

# A Suspicious Spinnet

Edwin M. Ripin

*Assistant Curator of Musical Instruments*

1. Opposite (above): The suspicious spinet, its nature disguised by a nonoriginal painted case and a false signature, "Paspuino Querci fiorentino fece 1615." Length 27¼ inches. Gift of Bernardus Boekelman, 11.176.2

2. Opposite (below): A genuine Querci spinet. Italian (Florence), 1625. Length 33¼ inches. The Crosby Brown Collection, 89.4.1230

The enormous boom that took place in the market for art and antiques, beginning in the 1880s, produced a parallel increase in the efforts of forgers and unscrupulous dealers to meet the new demand by providing counterfeit or altered objects. One dealer particularly active in the production of forged antiques was Leopoldo Franciolini of Florence, whose letterhead proclaimed that he dealt in furniture, fabrics, arms, porcelains, bronzes, coins, chess pieces, medals, and seals, as well as the musical instruments that appear to have been his special *métier*.

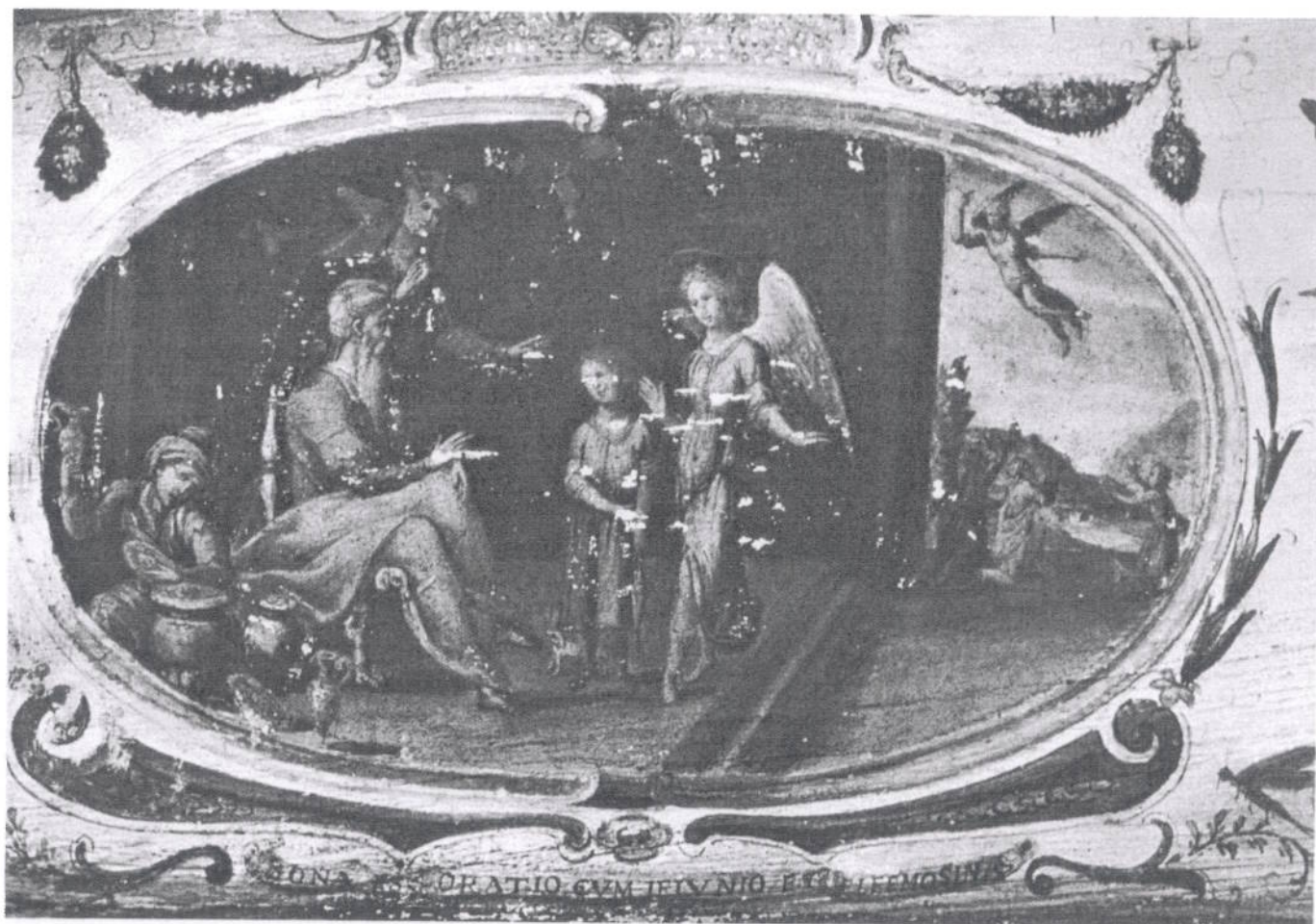
An enormous number of instruments of all types passed through Franciolini's hands. Some were left entirely untouched or given only minor and legitimate restoration; others received "improvements" in the form of more attractive decoration, fancy new stands, or fraudulent signatures and inscriptions; still others were actually made from scratch. Like his more legitimate colleagues, Franciolini issued catalogues, which are of great assistance in identifying the objects he sold. Moreover, many of the instruments that came from his shop bear all but unmistakable hallmarks of his style of work, including two highly stereotyped styles of decoration and a truly amazing inability to copy even the simplest Latin phrase correctly.

