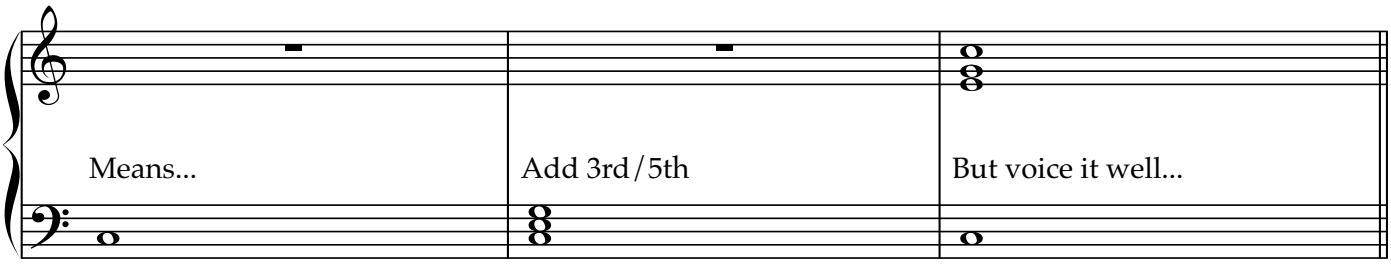
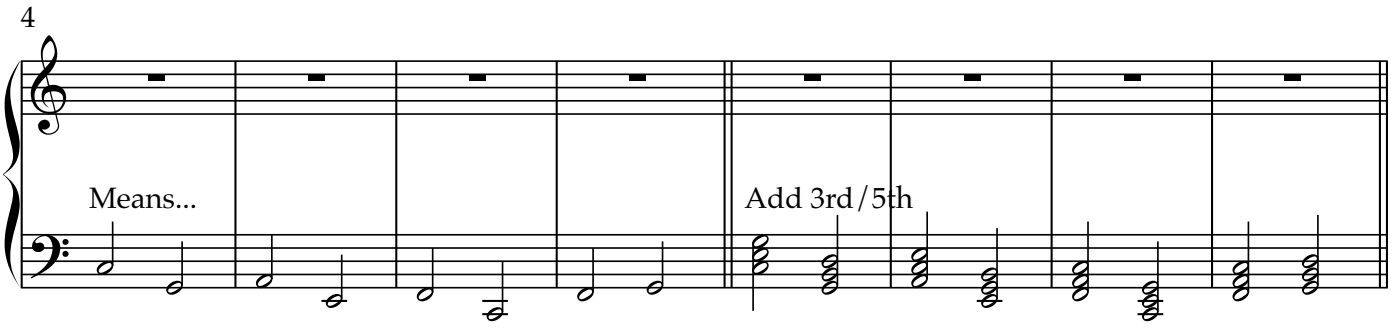
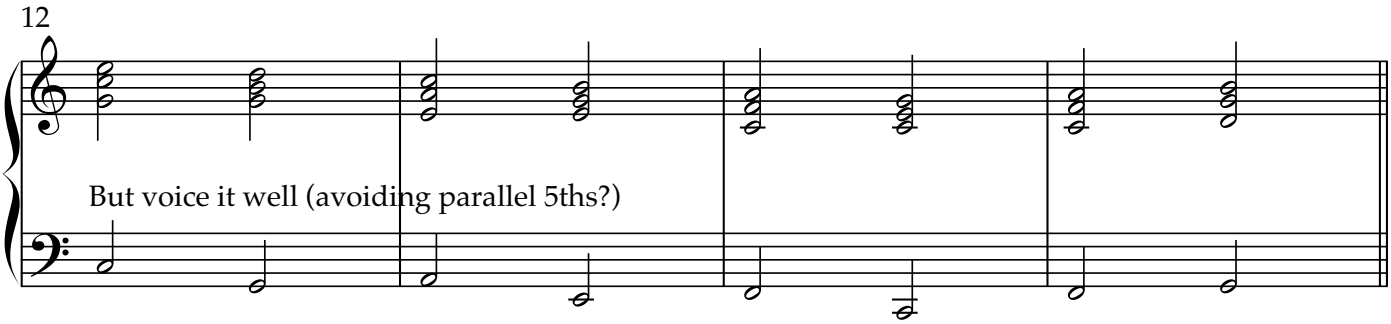
Guide to Figured Bass

