

A Walk Through Time:

An Exhibition of the Great Brescian Masters

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By Michelle Fiore

In late March 2007, I was on a business trip to Arizona with my husband. Alone at lunch one afternoon, I received a call from my colleague and friend Duane Rosengard. Toward the end of our conversation, Duane mentioned that a unique instrument exhibition would be taking place that would include several rare bass instruments.

The more I learned about the details of the exhibition, the more I knew that this was going to be a once in a lifetime opportunity – and one that I did not want to miss. The setting would be Brescia, part of the Lombardy region in Northern Italy, about 100 km east of Milan, and just 50 km north of Cremona. The region is saturated with a wealth of instrument making history, and I immediately started looking forward to traveling back to Italy to immerse myself in this fascinating instrument making culture.

The public exhibition was held at the Palazzo Martinengo in Brescia from June 9 through July 8, 2007. It had been several years in the making, and private collectors and public institutions lent over thirty instruments, among them six historically significant bass instruments. While the exhibition was focused on the instruments of Giovanni Paolo Maggini, instruments by Zaneto di Micheli, several by Gasparo Bertolotti da Salò and the two Rogeri were also present.

Monday June 11 was to be a unique day on which, by invitation only, makers and players were allowed “hands on” time with the instruments. This would allow for detailed study, which was in fact a large part of the purpose of June 11 – for experts to gather, discuss, share and perhaps come to conclusions through observing the various instruments, an experience that would make this day very valuable. Eric Blot, Carlo Chiesa, John Dilworth, Ugo Ravasio, Christopher Reuning and our

own Duane Rosengard were among the international experts who would be analyzing the instruments. Some of them not only attended but also contributed to organizing the exhibition.

For me, the highlights of the exhibition would be the basses. One would be the “ex-Dragonetti” bass made by Gasparo Bertolotti (1542-1609), better known as Gaspar “da Salò” as he was born in Salò, Italy. He is thought to be the founder of the Brescian school of violin making and is also one of the earliest violinmakers to which historical records make reference. His father was a musician, and in all likelihood, the person who gave Gaspar his musical training. Gaspar was known to be a good businessman and lived modestly, eventually becoming fairly wealthy.

Gaspar was one of the first luthiers to have interest in the larger bass-like instruments, which can be thought of as precursory examples to the instrument we today call the double bass. Typical characteristics of these works include a flat back, widely set f holes (to accommodate more strings), and deeper ribs. He used slightly exotic woods such as cherry, poplar and pear. His archings are typically fairly low and almost all of his instruments boast beautiful double purfling.

The sole Gaspar bass at the exhibition – the “ex-Dragonetti” – is usually on display at the Basilica of San Marco, Venice. Legend has it that nuns gave it to Domenico Dragonetti after a magnificent performance in their convent. How privileged I would feel to be playing a bass owned and loved by none other than Domenico Dragonetti!! Especially because at one time, absolutely no one was allowed to touch it – even Bottesini was denied.

I was equally (or perhaps even more) excited because the exhibition would feature five double basses by Giovanni Paolo Maggini (1580-1630/31). Maggini was Gaspar’s apprentice, and while his early work shows the influence of his teacher, the finest examples of craftsmanship are thought to come from after 1606 when Maggini established his own workshop. As his skill

and focus matured, the details of Maggini’s instruments reflected an ever-higher level of workmanship. Some historians even suggest that some of Gaspar’s basses might have actually been made by both men.

Maggini’s use of exceptional materials contributed to the magnificent tone of his instruments. The varnishes varied from a clear brown in his early years to a brighter, more transparent golden or reddish brown in later years. The backs of his violins and violas were sometimes elaborately ornamented, and let’s not forget the use of the double purfling typical in his late models. Like many of the great makers of the era, Maggini’s life was taken by the bubonic plague of 1630-31. Together, Gaspar and Maggini are considered to be the most important makers of the early Brescian school.

I simply could not pass up the opportunity to see this rare collection of six of their works. My husband and I arrived in Brescia on Sunday, the day before the private exhibition. As we arrived at the museum, we were invited to go on a walking tour of this quaint town. The tour was led by Mr. Ugo Ravasio, an historian who I understand to be of both Brescian and Cremonese descent. Mr. Ravasio spoke only Italian, which added to the authenticity of the tour. We spent a couple of hours walking the streets of Brescia, visiting churches and other landmarks, and absorbing the general history of the town.

