

# Tullio Giuliatti and Sons

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Roger Belloni & Gregg Miner



Tullio Giuliatti, circa 1918, with his personal harp guitar, built in collaboration with his son Armando

## Introduction

by Gregg Miner

This story is yet another wonderful, rare glimpse into the lives, careers and instruments of forgotten harp guitar players and luthiers. It is made possible by the secondary story: the friendship of the author with the last surviving member of the Giulietti "harp guitar dynasty," a little-known family of father and two sons, all of whom either built or played harp guitars during the long heyday of the Italian "flying basses guitars."

Both sons Armando and Giulio became musicians who followed in their father Tullio's footsteps as, respectively, a guitar builder and a guitar player. As was common for Italian guitarists of the early 20th century, instruments with floating sub-bass strings were popular and the Giulietti clan embraced them as well, in both hollow arm and theorboed variants.

We are indebted to Roger Belloni for so meticulously organizing his memories and sharing his photographs to preserve and share this untold harp guitar story. Some of the more interesting revelations to me were:

- The modern, somewhat Maccaferri-like designs of their early guitars.
- Similarly unique hollow arm guitars with sub-bass tuner arrays reminiscent of those of the earlier Gazzo instruments.
- That Tullio apparently strung his hollow arm "classical" harp guitar with silk & steel strings (rather than gut).
- The unfortunate lack of any recordings of Tullio. Son Giulio *did* record on harp guitar, however, and recordings of his performances of Delibes' *Pizzicato* and Calvaruso's *Celebre Tarantella*, discovered in 2011, are included here.<sup>1</sup>
- The quote by an Italian music critic noting "the Spaniards" disparagement of the harp guitar (Segovia, again!).

I would also like to specifically thank Marco Bazzotti, Antonello Saccu and Franco Ghisalberti for sharing additional Giulietti material with us, and Marco for the important Italian translation.

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<sup>1</sup> See p.16

## Part I

by Roger Belloni

### Tullio Giulietti

Tullio Giulietti was born in Rome in 1873. He was a carpenter with a passion for stringed instruments in general and the guitar in particular. Since his instrument-making business was already established by 1893 in Milan, we may assume he was very talented, being self-taught as a luthier and having learned only the basic elements of guitar playing from an acquaintance. He later studied the available methods of the day and developed such a repertoire that after his official debut as a recitalist around the age of 30 he became a full-time luthier and concert guitarist. The number of Italian performers of the past who also built their own instruments and presented selections composed or arranged by themselves is astonishingly high and seems unique to this country. Tullio's concerts were so well received that he embarked on extended tours, starting with a trip to Russia in 1904 that took him all the way to St. Petersburg and included performances in both vaudeville and more intimate and refined musical circles. After moving to London in 1908 and working steadily there for a while, he toured Spain, France, Spain, France, Holland, Sweden, and Switzerland, returning home in 1915 when war was declared between Italy and Austria. In the midst of all this activity two sons were born: Armando in Rome in 1903 and Giulio in Lugano, Switzerland in 1913. The former became a fine luthier and cello professor and performer, the latter, after starting on violin, decided to follow in his father's footsteps as a guitar recitalist. Although Tullio appeared in vaudeville shows like many of his contemporaries, he seemed to be more classically oriented and gave two concerts, in 1920 and 1923, at the Milan Conservatory and also at the Institute for the Blind, a much-respected venue where both Llobett and Segovia performed. Tullio Giulietti is mentioned in Domingo Prat's 1934 *Diccionario de Guitarristas y Guitarreros* in both the guitarist and luthier sections. Prat gathered his information from one of Tullio's guitar students who relocated to Buenos Aires.