Figured Bass is a shorthand guide which uses numbers to tell performers which chords are wanted above a particular bass note. The numbers refer to the notes to be added from *within the key signature*. Also the numbers added refer to the relationship between the bass and chord notes *within an octave*. The job of the player is to play a good spread/voicing that reflects the figures and also to play in a way that fits the style and detail of the piece. Much of this comes from listening and experience. Really accomplished figured bass players can use figures to create a contrapuntal texture with smooth line-based harmonic movement, or with stylish embellishments that complement the melody an another instrument. Figured bass is most associated with Baroque music performance, but recitative in classical opera would have been originally written using figures. More recently conventional ways of *realising* the figures have been transcribed and fully notated, eroding the skills that were once commonplace amongst keyboard musicians and guitarists.

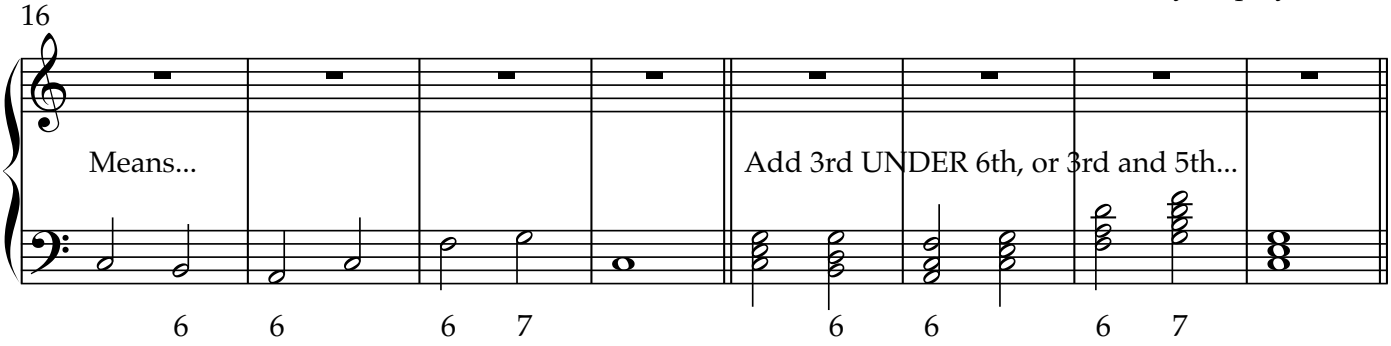
1. No numbers means construct a triad above the given bass note by adding the 3rd and 5th. Remember that this concept then needs revoicing to make a well-balanced chord voicing:







2. One number means add that, and add the 3rd and 5th when these would normally be played:



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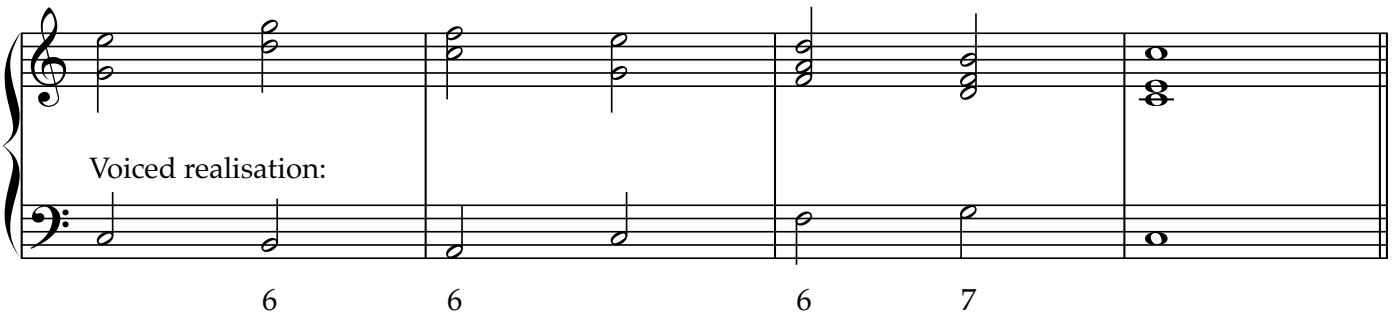

