

In Search of the Colascione or Neapolitan Tiorba. - a Missing Link?

Having just completed construction of an experimental mezzo-colascione based upon the instrument in the Dean Castle, Kilmarnock collection that I had opportunity to examine and measure in 1980, I have been trying to find out more about the colascione, how it may have been fretted, tuned and played. Disappointingly, a one month subscription to 'Grove On Line' failed to provide much more information than was already known following the research work of Martyn Hodgson, Donald Gill and others 35 years or so ago (Note 1).

Just to complicate matters we know that from the 16th C to 19th C in Italy pretty well any lute like instrument with a long neck might be named a colascione or calascione. Essentially obsolete by the beginning of the 19th C and with an unwritten oral tradition there is not much to go on. Nevertheless in an effort to glean more information from what little is already known it has been necessary to re-examine some of the more familiar references as well as to search for any evidence that there may be in the iconography.

The early colascione in Italy, similar in appearance to the long necked lutes of the Middle East with narrow neck proportionally more than about two to three times the length of the small body, came in three sizes – the large bass colascione with string length of about 100 to 130 cm, the half sized colascioncino tuned an octave higher with string length in the 50 cm to 60 cm range and the mid sized mezzo-colascione with string length in the range 75-90 cm..

A survey of surviving colascioni in the European collections dating from the 16th to 19th C suggests that three single courses were the norm for the colascione and two for the colascioncino. The colascione is distinct from the 6 to 8 course bass lute popular in Germany during the 18th C, a development of the mandore known as a Gallichon (or Gallichone or other similar variant).

It is thought that the colascione was introduced to Europe via Naples judging from the writings of Tinctoris who in the late 15th C observed Turkish (Ottoman) prisoners in Naples playing a spoon shaped instrument, called a tambura, fitted with three strings tuned an octave, fifth and fourth apart and played with either finger tips or a plectrum (Note 2). Presumably Tinctoris meant that the two higher pitched melody strings could be tuned either a fourth or a fifth apart. A tambura can be any kind of Middle Eastern long necked lute of which there are many, all with regional differences and – like the long necked Italian colascione – coming in a variety of sizes.

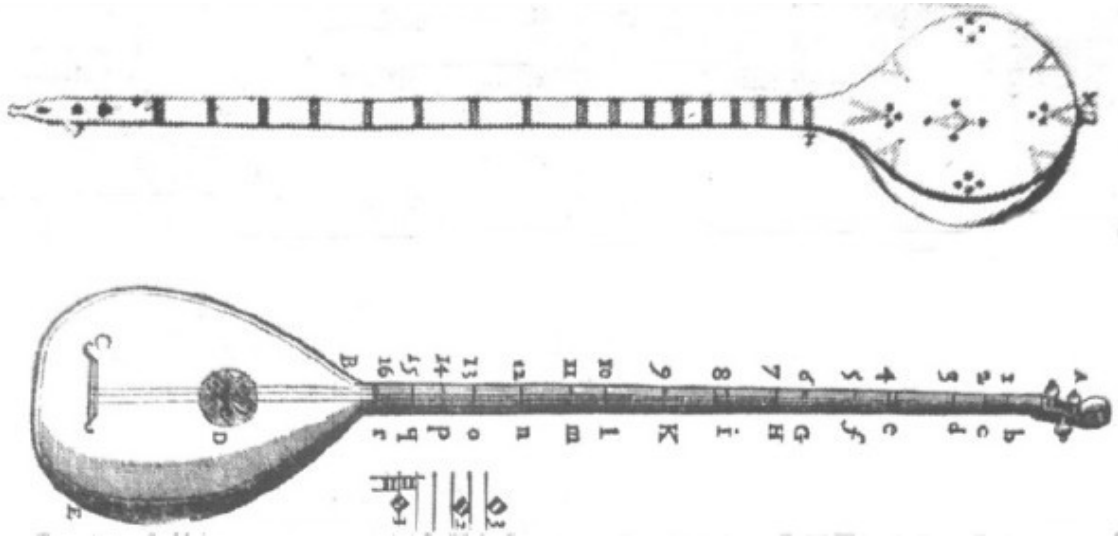
Pythagorean fretting for the two stringed tunbur of Khurasan (the strings tuned either a tone or a fourth apart) was advocated by 10th C philosopher Abu Nasr Al-Farabi. His tunbur had 17 frets to the octave with a total of 20 frets positioned on the neck to give a range of an octave and a tone (Note 3). The tunbur had 5 fixed fret positions that always occupied the same position on the fretboard. The remainder of the frets could be moved (or eliminated) dependant upon the preferences of the player. The five fixed frets were positioned to sound a whole tone (ratio 9/8), a perfect fourth (ratio 4/3), a perfect fifth (ratio 3/2), the octave (ratio 2/1), and a tone higher (ratio 9/8 of the half string length).

