Unearthing Forgotten Treasures: Anonymous Arias with Obbligato Violoncello at the Estense Library, Modena

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Unearthing Forgotten Treasures: Anonymous Arias with Obbligato Violoncello at the Estense Library, Modena

Alessandro Sanguineti

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During the last decades, scholarship concerning the early history of the violoncello has concentrated on the vocal and instrumental works of cellist-composers Domenico Gabrielli and Giovanni Bononcini from the late 1680s, with a particular focus on the leading role of the cities Modena and Bologna. Almost the entire repertoire produced in these two cities has been examined, particularly all manuscripts and prints collected by Francesco II, Duke of Modena, which now remain at the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria. Nevertheless, a conspicuous number of contemporary anonymous manuscripts in I-MOe containing obbligato violoncello arias remain largely unknown.

There is evidence of a connection between two such anonymous manuscripts and performances of particular operas. A source catalogued as Mus. G. 250 is associated with Domenico Freschi and Bernardo Sabatini’s music for the Olimpia placata (Parma, 1687), while Mus. G. 292 is connected with Sabatini’s La Pace fra Tolomeo e Seleuco (Piacenza, 1691). These two examples draw attention to other locations, namely Piacenza and Parma (the home of the Farnese Duke Ranuccio II’s Cappella Musicale). Much of the early music with solo or obbligato violoncello is connected with the other Emilian towns of Modena and Bologna, so the discovery of repertoire associated with Piacenza and Parma is indeed significant. Furthermore, these two sources also draw attention to composer Bernardo Sabatini, who wrote arias for obbligato violoncello despite not being a cellist.

Unfortunately, other manuscripts in I-MOe such as Mus. G. 291, 293, 296, 321, and 324 remain unidentified as regards the composer, opera title, and occasion/location of performance with which they were originally associated. These sources would undoubtedly be of great importance if the arias they contain were contemporaries of works by Gabrielli and Bononcini, cellist-composers who initiated the introduction of their instrument into their operas. Furthermore, if some of these sources were connected with Bernardo Sabatini or the cities of Piacenza and Parma, this would demonstrate a leading role of the Farnese court in the development of the early violoncello, a merit that has so far been solely attributed to Modena and Bologna. This article concerns one such source, catalogued in I-MOe as Mus. G. 291, which contains, among others, three arias with obbligato violoncello. Comparing the

1. Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, Modena, henceforth referred to as RISM code: I-MOe.
texts of arias from certain librettos published in northern Italy around 1685–90 with the texts in the arias from the aforementioned manuscript, a connection has come to light between the manuscript and the performance of L’Ercole Trionfante at the Teatro Ducale in Piacenza in 1688. Given the importance of this finding, this article aims to present the manuscript and the associated libretto.

Locating this manuscript in time and place has put the musical content and particularly the violoncello writing of these three arias under a different perspective. Not only has this finding revealed how the manuscript contains three of the earliest examples of arias with obbligato violoncello, but the writing for the instrument could also provide new information in the debate over early instrument playing position and tuning. Recent studies by Marc Vanscheeuwijck and Brent Wissick have demonstrated that the term “violoncello” at the end of the seventeenth century in Modena and Bologna could refer to an instrument strung with various tunings and held da gamba or da spalla (in between the legs or on the shoulder). Mindful of their findings, we should pose questions about the instrument function, register, tuning, and playing position in the three arias in Mus. G. 291. Therefore, this article aims also to examine the writing of the instrument in order to understand where these examples stand in the early violoncello history.

Mus. G. 291

One of the anonymous manuscripts in I-MOe is the collection of Ariette a una o due voci con BC catalogued as Mus. G. 291. The source contains fifty-five arias for soprano, alto or tenore, and continuo. This collection is of particular interest because it includes three arias with obbligato violoncello. So far it has not been possible to determine the origin of the arias, the opera(s) in which they were performed, the composer(s), or the librettist(s).

The outside bound cover of the manuscript is consistent with the red-based Este front found in many other late seventeenth-century collections or scores such as Francesco Antonio Pistocchi’s oratorio Il martirio di S. Adriano or Gabrielli’s opera Silvio Rè d’Alba. Mus. G. 291 is formed by two hundred folios probably written by a


3. The type of voice required in each aria is suggested in the index at ff. Iir-Iiv. This Italian spelling reflects a use of the terminology recurrently found in nineteenth-century musical sources and reveals how this index has been added at a later stage by a second hand. In the score there is no indication of this kind.


