

1 | Bartolomeo Cristofori in Padua

Scant information has been uncovered about Bartolomeo Cristofori’s early years in his home town of Padua. We know that he was born in Padua on May 4, 1655 and baptized there in the Church of S. Luca on May 6 under the name Bortolomio Christofani.¹ The baptismal record indicates that his father was named Francesco di Christofani, and that his mother’s name was Laura. Orthography was inconsistent in the late seventeenth century, so Cristofori’s name appears alternately in later official records as “Cristofali,” “Cristofani,” and “Cristofori,” though “Cristofori” was more consistently used in Medici accounts after 1694. Even Cristofori himself was inconsistent in spelling his own name: on bills to court it appears as Bartolomeo Christofori and Bartolomeo Cristofori. Francesco Scipione, Marchese di Maffei (more commonly referred to as Scipione Maffei, 1675–1755), the author of an article on the invention of the piano published in the *Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia* in 1711, variously refers to him as “Christofori” (crossed out in the original manuscript notes of his interview conducted in 1709), “Bortolo Cristofali” (as corrected in the same MS), “Bartolommeo Cristofali” (in the article published in 1711), and “Bartolomeo Cristofali” (in the 1719 republication of that article in a compilation of Maffei’s writings entitled *Rime e prose*).² Niccolò Susier, a Medici court musician and diarist, used the spelling “Bartolomeo Cristofani” and the nickname “Bartolo” in a diary entry marking Cristofori’s death dated January 27, 1731.³ Here the date is given in the *stile fiorentino*, notated *ab incarnatione* (abbreviated *ab. inc.* in this book, when so

¹ Padua, archive of the Church of S. Luca, May 6, 1655; Cristofori’s baptismal certificate is illustrated in Bruno Brunelli Bonetti, “Bartolomeo Cristofori e il mondo musicale padovano,” in *Bartolomeo Cristofori, inventore del pianoforte, nel terzo centenario dalla nascita* (Padua, 1955), p. 31.
² Verona, Biblioteca Capitolare, cod. DCCCCCLX, fasc. VI, no. I. Scipione Maffei, “Nuova invenzione d’un Gravecembalo col piano, e forte; aggiunte alcune considerazioni sopra gli strumenti musicali,” *Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia* 5 (Venice, 1711), pp. 144–159; Scipione Maffei, *Rime e prose del Sig. Marchese Scipione Maffei, parte raccolte da varij libri, e parte non più stampate* (Venice, 1719), p. 309; Laura Och, “Bartolomeo Cristofori, Scipione Maffei e la prima descrizione del ‘gravicembalo col piano e forte,’” *Il Flauto Dolce* 14–15 (1986), pp. 16–23.
³ Florence, Biblioteca Moreniana, Acquisti diversi 54, ff. 73r, 73v.

specified in cited documents), in which the year began on March 25, the date of the Incarnation; thus, Susier's diary entry was written in 1732 according to the modern calendar. In an anonymous, posthumous tribute to Cristofori written in 1741, he is referred to as "Bartolomeo de Christofani Padovano." From this tribute we also learn that Cristofori was nicknamed "il Burtulo."⁴ An anonymous, eighteenth-century musical dictionary refers to him as "Christofori Bartolomeo da Padova."⁵

Various archival records reveal an association between the Cristoforis and the Papafavas, the latter being an old, noble Paduan family. Bartolomeo Cristofori's baptismal certificate documents that his godmother was Lina Pani, a servant of Laura Papafava. Bartolomeo's father's profession was that of a *fattore*, that is, a property agent or administrator, and he worked for the Papafava family in that capacity; in 1662, he also served as best man at Laura Papafava's wedding. Many years later, when Bartolomeo Cristofori was in the employ of Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici in Florence, he was either asked or offered to contact Roberto Papafava, then a member of the Accademia Patavina, in order to inquire about engaging the singer Laura Spada for an opera that Ferdinando was staging in Livorno. When Papafava wrote back to Ferdinando on May 30, 1693, he invoked Cristofori's name in connection with that engagement.⁶

The Cristofori family owned parcels of land and houses in a small village outside Padua named Grantorto. This property (much of it was rented out and was thus income generating) had been passed down from generation to generation and ultimately came into the possession of Bartolomeo.⁷ In his will, he made provision for his property to pass on to his niece, Laura Pavese (see Chapter 2). A few months after the death of Bartolomeo's father on January 29, 1684, Bartolomeo rented a house behind the city's cathedral in a quarter called the *Drio Domo* (Figure 1.1), which suggests that he was domiciled in his home town until his departure for Florence in 1688.

