An Introduction to Figured Bass Accompaniment on the Classical Guitar

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AN INTRODUCTION TO FIGURED BASS ACCOMPANIMENT ON THE
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ABSTRACT

This treatise serves as both a brief amalgamation of historical continuo methodology as well as a working continuo method for the advanced guitar student. The first portion of the treatise informs the reader of figured bass practice with regard to stringed instruments such as the lute and theorbo in a historical context. A discussion of continuo practice on these intended instruments leads to the proposition of an application for continuo realization on the modern classical guitar. The second half of the treatise is a method composed of a series of exercises designed to gradually familiarize the reader with figured bass realizations on the classical guitar. Most of the exercises involving figured bass realization are derived from Santiago de Murcia’s Resumen de Acompañar la Parte con la Guitarra.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The life-long process of mastering any instrument involves careful study of technique, repertoire, interpretation, historical performance practice, and a thorough investigation of other instruments and literature to enhance one’s own understanding of musical language. More often than not, information on all the afore mentioned subjects are taken from historical documents which have been vetted over centuries and trusted by pedagogues through generations. While undoubtedly, new ideas and adaptations to older didactic materials often help prepare the student for modern interpretations and trends, one must prioritize more seasoned and somewhat “outdated” practices in order to fully comprehend the evolution of our instrument over time in regards to technique, theory, and practice.

Although the classical guitar is a relatively new instrument, careful investigation of history, repertoire, and pedagogy from previous time periods remains fundamental in the development of vocabulary, fluency and mobility on the instrument. The “classical” guitar has its own place in the history of stringed instruments since the guitar, as we know it today, is still very young compared to the family of bowed instruments. Despite the relatively brief history of the guitar, its role in performance has evolved continuously along side the construction of the instrument itself. Historically belonging to the family of plucked instruments including the lute, theorbo, archlute, chitarrone, and vihuela, in its modernized state the guitar is completely transformed and in many ways a refined version of these instruments. Modern adaptations include new materials for strings, standardized scale length, bracing systems, construction materials, and structural design enhancements that have completely transformed the instrument into the form it has today. These developments serve to increase playability, intonation, projection, and clarity to the old plucked ancestors from which the instrument was born. The guitar has changed significantly even since the mid twentieth century to accommodate larger concert halls and increasingly demanding repertoire.

For centuries the guitar, in its numerous forms, has been employed as an accompanimental instrument. In the height of its popularity in the seventeenth century, composers and players of the guitar created methods to better help the guitar enthusiast
understand how to accompany on the instrument with greater fluency and appropriate style. Continuo playing, for instance, was the most pragmatic accompanimental skill of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And while this practice is not as common today as it was several hundred years ago, it remains indispensable to the performance of repertoire with a written figured bass accompaniment.

As for the modern classical guitarist, figured bass realization is something quite unfamiliar to most even though the instrument lends itself very well to the practice. Continuo playing is a practice historically associated primarily with the organ, harpsichord, lute and theorbo. For example, a performance of music by J.S. Bach in Leipzig in 1727 used continuo instruments including the organ, harpsichord, gambas and lutes in the Trauerode at the University Church (Williams 27). This practice resulted from certain developments in musical composition. With the introduction of Caccini’s Nuovo Musiche came the necessity for delicate yet supportive accompaniment to the solo voice, which had assumed a greater depth of expressive capacity and freedom compared to the homogeneity of previous literatures. Intently developed in the latter half of the sixteenth century, the theorbo in particular was the required accompanimental instrument for the repertoire (North 3). The extended neck and deep bass register gave it more power and sustain than the lute but still was delicate enough so as not to obscure the solo voice part.

Perhaps part of the reason continuo playing is not as common as it was centuries ago, in addition to changes in compositional style, is that it is generally understood that such a practice must be done on period instruments, which are hardly as readily available as modern instruments. Various treatises and methods have been written for keyboard instruments on the topic of continuo playing, however the practice on keyboard is so varied from that of plucked instruments that it is necessary to seek out instructional sources from lutenists and guitarists. Although historical performance purists may balk at the idea of incorporating a modern instrument such as the guitar in the performance of baroque and renaissance repertoire, the modern player can benefit from studying the practice. In any case, the purpose here is to provide an introduction to the art of figured bass realization to the classical guitarist by learning from the traditions of the older instruments. If not for the purpose of learning to accompany singers or small ensembles
in a historically accurate fashion, the improvisatory aspect of figured-bass realization can sharpen the musical sense and benefit one’s overall musicality, understanding of harmony and proficiency on their instrument.

It (continuo playing) has many benefits for modern players and its study and practice should be encouraged. Through it one can learn harmony, counterpoint and many points concerning composition. The harmonic tension and relaxation in music is so important to phrasing and interpretation and can be an immense help in solo playing. I would recommend, from experience, that those embarking on the study of basso continuo for the first time, should analyze all their solo music from the continuo player’s point of view (North xi).

I recognize that a truly informed interpretation requires period instruments, especially if the rest of the ensemble is using baroque bowed instruments. Additionally, the theorbo has a deeper bass register than the modern guitar, more courses and therefore can provide a more sustainable bass while playing melodic material at the same time. This method will provide the reader the tools necessary to commence a study of figured bass realization on the guitar, but is by no means an exhaustive method. Once the basic principles and forms are absorbed it is up to any player be it one of the theorbo, lute or guitar to further their study of accompanimental styles, ornamentation and execution to best prepare themselves for the repertoire they wish to perform. Skilled figured bass accompaniment is something that will take years to achieve.

