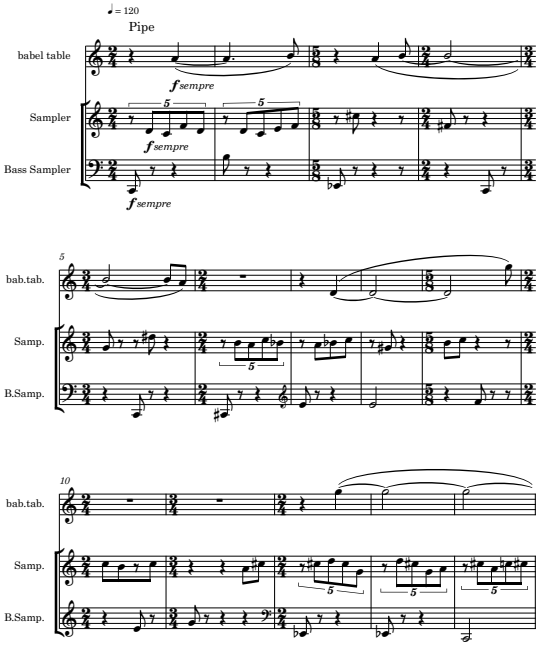
ME102

MA BEL

for babel table and computer



www.michael-edwards.org

MICHAEL EDWARDS

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ME102

programme note

ma bel was written for Jean-Francois Laporte and his composite compressed-air instrument, the *Babel Table*. This name works in both French and English, if the word order is reversed. And the connection to the Old Testament myth explaining the origin of the world's different tongues is clear.

The title *ma bel* transposes merely one character of *ba-bel* but in doing so offers several meanings to speakers of different languages: as a homonym in French (*ma belle*) it could refer to *my beautiful (wife, daughter, belle-sœur, etc.)* or imply the more complete *ma belle vie*; in English it could be misheard as *marble* (the stone but also the child's toy) or refer to *Mabel*, the woman's name; but in Arabic *ma bel* means *what but*, after which I particularly enjoy question marks and perhaps even a *why?*—good things to ask about a piece such as this.

So then: so few symbols, and even fewer syllables, but so much meaning and context. And *Babel* connects back beautifully to this in that, obscured from its mythological context, it refers more generally to a confusing mélange (as in mixture, not the Viennese coffee :): a mêlée, in the non-violent sense, of sounds and voices or a noisy, confused scene in general. Such is *ma bel*: a plethora of unrelated samples mixed with the potent sounds of Jean-Francois' instrument, all driven by a score which is digital yet conventionally notated.

What you see or read, however, is by no means what you get (I'm referring now particularly to the score). The symbols need even more translation, interpretation, and *making sense of* than usual. And that's not just the musician's job but the audiences' too (as always), given the sound structures on offer.

And further: *ma bel* integrates strongly emotive vocal utterances from a certain Austrian female; samples that are prelingual but often guttural (synonyms perhaps here: *before the tongue*, as in before language as well as the muscle)—even guttural in both senses: articulated in the throat and perhaps unpleasant or strange—and most definitely communicative, in a nonsensical way, *bien sûr*.

This is what music is: by no means a language but nevertheless able communicate or rather provoke a wide variety of experiences, and transporting meaning (or not) to individuals formed both collectively and uniquely. (*Ahh... ma bel(le musique)!*)

ma bel :: notes/instructions

Duration

8:30

Babel Table

1. The four groups of *Babel Table* instruments used are Pipe, Bols (both, ad lib.), Telescopiques, and Insects.
2. In all cases but the pipe, which membrane is played is left to the decision of the performer.
3. It is assumed that the *Babel Table* instruments will be amplified and panned to the front speakers only.

Max

1. Sampling rate is 48khz.
2. Max version 8 is required.
3. You will need the ICST Ambisonics package: launch the MaxMSP package manager and download it from there.
4. As a lot of samples are pre-loaded by the *ma bel* patch, even on fast computers it takes quite a while to load.
5. Once the patch is loaded, press the big X toggle (or press the space bar) and the score playback will start along with the MIDI sequence after the user-selectable countdown.
6. At the start of each section new samples and processing parameters will be loaded/routed automatically.
7. The score and sample playback speed can be changed with the horizontal slider.
8. During rehearsal you can jump to different sections of the piece using the given drop-down menu. This skips to predetermined points in the score and MIDI sequence. N.B. As of 22.12.21 the video playback no longer works in MaxMSP. Instead score images are used. These are not currently updated by this menu but can be configured upon request.

Output configuration

1. Output is to be selected from a range of loudspeaker configurations: simple stereo up to octophony and beyond (3rd order ambisonics-configured half/full domes).
2. Stereo performances are not optimal with the current ambisonic setup, but may be useful for rehearsal purposes.
3. Ambisonic movement types and parameters are set for each of the six sections of the piece, along with sample sets, etc.
4. Saved along with the ambisonics settings is the speaker configuration. This should be selected from the drop-down menu and saved in the preset object (shift click on the respective rectangle). This must be done for each of the 6 sections otherwise the outputs may be mis-configured on section changes.
5. A click track is sent out of output 17. This is also not controlled by the drop-down menu to skip to different parts of the piece but could also be configured upon request.

Balance

1. The performance will need someone on the mixing desk to balance levels.
2. Overall sound level is consistently high (but not dangerously so).
3. Maximum impact should be retained throughout, especially for the more percussive sounds/samples.
4. The samples in the computer part must be in equal balance to the amplified *Babel Table*.

Score

1. The A4 score is for rehearsal purposes: during the performance it will be read from the video presentation in the Max patch.
2. The pitches in the computer parts are mapped to a sampler banks so there is not usually a relationship between the perceived and notated pitches.
3. Similarly, pitches in the *Babel Table* part are relative, with middle D being the lowest and B5 the highest pitches notated.
4. The score indicates which *Babel* instruments are in use. The main instrument(s) come first; these are to be played by following the rhythms and relative pitches in the score.
5. Instruments following the main instrument(s) in parentheses continue to run and produce sound but are generally not interacted with while another instrument is focused upon (unless a multi-player performance allows it; see below).
6. Any instrument not mentioned but playing in the previous section should be turned off. These will be indicated using ‘strike-through’ font.

7. About five bars before a new instrument (set) is to be used, its name is indicated in the score in red, with square brackets and an arrow.

Interpretation

The *Babel Table* part does not in any way represent what should *sound*, rather it is an action line. When learning this piece, you should first find a variety of short and long sound events for each of the four instruments. You should then find a background or *passive* sound which should/could play continuously when the instrument is on but not in focus (i.e. indicated in parentheses in the score).

From the long and short notes you then find lower and higher pitched events. Bear in mind that when you see a note in the score, whether it is short or long, it means you attempt to find *or change* a sound. Whether the sound actually occurs or changes or not depends upon the state of the instrument and what you attempt to achieve. Furthermore, rests and rest bars by no means indicate that the instrument will be silent, rather that you are no longer necessarily performing an action—you could however be damping the instrument, or it could simply be playing on before being interrupted or changed by the next note. In all cases, however, of the utmost importance is an attempt to realise the contrapuntal exchange with the two computer/sampler parts.

What seems to work best are more 'extreme', high pitched, and noisy sounds. Aim for maximum impact sounds similar to highly distorted guitars and the grinding of heavy machinery. Held 'fundamental' tones don't work so well (particularly on the *telescopiques*). Where possible, I would avoid allowing such continuous tones to remain unchanged, even where instruments in parentheses continue to run. One exception would be when you find a highly-distorted or high-frequency sound—that can be held for a while, especially if it's dissonant and possible to hold whilst performing other actions. If there is more than one player, and one person is playing an instrument in parentheses, feel free to improvise with and especially interrupt the sound until going back to 'playing the notes'.

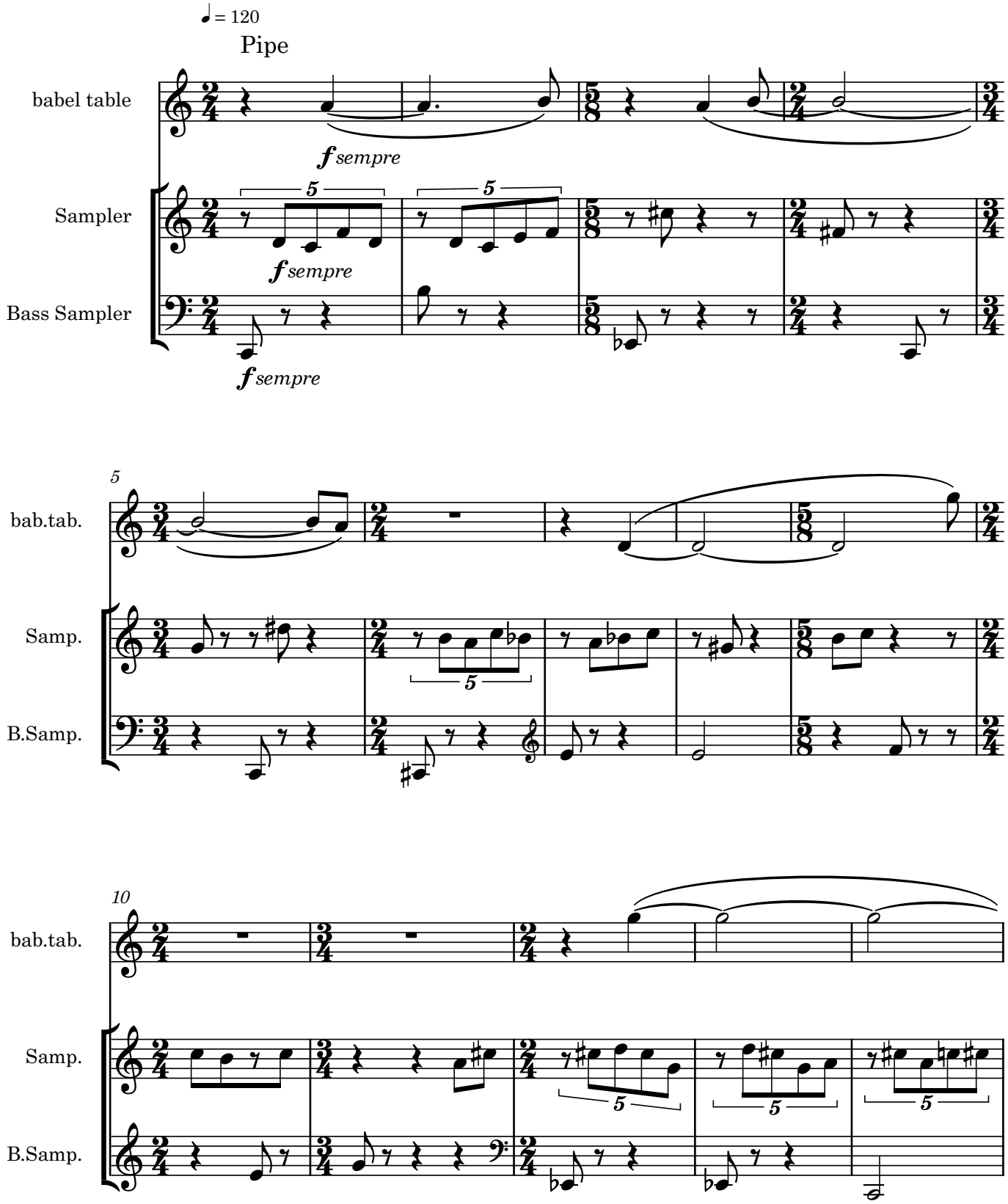
Coping with the tempo

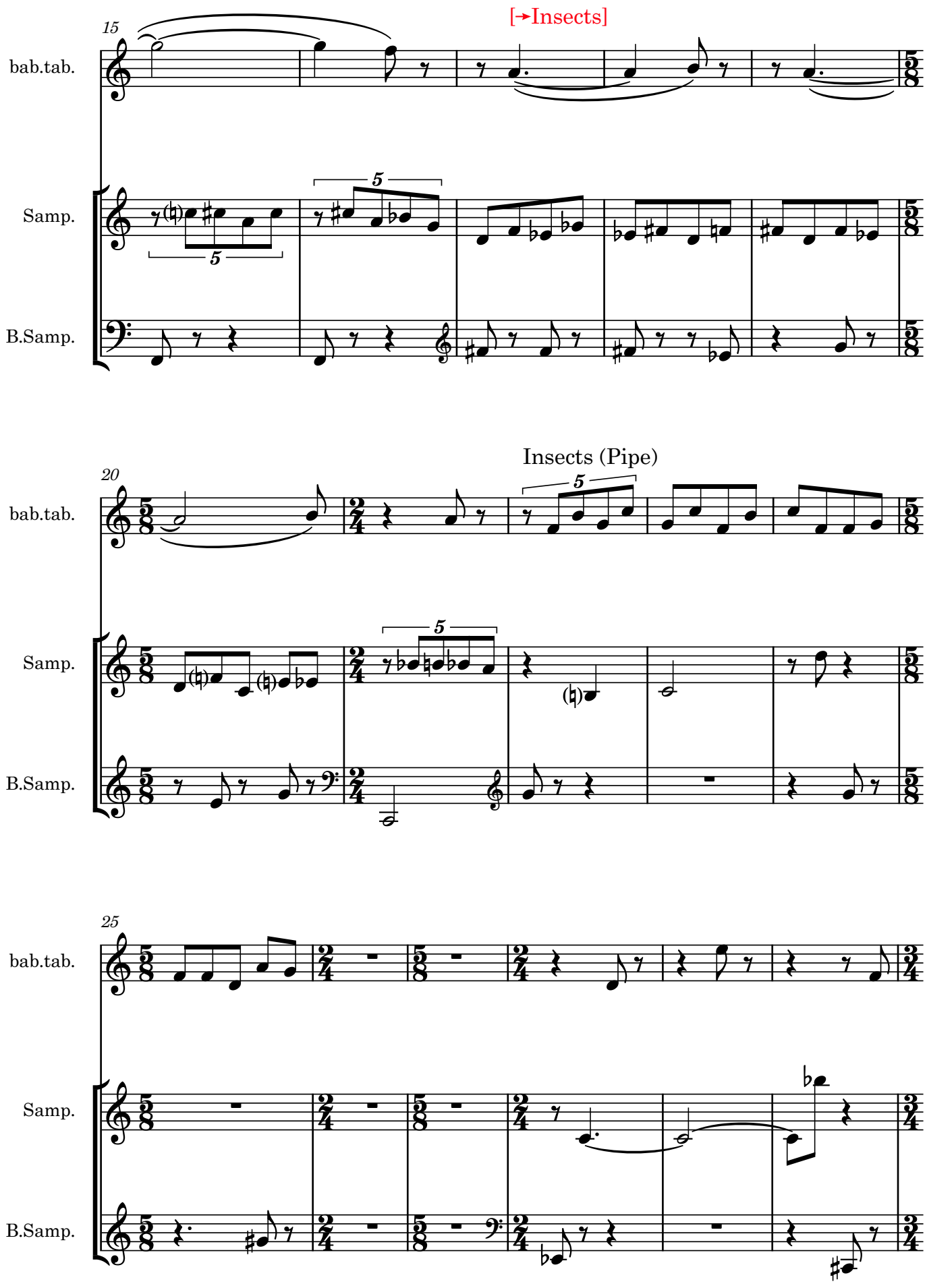
There are a lot of actions to perform and the tempo is high. If you feel yourself getting left behind, simply let the instrument(s) sound through a few bars and aim for an upcoming action bar to restart in time with the computer.

