

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:

This musical example shows a three-measure sequence in a grand staff. The bass line consists of three quarter notes: C2, G2, and C3. The treble staff is mostly empty, with a few notes in the third measure. The first measure is labeled 'Means...' and shows a simple triad (C-E-G) above the bass note. The second measure is labeled 'Add 3rd/5th' and shows a triad with a third and fifth added (C-E-G-A-C). The third measure is labeled 'But voice it well...' and shows a more complex, well-balanced voicing of the triad with the third and fifth in different positions.

4

This musical example shows a four-measure sequence in a grand staff. The bass line consists of four quarter notes: C2, G2, C3, and G2. The treble staff is mostly empty. The first two measures are labeled 'Means...' and show simple triads above the bass notes. The last two measures are labeled 'Add 3rd/5th' and show triads with a third and fifth added above the bass notes.

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This musical example shows a four-measure sequence in a grand staff. The bass line consists of four quarter notes: C2, G2, C3, and G2. The treble staff shows complex voicings for each measure. The first two measures are labeled 'But voice it well (avoiding parallel 5ths?)' and show well-balanced voicings. The last two measures show more complex voicings, including some with parallel 5ths.

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

16

This musical example shows a seven-measure sequence in a grand staff. The bass line consists of seven quarter notes: C2, G2, C3, F3, C3, G2, and C3. The treble staff is mostly empty. The first three measures are labeled 'Means...' and show simple triads above the bass notes. The last four measures are labeled 'Add 3rd UNDER 6th, or 3rd and 5th...' and show triads with a third and fifth added below the bass note. The figures 6, 6, 6, 7, 6, 6, 6, 7 are written below the bass line.

2

24

Voiced realisation:

6 6 6 7

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

28

Classic Ic-V7-I perfect cadence...again needs to be well voiced.

6 7 6 7 6 7 6 7

4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4

34

Seventh chords:

7 6 4 4 7 6 4 4 7 6 4 4

5 3 2 5 3 2 5 3 2

40

4 6 6 6 4 6 6 6

2 5 4 2 5 4

48

4 6 6 6 6 6

2 5 4

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*.

52

Ic-V-I in C minor:

6 4 ♭ 4 6 4 ♭ 4 6 4 ♭ 4 6 4

58

6 5 ♭4 2 6 6 6 6 6 4 7

62

6 5 ♭4 2 6 6 6 6 6 4 7

66

6 5 ♭4 2 6 6 6 6 6 4 7