

## Figured Bass

1. Take attendance and take questions about CYOW assignment Self-Test 3-3 A.
2. Use the following excerpt to introduce the terms: *recitative*, *figured bass* (or *thoroughbass*) and *continuo* part.<sup>1</sup>

### EXAMPLE:

J.S. Bach, Recitative (Bass), from *Easter Oratorio*, II  
Score: K/P Self-Test 3-3, p. 51  
Recording: MUSC 115 CD Track 5<sup>2</sup>

- “Many composers who were writing between 1600 and 1800 used a shorthand notation to describe the intervals above bass notes. This type of shorthand, known as **figured bass** (or sometimes *thoroughbass*), is a handy way of understanding choral construction as well as the melodic movement between chords. Today, the lead-sheet symbols of jazz and popular music serve a similar purpose.”<sup>3</sup>
- “In the Baroque period (ca. 1600-1750), the keyboard player in an ensemble read from a [*continuo*] part consisting only of a bass line" and symbols that indicate what harmonies are to be played.<sup>4</sup>
- What the keyboard player plays is referred to as a **figured-bass realization** (pp. 48-49). "The realization of figured basses is still considered to be an effective way to learn certain aspects of tonal composition."<sup>5</sup> We will create learn how to create figured-bass realizations in MUSC 116.
- In the literature, figured-bass symbols will be found above or below the staff. We will always write figured-bass symbols below the staff.

---

<sup>1</sup> Links to definitions are available on the course Web site.

<sup>2</sup> Available to students on the course Web site. See Online Course Listening.

<sup>3</sup> Laitz 2008, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Kostka and Payne 2008, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Kostka and Payne 2008, p. 49.

## Figured-Bass Symbols

- “Figured bass is predicated on the fact that the bass, the lowest-sounding voice, is harmonically the most important voice of any texture.”<sup>6</sup>
- Figured-bass symbols can be used *analytically* (to describe chordal constructions/voice motion in a passage) or *compositionally* (to create tonal music from figured-bass symbols).
- Figured-bass symbols indicate generic intervals (above the bass) with regard to the prevailing key signature.<sup>7</sup>
- By convention, larger numbers are listed above smaller numbers. Doubling and octave placement of notes above the bass are left up to the performer.
- Most symbols represent chordal constructions, however, figured-bass symbols are also be used to represent melodic motion in individual voices, for example, 5–6, 4–3, 7–6, 9–8, etc.
- By convention, the seven triad and seventh-chord formations (see Lesson 16) are so common that they are *often* assumed or abbreviated. The most common abbreviations are shown below:

**TRIADS**

Root position      1st inversion      2nd inversion

**SEVENTH CHORDS**

Root position      1st inversion      2nd inversion      3rd inversion

Keep in mind that figured-bass symbols are not standardized. In the literature, you will find a great deal of variation in their presentation. For example, a root position may be indicated as a:  $\bar{5}$ ,  $\bar{5}$ , or omitted entirely.

- Accidentals in the music, called *chromatic alterations*, are reflected in the corresponding figured-bass symbols. Note that an accidental in the bass will not be reflected in the figured-bass symbols.
  - An accidental by itself refers to the third above the bass.
  - An accidental next to a number raises or lowers that interval by a half step.
  - A slash through a number or + next to a number raises that interval by a half step.
  - A solitary horizontal line indicates that a particular note above the bass is held from one sonority to the next
  - A dash, as in 4–3, means that a single voice moves from the first interval to the second.

## HOMEWORK

1. K/P Workbook 3-3 A.
2. Read Ch. 3: Recognizing Chords in Various Textures, pp. 52-55.

## MATERIALS

1. Figured Bass handout (pdf) and recording available on course Web site.

<sup>6</sup> Laitz 2008, p. 122. See Laitz (2008) pp. 122-126 for a comprehensive introduction to Figured Bass.

<sup>7</sup> Please note that *lead-sheet symbols* (to be discussed in Lesson 19), do NOT take the prevailing key signature into consideration.

BAIN MUSC 115  
*Music Theory I*

3. **MUSC 115 CD Track 5:** Bach, *Easter Oratorio*, II, Recitativo: Wir sind erfreut (bass), performed by the Gabrieli Players, Paul McCreesh, cond. (p) 2001 Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, Hamburg (0:32)