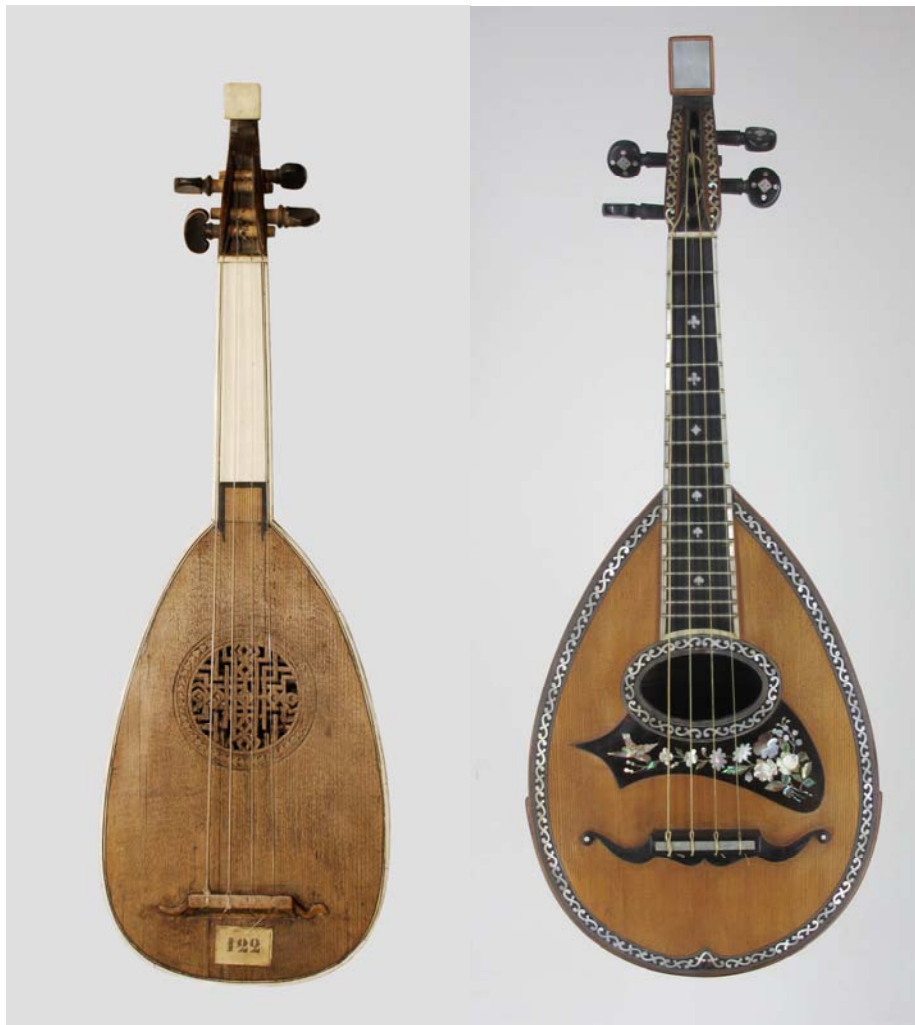


*Lorenzo Lippi*  
(English version by Simona Colombini)

# Bresciano Mandolin versus Tuscan Mandolin?

*notes for an organological (and musical) identification*



*Carlo Bergonzi's Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin, Cremona (Museo Nazionale degli Strumenti Musicali, Rome)  
and R. Maurri's Tuscan Mandolin, Florence (photo by F. and D. Sinier de Ridder, collection A. Timmerman)*

## *Introduction*

The identification of a historical musical instrument through a shared terminology allows on one side to avoid ambiguities in the historical and musical sphere, and on the other side to establish its peculiar specific nature.

This identification is based - whenever possible - on the name given to that instrument in the period in which it was in use; however, a more complex naming may be necessary, in cases where the historical one lends itself to mistakes (it is the case, for example, of the "Baroque Guitar" or - more correctly - "Guitar of the Baroque period", which defines the instrument with five double-orders in use in that historical period, that the simple term "guitar" would not be enough to identify).

