

The Rule of the Octave

The “rule of the octave” was a scheme devised by 16th and 17th century theorists to teach students how to harmonize an unfigured bass line when it ascended and descended by step through the scale.

Example: Francois Campion’s “rule of the octave” (1730):

If we were to combine all of the different versions of the “rule of the octave” created by different theorists and translate the figured bass symbols into Roman numeral symbols, it would result in something like this:

For major keys:

For minor keys:

Note that scale degrees $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$ are always root position triads and that scale degree $\hat{3}$ is always a first inversion triad. Note also that ii , ii° , and vii° are never found in root position, and that the iii chord is never used.

Special procedures:

- When the bass moves by descending fifths, both of the chords should be in root position
- For the deceptive cadence, chords on scale degrees $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{6}$ will both be in root position
- When the bass moves up by chromatic half step, the second chord will be in first inversion
- In minor, there is a tendency to move to the relative major, so scale degree $\hat{3}$ might be a root position III

Rule of the Octave Exercises:

Use the rule of the octave to choose figures for these unfigured bass lines, then realize in four parts.