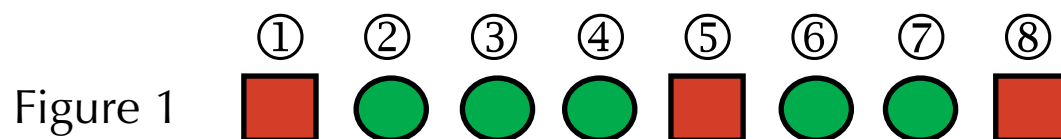
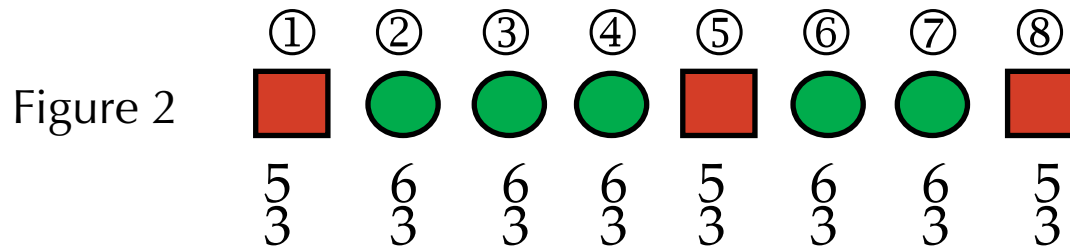


An Illustrated Guide to The Rule of the Octave

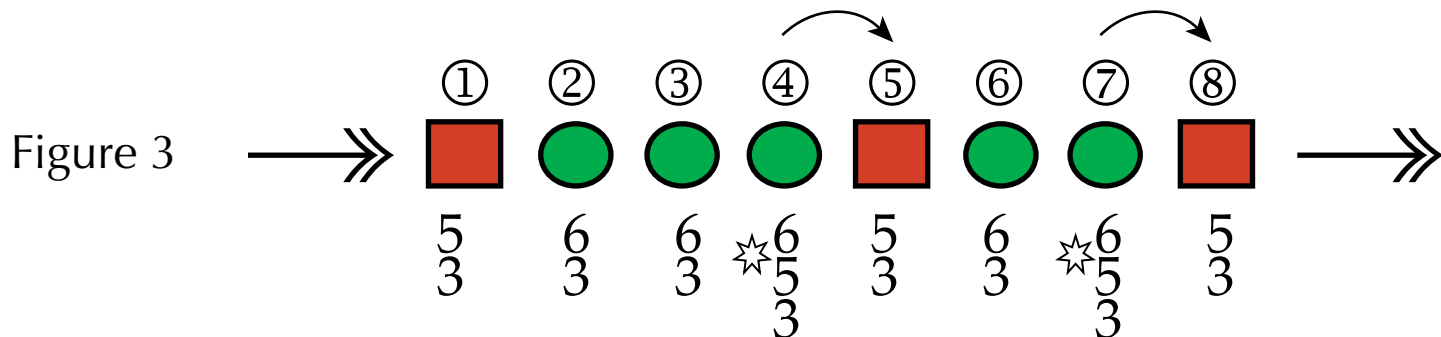
Figure 1 shows, in an abstract and greatly simplified form, how eighteenth-century musicians thought of the relative stability or instability of the different scale degrees across an octave in the bass. The white numbered circles represent scale degrees in the bass, the red boxes represent positions felt to be relatively stable points of arrival, and the green circles indicate positions felt to be unstable and more mobile.



