

Improvising Fugue: A Method for Keyboard Artists

By John J. Mortensen

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Reviewed by BRYAN ESPINOSA



Introduction: Improvisation, Partimento, and Pedagogy

It is well known that Bach could improvise fugues on subjects given to him on the spot. To the typical modern musician, this may seem like magic and learning to do so is impossible, but this is precisely what John J. Mortensen aims to demystify in *Improvising Fugue: A Method for Keyboard Artists*. He states his big claim in his very first sentence: “This book will show you how to improvise fugues at the keyboard. Eventually.” (xi). While the “eventually” admittedly does a lot of work in that sentence, he lays out a clear path to the goal. First, one must master the recognition, realization, and stylization of partimento (no mean feat!). This includes the memorization of dozens of harmonic patterns (schemata), playable in all keys and hand positions, along with learning common figuration and diminution patterns.¹ Then, with the partimento rules as a guide, one must learn the art of imitation, bicinium, and invertible counterpoint. Only after this is the ability to improvise a fugue even in reach, and then only with a great deal more practice.

Partimento is central to Mortensen’s program, taking up the first five chapters of the book. Although difficult to define because of its broad nature, partimenti generally refer to bass lines used for pedagogical purposes, either extracted from preexisting compositions or made up, for students to learn how to play, figure, and embellish, or even improvise and compose over (Sanguinetti 2007). Partimento and eighteenth-century improvisation go hand in hand, and so it is not unsurprising that the rediscovery and proliferation of research into partimento has led to a renewed interest in eighteenth-century improvisation. Although partimento research began in the early 1990s,² it really

1 These harmonic patterns are called schemata and predate the rediscovery of partimento by nearly a decade (see Gjerdingen 1986). Although the term schema is the term commonly used in the partimento literature (see Sanguinetti 2012), Mortensen avoids this term and consistently refers to these schemata as merely bass motions. This technically conflates two ideas, since the same bass motion may serve more than one schema.

2 The earliest study on partimento may have been Cafiero (1993). For an excellent recent summary of the last thirty years of partimento research, see Cafiero (2020, vii–x).

took off as a research program in 2007 with the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Music Theory* (Vol. 51, No. 1, 2007) dedicated to partimenti and the subsequent publication of *Music in the Galant Style* (Gjerdingen 2007). The next decade saw an explosion of partimento research from the first major monograph on partimento, *The Art of Partimento* (Sanguinetti 2012), to its first doctoral dissertation, “Counterpoint and Partimento: Methods of Teaching Composition in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples” (van Tour 2015), to numerous smaller journal articles and book chapters.

Partimento as pedagogy is slowly permeating the field of music theory, with Peter Schubert calling this an “improvisatory moment” (2017). *Improvising Fugue* must be seen in the context of this moment. Perhaps most significantly, Job IJzerman’s *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento: A New Method Inspired by Old Masters* (2018) is at present the first and only attempt at an undergraduate textbook for the teaching of harmony and counterpoint through partimento practice. In just the past several years, however, there seems to have been a proliferation of scholarly discussion on using improvisation, and specifically partimento, for the teaching of music theory. Michael Callahan’s “Learning tonal counterpoint through keyboard improvisation in the twenty-first century” (2017) advocates for teaching counterpoint through partimento and improvisation. In this very journal, Olga Sánchez-Kisielewska’s “Teaching the Rule of the Octave” (2022) demonstrates how one of the most fundamental partimento rules—The Rule of the Octave—can be used in the aural skills classroom. The third and final part of *Figured bass accompaniment in Europe* (Ticli 2023), titled “Basso Continuo and Partimento as a Pedagogical Tool Then and Now,” has no fewer than six chapters on the topic. And finally, the Improvisation and Pedagogy Interest Groups held a joint session for the 2024 meeting of the Society for Music Theory with seven presentations on the use of improvisation in the undergraduate classroom, one of which explicitly engaged with the partimento tradition.³

