

The Traces of Boccherini's Cello

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Preamble

History should look for “truth”, that is, for a trustworthy description of the past based on documented evidence. Historians must therefore be very cautious as to dubious or unproven statements, an attitude obviously calling for the careful checking of every single item before reaching any conclusion, whether it be through their own research or the research of others.

This being the foundation of deontological approach to historical science, a certain flexibility must be admitted when displaying the results of a given study. Thus, statements can be presented as hypothesis still to be confirmed or discarded, or even as speculations pointing towards possible futures developments, provided that both, hypothesis and speculations, are clearly labeled as such. They must also be of feasible, realistic, likely, logical, probable, possible quality, and of course, not result contradictory with documented evidence.

Historians failing to declare that their hypothesis or speculations are not yet sound conclusions are simply deceiving their readers and colleagues, thus placing themselves away from the proper and legitimate professional realm.

Nonetheless, such tools as hypothesis and speculations appear to be very useful when not used in excess and when they are ethically implemented, because they open new possibilities for future research, even though they may be discarded in the end.

In the present case of Boccherini's life and works, many biographers, historians and musicologists have fallen into an excess of speculation, either by their own or by borrowing unproven statements from others. There has been a lamentable carelessness beyond all plausible limits. In this sense we want to stress here two of the “great sins” liable to ruin many a valuable research (which are not the only ones pervading historical accounts): “presentism” and “wishful thinking”.

“Presentism” consists in projecting present-day views, mentalities or sets of ideas towards the past, therefore contaminating the real picture of what historians are studying with present-day conceptions.

“Wishful thinking” is the instillment of one's desires into the subject of research, thus creating a distorted image which matches the historian's wishes rather than her/his actual observations.

Since the more than frequent mixture of “presentism” and “wishful thinking” compounds an explosive mechanism capable of annihilating any historical account, we aim here to deconstruct one of the most recurrent cases of this explosive mixed mechanism related in this case to Boccherini's link with his instrument, the violoncello.

Although this is not the first time we approach the issue, recent speculative and unproven statements related to this topic push us to retrieve it from a new standpoint and to try to overcome it once and for all.¹

¹ We are perfectly aware that this kind of “frailty” is hard to overcome, but we had better not ignore it for it can become “chronic”. In fact, we have witnessed this very same year of 2009!! how several musicians and musicologists, radio broadcastings and films, playbill texts and magazine articles have still cast the idea that Boccherini, and even the Font family, had owned or used instruments built by luthier Antonio Stradivari. Also, several private music lovers who look for advise through our Asociación Luigi Boccherini web-page have expressed their delusion or surprise when we firmly stress that Boccherini (or the member of the Font family) never had any relationship with the famous Madrid Royal Palace's Stradivarius Quartet of instruments.

“Putting Everything Upside Down”: The Cello Sonatas as an Example

Disbelieve in History is a better primary approach than sheer unfiltered acceptance. Any excess in the checking process is more desirable than doing the opposite, so it is best not to discard any skeptical vision right away without a thorough analysis.

For instance, doubts cast over the authenticity of the *Cello Sonatas* attributed to Boccherini must not be neglected. The fact that Boccherini did not include those pieces in his own catalogue suggests that we are facing a set of works which in a certain sense are “different” from those actually included.² Adding to this that no autograph manuscript has ever been found of those pieces, they can legitimately be looked at with some disbelief. Opposite to this, even with a certain degree of subjectivity, the musicological analysis of those scores, their abundant recurrence to Boccherini's own melodies and their flavor, may allow us to consider them as authentic. Indeed, the «Nota» in first page of Boccherini y Calonje's Catalogue:

NOTA. Non s'includono le vocali, ne i concerti e sonate a solo che l'autore ha scritto per differenti strumenti, particolarmente per il violoncello. – Rinnovato l'anno 1797 (NOTE. Vocal (works), concertos and solo sonatas written by the author for different instruments, particularly for the violoncello, are not included. – Renewed the year 1797).

Yields a further and firm support to ratify the mentioned authenticity.

In any case, we must admit there is not a totally indisputable evidence that the *Cello Sonatas* attributed to Boccherini are seamlessly authentic, and historians should be very cautious about this kind of situations.

The above example warns us about the need to proceed on firm grounds of sound evidence and this is what the following pages will try to do in order to picture Boccherini's relationship with his instrument. As a corollary, when using only feasible or likely “hypothesis” and/or “speculations” they will be clearly labeled as such.

