

Giorgio Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*

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Since the last decade of the previous century, a number of scholars have been examining partimento: a musical format designed to create a self-contained keyboard work from an unfigured or figured bass line. Closely related to basso-continuo accompaniment, partimenti developed during the eighteenth century and, as Giorgio Sanguinetti puts it in his new book *The Art of Partimento*, ‘shaped the musical mind of innumerable composers during that century and part of the nineteenth century all over Europe’ (p. vii).

The study of partimento in our time gained momentum with a conference at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent in 2006 on ‘Thoroughbass in Practice, Theory, and Improvisation’, during which Robert Gjerdingen and Sanguinetti focused on the Neapolitan tradition of partimento playing.¹ Gjerdingen had already collected an extensive arsenal of partimenti and rules on his fascinating website, which is still growing and forms a perfect complement to Sanguinetti’s book.²

Overview

The Art of Partimento is divided into four parts: (1) History; (2) Theory; (3) Practice; and (4) A Guide to Realization. Each part is subdivided into chapters. Part One provides a definition of partimento, followed by an overview of the Neapolitan conservatories and teaching methods that gives a fascinating insight into the rise of these conservatories, the lives of teachers and students, and how students were learning and practicing. It closes with an extensive and detailed description of the partimento sources, their transmission and typology, and a genealogy of partimento masters. Part Two deals with all aspects of partimento

theory. Its central chapter is divided into five classes: (I) Basic Axioms, (II) Rule of the Octave, (III) Suspensions, (IV) Bass Motions, and (V) Scale Mutations. Step by step Sanguinetti guides the aspiring partimentist through all the rules pertaining to these topics. At the beginning of Chapter 9 he already states one of the most important principles of partimento (and of unfigured bass), namely that the harmony of a given bass note is determined by the notes preceding and following it (p. 99). This principle is worked out in detail in Classes II and IV. In Class II the author shows both the limits and possibilities of the accompaniment of scales, for which he presents two manners: applying the Rule of the Octave, and what he calls ‘sequential accompaniments’. The latter include diatonic conjunct motions of the bass, either ascending or descending, above which a series of alternating consonances, or consonances and dissonances, such as 5-6, 7-6, 9-8, or parallel sixths, may be played. In addition, harmonization of chromatic ascending and descending bass lines is shown. This is followed (in Class IV) by the treatment of disjunct bass motions, either in sequences or as single bass progressions. Carefully and thoroughly working through the rules of bass progressions, in combination with those about suspensions (in Class III), will in the end enable the partimentist/continuo player to play from unfigured basses effortlessly and, moreover, to employ dissonances freely where this is possible, and thus to create a colorful and harmonically varied realization already before the application of the other elements, such as diminution and imitation.

In Chapter 10, ‘Prelude to Realization’, Sanguinetti compares the task of the player unfolding a partimento’s implications with that of the actors of the *commedia dell’arte*, who did not recite from a written text but instead improvised their parts following a thread called *canovaccio*, or ‘scenario’ (p. 167). This was a summary of the plot and had to be completed through improvisation. The actors could improvise fluently because they possessed a large repertoire of cues, jests and gags they would use at the appropriate points in the comedy. In the following chapters of Part Three and in Part Four, Sanguinetti sets

1 For the proceedings see *Partimento and Continuo Playing in Theory and Practice*, ed. Dirk Moelants, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010.

2 ‘Monuments of Partimenti,’ faculty-web.at.northwestern.edu/music/gjerdingen.

out to teach the reader how to understand the musical *canovaccio* of a partimento, to be used at the appropriate points. First he describes the different stages from the starting point, following the three-stage approach suggested by Fenaroli and Guarnaccia: beginning with a simple chordal realization, followed by the addition of suspensions, and bringing it to its final stage with the addition of diminution, imitation, and texture.

As Sanguinetti notes, the elements of the final stage are not described in any textual document but nonetheless play a decisive part in giving a partimento a convincing musical shape (p. 169). Diminution, imitation and motivic coherence, however, is implied in the works of the masters, who in their partimenti always provide enough motivic material for the unfolding of the complete realization. This is the *canovaccio* to be discovered, and *The Art of Partimento* offers clear guidance in this respect. Sanguinetti explains basic diminution techniques, consisting of melodic patterns or broken violinistic figures, and points out that these often move on a different rhythmic level than the main pulse of the partimento, which proceeds at a slower pace than the actual bass line suggests. As for imitation, he shows for which hidden clues one has to look. For example, when two successive segments of a partimento are in an ‘interesting-boring’ relation, chances are that they are in double counterpoint (p. 195). A particularly valuable feature of Sanguinetti’s volume are the original realizations by Greco, Leo, Durante and Catelani, given in modern transcription. Following these examples the partimentist can learn the idiomatic style. Since that style does not seem to change much between, say, 1700 and 1830, the later realizations are still useful as models for the realization of earlier partimenti. All in all, Sanguinetti’s book forms an invaluable introduction to the history and theory of partimento that offers the reader and the aspiring student of *partimento* a manifold representation of the repertoire. It is lavishly illustrated with music examples, including illustrations of the applications of rules, complete partimenti – both transcribed and in facsimile – and historical realizations as well as realizations by the author. Sanguinetti’s realizations are generally very interesting, with many good solutions. The abundance of musical examples makes *The Art of Partimento* a book that one wants to read