One of Franciolini's catalogues lists an "Octave spinet, very fine painting attributed to Bernardino Poccetti, white background, signed: *Pasquino Querci fiorentino fece 1615*. La sua presenza e la sua abilità *bona estorio cum ieiunio et elemosina*. Length 0.68 m., breadth 0.32 m." The first phrase of the inscription may be translated "Pasquino Querci of Florence made [me] 1615"; the second, "His appearance and his skill," makes little sense by itself in this context; the third is untranslatable gibberish.

By a surprising but happy coincidence, the Metropolitan Museum possesses







4. Left: Inscriptions on the back of the nameboard of the Querci spinet

5. Below: An ultraviolet photograph and separate tracings of the inscriptions on the nameboard of the suspicious spinet. Each inscription consists of the three phrases shown in Figures 3 and 4



Paspuino Querci fiorentino fece 1615  
La sua presenza e la sua abilita

BONA ESTORTIO CVM IEIUNIO ET ELEMOSINA

Paspuino Querci fiorentino f 1615 La sua  
presenza e la sua bilita

BONA ESTORTIO CVM IEIUNIO ET ELEMOSINA



3. Opposite (above): The painting on the inside of the lid of the Querci spinet. Tobit, his sight already restored, is shown seated with his wife standing beside him. Before him stand his son Tobias (carrying the fish whose gall cured Tobit's blindness) and the angel Rafael. Behind Tobit's chair, a servant is dividing a mass of treasure into two equal parts, one of which was about to be offered to the angel when he revealed himself as a heavenly being. In the distance at the right, Rafael is seen taking his departure

two spinets bearing inscriptions approximating those given in Franciolini's catalogue entry. The first of these (Figure 1), clearly the instrument he was describing, is one of a group of four keyboard instruments given to the Museum in 1911 by the pianist, composer, and teacher **Bernardus Boekelman**.

Both the brightly painted outer case that houses the spinet and the inscription on the instrument's nameboard are highly suspicious. The decoration on the outer case bears a marked resemblance to that on other instruments traceable to Franciolini. Similar grotesques, mythological figures, and fanciful creatures on a white background are found on examples of his work purporting to date all the way between 1533 and 1703, even though this Renaissance style of decoration was in fashion only in the mid-sixteenth century. Furthermore, there are two vertical slots in the sides of the spinet itself, which must once have held a removable front board. Since the outer case also had a front board, which would serve no purpose if the spinet already had one, these slots suggest that the instrument did not originally have an outer case like the present one at all. Thus, the entire case, and not merely its decoration, can probably be attributed to Franciolini.

