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The Partimento Tradition in the Shadow of Enlightenment Thought

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The Partimento Tradition in the Shadow of Enlightenment Thought

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thoroughbass served as a foundational component of musical practice, theory, and pedagogy. In the Neapolitan music conservatories, composition pedagogy was intertwined with the process of realizing figured—or unfigured—basses, and eighteenth-century music theory across Europe often arose from the behavior of thoroughbass in practice. However, as the Enlightenment progressed through Europe, some theoretical and pedagogical approaches gained popularity, while others declined. In particular, the pedagogical method of teaching composition through partimento—in which practice held first importance and theory remained implicit—was overshadowed by the rise of Rameau’s explicitly presented harmonic theory, due to Enlightenment preference for clear systematization and knowledge equally attainable by all.

The sixteenth century saw the emergence of Italian music conservatories, originally charity schools for orphans. Port cities such as Naples contained more orphanages because of the higher populations of prostitutes and illegitimate children, and toward the middle of the sixteenth century some of these orphanages decided to specialize in teaching music, evidently to provide the orphans with a viable skill and the orphanages with extra income earned from their performances.^{1,2} Not all students at the conservatories were orphans, however; in the early seventeenth century the conservatories began to accept paying students as well.³ Instruction in

1. Giorgio Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31-32.

2. Rosa Cafiero, “Conservatories and the Neapolitan School: A European Model at the End of the Eighteenth Century?” in *Music Education in Europe (1770-1914): Compositional, Institutional and Political Challenges*, vol. 1, ed. M. Fend and M. Noiray (Berlin: BWV Berlin Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2005), 16-17.

3. Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 38.

the conservatories was graded by a hierarchy of levels through which students—all male, according to the custom of the Neapolitan conservatories⁴— progressed in their ten or so years of instruction to which they contracted themselves: young junior students (aged 10 to 14) studied solfeggio until their voices broke, older juniors took singing class, instrumental class, and partimento and theory class, and seniors added counterpoint to these last three subjects.⁵ Above this hierarchy was the primo maestro who oversaw all the other maestri. The maestri taught only senior students and selected the most talented of them to be maestriceilli, students who were in charge of teaching the junior students, who likewise taught the students less advanced than they were.⁶ Not all students were able to progress all the way up the hierarchy—yearly examinations determined whether or not students were allowed to remain in the conservatory.⁷

The Neapolitan schools were known across Europe for the quality of their teaching of composition, which was built on the study of counterpoint and partimento. Though counterpoint was indeed important in the Neapolitan schools—and though differences in the methods of teaching counterpoint distinguished the different conservatories from each other—partimento was a distinctively Neapolitan pedagogical method related to the concept of thoroughbass, originating and flourishing in the Neapolitan conservatories' unique environment.⁸ One of the first uses of the term *partimento* occurs in 1634, in Giovanni Filippo Cavalliere's *Il scolaro principiante de musica*. In it Cavalliere refers to the bass of a composition as partimento, using the term as a synonym. Likewise, in other sources from the early seventeenth century, partimento refers to the basso continuo part of a composition. At this point it was essentially another word

4. Ibid., 32.

5. Peter Van Tour, *Counterpoint and Partimento: Methods of Teaching Composition in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Usaliensis, 2015), 89.

6. Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 42-43.

7. Van Tour, *Counterpoint and Partimento*, 89.

8. Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 45-46.

for thoroughbass, though some writers defined it more particularly as an unfigured bass meant to be realized by the player. However, near the turn of the eighteenth century, the word *partimento* began to acquire a narrower, more focused definition than simply unfigured bass. Many *partimenti* written at this time were not exclusively composed of a bass part but included other clefs (and sometimes other parts) as well. These *partimenti* were written for students as practice in contrapuntal realizations of accompaniments. Interestingly, this usage of *partimento* bears several similarities to *basso seguente*, an Italian practice of the time. A *basso seguente* is a summary of a piece of music (often a choral fugue⁹) and consists of one staff, in which appears the lowest voice that is being played. This lowest voice is often the bass, but in compositions such as fugues, it may not always be the lowest voice. Even though this seems like an accurate description of *partimento* itself, there is a major difference between *basso seguente* and *partimento* that highlights an important feature of *partimento*: the *basso seguente* is written with reference to an existing composition, while the *partimento* is written as a seed from which the composition will be developed through improvisation (see Ex. 1) .¹⁰ Sanguinetti gives a thorough and concise definition in his book *The Art of Partimento*: “A *partimento* is a sketch, written on a single staff, whose main purpose is to be a guide for improvisation of a composition at the keyboard.”¹¹ Complementing the study of counterpoint, *partimento*’s pedagogical function in the Neapolitan schools was to teach composition through structured improvisation.

