



<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/em.2019.14.18>

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## Giovanni Gagliardi – a virtuoso and a visionary of the accordion

Translation of the article published in this issue (<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/em.2019.14.17>)

### Abstract

Giovanni Gagliardi (1882–1964), an Italian composer and accordionist is now a forgotten artist. As early as in 1911, in *Manualetto del fisarmonicista* published in Paris, he postulated modifications in the construction of the accordion, so as to improve the instrument's technical performance. The suggested modernisation of the accordion contributed to the development of the accordion repertoire, with new sound possibilities and new aesthetics. The life of the artist, who began his career as an itinerant player and reached the position of a virtuoso who was highly appreciated by Paris' bohemian artists, changed dramatically after the entry of Italy into World War I in 1915. His refusal to perform military service and after the end of the war also to perform public concerts, as well as 3.5 years of internment during World War II – show Gagliardi as a man engaged not only in musical matters, but also in public affairs. Until the end of his life, he played music in the comfort of his home, and in his correspondence with accordionists and in press interviews he promoted the instrument with free-bass system. Giovanni Gagliardi was decades ahead of his time, but it was him that the history proved right.

**Keywords:** Giovanni Gagliardi, accordion, free-bass accordion, virtuoso.

The accordion is a fairly young instrument – less than two centuries old. There are many interesting facts, now somewhat forgotten, which are worth recalling due to their importance and contribution to the development of the whole discipline. An example of this is i.a. the figure of Giovanni Gagliardi – a virtuoso and a visionary of the accordion. The subject literature on his activities

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Date of submission: 8.12.2019

Review 1 sent/returned: 17.12.2019/23.12.2019

Review 2 sent/returned: 17.12.2019/27.12.2019

Date of acceptance: 31.12.2019

is poor and is limited only to a publication in the series “Texte zur Geschichte und Gegenwart des Akkordeons”, edited by Helmut C. Jacobs<sup>1</sup>.

Giovanni Gagliardi, was born on February 14, 1882 in the village of Croce Santo Spirito in the municipality of Castelvetro Piacentino in the province of Piacenza as the oldest of the four siblings. His father Fermo Gagliardi was a farmer, he cultivated a small plot of land and he ran a tavern at the same time. His mother, Domenica Ferrari, was an itinerant trader. The Gagliardis took care of the education of their children. At a time when illiteracy rate in Italy reached 60%, the Gagliardi siblings attended school where they received an elementary education, i.e. in reading and writing.

Giovanni started his musical education by playing the ocarina, a musical instrument from the lip-aerophone group. He played a well-known variety of of this instrument, designed in the second half of the 19th century by an Italian, Giuseppe Donati. His first and probably the only music teacher was Raffaele D’Alessandro from Cremona, who taught him solfège, the principles of music, as well as the accordion. In 1902 he was given an instrument made by Luigi Savoia in San Giovanni in Croce, a village in the province of Cremona. The first public performances took place in his parents' tavern. Then he started a life of an itinerant player and gave concerts in nearby towns. During his wanderings, he met Italo Ferrari, a self-taught puppet theatre artist, with whom he established cooperation, enriching the theatre performances with his music. The friendship lasted for years, although it was Ferrari who made a great career as one of the most outstanding representatives of the puppet theater in Italy.

An example of the repertoire performed by Gagliardi at the time is *Mazurka variata*, a piece composed by the Italian violinist Augusto Migliavacca (1838–1901), eagerly adapted by accordionists, which is still known and loved in Italy. Moreover, he performed such pieces as the waltz *Vita Palermitana*, or the famous *Dance of the Hours* from the opera *Gioconda* by Amilcare Ponchielli<sup>2</sup>.

In 1905 Gagliardi had at his disposal another accordion made by Savoia. The instrument featured two manuals for the left hand: five-row standard bass system and a free-bass system, in which buttons were arranged in two rows in the order of the piano-type keyboard. Their placement on the side casing, imitating a bandoneon, was also innovative. It can be assumed that since there were no instruments of this type before, the author of the concept of the new accordion construction could have been Giovanni Gagliardi himself<sup>3</sup>. The new variant of of

<sup>1</sup> G. Gagliardi, *Kleines Handbuch des Akkordeonisten (1911)*, *Manualetto del fisarmonicista (1911)*, *Petit Manuel de l’Accordéoniste (1911)*, „Texte zur Geschichte und Gegenwart des Akkordeons”, vol. 2, ed. H.C. Jacobs, R. Kaupenjohann, Augemus Musikverlag Ralf Kaupenjohann, Bochum 2004, pp. 25–49.

