Closing phrases in the 16th-Century Genevan Psalter: exploring an underlying model

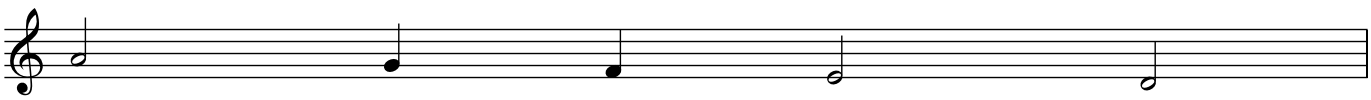
This study explores whether the closing phrases of the 16th-century Genevan Psalter - a collection of 124 psalm melodies - follow an underlying melodic model, an impression that arises more readily from singing the melodies than from examining written sources. Each melody ends with a phrase that moves toward the finalis (the 'home tone' of the mode, similar to the tonic in modern music). This final phrase not only confirms the mode but also provides a sense of closure.

The goal is to determine if these endings are shaped by a shared melodic pattern - a concise, mode-defining model that composers used as a foundation. To do this, we analyze the clausulae (cadential formulas) and the melodic motion leading to these clausulae.

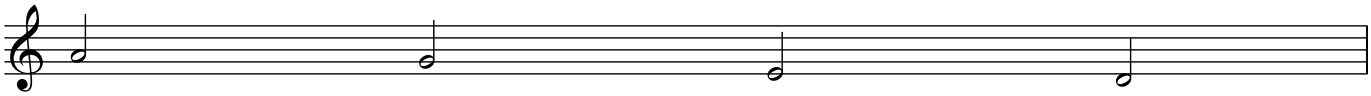
But first, we need to address a key challenge: how do we distinguish between structural tones (essential tones) and ornamental tones (decorative tones) in these Renaissance melodies?

1. The problem

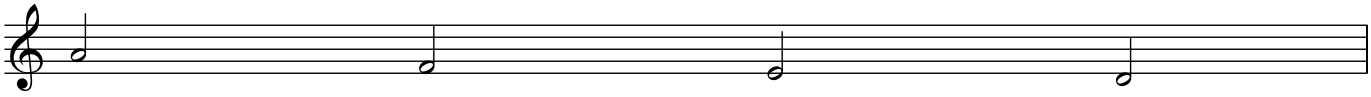
Unlike tonal music of later centuries, Renaissance compositions were not governed by modern metrical systems such as 4/4 or 2/2, but by more flexible rhythmic groupings shaped by text, tactus, and contrapuntal context. This raises questions about how individual tones within the phrase should be understood: are they structural tones forming part of the modal framework, or are they ornamental tones filling in the melodic line? Consider this closing phrase from Psalm 5 in D Dorian (Genevan Psalter, 1542 edition).



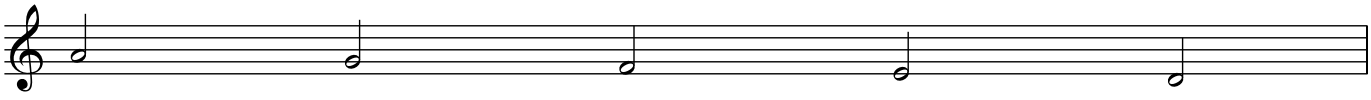
Option 1: F is an unaccented passing tone between G and E, so a variant of



Option 2: G is an accented passing tone leading to F, so a variant of



Option 3: G and F are both structural tones, so a rhythmic variation of a descending linear fifth progression (A-G-F-E-D).

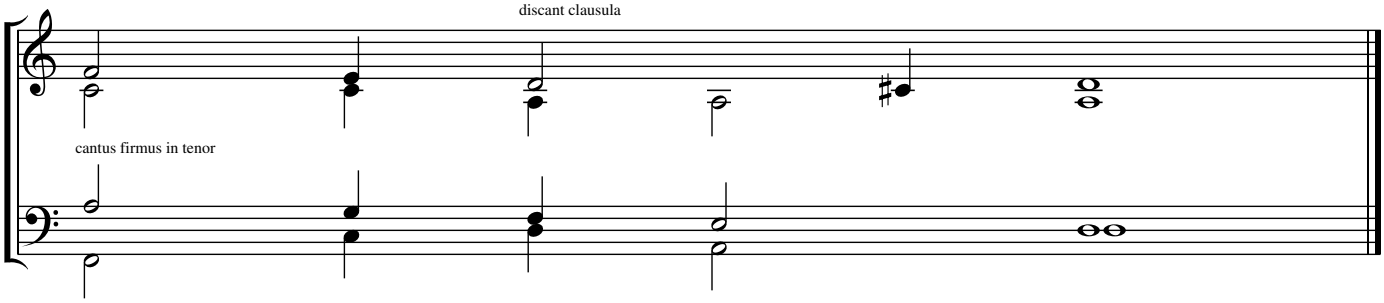


To do consistent research with a convincing conclusion, one has to answer these questions first.

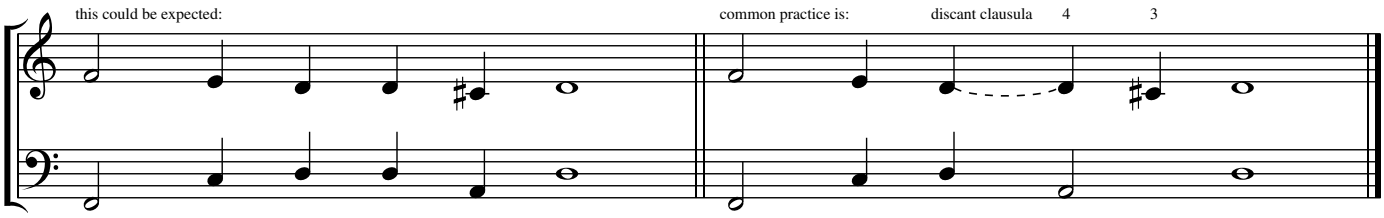
2. The answer

The question is whether a tone in a Renaissance melody functions as an ornament or as a structural tone. Intuitively - that is, without reference to historical practice but from a modern listener's point of departure, shaped and perhaps confused by exposure to many 20th- and 21st-century musical styles - one might hear the pulse in halves, which would suggest a passing-tone interpretation (option 1 and 2 above). Yet hearing the pulse in quarters is also possible. How, then, can we decide? The most reliable clue lies in contemporary settings: their harmonic and contrapuntal treatment shows how Renaissance musicians assigned structural weight to particular tones.

The melodic line A-G-F-E-D, as found in the Genevan Psalter, illustrates this distinction. In Claude Goudimel's 16th-century settings - both homophonic and polyphonic - the tones G and F in the tenor voice are harmonized individually, confirming their role as structural tones. Goudimels note-against-note setting:



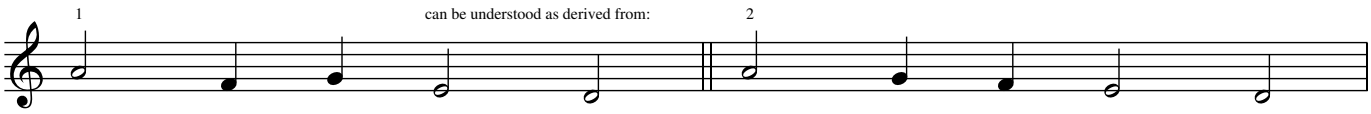
One notable exception in the Genevan Psalter occurs in the discant clausula - a specific cadential formula in Renaissance counterpoint - with a fourth suspension (dissonant) resolving to the third (consonant), where the note functions more as a tension-filled ornament as the previous example shows. But to make it fully clear, study the next example:



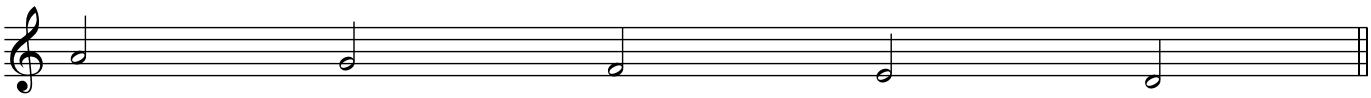
Examining how individual tones are treated in homophonic and polyphonic textures of psalm settings - such as those by Bourgeois (also composer most of the psalm tunes), Goudimel, Le Jeune, and L'Estocart - offers a reliable method for distinguishing structural tones from decorative ornaments. This approach not only clarifies the functional role of each tone but also provides broader insights into Renaissance compositional practices. The closing phrases of the Genevan Psalter are significant because they reveal which cadential formulas were used, show how each melody's mode is defined, and indicate whether composers favored uniformity or variety across the 124 psalm tunes, offering insight into their compositional approach.

