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# Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento:
# A New Method Inspired by Old Masters

## ABSTRACT

**Background**

In the past ten years 'partimento' has been of growing importance in the domain of music theory, as witnessed by the many recent publications and conference papers on this topic. Partimento stands for an eighteenth-century Neapolitan tradition of music education. A partimento is a figured or unfigured bass, which serves as an exercise for keyboard improvisation or composition. Through the realization of partimenti, young music apprentices at the Neapolitan conservatories acquired the musical vocabulary of the prevailing Galant Style.

During the course of the nineteenth century the partimento tradition gradually sank into oblivion. Until roughly ten years ago, it was almost entirely unknown to the music theory community. Its revival went hand in hand with the rise of schema theory. Schema theory is concerned with the replication (by the composer) and the recognition (by the audience) of musical patterns. These include all sorts of sequences, cadence formulas, and 'stock phrases', labelled Romanesca, Prinner, Quiescenza and the like. Though originating from the eighteenth-century Galant repertoire, these schemata are still traceable in music of the late nineteenth century. Schema theory provides a mode of 'historical' understanding. A modern performer or listener, who is acquainted with the vocabulary of the musical past, may feel a greater sense of participation. In conjunction with schema theory, partimento practice can help to re-acquire this stylistic understanding today.

Because of its concreteness, many theorists value partimento as an attractive and effective tool for teaching music theory. Classes in partimento are offered at various music institutions worldwide, usually as electives following a completed undergraduate harmony course. In recent years, methods for keyboard improvisation have been published, based on partimento and Galant schemata. However, a modern partimento and schema pedagogy still seems in its infancy.

This paper presents a new academic textbook, entitled *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento* (from now on HCP). Its publication by Oxford University Press is planned end of 2018. The method falls in line with the aforementioned educational developments. The title implies an integrated approach: no distinct disciplines but all three in one. HCP is intended as a (four-semester) undergraduate course, and offers an alternative to currently used textbooks on harmony. The following comparison between HCP and these traditional harmony textbooks can be made:

1. HCP takes a primarily contrapuntal perspective. Harmonic intervals and chords are the result of the combination of voices in a two-, three- or four-part texture. The concept of chord inversion, tacitly adopted from the start in almost textbooks currently in use, is carefully introduced only in later chapters, principally as a consequence of invertible counterpoint. In contrast, HCP treats the bass line (the thorough-bass) as the actual foundation of the harmony, rather than the progression of chord fundamentals. For instance, it ranks a sixth-chord on the fourth scale degree not as an inversion of an imaginary triad on the second scale degree, but as a chord in its own right;

2. In HCP, schemata are shown to be concrete and well-defined patterns, horizontally as well as vertically: horizontally, because the bass of, say, a Romanesca (following the famous Pachelbel bass) contains six successive stages, repeatedly a fourth down and a second up; vertically, because the bass line implies various but limited contrapuntal realizations. In this sense, the contrapuntal realization of a Romanesca, for example, is a 'holistic' procedure: the musical pattern is understood as a whole and only afterwards analysed in smaller components. This principle of HCP is opposed to the 'atomic' procedure taught to many students today: each stage of a harmony exercise seems to bring up a number of chord choices. Indeed, the advantages of the traditional method are unmistakable. The splitting up of the harmonic language in its smallest units enables a thorough systematization. However, the prize that has to be paid is an abstraction level that seems too high for many music students, practice-oriented as they are. Due to its concreteness partimento and schema theory sidesteps such a thorough systematization. Consequently, HCP does not claim to provide a complete and closed system. Rather, like the old partimento methods, it offers students tools that challenge them to apply the best suitable schemata and, through combination, to construct whole musical phrases;

3. One of the leading pedagogical principles behind the eighteenth-century partimento school is what we would call 'hands-on learning' today. The theoretical requisites for realizing partimenti, the *Regole* that have been formulated by masters such as Francesco Durante (1684–1755) and Fedele Fenaroli (1730–1818) are remarkably concise. Far from claiming to build a 'scientific' system, the *Regole* facilitated the acquisition of hands-on experience, and guided the training of memory and recognition skills. In other words, skill training had priority above conceptual learning. HCP aims to re-apply this educative principle to the teaching of harmony and counterpoint today.