<sup>2</sup> [no author’s name], *Vita romantica di Giovanni Gagliardi, obiettore della conoscenza e musicista*, „Liberta di Piacenza”, of 19.11.1950; source: [www.giovannigagliardi.net](http://www.giovannigagliardi.net) [accessed on 3.09.2017].

<sup>3</sup> J. Petrič, *The Concert Accordion. Contemporary Perspectives*, Augemus Musikverlag Ralf Kaupenjohann, Essen 2017, p. 30.

this instrument made it possible to extend the performance repertoire with pieces by such composers as Verdi, Chopin, Grieg, Franchetti<sup>4</sup>, Puccini and Bach.

Since 1905 Gagliardi's concert tours became increasingly extensive: in the north of Italy – Milan, in the south – Bari. The following anecdote dating from 1906, repeatedly recalled in the artist's memoirs, is connected with the town of Piacenza in the vicinity of Pistoia in Tuscany

Gagliardi found out that a famous Italian composer of sacred music, Lorenzo Perosi, was staying in Piacenza (called Don Perosi since he was a clergyman). In the evening, beneath his window, he performed the *Prelude* to G. Verdi's opera *Traviata*, an aria from Alberto Franchetti's opera *Germania*, which had its premiere four years earlier at La Scala in Milan. Disappointed that the window did not open, Gagliardi asked about it the composer's butler the next morning. It turned out that Don Perosi enjoyed the performance very much and he wanted to open the window to congratulate the accordionist, but the family expressly forbade it for fear of a cold!<sup>5</sup>

In 1907 Gagliardi received a diploma of La Società Filarmonica di Bolognese in Bologna. The content of this document states that on April 27, 1907 he performed and gave a concert before the members of the association and the assembled audience. The diploma was signed by the chairman of the association and the artistic director (illegible signatures). In the same year Gagliardi went to Paris, where he stayed until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. His stay in the French capital was preceded by shorter visits in Lorraine. According to Guido Deiro's account, published in 1948 in an American accordion magazine, the famous musician took accordion lessons from "the famous Giovanni Gagliardi" in Metz in 1907<sup>6</sup>.

In Paris, the cultural capital at the time, Gagliardi was part of the artistic community of musicians, painters and writers. He tried to promote the accordion as a concert instrument. He performed in theatres and cinemas, where he put live music to silent films. It was there that he met Antoine Schénardi, an Italian immigrant and accordion builder, with whom he worked on a variant of this instrument with free-bass system. The first classical music concert took place in 1909 in the cinema on Rue de Lyon (in the 12th arrondissement). The programme included overtures, waltzes and arias from famous operas. Contacts with the conductor Désiré-Émile Ingelbrecht, a music critic, as well as one of the first cinema critics, Émile Vuillermoz, enabled Gagliardi to give concerts in somewhat more prestigious venues – in the 18th arrondissement, Montmartre (Le Lapin Agile, Le Moulin de la Galette, le Bateau Lavoir), which at that time was the centre of Paris' artistic bohemia. Gagliardi had many pupils there and he gave

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<sup>4</sup> Alberto Franchetti (1860–1942) – an Italian composer of opera music.

<sup>5</sup> L. Fietta, *Fece una serenata a Don Perosi*, „La Gazzetta di Parma”, of 30.12.1956; source: [www.giovannigagliardi.net](http://www.giovannigagliardi.net) [accessed on 5.09.2017].

<sup>6</sup> G. Deiro, *The Complete Works of Guido Deiro*, ed. H. Doktorski, Mel Bay Publications, Inc., Fenton 2008, p. 8.

lessons in the Schénardi company's office. In 1911 he published a textbook in Italian and French for his students and the accordionists *Il Manualetto del Fisarmonicista / Petit Manuel de L'Accordéoniste*. Yet, it was not a guide to learning to play the accordion, but rather a kind of an artistic manifesto. Gagliardi presented there his aesthetic views and his patented keyboard arrangement for the right and left hand, which he suggested to name 'cromo-harmonica' (chrome-accordéon)<sup>7</sup>.

