Rationale - Charade

Written by Phoenix Gosper

My song “Charade,” is a ska song, inspired by second and third-wave ska bands such as Streetlight Manifesto, Madness, and Sublime. The song also includes elements, and conventions of other genres, such as Afro-Cuban jazz.

The song begins with a soundscape composed of various sounds from nature, which have been altered through pitch modulation, and other techniques to emulate the sound of a warzone. The main three sounds I recorded were a leaf being ripped, a stick tapping against a wooden surface, and a small handful of leaves being rubbed between my hands. I then lowered the first two sounds in pitch, adjusted the EQ, shortened the sounds, and looped them repeatedly. This allowed me to emulate the sound of a machine gun, and a helicopter, using these sounds from nature. For the helicopter sound, I also slightly adjusted the pan throughout the soundscape’s duration, thus creating the illusion that the sound was coming from different directions. As for the sound of rubbing leaves together, I kept this mostly the same, however, I did have to edit the sound slightly to remove some of the background noise. The final result was a soundscape that emulated the sounds of a warzone, with someone walking through the warzone towards the cabaret bar that the song is about. The soundscape serves the purpose of subtly highlighting the song's thematic meaning before the lyrics even begin, as the song is about a cabaret bar within a wartorn country, with that country being Chile during and after the 1973 Chilean coup. This establishes the message of the song to the audience before it is ever even stated by the lyrics.

Following the soundscape, the song's intro begins with an acoustic guitar line, without any other instruments behind it. The purpose of this is to establish a sense of dynamics and to heighten the energy of the pre-chorus and chorus by building up the number of instruments playing at any given time. The song is in the key of G harmonic minor, and the opening guitar riff alternates between the i and VII chords of this key, those being Gmin, and F#dim. I initially struggled to work out a chord progression for this section, as I was initially attempting to use the Gmin diatonic chords, making the i and VII chords Gmin and Fmaj. However, these two chords didn’t fit the vibe of the song in my opinion, so I tried instead using the chords of G harmonic minor, which sounded much more fitting for the opening chord progression. After 4 bars of the acoustic guitar riff, the drums come in for the first time. Initially, the drum beat is just a simple beat on the side of a snare drum, before transitioning to a full drum beat as the chorus begins in bar 12. The snare beat, which remains the same for the majority of the song, is a Cuban drum beat known as the “clave beat,” (Berklee College Of Music, n.d.) The use of this beat was inspired by its use in Afro-Cuban jazz, giving the genre a distinctive rhythmic feel, which I attempted to emulate. The inclusion of this drumbeat was inspired by the Australian Afro Cuban jazz band “Headphone Jones,” and their song “Baggage,” however, similar latin drum beats can also be found in latin rock songs, such as “Smooth” by the band “Santana.”

The song then transitions into an instrumental variation of the chorus, which contains trumpet, and bass, along with guitar, and a more complicated variation of the drumbeat, with this section beginning at bar 12. This use of dynamics helps to make the impact that the chorus has more significant to the listener, while also utilising some of the musical elements of ska as a genre. When discussing these elements, it is important to consider the fact that ska as a musical genre is typically separated into three smaller groups, each with different characteristics, historical significance, and cultural significance. These groups are usually referred to as “traditional ska,” which began in Jamaica in the 1950s, “Two-Tone,” or “second wave ska,” which began in Britain in the early 1980s, and “third wave ska,” which began in the United States of America in the 1990s (Traber, 2012). It is therefore vital when discussing the musical elements of ska to make the distinction between these different types and consider the cultural significance of each, to identify the elements of ska that only apply to specific ska movements, and areas that apply to all three major movements.

Ska as a genre, in all forms, is typically defined by its instrumentation, with ska songs almost always including horns, saxophones, guitars, keyboards, and drums. Ska songs also typically contain syncopated guitar lines, and political lyrics (Hussey, 1999). These elements are largely the same among all iterations of ska, and all three of the ska bands I have mentioned use these elements repeatedly. The chorus is the first specific moment where I incorporated these musical elements into my composition, specifically in its instrumentation, which, as I mentioned, includes a trumpet, guitar, bass, and drums, all of which are characteristics of ska. In regards to elements of specifically second and third-wave ska, those sub genres are generally known for their high tempo, especially in comparison to traditional ska. My composition is no exception, with a tempo of 190 BPM. The chorus uses almost entirely the same chords as the intro, however, the lead into the verse does contain a slight alteration to the chord progression, that being the inclusion of the first inversion of the G minor chord established earlier in the chorus. This gives the chord progression a clearer melodic progression, as for each chord, the highest note goes up in pitch from the last chord's highest note.

Following the chorus, the song transitions into the first verse, beginning at bar 20, which contains only bass, a quieter iteration of the drum beat, and vocals, which I represented with a flute part. The purpose of using fewer instruments in this section is not only to make the pre chorus and chorus feel more impactful in comparison, but to place greater focus on the song's lyrics, thus encouraging the listener to focus their attention on the song's meaning. As previously mentioned, one of the major elements of ska as a genre is the political nature of its lyrics. This defining musical element stems from ska’s roots in Jamaican culture, where it was used by the operators of mobile discos, or sound systems (Hussey, 1999), to offer a form of social critique (Traber, 2012). This expands beyond traditional ska to second and third-wave ska, with these bands often using the genre to critique elements of contemporary American and British culture. Take for instance the song “Date Rape,” by Sublime. This song serves as a criticism towards rape culture, especially in the United States at the time the song was released. As such, the lyrics of my composition are of a political nature, thus adhering to the conventions of ska as a genre. The song is a protest song about authoritarian regimes undermining movements of differing political ideologies through the use of extreme violence. While this theme and criticism can be applied to a number of historical governments and movements, the lyrics specifically allude to the 1973

Chilean coup, and the Pinochet government. I initially intended to record myself singing the lyrics over the instrumental part, however, I struggled to sing the part that I had written, because I had written it slightly above my range. Once I realised this, I tried to instead sing the part an octave down, but this didn't match the rest of the song, and there were some sections where this was impossible. Eventually, I decided that the best solution was to represent the vocal melody with a flute part, and provide the lyrics separately. If I was to redo the composition, one of the main changes I would make would be to either write the vocal melody with my vocal range in mind, or with a friend's range in mind, and ask them to record a vocal part. The lyrics of the first verse are as follows:

Can't walk around the street at night
Without somebody by your side
Can't talk about the need to fight
Before the jockeys can mount their ride
But still, the burlesque cabaret bars
Fill with content, fill your drinks
Freaks will speak behind guitars
The drunken rage is just all in sync

The first two lines refer directly to the idea of government control, with the "somebody" in the second line referring specifically to Pinochet's government. As such, the lyrics communicate the methods by which the government can control the thoughts and actions of its citizens, by watching over them, thus figuratively always being "by their side." The next two lines refer to the suppression of radical ideas, or "the need to fight," through extreme violence, with jockeys symbolising armed forces, as the noise horses make is akin to the noise of soldiers marching, or even the noise of bombs going off. This communicates the fact that, at the time, radical ideas were suppressed through the use of extreme violence and government intervention. This also calls hack to the soundscape at the beginning of the sound, which simulated machine gun fire, which is once again akin to the sound of jockeys "mounting their ride." The second half of the verse describes the cabaret bar from which a movement in opposition to the government is formed. The revolutionary nature of this movement is not explicitly stated at this stage in the song, however, the later verses help to slowly reveal this to the listener. Perhaps more importantly, the instrumentation of the second half of the verse contains one of the most important musical conventions of ska, which also pertains to each of its sub-movements. That musical element is syncopation in the guitar line, with each note or chord being played on the offbeat. While it pertains to all subgenres of ska, examples of second and third-wave ska songs that incorporate syncopation into their guitar lines include "One Step Beyond," by Madness, and "Santeria," by Sublime. Every verse of my song contains the same syncopated guitar line, however, a specific example can be seen in bars 28-35. These bars exclusively contain chords played on the offbeat, aside from a single flourish in bar 31. This creates the syncopation that ska is most commonly associated with.

The pre-chorus, which begins at bar 36, is one of the most musically unique sections of the entire composition, as its instrumentation differs in several very notable ways from the rest of the song. For example, this is the first instance in the song where the chord progression changes,

aside from the slight change found in bar 19. This is also the only instance in the song where the electric guitar plays, and the only instance where the guitar and organ notes are sustained for a prolonged period, giving this section very different dynamics from any other point in the composition. However, perhaps most significantly, this is the first stage in the song where the snare does not play the clave beat. These were all intentional choices that helped to communicate the meaning behind the lyrics of this section. The lyrics for this section are the following:

It's not the future in store
You can hear the choir call to
The jockeys on the lawn

As previously stated, the jockeys of the song are a symbol of extreme violence used by the government to suppress radical ideas. As such, the "choir" calling to "the jockeys on the lawn," symbolises the government recognising the cabaret bar from the first verse as a potential threat, and using military violence to suppress this threat. As such, the ethereal, and opposing nature of this section in comparison to the rest of the composition communicates the sense of hope held by those in the cabaret bar, before the song transitions back to its regular instrumentation and sound, symbolising this sense of hope being crushed by the government intervention.

The first chorus, which begins at bar 44, contains the same instrumentation, and chord structure as the instrumental version from earlier in the song, except repeated, and with some changes in dynamics to emphasise certain elements of the lyrics, such as the line "Breaks apart this whole charade," which appears in bars 58 and 59, and is accompanied by a break in the trumpet, guitar, and bass parts. The lyrics for this section are the following:

Come out, and join in, the new world order
The people in there are ripe for slaughter
Sick and the twisted, fickle reformers
The strangers, the workers, the teachers, martyrs
The wall is erased by a stick hand grenade
Some homemade explosives the government made
And the pounding of the cavalcade
Breaks apart this whole charade

The first four lines primarily communicate how the government perceives the revolutionaries behind the movement, as deserving of death, or "ripe for slaughter." It is also heavily implied that this representation is used by the government to convince others to agree with their violent actions, as per the line "Come out, and join in, the new world order." This is a common method of propaganda, representing a group, or idea, as something negative to give it an inherently negative connotation (Melson-Silimon et al., 2023). The final four lines describe the movement being temporarily broken apart, as a result of the government's actions. However, this section also indicates that "homemade explosives," are used. This is a reference to the fact that, during the 1973 Chilean coup, the US tried to disguise the extent of their involvement, despite the CIA being directly involved in staging the coup (Needleman, 1974). The line "breaks apart this whole

charade," also contains additional thematic significance to the rest of the song, however, this will only become apparent when we compare the first and second choruses.

The second verse, which begins on bar 70, is instrumentally very similar to the first verse, as well as thematically similar, though it does contain several key distinctions from the first verse, primarily in its different lyrics, and its inclusion of an alto saxophone. The main riff played by the alto saxophone can be heard in bars 78-85. This further demonstrates some of the musical conventions of ska, with the saxophone being one of the most commonly used instruments in the genre. Take for instance the opening to the song "Everything Went Numb," by Streetlight Manifesto, which contains a saxophone part that later transitions into a trumpet part. When I first wrote the saxophone part, I initially struggled to make the part fit with the rest of the song. Eventually, I realised that, because an alto saxophone is in the key of E♭, I had to transpose it to match the original key of the song. This was something I initially struggled to do, but eventually, I found a transposition table, which helped me determine how to transpose the part (Taming The Saxophone, n.d.). Even after finding the transposition table, this process took a while. Eventually however, I got used to the process, to the point that, when I included another saxophone part in the bridge, I was able to transpose it fairly easily. I also wrote this saxophone part before the trumpet part earlier in the song, which meant that I didn't have as severe of a problem writing that part, as I was used to the transposition process. Other than that, the second verse contains very similar instrumentation to the first. The lyrics of this verse are as follows:

Clear the town they said
Of everyone we have in mind
Pump their bodies full of lead
A military apartheid
If you hold opposing ideals
We will show you no appeal.
You can persuade, you can plead
But understand it's what we need
But the Burlesque takes over streets
Their heads in the sky, with heads at their feet
Gesture towards the cavalcade
Send in some men, send them to the grave

This verse, despite having different lyrics from the first, communicates something very similar. It shows the events following the government's destruction of the cabaret bar, with the government murdering anyone they deem to be unworthy of life, or in other words, "everyone we have in mind." The lyrics also reference many of the real-world actions of the Pinochet government following the 1973 Chilean coup. Specifically, it references the military dictatorship's ties to Apartheid and the numerous war crimes that were committed by Pinochet's government, including shooting those with differing political views, or pumping "their bodies full of lead," (CBS News, 2015). The verse then reveals that, despite the government's attempts, they were unable to stop the movement that began in the cabaret bar, when "the burlesque takes

over the streets." This is an exact mirror of the first verse, communicating that a movement is not confined to one isolated instance, and can be passed down from generation to generation.

While the second pre-chorus and chorus differ slightly from the first pre-chorus and chorus, the main thematic difference is in the ending of both choruses, and the difference in their lyrics. Specifically, while the first chorus ends with the line "Breaks apart this whole charade," the second chorus ends with the line "Puts an end to this charade." This difference highlights that from the government's perspective, they have not only succeeded in temporarily suppressing the movement that goes against their beliefs but also outright putting an end to the movement.

The bridge is the last musically and thematically distinct section of the composition, before the final chorus, which mostly consists of elements from the previous choruses. This section contains the i, VII, and V chord progression, which in the key of G harmonic minor, is comprised of the G minor, F# Diminished, and D major chords. This section, while being instrumentally similar to the chorus, with a guitar, bass, drum, and trumpet part, also contains a saxophone part, and differs in its dynamics. The distinction is achieved by the differences in the two drum parts, with the drum part in the chorus being quieter, and containing the clave rhythm, while the drum part in the bridge is louder, and doesn't contain the clave rhythm. This section also has a 6/4 time signature, meaning there are 6 beats in each bar, and a quarter note represents 1 beat. These musical elements are vital in communicating the meaning behind this section of the composition. As previously demonstrated by the pre-chorus, changes to the drum part and the dynamics of the song help to symbolise a shift in the narrator's perspective. In the pre-chorus, this represented the narrator's hope, before this hope was crushed by the "jockeys on the lawn." In this section, however, the shift represents the perspective the events are told from changing, from someone working for the government to someone working within the cabaret bar. This emphasises that regardless of how the government may paint those within the cabaret bar as "sick and twisted," or "fickle reformers," this image is not representative of the group at large.

The fact that this section comes after the government has supposedly put an end to the movement, as shown in the lyrics of the second chorus, implies that eventually, even after the movement has been forcefully suppressed by the government, the citizens under the government's control will eventually begin to see the events not from the government's perspective, but from the perspective of those within the cabaret, and emphasise with the goals and aspirations of those that the government merely considered a "charade."

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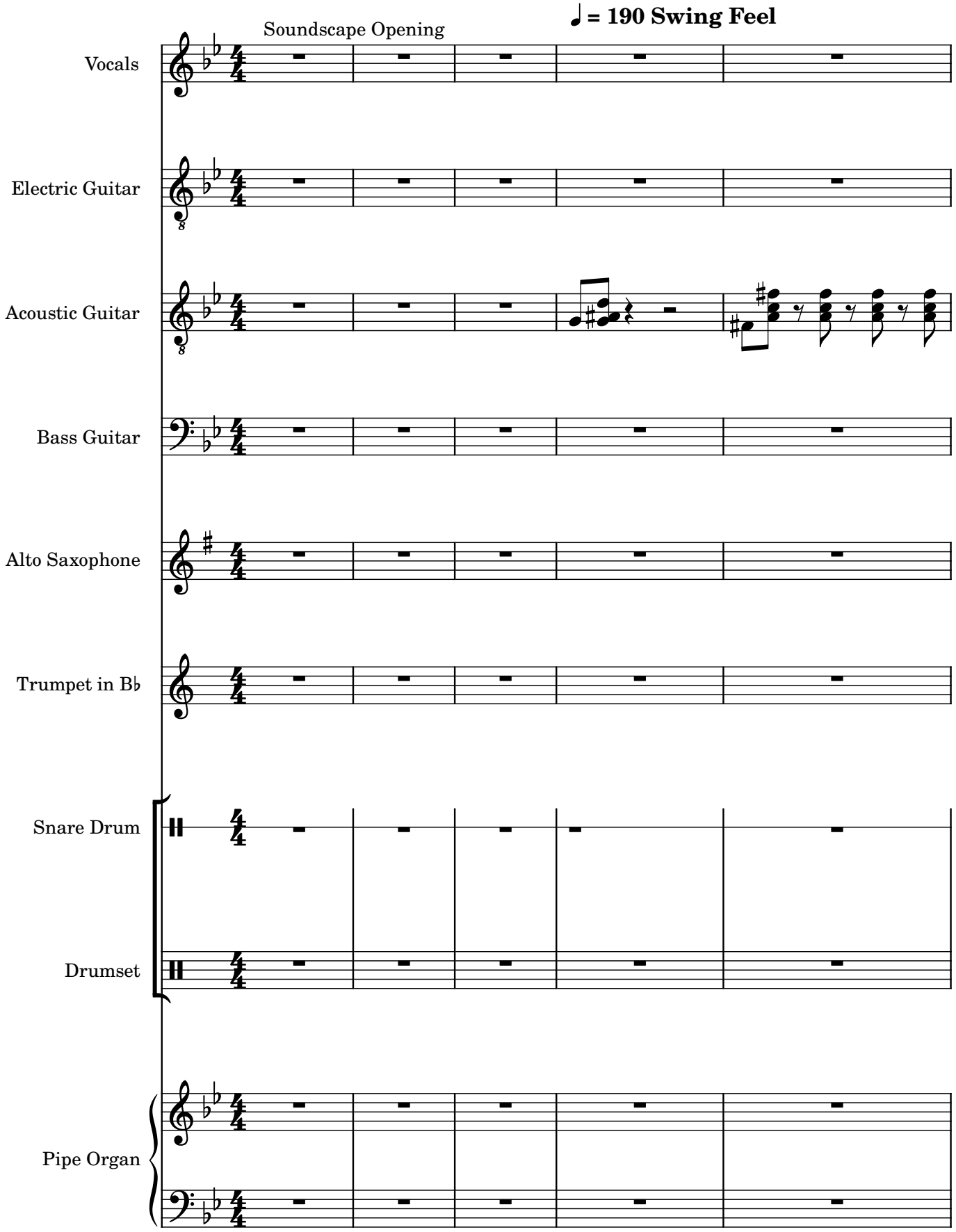
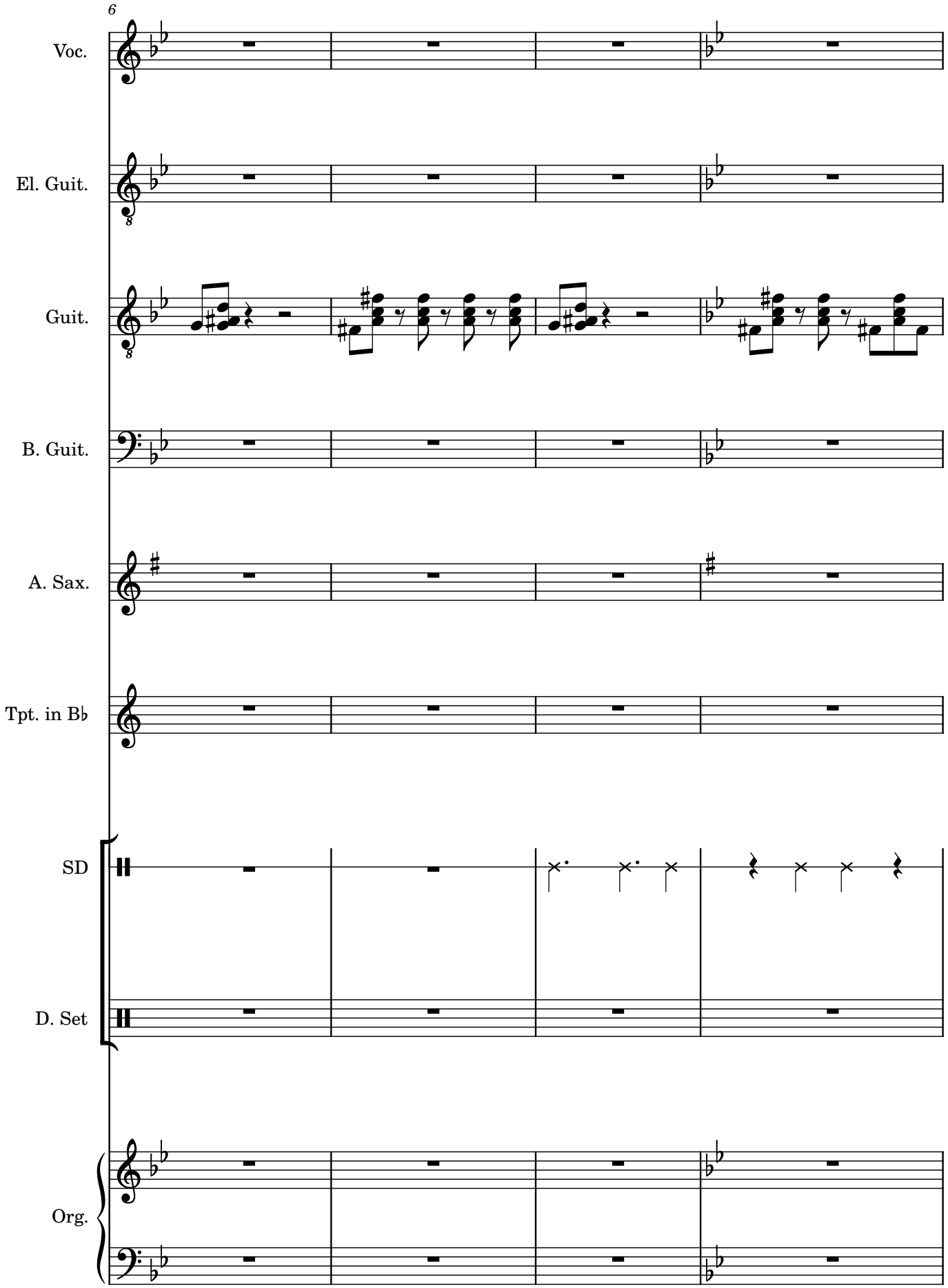
Charade

