CHAPTER 6
NEAPOLITANS & OTHER ITALIANS

A mandolin by Vincenzo Vinaccia, Naples, 1775. String length 32.6cm/12.8".
Image courtesy Didier La Roux & Stephen Morey

THE NEAPOLITAN MANDOLIN

Sometime in the 1740s a new kind of mandolin was created in Naples. It took the basic shape of the gut-strung mandolin, and added depth to the body by an additional wide rib closest to the soundboard. The (mostly) metal strings were tuned in fifths like a violin, and attached to pins at the end of the body, rather than to the bridge. The vibrating string length was around 33cm/13". The soundboard had a lateral bend or cant just behind the unfixed bridge, which combined with arched transverse bracing, made a strong and rigid soundboard structure. The curved peg-box with lateral pegs was replaced by a flat, paddle shaped head with the pegs inserted from the back, and ten fixed frets of ivory or metal were used instead of tied-on gut. Additional wooden or ivory frets were glued directly to the soundboard. The soundhole was open, either round or oval shaped, and instead of an inset rose, a rosette was inlaid around the hole. They used between 15 and 27 ribs and the narrow ones (excluding the extra wide rib at the top of the bowl) were often fluted.

This new Neapolitan mandolin combined aspects of several other stringed instruments of the time into an innovative and unique instrument. The violin tuning meant that a whole range of violin music could be played on the instrument and the greater volume of the body and metal

strings meant both a richer lower register and a bright jangly sound. The soundboard cant made the whole instrument more robust, although they were still delicate, lightly built instruments. The cant meant a greater 'break angle' of the strings over the bridge, putting more downwards pressure on the soundboard structure and exciting it more efficiently. The bent soundboard was the most important structural advance and was also used in the chitarra battente, another southern Italian instrument, although which might have come first is a matter of conjecture.

There is little contemporary information, at least in English, on the early history of the Neapolitan mandolin, let alone the thinking that went into the development of this new instrument. It is generally thought that it was the Vinaccia family of luthiers who introduced the new mandolin, and an extended family of Vinaccias was active for over two centuries building mandolins in Naples. We only wonder about who came up with the idea of bending the soundboard in that way and combining other ideas to create the new mandolin.

The head of the Vinaccia family in the mid 18th century was Gennaro, often latinized to Januarius on the labels. His instruments can be dated from 1755-1788, but there are instruments built by his sons Antonio, Giovanni (or Johannes), Vincenzo, Nicolo and perhaps others that are dated from the early 1750s up to the turn of the century. There are also labelled instruments by Antonio's two sons, Mariano and Gaetano and as well as a couple of other Vinaccias that no-one seems to have precisely tracked down. Antonio was the most prolific, with Stephen Morey documenting at least 17 surviving instruments with his label between 1754 and 1781.

Late 18th century Naples had numerous stringed instrument makers and known mandolin builders include Donato and Guiseppe Filano; the Fabricatore family of Giovanni Battista, Gennaro and Pietro; Luigi Cardillo; Bonifacio Caviero and Guiseppe de Maria.

The back of a Luigi Cardillo mandolin, Naples 1782. Noticeable is the distinctive hump in the back over the neck block. Image courtesy Stephen Morey

There has been longstanding debate around the oldest surviving Neapolitan mandolin. There is a long scale -79cm/31"- mandola in the Brussels Music Museum with a Gaetano Vinaccia label dated 1744, but both Morey and Robert Lundberg consider this instrument to be from later in the century, and probably not made by a Vinaccia at all. The earliest mandolin that can be reliably dated is from 1753 by Giovanni Vinaccia and which is extensively analysed by Kevin Coates in *Geometry, Proportion, and the Art of Lutherie*. Another, from ten years later, also by Giovanni, was restored by the late Robert Lundberg in 1987, and he described the instrument and his restoration of it to playable condition in an article published in *American Lutherie* in 1996. The labels reads: *Joanies Vinaccia filius Januarii fecit Neapoli A.D. 1763*

It is a typical mandolin of the period in its configuration. The body is made from cypress with 23 ribs. The 21 small ribs are fluted and the rib join at the end is covered by a cypress cap with the edges decoratively carved. The neck block and neck itself are made from poplar, and joined with an iron nail. The back of the neck, the peghead and fingerboard are veneered with strips of bone, ebony and tortoise shell, while the pegs themselves are boxwood. The fingerboard is flush with the soundboard and the ten frets on the neck are strips of brass. The 16.8cm/6.6" wide soundboard is made from three pieces of spruce, 2.6mm/.1" thick, which Lundberg suspected was cut from the same plank, although not book-matched. His suggested order of assembly for the soundboard was that the centre piece was first scored and bent at the cant line around 10-12°. The two arched soundboard braces were glued in place, and the outer pieces were bent and fitted to the centre piece. This would have involved a slightly angled edge on the outer pieces to compensate for the transverse arch. The joins were reinforced with strips of paper. The soundboard had an arch of close to 7.5mm/.3" in a width of 16.8cm/6.6". The two transverse soundboard braces were above and below the soundhole, with the lower one angled at about 6° with the bass side towards the neck. The round soundhole is bordered with a rosette of pearl pieces set into a red mastic. No string length is given, but 33cm/13" was usual for these instruments.

