

A review of figured bass

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I expect you have already come across figured bass in your study of harmony. But because it will be such an important part of our vocabulary, I'm providing this brief review.

The basics

Figured bass is composed of

1. a bass part, notated on a staff
2. numbers underneath the staff, which specify the chord to be played

The numbers indicate the intervals that make up the chord, measured from the bass.

Figured bass for common chords

Figured bass symbols for triads and seventh chords have conventional abbreviations. For this course, it is essential that you be fluent in these abbreviations.

		Full figures	Abbreviated figures
Triads	Root position	5/3	(figures omitted)
	First inversion	6/3	6
	Second inversion	6/4	6/4
Seventh chords	Root position	7/5/3	7
	First inversion	6/5/3	6/5
	Second inversion	6/4/3	4/3
	Third inversion	6/4/2	4/2

You should know the above abbreviated figures by heart.

Accidentals

Ordinarily, the quality of the specified intervals—i.e., whether major, minor, diminished, or augmented—is determined by the key signature.

- Alterations—i.e., notes that don't belong to the key signature—can be indicated by means of accidentals next to the figures.

- An accidental (i.e., a sharp, flat, or natural sign) on its own applies to the third.

Thus in the following examples,

- the 6 is G-natural
- the 6 is G-sharp, and the sharp sign indicates that the third is D-sharp
- the 6 is G-flat
- the 6 is G-natural



Limitations of figured bass

Figured bass is a shorthand and leaves a lot unspecified.

- The figures are “octave agnostic.” That is to say, if you see a “6” above a C bass, the chord will contain an A. But the figured bass does not specify whether this A will be a 6th above the bass, or a 13th (that is, a compound 6th), etc.
- The order of the voices is unspecified. For example, the figure 6/4 doesn’t mean that the 6 has to be played above the 4; the 4 could also be played above the 6.
- The intervals or the bass may be doubled where appropriate. (The question of when and where to double is a subject we will address later in the course; for now it suffices to say that figured bass doesn’t indicate anything about doubling either way.)

Notes

These limitations are actually a big part of what makes figured bass useful. They allow a performer or composer considerable freedom in realizing a figured bass, and they allow a music theorist to recognize the relatedness of many different chords.

Figured bass in roman numeral analysis

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.

When writing a roman numeral analysis, it is not necessary to indicate alterations to the key signature, because these will be implied by the roman numerals. For example, suppose we are in the key of C major, and there is a D major chord,

which we analyze as V of V. In our roman numeral analysis, we do not need a sharp sign to indicate that the third is raised, because this fact is already implicit in our analysis of the chord as borrowed from the key of G major.