² Two very similar versions of this catalogue are available, one in ALFREDO BOCCHERINI Y CALONJE, *Luis Boccherini. Apuntes biográficos y catálogo de las obras de este célebre maestro publicados por su biznieto*, Madrid, Rodero, 1879; and the other in the Bibliothèque National de France, shelve mark: Vma. 1074 R.74707: *Catalogo delle Opere di Musica Composte da Luigi Boccherini de 1760-1804, Ms.. 1er quart du XIXe s. – f. – 31p.; 255×340 mm. Catalogue thématique. Ex-libris gravé de Pierre Baillet – Acq. 81 – 672.*

Luigi and the Bowed String Instruments

We know for sure that Luigi's father, Leopoldo, was employed as double-bass player in the Palace Chapel of Lucca. His first job is described as «Sonatore di contrabbasso sopranumerario della Cappella di Palazzo».³

From this evidence we can construct a “speculative hypothesis” about why Luigi would have chosen the violoncello as his instrument for the whole of his life. We can imagine the young boy admiring his father while playing his double-bass, perhaps disregarding the most probable presence of one or more violins in the house (the violin having become highly prestigious after Corelli, Vivaldi, Albinoni, Tartini, it is most likely that a household such as the Boccherinis' would not have failed to include this instrument as part of the “furniture”).

We can further imagine Luigi wanting to emulate his father as a child-amateur double-bass player, but finding hard difficulties in manipulating such a tall instrument (some specimen are over two yards high).

Even being the double-bass at that time a sheer accompaniment instrument, added to the natural reverence towards his father, the boy would feel fascinated listening to its warm sonority and watching at its imposing appearance.

In order to overcome the “size” difficulty, we can also picture Leopoldo suggesting his son to try with the smaller and handier violoncello. Although the double-bass is usually played standing, the cello's technique is closer to that of the double-bass rather than to that of the violin, and it generates a more similar grave sound as well. In addition, it is most likely that Leopoldo would have stressed the fact that the cello had already a wider musical repertoire than the double-bass. This way we can round up the “speculative hypothesis” about how Luigi would have chosen the violoncello as his instrument.

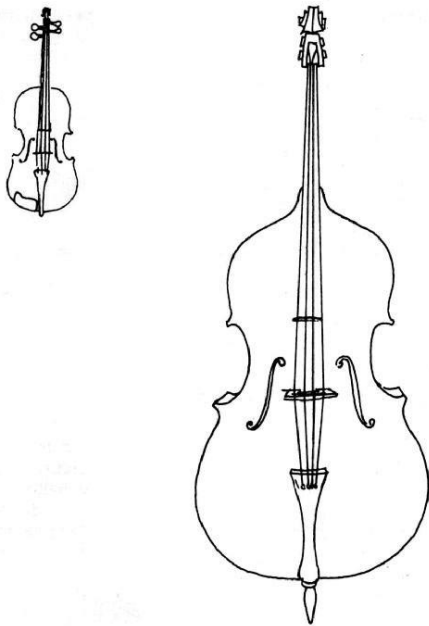


FIGURE 1 – A draft comparison between a violin and a double-bass.

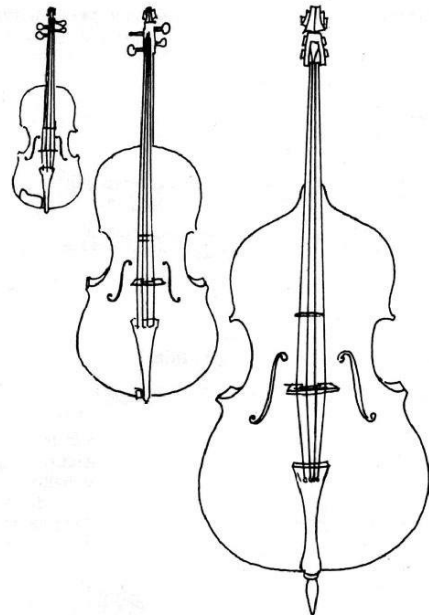


FIGURE 2 – A draft comparison between violin, cello and double-bass.

³ As documented in REMIGIO COLI, *Luigi Boccherini. La vita e le opere*, Maria Pacini Fazzi, Lucca, 2005, p. 14.

