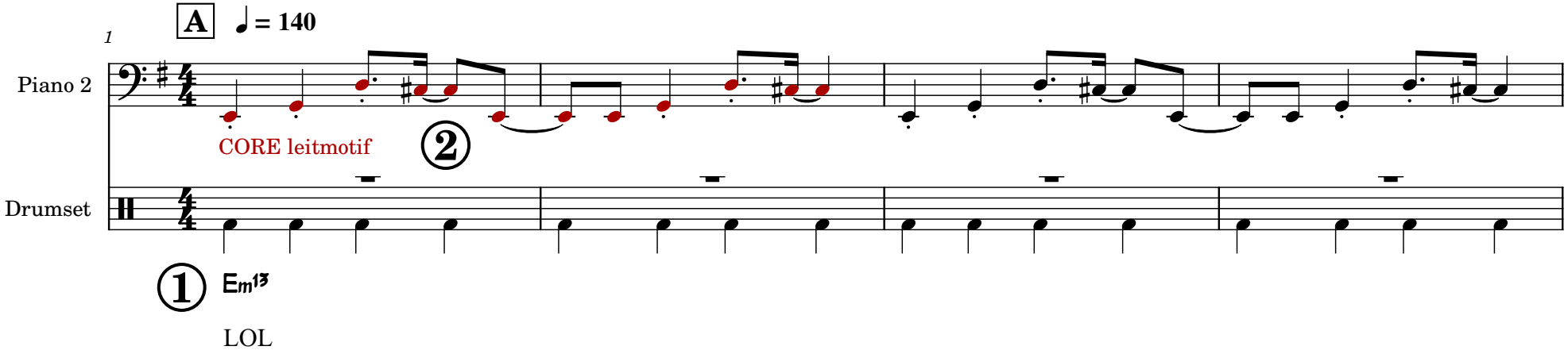
VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS

- For Educational Use Only -

Death by Glamour

from Undertale

Composed by Toby Fox
Transcription/Analysis by Seventh Sam
www.seventhsam.com

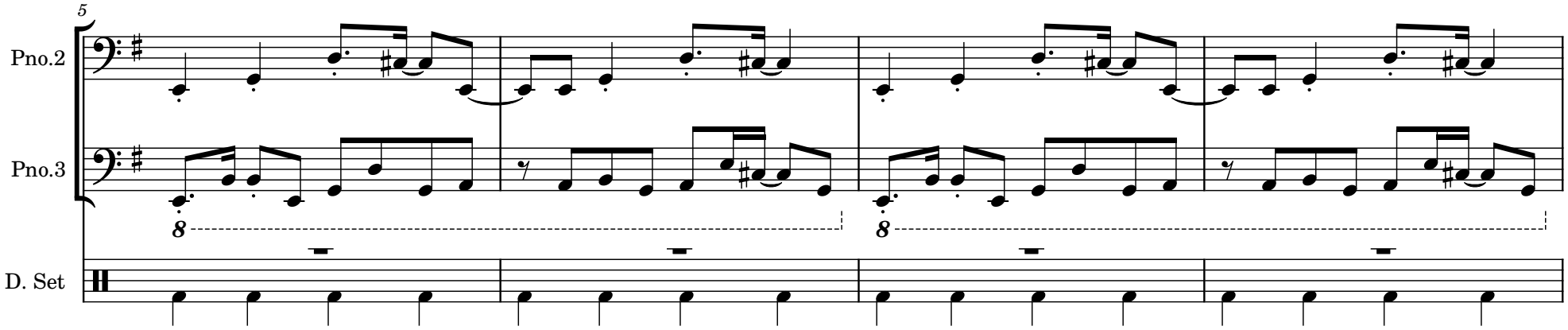


Where do I even begin? Undertale is such an absolute masterpiece that it's taking every ounce of willpower not to write a gigantic essay on why it's one of the most creative, well-written, and thoughtful works of art in all of video game history. I will do my absolute best to try and stay focused on the track at hand :-)

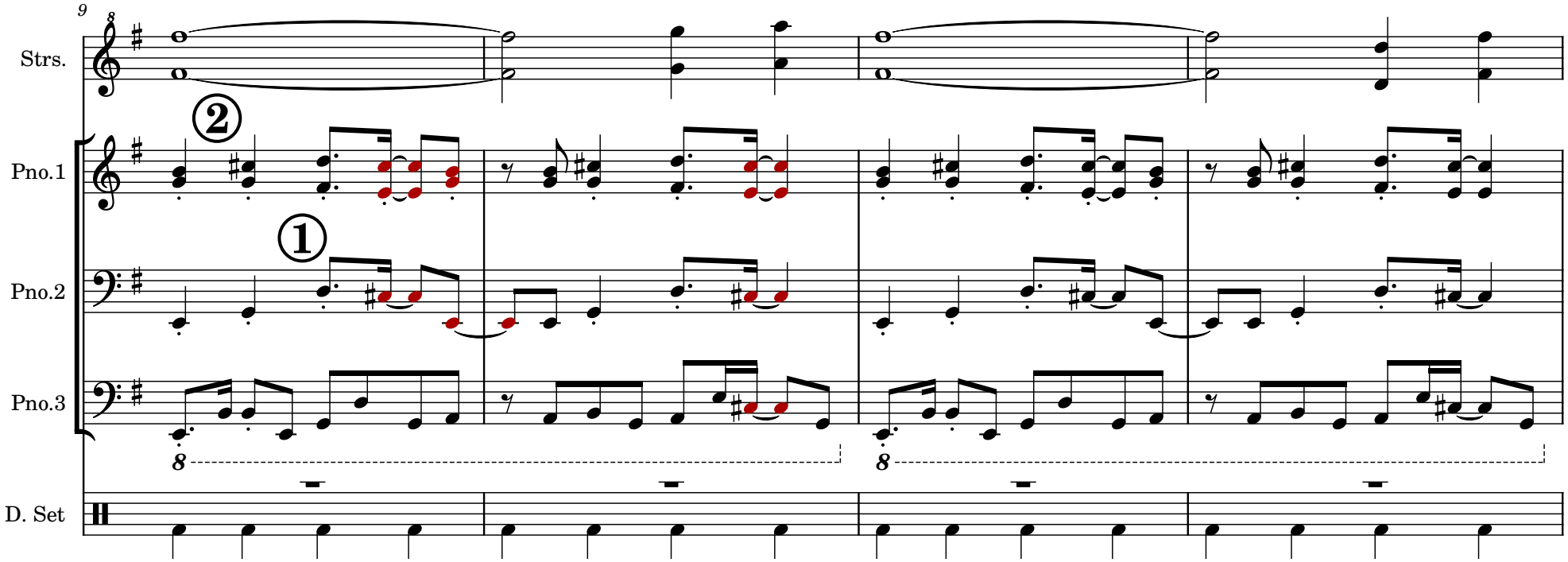
CONTEXT: The player is in control of an (as of yet) unnamed human protagonist who finds themselves trapped in an underworld full of quirky monsters with a...*tense* relationship towards humankind. In a quest to return to the surface, the player encounters a robot - named Mettaton - that has been accidentally programmed to try and murder any human it encounters. After several close calls, the player is finally forced to confront Mettaton in a climactic battle that...turns into nothing less than a televised dance-off to the death as the robot transforms into an *absolutely fabulous* mixture of David Bowie, Prince, and...you get the idea. This track accompanies said battle/dance-off.

This is arguably one of the best tracks in the entire soundtrack. It sounds fantastic and is emblematic of Fox's unique and genuine musical voice, but it's also a treasure trove of thematic coherency. No less than *three* leitmotifs are woven into this track and - as a self-proclaimed leitmotif enthusiast - I couldn't be more thrilled! So, let's get into the nuts and bolts (robot puns, yay) of why and how this track works:

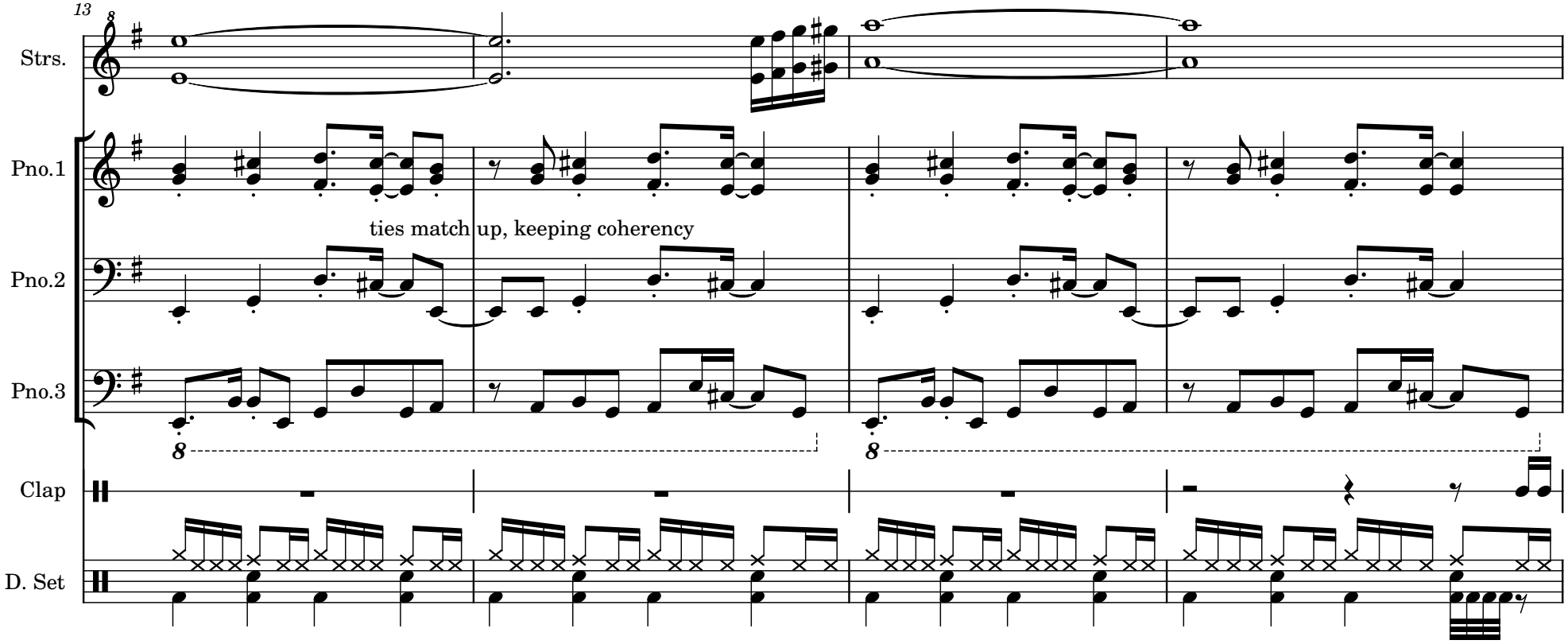
(1) - There's one "chord" for the entire section: Em13. Every note in the E Dorian scale is used in this section, and every note in the E Dorian scale belongs to the Em13 chord. Those just learning harmony might recall that the essential notes required to imply an extended chord are the root, third, seventh, and extended tone. And waddya know - in the motif, we get E (root), G (third), C# (13th), and D (7th) as our first four notes. A clever fox, that Toby...
(2) - This melody is one of three leitmotifs used to tie this battle to previously experienced situations. This particular theme is that of the dungeon (the CORE) that the player *just* traversed, the one that Mettaton is the "boss" of. Leading with this motif creates a great sense of continuity in gameplay as the player *just* heard this (albeit in a different key and context).

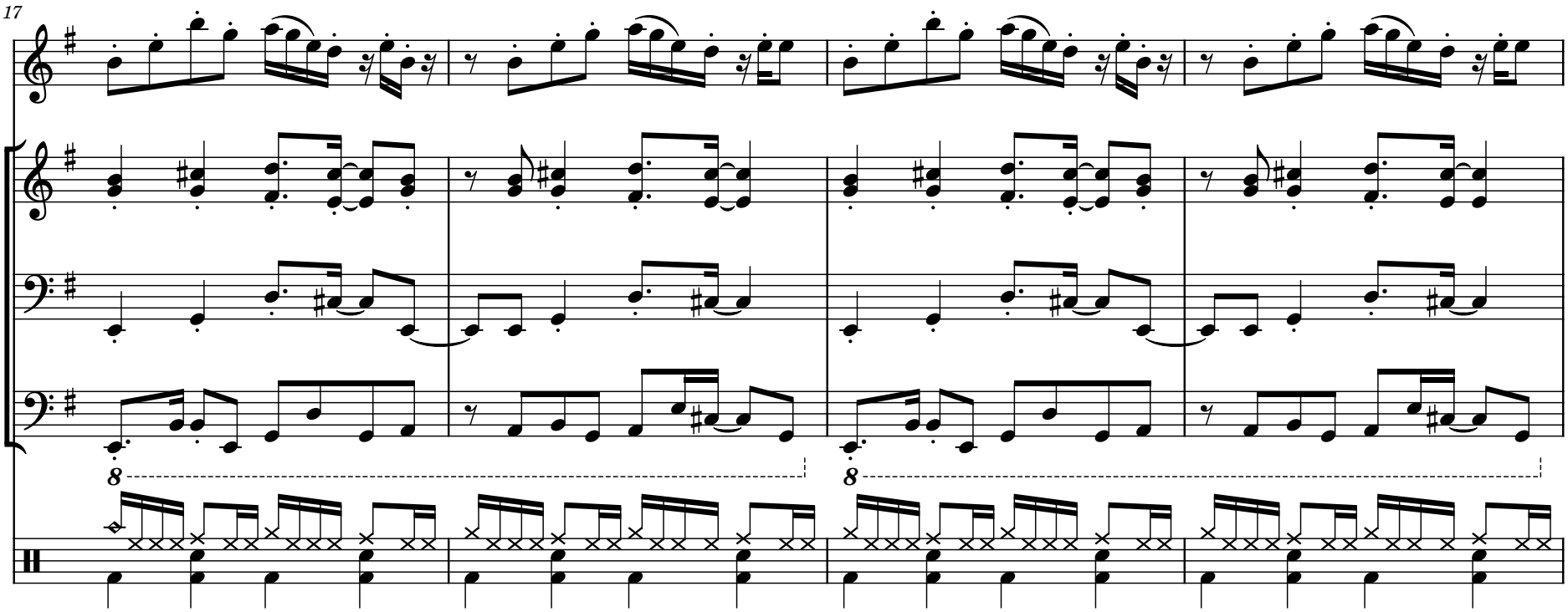


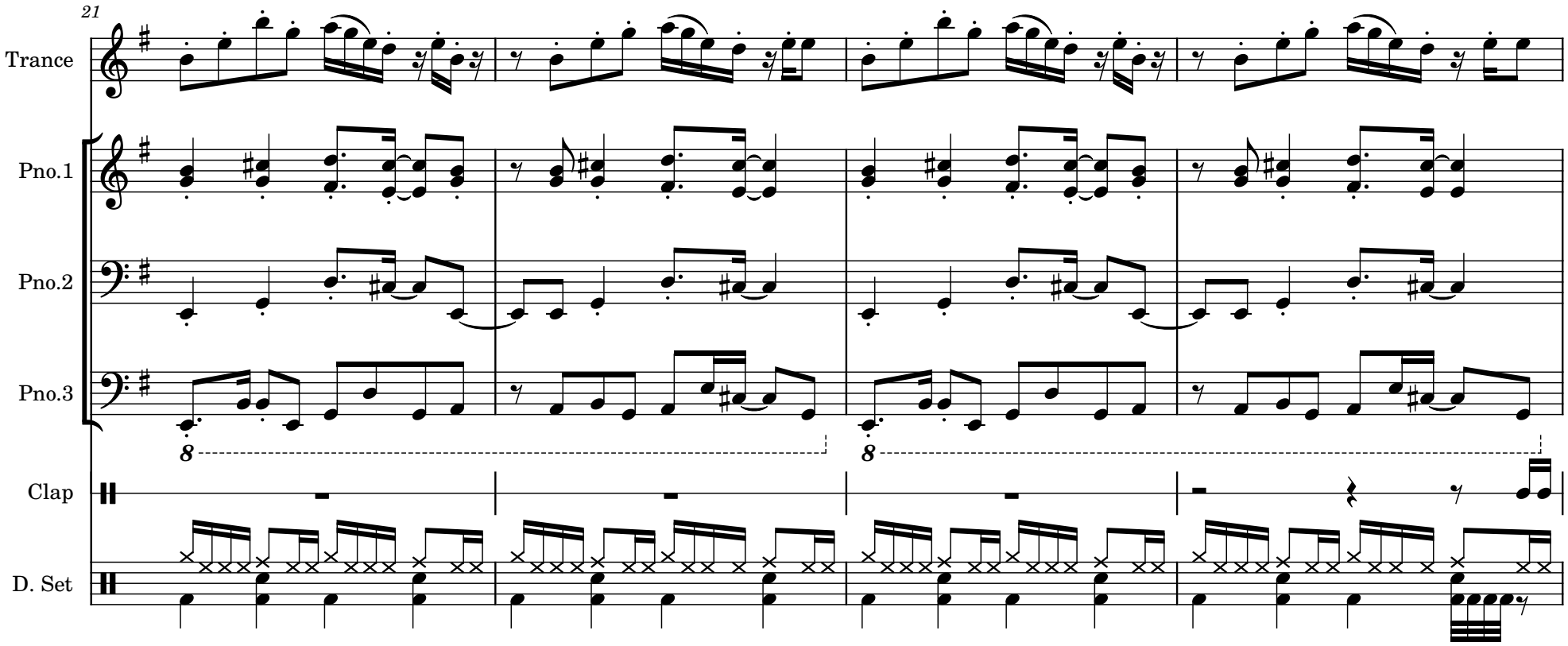
The entire A section is composed using 2-4 measure loops that layer on top of each other, which is why you see two "piano" tracks. This is idiomatic of electronic dance music, which is appropriate as the battle is a dance-off.