These entries are interesting though limited and flawed. After misspelling his informant's name (Ermanno Brandazzi is more likely than Prat's unpronounceable version) he also misspells Tullio's first name and the workshop's location (Crescenzago) and gets both his date of birth and death wrong. The guitarist and luthier entries are also swapped in error. We learn (in the luthier section) that Tullio performed his own extended fantasias based on operatic themes like Taraffo, and (in the guitarist section) that he introduced some (unspecified) innovations in guitar construction which are "not devoid of merit." The only concert mentioned is the one of April 1923 in the Petite Casino of San Remo. As an intriguing footnote, Prat states that although a great guitarist and builder, Tullio was still greater as a "bohémio" (Spanish version of the French



*bohemian*) and was held in high esteem as such! This is open to interpretation as the meaning of the word in the 1930's may have been more flattering than it is now. If we trust the entries in the much humbler *Dizionario dei chitarristi e liutai italiani* (Bologna, 1937) of a few years later – simply because the writers were closer to the source – then Tullio Giulietti died on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1933.<sup>2</sup>

## Armando Giulietti

Armando Giulietti was born in Rome in 1903. He started working in his father's workshop at an early age and built a guitar entirely by himself at the age of 16. He also became a cello professor, teaching and performing mostly in opera productions as first soloist. Many stories regarding himself and his father were related to me personally after we were introduced by mutual friends in the early 1970's. His memory was excellent until the last year of his life (1990) and the anecdotes were detailed and rich.

As an example, here's why we have no recordings of Tullio's music (this story also explains why the members of this family were highly thought of but handled with care as they had a charming but almost Django-like personality).<sup>3</sup> Tullio was scheduled to make records for the prestigious Fonit Cetra label but while the first track was being recorded someone shut a window and ruined the take. Tullio patiently resumed the session but this time somebody slammed a door. At this point he just stood up saying "That's enough, I don't need this aggravation or your records" and stormed out depriving us of a glimpse into his musical world!



Armando Giulietti with the author in 1989

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<sup>2</sup> Tullio is buried in the Milan Cemetery at Piazzale Cimitero Maggiore, 20156 Milano MI, the vault located at "Reparto 34 Ossuario 1928 IV fila inferiore."

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in the footnote on p.1, recordings of Giulio Giulietti have been found. See p. 14.

## Giulietti Harp Guitars



Both father and son made multi-bass instruments which were known as “guitars with flying (or floating) basses.” As late as the mid 1930’s the guitarist Primo Silvestri wrote an article for the magazine "Il Plettro" explaining that many classical and baroque pieces could not be played effectively on a regular six string. He brought as an example the Bach prelude for lute (played in A minor like Maccaferri) and advocated the use of a D# and a B in the bass to really bring the work to life, blaming the desire to "imitate the Spaniards" as one of the reasons for resisting the use of an extended low range.

Tullio played the guitar he was pictured with (at left), strung with silk core basses and light steel trebles. The instrument and the portrait both date back to about 1918 and the unusual cutaway/knee rest seems unique. As a final surprise, Armando swore to me that this portrait (the original was very large) is a pen and ink drawing done by one of Tullio's satisfied customers from a photograph. It's hard to believe, but Armando was a meticulous, precise and reliable person!

Right: Another 7-bass hollow arm harp guitar, this one built in 1938 for Monzino & Sons.

Instruments of both Tullio and Armando were sold through the Monzino shop in Milan.



Tullio’s son Giulio played a hollow arm instrument similar to his father's that was built by Armando (probably like the one in the Monzino collection, shown below). Giulio recorded with it and I saw the 78's but never heard them. In the post war years Armando concentrated almost exclusively on Torres-style guitars and was awarded first prize with the highest honors at the academy of St. Cecilia for two such instruments, so a 9-string he built in 1958 (shown further below) is an extremely rare exception. After that award Armando was often a judge at guitar-making competitions, notably at Terni alongside another great builder, Gallinotti, where the winner was Carlo Raspagni, another luthier I later befriended.