3. What does this mean?

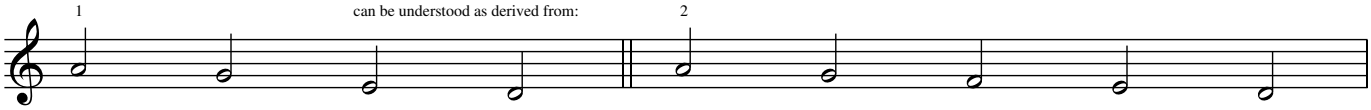
This knowledge of individual tones allows the mathematical operations described in our earlier article, 'Simple Math for Musical Ideas,' (e.g. adding, removing and shuffling or permuting tones in a melodic progression; study https://www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/Maliepaard_Simple_math_for_musical_ideas.pdf) to be applied with confidence. It also helps us understand melodies from a diminution perspective, revealing how the variety of musical gestures can emerge from a simple variation idea. The next example makes this clear. We can derive the first melody from the second using permutation: F-G results from swapping G-F.



which is a variant of



The next example shows omitting a tone.



In both cases, the underlying motion remains a descending linear fifth progression (A-G-F-E-D), even if the surface melody varies.

4. Research methodology

The present study investigates the melodic structure of the Genevan psalm tunes by focusing on their closing phrases.

Each melody concludes with a phrase whose motion toward the finalis defines the mode and provides a sense of closure. These closing phrases serve as the principal analytical units of the study.

4.1 Identification of Closing Phrases

All 124 unique Genevan melodies are segmented into phrases, most of which are separated by rests (the closing phrase is sometimes separated with its penultimate phrase by a caesura). So normally, the final phrase of each psalm tune, confirming the finalis, can be identified unambiguously as the closing phrase. This clear delimitation allows for a systematic focus on the portion of the melody that establishes modal identity.

A complete catalogue of all 124 closing phrases, ordered by their length (from four to thirteen tones), is provided in the Annex. This overview illustrates the wide range of phrase spans while allowing comparisons of melodic models across different lengths.

4.2 Definition of the Analytical Concept

The study aims to identify a basic melodic model -if one exists- and to analyze its variations. This model is understood as a mode-defining melodic model: a concise melodic pattern that establishes the finalis through characteristic motion. Given the limited freedom in confirming the mode, we expect consistent melodic motions across the repertoire.

4.3 Analytical Procedure

The first question to address is what can reasonably be expected under the rules of Renaissance counterpoint. Two cadential formulas are of primary importance: the discant clausula and the tenor clausula (see below). The altus clausula may occur, but only in a subordinate role, while the bassus clausula is irrelevant for monophonic psalm melodies.

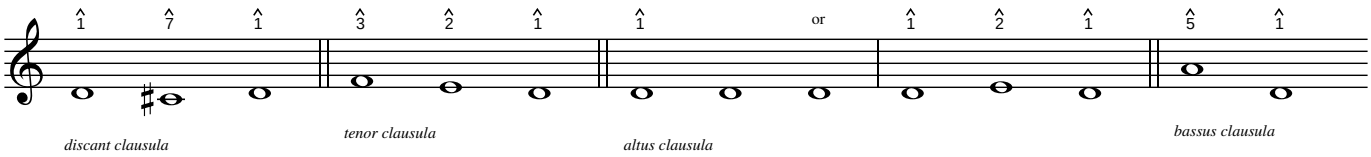
The mere presence of a clausula at the end of a phrase, however, does not reveal how that phrase was composed. Understanding the compositional process requires tracing the musical history of each clausula and examining it in terms of recurring melodic patterns and conventional ornamental types.

The analytical procedure therefore unfolds in four stages:

Step 1. Identification of the closing phrase in each melody.
Step 2. Identification of the clausula employed.
Step 3. Recognition of any stereotyped embellishments within the clausula.
Step 4. Analysis of melodic patterns leading to the clausula.

This method moves beyond mere classificatory analysis of cadences, offering a historically informed account of how closing phrases were formed in the 124 unique psalm tunes under study.

For this study, all tunes have been transposed so that D serves as the finalis. For clarity, the four clausula types defined in Renaissance counterpoint are listed below:



The tenor clausula refers to the sequence as F-E-D, although in practice it may appear in the next variant forms as F#-E-D or F-Eb-D.

5. Results I

Here the results of the previous steps 1, 2 and 3.

5.1 Clausula analysis

1. 71 closing phrases (57%) end with the tenor clausula.
2. 20 closing phrases (16%) feature a variation of the tenor clausula through G.
3. 9 closing phrases (7%) feature a variation of the tenor clausula through D.
4. 1 closing phrase (1%) features a variation of the tenor clausula through both D and G.
5. 17 closing phrases (14%) end with the discant clausula, where 10 closing phrases (6%) combine the tenor clausula (whether embellished or not) with a discant clausula as a suffix.
6. 2 closing phrases (2%) combine the tenor clausula with an altus clausula as a suffix.
7. 2 closing phrases (2%) combine the discant clausula with an altus clausula as a suffix.
8. 2 closing phrases (2%) exhibit the tenor clausula with F omitted.

5.2 Conclusion clausula analysis

The tenor clausula is the dominant cadential formula, appearing in 81% of phrases (including variations). The discant and altus clausulae are rare, often used as suffixes.

6. Results II

Here the results of the previous step 4.

