

# BASS WORLD

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**CENTERFOLD** Steven Reiley, Editor

## Bass made by Giovanni Dollenz Trieste, Italy anno 1852

By Aaron Robertson

Giovanni Dollenz (1802-1857) was born in Trieste, and was one of the two most prominent violin makers there during the first half of the nineteenth century. Trieste is a city in northeastern Italy located right at the head of the Gulf of Trieste on the Adriatic Sea. The city is only 100 km away from Venice, and in the nineteenth century, travel by boat between the two cities was relatively easy. Consequently, Trieste was heavily influenced both culturally and economically by Venice. The local opera house, the *Gran Teatro Civico de Trieste* (built in 1801), served as the region's principle center for musical performances. Today the venue, still in existence, is known as the Teatro Verdi, named after the great composer/conductor.

In the early nineteenth century it was reported that Dollenz was a pupil of the prominent Cremonese luthier Lorenzo Storioni. Although there are some similarities between Storioni's and Dollenz's instruments, there is no documented proof to support that statement. However, a connection is possible because Storioni's whereabouts after 1802 are unclear. Conversely, there is no known proof that he was in Trieste or that Dollenz was in Cremona. It is more likely that Dollenz was influenced by early Venetian makers while being primarily self-taught. In that case, claims of studying with Storioni would have been nothing more than self-promoting propaganda.

Giovanni Dollenz had one son, Giuseppe (born 1832) to whom he passed down his art of violin making. Giuseppe carried out instrument making in the same style as his father, although his work is not thought to be quite as artistic or skilled. There are also bows in existence made by both father and son, implying that they must have had somewhat of a full service shop. In addition to violin making, Giovanni was also a bass player and member of the Gran Teatro Civico Orchestra. In 1853 he was fired for incompetence because of the negative influence of the concertmaster, Giuseppe

Scaramelli. It is well documented through letters written about Scaramelli that he was a malicious, bitter person and was disliked by most members of the orchestra.

Dollenz basses are very straightforward in their construction. All known examples have flat backs, tops with relatively flat arching, and ribs of equal depth from the lower edge to the bevel at the upper back. Additionally, Dollenz basses have longer bodies that measure in the vicinity of 112 cm. The upper and lower bouts are proportionally narrower. This large pattern suggests that Dollenz's primary intention was an acoustical one, rather than playability. His varnish color varies from a yellow brown to a darker red brown. Dollenz's f-holes are patterned in a true Italian style, loosely after Stradivari, showing a certain diligence in his work. His purfling is of the typical three-piece method, which he places

fairly close to the edge. Most known examples have rounded edges with a very light channeling just inside the purfling. Dollenz generally makes the upper corners of the C-bouts slightly narrowed and placed a bit lower on the table, which makes the lower corners appear to extend outward. This trait, similar to some of Storioni's instruments, is a typical characteristic of instruments originating in Trieste. Scrolls made by both the father and son tend to be slightly elongated, with the peg box flared open and tapered from wide at the bottom to slightly narrow at the upper end. Typically, the eyes of the volutes are small and quite rounded, with the channeling being fairly deep. Overall, the scrolls have a slightly more delicate appearance than the typical Strad or del Gesu pattern. Instruments by the Dollenz family are not plentiful; however, a significant number of examples do exist. Some

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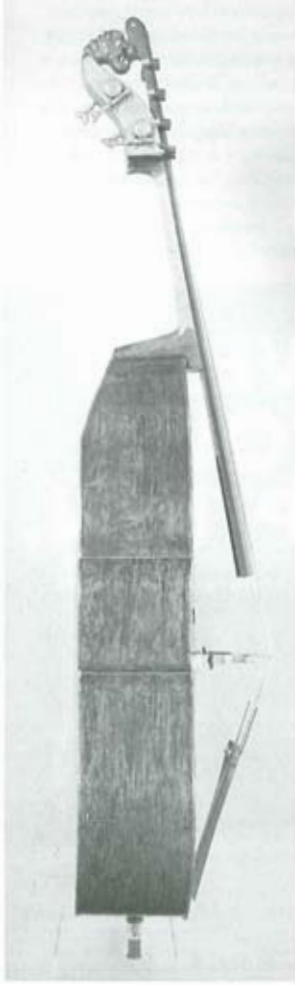
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The Dollenz Label, dated 1852



Sideview, note the flat back and flat arching



A close-up of the peg-box and scroll



Full-length view from the front



Full-length view from the back

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instruments have even been attributed to more famous makers such as Giuseppe Guadagnini. There are several known basses and cellos that fit into this category.

The bass by Giovanni Dollenz pictured here is original in all its parts and bears its original label dated 1852. With the exception of the head, this bass is a typical example of the maker's work. The top is made of two pieces of spruce, partially slab cut in the center, and almost perfectly matched along the center seam. The unpurfling flat back is made of two pieces of plain poplar with the ribs and scroll being of similar wood. The varnish is dark red brown in color. The unique scroll is similar in styling to a gargoyle, and is the only one of its kind known to us by this maker. Although the head was carved in this unusual style, the peg box and remainder of the scroll follow the typical style of other examples of the maker's work. One may speculate that Dollenz carved this gargoyle style head as a way of mocking Giuseppe Scaramelli, the first violinist in the opera orchestra who was ultimately responsible for getting him fired one year later. Imagine the head of this bass peering out of the orchestra pit during opera performances, glaring at the audience (or concertmaster) in a defiant manner.

I knew almost nothing about the history of this particular bass until recently, when on a trip to Valencia, Spain, I met a bass player who knew the Dollenz. At first we made small talk, getting acquainted. I asked him what kind of bass he plays and he in turn asked me about my instrument. When I told him who made my bass, he stopped in his tracks and immediately asked about the scroll. "Does it have the strange animal head?" I confirmed that it did. Excitedly he declared: "We must celebrate; the Dollenz is back in Spain!" And off we went for pael-la. He told me that his father had owned and played the bass for many years and that it was famous all over Spain and Argentina. Apparently, the previous owner of the bass played it in an orchestra for Pablo Casals. One day, he was warming up on stage while Casals was studying his score at the podium. Upon hearing the Dollenz, Casals dropped everything, passionately ran over to the bass player and asked him "What is that bass you're playing?" The player replied: "This is a bass by Giovanni Dollenz." Casals replied, "That's no bass - it's a trombone!"

This bass has also had quite an influence on contemporary makers for its unique modeling and huge tone. Dallas luthier Guy

Cole was so inspired by this Dollenz bass that he used it as a model for his own basses. Cole states: "The Dollenz was the first bass I attempted as a maker, and although I approached the project with some trepidation the elegance of the model and Aaron's diligent encouragement made the attempt too inspiring to resist. The results surpassed my intentions. Bravo Mr. Dollenz!" Guy Cole's Dollenz model bass garnered accolades at the 2005 ISB Maker's Competition, winning an award for tone.

Body length: 112.3 cm  
Upper bout: 49.4 cm  
Center bout: 36.9 cm  
Lower bout: 66.4 cm  
String length: 106.7 cm

Aaron Robertson studied double bass with Hal Robinson at the Curtis Institute of Music, and continued to be a substitute with the Philadelphia Orchestra after graduating from Curtis in 2000. He now works full time in sales of all string instruments for the family business, Robertson & Sons Violin Shop in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As part of his job he enjoys researching rare and collectible instruments and maintains an extensive archive of photos and information.

Photos by Justin Robertson