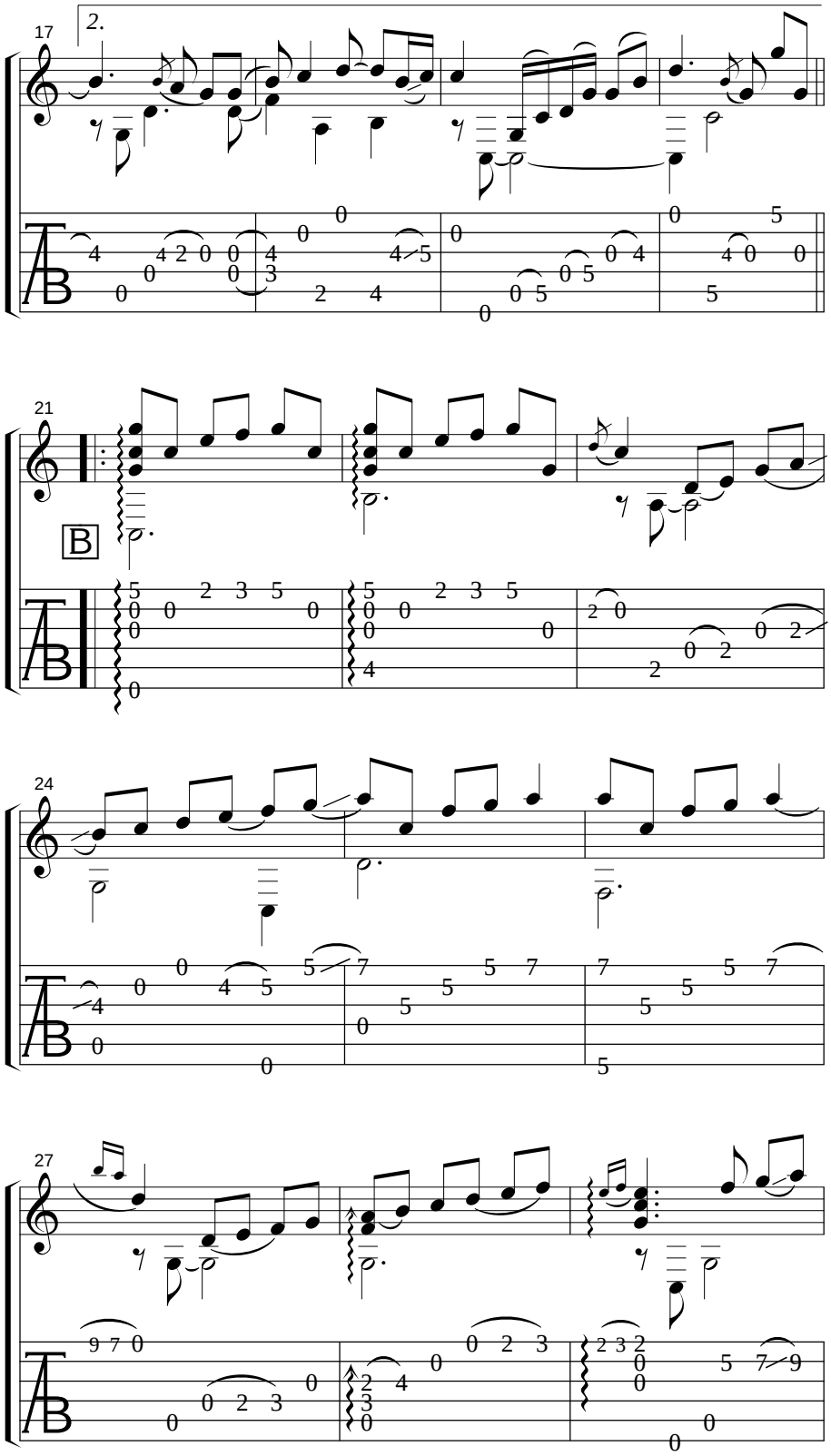
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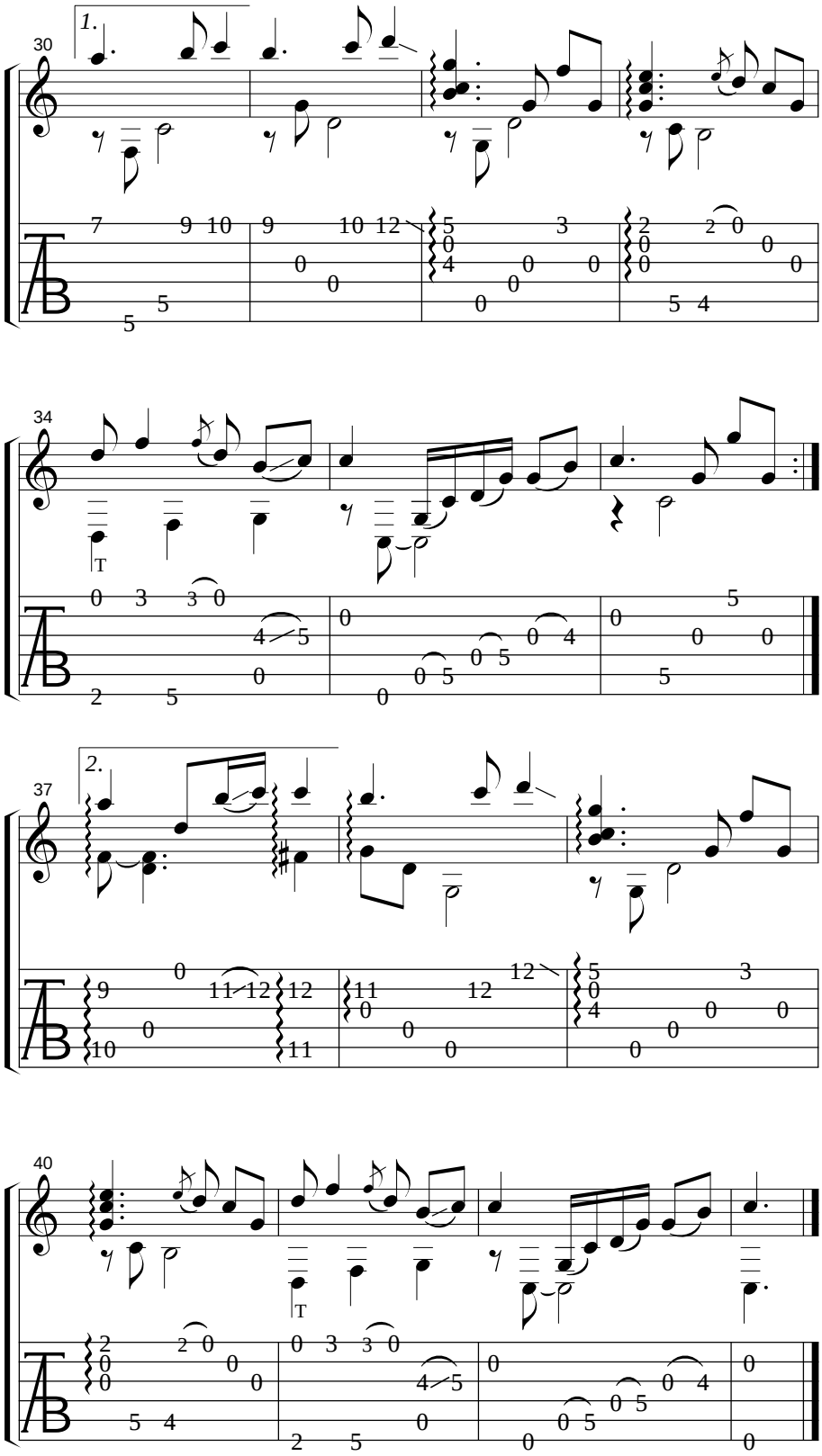
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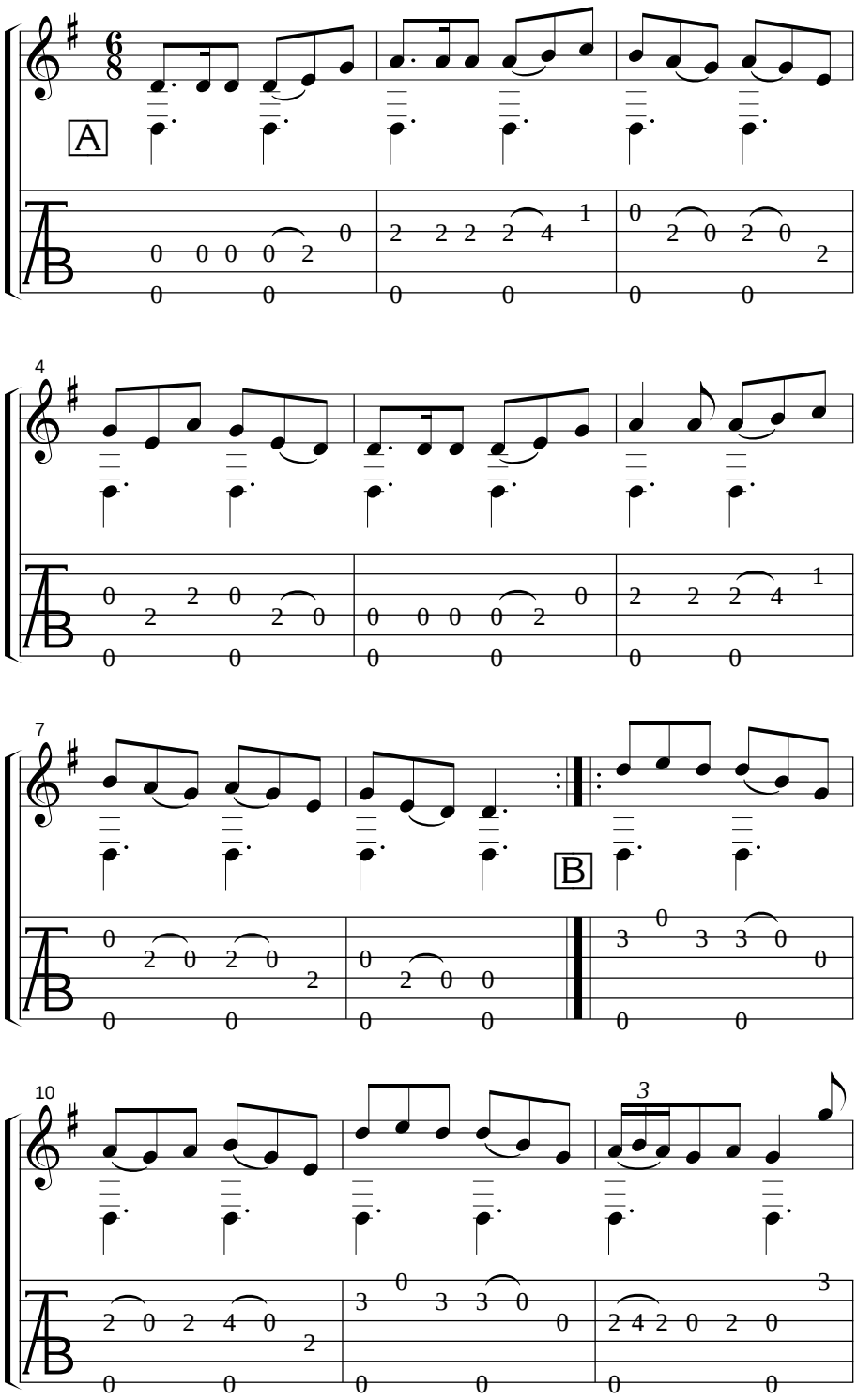
The Blarney Pilgrim

DADGBE

Trad. arr. Duck Baker



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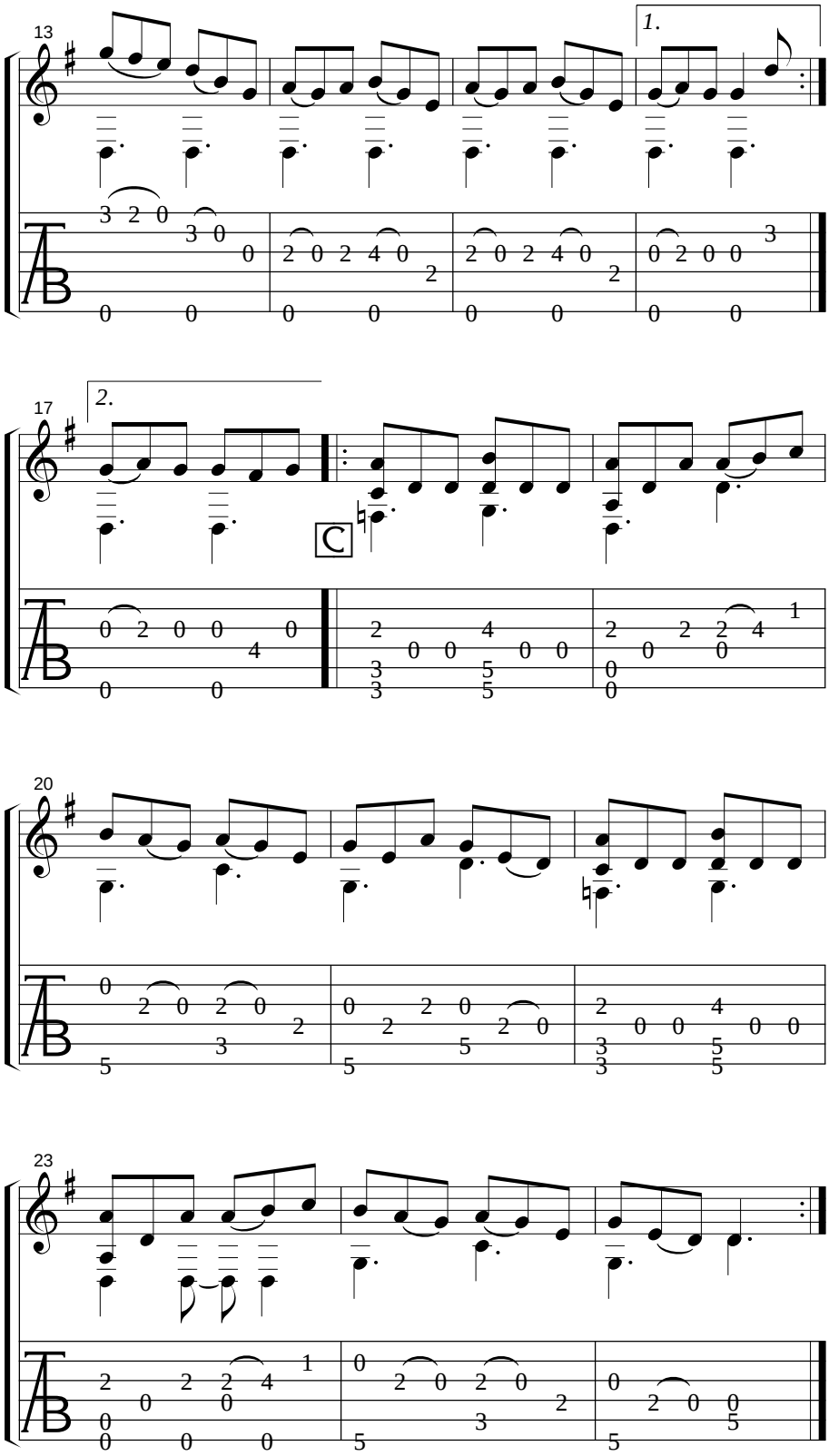
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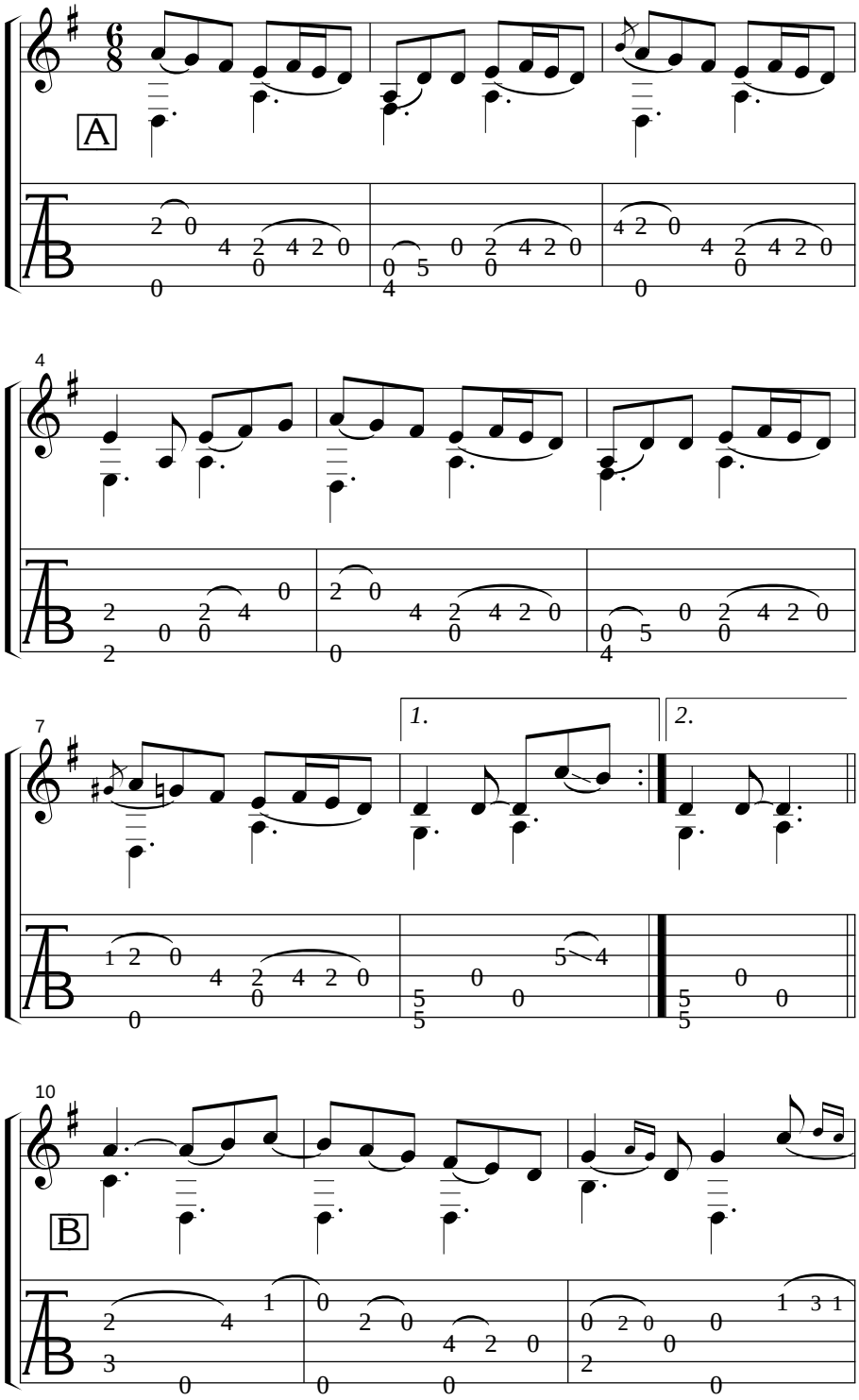
THE RAKES OF WATERLOO

