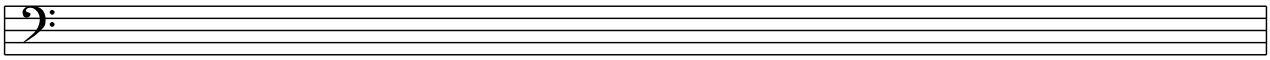

J. S. BACH

GENERAL BASS RULES

Adapted from Niedt's Music Handbook

Leipzig

1738

Edited by N. Schmidt

Lausanne

2003

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Introduction

The word Bass is derived from or may be traced back to the Greek word βασις, meaning basis or foundation. Others trace it back to the old Latin word *Bassus*, which is the equivalent of profundus, deep. When the word bass is considered alone, it signifies the bottom voice or bass line of the music, that is, any note which takes the lowest pitch, regardless of whether the note is sung or played on a bass instrument.

When one refers to general or figured bass, then bass such as is played with both hands on a keyboard instrument is meant. Thus, all or most of the voices of the music are played and sounded together. Figured bass is also called bassus continuus, or with the Italian ending, basso continuo, because it plays continuously, while the other voices pause here and there. Today however, the bass also pauses here and there, especially in skilfully composed music.

Figured bass is the most perfect foundation of music. It is played on the keyboard in such a way that the left hand plays the written notes, while the right hand strikes consonances and dissonances, so that this results in full-sounding harmony to the Glory of God and the delight of the soul. The ultimate goal of all music should be nothing but the Honour of God and the renewal of the soul. When this is not taken into consideration there is no true music.

Basic Rules

Rule 1

The written bass line is played with the left hand alone, but the other voices, whether indicated by figures or not, are played with the right hand.

Rule 2

The third is played with most figures, except when prohibited by the second and fourth being expressly indicated.

Rule 3

Two fifths and two octaves must not follow one another, for this is not only a definite error but also sounds bad. To avoid this, there is an old rule that the hands must move contrary to each other at all times, so that when the left hand goes up, the right goes down; and when the right goes up, the left goes down.

Rule 4

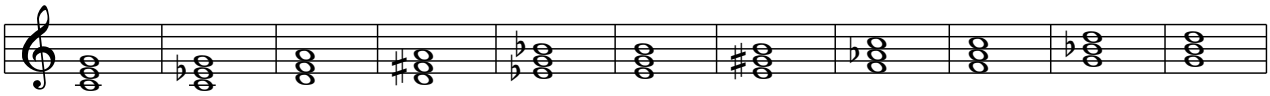
In order to avoid two consecutive fifths and octaves, the best choice is to use the sixth and thus obtain a rearrangement of tones.

Rule 5

Figures written above one another are played together, but when they follow one another, separated by a space, they are played one after the other.

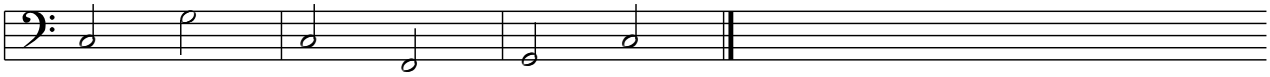
Harmonic Triads

Harmonic triads are used in composition and will be discussed here because figured bass is a starting point for composing and can be called an improvised composition with full sounding consonances and dissonances. Triads are created when performing figured bass. Furthermore, if the eager learner understands them well, and commits the following to memory, he may be sure that he has grasped a large part of the whole art. Harmonic triads are formed by joining the third and fifth to the fundamental note. This may be done for all tones, major and minor, in all twelve keys.

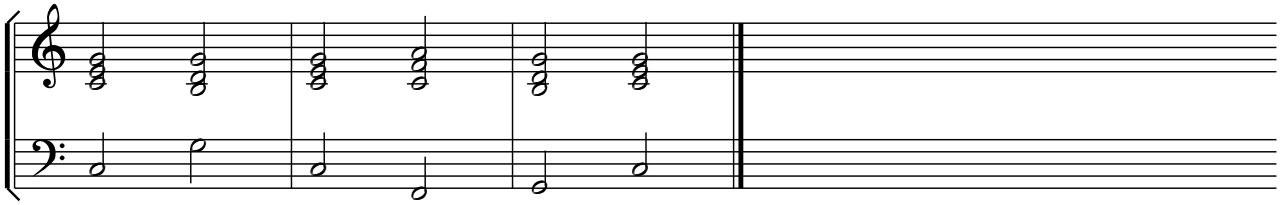


What to play when nothing is written over the Bass

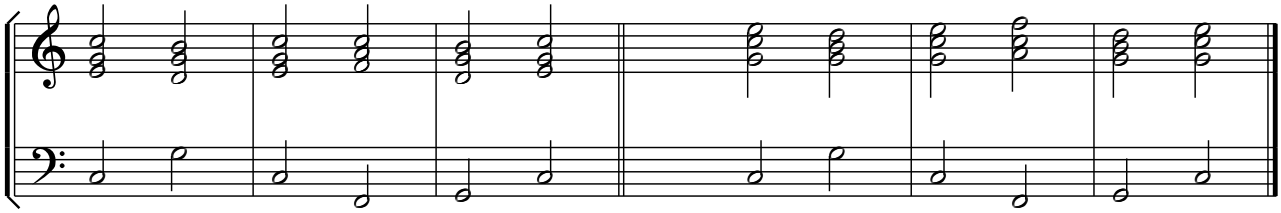
If nothing is written above the bass play only consonances, namely the 3rd, 5th, and octave. For example, the bass line could be written



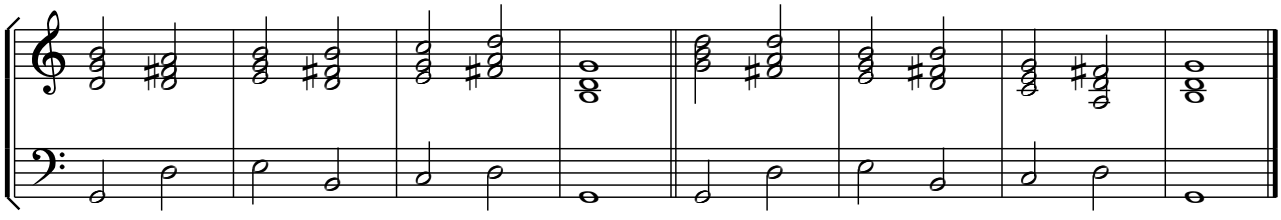
... and played this way by adding triads with the right hand:



However, one is not obliged nor required to play the same way all the time. Instead, the lowest voice (or alternatively the middle voice) may be made into the highest or main voice. For example, the preceding bass may also be played in the two following manners:



The following example shows how fifths and octaves, where two or more follow one another, do not fit well together. Instead, they sound bad even though they are perfect consonances.



