

Giovanni Bargnoni

The organ built by Filippo Tronci for the church of S. Benedetto, Pistoia

On 6th May, 1828, the newspaper *Gazzetta di Firenze* reported that “on the Low Sunday, the 13th of the past April” a new organ was dedicated in the restored church of S. Leopoldo in Pistoia by Luigi Gherardeschi who performed “very beautiful keyboard pieces, both in the morning and in the afternoon services, performing with his well known skill and good taste”.

Luigi Gherardeschi, chapel-master of the Cathedral of Pistoia from 1815 to 1866, belonged to a family of musicians who excelled in the Pistoian music scene from the middle 18th century up to the beginning of the 20th. His grandfather's brother, Filippo Maria Gherardeschi, a former student of Father Martini's in Bologna, was a prolific composer of sacred and secular music and had the position of chapel-master in Volterra, Pisa, and for a short time (1770-71) also in S. Zeno Cathedral, Pistoia. His successors were, in order, first his brother Domenico, then Giuseppe, Domenico's son, followed by Luigi, Giuseppe's son, and, finally, by Gherardo, Luigi's son, who died in 1905. For more than a century, therefore, this position was a prerogative of the Gherardeschi family.

The detailed accurate and acclamatory description of the new organ gives us an idea also of the repertoire performed by Luigi Gherardeschi on that occasion. Mr. Filippo Tronci's superb mechanical work, - the newspaper writes - “of real 8 foot” has a 52 key manual with 27 stops. Contrabbasso, Tromba duttile [slide trumpet], Clarinetto, Oboè, Corni da caccia, Fagotto, Corno inglese, Ottavino, and Armonica, that is bells diatonically tuned, and a real Band [drum, cymbals and Chinese hat] are outstanding among them for their expressive quality”. It is apparent that only the *da concerto* stops, imitating the sound of other instruments, were to be mentioned by the reporter, while he practically ignores what is the core of the organ, that is the Principale-Ripieno family.

Actually, the organists of that period, chiefly in Pistoia, instead of creating monumental polyphonic works like they did, f.i., in Gemany, were more interested in reproducing orchestral or band-type sonorities, with clarinet as solos or double bass backings. In fact the most appreciated quality of an organist at that time was not the exhibition of his virtuoso capacities, but rather his skill in finding stop variations to achieve newer and newer effects. All that was part of the Italian style, given that already in 1608, in his *Arte organica*, Costanzo Antegnati wrote about registration, saying that an organist does not become boring if he changes registration from time to time, because there is nothing so beautiful that, in the long run, does not become annoying, therefore implicitly suggesting frequent changes of registrations. However, in the 19th century, this trend overrode good taste more than once.

Perhaps too harsh a critic wrote about Mercadante's sacred music that he intended more to cheer the church-goers than to create a true religious piece of art, since “...most of the people who attend Sunday services are inclined to consider boring every music unable to make them forget they are in the church”. That might be the reason that convinced the Pistoiese organ builders to please their customers by dividing stops bass and treble as much as possible, so that the performers would easily change sonorities despite only one manual usually available, by increasing the number of the “da

concerto” stops and by adding percussive effects, such as timpani, bass drum, cymbals and bells (the *complete band* as described by the *Gazzetta di Firenze*), and devices like the “third hand”, that is a treble-coupler redoubling the right hand an octave higher. San Leopoldo/Benedetto organ fully belongs to this category.

The instrument has a single manual of 52 keys, with short first octave, and a pedalboard of 18 keys with short first octave.

This is the specification:

Trombe basse [8']	Principale Basso[8']
Trombe soprane [8']	Principale Soprano [8']
[Clarone bassi 4']	Ottava bassa
Clarinetto [soprani, 8']	Ottava soprana
Corno inglese [soprani, 16']	Raddoppio Principale Basso [4']
Corno da caccia [soprani,16'; originally Cornetto Cinese 16', 5' 1/3]	XV [2']
Fagotto nei bassi [8';da Do, 16']	Sesquialtera bassi [2' 2/3, 1' 3/5]
Ottavino [soprani, 2']	XIX-XXII [1' 1/3, 1']
Cornetto nei Soprani [2' 2/3, 2', 1' 3/5]	XXVI-XXIX [23', 12']
Flauto in 8 [4']	[Voce Angelica soprani, 8']
Flauto Tappato [8', from c]	[Contrabbassi ai pedali 16'+ 8']
[Campanelli (missing)]	[terzamano]

Bassi (bass) and *Soprani* (treble) divide between f° and f#°.

Accessories: two timpanos, tirapieno and polisire (free combination to add prepared stops).

The main winchest is a springchest, with two smaller added windchests.

No trace left of the “banda naturale” described in 1828.

Inside the pallet box, a scroll says: “Done by Filippo Tronci, year 1828, restored by Filippo, grandson, year 1880”.

The documents regarding S. Leopoldo’s restoration in 1826-27 describe the installation of a new eight foot organ. This very detailed report, that includes also the estimate of costs, partly differs from the structure that we have today, perhaps because of possible alterations made on occasion of the restoration of 1880. According to the estimate, some stops appeared to be divided bass and treble, while at the present, they are not divided, and the other way round. According to the document, the manual should have been of 54 keys, instead of the 52 keys rthat we have on the windchest, while the 12 key pedalboard became an 18 key pedalboard, even if with only 12 real notes.

The cost estimate clearly specifies the composition of the “band”, that is turkish cymbal, chinese hat (a conical structure consisting in iron rings with hanging small bells from them), catuba (bass drum) and “bells, that is the harmony consisting in no. 28 bronze bells” . The percussive effects that we find in this organ were common practice all over Italy. No wonder, then, that the greatest Pistoiese families of organ builders, the Troncis and the Agatis, accepted it.

Neither in the estimate or in the present-day organ do we find a trace of the *Oboè* the *Gazzetta's* journalist highly enjoyed. Very probably that was simply the *Corno inglese* played one octave higher.

At the end, master Tronci was rewarded with £ 2100, almost completely paid in cash, except £ 129,13, the value of “two old bellows and several lead pipes”, almost certainly belonging to the pre-existing organ of the same church, previously known as Monte Uliveto, placed in the back gallery as today, as we can see in the well known print of the Synod called in this church in 1786 by the bishop Scipione de' Ricci.

This organ is now lying idle. In 1969 the Parish council of San Benedetto decided that economically it would be better to build a new organ behind the altar than to restore the old organ, and so only the wood-trimmed chest and the front pipes still remain today. Of Filippo Tronci's original organ, only the carved wooden case, the windchests and the front pipes still remain.

The instrument built in S. Leopoldo came after the largest instrument ever built by the Troncis, more precisely by Benedetto Tronci in 1815, famous not only for its size (75 stops), but specially for its three manuals and double pedalboard. In the same year another work by Filippo Tronci was dedicated in S. Mommè Church. In January 1824 he built the organ in Montopoli, in 1826 another one in the Collegiata of Fucecchio and in 1827, a two-manual organ in the priory of S.Stefano e Michele in S.Miniato.

All these instruments show how meaningful the third decade of the 19th century was for this Pistoiese artist at the beginning of his career. The S. Leopoldo/Benedetto organ is certainly one of the most important, outstanding also because of the relevance of the church.

We hope the newly found documents on the organ, first published in this place, will awake new interest in this instrument and lead to its restoration.