Mozartian Perfection in Jazz

Module 9 of *Music: Under the Hood*

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Outline

- Biography of Billy Strayhorn
- Analysis of *Satin Doll*

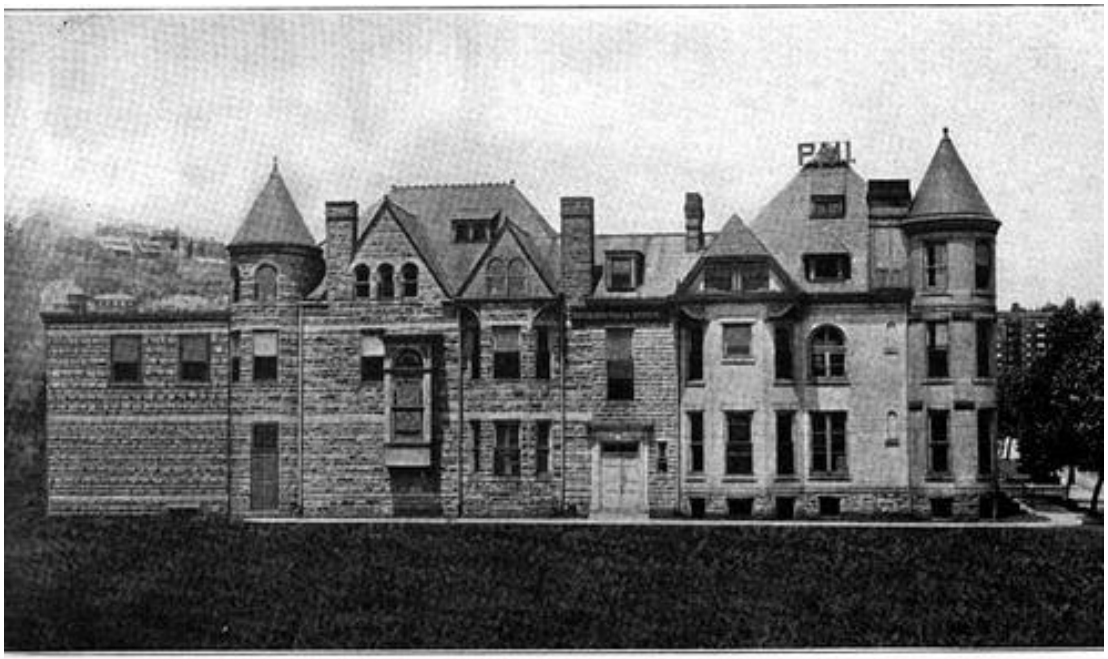
Biography

- Billy Strayhorn, 1915-1967
  - Grew up in Pittsburgh
    - Born in Dayton, Ohio
    - Soon moved to Pittsburgh
    - Attracted to music while staying with grandmother in North Carolina.
    - Attended Westinghouse High School.
    - Studied piano.

High school yearbook photo

Biography

- Professional development
  - Studied at Pittsburgh Musical Institute
    - PMI (est. 1915) was one of 4 top music schools in USA.
    - Located nearby in Oakland.
    - Trained many jazz greats.
    - Merged with Pitt Music Dept, 1963.



Pittsburgh Musical Institute
131-133 Bellefield Ave.

Biography

- Professional development
  - Studied classical music at PMI
    - Preferred Ravel and Stravinsky
    - Encountered racial barriers in classical music
    - Turned to jazz and wrote *Lush Life (1:33)*, age 19

Biography

- Professional development
  - Met Duke Ellington, age 23
    - Backstage at Stanley Theater (now Benedum Center).
    - Showed Ellington *Lush Life* and his arrangement of an Ellington piece.
    - Ellington invited Strayhorn to join him in NYC to write for his band.
    - But Strayhorn had to follow up.

Biography

- Professional development
  - Relocated to NYC
    - Ellington told Strayhorn to *Take the A Train* to reach his apartment in Manhattan.
    - This piece, written by Strayhorn, became the signature song of Ellington's band, also a jazz standard.

Biography

- Relationship with Ellington
  - One of the strangest professional relationships in musical history.
    - Ellington never gave Strayhorn a contract or a salary.
    - But Ellington put him up in his huge apartment and paid all his bills.