As the century progressed, mandolin bodies tended to become wider and deeper, growing from 17 to 19cm (6.7-7.9") wide and from 12 to 15cm (4.7-6")deep, and the circular soundholes would become more commonly oval shaped. By the 1790s a third soundboard brace between the soundhole and the cant was introduced, often slightly smaller than the brace immediately below the soundhole and at an angle to the centreline.

End views of the Cremonese mandolin by Guiseppe Tovia described in the previous chapter (on the left) and a 1775 Vinaccia mandolin on the right. Images courtesy Stephen Morey

The bowls themselves were lightly built, around 2mm thick, though the fluted shape of individual ribs meant that they would have been bent as thicker strips, perhaps 3mm/.12" and then thinned and shaped. They were usually completely lined with paper as reinforcement. There were no wooden linings along the top edge to provide more gluing surface for the soundboard, which was simply glued directly to the 2-3mm/.08-.12" wide top edge of the rib. The neck block was as small as practical to provide gluing surface for the top ends of the ribs, and a 10cm/4" nail held the neck in place. Similarly the triangular shaped tail block was quite large in surface area, but only 3-4mm/.12-.16" thick. The hitch pins for the string loops were supported by the tailblock, and the pressure of these has often led to a split along the line of the pins in the block as well as the decorative capping strip over the rib ends.

Three Neapolitan mandolins from the second half of the18th century. From the left: Donato Filano, 1763, string length 33cm; Giovanni Batista Fabricatore, 1797, string length 33cm; Januarius (Gennaro) Vinnacia 1777, string length 33cm. The Filano is in the collection of the Musikinstrumenten Museum, Berlin, the Vinaccia is in the collection of the Städtische Musikinstrumenten-Sammlung Munich and the images are courtesy Stephen Morey , The Fabricatore is courtesy of Fred Oster

The Neapolitan mandolin was played almost exclusively with a plectrum, as distinct from the gut-strung instruments which could be played either with fingers or a pick of some kind. The plectrums were usually quills made from bird feathers: ostrich, raven or hen were recommended by various authors of playing methods. The stringing was a mix of available types of string, with the high e" a fine gut, the a' from brass harpsichord wire, the d' from a slightly heavier gauge brass, but using two twisted together and the bottom g made from overwound gut or silk often with another brass string (the same gauge as the a') as an octave string. The overwound g string would have lacked the harmonic complexity of the plain metal strings, and using the octave string returned some of the jangliness.

Top: A Neapolitan bass mandolin (no label), string length 45cm/17.7"
Bottom: A Neapolitan mandolone by Antonio Vinaccia, 1786, string length 55cm/21.6"
The images are in scale relative to each other and scaled 75% compared to the mandolins on the opposite page.
Both instruments are in the collection of the Musikinstrumenten Museum, Berlin and photographs courtesy Stephen Morey.

BASS MANDOLINS & MANDOLONES

The new mandolin came in a variety of sizes. In addition to the standard mandolin, there were two sizes of four-course *bass mandolins* and the eight course *mandolone*. The smaller of the bass mandolins used string lengths of 45-50cm/18-20" and the larger around 78cm/30". There is no documentary evidence of stringing or tuning, but both Sparks[27] and Morey suggest that either c-g-d'-a' (viola tuning, a fifth below the mandolin) or G-d-a-e', an octave below, would have been likely. A 45-50cm string length is very close to 50% longer than a 33cm/13" mandolin, and that would allow them to be tuned a fifth lower using the same strings.

Superficially at least the bass instruments look to have been built in much the same way as the mandolins, although no-one seems to have looked inside one of these instruments to see what was done with the soundboard bracing. The necks were often longer, having an extra fret or two to the body join, rather than just the mandolin's ten frets and the bodies wider and longer though keeping much the same proportion. Mandolins were from 17-19 cm/6.7-7.5" at their maximum width across the soundboard, becoming wider and deeper as the century progressed while the bodies of the short scale bass mandolins, were 24-25cm/9-10" across and around 40cm/16" long. The longer scale instruments were 33cm/13" wide and 53cm/21" long.

