

Purposeful Listening In Complex States of Time

David Dunn

1997-98

"You should know that everyone, even human beings, when they are very young, can hear the future,
just as the fish could before the deluge, as so many present-day animals can do."

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for solo listener

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The meaning of music cannot be found within the mere structure of notes and/or their semiotic referents. There is no point to point correspondence of communicative intent and reception, and the extent to which there could be, would be a commentary on its triviality. For myself, the familiar information theory model of emotional and expressive communication through music has become untenable. Even though I probably never did accept it, I now consider it to be an extreme case of consensus misplaced concreteness. The attempt to identify objective content of expression within the musical object smacks of all the failed post-Kantian attempts to assign mind to a specific locus. Music is the same as mind, a distributed ecology of communal signification where meaning arises from the conditions of mutual conspiracy. Expression and meaning in music exist in the agreement to circumscribe a boundary upon a seemingly infinite set of superabundant associations and uses. In other words, how much you buy into the culture you are born into is not merely a matter of personal taste, but to assume that the meaning you have attributed to your music is a universal attribute is simply stupid.

In this composition I am posing a heuristic model for musical perception proceeding from a 'what if?' scenario. The particular 'what if?' is a shift in the ontologic status of mind from epiphenomenal to a priori. The need to let the resultant implications play out in my work as a composer arose from a confrontation with the radical view of mind and cognition asserted by traditional Buddhist concepts about the primacy of mind over matter. Such concepts emphasize the necessity to regard consciousness as the essential ground and paradigm for any correct understanding of the nature of reality. A personal dilemma arose in the process of trying to imagine what the implication for music might be when taking such a view seriously. This has led me back to the work of John Cage and his "silence" piece **4'33"** in the sense that ultimately it is about this very issue: that not only does music primarily consist of the perception of sound in time but that it is the perceiver that is engaged in both organizing that perception and assigning it meaning. Beyond this is the realization that this capacity takes place regardless of the intention of a composer or the specific nature of sounds occurring in an environment. It is the nature of perception that is the fundamental ground from which all music arises and not its materials, structures or communicative intent. As Elaine Barkin says, "Listening is primary composition." The historical events that have led Western music to this realization are summarized by Sean Cubitt: "Music and information dominate the hearing of the twentieth century, and their dialectic has only recently begun to evolve a third mode of hearing, the soundscape. Music from Russolo to Cage strips itself of inessentials---melody, harmony, counterpoint---to encompass all hearing, transferring the musician's mode of listening to the sounds of the world."

Often regarded as the most radical gesture of 20th century music, John Cage's **4'33"** is still characterized as an aesthetic anomaly, a singularity without precedent or subsequent tradition. Even for Cage it seems to have represented a problematic breakthrough that he could not extend or build upon. As Sam Richards describes: "There is a sense in which for much of the rest of his career he inevitably had to retreat from the **4'33"** of silence. He always maintained that it was his favorite of his compositions. But there is an uneasy despair in this." The aesthetic implications of this piece have been endlessly debated. Its defenders have laid claim for it as the open door that gave musicians permission to imagine that anything was now possible. It has also been dismissed as the nihilistic theatrical gesture of a charlatan. What has seldom, if ever, been discussed is the actual meaning of the composition as a cognitive process and its literal implications for music and its epistemological foundations as a human discipline. There is a sense in which both Cage's defenders and detractors have failed to fully contend with the deeper implications of his work but especially **4'33"**. Music just went on its merry way without processing the epistemological shift that this composition necessitates. We have merely regarded it as an intellectual gesture of final aesthetic conditions rather than a generative opening up to new attitudes. For many musicians the Cagean promise of freedom and revolution in aesthetic attitudes meant permission to be as reactionary as possible. To a large extent my composition ***Purposeful Listening In Complex States of Time*** is a personal response to this dilemma.

What I have been imagining is that beyond the event horizon of **4'33"** is a different universe of musical perception where composition might be based upon or at the least inclusive of an awareness of the primacy of mind, where an emphasis is placed upon the processes of perception and not materials. ***Purposeful Listening In Complex States of Time*** is my attempt at exploring the boundary of this concern for composition as the organization of perception rather than the manipulation of the material basis of sound. I am certainly not alone in this interest as is evidenced by the work of some of the most interesting and vital of contemporary composers. Pauline Oliveros has for many years been primarily concerned with specifying perceptual processes through which sound-making is generated and controlled. James Tenney and Alvin Lucier have quite purposefully attempted to advance many of Cage's aesthetic challenges through composing musical structures that emphasize non-dramatic organizational processes based on and/or intent upon revealing acoustical and psycho-acoustical phenomena. However, in all of these cases and quite unlike **4'33"**, while the musical results shift attention towards the perceptual processes of the perceiver, they accomplish this through a strategy of active sound-making.

A corollary concern of this composition that also arises from the assumption of the primacy of mind is the idea that compositional deep structure does not reside merely at an organizational level of formal objective attributes, what is generally taught as compositional technique and theory, but rather at the primary level of encoded mind: the communication of a history of distinctions made. In this view coherence arises as a life-like quality from the presence of a conscious mind encoded through its instantaneous presence at each manifested decision, what might be summarized as "mind recognizing mind." What music fundamentally communicates is that history of encoded mind. From this point of view much seemingly organizationally complex music would appear either incoherent or redundant because it does not involve such an intense presence of mind. So much of the current fashions of music rely on the crutch of formal and/or technological systems that appear to generate levels of complexity that in fact

abdicate decision making. Almost all current musical fashions could be seen to suffer from various levels of this structural dilemma: minimalism, algorithmic composition, improvisation, process music, ambient music, serialism, electroacoustic music and even most traditional tonal music that relies upon generative and cliched rules of form and melodic/harmonic relations. My contention is that a reliance upon generative processes and structural rules, no matter how ingenious, at the expense of mindful detail, actually weakens the potential for the listener to participate in the mental system.