But, according to our determination to put “everything upside-down”, we should even raise the following question: Can we safely state that Luigi Boccherini was actually a cellist?⁴

The answer is yes and the evidence to this respect is today abundant and leaves no room for doubt. Nonetheless, we must prove it in order to illustrate a case of historical guarantee, beyond any doubt. A short sample of supporting documents will be sufficient:

- As early as 1756 (when being 13 years old), Luigi is reported to have produced himself as a cellist in a concert at the Luccan church of San Domenico.⁵
- In 1758, Luccan ambassador in Vienna, Giovan Battista Domenico Sardini, writes to his brother Ludovico stressing how Luigi «suona il Bassetto», that is the cello.⁶
- After Leopoldo's death in 1766, Luigi joins with his cello Pietro Nardini (violin), Filippo Manfredi (violin) and Giuseppe Cambini (violin, but playing viola), to create the so called Tuscany Quartet, as attested years later by Cambini himself in his violin treatise (1803).
- Parisian chroniclers depict Boccherini playing his cello within the *Concerts Spirituels*.⁷
- During the spring of this same year, we see him performing in Aranjuez along with the so called Compañía de los Reales Sitios (Royal Sites Company).⁸
- A 1770 decree by the Infant Don Luis de Borbón, nominates the musician from Lucca in the following terms: «Dn Luis Boquerini violon de S. A. ()» (Dn Luis Boquerini cello of His Highness ().)⁹

This documentary sample could be largely extended but it will not be necessary. The fact that Boccherini was a (renowned) cellist has been proven for decades (if not centuries). Our only goal here was to present a case of free-of-doubt biographical assertion based on consolidated documentary evidence, not just on what has been said in lectures, meetings or conferences, or written in books or articles, because the sheer truth is that (too) many assertions related to Boccherini, later proven false, had previously been taken for granted just because they were printed or recorded and endlessly repeated, until some researcher finally denounced their condition as forgery, error or pure invention.

⁴ Although this could be taken today as an extemporaneous joke, or might seem an absolutely weird, inappropriate or even shocking question, the sheer truth is that it had once to be proven, so we might as well bring it here as an example of sound evidence no longer to be questioned.

⁵ COLI, *Luigi Boccherini*, p. 26.

⁶ There were in the 18th century various ways of naming the instrument: *bassetto*, *violon*, *violoncello*, *violonchelo*, *bajón*, etc.

⁷ For instance in the April 1768 issue of *Mercure de France*.

⁸ Playbill of Gian Francesco de Majo's opera *L'Almeria* states: «El aria final del acto segundo es compuesta y acompañada con el violoncello a solo del Sr. Luis Boccherini, luqués» (The final aria of the second act has been composed and accompanied on the cello solo by Sr. Luis Boccherini, from Lucca).

⁹ Archivo Histórico Nacional: Sect. Estado (State Section), File 2566, (Don Luis' Inventory and Testamentary).

Summarizing what we have stated so far, we can say beyond any doubt that Luigi Boccherini was a cellist; and we can also say he wrote some pieces for the violoncello (as several contemporary Parisian chroniclers assert and the Aranjuez playbill of *L'Almeria* has recorded). As far as the authorship of “his” *Cello Sonatas* are concerned, we can trust (as I do) or doubt about their authenticity, depending on our own scientific criteria and “faith”.

Once this has been clearly settled, we can proceed to the next point, that is: Which of the many available violoncello makers (luthiers) was the one chosen by Boccherini?

Given the present state of our knowledge we may also ask: Can we approach this issue through actual documentary evidence, or else should we leave it in an abstract realm full of snares favoring “presentism” and “wishful thinking” temptations?

Also: Have we any “Boccherinian-flavor” leads to guide us throughout this search?

Let’s approach all these issues through a first glance to the focal point of the historical blunder we are dealing with.

Stradivarius

Contemporary accounts about Boccherini describe him as a famous and prestigious composer and interpreter of the violoncello, credited as having developed the technique known as «thumb position» or «capotasto» to its highest level. This fame and prestige have been recuperated and we now consider the Luccan as one of the most gifted cellists in History.

Parallel to this, luthier Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) is today the paradigm of string instruments craftsmen and his 6 or 7 hundred specimens still in use are absolute jewels, highly priced and valued beyond any possible competitor.

The important fact to be noted here is that Stradivari instruments are more famous today than they were in the 18th century, compared to other more or less contemporary luthiers, like Giuseppe Guarneri (1698-1744), Niccolò Amati (1596-1684), or Jacob Stainer (1621-1683), not to mention other equally prestigious craftsmen of the same era. This means that some present analytical considerations might waver and risk falling into “presentism”.

