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EMANUELE RAGANATO

Saxophone Manufacture in Italy: A Short Survey

Even though we are fairly certain that Adolphe Sax made his first saxophone between 1840 and 1843, and we know that Gus Buescher made the first prototype for Conn industries in the USA in 1885, in Italy the early traces of this musical instrument are not so clear. The Italian musical instrument industry had a good reputation in the nineteenth century, and in some towns there were talented instrument craftsmen who worked well. This was particularly the case in the neighbourhood of Milan and Varese where at the end of the century hundreds of factories and small musical shops manufactured valuable brass and woodwind instruments which were exported all over the world.



Figure 1. *Maino & Orsi 1898 Catalogo Generale: soprano and alto.*

Even in the province of Verona there was a widespread musical tradition, to some extent derived directly from a previous tradition in the area of the towns of Adorf, Klingenthal and Markneukirchen, now on the borders of Germany and the Czech Republic. There were manufacturing centres in large urban areas and products made in them could easily be transported to the biggest European markets. Thus it seems strange that from the beginning of the twentieth century the majority of skilled workers in the Italian musical instrument-making industry worked in the Cusio area in Quarna Sotto. This is near Lake Orta, about seven miles west of Lake Maggiore in the Italian Alps, and about 40 miles northwest of Milan. It was, and still is, a difficult place to get to.

The instrument-making tradition deriving from Quarna is quite recent when compared to others. It goes back to the first half of the nineteenth century when Egidio Forni and his uncle Francesco Rampone (they were turners who migrated from Quarna to Milan to learn their craft) moved their musical business back to their birthplace and started employing local workers. In a short time this small firm became so important and prestigious that under Agostino Rampone it became one of the most important in Europe, and in due course the reputation of Rampone's woodwind instruments spread worldwide. To speculate about the date of the creation of the first Italian saxophone, it seems likely that either Agostino Rampone met Adolphe Sax or had the chance to use one of his instruments when he travelled on business or when he played the horn at the Scala Orchestra of Milan. The first prototypes from Quarna were developed using wood, which was easily available in the area; it was used for designing patterns and for testing the mechanical efficiency of keywork. Some of these wooden prototypes, from the twentieth century, are still on show at the Museo Etnografico di Quarna Sotto (see Figure 2 for a map showing the location of Quarna Sotto).

Meanwhile, in Milan there were expert craftsmen such as at Alessandro Maldura (a firm founded in 1850), Paolo Maino (founded in 1836), and

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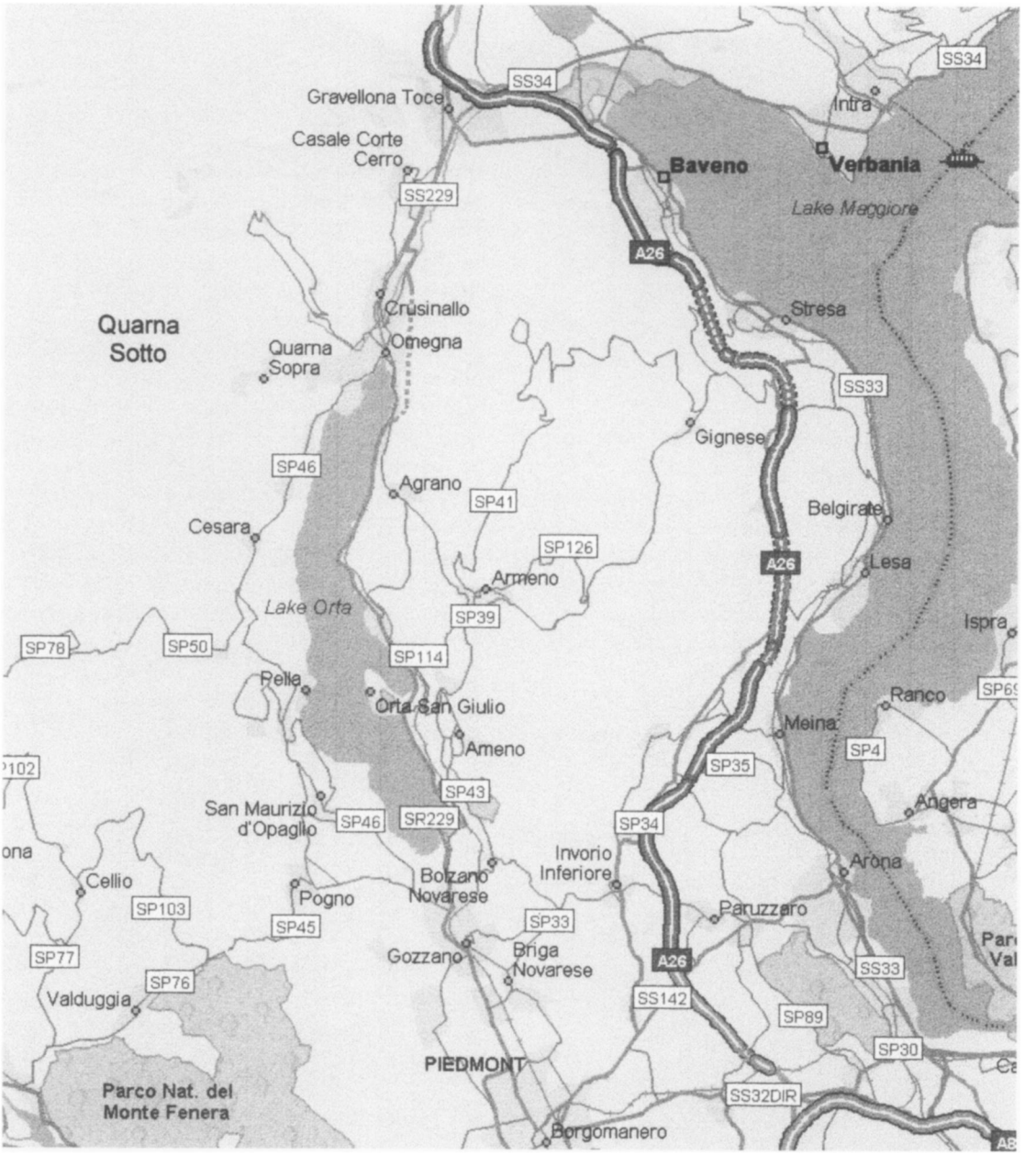