Duck Baker

DADGBE



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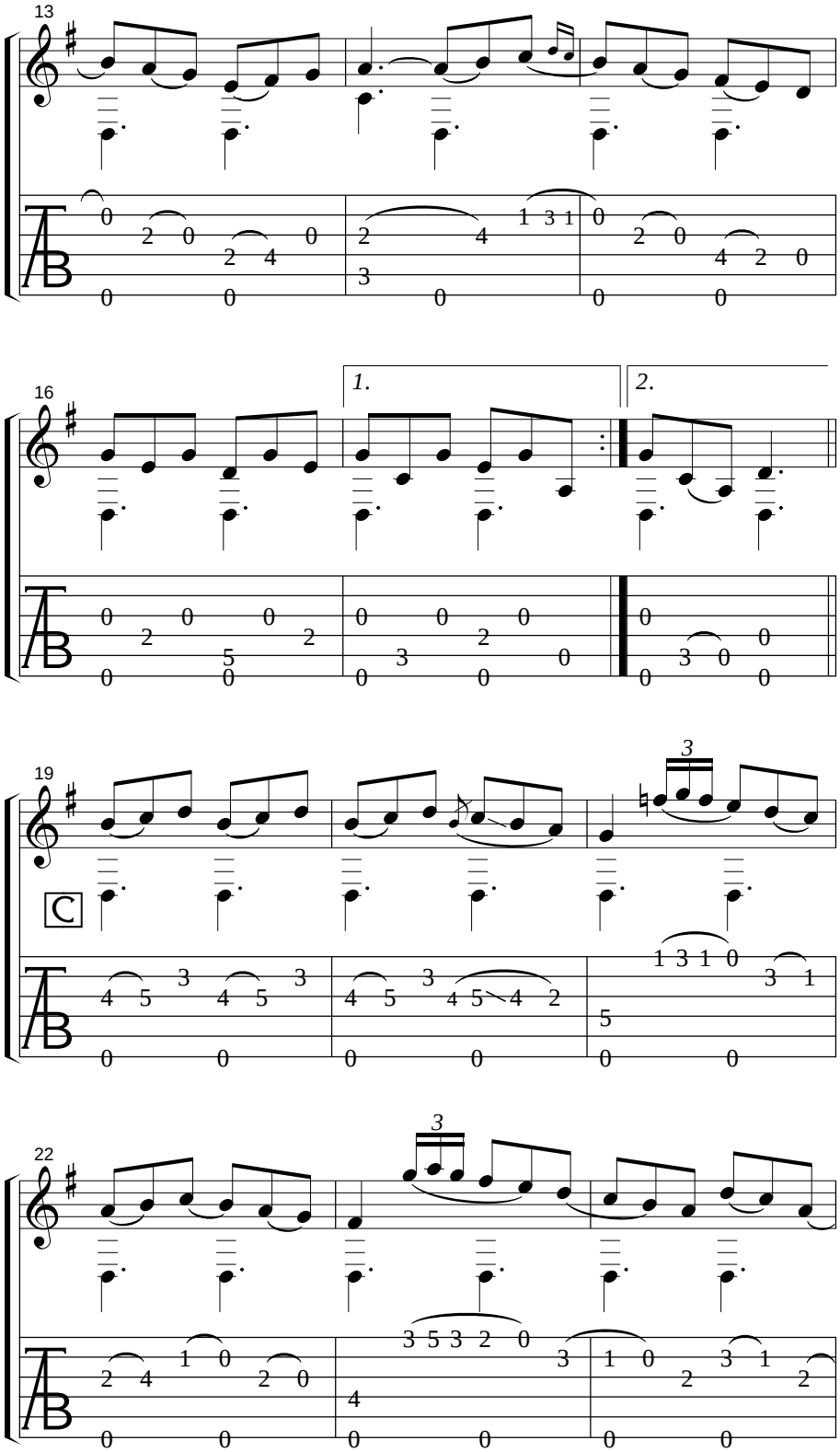
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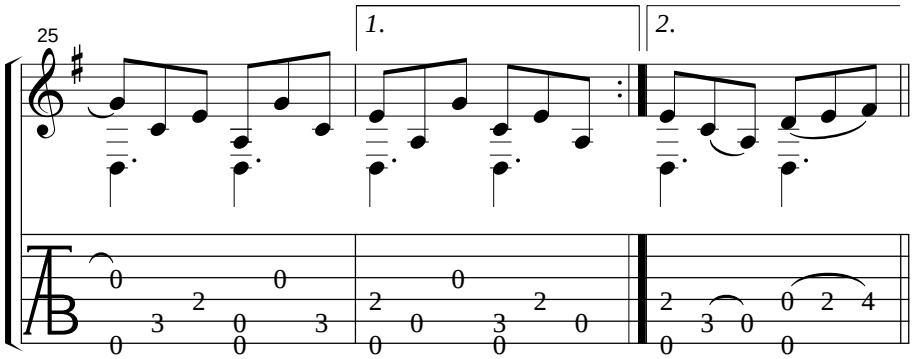
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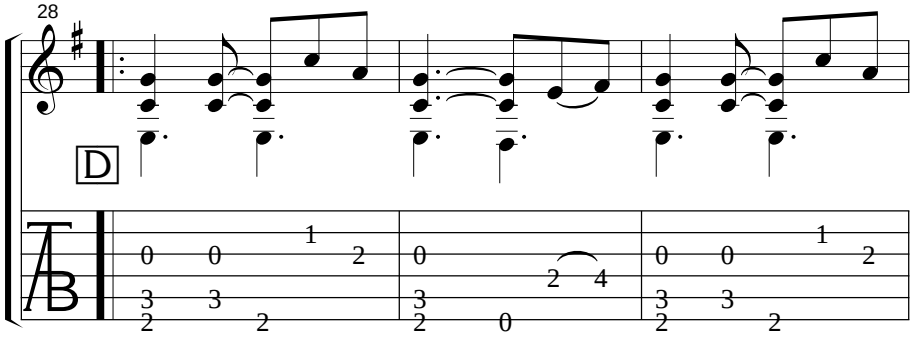
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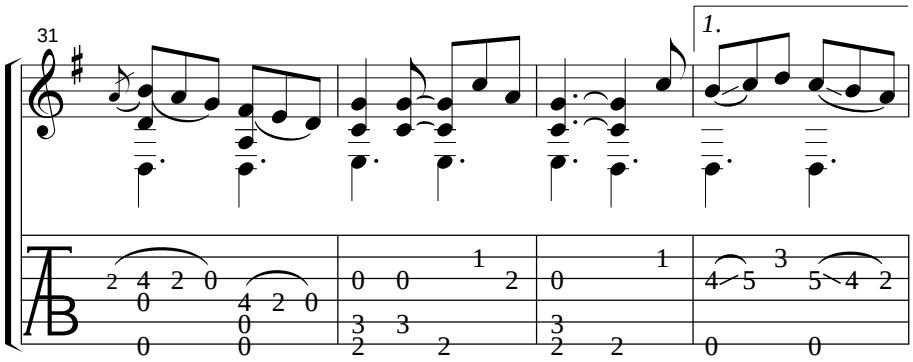
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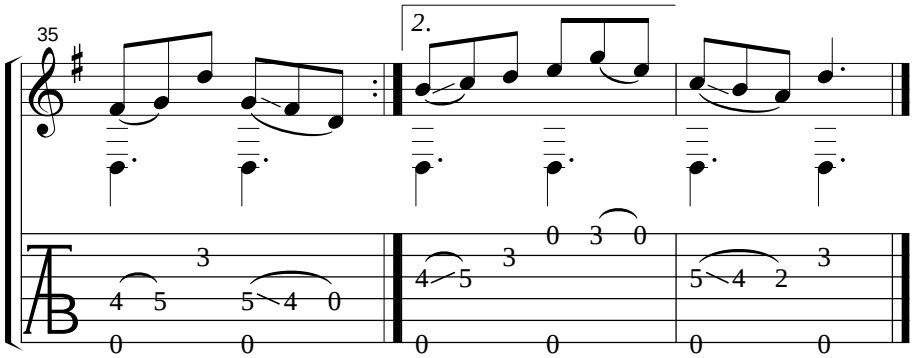
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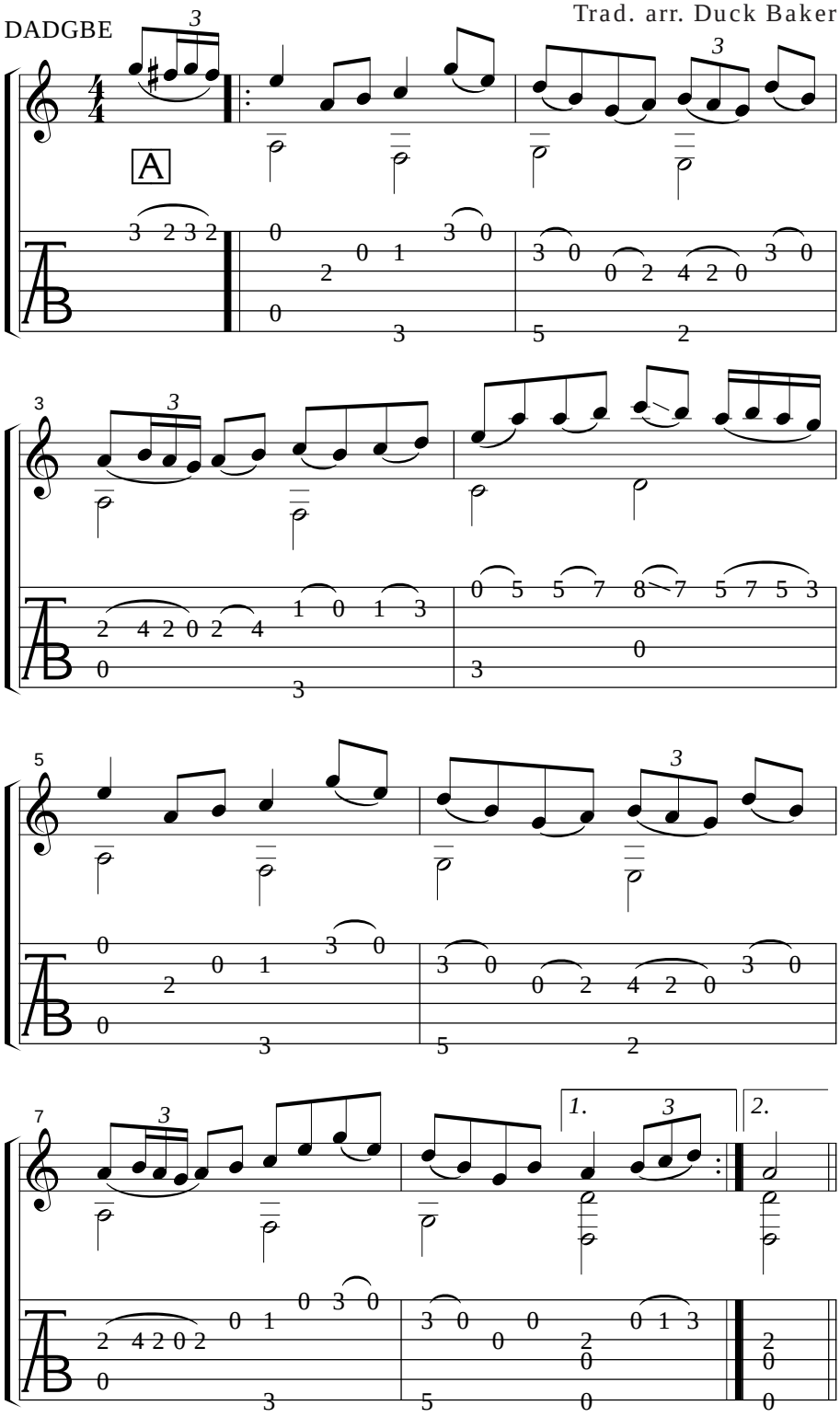
Sergeant Early's Dream

Trad. arr. Duck Baker



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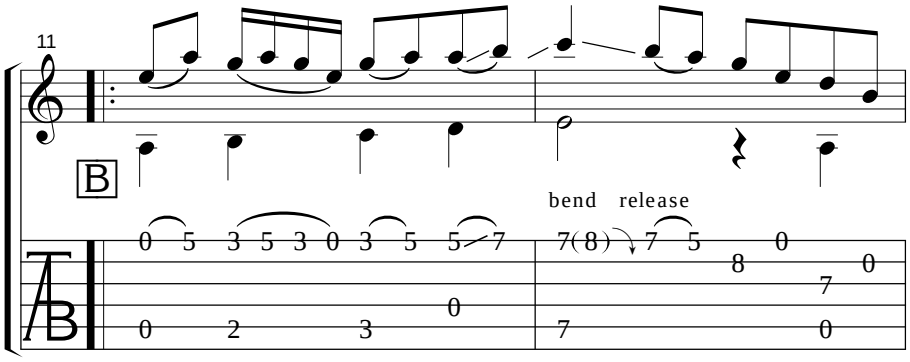
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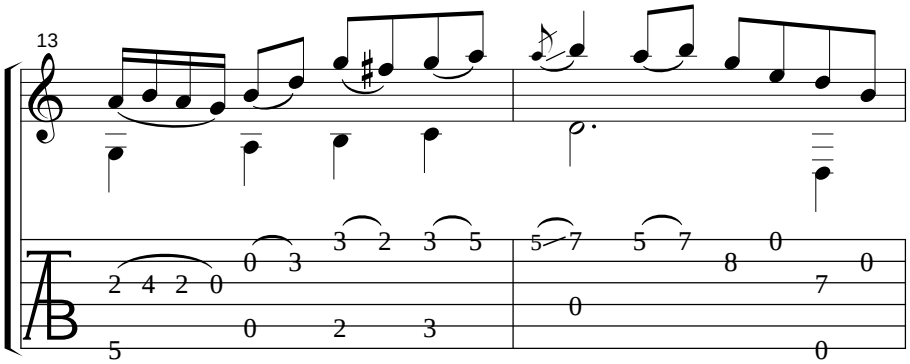
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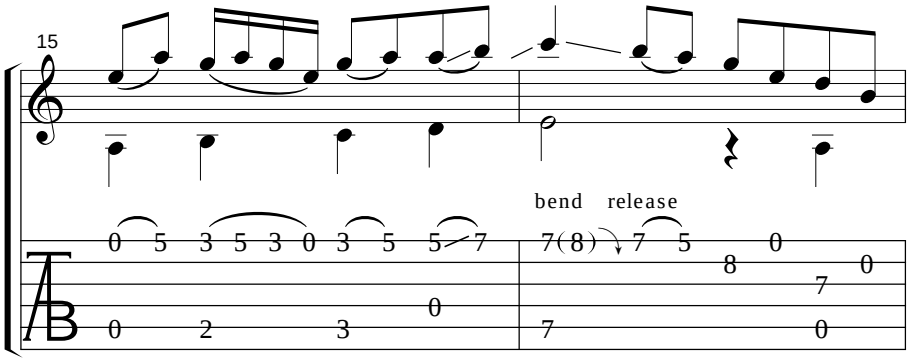
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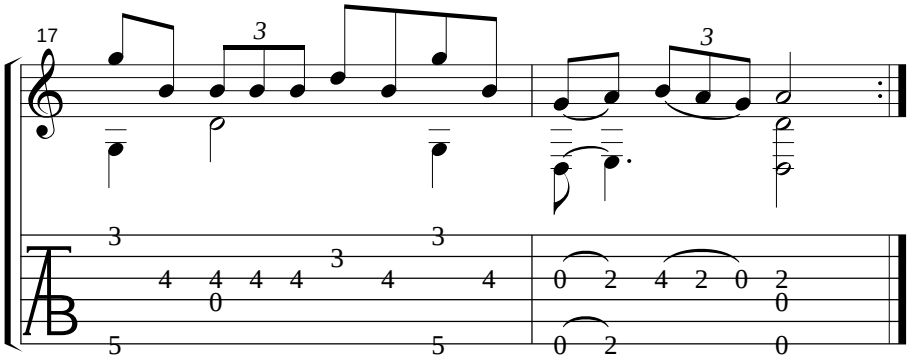
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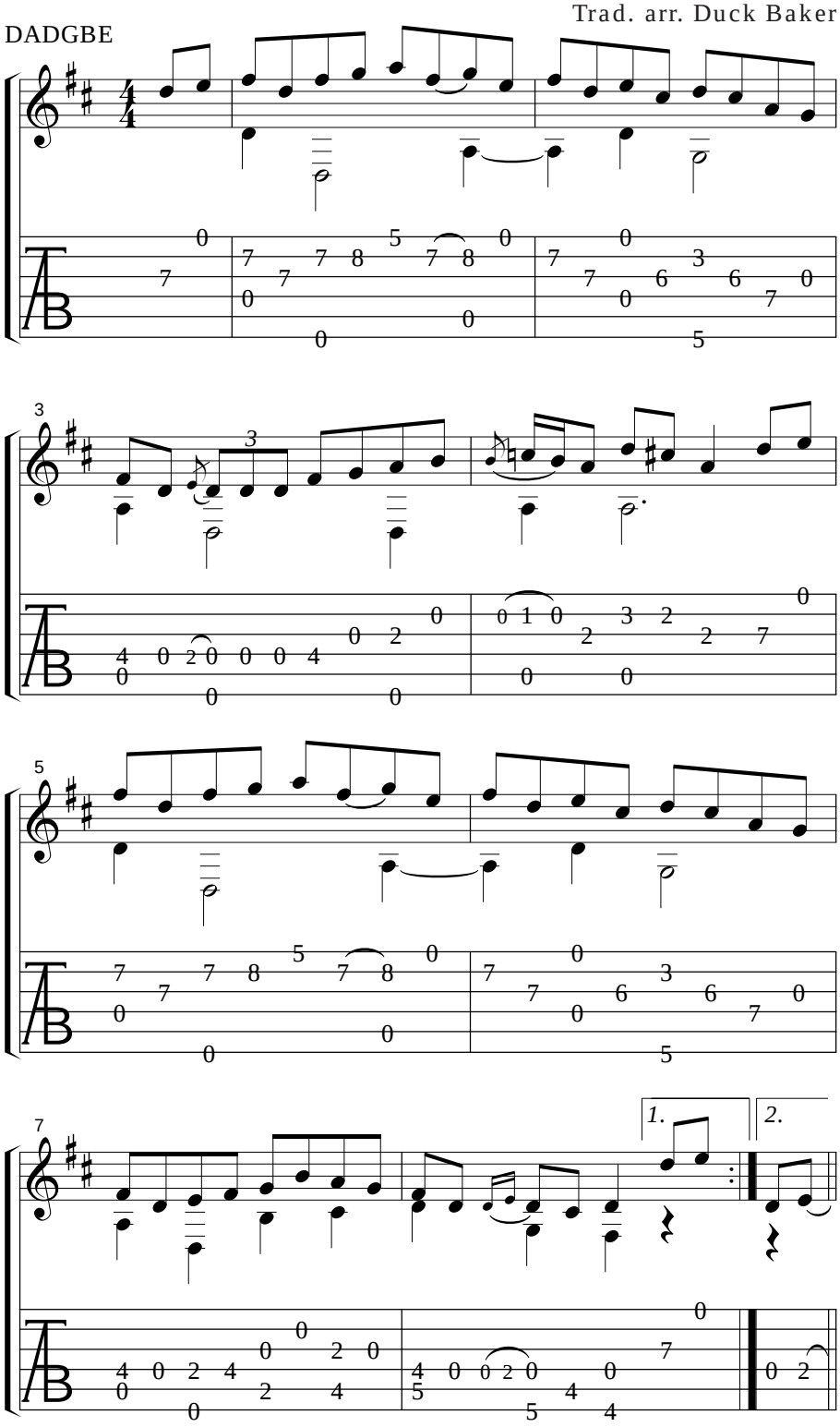
CHIEF O'NEILL'S FAVORITE

Trad. arr. Duck Baker

DADGBE



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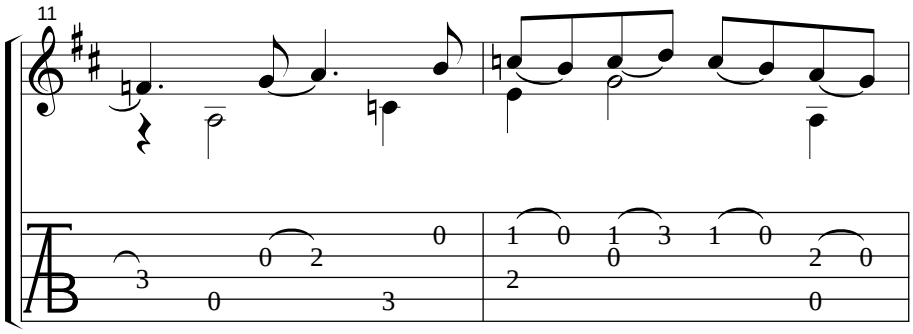
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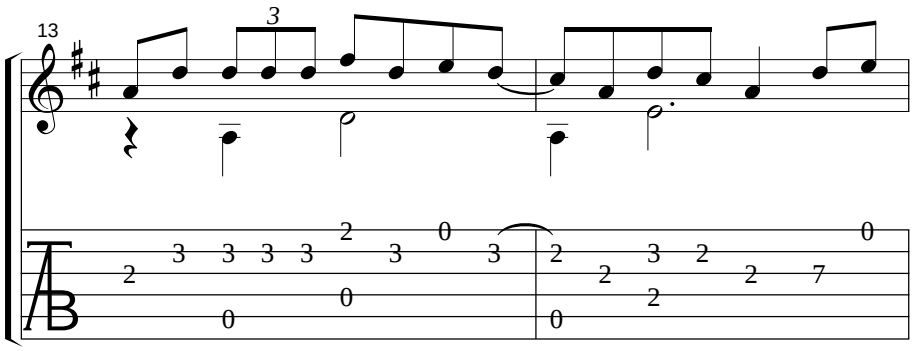
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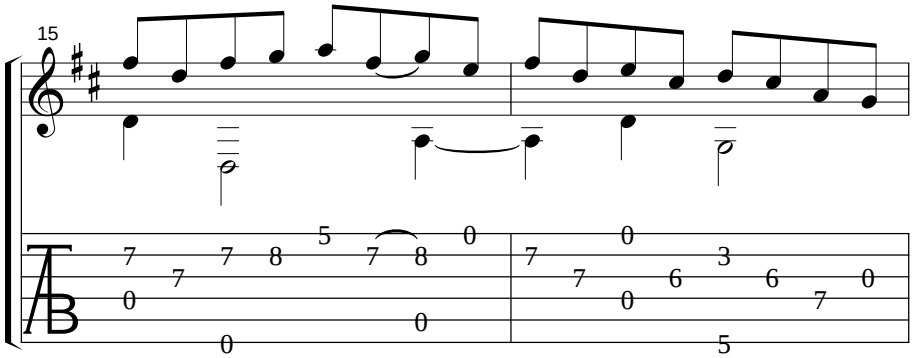
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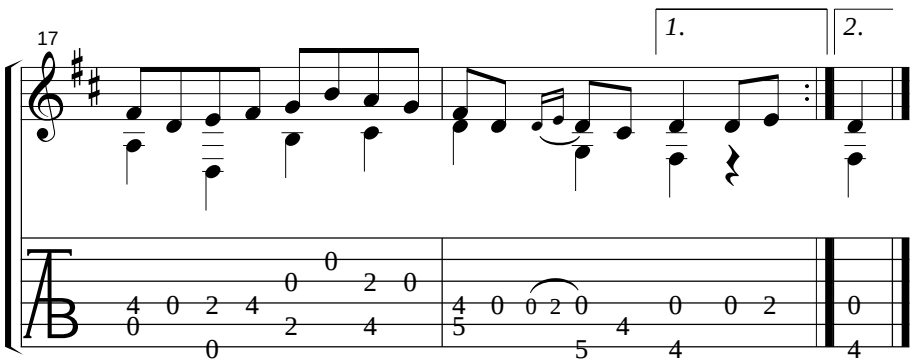
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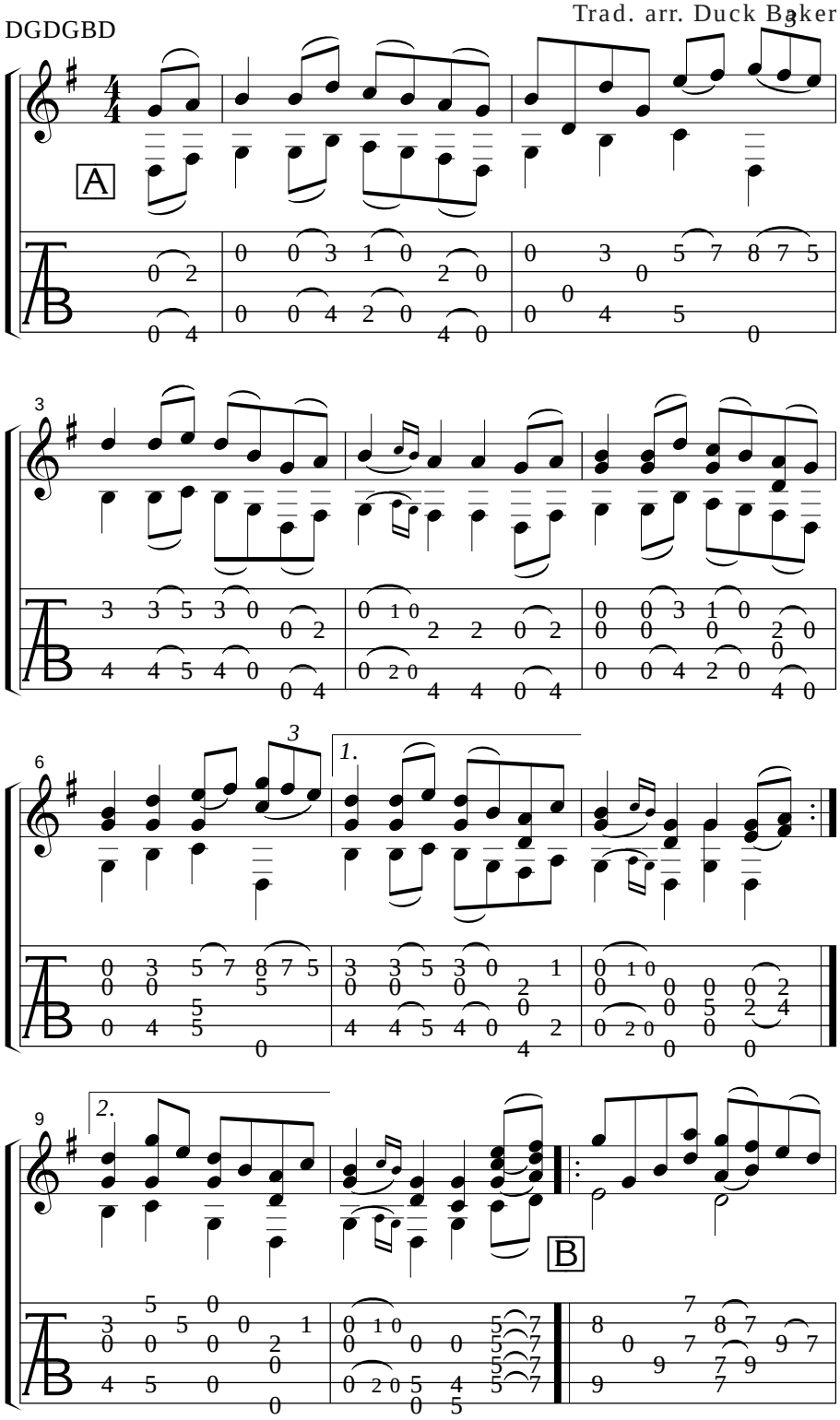
MISS FORBES FAREWELL

Trad. arr. Duck Baker

DGDGBD



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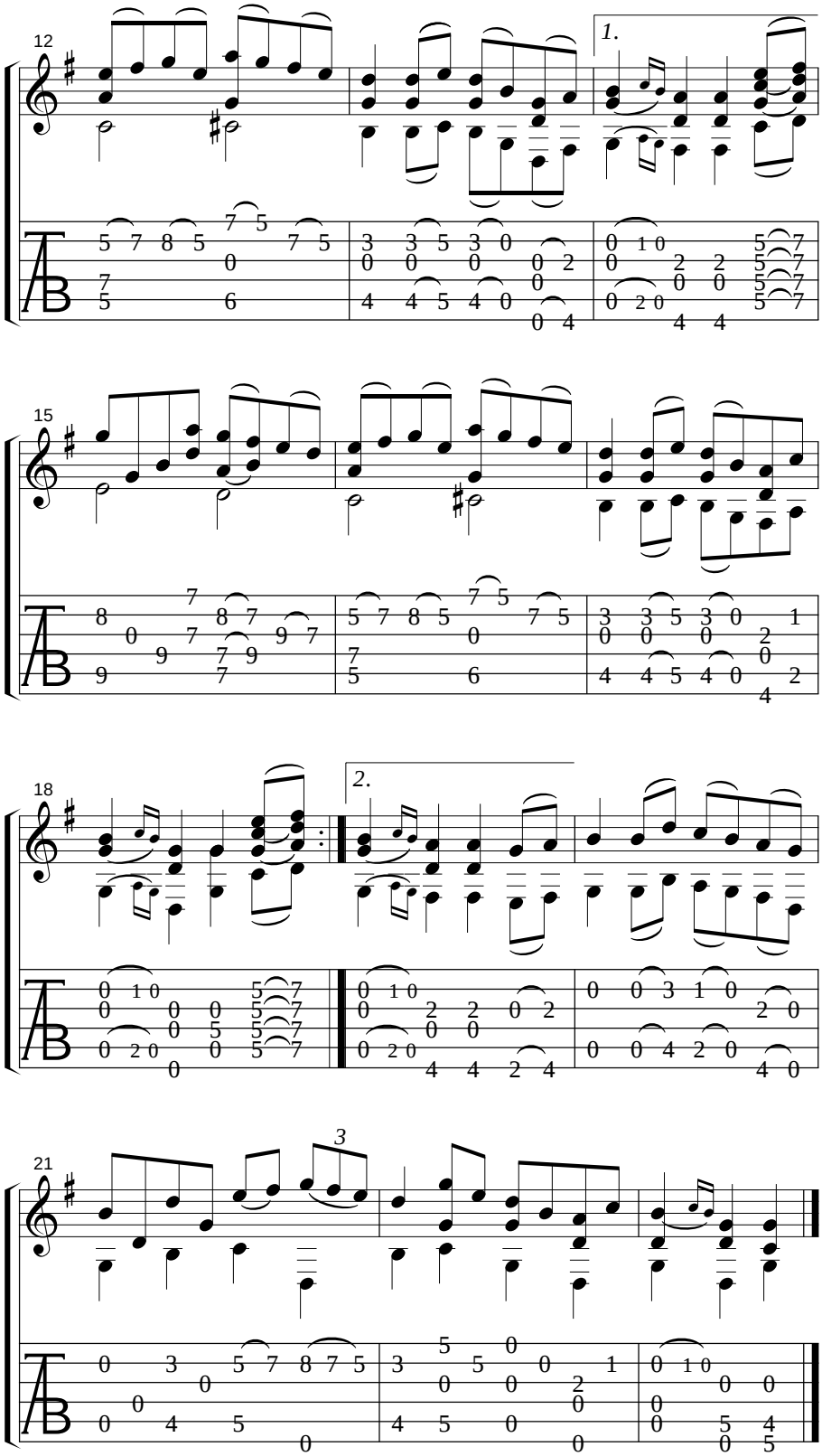
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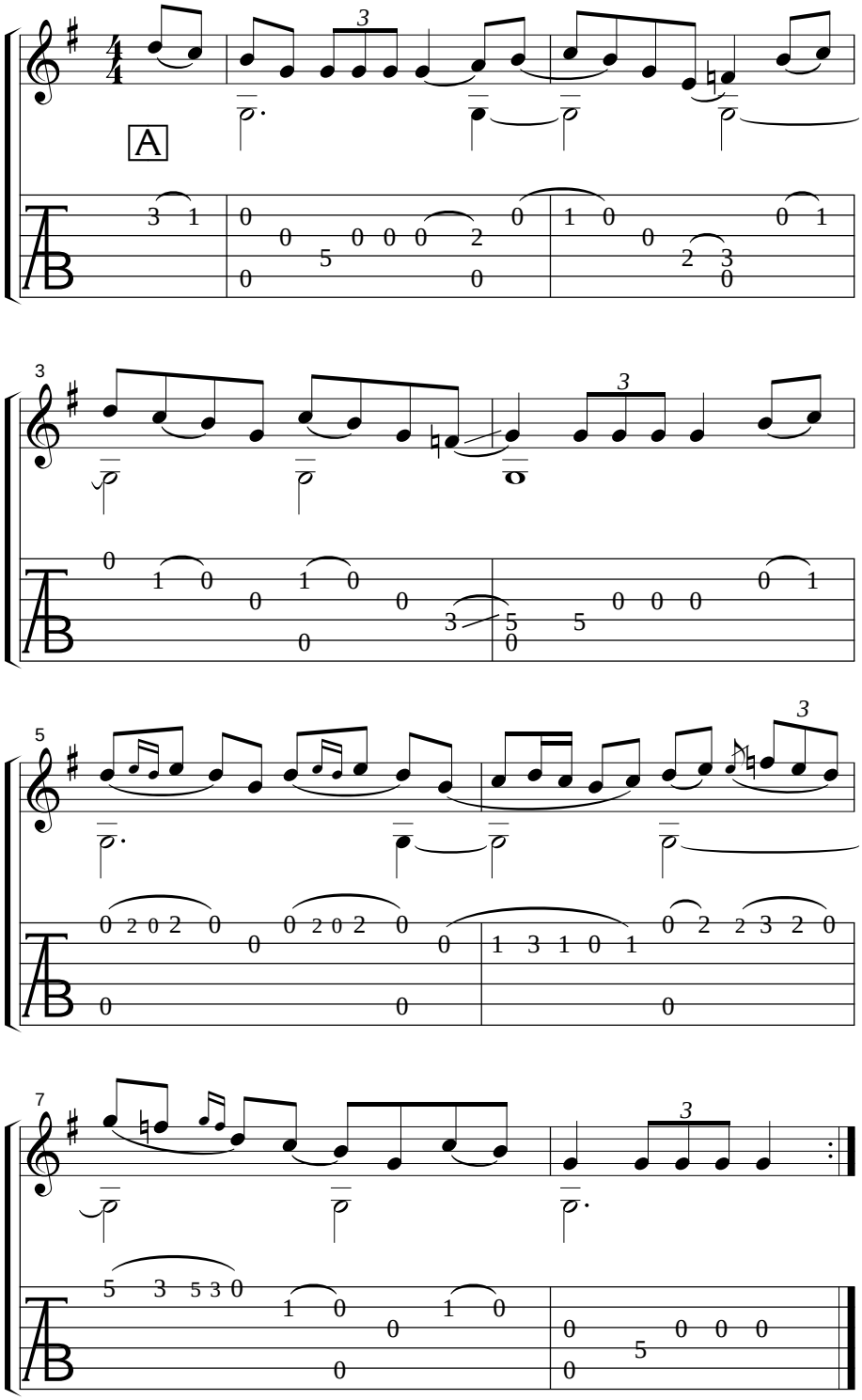
POLL HALFPENNY

Trad. arr. Duck Baker

DGDGBD



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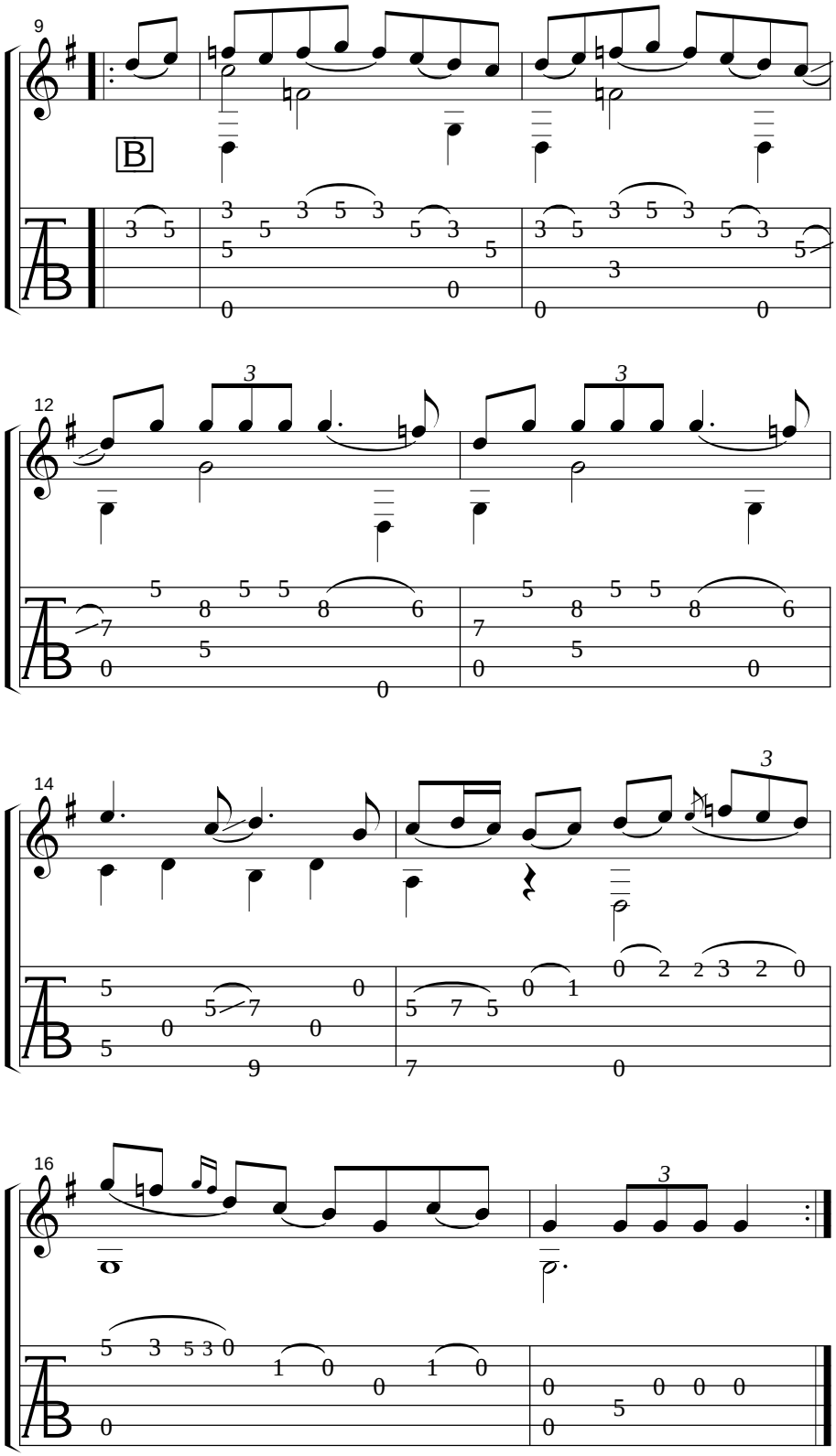
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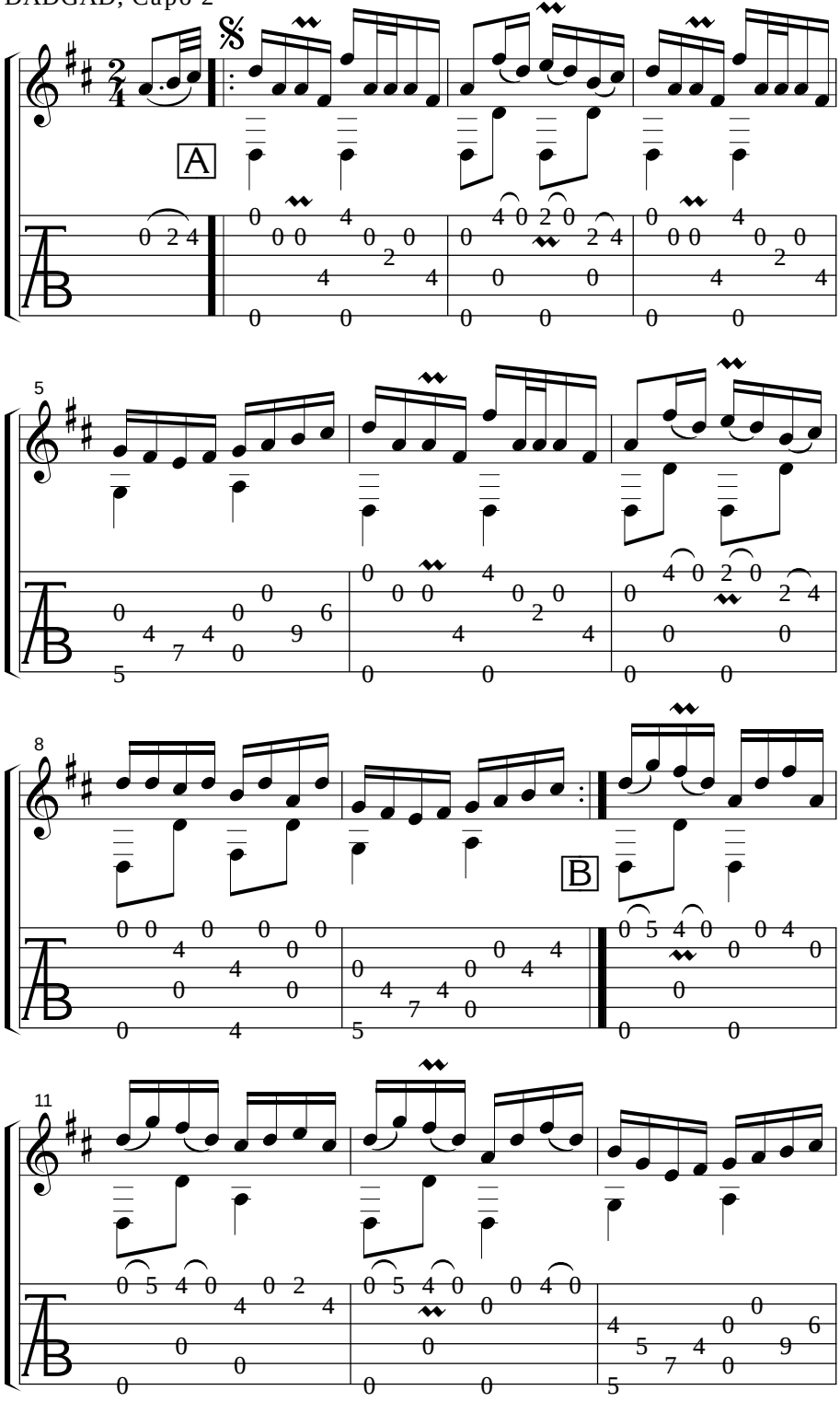
THE PURE DROP

