Tissimo

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tissimo.co/worksheets/figured-bass

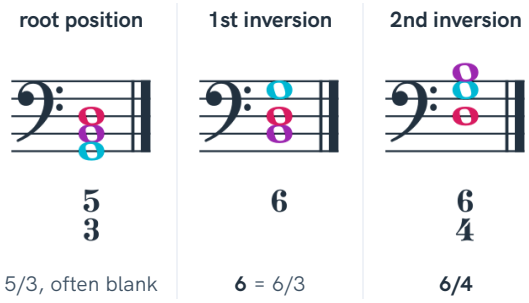
Figured bass

Baroque composers often wrote just a bass line with small numbers under it. The keyboard player read the numbers and filled in the chords on the spot. The numbers are called **figures**, and they all count up from the bass note.

NUMBERS COUNT UP FROM THE BASS

A figure names an **interval above the bass**. Count letters up from the bass note, calling the bass 1. Over B, the D is a 3rd and the G is a 6th: the figure is **6**, short for 6/3.

The figure gives letters, not places. The upper notes can sit in any octave and in any order. Root position, 5/3, is so common that it is usually left blank. These are the three positions of Handout 01.

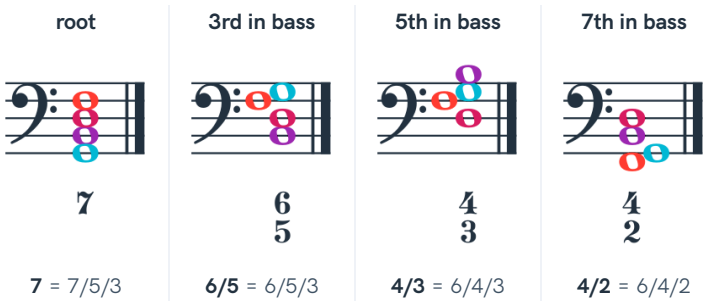


SEVENTHS: 7, 6/5, 4/3, 4/2

Add F and the chord is **G7**. Four notes need three numbers, so composers keep only the ones that tell the positions apart: **7**, **6/5**, **4/3** and **4/2** (often just 2).

To find the root of an inverted 7th, look for the **2nd**, the two notes squeezed together: the upper one is the root (Exercise 14). These are the labels Exercise 37 uses: **V6/5** is G7 with B in the bass.

root 3rd 5th 7th



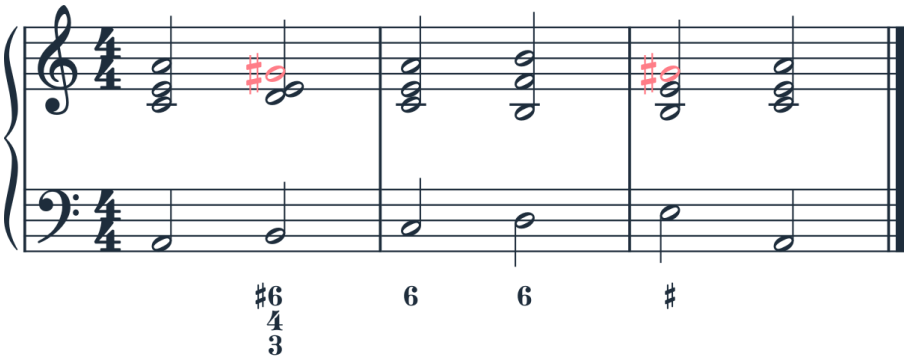
ACCIDENTALS, AND PLAYING FROM THE FIGURES

An accidental alone
changes the **3rd** above the bass. Under E in A minor, a lone ♯ means G♯, the raised leading tone.

An accidental beside a number
changes that note: ♯6 raises the 6th. A 6 with a slash through it, 6̸, means the same.

Realizing
Bass in the left hand, **three notes** in the right. Move each to the nearest note of the next chord (Handouts 42 and 385).

Here is an A minor bass that climbs A–B–C–D–E and returns home. Read the figures one at a time: the ♯6/4/3 under B and the ♯ under E both ask for G♯. Baroque keyboard players did this at sight. It was called the **continuo**: a harpsichord or organ filling in the harmony over the bass (Handout 340).



i – V4/3 – i6 – ii°6 – V – i · **coral** = the notes a ♯ asks for

Try it Play the A minor example slowly. Then cover the treble staff and play it again from the bass and its figures alone. When the figures feel easy, realize two more basses in Exercise 72.

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