

A short history of the mandolin.

Invoked by the Baroque, The *Angel of the Odd* hovered over the Arts. During the baroque period a new, stylistically complex mode of expression came into being. New sounds were produced. The baroque musicians' curiosity for the most refined sounds, among them the mandolin's, directed their research in favour of the aesthetically pleasing.

The word « *mandolino/mandola* or *armandolino* appeared around 1589 for the first time. It defined an instrument with a small almond-shaped sound table, the small soprano lute. It was in Florence that the sound of the plucked strings of the mandolin (*mandola* in Italy or *mandora* in France), was heard for the first time.

With its graceful appearance, fine strings, and charming sound, the youngest member of the lute family was very much appreciated in Italy at the beginning of the XVIIth century. The mandolin had several different names : « *leutino, leuto sopranino, mandola, mandore* or *armandolino* or simply *mandolino* » These names changed according to their geographical location, the region, or even the name given by a composer. Let's describe the *milanese* mandolin, called « *baroque* » (a term used from the *romantic* period) a distant cousin of the Neapolitan mandolin. It has a six double course of strings tuned in thirds and fourths: g,b,e,a d, g.. These strings are attached to a bridge set on a soundtable. It was called the *leutino* or *mandola*. It was played with a goose or pheasant quill or finger style. Sometimes even crow feathers or cherry wood were used.

The Neapolitan mandolin which is currently the most widespread, has 4 paired strings : e, a, d, g, tuned in fifths. It appeared in Naples around 1730. Its origins are not very clear. Its body resembles a small lute with paired strings attached to a tailpiece, which distinguishes it from the « *Milanese* ». The changed features appear to have been carefully thought through. At the beginning, the mandolin was strung with guts or braided silk. The highest 'd' strings were three-ply braided sheep gut while the other strings were brass or silver, etc...Various types of feathers were used for playing, such as crow feathers (*M. Corrette, 1764*). *Gabriele Leone (1770)* even suggested that ostrich feathers were likely to give better results...The very first Neapolitan instruments still remain the best mandolins ever manufactured, above all those manufactured by the great family of luthiers of the time, the *Vinaccias* of Naples. *Antonio Vinaccia* was the most famous.

This small instrument became a favourite of the elegant society of XVIIIth century Paris. It brought wealth and glory to certain great mandolin masters. The Italian musicians were much sought after by the Parisian *salons*. Their virtuoso performances blended perfectly with the taste of the baroque period: the graceful melodic lines and impressive broken chords matched the *insouciance* which reigned during the period of the Sun King, Louis XIVth.

In this treasury of music dating from 1750 to 1790, there are some concertos and sonatas of incomparable virtuosity. The first methods appeared around 1760. Let's mention a few precursors : *Gabriele, Léone, Gervasio, Denis, Mancinelli, Fridzeri*,

After 1790, the Neapolitan mandolin was hardly spoken of. The quality of the craftsmanship declined along with the mandolin's popularity. It fell into disgrace for almost a hundred years. Eventually like the guitars and mandores of the time it became as much a fashionable objet d'art as it was a musical instrument.

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