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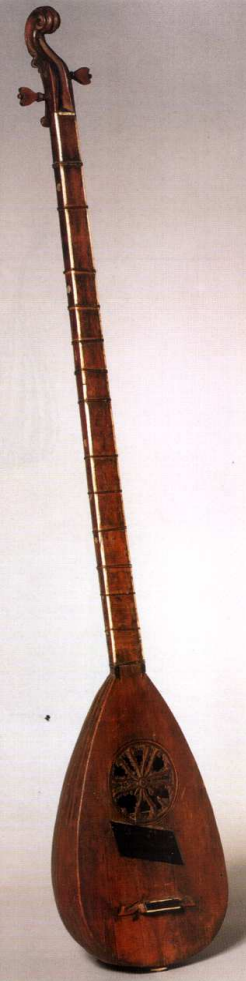
Is the “colascioncino” the
eighteenth-century ancestor of
“Cremonese” or “Bresciano” mandolin?

*A new iconographic source, a new hypothesis
of philological reconstruction.*



Background history

About "colascione" it has been written so much, but less we know certainly concerning to executive procedure; equally less known is the use of "colascioncino" - the smallest instrument of the family - and "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin, of which few written music has come there only, to forehead of reliable historical traces, about a very diffused use between the XVIII and the beginning of the XIX century.



It is a prevailing opinion that "colascione" was rather present in popular and carnival circle, in the central-southern Italy, mainly between the XVII and the XVIII century, with use proofs up to the half of the XX century¹. The "colascione" was one of the best-used instruments within "Commedia dell'arte". Further to some preserved samples in historical instruments collections, we can find diffused literary and iconographic citations, but unfortunately, very few written music, as it was an instrument used mainly for accompaniment and improvisations.

Less known is the diffusion of this instrument - in "colascioncino" size - in the North of Italy, especially in the XVIII century, in aristocratic or however cultured circles. As a testimony of this, besides some iconographic "salon flavour" representations, Mariella Sala and Ugo Orlandi² have mentioned several studies on the "Accademie de' nobili"³ (Noble's academies), from which results that in these Colleges - generally managed from Religious, and especially from the Jesuits - risen for the education of the managing class of that epoch, besides the classical curricular teachings, were imparted also optional teachings, for instance: disciplines of weapons, dance, rhetoric and, naturally, music. One of the most liked instruments, among the ones taught in the half of XVIII century, was the mandolin - in that epoch very popular - and in some other cases also the "colascioncino".

Very published in the same period was the success all over Europe of Colla Brothers, who exhibited themselves in theatres and in the most important salons, with "colascioncino" and guitar. Domenico Colla left us the unique, today known testimony, of written music for "colascioncino"⁴.

Regarding to "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin, its invention is attributed for the more to Bortolazzi, author also of the first mandolin method in German language, written at the beginning of the XIX century⁵, in which this mandolin model is mentioned and commended, but this option is not so reliable.



Carlo II. Reale, Re di Napoli *Matteo Ottoboni, Sculp. Gio: B. 1752.*

Domenico con suo Fratello Bresciani
Il primo, che è di faccia Monia mirabilmente il Calascione a due corde l'altro che è di Sigena, l'accompagnava con la Chitarra furono nel Mese di Aprile 1705. nell Palazzo di Venezia, dove Sua Maestà il Re di Prussia, le volle ambedue a Sonare.

1. For example in Abruzzo testimonies show the use of "colascione" at least up to the '900 half. See: M.Gioielli, Notizie sul colascione e la mandola in Molise, in "Utriculus", IX, n.36, 2005; M.Gioielli, Quattro colascionate, in "Utriculus", X, n.39, 2006. More in general about the presence of "Colascione" in southern popular circle, of recent publication: Fedele Depalma, 'O re de li stromiente, ed. Grifo, 2010, but the bibliography is rather ample.
2. M. Sala, Associazionismo mandolinistico a Brescia: una storia tenace and U.Orlandi, Il mandolino bresciano. Both these studies are published in Il mandolino a Brescia, a cura di Ugo Orlandi, Edizioni Franciacorta, 2002. To Ugo Orlandi, concert musician and known researcher it is owed for a long time a great deal a tenacious work of exploitation of the "Bresciano" mandolin, also through historically founded studies.
3. Teatro e musica nel '700 estense, a cura di G. Vecchi e M. Calore, ed. Olschki, 1994; Ugo Vaglia, L'accademia dei Formati a Brescia nel sec. XVIII, in Brixia sacra, A. III, n.1, 1968; M.T. Rosa Barezzani, La pratica strumentale nelle feste accademiche del settecento, in Cultura Religione e politica nell'età di angelo Maria Querini, Morcelliana, 1982; Gian Paolo Brizzi, La formazione della classe dirigente nel Sei-Settecento, Il Mulino, 1976.
4. *Sonata / Per colascioncino / Di Domenico Colla, manuscript, Dresda, Landesbibliothek.*
5. Bartolomeo Bortolazzi, Anweisung die Mandoline, Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, 1805.

Organological backgrounds

Also from the organological point of view, it is hard to define some unique and certain features about "colascione" and "colascioncino". We know that those instruments could have two, three or four strings - depending on period, place and use - even if, in popular circle, up to the 1.700's half, the two or three strings fitting could be much more frequent; these settings were probably tuned "to fifths", eventually the third string "to eights". The peculiar long neck on a very little wood box - which seems gradually over time, increase - could have, according to testimonies, from 16 up to 22 fret guts; strings - generally in gut, but we have a few proofs about metal strings - were tied from a fixed bridge to pegs, generally fitted in a "sickle shape" peg box. The testimonies we have, for the more refer to a plectrum use, in some case expressly cherry bark plectrum⁶.

With regard to "Bresciano" mandolin, testing the preserved instruments, we can say that its features are very similar to the above ones, except that it had sure four strings, mostly with a 300-330 mm. scale, with 9-10 fret guts (or frets) on the neck, tuned to fifths, like Neapolitan mandolin or violin⁷. Totally peculiar was the use of gut strings and "sickle shape" peg box; the rosette on soundboard could be: in parchment, directly carved out of the soundboard wood (most common), or totally absent; in this case, it could be possible that a parchment rosette was originally present and then lost away.

The definition of "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin is owed to the Bortolazzi, and in effects the instrument preserved today, originate generally from that area.

These two instruments - "colascioncino" and "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin - were diffused in similar circles and areas and also in a period of time which overlaps; in the second half of XVIII century we lose tracks of "colascioncino" and in the same period the "Bresciano" mandolin established, up to the first half of XIX century; furthermore the two instruments have several organological features in common. This fact makes reasonable the hypothesis that "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin derives directly by the "Colascioncino", to allow the execution of chamber music (or concert music), very in fashion at that time.

Ugo Orlandi has also supposed, that this instrument has been somehow invented by the Colla Brothers, during their Tour in central Europe, identifying in the mandolin built by François Lupot in 1760 - preserved in the "Museo degli Strumenti Musicali" in Milan - the absolute first sample of this model, realized by the luthier, directly on specifications from the Colla Brothers.

The hypothesis is suggestive and also sustained by reasonable documentation - even if it remains, of course, just an hypothesis - but what surely appears very probable, is that around the half of XVIII century the "Colascioncino" was diffused in cultural circles in the North of Italy, and that from it derives the "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin, more suitable for the execution of the music of that time.



New iconographic sources

I think that the finding of a good manufacture painting, realized in Cremona in 1741, in which is drawn an aristocrat and in the foreground there's a "colascioncino", with well defined organological

6. Among the various eighteenth-century literary references, I mention the one taken from: Bartolommeo Lorenzi, *Della coltivazione de' monti*, 1778, Canto Primo, L'inverno, LXXXVI:

Né della scorza tacerò, che sola
Atta è a svegliare il colascion tricolore,
Se mai la sera il villanel consola
Le diurne fatiche al suon concorde.
Per li tasti una man passeggia, e vola
Rapida l'altra, e fa tremar le corde;
Ma l'elastico libro il suon più dolce
Cava dai nervi, che cedendo molce.

7. As well as the already mentioned study of Ugo Orlandi, see also: Stephen Morey, *Mandolins of the 18th century, Cremona*, ed. Turris, 1993.

features, could contribute to supply this hypothesis, and gives in any case, some interesting information; for what concerns me, it is a stimulating work source.

On this unknown author painting there's only a writing: "Cremona - @ 31 Maggio 1741"⁸, no other indications about the author, or the person painted in it; anyway this writing is precious for our studies, because it identifies sure both period and place.

It's a portrait of a richly dressed man, who holds in a hand a pen and in the other a sheet on which there's an Indian ink drawing,



representing a little bird with some funny fancy strokes. The protagonist appears sitting at a table, on which there are: three cherries, a compass, an inkwell and some music sheets. On these sheets, on the foreground, lays down a well-drawn "Colascioncino", of refined accuracy.

At the time of finding, the painting was by the Mary Lippi's restorative atelier in Montepulciano; the owner gave it to her attention, she described it as a good manufacture painting, object of some further repainting, which had changed for the most part the background (now rather uniform), but not so much the portion of "colascioncino". The pictures here showed - with the courtesy of the owner - were taken before, during and after the restoration work.



Trying to identify the person in the painting, we considered the details, showing him as fond, for pleasure or profession, in music and drawing. The compass could be connected to drawing⁹, but curious is the presence of the three cherries and the little bird drawing so particular in tracing: sometimes certain signs lead to the name of the portrayed person. Unfortunately these details didn't bring to any identification of the represented person...



The represented instrument

For what concerns us, the real painting's protagonist is the "Colascioncino", mainly because we have no other results about iconographic representation so explicit, detailed and so refined manufactured of "Colascioncino" in aristocratic circles, especially with four gut strings.

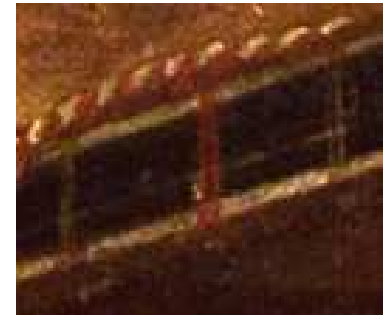


8. From the XVIII century we can find the @ sign, that means "addì" (on the day of...).

9. The compass is also a Masonic symbol, but this hypothesis seems uncertain, because Masonry was not so far widespread in the north of Italy in 1741.

As already told, the instrument is well painted, with many details, which lead us to give particular prominence to the painting:

- "first of all it's a four gut strings instrument (the representation is not so accurate, to recognize a possible metal windings on basses);
- "the structure is typical, the neck has 18 double loops fret guts (without frets added on the table), a small size light wood sound box and a glued bridge with a bone cover;
- "about fret guts, we can notice that they are tied around the neck in double loop, as used on the "Viola da gamba"; this feature was found also on a truly original, well manufactured instrument, probably antecedent to 1741¹⁰. This feature is probably connected to the little tapered neck, if fret guts were single, they would improbably held in place: so a double loop becomes more efficient. Very interesting and not so common is the red fret gut ... Beyond all observations about the habit to soak gut in heavy metal solution, it seems important that this red fret gut is the fifth, as if it was a "fret marker", very simple, but very efficient!
- "the "sickle shape" peg box ends with a "shield" and holds four light colour pegs, decorated with a little bone button on the top;
- "the sound table is decorated with a parchment rosette surrounded by an inlaid crown around the sound hole;
- "the fingerboard is in ebony, with a bone binding and the typical little ponts, which extend to the table; the table in turn, extend a little to the fingerboard and it is bound in ebony.



Some details are drawn in a strikingly accurate mode and it is very interesting to notice how they correspond with stylistic features, typically from "Cremona", rather - grant us the hazard - even from Stradivari...



- "The peg box shape reminds the violin one, and is surrounded by a black stripe, typical stylistic distinctive of "Cremonesi" luthiers. It ends with a "shield" and not with a scroll, this is a typical feature of string instruments, but it appears also in some violins of that epoch; see for example, the picture here showed, of a Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesù little violin scroll, dated 1735, with a shield and black border. The "shield" of "colascioncino" has a well-articulated typical shape - also present in Stradivari instruments and in his atelier models, preserved in "Museo Stradivariano"¹¹, which reminds to a "rich" manufacture, as well as the pegs, which are unusually refined.



10. It is a "colascioncino" probably even from seventeenth century, part of a private collection, studied and restored by Tiziano Rizzi, known great expert of historical mandolins; he was one of the first studying, rebuilding and revaluing the "Bresciano" mandolin; during this research we constantly compared and he gave me the information about this original "colascioncino", useful to make the construction's hypothesis.

11. About the models preserved in the "Museo Stradivariano" (Stradivari Museum) see: Simone F. Sacconi, I segreti di Stradivari, Libreria del Convegno, 1979; Andrea Mosconi, Carlo Torresani, Il Museo Stradivariano di Cremona, Cremonabooks, 2001.



- "As already told, the rosette, is surrounded by a decoration; this is carved out of the table and surprisingly similar to decorations used by Stradivari in his guitars: a sequence of bone's little rhombus and circles - or little squares - plunged into a black "stucco"; we can find the same decoration also in Stradivari inlaid violins. The painting shows this decoration as the black/white binding which surround it with relevant punctiliousness. Also the representation of the little table portion, between the decoration and the sound hole is careful. The rosette - probably in parchment or wood and parchment - is just a trace, however it seems very similar to some rosette of the preserved Stradivari guitars¹².

If we cannot for certain affirm that the represented instrument is a Stradivari "colascioncino", the described elements allow us to consider it certainly a high-quality "Cremonese" manufactured instrument and perhaps from Stradivari School; this fact, joined to the indication "Cremona 1741" on the painting, gives to the representation a truly appeal and also a certain reliability (it seems very credible, that the painter copied meticulously a real existing instrument).

Starting from an instrument like this, it comes very simple the hypothesis of the transition to "Cremonese or Bresciano" mandolin: just keeping exactly all features, simply reducing the neck up to 10 fret guts, the result is surprisingly that model of instrument...

Reconstruction hypothesis

It is a fact that around XVIII century "Cremonesi" luthiers often built different shapes mandolins and also from Stradivari there are preserved instruments with sketches and models from his atelier.

The other important luthier family, truly frequently dedicated to mandolin construction was Bergonzi: some preserved mandolins built by Michelangelo e Zosimo (sons of Carlo I) and by Carlo II (son of Zosimo and grandson of the forefather) got through to us.

Trying to speculate about a reconstruction of the represented instrument and about a similar version, but with a mandolin scale, I decided also to relate to an original instrument, from which I could obtain information, about construction and measures.

In the "Museo Nazionale degli Strumenti Musicali" in Rome are preserved several interesting instruments; among them, two Bergonzi mandolins actually fitting as "Bresciano". In detail: one is a (probably originally "Milanese") mandolin by Michelangelo and the other is an instrument, originally conceived as a "Bresciano", with Carlo Bergonzi label. This instrument was probably built by Carlo II, because it has the shape of a "mature" instrument, (probably built between the end of XVIII century and the beginning of XIX century; maximum spread period for that instrument). The uncertain fact is, that the label is damaged just in the portion with the date of construction. In the "Museo Nazionale degli Strumenti Musicali" in Rome there are also instruments coming from the end of 1800's and the beginning of 1900's antique market: at that time it was not so rare to forge or to "increase the value" of instruments, by restoring inclined to hide their vicissitudes and to show them as more antique. This mandolin appears - although with a plausible and generally authentic structure - covered with a thick dark varnish, (trick often used for the above-quoted purposed) and object of several restoration works. It seems plausible - even probable - that the "providential" cancellation of the construction date, would be explained, to attribute the



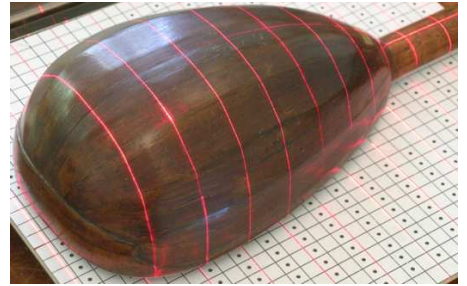
12. In particular, it seems the one preserved in the Oxford Ashmolean Museum - Collection Hill n°41.

instrument to Carlo I (so, coming from a more ancient period and built by a more esteemed luthier), rather than to the less valued nephew...

In any case it is a truly interesting instrument, with many connections to the one represented in the painting.

I could study this instrument just for a few hours; to retrace its real shape, I didn't want to evaluate it in an invasive way; so I decided for a bowl laser scan, re-elaborated via software. I evaluated thickness and general measures, even if the soundboard seems not really original, although its size, design and construction characteristics are credible and professional.

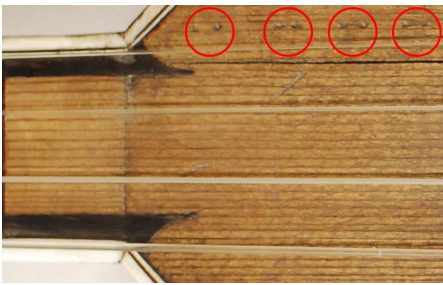
The bridge seems to be re-glued, so its actual position seems not correct. I hypothesise a slightly different fitting, depending on the general proportions of the instrument, on its soundboard and bars (which seem rather correct, respect on that epoch habits); very helpful were the very little traces on soundboard which identify the position of the added frets, today lost away.



As already told, some characteristic of the preserved instrument, seem truly similar to those on painting:

- Instrument shape, measures and overall design;
- The peg box ends with a simple rectangular "shield", but its construction - very similar to violin - is plausible and compatible in style (also the pegs, not all original, are very similar to the ones present in coeval string instruments);





- "The little soundboard portion on the neck seems different from the rest, this fact could increase the idea that the soundboard had been replaced - probably in antique epoch - but it also could be possible, that this was the original construction. Anyway, fingerboard ponts shape and the binding are really similar to the ones in the painting. Actually the mandolin is fitted with a bone fingerboard, binded with black/white/black and bone binding outside, which extend on the soundboard. The fingerboard ponts

are in ebony and extend on the neck surrounding the sound table. In the painting is evident an ebony fingerboard with bone binding and ebony bindings on the sound table. It could be a painter's aesthetic choice, better to define the shape of the instrument instead of a white outline, however in the reconstruction we choose to adopt this solution (that, overall, joins better the fingerboard with its ponts and that, is truly similar to the one on "Stradivari" mandolin from 1680).

The work in progress

On the current status of this study (August 2012), I've reconstructed the mandolin with a 335 mm. scale; two different size's "colascioncini" are in process: the first one with 18 fret guts on the neck - as exactly on the painting - which have a 540 mm. scale and the other fitting 22 fret guts with a 640 mm. scale, as noticed on a original instrument, referenced point.

The sound and the approach ease of the reconstructed mandolin is really surprising; its brilliant projecting sound, makes it an instrument suitable to be played "in ensemble" without being mortified.

In collaboration with Mimmo Peruffo of "Aquila Corde", we supposed a nude gut stringing for the first two strings, a "demi-filée" for the third and a wound string for the fourth. The working string tension to apply - in the little field of string behaviour, concerning with the ancient epoch technology - is still to test; we suppose to start with a quite remarkable tension (about 4/4,5 Kg to chanterelle, then to lower), which could ease a plectrum technic.

About tuning: the presence of four strings on the painted "colascioncino", with 18 fret guts on the neck, can afford several hypothesis, to evaluate through a musical test. It is even conceivable a stringing with the same strings of mandolin, obtaining a fifth below stringing, with a quite higher tension, compatible to play with plectrum much longer strings.

