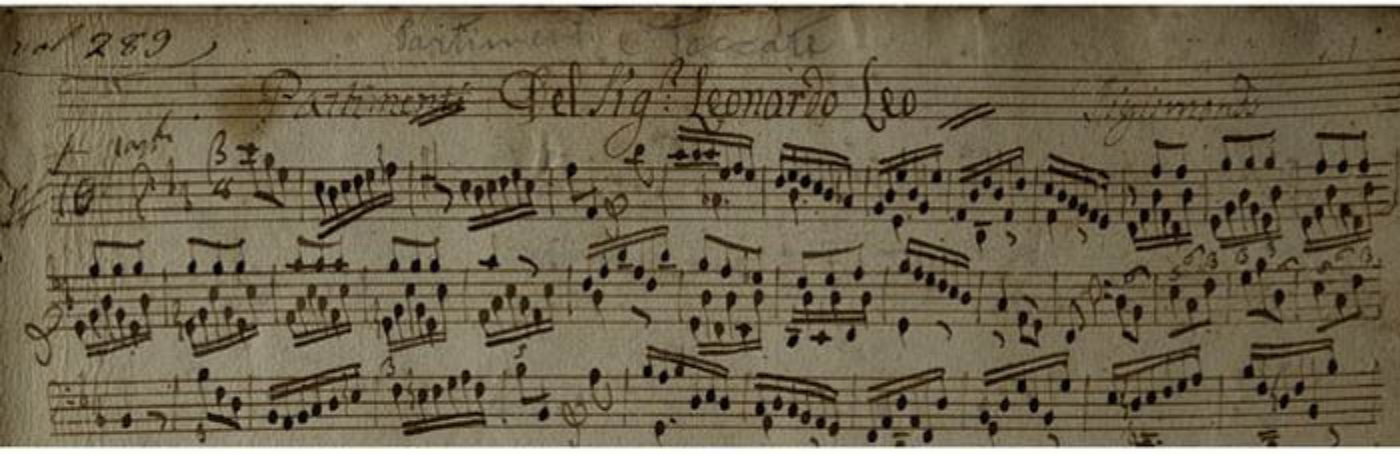
The Art of Partimento



History, Theory, and Practice

Giorgio Sanguinetti

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HISTORY, THEORY, AND PRACTICE

BY GIORGIO SANGUINETTI

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Printed in the United States of America
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To the memory of my father
Rodolfo Sanguinetti
who encouraged me in the study of music

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Prologue

In 1903 musical life in Paris was in full bloom. Hundreds of theaters, cafès, music halls, cabarets, and circuses saturated the city with every possible kind of music, from opera to ragtime to popular song to exotic Javanese gamelan. Claude Debussy had begun the composition of *La Mer* and, the year before, had staged his new, revolutionary opera *Pélleas et Mélisande*.

Also in 1903, the young French composer André Caplet was in Rome as a *pensionnaire* of the Académie de France, after having won in 1901 the Prix de Rome (the third prize was assigned to Maurice Ravel). Caplet had already begun a successful career as a conductor and would later become a close friend and collaborator of Debussy and an original and interesting composer (one perhaps not fully recognized today).

Caplet was in Rome on a mission. The director of the Conservatoire of Paris, Théodore Dubois, together with the composition professor Paul Vidal (the teacher of Nadia Boulanger) and the musicologist Charles Théodore Malherbe, had entrusted him with the task of finding some long-forgotten musical manuscripts in the library of the conservatory of Naples, called *partimenti*. The library of the Paris Conservatoire already owned some manuscripts of partimenti, apparently copies made in Naples at the end of the eighteenth century; Caplet's assignment was to find other materials of the same kind, hand-copy them, and bring the copies back to Paris. To make sure he did not ask for copies of partimenti already in possession of the Conservatoire, Dubois ordered a handwritten thematic catalogue of the Paris collection of partimenti. Equipped with the catalogue, Caplet went to Naples for a meeting with the director of the library, who in 1903 was Rocco Pagliara. The librarian politely welcomed Caplet, showed him the library and the manuscripts, and promised him that he would entrust his scribes with preparation of the copies. But he never did. Obviously under pressure from Paris, Caplet kept writing letters to Pagliara for two years, but he did not get any answer; nor was he able to bring the new partimenti back to Paris (the partimenti collection of the Paris library corresponds to the thematic catalogue, and the manuscripts are currently housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale, site Richelieu-Louvois).[1]

The reason for this silence is difficult to ascertain. It was probably not mere negligence; Pagliara was a dedicated librarian. Perhaps he did not want to share this material with newcomers. After all, in partimenti lay the secrets of the most glorious school of composition of the eighteenth century: that of Naples.

The aim of this book is to bring to life again the long-forgotten tradition of partimenti, a pedagogical device that developed in Italy, and particularly in Naples, and shaped the musical mind of innumerable composers during the eighteenth century and part of the nineteenth all over Europe. Its importance notwithstanding, this tradition has thus far eluded the attention of musicologists and theorists, most likely because partimento theory was transmitted orally, and the surviving sources are mainly manuscript collections of exercises and fragmentary rules. In writing this book, my guiding idea was that the partimento tradition had an overly individual nature. By "overly individual" I mean the tradition had a coherent and continuous existence that transcended the individual subjects. This concept influences the way the story of partimenti is narrated: the contribution of the single maestro is always put in the larger context of a tradition that lasted, substantially unchanged beneath its stylistic clothing, for more than two centuries.

The nature and scope of this book are a consequence of the multifaceted nature of the partimento tradition, and the still meager (but rapidly growing) literature on this field. To understand partimento tradition, one should approach it from musicological, theoretical, and practical points of view. Accordingly, this is essentially a book about music theory and practice, but one

in which musicology plays a significant role. It is organized in four parts, covering these fields. The first part is devoted to two aspects: history and sources. Partimento tradition developed in a specific and unique context, the four conservatories of Naples; an account of their history, organization, and syllabus is an indispensable introduction to any study in this field. The transmission and circulation of partimenti has (almost) always been committed to manuscript copies; it is therefore necessary to offer the reader orientation in the entangled and confusing situation of partimenti sources, including a general discussion of the different kinds of sources (such as monographs, collections, *zibaldoni*, etc.) and a specific description of the sources for every individual composer. Part Two deals with the theoretical aspects of partimento tradition, the so-called *regole*, or "rules." The rules were dictated orally by the masters, and the students set them down in their copybook along with the partimenti, or in separate booklets. Partimento rules constitute a complete theory of harmony and voice leading according to the Neapolitan tradition, and their knowledge is indispensable not only to understand the partimenti but also for an historically oriented analysis of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music. Parts Three and Four are practical, dealing with the realization of partimenti.

Taking the rules as a starting point, Part Three deals initially with the elementary realization and then moves on to the more advanced issues of partimento realization (diminution, imitation, rhythm, and motivic coherence) based on the surviving "authentic" realizations. The final chapters of the book (part Four) are essentially a guide to the realization of a selection of partimenti, grouped by affinities in genre, style, and form and arranged by difficulty.

My ambition was not only to draw as precise a picture as possible of what Ludwig Holtmeier appropriately termed a "forgotten 'culture' of music theory" but also to show that the potential of partimento practice as a teaching tool did not die out but is still intact.[2] In fact, this book is also a practical guide to the use of partimenti as living teaching tools.[3] Reviving a lost art implies enormous difficulties; in particular, one of the greatest problems is how and when to offer models of realization. First of all, apart from the few "authentic" ones, the realizations of the present author are necessarily conjectural (even if hopefully not implausible). Second, to give all the partimenti fully realized means robbing the reader of the struggle (and the pleasure) of finding his or her own solutions. On the other hand, it is hardly imaginable that a modern student (or even musician) might successfully surmount difficulties that took years (and the assistance of a maestro) to overcome for any Neapolitan student in the eighteenth century. Therefore, I have adopted a gradual approach. The partimenti in Chapter Fourteen are completely realized as specimens. For the partimenti in the six chapters of Part Four, I give only partial realizations, or verbal clues, and leave the reader the task (and, again, the pleasure) of completing the work. Finally, I have left entirely unrealized a number of partimenti shown as examples of their author's style throughout the book.

Characteristic of partimento notation is the usage of different clefs. Obviously, the main reason for that is that partimenti are written on a single staff; but there are other reasons. Through a clef change the author may signal a thematic entry, a textural modification, a tutti-solo alternation, and many other events; in other words, clef changes are an important medium for conveying instruction concerning the realization. Accordingly I have resisted the temptation of "normalizing" the clef variety in favor of the familiar treble-bass notation. In am confident that the practice of partimenti will also help students to deepen their familiarity with clefs reading, a skill that in the recent years seems to be lamentably declining.

As the readers will soon recognize, in this book I have focused on Naples as the main center of the partimento practice. In favoring the Neapolitan legacy I do not claim that this was the only one (although it was probably the most important); in fact, partimenti were used in virtually every musical center in Italy, but also in other European countries, and particularly in Austria and Germany. However, partimento sources outside Naples are still largely uncharted, and cannot provide a sound basis for a thorough account of non-Neapolitan partimento traditions. This field is open to further research.

This book would never have been written without the support of many friends, colleagues, and students. When in 1994 I obtained my first appointment as adjunct professor of music theory, my distinguished colleague and friend Agostino Ziino suggested, in his characteristically half-serious, half-mocking way, that I use as teaching material the partimenti of Fedele Fenaroli. Like many musicians of my generation, I vaguely remembered that they were something awfully obsolete, a relic of an era long past. I certainly could not imagine that from this (perhaps not-so-casual) hint could grow a long-lasting fascination.

Many other Italian colleagues gave me their support and advice during the long journey that led to the present book. I mention first Rosa Cafiero, whose pioneering studies paved the way to the current proliferation of partimento studies. I am particularly indebted to Francesco Cotticelli, Dinko Fabris, Paologiovanni Maione, and Lucio Tufano, who read the historical chapters of this book and gave me guidance through the intricate history of Neapolitan institutions. Bianca Maria Antolini, Danilo Costantini, and Guido Salvetti on many occasions shared with me their profound historical knowledge.

