

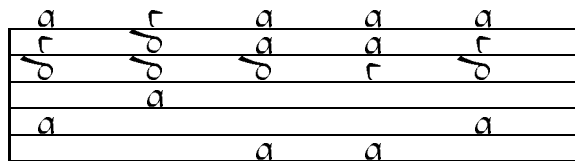
# Basics of the basics of lute continuo

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## The starting point for lute continuo learning

1. Learn to read bass staff fluently and to play it musically. Play whatsoever bass lines you happen to meet. (Already this ability makes you a useful partner for a melody instrument player and especially for a consort! Already at this stage the doors are opened for you!)
2. Study the basics of harmony: you should know the “piles of thirds” on a bass note without thinking; you should know, what a “suspension” is; you should know, what an “inversion” of a chord is, . . . (Don’t worry, at least in the beginning you need not know all the fine points of writing 4-part harmony on a given bass. That is only a way used in music schools to prepare students for part writing *etc.* In real continuo with lute you will change the number of voices, sometimes you will play “prohibited” progressions, . . . Also they did that!)
3. Learn to play chords I-IV-V-I in a few keys—let’s say in C, c, d, F, g, G and B flat (let the others wait for a while)—and try to find as many different ways as you can. You’ll soon find out, which ways please your ear. You’ll find things you already know from the solo pieces you have played. And how nice is it to find out that there are names for things your ear already knows! (For example in C-major C-F-G-C; in g-minor: g-c-D-g, *etc.*)
4. Learn to make 4-3 – suspensions in your I-IV-V-I – progressions in all the keys above. (In a moment you’ll hear more about numbers.) For example in C-major:



Find out different ways, and let your ear choose! This is quite a job, but not boring at all, if you like your lute!

5. An interval from a note to another can be expressed as an integer number; for example the distance from c to the a above it is called a sixth, 6. The numbers are counted while stepping on the notes that belong to the scale used (learn to know the key signatures!):

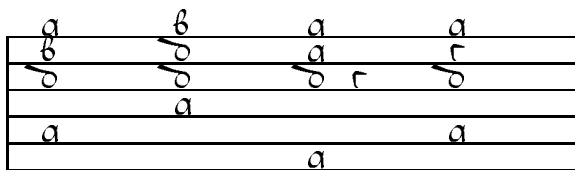
c . d . e . f . g . a . b . c . d  
1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 .

So you can see, how a is the 6th from c. And similarly f is the 4th from c, *etc.*

6. Numbers below or above a bass note signify intervals that are to be played above the bass note. The basic case, a “default<sup>1</sup> value”, is  $\overset{5}{3}$ , which means that a 3rd and 5th are played with the bass. This produces a normal 3-chord on the bass note as the “root”. The quality of the chord depends on what note of the scale the root is. For example, if the scale is major, there is a major chord, when the root is on 1st, 4rd and 5th note; it is minor, when on 2nd, 3rd and 6th; and a diminished chord, when the root is on 7th note. Don’t worry, it is not necessary remember these, you’ll have these chords anyhow, when you play 3rd and 5th with the bass! NORMALLY  $\overset{5}{3}$  is not written, only exceptions to it! You can take the intervals also from the next octave, and then for example the 5th may be lower to the 3rd that is taken from the next octave! But the bass must be the lowest, always! It happens quite often that when the bass is on 3rd note of the scale, the chord is  $\overset{6}{3}$ , even without written numbers. See below, point 9, about these numbers. (I write a 5 under the third note of a major scale, if I REALLY MEAN to play fifth in this special context!)
7. Also sharp ( $\sharp$ ) and flat ( $\flat$ ) are “numbers”. When they are alone, they are shorthand expressions for making the 3rd of the chord deviate from the note given by the key. So a  $\sharp$  says: make a 3-chord, but change the third from minor to major. If written exactly it means  $\overset{5}{\sharp 3}$ , so for example, if it is written under note c, when the key is c-minor, you have to play e ( $\sharp 3$ ) instead of the e flat ( $\flat 3$ ), and of course the default 5th, g.
8. Numbers 4-3, and sometimes 4- $\sharp 3$  (or also 4- $\flat 3$ ), signify that you must first play 4th on the bass, and then let it move to the 3rd. And play the “default” 5th with both cases. This is called the “suspension” of the third, a very important element in music from, let’s say 1300-1880, and still heavily used in “non-serious” music! An example: Let the key be c-minor (what is the key marking?), and the row of bass notes with numbers (remember: “no numbers”  $\rightarrow \overset{5}{3}$ ):