3. Two numbers either means a 2nd inversion chord or an inversion of a 7th chord:

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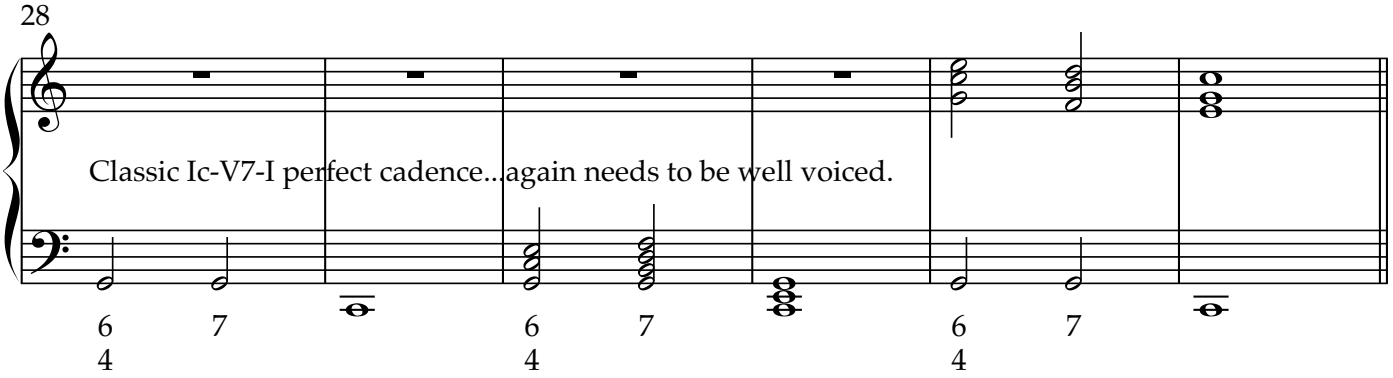

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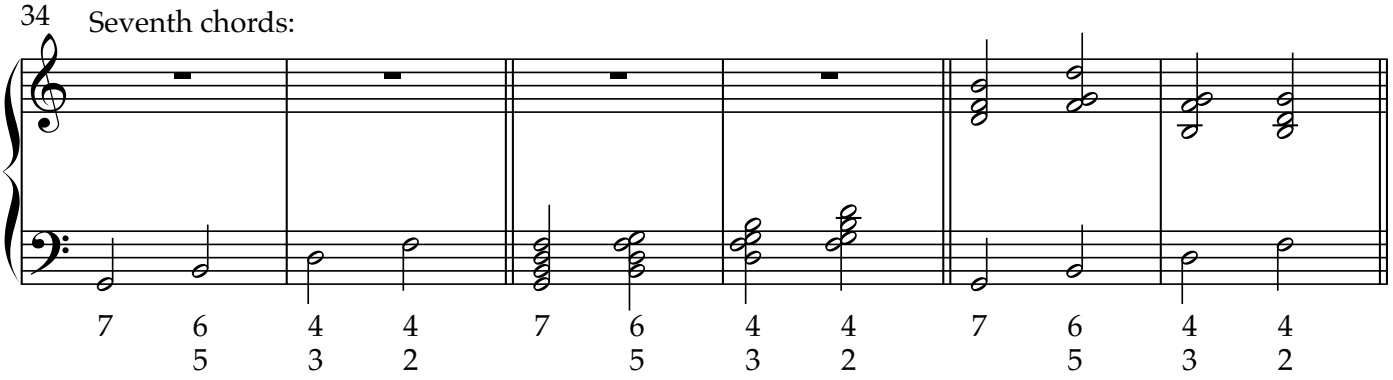