DADGAD, Capo 2

Trad. arr. P. Bensusan



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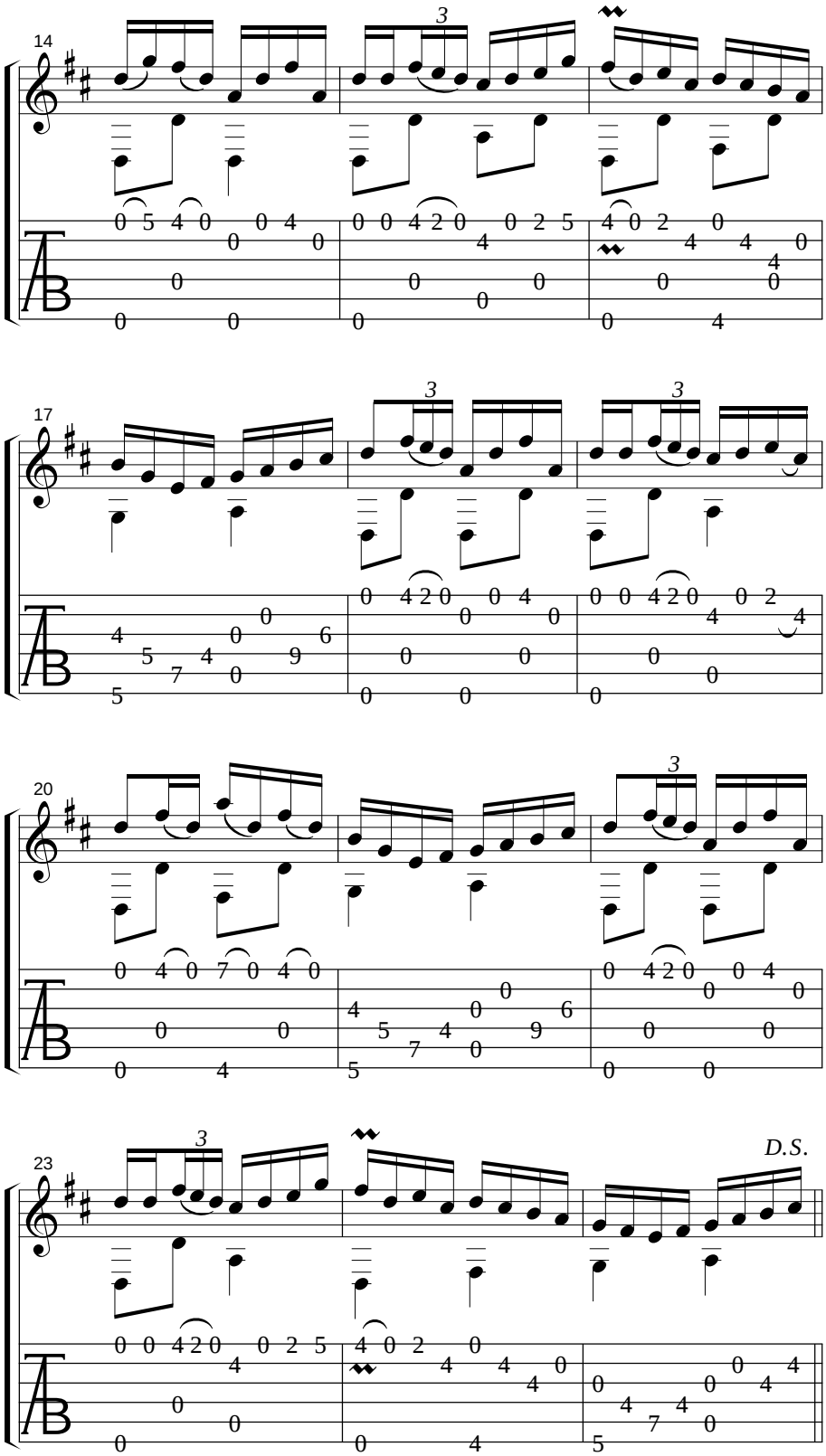
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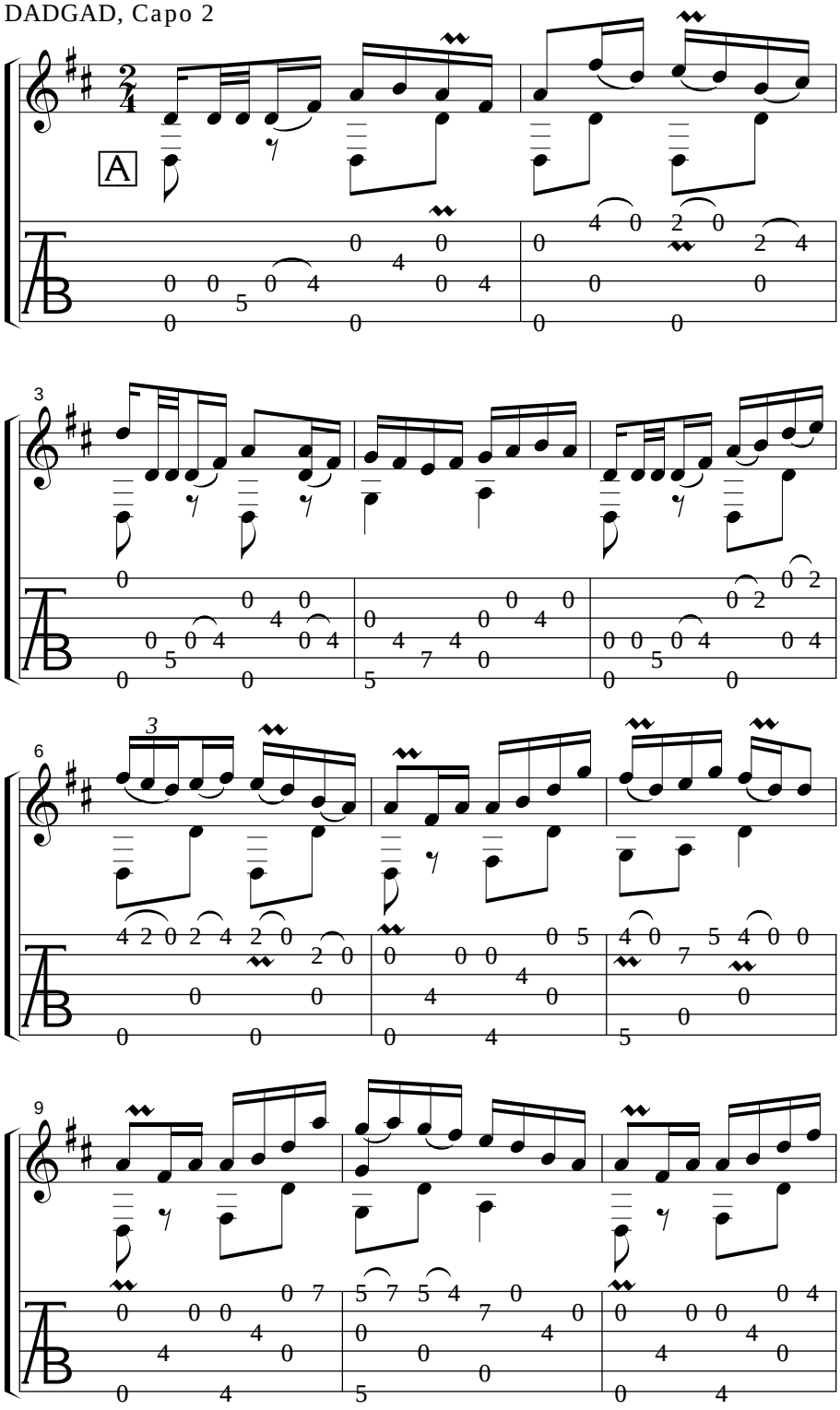
D.S.

THE FLAX IN BLOOM

Trad. arr. P. Bensusan

DADGAD, Capo 2



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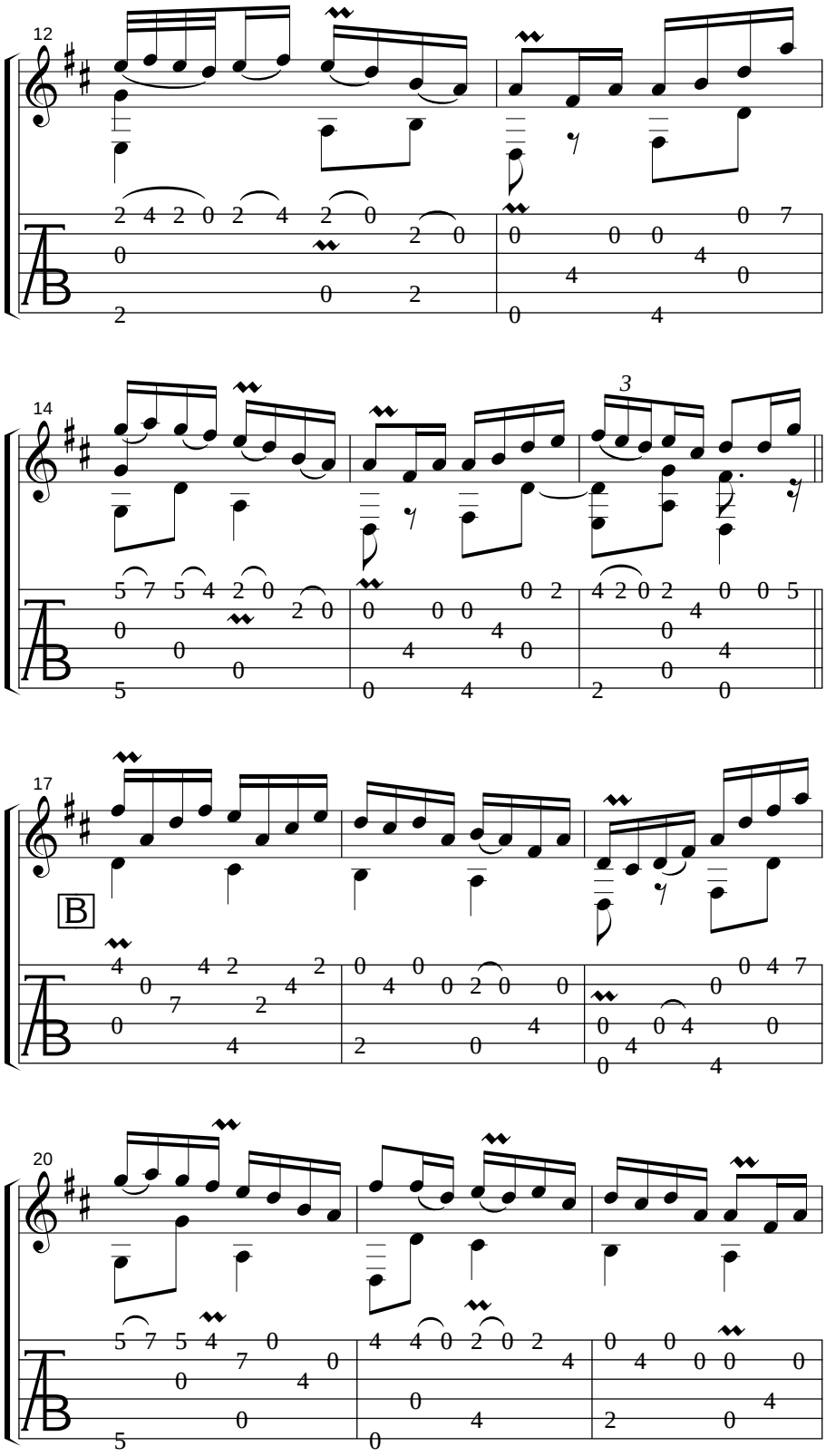
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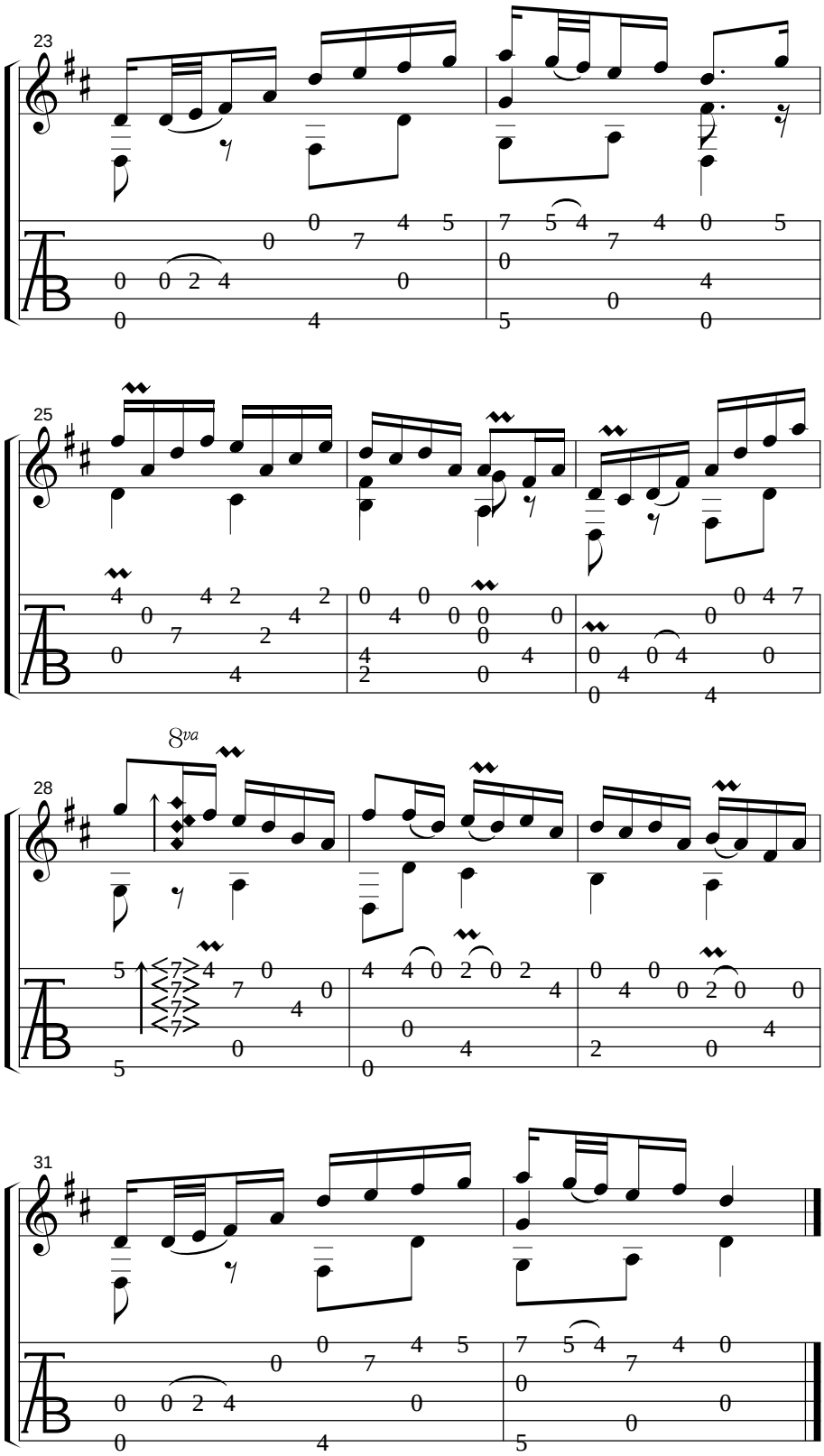
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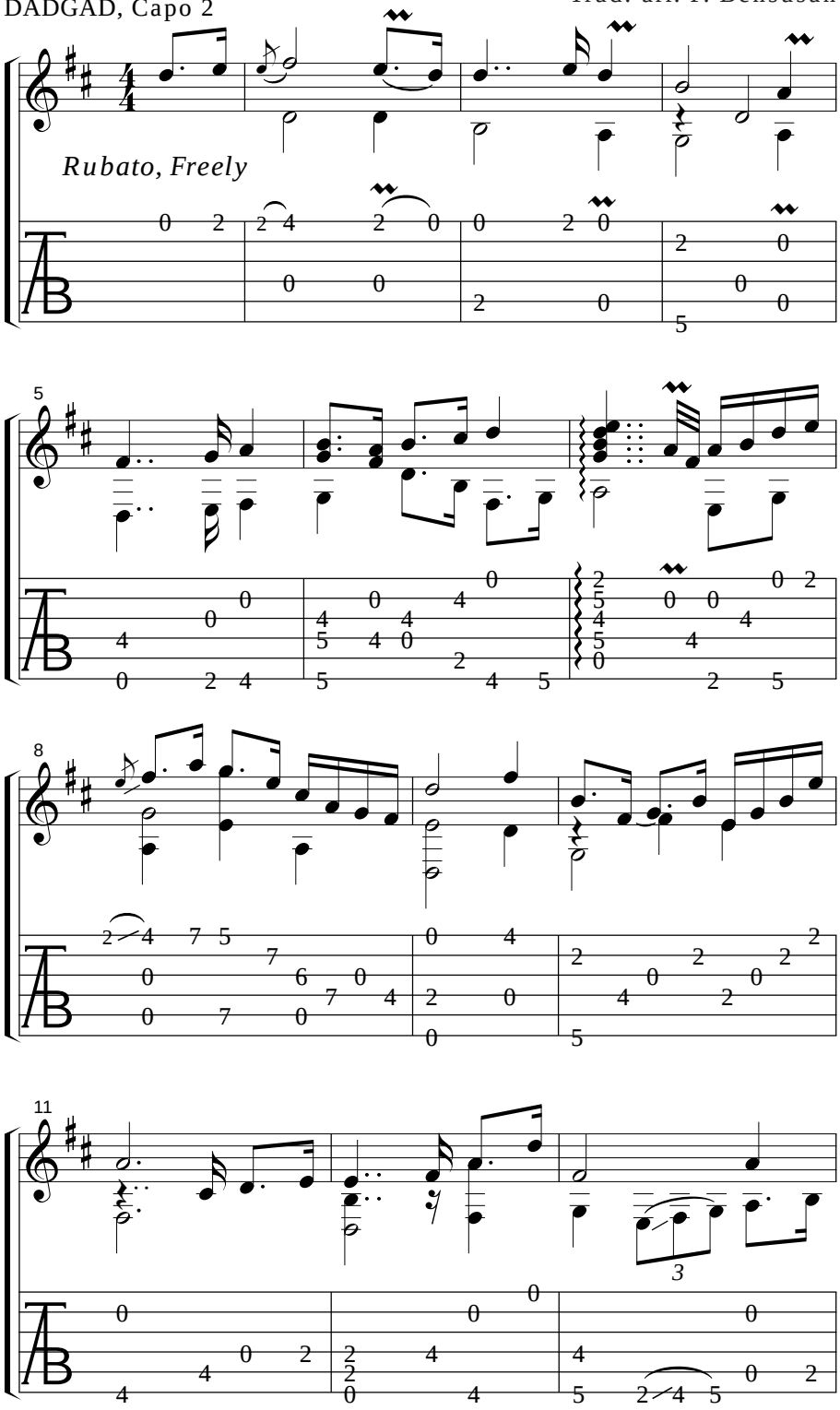
SHEEBEG AN SHEEMOR

