

Intro to Basso Continuo Harmony, ca. 1600

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I. Rule of the Octave

The harmonic universe throughout the Renaissance consisted of two key signatures, the one with no flats or sharps, and the one with one flat (the major/minor key system didn't exist yet). Around 1600 when more composers began to think of vertical harmony constructed above the lowest sounding voice, three main types of harmonies dominated:

- A) Major 5/3 chords
- B) Minor 5/3 chords
- C) 6/3 chords

If we build a triad on each of the scale degrees in each of the two key signatures without adding any accidentals, we end up with some of each of these three types of chords (on scale degrees whose fifth in the key signature would be a diminished fifth or tri-tone, we must avoid this interval by replacing the fifth with a sixth, giving us a 6/3 chord).

This kind of harmonization is called the "Rule of the Octave":

The image shows two musical staves illustrating the Rule of the Octave. The top staff is in C major (no sharps or flats) and the bottom staff is in F major (one flat). Each staff shows seven chords corresponding to the scale degrees. Labels below each chord indicate its type: major 5/3, minor 5/3, 6/3, major 5/3, minor 5/3, minor 5/3, and major 5/3.

Since these are the *normal harmonizations* for those notes in those key signatures, normally the continuo bass line doesn't need any figures to show them. *Figures are usually written only when the necessary harmonies depart from this series.*

- ✓ The figure for a 5/3 chord with its third raised against the key signature is simply '#' (or '♯' to raise a flat)
- ✓ The figure for a 5/3 chord with its third lowered against the key signature is simply 'b' (or '♭' to lower a sharp)
- ✓ The figure for 6/3 is simply '6' (the 3 is nearly always implied)

II. Accidentals (# / b / ♯)

A. Accidentals in the bass part

1. A bass note raised against the key signature normally takes a 6/3 chord
2. A bass note lowered against the key signature normally takes a major 5/3

The image shows musical notation for two staves, treble and bass clef. The top staff has notes with accidentals and labels 1) and 2). The bottom staff shows the corresponding bass line with accidentals.

B. Accidentals above the bass part

1. A raised third in one of the parts above the bass makes a minor 5/3 into a major 5/3
2. A lowered third in one of the parts above the bass makes a major 5/3 into a minor 5/3
3. A sixth in one of the parts above the bass makes a 5/3 into a 6/3

The image shows a musical score with three systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff, a middle staff with a treble clef, and a bass clef staff. The first system is labeled '1)' and shows a raised third in the middle staff. The second system is labeled '2)' and shows a lowered third in the middle staff. The third system is labeled '3)' and shows a sixth in the middle staff. The bass part in all systems consists of a single note on the bass line.

III. Cadences

A. The *finalis* (final resting point of a cadence) normally receives a major 5/3.

1. There are some cadences to minor 5/3s in early Baroque repertoire, but not usually long or important ones. Minor cadences usually want to move right into the next phrase rather than repose.
2. Sometimes in an ambiguous spot an elegant solution is to play a chord with no third.
3. After a cadence, if the next phrase begins with the same bass note, the harmony normally becomes minor again.

B. A descending fifth or ascending fourth in the bass is a perfect cadence.

1. The penultimate bass note takes a 4-3 dissonance/resolution (or 3-4-3).
2. The third here is always a major third, and sometimes needs to be raised against the key signature.

The image shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The top staff has a chord with a major third and a sharp sign above it. The bottom staff has a single note on the bass line.

C. A falling whole or half step in the bass is a 'tenor cadence'

1. The one with a half step is also called a 'mi' cadence.
2. The penultimate bass note takes a 7-6 dissonance/resolution (or 6-7-6, or 5-6).
3. The one with a whole step must take a major sixth, and it sometimes needs to be raised against the key signature.

The image shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The top staff has a chord with a major sixth and a sharp sign above it. The bottom staff has a single note on the bass line.

D. An *ascending* fifth or *descending* fourth leads to a *finalis* that feels to modern ears like a 'dominant.' This is an older type of cadence from the Renaissance and more rare.

1. The penultimate note often takes a 5-6, and the voice usually continues ascending one more whole step to arrive at the major third of the *finalis* chord.

The image shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The top staff has a chord with a major third and a sharp sign above it. The bottom staff has a single note on the bass line.

E. When the bass descends a half step and then returns, it's a 'descant cadence' or 'bass suspension.' A rare case.

1. The harmony on the anti-penultimate bass note normally goes from 5/3 to 5/2 or 4/2, and then the bass resolves the dissonance by descending a half step to the leading tone.



NB: This handout is a somewhat oversimplified explanation of early basso continuo harmony. As you master the rules above, you will come across many exceptions in the repertoire (and especially many pieces with completely un-figured or under-figured continuo parts). There are also other instinctive commonplace procedures that were understood by most composers or players harmonizing a bass line (i.e., that when the bass rises a semi-tone, the first bass note gets a '6').