

**Further to Comm. 2027 – In Search of the Colascione or Neapolitan Tiorba.**

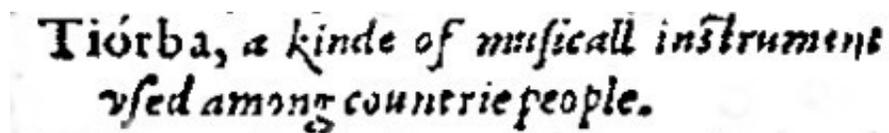
“The Tiorba gets its name from a certain Neapolitan street musician who first doubled the neck of a lute in length and added various strings, since at first it served only for the baritone and who was in the habit of calling this instrument 'Tiorba' as a joke. For Tiorba is the name of the instrument with which glovers are accustomed to grind perfumes, and it is a kind of mortar very similar to those little mills with which they are accustomed to dissolve almonds, mustard, and other seeds by pouring on a liquid which combines them into a milk. The first to give particular attention to this instrument was the most famous musician Hieronymus Kapsberger, a German nobleman. He brought it to such perfection that at this time it would seem deserving to snatch the palm away from the rest of the instruments, since no instrument has a greater musical variety, and indeed it is the only one suited to display the diatonic-chromatic- enharmonic system” (Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia Universalis*, Rome 1650 - Note 1).

The late Robert Spencer in his definitive article 'Chitarrone, Theorbo and Archlute (Early Music, October 1976) attempts to describe the differences between the various kinds of extended neck, double peg box lutes. He notes that the first mention of a Tiorba is in John Florio's Italian to English dictionaries. Curiously – although making reference to E.G. Baron (who in turn quotes Kircher's tale above about the origins of the Tiorba, Note 2) – Spencer makes no mention of Kircher's work relating to the Tiorba (or Thiorba or Theorba – confusingly all three names used by Kircher for the same instrument).

**The Tiorba According to Florio.**

Giovanni Florio linguist and lexicographer (1553-1625) was born in London but spent the best part of the next 20 years of his life living in Europe with his father before returning to England. Florio's father, a Franciscan friar came to England from Tuscany having fled persecution by the Inquisition in Italy after preaching in Naples, Padua and Venice. John Florio was the author of two Italian to English dictionaries the first 'A Worlde of Wordes' published in 1598 and a greatly expanded version 'Queen Anna's New Worlde of Wordes' published in 1611. As dictionaries the words included were those in established common usage in Italy and England. In addition to his in depth knowledge of the Italian language, Florio lists the literary works referenced in compiling his dictionaries. (Note 3)

In the 1598 edition Florio defines Tiorba as 'a kinde of musicall instrument used among countrie people' - so it was apparently an instrument not recognised as a lute by English society because the dictionary also defines Liuto, Liutto as 'an instrument called a lute'.



*Tiorba, a kinde of musicall instrument  
used among countrie people.*

In the 1611 edition the meaning of Tiorba is given as 'a musical instrument that blind men play upon called a

'Theorba'.

***Tiorba, a musical instrument that blind men play vpon called a Theorba.***

In this edition 'Liuto' now becomes 'any kind of lute'. There is no reference to Colascione or Calascione etc. in either of the dictionaries.

So what was this instrument so cryptically defined by Florio if it was not recognised as a lute and was played by blind men?

