Intro to Basso Continuo Harmony, ca. 1600

I. Rule of the Octave

The harmonic universe throughout the Renaissance consisted of two key signatures, the one with no flats or sharps, and the one with one flat (the major/minor key system didn’t exist yet). Around 1600 when more composers began to think of vertical harmony constructed above the lowest sounding voice, three main types of harmonies dominated:

A) Major chords  
B) Minor chords  
C) 6th chords (or 6/3 chords, or first inversion chords)

If we build a triad on each of the scale degrees in each of the two key signatures without adding any accidentals, we end up with some of each of these (on scale degrees whose upper fifth would be a diminished fifth or tritone, we replace the fifth with a sixth). This kind of harmonization is sometimes called the “Rule of the Octave.”:

II. Accidentals

A. When accidentals occur in the bass, the same procedure applies. Notice that sharps take sixth chords and flats take major chords.

B. An accidental in the upper part can also change a harmony from what the rule of the octave would normally produce:
III. Cadences

A. A descending fifth or ascending fourth usually indicates a cadence. In this case, both notes take a major harmony, the 'dominant' with a 4-3 dissonance/resolution or some variation on it:

B. There is also a sort of 'backwards' version of this cadence, where an ascending fifth or descending fourth leads to a major finalis that feels to us like a 'dominant.'

C. A falling major or minor second is often a 'tenor cadence' (the one with a minor second being a 'mi' cadence), and is basically the same procedure over a different bass note, thus some variation of 7-6 dissonance/resolution proceeding to a major finalis:

D. After a cadence on a finalis which normally takes a minor third, if the next phrase begins on the same note, it normally becomes minor again:

E. There are some minor cadences in early repertoire, but not long or important ones. Sometimes in an ambiguous spot an elegant solution is to play a chord with no third: