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SNF-Forschungsprojekt: «Transformationen instrumentaler Klanglichkeit»

Silvestro Ganassi's "viola d'arco tastada". Report on a research project on its contextualization and reconstruction

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Abstract

Lecture at the Galpin/CIMCIM Conference "Musical Instruments - History, Science and Culture" in Oxford, UK, Faculty of Music, 25th–29th July 2013.

Introduction

This paper presents a research project conducted in Basel during the past two years on the early viola da gamba in Italy. Analogous to the "design" of the project, each paper will examine a different aspect, with the insights being conflated at the end to offer a clear result. It should also be mentioned that although only three of us were able to present the project in Oxford, the three papers represent the work of all the project collaborators.

Transformations in Instrumental Sonorities – The Development of String Instruments in the Transition from the Late Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era (15th-16th Centuries)

Duration: September 2011 to May 2013

Hosted by: Schola Cantorum Basiliensis – University of Early Music

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Pre-conditions and problems

The research project at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis had an ambitious title that addressed, as the superordinate issue, the change in sonority in the period around 1500, which can be illustrated particularly well in instrument making. Specifically, it however includes a very clear goal: The hypothetical reconstruction of an “early” Italian type of viol, hence from the time in which the still new instrument, the viola da gamba, is clearly documented in diverse sources (that is to say, from the first third of the sixteenth century). Connected with this was also a reappraisal of the sources, materials, and theses concerning the development of the viol, as portrayed, for example, in Ian Woodfield’s influential book *The Early History of the Viol* from 1984. The diversity of this material required an interdisciplinary approach – with the participation not only of musicologists, organologists, and instrument makers, but also of art historians and specialized musicians in order to adequately deal with the different “source genres” in interaction with the various issues. As an additional factor alongside this decidedly interdisciplinary approach, we set ourselves the methodological goal that every one of our decisions concerning the reconstruction of the instrument not only had to be supported by sources, but also explicitly documented and traceable.

We were of course not the first to come up with the idea of reconstructing an early Italian viol. Yet, from the rediscovery of the viola da gamba up into the 1970s, a differentiation was hardly made between historical and stylistic types; but rather, one instrument and one bow could be used for the entire repertoire – what was sought was “an all-purpose viol.” An interest in early Italian viols arose primarily in the context of the English “Early Music” movement, in order to perform the respective consort repertoire on adequate instruments (this is documented in various articles, above all by Martin Edmunds and Ian Harwood, published in volumes of *Early Music* 1978).¹ The models for the reconstructions were viols (above all by Ciciliano, Linarol, Heinrich Ebert, and Jerg Gerle) preserved in museums and collections, which however were hardly seen as problematic sources and were copied more or less exactly. A critical consideration of these instruments began only later (for example, in the work of Karel Moens).² Then subsequent modifications and changes of shape were documented, discrepancies in the construction and in the transmission exposed, and the contiguity of the different parts called into question. Today it can be said that there actually exists not a single, in all respects undisputed original viol from the sixteenth century that could serve “1 to 1” as the basis of a faithful copy.

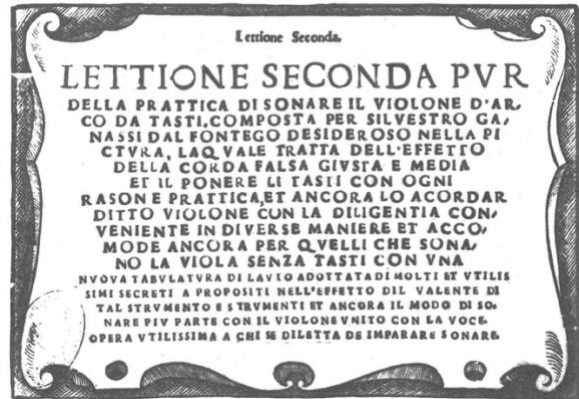
Comparable problems can be cited for the iconographical sources, which occasionally are and have been employed as alternative possibilities for the reconstruction of early string instruments, since paintings, too, are often problematic in terms of their exact attribution, precise dating and, more critically, later modifications, etc. And in no case should iconographical sources be misunderstood as realistic depictions in the sense of photographs *avant la lettre*. Therefore, for our project of a hypothetical reconstruction, we opted for another approach.

Silvestro Ganassi: Musician ...

