

## 1. Getting started with Continuo Basics: Do I have to improvise?

### Figured bass

The most basic step in playing continuo is the **realization**, or the creation of a complete harmonic texture from a bass line. Think of this as creating your own part. Realization is the most time consuming step when you first begin learning to play continuo. However you will learn to realize a bass line at sight with some experience.

Music students generally are taught one of three methods for analyzing or harmonizing chords. The first is the Roman numeral method:

The image shows a musical score in 4/4 time. The bass line consists of a sequence of eighth notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. Above the bass line, the treble clef contains chord realizations for each note. Below the bass line, Roman numerals are written: I, ii, iii, IV, V, vi, vii°, I.

Figure 1. The Roman numeral method of analysis

The treble clef indicates the chord realization. Capital roman numerals indicate a major chord, while the lower case roman numerals indicate a minor chord. The “°” indicates a diminished chord.

The second method of analysis uses the note name to specify a chord:

The image shows a musical score in 4/4 time, identical to Figure 1. The bass line has notes C, d, e, F, G, a, b°, C. Below the bass line, note names are written: C, d, e, F, G, a, b°, C.

Figure 2. The note-name method of analysis

Again capital letters specify a major chord, and lower case letters specify a minor chord.

The “o” indicates a diminished chord, and the treble clef indicates the chord realization.

Continuo players read from what is called **figured bass**, the third method for analyzing and harmonizing chords. Figured bass consists of a bass line augmented with **figures** to indicate what harmony is to be played above the given bass note. A bass line with no figures indicates that the harmonies to be played are in root position above the chord:

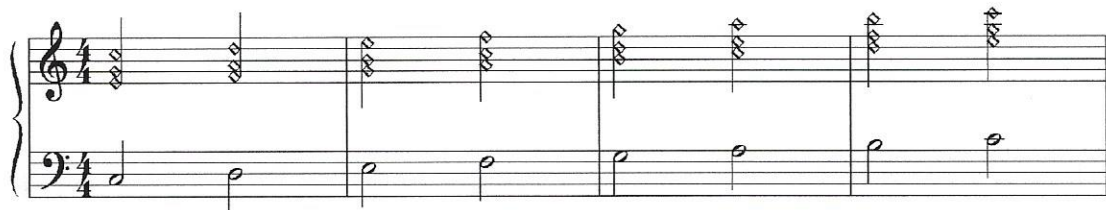


Figure 3. The Figured bass method of analysis

Thus, the figured bass system requires no figures to indicate the scales in Figures 1 and 2.

Simply read the bass note, and play the root position chord indicated by that note.

### Figures

A basic **triad** can be played in three ways: root position, first inversion or second inversion. Figured bass notation indicates these chords with the following figures:

(5) (3)	6 (3)	6 4
root position	first inversion	second inversion

Figure 4. Inversions of a basic triad

The figures in parenthesis are optional, and the chords will often be indicated more simply:

6
6  
4

root position                      first inversion                      second inversion

Figure 5. Inversions of a basic triad with minimal figures

Note that the figures indicate the interval played above the bass note.

Seventh chords can be played in four ways: root position, first, second or third inversion. These positions are indicated as follows:

7
6
(6)
(6)  
(5)
5
4
4  
(3)
(3)
3
2

root position                      first inversion                      second inversion                      third inversion

Figure 6. Inversions of a seventh chord

Or more simply:

7
6
4
4  

5
3
2

root position                      first inversion                      second inversion                      third inversion

Figure 7. Inversions of a seventh chord with minimal figures

All chords are realized within the context of the key signature given. If an accidental is required, it is indicated by placing a # or a *b* directly before the affected figure. If the accidental is not placed next to a figure, it is assumed to affect the third of the chord. Accidentals are not typically carried throughout the bar. Occasionally, a # is used to cancel a *b* and vice versa.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 8. Indicating an accidental

Figures larger than a ninth are not common. Intervals are usually reduced to less than an octave for the written figure, but can be realized larger than an octave in practice.

Now, observe how the basic figures that you have learned might be realized in performance. You might be given the following part:

<sup>10</sup> Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 125.



flames I swear cupid lurking lies. See his quiver,  
see his bow too, see his dart, fly, O fly, thou foolish heart.

Figure 9. *Silly heart forbear* by Nicholas Lanier (1588-1666)<sup>11</sup>

Lanier realized this song as follows:

Silly heart forbear, those are murdering eyes in whose  
flames I swear cupid lurking lies. See his quiver,

6 6

6 4 - #3

<sup>11</sup> Gordon J. Callon, ed., *Songs with Theorbo (ca. 1650-1663)*, in *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, vol. 105 (Madison: A-R Editions, Inc., 2000), 5.

see his bow too, see his dart, fly, O fly, thou— fool - ish heart.