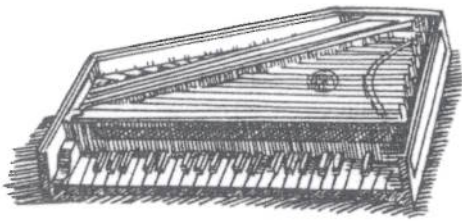
If this conclusion is correct, one must explain why Franciolini would have felt it necessary to provide a case for this instrument. The answer to this question is twofold: first, an outer case would provide a place for the decoration by means of which he could have hoped to enhance the salability of a plain instrument; second, the Italian spinets with which he would have been most familiar usually had outer cases, sometimes painted and sometimes covered with stamped leather.

The second spinet bearing inscriptions like those given in Franciolini's catalogue (Figure 2) is one of this latter type, and it still retains its original leather-covered outer case. This instrument, part of the Crosby Brown Collection presented to the Metropolitan Museum in the years 1889-1903, is the work of a minor Florentine maker, Pasquino Querci, and the back of the nameboard (Figure 4) bears his signature: *pasquino querci fiorentino f 1625*. Below this (in what seems to be a different though contemporary hand), is the incomplete and nearly obliterated phrase . . . *sua presenza e la sua abilità*. This phrase presumably began with some such words as "Laudato per la," which would permit the line to stand by itself as "Praised for his appearance and his skill."

Inside the lid of the outer case there is an elliptical painting (Figure 3) in which several events from Chapters 11 and 12 of the Book of Tobit are compressed into a single scene, below which there appears the motto *BONA EST ORATIO CVM IEIVNIO ET ELEEMOSINA* ("Prayer is good with fasting and alms"). This motto, also drawn from the Book of Tobit, would have expressed the entire allegorical meaning of the episodes shown in the painting to the pious seventeenth-century Italian who chose it for his spinet.

The signature, the other writing on the nameboard, and the Latin motto have no logical connection with one another: their only apparent relationship is that they are to be found at various places on the spinet shown in Figure 2. Thus, despite discrepancies in the date and in the rendering of the motto, this instrument must have provided the model for the inscription that now appears on





6. Above: A German octave spinet, as depicted in Volume 2 (*De Organographia*) of the *Syntagma musicum* by Michael Praetorius (Wolfenbüttel, 1619)

7. Opposite (above): The instrument shown in Figure 1, removed from its outer case. Length  $25\frac{7}{8}$  inches

8. Opposite (below): A comparable instrument, the spinet from a cabinet spinet-organ by Laurentius Hauslaib, German (Nuremberg), 1596. Length 26 inches. The Crosby Brown Collection, 89.4.1191