The highlights however, clearly were walking by the homes and workplaces of both Maggini and Gaspar. When I saw that one is now a retail store selling vases, etc., I thought, “how can that be...?!” This setting felt somewhat surreal. Back in my days as a student at the Chicago School of Violin Making, we of course studied Brescia, its great makers, and its influence on those to come. Now, I was here on a private tour walking the same streets where Gaspar and Maggini once lived and worked some 400 years earlier - anticipating the next day - when I would have the opportunity to study their instruments firsthand.

The day ended with the group sipping wine and dining on authentic Italian food at

a restaurant right across the street from the church where Gaspar is buried. What other place could have been more appropriate to end this special day?

Monday morning, the day of hands-on study, started with the violins, violas and cellos. The setting allowed for about ten instruments to be brought out at a time. The room used was specially lit, and small groups gathered around each instrument, shared observations or asked questions amongst themselves, and then moved on to the next instrument. At any other time, I would have been completely captivated studying these instruments. But here, the five Maggini basses and Dragonetti's Gaspar da Salò bass were waiting in the next room, all completely enclosed within glass cases. For me, this was something of a tease.

The real fun began in the afternoon, when the basses were removed from their heavy glass enclosures. We had about an hour to not only study, but also to play these instruments. This was the highlight for me! As I played a passage from a Beethoven symphony, I imagined Dragonetti performing the very same literature – at that time, the literature of his day – on this, the bass he owned.

The few of us most interested in the basses stayed in an intimate room, passing the basses from one to another. In this setting, we were able to play and compare the five Maggini basses with each other and with Dragonetti's Gaspar. Maggini constructed basses of two distinct patterns and we were able to compare examples of each. One pattern is fairly large, even by modern day standards. The other is smaller and includes instruments now referred to as "bassetti" or "violones". We discussed how each bass differed tonally. We analyzed playability and studied their construction. It was fascinating just to have Brescian wood of that age at hand and intriguing to compare the particular woods utilized.

I enjoyed comparing the two original Maggini heads (both of which were originally made for six strings) to the non-original ones, noting the obvious differences in form and function. The characteristic double purfling emphasized the distinctive outlines. Still on Dragonetti's Gaspar bass was a three-string bridge fitted by the English violinmaker Thomas Kennedy, on the bass since at least 1846 – the year of Dragonetti's death. It was still so unbelievably straight!

Of particular pleasure to me was to see the Maggini Dumas violone again. I had the opportunity to study this rare instrument in 2006, as it was here at Classic Contrabass from June-December of that year. I do miss sharing my workshop with this rare instrument, as it was a great conversation piece with a variety of customers. What a privilege to have shared each day with such an exceptional instrument.

In all my years of involvement with our instrument, I can say without hesitation that these instruments played and sounded like no other basses I've ever had my hands on. The bows, highly exceptional themselves, drew like butter and the tone qualities were generally rich, full, projecting and colorful. Even the basses not in the best state of restoration had excellent tone. I know that this was an experience of a lifetime.

Many thanks should be extended to Emanuele Beschi and Francesco Lattuada, the artistic directors of the exhibition, and to coordinators Filippo Fasser, Bruno Costerdi and Jan Bartos. The exhibition was several years in the making, and I can only imagine the time and effort extended to make it all happen. What a worthwhile effort for an unforgettable experience. Gratitude is also extended to the owners of the basses for the use of the photographs. Last and certainly not least, I need to thank Duane

Rosengard for bringing the exhibition to my attention. It was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity.

For the past 10 years, Michelle Fiore has owned and operated Classic Contrabass Inc., a workshop devoted to the sales and repairs of the double bass exclusively. Her workshop is located in Wheeling, Illinois, just 25 miles northwest of the Chicago Loop. In 1994, Michelle graduated from Northern Illinois University Summa Cum Laude with a master's of music in double bass performance. She immediately entered the Chicago School of Violin-Making, graduating from this full-time program in 1997.

