

Patriotic fervour

Gaetano Chiocci's mission was to prove he could recapture the skills of the old Cremonese makers. A revolutionary in his youth, Chiocci inscribed political exclamations inside some of his instruments. **Jan James** outlines his life and examines his 1872 violin



The Italian maker Gaetano Chiocci (1814–c.1881) is a typical product of the Romantic period in northern Italy, but with a touch of genius. In 1872, a time when Chiocci was still very active, J.W. von Wasielewski wrote that Chiocci was born into a distinguished family in Padua and started to study philosophy before switching to medicine, although it is unclear whether he ever practised medicine or finished his studies¹. At the same time he had violin lessons with Gaetano la Beretta, a Tartini pupil, and he seems to have been a keen player. In his late 20s he became involved in revolutionary movements in the Romagna region, then fighting for independence from Austrian rule; in 1841 he was arrested for his political activities and condemned to six months in prison (Italian independence came only after 1866). When he was released, he was called, nevertheless, to fulfil his military services in the Austrian army. Facing all kinds of drills and exercises, he considered that possibly his musical abilities could keep him free from field duty and so he applied to the military band. Fiddle players were not required but vacancies did exist in the woodwind section. After receiving a crash course from a few musician acquaintances he borrowed an instrument and applied for the post of second bassoon in the military band of the 13th regiment. He was accepted: apparently no great virtuosity was required for bassoonists in playing the military marches.

In 1844, he returned to Padua and took up the violin again. His broad cultural background and his musical knowledge meant that he was asked to become musical director of the ballet in Padua, and in 1857 he also became

artistic director of the opera theatre in Mantua. Here he met the violin maker Giuseppe Ceruti (1787–1860), who repaired Chiocci's Guarneri violin; they later became friends. In a conversation between the two men Ceruti complained that the old-Italian tradition of violin making tended to get lost. Chiocci replied that the Cremonese makers had been human beings after all and that anyone with the necessary knowledge and skill should be able to produce excellent instruments and that he would be prepared to show it. Ceruti was sceptical of course but seems to have provided material and advice, while Chiocci also consulted other violin makers in the Padua and Mantua regions. Many ambitious violin makers have pursued such an objective, but few have succeeded in the way Chiocci, by then 43, has. His first attempts were not that successful so he undertook an intensive study of wood and varnish with Dr Filipuzzi at the University of Padua, the results of which were never published. Switching on the basis of acoustical studies from the ubiquitous Stradivari pattern to a rather flat and broad pattern somewhat inspired by the Maggini model, including the double purfling and wide *f*-holes but keeping Stradivarian dimensions, he succeeded in creating instruments which were soon used and praised all over northern Italy and beyond. In 1864 he was a medal winner at the Florence Exhibition and also received a gold medal from the Society of Encouragement in Padua.

Chiocci, at least in the first period, kept his full responsibilities at the theatre. Although it is not mentioned specifically in von Wasielewski's article, it may be assumed that Chiocci



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made his violins at his large family home in Padua. Even when he became better known as a maker he never opened a shop and it seems that his income didn't depend on the sale of violins or on his doing repairs. In fact, he should be considered as an amateur maker, but without the secondary implication of dilettantism this often has. The patriotism and political engagement of his earlier years never left him, however, and sometimes political exclamations such as 'l'Italia farà da se' [Italy will do it itself] are pencilled in the interior of his instruments.

Chiocci's output was relatively small: 50 instruments in all, mainly violins, although René Vannes² mentions a cello of great beauty. Genuine instruments by Chiocci rarely, if ever, appear at public auctions, so it is difficult to fix a monetary value to them. The newest edition of

Photo: Anne Jansen, Amsterdam

Left: Chiocci's 1872 violin has wide f-holes and five-fold purfling. The revolutionary sympathies of his youth never entirely left him and occasionally political exclamations such as 'l'Italia farà da se' [Italy will do it itself] are pencilled in the interior of his instruments



*Taxe der Streichinstrumente*³ values his violins at the same level as those of the better German instruments dating from the second half of the 19th century, like those of Andreas Engleder (1810–61) or Ludwig Neuner (1840–97), and below good French instruments and Italian violins of some quality. Highly laudatory descriptions of Chiocci's work can be found in books by Lütgendorff⁴ and Hamma⁵, the latter producing photographs of two of his violins and the former stating that he was one of the best Italian makers in the second half of the 19th century, with his instruments commanding high prices; similar comment is made by Vannes². Undoubtedly, unfamiliarity with Chiocci's work plays a role in these somewhat conflicting judgments.

This violin dates from 1872 and bears the original (undecorated) printed ticket:

GAETANO CHIOCCI
fece in Padua 1872 no.39
Premiato con medaglia all'
Esposizinoe di Firenze 1864
e con medaglia d'oro dalla Società
d'incoraggiamento da Padua

A small brand G.C. is found in the left C-bout rib but there are no other marks, signs or political slogans. Apart

Left: front of the 1872 violin. Chiocci curiously uses a wood of extremely broad and even grain (3–4mm) for the two-piece table. The instrument bears a few repair marks, but it has a full tone which carries well

DIMENSIONS

Back length	35.6cm
Upper edge of top to bridge centre	19.3cm
Upper bouts	16.8cm
Middle bouts	11.7cm
Lower bouts	21.0cm
Ribs	2.7–2.9cm



from the typical model (similar to the 1866 instrument depicted by Hamma⁵) with rather short corners, wide *f*-holes and a five-fold purfling, Chiocci here curiously uses a wood of extremely broad and even grain (3–4mm) for the two-piece table. The borders are well finished and the ribs and head are of almost plain wood. The two-piece back is of vaguely flamed maple and brings out the lustrous orange–brown oil varnish on a yellow ground, which is also present mostly in its original state on the table ribs and, to a lesser extent, on the peg-box and scroll, with rebushed peg holes and a typical, elongated form. There are repairs to the back near the button and a few old table repairs. The instrument's full tone carries well and has a brilliant E string, corresponding with the description in Henley's book⁶. □

Left: the two-piece back is of vaguely flamed maple which brings out the lustrous orange–brown varnish on a yellow ground. Although only an amateur maker, Chiocci, according to Lütgendorff, was one of the best Italian makers in the second half of the 19th century

NOTES

1. *Gaetano Chiocci*, J.W. von Wasielewski, *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, Leipzig vol.7, pp.473–75, 1872.
2. *Dictionnaire Universel des Luthiers* vol.1, R. Vannes, Les Amis de la Musique, Bruxelles 1986.
3. *Taxe der Streichinstrumente*, 14th edition, A. Fuchs, edited by a group of experts, Hofmeister-Verlag, Hofheim am Taunus 1996.
4. *Die Geigen und Lautenmacher vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, W.L. von Lütgendorff, reprint of the sixth edition, Schneider, Tutzing 1975 vol.2.
5. *Meister Italienischer Geigenbaukunst* third edition, W. Hamma, Schuler, Stuttgart 1971
6. *Universal Dictionary of Violin and Bow Makers*, W. Henley, edited by W. Woodcock, Amati Publishing Ltd, Brighton 1973.