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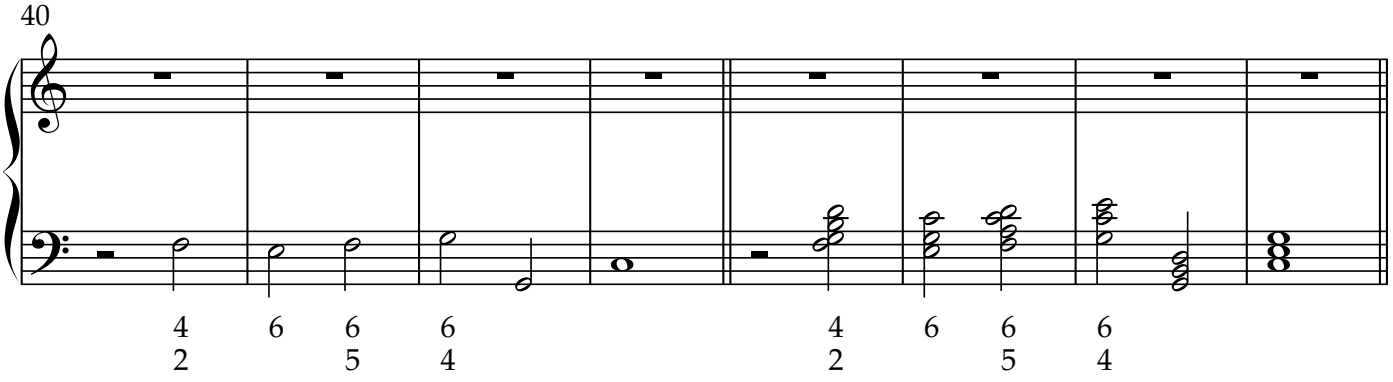