However, this book could never had been written if a group of non-Italian scholars had not shared my interest in partimenti. Thomas Christensen invited me to discuss my ideas on partimenti during his term as visiting professor at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent (Belgium), and he encouraged me to pursue the project of a comprehensive book on partimenti. During the first stages of my research, Jesse Rosenberg told me a colleague of his was working on a similar subject (a notice that usually throws scholars into panic). On the contrary, I found in Robert Gjerdingen a staunch supporter of this project, and an insightful counterpart in countless discussions. I am also indebted to Deborah Burton, William Caplin, and David Gagné, who read the first draft of this book and offered their advice. Carrie Churnside patiently corrected my prose in the first draft of this book. A valuable help came from my frequent exchanges of views with the growing community of German-speaking *partimentisti*, among them, Felix Diergarten, Ludwig Holtmeier, Rudolf Lutz, Johannes Menke, and Nicoleta Paraschivescu.

One of my greatest concerns was to test the reactions of a diverse group of colleagues and students when they were exposed to an eighteenth century pedagogy. I wish to thank the people who offered me this opportunity, among them Antonio Cascelli, Thomas Christensen, Peter Dejans, David Gagné, Jeroen D'Hoe, Robert Gjerdingen, and Frank Samarotto; and the distinguished group of colleagues who took part in a special session on partimenti at the AMS/SMT conference in Nashville, on November 6, 2008. Special thanks go to my graduate students at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, who enthusiastically tested this long-forgotten practice and on many occasions pointed out inconsistencies and errors in my realizations. Special thanks to Stefano Quaresima, who checked all my music examples; and to Laura Pontecorvo, who carefully read the second draft and signaled several errors.

The preliminary work for this book consisted primarily in collecting materials from a large number of libraries. I could not have succeeded in finding many sources without the help of a number of librarians. I am especially grateful to Licia Sirch (conservatory of Milan), Mauro Amato, Antonio Caroccia, Tiziana Grande, Francesco Melisi (conservatory of Naples), Faustino Avagliano OSB (Montecassino), Niccolò Maccavino (Noto), Markus Engelhardt, Christine Streubühr and Roberto Versaci (Deutsches historisches Institut in Rom–Musikabteilung), and the staff of the Estense library (Modena) and the library of the abbey at Grottaferrata (Rome). Giancarlo Rostirolla also supported my research with his unparalleled expertise in the field of Italian musical sources. I would like to express my indebtedness as well to the staff of the Music Division at Oxford University Press, and in particular to Suzanne Ryan, who believed in this project from its earliest stages. In the end, the most decisive support came from my wife, Teresa, who shared with me her deep knowledge of musical manuscript sources and always succeeded in rekindling my enthusiasm, especially in recurring moments of discouragement. And to Giulia, I must offer my deepest apologies for having sometimes neglected my paternal duties in favor of partimenti. This book is, to a great extent, also their book.

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About the Companion Website

www.oup.com/us/theartofpartimento

The research that led to this book allowed its author to collect a remarkable amount of material, which a printed book cannot offer to its readers. Besides, the ongoing research will probably discover many partimento-related sources we are currently not aware of. The ideal environment for this, and for other kinds of, documentation is the password-protected website that accompanies *The Art of Partimento*. On the website the reader will find a "Synoptic Compendium," the reference version of Chapter Nine. Another important website resource is a list of manuscript partimento sources available in public music libraries. The list is currently restricted to some of the most important Italian music libraries, but it will be updated regularly and extended to other countries. Finally, on the website the reader will find the audio files for most of the music examples in the book; they are signaled with Oxford's symbol  . In addition to this website, the reader is encouraged to take full advantage of Robert Gjerdingen's "Monuments of Partimenti," which builds upon his book, *Music in the Galant Style* (OUP 2007). Gjerdingen's is currently the largest partimenti repository available online, and an ideal complement to my own book.

Readers may access the companion website with the username Music1 and access code Book5983. Please note that these are both case-sensitive.

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THE ART OF PARTIMENTO

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Part One: History

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1

Of some odd musical manuscripts

In almost all of the music libraries in Europe, and particularly in Italy, anyone searching through eighteenth-century keyboard music manuscripts may easily stumble across a number of bizarre documents, looking more or less like that shown in Figure 1.1.

At first, the piece shown in the example looks like a plain figured bass—the continuo for some large ensemble, perhaps, since it is a separate part. But the violin clef in bar 6, and the ensuing fanfarelike passage, are certainly not usual in a continuo part. In the second bar of the next line, the figured bass comes back again, but with some unusual details, such as the "3 3" (not a common continuo figure), the sign "imit." (for imitation), and the tenor clef in the second bar of the third line. This alternation of figured bass and treble textures, and of three clefs (bass, tenor, and violin), all on a single staff, continues throughout the short piece. It is characteristic of a kind of keyboard music very much in use in the eighteenth century, called *partimento*.

The etymology of the word partimento is unknown, but the term was in use during the seventeenth century as a synonym for the bass of a composition. About the end of the century, a semantic shift occurred: while officially retaining its identification with the bass, the term was being used to indicate a kind of notational shorthand for keyboard instruments. In the new meaning, a partimento was not only a bass; every clef could appear, as well as polyphonic textures, passagework, and imitations. In other words, every possible complication that might occur in a keyboard piece could be notated (or hinted at) in a partimento. Partimento became an alternative notational system, as opposed to today's more familiar two-stave, fully notated score; this latter system was called in Italy *intavolatura* (as the antonym of partimento; the term intavolatura has nothing to do with tablature).

Obviously, partimento notation leaves ample space for improvisation. Indeed, unlike intavolatura, it *needs* improvisation in order to become music. Improvising was clearly not a problem for professional eighteenth-century keyboard players; both organists and harpsichordists

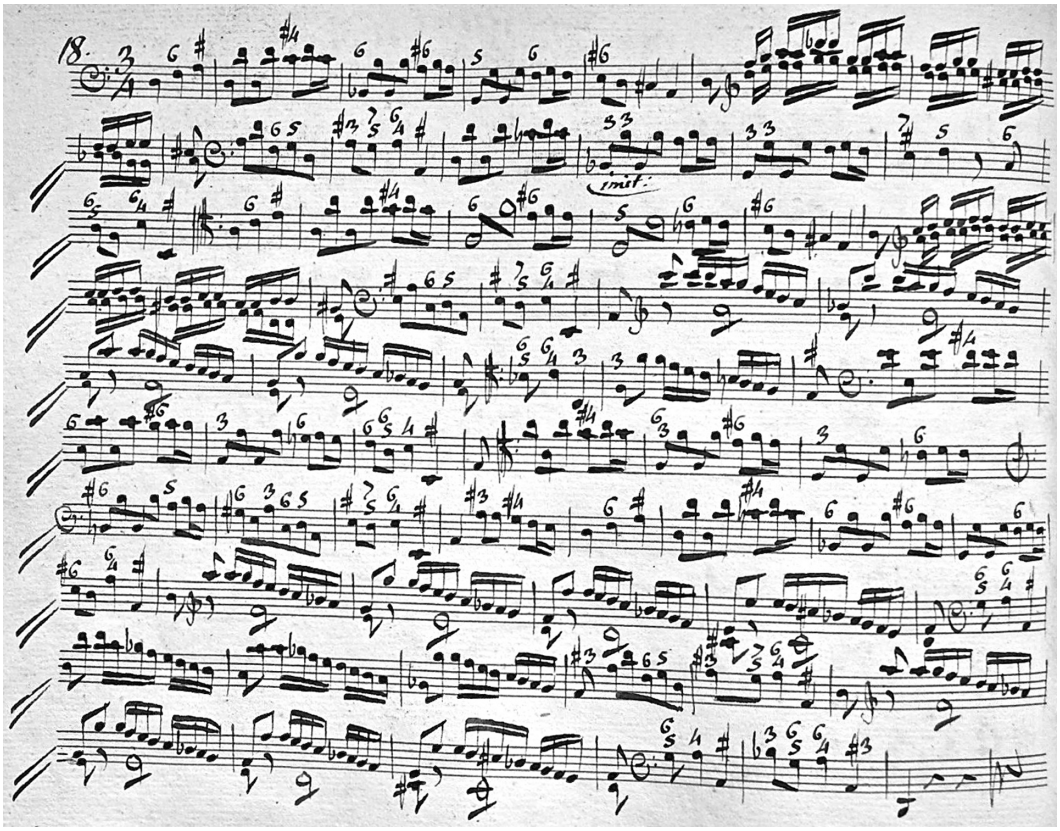


FIGURE 1.1 Francesco Durante, partimento in D minor Gj 235, from manuscript I-Nc 45.1.4 (c. 96v.) By permission of the library of the conservatory S. Pietro a Majella, Naples.

improvised all the time and must have found partimento notation extremely convenient. At the beginning of the century, great keyboardists such as Bernardo Pasquini explored with enthusiasm the possibilities of partimento writing and left unsurpassed models of sonatas for one and two simultaneous partimenti.

However, at a certain point it must have become evident that, besides being an efficient notational system—though only for highly trained professionals—partimenti also possessed remarkable potential as teaching tools. Through the practice of partimenti students could gain proficiency in a variety of fields: continuo playing, improvisation, unfigured bass, counterpoint, diminution, and fugue. Some of these fields were related to performance, but others—unfigured bass, fugue—were clearly of great interest for students of composition. Besides, all these skills entered the students' heads, so to speak, through their hands and not through their eyes. So, exactly as a performing student must develop a (quasi) instinctive response to the notational stimuli in order to obtain real proficiency on her or his instrument, likewise a composition student, using partimenti as a tool, could develop a (quasi) instinctive response to compositional stimuli. The faculty of developing a kind of automatic composition was the greatest advantage of partimenti as a teaching tool. Another benefit was that a composer trained in partimenti could gain unparalleled fluency in composition, and astounding rapidity. Modern musicians often gaze in awe at the fast working pace of great composers such as Gaetano Donizetti (who wrote his masterpiece, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in just five weeks) and take this as a token of genius. For sure, Donizetti was a genius, but his fast composition has nothing to do with that.

Every professionally trained Italian composer was able to compose an opera in five weeks, or less if necessary. This was the result of training, and not of genius.

Partimenti were perhaps the most efficient composition exercises ever devised; for this reason generations of teachers and students used them for more than two centuries. The flip side was that partimento training was long and weary, and it needed a teacher—a very good one. The extreme flexibility of partimenti, especially in the advanced stages, and the subtleties of their realization, made it impossible to commit to paper every aspect of the practice. Instead, partimento practice could flourish only in a context of a continuous oral tradition.

There was a place and a time, in Italy, where a unique combination of circumstances created the ideal environment for development of a partimento tradition. That was in Naples, between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the unique institutions that are the *conservatori*. Originally founded as orphanages in the early sixteenth century, four of these conservatori further developed as music schools: Santa Maria di Loreto, Santa Maria della Pietà dei Turchini, Sant'Onofrio, and I Poveri di Gesù Cristo. During the seventeenth century these four institutions became the most important music schools in Europe—indeed, the only professional music schools. Their fame attracted a great number of students from outside the kingdom of Naples, and more importantly many composers trained in Naples traveled all over Europe, taking with them the Neapolitan educational methods. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that every European composer in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries was exposed, directly or indirectly, to the influence of the Neapolitan masters.

An example may better illustrate this point. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the French theorist Alexandre-Étienne Choron was very active in disseminating the Italian approach to composition theory in his country, in opposition to the perspective of Rameau. In 1804 he published (together with the Neapolitan Vincenzo Fiocchi) an annotated anthology of partimenti by Leonardo Leo, Francesco Durante, Nicola Sala, Fedele Fenaroli, and others under the title *Principes d'accompagnement des écoles d'Italie*.[1] A few years later, in 1809, he ventured to publish a vast compendium of (mostly) Italian treatises by Sala, Padre Martini, and some non-Italian authors (including Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg) with the title *Principes de composition des écoles d'Italie*. This three-volume folio work was so expensive that Choron and his publisher, Le Duc, made use of a subscription system; they asked a large and qualified group of institutions and individuals to pledge to purchase the work in advance. The roster of subscribers was published in the first pages of volume 1 and is impressive; it included the French imperial family and several members the Conservatoire Impérial, the Chapelle Impériale, and the Académie Impériale de Musique. However, the most striking list is that of the "Compositeurs, Professeurs, Editeurs et Marchands de Musique." The list opens with the name of Joseph Haydn, followed by Giovanni Paisiello, Fedele Fenaroli, Luigi Antonio Sabbatini, Nicolas Isouard, Gaspare Spontini, Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, Johann Anton André, Gaetano Andreozzi, and Bonifazio Asioli. In eleventh position we have Beethoven, followed by Domenico Cimarosa, Muzio Clementi, and Johann Nikolaus Forkel; the list continues for a total length of six columns.

Insomuch as Haydn is concerned, his lifelong loyalty to Italian teaching methods is well known. In a often-quoted letter the aged composer states that "I had the good fortune to learn the true fundamentals of composition from the famous Herr Porpora." Nicola Porpora, who probably met Haydn in Vienna in 1753, had been a teacher in the Naples Conservatories of Sant'Onofrio and Santa Maria di Loreto, and a student of Gaetano Greco, another celebrated Neapolitan teacher and partimenti author.[2]

Beethoven's interest in Neapolitan music theory is less known. The year 1809 was not very productive for him; he composed "only" a few works, including the piano sonatas opp. 78, 79, and 81a, the "Harps" string quartet, and the "Emperor" piano concerto. However, as Thayer puts it, during this year he "was busy selecting and copying in order extracts from the theoretical works of C. P. E. Bach, Türk, Kirnberger, Fux and Albrechtsberger, for subsequent use in

the instruction of Archduke Rudolph."[3] Why did Thayer not mention Beethoven's subscription to a three-volume work on Italian compositional theory? Perhaps he simply overlooked it or did not consider this piece of information worthy of notice. In fact, the "official" history of music theory usually pays little attention to what happened in Italy in the eighteenth century and after, with perhaps the sole exception of Padre Martini. This neglect is the object of the next chapter.

2

What are partimenti?

There is a tacit assumption in the history of music theory: however glorious the Italian music-theoretical tradition may have been during the Renaissance and early Baroque, it disappeared suddenly and entirely in the eighteenth century.[1] The great German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus expressed this all-too-common idea in his typically authoritative style: "No Italian music theory was in a position to exert any influence beyond the Alps whatsoever following, and in spite of, the speculative treatises of Giuseppe Tartini and the erudite books of Padre Martini."[2]

As a consequence of what we might describe as this belief in a "mass extinction," references to Italian theorists appear only fleetingly in the literature on eighteenth-century compositional theory, even if the enormous influence of Italian composers and teachers all over Europe during that very period is generally acknowledged. It is a well-known fact that the eighteenth-century emigration of thousands of Italian musicians to all parts of Europe contributed to the diffusion and dominance of their music.[3] Less well known is the corresponding spread of their methods of teaching. A case in point is Haydn's statement (in Chapter One) about his studies with Porpora. The remarkable utterance about his master has failed to stir the interest of music theorists into discovering exactly what Porpora taught, and from what tradition. Porpora's task would have been difficult indeed had the Italian tradition allegedly failed to survive.

A NONVERBAL THEORY

This "mass extinction" claim, however, is not without some basis. As Renate Groth put it, there has never been an Italian Rameau—that is, a single theorist who, through an imposing corpus of theoretical writings, exerted a decisive influence on the way musicians think about their art.[4] In a study of Italian theory between 1850 and 1950, I have attempted to account for the diversity of the Italian theoretical tradition, and to illustrate its modes of expression. Unlike in France or

Germany, in Italy ideas about music rarely found their way through the medium of the published treatise, usually regarded by later historians of music theory as the normal, most authoritative mode of transmission. Rather, the most stimulating and innovative ideas circulated in short essays, as pamphlets, or as journal articles.[5]

During the era of Bach and Mozart, Italian composers, theorists, and teachers also failed to write treatises. They did not even write essays, pamphlets, or—least of all—articles. They did, however, publish a number of treatises of a very peculiar kind—almost wordless. Instead of presenting their ideas verbally, Italian musicians assembled large compilations of especially composed examples, with only a few intermittent verbal remarks here and there. Moreover, these Italian masters preferred to circulate their teaching material in manuscripts, rather than in published form. As a result, their substantial legacy consists of hundreds of manuscript volumes containing many types of material: sets of concise instructions called regole, fugues, canons, *solfeggi*, intavolature, and pieces written in a kind of shorthand notation, which they termed partimenti (the nature and content of these sources will be made clear in Chapter Seven).

All these sources lack almost any kind of text that could help the modern reader understand the material they offer. This paucity—or even absence—of words characterized all Italian (and particularly Neapolitan) theoretical works during the eighteenth century, both printed and in manuscript. One example is provided by Nicola Sala's *Regole del contrappunto pratico*, a monumental treatise of counterpoint published in 1794.[6] The sum total of all the words scattered throughout the two large folio volumes barely fills two pages; all the remaining space is occupied by musical examples.[7] This scarcity of words makes the interpretation of these sources so problematic that one wonders why the authors did not bother to leave more detailed written instructions. The answer, of course, is that they did not need to because they operated in the context of an oral tradition. Knowledge was transmitted from teacher to student, and from student to student, through direct contact. The number of words needed to illustrate musical examples depends greatly on the strength and coherence of the context in which a theoretical work was written. An isolated writer, or one who addressed himself to a broad and unknown audience, needed much more explanatory text than a writer producing material for a circumscribed circle of initiates. Thus Padre Martini, addressing his *Esemplare, o sia Saggio Fondamentale pratico di contrappunto sopra il canto fermo* (1774–75) to an international and diverse community of scholars, offered relatively extensive explanatory notes for his musical examples.[8] Sala, on the other hand, writing his *Regole di contrappunto* for the students in the Neapolitan conservatories, relied on the shared traditions of these conservatories to supply the missing verbal text. In other words, their disdain for formalization depends on the fact that partimento was, by and large, an esoteric doctrine; it was for insiders only. Only dedicated professionals—masters and novices—were supposed to have access to it, in a closed circle of the initiated: chapels, private teaching, and especially the four conservatories of Naples. The opposite kind of theorizing, that for outsiders, or the exoteric, was scarcely practiced in eighteenth-century Italy, and mostly conceived as an homage to noble protectors.

A theory that relied so heavily on an oral tradition would eventually face extinction when the context that assured its transmission disappeared. But in the eighteenth century there was to be no mass extinction of the Italian theory of composition, especially at a time when Italians were busy teaching music to countless students in every part of the world. Rather, the tradition had a different means of transmission—oral and practical, rather than verbal and intellectual. This hands-on approach found its best expression in the primary tool of the Neapolitan theory of composition—the partimento.

DEFINING PARTIMENTI

The origin of the word partimento is obscure. According to Rosa Cafiero, the term appears for the first time in the theoretical literature in *Il scolaro principiante di musica*, a short treatise in the form of a dialogue published in 1634 by Giovanni Filippo Cavalliere (or Cavalieri). In this early

appearance, the term is used as a synonym for a bass part.[9] Identification of partimento with the bass is confirmed by the earliest practical uses of the term in printed scores. Tharald Borgir mentions partimento as a synonym for "basso continuo" in the *Missarum, et moctectorum quatuor vocum* (Venice, 1602) by the Neapolitan organist and composer Giovanni Maria Trabaci.[10] Another instance is found in a series of *Pastorali a 4. 5. 6* by Padre Raimo (Erasmo Bartoli, 1606—1656) in the Biblioteca Oratoriana dei Girolamini in Naples: on the title page the instrumental bass part is called "partimento."[11] Likewise, on the title page of the *Salmi del Re David* (Psalms of King David, 1608) by the Palermitan monk Vincenzo Gallo the author writes that he has added the partimento "per commodità degli organisti" ("for the convenience of organists").[12]

Definitions of partimento rarely occur in Italian treatises or in collections of rules. But when they do, they also refer to a partimento as a bass. This identification depends on the fact that the rules for a partimento generally pertain to the elementary realization of a figured or unfigured bass line. A footnote to the Carli edition (1856) of Fenaroli's *Regole e partimenti* states that "the partimento is the low part against which the right hand plays the consonances."[13] Similarly, in his *Dizionario e Bibliografia della Musica* (1836) Pietro Lichtenthal gives this definition: "Exercises on a bass, either figured or unfigured, for the study of harmony and accompaniment."[14] The editor of the French edition of Fenaroli, Emanuele Imbimbo, gives a more abstract definition. He derives the etymology from an archaic meaning of the Italian verb *partire* (to deal, to distribute) and refers the term to the distribution of chords on the scale degrees.[15] The fact that most of the rules for a partimento deal with the addition of chords to a bass line may lead one to think that partimenti are essentially unfigured basses, as with those shown in Figure 2.1 (the first page of Fenaroli's book IV). To be sure, accompaniment from an unfigured bass was a specialty of Italian musicians, and authors such as Durante and Fenaroli wrote many totally unfigured partimenti. Yet other authors—such as Leo or Stanislao Mattei—did not, so a definition of partimento based on the presence (or absence) of figures is inaccurate.

Although the "official" definition continued to refer to a bass well into the nineteenth century, at the beginning of the eighteenth a transformation occurred, and partimenti developed into something very different from a thorough bass. Probably the individual composer who played the most important role in this change was Bernardo Pasquini, apparently the first musician to compose partimenti. Whereas the Neapolitans, in their rare definitions of the term, continued to identify the partimento with the bass, when they wrote partimenti very often they did something quite different. Some partimenti—the simplest ones—are actually just basses, but the majority of the most advanced partimenti are not limited to basses. Any clef may appear in a partimento, even high ones such as the soprano or French violin clef; often the bass clef opens a partimento, and very often (but not always) concludes it, but in the middle the clefs change frequently.

The resulting notation, as it appears from the Durante partimento shown in Figure 1.1, bears remarkable affinities to the practice of the basso seguente. This was a notational practice, first described by Adriano Banchieri (*Ecclesiastiche sinfonie*, 1607) and then regularly used by Italian composers and organists. Like the basso continuo, the basso seguente consists of a single staff and was used (chiefly by organists) for accompaniment of an ensemble, but it is conceptually different from the continuo. In fact, the basso seguente includes not only the bass line but whatever line happens to be the lowest-sounding part in the score. So, in a fugue with ascending exposition, the basso seguente may very well begin with a bass clef and then follow the succession of entries, changing clefs according to the voices. The organ part of Example 2.1 (an excerpt from a mass of Joseph Haydn) looks exactly like the exposition of a partimento fugue; in fact, the main difference between a partimento and a basso seguente is that the latter is a synthesis of an existing composition, while the former is the plan for a composition not yet in existence.[16]

At least one treatise makes fleeting reference to this practice of changing clefs. It is in the publisher's note to Pellegrino Tomeoni's *Regole pratiche per accompagnare il basso continuo* (1795)

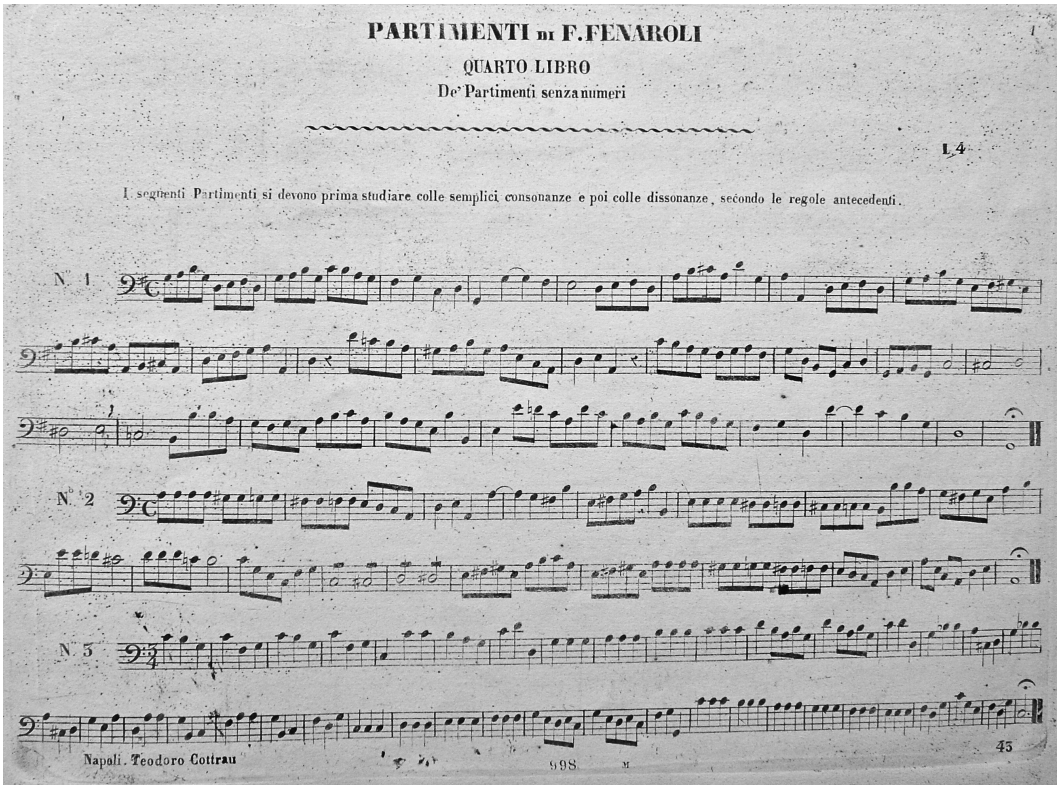


FIGURE 2.1 The first page of Fenaroli's "Book Four: of Unfigured partimenti" (Naples: Cottrau, ca. 1847). By permission of the library of the conservatory S. Pietro a Majella, Naples.

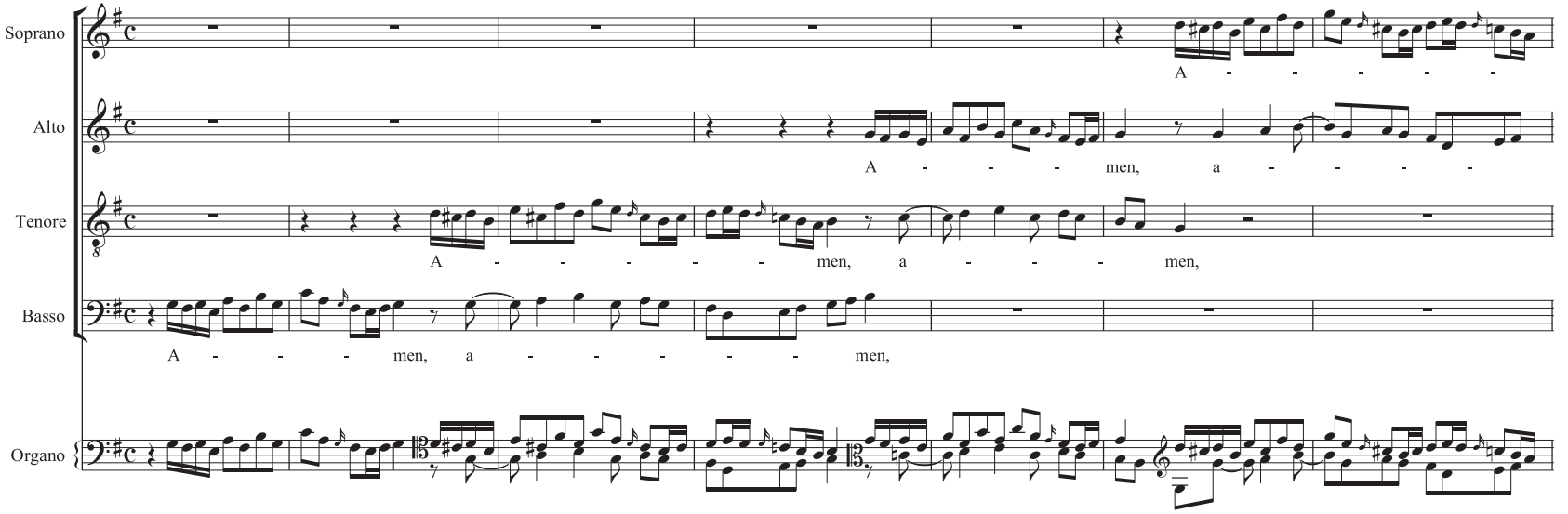
and refers to the author's partimenti (apparently never published) as exercises on "Bassi . . . o suonate" (basses or sonatas). The publisher then adds that they are "in modern and old style, with clefs [*chiavette*], imitations, fugues, and several other combinations."[17]

In the middle of the nineteenth century, François-Joseph Fétis gave a brief but intriguing description of the partimento in his *Esquisse de l'Histoire de l'harmonie* (1840). In this work, which is generally considered the first comprehensive history of music theory, Fétis aims to establish the harmony as a *science*, as opposed to basso continuo and accompaniment, which he considers mere *practique*. In Italy, wrote Fétis, the state of the science of harmony was far from being satisfactory, and so it remained until the end of the eighteenth century (he had a great interest in the theories of Tartini). Nevertheless, the practice of accompaniment made great progress, particularly in the schools of Pasquini in Rome and Alessandro Scarlatti in Naples. These great musicians wrote for their students many figured basses to which they gave the name of partimenti. Instead of using block chords, following French or German usage, these masters asked the accompanists to make all the voices of the accompaniment sing in an elegant way. In this respect, the Italians maintained for a long time an undisputable superiority in the art of accompaniment.[18]

In his remark, Fétis emphasizes the contrapuntal nature of the Italian partimento practice, setting it apart from the contemporary tradition of French and German continuo accompaniment.

During the last century, more accurate definitions have been offered by Gustav Fellerer and Friedrich Lippmann. In a short paper about improvisation in organ music, the former defined partimento as a "continuo-like notation of the organ piece" representing a "link between free improvisation and the *res facta*, i.e., the written-out organ composition."[19] Some ten years later,

EXAMPLE 2.1 An excerpt of the 'Gloria' in Haydn's *Missa Sancti Nicolai* (bb. 108 – 114). The notation of the basso seguente is very similar to a fugue partimento.



Fellerer expanded this short article into an anthology of fifteen partimenti, chiefly from the Santini collection in Münster, preceded by an introductory essay in which he emphasizes the improvisatory aspect of partimento playing and defines a partimento performance as a "guided improvisation" (*gebundene Improvisation*). He continues by saying that "the thematic content and the form are fixed, but the final aspect of the piece is left to the performer's fantasy."[20]

More recently, Lippmann defined the partimento as "the outline of a polyphonic composition, notated as a single voice with frequent changes of clefs, consisting partly of thorough-bass elements, partly of thematic statements, which can be used as a basis for a more or less improvised keyboard performance."[21] Lippmann's definition is quite accurate, though still not fully adequate to the complexity of the partimento tradition. Partimenti are not always notated as a single voice. Often the notation of advanced partimenti such as fugues, toccatas, or concerti ranges from one to three voices, with frequent changes of texture. What can be stated with certainty is that partimenti, regardless of the number of voices and clef changes, are always notated on a single staff.[22]

A decisive step toward better understanding of the authentic nature of partimenti has recently been taken by Robert Gjerdingen in his book *Music in the Galant Style*. In a chapter named "Il Filo," Gjerdingen discusses a musical concept that seems to have been rather well known among Italian (and Italianate) eighteenth-century musicians: "*il filo*" (the thread). In Gjerdingen's words, il filo is a "cognitive thread . . . that, like Ariadne's thread which led Theseus through the labyrinth, guides the listener through a musical work."[23] The concept of il filo has diverse actualizations from the points of view of the listener, the performer, the improviser, the composer, and finally the pedagogue. From the composer's perspective, the proper embodiment of il filo is the particular kind of sketch usually referred to as "continuity draft", a single-staff notational shorthand for entire works or sections of works. Gjerdingen points out the affinities between partimenti and continuity drafts, at the point that "someone unacquainted with partimenti could easily mistake a manuscript copy of an advanced partimento for a composer's sketch."[24]

Example 2.2 illustrates this point: it is the first piece from Fenaroli's Book VI, one of the most advanced collections of partimenti ever written. The absence of continuo figures and massive use of high clefs make this partimento look more like a sketch than a thorough bass (for an early nineteenth-century realization of this "partimento ricercato," see Example 20.8).

Like a continuity draft, a partimento is a single-staff notational shorthand with elements of continuo figures. Its purpose is to set up a firm outline for all the aspects of the finished piece: length, tonal plan, harmony, texture, and style. Unlike the continuity draft, which is an intermediate stage toward the written composition, the object of partimento is composition through improvisation. We might perhaps say that although the continuity draft is (or may be) the result of an act of improvisation, the partimento aims to inspire improvisation.

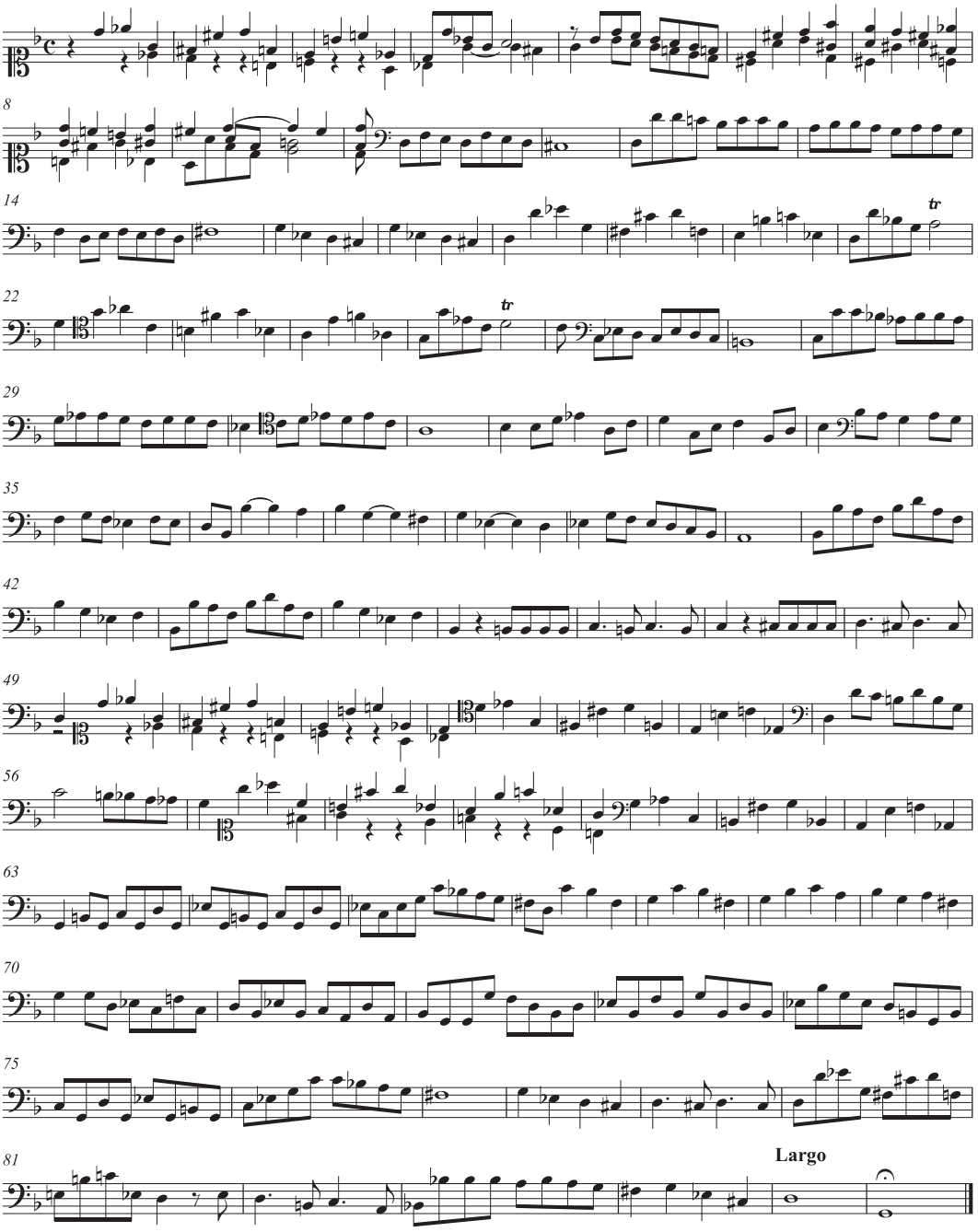
In conclusion, I suggest a general definition: *a partimento is a sketch, written on a single staff, whose main purpose is to be a guide for improvisation of a composition at the keyboard.*

BETWEEN SCHOOL AND ART

As we have seen earlier, the practice of partimenti started off as an alternative form of notation, without an explicit didactic function; in fact, in the oldest manuscripts partimenti and intavolature are often mixed together, sometimes in the same piece. Figure 2.2 shows a page of a toccata by Alessandro Scarlatti from a manuscript in the Naples conservatory library. In a multimovement toccata (written as intavolatura) a section is written as a partimento, accompanied by a notice that reads "arpeggio" and "right hand [accompanies] with the chords indicated in the bass."[25]

Organists used partimenti for their liturgical services, as a shorthand notation for the versetti in the *alternatim* organ mass. Pasquini probably wrote his partimento sonatas for one and

EXAMPLE 2.2 N. 1 from Fedele Fenaroli's Book VI ("Of fugal, imitated, and *ricercati* partimenti"). A very advanced partimento like this has more the appearance of a sketch than of a thorough bass.



two performers for the education of his nephew, Bernardo Felice Ricordati, but only a very skilled student could succeed in dealing with the great difficulties of their realization.

It was only with Alessandro Scarlatti's surviving partimenti collections that an unmistakable pedagogical project is clearly visible. The main source of Scarlatti partimenti, the London manuscript *Principi del sig. re Cavaliere Alesandro Scarlatti*, includes among other things a series

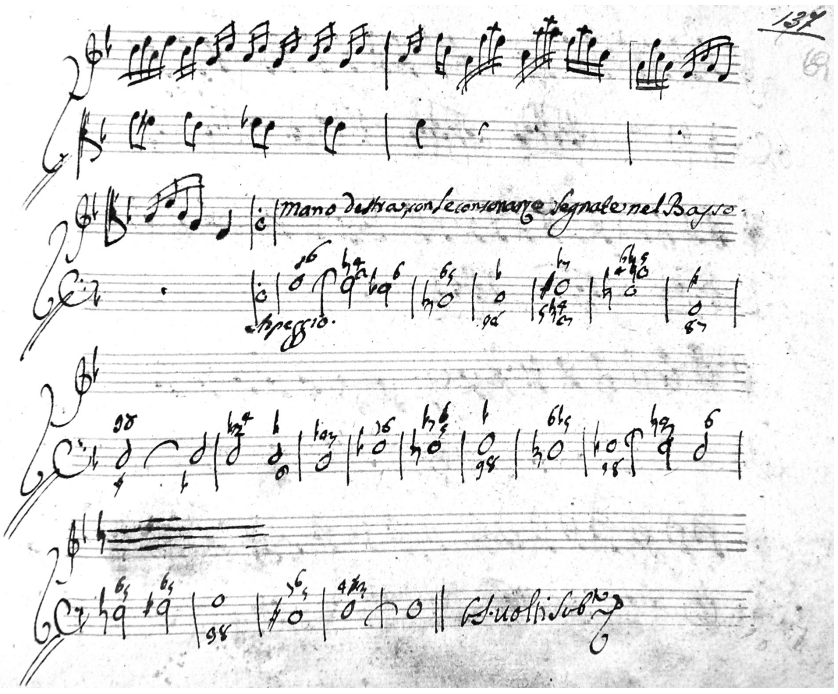


FIGURE 2.2 A partimento-notated movement of a toccata by Alessandro Scarlatti in I-Nc MS 7 (c. 69r). By permission of the library of the conservatory S. Pietro a Majella, Naples.

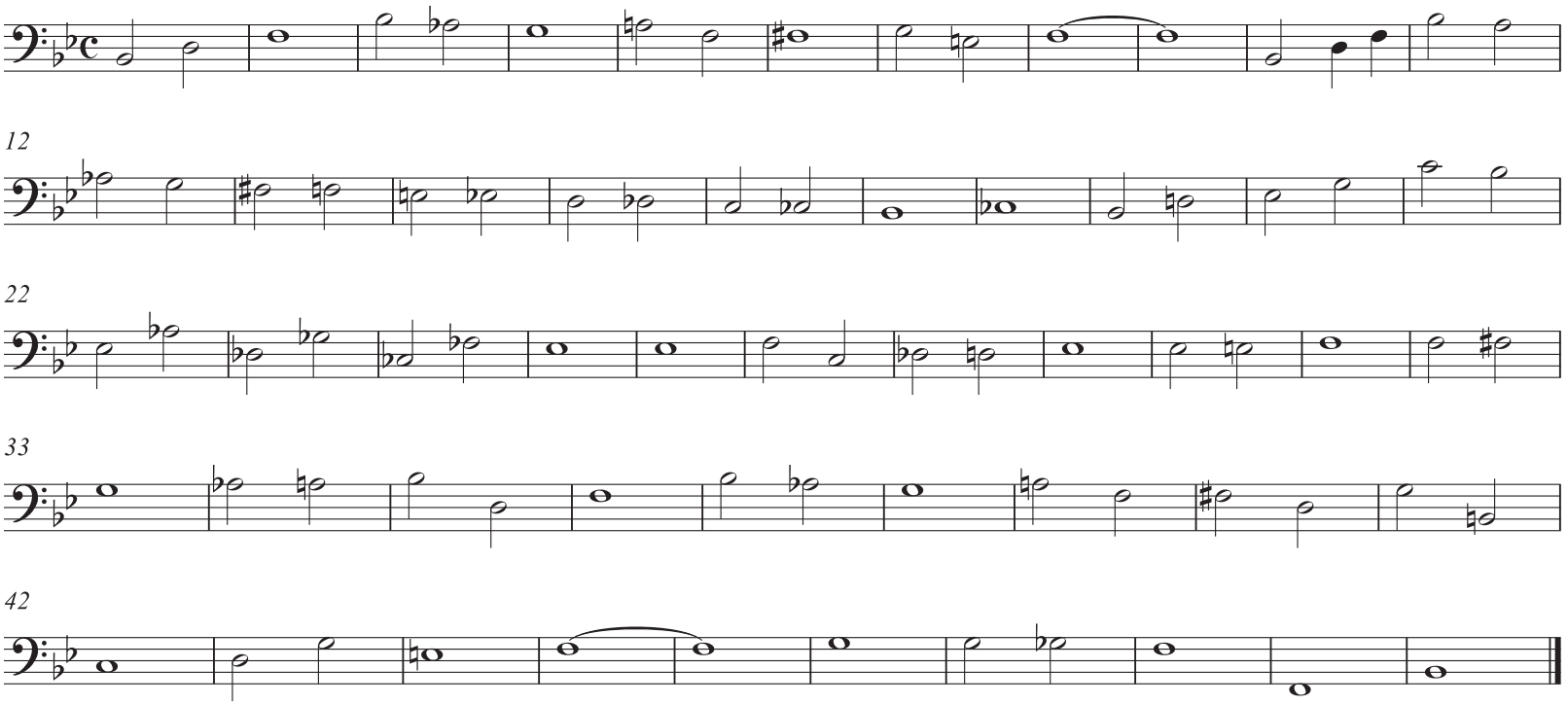
of rules followed by twenty-five partimenti arranged according to the previous rules.[26] In the partimenti collection of the next generation, and particularly in those of Durante, the pedagogical emphasis is clearer, and it becomes prevalent after Fenaroli.

So the question arises as to whether partimenti were considered exercises or real music—in other words, if they had artistic value. In his seminal work *Der Partimentospieler* (1940), Fellerer addressed the question of whether partimento playing should be considered a form of art (*Kunstform*) or a school exercise (*Schulform*): "Grown out of the continuo practice, the partimento developed into a self-standing artistic form of organ and clavier music, particularly in Italy. In 18th century Neapolitan circles partimento playing was a widely appreciated art, up until the point at which, about the end of the century, it started to be considered a mere school exercise and, confined in scholastic stiffness, lost all artistic value."[27]

However, it seems to me that Fellerer's sharp distinction between Kunstform and Schulform misses the point. In doing so, he adopts a nineteenth-century, romantic perspective, namely that every school exercise is only a preparatory work, a sort of gymnastic exercise for fingers and brain, and in no way to be confused with Art, which is inspired by the Spirit. This distinction had no real meaning for the eighteenth-century musician. In the pre-idealistic world there was a continuous interchange between school and art, and the boundaries between the two realms were indistinct. As W. Dean Sutcliffe writes with reference to Domenico Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas, "The assumption that there is a necessary gulf between the two areas, that one either composes proper music or satisfies pedagogical demands, is creatively and historically unrealistic."[28] For example, Handel could recycle one of his partimenti for Princess Anne (school work) as a movement in his concerti grossi (art work).[29] Incidentally, a great part of the music we cherish today as masterpieces—Scarlatti's *Essercizi*, Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, *Klavierübungen*, *Orgelbüchlein*, and cello suites, just to mention a few—originated as school works.

Therefore, it seems to me that a more correct perspective is to consider partimenti, at least in the eighteenth century, as both exercises and works of art, or better still, exercises that may

EXAMPLE 2.3 A bass on "exceptional resolutions" from Cesare De Sanctis, *La polifonia nell'arte moderna* (1887), vol. I (by permission of BMG Ricordi publications).



be developed into works of art. In many collections—such as Durante's *Numerati* series—the partimenti are arranged in order of difficulty. The easiest partimenti, those at the beginning of the series, are mere examples of bass progressions, and their musical interest is virtually nonexistent. Gradually they become more complex, until we realize we are looking at a real piece of music. However, there is no way to tell exactly where the exercises stop and music begins; art and exercise share the same substance. During the nineteenth century, the boundaries between school and art become increasingly difficult to cross, until the two realms become virtually alien.[30] In part, the musical interest of a partimento depends on the talent of the composer, but it is equally the result of the increasing separation between school and art. The partimenti of Durante and Leo generally have the same high musical quality (and the same style) of the nonpedagogical production of their authors.

At the end of the nineteenth century, partimenti became harmony basses, whose only purpose was to instruct students in certain harmonic progressions, with no regard for their artistic quality. One of the most influential Italian harmony treatises of this age is the first volume of *La polifonia nell'arte moderna* (Polyphony in Modern Art, 1887, written by the Roman composer and theorist Cesare De Sanctis (1824–1916). The basses supplied by De Sanctis as exercises in the appendix to his treatise are undoubtedly partimenti; some of them have imitations and even changes of clefs. However, the steady, static rhythmic pace and the absence of any idiomatic texture make them immediately recognizable as typical nineteenth-century harmony basses (Example 2.3).

3

THE PARTIMENTO IN ITALY

The partimento tradition has its roots firmly in musical practice, and more precisely in organ and harpsichord improvisation. The organ tradition developed earlier, growing into the verset and the fugue. A remote antecedent of this kind of partimenti is found in the tradition of alternating choir and organ in the performance of liturgical hymns in plainsong (this practice is also called alternatim). The earliest written organ compositions that were probably used for this purpose are those in the famous Faenza codex (I—FZc 117), a manuscript compiled at the beginning of the fifteenth century.[1] The practice of replacing some parts of the plainsong with the organ was not confined to the hymns, but covered also the Ordinary and the Proper of the Mass. The organ mass practice gave rise to a long-lasting tradition and developed a specific form of music: the organ verset.

THE ANTECEDENTS

However important the written repertoire may have been, it represents only a fraction of the history of the organ mass because, when organists answered the choir, they mostly improvised the versets on the basis of the plainsong. Obviously nothing was left of the fully improvised versets, but at a certain point it become apparent that the familiarity with the plainsong notation and modes was declining, and that many organists needed some help in order to improvise their versets. The Olivetan monk Adriano Banchieri, one of the most interesting (and sometimes bizarre) Italian theorists and composers in the period between the late Renaissance and early Baroque, had the brilliant idea of applying the newly discovered accompanying technique known as basso continuo to the Organ verset, in order to supply the organist with a guide for his improvisation. He expounded his idea in a volume entitled *L'organo suonarino* (the title

might perhaps be translated as "The Playful Organ") a work published for the first time in 1605 and then in revised editions of 1611 and 1622.[2]

Banchieri's versets anticipate some features of the partimenti, but they differ in several significant aspects. There are no real continuo figures, just accidentals; the notated part is rigidly monodic, and the function of the clef changes is only to hint at possible imitation. In addition, as Example 3.1 illustrates (a verset from Banchieri's *L'organo suonarino*), there is no trace of the idiomatic keyboard texture typical of the Neapolitan partimento tradition. All things considered, they can be seen as belonging to a different tradition—the organ mass—that only partially overlapped with the partimento tradition, whose actual beginnings can be traced to several decades after the last edition of the *Organo suonarino* (1622), at the end of the seventeenth century.

THE ROMAN CIRCLE

As far as I know, the earliest collection of partimenti to bear a date is an anonymous manuscript entitled *Regole per accompagnare nel Cimbalo ò vero Organo* dated 1696, now housed at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz.[3] As the title makes clear, it is a series of rules and precepts for thorough bass interspersed with exercises and more demanding pieces in partimento notation, such as organ versets. The origins of the manuscript are unknown, but there is a clue that might lead to Rome: the paper has a watermark with a lily inscribed in a double circle, a watermark that was used in Rome in the late seventeenth century.

The first dated partimenti whose author is known are those of Bernardo Pasquini, represented by three untitled manuscript volumes in the British Library (London) probably written between 1703 and 1708.[4] Pasquini, a native of Lucca (Tuscany), spent most of his artistic life in Rome where he, along with Arcangelo Corelli, reigned as undisputed master of the musical life in the city. In Rome Pasquini had many students coming from all the musical centers of Europe, and he exerted his influence on many of his colleagues and students. Some of them, such as Alessandro Scarlatti and Francesco Durante, were to go on to play a central role in the development of partimento tradition.

Apparently Pasquini (together with the anonymous author of the Berlin manuscript) was the first to recognize the potential, both artistic and pedagogical, of the partimento as a guide to improvisation. Example 3.2 shows Pasquini's *Fuga in basso continuo*. The contrapuntal implications of this difficult fugue are amazingly complex (see the entrance of the subject in inversion in bar 32, signaled by the words "entra la fuga al roverso).

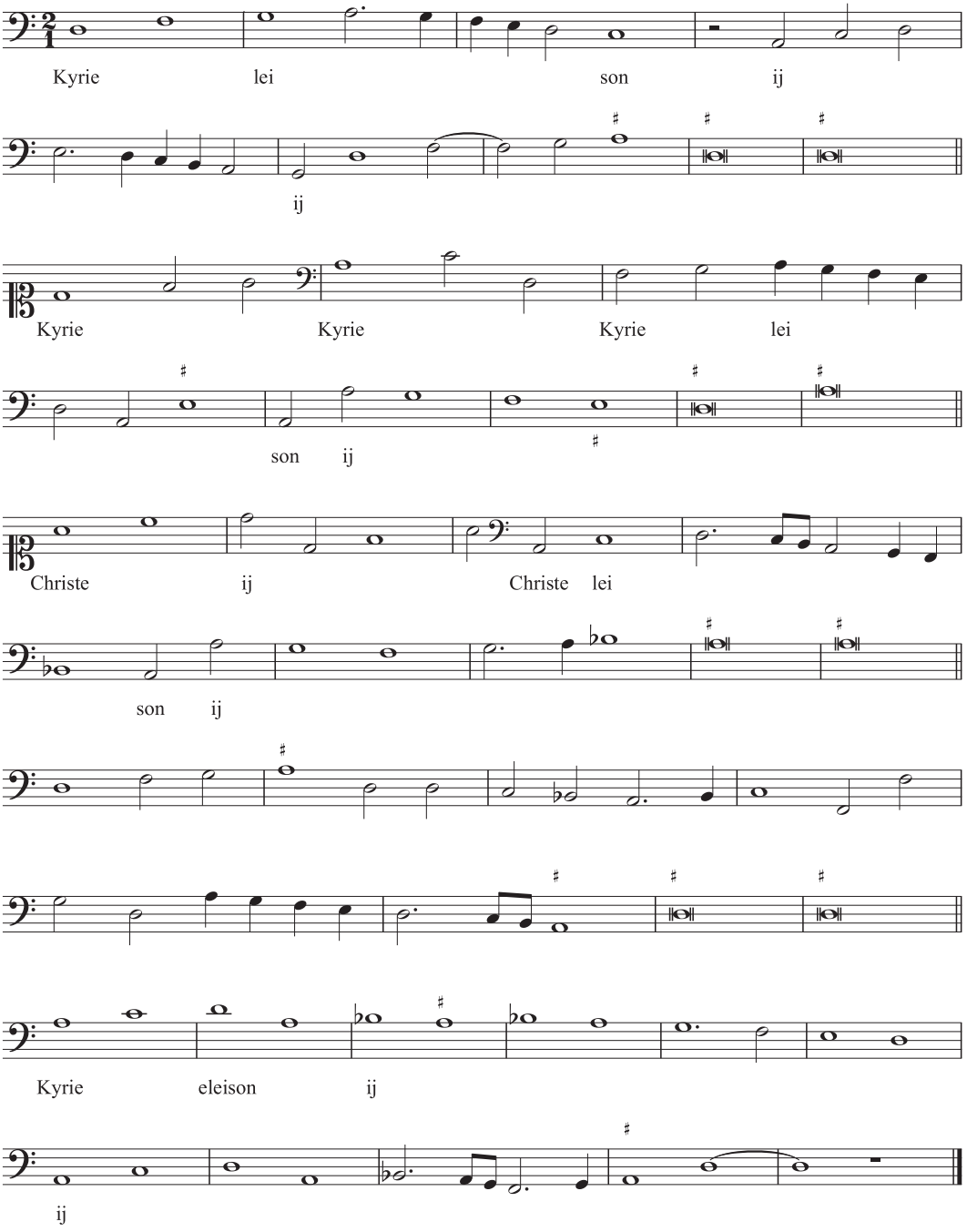
The second major figure in the development of the partimento was Alessandro Scarlatti, who has often been referred to as the founder of the so-called Neapolitan School. The partimento-related output of Scarlatti is relatively small, though high in quality, and consists of some miscellaneous manuscripts, or *zibaldoni*. The most important of these zibaldoni, now at the British Library, is dated 1715, the year in which Scarlatti left Rome for Naples to resume his teaching career.[5] It seems therefore that in the short span of a dozen of years, in Rome, the partimento in its dual form (as a form of art and as a pedagogical device based on improvisation) took its definitive shape, thanks to the fortuitous meeting of two masters, Pasquini and Scarlatti.

During the fifty or so years between 1670 and 1730, Roman musical life knew a period of grandeur. From the splendid Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689) to Queen Maria Casimira of Poland (1641–1716), to great patrons such as the cardinals Benedetto Pamphili (1653–1730) and Pietro Ottoboni (1667–1740), and prince Francesco Maria Ruspoli (1672–1731), an uninterrupted succession of nobles spent immense fortunes patronizing every genre of music and with their liberality made the Eternal city one of the leading musical centers of Europe.[6] Pasquini and Scarlatti, together with Corelli, Gasparini, and (between 1707 and 1710) Handel, were among the leading figures of this extraordinary season, and both were associated with Queen Maria Christina's Royal Academy (established 1656). In this academy—which after

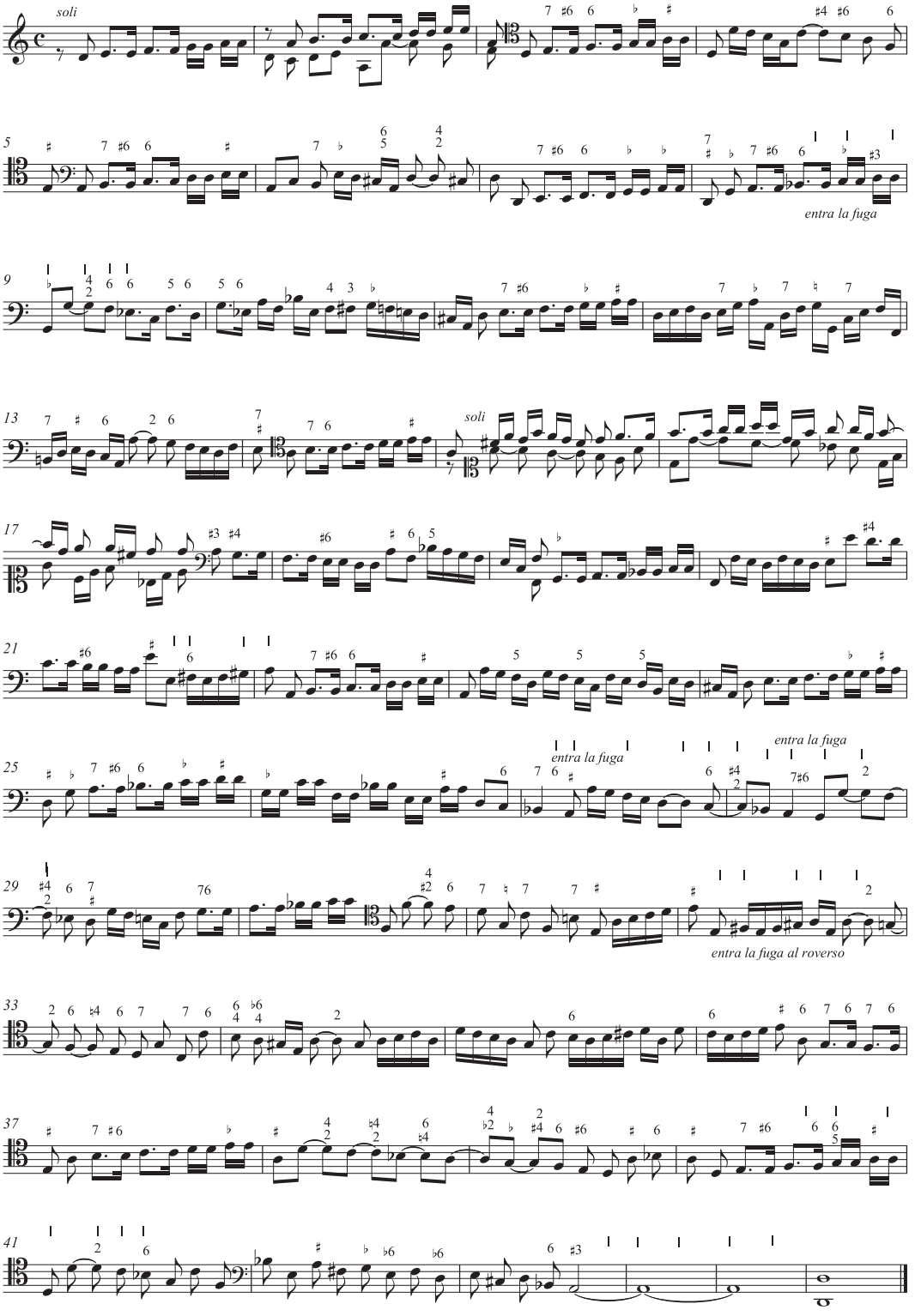
EXAMPLE 3.1 The Kyrie from the *Mass of Our Lady* (Messa della Madonna) from Adriano Banchieri's *L'organo suonarino* (1605). The subtitle reads: "Bass being a most secure guide until the final note through all the versets".

