The organ by Giuseppe Testa, 1676, in Serra San Quirico: An incredible sound

Francesco Cera and Andrea Pinchi

After more than thirty years and hundreds of instruments restored with the highest technical qualities, the restoration of historical organs in Italy still holds surprises and offers us opportunities for growth and knowledge. In the last few years, our view of the antique Italian organ has become even larger and more diversified, not simply in the general structure of the instruments, but mostly in the tonal concept adopted throughout Italy over the centuries by organbuilders.

In the church of Santa Lucia, in Serra San Quirico, an old village in the mountains near Ancona (Marche region), it was possible to discover a particularly rare instrument. It is an organ dated 1676, signed by Giuseppe Testa, a famous organbuilder from Rome. Scholars knew about the existence of such an organ, but since no evident signature was ever found, its attribution was still uncertain, also considering that it was in quite a different style from that which defined the organs made in the Marche region.

Background of the instrument

During the restoration process, conducted by the Ars Organi company, located in Foligno and owned by Andrea and Barbara Pinchi, an inscription on the top of a languid was found: "Io Giuseppe Testa Romano feci in Roma Anno 1676" ("I, Giuseppe Testa, Roman, made this in Rome in the year 1676"). Giuseppe Testa is surely to be considered the most important organbuilder in Rome in the mid-17th century; he maintained the organs in the basilicas of San Pietro and Santa Maria Maggiore, and built numerous organs now placed in the churches of Rome. Unfortunately, many of the instruments he built that are still extant have been greatly modified throughout the centuries; thus, there is little historical evidence of his work. This is why the organ in San Quirico is of such extraordinary importance: an organ by Giuseppe Testa that was quite well preserved.

Most of the elements are still original: 95% of the pipes, the keyboard and pedalboard, casework, windchest, even the stool for the organist! Particularly beautiful are the three central pipes of the façade, modeled in a spiral, typical of the Roman school. In the 19th century, drawknobs and bellows had been changed and were rebuilt during the recent restoration job, modeled after originals from the Roman School of the period. The pipes had suffered some bad nicking, but many pipes were still intact in the mouths and helped furnish the model for the general voicing of the instrument. The reason this instrument is about 200 km from Rome is that the Marche region, in the 17th century, belonged to the Papal States, and the reason for the choice of Santa Lucia in San Quirico is probably due to the fact that this village is on the way to the Sanctuary of Loreto.

Case and façade

Stop knobs

Pedalboard

Stoplist and sonorities

The stoplist of the Testa organ presents different elements of originality. There are two 8′ Principals, of which the second is of sweeter tone; the first inner pipes were made in metal, and so they have been rebuilt this way. There are two flutes, one 2⅔′ and the other 2′ (called by the builder Flautino), instead of the more common 4′ one. A 16′ Controbassi in spectacular chestnut wood, from C1 to C2, is coupled to the keyboard (the pedalboard is simply linked to the keys without an independent stop). The rarest stop is the 8′ Voce Umana, from F2. This well-known Italian stop, designed to beat in combination with the Principal, was widely used in northern Italy since around 1550, but it had never been used in Rome nor in other parts of central Italy until the beginning of the 18th century (apparently in Rome, Frescobaldi did not have the Voce Umana for his *Toccate per l'elevazione*). Therefore, this stop in the organ of San Quirico is the oldest that we know of among all the instruments built in Rome in the 17th century, and perhaps suggests that this stop was known by the organists of the Eternal City (we hope this hypothesis will be confirmed by other discoveries in the future). The effect of the drum is interesting and unusual; activated by the last pedal in the pedalboard, without its own pipes, it acts on the D1 and F1 notes of the keyboard.

The organ by Giuseppe Testa in Serra San Quirico offers us the possibility of finally hearing the tonal concept of this very important organbuilder from Rome, whose personality and craftsmanship are well evident not simply in the manufacture of the pipes and the mechanical parts, made with great knowledge, but also in the sound itself. At the time of the organ's construction, Rome was an important center for organ music; it was dominated by Bernardo Pasquini, follower of the master Girolamo Frescobaldi. Many organists from Germany came to Rome to learn the latest organ style.