Biography

- Relationship with Ellington
  - Strayhorn was in many ways the brain behind Ellington's music.
    - Ellington described him as "my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brainwaves in his head, and his in mine."
    - Strayhorn was more interested in musical **development**.

Biography

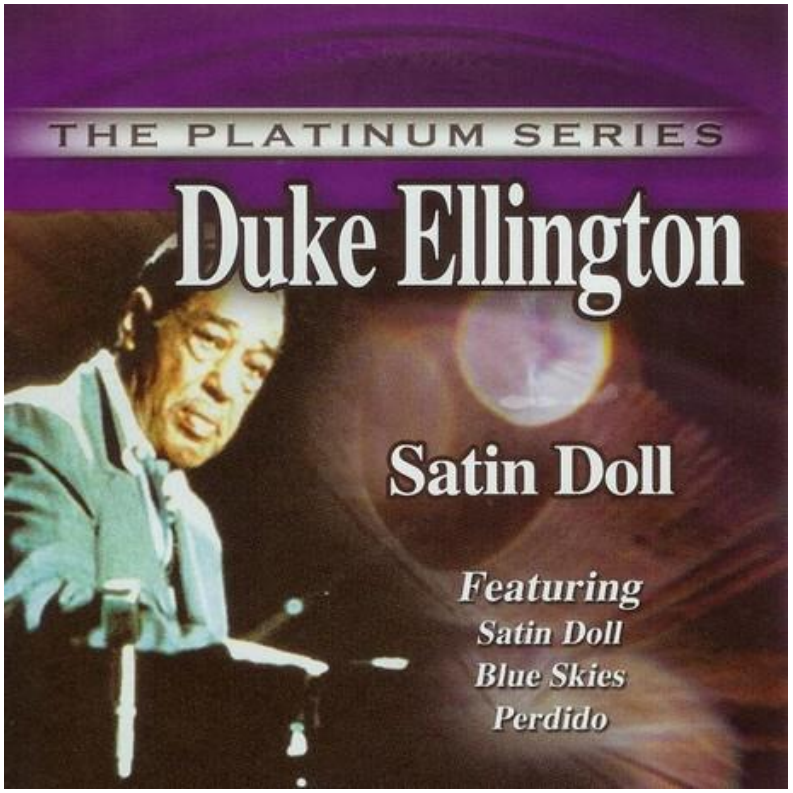
- Relationship with Ellington
  - Strayhorn got *some* credit for his work.
    - He was listed as a coauthor on some later pieces.
    - But most of his own work was credited solely or jointly to Ellington (this was common for big bandleaders of that day).
    - His name was omitted from many joint compositions.
    - Strayhorn was shy and modest about his contributions.

Biography

- Some Strayhorn songs
  - *Lush Life*, 1933-38
  - *Take the A Train*, 1939
  - *Something to Live For*, 1939
  - *Chelsea Bridge*, 1941
  - *Day Dream*, 1941
  - *My Little Brown Book*, 1942
  - *Lotus Blossom*, 1947
  - *Satin Doll*, 1953
  - *A Flower Is a Lonesome Thing*, 1957
  - *UMMG*, 1959

Satin Doll

- A song with Mozartian perfection
  - Has the elegance and behind-the-scenes cleverness of Mozart.
  - Ellington used it as closing number in many of his concerts.



Satin Doll

Audio file (Ellington and orchestra)

- What makes it work? A guess…
  1. Classical form (AABA)
  2. Apparent simplicity (as in Mozart)
  3. Repeated **ii** – **V** – **I** progression
     - Large-scale and locally
  4. Distinctive chromatic **bass line**
  5. Clever **pivot** that combines 3 and 4.
  6. Counterpoint between melody and **bass line**.
     - Both rhythmic and melodic