Messa della Madonna

Basso con sicurissima guida fin'alla finale di versetto in versetto.



EXAMPLE 3.2 Bernardo Pasquini, *Fuga in basso continuo*.



Christina's death (in 1689) would become the Arcadian Academy—gathered scholars, men of letters, philosophers, and musicians. As Franco Piperno argues, the atmosphere in the Academy encouraged a rationalistic and speculative approach to music, one that, in my opinion, may have led to the transformation of a perhaps already existing shorthand notation used by some organists into a form of *ars reservata*.[7] Furthermore, the almost certain presence at that time in Rome of Francesco Durante, another great Neapolitan composer and one of the greatest of the partimento masters, should not be overlooked, even though Durante was a student then and probably not in a position to confer with Pasquini as a peer.

As it appears, in early-eighteenth-century Rome the use of partimento was shared by other musicians. One of the other leading figures of the coeval musical life in Rome was Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni (1657–1743), a celebrated composer and theorist and a keen friend of Pasquini. In his Pitoni biography, Girolamo Chiti witnesses Pitoni using a strange kind of notation:

> Several times . . . [Pitoni] jotted down hastily, or many other times he, writing down the sole thorough bass, with the constraint of subject or answer, he drew from it, without making a proper score, the four parts, with or without dissonances, and always in a genuine and proper church style.[8]

Chiti's statement reinforces the hypothesis of a Roman beginning. In fact, he clearly refers to a time when this kind of notation was a novelty; had partimenti been common, Chiti would not have described them with such amazement.

After Pasquini, the partimento seems to have abandoned Rome for Naples, where the four conservatories formed the ideal substrate for its development. In fact, Rome never had conservatories; education of young musicians followed the traditional way of individual lessons from maestri di cappella in the innumerable churches, chapels, and basilicas of the papal city. Yet a partimento tradition survived in Rome, mostly among church organists, in a more or less direct line that connects Pasquini with Pietro Raimondi. One student of Pasquini was Tommaso Bernardo Gaffi, who has left us a manuscript treatise on accompaniment, *Regole per sonare su la parte*.[9] Gaffi taught Andrea Basili, author of an Italian counterpart of the *Well Tempered Clavier*, the *Musica Universale Armonico—Pratica* (composed about 1730 but published in 1776; the title page is shown as Figure 3.1).[10]

Basili's *Musica Universale* is composed of two series of twelve exercises consisting each in a scale, a prelude, a fugue, and an intavolatura in free style. The first series moves chromatically through the minor, the second through the major keys (the fugue in C minor is shown in Example 3.3). Most of the pieces are written as partimenti; therefore this work can be considered as the first partimento collection ever published.

Another student of Gaffi was Girolamo Chiti, a keen theorist and friend of Padre Martini who left *Risposte a una messa cantata*, a series of eighty organ versets in partimento.[11] The Roman Raimondo Lorenzini won in 1751 a competition for the position of organist at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, which he held for more than fifty years. He also wrote collections of partimenti.[12] A partimenti collection of one of Lorenzini's competitors, Gaetano Franzaroli, exists in the Santini collection.[13] Giuseppe Jannacconi studied with the teacher of Muzio Clementi, Gaetano Carpani, and left some manuscripts of regole for the accompaniment, with partimenti.[14] Eventually, the Roman tradition merged with the Neapolitan mainstream in the works of Pietro Raimondi.

NORTHERN ITALY

Other musical centers in Northern Italy developed their own partimento traditions, to a certain extent independently from the Neapolitan mainstream. Outside Naples the teaching of composition was undertaken individually, generally by a maestro di cappella in an important chapel or church (the case of Venice will be discussed later). The surviving non-Neapolitan partimenti collections point to two principal centers: Bologna and the northeastern area of Venice and Padua.

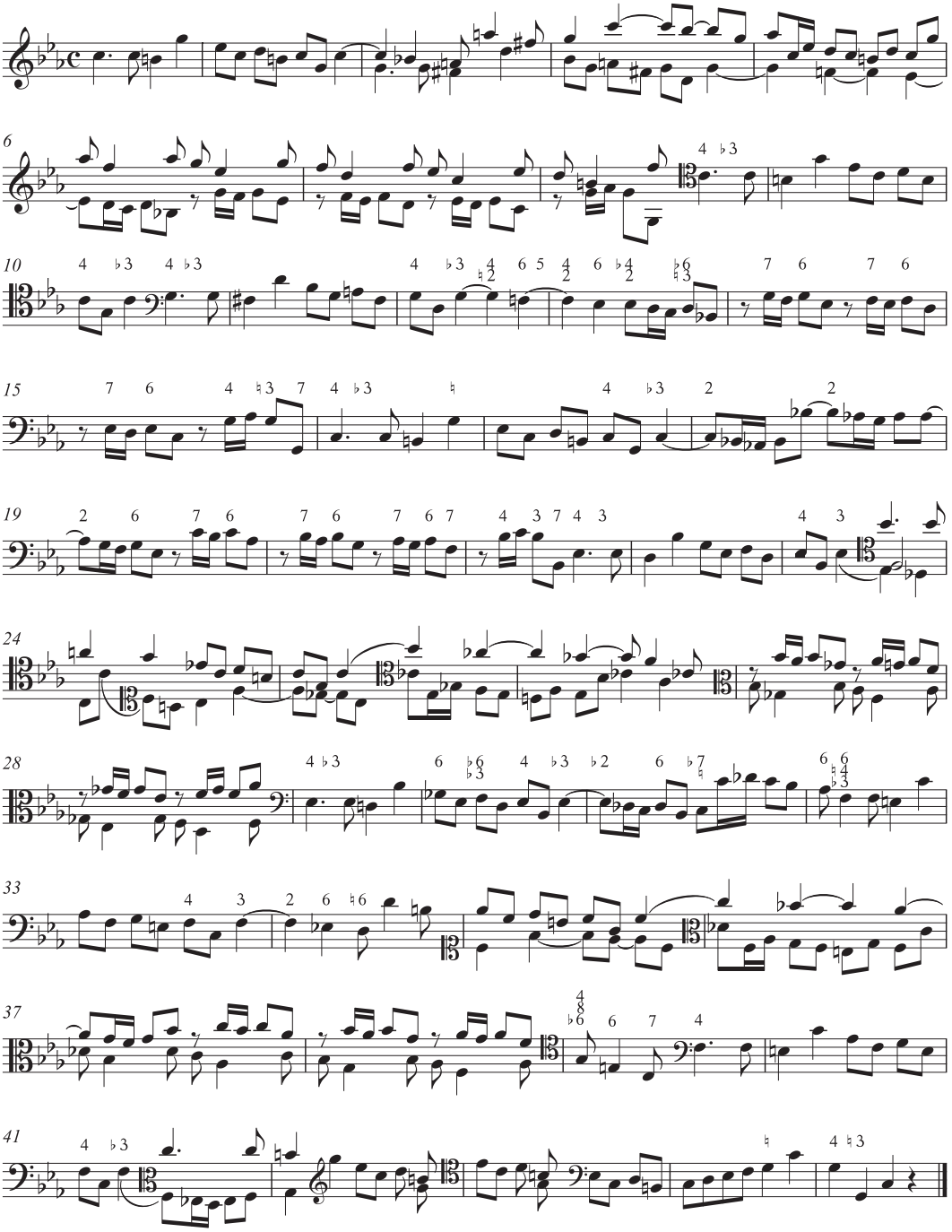
FIGURE 3.1 Andrea Basili, *Musica Universale Armonico-Pratica* (Venice, 1776): title page. By permission of the library of the conservatory S. Pietro a Majella, Naples.

The celebrated Bolognese theorist and pedagogue Padre Martini was more interested in counterpoint than in partimento. His few surviving manuscript treatises in accompaniment and thorough bass show the strong influence of French thought, and in particular that of Rameau. In the three Bolognese manuscript treatises in accompaniment, partimenti are virtually absent, and verbal explanations prevail.[15] A valuable partimenti collection by Padre Martini is preserved in a manuscript in the Modena Estense library under the title *Intero studio di Partimenti del Sig. P. Martini Conventuale*. It consists of a treatise on accompaniment followed by a series of partimenti ordered systematically by the ascending circle of the fifths.[16]

A student of Padre Martini, Padre Stanislao Mattei, held perhaps the most celebrated Italian composition school outside Naples; among his students were Rossini, Donizetti, and Domenico Puccini, grandfather of Giacomo. All of Mattei's output remains in manuscript, except for his didactic works, which when published posthumously gained a tremendous reputation in Italy. Mattei was, in fact, the only non-Neapolitan author whose partimenti were constantly used in Naples; there are several copies of Mattei's partimenti in the library of San Pietro a Majella and, significantly, some manuscript realizations of them.

Mattei's partimenti are included in the first part of his *Pratica d'accompagnamento sopra bassi numerati, e contrappunti a più voci sulla scala maggiore a minore* (Practice of accompaniment on figured basses, and counterpoints in several voices on the major and minor scale), first published in Bologna in 1825.[17] It is a large collection of partimenti, very accurately figured, ordered by keys (like those of his teacher Martini), and each preceded by a *cadenza* (actually a *cadenza lunga* or "long cadence," in modern terminology a cadential progression more or less four bars long). The second part of this work consists of examples of counterpoint making use of the ascending and descending scale instead of a cantus firmus (this was a common practice in Italy,

EXAMPLE 3.3 Andrea Basili, fugue in C minor from *Musica Universale Armonico-Pratica* (Venice: 1776).



shared also by the Neapolitans). Another influential work by Mattei is a series of figured basses realized for string quartet, published posthumously in Milan in 1850.[18] However, a conservative musician, Mattei had apparently a certain feeling for "remote" keys such as B-flat minor; the partimento in this key (of which Example 3.4 shows the first thirty-four bars) displays idiomatic, romantic piano writing, especially in bars 17–19.