More specific identifications are possible, in some cases on other grounds, for example regional, which is generally peacefully accepted, when this terminology is also present in historical terms. Typical is the case of the mandolin, which was in some cases more precisely identified in its regional variants, already in ancient times (for example: Lombard or Milanese Mandolin, Genoese mandolin, etc...).

However, this is certainly a convention that allows an unambiguous communication, that it is good - as far as possible in my opinion - that it maintains the historical roots of the original and recognized nomenclature, at the time when the instrument was circulating.

Other fundamental elements to distinguish and identify a musical instrument are its structure (the construction technique and in general its "concept" from a lutherie point of view) and its use (stringing, tuning and playing technique). A serious organological definition of a musical instrument cannot ignore the musical aesthetics to which it refers and the constructive concept, functional to the aesthetic one; the way in which an instrument is built responds to musical needs: analyzing the construction characteristics of the instrument allows us to imagine its use and the wanted sound characteristics.

All of the historical and organological information, generally allows the different instruments and their versions to be identified with clearly enough and uniqueness.

## *The Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin*

In my opinion, a case that deserves a clarity contribution is that of the Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin.

It is an instrument in use from the half of 18th up to the first half of the 19th Centuries, whose origin is still uncertain (a derivation from the Colascioncino<sup>1</sup> is assumed), but which had a certain fortune in that historical period. The organological identification is rather defined: the body was quite small, with a very light construction, as in the tradition of Baroque instruments; it was fitting four gut strings, tuned in fifths such as the Neapolitan Mandolin or the violin; the scale was mostly around 30-33 cm., with 9-10 frets (or pitches) on the neck. Usually he had a sickle-shaped peg box; the harmonic hole on the table could also have a parchment rosette, or directly carved on the soundboard wood (apparently more common).

The definition of Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin is due to Bortolazzi<sup>2</sup>, and in fact the instruments that have come down to us come mostly from these areas.

It was much more likely to be played with a plectrum - probably in cherry bark - rather than with the fingers.

The construction features certainly refer to a late 18th Century sound aesthetic, with stringing to a relatively contained tension and a sound rich in harmonics.

The rather accurate organological characterization and the presence of a specific naming documented by the sources of that epoch, therefore make the term "Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin" unequivocal and historically adequate. Being able to use even just one of the two territorial references: somebody is fond of the term "Bresciano mandolin" and some other to "Cremonese Mandolin": in any case, the identification is clear.

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<sup>1</sup> Two studies published in *Il mandolino a Brescia*, curated by Ugo Orlandi, Edizioni Franciacorta, 2002: M. Sala, *Associazionismo mandolinistico a Brescia: una storia tenace* e U. Orlandi, *Il mandolino bresciano*. Is up to Ugo Orlandi, well-known concert performer and scholar, a tenacious work of valorization about the Bresciano Mandolin, also through historically founded studies.

I report also a study by me: Lorenzo Lippi, *Is the "colascioncino" the eighteenth-century ancestor of "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin? A new iconographic source a new hypothesis of philological reconstruction* - www.lippi.net - 2012

<sup>2</sup> Bartolomeo Bortolazzi, *Anweisung die Mandoline*, Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, 1805.



So far it, all seems clear and shared... The problem comes - in my opinion - when we try to define with the same term also another instrument, with four single gut-strings, (and covered silk) and also tuned as the violin, which came into use at the end of the 19th Century and is similar to the Milanese or Lombard Mandolin (with six single strings), from the same period.

*In the picture: reconstruction of a Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin by Lorenzo Lippi.*

## *The instruments between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

Concerning the evolution of the instruments between the half of 18th and the 19th Century, a small - although brief - digression is useful.

There is a general trend to eliminate double strings in favor of single strings: thus, the five double orders guitar passes to five and then to six single strings and the mandolin (what was later called Milanese or Lombard) from six doubles to six singles strings. The construction structure progressively strengthens significantly, reaching in the second half of the 19th Century structures comparable to modern ones, probably in order to fit strings with higher tension, and certainly changing in a very significant way the sound, that - as required by the musical aesthetics of the time - takes the direction of a greater presence of the base frequency but less rich of harmonics.