Surprisingly, no documentation has been discovered in Padua that would indicate that any member of the Cristofori family, including

⁴ O. Mischiati, "Un elenco romano di cembalari redatto nel 1741," *L'Organo* 10/1 (1972), pp. 105–106.

⁵ Bologna, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale, H62, miscellaneous writings of Padre Martini, vol. C.

⁶ ASF GM 5878, f. 268. Leto Puliti, "Della vita del Ser.^{mo} Ferdinando dei Medici Granprincipe di Toscana e della origine del pianoforte," *Atti dell'Accademia del R. Istituto Musicale di Firenze* 12 (1874), pp. 140–141.

⁷ Michele Nisoli, "Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655–1732): Rassegna bibliografica con alcune aggiunte biografiche sugli anni padovani" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florence, 2011), pp. 16–17.



Figure 1.1 Map of Padua marked at bottom left with the approximate location of Bartolomeo Cristofori's residence, engraving, P. Mortier, from *Les villes de Venetie* (Amsterdam, 1704). Collection of the author.

Bartolomeo, was involved in musical instrument making or an associated craft. There has been considerable speculation that Bartolomeo Cristofori was originally trained as a violin maker in Cremona, as a thirteen-year-old Christofaro Bartolomei is listed as a household member in the 1680 census return of the violin maker Nicolò Amati (1596–1684).⁸ Because apprentices generally lived in the houses of their masters, we can assume that the above-named individual was serving his apprenticeship in violin making. However, the Christofaro Bartolomei listed in the 1680 Cremonese census return could not have been our Bartolomeo Cristofori, who then would have been twenty-five years old. Furthermore, the census returns of the parish in which Nicolò Amati lived consistently present Christian names first and surnames last; thus, the last name of the apprentice in the Amati shop is “Bartolomei” and not “Christofaro.”⁹

⁸ Cremona, Archivio Diocesano, census returns of the parish of S. Faustino, 1680, Casa Amati.

⁹ For a discussion of Cremonese census documents, including the lack of reliability of ages cited in these returns, see Stewart Pollens, *Stradivari* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 13–15.

Though there are several violoncellos and double basses with printed or handwritten inscriptions indicating that they were made by Bartolomeo Cristofori, these instruments are either stylistically dissimilar to one another or they have been altered in ways that make authentication problematic. This author has examined a refined contrabass (Museo del Conservatorio, Florence) bearing a printed label, and a crude, perhaps recut, contrabass with a handwritten inscription (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Both instruments could be eighteenth century and Florentine, but they are certainly by different makers. A third contrabass, bearing little resemblance to the other two, is in the collection of the Museo degli Strumenti Musicali in Milan.¹⁰ However, in this author's opinion, none of the handwritten labels of the bowed-string instruments purported to be by Cristofori is in his hand. Furthermore, the wordings "Bartolomeo Cristofori in Firenze 1715 Primo" (contrabass at the Museo del Conservatorio, Florence),¹¹ "Bartolomeo Cristofori in Firenze 1716" (violoncello, private collection),¹² and "Io Bartolomeo Cristofori fecit in Firenze 1717" (three-string contrabass, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) differ from the inscriptions consistently found on his keyboard instruments, typically "BARTHOLOMÆVS DE CHRISTOPHORIS PATAVINVS FACIEBAT FLORENTIÆ" (1722 and 1726 harpsichords). The wording of the inscription in the much-altered 1717 contrabass, "Io Bartolomeo Cristofori" (I, Bartolomeo Cristofori) is an unlikely way to begin a violin label and would appear to derive from the opening declarations of several of Cristofori's bills submitted to the Medici court; "Bartolomeo Cristofori in Firenze 1715 Primo" would also appear to be a corruption of the wording used in several other bills (see Chapter 2). Transcriptions of these bills were published in Florence in 1876 and would have been accessible to unscrupulous makers and dealers, who likely relabeled a few anonymous violoncellos and contrabasses to exploit the name of this famous instrument maker.¹³ Furthermore, there is not a single

