Learning Cadences

WHO SHOULD STUDY THIS LESSON

The following suggestions for how to learn the standard cadences are directed toward beginners. If you are already advanced enough to realize a figured bass, then the notation of the cadences in various Regole on this website may be sufficient for you, though you might still benefit from the exercises provided here.

WHAT YOU SHOULD PROBABLY FORGET

If you have taken one or more courses in harmony, much of what you learned will unfortunately get in your way as you begin to practice partimenti. Harmony courses were designed in the nineteenth century for middle-class amateurs who wanted a course "about" music, but who did not want to spend the years of apprenticeship required to become a professional musician. Believe it or not, thousands of fine composers like Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky would have failed a modern collegiate examination in "Harmony 101." They had a sophisticated knowledge of harmony but they never experienced the draconian simplifications of real music that make harmony courses possible (e.g., roman numerals, harmonic functions, etc.). If you can leave those concepts behind, then cadences and partimenti will be much easier to learn.

WHAT YOU SHOULD ALREADY HAVE STUDIED

You should have read the lesson "The Basics of Figures" on this website. You should also have read the "Guide to the Rule of the Octave." It is assumed that you know your key signatures, accidentals, and the treble and bass clefs.

MELODY FIRST

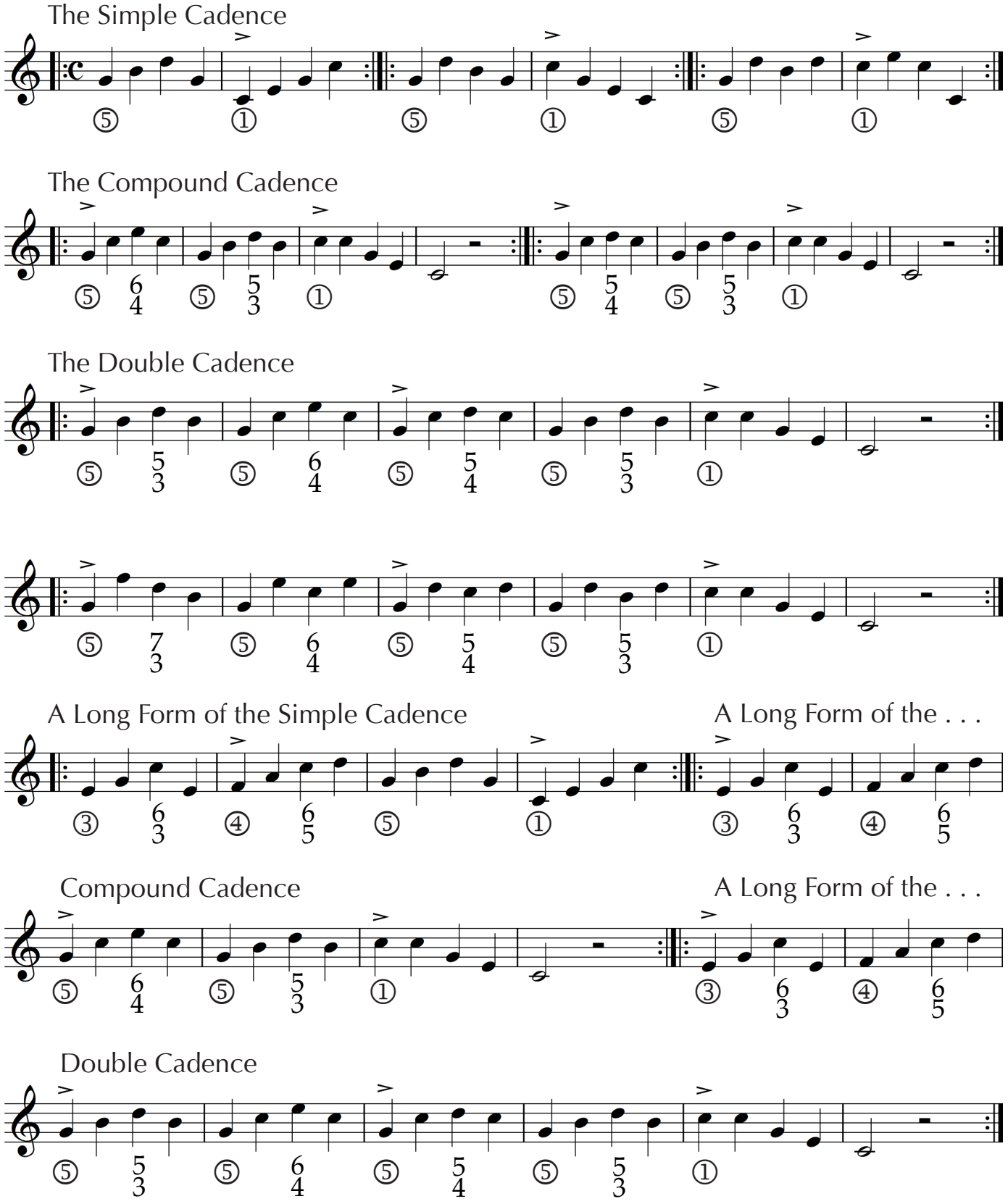
At the old conservatories in Naples, young students (7–10 years old) would first spend a couple of years working on singing exercises (solfeggi, pronounced "sole-FEDGE-ee). Through solfeggi (which were accompanied at the harpsichord) they learned tones, intervals, melodic figures and—most importantly—how melodies would fit together with basses and chords. So let's begin with melodies. . . .