The mandolones were larger in the body, but shorter in relative neck length giving the impression of a big, squat instrument and must have been quite cumbersome to play. The bodies were 32-33cm/11.5-13" wide, but they were 22-23cm/8.5-9" deep. The fretboard was 6cm/2.4" wide at the nut and used nine frets to the body join with a string length of around 55cm/21.6". Sparks suggests a tuning of F-G-A-d-g-b-e'-a'.

A Roman mandolone from the collection of the Markneukirchen Museum, Cat No. 256, string length 55cm/21.6", with the Roman mandolin on the next page at the same scale.
Images courtesy Stephen Morey and the Markneukirchen Museum.

THE ROMAN MANDOLIN

Naples was certainly the centre of activity with this new mandolin, but by 1760 there had developed a Roman style of wire-strung mandolin with Gasparo Ferrari the leading exponent of these. Structurally these were similar to the Neapolitan instruments, though the neck was wider, the bodies narrower (recalling in shape the earlier Roman instruments) and the string length a little shorter at 32cm/12.6". Many used an inlaid asymmetrically shaped scratchplate below the soundhole. The soundboard of one Roman mandolin in the Museé Instrumental in Brussels has the transverse brace below the soundhole straight across the soundboard, where the Neapolitan mandolins usually had that brace angled 6-7° so the bass end was closer to the neck.

In addition to the mandolins there was a Roman version of the mandolone, which were slightly larger than the Neapolitan instruments with body up to 39cm/15.4" wide, and having eight frets on the neck. String length remained the same at around 55cm/21.6". Commonly they had extra, unfretted courses on the bass side with an auxiliary nut halfway up the peghead and a complex arrangement of tuning pegs. One in the Markneukirchen Museum (although labelled as Neapolitan) has the nut made from ivory and quaintly carved to look like a castle battlement. These instruments typically used a trapezoidal shaped scratchplate, which was also an identifying feature of the Genoese mandolins.

A Roman mandolin, no label, string length 31.4cm/12.4"
In the Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, Cat No, Ec534-1933.
Image courtesy Stephen Morey

THE GENOESE MANDOLIN

These small six course Genoese instruments, with an eight fret neck, a string length of 31cm/12.2" and the tuning of an octave guitar, are rather a mystery. According to Federico Gabrielli, a Milan based luthier who specialises in 18th century instruments, there are only around 20 still in existence, none with a label, and mostly branded with the initials C N. There is a logic to making a mandolin with violin tuning, and access to that repertoire, but the rational behind the Genoese mandolin is a puzzle other than perhaps being able to double guitar parts as the six course guitar was only just becoming fashionable.

Gabrielli thinks there were only two or three builders of them, one who invented the idea and then a couple more who continued until late in the century. He sees them as being built in a typically Baroque manner, although with some peculiarities of their own. The neck uses three nails to hold it in place, a centrally placed one 10cm/4" long and two smaller ones of 5-6cm/2-2.5" on either side. The soundboard bracing differs from the southern instruments with one transverse brace between

Federico Gabrielli teaching in the classroom at the Civica Scuola Di Liuteria, Milan, 2009

A Genoese mandolin, string length 31cm/12.2". Image courtesy Didier La Roux

the soundhole and the cant, longitudinal braces from the neck join down towards the soundhole and a curved brace around the soundhole itself. A parchment rosette in the soundhole was usual and they all feature an inlaid trapezoidal scratchplate below the soundhole.

There are also a couple of six course bass mandolins surviving built in much the same way as the Genoese mandolins, with string lengths of 53cm/20.8" and which possibly used guitar tuning as well. These might be considered the first 12-string guitars.

To further confuse matters, there is also the occasional triple strung four course instrument, which Franz Jahnel in his *Manual of Guitar Technology* describes as a Sicilian mandolin (along with several other obscure sub-types that few others have noted). One undated example in the Gemeente Museum in Den Haag (catalogue no. Ec321-1933) has the flat peghead with rear mounted pegs of the Neapolitan instruments, a gently canted soundboard, but with the shallow body of a gut-strung instrument.

While the new Neapolitan mandolin became popular in Italy, and within a few years in France, it didn't mean the end of the gut-strung mandolins. As mentioned in the last chapter, their popularity continued, especially in the north of Italy, as they eventually evolved into the six, single gut string Milanese mandolin and the Cremonese or Brescian with four single gut strings tuned in fifths.

Inevitably there are numerous instruments scattered around museums which don't fit into any of these neat categories. After more than 200 years we may never know what inspired these instruments or the thinking that went into their creation, but by the early years of the 19th century the mandolin had fallen from favour. The guitar took over as the fretted instrument of choice and the mandolin languished for over half a century. At the same it was during its nadir that the next advance in design and construction took place, but there were few people interested enough to notice it.

An unlabelled mandolin in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, Cat No, Ec521-1933, called a Sicilian mandolin as it has four triple courses. String length 32.8cm/12.9".
Image courtesy Stephen Morey