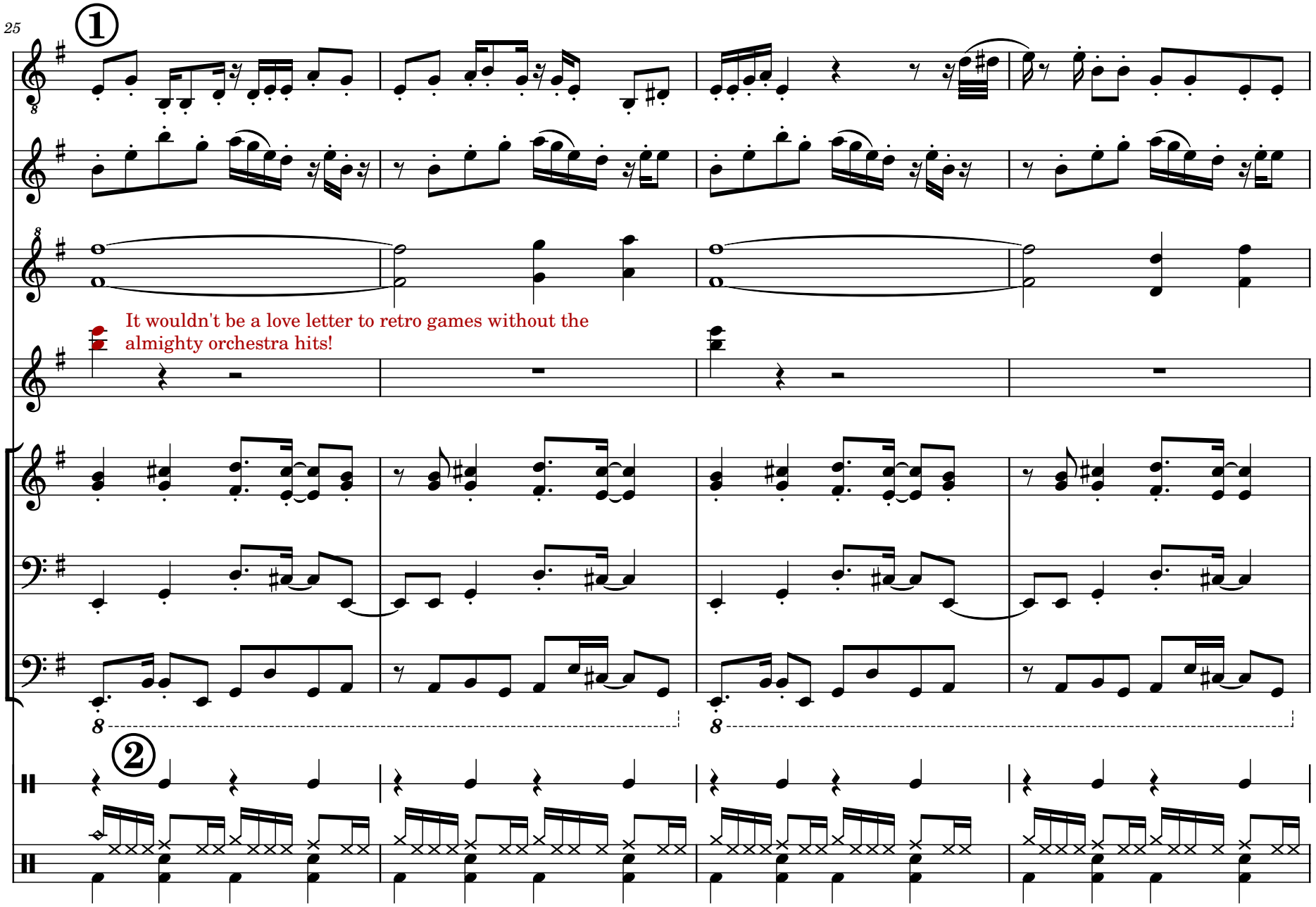


(1) - This texture is very dense (and there are more layers on the way), so Fox ensures the rhythm stays intelligible by aligning the syncopation so avoid *too* complex of a composite rhythm (see the colored notes above)
(2) - The strings are the first of many timbres that will introduce a very "disco" feel to the track. Not only is this just an immense amount of fun, but it fits the situation to a T.

