

A Fragment of a Fake Franciolini lute

In recent months there was an auction of some instruments and workshop contents previously owned by Ephraim Segerman, who many readers will know as one of the founding members of FoMRHI¹ and who did much to further our collective knowledge of early stringed instruments, and to reinvigorate interest in making and playing on gut strings.

Some of the musical items were offered within a sale by Adam Partridge², including lutes, citterns, banjos and other musical miscellanea. Many of the items attracted a fair amount of bidding and exceeded their initial listing estimate.



As a bit of speculative punt, I bid and won one of the auction lots of unusual looking oddments and half made instruments that looked like they could perhaps be rescued back to playing condition with some TLC.

Once back home I started sifting through five very dusty boxes, allocating a fair few for the wood burning stove among a couple of potential “projects” for a rainy day. Perhaps I was going to have to accept it had been a bit of a goose chase after all!

¹ Fellowship of Makers and Researchers of Historical Instruments - <https://www.fomrhi.org/>

² <https://live.adampartridge.co.uk/m/view-auctions/catalog/id/226>



However in with the dusty banjo necks was something that caught my eye as a lute maker. It looked like a part of an extended neck lute – chopped off above the lower nut. But it was rather strange in design and execution – if it was from a lute, the decoration was not very nicely done, and the design wouldn't ever have withstood being strung up with a full set of strings. Just another item for the wood pile then?



It was obviously quite old but why had been retained by an eminent early music specialist? Looking at it, there were so many things wrong with this lute neck and pegbox that stood out immediately:

- pine construction with a mastic ebonisation
- ill fitting pegs with little sign of wear or use
- a weak open backed pegbox, with a strange pointed gothic arch at the top
- strange mother of pearl inlay pressed into the mastic of the neck
- an upper nut that leans out precariously
- some sort of crude “ivory” inlay around the pegbox and up the neck

My “fake lute” and “Franciolini?” alarm bells were ringing quite deafeningly by this stage, and Lynda Sayce who took a look at the photos confirmed the fragment is indeed very typical of his

work. Lynda Sayce's article³ summarises the sorry tale of how these counterfeit "lutes" were sold to unsuspecting 19th C and early 20th C collectors. Many have even ended up in museums whose curators seem reluctant or embarrassed to accept their item is not genuine. Chris Goodwin has spotted two more in a Venetian musical instrument museum⁴.



These lutes were being churned out by Franciolini's workshop and offered for sale as if they were genuine 17th C instruments. Franciolini eventually was convicted of fraud when one of his instruments was being sold on to a German buyer who did some due diligence and spotted they were a con.



So for now, it hangs as a 19th C curiosity in a quiet corner of my workshop, yet I'm still left with a number of open questions that may never have an answer: Where is the rest of the lute? Did the body and neck get repurposed into a separate lute by Segerman? Did anyone buy a lute in the same sale that has any unusual features such as a mandolin style end clasp? Can the top and bottom ever be re-united?

³ Lute News (No. 91, October 2009) "How to spot a fake lute, or Signor Franciolini's shop of horrors", by Lynda Sayce

⁴ Lute News (No. 124, December 2017) "Franciolini strikes again? Two 'archlutes' in a Venetian musical instrument collection", by Chris Goodwin