

# Figured Bass



Figure 1. The Basso Continuo

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!**

SO THIS...

COULD BE PLAYED AS THIS!

THE **NUMBERS AND SYMBOLS** PRINTED BELOW THE **BASSO CONTINUO** PART ARE CALLED THE **FIGURED BASS**. SO HOW DO YOU TURN **FIGURED BASS** INTO **CHORDS**?

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!**

(5)  
3

IF THERE ARE **NO NUMBERS**, ADD A **THIRD** AND A **FIFTH** ABOVE THE **BASS**... YOU GET A **ROOT POSITION TRIAD!**

6  
(3)

A **SIX** BY ITSELF INDICATES A **SIXTH** AND A **THIRD** ABOVE THE **BASS**, WHICH CREATES A **FIRST INVERSION TRIAD!**

6  
4

A **SIX** AND A **FOUR** INDICATE A **SIXTH** AND A **FOURTH** ABOVE THE **BASS**, GIVING YOU A **SECOND INVERSION TRIAD!**

#6

HERE, THE **SHARP** APPLIES TO THE **SIXTH** ABOVE THE **BASS**, SO WE ADD A **SHARP** TO THE **6**.

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HERE, THERE IS **NO NUMBER** NEXT TO THE **SHARP**, SO WE APPLY IT TO THE **THIRD** ABOVE THE **BASS** NOTE.

#6

NOTE THAT THERE IS A **NATURAL**, NOT A **FLAT**, NEXT TO THE **SIX**... IF IT WERE A **FLAT**, WE WOULD WRITE A **C FLAT**.

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 **SEMI-TONE** AND IT'S **FLATTED** 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!**



**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!**

WOOO!