

Lorenzo Lippi
(English translation by Andrea Martini)

Cherry bark mandolin picks: investigations and experiments

Extract from the proceedings of the conference "Il mandolino a Milano e in Lombardia nei secoli XVIII e XIX" - May 2022. ()*

A. MONZINO e FIGLI - Milano, Via Rastrelli, 10 - Piano primo

PLETTRI o PENNE

Per Mandolino		La doz. Lire	Al cento Lire			La doz. Lire	Al cento Lire
4	Celluloide, colori assortiti . . .	25	1,25	26	A stella	1,80	10 —
10	Con buco a cuore	35	2,50	28	Vegetali, di corteccia di ciliegio, 1 ^a qualità	30	2,50
11	A due punte	60	3,50	Per Mandola, Mandolincello, Liuto Mandolone e Chitarra			
12	Punteggiate in rilievo	35	2,50	30	Celluloide, imitazione tartaruga	50	4 —
14	Osso di corno	60	4 —	31	Osso di corno	70	5 —
18	Tartaruga, 1 ^a qualità	60	3,50	32	Tartaruga scelta 1 ^a qualità	80	5 —
19	2 ^a »	45	3 —				
20	Punteggiate in rilievo 1 ^a qualità	70	5 —				
22	A due punte	90	6,50				
24	A virgola	1,60	12 —				
25	A triangolo	95	7 —				

(*)The conference was held in Milan between the 12th and the 15th of May 2022 by Tiziano Rizzi and Ugo Orlandi.

The use of picks made of cherry wood to play mandolins from the Lombardy area (and in general mandolins with gut strings) has been documented with certainty since at least the 18th century.

Some quotes as an example are:

- *Anyone who strings their mandolin with gut strings must use, as a pick, a piece of cherry wood, which is cut into the shape of a heart and of a suitable length to be able to hold it easily between the fingers, since feathers are worthless for gut strings.*¹
- *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.*²

In this poem in archaic, untranslatable Italian, it should be noted that the author metaphorically writes that "only the cortex is able to wake up the three strings colascione" referring to the pick, and further on continues with "the elastic book draws from the nerves (the strings) the sweetest sound" where "book" is the botanical definition of bark. (translator's note).

- *Regarding the way to hold the mandolin, it is known that the instrument itself is held with the left hand, like a guitar; the strings must not be played with the fingers of the right hand, as some have taught, and not even with a bird feather (replacing the bow in the violin), but the most appropriate use is with a small piece of cherry wood from the bark of a cherry tree, which in Italian it is called "Patacca".*³

¹ Giovanni Fouchetti, *Methode pour apprendre facilement à jouer de la mandoline à 4 et à 6 cordes*, Parigi, circa 1771.

“Ceux qu'on montent leur mandoline en cordes de boyeau doivent se servir en maniere de plume, d'un morceau d'écorce de Cèrisier, que l'on coupe en forme de coeur et de la longueur convenable pour pouvoir le tenir facilement dans les doigts car les plumes ne vallent rien pour les cordes de boyeau”.

² Bartolomeo Lorenzi, *Della coltivazione de' monti*, 1778, Canto primo, L'Inverno, LXXXVI. Note the term "the elastic book", where book is the botanical term to indicate the part of bark used for the production of picks.

³ Bartolomeo BORTOLAZZI, *Anweisung die Mandoline*, Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, ca. 1805. “Was die Behandlungsart der Mandoline betrifft, so hält man bekanntermassen das Instrument selbst mit der linken Hand, auf die nehmliche Art wie die Guitarre; die Saiten selbst darf man nicht

- *Petacca and Patacca. Taccone; and by extension in the cultured language, Pick. Comb. A piece of cherry wood or other or a feather with which the sound is drawn from the mandolin, the lute, the colascione and other similar instruments by plucking the strings.* ⁴
- *(Pick): Ivory stick ten centimeters long. According to modern people, a chicken feather or a small stick of tortoise shell for mandolas and mandolins with metal strings; a small piece of cherry wood from a wild cherry tree bark is used to play the half lute, commonly called Lombard mandolin.* ⁵

The use of cherry picks certainly continued at least until the mid-20th century and a nice article by Giuseppe Severini reports an interview conducted in collaboration with Federico Gabrielli with the luthier and mandolinist Erminio Travi, who says:

Picks were personally carved by mandolin players from cherry tree bark. The wood was dried, cut with a hacksaw and filed until the desired thickness and flexibility were obtained. The size and shape of these picks were approximately the same as the plastic picks made today. All the musician had to do, before starting to play, was to spread the tip of such picks with common soap, to make it smooth and ready to slide easily between the strings.