Classic form

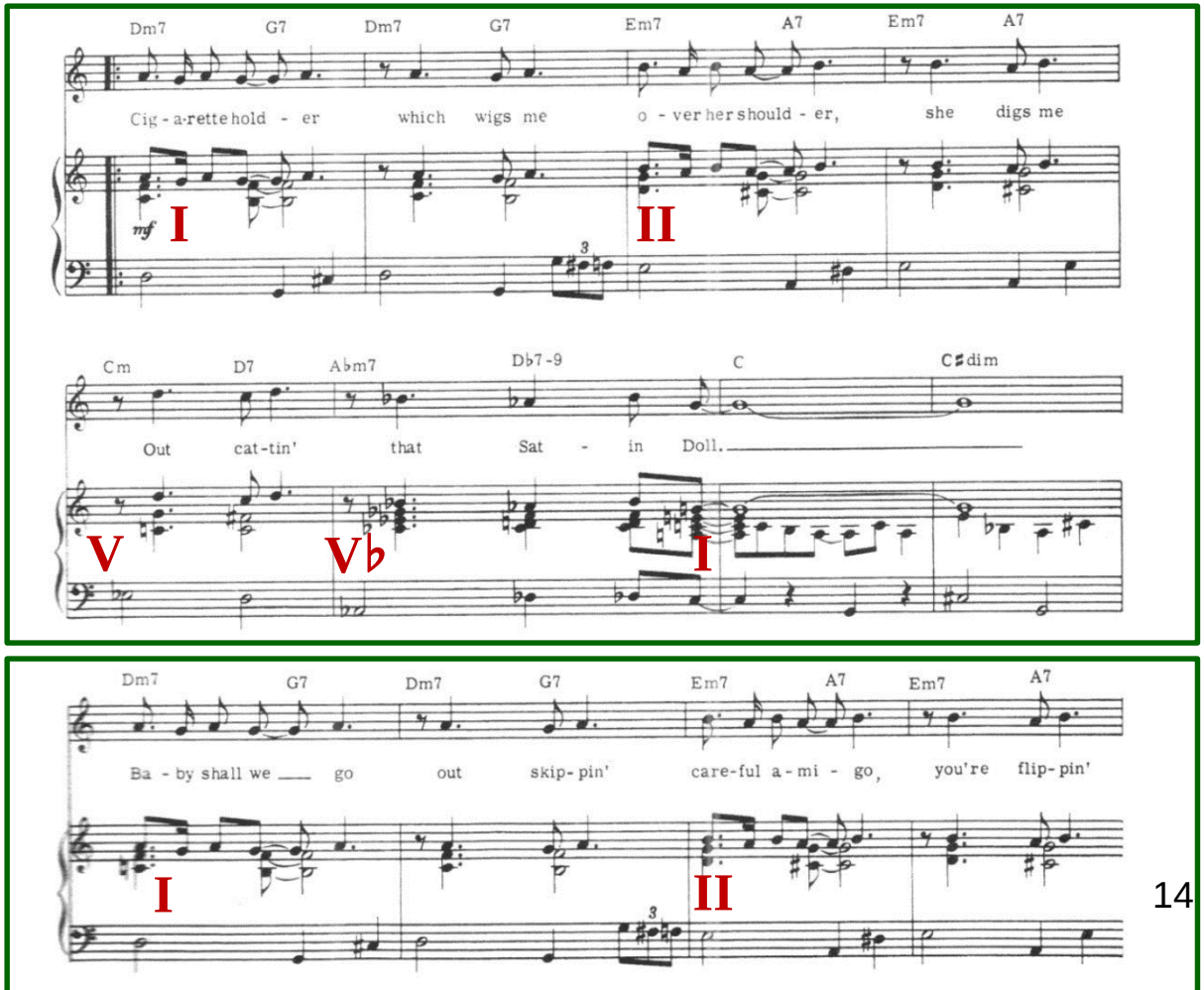
Audio file
(original sheet music)

Exposition

I-II-V-I in exposition (major **II** allows for sequence, up 1 step)

V slides through **V♭** (more on this later)

Exposition (repeat)