5. Domenico Gabrielli, Silvio Re’ degli Albani (Torino, 1689), libretto in I-MOe 83. H. 2; named Silvio Rè d’Alba in the manuscript score in I-MOe Mus. F. 422.
copyist of the court, and the arias with obbligato violoncello are ff. 19r–22v, 53r–56r, and 89r–94v. The frontispiece contains an index, probably written by the librarian Angelo Catelani in the nineteenth century, where the names and instrumentation of the arias are reported. It is worth noting here that arias no. 5 and 12 are identical. The arias with obbligato violoncello are no. 10 “Creder alla speranza,” no. 26 “Se il mio pregare,” and no. 43 “Penar per un bel volto.”

Comparing different librettos of operas performed during the 1680s in the Emilian area, there is an obvious connection between this manuscript and the opera L’Ercole Trionfante performed at the Teatro Ducale in Piacenza in 1688. The libretto was printed at the Stamperia Ducale in Parma the same year as the performance, and a copy can be found in I-MOe 83. H. 14. – 3rd libretto (fig. 1). In the preface to the Benigno Lettore, the librettist Aurelio Aureli writes:

... lo vedrai in moltissime Scene riformato dall’altro che feci, e con la maggior parte dell’Arie per non dir quasi tutte rinnovate quali poste in Musica dalla Virtù ammirabile del Sig. D. Bernardo Sabatini Servitore attuale di questa A.S. Spero che la soavità delle sue note armoniose ti radolciranno le amarezze della mia Musa. . . .

The libretto was originally written by Giovanni Andrea Moneglia, titled Ercole in Tebe, and first performed in 1661. In 1671 it was subsequently rewritten by Aureli per

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6. The same calligraphy is found in the index of Mus. G. 291 and at f. Iv in Ariette di Piacenza del 1688, I-MOe Mus. G. 293. In the latter the comment “Ignoro qual opera siai rappresentata a Piacenza nel 1688” is signed by A. C. This calligraphy is extensively found across many musical sources in I-MOe and it is probably the hand of the Angelo Catelani, librarian at the Estense in the nineteenth century. For an overview of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music collections in I-MOe consult Alessandra Chiarelli, “I Codici di Musica della Raccolta Estense, Ricostruzione dell’Inventario Settecentesco,” Quaderni della Rivista Italiana di Musicologia, no. 16 (Florence, Olschki, 1987).


8. All translations and paraphrases are my own unless otherwise indicated. English trans. “... you will see [this opera] reformed in many scenes from the other one I have done, and with the majority of the arias, if not all, renewed as composed by the admirable virtue of D. Bernardo Sabatini, current servant of this A.S. [Ranuccio II]. I wish that the sweetness of his harmonious notes will make the bitterness of my muse more pleasant. . . .”
Nicolini, and performed in Venice at the Teatro Vendramino San Salvatore with music by Antonio Boretti. The libretto Piacenza 1688 is the result of further revision by Aureli. The majority of the scenes and arias are new including the three arias with obbligato violoncello.

The manuscript Mus. G. 291 contains arias composed by Bernardo Sabatini for the performance of *L’Ercole Trionfante* in Piacenza. Sabatini (or Sabadini) served the Farnese court first as organist and later as the head of the *Cappella Musicale* from 1681 until his death. He composed music for more than ten libretti by Aureli. The librettist’s appreciation of Sabatini’s music is revealed in the preface of *L’Ercole Trionfante* but also in the libretto of their joint production *Teseo in Atene*, where Aureli defines the music as “admirable.”

Table 1, below, lists the arias found in the manuscript and their location in the opera. They appear in the same order as they do in Mus. G. 291. The names of the arias are taken from the manuscript’s index but are integrated with the full title found in Pio Lodi’s catalogue. The three arias with obbligato violoncello are indicated in bold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mus. G. 291</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Libretto</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Deh cessate (ò rie procelle)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XVIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Per dar morte (al traditor)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Amar senza tormenti</td>
<td>Act II / Scene III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Crudo amor (dirò)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Cara e dolce speranza</td>
<td>Act III / Scene IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Destino un di’ (consolami)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Tanto rigida (contro me)</td>
<td>Atto I / Scene XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Per uscir (dal Labirinto)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XXI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Quanto amaro (è l’aspettar)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XVI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td><strong>Creder alla speranza</strong></td>
<td><strong>Act I / Scene VIII</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Mi torna nel petto</td>
<td>Act III / Scene VIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Cara e dolce speranza</td>
<td>Act III / Scene IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Stringer chi s’ama (al sen)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XVI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Spiriti amanti (festeggiate)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene IV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. A copy is held at the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Racc.dramm.0519.