This is not so good

This is better

Rules for Common Figures

Rule 1

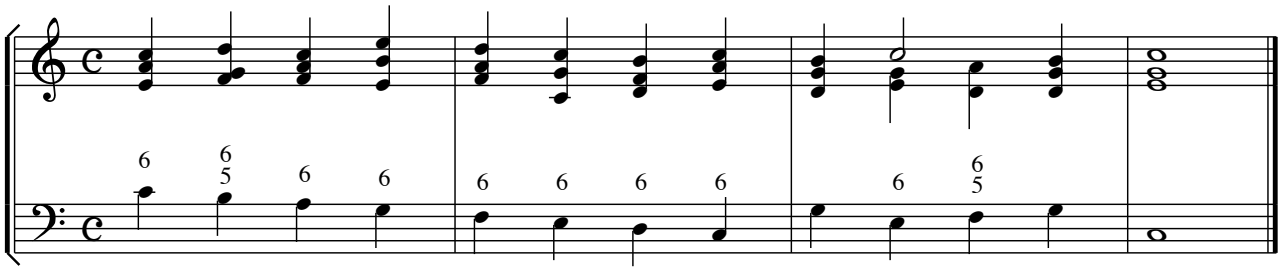
When the ♯ sign appears above a note, it signifies the major third. The same applies to sharp signs which occur in the key signature next to the bass clef. For example, if a ♯ is written above the A, then the major third, namely, C♯ must be played. If nothing is written, then C should be played. The same applies to the ♭ sign. Where a ♭ is written above a note, the minor third must be played. This should be carefully observed.

Rule 2

Figures marked with ♯, +, \ or / are raised one chromatique simitone, such as ♯2, 4+, or 6̸. Figures marked with ♭ or occasionally / are lowered by one semitone, such as ♭5, 7̸.

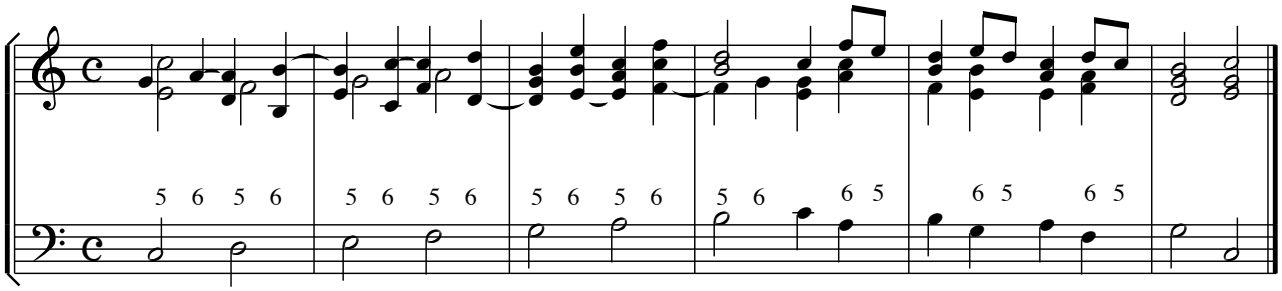
Rule 3

Where the figure **6** appears above a note, it signifies the interval of a sixth; i.e. counting from the bass note, the note above which the 6 appears, and playing the sixth note. With this, either a doubled third or a doubled sixth would be added. Sometimes the octave is played, especially when the next note is marked with the figures $\frac{6}{5}$ as in this example:



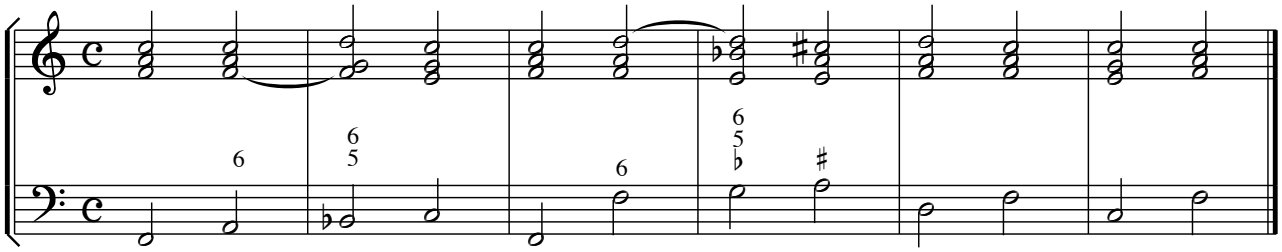
Rule 4

When a **5** and **6** follow one another, the fifth should always be prepared, the third and octave are then added to the fifth, and the sixth is played afterwards. But if it is the reverse, with the 6 appearing before the 5, then nothing is prepared, but rather it is played as written; that is, one plays the octave, the third and the sixth; then the fifth is played afterwards. The sixth may also be doubled, and with this arrangement only the third is added to the chord. For example:



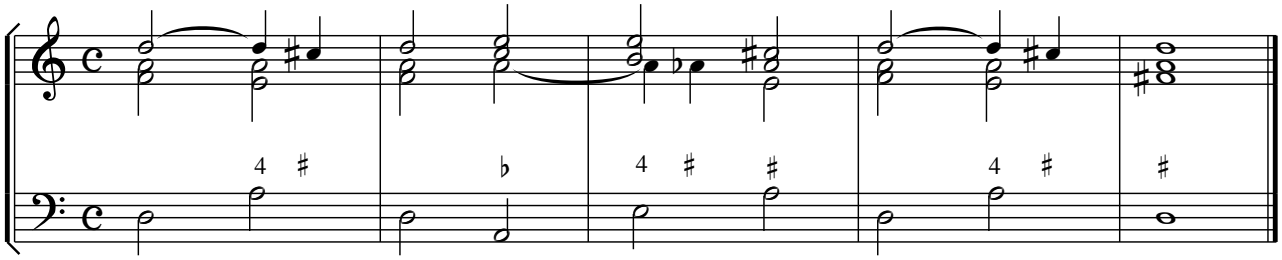
Rule 5

When $\begin{matrix}\mathbf{6}\\\mathbf{5}\end{matrix}$ appears above a note, the fifth must be prepared; the third and sixth are then added. e.g.:



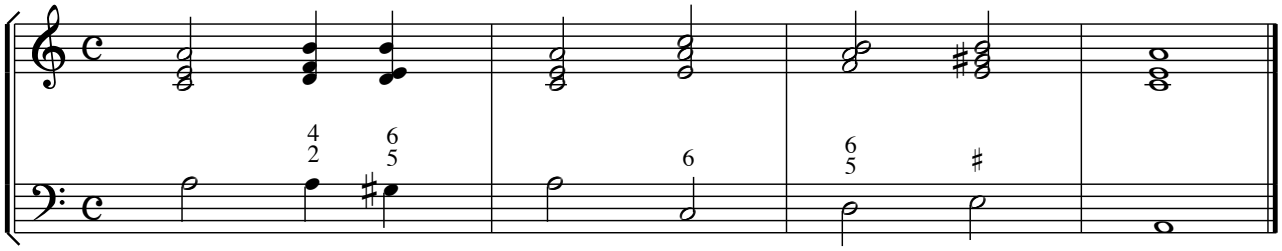
Rule 6

When a **4** and **3** are written next to each other, the fourth must be prepared. The third is played afterwards with the fifth and the octave, whether written out or not. By "prepared" is meant that the note has been played previously and is sustained over the next bass note.



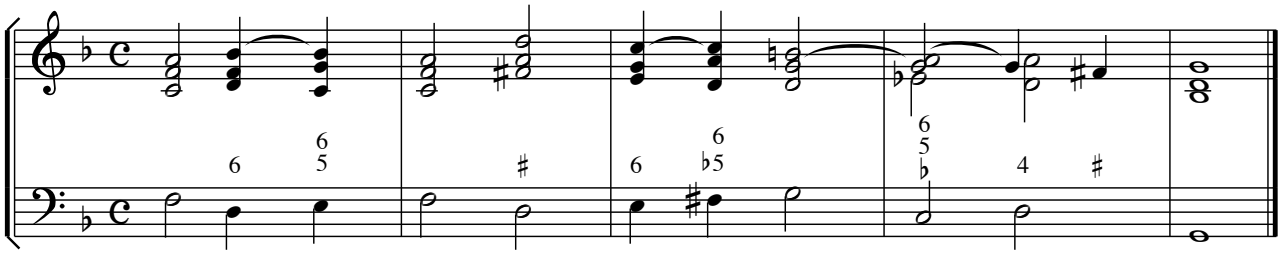
Rule 7

When $\begin{matrix}\mathbf{4}\\\mathbf{2}\end{matrix}$ appears over a note, the sixth is generally added even if not already written.
$\begin{matrix}6\\4\\2\end{matrix}$ are played together when the bass note has been prepared and resolve to $\begin{matrix}6\\5\end{matrix}$ if the bass moves down a half-step as shown in the following example.