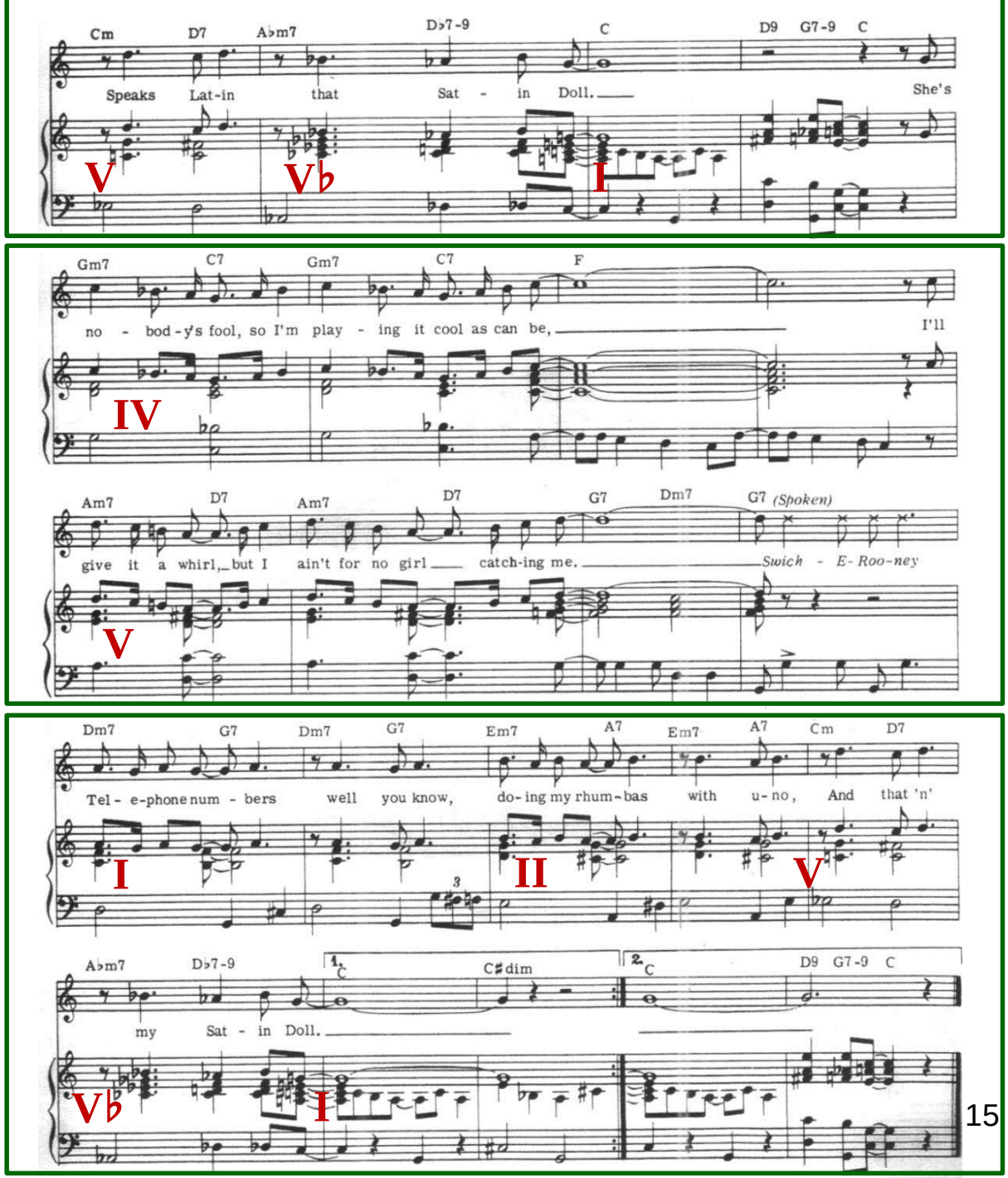


Exposition
(repeat)