9. Van Tour, *Counterpoint and Partimento*, 214-215.

10. Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 10-11.

11. *Ibid.*, 14.

EXAMPLE 1 Partimento No. 3, Book 5 (F. Fenaroli, collected by R. Gjerdingen. <http://faculty-web.at.northwestern.edu/music/gjerdingen/partimenti/collections/Fenaroli/Book5/03FenBk5/03FenBk5.htm>.)

Here it is necessary to distinguish between partimento as compositional exercise and partimento as pedagogical tradition. Partimenti—the literal exercises existing as notated sketches on paper to be realized on the keyboard—were used in teaching composition well after the golden age of the Neapolitan schools.¹² But in the environment of the Neapolitan schools, partimento was more than just an advanced exercise in realization. In the absence of explicit theory instruction, partimento provided a plethora of contextual examples of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theory worked out in real compositions. As Ludwig Holtmeier notes, “If one takes partimenti as a didactic tradition. . . in which the accompaniment of unfigured basses is of fundamental importance, then ‘partimento’ also contains a theoretical approach that is inseparably tied to the principles of the Rule of the Octave and the compositional models.”¹³ It is this definition of partimento as a theoretical approach that describes the unique system of pedagogy in the Neapolitan schools.

12. Ludwig Holtmeier, “Heinichen, Rameau, and the Italian Thoroughbass Tradition: Concepts of Tonality and Chord in the Rule of the Octave,” *Journal of Music Theory* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 25.

13. *Ibid.*, 25.

Partimento's distinctive form and use was molded by the oral, hierarchical teaching methods of the Neapolitan schools. As Sanguinetti states, "Partimento tradition was essentially a practical, teacher-to-student way of transmitting musical knowledge" that worked very well in the generational system of the Neapolitan schools.¹⁴ As such, there was no need within the Neapolitan school for written theoretical treatises, since musical knowledge and theory were transmitted orally through the teacher-student relationship.¹⁵ Though some written rules of partimento survive, they tend to be notes compiled by teachers or students as a reminder of the concepts taught through partimento, not a complete presentation of the theory on paper.¹⁶ Instead, extant partimento sources tend to consist mostly of partimenti examples in musical notation. For example, in *The Langloz Manuscript*—a collection of partimento fugues used by J. S. Bach—no words of explanation are included with the partimento fugues.¹⁷ In addition, there was no one generative system of theory taught in the Neapolitan schools. Rather, because of the close relationship between keyboard improvisation and written composition, theory tended to exist latently in the form of useful rules of thoroughbass and partimento realization. One such rule was the *règle de l'octave* (or Rule of the Octave as mentioned above), a harmonization of the ascending and descending scale (see Ex. 2). Not simply a utilitarian tool to make the task of harmonization easier, the *règle de l'octave* also contained tonal implications and relationships between chords—in other words, theoretical concepts.¹⁸ Thus, instead of being taught first with abstract theory and then applying the theory to examples, students worked with practical examples and assorted rules such as the *règle de l'octave*, memorizing and internalizing them at

14. Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 47.

15. *Ibid.*, 96.

16. *Ibid.*, 47.

17. Renwick, William, ed. *The Langloz Manuscript: Fugal Improvisation through Figured Bass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 113-187.

18. Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 113.

the keyboard. In the process of working their way through partimento and counterpoint, underlying theoretical concepts would gradually become clear to them and would automatically translate into greater proficiency at partimento improvisation and thoroughbass accompaniment.¹⁹ The strength of this organic and eminently applicable understanding of theory was possible in an environment like that in the Italian schools: the presence of a committed teacher, the master-apprentice relationship between teacher and student, and a culture of oral transmission.



EXAMPLE 2 *Règle de l'octave* according to François Campion (Thomas Christensen, "The *Règle de l'Octave* in Thorough-Bass Theory and Practice," *Acta musicologica* 64, fasc. 2 (July–December 1992), 91, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/932911>.)

