

Antonio Torriani and the XIX Century Milanese Bassoon School a First Survey¹

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An important event in the musical life of Milan in the first years of the XIX century was the arrival of the famous violinist Alessandro Rolla, who in the season 1802/1803 took the post of first violin and conductor at the Teatro alla Scala. In the wave of intellectual fervor following the French Revolution (northern Italy was occupied by the Napoleonic armies, and Milan had become the capital of a satellite state of France, the so-called Italian Republic), with Rolla many novelties arrived for La Scala orchestra, first of all a new conducting style that was to be praised by Louis Spohr for the precision of the ensemble and the care in the accompaniment of soloists; another was an increased appreciation of the artists that played the first parts, whose names appear in greater number in the credits printed in the opera librettos. In the very season 1802/1803 the first credit attributed at La Scala to a bassoonist can be found: the name was that of the virtuoso Gaetano Grossi of Milanese origin, a former collaborator of Rolla at the court of Parma.² After the deposition of the Duke of Parma Ferdinando by Napoleon in 1802, Rolla and Grossi moved to the new capital, where Rolla was to teach and conduct up to almost eighty years of age. Grossi instead is not recorded as active after 1803; a possible reason could be ill health, considering his death in Milan on the 14th of February 1807 at a relatively young age (according to the dictionary by Carlo Schmidl³ he was born around 1750).

Only after 1809 the name of a bassoonist can be found regularly active for the Milanese theaters, Gaudenzio Lavaria, who appears in at least 89 librettos of La Scala and the Teatro della Canobbiana up to 1830. Among the operas he had the opportunity to play in was the one that marked the triumphal debut of Gioachino Rossini in Milan, *La Pietra del Paragone* of 1812, and also the first production of *La Gazza Ladra* in 1817. The general reference works don't give details on Lavaria's life and activity, except some documents of 1807 where he appears as an applicant for the post of teacher of "fagotto, flauto e oboè" at the Conservatorio di Milano, of which in that year the charters were being prepared.⁴ The application was not favorably received, since in 1808, when the Conservatorio was founded, the teacher of flute,

oboe and bassoon was Giuseppe Buccinelli, a bassoon virtuoso in the service of the French Viceroy.

The first pupil of bassoon is recorded to have been Candido Amici "del Panaro" that is native of the valley of the Panaro river that flows between Bologna and Modena. Bonifazio Asioli, the Director of the Conservatorio, in his meticulous correspondence with the Minister had an occasion to write about Amici:

*Now I must inform Your Excellency that after having the Pupil Amici up to now practiced the Violoncello, it has been found that because of an illness in his right arm he will never acquire that good method to handle the bow, so [...] I am thinking of transferring him to the Bassoon.*⁵

Further information⁶ on the bassoon class comes from a letter of 1809 in which Asioli asks the Minister to appropriate funds for the purchase of two bassoons "because up to now, and for more than one year Professor Buccinelli has made up with instruments of his property for the instruction of the pupil." The last reference to Buccinelli is a request by him in 1819 to the new Austrian Government for a salary increase in consideration of his teaching three instruments.⁷ Besides Amici, in the books about the Conservatorio⁸ no student of bassoon is mentioned who graduated during Buccinelli's teaching period, but since the newspapers occasionally reported about bassoon soloists qualified as pupils of the Milan Conservatorio⁹, it can be supposed that the surviving documents are incomplete. In fact, we may trace the continuity of the Milanese bassoon school only after 1827 when, on the death of Buccinelli, the teaching was conveniently subdivided among the Professors Giuseppe Rabboni (flute), Carlo Yvon (oboe) and Antonio Cantù (bassoon).