Development

Standard **IV-V**
in development
again allows for
sequence, up 1 step

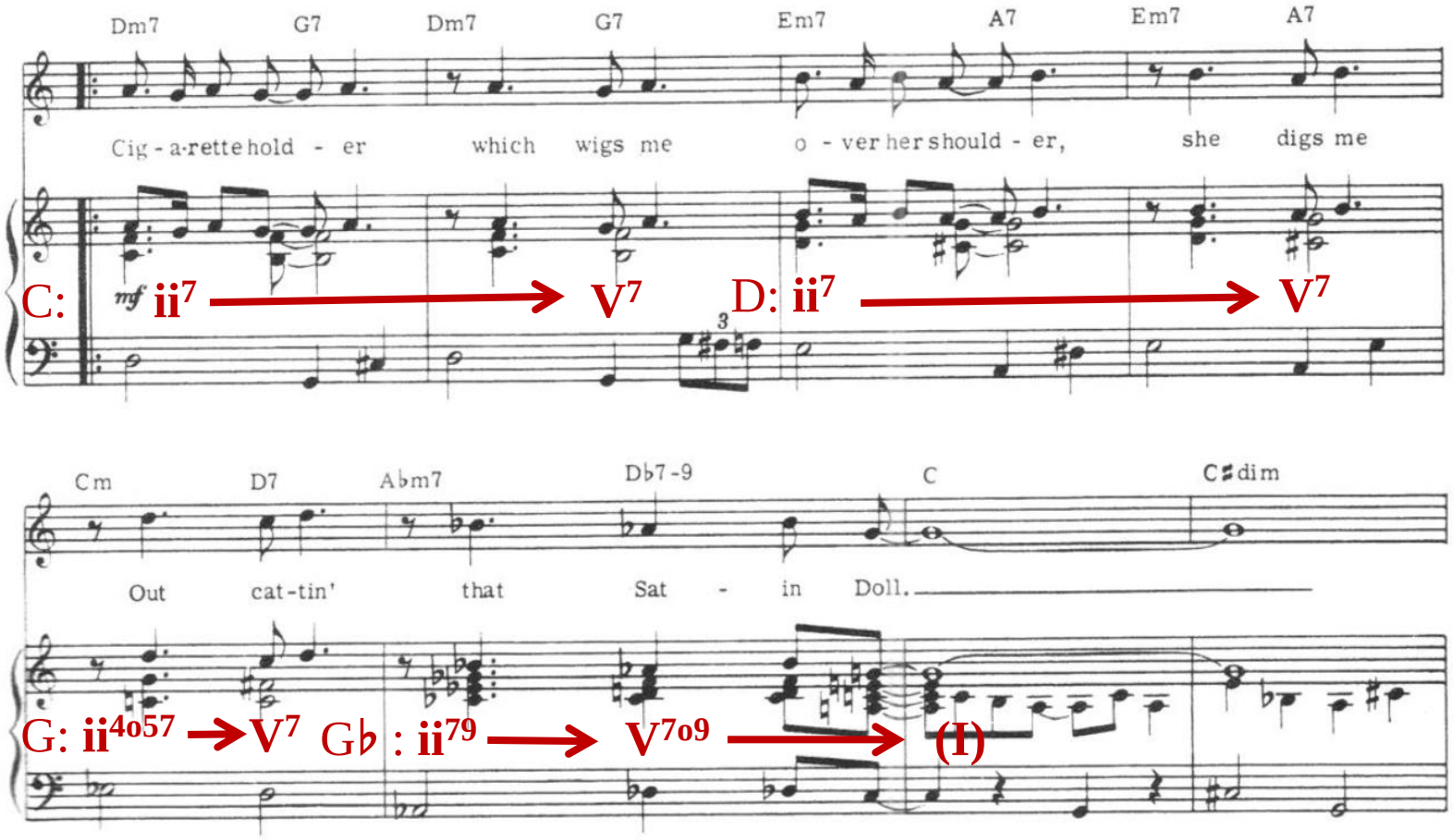
Recapitulation



Repeated ii-V-I progression