Figure 2. *Location of Quarna Sotto near Lake Orta in the Italian Alps.* © Crown Copyright 2002.

probably the most important, Ferdinando Roth (an Italian firm founded in 1838) which was probably the first to start production of Sax's instruments. There are saxophone catalogues from 1895, but production almost certainly took place before this date (see Figure 3). In the following years, the saxophone was to become the most important woodwind instrument and from 1898 was taken up by Bottali & Sons.

In Verona there had been well known factories since 1830. It is particularly interesting that in 1890 Ambrogio Santucci, a brass manufacturer, founded a company with Roth in Milan. Did he know of saxophone manufacture in other firms going on there at that time? Even his successor in Verona, shortly before 1900, Paolo Rondoni, had saxophones in his catalogues ranging from soprano to baritone with a double octave key system descending to low B, without trill keys and with a pearl key for central G similar to a clarinet layout. Meanwhile, in Milan the partnership between Maino and the clarinet player Romeo Orsi started the well-known 'Maino & Orsi' company, which soon became important. In 1881 it was charged with the production of all forms of woodwind instruments at a new pitch. All the other factories had to conform to them in order to fulfill contracts for the supply of new instruments to the army bands which too had changed their pitch. Some of the 1898 catalogues display advanced saxophones

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Figure 3. *Ferdinando Roth 1895 Catalogo Generale: series from soprano to baritone.*

and with a range of choice from soprano to bass in B♭. Orsi was a clarinet player at the 'La Scala' theatre in Milan, and for a while he became its president. He used to play as a professional musician and to teach, and he was appointed clarinet teacher at the Royal Majesty Conservatory of Milan. As in the case of Agostino Rampone, Orsi might well have met Adolphe Sax and examined and appreciated his instrument when he was travelling, giving concerts or visiting exhibitions.

From 1899, Wenzel Stowasser was the best-known craftsman in Verona, and he was the descendant of generations of Bohemian musical craftsmen. He had established a business in what was then called via Magenta, a suburb of Verona, producing excellent saxophones. By 1900, when a number of local bands were using this instrument, many independent craftsmen began to work under contract to the big companies to help meet the demand for new saxophones. In Florence, Pupeschi was the first to produce a range of saxophones, from soprano to baritone, which incorporated improvements to the keywork orginally devised for the clarinet, known as the 'Pupeschi System'.

