

Figured Bass



Figure 1. The Basso Continuo

THE NUMBERS AND SYMBOLS PRINTED BELOW THE BASSO CONTINUO PART ARE CALLED THE **FIGURED BASS**. SO HOW DO YOU TURN FIGURED BASS INTO **CHORDS**?

MUSICAL WORKS WRITTEN IN THE **BAROQUE ERA** WOULD OFTEN INCLUDE A PART CALLED THE **BASSO CONTINUO** WHICH WOULD CONSIST OF A **SINGLE BASS CLEF MELODIC LINE** WITH VARIOUS **NUMBERS** AND **ACCIDENTALS** PRINTED BENEATH THE NOTES.

NO, NO, NO... THERE WASN'T AN ACTUAL INSTRUMENT CALLED A **BASSO CONTINUO**! THE PART WAS PLAYED BY **TWO INSTRUMENTS**: A BASS CLEF INSTRUMENT LIKE **CELLO** OR **BASSOON**, AND A KEYBOARD INSTRUMENT LIKE A **HARPSICHORD**.

IN PERFORMANCES, THE BASS CLEF INSTRUMENT WOULD SIMPLY PLAY THE **GIVEN NOTES**, BUT THE KEYBOARD PLAYER WOULD **IMPROVISE** A PART BASED ON THE **NOTES** AND THE **SYMBOLS BELOW THE PART**!



SO THIS...

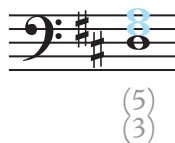
COULD BE PLAYED AS THIS!



FIRST OF ALL, IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW THAT THE **NOTE** GIVEN ON THE BASS CLEF PART IS ALWAYS THE **BASS NOTE OF THE CHORD**. AND REMEMBER: THE **BASS** IS NOT NECESSARILY THE **ROOT**!

SECOND, THE **NUMBERS** REPRESENT **INTERVALS** ABOVE THE **BASS**, EVEN THOUGH SOME NUMBERS ARE USUALLY LEFT OUT.

NOTE THAT THE INTERVALS ARE ALWAYS **DIATONIC**. DON'T WORRY ABOUT **INFLECTION**... JUST USE THE NOTES FROM THE **KEY SIGNATURE**!



IF THERE ARE **NO NUMBERS**, ADD A **THIRD** AND A **FIFTH** ABOVE THE **BASS**... YOU GET A **ROOT POSITION TRIAD**!



A **SIX** BY ITSELF INDICATES A **SIXTH** AND A **THIRD** ABOVE THE **BASS**, WHICH CREATES A **FIRST INVERSION TRIAD**!



A **SIX** AND A **FOUR** INDICATE A **SIXTH** AND A **FOURTH** ABOVE THE **BASS**, GIVING YOU A **SECOND INVERSION TRIAD**!



HERE, THE **SHARP** APPLIES TO THE **SIXTH** ABOVE THE **BASS**, SO WE ADD A **SHARP** TO THE **G**.



HERE, THERE IS **NO NUMBER** NEXT TO THE **SHARP**, SO WE APPLY IT TO THE **THIRD** ABOVE THE **BASS** NOTE.



NOTE THAT THERE IS A **NATURAL**, NOT A **FLAT**, NEXT TO THE **SIX**... IF IT WERE A **FLAT**, WE WOULD WRITE A **C FLAT**.

LASTLY, **ACCIDENTALS** ARE APPLIED TO THE INTERVAL THEY APPEAR WITH. IF YOU HAVE AN ACCIDENTAL **BY ITSELF**, IT APPLIES TO THE **THIRD** ABOVE THE **BASS**.

DON'T **OVERTHINK** THESE: IF THE COMPOSER WANTS A NOTE **RAISED BY A HALF-STEP** AND IT'S **FLATTED** IN THE **KEY SIGNATURE**, THE **FIGURED BASS** WILL HAVE A **NATURAL**, NOT A **SHARP**.

BY THE TIME THE **CLASSICAL PERIOD** GOT GOING, COMPOSERS **STOPPED INCLUDING** A **BASSO CONTINUO PART**, AND SO **FIGURED BASS** FELL OUT OF USE... WITH ONLY ONE EXCEPTION: **MUSIC THEORY CLASSES**!



REALIZING FIGURED BASS (WRITING CHORDS GIVEN A FIGURED BASS LINE) MAKES FOR AN **EXCELLENT EXERCISE** FOR STUDENTS TO LEARN **HOW TO WRITE** IN THE **COMMON PRACTICE PERIOD STYLE**!

WOOO!