Improvising Fugue is the second book by Mortensen, and it is in many ways a sequel to the first: *The Pianist’s Guide to Historic Improvisation* (2020). Still, the book is self-contained and can be understood without familiarity with his earlier work (although he recommends it if one has no prior experience improvising). It is aimed at “the level of an undergraduate conservatory student” (xii), and presumes adequate keyboard skills, knowledge of the basic workings of figured bass, music fundamentals (scales, key signatures, and the like), and the ability to transpose (xii-

3 The interest group meeting was held in Jacksonville, Florida, on November 8, 2024, under the title *Improvisation in/as Pedagogy*. Charles Weaver and Dani Zanuttini-Frank’s presentation, “Solfeggio for Teaching Historical Improvisation,” engaged with the partimento tradition with a focus on solfeggio.

xiii). The work may be thought of in three major sections. Chapters 1–5 cover all aspects of partimento realization. Chapters 6–8 cover various kinds of contrapuntal playing required to improvise a fugue. Chapters 9–16 cover each section of a fugue—exposition, episode, presentation, stretto, pedal point, cadenza, and ending—before a final chapter summing it all up titled “Improvising Fugue.”

Chapters 1–5: Partimento

Chapters 1 through 5 of *Improvising Fugue* form a primer on partimento. Mortensen begins his instruction on partimento with a chapter on the basics: consonances and dissonances, figured bass and chord inversion, and the Rule of the Octave. He eschews the use of Roman numerals, preferring figured bass only.⁴ To refer to scale degrees, he uses Gjerdingen’s notation of circled numbers. This is followed by a second chapter on ten partimenti by Giovanni Furno (1748–1835). One strength of this book is shown right away: following in the partimento tradition itself, it is typical that more of the space on the page is taken up by examples and exercises than by text. Therefore, Chapter 1, which is more explanatory than practical, is only ten pages long, but Chapter 2, which has more exercises than text, is thirty-six pages. Several pages are either exercises or solutions to exercises, and very few pages are more than half text.

Chapters 2 and 4 contain almost all the schemata needed to realize a partimento, and Chapter 3 (on bass diminutions) comes as a brief interlude between these two schema-heavy chapters. The first two of Furno’s ten partimenti only require the knowledge of the Rule of the Octave (covered in Chapter 1), and so Mortensen takes time to demonstrate how to realize and stylize such simple examples at sight. Thus, the first kind of improvised genre learned is the figuration prelude, and it is learned over the first two partimenti.⁵ New schemata are learned as Mortensen progresses through the rest of Furno’s ten partimenti: Cadences, Modulations (*terminazioni di tono*), the Cascade, Ascending 5–6, Descending 7–6, the Circle of Fifths, the Romanesca, the Monte, and the Tied Bass. While Chapter 2 limits itself to Furno’s ten partimenti, Chapter 4 introduces partimenti and other examples from a wide array of other composers to demonstrate the rest of the schemata (all various sequential or chromatic progressions) and provide more opportunities to practice.

4 Avoiding Roman numerals in favor of figured bass is common in both schema theory and partimento studies. In his first book, Mortensen does use Roman numerals, but states this to be a concession (Mortensen 2020, 2).

5 The figuration prelude is also the first type of improvisation in Mortensen (2020).

Reflecting the deeply practical and pedagogical nature of this book, Chapter 5 is merely called “Partimento Practice” and contains forty partimenti progressing in difficulty. They start out as figured basses without any bass diminution or style implications, and they progressively get more challenging. The exercises quickly introduce more diminution, requiring the reader to determine which notes to figure and how. Many of the later exercises feature stylized basses that resemble those of actual compositions. Although imitation is not introduced until the next chapter, there are clearly some partimenti which suggest it (the first is Example 5.7). About halfway through, the basses become unfigured, requiring the reader to fully realize the implications of the bass motions themselves. Mortensen warns: “The skills of partimento must be deeply internalized before going on to further, more difficult areas of study” (83). Once all the bass motions and schemata from the first four chapters are learned, it is the task of the reader to master the skill of recognizing, realizing, and stylizing them in real time.