After the First World War, jazz and the general popularity of the saxophone in America helped to increase demand for the instrument in Italy. Very soon instruments were appearing which were made by large factories yet bore brand names which had been stencilled onto them by smaller dealers. All

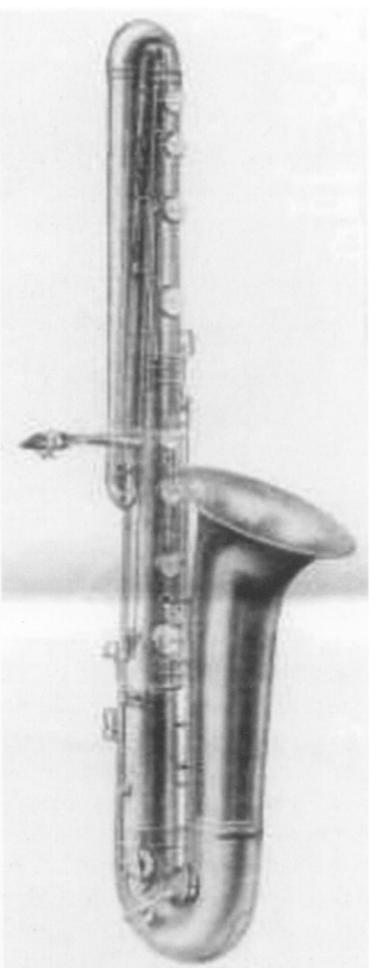


Figure 4. *Romeo Orsi 1930 Catalogo Generale: E♭ contrabass.*



Figure 5. *W. Stowasser 1929 Catalogo Generale: baritone and bass.*

over Italy, from Turin (Parisi) to Bari (Gardelli), many musical firms flourished, selling saxophones marked with their own brand although in fact they had been built in Quarna's factories. In 1921 a group of workers from Quarna, encouraged by the increasing demand, decided to set up a firm in Castelnuovo, the S.A.I.M. (Societa' Anonima Istrumenti Musicali). It is still possible to find some of these instruments with their trademark, even as far afield as Argentina. In the 1920s, the 'Saxophone Craze' was trendy. Although it had been completely unknown 40 years earlier, the saxophone had suddenly become the most popular instrument in the world. This increasing demand made the Italian

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Figure 6. *Rampone e Cazzani 1930 Catalogo Generale: straight alto.*



Figure 8. *L. Desidera e figli 1940 Catalogo Generale: baritone.*

firms appreciated for their instruments in the USA. They entered into business with the most important American instrument makers such as Buescher, Conn and King. These firms were interested in Italian instruments because of their high quality, competitive price and original design. In addition, at this time the curved sopranino, the straight alto and the half curved soprano saxophones became very popular. These instruments were patented in the USA. They included some of the earliest examples manufactured by Rampone & Cazzani; they can still be seen at the Ethnographic Museum in Quarna Sotto.



Figure 7. *Rampone e Cazzani 1930 Catalogo Generale: alto 'Delle Piane Trademark System'.*

Most people considered the saxophone to be without doubt the most American of all instruments. In Italian catalogues of that time, the professional models, those with the majority of mechanical components, were presented as such: 'Non plus ultra per il professionista' with a subtitle such as 'American Model' or 'Conn System ovvero Buescher System'. The apparent inferiority complex that firms like Orsi or Stowasser displayed by giving American names to their instruments was totally unnecessary since they produced a wide range of first rate instruments from sopranino (even curved in the case of Orsi firm) to contrabass. Others included the instruments of Rampone & Cazzani in the 1930s, such as the alto with the 'Delle Piane Patented System', double keyboard (in Italian – *bottoniera*) and with an extension in the treble to three octaves. In addition the 'non plus ultra' saxophones with embossed decorations on the bell are all amazing instruments, even today, having great artistic and organological value.

The extraordinary ability of Italian craftsmen is evident in the unbelievably high quality of the instruments they created. American musicians who had the opportunity to play Italian instruments were well aware of their value. They include, for instance, Rudy Wiedoeft and Gerry Mulligan. Wiedoeft was sponsored by Alfonso Rampone, a cousin of the well-known craftsman in Quarna who devoted himself entirely to the production of saxophones from 1934, when he took over the S.A.I.M., until 1973. Mulligan played an R & C baritone and, when touring Italy, always took with him Nerino Lanza, a trustworthy technician who worked for R & C. Mulligan also promoted the Borgani soprano in the USA in 1977.

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Figure 9. *V. Barcone & Sons: logo.*

When Fascism encouraged the musical education of the new paramilitary forces, Italian factories took advantage of the situation. Fascist student associations called Balillas, and other similar groups, ordered a great quantity of instruments which were produced only in Italy. During the 1940s, Alfredo Squaglia's firm in Florence developed a reputation for its models from the soprano to the baritone, while in Verona the 'Leonildo Desidera e Figli' firm increasingly copied the Stowasser design, particularly for its baritones.