This general tuning arrangement appears to have survived in the many varieties of modern long necked lutes of the Middle East.

A long necked lute is described by Marin Mersenne 1636 (Note 4) that he calls a colachon - having two or three strings. He compares it to a Turkish monochord. He tells us that it was four to five feet in length in the form of a lute with a very long neck and was used in Italy. The two 'melody' strings are tuned a fifth apart. Mersenne illustrates a three string version with the third (drone?) string tuned an octave lower than the middle string but notes that many other tunings were possible.

The colachon represented has a violin style peg box with transverse pegs and terminating in a scroll.

Mersenne's colachon has a neck of sufficient length to accommodate 16 frets.



Athanasius Kircher 1650 (Note 5) provides a similar engraving of a long necked lute shown alongside other European plucked stringed instruments like the lute (testudo), theorbo (tiorba), mandora etc. (see Plate VII)

Kircher labels his long necked lute as a “type of Turkish trichord commonly known as a colachon” and gives the same tuning intervals as Mersenne - an octave and a fifth. The engraving seems to show close spaced frets at the 4th, 6th, 8th and 9th position, as does the Mersenne engraving that might suggest partial microtone fretting?

Kircher includes plucked stringed instruments in his *Musurgia Universalis* only for completeness as he considered these instruments to be unworthy of serious attention as they were so debased as to be the common property of labourers of the lowest class.

(To avoid confusion, the type of lute Kircher labels 'Tiorba' in plate VII will now be referred to throughout this Comm. as a 'Theorbo' and the 'Colachon' as a 'Colascione').

He tells us that the tiorba was the invention of, and so named by, a certain Neapolitan street musician who 'first doubled the neck of a lute in length and later added various strings, since at first it served only for the baritone'. So this modified lute originally only carried a few (three or four?) bass strings, strings being added to extend the range upwards as the instrument was later developed into the familiar theorbo illustrated in Plate VII.

Curiously Kircher notes that the theorbo is the only fretted instrument suited to display the diatonic-chromatic-enharmonic system of the ancient Greeks – although this facility to produce quarter or microtones, of course, might apply to any instrument fitted with moveable frets (including the lute or colascione).