Travi recalls the beautiful effect produced by those picks on the gut strings and specifies that, while celluloid and tortoiseshell picks produced some noise due to the friction with the strings, no noise could be heard from the contact between cherry picks and gut. However, picks from cherry tree bark broke easily, deteriorated quickly, and had to be frequently replaced. ⁶

It is interesting, among other things, the practice of smearing the picks with soap. In addition to making them smoother, it is likely that historically it was also used to preserve gut strings, which are easily subject to wear and expensive.

mit dem Finger der rechten Hand, wie es wohl einige gelehrt haben, und eben so weing mit einem Federkiel (statt des Bogens bei der Violine) berühren, sondern man bedient sich am schicklichsten dazu eines kleinen Blättchens von Kirschbaumrinde, welches man im Italiänischen Patacca nennt.”

⁴ Francesco Cherubini, *Vocabolario Milanese-Italiano*, Milano, Regia Stamperia, 1841.

⁵ Giuseppe Branzoli, *Ricerche sullo studio del liuto*, Roma, Loescher, 1889. This is a footnote to the term “pick”.

⁶ Giuseppe Severini, *Intervista sul Mandolino Lombardo Al maestro liutaio Erminio Travi di Vignate (Milano)*, in: *Plectrum. Notiziario della Federazione Mandolinistica Italiana*, Brescia, Tipografia Squassina, novembre 1987.

Anyway, quite little is known about these older picks by direct knowledge as, probably due to their fragility, they are rarely found in mandolin cases and most often are of poor workmanship and in bad condition. They are therefore an almost "mysterious object" of which little is known regarding their shape and workmanship and we have at times ventured into imaginative hypotheses regarding their texture. These picks were obviously also sold by the Monzino company, which in a catalog from the 1920s shows all the varieties of picks and their prices but, curiously, the image of the cherry picks is missing...

A. MONZINO e FIGLI - Milano, Via Rastrelli, 10 - Piano primo

PLETTRI O PENNE

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		Lire	Lire			Lire	Lire
Per Mandolino							
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10	Con buco a cuore	— 35	2,50	28	Vegetali, di corteccia di ciliegio, 1 ^a qualità	— 30	2,50
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In an older catalog (1875) it is interesting that these picks were both sold as semi-finished products to be completed by the musician, and also as raw material that the musician could directly buy and have cut according to their specifications.

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ANTONIO MONZINO E C.

MILANO - VIA OREFICI N. 7. - MILANO

— Con grande Magazzino Succursale in Via Rastrelli N. 10. —

Laboratorio in Roma per la fabbricazione estiva delle corde armoniche di budella

MILANO - 1875

Penne per suonare il Mandolino Lombardo

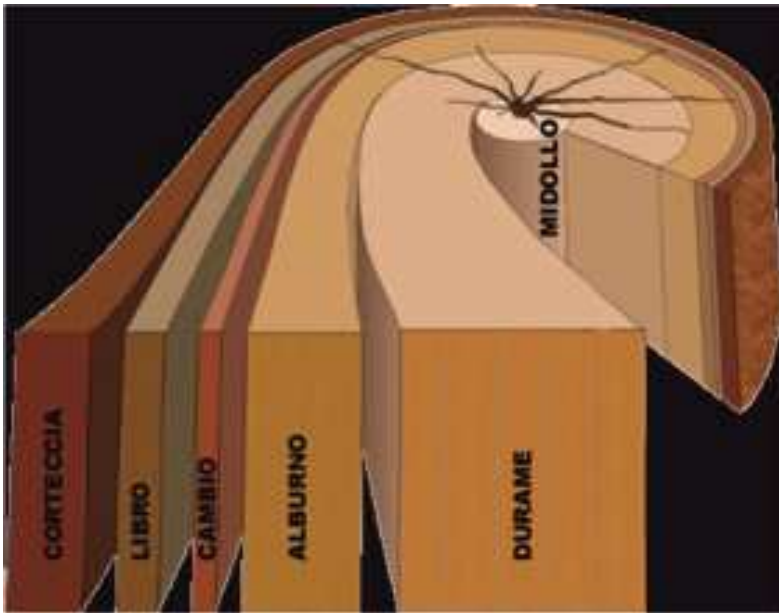
Di corteccia di ciriegio, greggie ossia solamente tagliate in pezzi rettangolari, Cent. 4 cad. ed al cento Cen. 80

„ „ „ „ „ „ con punta „ 2 „ „ „ „ L. 1, 50
„ „ „ „ „ „ Finite ossia lisciate, con punta „ 3 „ „ „ „ „ 2, 50

It is therefore confirmed that every mandolin player could modify the picks according to their own taste and the needs of their instrument, a practice that in my opinion should be more present also among modern players and for picks made of synthetic material. The importance of picks for the quality of the attack transient, the sound, and the playing technique in general, is very relevant and I believe that it would be desirable for each musician to experiment with their own picks trying different shapes and thicknesses (even non-homogeneous ones), and not rely solely on what the market offers in a standard way...