The measurements and the proportions of the pipes are such that their effect can be well appreciated by the ear. The sound is quite clear, bright and full of harmonics, even if not completely transparent but matched with a good fundamental and with generous speech. The main Principal is, along with the 2⅔′ Flute, the stop with more fundamental, though it maintains a light character. The second Principal is sweeter than the main one but not dark. The 4′ Octave marks a tonal separation from the main Principal, because of its narrower scaling; that is why it is more penetrating and clear. The five *ripieno* ranks follow the same style of the 4′ Octave, and their sound is similar to strings, very open and brilliant.

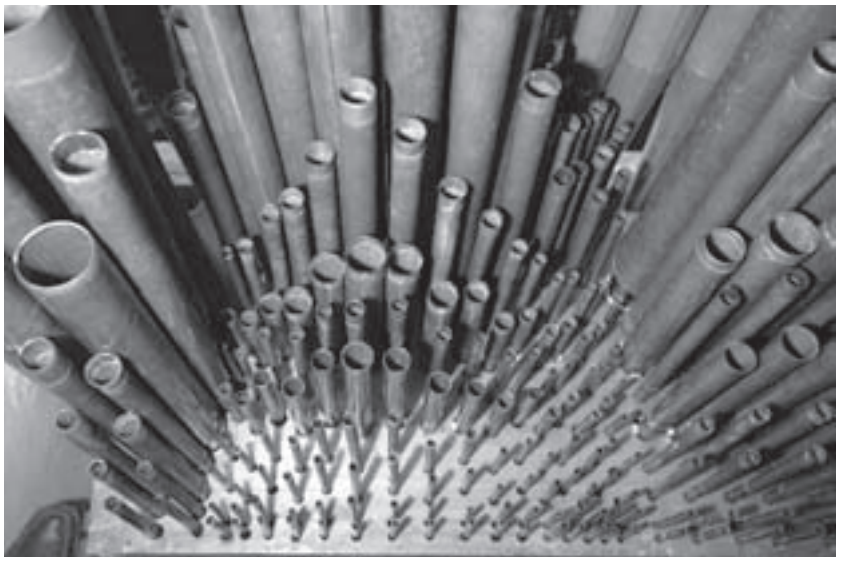
The Voce Umana has a sound that matches better with the main Principal than with the second. The 2⅔′ Flute is among the most surprising stops of the organ: its sound is strong, round and projects well in the church. It is only a hypothesis that the size of the other 2′ Flute recalls the Roman organs of 16′ that had 2′ and 1⅓′ flutes. Its timbre is different from the 2⅔′ one, less round, but does not lack sound. The 16′ Controbassi is also very clear and does not have a booming effect in the acoustic.

The restoration by Ars Organi has had the delicate responsibility to re-establish the original pitch with the best approximation possible, and to recreate the original sound of the instrument through an in-depth study and patient work of voicing, achieving surprising and very convincing results. This organ allows us to discover the sound conceived for the organ works of Bernardo Pasquini, and to execute with great taste all the literature of the 17th-century Italian masters as well as the German composers who took their inspiration while in Rome.

—Francesco Cera
Translation by Zoila Donati

The first time I saw the organ in the magnificent church of Santa Lucia, in 1987, I was aware that I was looking at an organ of rare beauty belonging to the Roman School, but I had no idea I was looking at the last masterpiece produced and signed by Giuseppe Maria Testa!

Obviously, whenever a restoration job is undertaken, one dreams of making an extraordinary discovery, like a hidden handwritten paper inside the windchest, or under the first key—or under the languid of the first front pipe!



Pipework

Keyboard

All of this, with other little discoveries, has allowed us to reconstruct the original look of the instrument.

The restoration work began in 1998 and ended in 2007. At the end of this job we produced an in-depth publication. I will later highlight the most important aspects regarding the tonal material.