Phoenix Gosper

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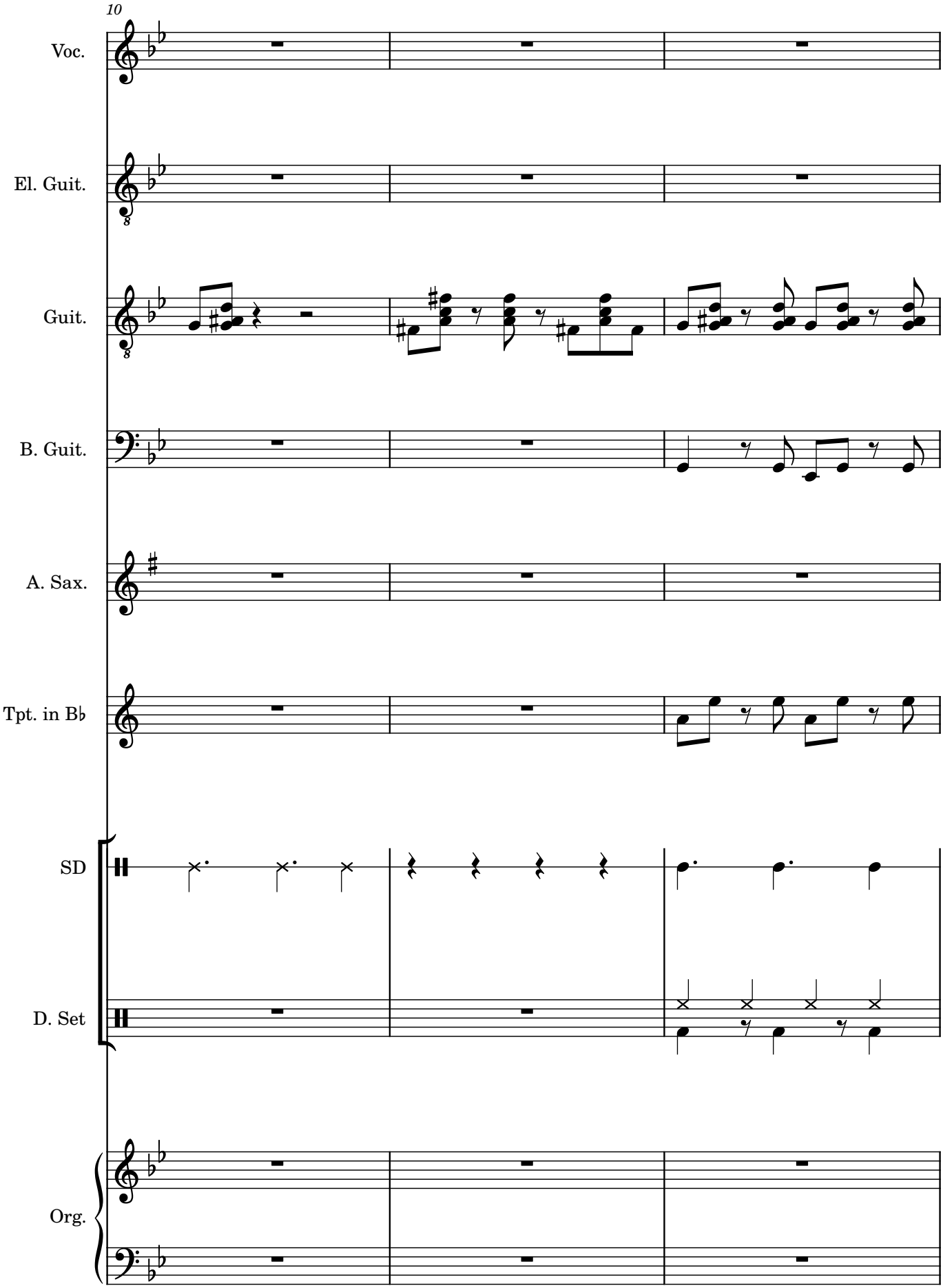
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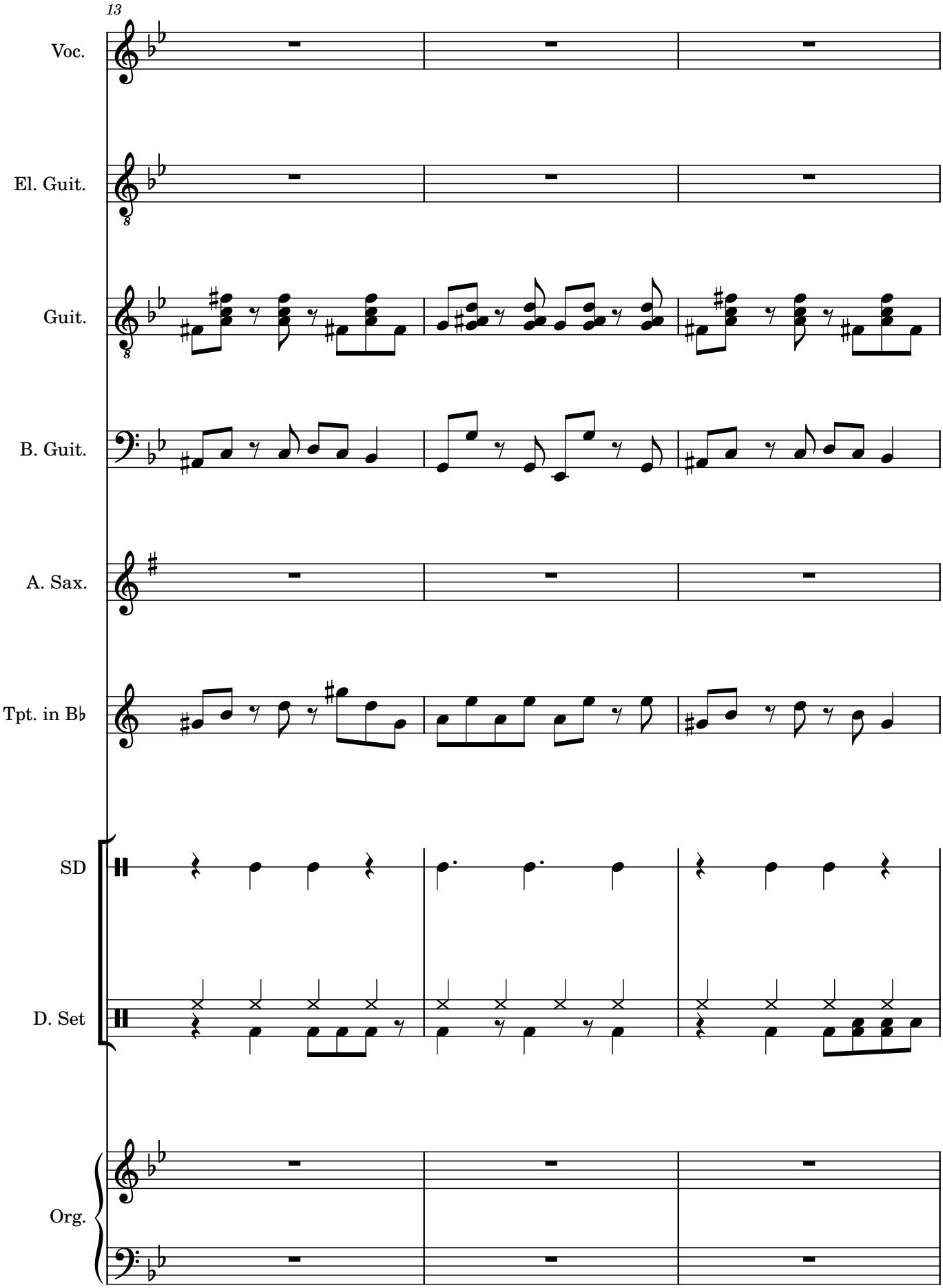
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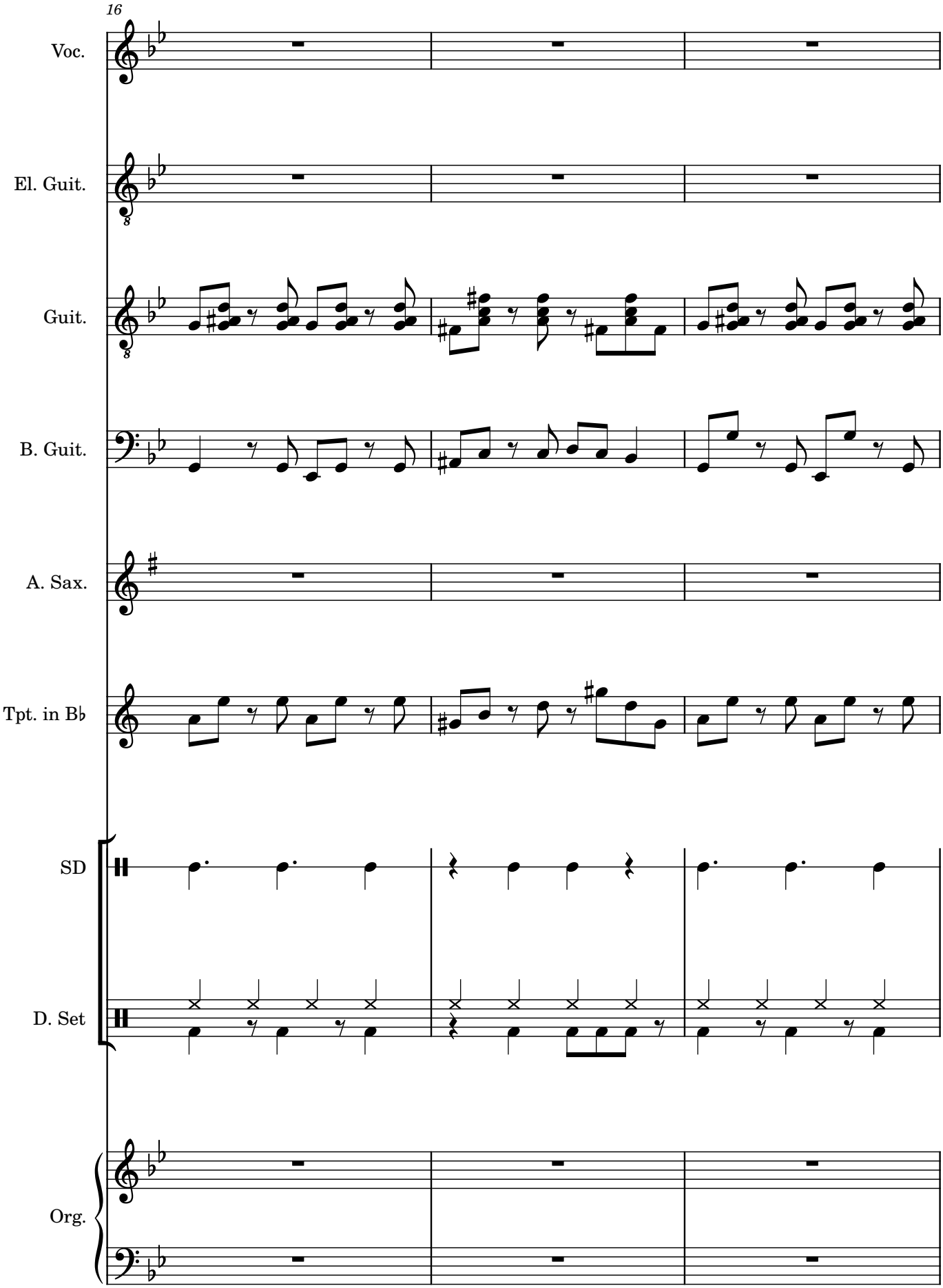
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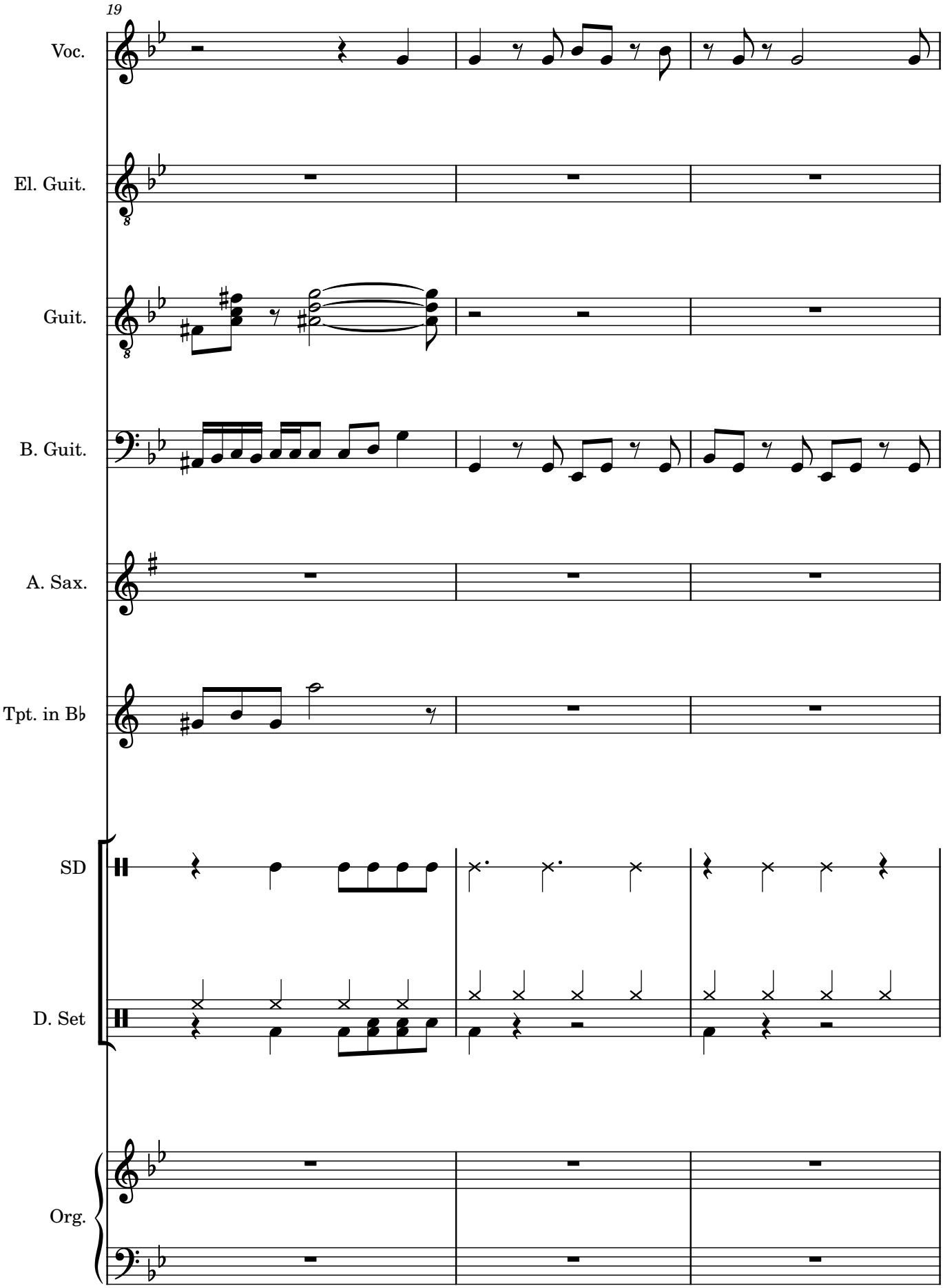
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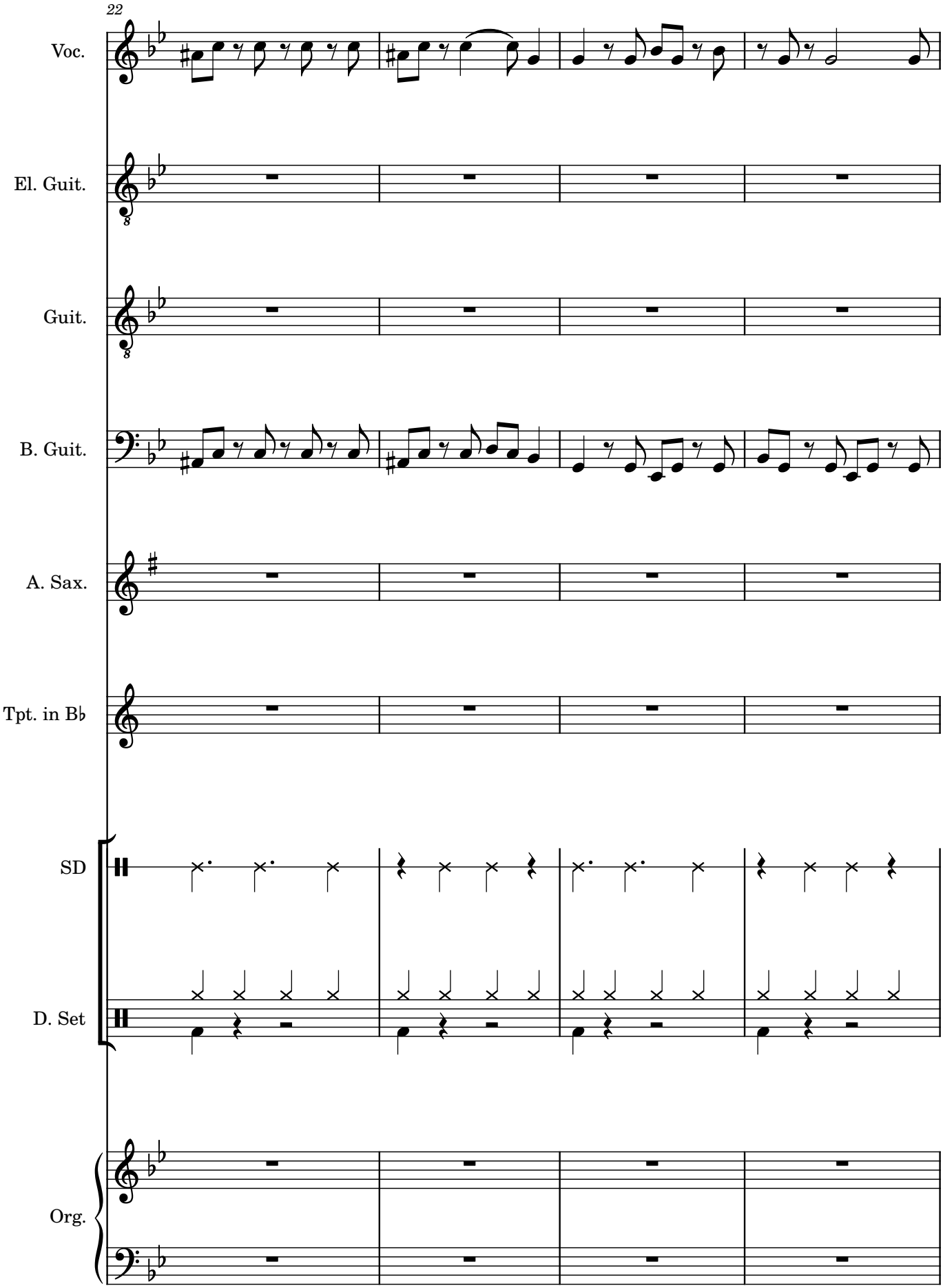
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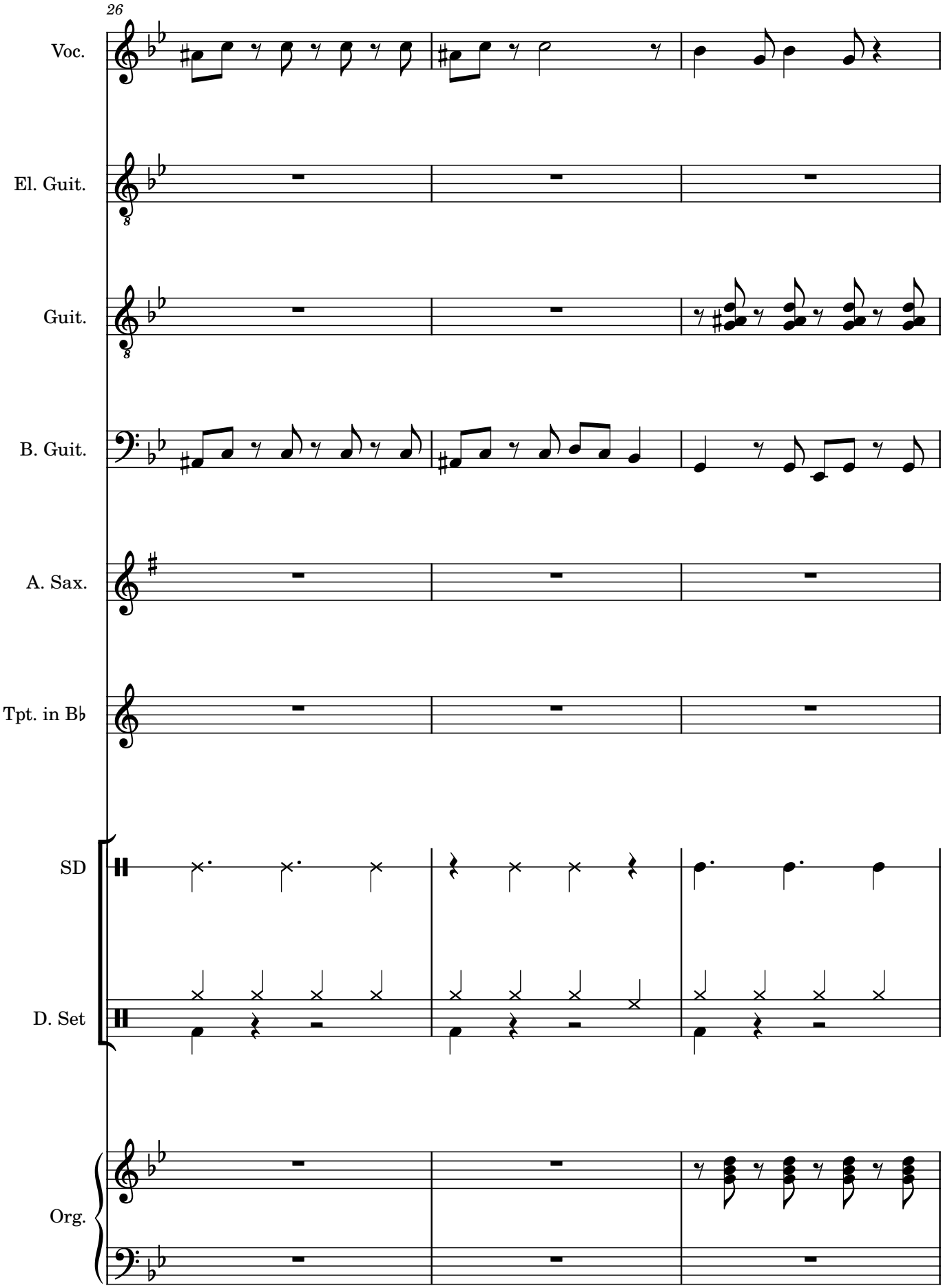
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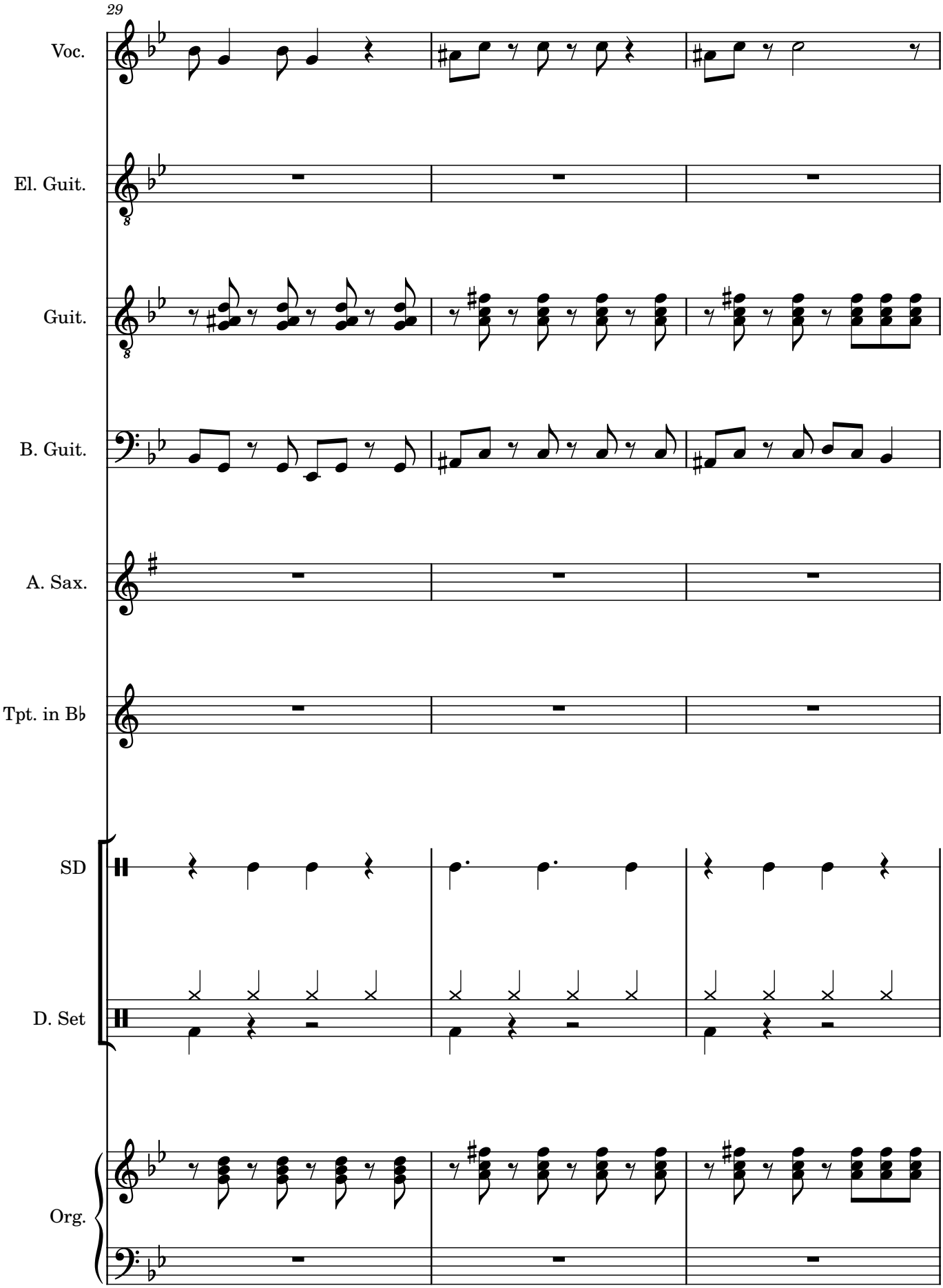
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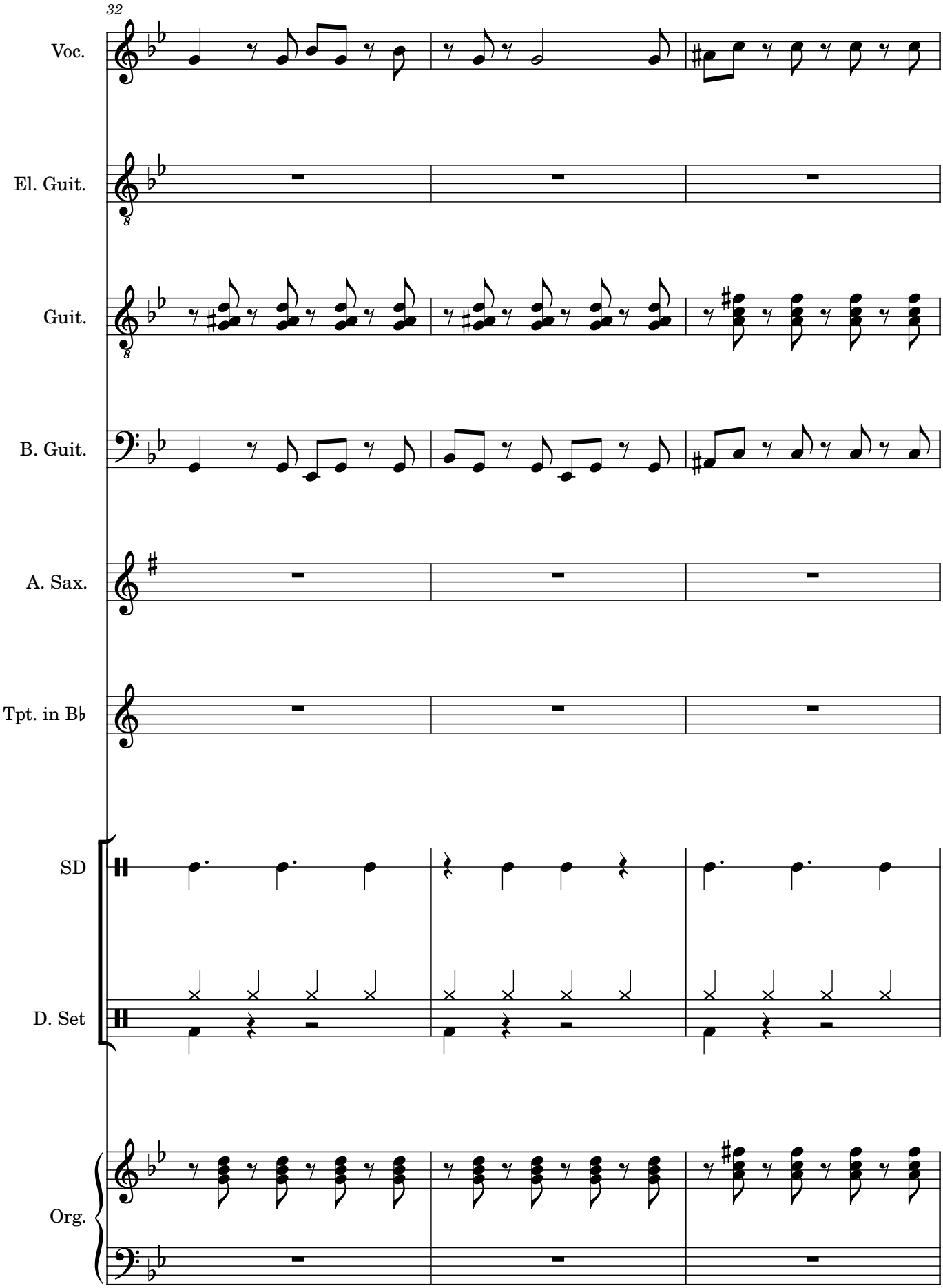