Going back to cherry picks, it must first of all be clarified that the term "cherry bark (or peel)" does not indicate the outermost part of the trunk, which is very fragile and non-elastic and therefore completely unsuitable. From a botanical point of view, the part of the trunk immediately underneath it is also called bark or peel, in practice the first portion of actual wood.

According to Travi, (in a part of the conversation not reported in the article, but remembered by Federico Gabrielli who witnessed it) the fact that the part used was the outermost one refers to the greater elasticity of the wood, since in his opinion the



lymph circulates in that part; furthermore, he suggested that the picks should be cut from the trunk in spring, when the plant awakens, for the same reason. In reality, given the findings analyzed, that portion of the trunk is from a botanical point of view "dead" wood and not the one where the sap circulates. Moreover, some tests carried out with seasoned

or freshly cut bark in spring make me perplexed about this hypothesis, not having noticed substantial differences from the point of view of resistance and elasticity.⁷

A hypothesis that I would like to put forward is that we began making picks with that portion of the trunk simply because it was immediately available even from standing plants (a custom that Travi himself certifies) and that the tradition was then maintained over time. Certainly, the wood thus obtained has the most "tangential" grain possible and it is therefore more flexible, but no appreciable differences were noticed even when trying to make picks with that arrangement of grains from actual wood (therefore more internal to the trunk).

A big quantity of perfectly preserved cherry picks has recently been discovered in an ancient case containing a Monzino mandolin from the late 19th century: there are a good number of them, they probably represented the musician's "stock" and these are basically picks that have never been used.

The collector who owns them, a Japanese man, very generously sent me some of these for study.

⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Mami Azuma, botanist, curator at the Civic Museum of Natural History in Milan, for helping me to delve deeper into the botanical aspects.



The shape is that of a common pick still in use today; to be noted on one side is the typical pattern of wood where the bark has been removed, confirming the fact that this is that part of the trunk just under the external bark.

The thickness varies from 7 to 9-10 tenths of a millimeter and the dimensions are on average 15-16 mm wide by 28-29 mm long.

I've made copies of these picks which I then offered to various musicians in order to test them and verify their functionality. Almost everybody agreed that on gut (or nylon) strings the attack transient is softer and the attack of the plectrum is significantly less noticeable than on synthetic ones.

However, unanimous was also the observation that for a modern technique the thicknesses between 0.7 and 0.9 mm. are excessive: I therefore decided to create picks of lower thickness (0.5 and 0.6 mm) which were more suitable for the modern musician. Perhaps research into the practice of these mandolins with thicker picks, as suggested by the materials found (not only those referred to here), would also be interesting from a musical point of view.

The samples I made refer to both fresh and seasoned wood and also to other species; my hypothesis is that excellent results, and perhaps even better ones, can be obtained by simply selecting different kinds of wood and not necessarily only using the bark, which would make the construction of the picks easier and more standardizable (an important characteristic today).

Yew, which is a particularly elastic and resistant wood and also with a relatively soft consistency which favors a "gentle" attack, gave excellent results among the various kinds of wood tested.

However, as previously mentioned even the cherry itself, not the bark, if cut correctly gave excellent results.



In the photos: seasoned and debarked cherry wood, freshly cut trunks and some of the samples made with different cuts, seasonings, thicknesses and species of tree.

In summary:

- * the cherry bark picks, at least those in use from the second half of the 19th century onwards, were most likely very or completely similar to those still used by the majority of musicians today (therefore not, for example, long and thin like those used in the Arab world and not thick like those used for manouche guitars);
- * the thickness appears to vary between 7 tenths of a millimeter and approximately one millimetre;
- * in my opinion, following tests carried out with different kinds of wood, similar results are also obtained with the innermost wood (not the bark), provided it is cut in the right way (using the most external part possible, however, allows to have the grain more extended and parallel);
- * excellent results have been obtained with other trees, in particular with yew;
- * for the technique in use today, thinner picks (0.5/0.6 mm.) have proven to be more comfortable;
- * for the use on instruments with gut (or nylon) strings, these picks appear very suitable and recommended.