# # - 6 - 4 - 3

Figure 10. *Silly heart forbear*, as realized by Lanier. Reprinted, by permission, from Gordon J. Callon's *Songs with Theorbo (ca. 1650-1663)*, in *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, vol. 105 (Madison: A-R Editions, Inc., 2000), page 5. The edition includes tablature, which is not reprinted here.<sup>12</sup>

Or, the same passage might be realized in this way:

Sil - ly heart for - bear, those are murd'r - ing eyes in whose

6 6

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a vocal line in the treble clef and a piano accompaniment in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The vocal line has the lyrics: "flames I swear cu-pid lurk - ing lies. See his qui - ver,". The piano accompaniment features a bass line with notes and fingerings: 6, 4 - #3. The second system also has a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics: "see his bow too, see his dart, fly, O fly, thou—fool - ish heart." The piano accompaniment has a bass line with notes and fingerings: #, #, - 6, - 4 - 3.

Figure 11. *Silly heart forbear*, a second possible realization

The solid line indicates a sustained harmony. Do not harmonize the passing tones in these passages.

Try realizing the next passage on your own. Keep things very simple by playing a single bass note in the left hand and a three-note chord in the right hand:

The image shows a single line of musical notation in the bass clef, 4/4 time signature. It contains a sequence of seven notes: a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, a quarter note B2, a quarter note C3, a quarter note D3, a quarter note E3, and a quarter note F3.

Figure 12. Possible bass line

Harpists often learn to feel the “shape” of a chord in their hands. Teach yourself to associate an inversion with a shape, and then apply that shape to the root of the chord. Experiment with using a very small range on the harp in your right hand. Stay below the

melody line and above the bass, and share as many notes as possible from one chord to the next. Try to create a melodic right hand line in the soprano voice.

### Cadences

Did you notice how the examples above ended with familiar sounding cadences? Cadential formulae are common in Baroque music. Familiarize yourself with the following common cadences:

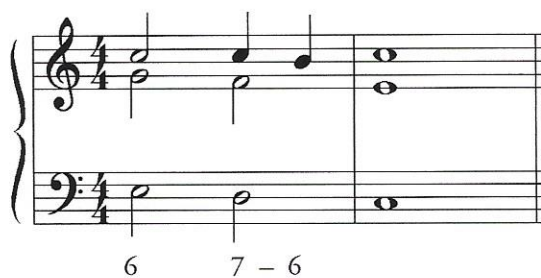


Figure 13. Medial cadence

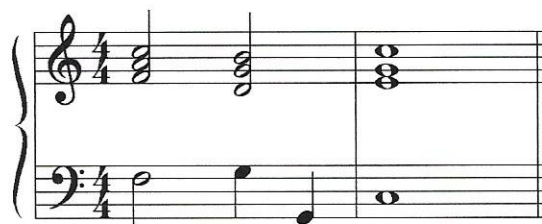


Figure 14. Perfect cadence



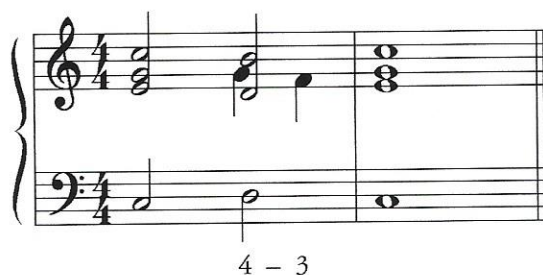


Figure 15. Half cadence

Note that the soprano voice ends on the tonic in a perfect cadence. Memorize a few basic cadences to include in your continuo “repertoire.” These are cadences that you know well and can play in several keys. Use consistent fingerings each time you play these patterns.

You may have noticed that cadences often include **suspensions**, which are indicated by a short dash joining two figures: 4-3. A suspension consists of preparation, dissonance and resolution. The dissonance occurs on an accented part of the measure:

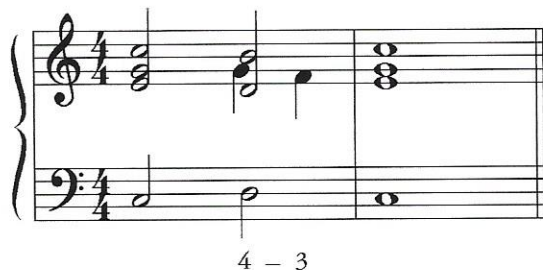


Figure 16. Suspension

On the harp, you might wish to re-strike the note that creates the dissonance. Other instruments tie this note, but the dissonant effect can be lost in the harp’s sound decay. Also, note that the minor third of the final chord is often raised to major in Italian style music. If you are unsure of the quality of the final chord (major or minor), omit the third.

### Common bass lines and harmonic progressions

As you become more familiar with playing continuo, you will notice some common bass lines and harmonic progressions. Find a harmonization pattern that fits well in your hand and consider this part of your continuo “repertoire.” Common bass lines and harmonic progressions include the circle of fifths, ground bass lines and a few basic dances. Realize the bass lines below with root position chords, unless otherwise indicated.



Figure 17. Ground bass on the Circle of Fifths

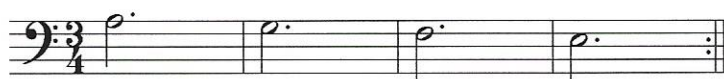


Figure 18. Possible ground bass



Figure 19. Ground bass from *When I am laid in earth* by Henry Purcell (1659-1695)<sup>13</sup>

Please note that subsequent statements of this bass pattern use various harmonies.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, edited by William H. Cummings (London: Novello, 1915?; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), 84.



