

## Realizing a Figured Bass (Writing a Melody)

### The Basic Process

- 1) Sing or play the bass line and find the locations and types of the cadences; label the cadences above the staff.
- 2) From the bass notes with figured bass, label the chords using roman numerals.
- 3) For each bass note/chord, list the pitches that can be used in the upper voices.  
Work to make step unnecessary as quickly as possible!
- 4) Write a good melody in the soprano voice that effectively complements the bass line and the harmonic motion.
- 5) Write the inner voices

### Writing a Melody

Unless instructed otherwise, end with a PAC.

Always start with the most constrained parts of the exercise, working outward from those parts to the places where there is the most free choice. If you approach it in this way, the first part of the process will often feel like solving a logic puzzle, with later parts feeling like freer composition. From the goal of making a musically effective complement to the bass line this makes sense, because some parts of the bass line will open many options, others quite few.

### General Guidelines

Follow all voice leading rules (no parallel fifths, no direct octaves unless the soprano moves by step, etc.).

All things being equal, a decently large range is a good thing in a melody, often an octave and sometimes more – but the most important thing is that the melody and the bass line work together effectively, and this may sometimes mean a smaller range. At minimum, though, the range should always be at least a fifth.

The melody should have a clear overall shape, with a decent amount of variety on the small scale (smaller ups and downs, a mix of steps, skips, and leaps, etc.).

Most melodies contain a single high point, and most descend to the cadence. Sometimes a repeated high point can be effective, but this will often involve some difference (e.g. placement on a different beat or over a different chord).

Melodies should feel they are going somewhere, so they don't want to get stuck on plateaus or cycling through the same few notes. Returning to the same pitch on downbeats can create a sense of stasis or excessive repetition, even if the line is otherwise rather active and varied.

The melody should be singable, mostly stepwise but with some skips and leaps for variety. Avoid an overly leapy melody. In assessing the impact of leaps, bear in mind that in general upward leaps, leaps to strong beats, and leaps with a change of chord are more salient than their opposites.

Leading tones in the melody should resolve – if not right away then soon, in most cases before departing from tonic harmony. (HC's are often an exception. The cadence creates a sense of being left hanging that the unresolved leading tone fits well with, and the phrase break creates a sense of new beginning, weakening the need for immediate resolution; if the leading tone from the HC is left unresolved, we will strongly expect to hear a PAC to resolve the leading tone and answer the HC.)

Melodic and rhythmic patterns should fit the meter.

The use of motives is often effective.