12. Pio Lodi completed a catalogue of the musical manuscripts held at the Estense Library. Because the titles of the arias found in the index in Mus. G. 291 are sporadically too short to understand the dramatic context of the arias, the author of this article has preferred to also include the titling found in Lodi’s catalogue. The additional parts are in brackets. Pio Lodi, “Catalogo delle opere musicali . . . Biblioteca Estense” (Parma, 1916–24/R1967) in *Arie, Ariette, Cantate*, 152–53.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Act / Scene</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Non può ridere (il mio core)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Fier Tiranno (è il Dio d’Amor)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Proteggi ò fortuna</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XVI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Pensieri che fieri</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XVII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Tenta, sospira (e prega)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XIX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Felice chi non ha (piagato)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Pupillette amate (e care)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Care linee (amato foglio)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Dagli alberghi (del tormento)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Nel campo d’un viso</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XVII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Con alma di scoglio</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td><strong>Se il mio pregar (non giova)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Act II / Scene XX</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Se à pietà (Dei non vi movo)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Breve lampo (di fortuna)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Chi ha nemica (la fortuna)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Fortuna minaccia</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XVI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Vieni e un raggio (di tue glorie)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>*Con furibondo cor</td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Volate (ò) momenti</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Se credi più mirar</td>
<td>Act II / Scene V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Con catene d’adamante</td>
<td>Act III / Scene IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Non provasti (cosa sia)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>D’altra beltà (più vaga)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XVII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Non chiedo [bramo] altro (da te)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>Morirò se vi perdo</td>
<td>Act III / Scene VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Sà il fulmine (di Giove)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>Verrà quel di’ (bramato)</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XVI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td><strong>Penar per un bel volto</strong></td>
<td><strong>Act II / Scene VI</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Bella non mi sprezzar</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Non so nè posso (frangere)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Quel cor (ch’ora mi neghi)</td>
<td>Act I / Scene XVIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Per fregiarmi (il crin d’allori)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>Chi ha timido core</td>
<td>Act II / Scene IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Di saette (è clava armato)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene XIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Bella consolati</td>
<td>Act I / Scene VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>Torno a te (Megara amata)</td>
<td>Act II / Scene X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>Chi non sa fingere</td>
<td>Act I / Scene II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>Adorata Megara, e dove sei?</td>
<td>Act III / Scene II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>Chi fama desia</td>
<td>Act I / Scene IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>Dopo torbida tempesta</td>
<td>Act III / Scene XIX (Ultima)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Aria no. 32 “Con furibondo cor” (for alto solo and continuo) is not found in the libretto. All arias, apart from no. 10 “Creder alla speranza,” no. 26 “Se il mio pregar,” and no. 43 “Penar per un bel volto,” are for voice/s and continuo.*
Aria con Violu° obbligato: “Creder alla speranza” (Act I, Scene VIII)

The text of the da capo aria corresponds exactly to the libretto on page 25. Megara, Queen of Tebe, is crying over the departure of her husband, Ercole. He leaves her in despair as he must find Teseo who is trapped in the world of the dead. According to Greek mythology, Teseo is one of the few heroes who is carried alive across the river Acheron that divided the world of the living from the world of the dead.