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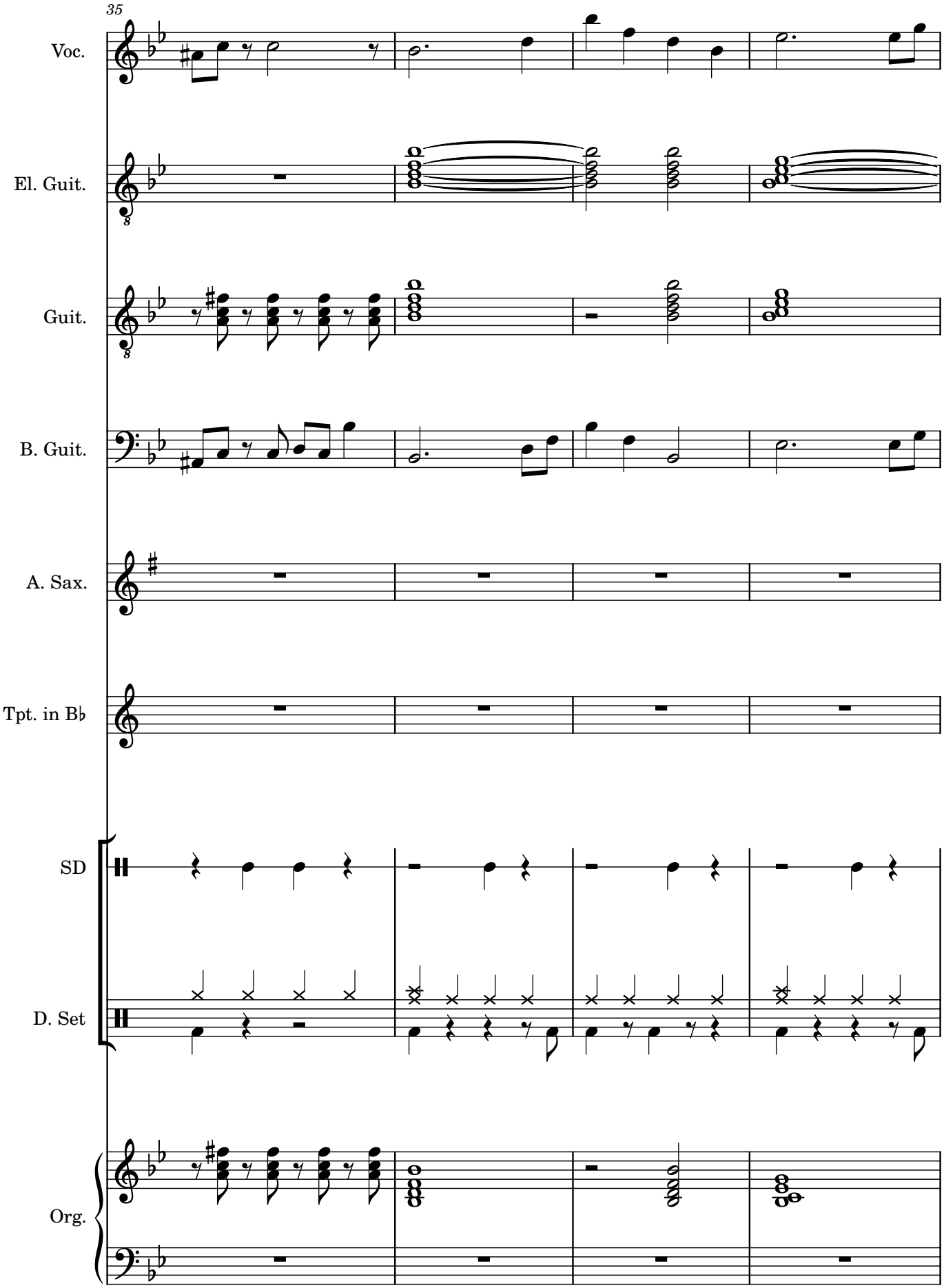
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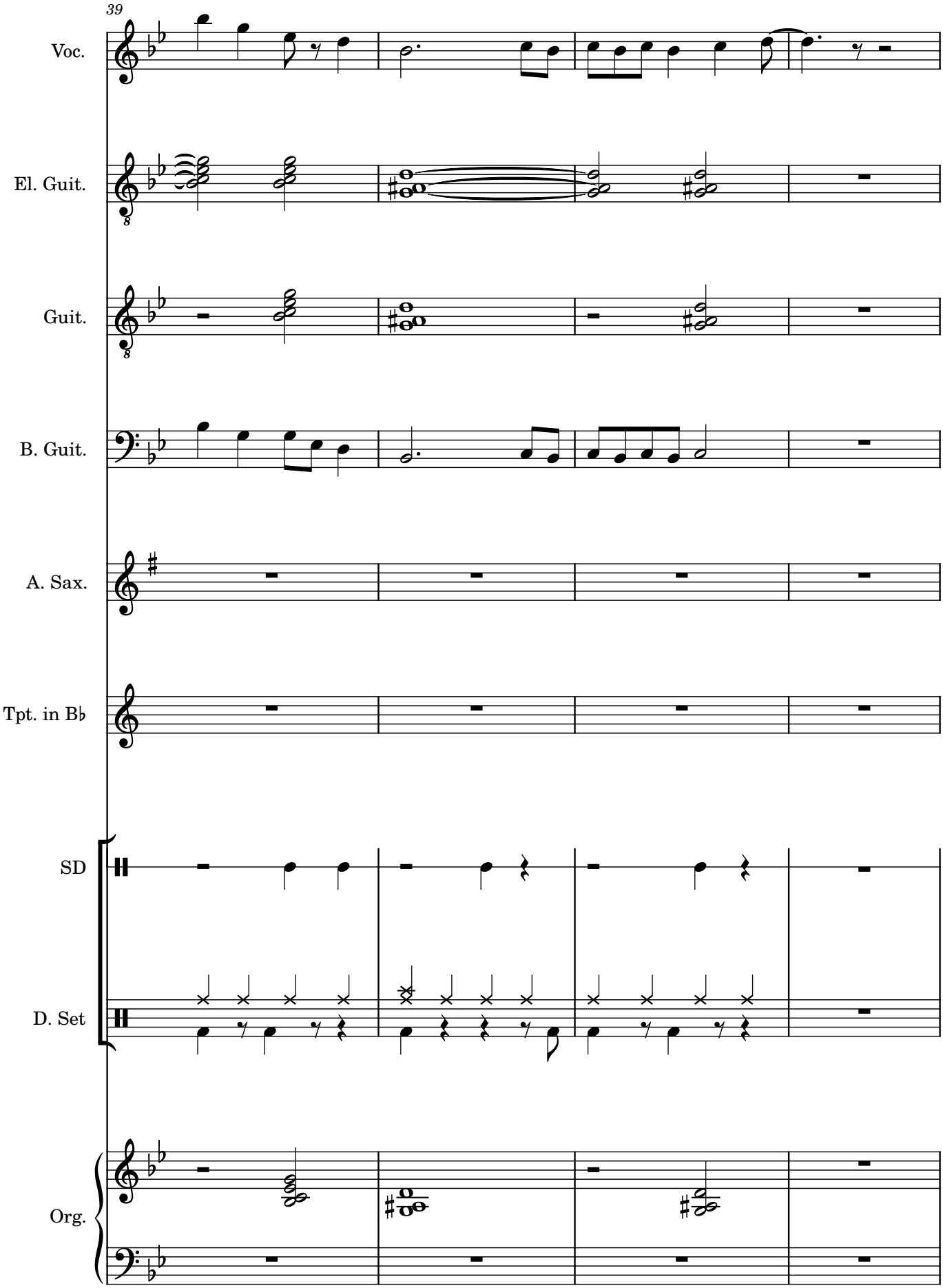
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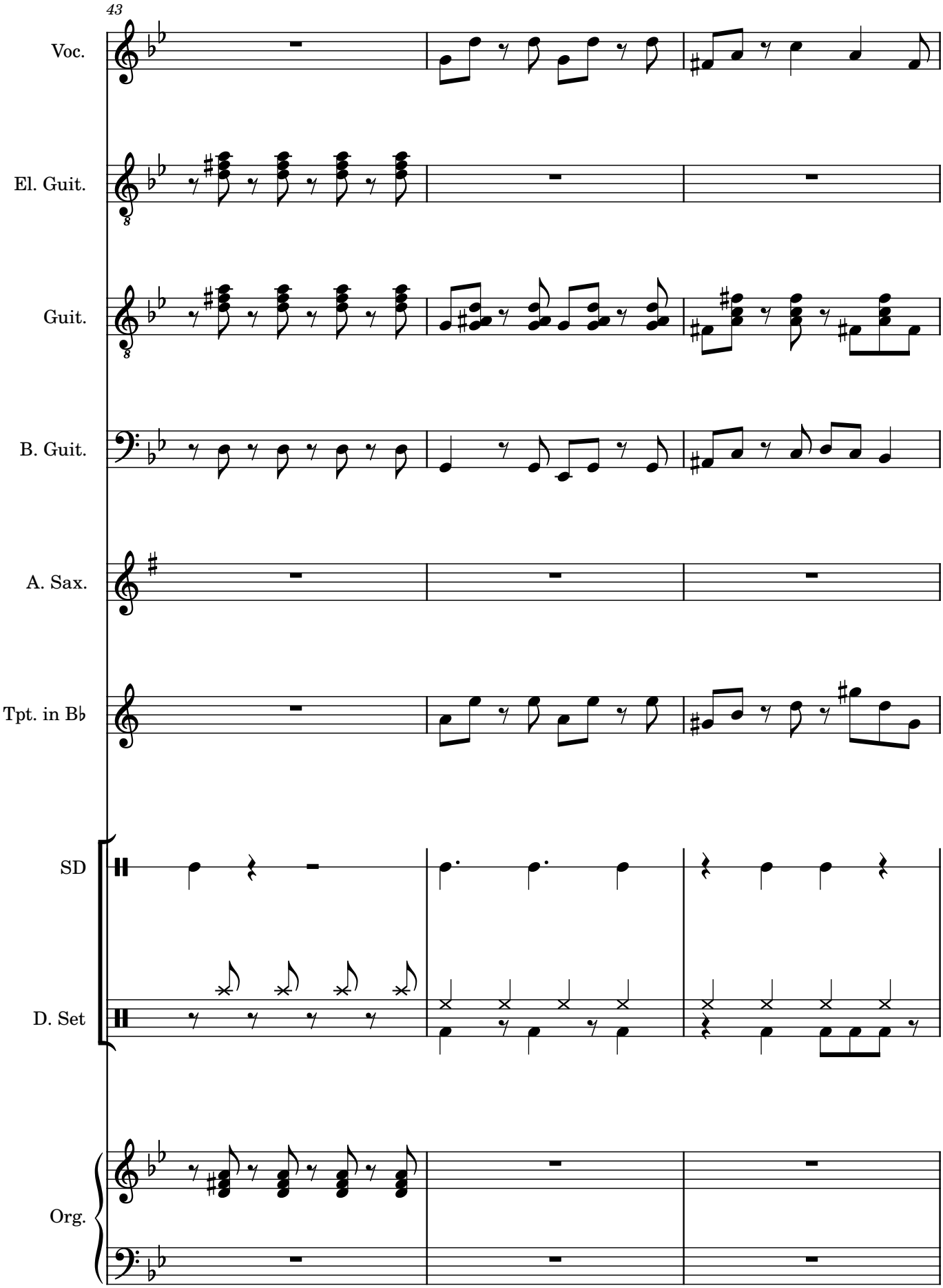
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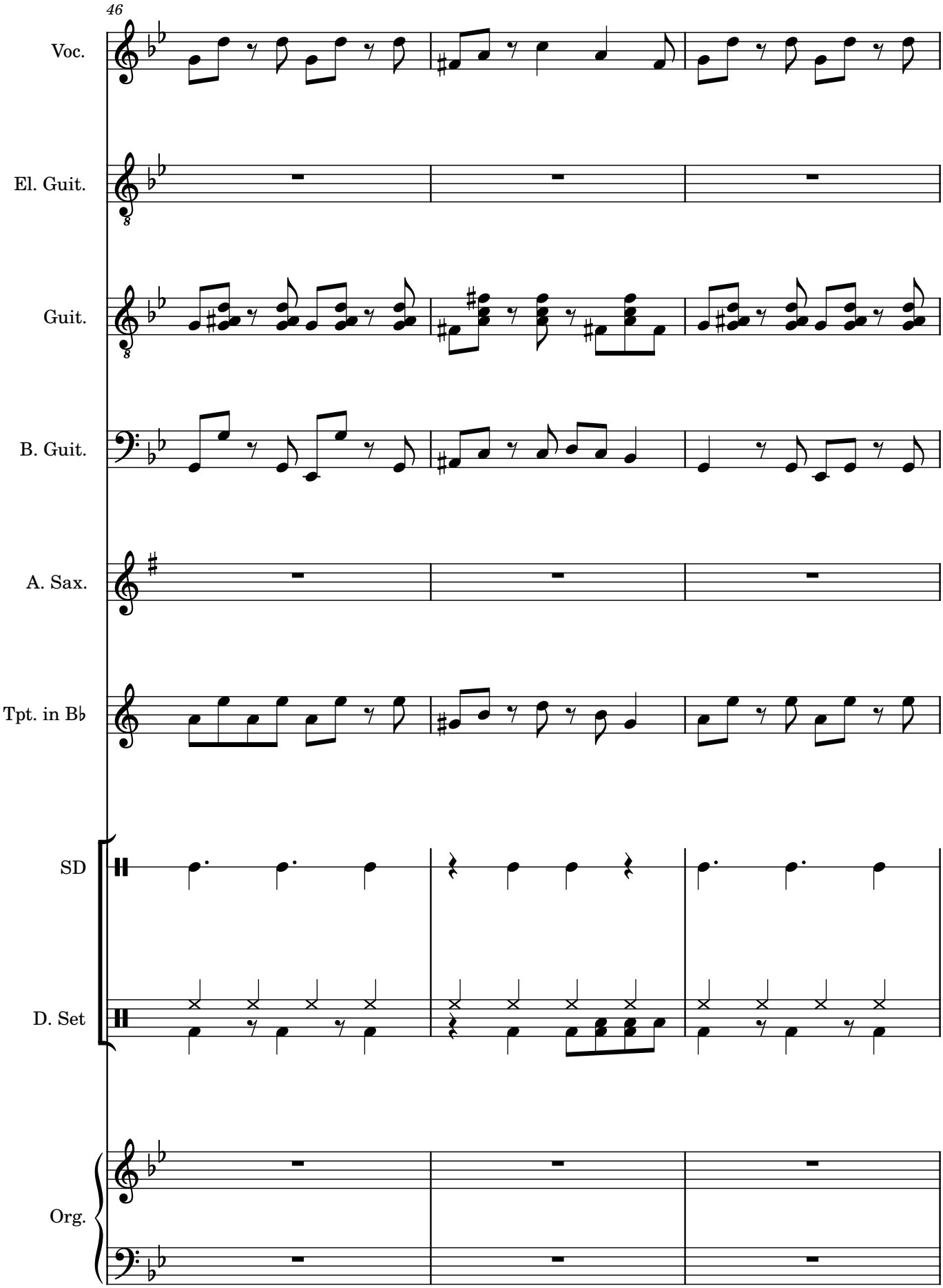
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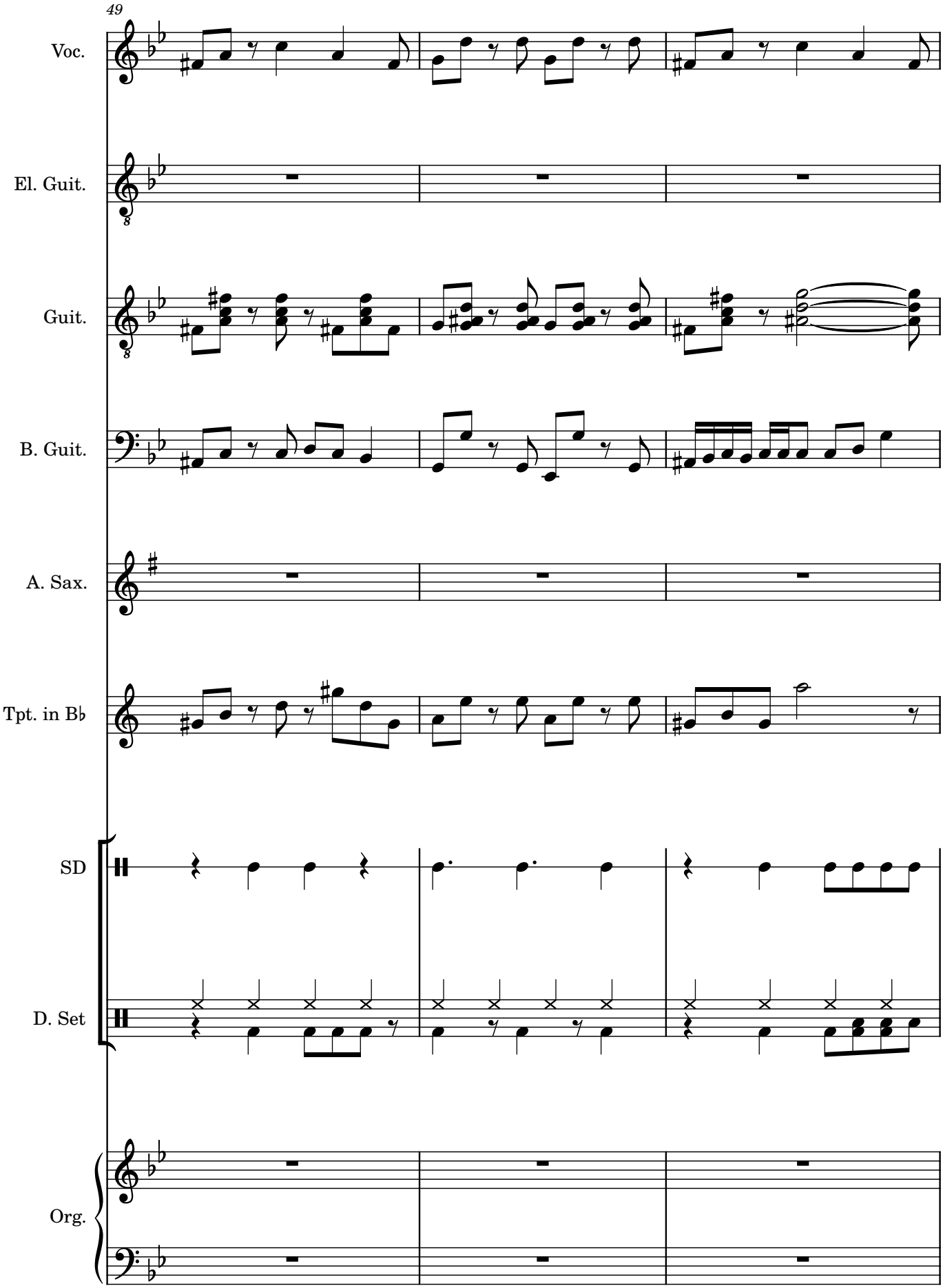
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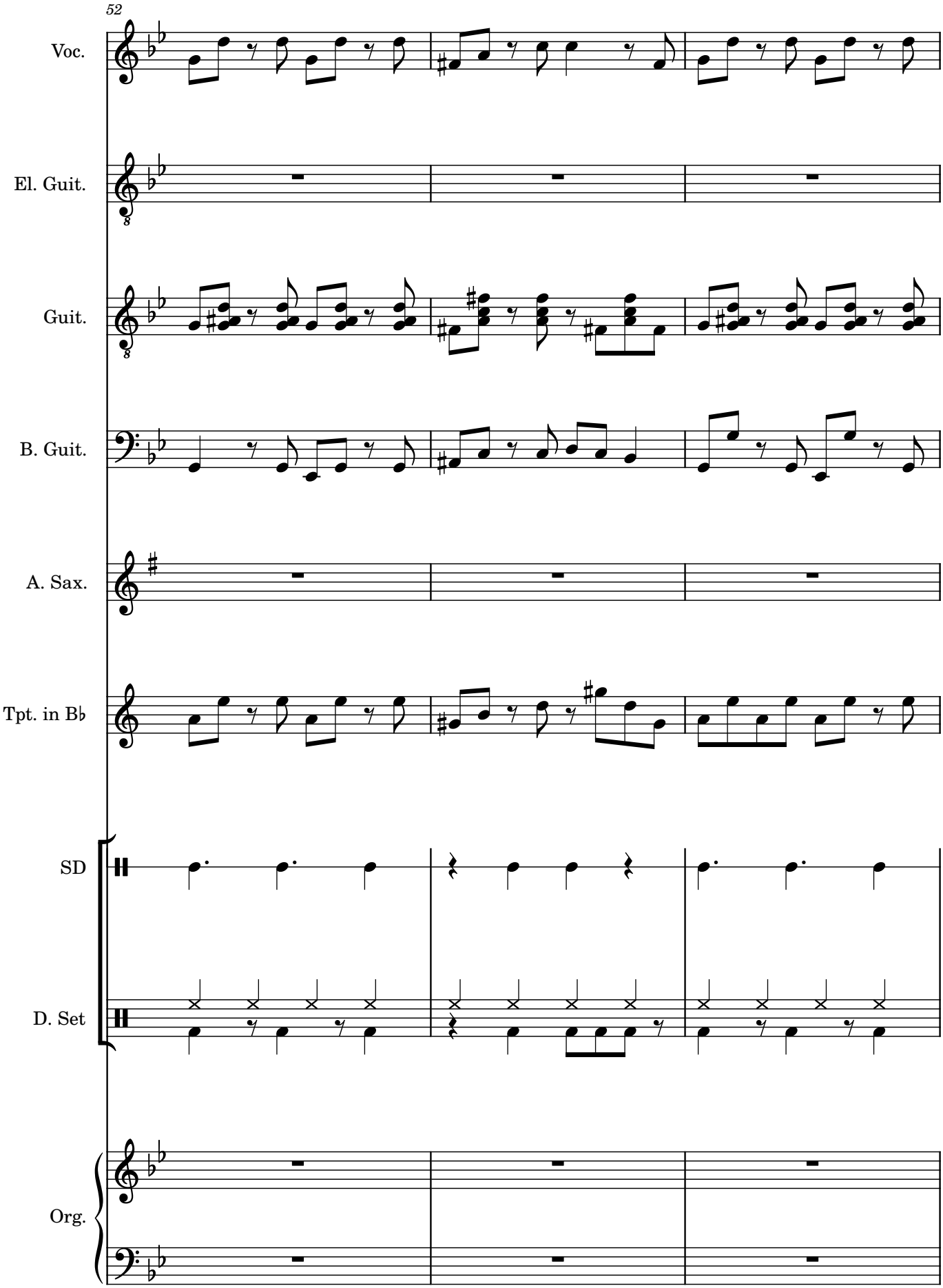
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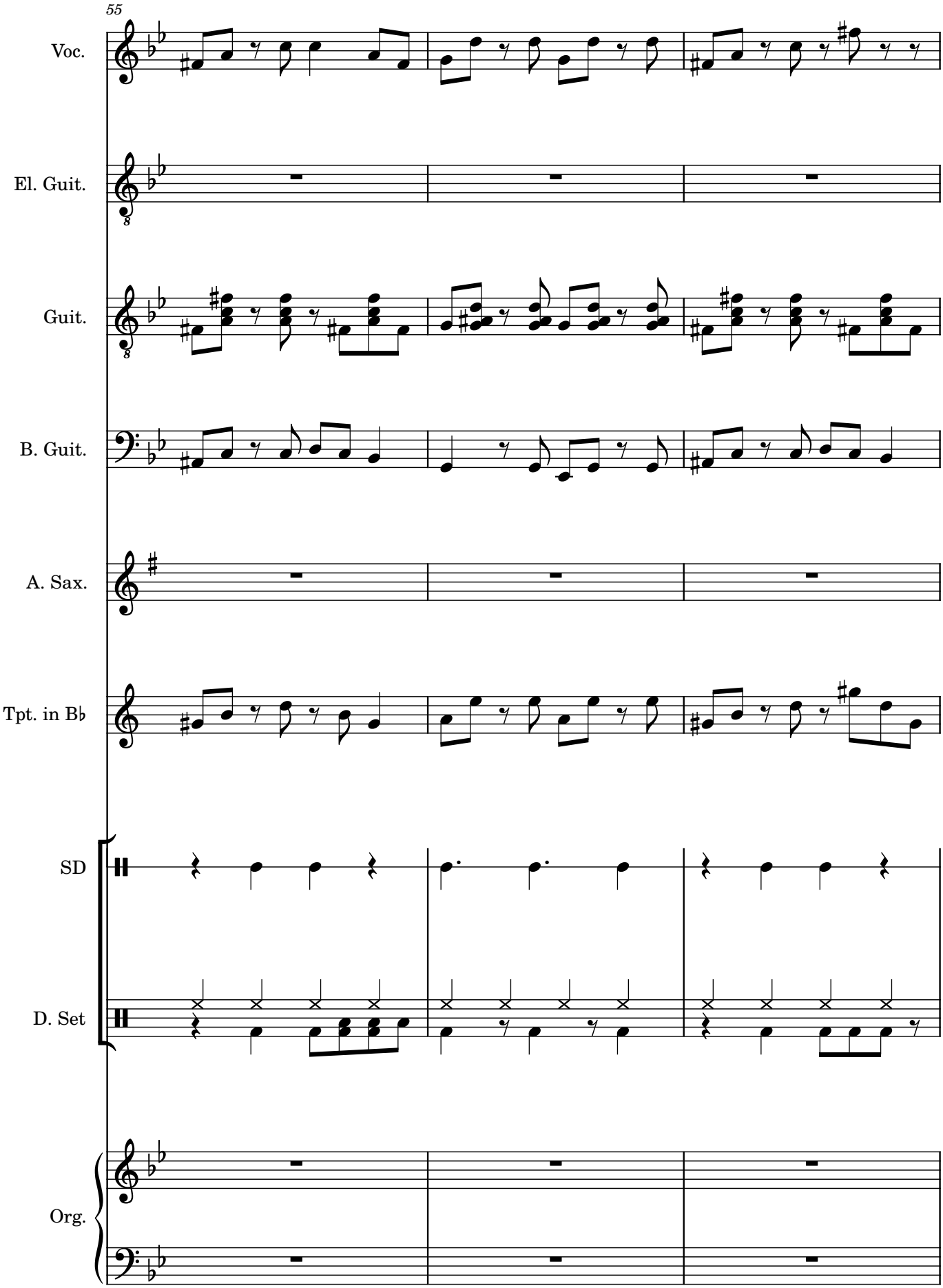
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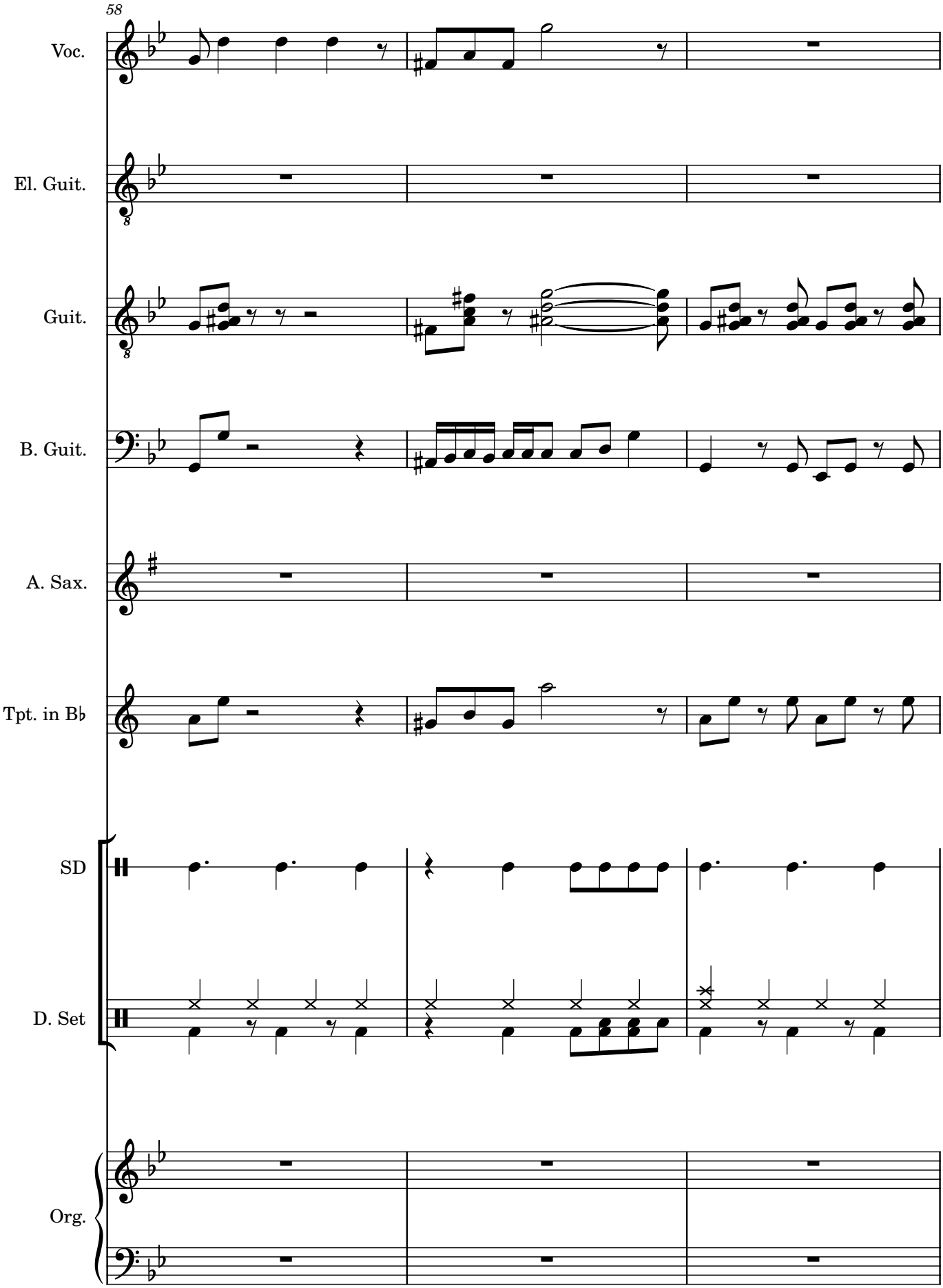
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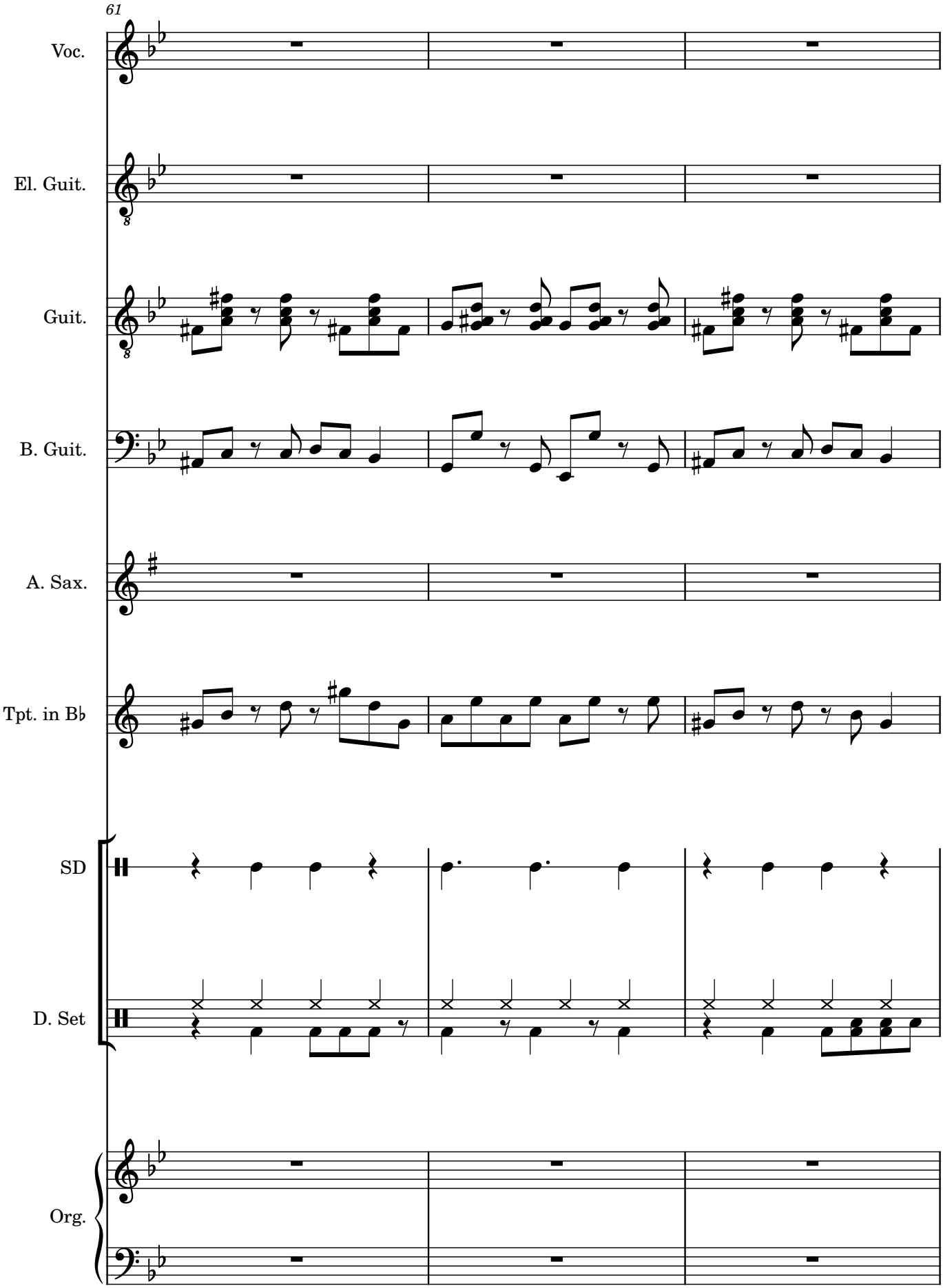
