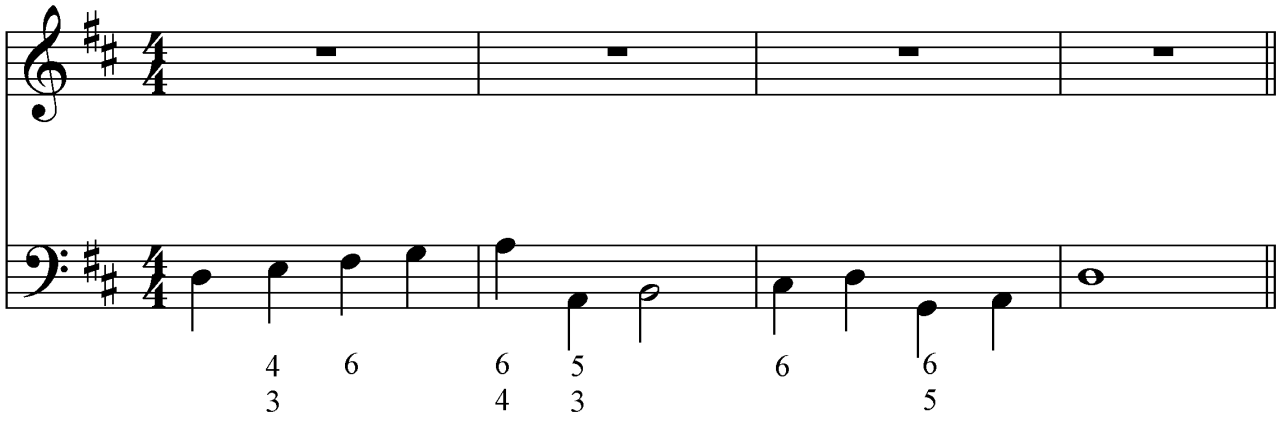
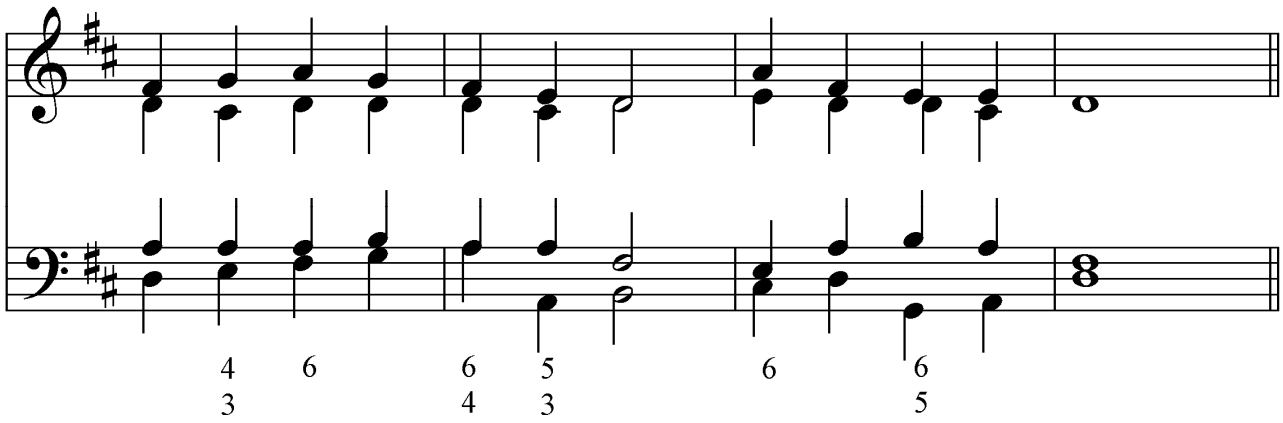
How to add parts above a figured bass

When we harmonise a melody it is always best to add the bass part first. In these figured bass exercises you are given the bass part anyway. It therefore seems logical to add a reasonable tune above the bass. It is usually the case that if the outer parts work well there will be a way of filling in the middle parts successfully.

Assume we are presented with **this** bass part.



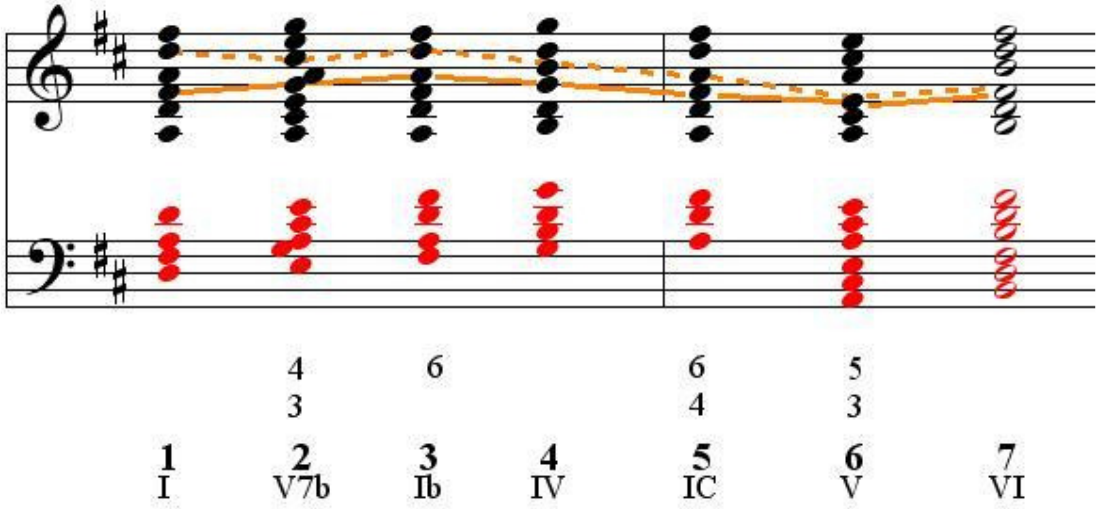
We want to end up with some elegant harmony like this:



It doesn't just happen! When you have done enough harmony, the process I am going to describe should happen quite quickly, even without you realising it. To start with, however, you need to weigh up all the possibilities slowly, until you can weigh them up rapidly.

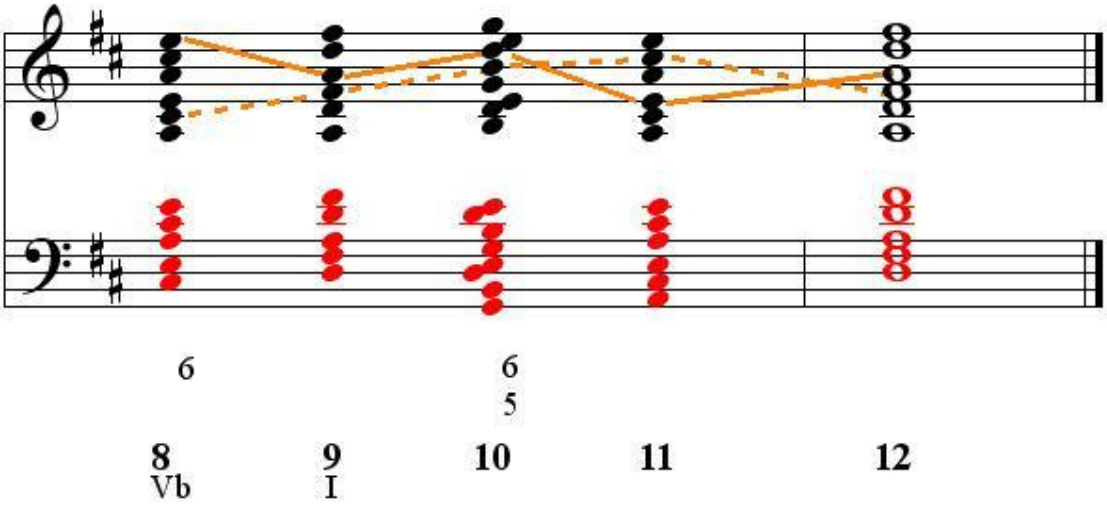
- For each chord there is a finite number of notes (vertically) above it which belong in that chord.
- Some of these are unreasonable because they are too high.
- Others you may rule out from the alto part because the tenor will need to have a note, or they are too low for the alto or too high for the tenor.
- Others you can rule out because they break a rule, such as in chord no. 3 where you would want to avoid doubling the F# as the bass has it already.
- With this is mind [and you could pencil in all the available notes] trace [in your mind or on paper] a smooth shape such as the thick line example, or the dotted line example (which has some jumps)

- As you work, check for consecutives. **Can you see the consecutive 5ths with the bass in chords 6 and 7? If you find some, you will have to change your line.**



- Do not opt for a note simply because it belongs in the chord, or you will produce an ungainly line.
- You need to think where you have been and where you want to go.
- Neither of these following lines really augur well for a successful completion of the exercise.

Do NOT do what follows!



In this exercise you need to know what will happen to the G in chord no. 2. It ought to fall but, if it did, you would have doubled 3rds (not entirely forbidden in outer parts in some contexts, but let's not go there). As the bass has the F# (i.e. the pitch is covered) you can allow the soprano G to

rise, as I did. The unreal 5ths in the worked solution between chords 2 & 3, are acceptable in this and similar contexts.

The next thing to consider is the progression V to VI chord nos 6 - 7. This nearly always requires you to double the 3rd of the chord. Happily, in this case, chord VI is minor; you can double a minor 3rd without being thought of as a vandal.

Chord 10 is a first inversion of a 7th chord; 'D' is the 7th so it needs to fall by step.

Here is an alternative solution. The **dotted lines** show a problem for the real purists. The sop and tenor do not have consecutives, but they jump in the same direction to a perfect concord (an octave). Such situations are best avoided, but if the tenor goes to a 'B' from C# there are consecutive 5ths from the minim to the next chord (S & T) although the crotchet E could have gone to an 'A' as it did in my first solution. These are the niceties one has to consider when doing harmony.

The only solution to experience; the more you do the better you get. You'll notice that the last few chords have not changed. This is because I recognise the final progression (**II^{7}b V I**) and I go onto automatic pilot when I see it.