Below and next page: Two advertisements from guitar magazines, courtesy of Marco Bazzotti, and Armando's letterhead on a note to the author:

PRIMARIA LIUTERIA ARTISTICA  
**ARMANDO GIULIETTI**  
Casa fondata l'anno 1893  
Milano - Via Francesco Soave, 1-a - Telef. 577940

★

SPECIALITÀ CHITARRE DA STUDIO,  
DA CONCERTO E DA JAZZ

MODELLI ITALIANI E SPAGNOLI  
"TORRES-HAUSER,, E DI PROPRIA CREAZIONE

RIPARAZIONE E RESTAURO DI STRUMENTI  
CLASSICI

LIUTERIA CLASSICA AD ARCO

★

*I MIGLIORI STRUMENTI IN COMMERCIO*

★

ESPORTAZIONE

**Tutti gli strumenti sono accuratamente costruiti a mano**, contrariamente a quanto viene praticato dagli industriali, la cui alta produzione è ottenuta esclusivamente con macchine.

Alcune tra le numerose affermazioni:

*All'amico Signor Giulietti le più vive congratulazioni per la chitarra "spagnola,, cedutami, strumento da classificare fra i gioielli di liuteria.*  
Rag. Guido Fiamberti

*Per il notevole "Liutaio,, italiano Signor Giulietti, col mio applauso.*  
Maria Luisa Anido

*Dopo aver frequentato e visto lavorare diversi ottimi liutai all'estero e in Italia, posso garantire che considero Armando Giulietti come uno tra i migliori. Le sue chitarre, per la qualità del suono e la finizione, dimostrano d'essere uscite dalle mani d'un artista che è padrone assoluto della sua professione.*  
Miguel Ablóniz

(Il Maestro Miguel Ablóniz possiede una magnifica chitarra TORRES-HAUSER costruita appositamente da Armando Giulietti nel 1954.)

From *l'Arte Chitarristica*, 1948

**Excerpt translations:**

*For the notable Italian "luthier" Mr. Giulietti, with my applause.*

**Maria Luisa Anido**

*[...] I consider Amando Giulietti one of the best for sound quality & finishings, [...] an artist who absolutely masters his profession.*

**Miguel Ablóniz**



## My Giuliatti Guitars

After meeting Armando I ordered a folk guitar which he based on a modernized Guadagnini pattern. I played it in England and also at Jazzland in Vienna where I was recorded by a fan. During this period he always addressed me as "Mr." or "Sir" and was warm and friendly but formal considering he was seventy and I was in

my early 20's and often wore Indian shirts and sandals, not to mention the hair! He was known to have asked rude or know-it-all characters to leave and often stated he'd sell a finished guitar to anybody but would not custom-build for someone he did not like because they would have to come around more than once!



The author in Armando's shop in 1975



Binomata e premiata liuteria artistica

## ARMANDO GIULIETTI

Casa fondata l'anno 1893

Via Francesco Sòavo 1a - Telef. 577940

**MILANO**

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Specialità chitarre da studio e da concerto  
Modelli Italiani, Spagnoli e di propria creazione  
Riparazione e restauro di strumenti classici  
Liuteria classica ad arco



Chitarre modello TORRES-HAUSER finissime, in legno noce, ciliegio, mogano, acero, palissandro, finemente filettate, tastiera ebano, tasti alpacca, meccaniche finissime incise a mano e placcate in argento, montate con corde AUGUSTINE, insuperabili strumenti per dilettanti e professionisti.

**Prezzo propaganda L. 40.000**  
Consegna pronta (salvo il venduto) massimo 45 giorni

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**Ottime chitarre da L. 23.000 in su**

Assortimento in 20 tipi diversi

I migliori strumenti in commercio

Tutti gli strumenti sono accuratamente costruiti e verniciati a mano, contrariamente a quanto viene praticato dagli industriali, la cui alta produzione è ottenuta esclusivamente con macchine e verniciatura nitro a spruzzo.

In the photo taken by a friend the day I picked up the instrument you can see two pictures on the wall. One shows Armando as a young man with his cello, the other a young soldier. This was an Italian American relative of his who helped him sell several guitars in Anaheim but sadly was later killed in action in Viet Nam.



Late 1920's Giuliotti 9-string harp guitar with non-original bridge (detail at right).