So, when picturing today Boccherini as a cellist of unparalleled high reputation, there is a tendency to link him with (presently) top valued Stradivari, in spite of the fact that any documentary evidence to support such linkage is lacking. This has led to an inaccurate mixture of “presentism” and “wishful thinking”, thus producing a puzzling, yet widely believed tale about one of the still extant Stradivarius instruments, spuriously denominated as «The Boccherini».

The story was divulged by the Spanish cellist Gaspar Cassadó’s (1897-1966) widow and was reported as a quotation (thus indicating a certain disbelief), by Yves Gérard in his *Catalogue of the Works of Boccherini*, including a picture of both sides of the instrument.¹⁰



FIGURE 3 – Antonio Stradivari at work.



FIGURE 4 – The Stradivarius cello known as “The Boccherini”.

¹⁰ YVES GÉRARD, *Thematic, Bibliographical and Critical Catalogue of the Works of Luigi Boccherini*, Oxford University Press, London, 1969, plate 12 and adjacent page.

It all begins with Boccherini supposedly owning this 1709 Stradivarius cello and later being «obliged by his straitened circumstances in the last years of his life to sell» it to an unknown purchaser. Any trace of the instrument is then lost until mid-19th century when it reappears in the hands of Sebastián de Borbón, who left it after his death to his nephew, the Duke of Hernani, to disappear again until the end of the Spanish Civil War (1931-1936). Finally, composer Juan Quintero (1903-1980), who had bought the cello at an auction at a very low price (since the instrument was quite damaged), offered it to Gaspar Cassadó to be repaired and used in his performances.



FIGURE 5 – Cellist Gaspar Cassadó

We are not concerned here about what happened to this instrument after the presumed selling by Boccherini. Our only interest lies in the very first lines of this “fairy tale”, that is: Did poverty force Boccherini to sell his cello (regardless of its luthier’s mark)? Did Boccherini actually own a Stradivarius cello?

The answer to the first question is: Absolutely not.

The answer to the second question is: Most likely not.

We must insist (once more) that Boccherini had never experienced any “straitened circumstances” during his adult life. His economic situation varied from being “well off” to being “opulent”, so he was never “obliged” to sell neither his violoncello nor any other patrimonial item.¹¹

As for the second question, we have nuanced the not response with a “most likely” clause for the simple reason that this kind of negative evidence does not exist (or is extremely seldom found). It is hardly conceivable to find a document certifying Boccherini never had a Stradivarius. For the same reason, we should not expect to find any statement guaranteeing he never owned, for instance, a Guarneri, either.

Negative evidence is only possible through a reasonable exclusion by deduction, and this is what we intend to prove in this case.

By the end of the 1990s, José Antonio Boccherini (sixth generation direct descendant of the Luccan composer) and myself, working independently but almost contemporarily, found a notarial deed up to then never spotted, where the composer and cellist declared the three musical instruments he owned in 1778.¹²

The following characteristics of this document are very significant:

- A) It has an absolute credibility, being a capital deed signed before a notary or royal actuary;
- B) It is (so far) the only known and trustworthy document mentioning what instruments Boccherini actually owned; and
- C) It is dated when Boccherini was a mature individual in the middle of his active life.

This kind of notarial deed was signed by the spouse to her husband’s favour after the wedding when he had had children from a previous marriage. The document is intended to recognise the value of each and all the goods owned by him at the time the second marriage is sanctioned, in order to avoid future inheritance controversies.

We are in front of a long manuscript listing every single object (clothes, dresses, furniture, jewels, menagerie, cutlery, money, etc.), the composer possessed in 1787, stating their corresponding value in copper *reales* (period currency in Spain. 1 *real* = 3 euros, or 4.5 US \$, approximately).

Under the epigraph «Alajas» («Jewels», that is showy objects, although misspelled for it should read «Alhajas»), we find the following three items:

Alajas / *Quero un Violon e Contrabaixo com sua*
Capa em mil e quinhentos Reales — 1. 10500..||
Idem un Violon Chius com sua Capa
doze mil e duzentos Reales — 1. 32000..||
Idem un Violon com sua Capa em Lin
queros Reales — 1. 20500..||

FIGURE 6 – Boccherini’s instruments in 1787.

¹¹ See, among other evidence, the micro-econometric analysis of Boccherini’s domestic welfare in Chapter XVII of JAIME TORTELLA, *Boccherini, un músico italiano en la España ilustrada*, Sociedad Española de Musicología, Madrid, 2002, pp. 423-469.