for Jean-Francois Laporte

ma bel

Michael Edwards 2019

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B.Samp.
20
Insects (Pipe)
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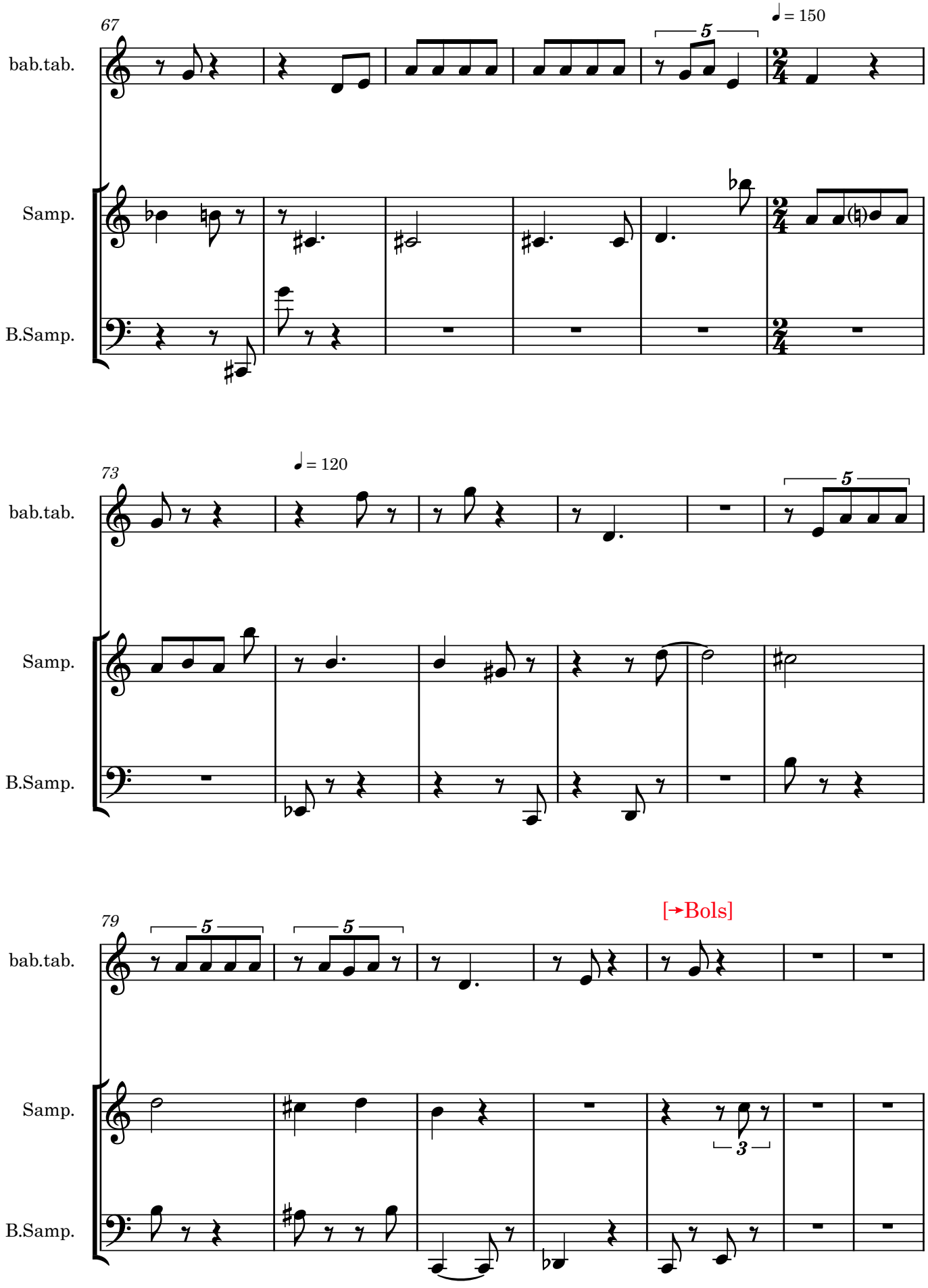
Samp.
B.Samp.
25
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.


31
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.
37
[→Telescopiques]
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.
43
Telescopiques (Insects Pipe)
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.


49
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.
55
[→Pipe]
61
Pipe (Telescopiques ~~Insects~~)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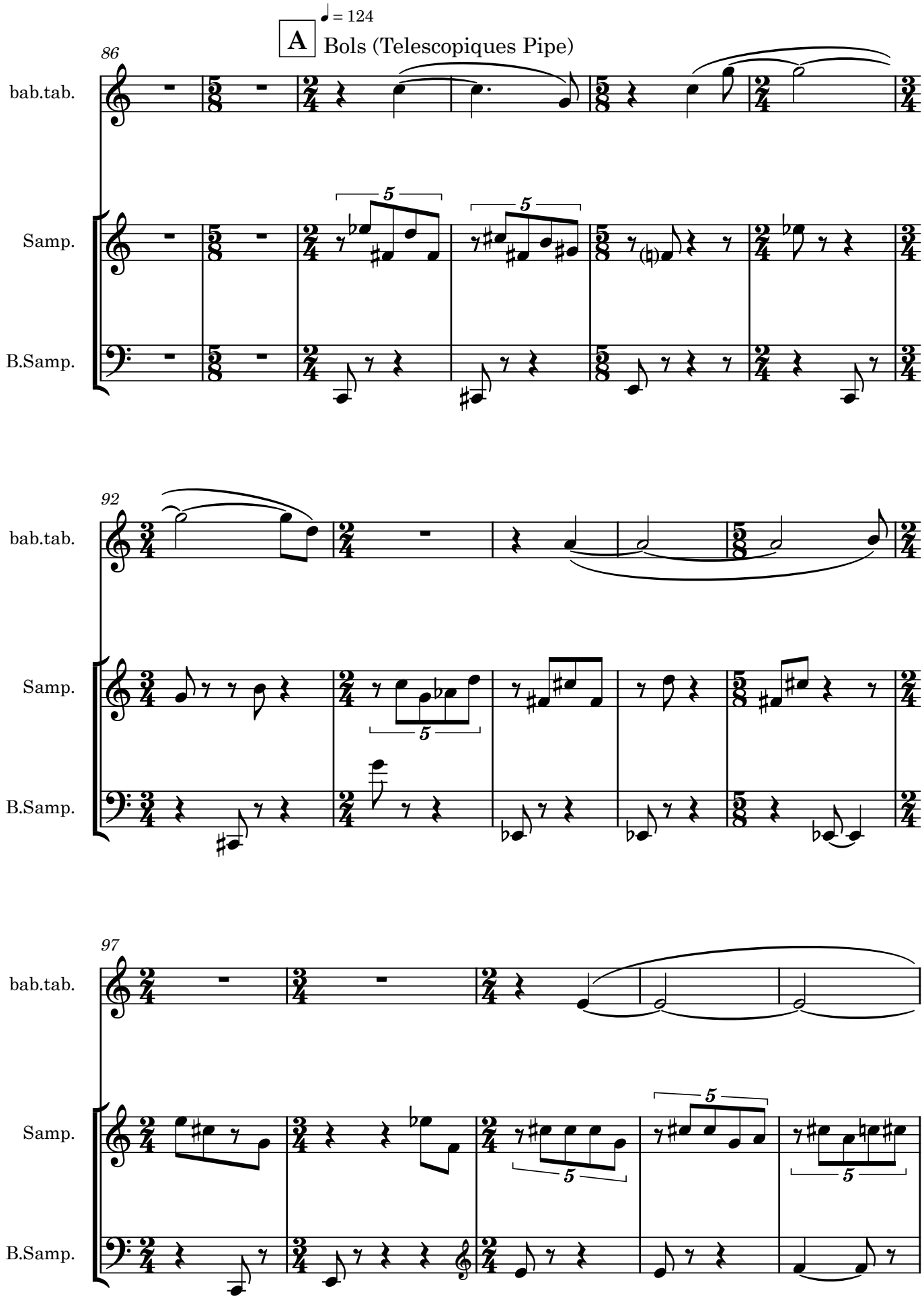
♩ = 150
5
73
♩ = 120
79
[→Bols]
3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92
97
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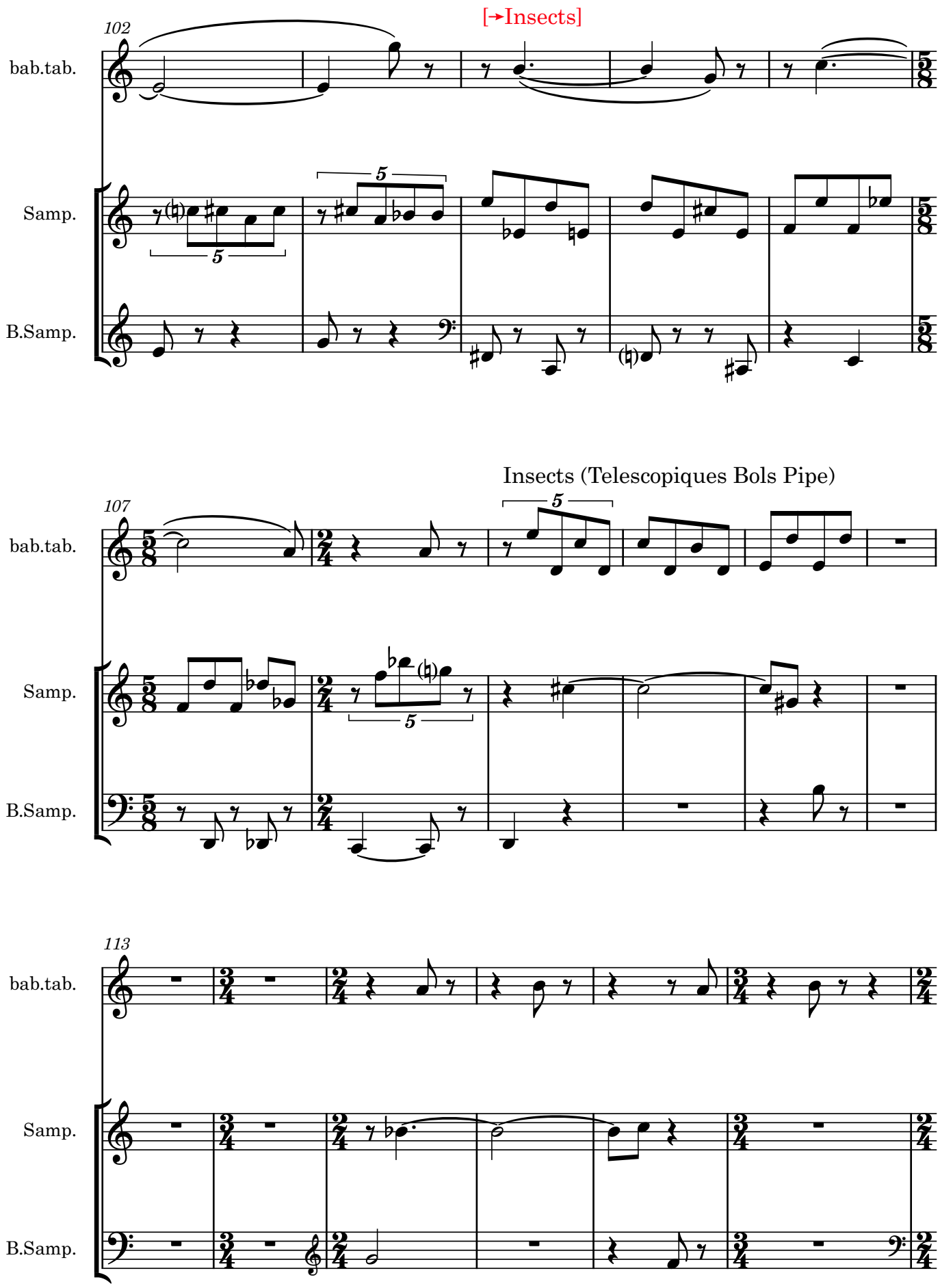
B.Samp.


