

GRADE 6 MUSIC THEORY

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Lesson 2: Figured Bass

Figured Bass



G:I IV⁶ V⁶ I iii⁶ vi IV IV² vii⁶ I V I V⁶ vi⁶ vii⁶ I⁶ ii⁶ V V⁷ I

Example of figured bass in four-part writing (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass)

Roman Numerals indicate the degree on which the chord is built
Figured Bass indicates the position of the chord (how it is played).

Figured Bass

- Figured bass is a system of describing a chord above a given bass note. The numbers in figured bass refer to the diatonic intervals above the bass note in accordance with the key signature:

		Figured Bass	Abbrev.
Root Position (a)	3rd 5th	5 3	To nothing! So common!
First Inversion (b)	3rd 6th	6 3	6
Second Inversion (c)	4th 6th	6 4	6 4 always written in full

Figured Bass

- The figured bass stays the same**, regardless of which triad is being described. In the key of C major, this is how each triad in each position would be analysed:

I 5 3 II 6 3 III 6 4 IV 5 3 V 6 3 VI 6 4 VII 5 3

I 6 3 II 6 4 III 5 3 IV 6 3 V 6 4 VI 5 3 VII 6 4

I 6 4 II 5 3 III 6 4 IV 5 3 V 6 4 VI 5 3 VII 6 4

Open Chords & Figured Bass

1. Given that all the open position chords below contain C in the bass, they can all be described as $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ | \\ 3 \end{matrix}$

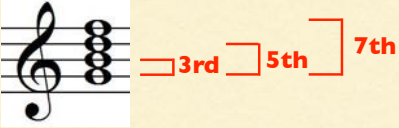
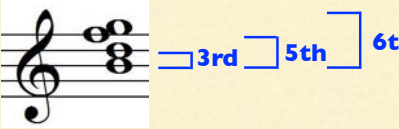
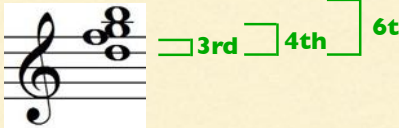
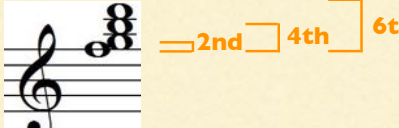


Open Chords & Figured Bass

2. The same also applies to open chords in first and second inversions:



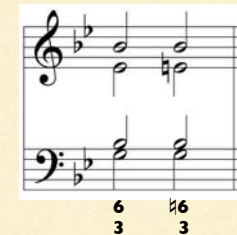
7th Chords & Figured Bass

		Figured Bass	Abbrev.
Root Position (a)		$\begin{matrix} 7 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{matrix}$	$\begin{matrix} 7 \\ = \\ 7 \end{matrix}$
First Inversion (b)		$\begin{matrix} 6 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{matrix}$	$\begin{matrix} 6 \\ = \\ 5 \end{matrix}$
Second Inversion (c)		$\begin{matrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 3 \end{matrix}$	$\begin{matrix} 4 \\ = \\ 3 \end{matrix}$
Third Inversion (d)		$\begin{matrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 2 \end{matrix}$	$\begin{matrix} 4 \\ = \\ 2 \end{matrix}$

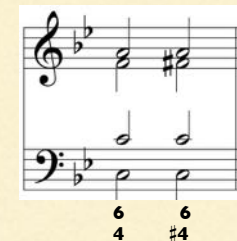
Chromatic Notes in Figured Bass

1. Remember that the numbers in figured bass refer only to the diatonic intervals above the bass note in accordance with the key signature.

In a key signature with two flats, a $\begin{matrix} 6 \\ | \\ 3 \end{matrix}$ written beneath a G in the bass tells us that a B \flat and an E \flat would be part of the chord. If you wanted an E \natural you would have to write $\begin{matrix} \sharp 6 \\ | \\ 3 \end{matrix}$.



In the same key a $\begin{matrix} 6 \\ | \\ 4 \end{matrix}$ written beneath a C in the bass indicates an A and F are part of the chord. If you wanted an F \sharp (e.g. to signify G minor) you would have to write $\begin{matrix} 6 \\ | \\ \sharp 4 \end{matrix}$.



Chromatic Notes in Figured Bass

- An accidental on its own always refers to third above the bass note. So # = #3 (implying $\overset{5}{\#3}$), and $\overset{6}{\#} = \overset{6}{\#3}$.
- These chromatic alterations usually occur in modulations and frequently in minor keys. The **tonic**, **subdominant**, and **dominant** are the most likely affected and can be either major or minor chords depending on the context.

6 6 # #4 6 # # #
2

Chromatic Notes in Figured Bass

- Notice that if you are using **Roman numerals with figured bass**, then **you do not need to use accidentals in the figured bass**, because:
 - the Roman numeral will already suggest any accidentals by telling you if the chord is major, minor, augmented or diminished.

i — v⁶ — VI — iv⁶ — V — V⁴/₂ — i⁶ — IV — V — I

A minor: F and G ($\hat{6}$ & $\hat{7}$) can be sharpened if ascending, which can change **minor iv and v** chords to **major IV and V** chords. Chord i can also become a **major chord I** at cadences (*tierce de Picardie*).