Antonio Cantù was probably born at the end of the XVIII century, since he is already mentioned in two librettos of the Teatro Re in 1818 and 1819. A distinguished performer, Cantù in 1831 was appointed first bassoon at the Teatro alla Scala, and held that post up to 1862 (between Lavaria and Cantù, the "Accademico Filarmonico Bolognese" Gaetano Manganello¹⁰ was hired for the Carnival season 1830/31). With Cantù, who taught up to 1868, and his colleagues at the Conservatorio, the

relationship between the two top teaching and performing institutions in Milan consolidated. The first wind parts in La Scala orchestra were often held by teachers of the Conservatorio, as for example in the seasons 1851/52 and 1852/53 when the woodwind section was formed by Rabboni, Yvon, Benedetto Carulli (clarinet) and Cantù.¹¹ Thus the main work opportunities for the pupils who graduated from the Conservatorio were offered by the several theaters that were active in Milan and the other towns in northern Italy. The credits in La Scala librettos don't mention the performers of the second bassoon parts, but since 1853 the "primo fagotto pel ballo" regularly appears¹²: during the following years three of Cantù's pupils held this post: Antonio Torriani, Giuseppe Borghetti and Giuseppe Cremonesi.

Antonio Torriani (b. Milan, January 17th 1829 - d. Milan, August 9th 1911)¹³ is certainly one of the most important bassoonists in XIX century Italy. He started his studies at the Conservatorio with Cantù in 1842, and already in 1846 he played first bassoon in the opera *I due Savoardi* by Antonio Cagnoni performed by the pupils; in 1850 on his graduation Torriani won a prize in instrumental performance.¹⁴ In 1853 he was "primo fagotto a vicenda" (that is co-principal) with Cantù for the season at the Teatro Carcano; after having performed several times at La Scala as "primo pel ballo", in 1864 he succeeded his teacher as "primo per l'opera", and held that post until 1893. This was one of the periods of greater splendor for the Teatro alla Scala, that with the Italian unification in 1861 became the center of the musical life of the new kingdom. Its successful productions were reproduced in all the other major theaters, and this as a result induced composers and publishers to present their works in Milan. For example Giuseppe Verdi, who after his initial success had not granted a premiere of any of his operas to La Scala¹⁵, choose the Milanese theater for the first Italian production of *Aida* and for the world premieres of *Otello* and *Falstaff*. The important solos entrusted to the bassoon in these operas give ample testimony to the performing abilities of Torriani: Verdi is even reported¹⁶ to have valued Torriani as "the first performer in all the world on this instrument."

Torriani's name is also connected to the origins of another important Milanese musical institution of the last part of the century: the Società Orchestrale del Teatro alla Scala. The orchestra had occasionally performed concerts outside the opera season, as for example the premiere of the *Messa da Requiem* conducted by Verdi himself in 1874, during which Torriani and his colleagues had the opportunity to play for the first time the

wonderful solos and the arresting bassoon quartet (see figure 1, where the player of a wind instrument looking like a bassoon appears behind the two male singers Maini and Capponi; this might be the only surviving image of Torriani¹⁷). In 1878 La Scala orchestra under the direction of Franco Faccio was



Figure 1.

invited in Paris for the Universal Exhibition, where it was favorably received; the program of the second concert in Paris opened with a bassoon concerto (the reports don't mention the composer) performed by Torriani.¹⁸ Subsequently, following this successful tour, in 1879 a regular concert season was started, presenting to the Milanese public for the first time works by French operatic composers, the German symphonic repertoire, and excerpts of Wagner, who at that time wasn't widely appreciated in Italy yet.

Besides his activity as a performer, Torriani was also a composer and an arranger: among his publications (see Appendix) are five original compositions (four for bassoon and piano, one for oboe, bassoon and piano) and four arrangements of operatic airs. His publications in this genre, that in the XIX century was very popular all over Europe, give a clear indication of the bassoon style that Torriani aimed at, and of the technique that was considered feasible by the Italian school in those years. For example, the *Divertimento* on Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, still performed today, skillfully exploits famous themes from the opera in order to bring out all the potential of the instrument. The various episodes, preceded by cadential moments that take the instrument up to the high C (and on one occasion, after Edgardo's aria "Fra poco a me ricovero", up to D), give the performer an opportunity to display fast arpeggios, slurred and in staccato, over the whole range of the instrument, as well as the cantabile of the tenor register. The piece also features a lively variation in triplets over the duet "Verranno a te sull'aure" and a whirlwind finale.