INSTRUMENTS

G.P. Maggini small violone or "bassetto"

- owned by the city of Brescia
- smallest bass at exhibition
- most in need of restoration
- only the back and ribs are original
- back length with button – 1019 mm
- table length – 989 mm
- F stop - 514 mm
- upper bout width – 433 mm
- middle bout width – 305 mm
- lower bout width – 578 mm





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G.P. Maggini “ex-Dumas” small violone or bassetto

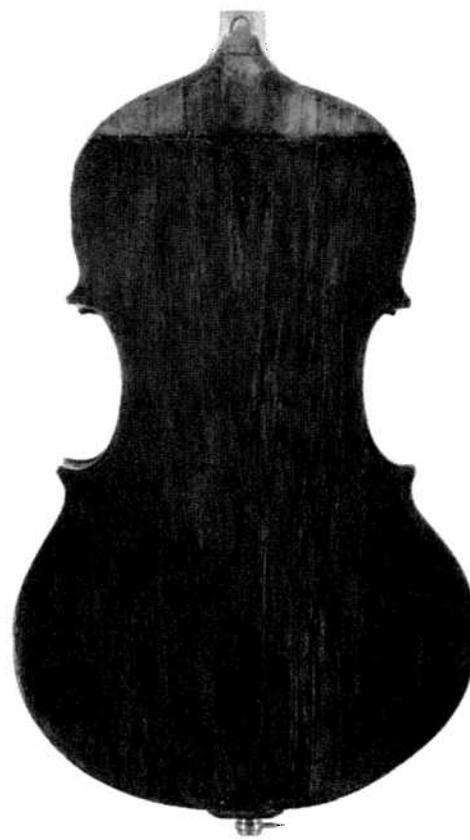
- privately owned
- small pattern
- recently restored by Harry Jansen of Amsterdam
- neck and head are the work of W. E Hill and Sons, London, c. 1890
- tonally exceptional
- string length – 930 mm
- back length with button – 1021 mm
- table length – 993 mm
- F stop – 526 mm
- upper bout width – 435 mm
- middle bout width – 308 mm
- lower bout width – 586 mm



Maggini, ex Dumas front



Maggini, ex Dumas, head by WE Hill and Sons



Maggini, ex Dumas back

G.P Maggini Contrabass “The Dragonetti”

- privately owned
- large pattern
- shares similarities with Gaspar’s “Dragonetti”
- also has Dragonetti’s name engraved on the faceplate
- head probably of the English school
- back length with button – 1096 mm
- table length – 1084 mm
- F stop – 545 mm
- upper bout width – 512 mm
- middle bout width – 353 mm
- lower bout width – 655 mm