[→Insects]
102
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.
Insects (Telescopiques Bols Pipe)
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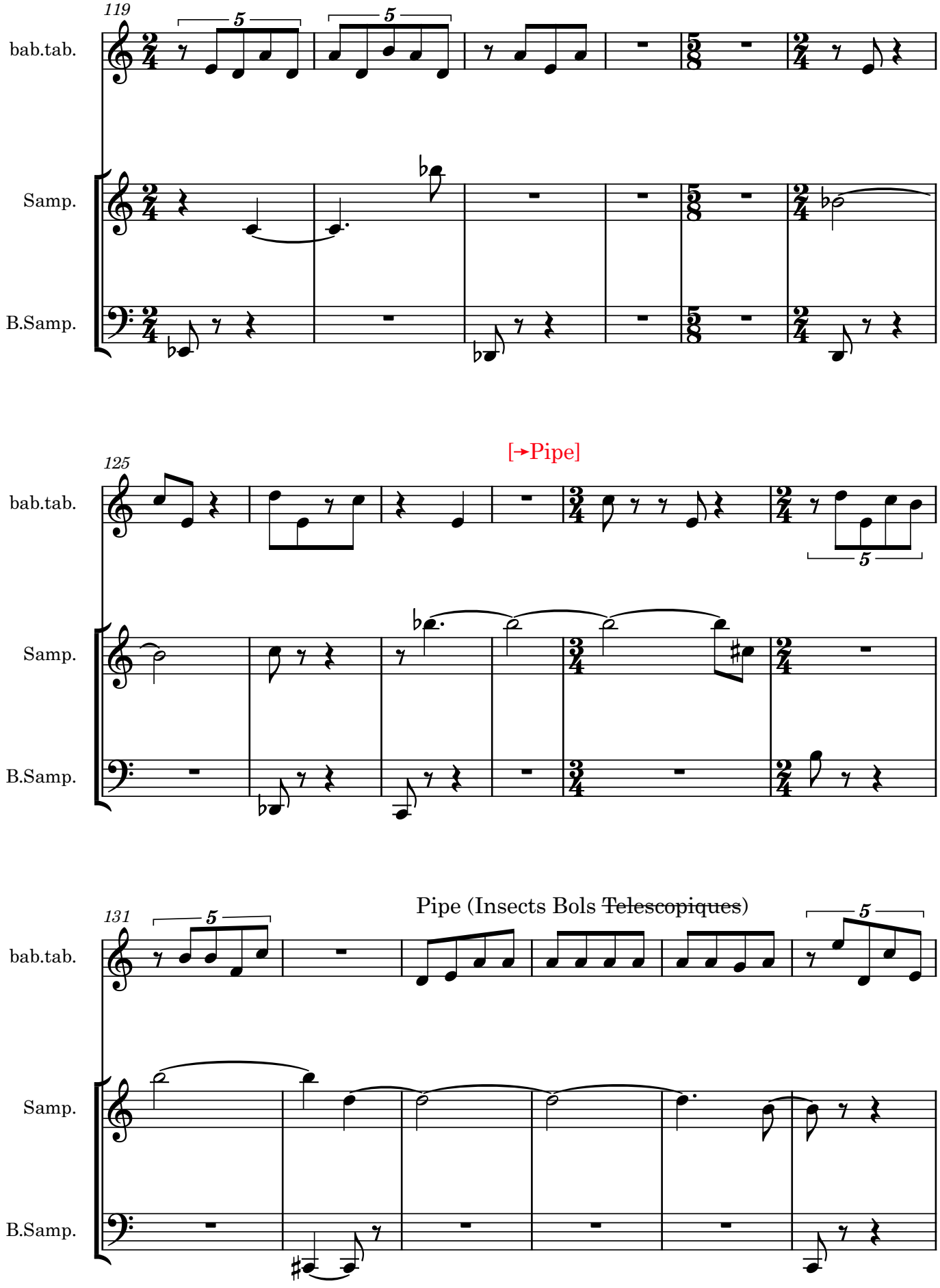
Samp.
B.Samp.
113
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.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B.Samp.
125
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B.Samp.
131
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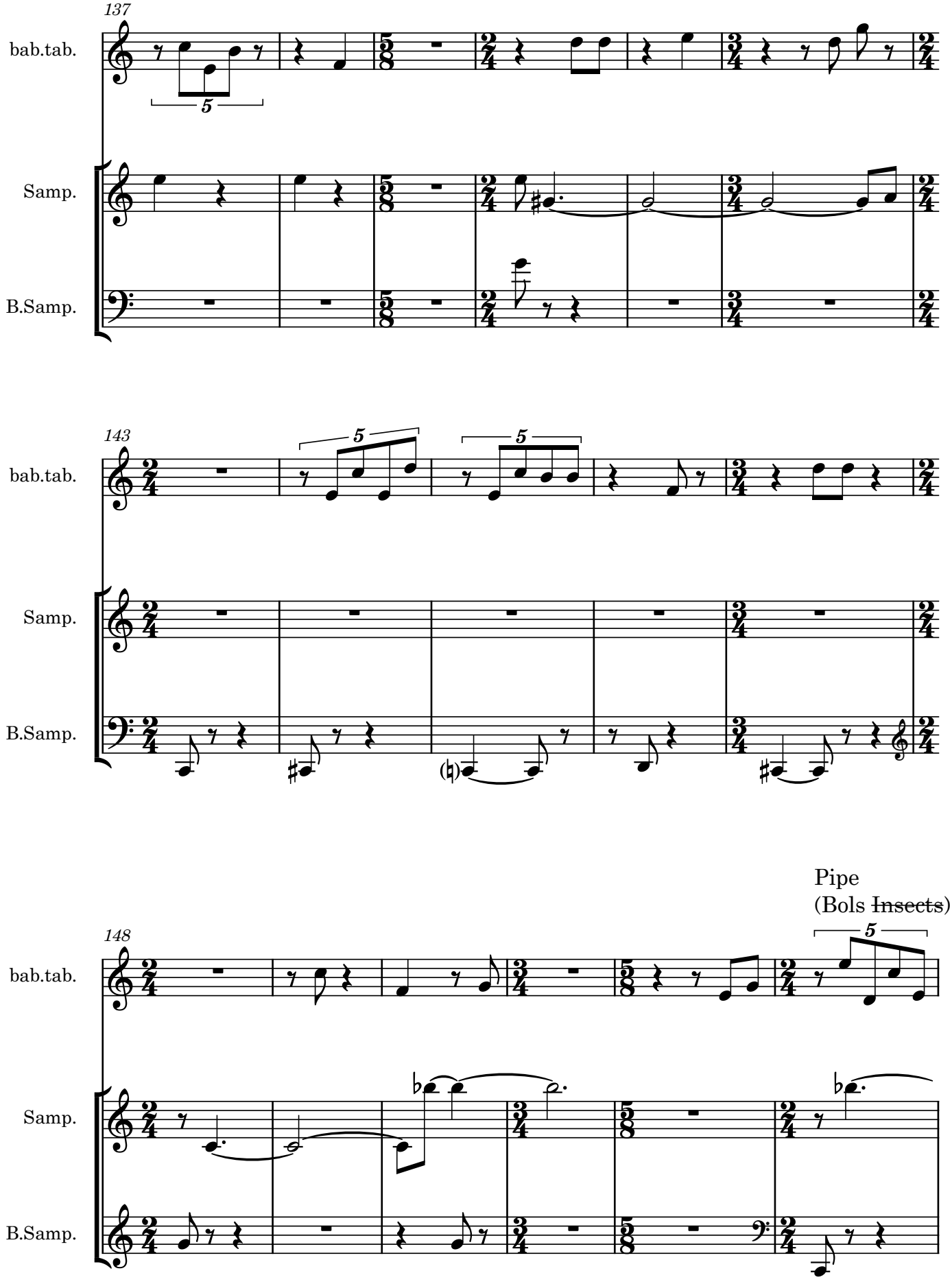
Samp.
B.Samp.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B.Samp.
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B.Samp.
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(Bols ~~Insects~~)
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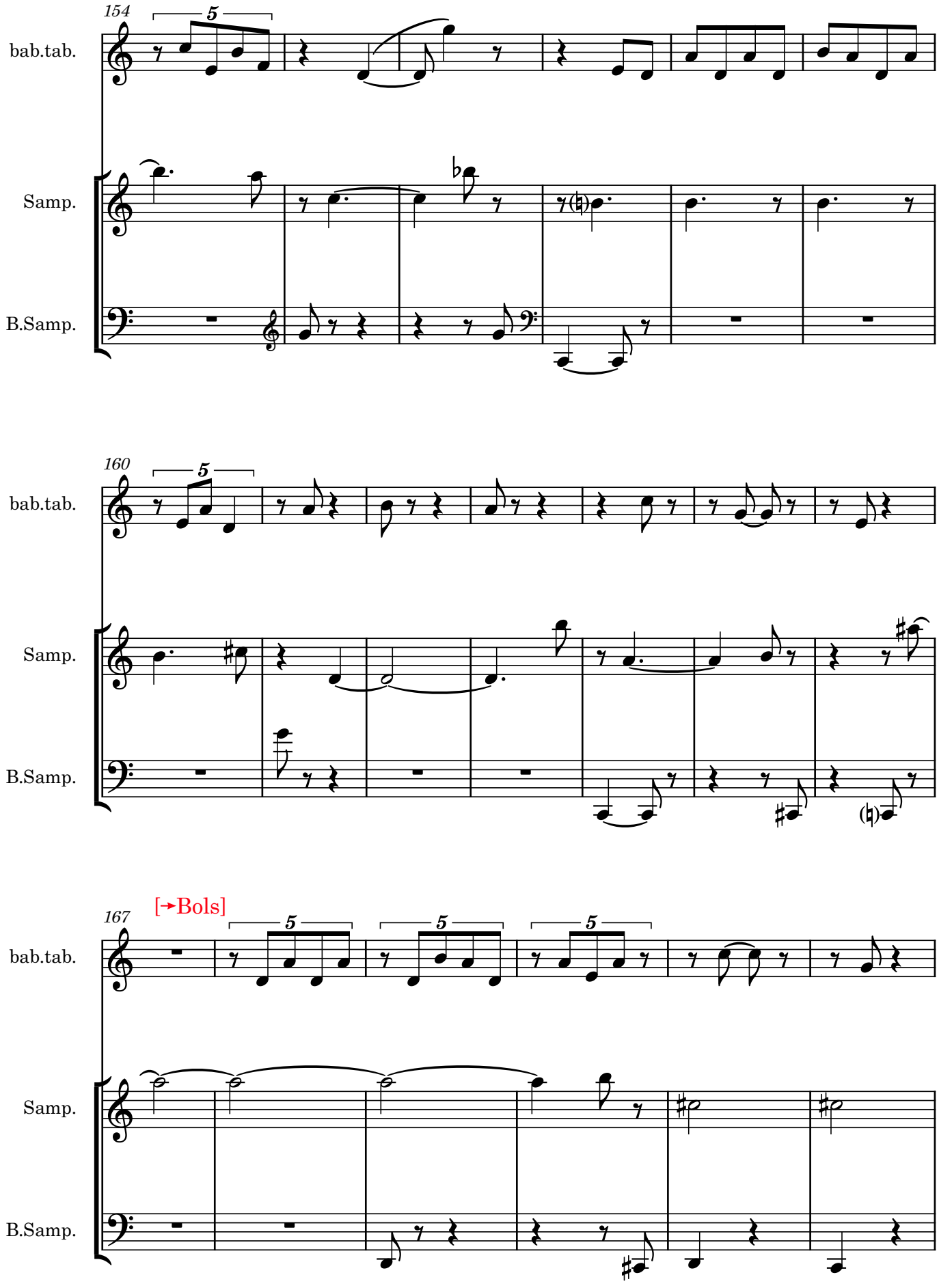
Samp.
B.Samp.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5
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160
5
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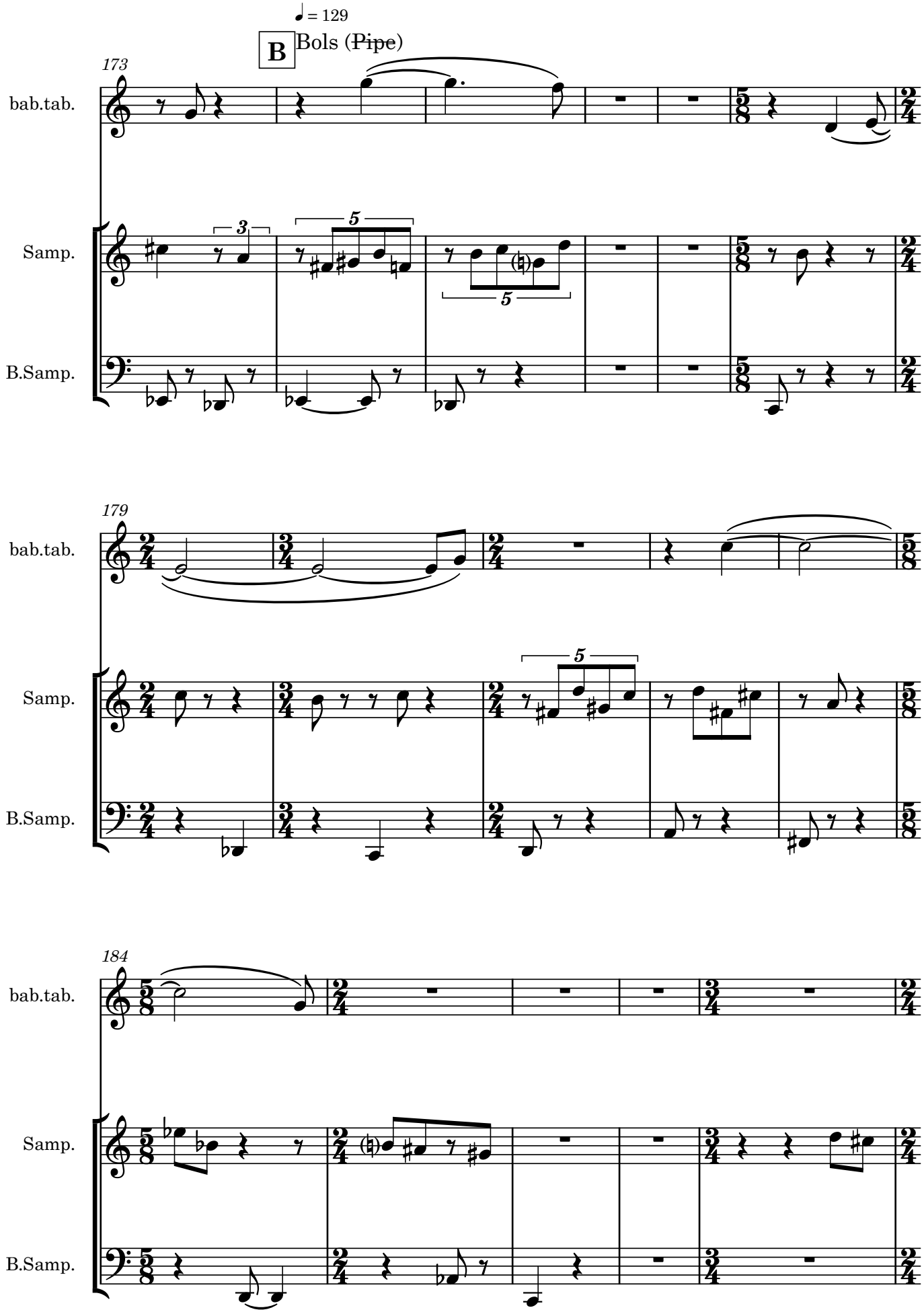
Samp.
B.Samp.
167
[→Bols]
5
5
5
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.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Bols (~~Pipe~~)
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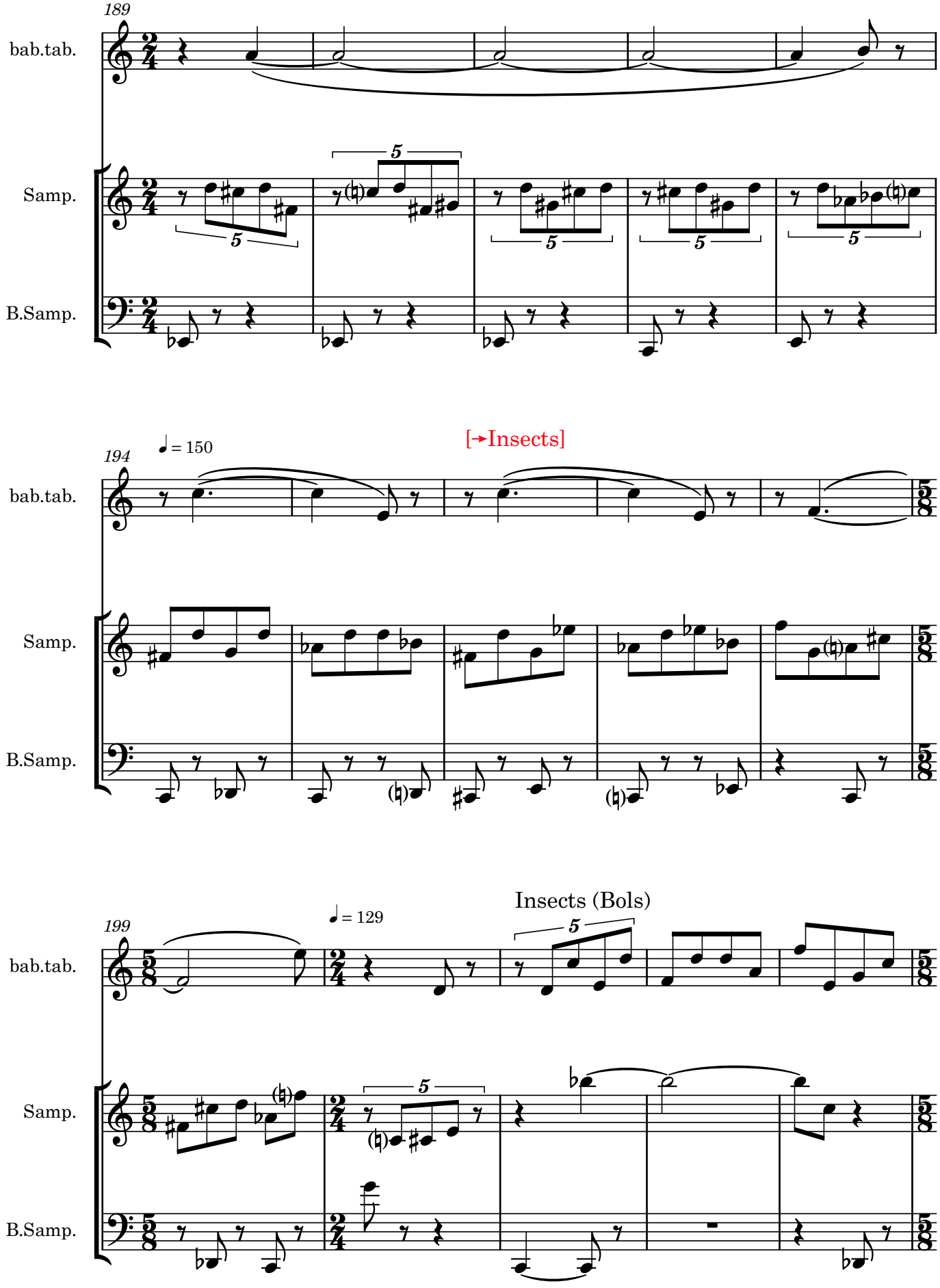
B.Samp.
184
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.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Samp.
B.Samp.
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Samp.
B.Samp.
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♩ = 129
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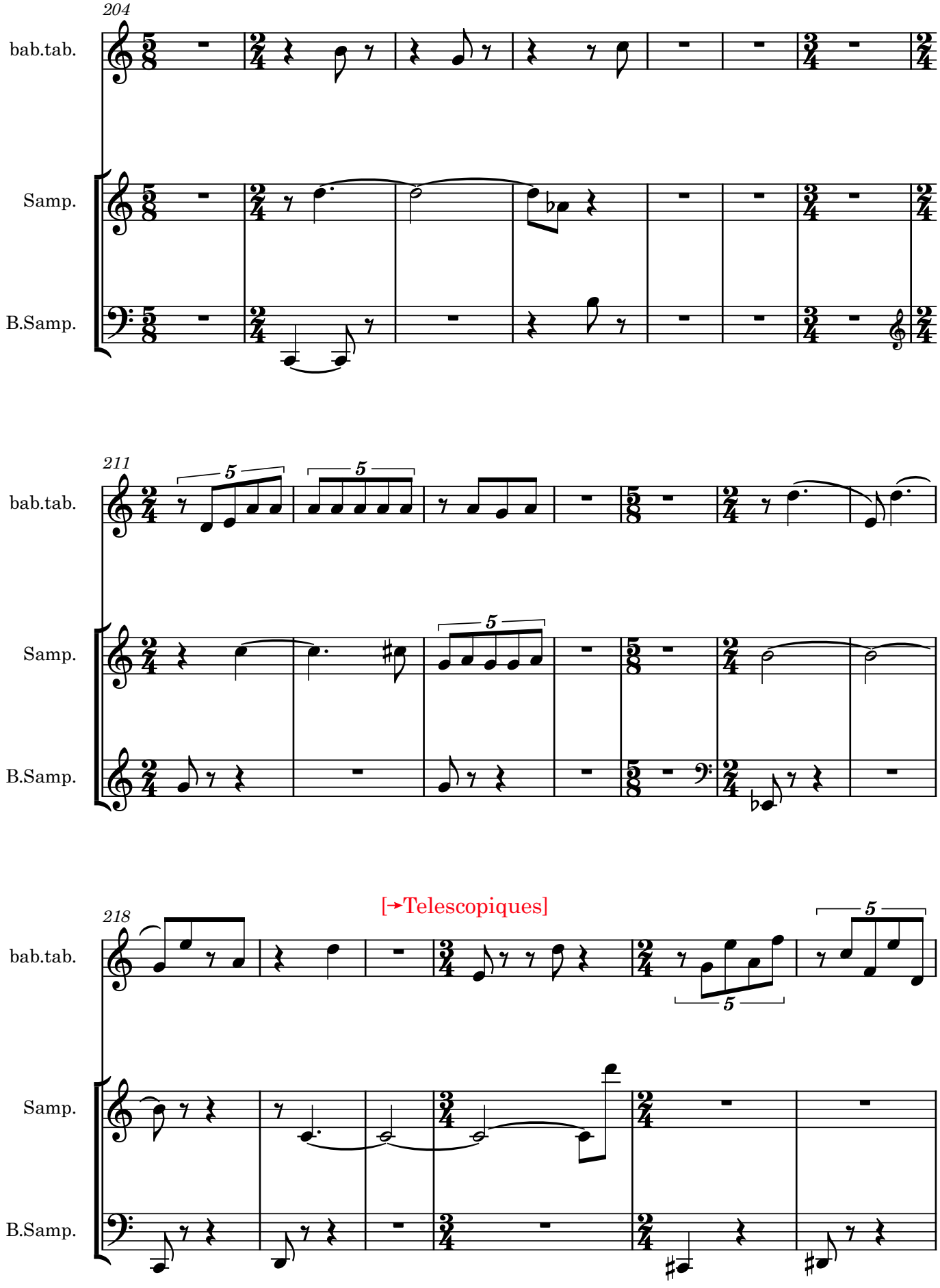
Samp.
B.Samp.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bab.tab.
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B.Samp.
211
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.
[→Telescopiques]
218
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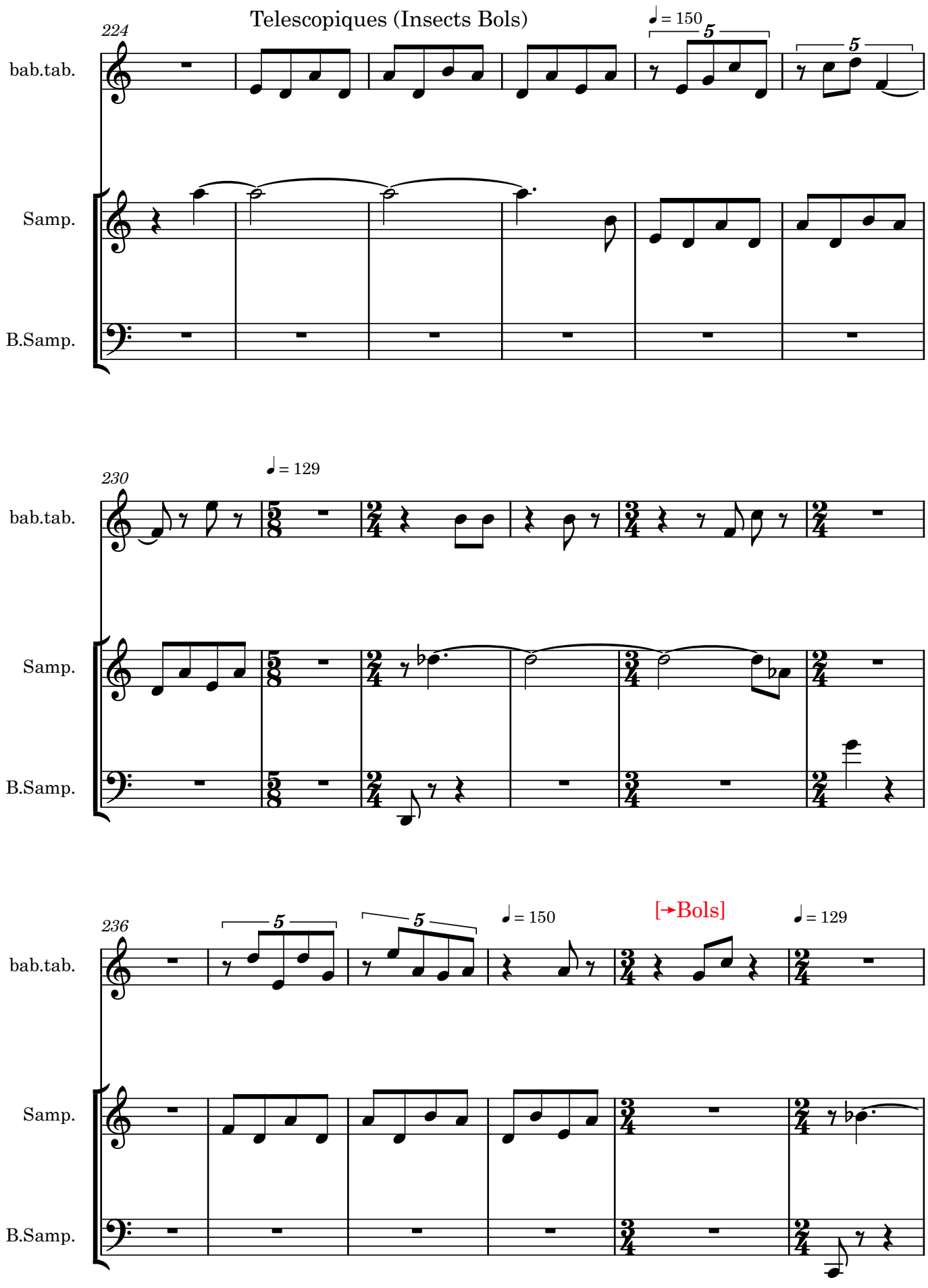
Samp.
B.Samp.


