

Story of Calaces' art of making stringed instruments

The artistic tradition of such a family of lute-makers, that is known in the whole world, begins with Calace Nicola, son of Vincenzo, that was born at Pignola (a centre that was very famous then because the sovereigns used to spend their summer there. It was situated in Basilicata, a few kilometres far from Potenza) in 1794. We have to thank, in a certain sense, Francesco di Borbone the first who, as soon as he came to the throne, on the 22th of February 1825, granted the amnesty to all the sentenced to death because of the war acts that had happened in the south of Italy between 1820 and 1821 under the reign of Ferdinando the first.

It was the Carbonari movement of the constitutionalists whose important exponent was Nicola Calace himself, chemist and landowner of Pignola, whose possessions were confiscated, his big palace destroyed (in the Bourbon land register we read that: "it was so big that he could rent part of it to other people") and he was given a life imprisonment in the Bourbon prison of Procida island. He was a good musician, as almost all the learned people of that age, and he probably gradually reached his love for guitars and mandolins during his years' imprisonment and, as soon as he was set free, he decided to stay in the beautiful island of Procida where he founded Calaces' workshop. From such a date he began to construct precious instruments, moreover guitars, and to be loved as a very able lute-maker. He died in Naples in 1859. We're sure that Nicola Calace would never imagine his passion for mandolin was destined to go faraway and to be world-famous.

Antonio Calace, son of Nicola, was born at Procida in 1828. He kept on with his father's art increasing its action field, because he had inherited the knowledge of such an art and a very versatile mind from his father. He moved to Naples, at University Lane n. 13 (it was a little street that went along the university building, but it doesn't exist anymore) to strengthen more and more his own activity, and he added lutes and mandolins to the guitars making. The modern transformation of the mandolin, with the introduction of strings made of steel and the mechanism instead of gut strings and caviglieri, goes back to his age. Many lovers preserve his instruments of exquisite workmanship. A perfect example of 1859 is preserved in the historical family collection. It won the silver medal at the fair of Palermo in 1872. He died in Naples in 1876.

Nicola Calace, Antonio firstborn, was born in Naples in 1859 and he was a very good musician more than a constructor. When his father died he joined his younger brother Raffaele to keep on with the art of making stringed instruments, because they both had inherited a patrimony both of art and of experience. Under the name of "Calace brothers" they strengthened their working beginning to export to Switzerland. Calace's mandolira was created in this period. It was patented and became very widespread. At the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, the great success of Neapolitan song that was taking possession of the particular sonorities of the mandolin, from a point of view released the mandolin of Naples in the whole world but, from the other, banished the instrument to a too popular position and not certainly consistent with its position of aristocratic instrument. So the Calace brothers put the classic value, -the lyre-, together with a mandolin, by creating an instrument of high descent called, precisely, -the Mandolyra-. Unfortunately, in spite of the numerous successes obtained (several gold medals and very important recognitions as the first prize were won at the beginning of the century as the International Exhibition of Paris) the rivalry between the Calace brothers was greater and greater because the younger brother, Raffaele, was a versatile person that led in every sector.

Obviously, Nicola didn't accept such a situation anymore and decided to leave everything and emigrate to America in 1911. Here he kept on with the art of making lutes together

with “Nicola Turturro”, another very clever lute-maker that had also emigrated to America in the same period and had manufactured very well done instruments. He had patented in America, too, under the name of Turturro, the same mandolyra as the one that had been successful in Italy. He died in 1924.

Raffaele Calace, second-born son of Antonio, was born in Naples in 1863. He kept on with his father’s art with his oldest brother Nicola at first and, after 1911, by his own. Because he loved plectrum instruments, he dedicated his own life to their success in the artistic field and he succeeded in doing it very well thanks to his complete and original artistic personality. As a master lute-maker he gave the greatest impulse to the glorious tradition of the plectrum by manufacturing instruments that, even if classic, could satisfy the new musical demands.

He created the “Classic Mandolin” for concert artists, that was big and with the fingerboard extended up to the 29th key, to overcome all the technical and special difficulties of such instruments. With real geniality he turned the Mandoloncello, instrument essentially used to play music for ensemble, into a “Cantabile lute” with five couple of strings, soloist instrument whose he became one of the greater musicians. To release the plectrum orchestra from the need of the contrabass he created the “Arciliute”, a superb transformation of the ancient models preserved at Sant’Angelo Castle, into a modern instrument that solved the problem. The plectrum orchestra was, so, all formed by its own instruments. He was able to make the Calaces’ plectrum instruments more and more perfect, thanks to special expedients, and universally appreciated and loved.

