

## Applying Partimento to Keyboard Improvisation in Romantic Styles:

### Problems and Strategies

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How does the improviser need to modify the basic harmonies and simple keyboard textures of the partimento tradition in order to create music in Romantic styles? This workshop will address specific adaptations that transform the language of partimento into that of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism.

While Romantic music uses most of the harmonic and contrapuntal devices of the Partimento tradition, certain innovations differentiate Romantic music from that of earlier eras, a few of which are listed below.

- Melody: Non-harmonic tones on strong beats in melodies;
- Harmony: Enharmonicity, common tone resolutions, distant key areas, chromatic mediant relationships, omnibus progressions, cadential avoidance, chromatic voice leading;
- Keyboard Style: Voices are not confined to their original tessitura but displaced across the keyboard, doubled at one or more octaves, and embedded within inventive and difficult virtuoso figurations;
- Rhetorical Extremes: Drama, expressiveness, intensity, playfulness, fury, etc, must all be heightened.

The elements listed above must all happen at the same time; for example, extended harmony must precipitate from virtuosic textures and evoke rhetorical extremes. Additionally, because composers developed highly individual keyboard style, it can be difficult to improvise in a “generic” 19<sup>th</sup> century style. One is likely (intentionally or not) to evoke the styles of specific, recognizable composers. When one does not wish to sound like a specific composer, one should have available a “library” of keyboard figurations that sound broadly derived from Romantic music yet without qualities idiomatic to any particular composer.

Students of improvisation frequently encounter the problems of continuity and form. In order to justify its own existence, a musical improvisation must convey a sense of narrative – that is, a compelling reason for continuing. Yet students often find themselves merely cycling through a series of harmonic devices, without any goal. In order to remedy this problem, students should be aware of typical forms of the Romantic era. Among the most convenient is the character piece, which is simply an A-B-A structure. After the presentation of theme A, the digression to Theme B will sound like a development. Thereafter, the return to A will sound like a recapitulation. This “sonata-in-miniature” is an effective dramatic structure yet only requires the improviser to have two ideas. Even more simply, the prelude is comprised of a brief exploration of a single idea, perhaps only a few phrases long.

Practical Exercise in Combining Romantic Harmonic Elements  
with Keyboard Figuration

Using the keyboard patterns provided, create short preludes which employ traditional bass motions as well as elements of enharmonicity, common tone resolutions, distant key areas, chromatic mediant relationships, omnibus progressions, cadential avoidance, chromatic voice leading. It is not necessary to include every element in a short prelude! Just choose two or three.

It should be fairly easy to adapt the keyboard figurations below to any harmonic structure.

Moscheles, Prelude #7

Schubert, Impromptu in G-flat

Chopin, Prelude Op 28 no. 9

Schumann, Romance Op 28 no. 1



Andante mosso. (♩ = 84)

3.

*pp*  
20

*p*

*cresc.*  
*p*

*p*  
3

*p*  
3

**Nº 9.** *Largo*

*f*

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

*cres.*

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

*ff* *decres.* *p*

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

*cres.* *ritenuto.* *ff*

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

*All. molto*

Sehr markirt. (M. M.  $\text{♩} = 88$ .)

The musical score is presented in six systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature consists of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo and performance instruction are 'Sehr markirt. (M. M.  $\text{♩} = 88$ .)'. The score begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a 'p.w.' (piano with wood) marking in the first system. The music is characterized by a consistent eighth-note rhythmic pattern in the right hand, often with slurs and accents. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment with chords and single notes. The piece ends with a final cadence in the sixth system.