AN ANALYSIS OF SCRIABIN'S ETRANGETE

(OP. 63, NO. 2)

by

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Alexander Scriabin's piano piece Etrangeté ("Strangeness") is the second of two Poèmes in his Opus 63, written in 1911-1912, during what most observers consider his late atonal period.[1] Neither tonal function nor any emphasis upon a diatonic collection is apparent in this piece; on the other hand, the formal structure (as will be seen below) is relatively conventional, with sections articulated by the use of recognizable motives or "themes" (a relatively uncommon approach in pieces of Scriabin's late period).[2] The formal sections are also distinguished by the use of distinct pitch-class collections, playing a role somewhat comparable to that of key areas in tonal works. Consequently, this analysis will first identify these collections and their distribution across the work. The sectional structure will then be described, and correspondences with particular pitch-class collections will be explained. A quasi-Schenkerian reductional graph will be used to illuminate both the skeletal melodic and bass movements and the most significant pitches within each collection. Finally, the prominent set classes used within each collection will be noted.

Pitch-Class Collections Used

Although at least one passage (as discussed below) can be analyzed in terms of a whole-tone collection, this piece makes most consistent use of the three octatonic collections, which in this analysis will be distinguished as shown below.

Octatonic Collection 1 (OC1): [1,2,4,5,7,8,10,11]
Octatonic Collection 2 (OC2): [2,3,5,6,8,9,11,0]
Octatonic Collection 3 (OC3): [0,1,3,4,6,7,9,10]

Certain subtleties in the use of these collections by this piece should be noted. (These nuances are summarized in tabular form in Figure 1; see also the graphic illustration in Figure 2.) For example, in measure 3 occurrences of pitch class 2 must be interpreted as upper neighbor tones outside of the referential collection OC3 (see pitch class map, Figure 5a). Such an interpretation is facilitated by the arpeggiated texture in this measure: here, as in much of the piece, the implied horizontal voice-leading is quite clear. (For clarity of presentation, the arpeggios have been verticalized and some octave duplications eliminated in the pitch class maps of Figures 5a-5h.) Moreover, these upper neighbor tones appear in the most metrically appropriate positions (that is, on the second half of the beat); also, they are "complete" neighbors - that is, they are surrounded on both sides by the principal tone (pitch class 1, a semitone below) which they embellish.

OC1 is used only in an incomplete form: pitch class 7 is not actually

present in the passages based on OC1. Thus in the strictest sense the pitches used constitute set class 7-31 ([1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11]), a subset of the octatonic collection. For consistency with the remainder of the analysis, however, the referential collection in these passages will be considered to be OC1. Collections OC3 and OC1 also overlap briefly, in the sonority appearing on the last beat of m. 6 (repeated in the following bar), as is illustrated in Figure 2. Here it is clear from the musical context that the highest pitch F♯6 merely continues the highest melody line from the beginning of the measure, and hence this pitch is associated with the previous collection (OC3); the pitches beneath this F♯6 belong to the collection OC1, which is continued in the following passage.

A more problematic and interesting passage is mm. 20-21, which, if considered outside of the context provided by the remainder of the piece, might perhaps seem to be based merely on the whole-tone collection 6-35 (somewhat obscured by passing and neighbor tones). This alternative interpretation is illustrated in the pitch class map of Figure 3, which should be contrasted with the octatonic interpretation shown in Figure 5f. Although superficially more complex, the octatonic interpretation offers certain explanatory advantages: it reduces the number of "nonharmonic" pitches from ten to five; moreover, whereas the whole-tone analysis places all of the passing and neighbor tones on the accented portion of the beat, these tones are placed in a more "natural" off-beat

position under an octatonic interpretation. Also, of course, an octatonic reading accords better with the remainder of the composition. The two interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however; in particular, the top melody line as well as the bass line in this brief passage fall entirely within the whole-tone collection. (See also the melodic imbrications in Figure 6b.)

Formal Structure

Motivic-thematic parallelisms and contrasts suggest that this piece is a miniature sonata form (**ABCA'B'**).[3] Here the "first theme" (**A**), marked "gracieux, délicat," appears at the beginning. After a brief transition (the third beat of measure 6, together with measure 7), the more lyrical, legato "second theme" (**B**) enters at m. 8. The two themes reappear in the "recapitulation" at m. 18 and m. 25 respectively. Measures 16-17 (**C**), although not really "developmental" in a motivic-thematic sense, nevertheless will be seen below to serve a function similar to the "dominant prolongation" in a typical tonal development.

As the graph in Figure 2 shows, OC3 is the predominant collection in this piece; moreover, the collections used are aligned closely with the sections just described, as shown in the table in the lower part of Figure 2. It is clear from this table that the three octatonic collections play a role in this piece rather similar to that of key areas in a tonal sonata

form. The "first theme" here is presented in the "tonic" OC3 collection. The transition corresponds to the brief area of OC3/OC1 overlap discussed previously. The "second theme" explores the contrasting OC1 area and then moves to OC2, which is then "prolonged" by the "development" section. In the "recapitulation," both "theme groups" are at last presented within the same "tonic" collection OC3, in much the same manner that a conflict among key areas is resolved in the recapitulation of a tonal sonata movement. For this reason no "modulation" between collections is required in the "recapitulation," and hence the transitional material from mm. 6-7 does not recur here.

Reductive Analysis

As the graphic reduction in Figure 4 indicates, the most prominent bass and melody notes in this piece form a succession of tritones, in which each of the three octatonic collections is associated with a characteristic tritone dyad. (The prominence of these tritones is most evident in the arpeggiated measures; for instance, the initial focal role of the 0-6 tritone becomes clear in m. 3, where F♯3 is the principal bass note and C6 is repeatedly stressed in the top notes of the arpeggios.) Much of the horizontal movement in the outer voices also follows the octatonic scale, thus providing further support for an octatonic interpretation of this piece. In particular, the lengthy ascending

octatonic treble line in mm. 12-16, as well as the corresponding line from m. 25 to the end, should be noted.

The melodic motion in mm. 20-22, on the other hand, briefly follows a whole-tone pattern (as was discussed above). This motion accomplishes an ascent of a tritone, with the consequence that m. 23 of the **A'** section appears a tritone higher than the corresponding m. 5 in the **A** section. Because the octatonic set class is invariant under tritone transposition, this motion preserves the OC3 collection. Moreover, the focal 0-6 tritone is preserved, although the roles of melody and bass in that tritone are reversed. This focal tritone is then retained at m. 26, so that the OC3 collection remains in effect to the end of the recapitulation.

Other Prominent Set Classes

Tetrachord 4-18 occurs repeatedly in the "inside" voices between the tritone-related bass and treble tones. Such occurrences are shown using small note-heads in Figure 4; additional occurrences of this set-class are noted in the pitch class maps and melodic imbrications. Most commonly, the 3-5 subset of this tetrachord is presented first, arranged with a tritone between the lower and middle tones and a perfect fourth between the middle and upper tones (as in the opening chord of m. 1); the fourth tone (in this case, the D♭5 in the treble on beat 2) appears soon afterward to complete the tetrachord.

