



REVIEW: BOOK

Child Composers in the Old Conservatories: How Orphans Became Elite Musicians

Robert O. Gjerdingen

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020

pp. 355, ISBN 978 0 190 65359 0

Adeline Mueller

Department of Music, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, USA

amueller@mtholyoke.edu

Robert O. Gjerdingen is among the musicologists who have helped loosen the grip of romanticism and mid-century modernism from scholars' and performers' approaches to European music from the long eighteenth century. His books *A Classic Turn of Phrase: Music and the Psychology of Convention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) and *Music in the Galant Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), along with numerous articles and papers on music theory, cognition and perception, have demonstrated both the ubiquity and the salience of galant schemata – those stock musical phrases with which musicians navigated the rich, wide borderlands between convention and invention, performance, improvisation and composition. In doing so, he gives us an insider's perspective on the building-blocks of common-practice tonality. Now a new generation of scholars, including Giorgio Sanguinetti, Nicholas Baragwanath and Peter van Tour, are publishing critical editions of surviving manuscripts of partimenti and solfeggi; and series like *Monuments of Partimento Realizations* (Visby: Wessmans Musikförlag, 2017–) and Gjerdingen's own *Monuments of Partimenti* (partimenti.org), as well as publications, recordings, videos and online resources by performer-scholars like Robert Levin, Nicoleta Paraschivescu, Ewald Demeyere, L'Arpeggiata and the Scroll Ensemble, offer students, scholars and aficionados a trove of materials with which to explore this tradition.

In his new book, *Child Composers in the Old Conservatories*, Gjerdingen takes a step back from the *what* of galant schemata to examine the *how*: how exactly did apprentice composers learn these tools of their trade? What was their curriculum, how were they assessed and how were the rules and norms transmitted (and modified) down the generations? In a wide-ranging study that encompasses source studies, archival documents and a generous helping of analogies from Charles Dickens to Pixar, Gjerdingen retraces the steps of composers working out and working through the formulae as they learned and taught musical phrasing. Along the way, he paints portraits of a host of noteworthy apprentices and masters in this craft.

The geographical and temporal scope of Gjerdingen's book is wide. He focuses primarily on the eighteenth-century tradition at the four boys' conservatories in Naples, with a second focus being the Paris Conservatoire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This represents, as Gjerdingen notes, a largely unbroken tradition of some 250 years, extending from the late seventeenth-century *intavolature* of Gaetano Greco and partimenti of Bernardo Pasquini all the way to the *chant donné* realizations of Claude Debussy (1879) and the first-prize harmony realization of the little-known Colette Boyer (1938). The dual focus on Naples and Paris – with occasional detours to Bologna, Regensburg, Vienna and Montpellier – makes for frequent abrupt leaps between cities and centuries, and some recapitulation of concepts and themes across chapters. A timeline of sources, or map of the institutions and centres surveyed, might have been helpful for orienting the reader, as might a family

tree visualizing the many lines of influence Gjerdingen notes between generations of instructors and students at these conservatories.

Despite its title, Gjerdingen's book is not so much a history of the conservatories or their students as a history of a system of musical education. His demystifying approach is welcome; as he says in one of the 101 (!) accompanying videos on the "Child Composers" YouTube channel, 'It may seem like magic to us, but [the ability to realize partimenti] was the result of a high degree of mental training' (Video 1.2, <https://youtu.be/7LwjTZTSDsc>). Partimenti gave conservatory students 'structured play' in 'the game of composition' (24), and Gjerdingen offers us courtside seats to a number of captivating drills and matchups. Overall the book makes a compelling case for reviving this system of musical training as a tool of musicianship and performance-practice pedagogy – a case that is somewhat undercut by nostalgic polemics about modern American collegiate music curricula, the recording industry in the digital age and popular music.