On the following page you will find melodic exercises based on the three basic cadences: (1) Simple, (2) Compound, and (3) Double. Each exercise represents tones in an imaginary bass (on the downbeats, and marked with numbered circles) followed by the other tones in the desired chords.

- In the first group ("The Simple Cadence") a 5/3 chord over ⑤ moves to a 5/3 chord over ①.

- In the second group ("The Compound Cadence") there are two chords over ⑤ before the partimento moves to a 5/3 chord over ①. The first of the two chords over ⑤ is either 6/4 or 5/4.

• In the third group ("The Double Cadence") there are four chords over ⑤ before the partimento moves to a 5/3 chord over ①. Those four chords are 5/3, 6/4, 5/4, 5/3.



You should sing or whistle these exercises. You could also play them on an instrument, but be sure to imagine a tone in your mind before you sound it on your instrument. As you do each exercise, try mentally to connect the imaginary bass tones (those marked with numbered circles). That is, when you sing the four tones in a measure, try to retain a memory of the downbeat to connect it with the downbeat of the next measure.

BENCHMARKS

1. Be able to sing or play these exercises fast enough so that you can hear the downbeats as tones that connect stepwise. When you sing a cadence, you should be able to hear the movement from ⑤ to ①. If you have trouble hearing these connections, try singing the tones on the downbeats louder and more sustained (tenuto) and the tones on the other three beats softer and shorter (stacatto).

2. Be able to sing or play these exercise in keys with up to three sharps or flats. Do the exercises in both the major and minor modes. In the minor mode, use the "harmonic minor" version. That is, degree ⑦ will always be a semitone below ①, and ⑥ will be a semitone above ⑤.

3. Be able to play the downbeats with your left hand on a keyboard (or keyboard app) while you sing or whistle the other three tones in each measure.

4. Be able to play the downbeats with your left hand, and the other three tones in each measure in your right hand.

5. Be able to play the downbeats with your left hand as a half-note (minim), and the other three tones in each measure as a block chord on the measure's second half-note value (i.e., at the point of the third quarter note [crotchet]).

6. Play what is described in benchmark no. 5, but in each of the three positions. First position starts with ❶ (black circles show scale degrees in the melody) as the highest tone in the right hand. Second position starts with ❸, and third position starts with ❺. For each key, these positions set the hand in a given register on the keyboard, and you should try to stay generally in that register as you play the cadences. At this stage don't think worry about connecting all the tones as if they each belong to separate voices. Just play all the chord tones that fit comfortably under your hand. For some chords you will play two or three tones, for others you may play three or four.

WRITTEN WORK

Assignment 1. Using a score of two staves with treble and bass clefs ("piano score"), copy the downbeats of the the cadences exercises onto the bass staff as whole notes (minims). Mark each scale degree. On the treble staff, above each bass tone, write whole-note chords with all the tones belonging to each chord.

Assignment 2. Using a score of three staves (bass at bottom, two treble staves above) copy out the bass of Assignment no. 1. For the topmost treble staff, write in whole-notes the upper tone of each measure in the melodic exercises. Notice that as a melody, this staff contains only stepwise motion. For the middle staff, write out these melodies: Simple Cadences, B–C; Compound Cadences, C–B–C; Double Cadences, B–C–C–B–C. For the long forms, place the tones G–A–... before the tones just mentioned.

Assignment 3. Play assignment no. 2 at the keyboard (or have someone play it for you, or record it). As you listen to it, make your mind follow only one part (bass, middle, or top). You should be able to hear the whole three-voice sound as a background, and in your mind focus on just one part.