

Learning The Rule of the Octave

WHO SHOULD STUDY THIS LESSON

The following suggestions for how to learn the Rule of the Octave are directed toward beginners. If you are already advanced enough to realize a figured bass, then the notation of the Rule of the Octave 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 the Rule of the Octave will be much easier to learn.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE STUDIED FIRST

You should have read “An Illustrated Guide to the Rule of the Octave” on this website. You should also have read “The Basics of Figures.” After finishing this lesson, you should try the Rule of the Octave section of one of books of Rules (*Regole*) on this website.

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-y). 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 Rule of the Octave. 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 (“Pairs . . .”) a less-stable degree in the bass moves to a more stable degree. The direction of the move in the bass, marked by an arrow, can change the less stable degree’s chord.
- In the second group (“Moves. . .”) the bass moves stepwise from one stable position to another, passing through one or more less-stable degrees.
- In the third group, the entire Rule of the Octave is presented both ascending and descending.

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 bass tones (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.

Pairs: Less Stable to More Stable

⑦ ↗ ① ② ↘ ① ② ↗ ③ ④ ↘

(Less Stable to Less Stable)

③ ④ ↗ ⑤ ⑥ ↘ ⑤ ⑥ ↗ ⑦

Moves Between Stable Degrees

① ↗ ② ↗ ③ ③ ↘ ② ↘ ①

③ ↗ ④ ↗ ⑤ ⑤ ↘ ④ ↘ ③

⑤ ↗ ⑥ ↗ ⑦ ↗ ① ① ↘ ⑦ ↘

Rule of the Octave: ↗

⑥ ↘ ⑤ ① ↗ ② ↗ ③ ↗ ④ ↗

Rule of the Octave: ↘

⑤ ↗ ⑥ ↗ ⑦ ↗ ① ① ↘ ⑦ ↘

⑥ ↘ ⑤ ↘ ④ ↘ ③ ↘ ② ↘ ①

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 the Rule of the Octave, you should be able to hear a slow scale as the downbeats rise or fall. 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 (*staccato*).
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 “melodic minor” version. That is, when ascending, ⑥ and ⑦ have the same pitches as in the major mode, but when descending, they are both flatted by a semitone. ⑥ descending to ⑤ will produce an “augmented sixth chord,” so called because the interval from a lowered ⑥ to a raised ④ (e.g., A \flat to F \sharp in C minor) is one semitone larger than a major sixth.
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 ① (black circles show scale degrees in the melody) as the highest tone in the right hand. Second position starts with ③, and third position starts with ⑤. 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 Rule of the Octave. At this stage don’t 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

Below is the second partimento from the first book of partimenti by Fedele Fenaroli, a famous master in Naples. He meant it to be a very simple partimento, but it still can be challenging for a beginner. The brackets above the staves indicate stepwise passages that fit the Rule of the Octave.

Assignment 1. Using a score of two staves with treble and bass clefs (“piano score”), copy Fenaroli’s bass onto the bass staff. Mark each scale degree. Beware of modulations—this partimento moves through three different keys. Allow plenty of space between the 1/4-notes (crotchets) to fit in faster notes in the treble (part of Assignment 2).

Assignment 2. On the treble staff, and only for the passages under brackets, for each quarter note in the bass write one 1/16th-note rest and three 1/16th-notes (semiquavers). Those three notes should match the chord-tones called for by the Rule of the Octave. You can use the melodic exercise on the previous page as a model for how to arrange these tones.

HINTS

- In measure 3 the “5” in brackets means “play a 5/3 chord here.” This ④ neither descends from ⑤ nor ascends to ⑤, so the normal Rule of the Octave does not need to apply.
- A lone sharp or flat refers to the 3rd of a chord.
- Because most chords have a 3rd, figures often omit a “3.” A lone “6” thus means 6/3.
- A 6/5 (meaning 6/5/3) whose bass ascends a half-step is usually over a ⑦. By contrast, a 6/5 that ascends a whole step is usually over a ④.
- A #4 means a 6/4/2 chord, meaning that it is over a ④ descending from ⑤. The treble tone that makes the #4 is usually a leading tone (⑦). In this partimento that is F#.