In Torriani's original compositions the lyrical element prevails, as it is already evident from the choice of titles and of the genre of the nocturne. An example is *Il Tramonto*, a short page (71 bars in 6/8) subtitled «pensiero romantico», where the romantic sensibility manifests itself just a few bars after the beginning of the bassoon part, with the sudden deviation of the melodic line towards the major mediant tonality (see musical example). The purpose of this device is obviously to avoid symmetry and to prolong the melodic arch, in order to exploit to the fullest the expressive character of the instrument. In fact the main quality of this piece is the appropriate use of the colors of the tenor register: the bassoon part lies almost entirely between the middle F# and the high A, moving out of this range only in the two cadences (top note C) and in the final arpeggio starting on the low G.

Torriani's activity as professor at the Milan Conservatorio from 1868 to 1908, that is up to 79 years of age, is attested by his editing of the bassoon tutor by Etienne Ozi, published in 1895 by Ricordi in an Italian edition that is still a standard textbook in Italian Conservatories. In the preface Torriani justifies his choice of this method, dating from nearly one century before, on the grounds that it is "the best, because more gradual and rational" and declares

My main purpose is that the pupil apply himself especially to the study of the voice and of the intonation. These two qualities form, in my opinion, the principal foundation for a good performer, and to reach such a scope I think it necessary to add before the first exercises [...] other short studies written in whole notes, and, after the varied exercises in all keys contained in the last part, arpeggios and scales, also in all tonalities, on all the range of the instrument, in order to make the pupil [...] used to the correct embouchure.

Besides these arpeggios and scales (where the range is limited to the top Db although, as we have seen, Torriani considered the top D feasible), ten «bravura studies», four by Drouet and six by Kummer, are added at the end of the tutor, as well as ten preparatory exercises from Emanuele Krakamp's tutor at the beginning. But the main editorial choice by Torriani is the cut of the six "Grandes Sonates" for two bassoons and of all the section on the embellishments, evidently considered too much bound to the XVIII century taste. In the first part the section on the reed is noteworthy, as it gives the measurements of the reeds made by Cantù (see figure 2), appreciably larger than modern ones: 135 mm. the length of the piece of cane before folding, 62 mm. the final length,

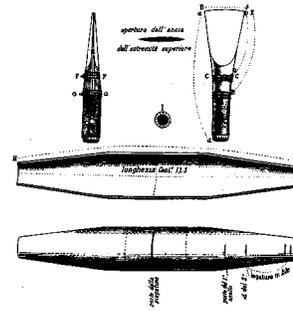


Figure 2.

19 mm. the width of the blade at the tip, 10 mm. at the base. The text does not state the tube length, but from the life-size drawing one can get a measurement of 30 mm., leaving 32 mm. for the blade. No information is given about the blade scraping, and the pupil is referred to "the advice of his teacher". The preface makes reference to the "modern Bassoon with all the recent improvements, including the addition of double Ab key in order to obtain the Gb/Ab slur", thus indicating the adoption also in Italy of the 22 key Jancourt system, built in Milan in those years by the firm Maino & Orsi.

If the research hitherto conducted clearly shows the important role played by Cantù and Torriani on the Milan scene, a role that strongly benefited from the close connection between the Conservatorio and the Teatro alla Scala, it's difficult to document in a similar way the activity of Torriani's successors at La Scala, Giuseppe Cremonesi and Alberto Orefici, both mentioned in the 1894/95 season librettos as "primi fagotti per l'opera" on equal rank before the "altro primo fagotto in sostituzione", Domenico Delledonne. The last years of the century were indeed critical for La Scala, that in 1897 lost the "dowry" granted by the municipality¹⁹, and was forced to close for one year. For the following Scala seasons the production system changed entirely, and the librettos weren't anymore printed by the impresario but by the publishers of the music, who, having in view a national circulation of printed material, had no interest in listing the names of local forces. Lacking this useful information source, a different approach will be necessary to increment the scattered data already collected on Cremonesi, a pupil of Cantù, born around 1840, and the younger Orefici, taking as a departure point the reforms in La Scala orchestra and repertory introduced, nearly one century after Rolla, by Arturo Toscanini. But this of course would lead well into the first quarter of the XX century, that will be the subject of another essay. ❖

Appendix: publications by Antonio Torriani

Op. 1 Fantasia per Fagotto con Accomp.to di Piano Forte Sopra Motivi della Lucrezia Borgia

Op. 2 Ricordati di Me, Notturmo Sentimentale per Fagotto con Accomp.to di Piano Forte

