

## Chromaticism in Figured Bass

This is a summary of the most common figured bass symbols for triads. Because this is a system that evolved over time, there is some redundancy in the functions of some of the symbols.

- Accidentals that appear to the right of the figure (number):
  - "flat": the specified pitch has a flat accidental, but it can also mean "lower by a half step"
  - "sharp": the specified pitch has a sharp accidental, but it can also mean "raise by a half step"
  - "\ through the figure or "+" to the right: raise by a half step
- Accidentals appearing alone or without a figure next to them refer to the note that is a third above the bass
- Chromaticism in the bass has to be indicated in the notation because the figured bass cannot accommodate it
- The figures do not determine the registral placement of the upper notes (they could be at any octave above the indicated interval)
- The figures do not determine which notes might be doubled (including the bass note); doublings are up to the player

In the five examples below, all chromatic alterations are represented. For each example, two versions are given: one with the notes as close as possible to the bass, and the other where one or both notes are at a higher octave transposition.

The image displays five examples of figured bass triads, each shown in two staves (treble and bass clef) with a circled number above. Below each pair of staves are the corresponding figured bass symbols.

Example 1: Treble clef shows notes G4, B4, D5; Bass clef shows notes G2, B2, D3. Symbols:  $6^b$  and  $6^b$  with flats below.

Example 2: Treble clef shows notes G4, A4, B4; Bass clef shows notes G2, A2, B2. Symbols:  $6$  and  $6$  with sharps below.

Example 3: Treble clef shows notes G4, A4, B4; Bass clef shows notes G2, A2, B2. Symbols:  $b$  and  $b$  below.

Example 4: Treble clef shows notes G4, A4, B4; Bass clef shows notes G2, A2, B2. Symbols:  $5^b$  and  $5^b$  with flats below.

Example 5: Treble clef shows notes G4, A4, B4; Bass clef shows notes G2, A2, B2. Symbols:  $6$  or  $6^+$  and  $4$  or  $4^+$  with a slash through the 4 below.