

New Light on Sagrini

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Bernard Lewis and Robert Coldwell, *In Search of Luigi Sagrini* (DGA, 2021)

Robert Coldwell, ed., *The Music of Luigi Sagrini* (DGA, 2021)

THE TWO IMPRESSIVE DGA VOLUMES REVIEWED HERE were co-authored by Robert Coldwell and Bernard Lewis, who make a convincing case for placing the guitarist and composer Luigi Perret Sagrini (1809–1874) somewhere in the first tier of virtuoso performers who inspired, nurtured, and popularized the guitar in Europe in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The two authors complement each other in an exemplary fashion. Together, they have accumulated a stunning amount of information, much of it previously unexamined or unavailable, and they present it to modern readers in an attractive two-volume package.

Bernard Lewis dates his decades-long fascination with Sagrini to 1962, when his father bought an old guitar, inside of which was pasted a label, “Guitare à la Sagrini,” and a date, “1825.” Lewis’s preliminary investigation led him to modern guitar scholars who encouraged his research and offered advice. By 2015 he was in touch with Robert Coldwell, a musicologist whose Digital Guitar Archive has a catalog that includes the collected works of Jan Nepomucen Bobrowicz, A. T. Huerta, Emilia Giuliani, and Ivan Padovec, as well as Johann Kaspar Mertz’s *Opfern-Revue* (all six volumes). Most of Coldwell’s publications deal with guitarists around the year 1830, by which time the popularity of the “modern” instrument was reaching its peak.

At first Lewis was able to find little information beyond several paragraphs in Philip James Bone’s useful (but often unreliable) dictionary of biographies, *The Guitar and Mandolin: Biographies of Celebrated Players and Composers*.¹ According to Bone, Sagrini was born in Monza in 1809, a child prodigy who became a teenage guitar virtuoso, touring widely between 1824 and 1828 and receiving encomiums at the Court of Turin and in Paris. Bone quotes one particularly laudatory review in the English journal *Harmonicon* in 1824, when Sagrini was just thirteen, and also notes that the young guitarist performed Mauro Giuliani’s *Variazioni concertanti* for two

¹ Philip James Bone, *The Guitar and Mandolin: Biographies of Celebrated Players and Composers*, 2nd ed. (London: Schott, 1972), 304–5.

guitars, op. 130, with Napoléon Coste in 1828. Sagrini established himself in London around 1840, and none of the early biographers had anything further to offer about his performing or teaching careers. Bone listed some of Sagrini's published compositions, providing titles and opus numbers (opp. 4–5, 11–13, 15–17, and 27), and cites Sagrini's many guitar arrangements and accompaniments for popular and art songs of the period. Bone adds: "Although rather more difficult than usual, they display the beauties of the guitar as an accompanying instrument."

The problems with the paragraph above are obvious: a great deal of basic information is misleading or simply missing. For example, Sagrini was actually born in Chambéry, and his 1828 duo performance with Coste was Giuliani's opus 35. None of the subsequent "encyclopedists" who copied and quoted Bone's biographical entries had discovered any substantive details, and it is not clear that they looked for them. In Sagrini's lifetime, births, deaths, marriages, baptisms, confirmations, and all census data were recorded in beautiful but sometimes illegible handwriting and preserved in large register books or card catalogs. Loose documents were gathered in pink ribbon bundles (thus "red tape") and shelved in *carton* boxes. Many records were lost in the wars, in fires, floods, or natural disasters. Some, even when carefully catalogued, were simply misfiled, and many books and scores were printed on acid paper that now crumbles into dust when touched. The mid-twentieth century saw revolutionary improvements in research technology, and the team of Lewis and Coldwell took full advantage of the new computerized world of travel, reprographics, telecommunication, the internet, and digitized data, to present a far more detailed and accurate narrative. Luigi [or Louis] Perret Sagrini was born in 1809 in Chambéry, the traditional capital of the Dukes of Savoy. In official documents, Sagrini was sometimes referred to as an Italian or a Savoyard; in fact, he was both, as the Duchy changed dynasties several times.