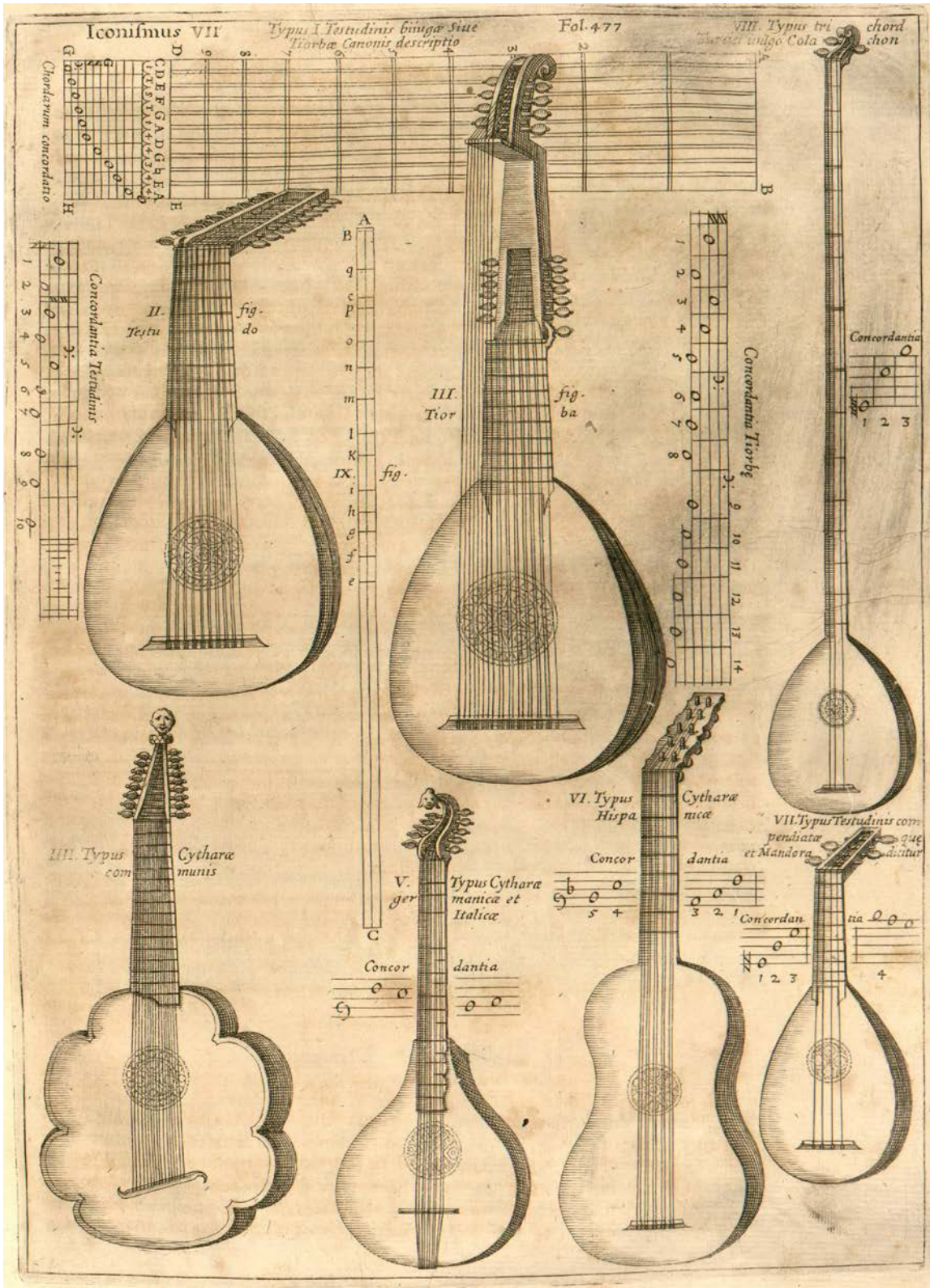


Plate VII – Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia Universalis*, Rome, 1650

Kircher also provides instructions on how to fret a lute in both Equal Temperament as well as Just Intonation (the latter shown as scale AC on Plate VII).

So the the Neapolitan tiorba, a development of the European lute, was clearly not the same instrument as the colascione described by both Mersenne and Kircher. It must have had a relatively large body (compared to a colascione), a proportionally longer neck than a conventional lute with 7 or 8 frets on the fingerboard but a shorter neck than that of a colascione.

'La Tiorba a Taccone' - originally published in Naples in 1646 - was composed by an unknown author under the pseudonym 'Felippo Sgruttendio de Scafato'. It is a satirical work written in Neapolitan dialect – a collection of verses in imitation of the style of Petrarch – conveniently using 10 strings of a tiorba a taccone to represent the 10 chapters into which the book is divided. The theme for his song is a certain 'Cecca', a slovenly Neapolitan woman of whose charms he gives a most ludicrous account (Note 6).

From the first two lines of the opening stanza and throughout the rest of the work it is clear that the 'tiorba a taccone' (i.e. a tiorba played with a plectrum) was otherwise known as a 'calascione' in Neapolitan society.

This example of a tiorba a taccone may have been fitted with either 5 double rather than single courses or perhaps was an instrument with 10 single courses representing an early stage in its development into the double pegbox extended neck theorbo?

DE LA
T I O R B A
A T A C C O N E

C O R D A P R I M M A .



N C I G N A T U R A .

S O N E T T O I .

STo Calascione, che me metto nzino ;
E sto taccone, che me piglio mmano ;
Pe fare mmidia a cchiù de no pacchiano ;
Me deze Apollo mmiezo a lo Pennino .