*Il Manualetto del Fisarmonicista*, that is a little guide for accordionists, consists of fourteen chapters which are prefaced by a brief introduction. In the first chapter, the author describes different types of instruments that are covered by the term of accordion. As he writes, this situation does not encourage the development of this instrument and complicates the methods of teaching playing the accordion. The author compares the chaos due to different types of accordion notation to the tower of Babel. In the second chapter, he describes the characteristics of the accordion and emphasises the unique features of this instrument, which is the only one of keyboard instruments that has the possibility to shape the sound intensity. He notes the role of registers in widening the scale and the sound colour palette of the accordion. In his opinion, the possibilities of this instrument are enormous, because "it can perform *legato* like the pipe organ and *pizzicato* like the violin"<sup>8</sup>. The third chapter is a presentation of the ideal instrument, that is – according to Gagliardi – the cromo-harmonica. The description concerns primarily the arrangement of both melodic manuals. The suggested keyboard arrangement makes it possible to apply one type of fingering to all keys. The cromo-harmonica has two five-row melodic keyboards for the right and left hand. The buttons are arranged vertically in minor thirds while the horizontal arrangement is chromatic, starting with the sound C: C, C-sharp, D, D-sharp, E, below D-sharp, E, F, F-sharp, G, etc. The instrument was also supposed to have the so-called pedal basses, the equivalent of a pedal keyboard in the pipe organ, arranged in fifths order. Gagliardi suggested the so-called zero *tremolo*, as he was a great opponent of the sound preferred by the performers of the *musette* style. He also suggested the need for *cassotto*, especially for the 16' choir to refine the accordion sound. His ideal instrument was supposed to have quiet mechanics of both keyboards. He also considered problems related to articulation, a correct change of bellows and the accordion repertoire.

The didactic remarks included in Chapter Seven have not lost their relevance: the need to learn how to read musical notation, increasing difficulty of the repertoire, choosing the right tempo, mastering technically difficult parts. In the next chapters, Gagliardi discusses what music is and acknowledges the great role of bellows technique in sound shaping, as he defines bellows as the "soul of the

<sup>7</sup> G. Gagliardi, Brevet d'Invention. XVII Arts Industriels, No. 423.798, Office National de la Propriété Industrielle, Paris 1911.

<sup>8</sup> G. Gagliardi, H.C. Jacobs, *Kleines Handbuch...*, p. 15.

accordion”<sup>9</sup>. The chapters of a more general character include many practical performance tips for accordionists, such as chapter ten *Learning Proper Fingering*.

Chapter thirteen deals with chamber music in accordion ensembles. The author draws attention, among other things, to the need of proper distribution of voices between individual instruments. In the last part of his book, he encourages accordionists to constantly improve the level of playing and admits that the accordion is very versatile and suitable for performing different genres of music.

When still in Paris, Gagliardi worked on the transcription of the first movement of *Symphony No. 5* by L. v. Beethoven for accordion<sup>10</sup>. The outbreak of World War I made him decide to return to his homeland. One of his last public concerts took place in the Esperia cinema in Parma in 1914. The audience witnessed a novelty in the field of media.

A leaflet from that time informs that before the film and in front of the famous accordionist Gagliardi, the Pathé newspaper No. 456 with “the most important events of the week” will be screened, which shows that the film chronicle is quite old!<sup>11</sup>

In 1915 Gagliardi and Italo Ferrari staged puppet shows together in many villages of the Po Valley.

The entry of Italy into the war in March 1915 is an important moment in Gagliardi’s life. In opposition to the violence that war inevitably brings, he refused to join the army and decided not to perform any more public concerts.

In 1915 he was called up to the army, but instead of appearing, he answered with a letter in which he condemned the war and explained why he did not want to wear the uniform. Initially, he was not taken seriously, but he insisted; a generous colonel, aware of the consequences that Gagliardi may face, found a way out and sent him home for a while. Gagliardi responded to the next conscription in the same way; and then the machine was set in motion: interrogations, insults, imprisonment, attempts at persuasion, further interrogations. It became serious, but eventually he was interned in a psychiatric hospital, which was a little better choice than prison<sup>12</sup>.

There he stayed a bit forgotten until 1919. He was released only due to a parliamentary interpellation by Armando Bussi, a deputy in Piacenza province. Giovanni Gagliardi is considered to be the first ever conscientious objector whose refusal to serve in the army had no religious grounds, but was based on personal beliefs and conscience.