Luigi's birth records have not been located, and his birth mother has not been identified. His father, Jean-Baptiste Jules [Giulio] Gabriel (1786–1863), was born in Vercelli, Piedmont, and claimed "music professor" as his occupation. Luigi was a child prodigy who was encouraged to perform from an early age; Giulio accompanied Luigi in his travels, arranged music for him, and accompanied him in guitar duets. It seems Luigi was "home schooled"; father and son spent plenty of time in coaches together. Giulio also provided similar training and services to his younger sons Italo Augusto Sagrini (1822–?) and Publio Scipion Sagrini (1829–1856). Luigi and Italo were both acclaimed as prodigious virtuoso guitarists; Italo and Scipion were similarly celebrated as concert pianists. Scipion's marriage license in 1850 reveals that he and his brother Italo, and their father (Giulio) and mother, Jeanne-Marie Suzanne Chapalaz (1801–1866), had been living in Lausanne since 1844. Meanwhile, Luigi had apparently remained in London, although his playing years were coming to an end.

The Lewis-Coldwell summary of Sagrini's performing career (*In Search of Sagrini*, chapter 2ff.) is based primarily on hundreds of concert announcements, advertisements, and reviews in local periodicals, beginning with an appearance at the Court of Turin (1820?), and followed by Lausanne, Zurich, Geneva, Lyon, and Paris (1824–25), Boulogne-sur-Mer (1826), Valenciennes and Douai (1827–28), and Lille, Brussels,

and Liège (1829). Concerts in this era almost always involved various performers in mixed ensembles. Sagrini's repertory included: original guitar solos; music by contemporary guitarists (Mauro Giuliani and Luigi Legnani are mentioned); duets with his father Giulio (who accompanied him on guitar or piano when needed); chamber music and songs, often in impromptu collaborations with local or visiting musicians; and occasionally even a concerto with orchestra. March 1825 saw the sixteen-year-old Sagrini perform in a benefit concert in Paris with the fourteen-year-old Franz Liszt. The average touring musician was not a glamorous figure. Musicians were not entirely removed from the medieval guild system, and children were often trained in the family trade at an early age (e.g., J. S. Bach, Mozart, Liszt; guitarists Giulio Regondi, Leonard Schulz). Travel by coach was slow, uncomfortable, and sometimes dangerous. Concerts had to be booked in advance (by handwritten mail, in unreliable postal systems). In 1826, one reviewer declared that Sagrini "knows no rival except Castellaci [*sic*]." The comparison is ironic, because Luigi Castellacci (ca. 1797–ca. 1845) was another young Italian guitarist (like Legnani, Matteo Carcassi, Filippo Gragnani, Francesco Molino) hoping to establish a musical career in Paris in the 1820s, at the zenith of the *guitaromanie*. Ferdinando Carulli was already securely established in Paris by 1809; Carcassi, Castellacci, and Molino had successful careers in Paris, but Sagrini ultimately chose to move on to London. So did Fernando Sor and Felix Horetzky. One of the attractions of Paris was the music publishing industry, reputed to be the best in Europe. In about 1825, Sagrini arranged with Parisian publishers to produce about a dozen of his original compositions (not all are extant). Castellacci was a prolific composer but his music, like Sagrini's, is largely ignored by contemporary guitarists. Music publishing was a useful revenue supplement. Musicians would often accept copies of their printed music in lieu of royalties and then sell the scores to their students.

A similar source of revenue was commission from sales of guitars. The enigmatic label in the guitar that inspired Bernard Lewis and Robert Coldwell to write this book seems to indicate a date, 1825, but it could also have been a model number. The Sagrini signature in the guitar does not match Luigi's, but is almost identical to a signature of Luigi's half-brother, Italo, that Lewis/Coldwell discovered on a concert ticket from 1837.

When reviewers disagreed about a guitar recital in the 1820s, their differences were rarely about the quality of the music itself or the technical skill of the musician. It was whether any guitar was sufficiently loud to be considered a "legitimate" concert instrument. One reviewer makes the case for the guitar:

And let it not be thought that the listener needs all the complacency of his ear to grasp the most delicate nuances of Mr. Sagrini's playing. I was at the end of our mirrored room, which, as we know, is not conducive to the development of sound, and I didn't lose a single note. . . . Mr. Sagrini wanted to convince us of the power of his instrument and to show us all that it is capable of, either by making it sing in the concerto for large orchestra, or by uniting it with a second guitar in a sonata, or by making it share with the piano the modulations of a varied theme; or

concertizing with the violin, the fortepiano, the flute and the bassoon in *Hummel's* magnificent quintet; or finally in provoking the hilarity of the assembly by the so comical and true chatter of the *Young and the Old*. Each of these pieces astonished and delighted the audience.²

