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## PARTIMENTO AS IMPROVISATION PEDAGOGY: RENEWING A LOST ART

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### RESUMO

A prática do *partimento* floresceu no decorrer do século XVIII, nos conservatórios italianos, e se estendeu até Paris onde funcionou como uma forma pedagógica da chamada “Escola Italiana”. O *partimento* pode ser entendido como uma linha de instrução do baixo, e foi utilizado por vários compositores e improvisadores clássicos europeus, fato pouco destacado. Como educadora musical que estuda a pedagogia da improvisação, penso que o esquecimento dessa prática no cenário pedagógico moderno é lamentável. Com base na minha crença sobre o potencial dessa tradição perdida de inspirar novos sentidos para a fluência musical, este texto tem por objetivo responder importantes questões como: O que é o *partimento*? Por que sabemos tão pouco sobre ele? Como sua prática se adapta à pedagogia da improvisação? Pode a prática do *partimento* fazer parte da pedagogia musical no século XXI?

**Palavras-Chave:** *Partimento*. Pedagogia musical. Improvisação.

### ABSTRACT

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of *partimento* flourished in Italian conservatories, spreading eventually to Paris where it functioned as a key pedagogical tool of the “Italian school.” *Partimenti* can be understood to be instructional bass lines, and was used by thousands of classical composers and improvisers across Europe, a fact that is often overlooked. As a music educator who studies improvisation pedagogy, the obsolescence of the practice in the modern pedagogical landscape seems lamentable. Based on my own belief in

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the potential of this lost tradition to inspire new creative means to musical fluency, the present paper seeks to answer some important questions: What are partimenti? Why do we know so very little of them? How does the practice fit into improvisation pedagogy more broadly? Can a practice of partimento become a part of musical pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**Keywords:** Partimento. Musical Pedagogy. Improvisation.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of partimento flourished in Italian conservatories, spreading eventually to Paris where it functioned as a key pedagogical tool of the “Italian school.” Partimenti can be understood to be instructional bass lines, and their pedagogical use was an integral component of the studies of Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart. Thousands of classical composers and improvisers across Europe were taught the inner workings of the musical language through the practical study of partimenti, a fact that is often overlooked. As a music educator who studies improvisation pedagogy and its potential integration into comprehensive musicianship training, the obsolescence of the practice in the modern pedagogical landscape seems lamentable. Partimenti and the craft-based instructional nature are particularly suited to 21<sup>st</sup> century educational objectives such as problem solving, creativity, and innovative thinking. Based on my own belief in the potential of this lost tradition to inspire new creative means to musical fluency, the present paper seeks to answer some important questions: What are partimenti? Why do we know so very little of them? How does the practice fit into improvisation pedagogy more broadly? Can a practice of partimento become a part of musical pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## **PARTIMENTO AND THE *CONSERVATORI***

In the words of the leading scholars in the field, Giorgio Sanginetti, partimento is “a sketch, written on a single staff, whose main purpose is to be a guide of improvisation of a composition at the keyboard” (2012, p. 14). Observing the written form, partimenti appear to be solely bass-lines, though they sometimes move between clefs and registers. Most often, they do not contain notated figured bass, but rather imply a

harmonic structure. Recent research into the craft has revealed that each *partimento* was in fact musical problem to be solved spontaneously – to be improvised.

This was done through the application of a very particular set of rules or *regole*. Students of *partimento* learned musical exemplars, or *schemata*, and then adapted them into new but similar contexts (Gjerdingen, 2007). Through an intense sequential study and practice of the *regole* and *schemata*, a student mastered the art of improvising *partimento*, and consequently gained an incredibly complex understanding and facility of the musical style at hand.

The practice and study of *partimento* originated in the late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> century, flourishing most prominently in four Neapolitan conservatories – Santa Maria di Loreto; Santa Maria della Pietà dei Turchini; Sant’Onofrio; and I Poveri di Gesù Cristo. The original *conservatori* were not specifically for training musicians or conserving music, but were instead intended to conserve orphans. In Italy it was customary for each conservatory to dedicate to the training of a particular trade or craft, so that the children may eventually become capable of making a living for themselves. One of these specialties was that of musicians, and the children were trained to be artisans – working musicians – in religious and courtly contexts. As the students in these Neapolitan conservatories gained competence, they were hired out for work, and the money they brought in helped to bring in better music teachers, leading eventually to the formation of some of the top instructional institutions in the history of classical music (Sanguinetti, 2012). It was here that *partimenti* were used to equip music students with a deep musical understanding by developing their improvisatory prowess. The instructional mode used for training Neapolitan musicians subsequently migrated across Europe, and “shaped the way music was imagined during the eighteenth century and beyond” (Sanguinetti, 2012, p. 31).

