

Figured Bass

Figured bass

- The numeric symbols commonly used to indicate chord inversions (such as 6 and $^{\sharp}$) originate in the practice of *figured bass*
- Figured bass was first used in the 18th century (during the Baroque era)
- Keyboard players would often be given a bass line and were expected to be able to improvise chords above it by interpreting (or “realizing”) the figures that were written below the bass line

A figured bass

- Here is an example of a figured bass



- And here is one possible realization



A figured bass

- The numbers in figured bass always represent *intervals above the bass note*
 - A 5 and a 3 indicates a 5th and a 3rd above the bass—in other words, a root position triad
 - A 6 and a 3 indicates a 6th and a 3rd above the bass—that is, a first inversion triad
 - A 6 and a 4 indicates a second inversion triad



A figured bass

- Abbreviations are common in figured bass
 - A 6 by itself also indicates a first inversion triad—it is implied that there is also a 3 above the bass
 - 7 , $^{\flat}$, $^{\sharp}$, and $^{\natural}$ indicate the different positions of a seventh chord
 - For example, $^{\flat}6$ indicates a first inversion seventh chord, with a 5th and a 6th above the bass, but also with an implied 3rd (to complete the seventh chord)



A figured bass

- Non-numeric symbols are also used
 - A sharp, flat or natural next to a number means to apply that accidental to that pitch above the bass
 - An accidental by itself is always added to the *third* of the chord (a 3rd above the bass)
 - A slash through a number (or a plus next to a number) means to *raise* that pitch above the bass



A figured bass

- Bass notes with no figures are interpreted as follows:
 - Bass notes that are repeated continue to use the previous figure
 - New bass notes with no figure are interpreted as root position triads

A musical score in bass clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation shows a sequence of chords. Red boxes highlight the following chords: a triad (C4, E4, G4) at measure 2, a triad (F#4, A4, C5) at measure 3, a triad (B4, D5, F#5) at measure 4, a triad (C5, E5, G5) at measure 5, and a triad (F#5, A5, C6) at measure 6. The figures below the notes are: 5 5 5 4 5 6 6 6^a 7^a.

A figured bass

- When a figured bass is realized by a keyboard player, the chord is typically spaced out (adding octaves) and some notes are doubled

A musical score in bass clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation shows a sequence of chords with wide spacing. The figures below the notes are: 5 5 5 4 5 6 6 6^a 7^a.

- Here are the same chords with spacing and doubling

A musical score in treble clef, 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation shows a sequence of chords with wide spacing and doubling of notes. The bass clef part below shows the original figured bass notation for reference.