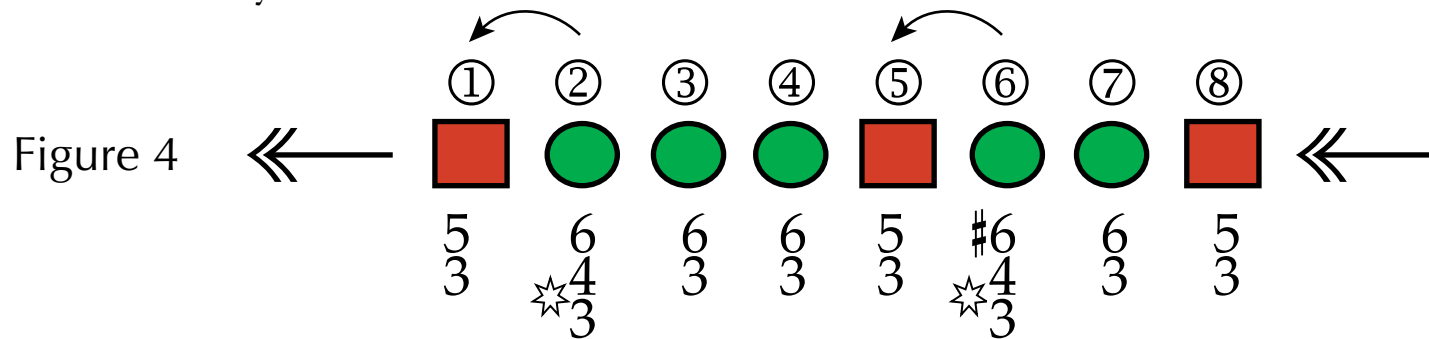
As a first approximation of the Rule of the Octave, we can imagine that the stable scale degrees receive a $5/3$ chord (a simple triad as in do-mi-sol) and that the unstable degrees will take some form of a chord with a 6, perhaps $6/3$ (as in re-fa-si). This simplified version of the Rule of the Octave (see Figure 2) highlights the great continuity in the traditions of polyphonic music, inasmuch as it has a great deal in common with late Medieval and Renaissance descriptions of fauxbourdon singing. In fauxbourdon, choristers gave perfect consonances (5, 8) to the first and last tones of a phrase of Gregorian chant, and imperfect consonances (3, 6) to the middle tones.



Like the melodic minor scale, the Rule of the Octave is different when ascending or descending. So for a better approximation, let us examine movement up and down separately. Figure 3 presents the ascending version. Dissonances (clashes between a “6” and a “5,” as marked by stars in Fig. 3) were added to the scales degrees that precede the stable positions. So as one ascends the scale in the bass, maximum instability (on ④ and ⑦) occurs just before a return to stability.



The same principle applies when descending (see Fig. 4), though the dissonances are now between a “4” and a “3.” In the descent from ⑥ to ⑤, the interval “6” is raised a half step to create a leading-tone (F# in a C-major context) to the stable ⑤, thus giving ② and ⑥ the same sonority.



There is still one more complication (see Fig. 5). The third scale degree was deemed partly stable, partly mobile. Following the principle of dissonance before stability, musicians often added a “4/3” dissonance to a rising ②, and almost always added a “4/2” dissonance to a ④ descending from ⑤.

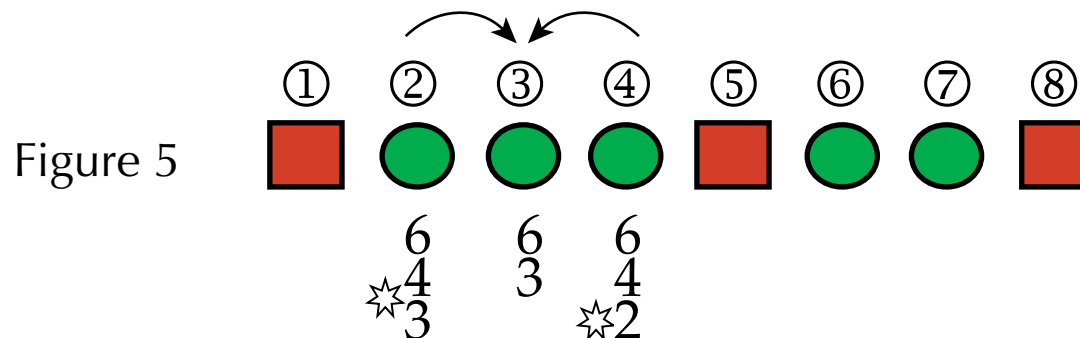
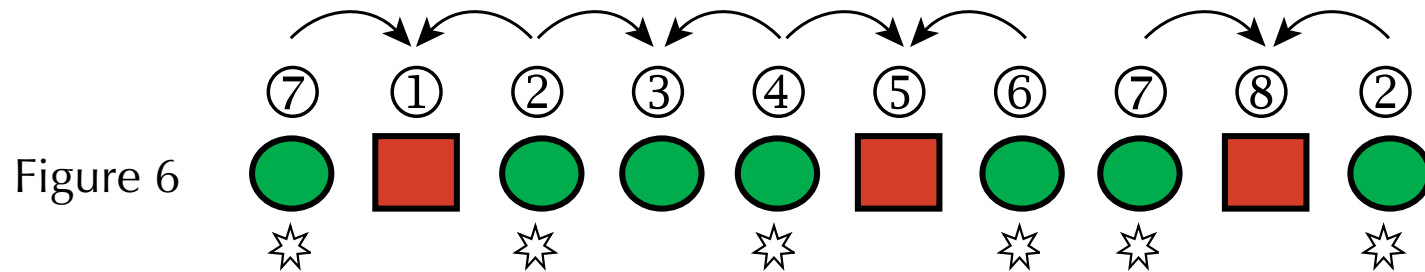