DADGAD, Capo 2

Trad. arr. P. Bensusan



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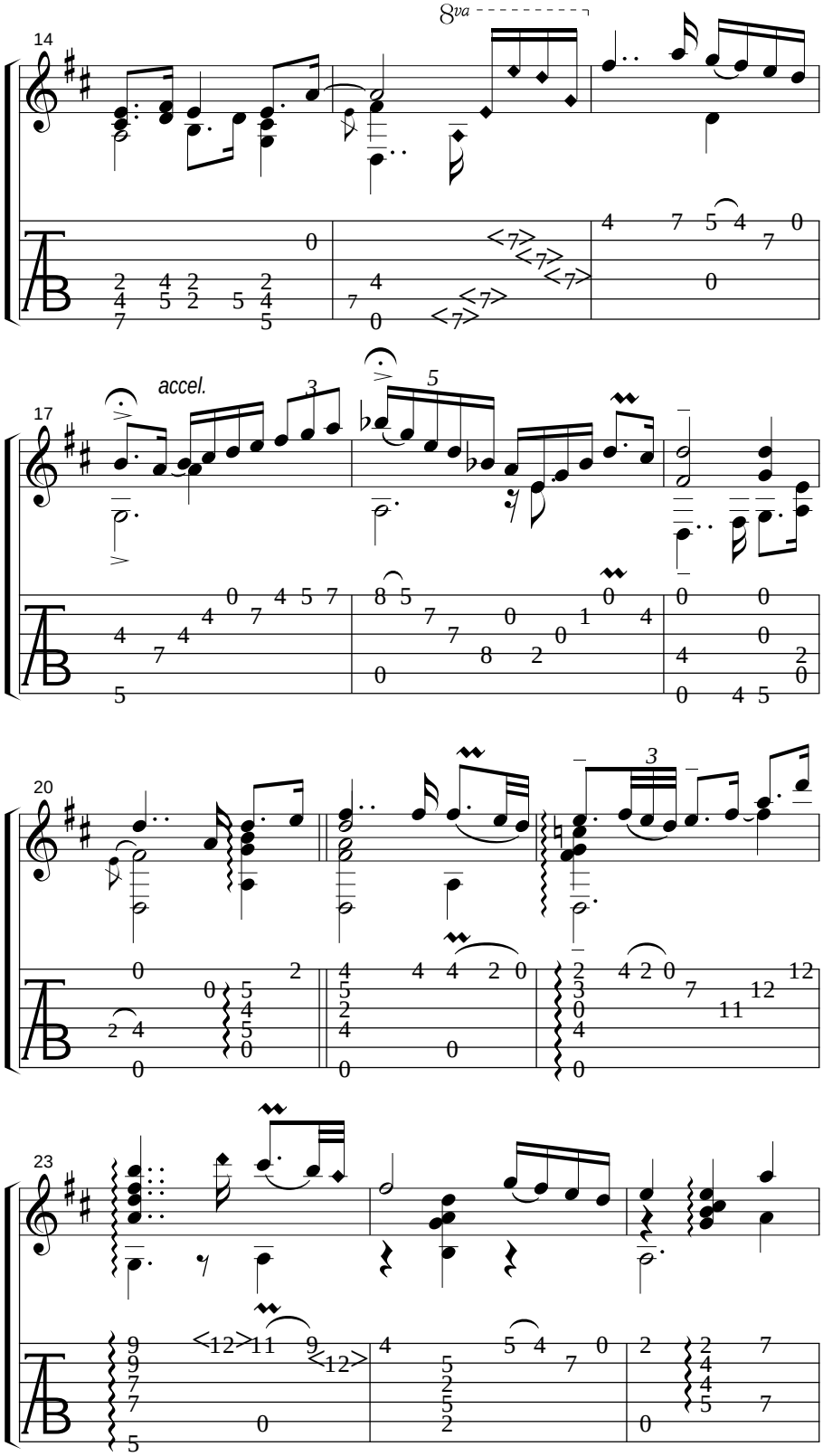
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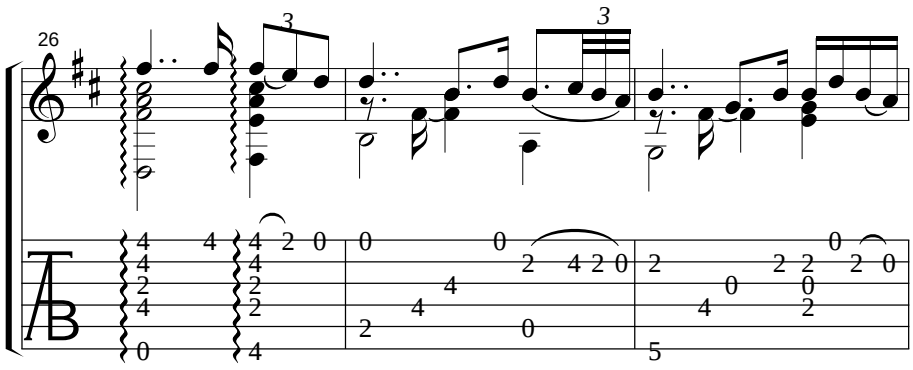
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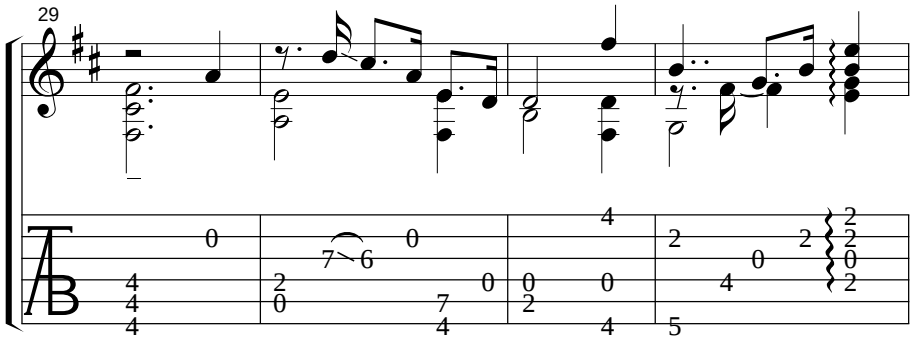
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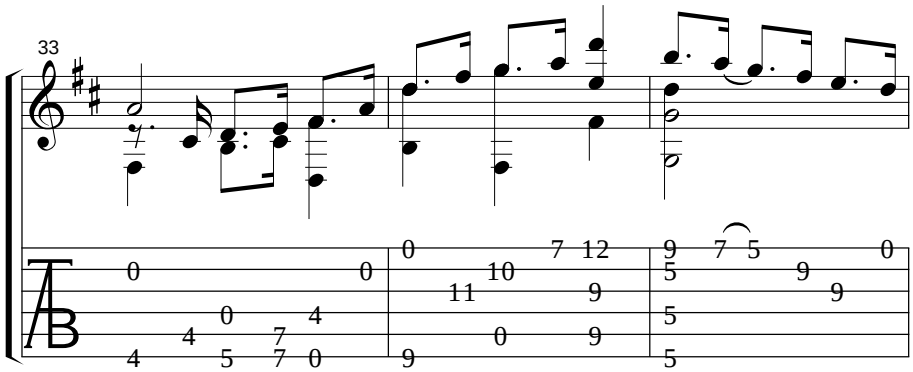
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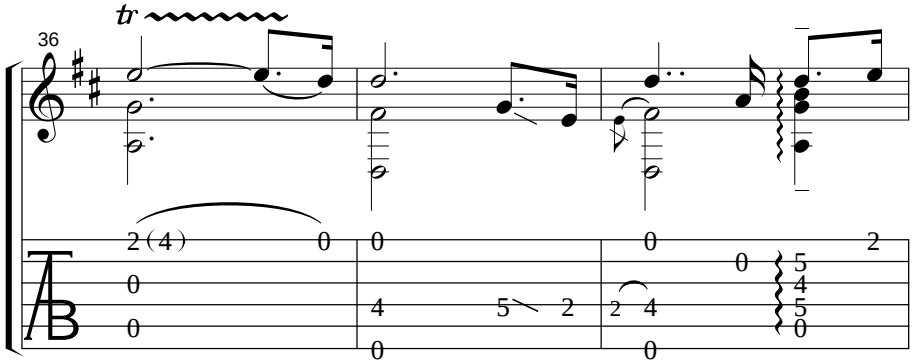
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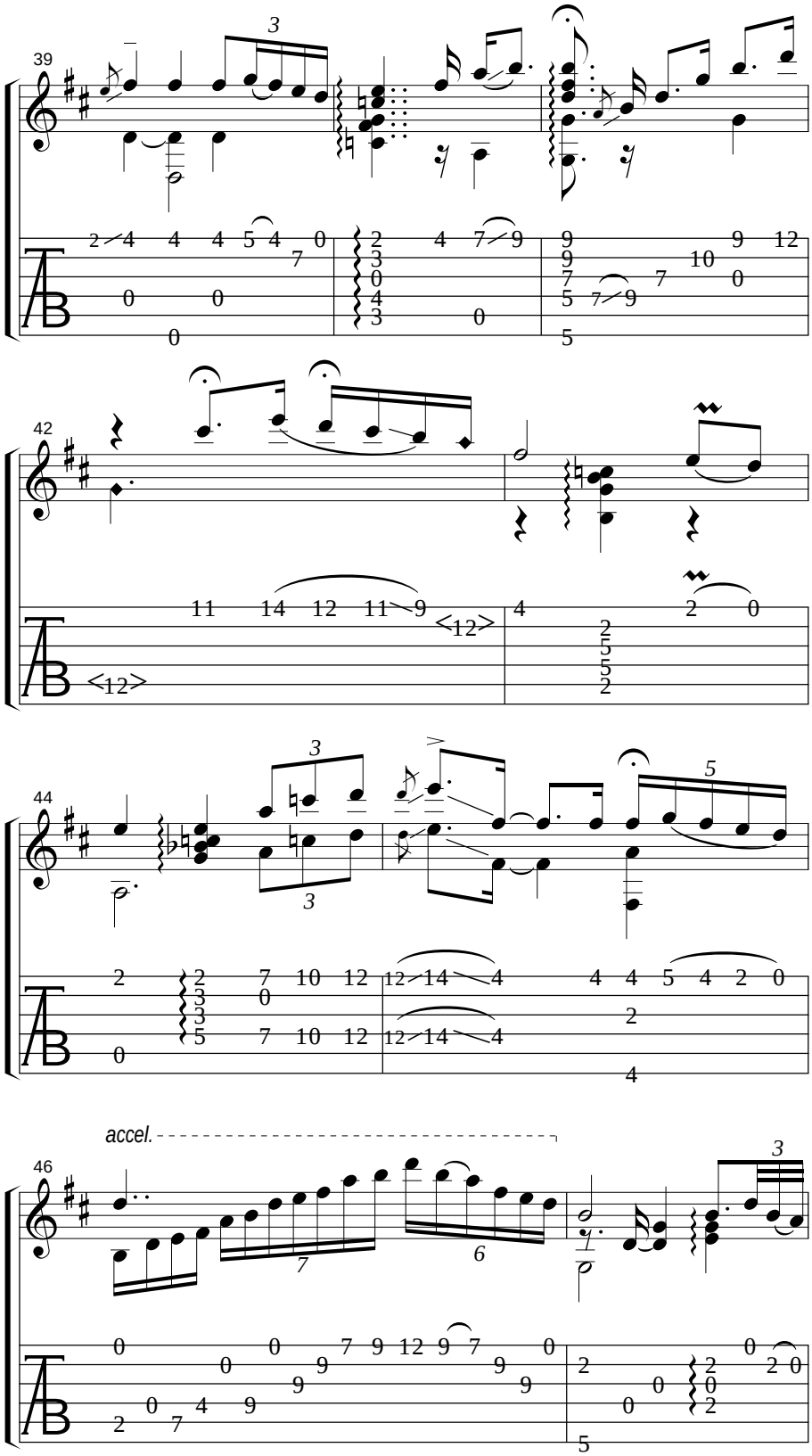
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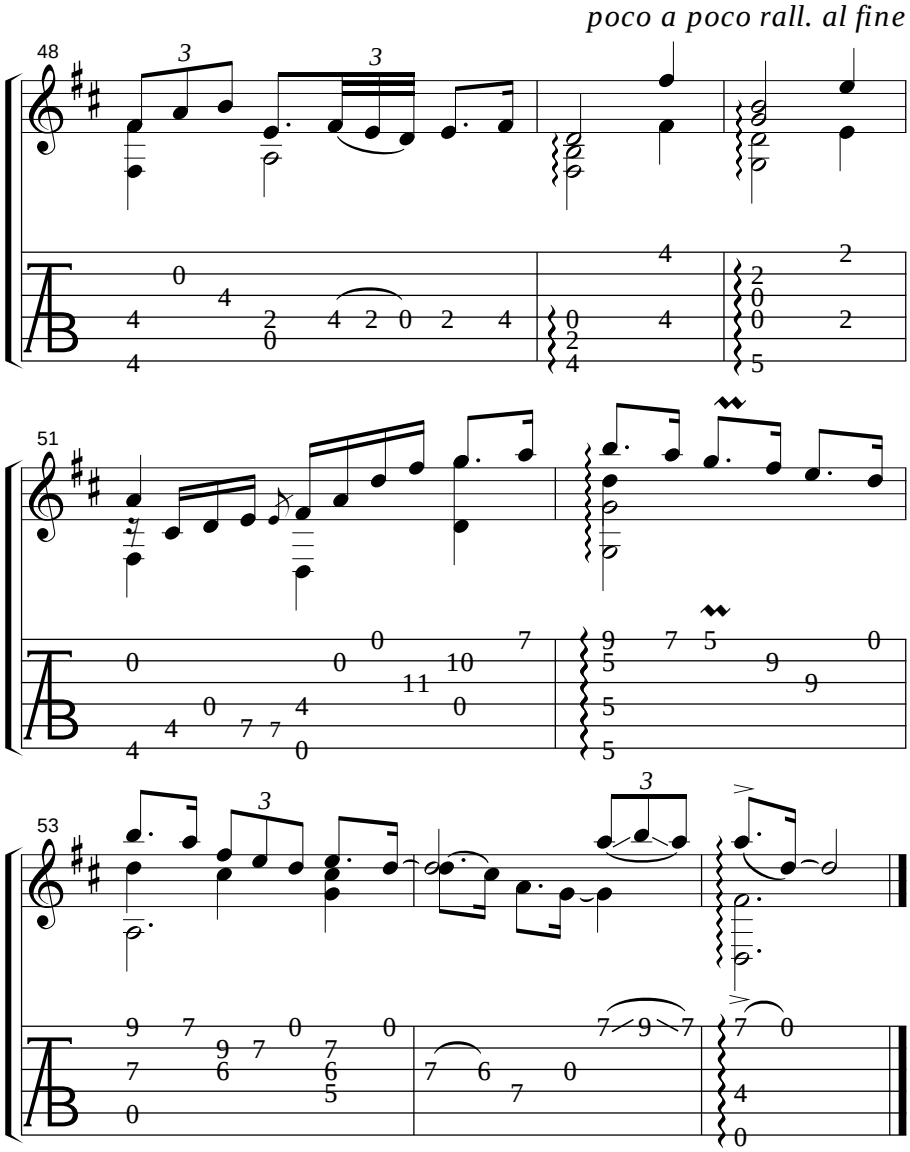
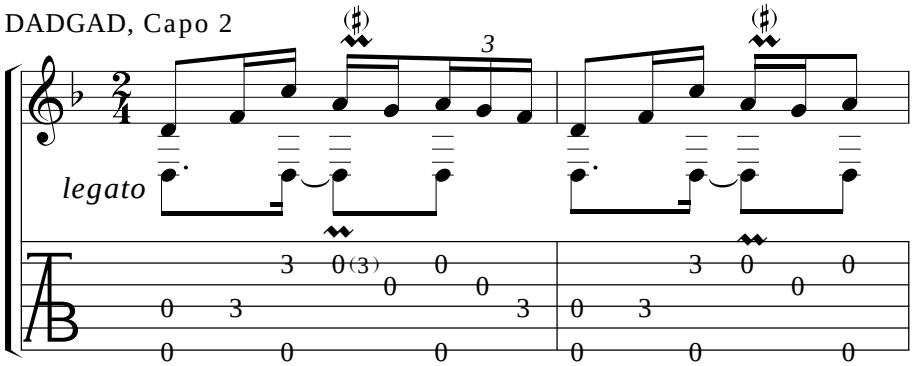


HEMAN DUBH

Trad. arr. P. Bensusan



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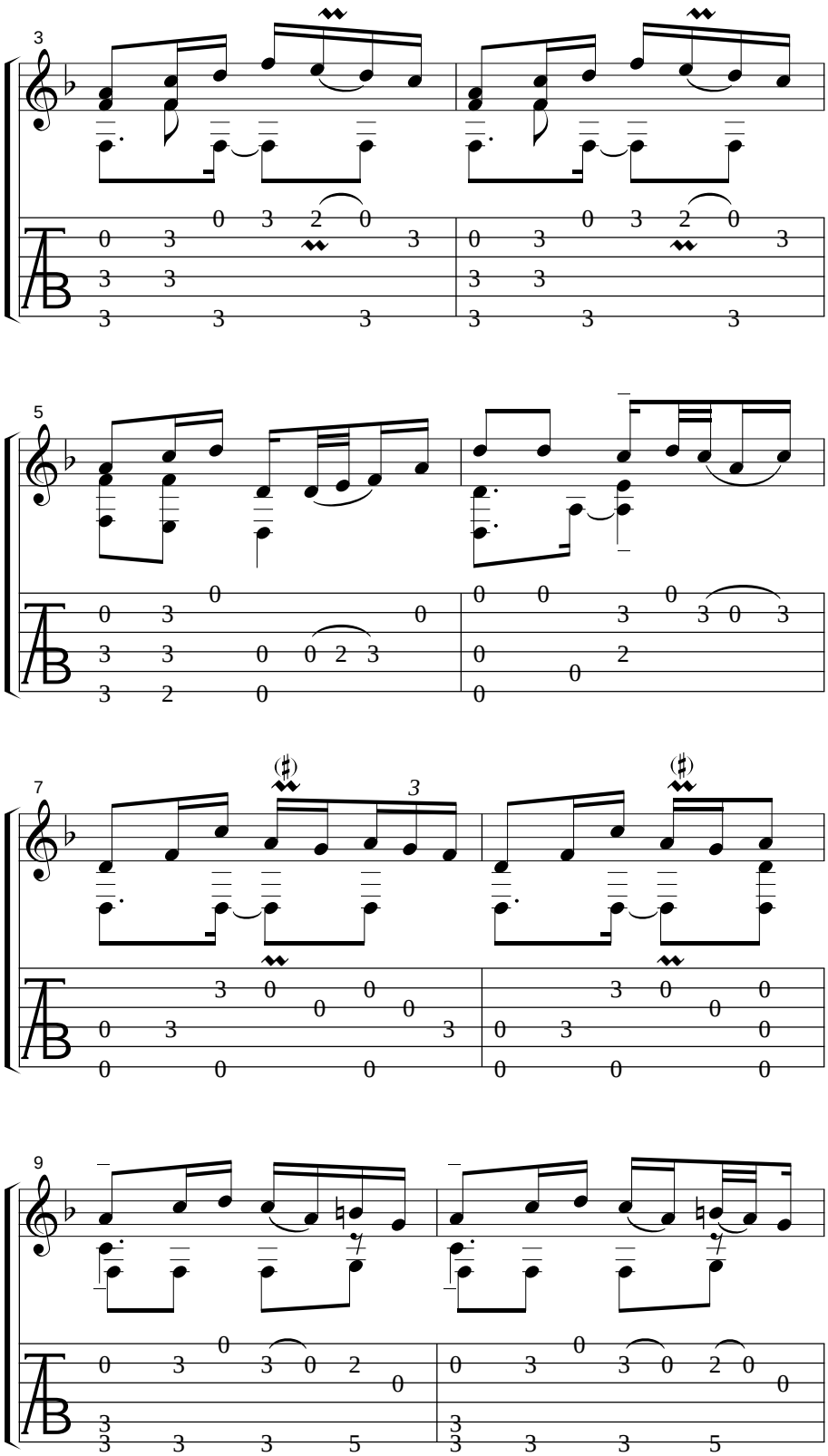
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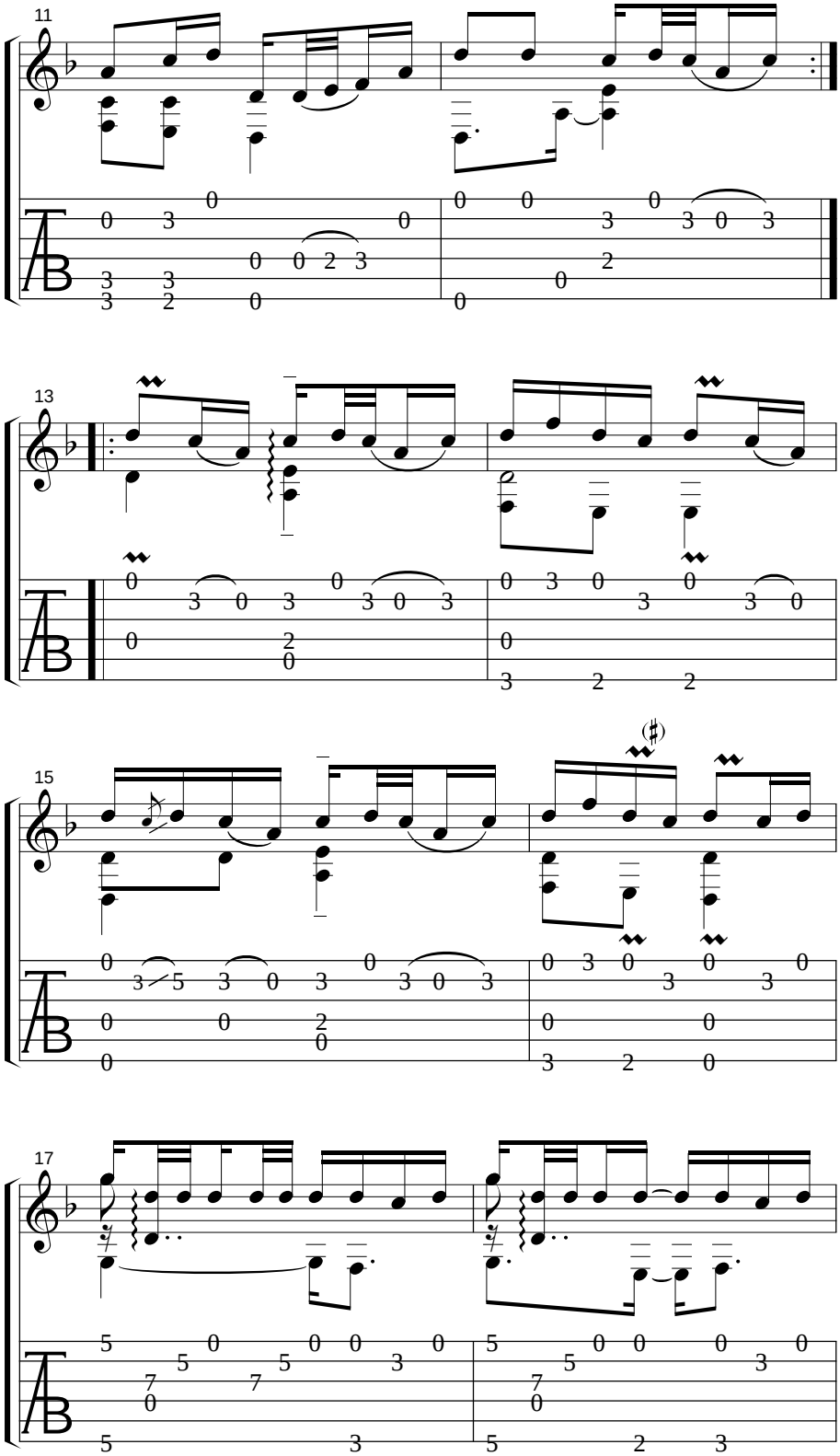
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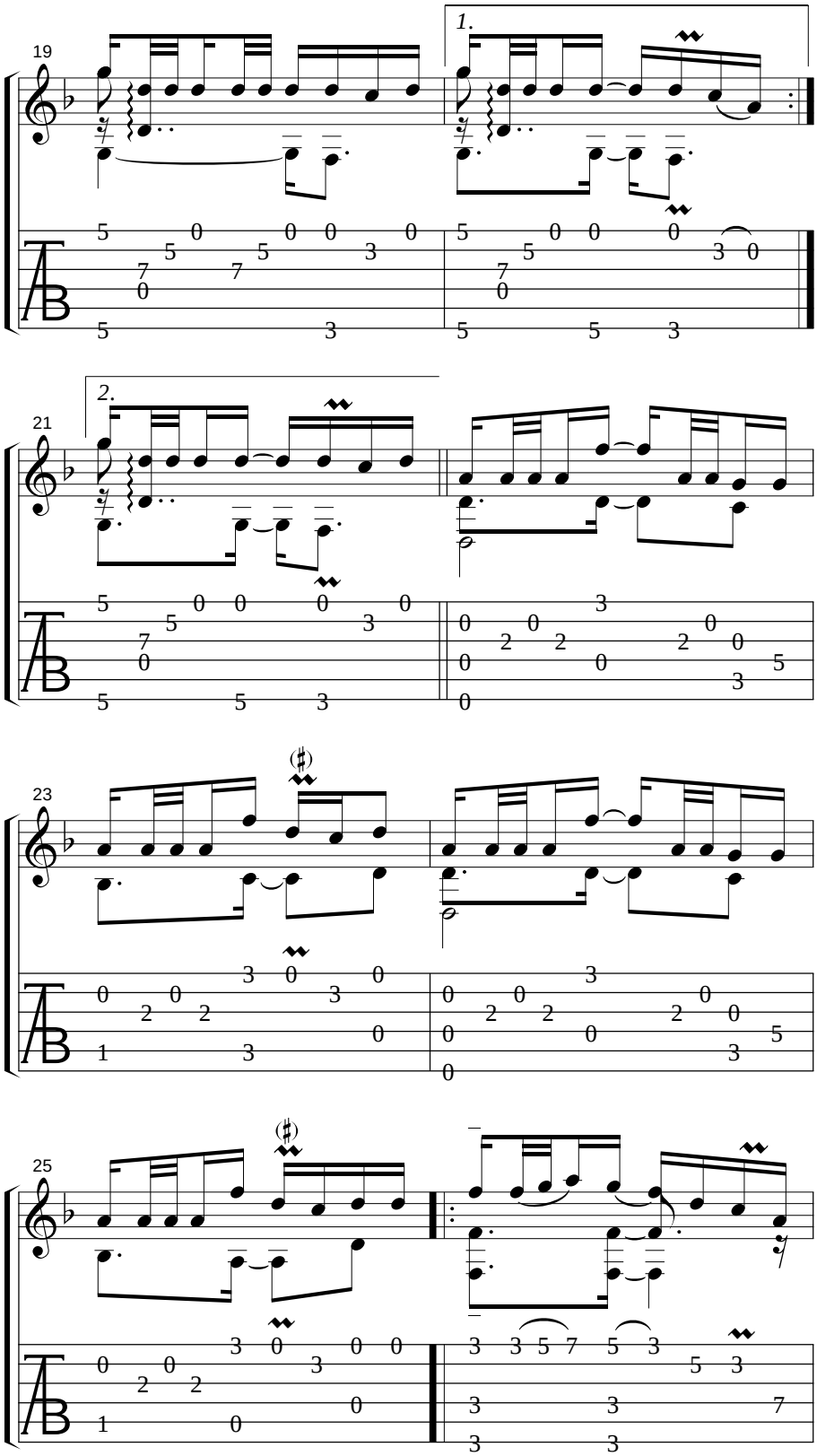
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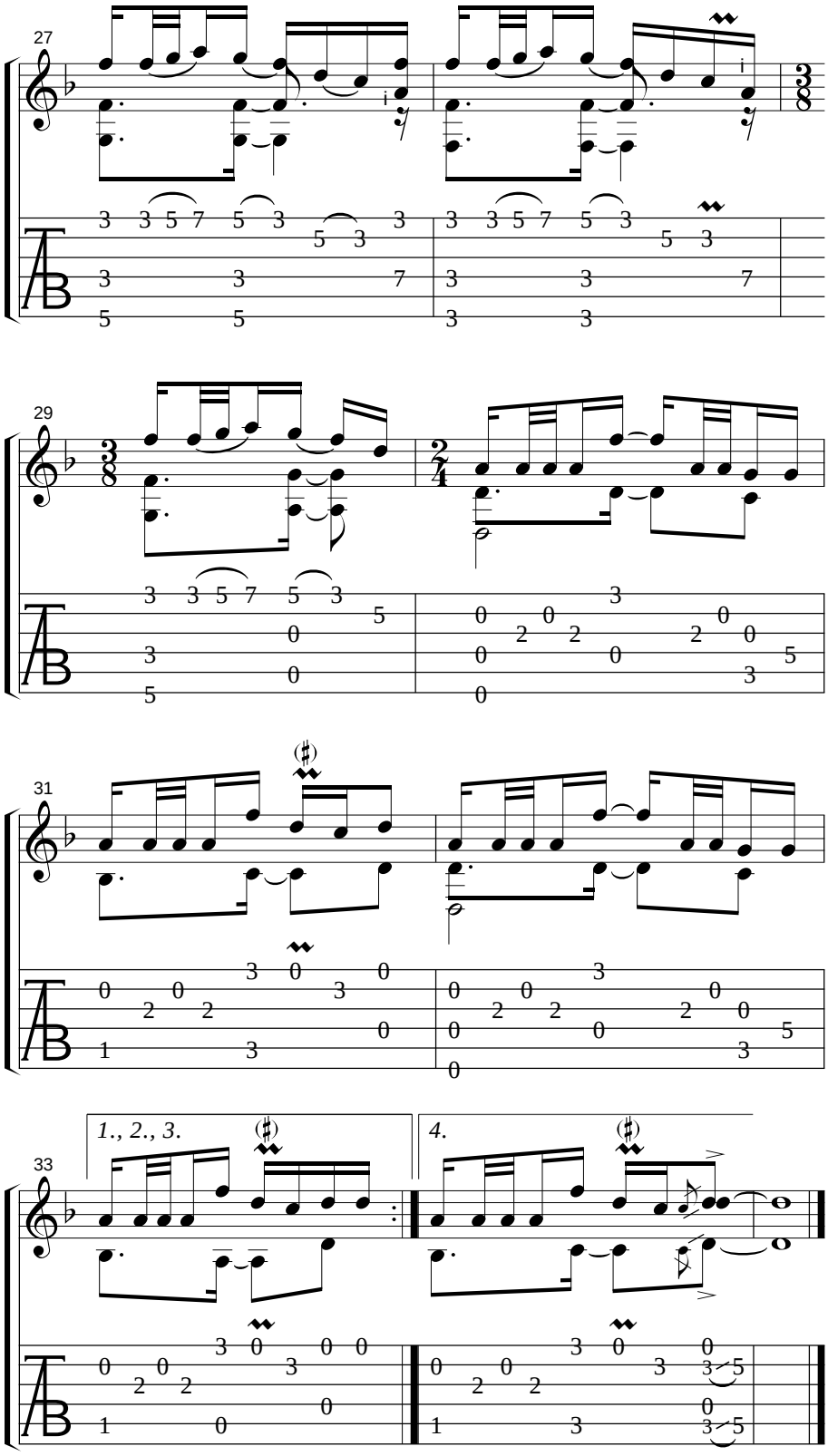
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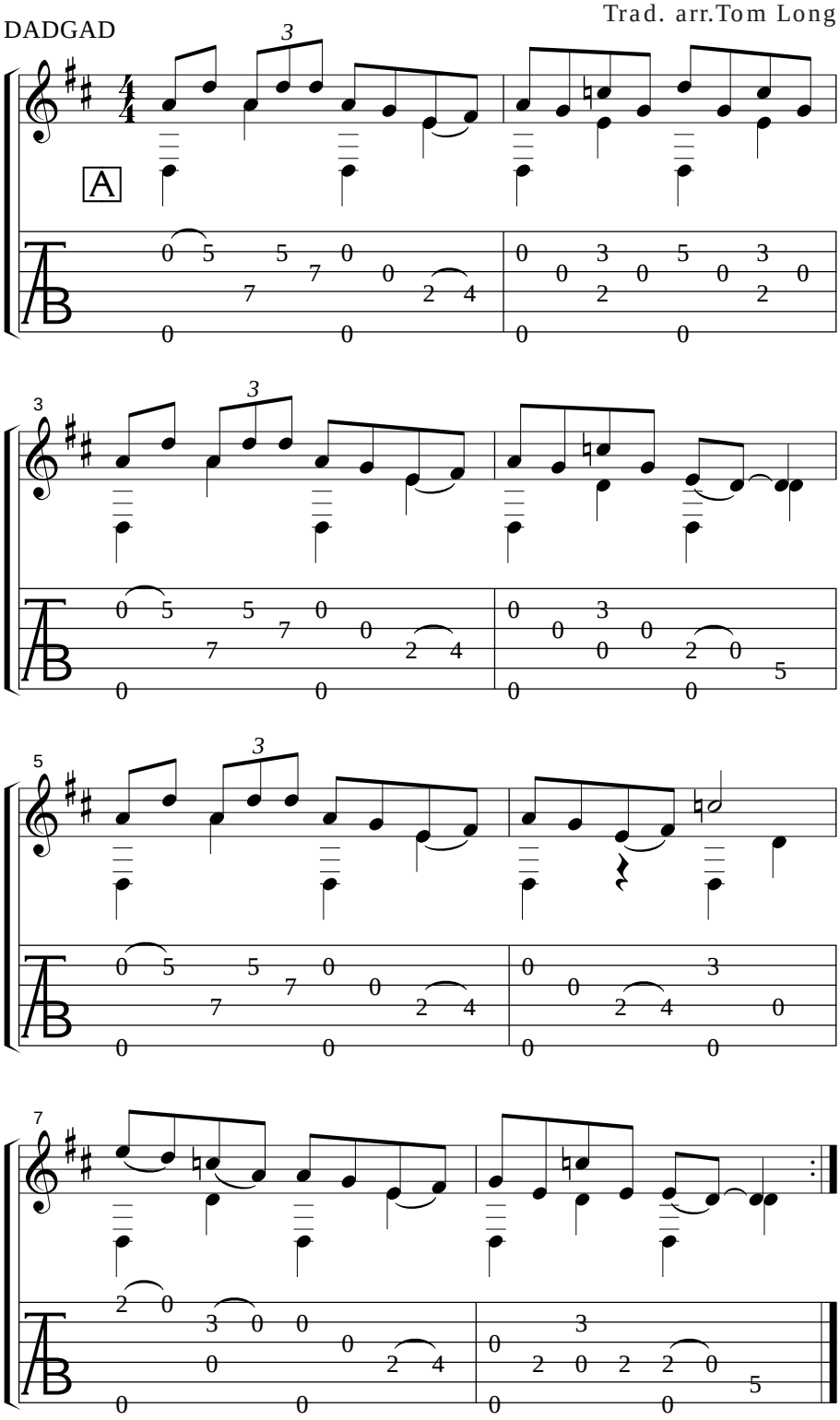
4.