In the sense that plucked instruments are all polyphonic, the guitar is similar to the lute or theorbo. The technical method of sound production is virtually the same, the right hand plucks the strings while the left hand “frets” the strings to change their pitch. Lutenists would often use left hand slurs to facilitate ornamentation, a practice not unfamiliar to guitarists. The use of slurs particularly with trills will become essential for accompanying as an idiomatic technique that can facilitate the legato and spontaneity of ornamentation. However, the issue of ornamentation and embellishment is a very complicated subject, and one should avoid any embellishments or ornaments until they are fluent in realizing the figures.
Acquiring the skill of figured bass realization has an array of benefits to the musician. The freedom to interpret the accompaniment in the most suitable way to the individual player is a liberating experience. One of the unique advantages of a figured bass line is that it can be interpreted by any instrument; organ, harpsichord, lute, theorbo, or perhaps even the modern guitar. A written out accompaniment is limited to the instrument for which it was conceived and does not give the performer any freedom for variation that may better suit their hands. The figured bass accompanist can adapt his or her part to suit their own technique, style, instrument, and capability. Continuo notation brings the printed music of the accompanist closer to that of the soloist since there is no treble staff between the bass staff and the solo part. This reduces the physical area the eyes must scan to see both parts. It is also common to have the figures above the bass line rather than below, which further allows the eyes to scan back and forth with greater precision between the two parts.

Historically informed style as an accompanist is dependent on two things: Technical factors include the realization of figures, quick interpretation, and decision making regarding the figures and physical execution on the instrument; musicologically the composer’s intended style of accompaniment is essential, and requires a broad knowledge of the many musical idioms and traditions. The best way to learn the latter of these skills, as J.S. Bach advised, is to learn from an experienced player, someone who would be considered a master. Unfortunately for us that is rarely a possible option, especially as guitarists hoping to delve into a subject matter that was popular on distant relatives of our instrument centuries ago (Williams 1).

Although keyboard, lute and theorbo continuo treatises provide indispensable instruction, background, and tradition in figured bass realizations, a method by the Spanish Baroque guitarist, Santiago de Murcia is perhaps more conducive to an application on the modern guitar. His Resumen de Acompañar la Parte con la Guitarra, published in 1714, Murcia delineates exercises for Baroque guitar that bridge the chasm between the keyboard and lute methods and provide the possibility for an adaptation on the classical guitar. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly for our modern application, Murcia clarifies the density of accompaniment on the guitar can be thinner than that on the keyboard or theorbo. His Resumen includes exercises intended for a
baroque guitar with a tuning very similar to that of the modern classical guitar. In fact the
strings of the guitar Murcia intended in his Resumen are tuned to the same pitches as the
modern guitar with the exception of the sixth string. Usually the baroque guitar employs
some sort of re-entrant tuning, but Murcia specifies the exact pitches of the strings on his
intended instrument in the Resumen. The similar tuning allows us to examine chord
voicings just as Murcia intended, while other methods noted in tablature can be tedious to
decipher especially when one considers the many different tunings for the various lutes
and theorbos. While figured bass treatises for the lute and theorbo serve well to provide
stylistic norms, accompanimental styles, and ornamentation practices, they are difficult to
adapt for the modern guitar. Murcia’s Resumen of 1714 intended for the Baroque guitar,
however, serves as an exceptional starting point from which to learn figured bass on the
classical guitar. This treatise translates and adapts exercises and chord examples from
Murcia’s accompaniment method from tablature to modern notation thereby enabling the
guitarist to understand the nature of figured bass realization.
Figured bass realization was born in the early seventeenth-century at the crossroads during the compositional style and aesthetic of Italian vocal music. Giulio Caccini perpetuated the shift from a polyphonic style that focused on the melismatic passaggi and virtuosity of the voice to a style that gave greater importance to the meaning of the text, allowing the words to be more easily understood. Caccini’s Le Nuove Musiche from 1602 prefaced with a section entitled “To the Readers” offers an explanation of his intention as to instrumentation and some stylistic performance instructions (Caccini 43). As this style of composition gained popularity due to its accessibility and expressive qualities, the practice of figured bass realization became the standard means of accompaniment for the voice as well as for instrumental works with accompaniment. Caccini himself was a player of the arch-lute, a long-necked plucked instrument similar to the lute, and mentions this instrument in the Nuove Musiche. This instrument was typically less expensive than the harpsichord, but more importantly it was portable and therefore became more popular as an accompanying instrument. For this reason, theorists such as Bénigne de Bacilly and Sébastien de Brossard preferred the theorbo, another plucked instrument similar to the arch-lute (Delair 10). While a performance of Caccini’s songs today would have a desirable sound when accompanied by an arch-lute or theorbo, these instruments can be hard to find and the number of skilled players is few. At the top of the next page is a copy of a plate from Caccini’s song, Aria Ottava: “Odi, Euterpe”. The accompaniment part clearly shows a bass line with figures dispersed throughout.
Adjustments and compromises are necessary when playing early music, especially if the intended instruments are not available. Adaptability to variables such as bow length and tension, string material, and other modifications are necessary of the performer. Today, the lute is probably more available than the arch-lute or theorbo because of its conveniently smaller size (similar to a guitar). The length of a theorbo could approach two meters, while the arch-lute would also be long due to the extra bass strings, but with lower tension strings than the theorbo (Caccini 48). While the massive scale of these instruments enables a deeper and more resonant sound, their cumbersome size make it difficult to travel - not to mention their temperamental behavior in varying climates. A harpsichord is most often used as an alternative to the lute or theorbo.