The use of partimenti in present-day music theory classes confronts us with several problems, since a mere employment of such exercises seems inappropriate. First, the easiest eighteenth-century partimenti that we know require a considerable set of musical skills, which a beginner may not have acquire yet. Second, all partimenti primarily demand realization at the keyboard. Since many non-keyboard students today only have

limited keyboard skills, other ways need to be found to link their realizations to aural perception. For this reason all exercises have to be designed in such a way that they can be sung or performed on melodic instruments. Third, all partimento collections, even those originating around the turn to the nineteenth century such as those of Giacomo Tritto (1733–1824) or Giovanni Furno (1748–1837), exhibit a conservative attitude toward the harmonic language. None of these seem sufficiently suitable to the works of, say, Beethoven or Schubert. For example, none of these employ enharmonic relationships. Therefore, new partimenti need to be made to cover nineteenth-century harmonic practices. Fourth, whereas students at eighteenth-century conservatories may have viewed the prevailing Galant Style as the common musical language of their time, present-day students are exposed to a much more diverse repertoire. As a result they lack the fluency of the eighteenth-century 'native musical speaker'. The required knowledge implicitly referred to in the partimenti, must now carefully be built up and made explicit.

HCP aims to cover the entire common-practice period. The musical examples span a period roughly from Corelli to Brahms. HCP follows schema theory usage by representing progressions in terms of bass motion through circled Arabic numerals from ① to ⑦, and by indicating patterns with terms such as Prinner, Ascending Rule of the Octave, and Double Cadence. Figured-bass numerals are used in the traditional way, yet with one difference: the addition of sharps, flats, and naturals is always adjusted to the momentary key.

HCP does not provide a complete method of music theory education. It is intended as a component of a practice-oriented training of musicianship skills in conjunction with solfeggio, analysis, and, if possible, modal or tonal (imitative) counterpoint. HCP reconceives the didactical axioms 'from simple to complex' and 'from concrete to abstract', in comparison with harmony textbooks. Simple and concrete in the context of HCP relates to experience, perception and recognition. The relation between consonance and dissonance is explored from the very beginning and remains one of the most essential subjects throughout the entire method. HCP starts with two-part scale realizations in thirds and sixths. Gradually more complex schemata are introduced, initially in two parts, subsequently in three parts, and finally in four parts. With respect to aural perception, four-part harmony is significantly more complex than harmony in three parts. Due to the two middle voices, four-part harmony looses the contrapuntal transparency of a three-part texture. Moreover, the lack of transparency increases the level of abstraction, especially for those who tend to think in melodic terms rather than in chords. This is why HCP introduces four-part realization only at a later stage in the method, and not, as usual, at the very beginning. This goes hand in hand with the introduction of established, but not intrinsically self-evident concepts like chord inversion, the diminished seventh chord, the secondary dominant, and so on. HCP concludes with chapters about chromaticism and enharmonization.

Ideally, in line with historical partimento practice, HCP would look like a workbook, containing only the most essential instructions. As I asserted above, such a format is not entirely suitable, due to the remoteness of the historical period in question. A certain amount of stylistic information seems indispensable. Therefore, HCP contains two volumes: a textbook and a workbook. The textbook provides the necessary stylistic and technical information. Each section discusses one or more repertoire excerpts. It deduces the schemata from the excerpts and subsequently generalizes them by means of prototypes. Each section ends with practical instructions for the exercises. The workbook contains exercises, partimenti by Fenaroli, Sala and others, and arrangements of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century compositions. This volume forms the core of the method. All acquired schemata are repeated over and over again in the exercises of the following sections as well. This is the strength of the old partimento pedagogy: by continuous repetition the musical habits become second nature to the students.

## Aims and Repertoire Studied

The proposed method, entitled *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento* implies an integrated approach of harmony and counterpoint, by means of partimento training. It is intended as an undergraduate course, and offers an alternative to currently used harmony textbooks. The method covers the entire common-practice period.

## Methods

The work makes use of recent publications on schema theory and partimento. It transfers their results into classroom teaching.

## Implications

HCP departs from a long tradition of harmony pedagogy, while restoring the eighteenth-century (Italian) partimento practice from a contrapuntal perspective.

## Keywords

Schema Theory, Partimento, Thorough-Bass, Pedagogy, Common-Practice Period.

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