A notable example of a composer whose work is almost entirely based upon mindful detail and yet generally defies formal analysis is the composer Morton Feldman, long associated with Cage's so-called New York School. Supposedly Feldman worked from what is often called an intuitive process that was mostly free of formal procedures. Besides its extraordinary aural charm, what is striking about his work is its sense of integrity. It almost always sounds as though every event were placed with a specificity and sense that is both appropriate but unpredictable. I recall sitting through a performance of a late Feldman piece that was typically immensely soft and long (over three hours) and was amazed to see the large audience on the edge of their seats throughout. My overall impression of Feldman's music is that it is truly a communication of purposeful thought that demands an analogous participation by the listener. Not only must a listener focus intensely on the sounds as objective fact but they are also forced to focus upon their own perceptual processes. It is music made at the fringes of **4'33"**. Thomas DeLio describes Feldman's **Durations** series: "As the work opens, the listener finds himself poised as if at the brink of his first contact with the world. Later, as relationships gradually coalesce, they appear to do so, not through any act of the composer, but rather through the will of the perceiving consciousness."

In ***Purposeful Listening In Complex States of Time*** my intention has been to extend important implications in the work of Cage and Feldman through composing internal states of awareness that delineate non-linear time structures. My assumption is that Cage's concern with silence and indeterminacy and Feldman's focus upon extreme quietude, mindful detail and epic duration were both intuitive attempts to assert that composition resides in the generation and exploration of perceptual states as a cognitive behavior. In both cases their works are attempts to define strategies for the revelation of the subjective attributes of listening as participation in a mental system. My project is to extend this understanding to its next, more conscious level. What is communicated to the performer are direct mental conditions for listening without any other expressive intention or content.

A performance of ***Purposeful Listening In Complex States of Time*** requires a solo listener in twenty outdoor environments of low level ambient sound. Each score page is to be realized in a different environment and documented through various media such as sound recording, photographs, verbal descriptions, etc. Each score page represents three minutes of time reading from left to right. Vertical lines beneath the notated events signify 20 second intervals of elapsed time. For all events, actual elapsed time is notated in both seconds (numbers) and spatial proportions (graphic length of beams extending from stems). The notation conveys two major conceptual constructs to the listener: 1) changes in perceptual awareness in the sense of specific instructions for directing the focus of attention over time; 2) an interpenetration of various temporal states that is complex and non-linear through manipulation of perceptual awareness (past, present and future represented as remembered, realtime and imagined listening conditions). Ultimately the scores can be regarded as an auditory/perceptual "scrams" overlaid upon the listener's experience of the soundscape and through

which an intensification of awareness towards both the environment and perception might take place. Further details about each of the conceptual categories follow.

Category 1: Internal Perceptual/Listening States and Their Changing Focus.

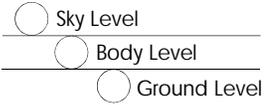
This is the predominant issue explored in this composition. Essentially the listener is asked to realize the notated events as notated pieces of music even though the activity is not active sound making. Instead they are asked to shift their perceptual focus through a wide variety of listening states that include a shifting of aural awareness towards the surrounding soundscape and their own bodies. The parameters of these listening states include factors such as elevation, proximity, and direction. They also include dynamic changes of these factors over time.

Category 2: Temporal States.

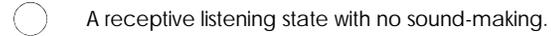
Three different time states are also stipulated as factors of change in the focus of listening. Past time conditions are represented as remembered states of focusing, present time conditions as realtime states of focusing, and future time conditions are represented as imagined possible states of focusing. Remembered events are notated as gold numbers, realtime events as blue numbers and imagined events as red numbers. The logic of this system derives from my interest in specifying a non-linear interpenetration of time states that is impossible to achieve through active sound-making. Any attempt to accomplish this as organized sound will merely collapse into a linear perception. It is only through organizing "silence" within a perceptual field that this can be implied because it demands the self-organizing capacity of a participating individual's perception.

NOTATION

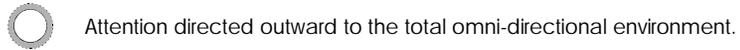
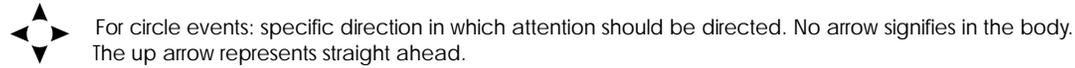
Position



Listening State



Direction



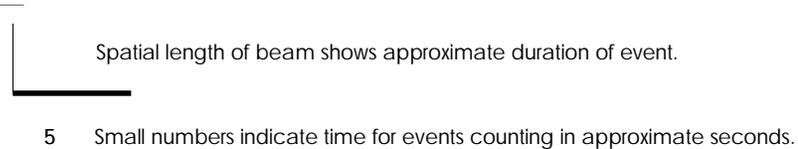
Proximity

- + Single plus sign signifies: adjacent to the listener's body.
- ++ Double plus sign signifies: a moderate distance from the listener's body.
- +++ Triple plus sign signifies: a far distance from the listener's body.

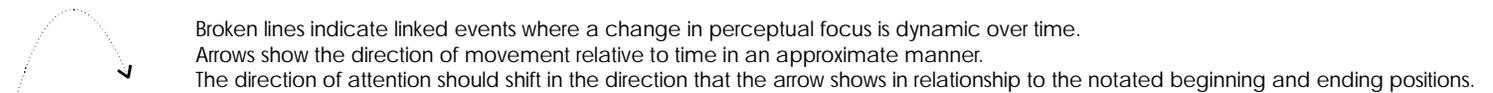
Time States

- 5 A blue counting number represents a realtime sound event.
- 5 A gold counting number represents a remembered sound event.
- 5 A red counting number represents an imagined future sound event.
- 5 A black counting number represents a neutral non-focused time duration.