Continuo playing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became a staple of the baroque keyboard player’s skill set. Countless treatises exist on this subject by a variety of keyboard composers such as Pasquini, Gasparini, G.F. Handel, J.S. Bach, and many others. The practice declined in the nineteenth century, however, as composers

Figure 1 Giulio Caccini, Aria Ottava: “Odi, Euterpe”
gave more specific details in their scores with fully composed accompaniments and cadenzas. This change signified an overall change in composition as the composer and more specifically the score grew in importance. In her foreword to the translation of Czerny’s Op. 200, Alice Mitchell offers some insight into the fading practice of figured bass realization.

This decline in the formal teaching of improvisation can be explained in part by the vanishing role of the improvising keyboard accompanist of the eighteenth century, without whose services C.P.E. Bach maintained that “no piece can be well performed.” Although the nineteenth century still preserved thorough-bass as a quasi catechism for musical grammar and syntax, improvising realizations as a critical component of the keyboardist’s performance technique had virtually disappeared well before 1836, the publication date of Czerny’s Op.200. (Czerny ix)

As these improvisatory realizations diminished, substitutions evolved for continuo players, such as pianists reading from a pre-composed realization of the figured bass. In an effort to rather backtrack toward a more informed performance practice, it would thusly be appropriate to realize the accompaniment on a modern relative of the lute, the guitar, while still reading from the original figured bass. In order to succeed however, the modern guitarist must first be familiar with the “science of accompaniment” as described by Denis Delair in his treatise of 1690. “It is this elusive art which, in bringing a piece of music to life, realizes the composer’s intentions (Delair 10). To give this claim justice a guitarist must study the art of accompaniment carefully in order to elevate and provide support to the solo voice in a style suited to the composer’s intentions.
CHAPTER 3: SIGNIFICANCE

Before the approach to figured bass is discussed, it is important to take note of the value of this skill for the guitarist. Figured bass realization opens up many chamber music opportunities and provides a skill set necessary for a well-rounded musician. First, the ability to realize a figured bass allows the musician to better understand treatment of harmony in the baroque period. Second, since the player is only given a bass-note with figures that indicate which intervals to play atop the bass, there is a great deal of freedom allotted to the player in creating their own chord voicings. The process of learning this craft will familiarize the guitarist with the harmonic positions across the entire neck of the instrument and better their understanding of voice-leading principles and composition.

Since the guitar has six strings aligned horizontally, and at least 19 frets aligned vertically, a two-dimensional “X-Y” plane results in greater use of pattern-recognition in learning scales, arpeggios and key areas without the theoretical understanding one might reach if playing scales or harmonic progressions at the keyboard. For example, the major and minor scales on the guitar can be played in all keys by simply shifting one’s position on the neck and using a patterned fingering to play the scale. While this enables the student to memorize scale patterns, it does not facilitate an understanding of how scales and harmonic progressions work on a theoretical level. The study of a figured bass as part of the guitarist’s training will help to provide this understanding, just as it does for students who learn their scales and harmonic progressions at the keyboard.

Lastly, proficiency with figured bass realization can serve as a step towards learning to improvise preludes, cadenzas and fantasies – something that is not as common in practice today as it used to be in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Gaining the skill of playing a thorough bass can increase a player’s improvisatory ability, which will transfer into their solo playing - resulting in a greater sense of phrase, interpretation, and musicianship. Since continuo playing is an archaic practice so intimately tied to music of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, it only seems plausible to use materials from this time as a springboard to a method for a modern instrument.
CHAPTER 4: MURCIA’S METHOD

Santiago de Murcia’s *Resumen de Acompañar la Parte con la Guitarra*, a manual for realizing bass figures on a five-course baroque guitar, contains much less detail than say Handel’s continuo exercises. Yet it suffices to provide a glimpse into the Spanish style of guitar accompaniment in the early eighteenth century and serve as a point of departure for the modern guitarist aiming to read figured bass. Elena Machado translated and transcribed the *Resumen* in her 1975 dissertation. In the dedication Murcia himself describes his work as the following:

Including everything that leads to this end: in which the aficionado will find, in various positions on the instrument, the realization of every type of chord inversion and appoggiatura or suspension on the seven natural and accidental pitches. (Murcia 1)