<i>c</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>c</i>
		4- $\sharp 3$	$\sharp$

You may play:




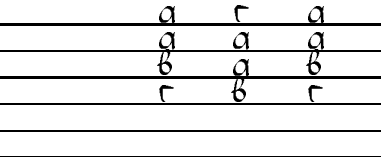
9. Number 6 below or above a bass note indicates that the default 5 is REPLACED by 6th note from the bass note. Also the 3rd is played. So 6 is a shorthand of  $\overset{6}{3}$ . For example, if you have a bass e with number 6, you have to play g (3) and c (6) above the bass. What you get is actually a C-major chord with its third as the bass note!
- (Quite often these numbers are considered as names for all kinds of so called inversions of chords; every note of a chord may be the lowest, and you will get very different effects using the same notes. The order, where the “name note” of the chord is lowest is called root

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<sup>1</sup>This default is not strict, as pointed out by David Tayler. See the remark at the end of this paragraph about using 6 instead of 5, and the discussion in the appendix at the end of these notes.

position. For a continuo player, seeing the numbers as indicators of intervals needed over the bass note, is more convenient and also corresponds how numbers were seen, when they were introduced in musical notation. Normally in music schools they teach “structural thinking”, where numbers are seen as chord position indicators. This more useful for analyzing harmonies than for producing them.)

10. A couple of examples:

Key F-major:	Key g-minor:
<i>f</i> <i>e</i> <i>f</i>	<i>g</i> <i>f</i> <sup>#</sup> <i>g</i>
6	6
	

What are the names of the chords? Play this progression in all the keys you know! (So, in all the keys, play the first note of the key, then the note just below it (a half step), and finally the first note again.) Find out “zillions” of ways of doing this in all the keys. Remember, you love your instrument, so this is not work, but fun!

11. Play the following, and write the bass and the NUMBERS on music paper:



12. Play similar progressions in all the keys in many different ways. You can improvise or write these on tablature paper. You are also allowed to improvise better melodies than mine above! :- ) For example:



13. Numbers 6-5 and 5-6 indicate 6th going to 5th and 5th to 6th. Examples:

Key C-major:

*c b c g c*  
6-5

d-minor:

*d g d c# d a d*  
5-6      6-5      4-# #

14. Numbers 7-6 and 6-7 indicate movement between 7th and 6th. And as in other cases, also # and b may be used. Example:

g-minor:

*g a g g c d g*  
7-#6      7-6 4-# #

15. Similarly other numbers and combinations are possible. When numbers are on top of each other, the notes are played with the bass; when numbers follow each other, they indicate a melodic movement. Some examples of typical combinations:

$\begin{matrix} 6 & 6 & 7 & 4 & 4 \\ 4, & 5, & , & 3, & 2, \end{matrix}$

and 4-#3, 6-5, 5-6, 7-6, and also combinations like #3-4-#3 are possible. Progression  $\overset{6-5}{4-3}$  is so typical that an example is necessary:

Key: G-major

*g c d d g*  
6-5  
4——3

Let the letters after the ties sound, they belong to the chord. Sometimes you may also play them.

(The  $\overset{6}{4}$  chord on d above is actually nowadays called an inversion of G-major chord (Check why!). In earlier times it was considered more as a melodic movement, not a “real” chord.)

16. All the notes of chords need not be played with all the bass notes. Often playing all of them is not only unnecessary, but even should be avoided. The more notes you play with the bass, the more emphasis that bass gets. And if every bass is important, no bass is important! The artistic estimation and understanding must govern the choice.

There is one very clear case: In 4-3 (4-♯3) movement the emphasis is on 4, and relaxation is on 3. So for example:

Key: C-major: the common  $c \quad g \quad c$   
 $4 - 3$

“all the notes”                      “good”                      “bad”

a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a		
r	a	a	r	r	a	r	r	r	a	r
o	o	r	o	o	o	r	o	o	o	r
r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r
a	r	r	a	a	r	a	a	a	r	a
a	a			a	a			a	a	

And more generally: when a dissonance goes to a consonance, the dissonance is important, and the consonance is relaxed.

17. In quick passages—even if there were lots of numbers—only the bass line, or bass with 3th or 6th can be enough.

(Some realizations of continuo line, especially for guitar, are quite horrible: you can see how the transcriber has tried to prove that guitar can play all the same notes that a keyboard player plays. And the poor player is so involved that s/he has no time to listen to, and to react to the main thing: the voice to be accompanied!)