Our point of departure was Silvestro Ganassi and his two methods for viol, which appeared in Venice in 1542 and 1543, respectively (Ill. 2 + 3): the *Regola Rvbentina* “che insegna · Sonar · de uiola d'arco Tasta da” and the *Lettione Seconda* “pvr della prattica di sonare il violone d'arco da tasti.”



III. 2: Silvestro Ganassi, *Regola Rubertina*, Venice 1542, Title, Image: CC



III. 3: Silvestro Ganassi, *Lettione seconda*, Venice 1543, Title, Image: CC

From the practical point of view, this approach offered a series of methodological advantages: The determination of a specific place (Venice) and point of time (the second quarter of the sixteenth century), and additionally a detailed method for the instrument with descriptive illustrations and information concerning the manner of playing, the repertoire, and the use of the viol. This abundance of information outweighed by far the disadvantage that Ganassi dates more toward the end of the period that interested us. Moreover, his writings also offered many clues for a specific instrument, which could be supplemented by further iconographical evidence and findings on selected original instruments. Above all, however, a closer look at Silvestro Ganassi supported our approach, inasmuch as a hitherto little noticed aspect of his biography shows him in a new light.

Let us briefly review the facts known up to now (based primarily on the research of Armando Fiabane and Stefano Pio).³ According to his own account, Ganassi was born in 1492 in Venice as the son of a barber, a native of Bergamo, who had a shop in the San Silvestro parish near the “fontego della farina” or granary in the vicinity of the Rialto bridge (III 4 + 5.).



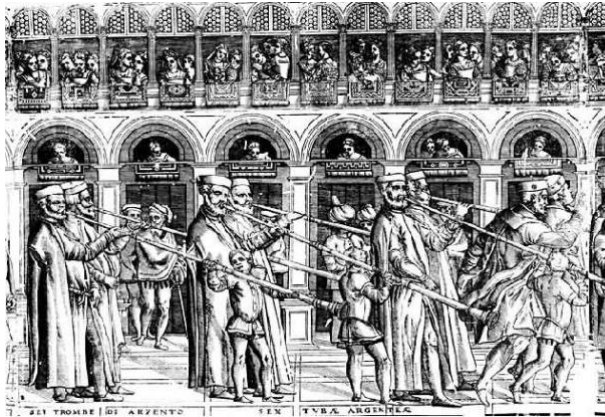
III. 4: Fontego della farina (Rio Tera S. Silvestro o del Fontego) in Venice, Photo M. Kirnbauer



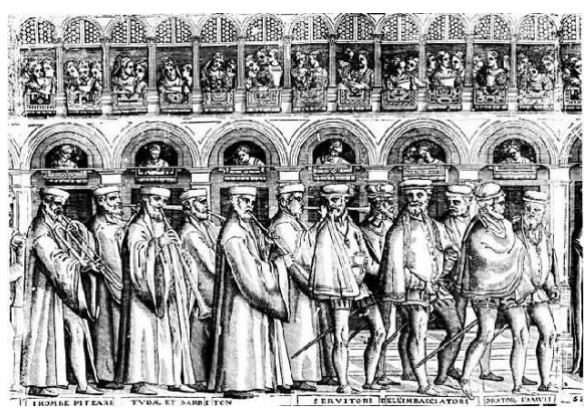
III. 5: Fontego della farina (Rio Tera S. Silvestro o del Fontego) in Venice, Photo M. Kirnbauer

This “fontego” became Ganassi’s surname, which was a means of distinguishing himself from the many other Ganassis who had immigrated from the same area around Bergamo, and also led to the title of his first publication, the *Fontegara* (1538).

In 1517 he was appointed “suonatore del Doge,” thus becoming a member of the important Venetian wind ensemble (accordingly, he called himself “syluestro di ganaßi dal fontego sonator de la Illustrissima Signoria Di Venetia” on the title page of the *Fontegara*). This position documents a social and economic ascent (which was lasting inasmuch as one of his two sons earned a doctorate in jurisprudence and was able to marry a noblewoman; the second son also became a “suonatore” of the Doge and later cornettist at the Polish royal court.) Ganassi’s appointment documents his outstanding musical artistry not only as a wind player: He assumed the position of the “contralto,” a register in which he had to play on various instruments.