It is therefore clear that a 19th Century guitar and one from the baroque period cannot be identifiable, as also is the case for the Milanese or Lombard Mandolin, as well as for the Neapolitan Mandolin, which - while always maintaining the same tuning - changes substantially its organological structure and also its stringing, obtaining completely different sound results and playing technique.

All these steps take place gradually: so, the five double strings guitar passes first to five single strings and then to six and its structure is gradually strengthened (the construction technique considerably changes). The same thing happens, for example, to the Milanese or Lombard Mandolin, which first loses the double orders - maintaining a construction structure similar to

the ones of the 18th Century - and then gradually strengthened, to achieve the structure in use until the half of 20th Century.

The first six single-strings mandolins preserved (known to me), are by Carlo Guadagnini: we know of at least four of them - built between the late 18th and early 19th Centuries<sup>3</sup>. These instruments, however, still maintain constructive characteristics similar to their double-orders predecessors: for example, the body is small with very thin ribs, the soundboard is relatively thin and a wooden and parchment rosette is closing the harmonic hole. It is very interesting to note that the last epigones of double-ordered instruments, (for example the ones by Giuseppe Presbler, son of the much more famous Francesco), built in the same years, have a body practically identical in size and construction to the ones by Carlo Guadagnini and therefore retain a structure still tied to the baroque tradition<sup>4</sup>. All of this as evidence of a seamless evolution between the six double-order and the six single-string mandolins.

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<sup>3</sup> I know about three instruments by private collections, one of which is owned by me and one is preserved in the Public Collection of the Turin Conservatory.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, these late baroque instruments are decidedly different, and therefore "anomalous", compared to those built in the period when this instrument was more classically in vogue: the more classic type of the six-order mandolin is certainly closer to the instruments by Francesco than to the ones by Giuseppe Presbler. Someone would love to call them "transitional", but the curious thing is that, these instruments are perhaps the most used today in the early music ensembles.



The Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin as described above, on the contrary does not actually experience the same evolution. In fact, it almost disappears after the first decades of the 19th Century (at the moment it is difficult to define precisely when). Almost all the preserved specimens are dated between the half of the 18th and the half of the 19th Centuries and have similar organological characteristics.

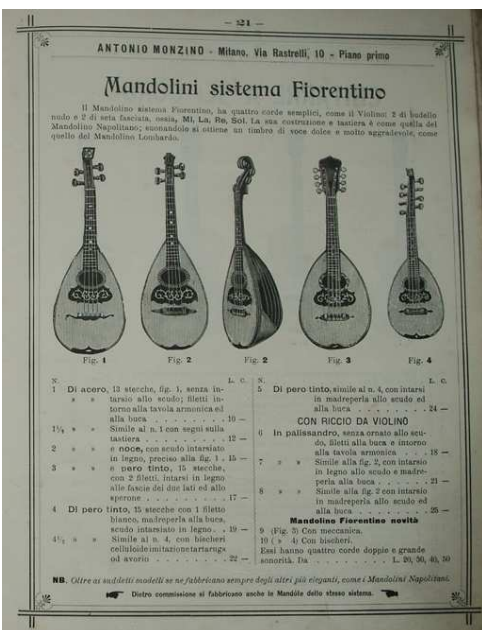
*A comparison between the six-order Mandolin by Carlo Guadagnini, Turin (Turin Conservatory Collection) and the six-double order Mandolin by Giuseppe Presbler, Milan 1796 (Metropolitan Museum of Art New York).*

## The Tuscan or Florentine Mandolin

At the end of the 19th Century, probably as a result of the luck that the Milanese or Lombard Mandolin had - like the Roman and Neapolitan ones during their so-called "golden age" - a four single-string mandolin began to be used, tuned

as the violin and therefore like the Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin. This instrument, from a constructive point of view, is conceived very similar to the Milanese Mandolin and was born with the declared intent to make available - even to those who played the Neapolitan or Roman Mandolin - an instrument that for constructive and sound aesthetics approached the contemporary Lombard one.