Creder alla Speranza
E’ gran follia d’un cor:
Un fascino dell’alma,
Ingannatrice calma
E’ vano il suo splendor.14

The role of Megara is sung by a soprano and in the Piacenza performance, as highlighted in the libretto, the role was taken by Clarice Beni “del Serenissimo di Parma.” Figure 2 shows the first page of this aria. The given terminology referring to the obbligato instrument is abbreviated to Violu° or Viol°. Whilst the writing is suggestive of a violoncello, it is also possible that this was performed on a violone. Nonetheless, it is very rare to find the latter notated in the tenor clef; in most contemporary sources from the same region the violone normally reads the bass clef such as in the Sonate da Camera a Tre, opus 1, by Paris Francesco Alghisi.16

The aria is in G major despite the lack of an F-sharp in the key signature. Apart from the indication of common time, no tempo marking is given, nor is the continuo line figured. Interestingly, the violoncello line is situated in the middle of the score, which is also the case for the other two examples found in this source. The same layout is found in the anonymous collections Mus. G. 250, 293, 296, and 321, as well as in Giovanni Bononcini’s oratorio Il Giosuè.17 This, however, is not a common feature; in other collections, such as Mus. G. 292, 324, and in most of the scores or collections of arias by Gabrielli or Bononcini, the violoncello line is placed at the top. The violoncello writing in the aria “Creder alla speranza” is not as challenging as that

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13. In this article an aria is intended da capo when the reprise is not written out. In contemporary repertoire there are both examples of arias with a da capo and arias where the reprise is written out, such as the aria “Vuoi tu ch’io sperì” in Gabrielli’s Flavio Cuniberto, I-MOe Mus. F. 421 (Act I, Scene XX, ff. 39v-42v).

14. English paraphrase: “To believe in the hope / it is the great madness of the heart: / a charm of the soul, / deceitful calm / vain is its beauty.” The punctuation is taken from the libretto text.

15. I-MOe 83. H. 14. – 3, p. 13. Ranuccio II is usually referred to as “Serenissimo di Parma” in archival sources; in this case, therefore, the libretto on page 13 implies that Clarice Beni works for the Duke of Parma and Piacenza.


17. Giovanni Bononcini, Il Giosuè (Modena, 1688); libretto in I-MOe 83. I. 6, manuscript score in I-MOe Mus. F. 103.
of Gabrielli and Bononcini, although it is placed in a similar register, spanning from G to g’. 18 The function of the violoncello varies from section to section: in the opening phrase it presents the musical pattern (m. 1) that will become the centre of the entire first section. When the voice enters (m. 5), the violoncello firstly imitates it in a canon-like style and then it alternates with the singer before the re-appearance of the opening phrase at the half m. 13. This concertante role is not found in the second section, where the violoncello is mainly doubling the continuo at the same pitch or, as in the last two measures, an octave higher. In this aria the change of role between concertante and continuo does not imply a change of preferred register. In some other contemporary arias where this ambivalence is also found, such as in the aria “con Violoncello Obligato” titled “Amor fammi goder” in Mus. G. 250, the violoncello enjoys the top string for the concertante passages and employs the middle two strings when supporting the voice with the continuo. 19 There is also not a relevant difference between the violoncello and continuo registers—with the latter spanning from F-sharp to c’. A lack of double stops makes it impossible to discern with certainty the tuning of the instrument. At least two different tunings are used in northern Italy at the end of the seventeenth century: one with the top string tuned to a and the other with the same string tuned to g. 20 The tonality of G major suggests that the use of the string tuned to g might be more appropriate, with the use of the resonant open string and its overtones. However, in the last two measures of the aria the cellist would need to extend the left hand beyond the fourth position to reach the g’. In other contemporary arias or sinfonias with obbligato violoncello, the extension of the left hand beyond the fourth position is occasionally found such as in Bononcini’s oratorio Il Giosuè.

18. Pitch notation: C’–B’, C–B, c–b, c’–b’ with c’ being middle C.


Aria con Violon.° obbligato: “Se il mio pregar” (Act II, Scene XX)

This is the closing aria of the second act where Pelio, the betrayer who had overtaken power in the kingdom, receives information about the return of Ercole. Pelio threatens to kill Megara if his fortunes dissolve, and although he is in love with her, he is prepared to sacrifice her if Ercole enters in Tebe. The text of the da capo aria corresponds to the libretto on page 66 and reads:

Se il mio pregar non giova  
La forza adoprerò,  
E con tiranna prova  
La cruda vincerò.21