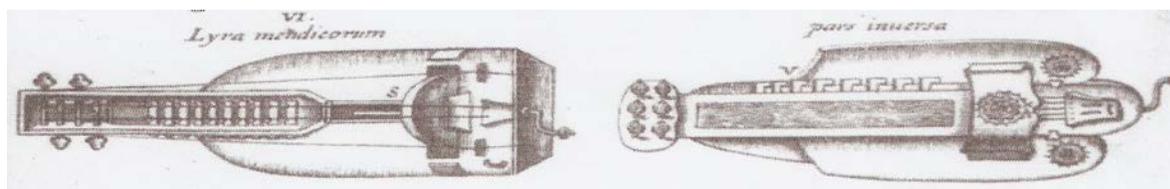
Any kind of fretted long necked lute with single peg box and 2, 3 or 4 (or more?) courses – a folk instrument - was known in Italy as a 'Colascione'. Kircher called it, not a lute, but a 'type of Turikish trichord commonly known as a colachon' and shows it for comparison alongside a lute (testudo). Likewise Kircher does not name his illustration of an extended neck, double pegbox Tiorba a lute although recognising that the Tiorba was originally a development of the lute. Of the two a Colascione might fit the bill as an instrument 'used among countrie people' but what about blind men? Florio does not say that a 'Tiorba' was an instrument that only blind men play upon. A tradition in Italy was for itinerant bands of blind musicians ('ciechi') to perform in the streets for visitors (for a fee). Perhaps Colascioni were used – together with other instruments – by these groups? (Note 4)

Douglas Alton Smith in his article 'On the Origin of the Chitarrone' 1979 (Note 5) provides some evidence to support an alternative proposal that a 'Tiorba' in Italy at one time was a colloquial term for a hand cranked Hurdy-gurdy (the hand motion simulating the operation of a hand quern mill or tiorba? - Note 8) – an instrument often associated with blind beggars since the 15<sup>th</sup> C. However, the author understandably then finds some difficulty in explaining how a Hurdy-gurdy might possibly represent a Chitarrone. He speculates that perhaps, 'prompted by wags', Chitarrone players 'had begun to use the ironic nickname Tiorba for their instrument' – a kind of term of affection.

Smith (although having translated Baron's 'Study of the Lute'), like Spencer makes no reference to Kircher's account of the origins of the Tiorba yet Kircher seems to confirm that a tiorba was indeed some kind of small hand operated grinding mill (in this case a pestle and mortar - Note8) – a name applied to the newly invented long necked lute as a joke. Here it is easier to visualise why the Neapolitan street musician referred to a pestle and mortar, the mortar representing the lute with extended neck and the pestle the plectrum (or taccone). The analogy is clear enough when witnessing a pestle and mortar in use the pestle being used with both a striking (crushing) and rotating (grinding) motion.

Interestingly Kircher mentions G. H. Kapsberger who 10 years earlier had published his 4<sup>th</sup> book of tablature for 'Chitarone or Tiorba' that includes the composition 'Colascione' – perhaps in recognition of the earlier humble origins of the developed more sophisticated extended neck, double pegbox Chitarrone?

In Plate VIII of his work Kircher refers to two Hurdy-gurdys as a Lyra Mendicorum or 'beggar's lyre' but Florio, on his part, makes no mention of a Lira Mendico in either of his dictionaries but otherwise defines Lira as a Lyre or Harp and Mendico as a Beggar. As well surely a Hurdy-gurdy was a familiar musical instrument in English society during the 16<sup>th</sup> C and earlier?



### De la Tiorba a Taccone

Interestingly, 'Taccone' according to Florio is rendered as 'a patching southerly fellow' and 'Tacconi' as 'great patching, cobbling, souterlie or tacking'. A 'souter' was a cobbler but more generally a term that might apply to any worker wielding a hammer such as a tinker. A 'souter' was also considered to be a low class uneducated worker and was used as term of contempt. So does a Tiorba a Taccone not only mean a Calascione played with a plectrum (used with a striking motion) but also one played by a common uneducated 'countrie' person - ambiguous poetic license fitting to the overall vulgar theme of the poem perhaps?

The 10 part poem 'de la Tiorba a Taccone' published in 1646 (Note 6). The poem is a parody – an account of the poet's love and admiration for the slovenly Cecca as well as of his gluttonous excesses – and so no doubt contains other many deliberate ambiguities?

Each chapter of this poem is entitled 'de la Tiorba a Taccone' except, curiously, for chapters 3 and 4 (representing strings 3 and 4) each entitled 'de lo Calascione'. Does this imply that the Calascione (and hence Tiorba a Taccone) was originally a three or four (single?) course instrument and that the 10 strings representing the 10 chapters of the poem are otherwise simply a poetic convenience?

