

## INTRODUCTION

The practice of the figured bass was fundamental in a period of music history in which the lute and the guitar were fully integrated into European musical life. It is no coincidence that the names of Thomas Campion and later Francois Champion and Santiago de Murcia stand out (concerning this, also for clarity on the use of specific terms, see the initial part of the text).

The modern guitar appeared at the beginning of the 19th century, by which time the practice of the figured bass was essentially at an end. However, we believe that information on this way of making music and a familiarity with its practice, at least at an elementary level, can be of great help to the guitar student, for at least two reasons.

First of all, through the ability to create correctly a numbered bass one has immediate access to the possibility of performing on the modern guitar an immense quantity of chamber music of the highest artistic level, but also solo music written during the period in which the practice of the figured bass was in vogue, such as that of Robert de Visée, can be interpreted in a different light if we keep this practice in mind. For example, it is possible to “fill out” the texture when necessary or appropriate.

But practical knowledge of the figured bass also helps the guitar student to develop a greater knowledge of the technical possibilities of the instrument (thanks to the converging between limits and instrumental possibilities which this musical practice encourages to explore); and for this reason it can help to bridge that gap between harmonic knowledge and instrumental practice which is often seen in guitar students.

For the introductory purposes of this text, as expressed above, it was decided to deal with the subject by following some simple criteria.

First of all, evidently, the doubt according to which the modern six-string guitar would not be suitable for addressing this topic has been overcome. Not only that, in the opinion of the writers, it is a concern which in any case has now had its day (assuming it was valid thirty or forty years ago). Even the most astute musicology today appropriately distinguishes between the abstraction of “philological performances” and the necessary awareness of “historically informed performances”. It is also a fact that the current guitar study programmes in conservatories almost everywhere involve the performance approach to music from before 1800, therefore also including those pieces written at the time of maximum splendour of the practice of the figured bass.

It was then decided not to address in this text the stylistic differentiations which characterized the practice of figured bass in different eras and countries. Moreover, even in a specialist manual on the figured bass such as the famous one by Hermann Keller – which also addresses these differences – we read that they will not be applied to the realization of the continuo given to the lute (the term “realisation” means the addition of the other parts involved or suggested by the bass). This is because when creating the figured bass on the lute, the necessary attention to the idiomatic specificities of the instrument becomes predominant (and a similar observation, evidently, can be made regarding the modern guitar).

Furthermore, given the didactic and introductory purpose of this work, we did not set ourselves the objective of training the student (common between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) to create the figured bass “on the spot”, by improvising (this could however be a subsequent objective, suitable for those who intend to devote themselves professionally to the practice of figured bass). Here, however, the aim was to enable the student first of all to write correct and effective figured bass realizations.

Finally, it was decided here to address the topic, in order to interpret the harmonic processes involved in the bass line, of the so-called “functional” harmony, which was developed starting from the treatise *Traité de l'harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels* (1722) by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764). Obviously the practice of figured bass began much earlier, and is already documented in editions dating back to the early 17th century. However, from a didactic point of view (and in line with the aims of this introductory work) it seemed much more useful (and connected to the type of harmony study that guitar students face today in high schools and conservatories) to use for the description of chords and harmonic connections the terms derived precisely from functional harmony (and therefore in this text we will talk about the construction of chords by thirds, inversions, connections between “fundamentals” and so on). Fortunately, the different theorization of the subject (before and after Rameau) does not in itself imply differences in the practical realization of the figured bass, and in our opinion, and with greater profit in this introductory context, Rameau’s theorization can be used, also to support realizations of the figured bass relating to musical pieces written before.