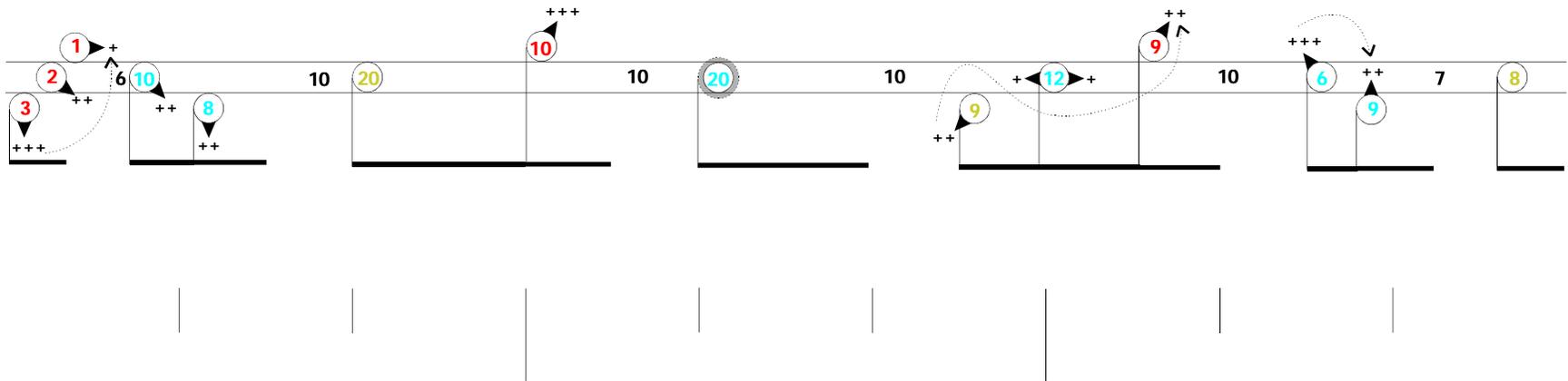
Duration



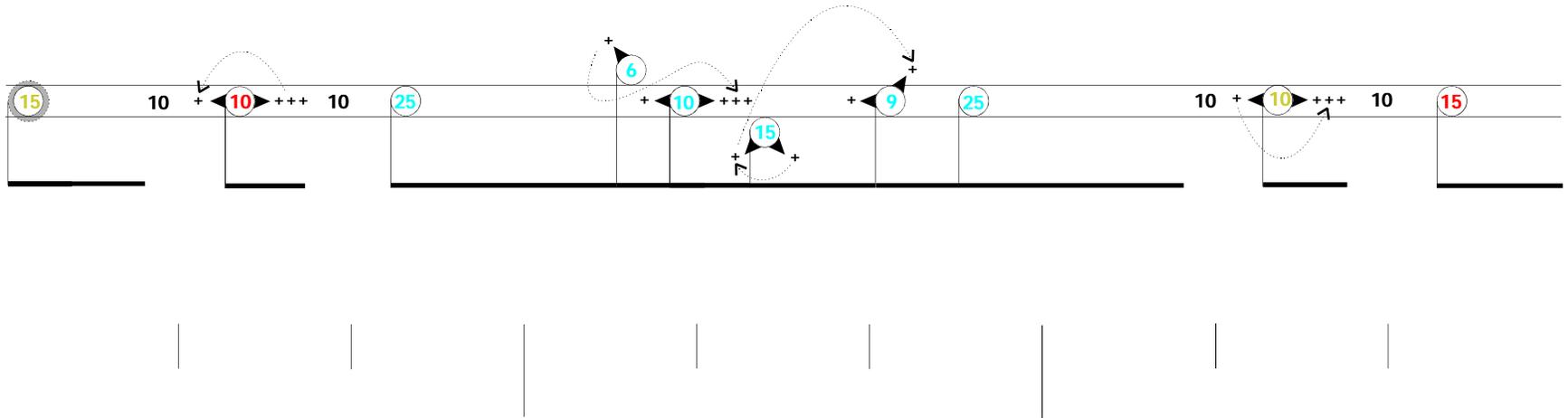
Phrasing



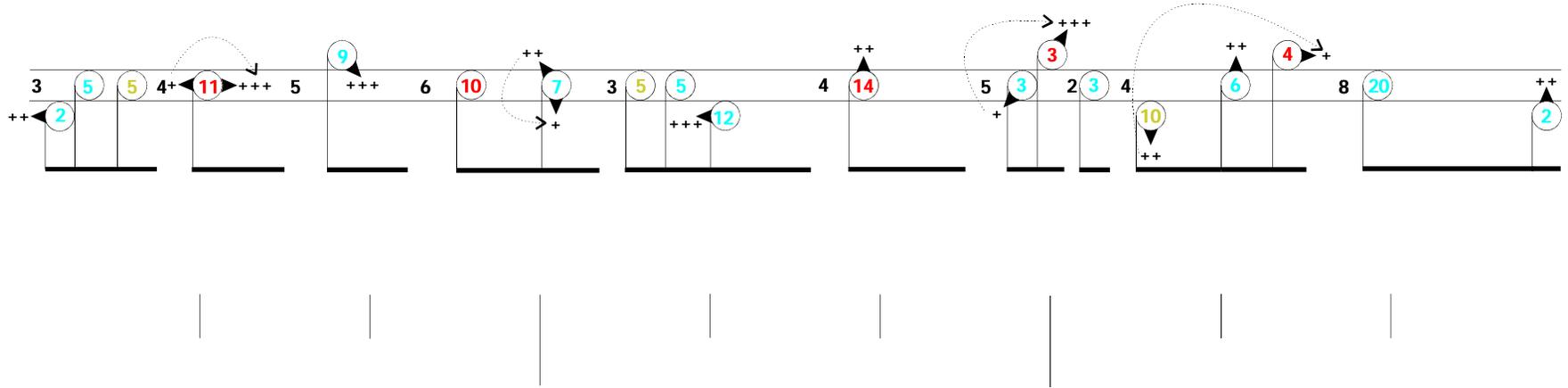
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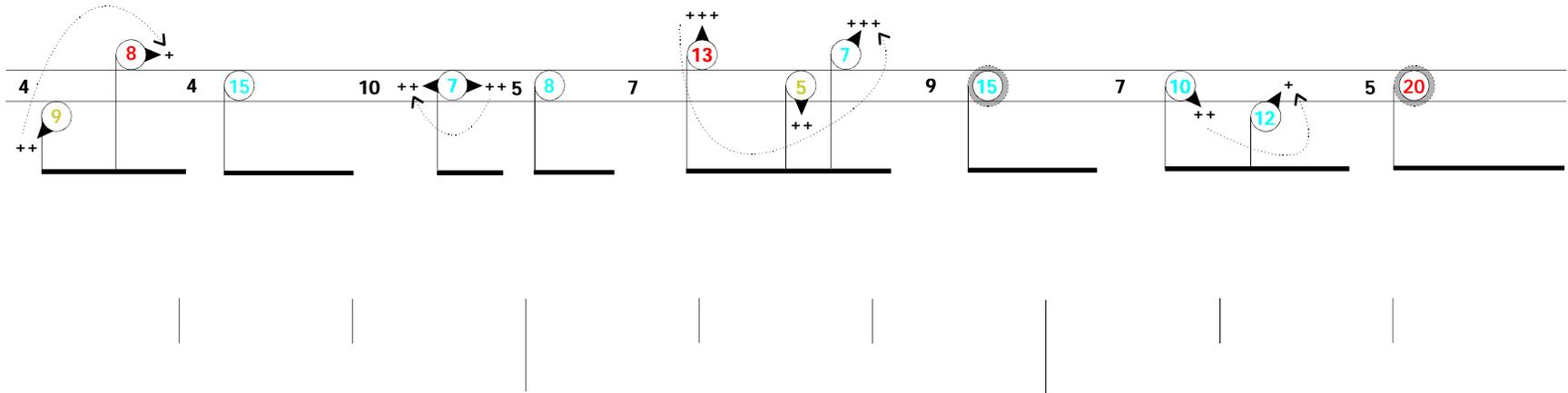
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