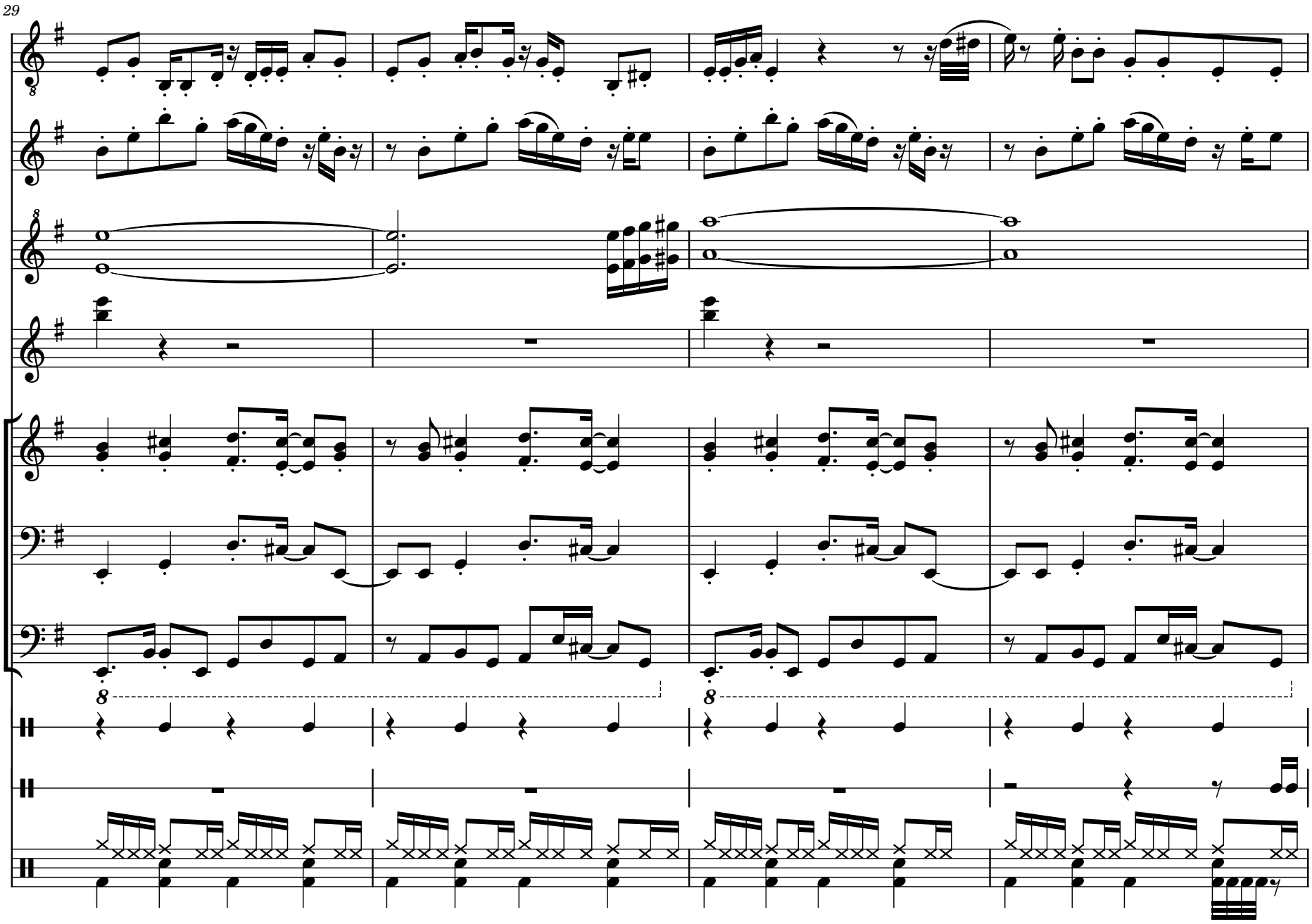

13
Strs.
Pno.1
ties match up, keeping coherency
Pno.2
Pno.3
Clap
D. Set

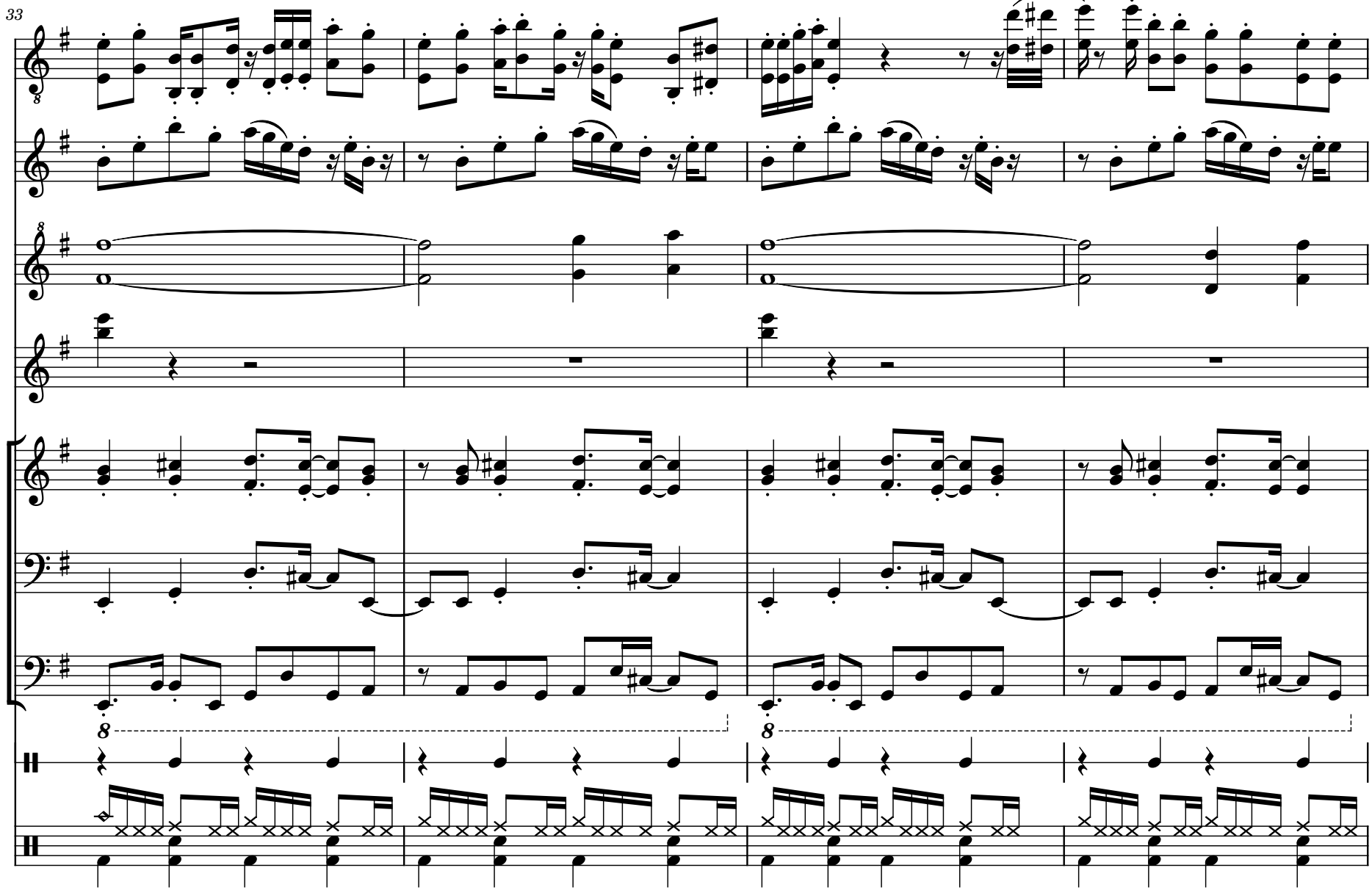

17
Trance
Pno.1
Pno.2
Pno.3
8
8
D. Set

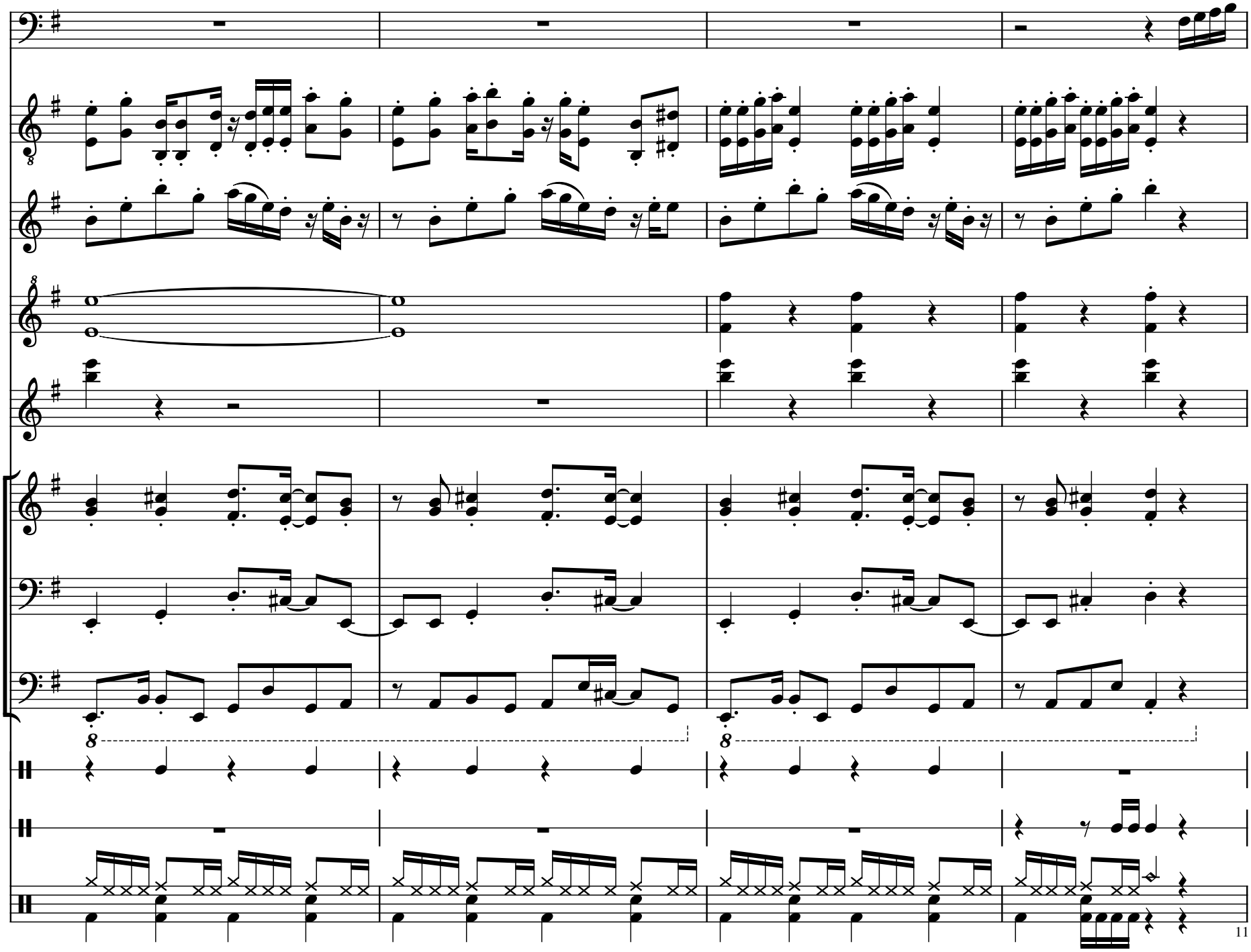

21
Trance
Pno.1
Pno.2
Pno.3
8
8
Clap
D. Set

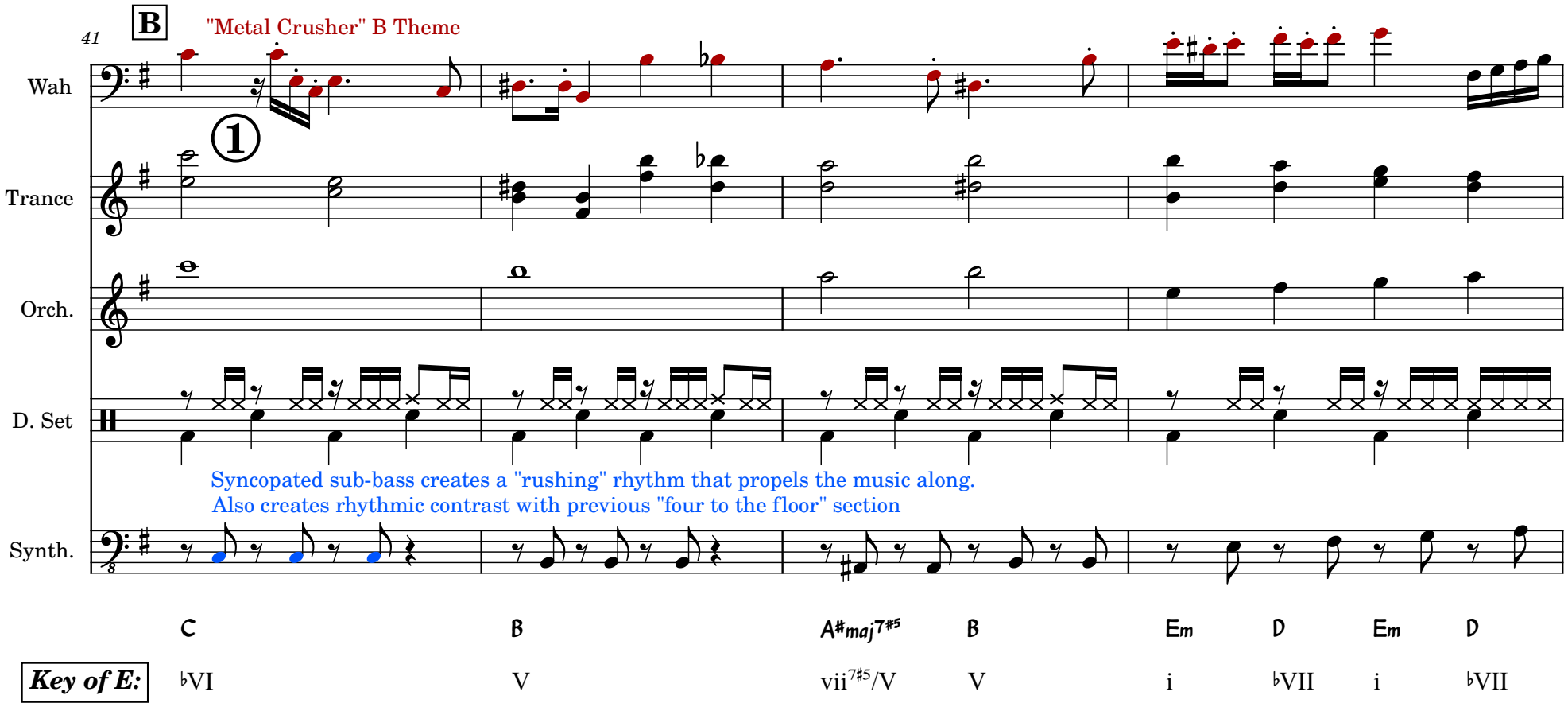


(1) - I'm not entirely sure what sound Fox used for this lead, but the articulation of the phrase is meant to sound very robotic. Liberal use of staccatissimo, pitch bends, and other little intricacies make digital sound come alive.
(2) - I believe this sound effect is the "Mario Jumping" sound effect. Not entirely sure...