¹² Maria Pilar Joaquina Porreti’s capital deed to Boccherini: Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid (Historical Protocol Archive of Madrid, Spain): Protocol 20.771, pp. 101-109, April 26, 1787, Notary: Antonio Martínez Llorente. Boccherini and Porreti had been wed eight days earlier.

The following is a transcription and translation for a better understanding¹³:

Item un Violon de Estayner con su Caja en mil y quinienttos Reales – -,1@500.,,
 Item un Violon Chico con su Caja en doscientos Reales – - - - - - - - - -, @200.,,
 Item un Violin con su Caja en Zinquenta Reales – - - - - - - - - -, @050.,,
 (Item a Cello by Estayner with its Case in fifteen hundred *Reales* – - - - - -,1@500.,,
 Item an small cello with its Case in two hundred *Reales* – - - - - -, @200.,,
 Item a Violin with its Case in Fifty *Reales* – - - - - -, @050.,,)

This list gives us clear indications: First, the ranking of the three instruments show both the valuation and the role they probably played in Boccherini's activities.¹⁴

Second, we infer Boccherini had a main cello, built by Austrian luthier Jacob Stainer (or at least at his atelier) which we can safely consider as the one he used for his regular performances.

The third indication would be that the small cello (maybe a cello of smaller size or maybe a *violoncello piccolo*) does not bear the luthier's name and it is assessed more than seven times less than de Stainer one. Based on these facts we can safely state that this instrument can hardly be considered one of such high quality as that of a Stradivarius. Had this small cello been crafted by Stradivari (or Guarneri, or Amati), Boccherini would have declared this circumstance (as he did with his Stainer) and also the price would have been significantly higher.

Finally, as far as the violin is concerned, it seems to be quite irrelevant for the present analysis, and it probably was of limited value to Boccherini himself. Its price and its anonymous luthier condition indicate this was not an "important" item, even though we tend to think that a composer mainly concerned with string music would want to have a violin close at hand.

Globally taken, the great relevance of this list of three instruments is reinforced by the fact it is the only credible documented reference regarding Boccherini's instruments that has ever been discovered by historians, researchers or biographers. So, we can safely state that Boccherini had chosen Stainer and not any other luthier, including Stradivari.¹⁵

Once soundly proven that Boccherini owned a Stainer cello, we can plausibly hypothesize that this was not by pure chance or opportunism, but the result of a conscious decision.



FIGURE 7 – Bas-relief of Jacob Stainer.

¹³ Spelling in 18th-century Spain was very loose and Spanish language does not include words starting by «St», so that the name «Stainer» becomes «Estayner» in order to avoid this non existing initial phoneme. Replacing a «y» for an «i» is just due to capricious writing by the clerk. In fact, «y» and «i» were very commonly interchanged. The word «Item», in this context, means «moreover».

¹⁴ The value of 1,500 *reales*, roughly equivalent as stated before to 4,500 € or 6,300 US \$, would not be the purchasing price but the assessment made specifically for the capital deed inventory. The same would happen with the other two instruments, but what really matters is the comparative price between the three, with the small cello and the violin being assessed at a much lower price.

¹⁵ There is a collateral (false and incredible) testimony about one instrument Boccherini would have possessed in 1803. This "testimony" is contained in a fallacious and never materialized report by French pianist, singer and composer Sophie Gail, during her (well documented) visit to Boccherini in Madrid, early in 1803. Madame Gail is said to have stated that the Luccan musician had «an old worm-eaten viola, a veteran lacking three strings»; see GERMAINE DE ROTHSCHILD, *Luigi Boccherini. His Life and Work* (1962), transl. from French by A. Mayor, Oxford University Press, London, 1965, p. 81, based on Picquot's phrasing: «un vieil alto troué, veuf de trois cordes» (LOUIS PICQUOT, *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Luigi Boccherini, suivie du catalogue raisonné des toutes ses oeuvres, tant publiés qu'inédites*, Philipp, Paris, 1851, p. 21. This and the rest of the report includes such absurd and unbelievable descriptions about Boccherini's dwelling and work conditions that it can only be taken as an invented romantic description deserving no credit whatsoever.

Interpreters using today period instruments know that Stainer's products had (have) a sound specially mild and sweet when compared to the stronger and more powerful sound of Stradivari string instruments. As far as we actually know, can we dare say that Boccherini chose Stainer's mildness in front of Stradivari's strength because it matched better his own taste?