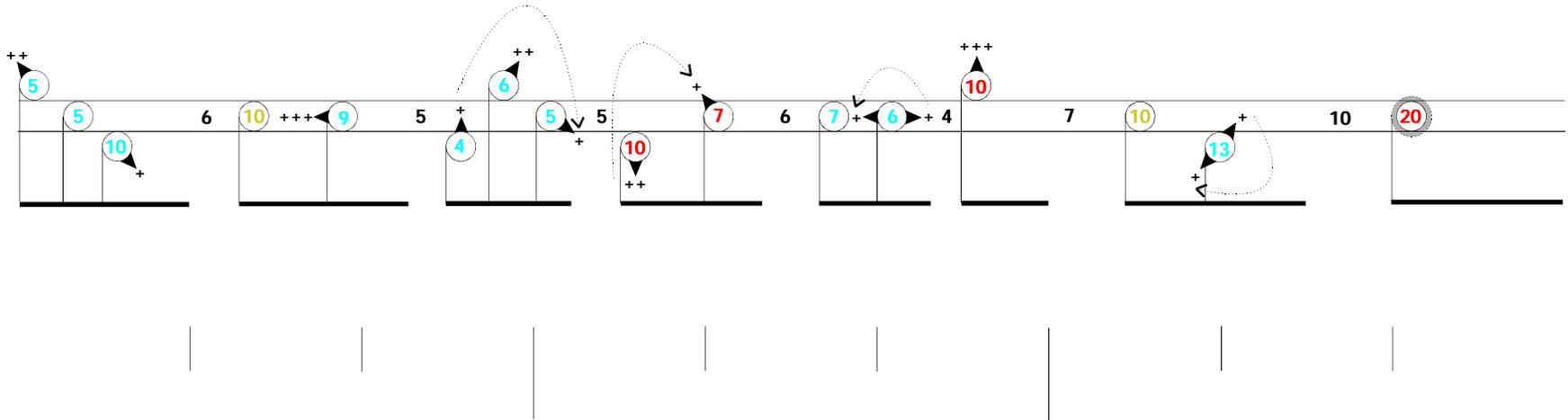
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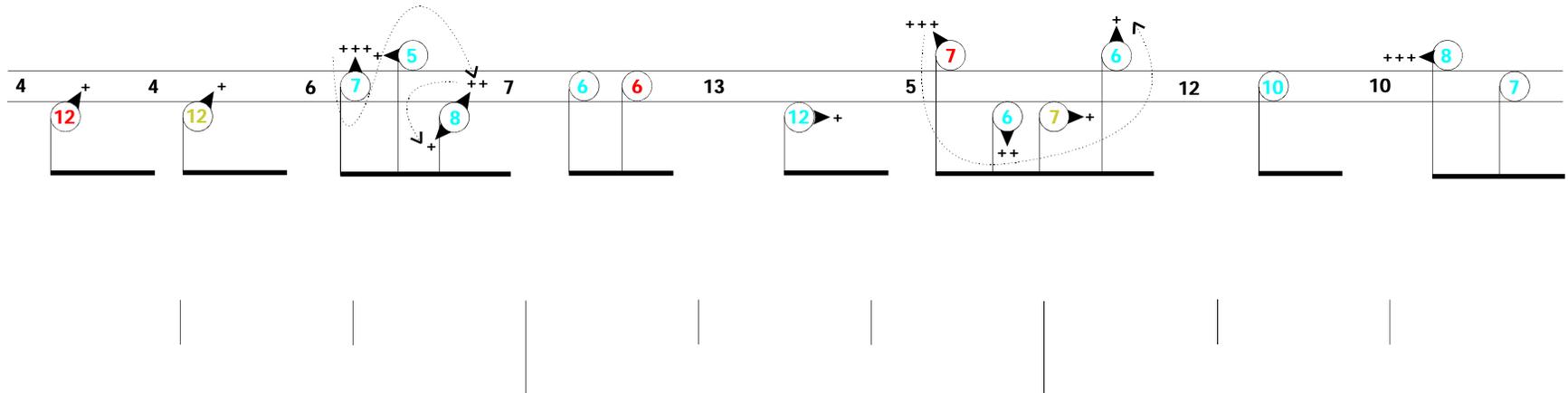
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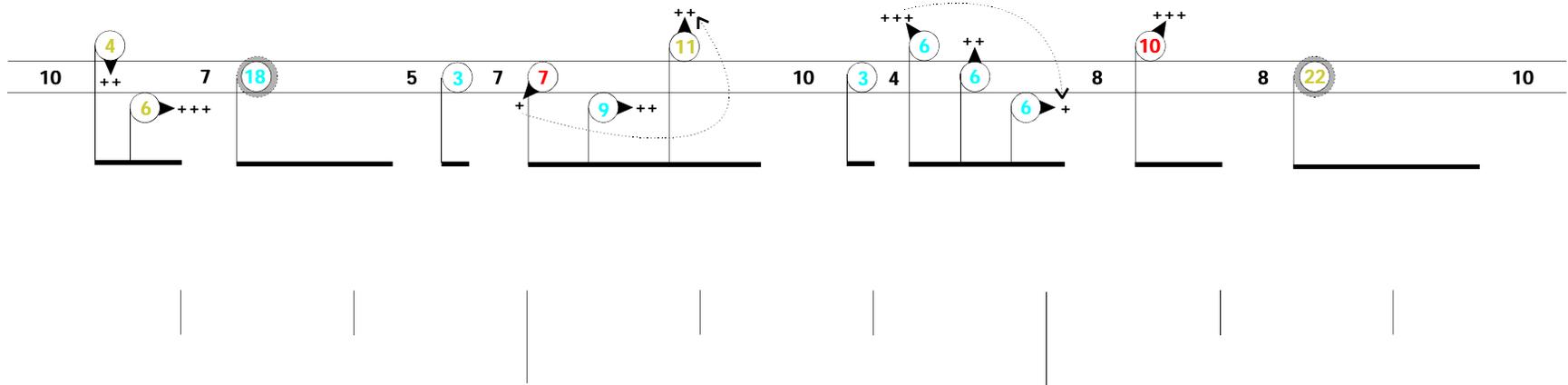
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