Pelio was sung by the soprano Giovanni Battista Spironi.22 Once again the terminology for the obbligato instrument is abbreviated to Violon°. In this case the tenor clef is employed throughout the whole piece, making the use of the violone very unlikely. The presence of the B-flat in the signature suggests the key of F major. Again, there is no tempo marking. The simple violoncello writing is almost confined to the use of the two top strings with a register ranging from c to f’. The continuo register differs, spanning from C to c’. The sparing use of the lower strings is often found in works by Gabrielli, particularly in his obbligato violoncello arias. Despite this tendency, in this aria the composer avoids almost all lower strings. The violoncello is more interwoven with the continuo than in “Creder alla speranza,” and its part constantly embellishes the continuo. The unique moment where the instrument is clearly concertante is in the opening four-bar phrase, when the violoncello introduces the voice. Interestingly the violoncello loses its obbligato role in the second section of the aria, where it almost joins the continuo. In this aria as well, there is no indication of the use of a particular tuning. Nevertheless, if the top string is tuned to g, the fingerings are not as convenient as when tuned to a.

Aria con Violon: no obbligato: “Penar per un bel volto” (Act II, Scene VI)

This is the aria sung by Ercole’s son, Ilo, who is in love with Iole. The aria occurs at the point in the drama where Ilo is imprisoned by betrayers Peleo and Aristeo. The latter offers Ilo a last chance to retrieve his freedom, in exchange for yielding his intended bride to the perfidious Aristeo. Ilo refuses and prefers to die rather than lose his love. The corresponding text on page 46 reads:

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21. English paraphrase: “If my pray does no help / I will use violence, / and with a tyrannical test / I will win the cruelty of my acts.”

Penar per un bel volto
E’ troppo un gran piacere.
Chi va d’ Amor disciolto
Non sà cos’è goder.\textsuperscript{23}

This \textit{da capo} aria, in G minor, was originally sung by Francesco Antonio Pistocchi, a well-known alto singer and composer who also worked for Ranuccio II.\textsuperscript{24} Numbering 37 measures, this aria is by far the longest of the three and contains the most interesting violoncello writing as well as some spectacular vocal \textit{passaggi di bravura}. Notwithstanding the tonality, there is only one flat in the key signature and no tempo indication is given. Despite the title (fig. 3), it is unclear whether the rubric \textit{Violon:}\textsuperscript{no} stands for violoncello or \textit{violoncino}. The latter is found in a few cases in contemporary archival sources or musical examples from Modena and Bologna and is sometimes used instead of violoncello, other times indicating an instrument probably very similar.\textsuperscript{25}

The introductory phrase is carried forward by a florid passage for obbligato violoncello, which decorates the line with sixteenth-note patterns. As is shown in example 1, it is essential that the performers choose a tempo which enables the virtuosic figuration to be rendered with both ease and musicality. Furthermore, in m. 10 the vocal part is syllabic in eighth notes, suggesting that an andante tempo is most suitable. This tempo also allows the violoncello enough time to place the sixteenth notes in the first passage properly, avoiding any sense of urgency. The andante also assists the singer in their articulation of the flourishing sixteenth notes, which occur in the first section with brief passages (mm. 13–15), or in the central part before the \textit{da capo} marking, where those patterns become longer and more virtuosic (mm. 31–32). In m. 6 the continuo line is missing the second part of the bar whereas at the end of the first section where the same phrase concludes the passage, the continuo bar is fully written.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Figure 3. f. 89r (detail). (Used by permission of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities.)}
\end{figure}

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
Element & Description \\
\hline
Violon: & No \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Table of musical terms used in the work.}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{23} English paraphrase: “Suffering for a beautiful face / it is such a huge pleasure. / He who leaves his love / does not know how to have joy.”

\textsuperscript{24} I-MOe 83. H. 14. – 3, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{25} Two musical examples in which the terms \textit{violoncino} or \textit{violonzino} appear are Domenico Gabrielli’s, \textit{Sonata con Tromba di D.G.}, San Petronio Archive G.14, and Giovanni Maria Bononcini’s, \textit{Arie e Correnti a tre strumenti}, opus 12, I-MOe Mus. F. 113, f. 15r. There are also a few archival sources where the term is employed, one of which is housed in the Archivio della Fabbriceria di San Petronio di Bologna, “Decreta Congregationis” VI (5), f. 99, where Giovanni Battista Vitali is called “\textit{suonatore di Violonzino}” (1664).
When the violoncello passage is represented as a conclusive statement of the first section, in mm. 23–28, it has an extra slur between the two Gs, between mm. 6 and 7, implying that the note should not be retaken. The manuscript parts contain quite a few mistakes in this aria, such as in m. 14, suggesting the source might have been copied in haste or that the original score was not clear. It is likely that the original working score of this opera has not survived. Example 2 shows the violoncello and the continuo parts in m. 14 in the original version and in a suggested editorial correction.

