Divisions on a Ground

Introductory Exercises in Improvisation for Two Players

Based on *The Division Viol* by Christopher Simpson (1664)

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Introduction.

The division viol was a peculiar instrument from the late Renaissance. It was a cross between a cello and a guitar, more or less. It had frets like a guitar, making it easy to find the correct pitches, but its shape and bowed sound resembled the modern cello. Musicians developed elaborate practices of improvisation involving the division viol (and many other instruments as well). For our purposes in these exercises, we will borrow ideas and examples from Christopher Simpson's instructional manual of 1664, *The Division Viol.*

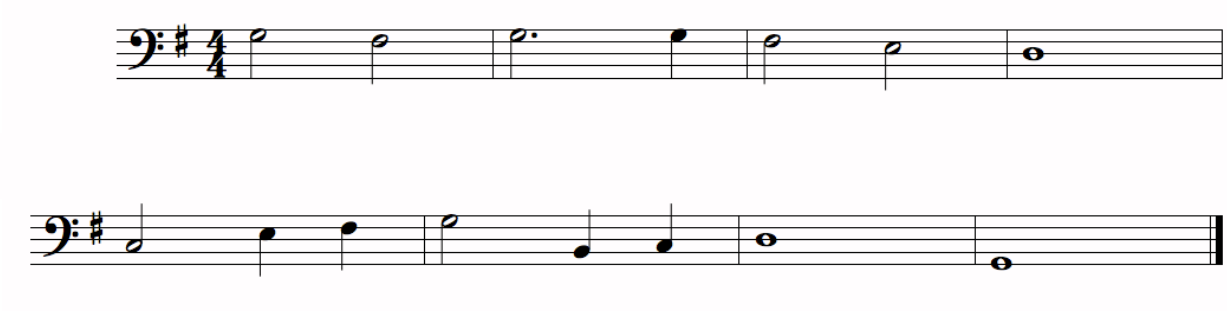
These exercises, designed for pairs of musicians, allow students to explore improvisation through the practice of division. Division is a form of improv in which longer notes are gradually broken up into smaller rhythmic values, creating continuous variation. Musicians create divisions over a short ground, which is just a bass line. It's short and simple, so the more you work on it, the better you get at making divisions.

Any two musicians can work together on these, as long as at least one of them can play low enough to play the ground so that it functions as a bass line. An alto and a soprano can even accomplish this, as long as the ground stays in the lower of the two parts. These might not work with, say, two piccolos. But many other combinations — a flute and cello, a violin and clarinet, a sousaphone and a kazoo — will work nicely.

Vocalists may wish create a text for the ground and descant (I will explain descant shortly). Of course, it is also possible to use sight-singing syllables or simply *la.* Let's get started.

1. Ground and Descant

A Ground from Christopher Simpson:

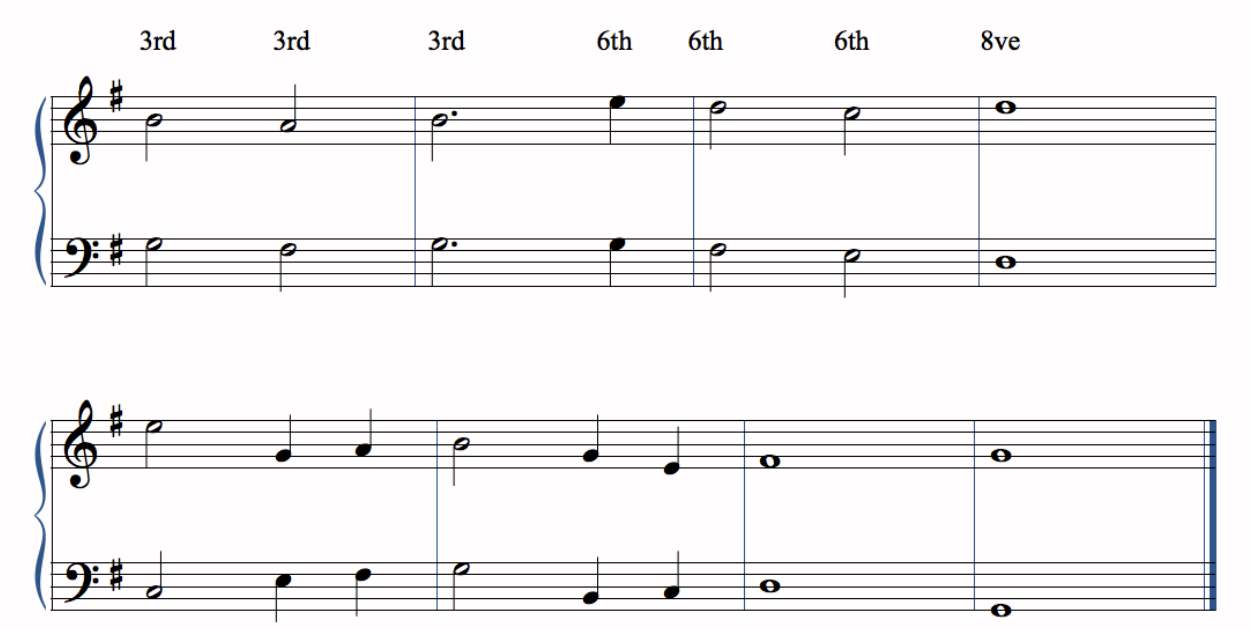


One player performs the ground so that everyone can get to know it. Then the ground is repeated, and the second player improvises a descant over it, using intervals of the 3rd, 6th, 10th, and 13th (the latter two are, of course, the same as the first two plus one octave). You can also play occasional octaves over the bass, but never two in a row if you're moving (remember, that's parallel octaves). Fifths are not entirely illegal, but stay mostly with the other intervals for now.

The descant can follow ascending and descending lines of the ground, but it is tasteful to break off parallel motion before too long and jump to another harmonious interval. That way the two lines achieve independence.

Don'y hurry past this part. Take time to create simple descants over the same ground. Beginning improvisers need a lot of time to get comfortable and enjoy this stage.

A Simple Descant:



At cadences, the descant improviser may get a little more bold in the use of 5ths and octaves. Try to remember your voice leading rules (especially parallel octaves and fifths) but don't worry when you make mistakes, which you will. Just make a note of it and think of a better solution for next time around.

When you start these exercises, the descant should match the rhythmic values of the ground.

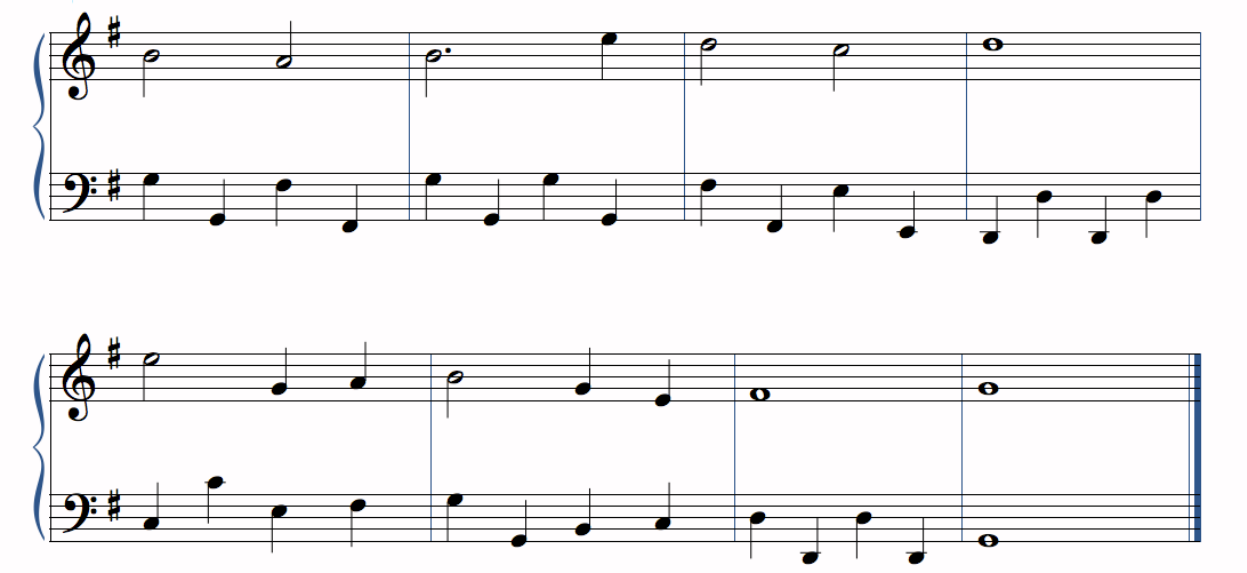
Repeat the ground and descant until you have found as many possibilities as you can. When there seem to be no interesting options left, trade parts (if your ranges allow) or go on to another ground.