1958 Armando Giuliotti 9-string harp guitar, restored and modified to ten strings at the request of the author (detail at right).

During my long stay in the U.S. I often thought of Armando and when I decided I wanted a classical guitar I phoned him and was glad to find him still living, though no longer active, and ready to sell me one from the last batch of instruments he had finished in 1983. Our last picture together shows him old and frail, the picture of the soldier boy still on the wall, now near the window, and the dedication saying more or less "a memory."

The harp guitars reached me after Armando's passing in peculiar ways. On December 25, 1990, I had a dream about acquiring another one of his instruments. I called him the next day and promised to drop by with a magazine article about him of which he was unaware. He thanked me and said he had to lie down as he was "slightly unwell." I later learned that he died just four hours later while relating to the doctor in his inimitable fashion all his ailments and all the remedies he had taken. I was the last person outside the family to talk to him. A few years went by and I semi-retired in my hometown. One day a student of mine told me about "one of those extra-bass guitars you say you'd like to find" in a Milan guitar shop. It turned out to be a late 20's Giuliotti which had just been repaired. I memorized the owner's number from the tag and bought it from him. His uncle, a Mr. Catalano, had purchased the instrument at the Monzino shop in downtown Milan as a young man and played it all his life as a solo performer and in a trio with violin and mandolin. This guitar has walnut back and sides and simple Guadagnini style bracing, giving it a powerful sound and a tone similar to a romantic guitar, but fuller. It has the Giuliotti brand but no label, the one on the inside being by Felice Albertini, who carried out some repairs in the



1930's and possibly installed the non-original bridge. After a while I started dreaming of another guitar with four floating basses and a more modern sound to complete my small collection. I was drawing a funny comic book story as a Christmas gift for my American friends and decided to include a scene in which Armando personally gave me the walnut guitar. The next morning luthier Lucio Antonio Carbone, who does all my repair work, called me up to inform me that a customer had left him a 1958 Armando Giulietti harp guitar inherited from his father in exchange for a Japanese classical cutaway electric! The instrument had numerous weather cracks, the extra peghead (for three basses) had been removed and two plugged holes in the left upper bout showed that it had been used as an electric. A new peghead was made, converting it into my dream 10-string! Just a year or so before this I almost ordered a similar instrument from a Mexican luthier, specifying a 10-string cutaway and going to a tone wood dealer looking for alpine spruce and pearwood because Giulietti spoke highly of this combination. Well, here was a double-curve cutaway harp guitar and it had a pearwood body (and of skilled workmanship)! It already existed when I was seven years old and often went to a movie theater across the street from Armando's workshop in my old neighborhood!

## Footnote

Sometime before I acquired the harp guitars, while I was still in San Diego, a young customer entered Lucio Carbone's shop with two peculiar gifts. One was a jar of "dragon blood," a very expensive resin used for varnish, the other a batch of several chrome plated brass pickguards of the kind used by some Italian luthiers for their jazz guitars. The young man said he had found them in the garbage in front of the old Giulietti workshop. It seems that, after both Armando and his widow were gone, someone junked what was left of a lifetime of artistic work, which may have included wood patterns (both men worked free hand), tools, some wood, at least three guitars Armando had finished but not assembled because of glaucoma, rare photographs, Giulio Giulietti's 78's and a nondescript grade school exercise book containing, in Armando's beautiful handwriting, the list of his postwar instruments with the names and phone numbers of all the original owners.

## About The Author

A native of Milan, Italy, Roger Belloni began his professional career in Cambridge, England, where, after playing in all the local clubs, he appeared at the prestigious Folk Festival at the age of 19. He then managed his own club in Italy and toured extensively all over Europe until, during an engagement at the famous Jazzland in Vienna, Austria, he met renowned Bluesman John Jackson, who invited him to the U.S. Roger has performed at countless clubs and festivals and on radio and TV in the U.S., Italy, Switzerland and Mexico. Most notably, he was selected by Blues expert and Robert Johnson historian Steve La Vere to open the first San Diego Black Music Festival and by record collector Lou Curtiss to conduct a guitar workshop with Sam Chatmon, half-brother of legendary Charlie Patton. During his nearly 20-year stay in the U.S., Roger has been chiefly influenced by North Carolina guitarist Bill Bryant, a student of Blind Boy Fuller, and has also ventured into the jazz idiom, playing with musicians of the caliber of Jimmie Noone, Jr. and sax great Eugene Porter (Benny Carter's co-arranger).