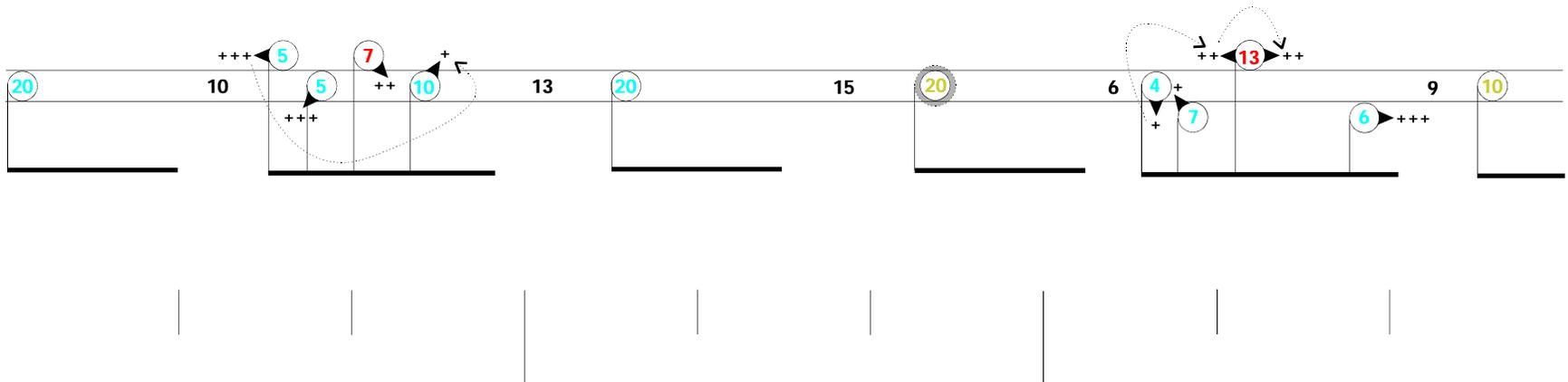
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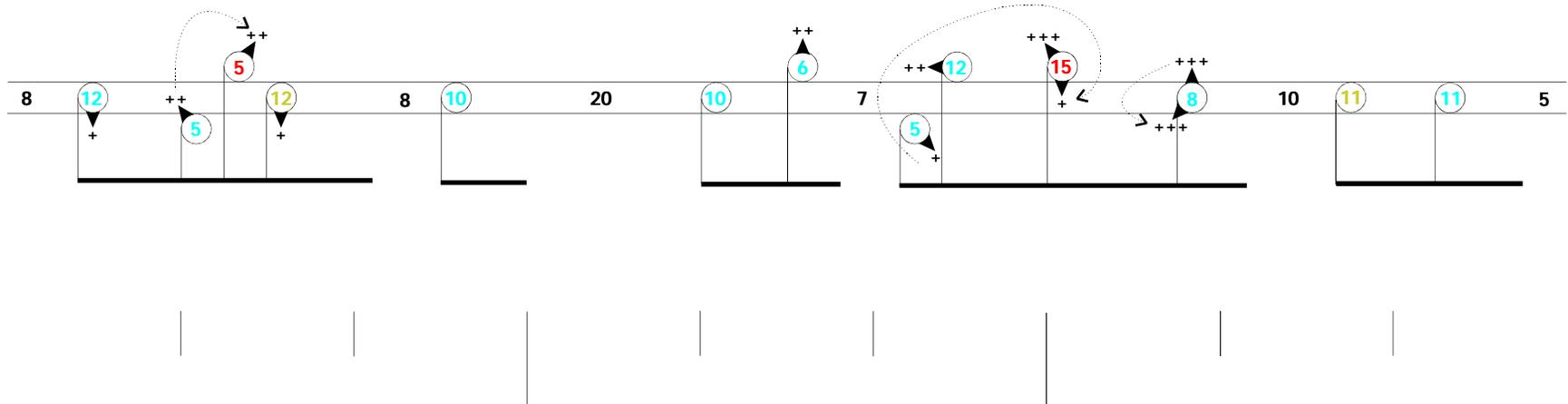
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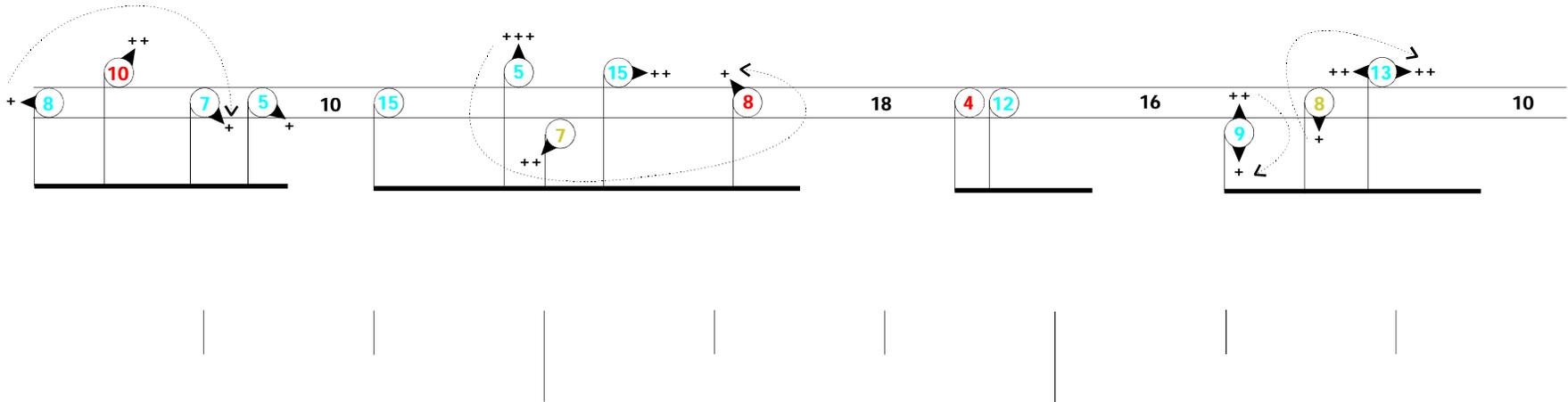
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