Telescopiques (Insects Bols)
224
bab.tab.
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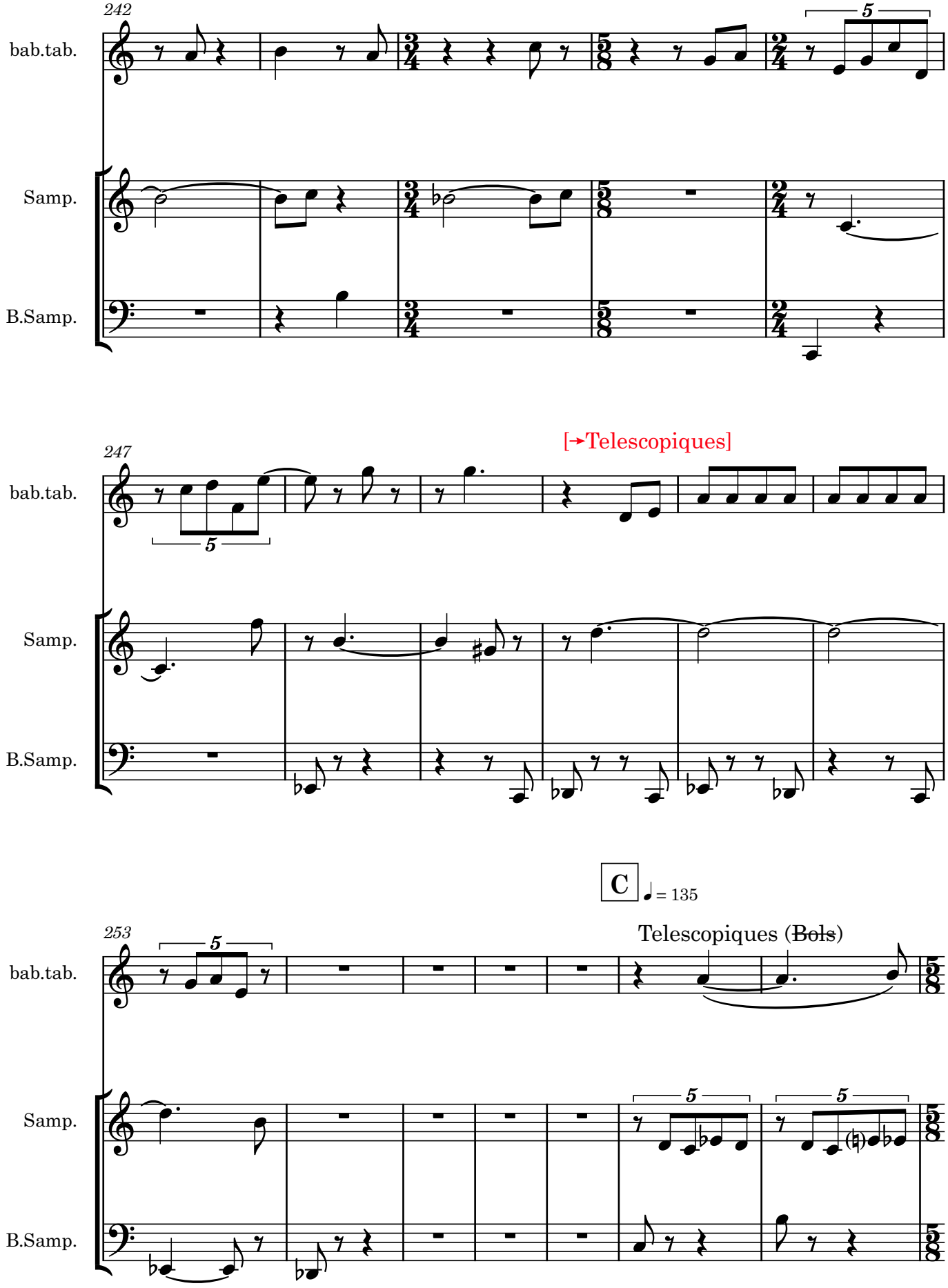
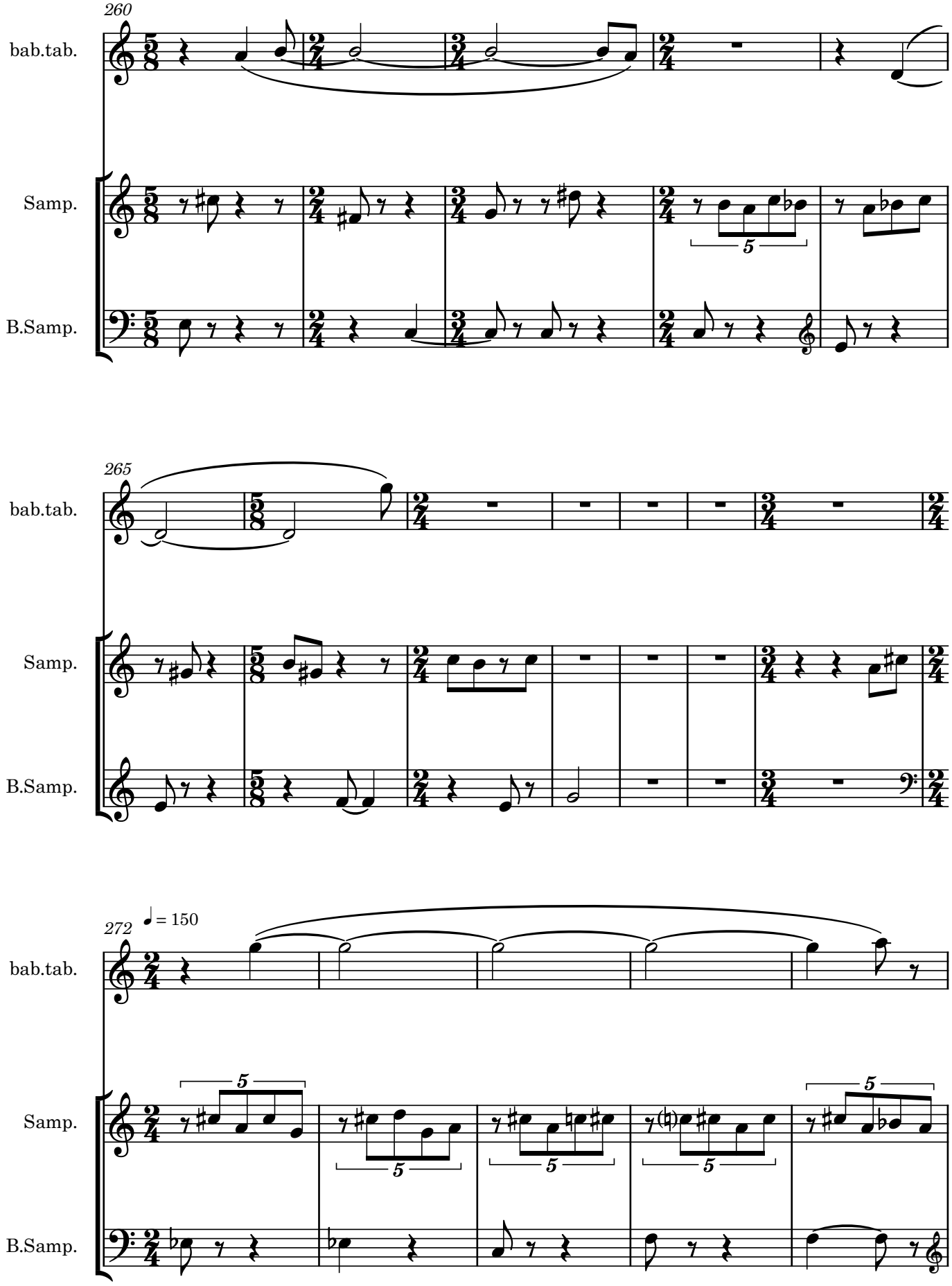
5
230
♩ = 129
236
[→Bols]

Bols
(Telescopiques
~~Insects~~)

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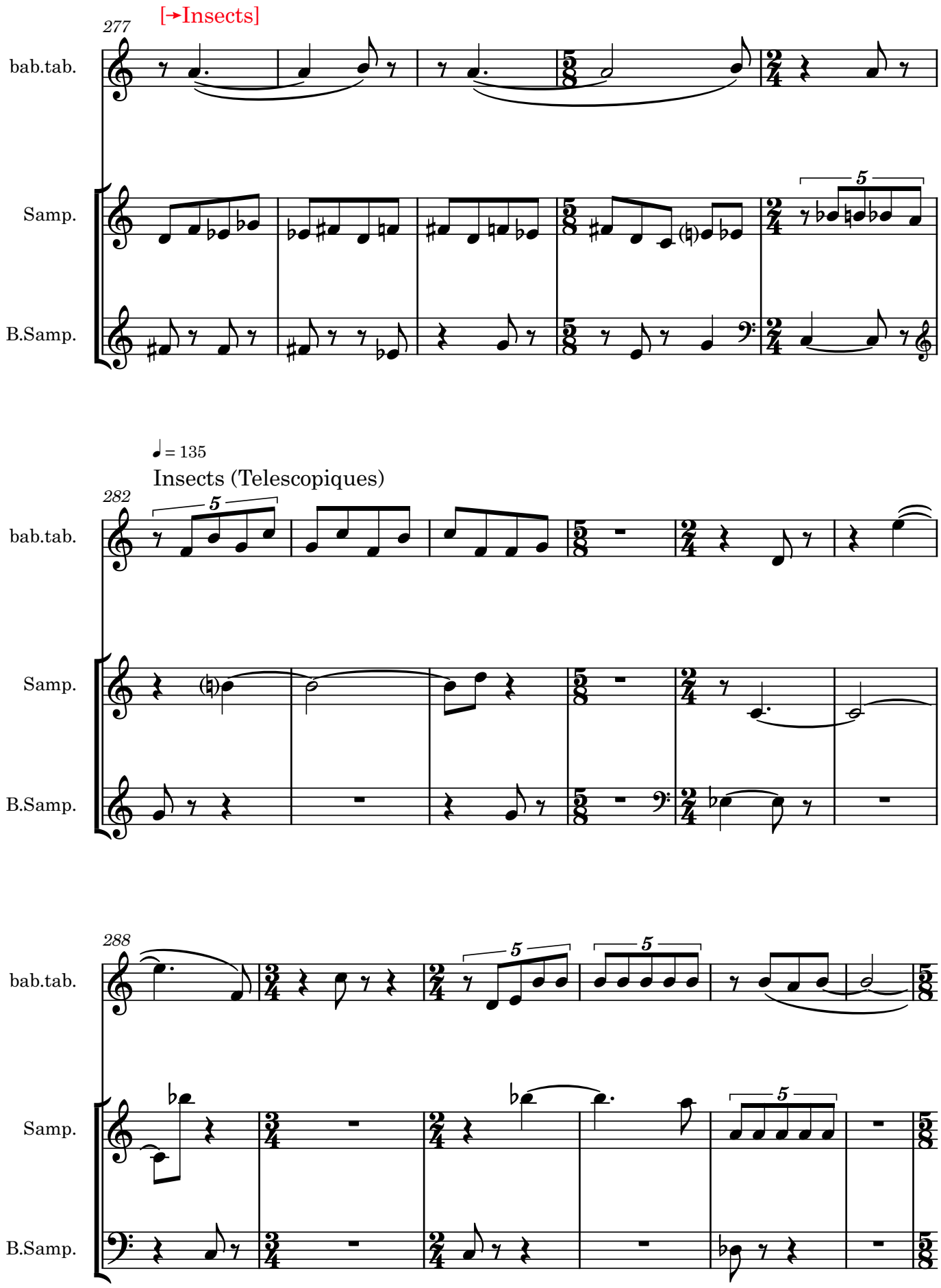
B.Samp.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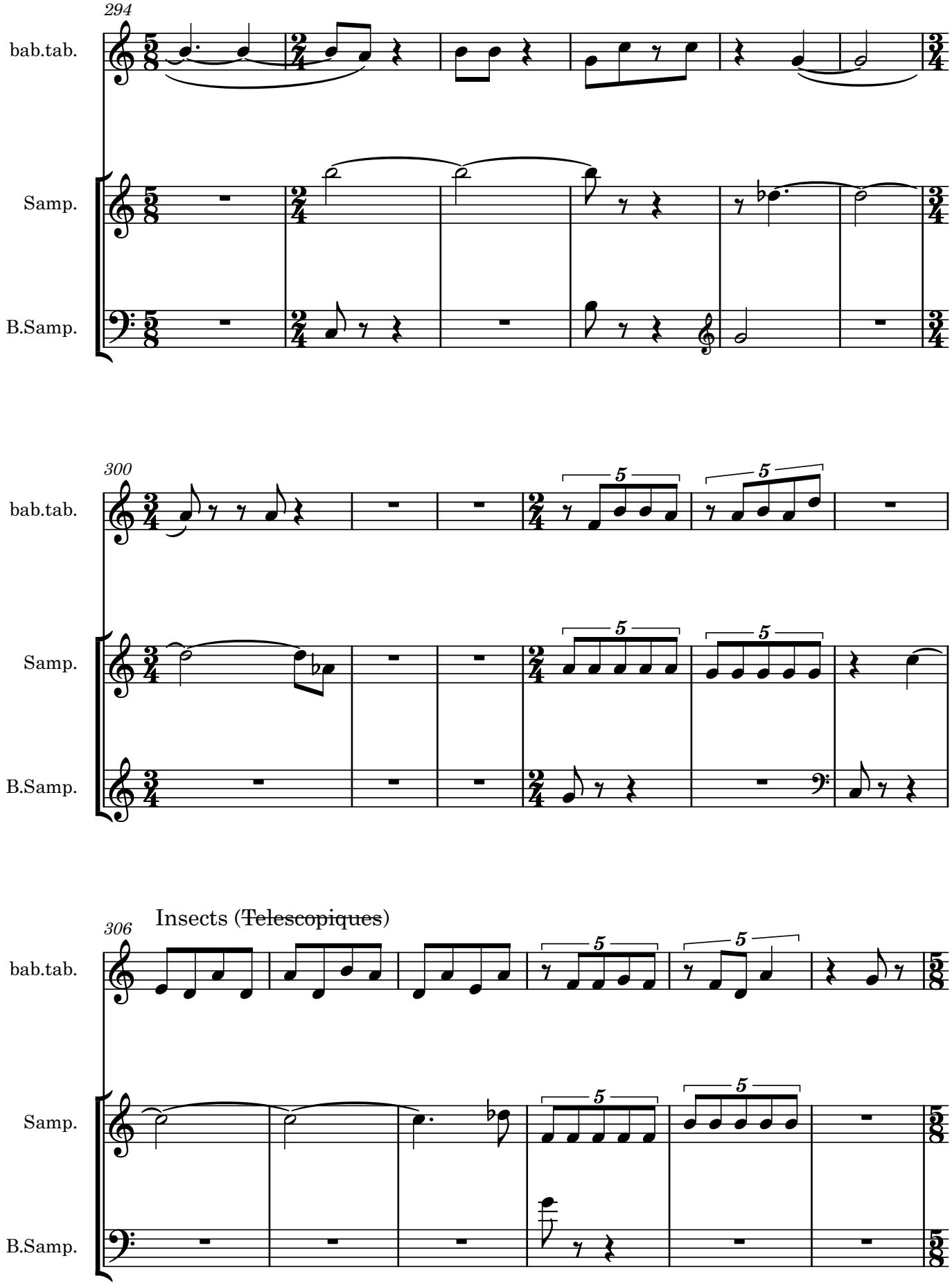
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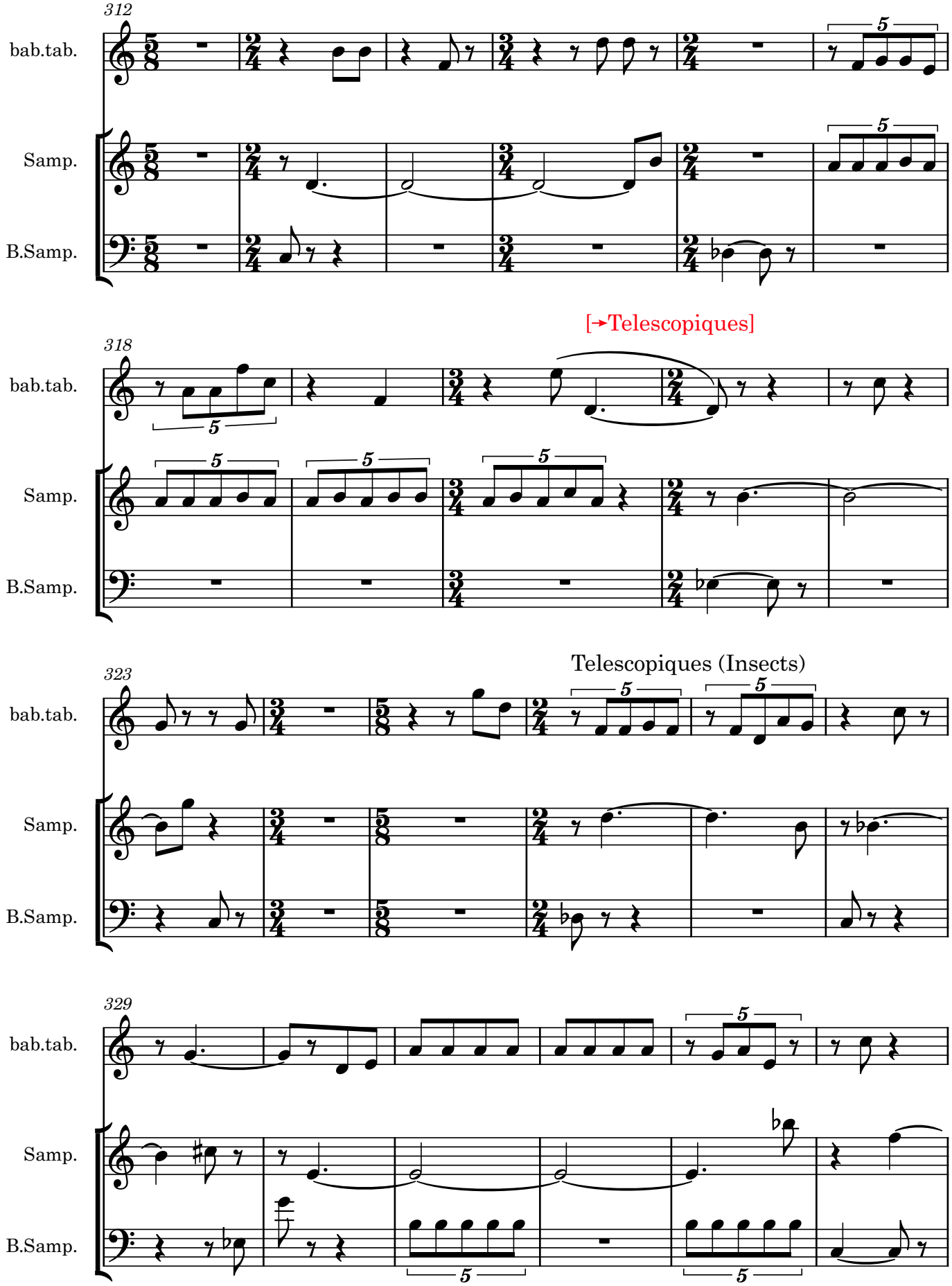
B.Samp.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318
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Samp.
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B.Samp.
329
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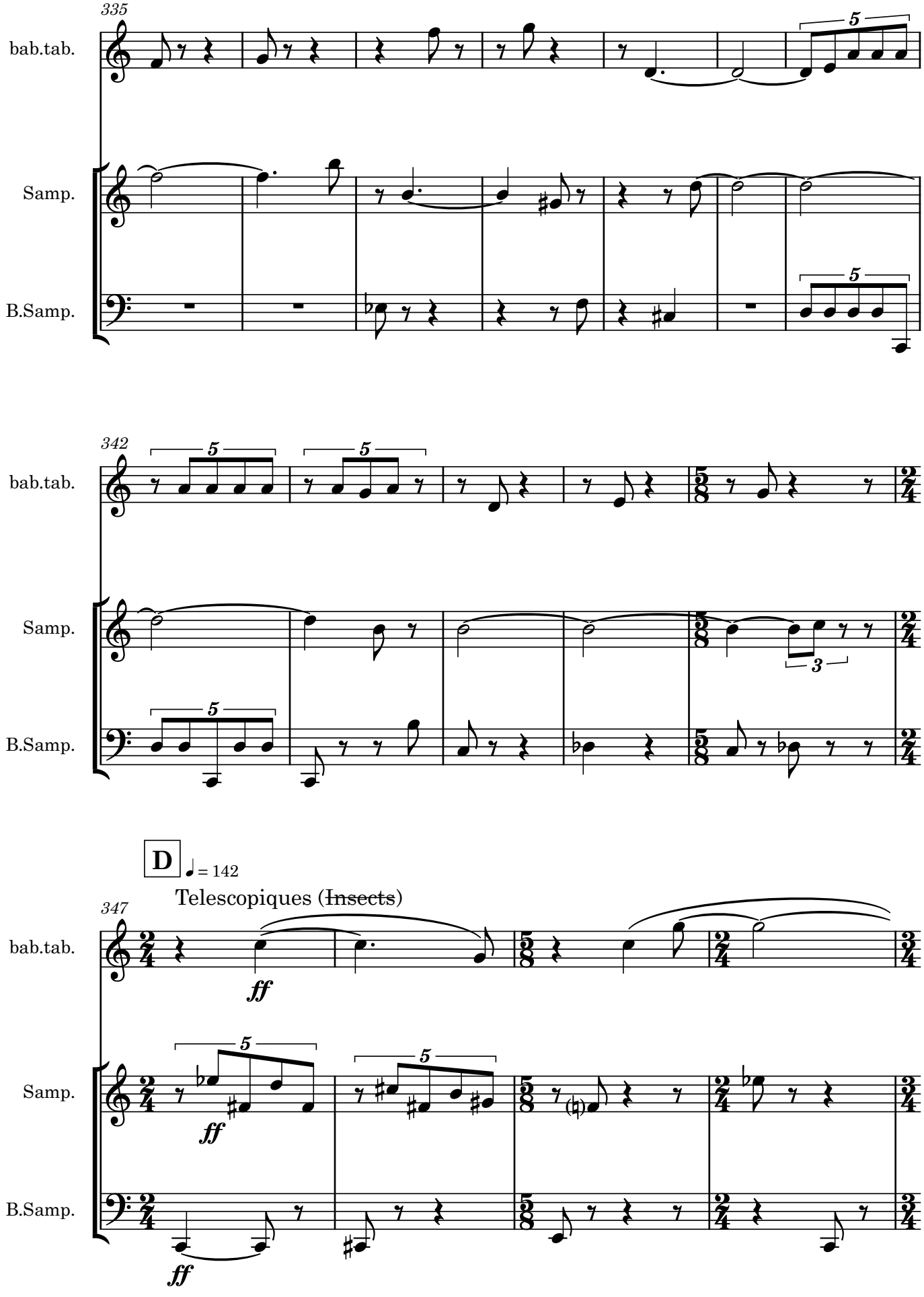