Example 2. m. 14 detail.

Once again, the register in which the violoncello is employed ranges from B-flat to g’, whereas the continuo’s ranges from F to d’. There is no use of the bass clef at all in the violoncello line and understandably so, given that the writing for the instrument, which mainly employs the upper two strings, reaches below the D string only three times. As in the aria “Creder alla speranza”, the violoncello obtains once again a double function: it starts as concertante in the opening phrase and then answers the voice with intricate eighth-note patterns (mm. 8–11), but it loses its independence by m. 12, where it doubles and embellishes the continuo line while mainly playing at the same pitch. After the repetition of the opening phrase the violoncello continues this supportive role in the second section as well. As for the aria “Creder alla speranza,” tuning the top string to g would mean that the left hand plays beyond the fourth position, given that g’ is reached in mm. 3 and 25. Nevertheless, considering the fingerings in other passages, it would indeed be convenient to play the rest of the aria with this tuning.
Another revealing aspect of the violoncello writing in “Penar per un bel volto” is the use of the extended position fingering technique. This comes as a result of the chosen tonality, with the b-flat just a semitone above the top string (if tuned to an a), as in the second aria. Nevertheless, as seen in the highlighted squared sections of example 1 (mm. 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9), this almost diatonic position is used very often. In the same example, the highlighted curved passage (mm. 6–7) can be played using the same stretching diatonic left-hand position, as also happens in m. 2, using the top string. Otherwise, in mm. 6 and 7 the cellist can also travel up and down the strings using two positions with the hand comfortably placing each finger chromatically. The debate around early fingering technique has been of prime concern in recent research. Marc Vanscheeuwijck considers that diatonic fingerings—an influence of the violin school—were common practice, and that only with Gabrielli and his predecessors did cellists start to use a more chromatic fingering.²⁶ This theory seems valid also considering that the Este court in Modena, where Gabrielli worked, was open to French influences and that cellists there might have been inspired by the French viola da gamba players who employed the semitone system. Nevertheless, it must be noted that a diatonic fingering cannot work on instruments that exceed a certain size, such as the violone. With the two instruments being very similar in size and basic function at the end of the seventeenth century in northern Italy, it is more likely that cellists regularly employed the semitone system. When possible, and especially in concertante passages, such as those in this particular aria, they would use the diatonic fingering inspired by the virtuoso violin technique.

Comparing the arias with other obbligato violoncello pieces

These arias by Sabatini present two particular challenges that warrant further investigation. A comparison with contemporary pieces of the same kind can enhance our understanding of these arias in terms of violoncello composition determining playing position and also its role in relation to the continuo.

First, it is worth noting that most of the arias with obbligato violoncello, namely from Gabrielli’s operas Clearco in Negroponte, Il Maurizio, and Silvio Re d’Alba and Bononcini’s oratorios Il Giosuè and La Maddalena a’ piedi di Cristo, employ the violoncello using mainly the top two strings.²⁷ When the G string, or even more rarely the C is played, it is mostly because the violoncello has joined the continuo or because of the note of the chord that the violoncello is playing. Otherwise, the concertante parts are almost entirely played on the more open and singing upper register, from d to g’. Sabatini does not use double stops in Ercole’s arias, whereas cellist-composers Gabrielli and Bononcini use this technique rather extensively. The


²⁷ Domenico Gabrielli, Clearco in Negroponte, I-MOe Mus. F. 424 and Il Maurizio, I-MOe Mus. F. 417; Giovanni Bononcini, La Maddalena a’ piedi di Cristo, I-MOe Mus. F. 102.
employment of extended positions is not particular to Sabatini’s writing for the instrument, but it is also used by his two contemporaries.