Several sources of the time identify this instrument with the term "Tuscan Mandolin", "Florentine Mandolin" or "Florentine system Mandolin", as this instrument was initially - and mainly - produced by Tuscan manufacturers.



Take the example of some catalogues of musical instruments for sale by significant traders (as for example Monzino in Milan). Also interesting is the quote in the "Theoretical and practical manual of the mandolin player" by Agostino Pisani (Milan, 1899) reading<sup>5</sup>:

"Theoretical and practical manual of the mandolin player" by Agostino Pisani (Milan, 1899) reading<sup>5</sup>:

*Tuscan Mandolin. - A mandolin of recent construction is the so-called Tuscan one, made in Florence by Lybert and Maurri (\*).*

*Here it is really an ingenious and useful stunt.*

*The Tuscan mandolin is shaped in shape and keyboard very similar to the Roman one. Only the strings are simple and not double, two of covered silk and two of gut. This results in the round and sweet sound of the Lombard Mandolin on a Neapolitan keyboard mandolin, and therefore it is and it will be highly appreciated by the amateurs of Neapolitan Mandolin, who would be able to play with the same ease on the Tuscan Mandolin; on the contrary, some difficulties, especially in the practice, will be encountered, by those who want to*

<sup>5</sup> Agostino Pisani, *Manuale teorico-pratico del mandolinista*, Milan, Ulrico Hoepli edit., 1899



*move from the study of the Neapolitan to the study of the Lombard, due to the effect of an essentially different keyboard.*

*(\*) A certain Pietro Saltucci from Rome, a skilled player, brought to Lybert a Roman Mandolin fitted with the violin strings.*

*The mandolin thus obtained, sounded bad, then Lybert proposed to build one with the Lombard body and bridge – so they did and in this way they obtained an instrument which is appreciated today and which will be even more so in the future, it is called Tuscan Mandolin. It is already known also in France and England. Lybert generally builds them in flamed maple because it is more sonorous.*



*In the picture: Tuscan mandolin by Raffaello Mauri, Florence 1897  
(photo: courtesy of Françoise-Daniel Sinier de Ridder, collection Alex Timmerman)*

## **Conclusions**

Compared to the Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin, the Tuscan or Florentine one has therefore very different organological characteristics, as well as the aesthetics of the sound (by virtue of a different construction concept and probably the stringing).

And not only that: at the time of its use it was unequivocally identified with a different name: in this second period it is not possible to find any mention of this instrument with the term "Cremonese" or "Bresciano" mandolin which instead was known to all with the term of "Tuscan".

Also from the construction tradition point of view, there is a complete solution of continuity between the eighteenth-century instruments and the late nineteenth-century ones.

All the useful elements for the attribution of a recognized and unambiguous naming, therefore go in a specific direction: these are two instruments different in history, use and construction, but united by the same tuning and - of course - by the belonging "family", the one of the Mandolin.

I therefore believe that it is important to define the two instruments with different names: "Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin" the eighteenth-century one and "Tuscan or Florentine Mandolin" the one produced since the end of the 19th Century.

The wish is that all this will also contribute to a more correct use of the two instruments in the musical field. Obviously, nothing prevents you from performing De Visée's music on a nineteenth-century or a modern guitar, but it is undeniable that it is more correct, (and in my opinion, more interesting), to play them on a five double-order guitar of the baroque period. In the same way, Vivaldi's music played on a Milanese or Lombard Mandolin, from the end of the 19th Century, with six single strings, is different, and in my opinion less correct and pleasant, than played on an 18th Century double orders instrument.

In the same way, to perform music from the period in which the Cremonese or Bresciano Mandolin was in vogue, it is certainly incorrect (and less pleasant) to play it on a Tuscan Mandolin.

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