He extended the manufacturing even to the violins that, as the other instruments of his workshop, reached not only the European countries but far lands such as Japan and America, too. Because he was a clever and creative man, a complete artist, he understood the mandolin couldn’t use music created for other instruments anymore. This, in fact, didn’t give suitable outcomes to emphasize the special virtues of such an instrument and to make the most of its sound capacity, as he wanted to. To do such an arduous plan he got a diploma in composition under the leadership of the masters Paolo Serrao and Francesco Ancona of the Academy of Naples, so that he constituted his own musical base.

So he made perfect the study of mandolin creating a very effective and complete method in which were analytically studied all the technical and artistic possibilities of the instrument. It was a unique and valid method even required in many foreign countries where they study classical mandolin. It has been printed in German, French and Japanese, too. Raffaele Calace is one of the few people that raised the repertoire of plectrum instruments. He wrote, in an edition published by his own, a classic library of the plectrum that included 180 works. Among his works we can remember: duets for mandolin and piano, duets for a couple of mandolins, duets for mandolin and lute, romantic quartets, classic quartets, compositions for mandolin and solo lute. Three concerts (in three tempos) and five preludes for solo mandolin tower over the others. They are real musical colossus.

In the field of plectrum art there are very few works that can compete with such compositions. He dedicated his own life to many activities. In 1905 he began the publication of a fortnightly artistic review called “Modern Music” that many famous musicians, such as De Nardis, Gennaro Napoli, etc., poets and Neapolitan painters of that age, wrote for. Such a publication lasted 5 years. So a more intensive concert activity began.

He was not only a valid mandolin and lute performer, but also an organiser of fine concerts made up of numerous bands that gathered a wide and keen public in the different Neapolitan cultural and musical halls. Many countries, such as German, Switzerland, France and Austria, applauded him as a clever soloist that excited surprise everywhere

about plectrum abilities.

In 1924 he toured to Japan where he conducted with great success the Orchestra of Imperial Court Master consisting of 80 musicians. With his lute-soloist concert, that was performed in front of the LL.AA. Imperial Hiro Hitho and his consort, he culminated the approval that had followed him everywhere.

Mikado, very satisfied about the beauty of the music, (compositions by Raffaele Clace), of the instrument and of his concert skill, decided to give "motu proprio" (by his own) to Raffaele Calace the Commenda of "Sacro Tesoro Giapponese" (Japanese Holy Treasure) with a wonderful gold and enamel decoration.

When he came back to Italy he founded the "Neapolitan Mandolin Academy" under the sponsorship of the LL.AA.RR. Piedmont Princes, even if he kept on with creation and publishing of compositions that his productive mind copiously created, and become its director by organizing a 40 musicians orchestra. The Academy was very active, rich in apprentices. He was on the jury of numerous competitions (Milan 1920, Rome 1922, Genoa 1926 and others).

During a concert tour in Germany, where he went with his daughter Maria, a fine and very clever musician, he recorded many loved discs. He took part in many lute fairs both in Italy and abroad and gained many honours such as: 2 honour commendas, 11 gold medals, 4 honour crosses, 2 silver medals and 3 patents. He died in 1934, pleased of his own work and sure of its carrying on thanks to his children: Giuseppe, his great collaborator in the art of making lutes and expert lute-player and Maria, mandolin concert artist of undisputed skill, that invented the new very praised Calace sextet, then quartet. She had numerous guitar and mandolin apprentices.

From 1985 the whole work of Raffaele Calace's compositions, printed by the publishing house Suiseisha in 9 volumes, is available in Japan. Up till now there are at least 10 CDs exclusively dedicated to his ingenious compositions. He has undoubtedly been the genius of the family and thanks to Raffaele Calace himself Calace's mandolins are played from Japan to Korea and from Europe to Australia.

Giuseppe Calace, Raffaele's second-born, was born in Naples in February 1899. Because he loved the art of making stringed instruments as much as his father did, he cooperated with him when he was very young. The name of the firm, that had been changed from "Fratelli Calace" (Calace brothers) to "Prof. Raffaele Calace" in 1901, was changed again, in 1922, after the scission between the brothers Nicola and Raffaele, in "Comm. Prof. Raffaele Calace e Figlio" (Comm. Prof. Raffaele Calace and his son) because of the active participation of Giuseppe to his father's art. After his father's death, Giuseppe continued with impulse his loved art, keeping alive the inherited artistic tradition.

Because he was also a good musician, besides being a lute-maker, he continued his family tradition in concert field together with his sisters Maria, a mandolin player, and Vittoria, a piano accompanist, in a very demanded and praised trio, after the stagnation of the last war. He took always part in the Calace sextet, then quartet, very well-known thanks to its intense activity.

The oldest brother Enzo, too, deserves our attention. When he was very young he drew attention to himself as a piano-player in Germany and became professor at the Academy of Berlin.

