

Introduction to Figured Bass

Figured bass symbols describe the vertical structure of the chord!


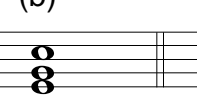
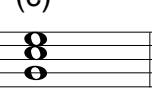
The bass is the foundation of harmonic structure. Figured bass symbols are used to indicate the bass positions of chords. The practice is derived from Baroque keyboard music where the player read from a part consisting of a bass line and some numerical symbols that indicated what chord was to be played. It was shorthand and, consequently, allowed an element of improvisation to enter the performance.

The figured bass symbols represent intervals above the bass. The notes obtained by these intervals may be played in any octave. The figured bass does not indicate open or closed spacing. The system deals only with intervals (During its period of invention, the theory of chords was not yet invented).

Figured bass was used as a means to notate improvisations, teach composition, and was the fundamental means by which composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven learned their craft.

The following example illustrates the figured bass symbols for triads and their inversions only.


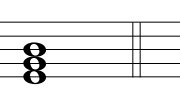

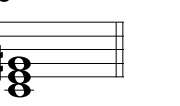
Ex. 1

(a)	(b)	(c)
		
5 3	6 3	6 4
(root position)	(1st inversion)	(2nd inversion)

The numbers in the above example represent the "general interval" from the lowest note in each chord to each upper note. The general interval, as you may recall, is simply the number of letter names from one pitch to another (remember to count the starting pitch as 1). In (a), C-E is a 3rd, C-G is a 5th, hence the 5/3 figured bass symbol.

It is important to know that each figured bass number represents an interval above the bass. This interval produces a note that is diatonic (fits into) to the key unless otherwise specified (we won't go into how to specify that yet, although you'll see I snuck in a clue in the example below!). Therefore, the figured bass is not telling us anything about the quality (major, minor, diminished, augmented) of the chord. In fact, the same figured bass figure could represent four different qualities depending on the bass note and the given key (Ex. 2).

Ex. 2

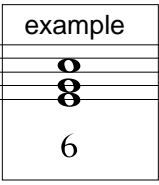
Major	Minor	Diminished	Augmented
			
5 3	5 3	5 3	5 3


*The slash through the 5 here is a symbol used to add a sharp to the note that is realized.

Lastly, figured bass symbols are usually abbreviated. The 5/3 symbol is abbreviated as " ". That's right: Nothing! If there is a bass note with no symbol underneath it, it is assumed to be in root position, or 5/3. 6/3 is abbreviated 6. 6/4 is not abbreviated.

Realize the figured bass for the following bass notes. Do this by examining the figured bass symbols. Then, write the acutally notes on the staff above the bass that the figured bass symbols represent.


example






6

4




6



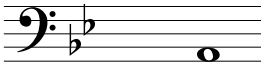
6

4




6

4




6




6

4




6

4



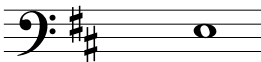
6

4




6

4




6




6

4




6



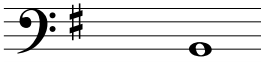
6

4




6


4



6




6




6

4



6

4



6

4