

Introduction to Figured Bass

Like jazz piano, figured bass combines music notation with chord symbols. Figured bass uses numbers and a bass line to represent intervals above the given bass notes. The bass is played by the left hand, and chords are built up in the right from the intervals supplied.

The following numbers are employed: **2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9**. Up to 3 numbers are stacked vertically to indicate simultaneous intervals.

Intervals in figured bass are written down without any indication of their quality. No symbols or words are used to describe an interval as major, minor, augmented or diminished. Instead, the interval is determined by counting a given number of scale steps above the bass note.

Here is an example in the key of C Major:

This represents a chord with E at the bottom, and additional notes 3 and 6 scale steps above E.

The C Major scale:

This is the actual chord represented by the figured bass notation. All that was needed to find the notes was knowledge of the key signature of C Major as well as the C Major scale -- nothing else. The notes were derived without ever having to consider whether the intervals were major, minor, etc.

The chord above is by no means the only possible realization. All the examples below are equally valid. Be aware of the following:

1. The vertical order of the figures does not determine the order of the intervals in the chord.
2. The right hand can be played in various regions of the keyboard.
3. The intervals in the right hand should be in close position, i.e. in an arrangement that is playable by one hand alone (with a total span of about an octave).

Accidentals in the key signature may affect the notes the right hand will play. However, accidentals earlier in the bar do not influence figures that occur later on. When chromatically altered bass notes are found, scale-step counting proceeds as if the note were unaltered.

Intervals can be chromatically altered by adding a sharp, flat or natural beside the number. A sharp raises an interval a half-step, a flat lowers by a half-step and a natural can do either, depending on the key signature.

It is essential to realize that figures have no functional quality, i.e. they do not denote exactly the same kind of chord every time they appear. The resultant chord always depends on the key signature and the particular scale degree chosen. Here is an example of how identical figures lead to completely different results:

Thus, the most that can be said about a figure is that it represents a very general kind of chord, i.e. a root position triad, a 7th chord, an inversion of some triad or chord, or a suspension with resolution. When you play figured bass, don't try to over-interpret the figures: just determine the intervals, arrange them appropriately in the right hand and play the chord. Excessive thinking will slow you down!

Figured bass is usually abbreviated by including just enough intervals to identify the chord. Other intervals are omitted, but the player is expected to fill them in anyway. The rationale is that squinting at too many numbers slows the performance too much, and chords can usually be written accurately even with some omissions.

The figure 3 (a third of some kind above the bass) rarely appears unless it is part of a 4-3 suspension. To indicate root position triads, no symbol at all is necessary. The performer is expected to remember to include a third, and sometimes a fifth, above the bass. If the third is to be chromatically altered, a standalone sharp, flat or natural is used, which refers to the colour of the third.

The figure 8 also rarely appears, unless it represents the resolution of a suspension, e.g. 9-8.

The art of figured bass, then, is to determine what **intervals** (including the omitted ones) are present, translate them into **notes** with any necessary **doublings**, and arrange them so that **smooth voice-leading** is possible between chords.

SUMMARY

1. Key signatures affect the intervals you play. For minor keys, do not assume leading notes are automatically raised!
2. Accidentals earlier in the bar have no effect on the intervals you play.
3. Chromatic alteration of the bass does not affect the counting of scale steps in determining an interval.
4. Don't think too much about the harmonic function of the figures: you may be led astray!