Then, he held the first chair of piano in Milan and was designated Academy principal. He was President of the most important concert society of Milan "Amici della Musica" (Friends of Music) and famous concert artist in Italy and abroad. Going back to Giuseppe Calace, it's right to say that he stimulated the production after the complete stagnation of the last war that made he sacrifice even four years of his artistic life because he was called to arms. In fact he came back to his loved art as soon as he was called off the arms. He had to overcome considerable troubles, as the almost complete absence of raw

materials, most of all wood, that had to obtain from the most strange origins such as rag-and-bone men and, above all, the wooden board that were once used to put beds on. He started his job, that thrilled him so much, again and his capable hands converted old pieces of wood that was once old furniture into instruments that sounded very well. His choice was not indiscriminate, but very meticulous and his great laboriousness and ability were rewarded and his instruments resumed their journey towards the farthest countries.

After his art was acknowledged it was more and more demanded and the name Calace was relaunched in the international field. His workshop was amplified and, to face up to the intense demand for instruments, he put many apprentices up there by deserving, so, the recognition of “Maestro di Bottega Scuola” (Workshop and School Master). He manufactured numerous instruments such as mandolins, mandolas, lutes, violins and guitars. He participated in numerous exhibitions in Italy and abroad by receiving flattering achievements. He obtained 5 gold medals, 9 silver medals and many others. He deserved the acknowledgment of the commenda of the Italian Crown. He died on the 5th of January 1968, and he bequeathed his art to his son.

Raffaele Calace jr was born on the 7th of July 1948 and has grown up at his father Giuseppe's school. He is continuing his family tradition with intelligence and value. He has got many acknowledgements till now, such as: a gold medal from the Town Council of Naples, 2 silver medals, 2 plaques of honour, a first prize at the Handicrafts exhibition of the Historical Centre and several awards for merit. He is keen on acoustics and a very good experimenter that has produced further improvements to the instruments such as a new division at the fingerboard of the concert mandolin. It's very accurate and its keys are made of inox steel because it is for concert artists and has to last a long time. His instruments are loved and in great demand especially in Japan and German.

The Classic Mandolin model A, most of all, has become the most important reference for the concert artist of such an instrument and for anybody wants the best performances. Because he is a deep sound scholar, he has carried some important improvements out such as the differentiated structure of the mandolins that makes them louder and lighter and a special technique for the guitars with “correzione di fase” (phase correction) that causes a very high sound level rich in harmonies (this last has to be patented). Because he is keen in electronics, too, he realized some non-conventional guitars that have been very appreciated by masters and good judges thanks to its easy sound and very good tone yield.

He has keenly devoted himself to the renewal of the Neapolitan Mandolin Academy that was founded by his grandfather Raffaele in 1929 and, together with master Ugo Orlandi, has taken part in the realization of the first two Compact Disks with the most important works by his grandfather Raffaele, to recover Neapolitan mandolin culture that had been already founded by his grandfather. He has been the president of Consorzio Artigianapoli since 1977, the association of the artistic and traditional craftsmen that want to create a handicrafts' Citadel. That's why he has often organized plectrum concerts by keeping on with his family tradition that wants to release a mandolin culture. We have to point out the exhibition of the Calaces' art of making stringed instruments that was housed at the National Museum of Potenza more than a month in 1999 and, together with the two-days exhibition held at Pignola in Raffaele Calace's honour. They were rich in very important concerts and meetings, and visited by many school-children by arousing great interest among the youths.

Annamaria Calace (1980), Raffaele junior's only child, has always showed a great bent for music and musical instruments. She is very skilful at playing plectrum instruments and has quickly distinguished herself by the fretwork art. She takes care, at the present time, of the instruments decorations, that are bored with real mother-of-pearl, and realizes the parts made of tortoiseshell. She is growing up very interested and involved in her

father's school and she is determined to maintain her glorious family tradition.

The magic moment

The instant when I pluck the string of one of my instruments for the first time it is a magic moment when a metamorphosis happens: that group of finely shaped clips and wooden sleepers, bent and stuck, starts resonating and uttering the first notes with a sound that is always unique for each instruments. It's as if a soul went down to that able wooden handmade instrument to give suddenly birth to it that become qualified to express the feelings of the person who is plucking that strings. I have often thought in that instant the lute-player makes an agreement with the only just created instrument: "I've given all my ability to you, placed my best care in realizing all your details, manufactured you with love, but now you have to play your role and your notes have to send vibrating messages to those who are listening by describing views and circumstances and communicating love, joy and sorrow. If you succeed in doing it, you will be a loved instrument and become the pride of the people who have chose you."

Raffaele Calace jr lute-maker