Chapters 6–8: Partimento and Counterpoint

Once partimento and bass diminutions have been fully mastered, Mortensen progresses to the three types of counterpoint needed to improvise a fugue: imitative counterpoint (Chapter 6), *bicinium* (Chapter 7), and invertible counterpoint (Chapter 8). Many partimenti were written with imitation in mind, and recognizing when a subject can be imitated in the upper voice is an essential aspect of realizing a partimento. Chapter 6 is the first chapter in which one gets the feeling that improvising a fugue might be possible. It begins with simple imitation within a partimento and ends with three partimento fugues. A partimento fugue is a partimento that implies fugal entries at certain points, which must be recognized by the performer. Gratefully, Mortensen provides a worked-out version for each of the partimento fugues. Mostly, these are realized like any other partimento, but with imitation whenever possible. The voices not participating in the imitation simply follow other notes of the schema implied by the bass motion.

Chapter 7 introduces what Mortensen calls *bicinium*, a term that generally refers to two-voice composition in the context of Renaissance and Baroque music, but which he uses more specifically “to denote a brief transitional passage [in two voices]” (173). The idea is straightforward: take a motive or figure and use it over one of the (typically sequential) schemata learned in Chapters 2 and 4. This is relatively simpler than other skills—and ends up being quite fun as well. The same motive or figure can often be

used in a wide variety of schematic contexts, and playing around with ideas quite easily lends itself to short and nice sounding transitional passages in only two voices. There is perhaps one interesting omission, which is acknowledged by the author: he remarks that “passages in two parts are governed by the principles of species counterpoint” but “will not repeat the rules here.” In fact, a knowledge of the rules of species counterpoint is assumed in many passages in this book—such as diminutions in Chapter 3 and suspensions in Chapters 2 and 4. Therefore, one should already be familiar with the basics of consonance and dissonance, passing and neighbor tones, and suspensions and other common figures before attempting Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 rounds out his discussion of counterpoint by relating various schemata which are, in fact, inversions of each other (what he calls *bass motion pairings*). In this way, one can easily tell whether a harmonic progression will be able to be inverted or not—for example, the Cascade, Circle of Fifths, and Tied Bass progressions are all inversions of each other. This concludes the contrapuntal skills required to begin to learn to improvise a fugue.

Chapters 9–16: Improvising Fugue

Mortensen finally introduces the subject of improvising fugue in Chapter 9, “Introduction to Improvised Fugue.” Here, he defines what he means by fugue: it is a contrapuntal work based on a single subject that has most or all of the following: the exposition, episodes, presentations of the subject, the pedal point, the stretto, and the final cadence (206–07). He focuses his historical discussion of fugal improvisation particularly on the *Fugue d’école* (academic fugue) of the nineteenth-century Paris Conservatory, where organ students were expected to improvise a fugue of a subject given to them with only minutes to prepare. As these students were not expected to improvise a countersubject on the spot, Mortensen too waives this requirement for improvising fugue (while also noting that most written fugues, in fact, do not have countersubjects).

The plan of this part of the book is simple. As fugues essentially begin with an exposition and then alternate between episodes and presentations of the subject before concluding with a pedal point and final cadence, with a stretto passage sometimes present, he addresses each of these sections in its own chapter. Chapter 10 summarizes the fugal form and sections by way of providing instruction on improvising a first fugue on a subject by Handel, and then he has a series of chapters on the exposition (Chapter 11), episode (Chapter 12), presentation (Chapter 13), stretto (Chapter 14),

and pedal point, cadenza, and ending (Chapter 15), respectively. The final chapter, “Improvising Fugue,” puts it all together (and also covers a few more advanced topics) to take a subject and turn it into a fully improvised fugue.

