

Figured Bass Symbols

Robert T. Kelley



- 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 (\sharp) 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 (\natural) 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. ($\sharp = \sharp 3$)
- If no figure appears below a bass note, the figure $\frac{8}{3}$ 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 vocal parts and other instrumental parts to determine the figure.

Table 1: Figured-Bass Symbols and Their Typical Realizations

| Figures | Realization | Figures | Realization |
|---|---|---|---|
| No figures | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | 5^+ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ \#5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ Raise 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ -step |
| Tasto Solo | 0 (bass alone, upper voices silent) | $\cancel{5}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ indicates dim. 5th |
| — | Upper voices stay stationary as bass moves | $\begin{smallmatrix} 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| \sharp | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ \#3 \end{smallmatrix}$ Raise 3 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a sharp) | $\begin{smallmatrix} 5 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$ (Usu. 4 3) |
| \flat | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ \flat 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ Lower 3 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a flat) | 6 | $\begin{smallmatrix} (8) \\ 6 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| \natural | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ \natural 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ Make 3 natural regardless of key signature | $\grave{6}$ or $\grave{6}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} (8) \\ \#6 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ (Raise 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ -step) |
| 2 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} (8) \\ 6 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| $\sharp 2$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ \sharp 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ Raise 2 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a sharp) | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 6 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| $\flat 2$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ \flat 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ Lower 2 by a $\frac{1}{2}$ -step (not necessarily a flat) | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| $\natural 2$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ \natural 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ Make 2 natural regardless of key signature | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| 2_+ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ \sharp 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ (Usu. dim. 7th chord) Raise 2 by $\frac{1}{2}$ -step | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 5 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 3 \\ 5 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| 2 3 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 7 & 8 \\ 4 & 5 \\ 2 & 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ (bass moves, upper voices hold) | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| 3 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | 6 6 6 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ (parallel 3rds and 6ths) |
| 4 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$ (Usu. 4 3) | 7 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 7 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| 4 3 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 & 8 \\ 5 & 5 \\ 4 & 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | 7 6 | $\begin{smallmatrix} (8) & (8) \\ 7 & 6 \\ 3 & 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ (no 5) |
| $\begin{smallmatrix} 4 \\ 4 \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 7 \\ 4 \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 7 & 8 \\ 4 & 3 \\ 2 & (1) \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| $\begin{smallmatrix} 4_+ \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ \sharp 4 \\ 2 \end{smallmatrix}$ Raise 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ -step | 8 8 8 | Play the bass line alone in octaves |
| $\begin{smallmatrix} 4 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | $\begin{smallmatrix} 6 \\ 4 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | 9 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 9 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ (Usu. 9 8) |
| 5 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 8 \\ 5 \\ 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ | 9 8 | $\begin{smallmatrix} 9 & 8 \\ 5 & 5 \\ 3 & 3 \end{smallmatrix}$ |
| | | 10 10 10 | parallel 10ths |