Murcia conceived this method for a five-course baroque guitar tuned similar to the modern guitar, A-D-G-B-E, from the lowest pitched course to the highest. The tuning is relevant since it eliminates the need to transcribe or alter the left hand fingerings indicated in Murcia’s tablature. His method unfolds not unlike a modern “folk” guitar method. He first delineates a large chart complete with the various puntos or chord shapes. Next, Murcia provides examples of how to use the puntos in a figured-bass context: On the bottom staff is the bass-line with figures, above that the tablature for the punto and above that the letter name of the punto. Eventually the students could wean themselves off of the punto chart, and read directly from the bass-line, and improvise the chords and suspensions in real time. Below is a chart of Puntos as it appears in Murcia’s *Resumen* from 1714.
Interestingly, the root of the chord indicated in the *Puntos* tablature is not always consistent with the bass-note indicated in the figured bass. This problem is solved however, by using the modern guitar to realize his chords. It was common in Spanish baroque guitar repertoire for a chord build on top of a G – bass note to be played with a B in the bass instead of a G. Since the lowest bass note available on the five course baroque guitar is an A, the B is the next lowest chord tone, and therefore substituted for the root, G. For this reason, inverted chords are often substituted for root-position chords. On the modern guitar these unwanted chord inversions are no longer necessary like they were on the Baroque guitar. This adaptation also allows for more consistent bass support and reduces the frequent necessity to change the bass register to accommodate the range of the baroque guitar. Part of the reason inverted chords were accepted on the baroque guitar is because of the unique strumming style that could “disguise” these inverted chords.
For a time the baroque guitar would have typically been strummed with a rapid stroke of the right hand called the *rasgueado*, as opposed the *punteado* style, or “plucked” style which became more popular as guitarist and vihuelist began to play polyphonic music (Lowenfeld 33). *A rasgueado* would attack the strings from the top down or the bottom up, but in any case the various strings were sounded in rapid succession. This technique allowed non-root position chords to sound appropriate, and even in Murcia’s polyphonic compositions it is not uncommon to find non-root-position harmonies at cadential points. Paintings by the artist Jean-Antoine Watteau clearly portray the *rasgueado* technique at the height of the guitar’s popularity in Spain.

![Figure 3 Mezzetin 1717-19 oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York](Image)

Notice in Figure 3 the guitarist strikes the strings using the nail-side of the fingers of the right hand.

The modern guitarist will need to overcome a few obstacles in their approach to figured bass realization. Firstly, guitarists may not be accustomed to reading from the
bass clef and while this is easily remedied through practice, it compounds the difficulty of simultaneously realizing the figures. Secondly, many notes on the guitar can be played in at least four different positions, forcing the player to make very fast decisions about where to voice a particular chord. Murcia’s Resumen contains exercises that can help with these difficulties.

Figure 4 from Lowenfeld’s translation of Santiago De Murcia's Resumen

This example contains instances where the realizations provided by Murcia do not exactly match the contour of the bass-line. Murcia is taking into account the range of the baroque guitar and giving examples of how to compensate for notes outside the range. In m. six the bass moves down from A to G, and then down another half step to F#, but the realization has an octave displacement, with the G bass-note being shifted up an octave.
The modern guitar’s extended bass range enables us to continue the original bass voice in the proper register and improve the voice-leading. Also, the guitar can be played with the sixth string lowered a whole step to accommodate keys such as D or G. Clear bass-connection is essential in supporting the melody. This balance should be aimed at full and rich bass notes, with the treble strings playing a subordinate role.

Not every instrument is suitable for accompanying since, in accompaniment, the trebles should not dominate the basses… This is the reason one ordinarily does not use the lute or guitar to accompany, since the trebles are too dominant, and the basses not loud enough. (Delair 10)

Perhaps if Delair could have heard a modern guitar he would agree that it is more suited for accompaniment because of the strong basses, timbral variety, and greater range. Still the guitar does not have such low basses as the arch-lute or theorbo which add an even greater depth to the overall sound.

Although Murcia does not include a great deal of textual instruction in his treatise, his realizations for the figured bass provide a tremendous amount of information on the accompaniment style he favored. For instance, when there is a rapid moving bass-line such as eighth notes or even sixteenth notes, he provides some helpful solutions to avoid difficult and rapid left hand finger changes. It is more difficult to play a dense accompaniment on the guitar as opposed to the harpsichord, so reductions are often necessary. It is most important to keep the rhythm and movement of the bass steady to ensure proper support for the vocal or solo instrumental line. In most cases if the accompaniment has an active bass line then it is an opportunity for the guitarist to better control the tempo through that section. This is often the case when there is a break in a recitative and the accompanist is expected to fill in the sound here. In the next example the bass and harmonic motion is slow and there is a chord placed above each bass note. The bass movement doubles in speed to quarter notes and the harmony is in half notes. Finally Murcia subdivides the bass again so it is in rapid eight notes with a chord placed at the half note.
Conversely it is sometimes necessary to sustain a very slow bass, such as a tied note, which is accomplished by restriking the chords. "The lutenists and theorbo player should learn to restrike the chords when the sound has died in order to give support to the soloist." (North 63). North also offers that the restriking of the chords must be done in a way that follows the stresses of the words and phrase. Ultimately he suggests that the performer should have the best idea of how to make his or her instrument sustain the best
sound. This of course applies to the music that could be accompanied by a single instrument, as opposed to music that calls for a melodic bass instrument in addition to lute or theorbo.

The charts in Murcia’s document do not mention the issue of arpeggiation, but a similar treatise dedicated to theorbo accompaniment by Denis Delair published in 1690 offers some insights into this aspect of playing. Although this treatise on French theorbo and harpsichord accompaniment differs greatly from Murcia’s *Resumen*, it is more thorough with regard to the different aspects of playing, such as arpeggiation and ornamentation. Charlotte Mattax’ commentary to her translation of Delair’s treatise from 1690 offers a quote by Campion where he mentions the *batterie* technique, an adaptation from guitar playing to the theorbo.