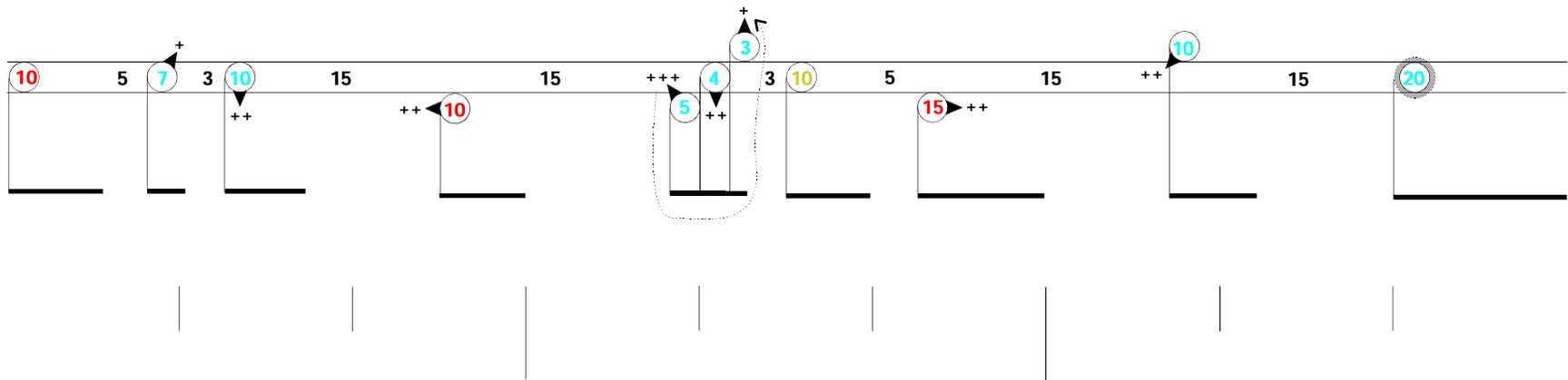
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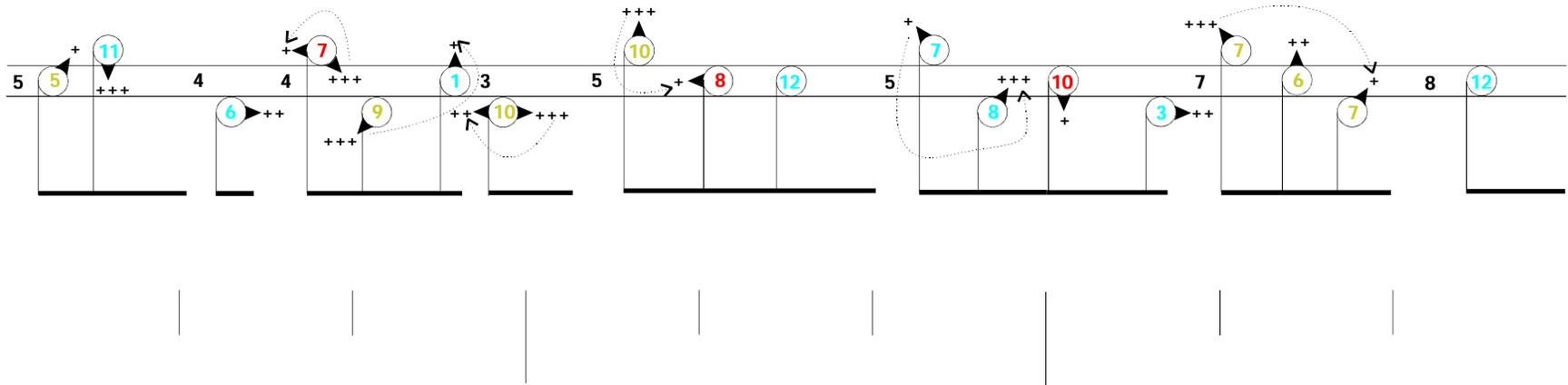
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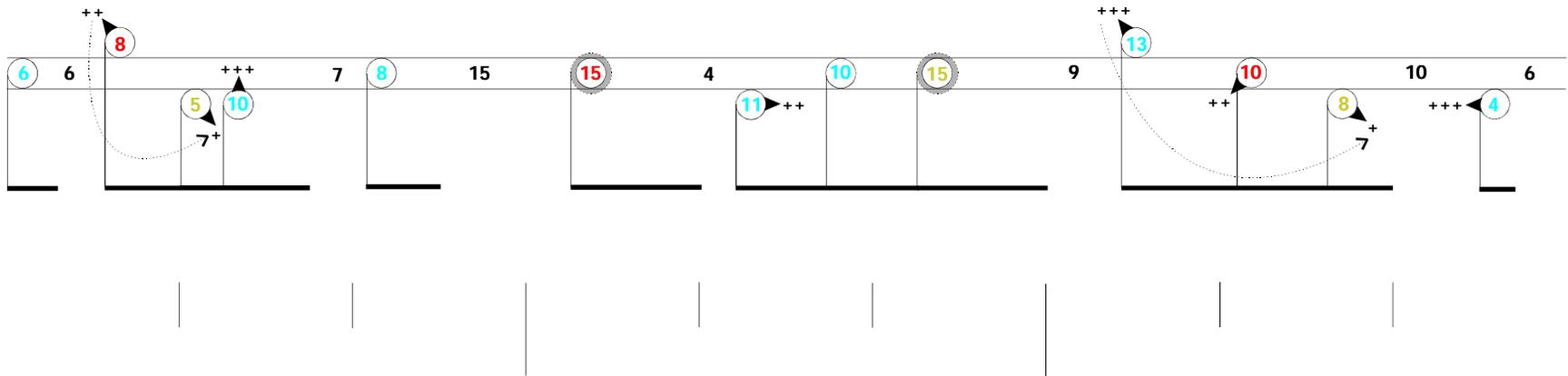
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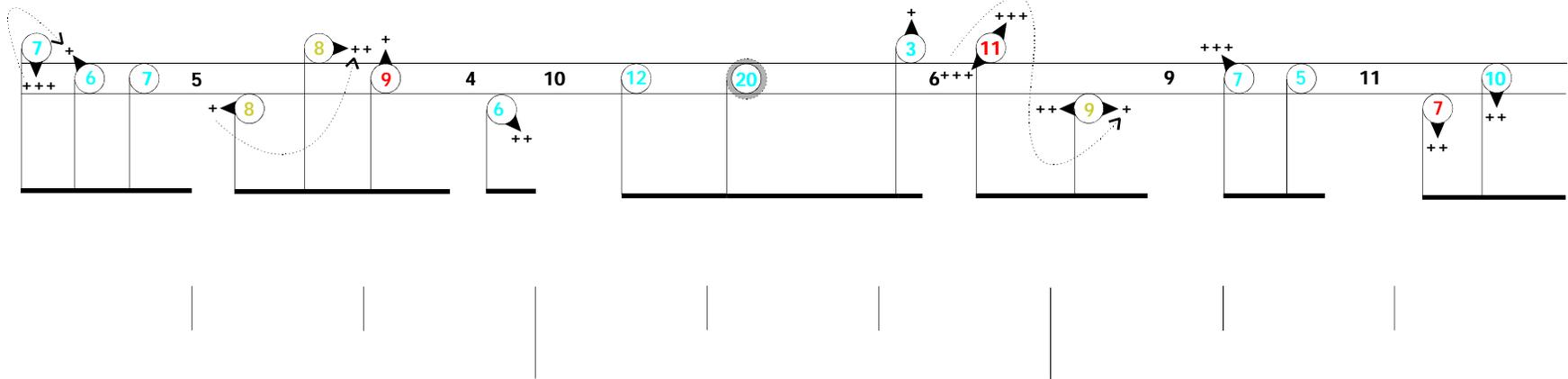