Ill. 6: Matteo Pagan, Procession at S. Marco (1556-1559), Image: CC



Ill. 7: Matteo Pagan, Procession at St. Marco (1556-1559), Image: CC

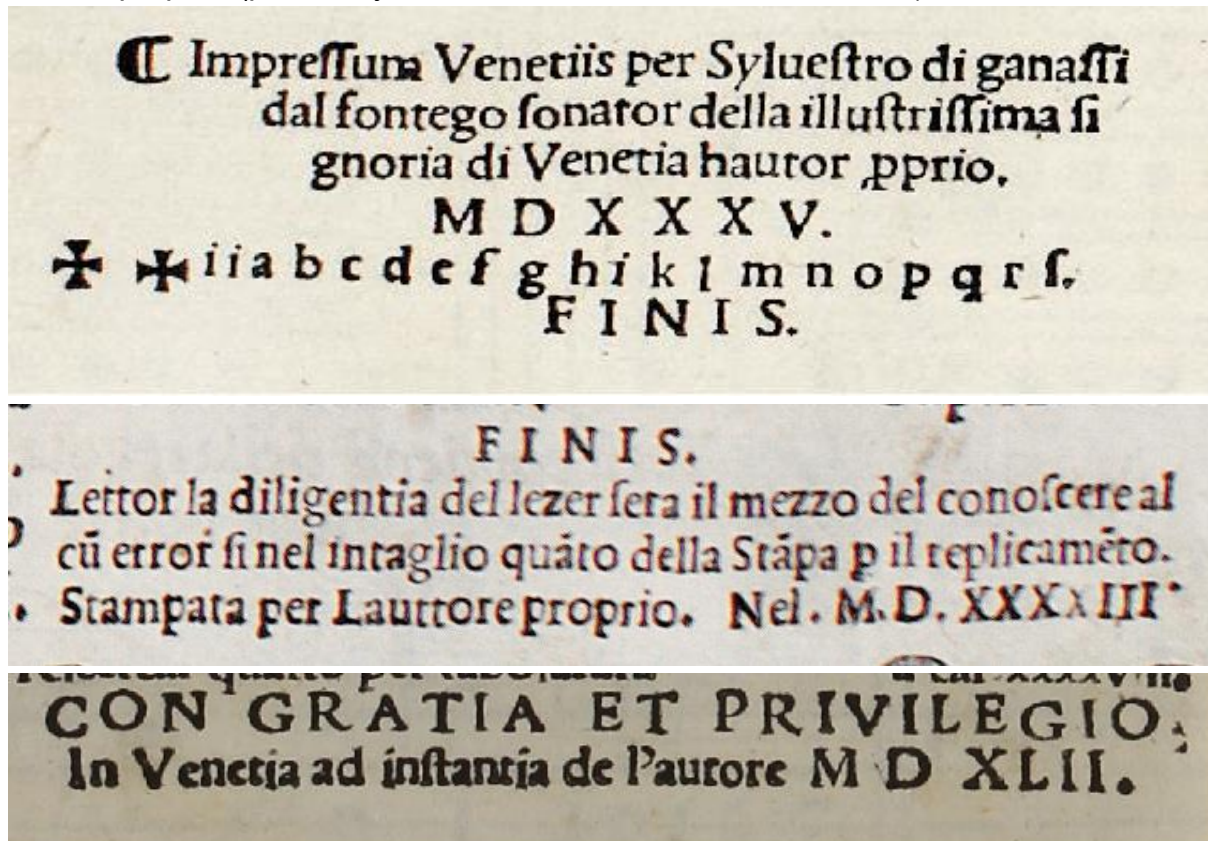
Thus, shawms, trombones, and (ceremonial) trumpets were demanded for representative occasions (Ill. 6 + 7). Additionally, the Doge’s instrumentalists were called upon for performances in San Marco, and played for the weddings of the “cittadini” (the city’s upper middle class). However, the engagements that represented the musicians’ most important source of income were those for the “grandi” and “piccole Scuole,” that is to say, for Venice’s numerous religious confraternities in whose devotions and, above all, processions music played a significant role. Documented in this context is also a “compagnia dei musici del Fontego,” perhaps a Ganassi family enterprise (two of Silvestro’s brothers were likewise “sonadore”).⁴ Besides wind instruments (such as trombone, shawm, recorders, and cornetto), string instruments were also played (according to their designation as “sonadori de viola e lironi”) – instruments that Silvestro Ganassi obviously also mastered.

Silvestro Ganassi’s outstanding position as instrumental musician is confirmed in a book from 1560 about “Venice’s notabilities.”): In Francesco Sansovino’s *Delle cose notabili che sono in Venetia* (Venice 1562), “Silvestro dal Fontego” appears in a list of the most important Venetian musicians (“senza alcun paro”), after Adrian Willaert, the “Principe de Musici,” and alongside musicians such as Marc’Antonio Cavazzoni and Claudio Merulo. His date of death is not known, but it is safe to assume that he died between 1557 and 1565.

