

Web Feature 4.1

Using figured bass to indicate chromaticism in Bach's Recitative II from Cantata no. 140

Web Example 4.1, which consists of the fifth movement (Recitative II) of Cantata no. 140 in its entirety, illustrates how figured bass numbers may be used to show chromatic alterations to upper voices.

The image displays a musical score for the fifth movement (Recitative II) of Cantata no. 140 by J.S. Bach. The score is arranged in five staves, from top to bottom: Violino piccolo / Violino I, Violino II, Viola, Basso (Bass), and Bassoon & Continuo. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is common time (C). The Basso staff includes the lyrics: "So geh her - ein zu mir, du mir er - wähl - te". The Bassoon & Continuo staff features figured bass notation: a '6' under the first measure, and 'δ' and '7' with a flat sign under the second measure. The 'δ' symbol indicates a chromatic alteration (lowering) of the note indicated by the '7'.

3

Braut! Ich ha-be mich mit dir in E-wig-keit ver-traut. Dich will ich auf mein

6
5

6

6

6

Herz, auf mei-nen Arm gleich wie ein Sie-gel se-tzen, und dein be-trüb - tes Aug - er-

6
4+
2

6

7^b 6^b 6̂
5 5^b

9

göt-zen. Ver - giss, o See - le, nun die Angst, derSchmerz, - den

7^b 6 7 4⁺
 4 2 5 2

12

du er-dul - den müs - sen; auf mei-ner Lin - ken sollst du ruhn, und mei - ne

6 6
 5^b 4 3 5^b

14

Rech - te soll dich küs - sen.

5 ♯

Web Example 4.1. Bach, Cantata no. 140 (v—Recitative II).

A number of chromatic inflections are indicated by the figured bass. The string parts and, to some extent, the vocal line help to reveal what the figures mean. This passage is a powerful example of Bach’s tone painting: most of the chromatic passages occur at emotionally emotive parts of the text. For example, “erwählte Braut” (mm. 2–3) means “chosen bride”; “Herz” (m. 6) means “heart”; “dein betrübtes Aug’ ergötzen” (mm. 7–8) means “delight your saddened eyes”; and “die Angst, den Schmerz, den du erdulden müssen” (mm. 11–12) means “the fear, the pain, which you must endure.” Each of these moments teaches us important aspects of chromatic figured bass.

First, find the chords accompanying the syllables “-wähl-te” in the phrase “erwählte Braut” (mm. 2–3). The slash through the number 6 indicates a chromatic *raising* of the note a diatonic sixth above the bass. Thus, in this context, the E \flat has been raised to E \natural , as seen in Violin 1. Occasionally a natural sign is found to the right or left of the number 6, meaning much the same thing—that the flatted pitch has become altered with a natural. The slash through the 6, however, indicates a *generic* raising—in other words, a slash through a 6 over an A in the key of G minor would indicate an F \sharp ; this

could be shown alternatively (and more specifically) with a sharp to the right or left of the number. Fourths above the bass can also be raised with a slash that appears as a vertical line through the cross-stroke of the numeral. Such raised-fourth symbols appear below bass notes in measures 6, 10, and 11. Which pitches have been changed, and in which parts are they?

Below the slashed 6 in measure 2 is a 5 with a flat next to it. This indicates that the diatonic fifth above the bass is chromatically lowered—from D to D \flat , as shown in the vocal line (the lower neighbor on “erwählte” also helps to emphasize the alteration). (In the same way, the 7 \flat —or \flat 7—symbols in measures 8, 9, and 11 indicate that the diatonic seventh above each of the bass notes has been lowered. Can you locate the pitches that show the alteration?)

Notice also that in measure 2 the slashed 6 is followed—seemingly on the same line—by a number 7. In general, two adjacent numbers arranged horizontally in figured bass indicate the specified intervals are happening in the same voice. (Remember, however, that the actual disposition of tones in a score may or may not be the same as the arrangement of numbers, highest to lowest top to bottom, in figured bass.) Can you locate a similar linear arrangement—showing an accented passing tone—elsewhere on the page?

When a third above the bass is altered—either raised or lowered—it is common to simply show the accidental of alteration below the bass note, without the “3.” Thus, on the last quarter-note beat of measure 4, the natural below the C indicates that the third above C has been altered with a natural; in this case, the E \flat that was a diatonic third above C has been raised to E \natural . We see a similar alteration on the penultimate chord of the movement.

One final observation: in measure 3, the bass note itself has been chromatically altered. However, this does not affect the upper voices, which are still a *generic* sixth and fifth above the bass note. Consequently, there are no changes to the figured bass numbers. (Remember also that the continuo player would *see* a chromatically altered bass note, so there is no need to signal such alterations in the numbers, unless a voice *above* the bass is involved.)

Accidentals in figured bass may be found before or after the numbers they modify; in addition, sometimes accidentals are provided as a courtesy to alert the performer that a previously changed note has been changed back. This means that in comparing various editions of a piece—and sometimes even within the same piece—inconsistencies may be found. Which figured bass annotations in Web Example 4.1 refer to courtesy accidentals?