It may also be noted that the 3-5 trichord in the opening of the piece, together with the the 0-6 tritone dyad of the principal melody and bass, form the first five pitches (belonging to set class 5-28) of Scriabin's famous "mystic" chord.[4] (Because the hexachord represented by the "mystic" chord is not a subset of the octatonic collection, however, the entire six-note chord is not prominent in this piece, although it does occur as a subset of the pitches in m. 3, where an upper neighbor outside of the octatonic collection is present.) This 5-28 pentachord occurs frequently throughout this piece.

The 4-18 tetrachord from the beginning of the piece (using pitch classes [9, 10, 1, 4]) reappears in the same registers in m. 25 (section **B'** in the "recapitulation") and is also used in the final arpeggio. Where the initial chord has B♭3 on the bottom and A4 on top, however, these roles are inverted in the final arpeggio, which extends from A4 on the bottom up to B♭6 as the final pitch. The 4-18 tetrachord is frequently combined with the aforementioned tritone dyad to form the 6-Z49 hexachord (as, for example, in the first arpeggio of m. 3). In many other cases, only one pitch of the dyad is included, yielding the 5-32 pentachord.

Finally, set-class 5-33, which is the only pentachord subset of the whole-tone collection, occurs repeatedly as a vertical simultaneity as the result of passing and neighbor tones, not only in mm. 20-21, but also in m. 3.

NOTES

1. Hugh Macdonald, for example, considers Scriabin's late period to begin in 1910; in the pieces of this period, he observes, "the harmony loses its conventional tonal function and becomes an entity in its own right." See Hugh Macdonald, "Skryabin, Alexander (Nikolayevich)," in Stanley Sadie, ed., The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), XVII, 373. A quite similar viewpoint (and chronology) is presented in Jim Samson, Music in Transition: A study of tonal expansion and atonality, 1900-1920 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1977), 156-158.

2. Macdonald, among others, observes that Scriabin's late works are "constructed from harmonic elements rather than themes." See Macdonald, 373.

3. It is not assumed here that the composer intentionally followed a classical sonata form; quite conceivably, he settled upon this structure simply because it is musically effective.

4. The so-called "mystic chord," customarily expressed (from bottom to top) as [0, 6, 10, 4, 9, 2] and belonging to set-class 6-34, was identified during the composer's own lifetime. See G. H. Clutsam, "The Harmonies of Scriabine," Musical Times 54 (1913): 156-158. See also Macdonald, 373.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clutsam, G. H. "The Harmonies of Scriabine." Musical Times 54 (1913): 156-158.

Macdonald, Hugh. "Skryabin, Alexander (Nikolayevich)." Stanley Sadie, ed., The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980. XVII, 370-375.

Samson, Jim. Music in Transition: A study of tonal expansion and atonality, 1900-1920. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1977.

Usage of Octatonic Collections

This piece uses all three of the possible octatonic collections:

Octatonic Collection 1 (OC1): [1,2,4,5,7,8,10,11]
Octatonic Collection 2 (OC2): [2,3,5,6,8,9,11,0]
Octatonic Collection 3 (OC3): [0,1,3,4,6,7,9,10]

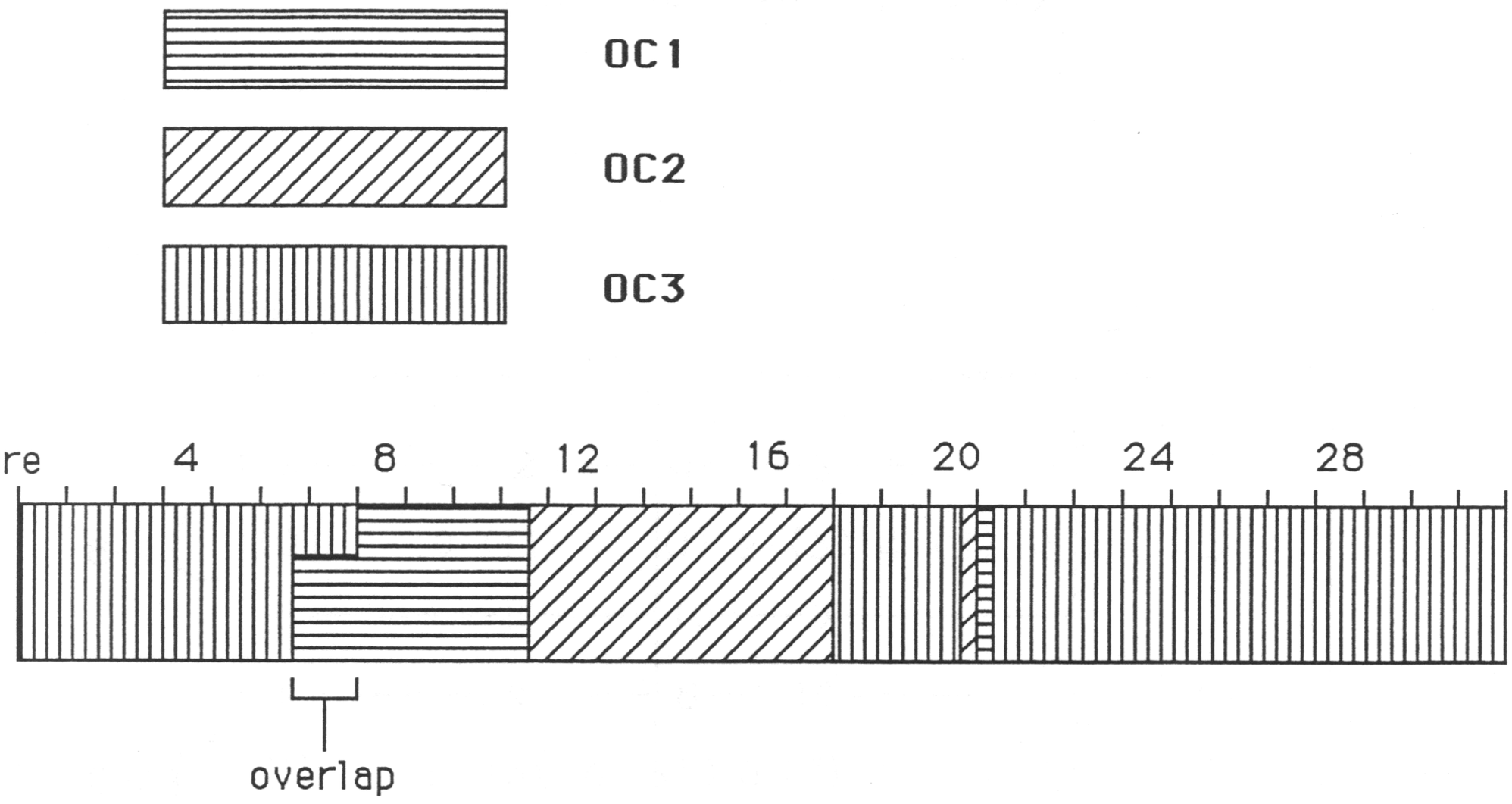
In the table below, the digit after the decimal indicates the beat within the measure; for example, 6.2 indicates the second beat of measure 6. Bars in 9/8 meter are considered to have three beats each.