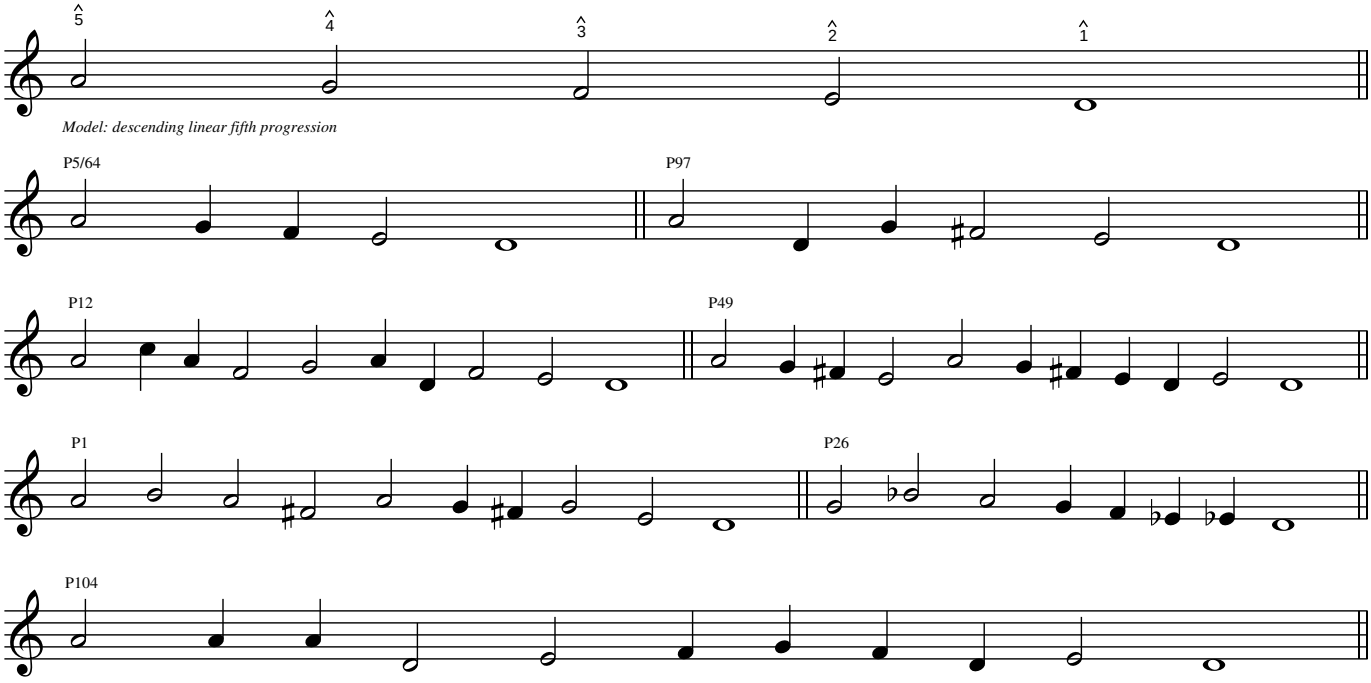
6.1 History clausula analysis

1. 27 closing phrases (22%) feature the A and G immediately preceding the tenor clausula, forming a descending linear fifth progression: A-G-F-E-D.
2. 1 closing phrase (<1%) features the A and G immediately preceding the tenor clausula with a discant clausula suffix, forming a varied linear fifth progression: A-G-F-E-D-[suffix].
3. 11 closing phrases (9%) feature the A and G immediately preceding an embellished tenor clausula, forming a varied linear fifth progression: A-G-F-[embellished tone]-E-D.
4. 13 closing phrases (11%) feature the A and G immediately preceding the tenor clausula, in which the interval A-G is ornamented, forming a descending, varied linear fifth progression: A-[embellished tones]-G-F-E-D.
5. 7 closing phrases (6%) feature the A and G immediately preceding the tenor clausula, in which the interval A-G is ornamented and the tenor clausula itself is embellished, forming a descending, varied linear fifth progression: A-[embellished tones]-G-F-[embellished tones]-E-D.

6.2 Conclusion history clausula analysis

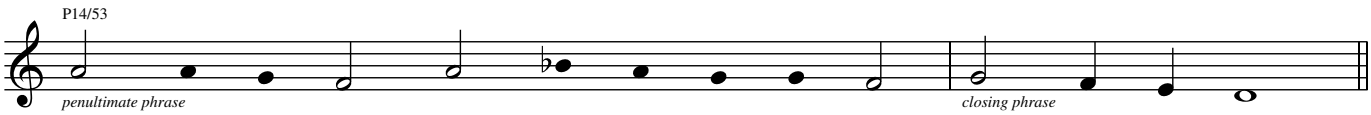
The A-G-F-E-D progression is a shared compositional model, used either in its basic form or with variations. This suggests composers worked from a common framework, balancing predictability with creative flexibility.

The next closing phrases gives an impression of this model and some of its variants observed in the corpus.



7. What about the other closing phrases?

Some phrases (22%) emphasize a descending linear third progression (F-E-D), omitting the fifth (A), and often embellishing the third tone by the fourth tone (G). However, when we include the penultimate phrase, the fifth often appears, suggesting these are abbreviated versions of the full fifth progression. One could say: even when the surface melody is shorter, the underlying fifth progression is often implied, adapted for text or rhythm. But this is remains open to multiple interpretations. Pars pro toto, one example:



The penultimate phrase consists of a diminution of the interval A-F. The closing phrase then provides a pleasing continuation: G-F-E-D. Overall, one might propose a descending linear fifth progression A-G-F-E-D. Alternatively, one might say that the third tone F is prolonged.

For completeness, seven closing phrases (6%) feature a rising, more or less embellished line leading to the finalis, ornamented by a discant clausula. Their only resemblance to the preceding closing phrases lies in their common starting point on the dominant A and their shared goal, the finalis D.

8. Overall conclusion

Key Findings

- Tenor clausula dominance: appears in 81% of phrases (including standard and varied forms).
- Descending fifth progression: present in 48% of phrases, either in its plain form A-G-F-E-D or with embellishments (e.g., A-G-F-[embellished tone]-E-D).
- Descending third progression: appears in 22% of phrases and functions as a condensed or truncated form of the descending fifth progression, often omitting the fifth (A) while retaining the core motion (G-)F-E-D. When the penultimate phrase is included, the fifth (A) frequently reappears, suggesting that the full fifth descent (A-G-F-E-D) remains conceptually intact even when not fully realized in the closing phrase.
- Rising lines: rare (6% of phrases), typically ending with a discant clausula and sharing a common starting point on the dominant (A) before resolving to the finalis (D).

Broader Implications

- Compositional Model and Communal Singing:
  The A-G-F-E-D progression served as a unifying framework for the Genevan Psalter, providing a coherent foundation for melodic construction while accommodating both uniformity and variation. This model was particularly well-suited to communal singing, where the entire congregation sang together in unison. The clarity and simplicity of the progression ensured that the melodies were accessible to all worshippers, reinforcing the Psalter's role in Reformed liturgical practice where congregational participation was central.
- Balance of Predictability and Creativity:
  Composers employed a clear cadential formula, particularly the tenor clausula, as a structural anchor to provide stability and modal clarity. This was essential for congregational singing, where predictable cadences made the melodies easy to follow. At the same time, ornamental flexibility uch as variations of the tenor clausula or the occasional use of the discant clausula, llowed for expressive diversity, demonstrating a thoughtful balance between uniformity and creative adaptation.
- Dominance of the Tenor Clausula:
  The prevalence of the tenor clausula (81%) aligns with its function as a foundational cadence in monophonic settings, while the discant clausula (14%) appears primarily as an ornamental suffix, reflecting its secondary role in this context. This distribution underscores how the Psalter's music was tailored to the practical and theological needs of communal worship, combining structural clarity with expressive richness.

Last remarks

This study provides a historically informed understanding of how simplicity and variation coexist in the closing phrases of 124 Genevan psalm tunes, how melodic identity is maintained across a large corpus, and how these patterns can be transposed to the broader Renaissance melodic repertoire, illustrating general contrapuntal practices.

To my knowledge, no prior study has systematically examined the closing phrases of the Genevan Psalter in this manner (asta.allen.ai - built on a massive database of over 200 million scholarly papers - did also not return any results). This analysis is based exclusively on the 124 closing phrases of the Genevan Psalter, relying solely on primary melodic material without additional sources. It is hoped that this study will offer insights for performers, composers, and scholars.