29
Rob. Nz
Trance
Strs.
Orch.
Pno.1
Pno.2
Pno.3
SFX
Clap
D. Set

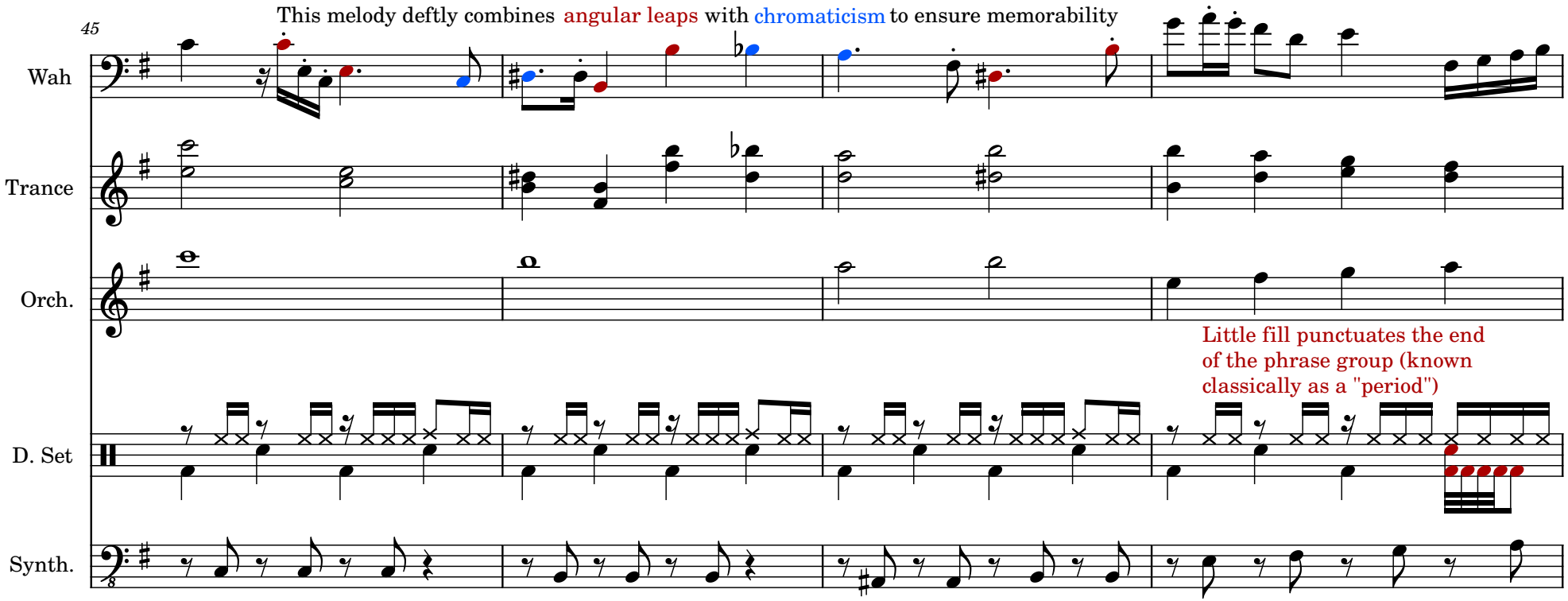

33
Rob. Nz
Trance
Strs.
Orch.
Pno.1
Pno.2
Pno.3
SFX
D. Set


Wah
Rob. Nz
Trance
Strs.
Orch.
Pno.1
Pno.2
Pno.3
SFX
Clap
D. Set



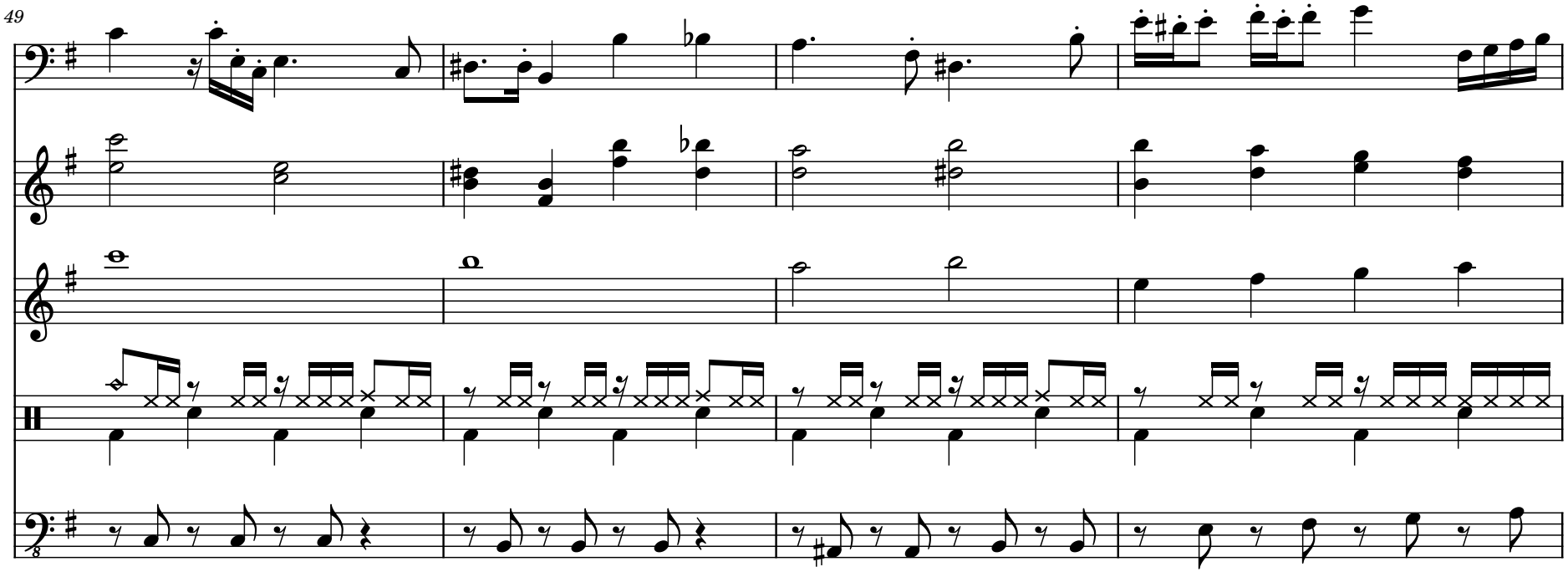
The B section switches to the parallel minor and the track takes a dark, intimidating turn; it's as if the music is reminding the player that - while this is fun and all - this David Bowie robot is still trying to murder you :-)

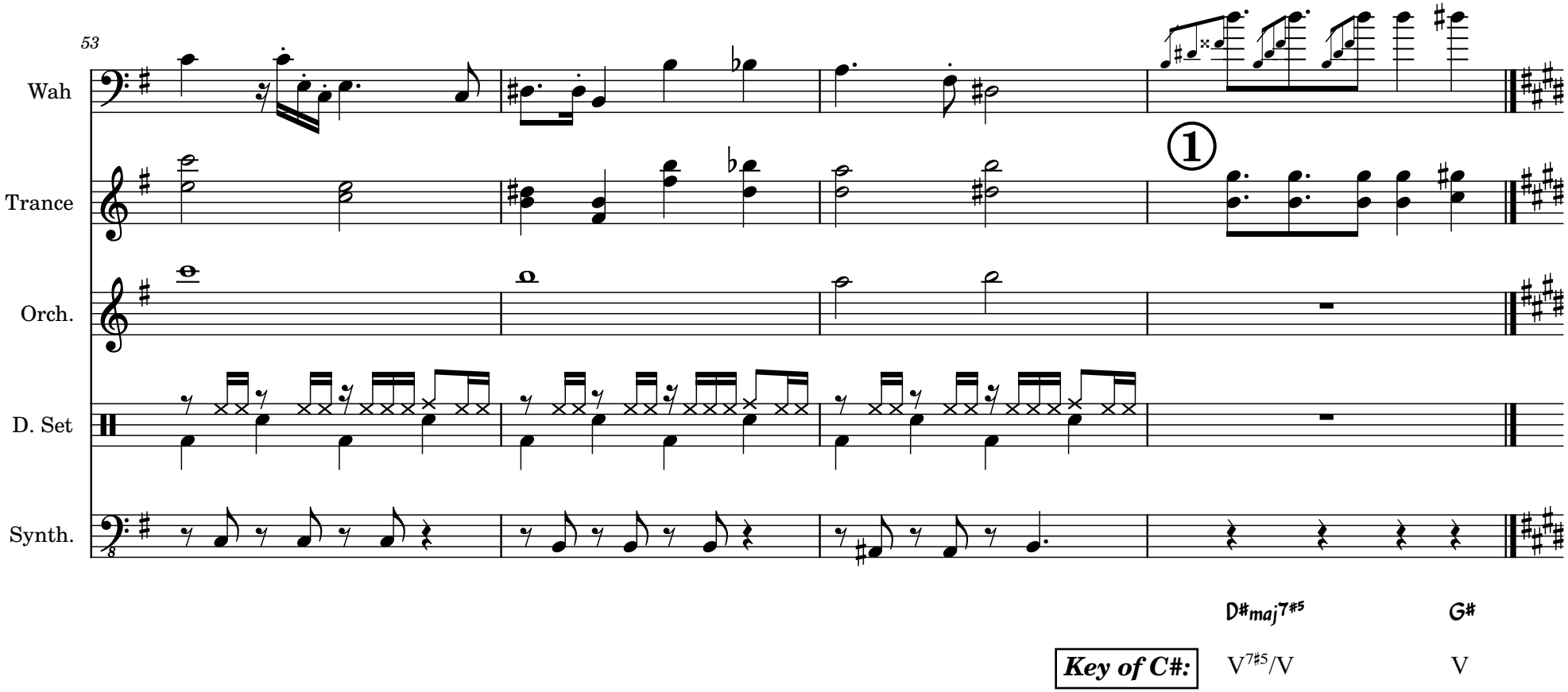
(1) - The second leitmotif emerges, this time the theme of Mettaton itself. This theme comprises the B section of "Metal Crusher", the battle theme that accompanies the various skirmishes with Mettaton that have preceded this climactic dance-off. Here the theme is largely intact (ensuring the player will recognize it), but it's subtly altered to fit this track's needs.