B.Samp.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347
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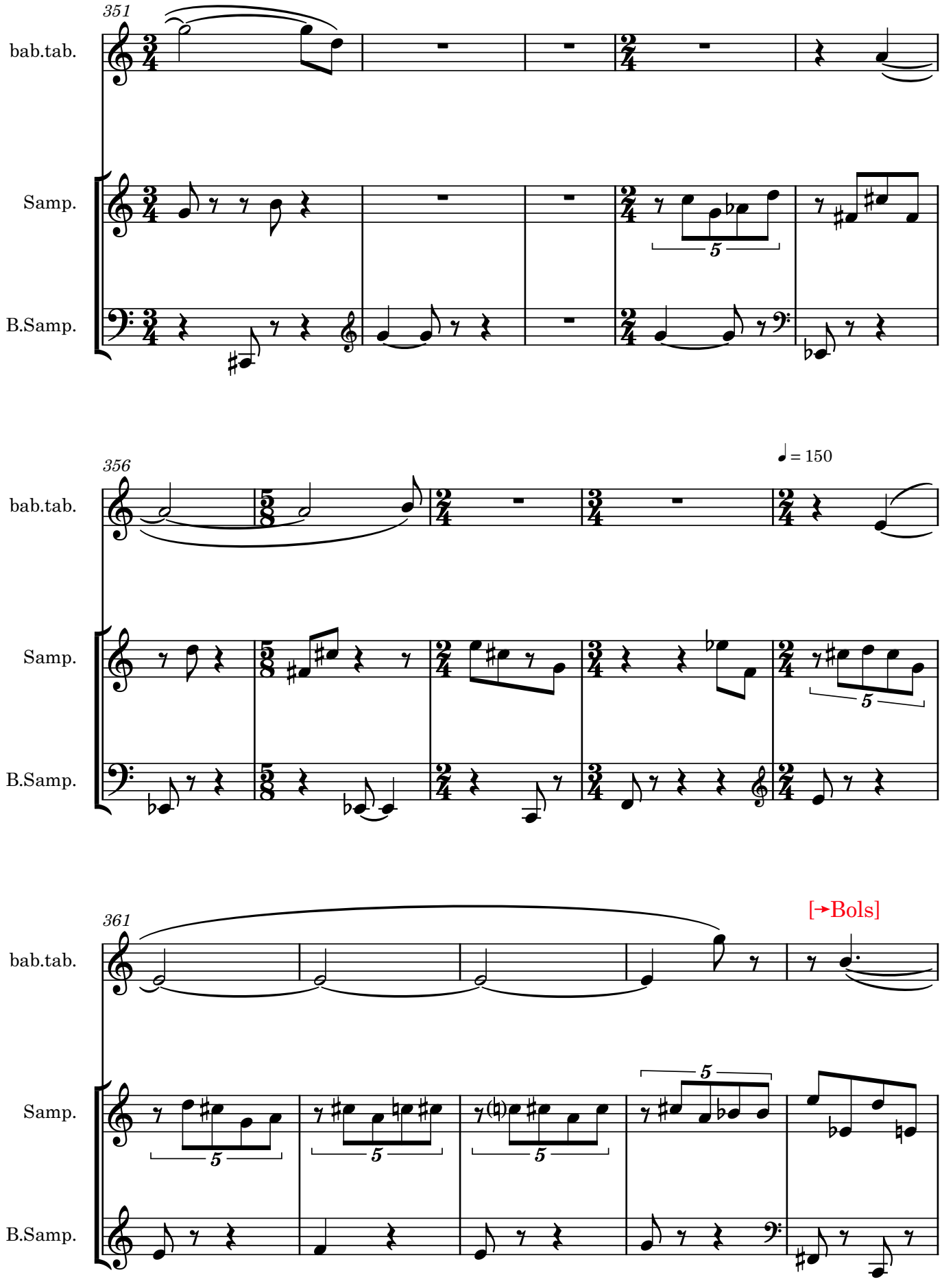
B.Samp.
ff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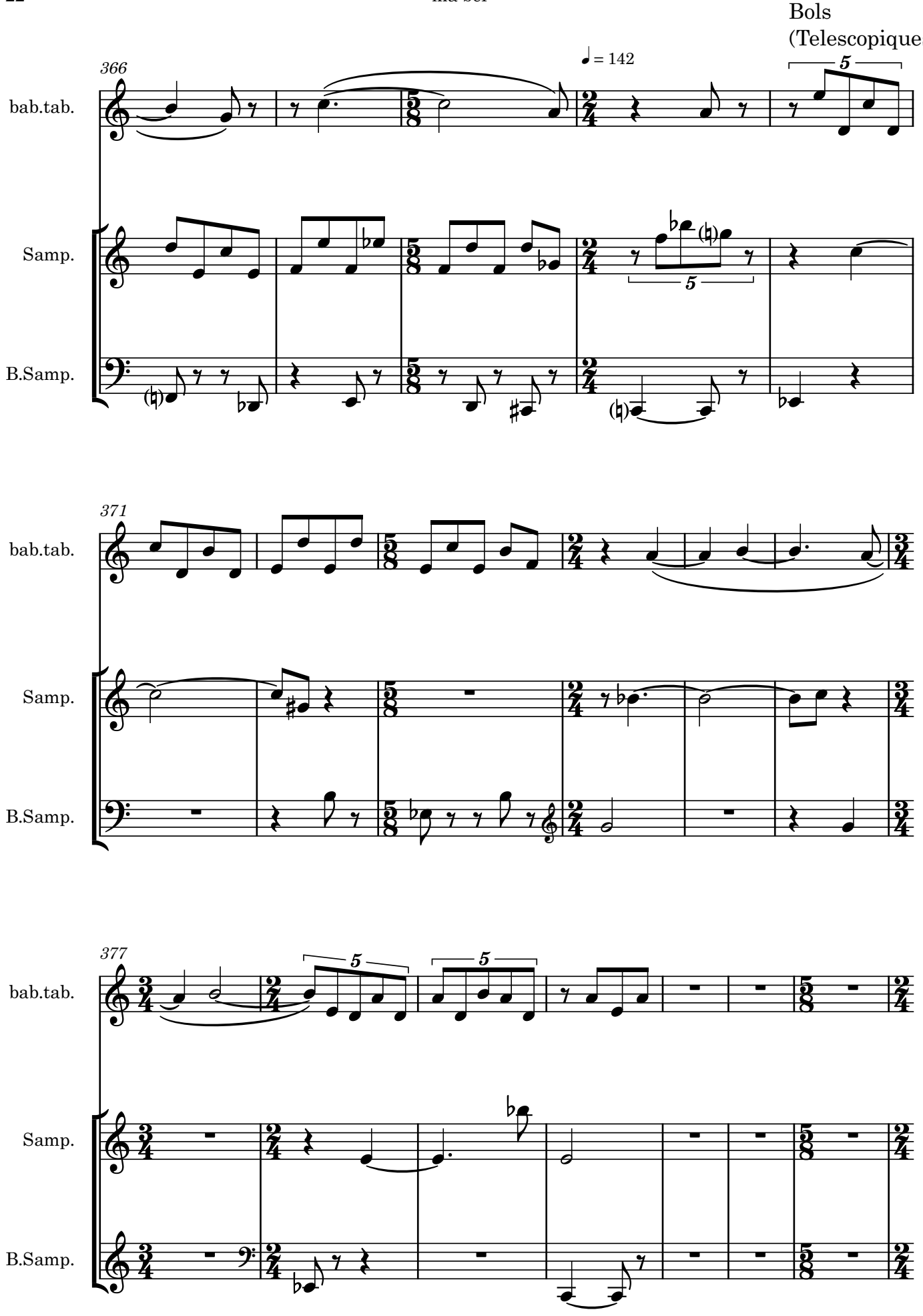
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366
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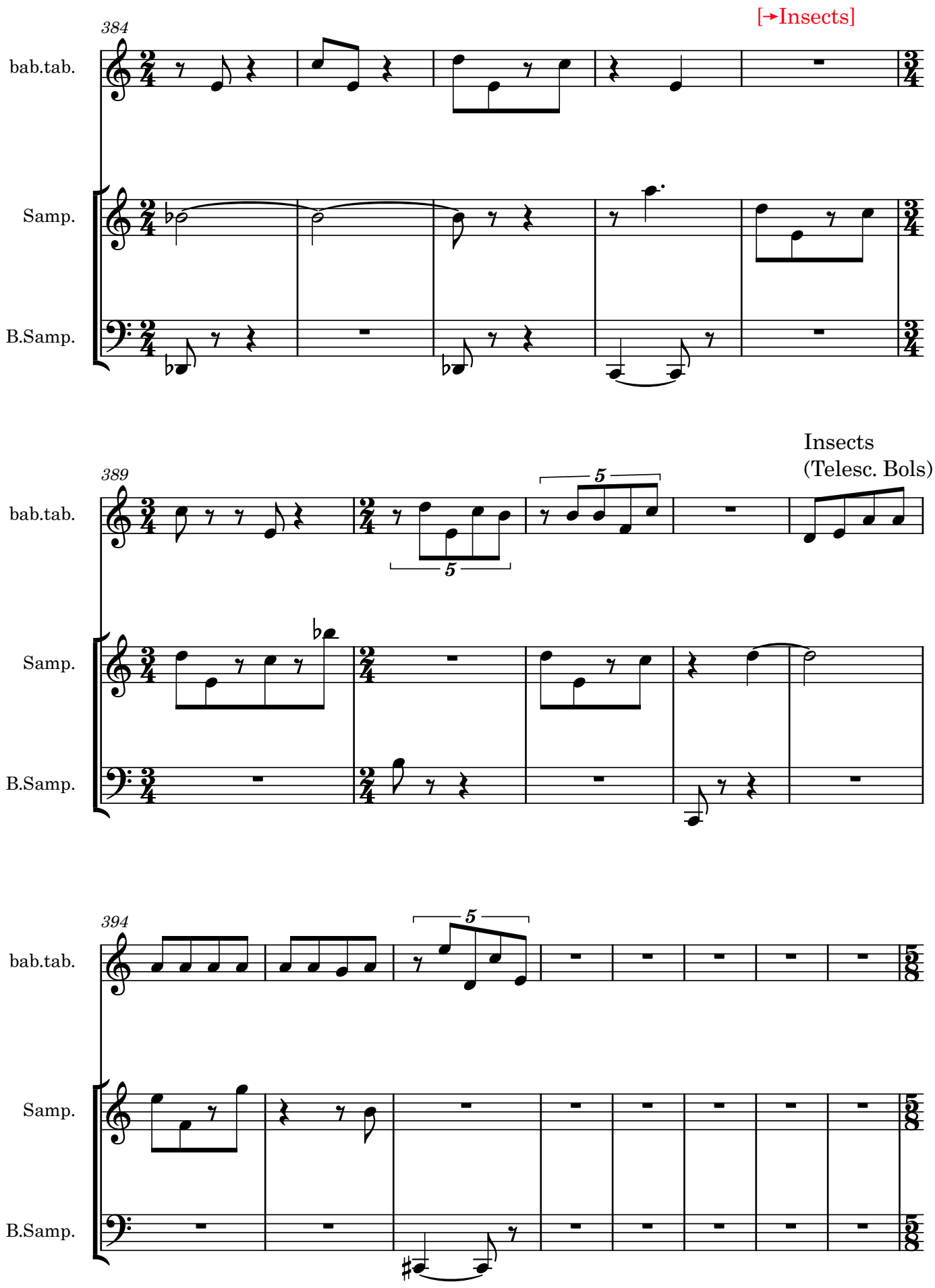
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Samp.
B.Samp.
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389
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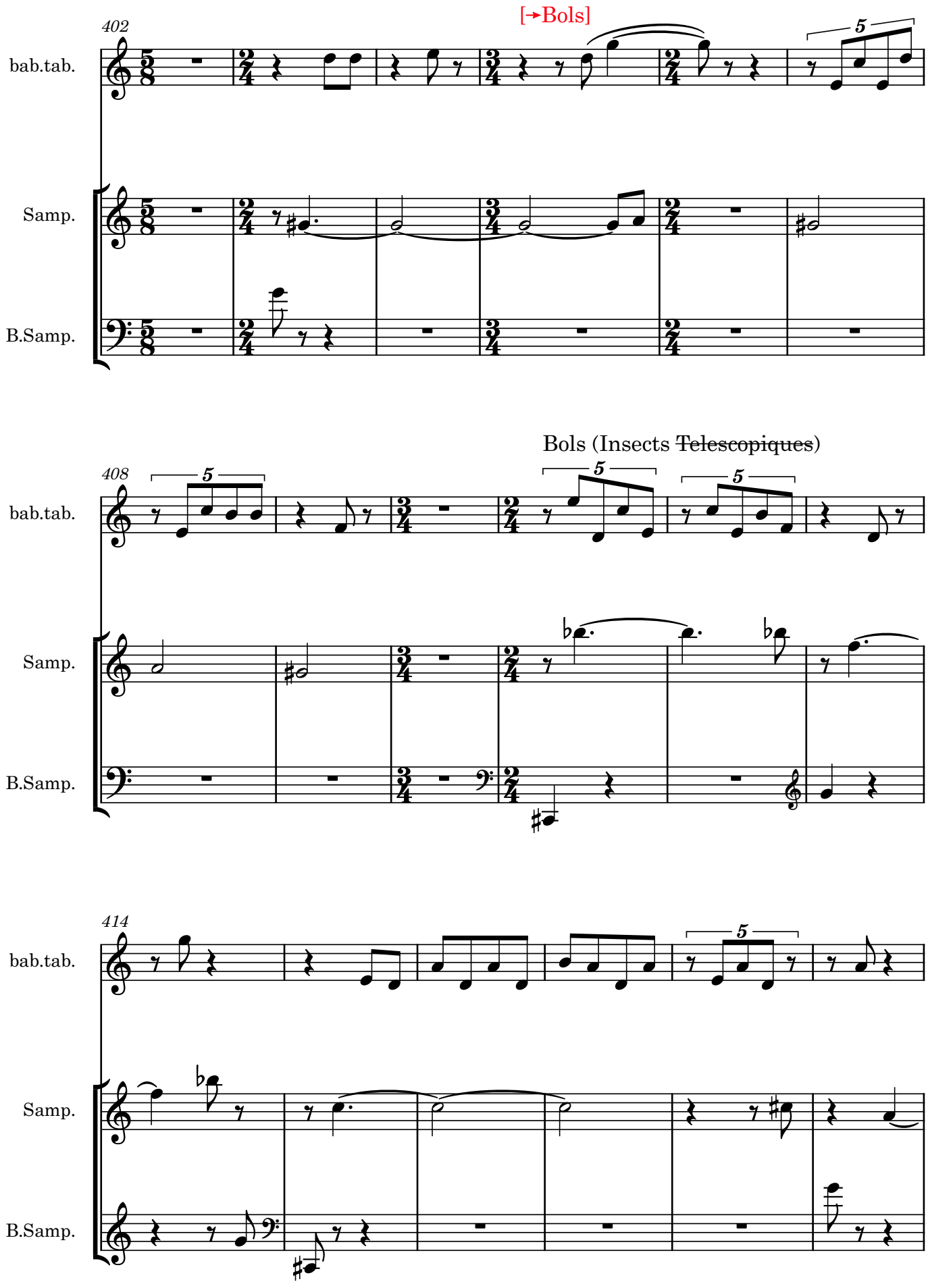