from the music stand of the keyboard rather than at the desk.

In spite of the book’s qualities, however, I have a few issues with it. In what follows, I will engage critically with, first, Sanguinetti’s view of the relationship between partimento and basso continuo; second, his concept of partimento theory with regard to voice leading and the understanding of consonance and dissonance; and third, his lack of recognition of typical seventeenth-century harmonic progressions.

Partimento and basso continuo

I find Sanguinetti’s definition of partimento, and his views about its relation to basso continuo, somewhat misleading. He repeatedly suggests a separation between partimento and basso continuo, which, I believe, does not exist. On the contrary, I think that in essence they are so closely related that much of the material in *The Art of Partimento* can be used in continuo accompaniment as well, both in terms of harmony and of texture. I will illustrate this point with examples that demonstrate how partimento *techniques* had been in use for at least a hundred years before the *term* was linked to the type of bass which forms the subject of Sanguinetti’s book. The essential change in the use of the term is that partimento no longer referred to keyboard accompaniment, but to solo keyboard music. Its content, however, did not change. In contrast to what Sanguinetti suggests, it is not ‘something very different from a thoroughbass’ (p. 11).

From the advent of basso continuo at the end of the sixteenth century, compositions for soloist and basso continuo included sections where the soloist was silent and the continuo player could demonstrate his skills as an improviser. These sections may alternate with the cantus-bass sections or occur as an introduction or coda. Since the continuo player is asked to keep the accompaniment simple while the soloist is performing, it seems obvious that in these bass solo sections the continuo player is expected to play something rather different from the neutral block-chord accompaniment. This principle was already formulated around 1600, for example by Luigi Zenobi, who wrote that the accompanist should play ‘unornamented, in right time, and neatly all the parts, while the other plays or sings with him, and, when the solo part pauses, come forwards in a gentle

manner with something more pleasing.²³ This 'something more pleasing' could include anything that will also fit in the 'true' *partimento* of the eighteenth century, such as imitation and melodic motion. A case in point is Francesco Rasi's solo motet *Rorate caeli* (1612). The facsimile in Example 1 shows the introduction on the highest staff, a single bass line, followed in the lower system by vocal and

bass part. The motet is unfigured (except in m. 6, where two flats indicate minor thirds) and opens with a solo introduction for the continuo player.

Given the solemn nature of the motet, it is possible that the seventeenth-century player would have improvised something as shown in Example 2 (my realization, with figures added to indicate voice leading).

Example 1

Francesco Rasi, 'Rorate caeli' per una voce solo.

A facsimile of a handwritten musical score for a solo voice. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. The middle staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "o caeli coelorum et". The bottom staff is a bass clef line. The notation is in a historical style with various note values and ornaments.

Example 2

Francesco Rasi, 'Rorate caeli' with continuo realization.

A printed musical score for a continuo realization of Francesco Rasi's 'Rorate caeli'. It features a vocal line and a continuo line. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. The continuo line is in a bass clef with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. The score includes figured bass notation (figures) below the bass line. The first system is labeled 'Sinfonia prima' and the second system is labeled 'Ro__ ra -'. The figures are: 5 6 b, 6 5 6 b, b b 4 #, 5 6 3 4 #6 3 4, 4 #3, 3 4.

3 '... sonando, schietto con tempo giusto, e pulitamente tutte le parti, mentre l'altro suona, o canta seco, e tacendo quello, moversi con maniera gentile a qual'che cosa piuttosto vaga, che artificiosa per accompagnarlo.' Luigi Zenobi, 'Lettera a N.N.' [Naples, 1601-1602], transl. Bonnie J. Blackburn and Leofranc Holford-Strevens, in: *The Perfect Musician*, Krakow: Musica Iagellonica, 1995, 48-49.

