Writing Figured Basses

In question 1 of the exam, you are asked to harmonise one of two melodies. Usually candidates use Roman numerals to show the chords in the first melody. Instead of this, you can, if you prefer, harmonise the second melody. In this case, you write a figured bass that would suit it. This can be more interesting than writing chord symbols alone, because you can see the bass line and try to make it more interesting.

The section begins by explaining how to notate figured basses – which figures are needed and which are not.

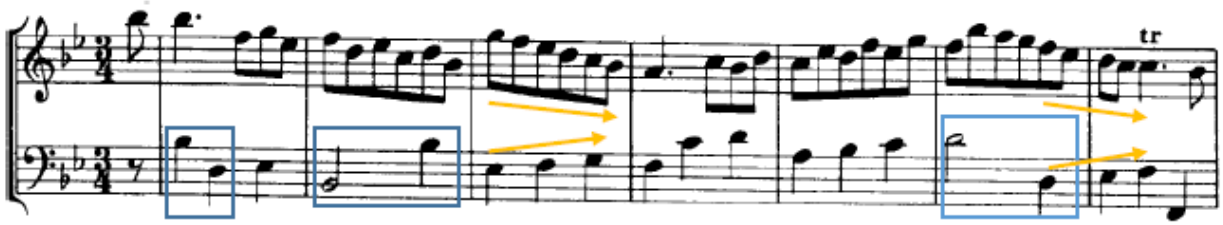
It then lists the chords and inversions that are generally used, and shows how to create strong chord progressions.

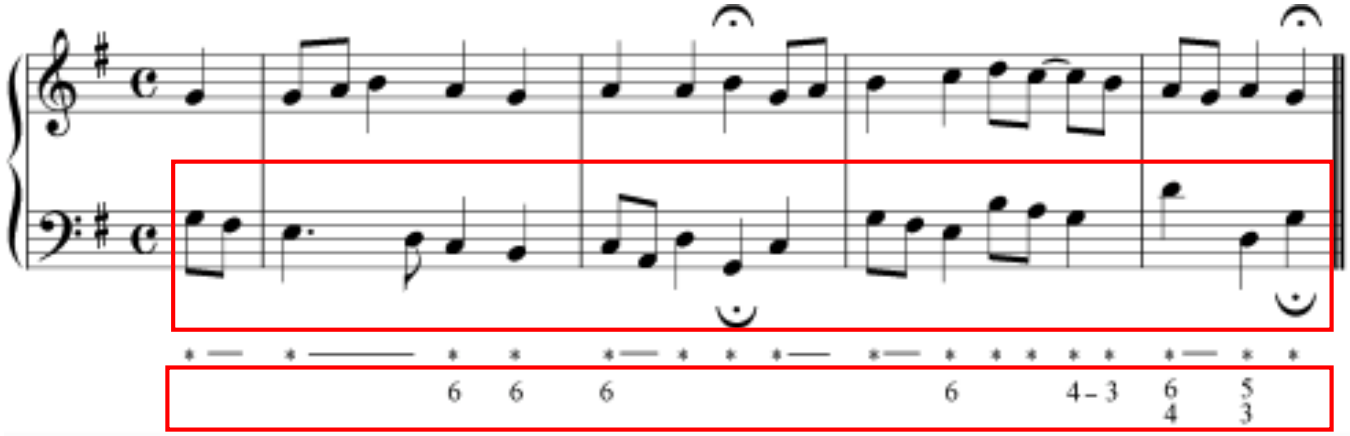
Particular attention is given to progressions which were particularly common in the late Baroque Period, including the "passing" $^{6}/_{3}$ and $^{6}/_{4}$ chords and "cadential" $^{6}/_{4}$ chords.

Baroque composers liked to "decorate" their tunes; you will see how Bach used various types of melodic decoration (such as auxiliary notes and anticipations. (These are dealt with in detail in the Harmony section of the Score Analysis module.)

It is possible to write figured basses simply by following "rules"; however Baroque composers developed their own style, so it is important to know the techniques they used to make their music interesting. There are many examples of Baroque figured basses (particularly by Bach and Handel, usually judged the "masters" of the late Baroque Period) that you can study, and there are comments on the elements of their style that you will be expected to imitate in the exam. Here is an example:

- In bars 3 and 5, every new beat has a new chord.
- The bass line doubles the melody a third apart for four beats in bars 5-6, but it never doubles the melody a fifth or an octave apart.
- Melody and bass move in contrary motion (opposite directions) in bars 3 and 6-7.



Finally there are exam-type questions that you can practise on.

In exam questions, the first line is done for you to show what is expected. Then you are given the melody and an empty bass line, with stars underneath to show where to write chords. Here is an example of the sort of thing you might be given. The red boxes show what you would be expected to write in – the bass line and the figures.