## AN ESOTERIC CRAFT

But why do we know so little about partimento? Perhaps because that is what the maestros of partimenti intended. While the rest of Europe was flooded with an abundance of musical treatises, written in styles that were comprehensible even to amateurs, the Italian tradition was far more cryptic, and indeed quite impossible for an amateur to comprehend. Partimento was an insider's art, passed down through study with maestros. The collections of partimento that were published often contained hundreds of sequential musical examples, accompanied by a limited set of *regole* at the beginning. They required additional explanations, and these were only possible with a maestro.

From the beginning of the partimento tradition until its decline in the early nineteenth century, the practice underwent evolution and modification, in accordance with the changing styles of the period at hand. Had luck been different, partimento might have transformed itself continuously through the Romantic period, arriving at the twentieth century, transmuted and alive, the descendant of a rich creative evolutionary process. Instead, partimento almost entirely disappeared in the nineteenth century, as did almost all forms of musical improvisation in classical music, with the exception of organ improvisation. The reasons that improvisation declined so steeply in Western Art music are the subject of another paper, but we can identify this period with an increased obsession with the score, as composers began notating more and more details of the composition, including the standardization of the written cadenza, and performers were allotted much less interpretive freedom.

## IMPROVISATION PEDAGOGY

When one examines literature on improvisational practice from the classical tradition, partimento is almost entirely absent until very recently. There is literature about the tradition of organ improvisation, and keyboard improvisation practices, as well as

descriptions of the art of cadenzas, embellishments and fantasies. We also find mention of the thorough bass era from 1600-1750, and the role of improvisation in that tradition. However, partimento was only recently understood to be such a complex improvisational pedagogy. The practice of partimento relies on a thorough understanding and fluency in thorough bass; however thorough bass (also referred to as figured bass or basso continuo) is based on an improvisation of an accompaniment to a written melody, typically being played by another instrument or ensemble. Partimento on the other hand, refers to bass lines that are not intended as the accompaniment to any fixed melody. On the contrary, in partimento, the performer is required to spontaneously improvise a complete piece of music, including harmony and melody, based upon only the given musical line. Often these melodic sketches travel through numerous keys and clefs, details that the performer must be capable of determining and reacting to spontaneously in performance. As such a complex form of improvisation, partimento deserves an important place within the literature regarding improvisation practices and pedagogy.

We do find a brief mention of the practice by Ernst Ferand (1887-1972) in his anthology of nine centuries of improvisation in Western music. The first scholar dedicated to the study of improvisation, Ferand's book remains an important part of the literature concerning structured improvisation in Western Art music (1961). The anthology is composed of musical examples of improvisatory practices preceded by an historical introduction. Partimento does not earn a place within the many musical illustrations however, illustrating a lack of knowledge within the field until relatively recently.

Music theorists and scholars Giorgio Sanguinetti, Robert Gjerdingen, Rudolf Lutz, and Thomas Christensen have been largely responsible for our increased understanding of the craft and art of partimento (Gjerdingen, 2007a, Sanguinetti, 2012; Christensen et al. 2010). Sanguinetti's recent publication, *The Art of Partimento*, serves as the most important source for understanding the techniques (2012), and Gjerdingen's website "Monuments of Partimenti" likewise provides an instructional model for learning the skill (n.d.). This resurgence of partimento comes at a time in

which musical scholars, educators and academics from a range of disciplines are beginning to rethink and re-imagine the importance of improvisation in the past and the present.

## **PEDAGOGY IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> AND 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES**

In Aaron Berkowitz's important new addition to the field of improvisation pedagogy, *The Improvising Mind* (2012), he discusses at length the practice of partimento. He uses Gjerdingen's classification of three broad categories of patterns in partimenti: cadences, the rule of the octave, and *movimenti* (special moves) to analyze other prominent improvisation pedagogies of the time, specifically, nine improvisation treatises from the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Unlike the published partimenti collections from the past masters, which are almost devoid of explanation, these improvisation treatises from the same period, written for middle and upper class amateur musicians, give explicit instruction in improvisation. They therefore serve as a lens into improvisational practices of the time. Berkowitz includes an insightful letter written in 1839 by Carl Czerny to a young lady who will soon be learning to improvise. Extremely verbose, Czerny describes a myriad of aspects surrounding improvisation and the proper course of action to acquire the skill. It provides an interesting glimpse into the practice of teaching improvisation at the time. Czerny expresses his belief that anyone who has acquired moderate skills playing can learn to improvise, "at least to a certain degree" (Berkowitz, 2012, p. 16). He asks the student to begin practicing, both alone, and in front of her teacher, "to connect together easy chords, short melodies, passages, scales, arpeggiated chords; or, which is much better, leave it to your fingers, to effect this connection, according to their will and pleasure" (Berkowitz, 2012, p. 16).