In keeping with the vulgar theme of the work, the tiorba a taccone may have been chosen as an appropriate subject being considered a rough, low class instrument of the streets. The calascione (rather than the colascione?) was eventually to become associated with accompaniment of rustic serenading and dance accompaniment. The word was also commonly used to describe a dull, lazy 'pot bellied' person presumably by association with the large deep bowl of a Neapolitan tiorba or calascione rather than that of the small, shallower bodied colascione.

The colascione is said to be an instrument associated with the early travelling Italian theatrical groups ('La Commedia dell'Arte). A search of the iconography, however - apart from the few well known 17th caricatures by Jaques Callot of actors holding long necked small bodied lutes - otherwise failed to confirm that these groups had a particular preference for the colascione in their performances over other strummed instruments or noise makers such as the guitar, lute, archlute, hurdy gurdy, jew's harp or even kitchen gridirons. On the other hand the calascione is said to have been used to accompany the ever popular 'Tarantella' dance. A review of the iconography depicting dance groups in Naples performing the 'Tarantella' during the 18th C show not early long necked colascioni being used for accompaniment but instead large bodied, lute like instruments fitted with three or four single courses. All of these lutes characteristically have two sound holes one centrally positioned with the other offset to the bass side.

An example is shown in an aquatint by Scottish artist David Allan (1787) depicting a group enjoying themselves somewhere at the far end of the bay of Naples with Vesuvius smouldering in the distance.



British Museum AN00270337_001

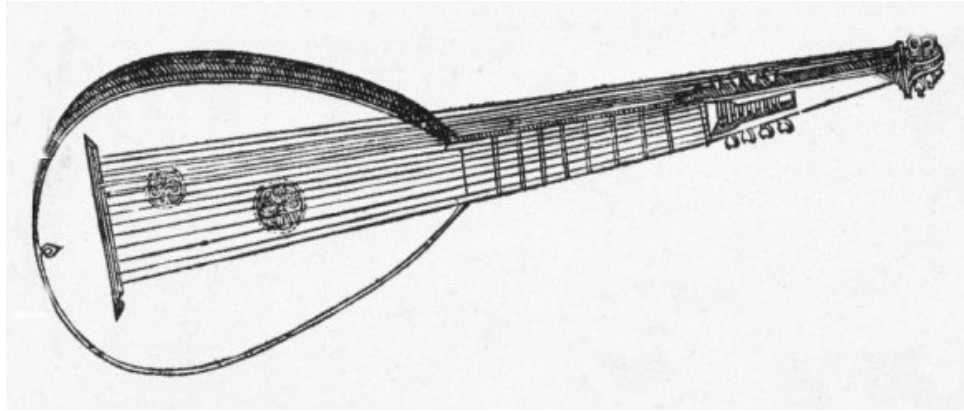
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The lute is shown as having three single strings and a neck roughly about the same length as the body. The pegbox is like that of a violin with transverse pegs and a scroll. The fingerboard is fretted with about 12 frets like a guitar. The bridge is not symmetrical but extends in length over to the bass side.

Other similar examples – all with the characteristic double soundhole arrangement - can be found in the works of several 18th C Neapolitan painters (Note 7). Are these all later examples of a *tiorba a taccone*?



Furthermore these instruments resemble the 'Paduanische Theorba' in relative size and geometry as described by Michael Praetorius (Note 8) - but without the treble strings and primary pegbox – the whole extended neck being the fingerboard..



Compare the Paduan theorbo with the four string, double sound hole lute in a painting by Neapolitan artist Guiseppe Bonito, circa 1740 (Note 9).



Note the wide asymmetric bridge (with ample space for more strings), the strange 'lop sided' geometry of the sound board, the long neck with a single peg box and only four single bass strings giving the appearance that this instrument might represent the bass half of a Paduan theorbo. Note also the simplified fretting arrangement with only four frets on the fingerboard that is clearly intended to carry a greater number. Note also the full tone spacing of the first fret. Could this be another example of a later version of the original Neapolitan tiorba a taccone? Could it be that the Paduan theorbo was originally modelled after this style of instrument - the neck widened and with a second pegbox added to carry the additional shorter stopped strings?

Another painting attributed to Bonito (Note 10) - shows a similar fret arrangement on a four single stringed lute (calascione?). Guiseppe Bonito was a renowned artist, painter appointed to the court of Naples. Oddly – unlike the rest of the painting – the lute is painted in an amateurist fashion as if the artist had a poor grasp of perspective. It does suggest, however, that the lute has a large and proportionally very deep bowl so this, perhaps, may be another example of a 'pot bellied' calascione?