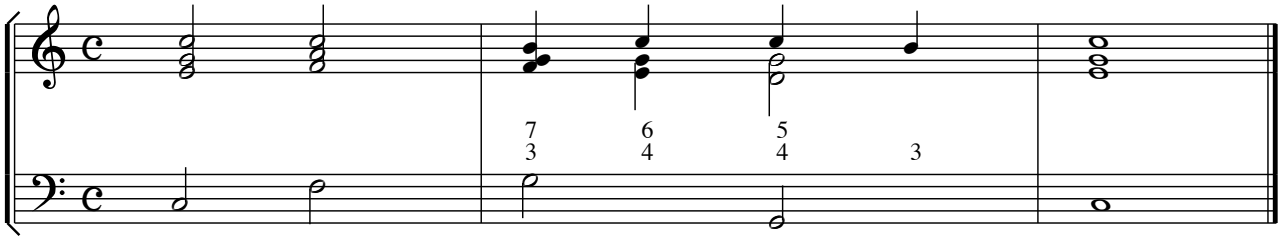
Rule 8

The **♭5** must always be prepared when notated. The third and sixth must be played with it whether notated or not as shown in the following example.



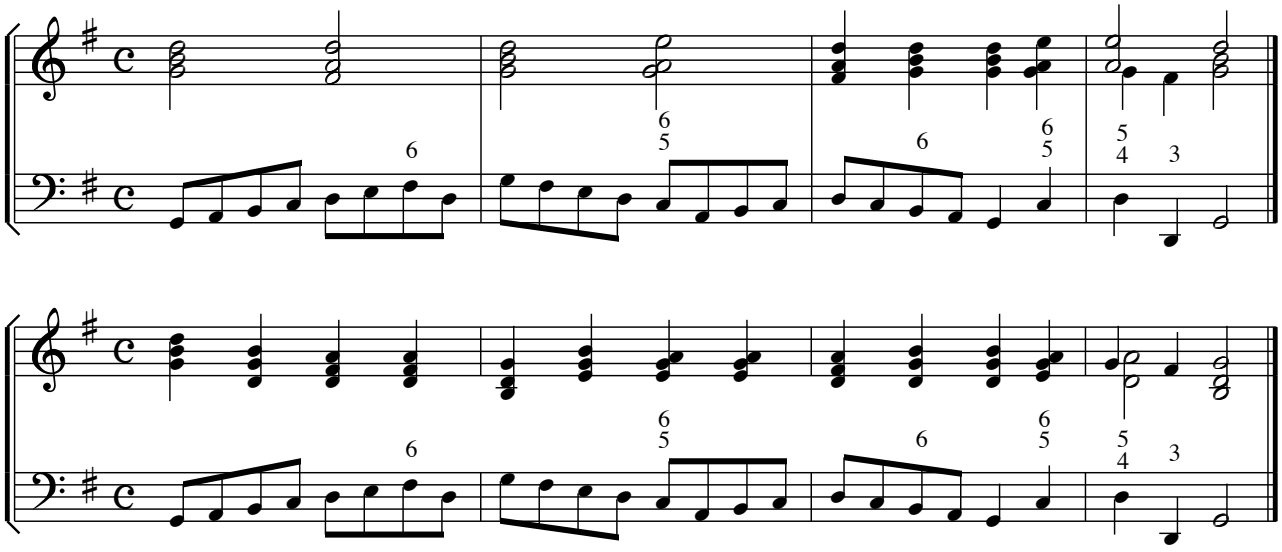
Rule 9

Where cadences are written, such as **7 6 5 / 3 4 4 3** , the figures are interrelated. Sometimes they are simply written 3 4 4 3 but should be played out fully as follows:



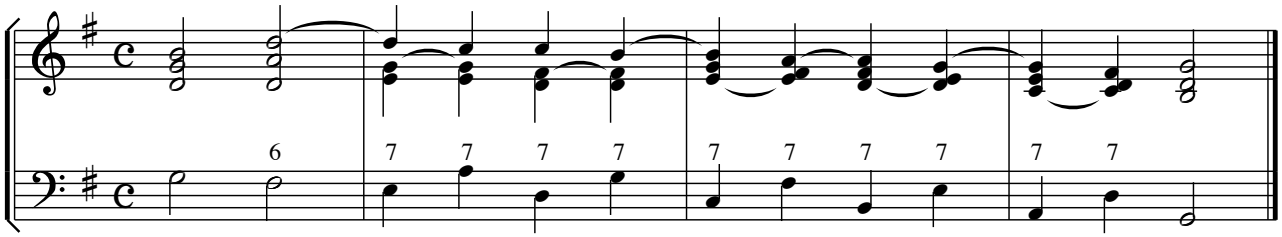
Rule 10

Walking-bass, which occurs frequently, does not require a new chord on all the notes. Only on the half or quarter beats.



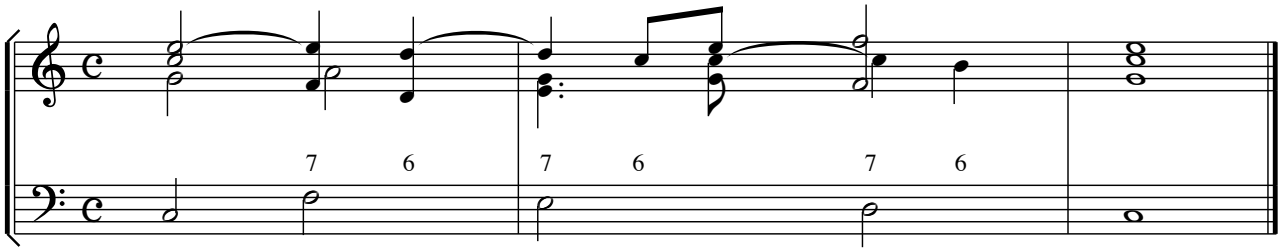
Rule 11

Where a **7** is notated alone, it must be prepared beforehand, and the third and fifth, or the third and octave are to be added to it. Sometimes the third is doubled.



Rule 12

Where a **7** and **6** appear next to one another, the seventh must be prepared. Either the third or the octave is added. Somtimes the third is doubled. Finally, the sixth, which may be major or minor, is played afterwards.



Rule 13

When a **9** and **8** appear next to each other, the ninth must be prepared and the octave played afterwards. The third and the fifth may be struck along with the ninth and the octave.

Rule 14

Where $\begin{matrix}\mathbf{9} & \mathbf{8} \\ \mathbf{7} & \mathbf{6}\end{matrix}$ appear, the seventh and the ninth must be prepared. The third must be played throughout. The sixth and octave are then played afterwards.