Despite the benefits of this system of partimento pedagogy, it had a few shortcomings, such as the extended amount of time and effort required to learn composition through this method. Michele Ruta, writing in the late nineteenth century about the Italian partimento tradition, wondered why the great Italian teachers, who so obviously had a thorough understanding of theory, declined to teach theory explicitly to their students and relied instead on partimento, which was governed by "rules not connected by any logical thread" and that took "the tireless work of many years to master."²⁰ He suggests that the masters may not have deemed their students capable of understanding the theory of harmony "through a more rational method,"

19. *Ibid.*, 7.

20. Michele Ruta, *Storia Critica*, 135-40, quoted in Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 97.

or that they may not have been able to articulate a consistent theory “owing to insufficient literary studies.”²¹ Finally, and tellingly, Ruta “[suspects] too that those masters of harmony would attribute such an importance to the figured bass, without explaining those principles, in order to be, for as long as possible, the only oracles able to interpret those enigmatic figures.”²² Though the reason is not entirely certain, it could be that Neapolitan teachers—probably through adherence to tradition or, perhaps, through love of seemingly secret knowledge—intentionally kept back from their students plain explanations of certain concepts of theory found in the figured bass. It also seems that if Neapolitan teachers did not themselves have any deficiency in theoretical understanding, they did seem to have very dim views of their students’ capabilities of theoretical understanding. For example, Fenaroli recommended that voice-leading principles be orally taught by the teacher and demonstrated on the keyboard, or else “a long and boring discussion would result, that would be inevitably too confusing for the beginners’ mind.”²³ Proficiency with partimento seemed to be viewed as a somewhat esoteric treasure handed down through generations and only attainable after years of grueling study in the conservatories, culminating in private lessons with one of the elite Neapolitan masters, possessors of this great partimento tradition.

In the early seventeenth century, to the northwest of Naples, a different pedagogical process with a new, more flexible philosophical background was arising. In France, Jean-Philippe Rameau was formulating a new system of theory centered upon chordal harmony, bringing Enlightenment ideals and influences into the world of music theory and pedagogy. Rameau’s main theoretical principle was that of the fundamental bass: a note from which a chord

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Fenaroli, *Regole* (1775), 10-11, quoted in Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, 116.

is generated, whether or not the note is physically included in the chord when it is played.²⁴ This theory “reduces all harmonies to but two basic building blocks: the consonant triad and the dissonant seventh.”²⁵ This idea was a radical new perspective on harmony in the eighteenth century, influencing thoroughbass pedagogy, which had relied on chordal rules such as the *règle de l’octave*. As mentioned before, the *règle de l’octave* posited a pattern of chords connected with the degrees of the scale; when memorized and applied to thoroughbass or partimento, it acted as a convenient heuristic for adding chords whose sonority and function were appropriate to the given bass line. However, useful knowledge of the *règle de l’octave* applied to thoroughbass practice required memorization of a vast number of chords in different keys and hand positions, not to mention all the exceptions to the rule.²⁶ Initially, Rameau’s theory of the fundamental bass sought to simplify thoroughbass pedagogy by explicating the theoretical concepts behind harmonic motion in the *règle de l’octave*. Example 3 shows Rameau’s explanation of the *règle de l’octave* through the motion of the fundamental bass with its characteristic leaps from the fifth degree of the scale to the first degree of the scale. However, as Rameau’s fundamental bass grew in importance in his theory, the theory separated itself from the *règle de l’octave*, turning toward the “abstract and formalistic.”²⁷

24. Ibid., 5.

25. Ibid., 57.

26. Ibid., 57.

27. Holtmeier, “Heinichen, Rameau, and the Italian Thoroughbass Tradition,” 12.

develop it more thoroughly, resulting in *Dissertation sur les différentes méthodes d'accompagnement pour le clavecin*, a “treatise of accompaniment” published in 1732.²⁸ In his *Dissertation*, Rameau outlined a completely new way of teaching thoroughbass accompaniment apart from musical notation.²⁹ The details of this system are beyond the scope of this discussion, but Rameau’s view of the benefits of his new system is indicative of Enlightenment ideals. Though Rameau’s new system of thoroughbass pedagogy still contained numerous and self-admitted flaws, such as excessive simplicity of notation, according to Christensen, “With Rameau’s new method, continuo playing was purely a mechanical process of chord placement and finger movement, or, as he proudly noted, just a ‘*mécanique des doigts*.’ By vastly reducing the plethora of chord signatures, and further by prescribing a few simple rules of chordal connection, Rameau had ostensibly distilled one of the most daunting and time-consuming tasks of musical practice into a process accessible to everyone. What had previously taken years of practice to perfect could now be accomplished in only a few months’ time.”³⁰