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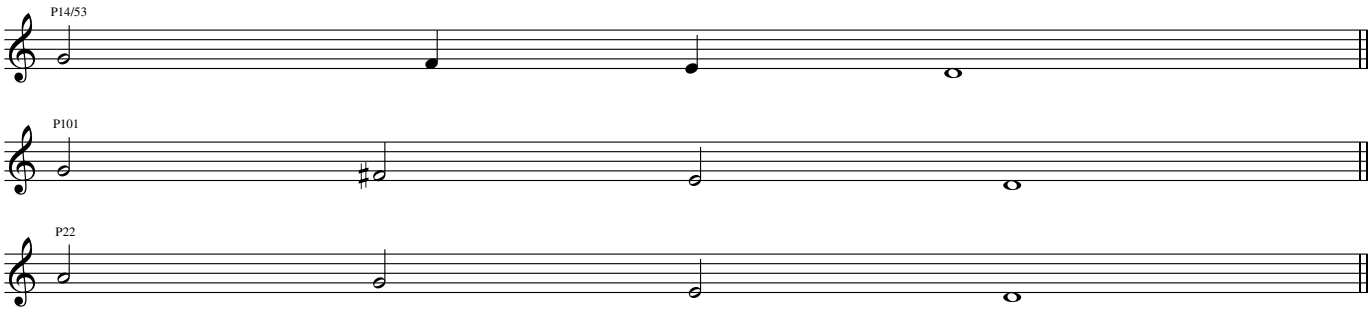
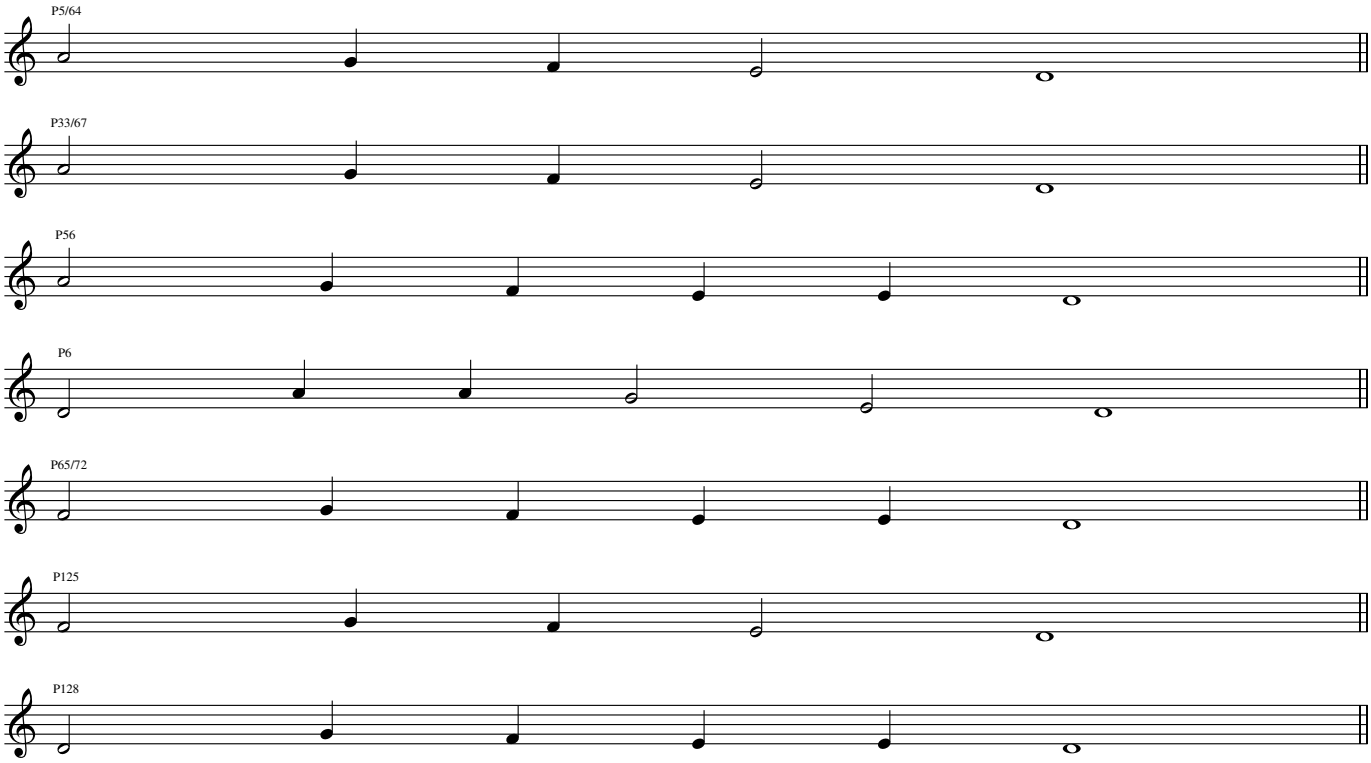
Annex (Dataset): Closing Phrases of the 16th-Century Genevan Psalter, Ordered by Length

The following catalogue presents all 124 closing phrases of the Genevan Psalter, ordered by their melodic length (from four to thirteen tones). Each phrase is shown in staff notation to provide the exact melodic form as found in the sources. In the main text, however, melodic outlines are referred to by pitch letters (A-G), which serve as analytical abbreviations of the notated material. This dual approach allows concise discussion of recurring intervallic models (such as A-G-F-E-D) while preserving access to the complete musical evidence in the Annex. The catalogue thus forms the empirical basis for the statistical and structural analyses in previous Sections 5-7.