Rule 15

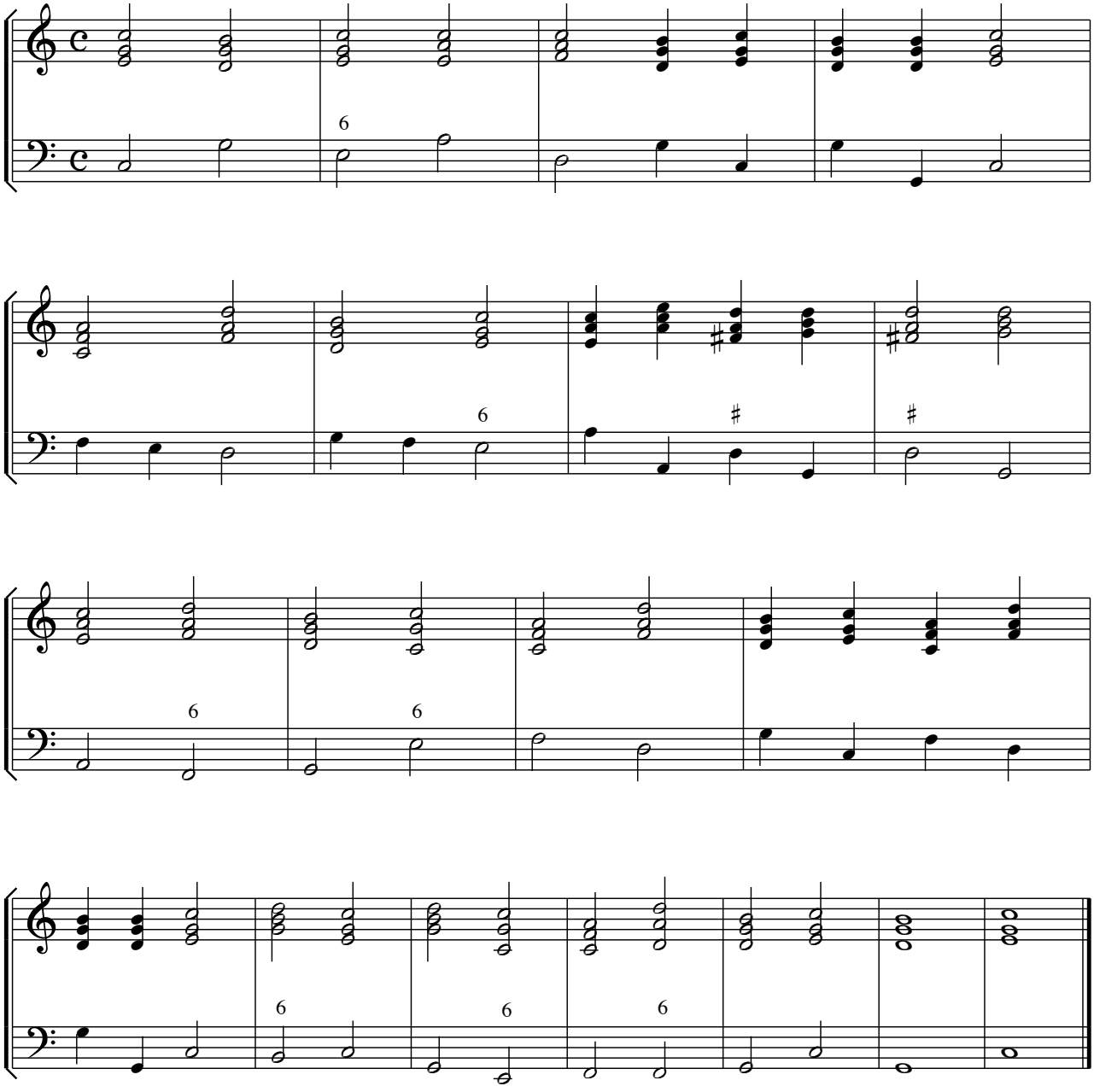
Sometimes the figures $\begin{matrix}\mathbf{9} & \mathbf{8} \\ \mathbf{4} & \mathbf{3}\end{matrix}$ also appear. A fifth is added to the fourth and ninth, both of which must be prepared. The third and octave are played afterwards.

The remaining, which can not be clearly described with words alone, may be deduced from example. Several examples in words and music are shown in the next section so that all the aforementioned may be better impressed upon the memory.

Examples in Words and Music

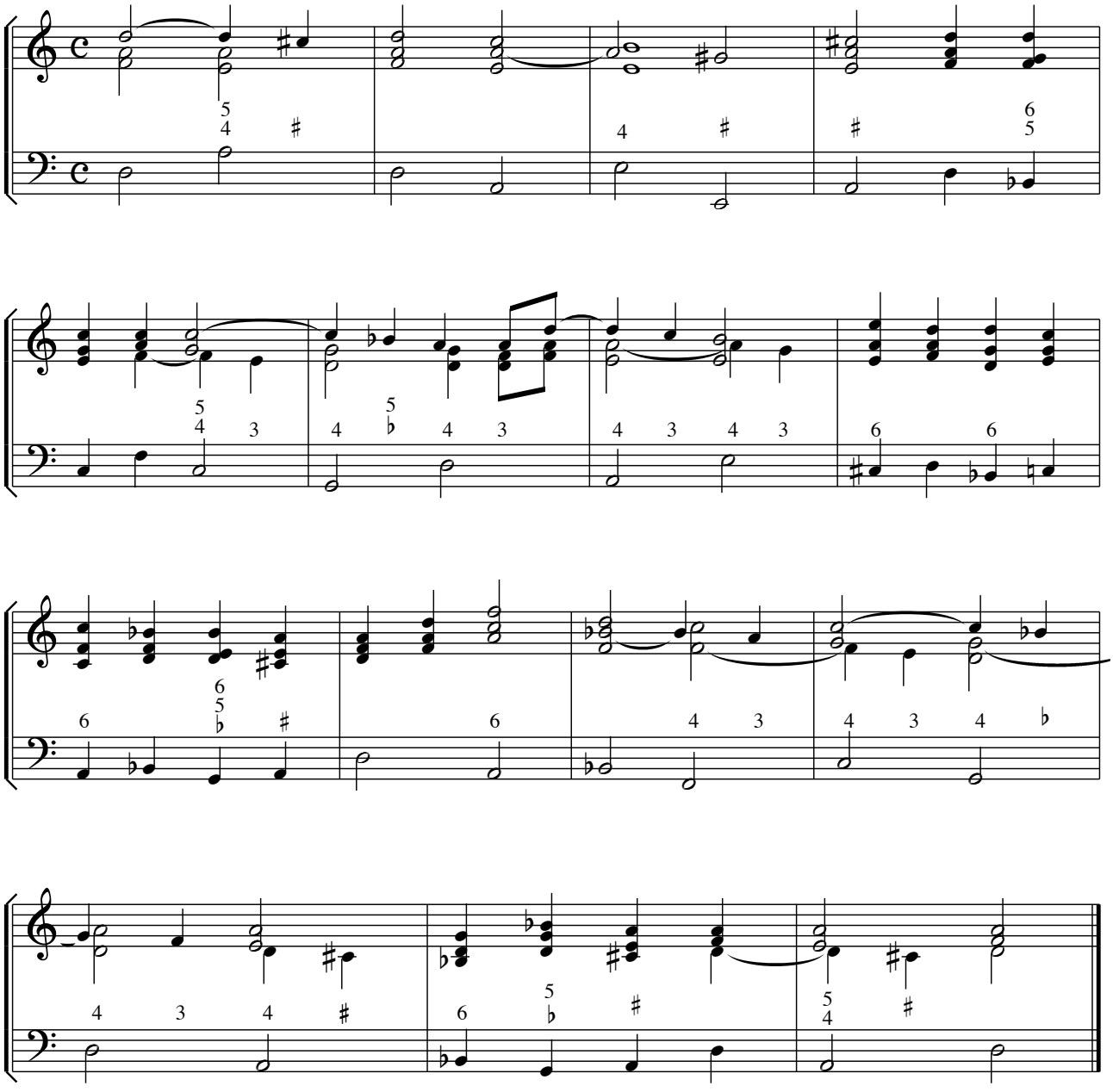
Example 1

When no figure appears over a note, a simple chord with the third, fifth, and octave is played. Generally speaking, when the right hand goes down, so must the left hand go up; and when the left hand goes down, the right hand must go up. This is called *modus contrarius*. In this way, one can avoid having many consecutive fifths and octaves.



