

PAUL VIDAL  
NADIA BOULANGER

A COLLECTION OF GIVEN BASSES  
AND MELODIES

I

Triads

The 5/3 Chord (Root Position)  
The 6/3 Chord (First Inversion)  
The 6/4 Chord (Second Inversion)  
The Diminished Triad

SELECTED, REVISED AND REALISED  
by  
NARCÍS BONET



FONDATION INTERNATIONALE  
NADIA ET LILI BOULANGER

A COLLECTION OF GIVEN BASSES AND MELODIES - I

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## Preface

All who have had the privilege of being in Nadia Boulanger's charge have been able to see for themselves just how much importance she attached to technique. Mastery of all the basic mechanisms – whether in the areas of composition, score-reading or instrumental control – was the essential pathway, as she saw it, for gaining access to a higher dimension in our art. Rather than indulging in grandiose flights of eloquence, she concentrated on making sure we knew our trade.

For this reason, the work of Narcís Bonet, who studied under her close supervision, emerges as such a treasure: enabling young students today to become acquainted with the two Paul Vidal collections – tried and tested many times over! – is a judicious initiative. No one was better placed than Narcís Bonet to make a sound selection of the finest bass and melody lines, and to add indications for realising them. Just as Nadia Boulanger made us learn chord progressions off by heart, using these collections will give earnest, tenacious students vital automatic reflexes.

The Nadia and Lili Boulanger International Foundation is particularly pleased to lend its backing to this publication, which gives a new lease on life to the teachings that we received with such veneration and such gratitude.

Dominique Merlet

*President, Fondation Internationale  
Nadia et Lili Boulanger*

## Preface

The Basses and Melodies of Paul Vidal have long been a secret common thread linking several generations of musicians in La Boulangerie to a unique tradition of harmonic training which was focused primarily on perfecting the difficult art of listening.

To me, it was this unrelenting quest for sensitive ears that made the true greatness of master teacher Nadia Boulanger. Through her, the Vidal Basses and Melodies have been the primary tool for teaching harmony. For a fortunate few, they have been kept alive as a precious treasure from an earlier tradition of mentorship training in which knowledge and awareness were brought forth from a student through the alchemy of dedicated work and a sensitive teacher.

It is without a doubt that all of us who worked slavishly on the realizations to these Basses and Melodies profited from a unique opportunity to feel that, in the Boulanger approach, it wasn't rules we were after but rather principles to discover, standards to hear and formulate and sonorities to understand.

As a young student, I had the greatest fortune to study these Vidal Basses and Melodies in depth with three of Nadia Boulanger's closest disciples of which nobody could have been more influential to my ear than Narcis Bonet.

Narcis Bonet is unique among Nadia's disciples in that he not only was thoroughly trained and beloved by her but also went on to explore the principles behind her teaching. Being an excellent pedagogue himself, Narcis Bonet made me feel that I was part of a living tradition of musical excellence. Through his sensitive teaching, these Vidal Basses and Melodies became vital, relevant, fertile and full of opportunities to discover and appreciate harmonic truths and insights.

Now, with this new edition, the Vidal Basses and Melodies selected and realized by Narcis Bonet can at last be made available to a new generation of musicians. The careful selection and excellent realizations by this great teacher have finally brought these gems of harmonic training to the broader musical community.

To the motivated student these volumes will be an endless resource of great harmonic training and wisdom. It is my belief that to the talented young ear, this work will bring sustenance, musical awareness, discernment and subtlety, and that music students across the world will at last be able to be part of the great tradition of musical training that was Nadia Boulanger.

Dr. Philip Lasser

*Composer*

*Professor in Counterpoint, Harmony and Composition at The Juilliard School  
Director of the European American Musical Alliance (EAMA) Summer Music Programs in Paris*

## Historical Introduction

The tradition of figured bass realization enjoys a long and lively history. And the use of numbers to describe the phenomena of musical sound extends much farther back, at least to Pythagoras in the fourth century BC. Numbers of vibrations per second produce pitch, ratios between a fundamental tone and its harmonics define the intervals and chords of the tonal system, and composers use mathematical proportions to create both small- and large-scale structures. Between musical tones and numbers there appears to be an irresistible, intimate, even indissoluble union.

Thus, it comes as no surprise to the educated musician, upon opening a manual like this, that numbers as well as notes fill its pages. To the uninitiated these exercises are locked in code. The work of highly trained insiders - the *partimentisti* - of which Paul Vidal, Nadia Boulanger and Narcis Bonet are three provides guidance for deciphering the code. Even to the experienced, the questions of where this tradition arose and how it flourished might present themselves. Here follows a brief historical perspective, with emphasis on France in the 19th century.

With the advent of Baroque style early in the 17th century, the practice of providing shorthand figures for the intervals and chords to be played above an accompanying bass line began. Although three works with figured bass were published in Florence and Rome in 1600, in the preface to his *Cento concerti ecclesiastici* (1602), Lodovico Viadana claims to have invented the term *basso continuo* to describe this process and seems to be the first to use it in print. One of the most celebrated instruction manuals for the realization of figured bass is Agostino Agazzari's *Del sonare sopra il basso* (1607). Exactly when and where instructional exercises began to be referred to as *partimenti* is unknown. However, given that arithmetic division in 16th century Italy was known as *partimento* and that the columns of numbers one finds in figured bass exercises bear a striking resemblance to the columns of figures in the tables of 16th century arithmetic handbooks, the reference is felicitous. Certainly, from the end of the 17th century on, the conservatories of Naples were the wellspring for the development of the *partimento* repertoire. And *partimenti* became not so much exercises in the art of accompaniment as springboards to the composition of self-contained pieces.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 18th century, mastery of *partimenti* became an indispensable component in the training of Italian musicians. Knowledge of the technique spread across Europe, reaching places as far-flung as Edinburgh (Pasquali, 1757) and St. Petersburg (Paisiello, 1782).<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, around the turn of the 19th century, in post-revolutionary France, the faculty of the newlyfounded Conservatoire de Paris turned to Italian pedagogical methods for its curricula. In the influential texts of Alexandre Choron (1804 and 1808), for example, one finds extensive reproductions of basses of some of the most famous *partimentisti*, e. g., Carlo Cotumacci, Francesco Durante and Fedele Fenaroli. Later, as Director of the Conservatoire from 1822 to 1841, Luigi Cherubini, having been trained in *partimenti* in Bologna, contributed to the school's pedagogical literature with copious original basses, sequences and melodies. Thereafter, exercises composed by Conservatoire professors and graduating students--Delibes, Franck, Thomas and Widor among them--displaced the Italian models, filling the Harmony and Accompaniment curricula with newer, homegrown material.

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(1) Thomas Christensen's research on thorough-bass as theory and compositional practice is seminal.

(2) See the work of Rosa Cafiero, Robert Gjerdingen and Giorgio Sanguinetti for the development and diffusion of the Italian tradition.

At the turn of the 20th century, a crisis arose in French music pedagogy: style was radically changing and, in the opinion of some, training was stifled by academicism. Debussy, in an interview with *Le Figaro*, complained: “The teaching of harmony [at the Conservatoire] seems to me to be completely defective” (1909). Others sought to preserve tradition. Pierre Constant, longtime Secretary of the Conservatoire, assembled for the School’s centennial anniversary his massive collection, *Basses et chants donnés aux examens et concours des classes d’harmonie et d’accompagnement (années 1827-1900)*. In 1904, Paul Vidal published a complete edition of the exercises of Cherubini.

In the midst of this turbulent zeitgeist, Vidal composed the exercises reproduced here. And it was in his classroom that Mlle Boulanger received her training. Truly remarkable is the unbroken continuity with the tradition and its high standards that Boulanger provided to generations of students well into the second half of the 20th century, often in the face of considerable scorn. (I recall hearing her methods described as “French provincial.”) While acknowledging that many of her students had no aspiration to compose and that even for those who did style had changed, she held fast to the belief that the study of *partimento* is indispensable for clear thinking, a keen ear and judicious taste.

Today, while 21st-century composers seek classical training and fashion neo-tonal languages, we who agree with the Expressionist Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí that “to be original one must return to one’s origins” (as Narcis Bonet himself once related)--we pay homage to Vidal, Boulanger and Bonet for their dedication to keeping the *partimento* tradition alive.

Donna Doyle, M. M.

*Student of Nadia Boulanger in Fontainebleau and Paris, France*

*Student of Narcis Bonet in Fontainebleau, France*

*Fontainebleau Schools Alumni Association, President Emeritus*

*Fontainebleau Schools Associations, Trustee*

*Queens College, Adjunct Instructor*

*City University of New York, NY USA*

## Introduction

Here at long last are published the “Basses et Chants donnés” (Given Bases and Melodies) by Paul Vidal (1863-1931) which over the years have served to nourish several generations of students of Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) followed by the students of her students.

Paul Vidal, composer (Rome Prize in 1883), conductor and professor at the Conservatoire Nationale Supérieur de Musique de Paris, wrote these “Given Bases and Melodies” for students in his accompagnement class of which Nadia Boulanger was one. She transcribed these exercises by hand and had her own students then copy them down as well.

It was in the 1950's that at her apartment Rue Ballu <sup>(1)</sup>, I myself copied down these same exercises from a manuscript that was itself surreptitiously taken from the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau, Nadia Boulanger's school where in 1979, I was to succeed her as Director. In the library of the Conservatory, I discovered a complete copy which I later found out from Nadia to be in the hand of Cécile Armagnac, perhaps the most faithful of Nadia's faithful students and helpers, who was herself Administrative Director, until her death, of the Nadia and Lili Boulanger Foundation. In this copy, which I jealously guard, I found several corrections in Nadia Boulanger's hand.

The cumbersome task of photocopying combined with my feeling of indebtedness towards both Nadia Boulanger and Paul Vidal, compelled me to propose the following edition of these “Given Bases and Melodies” duly revised, selected and presented with suggestions for their realization which are essential for the successful completion of these exercises. I hope, in this manner, to transmit faithfully Nadia Boulanger's pedagogical legacy to future generations of musicians and thus to acquit myself of my indebtedness to her teaching.

Just as these books were about to go to press and right after I had given a talk on the subject at the Colloque International sur Nadia et Lili Boulanger in October of 2004 at the Académie Musicale de Villecroze, my friend and colleague Jean-Louis Haguénauer revealed to me that he had in his possession a notebook of the same bases and melodies of Paul Vidal. It included an appendix of sixteen bases written by Nadia Boulanger herself. In the second appendix there were ten bases on altered chords and delayed resolutions by an unknown author, and a third appendix of sixteen bases under the title “miscellaneous”. This discovery delayed the release of this edition, but has unquestionably enriched it by the presence of the only exercises we have that were composed by Nadia Boulanger, and which are presented here with my realizations.

This publication has been made possible thanks to the strong support of Francesca Galofré, Director of DINSIC Publicacions Musicals, S.L. and a former student of the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau.

It seemed to me preferable not to present all of Vidal's numerous exercises, but to present a selection of the best and most useful ones –those which I use in my own harmony classes.

Thus I selected 20 of the 29 bases and 12 of his 19 melodies for root position chords; 20 of his 30 bases and 6 of the 8 melodies studying first inversion chords. I chose however to keep all 20 Bases and 6 melodies which study the second inversion (six-four) chord.

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(1) Nadia Boulanger lived at 36, rue Ballu in 9th arrondissement of Paris (now named Place Lili Boulanger) until her death in 1979.

Of the 14 basses on the diminished triad, I chose 10 though both of the 2 melodies Vidal writes to study this chord are kept. The 28 basses on Dominant seventh chords are reduced to 20, the 15 basses dealing with the other seventh chords are reduced to 10; the 9 basses on the dominant ninth chord are reduced to 8; the 8 basses on the leading-tone dominant chord reduced to 5, and the 18 basses on the diminished seventh chord reduced to 15. I kept in their entirety the “Partimenti” (basses with occasional melodic suggestions) which deal with all chords and the 2 basses which deal with the augmented-sixth chord.

The purpose of these exercises is to help students acquire the reflexes necessary to realize immediately these basses and melodies at the keyboard. This explains the repeated use of certain sequence patterns and progressions. One should not seek to vary needlessly their realization, which inevitably leads to errors, but to seek their best and most natural realization.

For those basses dealing with root positions triads, I suggest, before beginning any of the exercises to first do a rapid analysis of the bass in order to locate all the cadences, the sequences (always determinant of the correct disposition of the chords) and the progressions V-VI (deceptive cadence) and VI-II-V which enables one to change the disposition of chords <sup>(2)</sup>. Following, by way of example, is the analysis of the 1st given bass for root position triads:

The image shows two musical staves in bass clef. The first staff contains a sequence of chords labeled IV, II, V, followed by a section labeled 'march'. The second staff contains a sequence of chords labeled V, VI, IV, II, V, VI, also starting with a 'march' section. The notation includes notes and bar lines.

Furthermore, in order to facilitate the immediate realization of the root position basses and to avoid doubts in choosing the correct path to take when one comes to tricky “intersections”, I have added to Vidal’s symbols a few of my own, placed above the bass (Vidal’s numbers always being situated below the bass-line), indicating the correct disposition of the chord or the best succession of chords which will engender the most logical and best realization.

Finally, I suggest that one should practice realizing some of the exercises also in transposition to an altered version of the original key: i.e. to realize in D-flat, a bass originally written in D, in A-flat a bass written in A or in F-sharp a bass written in F. This should not incur too much difficulty as only the key signature has changed and no new clefs are needed to read the bass. This work is most beneficial for consolidating one’s knowledge of and familiarity with less often used keys.

Narcis Bonet

(2) For a complete understanding of chord disposition, I advise students to read my book, Les Principes fondamentaux de l’Harmonie (DINSIC Publicacions Musicals, S.L.).



# The 5/3 chord-root position

## Basses

1

2

# The 5/3 chord-root position triad

## Melodies

1

9

17

2

7

3

# The 6/3 chord-first inversion

## Basses

1

6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

11 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

2

5 6 5 6 5 6 5 6 5 6 5 6 5 6

6 6 6 5 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

11 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

# The 6/3 chord-first inversion Melodies

1

4

8

11

15

19

## Photocopying books is illegal • VBB1A

# The 6/4 chord-second inversion Melodies

1

6

10

14

18

# The diminished triad

## Basses

1

5 +6 6 5 5 +6 6 5 5 +6 6 5 6 5 5

5 5 +6 6 5 6 6 6 5 6 6 6 4 # 5

9 +6 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 +6 6 5 5 #

13 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 6

17 #6 6 6 6 6 6 6 5 5 6 6 6 5 5 6

+4 +4 +4 +4 4 +4

# The diminished triad

## Melodies

1

5

10

15

20

25



## Index

Preface by Dominique Merlet .....	3
Historical Introduction by Donna Doyle.....	5
Preface by Philip Lasser .....	7
Introduciont by Narcis Bonet .....	9
 <b>The 5/3 chord-root position</b>	
Basses .....	11
Melodies.....	31
 <b>The 6/3 chord-first inversion</b>	
Basses .....	40
Melodies.....	60
 <b>The 6/4 chord-second inversion</b>	
Basses .....	69
Melodies.....	102
 <b>The diminished triad</b>	
Basses .....	115
Melodies.....	131