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French Figured Bass from Roughly 1690 to 1720

Excerpts from Michel de St. Lambert: *Nouveau Traité de l'Accompagnement du Clavecin* (1707)

(All citations from the source are enclosed in quotation marks. All music examples not expressly marked „J.B.C.“ are taken from St. Lambert. In Chapter 1, excerpts from St. Lambert are reproduced on the left-hand pages.)

1. The Triad or Basic Chord

“The placement of notes in a chord is determined by the initial position of the accompanying [right] hand. Here the rule is that the hand, once placed in its initial position on the keyboard to play the first chord of an air [piece], should play all subsequent chords as close to that position as possible. Thus, the placement of voices will change each new chord, the upper note being given to the octave, fifth, or third as applicable.”

“When playing a figured bass, it is important to observe a few rules for the movement of the two hands. The hands must always move in contrary motion. In other words, when the bass rises, the accompaniment [in the right hand] must descend, and vice versa. This will prevent any voice from forming consecutive octaves or fifths with the bass, **which is strictly prohibited.**”



As St. Lambert’s own example shows (see above), the principle of contrary motion cannot always be strictly applied. Nevertheless, it remains the single

most important basic rule of figured bass playing. Even when the top voice repeats the same pitch, it is left to the inner voices to supply the contrary motion (mm. 2–3). Occasionally one voice will remain on the same pitch while the other two move in contrary motion or even parallel with the bass. This latter option usually occurs when the bass rises a fourth (as in mm. 2–3 and 4–5 of the example) or descends a fifth.

Strict contrary motion must always be applied when a bass harmonized in root-position chords (as in the preceding example) proceeds in stepwise motion within the diatonic scale (mm. 3–4). Otherwise, the result will be parallel fifths and octaves at once.

(J.B.C.)



This, to quote St. Lambert, is “strictly prohibited.”

Note, however, that St. Lambert expressly speaks of “consecutive octaves or fifths **with the bass.**” This implies that greater leeway is sometimes granted to the voice leading in the middle parts of the right hand, as we shall see later.