That a certain amount of imitation was employed in basso continuo realization is confirmed by many historical examples in which little snippets of imitation are included even when the soloist was *not* silent. In Example 3, taken from a cantata by Barbara Strozzi, we see in the solo part a short rapid figure of one eighth and two sixteenth notes (a so-called *figura corta*), and this same figure is hand-written, most likely by a continuo player, in the bass part (which now looks like a typical partimento).⁴ What we do not know, of course, is whether this was done in Strozzi's time or later.

Example 3

Barbara Strozzi, 'Basta cosi v'hò inteso' (1659).

Evidently the bass soli in accompanimental basses needed accomplished performers to bring them out to full effect. Only continuo players well trained in counterpoint and improvisation would be able to see the possibilities of a bass line and would recognize material in the solo part to use in the realization.

One of the problems Sanguinetti discusses is that the partimento rules 'concentrate exclusively on the basic level of realization but tell us nothing about advanced issues such as diminution, imitation, texture and style. This is one of the most puzzling aspects of partimento practice' (p. 100). Sanguinetti explains this lack of information as a consequence of the oral instruction, which certainly is an im-

portant factor. The same problem is encountered when one examines the basso continuo treatises – another similarity between basso continuo and partimento. The solution is also the same in both cases, because, as Sanguinetti explains, students would study counterpoint while studying partimento and accompaniment, all three courses being complementary to each other. (So all things considered, there is not all that much reason to be puzzled.)

Sanguinetti mentions diminution exercises as a source of possibilities for the elaboration of a realization, but he could also have men-

tioned other sources of inspiration, especially the works of great composers or partimento masters such as Paisiello. These can be used as models, and they were often recommended for this purpose by authors of continuo treatises. One important treatise should be mentioned here: Francesco Gasparini's *L'armonico pratico al cimbalo* (1708). This publication deserves more attention than it receives from Sanguinetti, for in the final chapters Gasparini, a famous composer in his days, gives various possibilities for elaborated continuo realization, with the comment that 'many such motifs, of various kinds, may be observed in the cantatas of many excellent composers.'⁵ Sanguinetti only gives the date of the first print of *L'armonico pratico*,

4 Barbara Strozzi, 'Basta cosi v'hò inteso', *Diparti di Euterpe*, Venice, 1659, 129.

5 Francesco Gasparini, *L'Armonico pratico al cimbalo* [Venice, 1708], repr. Bologna: Forni, 2001.

which could suggest that the book was outdated later in the eighteenth century. It should be noted, however, that it was reprinted six times during the eighteenth and even into the nineteenth century – the last edition appeared in 1802.⁶ The present-day student, deprived of the oral instruction of the Neapolitan tutors, may also turn to Heinichen, who admitted to have been influenced greatly by Italian composers such as Gasparini and Alessandro Scarlatti, and to Mattheson, whose detailed instructions – quite Italian in style – are most helpful to our purpose. Francesco Geminiani's *The Art of Accompaniment* (1756) is another valuable source in this respect.⁷

With regard to partimento theory Sanguinetti repeatedly writes that it is difficult, even 'the greatest problem' when dealing with the rules, to distinguish genuine partimento rules from thoroughbass rules (pp. 48, 98). But these rules, as long as they concern harmony and voice leading (and, as Sanguinetti notes, that is all they concern), do not differ essentially. The Rule of the Octave, the theoretical foundation of *partimento*, came in use in the last decade of the seventeenth century as a method to learn to accompany from an unfigured bass, and it has been discussed ever since in continuo treatises by Gasparini (1708), Dandrieu (1719) Heinichen (1728), Corrette (1753), Türk (1791), to mention just a few.⁸

Consonance and Dissonance

What the rules brought together by Sanguinetti make perfectly clear is that they are firmly rooted in seventeenth-century continuo theory, including the theory preceding the Rule of the Octave. As Sanguinetti writes, 'you cannot tell which chord to give to a bass note unless you

know where this note comes from, and where it goes' (p. 99). This axiom was the basis of continuo practice from its very beginning and it was already explained as such in the first extant continuo treatise: *Breve regola per imparare a sonare sopra il basso* (Siena, 1607), by Francesco Bianciardi.⁹ It seems that Sanguinetti did not make this connection between partimento and continuo practice, in particular the earlier continuo practice. As a result, some of his explanations of the rules are unsatisfactory, especially those about voice leading and the understanding of dissonance. A case in point occurs when Sanguinetti describes 'Tones with Obligatory Motion' (p. 105):

A puzzling rule concerns major and minor sixths. Pasquini writes that 'to a bass that descends by step one should give a major sixth that resolves on the octave of the next bass tone and the minor sixths resolve on the fifth,' and Cotumacci writes, 'All notes that end a motion descending by step need a major sixth. However, when those notes, to which a major sixth is usually given, skip a fourth up, or a fifth downwards, they need the major third, fifth and octave.' Pasquini's treatment of the major sixth originates from the contrapuntal cadence (or *clausula tenorizans*), a cadence that concludes the descending part of the RO [Rule of the Octave]. The cadential origin of this rule explains the otherwise puzzling assertion that every bass note descending by step must be accompanied by a major sixth, which does not happen in the RO; as Cotumacci makes clear, the major-sixth restriction concerns only the conclusion of stepwise motions. Cotumacci clarifies

6 Franck Arnold, *The Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-Bass*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931, 250.

