



Baroque Harmony 1

Harmonizing a Stepwise Bass Line in a Major Key

The **Rule of the Octave** is a pedagogical framework from the 17th and 18th centuries that outlines a systematic way to harmonize a stepwise bass line (ascending or descending through an octave) in both major and minor keys. It serves as a foundational tool in the study of thorough bass (also known as basso continuo) and partimento.

- **Figured Bass:** In the Rule of the Octave, each bass note is accompanied by figures—numerical symbols that indicate the intervals above the bass note and guide the realization of the harmony. These figures specify the chords and their inversions, allowing performers to create harmonies that align with the stylistic norms of the time.
- **Thorough Bass:** The Rule of the Octave was integral to the practice of thorough bass, where a musician (often a keyboardist or lutenist) improvised harmonies over a given bass line. It provided a standardized vocabulary of chords and voice leading, facilitating quick and stylistically appropriate realizations.

The Rule of the Octave simplifies the teaching of harmony by providing a clear structure for harmonizing scales, ensuring smooth voice leading and adherence to stylistic conventions of the Baroque and Classical periods.

In the **ascending Rule of the Octave in a major key**, the bass line moves stepwise up the scale, with specific harmonies applied to each scale degree. The **I chord** (the tonic) and the **V chord** (the dominant), are typically in root position, marked as "5" in figured bass, indicating a triad with the fifth above the bass note. For all other scale degrees—ii, iii, IV, vi, and vii°—the chords are harmonized in first inversion, marked as "6," which places the third of the chord in the bass. This creates smooth voice leading and aligns with the conventions of Baroque and Classical harmony.

In the **descending Rule of the Octave in a major key**, the bass line moves stepwise down the scale. The chords are typically in first inversion (marked "6"), but with notable variations. The **vi chord** is commonly harmonized with a raised sixth above the bass, indicated as "#6" in the figured bass. This adjustment creates a leading tone that enhances the voice leading to the next chord, often the dominant (V). The tonic (I) and dominant (V) remain in root position ("5"), anchoring the harmony.

This structured approach provides a clear framework for harmonizing major scales and is an essential practice for mastering thorough bass and improvisation in Baroque and Classical styles.

The figured bass outlined above represents a very basic application of the Rule of the Octave, offering a simple and practical starting point for understanding this concept; in practice, however, variations and embellishments, such as additional figures, altered tones, or chromatic passing chords, can be introduced to create more sophisticated and stylistically nuanced realizations.

Practical Examples

Here is an example of the Rule of the Octave applied to an ascending bass line in a major key.

Ascending Major Scale Simple Rule of the Octave

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The image displays musical notation for the Ascending Major Scale Simple Rule of the Octave in G major. It consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is an ascending major scale starting on G4. Above the staff, the scale degrees are indicated: 5, 6, 6, 6, 5, 6, 6, 5. Below the staff, the figured bass is written for the left hand. The figures are: 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 12, 14, 12, 14, 15. The figures are grouped into measures: 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 12, 14, 12, 14, 15.

Here is an example of the Rule of the Octave applied to a descending bass line in a major key. Notice the #6 on the sixth degree of the scale.

Descending Major Scale Simple Rule of the Octave

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You can make these examples more musical and engaging by incorporating diminutions, passing notes, and other embellishments to create a smoother and more expressive realization. Here is an ascending example of the Rule of the Octave in a major key, enhanced with diminutions.

Ascending Major Rule of the Octave with Diminutions

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I anticipated the dominant chord with the A on the last beat bar 2.

Further Reading

To explore this topic further, here are some recommended readings that provide deeper insights into the Rule of the Octave, figured bass, and historical improvisation:

1. **The Pianist's Guide to Historical Improvisation** by John J. Mortensen – This book offers a comprehensive introduction to historical improvisation practices, including the Rule of the Octave, and is an excellent resource for understanding the stylistic context and application of these techniques.
2. **Figured Bass on the Classical Guitar** by Peter Croton – A specialized guide for classical guitarists, this book delves into the realization of figured bass and includes practical examples, making it ideal for guitarists interested in thorough bass practices.
3. **Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento** by Job IJzerman – This book provides a theoretical and historical framework for understanding harmony and counterpoint as taught in historical traditions, with a focus on partimento and the Rule of the Octave.

These texts are invaluable for anyone looking to deepen their knowledge of historical harmony and its practical applications in both classical and modern contexts.

Practical Exercises for You

Here are some practical activities you can focus on for the next two weeks or month to deepen their understanding and application of the Rule of the Octave and related concepts:

Week 1-2: Foundational Practice

1. **Memorize the Basic Rule:** Practice harmonizing ascending and descending bass lines in a major key using the basic Rule of the Octave.
2. **Apply on the Guitar:**
 1. Play through the harmonizations in open position.

2. Experiment with movable shapes to play the Rule of the Octave in different keys.
3. **Add Figured Bass:** Write out a simple bass line with figures and practice realizing it on your instrument.
4. **Voice Leading:** Focus on smooth transitions between chords by minimizing finger movement and practicing legato connections.

Week 3-4: Creative Application

1. **Incorporate Embellishments:** Add passing tones, suspensions, and diminutions to your harmonizations to make them more musical.
2. **Experiment with Variations:**
 1. Try harmonizing using different inversions or altered tones, such as chromatic passing chords.
 2. Use the Rule of the Octave in a minor key and explore the differences.
3. **Compose a Short Study:** Write a short etude or piece using the Rule of the Octave as the harmonic foundation, incorporating creative diminutions.
4. **Transcribe and Analyze:** Find examples in Baroque music or partimento exercises where the Rule of the Octave is used, and transcribe them to see how composers applied it.

Extra Challenge for the Month:

1. **Improvise Using the Rule:**
 1. Improvise melodies over your harmonizations, keeping the figured bass framework in mind.
 2. Create a duet with one part playing the bass line and the other harmonizing or embellishing in real time.

Suggested Goals:

By the end of the month, aim to:

- Confidently harmonize a bass line using the Rule of the Octave in major and minor.
- Add stylistic embellishments to make the harmonizations musical.
- Understand how to apply the Rule of the Octave in both historical and modern improvisational contexts.