During the Second World War the European market for instruments suddenly crashed, and the relationships between Italian and American firms were interrupted because they were busy supporting their country at war. The Buescher firm, for example, was converted to the production of altimeters and oil pumps. It was a hard period for those firms operating in towns and a lot of them, such as Dante Rancilio (Milan), Zinzi (Rome) and Stowasser had to shut down. Moreover, many small dealers no longer sold instruments with their own name stencilled on them. Nevertheless, there were some useful experiences which benefited the Italian market, for some American soldiers fighting in Italy were able to try Italian instruments. I remember one soldier who was stationed at Bari and wanted to exchange a Buffet & Crampon for a Rampone that belonged to a local Italian musician!

At the end of the war, many former instrument makers emigrated in search of a better life abroad. However, with the re-opening of the market for traditional industries, factories such as Rampone e Cazzani, Orsi, Arnaldo and Orfeo Borgani (who were cousins working in Macerata), started producing instruments again. The majority of orders came from foreign dealers, including initially from Vincenzo Barcone who was an Italian American from New York. He imported the complete range of wind instruments manufactured by Rampone and sold them under his own brand name. Many other dealers did the same, once more stencilling their own names on instruments of Italian manufacture.

During the post-war financial boom, Italian factories had to cope with the demands of an expanding market for saxophones which meant that quantity became more important than quality. Unfortunately the Rampone & Cazzani firm went bankrupt because of bad management by the family. In 1958 a certain Signor Saltamerenda, a draper (whose firm supplied the velvet for the lining of instrument cases) who was one of the firm's creditors and who was related to Rampone through his wife, took over the firm in Quarna. Under his son Ferdinando's management he started a new production policy and changed the name of the firm to F.I.S.M. (Fabbrica Italiana Istrumenti Musicali), which included Rampone. He started to produce 2000 instruments each month, more than half with trademarks such as Meazzi, Mogar, Dolnet, Tinelli and Pan, while component parts were branded with names such as Keilwerth, B & S, Amati and many others.

However, in this period the Rampone firm began to lose the high esteem in which it had been held, while another, the well-known firm of Signora Ida Maria Grassi, originally from Milan in 1932, started to manufacture saxophones in a factory



Figure 10. *Arnaldo Borgani 1930 Catalogo Generale: professional tenor.*

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whose headquarters were opposite Rampone's. This period was characterised by the contrasts between the two firms, although they often employed the same workers, who used to finish work at home in the evening for one firm or the other. The craftsmen in Quarna always manufactured highly acclaimed saxophones for Signora Grassi, which were similiar to the models Selmer produced in that period (often even down to the engraving). This manufacturing policy was successful and the two firms again fully established themselves in the Italian saxophone market. There was another firm which used mass production: Giglio, in Parè, Como. Among the craftsmen employed by Giglio were Signor Bulgheroni, who was already famous for his excellent oboes, Signor Somaini, who had a reputation in Milan for his ability and knowledge, and Alfredo Santoni. Nevertheless, the instruments produced by Giglio's firm did not find an adequate market and sadly the factory had to be shut down. After 1965, Giglio's activities were continued by Santoni, who often branded his trademark onto instruments that had belonged to the previous management, and succedeed in making them popular in Europe and the USA. The Norwegian soprano player Jan Garbarek played a curved Santoni soprano for a while.

In the face of the competition from the low-cost instruments of Santoni, the number of Italian firms decreased considerably. In Verona, the old instrument-making tradition represented by Leonildo Desidera had been interrupted. However, it was revived later by one of the three De Bernardi brothers, who were craftsmen from Quarna. Signor De Bernardi was known as an excellent manufacturer of woodwind instruments, but he wisely kept the name of old factory.

The decline of instrument making continued and there was a period when Italian saxophones were often compared to the low quality instruments produced in Middle Eastern Europe. The situation got worse when, at the end of the 1970s, a vast number of Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese instruments flooded the market. Rampone (whose factory was still called F.I.S.M.), Grassi, Orsi and Orfeo Borgani succeeded in maintaining a place in the market for supplying instruments to local Italian bands. This situation lasted until the end of the 1990s when, one after another, Italian factories chose to specialize. Grassi closed his factories in Quarna in 1998 and, after selling his instruments and machinery, chose to close down his business. Borgani has decided to relaunch his own professional saxophone line by collaborating with international artists such as Joe Lovano and Bob Berg. Even though Orsi has declared that he wants