61
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SD
D. Set
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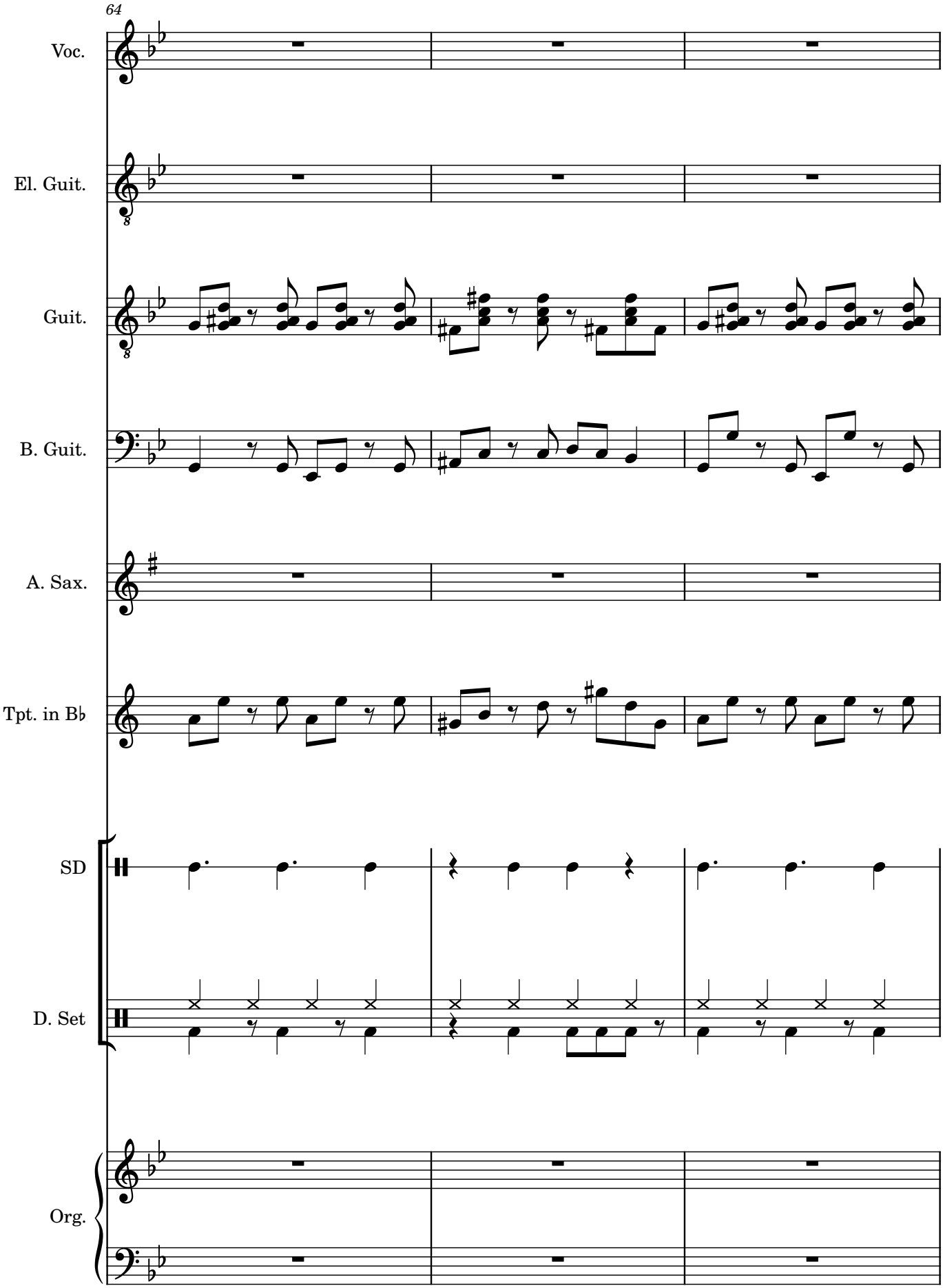
64
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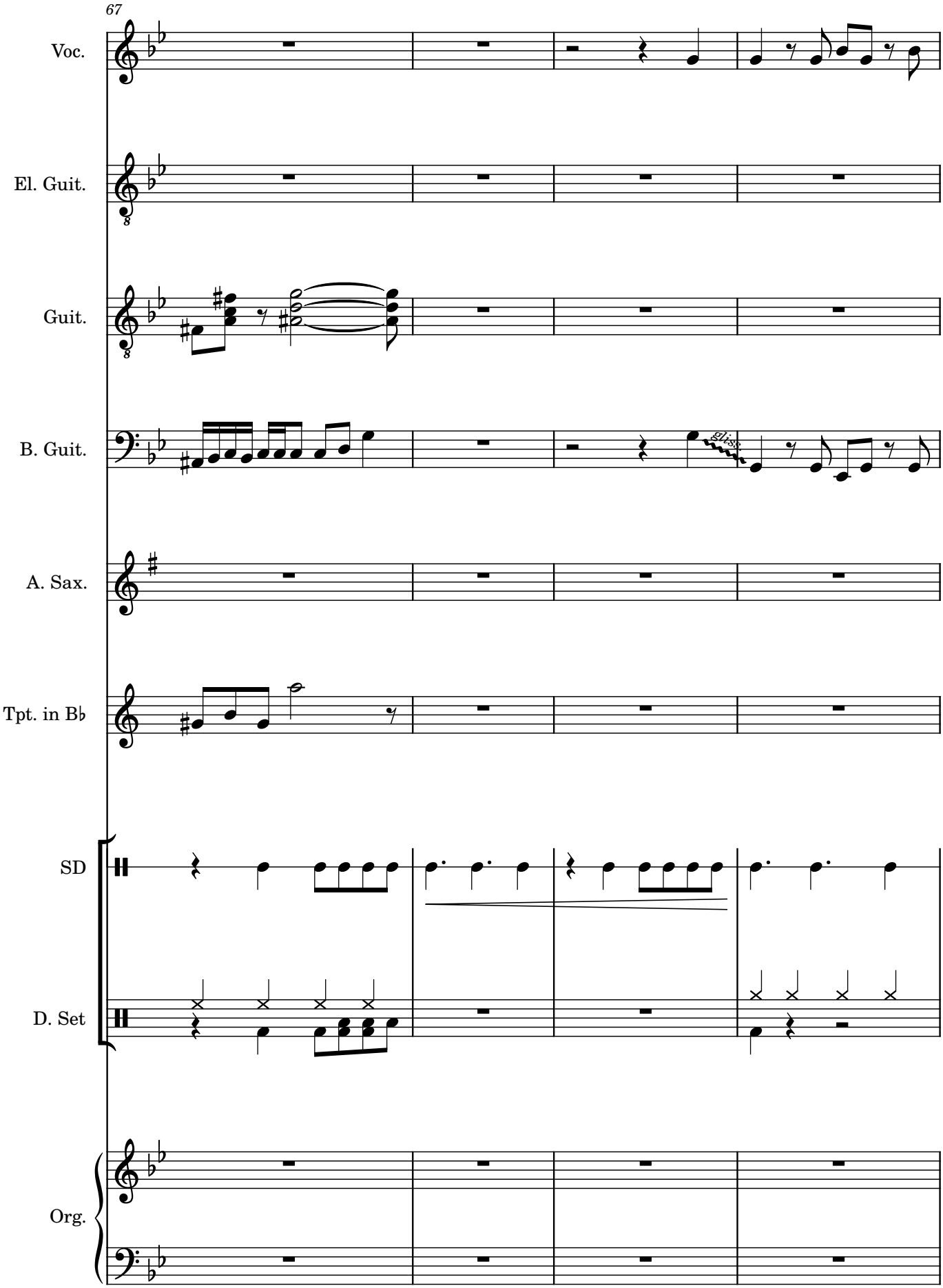
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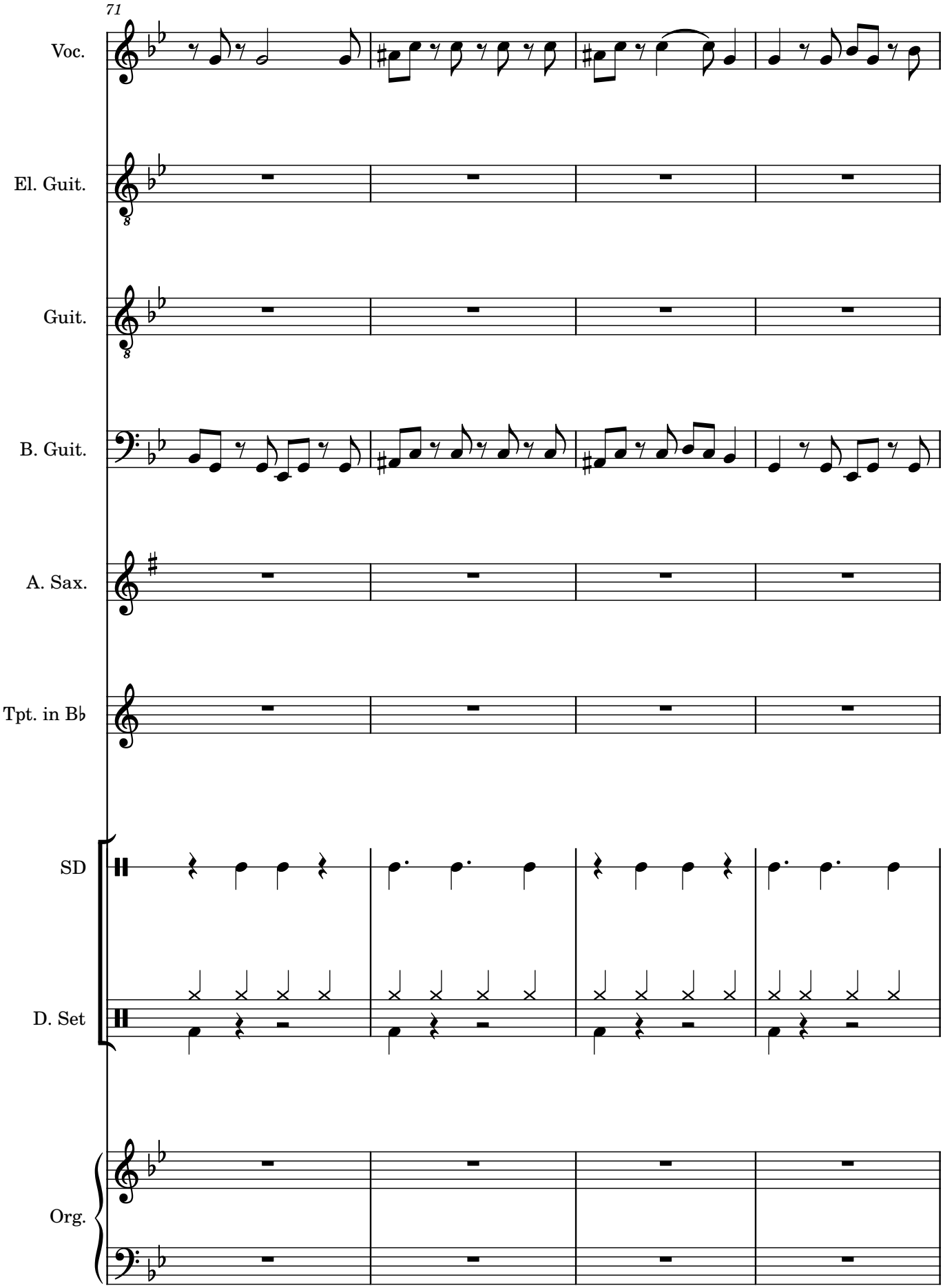
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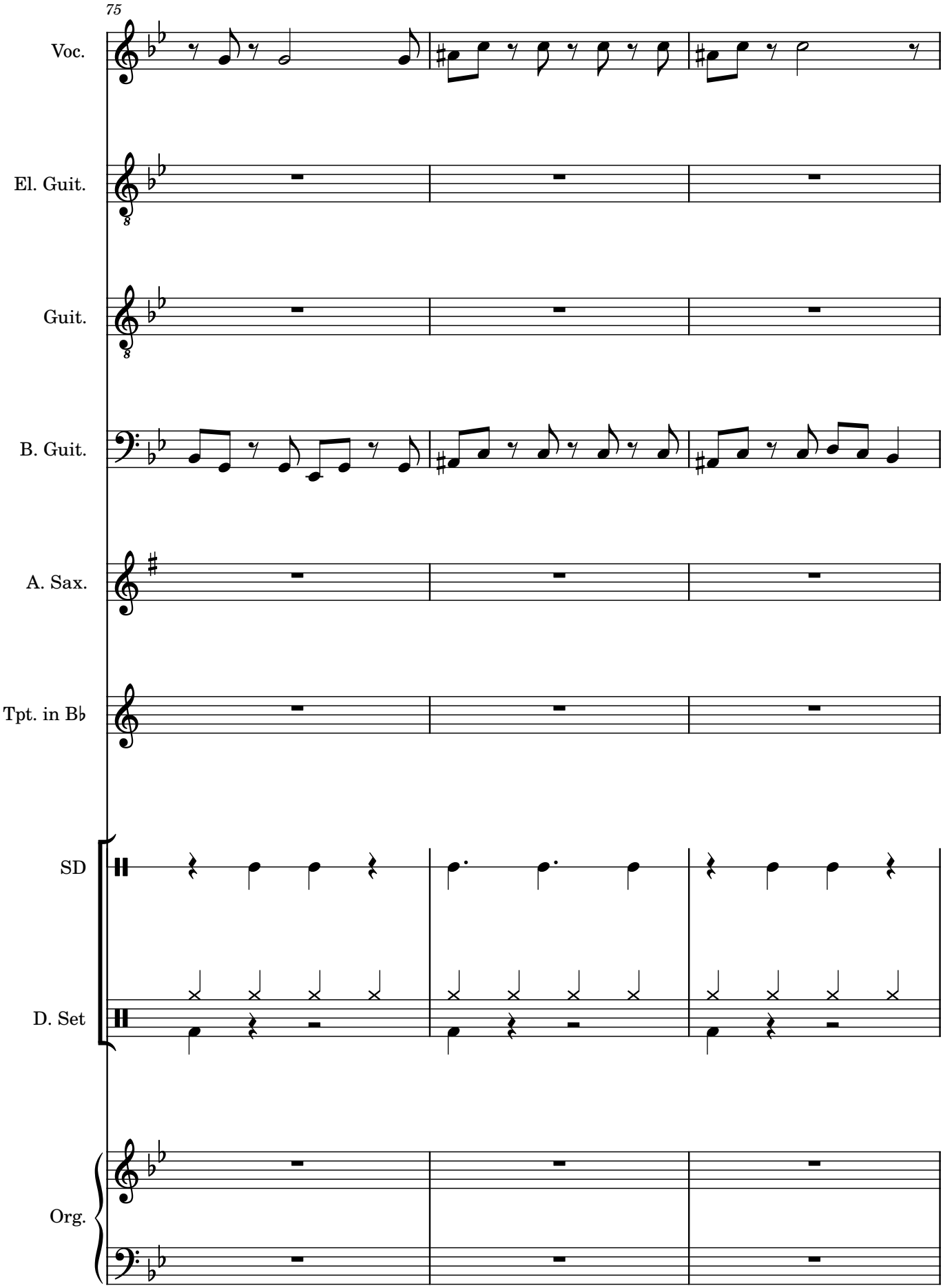
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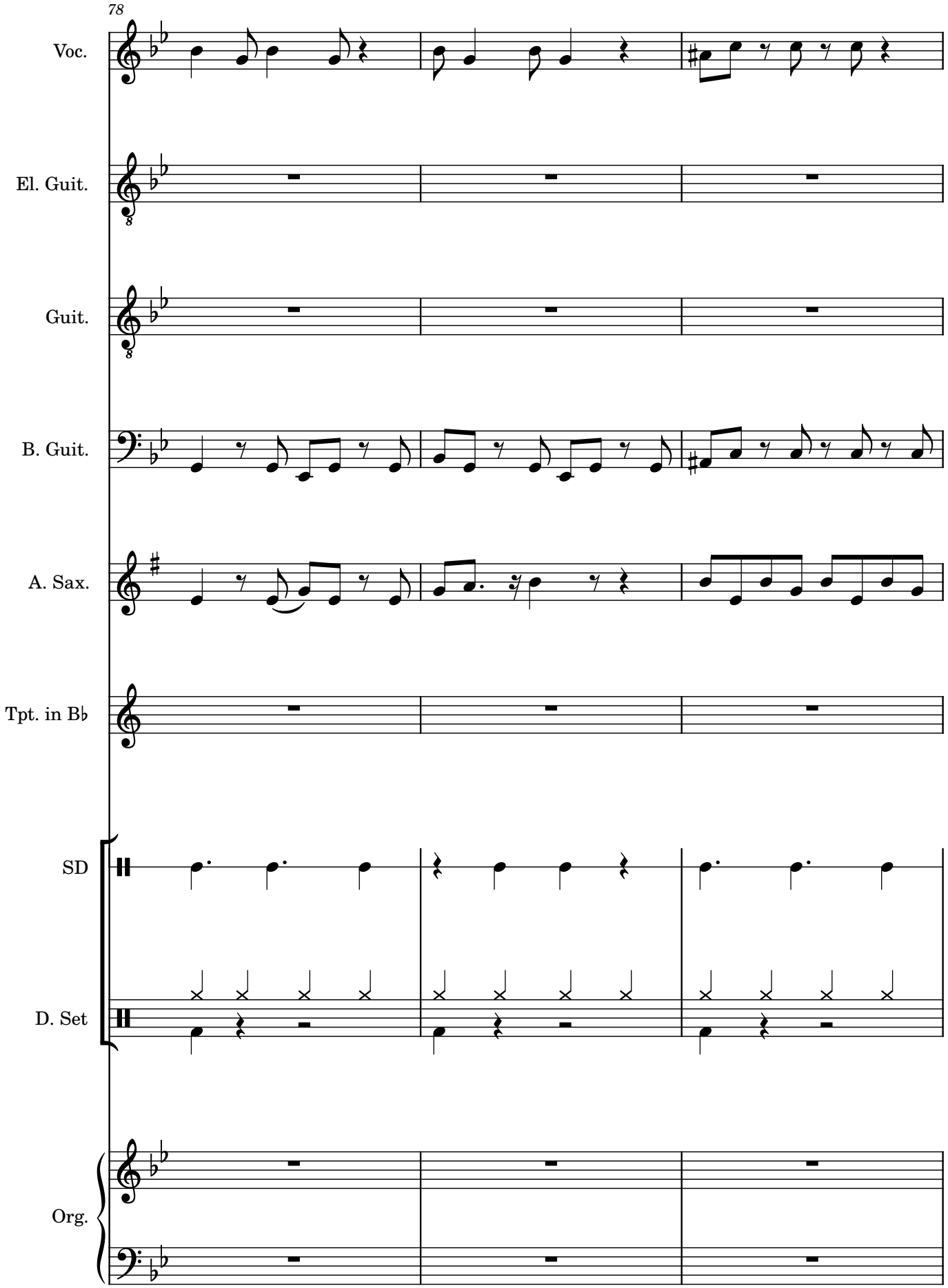
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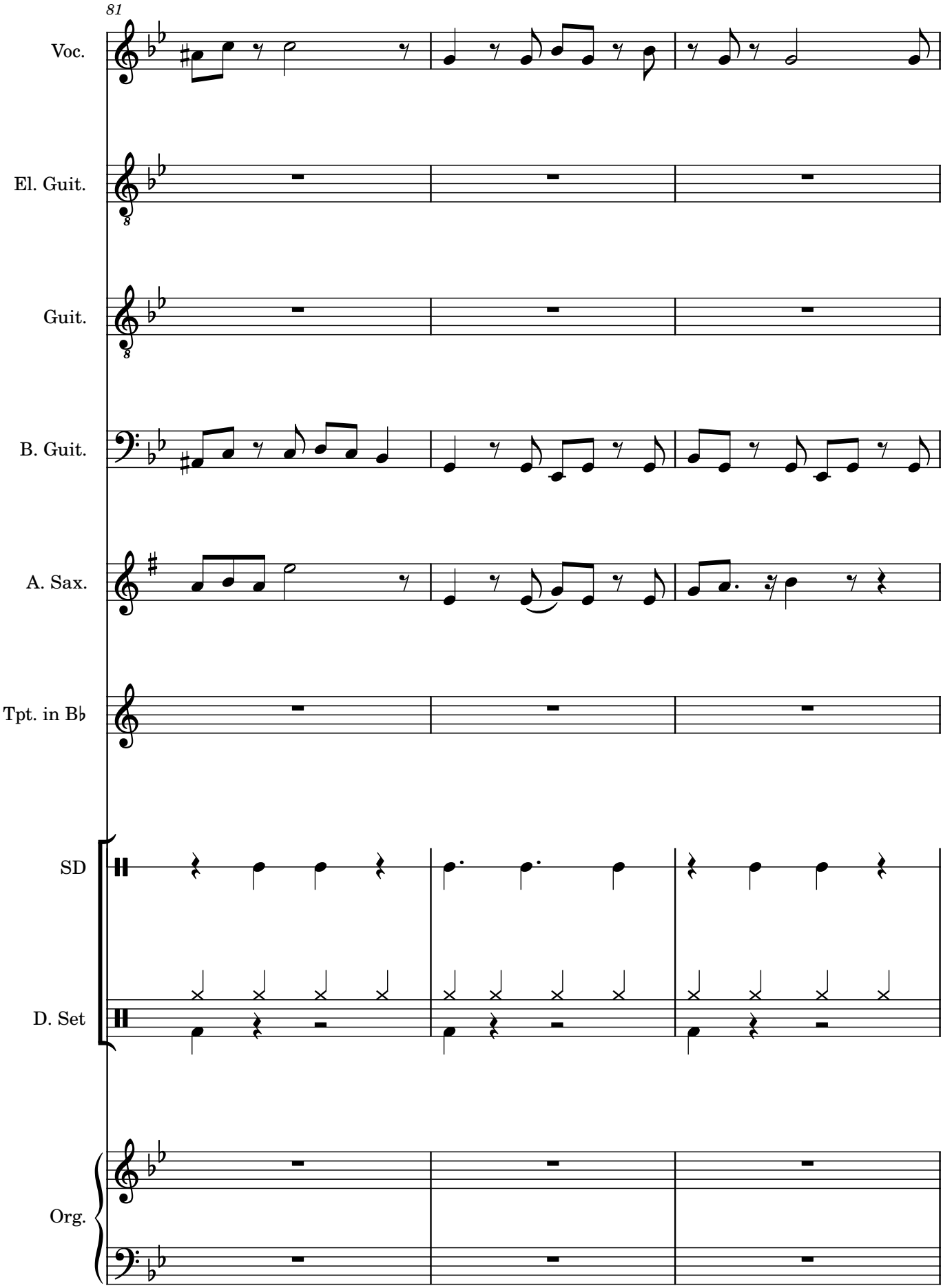
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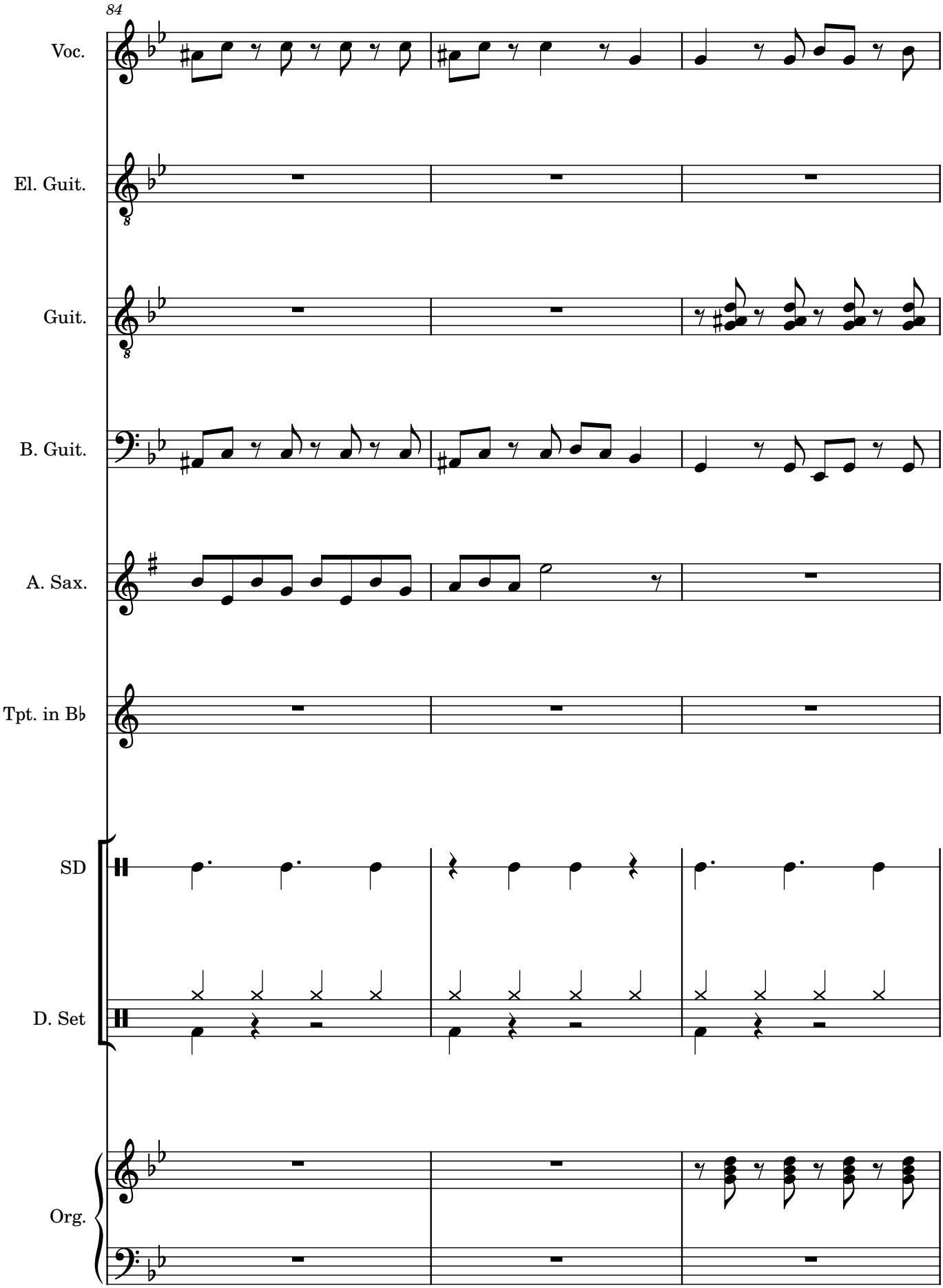