JENNY PICKING COCKLES

Trad. arr.Tom Long



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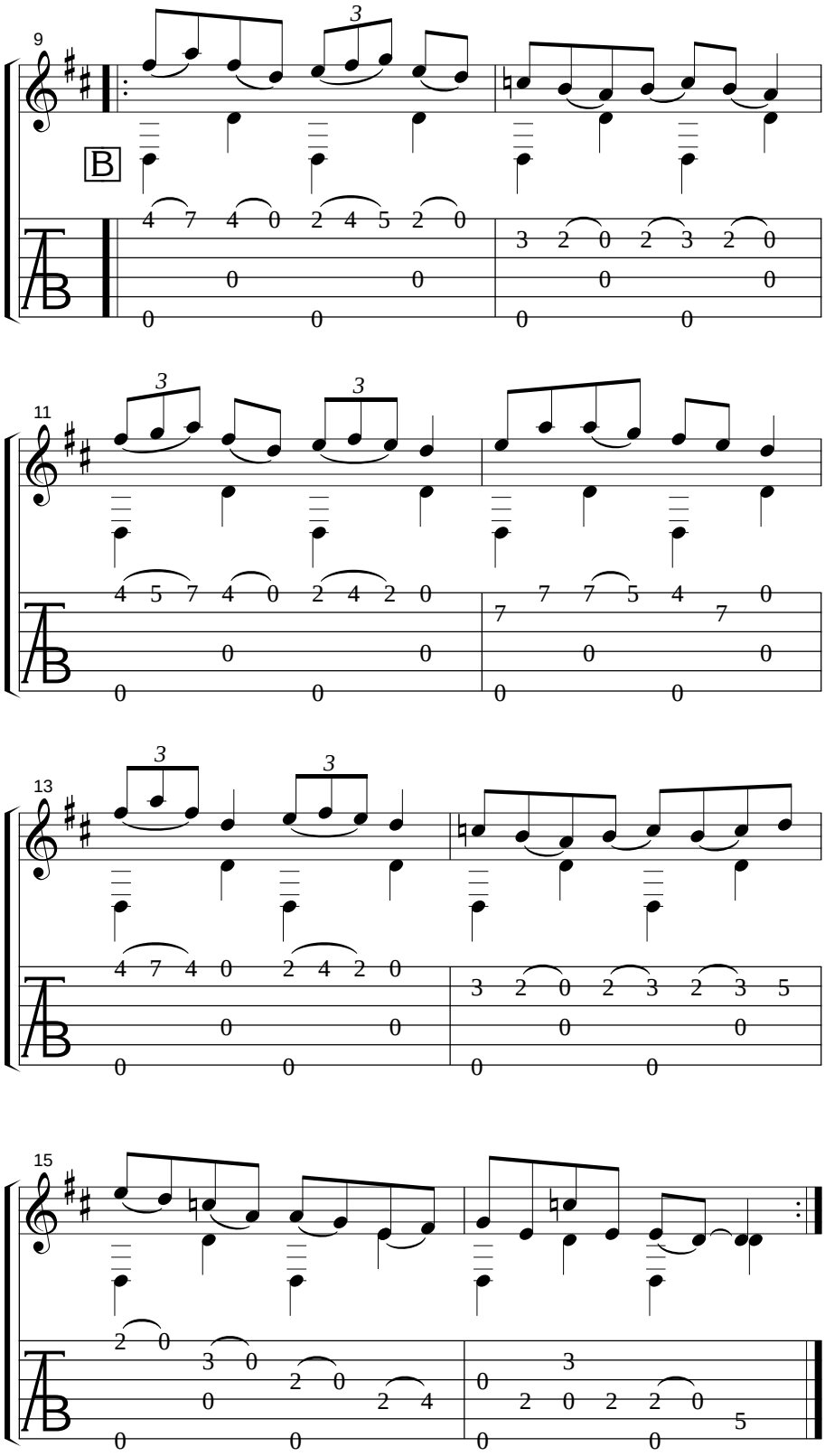
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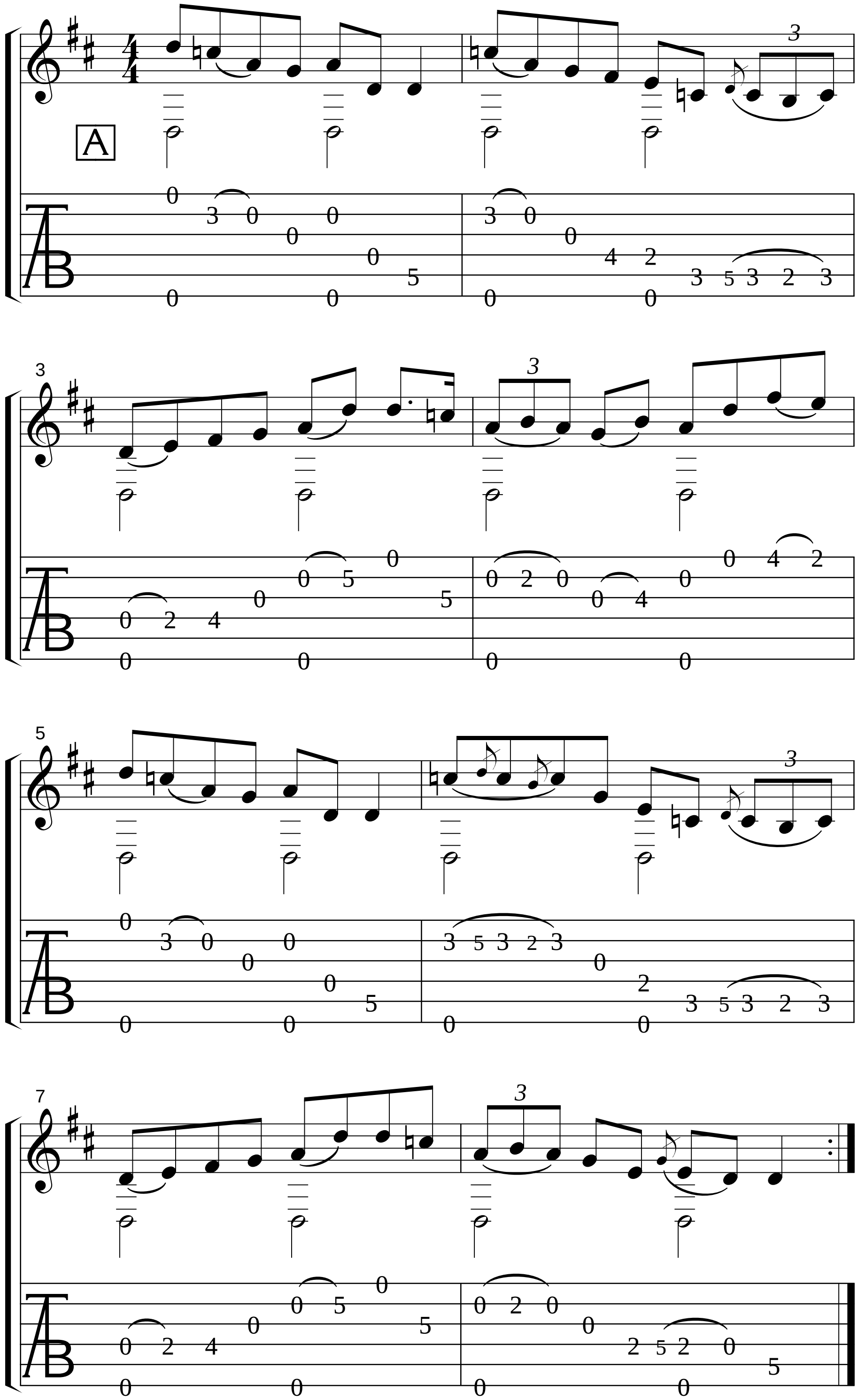
The Broken Pledge

DADGAD, Capo 3

Trad. arr.Tom Long



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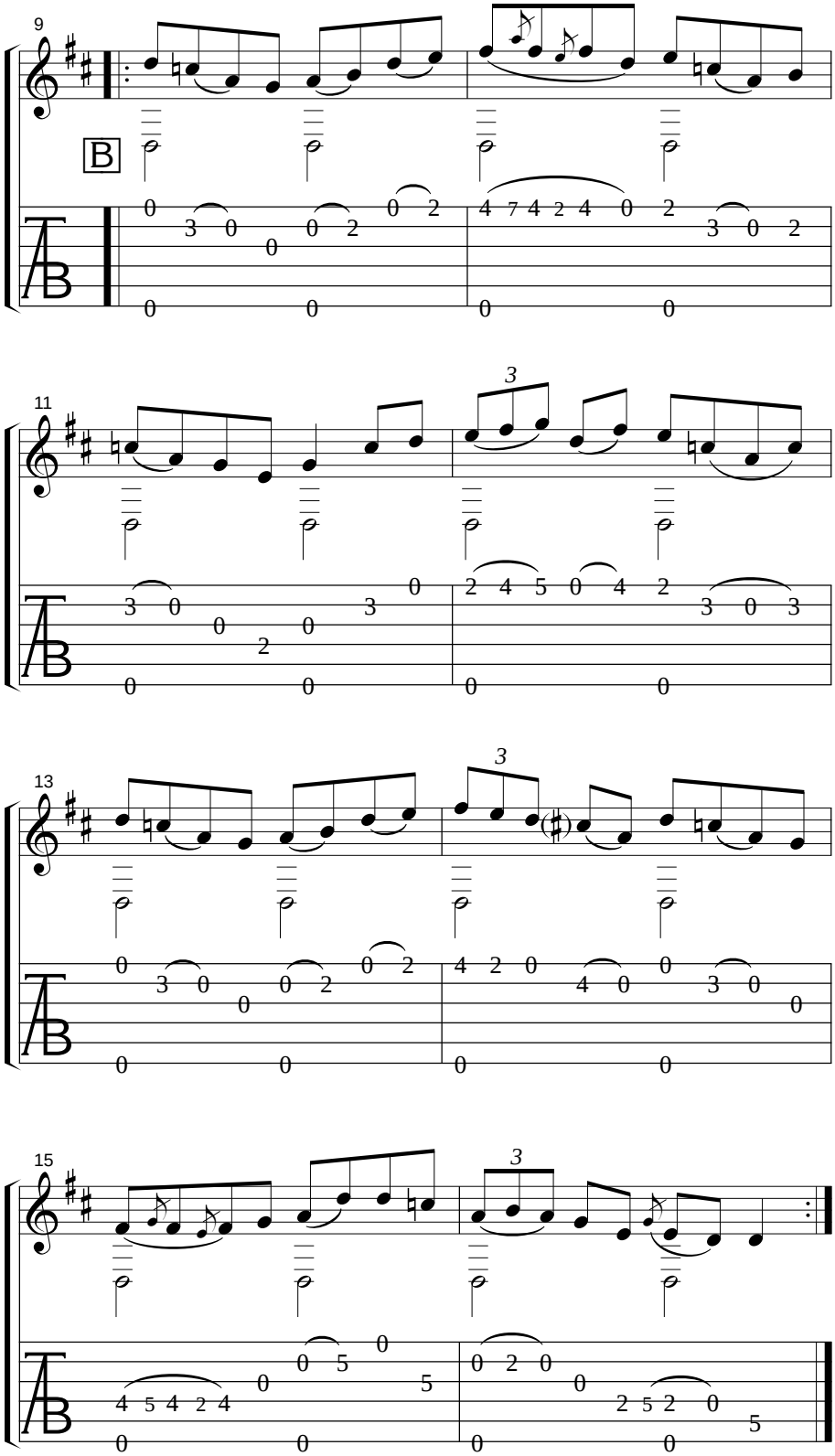
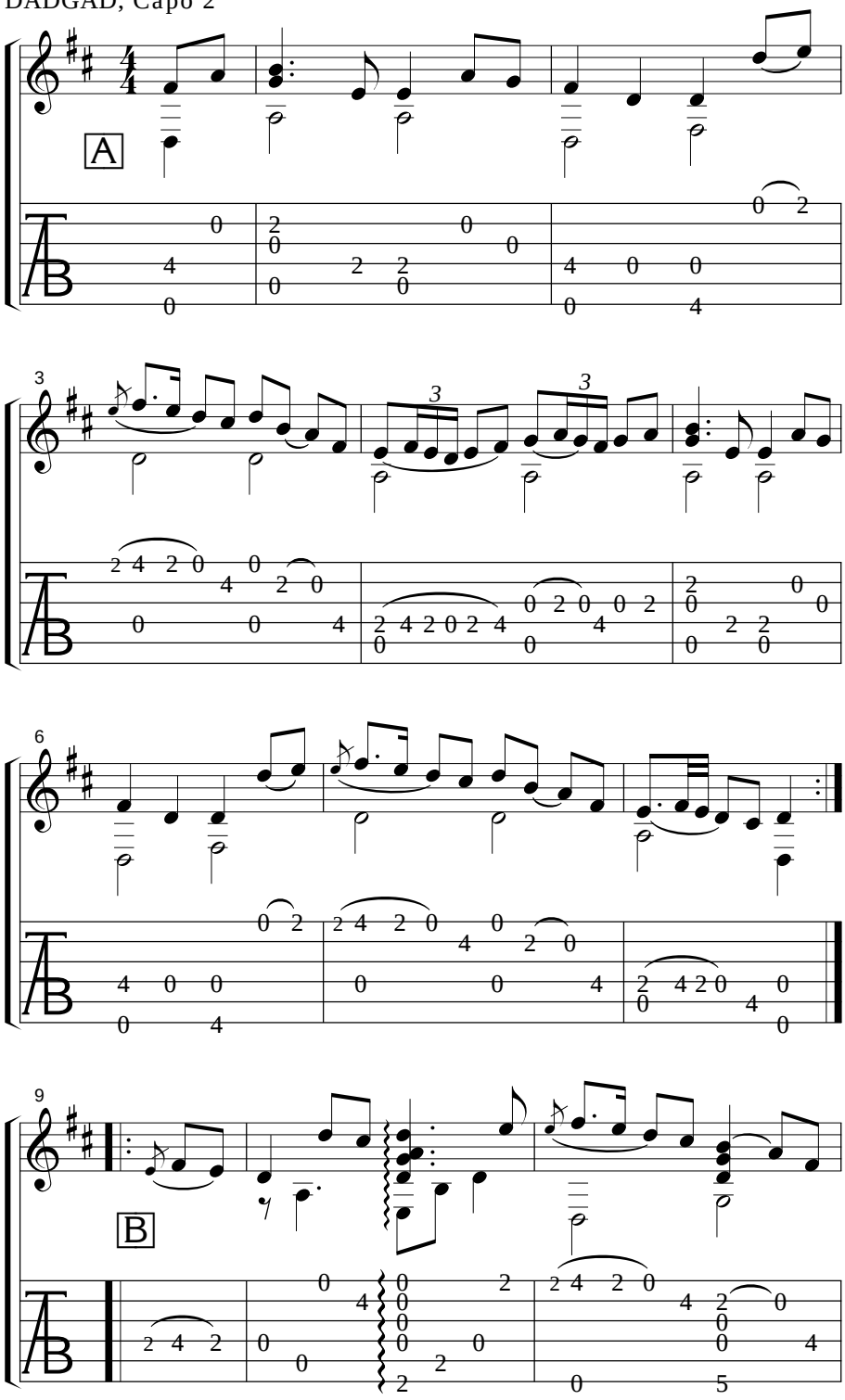