Op. 3 Notturmo per Fagotto con Accomp.to di Piano Forte

Op. 4 Fantasia per Fagotto con Accomp.to di Piano Forte sopra un tema del Pirata

Op. 5 La Speranza, Capriccio per Oboe e Fagotto con Accomp.to di Pianoforte

Il Tramonto, pensiero romantico per fagotto con accomp.to di Pianoforte (ca. 1850)

Duetto concertato per Flauto e Fagotto con accomp.to di Pianoforte sopra motivi del M° Verdi composto da P. Morlacchi ed A. Torriani (ca. 1850)

Divertimento per Fagotto con Accomp.to di Pianoforte sopra motivi dell'opera Lucia di Lammermoor di Donizetti (ca. 1865)

La Sera, Melodia variata per Fagotto o Violoncello con accomp.to di Pianoforte

Metodo per fagotto di E. Ozi riordinato dal Prof. Antonio Torriani (1895)

Endnotes

¹ This essay presents the first results of a research, promoted by the Associazione "Il Teatro della Memoria", on Italian bassoon players and music for bassoon. I wish to thank the fellow bassoonists William Waterhouse and Rino Vernizzi for the information generously given, Vittoria Zagari for the help in the research on the libretto collection of the Biblioteca del Conservatorio di S. Cecilia in Roma, and Carla Forgiore for the help in revising the English translation of the essay. Thanks are also due to Dr. Agostina Zecca Laterza, Librarian at the Biblioteca del Conservatorio "G. Verdi" - Milano, Dr. Marco Capra of CIRPeM (International Center for Research on Music Periodicals - Parma), Dr. Federica Riva, Librarian at the Sezione musicale della Biblioteca Palatina nel Conservatorio "A. Boito" - Parma, and Dr. Ludovica Petrina of the Biblioteca dell'Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte - Roma.

² Grossi and Rolla (whose bassoon concerto is considered to have been written for Grossi) had also made concert tours together. For example the libretto of Angelo Tarchi's opera *Demofonte* produced at the Nuovo Teatro in Crema in 1786 lists, immediately after the conductor, the "Professori concertisti Sig. Alessandro Rolla per viola; Sig. Gaetano Grossi per fagotto, e corno inglese, ambi all'attuale servizio della real corte di Parma". Gaspare Nello Vetro ("L'Accademia Filarmonica Parmense (1783-1849)" in *Ottocento e oltre: scritti in onore di Raoul Meloncelli*, ed. by Francesco Izzo and Johannes Streicher, Roma, Editoriale Pantheon 1993: 35-54) reports on an episode of 1785 when the "Professori Milanesi" (That is Rolla, Grossi and the cellist Giuseppe Rovelli) after a performance for the Accademia Filarmonica of Parma dared to enter the party reserved to the nobility, giving rise to vigorous protests by some haughty members of the exclusive circle. Notwithstanding this incident, the "Professori Milanesi"

continued to enjoy the protection of the Court, and made successful tours also to Mantova, Lucca and Reggio Emilia.

³ Carlo Schmidl, *Dizionario Universale dei Musicisti*, Milano, Matarelli, 1929, vol. I 668. Another reference to Grossi is in Nestore Policelli, *Storia della musica in Parma dal 1400 al 1860*, Roma, Edizioni Psalterium 1936, quoting the Parma court payroll of 1802 where Grossi's salary is determined in 8000 lire parmigiane, an extraordinary sum at a time when only a few musicians could count on a regular income in cash.

⁴ The handwritten notes preserved at the Archivio di Stato di Milano are published in Lodovico Corio, *Ricerche Storiche sul R. Conservatorio di Musica di Milano*, Milano, Tip. Umberto Allegretti, 1908: 85. Corio reads the name "Lavarini" but no musician of this name is recorded in Milan in the first part of the century.

⁵ L. Corio, *op. cit.*: 72. The change of instrument appears to have been a good choice, since Amici in three years obtained his diploma and subsequently had a distinguished career in the service of the court of Modena.

⁶ *ibidem*: 76

⁷ Federico Monpello, *II. R. Conservatorio di Musica "Giuseppe Verdi" di Milano*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 1941: 35.