Measures	Collection	Comments
1-6.2, F#6 in 6.3-7	OC3	Pitch class 2 in m. 3 is interpreted as an upper neighbor tone.
6.3-7 (other tones), 8-11.2	OC1	Pitch class 7 is absent.
11.3-17	OC2	
18-20.2	OC3	Pitch class 2 in 20.2 (second half of beat) is interpreted as a passing tone.
20.3	OC2	Pitch class 4 on the second half of the beat is interpreted as a passing tone. Pitch classes 5 and 9 are absent.
21.1	OC1	Pitch class 6 on the second half of the beat is interpreted as a passing tone. Pitch classes 7 and 11 are absent.
21.2-31	OC3	Pitch class 8 on the second half of beats 21.2 and 21.3 is interpreted as an upper neighbor tone.

The relative durations of the various octatonic collections are displayed graphically in Figure 2.

Figure 1

Scriabin, "Etrangeté"
Durations of Octatonic Collections

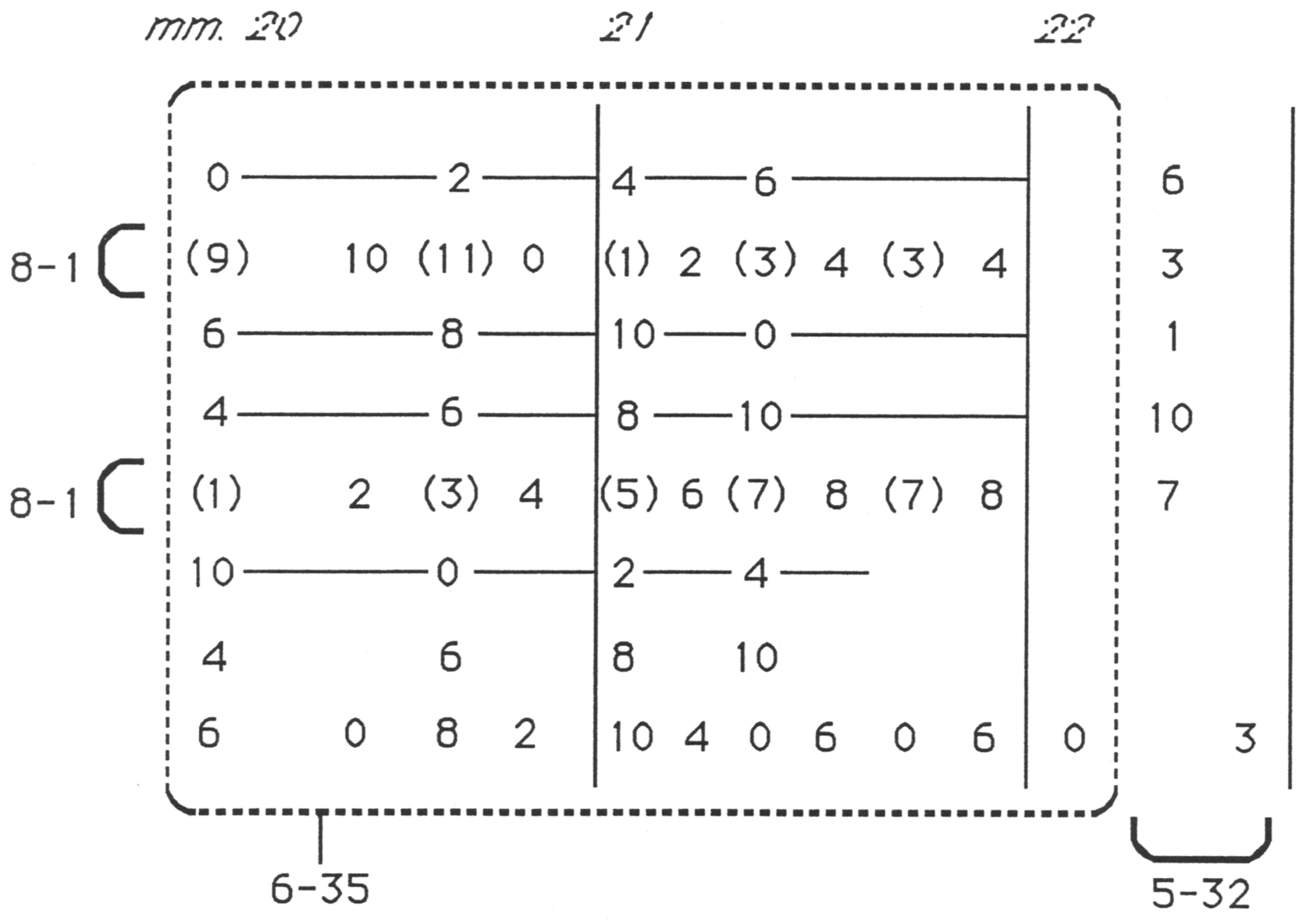


Octatonic Collections by Formal Section

Section	Measures	Collection
A	1-6.2	OC3
transition	6.3-7	OC3/OC1 overlap
B	8-15	OC1, OC2
C	16-17	OC2
A'	18-24	OC3 (except mm. 20.3-21.1)
B'	25-31	OC3

Figure 2

Pitch Class Map - mm. 20-22
Preliminary Whole-Tone Interpretation
(contrast with Figure 5f)



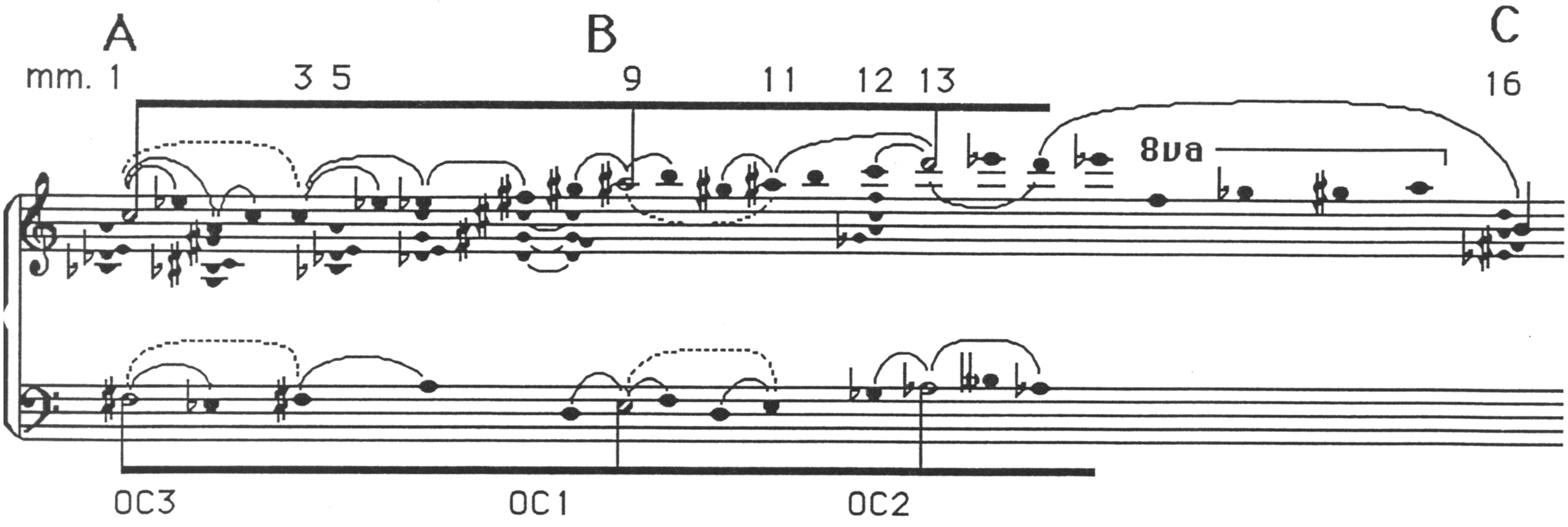
NOTE: ( ) indicates passing or neighbor tone;

⬭ indicates a collection with passing and neighbor tones excluded.