Figure 11. *Rampone e Cazzani 1930 Catalogo Generale: professional bass, with automatic chiver (a neck microtuner) and embossed bell.*

to offer his brand of saxophones, he has preferred to concentrate on the manufacture of clarinets. The American market managed by the L.A. Sax partner firm, belonging to Pete La Flaca, imports under its own trademark the curved sopranino and the contrabass, which had always been the most popular instruments by the firm from Milan, which was their sole manufacturer. However, the most interesting case is that of Rampone e Cazzani. In 1989 F. Saltamerenda decided to shut down the factory. This would have been bad for the tradition of instrument-making but even worse for the town's economy. Fortunately, Alessi Ltd of Omegna decided to save the firm and all its workers. This was because its owner was linked to the firm in Quarna through Giovanni Alessi, his grandfather, who had worked there in the 1920s, mostly as an engraver. They decided to re-launch the firm with a new design of saxophone, the Alessophone. Signor Roberto Zolla, who was the mayor of Quarna at the time, took part in the

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meeting which decided_the future of Rampone's activity. Signor Zolla was also a craftsman and had worked for several firms including Orsi, Rampone and Grassi.When Alessi decided to give up manufacturing saxophones, Roberto Zolla himself came forward to take over the firm. At this point, Alessi offered to finance the making of the Alessophone, to be produced together with Luca Polidori Di Volo, maker and performer, famous for his modified saxophones. Today Rampone e Cazzani (no longer F.I.S.M.) concentrate on saxophones made with both 'handcraft care and industrial perfection'. They continue to respect the reputation which the firms of Quarna had at the time of the 'Saxophone Craze' by launching once again on the world market professional musical instruments of unquestionable quality and competitiveness, the R1 line.

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LIST OF PRINCIPAL ITALIAN SAXOPHONE MAKERS

compiled by Emanuele Raganato

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	Manufacturer	Place of Manufacture	Year of first Production
1	Alziati Luigi	Milano	*c.*1870
2	*Belati Tito	Perugia	*c.*1920
3	Borgani Arnaldo	Macerata	*c.*1927
4	Borgani Orfeo	Macerata	1872
5	Bottali F.lli	Milano	1898
6	*Castellan E.	Padova	*c.*1950
7	*Corso Mario	Cinisello Balsamo	1960?
8	(?)Cusiano Premiato Stabilimento (Alfredo Rampone)	Omegna (VB)	1906
9	Desidera Leonildo	Verona	1930
10	*Framez	Milano	*c.*1950
11	*Gallett Simon	?	?
12	*Gardelli Alfredo	Bari	1920
13	Giglio	Parè (CO)	*c.*1950
14	Grassi Ida Maria	Milano	1932
15	*Grew Simom (Grey Simon?)	?	?
16	*Kalison	Milano	1928
17	*Lapini Adolfo	Firenze	*c.*1898
18	La Prealpina	Quarna	1847

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	Manufacturer	Place of Manufacture	Year of first Production
19	Maino & Orsi	Milano	before 1881
20	Maldura Alessandro	Milano	1850
21	*Meazzi	Milano	*c.*1960
22	*Mogar	Milano	*c.*1960
23	Orsi Romeo	Milano	1881
24	Orsi prof.Romeo	Milano	1902
25	?Orpheum Deluxe	?	*c.*1970(?)
26	*Parisi Silvio	Torino	*c.*1920
27	*Pizzi Umberto	Bologna	*c.*1920
28	Pupeschi	Firenze	*c.*1910
29	Rampone	Quarna-Milano	1850
30	Rampone Alfonso	Quarna	1934
31	Rampone e Cazzani	Quarna-Milano	1912
32	Rancilio Dante C.	Milano	1914
33	Riboni & Benicchio	Milano	*c.*1940(?)
34	Rigamonti	Milano	*c.*1920
35	Ripamonti	Milano	?
36	Roth Ferdinando	Milano	1838
37	S.A.I.M.	Castelnuovo Scrivia	*c.*1921
38	(*)Artigiana Musicale	Milano	*c.*1920
39	Santoni Alfredo	Parè(CO)	1965
40	Santucci Ambrogio	Verona	1830
41	Santucci-Roth	Milano	1890
42	*Saporetti e Cappelli	Firenze	*c.*1900
43	Squaglia Alfredo	Firenze	*c.*1940
44	Stowasser Wenzel	Verona	1899
45	*Tinelli	?	*c.*1970(?)
46	Vezzadini ,Prof.E.	Sestri Ponente	*c.*1920(?)
47	*Zin Guglielmo	Padova	*c.*1920
48	Zinzi Carlo	Roma	1850
49	Pelitti Giovanni	Milano	*c.*1894

* asterisk indicates stencils

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