the nameboard of the spinet shown in Figure 1

Paspuino Querci fiorentino fece 1615

La sua presenza e la sua abilità

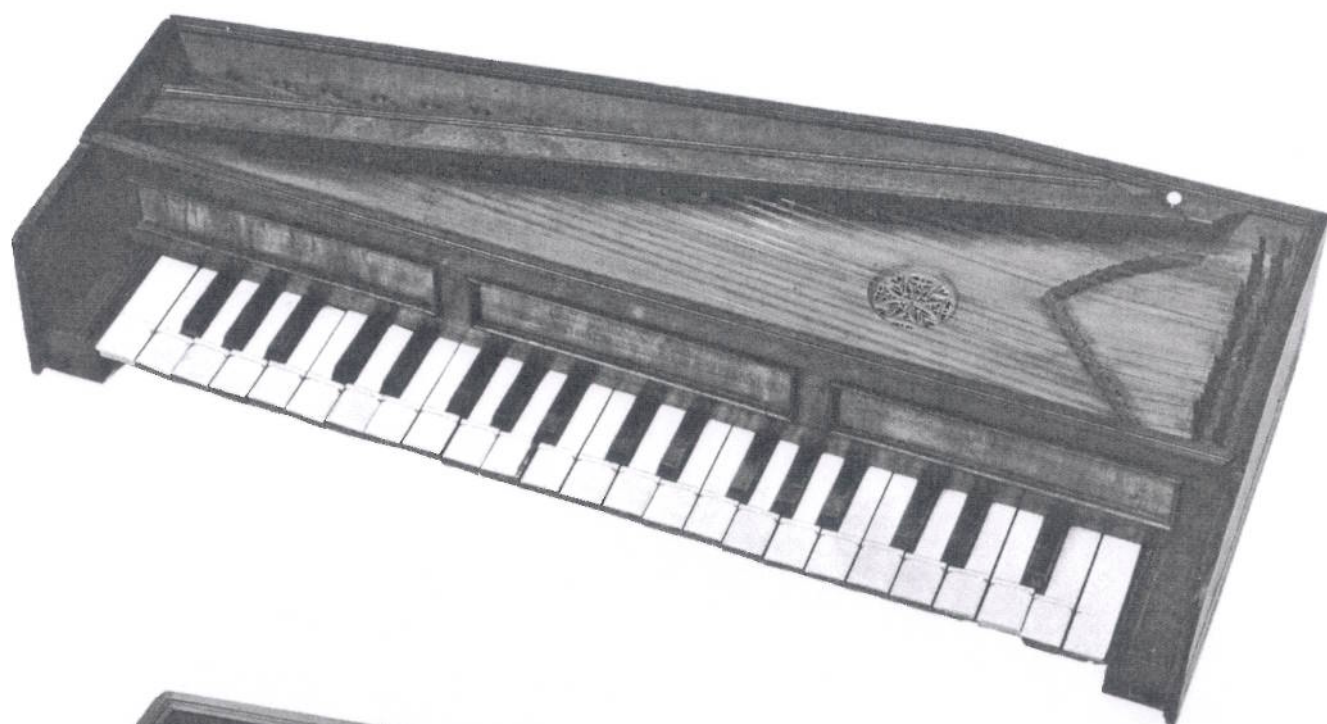
BONA ESTORTIO CVM IEIVNIO ET ELEMOSINA

The motto is, in fact, untranslatable as it stands, and whoever put BONA ESTORTIO on the nameboard cannot have understood Latin. It is unlikely that such a mistake would have been made or allowed to stand uncorrected in the seventeenth century, but errors of this kind are so frequent in Franciolini's work that they constitute an almost certain indication of his authorship. (Note, for example, that these words were further miscopied as *bona estorio* in his catalogue entry.) Accordingly, it should hardly come as a surprise that even Querci's first name has been copied incorrectly.

Furthermore, it is apparent that this inscription overlies other writing, and ultraviolet light reveals that the earlier inscription is identical to, and written in the same hand as, the one visible in ordinary light, but that it is upside down (Figure 5). Apparently these lines were copied from the various inscriptions on the genuine Querci spinet (presumably at some point when both instruments were in Franciolini's hands), garbled in the process, and put on upside down on the first attempt!

But what of the spinet itself (Figure 7) that Franciolini equipped with a spurious outer case, signature, and inscriptions? Is it one of his fabrications, or is it a genuine example of seventeenth-century Italian work? Examination of the instrument suggests that it is neither. For one thing, its workmanship is superb – far finer than anything to be found in Franciolini's own products, which often leave one with the impression that they never could have made music – and, for another, it has a number of non-Italian features. First, it is made of walnut rather than the cypress characteristic of Italian keyboard instruments. Second, as indicated earlier, this spinet does not appear originally to have had an outer case of the kind one expects with Italian instruments. Third, keyboards ending on A in the treble rather than C or F are not found on spinets built south of the Alps. These and various other characteristics, some merely non-Italian and others specifically German, point to Germany rather than to Italy as its country of origin.