Then Gagliardi took up a job as a customs officer in Castelvetro Piacentino, near his home town. Shortly afterwards, in 1920, he made another important decision in his life – the atheist decided to join the Protestant church with his brother Silvio.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> [no author’s name], *Vita romantica di Giovanni Gagliardi, obbietore della coscienza e musicista*, “Liberta di Piacenza”, of 19.11.1950, source: [www.giovaninigagliardi.net](http://www.giovaninigagliardi.net) [accessed on 3.09.2017].

<sup>11</sup> L. Fietta, *Fece una serenata a Don Perosi*, “La Gazzetta di Parma”, of 30.12.1956, source: [www.giovaninigagliardi.net](http://www.giovaninigagliardi.net) [accessed on 5.09.2017].

<sup>12</sup> [no author’s name.], *Vita romantica...*

Pupils and friends from Paris wrote letters to Gagliardi, e.g. the chromo-harmonica builder's daughter who continued to run the business with her husband after her father's death. In one of the letters, a pupil admitted that, for economic reasons, he played at *musette* balls, neglecting the genre of repertoire he had learned during Gagliardi's lessons.

Gagliardi was known in the Italian musical circles, which is evidenced by an article published in 1935 in the daily „Corriere della Sera” written by the music critic of this newspaper, Giovanni Cenzata, under the title *30,000 km with an accordion*. The text describes the course of the accordionist's musical career. *30,000 km* referred to in the title is the route reportedly traversed with the accordion by Gagliardi. In the same year 1935, at the request of Italo Ferrari, Gagliardi wrote an autobiography, *Vita aneddotica di un fisarmonicista*, which was to become the source of the plot of the comedy opera show intended by Ferrari.

Fascist Italy had not forgotten Gagliardi's anarchist views. In 1939 he was interned with other left-wing activists on the island of Ventotene. His attitude could also have contributed to this. As a public employee – a customs officer – he refused to join the fascist party. During his 3.5-year imprisonment in Ventotene<sup>13</sup>, he made friends with politicians who were interned there, including Sandro Pertini, who would later become the President of the Italian Republic, and Umberto Terracini, a prominent member of the Italian Communist Party. Shortly after the end of the war, from April until the end of 1945, Terracini visited Gagliardi many times. It is not known what the content of the long nightly discussions was, as Gagliardi did not refer to these events in any of the interviews.

Despite Gagliardi's ostentatious attitude towards political events, manifested in the cessation of his concert activities, he took a keen interest in accordion matters in Italy. He welcomed the opening of an accordion class at the Conservatorio di S. Cecilia in Rome in 1960<sup>14</sup>. He constantly persuaded Italian accordionists into using the instrument with free-bass system.

Gagliardi was also appreciated in France. His name appears on the editorial committee of the magazine “Accordion Musique”. Pierre Monichon, one of the editors, visited Gagliardi several times at his home in Croce Santo Spirito. It was to him that the elderly accordionist gave many valuable memorabilia, including *Manualetto del Fisarmonicista*.

In the post-war period, 6 articles on Gagliardi's life and activities were published. They appeared in the following magazines: “Magazine del'accordion” (1948), “Liberta di Piacenza” (1950), “La Provincia di Cremona” (1954), “La Gazzetta di Parma” (1956), “Il Resto del Carlino Parma” (1964), “La Fisarmonica” (1964).

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<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://www.diariodemallorca.es/actual/2008/05/13/memoria-exiliado-favor-reconciliacion/357316.html> [accessed on 2.11.2019].

<sup>14</sup> [no author's name], *E morto Giovanni Gagliardi*, „La Fisarmonica” 1964, no 12; source: [www.giovannigagliardi.net](http://www.giovannigagliardi.net) [accessed on 10.09.2017].

The only preserved Gagliardi's recordings date from 1960. They were made in the already elderly artist's home (he was nearly 78 at the time). The recording was made on a Grundig reel-to-reel tape recorder. Two minor works by J.S. Bach were recorded at that time – the *Polonaise* and the *Three-Part Invention in F minor*. In these recordings, even Gagliardi's voice can be heard, commenting on his own playing.

Castelvetro Piacentino in 2011 honored its famous inhabitant by naming one of the streets after Giovanni Gagliardi.