## WIDENING THE LENS

Since the 1960's the field of music education has been enriched by the creative pedagogies of improvisation by such musician/educators as R. Murray Schafer, John Stevens, John Paynter, Pauline Oliveros, and numerous other practitioners of free improvisation. Proponents of free improvisation pedagogy appreciate its ability to be a democratic music that embraces differences and supports individual creative processes (Hickey, 2009; Kanellopoulos, 2011). Free improvisation is open to anyone, regardless of age, musical ability, or stylistic know-how. It brings its participants into a space in which diverse backgrounds and musical influences enrich the musical process rather than restrict it. Derek Bailey, in his important work *Improvisation: Its nature and practice in music* preferred to call it non-idiomatic improvisation (1992). Non-idiomatic improvisation is an important pedagogical tool for accessing creativity and helping musicians find their own voice. The creative musical process most often takes place in interaction with other musicians, and focus is on being in the moment. The collaborative potential and democratic elements inherent in the practice resonate well with our times. Due to the emphasis on a collaborative dialogue of improvisational gestures, adherence to a strict set of rules seems to go against the nature of free improvisation. Improvising musician, composer, and scholar George Lewis is one critic of idiomatic improvisation, believing that using prepared patterns does not engage practitioners in a process that leads to the creation of their own musical sound and material (2000). However, since the training of musicians today is still most often based on a thorough study of existing musical languages, to consider integrating idiomatic improvisation into the study of music can only deepen a student's ability to become creative musical agents. Partimento may be a beneficial addition to traditional theory and musicianship training, offering a new vehicle for creative application of musical elements.

Gaining competence in the foundational rules of a given musical language forms the basis of improvisatory practices in numerous musical cultures throughout the world. Ethnomusicologist Benjamin Brinner recognizes similar methods of acquiring competence in music of the Middle East, South Asian musics, Javanese Gamelan, and

jazz. Students in these vastly different contexts all must develop “ground rules and successful strategies of sound production, patterning, and manipulation” (Brinner, 1995, p. 119).

## **JAZZ, AUTOMATICIZATION, AND COGNITION**

Jazz is in many ways similar to partimento– musicians use a musical skeleton that contains limited musical elements (harmony and melody) as a springboard over which to improvise. Philip Johnson-Laird (2002) has written about the manner in which jazz musicians improvise:

Jazz musicians know by heart the chord sequences on which they improvise. These sequences are consciously accessible and readily communicated [...] Musicians also have in their heads a set of unconscious principles that control melodic improvisation. This procedural knowledge [...] enables musicians to improvise in real time (p. 439).

These unconscious principles refer to the ‘automaticization’ of musical formulas and phrases that exist within the given style of music being played. This is the same strategy being addressed in the improvisation treatises and the practice of partimento. Beyond memorization, an important element of this automaticization in classical music and in jazz is the practice of transposition. Transposition should become an unconscious ability if one is to master improvisation. Viewed as a pedagogical tool, we understand the importance of a rigorous practice of transposition in the beginning stages of instrumental practice. Through repeated rehearsal, the musical language is transferred from short term to long-term memory, becoming automatically accessible during the time of performance.

In an article directed at the classical music world, jazz musician and educator Bill Dobbins argues for a comprehensive music training which incorporates improvisation from the earliest stages – one which unifies the different elements into a language



(1980). “A skilled improviser in any tradition must be able to deal with the relevant elements of melody, rhythm, and harmony in a spontaneous and expressive manner. These music elements must be thoroughly understood and assimilated technically, aurally, and kinetically, as well as theoretically” (1980, p. 38-9). He makes the direct comparison between the manner in which Baroque musicians improvise from a bass line and a jazz musician follows the chords of a specific tune. “Baroque, Classical, and jazz musics also share the practice of fully developed, spontaneous rhythmic and melodic re-workings of pre-composed material” (1980, p. 38). Not only do they work with pre-composed material, they also recycle and transform melodic motifs played earlier within the same solo or partimenti. Classical improvisation and jazz both make use of extension, fragmentation, diminution and augmentation.

At this point, our understanding of improvisation can be better understood with the aid of cognitive science. Jeff Pressing (1988) was an important researcher and scholar on the intersection of these two fields. He outlines the cognitive steps required in learning to improvise. Firstly, materials must be understood in intimate detail and from various perspectives. The next cognitive step is the creation of connections and cross-linkages. In Pressing’s (1988) words, “improvisational fluency arises from the creation, maintenance and enrichment of an associated knowledge base, built into long-term memory” (p. 53-4).

Not only does the memorization, transposition and repeated practice of formulas builds one’s vocabulary with which to improvise, it also serves to refine the novice’s perception of music and achieve “implicit internalization of important realizations in the tonal system” (Berkowitz, p. 64). The pedagogical implications of this concept speak far beyond simply acquiring improvisational abilities. They implicate a deep understanding of musical concepts being put into practice and integrated into the musician’s vocabulary.