In 1828, Luigi and Giulio departed Paris for Belgium. The celebrated Coste-Sagrini duet took place in Valenciennes, followed by concerts in Mons, Lille, and Brussels. In April 1829, Sagrini shared two concerts in Ghent with the Irish pianist George Alexander Osborne. The political tensions which would lead to the Revolutions of 1830 in France and Belgium were becoming apparent when Luigi performed his last concert in Brussels in April 1829. The Sagrini, father and son, travelled to London where Luigi's reputation had preceded him. By June 2, he was performing at the King's Theatre, and two weeks later, he played a Fantasia in a benefit concert in the Argyll Rooms in London. Although there was no shortage of guitarists in England, Sagrini's brief appearances were highly praised, and he soon was collaborating with England's best musicians, providing entertainment in the city mansions and country villas of the Edwardian *bourgeoisie*. He spent the next several years travelling between his home in London and the fashionable, music-loving resorts of Brighton, Bath, Bristol, and Cheltenham. Lewis and Coldwell point out that after twenty years of performing, Sagrini had an excellent reputation and more than a few friends. He also had rivals who resented the competition. In late November 1829, the *Brighton Gazette* reported that Sagrini had played in an evening party for eighty people at Brunswick Terrace and that he was "said to be the best player [on the guitar] now living." A few days later a reviewer sniffed that the guitar was "an insignificant instrument for a solo," but admitted that Sagrini was, nevertheless, "the best performer we have had the opportunity of hearing in Brighton." It happened that the Spanish virtuoso Trinidad Huerta (the self-proclaimed 'Paganini of the guitar') was in Southampton when he learned of the encomiums for Sagrini. He booked a coach to Brighton and made a surprise appearance at Mr. Piozzi's Friday Evening concert, where he played a program described as "matchless." (*In Search of Sagrini*, p. 43.)

Sagrini played five more concerts in Brighton that winter. His only performances outside of England were in August 1831, in Arras, and in September 1832, when Sagrini was invited to Lausanne for three concerts. He took advantage of the opportunity to perform in Paris on his way back to England. This latter concert (February 1833) included a concerto with orchestra and a set of variations composed by his old friend Legnani. After his return to England in May 1834, Sagrini resumed his previous role as a participant in the ensemble concerts that were fixtures of the social scene in London and the West Country; mostly he was playing duos with the violinist Bucher. In April 1835, Luigi performed in concerts in Bath, Bristol, and Clifton. Meanwhile, in London, Luigi's half-brother Italo Augusto was performing with several different

2 Sagrini's *bis* was *The Young and the Old*, a popular burlesque sometimes attributed to Paganini in which distuned guitar strings parody the voices of two women, young and old, in a marketplace. Sagrini played it often in the years 1828–29.

ensembles playing difficult solos for guitar and piano, a concerto by Hummel, and music composed by “Sagrini the elder” (probably his father). Italo was thirteen years old.

Concert opportunities kept the Sagrini family busy in 1833–34, but decreased significantly in 1835–38. There were still many famous (and good-natured) guitarists in London, as was demonstrated by Huerta’s Grand Septetto of 1838, which called for seven guitars organized by Huerta to join in a festive *cachucha*. The Sagrinis were of course invited, and they participated again in the Quintet the following year. Luigi’s last known concert took place in 1840, when he performed with Mme. de Goñi, who was emigrating to the United States.

After decades of travelling back and forth by coach across south and west England, Luigi at last could take a train: 1840 was the year railways finally connected London with Brighton.

There is a great deal more to say about Bernard Lewis’s and Robert Coldwell’s *In Search of Sagrini*, as it takes the Sagrini family into the next generations, with enough subplots to write a TV serial script: an attempted blackmail, a war hero comes home, a bitter courtroom drama over an inheritance, and more. There are eighty pages of family records, government documents, and stunning guitars, beautifully photographed. In the companion volume, *The Music of Luigi Sagrini*, there are 282 pages (soft-bound) of music for solo guitar, two guitars, and piano and guitar. It also includes comprehensive notes on the music, a short biography of the composer by Coldwell, and many reproductions of title pages. The editors list all of the “known” works by Sagrini from the years 1825–1850, but they were unable to discover extant examples of about a third of them. Of twenty-seven numbered works, Coldwell was unable to locate copies of opera 1, 3, 8, 10, 14–15, 17–19, 22–23, or 25–26. Such *lacunae* in composers’ catalogs are a common problem for scholars investigating this era. In many cases, the music in question may have been prematurely promised to the publisher and then never completed or delivered. It also may have never existed, or no copies survived. *The Music of Luigi Sagrini* contains a list of sixty-three songs with guitar by Sagrini. Works for voice and guitar were a British specialty, and those of Sagrini were particularly admired. This would make a great third volume for a Sagrini collection.