

Mandolin repertoire research the modern way

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by

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Federico de Bord has been exploring manuscripts from across Europe thanks to his St Cecilia's bursary

The instrument that we know nowadays as the mandolin had been modified throughout the 17th and 18th centuries before becoming popular around the world. It is possible to find different construction models from various luthiers over the different Italian regions. Unfortunately the repertoire that would have been played on these mandolins had been almost forgotten, or at the very least modified for playing on the more common Neapolitan model. During my research, I found many manuscripts from the 18th century written for mandolin in various European libraries. Studying this music has allowed a greater understanding of how the early mandolin was tuned and played, and reconstruction of some of the repertoire for the instrument.



Federico de Bord plays a six-course "mandolino alla genovese"

As I am from Genoa, initially I was looking for music written for the “mandolino alla Genovese”, Genoese mandolin, being keen to reconstruct the history of this forgotten model. There are a few dozen of these instruments in museums and private collections across the world and many of them are hot-branded “C.N.”, referring to the Genoese luthier Christian Nonnemacher. Particularities of this mandolin are the five or six double courses of gut strings, the neck joint on the ninth fret, the canted soundboard, the string anchorage by endpins on the bottom, the parallelogram pickguard, the metal frets and the parchment rosette. Unfortunately, only a few pieces of music could be traced to this specific instrument, but it was during this research that I realised the wealth of manuscripts from the 18th century written for other mandolin models.

The Friends of St Cecilia’s Hall bursary has allowed me to request copies and digital copies of a large number of manuscripts from libraries and private collections. Through this I have had the opportunity to study the mandolin tablatures written by the famous lute and mandolin player Francesco Bartolomeo Conti, now stored in the Lobkowitz family private collection. This beautiful French tablature, written for a mandolin played with the fingers rather than a plectrum, provided me with useful information about Conti’s music.

This knowledge turned out to be very useful when I saw another manuscript, stored in Glasgow, called “Scola del Leutino, o sia Mandolino alla Genovese” (“[an instrument of] the small lute school, or Genoan mandolin”). This is the only existing record of the Genoese mandolin, and the library catalogue links it to Francesco Bartolomeo Conti, to the period between 1724 and 1735. At Folio 3, we have a beautiful watercolour of the Genoese mandolin; on the pegbox is written: “Francesco Conti”. However, by comparing it with other manuscripts handwritten by Conti, we can see that it is not his autograph and probably not related to him.

Copies of many other manuscripts from different European libraries are being studied in order to better understand the characteristics of 18th century mandolins. I would like to thank the Friends of St Cecilia’s Hall for supporting my research, giving me the opportunity to see sources that are not easily accessible in person. Such manuscripts are one example of the large number of information sources we can use to solve difficult puzzles about the history of musical instruments.