There is an art to playing chords. The thumb having played the essential bass note, the other fingers should play a *batterie*, alternately re-ascending and multiplying the chord. (Delair 13)

Arpeggiation allows the performer to stretch and condense the support as needed to accommodate the soloist. The speed and acceleration or deceleration of an arpeggio can support the emotional affect of the text. Nigel North gives some advice to guitarists on this subject in his method, *Continuo Playing on the Lute, Archlute and Theorbo*. He mentions that the modern guitarist might be accustomed to arpeggiating chords so that the last note of the chord falls on the beat and the first bass note of the chord comes before the beat. He stresses that starting the arpeggio before the beat is not desired when accompanying a soloist. Since the continuo instrument must provide a rhythmic skeleton for the soloist, the bass must fall on the beat, with the arpeggio following after. This is especially important when playing with a melodic bass-instrument (North 69). Although Murcia did not include specific instructions for stylistic elements as did other treatises like that of Delair, his realizations are an excellent way to begin familiarizing oneself with the harmonic positions on the guitar. Delair is more specific about execution and stylistic issues, complimenting the lessons offered by Murcia. The *Resumen de Acompañar la Parte con la Guitarra* benefits the player with examples in the 8 keys or
tonos common in the baroque repertoire. In order to improvise harmonies fast enough to site-read music it is essential to memorize many different chord voicings in all keys.

While Santiago de Murcia left out certain details of performance like the arpeggiation of chords, phrasing, hemiolas, and details of the relationship between the accompanist and the soloist, he did include other useful details not offered by similar contemporary Spanish treatises such as that of Gaspar Sanz. Murcia created his *Alphabetto Italiano* as a system for categorizing the different puntos on the guitar. He offers examples of these puntos in not only the eight common baroque keys, but also the eight tonos naturales and the eight tonos accidentals. This covers quite a few positions on the guitar, while other methods might provide a smaller set of examples and leave it to the student to transpose them into other keys. Secondly Murcia in great detail describes the use of appogiature and ligaduras (Murcia 19). The treatise by Gaspar Sanz does not touch on this subject. A brief excerpt from Lowenfeld’s translation of the *Resumen* offers some guidelines for suspensions:

Regarding the rule for choosing the pitches it should be noted that in the suspensions or appoggiaturas of the fourth moving to the third (which are most commonly used) one should use a fifth above the bass or, in its place the octave in certain cases, so as not to disturb the left hand. In the suspensions or appoggiatura of the sixth moving to the fifth (when it appears at a cadence) one should accompany the sixth with the fourth, and the sixth resolves to the fifth keeping the fourth tied; and then the fourth resolves to the third. (Murcia 8a)
Figure 5 displays some of the various tonos present in Murcia’s method. One can observe here the thinness of the texture, most chords containing only three notes and some only two. Although this may seem obvious, Santiago explains that the pitches above the bass are to be realized on the remaining strings above the bass note. “… If the bass is on the fifth course of the guitar, one can use any course from the fourth down to
find the pitches.” (Murcia 8a). He describes the same principle for bass notes on the fourth and third courses as well. The inclusion of such invaluable bits of information demonstrates that his Resumen was intended for a large audience, probably both the amateur and the more ambitious players alike. Additionally the increasing popularity of monody and the availability of the guitar would have created a large market for accompanimental instruction. Murcia includes in the second half of the Resumen examples of dance pieces to be performed on the guitar. Along with minuets, bourrees, passapieds, courantes and gigues, Murcia includes pieces with distinct French titles such as La Triomphante and La Nouvelle Figure. Lowenfeld suggests that Murcia must have been familiar with the work of French lutenist, Denis Gaultier whose Rhetorique des dieux c. 1650-55 contains similar dance titles. Murcia also includes pieces that are dedicated to his patron and most important student, Queen Maria Luisa of Savoy (Murcia 20).

Although Murcia’s treatise provides thorough examples of figured bass realizations, one cannot stop here if hoping to become proficient in this art. Additional study in the areas of accompaniment style, text painting, and counterpoint would greatly assist in this endeavor. While having many benefits to the modern player, the practice of continuo playing can also push the player in the direction of improvisation. Realizing figures above a bass is a form of improvisation in itself, and this practice ultimately enhances the musical sense and the ability to individualize the interpretations of solo repertoire. Just as the decline of basso-continuo coincided with the decline of the solo keyboard improviser, the practices might once again be revitalized and taught on a large scale. Some of the most effective preludes and fantasies from the baroque era by composers such as Frescobaldi, Froberger or Bach were intended to sound improvised.

The remaining chapters in this method provide examples of realized chords and their corresponding figured-bass symbols in addition to common suspensions and chord resolutions, followed by extended examples of harmonic progressions composed by Murcia. First, however, since a figured bass part is most commonly written in bass clef, the guitarist must familiarize him or herself with this notation. Failure to do so will compound the complications of realizing figures above the bass with note identification and slow the learning process.
CHAPTER 5: READING BASS CLEF

Guitarists are accustomed to reading only treble clef notation as is standard practice for this instrument. To facilitate the fluency in bass clef, a series of sight reading exercises are provided here and must be studied before any realizations can be attempted. The following chapter provides sight-reading examples to familiarize the guitarist with bass clef. It is of utmost importance to avoid playing these exercises in individual repetition so they do not become memorized. The idea is to improve sight-reading, not memorization. Of course these are merely examples and exercises, once they have been exhausted you can explore an innumerable amount of sheet music in bass-clef to continue improving your skills.