As the Enlightenment era progressed and principles such as systematic presentation of ideas or the accessibility of reason regardless of social standing began to characterize European thought, partimento pedagogy with its heuristics such as the *règle de l’octave* seemed ungainly, out-of-date, and undesirable. In contrast, Rameau’s theory of the fundamental bass (despite its numerous internal contradictions and revisions) seemed much more attractive, being allegedly supported by Rameau’s scientific experiments and providing an elegant explanation of a knotty topic, much as Isaac Newton had reduced the workings of the galaxy to a few simple laws.³¹

28. Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought*, 57-58.

29. *Ibid.*, 58.

30. *Ibid.*, 60.

31. Thomas Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.

Rameau combined this strand of Newtonian, empiricist thought with Cartesian epistemology, seeking to derive principles from theory first before practice and therefore turning to mathematics as the foundation of his theory rather than starting necessarily with laws derived from his observations of music.³² These philosophical influences illustrate one reason that Rameau succeeded in his reception where partimento started to fail: his ability to capitalize on the ideas in vogue at the time. His presentation of his theory evolved to match prevailing philosophies even within the Enlightenment era. In Thomas Christensen's words, "[Rameau] showed an uncanny genius for casting his theory in a rich assortment of intellectual metaphors and models that enjoyed high prestige among his readers."³³ Unlike the more rigid, tradition-focused operating methods of the Neapolitan schools that provided the specific environment in which partimento was able to flourish, Rameau's theories could be presented in the rhetorical and cultural garments of numerous different philosophies as the currents of the Enlightenment changed and developed.

Another factor contributing to the rise of Rameau's theory is succinctly explained by Holtmeier: "The singular and indeed puzzling success of Ramellian theory can substantially be attributed to the fact that Rameau never fledged a real theoretical opponent, someone who could have confronted his *basse fondamentale* with a competing concept."³⁴ Part of the reason for this absence of an opponent to Rameau's theory was that the theory found in partimento pedagogy—incorporating the *règle de l'octave* and other rules—was never explicitly posited by the Neapolitan schools. That would have been contrary to their *modus operandi*.

32. Ibid., 11-12.

33. Ibid., 304.

34. Holtmeier, "Heinichen, Rameau, and the Italian Thoroughbass Tradition," 26.

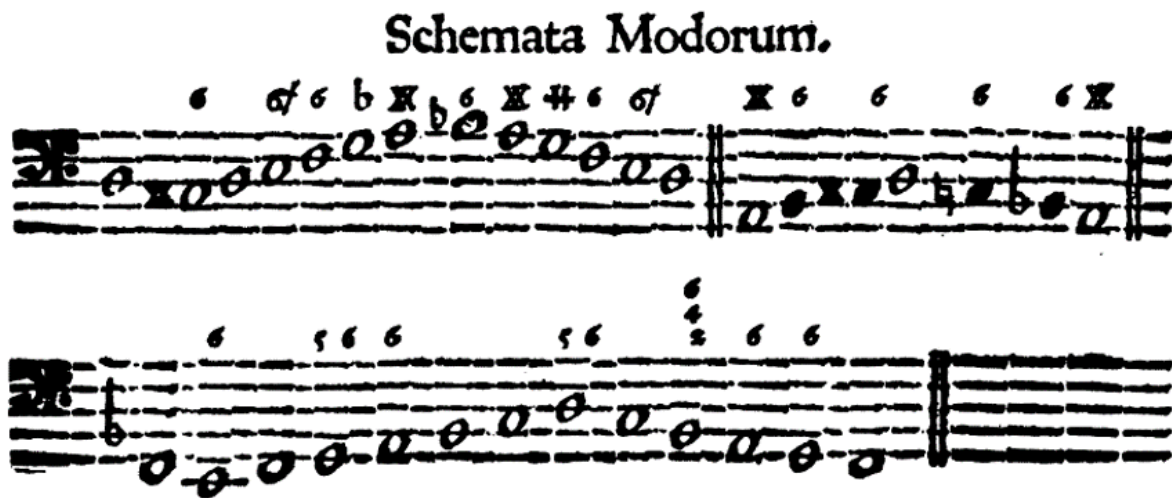
Though the maestri of the Neapolitan schools never attempted a treatise describing partimento theory, one person did—Johann David Heinichen, a German. In the Baroque era, German music was heavily influenced by Italian music; many German musicians would travel to Italy in order to learn the Italian musical styles. Heinichen himself wrote, “Why do we go through effort, danger, and expense to travel around from nation to nation. . . ? Simply and solely to develop our good taste.”³⁵ After studying with Kuhnau in Leipzig, Heinichen worked for various patrons, finally traveling to Italy around 1710. His operas were highly acclaimed in Venice, and he was able to adopt the Italian musical style in a very effective manner.³⁶ In 1728 Heinichen revised his previous treatise on thoroughbass and published the second edition of *Der General-Bass in der Composition*, whose second half (“On the Complete Science of Thoroughbass”) attempts to collect and explicate Italian partimento theory. In his treatise, Heinichen takes the *règle de l’octave* as his basis for theory and the concept of chord without abandoning the emphasis on contrapuntal linearity; in the words of Holtmeier, the strength of Heinichen’s presentation of partimento theory is “that it does not seek to deduce harmony and melody, line and sonority (*Klang*), chord and counterpoint from a single coherent principle, as Rameau does, but permanently works through the tension between those poles in a dialectical way.”³⁷ This dialectical treatment of verticality and linearity is shown in Heinichen’s conception of the *règle de l’octave*—the linearity of the bass line remains stepwise (with no leaping fundamental bass beneath it), while chords remain diatonic throughout, unlike both Rameau’s and the traditional *règle de l’octave*, which in places contain the leading tone of the fifth degree (see Ex. 2, 3, 4). Despite the flexible strength that characterized partimento theory, Heinichen’s