Figure 6 shows how dissonance and directional movement in the bass combine to continually emphasize the $5/3$ triads on ①, ⑤, and ⑧, and to a lesser extent the somewhat stable $6/3$ chord on ③.



Given the many combinations possible among degrees, directions, dissonances, and sonorities (e.g., $5/3$ vs. $6/3$), “the” Rule of the Octave is not a fixed set of chords. Instead it serves as a summary or norm of the fluid and highly context-dependent practices of eighteenth-century musicians. Beginners, often young children, were taught a basic form of the Rule of the Octave, and that form can be found near the opening of most manuscripts of partimento rules (It.: *regole*), including those by Fenaroli, Furno, Durante, and Insanguine (see “Collections” under “Partimenti”). Please refer to those documents for the Rule of the Octave in standard musical notation.

In Furno’s handbook he points out common departures from the basic Rule of the Octave. For example, a descending ④ that does not descend from ⑤ may be played as a simple triad, as can a ⑥ when it is left by leap. When the bass leaps, especially in se-

quences, many of the resulting patterns fall under the headings of “Bass Motions,” which are dealt with separately in the Regole. Some maestros wrote out complex and more chromatic ways of harmonizing a scale in the bass, calling each new type a Rule. But only the basic Rule of the Octave achieved wide recognition. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it would have been hard to find any highly trained musician who did not know the Rule of the Octave.

There is a manuscript preserved in Modena, Italy that had been a workbook at one of the Naples conservatories for a 13-year-old boy named Domenico Cimarosa (pronounced “chim-a-ROSE-ah”). We know this because the boy, later a famous composer, scribbled his name on several pages and wrote the year (1762) on the first page. From his workbook we can see that he was studying partimenti adapted from the famous maestro Francesco Durante. If Cimarosa had learned only the Rule of the Octave and a few cadences he still could have made a good start on realizing these partimenti. On the following two pages you will find the opening passages from the first two partimenti in his workbook, each now marked with scale degrees and keys, one major, one minor (Cimarosa only saw the bare notes; he had to work out the scale degrees and keys by himself). Below each partimento your editor has provided a sample realization following only the Rule of the Octave, simple cadences, and the basics of counterpoint. Cimarosa would probably have made different realizations because the choices a performer makes of melodic patterns and ornaments can be highly individualistic and yet still correct under the rules.