2. Divided Ground and Descant

Once the first exercise seems comfortable, you can move on. The descant player will improvise as before, using primarily imperfect consonances, with perfect intervals available at cadences. The ground player will now "divide"; in the 17th century this meant keeping the basic melodic outline of the ground, but splitting it into smaller rhythmic notes.

For half notes, you can start by dividing them into quarters. The safest method of all is to use the octave above or below, since this is functionally the same pitch, and you will almost never create an awkward musical situation this way. Also, try using 3rds (above or below) after each written note. This usually works but not every time. Don't worry about clunkers; just notice that it was bad and try something different next time around.

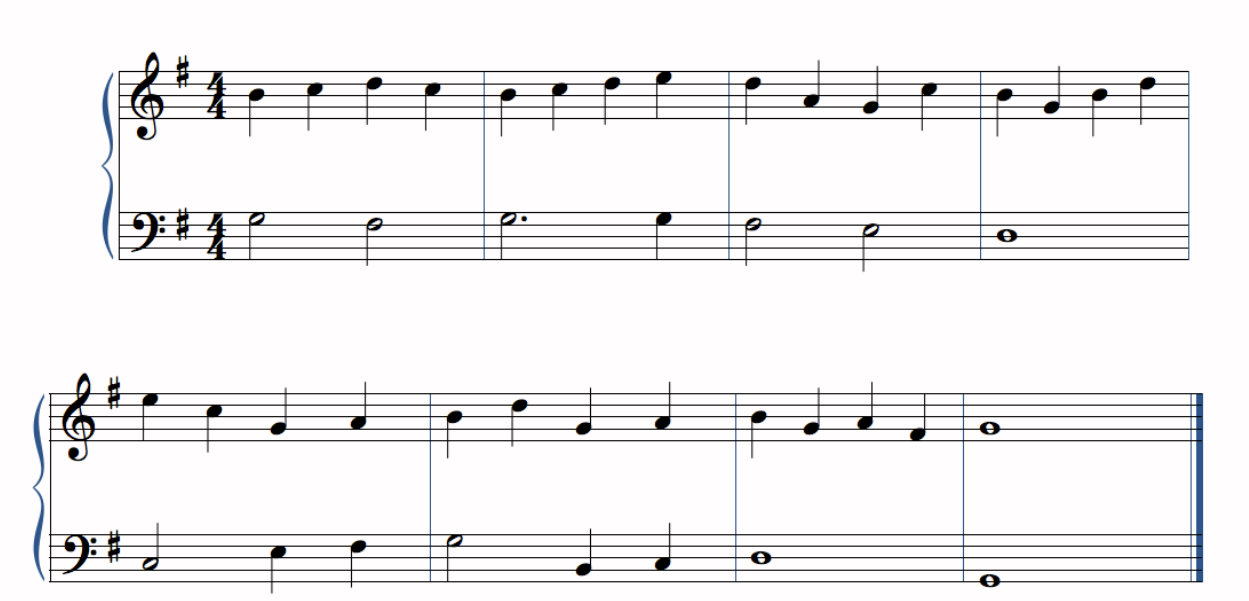
The Ground Divided by Octaves:



3. Ground and Divided Descant

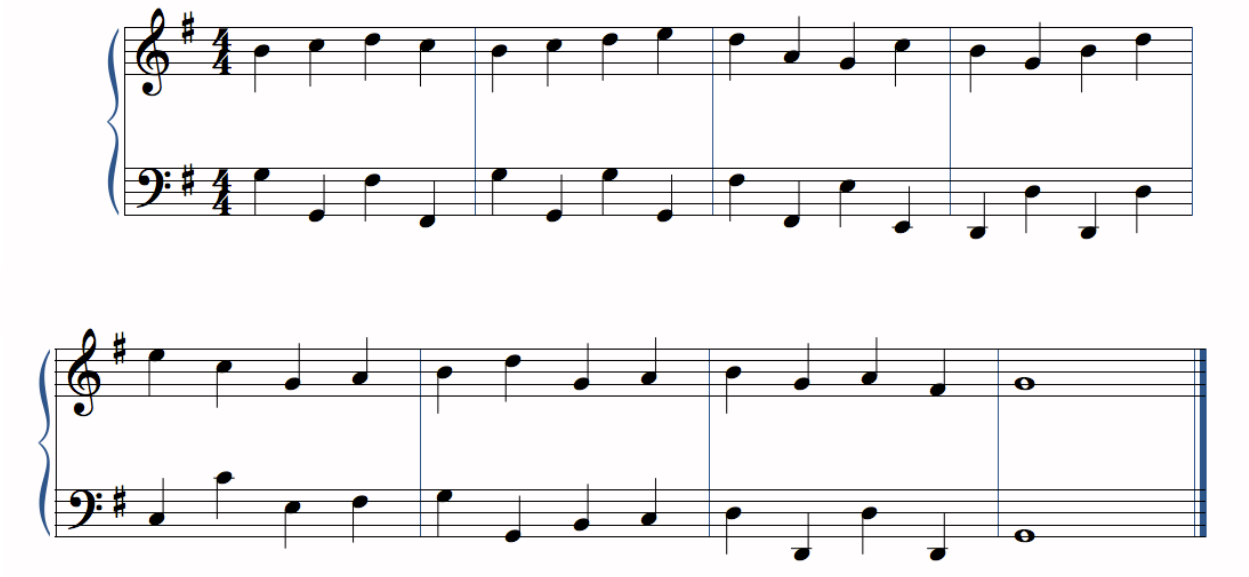
Now it's the descant player's turn. The ground player should return to the simple, written version. The descant player can now begin dividing rhythms. Start by breaking all the half, dotted half, and whole notes into quarters. Yes, there are rules about what kind of lines you should write, but just play for a while, noting what sounds so good or no good, and see if you can start following the

rules intuitively.