Gjerdingen divides the book into four parts that roughly follow the path of an apprentice composer growing up in the conservatory tradition. Part 1 ('Children in Need') gives an overview of the institutions and some of their students/apprentices and composers/masters. Two boys serve as representatives of their respective institutions: Domenico Cimarosa (1749–1801) for Naples and Henri Busser (1872–1973) for the Paris Conservatoire. This allows Gjerdingen to introduce the reader to some aspects of the organization of, and daily life at, these conservatories, as well as master composers such as Francesco Durante, Leonardo Leo and Fedele Fenaroli (he treats Paris in greater detail in part 4).

Part 2 ('Technologies of Training') covers the six elements Gjerdingen identifies as central to curricula of the conservatories, with a chapter each on schemata, solfeggi, partimenti, counterpoint, *intavolature* and dispositions (multi-part arrangements), along with their French counterparts. Here Gjerdingen makes a productive analogy with John Sinclair's 'idiom principle' of language production (130–132), and with immersion methods of language acquisition (136). Part 3 ('Trial by Contest') treats the assessment of students' mastery of the conservatory curriculum through tests and prize contests. Here the book's scales tip toward Paris, with an informative comparison of four entries in the harmony contest of 1877 (212–216). Part 4 ('Transforming Commonplaces') addresses the ways composers could move from draft sketch to painted masterpiece. This section features extended digressions on visual formulas in the teaching of drawing (chapter 18) and a long description of the curriculum at the *École des Beaux-Arts* (chapter 20), followed by a presentation of primary sources on the curriculum, rules and regulations for Conservatoire students. I must confess I did not get a strong sense of the 'transformation of commonplaces' when it came to the music examples, beyond the brief discussion of Maurice Ravel's use of a particular schema in No. 7 of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911) (306–309 and Video 21.4, https://youtu.be/gA3TX_1TTy0).

Turning to the book as an object of use, I puzzled over its large format, wide margins and lavish illustrations. Gjerdingen thanks the Kaplan Institute at Northwestern University for helping to fund the illustrations – I expect we also have them to thank for the book's modest price of \$35 when it could easily have been twice that amount. The textbook format made sense for *Music in the Galant Style*, and many may also wish to read this volume at the keyboard. But it does not present itself as a text for classroom instruction, as do Giorgio Sanguinetti's *The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and particularly Job IJzerman's *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento: A New Method Inspired by Old Masters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Gjerdingen's book also lacks some of the necessary apparatus to maximize its utility for undergraduate courses, such as a glossary, as we find in Nicholas Baragwanath's *The Solfeggio Tradition: A Forgotten Art of Melody in the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). Adding to the length is the fact that each chapter begins with a delightful but frequently extended digression that offers the reader a point of reference, if often an anachronistic one. As someone who also owes much of her early education to Walt Disney (83) and loves *Forbidden Planet* (16), I found such analogies engaging but often distracting.

Scholars will find the existing apparatus useful, with some caveats. The 'For Further Study' section in the Appendix is split into suggestions for children, older teens and college students, and scholars. But this, and the minimal notes, do not obviate the need for a comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The extended catalogue of supplementary videos on the YouTube channel is extremely helpful, though the videos lack embedded subtitles or transcripts, which would have enhanced their accessibility. Within the text, many of the longer block quotes were left unglossed; I often found myself wishing for more complete citations for many of the images, and endnotes for more of the sources mentioned. Several names were missing from the index (Emmanuele Guarnaccia, Madeleine Jaeger and Joséphine Boulay, for instance). Many terms already introduced are again given translations or pronunciations later in the book – again, a glossary or index of terms would have helped here.

The aforementioned polemics about 'popular styles' (7), avant-garde music (97) and the 'dumbing down' of the college curriculum (16) detract from the argument, as do some uneasy generalizations about countries (275), 'selfie' culture (314) and the 'general absence of female instrumentalists from the concert stage prior to the twentieth century' (77) – Regina Strinasacchi, Clara Schumann, Teresa Carreño and the many nineteenth-century women's orchestras are just some of the notable exceptions that come to mind. There is some outdated language in the sections discussing gender (63, 77–78, 143, 234), and the chapter on Boyer and her extraordinary prize composition bears a title that essentializes and exoticizes her disability. I wished for more discussion of a rare manuscript from one of the Venice *ospedali* which contains the realization of a *scaletta* (232 and Video 16.6, <https://youtu.be/Fis4p0iyfno>); as Gjerdingen remarks, few manuscript lessons in composition survive, since the girls and young women in Venice's conservatories were not being prepared for professional positions as composers or chapel masters, as in Naples. I also would have liked more discussion of the segregated classes for men and women at the Paris Conservatoire (233–234), and how this affected the materials and exercises with which they engaged; scholars such as Annegret Fauser and Katherine Ellis have laid the foundation for further research in this area.