35. George J. Buelow, *Thorough-Bass Accompaniment according to Johann David Heinichen* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), 2.

36. *Ibid.*, 4-11.

37. Holtmeier, “Heinichen, Rameau, and the Italian Thoroughbass Tradition,” 43.

treatise—which often left theoretical frameworks implicit and forewent systematic presentation in favor of preserving complexity—could not compete with Rameau’s much simpler theory.³⁸ In an Enlightenment environment where clarity and systematization prevailed, Rameau’s theory gained influence while partimento pedagogy declined.



EXAMPLE 4 Heinichen’s conception of the *règle de l’octave* (Ludwig Holtmeier, “Heinichen, Rameau, and the Italian Thoroughbass Tradition: Concepts of Tonality and Chord in the Rule of the Octave,” *Journal of Music Theory* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40283107>.)

This is not to say that the use of partimenti as exercises ceased; rather, partimenti continued in Italy through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Likewise, use of partimenti had spread to France and were used as exercises in Parisian conservatories by pedagogues such as Nadia Boulanger into the twentieth century. Example 1 shows a partimento exercise originally written by Federe Fenaroli that Boulanger’s student Walter Piston later realized into a fugue.³⁹ However, though partimento exercises themselves are useful compositional tools no matter what theoretical background accompanies them, their full import was lost with the ascendance of

38. *Ibid.*, 42.

39. Robert O. Gjerdingen, “Partimento, que me veux-tu?” *Journal of Music Theory* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 127-128.

Rameau's theory of harmony. As Rosa Cafiero says, "Today, we can see that the Neapolitan tradition, when fully functioning in its world of close-knit teachers and students, was indeed a highly systematized process for developing skills in improvisation and composition. But when taken out of its native context and reduced to 'treatises' read by students unaware of the tradition, it began to transform into part of the nineteenth-century study of harmony. . . . We can detect subtle shifts of concepts as partimenti leave their homeland of an essentially oral tradition and are subsumed into a foreign, more literary tradition of printed harmony books."⁴⁰ Thus the forces of history soon laid the system of partimento pedagogy to rest.

Rameau's approach to pedagogy, built from a foundation of a few explicitly stated theoretical rules, contrasted with the Neapolitan schools' approach, in which theory subtly wound its way through the preponderance of assorted exercises, culminating in implicit knowledge at the end of training. Though the individual partimenti themselves survived,⁴¹ partimento's role as an interactive exporter of implicitly stated music theory soon became obsolete, eclipsed by the burgeoning popularity of Rameau's theory of fundamental bass.

40. Rosa Cafiero, "The Early Reception of Neapolitan Partimento Theory in France: A Survey," *Journal of Music Theory* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 154-155.

41. Gjerdingen, "Partimento, que me veux-tu?" 128.

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