¹⁰ Natale and Franco Gallini, *Museo degli strumenti musicali: Catalogo* (Milan, 1963), pp. 73–74, pl. 51.

¹¹ Mario Fabbri, Vinicio Gai, and Leonardo Pinzauti, *Conservatorio di Musica Luigi Cherubini: Antichi strumenti* (Florence, 1980), pp. 69–70; Giuliana Montanari, "Bartolomeo Cristofori: A List and Historical Survey of his Instruments," *Early Music* 19 (1991), p. 392.

¹² John Dilworth, "Two-part Invention," *The Strad* 95/1136 (1985), pp. 668–670; Montanari, *ibid.*, pp. 392–393.

¹³ Ferdinando Casaglia, *Per le onoranze a Bartolommeo Cristofori* (Florence, 1876), pp. 17–31.

This wording was also used by Bartolomeo Cristofori when he signed and certified his 1716 inventory of the Medici's musical instruments; a facsimile of this signature was published by Puliti, *Della vita del Ser.^{mo} Ferdinando dei Medici*, p. 198.

mention of a bowed-string instrument by Bartolomeo Cristofori in the Medici musical instrument inventories dated 1700, 1716, and 1732, nor is there any indication among the numerous bills and payment records preserved in the Medici Archives that Cristofori was involved in making or restoring such instruments – though there are records that other instrument makers, such as Sabatino Ciampi (Campi, Ciompi, or possibly Cianchi), were paid for work done on string instruments.¹⁴ All of Cristofori's bills (see Chapter 2) are for work on keyboard instruments.¹⁵ This strongly suggests that the Bartolomeo Cristofori who served Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici was not involved in the making or restoring of violins, violoncellos, and contrabasses, and the ascription of any bowed-string instrument to Bartolomeo Cristofori of Padua must thus be viewed with suspicion.¹⁶ Unfortunately, no evidence has yet been discovered that Cristofori served a formal apprenticeship in keyboard instrument making or was a member of any craft guild in his home town; nor did he become a guild member when he settled in Florence.

In his biography of the organ builder Gottfried Silbermann, Ernst Flade suggests that there could have been a working relationship between the organ builder Eugen Casparini (true name Johann Caspar; b. Sorau [now Poland], 1623; d. Wiesa, 1706) and Cristofori. Eugen Casparini was the son of an organ builder and mathematician, Adam Caspar. Eugen worked in Venice and Gorizia (in the Friuli region) before settling in Padua around 1669, where he constructed a number of organs, including two for the basilica of S. Giustina: one in 1679 (which included a 16' *Principal* and 26' *Fagott* [bassoon stop] of wood) and another in 1681 having 32 stops. Cristofori would have been in his twenties when these organs were constructed and might have taken an interest or perhaps participated in their construction. Previously, Casparini had made a small organ (having six *ripieno* ranks and a wood *Fagott* on a separate wind chest) for the basilica of S. Antonio in 1662. In 1686 Casparini departed Padua for Vienna, where he worked on the court's organs and constructed a *Positiv* (a small,

¹⁴ ASF DP 434, f. 38r; 435, f. 30r; 438, ff. 47r, 74r.

¹⁵ ASF GM 1073bis, ff. 2567–2584; Casaglia, *Per le onoranze a Bartolommeo Cristofori*, pp. 17–31.