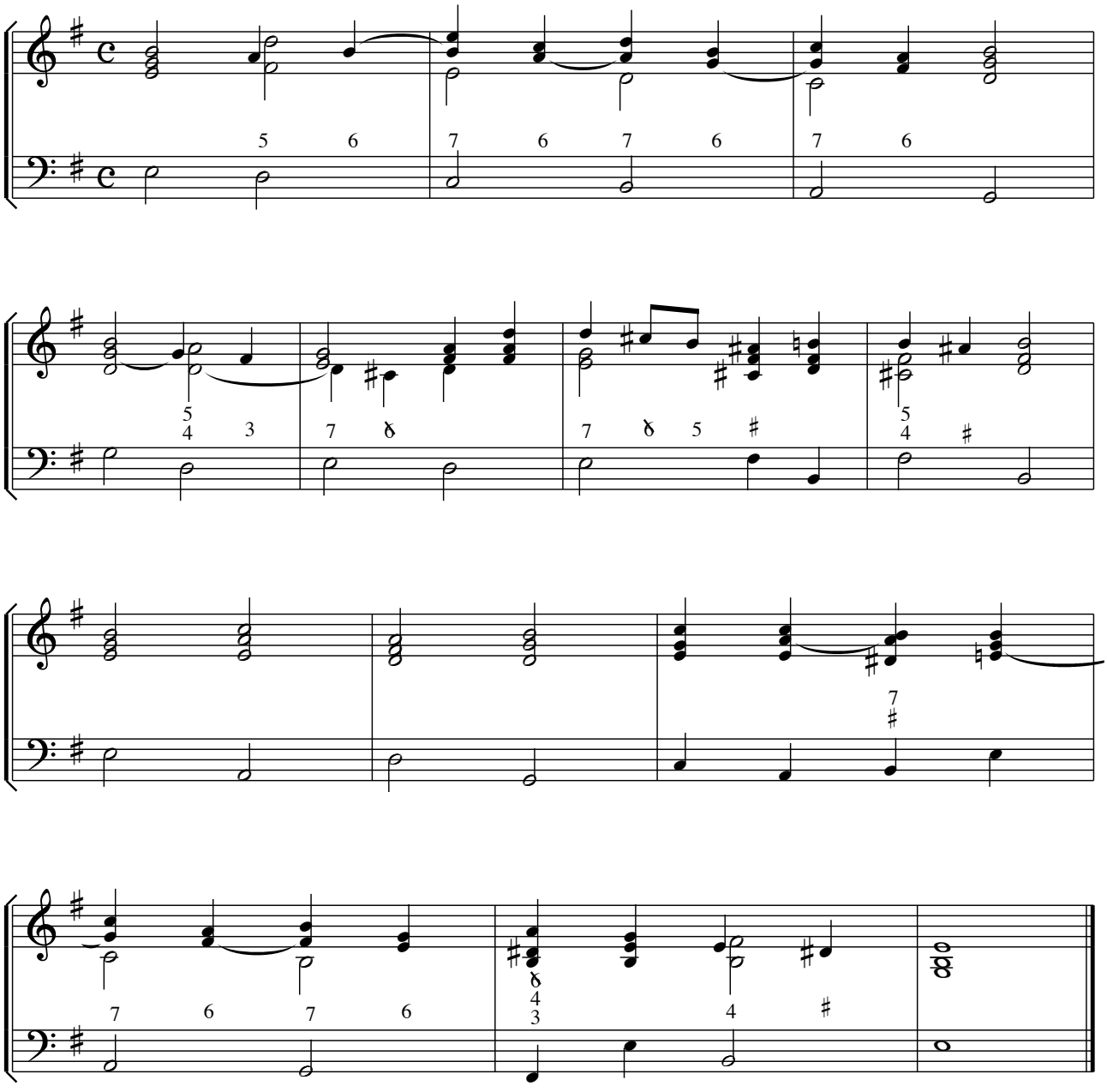
Example 2

When a fourth appears above a note, it must be prepared in the previous chord.
The fifth and the octave are played with it. Then, the fourth resolves to the third.