45
This melody deftly combines angular leaps with chromaticism to ensure memorability
Wah
Trance
Orch.
Little fill punctuates the end of the phrase group (known classically as a "period")
D. Set
Synth.

Same

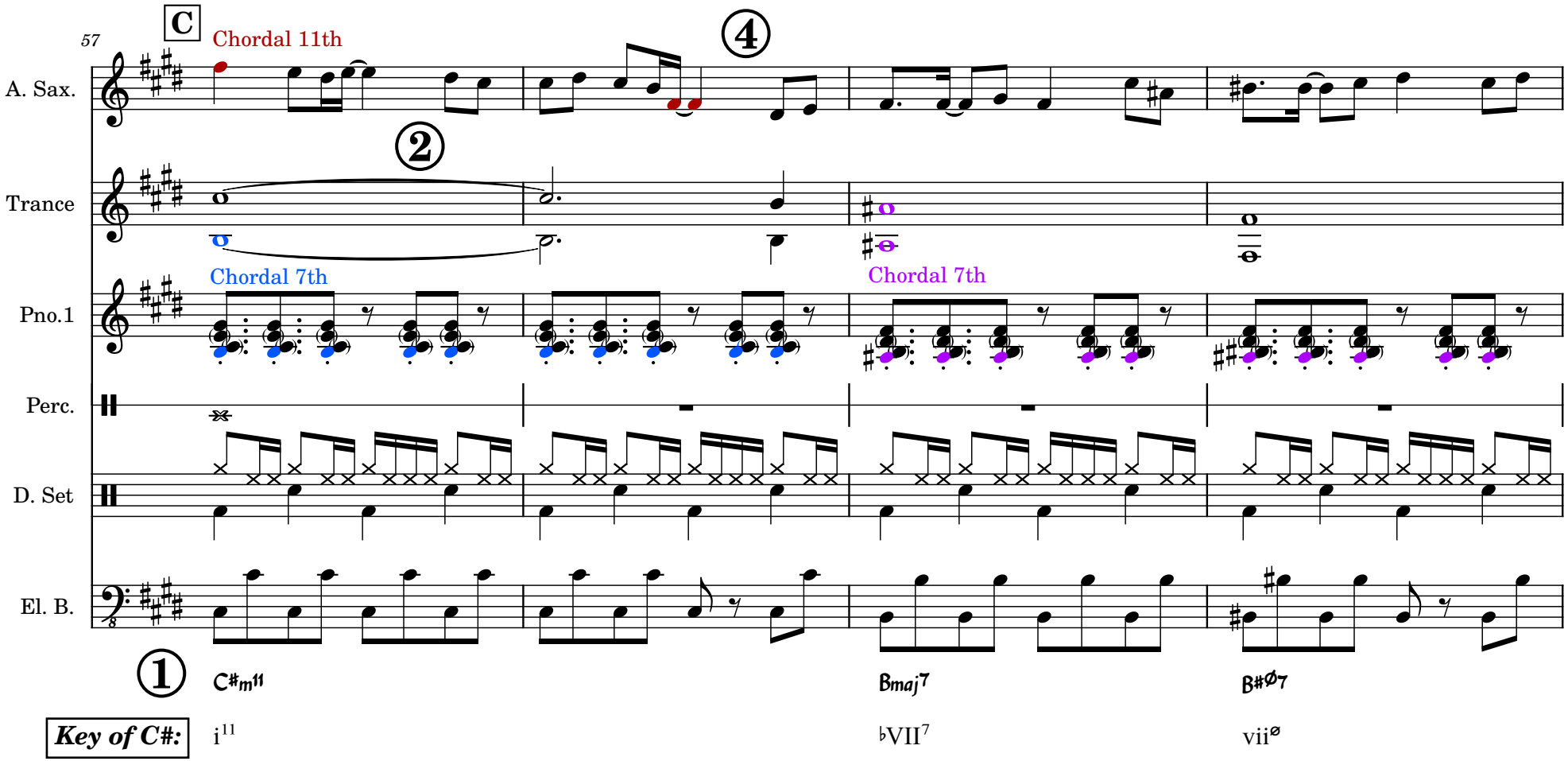
Same


49
Wah
Trance
Orch.
D. Set
Synth.



(1) - A sudden, startling modulation comes out of nowhere, injecting levity and serious energy into the already frantic pace of the track. Despite the abrupt shift in register and tone, the progression is a logical secondary dominant cadence, utilizing a chromatically altered chord (the maj7#5) to progress to the dominant of the target key of C# (a minor third away from our home key, E).

Why does that matter? Well, Fox wanted to create a sudden and exhilirating effect, and there's little better way to do that - harmonically speaking - than a fast modulation to a chromatic mediant!



(1) - Don't let the key signature fool you: we're in the Dorian mode again, characterized by the bVII and ii chords. Fox also utilizes 7ths and extended tones to drench this section in a modernity. The tonic 11th chord feels right at home with the retro, disco vibe.

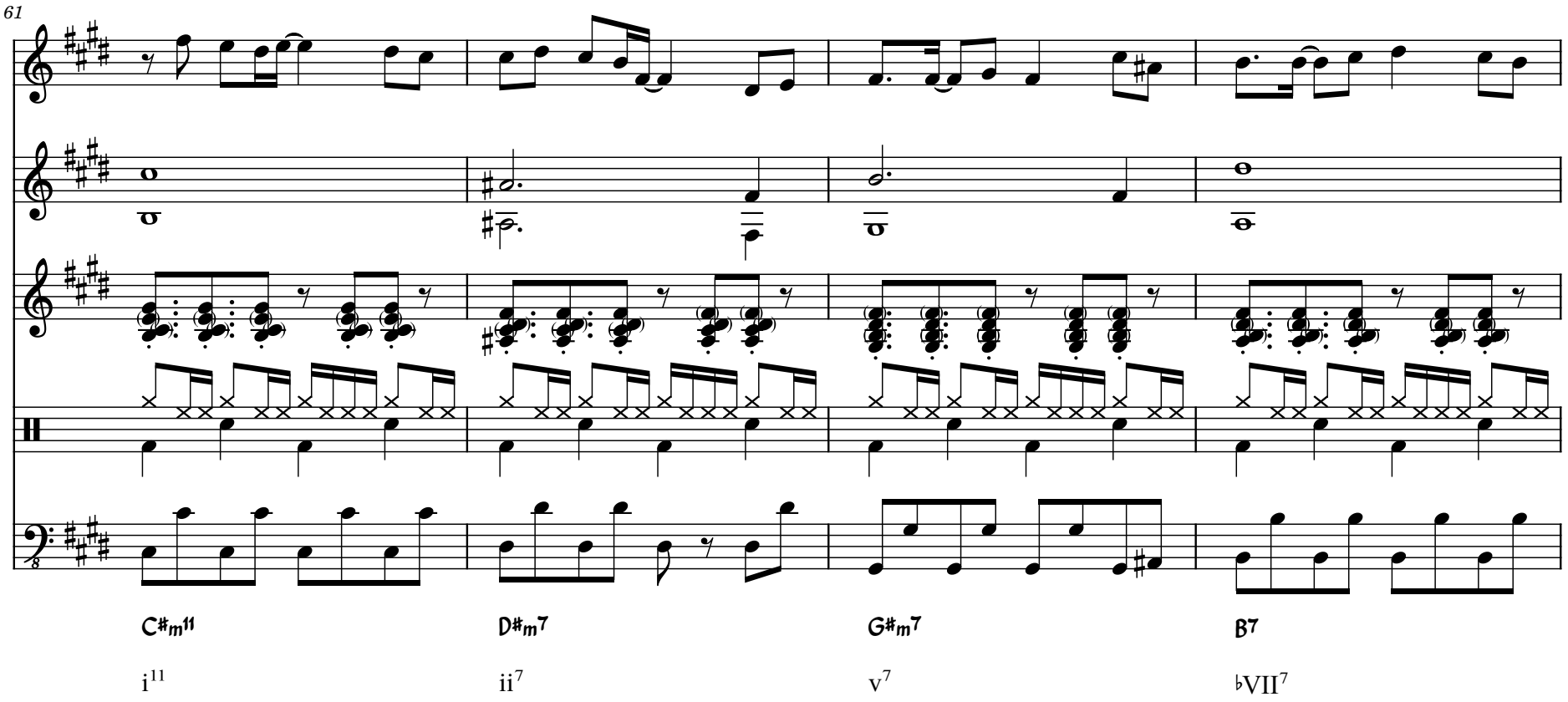
(2) - The instrumentation of this section is:

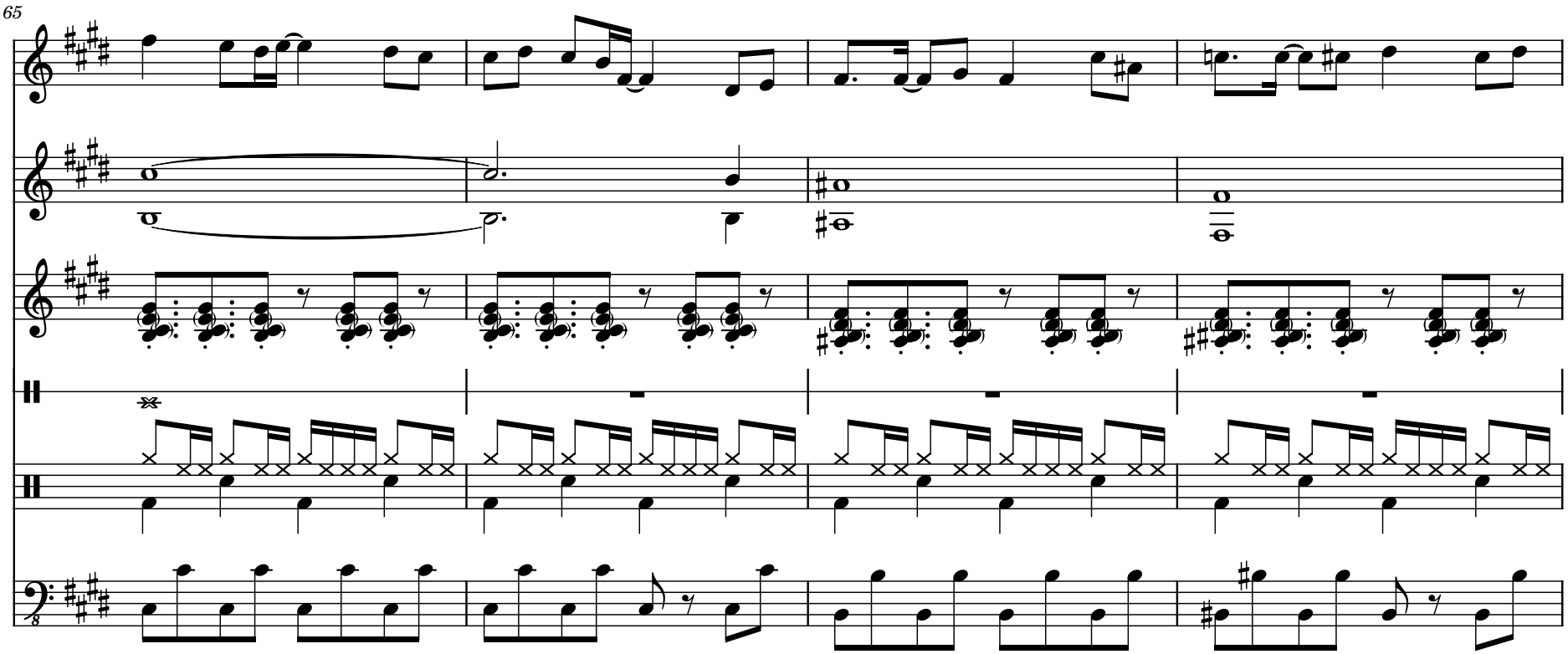
a) A *great* contrast with the previous section, which is not only very fun (and funny) but *engaging*.

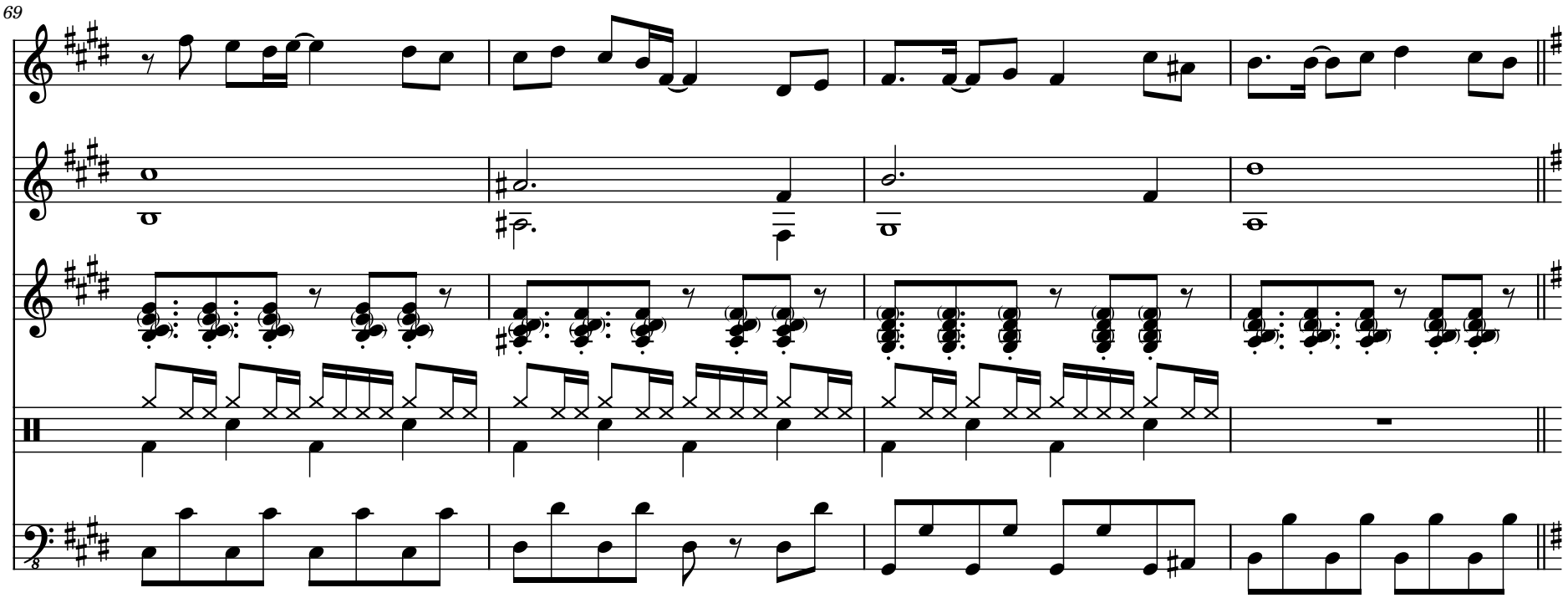
b) An over-the-top tip of the hat to the "disco" sound.

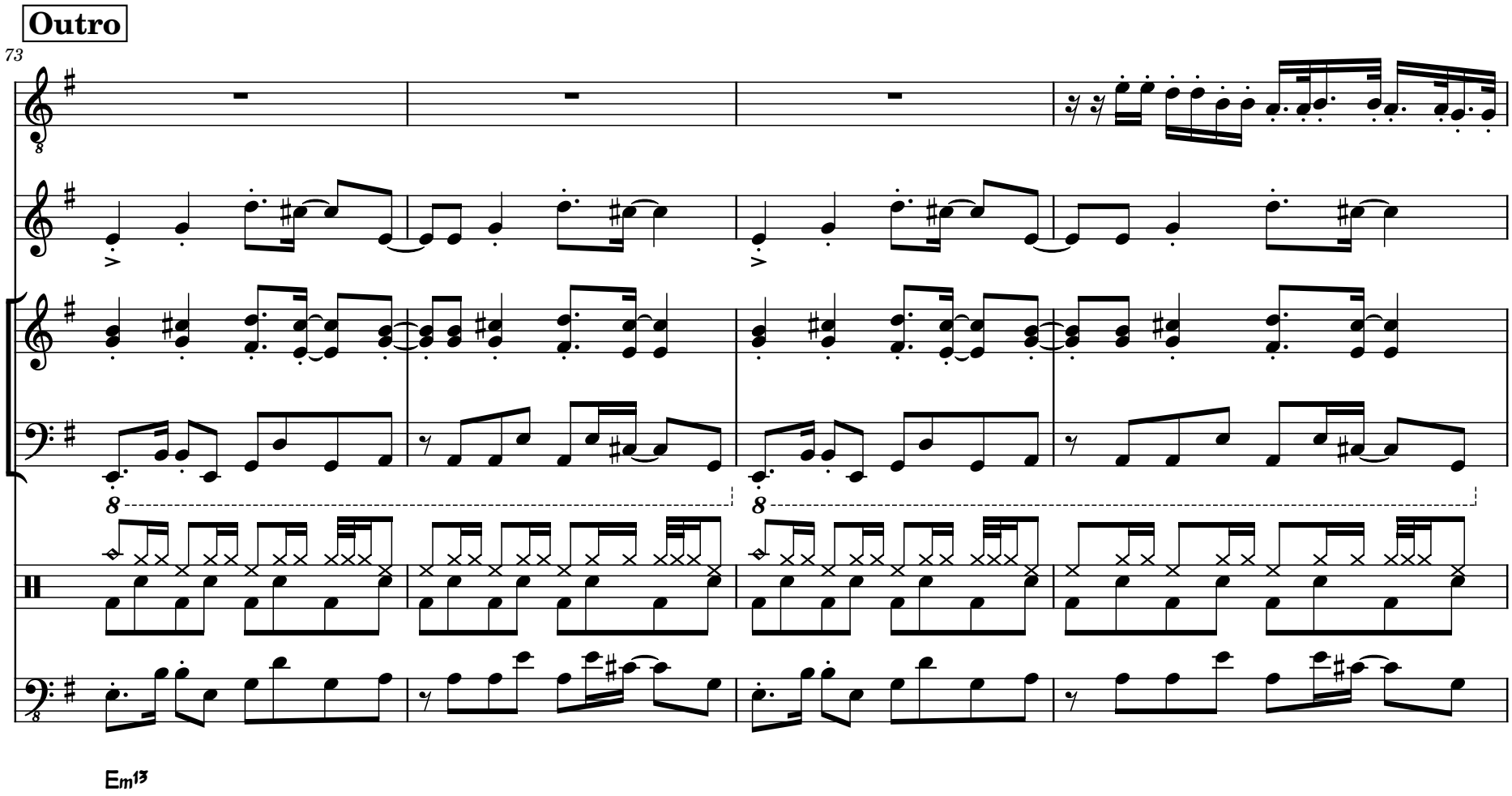
(3) - The piano stabs are entirely in Clave rhythm. It's a dance-off, so a dance rhythm seems appropriate!