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DE LO  
**CALASCIONE**  
 DE  
**FELIPPO SGRVTTENDIO**  
 DE SCAFATO.  
 CORDA QUARTA.

DE LA  
TIO RBA  
A TACCONE

CORDA PRIMMA.



NCIGNATURA.

SONETTO I.

**S**To 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.

Oh comm' è bello liscio, oh comm' è fino;  
Ha de Cestunia no copierchio sano;  
Ogne corda, che nc' eje è no stentino,  
Che se sente dà Puerto a Campagnano.

Co sto strommiento grazioso tanto  
Voglio cantare cchiù de na canzona;  
E spero tutte vincere a lo canto.

Musa, tu che staie ncoppa d' Alecona;  
Mente de Cecca le bellizze canto,  
Lavorame de Terza na corona.

this first page of the poem is available in the program notes of the two CD recording 'Canzoni Villanesche' (Note 7). Quote:

“First String, Entitled Sonnet 1

This Calascione, which I press close to my heart  
And this plectrum which I hold in my hand  
To provoke the envy of more than a few people  
Apollo has given them to me, one day while walking in the Pennino.

Oh! how beautiful it is, how smooth; Oh! how fine!  
Its lid (sound board?) is entirely made of tortoiseshell,  
Each of its strings is a gut  
Which is heard from Portico to Campagnano.

With such a gracious instrument as this,  
I want to sing many songs, and with my singing, I hope to conquer everyone.

Thou muse, who dwells in Helicon,  
While I sing of the beauties of Cecca,  
Prepare me a crown of cauliflowers!

So, on this opening page alone we learn that the Calascione or Tiorba a taccone, was held at chest level (presumably with a supporting shoulder strap?), was played with a plectrum, was gut strung, was finely made with a costly sound board entirely covered with a decorative veneer of tortoiseshell, was used as vocal accompaniment and was very loud (could be heard from Naples to Rome!!)

Some modern Italian authors say that the taccone (plectrum) was made from leather. The original source confirming this has yet to be identified but trials using a leather plectrum have established that hard leather is feasible as a material for this application.

So far there would appear to have been two kinds of Neapolitan colascione (or calascione), one type derived from the Middle Eastern Tambura (as proposed by A. Baines) as illustrated by both M. Mersenne (1636) and A. Kircher (1650), called a colachon, with narrow neck about 2 to more than 3 times the length of the body and the other derived from a lute with neck length doubled called a tiorba – all with single pegbox generally carrying 3 or 4 courses. A surviving example of the latter style may be the so called colascione in the instrument collection, Dean Castle, Kilmarnock, Scotland.  
More on this to follow.

## Notes

1) Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia Universalis*, Rome 1650 – Book 6, Chapter 2, page 476:

Thiorba nomen suum inuenit à Circumforaneo. quodā Neapolitano, qui primus testudinis collum productius duplicauit; chordas diuersas addidit, cum primò non nisi barytono seruiret, atque hoc instrumentum ioco quodam vocare solebat Thiorbam; vocant autem Thiorbam id instrumentum, quo Chirothecarii odorifera molere solent, estq; mortarium quoddam prorsus simile molulis illis, quibus amygdala, synapi, aliaq; grana in superaffuso liquore conuenienti in lac dissoluerent solent. Hoc instrumentum primus deinde excoluit clarissimus musicus Hieronymus Capisberger Nobilis Germanus, & ad eam perfectionem perduxit, vt hoc tempore merito reliquis instrumentis palmam præripuisse videatur; cum nullum instrumentum maiorem varietatem harmonicam habeat, imò solum aptum sit ad diatonico-chromatico-enharmonicam methodum exhibendam.

English translation of the section on musical instruments by Frederick Baron Crane, MA Thesis, State University of Iowa, 1956 – freely available on line (Google search).