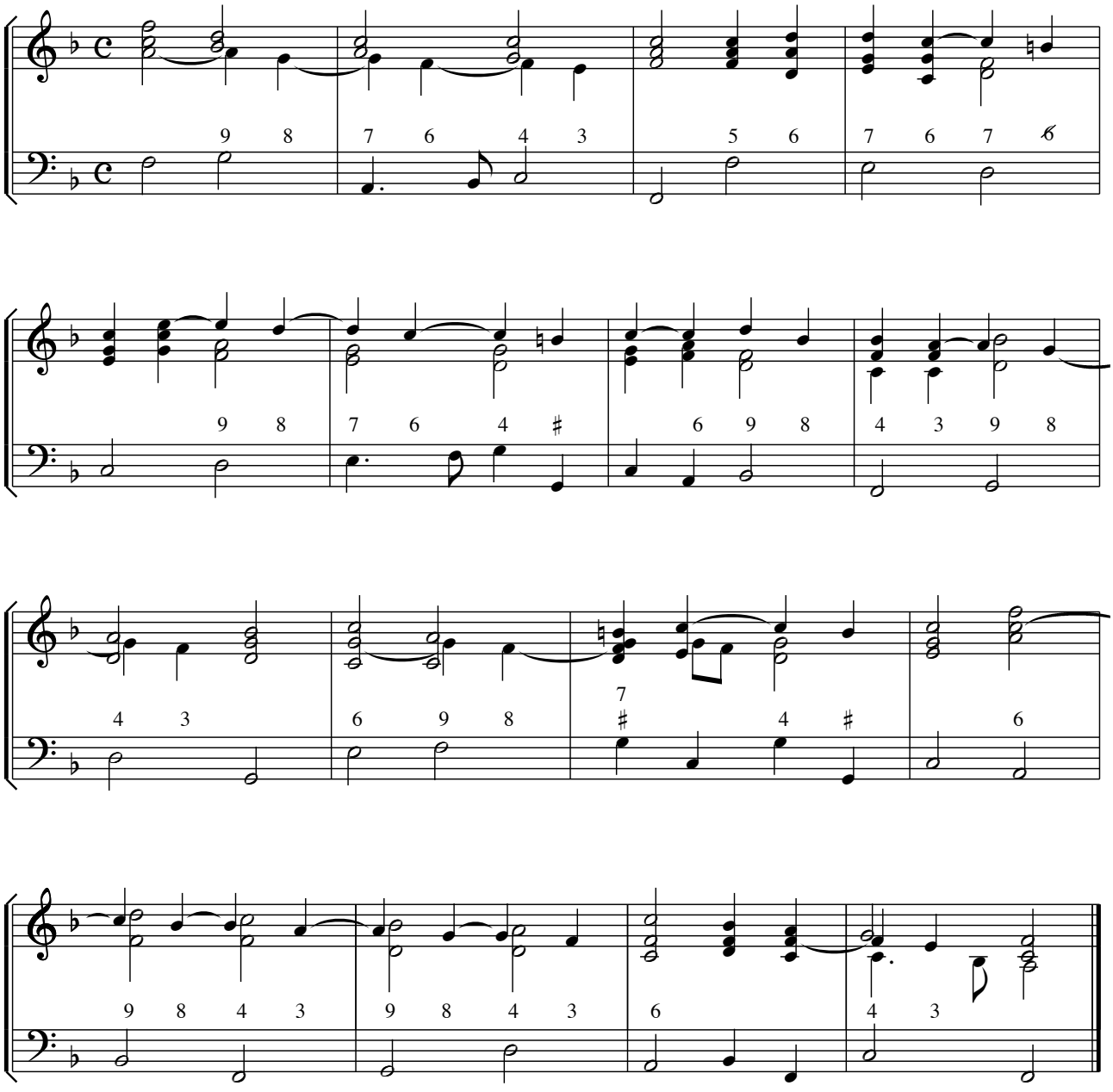
Example 3

When a seventh and a sixth appear above a note, the seventh must be prepared in the previous chord. The third and the fifth, or the third and the octave are played. Sometimes the third is doubled. The prepared seventh resolves to the sixth.



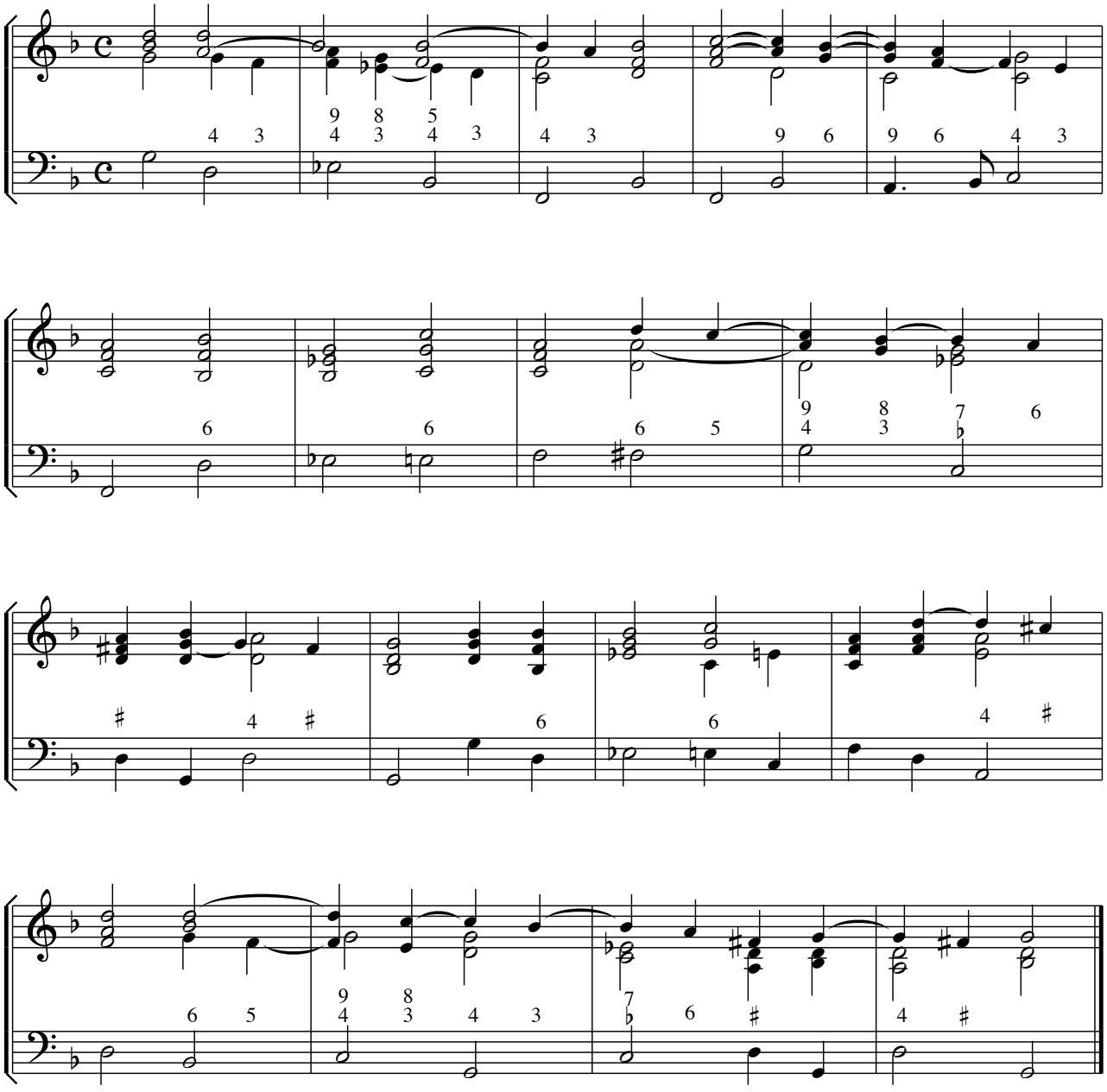
Example 4

When a ninth and an octave appear above a note, the ninth must be prepared in the previous chord. The third and fifth are played with it and the ninth resolves to the octave.