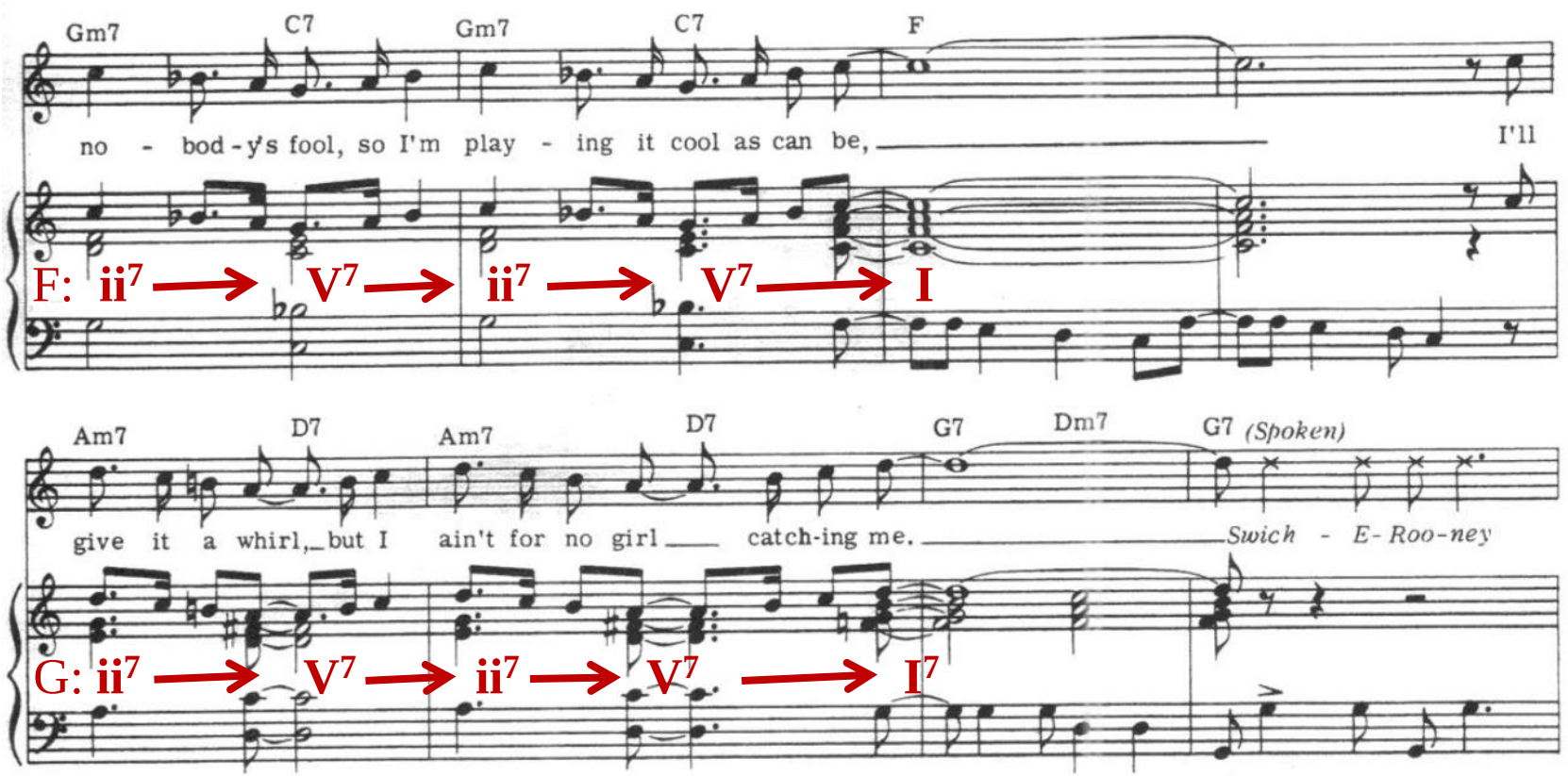
Audio file

In the exposition & recap…



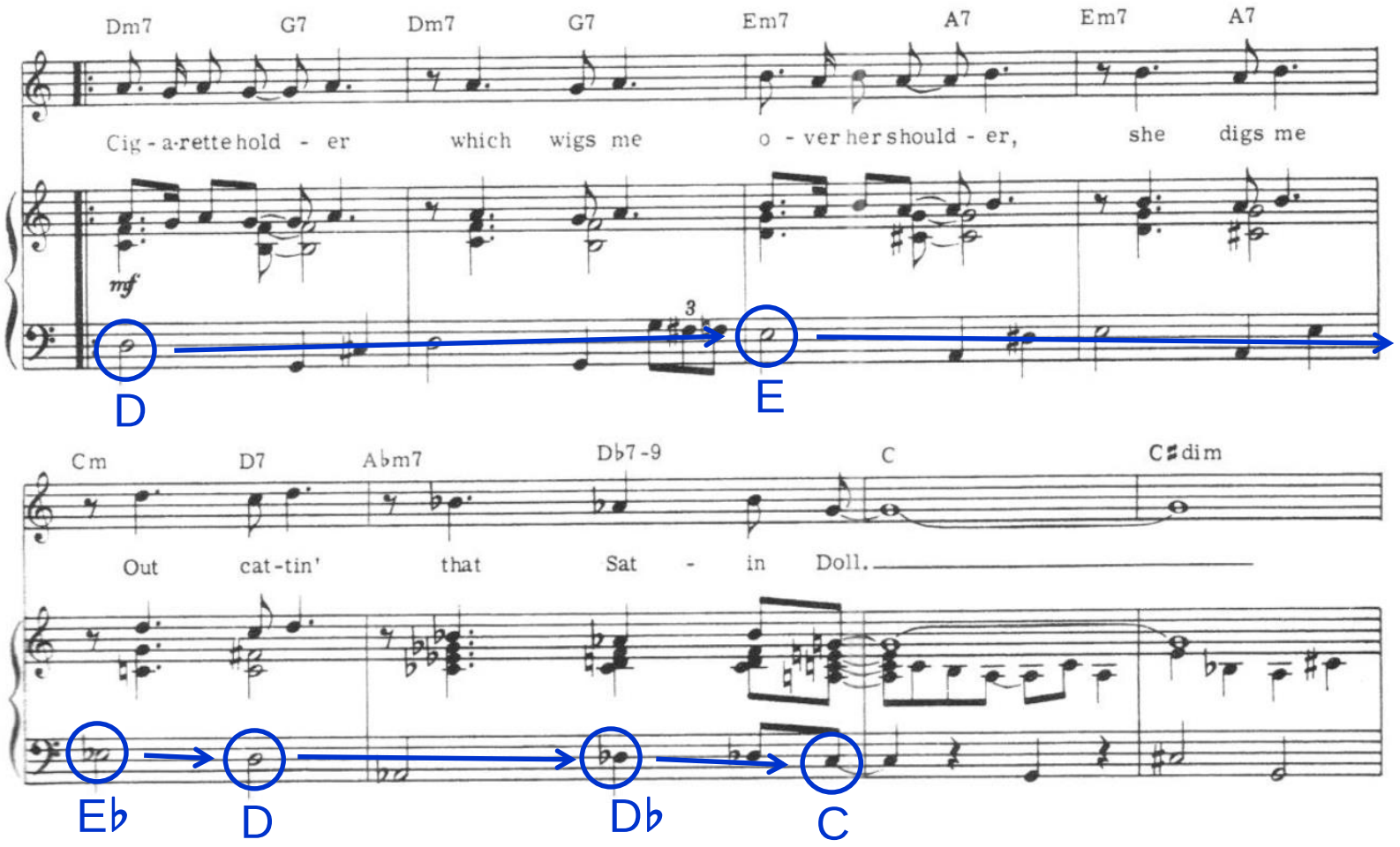
Repeated ii-V-I progression