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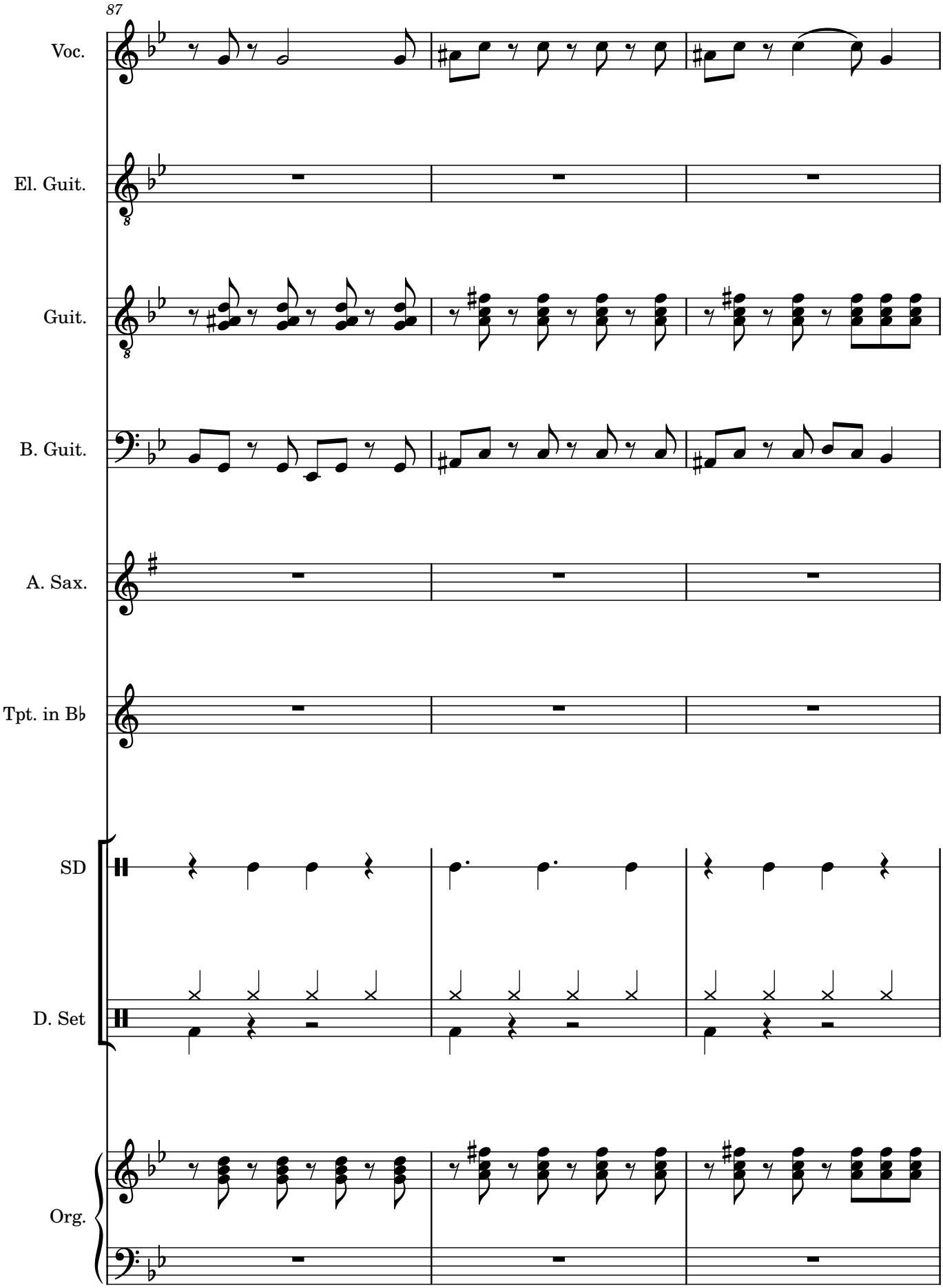
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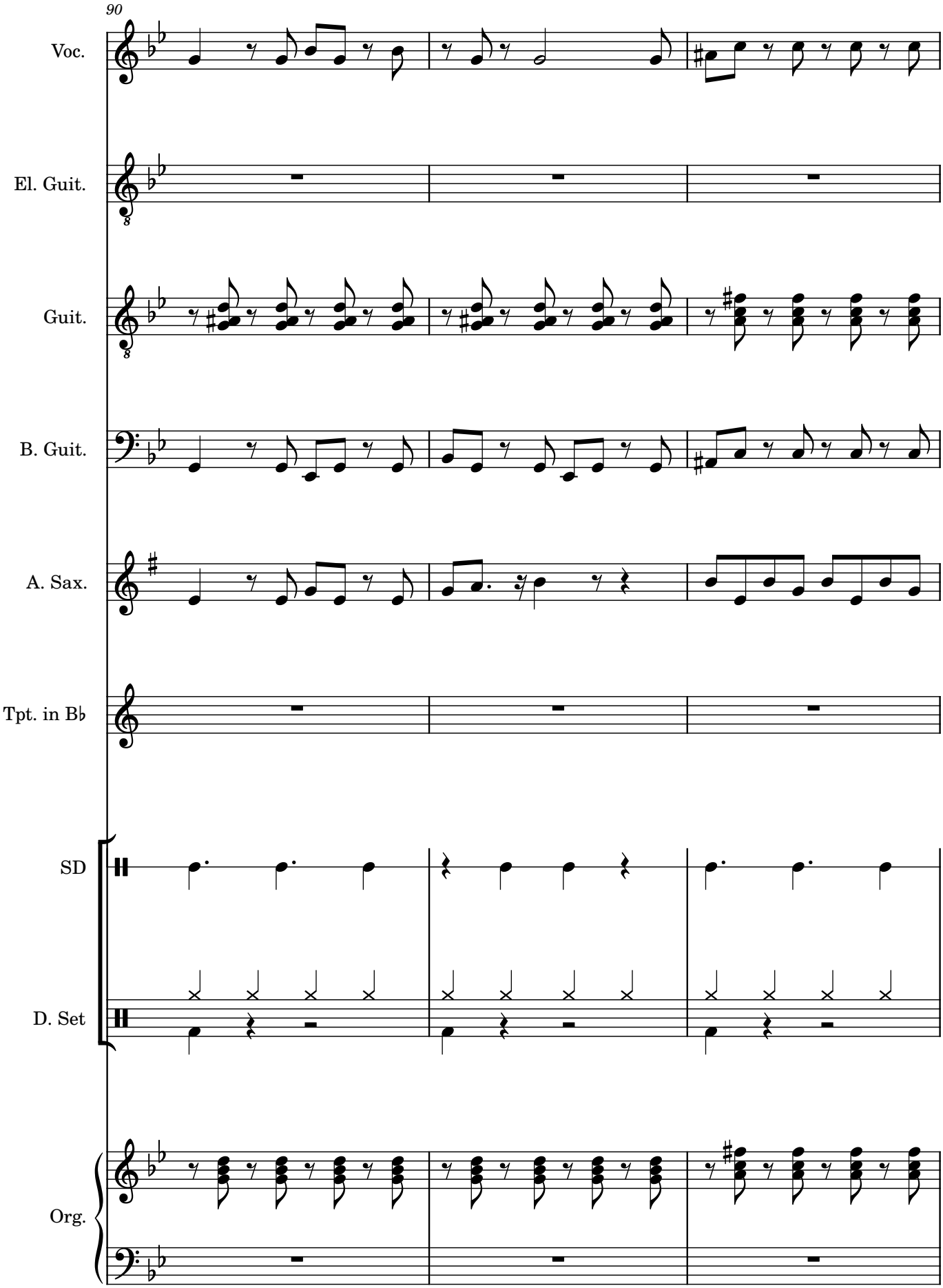
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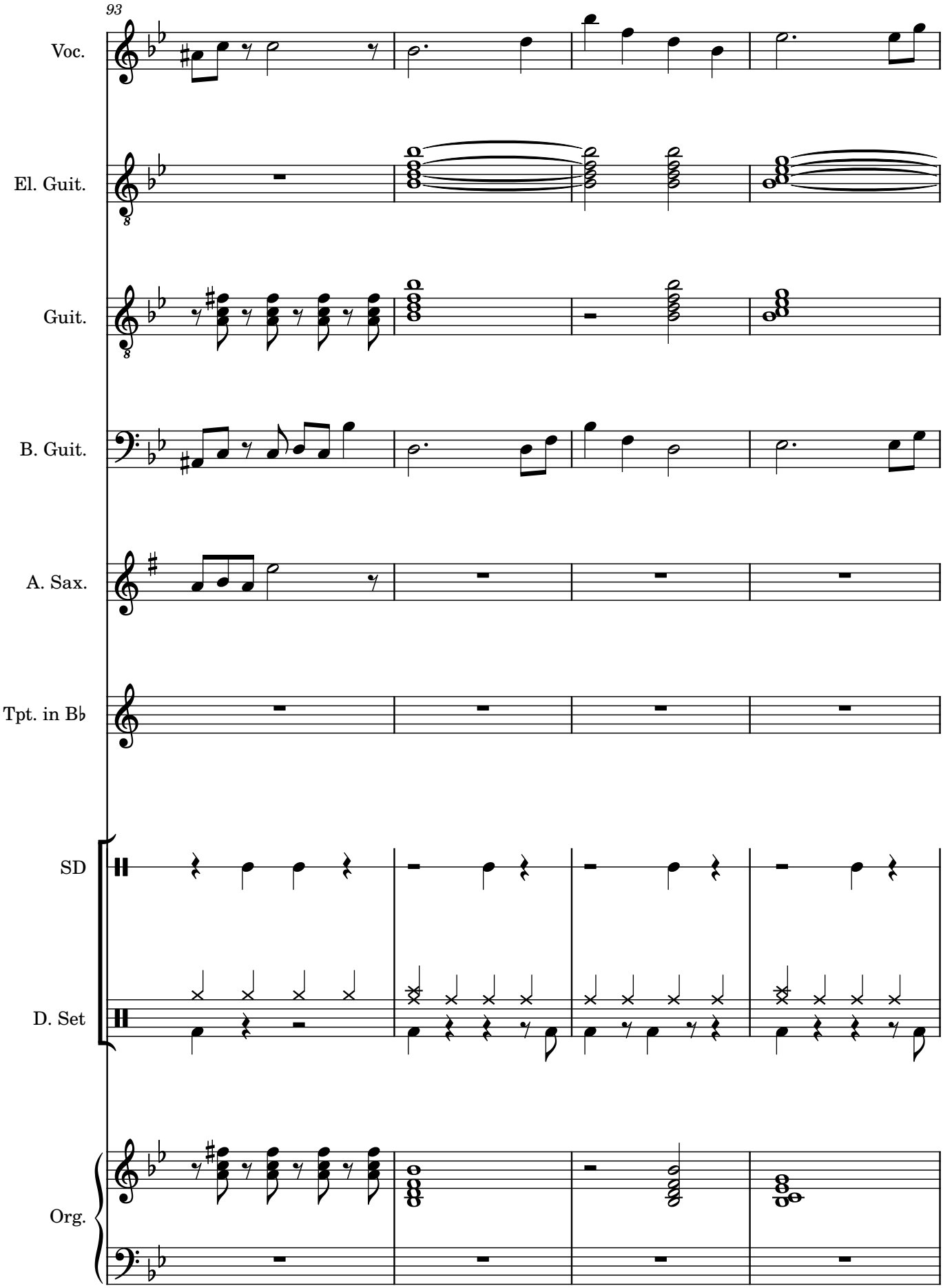
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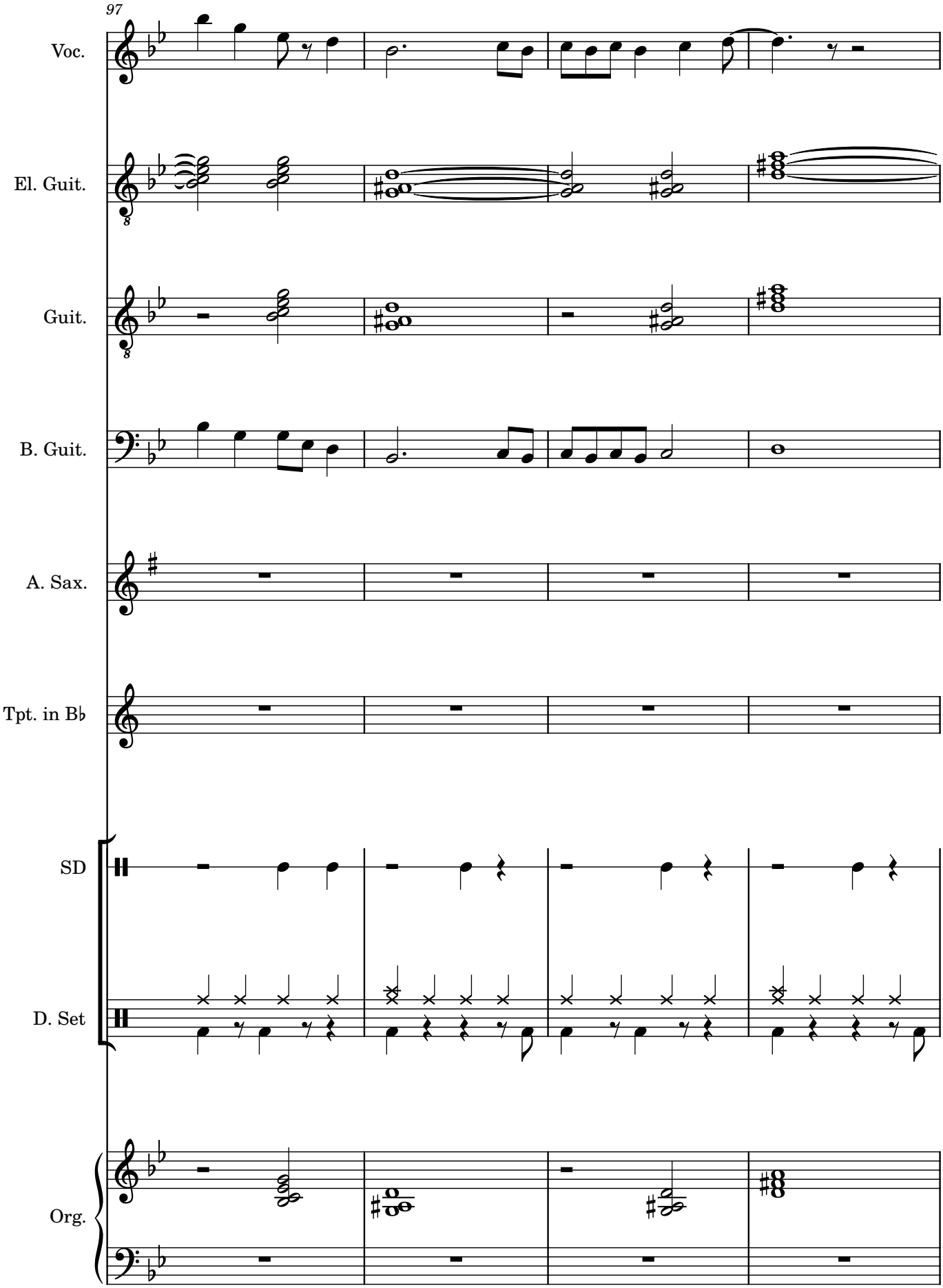
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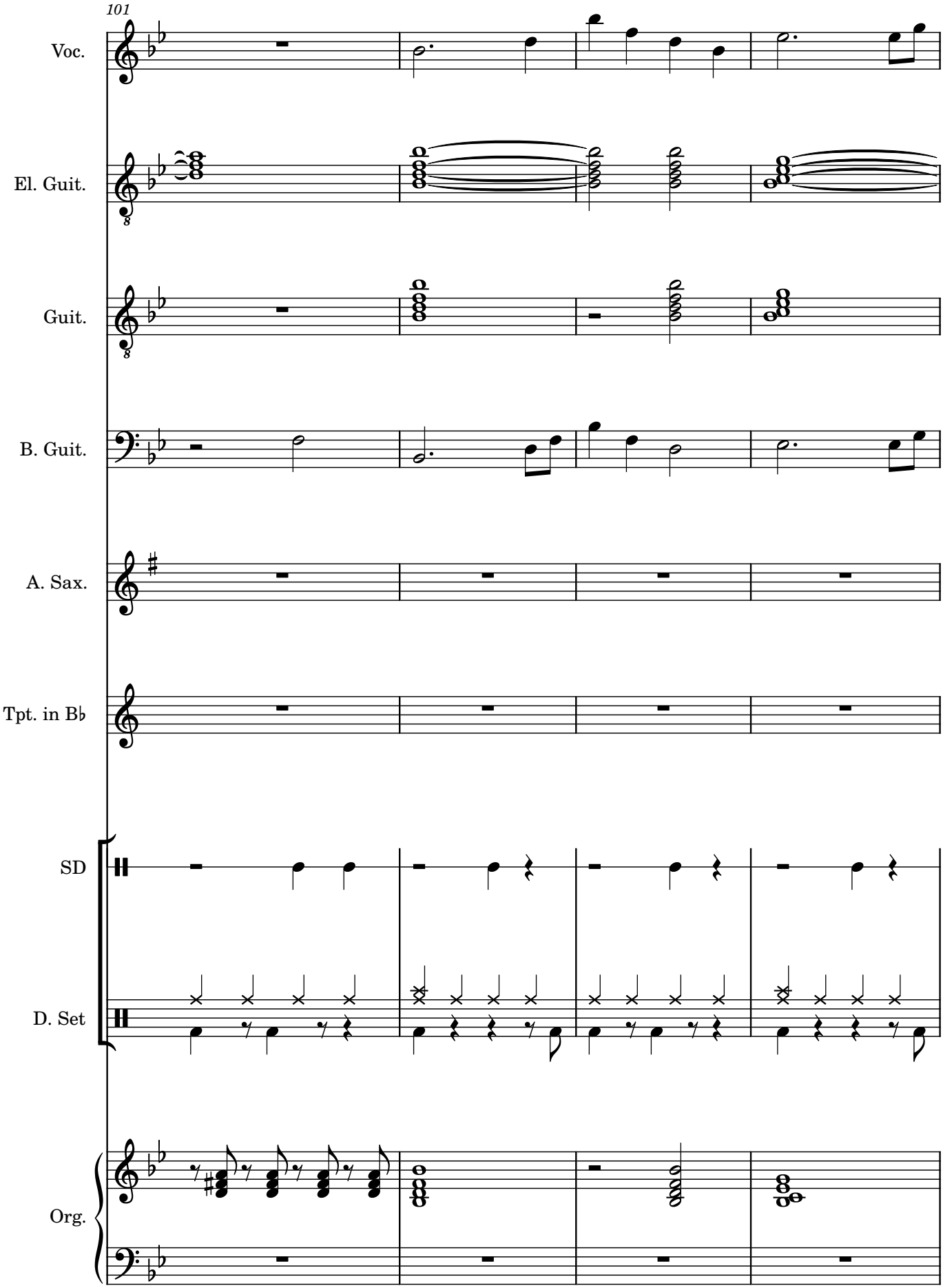
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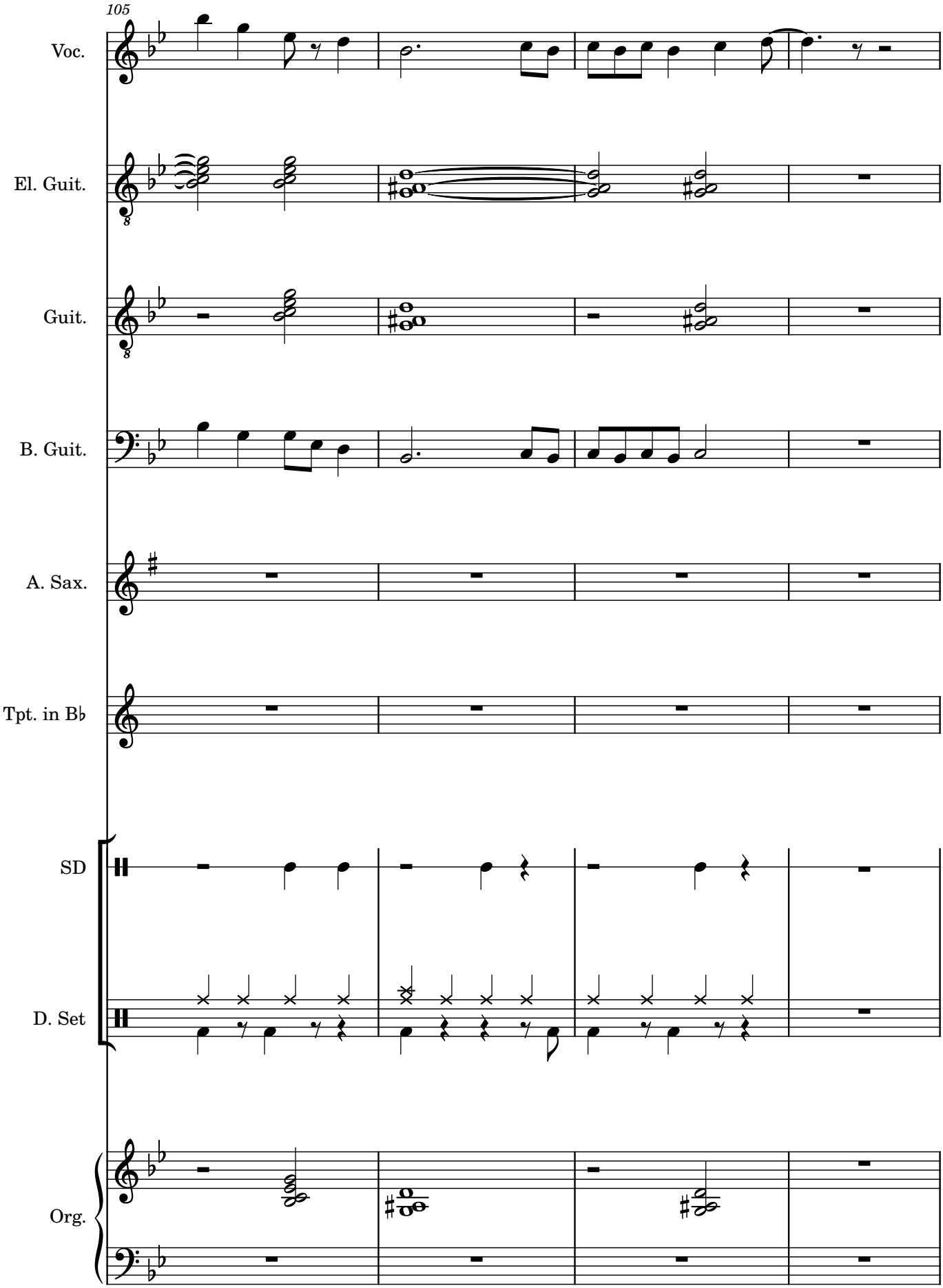
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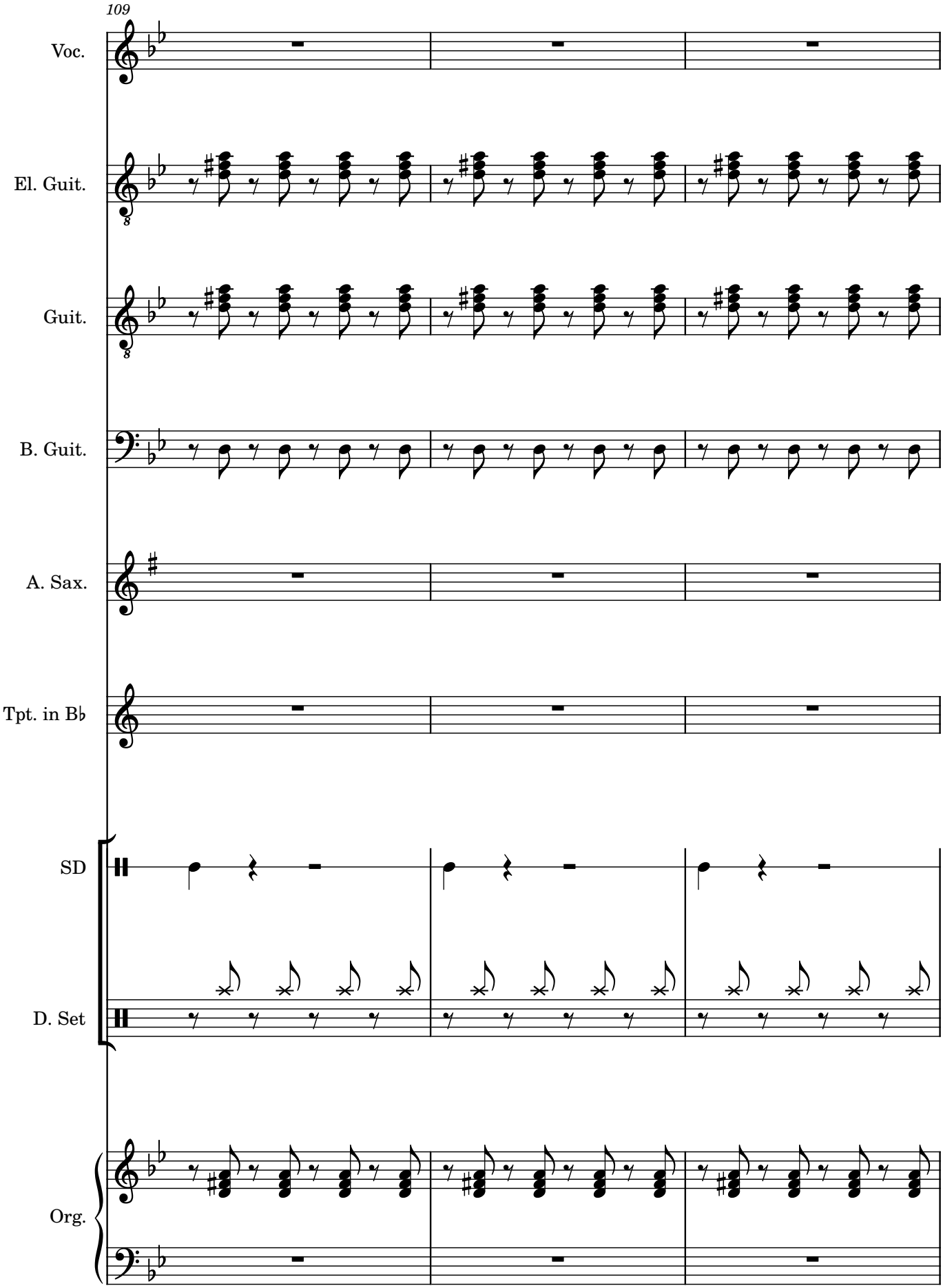
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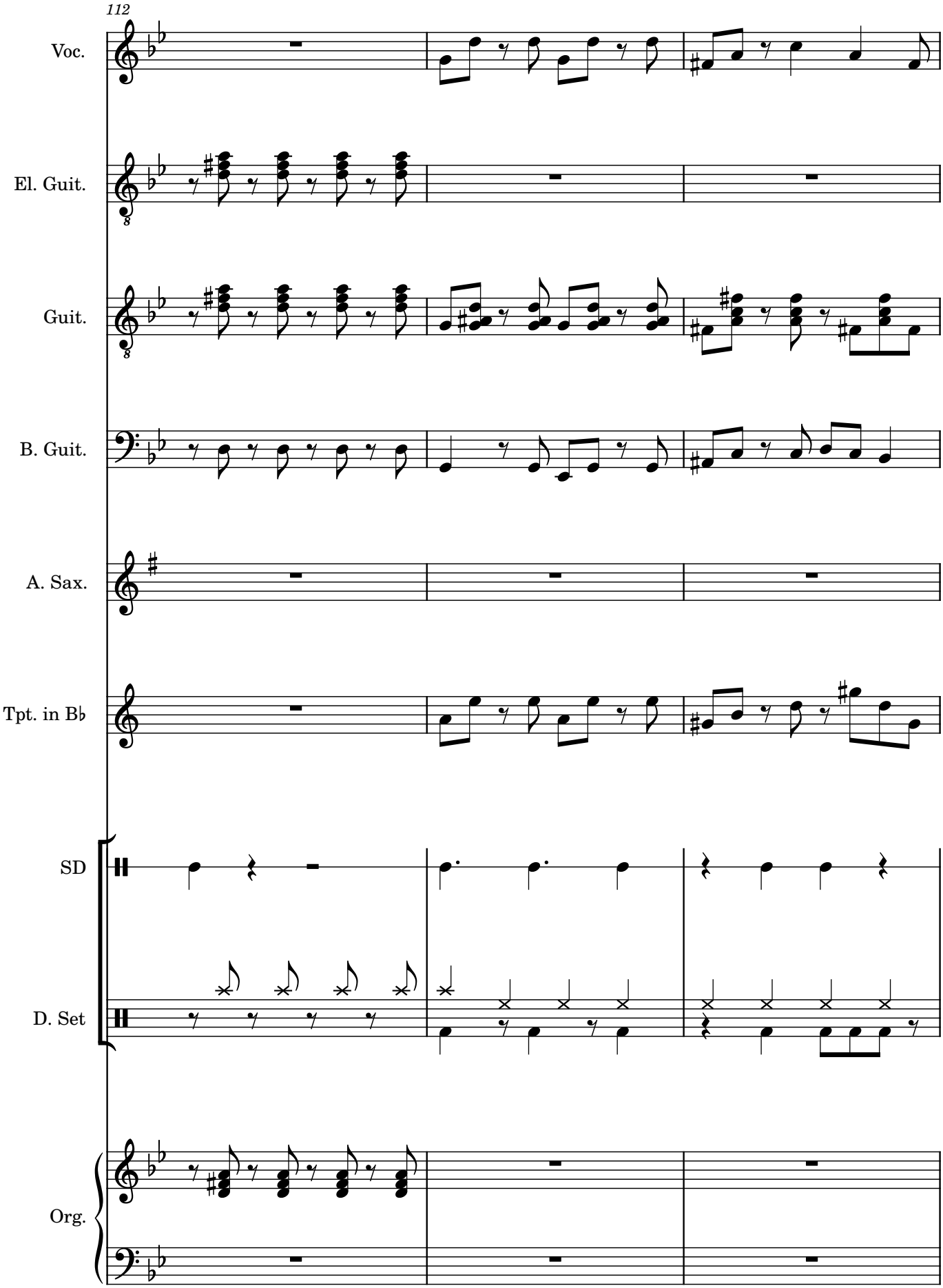
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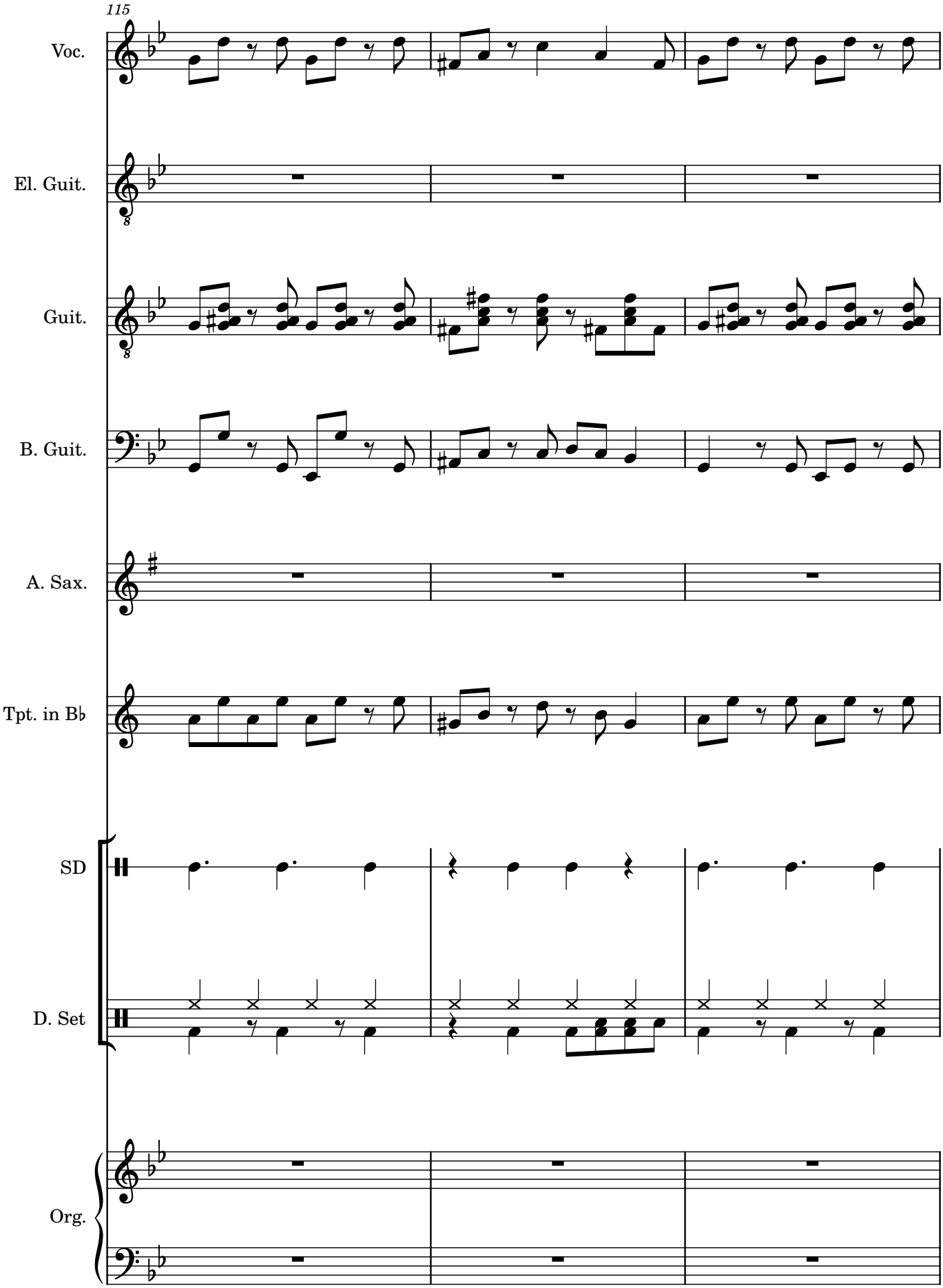
