

Realising Figured Bases

Nowadays, in rock, pop, jazz and folk groups, most instrumentalists read from “lead sheets”. Above the melody, these have chord symbols which show which chords the keyboard and guitar players should keep to.

Sometimes they also show which bass notes the keyboard and bass players should follow. In the jazz melody below, the bass notes of the chords (e.g. G for the G chord, but F for G/F, E for C/E) mark out a walking bass from G all the way down to A.

Between about 1650 and 1750, performers who played the same types of instrument – keyboard (usually harpsichord), bass (or cello), and guitar (or lute) were given a “figured bass”. Sometimes an organist would play the chords on a manuals (keyboard) and the bass line on the pedals.

Under the bass line were written figures that showed which chords should be played. The musician(s) who played the chords and the bass line were called the “(basso) continuo”.

Here is the figured bass that would be given to a continuo player to accompany the tune above (with the same chords):

In the exam, you will be given a figured bass and asked to “realise” it for keyboard or four-part voices (soprano, alto, tenor and bass). (To “realise” a figured bass means to write out the notes that a keyboard player would play, or that voices would sing.) Here is an example of a figured bass realised for keyboard:

Here is an example for voices. (There have to be four parts, one for each voice to sing.)