To the reader:
It is essential to be fluent enough at reading that you do not rely on left hand fingering indications. Figured bass parts will never have fingerings written in so it is best not to use that as a crutch. Play the bass notes in the closest proximity to one another whenever possible and try not to change left hand positions if it is avoidable. Eventually your left hand fingering of the bass note will depend on the notes above the bass as indicated by the figures and the previous or following chord in the piece.

A short study of some major and minor scales will help familiarize you with bass clef in the context of a pattern with which you are already familiar. After reading through the scales with some degree of comfort the proceeding exercises should be played slowly ensuring that accuracy is of primary concern. As proficiency improves the tempo can be increased. Avoid writing in left hand fingerings below or above the notes. When you are ready to accompany a soloist, it will be strongly encouraged that you mark your score with as many hints and reminders as possible to help you remember your realization which should be prepared ahead of time. Also take into account that the treble clef notation that is standard for classical guitar music notates pitches an octave higher than they actually sound when played on the guitar. The bass clef notation on the other hand sounds just as it is written.
Exercise 1: Scales

C major

C minor

D Major

D Major (6th string tuned to D)
D minor

A Major

A Melodic minor
E Melodic minor

Non-Scalar exercises

1)

2)

3) The following bass is an excerpt from the *Grave of Violin Sonata II* BWV 1003 by
Excerpts from actual Continuo parts

1. *Vivace and Adagio by A. Corelli (from Op. 1 No. 4, Rome, 1683)*

Vivace

[Musical notation image]

Adagio

[Musical notation image]
After working through these exercises you should be more comfortable reading bass clef on the guitar. Your speed and fluency will continue to improve as you work through the proceeding figured bass exercises. The goal is to read in bass clef with the same fluency that you read in treble clef. This not only bodes well for reading a figured bass, but allows you to more easily read scores for other bass clef instruments on the guitar as well. If you need more practice reading bass clef, repeat chapter 1 and use scores from other bass instruments or piano to expand your practice repertoire. If and when you feel comfortable with bass clef, move on to Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 6: BUILDING ON THE BASS

This chapter adds an interval of a 3\textsuperscript{rd} above the bass. The most common harmony encountered is the root position triad, so it important to be able to locate third and tenths above the bass on the guitar without having to think too much about it. Figured bass realization requires you to think diatonically and to always have the key signature in mind when making realizations. Whenever placing intervals above the bass, these notes must follow the key, unless the figures tell you otherwise. In general, if a root position chord is intended, there will be no figures below or above the bass. In these situations the plausible thing to do is to place a 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 5\textsuperscript{th} above the bass depending on the context. Sometimes it may be appropriate to play only a 3\textsuperscript{rd} above the bass, and other times the bass note alone with suffice, particularly on weak beats when the bass is moving in eighth notes or any higher subdivision. Depending on the ambiguity of the bass, you might find the following figures above or below the bass:

\begin{align*}
3 & 5 & 8 & 8 & 8 & 8 \\
3 & 5 & 5 \\
3
\end{align*}

For now your only concern is the addition of a 3\textsuperscript{rd} above the bass. The following exercises provide a given bass note with the figure “3” below the staff. The quality of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} that results is dependent on the key signature, some will be major and some will be minor. At this time it is crucial to take into consideration that seventeenth and eighteenth century musicians did not think about harmony in the post-Rameau way that we think about harmony. The term “functional harmony” was not yet known and the harmonic construct was a product of figured bass practice. We will begin with a G-major scale, followed by 3\textsuperscript{rd’s} played above the bass, and then 10ths played above the bass. For a time in seventeenth-century Italy, it was common for compound figures to be used. After c1650, however, this practice died out. For the sake of distinguishing between 3rds and 10ths I have used the indication of a 10\textsuperscript{th} for some exercises. Just as Murcia states in his Resumen, the 3\textsuperscript{rd} can be played on any of the remaining higher pitched strings. So if the
bass note is played on the sixth string, you want to play the $3^{rd}$ on any of the remaining five strings.

*A note about the realizations: These are provided to show you how to realize the figures on the guitar. Remember that the treble staff on guitar sounds an octave lower than written, so when reading from the treble staff, treat it just as you would a regular guitar score. The bass staff does not need to be transposed, the notation sounds as written.

1. 

Realization:

2. Now in 10ths: The numeral 3 is still used here since compound intervals such as the $10^{th}$ are not commonly used
Now that you have gained some familiarity with 3rds on the guitar, you may repeat this exercise with remaining intervals: Play these exercises with a fourth above the bass, a fifth, a sixth, and a seventh. The more practice you have finding these intervals the faster you will be at realizing the figured bass.
CHAPTER 7: REALIZATION OF CHORDS