(4) - Aaaand, lest we forget...the third and final leitmotif appears in this section, this time quoted from the track "It's Showtime!", itself a silly piece that plays when Mettaton broadcasts various reality-TV murder-plots starring the player (*hard to explain, I know...*). Point is: the silliness of the leitmotif is re-woven into an entirely different context. Why does this matter? It ***mirrors the evolution of Mettaton's character***. It's no longer a silly, comedic foil - it is now a full-on, bad-ass dancing machine of death ready to help you meet your maker in style, baby! (Still comedic, but bad-ass nonetheless...)


61
A. Sax.
Trance
Pno.1
D. Set
El. B.
C♯m11
D♯m7
G♯m7
B7
i11
ii7
v7
♭VII7


65
A. Sax.
Trance
Pno.1
Perc.
D. Set
El. B.

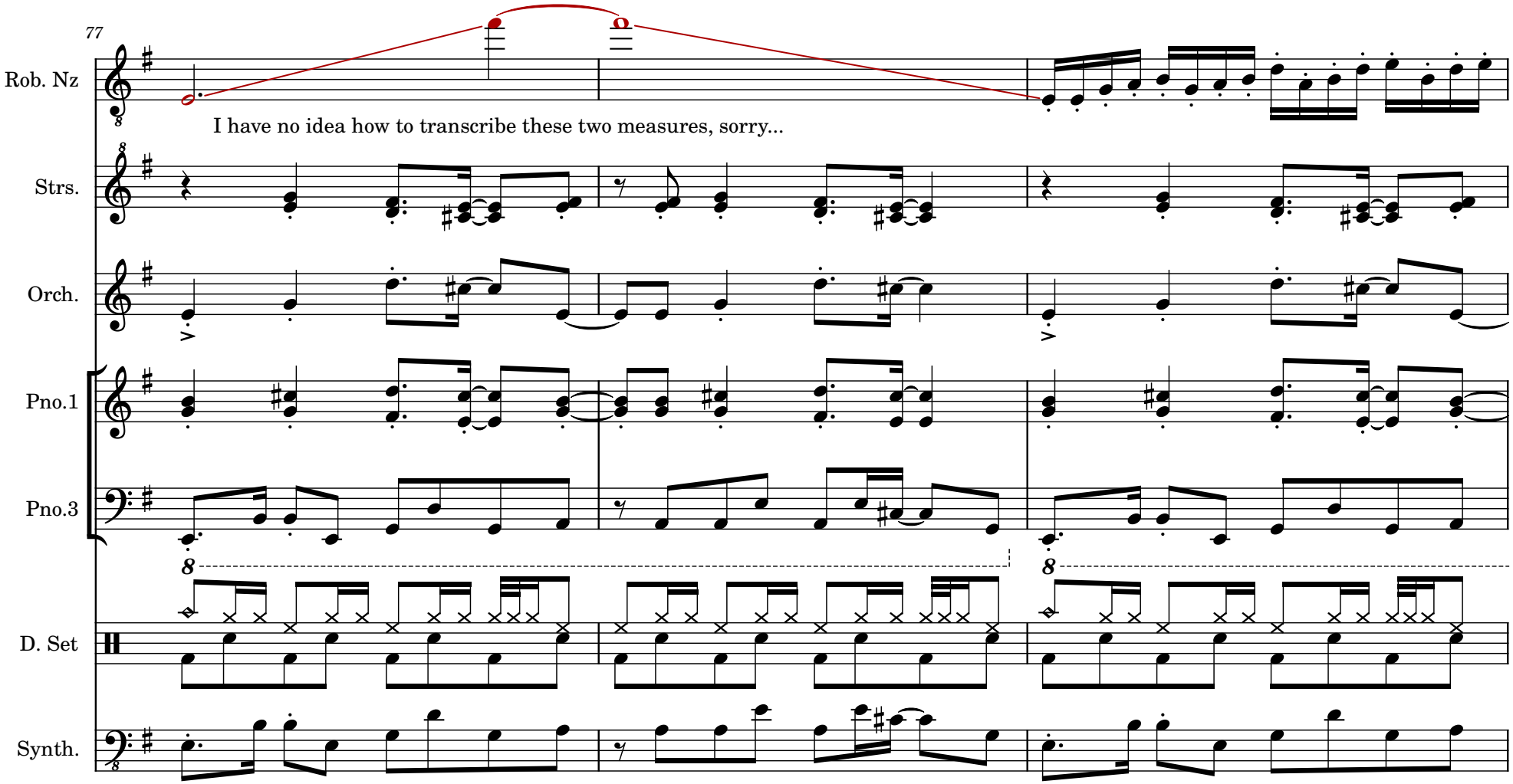

69
A. Sax.
Trance
Pno.1
D. Set
El. B.

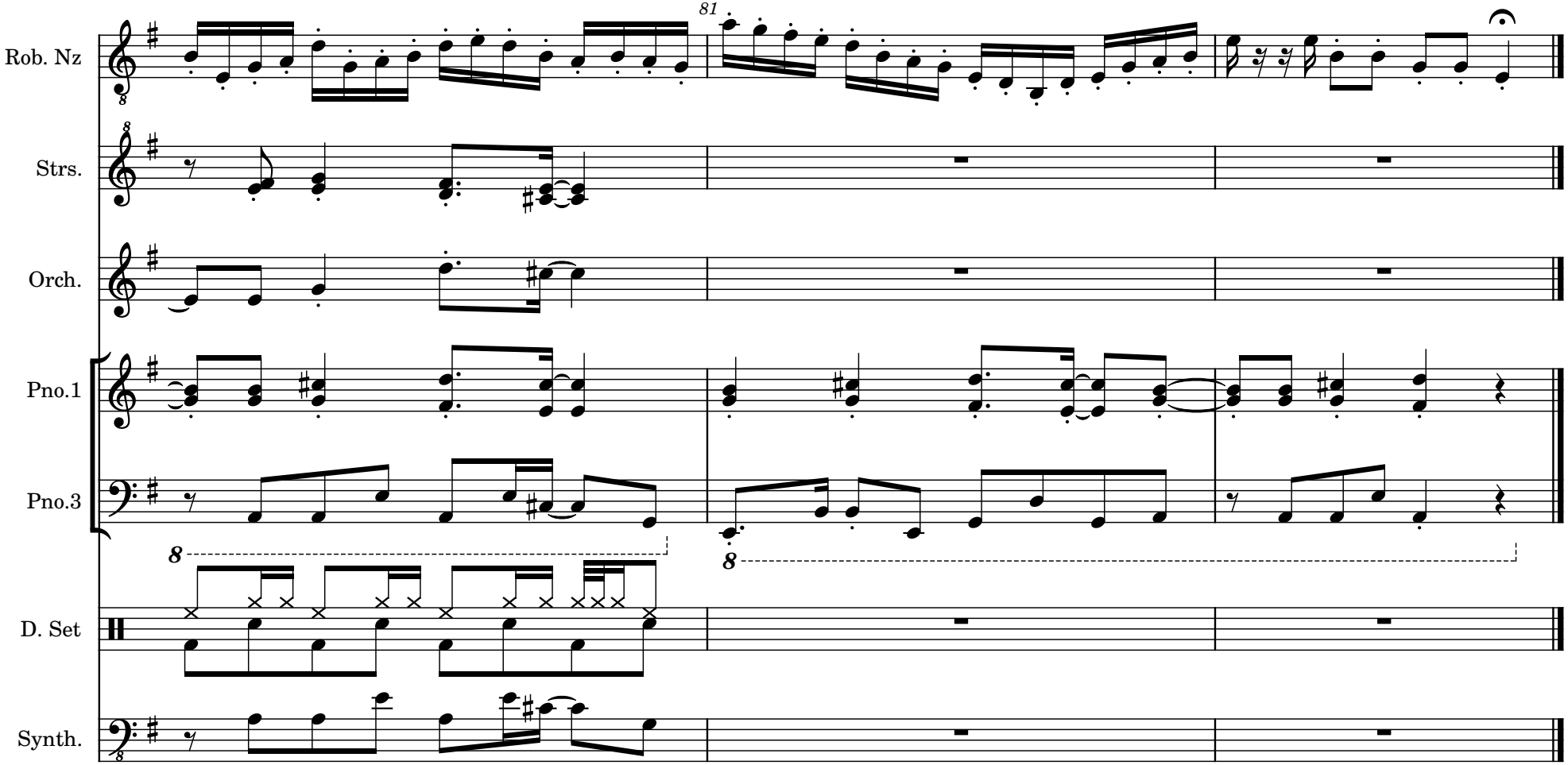


And we're back in E Dorian. The A section's material is shuffled around to intensify the timbre and propel the listener towards the ecstatic finale. Other than pointing out the guitar-solo like "cadenza" in the lead voice, there's little left to be said about this track, theory-wise. However, there *is* something to be said about why this track *just works*:

Quite simply, it's music from Toby Fox's expansive and unfiltered imagination. No market testing, no trend-chasing, no playing it safe. Undertale - and its music - has a place in video game history not because it's a love letter to old, nostalgic games or because it has a particularly enthusiastic fanbase. No, it's because the game - and its music - is authentic, incredibly well conceived and written, and crafted with a level of depth, heart, and integrity that's quite lacking from 90-95% of AAA games.

Okay, I couldn't resist gushing a little about Undertale...c'est la vie!


77
Rob. Nz
I have no idea how to transcribe these two measures, sorry...
Strs.
Orch.
Pno.1
Pno.3
D. Set
Synth.



This track actually *does* loop in the game after this point. Perhaps a point of criticism that the loop point could be better, but I honestly didn't notice it while playing...I was too busy having fun!