Figure 20. Folia

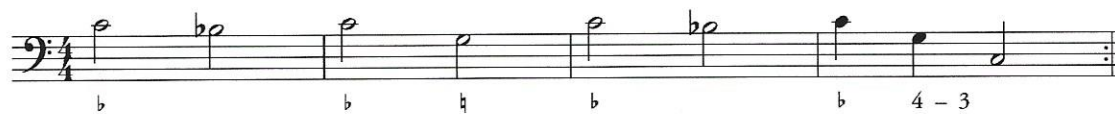


Figure 21. Passamezzo antico



Figure 22. Passamezzo moderno



Figure 23. Romanesca

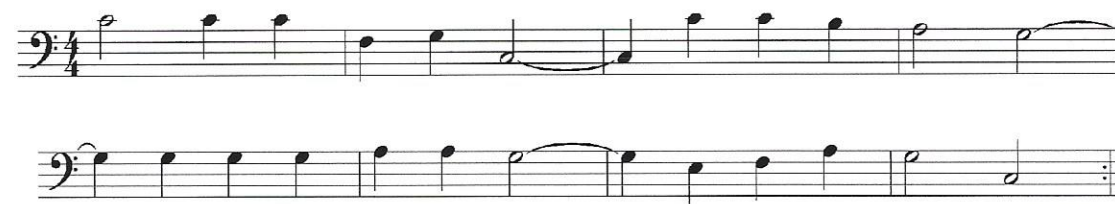


Figure 24. Ruggiero

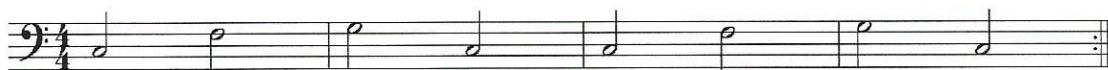


Figure 25. Bergamasca

### The Rules

Below is a quick summary of some basic rules for proper continuo playing. Do not be overwhelmed by the etiquette of good **counterpoint**. Instead, learn to recognize and apply correct style gradually as you become more confident. Focus on a few of the rules to start, adding the other rules one at a time, as you are able.

1. If you must play one note, play the root of the chord. If you play only two notes, play the root of the chord plus the third, which defines whether the chord is major or minor and creates a full sounding texture. Avoid doubling the third of any chord.
2. When resolving dissonances, resolve leading tones ( $\sharp$ ) up and flattened tones ( $b$ ) down.
3. Avoid consecutive fifths and octaves in the outer voices. Apply contrary motion instead.
4. Do not double or play above the melody line.
5. When in doubt, leave it out! Avoid striking the strings too often.
6. Avoid using modern realizations and editorial figures. Improvising allows you to create an idiomatic part that suits your playing abilities.

## The Exceptions

Exceptions are the rule! The reason that rules were published is because many players ignored them. Composers became frustrated by the discrepancy between what was considered acceptable in theory and what was actually being produced on stage. The rules of counterpoint were published to educate inelegant performers as to the desires of the composer. However, many fine players created passionate interpretations of music despite the rules, and these players were more historically informed than the reader or author will ever be.

1. As a safety precaution, if you are uncertain of the quality of the chord, play a “naked fifth.” In other words, leave out the third of the chord.
2. Experiment with using the full range of your instrument. Play the bass line an octave lower or double it (triple harp) for special emphasis. Create a counter melody in the range of the soloist. Never, however, interfere with the solo line but work to enhance the soloist.
3. Understand the structure of the composition and observe the harmonic rhythm of the score. Omit fast moving chord progressions, quick bass lines and passing tones that might sound muddy on the harp. Outline the structure of the composition. Do not harmonize more than one chord per beat, sometimes even fewer.
4. Be aware of differences between the harp and a keyboard instrument or lute. Enjoy these differences, and do not attempt to play in the style of another instrument.



## Summary

You have been given a tremendous amount of information in this chapter. Process what you are able; apply it to your music and score preparation, and return to the chapter for more information. To practice continuo well, understand the score and LISTEN! Be aware of the key in which you are playing and the harmonic structure of the music. Remember that you are an accompanist. Relax and enjoy creating your own part.

“Do I have to improvise?” Like jazz musicians, Baroque continuo players improvise within a specific form and set of rules. Begin your journey by staying well within the set boundaries and explore a little more freely in each session.

## Suggested Readings:

Arnold, Franck Thomas. *The Art of Accompaniment From a Thorough-Bass as Practiced in the XVIIth & XVIIIth Centuries*. London: Oxford University Press, 1931.

Keaney, Helen. *Figured Bass for Beginners: a Self-paced Primer in Playing from a Figured Bass*. Boston: E.C. Schirmer Music Company, 1981.

Ledbetter, David. *Continuo Playing According to Händel: His figured bass exercises*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1990.