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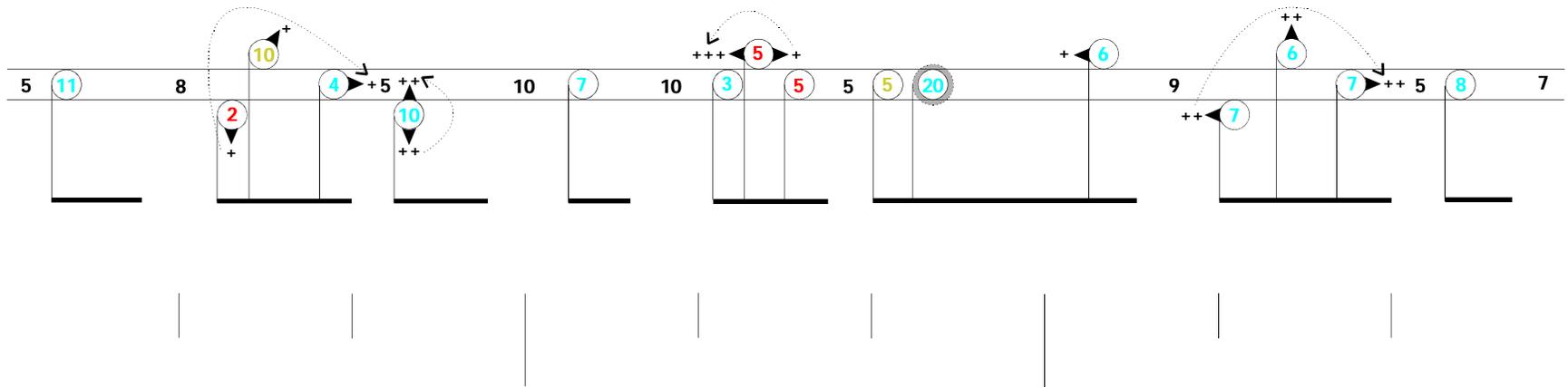
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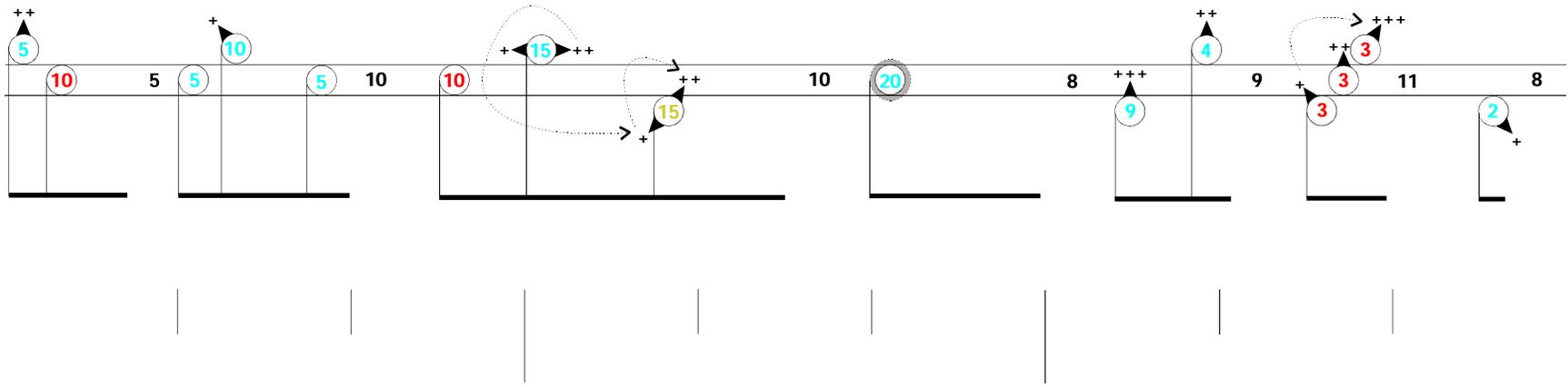
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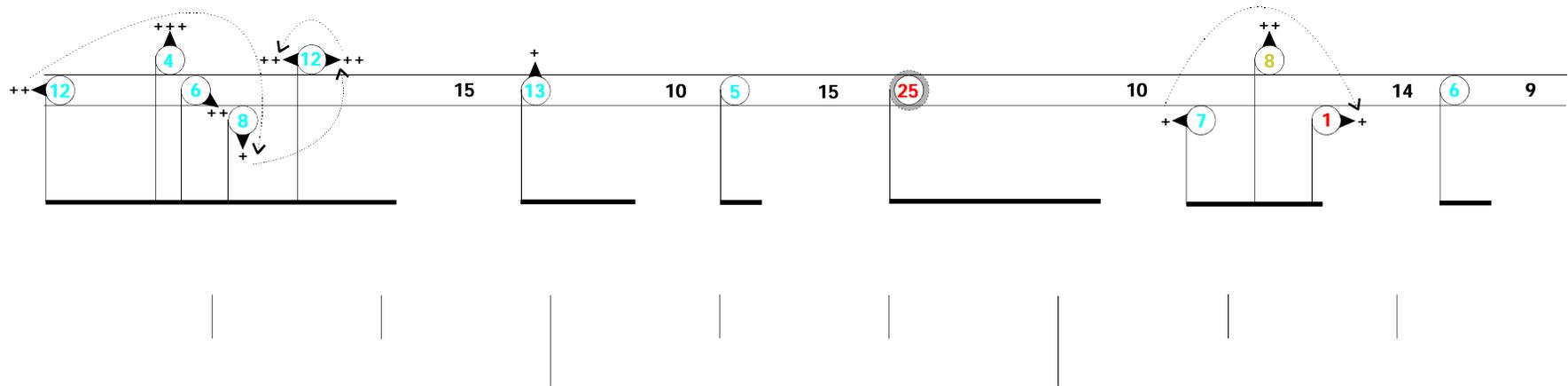