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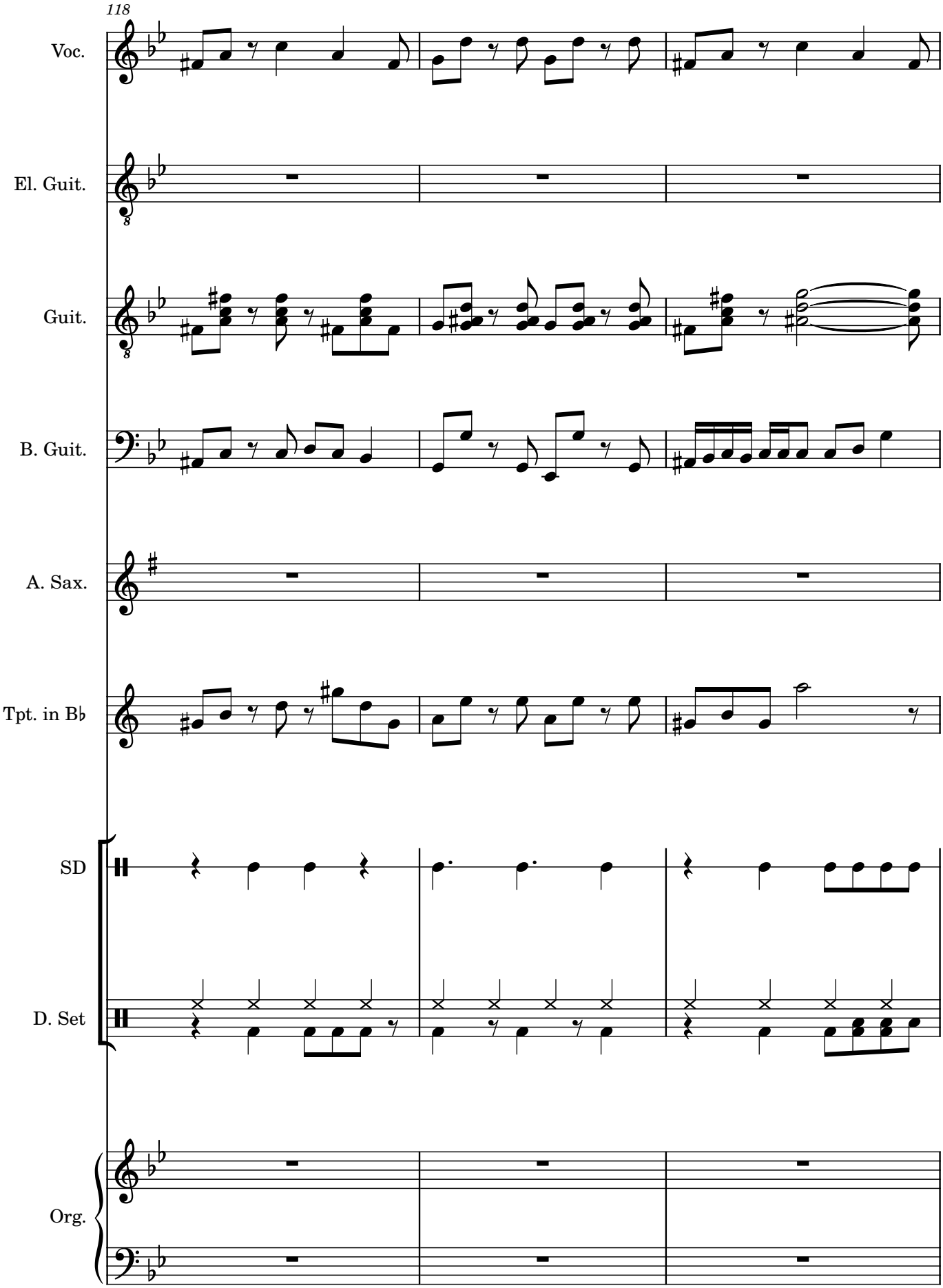
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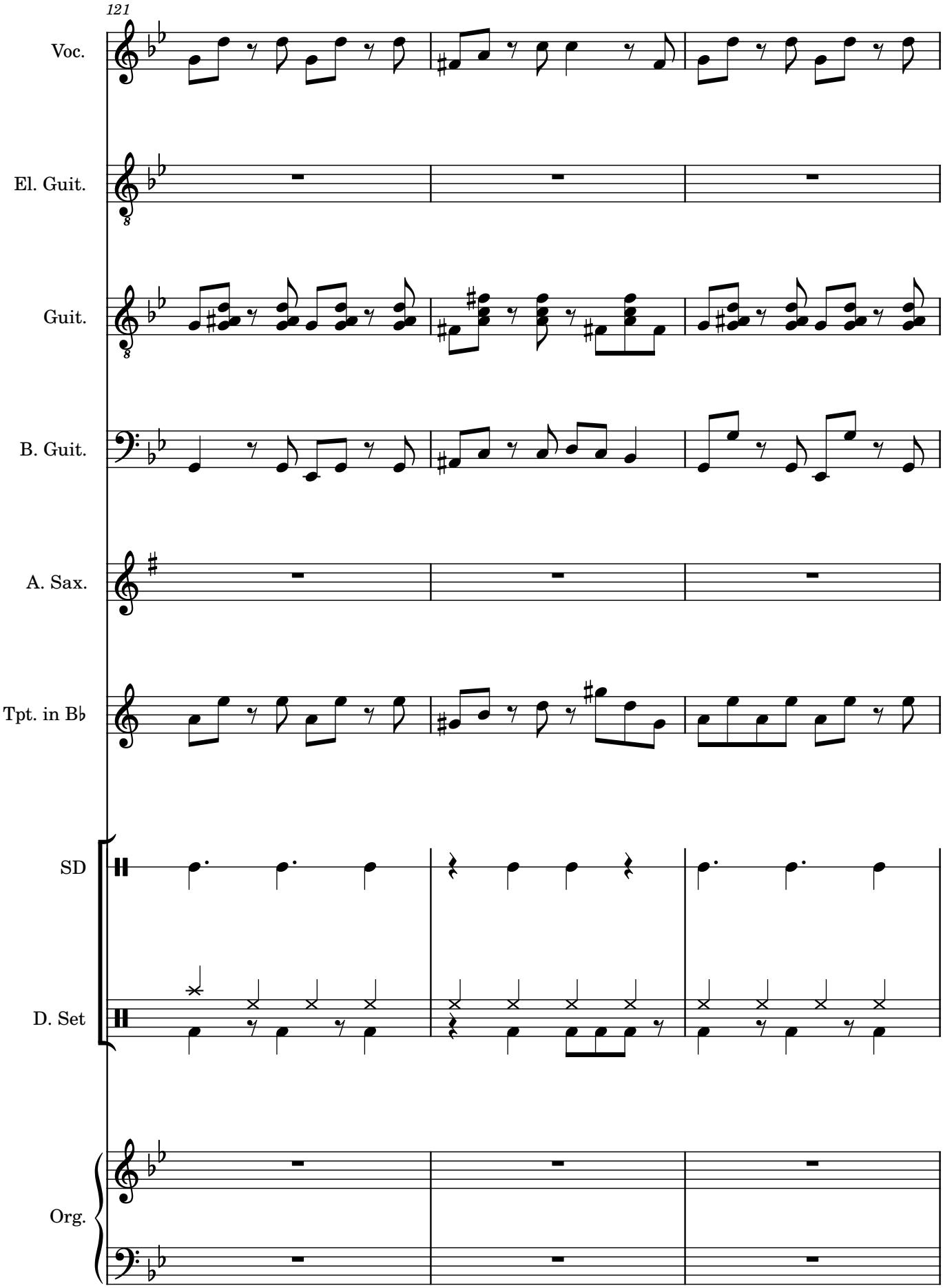
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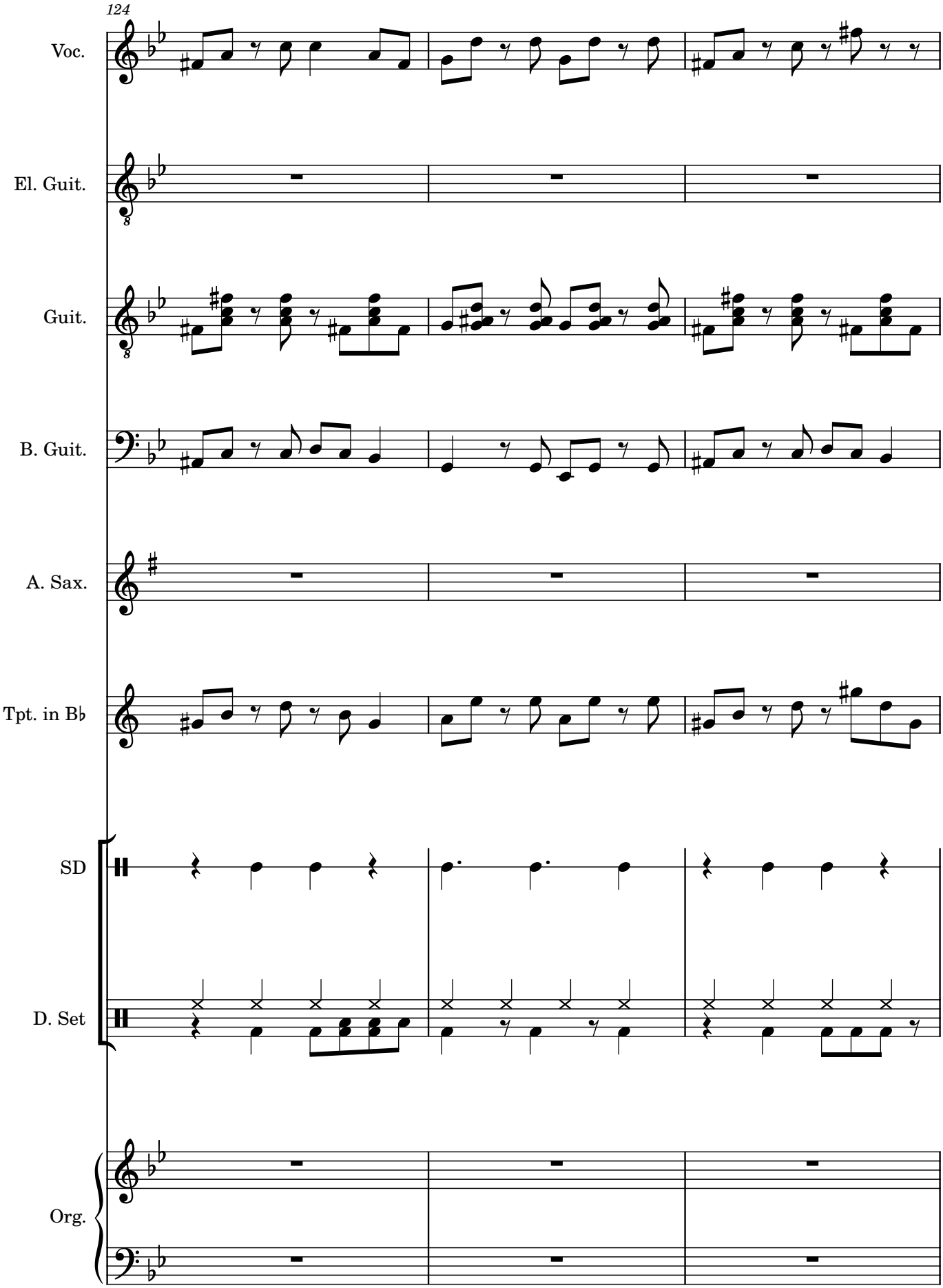
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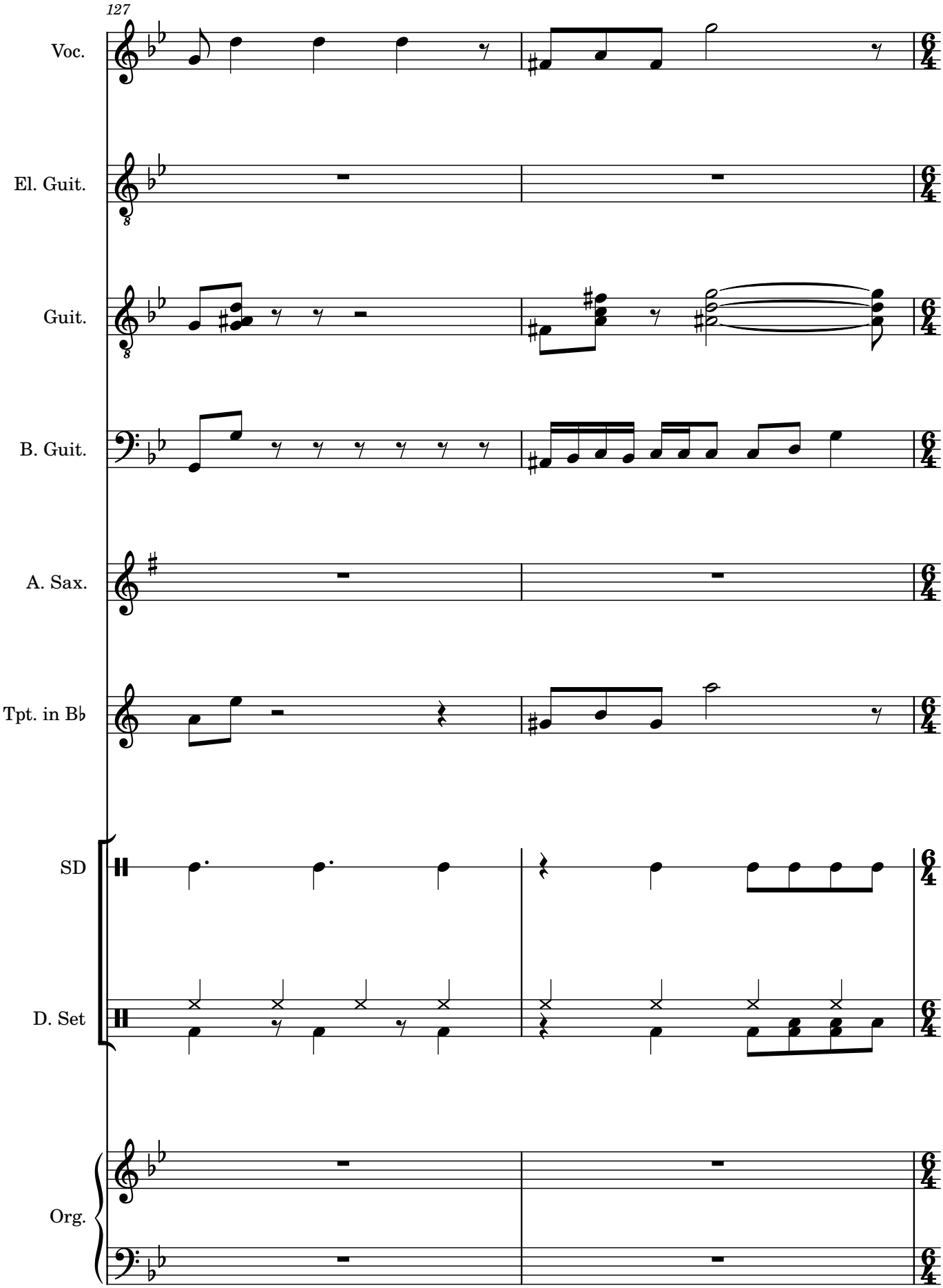
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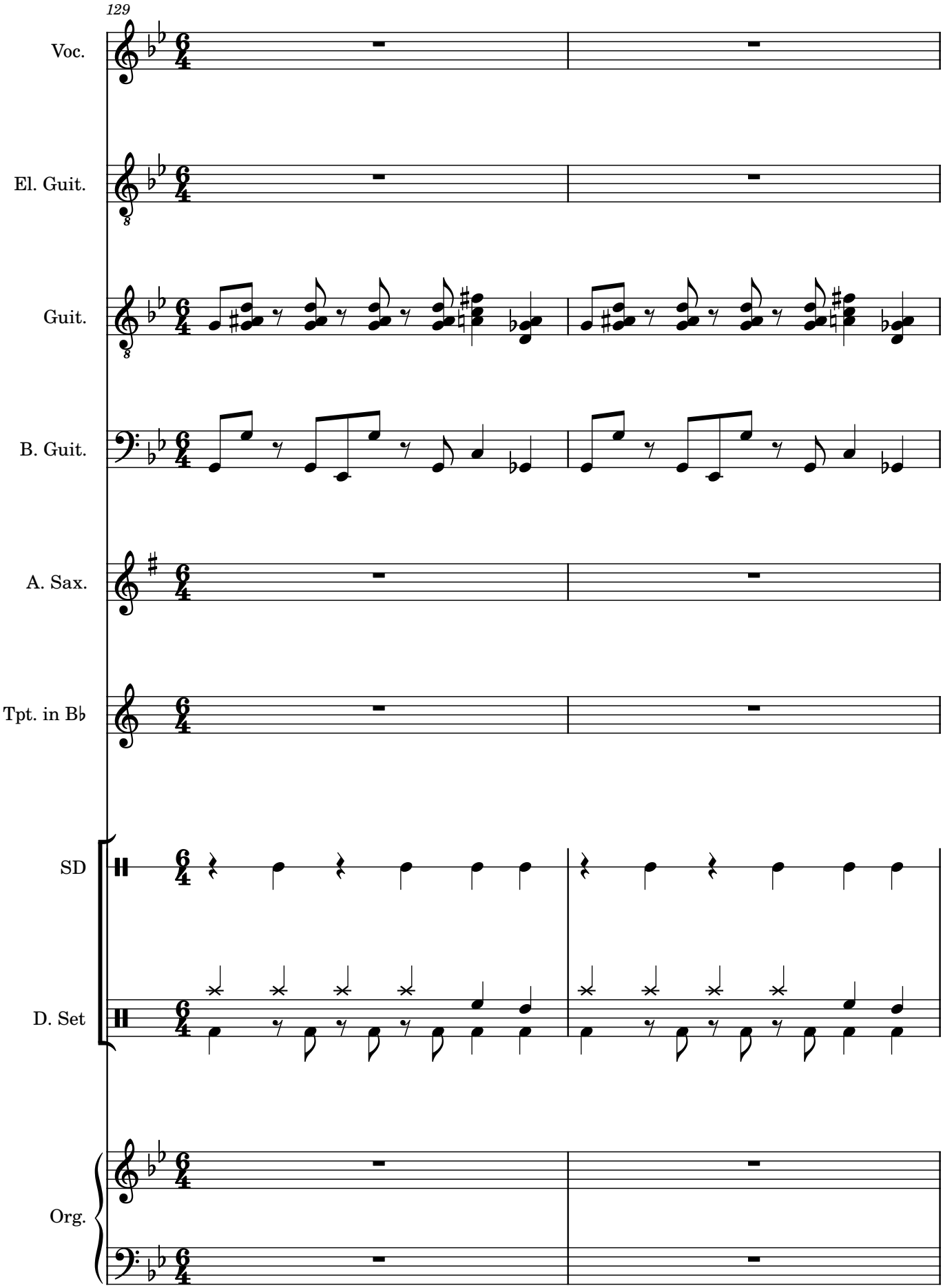
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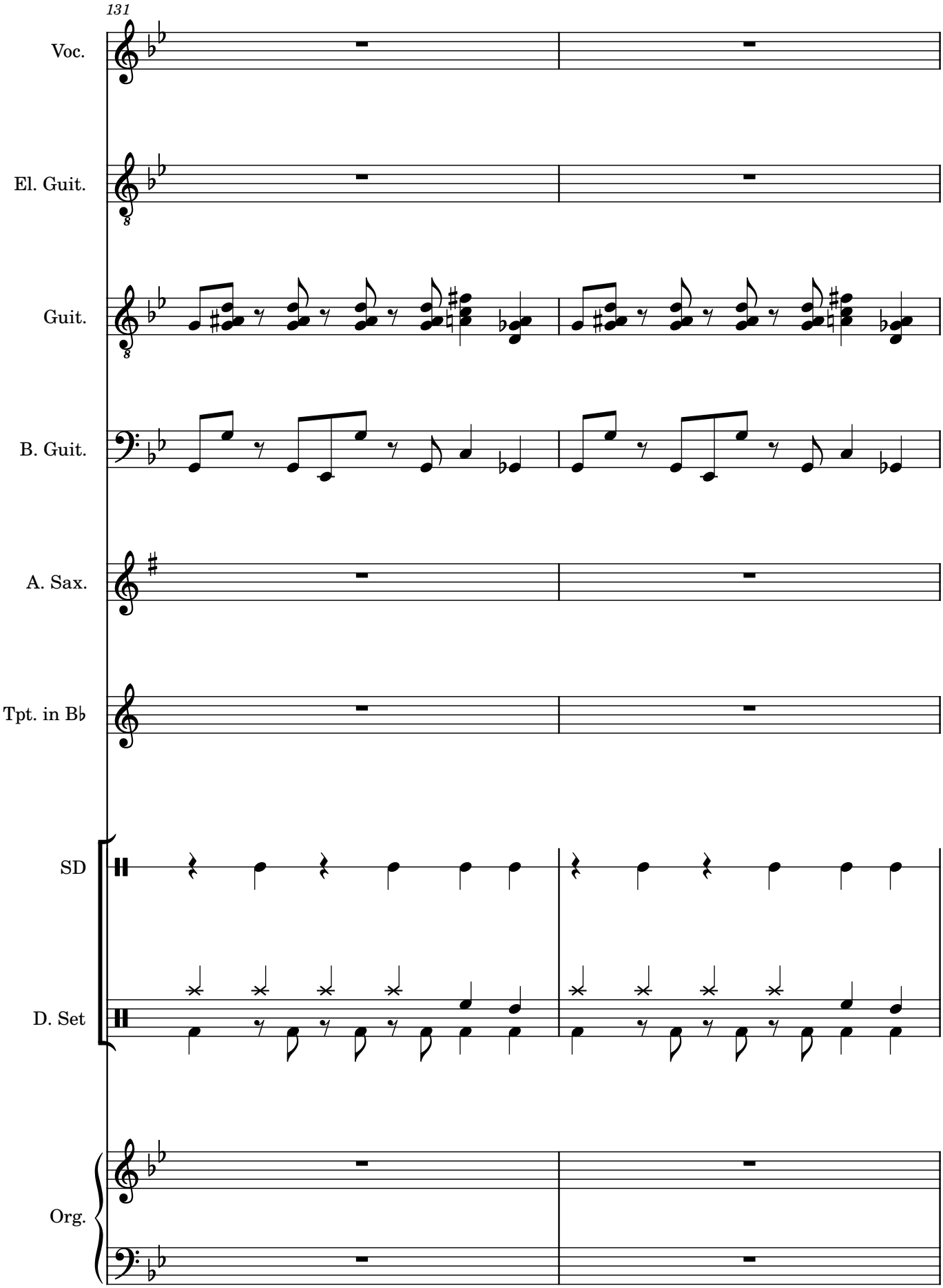
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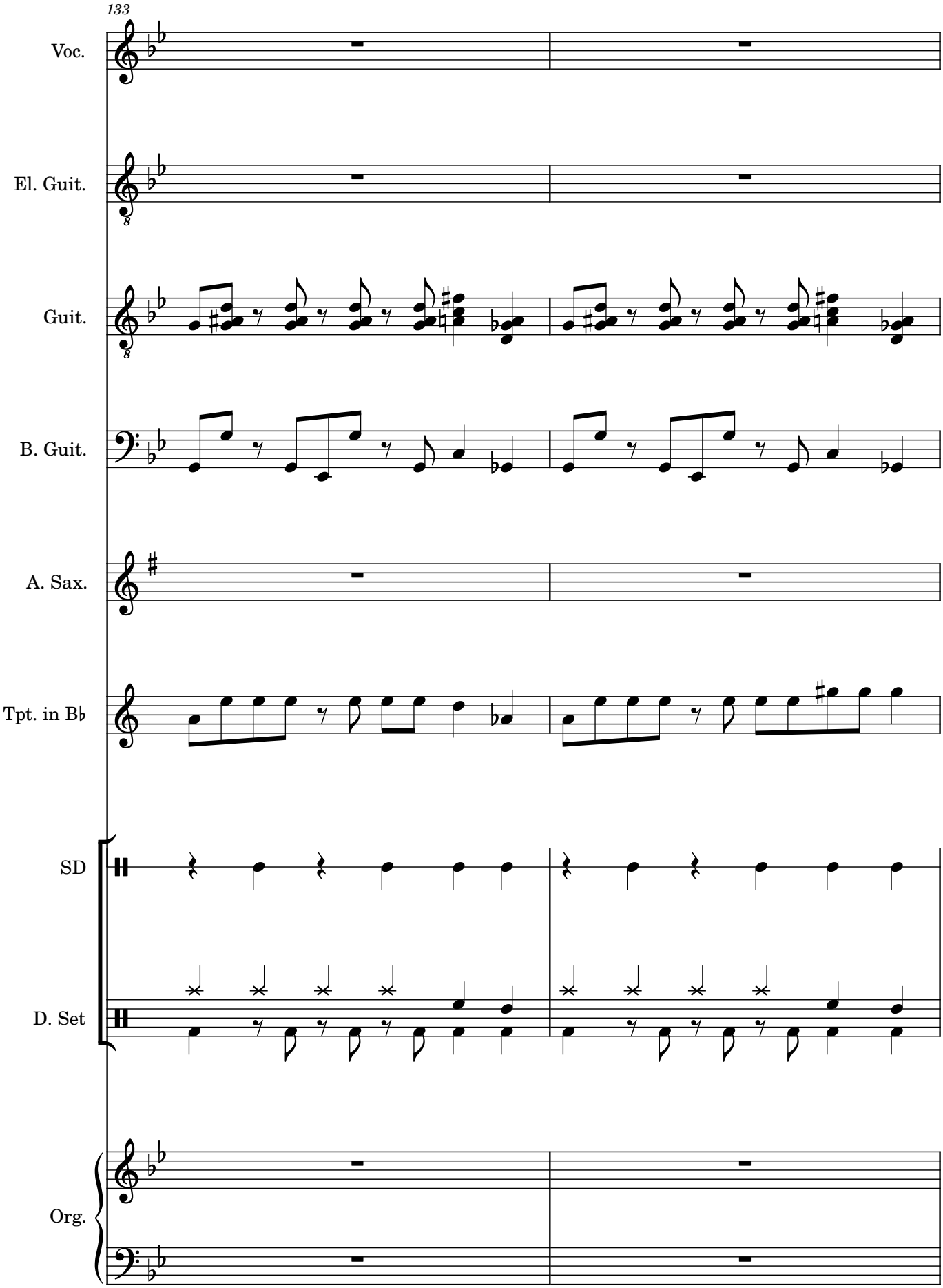
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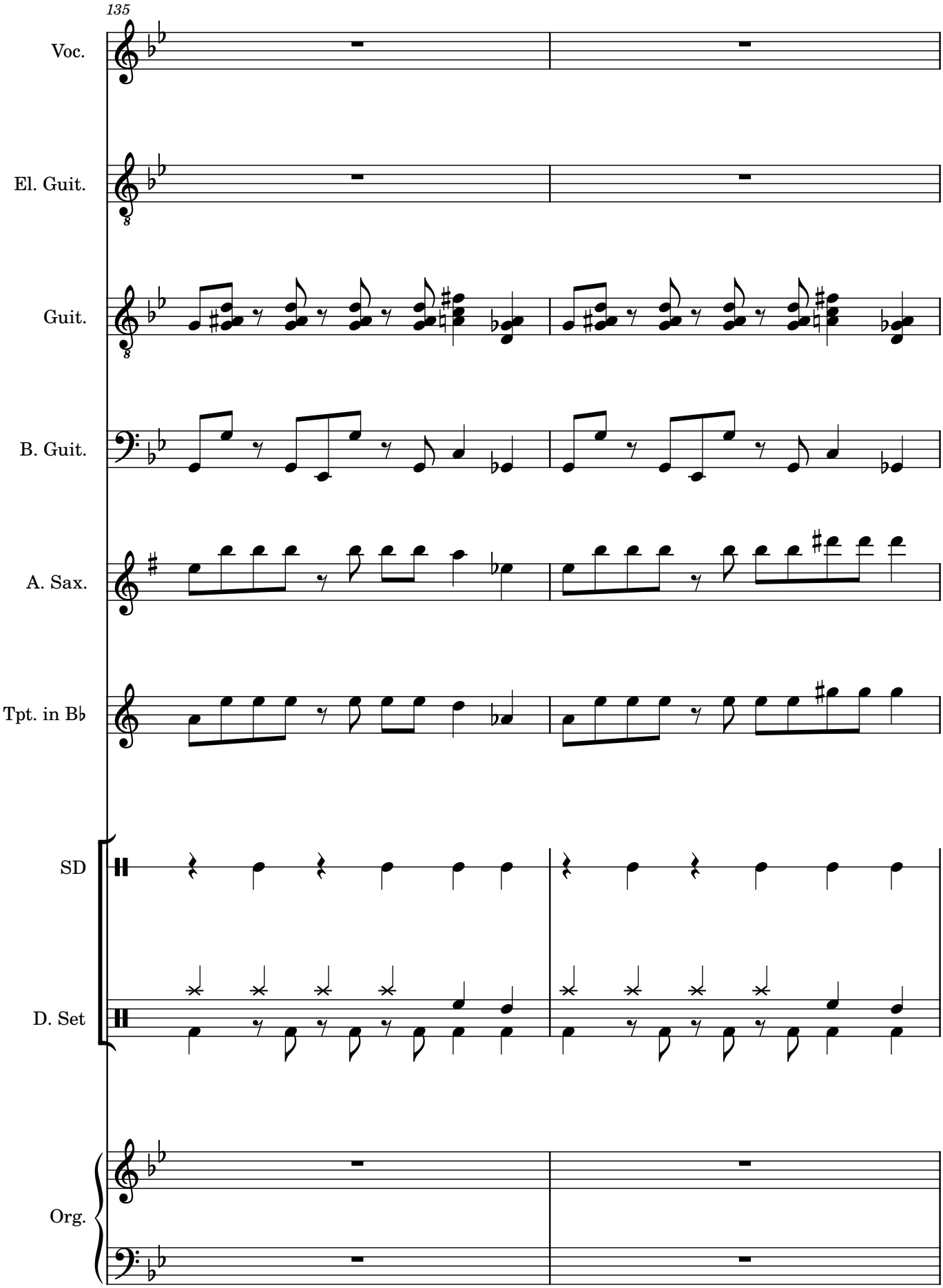
