

A Learner's Guide

WHO SHOULD READ THIS GUIDE

Anyone interested in developing their ability to perform partimenti and to improvise or compose in a classical style.

LEVEL 0: *Complete Beginner*

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE LEARNED FIRST

You should already know the most common key signatures, accidentals, the treble and bass clefs, the names of intervals, notes durations, and the other skills involved in reading standard music notation.

WHERE TO BEGIN

For centuries the art of European classical music was described in terms of intervals, and beginning around 1600 those intervals have been notated as arabic numerals above or below a bass part. So your first stop should be the lesson "The Basics of Figures."

LEVEL 1a: *First Steps*

LEARN SOME CORE PATTERNS

Cadences—the "punctuation marks" of classical music—occur every few measures in music of the type written by Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven. The lesson "Learning Cadences" will help you develop facility with three of the most common types of cadences.

Basses often move by step to the next tone up or down. Stepwise motion was so common that one of the first things taught to beginning musicians in the 18th and 19th centuries was something called the Rule of the Octave. This rule showed how to harmonize an ascending bass and a descending bass. Two lessons can help you with the Rule of the Octave. The first one, "An Illustrated Guide to the Rule of the Octave," gives an overview of the Rule and some explanation of the logic in its design. The final part of that lesson may be too advanced for beginners and can be omitted. The second lesson, "Learning the Rule of the Octave," will help you learn to hear each interval and chord in the Rule.

Knowing cadences and the Rule of the Octave will go a long way toward understanding how to approach a partimento. But that is true only if you thoroughly memorize these patterns. You should be able to sing, whistle, play them on an instrument, or play them at the keyboard (the ultimate goal), and you should practice them in several different keys and in both the major and minor modes. If you need to stop and think about what tones or chords come next, then you have not yet learned these patterns well enough. They should become second nature to you.

LEVEL 1b: Basic Realizations with Chords

LEARN THE RULEBOOKS

Regole (pronounced “RAY-go-lay”) is the Italian word for “rules,” but in the world of partimenti it means “a book of rules.” Many of the important masters wrote out rulebooks for their students. Each of them covered the basic subjects (cadences, Rule of the Octave, etc.) and several of the more advanced subjects. None of them covered everything, so it can be helpful to read and study more than one rulebook. Of the ones on this website, the clearest, easiest, and the one with written-out realizations is by Giovanni Furno (Partimenti>Collections>Furno). Once you finish Furno’s *Method*, you should proceed to study the rulebook of Giacomo Insanguine, and then the rulebook of Fenaroli. Fenaroli’s is the most thorough and detailed. It can be hard for a beginner, but should be easier if you have already absorbed the material in Furno and Insanguine’s books.

YOUR FIRST REALIZATIONS

One of the goals of partimento training is improvisation—being able to make up your own music in the moment. Because improvisation takes a high level of skill to do well, partimenti provide “training wheels.”

The strongest training wheels are provided by figures. An experienced partimento player does not need them, but they can be very helpful to a beginner. They may provide that extra degree of confidence that allows a novice to move forward. More subtle training wheels are provided by the partimento itself. By providing continuity, what Mozart’s father called *il filo* (the “thread”), the partimento gives you a path to follow and guided practice in shaping a fluent musical work.



Because sample realizations are provided in its Appendix, the *Method* of Furno contains partimenti that are good first challenges for beginners. Try providing chords on a treble staff—two, three, or four notes above each note in the bass—for partimenti numbers one through six, and then compare what you have done with the sample realizations in the Appendix. Because a partimento bass can be realized in thousands of ways, all of which might be acceptable, your realization will probably be somewhat different than what appears in the Appendix. But check to see that your chords are similar. If they are very different, try to understand why the solution in the Appendix is the way it is.

After working through the first six partimenti of Furno, you should switch to the partimenti provided in the *Rules* of Insanguine. They have ample figures, and the focus of each partimento example is made clear in the preceding text.

When you feel confident about the partimenti in Insanguine’s *Rules*, you can move on to Book 1 of Fenaroli’s partimenti.

NOTE: When practicing partimenti, take a tempo slow enough that you do not hesitate between tones in the bass. If you find yourself starting, stopping, starting, and so forth, you are going too fast!

LEVEL 2: More Melodic Realizations

AN IDEAL TEXTURE

As you become more comfortable with simple partimenti, begin to learn the typical right-hand patterns of decoration laid out in Francesco Durante's Embellished Basses (*Partimenti diminuiti*). In imagining an ideal texture, think of Domenical Scarlatti's harpsichord sonatas, not J. S. Bach's chorales. Partimenti in fast note values were likely written for the harpsichord. Partimenti with long note values and ties that extend over several measures were likely written for the organ.

OTHER WAYS FORWARD

A variety of small partimenti, many with chromatic passages, can be found in Mattei's Piccolo Basso ("Little Bass"). Each poses an interesting musical problem for the performer. Their brevity, however, helps to limit their difficulty. They also provide practice in reading more complex figures. In style they are typical of the Beethoven period.

As you experiment with various partimenti on this website, you may begin to notice passages where the bass performs a motive and then pauses on a long tone. This is often a cue to repeat that motive in the melody. The higher levels of partimenti presume a polyphonic give and take between the bass and melody.

Among the most advanced partimenti are the partimento fugues. Though we have little historical information about how these works were performed by students, the best advice may be to keep the texture thin. Do not attempt to perform a four-voice fugue with all four voices sounding all the time. This is bad practice even in written-out fugues, and almost surely fatal for improvised partimento fugues.