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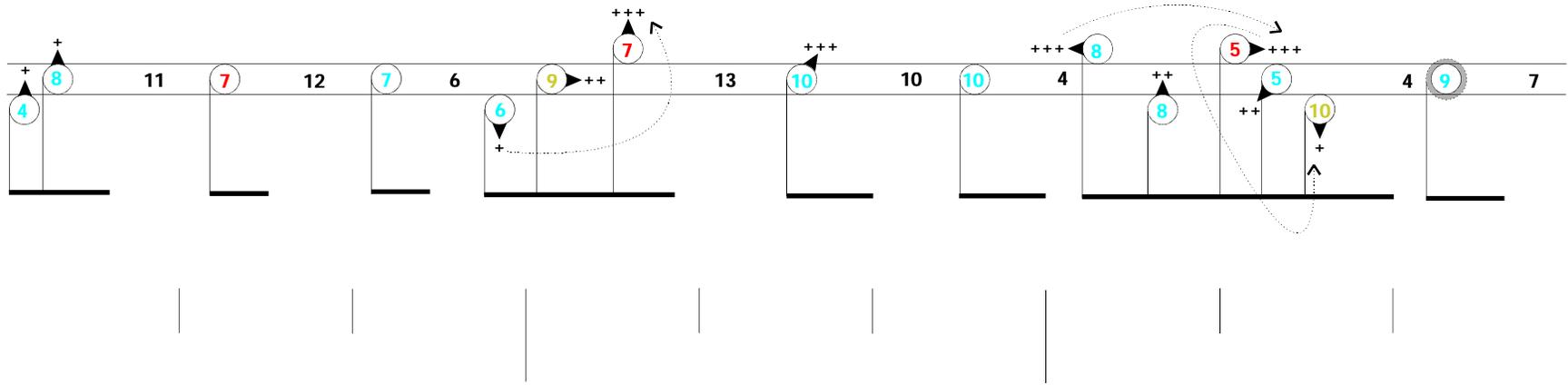
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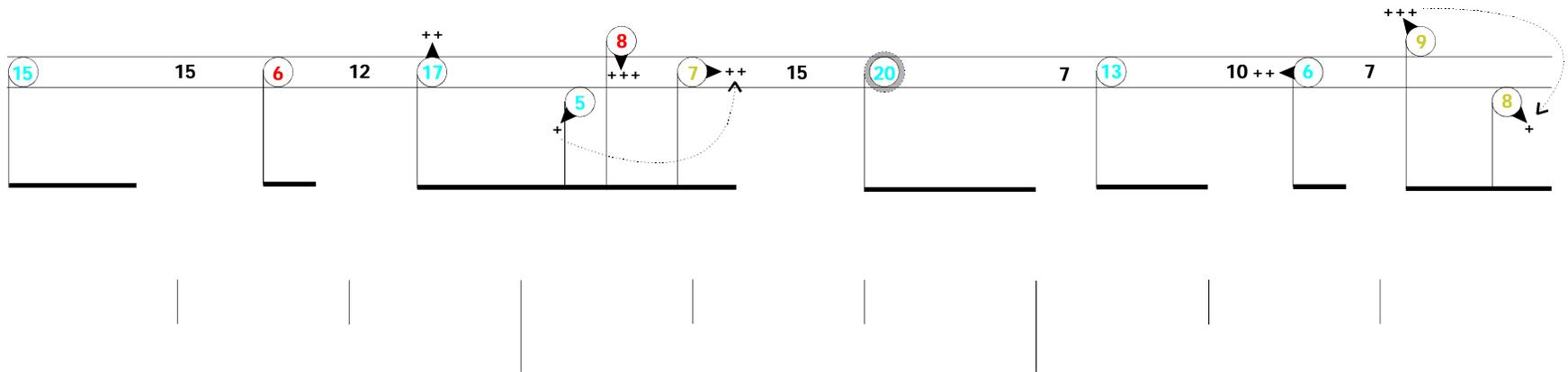
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20.