Figure 7 shows two systems of musical notation in bass clef, 2/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first system consists of two measures. The first measure is marked with a '4' and contains a quarter note G2, a quarter rest, and an eighth note G2. The second measure contains an eighth note G2, a quarter note A2, and an eighth note B2. The third system also consists of two measures. The first measure contains an eighth note G2, a quarter note A2, and an eighth note B2. The second measure contains an eighth note G2, a quarter note A2, and an eighth note B2. Chord diagrams are indicated above the notes: G Major (measures 1-2), D Major (measures 3-4), and G Major (measures 5-6). Fingering numbers are provided below the notes: ① ⑤ ① ③ ② ⑤ ③ ② ① ④ ③ ① ② ⑤ ③ ② ① ⑤ ⑦ ⑤ ⑥ ⑥ ⑦ ⑦ ① ① ④ ③ ⑥ ⑥ ⑦ ⑦ ① ③ ④ ⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ⑤ ①.

Figure 7 The opening of the first partimento in Cimarosa's workbook.

Figure 8 shows a sample realization of Figure 7, consisting of two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of two measures. The first measure contains a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. The second measure contains a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. The second system also consists of two measures. The first measure contains a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. The second measure contains a quarter note G2, a quarter note A2, and a quarter note B2. The notation is in treble clef, 2/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bass clef part is identical to Figure 7.

Figure 8 A sample realization of Fig. 7, with one added voice (disposizione a due)

Figure 9 shows two staves of bass clef music in 3/4 time. The first staff is labeled "G Minor" and "C Minor" with a dotted line between them. The second staff is labeled "F Major" and "Bb Major" with a dotted line between them. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 1-5 below the notes.

Figure 9 The opening of the second partimento in Cimarosa's workbook

Figure 10 shows a sample realization of Figure 9 with two added voices. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The second system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is in 3/4 time and features a variety of note values and rests.

Figure 10 A sample realization of Fig. 9, with two added voices (disposizione a tre)

Success with partimenti requires learning to scan a bass to recognize the local keys and their scale degrees. The Rule of the Octave is only helpful if one knows which octave is the right one for the passage in question. Apprentice musicians have always needed to work on these skills. Alois Förster, a friend and colleague of Beethoven, gave his students exercises in which the scale degrees were already marked for them. The image below (Fig. 11) is from one of his exercises (ca. 1818).

FONTE

F# Minor — E Minor — D Major

Rule of the Octave: ④ ⑤ ① ① ① ⑦ ⑥ ⑤ ⑦ ① ① ① ⑦ ⑥ ⑤ ⑦ ①

Figure 11 From p. 31 of E. A. Förster's *Practical Examples* (Vienna, 1818)

The publisher of Förster's exercise used a "1" that looks to modern eyes much like a "4," so circled numbers have been added below Förster's for the sake of clarity. Although Förster indicated an advanced harmonization for his bass, the dashed lines drawn below the circled numbers show how much of his exercise could have been harmonized with just the Rule of the Octave.

The local keys labelled above the image in Figure 10 align with Förster's degree numbers. Förster did not treat overlapping key contexts, which would have required two or more rows of numbers. He seems to mark a modulation only when an accidental signals a change of scale. That approach can be too rigid and can fail to account for changes in the interpretive context. The musical present is poised between memory and expectation. The F# bass in measure two of Figure 11 is the expected goal (= ①) of a cadence in the key of F# minor. When the F# bass in measure three enters an octave higher, it can be remembered as a ② at the beginning of the E-minor passage. And when the excerpt ends in D major, that same F# bass can be faintly remembered as a ③. That larger view is supported by a bass pattern that the Italians called "down a fifth, up a fourth" (i.e., F#–B–E–A–D) and that the Germans called a "circle of fifths." Please refer to Figure 7, measure 5, for an example of how to handle an overlapping key context through two sets of numbers.

After learning the Rule of the Octave a student would progress to cadences. As mentioned, the first two measures of Figure 11 present a cadence. By "cadence" we mean a pattern whose shape and meaning one has come to recognize from experience. In working through partimenti, a student will learn to recognize a number of patterns that can be used for different types of themes and passagework. The excerpt from Förster's exercise includes, for example, a "Fonte" (pronounced "FONE-tay"; Italian for a well or spring, as in "going down a well"). A Fonte combines a brief passage in minor with a similar passage one step lower in major (in Fig. 11, E minor descending to D major). An inventory of many such useful patterns can be found on this website under the heading "Schemas."