... and draughtsman

Compatible with this picture of Silvestro Ganassi are his three surviving instrumental methods (which were, by the way, the earliest of their kind in Italy): In 1535 he published the abovementioned *Opera Inititulata Fontegara* on playing the flute and

diminutions; in 1542 and 1543, the two methods for the viola da gamba (and lute, which usually ignored today). But an entirely new aspect is offered by the fact that Ganassi was not only the author, but at the same time his own publisher and probably also his own printer. Thus, in the colophon we read (Ill. 8-10): "Impressum Venetiis per Syluestro di ganassi dal fontego sonator della illustrissima signoria di Venetia hautor pprio, M D X X V." (*Fontegara*), and "ad instantia de l'autore" (under the responsibility of the author; *Regola Rvbertina*), and explicitly "Stampata per l'autore proprio" (printed by the author himself; *Lettione seconda*).



Ill. 8-10: Colophon of Ganassi's prints, Images: CC

This raises a series of hitherto unanswerable questions in view of the fact that the publishing of a print and, even more, the running of a printing shop is a technically and financially challenging undertaking (even if a contract printing shop were commissioned with the actual printing process). One could also expect that further prints were issued, but none have been documented. But of more central importance to our subject is the question of the illustrations, in particular those of the viols in his publications, whereby it can now reasonably be assumed that Ganassi himself was responsible for them, too. The formulation "desideroso nella pictura" in the title of the *Lettione seconda*, which always seemed a bit strange, now has to be taken at face value: Ganassi was indeed known to his contemporaries as an illustrator and painter. No less than two treatises emphasize his abilities in these areas: In Paolo Pino's *Dialogo della pittura* (Venice 1548) Ganassi is described as "figliuolo della musica" and "nipote della pittura," who not only has a divine intellect, entirely sublime and full of virtue, but is also a "buon pittore," a good painter. In Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della pittura* (Venice 1557), it is said about "vostro virtuoso Silvestro, eccellente musico e sonatore del doge [...] il quale disegna e dipinge lodevolmente e ci fa toccar con mano che le figure dipinte da buoni maestri parlano, quasi a paragon delle vive." (...who laudably draws and paints, and who with the hand can make the figures painted by good masters speak as if in competition with the living.)

Both aspects – Ganassi as an important instrumental musician, whose information on playing and use of the viol is to be taken seriously, and Ganassi as an esteemed illustrator and painter, who controlled the graphical presentation of the instruments in his publications – represent an important argument for our decision to make his publications the basis of an instrument reconstruction.

Context

By way of conclusion, I would like to define the first of these two aspects more precisely. Already the title *Regola Rvbentina* points to the dedicatee, Ruberto Strozzi (ca. 1512–1566), who like his friend, cousin, and dedicatee of the *Lettione seconda*, Neri Cappone (1504–1594), belonged to a illustrious circle of exiled Florentines in Venice (“fuorusciti”) and had viol lessons with Ganassi.⁶ Ruberto Strozzi was the son of one of the undoubtedly wealthiest men of the first third of the sixteenth century, Filippo Strozzi. After a conflict with the Medici, whose politics Strozzi had financed, the Strozzi and the related Neri family were forced to go into exile. Ruberto can first be documented in Venice in 1536 and again from July 1538 to late summer 1542; Neri came to Venice from Lyon in 1538, and remained until 1544. In these years immediately before and after the publication of Ganassi’s viol method, Neri supported a kind of private musical academy under the direction of Adrian Willaert, in which Ganassi also participated (as a player at the meetings, and as the “trainer” of the two amateurs). In the *Lettione seconda*, Ganassi calls these meetings a “divino e sacro collegio,” over which Willaert presided as “Principe.” In this “collegio,” which was also described by others, for example, by Antonfrancesco Doni, viols were also employed.⁷ The musical repertoire can be easily reconstructed (with the keywords: music by Adrian Willaert, in particular his *Musica nova*, by Cipriano de Rore, and by Girolamo Parabosco).