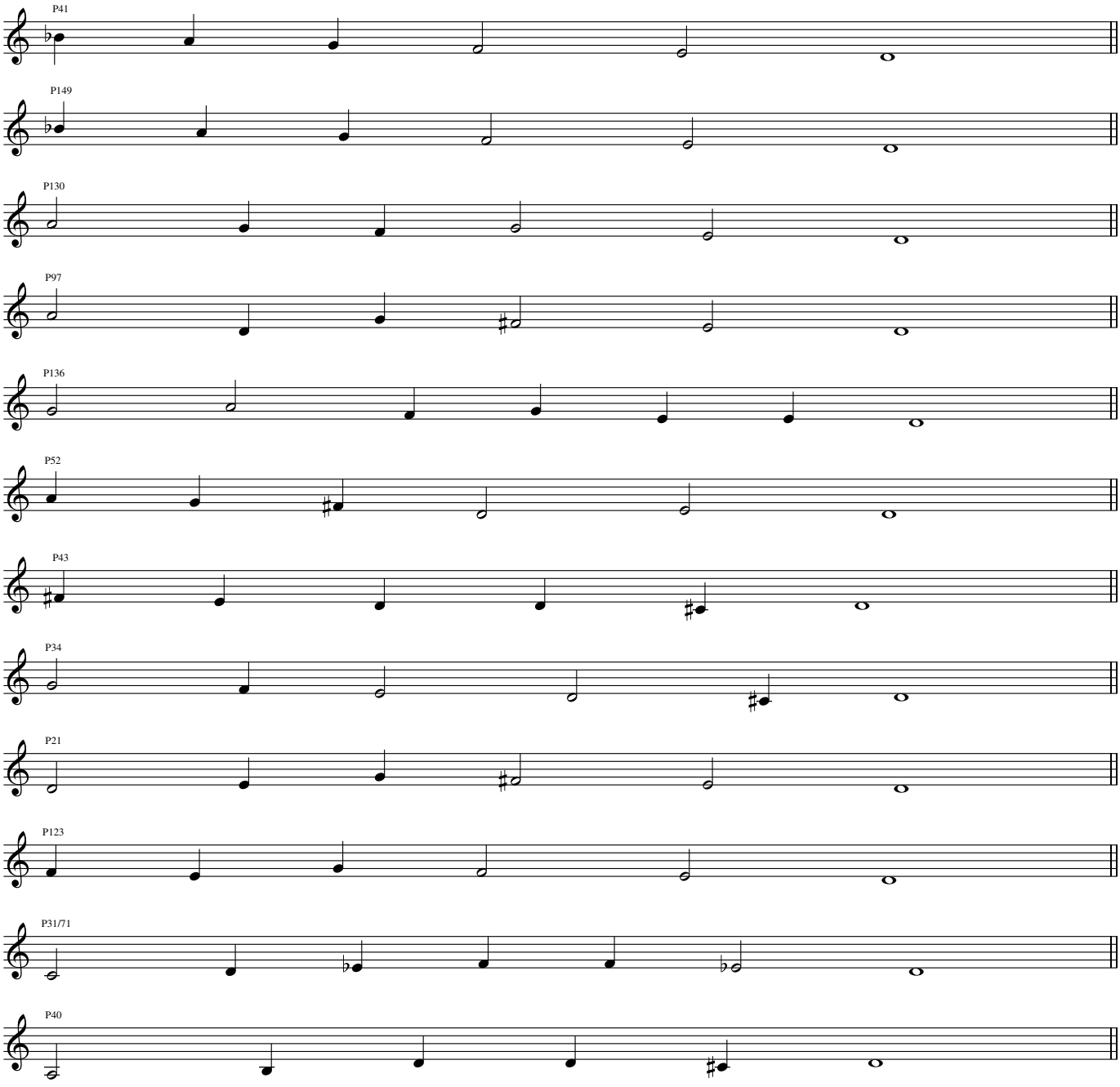
1. Four-tone closing phrases



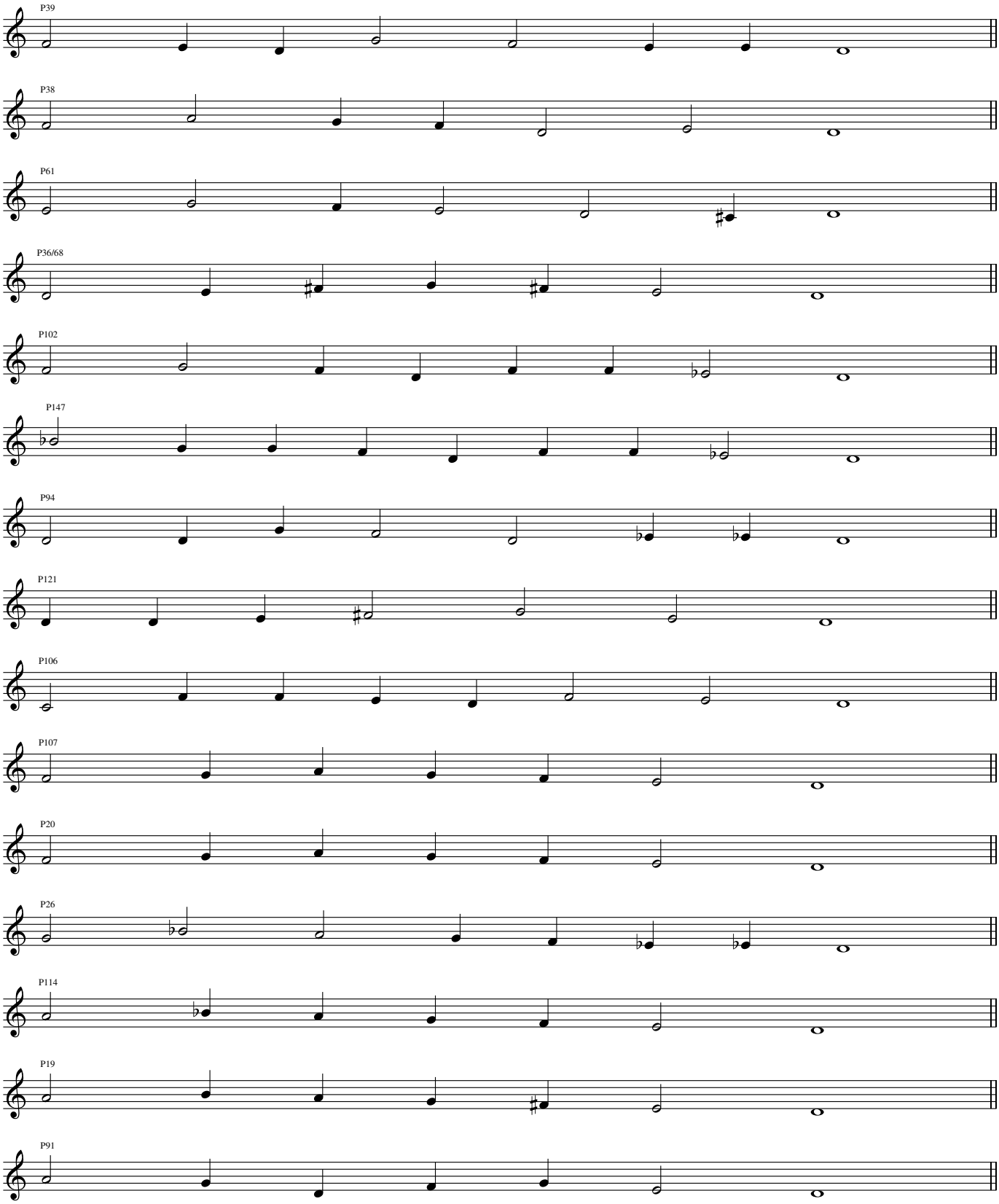
2. Five-tone closing phrases

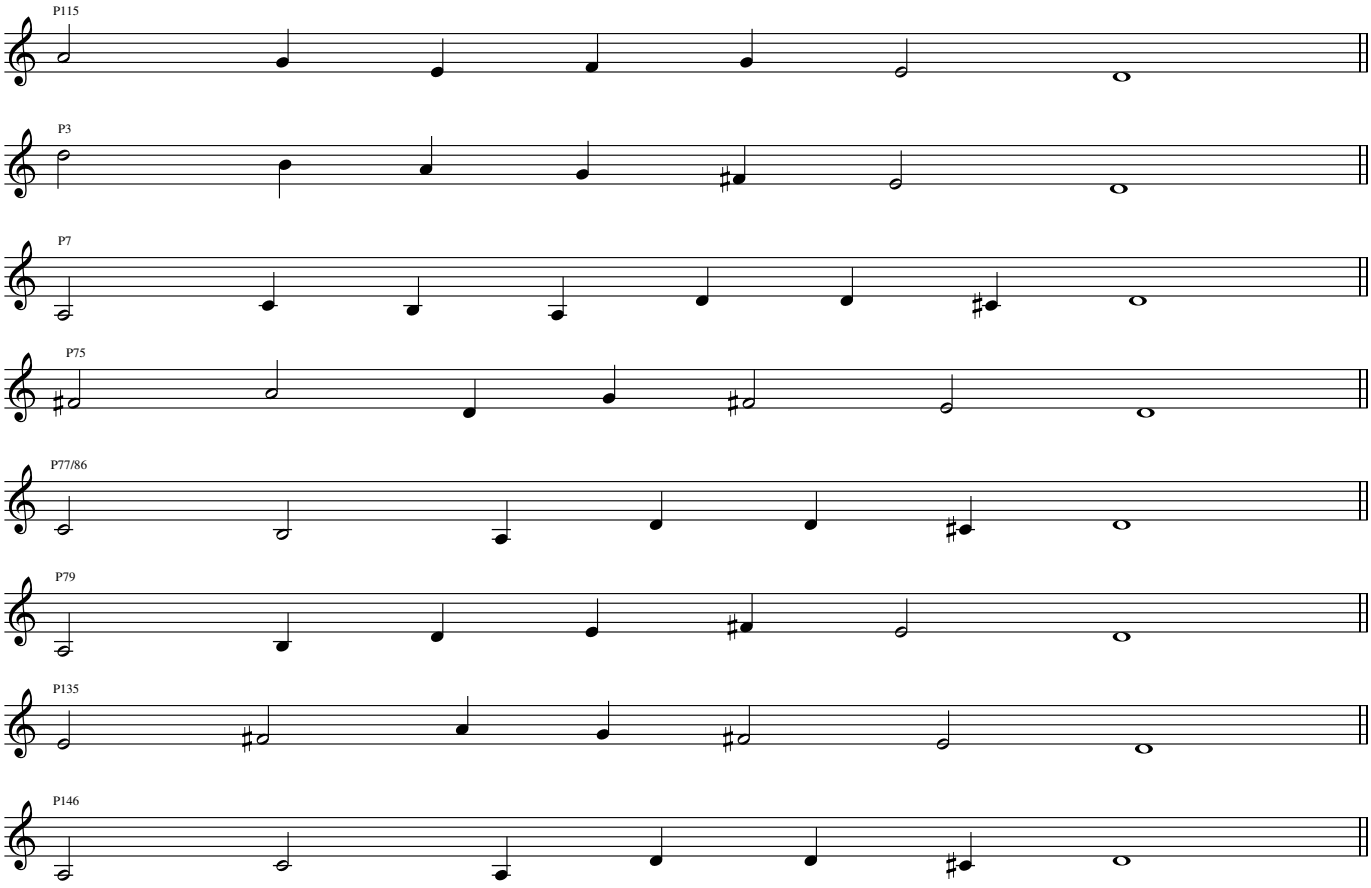


