

Lorenzo Lippi • Donatella Melini

GIOVANNI BATTISTA MALDURA  
AND THE *INVENTION*  
OF THE ROMAN MANDOLIN


Translated by  
Simona Colombini

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Cover: Maldura caricature from the first page of «Il Cicerone» January 3, 1889.

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## Introduction

This contribution intends to reconstruct the figure of Giovanni Battista Maldura (1859-1905), a renowned musician and tireless entertainer of the Roman musical life in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as well as an undisputed innovator in the context of a new luthier conception of the mandolin (see LIPPI 2014a), an instrument of which he was recognized – even internationally – as a great virtuoso. The need to restore the figure of Maldura to its legitimate role, arises at a time when the mandolin – after a few decades of oblivion – is regaining its rightful importance in the musical and cultural history of our country, finally freeing itself from the stigma of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that tied it predominantly, and sometimes exclusively, to a mostly popular soundscape. In addition to the musical repertoire, in recent years, a significant study campaign has also been launched in the more specialized lutherie field, which allowed to clarify the mandolin technical-constructive characteristics and the contribution of the various Master luthiers who have dedicated over time mastery and inventiveness to the mandolin.

This is a two-voice volume, in order to bring together the two souls of Giovanni Battista Maldura: the brilliant teacher and musician and the luthier, two souls that – as will be seen – were never too far apart.

last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, even in Rome, plucked instruments such as guitar and mandolin began to enjoy an increasingly relevant interest transversal to all social classes. As we will see, in the same period in which Maldura became the leading teacher of the aristocracy and bourgeois high society, we witnessed the establishment of many plectrum orchestras – even amateur ones – which increased exponentially both the demand for instruments and that of editions (such as methods, “ad hoc” transcriptions of the great operatic successes of the moment, specialized magazines), as well as events and places to perform.



The parents: Paolo Maldura (1831-1921) and Carlotta Cislighi (1826-1902).

# 1.

## Giovanni Battista Maldura, musician and teacher

### 1.1 THE TRAINING

Giovanni Battista Maldura (1859-1905) was born in Rome into a wealthy family. His father Paolo (1831-1921), was an engineer and worked as a postal worker at the Vatican. Like his father, Giovanni Battista also undertook engineering studies and for some time carried on the profession, as we know from small biographical notes, probably dictated by himself, and reported in various magazines or memories dedicated to him.

The will of his father, engineer Paolo, and his open and flexible mind, had led him to obtain a degree in engineering and architecture, so much so that for a short time he also practiced the profession. But eventually, his innate inclination for music took over and he ended up dedicating himself entirely to it. (AMATO 1947, pp.165-166)

The fine arts, to which both music and architecture belong, were after all a distinctive passion of the Maldura family. Uncle Gaetano Pennacchini was an artist of the renowned Studio Vaticano del Mosaico (Vatican Mosaic Studio), engaged between 1854 and 1874, in the construction of the new mosaic decoration of the facade of the

## 2. The patents, the factory and his “leave”<sup>1</sup>

The good mandolinist Maldura aroused the admiration in the intelligent audience, while in performing only a duet, he put so much talent as to wonderfully imitate the sound of two mandolins.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 MALDURA AND DE SANTIS: THE APPROACH TO LUTHERIE

It was 1884 and Maldura's skills as a performer were by now much more than consolidated and unanimously recognized, but another very important event is to be recorded at this point in the chronology: Maldura's growing interest in violin making. And was it perhaps that observation by Sgambati “Soon they will adapt a machine to this instrument!” (see Chap. 1.4) that led Maldura to observe the mandolin from a more technical point of view, in order to put into practice, the knowledge acquired during the engineering studies recently concluded? Certainly, the frequentation of Maldura with the Roman luthier Giovanni De Santis<sup>3</sup> (1832-1916) solicited and contributed to his new ideas regarding the acoustic optimization of the instrument. After all, and it is worth nothing, Maldura's first mandolin was an instrument that De Santis built in 1877, at the time Nino was eigh-

1. About the technical analysis of both the patents and the innovative relevance of the “Maldura System” and the technical point of Maldura's relations with the luthiers De Santis and Embergher, see the next chapter.
2. «La palestra musicale di Roma», May 3, 1884, ACM.
3. About De Santis see LIPPI 2014b.



The first page of «Il Cicerone» (January 3, 1889) shows the caricature of the Marquis Vitelleschi playing guitar and G.B. Maldura playing mandolin, ACM (above); Maldura trademark registered in Rome on August 7, 1896 (below).