Throughout three centuries the instrument has undergone numerous interventions, some of which have been particularly serious, such as converting the instrument to equal temperament, raising the pitch to 426 Hz at 11°C, tampering with the drawknobs, the modifications of the pedal windchest and the substitution of the original bellows. However, the original pipes were all present, even if they were seriously altered by the falling of the rackboard and by interventions made with little attention. The tops of the front pipes and of the internal ones had been cut and scrolled. Some feet of the façade pipes had dents that could easily be seen, and some toeholes had been altered and closed. A substantial number of factory-made pipes had been used to fill in or replace a few original pipes, which were considered impossible to save.

From a tonal standpoint, everything seemed to coincide with the original model, although a lot of the pipes in the ranks had been mixed, and not all of them played where they were supposed to. Even the pipes of the 2′ Flautino had been used in the 2⅔′ Flauto in XII, and in their place in the 19th century someone had put a 4′ Ottavino. The first four pipes of the Principale Primo (front), originally made in metal, had been replaced in the 1800s with pipes made of fir. The 16′ Contrabassi stop in chestnut, originally stopped, had been opened and doubled in its length with fir.

The survey has highlighted all the elements of the primary nucleus, then they have been rearranged according to the original numbers. By doing this, all the pipes that had been moved started to play, as they should have, consistently with the right balance between diameters and lengths. All operations providing the correct rearrangement have also restored uniformity of the thickness of the pipe metal, especially in the principals: very thin in the Principale Primo and Voce Umana, and much more robust in the Principale Secondo. The thicknesses of the metal of the Flauto in XII are much more substantial and they grow proportionally towards the high notes.

The bevel of the languids varies greatly according to the stops. The lab analysis produced the following results: front pipes 97.9% tin; inner pipes 98.4% lead. Following the preliminary phase, the pipes have all been cleaned and restored to their original conditions. During the last intervention the instrument had been retuned to 426 Hz at 11°C, and the temperament modified to equal, which made it necessary to lengthen all the pipes.

Once we collected all the non-original pipes, we proceeded building 154 pipes out of 471 (33%) using the same models, alloy and measurements of the originals. The pitch has been restored at 415.7 Hz at 14°C, humidity at 52%, while keeping in mind the pipes of the 16′ Controbassi, which maintained traces of the plugs inside, and the original metal pipes, which preserved unaltered voicing and length of the bodies. The temperament is again meantone ¼ comma.

The characteristics of the nicking are rather common to all the stops and count on average seven nicks per languid. For the Principale I, Principale II, the Ottava and the Voce Umana, the nicking is done all the way to the pipes of ½′.

The greatly varied bevel of the languids of the different stops and the differentiated scaling speaks by itself to the knowledge of Giuseppe Testa, who knew how to design the instruments he made with incredible taste and attention. The principals are differentiated in diameter and metal thickness. The *ripieno* ranks present a complex and elaborate mix of diameters that are narrow for the high notes and more generous in the low notes.

The Flauto in XII was thought out and realized with very clear principles, with diameters that start out rather narrow to widen later towards mid-keyboard, doing the same thing with increasing pipe metal thickness. This is the physical rendering of a wooden recorder, with its dynamic characteristics. All operations have been supervised and directed by the Italian authorities appointed to supervise all restorations in the Marche region, in this case Professor Maria Claudia Caldari and Maestro Mauro Ferrante.

Also part of this restoration were Andrea and Barbara Pinchi, Ivan Dumitrak, Marco Dominici. Assistant for voicing: Francesco Cera. Historical-philological research: M° Mauro Ferrante, Ispettore Onorario della Soprintendenza delle Marche; Prof. Paolo Peretti, Organologo e Musicologo, Conservatorio di Bari.