## Summary

Why should Giovanni Gagliardi be remembered? He was certainly a visionary accordionist who was ahead of his time. His most important postulate from 1911, which was included in *Manualetto del Fisarmonicista*, was the need for unification of the construction of the accordion. Chapter five of this book is entitled *One accordion for all accordionists*<sup>15</sup>. A similar conclusion was reached in 1992, at the International Accordion Symposium in Miętne near Warsaw, by European and North American performers, teachers and representatives of accordion manufacturing companies. The multitude of keyboard systems and technical parameters of the accordion models increases the production costs and thus the price of the instrument. Moreover, in the education process it makes it more difficult for students to switch – according to their physical development – to larger and larger instruments. Violinists do not have that kind of problems. A small child who is just beginning to learn to play the violin usually takes his first steps with the  $\frac{1}{8}$  size. As he grows gradually, he reaches the full size of the violin and exchanges the instrument for basically the same, but a larger size. Thus the violinist reaches the full size of the instrument in a more natural way than the young accordionist did until recently. In the latter case, even the fidelity to one company did not guarantee the uniformity of such external features as: button diameter, row spacing, keyboard angle, etc. The Symposium held in Miętno initiated a difficult process of unification, concerning not only the instrument itself, but also some elements of accordion music notation.

The chromo-harmonica patented by Gagliardi had 5-row melodic manuals for the right and left hand. Contemporary accordionists have already a standardized accordion with a 5-row keyboard for the right hand and a 4-row free-bass system for the left hand. The pedal basses postulated by Gagliardi are superbly replaced by a converter, and as a result two instruments are contained in a single one: with a standard bass-chord keyboard and with a free-bass system, of which Gagliardi was a fervent promoter.

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<sup>15</sup> G. Gagliardi, H.C. Jacobs, *Kleines Handbuch*..., p. 38.

The Italian visionary also postulated the so-called zero *tremolo*. This type of tuning of concert instruments gained accordionists' recognition only in the second half of the 20th century. In his textbook, Gagliardi also considered problems of the accordion technique related to articulation, fingering or correct change of bellows. Accordionists started to deal with these issues only in the middle of the last century. The didactic works by Franz Krieg<sup>16</sup> (*Der neue Lehrweg*, 1949) and by Włodzimierz Lech Puchnowski<sup>17</sup> (*Szkola miechowania i artykulacji akordeonowej*, 1964) again drew attention to this key issue for accordion technique. The use of the thumb of both hands recommended by Gagliardi in the selection of an ergonomic fingering prompted such contemporary construction solutions as lowering the first and second row of the melodic manual in some accordion models (e.g. accordion by the Spanish virtuoso Iñaki Alberdi and instruments built according to the concept of the Norwegian Anders Grøthe). Giovanni Gagliardi also transformed the accordionists' repertoire. The pieces by Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg which were part of the programmes of his concerts were uncommon at that time. Even today, despite the great development of the original accordion literature, transcriptions have a very important role in both accordionist's education and concert repertoire. New areas of music are also constantly being discovered and this music is being transposed for concert accordion. Giovanni Gagliardi was decades ahead of his time, but it was him that the history proved right.

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<sup>16</sup> F. Krieg, *Der neue Lehrweg für Akkordeon*, Matthias Hohner Verlag, Trossingen 1949.

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## Giovanni Gagliardi – wirtuoz i wizjoner akordeonu

### Streszczenie

Giovanni Gagliardi (1882–1964), włoski kompozytor i akordeonista, to postać obecnie zapominana. Już w 1911 roku postulował – w wydanym w Paryżu *Manualetto del fisarmonicista* – zmiany w budowie akordeonu mające na celu ulepszenie techniczne tego instrumentu. Zaproponowana modernizacja akordeonu przyczyniła się do rozwoju akordeonowego repertuaru, o nowych możliwościach brzmieniowych i nowej estetyce. Życie artysty, który swoją karierę rozpoczął jako wędrowny grajek, a doszedł do pozycji cieszącego się uznaniem paryskiej bohemy wirtuoza, zmieniło diametralnie przystąpienie Włoch do I wojny światowej w roku 1915. Odmowa służby wojskowej, a po zakończeniu wojny także publicznych koncertów, oraz 3,5-letnie internowanie w czasie II wojny światowej – przedstawiają Gagliardiego jako człowieka zaangażowanego nie tylko w sprawy muzyczne, ale i publiczne. Do końca życia muzykował w domowym zaciszu, a w korespondencji z akordeonistami oraz w wywiadach prasowych propagował instrument z manuałem melodycznym. Giovanni Gagliardi wyprzedzał poglądami o dziesiątki lat swoją epokę, ale to właśnie jemu historia przyznała rację.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Giovanni Gagliardi, akordeon, akordeon z manuałem melodycznym, wirtuoz.