## 3

# Giovanni Battista Maldura instrument maker

### 3.1 THE COLLABORATION WITH DE SANTIS AND THE FIRST PROTOTYPE

As we have already seen, Maldura committed his trustworthy luthier Giovanni De Santis, to realize his patent. For the latter, the meeting with Maldura must have certainly been shocking: as a consequence of the exclusive license, for the production of mandolins with the new conformation, De Santis obtained significant awards (e. g. in the Turin 1884 Exposition), but above all many purchase orders. The innovations introduced by Maldura soon became a style common to all luthiers – after the period of validity of the exclusive license granted by Maldura – and practically no more instruments were built according to the previous style. This fact gives the dimension of the overwhelming success that this novelty had in the Roman environment. From this point on, it can be said that the name of De Santis was essentially linked to the production of mandolins, even if he continued to deal, at least on paper, with pianos as well. Subsequently, thanks to the notoriety acquired, he also had the satisfaction of being honoured with the “Cavalierato”, as he proudly cares to point out in the labels of the instruments starting from the 1890s. It is curious to note that, in reality, the process for the award of the honor (the “Crown of Italy”) had already started in December



Mandolin De Santis 1877 owned by Maldura, ACM (*on the left and following*).  
The modifications, requested to the luthier to implement the subsequently patented innovations, are clearly visible.

## Addendum

Part of the press review about his concert and social activity, (shown here in chronological order), was collected over the years by Maldura himself. The newspaper clippings – some double – appear orderly pasted on the pages of a column and cover the period of activity from 1872 to 1900, both in Italy and abroad. There is also an article, published in 1929 by *Il Messaggero* – and placed in the column by the heirs – which concerns both the Rome of past times, with Maldura as entertainer and undisputed “Capo Sminfo” of the famous *carciofolate* (the amazing convivial dinners based on artichokes) and a memory of the Scapigliatura of the Roman artists of Via Margutta in 1930. This precious testimony is still preserved today in the family archive (Archivio Casa Maldura).

\* \* \*

The clippings of the articles published on March 12, 13 and 19, 1895 all refer – as also reported by the annotation at page 37 of the column – to the lyric drama *A basso porto: scene napoletane* by Nicola Spinelli staged at the Costanzi theater in Rome, in which in the third act a mandolin solo stood out.

La Garzetta di Salin  
15 agosto 1882

**Olivavecchia, 13 agosto.**

E senza parlare di altri signori e signorine che gentilmente si prestarono a suonare varie sinfonie a due e a quattro mani sul pianoforte, mi piace di ricordare con speciale menzione i signori Maldura, padre e figlio, i quali, l'uno pel mandolino, l'altro accompagnando colla chitarra, suonarono la Rondella del Marco Visconti, con maravigliosamente, con tanto affetto, con tanta intelligenza ed espressione, che se non fosse stato per non voler abusare di loro gentilezza, si sarebbero invitati a ripetere o a dare nuove prove di sì vera e pure modesta maestria.

La Liberté =  
7 agosto 1883

Terza al Pige i soliti facchetti ed un concertino attirano nella sala pompetosa il Re della coltura italiana Ciro, nostro aguzzano, la signorina Rita che promette di diventare un'ottima artista, e sullo scintillio il bravo professor Maldura. L'ingresso della serata, che fu di circa 100 lire, venne erogato a favore dei danneggiati di Comincioli.

Il Capitano Giacassa =  
7 agosto 1883

Verso le 10, nella sala pompetosa, cominciò il concerto.

Una fureta vibrò dal mandolino del professore Maldura, un giovane romano, alto, magrolino, con uno dei occhi più rotondi, in codesta città che ne ha sette tanto famosi. Il Maldura moltiplica talmente le sue cinque dita, quando suona, che pare della rozza degli otto... mani. A vederlo e a sentirlo, proprio ci s'incanta. Si farà presto un bel nome, quel giovane lì!



Il Capitano Giacassa  
29 agosto 1883

Estasiato il professor Maldura, suonando il mandolino, con una agilità, una maestria, un colorito indescrivibili. Escegi in cavatina di Hoff, un pezzo pieno di passione, da grande concertista, e dovè fare il bis, fra le ovazioni clamorose del pubblico.

Vi lascio immaginare gli applausi che scoppiarono nella sala, quando Cotogni cantò la serenata del Don Giovanni di Mozart, accompagnato col mandolino dal Maldura...

Serata indimenticabile. L'ingresso è stato superiore alle duemila lire.

Conte di Takoro.

21 gennaio 1886

**LA PALESTRA MUSICALE**

**21 La Befana allo studio Ezekiel**

Mettete in un salone Rotoli, Consolo, Davies, Maldura, Im-hof, Pascarella, Ranche, e qualche altro dell'istesso genere: fate che essi suonino, cantino, declinino: supponete che questo salone, adobbato artisticamente, sia il bizzarro studio alle Terme Diocleziane del distinto scultore signor Mosè Ezekiel, ed avrete per risultato una serata deliziosa, indimenticabile e veramente riuscita: infatti tale fu quella che il simpatico Ezekiel volle procurare ad un complesso di distinte persone la sera della Befana.

Fra gli invitati notammo molte belle ed eleganti signore, come la Sgambati, Von Decker, Consolini, la signora Im-hof (una vera madonna di Raffaello) Valeri, Morgan, Ballo, i signori consoli d'America e di Germania, Sgambati, Papini, Masini, Urban, Maccagnani, Comen e tante altre simpatiche persone di cui non ricordo il nome.

Conte di Takoro  
Maldura  
Civitanova

De Civitanova

De Civitanova

W  
X  
Y  
Z