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!

![Diagram of figured bass](image)

**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!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Interval</th>
<th>Example 1</th>
<th>Example 2</th>
<th>Example 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>9♭7#5</td>
<td>9♭7#5</td>
<td>9♭7#5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>9♭7#3</td>
<td>9♭7#3</td>
<td>9♭7#3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 fourth** indicate a **sixth** and a **fourth** above the bass, giving you a **second inversion triad**!

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 **semitone** and it’s flattened 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**!

**Woooh!**

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**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**?

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!