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## **Moving early music: Improvisation and the work-concept in seventeenth-century French keyboard performance**

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### **Citation**

Edwards, M. T. C. (2021, January 7). *Moving early music: Improvisation and the work-concept in seventeenth-century French keyboard performance*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138943>

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Cover Page



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**Issue Date:** 2021-01-07

## Chapter Three: Historical Improvisation in Theory and Practice

Historical improvisation, it seems, is having a moment. Music theorist Thomas Christensen (2017) argues as much in his introductory essay to *Studies in Historical Improvisation*, in which he situates this area of study within the wider field of improvisation studies, whose efforts and outcomes have fortuitously coalesced around our own historical moment. We can now understand and appreciate how the reconstruction of earlier musical practices falls within the same sphere of activities as the music-theoretical and anthropological analysis of jazz, as well as the ethnomusicological study of world music. Christensen quite rightly argues that improvisation's current moment has also been sustained by the ongoing musicological and philosophical critique of the work-concept, both opening the door for the study of practices divorced from the musical score, as well as allowing for the (immensely problematic) admittance of these same practices into the work-concept's hallowed halls. In short, both historically and globally, the prevalence of unwritten, oral musical practices eclipses that of literate ones.<sup>1</sup> It is only now that the scales of scholarship seem to be tipping.

In detailing the “moment,” Christensen illustrates how the study of historical improvisation naturally highlights commonalities between diverse improvisational practices (like a reliance on pre-learned gambits and memorized material, for example). But, perhaps more importantly for my own study, he also reminds us how divergent historical practices, even while ultimately all resulting in improvised music, can also be founded in divergent theoretical and pedagogical paradigms. I have

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<sup>1</sup> Oral or unwritten music (as discussed in the previous chapter) is not necessarily the same thing as improvised music. After all, some improvisational practices—including partimento, discussed later in this chapter—may use or rely upon notation. Nevertheless, even if unwritten music is entirely “composed” in the mind, an absence of notation naturally encourages the use of improvisational techniques in the compositional process.

taken this caution to heart for my own project of reconstructing improvisational practices of seventeenth-century French harpsichord music, both general and specific (namely, the improvisational style of Chambonnières). Because of a relative paucity of historical sources related to keyboard improvisation in France, particularly in the first half of the seventeenth century, it remains an overwhelming temptation to adapt well-documented, successful approaches to conceptualizing historical practices of keyboard improvisation—like Robert Gjerdingen’s galant schemata and Giorgio Sanguinetti’s approach to *partimento*, for example—to the particular problems of my chosen repertoire. This risks, however, eroding some of the very differences I am interested in preserving! Given that I am pursuing the problems and methods of historically-informed performance to their logical conclusion in historical improvisation, I must at all times remain sensitive to the historically and culturally specific.<sup>2</sup> What makes seventeenth-century French improvisational practice different from eighteenth-century Neapolitan practice? And how is Chambonnières’s practice different from that of his contemporaries and successors?

But first, what is improvisation? Philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson (2003), after first dismissing some of the “commonsense” definitions, and then after enumerating a long list of subtypes of improvisation, finally arrives at some common threads:

... the difference between the various forms of improvisation is far more quantitative than qualitative. Each instance [subtype] involves a kind of reworking of something that already exists, so the differences concern the ways and the degrees to which this reworking takes place. Interestingly enough, none of these instances qualifies as ‘improvisation’ in the sense we cited earlier (‘something created on the spur of the moment out of nothing’). (Benson 2003, 30)

For example, one of Benson’s subtypes, improvisation<sub>7</sub>, encompasses a number of activities we typically understand as improvisational in both Baroque music and jazz, involving “changing the

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Haynes writes compellingly about how the ideals of HIP should lead naturally to historically-informed performers learning to compose and improvise in historical styles (2007, 203-14).

melody line and/or altering the chords” (2003, 28). Benson’s improvisation<sub>1</sub>, on the other hand, which consists in the performer’s introduction of musical detail like timing and dynamic, is usually seen not as a matter of improvisation, but of interpretation. Nevertheless, as Benson argues persuasively, this kind of activity also constitutes a kind of improvisation. After all, the player’s performance is itself a “reworking” of an inherently incomplete score. Benson’s notion of reworking thus allows us to recognize commonalities shared between seemingly dissimilar practices and operating at different scales of musical activity.

Emphasizing the uniqueness of each improvisational act, Marcel Cobussen notes that “it is not a good idea to write about improvisation in general, as it encompasses too many and too diverse practices” (2017, 14). Indeed, Cobussen instead adopts the approach of “radical empiricism” as a corrective against over-generalization. Radical empiricism thus entails focusing “on particular and individual cases . . . not examples subsumable under a more general category” (2017, 14). Both of these approaches—Benson’s emphasis on the commonalities shared by different forms of improvisation, and Cobussen’s emphasis on their differences—help in reconciling the individual improvisational act with its place in a larger web of improvised practices. Within historical improvisation, we see this balance play out in Gjerdingen (2007) and Sanguinetti’s (2012) studies of eighteenth-century Neapolitan conservatories, in which they demonstrate how an extremely localized practice of composition and improvisation in Naples went on to influence musical style across Europe for more than a century. With respect to my own practice of historical improvisation, the question becomes one of confronting my contemporary musical personality with appropriate historical evidence. My improvisational practice will of course be distinct from the historical practices that inspired me; but as an historically-informed performer, it is through engagement with historical practices that I create the possibility of actively understanding and re-shaping my own. The actual “correctness” of the result is not of any great importance. If I intend to play like

Chambonnières, there are few who can really invalidate the effort, save perhaps for the “Early Music Police,” as the more vociferous factions of HIP-as-tradition’s orthodoxy are sometimes called (Shull 2006, 90). Instead, the benchmark for success is the degree to which I effect artistic growth and development. By stepping outside of myself (and, imaginatively, my own time and place), I can reconsider and recombine the various facets of my musical personality to create something new.

How might the *clavecinistes* of seventeenth-century France have learned to improvise? And, given that historical improvisation serves as my primary methodological tool for teasing out some of the latent contradictions and tensions in the work-concept, how should *I* learn to improvise? In what follows, I will begin by sketching out an approach to historically-informed improvisation grounded in two of the best-documented approaches to date, namely schemata and *partimenti*.<sup>3</sup> As formulated by Gjerdingen and others, schemata function both as voice-leading frameworks and as conceptual categories.<sup>4</sup> Relying on the work of Folker Froebe, Johannes Menke, Ludwig Holtmeier and others, I will first explore the extent to which the schema functions (or can function) in a stylistically agnostic way as a scaffolding for tonal music; or whether, in contrast to other concepts like the *Satzmodell*, and in sympathy with *topos*, it remains an historically and culturally specific construct. Regardless of whether they are viewed as models for musical communication or merely for composition, a robust collection of schemata or *Satzmodelle* will form an essential part of any historically-informed improviser’s basic toolkit.

For Gjerdingen and Sanguinetti, the primary means by which galant apprentices internalized these schemata was the *partimento*, an instructional (un)figured bass that encapsulated a musical composition while training the student’s mind, ears, and hands to produce an almost automatic

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<sup>3</sup> Within historical improvisation studies, these two concepts have received the greatest share of critical attention in the English-speaking world over the last decade. They have also been the focus of quasi-empirical studies on the effectiveness of historically-inspired pedagogical approaches in improvisation (Rabinovitch and Slominski 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The best exposition of schema theory is Gjerdingen’s *Music in the Galant Style* (2007).

response to a musical stimulus.<sup>5</sup> Partimento practice enabled young musicians to learn a variety of compositional and improvisational skills at once, including diminution, counterpoint, harmony, and even schematic construction of a bassline. I will, therefore, examine the pedagogical principles underlying the practice of partimento, in hopes that I can eventually extend this culturally-specific practice to inform musical improvisation in seventeenth-century France.

In order to learn how to adapt these methods, I will review a comprehensive selection of recent studies of historical improvisation, as well as the pedagogical applications of this research. All of these approaches are premised on a thorough engagement with a reliable conceptual and practical toolkit: schemata and *Satzmodelle* for the creation of improvised musical structure, diminution practice for the creation of a musical surface, and thoroughbass as a pedagogical tool for learning improvisational technique. Each of these sources develops an idiosyncratic approach to historical improvisation and its pedagogy, guided by the example of specific primary sources and historical repertoires. Following the suggestion of the *Compendium Improvisation* (Schwenkreis 2018), then, I will seek to develop an approach tailored to my own chosen improvisational style, namely the style of the seventeenth-century *clavecinistes*, and more particularly, the style of Chambonnières.

To that end, I will next review some of the primary sources dealing with improvisation in seventeenth-century France. Compared to the situation in Italy and Germany, we are left with a relative dearth of detailed accounts of improvisational technique and pedagogy during the French Baroque. To that end, I will first discuss the extent to which French thoroughbass and accompaniment treatises can speak to improvisational technique, as well as how the practice of accompaniment might have been linked to counterpoint and composition. Finally, I will discuss the recent dissertation of Stephen Grazzini (2014) on the improvisation of *préludes non mesurés*. As one

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to Gjerdingen's *Music in the Galant Style*, the standard reference for Neapolitan partimento practice is Giorgio Sanguinetti's *The Art of Partimento* (2012).

of the only large studies in recent years to deal with improvisational practice at the keyboard during the French Baroque, I will make a careful appraisal of some of its methods and claims, and assess the extent to which I can extend its approach for my own improvisational practice. In sum, I will synthesize a variety of contemporary approaches to the pedagogy of historical improvisation with the aim of adapting their suggestions to the particulars of my own radical empiricism, working towards a style at once familiar and recognizable, yet entirely unique.

### **Schema and Satzmodell**

What is a schema? In Gjerdingen's galant orientation, a schema is part of "a particular repertory of stock musical phrases employed in conventional sequences" (2007, 6). In his *Music in the Galant Style*, Gjerdingen—a scholar of music theory and music cognition—proceeds to define the style in terms of these schemata, ultimately leading us not just to an understanding of how composers were able to work with such great speed and facility, but to how this music was heard and appreciated in its own time. His archeological project then is designed "to provide an option for the modern listener, a method for developing an historically-informed mode of listening to galant music" (Gjerdingen 2007, 19). Elsewhere, Gjerdingen and fellow music theorist Janet Bourne have drawn attention to similarities between the *constructions* (that is, the pairing of linguistic form with communicative function) of construction grammar and the *schemata* of various kinds of music, both learned through periods of apprenticeship:

An orphan at one of the eighteenth-century conservatories in Naples, the prodigy Henri Fissot at the Paris Conservatory in the 1850s, and the young Rachmaninoff at the Moscow Conservatory in the 1890s all learned the art of composition through the age-old practice of child apprenticeship. Apprenticeship meant a long-term and focused internalization of the preferred productions of adult role-models or masters. In linguistics many scholars call those utterances 'constructions,' and in music many scholars have begun to call them 'schemas.' (Gjerdingen and Bourne 2015, "Introduction")

They continue with the comparison, linking the schema's form and function with the expression of meaning:



A working definition of a construction in both language and music might thus be ‘an entity with a conventionalized form, one that is generally paired with a particular meaning or function associated with a common situation in human communication.’ In music this could mean a marked chord or progression, a conventional articulation like the half cadence, or the many schemata developed for phrases and sequences. Because music is rarely directly denotative, the notion of communicative function must be broad enough to include the evocation of mood, the suggestion of affect, and the whole range of nonverbal meanings treated in semiotics and embodied cognition. (Gjerdingen and Bourne 2015, “Introduction”)

In a musical context, a schema is a conceptual category for a variety of musical utterances, marked by some “conventionalized form” and corresponding to a particular “communicative function.” In linking form and function, schemata thus pair particular usages of voice leading, harmony, and counterpoint (syntax) with particular kinds of musical expression and meaning (semantics). By their invocation of communication, Gjerdingen and Bourne also call to mind the notion of *topics*, first identified and defined by musicologist Leonard Ratner as “subjects for musical discourse” divided into “types” and “styles” (Ratner 1980, 9). Although the concept of topic has expanded considerably in recent years to serve as an umbrella term for all kinds of semantic musical functions, they should still be distinguished here from schemata, which function more on the level of musical syntax than style or genre.<sup>6</sup>

Gjerdingen enumerates a wide variety of schemata used within the galant style, each fulfilling a particular kind of function: for example, the *Romanesca* as an opening gambit, the *Prinner* as the standard riposte, and the various types of *Clausula* as closing move options.<sup>7</sup> The “conventionalized

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<sup>6</sup>To that same end, music theorist Danuta Mirka defines topics as “musical styles and genres taken out of their proper context and used in another one” (2014, 2).

<sup>7</sup>In some important ways, these schemata might remind us of music theorist William Caplin’s formal functions used for the analysis of Classical form. Both formal functions and schemata imply a notion of musical temporality, predicated on “our ability to perceive that something is beginning, that we are in the middle of something, and that something has ended” (Caplin 2010, 24). The segmentation of musical time into discrete schemata (opening gambit, riposte, and closing move) is roughly analogous to Caplin’s segmentation of the Classical sentence theme type, consisting of presentation, continuation, and cadential formal functions.

While some of Gjerdingen’s names for schemata are drawn from traditional usage (like the *Romanesca* and the various *Clausulae*, for example), others are entirely invented or named in honor of particular theorists. The *Prinner*, for example, is named after the seventeenth-century Austrian theorist Johann Jacob Prinner. This schema’s bassline moves stepwise

form” of the schema consists of a treble-bass pair, notated using scale degrees and inflected by weak and strong beats. In the text, Gjerdingen’s representation of the category takes the form of a small diagram, including all the salient details of the category but excluding any constraints of meter, key, or texture. The Romanesca, for example, is shown in Figure 3.1. In fact, this diagram represents only one possible variant of the Romanesca schema, namely the one most used by galant composers. Gjerdingen locates the compositional origin of the schema in the search for a solution to a problem: how does one add a third voice to two voices moving in parallel thirds? The seventeenth-century solution uses a leaping bass below the parallel thirds, forming a sequence of 5/3 chords: Johann Pachelbel, for example, uses this solution in his famous canon (Figure 3.2). The Classical solution, on the other hand, adds a treble voice, creating a stepwise bass line (Figure 3.3). In other words, the galant solution (Figure 3.4) combines the beginning of the Classical solution with a modified ending of the seventeenth-century solution. The result is what Gjerdingen identifies as the galant Romanesca: a pattern composed, played, and appreciated ubiquitously during the eighteenth century.

The process by which Gjerdingen developed his catalogue of schemata seems to have involved the happy confluence of corpus studies: in his research, Gjerdingen discovered remarkable similarities between the stock phrases of galant music and the bass lines of partimenti (more on these later). The partimenti by which Neapolitan apprentices learned their craft are filled with exactly the same sort of musical patterns that students subsequently used in their own compositions. Partimenti were sometimes accompanied by a short written text—or, more often, a *maestro*’s oral instruction—explaining the rules (*regole*) and standard movements (*movimenti*, essentially sequential bass patterns) that would be encountered in the students’ exercises. Thus, the *movimenti* and *regole* of

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from scale degree 4 down to scale degree 1, with the treble trailing in parallel thirds. For more details, see Gjerdingen (2007, 45-60).

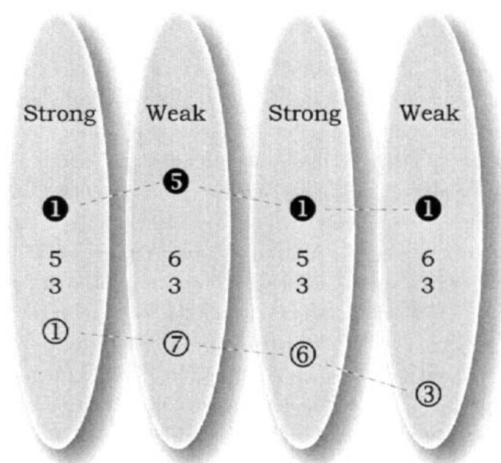


Figure 3.1. The Romanesca Schema from *Music in the Galant Style* (Gjerdingen 2007, 454)



Figure 3.2. The “Leaping” Romanesca



Figure 3.3. The “Stepwise” Romanesca



Figure 3.4. The “Galant” Romanesca

partimento theory often reappear (sometimes slightly altered) in Gjerdingen's galant schemata. Gjerdingen (2007, 30) cites Cimarosa's *zibaldone*, or student notebook, which contains a clear example of the seventeenth-century Romanesca. Indeed, the Romanesca as a schema (at least in its seventeenth-century version) is really no more than the rule "Falling by Fourths and Rising by Step" melded with the rule of the "Descending 5-6" (Sanguinetti 2012, 138). It seems, therefore, that the galant composer's education within the Neapolitan conservatories inculcated the perfect union of musical syntax (via *regole* and *movimenti*), style (via the strategic placement and disposition of schemata in partimenti and solfeggi), and fluency (through the playing of partimento at the keyboard). In short, galant composers had their compositional tools directly at their fingertips: they were, in fact, taught to be improvisers, whether with their pens or with their instruments.<sup>8</sup>

Gjerdingen is ultimately interested in schemata not just for their compositional expediency, but also for their capacity to convey meaning. The Romanesca ultimately determines its meaning within a vast syntactic-semantic web of possible musical utterances. Gjerdingen, helpfully, provides such a web (see Figure 3.5), in which the coloring of squares indicates how likely it is that one schema might follow another.<sup>9</sup> Part of how a given schema acquires and expresses meaning is in its capacity to arouse (and thwart!) our expectations. Thus, within the communicative web of galant music, the Romanesca acquires domain-specific meaning by virtue of its discursive relationship to, say, the Prinner. Part of what defines the Romanesca in a particular style, then, is our expectation that it might lead to a Prinner, and composers, working within the same communicative web, can move to satisfy or thwart that expectation. Quite apart from considerations of voice leading and musical

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<sup>8</sup> Although most partimento scholarship has focused on partimento's fostering of improvisation at the keyboard, the partimento could also be used as the basis for a *disposizione*, a written-out realization. Peter van Tour (2015), in particular, has demonstrated the importance of these compositional drafting exercises for the teaching of counterpoint in Neapolitan conservatories.

<sup>9</sup> Heavily-shaded squares indicate high occurrence, lightly-shaded ones show lower occurrence, and white squares indicate no occurrence whatsoever, as observed in the corpus of pieces presented in Gjerdingen (2007).

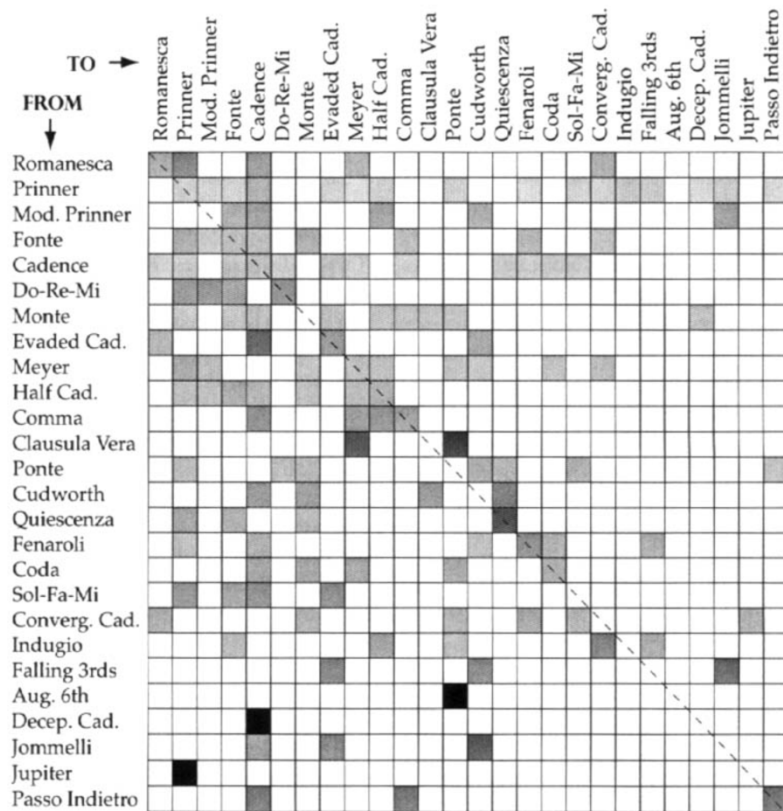


Figure 3.5. A Probability Graph from *Music in the Galant Style* (Gjerdingen 2007, 372).

syntax, schemata thus relate to each other in ways that might seem arbitrary, but in fact follow established conventions of usage passed on from master to pupil. Because there is a high probability of a Romanesca leading to a Prinner, the Romanesca thus helps define the Prinner. At the same time, because there is very little probability of a Prinner leading to a Romanesca, the Prinner also defines the Romanesca. The two schemata thus define each other recursively. Moreover, it stands to reason that each schema within the system partly defines all the others: the Fonte<sup>10</sup> and Romanesca, for example, partly define each other by their non-relatedness. Put another way, with all of these interrelationships in force, we might imagine that artificially changing the relationship between two schemata would have cascading consequences for the relationships between other schemata as well.

<sup>10</sup> Another schema, characterized by its sequencing of a given musical pattern down a step.

The reason I raise this point is that while we should admire the vast archeological project undertaken by Gjerdingen, and while we can certainly appreciate its applicability to large swathes of Italian-influenced repertoire, we have every reason to be cautious when applying Gjerdingen's results to other periods and styles. A Romanesca in the Italian galant style might mean something entirely different from a Romanesca in seventeenth-century France.

Contemporaneous with the largely Anglo-American inquiry into schema theory, German-speaking music theorists have worked with the related concept of the *Satzmodell* (Sprick 2014). *Satzmodelle* are understood here to be “compositional types and formulas” as formulated by Carl Dahlhaus (1990, 94), who attempted to explicate the intervallic organization of music prior to the eighteenth century and explore how these compositional approaches interacted with the new chordal approach advocated by Rameau and his successors. The *Satzmodell*, like the schema, is a model for understanding compositional technique. It is, most often, a polyphonic, contrapuntal voice-leading framework, shorn of any textural, stylistic, or idiomatic detail, and most often represented, as Gjerdingen attempted to avoid, “in the key of C major, with a 4/4 meter” (2007, 453). Figure 3.6, for example, shows a typical *Satzmodell* from Johannes Menke's (2009) collection. Whatever generality such *Satzmodelle* may lack in their representational form is more than compensated by their wide applicability to diverse forms of repertoire, “open to far-reaching transformation and combination” (Sprick 2014, 102).



Figure 3.6. A 7-6 suspension *Satzmodell* (Menke 2009, 17)

The origin of most of these *Satzmodelle* can be pinpointed in the practice of Renaissance *contrapunto alla mente* (literally “counterpoint in the mind”, or improvised vocal counterpoint). *Contrapunto alla mente*, sacrificing the variety demanded by written counterpoint, relied on the repetition of sequential, canonic models for its practicality and reliability, and singers made use of these Renaissance *Satzmodelle* with diverse formal and compositional constraints, both with and without a cantus firmus.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps inevitably, these same compositional models turn up in Renaissance instrumental improvisation practice: Sancta Maria’s compendious *Art of Playing the Fantasia* (1565) relies on these sequential models not only for the improvisation of imitative textures at the keyboard but also for the homophonic technique of “playing in consonances” (Roig-Francolí 1995).

More remarkably, Folker Froebe (2007) has demonstrated convincingly how the pedagogical conceits of these practices formed the lasting basis for baroque *Satzmodelle*. Froebe shows how the apparent novelty of the *seconda prattica* represented by Monteverdi actually relies on its appropriation of the *prima prattica*’s improvisational practice. Moreover, Froebe highlights the continuing importance of these sequential models throughout the seventeenth century, with particular importance placed on the improvisation manual of Spiridione (the *Nova Instructio* of 1670), Georg Muffat’s continuo treatise *Regulae Conventuum Partiturae* (1699), and Andreas Werckmeister’s *Harmonologia Musica* (1702).<sup>12</sup> Building on this work, Menke (2009) has synthesized and systematized these various sources into one coherent set of *Satzmodelle* of broad applicability during the seventeenth century, in which he pinpoints a small subset of models that became significant for eighteenth-century practice. A similar sort of systematisation occurs in Menke, Ludwig Holtmeier,

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<sup>11</sup> Music theorist Peter Schubert has been especially instrumental in explicating these techniques and how they relate to contemporaneous compositional practices. See, for example his chapter “Counterpoint Pedagogy in the Renaissance,” in Schubert (2002).

<sup>12</sup> The last of these received a particularly useful exegesis by Dodds (2006).

and Felix Diergarten's (2008) *Vademecum* that accompanies their edition of Paisiello's partimenti, summarizing many of the *regole* and *movimenti* covered by Sanguinetti in great detail. Thus, Renaissance *contrapunto alla mente* has led us back to where we started, namely in the world of Neapolitan partimento and its accompanying galant schemata.

The concepts of *Satzmodell* and schema are intimately linked, both simplifying the detail and richness of sounding music to reveal a more basic underlying framework of musical structure. Indeed, both models often lend themselves toward uncovering commonalities shared among diverse composers, genres, and time periods. But while the *Satzmodell* mostly remains agnostic towards the complexities of reception, the schema at least implies something of a code of musical conduct shared by composer and listener, enabling the communication of ideas through a common language. More recently, Gjerdingen has drawn a distinction between *movimenti*—sequential patterns that he describes in terms similar to *Satzmodelle* as “cues to the improvisation and composition of eighteenth-century music”—and schemata, which are “distillations of the *experience* of eighteenth-century musical phrases” (Gjerdingen 2020, 335). Indeed, this is part of the reason that Gjerdingen prefers representing his schemata via scale-degree diagrams rather than through musical notation: it makes for a better approximation of a given schema's mental representation. We can consider these two theoretical models, then, to occupy points on a broader continuum of musical practice, ranging from an emphasis on the know-how of compositional technique (*Satzmodell*) to an emphasis on the know-how (via syntax and semantics) of musical communication (schema). As points along this continuum, we could also add Michael Callahan's “*elaboratio* frameworks” and Stephen Grazzini's “thoroughbass formulas,” discussed below, each with its own peculiar blend of representation and emphasis. For my own part, I am content to refer to the “stock patterns” of seventeenth-century French keyboard music as schemata, bracketing temporarily the issues of reception and representation that accompany the term. Later, in Chapter Five, when I have developed



improvisational skill of my own, I will return more fully to these complex issues of musical communication.

## Partimento

As discussed above, the study of *partimenti* was the primary means by which galant composers internalized their repertoire of schemata and *Satzmodelle*.<sup>13</sup> To use a linguistic metaphor, if a lifetime of listening to galant music created a *passive* understanding of the music's vocabulary, then the playing of *partimenti* helped composers make this same vocabulary *active*. *Partimenti* achieved this feat through the deliberate pairing of stimulus and response. Rather than adopting the top-down, theory-driven pedagogical approach of Rameau and his followers, the conservatories of Naples instead led students to an experiential understanding of harmony, counterpoint, and composition, using an unfigured bass as the primary stimulus and demanding an appropriate compositional response from the student.<sup>14</sup> In order to successfully realize a *partimento*, the student would need to parse the unfigured bass into recognizable patterns (the "Rule of the Octave" (RO), cadences, *movimenti*, etc.) and harmonize it appropriately.<sup>15</sup> They would then need to recognize compositional devices inherent in the bass (like the opportunity for imitation), and provide an appropriate texture for their right hand, including appropriate diminutions and motivic material suggested in the bass line. Thus, the unfigured bass of the *partimento* encapsulated a fully-formed composition, albeit one whose details were left to the performer to discover or invent.

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<sup>13</sup> Although most research on *partimento* has focused on the Neapolitan conservatories, the *partimento* tradition has roots leading back throughout the seventeenth century, ranging from Banchieri's pseudo-*partimenti* in *L'Organo Suonarino* (1622) to the figured bass versets and fugues of Pasquini (2006).

<sup>14</sup> For more on the differences between the Italian tradition of *partimento* and Rameau's efforts at systematization, see Holtmeier 2007. This is, of course, something of a generalization since, as Holtmeier also acknowledges, "Rameau's complex operations still have a recognizable basis in experience and in the musical features themselves" (2007, 22).

<sup>15</sup> The Rule of the Octave was a method of harmonizing unfigured scalar bass lines, assigning particular harmonies to particular scale degrees in the bass. The best explanation of the rule is still Thomas Christensen's "The 'Règle de l'Octave' in Thorough-Bass Theory and Practice" (1992). There is also a wonderful explanation of the rule's pertinence both to *partimento* practice and to nascent conceptions of tonality in Holtmeier (2007). *Movimenti*, meanwhile, refer to the various sequential bass patterns that do not follow the rule of the octave.

How would a typical apprentice at a Neapolitan conservatory have gone about learning the language of galant music? The first step in learning a given schema was to internalize its corresponding *regole*, or the rules of partimento practice. The rules, ostensibly concerned with the harmonization of an unfigured bass, were actually a form of implicit theory that gradually introduced students to the principles of tonality (Menke 2010). Rather than present this tonal theory explicitly in prose, the rules instead exemplify the theory, pointing collectively towards an unspoken theory of tonality. By internalizing the rules through practice, the player comes to absorb and master these same tonal principles. Although these *regole* were, by and large, conveyed orally, there are also numerous extant collections of rules, both printed and in manuscript, that provide “stock patterns” and rules governing their usage, together with illustrative musical examples.

Fenaroli’s *Regole* of 1775 was to become one of the most influential and complete of these collections: it was later incorporated into a six-part edition of his complete partimenti, and was reprinted numerous times. The Romanesca, for example, was covered by the rule for the *movimento* of “Falling by Fourths and Rising by Steps” (Figure 3.7). Fenaroli describes it in this manner:

Firstly, all of the notes of this partimento can be accompanied with a 3rd and 5th. That is, one considers the first of these notes as a first of the key that passes to its fifth. And thus one considers the third note of the partimenti likewise as a first of the key that passes to its fifth. (Fenaroli 1775, 49-50)

Figure 3.7. Fenaroli’s Variants for “Falling by Fourths and Rising by Steps” (Sanguinetti 2012, 155)

In a nutshell, each note of the bass is to be accompanied by a triad. In most cases, there are several possible realizations of a given bass motion; in the case of the Romanesca, Fenaroli provides the aforementioned variant with triads as well as a variant with alternating 4-3 and 9-8 suspensions. By transposing these examples into a variety of different keys, the budding keyboardist begins to get a feeling for the *movimento* and its characteristic voice leading. The next step for our hypothetical apprentice is to study the schema in a practical musical context: for example, in Durante's "Perfidia" partimento (Gj 244)<sup>16</sup> from the *Partimenti Numerati* (figured partimenti). This partimento presents the Romanesca schema numerous times in a wide variety of musical contexts (different keys, modes, clefs, rhythms), and the figures provide enough information for the apprentice to choose an appropriate realization of the schema. After mastering this piece (and many others like it), our apprentice might be assigned an unfigured partimento, for example the seventh partimento from Durante's *Partimenti Diminuiti* (Gj 7). This partimento also presents the Romanesca schema several times in succession, but this time, without the benefit of figures. The player must recognize the schema wherever it occurs and realize it with the appropriate harmony and voice leading.

Of course, beyond issues of voice leading, our apprentice also wishes to learn something of idiomatic style and texture. Partimento rules generally only dealt with an abstract, polyphonic texture, and thus, most of our apprentice's instruction was doubtless provided orally. Durante's *Diminuiti*, however, provide an exceptional glimpse into this oral practice, as each of the partimenti contains one or more *modi*, or manners of diminution to be applied to certain bars of the partimento. Gj 7, for example, provides the following two *modi* for the first two bars of the partimento, shown in Figure 3.8. As it happens, the bars chosen by Durante correspond exactly to those of the Romanesca schema our apprentice is studying. The apprentice must now apply the

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<sup>16</sup> "Gj" identification numbers were introduced in Gjerdingen's (2005) "Monuments of Partimenti" website.



Figure 3.8. Durante's two Modi for Gj 7 (Sanguinetti 2012, 187)

appropriate figuration whenever the given schema occurs, creating a lasting pedagogical connection between the schema and its potential diminution.

Our Neapolitan apprentice has not yet finished with the Romanesca; the student will continue to encounter the schema in a wide variety of partimenti, further reinforcing the association of a particular bass line with a particular realization. The aim in all this is to create a nearly unconscious, instantaneous response to the unfigured bass, making its realization less a product of reflection than of reflex. By a process of continual repetition, variation, and transposition (both of motivic cells within the partimento, as well as of the partimento as a whole), the apprentice internalizes the schema tacitly, intuitively, and completely.<sup>17</sup>

Although the majority of recent scholarship on partimento has centered on the conservatories of Naples, the practice—both as a shorthand method for encapsulating compositions and as a

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<sup>17</sup> I am not aware of any specific advice given by Neapolitan *maestri* regarding the transposition of partimento exercises. Given how frequently transposition of material is recommended in improvisation treatises in other traditions, it seems highly likely that the Neapolitans would do so also. The examples of simple exercises written out in various keys—the Rule of the Octave, for example—provides further evidence of this. Furthermore, the construction of partimento bass lines often involves the transposition of motivic cells, allowing the student the opportunity to practice their realization in a variety of keys. Sanguinetti details this in his explication of the “modular étude” in *The Art of Partimento* (2012, 248-54).

pedagogical conceit—had considerable circulation throughout Europe.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, partimento seems to have been widely cultivated in the German states during the eighteenth century, even if the various traditions never coalesced to form discrete schools, as the Neapolitans did. While there are few remaining sources, the ones that survive show remarkable variety of style and intent. The Preludes and Fugues of Gottfried Kirchhoff’s *L’A.B.C. Musical* (1734), published in Amsterdam by the Halle-based composer, are relatively advanced works showing a high degree of motivic invention in the bass lines. In the North, Johann Mattheson’s *Große General-Baß-Schule* (1731) is remarkable for its thoroughness. Each of its figured basses is accompanied by a (usually lengthy) discussion of a variety of performance issues including tempo, meter, genre, and style. Even more tantalizing is the copious advice Mattheson provides on how to go about realizing the bass line. Much like Durante, Mattheson suggests a variety of figurations, textures, and rhythms to use in the right hand. But where Durante provides only a few representative measures of the various *modi* and leaves it to the student to deal with the rest, Mattheson’s discussion provides invaluable advice on how to fill in the blanks. It *almost* feels like a one-on-one lesson with a knowledgeable maestro.

The Langloz Manuscript, despite its intimate connections to Bach’s circle, has not generated the sort of interest scholars have invested in the Neapolitan partimenti.<sup>19</sup> Vasili Byros pinpoints this problem, in a brilliant article on potential pedagogical uses of the manuscript, when he notes that the preludes and fugues “do have a certain superficial emptiness and dryness about them” (Byros 2015). Indeed, Byros makes a virtue out of the undifferentiated, characterless bass lines. Rather than

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<sup>18</sup> Beyond the aforementioned work of Gjerdingen, Sanguinetti, and Van Tour, I must also mention the research of Nicoleta Paraschivescu (2019), which examines the partimenti of Giovanni Paisiello and their connections to Paisiello’s own compositional style. Although its focus is considerably later than the seventeenth-century French repertoire under study here, her work is nevertheless useful to me as a creative and musicologically rigorous example of a contemporary performer engaging with partimento.

<sup>19</sup> William Renwick hypothesizes that “the origins of the work are Thuringian, in the period 1700–20, that the contents may stem directly or indirectly from J. F. [sic] Niedt, J. N. Bach, J. S. Bach, or another contemporary composer altogether, and that the transmission as well as the attribution to Bach most likely involved Kittel” (2001, 28).

treating them in the same manner as the advanced Neapolitan partimenti (like the “Perfidia”) or like Mattheson’s basses—in which the player’s task is to follow the partimento composer’s lead, responding and reacting appropriately to the motives and *Manieren* contained therein—Byros suggests another approach: treat the Langloz Manuscript as a “body of inventions,” to be developed freely by the composer-performer.

Byros’s efforts fill a noticeable gap in our understanding of the pedagogical uses of partimento. Thanks to Gjerdingen and Sanguinetti, it is already very well understood how composer-performers accumulated their vast body of tacit knowledge, but there is still the problem of “blank page syndrome,” that is, the compositional paralysis that comes about when faced with a blank page, devoid of any pre-given material. Byros demonstrates a number of ways in which a partimento (especially a simple one like those contained in the Langloz manuscript) could be individualized, not just through the application of figures and *Manieren*, or through rhythmic variation, but also through the composing-out of the bass line itself. His treatment of the Langloz materials through “discovery and exploration of genre-specific structuring principles, and their elaboration, extension, expansion, and variation” provides a plausible, if hypothetical explanation for how apprentices assimilated the materials of partimenti, forming a useful pedagogical bridge between the partimento as continuity draft and the blank page (Byros 2015). Indeed, Byros’s work serves as a bridge in our discussion as well, as it moves from an analysis of historical materials to their contemporary pedagogical application.

## **Contemporary Pedagogical Approaches**

In recent years, there have appeared a number of book-length studies on the pedagogy of baroque keyboard improvisation. Among the most significant are the *Compendium Improvisation* (Schwenkreis 2018), Michael Callahan’s “Techniques of Keyboard Improvisation in the German Baroque” (2010), and Lieven Strobbe’s *Tonal Tools* (2014). The most useful and wide-ranging of

these is certainly the *Compendium Improvisation*, developed by members of the Forschungsgruppe Basel für Improvisation (FBI) at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. Intended as a sort of practical method-book for historical improvisation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century styles, the book consists of a variety of individual articles written by different members of the FBI, each addressing a particular genre, style, or facet of improvisational technique. These chapters cover diverse topics and styles including figuration, ostinato, partimento, chorale harmonization, modulation, and—finally—rhetoric. The authors also draw upon a variety of (mostly German) historical sources to contextualize their pedagogical approach. Despite this stylistic diversity, the book is underpinned throughout by the material presented in its first chapter, consisting of a collection of the most important *Satzmodelle* for the Baroque, including cadences, sequences, the RO, pedal points, and a selection of opening gambits. Far from providing a mere theoretical description of these *Satzmodelle*, the book offers a concrete pedagogical approach to learning and internalizing them. For each *Satzmodell*, the authors provide a short exemplary partimento or ostinato exercise, designed to teach the *Satzmodell*'s normative realizations. These *Satzmodelle* thus form the core of the book's common language, applied by its authors to diverse improvisational settings.

The *Compendium* attempts to accomplish a great many goals within the same volume. It is, at once, a practical handbook for students, a pedagogical work for teachers of historical improvisation, and a work of impressive musicological and music-theoretical research. Beyond the specific compositional models and techniques it offers, however, the most useful aspect of the book is its espoused *attitude* towards music-making. The authors propose an historically-informed model for creativity in improvisation, wherein *Satzmodelle* and musical repertoire are considered two sides of the same improvisational coin, related by the twin processes of “instantiation” and “abstraction” (Schwenkreis 2018, 32). Within this model, *Satzmodelle* can be transformed into idiomatic, sounding music through a process of improvisational instantiation; at the same time, that same sounding

music may be abstracted into its underlying *Satzmodelle* through a process of analytic reduction. In this way, improvisers are brought into conversation with the repertoires they play. Newly found repertoire may be disassembled by the player into its component parts, only to be re-assembled through improvisation. Even the player's own improvisations are themselves amenable to being disassembled, abstracted, transformed, and reassembled into new improvisations through this same process. Any specific collection of compositional models is, therefore, of far less importance than the method by which these models may be acquired. The authors envision, then, that the motivated player will use these techniques to develop a personal improvisational language, informed by the specific repertoires and models chosen and encountered by the player. The *Compendium's* collection of *Satzmodelle*, along with its many stylistically-targeted articles, are provided merely as a kind of beginner's vocabulary for the long journey towards improvisational fluency.

Another of the most thorough applications of primary sources to issues of contemporary pedagogy is found in music theorist Michael Callahan's PhD dissertation (2010) on keyboard improvisation in the German Baroque. In it, he seeks to integrate a wide variety of historical sources to construct a comprehensive music-theoretical framework, one he uses to explain and synthesize discrete hierarchical levels of musical structure in improvisation. Modeled after Mattheson's divisions of classical rhetoric (*dispositio*, *elaboratio*, *decoratio* etc.), Callahan illustrates how a piece's form can be represented by a *dispositio*, articulated as a series of compositional goals (establish tonic, modulate to V, etc.).<sup>20</sup> A particular *dispositio's* goals—that is, its cadential waypoints—are realized by *elaboratio*, represented in the form of voice-leading skeletons rather like *Satzmodelle* (or “*elaboratio frameworks*” as he calls them). The *elaboratio* is ultimately transformed into sounding music in the *decoratio*, using the principles of diminution technique. Callahan discusses a number of historical

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<sup>20</sup> For a brief yet informative survey of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German comparisons between musical composition and rhetoric, including Mattheson's five-fold sequential “divisions” of rhetoric, see Dreyfus (2004, 1-10).



sources for each of these hierarchical tiers—Koch and Mattheson for the *dispositio*, *partimenti* for the *elaboratio*, and the diminution pedagogy of Michael Wiedeburg for the *decoratio*, to name just a few examples—and, after an exploration of the application of these principles to imitative counterpoint, he synthesizes them into a contemporary approach to teaching keyboard improvisation.

In each of his chosen historical sources, Callahan is particularly attentive to extending the usefulness and practicality of the author's original intent. His discussion of Spiridione's *Nova Instructio* is a particularly good example.<sup>21</sup> Spiridione a Monte Carmelo (1615-1685), a German monk who traveled extensively throughout Europe, assembled a remarkable collection of short musical examples, each only several bars in length, into a series of *cadentiae*. The *cadentiae*, analogous to the *movimenti* and *regole* of Neapolitan *partimenti*, present a variety of seventeenth-century commonplaces, like cadences and sequential bass motions. Each *cadentia* exemplifying a given pattern is thus prefaced by a brief figured bass, and each of the following examples is a realization of that same bass. Spiridione expects the player to practice, transpose, and memorize these exemplars so that they can be recalled unconsciously, culminating in an improvised piece assembled from the tasteful concatenation of the *cadentiae*. Callahan's insight is that Spiridione may also be providing a method by which to learn the principles of diminution *implicitly*. By providing literally hundreds of possible realizations of the same bass line, Spiridione is also providing the player with the opportunity to sharpen their analytical skills as well. Thus, the thoughtful player will look beyond the surface realizations of the bass to the *elaboratio* framework underneath, and will begin to deduce principles by which these frameworks can be embellished:

By distinguishing the generic voice-leading progressions from the diminution techniques employed to render them as musical surfaces, an improviser can learn

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<sup>21</sup> Bellotti provides a good modern edition of Spiridione's work, along with some sage advice on how one might incorporate the *cadentiae* into a pedagogy of historical improvisation.

both sets of patterns and techniques simultaneously, thereby laying the groundwork for not only a basic repository of memorized passages, but also a flexible and limitless interaction between the generative levels that beget them. (Callahan 2010, 84-5)

Callahan's dissertation culminates in the contemporary application of these historical approaches to keyboard improvisation, and he presents a sample curriculum that leads from *decoratio* (via ground bass improvisation) to the improvisation of freestanding pieces. Throughout this discussion, he addresses the interaction between improvisational technique and the analysis of repertoire. Moving from a set of improvisational procedures (like diminution technique) to the analysis of repertoire from an improviser's perspective demands a modicum of improvisational experience, but after this point, improvisational practice and analysis of repertoire become mutually beneficial activities.<sup>22</sup> Technique informs analysis, and the analysis, in turn, leads to further technical development. In Callahan's pedagogy, this interaction applies not just to *decoratio*, but also, via careful selection of repertoire, to the learning of *elaboratio* frameworks: in addition to frameworks encountered in *partimenti* and *cadentiae*, the student learns to extract *elaboratio* frameworks from an analysis of repertoire, and subsequently learns how to redeploy these frameworks to realize a particular *dispositio* (of a minuet, for example). Callahan ends with a series of exercises designed to explore the improvisational interactions between his three hierarchical tiers. Demonstrating this with a series of *allemandes* by Buxtehude, Callahan recommends holding two of the tiers constant, while varying the third, "toning just one set of improvisational muscles" (2010, 280). For example, maintaining the *dispositio* and *decoratio* of a given *allemande*, while varying the chosen *elaboratio* frameworks, leads to a deeper practical understanding of the *decoratio* strategies employed by the composer, and therefore, to a deeper technical understanding on the part of the improviser.

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<sup>22</sup> This is a point also noted by William Porter (2000), who recounts his work with students learning to improvise seventeenth-century North German *praeludia*.

I suspect that many of Callahan's techniques may prove deeply relevant to improvisation in the style of seventeenth-century *clavicinistes*. Of particular value are his insights into the relationship between the theoretical models of *elaboratio* and the variety of exemplars one encounters and attempts to assimilate. I also find his design of exercises, particularly the "isolation exercises," to be a brilliant way of practicing the integration of techniques proper to the various improvisational tiers. Perhaps the only area in which Callahan's presentation lacks is in its acknowledgment of the tacit dimensions of improvisational learning. Writing as a music theorist, Callahan is primarily concerned with describing his improvised music's formal and structural characteristics. Approaches to music learning that seek to cultivate bodily awareness, therefore, are given relatively short shrift. The sociologist and pianist David Sudnow, by way of contrast, describes in painstaking detail the process by which he learns to internalize jazz chords physically as "grabbed places," and this kinaesthetic dimension of learning is a large part of what enables his development as an improviser (Sudnow 2001, 12). In Callahan's case, although he is himself an able keyboardist and pedagogue, his observations here are mostly gained analytically rather than intuitively through practical experience at the keyboard. His activities and reflections as a pedagogue will, however, be discussed below.

Lieven Strobbe's *Tonal Tools* (2014) is an attempt to adapt and apply the methods used by Neapolitan conservatories to contemporary pedagogy of tonal improvisation. Strobbe divides tonal music into a number of named "components," each of which fulfills a particular tonal function. Although somewhat analogous to galant schemata, Strobbe's components are more loosely defined, functioning more like tonal pathways than as defined harmonic-contrapuntal models. The *Lancia*, for example, simply moves from tonic to dominant, while the *Quiescenza* creates a pedal point by shifting upper voices above a sustained bass. Each component can be realized by a number of "applications": the *Lancia*, for example, can be played either "leaping" (a direct movement from I to V) or "walking," with the movement between tonic and dominant filled in by additional bass notes.

The “walking” application can be further subdivided into the *Overture* component (I up to V) and the *Reverence* component (I down to V), each of which can receive further applications (like “gliding,” in which intermediate bass notes are accompanied in fauxbourdon). The components are clearly inspired by Gjerdingen’s schemata, and Strobbe prefaces the book with an invocation of “Eighteenth-century jazz” and the aim of partimenti to “transfer knowledge about how tonal music works” (Strobbe 2014, 14), but the components are meant to be as stylistically agnostic as possible. Apart from “idiomatic” applications like “ragtime,” the player is meant to be able to adapt these components to function in whatever musical style they choose. Given that they do not necessarily demand adherence to a specific pairing of bass and treble, these “components” are considerably closer to Callahan’s *elaboratio* frameworks, as they rely on registral flexibility and often invertibility. For each component, and often for each particular combination of component and application, Strobbe provides a number of examples from the repertoire (ranging from J.S. Bach to Paul McCartney) and discusses relevant issues of voice leading and usage.

The question of how to put Strobbe’s components into use is slightly less clear. He does provide some basic advice on how to learn a component, and it mostly matches advice offered by Callahan: one should repeat, memorize, transpose, and transform (via changes in rhythm, texture, number of voices, diminution strategy, etc.) a component until it has been internalized. The next step is to find the component embedded in a (probably unfigured) partimento, in which the student’s task, just as in Neapolitan partimenti, is to match the bass with an appropriate realization and diminution. Beyond this, he recommends creative engagement with the partimento, much along the lines suggested by Byros above, albeit more modestly. He therefore suggests methods for modifying the partimento bass itself. He discusses “stretching” and “compressing” the bass (playing it in a faster or slower harmonic rhythm) in contrast to “composing-out” (adding intermediate harmonies between events in the schema), “cutting” (deleting intermediate harmonies), and “merging” (dovetailing the

end of one schema with the beginning of another). Although he does discuss a number of diminution strategies, this is not a particularly well-developed aspect of the book.

Ultimately, what Strobbe demands is an experienced *maestro*, one capable of selecting (or likely composing) partimenti that will reinforce the components being studied. Apart from a small collection of ostinato basses, as well as a recommendation to extract partimento basses from repertoire, Strobbe offers little help in the matter of finding appropriate study materials. What I do find useful about his book, though, is the principle of adapting a fairly abstract “component” to diverse styles and genres. To adopt the language used at the beginning of the chapter, we can learn to adapt a *Satzmodell* to the context of a particular style and genre, transforming it into a culturally-charged, syntactically-meaningful schema. I also find Strobbe’s method of adapting the partimento bass to be an invaluable part of any improvisation curriculum, since it forms a useful bridge to free improvisation.

Finally, there are a number of additional monographs that treat historical improvisation, but their approach tends to coincide with those already discussed. Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra’s *Bach and the Art of Improvisation* (2011), for instance, uses many of the same principles recommended by Callahan, albeit limited to the improvisation of chorale-based forms. After some introductory material on historical keyboard fingering and technique, she presents basic information on voice leading and thoroughbass, leading to a wide variety of exercises in chorale harmonization (including an interesting presentation of techniques for modulation from Walther) and the improvisation of chorale partitas, chorale preludes, and dance suites (based on chorales). It is a pity, in fact, that the connections she makes between historical keyboard technique—that is, the physicality of keyboard playing—and improvisational practice are not further developed. To do so would speak to some of the tacit dimensions of improvisation that continue to remain unexamined by historically-informed

performers.<sup>23</sup> Pianist John Mortensen's *The Pianist's Guide to Historic [sic] Improvisation* (2020), meanwhile, is intended to share the techniques of historical improvisation with classical pianists. Again, its primary contribution consists in its presentation of a variety of pedagogical exercises for pianists, fashioned from established research in historical improvisation, albeit adapted for the interests of another public.

## Other pedagogical approaches

There are several other musicians and scholars who discuss successful pedagogical results in historical keyboard improvisation that also merit attention, and which I will introduce here briefly. The keyboardist, conductor, and improviser Rudolf Lutz has described in some detail his pedagogy of Baroque improvisation in his article, "The Playing of Partimento" (2010), and of which I have firsthand knowledge gleaned during private lessons and masterclasses conducted in 2013–2015. Like Callahan, Lutz proposes learning a wide variety of *Satzmodelle* and developing them in the manner of a ground bass or ostinato. For each of these ostinato models, the student explores a variety of voicings and diminution techniques (including the use of invertible counterpoint).<sup>24</sup> Lutz also recommends the mutual interaction of repertoire and improvisational practice: for example, he suggests comparing a student's improvisation on a particular *Satzmodell* with an exemplary realization from the repertoire. In a manner similar to Callahan's "isolation" exercises, he also proposes creating a "de-individualized," simplified bass for the practice of partimento (Lutz 2010, 126). By extracting

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<sup>23</sup> For a tantalizing example of the potential relationships between keyboard technique and compositional-improvisational technique that might be discovered, see Massimiliano Guido's "Counterpoint in the Fingers. A Practical Approach to Girolamo Diruta's Breve & Facile Regola Di Contrappunto" (2012).

<sup>24</sup> Lutz, more than any other pedagogue in the field, emphasizes practicing all the possible *physical* realizations of a given *Satzmodell*. With two hands, and a certain number of voices to play using those two hands, the question of the *distribution* of those voices between the hands comes into play. Assuming a four-voice *Satzmodell*, the following distributions are possible: R.H. (3 voices) + L.H. (1 voice) (the thoroughbass distribution); R.H. (2 voices) + L.H. (2 voices) (Sancta Maria's polyphonic distribution); R.H. (1 voice) + L.H. (3 voices) (the monodic distribution). Lutz recommends practicing 3-voice realizations as well, and for organists, he also demands utilization of the pedals, leading to further variety of potential voicings.

this bass from chosen repertoire, and by transforming it after the method suggested by Friedrich Niedt in the *Handleitung zur Variation* (1706), the student has the opportunity of exploring alternative manners of diminution and comparing their results with the composer's.<sup>25</sup>

William Porter has described the methods and results behind his reconstruction of the improvisational practices of seventeenth-century North German organists. One of his most surprising insights in working with students was that knowledge of the repertoire in question was not necessarily helpful:

Most of the students in the group had only minimal familiarity with the repertoire in question. Surprising though this lack of knowledge may be, it was in fact an advantage in that it allowed the genre to be taught as a series of improvisational procedures, unencumbered by students' memory of specific compositions. No examples from the repertoire were presented to illuminate a procedure or exercise until after it had been reasonably well mastered by the group. Since the goal of this endeavor is re-creation rather than imitation, this will continue to be the policy. (Porter 2000, 35)

The distinction between imitation and re-creation is significant here. Although imitation becomes inevitable after a certain initiation period, it is only then—after one has gained the ability to think, judge, and analyze improvisationally—that imitation can function creatively as re-creation. This is perfectly congruent with Benson's (2003) notion of improvisation as the “reworking” of something that already exists. The way in which we “work” (or even imagine that we can work) with material is conditioned by experience. Porter's point is that budding improvisers can only intend to re-create through imitation after they have first been conditioned to think improvisationally: not as executants, interpreters, or performers, but as *composers in performance*.

Music theorists Gilad Rabinovich and Johnandrew Slominski (2015) have discussed their results teaching galant keyboard improvisation to students at the Eastman School of Music. Teaching

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<sup>25</sup> Strictly speaking, in Callahan's terms this sort of *Niedtsian* exercise, as Lutz puts it, maintains the dispositio constant, maintains parts of the elaboratio constant (albeit expressed as thoroughbass rather than as a voice-leading framework), and varies the decoratio.

students on separate partimento and schemata tracks, the authors discovered a variety of benefits in adopting such an approach. One unfortunate aspect of the study is the apparent separation of the two improvisational activities (realizing partimento, and embellishing a series of schemata), but given the limited time allotted each participant (four half-hour sessions), this is an understandable restriction.

Finally, Michael Callahan has also published several articles discussing the pedagogical results of applying his research in the classroom. In an article on long-range planning in improvisation, he suggests slight cracks in his hierarchical model of improvisation, implying that decisions made on lower levels (*decoratio*) in the course of performance can have an impact on higher ones (*elaboratio*, *dispositio*) (Callahan 2012, 63-8).<sup>26</sup> And in a 2017 article on the use of technology in the classroom, Callahan provides valuable examples for how the pedagogical techniques of partimento practice can be adapted for students in contemporary settings.

Taken together, these pedagogical approaches to baroque keyboard improvisation demonstrate the plausibility of historical improvisation as a creative and scholarly enterprise. They propose methods of re-creating improvised practices from the past, relying upon the music-theoretical paradigms (schema, *Satzmodelle*) and pedagogical techniques (partimento) introduced earlier in this chapter. They introduce concrete and practical approaches for learning improvisational techniques—like Callahan’s isolation exercises—as well as new ways of thinking about the relationship between one’s musical repertoire and improvisational practice. Strikingly, however, these approaches restrict their focus nearly exclusively to German and Italian musical practices during the Baroque, leading one to ask: might improvisation have worked differently in France?

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<sup>26</sup> In the most telling example, Callahan demonstrates how a change of just a single note (a flattened leading tone) in the context of a cadence motivates entirely new sets of tonal objectives.



## Keyboard Improvisation in Seventeenth-Century France

Given the extraordinary wealth of materials related to historical keyboard improvisation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy and Germany, one might be surprised to discover another situation obtains in France. Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, improvisation of various kinds was an essential part of musical life in seventeenth-century France, there remain very few historical documents detailing its pedagogy, particularly for keyboard instruments. This might be explained, at least partly, by way of the peculiar history of thoroughbass in France.

As Thomas Christensen has pointed out, due to political and social forces, the practice of thoroughbass got off to a very late start in France, with the first work by a French composer calling for continuo only published in 1652, namely Henri Dumont's *Cantica Sacra*.<sup>27</sup> Plucked and strummed instruments (guitar, theorbo, etc.) adopted the practice first, probably due to the harmonic, vertical orientation of their music.<sup>28</sup> Keyboardists followed suit, with the earliest treatises being authored by D'Anglebert (1689), Nivers (1689) and Delair (1690). Perhaps because of this late start, these treatises and those that follow never approached the same advanced level as those of Niedt (1706), Heinichen (1728), and Mattheson (1731). Indeed, and with few exceptions, rather than addressing the niceties of professional accompaniment, or including sample realizations, these French treatises tend to brevity and restrict themselves to simple matters of voicing, figuring, and voice leading.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Christensen cites "a confluence of social and political factors in which the church, court, and music guilds sought to maintain tight control over musical practice by keeping at bay many of the innovations stemming from the Italian *seconda prattica*" (1993, 45). Thoroughbass was likely considered one of those innovations. The first published work in France calling for basso continuo was actually by the Dutch poet and composer Constantijn Huygens, his *Pathodia sacra et profana* of 1647.

<sup>28</sup> The first treatise dates from 1660, namely Nicolas Fleury's *Méthode pour apprendre facilement à toucher le théorbe sur la basse continuë*.

<sup>29</sup> Boyvin's treatise of 1705 is a significant exception to this trend, since he includes some basic partimenti. For an excellent summary and assessment of French thoroughbass treatises from 1660 to 1775, see Zappulla (2000). For a fine selection of facsimiles of these treatises, see also the Saint-Arroman (2006) collection, published by Fuzeau in six volumes.

Also unlike the advanced German treatises as well as the Neapolitan *partimenti*, these French treatises never make the path from thoroughbass to composition entirely explicit.<sup>30</sup> There is, at least, some clear evidence that the French considered accompaniment and composition to be related and mutually beneficial activities. Take, for example, one of the earliest treatises on accompaniment (read thoroughbass) for keyboard instruments, Jacques Boyvin's *Traité abrégé de l'accompagnement* (1705). Although he refrains from anything approaching Niedt's lofty, rhetorical flights of fancy, Boyvin does highlight the great benefit composers receive from also practicing thoroughbass, noting that "quand on a la main sur le Clavecin, on découvre des beautés qu'on ne trouveroit pas sans cela, quelque science, et quelque délicatesse de génie qu'on pût avoir" (1705, 8).<sup>31</sup> Several authors would also link accompaniment and composition in the titles of their treatises, as François Campion (1716) did in his *Traité d'accompagnement et de composition*. Perhaps the clearest example of this linkage is Rameau's opinion in the *Code de musique pratique*.

Les principes de composition & d'accompagnement sont les mêmes, mais dans un ordre tout-à-fait opposé. Dans la composition, le seule connoissance de la racine donne celle de toutes les branches qu'elle produit: dans l'accompagnement au contraire, toutes les branches se confondent avec leur racine.<sup>32</sup> Rameau (1760, 24)

In contrast to Niedt—who views thoroughbass as the “most complete foundation of music” (1989, 28)—Rameau sees both accompaniment and composition as rooted in a more fundamental principle, namely his own *basse fondamentale*. All told, even if some authors considered thoroughbass as a foundational discipline for composition, because their accompaniment treatises stay primarily at a beginner's level, we cannot know with any great precision how thoroughbass might have led to

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<sup>30</sup> This trend of extolling the virtues of thoroughbass as the foundation of all composition can be observed in Niedt's *Musikalische Handleitung*, first published in 1700 and translated into English as the *Musical Guide* (1989), and culminates in Heinichen's detailed exposition in *Der Generalbass in der Composition* (1728).

<sup>31</sup> “When one has one's hands at the harpsichord, one discovers beauties that one would not find without it, whatever theoretical knowledge or refinements of genius one might imagine to possess” (my translation).

<sup>32</sup> “The principles of composition and accompaniment are the same, but in entirely the opposite order. In composition, mere knowledge of the root gives that of all the branches it produces; in accompaniment, on the contrary, all the branches are confounded with their root” (my translation).

composition in France.<sup>33</sup> Apart from thoroughbass sources, there are a number of instrumental treatises offering advice on preluding (improvising), but they generally lack the harmonic and contrapuntal awareness displayed by German and Italian sources. Rameau's discussion of improvisation in the *Code*, sadly, contains very little practical advice (1760, 178-85).

Beyond several short articles, the only extended contemporary discussion of historical keyboard improvisation in France is found in music theorist Stephen Grazzini's 2014 dissertation.<sup>34</sup> In it, Grazzini seeks to excavate the *prélude non mesuré* as an improvised genre. He looks both to understand French baroque reception of the prelude genre as a type of improvisation (together with French reception of improvisation as an activity and an idea), as well as to understand the techniques by which such preludes were improvised. Beginning with the idea that a prelude relies on "performance practice techniques" like continuo realization and melodic embellishment, Grazzini pursues a hierarchical approach to preluding, modeled after that of Callahan. The *decoratio* consists of a variety of ornate, figurate arpeggio models (drawn from French harpsichord and continuo treatises) coupled with ornamentation and diminution techniques from viol and singing treatises. The *elaboratio* consists of "thoroughbass formulas," which Grazzini represents quite simply as figured bass, in opposition both to Gjerdingen's schematic bubble diagrams and Callahan's (and the *Satzmodell* tradition's) voice leading skeletons. Figure 3.9, for example, shows one of the formulas most important to Grazzini, the "mi-fa" formula. For Grazzini, the *dispositio*, or the form of the prelude, is ultimately the most problematic aspect of the hierarchy. While he does suggest several formal models, including cadential frames and scale harmonizations (rather dubiously linked to C.P.E. Bach's presentation of the same method), Grazzini ultimately rejects the problem-solving of

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<sup>33</sup> Boyvin, tellingly, stands as one of the minor exceptions here.

<sup>34</sup> The most significant of these short articles are in the German *Satzmodell* tradition: see Hamer (2012) on Louis Couperin's preludes, as well as Froebe (2012) on Bach's appropriation of French models.



Figure 3.9. The “mi-fa” Formula (Grazzini 2014, 185)

dispositio in favor of a *problem-finding* approach. Rather than deciding in advance on the form of the prelude (what Callahan calls a “pre-improvisational” decision), the improviser treats the prelude as a problem-finding journey, searching out new harmonic possibilities and dealing with problems that arise along the way.

I do have reservations concerning several aspects of Grazzini’s work. For one, it seems to me that trying to demarcate the work of *composition* from the work of *performance* is, although perhaps laudable in the service of demystifying improvisation, ultimately anachronistic. It may be convenient to reconceptualize the prelude as a product of performance practice rather than composition; this might explain how these pieces were created at the keyboard by performers. Nevertheless, although it is true that the path from thoroughbass (or partimento) to composition was not entirely explicit in France, recalling the example of Boyvin cited above, there is still ample evidence that performance and composition—and, therefore, the roles of performer and composer—were not separate spheres. Related to this is the problem that Grazzini seems to consider preluding as an activity more or less unrelated to other forms of improvisation. Even though the *prélude non mesuré* was the genre most often associated with “improvisation as concept” in France, Grazzini considers the “improvisation as practice” of preludes separately from the improvisation of other genres that were also associated with composed music.<sup>35</sup> Although this may have been expedient in restricting the

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<sup>35</sup> Though, admittedly, Grazzini does recommend extending his study to the improvisation of other forms and

scope of his study, it also seems to me to be unfortunately near-sighted, given how frequently compositional techniques discovered in one genre tend to re-appear in others.<sup>36</sup>

For my own interest in reconstructing the improvisational practice of Chambonnières, there are several aspects of Grazzini's work that should prove useful, most important of which is his collection of thoroughbass formulas gathered from French continuo sources. Much like the Neapolitan *regole*, or Gjerdingen's schemata, these formulas could serve as the basis for a rich practice of improvised music-making. Although by no means complete, they do at least serve as a starting point in fashioning my own vocabulary of schemata, drawn from a corpus of exemplars (dance suites by Chambonnières) specific to my own targeted style. In addition, Grazzini's discussion of different modulation strategies and his "problem-finding" approach to musical form will serve as starting places for developing my own approach, adapted to genres and styles different from Grazzini's. Although he has done a great deal to explain *how* these preludes could have been improvised using historical techniques, he has not put this theoretical grounding into practice. In the next chapter, therefore, I will deal with each of these topics more fully and practically.

## Summary

Based on this review of recent literature in historical improvisation, I can identify several areas of difficulty or concern in connection with reconstructing improvisational practices of seventeenth-century French keyboard music: first, the relation between theory and practice, understood here as the interaction of historically-inspired improvisational practice with historically-appropriate

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genres, including some in which an improvisation concept might not necessarily have been operative (Grazzini 2014, 326-33). For more on the difference between improvisation as concept and practice, see Bruno Nettl (1998, 9-10). An improvised practice is just an instance of composition in performance. An improvisation-concept, on the other hand, is a culture's collection of ideas and associations with improvisation, such as spontaneity, freedom, or genius. For Nettl, a cultural practice of improvisation does not necessarily have to coincide with that same culture's concept of improvisation.

<sup>36</sup> Porter (2003) has written about how canonic techniques associated with the improvised fantasia by Sancta-Maria have re-appeared in diverse contexts, not all of them imitative.

exemplars; second, a conceptual reliance on thoroughbass; and third, the appropriate design of (auto-)didactic material. I will address each of these points in turn.

## 1) Theory and Practice

If Chambonnières were teaching at a Neapolitan conservatory, what *regole* and *movimenti* might he have written into his student's *zibaldone*? While there is no direct analogue in seventeenth-century France for the Neapolitan *regole*, it is possible to reconstruct the rules, procedures, and models governing composition. Historical treatises in thoroughbass (accompaniment), counterpoint (composition), and diminution (various treatises on viol and voice performance) present a detailed, if incomplete, view of the most common bass progressions (*movimenti*), with their standard voice leading (*Satzmodelle*), along with strategies for elaborating and embellishing these progressions. Although we have nothing comparable to the *Diminuiti* of Durante, we do at least have descriptions of diminution technique together with examples of their practical application,<sup>37</sup> as well as detailed theoretical descriptions of contrapuntal dissonance treatment, known as “supposition” in France (Cohen 1971). Given their pedagogical origins, these techniques and models should necessarily form the core of my own set of improvisational generating principles.

Beyond these rules, though, we can still detect the traces of schematic composition within the music itself. The extant repertoire's correspondence with the rules and progressions of thoroughbass tutors and with the diminution techniques of performance treatises, as Grazzini has shown, implies a link between improvisational technique and the primary evidence we have of the practice of that technique: namely, the repertoire. As William Porter noted, although we cannot directly observe the techniques used to create improvised music in the past, by observing the results of those techniques, we do indirectly gain some knowledge about the techniques themselves:

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<sup>37</sup> The many extant *doubles*, or variations in smaller note values, of dance movements are excellent examples.

The problem for us is that the most direct evidence we have of 17th-century improvisation is the repertoire, namely, the result. While it is true that to examine a result is not the same thing as to examine causal factors, it is possible that an analytical study of examples of the repertoire can reveal compositional procedures that may also have been improvisational procedures. (Porter 2000, 30)

In sum, we need the improvisation techniques *and* the repertoire that *could or might have been* generated by those same techniques in order to get a more complete picture of a particular improvisational practice.

As I will elaborate in the following chapter, the study of historical improvisation entails the transformation of explicit, analytically-derived knowledge into tacit, embodied knowledge and know-how. As Callahan has shown in the case of Spiridione's *cadentiae*, a detailed study of a variety of exemplars from an improviser's standpoint can yield important analytical and intuitive insight into improvisational models and techniques. With a given exemplar, the analysis begins from an historically-situated theoretical, artistic, and technical frame (thoroughbass, schema, *elaboratio* framework, etc.). By means of an effective practice method, the internalization of the exemplar generates new embodied improvisational knowledge and know-how. This inevitably leads to a change in one's own artistic practice, and thus the improviser reaches a new analytic frame by which to assimilate a chosen exemplar. Moreover, by means of their improvisational practice, the improviser continues to generate newly-created exemplars for their analysis, leading to yet another process of internalization of the exemplar and subsequent development of embodied knowledge. Thus, improvisational technique and artistic practice work in constant dialogue. From this vantage, and in line with Callahan, I am less interested in assembling *one* definitive collection of models and techniques than in learning to navigate the flexible, ever-changing web of connections between my own improvisational know-how and an established compositional practice. As my improvisational kinship with the seventeenth-century *clavecinistes* grows, I expect to see my understanding of its

generating principles change, just as I expect my understanding of its repertoire to change as well. Nothing will stay fixed.

## **2) Thoroughbass**

Of course, my initial analytic frame remains slightly problematic. Earlier, I somewhat uncritically cited thoroughbass treatises from France as a potential source for improvisational techniques and models. Indeed, virtually all of the pedagogical materials cited above ground their discussion in the language and practice of thoroughbass. Thoroughbass, however, both as a practice and as a conceptual framework for composition, came to France much later than to other European nations. Given that the composers relevant to my study (Chambonnières, Louis Couperin, D'Anglebert, Hardel, etc.) may have only learned accompaniment from a figured bass as adult musicians, am I justified in conceptualizing their compositional technique in terms of thoroughbass as well? Would not an approach based on traditional rules of counterpoint be more historically appropriate, particularly since Chambonnières, rather famously, refused to play thoroughbass in Lully's band?

In short, while such an approach might be more historically correct, it would also be considerably less convenient. As Christensen notes (1993, 46), part of the reason that thoroughbass spread so rapidly in France after its introduction was that it proved congenial for representing the style of music that had been in fashion already for several decades: a bass-driven, harmonically and vertically oriented homophonic style. Even in composition pedagogy in France at that time (that is, counterpoint pedagogy), we can observe the same harmonic orientation (Christensen 1993, 62-4). Moreover, as organist and improviser Edoardo Bellotti (2017) has shown, thoroughbass was from its very beginnings in Italy conceived as an extension of counterpoint, and good continuo playing was assumed to follow contrapuntal principles. Indeed, part of the reason for thoroughbass's continued popularity as a pedagogical aid through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must be due to its reconciliation of vertical and horizontal orientations in one easy-to-read notation. Moreover, as



Folker Froebe (2007) and others have shown, the adoption of thoroughbass did nothing to hamper composers' use of Renaissance *Satzmodelle*, albeit oriented towards a harmonic bass rather than a tenor.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, adopting an empirical stance, we can observe that Chambonnières's extant music (which dates, admittedly, from the latter part of his life) exhibits all the usual characteristics of bass-driven, tonally-oriented dance music. That is, since it looks and behaves like thoroughbass-influenced music, we can assume that it *is* thoroughbass-influenced music, even if Chambonnières might have understood it better himself as harmonically-oriented counterpoint. I will therefore begin my improvisation studies in the next chapter with the hypothesis that thoroughbass treatises *can* tell us something about how improvisation was taught in seventeenth-century France.

### 3) (Auto-)didactic Materials

Although we have a fairly good understanding of the rules of composition, accompaniment, and diminution as taught in seventeenth-century France, we know almost nothing about *how* these rules were taught. How, and by which methods, did students learn and assimilate the materials and techniques of their music? What we lack is something analogous to the Langloz Manuscript, Handel's lessons for Princess Anne,<sup>39</sup> Mattheson's *Große Generalbass-Schule* (1731), or especially, the partimenti of Fenaroli and Durante. Given the tremendous pedagogical advantages of these methods, it seems unlikely that savvy pedagogues in France would not have developed similar approaches to teaching composition and improvisation; and yet, we have very little evidence of this.

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<sup>38</sup> This absorption of renaissance techniques by baroque composers explains why I have not discussed here the various contemporary theoretical discussions of renaissance (vocal) counterpoint pedagogy. Moreover, there is evidence that vocal improvisation pedagogy informed keyboard improvisation technique as well. For a good discussion of this, see Peter Schubert's "From Voice to Keyboard. Improvised Techniques in the Renaissance" (2012).

<sup>39</sup> See Holtmeier, Menke, and Diergarten's *Solfeggi, Bassi e Fughe: Georg Friedrich Händels Übungen zur Satzlehre* (2013). Contrary to earlier reception of these lessons by Handel as simple thoroughbass instruction, Holtmeier et al. excavate it as a compositional-improvisational method.

While we wait for this evidence, I will continue on the assumption that the French *clavecinistes* did indeed develop such methods, and moreover, that these methods functioned analogously to the better-documented pedagogical traditions in Germany and Italy. In creating pedagogical materials for my own use, I will freely adapt ideas from the various sources discussed in this chapter, the ideas listed here for the reader's convenience:

- Practicing the frequent repetition, transposition, and variation of a variety of schemata
- Composing partimenti that practice or exemplify a given schema or schemata
- Practicing a variety of diminution strategies applied to a variety of schemata
- Thoroughbass and *Satzmodell* analysis of repertoire, designed to add to my schematic compendium and to discover new strategies for diminution
- The creation of *elaboratio* skeletal reductions of chosen pieces
- The creation of a partimento bass reduction of chosen pieces
- Practicing Callahan's isolation exercises in the context of chosen pieces
- Practicing variation of the partimento bass (composing-out, cutting, etc. in the manner of Byros and Strobbe)
- The free improvisation of dance movements, with or without a partimento bass

By adopting a wide variety of approaches and integrating them into my own experimental practice, I have the opportunity to find out what works best in my chosen style: that is, the style of Chambonnières as *re-created* within my own improvisational practice. In the next chapter, then, I will analyze my work putting these methods into practice, moving from a theoretical description of improvisational technique to an embodied, experiential understanding. These diverse approaches function analogously to Rheinberger's (1997) "technical objects," leading ultimately to an understanding of epistemic unknowns. How does one learn to improvise in this style? How well does improvisation in this style correspond to the models proposed by Callahan, Grazzini, and

others? How does the style I am recreating conflict, agree, or otherwise coexist with my own style as a performer? What, exactly, is *bon goût*? These are some of the questions that an experimental improvisational practice might seek to answer through the artist's own aesthetic sensibility. The ultimate aim, as ever, is not so much to arrive at historically verifiable results. This work is, after all, a product of HIP-as-method, and HIP only uses historical evidence as a starting place for new creativity. To that end, I turn now to my own improvisational practice, in dialogue with my imagined maestro, Jacques Champion de Chambonnières.