The following examples show some possibilities of chord realizations on the guitar. First play through the examples and study each chord so that you know exactly which note corresponds with which figure, how the sevenths resolve, and make note of the common 7-6 and 4-3 suspensions. These will come into practice very often in your continuo playing. We will begin with chords over a C bass. Left hand fingers have been excluded from these exercises so you can come up with their own fingers to best suit your hand. Many of these chords can be played in more than one position on the guitar and these possibilities should be explored. In the following exercises the bass staff contains the figured bass. The treble staff above is an example of a realization in familiar guitar notation. First look at the bass and figures, then look at the realization, and once you have fingered it on the guitar, examine the bass yet again to confirm you have the right intervals above the bass. Study the chords and voice leading carefully. Eventually, you want to be able to read from the figured bass alone, so it is important that you become familiar with the progression of chords and the placement of the voices above the bass. The examples from Santiago de Murcia’s *Resumen* but have been modified to suit the modern six string guitar. Also, some figures were left out by Murcia which I have added to provide greater clarity.
These chords can be easily transposed into different keys. After you are comfortable with the chord shapes and the suspension resolutions, try transposing the exercise up a 3rd or whole step to play the chords in other keys.
4-3 and 7-6 Suspensions
More inversions of seventh chords

The player must memorize these figures and corresponding chord shapes before attempting to play a thorough bass from figures alone. Remembering that these are only examples, pay close attention to which notes in the chord correspond to which figures. Depending on the nature of the accompaniment you are playing you will have to decide how full or thin you want your chords to be. Sometimes three, four, or five note chords will be necessary, especially in slow pieces where the solo part is sparse and notes are sustained. Other times you will want to reduce the thickness of the accompaniment to only two notes or even just the bass alone. This decision making process can only be learned by listening to experienced continuo players and using your ear to determine the style of accompaniment.
Chord Realizations over a G bass
More inversions and the 9-8 suspension

With A-major key signature
These chord voicings will help you become familiar with playing intervals above the bass. Just as keyboard players are instructed to keep their hands close together and near the center of the keyboard when playing continuo, you as the guitarist should keep the intervals above the bass within close reach as well. This prevents us from having to shift positions and keeps the left hand positions comfortable.

The next chapter takes the chords further and places them in the context of harmonic exercises involving extended chord progressions. You will come across chords that were not presented in the previous examples, but the principles involved in realizing the chords are all the same. The idea here is not to memorize every single chord possibility above every possible bass position, but to get a feel for the chord voicings and learn the “formula” so you can apply this to any basses you encounter. The musical examples you are about to play are also from Murcia’s Resumen, but again they have been modified to better suit the modern guitar and the figures have been edited to better represent the realizations. Moreover, the chords in the realization have bass notes that better correspond to the original bass line with figures. As mentioned before, it was common for the baroque guitarist to play inverted chords when the root was not available in their register.
CHAPTER 8: MURCIA’S HARMONIC PROGRESSIONS

Example 1

Continued on pg 37
Notice how the frequency of the chords lessens as the bass moves faster. The density of texture in the chords becomes thinner. The tempo and speed of the baseline will determine the nature of your accompaniment. Always remember first and foremost that a steady rhythm must be maintained to provide a solid harmonic foundation for the soloist. Never should your accompaniment interfere with the solo part or over-power it.
Example 2:  G minor-key signature
Example 3: G major

Continued on page 40
Continued

The following portion of the excerpt contains passages with the bass part written in a C-clef. Murcia points out in his commentary that this clef was commonly used in songs of the “Old Spanish” style. I kept the C-clef as he notated in order to offer a chance to become familiar with yet another clef. This clef choice also keeps the notes within the staff rather than on ledger lines. Typical figured bass parts will only be in bass clef. Murcia possibly included these passages as an example of a cadenza-like passage in which the solo voice or instrumental part is resting.
Example 4: D major
Example 5: 6/8 Time signature

The next example serves to demonstrate the treatment of a moving bass in a 6/8 time signature. When the bass is moving in eighth-notes, the placement of chords occurs on beats one and four. When the motion of the bass slows down to dotted quarter-notes, enough time and space exists to create suspensions when they are appropriate ie. cadential points.
CHAPTER 9: IMPLEMENTATION

The exercises presented in this treatise serve as a preliminary guide for the classical guitarist to become acquainted with the art of figured bass accompaniment. Study of the chords and exercises should not be limited to a few read-throughs; they should be studied thoroughly to the point of memorization. This will allow you to create a working memory of the chord voicings so that these can be applied when reading from a figured bass part. Additionally, if you attempt to accompany vocal or instrumental music by Caccini, Frescobaldi, Sigismondo d’India, Vitali or any number of composers’ music of that time period it is essential to make your own investigation of the music before your first rehearsal. As someone new to figured bass practice, walking into a performance situation not having studied the score and making personal notes beforehand can have disastrous consequences. Without solid support from the rhythm section, the singer or soloist will be confused and unable to focus on his or her part. While investigating the score, study the solo part and make decisions about your accompanimental style. When you will strum chords or arpeggiate, when you will not play any chord at all, etc. etc. Since the guitar cannot sustain a note as can the organ, it is often necessary to re-articulate bass notes when the part calls for a whole or even half-note, particularly when the solo line is still active and needs the support of your bass.

Ornamentation of the thorough bass part is a delicate and complicated subject. The style of ornamentation in seventeenth and eighteenth century varied between composers, regions, instruments, and style of repertoire. First it must be understood that the primary objective is to become fluent in realizing the chord symbols accurately and simply without embellishment. While early composers seemed to favor ornamentation of the thorough bass, most players between 1750 and 1800 made relatively simple realizations of the accompaniment. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, if a piece called for highly ornamented flourishes the composer would include them in the score (Williams) 38. Most notably utilizing this treatise as an introduction to figured bass accompaniment, the guitarist should aim his or her focus on delivering a solid rhythmic foundation of the bass line with appropriate harmonies. This simply takes time if figured bass is a newly acquired skill. In addition to playing accurate accompaniments, you must
listen intently to the soloist in order to sensitively respond to rubato and phrasing.

