Figured Bass Symbology

Robert T. Kelley

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- Figured bass is a shorthand system for indicating the harmonies that occur above a given bass note or string of bass notes.
- The numbers represent intervals that should be played, sung, or written above the given bass note.
 - Compound intervals are usually reduced to simple intervals in the figured bass notation.
 - Interval quality is usually ignored (with the exception of the 5 with a forward slash through it) and is simply implied by the key signature and whatever alterations are added to the figures.
- Figured bass is an abstract harmonic notation and does not typically include information about voice leading.
 - It is therefore the performer's duty to ensure that the figured-bass realization adheres to the Baroque style, including avoidance of parallel perfect fifths and octaves and largely stepwise voice leading.
 - For more information on how to play from a figured bass, see my translation of Nivers, *The Art of Accompanying on the Basso Continuo*, http://www.robertkelleyphd.com/Nivers.pdf>.
- The following symbols indicate that the note referred to by that number should be raised by a half step (A1) (relative to the key signature):
 - 1. A backward slash through a number
 - 2. A plus symbol before a number (or sometimes after)
 - 3. A sharp symbol (#) before a number (or sometimes after)
- The following symbols indicate that the note referred to by that number should be lowered by a half step (A1) (relative to the key signature):
 - 1. A flat symbol (b) before a number (or sometimes after)
 - 2. A forward slash through a number (very rare)
- A natural symbol (\$) simply means that the note should be made a natural regardless of the key signature or any other accidentals in the measure.
- If a sharp, flat, or natural appears alone in the figures, it means that the note a third above the bass should be altered as indicated. (# = #3)
- If no figure appears below a bass note, the figure $\frac{8}{5}$ should usually be assumed.
 - Most Baroque music uses partially figured basses, where other figures are omitted as well.
 - In such cases, a performer must refer to the other instrumental parts to determine the figure.

Figures	Realization	Figures	Realization
No figures	8 5 3	5+	$^{8}_{\sharp 5}$ Raise 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ -step
Tasto Solo	0 (bass alone, upper voices silent)	5	$\frac{6}{5}$ indicates dim. 5th
	Upper voices stay stationary as bass moves	<i>ه</i>	5 indicates dim. 5th 3
#	⁸ ₅ Raise 3 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a sharp)	5 3	8 5 3 8
þ	⁸ ₅ Lower 3 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a flat)	4	$\binom{8}{5}_{4}^{6}$ (Usu. 4 3)
4	$^{8}_{5}$ Make 3 natural regardless of key signature	6	6 3 (8)
2	$\begin{array}{c} 6\\ 4\\ 2\end{array}$	¢ or č	$\begin{array}{c} \begin{pmatrix} 6'\\ \#6' \end{pmatrix} (\text{Raise 6} \frac{1}{2}\text{-step}) \\ 3 \end{array}$
# 2	⁶ ⁴ ⁴ ⁴ ⁴ ² Raise 2 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a sharp)	6 3	6 3 8
b2	⁶ ⁴ _{b2} Lower 2 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a flat)		6 4 6
þ 2	$^{6}_{4}$ Make 2 natural regardless of key signature	$\begin{array}{c c} 4\\ 2\\ \hline 6\\ 4 \end{array}$	4 2 6 4
2+	⁶ ⁴ $_{\pm 2}^{4}$ (Usu. dim. 7th chord) Raise 2 by $\frac{1}{2}$ -step	3 6 5	3 6 3 5
2 3	$\begin{array}{c} 7 & 8 \\ 4 & 5 \\ 2 & 3 \end{array}$ (bass moves, upper voices hold)	6 5 3	6 5 3
3	8 5 3	6 6 6	$\frac{6}{3}$ (parallel 3rds and 6ths)
4	${}^{8}_{4}$ (Usu. 4 3)	7	(8) (8)
4 3		$\begin{bmatrix} 7 & 6 \\ 7 \end{bmatrix}$	$ \begin{array}{c} (8) & (8) \\ 7 & 6 \\ 3 & 3 \\ 7 & 8 \end{array} $
$\frac{4}{2}$	$\begin{pmatrix} 6\\ 4\\ 2 \end{pmatrix}$		$ \begin{array}{cccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc$
$\frac{4+}{2}$	$\overset{6}{\overset{4}{_{2}}}$ Raise 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ -step	8 8 8	Play the bass line alone in octaves
$\frac{4}{3}$	6 4 3	9 8	9 8 5 5
5	8 5 3	10 10 10	3 3 parallel 10ths

Table 1: Figured-Bass Symbols and Their Typical Realizations

Figure 1: Joseph Joachim Quantz, "Affettuoso di molto" from Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen.

Huoso dimolto. ٤ 6 p: TTL 6 6 5 .5 .5 .6 .5 p p 6 me pr 42 07 2 31 81 8 PP pp 50 6 6 6 *6*6 5 55 6 p: P m p D 66 39 Ş 3 ₽₽: p P ₽.