¹⁶ Notes made during Scipione Maffei's 1709 interview with Cristofori (which deal primarily with the development of the pianoforte) nevertheless reveal that Cristofori did have knowledge of violin acoustics, including an understanding of soundpost adjustment. This should not be viewed as evidence that Cristofori was formally trained as a violin maker, for when Maffei conducted his interview, Cristofori had already been the official court instrument maker for over twenty years and had certainly gained some familiarity with the tonal apparatus of the violin. See Stewart Pollens, *The Early Pianoforte* (Cambridge, 1995; repr. 2009), pp. 232–237.

semi-portable organ) having five registers of paper pipes.¹⁷ Such pipes, made of rolled paper impregnated with glue, were thought to impart a softer, sweeter sound than metal or wood pipes. Organs with paper pipes date back in Italy to the late fifteenth century (one such organ, constructed in 1494 by Lorenzo da Pavia, possibly for Isabella d' Este, is preserved in the Museo Correr in Venice),¹⁸ and such pipes may have been the inspiration for the rolled paper hammer heads that Cristofori used in his 1720 and 1726 pianos (cylinders made of multiple layers of rag paper impregnated with animal hide glue are light in weight and rigid, though springy). Casparini sometimes equipped his organs with "toy stops," such as the drum, which might have provided the impetus for Cristofori's invention of the hammer action later used in his piano. The organ builder Andreas Silbermann (1678–1734) is believed to have worked for Eugen Casparini around 1697 – perhaps this relationship facilitated Gottfried Silbermann's (Andreas' brother, 1683–1753) later familiarity with Cristofori's piano action, which he scrupulously copied in the pianos he made in the 1740s (see Chapter 5). As we shall see in Chapter 2, Cristofori was evidently a capable organ builder, for he constructed a small organ with wooden pipes for the court.

In the sixteenth century, two prominent harpsichord makers were associated with Padua: Franciscus Patavinus (Francesco of Padua, also known as "Il Hongaro" or "l' Ongaro" ["the Hungarian"]), who flourished between 1527 and 1562, and Antonius Patavinus (Antonio of Padua), who flourished around 1550. The Medici musical instrument inventory of 1700 lists a *cimbalò dell'Ongaro* inscribed "Francisci Patavini dicti Ongaro MDLXII" having two registers, principal and octave, and 52 keys of boxwood and ebony having a compass of G–c³, with the first two sharps split (thus a short-octave compass of BB/GG–c³). The inventory description further describes it as being removable from a lacquered (*vernici all'indiana*) outer case with painted lid, and having the typical Italianate thin-walled construction of cypress, with case sides inlaid with strips of ebony and garnished with ivory studs; the soundboard of

¹⁷ Ernst Flade, *Der Orgelbauer Gottfried Silbermann* (Leipzig, 1952), pp. 1–8; Peter Williams, *The European Organ 1450–1850* (London, 1966), p. 221; *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London and New York, 1980), s.v. "Casparini."

¹⁸ Marco Tiella, "The Positive Organ of Lorenzo da Pavia (1494)," *The Organ Yearbook* 7 (1976), pp. 4–15; Clifford M. Brown, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia* (Geneva, 1982), pp. 196–197; Luisa Cervelli, "Un prezioso organo del '400: alla ricerca della sua voce perduta," *Bollettino dei Musei Civici Veneziani* 4 (1969), pp. 21–36; Carlo dell'Acqua, *Lorenzo Gusnasco e i Lingiardi da Pavia* (Milan, 1886).

cypress with four fretworked roses. No harpsichords made in Padua in the latter half of the seventeenth century have come down to us, nor do we know of any harpsichord makers of note living there with whom Cristofori might have apprenticed with. In fact, there are no known keyboard instruments of Cristofori's dated prior to his arrival in Florence, and all of his extant inscribed instruments indicate they were made there (BARTHOLOMÆVS DE CHRISTOPHORIS PATAVINVS FACIEBAT FLORENTIÆ [Bartolomeo Cristofori of Padua made in Florence]). Aside from an uninscribed and undated thin-walled harpsichord attributed to him (the so-called "ebony harpsichord" inventoried by the Medici in 1700 and now in the collection of the Museo degli Strumenti Musicali del Conservatorio "Luigi Cherubini" di Firenze; see Chapter 3) and his two oval spinets (one presently on loan from the Museo Bardini to the Museo degli Strumenti Musicali in Florence and the other in the collection of the Grassi Museum für Musikinstrumente der Universität Leipzig; see Chapter 3), all of his instruments exhibit heavy-walled construction that bears no resemblance to the few Paduan-school harpsichords attributed to the considerably earlier makers of that city who are mentioned above. In any case, we should not assume that their harpsichords were still present in Padua during Cristofori's residence there, and if any of them were, that he was familiar with or had access to them. Thus, we cannot conclude that Cristofori was steeped in what little we know of the Paduan harpsichord-making tradition, and it is entirely possible that he was self-taught.

