

The rule of the octave

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Within any key, a given scale degree in the bass will often imply a given harmony.

The tonic chord is the most important chord, so

- $\hat{1}$ implies **I**
- $\hat{3}$ implies **I6**

The dominant chord is next most important, so

- $\hat{5}$ implies **V**
- $\hat{7}$ implies **V6**

The “pre-dominant” harmonies (IV and/or its near synonym ii6) are next most important, so

- $\hat{4}$ implies **IV/ii6**

The remaining scale degrees, $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{6}$, are a little more flexible. Their usual harmonizations can be summed up with the following rule of thumb:

- when the bass proceeds by leap, use a root position chord
- when the bass proceeds by step, use a first-inversion chord

(Keep in mind this is a rule-of-thumb and not an iron law!)

Thus, if scale degree $\hat{2}$:

- proceeds by step to $\hat{1}$ or $\hat{3}$, use **vii°7** (or **V4/3**)
- proceeds by leap, use **ii5/3**

And if scale degree $\hat{6}$:

- proceeds by step to $\hat{5}$ or $\hat{7}$, use **IV6**
- proceeds by leap, use **vi5/3**

One important exception to the above occurs when **when the bassline goes $\hat{5} \hat{4} \hat{3}$** : in this important case, $\hat{4}$ **will be harmonized with V4/2**.

All of the above basically applies to both minor and major keys, with the following provisos for minor keys:

- root position $\hat{2}$ is not much used in minor (because it is a diminished triad)

- minor chord progressions will often move in and out of the relative major (so III is a much more important chord in minor keys than iii is in major keys)

There are, of course, other exceptions to the above. (For example, where a composer will use iii rather than I6.)

Rule of the octave

Using the above guidelines, we can readily harmonize an ascending or descending bass scale. We will then have what in the 18th century was known as “the rule of the octave.” This “rule” was a common pedagogical device for aspiring contrapuntists. It provides a very useful heuristic for

- harmonizing a bassline
- inventing idiomatic chord progressions

You should both learn and understand the rule of the octave.



Figure 1: Rule of the octave (major)



Figure 2: Rule of the octave (minor). Note that $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ are raised when ascending and lowered when descending.

You might find it easier to remember the rule as follows: - $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$ have 5/3 chords - $\hat{4}$ has ii6/5 (or IV or ii6) ascending, and V4/2 descending - all other degrees have 6/3 chords

Notes on the rule of the octave

There are about as many variations on the rule of the octave as there are extant sources for it. Some of them favor triads; others use many seventh chords. Very often, in the descending rule of the octave, $\hat{6}$ has a raised 6th, so that V is approached by a V of V harmony.

If you already learned the rule of the octave somewhere else, you may have learned a somewhat different version. (For example, on $\hat{2}$ there may be a $V4/3$ chord.) If so, that's fine: I don't care exactly which version of the rule you use. What's important is that you

- know some version of the rule
- understand the logic behind the selection of harmonies, as explained above