B.Samp.
5
5
Insects
(Telesc. Bols)
394
bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.
5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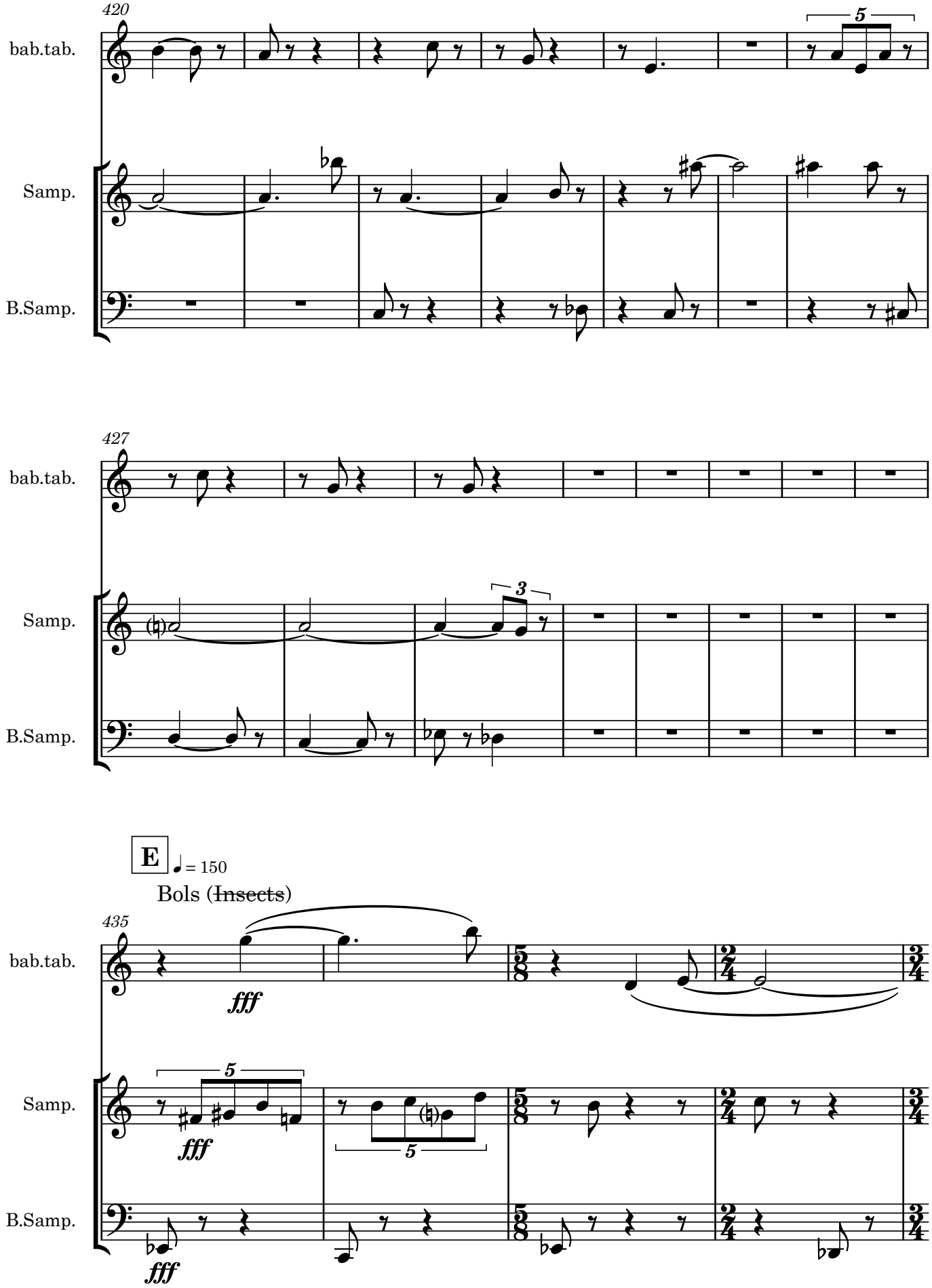
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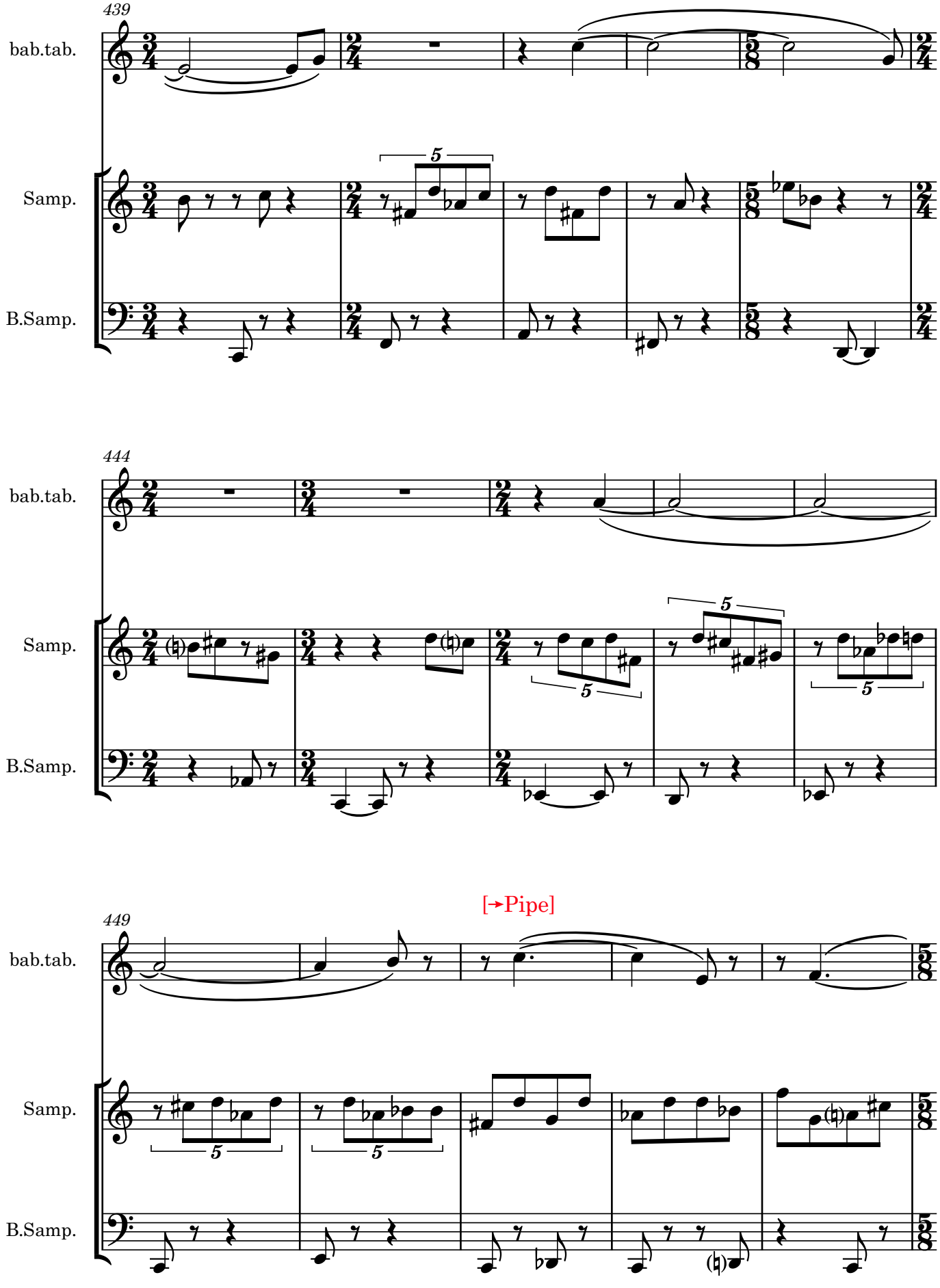
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bab.tab.
Samp.
B.Samp.
444
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Samp.
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[→Pipe]
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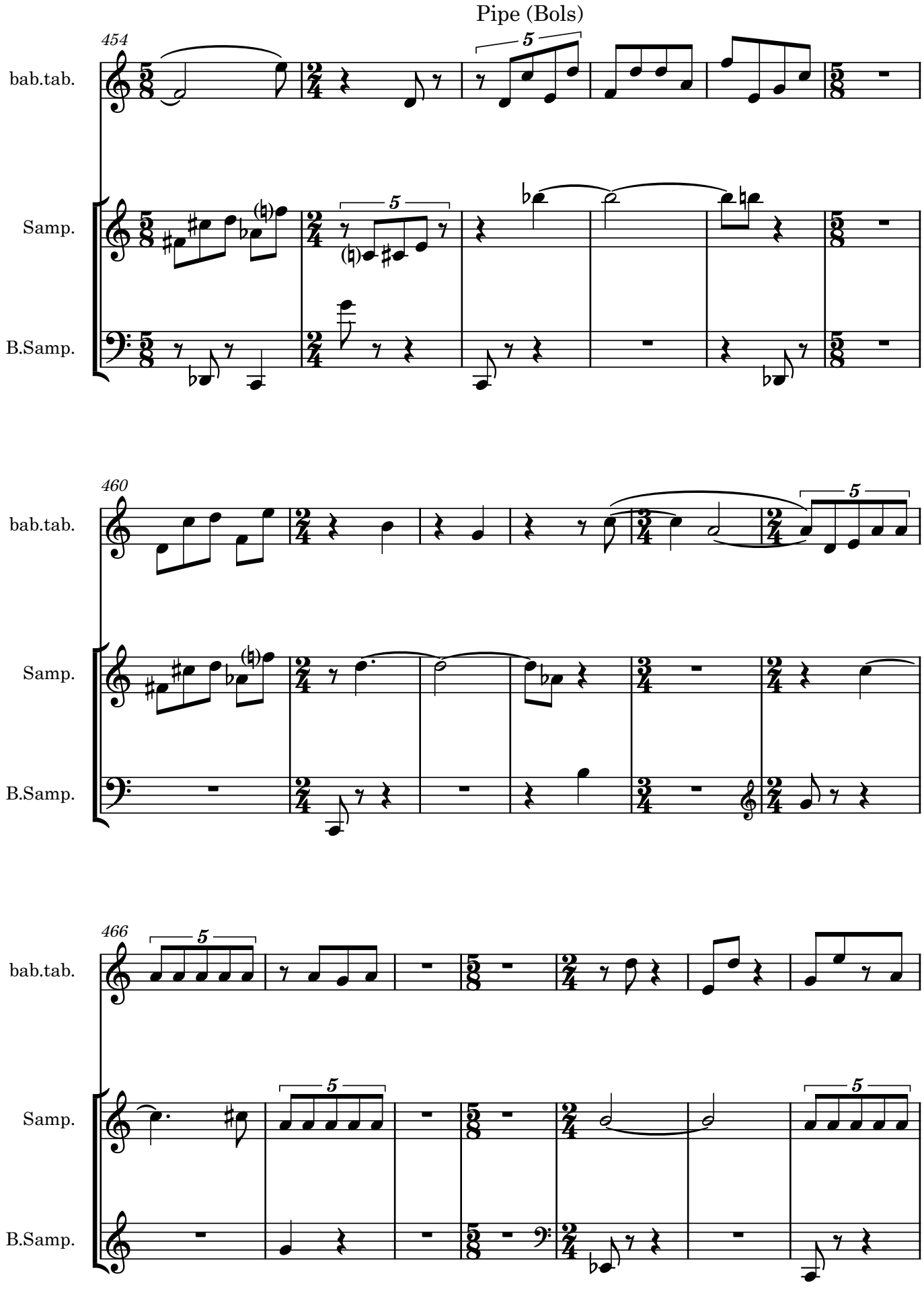
B.Samp.


