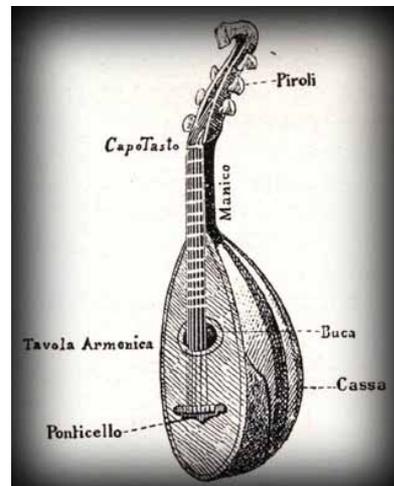


THE MANDOLINO MILANESE

The term *mandolino Milanese* is found for the first time in 1805 in the method published by the mandolin virtuoso Bartholomeo Bortolazzi¹. It was referred to a 6 single strings mandolino² which directly descended from the old 6 double course with whom it shared some construction features: the tuning in fourths, the bridge glued on the soundboard and the sickle shaped pegbox.

This type of mandolin - of which the oldest surviving instruments are from the very late eighteenth century - was also called *mandolino Lombardo* being built mainly in Lombardia and North Italy; it became more popular between 1880 and 1920 when it was used as an alternative instrument to the most known Neapolitan mandolin (4 wire double courses tuned in fifths).

Ferdinando Francia wrote in his method (*Lo Studio del mandolino milanese*) published in 1890: *the rediscovering of this type of mandolin had started in Milan a few years ago when, thanks to the industrious impulse of Mr Antonio Monzino, the club of amateurs mandolin and guitar players was founded. [...]*



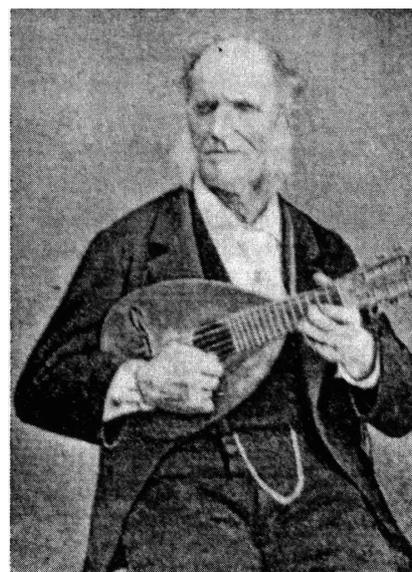
Alessandro Rosati, *Metodo per mandolino milanese*
Edizioni Ricordi, Milano 1875-1900 circa

A few years later Agostino Pisani³ describes it as a six strings instruments of which three of gut and three of silk over spun with silvered copper and tuned in fourths, with a major third between the sixth and fifth string.

The fingerboard of these instruments was not anymore flush with the soundboard but was raised and its length was extended up to 19 or 20 brass bars. Each fret was also scalloped to allow a better intonation.

Comparing it to the old 6 double course mandolino, the Milanese type has a rounder and heavier body, thick counter clasps and a stronger barring to counteract the increased tension of the single strings. The neck and the pegbox were generally from one piece of wood and we find a wooden scratch plate set into the soundboard. Besides the already mentioned Monzino family, other makers must be remembered: Carlo Albertini from Milan and Enrico Rocca from Genoa of whom a good number of Milanese mandolin have survived.

Among the important players must be remembered the outstanding Pietro Vimercati from Milan - who was active during the first half of the nineteenth century and was praised as the "Paganini" or the "Giuliani" of the mandolino. Another important virtuoso was Giovanni Vailati from Crema (ca. 1813-1890), blind since his childhood, who became a close friend of important



composers such as Verdi and politicians as Mazzini and Garibaldi.

¹ Bartholomeo Bortolazzi, *Anweisung die mandoline*, Breiktopf & Härtel Lipsia 1805.

² A few rare 5 strings *mandola milanese* have survived. These are bigger instruments, probably tuned like a 6 string mandolino without the top string.

³ Agostino Pisani, *Manuale teorico pratico del mandolinista*, Ulrico Hoepli, editore librario della Real casa, Milano 1898, p. 26

Unlike the Neapolitan mandolins (which in the nineteenth century were entirely strung with steel strings and plucked with tortoiseshell plectrums) the Milanese type, being strung with gut was always played with a cherry bark plectrum⁴, which the Italians used to call “patacca”. In sharp contrast to the attention received from some of the leading composers of the eighteenth century, by the 1820s virtually no music was composed for the mandolino, although it continued to be popular, especially in North Italy.

Having the same extension of the Neapolitan mandolin, the *mandolino Milanese* could also share the same repertoire and, as well as the Neapolitan, was also played in the many mandolin ensembles or so called “plectrum orchestras” at least until the end of World War I.

Davide Rebuffa



⁴ *The mandolino lombardo or milanese has six strings, three of which made of silk covered with copper and three of gut which we strike with a plectrum made of cherry bark.[...]* In: A. Galante, *Il mandolino ed istrumenti affini*, conferenza tenuta al circolo dilettanti mandolinisti e chitarristi di Milano il 22 marzo 1891, illustrata e pubblicata per cura di Antonio Monzino, Milano, pp. 33-34.