3. Six-tone closing phrases

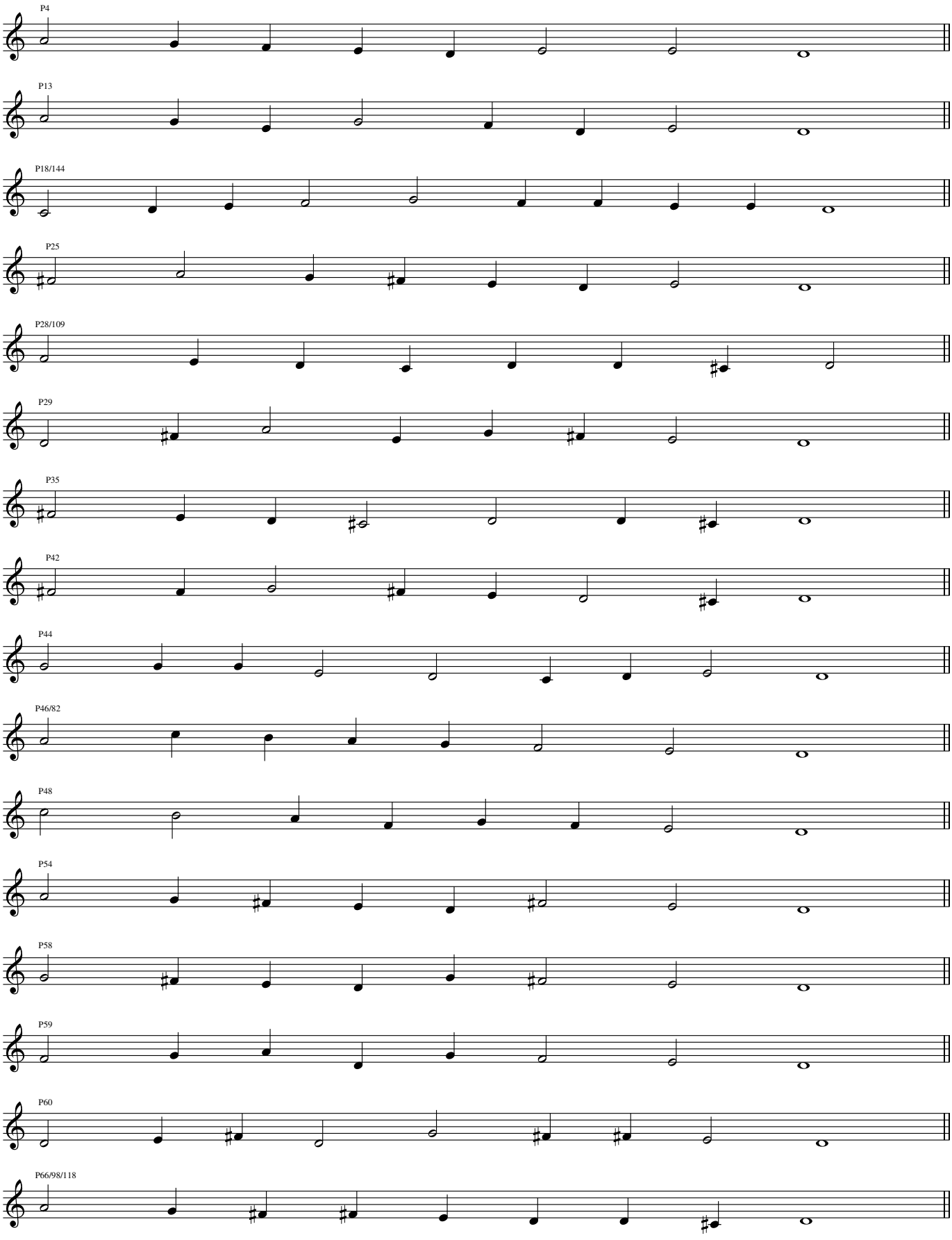


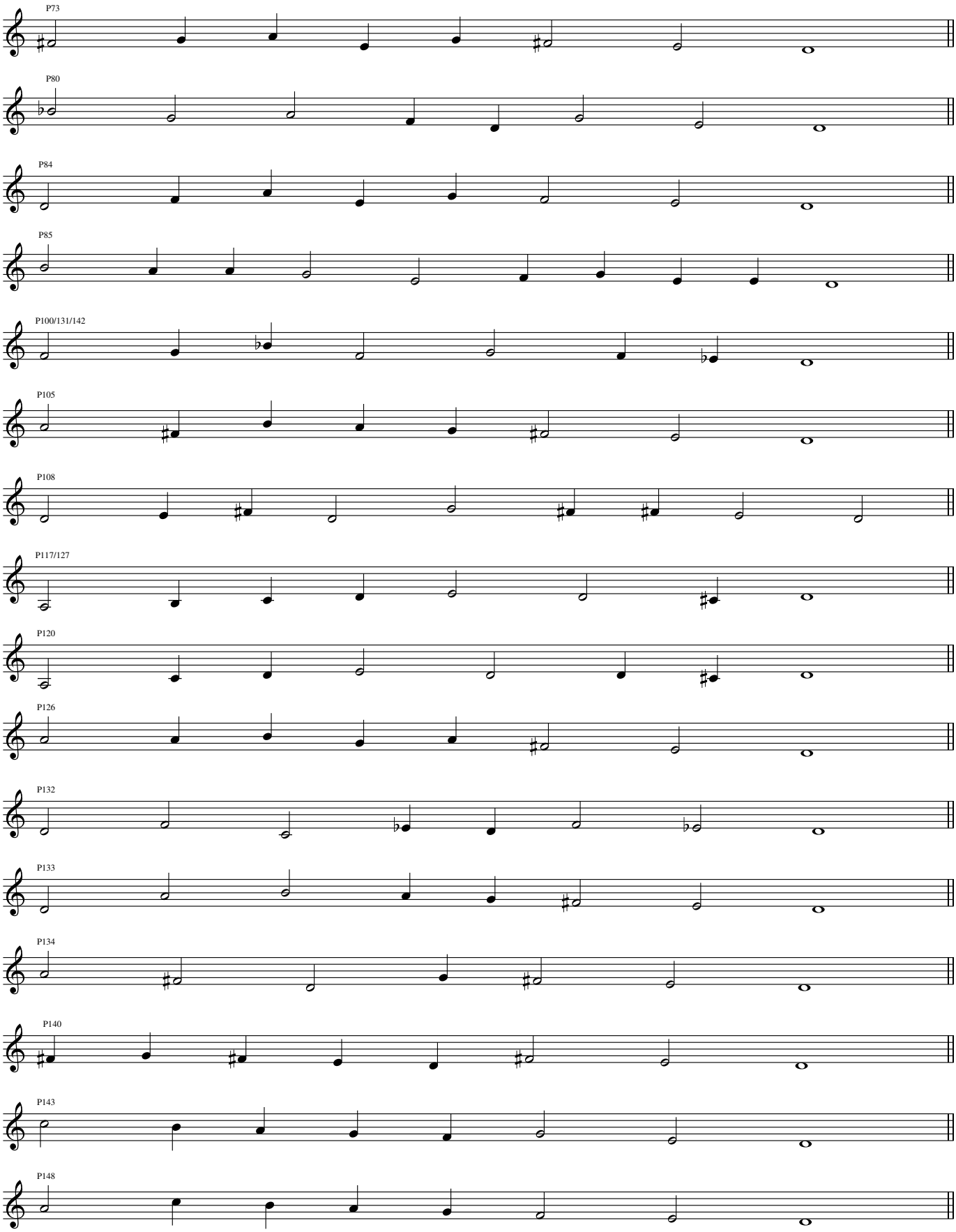
4. Seven-tone closing phrases

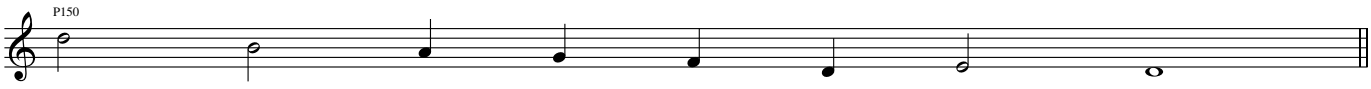