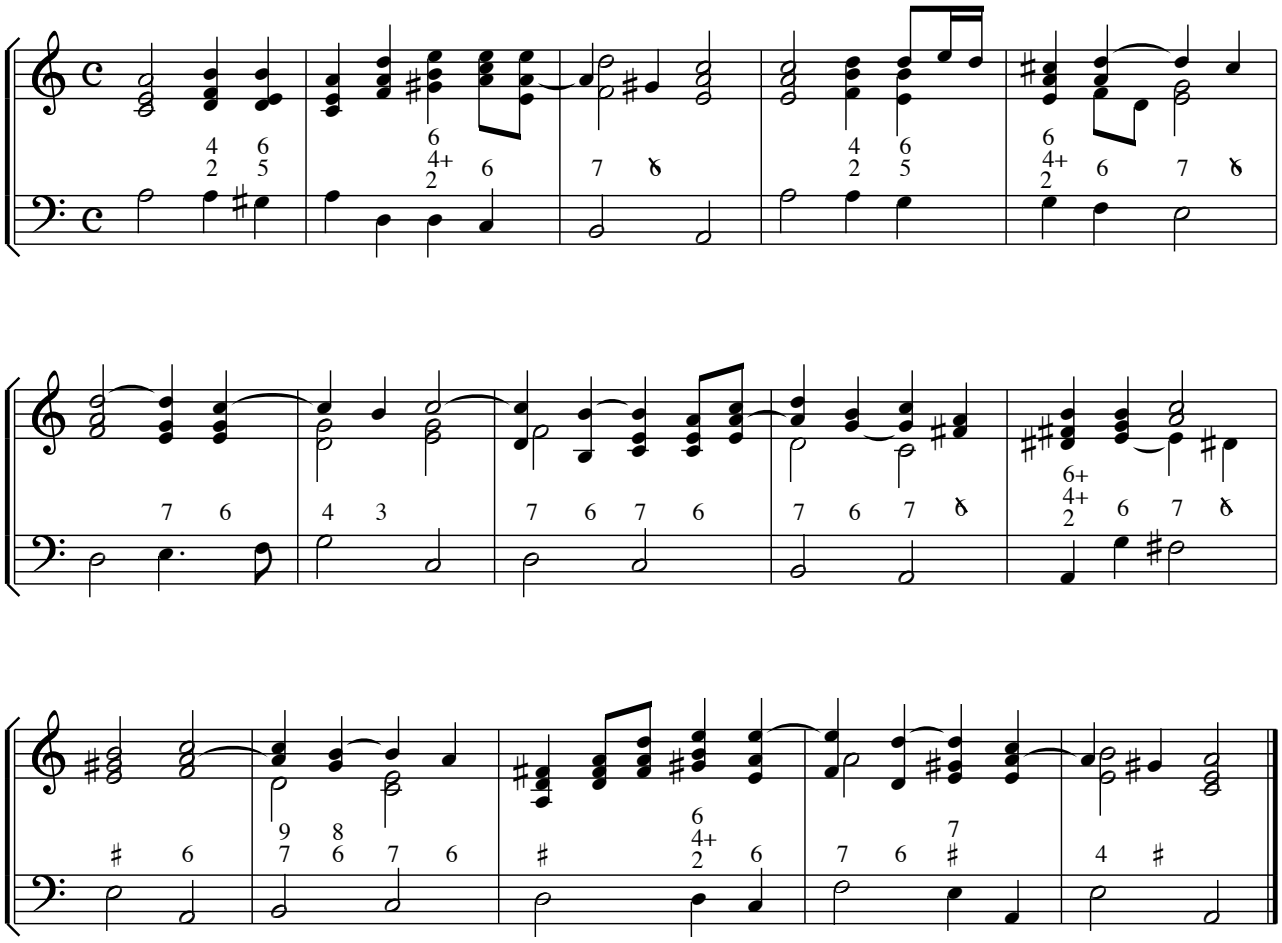
Example 5

When $\begin{smallmatrix}9\\4\end{smallmatrix}\ \begin{smallmatrix}8\\3\end{smallmatrix}$ appear above a note, $\begin{smallmatrix}9\\4\end{smallmatrix}$ must be prepared and resolves to $\begin{smallmatrix}8\\3\end{smallmatrix}$. The fifth should be added. Note that the ninth is the same as the second, the tenth the same as the third, the eleventh the same as the fourth and the twelfth the same as the fifth.



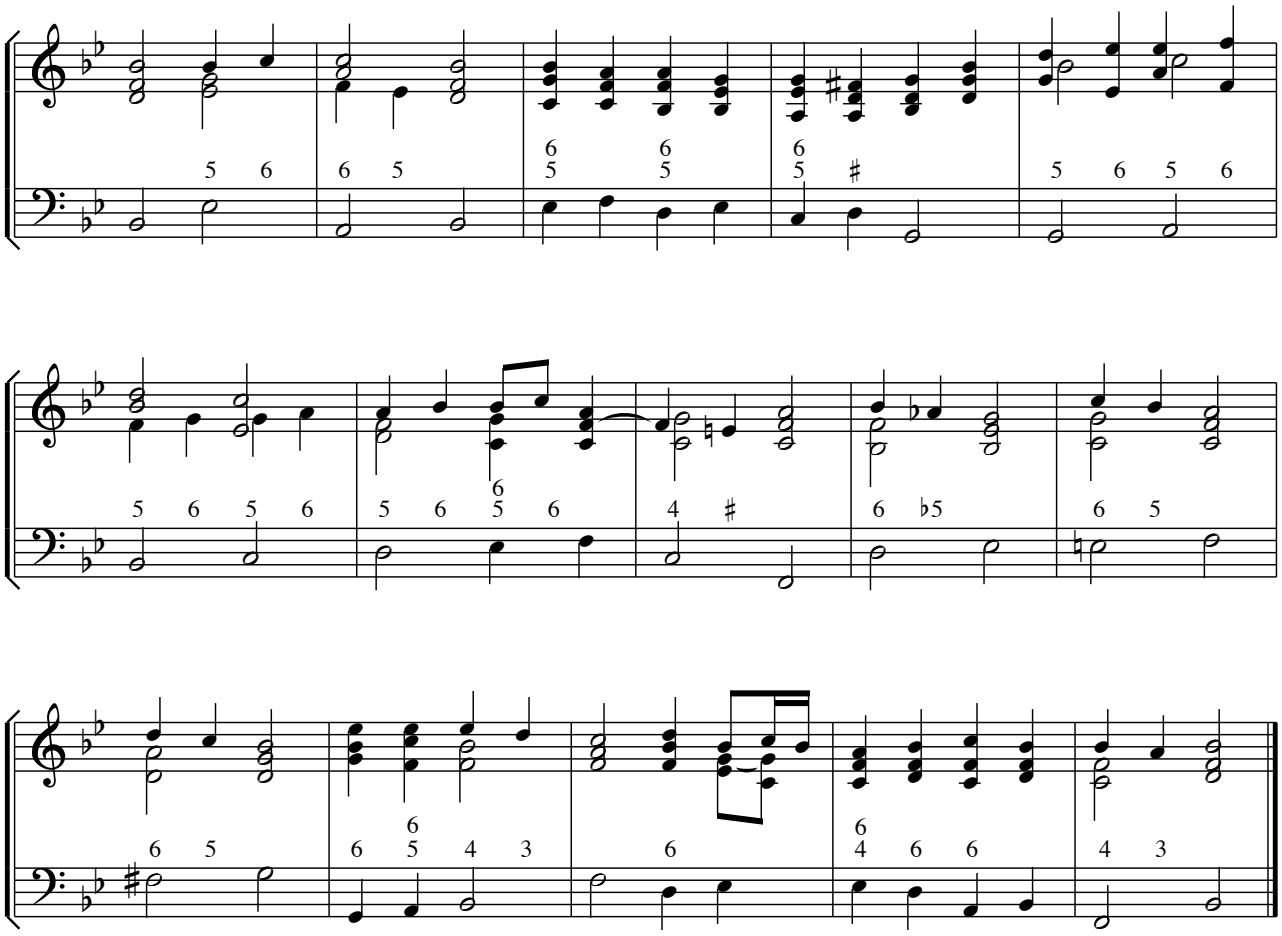
Example 6

When $\frac{6}{4}$, $\frac{4}{2}$ or 2 appear over a note, the bass should be prepared by the previous note. $\frac{4}{2}$ is played in the right hand and resolves most of the time to $\frac{6}{5}$ when the bass moves down a half-step or a whole step.