Pipe (Bols)
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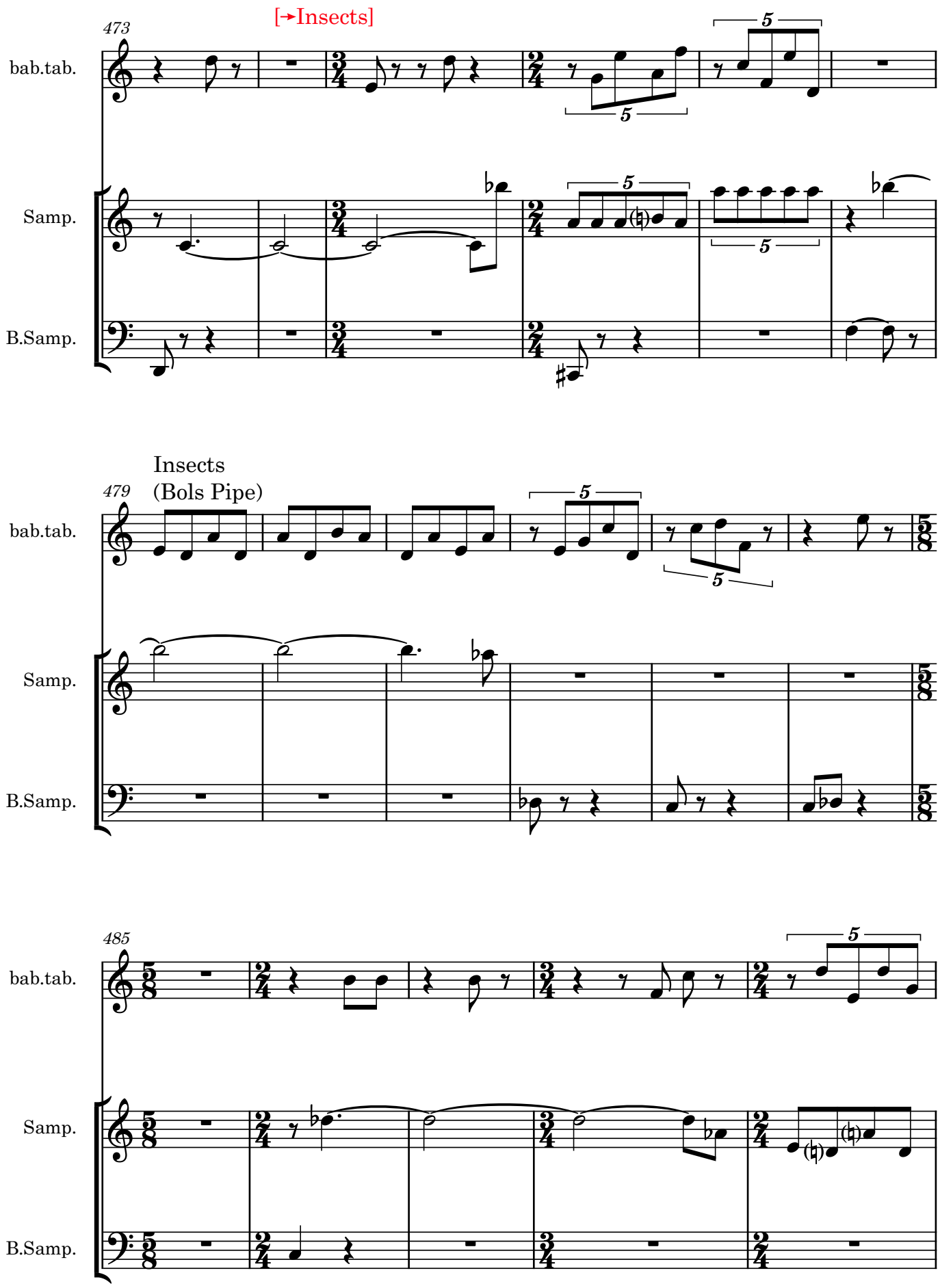
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Insects
(Bols Pipe)
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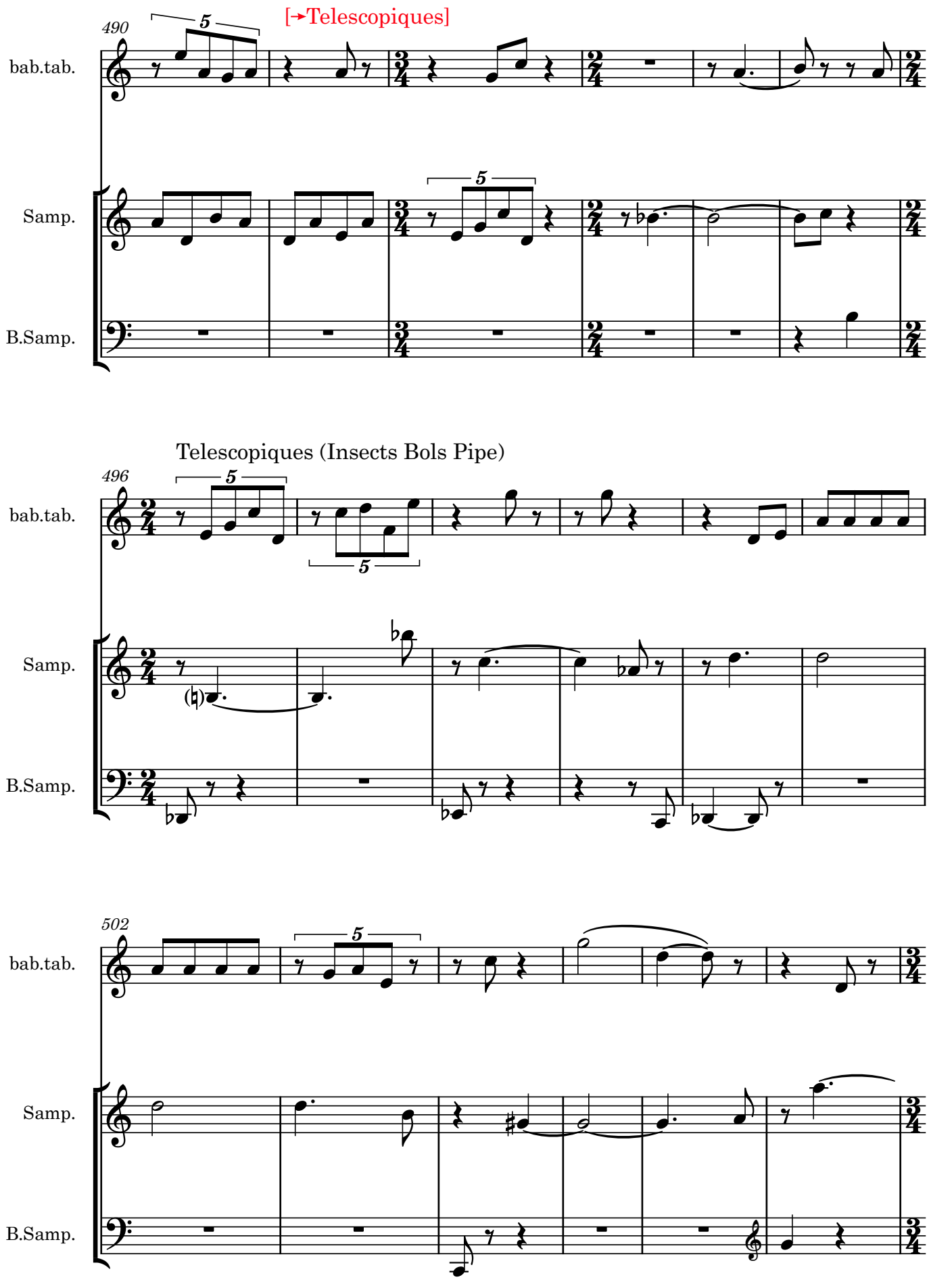
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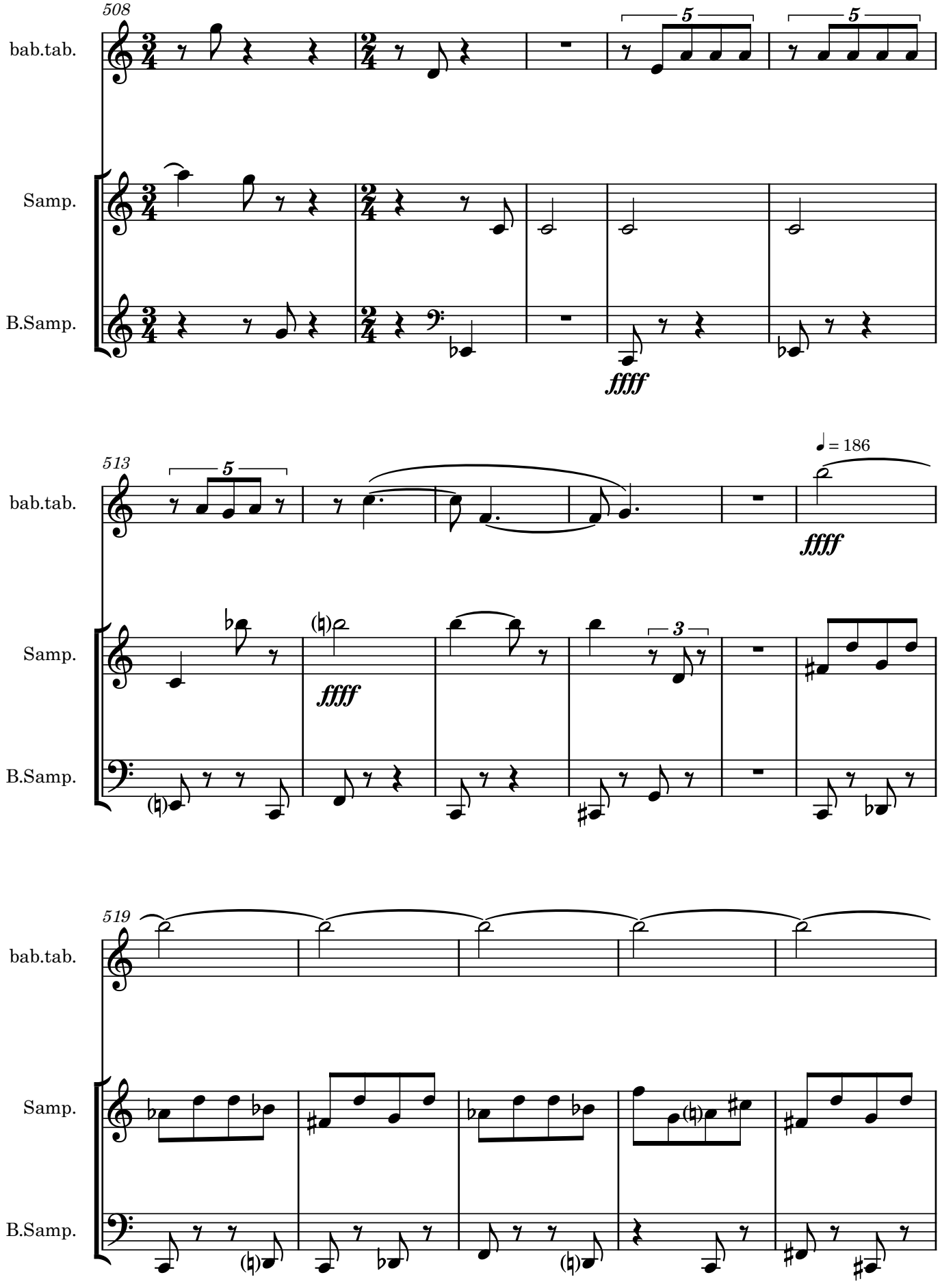
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B.Samp.
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513
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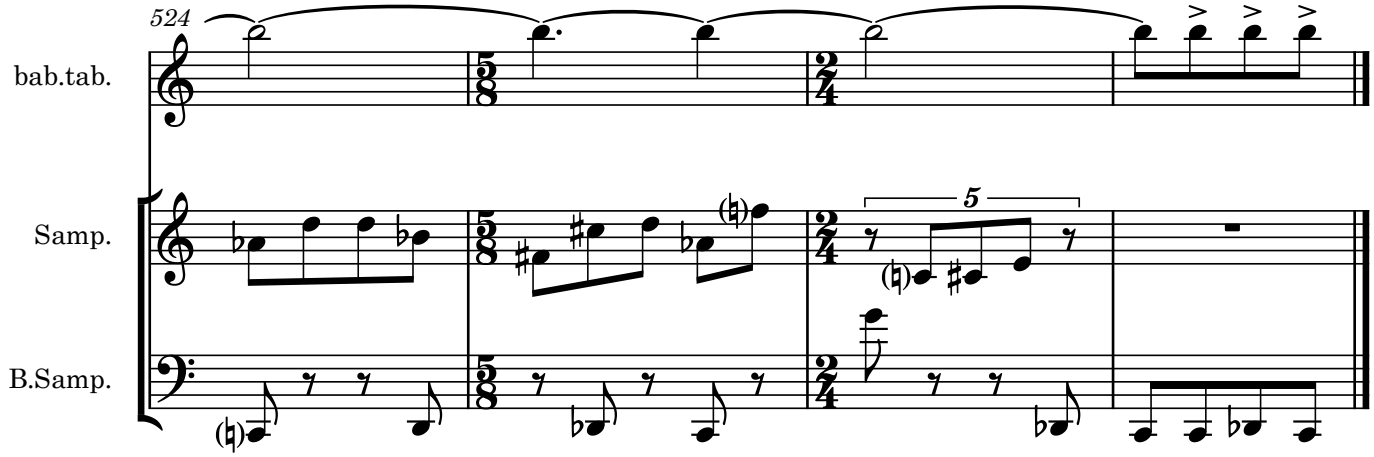
ffff
3
519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