## **PARTIMENTO IN TODAY'S MUSIC TRAINING?**

Thanks to the renewed interest in partimento by scholars and theorists, we can expect to see more widespread acknowledgement of the practice and pedagogy of partimento in coming years. The publications now emerging on the topic have the potential to serve as guides for reviving a lost tradition. Whether the practice will be reborn in the modern classroom or function only as a subject of historical importance remains to be seen. There are aspects of improvisation pedagogy from the time of partimento that are ill fitted to our modern educational environment. There are, however, positive elements that can be harvested and introduced to the modern classroom, and we may speculate what unique benefits they might bring.

When partimento was widely practiced, conservatory students were being trained for work in church services and in courts, and there was only one accepted style of music, to which all of these musicians adhered. Today's context is far less black and white, and modern musicians, even those who remain solely within the classical realm, tend to study and perform music from a multitude of styles and periods. Perhaps they eventually focus their expertise in one style, but more often than not, modern performers maintain a performance practice that incorporates divergent styles.

## **IN MUSIC THEORY CLASSROOMS**

When partimento is viewed as a practical reinforcement of the conceptual skills being learned in theory and ear training, as an addition to the present day study of theory, we can view it as an enriching tool that brings a great deal of creativity to a pedagogy which is greatly lacking it at present. The growing body of research in the field of improvisation pedagogy, both of a quantitative and qualitative nature, points to the benefits to overall musicianship of acquiring the skill. Gaining the ability to improvise with musical material enhances musicality on all levels – melodic fluency, harmonic understanding, interpretive depth, and compositional abilities.

Undoubtedly, there are a multitude of experimental practices presently occurring in music theory classrooms, and innovative educators are creating ways for students to more fully absorb the fundamentals they are teaching. In North America, Peter Schubert at McGill University has students improvise in theory and counterpoint classes (2007). Peter Silberman at Ithaca College has created a method for teaching students to hear and understand aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century music through improvisation (2003).

Partimento uses improvisation as a tool for gaining compositional skills. The relationship between composition and improvisation is the subject of much discourse, with a common definition of improvisation being composition in the moment and similar ideas (Sloboda, 2000; Pressing, 1988). It is now widely known that almost all composers of the past were notable improvisers and that these two skills were once closely associated. If a tradition of partimento were to be revived, Western classical musicians could potentially bring back into being this close association between composition and improvisation.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Partimento can be immensely useful for the development of musicianship and authentic performance practice, providing an effective means of absorbing the musical style at hand, while developing faculty within that language. Western Classical Art music was once a richly improvisational music, and the decline of the practice in the Nineteenth century marked a significant shift in performance, and consequently, musical training in the field. Today, the performance of Western classical art music is one of extreme technical and artistic mastery, almost exclusively exhibited through performance of the canon and contemporary compositions. The requirements of performing at today's standards often make the task of learning to improvise seem overly ambitious, and only a handful of professional performers are willing to attempt to improvise musical material in performance. Since improvisation is not a standard of

performance, the study of improvisation in instrumental music instruction or music fundamentals is still quite rare.

For too long, music education has focused on repertoire as the goal, favouring product over process. By instead prioritizing the attainment of musical fluency, or the ability to express oneself musically, over the study and memorization of pre-existing compositions, we would provide music students with musical agency – something that is all too often missing in today's music education. From childhood through to professional music training, students deserve to be creative participants in the music making, as opposed to solely interpreters.

Improvising challenges students to be active listeners, preparing them to make complex decisions in the moment. When students improvise, they more deeply integrate the fundamentals of music into their own vocabularies and therefore develop a more comprehensive musicianship. Current research has revealed the importance of creativity in learning, and movements toward more experiential learning in education more broadly point towards greater emphasis on skills such as improvisation and composition. Can partimento be used to restore the training of musical fluency within our music programs?

Imagine a renewed musical landscape in which musicians are fluent in the language of music, improvising partimenti on the keyboard and on their own instruments, in ensembles with fellow improvising musicians. They may perform less of the well-worn repertoire, but concerts would now be infused with improvisatory life and creative moments of suspense and surprise. Imagine a common set of 'standard' partimenti, and the enjoyment of hearing different performers improvising their own versions, much in the same way jazz musicians improvise. Partimento can be part of a much needed process of transformation and renewal in classical music – and by training musicians to have fluency with their language, we invite creative collaboration at a whole new level. Musicians can compose their own partimenti, with modern day *regole* to accompany it – and they may serve as springboards for collaborative improvisation, as a “point of departure” (Nettl&Russel, 1998, p. 13). Perhaps they can

be the instigator of change, helping to revive the classical music world with a flourishing of creative energy.

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