—Andrea Pinchi

The Organ
Keyboard 45 notes, short octave, C1–C5
Total width 653 mm

Pedalboard 10 notes, short octave, C1–C2 plus drum pedal

Stoplist

8′	Principale I
8′	Principale II
4′	Ottava
2′	Quinta Decima
1⅓′	Decima Nona
1′	Vigesima Seconda
⅔′	Vigesima Sesta
½′	Vigesima Nona
8′	Voce Umana
2⅔′	Flauto in XII
2′	Flautino
16′	Controbassi, stopped

Francesco Cera was born in Bologna, Italy. He studied organ and harpsichord with Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini and later with Gustav Leonhardt at the Amsterdam Conservatory. Regarded as one of Italy's leading early music specialists, he has performed as a soloist in international festivals and on historic organs throughout Europe.

Cera has recorded harpsichord and organ works by 17th-century Italian composers (Rossi, Merula, Storace and Valente) for the Tactus label, to critical acclaim. The French label Tempéraments issued the anthology "Rome Baroque," with music by Frescobaldi and Pasquini. Francesco Cera has recorded three CDs of Scarlatti's sonatas (from a 1742 manuscript), and taken part in the performance of all the sonatas at the Festival in Ghent (Belgium). The ARTS label has recently issued his recordings of Bach's French Suites and four Harpsichord Concertos (with I Barocchisti, Diego Fasolis, conductor).

From 1991 to 1994, Cera was a member of the ensemble Il Giardino Armonico. He directs the Ensemble Arte Musica, with whom he performs an Italian repertory spanning the period of Gesualdo's madrigals to 18th-century cantatas. He has led masterclasses and workshops at the Royal Academy of Music London, Académie d'Orgue de Fribourg, Accademia di Musica Italiana per Organo, the University of Illinois, Cornell University, Arizona State University, and Oberlin College. Since 2001 he has lived in Rome, where he is Honorary Inspector of Early Organs for Rome and the Lazio region. His website: <www.francescocera.it>.

Born into a family of organ builders, Andrea Pinchi learned the rudiments of the art of organ building as a child from his paternal grandfather, Libero Rino. After receiving a scientific degree in 1987, he officially joined the family business, refining his knowledge under the direction of his father, Guido, and participating in the construction of important organs, working especially on pipe design and pipemaking. From 2001–2003 he was managing director of Stinkens Italia Srl, a company that has made thousands of pipes worldwide, and especially for U.S. organbuilders, over the years.

In 2001, with his sister Barbara, he founded the historic organ restoration firm Ars Organi, which has carried out restorations of great interest, such as those of the 1509 organ of Mastro Paolo Pietropaolo in the Chiesa Museo di San Francesco in Trevi (Umbria), the 1615 Antonino La Valle instrument in Santa Maria Assunta in Sclafani (Sicily), the 1759 Conrad Werle organ in San Giuseppe in Leonessa (Lazio), and currently, the two-manual 1769 Aloysius Galligani organ in the Chiesa del Suffragio in Foligno. He has considerable experience in the field of organology, thanks to the teaching and guidance of Dr. Oscar Mischiati, with whom he worked closely from 1981 to 2004 in his family's restoration business.

Pinchi supervised the cataloging of the organs in the diocese of Foligno for the Umbria region; he has published numerous articles on organology. He has participated in organbuilding meetings both in Italy and abroad; he is president of L'Associazione "Aloysius Galligani," which deals with historic organs of the Umbria region.

He is owner, with his siblings Barbara and Claudio, of Fratelli Pinchi <www.pinchi.com>, a company founded in 1930, which has built over 440 organs in Italy and other countries; among the most significant are those of the Duomo in Arezzo, Kusatzu Concert Hall in Japan, Tempio Don Bosco in Asti, and Padre Pio Basilica in the Renzo Piano-designed San Giovanni Rotondo—a four-manual, 100-rank mechanical action instrument. He has supervised the temperament and tuning of many historic organs for recordings made by Archiv-Deutsche Grammophon, Camerata Tokio, Discantica, Opus 111, Quadrivium and Tactus. He does design work both for the family firm and for foreign organ builders.