⁸ Lodovico Melzi, *Cenni storici sul Reale Conservatorio di Musica*, Milano, Ricordi 1878; L. Corio, *op. cit.*; Federico Monpello, *op. cit.*

⁹ for example the *Corriere delle Dame* on October 7th 1820 reports on the performance in Lucca by the pupil Angelo Saurinelli.

¹⁰ A reference to Manganelli can be found in a letter by Rossini, who considered him "eccellente" and had him hired for a production of *La Gazza Ladra* in 1818 in Pesaro (see Gioachino Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, ed. by Bruno Cagli and Sergio Ragni, Pesaro, Fondazione Rossini, 1992, vol. I 303).

¹¹ This "celebre quartetto" was also much admired at the private performances given during the social gatherings of the intellectual circles, as for example in the home of Rabboni himself (see Guglielmo Barblan, "L'Ottocento e l'inizio del secolo XX" in *Storia di Milano XVI*, Fondazione Treccani degli Alfieri, 1962: 706 n. 2).

¹² It must be remembered that an evening usually comprised one opera and one or two ballets, making it necessary for two performers to alternate in the first parts.

¹³ C. Schmidl, *op. cit.*, vol. II 610. The dates are confirmed by the official notice in the Milan newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, that on August 12th reports the death, registered on August 10th of "Torriani Antonio, pensionato, di anni 82, residente in piazza della Vittoria 1".

¹⁴ *L'Italia Musicale* of August 28th 1850, reporting on the school concert, positively reviewed his performance of a "Fantasia sopra motivi della *Lucrezia Borgia*", composed by Torriani himself (see Appendix), with these words: "The composition was much appreciated as well as the performance, and the young player deserves more praise inasmuch as greater is the difficulty to overcome in that instrument"

¹⁵ There were several reasons for this, one of which was Verdi's dissatisfaction with the scanty orchestral forces granted by La Scala impresarios for the production of his operas (see Gregory W. Harwood, "Verdi's Reform of the Italian Opera Orchestra", 19th Century Music X, 2 (Fall 1986): 108-134).

¹⁶ F. Monpello, *op. cit.*, 68.

Antonio Torriani - *Tramonto* (battute 12-22)

¹⁷ The xylograph, depicting a performance on La Scala stage that took place a few days after the premiere in the church of San Marco, was printed by *Nuova Illustrazione Universale* on June 14th 1874.

¹⁸ Giampiero Tintori, *Duecento anni di Teatro alla Scala. Cronologia opere-balletti-concerti 1778-1977*. Gorle, Grafica Gutenberg, 1979; 261 n. 1. Schmidl, *op. cit.* writes about another performance by Torriani in London, but gives no date.

¹⁹ There were fiery discussions in the Municipal Council between the Left and the Right about the propriety of spending the taxes paid by all citizens for the amusement of a few "palchettisti" (the patrician families that owned the opera boxes). To give an idea of the bitterness of the social confrontation in that crucial turn of the century it may suffice to remember that on May 1898 the increase in food prices gave rise to riots in the streets of Milan. In the ensuing repression, the army dispersed the crowd with cannon rounds, killing at least 80 civilians.

²⁰ Orefici in 1926 was professor at the Turin Conservatorio, and in that year published a *Storia del*

Fagotto. Presumably a pupil of Torriani, who dedicated his composition *Le Sera* to him, Orefici is still known for his *Studi melodici* and for the *Studi di Bravura*.

About the Author ...

Andrea Toschi graduated in Mathematics in 1973 and subsequently studied bassoon with Sergio Romani, obtaining his diploma at the Conservatorio dell'Aquila in 1981. In the 1982/83 season he played in the orchestra of the Teatro Massimo in Palermo. Since 1983 he has taught Musical Education in the Scuola Media Statale, and has played bassoon and contrabassoon freelance with the major orchestras in Rome (Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Teatro dell'Opera, Orchestra Sinfonica della RAI) as well as with many chamber groups. In 1985 he founded, together with Andrea Whitcomb (oboe) and Yvonne Fisher (clarinet), the Masters of the Reed trio. He is also active in the field of Renaissance music, playing curtal and organizing performances of historical dances, and has published essays on XIX century Italian ballet music.