In the development…



Distinctive chromatic bass line

Audio file

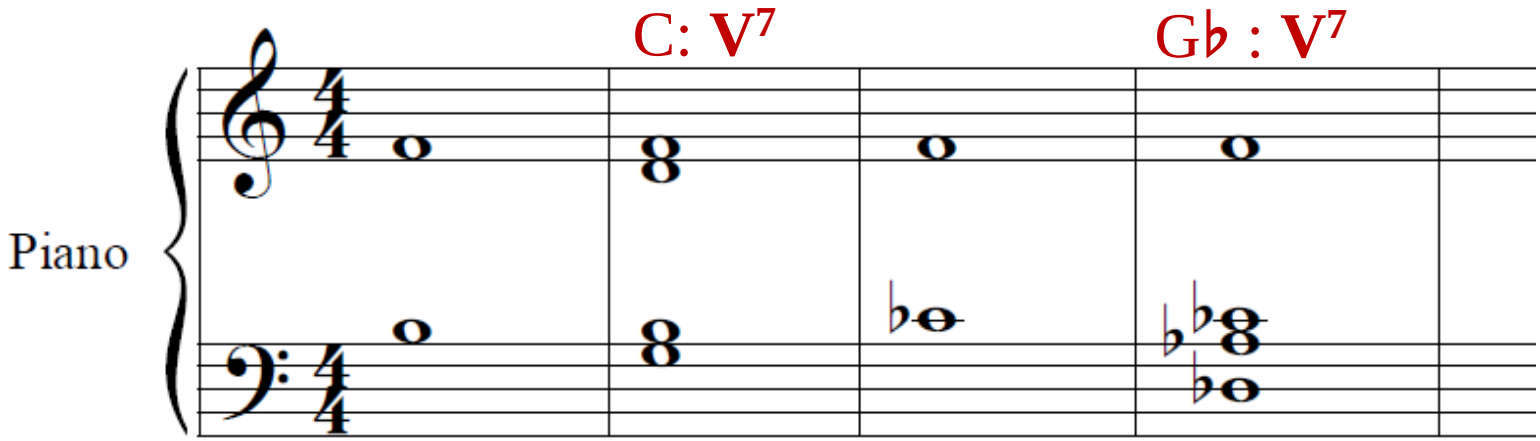


Chromaticism echoed in introduction!