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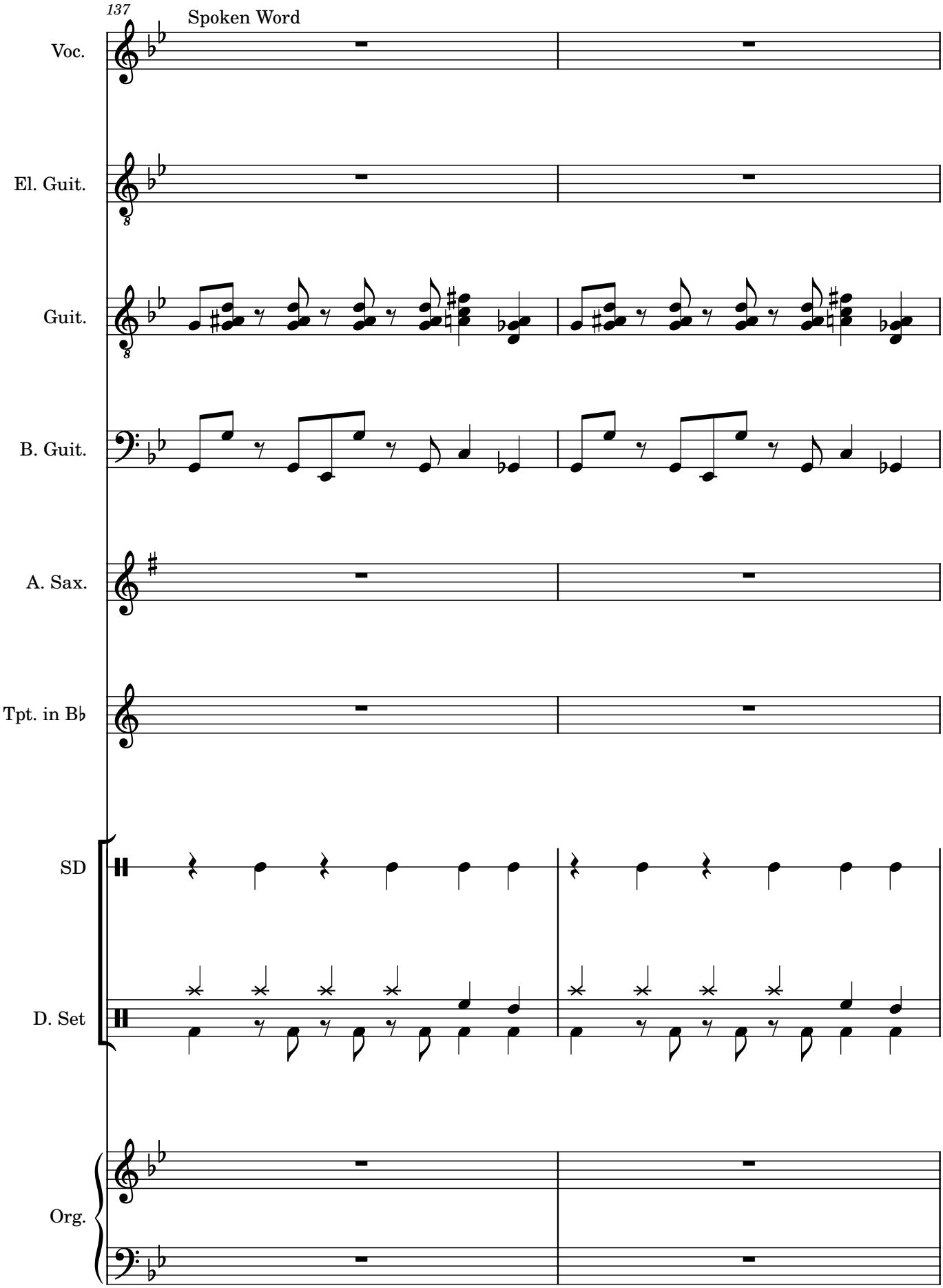
137
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A. Sax.
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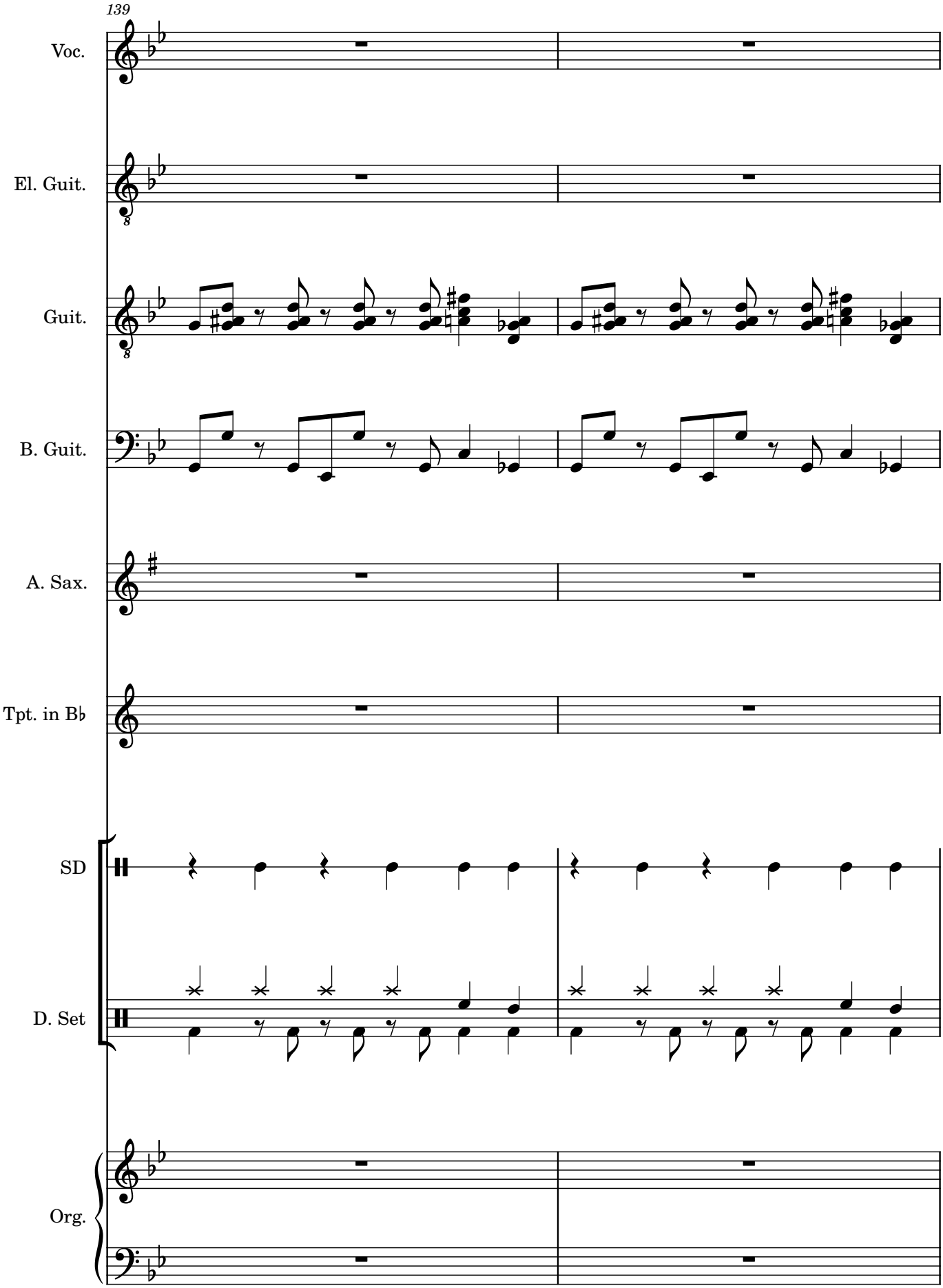
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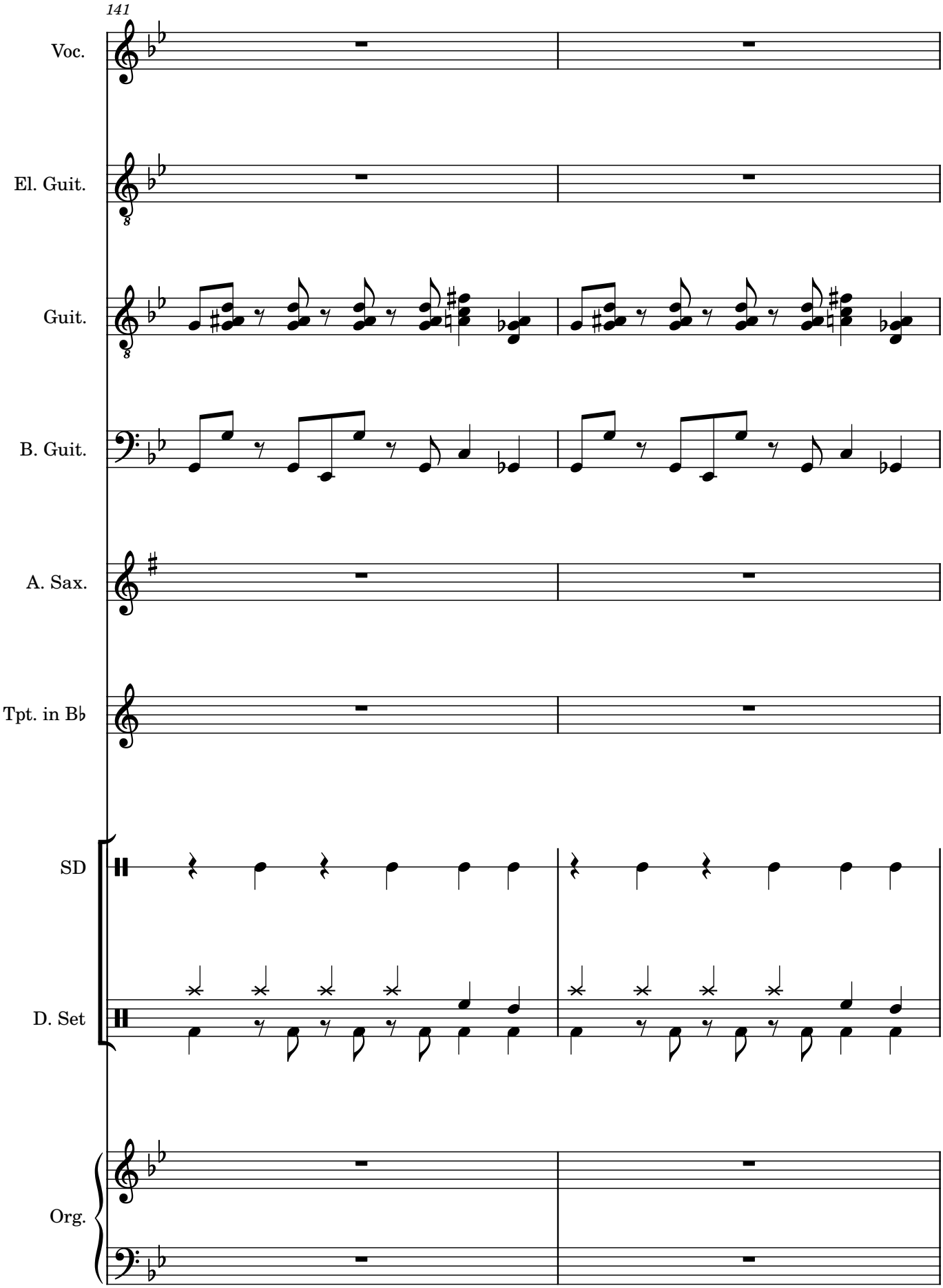
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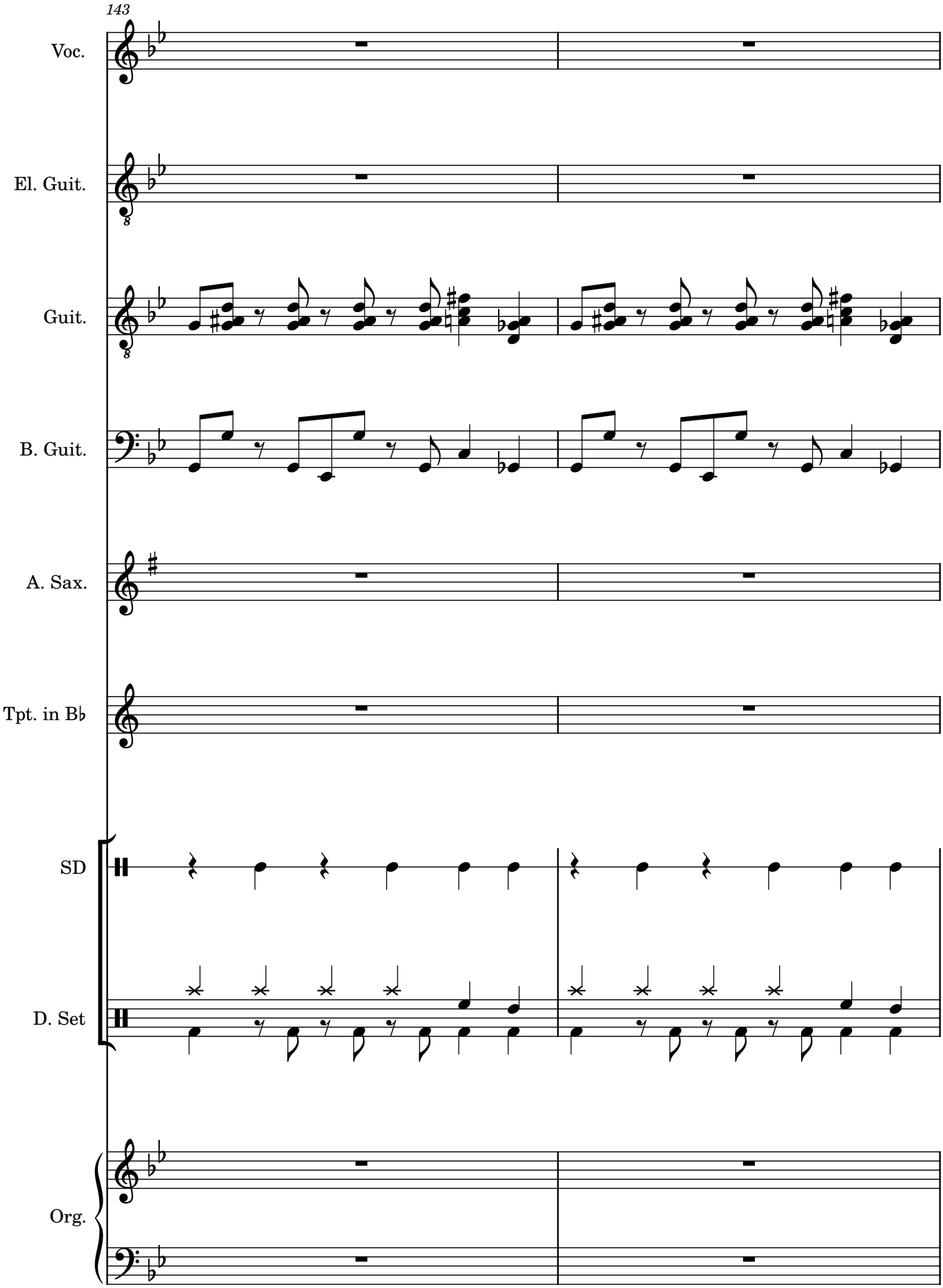
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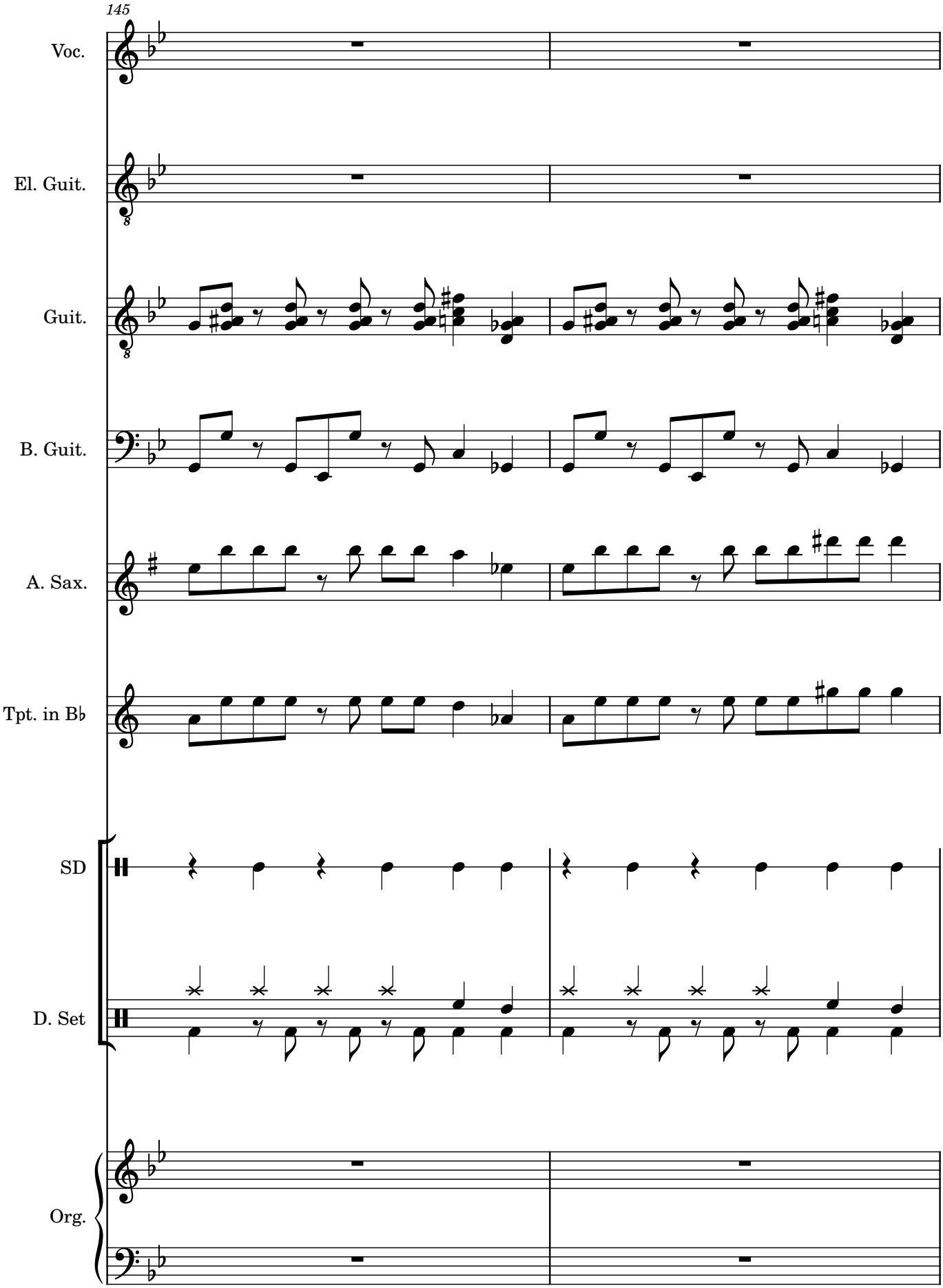
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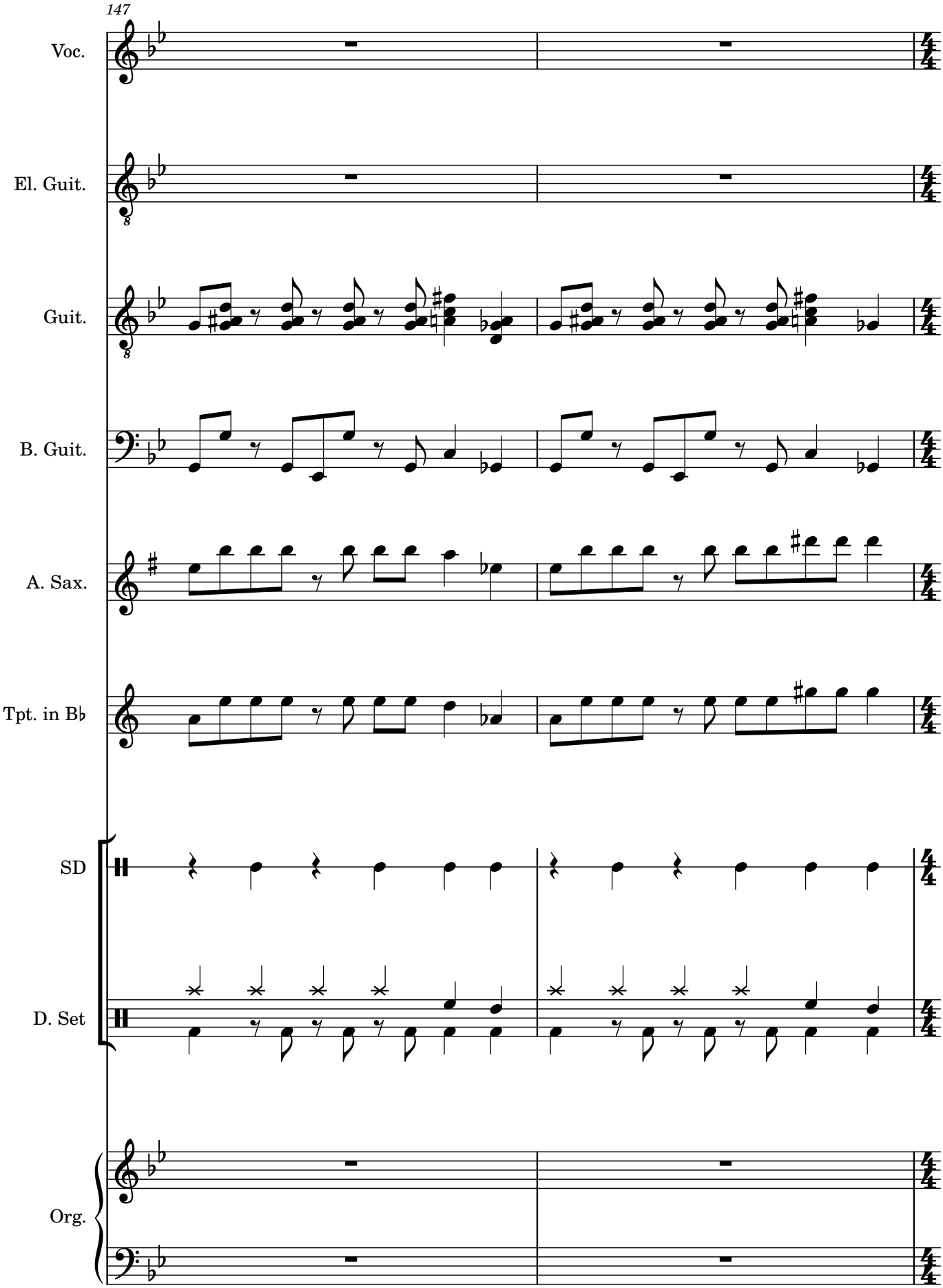
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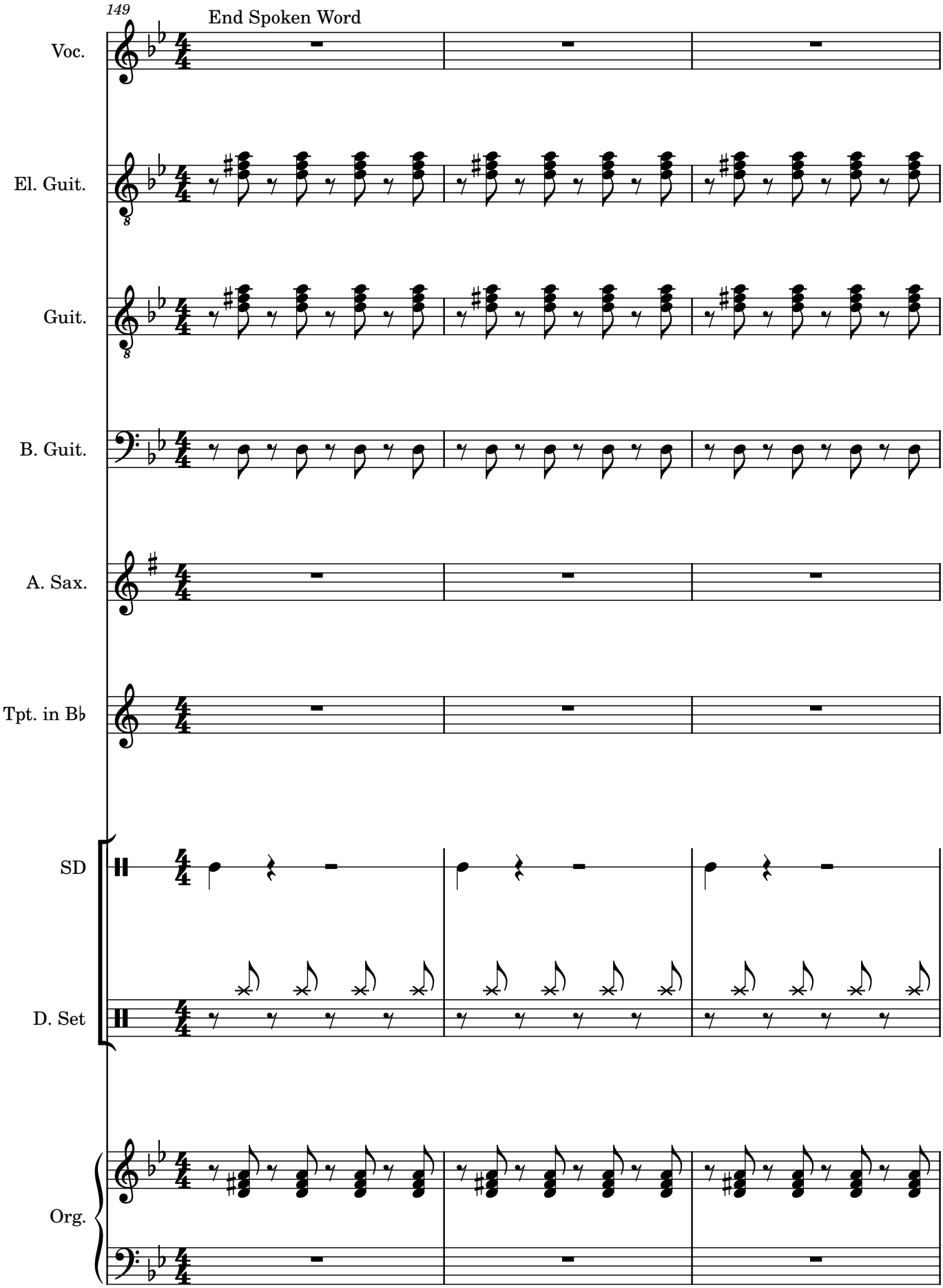
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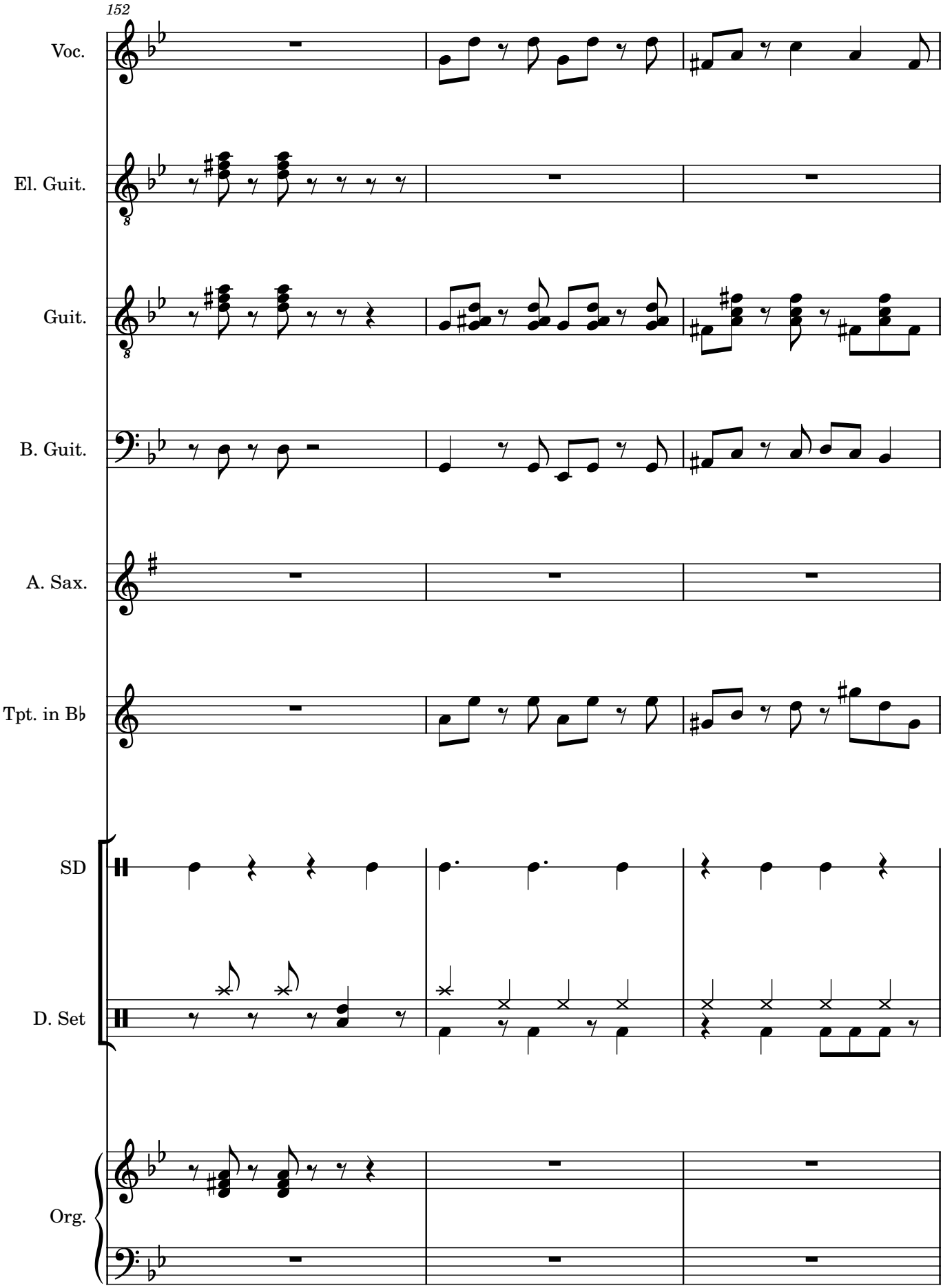