Everything in Chapters 9–16 flows naturally from Chapters 1–8, and without mastering the initial skills of playing partimenti, adding diminutions, playing imitative counterpoint where appropriate, improvising appropriate motives over simple sequential schemata (bicinium), and being able to recognize and take advantage of the invertible bass motions, even improvising a simple exposition on a simple subject is impossible. One must also be able to keep the subject in mind and be able to play it in any key and in any voice.

Mortensen provides plenty of examples of worked-out fugues, and one very important point must be kept in mind: improvised fugues are not masterpieces and will (probably) never rise to the level of composed fugues (especially of those by Bach). Mortensen’s examples make excellent use of diminution, motives from the subject, imitation, and invertible counterpoint, but the voices not active in any of these techniques are clearly still just realized partimento. This is really true of any eighteenth-century fugue, but it is more transparent in these improvised fugues.

Conclusion

Mortensen’s *Improvising Fugue* is the first work in a revitalized partimento tradition that attempts to teach fugal improvisation. In fact, it is the first published monograph that provides instruction on how to proceed step-by-step from partimento to a fully improvised work. One delightful aspect of Mortensen’s writing, in keeping with his pedagogical aim, is his use of the second person throughout. His regular use of *you* (and *we*) evokes a sense of him directly providing instruction to his reader. This instructional tone, along with the copious amount of practical material in the book, frequently makes the work feel like a personal lesson rather than a dry theoretical text. A drawback of Mortensen’s book is that it seems to be for a fairly niche audience: those with adequate keyboard skills (at the level of an upper-level conservatory piano student) who wish to use them to learn to improvise a fugue and will moreover commit to the countless hours it takes to master the requisite skills to even begin to improvise fugal sections. This sounds more like piano pedagogy than theory pedagogy; however, I wish to conclude this review with some additional value it has beyond (or even before) learning to improvise fugue.

First, Partimento is a growing field of study at the intersection of music theory, musicology, performance practice, and composition, but given its pedagogical nature there are still surprisingly few modern pedagogical works that attempt to teach it.⁶ The sheer number of examples, clear explanations, and worked-out solutions make *Improvising Fugue* an excellent resource for hands-on learning of partimento, especially for those who already have a basic understanding and want additional practice. The first five chapters are accessible to anyone who wants to learn figured bass and partimento, or who wants additional instruction without having to track down primary sources.

Second, *Improvising Fugue* also provides a much-needed account of how invertible counterpoint and fugue might be approached from a more-historically-grounded perspective. Too often, courses on counterpoint focus too much on species counterpoint (following Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*), which while important for learning counterpoint, does not account for the harmonic structure and flow that the partimento tradition offers. It is difficult to imagine a course on counterpoint using this book, but anyone who teaches such a course should be well-acquainted with it.

Finally, this book demonstrates a deeply *practical* music theory. In a recent chapter in *Cognate Music Theories*, Robert Gjerdingen has argued that knowledge of partimento (“basses to which a performer supplied one or more upper voices to create an improvised keyboard composition”) represents practical—or “artisanal”—knowledge of “a largely unwritten tradition taught through demonstration and repetition of stock musical patterns.”⁷ This echoes Andrew Goldman's more general argument for improvisation as “a way of knowing.”⁸ Improvisation through partimento was indeed one of the key ways of knowing, and learning and being able to teach this artisanal knowledge in the twenty-first century is key to fully appreciating the music of the past. *Improvising Fugue* represents an important step in the advancement of this pedagogical goal.

6 Two notable previous examples include Sanguinetti's *The Art of Partimento* (2012) and Ijzerman's *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento* (2018). *The Art of Partimento* includes over one hundred pages of instruction on how to realize partimento (Chapters 16–21) in addition to an earlier chapter on “The Rules” (Chapter 9). Sanguinetti even has an excellent chapter on the Fugue (Chapter 21), although it is more descriptive than instructive. *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento* provides instruction more appropriate for undergraduate music majors.

7 Gjerdingen (2024).

8 Goldman (2016).

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