Maggini ex Dragonetti front



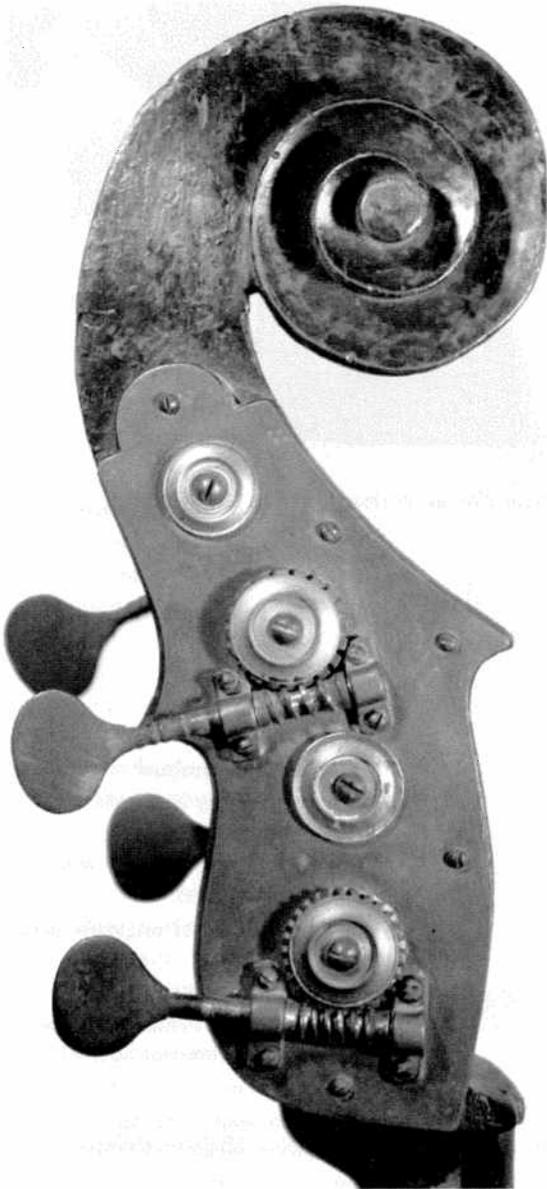
Maggini ex Dragonetti back

G. P Maggini contrabass

- privately owned
- large pattern
- retains its original head
- shows evidence of once being a 6 string instrument
- string length – 1067 mm
- back length with button – 1106 mm
- table length – 1085 mm
- F stop – 569 mm
- upper bout width – 532 mm
- middle bout width – 356 mm
- lower bout width – 672 mm



Maggini, private American collection front



Maggini, private American collection head



Maggini, private American collection back

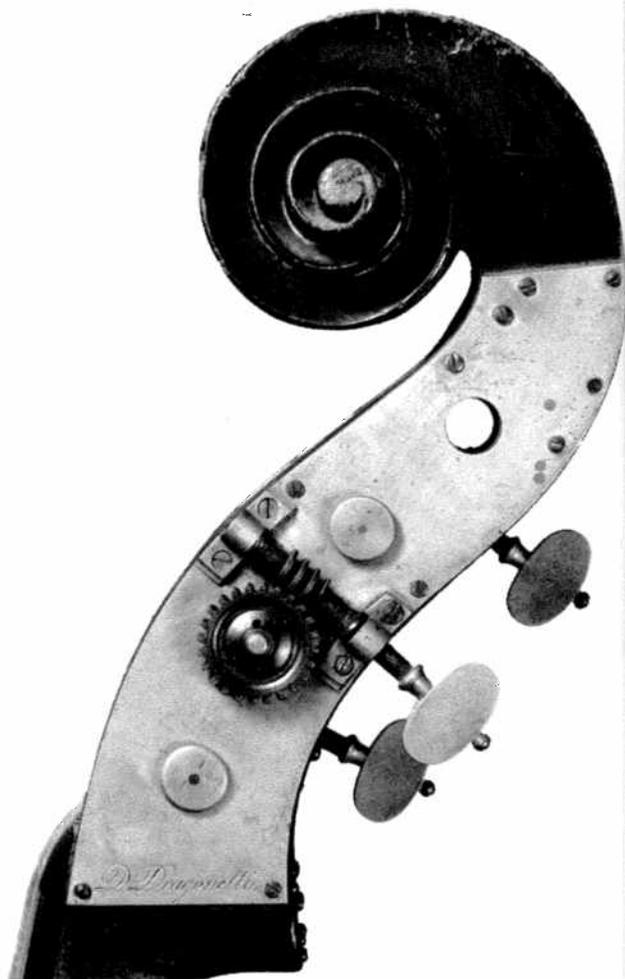
Gasparo Bertolotti da Salò –

The Dragonetti Bass

- displayed in San Marco, Venice
- large pattern
- restored by Sergio Scaramelli of Ferrara, Italy
- non-original head attributed to Giovanni Battista Bodio, Venice, c.1824
- brass plate engraved with Dragonetti's name
- string length – 1077 mm
- back length with button – 1143 mm
- table length – 1140 mm
- F stop – 617 mm
- upper bout width - 539 mm
- middle bout width – 378.5 mm
- lower bout width – 682 mm



Gaspar da Salo ex Dragonetti front



Gaspar da Salo ex Dragonetti, head by GB Bodio

G.P Maggini contrabass

- owned by the city of Brescia
- characteristically Maggini
- original head that is typical of the Brescian school around 1600
- visible evidence of originally having a 6 string set-up
- string length – 1060 mm
- back length with button – 1107 mm
- table length – 1090 mm
- F stop - 575 mm
- upper bout width – 528 mm
- middle bout width – 350.5 mm
- lower bout width – 666.5 mm