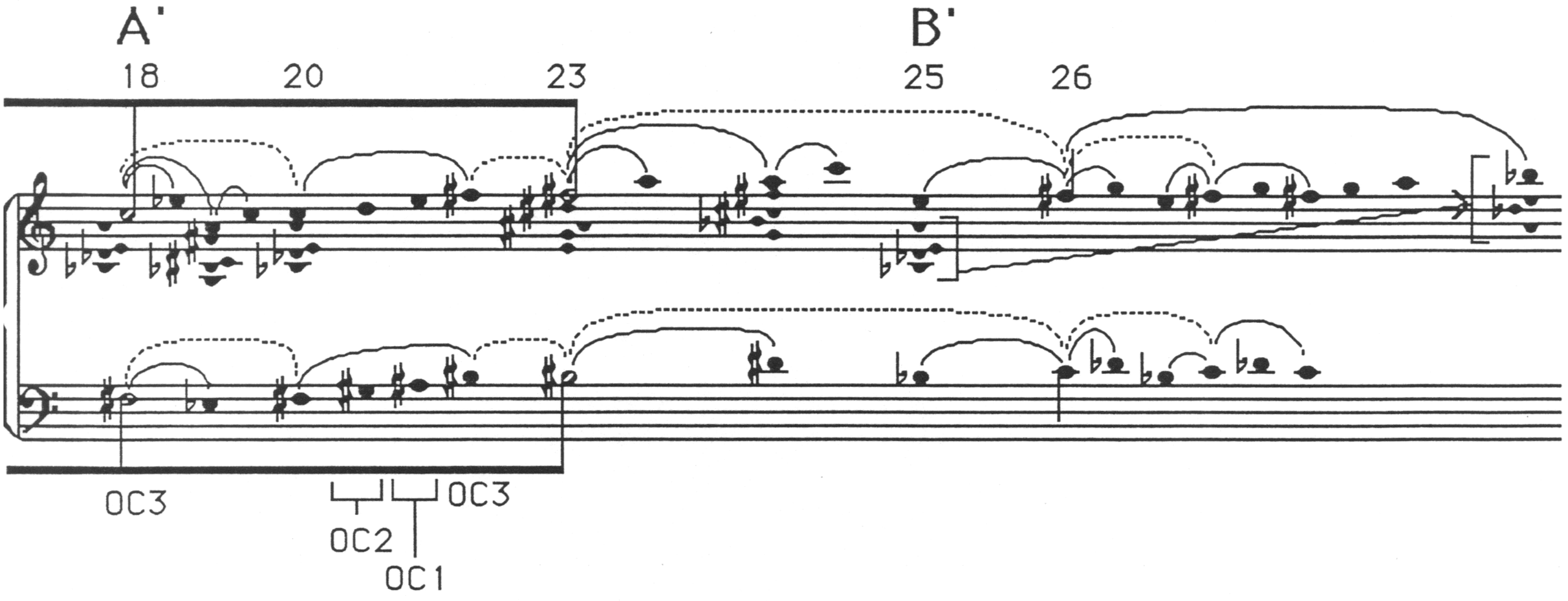
Figure 3

Graphic Reduction

NOTE: Some registers have been altered for clearer presentation.



(continued)



Central Tritones Associated with Octatonic Collections

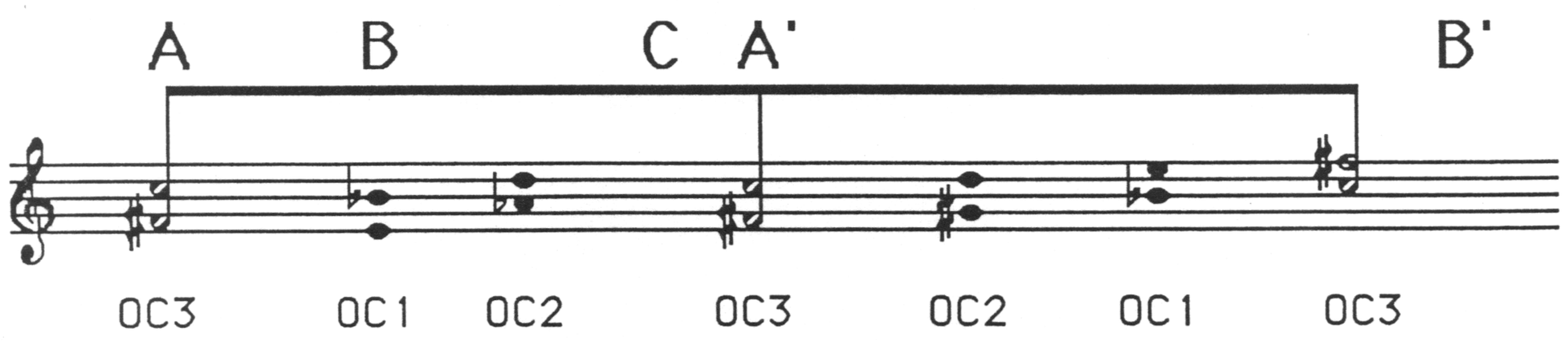
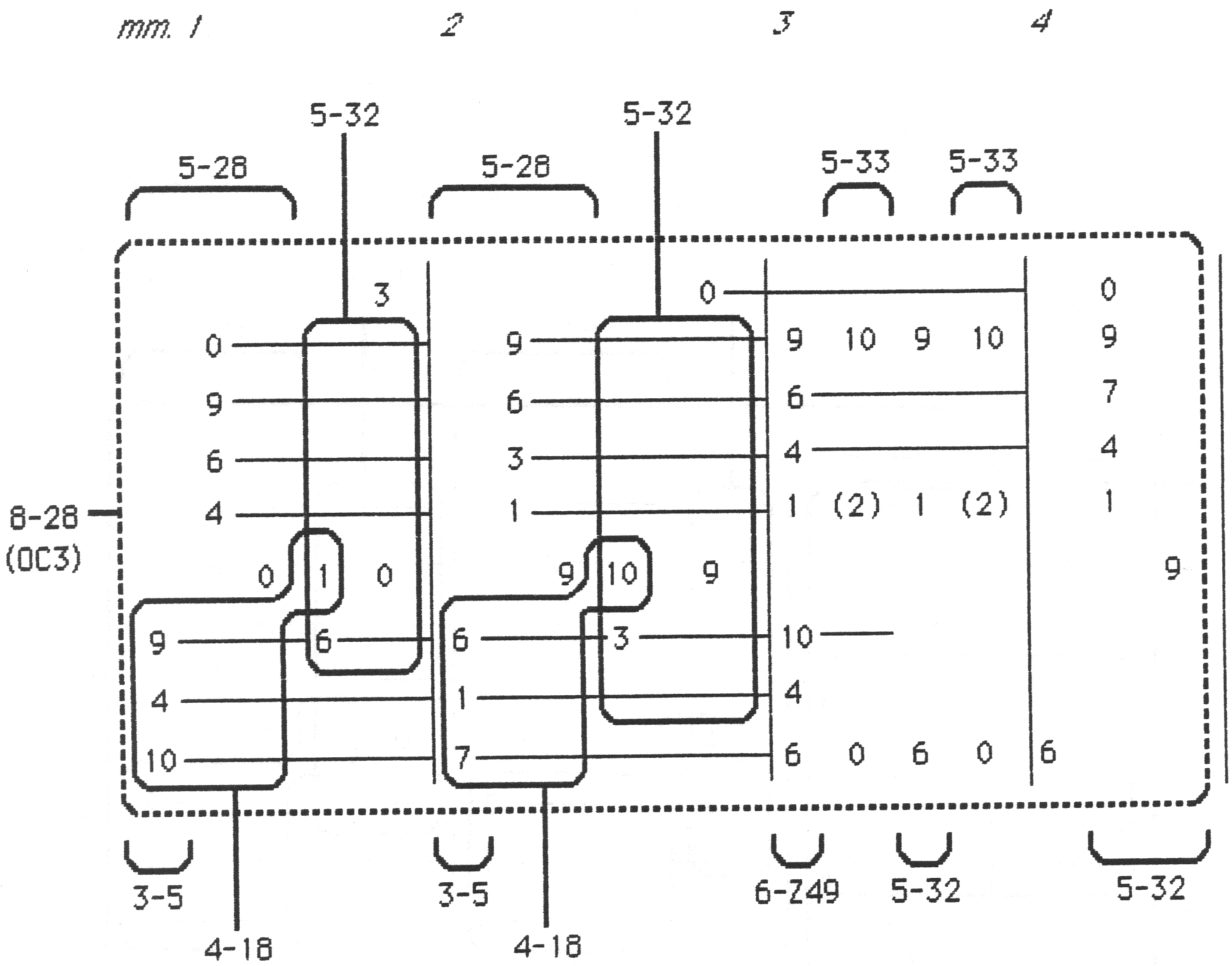