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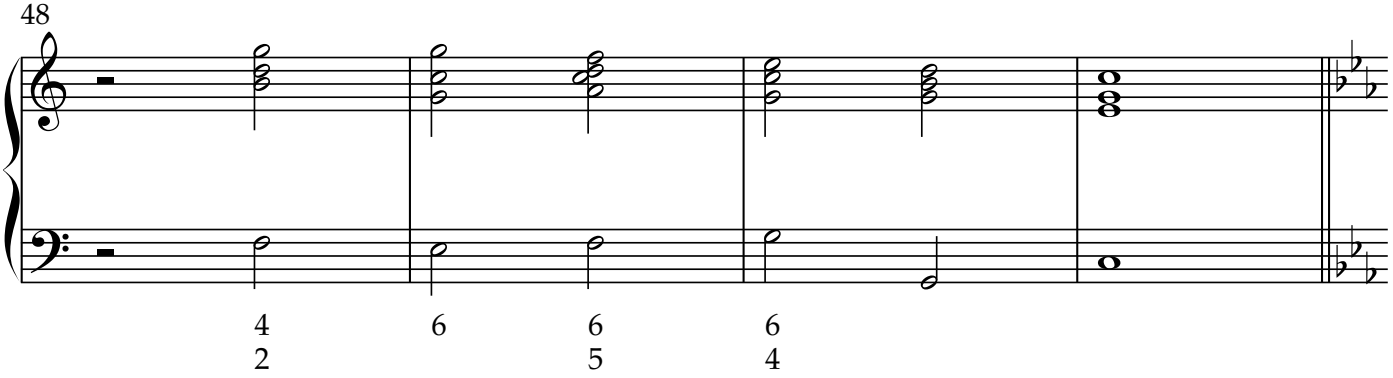
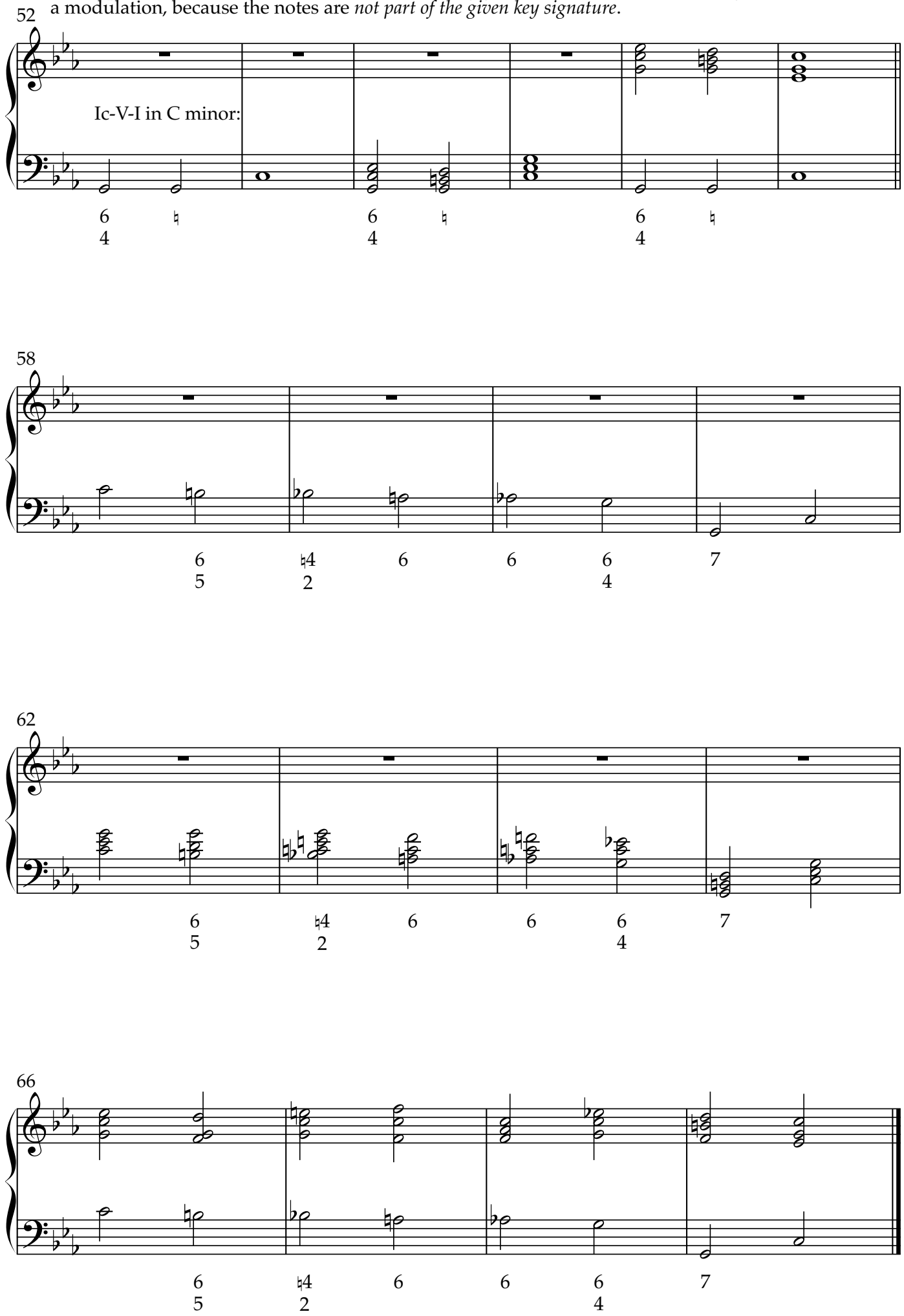
4. Sharps, flats and naturals are used too. Normally you'll find these in a minor key or where there is a modulation, because the notes are *not part of the given key signature*.