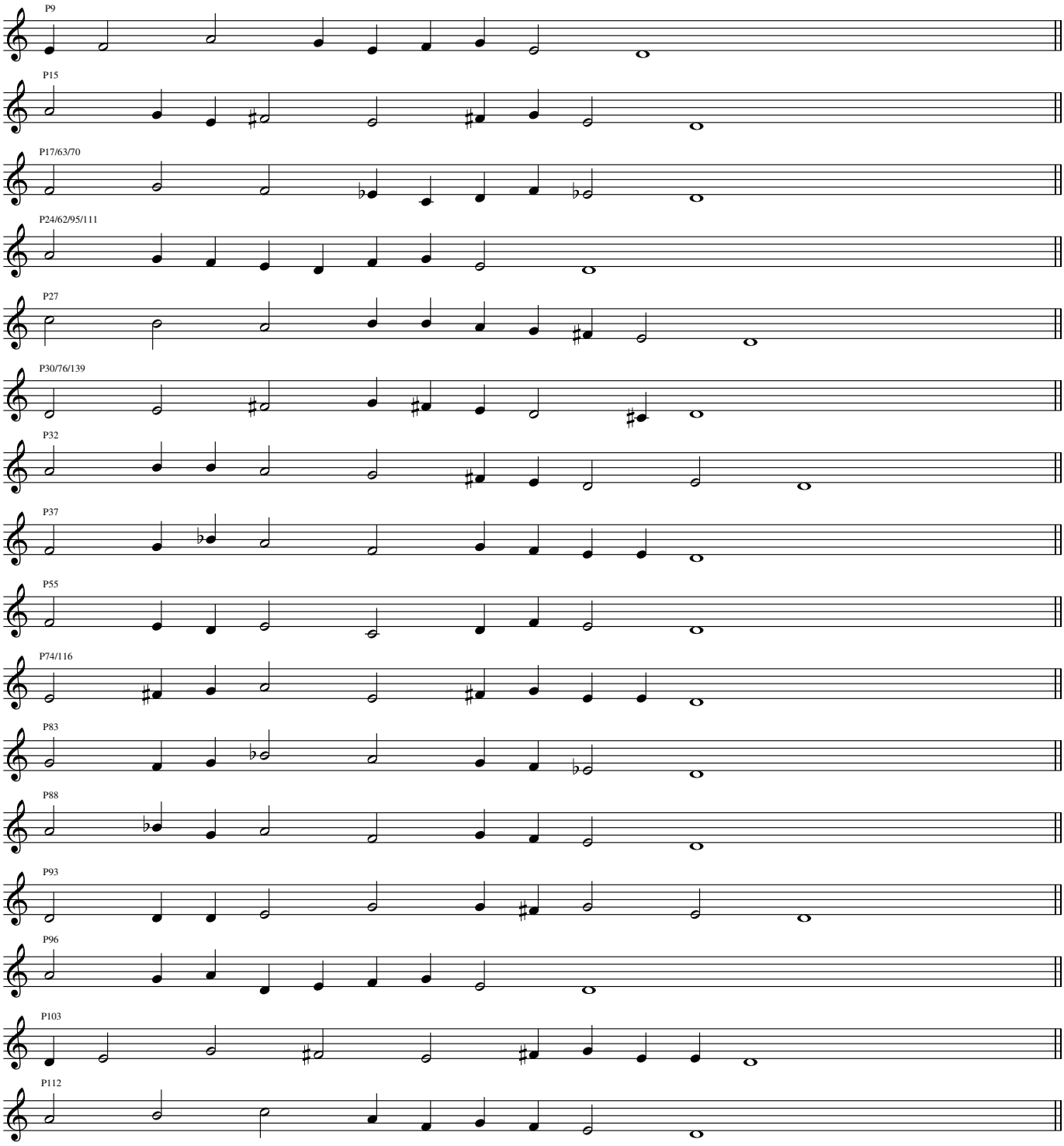
5. Eight-tone closing phrases

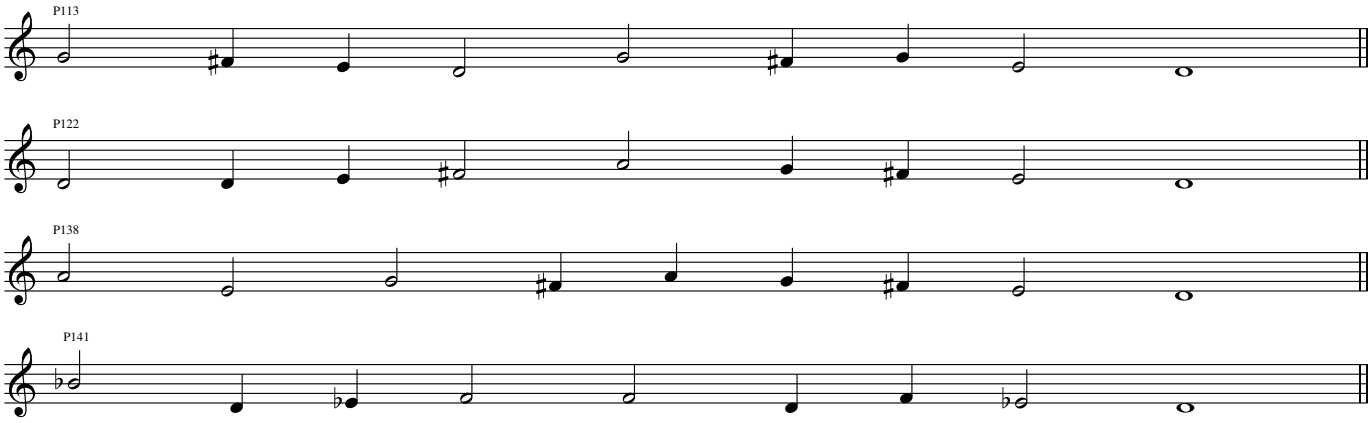




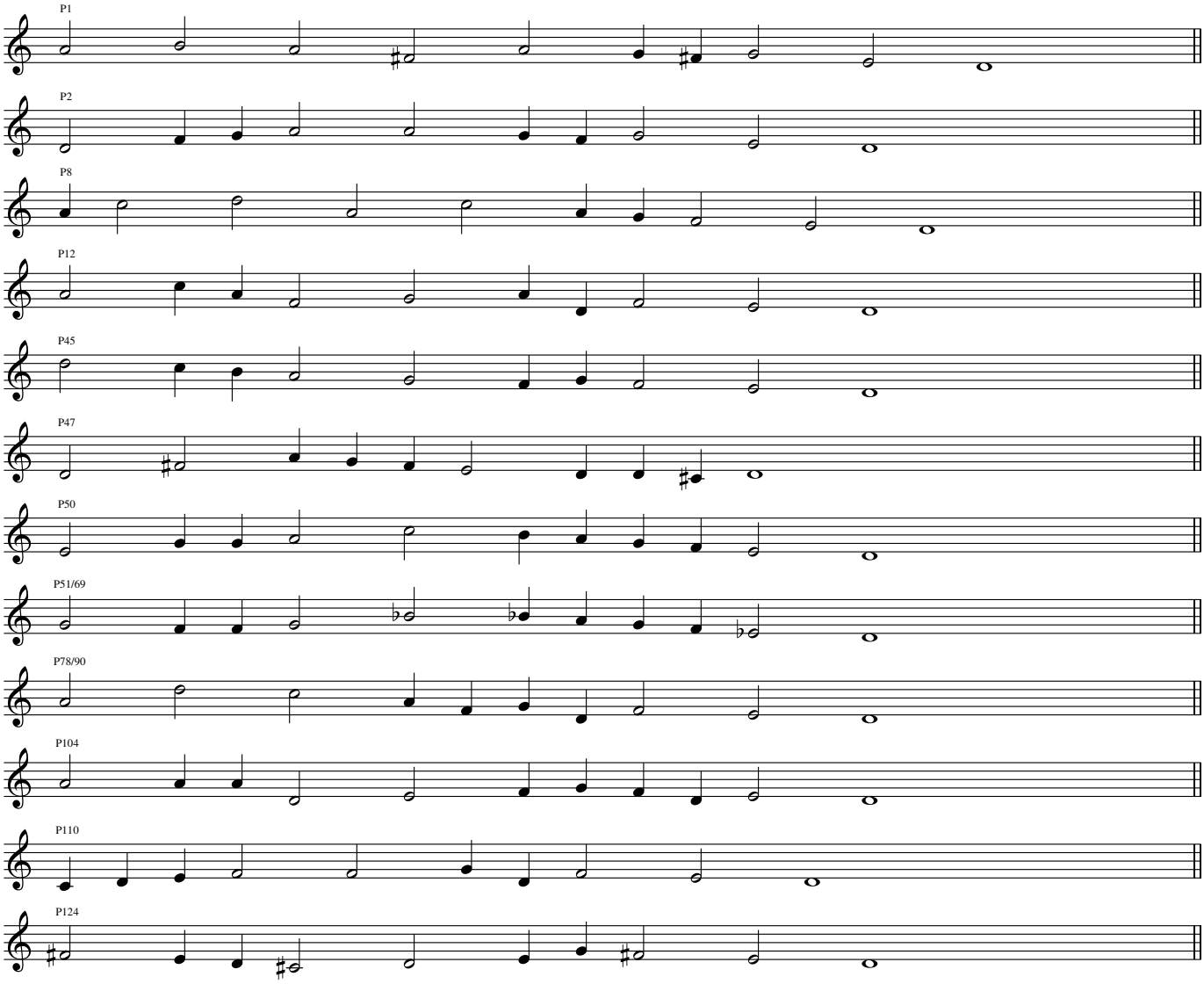


6. Nine-tone closing phrases