7 Johann-David Heinichen, *Der General-Bass in der Composition* [Dresden, 1728], repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1969; Johann Mattheson, *Grosse Generalbass Schule* [Hamburg, 1731], ed. Wolfgang Fortner, Mainz: Schott, 1956; Francesco Geminiani, *The Art of Accompaniment* [London, 1755], repr. Firenze: Studio per edizione scelte, 1990.

8 Jean-François Dandrieu, *Principes de l'accompagnement du clavecin* [Paris, 1719], repr. Geneva: Minkoff, 1972; Michel Corrette, *Le maître de clavecin pour l'accompagnement*, [Paris, 1753/1775], repr. Geneva: Minkoff, 1976; Daniel Gottlob Türk, *Anweisung zum Generalbassspielen* [Halle and Leipzig, 1791], repr. Amsterdam: Knuf, 1971.

9 Francesco Bianciardi, 'Breve regolo para imparare a sonare sul Basso', in: Agostino Agazzari and Francesco Bianciardi, *Oeuvres théoriques complètes*, ed. and transl. Jean-Philippe Navarre, Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1996, 51-65.

This fragment also shows the application of the rule about imperfect to perfect consonance whenever the bass leaps a fourth up or a fifth down (i.e., from major third to octave). Only when a third in the solo parts is descending instead of ascending, it has to be minor (as in m. 47); in those cases the natural sign is given instead of a sharp, to indicate a minor third. With regard to the understanding of consonances and dissonances Sanguinetti writes:

One of the most puzzling aspects of partimento theory concerns the distinction between consonance and dissonance. Most collections of rules display at the beginning the standard list of the four consonances (third, fifth, sixth, and octave) and four dissonances (second, fourth, seventh, and ninth). Shortly thereafter, however, the authors seem to understand the consonance-dissonance distinction in very different terms. When Fenaroli comes to detailed discussion of dissonances ... it is clear that for him only suspensions can be considered dissonances Now, since even the more elementary partimento relies on the RO for its realization, and since the RO includes a fair number of dissonances – both among upper voices and between bass and upper voices – it is clear that the standard distinction between consonance and dissonance is not in force anymore. We might understand the Neapolitan position in this way: in strict counterpoint the standard consonance-dissonance boundary is always valid; in partimento theory the notion of consonance is extended to all basic procedures of accompaniments. In other words, all chordal elements (including seventh chords and their inversions) are understood as consonances, and the concept of dissonance refers only to suspensions. (pp. 103-104)

In addition to indicating consonant intervals, the term 'consonances' has also been used for centuries to indicate chords (in this context always plural!), in its meaning of 'concord' or

'harmony'. One of the earliest examples of this use is given by Diego Ortiz in his *Trattado de glosas* (1553): In his description of the second manner in which the viol can play together with the harpsichord he wrote: 'I composed and put here six ricercate in this way on a plain chant, written as lowest part and to be played on the harpsichord. They have to be accompanied with consonances and some counterpoint in the style of this ricercata.'¹¹

Moreover, whether the Rule of the Octave includes a fair number of dissonances depends on the perspective from which one looks at it: from the historical vantage point or from that of functional harmony. In the historical view, the only dissonances included in the Rule of the Octave are the second and fourth (counted from the bass up) on the fourth degree of the descending scale, and they are passing dissonances prepared by $\frac{5}{3}$ on the previous fifth degree. The fourth, in the $\frac{6}{4}/\frac{3}{1}$ chord on the second degree (ascending and descending) and on the sixth degree of the descending scale, was at first only used in combination with $\frac{6}{5}$ as an ornamental passing note which was later, in the second half of the seventeenth century, added to $\frac{6}{5}$, as if it were a 'frozen' passing note.