In Scipione Maffei's notes of his interview with Cristofori made in preparation for his article on the invention of the piano published in 1711, he writes that Cristofori indicated that he did not want to come to Florence, but that Grand Prince Ferdinando replied "*il farò volere io*" (it will be, I wish it). He was evidently induced to relocate by the offer of a generous stipend, the payment of his rent, and the loan of furniture, pots and pans, and other household sundries. As we shall see in Chapter 2, his stipend and perquisites were not considered remuneration for making new instruments, undertaking complex restoration work on valuable keyboard instruments in the court's collection, or even fulfilling mundane tasks such as moving keyboard instruments – for he billed the court separately for those services.

What impelled Grand Prince Ferdinando (then twenty-four years of age) to hire the thirty-two-year-old Cristofori, initially under the title of instrument maker and tuner, remains unclear. Perhaps Cristofori impressed Ferdinando with the idea of a dynamically flexible keyboard

instrument fitted with a hammer action and was invited to work out the details and build such an instrument in the Uffizzi workshops with the assistance of its highly skilled court craftsmen. It is also conceivable that Cristofori had already constructed a piano and that Ferdinando somehow encountered and became intrigued by it, though perhaps he was simply impressed by Cristofori's skill as a harpsichord tuner.

As we shall see in the next chapter, Cristofori never billed the Medici court for constructing a pianoforte (which may indicate that he did not build it in Florence, but arrived there with it). The first documentation of such an instrument is an entry in the 1700 Medici musical instrument inventory that describes it as an "Arpicimbalo di Bartolomeo Cristofori di nuova inventione, che fa' il piano, e il forte" (a large keyboard instrument by Bartolomeo Cristofori, of new invention, that makes soft and loud). The date of the inventory is generally associated with the year the piano was invented, but the appellation "new invention" could refer to an instrument made any time after March 17, 1691, *ab. inc.* (1692 by the modern calendar), the date of the previous Medici musical instrument inventory, which does not list such an instrument, or even before Cristofori began working in the Florentine court in 1688. There is, however, one piece of documentary evidence, slender though it is, that he did invent the piano in 1700 (see Chapter 3).

We know that Grand Prince Ferdinando departed Florence on December 18, 1687 to take part in the *Carnivale* in Venice, and that he arrived there with thirty of his courtiers on or around January 17. Along the way, he and his entourage are recorded as having visited Bologna, Vicenza, and Padua. According to a letter posted from Venice on January 17, 1688 by the *abate* Carlo Antonio Gondi, Ferdinando stopped in Padua and left for Venice by boat the following morning after attending mass at the basilica of S. Antonio (for which Casparini had built a small organ in 1662; see above).¹⁹ It is possible that Ferdinando encountered Cristofori during that brief stay, or perhaps the two met in Venice during the protracted carnival season. Ferdinando returned to Florence on March 24, and by April 30 Cristofori was ensconced at the Medici court and variously described in court records as a *strumentaio* (instrument maker) and *buonaccordaio* (keyboard tuner).

¹⁹ Nisoli, *Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655–1732)*, pp. 30–33; Lorenzo Spinelli, "Le esperienze veneziane del principe Ferdinando de' Medici e le influenze sulla politica spettacolare e dinastica toscana (1688–1696)," *Medioevo e Rinascimento* 19/16 (2005), pp. 159–199.