Pivot on tritone combines ii-V-I with chromatic bass

Audio file

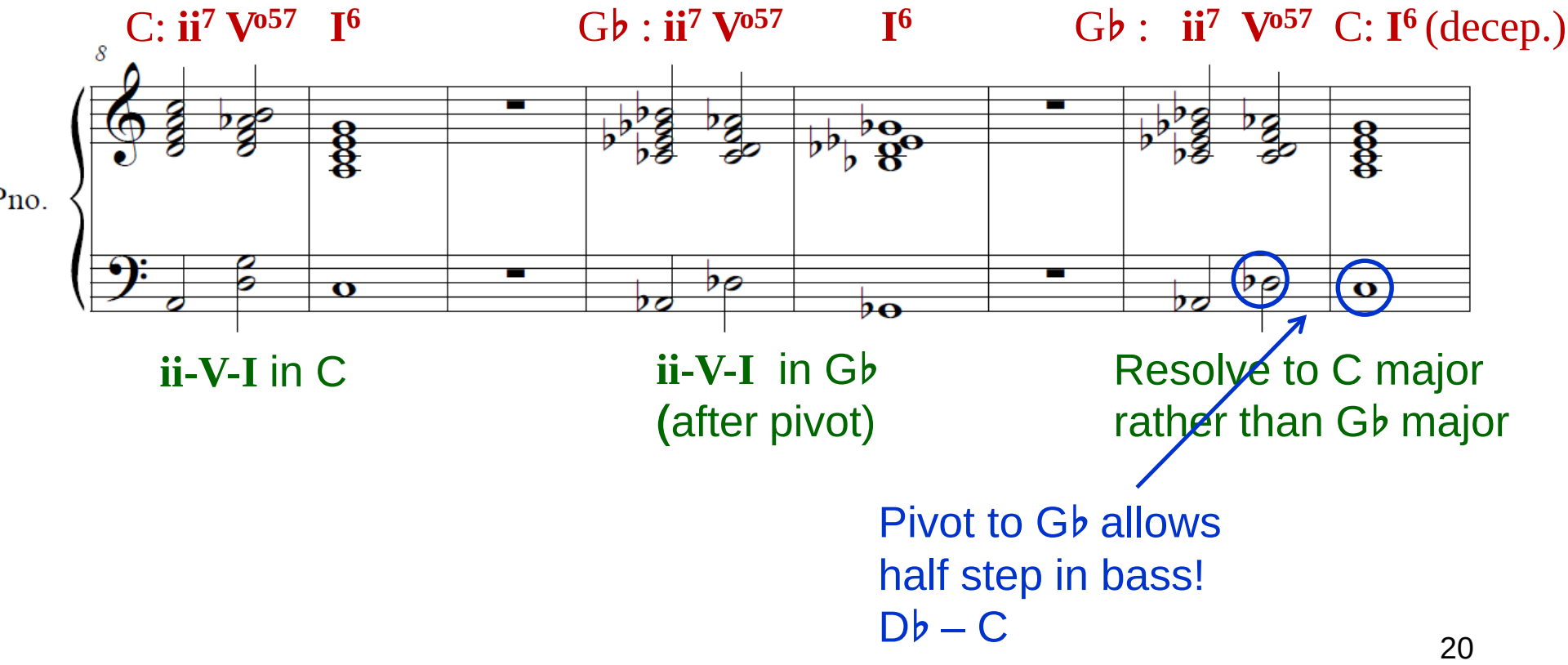
Underlying relationship:
Same tritone interval appears in dominant 7th chords of keys a tritone apart (C and G♭)



B-F tritone	B = 3rd F = 7th of chord	C♭ -F tritone (C♭ = B)	C♭ = 7th F = 3rd of chord

The 2 notes of the tritone swap roles in the chord.

Pivot on tritone combines ii-V-I with chromatic bass

Audio file

Pivot to G♭ and deceptive resolution to tonic preserves chromatic bass line.