Finally, I had some reservations about Gjerdingen's evidence for the treatment of boys in the Naples orphanages (12, 64). I did not expect this book to be a sociological or economic history of orphans, orphanages or the foundling system. But Thomas Max Safley, in *Charity and Economy in the Orphanages of Early Modern Augsburg* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1997), has warned against a reliance on prescriptive literature, which can often lead to an overly rosy or at least one-sided picture of the lived experiences of orphans and foundlings. Some acknowledgment of this gap, or perhaps some information from the institutional archives of the orphanages, might have given a more nuanced picture of the status of children in Naples. In short, I would have expected a book with a title such as this one to engage more with the methodologies of scholarship on childhood – examining how historical institutions of learning enculturate and socialize children and uphold norms, values and traditions, and searching, if inconclusively, for evidence of the child as a 'social actor in historical sources' (Harry Hendrick, 'The Child as a Social Actor in Historical Sources: Problems of Identification and Interpretation', in *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, ed. Pia Christensen and Allison James (London: Routledge, 2008), 40–65).

Gjerdingen's use of secondary sources is idiosyncratic. His main interlocutor for child apprenticeship and labour is from 1912 (181–182), and for music-education reform is from 1926 (313–316). Older sources are by no means problematic in and of themselves, merely deserving of a critical consideration that would also encompass more recent publications. The final chapter, 'Learning Old Music in a New Age of Digital Reproduction', does not appear to take into account the multiple scholar-performer-instructors who are already reintroducing partimenti and historical improvisation into college and conservatory curricula, with great success. In addition to the practitioners and sources already cited, Peter Schubert's and Michael Callahan's contributions to Massimiliano Guido's edited volume *Studies in Historical Improvisation from 'Cantare super Librum' to 'Partimenti'* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) demonstrate the efficacy of introducing partimenti into the twenty-first-century classroom.

Notwithstanding some moments at which Gjerdingen seems to lose ‘authorial control’ – incidentally, a point that Kofi Agawu had made in his 1991 review of *A Classic Turn of Phrase* (*Music Theory Spectrum* 13/1 (1991), 112) – *Child Composers in the Old Conservatories* still paints a vivid portrait of this musical tradition, one that Gjerdingen adeptly reverse-engineers so that readers can recover, or at least approach, the ‘embodied knowledge’ (323) cultivated by past generations of students. As someone who puzzled delightedly over Fux’s species-counterpoint exercises as an undergraduate, and who learned to read *Kurrentschrift* thanks to a writing workshop at the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem that was based on eighteenth-century method books (we even cut our own quills), I can attest to both the value and the sheer pleasure of immersing oneself in a learning method from the distant past. Whether it’s a seven-year-old Alma Deutscher ‘trading fours’ with Tobias Cramm at the organ (Video 22.1, <https://youtu.be/90Yn1WbIbTk>), or a pop or hip-hop elaboration of the Romanesca schema, we can all, with Gjerdingen, appreciate a well-honed ‘ability to think in music’ (231).

Adeline Mueller is Assistant Professor of Music at Mount Holyoke College. Her book *Mozart and the Mediation of Childhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021) examines Mozart’s role in the social and cultural re-evaluation of childhood during the Austrian Enlightenment. She has published articles in *Eighteenth-Century Music*, *Opera Quarterly* and *Frontiers in Communication*, and has contributed chapters to such edited volumes as *Mozart in Context* (ed. Simon P. Keefe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)) and *The Cambridge Companion to ‘The Magic Flute’* (forthcoming, 2022).