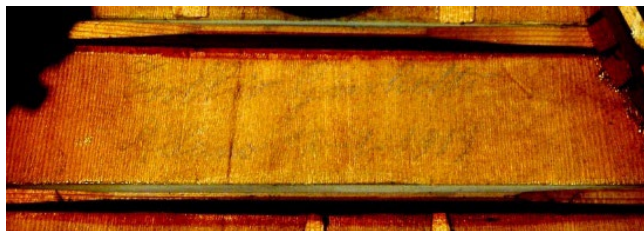
## Part II

by Gregg Miner

### Additional Giulietti Harp Guitars

Since Roger wrote the above article in 2009, several new Giulietti harp guitars have been discovered, which I'd like now to share.

This 5-bass theorboed harp guitar built by Tullio for Monzino and Sons in January, 1919 is pretty modern-looking for a pre-Maccaferri guitar! The extension seems to have utilized two friction pegs and three side tuners. All original?



Collection of Antonello Saccu, photo courtesy of Franco Ghisalberti.



This 4-bass instrument marked on the soundboard with the Giuliotti signature is similarly modern. Note the unusual fingerboard extension, also seen on Tullio's instrument above and Pietro Taraffo's instrument below. What was its purpose?

From a private collection in Italy





Manluccio Gabba submitted photos of this instrument to my Genovese collaborator, Franco Ghisalberti. It is marked "Tullio Giuliani, Milano 15/12/1918".

It is hard to know what is original on the bass extension, as there are two friction peg tuners that match the main head, plus three geared tuners for a total of five basses. On the other hand, it is not very different from Antonello Saccu's 5-bass specimen above!

The bridge has five spots for the basses, but the bridge could be non-original. Someone also thought to be clever and added a 7<sup>th</sup> geared tuner to the main neck to double the high E string (with a pair, like a mandolin). You can see the slots in the bridge.



And finally: The Cagetti family (owner of Rinaldo Taraffo's Gazzo harp guitar and stand) kindly let Franco Ghisalberti scan this fantastic photo for us. It shows Pietro Taraffo with an interesting Giuliani harp guitar, unusual in having 6 bass strings, on 2 different levels - the head extension "stair-steps" to put 3 at a longer distance from the neck strings, and then 3 longer again. You can see that he had a missing string when the photo was taken. We have now seen Pietro with 3 different harp guitars - 1 by Gazzo, and 2 by much better makers - Mozzani and Giuliani. Perhaps he was more of a connoisseur than his more famous brother, as he wasn't playing his own solo shows in huge halls?

## Rare Recordings by Harp Guitarist Giulio Giulietti (1913-?)

By the kind donation of Franco Ghisalberti

These recordings are definitely played on a harp guitar, though the model is unknown, as is the stringing. Regardless of how elaborate the instrument was, Giulio uses *no* sub-basses on the first piece, Calvaruso's *Celebre Tarantella*, and only *one* sub-bass on *Pizzicato* by Delibes. Here, one can plainly hear the open E, A and D strings of the neck, and one floating low D.

Note: Giulio appears to have tuned his instrument up a half step, as the D is pitched Eb, and likewise the open E, A, and D strings sound as F, Bb, and Eb respectively. Franco assures me that perfect care is taken with calibrating the playing speed for the transfer to digital.

Click on an image to listen to the recording:



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**About The Author:** Gregg Miner is, at various times of the day, a plucked stringed instrument collector, scholar, recording artist and performer. He is widely considered the world's leading authority on harp guitars. His web sites include Harpguitars.net, Harpguitarmusic.com and Minermusic.com.

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