The two viol methods by Silvestro Ganassi have to be seen in the context of this special environment of cultivated music enthusiasts – and indeed even more so than in that of the Doge’s instrumentalists or of the “compagnia dei musici del Fontego” with its duties for the “scuole.” However, this is just “the tip of the iceberg,” so to speak, in view of the considerable dissemination of “viole,” “lire,” and “lirone” in Venetian households, as evidenced, for example, by inventories and testaments.⁸ A window is opened here to a musical repertoire and to the specific use of the viol. Ganassi’s now verifiable skill as an illustrator and painter, as well as the significant fact that Ganassi was his own publisher and printer – and perhaps even woodcutter –, lend his publications particular importance.

Martin Kirnbauer, 2013 / translated by Howard Weiner

Notes

1 Edmunds Martin, [Venetian viols of the sixteenth century](#), in: Galpin Society Journal 33 (1980), pp. 74-91

Edmunds Martin, [Venetian viols of the sixteenth century reconsidered](#), in: Boer, Johannes; van Oorschot, Guido (ed.), *A viola da gamba miscellany*. Proceedings of the International Viola da Gamba Symposium Utrecht 1991, Utrecht: STIMU 1994, pp. 15-26

Harwood Ian, Edmunds Martin, [Reconstructing 16th-century Venetian viols. Jan Harwood talks to Martin Edmunds](#), in: Early Music 6 (1978), pp. 519-525

2 Moens Karel, [Die Frühgeschichte der Violine im Lichte neuer Forschungen](#), in: Lauten, Harfen, Violinen. Tage alter Musik in Herne, Herne: Stadt Herne 1984, pp. 54-86

Moens Karel, [Authenticiteitsproblemen bij oude strijkinstrumenten](#), in: Musica Antiqua 3/3 (1986), pp. 80-87 und 3/4 (1986), pp. 105-111

Moens Karel, ['Renaissancegambas' in het Brussels Instrumentenmuseum. Vragen rond toeschrijvingen, verbouwingen en authenticiteit](#), in: Bulletin van de Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis Jubelpark Brussels 66 (1995), pp. 161-237

Moens Karel, [Problems of authenticity in sixteenth-century Italian viols and the Brussels collection](#), in: Orlando, Susan (ed.), The Italian viola da gamba. Proceedings of the International symposium on the Italian viola da gamba: Magnano, Italy, 29 April-1 May 2000, Solignac: Edition Ensemble Baroque de Limoges 2002, pp. 97-114

Moens Karel, [Tiefe Streichinstrumente aus dem Bestand der venezianischen Sammlung Correr im Brüsseler Musikinstrumenten-Museum. Fragen zur Authentizität](#), in: Lustig, Monika (ed.), Geschichte, Bauweise und Spieltechnik der tiefen Streichinstrumente: 21. Musikinstrumentenbau-Symposium Michaelstein, 17. bis 19. November 2000, Dössel: Stekovics 2004, pp. 75-99 (Michaelsteiner Konferenzberichte)

3 Kirnbauer Martin, [Armando Fiabanes 'lettera su Ganassi'](#), in: Glareana 61/2 (2012), pp. 40-54

Pio Stefano, [Viol and Lute makers of Venice 1490–1630](#), Venedig: Venice Research 2011

4 Quaranta Elena, [Olter San Marco. Organizzazione e prassi della musica nelle chiese di Venezia nel Rinascimento](#), Firenze: Olschki 1998 (Studi di musica veneta 26), p. 180

5 This background perhaps explains a source that Bonnie Blackburn again recently called attention to: in connection with a lawsuit – in which Ganassi participated as a witness and that had to do with the marriage of the artist Tiziano in 1520 – a personal contact between Tiziano and Ganassi is documented. See Blackburn Bonnie J., „Myself when Young: Becoming a Musician in Renaissance Italy – or Not“, in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 181 (2012), pp. 169-203, p. 175 n. 20

6 Cf. Agee Richard J, [Ruberto Strozzi and the early madrigal](#), in: Journal of the American Musicological Society 36 (1983), pp. 1-17

Feldman Martha, [City culture and the madrigal at Venice](#), Berkeley etc.: University of California 1995, pp. 24-46

7 Antonfrancesco Doni, *Dialogo della musica*, Venice: Girolamo Scotto 1544 (dedication in the tenor partbook)

8 Cf. e.g. Vio Gastone, Toffolo Stefano, [La diffusione degli strumenti musicali nelle case dei nobili, cittadini e popolani nel XVI secolo a Venezia](#), in: Il flauto dolce. Rivista per lo studio e pratica della musica antica 17-18 (1988), pp. 33-40

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