Heinichen Goebel offers some advice on the subject of ornamentation:

> Until a beginner has thoroughly practiced the first principles of the thorough bass, he should be left undisturbed by the considerable equipment of embellishments and the too confusingly ornamented thorough bass. To play an embellished thorough bass requires much experience, discretion, and judgment. How can one preach these things to a beginner when he is still not trained in the fundamentals? Besides, the thorough bass was not conceived to enable one to perform with it as in preludes, but only so that the concerted parts would be accompanied (North 85).

Once you feel comfortable with the exercises in this treatise and have transposed the chord realizations into various keys, it will be worthwhile to find some scores with a simple figured bass part and begin experimenting. Typically the undergraduate or even graduate student guitarist finds their accompanimental options a bit limited. In this collegiate setting common repertoire choices include songs by John Dowland, Giuliani, Falla, Sor, and others but they all possess explicit written out accompaniments. With the additional ability to read a figured bass, the student can accompany singers in a vastly expanded scope of music. Remember to choose repertoire that fits your ability and instrumentation. Keys with more sharps or flats will be more difficult initially and continuo parts expressly intended for harpsichord will have to be altered to fit the guitar. With this in mind, avoid attempts to make your realization denser than it needs to be.

The timbral variance of the guitar combined with its dynamic range will permit thinner textures. Moreover the use of *Rasgueado* is appropriate in certain repertoire. The lutenist and composer Thomas Campion mentioned in 1730 that he insisted his students take some lessons on the guitar to learn correct execution of this technique. The technique is also indicated in solo works for French lute and theorbo. North advises that the strum occur on strong down beats and be executed with the “i” finger, or index finger. As guitarists we are well aware of this technique although it should be used sparingly and only when a high degree of volume is necessary. If placed at the wrong time it might be
disruptive to the solo line. The technique is most appropriate for music with a simple harmonic accompaniment such as Monteverdi’s Madrigals of War (North 75).

Pay close attention to the top voice in the realizations of the harmonic exercises in chapter 7. It is often recommended particularly when accompanying singers to place their melody note in the top voice of the chord. This awareness in turn will help shape the structure of the chord and help the singer find the right intonation (North 78). The guitar has a more pronounced attack than the lute or baroque guitar as a result of nails in the plucking hand, modern construction, string materials, etc. Take extra care, and arpeggiate the chords sometimes fast, sometimes slow, depending on the mood of the piece. Lastly, and perhaps of greatest importance in a sensitive accompaniment is the study of the text in vocal music. It is imperative to know the meaning of the text in order to understand which dissonances to bring out or when to take a breath and let the singer pause. North suggests “for common speech a quick harpeggio; for tender a slow one; and for anything of passion, where anger, surprise, etc. is expressed, little or no arpeggio…” (North 79).

In closing, and with the shared sentiments of Santiago de Murcia, the purpose of this treatise is to engage the modern guitarist in a practice not only uncommon to the classical guitar, but one that is increasingly becoming an art of the past. The study of figured bass on the guitar will increase your understanding of harmonic language and the essential tension and relaxation of phrasing from the ground up that is essential to a tasteful and expressive interpretation of Baroque repertoire. The liberation from a fixed part in the score gives the player freedom and an opportunity to enlist their own personal sentiments, technique, and style into the music. Once the skill is developed enough for performance, playing a continuo part in an ensemble is enormously gratifying and fun. “My only wish is to enhance the pleasures of the lovers of the guitar, giving them along with novelty, the most appropriate incentive for their application.”

Santiago de Murcia, prologue of the Resumen, 1714.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jon Paul Yerby, Guitarist

Education
-Florida State University  D.M.A. Guitar Performance  2008-2012
-University of Texas at Austin  B.M. Guitar Performance  2002-2005
-University of North Texas  Undergraduate study  2000-2002

Applied/Private Study
-Bruce Holzman, Florida State University  2008-2012
-Adam Holzman, University of Texas at Austin  2002-2005
-Tom Johnson, University of North Texas  2000-2002

Awards/Distinctions
-Founder and director of Seven Hills Guitar Series, Tallahassee, FL  2011-present
-Director, Classical Guitar Society of Tallahassee  2011-present
-Dean's List at UT Austin, TX  2003-2004
-Semi-Finalist at Boston GuitarFest 2007 festival and competition  2007
-Honorable Mention and Concert, Young Texas Artists Competition  2005
-Participants Concert, Stetson International Guitar Festival  2005
-Associate Director of Boston GuitarFest  2006-2008

Teaching
-Gifted Music School, Salt Lake City, Utah  2012
-Adjunct professor of Guitar at Tallahassee Community College  2010-12
-Belvoire Terrace Performing Arts Workshop  2009
-Clavier-Werke, Austin, TX  2004-05

Festivals/Workshops
-Boston GuitarFest Boston, MA  2006-2007
-Accademia Musicale Chigiana Siena, Italy  2005
-Guitar Foundation of America  2002-20012
-Stetson International Guitar Workshop Deland, FL  2001-2004