Mindful of Brent Wissick’s remarks concerning violoncello music of this period and his reflections over the use of the violoncello da spalla, we should question the actual playing position used by the performer.\(^{28}\) Were these three arias played with a violoncello da spalla or with the instrument held in between the performer’s legs, da gamba? The employment of mostly the top strings, even if not predominately in high positions, and the extended position fingering technique might suggest that a shoulder-held position is possible, but there are no other indications making the choice essential. It is also possible that the avoidance of the lower two strings is related to a problem of sonority characteristic of the instrument at that time. For example, it is possible that the lower string of violoncellos dating from the second half of the seventeenth century did not vibrate properly because of the physical-acoustic characteristics.\(^{29}\) Considering that the violoncello employed in these arias might have been a smaller experimental version, an instrument of this kind would surely have sounded at its best in the upper register. On the contrary, in contemporary instrumental music with violoncello, the instrument is more often used in its full range such as in Alessandro Stradella’s Sinfonie a due, o a tre or in Gabrielli’s Sonate con Tromba.\(^{30}\) What becomes clear when examining this instrumental music by Stradella and Gabrielli is that choice of register is not a matter of playing position or sonority but a matter of function. When the role is solo/concertante, the violoncello inclines towards the top two strings and, on the contrary, when it has more of a continuo role the middle register is mostly employed. In these arias the violoncello is much more disconnected from the continuo and appears more as a soloist than in much of the instrumental music consulted, making the choice of the upper singing register a natural consequence.

Conclusion

All arias but one in Mus. G. 291 were performed in the production of L’Ercole trionfante in Piacenza in 1688. This unearthing has brought to light the work of composer Bernardo Sabatini and the role of the Emilian centers of Parma and Piacenza in the early stages of the violoncello’s history. Sabatini was most likely the first composer to include arias with obbligato violoncello, despite not being a cellist himself. Both Gabrielli and Bononcini composed for and performed on the violoncello, therefore their music manifests their practical knowledge of the instrument, especially in concertante passages. Further research is needed to ascertain the circumstances under which Sabatini began to compose for the violoncello.

\(^{28}\) Wissick, “The Cello Music of Antonio Bononcini.”


Similarly, it would be stimulating to identify whether he was influenced by a particular virtuoso player (indeed Gabrielli himself might have been the inspiration). Domenico Galli Parmiggiano (from Parma) should be considered, given that he composed the famous *Trattenimento Musicale sopra il Violoncello a’ Solo* in 1691 and dedicated it to Francesco II.\textsuperscript{31} Further research would also allow us to contextualize Sabatini’s arias in more detail. A greater degree of related information would assist the performer in understanding the writing for the instrument. While far from being as innovative as contemporary arias of the same kind composed by Gabrielli and Bononcini, the obligato violoncello arias “Creder alla speranza,” “Se il mio pregar,” and “Penar per un bel volto” pose questions about aspects such as playing position (*da spalla* or *da gamba*), tuning, fingering (chromatic or diatonic), and the instrument’s role within the ensemble.

Finally, in Mus. G. 291 the absence of arias with other obligato instruments or instrumental arias must be noted. Though obligato arias other than for the violoncello are also absent in Mus. G. 250 and Mus. G. 293, it is interesting that the fifty-five pieces in Mus. G. 291 do not contain any other examples of this kind. It is certain that because of the personal nature of the musical collection and its physical state (i.e. that each page contains only four lines), no instrumental arias with more than two instruments could be copied. Nonetheless, in other anonymous manuscripts at the Estense library there are examples of arias for violino, violetta, viola, or even for a rather unusual and unknown musical instrument named *pertichino*. Since all arias in the libretto of *L’Ercole Trionfante* are found in Mus. G. 291, we should assume that the performance of these arias uniquely included a violoncello, continuo player/s and singers. This would leave the rest of the ensemble, normally two violins and alto and tenor viola, to only play in the *ritornelli* at the end of the arias and the *sinfonie* before the acts. This spare usage of the rest of the ensemble is a rare, if not unique, example in the repertoire of this kind. Whenever there was a predominant use of a particular instrument in an opera score, this normally occurred because of the presence of a particular virtuoso. Nonetheless, it is unknown whether this was the case for *L’Ercole trionfante* in Piacenza in 1688. Regardless of the presence or absence of a violoncello virtuoso at the performance, the manuscript catalogued as Mus. G. 291 poses questions over the burgeoning role of the violoncello within, but also outside the continuo group, and provides new information relevant to the discussion about violoncello performance practice at the end of the 1680s, therefore widening the perspective of musicologists and period cellists.

\textsuperscript{31} Domenico Galli, *Trattenimento Musicale sopra il Violoncello a’ Solo*, I-MOe Mus, C. 81, f. 2v.
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