This view of dissonances, which differs from Sanguinetti's, can only be understood if one takes into account that in basso continuo as well as in partimento theory all intervals are counted from the bass up, and, moreover, that chords are not considered as inversions. This means that for example $\frac{6}{5}$ on D, in other words D-F-B, is considered a consonant chord because both the F and B are consonances to D. The augmented fourth between F and B is inconsequential here. The $\frac{6}{5}/\frac{3}{1}$ chord is a consonant chord as well, because it is not perceived as the second inversion of the dominant seventh. The diminished fifth and the tritone take a somewhat different position. They both may (at least according to Gasparini, who contends that 'the diminished fifth as used in accompaniment may be tied or used freely') be used with or without preparation, but they are considered as some kind of dissonance, although not to the same degree as the second, seventh, and ninth

11 'Di questa maniera di sonare, ho composte e qui sottoscritte sei ricercate sopra il Canto piano che seguita, ilqual si deve porre nel Cimbalo dove ch'è notato per Contrabasso, accompagnando le consonando poi con qualche contrapunto conforme a questa ricercata'. Diego Ortiz, *Trattado de glosas*, Second Book [Rome, 1553], 30.

12 'Questa quinta falsa negl'accompagnamenti può venir legata, e sciolta.' Gasparini, *L'Armonico pratico*, 39.

(the fourth is ambiguous in this respect).¹² Since continuo players and partimentists did not think in terms of inversions (or functional harmony), it follows that in the context of partimento we should not do so either. The appreciation that not only melody and imitation, but also chords were handled according to rules of counterpoint is central to the understanding of partimento. One of the real revelations of Sanguinetti's book for me was that the partimentists maintained this way of thinking about chords far into the nineteenth century.

Harmonic Progressions

My last point of criticism concerns Sanguinetti's lack of coverage of typical seventeenth-century harmonic progressions that survive into the eighteenth century. A case in point is

his realization of a *partimento* by an anonymous author, which Sanguinetti titled *Fantasia sopra il lamento* (pp. 294-297). (The anonymous composer realized the first two bars himself, until the second beat of m. 3; from that point onwards the original has only the bass line with figures.) The piece, reproduced here as Example 5, begins with a chromatic descending tetrachord followed by a four-note motive that first appears in m. 3. Sanguinetti points out an unusual continuo figuring in m. 4, where the figures dictate two sevenths in direct succession on a stepwise bass progression. He comments: 'The figures are not a copyist's mistake; their aim is to accommodate on the cadence a last occurrence of the four-note motive' (p. 297). Sanguinetti illustrates this in his realization.

Example 5

Anonymous, *Fantasia sopra il lamento*, mm. 1-6. Sanguinetti's realization (Ex. 19.3).

Example 6

Henry Purcell, facsimile of bass part of Sonata III.

Example 7

Henry Purcell, Score of the last bars of Sonata III.

The use of two parallel sevenths upon a step-wise bass progression is, however, not an invention by the anonymous composer. It is a typical cadential progression that has been employed from the beginning of the seventeenth century, for example in 'Ecco pur' from Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1609), and the earliest written-out realization of this progression known to me is given by Girolamo Kapsberger in lute tablature (1612).¹³ Numerous Italian, French and English examples of this progression can be found in seventeenth-century compositions. One example appears at the end of the third of Purcell's trio sonatas titled *Ten Sonata's in Four Parts* (1697). Example 6 shows the bass part (the work is published in separate parts). Put in score, showing violins, string bass and basso continuo (Example 7), we see a progression that may seem extraordinary to us but was not to Purcell, combining a delayed cadence (as described by Sanguinetti on p. 111), with the parallel sevenths before the final cadence. The typical realization of the parallel sevenths is to play a major third (with the seventh) on the first and a fifth (idem) on the second bass note, because this third has to resolve in the fifth. In the *partimento* the third is not indicated while in Purcell's example the fifth is left

out, but it has to be $\frac{7}{5} - \frac{7}{5}$ all the same. In fact, the realization has parallel ninths, instead of sevenths. I made another version, now with sevenths shown below (Example 8). The other differences between Sanguinetti's realization and mine are rather a matter of taste.

Conclusion

These points of critique do not seriously diminish the immense practical value of this book. I therefore wholeheartedly recommend it to everyone who wants to study, and train him or herself in improvisation and basso continuo. After reading and playing through this work, one is thoroughly familiar indeed with what Gjerdingen called 'the secret world of *partimento*'.

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Example 8

Anonymous, Author's realization with parallel sevenths.

The musical score for Example 8 is presented in two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C). The bass staff includes figured bass notation below the notes. The figures are: 4 3, 6 6, 5 7 4 3, 5 6, 6, 4 3.

¹³ Girolamo Kapsberger, *Libro primo di Arie Passeggiate à Una Voce Con L'intavolatura del Chitarone* [Rome, 1612], in: 'Infinita bellezza'.