

A review of figured bass

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Figured bass is composed of 1. a bass part notated on a staff 2. numbers underneath the staff indicating the chord to be played

Figured bass is also used together with roman numerals to specify chord inversions in a harmonic analysis. In this case, the roman numerals play the role of the notated bass part.

The numbers indicate the intervals to be played, measured from the bass.

The intervals are notated in an “octave agnostic” manner. That is, if you see a “6” above a C bass, you know the chord will contain an A, but it could be an A a 6th above the bass, or a 13th (that is, an octave plus a 6th) above the bass, etc.

Figured bass for common chords

Figured bass symbols are conventionally abbreviated for many triads and seventh chords. For this class, it is essential that you be fluent in these abbreviations.

triad		
root position	5/3	(no figures)
first inversion	6/3	6
second inversion	6/4	6/4

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second inversion	6/4	6/4