One highly unusual detail on the Museum's spinet is that, instead of being in one piece, the bottom originally had a removable section (now lost) immediately below the front of the keys. This feature is characteristic of an instrument designed to be part of a *claviorganum*, a combination of a chamber organ with a harpsichord or spinet, in which the keys of the organ could be operated by those of the harpsichord or spinet. (The removable section of the bottom would have held the small rods by means of which the keys of the spinet could be made to depress those of the organ when the spinet was being played.) In fact, an almost identical spinet (Figure 8) with a similar two-piece bottom, made in Nuremberg in 1596, forms part of a cabinet spinet-organ in the Crosby Brown Collection. Surviving examples of such instruments are extremely rare, as indeed are all German keyboard instruments of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.





Thus it is not surprising that Franciolini – who seems to have been no more knowledgeable about instruments than the most credulous of his customers – did not recognize this spinet for what it was and attempted to make it more like those he knew.

The Italianizing of a German instrument by providing it with an outer case and borrowed inscriptions is of particular interest for two quite different reasons. On the one hand, it presents us with a particularly clear example of one of Franciolini's methods of operation; moreover, it shows that the genuine Querci spinet must have passed through his hands (a fact one could not have guessed had Franciolini not copied its inscriptions) and that it was actually possible for such an instrument to leave his shop unscathed. On the other hand, because of the far greater rarity of German instruments than Italian ones, this instance of Franciolini's labors actually had the temporary effect if not of turning a silk purse into a sow's ear, at least of silver-plating an object made of pure gold. Thus, this spinet provides us with one of those rare and distinctly pleasurable occasions on which the investigation of a questionable object leaves us and not the forger with the last laugh.

#### Note

As this article was going to press, evidence confirming Franciolini's acquaintance with the genuine Querci spinet was provided me by Otto Rindlisbacher of Zurich, who generously sent me photocopies of three Franciolini catalogues in his possession, two of which had previously been unknown to me. One of the latter includes as item 104 an "Octave Spinet, very fine. The painting is attributed to Antonio Poccetti. (Signed): *Pasquino Querci fiorentino f. 1625. La sua presenza e la sua abilità BONA – EST – ORTIO – CUM – IEIVNIO – ET – ELEMOSINA. Covered in Leather ornamented with Fleurs-de-lis and Figures.*" Despite the superficial similarity of this description to the catalogue entry for the spinet shown in Figure 1, the specification of a leather covering makes it clear that this entry refers to the instrument in Figure 2.

#### References

A documented history of musical instrument collections may be found in Emanuel Winternitz, *Musical Instruments of the Western World* (New York, 1966), and Frank Arnau, *Three Thousand Years of Deception in Art and Antiques* (London,

1961) provides a good overall survey of art forgery with a detailed treatment of the nineteenth century. Lists of the keyboard instruments offered in two of Franciolini's catalogues were published by Raymond Russell in *The Harpsichord and Clavichord* (London, 1959), which, together with Frank Hubbard, *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965) gives a complete survey of Italian harpsichord and spinet building. The only publication dealing with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German keyboard instruments is John Henry van der Meer, "Beiträge zum Cembalobau im deutschen Sprachgebiet bis 1700" in *Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums*, 1966. The present writer is planning a facsimile publication of the surviving Franciolini catalogues in the near future.

The kindness of Prof. Henrik Glahn, Director of the Carl Claudius Musikhistorisk Samling, Copenhagen, in placing photocopies of the Franciolini catalogues in his archives at my disposal made it possible for me not only to connect the spinet shown in Figure 1 with Franciolini's workshop but also to realize for the first time the true extent of Franciolini's activities. The generous assistance of Emanuel Winternitz and Olga Raggio is also herewith gratefully acknowledged.