9
B
11
3
13
3
15
3

Moran's Return

Trad. arr. Pat Kirtley

DADGAD, Capo 2



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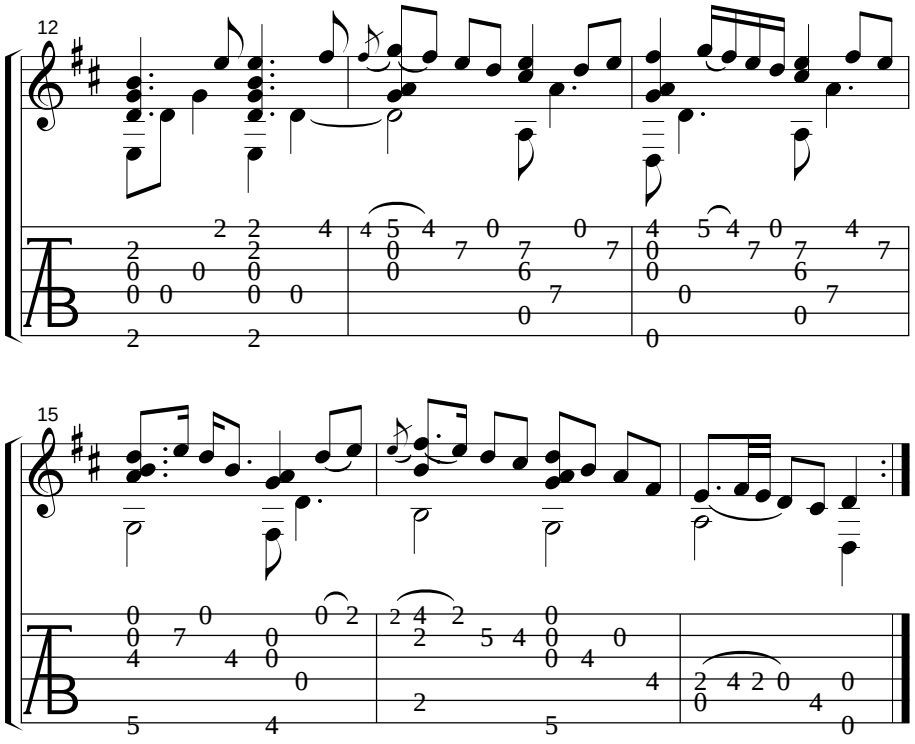
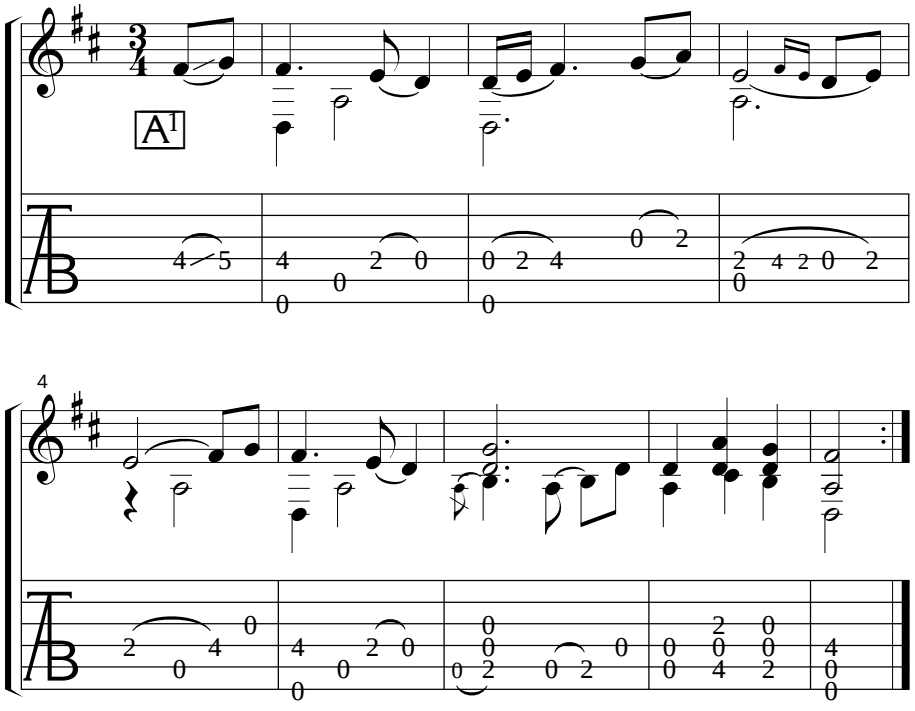


SOUTH WIND

DADGAD, Capo 2

Trad. arr. Pat Kirtley



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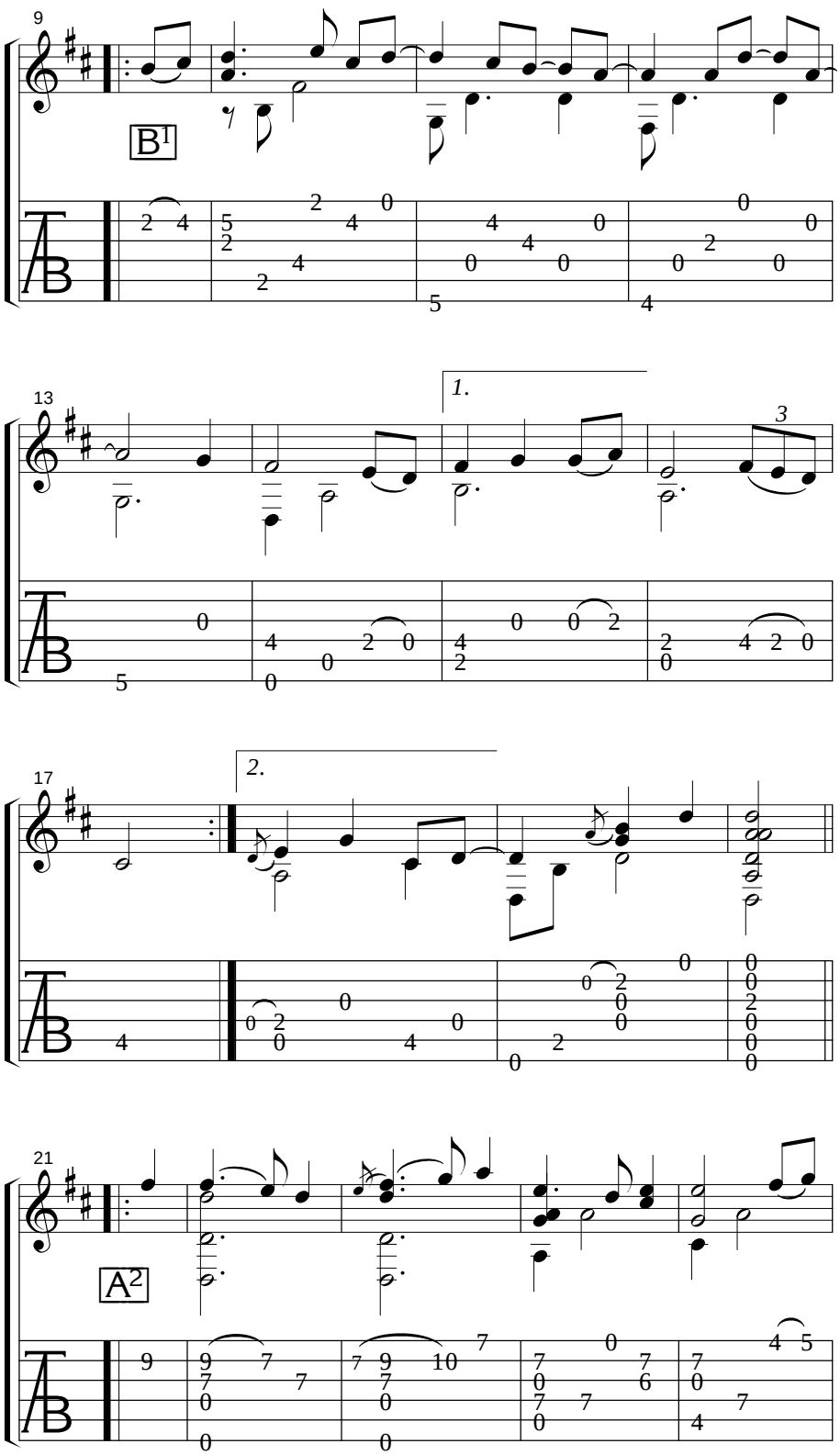
9
B1
13
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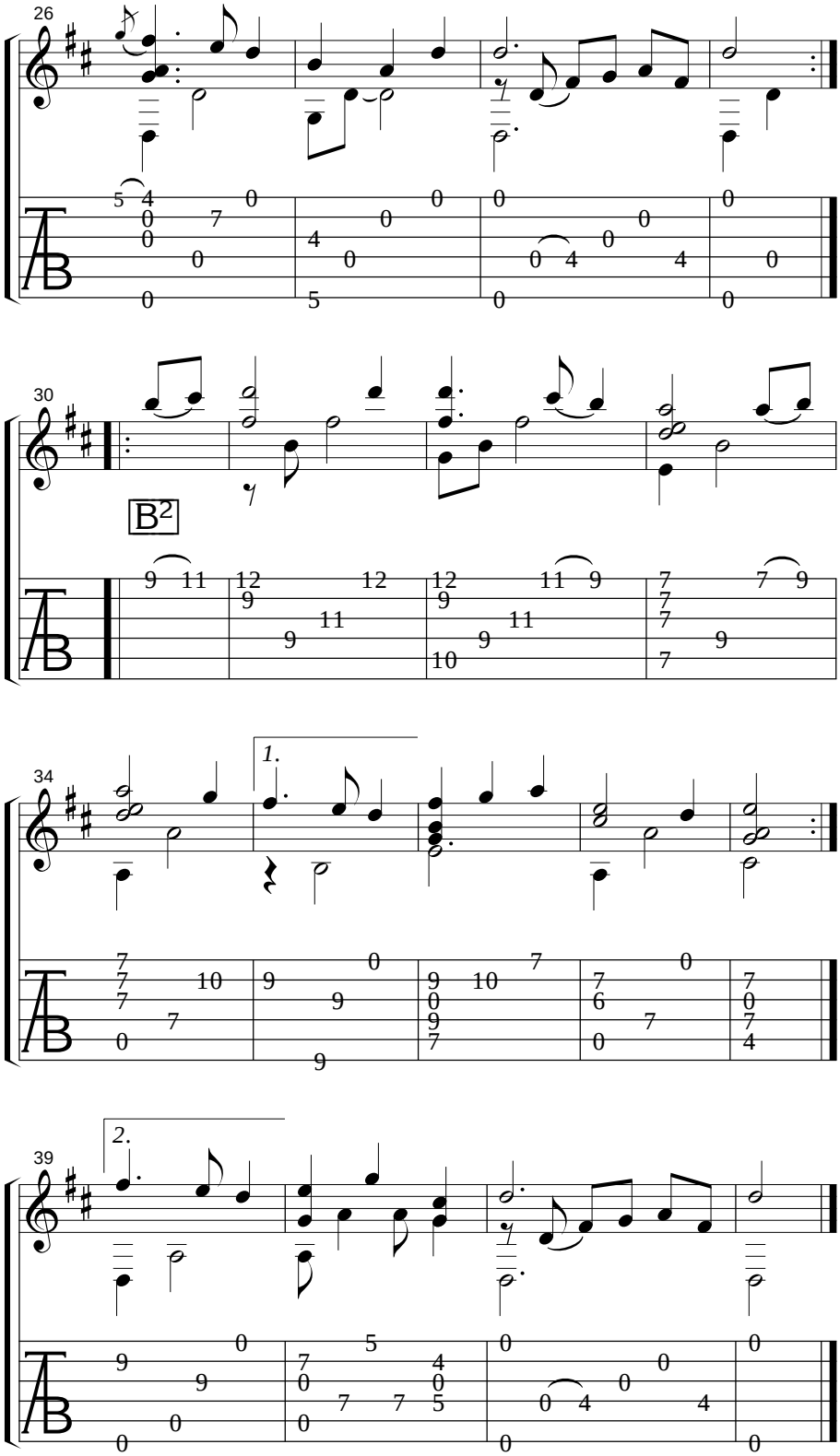
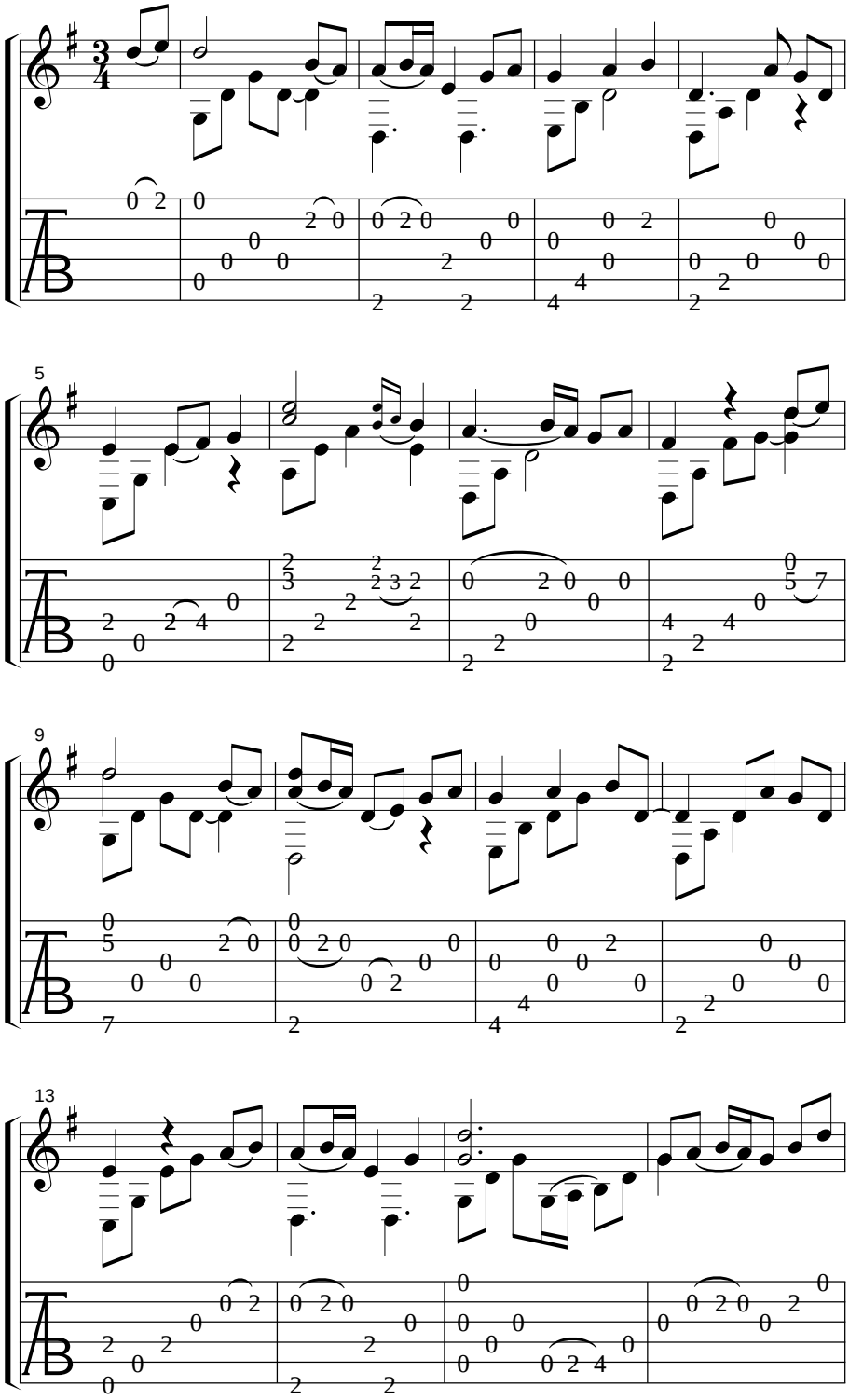
3
17
2.
21
A2


26
30
B2
34
1.
39
2.