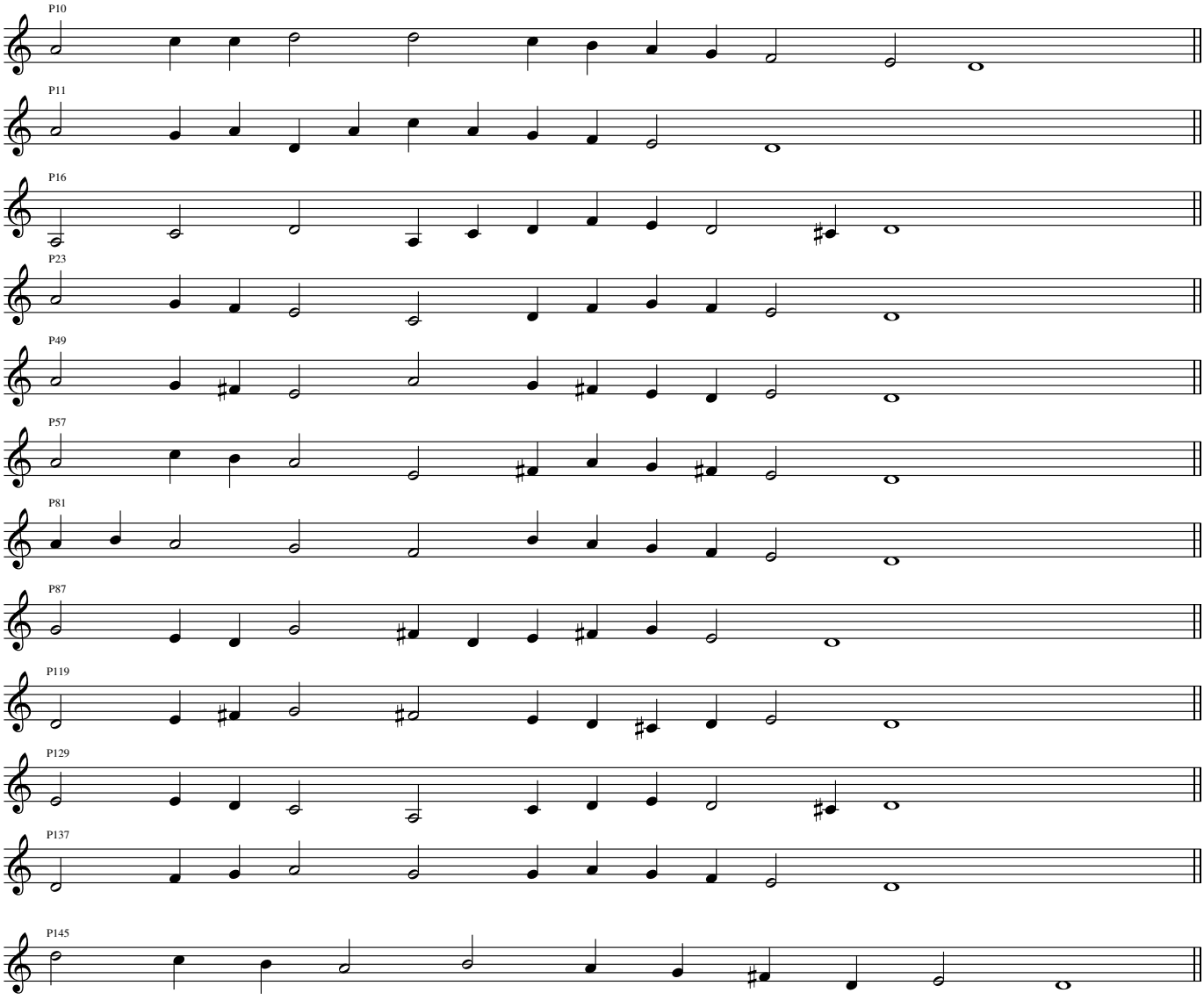




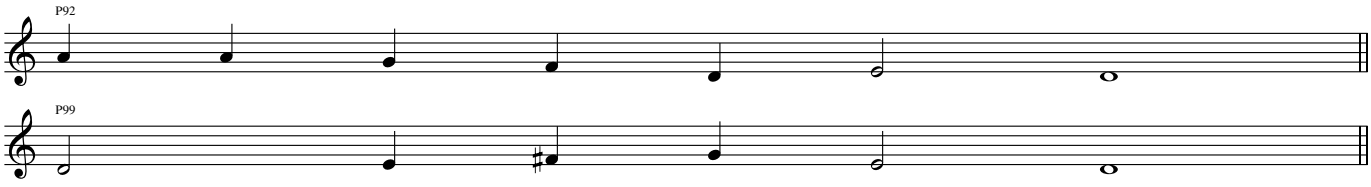
7. Ten-tone closing phrases



8. Eleven-tone closing phrases



9. Twelve-tone closing phrases



13. Thirteen-tone closing phrases