Figure 4

Pitch Class Map

mm. 1-4:



NOTE: ( ) indicates passing or neighbor tone;

indicates a collection with passing and neighbor tones excluded.

Figure 5a

Pitch Class Map
(continued)

mm. 5-7:

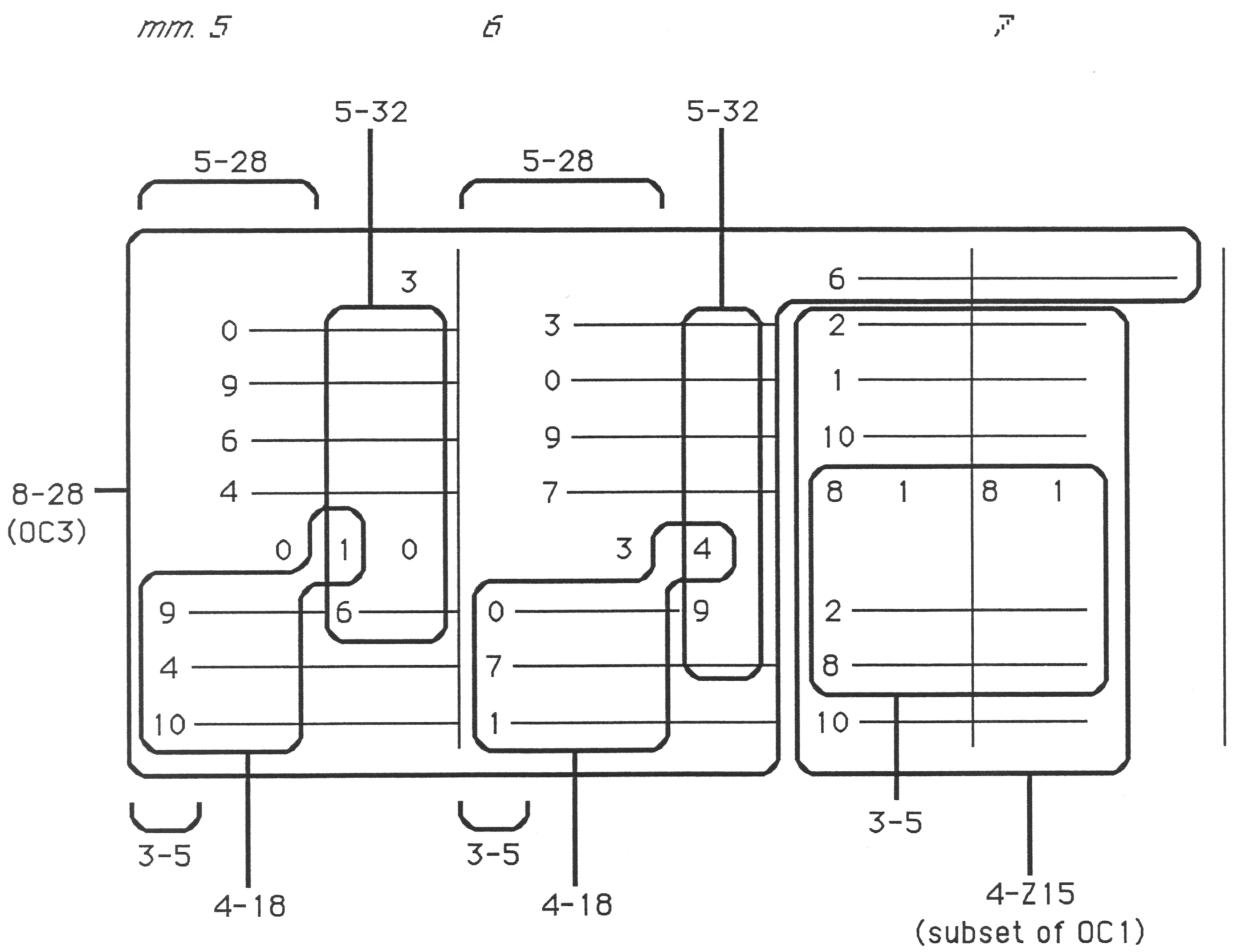


Figure 5b

Pitch Class Map
(continued)

nm. 8-11:

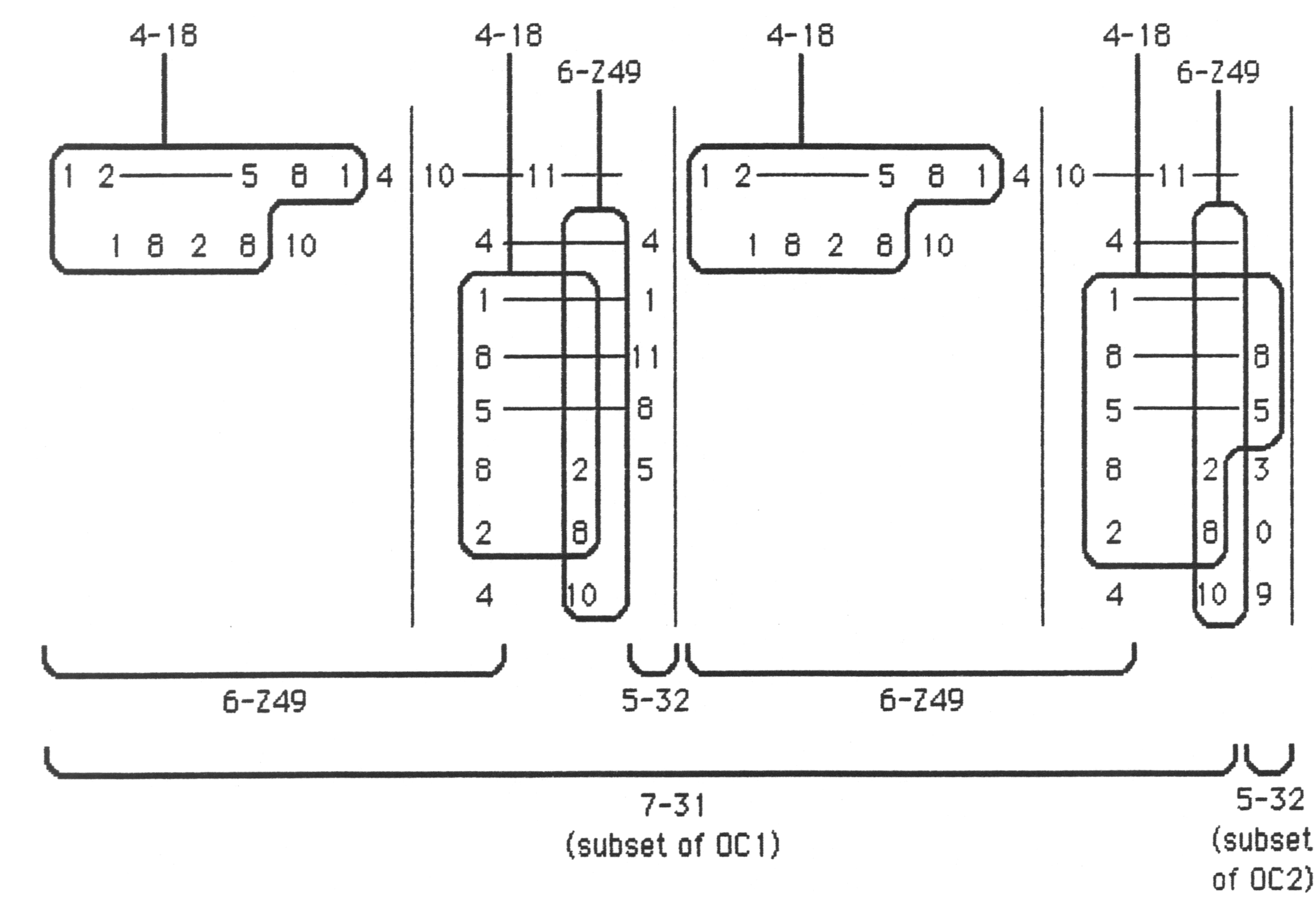


Figure 5c

Pitch Class Map
(continued)

nm. 12-14:

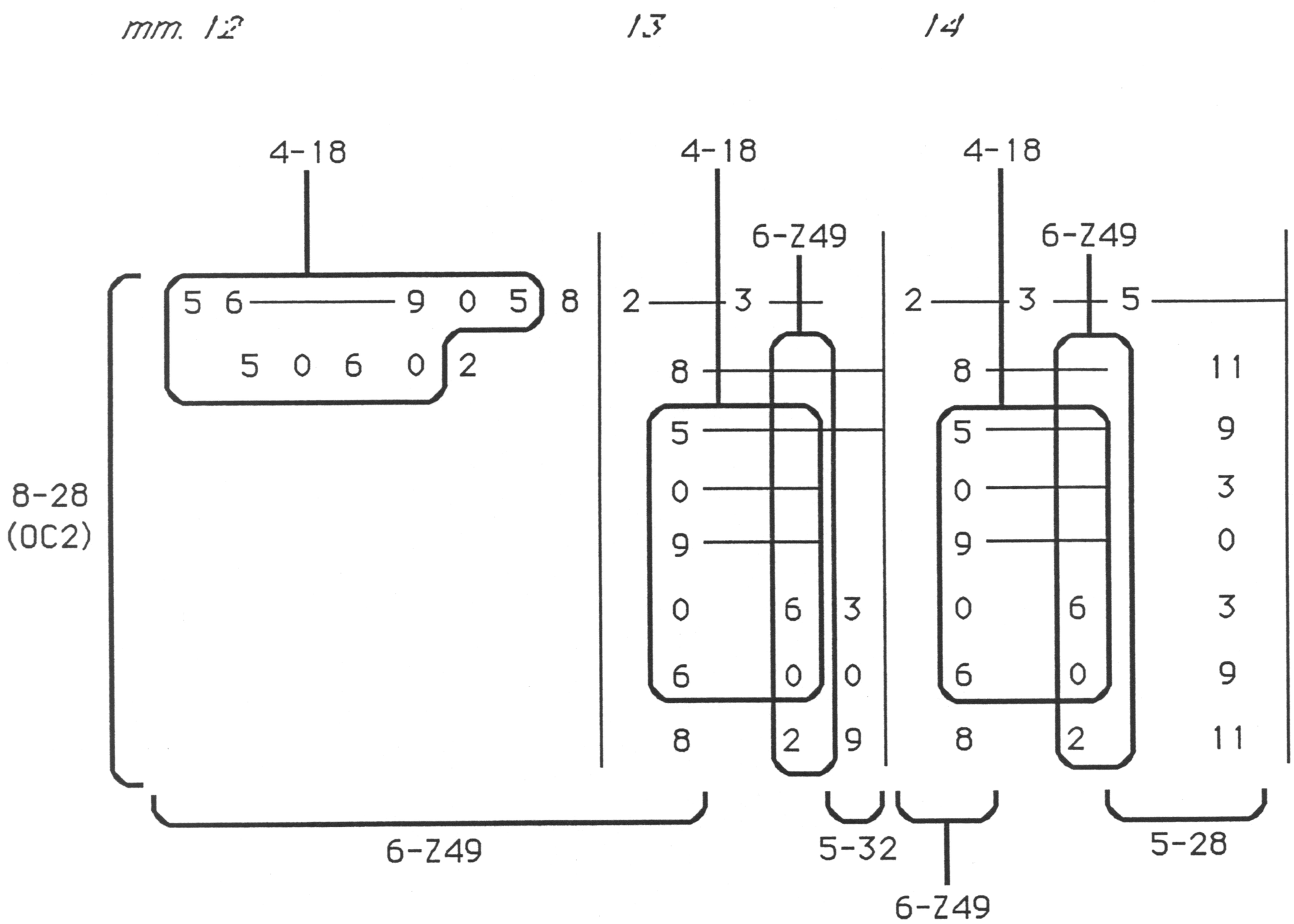
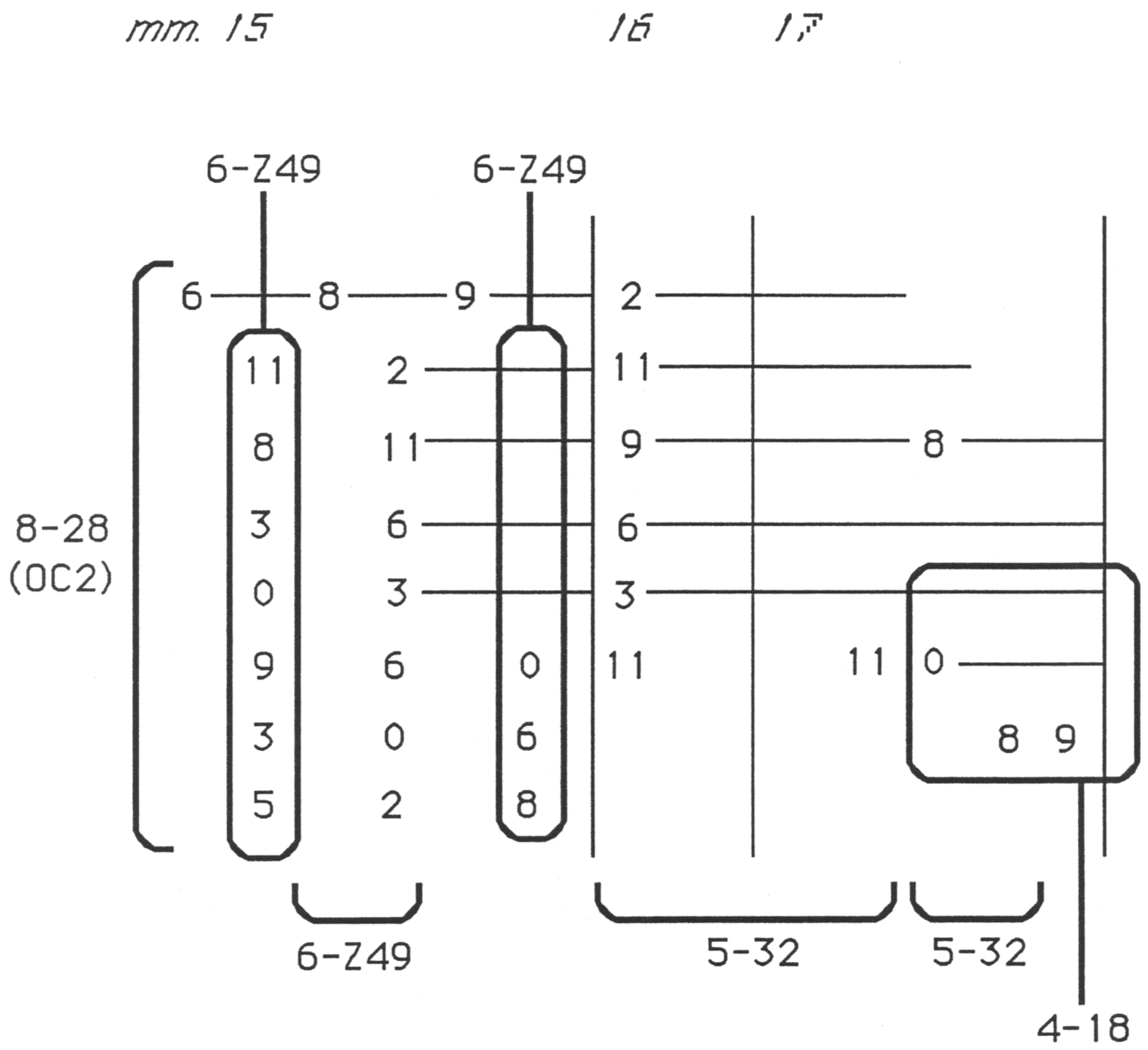


Figure 5d

Pitch Class Map
(continued)

mm. 15-17:

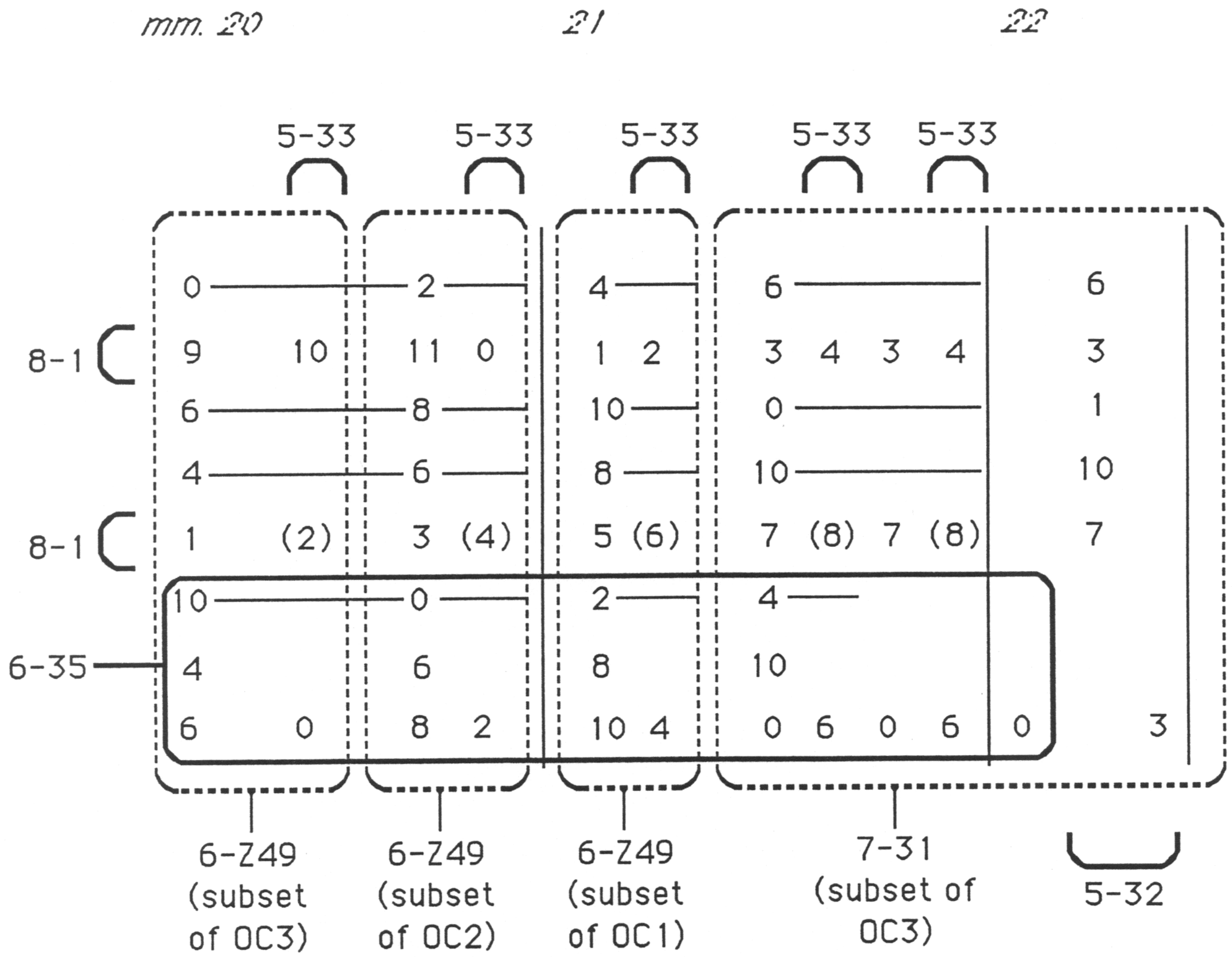


mm. 18-19: same as 1-2

Figure 5e

Pitch Class Map
(continued)

nm. 20-22:



NOTE: ( ) indicates passing or neighbor tone;


indicates a collection with passing and neighbor tones excluded.

Figure 5f

Pitch Class Map
(continued)

nm. 23-26:

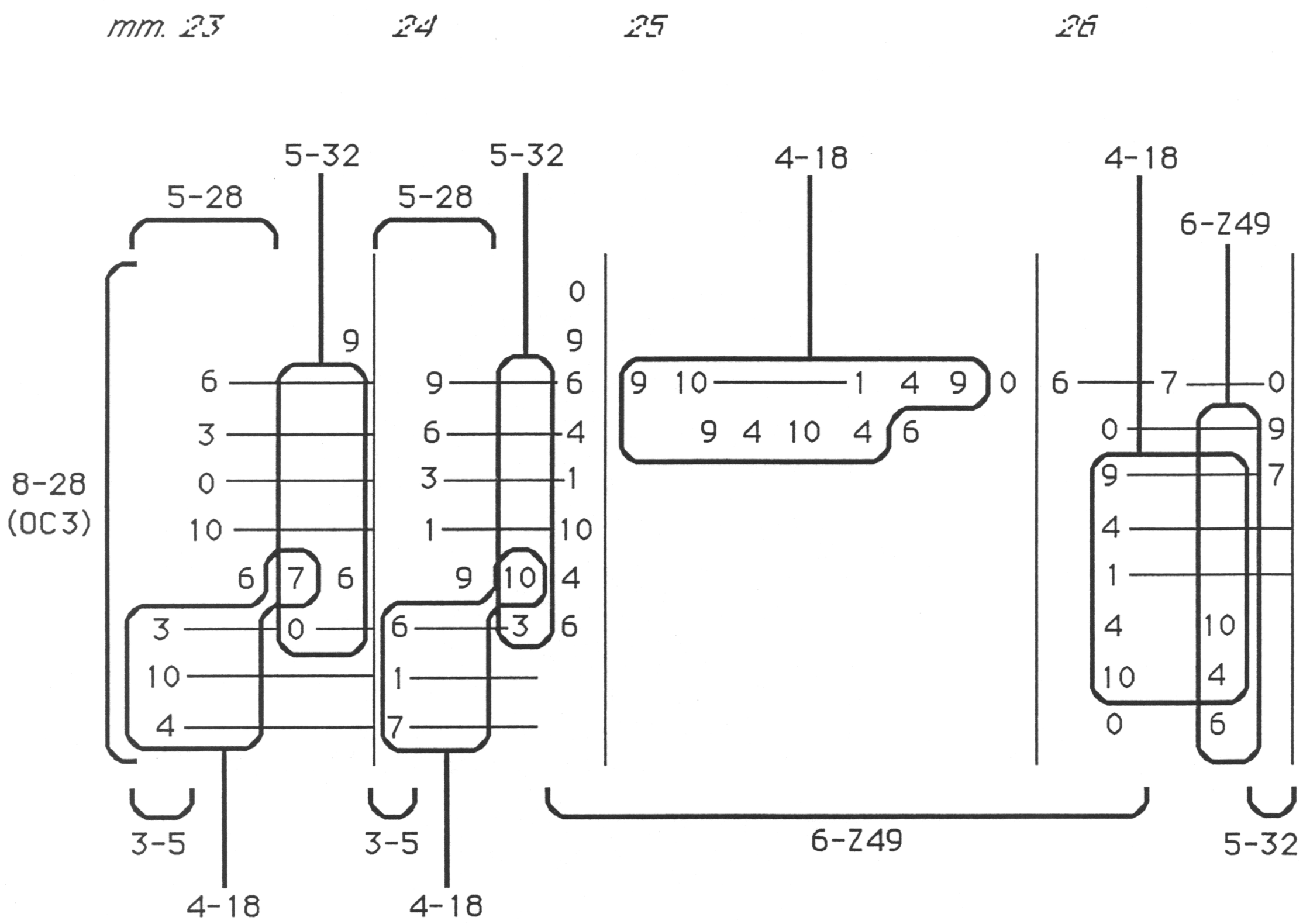


Figure 5g

Pitch Class Map
(continued)

mm. 27-28: same as 25-26

mm. 29-31:

Figure 5h

Imbrication of Melodic Lines

mm. 8-9 (melody line)
1 2 5 8 1 4 10 11

3-3, 10, 11, 11, 10, 5
4-18, 17, 27, 13
5-16, 32, 25
6-Z49, 6-Z50
7-31

(Above recurs in mm. 10-11 and in transposition in mm. 25-26. In transposition, it also occurs with an extension in mm. 12-15 and 27-31, as shown below.)

m. 8 (lower line)
1 8 2 8 10

3-5, 8
4-Z15 (all-interval tetrachord)

(Above recurs in m. 10 and in transposition in m. 12, m. 25, and m. 27.)

mm. 12-15 (melody line)
5 6 9 0 5 8 2 3 2 3 5 6 8 9

3-3, 10, 11, 11, 10, 4, 2, 2, 2, 2
4-18, 17, 27, 13, 3, 10, 3
5-16, 32, 25, 10, 10
6-Z49, Z50, Z23, Z13
7-31

(Most of the above line recurs in transposition in mm. 27-31.)

COMMENT: The above line is clearly based on an octatonic scale, leading toward the prominent pitch class 11 of m. 16.

Figure 6a

Imbrication of Melodic Lines
(continued)

mm. 14-15 (lowest line)
8 2 11 5 2 8

3-10, 10, 10
4-28

mm. 20-22 (melody line)
0 2 4 6

3-6, 6
4-21 (subset of whole-tone collection)

mm. 20-22 (lowest line)
6 0 8 2 10 4 0 6 0 6 0

3-8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8
4-25, 21, 25, 21, 25
5-33, 33, 33
6-35 (whole-tone collection)

Figure 6b