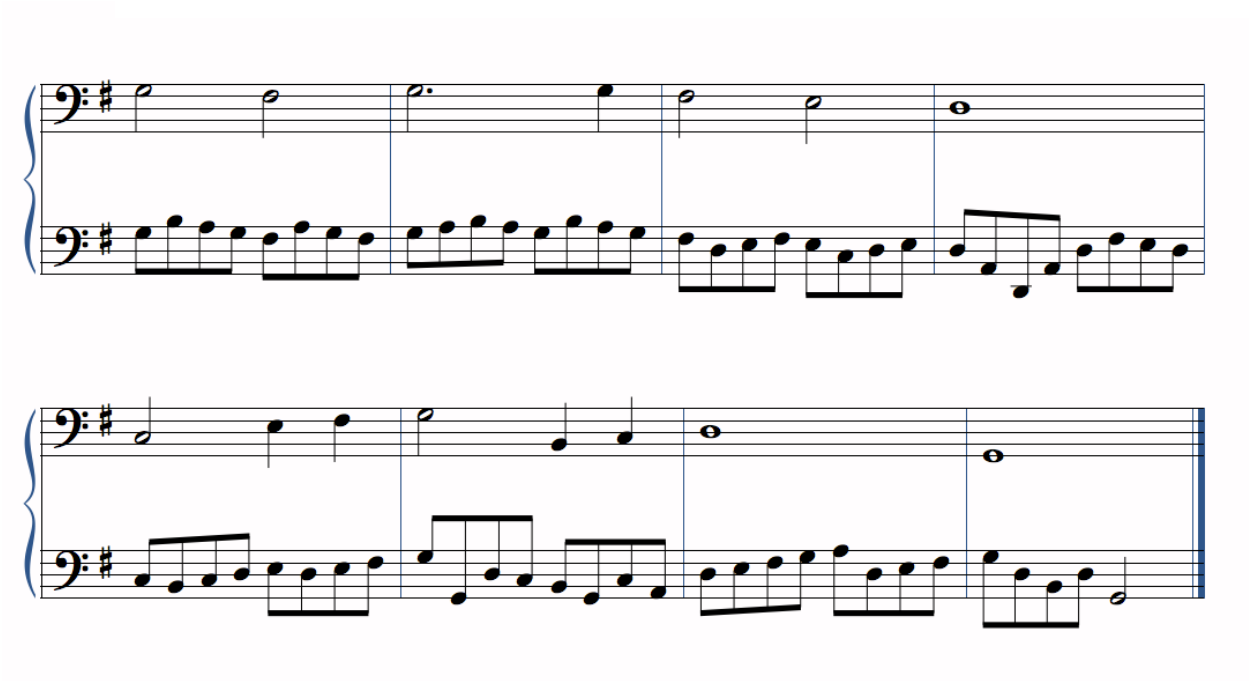


4. Both Parts Divided

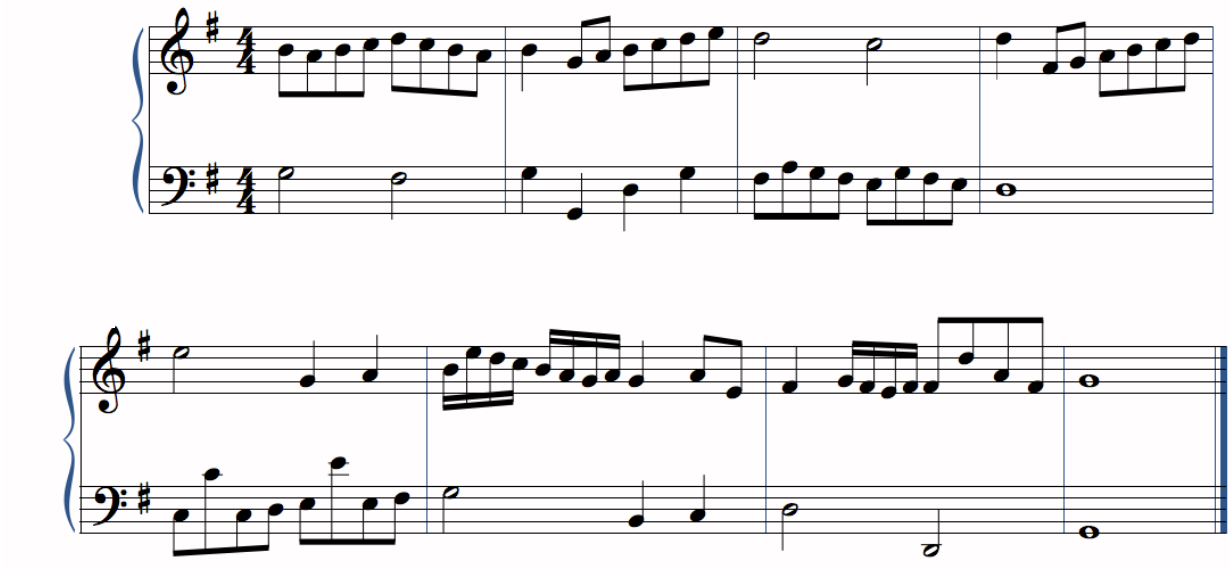
After practicing the methods above, players can divide both parts. Initially, the ground player should stick with division by octave, as this will avoid any problems with voice leading.