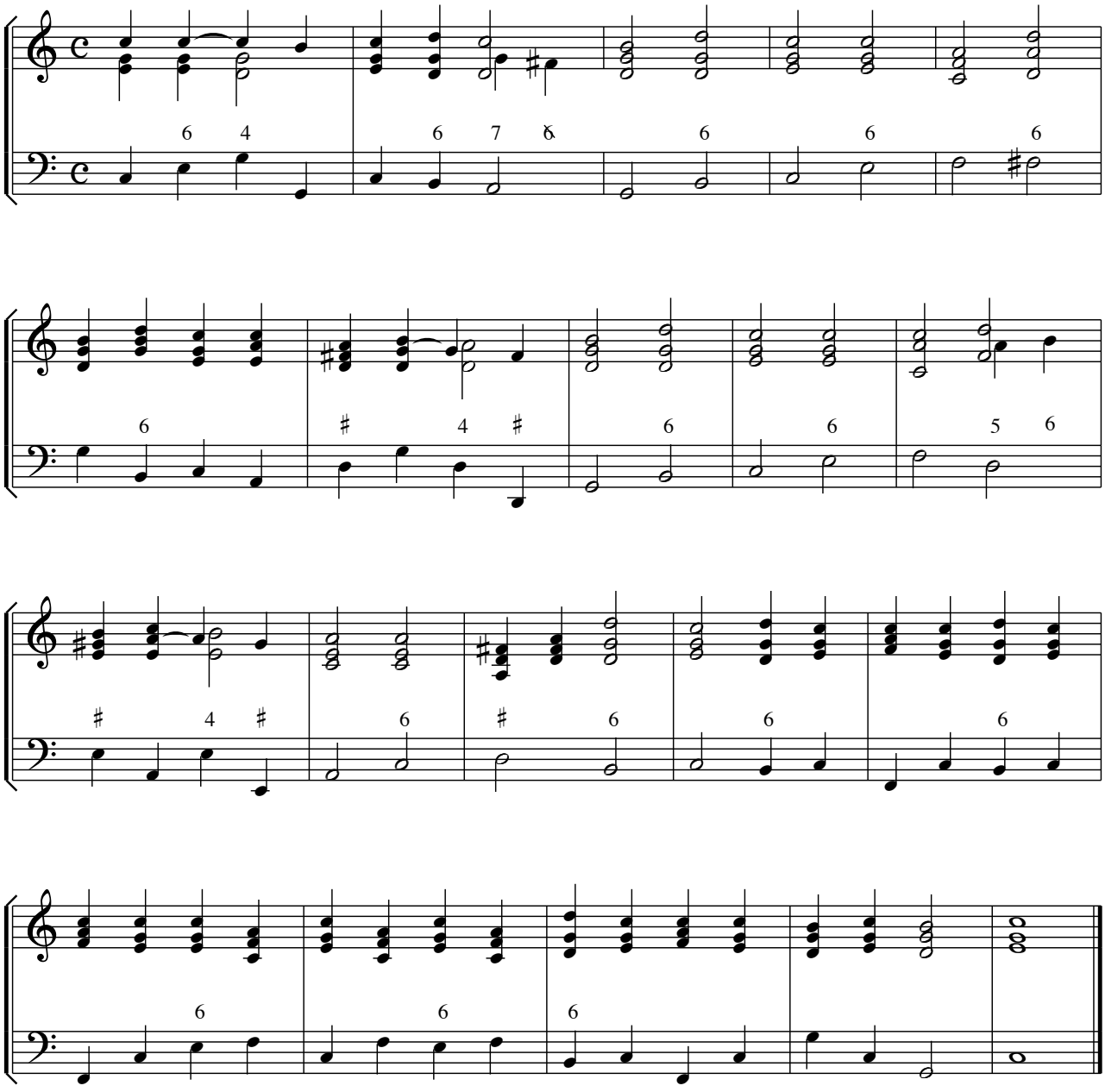
Example 7

When a sixth and a fifth appear next to one another above a note, they are to be struck one after the other. Then either the octave is added, or the third or the sixth is doubled. If, however, they appear one above the other, then the third is played and sounded together with them.

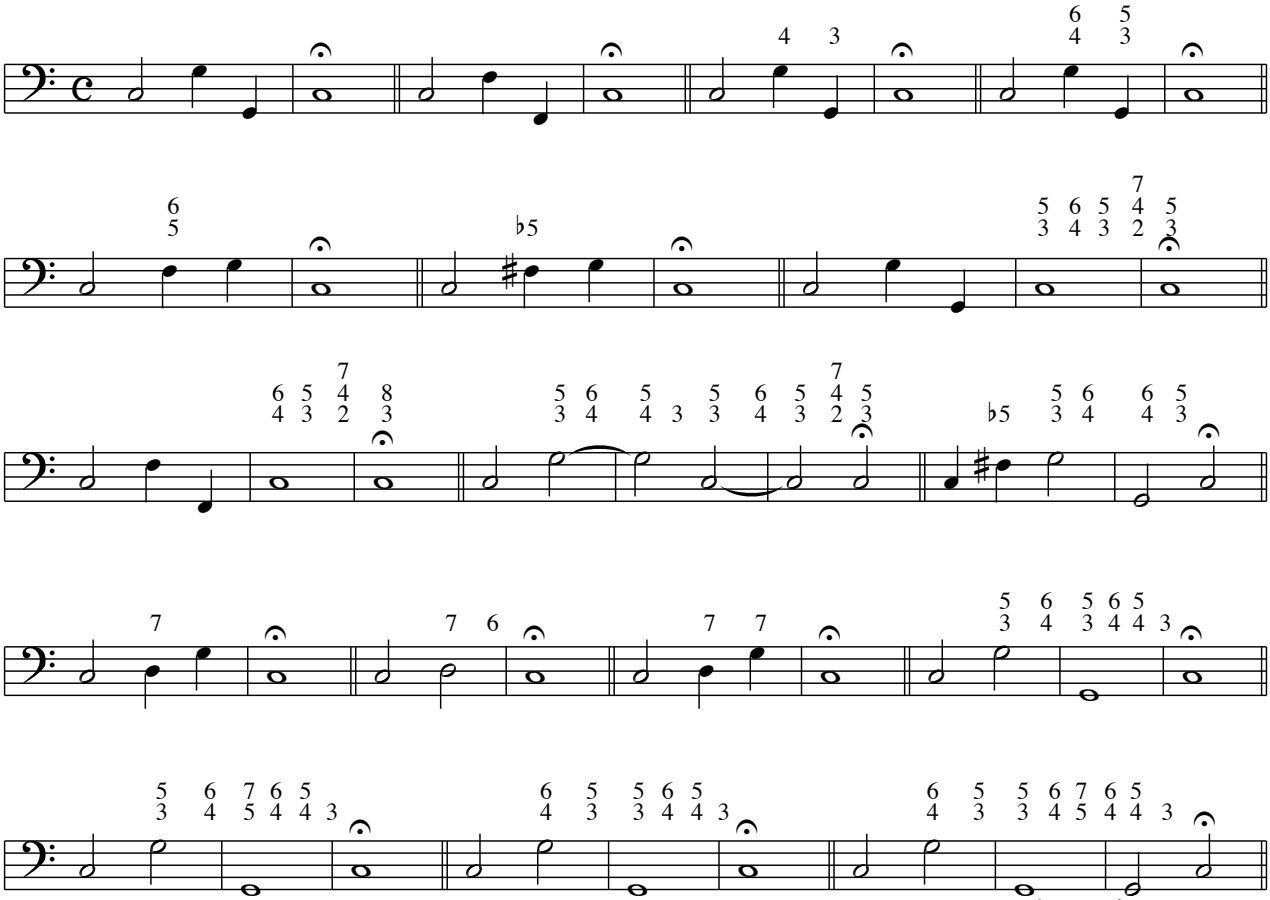


Example 8

When the bass note happens to be the third of the tonal chord of a piece, the sixth must always be played, whether notated or not, unless the cadence is modulating to another key. For example, in the key of C, a six must always appear above an E. In the key of A, a six must appear above a C.



Common Final Cadences



"For me, almost only the bass is of any significance. It is sacred to me and is the solid foundation upon which I tell my stories. What I do with the melody is only a game, a spirtual game. For over a given bass line I truly discover something original, I give to it new melodies, I create".

Johannes Brahms
Vienna, February 17th 1869