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

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sonnte man schon sagen, daß die Theorba zwar stärker, aber die Laute desto delicater sey. Herr Machevon hat hier bey dieser Sache nicht ermogten, ob wohl von Naben könnte das der hochberühmte Kircher mit ihm nicht seines Sinnes ist, welcher dieses Instrument nicht allein andern vorziehet, sondern so gar darthut, daß man alle drey Genera vollkommnen, und vielmehr Veränderungen und Zierlichkeiten darauf haben könnte. In Rom und Padua hat man sonst die schönsten und besten gemacht. Die Römischen welche auch sonst Chitarone genennet werden, sind die größten gewesen, und haben mit ihrem Corpore in die Länge stehendhalb Schuh und zwey Zoll ausgemacht. Weilen nun aber Pater Kircher die

Thiorbam id instrumentum, quo chirothecarii odorifera molere solent, estque mortarium quoddam prorsus simile molulis illis, quibus amygdala, synapi aliaque grana insuper affuso liquore conuenienti in lac dissoluerent solent. Hoc instrumentum primus deinde excoluit clarissimus Hieronymus Capisberger, Nobilis Germanus, et ad eam perfectionem perduxit, ut hoc tempore merito reliquis instrumentis palmam præripuisse videatur; cum nullum instrumentum maiorem varietatem harmonicam habeat, imò solum aptum sit ad diatonico-chromatico-enharmonicam methodum exhibendam.

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beweisen daß das Accompagnement der Lauten tout à fait von denen Italiänern wäre abgeschafft worden; was aber die Theorba anlanget, so hat er davon nicht die geringste Erkenntnis gehabt. Mich wunderet, da er doch bey Pater Kircher so fleißig gelesen, er nicht anmercket, daß solches Instrument von einem Neapolitanischen March-Schreyer aus der Lauten wäre verfertiget worden; der solches Instrument aus Schertz nach einem Verlöbte, worinnen er seine Schmirrethen zubereitet, genennet, solte erfunden haben, welches nachgehends, nachdem man den Nutzen davon gesehen, von einem teuschischen Edelmann, der ein vortreflicher Musicus gewesen, und Hieronymus Capisberger geheissen, wäre excollet und in Stand gebracht worden. (a) Hier könnte

(a) Thiorba a Testudine differt, ait pag. 476. cap. 11. Kircherus quod illa duplici collo (vocalus autem collum, illam partem, intra quam verticilla chordas agglomerant) hæc unico consistet. Inventum Neotericozum est, cum apud antiquos nulla fiat horum Instrumentorum mentio. Thiorba nomen suum inuenit a circumforaneo quodam Neapolitano, qui primus Testudinis collum productius duplicavit; chordas diuersas addidit, cum primùm non nisi barytono seruiret, atque hoc instrumentum ioco quodam vocare solebat Thiorbam; vocant autem Thiorbam

3) Both editions of Florio's dictionaries are freely available on line (Google search).

4) The performances of the 'ciechi' were musically substandard according to Neapolitan painter, poet, musician and satirical writer Salvator Rosa (1615 – 1673) who is quoted as saying about those foreign visitors to Naples who were unimpressed by his poetic utterances – “What folly to lose my time and talent in reading before these beasts of burden, who feel nothing, and have no intellect beyond what is necessary to understand the ballad of a blind man” (Aggio io bene speso lo tiempomio, in legere le fatiche mie alli somari, e a gente che nulla intienne, avvezza solamente a sentire non autro che la canzona dello cieco”).

5) 'On the Origins of the Chitarrone', Douglas Alton Smith, Journal of the American Musicological Society, Vol 32, No.3, 1979. Freely available from JSTOR – register as MyJSTOR member.

6) 'La Tiorba a Taccone', Naples, 1646, author 'Felippo Sgruttendio de Scafato' freely available on line (Google search).

7) From the program notes for the two CD set 'Canzoni Villanesche' , Ensemble Daedalus, directed by Roberto Festa, ACCENT records (notes freely available at [cdn1.orastream.com/pdf/4015023242685.pdf](http://cdn1.orastream.com/pdf/4015023242685.pdf)).

8)



**Tiorba - Pestle and Mortar**



**Tiorba – Hand Quern Mill**