However, there are some fairly reliable ways of dividing grounds that are more interesting than just octave breaking. Keep the written notes on the strong beats, and fill in thirds above or below in eighth notes. Try this (top staff is the original; lower staff is divided):



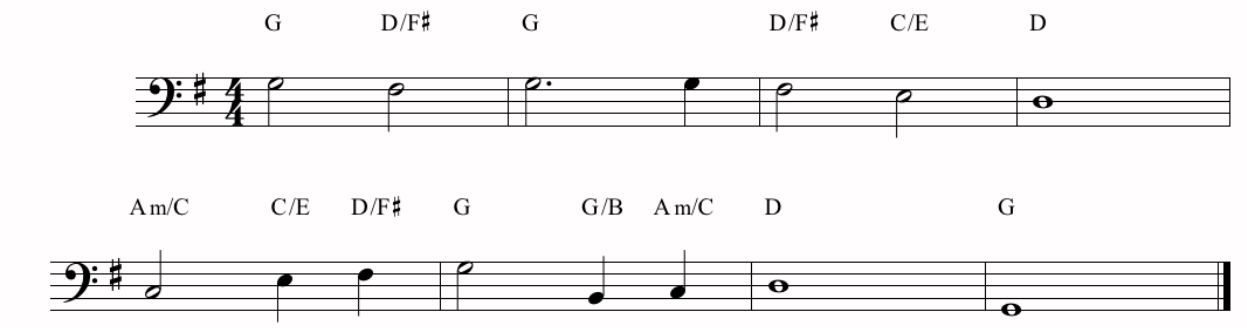
Let's see what can happen when both parts divide. It is not necessary to play entirely in quarters or eighths when dividing; sometimes it's tasteful to retain long notes in the ground or descant, especially when the other player is using smaller divisions. Here is one example of both parts variously divided:



A Word About Chord Progressions:

We have not spoken yet about the implied chord progressions that underlie these grounds. In the 1600's when Christopher Simpson wrote his instruction manual on improvisation, the idea of a chord built up from a root was not really established. They thought about a bass note with various intervals above it. So a C major chord in first inversion wasn't a "C chord" to them; it was an E in the bass with a 6th and 3rd above it. Of course, you can think this way and create fruitful music.

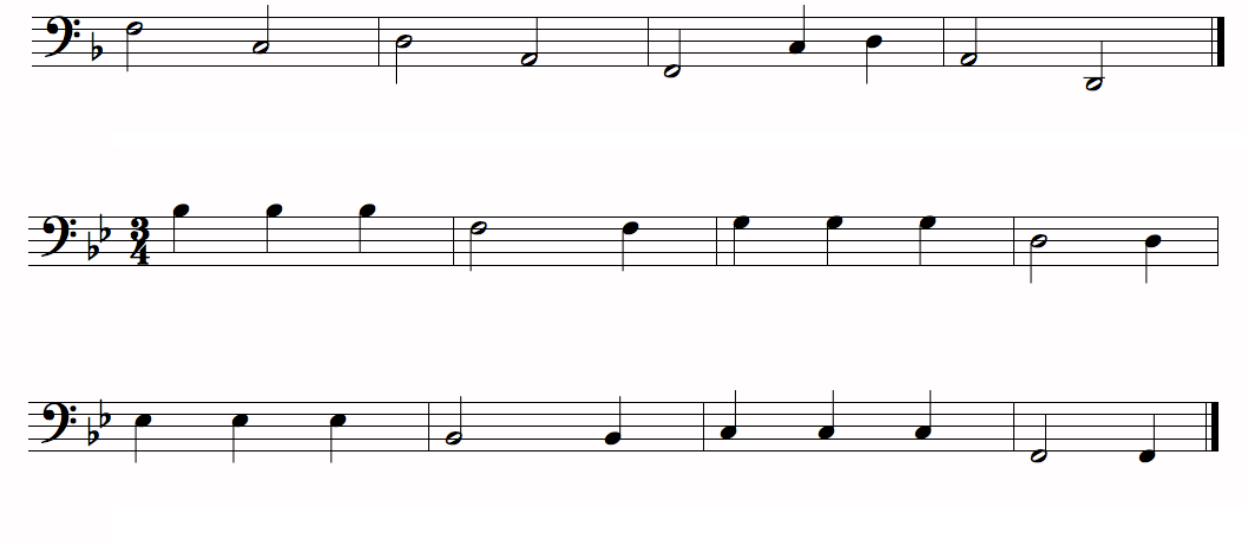
However, given the way harmony is universally discussed today, I think it's probably smarter if you learn to think about these grounds as having modern chord progressions. Our first ground, then, goes like this:

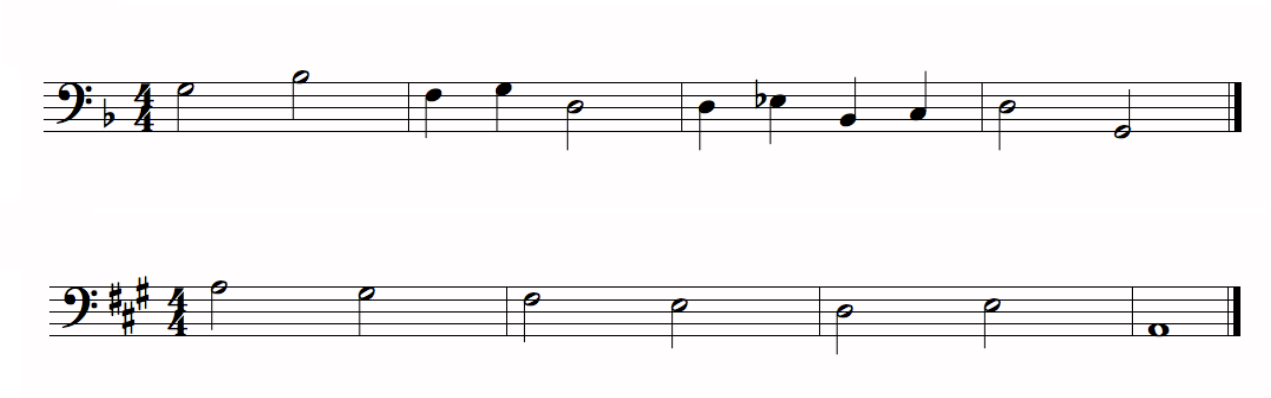


Yes, there are many different harmonizations available. But you get the basic idea.

The ground and descant players should both get some version of a chord progression in mind. This will help immensely as you create divisions.

And now, here are a few more ground examples from Christopher Simpson. Work through each one together.





Finally, you can find your own "grounds" anywhere you like. A good place to start is with a hymnal. Find a tune you like and steal the bass line. Create a new descant for it, or try using the existing melody and making divisions on it. Just keep the ground short so that you can try many repetitions and really discover its inner workings.

When you and your partner have played several grounds together, consider arranging a seamless performance such as the following:

1. Play the ground.
2. Improvise a descant.
3. Divide the ground in octaves.
4. Return to original ground and divide the descant, perhaps more than once.
5. Simple divisions on both, for several repetitions.
6. If you are comfortable, try some smaller note values here and there in your divisions.
7. Using a signal between the players, return to a simple version of ground and descant, and play it maestoso for a strong ending.

Now, go perform for some listeners. Let me know how it goes.