

Robert O. Gjerdingen*¹

*Northwestern University, United States of America

¹r-gjerdingen@northwestern.edu

Teaching Partimento Analysis and Realization in 19th-Century Paris

ABSTRACT

Background

Because so much of the Neapolitan tradition of partimento was self evident to musicians in Naples, we can find more explicit and thorough descriptions of it in writings by French musicians. In addressing French student musicians, French masters had to clearly explain the purpose and goals of this specialized training. And in the course of these explanations these French authors provided valuable details not found in Italian sources.

Partimento training was central to instruction at the *Conservatoire de Paris*. Though the curriculum went through many changes during the nineteenth century, partimento playing remained a core activity in the foundational course known as *Harmonie et accompagnement*. Claude Debussy, for instance, was remembered as a gifted partimento player in the class of Auguste Bazille.

The national traditions of Italy and France, especially during periods when nationalism was so strong as to affect scholarship, have tended to emphasize the uniqueness and independence of each society. Yet the Milan Conservatory was heavily influenced by the Paris Conservatory, and the Paris Conservatory was founded to teach the methods of the Naples conservatories and the school of Bologna around Padre Martini. Names like Paisiello, Sacchini, and Honoré Langlé, prominent in the establishment of the Paris Conservatory, were all graduates of the conservatories in Naples.

Langlé, Choron, Catel and others helped to translate the bass motions (*moti dell basso, movimenti*) taught in Naples into the *marches harmoniques* taught in Paris. Partimento basses, when not called partimenti, were called *basses données*, and melodies requiring basses were called *chants donnés*. The art of written partimento realizations, termed *dispositione* in Naples, became *realisations* in Paris. So although the terminology changed, the core curriculum of teaching polyphony schemas and then testing their recall with bass or melody realizations remained intact. It became the central skill tested in the Paris Conservatory's elaborate system of *concours* for the subjects of harmony and counterpoint.

A *marche harmonique* was typically presented either as a figured bass or as four voices in open score, each with their own clef (bass, tenor, alto, soprano). The four-voice version was the model, and each voice had a definite role. Take, for example, the bass motion known in Naples as 'down a 4th, up a step' (*cala di quarta, sala di grado*). This is the bass of Pachelbel's canon, or of the old aria *La romanesca*, of the major-mode section of the English carol Greensleeves, or of a number of old *bassi ostinati*. One of the upper voices would begin on the third scale degree and descend stepwise. Another upper voice would begin on the tonic and also descend stepwise. A third upper voice would begin on the fifth and hold its

note for two stages of the bass, and then descend a third. Learning this *marche harmonique* meant being able to play it at the keyboard in any key, being aware when any of its voices occurred in a *basse donnée* or *chant donné*, and being able to write diminutions on its bass or upper voices for the purpose of elaborate *realisations*.

When André Caplet arrived at the Paris Conservatory, his new teacher of composition, Xavier Leroux, told him to first realize the partimenti at the back of Bazin's harmony text. Much later, when Caplet won the Prix de Rome (1901), besting Ravel, he was asked by the Conservatory librarian to bring back a number of partimento manuscripts from Italy. Debussy's harmony teacher, Émile Durand, used a partimento from the sixth book of Fenaroli as an assignment for his class. In Paris the Italian partimento tradition had taken up the position held by Greek and Roman sculpture at the École des Beaux-Arts. That is, partimenti were considered the source of classical models that represented an ideal of grace, beauty, and technical perfection.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The aim of this study is to report on how Parisian master teachers at the *Conservatoire* passed on the traditions of partimento analysis and realization. Auguste Panzeron, for example, showed how to realize a partimento by Fenaroli. Hippolyte Colet published collections of Scarlatti sonatas and Bach two-part inventions to show students how to create authentic realizations of eighteenth-century partimenti. And Édouard Deldevez provided a multi-level hierarchical analysis of a Fenaroli partimento to guide a student's process of realization.

Methods

The methods used in this study are an extension of the historical and cognitive methods of schema theory to the new area of cross-cultural transmission.

Implications

Perhaps the most surprising finding for a modern scholar is the ubiquity of partimento playing and written realization at the Paris Conservatory. One can, for instance, provide evidence of a French "dialect" in partimento realization. And the discovery of multi-level partimento analysis has significant implications for understanding how earlier musicians conceived of musical syntax.

Keywords

Partimento, *Marche harmonique*, *Movimenti*, *Moti del Basso*, Auguste Panzeron, Hippolyte Colet, Édouard Deldevez, Augustin Savard, Auguste Bazille.

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