We may safely answer this question positively based on two indications, both in the line of Boccherini's clear tendency to require interpreters of his music to play in a melodious, courteous, moderate, smooth and affable manner. A) Dynamic indications contained in many of his scores suggest that the interpreter carefully shade his or her musical expression. Here below is an abbreviated sample list of how Boccherini wanted his music to be played, most likely matching the "soft" characteristics of Stainer's instruments:

- *Amoroso* (with love);
- *Malinconico* (melancholic);
- *Pianissimo* (very feeble)
- *Dolcissimo* (very sweetly),
- *Con soavità* (with smoothness)
- *Mezza voce* (half voice)
- *Sotto voce* (under voiced)
- *Teneramente* (tenderly)
- *Che appena si senta* (almost inaudible)
- ...

B) Pointing in the same direction, we can also bring here a testimony by young violinist Alexandre Boucher, who visited Spain and met Boccherini during the late years of the 18th century.



FIGURE 8 – Alexandre Boucher (period print).

Gustave Vallat, in his book, *Études d'histoire de moeurs et d'art musicale: Alexandre Boucher et son temps*, published in 1890, transcribes what Boucher had explained about an encounter he had with the Luccan composer in Madrid:

One day Boucher, happy and honored by his relationship with this great musician [Boccherini] to whom he professed a true veneration, asked him permission to play one of his compositions. Our impetuous violinist starts. Boccherini frowns and then his face shrinks up, as if he were feeling a violent pain; Boucher plays still harsher; the author, highly exasperated, shouts:

– Brigand, you make my placid compositions to thunder and storm. Stop! This is too much, I cannot bear being harassed any more!

– Master, forgive my error, said immediately Alexandre; take me as your pupil, teach me the style you wish for your works. Be good and teach me how to write music and initiate me to the secrets of that science you master so well.

– I accept, answered Boccherini; but you will interpret a concerto by Viotti or by Kreutzer for me so that I can applaud you. You will be allowed all foolishness while playing that music; but I forbid you to play mine before I myself will allow you to.

So, Boucher managed to write and interpret with a new style under this master's directions, whose energy was inexhaustible and whose interpreting talent was of a wonderful sweetness.

There is no reason to doubt about this self-testimony since Boucher's image does not come off as particularly brilliant. On the contrary, he describes his «thunder and storm» way to play as being very far from Boccherini's taste, a taste Boucher himself would end up adopting as his own and describing as «of a wonderful sweetness».

Therefore, we may infer that Boccherini's Stainer cello was not the result of an "accident", or a "hazardous" opportunity, or a "random" acquisition. He probably sensed and appreciated the soft and sweet sound of this instruments while visiting Vienna during the 1750s and he possibly purchased it, and keep it at least until 1787.

No trace of any instrument made by Stradivari is extant.

Conclusions

All we have illustrated here indicates that Boccherini's link to Stradivari's instruments is just a matter of pure wishful thinking with a touch of presentism, since his preference for Stainer is firmly documented. After all, it was not such a weird or infrequent case at that time. Many Baroque and Classical musicians had felt inclined to use the Austrian luthier's instruments rather than the Cremonese's, like the very famous violinist and composer Francesco Maria Veracini (1690-1768) who owned not one but two Stainer violins he had named «Peter» and «Paul».



FIGURE 9 – Francesco Maria Veracini (period engraving print).

Even though we have no written testimony by Boccherini himself (nor by any other of his contemporaries) describing his decision to purchase a Stainer cello, we see no risk in stating that he had selected the instrument which best suited his taste, rather than any other one available at the time.

It is obvious that Stradivari's atelier in Cremona was closer and easier to reach from Lucca (or from Spain) than Stainer's in Austria, so his selection must have been decided after considering the qualities of Stainer's products, above any other criteria.

Briefly, we can summarize this analysis stressing the following considerations:

- A) Boccherini owned in 1787 a cello by Stainer, and this is the only well-documented truth thus far, related to his instruments;
- B) No evidence nor plausible indication has yet been produced to support that Boccherini ever owned an instrument by Stradivari, or by any other luthier except Stainer;
- C) Historical and biographical accounts should allow no room for wishful thinking or presentism.

Nonetheless, we fear that a long time may pass before being able to detach Boccherini from Stradivari, but we hope these pages will help to shorten this undesired “long time”.