For example, in C-major:

slow version:	fast version:
$c \quad d \quad e \quad f \quad g \quad c$	$c \quad d \quad e \quad f \quad g \quad c$
6    6    6-5   4-3	6    6    6-5   4-3

a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a
r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r
o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r
a	r	e	a	a	r	e	a

18. Let us analyze one real example of an accompaniment by Dowland: the beginning of “Sorrow stay” from 2nd book. In a way Dowland still was writing intabulations of lower voices in renaissance style, but early baroque is very near. It is very good idea to analyze existing “continuo realizations”: you can learn lots of technique and style!

a	r	a	a	a	b	c	a
a	a	a	f	e	r	e	a
b	a	b	f	r	b	c	b
r	b	r	e	f	r	e	r
			r				

g minor

the base: *g* *f#* *g* *d* *d* *b* *c* *a* *g*  
 numbers: 6-5 9-8 4-#3 # 6 7-#6

The 9th is kind of 2nd. Can you see where it comes from, if you play the passage carefully? Can you see, where from the 7th comes? See the way 4-#3 is decorated!

19. At the end of the “starting point” let us have a look to different possibilities of realizing one beautiful bass line. One reason for leaving the starting point now is that for selection of what to play, we should know what we accompany: one singer (what text?), an ensemble of singers, a choir, solo instrument (loud or soft?), an ensemble of instruments, an orchestra, ... Is the music from Venice 1600, London 1650, Paris 1690, Hamburg 1700, ...

But, anyhow, our ending example will be in g-minor, and let’s start with a very “normal” realization:

*g* *a* *bb* *c* *d* *g*  
 #6 6 6-5 8—7 #  
 4-#3

a	a	a	a	a
a	e	a	b	a
b	b	a	a	r
a	r	a	r	a

If the bass is very fast,

you may play:

or in 3rds:

or in 6ths:

a	a	a	a	a	a
a	a	a	b	a	a
b	a	r	a	r	b
a	r	a	r	a	a

So, not always “all the numbers” are needed. Especially, if in this example, the melody is singing/playing in thirds of the bass, you should choose sixths, and vice versa.

If the piece is slow, and you need lots of emphasis to this place, perhaps because of the words, you may play:

a	a	a	a	a	a	a
a	e	a	b	a	e	a
b	δ	b	δ	b	a	δ
r	e					r
r			a	r		r
a	r	δ				a

And of course you may 'roll' on every chord a while, if necessary.

Sometimes it is nice to play "separée", separate the notes:

"country style":

"style brisée":

a	a	a	a	δ	r	a	r	a	a	a	a
a	e	a	b	e	a	a	e	a	b	e	a
b	δ		a	r		b	δ			a	δ
								r			
a	r	δ	a	r	a	a	r	δ	a	r	a

And finally, if the melody is resting, you have a place for your solo:

or:

aδra	aδ	ra	δr	a	a	a	a	a	r	δrra	a	a
a	e		a	b	a	e	a	a	e	a	b	e
b	δ			a	r			b	δ		a	δ
a	r	δ	a	r	a	a	r	δ	a	r	a	a

or, or, ...

Continue continuo yourself, only the sky is the limit!

(The end of "The starting point for lute continuo learning".)

## Appendix

David Tayler commented on my “Starting point” – article:

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> The statement that the default value for a given bass note 5-3 is not
> supported by the sources. For all of the 17th century and into the
> beginning of the 18th the note B in the key of G (that is, the mediant or
> third note of the scale) is harmonized as a six chord. This is seen in
> the many guitar Alphabet tablatures as well as lute tablatures. Nicolo
> Matteis specifically mentions this in his treatise on continuo playing.
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Yes this is true. They formulated this rule of 6th for playing unnumbered bass lines, because it is so common to have a 6th chord, when the bass is on the 3th or 7th note of the scale. With the 7th the case is quite secure, because both 5/3 and 6/3 give you a suitable harmony, but perhaps this warning for 3th degree should already be written to my “Starting point”– article.

By the way, have you checked the early alfabeto-accompaniments: it happens every now and then that they use 5/3 on 3th degree, where we would without hesitation use 6/3! It has sometimes been explained that they were so busy in printing the books and getting the money from quite wide guitar-playing markets that they did not have time to proofread the prints.

But who knows! Anyhow, in the beginning of 1600 the harmony was not yet the “functional harmony” taught nowadays, but lots of methods of modal music were still in use.

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