The fret arrangement is clear enough with only five double tied frets on a finger board designed to carry more frets. The first fret position suggests full tone spacing.

This small soprano instrument – just over a metre in length – perhaps inspired by a tiorba a taccone (?) illustrates the exaggerated 'pot bellied' style of bowl of the larger instrument. This instrument is housed in the Museo Arte e Tradizione Popolari, Rome (Note 11)



Ernst Gottlieb Baron launched a sarcastic diatribe against his contemporary, composer and music critic Johann Mattheson (1681 - 1764), for daring to suggest that the lute was useless for accompaniment in churches and operas and for suggesting that the lute had consequently been abandoned by the Italians in preference for the louder calichon (calascione?) and theorbe (theorbo). In support of his argument, Baron invokes Kircher's story that the theorbo was an instrument developed from the lute by a Neapolitan charlatan. He chides Mattheson for not knowing that a calichon is only the bass of a lute and that more can be achieved on a lute with many strings than on a calichon with three, four or up to six courses.

In the same breath Baron also notes that the Paduan theorbo was more convenient to handle as

they only measured about 5 feet in length. (Note 12)

So Baron confirms a distinction between the Italian calichon with its three to six courses and the fully developed theorbo with its double pegbox and with up to 14 courses like the Paduan theorbo – both apparently used for the same purpose by the Italians for accompaniment in churches and opera. However, we do not know for sure if Baron is referring to the 3 or 4 stringed colascione of the Mersenne/Kircher variety or to an intermediate development of the modified lute represented by the tiorba a taccone or calascione. There is no evidence to suggest that the colascione had more than two to four strings so Baron is, perhaps, more likely to be talking about the calascione?

No doubt both colascione and calascione co- existed into the 18th C before becoming obsolete by the 19th C, yet only examples of the colascione survive. Why?

The surviving long necked two or three stringed colascioni of all sizes appear to be of quality construction, some made from costly materials like ivory and ebony suggesting that these were not street instruments and so worthy of preservation?

The Ottoman Turks were always a feared and formidable threat to European nations yet from the 16th to 18th C it was fashionable for European upper class society to imitate Turkish art and culture by not only acquiring costly Turkish made artifacts like rugs and carpets but by wearing Ottoman style clothing and even decorating entire rooms with Turkish furnishings. No doubt this fashion gained popularity because it allowed the rich to flaunt their wealth and to play fantasy games, full of Eastern promise, with family and friends. The 'Turquerie' fashion found its way into the theatre and opera offering a world of exotic splendour to the average person in the audience. The fashion did not, however, embrace Ottoman music with its exotic scale systems, microtones and unusual rhythms (to the Western ear) – music that Mozart once said was “offensive to the ears” (a sentiment echoed earlier by Praetorius who wanted to believe that the Turks had no ear for music other than that provided by the drums, cymbals and shawms of the Janisarry military bands. The Germans did however embrace the idea of military bands from the Turks!).

To hazard a guess, the long necked colascione of the type described by Mersenne and Kircher may have played a part in this European Turkish fashion fantasy not as a genuine instrument of the Middle East like the Baglama Saz or Turkish Tanbur but as a 'look the part' substitute with strings tuned a fourth apart like the bass half of a guitar (or lute) and fretted accordingly so that it might perform in consort with other European fretted instruments of the period.

Domenico Colla and his brother toured Europe in the 1760's (as did the Merchi brothers in the early 1750's) giving concerts for the large colascione and the two stringed soprano colascioncino and for colascioncino and guitar. Colla wrote six sonatas for the colascioncino and accompaniment. However, this move to establish the colascione as a 'serious' instrument, although well received by audiences of the time, clearly came too late for success.

As for the calascione (or tiorba a taccone) it may also once have been used as a simpler, low cost alternative for operatic accompaniment before being eclipsed by the more versatile theorbo – the discarded instruments then finding a second useful life once again on the streets of Naples before – worn out from hard use - fading into oblivion surviving only in the iconography of the 18th C.