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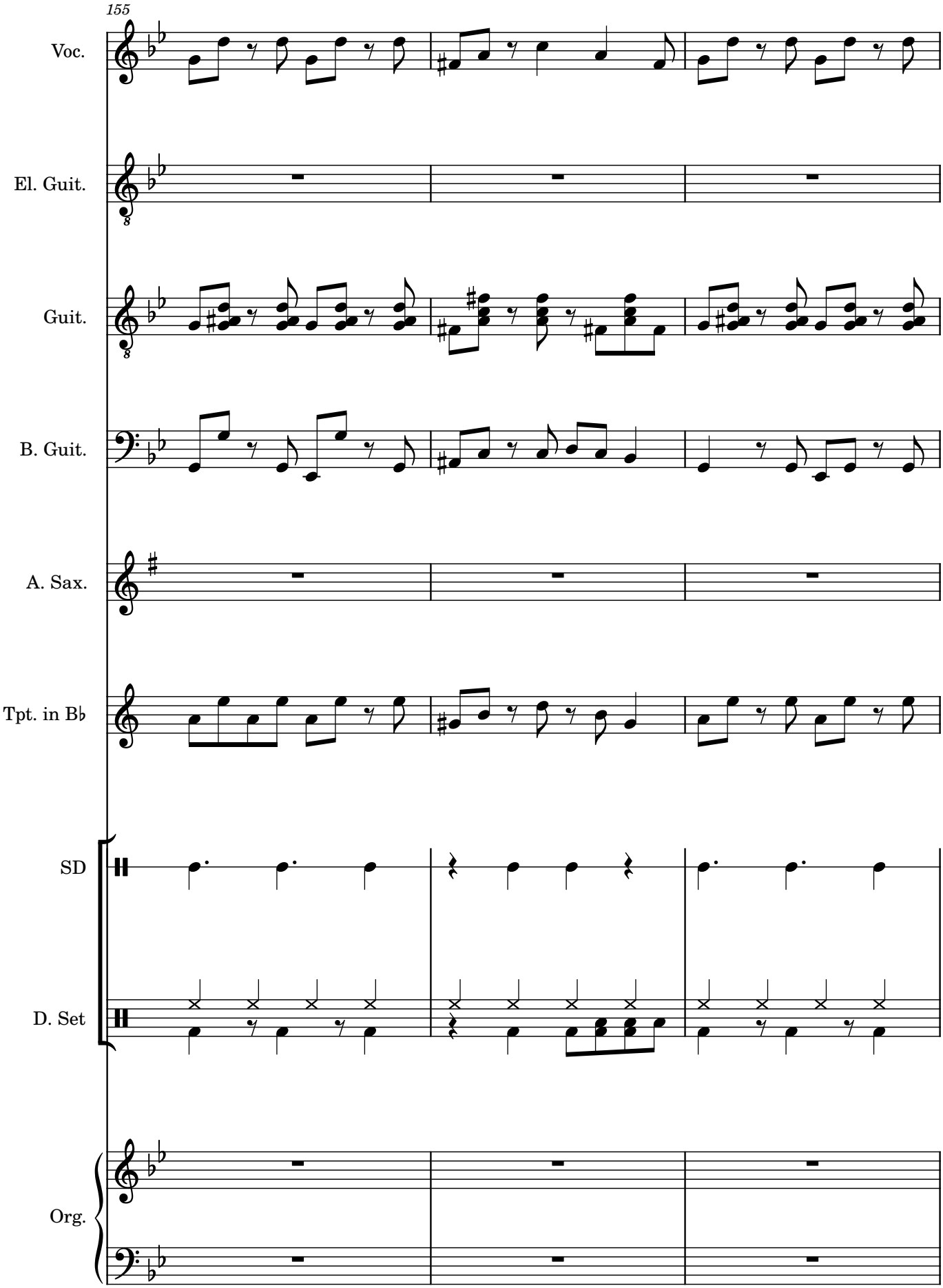
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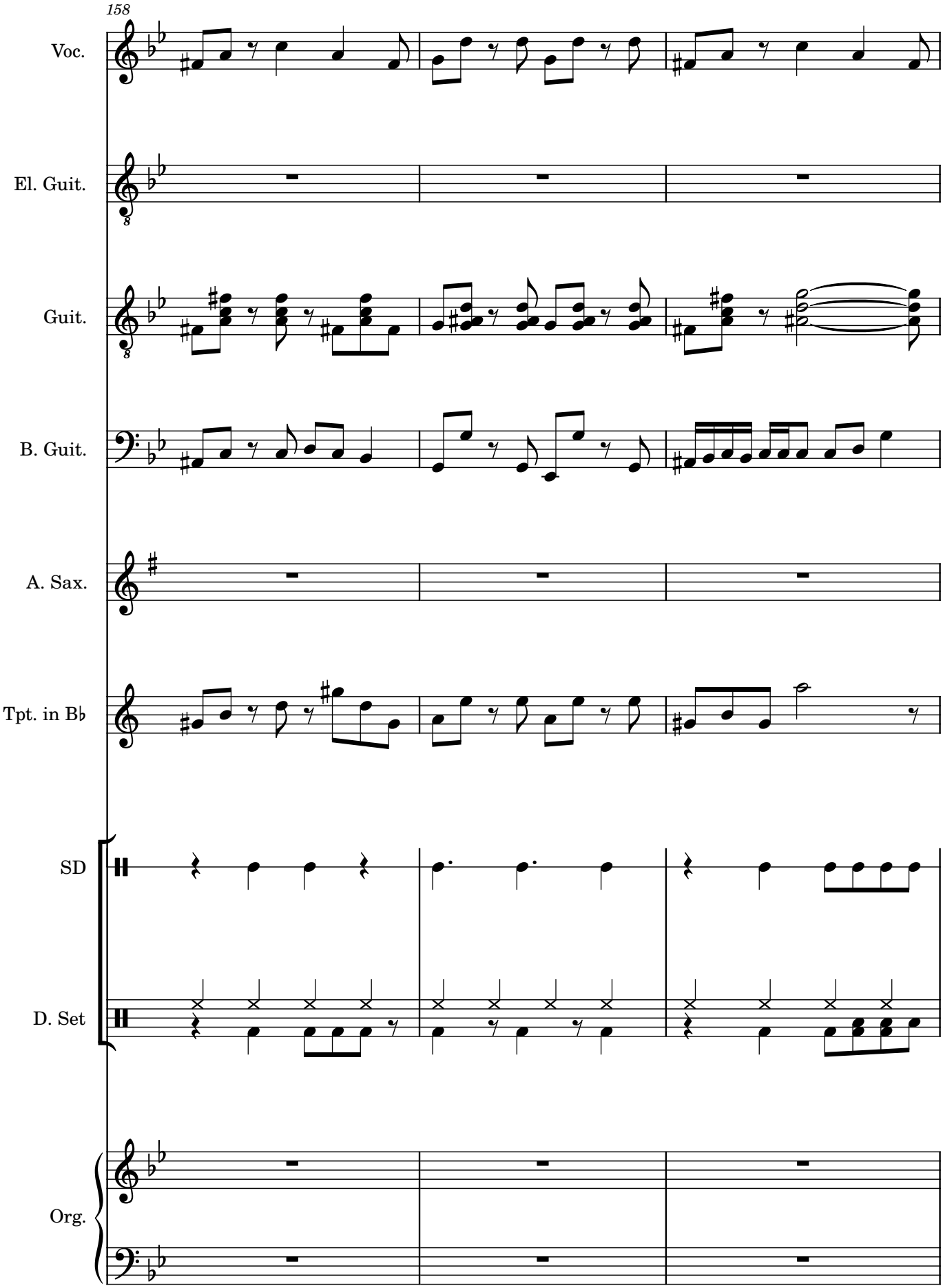
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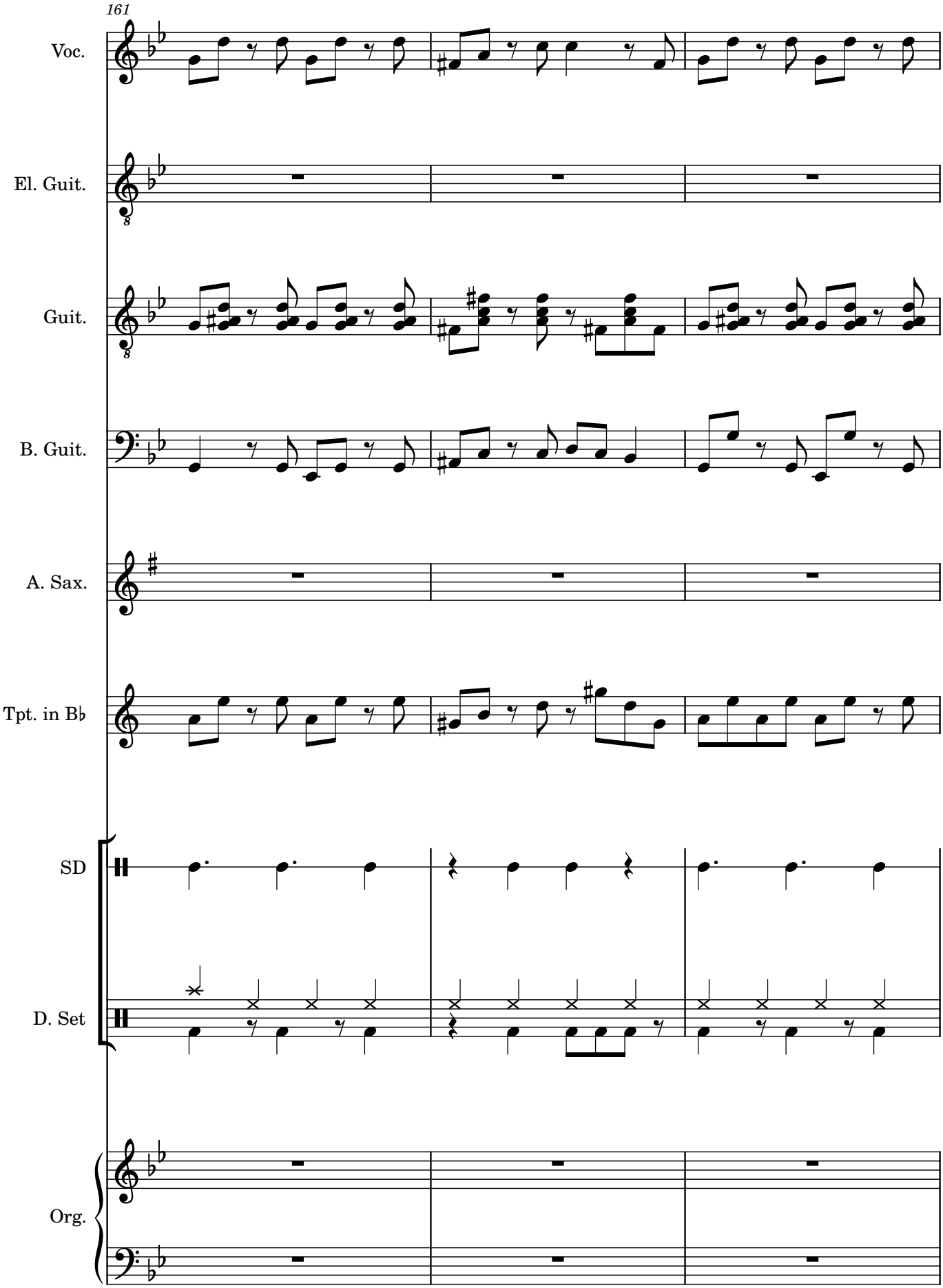
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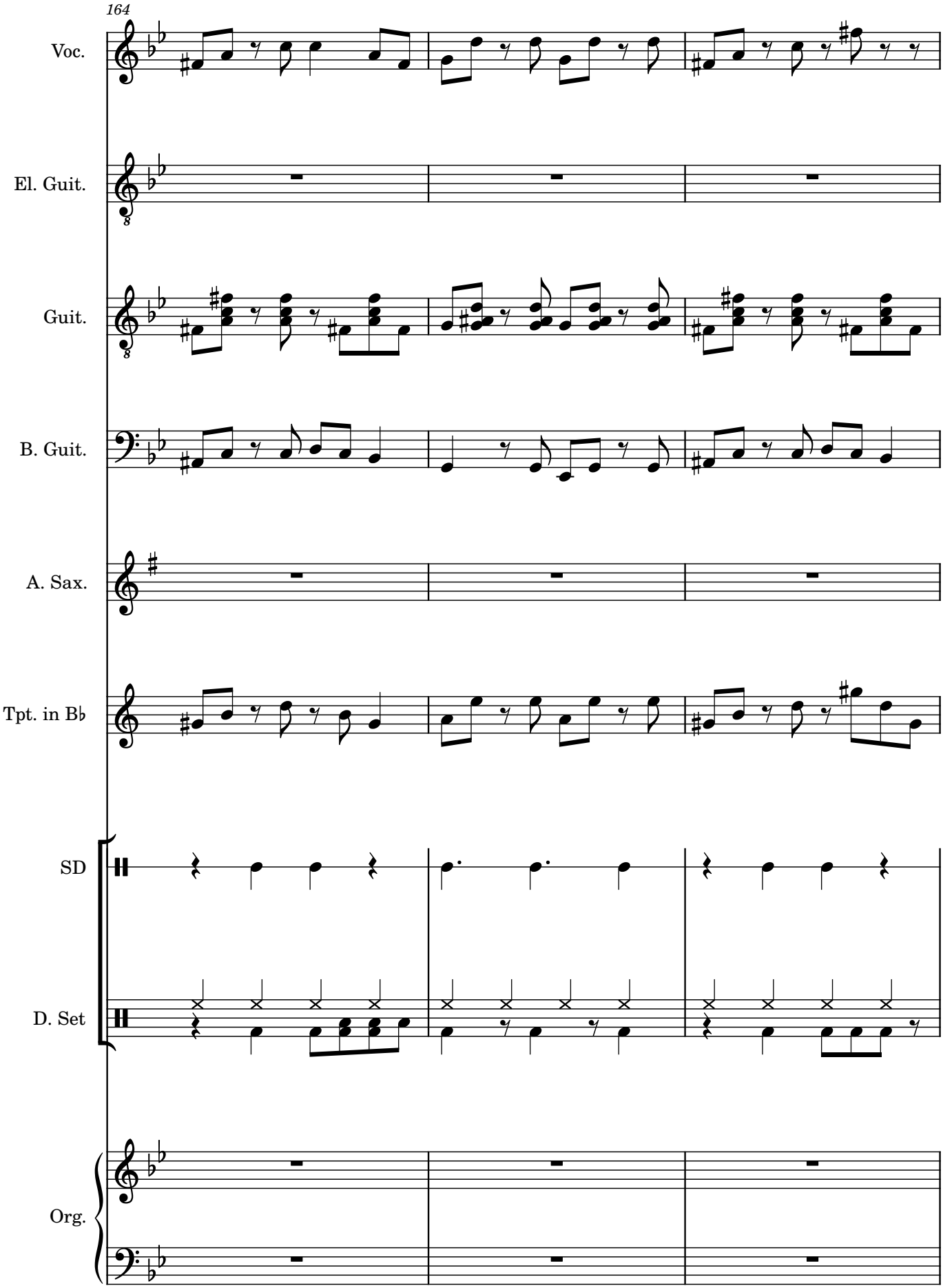
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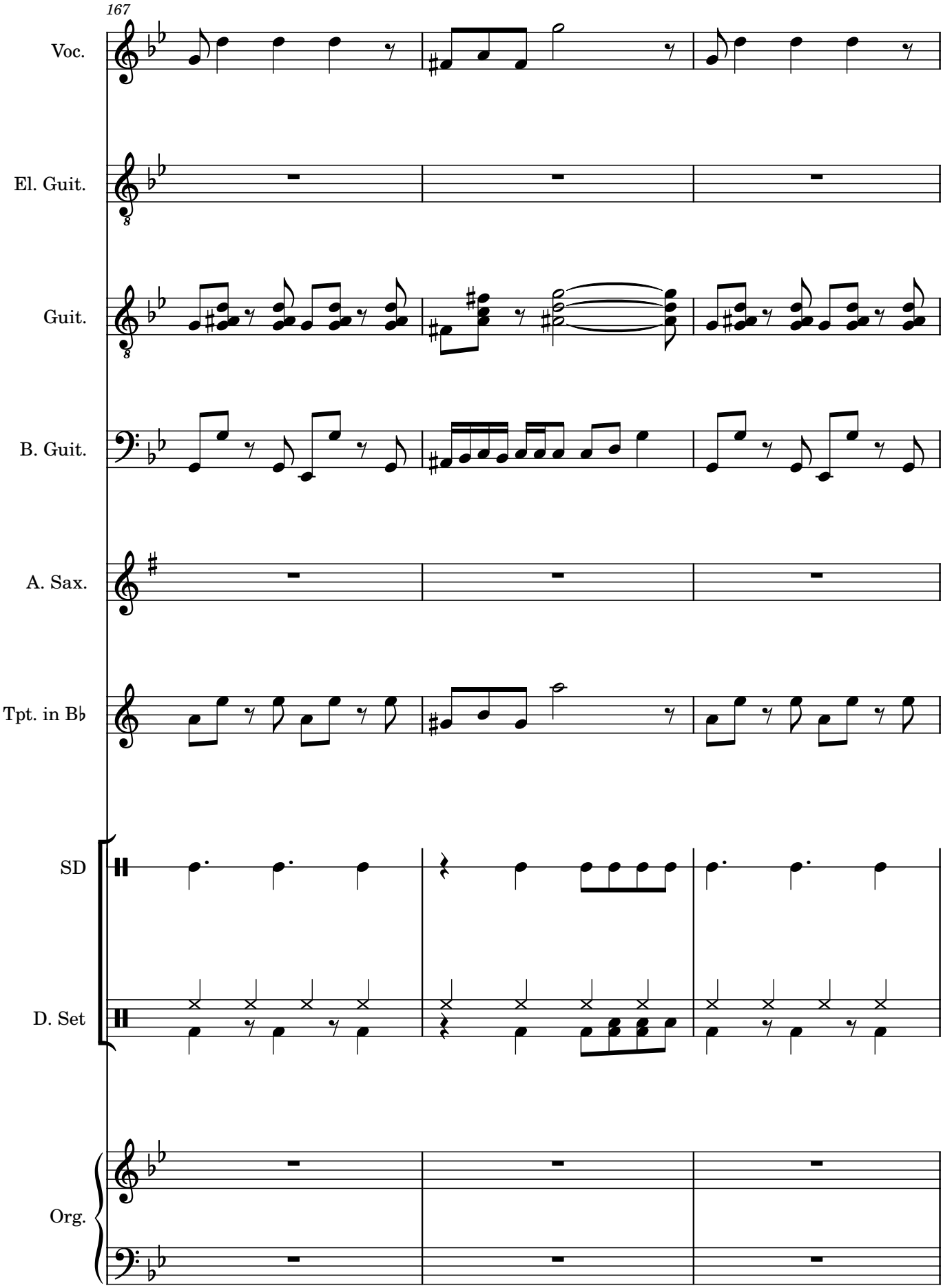
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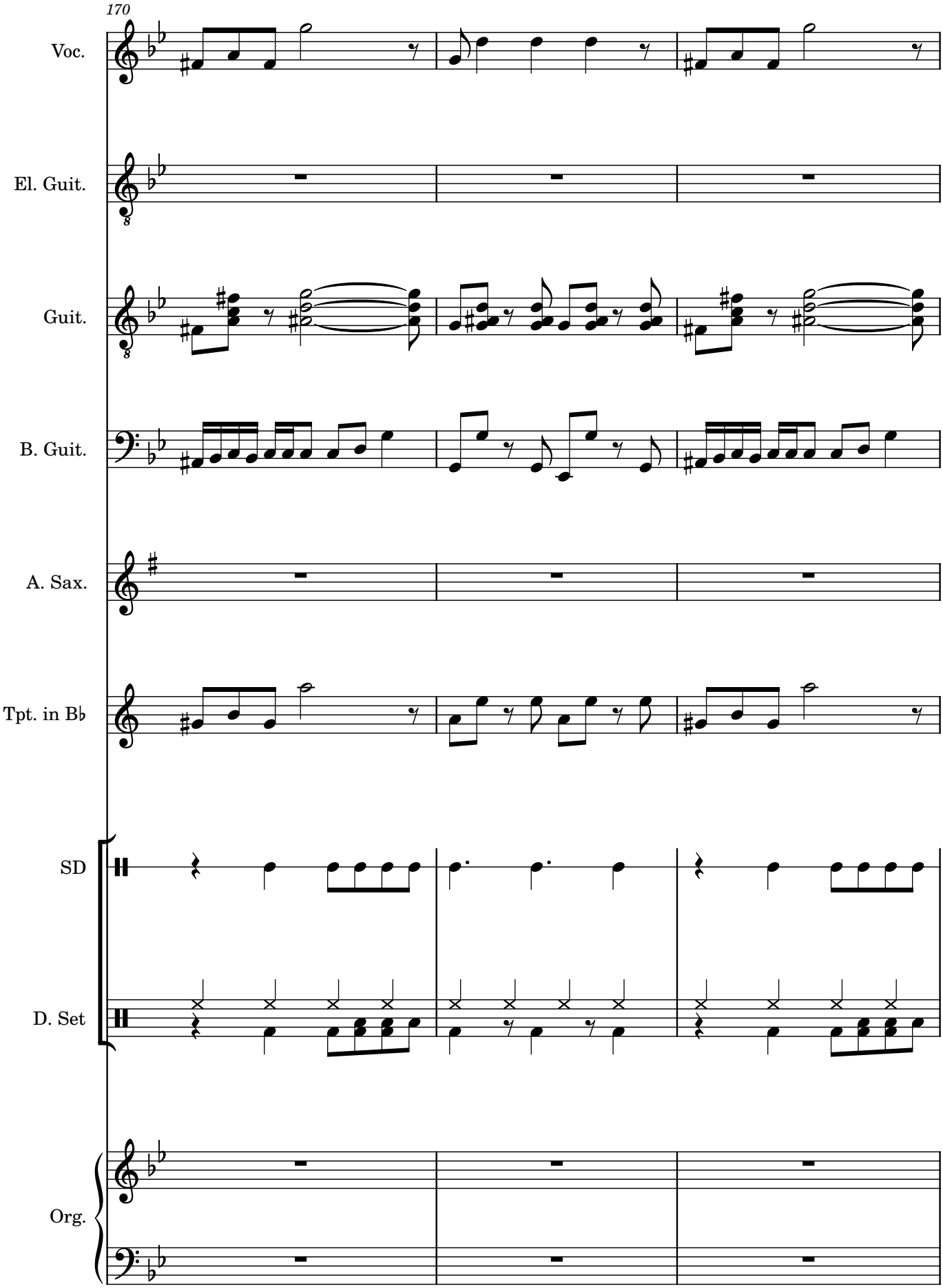
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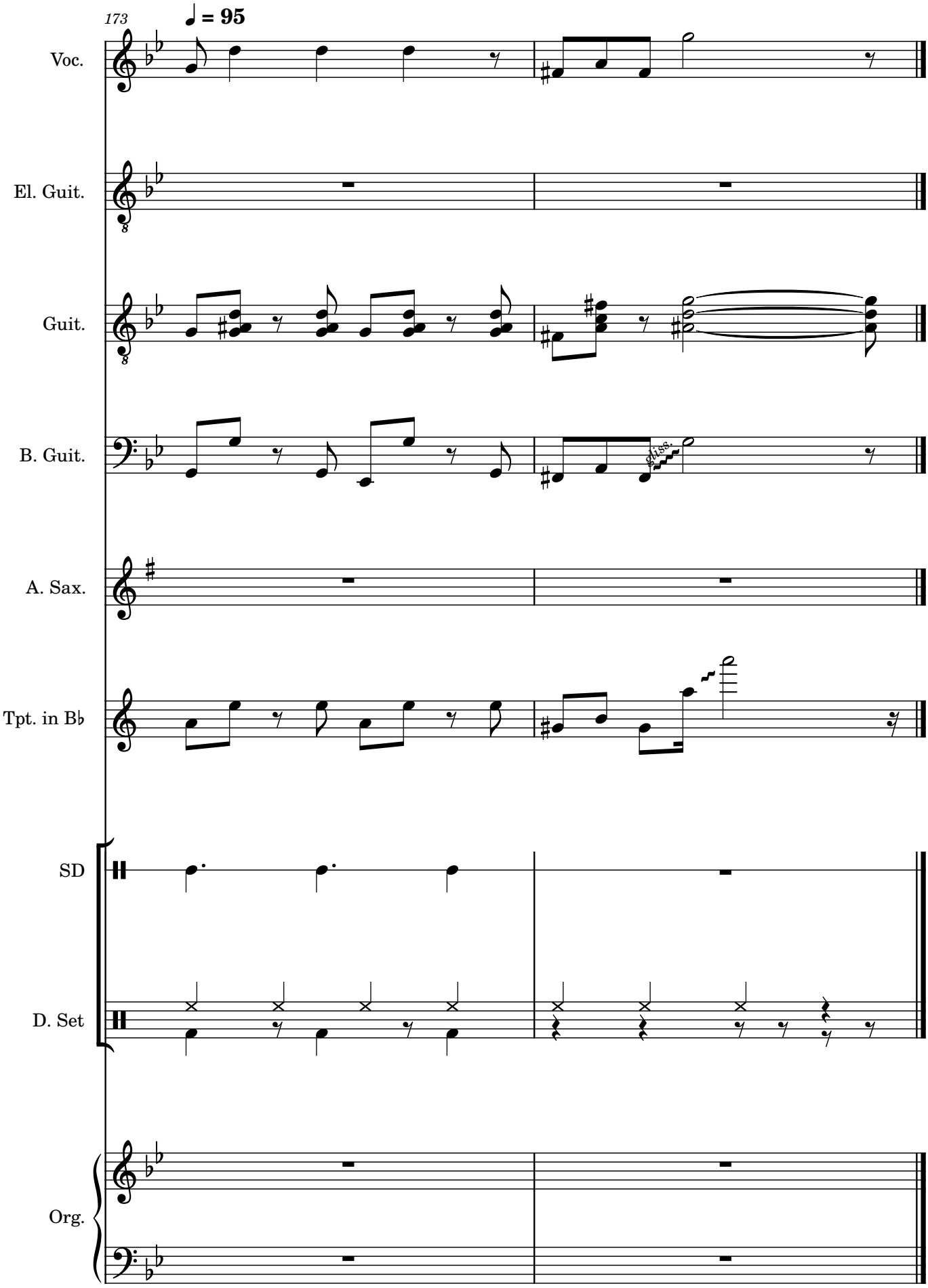
173
♩ = 95
Voc.
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Guit.
B. Guit.
gliss.
A. Sax.
Tpt. in B♭
SD
D. Set
Org.