JOCK O'HAZELDEAN

CGDGAD, Capo 4

Trad. arr. El McMeen



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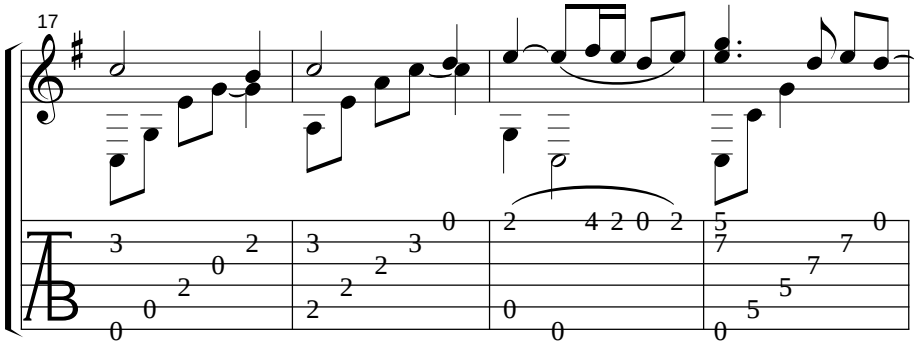
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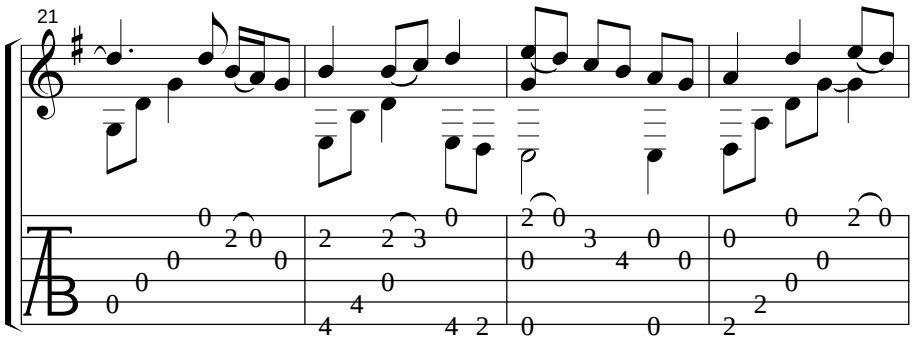
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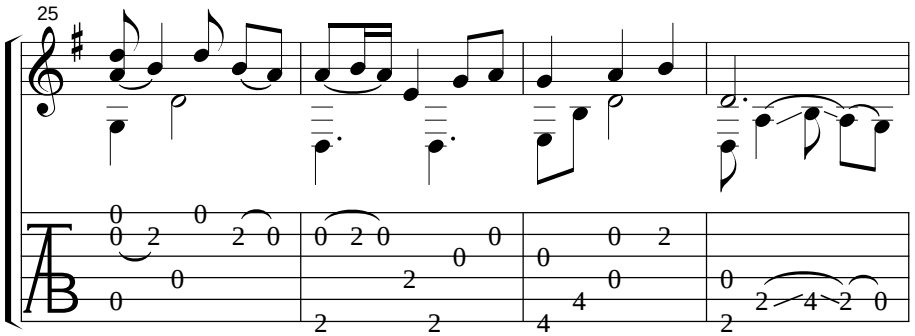
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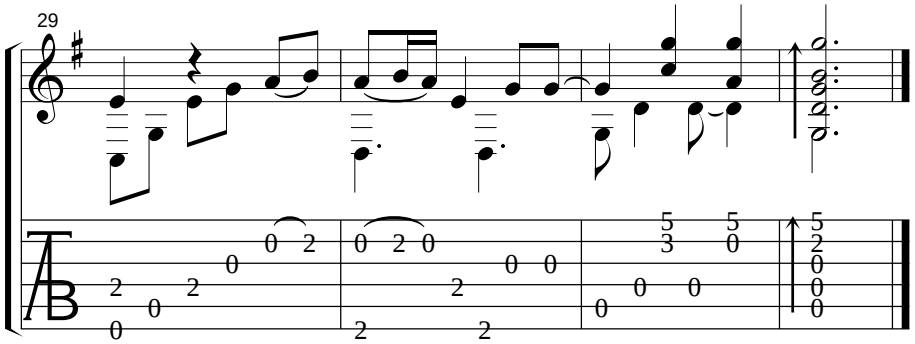
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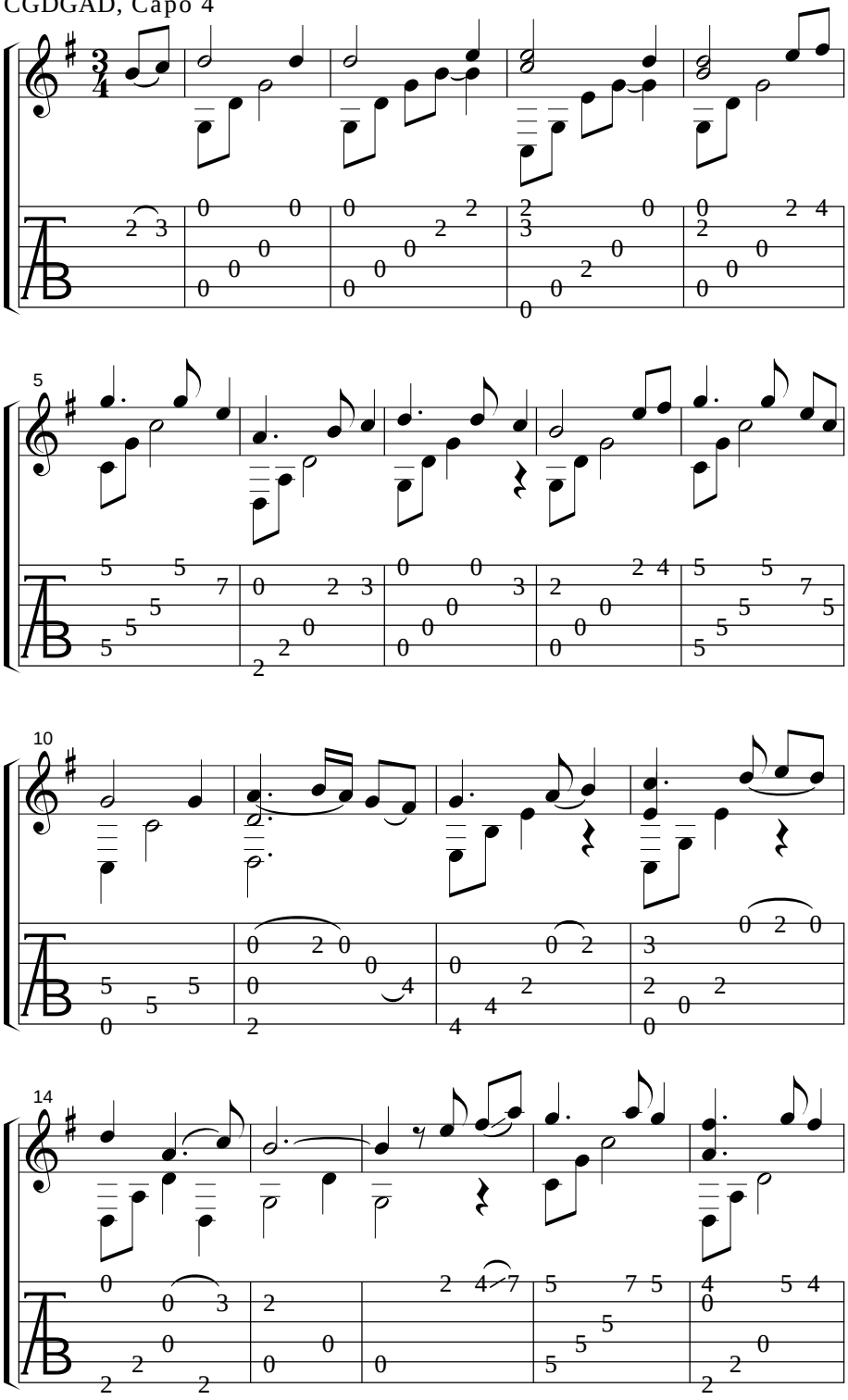
The Castle of Dromore

Trad. arr. El McMeen

CGDGAD, Capo 4



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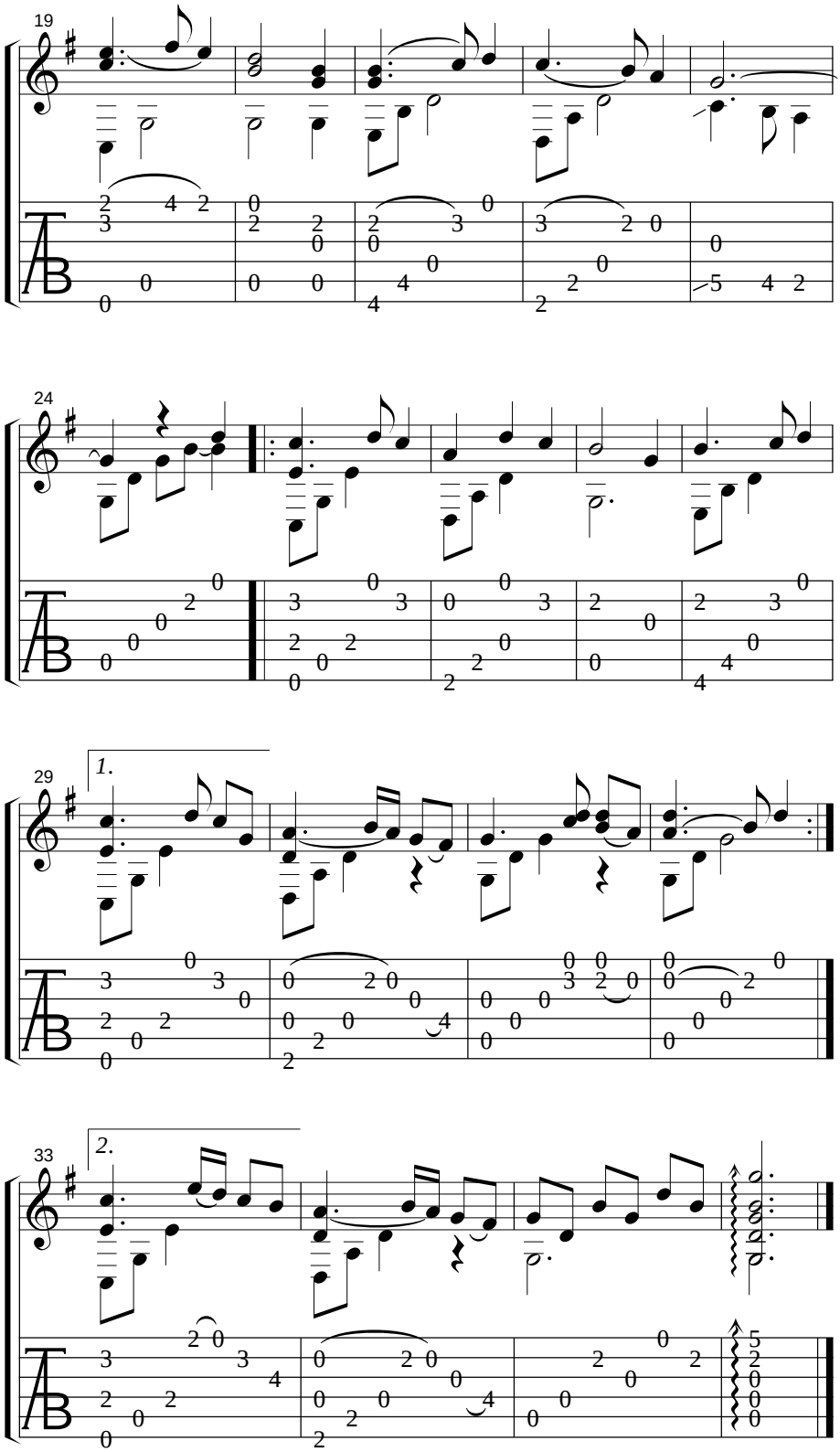
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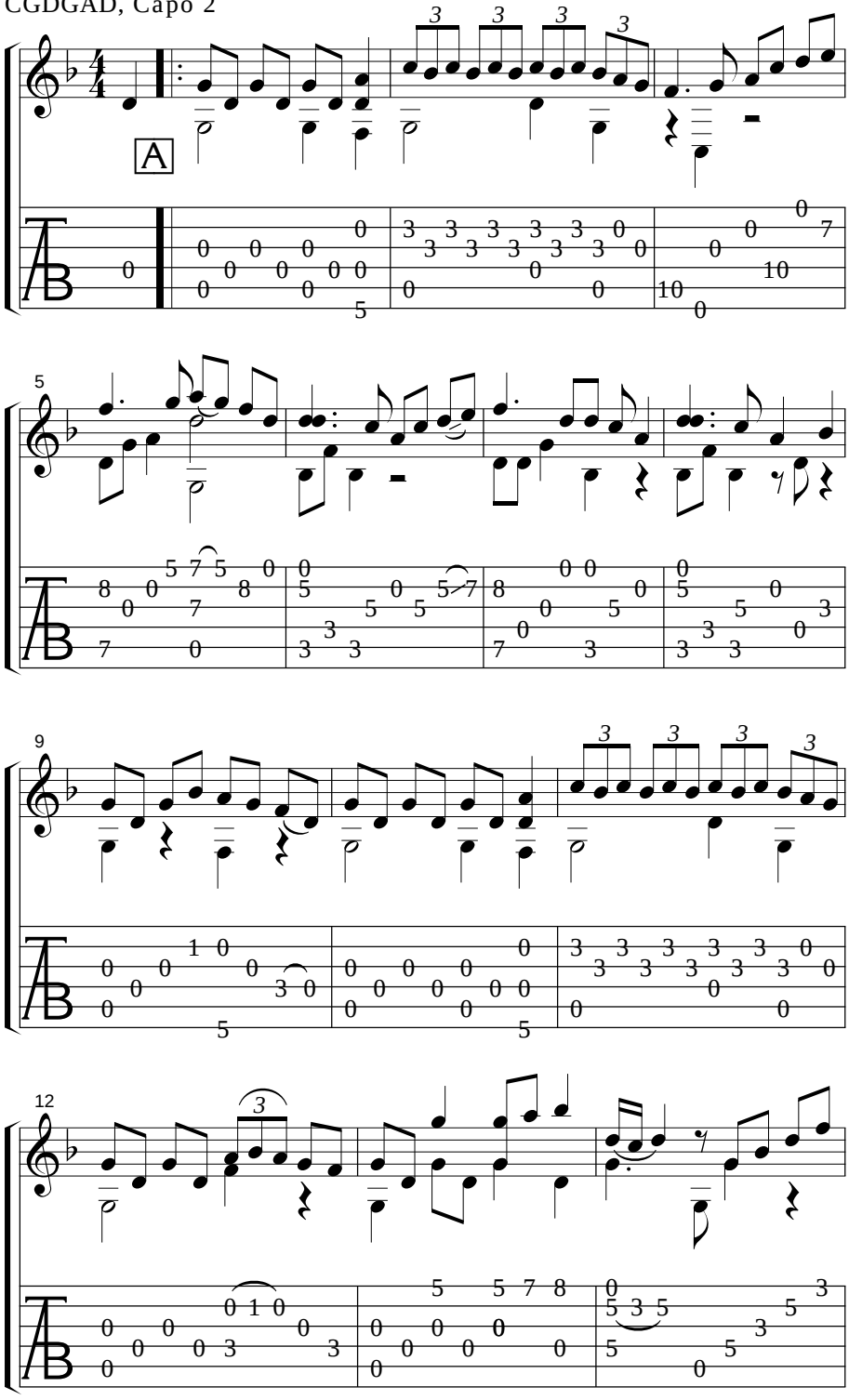
24
29
1.
33
2.

O'Carolan's Farewell to Music

O'Carolan, arr. El McMeen

CGDGAD, Capo 2



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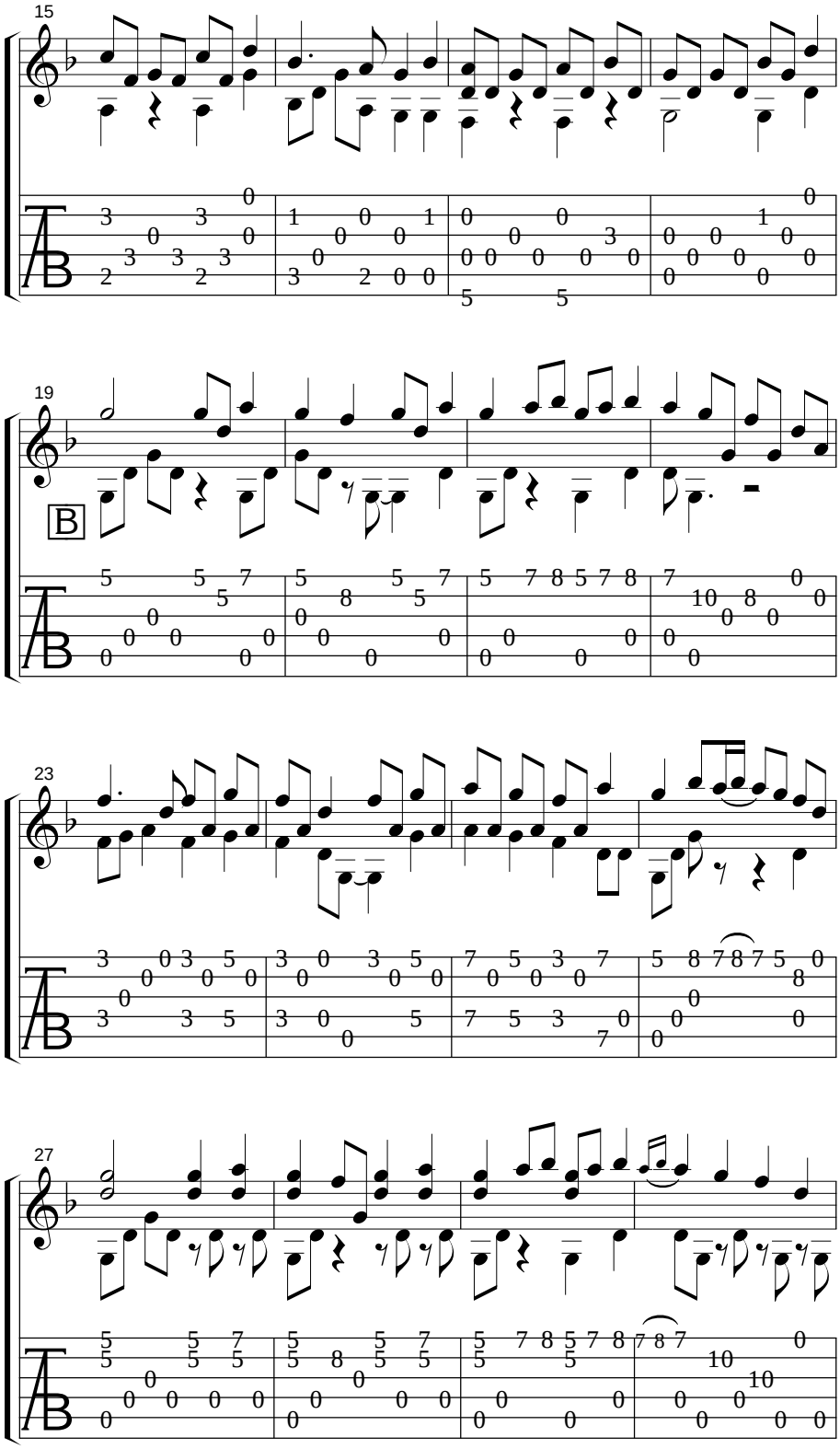
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23
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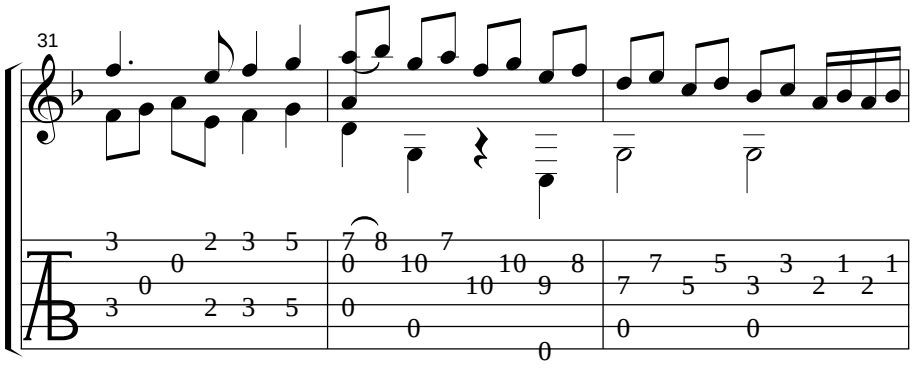
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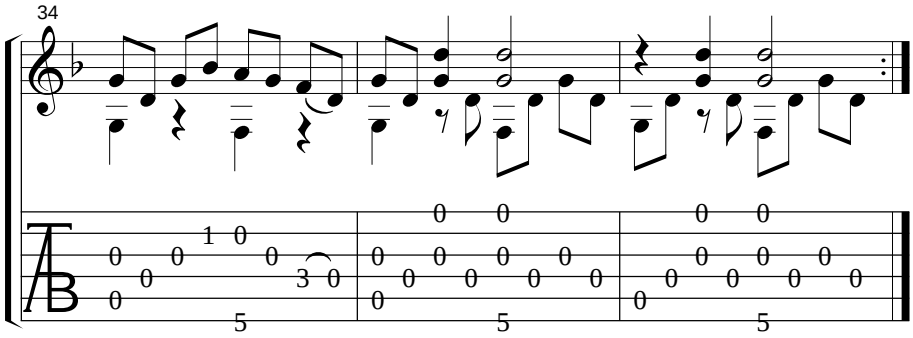
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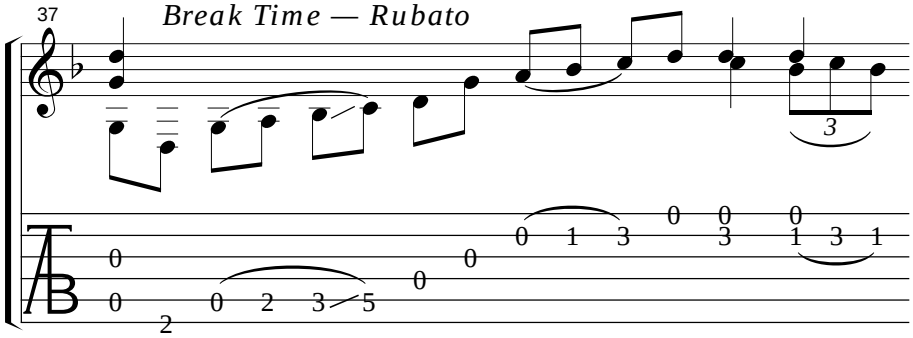
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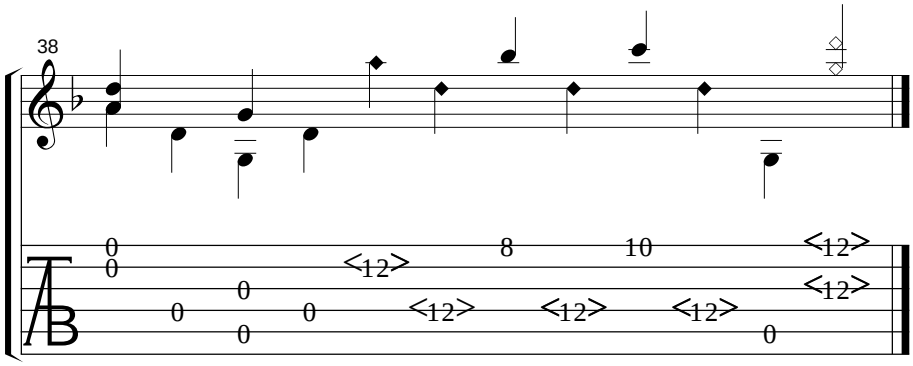
Break Time — Rubato


38

Pat Kirtley
- Planxty Irwin
- Rodney's Glory

Martin Simpson
- Medley: Rosie Anderson, The Shearing's Not For You & Bogie's Bonny Belle

Steve Baughman
- Bill Malley's Barndance
- Fanny Power

Duck Baker
- The Blarney Pilgrim
- The Rakes of Waterloo
- Medley: Sergeant Early's Dream & Chief O'Neill's Favorite
- Medley: Miss Forbes Farewell & Poll Halfpenny

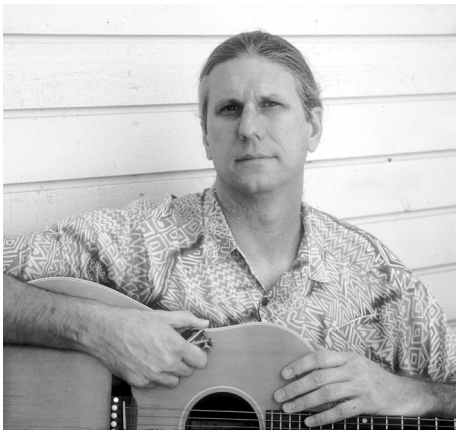
Pierre Bensusan
- Medley: The Pure Drop & The Flax In Bloom
- Sheebeg An Sheemor
- Heman Dubh

Tom Long
- Jenny Picking Cockles
- Broken Pledge

Pat Kirtley
- Moran's Return
- South Wind

El McMeen
- Medley: Jock O'Hazeldean & The Castle Of Dromore

Martin Simpson


Tom Long

Duck Baker

VESTAPOL 13063

Running time: 59 minutes • Color
Photo of Martin Simpson by Anna Grossman
Photo of Duck Baker by Jo Ayres
Photo of Tom Long by Leslie A, Smith
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