Cav: P. L. Ghessi del. Roma

Matth: Oesterreich Sculp: Dresden 1752

Domenico con suo Fratello Bresciani
 Il primo, che è di faccia suona mirabilmente il Catacioncino à
 due corde, l'altro che è di Schiena, l'accompagnava con la Chitarra
 Furono nell Mese di Aprile 1763, nell Palazzo à Sans-souci, dove Sua Maestà il Rè di
 Prussia li intese ambedue à Sonare.

Notes

- 1) M. Hodgson – FoMRHI Comms. 175, 194, D. Gill – FoMRHI Comm 274 and 'Mandores and Colachons' G.S.J. Vol 34 (March 1981) pp 130-141.
- 2) See Baines 'Fifteenth-century Instruments in Tinctoris's *De Inventione et Usu Musicae*', G.S.J. Vol 3 (March 1950) pp. 19-26.
- 3) Translation and analysis of the lute and tunbur fretting arrangements of Al-Farabi (from *Kitab al-Musiqi al-Kabir*) – Chris Forster 'Musical Mathematics', part IV Arabian, Persian and Turkish Music, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 2010. Note that the more complex microtone fretting of the modern classical Turkish tanbur was a late 17th development attributed to Dimitrie Cantemar (1673-1723) designed to meet the requirements of performance of the art music of the Ottoman court.
- 4) Marin Mersenne 'Harmonie Universelle', Paris, 1536 - Livre Second, Proposition XVI, pp 99-100 and Proposition XX, Livre Quatriesme des Instrumens pp 227-228 – freely available on-line (Google search)
- 5) Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia Universalis*, Rome, 1650. A translation of the section on musical instruments by Frederick Baron Crane, MA thesis, State University of Iowa, 1956 - freely available on-line (Google search).
- 6) Neapolitan dialect – through historical circumstance – is a mix of native Italian and Spanish complicated by abbreviation of words. So, for example, Italian 'questo' (this) becomes 'sto'. I have been unable to track down a translation of the text – although one certainly exists or did exist. However an article in 'The Mirror of Literature, Amusements and Instruction' John Limbard , Vol. 1, No 24, June 17, 1843 provides a critical review of the work – both the original text and article are freely available on-line (Google search)
It has been suggested that Giulio Cesare Cortese author of 'Lo Calascione', 1570 may also have composed 'De la Tiorba a Taccone'.
A survey of the text reveals that there are nine references to 'Calascione', two to 'Taccone', one to Tiorba and two to 'Liuto' although their context in the poem has yet to be established.
In the absence of an informed translation my guess is that the opening two lines of the first stanza might mean something like 'This Calascione, placed on my lap (?) and this plectrum (tacca = stick, rod) held in my hand'?
- 7) For example Neapolitan painters such as Saverio della Gatta (1777-1829), Pietro Fabris (1740-1792), Filippo Falcatore (1718-1768) used settings of tarantella dance groups as subject matter – all images freely available on-line (search Google images for 'tarantella').
- 8) *Syntagma Musicum II de Organographia*, parts I and II, Michael Praetorius, 1614/1615, translation David Z. Crookes, Clarendon Press, 1991.
- 9) Detail from 'Nello Studio del Pittore' by Guiseppe Bonito (1701-1789) in the Capodimonte

Museum, Naples. Note that the villainous looking fellow in the foreground is smoking a long stemmed Turkish chibouk pipe, no doubt filled with Turkish blend tobacco, 'Turquerie' fashion. Bonito also painted the two official portraits of the then Turkish ambassadors to Naples, Hacı Hüseyin Efendi (1741) and Mustafa Bey (1742). Portraits freely available on-line (Google image search)

10) Detail from 'Concertino' by Guiseppe Bonito in the Capodimonte Museum, Naples.



11) This instrument is discussed here on-line:

http://www.alfonsotoscano.it/forum/Subject.asp?S_ID=612&H_ID=36&pageid=2&show=1

12) Ernst Gottlieb Baron 'Intersuchung des Instruments der Lauten', Nürnberg, 1727, Part 2, Chapter 1. – freely available on-line (Google search)

Translation also by Douglas Alton Smith 'Study of the Lute, Ernst Gottlieb Baron (1727)', Instrumenta Antiqua Publications, California, 1976. In the translation Baron's 'Calichon' is rendered – rightly or wrongly - as 'colascione'.